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The Tale of "Gilgamesh and Akka" and the Question of Epic Tradition in Early Babylonia

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Abstract From the perspective of both its form and content, the tale "Gilgamesh and Akka" occupies a unique place among the Sumerian literary compositions. This communication argues that it once formed an episode within a larger, epic tradition. This oral composition probably originated in the Pre-Sargonic period, with its surviving written version having been an Ur III redaction. Stylistically, 'Gilgamesh and Akka' exhibits the characteristics of a short heroic epic poem, which focuses on human action and is devoid of any forms of divine participation. This communication also presents a new translation of "Gilgamesh and Akka", which offers new interpretations of several of its crucial passages.

Keywords Gilgamesh. Akka. Conflict between Uruk and Kish. Heroic/historic epics. Gilgamesh's death tradition. Hero's death and the birth of epic. Panegyrics and epics.

Summary 1 Part 1. The Plot of GA. – 2 Part 2. The Date, the Literary Classification, and the Possible Oral Background of GA.

For Wolfgang Heimpel, on his 85th birthday, with admiration and in friendship

The Sumerian[1] narrative composition "Gilgamesh and Akka" (henceforth abbreviated as GA) is a fascinating text. Superficially, there is not much to it. It numbers only 114 lines, which are completely preserved. Its plot is seemingly (though in reality deceptively) simple. For these reasons, and equally because of its historical interest, it has been repeatedly edited, translated, and discussed.[2] Therefore, why another study of GA? The reason, as I will argue in this communication, is that GA is completely unique among the whole body of Sumero-Akkadian literature. This fact alone, which has not been

This study had a long gestation history. During my forty-two years of teaching at Harvard, I read "Gilgamesh and Akka" with my students practically every second year in my Beginning Sumerian class. This gave me an opportunity to re-read it regularly and to rethink the various issues this composition raises. More directly, my study derives from the lecture "The Sumerian Composition 'Gilgamesh and Akka': A New Translation and Interpretation", which I presented at the Università di Napoli l'Orientale, 10 April 2025. I offer my cordial thanks to Eric Aupperle, Marco Bonechi, Lucio Milano, and Manuel Molina, who read the manuscript of this paper and offered comments, suggestions and bibliographic additions. It goes without saying that I alone am responsible for the views expressed.

1 Citations of cuneiform sources follow "Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative", `https://cdli.earth` and "Database of Neo-Sumerian Texts" (= BDTNS), `http:/bdtns.filol.csic.es`.

2 The most recent full edition of GA is Katz 1993, which cites all the previous editions and discussions. All the subsequent treatments of importance are cited in the present study.

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adequately recognized until now, makes such an undertaking worthwhile. Another reason is that, as I hope to show, it is still possible to improve an understanding of its plot.

This study is divided into two parts. The first part is concerned essentially (though not exclusively) with the plot of GA. There I offer my understanding of it, which is based on my own translation of this composition. Since the cuneiform text of GA is well established, I dispense with a transliteration of it. For those who wish to consult it, I recommend the online edition in *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature 1.8.1.1. Gilgamesh and Aga: Composite Text*. Lexical points that remain uncertain or problematic I duly discuss here. By contrast, the second part addresses issues of more general nature, primarily the date of the composition of GA, its classification as a literary genre, and the possible existence of an oral version of it.

1 Part 1. The Plot of GA

1.1 The Arrival of Akka's Envoys (lines 1-2)

The story begins abruptly with a simple statement that the envoys of Akka arrived in Uruk. As one learns from the following passage (lines 3-8), Akka requests that Uruk submit to Kish. The implication is that Uruk should become Kish's vassal. It is the beginning of a long passage which continues down to line 39.

This being the perfect example of an *in medias res* beginning,[3] there is little doubt that, as already observed by Thorkild Jacobsen,[4] "the tale is clearly not self-contained, but represents rather a single episode in a much wider epic context leading up to it that is now lost".

That GA formed part of a much longer narrative cycle is also indicated by its concluding episode (lines 100-12), which alludes to an earlier event involving Gilgamesh and Akka in which Akka behaved magnanimously toward Gilgamesh. If my translation of lines 104-6 is correct (see below), it would seem that Gilgamesh had been Akka's captive at one point. It is possible, therefore, that the conflict GA is concerned with was preceded by an earlier war between Uruk and Kish in which Akka (or his alleged father En-mebaragesi) had an upper hand, capturing Gilgamesh and taking him as a prisoner-of-war to Kish.

Here it may be significant that, in our tale, the Kishite adversary of Gilgamesh is Akka, of whose accomplishments otherwise nothing is known.[5] One would rather expect that person to have been En-mebaragesi. Indeed, according to "Shulgi's Hymn O", it was En-meberagesi who had been taken captive by Gilgamesh.[6] These facts may add weight to the assumption that the conflict between Uruk and Kish to which the tale alludes to had a long and complicated history.

However, disregarding how that war may have fitted sequentially into the popular history of early Uruk-Kish interrelations, it seems certain that the plot of GA itself does not describe the course of a single military conflict, beginning with its causes and leading up to its eventual resolution, but is rather confined to its final crucial episode. This conclusion is based on my reading of the cryptic lines about "wells" (see below under 1.2.), that, if I am correct, indicate that, before Akka sent his envoys to Gilgamesh with his (final) demand of Uruk's submission, Kish had deprived Uruk of water, apparently by diverting the upper course of the Euphrates. If so, that particular conflict between Uruk and Kish was

3 See in detail below under 2.2.6.

4 Jacobsen 1987, 345.

5 The only source possibly mentioning Akka is a lapis lazuli pearl bearing the following inscription: ^{d}Inana / Ak / lugal / GIŠ.UH$_3^{ki}$, "(for) Inana, Ak(ka), king of Giššag (donated this)" (MVN 10 1). For GIŠ.UH$_3^{ki}$ being an early writing of the name of Umm al-Aqarib (rather than of Umma), see Alamamori 2024; Steinkeller (forthcoming). Based on its paleography, this inscription almost certainly dates to the ED II period (or ED I, if one follows the recent reevaluations of the status of ED II; see especially Evans 2007). The use of the title lugal (rather than ensi$_2$) in the inscription may support the possibility that the donor of the pearl came from northern Babylonia. If this Ak(ka) indeed was the same person as the king of Kish, one would find here additional evidence that, in ED II times, Kish controlled significant sections of southern Babylonia. In this connection, it should be noted that the personal name Ag-ga appears in Ebla sources. Of special interest here is ARET 1 7 rev. xi 12-18, where its bearer is a Mari merchant.

6 e$_2$ ˹Kiš˺^{ki}-še$_3$ ^{giš}tukul-zu ba-ta-a-e$_3$ ur-[s]ag $_7$-bi ad$_6$-a mi-ni-dab$_5$ [lugal Ki]š^{ki} En-me-barag-ge-e-si [… sa]g-ga$_2$-na gir$_3$ mu-na-ni-us$_2$ nam-lugal Kiš^{ki}-ta Unug!(ŠEŠ.UNUG)^{ki}-še$_3$ am$_3$-mi-de$_6$, "(Shulgi addressing Gilgamesh:) You dispatched your weapons against the house of Kish, you took prisoner its seven heroes, you set your foot on the head of En-mebaragesi, [king] of Kish, you brought kingship from Kish to Uruk/Ur" ("Shulgi O" lines 56-60; following Klein 1976, 278). One of the MSS of the "Sumerian King List" adds, following the mention of Dumuzi of Uruk and before the listing of Gilgamesh, the following two lines: šu aš En?-me-barag-ge$_4$-e-si nam-ra ˹i$_3$?˺-ak? ("Sumerian King List" lines 111a-111b ms. P3+BT14; Klein 1991, 125). However, it appears quite certain that this information pertains to Gilgamesh and not to Dumuzi.

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a protracted one, with Kish initially trying to force Uruk into submission simply by cutting off its water supplies and resorting to an outright siege only when that measure had failed to take its intended effect.

Such an understanding of the plot has important implications for the text-historical aspects of GA, for it strongly suggests the existence of an autonomous oral tradition about the war between Gilgamesh and Akka that antedated the recording of the tale in the form it survives, the event that took place, as there is every reason to believe, in Ur III times. The questions as to whether that earlier oral tradition may have taken the form of discrete epic poems, and, if such indeed existed, of what the nature of the relationship between those oral compositions and the surviving written version may have been, will be taken up in detail in Part II of this study. In a preliminary way, it may be suggested that the story of the conflict between Gilgamesh and Akka, as it existed in that (hypothetical) pre-Ur III oral tradition, had a symmetrical, two-part structure in which Kish and Uruk were in turns assigned the roles of the victor and the defeated. The theme of final reconciliation, present in the written version (lines 102-12), may not have been part of the oral story. This is suggested, in my opinion, by the fact that such a theme fits too neatly and too conveniently the propagandistic aims of the Ur III state not to suspect that it was an Ur III innovation. For more on this point, see below under 2.1.

Finally, I need to address the question of the historicity of GA. In other words, were Gilgamesh and Akka real human beings and did the events described in that tale really happen? In my opinion, GA was part of what I identified elsewhere as the Mythical History of Babylonia, which run a course parallel to that of the history of facts. The two remained in a dialectical relationship, in which they constantly interacted and influenced one another.[7] Although there may have existed an archaic ruler of Uruk named Gilgamesh, from the perspective of Mythical History that point is completely irrelevant. In the following discussion, therefore, all the potentially 'historical' data I cite from literary and religious sources are to be understood exactly in the same way.

1.2 Gilgamesh Consults Uruk's Elders (lines 3-8)

Having received the envoys of Akka, Gilgamesh convenes a general gathering of the elders of Uruk. Having described to them the deteriorating state of Uruk's water reserves, he argues that, despite this precarious situation, Uruk should not submit to Kish but to oppose it with arms.

The understanding of this passage hinges on the meaning of the verbal phrase tul_2 til-le-da, which appears here and in a slightly different wording later in the text. Almost without an exception, its translators believed that, unless Uruk submitted to Kish, the latter would subject the population of Uruk to the performance of corvée labor, which would call for the excavating of wells for Kish. This interpretation assumed that, in tul_2 til-le-da, the verb til means 'to complete, to finish, *zu vollenden*'.

However, if the text indeed talked of the excavating of wells, the expected verb would have been ba-al or dun, both meaning 'to excavate, to dig',[8] rather than til.[9] Moreover, wells were of secondary economic significance in southern Babylonia. In irrigation, they were used only to water orchards and

7 Steinkeller 2017, 178-86.

8 In Ur III economic sources, the verb used is ba-al. See workers pu_2 ba-al, '(were employed) to excavate wells' (MVN 16 1055:5-6; MVN 21 96:11; UTI 4 2356:1-2, 2397:13; etc.). In reference to urban wells, especially the ones made of fired bricks, Pre-Sargonic sources from Lagash use the verb du_3, 'to erect, to build'. See the following example: PN e_2-bi PN_2 mu-na-du_3 pu_2 sig_4-$alur_x$(BAHAR)-ra e_2-a mu-na-du_3, "PN built this house for PN; within (that) house he (also) built a well of baked bricks" (Steinkeller 2011, 3-4 n. 4 iv 1-7). For other attestations, see Behrens, Steible 1983, 277. This verb is also used in an Ur III text from Umma: 5 $geme_2$ im IL_2-ga_2-de_3 gub-ba pu_2 $šag_4$ e_2-a du_3-a (CUSAS 3 210 iii 1-2; courtesy of M. Molina).

9 Attinger 2021, 185; Cohen 2023, 135, 283.

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vegetable gardens (especially during the summer growing season).[10] Even more importantly, excavating of wells was never part of corvée obligations.[11]

These obstacles are removed if one follows the alternative meaning of til, which is "to use up, to exhaust, to come to an end".[12] Hence my translation: "the wells are becoming depleted, exhausted". In my view, the historical situation behind Akka's request is to be reconstructed as follows. Sometime before Akka sent his envoys to Gilgamesh with his (final?) demand for Uruk's submission, Kish had deprived Uruk of water by diverting the upper course of the Euphrates, a military procedure that was commonly practiced throughout Mesopotamian history (see in detail below). If so, that particular conflict between Uruk and Kish was a protracted one, with Kish initially trying to force Uruk into submission by cutting off its water supplies, resorting to an outright siege only when that measure had failed to take its intended effect.

