

THE BIRTH OF GILGAMESH (Ael. NA XII.21)
A case-study in literary receptivity*

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*Rapunzel, Rapunzel,
Laß mir dein Haar herunter!*

1. *Greek and Near Eastern literature*

1.1. *Das zaubernde Wort* – In a letter to Helene von Nostitz, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote about the Babylonian *Gilgameš Epic*, a translation of which he had just read in the *Inselbücherei* series. According to Rilke the epic contained “Maße und Gestalten die zum Größesten gehören, was das zaubernde Wort zu irgendeiner Zeit gegeben hat. (...) Hier ist das Epos der Todesfurcht, entstanden im Unvordenklichen unter Menschen, bei denen zuerst die Trennung von Tod und Leben definitiv und verhängnisvoll geworden war.”¹

The literary quality of the *Gilgameš* epic is indeed striking – the celebrated friendship of *Gilgameš* and *Enkidu* and the sorrow of *Gilgameš* over the latter’s death are pictured in a compelling drama of such powerful imagery that it has even outlived its own bold image of eternity, the mighty walls of Uruk. Ever since its rediscovery, now some 130 years ago, the epic has stirred the minds of its many readers and – as is the hallmark of any true work of art – found just as many interpretations.

It may come as no great surprise, then, that in the debate on Oriental ‘influences’ or (better) Near Eastern or ‘West-Asiatic’ elements in Greek literature the *Gilgameš Epic* has continuously held a central place. This is not the place to review the long and, at times, tediously unproductive debate between the modern *philobarbaroi* and the defenders of the romantic vision of a monolithic Hellas rising from the lowly dusts of time to a sublime state of ‘edle Einfalt’ all by itself and by itself alone. The unfortunate hype on Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* (New Brunswick 1987-1991) is emblematic for the stream of scholarly blood that has been shed without moving the real debate even an inch ahead. It is surprising how close this work is to some of the products of the German pan-Babylonian movement, such as Peter Jensen’s *Das Gilgamesch-Epos in der Weltliteratur* (1906, 1928).² A taste of the level of emotionalism and religious zeal

* The following text is basically a straightforward reworking of my lecture in Halle (15/VII/2002). Some of the problems touched upon here certainly deserve fuller treatment, as do some of the works listed in the bibliography, but such would exceed by far the limits of this already lengthy paper. I am grateful to Robert Beekes, Jan Bremmer, Martijn Cuypers, Birgit Gufler, Kristin Kleber and Marten Stol for their fruitful comments and suggestions on the manuscript or parts of it. The responsibility for the flaws that this article may still contain is entirely mine.

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Helene von Nostitz, Briefwechsel*, Frankfurt a.M., 1976: 99; compare Moran 1980.

² This does not mean, however, that such works should be ignored by scholarship. Jensen’s work contains a number of ideas that retain their interest (cf. S.N. Kramer 1944: 8 fn. 1, “these volumes may prove to be more significant than is generally assumed”). Also, many of Jensen’s intuitive and naive

that could be reached in the debate of those days is found in another work by Jensen, a pamphlet entitled *Moses, Jesus, Paulus. Drei Sagenvarianten des babylonischen Gottmenschen Gilgamesch: Eine Anklage wider Theologen und Sophisten und ein Appell an die Laien* (Frankfurt a.M. 1910).

1.2. *Oriens & Occidens* – Fortunately, the last two decades have also witnessed the foundation of a more objective and stable discussion of East-West contacts and cultural receptivity.³ Again, this is not the place for an extensive review of this development. I merely wish to underscore that the works of Walther Burkert (1984/1992²; see also *idem* 2003) and Martin West (1997) really have been groundbreaking in terms of perspective and effect. Whereas individual aspects of these studies may not be immune to criticism, not in the last place the relatively modest attention given to issues of theory and method, the enduring intellectual gain is undeniable. Here we have two thought-provoking and non-absolutist collections of parallels given by scholars who both actually ‘crossed the border’ by familiarising themselves with Akkadian, following Eduard Meyer’s footsteps and gaining real access to a world that has been the prime manifestation of the ‘Other’ ever since the Persian wars. This ‘small’ step in practical terms indeed turns out to be a giant leap when seen as the first towards the establishment of a new mental framework in which Orient and Occident are no longer eternally juxtaposed, but seen, fundamentally, as an Aegean-Asian cultural continuum.⁴ From the latter perspective the value of a beautifully-phrased and often-quoted statement from West’s edition of the *Theogony* (1966: 31) can hardly be underestimated: “As it was, the great civilisations lay in the East, and from the first, Greece’s face was turned towards the Sun. Greece is part of Asia; Greek literature is a Near Eastern literature.” This mental outlook, at least as I understand it, is what future research in this discipline should definitely aspire to. Nobody would seriously claim that classical or archaic Greece had no identity of its own, nor would anyone do so for the Neo-Assyrian empire, the kingdom of the Arsacids, the Sumerian city-states, etc. Yet, the various species of ‘orientalists’ seem to have little trouble in recognising the reality and importance of an overarching unity to which the cultures of their interest, for all their uniqueness and distinctiveness, ultimately belonged (at the highest level of abstraction we call this unity ‘the ancient Near East’). The *possibility* of intercultural contacts (ranging from elite borrowings to large-scale integration) is considered as axiomatic in these fields, geographic, linguistic and other divides notwithstanding. When it comes to Greece, however, one can, though there is a growing awareness of

comparisons (i.a. Jensen 1902, 1906, 1928) may not be extremely valuable when it comes to establishing actual literary links, but their wide scope makes his works useful as a Fundgrube for comparative folktales analysis (cf. §1.3.1. below). The same holds true for M. Astour’s *Hellenosemitica* (1965), which, although over-optimistic and lacking a sufficiently critical attitude, contains a myriad of provocative ideas.

³ Compare the principles on which the work of the Arbeitsgruppe ‘Orient und Okzident’ is based (Schuol, Hartmann & Luther 2002: esp. pp. 7-10).

⁴ This model has, of course worthy predecessors in those scholars or movements that aimed to stress the importance and consequence of ‘Oriental’ culture, be it that of antiquity or of later periods. As an example relating to the Islamic period, von Hammer-Purgstall’s *Fundgruben des Oriens* (with Goethe’s jubilant “Gottes ist der Orient, Gottes ist der Okzident!” on the title-pages) should not remain unmentioned.

other, related cultures, still discern the tacit notion of a world apart: Greece is in contact with, but still separate from its neighbours. With the ever-increasing archaeological, philological and historical evidence of international contacts and acculturation the question arises whether this antiquated dichotomic model, even when reformed and stripped from its ideological aspects, is really fit to carry the debate along new generations of scholarship.⁵ “Greece is part of Asia,” it should be remembered, is not a conclusion, but an outlook.

1.3. *Theory & method* – As stated above, a systematic treatment of the theory and method involved in establishing and contextualising contacts and explaining forms of cultural receptivity still remains a desideratum.⁶ The following paragraphs aim to be a preliminary contribution to such a treatment.

1.3.1. *The importance of oral traditions* – There is a grave theoretical problem in the commonly applied approach of comparing Greek (or Roman) texts with their supposed Near-Eastern predecessors.⁷ This approach is inevitable, as texts is all we have. Yet, these texts and the parallels they may display are, in most cases, just a surface phenomenon. A direct relationship between *texts* is a rarity. The Aramaic *Aḥiqar Romance* and the Greek *Life of Aesop* are indeed so closely related that at some points one may speak of an actual translation. The work of Berossus, too, is partly a direct reflection of Mesopotamian texts. A rare echo of the *Gilgameš Epic* (as opposed to the oral Gilgameš tradition) may perhaps be found in the *Epistola de Mirabilibus* at the end of the second book of the Greek *Alexander Romance*, possibly based on an Aramaic intermediary.⁸ These are exceptions, however, and it is essential to realise that

⁵ An example that may not be very well known is the fact that much of the Greek lexicon consists of non-Indo-European material. There are loanwords from Semitic languages, but as far as attributable, the ‘foreign’ words mostly belong to the pre-Greek/Anatolian substratum that was spoken in western Anatolia (probably as far as Cilicia) and spread from there to pre-Indo-European Greece (see Beekes 2003, proceeding from earlier work by Furnée 1972). There are at least 1250 (out of 6600) etyma in the Greek language that go back to pre-Greek, including the names of most of the principal gods and cities. The processes of acculturation and integration that inevitably lie at the basis of this situation suggest an early receptiveness of Greek culture and pose fundamental questions as to the nature of that very ‘Greek’ culture.

⁶ The term ‘influence’ is better avoided as it projects a sense of one-sided linearity on such contacts and creates a distorted and too narrow view of the processes of transmission and the dynamics of creative reception. Although most scholars using the word certainly have no such intentions, the word ‘influence’ voices the notion of a cultural expansionism that crosses an imagined border (see below), as if it were destined to leave its traces in Greek soil – the local response in fact being of little interest. Yet, it is actually precisely the latter point, the cultural *receptivity* that makes these matters interesting. In the case of literary traditions, what matters is why certain stories were carried along various cultures, why people were interested in them, in what context they were received, and, most and for all, how this material, after it had landed on those doorsteps in Askra and Smyrna, was eventually incorporated and reworked into new masterpieces. For all this, the terminology and models developed within the discipline of intertextuality may prove to be useful tools in the debate on cultural receptivity.

⁷ Cf. the discussion, with a number of similar views, in George 2003: 55-7.

⁸ For the *Life of Aesop* see Pfister 1923 and Holzberg (ed.) 1992. For the *Epistola de Mirabilibus* see Henkelman 2004 (with prev. literature). For Berossos see Kuhrt 1987: esp. 46.

the actual intercultural connection is in most cases that between an oral tradition in the Near East and an oral tradition in Greece. The text used for the Near Eastern side, say the Standard-Babylonian version of the *Gilgameš Epic*, is in fact the written pendant of a popular, oral tradition surrounding the hero Gilgameš. The Greek text in which one may discover Gilgameš ‘Nachleben,’ say the *Odyssey*, in turn is also the product and the reworking of oral traditions. It is not between the texts themselves, but between the oral traditions, from which just the tip of the iceberg is revealed, that a direct relation may be assumed.⁹ In fact, one needs to take one further step, for the plural ‘oral traditions’ is not entirely correct. When we assume that stories spread, like an oil-stain on the ocean surface, slowly from village to village and between people that were in close and daily contact, it would be better to speak of a single, encompassing ‘stream of oral tradition.’¹⁰ ‘Homer’ surely did not read *Gilgameš*, but he (i.e. Greek epic singers) could tap into the great and continuous reservoir of stories told, retold and transformed throughout the ancient world.¹¹ This is the background of, e.g., the parallel between Circe and Ištar (catalogue of unfortunate lovers turned to animals), Circe/Calypso and Siduri (paradisiacal garden at the end of the world), Menelaus and Ūta-napišti (‘entrückt’ by the gods, without dying, to a remote paradisiacal island). It is well possible that even the occasional match on the level of words, names, imagery or other significant details, such as the celebrated lion (or lioness) simile in the *Gilgameš Epic* and the *Iliad*, has to be explained by oral rather than textual transmission.¹²

⁹ Unfortunately, such rather obvious notions are still not generally accepted. Tzvi Abusch’ study (2001) on parallels between the Homeric poems and the *Gilgameš Epic*, completely ignores the role of the oral tradition and speaks of ‘influence’ (cf. fn. 6 above) of the Mesopotamian on the Greek *texts* (notably on p. 6). Apart from that, it casts an over-simplified interpretation on the figures of Gilgameš, Achilles and Odysseus, whose Werdegang is reduced to ‘identification with the human family’ (Achilles) ‘finding self-control’ (Gilgameš) and ‘resuming the social responsibilities of a king’ (Odysseus). Yet, perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the article is that it was published in a volume on ‘*methodological* approaches to intercultural influences’ [my italics, WH].

¹⁰ This is not to say that this single stream would look the same in every period and every culture, nor do I at any point want to deny the creative reception of literary themes in written as well as oral compositions, but I do want to stress that, both on a conceptual and on a practical level, it makes little sense to imagine *distinct* oral traditions: a Near Eastern one, that stops at a certain border, followed by a separate Greek one. Compare West (1997: 401), “a broad stream of international tradition, the present evidence for which is somewhat fragmented.”

¹¹ That ‘the ancient world’ is not a hollow and meaningless model is easily shown by the fact that this entity (roughly the Near East including parts of India, Central Asia, Africa north of the Sahara, and Europe) does have tangible limits. Folktale motifs in this ‘ancient world’ are not commonly found outside its borders. This means that we are dealing with a distinctive cultural entity.

¹² For the lion(ess) simile see Σ 316-322 and *Gilg.* SBV VIII.50-64 (text and translation George 2003: 654-7; see also *ibid.* 57 and Streck 1999: 89, 173). Note that West (1997: 401) takes the episode as an indication of literary borrowing from the *Gilgameš Epic* itself. As compelling as his treatment of the *Iliad* (on Achilles and Gilgameš) is, I am not sure whether “some sort of ‘hot line’ from Assyrian court literature of the first quarter of the seventh century” (*ibid.* 627) really existed. Circe, Calypso and Ištar: Germain 1954: *passim*; Abusch 1986; Crane 1988; West 1997: 405ff. (on Circe see also Arans & Shea 1994, who underline the wider Eurasian network of folktales to which the Circe episode belongs). Menelaus and Ūta-napišti: Astour 1998; West 1997: 166-7.

1.3.2. *Oral tradition and literary receptivity* – The preponderance of oral traditions in literary receptivity has two major consequences. One is that many of the motifs that may, ultimately, have come from, or via, Mesopotamia, will have been remodelled, adapted to local taste, furnished with new names, combined with other stories, etc., to such a degree that they have become unrecognisable. This complicates matters considerably but this (to quote Finley) is a pity, not an argument. Thus, one may, in certain cases, have to deal with the difficult problem of thematic contamination: a single Greek text may continue themes or motifs originating from two or more originally distinct Mesopotamian stories (as in the case that will presently be reviewed). Incidentally, it should be noted that this phenomenon can hardly be explained by assuming direct links between *texts*.

A second consequence is that literary transmission has possibly, or even probably, been of much greater extent and importance than is usually assumed. In this respect, the mere comparison of texts as such (without the above theoretical framework) may be considered as misleading, since it necessarily results in an underestimation of the level and depth of literary receptivity.

