Shattered tablets and tangled threads: Editing Gilgamesh, then and now *

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Until about one hundred and fifty years ago all that modern people knew about the Babylonian hero-king, Gilgamesh, was the story in Aelian's *De natura animalium* xii. This Roman author, writing in Greek in the second century AD, illustrated his contention that animals often showed kindness to humans with a story of how an eagle swooped down to save the infant Gilgamos as he plummeted to a certain death. The baby, fathered by a phantom and born in secret to a princess, had been cast from a high tower on the orders of the king. The eagle bore him off to a gardener, who brought him up. In due course he became king of the Babylonians in place of his grandfather.

As it turns out, almost nothing of this story bears any relation to the traditions handed down about Gilgamesh in the ancient corpus of Babylonian literature that is now in the process of recovery. I stress 'in the process' because the work has really only just begun, with most scholars working in the field as pioneers, reading cuneiform texts and researching topics that have not been treated before. The Epic of Gilgamesh, however, has been the subject of much more scholarly attention than average, certainly because it is generally recognized as a great poetic masterpiece with an established place as the first long epic narrative in the history of world literature.

History of modern editing

The first to make sense of the clay tablets on which the poem was written was George Smith, who was employed by the British Museum in the late 1860s to sort through the fifteen thousand or so broken fragments of Assyrian cuneiform tablets and other inscriptions sent back to the museum from Kuyunjik, the citadel mound of Nineveh, in the early 1850s, chiefly by Austen Henry Layard but also by his assistant Hormuzd Rassam and by W. K. Loftus. Smith was self-taught and his understanding of the newly deciphered Akkadian language of ancient Babylonia and Assyria was partly intuitive, but he had a genius for sorting fragments into genres, for identifying pieces that belonged together, for joining them and for giving a reasonably accurate account of their contents. The Epic of Gilgamesh was one of the texts in which he took a particular interest, especially when he discovered that its eleventh section (Tablet XI) contained an account of the Flood that was clearly related to the story of Noah in Genesis. This discovery was publicized in a lecture to the Society of Biblical Archaeology in December 1972 (Smith 1873), which in turn led a London newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, to fund the first of Smith's three journeys to Mesopotamia in search of more

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tablets. By 1876, the year of his premature death from fever near Aleppo, George Smith had made a preliminary attempt at reproducing the cuneiform text of parts of the epic in the lithographic type that had recently been developed as a means of rendering cuneiform script in two dimensions (Smith 1874, Rawlinson and Smith 1875: pls. 48–51), and had published two books that gave translations of the Epic of Gilgamesh – a name then read as Izdubar – so far as he knew and understood it (Smith 1875, 1876). Others soon began to offer editions of the better-preserved passages in lithographic cuneiform type or transliterated text and translation (Boscawen 1876, Talbot 1877, Delitzsch 1885).

Smith's successors in the British Museum, especially T. G. Pinches, continued the work of sorting the Kuyunjik tablets, which turned out to be the remains of the Assyrian royal libraries and archives (often called King Ashurbanipal's library). Inevitably he came across more tablets of Gilgamesh. Further pieces were found during the monumental work of cataloguing the Kuyunjik tablets, a task chiefly accomplished by a German Assyriologist, Carl Bezold (Bezold 1889–99). The tablets from Nineveh were soon outnumbered by an avalanche of further accessions of more Assyrian and, especially, Babylonian tablets deriving chiefly from the activities of Hormuzd Rassam, the British Museum's agent in Mesopotamia in 1878–82, and Wallis Budge, a member of the museum's curatorial staff who purchased cuneiform tablets in Baghdad and elsewhere in 1888–91. Among the huge quantity of Late Babylonian tablets from Babylon and Borsippa Pinches began to identify more pieces of the Epic of Gilgamesh, but he was one man, largely working unaided, and hardly made inroads into the mass of new material, which numbered at least one hundred thousand pieces. The true figure is probably much higher and will not be known until the work of cataloguing Rassam and Budge's tablets, currently in progress, is concluded.

During the years immediately following the arrival of the Babylonian tablets another German scholar, Paul Haupt, embarked on the first attempt to make pen-and-ink drawings of the cuneiform text of the entire Gilgamesh epic, utilizing all the known tablets, Assyrian and Babylonian (Haupt 1884–91). Haupt's cuneiform copies laid the groundwork for a new edition of the epic that took advantage of the considerable progress made in the understanding of the Akkadian language in the decades that had elapsed since George Smith's pioneering attempts. This was the book of Peter Jensen, an extraordinary feat of scholarship that gave editions of Gilgamesh and many other Babylonian literary compositions in a remarkably accurate transliterated text and translation (Jensen 1900). The appearance of Haupt and Jensen's work set the study of the epic on a scientific footing and generated a rash of translations and adaptations, including the 1911 version by Arthur Ungnad that so thrilled the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (Moran 1980).

Excavations, licit and illicit, continued in the ruin mounds of Mesopotamia. Overwhelmed by clay tablets, as it seemed, the British Museum no longer felt it necessary to monopolize the market and other museums, chiefly in Europe and North America but also in Istanbul, began to amass large collections of cuneiform. At the same time a greater diversity was evident in the tablets coming from Mesopotamia. The British Museum's

Kuyunjik tablets were overwhelmingly Assyrian and written in the seventh century BC. Rassam's tablets were mostly Babylonian and inscribed in the eras of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian empires. Budge's were mostly Old Babylonian, from the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries. But soon cuneiform tablets began to appear from a whole range of periods and sites. In consequence it quickly transpired that cuneiform writing had been in use from the third millennium to the first century BC (if not later), that almost all ruin mounds of Mesopotamia would yield tablets when turned by an archaeologist's spade, and that the technology of writing on clay had spread at times far beyond Babylonia and Assyria, to Upper Egypt, central Anatolia and Persian Khuzistan (ancient Elam).