In response to the diversion of the Euphrates by Akka, the Urukeans were forced to excavate wells throughout their land. But the wells soon began to be depleted. This made it necessary for them to excavate still deeper wells, the ones from which water was drawn by buckets suspended on hoisting ropes. The progressive diminution of Uruk's water supplies is vividly described in lines 5-7:

"The wells are becoming depleted! The wells of the (whole) land (of Uruk) are becoming depleted!
"The small (i.e., shallow) wells of the (whole) land are becoming depleted!
"(Even) the deep wells with hoisting ropes are becoming depleted!"

Eventually, the situation became critical, with Uruk having been completely deprived of water. And it was at that moment that Gilgamesh seeks the advice of Uruk's elders. His question is: given the gravity of the situation, should we or should not we submit to Akka? He recommends that Uruk should fight.

That, in our passage, til means 'to exhaust' was already considered by Yuhong Wu,[13] who translated it: "(your water supply) will be brought to end" or "(the well) will become used up / dry up". Wu was also the first translator to conclude that Akka had attempted to deprive Uruk of irrigation water. However, he failed to consider that the entire Euphrates had been diverted for that purpose, nor did he explain the significance of wells.[14]

10 Such wells are designated as pu_2 $^{giš}kiri_6$, "orchard wells". See Rochester 172, which lists vegetables produced in the Umma districts of Gu'edena, Mushbi''ana, and Apishal. Those are summarized as mun-gazi pu_2 $^{giš}kiri_6$ u_3 ab-sin_2, "vegetables and spices (produced) in the orchards (with) wells and in the furrows (of fields)". For the wells in date-palm orchards, see MVN 16 742 rev. 18-21; Nisaba 6 17 ii 17-18. Their importance is demonstrated by the fact that, at Umma, there existed a special administrator in charge of them called dub-sar pu_2 $^{giš}kiri_6$ (MVN 14 57 seal; BPOA 2 2084 seal; etc.). The wells were provided with jars (^{dug}gur pu_2) and buckets (ma-ad-li_2-um pu_2). Note, especially, 10 ^{dug}gur pu_2 la_2, "10 jars (to be) suspended in wells" (Nisaba 15/2 180 vi 19'), which approximates the pu_2 $eš_2$ la_2, "wells with hoisting ropes", of GA lines 7, 13, and 22. As demonstrated by the following lexical entry: pu-u_2 TUL_2 = *ṣi-ip*(var. *ṣip*)-*pa-tu* (CAD Ṣ 92 *ṣippatu* A), "well" was a virtual synonym of "orchard".

11 But this does not change the fact that Akka's objective must have been to obtain corvée labor from Uruk, though for other types of projects. Differently, Civil (1999-2000, 181), who talks of "the unfounded assumption that Kish wanted to exact corvée work from the Uruk people".

12 See Attinger (2021, 1043), who translates til as "être épuisé (subsistence, rations)", "consommer entièrement, user, utiliser entièrement". For this sense of til, see the following examples: PN u_3-na-dug_4 la_2-i_3-e ud-sakar-ka ha-bi_2-til-e, "speak to PN: he must eliminate / put an end to the deficit before the New Moon!" (BDTNS 1882121 iii 7-9; courtesy of M. Molina); ^{d}Na-ni lu_2 numun til-til-la, "Nani whose seed/posterity came to an end" ("Proverb 14" line 16); mu sar_2-a mul-an za-gin_3-gim šid-bi nu-til-le sag-e-eš rig_7 mu-na-ab, "grant him innumerable years, whose number, like that of the heavenly stars of lazuli, has no end" ("Rim-Sin E" line 68); sag-us_2 nu-til-le-[de_3], "constant attendant" ("Rim-Sin G" line 30); ud kalam til-til-e, "the storm that annihilates the Land" ("The Lament for Ur" lines 177, 182, 199); šaman-la_2 kug dam-gar_3-ra-ka til-til, "the assistant who uses up all of (his) merchant's money" ("Two Scribes" line 65 = Johnson, Geller 2015, 183-4); Sa-am-su-i-lu-na lugal kalag-ga numun lu_2 $erem_2$-gal_2-la-ne-ne bi_2-in-til-til-la_2-e, "Samsuiluna, strong king, the one who extinguishes the seed of evil-doers" (RA 114 [2020] 34 v 22'-25'). The form til-til-le-de_3 is an intransitive imperfective participle. Cf. sag-us_2 nu-til-le-[de_3] in "Rim-Sin G" line 20, and mu… nu-til-le in ("Rim-Sin E" line 680, where in the agent likewise is absent. Contrast the perfective numun til-til-la in "Proverb 14" line 16.

13 Wu 1998.

14 "Since Agga … controlled the water of the Euphrates flowing to the South Babylonian(sic), all the city-states submitted to him, but hero Gilgamesh and his city Uruk would not. Probably, some canals of the Euphrates had been dammed up and the water flowing to Uruk had been turned away by Kish on the upper river" (Wu 1998). That the wells were of strategic importance for Uruk was recognized also by Civil (1999-2000, 182): "Our text suggests that its [i.e., Uruk's] inhabitants tried to remediate the lack of water by digging wells… 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 to be assieged, and in any case war would delay the pressing search for essential water". But Civil never considered the possibility that the lack of water had been caused by the diverting of the Euphrates by Akka's army. Rather, he thought that this situation resulted from the fact that the western branch of the Euphrates had shifted away from Uruk already in ancient times, a natural process that is well documented during the river's more recent history (Civil 1999-2000, 182).

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The verb t i l was correctly read as 'to empty (the wells)', also by Andrew George.[15] However, George interpreted the sense of this passage differently: "These lines are usually taken to represent the literal demands of Akka, that the men of Uruk become drawers of water for Kish. I assume instead that in describing a menial task for which there can be no end, the poet conveys figuratively the endless and impossible toil that will follow a surrender of independence".[16]

The diversion of rivers and major canals as a way of strangling the downstream situated settlements was a well-known military strategy in ancient Mesopotamia. The earliest documented case of it is the diversion of the waters of the Tigris by the Gutians, whose objection was to deprive Uruk and other southern city-states of their supplies of irrigation water coming from the Tigris riverine system.[17] Later, the same method was used by the Old Babylonian king Abi-eshuh as part of his war on the Sealand. "By diverting the waters of the Tigris towards the Euphrates, the king intended to dry up the Mesopotamian Marshes, the home of the Sealand enemy, thus, starving its population".[18] Another, even more famous case, of such a military operation occurred in 539 B.C.E., when Cyrus diverted the waters of the Euphrates so that his troops could capture Babylon (Hdt., *Hist*. 1.189-1.191; "Isaiah" 44:27-28). It appears that, from a technical point of view, the diverting of the Euphrates and the Tigris was a relatively simple procedure.[19] But the best illustration of this–because it involves Gilgamesh himself–is provided by a Sumerian literary text describing how the population of Uruk diverted the Euphrates within the city of Uruk, in order to construct in the dry riverbed a stone tomb for Gilgamesh ("The Death of Gilgamesh", Me-Turan Version Segment H lines 10-21; Nippur Version Segment H lines 1-21). Whether true or not, this story shows that such operations must have been quite routine.[20]

The tradition that Gilgamesh was involved in the digging of wells is also preserved in the Akkadian "Gilgamesh Epic". Already in the Old Babylonian version, the elders of Uruk instruct Gilgamesh to excavate wells on his way to the Cedar Forest, so that he may libate Shamash and his father Lugalbanda with fresh water every evening.[21] See also the standard version of the "Gilgamesh Epic", Tablet I 39: *he-ru-ú bu-ú-ri sá* GU_2 KUR, "the one who excavated wells on the hill-flanks?".[22] But this request is bizarre: why should Gilgamesh excavate a new well every day, instead of using spring water that would be readily available to him during his journey? Therefore, one cannot but suspect that, although still vaguely remembered in the Old Babylonian and later periods, the original nature of the connection between Gilgamesh and the wells had been forgotten by that time.[23]

1.3 The Recommendation of the Elders (lines 9-14)

Not unexpectedly, the conservatively inclined elders disagree with Gilgamesh. Offering the gravity of Uruk's water situation as their rationale, they recommend submitting to Kish.

The fact that Gilgamesh subsequently puts the same query before the able-bodied men of Uruk (see under 2.4. and 2.5.) gave rise to the idea that, during Pre-Sargonic times, the governance of southern-Babylonian city-states may have involved the participation of bicameral advisory bodies, composed of the chambers of city elders and the younger citizenry respectively.[24] However, since the existence of such an institution is not mentioned or alluded to anywhere else, I would think that the juxtaposition of the city elders and the young men in this composition is merely a rhetorical device, with the two groups serving as stand-ins for the two alternative approaches/mindsets that tend to dominate the decision-

15 George 1999, 143.

16 George 1999, 143.

17 Steinkeller 2001, 30-1.

18 Van Lerberghe et al. 2017, 18.

19 Such operations were especially easy to conduct on the Euphrates, which always carried much less water and had a lower gradient than the Tigris. Already in Ur III times, and probably even earlier, the Kish branch of the Euphrates was carrying much less water than before, due mainly to the diversion of its water into a new, western branch (Arahtum) (Lauersen, Steinkeller 2017, 73 fn. 10).

20 A very similar story was related by the historian Jordanes about the Visigothic king Alaric. According to that account, upon his death in 411 AD Alaric was allegedly buried under the riverbed of the Busento in Calabria. See Grimm, Grimm 1961, 81.

21 George 2003, 206-7 lines 268-71.

22 George 2003, 540-1.

23 "Wells of Gilgamesh" are also mentioned in lexical sources and in the omen series "Shumma alu" (George 2003, 1: 94-5).

24 See most recently Neumann 2022, with earlier literature.

making process: the more cautious and conservative position typical of the old and the more impulsive and daring stand of the young. Clearly, the fact that Gilgamesh ignores the advice of the elders shows that he does not really need it. His mind is already made up. He consults the young men only because he knows that they will support his course of action.

1.4 Gilgamesh Ignores the Recommendation of the Elders and Lays His Case Before the Able-Bodied Men of Uruk (lines 15-23)

As in his address to the elders, Gilgamesh describes the seriousness of Uruk's water situation but argues that, despite of it, Uruk should not submit to the House of Kish.

1.5 The Recommendation of the Able-bodied Men (lines 24-39)

The able-bodied men, quoting a saying of wisdom about the unrelieved hardship of the serf's dole (lines 25-8), recommend that Uruk resist Kish with arms (line 29). Otherwise, they would be forced to perform corvée work for Kish.

As argued by this author (2013, 362), the saying, which is also attested elsewhere ("Sumerian Proverbs" Collection 3.1), describes the fate of corvée laborers. Crucial here is the phrase gub-gub-bu-de$_3$ tuš-tuš-u$_3$-de$_3$, "if not on duty, then waiting for a duty-assignment" (line 25), which undoubtedly refers to the Ur III rotational system, called bala gub-ba bala-tuš-a. During the bala gub-ba phase, "performing the duty", which lasted half a year, workers were employed full time. During the other half of the year, called bala tuš-a, "sitting out the duty", the same workers served as a reserve force; sometimes, they would hire themselves out for wages, usually to the same institutions. This citation shows that the tale, if not composed in Ur III times, it must at least have been redacted at that time (see further below under 2.1.).

Then, in a sort of motivational 'pep-talk', they try to build up Gilgamesh's confidence and extort him to provide his leadership, reminding Gilgamesh that Uruk has always enjoyed a special divine protection (lines 30-9). They assure him that, given this protection and his own reputation as a renowned warrior/wrestler (literally: 'head-basher'),[25] his very appearance on the battlefield will suffice to overwhelm Akka and his army.

A striking feature of this passage is the apparent connection between Gilgamesh and the young men of Uruk, as contrasted with his adversarial relationship with Uruk's elders. Since he and the young men share a common understanding, one could even say that he self-identifies with this social group: he is one of them. This motif is also reflected in Gilgamesh's title "the king of young men" (lugal guruš-ene), which appears in two Pre-Sargonic votive inscriptions dedicated to him.[26] The fact that this epithet of Gilgamesh is documented nowhere else could have a bearing on when exactly the original version of GA had been composed.

