

**Monumental Discovery of *The Epic Of Gilgamesh*- A Masterpiece
of Ancient World Literature**

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Abstract

Literary investigation is often exciting and such an endeavour when coupled with archaeological excavations, although a rare phenomenon, can be academically highly productive. This research paper is based on the vigorous research and prolific works of David Damrosch and Martin Puchner of Harvard University on the '*The Epic of Gilgamesh*.' This text was preserved in the cuneiform clay tablets. It is often considered to be the oldest surviving work and the most ancient text of the World literature that disappeared for around 2000 years that never happened in case of any other written text so far. However, this mysterious disappearance for about 2000 years does not just contribute for the value of its antiquity, but throws light on the various aspects of a civilization that thrived on the glory of its culture and superstructure of society. The epic of legendary Gilgamesh existed in oral form long before it was written down. Literary works that belong to proto historical period do pose innumerable difficulties in situating, comprehension, linking with the milieu and above all making sense for the current times. This paper is a modest academic attempt at capturing the spirit of one of the oldest texts of the world that has acquired the status of being a masterpiece of world literature.

Keywords: Epic, Masterpiece, World Literature, Civilization, Culture

The destruction of archaeologically sensitive and historically important sites hardly mattered amid all the human bloodshed in the Middle East during the Gulf war. But the destruction of the Mosul Museum by the self-proclaimed Islamic State, and their explosion of a series of eminent ancient cities in year 2015 – Nimrud and Hatra in Iraq, Palmyra in Syria – have gripped more media attention than their ruthless slaughtering of hapless people and innocent children. The Second Gulf War that led to the downfall of Saddam Hussein regime which was accelerated by the Bush Administration of USA and the subsequent 9/11 tragedy are somewhere at least remotely connected to the cultural destruction of Middle East

countries. Even Saddam Hussein had written a novel, “Zabibah und der konig” in the year 2000, maybe with the help of ghost writers, influenced by *The Epic Of Gilgamesh*.

The concept of the ‘Epic’ is a Semitic Babylonian invention. It is said that the Sumerians did not have any kind of epic. They shared stories as series of narratives or poems and hardly presented them together as a whole. The story of Gilgamesh in Epicform denotes the Babylonian version of narrative. Earliest forms of literature in two differing cultures like the Babylonians and the Sumerians should not be confused. The Babylonian version is the earliest epic but not the earliest literature.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, which was preserved in the cuneiform clay tablets, is often considered to be the oldest surviving work of World literature that disappeared for around 2000 years that never happened in case of any other written text. However this mysterious disappearance for about 2000 years does not just contribute for the value of its antiquity, but throws light on the various aspects of a civilization that thrived on the glory of its culture and superstructure of society. Although the modern Semitic notion of *Epic* differs from the current work in question, it can be vaguely attributed to possess the qualities of Epic. Modern readers are bound to face too many blank spaces, incomprehensible passages and of course linguistic complications in the epic that makes reading a challenge and establish certain level of academic coherence.

Several versions of Gilgamesh’s achievements and story must have been in circulation in the ancient Middle East. Archaeologists have discovered the most primitive ones, inscribed on clay tablets in the Sumerian language before 2000 BC. Other tablets convey stories about Gilgamesh in Elamite, Hurrian and Hittite languages. Over a period of time, many stories were consolidated into a larger-than-life work. The most complete known version of this long poem was found in Nineveh, in the ruins of the library of Assur-bani-pal, the last great king of the Assyrian empire. Assur-bani-pal was irrefutably a great monarch and a warmonger. He was also a vigorous archivist and collector. Much of the existing knowledge about ancient Mesopotamia and its civilization is owed to his efforts.

Even during ancient time, the text would have been circulated in eastern regions and translated into few other languages. During 19th century a group of explorers and would-be archaeologists excavated a huge mound of mud in Niniveh. It was the capital of Assyria and

also the site where the palace of Assur- bani-pal was situated. His library was destroyed rather burned down presumably by his enemies. Texts written on the parchments were burned down. However cuneiform clay tablets were in-tact where the text of Gilgamesh was found to the astonishment of those explorers.