The result of this wider interest and greater diversity of finds soon showed in Gilgamesh studies. When in 1930 R. Campbell Thompson produced a new academic edition of the epic in cuneiform and transliteration (Thompson 1930), the London tablets were supplemented within it by pieces in Berlin, Philadelphia and New Haven. First-millennium sources from Nineveh, Ashur and Babylon were accompanied by fragments of older versions of the epic of which Haupt had known nothing: two early second-millennium tablets from southern Babylonia, one from north Babylonia and a twelfth-century fragment from the Hittite capital, Hattusa in central Anatolia.

By this time Thompson was at the end of a long and extremely productive career, during which he had personally copied and published thousands of Kuyunjik fragments. His edition of the epic was not his best book, but it has remained until now the starting point for any person seeking to get to grips with the original text. My own work over sixteen years was once again to collect all available extant sources of the Babylonian Gilgamesh within the covers of a single book (George 2003). The emphasis was on establishing by first-hand study of all the cuneiform tablets a definitive text that will serve as a tool of reference for many years to come. In the absence of any sound mechanical means of reproducing cuneiform text in two dimensions, this was done by making accurate and reliable copies of the cuneiform in pen and ink. This technique has been the traditional medium for reproducing cuneiform since the abandonment of lithographic cuneiform typesetting one hundred years ago. Pen-and-ink drawing is not a perfect medium, however, for it can be compromised by deficiencies in the drawer's eyesight, interpretation and artistic skill, and even in the most capable hands it fails to engage the reader in the three-dimensional aspects of reading clay tablets. With the rapid development of ever more sophisticated technology it is certain that digital photography, though still an inadequate tool in many circumstances, will soon supersede drawings. The next attempt to edit the text of Gilgamesh will undoubtedly present the primary evidence – the cuneiform texts – in digitized form.

The years that elapsed between the second edition of the epic (Thompson 1930) and its successor (George 2003) saw a predictable continuation of the trend observed for the period immediately preceding 1930 – predictable but nevertheless hugely productive. Thanks to the combined efforts of museum curators and researchers on the one hand and archaeologists on the other, we now possess many more sources for the epic than informed the previous

edition. By 2003 thirty-three second-millennium fragments were known, against the four known to Thompson, and 184 first-millennium pieces, up from 108. Most were published piecemeal in scholarly journals and collections of cuneiform texts (for bibliography see George 1999: 57–8, 2000: 226–8); those of the remainder that were accessible appeared for the first time in the new edition. Nor does a new edition stem the flow. New pieces continue to be identified and published (Maul 2005: 11, Arnaud 2007 nos. 42–5, George 2007, George forthcoming).

The advance in knowledge that the new fragments have brought to the text has been considerable. We now have a much more informed view of the history of the poem in its various versions. Most of the confusion that still existed in 1930 with regard to the sequence of some episodes of the story has long since been cleared up and many of the lacunae that existed in the text have been filled, wholly or partly. Some impression of the advances made in our knowledge of the poem's history and its text will be gained from what is written below (see further George 1999).

If the latter part of the twentieth century saw huge progress in our knowledge of the Babylonian epic, it also witnessed almost the entire history of the reconstruction of five Sumerian poems about Gilgamesh (known in those sources as Bilgames), one of them in two versions. The Sumerian poems belong to the oldest corpus of literature in human history and are in some sense predecessors of the Babylonian poem. Though Old Babylonian fragments of the five poems were excavated at Nippur in central Babylonia in the 1890s and two pieces were already published before the first world war, the first serious attempts at reconstructing the texts as a whole did not occur until the 1930s. The pioneering work of recovery and publication continued slowly after the second world war, mainly at the hands of Samuel Noah Kramer and his students. Only when substantial new pieces were published in the 1990s did it become possible to give at last a full account of all five poems (up-to-date translations are given in George 2000: 141–208; Frayne 2001: 99–155).

Provenance and period

The steady accrual of new sources of the Babylonian epic over the last seventy years has brought with it an increased variety of provenance and period. We now have old Babylonian tablets from two sites on the River Diyala, north-east of Baghdad, as well as from Babylonia proper. The tablet from Late Bronze Age Hattusa in Anatolia has been supplemented by fragments of a slightly older version of the text from the same site, and pieces of the epic of roughly similar date have also come to light elsewhere on the western periphery of Mesopotamia, at Emar on the Euphrates, Ugarit on the Mediterranean coast and Megiddo in Palestine. Hattusa has also yielded local paraphrases of the epic (in Hittite and Hurrian). Other Middle Babylonian tablets are now known from Ur and Nippur in Babylonia itself. In Thompson's day first-millennium copies of the epic came chiefly from seventh-century Nineveh, with one fragment of the same date from another Assyrian capital, Ashur, and several later pieces from Babylon. These have now been supplemented by many more Late

Babylonian pieces from Babylon, a handful of Persian or Seleucid-period tablets from Uruk in southern Babylonia, and more seventh-century tablets from several Assyrian centres (Ashur and Kalah on the Tigris, and provincial Sultantepe in Turkish Mesopotamia). In addition older Assyrian tablets have also surfaced at Kalah and Ashur.

The accumulated evidence allows an ever more refined appreciation of the development of the epic against the *longue durée* of ancient Mesopotamian history. In Chart A the extant material is tabulated into four boxes. First are the Sumerian poems of the hero known in that language as Bilgames. These are short narrative poems, independent of each other, that are known mostly from eighteenth century tablets copied out by Babylonian scribal apprentices during the course of their education. A few older fragments survive, enough to show that Sumerian poems of Bilgames were already extant at the end of the third millennium.

