

Gilgāmeš beyond cuneiform. A new investigative methodology and literary history

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1. Introduction

For the first two decades of Gilgāmeš' rediscovery, his name was unknown,¹ although he was thought to correspond to the biblical Nimrod.² This all changed with a chance discovery made by Pinches in late 1890:³

EXIT GIŠTUBAR!

It has been found at last, the long wished-for reading of the name of the well-known hero and it is neither Gistubar, nor Gisdubar, nor Gisdubarra, nor Izdubar, nor finally, Namrašit, but

GILGAMEŠ.

Pinches had stumbled across this reading in a tablet written by an anonymous 7th-century BC medical student probably from Sippar (Tall Abū Ḥabba, Iraq): In a commentary to a treatise entitled *ana antašubbû nasāḫi u* [*pašāri*] 'in order to remove and eradicate epilepsy',⁴ the student had furnished the following gloss (CT 41, 43 o. 4):

^dGIŠ.GÍN.MAŠ | ^d*gi-il-ga-'meš'*

Remarkably, some 135 years after Pinches' discovery, this is still the only purely syllabic writing of Gilgāmeš' name presently attested for the first millennium BC; without it, the precise reading of the Mesopotamian hero's name would still cause debate. Its identification in AD 1890 heralded a new era in the comparative study of ancient literature: Gilgāmeš' name had been hiding in plain view in a story within the early 3rd-century AD author Claudius Aelianus' *De natura animalium* describing an obscure Babylonian king *Gilgamos* (Γίλγαμος) birth and subsequent rescue by an eagle. Nimrod was set aside, and this figure was instead swiftly compared to the Akkadian king Šarru(m)-kīn (ascribed an equally miraculous fate as an

¹ This study has its origins in two protracted confinements in early 2021 during the present author's ostensible travel stipend furnished by the German Archaeological Institute—one in Heidelberg in a room kindly supplied by Thomas Götz, and another in İzmir, Turkey, as a guest of Süleyman Çınar, both of whom are to be thanked. In the interdisciplinary (digital) atmosphere of the Institute for the History of Ancient Civilisations at the North-East Normal University, Changchun, China, the present author's theses were permitted to mature between late 2021 and early 2023, during which time he presented his preliminary findings at various conferences. During a visiting fellowship at the University Münster Excellence Cluster Religion and Politics between October 2023 and March 2024 with the topic 'Priesterliche und profane Königskritik in der hellenistisch-babylonischen Literatur', the present author was then able to draft the present study, a heavily revised version of which was finally completed within the framework of the project "Governance in Babylon – Negotiating the Rule of Three Empires" (2021–2026, University of Münster) funded by the European Research Council within the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement no. 101001619) under principal investigator Kristin Kleber. The present author is grateful to Sven Günther, Takayoshi Oshima, two anonymous reviewers from JAC, and not least Nicolaas Verhelst, Yoram Cohen, and Hartwig Bouillon for reading this article in various incarnations.

² "These tablets record primarily the adventures of a hero whose name I have provisionally called Izdubar. Izdubar is, however, nothing more than a makeshift name, and I am of opinion that this hero is the same as the Nimrod of the Bible" (Smith 1875, 166).

³ Pinches 1890.

⁴ The precise medical treatise discussed is not preserved, but an earlier exemplar from Aššur (BAM 311) bears close similarities.

infant),⁵ the legendary Mesopotamian king Etana (who rode an eagle to heaven),⁶ or the Greek hero Perseus.⁷ More generally, the identification of the indisputable survival of Gilgāmeš' name within a Greek-language source initiated a protracted conversation between the nascent field of Assyriology and the Classics over literary influence which has intensified in the past decades.⁸

This early discovery notwithstanding, the means by which Gilgāmeš reached Classical tradition have remained obscure, and progress since in cataloguing further transmissions slow. While his noting in a list of ancient kings compiled by the Syriac-language author Tādūrūs Bār Kōnay in the 8th or 9th centuries AD did little to advance knowledge of his existence beyond cuneiform,⁹ identification of both Gilgāmeš and his foe Humbaba in AD 1975 within fragments of the 'Book of Giants' discovered at Qumrān, Israel,¹⁰ has proven more useful. This pivot towards Enochic literature has since yielded Gilgāmeš' possible cameo as a demon in an incantation preserved in the the *Kitāb ar-Raḥma* generally attributed to the 15th-century AD scholar Ġalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī.¹¹ These four attestations (Aelianus, Bār Kōnay, Qumrān, as-Suyūṭī) remain the only literary transmissions of Gilgāmeš beyond cuneiform for which there is general scholarly consensus, and suggest a very limited reception outside of traditional Mesopotamian scribal culture.¹²

This paucity of accepted attestations is all the more remarkable as the Gilgāmeš epic continued to be copied as late as the Parthian period, and that Aramaic had become the vernacular of the Neo-Assyrian empire by the late 8th century BC at the latest, presenting centuries of opportunity for bilingual scribes to transmit his epic into Aramaic or Greek.¹³ Indeed, native speakers of Aramaic were demonstrably copying out the Standard Babylonian recension of the epic (*Ša nagba īmuru*) in cuneiform by the 7th century BC.¹⁴ In turn, at the close of the first millennium (cuneiform culture's terminal centuries), Babylonian scholars transcribed not only lexical lists, but also incantations and similar literature into Greek letters (the so-called Graeco-Babyloniaca).¹⁵ To this might be added a profusion of Late Babylonian literary compositions attested during the latter half of the first millennium, suggesting a lively literary culture in Babylonia.¹⁶

Certainly, the Early Iron-age literary corpora of alphabetic West Semitic languages (save the Old Testament) are all but lost, leading some to entertain notion of a translation of the Gilgāmeš epic into these languages,¹⁷ but the dearth of Classical attestations for this legendary king of Uruk remain an impediment.¹⁸ For this reason, some scholars of ancient literature have instead investigated similarities in narratives, characters, or motifs between the Gilgāmeš epic and later compositions within other literatures, whether Homeric,¹⁹

⁵ Sayce 1890.

⁶ Harper 1891.

⁷ Oppert 1891.

⁸ See esp. Haubold 2013.

⁹ Jacobsen 1939, 89, fn. 127.

¹⁰ Milik 1976, 313.

¹¹ Schwartz 2002.

¹² See the surveys by Tigay (1982, 251–255) and George (2003, 54–70, 89).

¹³ On bilingualism in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, see recently Radner 2021. The present author (Edmonds 2023) has identified evidence of the use of Aramaic within the Neo-Assyrian administration as early as the 890's BC.

¹⁴ MS P contains a mistake which could only have been made by a native speaker of Aramaic (George 2003, 802–803): in SB I, 259, EN-*ša bēlīša* "her lord" is written in place of the correct DUMU-*ša mārīša* "her son"—a confusion between Aramaic *mārē* "lord" and Akkadian *māru* is the only solution.

¹⁵ For the Graeco-Babyloniaca, see recently Lang 2021; 2023.

¹⁶ This corpus has been dubbed 'Late Babylonian Priestly Literature' (Jursa/Debourse 2017; Debourse/Jursa 2019; Jursa/Debourse 2020). Along with the shift in Babylonia's political constellations, the influence of Aramaic or perhaps even Greek literature upon these late compositions could be supposed, as is identifiable for the Na'id-Šīḥu 'epic' (Edmonds 2019, 344).

¹⁷ Most recently Helle 2021, 234. The newest scepticism thereof is voiced by van de Mieroop (2023, 168).

¹⁸ Considering the Greek-language Aisōpos-romance's wholesale borrowing of content from the 'Aḥīqar novel, immediately recognisable episodes of the Gilgāmeš epic would be expected, should an Aramaic translation of the epic have been proliferated.

¹⁹ See esp. West 1997; Abusch 2001; Clarke 2019.

Arabic,²⁰ or Indian,²¹ as a means of breaking this deadlock. However, such research has proven fraught on account of its subjective standards of proof.²²

In this study, the present author reviews both the broadly accepted extra-cuneiform attestations of the figure of Gilgāmeš (Aelianus, Bār Kōnay, Qumrān, as-Suyūṭī), and two suggested transmissions which have not yet been seriously studied (Flavius Josephus, Babylonian Talmūd), before proposing a novel additional transmission: the survival of a Gilgāmeš-like Babylonian king Garmos within a strand of Greek literature. In doing so, he articulates a methodology for tracing the transmission of literary figures from cuneiform into other literary cultures, as will now be presented.

2. A methodology for tracing extra-cuneiform literary transmission

The identification of textual transmission between the cuneiform literary corpus and other corpora presents a host of unique factors—it necessitated not only a change of language, but also script, medium, and attendant scribal culture; at once, only very limited extra-cuneiform transmission gains in plausibility.²³ Recourse is hence made to orality, but this presupposes oft-unevidenced complementarities between ancient written and spoken literary culture(s).

Prevalent have proven ‘top-down’ modes of postulating and investigating literary transmission between cuneiform and other literary corpora, which begin from the premise that such exchanges must have occurred, and work backwards to identify supporting evidence.²⁴ Nonetheless, the caveats listed already suggest that such approaches offer only limited insights.²⁵ Indeed, the foundations of such models are frequently programmatic,²⁶ seeking to dissolve or shift disciplinary boundaries, and thus predisposed to the identification of correlates between the literatures of compared cultures; recourse is often made to theoretical models to justify this approach. The selection of compared sources is usually of each culture’s most prominent and prestigious works (to modern scholars), and the comparison initially positivistic, with criticism first presented following the initial analysis.²⁷ It is usually only once a transmission is dubbed convincing that the consideration of its transmission is considered; the absence of a plausible route is often resolved through appeals to lost intermediary texts.²⁸ Certainly, there has been a movement towards more stringent methodologies,²⁹ and a narrowing of comparisons to similar genres³⁰ among followers of this approach, but the fundamental issue of falsifiability remains. As a result, ‘comparativist’ studies now examine these texts ‘at a distance’ from one another, so as to enable ancient intercultural discourse without

²⁰ Dalley 1991a; 1991b; 1994.

²¹ Panaino 2001; Abusch/West 2014; Muthukumaran 2024.

²² See, for example, the criticisms by Matijević 2018.

²³ Compare the investigation of Mesopotamian wisdom literature’s transmission outside of cuneiform by Cohen (2024).

²⁴ The initial assertion is generally grounded in an appeal to either a highly interconnected or even ‘globalised’ world necessitating such transmission, or the alleged volume or decisiveness of connections between individual literary compositions.

²⁵ A recent summary of such approaches is presented by Davies 2023.

²⁶ Haubold (2014, 28) writes explicitly of the conflict between scholars’ “philological commitment to Greek literature and their political commitment to opening up the canon of western literature”.

²⁷ A classic example is that of Gilgāmeš and Achilles, who ostensibly display a gamut of similarities such as their martial prowess, grief over the loss of a bosom companion, and rumination over immortality (e.g. Clarke 2019). Yet, these begin to unravel when the arresting differences are also noted (see George 2003, 55–57).

²⁸ Compare West’s (1997, 629) reconstruction of a ‘hotline’ transmission: “Here, then, is one way in which a line of communication might be imagined linking the *Iliad* poet to Nineveh through a single intermediary. An alternative approach to the problem is to think in terms of an Assyrian poet ‘defecting’ to the West, becoming Hellenized in the course of a few years, and turning into a Greek poet. We might picture him as a *nāru* with a scribal education, a disaffected man, planted against his will in one of the western border settlements, perhaps as an overseer, slipping down to the harbour one day and begging a passage on a ship sailing for Cyprus.”

²⁹ See Tigay 1993; Bernabé 1995; Henkelman 2006; Lardinois 2018.

³⁰ Note the approach employed by Metcalf 2015.

tackling the issue of transmission.³¹ While interesting, such an approach is nonetheless unfalsifiable, and is easily misunderstood for (or serves unintentionally to bolster) positivistic transmission history.