1.3.3. *Oral tradition and iconography* – A point of considerable importance is the possible role of iconography as a means of transmission of literary themes, or as a factor influencing such borrowings. The iconographic theme of Perseus slaying the Gorgo, as argued by Birgit Gufler in a previous volume of this series (2002), presents clear and eloquent resonances of a group of images from Mesopotamia and its periphery that are generally believed to depict Gilgameš, Enkidu and Humbaba. These images do not necessarily reflect the *Gilgameš Epic* (or the Sumerian *Bilgames and Huwawa*) in a direct way; they are certainly not ‘illustrations.’¹³ Similarly, the Greek images, especially those from the archaic period, differ markedly from the Perseus story as it became known in its literary reverberations (Hesiod, Pherecydes, Apollodorus). This places the iconography of the theme in between its written

¹³ The occurrence of only this theme and that of the Bull of Heaven in images, suggests to me that Gilgameš’s persona in art mainly is that of the brave and adventurous king. This image is not alien to the epic, but it hardly gives extensive coverage of its message. Lambert, whose study identifies the two iconographic themes as belonging to the Gilgameš tradition (1987), insists that they should refer to the epic, because they do not show major discrepancies (but what about the Humbaba with “feline paws and a bird’s talons for feet”?) and because other scenes would either be “too difficult to depict” or not “specially memorable in themselves” (1987: 51-2). This line of reasoning seems (a) to imply an unsubstantiated underestimation of Mesopotamian artists and/or (b) an unargued reduction of major themes that could have been depicted (Gilgameš and Enkidu wrestling, Gilgameš mourning for Enkidu) to less interesting episodes. My impression is that the occurrence of the Humbaba and Bull of Heaven episodes in art at least reflects a *selection* based on preferences that are not entirely in line with the general spirit of the epic. It seems that in oral tradition Gilgameš (as his thematic successors) was primarily a king of great powers, who transgressed the boundaries of ordinary human existence, travelled to exotic places and killed fabulous monsters (cf. §3.1 below). The same is true for the Gilgameš of the epic, but here the emphasis is wholly different: the subject is the *limits* set to man’s existence and his absolute inability to reach the blessed life of the distant gods and their favourites. I would suggest that the Gilgameš iconography belongs to the popular stream of tradition, not to the sphere of the epic. This would explain why the Gilgameš of the images sometimes appears wearing a dress or crown indicating divinity (Lambert 1987: 44, 49); the popular tradition seems to have had no problem in identifying Gilgameš as a god (cf. §3.1).

manifestations in Greece and Mesopotamia, i.e. in a position that is quite similar to that of the oral tradition between, say, the *Odyssey* and the *Gilgameš Epic* (cf. above). The difference is that the iconographic tradition is extant and traceable, whereas the oral usually is not. The iconography is therefore, at least in some cases, ‘illuminating’ in more than one way. Thus, in the case discussed by Gufler, there are a number of consequential parallels between the slaying of H̄umbaba and that of the Gorgo in the written tradition (2002: 69-72). In addition, as Gufler points out, the similarity of Perseus and Gilgameš in popular, oral tradition is confirmed by a story documented by Aelian in *De Natura Animalium* XII.21 (on which see below), where the author himself (or his source) plays with the similarity between the two heroes, Gilgamos (Gilgameš) and Perseus, who were both exposed at birth. Yet, the similarities within the iconographic tradition are much greater. A sixth century Greek vase, for instance, shows Perseus, Gorgo and Hermes in a composition that is similar to the Mesopotamian images, and, in addition, has the striking detail of a *bearded* Gorgo (cf. some depictions of H̄umbaba). Gufler discusses another remarkable image of an ‘Athena’ slaying the Gorgo. This figure appears in the same position, in the same posture and wearing the same long garment as Gilgameš does in the Mesopotamian images. The suggestion is that this or similar images prompted the variant story according to which the Gorgo was indeed killed by Athena (*ibid.* 75-8). The story undoubtedly first occurred in popular tales before it was recorded in the form that has come down to us. What we see, then, is an iconographic tradition that has not only retained details (position and number of figures, bearded Gorgo) that are absent from or invisible in the Greek texts, but that also has developed new variations and was at interplay with the oral and ultimately with the written tradition. As a whole, such cases of iconographic reception offer a tantalising glimpse of the amount of detail and variation that might have occurred in the stream of the oral tradition.¹⁴

1.3.4. *Written and oral traditions in Mesopotamia* – The question of oral traditions in the Near East, specifically Mesopotamia, deserves some further clarification. The cultures of ancient Mesopotamia have often been celebrated for their literacy. Here, people first invented scripture, developed bureaucracies to an astonishing level of control and complexity, and composed great works of literature. Yet, though hard to grasp, the simultaneous existence of a lively, popular and oral tradition is nowadays commonly excepted. First, it is important to realise that in Mesopotamia, as in any pre-industrial society, a major part of the population was illiterate or semi-illiterate and had no direct access to the written tradition. Secondly, as in every other culture, people surely enjoyed telling and listening to popular stories, or attending a professional recital or staging with specialist performers. The latter could involve music and

¹⁴ A few other cases may be mentioned, such as the apotropaic watchdogs in Mesopotamian art and Greek myth (Faraone 1987) the statues of Rešep/Apollo (Burkert 1975) or the surprising parallel of the city of Babylon surrounded by snakes in Mesopotamian reliefs and medieval manuscript illuminations (Bord & Skubiszewski 2000). The latter is a reminder that the classical world is not always represented in the chain of transmission, at least not in the existing material. The same is sometimes true for literary motifs, such as the ‘Tale of the Fox,’ discussed by Vanstiphout (1988), that reached medieval Europe via an Indian and Arabian detour.

singing: there is evidence of written texts being used as performance poetry.¹⁵ The practice was not confined to Mesopotamia, but, as Monika Schuol has demonstrated (2002: 336-40), is also attested in the Hurrian and Hittite world.

Public recitations and stagings of literature must have been a major crossroads of written and oral traditions: the story heard during such a performance would have been retold, would affect existing oral stories or would itself become subject of reworking. On the other hand, the performer surely knew how to adapt his story to the tastes and expectations of a particular audience. This does not necessarily imply ad hoc improvisation – in certain cases it simply may have meant a tailor-made reworking of the text. This may seem surprising, but even ‘classical’ compositions were not as canonically fixed as they are today. The variation and number of local versions of the Old- and Middle-Babylonian *Gilgameš Epic* shows that the tastes of the audience must indeed have been a factor of great influence. It is noteworthy in this respect that the texts on Gilgameš in Hittite and Hurrian are local reworkings of episodes from the *Gilgameš Epic* rather than faithful translations (cf. §3.1 below).

1.3.5. *The Iron Curtain has yet to fall* – I return to the question of contacts and literary receptivity. An additional problem, in terms of the theory on literary borrowings, is the context of transmission. In the past, many possibilities have been explored, such as priests, craftsmen, mercenaries, diplomats, doctors, etc. Such special individuals, who travelled to or from Greece, may certainly have been responsible, sometimes single-handedly, for certain cultural transmissions.¹⁶ Yet, the weak point of this kind of approach is, again, the thought of a fundamental divide between East and West, an Iron Curtain that needed to be breached in some dramatic way for cultural contacts to be possible at all.¹⁷ In most respects (except in ideology) such a barrier never existed. It did not, for example, exist in trade: goods were transported over shorter and larger distances, in the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions or via various overland routes. This not only brought Greeks into contact with the outside world, but also made its existence tangible and, in the case of images, its stories visible (cf. §1.3.3 above). Nor can it seriously be assumed that people were not in touch with their direct neighbours, even if they spoke a different language.¹⁸ In case one would (imprudently) assume that the notion of the ‘enemy’ really had much effect outside the centres of this ideology (such as fifth-century Athens), the ‘enemy’ would have been perceived as a distant entity, not as the people from the next village.¹⁹ In short, local, day-to-day contacts

¹⁵ Compare the various contributions to Vogelzang & Vanstiphout (eds.) 1992, e.g. that of J.S. Cooper (1992: 115, “when we think ‘literature’ in ancient Mesopotamia, we must hear constant [...] melody”).

¹⁶ An example of an individual whose presence in Greece (i.c. in Athens) may have been of some impact is the Persian Zopyrus (see Henkelman 1999).

¹⁷ On the thought of an ‘Iron Curtain’ see Schuol, Hartmann & Luther 2002: 7; D. Lewis 1985: 108.

¹⁸ In this respect Anatolia was probably a more important bridge than the Levant, simply because here Greek and other populations lived side by side from at least the 15th century onwards (see Schuol 2002: 345-51, with bibliography), whereas an Anatolian-Aegean *Sprachbund* has to be assumed for the pre-Indo-European period (cf. fn. 6 above).

¹⁹ It should be stressed that even between Achaemenid Persia and fifth-century Athens cultural links are amply attested, as has been shown by Margaret Miller (1997). Despite the seemingly preponderant ideology of despised barbaroi “claims of contempt are disproved by the evidence of archaeology,

were probably responsible for a larger part of cultural exchanges, and this holds especially true for the transmission of oral traditions.

1.3.6. *Method* – A few words on the method of establishing and evaluating literary borrowings may be useful too, although it is hard to formulate general rules when dealing with such diverse material.²⁰ I name just a few criteria (partly taken from the useful studies of Tigay 1993 and Bernabé 1995), without pretension of completeness:

- *series* of parallels in a single story
- original story line or part of it
- number and character of secondary figures
- unusual narrative elements such as unexpected turns
- ‘blind’ motives (redundant in the new story, but relevant in the original).
- significant details (names, loanwords, special objects, rare combinations, similes)
- popularity and spread of the original tradition (story, theme or motif)
- occurrence of literary borrowings of the same motif in other receptive traditions
- occurrence of other literary borrowings in same work, oeuvre, genre, period or culture

There are also a number of contextual criteria that come into play especially when a tradition shows a certain variation (extra elements, syncope of motifs, contamination with other stories) *vis-à-vis* the supposed original tradition. The point is that the variation has to be explicable in terms of narrative and of literary context (or, where applicable, of intertextuality). An attempt at explanation may involve the following questions:

- Does variation (or various kinds of variation) exist in the original cultural contexts or is it likely to have existed (e.g., because the story or the hero was popular).
- Does the same variation occur elsewhere in the donor culture or receptive culture(s)?
- In the case of contamination of one of more traditions: is there a convincing explanation within the donor culture (thematic similarity, links between main characters)?
- If not: is there such an explanation possible from within the receptive culture?
- In the case of additions: are they explicable from the receptive culture in which the original tradition is embedded?
- In the case of syncope or reduction of elements: is it explicable why specifically these elements should have dropped out?

epigraphy, iconography, and literature, all of which reveal some facet of Athenian receptivity to Achaemenid Persian culture” (Miller 1997: 1).

²⁰ That the development of critical tools is much needed is clear from the literature on supposed literary borrowings, especially when it comes to perceived echo’s of the *Gilgameš Epic*. See, for example, the cases discussed and criticised by Andrew George (2003: 62-9).

Obviously none of these criteria can serve as a magical wand and all of them should be applied with caution. Additional sets of genre-specific criteria will be necessary in the case of fables, wisdom-literature, magical lore, fairy-tales, cosmology, epic, etc.

2. *Aelian on Gilgames: text and attribution*

I will now turn to a case that may serve to illustrate some of the principles outlined above: the birth of a certain Γίλαμος in the work *De Natura Animalium* ('On the Characteristics of Animals') by the roman author Claudius Aelianus (165/175 – 222/238 AD). This story, in my opinion, clearly demonstrates the importance of oral tradition in the transmission of literary motives and themes from the ancient Near East.²¹

2.1. *Selection* – My choice for a 'late' text is deliberate. Normally, the debate on Near Eastern elements in receptive cultures concentrates on the earlier periods of Greek literature and typically discusses parallels between Gilgameš on the one hand and Achilles, Odysseus, and Heracles on the other. This focus is not primarily related to a particularly high level of contact with neighbouring cultures in these early periods. It is, apart from a relative disinterest in later periods, in fact a remnant of an old apologetic attitude that strives to prove that 'Hellas' was indeed affected by Near Eastern 'influence.' The best way to do so would obviously be to show Near-Eastern elements in Homer and Hesiod, those founding stones of Greek literature. But from a purely cultural-historical point of view borrowings attested in the Hellenistic or Roman periods are just as interesting for the present debate. Quite often such 'late' texts provide more secure and more elaborate parallels. Apart from that, there is also simply more material that is fit for discussion. The strongest echoes of the *Gilgameš Epic* are, for example, to be found in the aforementioned *Epistola de Mirabilibus* in the Greek *Alexander Romance*. The story recorded by Aelian presents another striking case of a late borrowing that is of considerable consequence for our understanding of the Gilgameš reception and even for the figure of Gilgameš in Mesopotamian context.

2.2. *Earlier scholarship on Gilgames* – In 1890 Theophilus Goldridge Pinches was the first to read the name of Gilgameš correctly (rejecting the old reading of the name as 'Izdubar'). This discovery provoked immediate reaction by Henry Archibald Sayce, who published a small note in *The Academy* of November 8th 1890 in which he compared the name of Gilgameš with that of Γίλαμος, a name occurring in *De Natura Animalium* (XII.21) by Claudius Aelianus. Sayce himself already acknowledged that, although the name was identical, the story told by Aelian had nothing to do with the *Gilgameš Epic*. He proposed to connect it to the so-called *Sargon Birth Legend*, a suggestion that was followed by many Assyriologists. Others, such as Edward Harper (1891), saw elements of the story of *Etana* in the text by Aelian, or even a combination

²¹ For a useful survey, with bibliography, on Aelian and his works Kindstrand 1998. See also Henkelman [forthcoming].

of Sargon and Etana. But whatever the position taken, there is general agreement that the story has little in common with the Mesopotamian Gilgameš.²² To my knowledge no attempt has thus far been made to reconcile the story of the birth of Γίλγαμος with the *Mesopotamian* Gilgameš tradition and to present it as a genuine part of that tradition.

2.3. *Gilgamos: text* – The text of *De Natura Animalium* is in desperate need of a new critical edition. The latest edition is in fact the one by Hercher from 1858 (largely retaken, but with reduced critical apparatus in the 1864 Teubner edition). For a fully annotated text (also with continuous commentary) one has to go back to Jacobs' 1832 edition. The text presented here is taken, with some changes, from Hercher; the translation is adapted from Scholfield's Loeb edition (1958-9).

Ἴδιον δὲ τῶν ζῴων καὶ ἡ φιλανθρωπία. ἀετὸς γοῦν ἔθρεψε βρέφος. καὶ εἰπεῖν τὸν πάντα λόγον ἐθέλω, ὡς ἂν γένηται μάρτυς ὧν προεθέμην. Βαβυλωνίων βασιλεύοντος Εὐηχόρου Χαλδαῖοι λέγουσι τὸν γενόμενον ἐκ τῆς ἐκείνου θυγατρὸς τὴν βασιλείαν ἀφαιρήσεσθαι τὸν πάππον (Χαλδαίων μὲν ἦν τὸ εἰρημένον θέσπισμα). τοῦτο ἐκεῖνος πέφρικε, καὶ (ἴνα εἴπω τι καὶ ὑποπαίσας) Ἀκρίσιος γίνεται ἐς τὴν παῖδα· ἐφρούρει γὰρ πικρότατα. λάθρα δὲ ἡ παῖς (ἦν γὰρ τοῦ Βαβυλωνίου σοφώτερον τὸ χρεῶν) τίκτει ὑποπλησθεῖσα ἐκ τινος ἀνδρὸς ἀφανοῦς. τοῦτο οὖν οἱ φυλάττοντες δέει τοῦ βασιλέως ἔρριψαν ἐκ τῆς ἀκροπόλεως· ἦν γὰρ ἐνταῦθα ἀφειργμένη ἢ προειρημένη. οὐκοῦν ὁ ἀετὸς τὴν ἔτι τοῦ παιδὸς καταφορὰν ὀξύτατα ἰδὼν, πρὶν ἢ τῇ γῆ προσαραχθῆναι τὸ βρέφος, ὑπήλθεν αὐτὸ καὶ τὰ νῶτα ὑπέβαλε, καὶ κομίζει ἐς κηπὸν τινα, καὶ τίθησι πεφεισμένως εἶ μάλα. ὁ τοίνυν τοῦ χώρου μελεδωνὸς τὸ καλὸν παιδίον θεασάμενος ἐρᾷ αὐτοῦ, καὶ τρέφει· καὶ καλεῖται Γίλγαμος, καὶ βασιλεύει Βαβυλωνίων. εἰ δὲ τῷ δοκεῖ μῦθος τοῦτο, (οὐ) σύμφημι πειρώμενος ἐς ἰσχὺν κατεγνωκέναι αὐτόν· Ἀχαιμένη μὲν τὸν Πέρσην, ἀφ' οὗ καὶ κάτεισιν ἡ τῶν Περσῶν εὐγένεια, ἀετοῦ τρόφιμον ἀκούω γενέσθαι.

selected critical notes (for sigla see Hercher 1858):

³ εὐηχόρου codd. σευηχόρου **M m** Jacobs Hercher I-II σευκχόρου sive σακχόρου lect.inc. **a** Σωσάρου prop. Forster ⁴ Χαλδαίων ... θέσπισμα codd., del. Hercher I-II, Scholfield et al.; recte def. Jacobs ("sunt enim ineptissime interposita") ἦν codd. οὖν prop. Jacobs εἰρημένον codd. προειρημένον **a** ⁹ ὁ ἀετὸς codd., Jacobs ἀετὸς **a** Hercher I-II ¹³ γίλγαμος codd. γίλγαμος **r** **Ap** τίλγαμος **a** τεύταμον prop. Forster <οὐ> add. Henkelman οὐ μὲν φημί susp. Jacobs ¹⁴ ἀχαιμένη μὲν codd. ἀχαιμένη <γε> μὴν Hercher I-II.

