

3 | Gilgamesh and glory

In contrast to later Western traditions that are classed as heroic epic, great deeds done in battle are *not* the central focus of the early cuneiform literature that we are studying. Sure enough, excellence in battle is one of the characteristic glories of the great king, and this finds its place (for example) in the lamentation in *The Death of Gilgamesh*:

The great wild bull is lying down, never to rise again,
the lord Gilgamesh is lying down, never to rise again,
he who was perfect *in combat* is lying down, never to rise again,
the warrior girt with a shoulder-belt is lying down, never to rise again,
he who diminished the wicked is lying down, never to rise again . . .
(*Death of Gilgamesh* M 1–6: George 1999: 197)

Paradoxically, however, among the narrative texts the battlefield is seldom the place where the central issues are explored and put to the test:¹ the real arena of action is within the protagonist or between him and the gods.

Lugalbanda and the gods

This principle is well exemplified in the narratives concerned with Lugalbanda, the father of Shulgi and Gilgamesh.² *Lugalbanda in the Wilderness* (also known as *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave*)³ begins in military mode, with Enmerkar the king declaring war against Aratta and mustering his army:

The levy of Unug marched out with the all-wise king;
the levy of Kulab followed Enmerkar.
The levy of Unug was a flood;

¹ Even in *Gilgamesh and Akka*, which is concerned with siege warfare, the plot is more concerned with negotiations than combat (George 1999: 143–8).

² *Lugalbanda in the Wilderness* and *The Return of Lugalbanda* are best seen as successive episodes of a single narrative sequence.

³ The name *Lugalbanda in Hurrumkurra* is also used. See Vanstiphout 2003: 99–131; Black 1998: 176–84 and *passim*; useful discussions by Alster 1990, 2005b.

the levy of Kulab was a storm cloud.
 Hugging the earth like a heavy fog
 their thick dust reached to heaven.

(*Lugalbanda in the Wilderness* 26–31, Vanstiphout 2003: 104–7)

In the host march seven champions, who are brothers; Lugalbanda follows them at the rear. The narrative seems to be leading towards battle, but instead Lugalbanda is taken ill on the march and is left in a mountain cave to live or die; his brothers promise that after the war they will return to bring him home or, if he has died in his sickness, to bury him. In the cave, Lugalbanda struggles against fever and death; he prays in his agony to Utu the sun-god, Inana the great goddess, and Suen (= Akkadian Sin) the moon-god, and they grant him their help. Emerging from the cave, Lugalbanda does great deeds in the wilderness – he finds water, makes fire and bakes bread, and brings down wild animals for food. After he has honoured the gods with due sacrifice, there follows a cosmic battle (poorly preserved)⁴ after which he is exalted with divine favour:

From that time, Utu, the . . . of Enlil
 granted to him (Lugalbanda) the great office of herald of heaven,
 and he added the . . . jurisdiction over all the countries.

(*Lugalbanda in the Wilderness* 429–31, Vanstiphout 2003: 126–7)

Lugalbanda has become almost an equal of the gods, and (by implication) he is now destined for kingship. In the sequel, *The Return of Lugalbanda*, he returns to the war to help Enmerkar with Inana's support; even there, however, the siege of Aratta is described only for a few lines,⁵ and Lugalbanda overcomes Aratta not by fighting but by using a magical fish granted to him by Inana. The essential theme is the relationship between the king, gods and people, and the challenge of mortality that attends the king's movement to success and divine status. The same bundle of themes will be the centrepiece of the development of the epics concerned with his son Gilgamesh.

Development and dissemination of the Gilgamesh epic

From the beginnings represented by the Sumerian poems on Gilgamesh, a single large-scale narrative was gradually developed in the course of

⁴ For a review of the difficulties of interpretation, see Alster 2005b.

⁵ *The Return of Lugalbanda* 254–65, at Vanstiphout 2003: 156–7.

the second millennium BCE.⁶ It is possible – even likely – that oral song and storytelling drove much of the development,⁷ but it is also certain that a major driver was the transmission of narratives in Sumerian and other languages through the scribal schools. It is agreed that there were two decisive stages in the development of an integrated *Gilgamesh* narrative, and that both of these show signs of the influence of artistic design rather than merely editorial compilation. The first of these stages was reached with what is known as the Old Babylonian Version, perhaps c. 1700 BCE. After a period of complex and less clearly delineated stages, yielding the Middle Babylonian texts, there was further expansion and development into what is now known as the Standard Babylonian Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.⁸ The ancients themselves ascribed this latter work to a single master intellect: ‘from the mouth of *Sîn-lēqi-unninni*’.⁹ At some stage in the later period of development, possibly the period in which *Sîn-lēqi-unninni* worked, there was a further (and comparatively inorganic) addition of the Twelfth Tablet, a direct prose translation of part of the Sumerian poem *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*. The epic is artistically complete without this addition, and the rationale behind its inclusion remains obscure,¹⁰ although it will turn out to be vital to our argument as it develops.

⁶ For an overview see George 2003: 1.22–33 and his summary accounts, George 2007c and 2010a. Sallaberger 2008 is largely consistent with George; cf. also the foundational earlier work of Tigay 1982. In my discussion I am concerned principally with the Standard Babylonian Version, and I cite the Old and Middle Babylonian tablets only when they provide corroborating evidence for passages for which the evidence in the Standard Version is fragmentary, or where they offer unique evidence for motifs that are important for the Greek reception. I follow George’s wide-ranging and thematically inclusive analysis, and try to avoid dependence on one or other limiting hypothesis on the developing *meaning* of the epic (cf. e.g. Foster 1987; Abusch 2001).

⁷ For example, Wasserman argues (2011: 4–5, cf. George 2003: 1.143–4) that references to *Gilgamesh* in Old Babylonian incantations for babies – ‘lullaby’ texts – bear witness to oral circulation of a kind normally lost from the scribal record. As George (2003: 1.7) mentions, there is a suggestion of a possible mode of oral transmission within the textual tradition itself: in *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, his musician Lugalbagabal plays and sings while *Gilgamesh* drinks beer (see further George 2010b: 113–14), and similarly the song of the same musician Lugalbagabal plays a pivotal role in the plot of the *Tale of Gudam* (Gadotti 2006). It is tempting to see this as a reference to *heroic* song in courtly circles. However, as with the equivalent lore in Homer, there is no way of telling whether this reflects social realities or a fictive back-projection by the makers of the very texts that we have before us.

⁸ The text presented in George 2003 is supplemented by evidence from tablets subsequently published with episodes corresponding to Tablets I and V (George 2007a, Al-Rawi and George 2014). An extremely helpful supplement to George’s exposition is the extended review by Wasserman 2011, especially the diagram facing p. 2.

⁹ George 2003: 1.28.

¹⁰ Vulpe 1994 presents a strong, but necessarily speculative, argument for seeing the Twelfth Tablet as ‘a necessary and elegant conclusion’. See further below, pp. 108–110, 289–292.

In the monumental epic, the themes that we have seen in the various Sumerian poems are melded into a vastly more complex and many-faceted unity. The distribution of manuscripts shows that the text achieved canonical status: most date from the seventh century BCE or later, but they must bear witness to a long-established process of codification, study and recopying.¹¹ Along with numerous fragments from such a wide range of cities as Babylon, Borsippa, Nimrud, Ashur and Sultantepe, and even from Gilgamesh's own city of Warka (Uruk), there are substantial remains of several separate sets of tablets from the royal collection of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, and these still represent the largest group of witnesses to the epic.¹² Recent work has shown that this archive was the product of a systematic campaign of collection and compilation from sources in pre-existing libraries attached to temples and other scribal centres: it represents, in effect, the codification under Assyrian royal power of the Babylonian textual canon.

Vitaly, however, the epic was not merely an archived possession of kings and temple officials. The lore of Gilgamesh was disseminated right across south-western Asia, and the many fragments that survive are no doubt only a small trace of the original spread. Crucially for the comparison with Homer, several fragments in Akkadian have been found at Ugarit,¹³ which was to be a major point of contact between the worlds of Mesopotamia and the Greek Aegean up to time of destruction c. 1200 BCE, and whose wider region continued in that role into the time when its people were known to the historical Greeks as Phoenicians (above, pp. 16–27). Although little is known of the narrative culture of Levantine languages in this period, it is significant that artistic survivals from the eastern fringe of the Mediterranean in this period include many scenes that invite identification with the two major combats of the epic, those with Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven.¹⁴ From the Hittite empire, whose capital at Hattusa has yielded textual archives in international languages as well as Hittite itself, there is evidence for multiple channels of reception. In Akkadian from this horizon there are three fragments from the Middle Babylonian stage, of which two (*Boğ 1*, *Boğ 2*) differ from each other linguistically and are unlikely to be derived from a single exemplar (the third, *Boğ 3*, is too slight for any

¹¹ George 2003: 1.379–91. ¹² Cf. p. 40 above.

¹³ For edition and translation of the Ugarit fragment (now listed as *MB Ug 1*) see George 2007a. In George's view the four pieces all come from the same recension of the epic, one that is closely related both to the Middle Babylonian and the Standard Babylonian Version but distinct from either (George 2007a: 253–4).

