

## Reading Gilgameš

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These are a series of “low level” remarks on the Sumerian Gilgameš narratives. They eschew the high level discussions about literary genre and structure, such as whether a composition has the shape of an eight or a “sablier,” about poetic and rhetorical forms (the reader should not expect to be delightfully surprised by the discovery of a new chiasmus), or even about historicity. The present remarks deal mostly with lexical and grammatical points, and, if they go at all into the structure and organization of the text, they follow the views of discourse grammar, rather than those, of a more impressionistic nature, familiar to the historians of literature. Questions of textual criticism are considered only when germane for the discussion of a particular point.<sup>1</sup>

The relatively complete state of preservation and the moderate length of this epic tale make it an ideal case study not only of the multiple problems raised by the ancient Sumerian narratives, but also of the various methodologies, good and occasionally not so good, with which modern scholars tackle these problems. To keep these remarks brief, the reader is referred to the bibliography given in Dina Katz, *Gilgameš and Akka*, LOT 1, Groningen 1993. Recent additions to it are:

- Black, J.A., “Real and Unreal Conditional Sentences in Sumerian”, *ASJ* 17 (1995) 15-39, esp. 26-28.
- Lafont, B., “Review of Katz *Gilgameš and Akka*”, *BiOr* 53 (1996) 107-10.
- Pettinato G., *La saga di Gilgamesh*, Milano 1992, pp. 307-11, 399-401.
- Pettinato, G., “Il bicameralismo a Sumer: un topos letterario assunto a realtà storica”, *Rendiconti dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei Ser. 9, 5* (1994) 47-85.
- Shaffer, A. - Tournay, R.-J., *L'épopée de Gilgamesh*, Paris 1994, pp. 282-91.

Bibliography of a mere historical interest, not listed in Katz, *Gilgameš and Akka*, can be found in:

- W.H.Ph. Römer, *Das sumerische Kurzepos “Bilgameš und Akka”*, AOAT 209/1, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1980.

After this paper (read at the American Oriental Society Meeting in New Orleans, 1997) was written, there has been a new important contribution:<sup>2</sup>

1. These remarks are not intended either as a critical review of previous works; not every point of disagreement is mentioned, and, regrettably, my predecessors do not always get here explicitly the praise they deserve, but they can be assured of my gratitude.

2. These contributions, unfortunately, could not be taken into account in the text on time.

- Wilcke, C., "Zu 'Gilgameš und Akka'. Überlegungen zur Zeit von Entstehung und Niederschrift, wie auch zum Text des Epos mit einem Exkurs zur Überlieferung von 'Šulgi A' und von 'Lugalbanda II'", M. Diettrich - O. Loretz (eds.), *Dubsar anta-men. Studien zur Altorientalistik. Festschrift für Willem H.Ph. Römer zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres mit Beiträgen von Freunden, Schülern und Kollegen*, AOAT 253, Münster 1998, pp. 457-485.

See also:

- Yuhong, Wu, "The earliest War for the Water in Mesopotamia: Gilgameš and Agga", *NABU* 1998:103.

Wilcke (*Fs. Römer*, pp. 484-85) publishes N 3591 (which joins CBS 10355) and N 3563. I have seen a one-column tablet in private hands with the first sixty lines of the composition. It is mentioned sporadically in the following comments as text Z.

The textual transmission of GA is possibly the most thoroughly studied in the Sumerian literary corpus: Römer (*Bilgameš und Akka*), Cooper (*JCS* 33 [1981] 224-241), Vanstiphout (*AuOr* 5 [1987] 129-141), and Katz (*Gilgameš and Akka*), all elaborate in considerable detail on the manuscript transmission. None of them explicitly addresses the theoretical problems of textual history, and no discussion, which would necessarily be lengthy, of the methods will be attempted here. Suffice it to say, that matters such as the distinction between phenetic and genetic variants, the parallelism between oral and written texts (discussed below), are still in need of clarification, as is the evaluation of the scribes acceptance of, and tolerance for variability.<sup>3</sup> A hypothesis outlined at the end of the present section could make practically impossible to establish a stemma.<sup>4</sup>

GA offers numerous examples of discourse ellipsis, of essential information left unsaid. A very clear case is encountered already in the first two lines: they imply that the envoys brought a diplomatic message whose contents are never made explicit. The text jumps right away to Uruk's reaction to the message. Attempts to explain why range from an imprecise "it [the content] was given by the context" (Jacobsen, *The Harps that Once...*, Yale 1987, p. 346, note 1), to the assumption that GA continues a previous literary composition (Shaffer - Tournay, *L'epopée de Gilgamesh*, p. 283), or, more realistically, to the assumption of "extra-textual information that we do not possess" (Cooper, *JCS* 33 [1981] 224). In fact, it is a quite common trick for a performer-narrator to rely on common knowledge in order to establish an empathic connection with his audience. It flatters its members, implicitly complimenting them for their familiarity with the society's traditions, and contributes to make them feel part of a given social group. Appeals to this extra-textual information, understood as a general knowledge (mostly unwritten) of beliefs, tales, and traditions, are found elsewhere in Sumerian texts. In the opening line of the "Song of the Hoe," to give an example, the predicate contains the conjunctive -inga- with no preceding text to connect to. The connection is with the world of deeds of Enlil, a word present in the mind of the audience: "The Lord has *once more* manifested himself with an everlasting deed." Otherwise, suddenly starting a tale in medias res is accepted practice in universal folklore and poetry, there is no need to postulate a lost "Gilgameš and

3. Important contributions to the oral vs. written question can be found in H.L.J. Vanstiphout (ed.), *Mesopotamian Epic Literature. Oral or Aural?*, Lewiston - Queenston - Lampeter 1992.

