

The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Physical Record of the Past

Andrew Hungerford

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The stories that a culture tells can reveal volumes about their beliefs, attitudes, history and everyday lives. Even the most fanciful of tales is often rooted in some form of cultural truth. When using mythology to determine details about the literal history of a people, however, one must be able to sift through fictional elements to determine how much of a tale portrays real events. In mythologies that claim to be true histories, the line between fact and fiction then becomes quite important, and of varying degrees of difficulty to discern.

The city of Uruk in Mesopotamia is considered by many to be the world's first city. The Epic of Gilgamesh, essentially the world's oldest piece of literature, is an elaborate myth told on eleven (or twelve, depending on interpretation) clay tablets detailing the exploits of a ruler of Uruk. While much can be learned from this epic from a literary point of view, I will here examine how the Uruk described in the epic compares to that of the archaeological record. Though archaeological evidence itself can be somewhat open to interpretation and various sources of error, the physical record of the past combined with descriptions from this earliest of epics can give us a fuller picture of one of the first civilizations. Using archaeological evidence from Uruk and contemporary cities and this epic I hope to explore aspects of early Sumerian life, as well as providing a test case for the broader question of validation of views of the past through combination of elements of mythology and archaeological evidence.

A Brief Overview of the Epic

THE PHYSICAL TABLETS

The first 11 tablets of the Gilgamesh Epic were unearthed in fractured form from the palace library of Ashurbanipal, a king who reigned from 668–627 BC, at Nineveh in the 1860's. Each tablet has writing in six columns of wedge shaped Cuneiform. The tablets' condition leaves some gaps in the complete tale with tablet IV seeming especially incomplete. Copies of the epic have been discovered in many other locations (e.g., Ur, Sippar, Ischali), and there are apparently several versions in existence including translations into Hitite, Hurrian and Elamite. (McCall 14,19)

Where the text is fragmentary in the standard Old Babylonian version of the Epic, modern scholars have used alternate versions and additional fragments to help fill in the gaps. The result is the full twelve tablet poem, with some 3000 lines.

The author of the Epic is recorded as a scribe named Sin-Leqi-Unnini in a first millennium BCE catalogue of Cuneiform literature. Sin-Leqi-Unnini was an exorcist priest who like lived in Uruk in the Middle Babylonian period (1600-1000 BCE). The existence of other versions before this time leads scholars to believe that, rather than being the first author, Sin-Leqi-Unnini acted as editor in recording a definitive version of the story. (McCall 35)

THE STORY, IN SUMMARY

The poem begins with the introduction of Gilgamesh, and a summary of his great deeds and adventures and segues into narrative storytelling. In the beginning, Gilgamesh is a young king who is a very strong but somewhat abusive ruler. Among his abuses of power are the hoarding of the city's women "for his own purposes" as well as forcing men to do extreme labor. The citizens, admiring his strength but taxed by his oppressive behavior, pray to the gods for help. In response to the prayers, Aruru, goddess of creation, creates the wild man Enkidu, intending him to be a match for Gilgamesh, one who will be a companion and help to calm his ways.

After his birth, Enkidu runs amongst the animals, behaving as a wild creature would. So doing, he frightens a young hunter who comes to Gilgamesh for help. Gilgamesh commands that a temple girl, Shamhat, (called harlot or prostitute in most literal translations, though the original word had different connotations) go to the forest and entice Enkidu away from the wild to civilize him with her charms and physical affection.

After spending seven nights with Shamhat, Enkidu finds that he cannot run as he once had and animals shy away from him.

Returning to Shamhat, she tells him that he is now above the beasts and that he should come to Uruk where he will meet Gilgamesh, his equal. Meanwhile in Uruk, Gilgamesh has two prophetic dreams which upset him greatly. He relates them to his mother, the goddess Ninsun. Ninsun calms him and tells him that they predict the coming of Enkidu who will become his best friend.