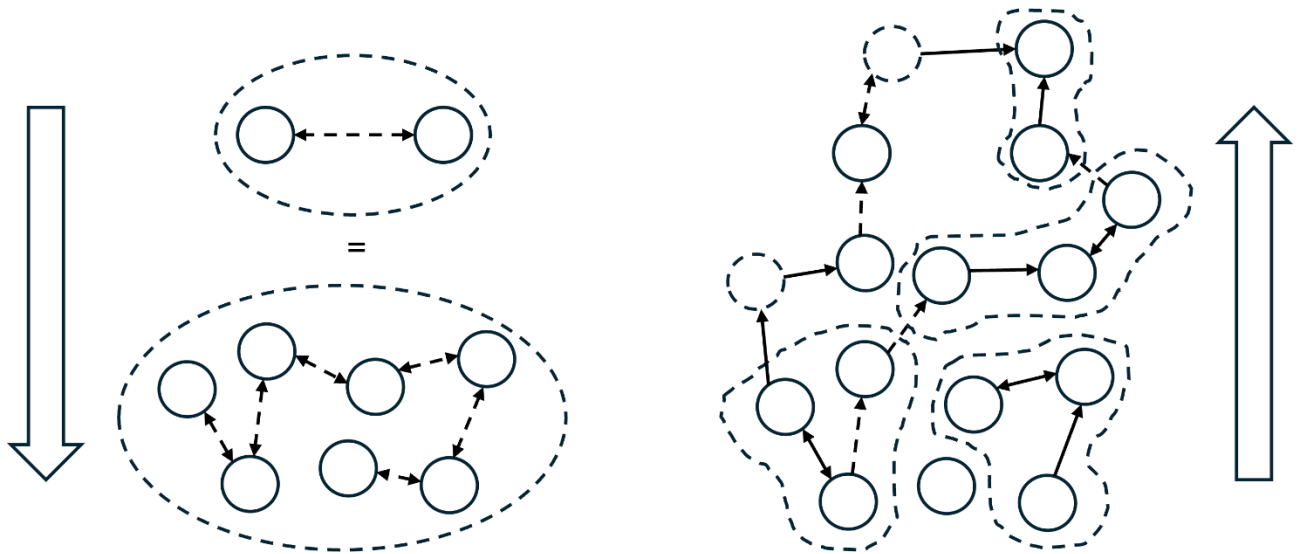


Figure 1. Top-down (left) and bottom-up (right) articulations of literary transmission

The present author should like instead to articulate an alternate, ‘bottom-up’ methodology, which has its roots in (often unstated) philological research.³² This is based upon close reading, literary microhistory, and ‘forensic’ philological work, seeking first to establish plausible routes of transmission on a modest scale before assessing a prospective attestation. Its method involves the patient collection of epigraphical and philological data so as to identify transmission from distinctive philological traces and ‘signatures’ within a text, and then the application of this acquired *instrumentarium* upon further examples, in order to construct networks of literary interconnection wherein each link is falsifiable, and hence open to scholarly criticism. This method’s ultimate goal is the construction of literary history spanning cuneiform and other literary cultures ‘from the ground up’, and the articulation of literary and cultural theories based upon this information which can influence wider scholarly discourse. In a practical sense, this involves a series of steps.

1. exploration

2. hypothesis

3. evaluation

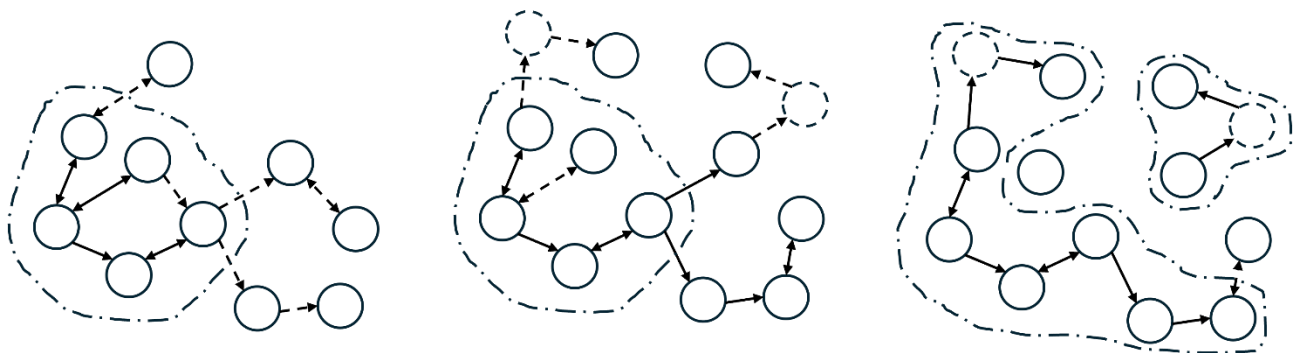


Figure 2. Cycles of articulation in writing transmission histories

³¹ e.g. Haubold 2013.

³² Compare George’s (2003, 70) remarks: “In any reconstruction of how the ancient corpus of Babylonian literature could inform the literary creativity of other civilisations it is necessary (a) to allow for the existence of common narrative patterns and motifs and (b) to postulate intermediate landing stages in Aramaic, Phoenician, Hellenistic Greek, and probably other languages. It is therefore unfortunate that we know almost nothing of literature in the Levant in the period immediately after the Late Bronze Age, and so little of Aramaic literature in southern Mesopotamia between the era of cuneiform scholarship and the early Arabic writers.”

The first, exploratory step establishes an initial ‘lay of the land’ by surveying previous literature, identifying interrelations for which a scholarly consensus exists, articulating from these nodes and the relationships between them, identifying thereby the technical, cultural, and social parameters, media, and motivations appendant to them. Here, establishing the granulation of the analysis is vital—the nodes could be entire traditions, discrete literary works, individual manuscripts, or even narrative episodes; which level of analysis is chosen will vary between cases, and multiple attempts may be required before the appropriate level for comparison is established. The nature of influence represented by connections is modelled (i.e. one-way, two-way, certain, probable). As much information as possible is collected for each node and connection, and evidence which cannot be falsified is excluded. These will serve as the foundations for ‘potted’ literary histories in the subsequent stages. So as to prevent a ‘steeplechase’ from one source to another, ‘islands’ of at least ostensibly secure transmission are already demarcated, each of which is viable as a contingent broader literary history without any other, thus limiting the likelihood of arguments being stacked into a ‘house of cards’.³³ Further nodes and connections beyond the secure ‘islands’ are also ideally selected, to render the model more dynamic, with examples with the highest likelihood of having received or transmitted content between languages, scripts, cultures, or geographical areas being privileged.³⁴

In the second, hypothesis stage, the initial findings of the first step are closely scrutinised and any alternative reconstructions presented. This may involve excluding a node from the ‘island’ of secure transmission, extrapolating novel intermediary nodes, or adding, removing, or altering the nature of connections. This is achieved through the writing of preliminary literary microhistories using the material collected in the first stage; here, a thick ‘thick description’ approach particularly assessing the *Sitz im Leben*, materiality of texts, and interplay of orality is integrated as far as is possible. In establishing the connections, the focus is again on falsifiability, such as the presence of a literary figure in the investigated text with a name presenting a close assonance or graphical similarity with that of a figure within a known transmission, tell-tale graphic or phonological transformations of proper names, and close reading to reveal potential misunderstandings resulting from translation or botched transmission. Any necessary textual or oral intermediaries are identified. Each necessary stage of a transmission (change of language, change of script, change of function) is patiently imagined, and the context of each transmission envisaged.

The final, evaluation stage stringently assesses the suggested hypotheses with a counterfactual method, and remodels the network presented until it reflects the available information and a minimum of necessary nodes and connections is achieved. ‘Islands’ may become more loosely connected ‘archipelagos’, as previously firm connections are discarded. From this, the literary microhistories can be finalised, and larger histories of traditions (i.e. the islands) carefully contoured through contextualisation. The histories developed from the ‘islands’ should function as ‘building blocks’ for broader literary history, but each block should also present complete academic transparency and falsifiable contingency so that a swift rearticulation can occur when new evidence becomes available. Whenever such a recalibration becomes necessary, the entire three-stage process is simply repeated.

Importantly, the repetition of this analysis permits the identification of broader patterns within the data, and the refinement of the methodology itself, enabling self-criticism such as the recalibration of the appropriate levels of granulation for future investigation, or the better identification of the criteria for and dynamics of transmission, all of this occurring in a self-optimising feedback loop.

The ensuing study is preliminary, and performed entirely ‘manually’, but with the development of knowledge graphs within the broader field of artificial intelligence, this could be performed in a semi-automated capacity. In light of the present format

³³ Compare West (2018, 278): “So there is my house of cards. Blow it down who will. It is a frail structure, and I see no way of making it stronger. But I hope it may be found attractive enough to be let stand for the moment.”

³⁴ Naturally, ‘library texts’ and high literature are less likely to have furnished transmissions than ‘working texts’ such as scientific and medical treatises, liturgical texts, or school exercises, all of which had specific functions.

3. Gilgāmeš within cuneiform

Gilgāmeš' journey through cuneiform tradition is no less than spectacular; in summarising here chronologically and spatially this career, the transmission of various recensions of his epic must necessarily serve as the backbone. Nonetheless, the literary figure of Gilgāmeš must also have been shaped by his parallel existence as an important minor deity whose veneration encompassed both mortuary cult and sporting activity.³⁵ The mass of visual sources which must also have informed Gilgāmeš-tradition can only be cursorily examined within this study.³⁶

Already attested as a divinised king during Mesopotamia's Early Dynastic period,³⁷ Gilgāmeš' hold upon the Mesopotamian cultural consciousness during the third millennium BC is demonstrated by his curious conflation with Šarru(m)-kīn, the wide-ranging founder of the subsequent Akkadian kingdom.³⁸ It is presently impossible to tell as to whether the shift of the mythical eren-forest from the Zagros in the east to the Levant in the west presaged Šarru(m)-kīn's own forestry there or inspired it.³⁹ Later literary traditions describe Šarru(m)-kīn's troops marching through darkness as if at world's end and venturing to the land of one *Utā-rapaštim*, evidently the later Utā-napištim.⁴⁰ The geographical imagination of the Sumerian Gilgāmeš-cycle which had coalesced by the era of the Third Dynasty of Ur at the latest is considerably narrower (the ogre Humbaba's forest in the Zagros),⁴¹ but royal emulation just as fervent, with the Neo-Sumerian ruler Šulgi consciously emulating his divine 'brother'.⁴²

The Old Babylonian period witnesses the first definite sighting of an epic Gilgāmeš-composition, the rousing *Šūtur eli šarrī* 'Surpassing all kings', the distribution of which is presently restricted to Babylonia. As a part of the scribal curriculum, various Middle Babylonian recensions of *Šūtur eli šarrī* would travel far afield, being read at Hattuša (Boğazköy, Turkey), Ugarit (Ra's Šamrā, Syria), Iṣmar (Tall Maskana Qadīma, Syria), and Magidu (Tēl Mēgiddō/Tall Mutasallim, Israel). Hurrian and Hittite Gilgāmeš-compositions as preserved at Boğazköy would also emerge.⁴³

In turn, from the end of the Late Bronze age onwards, a more pessimistic Standard Babylonian recension of the epic entitled *Ša nagba īmuru* 'He who saw the deep' emerged, and slowly assumed canonicity.⁴⁴ It was the tablets of this composition which were kept in the 'library' of Aššur-bāni-apli at Ninūa (Naynawā, Iraq), and its protagonist whom late Neo-Assyrian kings sought to emulate. Late Babylonian editions of *Ša nagba īmuru* point to its continued importance within the scribal curriculum during the Persian and Hellenistic eras even as literary tastes profoundly shifted. The latest-known dated manuscript of *Ša nagba īmuru* was copied in Uruk (Warka, Iraq) in 130 BC.⁴⁵

³⁵ For Gilgāmeš' sporting connection, see Rollinger 2006. For his cultic functions, see esp. George 2003, 119–137.

³⁶ See the studies within Steytmans 2010b.

³⁷ Most famous is a votive mace head to this legendary king (Krebern timer 1994). Note Zand's (2020, 5–13) interesting identification in IAS 282 of a ruler (possibly of Uruk) called en.meš who campaigns into the mountains in a rather Gilgāmeš-like manner.