¹⁴ Ornan 2010; cf. Lambert 2010.

inferences to be drawn).¹⁵ Alongside the Hittite-language prose paraphrase of the entire story, known as the *Song of Gilgamesh*,¹⁶ parts of which will be considered in detail below, there are also fragments in Hurrian.¹⁷ When the Hittite work calls itself a ‘song’, this is in keeping with Hittite generic convention and does not necessarily indicate that an oral version has been transcribed;¹⁸ at the same time, however, there can be no doubt that the story of Gilgamesh was known, *as a story*, in many forms in central Anatolia in that period. Variations between the Hurrian fragments – as, for example, in the spelling of proper names – have encouraged the hypothesis that they belong to at least three separate recensions or ‘textualisations’. Although the Humbaba episode looms largest across the fragments surviving from the Hittite sites, there is evidence that Hurrian versions as well as the Hittite prose summary also included the journey to Ziusudra/Uta-napishti (under his name of Ullu¹⁹), corresponding to the story-line of the final tablets of the Standard Babylonian Version.

The question remains open as to how much thematic and poetic unity was maintained through the process of diffusion, and it would be unnecessarily limiting to begin this enquiry with a fixed hypothesis as to how much was due to professional scribes and how much to oral exchange between poets and singers or, indeed, more casual retellings in less artistic forms. In what follows I will present a reading of the Standard Babylonian Version, nuanced in the light of the model of intertextuality and reception outlined in the Introduction. It is not my aim to reconstruct the discourses that drove its composition and original reception – that task belongs to the specialist cuneiform scholars, on whose work I lean throughout – but instead to suggest how the poem in this or a similar recension might have been heard (or read, or encountered at second hand, or otherwise

¹⁵ George 2003, 1.306–26.

¹⁶ The surviving texts of the Hittite paraphrase are collected in an authoritative translation by Beckman 2001.

¹⁷ The Hurrian fragments are discussed in detail by Bachvarova 2016: 72–6, arguing speculatively for the survival there of a version of the story in which Gilgamesh spared Humbaba.

¹⁸ For the latest study of the Anatolian reception see Bachvarova 2016: 54–77. Bachvarova’s argument is often hard to pin down, because she routinely posits diversity of oral transmission to explain any or all variations between surviving written versions of a given text (see esp. 54–77). Beckman (2003: 45) shows convincingly that the prose *Song of Gilgamesh* calls itself a ‘song’ in keeping with Hittite generic convention (compare e.g. the ‘Song of Kumarbi’), and should not be regarded as a direct reflection of an oral tradition. On the formulaic nature of the ‘Let me praise . . .’ opening see also Metcalf 2015: 102–3.

¹⁹ Hittite *Ullu* is a loan-translation with the meaning ‘the distant one’ (George 2003: 1.25; Beckman 2001: 165; Bachvarova 2016: 72–6).

assimilated) somewhere between south-western Asia, the Aegean Sea and mainland Greece up to the time when the Homeric creation came together in the early centuries of the first millennium BCE.

The ruler between human and divine

The poem opens with the praise of Gilgamesh for the wisdom that he achieved on his journey to the immortalised survivor of the Flood, whom we met in the previous chapters as Ziusudra and Atrahasis:

He who saw the Deep, the country's foundation,
 who knew the proper ways, was wise in everything!
 Gilgamesh, who saw the Deep, the foundation of the country,
 who knew the proper ways, was wise in everything!
 He explored everywhere the seats of power,
 knew of everything the sum of wisdom.
 He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden,
 brought back a tale of before the Deluge. (I 1–8)²⁰

In the Sumerian texts that mention this journey, what Gilgamesh learnt seems to centre on the correct mode of sacrificing to the gods, a skill that had vanished with the Flood itself.²¹ This achievement continues to be specified in the Standard Babylonian Version – he ‘established the proper rites for the human race’ (I 44)²² – but it seems to become something more general and more profound: the achievement of the one ‘who saw the Deep’ was to bring back wisdom, a more basic or intangible truth, keyed to the deep waters over which Ea presides.²³ Just what that truth was will become the focus of the journey’s unexpected conclusion.

For the moment, however, this theme looms less prominently than the praises of the king, whose glory presides over the city. The city in antiquity is not the necessary evil that it has become in our world, a place of pollution and overcrowding: rather it is where vitality and

²⁰ The text printed here is George’s (2012: 228–9) revised translation of the opening, incorporating supplements from the recently discovered Ugarit tablet *MB Ug I* (George 2007a: 241).

²¹ Recalled in *The Death of Gilgamesh* (M 57ff.: George 1999: 198–9).

²² The theme may also have been recalled in a now poorly-preserved part of *SBV* Tablet X (George 2003: 1.505), and it is noteworthy that Uta-napishti’s account of the Flood includes a description of the sacrifices that he instituted at its end (*SBV* XI 156–63).

²³ On *naqbu* here, indeterminately ‘the deep, the cosmic waters’ or ‘the totality (of wisdom)’, see George 2003: 1.444–5.

abundance are concentrated.²⁴ The hero's achievement is summed up in the sight of the walls of Uruk themselves, which he built:

He came a far road, was weary but at peace;
all his labours were set on a tablet of stone.
He had the rampart built of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
of holy Eanna, the sacred storehouse.
See its wall like a strand of wool,
view its parapet that none could copy! (I 9–14)²⁵

It is here that the imagined audience of the poem is to lift up a tablet of lapis lazuli and read of his glories: this can perhaps be heard as a reflexive allusion to the epic itself, in which those glories will now be recounted.²⁶ The notion that the king's achievements are physically represented in the city walls is paralleled in the *Song of Bazi*, a poem of praise to another divinized king from the remote past – whose death, coincidentally or otherwise, we will also see remembered alongside that of Gilgamesh in wisdom poetry.²⁷ Then his greatness is recounted in a paean of praise, derived from the Old Babylonian sources and looking back ultimately to the Sumerian texts.²⁸ He was a warlord, shielding his men and leading their assault:

A mighty bank, the protection of his troops,
a violent flood-wave that smashes a stone wall! (SBV I 33–34)

Like Shulgi, he asserted order over chaos, opening the mountain passes and digging wells for fresh water, just as he restored the cult places and their rituals. At the same time as being the 'violent flood-wave' in wars against his people's enemies, he is master of order and pattern in his own city, and this in turn is an image of the divine ordinances that guarantee and embody the order of the world as a whole. The tension between these two excellences will loom larger as the narrative proceeds.

²⁴ This principle is explored by Van de Mieroop 1997: ch. 3. For the corresponding idea in the early Homeric depiction of the city, see Scully 1990.

²⁵ Text from George 2012: 229.

²⁶ A similar motif is used in the *Cuthean Legend of Naram-Sin*, where the relevant lines are substantially preserved in the Late Assyrian Version (Foster, *BTM*, p. 348; see Foster 2007: 16–17).

²⁷ For the *Song of Bazi* see below, pp. 107–108, and for Bazi and Gilgamesh in the *Poem of Early Rulers* see p. 86.

²⁸ Compare esp. the opening lines of *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* (George 1999: 169) and the opening and closing of *The Death of Gilgamesh* (George 1999: pp. 197, 208).

Gilgamesh is human, but not in the way that we lesser mortals of later times are human. There is divinity in his parentage; he is the ‘wild bull’ of his father Lugalbanda and the calf of his mother Ninsun, the Wild Cow Goddess, and its proportion is precisely defined: ‘two thirds of him god but a third of him human’ (SBV I 48). This image of an ambiguous relationship between mortality and immortality locates Gilgamesh at a pivotal moment in the sequence of cosmic history. The *Sumerian King-List* and subsequent texts in the same genre record the gradual shortening of the lives of the kings since primordial times,²⁹ and this progressive loss of vitality is mirrored in the decline of the human race in general. There is an instructive parallel in the incantation text *Bīt mēseri* – attested in tablets of Neo-Assyrian date, but drawing on older traditions – which gives a list of the succession of divine primeval sages (*apkallu*), who were said to have transmitted and protected the ordinances of cosmic order and harmony.³⁰ They are identified with the protective deities of whom images are to be placed in the house to ward off demonic attacks, and who are also represented on a more elaborate scale among the human–beast hybrid figures carved in relief in the royal palaces of the Neo-Assyrian period.³¹ The first seven of these sages are divine beings, named as carp–fish ‘born in the river’; they are followed by four sages ‘of human descent’, of whom the last, Lu-Nanna, is described as ‘two-thirds *apkallu*’³² – in other words he is at an intermediate point between the divine sages of ancient times and the purely human scholars thereafter, in the same way as Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and one-third human. Lu-Nanna ‘expelled a dragon from the temple of Ishtar and Shulgi’, and the chronicles also specify that he lived at the same time as Shulgi – who, as we have seen, is represented as calling himself the brother of Gilgamesh.³³

The ruler as sexual tyrant

If the near-divine vitality of Gilgamesh makes him a potent leader of men and a defender of civilisation, in another sense this very abundance of energy makes him dangerous to human society. This is the pivot on which

²⁹ Glassner 2004: 3–33, with Kvanvig 2011: 83–105.

³⁰ The text was first published in partial form by Reiner 1961, then with evidence from further tablets by Borger 1974; see further Wiggermann 1992: 105–18, and Borger 1994 with analysis updated from Borger 1974 but a less full presentation of the text; cf. Kvanvig 2011: 107–58.

³¹ Ataç 2010. ³² *Bīt mēseri*, Tablet III, 26–9. See Borger 1994: 230–31; Kvanvig 2011: 108–9.