1.6 Gilgamesh Prepares for War (lines 40-7)

Overjoyed by the response of the able-bodied men and buoyed by their enthusiasm, Gilgamesh instructs Enkidu to get the arms ready. Having rejected Akka's demand (which is only implied in the text), Gilgamesh

25 sag LUM-LUM (lines 36 and 110). It is likely that sag LUM-LUM is to be read here sag gul$_2$-gul$_2$, because of the epithet sag-gul-gul-e-n[e], which describes wrestlers in "Gilgamesh and Bull of Heaven" line 18 (Klein, Sefati' 2020, 20, 36). As I note later, Gilgamesh was renowned for his wrestling skills.

26 Steinkeller 2018, 173-4; see further below 2.3. As I argued elsewhere (Steinkeller 2018, 151-6), the kingship of Gilgamesh represented a complete *novum* in the Mythical History of Babylonia. Unlike En-merkar and Lugal-banda, the two other legendary rulers of Uruk, who were Inana's obedient cultic servants, Gilgamesh, as he appears in written records, is "a secular ruler through and through. His interests and preoccupations are of an entirely different kind. Thus, he prefers to be with the boys, goes on foreign expeditions, and seeks fame. His life is all about individual achievement. This attitude is epitomized by his most important and lasting achievement, which was the construction of the city-wall of Uruk. With one insignificant exception, Gilgameš is never described as a temple builder, which was a defining characteristic feature of rulers of southern Babylonia in Early Dynastic times" (154). His predilection to spend time in the company of young men recalls the memorable words spoken by King Henry: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; For he to-day that sheds his blood with me Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile" (in Shakespeare's *Henry V*).

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now expects that Akka and his army will soon be on their way to besiege Uruk. His intention undoubtedly is to launch a surprise attack on them before they reach Uruk and, therefore, to frustrate Akka's plan of battle.

1.7 Akka Lays Siege to Uruk, Frustrating Gilgamesh's Plans (lines 48-50)

The surprise is Uruk's, however, since in less than five days Akka's army lays siege to Uruk. This turn of events being completely unexpected, Uruk is thrown into confusion and despair.

1.8 Gilgamesh Devises a Stratagem (lines 51-3)

Luckily, however, Gilgamesh conceives an alternative plan, which (as we learn only later, see under 1.10.), is to send out a sortie to capture Akka. But for this plan to succeed, a diversionary action is needed, which will permit the sortie to leave Uruk undetected. Gilgamesh asks for a volunteer who would be willing to sacrifice himself to create such a diversion. Birhurture, one of Gilgamesh's bodyguards, steps out, praising the cleverness of the plan.

The role of Birhurture is of crucial importance for the narrative. It was brilliantly solved by Wolfgang Heimpel:[27] "Being shut up behind their wall, the Urukeans were unable to use their numerical advantage. To get it back they must make a sortie. (Toward that end, Birhurture is sent out as a distraction, and subsequently caught and beaten by Akka's soldiers). This is according to plan, because, struggling with them, Birhurture manages to get them away from the gate, which remains unguarded".[28]

1.9 Gilgamesh's Stratagem is Put into Action – the Set-Up (lines 59-83)

Birhurture goes out of Uruk through the main city gate. As was called for by Gilgamesh's plan, he is immediately caught and, perhaps after offering some perfunctory resistance, brought before Akka. But, as soon as he begins to speak to Akka, the chief armorer (zabar-dab$_5$) of Uruk shows up on the top of the city wall, treating the enemy to a little performance. Such shows of force, which consisted of taunting, obscene gestures, and all sorts of intimidating behavior, formed a traditional prelude to the battle in all societies.

A good example here is the Maori war-dance called *peruperu* (*haka*): "Various actions are employed in the course of a performance, including facial contortions such as showing the whites of the eyes, and poking out the tongue, and a wide variety of vigorous body actions such as slapping the hands against the body and stomping of the feet. As well as chanted words, a variety of cries and grunts are used" ("Haka" Wikipedia).[29]

When asked by Akka if the man on the wall is his master (i.e., Gilgamesh), Birhurture replies that that man surely is not his master and goes on to taunt Akka (lines 70-81).

Birhurture boasts that, if that man indeed were Gilgamesh, Akka's army would instantly be defeated and Akka himself would be captured in the midst of his troops. Uruk's military capabilities being null at

27 Heimpel 1981, 242.

28 Cf. Klein 1983, 204: "Alternatively, his [i.e., Birhurture's] task may have been to divert the attention of Agga and his generals from the city-gate, the point from which Enkidu and his commando-troops planned to launch their attack on the army of Kish. Consequently, the ensuing attack takes the besieging army by surprise, and Agga is captured in the midst of his body-guards, at the most protected place of his military camp".

29 Pre-battle preliminaries of this kind were the subject of a recent monograph by James Gersbach. Naming them "battle expression" and focusing on their manifestations in the Classical world, this author characterizes them as follows: "Ancient literary and archaeological evidence reveals that military forces from the Graeco-Roman world intentionally employed a range of battle expression types that aimed to adversely affect the psychological state of the enemy on the battlefield. Characteristics of intimidatory battle expressions were large-scale choreographed demonstrations of massed movement and/or noise as well as taunting that could be inspired from events that transpired on the battlefield. The adoption of intimidatory practices on the battlefield appears consistently in the evidence and universally amongst cultural groups, suggesting it was a typical feature of ancient military life. The purpose of gaining a psychological edge over the enemy by deflating the enemy's mental wellbeing had real military outcomes and should be considered as an extension to military strategy. The sophistication and humour that ancient armies exhibited on the battlefield in their attempts to intimidate or distract the enemy justify the adoption of the battle expression as a replacement for war cry when accounting for the sonic and visual displays of military forces on the battlefield that could transpire before and during military engagement in antiquity. Evidence reveals that military forces, irrespective of ethnic composition, throughout the Graeco-Roman world, adopted tactics that aimed to intimidate the enemy prior to and/or during battle" (Gersbach 2023, 55). For threats and boats in the formal preliminaries to battle in epics, see Hainsworth 1989, 230.

this point, such a proposition sounds absurd and highly offensive to the Kishites, who give vent to their anger by beating Birhurture into a pulp. In fact, however, Birhuture's boast is an accurate prediction of what precisely is going to happen when, only a while later, Gilgamesh himself shows up on the wall.

There are reasons to suspect that the zabar-dab$_5$ official is none other than Enkidu:

1. as is made clear by the meaning of zabar-dab$_5$, "the one who holds / take care of bronzes", this title designated, at least originally, an official in charge of bronze objects, primarily weapons and various types of vessels. Because of the rarity and high cost of bronze during the third millennium, the social status of the zabar-dab$_5$ must have been very high. Unfortunately, little information on this official survives. He is documented since Pre-Sargonic times. An ED IIIb tablet from Adab mentions a certain Lugal-men zabar-dab$_6$(URUDA)[30] (CUSAS 35 7 iii 9-10). Most of the attestations of zabar-dab$_5$ date to the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods.[31] He disappears subsequently. In Ur III times, he was one of the highest officials of the state, whose principal role apparently was to provide ritual offerings on behalf of the royal family.[32] As indicated by the titles zabar-dab$_5$ geštin$_x$(DIN) kaš-a gal sagi-mah ugula maš$_2$-šu-gid$_2$-gid$_2$-de$_3$-ne, "the zabar-dab$_5$, the great one of wine and beer, the chief cup-bearer,[33] and the supervisor of the diviners" which were carried by the zabar-dab$_5$ dNanna-zi-šag$_4$-gal$_2$ and ^{d}En-lil-zi$_2$-šag$_4$-gal$_2$,[34] he also supplied alcoholic drinks to the royal court, and supervised the (royal) diviners. None of the Ur III and Old Babylonian sources offer an indication that the zabar-dab$_5$ was in any way connected with weapons or military affairs. It is possible, however, that, by the Ur III period, the zabar-dab$_5$ had become a purely honorific title, which no longer had anything to do with his original function, which, as I suggest, was that of the "chief armorer".[35] Such an evolution of titles was a common phenomenon throughout history. A good example here is the Polish *miecznik*, "the one of swords", originally the king's deputy in charge of weapons, who, by the sixteenth century AD, became a titular court official.
2. Earlier in the tale, it is Enkidu who is instructed by Gilgamesh to get the arms ready (lines 42-5). This suggests that Enkidu served as Uruk's chief armorer.
3. The "performance" given by the zabar-dab$_5$ on the top of Uruk's city wall would be convincing and credible only if he closely resembled Gilgamesh. And the only person fitting this role is Enkidu, who was a virtual double of Gilgamesh. Otherwise, if the zabar-dab$_5$ was some other, anonymous individual, his participation in the plot, which was of crucial importance for Gilgamesh's plan to succeed, would be difficult to justify. Moreover, if the zabar-dab$_5$ had been, as in Ur III times, an official in charge of royal offerings, the reason why he should play such an active role in an event of purely military nature is without an explanation.

But, even if the zabar-dab$_5$ was not Enkidu, this does not affect the essential meaning of the episode.

30 The value dab$_6$ of URUDA is well documented in the Pre-Sargonic sources. See, e.g., ba-dab$_6$-kar-re$_2$ (Frayne 2008, 269-75 Urukagina 3 ii 13'); mu-dab$_6$-il$_2$ (Frayne 2008, 433-7, Lugal-zagesi 1 ii 32); mu-dab$_6$-zi (Frayne 2008, 433-7, Lugal-zagesi 1 iii 2).

31 For attestations, consult CAD Z 5, BDTNS, and CDLI.

32 According to Walther Sallaberger (1999, 186-8), zabar-dab$_5$ was "das höchste kultische Amt" and "der höchste Verantwortlicher für den königlischen Kult" in Ur III Babylonia.

33 That the Ur III zabar-dab$_5$ officials supervised cupbearers (sagi) is confirmed by the examples where the sagi are identified as their subordinates. See, e.g., SAT 1 53:9-10; Kennelmen n. 9:6; AnOr 7 79:7-8; grain še-ba sagi iti 12-kam ugula zabar-dab$_5$ (Nisaba 15/2 1079:1-4).

34 CBT 1 BM.12920+A seal; CBT 3, BM.28053a seal; BDTNS 043167 seal; Nisaba 30 58 seal; BDTNS 170855 seal; BDTNS 17133 seal; studied by Waetzoldt (2006). The reading of DIN.KAŠ-a-gal is somewhat uncertain. Waetzoldt tried to connect it with the later KAŠ.DIN = kurun. However, since no other examples of kurun are otherwise attested in Ur III texts, a more likely reading is geštin$_x$(DIN) kaš-a(k) gal. For the examples of wine and beer being issued together, see the following examples: 150 kuš ka-bar kaš ^{giš}geštin-še$_3$, "150 leather jar-stoppers for beer and wine" (ITT 5 10010:6); 10 gin$_2$ i$_3$-giš 2 sila$_2$ zu$_2$-lum nig$_2$-sizkur$_2$-ra kaš geštin, "2 shekels of sesame oil and 2 liters of dates as part of the offering of beer and wine" (Behrens 74:1-3); 4 ^{dug}nig$_2$(GAR) gal 0.4.0 kaš geštin, "4 large nig$_2$ jars with 40 liters of beer and wine" (Atiqot 4, pl. 20 n. 67:17).

35 Such a possibility was already considered by CAD Z 6a: "Gilgamesh and Akka" and other sources "indicate that zabar *dabbu* was a high military rank (possibly, originally, the weapon carrier of the king)". I assume that this interpretation is to be attributed to Thorkild Jacobsen.

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1.10 The "Sting" (lines 84-99)

At this point,[36] the chief armorer (who, as I suggest, is actually Enkidu) departs from the scene, his place on the wall being taken over by Gilgamesh. The appearance of Gilgamesh in his resplendent battle gear stirs up everybody in Uruk. A sortie is formed–undoubtedly by Enkidu–armed with battle maces and put in a battle-ready position in the lane leading to the city gate.[37]

The Kishites, already distracted by the performance of the armorer and the taunts of Birhurture, have now their attention completely focused on the top of the wall–where a new figure has just appeared–leaving the city gate unguarded. This allows Enkidu to sneak out through it without detection. After ascertaining that the way is clear, he is apparently followed by the rest of the sortie.