³⁸ Note, for example, the allusions to Gilgāmeš tradition in the Šarru(m)-kīn-composition from Kaneš (Alster/Oshima 2007, 4). Buccellati (2019) has argued that an Akkadian Gilgāmeš epic already existed during this period, but the scant evidence is ambiguous.

³⁹ See Klein/Abraham 2000 and more generally Konstantopoulos 2021, 4–17.

⁴⁰ For Šarru(m)-kīn's march through darkness, which recalls both Gilgāmeš' race against light, and the journey to the end of the world within the much later *Alexander Romance* (Henkelman 2010), see MesCiv 7 iv 9' – 11'. Utā-rapaštim's identity with Utā-napištim is neatly demonstrated by *Uttur-napušti* in the Ugarit Gilgāmeš-recension, which is a confused intermediate form (George 2007c, 238).

⁴¹ See the recent summary of the Sumerian cycle by Gadotti 2023.

⁴² See esp. Klein 1976 and most recently Johnson 2021.

⁴³ See the recent editions by Beckman 2019.

⁴⁴ George 2003, 28–33. For the shift in tone, see esp. Jacobsen 1990.

⁴⁵ The latest non-astronomical cuneiform text can presently be dated to 22 BC (Jiménez/Mitto 2024). On the gradual end of cuneiform scholarship, see generally Geller 1997.

In light of this long history of cuneiform transmission, it is remarkable that Gilgāmeš’ name—best rendered in epic English as ‘Childe Gilga’⁴⁶—seems to have undergone little substantial change in pronunciation for more than two millennia,⁴⁷ although its manner of writing did shift. An early (pseudo-)Sumerian writing ^dgiš_{ilx}(BÍL)-ga-mes (usually abbreviated in *Šūtur eli šarri* to ^dGIŠ) gradually gave way to the Middle Babylonian ^dGIŠ.GÍN.MAŠ (or ^dGIŠ-gím-maš),⁴⁸ which was then ubiquitous throughout the cuneiform Near East until the end of this script’s use,⁴⁹ implying that a form *Gilgāmeš* (perhaps pronounced closer to *Gilgimmaš*) was usual.

Admittedly, some minor variants are identifiable. Firstly, an alternate Middle Babylonian pronunciation *Gišgāmaš* or *Gišgimmaš* (or *Kiškāmaš* and *Kiškimmaš*) known from Īmar and perhaps southern Mesopotamia.⁵⁰ Moreover, some curious learned writings of the late second and first millennium BC such as ^dGIŠ.KAL.TUK, KAL.GA.IMIN, ^dGAL.SAG.[ME]S?, or ^drGÀL.SAG’.MES,⁵¹ suggest a pronunciation *Galgāmeš*, which bears a striking resemblance to the Hurrian form *Galgamiš* and an Akkadian form ^dgal-ga-meš from Ugarit. Until more syllabic writings are identified, the shibboleths which might have belied differing (perhaps concurrent) pronunciations of this name remain obscure. It certainly remains striking that a 7th-century BC medical student in Babylonia needed the sign combination ^dGIŠ.GÍN.MAŠ glossed; it is conceivable that a ‘learned’ and ‘vulgar’ pronunciation of the name coexisted.

Building upon this ‘matrix’ of cuneiform attestations, the accepted and proposed extra-cuneiform transmissions might now be considered (see Tab. 1).

Table 1. Prospective extra-cuneiform Gilgāmeš-attestations considered in this study

Source	Place of composition	Date of composition	Gilgāmeš attestation
‘Book of Giants’	(Eastern?) Jewish community	3 rd century–161 BC	<i>glgmys/š</i>
Flavius Josephus <i>Antiquae Judaicae</i>	Rome	AD 94	<i>Golgomēs</i>
Iamblichos <i>Babyloniaca</i>	Syria?	2 nd century AD	<i>Garmos</i>
Claudius Aelianus <i>De natura animalium</i>	Rome	Early 3 rd century AD	<i>Gilgamos</i>
Babylonian Talmūd	Southern Mesopotamia	3 rd –6 th century AD	<i>gwlm̄yš</i>
Bār Kōnay <i>Ktābhā d-’eskōlyōn</i>	Northern Mesopotamia	8 th –9 th century AD	<i>gmygmws</i> , <i>gmygws/gmngws</i> , and <i>gnmgws/glmngws</i>
Ġalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī, <i>Kitāb ar-Rahma</i>	Egypt	15 th century AD	<i>ḡlḡmw/ys</i>

⁴⁶ Gilgāmeš’ name can be neatly subdivided into two elements, /gilga/ and /mes/. Despite the bewildering combinations and variations of GIŠ, NE, PAP, and GA forming the earliest writings of the first part of this name, it now seems that these would nonetheless all have been rendered as /gilga/ in line with later syllabic writings (Rubio 2012; George/al-Rawi 2019, 132; criticism: Keetman 2014; Worthington 2020, 24, fn. 80). Compared to the profusion of writings for the first element, Gilgāmeš’ second element MES remains more or less stable throughout history, albeit later being rendered syllabically as -mi-iš and pseudologographically as MAŠ (George 2003, 82). That Gilgāmeš’ appears in the early second millennium in an abbreviated form (e.g. *ge-el-ga* or ^dGIŠ) without this second element MES (the meaning of which is ‘hero’ or ‘youth’ in Sumerian) suggests to the present author that this it was originally an epithet (i.e. ‘Gilga the Youth’) akin to Byron’s ‘Childe Harold’ (or Browning’s ‘Childe Roland’)

⁴⁷ See George’s (2003, 71–90) foundational survey.

⁴⁸ In the Old Babylonian epic, Gilgāmeš’ name is abbreviated to ^dGIŠ which may suggest that it was more generally to be read ^dGIŠ^{giš_{ilx}-ga}-mes, and that ^dGIŠ stood for his short form *Gilga*.

⁴⁹ Some ‘holdouts’ for the writing ^dgiš_{ilx}(BÍL)-ga-mes can be attested, most prominently at 12th century Ugarit (George 2007c)

⁵⁰ This confusion over the initial GIŠ may well explain the curious forms ^mGÍN.MAŠ from Boğazköy and ^mGIM.MAŠ from Tēl Mēgiddō, for which Beckman (2019, 11–12) has no answer. Īmar has also yielded an interesting Akkadian form *ki-il-ga-mes*.

⁵¹ See George (2003, 86–88), and Nurullin’s (2012) arguments for a rendering *Galgāmeš*.

4. Gilgāmeš beyond cuneiform. A study of the attestations

4.1 Gilgames in Claudius Aelianus' *De natura animalium* (Rome, 3rd century AD)

The aforementioned Babylonian king *Gilgames* whose name is so arrestingly assonant with that of Gilgāmeš is mentioned in the following anecdote in Claudius Aelianus' *De natura animalium* (12.21):⁵²

Ἴδιον δὲ τῶν ζώων καὶ ἡ φιланθρωπία. αἰετὸς γοῦν ἔθρεψε βρέφος. καὶ εἰπεῖν τὸν πάντα λόγον ἐθέλω, ὥς ἀνγένετο μάρτυς ὧν προεθέμην. Βαβυλωνίων βασιλεύοντος (Σ)ευηχόρου Χαλδαῖοι λέγουσι τὸν γενόμενον ἐκτῆς ἐκείνου θυγατρὸς τὴν βασιλείαν ἀφαιρήσεσθαι τὸν πᾶππον. καὶ Χαλδαίων μὲν ἦν τὸ εἰρημένον θέσπισμα. τοῦτο ἐκεῖνος πέφρικε, καὶ ἵνα εἶπω τι καὶ ὑποπαίσας, Ἀκρίσιος γίνεται ἐστὴν παῖδα· ἐφρούρει γὰρ πικρότατα. λάθρα δὲ ἡ παῖς (ἡ γὰρ τοῦ Βαβυλωνίου σοφώτερον τὸ χρεών) τίκει ὑποπλησθεῖσα ἐκ τινος ἀνδρὸς ἀφανοῦς. τοῦτον οὐνοὶ φυλάσσοντες δέει τοῦ βασιλέως ἔρριψαν ἐκτῆς ἀκροπόλεως· ἡ γὰρ ἐνταῦθα ἀφειργμένη ἢ προειρημένη. οὐκοῦν ὁ αἰετὸς τὴν ἔτι τοῦ παιδὸς καταφορὰν ὀξύτατα ἰδὼν, πρὶν ἢ τῇ γῇ προσαραθῆναι τὸ βρέφος, ὑπῆλθεν αὐτὸ καὶ τὰ νῶτα ὑπέβαλε, καὶ κομίζει ἐκ κῆπὸν τινα, καὶ τίθησι πεφεισμένως εὖ μάλα. ὁ τοίνυν τοῦ χώρου μελεδωνὸς καλὸν παιδίον θεασάμενος ἐρᾷ αὐτοῦ καὶ τρέφει· καὶ καλεῖται Γίλγαμος, καὶ βασιλεύει Βαβυλωνίων.

And even the love for human beings is a characteristic of animals. An eagle, at any rate, raised an infant. And I wish to tell the whole story, as it would be a witness of what I proposed. When (S)euēchoros was king of the Babylonians, the Chaldaioi said that the one born from that man's daughter would take the kingdom away from his grandfather. Now, that which had been uttered by the Chaldaioi was a prophecy. He shuddered at this, and so that I might speak even a little jokingly, he becomes an Akrisios towards his daughter, for he began to keep watch over her most relentlessly. But in secret the young woman (for fate was cleverer than the Babylonian) gives birth, having become pregnant by an unseen man. This [baby] therefore the guards, in fear of the king, threw from the acropolis, for here the aforementioned young woman had been detained. Then indeed the eagle, seeing most keenly the child's descent in midair, before the infant was dashed against the ground, swooped underneath it and threw its back beneath it, and it carries it to a garden, and sets it down most mercifully. Thereupon, the guardian of the place, seeing the beautiful little child, falls in love with it and raises it. And he is called Gilgames, and he becomes king of the Babylonians. But if this seems like a myth to anyone, I concur, making vigorous trial of it, in pronouncing this verdict.⁵³ Achaimenēs, however, the Persian from whom also descends the nobility of the Persians, I hear that he was the nursling of an eagle.

Aelianus' work discusses the attributes and behaviours of animals, and this is only a passing anecdote therein. Very curiously, he introduces the story as a case of an eagle raising or nursing (ἔθρεψε) an infant, although the eagle's role in the subsequent story is as a momentary rescuer, and the child-rearing is left to a gardener—the story of Achaimenēs (left by him untold) would seem a better fit to this contention. The sense is thus gained that this story was shoehorned into his work, and was a pre-existing, discrete story, rather than Aelianus' own confection. Nonetheless, any demonstrable chain of transmission for this story from a Classical author (Berōssos, Ktésias, or other) to Aelianus is presently lacking.⁵⁴ While he never known to have left Italy, Aelianus' residence in Rome would have presented him with a vast array of possible sources

⁵² Edition and translation after Smith 2020, 330.

⁵³ Henkelman (2006, 820) here inserts a negation, interpreting Aelianus' verdict as positive, which Smith (2020, 335–337) argues against. This point does not affect the present arguments.

⁵⁴ Berōssos has been conventionally posited as Aelianus' source (Schnabel 1923, 171; Jacobsen 1939, 87; Hallo 1963, 52; Burstein 1978, 29–30; Wilcke 1989, 562–563), but Henkelman (2006, 821–825) has argued instead for Ktésias. There is no firm evidence as of yet for either author having featured this story. Claudius Aelianus seems rather derisive of this story within his own narrative, which thus may very well bespeak an oral tradition, as imagined by George (2007a, 457–458).

(written or oral) from which to have plucked his Gilgames-story. Aelianus himself references Akrisios and the Perseus myth,⁵⁵ suggesting its status as a fable.

To add to these difficulties, no Gilgāmeš-birth narrative akin to that regaled by Aelianus has been identified within cuneiform literature.⁵⁶ The result is an ‘eastern’ fable in Greek harbouring a protagonist whose name displays undoubted congruence with a famous Mesopotamian literary figure, but otherwise bearing scarce resemblance to his known story.