"The love of man is another characteristic of animals. At any rate an eagle nursed a baby. And I intend to tell the whole story so that it may be evidence of what I stated. When Euechoros was king of the Babylonians, the Chaldaeans foretold that the son

²² Connection with *Sargon*: Sayce 1890; Jensen 1906: 156-8; Weißbach 1912: 1363; Greßmann 1913: 11-3; Edzard 1965: 73; B. Lewis 1980: 169; Tigay 1982: 252-5. Connection with *Etana*: Harper 1891; Jeremias 1891: 56; *idem* 1890-4: 811; Kohler 1891; Lidzbarski 1893: 267; Meißner 1894: 18; Zimmern 1903: 565 fn. 3; Jastrow & Clay 1920: 26; Hubaux & Leroy 1939: 166-8; Virolleaud 1951: 131; Kinnier Wilson 1985: 15-6; George 2003: 61. Connection with both *Sargon* and *Etana*: West 1997: 478.

born of his daughter would wrest the kingdom from his grandfather (note: what was said by the Chaldaeans had the status of a *prophecy*). This made him shiver with fear and (if I may be allowed the small jest) he played Acrisius to his daughter: he put the strictest of watches upon her. Yet, the daughter gave birth to a child (for fate outwitted the Babylonian), being pregnant by some obscure man. So the guards, from fear of the king, hurled the infant from the citadel, for that was where the aforesaid daughter was imprisoned. Now the eagle which saw with its piercing eye the child while still falling, before the baby would be dashed to the earth, flew beneath it and flung its back under it, and conveyed it to some garden and set it down with the utmost care. Well, the caretaker of the place, when seeing the pretty baby, fell in love with it and nursed it; and it was called Gilgames and was king of the Babylonians. If anyone regards this as a mere story, I, after testing it to the best of my ability, do <not> agree with the verdict. Indeed I hear that Achaemenes the Persian, from whom the Persian nobility are descended, was the nurseling of an eagle.”

2.4. *Additional notes on the text* – There are a few textcritical points that need to be addressed here as they are relevant for the attribution and analysis of the text. First, the precise form of the name of the grandfather of Gilgames (l. 3) is disputed. Five manuscripts have Εὐηχόρου (see Jacobs 1832 ad loc.), but both Hercher and Jacobs chose to print the variant Σευηχόρου. Euechoros may be preferred, however, on the basis of the similarity with Euexios/Evēokhos/’Ευήχοιος, the name of a ‘king of Chaldaea’ in the epitomes of Berossus’ *Babyloniaca* (FGH 680 F5).²³ The supposed communal form, Εὐήχορος (preserved in the Aelian mss., but not elsewhere), has tentatively been identified with Enme(r)kar, name of the grandfather or pre-predecessor of Gilgameš according to Mesopotamian tradition (i.a. the *Sumerian Kinglist*).²⁴ The same tradition has Lugalbanda as Enme(r)kar’s successor and as Gilgameš’s father or stepfather. In the epitomes of Berossus, the son of Euechoros is called Chomasbelos, which Jacobsen speculatively restored as Logalbandos.²⁵ In short, what Jacobsen proposes is:

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------|------------|---|--------------|---|------------|
| <i>Sumerian Kinglist</i> | Enme(r)kar | – | Lugalbanda | – | Gilgameš |
| Berossus | *Euechoros | – | *Logalbandos | – | [Gilgames] |
| Aelian | Euechoros | – | / | – | Gilgames |

For Jacobsen the above reconstruction made it clear that Aelian’s Gilgames story should be attributed to Berossus and this view has been repeated by various other scholars. There are, however, also arguments that point in a different direction (see

²³ See Zimmern 1903: 565 fn. 3 and Jacobsen 1939: 86-7 fn. 115 with more literature.

²⁴ Jacobsen *ibid.*, Burstein 1978: 21 (fn. 61), 29 (fn. 121).

²⁵ If I understand Jacobsen’s suggestion (1939: 88 fn. 122) correctly, *ΛΩΓΑΛΒΑΝΔΟΣ is taken to have been corrupted to *ΧΩΜΑΣΒΑΝΔΟΣ, which was partly illegible in a certain manuscript (*ΧΩΜΑΣΒ...ΝΔΟΣ), thus triggering a further corruption and resulting in the eventual ΧΩΜΑΣΒΗΛΟΣ. Such a wild development seems only conceivable with a very bad manuscript and even then it would involve inexplicable changes (notably Γ > Μ). Generally speaking, it is true, however, that the existing epitomes of Berossus’ work are likely to contain (gross) corruptions of unfamiliar names.

below). In any case, Jacobsen's proposal should be treated with much caution: altogether, the line of reasoning is slightly circular and at points highly uncertain.

I am not aware of any conclusive argument to consider Χαλδαίων μὲν ἦν τὸ εἰρημένον θέσπισμα (ll. 4-5) as a gloss and delete it from the text (as Hercher and others did). As it is, it clarifies the grave nature of the saying of the Chaldaeans (an 'official' prophecy). For this, retaining it (as Jacobs advocated) seems more attractive.

In ll. 13-4, I have printed <οὐ> σύμφημι, although no edition has actually done so (Jacobs only considered the possibility). With the added negation the text seems to make more sense. Aelian is trying to convince his audience that animals show more care for their young and even for human children who are rejected by their own kin. Why would he then suddenly feign scepticism on the evidence just given (μάρτυς) to prove his point? Note that μῦθος (l. 13) has a markedly negative ring in Aelian's work (cf. Kindstrand 1998: 2963), and would therefore not be used light-heartedly. Also, if the following Achaemenes story would, by contrast, have seemed convincing to the author, why did he not make this story the centre of the paragraph instead of giving it as a mere paraphrase at the end? With the added negation the rhetorical structure of the argument seems to be restored: 1) animals care for humans, 2) I have evidence on Gilgames that testifies to this statement, 3) I have carefully investigated this evidence, my conclusion is that it is *not* a mere story and 4) I have concurring evidence on Achaemenes.

Finally, it should be noted that the seemingly vague ἀκούω in l. 15 belongs to a stylistic repertoire that Aelian consequently applies to avoid the impression of an arid, studied reference-work. The contrast, in this respect, between *De Natura Animalium* and Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae* (which probably had appeared some years earlier) may not be a coincidence. In any case, Aelian's seems intended to recreate a Herodotean atmosphere in which anonymous, orally communicated information flows into the story and is woven into a pleasant, variegated tapestry. In Aelian's case this is, however, literary 'Spielerei' and his readers could surely be expected to know that ἀκούω in reality referred to written and well-known works by authors that Aelian was fully aware of yet whose names he chose to suppress (cf. Zucker 2001: xiv-v).

Initially, I suspected that ἀκούω would be the marker of a new source, especially when used in the middle of or at the end (rather than at the beginning) of a paragraph, as in *NA* XII.21. Yet, a survey of the word's occurrences reveals no single pattern: ἀκούω can be used to introduce a new source but also to refer to a source already quoted, implicitly or explicitly, in a preceding paragraph. There are even cases where multiple occurrences of the word apparently refer to the same author. In other words: in *NA* XII.21 ἀκούω does not necessarily set the story of Achaemenes apart from the preceding (Gilgames); it may just as well refer to a common source.²⁶

²⁶ In *De Natura Animalium* ἀκούω is used 119 times, but, surprisingly, only 14 times in *Varia Historia* (given the different length of the works this gives a ratio of about 3:1). Some eloquent examples are *NA* IV.7 (from Aristotle?); IV.32 (certainly from Ctesias – mentioned explicitly in IV.27); XVII.26 (from Ctes.? – mentioned explicitly in XVII.29). A series of occurrences is found at the beginning of book XVI, in a series of paragraphs on Indian birds and other animals, that are usually all ascribed to Megasthenes (though he is not mentioned in any of these paragraphs). XVI.2, XVI.4-5 have ἀκούω, but not so the intermediate and subsequent paragraphs. A second series is found in XVII.32-3 where ἀκούω probably

2.5. *Narrative pattern* – Although the line of argument in *NA* XII.21 as a whole seems clear and logical, the narrative logic of the story on Gilgames shows a few oddities. First, although the story indeed expresses a general concern of animals for humans, the first eagle does not actually nurse the infant as was promised in the introductory line. Instead, it acts as the infant’s rescuer who, without any specifically *parental* care, brings the young Gilgames to ‘some garden.’ Only Aelian’s second example, Achaemenes, actually is the *nurseling* (τρόφιμος) of an eagle. Also, the information that Euechoros’ daughter was locked up in the citadel comes only after the baby has been hurled down from its walls. Generally, the story gives the impression of being epitomised – especially in the laconic line on the gardener and the further history of Gilgames. It is unclear whether all of this is due to Aelian himself or to his source. Aelian is known to have used earlier anthologies (though not as much as was previously assumed), so there is certainly a chance that he only knew an abridged version of the full story.

2.6. *Attribution* – As indicated above, Berossus’ *Babyloniaca* has been identified as the source of *De Natura Animalium* XII.21.²⁷ This mainly rests on a name in the *Babyloniaca* that is seemingly related in both form and context to Aelian’s ‘Euechoros.’ There are, however, several problems involved in this attribution. First, Aelian never mentions Berossus. It is true that Aelian often avoids mentioning the names of his sources (ἀκούω) and cultivates a certain literary vagueness (merely referring to the author’s place of birth or his father’s name). In a series of testimonies from the same source, the author’s name is typically mentioned only once. A complete silence on Berossus would, however, still be somewhat surprising. Secondly, there is not a single paragraph (apart from *NA* XII.21 itself) that can be associated with Berossus’ work. A direct borrowing from the *Babyloniaca* (which never was a very wide-spread book in any case), seems therefore unlikely.²⁸

In theory, Aelian could also have found a quotation or borrowing from Berossus in one of the authors whom he did consult, such as Juba of Mauretania (so Schnabel 1923: 171). This could explain why only one single testimony from Berossus is found in Aelian’s work and perhaps also why Berossus’ name is omitted. Yet, even in this reconstruction, three problems remain. First, Aelian certainly knew and used Juba’s *De*

twice refers to Amyntas (on Caspian animals). XVII.38 (Caspian bird) lacks ἀκούω but may well stem from the same source. Intermingled with this are XVII.31 (ἀκούω; Ctes.) and XVII.34 (without ἀκούω; Ctes.). A surprising example from *Varia Historia*: the two notes on Darius I that are not based on Herodotus (VI.14, XII.43) both have ἀκούω and may both stem from Deinon’s *Persica*. For a survey of attributions, with references, see Henkelman [forthcoming].

²⁷ Burstein 1978: 29-30 includes the whole paragraph (including ‘Achaemenes’) as a possible fragment of the second book of the *Babyloniaca*; the same attribution is found in Schnabel 1923: 171; Jacobsen 1939: 87 (fn. 115); Hallo 1963: 52; Wilcke 1989: 562. The paragraph is not included in Verbrugghe & Wickersham 2000. Note that Jacoby did not ascribe *NA* XII.21 to any author, and listed the passage as FGH 696 F14 among other unassigned fragments. A translation is included in Foster’s translation of the *Gilgameš Epic* (2001: 154-5).

²⁸ Incidentally, Berossus does not seem to have used the *Gilgameš Epic* in the *Babyloniaca* (Komoróczy 1973: 134; Tigay 1982: 251) but this is not an argument against the attribution of Ael. *NA* XII.21 to Berossus, for the story on Gilgames’ birth derives from popular tradition, not from the epic.

Expeditione Arabica, but there is no firm evidence to suggest that he was also working with the same author's *Assyriaca*. It is the latter work (if any) that would be the logical candidate for having included the story on Gilgames. ²⁹ Secondly, Berossus, himself a Babylonian, would not likely have used 'Chaldaioi' for 'oracular priests' or 'astrologers' specifically, as most Greek authors did (see Kuhrt 1987: 34, 56). Indeed, the surviving fragments suggest that he used 'Chaldaioi' correctly as a generic term for the population of (southern) Babylonia and its kings. ³⁰ A third objection may lie in Aelian's the two subsequent paragraphs in *De Natura Animalium*, on Achaemenes (*NA* XII.21) and on tame lions at the temple of Anaitis in Elymais (*NA* XII.23). ³¹ Their subject matter is geographically related to the Gilgames note (Persia-Elam-Babylonia). It is well established that Aelian has the habit of quoting series of testimonies from the same author in successive or semi-successive paragraphs. This could be the case here too: there are in any case no indications to the contrary (ἀκούω in l. 15 is no objection, cf. §2.4 above). If we indeed have a series from a common source, however, it seems questionable that Berossus was this common source. A brief outline of the historic background of the information on Achaemenes and Anāhitā/Anaitis may illustrate this.

The story of the eagle and Achaemenes can be related to a series of Iranian royal founder myths (Cyrus, Arsaces, Sasan, Ardashir, Shapur) and, more specifically, to the myth of Zāl and the Simurgh in Firdowsi's *Shahnameh* (which contains material from much older popular traditions). ³² Quite possibly it was, as Pierre Briant has suggested, promoted by the Persian court after Darius had founded the Achaemenid line. The story would have projected a sense of divine blessing on this dynasty, thereby legitimising what was really a coup d'état against the legitimate rulers. ³³

The reference to a temple of Anaitis in Elymais (with the tame lions) agrees with the fact that Anāhitā was venerated by the (later) Achaemenids. In the Hellenistic period, she was associated with Nanaia, an old goddess who had been venerated for

²⁹ On Juba and Berossus see Kuhrt 1987: 34-5. For passages cited from Juba or attributable to him see Henkelman [forthcoming]. A solution to the problem mentioned here, may be that *De Expeditione Arabica* had a wider scope than expected from its title. A story on the herb of life was told by Juba in *De Expeditione Arabica* (Plin. *NH* XXV.2.5), but that need not be significant.

³⁰ See FGH 680 F5, F7, F16. There are also some cases where the meaning is not completely clear (F3), but in any case Χαλδαίος (without further qualification) for 'oracular priest' does not occur in the existing fragments.

³¹ Like the story on Gilgameš, these two stories are not documented in any other extant text.

³² Mawet 1983; Lewis 1980 no. 59; generally Christensen 1936: 113-5. The animal nurse in the story of Zāl, the Simurgh, was a mythical eagle-like bird. For the divine aura projected on the Achaemenid line by the Achaemenes story see also Plato, *Alc. I* 120e (hinting at a story, probably the same as the one epitomised in Aelian, that 'Zeus' was Achaemenes' father). There are many references to the special symbolic value of the eagle for the Achaemenid and subsequent Iranian dynasties (Hdt. I.209, III.76, Xen. *Cyr.* II.1.1, II.4.19, VII.1.4, *Anab.* I.10.12; Curt. III.3.16; Isaiah 46:11). See also Harmatta 1979. It would be interesting to explore the possibility of explaining Hesiod fr. 364 Merkelbach-West (on which see West 1997: 331-2), referring to an eagle as omen in the siege of Nineveh, from the perspective of the bird's importance in Iranian royal tradition.

³³ See Briant 1996: 122-3, 341-2, 344. As Briant argues, what Darius really did was transforming the concept 'Achaemenids' from a clan to a closed dynasty. By furthermore including the Teispid line of Cyrus and Cambyses as a collateral branch of the Achaemenid family, he could ultimately suggest that he, Darius, was the only legitimate successor to Cambyses (complete discussion 1996: 109-127, 924-7).

centuries in Susa and Mesopotamia (Uruk), but the syncretism may in fact date to the Achaemenid period. Nanaia was associated with lions. A goddess in a nimbus, riding on a lion, is depicted on an Achaemenid seal from Anatolia. The temple ‘in Elymais’ may be the same as the one Antiochus IV Epiphanes set out to plunder in 164 BC and described as shrine of Artemis, Nanaia, or Aphrodite in various sources.³⁴

Both notes are fairly accurate and suggest a source well-acquainted with Achaemenid matters. Berossus could have been that source, for the fragments of his work show both interest in and knowledge of the Achaemenid period. In fact, he does mention the Achaemenid cult of Anaitis being set up in Babylon and other places, including Susiana (FGH 680 F 11). The specific information given by Aelian (*NA* XII.23) is, however, not known from Berossus. Generally, Berossus seems to have given information on the Persians only in relation to Babylon (his paragraph on Anaitis is centred around Babylon). One might wonder, then, if notes on a temple in Elymais and, especially, on Achaemenes would have felt under the scope of his work. I think that a second option would at least be worth considering, i.e. that Ctesias’ *Persica* was the source of these two notes, and possible also of that on Gilgames.