When Enkidu reaches Uruk, he comes across Gilgamesh preparing for an evening rendezvous. The two fight there, fight so hard they damage the walls of Uruk (although the details vary with translation). When they've fought each other to exhaustion, they recognize each other's strength and promise a bond of friendship.

Becoming great friends, they soon set off to make themselves heroes by slaying the giant/god Humbaba that guards a pine forest and terrorizes men who venture near.

The relatively incomplete fourth tablet tells of the journey of Gilgamesh and Enkidu to the forested hill where Humbaba lives, as well as suggesting the killing of one of Humbaba's defender/servants. After resting and having fateful dreams, the two proceed up to where Humbaba waits and with a little help from the god Shamash, there are able to defeat the giant. Despite a plea for mercy, they kill the monster and return to Uruk as heroes.

Washing and changing from his bloodied robes, Gilgamesh is visited by the goddess Ishtar, who attempts to convince Gilgamesh to be her lover. Gilgamesh rejects her in mocking terms and Ishtar flees to complain to her father, Anu. Eventually succumbing to Ishtar's complaints, Anu looses a holy bull from the heavens. The bull causes an earthquake which swallows nine dozen citizens of Uruk. Gilgamesh and Enkidu, working together, defeat and butcher the bull, offering its heart as sacrifice to Shamash. When Ishtar appears on the city walls to curse them, Enkidu flings a piece of raw meat from the bull at her, offering his own challenge. There is celebration throughout the day and Enkidu and Gilgamesh are again hailed as heroes.

That night, however, Enkidu dreams that the gods gathered to determine that either Enkidu or Gilgamesh should die for the offence to them (despite support from the god Shamash). The lot falls to Enkidu who

soon loses his strength and lies dying. First cursing those he knew, Enkidu rages against the world. After calming words from Shamash, however, he repents and says good-bye to Gilgamesh, lamenting that he will not die in battle.

Gilgamesh cries out in sorrow and leads the city in mourning. Elaborate funeral rites are prepared for Enkidu. Plagued by the question his own mortality, Gilgamesh sets off in search of Ut-napishtim who was the builder of the ark which weathered the ancient flood and who holds the secret of eternal life. Gilgamesh wanders through the wilderness, killing creatures and monsters, climbing mountains finally finding himself on a sacred path within the mountains of Mashu. At the edge of the sea he meets a wise barmaid named Siduri, who waits on him and offers answers to his philosophical questions. When Gilgamesh persists in his search, she points him on his way, telling him to seek the boatman, Ur-shanabi, to find passage across the lethal waters of the sea.

Leaving in search of Ur-shanabi, Gilgamesh soon finds him (the passage describing his search is very fragmentary). Gilgamesh is told to cut down three hundred poles each one-hundred feet long. These poles are used one at a time to cross the water and Gilgamesh is warned not to let the water touch his hand. Having crossed the sea, he meets with Ut-napishtim, who tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood, and how he survived by building the ark at the behest of the goddess Ea.

In order to achieve immortality for himself, Gilgamesh must pass a test by staying awake seven days and nights. He resolves to attempt but, being exhausted from his journey, he falls asleep as soon as he begins. Ut-napishtim's wife bakes a loaf of bread for him each day, and when Gilgamesh awakes he finds moldy bread as testament to his failure. Despite his failure, Ut-napishtim resolves to send Gilgamesh on his way once he is cleaned up and dressed as the king he is. As a parting gift, Ut-napishtim tells Gilgamesh of a flower that grows under the sea that will grant eternal life. Before he travels home, Gilgamesh dives to the sea floor and retrieves it. Travelling back to Uruk with Ur-shanabi, he stops to bathe in a pool, setting down the flower. As he bathes, a snake steals the plant and escapes, shedding its old skin. Gilgamesh realizes that immortality is not to be his and finally gives up.