Gilgamesh's fame did not survive Assyria's downfall. Although he had been a pervasive literary, religious, and historical figure for two millennia, he would be completely forgotten until Victorian times. In 1839, an English traveller named Austen Henry Layard excavated around 25,000 broken clay tablets from the ruins of Nineveh. However there was no one to sponsor his venture. He had to write a blockbuster in the year 1849 to raise money that could sustain his further research. Henry Rawlinson, an expert on Assyria, was able to decipher cuneiform, began the meticulous archaeological and challenging linguistic work of translating them. He first worked in Baghdad and then later at the British Museum. Rawlinson had discovered the Stone of Darius. That was also known as the Persian Rosetta Stone, a monument depicting the Persian emperor's conquests in several languages. This structure provided the clue to translating cuneiform's wedge-shaped alphabet.

Mention must be made about the great efforts of Austen Henry Layard, George Smith, Hormuzd Rassam and Henry Rawlinson. George Smith was a working class apprentice. He never went to school, but he was an expert in engraving banknotes. Hormuzd Rassam, a well-known Iraqi scholar and Henry Rawlinson, a linguist, intensely studied terra cotta tablets and realized its historical and literary worth. All these veterans publicized the merit of the epic of Gilgamesh. Austen Henry Layard's '*Nineveh and its remains*' published in 1849 was an archaeological blockbuster that drew wide attention towards the Sumerian work. Despite his efforts there were no sponsors to financially support the project. George Smith's '*The Chaldean Account of Genesis*', published in 1878, proved to be a best seller although reprinting the same was too difficult. Even George Smith received no monetary support from British museum or from any other agencies. Henry Rawlinson was fascinated with the cuneiform scripts. Being a remarkable linguist, he took 20 years to vaguely decipher the ancient text of *The Epic Of Gilgamesh*. The epic of legendary Gilgamesh existed in oral form long before it was written down. In fact in this epic, Gilgamesh is a protagonist and a writer who writes his own story.

Rawlinson's apprentice George Smith rendered the eleventh tablet of the *Gilgamesh* epic into English in 1872. It became an immediate sensation. This tablet contains the Sumerian story of the flood, which has so many parallels with the story of Noah's ark that many people surmise the author of the biblical account was familiar with *Gilgamesh*. Possibly, both versions hearken back to an even older source. Victorian archaeologists dug up and translated more and more tablets. Within a few years, the broad outlines of the epic had been re-established and many more tablets have been discovered since. Even so, the poem is still incomplete and a major chunk of what exists today is disconnected to the point of incomprehensibility. The different translations of *Gilgamesh* vary widely in terms of details included and their interpretation. The best-preserved version of the story comes from the Babylonian writer Shin-Leqi-Unninni (wrote 1300-1000 BCE) who translated, edited and may have elaborated the original story.

Qualities of Epic in the Epic of Gilgamesh: Technical and thematic features of the epic include its heroic and vibrant beginning. The text on about one dozen tablets is extremely economical in language. Out of around 3000 lines only 2000 lines have been recovered and enormous efforts were put to decipher the available text. It sufficiently possesses significant qualities of an epic such as a Gilgamesh's pursuit for immortality that is mentioned in the final tablet, after the death of his beloved friend Enkidu, the foundation of an urban space/city that symbolises the development of a civilization, an asymmetrical relationship between gods and humans- exception being the rejection of Goddess Ishtar by Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh's subsequent rebellion against God, the idea of underworld and upper world that suggest the rudimentary notions of hell and heaven, natural calamities like flood damaging the city and finally the poetical quality of the narration that breaks the monotony of prose.

Proto-imperialist projects/mission: Gilgamesh's journey to get cedar to the forest to build a strong palace noticeably demonstrates his imperial ambition. Building a palace just by burned mud would not survive for long. Gilgamesh desired for a stronger building that metaphorically hints at his imperial instincts. Here the role of literature may also be highlighted. He had to cut down trees to enhance and standardize urban space. Literature becomes the preoccupation of urban centric people rather than countryside untrained mass. It also reflects its pro city prejudice. Why this form of epic is chosen for narration- becomes a matter of culture and condition of the milieu.