Ctesias is mentioned by name twelve times in the works of Aelian, and testimonies from works (*Persica* and *Indica*) are attested with certainty in a number of additional cases. The cases that mention Ctesias’ explicitly as source include notes on cows in Susa (*NA* VII.1) and on snakes in Sittace ‘in Persia’ (actually southern Babylonia, *NA* XVI.42) – both show a thematic and geographical interest comparable to that of the story on the lions in the Anaitis’ temple.

From Diodorus’ excerpt, we know that Ctesias recorded the story of Semiramis’ birth and exposure (Diod. II.4.3), i.e. a story that, with those of Achaemenes and Gilgames, belongs to the Märchentypus ‘the hero who was exposed at birth’ (cf. § 4.2 below). Generally, it is clear that Ctesias was interested in such popular stories from Mesopotamia and reserved extensive space for folktales on Semiramis, Ninus and Sardanapallus.³⁵ The story of Gilgames fits this interest.

Another point is that names in Ctesias’ work were less susceptible to ‘volksetymologische Umdeutung’ (compared to, e.g., Herodotus) and the preservation of the name ‘Gilgames’ agrees with this profile.³⁶ Ctesias, seems to have had access to popular traditions on Mesopotamian and Iranian history, not available to other Greek authors. His (largely neglected) account of the Medes and their role in the downfall of

³⁴ Ael. *NA* XII.23: Briant 1996: 264-5, 943; Hansman 1985: 234; Boyce & Grenet 1991: 47-8. I think the Achaemenid royal inscriptions do not *exclude* a cult of Anāhitā during the reigns of the early Achaemenids (as is sometimes argued). Nanaia: Azarpay 1976; Hansman 1985: 233-5; Joannès 1990: 173-5; Stol 1995; Vallat 2002; Ambos 2003. Seal: Moorey 1979: 223-4; Briant 1996: 264-5, 943 (with lit.). Antiochus IV: II Macc. 1:13-17, Polyb. XXXI.9 and elsewhere; see Hansman 1985: 232; Stol 1995.

³⁵ This is not to say that Berossus was not sensitive to such stories: the argument that Aelian’s note on Gilgameš could not stem from the *Babyloniaca* because that work would be “more accurately informed by ancient Mesopotamian written traditions than Aelian’s passage” (George 2003: 69 fn. 193) overstates Berossus use of such sources, and moreover ignores the probability that the story in Aelian reflects genuine Mesopotamian traditions, be it not written, but oral. The *type* of story told by Aelian does not, I think, provides a valid argument for identifying either Berossus or Ctesias as its source.

³⁶ On the relatively modest influence of popular etymologies in Ctesias see Schmitt 1979: 128; Schmitt reiterated and expanded his views in a lecture (8/XI/2003) during the Orienttagung at Saarbrücken.

Assyria makes in fact much more sense than Herodotus' *Medikos Logos*, and, astonishingly, his list of Median 'kings' contains four names that also occur as those of Median city-lords in the annals of Sargon II.³⁷

Finally, it appears from a (slightly disinterested) remark by Diodorus (II.21.8-22.1) that Ctesias gave a list of Assyrian kings. Although Diodorus claims that there was nothing of interest in this list, it would be conceivable that the story of Gilgames' birth had found a place in this context (as it did, apparently, in the Sumerian Kinglist, cf. §3.3. below).

In the end, I would be inclined to prefer Ctesias over Berossus as likely source of the Gilgames story. Yet, the choice is not necessarily limited to these two options, nor is the ascription to Ctesias completely unproblematic. The usage of the denominator 'Babylonians' (rather than 'Assyrians') may actually plead against Ctesias and in favour of Berossus (cf. Kuhrt 1982). The matter clearly has to remain undecided in the absence of decisive arguments. This is not a grave problem, however, as the transmitter of the story is ultimately of less importance than the fact that story exists and reveals something of both the strength and the variation of Mesopotamian oral tradition (see §4.3 below). In fact, the real gain from the above elaboration on the *context* of the Gilgames story in *NA* XII.21 (Achaemenes, Anāhitā) is that it appears that Aelian was tapping into a source well-acquainted with Near Eastern culture and traditions. It would seem to me that he found 'Gilgames' in this same source, which was probably not far removed from popular Mesopotamian stories on Gilgameš.

3. *Gilgameš*

3.1. *The popularity of Gilgameš* – The literary persona of Gilgameš was by no means enshrined in the celebrated epic that moved Rilke so deeply. From the very beginning a lively and varied oral tradition has to be assumed from which the five Sumerian Gilgameš poems emerged (by the end of the third millennium), and which later shaped the first, Old-Babylonian *Gilgameš Epic* (at the beginning of the 2nd millennium) and then continued to influence it, triggering local adaptations, additions and new versions down to the Standard-Babylonian version of the epic (existing by the end of the 2nd millennium), known especially from the library of Assurbanipal in Nineveh. In turn, the oral tradition must itself have been influenced by the textual tradition via public stagings and recitations (cf. §1.3.4 above) and, perhaps, to a lesser degree, by scribal apprentices who read and copied the epic during the last phase of their training.³⁸ The oral tradition is hardly directly attested anywhere, but its traces certainly are. As they

³⁷ See Diod. II.32.4-6 and compare Luckenbill 1927: §192. The names are: Arbaces – Arbaku, Mandaucas/Maudacas – Mašdaku, Artycas – Hardukka, Aspandas – Ašpanra. Streck (1900: 362) already mentions these four possible identifications. See also Fuchs & Schmitt 1998 on Arbaku. On Ctesias and the Medes see most recently Lanfranchi 2003: 118 and Lenfant 2004: xl-11 (commentary), 78 (edition). Though one should be cautious in drawing historical conclusions from the occurrence of the four names, it is in any case clear how strong such documentation contrasts with Jacoby's (1922) rude condemnation of Ctesias and his work.

³⁸ As convincingly argued by George 2003: 35-9.

have been the subject of ample discussion by others, including the rich overview recently given by George in his monumental new edition of the *Gilgameš Epic* (2003: 3-137, largely replacing Lambert 1960), I just list them in a summary.

It has long been recognised that the five independent Sumerian poems about Gilgameš rest on the popularity of the legendary king of Uruk in the oral tradition. The texts as we have them could be recorded as court entertainment performed for Ur-Namma (2112-2095) and Šulgi (2094-2047), Ur III kings who stylised themselves as ‘brother of Bilgames’ (the Sumerian form of Gilgameš; cf. George 2003: 108-12). Although direct confirmation of this is lacking, there are indications that professional singers and musicians performed recitations of the poems (George 2003: 7). One of these poems, *The Death of Bilgames*, centres on the notion that Bilgames was to be a ruler of the Netherworld, presented here as consolation for not attaining immortality. This function re-appears in the sacrifices, votive objects, cult statues and sanctuaries related to the *god* Gilgameš, especially in the earlier periods (*ibid.* 15-6, 119-27; cf. 94-5). His figure seems to have been central in the annual celebration of an ‘All Souls’ festival, as it was in certain exorcism rituals. Similarly, Gilgameš is mentioned as boatsman of the dead. Texts attesting to his important role in the Netherworld, mostly as a lesser deity, are known from the Ur III period well into the first millennium (*ibid.* 127-137). In the Standard-Babylonian *Gilgameš Epic*, this function is briefly alluded to, but it certainly does not play a dominant role.³⁹ Here, Gilgameš is primarily depicted as the tragic mortal, forcefully reminded of the limitations of human existence. Readers are encouraged to relate to his humanity, not to venerate him as a chthonic god. In the epic, Gilgameš’s somewhat bitter consolation is the eternal fame of his exploits, not the incorporation in the pantheon of the shades. This is not to say, of course, that a Mesopotamian audience would see the epic Gilgameš as an entirely different and distinct figure from the familiar Netherworld deity (to think so would project anachronistic expectations on the epic) – but that a markedly divergent emphasis was intended and understood is, I think, undeniable. In any case, the tradition that carried the notion of Gilgameš’s functions in the Netherworld was not the epic itself, and, although it pops up in quite a number of texts, it must basically have been popular and orally transmitted knowledge.

A reservoir of popular stories centring on Gilgameš, similar and related to the one that shaped the Sumerian poems, is taken by Andrew George as the prime background of the first, Old-Babylonian *Gilgameš Epic*. This work may, like the Homeric epics, have stood “at the end of a long development as a poem transmitted orally” (2003: 21). It should be added that both the *Iliad* and the *Gilgameš Epic* display a thorough reworking and reorganisation of existing orally transmitted material to shape a unified drama. In this, the poet certainly was selective and, if necessarily, audacious. In the case of Gilgameš, particularly his associations with the Netherworld (prominent in the oral tradition and reflected upon in two of the Sumerian poems) were suppressed, only alluded to or transformed.⁴⁰ The Old-Babylonian *Gilgameš Epic*, then, is a new literary

³⁹ See SBV III.105-6 in George 2003: 580-1 (with the comments on p. 127).

⁴⁰ A significant example of the latter is the reworking of material known from the Sumerian *Death of Bilgames* (but not necessarily directly derived from it; see below) into the passages on the death and funeral of Enkidu, not Gilgameš, in the epic (on which see George 2003: 19). In doing so, the poet

reworking of material that mostly must have been orally transmitted. As George shows, the old view that the epic was formed primarily by uniting the Sumerian poems and reworking them in Akkadian, lacks support in the existing evidence (2003: 17-22).⁴¹

From the first attestations of the *Gilgameš Epic* in the Old-Babylonian period, there is a considerable variety in versions from different periods and places. These must reflect, as stated before (§1.3.4), the wish to adapt to local tastes and expectancies. This is certainly true for the reworkings of epic in Hurrian and Hittite, or the local version found at Ugarit.⁴² For the Middle-Babylonian period at least six different strands in the textual tradition must be assumed according to George (2003: 24-7).⁴³ This surprising variety may just have been part of an even larger network in which orally transmitted versions of the epic as well as less literary stories on the hero widely circulated and in which public recitations of the epic, with some kind of musical accompaniment, may well have played a considerable role. The latter is supported by the find of part of the epic in a 7th century family library of ‘chief singers’ (*ibid.* 34-5) and also by the fact that the Hittite version was known as ‘the *song* of Gilgameš.’ All this, in combination with the spread of the Akkadian epic in the second half of the second millennium – outside Mesopotamia proper it is attested in Ugarit, Megiddo, Emar and Boğazköy – creates the image of a tale that was not confined to the libraries or even to the royal courts, but very much alive, changeable, widely popular and hence a certain source for new or adapted oral stories on Gilgameš.

Towards the final stages of the epic’s development (possibly by the end of the second millennium), Gilgameš’s mortality received a stronger emphasis. Apparently, it was at this point that the magnificent symbol of the bold walls that enclose Uruk (and the story!) was added, as well as the prologue pointing to the wisdom acquired (with a new first line, “He who saw the Deep...”).⁴⁴ This development may have been related

heightened the drama of Enkidu’s death and, at the same time, managed to avoid an elaboration on the chthonic function of Gilgameš as Netherworld official which would have been inevitable in a relation of the latter’s death.

⁴¹ The same conclusion was already reached by the classicist G.S. Kirk (1970: 87). His line of argumentation being largely intuitive, his assessment on the themes derived from oral traditions in the *Gilgameš Epic* is certainly valid, as is his observation on a “broadly based popular tradition of myths, from which the literate and poetical versions we know derived their persistent strength and their capacity for apparently spontaneous variation.”

⁴² The text from Ugarit remains unpublished; see George 1999: 139-40. For the Hittite version see Beckman in Foster 2001: 157-65 (translation) and *idem* 2003 (discussion of the unique character of the Hittite version). The Hurrian fragments are available in hand copies only (references *ibid.* 42).

⁴³ Tigay’s monograph (1983) on the evolution *Gilgameš Epic* is partly antiquated by George’s work, but remains of interest. A paper by the same author (1993) discusses the implications of the existence of many deviant manuscripts of the *Gilgameš Epic* for the question of its reception in other cultures. Indeed, some of the variants seen in later manifestations of motifs related to Gilgameš could go back to (now lost) diverging manuscripts. Yet, the kind and amount of variation cannot be solved by this observation, though in itself certainly valid, alone. I retain that texts, even if there are many and significant variants, are a surface phenomenon when it comes to transmission of motifs.

⁴⁴ George 2003: 28-33. I find George’s argumentation (*ibid.* 47-54) on tablet XII, the vision of the Netherworld, very compelling. It is argued that the text cannot be considered as an integral part of the epic, but as an appendage it is “not an idle one.” The latter inference is based on the idea that the epic, or

to the emergence of the genre of wisdom-literature,⁴⁵ but it does not seem to be reflected in the more popular traditions on Gilgameš. Thus, throughout Mesopotamian history only two Gilgameš themes are known (with certainty) from art: the killing of Ĥumbaba and the slaying of the Bull of Heaven. While these themes indeed figure prominently in the epic, there is no need to suppose a linear connection.⁴⁶ Rather, and this is especially true for the later images, the selection and apparent popularity of only these exotic exploits (and not, e.g., Gilgameš's mourning for Enkidu) point to a different perception of Gilgameš which centred more on his glorious adventures than on his mental journey. This observation holds true for other media as well. In omen apodoses, apart from his rule over the Netherworld, only Gilgameš's might and his unsurpassed deeds are referred to (see George 2003: 112-7). Even the rhetorical vignette known as the *Letter of Gilgameš*, on the materials for a funerary statue for Enkidu, is primarily occupied with the demand of exotic goods from far-away places, stressing Gilgameš's universal dominion.⁴⁷

part of it, was recited during (royal) funerals and memory cults (53-4; cf. Frahm 1999). At the same time, I find it surprising that George credits Sîn-lēqi-unninni with the addition of tablet XII (*ibid.* 32). Sîn-lēqi-unninni is convincingly presented as the "profound thinker of ... unique calibre" who revised the Old-Babylonian epic into "a sombre meditation on the doom of man." How, then, can this individual also be credited with adding a text that, as George states, lacks "the poetic genius that pervades the great poem" and the content of which is completely inconsistent with tablets I-XI, especially after Sîn-lēqi-unninni's introduction of the ring-composition with Uruk's walls (48)?

⁴⁵ I wonder, though, whether this relation with notions commonly expressed in wisdom-texts is as straightforward as is assumed by George (2003: 32-3, 69) and others. Is there a sense of resignation in the poem? Or (worse), is the Standard-Babylonian version intended to show that "also Gilgameš must learn self-control" (Abusch 2001: 3)? I do not think so. The inclusion of the story of the Flood in tablet XI, may be very close, even to the level of wording, to the story of Atrahasis (another name of the Flood hero), but that does not necessarily imply that the two stories are told with the same *intention*. The bitter contrast between the deeds of the pious Ūta-napišti, who became immortal, and Gilgameš, whose behaviour offended the gods and thereby provoked the cruel punishment of *Enkidu's* death, is undeniable. In the epic, the drama of Gilgameš is much more profound than the drama of Ūta-napišti. I admit that it is easy to project a modernistic interpretation on this contrast (as, I think, Gresseth 1975 does), but nonetheless the poem indeed renders problematic the relation of man and god in a very poignant way (cf. George 2003: 33). For me it is therefore hard to believe that a Mesopotamian reader, after being constantly encouraged to relate to the struggling protagonist and his refusal to yield to the human condition, would be willing to give up this sympathy just by the speech of Ūta-napišti. The latter simply is not a real alternative for the insoluble drama that confronts Gilgameš. The hero, like Achilles, may accept his doom in the end, but that does not imply resignation or learning 'self-control' (*sic!*). The pain of Enkidu's death, the central theme of the epic, is not soothed. Ūta-napišti had his own drama in the loss of his world by the Flood, but *he* was saved and, moreover, never experienced the personal tragedy related in the epic. Such considerations find, as I see it, full focus in the epilogue. When Gilgameš repeats the prologue on the proud walls of Uruk (thus finally embodying the narrator's perspective) in front of Ur-šanabi, Ūta-napišti's boatsman (and representative), he is in fact formulating his answer to Ūta-napišti's speech. It would, perhaps, stretch the matter too far to speak of irony, but the defiant attitude is clear enough. The tragic heroism of the mortal Gilgameš and the eternal fame symbolised by Uruk's walls can, after all, be attained by neither gods, nor Ūta-napišti.