The Babylonian material, composed in the Akkadian language, falls into three groups according to period, Old, Middle and Standard Babylonian. The first two periods are defined in terms of the vernacular dialect of southern Mesopotamia, as it appears in the extant documentation. The documentation is patchy: we do not possess tablets from all centuries, so that gaps intervene in our knowledge of the language and the literature written in it. Old Babylonian is the dialect of Akkadian spoken in southern Mesopotamia in roughly the first four centuries of the second millennium but best known from documents of the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries. It developed into Middle Babylonian during the dark age that intervened in the middle centuries of that millennium. Middle Babylonian is chiefly known from the fourteenth to twelfth centuries but recent discoveries of sixteenth-century texts, still to be published, may improve our knowledge dramatically. Documentation becomes very scarce by the turn of the millennium and is not again plentiful until the eighth century. By this time the vernacular language had developed further, into Neo-Babylonian, but a literary form of Middle Babylonian had become the conventional written medium of educated expression. This we call Standard Babylonian. It remained the predominant dialect of the written scribal tradition until the end of cuneiform writing.

Though the second-millennium versions of the epic are only fragments and even the first-millennium text is far from complete, enough text has survived to allow a provisional reconstruction of its evolution. The probable interaction between the different versions of the poem over the centuries is represented in Chart B.

The Old Babylonian tablets are now twelve in number, two of which join. They are of much the same date as most copies of the Sumerian poems. They demonstrate that already in the eighteenth century the Babylonian written epic was quite different from the Sumerian poems, that it was from the start a long poetic narrative bound together by common themes and exhibiting a unified plot. But they also bear witness to versions of the text that display major and minor differences in wording. This is one sign that the origin of the Babylonian epic surely lay in narrative poetry transmitted orally. We can suppose that lays of Gilgamesh circulated in lower Mesopotamia in the latter part of the third millennium, a time when Sumerian and Akkadian were both spoken, and that the two traditions of sung literature gave

rise to both the Sumerian poems and the epic poem in Akkadian. In due course these two corpora were captured in writing and passed into the literature handed down by scribes. This happened first with the Sumerian poems, for Sumerian was the first language of writing and was accorded more prestige at court and in scribal training. The Sumerian poems probably found their final form as court entertainments and then became fixed in the early academic curriculum. The written Old Babylonian poem gives the impression of being much closer to oral roots, to a single master poet or minstrel. Nevertheless, several of its earliest manuscripts already derive from scribal schools.

In the modernized scribal curriculum that developed in northern Babylonia during the mid-to-later second millennium the Babylonian poem soon became an academic copy-book, just as the Sumerian poems had been in the old curriculum. The Middle Babylonian sources show the written poem as it had developed between one and six hundred years after the Old Babylonian period. They comprise 23 fragments that sort into fourteen separate tablets. This intermediate period in the epic's development is characterized by considerable diversity, with quite substantial differences apparent in the various versions that survive. So it seems that as the centuries passed and the written epic spread with the cuneiform academic curriculum to far-flung places, the several Old Babylonian editions spawned a larger number of Middle Babylonian editions, as well as paraphrases and local translations.

By contrast the first millennium knew a standardized text, the Standard Babylonian version. A few old and deviant manuscripts bearing witness to one or more older versions of the text survived in Assyria and are placed with the Middle Babylonian recensions on Chart A. But essentially the poem had been put into a fixed form, so that manuscripts from different centuries and different cities show a remarkable degree of unanimity, right down to the last extant tablet, a manuscript dated to about 130 BC. The standardizing of the text was very probably the work of a scholar-poet who probably lived towards the end of the second millennium. This is an era when it is known that other works of the Babylonian scribal tradition current in contradictory versions ('tangled threads') were edited by learned men into fixed versions that were standard in the first millennium (Finkel 1988).

As part of the venerable scribal tradition of the first millennium, the Standard Babylonian epic was a standard copy-book, and for that reason we possess many fragments of it. At last count there were 189 tablets and fragments that bear individual museum numbers, including five pieces in Berlin or Istanbul that were identified too late to be incorporated my edition. Many of the broken fragments join to form assemblages of between two and a dozen small pieces. These assemblages can be identifed as belonging together as witnesses to individual manuscripts. The total number of Standard Babylonian manuscripts currently known is 77, and rising.

A consequence of this large number of sources is that the Standard Babylonian version of the poem, though only about two-thirds complete and standing at the end of a long history of development, remains a much better guide to the epic's contents than the skeletal remains of the second millennium. It is from this version that we learn how the hero-king Gilgamesh

so tyrannized the people of Uruk that the gods sent the wild man Enkidu to be his rival and friend, how then the two heroes slew the ogre Humbaba in the sacred Cedar Forest of Lebanon and, returning to Uruk in triumph, despatched the Bull of Heaven that the goddess Ishtar had brought down to avenge Gilgamesh's scorn of her. By way of punishment the gods determined that Enkidu must die, driving Gilgamesh, consumed by grief and fear of death, to roam the ends of the earth in a vain quest for immortality, there to hear the story of the primeval flood from its sole survivor.

Editorial problems

Even when not fired, clay is a much more durable material than papyrus, parchment, wax and wood, and this fact accounts for the preservation of cuneiform tablets in enormous numbers: something like a third of a million already in museums and many times that number still under the ground in Iraq and neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, intact cuneiform tablets are rare: most are found as broken fragments, often as a consequence of intentional or accidental smashing or other damage in antiquity, but also a result of long residence beneath the surface and the trauma of subsequent excavation. Earthworms and other burrowing animals pose a serious threat to buried tablets, as do the blades of archaeologists' picks and trowels. Tablets buried below rising groundwater have often absorbed mineral salts that severely damage or even totally destroy them when excavated and allowed to dry without conservation.