Nevertheless, the story has been scrutinised for diagnostic content with which it might be culturally and literarily contextualised, as will also now be assailed. Firstly, Gilgames’ siring by an “invisible man” (ἐκ τινοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἀφανοῦς) has been suggested to reflect the tradition within the Sumerian King List that Gilgāmeš was fathered by a *lillû*-demon,⁵⁷ a notion potentially supported by an equation of king (S)euēchoros ([Σ]ευηχόρος) with Enme(r)kar, Gilgāmeš’ grandfather in the same list.⁵⁸ The difficulty with such a suggestion is the temporal distance between proposed attestations, the variety of origins (legitimate and otherwise) ascribed to Gilgāmeš, and the father’s archetypical absence in such narratives.⁵⁹

Another point of comparison has been the eagle. Striking in this regard is the depiction of a child clinging to an eagle on the famous 9th-century gold cup from Hasanlū;⁶⁰ the artistic inspiration and influences of this vessel’s decoration are disputed,⁶¹ but its lower register contains vignettes which can be plausibly connected with Gilgāmeš-tradition. Most obviously, two figures slay a Humbaba-like figure in a classic kneeling pose at the bottom left, a Gilgāmeš-like individual wearing a tunic of lion tails strides forth at the bottom right, and the same leonine-attired individual boxes a man couched in a mountain in the centre of the bottom register. That the eagle and rider are also part of this Gilgāmeš-esque complex seems likely, although all of these scenes need not be part of a single epic composition—a cycle (as in the Sumerian literary tradition) could also have informed this tableau. This is enough to assert that a story of aquiline infant rescue was a part of Gilgāmeš-tradition within the eastern Taurus and northern Zagros during the Early Iron age, but its origins must remain open.⁶² In pursuit of a model within cuneiform literature for this episode, scrutiny has fallen upon the king Etana’s heavenward ascent astride an eagle,⁶³ but the circumstances and purpose of this journey are wholly different. Tantalisingly, it is possible that the eagle later returns to abduct Etana’s son (perhaps even from a ziggurat) later in the story,⁶⁴ but the ascription and interpretation of the relevant fragments remains fraught, and the motivations for this reconstructed scene are alien to the Gilgames-birth narrative, in which the eagle is the rescuer.

Within Classical tradition, attention has been drawn to Zeus’ abduction of Ganymēdēs as an eagle, but this again is to entirely different ends,⁶⁵ as is Alexander’s journey heavenwards on a chair borne aloft by birds of prey.⁶⁶ Closer to Gilgames’ plunge is the casting of the child Astyanax/Skamandrios from Ilion’s walls,⁶⁷ but this is only one of many gruesome fates attested for this infant, and the eagle is absent.⁶⁸ Rather, the nearest

⁵⁵ See Oppert 1891; this has recently be highlighted once more by Smith (2020, esp. 341–342).

⁵⁶ Frayne’s (1999) speculative reconstruction of a Sumerian Gilgāmeš birth narrative has been generally dismissed (e.g. George 2003, 5–6. 100–101; Henkelman 2006, 831, fn. 55).

⁵⁷ Jacobsen 1939, 90–91, fn. 131.

⁵⁸ Henkelman (2006, 819) has noted that Seuēchoros’ name lacks its initial sigma in some manuscripts, and hence resembles other survivals of the name Enmerkar (see below).

⁵⁹ Greek ἀφανος could also be meant metaphorically to indicate an individual of social inconsequence.

⁶⁰ See Dalley 2022, 114.

⁶¹ Compare Porada 1959; Winter 1989; Robinson 2003.

⁶² Dalley (2022, 114) appeals to a reference within the Sumerian Gilgāmeš and Agga-composition, but acknowledges the difficulties associated with this.

⁶³ First proposed by Harper (1891). See recently Currie (2021, 133–134).

⁶⁴ See Kinnier Wilson 2007, 48–53.

⁶⁵ See West 1997, 478; Currie (2021, 132–133) is more sceptical.

⁶⁶ See recent discussion of this story by Konstantakos 2020.

⁶⁷ West 1997, 478.

⁶⁸ Note however, that there is a tradition already in the 5th century BC in which the child survives to found cities in the Troad or further afield (Smith 1981).

parallel to the Gilgames story in Classical tradition is the legend of the Messenian hero Aristomenēs' miraculous rescue by an eagle when flung by the Spartans into the crevasse of Kaiadas.⁶⁹ As in the Gilgames-narrative, the bird carefully positions itself beneath him as he falls in order to catch him;⁷⁰ while an adult warrior, Aristomenēs is cast into a site associated by Ploutarchos with (alleged) Spartan infant exposure,⁷¹ suggesting the folktale of the eagle's rescue of the child underpins this legend. Tellingly, his subsequent vulpine escape from the pit suggests the episode's origin in Near Eastern folk literature.⁷² In turn, children riding eagles build Lykurgos of Babylōn's tower in the sky in the Ἀῖῖα-inspired portion of the Aisōpos-romance, but this seems a fantastical refraction of the earlier trope at best.

Finally, the most popular comparandum for the Gilgames-story has been the so-called 'Birth legend of Šarru(m)-kīn', wherein the Akkadian ruler Šarru(m)-kīn's infant exposure and subsequent rescue is detailed.⁷³ Here, the similarity is not in the child's mishap, but rather its fostering by the water-drawer Aqqi. The promotion from gardener (or his son) to king is a consistent Near Eastern trope, from Šarru(m)-kīn to Enlil-bāni in cuneiform literature, and Belēteras to Abdalonymos in Classical historiography, and hardly diagnostic, but the name *Aqqi* does resemble that of the king Agga, Gilgāmeš' mentor and ultimate rival in the Sumerian cycle,⁷⁴ suggesting a deeper connection between these stories of Gilgāmeš and Šarru(m)-kīn. The composition itself is first millennium BC in date without known antecedents, and thus stands at the end of a tradition rather than its inception, presenting much leeway for earlier, alternate traditions.

This analysis points to a Near Eastern coinage for Aelianus' Gilgames-tale, but not necessarily a Mesopotamian origin; only the characters' names imply an ultimate cuneiform source, and hence their philological analysis is informative.

The name *Gilgames* evidences a remarkable similarity to the Standard Babylonian form *Gilgāmeš*, but it is evident that the final *-eš* has been replaced with a *-os*, this implying that the last element of *Gilgāmeš* name had been reinterpreted as a Greek nominative of the second declension.⁷⁵ Qumrān's Aramaic writing of Gilgāmeš' name as *glgmys/š* (compare Josephus' *Golgomēs*) is earlier,⁷⁶ and closer to its first millennium BC rendering, suggesting its anteriority. The shift from an earlier inflected ending *-ys/š/-ης* to a later *-ws/-ος* does not readily present a phonological solution, but is neatly explained by scribal misreading; in the Aramaic script of the period, the signs yod and waw are visually very similar, and an Aramaic form of the foreign name *glgmys* could easily have been mistaken for *glgmws* and rendered in Greek as *Gilgames*.⁷⁷ This would point at a genuine West Semitic textual source as having underlain this fable.⁷⁸

Such an interpretation is supported by the aforementioned proposed derivation of (S)euēchoros' name from *Enme(r)kar*; transmissions of Berōssos preserve similar forms, e.g. *Ewek'sios* (ἐκπυῖον), and a king ὡγρ

⁶⁹ Ogden 2004, 74.

⁷⁰ Pausanias 4.18.5: οἱ δὲ ἀποσεμνύνοντες τὰ κατ' αὐτὸν Ἀριστομένει φασὶν ἐμβληθέντι ἐς τὸν Κεάδαυ ὄρνιθα τὸν αἰτὸν ὑποπέτεσθαι καὶ ἀνέχειν ταῖς πτέρυξιν, ἐς ὃ κατήνεγκεν αὐτὸν ἐς τὸ πέρας οὔτε πηρωθέντα οὐδὲν τοῦ σώματος οὔτε τραῦμά τι λαβόντα. Translation (after Ogden 2004, 6–7): "Those inclined to make a good story out of the legend of Aristomenes tell that when he was thrown into the Kaiadas, a bird, specifically an eagle, flew beneath him and bore him up with its wings until it brought him to the bottom without him receiving any damage or wound to his body."

⁷¹ Ploutarchos *Lycurgus* 16.1–2.

⁷² The legend concludes with Aristomenēs' escape from the netherworld-like pit with the aid of a fox reminiscent, on the one hand, of an episode from Sindbād's fourth voyage (Ogden 2004, 211–215), and, on the other, of the fox's role as a psychopomp in Sumerian literature (Matuszak 2025).

⁷³ First proposed by Sayce (1890) and most recently championed by Metcalf (2025, 26–28).

⁷⁴ Curiously, the assonance between names *Agga* (Gilgāmeš' former mentor and later foe in the eponymous Sumerian composition) and *Aqqi* in the 'Birth legend of Šarru(m)-kīn' do not seem to have been investigated hitherto, although both occupy a similar role.

⁷⁵ Compare this to Tādūrūs Bār Kōnay's *gnmgws/glmgws* which probably originates in a form **glgmws* (Section 4.2).

⁷⁶ See Section 4.5. *Golgomēs* is presumably inflected in the Greek first declension.

⁷⁷ Cooley (2014, 73–74. 78), also noting that the writing of *-ws* in Aramaic onomastics for Greek *-ος* and Latin *-us* is commonplace.

⁷⁸ This explanation could also account for the fluctuation between *glgmys* and *glgmws* in the writing of as-Suyuṭī's demon (see Section 4.4); such a visual mistake is not possible between the equivalent Arabic letters.

appears as the eleventh ruler (ensconced between *gmygws/gmngws* and *gnmgws/glmgws*) in Bār Kōnay's king list.⁷⁹ Assuming that an Aramaic intermediate form *ʔwkr similarly underlay the name (S)euēchoros would explain this name;⁸⁰ while a cuneiform to Greek transcription following the logic of the Graeco-Babyloniaca could conceivably render *Enme(r)kar* as (S)euēchoros, this would not as readily convert *Gilgāmeš* into *Gilgamos*.

Hence, the following transmission history might be proposed. A fable of Gilgāmeš' miraculous rescue by an eagle was composed in Aramaic, drawing upon earlier northern Syrian tradition. This then entered Greek literature, perhaps in Syria or the Levant,⁸¹ and circulated in the eastern Mediterranean, where it informed Aristomenēs-tradition, before ultimately winging its way to Claudius Aelianus in a more or less fixed form.

4.2 *gmygmws*, *gmygws/gmngws*, and *gnmgws/glmgws* in Tādūrūs Bār Kōnay's *Kṭāḫā d-ʔeskōlyōn* (northern Mesopotamia, 9th century AD)

Yet another potential transmission is the appearance of one or two kings with Gilgāmeš-assonant names within a list of ancient monarchs contemporary with the biblical patriarchs presented in Tādūrūs Bār Kōnay's 9th-century AD Syriac didactic work *Kṭāḫā d-ʔeskōlyōn* (Mimrā II, 120).⁸² While detailed scholarly investigation of the origins of Bār Kōnay's lists of rulers remains a desideratum, a preliminary analysis can be presented here. In a recension of the text from ʔOrūmīye, Iran, the last of ten monarchs who reigned is given as one *gmygmws*,⁸³ while manuscripts of the same book from Seert, Turkey, list twelve rulers, the tenth of these being given as *gmygws* or *gmngws*, the eleventh as one ʔwgr, and the twelfth as *gnmgws* or *glmgws*.⁸⁴ The tautology of the 12-king Seert-list suggests that it is a development of the 10-king list from the ʔOrūmīye-recension. Indeed, ʔOrūmīye's *gmygmws* resembles Seert's tenth king *gmygws/gmngws* more closely than the twelfth *gnmgws/glmgws*, suggesting that the final two kings were appended to the list. A closer analysis of the list's contents in its two recensions is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Writings and interpretations of the kings listed in Bār Kōnay's *Kṭāḫā d-ʔeskōlyōn*

Order	ʔOrūmīye	Seert	Likely vocalisation	Identity, derivation, and comments
1	<i>nmrwd</i>	<i>Nmrwd</i>	<i>Nimrōd</i>	Biblical Nimrōd the hunter, progenitor of kingship and empire. Here dubbed <i>rēš gabbārē</i> 'chief of the heroes'
2	<i>ḥlbṭwr</i>	<i>ḥlbṭwr</i> var. <i>qlbṭwr</i>	<i>Ḥilbaṭōr</i>	Unclear. -ṭwr may reflect Greek -τωρ or Latin -tor, perhaps <i>Philopatōr</i> —thus with a progressive visual confusion of original initial <i>pē</i> (* <i>plbṭwr</i>) for <i>qōp</i> (<i>qlbṭwr</i>) and then finally <i>ḥēṭ</i> (<i>ḥlbṭwr</i>). If so, then the logical king would be Ptolemaios IV Philopatōr, antagonist of 3 Maccabees.
3	<i>šmgr</i>	<i>Šmgr</i>	<i>Šamgar</i>	Biblical Šamgar son of ʔĀnāt mentioned in Judges
4	ʔwl	ʔbyl var. ʔwl	ʔAbīl	Abbreviation of ʔĒwīl Mērōdaḳ (i.e. Amēl-Marduk, king of Bābili)?
5	ʔšlmwn	ʔšlmwn var. ʔšlymwn	ʔAšlēmōn	Perhaps biblical Šlomo (compare Syriac <i>Šlēmōn</i>), note similarity to ʔAḥlīmōn.