³³ Glassner 2004: 288–9.

the action now turns. After the opening eulogy, the narrative of the first tablet is set in motion by a more sinister expression of his kingly power, for which the Ugarit tablet provides a startling image, emerging out of context among the opening images of his glorious achievements:

Gilgamesh lets no young bride go free to her husband,
he is their wild bull, they are his cows. (*MB Ug I* 12–13, George 2007a: p. 241)

The problem comes into clearer focus as the people's complaints grow: he fights his companions endlessly, he harries the young men and 'lets no son go free to his father'; he keeps men busy through labour service or his constant demands for wrestling contests; and he comes between the young women and their mothers and also, more ominously, their husbands (*SBV I* 76).³⁴ The form taken by this bullying is not made explicit here, and is perhaps deliberately left doubtful. However, a well-preserved section in one of the Old Babylonian texts³⁵ states clearly that he is claiming the right to have sex with each marriageable girl before she can be united with her husband, and sexual aggression was part of his story even in the Sumerian *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*.³⁶

The same kind of sexually dominating behaviour would become a dark rumour in medieval traditions about the self-assertion of lords over their underlings – *ius primae noctis* in legal Latin, *droit de cuissage* or *droit de seigneur* in French.³⁷ As we will see in a later chapter, in the *Iliad* too a related problem of the overlord's sexual appropriations sparks off the conflict in the Greek camp. In its conflation of social dominance with privileged access to females, Gilgamesh's behaviour is an expression of the violent, even beast-like extremes to which male power and self-assertion can extend.³⁸ As such (though this is never stated in so many words) it expresses the uncomfortable truth that heroic energy is dangerous to social order at the very same time as defending and guaranteeing that order – the theme that will be brought into still clearer focus in the *Iliad*.

³⁴ The restoration *muti-ša* 'their husbands', conjectural in George's 2003 edition, is confirmed by the Ugarit tablet (George 2007a, at *MB Ug I*, line 12), although the line appears there at an earlier point in the passage.

³⁵ See the Pennsylvania tablet, *OB II* 154–63, with George's note (2003: 1.187–8, cf. 448–9).

³⁶ George 2003: 1.7, citing Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 1993: 101–3. On the developing image of Gilgamesh's sexual tyranny between the Sumerian texts and the Standard Babylonian Version, see further Cooper 2002.

³⁷ Boureau 1998. ³⁸ This strategy for interpreting the *Iliad* is explored by Gottschall 2008.

The energy of the ‘wild bull’ is surging unchecked, and the people suffer. They complain to the great goddess Ishtar,³⁹ and the gods respond by means that may at first seem strangely indirect: at the prompting of Anu⁴⁰ they make a counterpart for him, one who will ultimately become his companion and ‘equal to the storm of his heart’ (SBV I 97).⁴¹ This is Enkidu, who is made first to live wild among the beasts of the wilderness but is tamed through his sexual initiation with Shamhat (the translators’ ‘harlot’), a woman whose professional sexual agency is probably to be understood in terms of membership of the group of women consecrated to one of the great goddesses, perhaps Ninsun herself.⁴² He learns of Gilgamesh’s tyranny; he goes to the city to face him down, barring his entry to a house in which there is a new bride; they fight and, his anger subdued by the combat, Gilgamesh becomes firm friends with Enkidu.⁴³

If the behaviour of Gilgamesh and Enkidu reminds the modern reader of adolescent youths, this is perhaps more than a trivial throwaway thought: there may be a sense in which they are moving through changes modelled on the movement of a man from youth to maturity. On an alternative or complementary level, their relationship can be understood in terms of physical sexuality, though this becomes fully explicit only once, in the Twelfth Tablet appended to the epic at a late stage of its development (see below).⁴⁴ Wherever we locate the episode of the initial encounter

³⁹ The name of the god appealed to is not preserved here in the Standard Babylonian Version. George proposed Anu in his supplements (at SBV I 80, 93), but his subsequent edition of the Ugarit tablet names Ishtar as the deity who hears the people’s complaint (George 2007a, *MB Ug I*, line 14).

⁴⁰ The idea may be understood as coming originally from another god, possibly Ea as George (2003: 2.788, on line 96) suggests. One manuscript at line 100 ascribes the idea to Enlil (George 2003: 1.545 n. 14), which may be significant in view of Enlil’s role later in the narrative, when the two heroes kill his son Humbaba.

⁴¹ One unusual tablet preserves a version of the coming of Enkidu in which the names of Gilgamesh and Enkidu have been replaced, respectively, by Sin the moon-god and Ea, suggesting perhaps that the story has been reinterpreted in terms of a cosmological allegory (George 2007b). This bears comparison with the lines of the Standard Babylonian Version in which Ninsun predicts that Gilgamesh will travel the sky (SBV III.102–3, discussed below, n. 53). So far as I can see, however, none of the materials unique to this tablet are relevant to the present discussion.

⁴² The usual translation ‘harlot’ for Akkadian *ḫarīmtu* is potentially misleading. Although the word can refer to prostitution as a profession and as such can be used insultingly (for examples see CAD s.v.), it is also used for other classes of women whose lives are independent of men, including the consecrated sex-workers attached to the temples of the great goddesses, including that of Ninsun herself at Uruk (SBV III.42 with George 2003: 1.148). Cf. Steele 2007: 305–7.

⁴³ Most of this section is missing from the Standard Babylonian Version and is supplied from the Pennsylvania tablet.

⁴⁴ There are three key passages for this question. First, in Tablet I the symbols of Enkidu’s coming that appear in Gilgamesh’s dreams seem to be erotically charged: for discussion of the evidence

between the pair in emotional terms, its import in the narrative is clear: Gilgamesh is no longer alone in the expression of his energies. In a sense, the gods have responded to a weakness inherent in the notion that the king should be supreme and unrivalled (SBV I 45–6, sim. I 82–7, 95–8, etc.): if his supremacy is unchecked and unmediated, his forcefulness tends towards tyranny. Friendship, perhaps even love, is the instrument the gods use to temper the king's ebullience.⁴⁵

The assault on Humbaba: triumph and peril

In response (it seems) to Enkidu's misery at Gilgamesh's mother's disdain at his uncouth appearance, the two decide to go to the cedar forest to attack its guardian. This episode draws closely on the Sumerian *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* discussed in Chapter 2: but the context is very different, above all because Enkidu was a mere slave in the Sumerian version, but now he is bonded with Gilgamesh as an equal, in companionship and esteem if not in social status.⁴⁶ When it becomes clear that Gilgamesh needs Enkidu's help to succeed, Ninsun welcomes him into the community of her temple, and declares him her adoptive son and thus, implicitly or explicitly, Gilgamesh's adoptive brother (SBV III 116–28).⁴⁷

Fundamentally, then, it is as a pair bonded together that the two set out to win glory, through exploits that draw them away from the confines of the city and into the wider world beyond. In the discussion that follows, many of the details will inevitably be similar to those that have already been traced in the Sumerian texts examined in Chapter 2; but there are subtle differences, making it important that we trace the development of the story in the Standard Babylonian Version carefully on its own terms.

see George 2003: 1.452–4. Second, when Gilgamesh in his mourning for Enkidu veils his face, the simile 'like a bride (*kima kallati*)' is used (SBV VIII.59). The third is in the Twelfth Tablet, when the phantom of Enkidu refers to 'the penis that you touched' (SBV XII.96). As noted elsewhere (p. 216), this replaces a reference to *heterosexual* intimacies in the Sumerian forerunner text, suggesting that the relationship between the two friends became more sexualised in the later stages of the tradition. For varying interpretations of the relationship between the Sumerian and Akkadian texts on the issue of the sexuality of the friendship, see Abusch 2001; Cooper 2002; Nissinen 2010; and cf. Halperin 1990, associating the friendship with that between Achilles and Patroclus.

⁴⁵ See further Haubold 2015: 248–50.

⁴⁶ This theme is already present in the variant text of the Sumerian *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* in the fragments from Meturan (George 1999: p. 186 at Mt 1 22; Cavigneaux and Al-Rawi 2000a: 4–5).

⁴⁷ The phrase 'in brotherhood' (*ana aḥḥūti*) at SBV III.128 is conjectural.

Humbaba, guardian of the cedar forest in the far west, on the mountains of the land that we call Lebanon,⁴⁸ is a monstrous or demonic being, a terror to men, but is also a divinely sanctioned protector of the forest. Such ambiguity is typical of the lesser divine beings in Mesopotamian thought: a general comparison can be made, for example, with a relatively late newcomer to the array of divinities, Pazuzu the wind-demon, who is a being of terror but is also invoked to ward off evil.⁴⁹ With his ominous appearance – his bizarre face, with coiled patterns like entrails, figured as an evil sign in divination – and the supernatural weapons known as his ‘auras’ or ‘terrors’, which can also be reified as his cedar trees or anthropomorphically as his sons,⁵⁰ Humbaba is an enemy beyond mortal strength: ‘His voice is the Deluge, his speech is fire, his breath is death’ (*SBV* II 221–2, etc.).

Why do they decide to make the long journey to attack him? The surviving evidence suggests that, despite the more complex dramatisation, the motivation is essentially the same as in the forerunner of this episode, the Sumerian *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* (see pp. 44–48 above). The key lines in which he first explains the plan are missing from the Standard Babylonian Version, but references later in the text confirm that the guiding purpose is that victory over such an enemy will be enough to guarantee unending prestige – ‘a name [for] future [time]’ (*SBV* IV 248) – for them as a pair and for Gilgamesh in particular.⁵¹ In the Old Babylonian version found in the Yale tablet, he makes the same declaration to the assembled people of Uruk:

I will conquer him in the Forest of Cedar,
that Uruk’s offshoot is mighty I will have the land learn.
Let me start work and chop down the cedar,
a name that is eternal I will establish for ever!

(*OB* III 184–8, George 2003: 1.203)

⁴⁸ On the location see George 2003: 1.20, 93–4.