4. A couple of remarks. Sources N and J, a "perfect fit" according to Vanstiphout *AuOr* 5 (1987) 131, cannot join since they overlap in line 35. The reassignment of sigla in Vanstiphout, *NABU* 1989:99 is thus premature, and can contribute only confusion. The notion of one being able to use the tablet "cores" as a criterium in making indirect joins (*ibid.* and 133) is mostly illusory. There are a few tablets, exceedingly few, with clear traces of layering in the interior clay structure, in the great majority of cases, however, the clay is sufficiently homogenous to prevent any conclusion. Analysis of trace elements in the clay, if it turns out to be sufficiently discriminatory, could provide some help; meantime, the clues for non-immediate joins are paleographic (ductus, tablet shape, etc.) on the one hand, and orthographic and grammatical on the other.

Akka I" and assume that what we have is its sequel.<sup>5</sup> I will skip here the discussion of the nature of the assemblies; the bi-cameral congress, and similar over-interpretations. The most realistic solution, it seems to me, is to imagine a sort of, possibly customary, town meeting, or rather two divided along age lines. Nothing in the text, however, not even the adjective gar-ra applied to unkin, demands the exclusion of the idea of simple, informal gatherings, one of old people, the other of youth. The assumption that Gilgamesh could not act alone without the approval of the assembly is again over-interpretation. He could not go to war all by himself, did he?

*Line 4, and parallels.* inim ì-kiṅ-kiṅ-e, an imperfective simultaneous with the perfective ba-an-gar, implies a deliberate choice of words; (cf. é-me-eš du<sub>14</sub> na-mu-un-[ṅar] in la-ga ba-an-kiṅ-[kiṅ] "Winter did not fight (yet) he kept looking for nasty insults" Winter and Sumer 154 ; see also ELA 237 and EEm 117; NŠA 205); one can paraphrase it: G. presented the question, carefully choosing the (his own) words. Jacobsen (*The Harps that Once...*), with "was seeking, seeking for words," seems to agree with this proposal; "en l'exposant ainsi" of Shaffer and Tournay (*L'épopée de Gilgamesh*, p. 282) is too free and colorless; Kramer (*AJA* 53 [1949] 10) "seeks out (their) word," accepted by most translators, is somewhat pedestrian: presenting a question already implies the expectation of an answer.

*Lines 5-7, and parallels.* All translators understand the sentences of these lines as adverbial subordinates of purpose: "to complete ...," "zu vollenden ...," "pour en finir ...," as if the suffix were -dè, instead of -da (or -dam), which forms nominalized or relative clauses with obligation: "who/which has to ...".<sup>6</sup> Note that there is no main clause from which a subordinate adverbial clause could hang from.<sup>7</sup> Some translations give, unintendedly perhaps, the false impression that lines 5-7 are subordinates with their main clause(s) in line 8 ("to finish wells ... we must not submit ..."). Such translations are one of the sources of the unfounded assumption that Kish wanted to exact corvée work from the Uruk people. One must translate 5-7:

"(Oh) there are many wells that have to be finished, many wells of the land are yet to be finished,  
many shallow wells of the land have yet to be finished,  
many deep wells (and their) windlasses are yet to be finished."

The connection of these words with the general discourse has been so far left unexplained, or attributed to quite unlikely reasons: Kish needed clay from Uruk (Shaffer - Tournay, *L'épopée de Gilgamesh*); does it make any sense to have boats carry clay 200 miles upstream to Kish? Aka's demands concerned "irrigation works" (Katz, *Gilgamesh and Akka*, p. 17); if they were in the Uruk area, what would Kish care about irrigation 100 miles away, as the crow flies, and specially *downstream*? If Aka needed

5. Introductory passages in Sumerian literature are still in need of a systematic treatment, a little along the lines of Wilcke, "Die Anfänge der akkadischen Epen", *ZA* 67 (1977) 153-216 (for Akkadian). Such an investigation would need to consider a wide cross-cultural range of introductions. For instance, the, usually mistranslated, opening lines of the "Marriage of Martu": "Ninab was Ninab (but) Kirtab was not yet Kirtab" (thus and not "was (not) existing", confusing the verbs me and gál) has striking parallels in the world folk literature. Compare it with the opening "això era i no era" in Mallorca fairy tales.

6. In the discussions about the suffix -dè, appended to non-finite verbal forms in subordinate clauses, its role is not always clearly stated. It has in subordinate clauses the same role that -šè has in nominal phrases: to é-šè ga-ṅen "I want to go home," corresponds é-ba-e-dè ga-ṅen "I want to go to divide an estate". This -dè is typically found with verbs of intention, movement to, etc. The suffix -da similarly added to a non-finite verbal form represents -dè plus the relative suffix -a. Contrast é dū-dè "to build a house" with é dū-da "the house which has to be built." The combination of similar forms, but a different function, with personal pronouns, e.g. ṅar-ra-zu-dè is a case by itself not discussed here. Note, finally, that given the orthographic vagaries of the texts, one can sporadically find -dè where one expects -da, and viceversa, without affecting the validity of the interpretations proposed above.