Noticing Gilgamesh, Akka asks Birhurture whether this is his master. Birhurture replies that this, indeed, is his master.[38] As he says it, Enkidu and his men make a surprise attack and take Akka prisoner. And so Birhurture's prediction is fulfilled.

The importance of Gilgamesh's appearance on the wall was rightly stressed by Civil: "The whole point of the tale is to show the supernatural powers of G[ilgameš]. He alone, by its sole presence, appearing with his radiating aura at the top of the city wall, overwhelms the Kish army. All the previous episodes are there to make clear how no one can truly help him, he acts all alone".[39]

But I think that Civil somewhat exaggerates the role of Gilgamesh in the tale. He certainly did not act alone. The contributions of Birhurture, the zabar-dab$_5$ (= Enkidu?), and the ordinary Urukean soldiers were equally responsible for Uruk's success. Its victory over Kish was a joint effort, which, as I see it, depended on purely military factors (see further below under 2.2.3.). Moreover, the powers of Gilgamesh were not "supernatural", at least not in the otherworldly sense. Like the Homeric champions, he indeed possessed extraordinary physical characteristics and was an exceptionally able and experienced warrior. One must also assume that his armor and weapons were of special quality as well. His appearance, therefore, must have been truly frightening. But this fact, however significant, would not have been sufficient to defeat Akka's army.

The real hero was in fact Birhurture, who sacrificed himself for the common good. More than anything else in the tale, Birhurture's act is the reflection of a true heroic ethos.

In the passage describing the capture of Akka, of interest is the mention of barges (ma$_2$-gur$_8$) in lines 80 and 98: "the prows of the barges were chopped off". It is obvious that Akka's soldiers must have used barges, on which their materiel and supplies were transported over the Euphrates, from Kish down to Uruk. Accordingly, it appears that, just before their final assault on Uruk, they had reverted the Euphrates back into its original bed.

1.11 The Reconciliation Between Gilgamesh and Akka (lines 100-12)

In recognition of a favor that Akka had apparently granted Gilgamesh sometime in the past,[40] Gilgamesh pardons Akka. In addition, he makes Akka his governor and general. He even puts him in charge of all his troops. Akka, in turn, acknowledges that Gilgamesh indeed is the true and only ruler of Uruk. These acts of mutual generosity signal that Uruk and Kish are now fully reconciled with each other. Akka returns to Kish.

The "earlier favor" referred to in this passage is one of the many internal clues that there existed an oral, considerably longer version of the tale which narrated an earlier phase of the war between Uruk and Kish. In that hypothetical earlier conflict, Kish may have been victorious over Uruk. Since Gilgamesh compares himself to a "captured bird", it is conceivable that Akka–or alternatively his father En-mebaragesi–had captured Gilgamesh at that point, pardoning him subsequently.

36 Sting: "a carefully planned operation, typically one involving deception" ("Oxford Dictionaries" online).

37 It is possible that Enkidu's sortie had actually used a *different* city gate to sneak out of Uruk. This would have made this action more difficult to detect by Akka's soldiers.

38 Most of the translators assume that, in line 93, it is Enkidu whom Akka is addressing. See Cooper 1981, 237; Jacobsen 1987, 353; Katz 1995, 45. But this is impossible, because, at that moment, Enkidu and his sortie were about to attack Akka's camp.

39 Civil 1999-2000, 187.

40 See line 110a. I follow here source CBS.10355+N.3591 (Wilcke 1998, 484), which reads: [sag mu]-sig$_{10}$ šu-mu ⌜im-mi-ib-gi$_4$⌝, "it has been entrusted to you. Repay my favor!". This MS omits "You are (its) master (and) champion! The head-basher, the prince beloved of An".

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It appears quite certain that his theme of reconciliation, which concludes the tale, was introduced only in Ur III times, when the surviving written version was apparently redacted (see further below under 2.1).

1.12 The Meaning of the Tale

If one accepts this understanding of the plot, GA is a tale of how, when put in a seemingly hopeless situation, Uruk was able to prevail over Kish thanks mainly to Gilgamesh's cunning and military acumen. In many ways, therefore, it is an apotheosis of Gilgamesh as a crafty military strategist. For this reason, a title "How Gilgamesh tricked/outsmarted Akka" would be quite appropriate for it.[41] As he appears in our tale, Gilgamesh was more of an Odysseus than an Achilles figure. Note that, apart from performing a show on the city wall, he did not participate in the battle himself![42]

Translation of GA

1. The envoys of Akka, son of En-mebaragesi,
2. came from Kish to Gilgamesh.
3. Before the elders of his city Gilgamesh
4. lays the matter, seeking advice:
5. "The wells are becoming depleted! The wells of the (whole) land (of Uruk) are becoming depleted!
6. "The small (i.e., shallow) wells of the (whole) land (of Uruk) are becoming depleted!
7. "(Even) the deep wells with hoisting ropes are becoming depleted!
8. "(But, in spite of this) we should not submit to the House of Kish! Let us fight!"
9. The convened gathering of his city's elders
10. answers Gilgamesh:
11. "(Indeed) the wells are becoming depleted! The wells of the (whole) land (of Uruk) are becoming depleted!
12. "The small (i.e., shallow) wells of the (whole) land (of Uruk) are becoming depleted!
13. "(Even) the deep wells with hoisting ropes are becoming depleted!
14. "We should (therefore) submit to the House of Kish! We must not fight!"
15. Gilgamesh, Lord of Kulaba,
16. (being) the one who trusts Inanna,
17. did not take to heart the words of his city's elders.
18. For the second time, before the able-bodied men of his city Gilgamesh
19. lays the matter, seeking advice:
20. "The wells are becoming depleted! The wells of the (whole) land (of Uruk) are becoming depleted!
21. "The small (i.e., shallow) wells of the (whole) land (of Uruk) are becoming depleted!
22. "(Even) the deep wells with hoisting ropes are becoming depleted!
23. "(But, in spite of this) we should not submit to the House of Kish! We should fight!"
24. The convened gathering of his city's able-bodied men answers Gilgamesh:
25. "As they say: if not on duty, then waiting for a duty-assignment;
26. "If not marching at the prince's side,
27. "Then cleaving to the donkey's thigh–
28. "Who would have stomach for that?
29. "We should not (therefore) submit to the House of Kish! Let us fight!
30. "Uruk, handiwork of the gods,
31. "Eanna, the temple descended from heaven–
32. "it was the great gods themselves who fashioned its parts!

41 A similar characterization was offered by Heimpel 1981, 243: "the story relates a trick and becomes entertaining, a quality which may contain a clue for the question of the function of the text: the story of the Trojan horse, which also tells how a city wall was overcome by trickery, was, according to the Odyssey, sung for entertainment of the nobility".

42 This point has also perceptively been noted by Ponchia 2016, 52: "[this passage] reveals at the same time a comic or satirical overtone in its portrayal of a heroic king who stays safe behind his wall, while the heroic action of confronting the enemy on the field is delegated to poor Birhurture, who gets repeatedly beaten". But I do not see any reason to suspect comic overtones here. As being usually based on purely personal perceptions, scholars' attempts to detect satire/humor in Sumerian literature have not in general been very successful.

33. "Its great ramparts were compacted by An!
34. "Its lofty dwellings were founded by An!
35. "It (now) remains in your trust! You are (its) master (and) champion!
36. "When a head-basher (like you), a prince beloved of An,
37. "comes (to confront Akka), oh, how he will be afraid!
38. "Its (i.e., of Kish) troops will dwindle, they will scatter (in retreat) from their rear;
39. "his men will be unable to resist!"
40. Then Gilgamesh, Lord of Kulaba,
41. Rejoiced at the words of his city's able-bodied men, his spirit brightened.
42. He speaks to his servant Enkidu:
43. "Let the implements and arms of battle be made ready!
44. "Let the battle mace return to your side!
45. "May they create a great terror, a terrifying aura,
46. "So that when he (i.e., Akka) comes (to battle) my great terror will overwhelm him,
47. "His plans will be frustrated, his strategy will fall apart!"
48. (But) not ten, not even five, days had passed
49. (When) Akka, the son of En-mebaragesi, laid siege to Uruk.
50. (And so it was) the plans of Uruk that became frustrated!
51. Now Gilgamesh, Lord of Kulaba,
52. speaks to his warriors:
53. "My warriors, you (all) look despondent.
54. "(But) somebody with courage (among you) surely will rise (and say): 'I will go to Akka!'"
55. Birhurture, his royal bodyguard,
56. lauds his master (for his stratagem):
57. "I will go to Akka,
58. "so that his plans will be frustrated, his strategy will fall apart!"
59. And so Birhurture goes out through the city gate.
60. As soon as Birhurture went out through the city gate,
61. they captured him at the entrance to the city gate.
62. They pounded Birhurture from head to toe
63. (and) brought him before Akka.
64. He speaks to Akka.
65. He had not yet finished his words when the armorer of Uruk climbed up the wall
66. and leaned out over it.
67. Akka saw him.
68. He speaks to Birhurture:
69. "Servant, is that man your master?"
70. "That man is not my master!
71. "Were that man my master,
72. "Were that his terrifying brow,
73. "Were those his bison eyes,
74. "Were that his lapis beard,
75. "Were those his fine fingers,
76. "Then would not multitudes fall down, would not multitudes rise up?
77. "Would not multitudes be covered with the dust (of battle)?
78. "Would not all the foreign invaders be overwhelmed?
79. "Would not the mouths of people (lit. : the mouth of the land) be filled with the dust (of death)?
80. "Would not the prows of the barges be chopped off?
81. "And would not Akka, the king of Kish, be taken captive in the midst of his troops?"
82. (When they heard this), they beat him, they struck him,
83. they pound him from head to toe.
84. Following the armorer of Uruk, Gilgamesh climbs up the wall.
85. (His) terrifying aura overwhelmed everyone of Kulaba, young and old.
86. The able-bodied men of Uruk took up battle maces.
87. They positioned themselves in the passageway to the city-gate's entrance.
88. (Then) Enkidu alone came out (stealthily) through the city gate.
89. (At that very moment) Gilgamesh leaned out over the wall.
90. As he was looking out, Akka saw him.

91. (Akka speaks to Birhurture:) "Servant, is that man your master?"
92. "Yes, that man is indeed my master!"
93. Just as he (i.e., Birhurture) said that,
94. Multitudes fell down, multitudes rose up,
95. Multitudes were covered with the dust (of battle),
96. All the foreign invaders were overwhelmed,
97. The mouths of people were filled with the dust (of death),
98. The prows of the barges were chopped off,
99. And Akka, the king of Kish, was taken captive in the midst of his troops!
100. (Then) Gilgamesh, Lord of Kulaba,
101. spoke to Akka:
102. "Akka my captain, Akka my colonel,
102a. "Akka my governor, Akka my general,
103. "Akka, the generalissimus of (all) my soldiers,
104. "Akka, you (once) granted me breath, you granted me life!
105. "The one who was taken away (from his home) you Akka sheltered in (your) bosom!
106. The bird which was carried away (from its nest) you Akka fed with grain!"
107. (Akka speaks:) "Uruk, handiwork of the gods,
108. "Its great ramparts were compacted by An!
109. "Its lofty dwellings were founded by An!
110. "It indeed remains in your trust! You are (its) master (and) champion! The head-basher, the prince beloved of An.
110a. ["Repay me] my favor!"
111. (Gilgamesh speaks:) "By Utu, I hereby repay you the former favor!"
112. And he set Akka free (to return) to Kish.
113. Gilgamesh, Lord of Kulaba,
114. Praising you is sweet!

2 Part 2. The Date, the Literary Classification, and the Possible Oral Background of GA

2.1 The Date of GA

Like most of the surviving Sumerian literary compositions, all the manuscripts of GA date to Old Babylonian times. It is generally assumed, however, that many (if not the majority) of these compositions had actually been composed during the Ur III period. In some instances–though such are quite rare–an even earlier date of composition can be demonstrated. Not surprisingly, therefore, GA too has usually been dated to Ur III times. This is especially so since the other Sumerian compositions dealing with Gilgamesh, especially "Gilgamesh and Huwawa" among them, were almost certainly composed during the Ur III period. Such an attribution is also favored by the fact that, as well known, the Ur III kings traced their descent back to Gilgamesh and his dynasty.