The Flood story: This is supposed to be interpolated and has a reference in the old testament of Bible as well. This marks a point when myths turn into something that looks more like history. It is a story within the story that seems to bridge history and myth. This destruction also hints at the limits of civilization in the face of ruthless natural calamity.

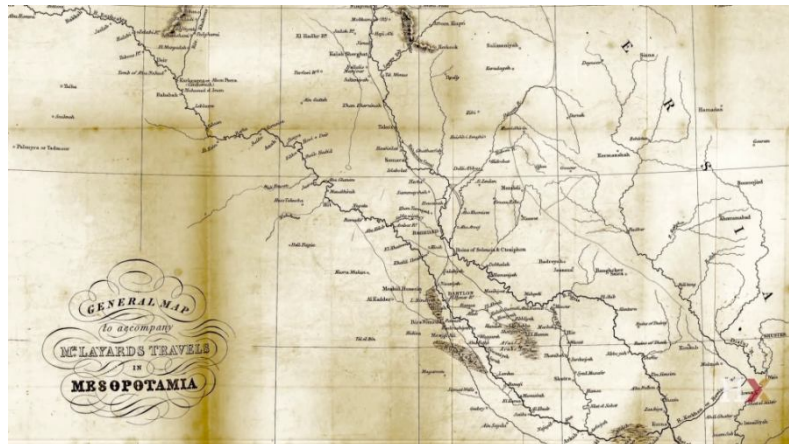
Like other ancient cultures- the Greeks, Romans, Persians,.. etc., the Sumerians were not heard of. Their culture and language were somewhat like ciphers. Then in the late 1800's we have this new epic in a new language. That in itself was ground-breaking. Unlike the heroes of Greek or Celtic myths, the hero of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was an actual historical character. He was a monarch who ruled over the Sumerian city-state of Uruk around 2700 BC. Long after his death, people worshipped Gilgamesh. He was a legendary warrior, builder and notable for his wisdom and judgement. One prayer invokes him as "Gilgamesh, supreme king, judge of the Anunnaki" (the Gods of the underworld). Called Erech in the Bible, Uruk was one of the great cities of ancient Mesopotamia. The historical King Gilgamesh possibly raised its walls, which archaeologists have determined had a perimeter of six miles. Today its ruins are situated near the town of Warka, in southern Iraq, about a third of the way from Basra to Baghdad. He was also known for digging wells for water sources. A team of German archaeologists recently announced that they had discovered a buried structure there that might be Gilgamesh's tomb. It is safe to say that the reconstruction of the history of Gilgamesh is in process. Though the military actions of 2003 stopped their work before excavations could begin, their claim has aroused considerable academic interest.

The Epic of Gilgamesh was written in Akkadian, which is a Babylonian language. It is written on eleven tablets, with a disconnected appendix on twelfth tablet. The tablets actually name their author, Sin-Leqi-Unninni, whose name translates to "Moon god, accept my plea." This poet/editor must have completed his work sometime before 612 BC., when the Persians conquered the Assyrian Empire and destroyed Nineveh. When Enkidu is struck to death, Gilgamesh falls into a deep grief and, recognizing his own mortality through the death of his friend, questions the meaning of life and the worth of human accomplishment in the face of ultimate extinction. Casting away all of his old vanity and pride, Gilgamesh sets out on a quest to find the meaning of life. He also seeks some way of conquering death. In doing so, he becomes the first epic hero in world literature to face inexorable fate and inevitable death. The friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is something more than the normative one. And the astonishing story of humanising Enkidu by making him to sleep with a woman for