As he and Ur-shanabi return to Uruk his spirits are buoyed as he realizes all that he has accomplished in his life. He points to the fire baked bricks of the walls, and with pride asks Ur-shanabi to walk and admire the walls that he has built. (Jackson) (Kovacs)

THE TWELFTH TABLET

Many scholars choose to end the epic here as these first eleven tablets exist as a cohesive whole; the story is done and ends on a somewhat triumphant mind-set. The twelfth tablet has the feeling of an after thought, another story simply dealing with the same characters. Here, Enkidu is once again alive. Gilgamesh has dropped to important objects into the underworld and asks Enkidu to retrieve them. Enkidu goes down, but does not heed all the warnings given to him and so becomes trapped. He returns briefly (he is able to meet Gilgamesh halfway) to give a grim account of the afterlife. (Jackson)

Gilgamesh the Man and Myth

Though by no means definitive truth, it is believed that Gilgamesh was a youthful ruler of Uruk around 2600 BC, during its First Dynasty. (McCall 38) Gilgamesh has an entry on the *Sumerian King List*¹ which lists him as ruling after the flood for 126 years. This recorded long reign can be attributed to several factors. First, it could be a mythological element accepted as truth. Or, it could simply be an inaccurate quantity intended to represent “a very long time” (but not as long as the pre-flood king/gods ruled). Rivkah Harris observes in her studies on aging in Mesopotamia that Sumerian peoples were not particularly concerned with precise numerical age; it did not hold for them the importance that it does in modern societies. Records of the ages of people tend to, then, be imprecise. As an interesting note, Harris points out that in the Mesopotamians’ vaguely sexagesimal numerical system, 120 years was seen as an ideal old age (with the 3,600 year multiples of ancient rulers also corresponding to the numerical system). It is interesting that the rule of Gilgamesh is recorded as the ideal life span, plus another six years.

DIVINE BIRTH, EARTHLY ACHIEVEMENT

According to tradition, Gilgamesh is the son of the goddess Ninsun. Though some versions of the epic claim his father to be Ninsun’s hus-

1. The *Sumerian King List* is a somewhat peculiar historic/literary record that exists in several versions, the oldest dated around 2125 BC. It lists several periods of rulers, the center of government alternating cities depending on the king, beginning before the ancient flood and continuing to times contemporary to its composition. Among its peculiarities are the records of the pre-flood kings; they all have ludicrously long reigns, all in multiples of 3,600 years. Indeed, according to the King List, there were 241,200 years of ruled civilization prior to the flood. Following the flood, reigns of kings fall into hundreds of years and, over time, creep into more reasonable sounding time spans. Apart from the lengthy rules, the King List also records some kings as ruling sequentially when other evidence supports simultaneous rule in different cities. (britannica.com 1) (*The Sumerian King List*)

band, the king Lugalbanda the *King List* suggests that his father is instead a high priest of Kulaba. Either way, Gilgamesh is seen as two-thirds divine, according him special status, and perhaps fuelling myths of a particularly long life span.

Historically, it would appear that the greatest achievement of Gilgamesh was the construction of the walls of Uruk. They are attributed to him in the epic, and the association is confirmed in a later record. King Anam, a later ruler of Uruk, recorded his own rebuilding of the walls, describing them as “an ancient work of Gilgamesh.” (McCall 38)

A YOUNG MAN'S JOURNEY

The Gilgamesh of the beginning of the epic is portrayed as a young, strong, handsome, but irresponsible, man. By the end of the eleventh tablet, he has been hailed as a hero, made and lost his greatest friend, and come to terms with his own mortality. On the final leg of his journey he returns once again clothed in kingly robes, but stays depressed until he and Ur-shanabi reach Uruk. Then he seems to come to terms with his life and points out the greatness of the walls of Uruk to Ur-shanabi. He has returned from his travels as a mature King.