⁴⁹ Pazuzu is described as ‘king of the evil wind demons’ in the inscription on his famous statuette in the Louvre, Paris; but his image was used for its apotropaic power of driving away the pestilential winds, especially the west wind. See Black and Green 1992: 147–9; Wiggermann 2007.

⁵⁰ The weapons are various called *melemmū* ‘auras’, *pulhiātu* ‘terrors’, *namrīrrū* ‘radiant beams’ (George 2003: 1.144 with n. 24; Al-Rawi and George 2014: 74–5; Fleming and Milstein 2010: 56–8).

⁵¹ There are indications in the text that Enkidu knew Humbaba in the wild days of his youth (see esp. *SBV* V 89). Among the older versions this is explicit in the Yale fragment (*OB* III 106–7, George 2003: 1.198–9) and the Ugarit fragment *MB Ug* 2 (George 2007a, translation at p. 252: ‘When Enkidu lay asleep with his animals . . .’). The new fragment from Suleimaniyah has fragmentary lines in which Humbaba may be referring to the same thing (Al-Rawi and George 2014: p. 79, lines 61–72, with their commentary). However, there is no indication that past dealings between the two play any part in motivating the expedition to seek combat with Humbaba.

Yet there is a pessimistic twist behind this ambition. Enkidu, voicing the warnings of caution, tries to dissuade Gilgamesh from seeking out an enemy whom even the gods could not defeat (SBV II 226). To this Gilgamesh responds with a fragment of proverbial wisdom:

Why, my friend, [do you] speak like a weakling?
And your mouth went limp, you [vex] my heart!
As for man, [his days] are numbered,
all that he ever did is but [*wind*.] (SBV II 232–5)

The logic of the sequence can only be that an eternal name is worth seeking because life itself will slip away in death: the quest is to preserve one's name through fame, extending to a more abstract and perhaps more meaningful level the hope of the preservation of one's name through cultic commemoration. Already the urge to heroic achievement is underpinned by pessimism about the limitations of the human condition. This theme is clearly enunciated in the Yale tablet, where the lines equivalent to those cited above are preceded by another proverb, which we have already encountered in its Sumerian form:⁵²

Who is there, my friend, that can climb to the sky?
Only the gods have [dwelled] forever in sunlight.
(OB III 140–1, George 2003: 1.201)

So the pair prepare for their expedition; but an ominous note sounds even now, when they pray to Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun. When she hears of the plan her response is one of sorrow (SBV III 35), and she turns in complaint to Shamash the sun-god:

Why did you assign (and) inflict a restless spirit on [my] son Gilgamesh?
For now you have touched him and he will travel
the distant path to where Humbaba is.
He will face a battle that he does not know,
he will ride a route that he does not know. (SBV III 46–50)

On the face of it this is no more than the mother's worry for her son undergoing such toils: but does it look further, foreshadowing the epic's later theme of the disasters that follow on his exploits? Is it because of the same foreboding or foreknowledge that Ninsun in a later prayer reminds Shamash that Gilgamesh's destiny is to spend his afterlife alongside

⁵² See above, p. 43.

Ningišzida, the vizier of the Underworld (*SBV* III 104–6)?⁵³ Here, even in the fragmentary state of the surviving text, we can trace a theme that will also loom large in our later study of Achilles: the hero's divine mother has an intimation that his deeds will lead to his death, so her response even to their beginning is to lament in anticipation of what will happen in the end.⁵⁴ For Gilgamesh the causal chain that will lead from his present undertaking to his death remains obscure when she speaks of it, and in this too the present scene will be paralleled in the Iliadic scenes between Achilles and his mother Thetis (see below, pp. 207–209).

When the pair are on their journey, the foreboding is repeated in Gilgamesh's ominous dreams. In one dream a mountain falls on him, in another storm and lightning ravage the earth, in another he is taken by a monstrous thunderbird, in another he undergoes combat with a bull; but in some or all of the dreams a mysterious stranger saves him from the danger.⁵⁵ Each time Enkidu interprets the dreams favourably, as predictions that they will defeat Humbaba with the help of Shamash; and he reassures him⁵⁶ with praise derived from the formulaic traditions of the Sumerian poems.

In Tablet V they begin to draw near to their enemy.⁵⁷ As they climb the mountain Gilgamesh is smitten by 'stiffness' and terror,⁵⁸ under assault from Humbaba's 'auras', and Enkidu urges him to courage and strength:

You have been smeared in [blood], so you need not fear death:
[wax] wrathful, and like a very dervish go into a frenzy.
Let [your shout] boom loud [like] a kettledrum!
Let stiffness leave your arms and feebleness arise [from] your legs!⁵⁹

⁵³ Ninsun also speaks of Gilgamesh becoming a deity who travels the sky (*SBV* III. 102–3); elsewhere, however, if he has a glorious afterlife destiny it is as an Underworld deity who judges the dead (George 2003: 1.129–36, 461, and see above, pp. 48–50).

⁵⁴ See Currie 2016: 110, with further parallels.

⁵⁵ The dreams, five in all, are only partly preserved in the Standard Version. The group mentioned here is a synthesis based on George's comparison between what survives of the Standard Version and a number of other tablets containing earlier variant versions (George 2003: 1.464–5).

⁵⁶ This depends on George's partly hypothetical reconstruction of how the surviving lines originally belonged in the narrative (George 2003: 1.465).

⁵⁷ Since the publication of George's standard edition in 2003, the sequence of the text has been revised by the incorporation of material from the new Tablet V manuscript from Suleimaniyah (Al-Rawi and George 2014). As well as the entirely new material, the Suleimaniyah manuscript allows much that was formerly published as the latter part of Tablet IV (from the manuscript denoted AA) to be reassigned to Tablet V. More recently, Jiménez 2014: 99–100 has published a further fragment from one or other of the sequences in which Enkidu urges Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba, who then weeps 'before Shamash' (sim. Al-Rawi and George 2014: pp. 80–81, lines 265–75).

⁵⁸ See esp. Al-Rawi and George 2014: pp. 76–7, lines 27–30.

⁵⁹ Al-Rawi and George 2014: pp. 78–9, lines 39–44.

As Humbaba realises that the intruders are approaching, he speaks aloud to himself in anticipation of the meeting, and Enkidu again reassures Gilgamesh, reminding him of the strength of their partnership: ‘One friend is one alone, but [two are two].’⁶⁰ When they face Humbaba at last, he rails in mockery against Enkidu and declares that he will kill Gilgamesh: ‘I will feed his flesh to the “locust” birds, the ravening eagles and vultures!’ (V 94). The weird contortions of his face again terrify Gilgamesh until Enkidu urges him back to the combat (V 95–107). The force of the ensuing battle divides the mountain range in two; but at last Shamash sends winds to bind Humbaba, and he is overcome. In a scene dramatically developed from the earlier Sumerian texts, Humbaba three times begs for his life to be spared, first pleading with Gilgamesh himself and then begging Enkidu to intercede (SBV V 144–155, VI 79–80, 238–9);⁶¹ he weeps, offering to become Gilgamesh’s slave;⁶² but each time Enkidu urges Gilgamesh to kill him and fulfil their purpose, in lines that have been reconstructed conjecturally as follows:

Establish for ever [*a fame*] that endures,
how Gilgamesh [*slew ferocious*] Humbaba! (SBV V 188–9, 244–5)⁶³

So the guardian of the forest is slain by the two heroes acting together: Gilgamesh cuts his throat and Enkidu rips his body open (SBV V 263–5).⁶⁴

This, then, must be the pinnacle of the two heroes’ achievement, the deed that will win them their immortal name. But over it hangs the curse that Humbaba utters before he is killed:

May the pair of them not grow old,
apart from his friend Gilgamesh may Enkidu have nobody to bury
him! (SBV V 256–7)

At the moment of triumph comes the foreboding of disaster. In the immediate context, the danger seems to come from the way the two heroes have become caught among the personal loyalties and enmities of the gods.

⁶⁰ Al-Rawi and George 2014: pp. 78–9, line 75.

⁶¹ An earlier version also survives in the Ugarit tablet *MB Ug2* (George 2007a: 250–4).

⁶² None of the surviving texts of the Standard Babylonian Version preserve the specific point that Gilgamesh feels pity and is about to yield, as in the corresponding Sumerian texts (see *Gilgamesh and Huwawa A*, lines 158–62, at *LOAS*, pp. 347–8, sim. George 1999: p. 159 at lines 158–62; *Gilgamesh and Huwawa B*, George 1999: pp. 165–6 at lines 135 ff.).

⁶³ Here I include George’s conjectural supplements from the Penguin translation; the translation in the standard edition is more conservative and the lacunae are left empty (cf. also Al-Rawi and George 2014: p. 81).

⁶⁴ In the Sumerian text Enkidu alone performs the *coup de grâce*, but this should not be taken to mean any lesser responsibility for Gilgamesh, whom Enlil then blames for the killing.