⁷⁹ Jacobsen 1939, 86–87, fn. 117.

⁸⁰ It might be suspected that an emendation to *Seuēchoros* was in analogy to the villainous Sinḫarīb (i.e. the Assyrian king Sîn-aḫḫē-erība) who often appeared as an antagonist in Aramaic literature (Holm 2014), and whose name could appear in comparatively bastardised variants such as *Sinnaces* (Richardson 2017).

⁸¹ Comparable is the northern Syrian cycle of stories from which Ovidus plucked his version of Pyramos and Thisbe, which relocated a local Cilician story to a fictionalised Babylōn.

⁸² First observed by Lewin (1905, 25), this possible survival has since been followed by Jacobsen (1939, 87), Reeves (1992, 121. 159), Tigay (1982, 252), and George (2003, 89).

⁸³ Lewin 1905,

⁸⁴ Scher

6	<i>ʔhlymwn</i>	<i>ʔhlymwn</i> var. <i>hlymwn</i>	<i>ʔAhlīmōn</i>	Perhaps the Zoroastrian daeva <i>ʔAhrīman</i> , with the name undergoing lambdism through a Book Pahlavi transcription (i.e. <i>*ʔhlmnʔ</i>)
7	<i>šymrwn</i>	<i>Šmyrwn</i>	<i>Šamīrōn</i>	Semiramis, legendary memory of Sammu-rāmat of Assyria. The present form witnesses a shift of final vowel and a commonplace interchange of final <i>m/n</i> (i.e. <i>Šamīrām</i> to <i>Šamīrōn</i>).
8	<i>slyr</i>	<i>Sltyr</i>	<i>Saltēr</i>	In analogy to <i>*plbṭwr</i> for <i>Philopatōr</i> , perhaps <i>-tyr</i> from <i>-τῆρ</i> , thus a bastardisation of <i>*swṭyr</i> for <i>Sōtēr</i> , epithet of Dēmētrios I from 1 Maccabees.
9	<i>ʔhlymwm</i>	<i>ʔhlymwm</i>	<i>ʔAhlīmōn</i>	“Another” (<i>hrēnā</i>) <i>ʔAhrīman</i> . The reduplication is unaccountable.
10	<i>gmygmws</i>	<i>gmygws</i> var. <i>gmngws</i>	<i>Gamīgamōs</i>	Apparent bastardisation of <i>Gilgāmeš</i> . Note assonance with the fabled ruler Ğamğam ‘skull’
11	-	<i>ʔwgr</i>	<i>ʔŌgar</i>	Late transmission of Sumerian <i>Enme(r)kar</i> by way of Berōssos?
12	-	<i>gnmgws</i> var. <i>glmgws</i>	<i>Gilmagōs</i>	Plausible transmission of the name <i>Gilgāmeš</i> , perhaps by way of Greek <i>Gilgamos</i> (<i>*glgmws</i>) with subsequent metathesis to <i>glmgws</i> in analogy to Aramaic <i>mgws</i> ‘magus’

Should the present author’s analysis hold, then most of the kings (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8) have a biblical origin, with a reduplicated Iranian *ʔAhlīmōn* (6, 9), the Classical *Šamīrōn* (7), and the final three kings (10, 11, 12) being of Mesopotamian origin. It is also noteworthy that 5, 6, 7, and 9 all share an ending *-ōn*, are composed of three syllables, display visually similar Syriac characters, and bear an assonance, which may suggest that a corruption of a single original name (perhaps *ʔhlymwn*) generated these different entries. The Iranian or Persianate influence is particularly interesting considering Bār Kōnay’s close acquaintance with Manichean doctrine,⁸⁵ which could provide a route of transmission for *Gilgāmeš*-tradition, considering that the ‘Book of Giants’ served as Manichean scripture. Persian interference would also explain the garbled forms *gnmgws* and *glmgws*, as a metathesis of **glgmws* (akin to Aelianus’ *Gilgamos*) would produce *gl mgws*, i.e. ‘Gil/Gal the Magus’.⁸⁶ In turn, the form *gmygmws* (perhaps *Gamīgamōs*) reminds of the character Ğumğuma ‘skull’ (Ottoman Turkish: *Cümcüme Sultan*) in Islamic legend.⁸⁷ The earliest version of this story has Saint Makarios interrogating a skull in the desert, which confesses to have belonged to a pagan high priest now in limbo.⁸⁸ Early Islamic versions replace Makarios with Christ, and have the skull resurrected;⁸⁹ subsequent versions frame the skull’s owner as a great ancient king unable to overcome his mortality, introducing a *Gilgāmeš*-esque *vanitas*-motif, most elaborately in the Yazīdī oral version surviving today.⁹⁰

Hence, the analysis suggests a list stitched together from the names of rulers both ancient and Hellenistic within and without the Bible, some of which were reduplicated through scribal error (*ʔAšlēmōn*, *ʔAhlīmōn*, *Šamīrōn*, *ʔAhlīmōn*). A longer version of the list sought to include tautologously kings from another source (*ʔŌgar*, *Gilmagōs*). An *interpretatio Iranica* is suggested by the garbling of many names. The precise dynamics of the list’s compilation and subsequent development require further articulation against the backdrop of broader patterns within Syriac historiography. Nonetheless, the claim that a king *Gilgāmeš* has survived in garbled form within the *Kṭābhā d-ʔeskōlyōn* can be upheld.

⁸⁵ See, for example, Reeves 1992, 189–198.

⁸⁶ Compare Bār Kōnay’s references in his work to Zardošt (i.e. Zarathustra) as *zrdwšt mgwsʔ*.

⁸⁷ See

⁸⁸ See Ward 1975, 115–116.

⁸⁹ e.g. Weil 1845, 286–291.

⁹⁰ See Kreyenbroek, Rashow 2005, 350–354.

4.3 *glgmys/š* (and *hwbbs/š*) in the ‘Book of Giants’ (Qumrān, 3rd-2nd centuries BC)

Enjoying considerable popularity in Antiquity, the ‘Book of Giants’ recounts the story of the sins and judgement of antediluvian giants prior to the impending Deluge, inspiring the Book of Jubilees and enduring as an item of Manichean scripture.⁹¹ Within the fragments of this text discovered at Qumrān, Israel,⁹² the names *glgmys/š* and *hwbbs/š* appear on two occasions each.⁹³ In Fragment 4Q531, 17:12, a giant (perhaps ʾŌhya) asks Gilgāmeš to tell of a dream he has had.

glgmys ʾmr hlmkh

“Gilgamēš, tell of your dream!”

In Fragment 4Q203, 2:1–2, Gilgāmeš’ message is relayed:⁹⁴

w[ʾw]hyh ʾhwy ʾnwn dnʾ dy ʾmr lh glgmys h[w]bbs ʾphʾ wmtʾmr dyn ʾl npšh

And ʾŌhya informed them (about) that which Gilgamēš had said to him. “Hōbabiš opened his mouth and [judg-]ment was pronounced against his soul.”

There has been scarce doubt that these figures are to be equated with Gilgāmeš and Hūmbaba.⁹⁵ Commentators have pointed to the significance of dream interpretation within Gilgāmeš tradition, alongside his and Hūmbaba’s large dimensions, and Gilgāmeš’ chthonic aspect.⁹⁶ Since their identification, the motivations for their inclusion in this work have been debated without any scholarly consensus having been reached.⁹⁷

The names *glgmys/š* and *hwbbs/š* are hence revealing. Both display an alternation between the letters shin and samekh in their final consonant, implying that this was without semantic import, and rather an artifact of the source from which they had been transmitted.⁹⁸ While such a final letter is logical for Gilgāmeš, it has remained unexplained as of yet for Hūmbaba.⁹⁹ Yet, the spelling *hwbbs/š* resembles Hūmbaba’s Hurro-Hittite name,¹⁰⁰ which might now be considered (see Tab. 3).

At Hattuša, Gilgāmeš-compositions survive in both Middle Babylonian and local Hittite-influenced Akkadian, and also in Hurrian and Hittite recensions.¹⁰¹ The Hittite and Hurrian versions are distinct

⁹¹ This finding has been lent credence by the appearance of both one *hwb(ʾ)byš* (Henning 1943, 57. 60) and an *ʾtnbyš* (Sundermann 1973, 78; 1984, 497) in the Manichean recension of this work found at Turpan (吐鲁番), People’s Republic of China, which Reeves (1993) identified with Hūmbaba and Uta-napištim respectively (see, however, reservations by Huggins 1995).

⁹² See Xeravits/Porzig 2015 for a recent overview of the textual corpus recovered from Qumrān (i.e. the ‘Dead Sea Scrolls’).

⁹³ Hūmbaba appears once more in an unclear context (4Q530).

⁹⁴ This passage follows Goff’s (2009, 238) reconstruction.

⁹⁵ Cooley (2014, 74–75) denies the appearance of Hūmbaba but his arguments centre upon the apparent inappropriateness of the ending in samekh/shin as he only imagines a transmission from Standard Babylonian tradition as possible; in fact this ending can be philologically explained (see below). Cooley (2014, 74–75) further argues that Gilgāmeš is exclusively rendered as *glgmws*, arguing on the strength of visual similarity of yod and waw. This reasoning is based on his assumption that the Greek form *Gilgamos* is chronologically anterior to Qumrān, which is both anachronistic (*Gilgamos* is first attested centuries later), and fails to take into account the form *Golgomēs*.

⁹⁶ Stuckenbruck 2003, 325–332; Goff 2009, 228–230.

⁹⁷ For example, the presence of these names led Beyer (1984, 259) to suggest a Mesopotamian origin for this work.

⁹⁸ Selz (2011, 791) considers this “distortion”. Stuckenbruck (2003, 328) suggests an Iranian origin for the ending based on prosopographical arguments.

⁹⁹ His etymology was originally explained by Milik (1976, 313) as *Hōbab-ʾiš*, i.e. ‘Hūmbaba-man’, but this is unlikely considering the *s/š*-oscillation.

¹⁰⁰ Tigay (1982, 252, fn. 4) cautiously notes the similarity to Hūmbaba’s Hurro-Hittite name. To the present author’s knowledge, this possibility has not received further academic scrutiny.

¹⁰¹ Beckman (2019, 4) dates the Middle Babylonian edition to the 14th century, and the Hittite Akkadian version to the 13th century, and notes that that Hurrian fragments straddle both centuries. He further places some of the Hittite fragments in the mid-14th century or later, and others in the 13th century.

compositions in themselves which significantly depart from what is known of the contemporary Akkadian recensions of the epic. In the Hurrian composition, Ḫumbaba assumes a much more prominent role, while the Hittite version situates much of the action in south-eastern Anatolia, provides him with a divine creation rather than a mortal birth, and accords Gilgāmeš and Enkīdu larger dimensions than in the Akkadian version.