By contrast, however, several scholars were of the opinion that "Gilgamesh and Akka" may have been composed in Early Dynastic times. Here one can mention Thorkild Jacobsen, Geza Komoróczy, Dina Katz,[43] and Gianni Marchesi.[44] A pre-Ur III date of the tale was also considered by Mario Liverani, with a difference that, according to him, its plot reflects best the historical realities of the Sargonic period.[45]

A radically different dating was suggested by Claus Wilcke, who speculated that GA was composed at Uruk in Old Babylonian times, around the time of Sumu-el of Larsa.[46] Wilcke based this dating on the fact that some of the manuscripts of GA are written in the characteristically late Old Babylonian

43 "It may be suggested that the early tale originated prior to Utu-hegal's war against the Gutians, perhaps in Gilgamesh's own time" (Katz 1987, 114). For the same dating, see also Katz 1993, 31.

44 Jacobsen 1987, 345; Komoróczy under Klein 1991, 127 fn. 23; Katz 1987, 114; Marchesi 2004, 192 n. 220.

45 "The tale ... [makes] more sense if contextualized after the victory of Sargon against Lugalzagesi. This was the time when the rulers of Uruk tried to reconcile their current subordination to the empire with their former autonomy, rooted in the past splendour of their city" (Liverani 2014, 148).

46 "Als Entstehungsort des Epos wird man Uruk vemutten können [...] ungefähr zur Zeit von Sumu-el von Larsa [...] Ein Epos über den die Unabhängigkeit Uruks gewinnenden mytischen König Gilgameš bietet sich an als Legitimationsmythos" (Wilcke 1998, 481).

version of Sumerian.[47] However, orthography is not a reliable dating criterion.[48] It is known that the Old Babylonian scribes routinely rewrote earlier texts according to their understanding of the Sumerian grammar. A good example in point is the composition "Instructions of Shuruppak". Although originally written down in ED III times, and probably recopied during the Sargonic and Ur III periods, this composition was eventually completely rewritten in Old Babylonian times, in accordance with the then grammatical and orthographic rules. If not for the existence of the earlier MSS, one would never suspect that it was composed in the ED III period.

Therefore, the assumption that GA dates, *at least in the surviving written form*, to the Ur III period is the most probable one.[49] As already discussed, three points support this dating specifically: 1) the inclusion in the tale of a proverb whose background unquestionably is Ur III (see above under 1.8.); 2) the sequence of officials cited in lines 102-3 of the tale–the captain (u g u l a), the colonel (n u - b a n d a $_3$), the governor (e n s i $_2$), and the general (š a g i n a)–is characteristic of the Ur III politico-military organization;[50] 3) the concluding theme of reconciliation, which likewise seems to reflect Ur III reality (see below). In my opinion, these three points offer undisputable evidence that, disregarding the exact date of its composition, the tale underwent some degree of redaction in Ur III times.[51]

For the dating of the tale, of particular significance is the theme of reconciliation that concludes and so to say "crowns" the narrative. This is because this theme fits perfectly the needs of Ur III political propaganda, whose primary objective was to turn Babylonia into a fully integrated political, economic, and cultural system.

Although Babylonia had successfully been united by Ur-Namma and his son Shulgi, it is more than certain that significant differences and tensions between the southern and northern portions of it still existed in Ur III times. In my view, the tale's conclusion is a propagandistic argument that, while the political relations between South and North had indeed been characterized by a long-standing conflict, that adversarial relationship is finally a thing of the past, with the two lands coexisting now in peace and harmony. This argument is diplomatically coached in the realities of semi-mythical past: since the times of Gilgamesh and Akka, the balance of power between southern and northern Babylonia has constantly shifted back and forth. Now, finally, the conflict between the two has peacefully been resolved. Although Uruk (read Ur-Namma/Shulgi) had been the ultimate winner, Kish has become an equal partner of Uruk. Its ruler, now serving as a governor and a general of Kish, shares power amicably with the ruler of Uruk.

A very similar propagandistic paradigm underpins the compositions forming the so-called "Aratta" cycle. In the hoary past, the relationship between the lowlands (Babylonia) and the Iranian highlands (Elam, Marhashi, etc.) used to be a hostile and competitive one. But this situation has changed under the Ur III kings, when an age of peaceful coexistence (*Pax Babyloniaca* of sorts) had been ushered in. Because of their mutual dependence–the former need metals, stone, and timber, the latter need grain, oils, and woolen textiles–the two regions must cooperate with one another, both economically and politically.

However, the fact that GA was redacted in Ur III times does not mean that the *entire* tale was necessarily composed at that time. As the following discussion will show, my own preference is to think that there existed an oral version of the tale, which had been composed much earlier, possibly as early as ED times. One may speculate that this oral GA was known, probably in various forms, from the Pre-Sargonic into the Ur III period, and that it was only under the Ur III dynasty that it was finally put into writing. That written GA, the text we have at our disposal, was a considerably abbreviated version of the original oral tale.

47 "Der Text von 'Gilgameš und Akka' zeigt also Merkmale, die für seine Entstehung in der 'frühaltbabylonischen' Zeit sprechen können" (Wilcke 1998, 472).

48 Wilcke's interpretation has recently been questioned also by Neumann 2023, 511.

49 Cf. Neumann 2023, 510-11: "Die literarische Überlieferung zu Gilgameš, hymnisch wie episch, hatte daher letztlich zum Ziel, in den Handlungen des Königs von Uruk die Legitimität und Wirkmächtigkeit des Herrschers Šulgi von Ur zu vermitteln. Dies dürfte gewiss auch auf die vorliegende Dichtung 'Gilgameš und Akka' zutreffen".

50 The ranks of u g u l a, n u - b a n d a $_3$, and š a g i n a are typical of the military organization. See Steinkeller 2013, 351-2. With the addition of e n s i $_2$, "governor", the sequence comprises the most important positions of the Ur III political system.

51 Katz 1993, 31-2, too believed that the tale was edited in Ur III times.

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2.2 The Uniqueness of GA Among Sumerian Literary Compositions

It has been customary to class GA together with the other Sumerian narrative tales that concern Gilgamesh. This Gilgamesh "cycle", numbering five compositions,[52] has in turn been typologically linked by scholars to the four narrative poems dealing with the adventures of two other semi-historical rulers of Uruk, En-merkar and Lugal-banda. All these compositions are usually identified by Sumerologists as "epics". I will discuss the validity of this designation later.

However, GA is completely unlike any of those compositions. Among the features that make it singularity unique, the following ones are particularly striking.

2.2.1. The tale is replete with the examples of what Miguel Civil identified as "discourse ellipsis", an omission of the information that is essential for understanding of the plot. In fact, so much information is left unsaid that the plot of GA is practically incomprehensible in its present form. Thus, we are never told the content of Akka's demand; the importance of wells is never explained; Gilgamesh's intention to confront Akka in the field is not spelled out; beside Gilgamesh's question "Who will go to Akka?", the nature of his alternative plan is not specified; the climax of the tale, during which Enkidu leads a sortie out of Uruk's city walls and captures Akka, is only briefly sketched out; and the reasons why Gilgamesh pardons Akka are never explained. In my judgment at least, the tale records only the high points of the plot, told in a characteristic "telegraphic style".[53]

These facts strongly suggest that, in its present form, the tale is but a summary or an abridgement of a longer story. For this conclusion, see already Jacobsen:

> This short tale of Gilgamesh and Aka remains so far the only example of true primary epic that Sumerian has to offer. It may well be that the genre was losing favor and was dying out by the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur, from which the bulk of the known literary compositions dates. That the genre once was better represented is indicated by "Gilgamesh and Aka" itself, for that tale is clearly not self-contained, but represents rather a single episode in a much wider epic context leading up to it that is now lost. This particular tale may have survived because of the dramatic way in which it presents the inner conflict in Gilgamesh between ambition and loyalty, pride and gratitude, and its resolution. (Jacobsen 1987, 345)

2.2.2. Another distinguishing feature of the tale is its patently profane character. Within the entire body of Sumerian narrative compositions, literary and historical alike, GA is the *only* text in which events take place without any direct or indirect divine intervention, with their outcomes being the sole result of human actions.[54]

Strangely, this point has attracted little attention so far. Notable exceptions here are Kramer, Komoróczy, and Klein: "Brief as it is, however, it [i.e. GA] is of rather unusual interest. Its plot deals with humans only; unlike all the other epic tales, it introduces no mythological motifs involving any of the Sumerian deities".[55]

As G. Komoróczy correctly pointed out (cf. his *A Sumer Irodalmi Hagyomány*, 40 ff; 54-5), one of the major characteristics of our epic, indicating its great antiquity, is the conspicuous absence of magical or mythological motives from its plot".[56]

That GA significantly differs in this respect from other Sumerian 'epic' poems was observed also by Katz. However, rather than interpret these distinguishing features positively as evidence of the tale's

52 Apart from GA, these are "Gilgamesh and Huwawa", "Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven", "The Death of Gilgamesh", and "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld".

53 Civil 1999-2000, 180, tended to deny the possibility that the "discourse elipses" in GA are intentional deletions, explaining them rather as a performance method, by which the narrator relied "on common knowledge in order to establish an empathic connection with his audience". In this case, however, the omissions are too many and too serious to be accounted for in this manner: the Ur III audience would certainly have lacked the knowledge necessary to reconstruct the intricacies of the plot. Significantly, at the same time Civil 1999-2000, 188, strongly believed that written Sumerian literary texts are generally abbreviated versions of oral compositions.

54 Except for the mentions of An and Inana in stereotypical expressions: "Gilgamesh the one trusts Inana" (line 16), "the walls and dwellings of Uruk were compacted by An" (lines 33-4, 108-9), and "prince beloved of An" (lines 36 and 110), deities do not play any role in the tale.

55 Kramer 1963, 186.

56 Klein 1983, 204 n. 19. At my request, Dr. Zsombor Földi has kindly read Komoróczy's Hungarian text. He identifies Komoróczy's main conclusions as follows: GA is the most archaic piece of Sumerian epic that has come down to us; of all the Sumerian epics, GA is the only one that is free of irrational/magical elements; such elements appear gradually later and thus constitute a criterion for dating these compositions.

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distinctiveness, Katz judged them negatively as compositional deficiencies, which, as she seemed to think, take away from the value of GA as an example of 'epic' poetry:

> In respect to its literary form *Gilgamesh and Akka* is indeed structured as an epic tale... the composition, however, lacks some typical features of the epic genre. The setting is narrower in scope, the protagonists act like ordinary human beings, and there is no involvement of gods or demons. Furthermore, there are no philosophical or moral implications. Thus *Gilgamesh and Akka* is not only the shortest tale about Gilgamesh, but also the only one lacking mythical or legendary elements.[57]

2.2.3. The tale focuses its interest exclusively on the martial aspects of the Uruk-Kish conflict, relishing the shifts taking place in the constantly changing military situation. In my view, this interest in military realia, which would make the tale particularly attractive to an audience of experienced warriors, is probably its main and defining characteristic. This characteristic is completely unique, not only among Sumerian compositions, but also within the entire corpus of the surviving cuneiform literature.

2.2.4. The brevity of GA is another feature that sets it apart from the extant Sumerian 'epic' poems. This fact, however, does not disqualify it from being classified as an epic, if indeed this designation applies to our tale (see below under 2.3. where I address this question in detail). Although in the common understanding of this term, epic indeed is thought to be a long narrative poem,[58] epics vary greatly in size, the scale of the genre being from the short lay or poem to the long epic.[59] Thus, Russian bylina may be as short as 23 lines, though usually from 100 to a 1000; the poems of the "Elder Edda" number from about 40 to 384 lines; the ballads in the Kalevala between 50 and 400.

According to Paul Zumthor,[60] short epic commonly is "a story with a single episode, in dramatic gradations, or a hyperbolic accumulation of brief juxtaposed episodes–a single character, sometimes collective …, fighting a stronger adversary".