Harris offers strong arguments in favor of The Epic of Gilgamesh functioning as a coming of age tale. Drawing from cuneiform records and existing art, she proposes that mature adulthood was certainly the most valued stage of life in Mesopotamian society; statues and artwork almost always portray men and women who are neither particularly young, nor very old. (23)

PHYSICAL REPRESENTATIONS

Judging from the number of surviving copies, or fragments, of the epic of Gilgamesh, it seems reasonable to suppose that it was a popular story. One would think, then, that elements from this story would likely be depicted in other art forms. Unfortunately, the precise subject matter of painting and sculpture is often difficult to know for certain; generally descriptive labels are not provided (although one notable exception is a clay head of Humbaba which is clearly labelled as such.) (McCall 41) There are, however, quite a few works that have been interpreted as depicting scenes from the adventures of Gilgamesh. The most common representations I've come across in my research are scenes of Gilgamesh and Enkidu battling with Humbaba. The two heroes are portrayed as young men with curled hair and long beards, while the monster is a larger, ugly man, with a square head, large mouth and sometimes horns. Other scenes that are possibly captured in art are the initial fight

between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and the killing of the Holy Bull. This last may be represented on several images from cylinder seals¹. (Jackson)

The Cities of Sumer

In the Ubaid period, beginning around 4300 BC, a number of significant settlements arose in the flood plain of southern Mesopotamia. Among these villages was Eridu, center of civilization before the flood, estimated to have had a population of over 5000 even this early on. (Feder 512)

Periods in cultural evolution for these early stages of urban development into the rise of full cities are often distinguished and arranged into chronological progression by the type of pottery observed at different archaeological levels. (Burney 50) The advent of the Uruk period in southern Mesopotamia is marked by the appearance of wheel made pottery and particularly grey burnished wares. (Burney 58) It is during this period that the world's first true city came into its own.

The city of Uruk grew into being around 3800 BC on the banks of a branch of the Euphrates river. Apparently beginning as two separate settlements, Kulaba and Eanna, it coalesced into a city of unrivalled size and wealth, even in its early days. At its height, the walls of Uruk spanned 9.5 km that enclosed 502 hectares of land and a population of perhaps more than 50,000. (Saleh) The question of exactly what Uruk was like during the reign of Gilgamesh is a more complicated matter.

ON ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANCIENT CITIES

As there wasn't enough fuel to allow kiln baked bricks to be readily available, the primary building material in Sumerian cities was dried mud brick. Because of this, buildings didn't weather very well and had to be constantly maintained. As old buildings were replaced, layers of settlement built up, creating a large mound known as a tell. This word for the pile of occupation debris dates back to the Semitic languages in the third

1. Cylinder seals were small stone cylinders with images engraved on the surface, designed to leave an impression when rolled in hot wax. The first seals appear around the same time, or slightly before, the initial evidence for writing (a few hundred years before 3000 BC). The cylinder seals in later periods depict complex scenes of action and sometimes the owners' name. They are considered some of the finest art work from Mesopotamia and were used to mark personal property and in making documents legally binding. (Britannica 2) Images of scenes of contest that are likely based on scenes from the Epic of Gilgamesh appear as early as the third Early Dynastic period (~2500 BC), very shortly after the time ascribed to Gilgamesh's rule. (Burney 69)

millennium BC, showing that the results of constant reconstruction were an accepted part of city life. These mounds make excavation difficult as both vertical and horizontal axes must be accounted for. Complicating matters further, each levels' depth is not consistent, and foundation trenches may be dug into older layers. (Britannica 1)

GENERAL BUILDING AND CITY PLANNING

While the precise layout of the city at any given time may be hard to determine, there is much that can be said about cities in general over this period. Little prior planning was put into city construction except for some small amount of "zoning" for residential districts when cities were newly created. The city pattern is easy to describe if we start with the house unit and move outward. The center of the house is a central court area or living room around which the secondary rooms are grouped as defined by use requirements and available space. Originally houses were built with irregularly shaped open spaces between them, generally oriented to coincide with the prevailing breeze. Tracks between them follow established trails formed by the feet of flocks, donkeys and men. As cities grew within fortified walls, the open spaces would be filled in with collections of other buildings, with thoroughfares blocked off. Houses, in a full city, could only be accessed by narrow lanes and dead end alleys. (Lampl 21)

With constant building renewal and city reconstruction, better access lanes were developed, along with some street paving and drainage. Other housing types, from Ur's distinctive residential areas, include "town-houses" which were often two stories and a series of small dwellings interspersed with shops, workshops and shrines. (Lampl 22)

MONUMENTAL STRUCTURES

Apart from these residential and commercial areas, the Sumerian cities also featured complexes of monumental buildings, including the holy area, and the ruler's palace. The temples, or temenos (holy enclosure), often began as collections of holy buildings in early periods, often on platforms, that were surmounted as time went on by the prototypical element of Sumerian architecture, the ziggurat.