⁴⁶ See fn. 14 above; cf. George 2003: 100-1.

⁴⁷ See George 2003: 117-9 and Foster 1982; translation: Foster 2001: 167-8.

3.2. *Gilgameš beyond Mesopotamia* – Not surprising, it seems that it was the super-human Gilgameš that outlived Mesopotamian culture. His name survived as that of either ‘a great king,’ as the protagonist of a founder folktale (Aelian) or, in a tradition first attested in the Qumranic *Books of Giants*, as one of the wicked antediluvian angels. The same character is later represented as an evil demon.⁴⁸ The epic itself, with its sombre, introspective tone, does not seem to have continued beyond the demise of Mesopotamian culture, except, perhaps, for a distant echo in the *Alexander Romance* (cf. §1.3.1 above). Other texts, including those in which the name of Gilgameš appears, have time and again been adduced as direct traces of the epic, but upon closer inspection such claims cannot be upheld, certainly not against the likelihood of derivation from the oral tradition. Indeed, motifs attached to the hero in Mesopotamia are found again in many other cultures, including the Greek world: the innocent savage, the expedition against the monster in the forest, the tempting goddess with her catalogue of lovers, the quest for the island beyond the outer Ocean and its immortal inhabitant, the paradise garden at the end of the world, the waters of death, the plant of rejuvenation, the role of the snake and the loss of immortality.⁴⁹ None of these motifs were necessarily novelties when they first appeared in the *Gilgameš Epic* or the Gilgameš tradition in general – at least some demonstrably belong to an older Eurasian stock of motifs. It has to be born in mind, however, that most of these motifs would

⁴⁸ The names of Gilgameš (*glgmyš*, *glgmys*), Humbaba (*hwbbš*, *hwbbbs*) occur in the Qumranic text known as 4QEnGiants. It seems that this tradition formed the basis for the Manichaean *Book of Giants* found in Turfan, which preserves the names of Humbaba and, perhaps Ūta-napišti. This, or a similar tradition, in turn inspired a collection of Arabic anti-demonic spells, in which a certain Jiljamiš (*jljmyš*, *jljmwš*) appears. The demonisation of Gilgameš may or may not ultimately derive from his role as ruler of the Netherworld. In any case, Gilgameš’s fame as king of old may have triggered his inclusion in the Qumranic texts (cf. Milik 1976: 29). See Reeves 1993 and the extensive treatment (with references to editions) in George 2003: 60-3, 89, 147, 155. George adduces convincing arguments to refute the suggestion (by Stephany Dalley) that the Qumranic fragments reflect an Aramaic adaptation of the *Gilgameš Epic*. The name Gilgameš also occurs in Syriac, in a list of postdiluvian kings, given by the Nestorian Theodor bar Qoni, which undoubtedly was triggered by Mesopotamian kinglist traditions and/or the status of Gilgameš as great king of old (Jacobsen 1939: 89; George 2003: 61). A similar context may be suspected for Flavius Josephus’ Γολγόμεης (*Ant.Iud.* II.178), if that is indeed a rendering of the name Gilgameš (as suggested by Tigay 1982: 252). Although the identification is, on the face of it, not unlikely, it is hampered by the fact that Josephus repeats Gen. 46:11 (the three sons of Levi), which has “*Gershon*, *Kohath*, and *Merari*.”

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Adrados 1978; *idem* 1987; Auffahrt 1991: 131-40; Klímová 1975, Vanstiphout 2001a; Virolleaud 1951, West 1997: 118, 463-7 (and *passim*) and fn. 11 above. George (2003: 65-8) is, once more, right in challenging Dalley’s interpretation (1991) of the tale of Buluqiya in the *Arabian Nights* as a direct reflexion of the *Gilgameš Epic*. The tale does, however, contain at least three relevant motifs: the quest for the far-away island, the meeting with the immortal wise (Al-Khidr) and the lost chance of immortality. The latter occurs as a foolish failure to accept the plant of rejuvenation. I disagree with George that this is a “big difference” from Gilgameš who actually does obtain such a plant, but loses it (George 2003: 68-9). It is the idea of immortality within reach but lost by sheer bad luck, neglect, or stupidity that counts. A similar development of the motif is found in the story (told by various Greek authors including Aelian *NA* VI.51; cf. Adrados 1987) of the ass who gives away the plant of rejuvenation for permission to drink from a well guarded by a snake. Compare also the *Alexander Romance* (II.39.11-41.6): Alexander misses the opportunity to drink from the water of life because of the selfishness of his cook (see Henkelman 2004). On Buluqiya see also Segert 1963.

have automatically evoked ‘Gilgameš’ throughout Mesopotamia and larger parts of its periphery. In other words, the Gilgameš tradition probably was for a long time the main carrier and Mesopotamian culture a funnel through which these motifs went. Thus, in a way, the spread of certain motifs indeed means a proliferation of the Gilgameš tradition and this legitimises part of the discussion on the Gilgameš ‘Nachleben.’ Yet, their wide spread, their quick and radical adaptation to new contexts, and their invariably folkloristic character, pleads for emanation of these motifs not from the epic, but from the oral tradition.

3.3. *The family of Gilgameš* – A particular detail of the non-epic tradition on Gilgameš deserves separate mention. In the *Sumerian Kinglist*, a compilation known from texts dating to the 19th century BC or later (but possibly originating from the reign of Šulgi), there is an entry on Gilgameš: “divine Gilgameš – his father was a *lil(l)û*-demon – en (lord) of Kullab (Uruk), reigned 126 years.”⁵⁰ The siring by a *lilû*-demon is obviously not to be taken as a historical note, but the information is in the context of the earlier part of the kinglist (which contains much mythological material) not really surprising. What is surprising, however, is that *Gilgameš* has a demon father. This information is not given elsewhere: the goddess Ninsuna is Gilgameš’s mother, and her husband, king Lugalbanda, is typically staged as Gilgameš father.⁵¹

Already the edition of Thompson (1930: 9-10) compares the occurrence of a *lilû* father in the *Sumerian Kinglist* to the story in Ael. *NA* XII.21.⁵² Both texts contain just lapidary references to a longer story that may be identified as ‘the hero who was exposed at birth’ (on which see §4.2 below). The idea that Gilgameš’s mother became pregnant by somebody who was not her husband, does fit in the structure of this story, especially given the nature of the *lilû*. Generally, *lilû*-demons (male and female) seem indeed rather preoccupied with babies and pregnant women. The females are, as emblematically evil seductresses (cf. biblical Lilith), known to enter one’s house

⁵⁰ Edition and translation: Jacobsen 1939: 88-91. For a discussion of the nature of the kinglist (with references) see Kuhrt 1995 vol. 1: 29-31.

⁵¹ As, e.g., in the Sumerian *Bilgames and Huwawa*. See Falkenstein 1957-71: 358; George 2003: 106-8; cf. Klein 1991: 129 fn. 34.

⁵² The same connection is suggested by Jacobsen 1939: 90-1; George 2003: 106-7 (cf. also 109 fn. 80). Wilcke 1989: 562-3, 566 sees in the usage of ἀφανής in *NA* XII.21 an indication that *lilû* in the *Sumerian Kinglist* means ‘nothingness’ rather than ‘demon.’ While lexically possible, there is no reason why the kinglist should like to express ‘commoner’ or ‘nobody’ by this particular word (the demonic connotation would be unavoidable). There are indeed versions of the exposure story in which a commoner acts as the father, but I am not entirely sure that Aelian’s story belongs to this subtype. That the princess was made pregnant ἔκ τινος ἀνδρὸς ἀφανοῦς, can mean ‘by a commoner, a nobody.’ Yet, especially given the fact that the princess was locked up and guarded in a citadel, I wonder whether one should exclude a god or demon as father. It should be remembered that the Gilgames story is, in fact, a rather incomplete and distorted epitome of a longer story. In the Perseus story, Danae was locked up, impregnated by a god, and then *disbelieved* by her father (Apoll. *Bibl.* II.4.1). If we assume, for the sake of argument, that the story of Gilgameš developed along the same lines, the guards and king Euechorus would not have believed the daughter’s defence that infant was sired by a god or a demon. They would explain the ‘impossible’ pregnancy by assuming an ἀφανής intruder: an ‘obscure’ or (literally) an ‘invisible’ man. In other words, I think ἀφανής might just as well represent the perspective of the king in the story – it does not give a certain clue on the nature of the father.

through the window at night. The habits of the male variety are not very well documented, certainly not regarding the latter aspect, but similar behaviour does seem likely.⁵³ The reference to a *lilû* demon as Gilgameš's father (instead of canonical Lugalbanda) may therefore well refer to a story of impregnation by a *lilû* who intruded into Ninsuna's house. The infant born from such a union would possibly have become subject to exposure, after which the story could have developed into 'the hero who was exposed at birth' as Aelian records it.

The above explanation of the *lilû* note in the *Sumerian Kinglist* is supported by another hint to 'the hero who was exposed at birth' found in the same composition, in the entry on Sargon (Jacobsen 1939: 110-1; cf. Drews 1974: 390 and §4.1 below). Another point, called attention to by George (2003: 106), is that according to the Hittite version of the *Gilgameš Epic*, the hero "wandered around all the lands" before he came to Uruk.⁵⁴ This is, again, in line with the theme of 'the hero who was exposed at birth' (who, in many manifestations of this type of Märchen, returns to his native city after years spent in a humble environment).

The story of the unexpected pregnancy of Gilgameš's mother and its possible further development (exposure, rescue, survival, return to his city and successful claim to the throne) was, as far as we know, never recorded in full in cuneiform. It is certainly absent from the *Gilgameš Epic*, though a pun in SBV X.270 may refer to the *lilû* father (as Vanstiphout 2001b: 133 argues). This almost complete absence in the Mesopotamian written tradition, underlines the importance of Aelian's story on Γίλγαμος, for, though not complete, it preserves its main elements.⁵⁵

It should be readily admitted that the exegesis given here on the *lilû* in the *Sumerian Kinglist* and the possible connection with Ael. *NA* XII.21 is speculative, if only for the huge laps of time (more than two thousand years). Also, certain problematic aspects, notably the 'exposure' scene in Aelian's story, call for further elaboration. In the following paragraphs, these aspects, as well as the question whether *NA* XII.21 really has a manifestation of 'the hero who was exposed at birth' will be discussed. In addition, some suggestions will be advanced that could explain why the

⁵³ See Farber 1987-90, Black & Green 1992: 118 and Hutter 1999 on *lilû*-demons. See also Jacobsen 1989b (esp. 275 fn. 51) on Gilgameš.

⁵⁴ Compare Wilcke's remarks on *Bilgames and Agga* (1989: 563).

⁵⁵ An article by Douglas Frayne (1999) is deliberately not taken into the discussion. Frayne argues that an Early Dynastic text from Tell Abū Šalābīḥ on Ninsuna and Lugalbanda (dated to ca. 2600 BC), gives evidence for a birth story on Gilgameš with a *lilû* demon and compares it to Aelian's story on Gilgames. The text is fragmentary, however, and very difficult to understand. Compared to its edition and analysis by Jacobsen, Frayne's interpretation gives the impression of being over-optimistic and has as such been condemned by George (2003: 4-5, "should be repudiated as unproven"). In any case it is clear from Jacobsen's text that neither Gilgameš, nor a pregnancy, nor an exposure is mentioned. A *lilû* does indeed occur, but its role is not immediately clear. Jacobsen's suggestion ("conjectural and conjectural only") is that "Lugalbanda had used the tribute he had been sent to collect [in the eastern regions, WH] to pay the brideprice for Ninsuna and so faced disaster when he returned" (1989a: 84). The *lilû* appears in the latter context and may be the ghost of Lugalbanda's mother, rising "to protect her son from threatening danger" (*ibid.* 85; cf. Jacobsen 1989b: 275). It seems that Ninsuna at this point asks the *lilû* help to conceive children, but the texts is again fragmentary and breaks off shortly afterwards. It may be possible, then, that the *lilû* was after all involved in a pregnancy, but apparently not in the role hinted at in the *Sumerian Kinglist*. Without further analysis of the text, the matter has to stay an open question.

story became attached to Gilgameš in the first place and why this connection is likely to have continued throughout the many centuries that separate the *Sumerian Kinglist* from *De Natura Animalium*.

4. *Sargon*

4.1. *Sargon in a wicker basket* – As we have seen, Henry Archibald Sayce (1890) was the first to connect the story of the infant Γίλγαμος to the so-called *Sargon Birth Legend* (“The legend of Sargon of Accad seems to have been attached to that of Gilgamesh”). This text is one of several stories centring around the legendary founder of the Akkad Dynasty (2340-2159 BC) and is known from Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian copies dating to the 7-5th century BC. The translation of lines 1-21 quoted below is taken from Joan Westenholz’s *Legends of the Kings of Akkade* (1997: 38-49):

Sargon, the mighty king, king of Akkade, am I.
My mother was an en-priestess(?), my father I never knew.
My father’s brother inhabits the highlands.
My city is Azupiranu, which lies on the bank of the Euphrates.
She conceived me, my en-priestess mother, in concealment she gave me birth,
She set me in a wicker basket, with bitumen she made my opening watertight,
She cast me down into the river from which I could not ascend.
The river bore me, to Aqqi the water-drawer it brought me.
Aqqi the water-drawer, when lowering his bucket, did lift me up.
Aqqi the water-drawer did raise me as his adopted son,
Aqqi the water-drawer did set me to his gardening.
While I was (still) a gardener, Istar did grow fond of me,
And so for [...] years I did reign as a king,
I did ascend all the high mountains,
The black-headed people [the Sumerians, WH], I did rule and govern.
With copper pickaxes, I did cut my way through the (most) difficult mountains.
I did traverse all the foothills,
The sealands, I did sail around three times.
Dilmun did submit to me (?) ...
The Great Wall of Heaven and Earth(?), I did ascend.
[(Its very st]ones(?), I did remove [...]

The *Sargon Birth Legend*, as we have it, is very much a literary work in which the plot of the founder story takes up a mere 11 eleven lines and, in fact, serves a secondary purpose: to underscore the greatness that *was* Akkad. After the first half, in the form of pseudo-auto-biography, the second, poorly preserved part of the composition (not given here) “has a ring of misfortune and calamity” and shares features with certain curse formulae as well as wisdom literature and texts centring on the portended doom

of great cities.⁵⁶ As a whole, the now fragmented *Sargon Birth Legend* must have pictured a grand *vanitas* tableau.⁵⁷ To a Mesopotamian public it must have been especially appealing because of its reflections on popular notions like the nature vs. culture (wasteland replaces Akkad) and the vainness of human endeavour, but also because it referred, poignantly, to the well-known legends of old Akkad, in particular to the Märchen of the hero who was exposed at birth. The latter is hinted at in much older texts, the *Sumerian Kinglist* and the *Sumerian Sargon Legend*.⁵⁸ In the *Sargon Birth Legend* (probably composed in the Neo-Assyrian period) the story is retold in a posed naïve style, imitating that of the folktale. Azupiranu is not a real city and its name may mean ‘Spice Town.’ The water drawer (i.e. gardener) has not a real personal name, but one derived from his role in the plot (Aqqi means ‘I poured’).⁵⁹ Along the same lines, ‘my father’s brother’ needs not be taken too literally; another translator therefore gives ‘my father’s kinsman.’⁶⁰ The ‘highlands’ (perhaps the Iranian plateau) are a typical far-away place of myth and legend. The ‘Great Wall of Heaven and Earth’ is known from Mesopotamian cosmic geography and was perceived as a northern chain of mountains.⁶¹

4.2. *The hero who was exposed at birth* – The story of Sargon’s birth is a typical Königserweis. Though a royal child and born for the throne, Sargon was exposed at birth and raised outside the royal court. Still, he managed to become king after all, thus fulfilling his destiny and providing ample proof of his nobility. That Sargon was of royal birth is probably implicit in the title of his mother, the en-priestess, a role known to have been assumed mostly (if not exclusively) by royal daughters. Historically, such priestesses were the brides of the god Nanna in Ur and as such may have performed a sacred marriage rite. It is probable that the story of Sargon’s birth alludes to popular resonances of these ancient rites (not to a historical reality).⁶² In any case, the

⁵⁶ See Westenholz 1984: 76-7 (suggesting that the text is a Lament over Akkad). The occurrence of a *qadû* (‘screech owl’), sometimes a symbol of destroyed cities, is particularly significant here.