The artistic integrity of the short epic was noted by Maurice Bowra: "both short and long poems have appropriate techniques. It is wrong to assume that the short lay is an imperfect preliminary to the full epic".[61]

"The short lay has its own characteristics and standards. It can be roughly divided into two classes. The first, which is much commoner, treats a single subject, the second a series of episodes, and this difference dictates a considerable difference of manner".[62]

However, given the fact that, as discussed earlier, the surviving written version of GA undoubtedly is heavily abbreviated, the length of the original oral version (if such indeed existed, see below under 2.3.) is impossible to calculate.

2.2.5. Unlike the other Sumerian "epics", which invariably have long and complicated plots, GA is concerned with a single but crucial episode: the siege of Uruk by the forces of Kish and the capture of Akka. As argued earlier, that episode was likely part of a much longer narrative, which described the war between Uruk and Kish.

As emphasized by Bowra, "the art of the single episode" is typical of short epics. "The art of the short lay consists largely of creating this sense of crisis and leading rapidly to the simple dramatic moment".[63] "What counts is the central, significant event, the surprise which it awakes and the force with which it strikes us".[64]

But "epic episodes" are more than that. Very often they assume the role of the "epic moment", the high point of the narrative, the climax of the whole story. See the following observations by A.T. Hatto:

57 Katz 1993, 3. Katz underestimated the potentialities of the epic genre, since, as one can learn from any standard introduction to world epic, neither the brief scale of GA nor its reliance on human actors to the total exclusion of divine participants and of any other fantastic elements makes it less of an epic poem, both features, in fact, being commonly found in this immensely rich and multifaceted body of literature.

58 See, e.g., Thrall et al. 2008, 174-5: "A long narrative in elevated style presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race".

59 Bowra 1952, 330.

60 Zumthor 1990, 82.

61 Bowra 1952, 331.

62 Bowra 1952, 331.

63 Bowra 1952, 334-5.

64 Bowra 1952, 334.

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"Epic poetry is apt to condense long-drawn tensions into brief scenes of dramatic power enhanced by visual magnificence, that is, 'epic moments'"; "epic moments are highly charged narrative ganglia".[65]

2.2.6. Of all the Mesopotamian narrative compositions, Sumerian and Akkadian alike, GA is the only one that begins *in medias res*.[66]

As recognized since ancient times, such introductions are characteristic of the epic genre. It was already Horace who, in *Ars poetica*, asserted that epic must begin *in medias res*.

Modern students of the genre have invariably stressed the commonness of such an opening in epics as well. Thus, according to Bowra, who cites many relevant examples, "short poems may equally well begin with an opening which goes straight to the heart of the matter in question... starts in the middle of an action which indeed explains itself".[67] As this author writes, *in medias res* beginnings are closely connected with the principle of the single episode: "The poet sees that he must make the most of it and goes straight to the point at the start".[68]

Apart from the "Iliad", other famous attestations of such an introduction come from "Slovo o Polku Igorove": "Igor waits for his dear brother Vsevolod. And Wild Bull Vsevolod [arrives and] says to him"; and "The Poem of the Cid": "My Cid turned his head and stopped and gazed with streaming eyes".

In medias res beginnings commonly treat of "persons arriving with news or the like", very often messengers.[69] This phenomenon is particularly frequent in short poems, though it appears in long epics as well, as in "The Iliad", which begins with the description of how Chryses, the priest of Apollo, arrives with rich gifts to ransom his daughter. It may not be accidental that GA begins with an arrival of messengers as well.

2.3 Was There an Oral Version of GA?

That there was an oral version of GA is not a novel idea. Among the scholars who entertained such a view, one may name Kramer, Heimpel, Alster, and Jacobsen.[70] On the other hand, Jerrold Cooper took a more cautious position on this issue: "Where and by whom epic tales like Gilgamesh and Agga were recited and what relation our written texts have to those that were actually recited are all questions whose answers must remain guesses".[71]

Civil offered a particularly extensive and cogent argument in favor of the existence of oral poetry in ancient Sumer, with a specific reference to GA. His views deserve to be cited in full:

> 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 compositions 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... 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.[72]

65 Hatto 1980, 1, 4, 6.

66 Civil 1999-2000, 180-1, argued that since "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 Akka I' and assume that what we have is its sequence". This is incorrect, however. *In medias res* beginnings are by no means universal. They appear typically in epics. Characteristically, one finds no examples of them in Sumero-Akkadian literature, which favors etiological/cosmological introductions.

67 Bowra 1952, 333.

68 Bowra 1952, 334.

69 Bowra 1952, 287-90.

70 Kramer et al. 1983, 345; Kramer 1946, 120-1; Heimpel 1981, 243; Alster 1972, 27; Jacobsen 1983, 345.

71 Cooper 1981, 226-7.

72 Civil 1999-2000, 188-99.

To be sure, the task of proving that there indeed existed an oral GA is extremely difficult, if not an impossible one. Still, I will try to argue such a case anyway.

I begin with the question of the classification of our tale as a literary genre. As noted earlier, GA is commonly grouped with other Sumerian compositions treating of mythical heroes such as Gilgamesh, Lugal-banda and En-merkar. All these compositions are customarily identified as 'epics'. The question whether this label is in fact correct, and whether some other designation would not have been more appropriate for this group of poems, is, if not completely futile, at least not a particularly productive one. This is especially so since the very question of what constitutes 'epic' remains highly disputed, with no realistic hopes of ever being resolved. This having been said, the fact remains that, while disagreeing on the specific definition, modern students of literature do accept, if not much more than intuitively, the existence of a discrete literary genre called 'epic'. Furthermore, there is no question that the Sumerian compositions in question indeed share much in common, both in terms of their form and thematic concerns, with the 'epic' poetry, and since no other literary genre comes closer in terms of shared similarities, it is certainly justified to classify them as epic poems.

The correctness of this classification may be argued on various grounds, most of which are self-evident, such as the fact that the focus of these narrative compositions is uniformly the adventures of human beings who act as heroic figures. I believe that this feature alone is sufficient to place our poems securely in the realm of epic. This is as far as the issue of 'epic' in Sumerian literature may be taken without getting bogged down into a stale terminological dispute. In my view, the 'epic' label is particularly apt in the case of GA. Here one thinks especially of the genre known as 'heroic' epics.[73] This is primarily because many (if not all) of the distinctive features of GA I identified earlier are typical of that genre as well.

To quote Ruth Finnegan, heroic epic poems "resemble each other not only because they are narrative and designed primarily for entertainment, but also because of a basic likeness in outlook. There is a concentration on the adventures of human beings who act as heroes, fired by the longing for fame and glory". To put it slightly differently, they are imbued what may be termed "heroic spirit".[74]

Heroic epics tend have a 'historical dimension', in that they invoke 'true' events, which are at best dim reflections of historical facts. In support of this theoretical stand, Karl Reichl, a specialist on Turkic epics, agued as follows:

My emphasis on singing *the past,* on the importance of a 'historical dimension' in heroic epic, should not be understood as a contribution to the theory of origins. In my discussions of heroic epics like "Edige", "Beowulf", and the "Chanson de Roland" it emerged that there is a difference between the "historical nucleus" as a historiographically verifiable element, and the past, "our past", as the focus of identification. The two might overlap, as in the case of "Edige" and the "Chanson de Roland", but the "historical nucleus" might also be merely tangential to the narrative, as in "Beowulf". Similarly, the role a heroic past plays on the pragmatic level, in the dynamic relationship between epic, singer, and audience, differs considerably between epics and traditions. But despite differences and variations, there is a common concern with the past, not as the historiographer's history but as the time of heroes and ancestors, which justifies comparison.[75]

The events so invoked in historical epics very often are of pivotal importance for the history of nations or societies. The "Iliad", "Chanson de Roland", and "Slovo o Polku Igorove" are prime examples here.[76]

I submit that the narrative of GA belongs here typologically as well. Although Gilgamesh may not have been a real historical figure, the conflict between Uruk and Kish was *the* event that shaped the history of Babylonia throughout most of the third millennium BCE. This conflict began in ED II (if not already in ED I) with rulers such as En-mebaragesi and Me-silim and continued–more or less without any interruption–through the ED III period down to the time of Sargon.[77]

This shape of the early history of Babylonia is also reflected in the Sumerian King List. Though not a true historical source, this document too organizes events from the perspective of an ongoing struggle between Uruk and Kish. This view is echoed by the beginning of the "Curse of Akkade" lines 1-6:

73 Zumthor 1990, 85, preferred the term 'historic', arguing that "the epic tends toward the 'heroic', only where 'heroic' means the exaltation of a sort of community superego".

74 Finnegan 1977, 247.

75 Reichl 2000, 180.

76 The observations of Zumthor (1990, 85) are especially relevant in this connection: "It has been noted that it [heroic epic] finds its most fertile grounds in border regions where there exists a prolonged hostility between two races, two cultures–neither of which obviously dominates the other. The epic song crystalizes this hostility and compensates for the uncertainty of competition; it foretells that all will end well, proclaims at least that we have righteousness on our side. In so doing, it forcefully arouses action".

77 For an extensive discussion of this conflict, see now Steinkeller 2024, 10-14.

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When Enlil's caprice
had slain Kish like the Bull of Heaven,
had slaughtered the House of Uruk land in the dust like a great ox,
and then, to Sargon, king of Akkade,
Enlil from south to north,
had given enship and kingship.[78]

For the above interpretation of GA, note also that this is the only Sumerian epic poem in which a 'historical' kernel may be detected.

That various forms of oral poetry existed in early Babylonia is demonstrated by the contemporaneous art. Of special importance here is the so-called Standard of Ur. This wooden artifact, whose original shape cannot be determined, is decorated with two panels, inlaid with a mosaic of shell, red limestone, and lapis. Because of their subject matter, these panels have usually been dubbed "War" and "Peace" respectively **[figs 1-2]**.



Figure 1 The Standard of Ur, "War" side. After https://smarthistory.org/standard-of-ur-1/



Figure 2 The Standard of Ur, "Peace" side. After https://smarthistory.org/standard-of-ur-2/

78 Cf. Steinkeller 2003, 285.

The panels form a single narrative sequence,[79] which begins with the bottom register of the "War" section, depicting battle wagons trampling dead enemy soldiers. The middle register shows what happens after the battle: some enemies are being slaughtered on the spot, while others are being led away as prisoners of war. This scene continues onto the top register, where the prisoners are brought before a large male figure, which, because of its dominant size, must be the commander of the victorious army. The story resumes on the bottom register of the "Peace" panel, continuing then on the middle register, both showing the transportation of war booty, which consists of equids, cattle, sheep, and various commodities. The top register of the "Peace" panel depicts a banquet culminating and celebrating the victory so accomplished. The commander is the prominent seated male to the left. He is faced by six other men, also seated, to his right. As already noted by Henri Frankfort (1970, 74-5), the fact that all the participants are male is unique. Although depictions of banquets are common in ED III art, they invariably show mixed groups, men and women.

For our purposes, of special importance are the two figures standing to the right of the banqueteers. Also facing the commander, these are a harp player and, behind him, a singer.

The singer has characteristically long hair. He shows striking similarity to Ur-Nanshe, the "chief singer" (nar-mah), two statues of whom were excavated in the ED III levels at Mari.[80] See figure 3, which shows the better preserved one. Ur-Nanshe sports the same hairdo as the singer of the Ur Standard. He originally held a string instrument of some kind, which is now destroyed **[fig. 3]**.[81]



Figure 3 The Statue of Ur-Nanshe of Mari. After woldvrcandi library – WorldPress.com

79 Here I follow the reading of the Standard by Winter 1985, 19.

80 Parrot 1967, 89-93 and pls. XLV-XLVI. It is dedicated to the goddess Inana-ZA.ZA for the intention of Iplus-Il, king of Mari. From the same locus survive fragments of a similar statue of Ur-Nanshe, which records an identical dedication. See Parrot 1967, 93-6, figs 132-3.

81 It may be noted here that, at roughly the same time when this Ur-Nanshe was active, Ebla was visited by a group of singers from Mari. One of them was named Ur-Na-zi-a, where Na-zi-a is but a different form of the divine name Nanshe (Steinkeller 1993, 237-8). While there is no reason to suspect the same identity between these two individuals (the Ur-Nazi of Ebla sources was a nar-tur, "junior singer"), it is likely that the name Ur-Nanshe enjoyed high reputation at Mari, being associated with singers, probably in reflection of their original Sumerian background.