The purpose of a ziggurat was to recreate a mountain on the flood plain to provide a home for the god to which it was dedicated. The base of the ziggurat is a tall platform, reminiscent of the lower section of a pyramid, which would often be built on the remains of older temples. On top of this platform would be the temple, accessible by multiple stair-cases around the sides of the platform. (Burney 66)

In a curious architectural note, Lampl observes that Mesopotamian builders often created individual structures that obeyed a certain aesthetic of symmetry. While individual structures showed this aesthetic, however, groups of structures show now real planning whatsoever; they appear to be thrown together haphazardly. Indeed, he points out that when a single temple is built on top of a platform it often appears that its relationship to the supporting structure is of no concern, so long as the mountain-like ideal was achieved. (19)

URUK ITSELF

Now that a basic pattern for the structure of southern Mesopotamian cities within their walls has been established, we can focus on what is known about Uruk itself. The city was dominated by two large temple complexes at its center, each originally belonging to the separate towns. (Saleh) The sanctuary originally belonging to Kulaba was dedicated to Anu, the father of the gods and patron of Uruk and is called the “White Temple.” The complex from Eanna was dedicated to Inanna (also known as Ishtar). On the northwest side of the Eanna complex was a ziggurat, from the late third millennium BC. The temples were likely ornately decorated with colored stone mosaics. (Burney) The palace was located close to the temple complex. The walls of Uruk were a double wall of baked bricks, reinforced by close to one thousand semicircular bastions. (Lampl 15)

GILGAMESH IN THE CITY

References to Gilgamesh in the streets of Uruk are scarce in the epic. There is the initial meeting of Enkidu and Gilgamesh as Gilgamesh is heading to or from an amorous encounter. One can almost picture the two of them fighting in the cramped alleys of the city’s residential districts, and this is implied in translations of the text. “In the alleys of Uruk/during a display of force/the approach of Enkidu stopped everything/.../Youths rallied around./People adored him as they adore a newborn babe./... /and Enkidu stood before the gate where new lovers go.../ It is there where they first fight/ throughout the night and round about Uruk’s walls/which they chipped and wrecked in places.” ((Jackson 16) This translation gives an epic scope to the conflict, perhaps implying that they fight was taken outside of the city walls where there was more room. In another translation, we see the conflict literally confined to the streets, with an interesting alternate evocation of the people of Uruk thronging about. “He (Enkidu) walked down the street of Uruk-Haven/.../ He blocked the way through Uruk the Sheepfold./ The land of Uruk stood around him,/the whole land assembled about him,/ the populace was thronging around him,/ the men were clustered about him,/and kissed his feet as if he were a little baby./.../ Enkidu blocked the entry to the marital

chamber,/ and would not allow Gilgamesh to be brought in./ They grappled with each other at the entry to the marital chamber,/ in the street they attacked each other, the public square of the land./ The doorposts trembled and the wall shook.” (Kovacs) Here we have a very clear picture of the city, with perhaps more open space than thought to exist in prototypical Mesopotamian cities. Again, with the remains of cities as they are, it’s hard to know for certain the precise layout at any given time. Keeping in mind construction methods of the day, the comments here that the wall shook are not necessarily superlative.

Another combat takes place within the city; the conflict with the holy bull summoned by Ishtar. Though great emphasis is placed on the earthquakes that swallow hundreds of citizens, little detail of the surrounding city is included, save for the appearance of Ishtar on the walls.

