

# GILGAMESH



# ANTIQUITY

- Antiquity (3000 BC–500 AD)
- Middle Ages (450 AD–1450 AD)
- Modernity (1400 AD–present)
- Antiquity:
  - pre-Christian, polytheistic or animistic, illiterate, slaves vs. citizen, pervasive sexuality, emphasis on beauty, order
  - Nietzsche: pre-moral universe, no value judgments; you can break the law, but you cannot *sin*; some punishment, no reward



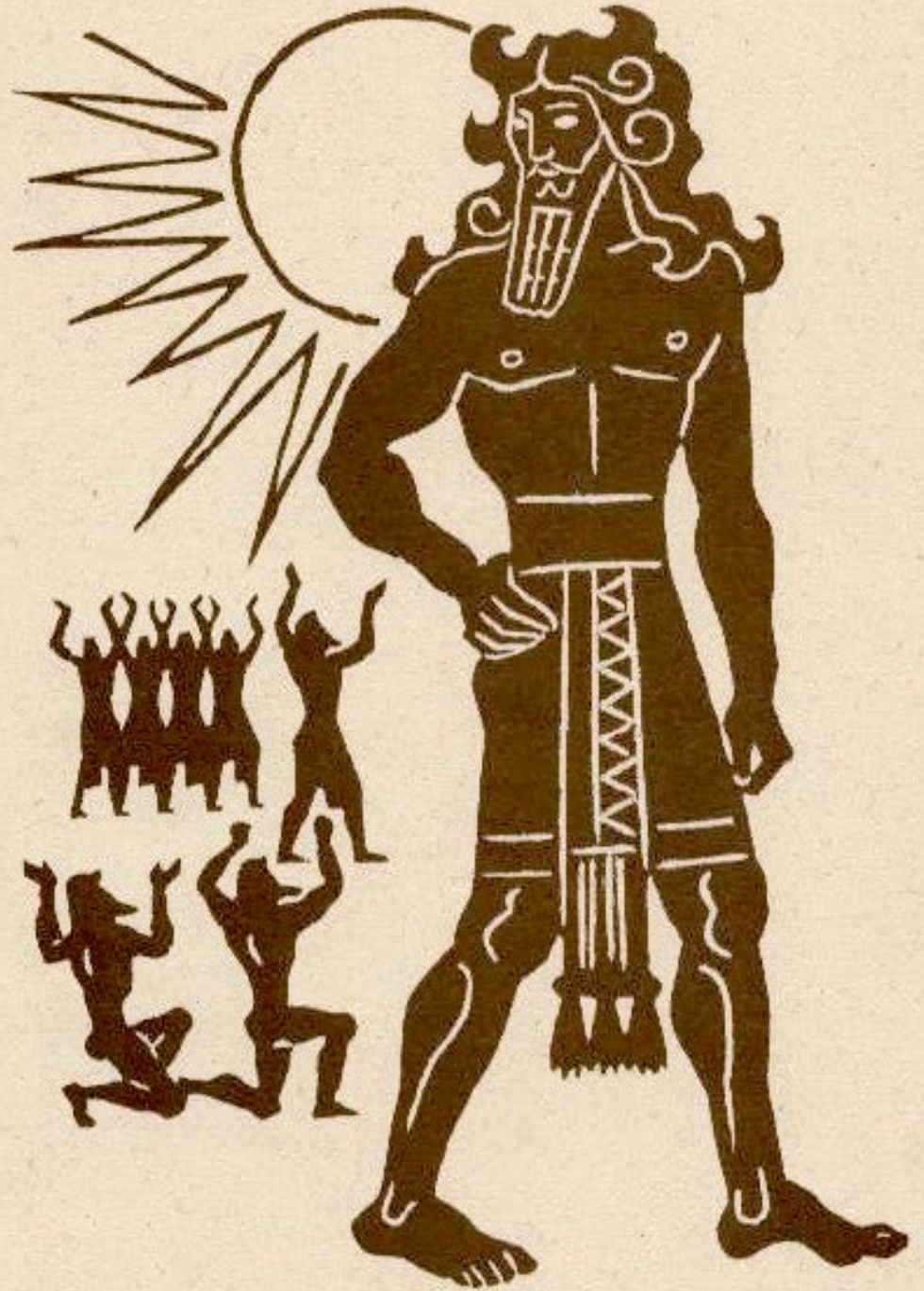
# THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