They have been protected throughout by Shamash, as Gilgamesh's mother had arranged: Ninsun reminds Shamash that he hates Humbaba, the enemy of mankind and the 'Evil Thing' of the land (*SBV* III 54).⁶⁵ Yet at the same time Humbaba is the son and servant of the great god Enlil. The heroes are aware of the prospect of his wrath, and in the dialogue before the killing, Enkidu has already hinted at the danger:

finish him, slay him, do away with his power,
before Enlil the foremost has learned (about it)!
The [great] gods could be angry with us,
Enlil in Nippur, Shamash in [Larsa] . . . (*SBV* V 184–7, sim. 241–4)

In the corresponding Sumerian text, as we saw above, the heroes try to appease Enlil by dedicating Huwawa's head to him, and he responds with anger at Gilgamesh for having killed him rather than taken him as a servant (*Gilgamesh and Huwawa A* 187–92, *LOAS*, p. 349). Here in the Standard Version their response is more complex. As soon as the killing has been carried out, Enkidu realises the consequences ahead:

[My friend], we have reduced the forest [to] a wasteland,
[how] shall we answer Enlil in Nippur?
[In] your might you slew the guardian,
what was this wrath of yours that you went trampling the forest?
(Al-Rawi and George 2014: pp. 82–3, lines 303–6)

Driven (we presume) by this fear of retribution, they first slaughter the 'seven sons' of Humbaba, here a personification of the 'auras' that used to protect him;⁶⁶ then, as in the Sumerian text, they cut down one of the high cedar trees of the forest to make a great door to be offered to Enlil at his temple, and float it downriver on a raft, Gilgamesh carrying the head of Humbaba with him (*SBV* V 299–302⁶⁷). Enkidu prays that the sanctuary in Nippur will welcome the offering, and (according to a line attested in one of the Old Babylonian fragments) he hopes that Enlil will 'take delight' in the door (*OB IM* 28, George 2003: 1.271).

Is that hope doomed? At this point the story of the killing of Humbaba concludes, and (to judge from what survives) nothing was said in the epic

⁶⁵ See George's note on the meaning of this phrase (George 2003: 2.811–12).

⁶⁶ Al-Rawi and George 2014: pp. 82–3, lines 307–8. This identification of the 'sons' depends on complementary evidence from the Old Babylonian fragment from Ischali, in which the 'auras' are personified and described as 'escaping in the wood' (*OB Ischali* 12–17 at George 2003: p. 263; see discussion, Al-Rawi and George 2014: pp. 74–5).

⁶⁷ Supplemented by Al-Rawi and George 2014: pp. 82–3, lines 320–4.

of Enlil's immediate response. The implication must be that retribution for what they have done will be worked out in more mysterious and unseen ways, and some such schema seems to be needed to make sense of the follies and disasters that beset Gilgamesh and Enkidu from here on.

Ishtar: crisis after triumph

The turn comes immediately, and it comes through the dangerous power of divine sexuality. Gilgamesh at the opening of Tablet VI has returned to the city as the triumphant king, and the goddess Ishtar (= Sumerian Inana) looks down on him with the 'raised eyes' of desire (*SBV* VI 6). As her husband, she says, he will have great honour, and the land and the animals will be blessed with great fertility: all this looks back to the archaic sacral image of the king wedded to the goddess, as in the Shulgi hymns examined in Chapter 2. In this role he will live with her in her temple at Uruk, ruling her centre of power. But Gilgamesh spurns her and rails against her in vicious metaphors:⁶⁸

[*Who* . . .] would take you in marriage?
 [(You), . . . that does not solidify] ice,
 a louvre-door [that does not] block breeze and draught,
 a palace that massacres [(. . .)] warriors . . . (*SBV* VI 32–5)

The long catalogue of sinister images culminates in 'a shoe that bites the feet of its owner' (*SBV* VI 41), an image that recurs in omen texts as a harbinger of death.⁶⁹ He recounts the tales of other lovers of hers whom she maimed or ruined: most famously Dumuzid (*SBV* VI 46–7), the archetypal 'dying god' who serves as her consort but is sent down to misery in the underworld, but also others whose sufferings at her hands are not known from elsewhere:

You loved the shepherd, the grazier, the herdsman,
 who regularly piled up for you (bread baked in) embers,
 slaughtering kids for you every day.
 You struck him and turned him into a wolf,
 so his own shepherd boys drive him away,
 and his dogs take bites at his thighs. (*SBV* VI 58–63)

⁶⁸ A somewhat fuller version of the present speech is also attested in the Middle Babylonian fragment from Emar (George 1999: 136–8, 2003: 333–6).

⁶⁹ George 2003: 1.473.

The pathetic fate of the wolf is akin to that of Dumuzid, in one of the Sumerian articulations: he is a shepherd, and he is transformed into a gazelle to escape the demons sent to take him to the land of the dead.⁷⁰ But the story of metamorphosis here is different, and it resembles the many Greek tales of a mortal turned into an animal by a goddess who has used him for sexual gratification.⁷¹ Whoever composed these lines seems to be setting story-patterns in parallel with each other, moving through analogous old tales or poems about Ishtar to give form to Gilgamesh's rejection of the goddess.⁷² In context, however, the verbal artistry of the speech makes it all the more startling as an enactment of heroic overconfidence and bravado. This movement of mind begs to be characterised as something like arrogance, pride, recklessness: words that, once we use them, immediately look towards the Greek theme that the hero's highest point of triumph is the moment when he moves to disastrous excess (below, pp. 193–197).

Ishtar goes to Anu her father, the sky-god, to weep for the 'abuse' and 'insult' (VI 84–6) that have been brought against her; he suggests (like a human father to a wilful daughter – a startlingly realistic touch) that she may have begun the trouble by provoking the man, but she persists and demands that he give her the Bull of Heaven – that is, the celestial beast identified with the constellation Taurus – to send against Gilgamesh in revenge, here reprising the Sumerian *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*. In face of his reluctance she threatens to overturn the cosmic order by wrecking the Underworld so as to release the dead among the living (SBV VI 96–100), just as she also threatens in *The Descent of Ishtar to the*

⁷⁰ See *Dumuzid's Dream* 174–80, LOAS, p. 82. On the general question of Mesopotamian analogues for the myths referred to in the list of Ishtar's lovers, see George 2003: 1.473–4, and note possible resonances with the *Tale of Gudam* (on which see Gadotti 2006).

⁷¹ In Greek there are exceptionally close parallels in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, whose centrepiece is the sexual union between Aphrodite and the shepherd Anchises, and there are repeated references to the prospect of the maiming, castration or punishment of the mortal lover (*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 187–90, 286–90), while the goddess herself recounts the story of Tithonus, who became shrivelled up and (in later-attested versions) was changed into a cicada after his union with the goddess Dawn (218 ff.). If the story of the cicada transformation is alluded to in this passage (cf. *Il.* 3.150–2), it finds a further close parallel in Gilgamesh's series of ruined lovers: Ishullanu the gardener tries to reject her and is punished by being turned into a *dallalu* (VI 76), a mysterious word which is attested only here, but presumably derived from *dallu* 'small, stunted': it is variously explained as referring to a spider, frog, mole or dwarf (George 2003: 2.838 favours 'dwarf'). On Near Eastern motifs in the *Hymn to Aphrodite* see further Faulkner 2008: 18–22; Currie 2012a, with Currie 2016: 173–83.

⁷² Cf. Currie 2012a: 557–62, on the allusive strategies here and their Greek analogues.



Fig. 4 Cylinder seal with impression believed to show Ishtar with Gilgamesh and Enkidu as they attack the Bull of Heaven.

Underworld.⁷³ Anu is thus persuaded to release the monstrous Bull for her to inflict on Uruk. Gilgamesh and Enkidu wrestle with the Bull. This scene is almost certainly depicted on several cylinder seals which are dated to the Neo-Babylonian period,⁷⁴ postdating the canonisation of the Standard Babylonian Version and therefore belonging to the period when the epic was being widely copied as a classic. One of these images seems to represent the two heroes killing the Bull while Ishtar looks on in dismay (Fig. 4).

Why do they behave like this? There is a clue when, at a difficult point in the combat, Enkidu seeks to strengthen Gilgamesh's resolve by reminding him of the need to preserve the prestige they have won:

My friend, we vaunted ourselves [(...) in our] city,
how shall we answer the dense-gathered people? (SBV VI 130–1)

These lines show clearly that they are still driven by the need for glory that led them to assault Humbaba: to draw back from the present challenge would be to put their prestige in doubt. The aftermath of the exploit repeats and amplifies the problems that they faced after that earlier killing, when they tried to appease the coming anger of Enlil. The heroes first take out the beast's heart and offer it to Shamash (SBV VI 148);⁷⁵ but his response to the

⁷³ See *The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld* at Foster, *BTM*, pp. 498–505; also Dalley, *MM* 154–62. Ereshkigal makes the same threat in the longer and later version of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*: see *BTM*, p. 520, at C v 11'–12'.

⁷⁴ Collon 2005: 179–81. See further Ornan 2010.

⁷⁵ This seems to have been a customary act after the killing of a bull: see George 2003: 1.476.

offering is not mentioned, and instead Ishtar herself appears on the city wall, wailing for the death of the Bull and (seemingly, though this is a doubtfully attested passage) calling down a curse upon Gilgamesh.⁷⁶ Enkidu answers her with insolent violence:⁷⁷

Enkidu heard this speech of Ishtar,
he tore a haunch off the Bull of Heaven and threw it down before her.
'You too, had I caught you, I would have treated you like it!
I would have draped its guts on your arms!' (SBV VI 154–7)

After abusing her in such terms, they take the horns of the Bull and decorate them to be used in the veneration of Gilgamesh's deified father Lugalbanda. Significantly, this replaces an episode of the earlier Sumerian poem *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* in which they dedicated the horns to Inana (= Ishtar) herself, an act that seems to parallel their hapless dedication of Humbaba's head to Enlil.⁷⁸ In the newer version, their urge to honour those above them has shifted to the hero's own bloodline: does this heighten the sense of their disregard for the great goddess and, by extension, for the celestial divinities as a group?