Other action in the epic occurs within the palace of Gilgamesh or Ninsun’s shrine, but little descriptive detail of the buildings is given. (Jackson)

Outside of Uruk: A Comparison of Place

Despite the large size of fortified Uruk, the city did not strictly end at its walls. Typically, Mesopotamian cities were surrounded by supporting suburbs which encompassed farms, fields, orchards and date groves. The harbor area was also vitally important as a commercial center.

CLIMATE AND CROPS

The overall climate of Mesopotamia was likely much as it is today, though not necessarily in the same places (river courses have changed over the years). It appears that in the time of Uruk, many branches of the Euphrates wound down to the sea. (Adams 85) In a dry climate with sparse rainfall (although there were seasonal marshes), the potentially fertile land was made bountiful by canal networks for organized irrigation and drainage. Regularly watered, the land could support several crops per year. Principal crops were cereals (wheat, later the more hardy barley) and dates, and livestock included sheep, goats and cattle. (McCall 29) Bovines were likely used to pull plows in the fields, as well as some two and four wheeled vehicles. Equids also appear as draught animals around the time of Gilgamesh. Chief among them would be the Asiatic “half ass” though there is also evidence for the true ass and domesticated horse. (Littauer 35) The soil around Uruk was plentiful

with clay, providing not only material for tablets, but also the chief building material.

AN URUK WORLD SYSTEM

Beyond these immediate suburbs, there is also evidence for an earlier intricate network of towns and outposts, all beholden to the primary city-state. The system arose during the Uruk period and outpost populations ebbed and flowed with passing years. (Algaze) Many of the more rural outlying areas were abandoned as people flocked to the rapidly growing Uruk during the first dynasty, but increasingly complex networks of settlements arose that were bound to Uruk. (Adams 87) Perhaps it is near one of these outposts that Enkidu originally appeared (by one of the seasonal wetlands), explaining why the hunter came to Gilgamesh for help; though the hunter was from out of the city, Gilgamesh was still responsible for the outpost. Likewise, though the forest Humbaba guards is miles away from Uruk proper, it may have been near a far outpost that still fell within the domain of Uruk.

FEATURES OF THE LANDSCAPE

The location of the Pine Forest in which Humbaba resides is open to debate; an early version of the text implies that it is to the east in the Zagros mountains, while a later version suggest to the west, near Lebanon. Either way, forests do grow in the mountains, but would be unfamiliar to the lowland population of Uruk. In the epic Gilgamesh and Enkidu spend time admiring the forest, even as they are on the brink of their battle, showing a sense of wonder that matches that which the average citizen might have. (McCall 42) The location of the home of Siduri in the latter part of the epic was likely meant to be near the Phoenician coast of the Mediterranean. (McCall 46)

The Everyday Life

THE PEOPLE

The peasant's life in Mesopotamia was a hard one, with land that had to be protected and crops carefully tended. Cities certainly attracted people from rural areas; the protection and help the large settlement could offer would be invaluable. Even from the time of Gilgamesh "advertisements" have been found that read "Come to Uruk...where the men dress elegantly and every day is a holiday, where there's music and buxom girls for your pleasure, seductive and sweetly perfumed." (Ziehr 40) Regardless of the truth of this particular statement (though perhaps it supports the idea of the citywide celebrations mentioned in the epic, at least

to a limited extent), the attraction of new people to the city and its suburbs benefited both the city and the peasants.

Within the city walls, numerous artisans lived and worked. Builders, tanners, clothiers, stone-carvers, jewelers, carpenters, bakers, potters and basket-makers all found a living in the city. (McCall 32) The gold work of Sumerian artisans was quite impressive, and they often used various alloys of gold and silver. (Burney 73) Builders were in frequent demand and the collapse of houses was not uncommon both from poor construction and the simple fact of their primary building material. If anyone was injured as the result of a home collapse, the builder was severely punished. (Ziehr 40)