That this image may provide a possible *Sitz im Leben* for GA was suggested already by Heimpel:

> It is quite plausible that our story too belonged to the repertoire of royal entertainment in Babylonian courts from at least the Early Dynastic III period on. An illustration of such an occasion is provided by the upper register of the peace panel of the standard of Ur. A singer, accompanied by a lyre player, entertains a party, surely the king and his courtiers.[82]

Given the overall message of the standard,[83] the bard likely sings a song celebrating the military victory depicted on the "War" panel. His audience are the commander and his chief warriors. But the song itself is missing alas.

As I noted earlier, the banquets depicted in Sumerian art invariably involved both male and female participants. See the following two ED III representations of banquets, which are attended by musicians as well **[figs 4-5]**.



Figure 4 A plaque from Tell Agrab, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, University of Chicago, A. 18073; Boese 1971, 168-9 AG 2, pl. 1 fig. 2.
After en.m.wikipedia.org.Banquet plaque.Tell Agrab

82 Heimpel 1981, 243.

83 If this is the correct reading of the Standard, its subject matter is a single successfully accomplished military campaign. However, rather than depicting a specific event, it undoubtedly is a generic representation.



Figure 5
A plaque from Khafajah, Iraq Museum, Baghdad, IM.14661; Boese 1971, 172 CT 2, pl. 5 fig. 2.
After Amin, O.S.M. (2019, May 25). *World History Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from https://www.worldhistory.org/image/10776/sumerian-votive-plaquefrom-khafajah/

More interesting is this example **[fig. 6]**, where, apart from a man and woman in the top register, the bottom register depicts a musician and a singer. The position of the singer's arms makes it clear that he is singing or reciting something. To the right of the musician and the singer, there are two wrestlers, accompanied by a man holding a baton. He must be the referee supervising the wrestling competition. It is highly likely, I think, that these four men form one group. If this is true, the song or the poem so performed must have described the wrestling match.



Figure 6
A plaque from Khafajah, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, University of Chicago, A.12417; Bosse 1971, 176 CS 7, pl. 9 fig. 2.
After Suter 2024, 224 fig. 14.1

Here I need to remind the reader that wrestling happened to be Gilgamesh's favorite sport.[84] His reputation in that respect was such that, after his death, a special competition allegedly had

84 See Steinkeller 2018, 160 n. 28.

been established in recognition of his wrestling feats: "youthful men and onlookers(?) will form a semicircle(?)..., and in front of it a wrestling match will be organized; in the month of NE-NE-gar, the festival of ghosts, even though he (i.e., Gilgamesh) will not be there, lights(?) indeed will be set up (for him)" ("Death of Gilgamesh" Segment E lines 8-11). As will become significant in the following, this festival focused on the worship of Gilgamesh as the king of the human denizens of the Netherworld.[85]

While the existence of heroic poems in ED III times must remain hypothetical, we have evidence that, already at that time, Gilgamesh was worshiped as a heroic figure. Particularly important here are three Pre-Sargonic mace-heads, which are dedicated to Gilgamesh ex-voto.[86] Two other examples of such dedications date to the Ur III period.[87] The very nature of these objects makes it certain that Gilgamesh's worship centered on his martial characteristics. This is confirmed by the inscriptions recorded on two Pre-Sargonic mace-heads,[88] in which he is given the titles of (lugal) kalag-ga, "the mighty (master/king)",[89] and lugal guruš-(e)ne, "master/king of young men" **[figs 7-8]**.[90]

The second of these titles, which is assigned to Gilgamesh only here, is of particular interest, for it immediately brings to mind the intimate connection between Gilgamesh and the young men of Uruk in GA. In fact, this otherwise completely unique designation could be the only textual datum that would allow one to date the original GA to Pre-Sargonic times.[91]

Thanks to the contemporaneous sources from Lagash, we also know that, already in the ED IIIb period, Gilgamesh was believed to serve as the ruler of the human denizens of the Netherworld.[92]

This fact implies that, already then, the death of Gilgamesh was an important component of the tradition pertaining to this legendary ruler. The memory of Gilgamesh's demise and his peculiar burial survived down to the Ur III period, as is evidenced in the composition "Death of Gilgamesh", which, as I mentioned earlier, describes his mortal disease, death, and funeral. The fact that Gilgamesh's death

85 A stele found near Badra, now in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad, IM.75208; Safar 1971; Canby 2001, 24, pl. 14 d, shows an especially extensive wrestling scene. The stele is decorated on its front, left, and right sides. The top section is missing. See the drawing in Canby 2001, pl. 14 fig. d. Two registers survive. The top register shows, in that order, three kneeling wrestlers grasping their hands in a praying or greeting attitude; two referees holding batons; four wrestlers involved in a contest; two musicians, a drummer and a harp player; on top of the big drum balances a wrestler. The lower register depicts a procession of two groups of men facing each other. The men to the left have shaved heads, the ones to the right are bearded. All of them grasp their hands in a praying gesture. Between them, two men carry a sheep and a goat respectively. Finally, to the right there are two men standing next to a large beer(?) vessel. Canby 2001, pl. 14 fig. d, subscript, dated the stele to ca. 2650 BCE. A lower dating, ca. 2400 BCE, appears to be more realistic. It appears that the stele depicts a single wrestling event, which, as suggested by the praying posture of some of the participants and the animal offerings, had a ritual character. Is it possible that it is the wrestling competition honoring Gilgamesh?

86 (1) Krebernik 1994, 8, 10-12 (possibly from Uruk); (2) de Genouillac 1913, 101 n. 2 (provenance unknown); color photograph in Sallaberger 2013, 53 fig. 5.4; (3) YOS 1 3 (provenance unknown) = Braun-Holzinger 1991, 45-6 K 17. Cf. Sallaberger 2013, 53; Steinkeller 2018, 155, 173-4.

87 (1) Steinkeller 2011, 20 n. 17; (provenance unknown); (2) Steible 1991, 355 n. 1 (provenance unknown); (3) Braun-Holzinger 1991, 45 K. 18; "Paris, Louvre, Keulenkopf mit Weihung an Gilgameš; wird demnächst von B. André publiziert".

88 ^{d}Bil$_3$-ga-mes lugal guruš-ne-ra... kalag-ga dumu ^{d}Nin-sumun$_2$-ka-ra (Krebernik 1994, 8, lines 1-6); ^{d}Bil$_3$-ga-mes lugal guruš-še$_3$-ne-ra (de Genouillac 1913, 101 fn. 2: 1-2) **[figs 7-8]**.

89 Gilgamesh is the earliest documented bearer of the title lugal kalag-ga. This title was later assumed by Naram-Suen upon his deification. See Steinkeller 2017, 136, 139-41; 2018, 155. It was later revived by Shulgi, likewise upon his deification. See Steinkeller 2017, 151.

90 Note further that one of the Ur III mace-heads (Steinkeller 2011, 20 n. 17) was dedicated to Gilgamesh by a certain Ur-Numushda, an "elite soldier" (aga$_3$-us$_2$). In the other Ur III example (Steible 1991, 35 n. 1), the donor calls Gilgamesh "his master/king" (lugal-a-ni), which too may be an indication of his military background.

91 The significance of this title and its possible connection with GA was noted already by Gianni Marchesi 2004, 192 n. 220: "Such a title is possibly related in some way to the episode narrated in the Sumerian epic *Gilgameš and Akka*... If so, it follows that this story on Gilgameš already existed and circulated in the ED period".

92 The evidence here are the mentions of gu$_2$ ^{d}Bil$_3$-aga$_3$-mes-ka, "the assembly (of the dead Lords) of Gilgamesh" in the sources from Lagash (DP 54 xi 5, 218 iv 4', 222 ix 7'; VAS 14 74 x 9 [following an offering for Gilgamesh], 172 ix 8; VAS 27 10 xi 5). The same cultic locus is called alternatively ki-gu$_2$, "the place of the assembly, gathering". See ki-gu$_2$-še$_3$ e-ne-de$_6$ (Nikolski 1 25 iv 9); ki-gu$_2$-še$_3$ ba-ne-de$_6$ (DP 57 v 5), ki-gu$_2$-ka ba-sa$_6$ (BIN 8 351 i 4, ii 4); [ki]-gu$_2$-ka (RTC 50 i 1). The place in question appears have been a building: e$_2$ e$_2$-bar ^{d}Bil$_3$-aga$_3$-mes-ka du$_3$-a [i$_3$]-DU, "(fish delivered) to the building erected at the 'outbuilding' of Gilgamesh" (DP 287 iv 1-2). In these examples, gu$_2$ is an abbreviation of gu$_2$-en(-na), "the gathering of the Lords". The full term appears in DP 53 viii 11 and TSA 1 viii 2, which record offerings for ^{d}Dumu-zi gu$_2$-en(-na), "Dumuzi of the assembly of the Lords". For the meaning of gu$_2$-en-na, of particular importance is the following bilingual passage, which mentions Dumuzi and Gilgamesh in the Netherworld setting: g[u$_2$-e]n-ar šeš-mu, ˹gu$_2$˺-en-na-a[r] = *ina nap-ḫar be-li a-ḫi ina n*[*ap-ḫar be-li*] šeš-mu ^{d}Dumu-zi-da g[u$_2$-en-na-ar] ^{d}Gilgameš umun ki-ta = *be-el er-ṣe-ti*, "in the assembly of the Lords, my brother, in the assembly of the Lords, my brother Dumuzi, in the assembly of the Lords, (with) Gilgamesh the Lord of the Netherworld" (Civil 1983, 48 lines 9'-11'). Cf. Attinger 2021, 424, who translates gu$_2$-en as "'totalité (des) seigneurs' d'où 'assemblée'". The "Lords" referred to in gu$_2$-en(-na) are the dead rulers and high priests over whom Gilgamesh ruled in the Netherworld. In Pre-Sargonic Lagash, they were also called en-en KU.KU-ne, "sleeping Lords". For their cult at Lagash, see Steinkeller 1999, 110-11; 2005, 23 fn. 26; 2017, 30-1. For Gilgamesh as a Netherworld ruler, see also George 2003, 127-30.

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and funeral play no role in the Akkadian versions of the "Gilgamesh Epic" could be interpreted that these events played a particularly pronounced role in the earliest stages of Gilgamesh's tradition, that is, during the last four centuries the third millennium.[93]



Figure 7 A mace-head dedicated to Gilgamesh. After Krebernik 1994, 11

93 There is nothing in this text that would indicate its oral background. Except perhaps for the dramatic prologue (lines 1-14), each line of which names a different designation of Gilgamesh, followed by the phase "he has lain down and is never to rise again!"

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Figure 8 A mace-head dedicated to Gilgamesh. After Sallaberger 2013, 53 fig. 5.4

That the cult of Gilgamesh was a pan-Babylonian phenomenon during the ED IIIb period could find support in iconographic evidence as well. I am referring here to a group of sealings, which belonged to the ED IIIb rulers and generals of Mari.[94] These sealings have a characteristically martial flavor, as they show realistic depictions of battles. In practically all of them, the battle scene is dominated by a standing naked male who is holding two lions. This figure functions almost as a heraldic emblem, the symbol of a perfect warrior of sorts. See figures 9-11 for three of these seals. An even earlier representation of this male appears on a vessel from Tell Agrab. The hero is likewise naked, except that he wears a belt; he grasps two lions **[fig. 12]**.[95] I am more and more inclined to think that, as it has often been suggested in the past, this is a depiction of Gilgamesh–be he a real person or a purely legendary character.

All these data demonstrate quite conclusively that Gilgamesh was worshiped as a heroic figure in the ED IIIb period. Here it needs to be noted that the evidence of Gilgamesh's deification dates even earlier, to the ED IIIa period.[96] As proved by the Lagash evidence, that cult was not confined to Uruk, but was a Pan-Babylonian phenomenon. It also appears that the fact of his death was an important if not the crucial – element of this tradition.[97] The last point could have further implications for the ultimate origins of GA.

94 Beyer 2007, 254 figs 17-19. Cf also Beyer 2007, 250 figs 15-16.

95 Marchetti, Marchesi 2011, 26 fn. 45, suggest that this vessel "can be dated to no earlier than Early Dynastic I, possibly even later". Thus, an ED IIIa date appears to be the most likely one. The same figure is depicted on another vessel from Tell Agrab (see Highlights from the Collection. Animals at the link `https://isac.uchicago.edu`). The naked man, also belted, grasps the rumps of two lions. The tails of two other loins are tucked under his arms, and all four animals attack a bull on the opposite side of the vessel.

