

Epic of Gilgamesh

Honors 2101

Unit 1: Mesopotamia and Ancient Near East

Rough Outline

- Some Background
- Tablets I-V
- Tablets VI-VIII
- Tablets IX-XI
- Closing Thoughts

Background

- Earliest known literary text (~2100 BCE)
- “Standard” Version 7th c. BCE
 - Library at Nineveh (excavated mid 19th c.)
 - “He who saw the deep” vs. “Surpassing all other kings”
 - 1000s of copies (scribes)

Gilgamesh a Real King?



- Sumerian King-list
- Lived ~2500 BCE
- Ruled Uruk
- Cult figure and oral stories



Map of Ancient Near and Middle East

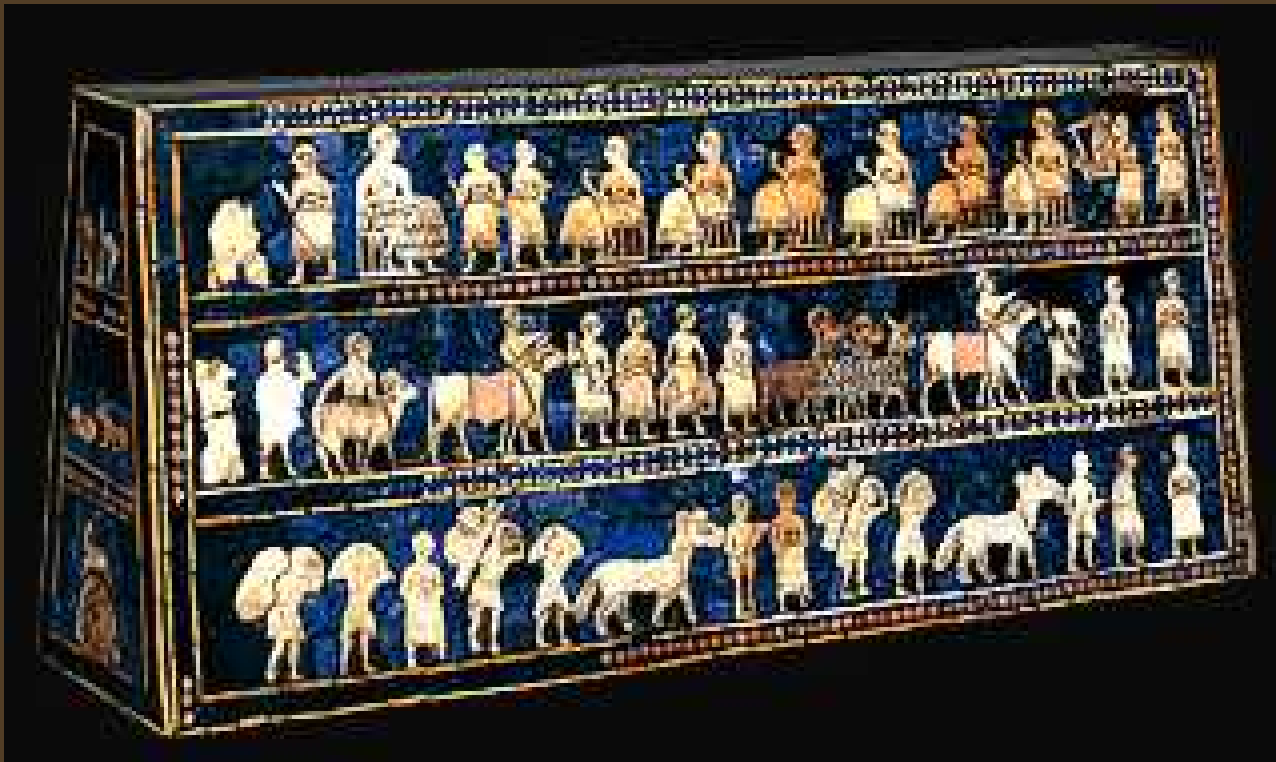
(Fiero, G. (2006). *The Humanistic Tradition*, Vol 1. 5th ed. McGraw Hill, p.38.)

Warrior Kings

- Kings were military leaders, builders, protectors
- Strength, cunning, virility, divine favor
- Law, justice, and order in an uncertain world
- Glory and Immortality



Standard of Ur



Peace and War

- Peace: agriculture, trade, crafts, flourishing
- War: conquering enemies, tribute, fierceness and authority

Key Themes



- Companionship
- Death
- Immortality
- Gods-Humans Relationship
- “Meaning of Life” or “Growing Up”?

Summary of Tablets I-V

- Enkidu created to counter Gilgamesh
- Contest leads to friendship
- Expedition against Humbaba
- Victory

Who is Who?

- Anu (along with Enlil and Ea)
- Gilgamesh
- Enkidu
- Shamhat
- Ninsun
- Shamash
- Humbaba (along with Adad)
- Ishtar (later)

Tablet I

- What is Gilgamesh known for?
- What is the trouble with Gilgamesh?
- Who is Enkidu? What are his characteristics?
- After Enkidu is “civilized” by Shamhat, what distinguishes him from the animals?
- What are the two dreams Gilgamesh relates to his mother?