⁵⁷ It may be noted that the label ‘legend’ is not very helpful in the case of this composition.

⁵⁸ The kinglist (Jacobsen 1939: 110-1) introduces Sargon’s father or foster parent as gardener. Both this text and the *Sumerian Sargon Legend* (Cooper & Heimpel 1983) state that Sargon, as an adolescent, served as cupbearer, a motif attested elsewhere as part of the story of the hero who was exposed at birth. The motif is referred to in a sixth-century text, the *Weidner Chronicle* (Grayson 1975: 148 ll. 46-7). See on the various versions Kuhrt 2003 and below fn. 65. The *Sumerian Sargon Legend* also has a motif known as ‘Uriah letter,’ which reoccurs in various stories of the aforesaid type. See on this Afanas’eva 1987; Alster 1987; Hallo 1996: 32-5; Vanstiphout 1986: 224 with fn. 65.

⁵⁹ See Lewis 1980: 44-5, 48, 109; Westenholz 1997: 39 ad l. 4 (suggesting an ambiguity in ‘Azupiranu’).

⁶⁰ Lewis 1980: 43-4; cf. Westenholz 1997: 39 ad l. 3.

⁶¹ Horowitz 1997; *idem* 1998: 32-3.

⁶² The historical Sargon of Akkad appointed his own daughter Enheduanna as en (*entu*) at Ur. See Hallo & Van Dijk 1968, Lewis 1980: 38-42, Postgate 1994: 128-30 and Kuhrt 2003: 349-50 (with bibliography). Much later in Mesopotamian history, this tradition was retaken by the Neo-Babylonian ruler Nabonidus, probably (as Kuhrt 2003: 355 surmises) as part of conscious effort to revive interest in Sargon of Akkad. That a more popular reflection on the old institution and its rite also circulated in Mesopotamia, at least in the late period, is apparent from Herodotus’ story (I.181) of the woman sleeping with a god in a room in the upper floor of the temple tower at Babylon (*pace* Panitschek 1986). This

Mesopotamian audience of the *Sargon Birth Legend* was expected to understand why the en-priestess mother would have had to expose her son, who ‘never knew’ his father.

Stories of the Märchentypus (or folktale type) ‘the hero who was exposed at birth’ have had an extremely wide spread in the Near East, Europe and India. A monograph by Brian Lewis (1980) on this subject has 72 different versions, but this represents only a fraction of the total number of stories. From the stories collected in his study, Lewis, following the method of Finnish folklorist school, tried to reconstruct an ‘Ur-Form’ of the story. His method is rather questionable at various points, but it holds certainly true that more or less the same frame is shared by all these stories.⁶³ The normal story line would be that a king is alarmed by a prophecy about his grandson and imprisons his daughter to keep her from becoming pregnant. His daughter becomes pregnant nevertheless, in some cases by a god, in other by a prince or a commoner. Fearing her father’s revenge the daughter exposes her child. Sometimes she does this by laying it in a watertight basket or box which is put out on the water. In other cases the child is left in an uninhabited place on the king’s orders. In stories of the latter sub-group the infant is nursed by an animal and at a later stage raised by common people such as shepherds. In the case of water-exposure the child is found by fishermen, gardeners or other common people who raise it. In all cases the child eventually succeeds in winning the throne it is entitled to by birth.

Lewis believed that this folktale type originated from Mesopotamia or Anatolia and was connected to Sargon at a very early date, long before the date of the extant texts of the *Sargon Birth Legend* (1980: 262-3; cf. 4.1 above). While these contentions are both attractive, caution is warranted. An extensive version of the story with Sargon as subject is not extant – we only have a concise, literary version and a few references in older texts. Nor can it be excluded whether the story as such already existed before the Akkad period, in which case Mesopotamia would be the funnel, not the origin of the tradition. Besides, the spread of the story should, I think, primarily be seen as a showcase for the importance of the *receptive* cultures: every variant is clearly adapted

tradition may have been inspired by the fact that Etemenanki, the ziggurat of Babylon, contained several sanctuaries, including one with a bed conceivably used for a certain sacred marriage rite. The bed of Etemenanki is mentioned in a cuneiform text dating to 229 BC (see Matsushima 1988: 108-9), but also occurs in earlier first millennium sources testifying to the royal concern for such beds and ‘sleeping rooms’ of the gods. Yet, the exact implication of the rite(s) involved remains mysterious and a (considerable) difference with the older rite certainly must be reckoned with (Matsushima *o.c.*). Notwithstanding these uncertainties, it may be clear that Herodotus’ report must, essentially, be based on an authentic local legend (whatever the latter’s historic value). This renders the story particularly important for the origin of the motif of ‘the maiden in the tower’ (Aarne-Thompson 1961: no. 310) but the substantiating any speculation as to this subject would require a treatment exceeding the limits of this paper.

⁶³ A point of critique is that Lewis’ method of dating is based on first attestation of stories (sometimes ignoring testimonies proving the existence of earlier versions). Also, the organisation of his corpus of stories by linguistic divisions is confusing, especially as the study shows so clearly that the story type did not respect such borders. These flaws do not have a fatal effect in the end result, however. To me, the qualification of Lewis’ application of the Finnish method as ‘non-productive’ (Westenholz 1984: 79) seems overreacted. Note that the older study by Binder (1964), though different and more modest in scope, remains of interest as well.

to the context in which the story was incorporated, sometimes creating stories that, in their new and divergent form, have become emblematic themselves (Oedipus).⁶⁴ Even modest variation can be highly significant too, as Amélie Kuhrt has demonstrated in a recent article on Herodotus' and Ctesias' reports of Cyrus' youth.⁶⁵

Celebrated examples of the story of 'the hero who was exposed at birth' are found in the lives of Moses, Cyrus, Romulus & Remus, Nimrod, Semiramis and, of course, Perseus. The legend of Perseus is alluded to by Aelian in *NA* XII.21 by the little joke on Acrisius (Euechoros 'played Acrisius to his daughter,' see also §1.3.3 above). The latter locked up his daughter, Danae, in a bronze chamber (or, in other versions, a bronze tower) where she was visited by Zeus and later gave birth to Perseus. Mother and son were then put in a wooden box on the open sea by Acrisius, but again to no avail: as an adult Perseus would unknowingly kill his grandfather and thus become king.⁶⁶

Aelian's play on the similarities between his Gilgames and Perseus is well-informed, as the former indeed plays the main role in yet another manifestation of 'the hero who was exposed at birth.' What we have in this story is a grandfather alarmed by a prophecy, a daughter locked up in a citadel, yet still becoming pregnant by an obscure man. The child she bears is taken away, saved and raised by a commoner and eventually becomes king. Commentators like Sayce thus appear to be right when they connect the Gilgames story to the *Sargon Birth Legend*.

⁶⁴ Compare Bremmer's study of the Romulus & Remus myth (1987: esp. 26-34) which adduces many parallels (i.a. from Iran), while at the same time underlining, very rightly, that "the Romulus and Remus story was handed down because it had a meaning in terms of the Roman cultural matrix" (*ibid.* 27).

⁶⁵ Kuhrt (2003) draws attention to the dissimilarity between the *Sargon Birth Legend*, that clearly refers to Sargon's royal lineage, and the entry in the *Sumerian Kinglist* that only has Sargon as [son?] of a gardener. If the gardener is the real father (instead of Zimmern's 'Pflegevater' or Güterbock's 'Aufnehmer,' see Jacobsen 1939: 111 fn. 238), it would mean that a different tradition, without royal descent, is at stake. A second case is that of Cyrus: son of a princely mother and a noble father according to Herodotus, son of a brigand and a goatherd according to Ctesias. Kuhrt is, of course, right in pointing out these differences (cf. Christensen 1936: 120), but when we discussed the subject some time ago, I nevertheless hesitated to accept the notion that the stories are fundamentally different. To me, the motifs of gardener, cupbearer and 'Uriah letter' are all associated with the 'hero who was exposed at birth' tradition; the gardener and the cupbearer moreover point to royalty. The laconic references in the *Sumerian Kinglist*, etc. would then be mere hints at a longer story, in which Sargon would have been of explicit royal lineage. Likewise, Ctesias' story on Cyrus would have deliberately suppressed certain elements (perhaps to contrast with Herodotus), but at the same time retain other significant birth story elements (gardener, cupbearer, prophetic dream). Re-reading Kuhrt's study, I have come to realise, however, that our positions are not mutually exclusive after all: in 'the rags and riches' variants, vestiges of the original story line have indeed been preserved, but within the narrative the focus has shifted. Instead of the royal birth, the humble upbringing now received full attention and, over time, this focus became so dominant that a new story with a divergent significance emerged. From this perspective, the selectiveness of the entries in the kinglist (Sargon), or the divergent story line (Ctesias' Cyrus) have to be given proper weight as they represent (probably interrelated; see also Westenholz 1984: 76, 78) re-interpretations of the original theme. At the same time, the stories also do belong to the wider network of the 'hero who was exposed at birth' type and retain its most essential message: some individuals are bound to be king (by birth, fate, or both).

⁶⁶ Apoll. *Bibl.* II.4.1-4; earlier versions: Gantz 1993: 299-311. The bronze *tower* is mentioned in Hor. *Carm.* III.16 and Ovid. *Ars Amat.* III.415-6 (but see the commentary by Gantz, *o.c.* 302).

As a principle, Gilgamos and Sargon just belong to the same, large group of heroes exposed at birth. Yet, there is a specific connection between the two of them: both find a foster parent in the person of a gardener. In the case of Sargon this is a significant detail. The connection between kings and gardening (or, in a wider sense, agriculture), is well-established in the realms of cult and ideology in Mesopotamia and, in later times, in the Achaemenid empire.⁶⁷ That Sargon was raised by a gardener, whose skills he acquired, is therefore a prefiguration of his reign over Akkad. In the case of the Gilgamos story the motif has lost its significance: as Aelian represents it, there is no special need for the foster parent to be a gardener. Aelian's gardener is, therefore, a blind motif which establishes a special link between this story and that of Sargon. This contention receives support from the fact that the gardener motif is a rarity in stories of the type 'the hero who was exposed at birth.' There are five such cases known to me and, apart from that on Sargon, only the case of Cyrus was documented earlier than that of Gilgamos.⁶⁸ Given the likelihood (as argued by Drews 1974 and Kuhrt 2003) that the Cyrus' birth stories were inspired by contemporaneous popular tales and texts (known from the 7-5th centuries) on Sargon, it becomes clear that the story on Gilgamos is pretty close to the source. The story in *NA* XII.21 may be derived directly from the Sargon tradition, or (less likely) from Sargon *via* Cyrus. This state of affairs calls for a comparison of the figures of Sargon and Gilgameš in literary and popular traditions: is there a reason why they may have collided into a single story? Before going into this question, however, it may be wise to revisit the Gilgamos story once more.

4.3. *A defective tradition?* – Upon closer inspection the story of Gilgamos as told by Aelian, appears to be an imperfect example of the theme of 'the hero who was exposed at birth.' I think that there can be no doubt that the story indeed belongs to this type (cf. §4.2 above), but at the same time it is true that a central element, the actual exposing of the child is missing. Instead one finds a scene in which the infant is hurled from the citadel and caught by an eagle. There should be no mistake about the role of this eagle: it does not constitute a real foster-parent as other eagles and birds do in the stories on

⁶⁷ See Drews 1974: 389-90 on the tradition of 'gardeners' being put on the throne, possibly in relation to a royal substitution ritual (add the case of Alexander and Abdalonymus in Curt. IV.1.15-26, Diod. XVII.47.1-6 and Plut. *Fort.Alex.* II.340c-d). Ideology of the king as gardener: Fauth 1979, Briant 2003. Note that there is evidence for a 'garden of Gilgameš,' but this is probably just a plantation supporting the cult of the deified Gilgameš (see George 2003: 112, 125).

⁶⁸ Apart from Sargon, Cyrus and Gilgamos, there is an Indian story (Aghaṭa) and a Birmese story (Udibwa). The Indian story contains the 'Uriah letter' motif also known from the Sargon tradition. The two stories are discussed by Lewis (1980: nos. 51, 72) and listed in the *Motif-Index* (Thompson 1956-8: R131.8.2). The story of Cyrus, probably from Ctesias, is preserved in a testimony from Nicolaus of Damascus (FGH 90 F66:3; edition: Lenfant 2004: 93-5 [cf. lvii-lx]). Here, Cyrus puts himself under the patronage of the royal gardener. The importance of the gardener motif as a connection between Cyrus and Sargon was already recognised by Drews 1974: 389-90 (cf. Tigay 1982: 254 on Gilgamos/Sargon). In contrast to the gardener in the Gilgamos story, the element of gardening in the Cyrus story is probably not a blind motif as the association king/gardener was still understood and productive in ideology (see Briant 2003).

the exposure of for example Semiramis, the Iranian Zāl or Ptolemy Soter.⁶⁹ The case of Achaemenes, mentioned by Aelian in the same paragraph, is very telling in this respect: he certainly was a τρόφιμος ('nurseling') of an eagle. Gilgames was not (cf. §2.5 above). The element of animal nursing is not represented in the story (nor, for that matter, 'water-exposure,' as in *Sargon*). In addition, the act of throwing the child from the citadel hardly fits the definition of exposure.⁷⁰ In 'the hero who was exposed at birth,' the grandfather indeed does intend to kill his grandson, but the act of exposure is always ambiguous. Without protection from ferocious animals, the child's future seems dim, but at least it is not killed directly by humans. The executioner often disobeys the king's order (which calls for straightforward execution) and thus creates the possibility of survival. Also, the child's chances are frequently enhanced by protective measures taken by the mother or others (blankets, rich gifts). This is even clearer in case of water-exposure, where the basket or container is often said to be made water-tight by the mother. In general, then, the act of exposing is a means to save the child's life, not to terminate it.

Thus, while the story on the infant Gilgames evidently belongs to the type 'the hero who was exposed at birth,' the central scene (exposure) and the frequently-occurring motif of animal nursing are omitted. I believe these two omissions should be taken as the result of a single rearrangement of the story line by the intrusion of an alien element, the ride on the back of the eagle. It may be that the latter is an echo of the story of *Etana*; in that case the story of Gilgames represents a contaminated version of the birth story. I will return to this point in a subsequent paragraph (see §5.5 below).

4.4. *Sargon and Gilgameš* – Finally, one may ask why the Sargon Birth Legend was transferred to Gilgameš. In fact, the enormous spread of this type of story in itself adequately answers the question: the story apparently could be attached to any legendary ruler of some importance. Yet, in the case of Gilgameš and Sargon it is possible to identify a set of more specific and context-related explanations for the variation.

Mesopotamian literature is clear enough on the parallel between Gilgameš and Sargon. First, they were probably the two most popular heroes of this literature. Like the *Gilgameš Epic*, texts on Sargon were found also outside Mesopotamia proper (Amarna, Boğazköy). Also, Gilgameš as well as Sargon figured as author of pseudo-letters.⁷¹ Both heroes were especially remembered as great kings and explorers of distant, exotic regions. Westenholz enumerates at least 4 texts other than the *Sargon Birth Legend* that refer to Sargon's exploits and the rich tribute collected in such

⁶⁹ See Lewis 1980: nos. 15, 59, 36 (compare also nos. 22-3). For the Iranian tradition of the nursing bird see above §2.6 and Mawet 1983.

⁷⁰ Lewis ignores the problematic nature of *NA* XII.21 as manifestation of 'the hero who was exposed at birth' (1980: 169) and at one point presents the act of hurling the child down from the citadel as 'exposure' (*ibid.* 219).