- It's old: Gilgamesh was probably a real king who lived somewhere around 2,800 BC–2,500 BC. Almost 5,000 years ago.
- It was probably written down about 2100 BC, and the oldest surviving version of the combined epic is from about 1800 BC



# THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

- The standard version is from about 1300–1000 BC.
- This, then, is a story that people told again and again for over 2,000 years
- It was completely forgotten until its re-discovery in 1853
- Inserted into cultural memory (Hobby Lobby); but re-emerges as an independent story in the 20th century



Gilgamesh tablet seized from Hobby Lobby in late July



# THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

- Written in different languages, at different times—Sumerian and Akkadian (related cultures in Mesopotamia). Sumerian in Babylon, a language of priests and rituals (like Latin, later)
- The 'standard version' is in Akkadian, written on 12 clay tablets by a scribe, Sin-liqe-unninni, around 1200 BC.
- Fragmentary, incomplete—at times inconsistent (tablet 12)

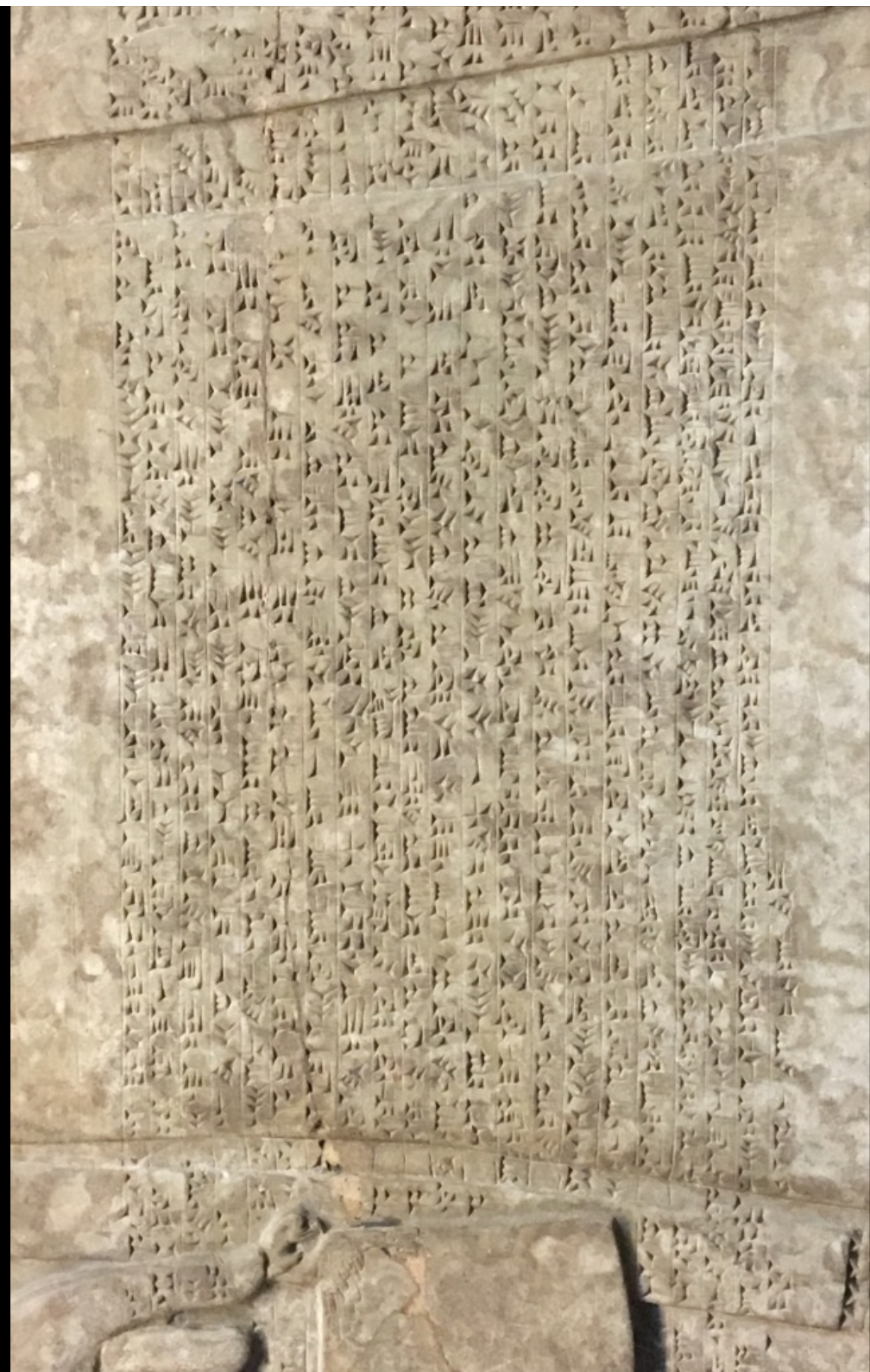


# TIMELINE

~3000 BC	Ancient Sumer, invention of (Western) writing
~2800 BC	King Gilgamesh of Uruk
2300 - 1800	Akkadian Empire, oral "Gilgamesh" tradition
1800 - 1600	Babylonian Empire, lots of written <i>Gilgamesh</i>
1600 - 900	Hittites, Amarna, Assyrians
~1200	Sin-liqe-unnini edits "standard version" of <i>Gilgamesh</i>
900 - 500	Neo-Assyrians, Neo-Babylonians
500	Spoken Akkadian dies out
500-200	Persians, Alexander the Great, end of Babylon
150	Last copies of <i>Gilgamesh</i>
0	Last cuneiform tablets

# OVERLAP

- Sumerian a “linguistic isolate”; Akkadian a *Semitic* language (related to Hebrew and Arabic)
- *Gilgamesh* contains mythic ideas familiar from us from the Bible, particularly the Flood story from Genesis