Above the artisans in social standing were the scribes. Trained in schools that were almost always attached to temples (although there is evidence for an independent school in Ur) schooling began in boyhood. It was long and repetitive involving the copying of cuneiform signs over and over again. (McCall 34) Once completing schooling however, one was guaranteed a good career in administration, and education was something that was desired. A well known proverb said, "Happy is the lot of the scribe." (Ziehr 43)

WOMEN'S ROLES

Women in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* form a number of important, if sometimes tangential figures. There is: Shamhat, the temple prostitute who civilizes Enkidu and brings the friends together; Ninsun, Gilgamesh's wise mother; Ishtar, the lustful, vengeful goddess; Siduri, the philosophical barmaid, again, a wise female figure; and Ut-napishtim's wife, who intercedes on Gilgamesh's behalf. Tasks of women in Mesopotamia were primarily geared toward the household and frequently women from the middle levels of society were characterized by the roles of their husbands, fathers and brothers. (Harris 105) Despite this categorization and the patriarchal nature of Mesopotamian society, women had extensive rights. They could conduct business independently of men, fill positions as high as that of a provincial governor and could rise to great esteem as priestesses. (Ziehr 43) Older women (beyond child bearing years and sometimes widowed) too could have various occupations, from brewer of beer to herbal healer to simply being a grandmother. (Harris)

DEATH AND BURIAL

After the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh calls upon various craftsmen of the community (such as those mentioned above) to come together and build a statue of his friend with a chest of lapis lazuli (a deep blue semi-precious stone) and skin of gold. Unfortunately, many of the following

Closing Remarks

lines (presumably detailing funeral rites) are missing. He does also offer bowls of butter and cream at a temple before beginning his search for immortality, presumably as part of the mourning ritual. (Kovacs) Unfortunately, records of burials from the first Early Dynastic period cannot shed much more illumination on this section. Generally, people of lower rank (especially children) were simply buried in the floor of the house, the body sometimes wrapped or enclosed in a coffin, accompanied by a few grave-goods. (Harris 15) Evidence for organized cemeteries with elaborate burials for the wealthy or powerful appear in some cities around E.D. II with the Royal Cemetery of Ur dating from E.D. III. (Burney 72) As current burial finds from E.D. I city layers are rare, it is difficult to interpret the existing text regarding the funeral rites of Enkidu as common or extraordinary; only further discovery can be of real assistance.

Closing Remarks

When viewed on its own, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a literary masterpiece of early civilization. Upon examination in conjunction with evidence from the archaeological record, it becomes more, taking on an air of legitimate cultural history, despite the clearly mythic elements. Archaeological evidence does not explicitly contradict any parts of the epic that portray earthly activities and, moreover, it helps to ground the story in reality. The Uruk portrayed in the epic complements that which is uncovered by digging in the tell, and perhaps some parts (such as the description of Enkidu's death rites) can give archaeologists an idea of further features to look for in future digs. Using the archaeological record to explore elements of literal truth in the epic and other mythologies can help to foster an understanding of ancient life that goes beyond remains of mud-brick buildings and helps to open a window into what was the living heart of a culture.

Miscellaneous Notes

- PAGE FORMAT** In general, each page of text in this format is roughly equivalent to 1.27 pages of standard double-spaced text.
- NAMING CONVENTIONS** In this paper I tend to interchangeably use the terms Sumer and Mesopotamia when referring to the area surrounding Uruk. More correctly, Mesopotamia is the larger area, divided into two major civilization centers, Akkad and Sumer. Akkad was the northern area, where the Tigris and Euphrates were closest together, while Sumer was the southeast, the area that is the focus of this paper. Preferential use of either term herein should not be construed to have specific intended meaning; I've treated Mesopotamia and Sumer as essentially synonyms for my purposes.
- CITATIONS** I have attempted to maintain a consistent MLA inspired style for my parenthetical documentation. I do use a few particular exceptions, however. When a statement is drawn from the entirety of knowledge gained from a significant portion of a book (such as the summary of the epic) I mention the work, but no specific page numbers. Also, in citing Encyclopedia Britannica articles available on-line, I have simply given them numerical designations for ease of reference.

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