7. There is a translation ambiguity with English *to* which can mark the goal but also the simple infinitive.

manpower in Kish itself, something would have been said about corvée work. I would propose that the mention of wells is ultimately an echo of a quite credible historico-geographic event. In its secular meanderings, the Euphrates once (and quite likely more than once) drifted away from Uruk. To keep enjoying a sufficient water supply, the habitants of the town were reduced to dig wells. Similar situations have been described by last century travelers in Southern Mesopotamia. At the beginning of the century, H.W. Cadoux, who visited the area in 1903, found that the traditional bed of the Euphrates was completely dry from al-Mussayyib all the way to 5 or 6 miles upstream from Samawa, a distance of over 150 miles, the water being carried exclusively by the al-Hindyah canal. And he adds "numerous holes were being dug in the deepest part of the [old, dry M.C.] bed for supplying the inhabitants and soldiers with drinking-water."<sup>8</sup> It is quite likely that, already in ancient times, the westernward drift of the Euphrates bed took the river in a course away from the city.<sup>9</sup> Our text suggests that its inhabitants tried to remediate the lack of water by digging wells. The folklore attributed these wells, perhaps still visible in later times, to an initiative of Gilgameš. There is a definite, albeit not too explicit, tradition of Gilgameš as a well digger in the Akkadian epic (Gilg. IV i 5; Y vi 268; Meissner frag. i 3f.). After finishing a well, according to *Šumma ālu*, one had to recite the now lost incantation "The Well of Gilgameš" (Caplice, *Or* 42 [1973] 513f.).<sup>10</sup> Later on, the dry wells, perhaps by then taken for clay pits (*issû*), were still a feature of the Uruk landscape: "one sar (of Uruk) is city buildings, one sar is orchards, and one sar clay/sand pits" (Gilg. XI 306). Finally, the interpretation proposed here could provide a motivation for a choice between *nagbu* A "source" and *nagbu* B "everything" in the opening line of Akkadian Gilgameš: *ša nagba imuru* would mean "the one who found out / located the water sources," rather than the more philosophical "the one who saw everything."<sup>11</sup> In this scenario, the mention of the wells makes sense, they had an obvious strategic importance. No resistance would be possible if the waterless town were besieged, and in any case war would delay the pressing search for essential water. Lines 5-7, and parallels, are exclamatory phrases, syntactically, but not pragmatically, unconnected with the context, tersely giving an essential factor in the choice of war or peace.

The "wells of the land" appear unexpectedly as a textual variant in Proverb 2.69 (Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs*, Philadelphia 1949, pp. 224ff., with the addition of N 5177 and 3N-T915m). In the text, more of a minifable than a proverb, a fox calls his mate to go to Uruk and "crush it like a leek," to go to Kulaba and step on it "like with a sandal"; they were barely 3,6 Km (var. 360 m) from the city that the city dogs started barking; and the fox said: "Geme-Tummal, Geme-Tummal (the name of the wixen), go back to

8. H.W. Cadoux, "Recent Changes in the Course of the Lower Euphrates", *The Geographic Journal: Royal Geographic Society* 28 (1906) 266-77. According to Cadoux, at that time the German Expedition to Babylon had to dig wells too. Some Sumerian lamentation passages are likely descriptions of similar conditions. Curiously, Cadoux's descriptions are at times extremely similar to those of the ancient laments; for instance, "the bridge of boats, which in ordinary times gave [to the town] an appearance of importance, was lying ignominiously on the sand of the river-bed" (p. 274). Without going into the geomorphological aspects, note only that F.R. Chesney, *The Expedition for the Survey of the Rivers Euphrates and Tigris*, London 1850 (reprinted, Greenwood: New York 1969) map ix, shows a dry river bed leaving the Euphrates at Lamlum, passing next to the Warka ruins, and rejoining the Euphrates a few miles downstream from Samawa. For general information on the area, see R.M. Adams - H.J. Nissen, *The Uruk Countryside*, Chicago 1972.

9. The puzzling role of Uruk in Ur III times, when the town seems to play the role of a very important religious center, but not of a town with significant administrative and commercial activities, is perhaps to be explained by the lack at the time of direct access to water courses. Note that in the royal travels, going by boat from Ur to Nippur, the river stop in Uruk could have been a place giving access to the town, but not sufficiently close to feed its water needs.

10. The connection between G. and wells was noticed by Römer, *Bilgameš und Akka*, p. 48, but without drawing further conclusions.

11. A semantic play between the two meanings cannot, of course, be excluded.

your lair! evil things are roaring.” For “go back to your lair,” seven mss. have (a), but one has (b) “the wells of the land”:

- (a) dūr-zu-šè gá-nam-ma-da  
 (b) túl-túl kalam-ma-ke.

There is an undeniable phonological resemblance,<sup>12</sup> but the interesting point is: how did the idea come to the head of the schoolboy writing the tablet with the variant? He must have been thinking of the legendary wells of Uruk. One could even wonder if the fable was seen as a parody of GA (“when Aka went to Uruk” equalling “when Ka went to Uruk”). Incidentally, one learns from the variant to read túl rather than pú in these lines of GA.