So the pair return to the city in triumph, and the people are gathered to admire them (SBV VI 169–70). Gilgamesh asks a question of the serving-girls in the palace,

'Who is the finest among men?
Who is the most glorious of fellows?' (SBV VI 172–3)

and they answer with due adulation:

'Gilgamesh is the finest among men!
[Gilgamesh is the most] glorious of fellows!' (SBV VI 174–5)

Ostensibly they have preserved the supremacy with which they 'vaunted themselves in the city', but the implicit foreboding is unmistakable. The women's praise is the most potent sign that the heroes have reached the pinnacle of success, but that success has been won by rejecting and belittling the goddess as well as by triumphing over a creature who

⁷⁶ This interpretation is uncertain, and what she says could be simply an expression of grief (George 2003: 2.842, at line 153).

⁷⁷ In the Sumerian version Gilgamesh not Enkidu throws the haunch (George 1999: p. 174, at Ma 130 ff.): the change perhaps reflects a redeveloped understanding of the relationship between the two heroes.

⁷⁸ See pp. 47, 72 above.

embodies part of the celestial order of the world. Are they now at risk of ignoring or forgetting the old pessimistic wisdom of human limitations, in a magnified version of the false optimism against which the *Poem of the Righteous Sufferer* was a warning? Gilgamesh has climbed to a high place, and he is about to totter.

The death of the friend

Intuitively – or with an unacknowledged memory of the Sophoclean or Shakespearean ‘tragic hero’ and the critical baggage that hangs around that term – we might expect to hear now of Gilgamesh moving into ‘error’, *hamartia*.⁷⁹ But there is no such easy progression. Instead, the story twists again, and evil comes along a sidelong path. Enkidu has a troubling dream: its details are lost from the Standard Babylonian Version, but clues survive elsewhere, principally in the Hittite prose paraphrase named by its ancient scribes as the *Song of Gilgamesh*. The passage is translated as follows by Beckman, with Enkidu describing his dream to Gilgamesh:⁸⁰

Anu, Enlil, Ea and the Sun-god of Heaven [were seated in council]. And Anu spoke before Enlil, ‘Because they have killed the Bull of Heaven, [and because] they have killed Huwawa, who [made] the mountains thick with cedars’ – so said Anu – ‘between them [one must die]!’ And Enlil said, ‘Enkidu shall die, but Gilgamesh shall not die!’ (*Song of Gilgamesh* III §1, Beckman 2001: p. 163)

Here, as in the Flood narrative, it is Enlil who inflicts harsh and even arbitrary punishment: why has Enkidu been singled out for death? Is it because – in the Hittite as in the Babylonian version – he had urged Gilgamesh not to spare Huwawa when he begged for mercy (*Song of Gilgamesh* I §22, p. 161)? By asking that question we are trying to fit the poem to a pattern of theological norms that might make sense in our own world; but as the debate continues in the text itself, it depends on a simple exchange of blame and counter-blame among the gods themselves:

⁷⁹ For Aristotelian *hamartia* see *Poetics* 1453 a 7 ff.; measured discussion by Halliwell 1998: 202–37.

⁸⁰ Discussions by Beckman 2003; Bachvarova 2016: 63–72, and on the present passage in particular Stefanini 1969: 41, with George 2003: 1.478.

Then the Sun-god of Heaven responded to heroic Enlil, ‘Didn’t they kill them (!) at my (!) behest⁸¹ – the Bull of Heaven and Huwawa? And should innocent Enkidu now die?’ Enlil became angry with the Sun-god of Heaven, ‘Why do you accompany them daily like a comrade?’ (*Song of Gilgamesh* III §2, p. 163)

The dream ended, Enkidu awakens knowing that he will die. It is of course possible that this brief and bald account is a Hittite invention, but this is unlikely to be the case. Another episode of the Hittite text, one that is demonstrably independent of the Babylonian model, reveals its innovative character by using gods from the Hittite rather than the Mesopotamian pantheon; in contrast, the present passage revolves around Anu, Enlil and Shamash the sun-god in just the way that we would expect from the source text.⁸² It may or may not be coincidental that from elsewhere at the same find-site there survives a fragment of a Middle Babylonian version telling of the gods gathered in judgment, and one string of words is tentatively reconstructed as the wish or command that Enkidu should not ‘acquire descendants’.⁸³ It is an inviting possibility that this fragment is from a version akin to the source that was summarised and adapted by the composer of the prose text in Hittite. Even without that, however, the Hittite evidence allows us to hypothesise with some confidence about what would have happened in the original Babylonian version of the dream. Enlil spoke out in complaint against the doings of Enkidu; Shamash argued that the heroes were acting at his prompting⁸⁴ – at the relevant point in the Hittite version the Sun-god speaks words of encouragement when they first encounter Huwawa, as well as rousing up his winds against the enemy⁸⁵ – and Enlil, seemingly, closed down the discussion by accusing Shamash of being meddlesome.

In this partisan bickering among the individual gods, was there any room for a discourse of high justice?⁸⁶ Nothing here or in the Babylonian

⁸¹ See n. 84 below.

⁸² Beckman 2003: 43. On the other hand, Bachvarova (2016: 68) argues that the scene resembles the configurations seen in Hittite prayers and substitution rituals, consistent with the hypothesis that it is not necessarily derived from a passage in the Mesopotamian source.

⁸³ *MB Boğ I*, fr. (f), as printed by George 2003, 1.314–17; cf. Bachvarova 2016: 68. For overall surveys of the Akkadian fragments from Boğazköy, see George 2003: 1.306–25, Bachvarova 2016: 60–63.

⁸⁴ The transmitted text here is doubtful, and ‘your behest’ has been emended to ‘my behest’. A contrary view was advanced by Stefanini (1969: 43), arguing for retaining the MS reading – which, however, necessitates positing an earlier intervention by Enlil for which there is no evidence.

⁸⁵ Tablet I, §§19, 21, Beckman 2001: p. 161.

⁸⁶ I am grateful for the comments of the anonymous Cambridge University Press reader, which have done much to clarify the present section.

versions survives to explain or justify why Enkidu alone must atone for the deeds that they both committed in unison. It is possible, however, to speculate that the debate might have worked itself out as a decision to *reverse* an earlier divine plan. The gods, having created Enkidu to help divert Gilgamesh's violence away from his fellow humans, have now found themselves faced with a still greater threat from the pair of them in unison; they decide simply to undo the problem by cancelling the existence of Enkidu. This would then be an instantiation of a pattern repeated across many Mesopotamian narratives of the gods: they have solved a problem by an act of creation, and when that creation becomes troublesome they sweep it away. In the Epic of Creation *Enuma Elish*, for example, Apsu's response to the annoyance caused by his younger descendants is to plot to destroy them, 'to put an end to what we have created'.⁸⁷ *Atrahasis* offers an even more precise parallel, giving Enlil the leading role in the reversal: there, as we have seen, it was at his prompting that the entire human race was to be swept away when it had become a nuisance to the gods (above, pp. 52–54). But for Enkidu's death nothing in our texts gives direct support to such a reconstruction, and it remains a guess. From what we can see, this moment in *Gilgamesh* simply expresses one of the abiding strangenesses of all ancient depictions of the gods: their motivations are unknowable, and the sufferings of mortals are only heightened by our ignorance of their decision-making. This problem will recur again and again when we consider the *Iliad*, and we will look in vain in Homeric epic for a more optimistic solution than that offered by the Mesopotamian narratives.

When the Standard Babylonian Version resumes, Enkidu has awoken from his dream, and in anger (perhaps in a fever or delirium, with the sickness of his death already coming upon him) he speaks out against the temple-door that they set up after killing Humbaba as an offering to Enlil, saying that he wishes he had dedicated it instead to Shamash, who had given him help (SBV VII 37–64).⁸⁸ Enkidu seems to have taken the dream as a certain prophecy of death; Gilgamesh promises to pray to Shamash and the other gods, even Enlil, and to dedicate a votive statue on his behalf, presumably in order to beg them to have mercy; but Enkidu replies that this would be useless, apparently quoting a proverbial saying:

⁸⁷ Tiamat's indignant description of what Apsu proposes to do: *Enuma Elish* I 45 at Foster, *BTM*, p. 440.

⁸⁸ Following George's tentative reconstruction of Enkidu's words about the door (George 2003: 1.478 with n. 120).

[*What Enlil*] commanded is not like that of the gods of [. . .]
 '[What he] commanded, he did not [erase] again,
 [what] he *proclaimed*, he did not erase again.' (SBV VII 85–7)

Does this refer to the role of Enlil as holder of the 'tablet of destinies', where the order of things is fixed or determined in writing,⁸⁹ or to a more mysterious and intangible sense of the causes of death? Either way, Enkidu's death is now certain:

My friend, [*my destiny is*] drawn,
 people do go prematurely to their fate. (SBV VII 88–9)

'Fate', 'destiny', the order of things, in Akkadian *šimtu*:⁹⁰ the sense of the second line, on George's interpretation, is literally that people go down to death even when it is not *šimtu* for this to happen so soon.⁹¹ Enkidu curses the hunter and the woman Shamhat, the people who brought him from the wilds to civilisation: he seems to hate the life that he has led in Gilgamesh's company. Shamash replies from heaven with words of consolation, urging him to turn away from this hatred, but as his speech develops it dwells on more grim things:

Now Gilgamesh, your friend and brother,
 [will] lay you out on a great bed.
 [On] a bed of honour he will lay you out,
 [he will] set you on a restful seat, the seat to (his) left,
 [the princes] of the earth will kiss your feet.
 [He will make] weep for you the people of Uruk, he will make them sob
 for you,
 the people [so bonny] he will fill full of grief for you.
 (SBV VII 139–45, cf. VIII 84–9)

He will have a great funeral, Gilgamesh and the people will mourn him: but what solace, one wonders, is it to think of these things that will come after death? Is there any blessing in being honoured by 'the princes of the earth' – that is, by the gods who inhabit the land of the dead?⁹²

⁸⁹ See Black and Green 1992, s.v. 'tablet of destinies'. For the significance of the Tablet of Destinies see esp. the poem *Anzu*, in which the Anzu-bird steals the Tablet from Enlil (Foster, *BTM*, pp. 555–78; Dalley, *MFM*, pp. 203–27).