⁷¹ See §3.1 (with fn. 47) above on the *Letter of Gilgameš*. For the Sargon letters see Lewis 1980: 140; Westenholz 1997: 18, 141-169.

countries.⁷² In one of these (*Sargon in Foreign Lands*), Sargon reaches, like Gilgameš, the distant Cedar Forest.⁷³ An episode in another Sargon text, *The King of Battle*, evokes the theme of Gilgameš's expedition to both this forest as well as the latter's journeying through the dark passage at the end of the world.⁷⁴ Conversely, it has been suggested that the *location* of the Cedar Forest in the *Gilgameš Epic* was, at some point, adapted to the tradition of Sargon's exploits in north-western regions (George 2003: 94). Generally, the focus on exotic exploits and universal dominion in the popular tradition on Gilgameš may (partly) have been prompted by the image of the mighty kings of Akkad (so George, *ibid.* 119).

Sargon occurs regularly in omen apodoses, in which again his universal dominion, unparalleled strength, etc. are especially commemorated (Lewis 1980: 136-40). The same focus of 'king who had no rival' and journeys to exotic regions is found in the omen apodoses mentioning Gilgameš (see George 2003: 112-7 and §3.1. above). Once the latter is said to have "gored the great mountains" (*ibid.* 116), an exploit that one would be inclined to credit Sargon with. A tablet with the image of a Humbaba mask depicted on it has an omen with a protasis that refers to a 'Humbaba head' (in the entrails), but the apodosis mentions Sargon, not to Gilgameš one of whose celebrated adventures was the slaying of Humbaba.⁷⁵

Very suggestive is the so-called Babylonian *Mappa Mundi*, a late-Babylonian document on which a schematic map of the world is depicted. A central land-mass is surrounded by a ring-shaped ocean. Outside this ocean several triangles (known as *nagû*) indicate exotic regions outside the normal world. In the accompanying text several exotic animals are enumerated, followed by three individuals apparently associated with the outside regions: Ūta-napišti, Sargon and Nūr-Dagan (Horowitz 1998: 36). Nūr-Dagan is known from a text on Sargon (*The King of the Battle*) as a king in distant Anatolia. Sargon himself was the travelling king par excellence and Ūta-napišti is, of course, known as the immortal hero of the Flood, living on his remote retreat. The surprising point is the absence of Gilgameš who was famous for reaching the edges of the world and with whom Ūta-napišti normally is associated.

Finally, both Gilgameš and Sargon appear in more reflective texts: the *Sargon Birth Legend* (vanitas) and the *Gilgameš Epic*. It seems, then, that the two heroes were indeed comparable in Mesopotamian eyes. That the birth story, if it was indeed originally linked to Sargon, could be transposed to Gilgameš is not surprising from this perspective (though it cannot be proven). The notion (in the *Sumerian Kinglist*) that Gilgameš's father was a *lilû* demon (cf. §3.3. above) can be taken as an indication that this combination of traditions probably occurred quite early in Mesopotamian literary history. In any case, the much later literary composition of the *Sargon Birth Legend* is

⁷² Westenholz 1997: 34-5 (*I Sargon*), 59-77 (*Sargon, the Conquering Hero*), 78-93 (*Sargon in Foreign Lands*), 102-39 (*The King of the Battle*).

⁷³ So too in *Sargon the Lion* (Westenholz 1997: 94-101). In *The Sargon Geography* the Cedar Forest is included in Sargon's empire (see Horowitz 1998: 67-95).

⁷⁴ The motif of Sargon 'marching into darkness' also occurs in omen apodoses. See Glassner 1985: 122-4 and Lewis 1980: 136-8.

⁷⁵ "Wenn die Darmwindungen einen Humbaba-Kopf bilden: Befund des Sargon, der das Land beherrschte" (Wilcke 1972-5: 534-5; cf. Lewis 1980: 139 no. 27).

equally vague on the hero's father, who remained 'unknown' to his son. He is described as an outsider whose kinsmen inhabit 'the highlands.' These regions lie outside the sphere of normal human culture and may either be taken as a reference to the low social status of the father, or, perhaps, as a tacit hint to him being a demon.

5. *Etana*

5.1. *A Heaven too high* – Starting from Eduard Harper (1891), various commentators have suggested that the flight on the back of the eagle in the story recorded by Aelian is a distant echo of the Babylonian tale of Etana.⁷⁶ This Etana, a mythical king of the city of Kiš, is already mentioned in the *Sumerian Kinglist* as “a shepherd, he who ascended to heaven (and) who consolidated all countries” (Jacobsen 1939: 80-1; Haul 2000: 39-49). Various other texts, such as omen collections, refer to “the king who ascended to heaven” (Horowitz 1998: 43; Haul 2000: 47). The story itself is related in the so-called *Series of Etana* (henceforth *Etana*) of which Old-Babylonian, Middle- and Neo-Assyrian recensions are known (Haul 2000: 5-6). These versions show some variations in the narrative, but none of these seems directly relevant for the present argument. In comparison to the *Gilgameš Epic*, the text of *Etana* as a whole is less well preserved, which, in the past, resulted in divergent reconstructions of the story line.⁷⁷

The story of Etana, as given in the latest edition (Haul 2000), starts with a council of the gods, in which Etana is selected as a ‘shepherd,’ a king who will rule the city of Kiš. After a lacuna [Etana?] is mentioned as builder of a sanctuary. Now the focus shifts to a tableau outside the sanctuary, to a tree in which a snake and an eagle live together. To lessen the burden of parental care and searching for food, eagle and snake agree to a hunting partnership, formalised by a solemn vow to the sungod Šamaš. When the eagle breaks his oath by devouring the snake's children, the poor snake bursts into tears and turns to Šamaš for help. Upon the sungod's advise, it hides in ambush in the carcass of a bull and takes revenge on the faithless eagle by pulling out its feathers and throwing his former ally into a deep pitch. There, the bird, truly ‘a sick

⁷⁶ See above fn. 22 for further bibliography. Note that while Harper was very cautious, many later commentators were not and treated the parallel as if it was self-evident (which, I think, it is not). Only Hubaux & Leroy 1939: 167-8 refer to the, perhaps significant, motif of the eagle catching the hero *on his back* (“contraire à toutes les lois de la nature”) in both *Etana* and Aelian's story on Gilgames. West 1997: 478 notes the same detail, but does not elaborate on it.

⁷⁷ The current authoritative edition is that of Haul (2000, with translation). Another recent text is that of Saporetto (1990). The earlier edition of Kinnier Wilson (1985) seems over-adventurous on certain points. One of these is the reconstruction of the end of the composition which is partly based on Aelian's Gilgames story. The argument is entirely circular, as the connection between Etana and Gilgames has to be argued from *Etana*. Moreover, Kinnier Wilson's idea (1985: 13-6) involves a grudging eagle, who abducts Etana's son; the latter manages to return to Etana's city and unknowingly kills his father. For each of these points proof is lacking, even in Aelian's story (the eagle of Gilgames is hardly *abducting* the infant!). The whole reconstruction should be rejected as ill-substantiated speculation. Another point is that of the number of flights on the back of the eagle: Kinnier Wilson assumed no less than three flights (plus a trial flight; 1985: 9-12), Horowitz just a single one (1998: 43-66) and Haul assumes two flights (2000: 15-29).

eagle looking at the sky,' prays to Šamaš for relief day after day. Meanwhile Etana, the king of Kiš, is also directing his prayers to the sungod, as he needs the herb of birth for his wife so that he will finally have an heir ("a name"). Upon the directions of the sungod, Etana finds the eagle in his pitch, apparently feeds the bird so that it can grow new feathers (as appears from the Old-Babylonian and Middle-Assyrian recensions). In return, the eagle promises to take Etana on his back and fly to heaven in order to obtain the herb of birth. During the flight Etana looks back three times and at each stage the earth and the surrounding ocean have become smaller and are compared to round objects (a garden with a ditch around it, etc.). The last time Etana looks back, the earth and the ocean have become invisible and, struck with fear, he commands the eagle to turn back to Kiš. During this return flight the eagle drops Etana three times and catches him again on his wings at each stage, the last time just before Etana is dashed against the surface of the earth. After this first apparently unsuccessful flight, Etana has a prophetic dream that is explained as an encouragement to fly to Ištar's heaven by the eagle. The pattern of the second flight with three stages, at which Etana looks back at the earth as a round object, repeats itself. The journey is exactly as Etana's vision predicted, but its result is unknown as the end of the story has not been preserved. Previously, it was commonly assumed that Etana did not find the herb of birth after all. Haul speculates, however, that Etana did find the object of his quest (as in other stories of the Etana-type), but lost it in the end "durch eine 'törichte' Tabu-Verletzung oder dergleichen" (Haul 2000: 32). In any case, a positive ending does not seem likely. As such, the story, like the *Gilgameš Epic*, can tentatively be understood as a reflection on the limitations of human existence. We do not find the kind of tragedy that befell Gilgameš, but lost illusions (and gained insight) may well have concluded the text.⁷⁸

5.2. *The popularity of Etana* – Etana, like Gilgameš, must also have been prominent in a more popular, oral tradition. The first indication of this is a series of images from the Akkad period depicting a man on the back of an eagle. There is little doubt that a version of the Etana story is meant, but various elements in these seals suggest that it was not the story as we have come to know it. On one seal, for example, there is a tree with an eagle sitting in it, but at its feet there is not the snake, but a lion. On other seals the eagle has the head of a lion or Etana is wearing cloths normally reserved for gods. Moreover, various seals (including one from Susa) have additional figures that cannot be explained in the context of the epic and seem to suggest an oral tradition.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ The fact that the *Sumerian Kinglist* mentions a son of Etana does not prove the contrary as the kinglist is primarily interested in presenting the legendary kings in linear succession (*pace* Komoróczy 1964: 40; Wilson 1985: 13, etc.). On the motif of 'a heaven too high' see also Greenspahn 1994.

⁷⁹ See esp. Douglas van Buren 1950; Baudot 1982; Haul 2000: 40-4. See also Levin 1966: 38-41. Susa: Porada 1962: 33-4 (with fig. 14 on p. 31). Baudot expresses surprise at the great variety: "...we are struck by the independence of the seal-cutter. The legend certainly was common property for the people, but the artist makes a composition of its own..." (1982: 7) And: "It is obvious that the text was close enough to the people to create a rich iconographic repertory" (*ibid.* 8). I think oral tradition should have been mentioned here (cf. Haul 2000: 44): this, and not in the first instance the seal-cutter, is the logical candidate for creating versions other than the one preserved in *Etana*. This approach would easily solve perceived problems, such as that of the seal which, apart from Etana on the back of the eagle, has a tree with an eagle and lions. Baudot (*ibid.* 5 with fig. 6) considers the possibility of a second, unrelated myth, even though

A second, indirect indication, as with the *Gilgameš Epic*, is the fact that *Etana* was used in the school curriculum (hence widely known) and may have been recited or staged with musical accompaniment.⁸⁰ This undoubtedly stimulated the oral tradition (cf. the remarks on *Gilgameš* in §3.1 above).

Another indication of the popularity of Etana motifs in the oral tradition is found in the enormous spread of such motifs outside Mesopotamian culture. The extent of this spread can only be explained by assuming a lively oral tradition on Etana in Mesopotamia.

In *The Types of the Folktale* by Aarne & Thompson (1961) about 65 attestations of the Etana motifs are enlisted under number 537. Later studies identified even more so-called Etana-Märchen.⁸¹ Many of these stories retain *series* of motifs and significant elements, such as the hero taking care of the wounded eagle, his looking back during the flight, seeing ocean and land as round objects, and, notably, the eagle dropping and catching the hero three times. In most cases some magical object in a far-away land is the reason of the quest. Remarkably, the story of the snake and the eagle, which originally may have been an independent story that was first incorporated as a prologue to *Etana*, is still present in a number of later stories (in the full version, AaTh 222/222B* + 537). One such story is described by Martti Haavio in a monograph on Finnish echoes of the tradition and was first recorded in 1909 in the village of Revonkylä in the north of Lapland.⁸² In this story a war breaks out between birds and quadrupeds, in which the eagle plays a prominent role but also gets badly hurt. A hunter finds the eagle, aims his bow, but is convinced by the animal not to shoot but to cure it with the promise of a rich reward. When healed, the eagle takes the man on his back and during the flight the hunter sees and describes ocean and earth as ever smaller round objects. The element of falling and catching is also present. In other words: the Finnish Märchen surprisingly has series of significant parallels with the story of Etana as we know it and has, moreover, retained the original narrative pattern. And there is more: when the hunter finally gets home after his adventurous flight, his wife appears to be pregnant – a blind motif that strongly points to the Etana tradition.⁸³

the unity of the seal image (with two scenes from the same story) is evident. I think Frankfort (1939: 138 with fig. 24h) was right in suggesting a variant of the eagle and snake fable that occurs at the beginning of *Etana*. It is indeed true that this fable has found an extremely wide spread outside *Etana*; a variant with eagle and lion(s) is well conceivable.

⁸⁰ See Scheil 1927: 103; Wilson 1985: 28. Staging: a text of *Etana* was found in the library of the chief-singers in Assur that also included part of the *Gilgameš Epic* (Westenholz 1992: 152; West 1997: 600). Note that Etana, like *Gilgameš* and Sargon, occurs in omen apodoses (Horowitz 1998: 43 fn. 1; Haul 2000: 47).

⁸¹ See notably Levin 1966 as well as the very useful survey in Haul 2000: 75-87 (including a discussion on the relation between the Etana-Märchen and *Etana*).

⁸² Haavio 1955: 7-8. Haavio's book, with the slightly programmatic title *Der Etanamythos in Finnland* (stricto sensu *Etana* never existed in Finland), is an amazing Fundgrube attesting to the persistence of motifs in oral tradition and a powerful reminder of the importance of such traditions in literary receptivity. On the incorporation of the eagle and snake story in *Etana* (and later stories) see especially the extensive analysis by Haul (2000: 49-74).

⁸³ A separate branch of stories with Etana motifs centres around Nimrod, Kay Kavūs, Alexander the Great, Ahīqar and Aesop respectively (see Henkelman 2004 with bibliography). Stories that retain the

5.3. *Etana and Gilgameš* – As we have it, the story of *Etana* is, like the *Sargon Birth Legend*, contains motifs and themes typical for Märchen, but reworked into a highly literary composition. Though the end is lost, it is a reasonable assumption that it centred around the notion of ‘a heaven too high.’ If Haul’s idea that Etana lost the herb of bird at the last moment is right, the parallel with the *Gilgameš Epic* would be even stronger. Note that the herb of birth, providing dynastic *continuity*, is not all that different from the herb of youth: a man without a son is as much deprived of immortality as man without eternal youth (cf. Haul 2000: 45).

The similarity of Etana and Gilgameš does not stop, however, at these reflections on mortal existence in the textual tradition. A different perception of the persona of Etana in oral tradition probably forms the background of isolated remarks on his important position in the Netherworld, a position that links him to Gilgameš in his capacity of judge over the shades. Etana and Gilgameš are often mentioned closely together in these roles (see Haul 2000: 44-6). An allusion to Etana in this Netherworld role is in fact recorded in the additional 12th tablet of the *Gilgameš Epic*.⁸⁴ Conversely, the motif of the tree with snake and eagle reminds of Inanna’s tree and its inhabitants in the Sumerian *Bilgames and the Netherworld* (Haul 2000: 51-2). In some texts the name of Etana is preceded by the determinative for ‘divine,’ as happened to Gilgameš (Komoróczy 1964: 41; Haul 2000: 45).

The parallels listed above may perhaps not be as strong as those between Gilgameš and Sargon, but they are enough to establish that Gilgameš and Etana occurred in related contexts, thus constituting the possibility of motif exchanges. Moreover, there is an additional argument from the role of the eagle.