*Line 8.* The verbal forms of the formula in line 8, repeated with alternations in 14, 23, and 29, seem to have already caused trouble to the ancient scribes, to say nothing of the modern translators. A very detailed discussion of preceding opinions is found in Pettinato, *Rendiconti dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei* Ser. 9, 5 (1994) 59ff. (add Katz, *Gilgameš and Akka*, pp. 34ff.). The root of the trouble is first morphosyntactic: neither the deontic modal function of na- (prohibition or negative exhortation), nor its epistemic assertive function in narratives seem to account for the forms present in the text. There are no similar forms of deontic na- with 1st plural in the Nippur corpus.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, some logical assumptions of the modern reader are in conflict with the transmitted text. In an attempt to cast new light on the difficulties of these lines, I would suggest (1) to leave completely aside the non-Nippurian source A; experience shows that it is a good rule of thumb the one that recommends to first group the Nippur sources together and reconstruct the text from them alone, before comparing them with non-Nippurian sources; and (2) that the readings of the tablets should be harmonized and preserved as much as possible, before proposing any emendation. The choice of variants accepted by the translators is essentially the same made by Kramer (*AJA* 53 [1949] 7). It mixes Nippur sources with A in lines 8 and 14, but otherwise does not emend sources. Only Vanstiphout (*AuOr* 5 [1987] 139), followed by Katz, boldly emends lines 23 and 29 to put them in step with the logic of the modern reader. And, finally, (3) to take into account all the possibilities: inclusion and exclusion of the addressees in the sphere of the speaker (1<sup>st</sup> person plural versus 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural), and assertion versus interrogation.

All translations so far assume that the two clauses of lines 8 and 23 are joined by a tacit adversative conjunction: “let us submit BUT not fight,” or “let us not submit BUT fight.” G.’s words seem much more natural if the two clauses are considered a disjunction. Paraphrasing: “what is your answer going to be? we do not want to submit OR we do not want to fight?”<sup>14</sup> G. *consults* the assemblies, offering a choice and seeking agreement, he does not try to dictate a plan of action. By the use of the 1st person plural, G. makes himself a member of the age group of the elders (*ad captandam benevolentiam*), contrast this with his address to the gathered young men, line 23; G. uses there the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural, as if deeming them his inferiors. Keeping in mind that source A will be ignored in what follows, the only significant discord<sup>15</sup> among Nippur sources in line 8 is the 2pl in F, a really minor and easily explainable point.

12. Note that UN has a variant reading /kanam/ in main dialect, according to Ea IV 51 and TRS 38:10, as well as the Ebla Sign List 45: ge-ne-m(u-um)

13. The opening lines of Enlil and Ninlil I, have also the 1st plural suffix, but the na- there is epistemic.

14. I must admit that the negative formulation is puzzling. If it were used only when addressing the old men, one could imagine a subtle mockery of a general negative attitude of older people, but line 23, where G. addresses the young people has the same negative pattern. The matter needs further study.

15. I disregard for the moment the alternation between *hamfu* and *marû*.

*Line 14.* The disagreement among Nippur sources is again minor: ga-àm- (“we want to become subjects ...”) in C, versus ba-an- (“we will become subjects ...”) in B.

*Line 17.* “Did not approve” (Cooper), “grieves” (Vanstiphout, *OLP* 17 [1986] 34) do not render precisely the sense of the text; “ne prit pas à coeur” (Shaffer - Tournay) is better. The phrase šà-šè nu--gíd means “not to take seriously,” and is used of a person who is not bothered by an apparently unpleasant situation, it connotes indifference.

*Line 23.* Similar to line 8, but with the suffix of the 2pl. in all sources. B omits nam- in the first clause, like in line 14 (and 29). In the second clause, C has 1pl (restored because of ga-àm-), the rest (F, J, and even B) have nam-ba-, J with 2pl, B with 1pl, written -ge-[d]è-en (an occasional abbreviated writing of -en-dè-en). F has an identical reading in Langdon’s copy, but the line is broken away after sig in the photo in *AJA* 53 pl. ii. Presumably it is an error of Langdon who took the signs from the similar line 29. Examining the spot around 1960, it did not look to me at all like a recent break. In the first half, G. does not identify himself with the social group he addresses, as he did in line 8, in the second half the sources are divided.

*Lines 25-28.* No matter what strategy is going to be used, the young men are full of energy and enthusiasm, and ready. These lines contain again *disjunctive* clauses:

“as they say: the ones who stand up OR the ones who sit down,  
the ones who ride with princes OR  
the ones who hold onto the haunches of a donkey,  
who will have the courage for this? (i.e., to fight)”