96 SF 1 rev. iii 21'.

97 There are no indications that the other legendary rulers of Uruk appearing in the Sumerian "epics"–Lugal-banda and En-merkar–were worshipped as heroes. Like Gilgamesh, Lugal-banda was deified already in the ED IIIa period. Already then, he was also paired with Nin-sumun. Although Gilgamesh is identified as the son of Nin-sumun as early as ED IIIb (see above n. 57), he is not connected with Lugal-banda until the Ur III period. As for En-merkar, he almost certainly was an Ur III invention. See Steinkeller 2018, 152 n. 10.

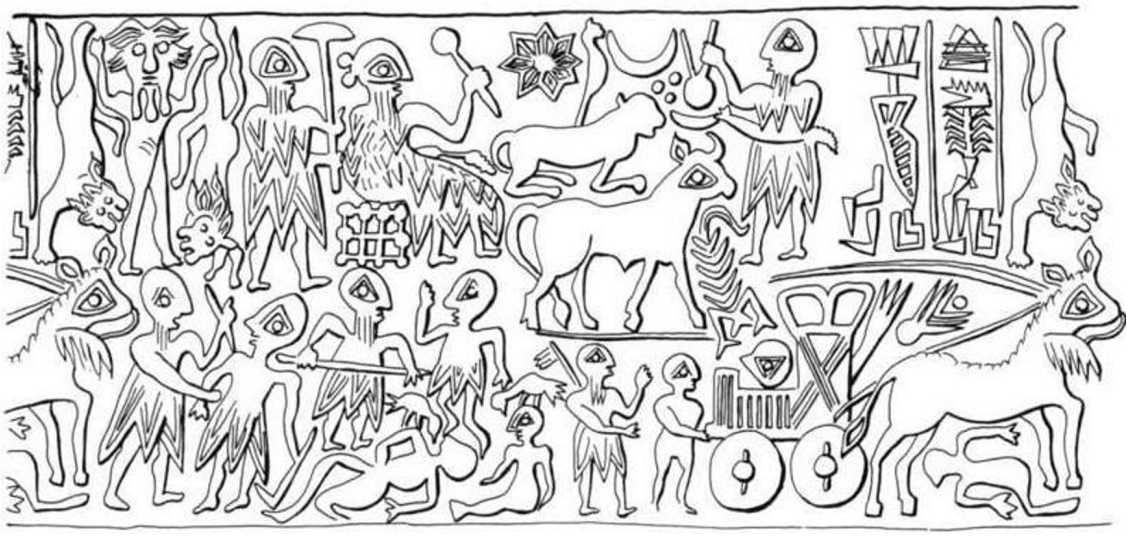


Figure 9 Seal of Ishqi-Mari, king of Mari. After Beyer 2007, 254 fig. 17

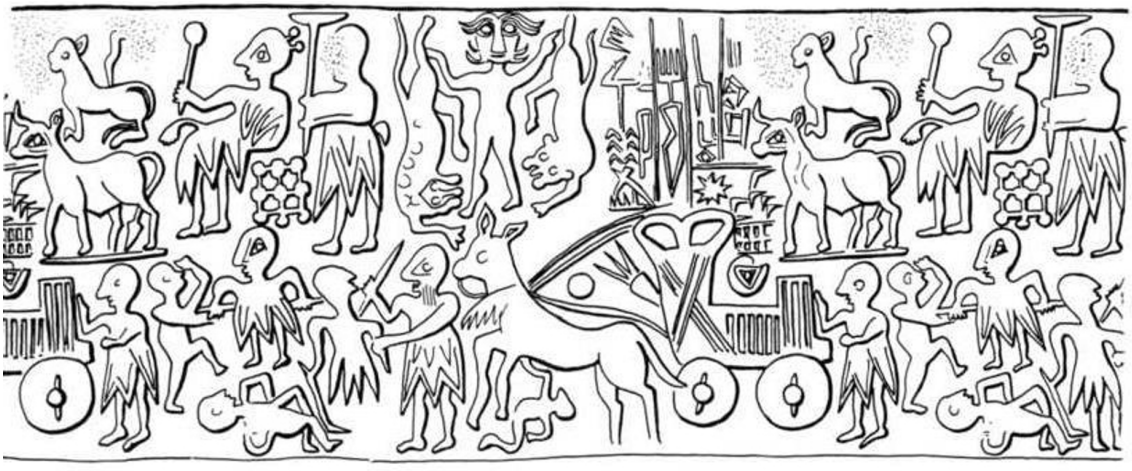


Figure 10 Seal of Ishqi-Mari, king of Mari. After Beyer 2007, 254 fig. 18

Writing in the reference to Homeric epics, Gregory Nagy argued that "the cult of heroes is a subtext, as it were, for the development of epic traditions about heroes in ancient Greece".[98] According to him, the most fundamental aspect of the cult of Hellenic heroes was that "the hero must experience death. The hero's death is the theme that gives him power–not only in cult but also in poetry".[99] In this connection, Nagy stressed the fact that the death of heroes played an important role also in the development of Sanskrit (Radjasthani) epics. In the Indian epic tradition too, "what gives the hero his ultimate power is the actual fact of his death".[100] According to the Sanskrit specialist Stewart H. Blackburn, "the death event operates as the 'generative point' for stories in local traditions. It leads to deification, to worship, to a cult, and eventually to a narrative which is ritually performed to invoke the spirits of the dead".[101] It appears quite likely, therefore, that both in ancient Greece and India, the death of heroes was one of the sources, possibly the crucial one, of epic literature.

98 Nagy 1995, 167.
99 Nagy 1979, 9.
100 Nagy 1995, 168.
101 Nagy 1989, 22.



Figure 11 Seal of Iddin-Eshtar, general of Mari. After Beyer 2007, 254 fig. 19

Is it possible, therefore, that in Babylonia too the Pre-Sargonic cult of Gilgamesh, in particular the traditions of his death, were the "subtext" from which the oral version of GA had developed? As in the case of the heroes of Greek and Indian epics, the death of Gilgamesh may have been the starting point of his worship. This may have led to his deification and then, possibly, to the formation of epic poems that celebrated his achievements.



Figure 12 Stone vessel from Tell Agrab, Iraq Museum IM.27905. After Wikipedia Commons: Gilgamesh in a Sculptured Vase, Shara Temple, Tell Agrab, Iraq.jpg

In summary, I offer the following tentative conclusions. Although the surviving text of GA does not contain anything that would allow us *securely* to date its origins to Pre-Sargonic times, it likely reflects an earlier oral tradition, which had been still alive in Ur III times.

As for the exact history of this composition, the following scenario appears to be the most likely one:

There existed an earlier oral GA, in roughly the same form as the surviving poem. Its origins went back to the ED III period. This oral poem was written down for the first time in the Ur III period, with some minor editorial changes having been introduced into it, of which the most significant one was the very ending, describing the reconciliation between Gilgamesh and Akka. Alternatively, but less likely, the tale was only recomposed orally in Ur III times, with its recording having taken place in the early Old Babylonian period.

Assuming that this interpretation is correct, one could then posit the existence of other ED III oral tales about Gilgamesh that dealt with some other events of his life, particularly, his death and of how he had become the leader of the human denizens of the Netherworld.

But before I close, I wish to identify another datum that is potentially of significance for the origins of Sumerian epic tradition. Nagy suggested that praise poetry (panegyrics or eulogies) may have been one of the sources of Homeric epics. In this Nagy drew support from Aristotle's assertion ("Poetics" 1448b 32-34) that epic takes its origin in eulogy. As Nagy puts it, "praise poetry can be reconstructed as *a* basis, not *the* basis for the development of epic".[102]

The idea that there is a connection between panegyrics and epic poetry is not new, of course. Such a point was argued already by H.M. Chadwick and N.K. Chadwick: "the chief source of narrative poetry must be sought in the heroic panegyric". And consider also Bowra (1952, 10):

> the resemblances between panegyrics or lament and heroic poetry are so close that there must be a relation between them. Historical priority probably belongs to panegyric and lament, not merely because they are similar and less objective, but because they exist in some societies where heroic poetry is lacking.[103]

Even more pertinent here are the observations by Jeff Opland, an eminent student of the Xhosa poetry. Although narrative is only implicit in Xhosa eulogies, these compositions occasionally exhibit passages of explicit narrative as well. In Opland's opinion, this shows that "the structure of the poetry is sufficiently flexible to permit extension into narrative";[104] "it is certainly feasible that poets operating in a tradition of eulogy, a genre in which narrative is implicit, could produce explicit narrative poetry when they become conscious that their audience… has grown more universal and might not understand the arcane references and allusions normally apprehensible to the poet's local audience. Narrative is embryonically present in eulogy; if a praise poet perceives that his audience has altered significantly, he may expand on the allusions in extended passages of explicit narrative. The narrative element might even come to dominate the eulogistic, with the praises perhaps retained as heroic epithets or elegant variations for the characters. In this way, eulogy could well give rise to epic".[105]

GA concludes with a praise of Gilgamesh: "Gilgamesh, Lord of Kulaba, praising you is sweet!" (lines 113-14). By itself, this fact is not unusual, since this stereotypical praise-formula is almost invariably attached to the Sumerian literary compositions dating to the second millennium BCE, be they epic poems or religious hymns. What is of interest is the great antiquity of this formula. It is documented already in the ED IIIa period. Examples here are the so-called "hymns" from Abu Salabikh celebrating temples and their divine owners,[106] the "hymns" to Shamash,[107] Nisaba,[108] and Ushumgalana-Dumuzi,[109] and the incantation praising Ningirsu, which is part of a building inscription of Ur-Nanshe of Lagash.[110] To this category also belong the later "hymns" of Gudea of Lagash, which praise the construction of the

102 Nagy 1995, 171.

103 Chadwick, Chadwick 1940, 723.

104 Opland 1989, 122.

105 Opland 1989, 140.

106 Krebernik, Lisman 2020.

107 ^{d}Utu za$_3$-me$_3$ (ARET 5 6 xviii 2-3 + OIP 99 342 iii 9 = Krebernik 1992, 81).

108 ^{d}Nisaba za$_3$-me (ARET 5 7 xiv 4 = Krebernik 1992, 90).

109 ^{d}Ama-usumgal za$_3$-me (ARET 5 21 xv 3-4 + OIP 99 278 vii' 3-4 = Krebernik 2003, 177).

110 ^{d}Nin-gir$_2$-su za$_3$-me (Frayne 2008, 117-18 Ur-Nanshe 49 iii 9).

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Eninnu, Ningirsu's main temple.[111] It is striking that all these compositions are of a *religious* character. It goes without saying that the extreme brevity and formal simplicity of the Abu Salabikh compositions dedicated to temples and their gods makes it impossible to classify them as "hymns". The best definition fitting them is panegyrics or eulogies. In my opinion, this definition also applies to the other "hymns" I enumerated earlier, even the ones of Gudea. All of them are best described as panegyrics, with varying volumes of narrative added to them.[112]

These facts suggest that, in early Babylonia, panegyrics were, as in ancient Greece, one of the sources of epic poetry. If, as it appears likely, the traditions of the death of Gilgamesh and his subsequent deification led to the birth of praise poetry associated with him, such compositions could have eventually contributed to the formation of epic poems about him, one example of which, as I suggest, being GA.

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111 ^{d}Nin-gir$_2$-su za$_3$-mi$_2$ e$_2$ ^{d}Nin-gir$_2$-su du$_3$-a za$_3$-mi$_2$ mu-ru-bi-im ("Gudea Cylinder A" xxv 14-16; Edzard 1997, 88).

112 Even Gudea's "Statue B", which likewise describes the construction of the Eninnu, can be classed as a panegyric. Note its concluding lines: gaba-gal$_2$ dingir-re-ne-ka en ^{d}Nin-gir$_2$-su-ka nam-mah-ni un/kalam-e he-zu-zu, "may the nation/land make known the greatness of the vanguard of the gods, the lord Ningirsu" (Edzard 1997, 38 ix 27-30).

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