Broken fragments mean damaged writing, and this brings additional problems to the already difficult task of decipherment. The cuneiform writing system is full of variables: the same sign can often be read as one or more different syllables or half-syllables and as one or more different words. At the same time there exist other signs that can represent the same syllable or half-syllable or stand for the same word. Thus there are something like twenty different signs that represent the sound *tu* and something like a dozen word-signs (logograms) for the word 'king'. Fortunately not all possibilities were conventional and still fewer were standard at any given time, so that a knowledge of scribal habits usually allows a speedy decipherment of easy unbroken text. Not all texts are easy, though, and even in easy texts the decipherer can encounter a word of unknown meaning or one that has not been met before. For Akkadian is well and truly a dead language, and although after a century and a half of study its grammar and vocabulary are very well known, it still keeps some secrets and remains capable of springing surprises.

Most text is not unbroken, so that damaged signs and incomplete words and phrases can become *cruces interpretum*. Except in the most predictable contexts, attempts at restoring damaged passages of cuneiform are always provisional and liable to be refuted by the appearance of other manuscripts. The editor of a text like Gilgamesh must avoid the temptation of over-restoration and allow that many broken words and damaged signs cannot yet be deciphered confidently. It has often happened that a restoration every one has

accepted as right for generations has suddenly been proved wrong by the discovery of a new source for the passage in question.

A more positive circumstance has already been mentioned, namely the number of sources recovered. Those cuneiform texts that became part of the traditional scribal curricula of ancient Mesopotamia, such as the Sumerian poems of Gilgamesh in the early centuries of the second millennium and the version of the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh that was current in the first millennium (the Standard Babylonian epic), are for that very reason known to us from many different manuscripts. Consequently what are broken lines on one tablet may be restored from another tablet, perhaps also damaged but in different places. A sample passage of the Standard Babylonian epic will illustrate how the text is often reconstructed from several different manuscripts in varying states of repair. It will also show the processes through which a cuneiform text on a clay tablet is converted to a Romanized transliteration, a Babylonian text and eventually to a translation.

Immediately after their greatest triumph Gilgamesh's friend Enkidu is sentenced to death by the gods. Lying on his death-bed, he has a dream in which he finds himself seized by Death's fell envoy and dragged off to the netherworld. Three manuscripts supply the lines of this episode, which occurs in Tablet VII of the Standard Babylonian epic. Two are tablets from the Assyrian royal libraries discovered in Nineveh (MSS E and L) and one is Late Babylonian, probably from Babylon (MS g). All three manuscripts share the standard format of six columns, three on the obverse and three on the reverse. MS E comprises four fragments that do not join but exhibit the same handwriting and physical appearance. MS E_2 (first published in 1968) is a surface flake that holds parts of its columns iv and v. MS L also survives as four pieces that clearly belong together. Two of them provide text of our passage. MS L_1 (known to George Smith but first published in cuneiform by Haupt) is the top right-hand corner of the tablet's reverse; L_3 (published by Thompson) is a small piece that straddles the margin between columns iv and v and almost joins L_1. MS g survives as three separate fragments, first published in 1965; the second, MS g_2, is a part of its fourth column. Between them the four pieces allow the complete reconstruction of SB VII 168–73.

The cuneiform text of these lines is given on Figs. 1 and 2. Fig. 1 gives a photograph of the clay tablet fragment denoted by the siglum MS g_2. Fig. 2 presents my pen-and-ink facsimiles of the other three fragments, with the lines at issue boxed. The production of such drawings (known in Assyriology as 'hand copies') is the first stage in the editorial process that transfers the cuneiform text from clay tablet to modern translation. The subsequent stages are present below:

(a) transliteration of the cuneiform signs, 'score'-style (manuscript by manuscript), cuneiform signs with phonetic values being rendered in lower case and logograms in small capital letters

168 L_1 iv 17 [ ]-⌜lu⌝ uk-ku-lu pa-nu-šú

	L_3	iv 6'	šá 1-e[n]
	g_2	iv 4'	[š]á 1-en eṭ-lu uk-ku-ul pa-n[i-]
169	E_2	iv 1'	a-[ ]
	L_1	iv 18	[ ]-i pa-nu-šú maš-lu
	L_3	iv 7'	a-na š[á]
	g_2	iv 5'	[a]na šá an-ze-e pa-nu-šu maš-[ ]
170	E_2	iv 2'	rit-t[i]
	L_1	iv 19	[-t]a-šú ṣu-pur a-re-e ṣu-pur-a-šú
	L_3	iv 8'	rit-t[i]
	g_2	iv 6'-7'	⌜rit⌝-ti UR.MAḪ rit-ta-a-[šu] / [ṣu-pu]r a-re-e ṣu-pur-ra-[šu]
171	E_2	iv 3'	iṣ-bat qí-ma-ti-i[a]
	L_1	iv 20	[ ] ⌜ú⌝-dan-ni-na-an-ni ia-a-ši
	L_3	iv 9'	iṣ-ba[t]
	g_2	iv 8'	[qi]m-⌜mat-ti⌝-iá {DIŠ} ú-dan-ni-na-[ ]
172	E_2	iv 4'	am-ḫaṣ-su-ma GIM k[ep-]
	L_1	iv 21	[-p]e-e i-šaḫ-ḫi-iṭ
	L_3	iv 10'	am-ḫ[aṣ-]
	g_2	iv 9'	[GI]M kep-pe-e i-[ ]
173	E_2	iv 5'	im-ḫaṣ-an-ni-ma ki-ma [ ]
	L_1	iv 22	[ ] ⌜a⌝-mu uṭ-ṭeb-ba-an-ni
	L_3	iv 11'	im-[ ]
	g_2	iv 10'	[-m]a ⌜a⌝-mu [ ]