The first members of the disjunctions describe the young men, the second disparagingly the old men, an age contrast that parallels the opposition in the attitudes of the two assemblies. The obvious conclusion is that only youth has enough courage to fight if necessary. Note that one must read -e-ne, instead of -e-dè, the forms being plural participles: The existence of “plural” roots for gub and tuš does not militate against this interpretation. Cross-linguistically, the plural in a verbal stem is not simply the result of an agreement with a plural noun phrase in the sentence, but can be an inherent plurality of the verbal stem itself. Thus one can have “pluralized singulars” and “singularized plurals” and this obtains in Sumerian where one can have not only dūr-dūr-ra-zu-dè (Farmer Instr. 98), and tuš-tuš-ù (Dialogue 5:112), but the general plural-marking forms can be added: compare àm-mi-ni-in-gub-gub-bu (Lugalbanda I 258), im-mi-ib-gub-bu-ne (Enki and the World 145), and the frequent -su<sub>3</sub>-su<sub>8</sub>-ge-eš.<sup>16</sup> In line 27, the verb háš/haš<sub>4</sub>--dab<sub>5</sub>, lit. “to grab the thighs/haunches” seems to mean “to grab firmly someone, preventing him from escaping,” “to hold tight(?)” za-e zabar-dab<sub>5</sub> ù nar-gal-e PN<sub>1</sub> abulla-mah-a haš<sub>4</sub> dab<sub>5</sub>-bé-‘x’-en-zé-en “you, the master-of-the-cups and the chief musician, grab PN<sub>1</sub> at the Great Gate! (before he has a chance to escape)”; I take the verb as an imperative plural<sup>17</sup> (Michalowski, *JCS* 30 [1978] 115:4); gal<sub>5</sub>-lá-e-ne haš<sub>4</sub>-a-na i-im-dab<sub>5</sub>-bé-eš “the gallas held him (Dumuzi) by his hips(?)” (Innanas’s Desc. 350). This line depicts the old men atop donkeys, precariously holding onto their mounts, trying to keep themselves from falling down.<sup>18</sup>

16. One can have, of course, at the same time intensive reduplication. A discussion here would require too much space. See M. Durie, “The Grammaticalization of Number as a Verbal Category”, *Proc. 12th Meeting of the Berkeley Ling. Soc.*, Berkeley 1986, pp. 355-70, and M. Mithun, “Lexical Categories and the Evolution of Number Marking”, M. Hammond - M. Noonan (eds.), *Theoretical Morphology*, San Diego 1988, pp. 211-34. For Sumerian, previous, somewhat incomplete, studies include J. Krecher, *WO* 4 (1968) 1-11; P. Steinkeller, *Or* 48 (1979) 54-67; and M. Yoshikawa, *ASJ* 3 (1981) 111-124.

17. The interpretation proposed there by Michalowski deserves also serious consideration.

18. Alster, *Studies in Sumerian Proverbs*, Copenhagen 1975, p. 92:28. It seems unlikely that one has to translate “holding the reins.” The term for this is zib gíd: en-e zib mu-un-gíd dūr<sup>ur</sup> mu-dūr-ru-(un), Lugalé 154 (completed by Borger, *Or* 55 [1986]

*Line 29.* Leaving aside B, whose scribe seems to have had problems with his verbs, the first clause has 2pl, the second 1 pl, and, as far as one can tell, both had nam-ba-. A free translation would thus be: “you, the old men, do not have / should not submit, but we, the young ones, do not need not fight either.” In other words, neither submission nor armed conflict are inevitable. The statement adds an unpredictable twist to the plot, and creates a modicum of suspense. How are the Urukians going to get out of their predicament? The prosaic solution that simply emends the text and reads ga-àm- does not give sufficient credit to the storytelling skills of the ancient author, and has not understood the nature of the *drôle de guerre* that follows. The clouds of war gather at the beginning, but there is no *real* war in GA. The conflict will be resolved by the supernatural powers, manifested in the magic rays (me-lám), of the hero Gilgameš on which the young men put their confidence.

*Lines 30ff.* The assembled youth start singing what could be called the “Uruk national anthem.” It will be repeated towards the end (lines 107ff.). Follows an optimistic preview of the fate that awaits Aka and his hosts (lines 37-39).

*Line 36.* Two translations have been proposed for sag LUM-LUM: one, “smasher of heads” (Cooper, Jacobsen, Katz),<sup>19</sup> the other, based on *unnubu*, gives “Üppigewachsener Mann” (Römer), “tête splendide” (Shaffer - Tournay). I believe that the expression cannot be kept separate from i-a lum-lum ù-luh-ha sù-sù of Gilgameš and Huwawa B (= GH B) 1, etc. It is a metaphor based on the growing vegetation, to be translated by something like “exuberant,” (cf. Civil, *The Farmer's Instructions*, p. 88, note 90).

*Line 37.* ñen-a-ni, the pronoun refers to Aka, not mentioned since line 1, an extremely long anaphoric distance; for this concept and its importance in discourse structure, see T. Givón *Syntax* II, Philadelphia 1990, pp. 910ff., and Id., *Voice and Inversion*, Philadelphia 1994, pp. 9ff. The phrase ní mu-ni-in-te has to have G. (the addressee) as agent because of the mu- prefix.

*Line 38.* The suffix -bi is probably here a demonstrative “that army” (Cooper), although Kish cannot be excluded as antecedent, given the anaphoric perspective of the author; cf. precedent line and also the following line 39

*Line 45.* First mention of the me-lám, the “radiating aura,” the superhuman power that will be ultimately the instrument of victory.