⁹⁰ On *šimtu* there is a very useful summary treatment by Rochberg 2010: 19–30. On the relationship between *šimtu*, prediction and divination, see also Rochberg 2004: 50–51, 196–7, and cf. Rochberg 2016: 170–6.

⁹¹ George 2003: 2.846, note at line 89.

⁹² For this as the meaning of 'the princes of the earth', see George 2003: 2.848, note at line 143.

Enkidu next describes another dark dream, where he was attacked and seized by a demonic man, with the features of the ominous *Anzu* bird and limbs like those of lion and eagle (SBV VII 165 ff.). In the dream, Gilgamesh in terror failed to help him, and the assailant turned him into the form of a bird and brought him in this shape to the land of the dead:⁹³

[He struck] me, he turned me into a dove.
[He bound] my arms like (the wings of) a bird,
to lead me captive to the house of darkness, the seat of Irkalla . . .
(SBV VII 182–4)

The dream develops into an account of the Underworld and its miseries, drawing on imagery that was already a set-piece when the epic was composed:⁹⁴

the house whose residents are deprived of light,
where dust is their sustenance, their food clay.
They are clad like birds in coats of feathers,
and they cannot see light but dwell in darkness. (SBV VII 187–90)

The imagery of this mythical death-world shades into that of the grave itself: it is ‘the House of Dust’, a place of darkness, misery and absence. Here Enkidu saw the multitudes of the dead:

I looked and (saw) the crowns stowed away;
there sat [kings], the crowned heads who had ruled the land since days of
old . . . (SBV VII 194–5)

Kings, priests and figures of earlier legend⁹⁵ were there, gathered before the queen of the Underworld, Ereshkigal, and her scribe: in death, the vision seems to tell, all men will be reduced to the same level of abnegation.

⁹³ George notes the suggestion of a link between the bird-form into which he is transformed in the dream, and the bird-forms traditionally taken by the inhabitants of the Underworld (George 2003: 1.481).

⁹⁴ As George notes, the same formulation describes the Underworld in near-identical lines in *The Descent of Ishtar* 4–10 (BTM, p. 499), *Nergal and Ereshkigal* (Late Version, ii 1’–7’, BTM, p. 516). See further below, pp. 253–254.

⁹⁵ The text names the legendary king, Etana, who in the surviving portion of the eponymous poem flies on an eagle’s back in his quest for the ‘plant of life’ (see also below, p. 86), and the shepherd god Shakkan. Etana is attested elsewhere as a senior official of the Underworld, and this role has obvious thematic resonances with the later fate of Gilgamesh himself (George 2003: 1.128–9, and below in Ch. 4), but Shakkan’s presence is more mysterious (cf. George 2003: 2.850–2, note at SBV VII 202). Presumably the thematic significance of both would be clearer if Enkidu’s vision survived more fully.

As the days pass after this dream, Enkidu's sickness worsens, he lies in bed; and so he slips away into death, begging Gilgamesh to remember him (SBV VII 251–2). Much of the account of Enkidu's dying words is lost, but on the basis of what survives the following restoration has been proposed:⁹⁶

[My god] has taken against me, my friend, . . . ,
 [I do not die] like one who [falls] in the midst of battle.
 I was afraid of combat, and . . .
 My friend, one who [falls] in combat [makes his name],
 but I, [I do not fall] in [combat, and shall make not my name].
 (SBV VII 263–7, following George 1999: p. 62)

This is the final bitterness: he will not now achieve the glorious name that endures, the name for whose sake he and Gilgamesh faced Humbaba, and for whose sake they became supreme in the city. This inglorious death from sickness will cheat him of the very prize that they had sought as consolation in face of the certainty of death.

Enkidu as substitute for Gilgamesh?

'Enkidu shall die, but Gilgamesh shall not die!' The implication seems clear that in some sense Enkidu dies in Gilgamesh's place, as a proxy or substitute for the hero who led the assault on Humbaba and who rejected the advances of Ishtar. That would remain no more than a vague suspicion, a possibility for adding literary shape beyond the realities of the text itself,⁹⁷ were it not for a curious crux in the manuscript transmission of Tablet II. Where Enkidu is about to encounter Gilgamesh for the first time to prevent him from intruding on a wedding, the key sentence is translated:

For Gilgamesh, like a god, a *substitute* was in place. (SBV II 110)

⁹⁶ Here I print the reconstructed text offered by George in his Penguin edition of 1999: George 2003 gives a more conservative translation where the sequence of ideas is left incomplete, but in his analysis (George 2003: 1.484) he suggests a reconstruction of the same train of thought as is reflected in the more bold restorations in the Penguin edition.

⁹⁷ Cf. the psychoanalysis-based interpretation by Van Nortwick 1992, 8–38. Van Nortwick's reading depends on the intuition (or conceit?) that the principal heroes in *Gilgamesh* (as also in the *Iliad* and even the *Aeneid*) are to be understood in allegorical terms, as representing processes of disavowal and integration within a single personality. Although this finds parallels in authentic ancient responses to the Graeco-Roman works (as, for example, in Fulgentius' interpretation of the *Aeneid*), nothing of this kind is attested for *Gilgamesh*, either in ancient responses or within the text. See my review, Clarke 1993.

The problem is the last word of the line in Akkadian, *pūhu* ‘substitute’ (the final syllable *-hu* is restored by the editor to supply a gap in the tablet, but the reading seems certain). This word has peculiar ritual associations, being one of the key terms associated with concept of the ritual substitute installed in place of a king (*šar pūhi*).⁹⁸ This custom is reconstructed as follows. When the life of the rightful king (*šarru*) was threatened by an evil omen, an insignificant person would be chosen to replace him during the time of danger and to take the evil upon himself, wearing his robes and insignia while the king himself took refuge in pretended obscurity, disguised as a ‘farmer’ or ‘gardener’; and surviving texts leave no doubt that the substitute could be put to death when the peril had passed. For example, a series of letters survive in the name of Mar-Issar, representative in Babylon of the king Esarhaddon,⁹⁹ which report the installation of a substitute king in response to the evil portent presented by an eclipse, followed after one hundred days by the termination of the substitute’s mock reign:

[Damqî], the son of the prelate of Akka[d], who had ru[led] Assyria, Babylon(ia) [and] all the countries, [di]ed with his queen on the night of [f xth day as] a substitute (*dinānu*)¹⁰⁰ for the king, my lord, [and for the sake of the li]fe of Šamaš-šumu-ukin. He went to his fate for their redemption. We prepared his burial chamber. He and his queen were decorated, treated, displayed, buried and wailed over.¹⁰¹

This text dates from as late as the early seventh century BCE, and indeed almost all direct evidence for this custom of royal substitution belongs to the Neo-Assyrian and later periods. However, the role of the ‘master scholars’ in this period, using knowledge of omens and apotropaic rituals to protect the king and maintain order in the state, stretches back into the longer history of Mesopotamian kingship and should be seen as an expression of an authentic tradition.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ The standard study is Bottéro 1992: 138–55; see also Parpola 1970: xxii–xxxii, Rochberg 2004: 78, 222–3.

⁹⁹ Parpola 1993: 285–9, nos. 350–352. See also pp. 4–6, nos. 1–4; p. 12, no. 12; pp. 67–8, no. 90 (the substitute’s death is explicit here); p. 155, no. 189; p. 157, no. 193; pp. 172–175, nos. 219–221; p. 254, no. 314; pp. 120–124, no. 160 (see here line 4, where the death of the substitute is again explicit). Lambert 1957–8, 1959–60 examines evidence for the ritual itself, including the death of the substitute.

¹⁰⁰ This term is used interchangeably with *pūhu* in this group of letters from Esarhaddon’s servant Mar-Issar and elsewhere: see for example no. 350, line 1’; no. 351, line 5, and cf. p. 121, no. 160, line 4.

¹⁰¹ Parpola 1993: p. 288, no. 352, lines 5ff.

¹⁰² On the continuity of divinatory traditions see Parpola 1993, xiii–xxx, and cf. Rochberg 2004: 43–97, esp. 63–4; Van de Mieroop 2016: 87–112. The surviving direct evidence for the substitution ritual is assembled by Parpola 1970: xxii–xxxii. The chronicle entry about king

It must be emphasised, however, that the textual evidence suggests that the use of this motif in Tablet II does not extend back to the remoter origins of the Gilgamesh tradition. The complete text of the line where *pūḫū* appears survives in only one manuscript, from the archives of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh;¹⁰³ in the equivalent passage of the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania tablet the order of the lines is more logical and the word is *meḫru* ‘rival, equal’, which yields a simpler meaning.¹⁰⁴ The new wording suggests that at some stage in the transmission, perhaps identifiable with the composition of the Standard Babylonian Version proper, it made sense to at least one editor or redactor to conceptualise Enkidu as a substitute yielded up to death in place of Gilgamesh.¹⁰⁵ If this is right, the motivation may have been connected to one of the pervasive themes visible in *Gilgamesh* and in Akkadian literary tradition as a whole: a concern with *aetiological* narrative, the construction of plot-events to serve as origin-stories for the familiar cultural phenomena of later times.¹⁰⁶ Potentially, at least, Enkidu as a ‘substitute victim’ would serve as a model or pattern for the royal substitution rituals of the world of the redactor’s own time.¹⁰⁷ This one-word allusion cannot be allowed to overshadow our overall understanding of the death of Enkidu, which speaks to the universal sorrow of the death of a loved one, but it remains significant as a strand in the ancient interpretation of what happened between them, and it will reappear when we consider the equivalent crisis in the Greek epic when Patroclus dies in place of Achilles.