(b) composite version of (a), with variants collected beneath

$L_1L_3g_2$	168	šá 1-en eṭ-lu uk-ku-lu pa-nu-šú
$E_2L_1L_3g_2$	169	a-na šá an-ze-e pa-nu-šú maš-lu
$E_2L_1L_3g_2$	170	rit-ti UR.MAḪ rit-ta-šú ṣu-pur a-re-e ṣu-pur-a-šú
$E_2L_1L_3g_2$	171	iṣ-bat qí-ma-ti-i[a] ú-dan-ni-na-an-ni ia-a-ši
$E_2L_1L_3g_2$	172	am-ḫaṣ-su-ma GIM kep-pe-e i-šaḫ-ḫi-iṭ
$E_2L_1L_3g_2$	173	im-ḫaṣ-an-ni-ma ki-ma ⌜a⌝-mu uṭ-ṭeb-ba-an-ni

Variants: 168 g_2: uk-kul pa-n[i- 169 g_2: [a]na L_1: an-zi]-i g_2: pa-nu-šu 170 g_2: rit-ta-a-[šu], ṣu-pur-ra-[šu] 171 g_2: qi]m-⌜mat-ti⌝-iá {DIŠ}

(c) transcription of (b) into 'normalized' Akkadian words, with false inflections corrected

168 *ša ištēn eṭli ukkulū pānūšu*
169 *ana ša anzî pānūšu mašlū*
170 *ritti nēši rittāšu ṣupur arê ṣuprāšu*
171 *iṣbat qimmātīya udanninanni yâši*
172 *amḫassūma kīma keppê išaḫḫiṭ*
173 *imḫaṣannīma kīma ami uṭṭebbânni*

(d) analysis of (c) as a sequence of poetic lines of three or four stress-bearing units (feet) arranged as couplets (acute accent marks stress, | divides feet, || marks a halfway pause or caesura)

168 *ša išt´ēn | éṭli || úkkulū | pān´ūšu*
169 *ana ša anz´î | pān´ūšu | máślū*
170 *ritti n´ēši | ritt´āšu || ṣupur ar´ê | ṣupr´āšu*
171 *íṣbat | qimmāt´īya || udanninánni | y´âši*
172 *amḫass´ūma | kīma kepp´ê | išáḫḫiṭ*
173 *imḫaṣann´īma | kīma ámi | uṭṭebb´ânni*

(e) translation of (d), punctuated to take account of the usual congruence of syntax and poetic units of half-line, line and couplet

168 There was a man, grim his expression,
169 his face was like that of an *Anzû*-bird.
170 His hands were a lion's paws, his claws an eagle's talons,
171 he took hold of my hair, he overpowered me.
172 I struck him but he sprang back like a skipping-rope,
173 he struck me and capsized me like a raft.

The passage of text treated here demonstrates something of the techniques of reconstruction customarily employed in editing cuneiform texts that survive on multiple manuscripts. Sources for Babylonian literary texts are not usually many, so that the reconstruction of any given line of composite text (b) from the extant fragments (a) is often unproblematic and frequently makes few demands on the judgement of a modern editor. When it does, usually it is a matter of choosing between variants in spelling, and here it makes good sense to give precedence to a spelling that best reflects the standard grammar as we understand it. Hence, in l. 168 of (b), MS E's *uk-ku-lu* is preferred to MS g's *uk-ku-ul* because it is a better match for the expected form *ukkulū*. There is no guarantee that the preferred spelling survives on the best-preserved manuscript. Consequently readings from

tiny fragments as well as large tablets can find their way into the composite text. Manuscripts being fragmentary, the best or standard spelling might not be complete, and a less good or non-standard variant might enter the composite text for that reason. So in l. 169 of (b) MS g's *an-ze-e* finds favour over MS L's [*an-zi*]-*i*. More rarely, a spelling that matches grammatical expectations occurs on none of the extant manuscripts, so that the editor is forced to make use of an inferior or unorthographic spelling. A case in point is *ṣuprāšu* in l. 170 of (b), for which no first-millennium witness yet offers the conventional *ṣu-up-ra-šú*.

In a situation where almost no manuscripts are complete and most are very fragmentary, the several methodologies of textual criticism and editing developed in other fields have proved unsuitable in cuneiform scholarship (see Michalowski 1989: 21–5). For example, it is not usually possible to adopt as the basis of the transliteration a single manuscript to which others are considered subordinate. In any case, it is an odd feature of the cuneiform scribal tradition that the best-preserved and longest manuscripts themselves rarely present a text that is free from non-standard spellings, corruption or other blemish, so that this methodology would be a poor tool in the context. In cuneiform studies the process of textual reconstruction is by contrast a work of compromise and pragmatism, without any aim other than to produce a modern transliterated text that is as accessible to the reader as possible. Recent scholars have emphasized that the results, obtained as they are from manuscripts of different date and geographical origin, are essentially idealized texts, in Michalowski's words 'intellectual constructs'. Composite transliterated editions cannot be claimed to recreate the ancient texts as these existed at any given time or place, but they are nevertheless the best we can do.

At present not every line can be reconstructed as demonstrated for SB VII 168–73, but with the continuing discovery of new pieces in museum storerooms and archaeological digs there is no doubt in my mind that eventually the whole text of the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh will be recovered and the poem reconstructed much as it last was more than two thousand years ago.