*Line 53.* The verb has been variously translated: “frown” (Kramer), implicitly based on igi--suh = *nekelmû*, but incongruent in the context; “lassen die Augen (vor Wut fast) heraustreten” (Römer), inspired on igi--suh = *balāšu*, hardly better fitting; “look worried” (Cooper, lexical source unspecified) inspired “look despondent” (Vanstiphout), and “look alarmed” (Katz), and, presumably, “vous êtes troublés” (Shaffer - Tournay); “are all frowning” (Jacobsen), *balāšu* again. No one seems to have noticed that C+ N 1250 has [igi mu-un]-zàg-zàg-en-zé-en “I have chosen you”;<sup>20</sup> source Z has similarly igi zàg-zàg-e-en-x-en. The verb is igi--zàg = *nasāqu* A “to select,” and still better = *bêru* A “to select,” typically said of elite troupes. The variant with igi--suh must have here a similar meaning, since suh is also *nasāqu* A. The suffix -ù-ne in B and I, “my warriors! (I have chosen *them!*)” would be an (ironical) aside, of the type found in

448), quoted in Comm. C to Aa 11/5 r. 17': [...] 'x'.MEŠ : ap-pa-a-tù šá ANŠE : en zib mu-un-gíd-i <sup>ant</sup>NITÁ<sup>ur</sup> mu-dú-ru (un) : ...; 4 lá-e zib mu-un-gíd-i “holds the reins of a four-donkey team” Innana-Ebih 72f.; i-bí zi-da-zu <sup>zi-ib</sup>IBxES-ni ba-an-gíd<sup>bi-ii</sup> “the one in front of your right side holds his reins” CT 15 14:14 (Eršemma 164).

19. It is difficult to tell on which lexical equation this is based: LUM has no less than 73 entries in Aa V/1.

20. The provisional transliteration in Cooper, *JCS* 33 (1981) 234 is misleading at this point.

the school dialogues. The form *igi mu-un-suh-suh-en-zé-en* in Vanstiphout (*OLP* 17 [1986] 44; *AuOr* 5 [1987] 139) is a manufactured hybrid not given by any source.

*Line 55.* For the personal name, compare perhaps the implement <sup>615</sup>BIR-DU-tur-ra MSL 6 152:113, after bird traps, but of meaning unknown. Text Z has in all instances what looks like a sign DA, instead of HAR. The official's name is obviously humoristic, based on an implement but susceptible perhaps of a word play: "kidney" (*ellan*), or "butterfly" (*giriš*) (Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz*, Cambridge 1970 [1957], p. 382). Such wordplays, of course, would enter into consideration only as visual, graphic, not phonic plays. The office of *sag-lugal* "head of the royal household(?)" is treated in sources F and M here as a compound, in C, and now in Z, as a genitival construction. In Enki and Ninmah (CT 42 28:13) it is treated, if it is the same thing, as a genitival construction.

*Line 56.* Lit. "pleased his king," in the sense that he tried to do something to please him, is preferable to "said enthusiastically" (Cooper), or "praised" (Jacobsen, Katz). The meaning of *mí--dug<sub>4</sub>* is essentially "to do something nice for someone," "to treat something nicely" (e.g. "to decorate").

*Line 57.* Fragment N 1250 adds a line [. . .]-na-gu<sub>4</sub>-gu<sub>4</sub>-ud, something like "I will go prancing towards him."

*Line 62.* Compare *sukud* = *kapāšu* in Comm. to Aa 8/3:20f. I suspect that this *kapāšu* is only a variant of *kabāšu* and thus *sukud* means here some sort of headgear or crest (*kubšu*). Note also *sukud* = *šapāru ša qarni*, next to *sukud* = *kapāšu* Comm. to Aa 8/3 *ibid.*; this is *šapāru* B in CAD, to be translated by something like "to adorn the horns with streamers", and identical with the *šepēru* that gives *šipru* "crest" and the like. Some kind of ornate headgear, indicative of his rank, is forcibly removed from the official's head. The implication here is that it is an humiliating act. In any case, translations such as "they beat from head to toe" (Cooper), "gave a thorough beating" (Katz), and especially, with subject switch, "(the official) had to pound down and pound down his bludgeon" (Jacobsen, misreading ZUGUD instead of SUKUD, and followed by Shaffer and Tournay) are unwarranted, as are all the translations based on an old misreading of SUKUD as UZU. In any case, a physical beating, expressly mentioned in line 82, is here excluded.

*Line 69.* The final vowel after -zu marks the interrogative, and this is one of the exceptional cases with a written indication that questions had, not surprisingly, a special intonation; see my remarks in *Miscellanea Babylonica. Mél. Maurice Birot*, Paris 1985, p. 73.

*Lines 71ff.* These lines are discussed in Black, *ASJ* 17 (1995) 26ff. (see previously Klein, *JAOS* 103 [1983] 201-203); my interpretation differs: I assume that line 71 is a conditional expressing a hypothesis contrary to fact, and that lines 72-75 describe the consequences that would obtain if the hypothesis were true. Lines 76ff. describe, with negative clauses *in the indicative*, the factual situation resulting from the non-truth of the premise in line 71. Shaffer and Tournay translate correctly 71 and 72-75, but take 76ff. as interrogative clauses. I would translate:

- 71 If that man over there were my king,  
72 his forehead would be terrifying, etc.  
76 (but) no multitudes have fallen down, etc.