Table 3. Writings of the names of Gilgāmeš and Ḫumbaba at Ḫattuša (after Beckman 2019, 12, tab. 2b)

Middle Babylonian	Boğazköy Akkadian	Hurrian	Hittite
^d GIŠ.GIM.MAŠ ^d GÍN.MAŠ	^d GIŠ.GIM.MAŠ	^d GIŠ.GIM.MAŠ ^d gal-ga-mi-iš ^{d.gi} šgil _x (BÍL)-ga-mes	^d GIŠ.GIM.MAŠ(-uš/-un) ^d GIŠ.PAN.MAŠ(-un)
^d ḫu-WA-WA	^d ḫu-[x-x(-x)]	^d ḫu-WA-WA(-in)	^d ḫu-WA-WA(-iš/-in)

The orthography with the sign WA in Ḫumbaba’s name—which can be read as *pi*—is potentially phonetically polyvalent during this period, perhaps demonstrating a fricative /f/ in Hurrian,¹⁰² but not diagnostic. What does stand out is the potential for the final shin/samekh to represent a frozen case ending, either of the Hittite nominative or the Hurrian ergative. The reverse is certainly attested, with the final consonant of the name *Atram-ḫasīs* being reinterpreted as a Hittite nominative at Ḫattuša, with a resultant stem form ^mat-ra-am-ḫa-ši attested.¹⁰³ It is unclear as to whether Gilgāmeš is inflected in Hurrian, but this is attested for Hittite albeit with logographic spellings—it is unclear as to whether the inflected Hittite pronunciation would have been a longer correct form like **Gilgāmes-us* or a **Gilgām-us* in analogy to *Atramḫasī-s*.¹⁰⁴ In turn, Ḫumbaba’s name is inflected in the Hittite and Hurrian compositions alike, which is particularly interesting as this is never the case within Babylonian Akkadian scribal tradition, but is attested in Akkadian-language sources from Middle Assyria and Ugarit.¹⁰⁵ The ambiguity over whether the final consonant of Gilgāmeš’ name was a case marker or not in Hittite and Hurrian may have provoked the inflection of Ḫumbaba’s name

Evidence for this hypothesis is supplied by the unusual Middle Babylonian Gilgāmeš-compositions from the mid-13th century discovered at Ugarit demonstrating traces of a Middle Assyrian transmission and proximity to the late Akkadian version known from Boğazköy.¹⁰⁶ This suggests that northern Mesopotamian recensions of the epic at this time were influenced by one or more Gilgāmeš-compositions in a neighbouring language, either Hittite or (more likely Hurrian) in which Ḫumbaba’s name was inflected. It is also telling that Gilgāmeš’ name is rendered as ^dgal-ga-meš in a contemporary lexical list from Ugarit, this resembling the Hurrian form *Galgamiš*.

As a result, it is plausible that local Late Bronze-age characters called *Galgāmeš* and *Ḫubibiš* survived on into the Early Iron age in the Levant (entirely independent of the Standard Babylonian epic), and thus entered the Book of Giants as *glgmys/š* and *ḫwbbs/š*. That *Ḫubibiš* retained his ‘frozen’ case ending would have been in analogy to *Galgāmeš*.¹⁰⁷ Certainly, Early Iron-age Syro-Anatolian monumental art displays figures engaging in obviously Gilgāmeš-akin activity,¹⁰⁸ implying the persistence of a local form of this story prior to the conquest of the region by Assyria during the Early Iron age. This must have been textualised in Aramaic, but whether it represented a translation of an earlier Hurro-Hittite-influenced Akkadian-language composition akin to the Ugarit Gilgāmeš-compositions or a novel work remains unclear. If it contained the

¹⁰² Guichard (1994) has argued for a Hurro-Hittite pronunciation *Ḫupipi-* to better fit the Hittite vowel-class of its inflection, reflecting what George (2003, 144–145) has since defined as a northern Mesopotamian and Syrian pronunciation of the name.

¹⁰³ See the forms collected by Beckman 2019, 92.

¹⁰⁴ If the latter, then a remarkable propinquity to Aelianus’ *Gilgamos* is evident, although this may be coincidental.

¹⁰⁵ George 2007c, 238.

¹⁰⁶ George 2007c.

¹⁰⁷ Schwartz (2002, 234) already suggested that the names present an intentional doublet; one might compare Arabo-Persian *Kalīla wa Dimna*, or the Kurdish *Mem û Zîn*.

¹⁰⁸ See Steyrmans 2010a.

eagle-episode surviving in the Gilgames-fable, then it may well not have been dependent on a prior cuneiform text.

Regardless, if the dominant Gilgāmeš tradition in the Early Iron-age Levant was local, deriving from an earlier Late Bronze-age tradition, and preserved in a local West Semitic alphabet, then this could well explain the present death of exemplars of the Standard Babylonian epic any farther west than Sultantepe. This would also explain the lack of ‘smoking guns’ between *Ša nagba īmuru* and Homeric or adjacent literature—what Gilgāmeš-material could have been transmitted into the Eastern Mediterranean would have been the product of a local Iron-age Levantine tradition, rather than Mesopotamia proper. Models of literary dissemination within the eastern Mediterranean would need to be adjusted accordingly.

4.4. *ḡlḡmw/ys* in Ǧalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī’s *Kitāb ar-Raḥma* (Egypt, 15th century AD)

The next potential attestation is the appearance of the demon *ḡlḡmw/ys* mentioned within Ǧalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī’s *Kitāb ar-Raḥma*.¹⁰⁹ Considering Gilgāmeš’ appearance in Qumrān’s ‘Book of Giants’, the suggestion has been that *ḡlḡmw/ys* made his way into as-Suyūṭī’s work by way of Manichean thought, although Late Antique or Jewish magical traditions are also plausible.¹¹⁰ The variation between between waw and yod suggests the aforementioned visual confusion between these letters in Imperial Aramaic script (see Section 4.1), which also holds for Manichean script. While this may well represent an authentic demonic ‘afterlife’ for Gilgāmeš, the resultant figure shares little beyond a name with the Mesopotamian literary hero, particularly as it is philologically impossible that the accompanying demon *hm’mh* is a survival of Ḥumbaba.¹¹¹ The very precise context of this likely transmission suggests that Gilgāmeš had left his story long behind him by this juncture.

4.5 Golgomēs in Flavius Josephus’ *Antiquae Judaicae* (Rome, AD 94)

Not investigated hitherto is the appearance of a *Golgomēs* (Γολγόμης) in Flavius Josephus’ 1st-century AD *Antiquae Judaicae* (2.176–177) within a list of the descendants of Iakobos (i.e. Yaʿaqōb, the biblical Jacob) in the place of Gēršōn, son of Lēwī (see Genesis 46:11).¹¹² By means of contrast, the Septuagint supplies Γηρσών, and the pseudo-Philonian *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* contains one *Getson*, rendering *Golgomēs* a hapax within Antique biblical historiography.

The form *Golgomēs* presents remarkable similarities to Qumranic *glgmys/š*, particularly in light of the penultimate eta which is suggestive of *glgmys/š*’ penultimate yod. In turn, its omicra remind of the form *Galgāmeš*, particularly if the so-called Canaanite vowel-shift is inferred. It is hence entirely possible that a Greek rendering *Golgomēs* hails directly from an vocalisation of alphabetic *glgmys/š*. Insofar, a transmission to Josephus of a Levantine writing of Gilgāmeš’ name by way of oral tradition or a manuscript in either Greek or a West Semitic language is plausible. This assessment can be further precised.

Beyond the inclusion of *Golgomēs*, the forms of the seventy names within Josephus’ list do not accord closely enough with those of the Septuagint or pseudo-Philo to suggest a common *Urtext* (for example, most of Josephus’ names receive Greek inflection). That the Josephine list was separate from those current in

¹⁰⁹ First suggested by Haas (1986, 217), and followed by Reeves (1992, 121), Schwartz (2002), and George (2003, 89). For the relationship between as-Šanawbarī’s earlier *Kitāb ar-Raḥma* and that of as-Suyūṭī, see Sijpesteijn 2022.

¹¹⁰ See Hämeen-Anttila (2014, 7–8), noting the many variant or corrupted forms, but also broadly supporting such a thesis.

¹¹¹ Hämeen-Anttila 2014, 6–7.

¹¹² See Tigay 1982, 252, fn. 5. Gēršōn was frequently confused with his near homonym Gēršōm, son of Mōše (Exodus 2:22, LXX: Γηρσάμ), who appears elsewhere within Josephus’ narrative (*Ant. Jud.* 2.277–2778) as Gērsos (Γῆρσος), and even receives an etymology from him. This similarity in names may explain the substitution of Gēršōn with a less homonymous name within the list employed by Josephus. A possible ‘intermediate form’ is presented by Codex Marcianus (Venetus) Gr. 381’s Τελσέμης (Schlatter 1913, 39), which might be emended to a somewhat Gilgāmeš-like *Γελσέμης.

Alexandria accords well with recent arguments that Josephus first acquired the scriptural instruction which he would display in his *Antiquae Judaicae* after his move to Rome in AD 71, obtaining it from the city's Greek-speaking Jewish diaspora.¹¹³ This would mean that a biblical figure Golgomēs was known to Rome's Jewry at the time of Josephus' publication of his work in AD 94.¹¹⁴ The appearance of apparently Mesopotamian material within a Jewish genealogy could well have been welcome within this community, as Josephus' era witnessed heated debate over Jewish origins, including accusations that they were descended from a race of slaves,¹¹⁵ or hailed from Egypt. Josephus militantly defended a Mesopotamian origin for the Jews in his *Contra Apionem* (2.28–32), and prefaces his presentation of this list in his *Antiquae Judaicae* with a similar sentiment (2.176–177).¹¹⁶

Τούτῳ θαρρήσας τῷ ὄνειρατι προθυμότερον εἰς τὴν Αἴγυπτον σὺν τοῖς υἱοῖς καὶ παισὶν τοῖς τούτων ἀπηλλάττετο. ἦσαν δ' οἱ πάντες πέντε καὶ ἐβδομήκοντα. τὰ μὲν οὖν ὀνόματα δηλῶσαι τούτων οὐκ ἔδοκίμαζον καὶ μάλιστα διὰ τὴν δυσκολίαν αὐτῶν· ἵνα μέντοι παραστήσω τοῖς οὐχ ὑπολαμβάνουσιν ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῆς Μεσοποταμίας ἀλλ' Αἰγυπτίους εἶναι, ἀναγκαῖον ἡγησάμην μνησθῆναι τῶν ὀνομάτων.

Encouraged by this dream he (*scil.* Iakobos) more eagerly left for Egypt with his sons and their children. And there were in all seventy. Now I did not consider it advisable to reveal their names and especially because of their difficulty. However, in order that I may demonstrate to those who do not suppose that we are not from Mesopotamia but Egyptians, I considered it necessary to recall their names.

In such a light, Golgomēs' origin in the figure of Gilgāmeš seems very likely on both philological and historical grounds, although it is unclear as to whether knowledge of him encompassed anything more than consciousness that he was a Mesopotamian ancestor of the Jews. That *Golgomēs* (or *glgmys/š*) could at all be substituted for Gēršôm/n—perhaps as *grš(m/n)*—is striking, and is suggestive, should Garmos, king of Babylôn (see Section 4.7) be envisaged as a genuine extra-cuneiform Gilgāmeš-tradition.