Tablet II

- What symbolizes Enkidu's becoming a civilized man?
- Why is he angry at Gilgamesh?
- How do Enkidu and Gilgamesh meet?
- Why become friends?
- Why suggest a campaign against Humbaba?
- What response does he receive?

Tablet III

- What is Enkidu expected to do on the journey? Is he a companion or servant?
- What supplications does Ninsun perform for Gilgamesh's journey?
- Why would Ninsun adopt Enkidu?
- Is Gilgamesh fearful or determined? What about Enkidu?

Tablet IV

- Recount the gist of Gilgamesh's dreams and Enkidu's interpretation of them.
 - Why does Enkidu interpret them as he does?
 - How would you interpret the dreams?
- What role do dreams play in the epic, thus far?
 - Dramatically and culturally

Humbaba



Tablet V

- As Gilgamesh and Enkidu approach the Forest of Cedar what are their impressions, feelings, actions?
- Why does Humbaba accuse Enkidu of treachery?
- How does Gilgamesh ultimately overcome Humbaba?
- Recount the (suppliant) pleading of Humbaba:
 - what does this reveal about the characters and the story?

Review of I-V

- Companionship of Enkidu and Gilgamesh
 - Is Enkidu friend or servant?
 - What does Enkidu do for Gilgamesh?
- Supplicants and Kings
 - Review the instances of supplication and responses to it.
- Motives and Virtue
 - Why do characters act as they do?
 - What virtues (or lack of virtue) do they exhibit?
 - Have the characters changed, remained the same?

Overview of VI-VIII

- Ishtar and the Bull of Heaven
- Death of Enkidu
- Gilgamesh reacts

Tablet VI

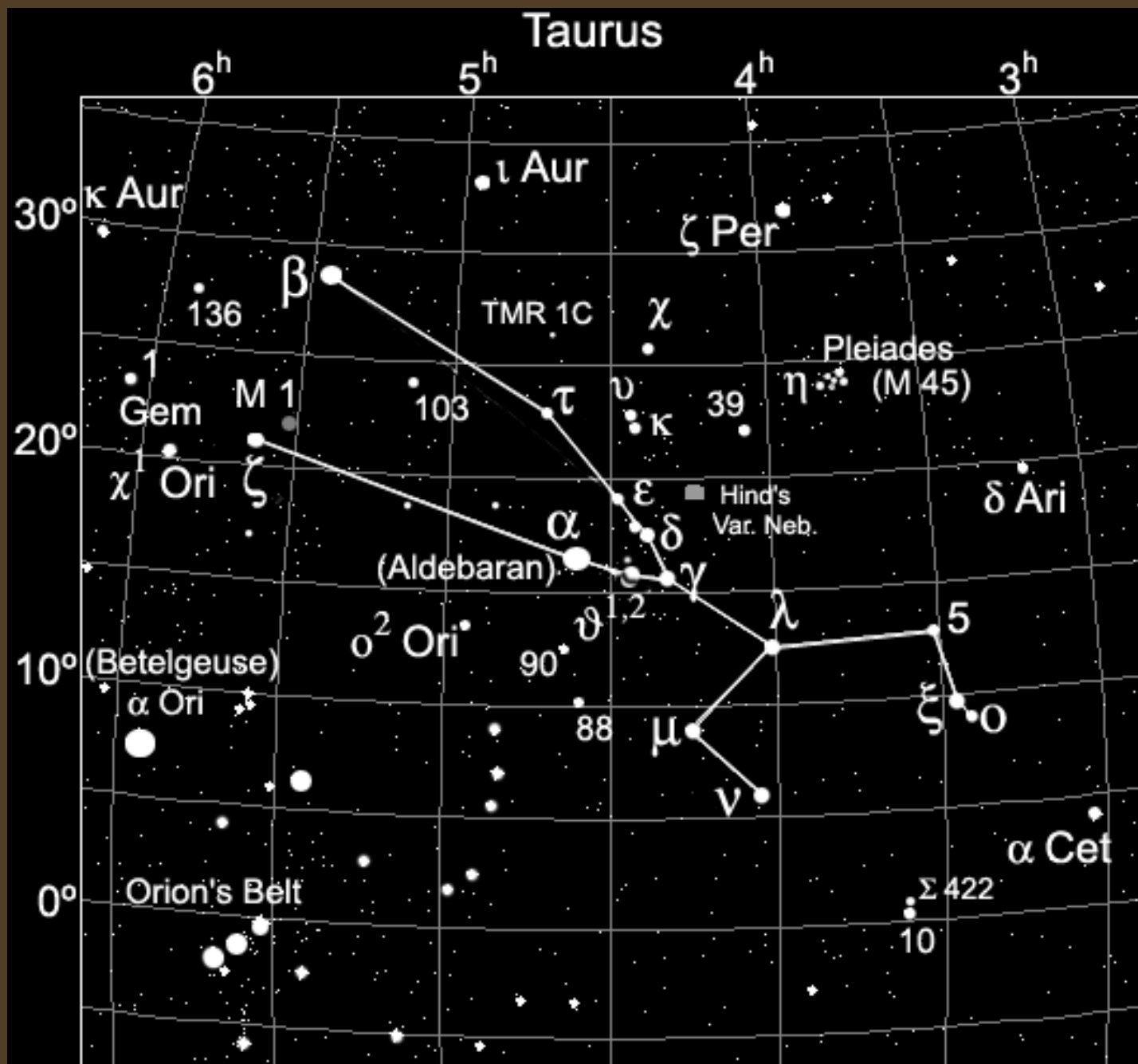
- What does Ishtar promise Gilgamesh if he becomes her husband?
- What is Gilgamesh's answer?
- Ishtar sends the Bull of Heaven on Uruk; Why? What are the consequences?
- How is the Bull of Heaven killed?
- What is Gilgamesh's final response to Ishtar?