Ancient editing

It is clear from what has already been stated of the history of Gilgamesh that the written poem underwent considerable development over a period of many centuries until a standard text was established, probably towards the end of the second millennium. According to Babylonian tradition the poem was the work of a certain Sîn-leqi-unninni, a scholar from Uruk who was believed to have been a contemporary of Gilgamesh himself. However, Sîn-leqi-unninni bears a name of a kind not found before the second millennium, so the tradition clearly preserved an anachronism. Instead there is little doubt that Sîn-leqi-unninni's name was associated with the epic because he was the man who gave it its final, fixed form. Sîn-leqi-unninni is thus one of the earliest editors in recorded history. From a comparison of the standard version of the first millennium with the older fragments we know that the person responsible for the standard version remodelled the poem. He provided

it with a new prologue and recast the story to emphasize the theme of wisdom gained through suffering. Probably he was responsible for interpolating a version of the flood story, adapted from the old poem of Atra-hasis, and for appending to the epic as Tablet XII the rump of one of the Sumerian poems of Bilgames in an Akkadian prose translation. He left his mark also on the prosody, reducing variation in parallel and similar passages by combining their lines and repeating them verbatim to produce a text characterized by long sections of repetition where older versions had none. For this he often stands accused of damaging the poem's literary qualities, but at the same time it can be argued that he introduced a profundity of thought that was probably lacking in the older versions.

Though the editorship of Sîn-leqi-unninni probably changed the poem so radically that it is no wonder the Babylonians later named him as its author, it is clear from the multiple versions of the second millennium and from the existence of textual variants in the standard version of the first millennium, that he was not the only individual to leave his mark on the written epic. However, we know nothing of these others.

The evolution of a written text of the scribal edition is a combination of a variety of factors. Some changes in the text may have been the result of intentional editorial decisions, such as the replacement of an obscure word by a common one. Other changes may have been inadvertent. A scribe making a new manuscript by reading an old tablet (aloud) to himself and reproducing it afresh might sometimes have misread, miscopied or otherwise misinterpreted what lay in front of him, introducing new textual variants that became part of the tradition. The transmission of a Babylonian text of the scribal tradition relied on human memory as well as written record. Tablets were sometimes copied on the dictation of some one who knew the text by heart. Human memory being what it is, textual variants, different orders of lines, missing and extra lines could all have arisen in this way and so entered the tradition. Here one must remember that the scribal tradition known to us is essentially the curriculum of scribal education. Ashurbanipal's Kuyunjik tablets aside, it seems that most copies of traditional texts were the work of boys and young men learning to be scribes and not the products of masters. This is true of first-millennium tablets as well as of the Old Babylonian copies of Sumerian literary texts. It should then not be a surprise if textual variants include crass mistakes and corruptions as well as editorial changes.

This paper will conclude with examples of both sorts of textual variation, diachronic and synchronic, looking first at passages that illustrate the evolution of the text through the various versions currently extant and then at variant readings in the standardized text of the first millennium.

Evolution of the text

Because of the comparative paucity of second-millennium tablets, there are not so many episodes extant where corresponding passages from several versions can be compared. One of them is the counsellors' warning as Gilgamesh and Enkidu prepare to set out on their journey to do battle with Huwawa (later Humbaba) in the distant Cedar Forest. There are

now four sources for this episode, stemming from the eighteenth century to the late first millennium BC, and from Anatolia and Assyria as well as Babylonia. Two of them are very recent additions to our knowledge.

The following is the text of the counsellors' speech as given in the long-known Yale tablet, one of the Old Babylonian editions of the epic. It is partly a repetition of lines that occurred earlier on the tablet (the symbol // identifies parallel lines):

189	The elders of Uruk-the-Metropolis	
190	gave answer to Gilgamesh:	
191	'You are young, Gilgamesh, and carried away by enthusiasm,	
192	whatever you do, you cannot understand.	
193	We hear of Huwawa, (that) he is strange of visage:	
194	who is there can withstand his weapons?	
195	For sixty [leagues] the forest is a wilderness;	// OB III 108
196	who is there can venture inside it?	// OB III 109
197	Huwawa, his voice is the Deluge,	// OB III 110
198	his speech is fire and his breath is death.	// OB III 111–12
199	Why do you desire to do this thing?	// OB III 113–14
200	An unwinnable battle is the ambush of Huwawa.'	// OB III 115–16

Yale tablet = OB III 189–200

A very damaged account of the same speech occurs on a fourteenth-century fragment from Anatolia, first published in 1988:

[5' The elders of Uruk *gave answer to Gilgamesh*:]	// OB III 189–90
'Why do you desire [to do this thing?]	// OB III 199
[An unwinnable battle] is the ambush of Huwawa.	// OB III 200
[*Who is there* 7' *can withstand his weapons*?]	// OB III 194?
[For sixty] leagues [the forest] is a [wilderness . . . '	// OB III 195

MB Boğ$_1$ d 5'–7'

Enough is preserved to show that this version uses lines that are present in the Old Babylonian Yale tablet but places them in a different order. An early Neo-Assyrian tablet from Ashur that holds another intermediate version of the episode is slightly better preserved. It was published only in 2001:

6'	The senior [advisers rose,] saying [to Gilgamesh:]	// SB II 287
7'	'[You are young,] my lord, [carried away] by enthusiasm,	// OB III 191 // SB II 289
8'	[. . .] what you speak of finds [no] favour [. . .]	// OB III 192 // SB II 290
9'	'You [are young,] my lord, [carried away] by enthusiasm,	repetition of 7'

10' [. . .] what you speak of finds [no] favour [. . .] repetition of 8'
11' [. . .] . . . of Humbaba will be too ferocious for [*you* . . . ,]
12' his [speech] is fire, his utterance [is *death*.] // OB III 198 // SB II 292
13' [For] sixty leagues each way [the forest] surrounds him, // OB III 195 // SB II 293
14' [who] is there would venture within? // OB III 196 // SB II 295
Adad is the [first, (but) he is the second!] // OB III 134–5 // SB II 297
15' [In order to] keep his cedars safe, // OB III 136 // SB II 298
[Enlil made it his destiny] (to be) the terror of the people.' // OB III 137 // SB II 299

Assyrian MS **y** obv. 6'–15'

This version of the speech also contains in a different order lines that are present in the Yale tablet, though it is a set that hardly overlaps with the Anatolian fragment. Some expansion can be observed. One couplet is repeated and three lines are appended that in the Yale tablet occurred earlier in the episode. More interestingly still, the passage contains numerous alterations to vocabulary and phrasing, some of which significantly alter the sense.