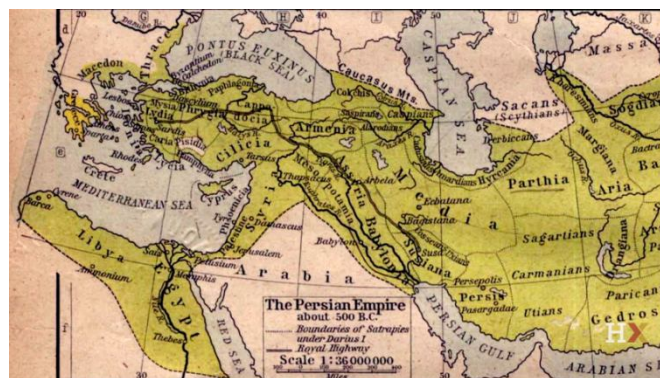
7days and nights perplexes the modern readers. This rite de passage for half human Enkidu to enter a civilized society may also be a sign of misogynist tendencies. The angst of Gilgamesh and the questions his friend Enkidu's death resonate with every human being who has struggled with the meaning of life in the face of death.

The Epic of Gilgamesh remained a curious case of archaeology for about a century even after unearthing it. Despite its innumerable omissions and obscurities, its strange cast of Gods, and its unfamiliar theory about the creation of the universe, the story of Gilgamesh is both historically important and gripping. An exciting adventure that celebrates kinship between men, it asks what price people pay to be civilized and questions the proper role of a king, and it both acknowledges and scrutinizes the attractions of earthly fame. Most of all, *Gilgamesh* describes the existential struggles of a superlatively strong man who must reconcile himself to his mortality and find meaning in his life despite the inevitability of death. Death is an inevitable and inescapable fact of human life, which is the greatest lesson Gilgamesh learns. Gilgamesh is bitter that only the gods can live forever and says as much when Enkidu warns him away from their fight with Humbaba. Life is short, the two warriors tell each other on their way to the deadly confrontation in the Cedar Forest, and the only thing that lasts is fame. But when Enkidu is cursed with an inglorious, painful death, their bravado rings hollow. Shamash, the sun god, consoles Enkidu by reminding him how rich his life has been, but though Enkidu finally resigns himself to his fate, Gilgamesh is terrified by the thought of his own. Mesopotamian theology offers a vision of an afterlife, but it gives scant comfort—the dead spend their time being dead.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is basically a nonspiritual narrative. There is no historical evidence to show that it was performed as part of some religious ritual even though the epic is rich in religious imagery. Reading this ancient text of Sumerian culture (which has been appropriated by numerous translators and archaeologists for the current readership) in the present troubled context of post 2nd Gulf war offers a lesson on the eternal quest of power hungry rulers for immortality despite the temporariness of life itself. Of late, Joan London, an Australian novelist, wrote a novel on Gilgamesh and published it in 2001. The novelist reworked on the story of Gilgamesh from feminist perspective thus enhancing its possible literary dimension.



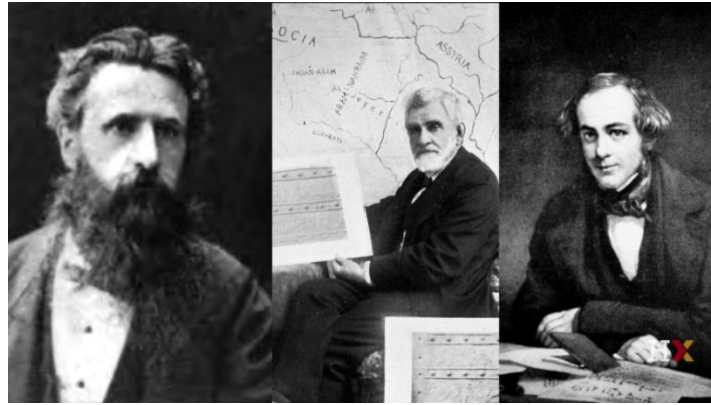
‘Map of Mesopotamia’ from ‘Nineveh and its Remains’ by Austen Henry Layard, 1849.



‘Historic Map of the Achaemenid Empire’ by W. R. Shepherd.



Humbaba, a mythic monster is being killed by Gilgamesh and Enkidu.



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2]Hormuzd Rassam

3]Henry Rawlinson

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