The Poem of Early Rulers

The miseries of Enkidu’s last days, and the sorrows that he expresses before he dies, are firmly rooted in the oldest traditions about him and Gilgamesh. His account of the miserable sights of the Underworld

Erra-imitti and his substitute Enlil-bāna, often cited as evidence for the existence of the custom in the earlier second millennium BCE, has recently been reinterpreted as an allusion to problems with the custom in its later form, projected back into the remote past (Glassner 2004: 79–80, with texts at pp. 268–73).

¹⁰³ See the full diplomatic edition at www.soas.ac.uk/gilgamesh/standard/file39590.pdf. Of the two manuscripts for this line, one is lacunose for the line-ending.

¹⁰⁴ *OB II* 194, George 2003: 1.178–9.

¹⁰⁵ George suggests that the word *pūḫū* was introduced by ‘a Middle Babylonian editor’, who misunderstood the original significance of the ‘rival’ motif and replaced it with ‘something he knew: the ritual of the substitute king’ (2003: 1.455–6).

¹⁰⁶ Cf. George 2003: 1.92–9.

¹⁰⁷ I am grateful for the suggestions of one of the anonymous readers on this point.

draws on the traditions represented by the Sumerian *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, discussed in the previous chapter, and the line reconstructed above as ‘I do not fall in combat ...’ draws on a line spoken in the Sumerian text by Gilgamesh, albeit in the context of a different kind of descent to the Underworld on Enkidu’s part.¹⁰⁸ Clearly, it was always central to the tradition that Gilgamesh was forced to confront these grim truths. As we saw, the Sumerian *Death of Gilgamesh* centres on a dream in which Gilgamesh sees the gods passing judgment on his life and exploits, and deliberating over whether he should be mortal or immortal; they decide he must die, with the consolation of becoming a judge in the Underworld and being commemorated among the living forever.

More widely, the evidence is that the deaths of the heroes of this poem were traditional as paradigms of the universality of death. The key document is *The Poem of Early Rulers*,¹⁰⁹ a text with a remarkably long history and wide dissemination – the original composition in Sumerian led to an Akkadian version and then to a further reworking in Sumerian, and bilingual copies are known from Emar and Ugarit as well as lesser survivals from within Mesopotamia, including a copy from the library of Ashurbanipal. The poem works on the pessimistic wisdom tradition that we have already observed in connection with Uta-napishti, beginning from the absolute fixity of the divine dispensation:¹¹⁰

[The fates are] de[termined] by Ea,
[the lots are drawn] according to the will of the god.
(*Poem of Early Rulers* 1–2)

This, says the poem, is the wisdom of the ancients, ‘our predecessors’ (4); but they have died and can never return from the Underworld. This thought leads to a catalogue of great names from the past:

¹⁰⁸ See *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld* line 236, LOAS, p. 37; George 1999: p. 187 line 237.

¹⁰⁹ For texts, translations and discussion, see Alster 2005a: 288–322; Cohen 2013: 129–50; Foster, *BTM*, pp. 769–70; George 2003: 1.98–9. The poem is often called *The Ballad[e] of Early Rulers*, and Foster even subtitles it ‘a drinking song’. Two factors seem to have influenced scholars in using these terms. First, there is the exhortation to ‘let Sirash rejoice over you’ (line 23, Alster 2005a: p. 319); Sirash being a goddess of beer, this has suggested to some editors the frame of a drinking-song. Second, the editor Daniel Arnaud called the poem *La Ballade des héros du temps jadis* because of its thematic resemblance to the fifteenth-century poet Villon’s celebrated poem of similar name. From the generic point of view, however, the notion of a ‘ballad’ is potentially misleading for what is essentially a scholarly wisdom text (Cohen 2013: 130, 143).

¹¹⁰ I cite here from Cohen’s edition of the Akkadian text from Emar (Cohen 2013: 133–4), with his secure supplements from the other tablets.

[All life is but a swivel of an eye],
 [life of man]kind cannot [last forever].
 Where is Alulu [who reigned for 36,000 years]?
 Where is [Enten]a who [went up to heaven]?
 Where is Gil[gamesh w]ho [sought] (eternal) li[fe] like (that of) [Zius]udra?
 Where is Hu[wawa who . . .]?
 Where is Enkidu who [*proclaimed*] (his) strength throughout the land?
 Where is Bazi? Where is Zizi?
 Where are the great kings of which (the like) from then to now
 are not (anymore) engendered, are not bo[rn]?
 (Poem of Early Rulers 9–18)

Gilgamesh and Enkidu here stand among the proofs or demonstrations that death is inevitable and cannot be escaped. It is worth asking what has led to the selection of this particular list of names, which have close affinities in the *Sumerian King-List* as well as in the Gilgamesh narrative tradition.¹¹¹ Alulu, the first king from the time before the Flood, was famed for his great longevity and was associated with wisdom and magical power. Entena is another primal king, better known as Etana: according to the epic named after him, he flew to heaven on an eagle's back in a vain attempt to obtain the 'plant of birth' that would bring about the birth of an heir to continue his line,¹¹² but he died and his name appears elsewhere as an inhabitant of the Underworld.¹¹³ Bazi and Zizi belong also in the King-List, and may once have been the centre of much other traditional lore – for example, there is a hymn addressed to Bazi, and the tablet in which it survives refers to its public recitation at an annual festival.¹¹⁴ Gilgamesh is recalled in terms of the story that we have already observed in the Sumerian *Death of Gilgamesh*, his journey to Ziusudra the survivor of the Flood.

One could argue that Etana and Gilgamesh are linked here by the shared theme of a failed quest to reach the divine world (cf. below, pp. 105–108), and speculate that some further factor, unclear to us, creates thematic connections between them and Bazi, Zizi and Alulu.¹¹⁵ However, the

¹¹¹ I draw closely here on Cohen's analysis (2013: 146–8, with Cohen 2012); see also Alster 2005a: 308–10.

¹¹² Foster, *BTM*, pp. 533–54.

¹¹³ References at George 2003: 2.850, note at *SBV X* 202, where Etana is one of those seen by Enkidu in his dream of death. On the wider diffusion of the Etana story in Near Eastern antiquity see Winitzer 2013; Currie (forthcoming).

¹¹⁴ Cohen 2012: 147, with George 2009: 1–15; and see pp. 107–108 in the present book.

¹¹⁵ Cohen 2012 suggests that Bazi and Zizi are associated with Gilgamesh and Huwawa because they were held to have ruled in territories to the west of Mesopotamia, and Gilgamesh's quest to kill Huwawa is located in the west.

remaining names suggest a different approach. The Sumerian translation – accompanying the Akkadian in the same manuscripts – allows the following reconstruction of the line about Huwawa:¹¹⁶

Where is Huwawa who was subdued when bowing down (*to
Gilgamesh*)? (14)

Huwawa (= Humbaba) is *not* included here because of some glorious achievement, but because of the event that makes him famous in the narrative tradition: his defeat in the combat on the mountain. Listed as he is *between* Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the implication is that for them too the point is that despite their celebrated roles in myth and epic they have faced the same doom as other mortals.

In this way, the burden of the list becomes simply that all fame leads inevitably towards the grave. The implication is that human endeavour is futile, if even the most glorious exploits and the most famous conflicts lead to dust and darkness. But the poem does not simply rest on that bleak thought. Instead, the fact of mortality leads to a new teaching:¹¹⁷

Life without light – how can it be better than death?
Young man, let me [*teach you*] truly what is your god's (nature; i.e. his
eternity).
Repel, drive away sorrow, scorn silence!
In exchange for this single [day of h]appiness, let pass a time [of silence]
lasting 36,000 [(years)].
May [Sirash] rejoice over you as if over (her) son!
This is the fate of humanity. (19–24)

Although these lines are tantalisingly brief, their import is clear: the right response to death is to defy its bleak reality, to enjoy the 'day of happiness' for which it is the necessary price. Sirash is a goddess of beer (see n. 109): if mortality is the 'fate of humanity', then let there be consolation in the comforts of social life and company while they last.

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, as we will see, after Enkidu's death Gilgamesh will be drawn eventually towards a teaching closely akin to that of the *Poem of Early Rulers*. The theme will be worked out progressively, exploring the hero's own sequence of responses to the death of Enkidu – responses that will move from despairing denial towards an acceptance of the truth of the human condition. In the monumental Standard Babylonian Version, as we

¹¹⁶ See composite edition and translation by Cohen 2013: 140–1.

¹¹⁷ Citing again from the Akkadian text from Emar as edited by Cohen 2013: 134–5.

will see, this message (if that is the right word) is covertly implied rather than stated in so many words; but we will find it explicitly articulated in the Old Babylonian forerunner of that text, and again in the wisdom that Homer puts in the mouths of some of his characters, including Odysseus himself in the *Odyssey* (below, pp. 312–317).