4.6 *gôlāmîš*-wood in the Babylonian Talmûd (southern Mesopotamia, 3rd-6th centuries AD)

The Babylonian Talmûd preserves a curiously named wood called *gwlm̄yš*,¹¹⁷ which has been vocalised as *gôlāmîš*, and associated with the Targumic forms *galmāšā*, *gôlmēš*, and *galmēšîn*.¹¹⁸ This word's etymology remains unclear,¹¹⁹ but the contexts in which it occurs seem revealing. Firstly, it is discussed in *Rôš haš-Šānā* 23a: 5, in a discussion of the use of cedar for torches:

ʾmr rb yhw dh ʾrbʿh myny ʾrym hw ʾrz qtrwm ʿš šmn wbrwš qtrwm ʾmr rb ʾdrʾ dby rby šylʾ ʾmry mblygʾ wʾmry lh zw gwlm̄yš

Raḥ Yēhūdā said that there are four types of cedar: Cedar, *qatrôm*, pinewood, and cypress. Regarding *qatrôm*, Raḥ said that this is *ʾadrā*. In the school of Rabbī Šēlā, they say that this is *mablīgā*, and some say it is *gôlāmîš*.

¹¹³ See Saltlow (2020), who further convincingly argues that Josephus had only limited knowledge of Hebrew.

¹¹⁴ This point is interesting considering that Aelianus would write his own fable about a Babylonian king *Gilgamos* a little more than a century later while residing in Rome.

¹¹⁵ Friedman 2014.

¹¹⁶ Translation from Brill's Josephus Online.

¹¹⁷ Tigay (1982, 252, fn. 5); his observation must have been prompted by its assonance to *Gilgāmeš*, but he does not provide a further elaboration.

¹¹⁸ Jastrow 1903, 222.

¹¹⁹ Jastrow presents a dubious etymology of *glm* 'hard, stone like' with a formative *yš*, doubted by Löw (1924, 22), who draws rather upon Perles' (1866, 152) suggestion that it is connected to New Persian *gulamūš*, a type of willow. Sokoloff (2002, 268–269) has most recently left the question open, but has noticed the appearance of a mysterious word *zw* before both words.

This same wood appears once more in *Sanhêdirîn* 108b: 8, this time very remarkably in the context of the construction of the Ark:

šh lk tbt šy gpr mʔy gwpr ʔmr rb ʔdʔ ʔmry dby rby šylʔ zw mblygh wʔmry lh gwlmýš

“Make you an ark of *gōp̄er*-wood” (Gen 6:14); what is *gōp̄er*-wood? Rab Addā says that they say in the school of Rabbī Šēlā that this is *mablīgā*, and others say it is *gōlāmīš*.

Here, it occurs once more adjacent to the *mablīgā*-tree, intimating that it is again to be understood as a manner of cedar. This hardly surprises, as there is a persistent Jewish tradition found already in *Targūm ʔUnqlōs* of the Ark having been constructed from cedar (*qatrōm* once more). Moreover, Nōaḥ was imagined in Jewish *Haggādā* as having planted and subsequently felled a cedar forest over some 120 years spent waiting for mankind to repent, a story prevalent enough to have also entered Christian Syriac literature.¹²⁰ The origin of this connection of cedarwood to the ark is unclear, but suspicious in light of the assonance of *gōlāmīš* with *Gilgāmeš* (or, indeed, Josephus’ *Golgomēs*, Qumrānic *glgmyš/s*), and the association of the Mesopotamian hero with both cedar and the flood narrative.

Certainly, there is increasing recognition of not only the influence of Persianate culture upon Talmudic literature, but also earlier Mesopotamian material.¹²¹ In turn, Talmudic scholarship made use of Akkadian medical texts and lists of flora, presumably by means of Aramaic textual intermediaries.¹²² It seems quite plausible that *Gilgāmeš* inadvertently entered Talmudic floral lore through intermediary Aramaic lexical transcriptions or translations of commentaries, considering the *GIŠ*-sign within his name.¹²³ That he became associated with the Ark’s apocryphal cedar could be a reflex of his prominent association with the felling of this wood in omen literature.¹²⁴ Thus, that a special cedarwood called *gōlāmīš* derived from the name *Gilgāmeš* did the rounds of Babylonian Talmudic scholarship is cogent, although the degree to which this was intentional cannot be ascertained. A less inanimate potential example of transmission might now be considered.

4.7 Garmos, king of Babylōn, in Iamblichos’ *Babyloniaca* (2nd century AD)

The Babylonian king Garmos is the antagonist of Iamblichos’ lurid 2nd-century AD romance, the *Babyloniaca*, a summary of which survives in the writings of Phōtios.¹²⁵ Garmos, king of Babylōn, is a capricious and barbaric Oriental despot who has newly lost his wife and hence becomes besotted in the novel’s heroine Sinōnis, whose true love is one Rhodanes. The pair escape Garmos’ repeated attempts to marry Sinōnis by force and dispose of Rhodanes, being pursued by the eunuchs Sakas and Damas, who are mutilated for their failure, the latter further being executed. These curious adventures—replete with wild digressions featuring the characters *Tigris*, *Euphrates*, and *Mesopotamia*—culminate in Sinōnis’ marriage to the young king of Syria to spite Rhodanes’ perceived unfaithfulness. Garmos, who is drunkenly dancing with flute-girls about a crucified Rhodanes, is informed of this by letter and immediately frees Rhodanes to lead an army against Syria, privately instructing his lieutenants with yet another missive to kill Rhodanes once he has defeated the king of Syria and won back Sinōnis. Yet, this plot is foiled, and Rhodanes becomes the next king of the Babylonians with his love at his side.

¹²⁰ See Ginzberg 1899, 410–411.

¹²¹ See e.g. Demsky 2005; Goldstone 2019, 5–6.

¹²² See Geller 1991; 2000 Geller/Rudolf 2020.

¹²³ It might be recalled that CT 43, 41, containing the famous gloss of *Gilgāmeš* was intended to aid in the reading a medical prescription featuring *Gilgāmeš* (BAM 311, o. 60).

¹²⁴ See the references collected by George (2003, 112–117), including an example from Late Babylonian Sippar.

¹²⁵ See the translation by Stephens and Winkler (1995, 190–199). Bianchi (2016) argues that Phōtios only summarises less than half of the work’s contents, although 39 books would be an enormous size for a Hellenistic novel.

Iamblichos' biography is known from the Souda and his own statements. The former states that he was born of slaves, but a scholion in Phōtios presents a different story:¹²⁶

οὗτος ὁ Ἰάμβλιχος Σύρος ἦν γένος πατρόθεν καὶ μητρόθεν, Σύρος δὲ οὐχὶ τῶν ἐπακηκότων τὴν Συρίαν Ἑλλήνων, ἀλλὰ τῶν αὐτοχθόνων, γλῶσσαν δὲ εἰδὼς καὶ <ἐν> τοῖς ἐκείνων ἔθεισι ζῶν ἕως αὐτὸν τροφεύς, ὡς αὐτός φησι, Βαβυλώνιος λαβὼν, Βαβυλωνίαν τε γλῶσσαν καὶ ἥθη καὶ λόγους μετεδιδάσκει, ὣν ἓνα τῶν λόγων εἶναί, φησι, ὃν καὶ νῦν ἀναγράφει. αἰχμαλωτισθῆναι δὲ τὸν Βαβυλώνιον καθ' ὃν καιρὸν Τραιανὸς εἰσέβαλεν εἰς Βαβυλῶνα, καὶ πραθῆναι Σύρ[ω] ὑπὸ τῶν λαφυροπώλων. εἶναι δὲ τοῦτον σοφὸν τὴν βάρβαρον σοφίαν ὡς καὶ τῶν βασιλέως γραμματέων ἐν τῇ πατρίδι διάγοντα γεγενῆσθαι. ὁ μὲν οὖν Ἰάμβλιχος οὗτος Σύραν τὴν [καὶ] πάτριον γλῶσσαν εἰδὼς, ἐπιμαθὼν [καὶ] τὴν Βαβυλωνίαν μετὰ ταῦτα καὶ τὴν Ἑλληνά φησιν ἀσκήσαι καὶ χρῆσι[ν] λαβεῖν ὡς ἀγαθὸς ῥήτωρ γένοιτο

This Iamblichos was a Syrian by birth, both on his father's and his mother's side, not a Syrian in the sense of a Greek living in Syria but a native. He spoke Syrian and lived in that culture until a tutor, as he tells us, who was Babylonian, took charge of him and taught him the language and culture of Babylōn, and their stories, of which the one he is writing is an example. The Babylonian was taken prisoner in the time when Trajan entered Babylonia and the booty merchants sold him to a Syrian. He was learned in the wisdom of the barbarians, enough to have been one of the king's scribes when he was living in his fatherland. So this Iamblichos, speaking his native Syrian, learned Babylonian as well, and after that he says that he worked hard practicing Greek too, so as to be an accomplished rhetor.

In turn, Phōtios states this of Iamblichos:¹²⁷

λέγει δὲ καὶ ἑαυτὸν Βαβυλωνιον εἶναι ὁ συγγραφεὺς, καὶ μαθεῖν τὴν μαγικὴν, μαθεῖν δὲ καὶ τὴν Ἑλληνικὴν παιδεῖαν, καὶ ἀκμάζειν ἐπὶ Σοαίμου τοῦ Ἀχαιμενίδου τοῦ Ἀρσακίδου, ὃς βασιλεὺς ἦν ἐκ πατέρων βασιλέων, γέγονε δὲ ὅμως καὶ τῆς συγκλήτου βουλῆς τῆς ἐν Ῥώμῃ, καὶ ὑπατος δέ, εἴτα καὶ βασιλεὺς πάλιν τῆς μεγάλης Ἀρμενίας. ἐπὶ τούτου γοῦν ἀκμάσαι φησὶν ἑαυτόν. Ῥωμαίων δὲ διαλαμβάνει βασιλεύειν Ἀντωνῖνον, καὶ ὅτε Ἀντωνῖνός, φησιν, Οὐῆρον τὸν αὐτοκράτορα καὶ ἀδελφὸν καὶ κηδεστὴν ἐπεμψε Βολογαίσῳ τῷ Παρθυαίῳ πολεμήσοντα, ὥς αὐτός τε προεῖποι καὶ τὸν πόλεμον, ὅτι γενήσεται, καὶ ὅποι τελευτήσοι. καὶ ὅτι Βολόγαισος μὲν ὑπὲρ τὸν Εὐφράτην καὶ Τίγριν ἔφυγεν, ἡ δὲ Παρθυαίων γῆ Ῥωμαίοις ὑπήκοος κατέστη.

The writer says that he himself is a Babylonian and has learned magic, that he also had a Greek education, and that he flourished under Sohaimos the Achaimenid and Arsakid, a king from a line of kings, and who became a member of the Senate at Rome and then a consul and then a king again of Greater Armenia. This was the period in which he says he lived. He expressly states that Antoninus was ruling the Romans. And when Antoninus (he says) sent the emperor Verus, his brother and kinsman, to make war on Vologaeses the Parthian, he himself foretold that the war would occur and how it would end. And he tells how Vologaeses fled beyond the Euphrates and Tigris and how the land of the Parthians became subject to Rome.

It is difficult to reconcile these varying stories, but the claim of Babylonian knowledge (and divination) is noteworthy, particularly as spurious digressions to explain Babylonian customs survive do survive in fragments of the work.¹²⁸ For all of this oriental colouring, however, the work obeys the conventions of Hellenistic novels, and does not seem to follow the plot of any recognisable Babylonian literary work.¹²⁹ In this respect, the names of the characters are telling. Rhodanes may well originate from the Persianate hero Farīdūn (perhaps in his Armenian incarnation *Hradēn*),¹³⁰ while Sinōnis' name is evidently from Aramaic

¹²⁶ Translation from Stephens and Winkler (1995, 181).

¹²⁷ Translation from Stephens and Winkler (1995, 181–182).

¹²⁸ For example, the procession of *Babyloniaca* Fragment 1 (Stephens/Winkler 1995, 223–227).

¹²⁹ A possible exception is presented by an allusion to the story of Pyramos and Thisbe (Gärtner 2010, 259–262), should this have been an authentic Babylonian composition, rather than Ovidus' invention.

¹³⁰ See Dowden (2018, 154–156), who further equates Sinōnis with Šahrnāz, and Garmos with the villainous Zahhāk.

snōnīlā ‘swallow’. Garmos remains a problem, with Dowden’s etymology of ‘worm’ in analogy to *Zahhāk* (who has two serpents growing from his shoulders in Iranian mythology) hardly convincing,¹³¹ particularly as a scene in the novel involves a prophetic dream in which Sinōnis as a swallow is pursued by Rhodanes as a swift and Garmos as an eagle, hardly a draconic image.