5.4. *Sicut aquila renovabitur iuventus mea* – Near Eastern stories abound in references to the eternal eagle, who renews its youth by loosing its feathers and growing new ones. This motif is mentioned in Psalm 103 and in Isaiah 40:31 and from these texts Saint Augustin took his celebrated saying *sicut aquila renovabitur iuventus mea* (comm. in Ps. 103). Some Jewish traditions have the eagle loose its feathers and dive into the sea from a great height or taking a bath in the fountain of youth, after which it is reborn like the Phoenix. In other traditions, including various European fairytales, the eagle possesses knowledge of Paradise, the tree of life or the fountain of youth.⁸⁵

All this shows that the eternal eagle constitutes a convincing parallel of the snake in the *Gilgameš Epic*, who, in an etiological passage, steals the herb of youth from Gilgameš and renews its youth by shedding its skin. Though somewhat obscured, the

story line of Etana in such a surprising degree, are also known from modern Kurdistan, Syria and Uzbekistan (Aro 1976).

⁸⁴ See SBV VII.198-205.

⁸⁵ See Morgenstern 1914-5; Williams 1956; Hubaux & Leroy 1939: 135-60. The motif is already hinted at in the *Rigveda* (Rv. 4.26.7a; the *śyená* bird brings *soma*) and perhaps the younger *Avesta* (*Yašt* 14.41, *saēna* and *haoma* mentioned together). Modern fairytales: Grimm KHM 62 (‘Die Bienenkönigin,’ with a raven), with Rölleke’s commentary (1985) ad locum; Frazer 1921: 366-8; Thompson 1956-8 (Motif-Index) s.v. B758 and A2578.2. In India the motif is connected to parrots (De Bruin 1993: 189-90 with bibliography).

same characteristics of the eagle are still present in *Etana*: the eagle loses its feathers and grows new ones.⁸⁶ He is also the expert on the herb of birth (Etana and Šamaš expect him to know how to reach the plant). As stated above (§5.3), this herb that would provide continuity in the form of a son, is not really far removed from Gilgameš's plant of eternal youth. If indeed both magical plants were lost in the end, both traditions would project the same opposition between animal and man: the snake and eagle manage to rejuvenate, but to man immortality is lost. In *Etana*, as stated above, such notions are somewhat obscured. Yet, one may imagine that in the oral tradition, Gilgameš and Etana were closer than the textual sources suggest at first sight. To me it seems that this strengthens the case for possible motif exchanges between the stories on Gilgameš and Etana.

5.5. *Etana and Gilgameš* – Proceeding from the relative closeness of Etana and Gilgameš in Mesopotamian context, and the assumed popularity of both heroes in oral traditions (cf. §§ 3.1, 5.2 above), it seems at least possible that the flight on the back of an eagle in Aelian's story on Gilgameš is indeed a late echo of the Etana tradition. As indicated above (fn. 22) a series of commentators has claimed this connection, be it mostly without further argumentation. Upon closer inspection, however, it appears that the parallel is not terribly strong. The main connection, to which previous commentators invariably referred, is the motif of a human carried by an eagle. Yet, not all flights on the back of a bird can be associated with the Etana tradition. It seems significant, however, that the infant Gilgameš is caught during his fall on the back of the eagle, just before he would have been dashed to the earth. This motif occurs very persistently in the Etana-Märchen.⁸⁷ Also, the fact that both heroes are carried on the back of the eagle may be regarded as significant (cf. fn. 76 above). The latter argument is uncertain, however: although eagles normally carry their prey with their claws,⁸⁸ riding an eagle may simply be a consequence of its function as transport animal (rather than predator) in the story.

Even with the fall-and-catch motif, I would hesitate to identify Gilgameš' eagle as a distant relative of Etana's eagle. What makes the case more convincing is, in my view, the probability that the fall and the flight on the back of an eagle represent an *intrusion* in the normal narrative pattern of the birth story (see §4.3 above). The eagle episode replaces the expected exposure and animal nursing; it is an alien element, not a spontaneous variation of original motifs.

As I see it, the story on Gilgameš recorded by Aelian is basically a birth story of the type known from the Sargon tradition. The theme is transposed to a new hero, Gilgameš/Gilgameš. Apart from that, there is contamination with one of the main

⁸⁶ Perhaps his nose dive from great height recalls that of the eagles plunging themselves into the sea to shed their feathers.

⁸⁷ Cf. Haul 2000: 23, "Das Halsbrecherische 'Beinahe-Zerschellen' scheint ein so attraktiver Zug des Himmelsturzmotivs gewesen zu sein, daß ihn kein Märchenerzähler und auch nicht der Erzähler des Etana-Epos ausgelassen hat."

⁸⁸ So too in myth, as, e.g., Ganymede who has no connection whatsoever with 'Etana' (although such has been argued by many, i.a. Harper 1891; Gadd 1971: 110 fn. 3; Burkert 1992: 122; West 1997: 478). Astour's approach to Ganymede seems much more fruitful (1998: 58).

motifs from the Etana tradition: the flight on the back of an eagle (including the fall-and-catch motif). The only remaining question is, then, whether the contamination of these specific two traditions has a parallel, for that would constitute an extra argument in favour of the analysis proposed here. The answer is affirmative.

5.6. *The Maiden in the Tower* – An early Jewish story recorded by Solomon Buber in the introduction to his edition of the Midrash (commentary) of Rabbi Tanhumar reads as follows:⁸⁹

King Solomon had a beautiful daughter. Learning from her horoscope that she was fated to marry a poor Israelite of low birth, he built a very high tower with no entrance thereto; and, after providing a large stock of victuals, locked her up there. At some time, a poor youth, exhausted from long travel, sought to shelter for the night in the carcass of an ox; and, when he had fallen asleep, a large bird alighted upon the carcass and carried it up to the roof of the tower. When the youth awoke and found himself, at his great surprise, in that elevated position, he soon made the acquaintance of the princess. But, being as chaste as he is fair, he writes a marriage contract with his own blood, calling God and the angels Michael and Gabriel as witnesses before he marries her.

One element is especially striking in this story: the carcass of an ox in which the young man seeks shelter. Unless ox carcasses were ever a popular place to spend the night, this strange element (blind motif), in combination with the large bird lifting the carcass, is strongly reminiscent of the (reworked) folktale in the prologue of *Etana*, in which the snake hides in the carcass of a bull, waiting for the eagle to approach.

The role of the eagle makes the above story very relevant for Aelian's story on the infant Gilgames. In both stories one finds 'the maiden in the tower,' a motif that sometimes serves as introduction to stories of the 'hero who was exposed at birth' type.⁹⁰ In 'the maiden in the tower' a (royal) daughter is locked up by her father in a citadel or tower. The reason may be a prophecy on a possible child, or simply to prevent the loss of virginity. A variant, well known from Grimm's *Rapunzel*, has a witch, to whom the daughter was promised at birth, who locks the girl up in the tower.⁹¹ In every case fate (as Aelian would say) 'outwits' the prison-taker: a young man (or god, or demon) always succeeds in reaching his unreachable Rapunzel. In case of Gilgames (and other stories) this results in pregnancy, followed by the sequence of the birth story. In the story on Solomon's daughter (as retold by Kohler 1891), the narrative seems to end at the point of the 'marriage,' but further development as the 'hero who was exposed at birth' seems only logical (an original to which the *Midrash*

⁸⁹ Text: Buber 1885: 136. The summary given here is quoted from Kohler 1891. Kohler also relates a Mandaean legend with a similar story line (Solomon's daughter on a mountain top, a prince in the trunk of a hollow tree carried thither by the Simurgh (etymologically an eagle). In addition, the Mandaean legend has the pregnancy and three children of the daughter and therefore represents a fuller version of (the first half of) 'the hero who was exposed at birth.'

⁹⁰ See Aarne & Thompson 1961: no. 310.

⁹¹ Though the Grimm brothers' rendering (KHM 12) is the most familiar, it is by no means the most original or fullest version of *Rapunzel*; see Lüthi 1960.

merely refers?). The strongest parallel between the two texts is, however, not (the beginning of) the birth story, but the role of an eagle or 'large bird' carrying a human. In case of the Jewish story, the link with the Etana tradition is firmly established by the blind motif of the bovine carcass. This does not, of course, constitute definite proof that the eagle of Gilgames is also an echo of Etana's eagle, but it does show that contamination of 'the hero who was exposed at birth' (Sargon) and motifs from the Etana tradition is principally possible. Further confirmation is found in a number of other stories or cycles that show similar contaminations.⁹² Yet, though the possibility cannot reasonably be denied, the case for an Etana motif in the Gilgames story will probably never reach the level of certainty. That may seem a somewhat meagre outcome, but given the limitations imposed by the nature of the material in this type of discussions, it is actually a maximum result.

6. Summary

The story of Γίλγαμος in *De Natura Animalium* XII.21 provides a striking confirmation of the importance of oral tradition in the debate on literary receptivity. As I have tried to show, this story contains a series of significant elements (including the blind motif of the gardener) that point to the Märchentypus 'the hero who was exposed at birth' and, more specifically, to the Mesopotamian Sargon tradition. In addition, Aelian's story includes two interrelated alien motifs (eagle flight and 'fall-and-catch'), both known from the Etana tradition. This contamination is only explicable from an oral background.

Even if the identification of the Etana motifs would prove to be misguided, this would not be fatal to the contention that *Ael.* XII.21 is a showcase for the importance of the oral tradition. For the textual tradition (i.e. the *Gilgameš Epic* and the *Sargon Birth Legend*), could not adequately explain the coming together of the figure Gilgameš/Gilgames and a story that was known specifically of Sargon of Akkad.

Gilgameš, Etana and Sargon are primarily known from the respective texts named after them, but for each of these heroes it is likely that a popular tradition existed parallel to the textual tradition. It was this popular, oral tradition that was the force behind the remarkably wide spread of themes and motives that we know from *Etana* and *The Sargon Birth Legend*. As a consequence of this spread, a story on Gilgameš,

⁹² The combination of motifs occurs elsewhere too. Nimrod occurs in Arabic and Hebrew birth stories in the roles of the grandfather/king and of the exposed infant (nursed by a leopard; see Lewis 1980: nos. 5-6; Heller 1993; cf. Binder 1964: 165-8). Some of these sources also have the (arrogant) flight to heaven with eagles (Lidzbarski 1892: 113; Meißner 1894: 17 n. 1; Aro 1976: 26). Yet another (Arabic) story casts Nimrod in the role of Gilgameš: searching for Noah's son, who lives at the shores of a remote sea (Aṭras Sea), in which Nimrod bathes (see Lidzbarski 1892: 115; cf. *idem* 1893: 267 n.4). Note also the link between Nimrod and Uruk (Erech) in Gen. 10:8-12. These connections of motifs, at least in the persona of Nimrod, are clearly of great interest and deserve more extensive study. The *Epistola de Mirabilibus* in the *Alexander Romance* combines motifs known from *Etana* and the *Gilgameš Epic* (Henkelman 2004). Similarly, the story of Shamshum aj-Jabbar contains clearly recognisable motifs from a number of traditions, including those surrounding Etana and Gilgameš. Vanstiphout's study (2001a) on the matter is a showcase for how this kind of material should be handled.

developing as the birth story, but with the inclusion of the eagle flight (with the fall-and-catch motif), could have emerged in many regions and periods, including the Graeco-Roman world. Aelian could therefore, in theory, have found such a story in his own hometown.

Yet, we have also seen that notably Sargon and Gilgameš, and, to a lesser degree, Etana and Gilgameš are comparable figures specifically in *Mesopotamian* context. For me this means that folktales and motifs attached to Sargon and Etana could be transposed to Gilgameš relatively easily. In case of the birth story this could have happened at an early date, as may be deduced from the occurrence of Gilgameš's *lilû* father in the *Sumerian Kinglist*. The closeness of Sargon and Gilgameš in oral tradition would certainly have been a stabilising factor guaranteeing the survival of the new birth story.

In short, the donor culture (Mesopotamia) offers ample explanation of the variation (Sargon becoming Gilgameš) and the contamination (inclusion of Etana motifs) found in the story of Γίλγαμος. As I have indicated, similar variations and contaminations occur elsewhere too. This means that all the relevant methodical questions on literary borrowings (cf. §1.3.6 above) have been answered.

That a Mesopotamian story is indeed what is reflected in *NA* XII.21, appears also from its context in *De Natura Animalium* (Achaemenes, Anāhitā) which reveals a well-informed source. It seems likely that Ctesias, or alternatively Berossus, acted as transmitter of the story recorded by Aelian. In either case, we are close to the source: this 'late' text reveals something (however distorted) that no cuneiform tablet has ever been able to show: a genuine *Mesopotamian* oral tradition.

7. Coda

In the preceding paragraphs much attention was given to the analysis of motifs combined in Aelian's story on Gilgamos. We should, however, not focus solely on the parallels with various Mesopotamian traditions at the risk of overlooking the creative reception of the story. For, in the end, the question 'about whom is this story really: Gilgameš, Sargon or Etana?' has to be answered with a simple and firm 'neither of them.' At the very first place, the story is about Γίλγαμος, not about Gilgameš. It is told by Aelian to demonstrate the goodness of animals *vis-à-vis* the cruelty of humans and as such fits into Aelian's conception of 'animal psychology.' Also, it is adapted to the Graeco-Roman cultural context by the Greek perception of 'Chaldaeans,' the reference to 'Babylon' (instead of Uruk) and, especially, the play on the familiar Perseus story.⁹³

It was only at an earlier stage (invisible to Aelian's public), that Γίλγαμος was Gilgameš, in the Mesopotamian story possibly transmitted by Ctesias or Berossus. I believe that calling him 'Sargon' (or 'Etana') would be wrong: it was the persona of

⁹³ Note that the Perseus tradition in itself contains distant echoes of the Sargon and (in the Gorgo episode) Gilgameš traditions, but this is 'just' a fact established in modern times and hence irrelevant in terms of creative reception ('Perseus' is verily part of the *Greek* context in which 'Gilgamos' is received).

Gilgameš that attracted the birth story, not the birth story that attracted the name Gilgameš. This story is not only truly Mesopotamian, but should, as far as I am concerned also definitely be counted among the stories that make up to the Gilgameš tradition. This assessment has two major consequences.

First, our perception of Gilgameš is enriched with the notion that he was not only the tragic protagonist in a ‘Epos der Todesfurcht,’ but also the child in a miraculous story in which a glimpse of the golden age suddenly breaks through. For, though we may perceive ‘the hero who was exposed at birth’ merely as a charming fairytale, ancient perception would undoubtedly have been much more sensitive to the powerful innocence of the exposed child. The reversal of the normal order visible in the care bestowed on it by ferocious animals shows that *this* blessed child is elected to become king and kill the arrogant, faithless ruler. Its humble upbringing and struggle to attain its rightful place guarantee the just rule foreshadowed in the outbreak of peace in nature. As such ‘the hero was exposed at birth’ is a story of great expectations: not coincidentally precisely the theme of natural peace, of lion and lamb lying down together, found such wide acclaim in messianic literature (e.g. Isaiah 11.1-9; Marc 1:13; John 1:13; Verg. *Ecl.* IV.18-30) and such exuberant expression in late medieval songs and paintings.

Secondly, it becomes clear now that the long series of stories on the hero Gilgameš (though modified to Γίλαμος) never died out really. Whereas the *Gilgameš Epic* was definitely buried under Mesopotamia’s sands sometime during the first centuries of the common era, the hero of the orally transmitted stories was not forgotten. Aelian’s *De Natura Animalium* remained popular and was used as Fundgrube or as object of reworking well into the fifteenth century (Kindstrandt 1998: 2991). Then, in 1556, it was edited and printed by the Gesner brothers in Zurich. New editions appeared regularly until the middle of the 19th century, when interest in Aelian faded. Ironically, it was precisely at that time that Gilgameš reappeared. When Akkadian cuneiform was declared deciphered by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1857, when the *Gilgameš Epic* was uncovered and recognised in the 1870s, and when, finally, the name ‘Gilgameš’s was read correctly in 1890, the name Γίλαμος was already there all the time. Sayce just needed to check his Teubner edition of Aelian to find it.

From the earliest texts, Gilgameš appears to us as a hero preoccupied with ‘setting up his name.’ It was the epic, that august achievement of Mesopotamian literature, which made him immortal after all. Yet, the strength of Mesopotamian oral tradition deserves full credit too, for by this ‘zaubernde Wort’ Gilgameš’s name was preserved and the memory of that amazing hero kept alive.

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