Thus lines 72-75 are not syntactic parallels to line 71, but form a complex, coordinated apodosis. The transformation of NP<sub>1</sub>-ani NP<sub>2</sub> into NP<sub>1</sub> NP<sub>2</sub>-ani (which gives lit. "a terrifying forehead would be his") is



discussed in Klein, *JAOS* 103 [1983] 201-203; the peculiar syntax, however, does not invalidate for these lines<sup>21</sup> a translation "his NP<sub>1</sub> would be (of) NP<sub>2</sub>"

*Line 98.* South Mesopotamian boats had typically extremely high end tips at bow and stern, to the point that a boat may be compared to a moon crescent, and vice versa, in the literature. It is believed that this facilitated the handling of the craft among tall aquatic vegetation, but the practical or symbolic consequences of breaking the "horns" of a boat are not clear but certainly bad. It could be a simple synecdoche implying the total breaking of a boat.

*Lines 101ff.* G. could do anything of Aka. He could make him his subject, assigning him to any rank he wanted, from lowly *ugula* (more "sargent" than "lieutenant") to general of the army, but instead sets him free, purportedly in gratitude for a previous favor, but it is clear that Aka is completely paralyzed and defeated, he would have no chance against the superhuman powers of G., were he foolish enough to attempt a new attack. The nature of the favor, unfortunately, is a matter of speculation.

*Line 104.* Note that the variant of C, with the infrequent form *mu-e-sum*, should not be translated "you have given me." The omission of the dative and object infixes, as well as the prefix *mu-e-*, topicalize the agent and, secondarily, the action itself (Edzard, *WO* 8/2 [1976] 177 calls such forms "der völlig absolute Gebrauch"); one could paraphrase "you are a (life) giver." The text (*ma-an-*) of L and O, of course, authorizes the translation "you gave me."

*Lines 107-10.* It is generally assumed that the words of the "Uruk national anthem" are uttered by Aka. It seems better to leave it to the audience of courtiers and armed men that thus celebrates the victory. The "singing" does not really interrupt G.'s speech, it is simultaneous with it: "G. said to Aka: ... (meantime the entourage said): 'Uruk, workshop of the gods ...'." A modern writer would say something like "at the shouts of 'Long life Uruk!, Gilgameš, etc.'" G.'s speech flows with no interruption from lines 106 to 111.

*Line 110.* The restoration in source C: *šu-m[u gi<sub>4</sub>-ma-ab]* (Vanstiphout, *AuOr* 5 [1987] 141; Katz, *Gilgameš and Akka*, p. 45) does not have any syntactic parallel in the Nippur corpus. *šu--gi<sub>4</sub>* "to return" does not have such a construction: *šu*, followed by a personal pronoun or not, is in the locative.

The whole point of the tale is to show the supernatural powers of G. He alone, by its sole presence, appearing with his radiating aura at the top of the city wall, overwhelms the Kish army (lines 84ff.). All the previous episodes are there to make clear how no one can truly help him, he acts all alone, self-sufficient, like a true epic hero.

- (1) he does not need the support of the elders of the city
- (2) the young men enthusiastically follow the hero, but they are inexperienced and ineffectual.
- (3) The *sag-lugal* offers help (to negotiate or in a singular combat?); he fails miserably.
- (4) Enkidu and the Uruk militia prepare a sortie, but they are not needed.

These themes form a sort of crescendo from the less significant (the approval and support of the elders) to the potentially most powerful, the armed assistance of his companion Enkidu and of his men. A secondary and synchronous narrative layer (including the mistaken identification of *zabar-dab<sub>5</sub>*) aims in the same direction: guides the interest of the audience to the place in the landscape of the tale where G. and his magic rays will appear. If the people of Uruk, its soldiers, and weapons are mentioned it is simply to show that they alone could not win. The ridiculous attempt of BIRHURtur underlines the lack of

21. This statement does not apply to all passages adduced by Klein, they represent more than one syntactic construction.

military savoir-faire, and if Enkidu and the Uruk militia get ready for a sortie it is only to show that they are not really needed to win the day.

As for the general tone of the tale, I believe that it is full of humorous touches: the ridiculous old man, BIRHURtur<sup>22</sup> coming out of the gates dancing (see above comment to line 57), having the possibly pompous hat and insignia unceremoniously removed, his inept handling of the situation and his beating, etc. even the conclusion itself. After the defeat, G. lets Aka go, (in a sporty gesture not unlike the fisherman putting back in the water the "big one"). We may discuss solemnly the value of GA as historical source (about the same of the "Chanson de Roland," in my opinion) and what it reveals about political history (the old generation and the young do not agree, not really a revelation ...). Most of the humor is not recoverable, and, as usual, dissecting what is accessible kills it. I suspect that the entertainment value of the tale was considerable, perhaps it could be compared to a libretto for a zarzuela ... even if we cannot enjoy it as such. In conclusion, we have here a comedy intended to lift up the spirits of the Urukians finding themselves in some particular trying circumstances.