Moreover, contradicting this thesis is the independent existence of a fictional Garmos, king of Babylōn outside of Iamblichos’ work, as demonstrated by a strange fictive letter between Garmos of Babylōn and the king of India which has somehow infiltrated the epistles of Apollōnios of Tyana as compiled by Philostratos (*Epistolae* 59).¹³²

βασιλεὺς Βαβυλωνίων Γάρμος Νεογύνδῃ Ἰνδῶν βασιλεῖ. εἰ μὴ περίεργος ἦς, οὐκ ἂν ἦς ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοτρίοις πράγμασι δίκαιος, οὐδὲ ἂν ἄρχων ἐν Ἰνδοῖς ἐδίκασες Βαβυλωνίοις. πόθεν γάρ σοι γνῶριμος ἦν ὁ ἡμέτερος δῆμος; νῦν δὲ ἐπείρασας ἀρχὴν τὴν ἐμὴν ὑποκοριζόμενος ἐπιστολαῖς καὶ τοιαύτας ἀρχὰς καθιεῖς καὶ πρόσχημα ποιούμενος τῆς πλεονεξίας τὴν φιλανθρωπίαν. περανεῖς δὲ οὐδέν, οὔτε γὰρ λαθεῖν δύναιο.

Garmos, king of the Babylonians, to Neogyndēs, king of the Indians. If you were not so meddlesome, you would not be administering laws in other people’s affairs, or offering judgements to the Babylonians while ruling in India. For how would our people be familiar to you? Now you have made an attempt on my rule by coaxing with letters and appointing various types of officials and adopting the façade of human compassion as a cover for greed. But you will achieve nothing, for you cannot escape detection.

It is generally thought that this letter does not belong to Iamblichos’ *Babyloniaca*, as its subject matter does not accord with the narrative (Garmos here seems positively connoted),¹³³ suggesting that Garmos existed as a character exterior to Iamblichos’ work. Indeed, considering the unusually frequent and self-conscious use of letters within the *Babyloniaca*,¹³⁴ it might be suspected that Iamblichos was alluding to a pre-existing Greek-language literary corpus of ‘Garmos-letters’ (this missive can hardly stand alone) by naming his antagonist such. The question as to this proposed corpus’ origins might be considered.

Certainly, the notion of Indian and Babylonian kings corresponding, and here disputing sovereignty does have a Seleucid resonance. Yet, this is also immediately reminiscent of the Neo-Assyrian and Late Babylonian composition dubbed the ‘Gilgāmeš Letter’ appearing within scribal curricula at both Ḫuzīrīna and Nippur.¹³⁵ In this composition, the legendary king Gilgāmeš (written ^dGIŠ.GÍN.MAŠ) writes to the distant king of the land of *x-ra-nun-na*^{ki} demanding lapis lazuli and obsidian for his friend Enkidu (presumably for his burial); while the foreign king’s name is frustratingly lost and the toponym remains obscure, the raw materials imply a distant eastern location.¹³⁶ Curiously, Gilgāmeš is king of Ur rather than Uruk,¹³⁷ and orders the stones shipped to the harbour at Bābili.

¹³¹ Dowden 2018, 155–157.

¹³² The *Vita Apollonii* does contain letters from the Indian king Phraōtēs; the erroneous addition of Letter 59 to the corpus may be because it contains correspondence with another Indian monarch. Another possibility for accidental mixing of these two fictional literary corpora could be confusion of the *Vita Apollonii*’s Babylonian *Damis* with the *Babyloniaca*’s Babylonian *Damas*.

¹³³ e.g. Stephens/Winkler 1995, 190, fn. 13.

¹³⁴ See Jackson 2024.

¹³⁵ The text has been recently re-edited by Frazer (2024, 73–114). Frazer’s MS e and f are unpublished scribal exercise tablets from Nippur; she reports (Frazer 2024, 75. 77) that both are large multi-column tablets containing lexical extracts and verbal paradigm on their obverse, and a wide range of literary extracts in six columns apiece on their reverse. MS e’s reverse reverse features an extract from the ‘Gilgāmeš Letter’ repeated twice, various extracts from unidentified compositions, and an excerpt from the ‘Šarru(m)-kīn birth legend’. MS f’s reverse features an extract from the ‘Gilgāmeš Letter’ repeated thrice, and extracts from other works including the ‘Poor Man of Nippur’, and once more the ‘Šarru(m)-kīn birth legend’.

¹³⁶ Stupendous quantities of goods and labour appear in the text, didactically manner for students to copy out.

¹³⁷ George (2007b, 61) notes that Gilgāmeš is also king of Ur in a very unusual late Old Babylonian copy of the epic.

The ‘Gilgāmeš Letter’ is part of a triad of texts known from the Assyrian and Babylonian scribal curriculum of the first millennium as known from ʔuzīrīna, Ninūa, and Nippur, also featuring the ‘Birth legend of Šarru(m)-kīn’, and the ‘Poor man of Nippur’,¹³⁸ which were often excerpted one after another in scribal exercises. The ‘Poor man of Nippur’ is generally accepted to have survived as a folktale inspiring the ‘Tale of the larrikin’ in the Arabian Nights (i.e. *ʔAlf layla wa-layla*),¹³⁹ suggesting some manner of Aramaic composition (whether written or oral) as intermediary; thus, it is quite plausible that the didactic exercise of the ‘Gilgāmeš Letter’ (excerpts of which could even share the same tablet as the ‘Poor man of Nippur’) also made its way into Aramaic literature, and inspired the writing of ‘Garmos-letters’ in Aramaic or Greek as a means of epistolary fiction. Certainly, both centre upon a fictive ruler writing to a distant king, a genre long established in Mesopotamian literature.¹⁴⁰ By such logic, the Babylonian king *Garmos* might be another bastardisation or misreading of ^dGIŠ.GÍN.MAŠ: for example, as a form akin to Talmudic *gōlāmīš* or Targumic *gōlmēš* which had undergone rhotism under the influence of an Iranian language.¹⁴¹ Whether Garmos’ cruel, libidinous, and drunken behaviour in the *Babyloniaca* following his wife’s death is Gilgāmeš-like enough to qualify him as a late distortion of this literary figure is subjective.¹⁴² A conclusion to the present investigation might now be assailed.

5. Conclusion

This study has re-examined the question of the transmission of Gilgāmeš beyond the cuneiform record (Section 1), providing close philological and literary historical reasoning by means of a ‘bottom-up’ methodology (Section 2) in order to better contextualise the appearances of those attestations generally held to be plausible (Sections 3, 4.1–4), and to investigate three new possible sightings of Gilgāmeš in Jewish Babylonian and Hellenistic literature (Sections 4.5–7).

The new methodology has particularly highlighted the role of ‘working texts’ such as scribal exercises and scholarly texts in preserving literary figures, rather than the much-vaunted epic. This finding is interesting insofar as it suggests the importance of a chaotic, scholastic contexts for literary transmission out of cuneiform. That the Gilgāmeš epic cannot presently be evidenced as having received the same treatment despite its appearance in the scribal curriculum could well be because of its length, seriousness, and prestige—as mastering it would be the mark of a literatus, the motivation for its transmission into other scripts may well have been absent. By means of contrast, more ‘rough and tumble’ texts of the curriculum such as the Gilgāmeš-letter, and the ‘Poor man of Nippur’ would have been ideal for swift cribbing into Aramaic or Greek and further modification, whether in literary parody or in oral story telling. To write a plausible transcultural literary history of the first millennium BC, it may be necessary to think not as Sîn-lēqe-unninni or Homēros, but rather as a less than conscientious ancient schoolboy. For all that they might be begrudged for their idleness, it is courtesy of their industry that Assyriology is rid of *Izdubar*, and Gilgāmeš survived to terrorise the *Babyloniaca*. The following preliminary literary history can be sketched.

From this study, it is apparent that at least one Gilgāmeš-composition (whether fable or romance) was certainly circulating in a West Semitic alphabetic form *glgmys/š* within Syria, the Levant, and perhaps more broadly the eastern Mediterranean prior to the 3rd century BC, as it was this tradition which informed the figures of *glgmys/š* and *hwbbš/š* in the ‘Book of Giants’ from Qumrān, rather than the Standard Babylonian

¹³⁸ The ‘Poor man of Nippur’ is attested at ʔuzīrīna, Ninūa, and Nippur, the ‘Gilgāmeš Letter’ at ʔuzīrīna and Nippur, and the ‘Birth legend of Šarru(m)-kīn’ at Ninūa and Nippur.

¹³⁹ Gurney 1956; 1972.

¹⁴⁰ See Foster 1982. A fictional letter from Šarru(m)-kīn to his governors excerpted alongside lexical lists is also attested from Old Babylonian Ur (Westenholz 1997, 148–169).

¹⁴¹ Compare also Bār Kōnay’s *gmygws/gmngws* and *gnmgws/glmngws*. For rhotism in Akkadian names transmitted into Aramaic during this period, see Bamberger 2013, 286–287, fn. 230.

¹⁴² Garmos’ representation with an eagle in the *Babyloniaca* also reminds of the Gilgames-fable, although this may well be complete coincidence.

epic as has generally been reconstructed hitherto. Indeed, it is possible that *Ša nagba īmuru* was never popular west of the Euphrates, precluding its direct influence of literary cultures west of the Ġazīra.

Between the 3rd century BC and end of the 1st century AD, Gilgāmeš' literary influence had been reduced to a legendary king of fable in the eastern Mediterranean, his name being occasionally rendered into Greek, for example within the Jewish diaspora in Rome.¹⁴³ By the 3rd century AD, a Greek form *Gilgamos* had emerged within the Mediterranean, presumably the result of a misreading of the name's penultimate sign as **glgmws*, this being the king encountered by Aelianus, and the source of the name reaching Bār Kōnay in heavily mangled form around the 9th century AD.¹⁴⁴

Parallel to these developments is the Talmudic scholarship which transmuted Gilgāmeš into a special form of wood called *gōlāmīš*, at least according to hearsay, between the 4th to 6th centuries AD. Independently of the Gilgamos-fable and similar literature to the west, a tradition of fictive letters written by one Garmos, king of the Babylonians emerged by the beginning of the 3rd century AD, likely in the Hellenistic east. This king would have had his origin in the limited transmission of literature such as the 'Gilgāmeš letter' from the traditional cuneiform scribal curriculum into Aramaic. When Iamblichos wrote his dramatic and gruesome romance the *Babyloniaca*, he drew knowingly upon such letters in fashioning his evil tyrant of Babylōn. The 'epic' Gilgāmeš was warped into a stereotypical oriental despot, echoes of whom may even survive in Lykourgos, king of Babylōn in the Aisōpos-romance (in place of 'Aḥīqar's *Sinḥārīb*).

With this study, only the first inklings of Gilgāmeš' career beyond cuneiform have been sketched, and some initial 'building blocks' for a novel literary history of the ancient Near East in the first millennium fashioned. New cuneiform attestations, patient literary micro history, and further philological scrutiny will certainly serve to alter the image presented here (particularly once a knowledge graph-aided systematic investigation is undertaken), but this is the very purpose of the methodology presented here, which maximises falsifiability. How Gilgāmeš' extra-cuneiform para- or afterlife coincides with broader societal, cultural and literary changes such as the rise of the first 'true' Near-Eastern empires, or the decline of the Akkadian epic and the rise of the Aramaic romance has not been explored—this is the stuff of further consolidatory studies. The identification of further extra-cuneiform attestations is also to be expected: From Parthian Uruk's *Gareus* to Tartessos' *Habis* and *Gargoris*, many of Gilgāmeš' possible journeys beyond cuneiform remain to be assessed.

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¹⁴³ This corresponds to the -ys/š/-ης, 'first declension' spelling.

¹⁴⁴ This corresponds to the -ws/-ος 'second declension' spelling. as-Suyutī may have had multiple variants of this name to hand when he composed his treatise on spells in the 15th century AD.

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