Finally there is the Standard Babylonian version of the passage. The text is reconstructed from five different first-millennium manuscripts, a badly damaged tablet from Kuyunjik known since 1884 and, unusually, four fragments from Babylonia. Two of the Babylonian pieces were published by others, in 1954 and 1993 respectively, while the other two first appeared in my critical edition (George 2003). Thanks to the appearance of the new manuscripts the passage is at last completely recovered:

287 The senior advisers arose, cf. MS **y** 6'
288 (one) expressed in return (their) opinion to Gilgamesh:
289 'You are young, Gilgamesh, carried away by enthusiasm, // OB III 191 // MS **y** 7'
Var. adds '[your mother] (just) bore you'
290 and the thing that you talk (*var.* speak) of you do not understand.
// OB III 192 // MS **y** 8'
291 Humbaba, his voice is the Deluge, // OB III 197 // SB II 221
292 his speech is fire, his breath is death. // OB III 198 // MS **y** 12' // SB II 222
293 He hears the forest murmur at sixty leagues' distance; // OB III 195 // MS **y** 13'
// SB II 223
294 he who ventures into his forest, [feebleness will seize him!] (MS ee only)
295 Who is there would venture into his forest? // OB III 196 // MS **y** 14a' // SB II 224
296 Who is there among the Igigi-gods that would oppose him? // SB II 226
297 Adad is the first, but he is the second! // OB III 134–5 // MS **y** 14b' // SB II 225 (ll.
298 In order to keep the cedars safe, // OB III 136 // MS **y** 15a' // SB II 227
299 Enlil made it his destiny to be the terror of the people.' // OB III 137 // MS **y** 15b'
// SB II 228

SB II 287–99

In respect of the presence and order of lines, this version of the speech offers much the same text as Assyrian MS **y**, though the repeated couplet is not in evidence and two additional lines put in an appearance. In some places the phrasing is closer to the Yale tablet, in other nearer to the Assyrian tablet.

It is obvious from these passages alone that a lineal descent, Yale – MB Boğ$_1$ – Assyrian MS **y** – SB II, is most unlikely. The last two versions share a common ancestor, but this was neither the Old Babylonian Yale tablet nor the Middle Babylonian version represented by the Anatolian fragment. Rather it was some late second-millennium version that inherited much from the edition represented by the Yale tablet, no doubt at several removes. The textual genealogy of the Epic of Gilgamesh is clearly a complex one, with many different lines of transmission. And that is no surprise for a text transmitted over such a long time by so many different hands in such a wide variety of places. One thing is certain: as more second-millennium tablets come to light we shall keep learning more about the history of the text's development.

Textual variants and recensions

The multiple manuscripts of the first millennium show that eventually the epic found a standardized form. The topic of genealogy raised in the preceding section leads into the question of whether families of manuscripts can be identified among the nearly eighty manuscripts currently extant. Physical appearance and layout are not a fertile field of enquiry here, for almost all the first-millennium tablets exhibit the same six-column format and 'landscape' orientation. But manuscripts might nevertheless be expected to fall into different groups according to their choice of textual variants. Given the derivation of the first-millennium tablets from different cities – and we know the rough provenance of almost all the 189 fragments of the Standard Babylonian epic – one should look for signs of the existence of different recensions of the poem in different places of origin. To this end I have made a study of textual variants in the best-preserved sections of the Standard Babylonian epic, Tablets I, VI and XI (George 2003: Chapter 9). The variants fall into the following types:

(a) expansion/contraction of text (addition/omission of lines, repetition of couplets, other extrapolations)
(b) transposition of lines
(c) larger-scale reordering of lines
(d) rephrasing of entire lines
(e) transposition of smaller units (words or phrases)
(f) substitution of words or phrases with rough synonyms
(g) corruption of words or phrases
(h) addition or omission of words or phrases

(i) changes of tense, stem or mood of verb
(j) changes in number or gender of noun
(k) presence or absence of suffixed particles (pronouns, ventives, enclitics)
(p) alternative possessive constructions
(q) variation in dialect and use of phonetic v. morphographemic spellings
(r) other minor changes

As an example of the kind of evidence furnished by these textual variants, I shall present instances of (f) and (g) in translation. Each example is identified by tablet and line number (e.g., SB I 43) and by the sigla of the manuscripts in question. Sigla in upper case are from Nineveh and those in bold lower case from other Assyrian cities; these manuscripts were written in the eighth and seventh centuries. Sigla in plain lower case are from Babylonian cities, mostly Babylon and Uruk, and date from a little to a lot later, the sixth to second centuries. The arrangement in columns, left and right, does not signify superior v. inferior variants:

SB I 43	**g**: destroyed		h: overthrew
SB I 92	P: warrior's daughter		h: [warrior's] wife
SB I 104	P: offspring of silence		h: offspring of death
SB I 106	P: adorned (*uppuš*)		h: ? (*nuppus*)
SB I 108	BP: people		h: gods
SB I 176	Fx: jostling(?)		P: drinking
SB I 199	Fn: defiled (*ultaḫḫi*)		B: grew frightened (*ultaḫḫit*, corrupt)
SB I 288	B: man		ho: friend
SB VI 7	AOQ: bridegroom		**a**: my groom
SB VI 16	A**a**: courtiers		Q: lords
SB VI 18	A**a**: ewes		Q: sheep
SB VI 21	AQ: acquire		**a**: have
SB VI 44	A: lovers		O: bridegrooms
SB VI 50	A: stands		Q**a**: sits
SB VI 51	A: perfect (*gamir*)		**a**: favourite (*migir*, corrupt)
SB VI 60	A: kids (*unīqēti*)		**a**: sacricial animals (*niqêti*)
SB VI 82	AQ: went		**a**: went up
SB VI 141	O: circled around		**a**: passed beside
SB VI 155	A: threw before her	O: cast down [...her]	**a**: hurled at her
SB VI 163	OQ: minas (*manâ*)		A: finger-widths (*ubānē*, corrupt?)
SB VI 171	A: serving girls (*muttabbilāti*)		O: detractor (*muṭappila*, corrupt)
SB VI 180	O: asleep		Q**a**: lying down
SB VI 181	O: asleep		Q**a**: lying down
SB XI 89	JT: seal your hatch		W: seal the boat

SB XI 95	C: caulker	W: caulking
SB XI 99	W: thundering	J: bellowing
SB XI 113	C: destruction	J: rainstorm
SB XI 117	C: like a woman in labour (*kīma ālitti*)	J: aloud (*malīti*)
SB XI 120	T: because I	J: I who
SB XI 120	T: assembly	J: presence
SB XI 121	T: assembly	J: presence
SB XI 127	T: parched lips	J: closed lips
SB XI 134	CT: observed the weather	J: observed the sea
SB XI 141	T: fourteen	J: twelve
SB XI 149 // 152	CW: ? (*ipiramma*)	J**c**: it came back (*itūramma*)
SB XI 175	CJ: who? (*ayyumma*)	**c**: whence? ([*ayyān*]*umma*)
SB XI 185	C**c**: sin	J: crime
SB XI 195	C: land	J: people
SB XI 199	J: Ellil	**b**: King Ea (corrupt)
SB XI 241	CTW: you awoke	J: I roused you
SB XI 259	CW: city	J: land

These examples give an idea of how minor variants came to be generated, by use of synonyms, exact or loose, of homonyms, exact or loose, by substitution in the face of obscurity or through arbitrary preference, and by intelligent or unintelligent corruption.

The evidence for families of manuscripts is not conclusive, however, neither in the examples listed above nor in those that I have not given. Where variants exist between three or more manuscripts they do not always take the same sides. Thus in Tablet VI, so far known only from Assyrian manuscripts, MSS Q and **a** tend to agree when faced with variants from MSS A and O, but on occasion MS Q agrees instead with MS A; similarly MS O is sometimes in disagreement with MS A. In Tablet XI MSS C, T and W would seem to present a united face in disagreeing with MS J, but in cases of variants where more than two manuscripts are preserved the picture is not entirely consistent. In Tablet I the Late Babylonian MS h differs more from the Kuyunjik manuscripts (B, F and P) than they do amongst themselves, which might speak for a rift between Assyrian and Babylonian sources. Other Late Babylonian sources, however, side with the Assyrian MS F in disagreeing with MSS B and P. This and the evidence of the variant lines, words and phrases that fall under other headings is not conclusive in making a clear-cut case for recensions of the Standard Babylonian text divided by place or by time, say Assyrian v. Babylonian or seventh century v. later. Many more witnesses to the text are needed before the situation becomes clearer. Even then optimism would be misplaced, for other factors inherent in the nature of the sources and their transmission undermine the very concept of groups of manuscripts (for a full discussion of the problems see Black 1998: 30–3).

Conclusion

In the two preceding sections we have had a glimpse of the work of many of the ancient editors and copyists who generated smaller and larger changes in the written text of the Epic of Gilgamesh, whether inadvertently or by intention. None of these changes brought to the poem anything that can be identified with Aelian's story of the baby saved by an eagle. As often with ancient Near Eastern traditions reported by classical authors, there is little agreement between the cuneiform documentation and the account in Greek. The reasons for this are manifold, but the most important is the circumstance that, almost without exception, classical authors knew the Mesopotamian traditions only at second (or third or fourth) hand. A huge gulf existed between what was written on the cuneiform tablets and what was passed down on the papyri of Alexandria and Herculaneum. In that gulf stood a host of lost go-betweens, written and oral traditions in Aramaic, Phoenician and probably other languages. Most of the intermediaries are perished beyond recall and will never be recovered.

The fascination of the cuneiform sources, however, is that they *can* be recovered and *are* being recovered. This is one of the great joys of working in ancient Mesopotamian literature, that we know more manuscripts are out there waiting to be excavated, read, identified, even joined to fragments already recovered, and used to restore missing and broken text and to solve all sorts of other problems. Piece by piece, the recovery of the ancient literatures of Sumer and Babylonia goes on. These dull-looking tablets of clay will go on yielding more and more first-hand knowledge of ancient Mesopotamia and its intellectual achievements for as long as the modern world is both interested in the legacy left by the Babylonians and – crucially – willing to pay for its study.

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Captions

Fig. 1 Photograph of MS g_2, reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum, with ll. 168–73 of SB Tablet VII boxed

Fig. 2 Line drawings of MSS E_2, L_1 and L_3, with ll. 168–73 of SB Tablet VII boxed

Chart A Synopsis of the extant narrative poems about Gilgamesh, segregated by period

Chart B Time chart illustrating the evolution of the Gilgamesh epic