What other “mythological images of bulls can you recall?



MS 1989
The Gilgamesh cylinder seal. Assyria, ca. 7th c. BC



Tablet VII

- Why must Enkidu die?
- What is the deal with the door?
- How does Gilgamesh respond to Enkidu? (Cf. with Tablet IV & V)
- Who/Why does Enkidu curse and then bless?
- What is the vision of the underworld?
- In the end, does Enkidu die an honorable death?

Tablet VIII

- Describe the general scene of Enkidu's funeral.
- What are the important elements?
- How does Gilgamesh act?
- What is the purpose of the funeral?

Review of VI-VIII

- Gilgamesh grows in wisdom and conceit.
 - Ishtar's offer
 - Defeat of Bull of Heaven
 - Astrological Meaning?
- Gilgamesh-Enkidu Relationship
 - Friend or servant?
- Facing Mortality
 - Enkidu's death, curse, blessing, and funeral
 - Gilgamesh's reaction

Overview of IX-XI

- Wanderings of Gilgamesh
- Uta-napishti's Flood Story
- Losing and Gaining "Immortality"

Tablet IX

- Why does Gilgamesh wander?
- Consider the Lion scene (moon, Shamash, etc.)
- What is the encounter with the Scorpion-men and journey under the mountain? Why impossible things?
- What is up with the Jeweled Garden?

Tablet X

- Why does Shiduri, the tavern-keeper, hide from the approach of Gilgamesh?
 - Explain the formulaic greeting.
- Describe the encounter with Ur-Shanabi and the Stone Ones?
 - Any parallels?
- What is Uta-napishti's response to Gilgamesh's quest?
 - What has Gilgamesh's toil wrought? Advice?
 - Fate? Gods and Humans?

Tablet XI

- Recount the Flood Story:
 - Why the Deluge? Why warn Uta-napishti?
 - Parallel elements?
 - Ship, animals, humans, storm, birds, offerings, council of gods, immortality, justice XI.185 f.)?
- What is the challenge of sleep?
 - Does Gilgamesh succeed?
 - How do we know? Despair?
- What is Uta-napisthi's gift to Gilgamesh?
 - What is the plant? What does it do?
 - Did he successfully achieve it?
- What is Gilgamesh's final insight?

*Tablet XII

- Bilgames and the underworld.
- Compare “Descent of Inanna”.

Review of IX-XI

- Wonderous journeys and fantastic geography.
- Quest and despair of Gilgamesh.
- Flood Story (and parallels).
- Final Lesson...(punchline).

Closing Thoughts?

- Journey of the “Hero” archetype...
- Companions and Supplicants
- Death and Immortality
- Divine and Human Relations
- Historical Influence...

Some Paper Topics (1)

- The poet Rainer Maria Rilke described the Epic of Gilgamesh as “the epic about the fear of death.” Develop a thesis in response to Rilke’s statement.
- The Sumerologist, Thorkild Jacobsen, described the epic as a “story of learning to face reality, a story of “growing up”.” Develop a thesis in response to Thorkild’s statement.
- How is the character of Gilgamesh changed or unchanged over the course of the epic? How and why? What role do the other characters play in this?
- How are the female characters portrayed in the epic? What does this reveal about women in ancient Mesopotamia? In general?
- What does the epic reveal about the companionship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu? What does it reveal about companionship in general, if anything?
- What role do the gods play in the epic? Are they removed, interested, indifferent? How do the human characters relate to the gods?

Some Paper Topics (2)

- Describe the significance of “The Bull of Heaven” episode. Explore both the literary/dramatic elements, as well as the symbolic/astrological significance. (May require some research.)
- With the death of Enkidu we are given a “vision” of the underworld. What is this vision and how does it play into Gilgamesh’s reaction to his death. Also, compare this vision of the underworld with others.
- In Tablet XI we are given a story of a great deluge. How does thei compare with the Biblical account? Given that the Epic of Gilgamesh predates Hebrew and Greek sources, speculate (or do some research) on the possible influence the Epic has had on these other literatures. What does this imply for how we understand, say, the Hebrew account?
- Gilgamesh is a classic hero figure, a warrior-king who quests for various trophies. Even though he is very successful, he fails in his final question for immortality. Discuss this “failure” (did he fail?) in relation to our understanding of heroes. What is a hero?