Reading GA one gets the impression that a recitation limited to the text as written on the tablet would have resulted in a short, flat, and lackluster performance indeed. It seems unlikely that the text of the tablets is all that there is to the GA story. No matter how artificially narrated, the performance of reading or singing the text itself would have lasted no more than a few minutes. At this point, a hypothesis comes to mind. As it is now generally accepted, the "literary" texts, at least the narrative ones, were above all traditional oral compositions, meant to be recited or sung in public performances, accompanied some times by a musical instrument. I would suggest that the written texts of the same compositions are secondary in the sense that they were *abbreviated* versions whose purpose was (a) the training of singers and similar performers in special centers, and (b) the preservation of the composition themselves; they were not intended to be "read" in any usual sense. The main point here is that oral and written versions of the same composition were in principle *different*. Oral texts were not in all cases simply a link in the transmission of the written text, but were autonomous entities having a life of their own. Once in a while some were written down. The situation is enormously complex for several reasons and the rules must have been quite different according to the various text genres. The "popularity" of different texts may have been very variable: some may have had an existence limited to very ritualized performances in a cultural or royal court setting, others may have had repeated, informal performances in settings that could be called private. The first would tend to have a stable textual history, the latter would be more changeable, with all kinds of gradations in between. Furthermore, a text forgotten in the oral tradition may have been "discovered" on an old tablet and brought back to life. There are, for instance, in OB times, adaptations of ED texts from rediscovered tablets, the scribe trying to reproduce, not always successfully, the obsolete signs, and adding glosses to try to give the ancient pronunciation. The examples are mostly lexical, and none so far narrative, but there is no reason whatsoever why this may not have happened to an "epic" story too.

If the hypothesis that written texts were abbreviated is correct, it is extremely important to determine, if possible, the criteria governing the compression of a relatively lengthy performance to fit the space of a few tablet columns. If the tablet was only a learning tool or a mnemonic help delineating the essentials of a composition, the instances when an important change of scene or a long trip are reduced to half a line of text, or the silences that hide apparently momentous events (some of the ones in GA have been pointed out above) become explainable. These holes could be filled in during the performance with "the tools of the trade": stock phrases and the traditional formulae so dear to literary historians. Why, on the other hand, are

22. There is something fishy about this character: would sag-lugal be here a euphemism for "eunuch", patterned after sag-ur-sag?

repetitions given in full? First, there may be hidden repetitions with only the first and perhaps the last line given, repetitions that are now undetectable. When the repetition involves changes of dialect, as in G. and Enkidu, or some of the lines are altered, no explanation is needed. More difficult to justify are identically worded repetitions. Perhaps faithfulness in the repetitions was seen as the hallmark of a narrators skill, perhaps the audience repeated the text along with the performer and was very demanding, refusing any changes.

The existence side by side of a long, living oral version and a short written one would create a constant feeding and counterfeeding of textual variants. Without getting into details, it is easy to see how this could complicate in unexpected, and undetectable ways the genealogy of the manuscripts.

There is more to the matter that I could possibly explain here. I am not denying that there may have been tablets meant to be written texts and nothing else, not only the copies of the Ekur inscriptions in Nippur, and also many short lyrical poems, for instance. Each genre has its own rules. I am convinced, however, that despite the impression given by the existence itself of a writing system, and by the abundance of tablets, the literary culture of Mesopotamia, at least up to the end of the OB period, was a culture of the spoken word, not of the written word.

Finally, if my proposed interpretation of the passage about the wells is correct, it shows that the Sumerologist must pay attention to the concrete, physical circumstances surrounding the creation of the text. A further example can be found in the tale of "Gilgamesh and Huwawa." At the very end of the story G. and Enkidu had brought Huwawa's head in a sack, and presented it to Enlil who is displeased and asks why they have acted this way. And Enlil tells them (line 189ff.): "he will dwell before your eyes, he will be fed what you eat, he will be given to drink what you drink, he will be placed as a fitting ornament in the temple(s) of the great gods!" The first three lines are given here according to Edzard's edition,<sup>23</sup> but the last one (192) is based on a different reading of sources NiC and NiI (+ NIA). Instead of [<sup>h</sup>hu]-wa-wa ..., I believe that NiI has to be read: [é dingir] gal<sup>1</sup>-gal<sup>1</sup>-, and, combined with NiC,<sup>24</sup> the line can be restored:

[é dingir] gal<sup>1</sup>-gal<sup>1</sup>-e-ne-ka me-te-aš hé-em-mi-ḡá[!]

"it (G.'s head) will be placed as an ornament in the temple of the great gods."

The topos me-te-(aš)--ḡá is well-known and said mostly of locations, buildings or parts thereof. A stone head of Huwawa was found in situ in Tell al-Rimah next to or as part of a gate in an OB temple (Iraq 27 72 and pl. 16a)<sup>25</sup>. The relation with the literary passage is obvious.

23. D.O. Edzard, "Gilgamesh und Huwawa A. II. Teil", ZA 81 (1991) 229-230.

24. I cannot see the -zju at the beginning of the line in NiC; -ka is found only in this source and is omitted by NiI.

25. A very good overview of the visual representations (and everything else on the subject) of Huwawa is given by C. Wilcke, RIA 4 (1972-75) 535. The Tell al-Rimah heads are mentioned there, but without relating them to textual materials. Major additions for representations: J.-L. Huot, "Le meurtre de Humbaba", *Larsa: travaux de 1985*, Paris 1989, pp. 163-73; W.G. Lambert, "Gilgamesh in Literature and Art: The Second and First Millennia", A.E. Farkas *et al.* (eds.), *Monsters and demons in the ancient and medieval worlds: papers presented in honor of Edith Porada*, Mainz on Rhine 1987, pp. 37-52.