- The creation of Enkidu might also be familiar: created out of dust by a God, in harmony with the natural world, tempted by a woman, forced to leave natural world forever. Some key differences, too.







125 mi

North Sea

DENMARK

Copenhagen

LITHUANIA

Vilnius

BELARUS

Moscow

Ryazan

Hrodna

Minsk

Smolensk

Tula

Bryansk

Homiel

Voronezh

Saratov

Hamburg

Bremen

Szczecin

Berlin

Warsaw

Brest

NETHERLANDS

Amsterdam

Hannover

Poznań

POLAND

Wrocław

Lublin

BELGIUM

Köln

Dortmund

Leipzig

Dresden

Katowice

Kraków

Kyiv

Kharkiv

GERMANY

Nuremberg

Brno

CZECHIA

Vienna

SLOVAKIA

Košice

UKRAINE

Zaporizhzhya

Donetsk

Rostov-on-Don

Volgograd

FRANCE

Paris

SWITZERLAND

Munich

AUSTRIA

Graz

HUNGARY

Romania

MO尔多VA

Odessa

Mariupol

Krasnodar

Lyon

Geneve

Milan

Venice

CROATIA

Zagreb

Timișoara

Bucharest

Sevastopol

Simferopol

Sochi

Pyatigorsk

Makhachkala

Bordeaux

Toulouse

Nice

Pisa

Florence

Sarajevo

SERBIA

Nis

BULGARIA

Constanta

Varna

Burgas

Grozny

Makhachkala

Madrid

Zaragoza

Barcelona

Marseille

Rome

Naples

Bari

ALBANIA

Thessaloniki

Plovdiv

Istanbul

Ankara

TURKEY

Samsun

Ordu

Trabzon

Van

Baku

Irid

València

Palma de Mallorca

Cagliari

Palermo

Catania

Patras

GREECE

Athens

Izmir

Balikesir

Bursa

Konya

Antalya

Karaman

Adana

Kahramanmaraş

Oran

Murcia

Algiers

Bizerte

Tunis

Susah

Sfax

Tripoli

Benghazi

Heraklion

Alexandria

Cairo

Nicosia

Hatay

Aleppo

Mosul

Kirkuk

Baghdad

Oujda

Constantine

Kairouan

Sfax

Tripoli

Benghazi

Alexandria

Cairo

Jerusalem

Khan Yunis

Amman

JORDAN

Tabuk

Nasiriyah

Basra

Khorram

Dezful

Ahvaz

ALGERIA

Mediterranean Sea

Ionian Sea

Black Sea





Turkey

Caspian Sea

Diyarbakir

Gaziantep

Waššukani

Mosul

Ninive

Iran

Aleppo

Hatra

Assur

Kirkuk

Nuzi

Hama

Mari

MESOPOTAMIA

Tigris

Palmyra

Syria

Syrische Wüste

Euphrates

Baghdad

Sippar

Babylon

Kerbelaa

Kisch

Nippur

Nadschaf

Isin

Lagas

Ahvaz

Israel

Iraq

Jerusalem

Amman

Uruk

Ur

Charax-Spasinu

Basra

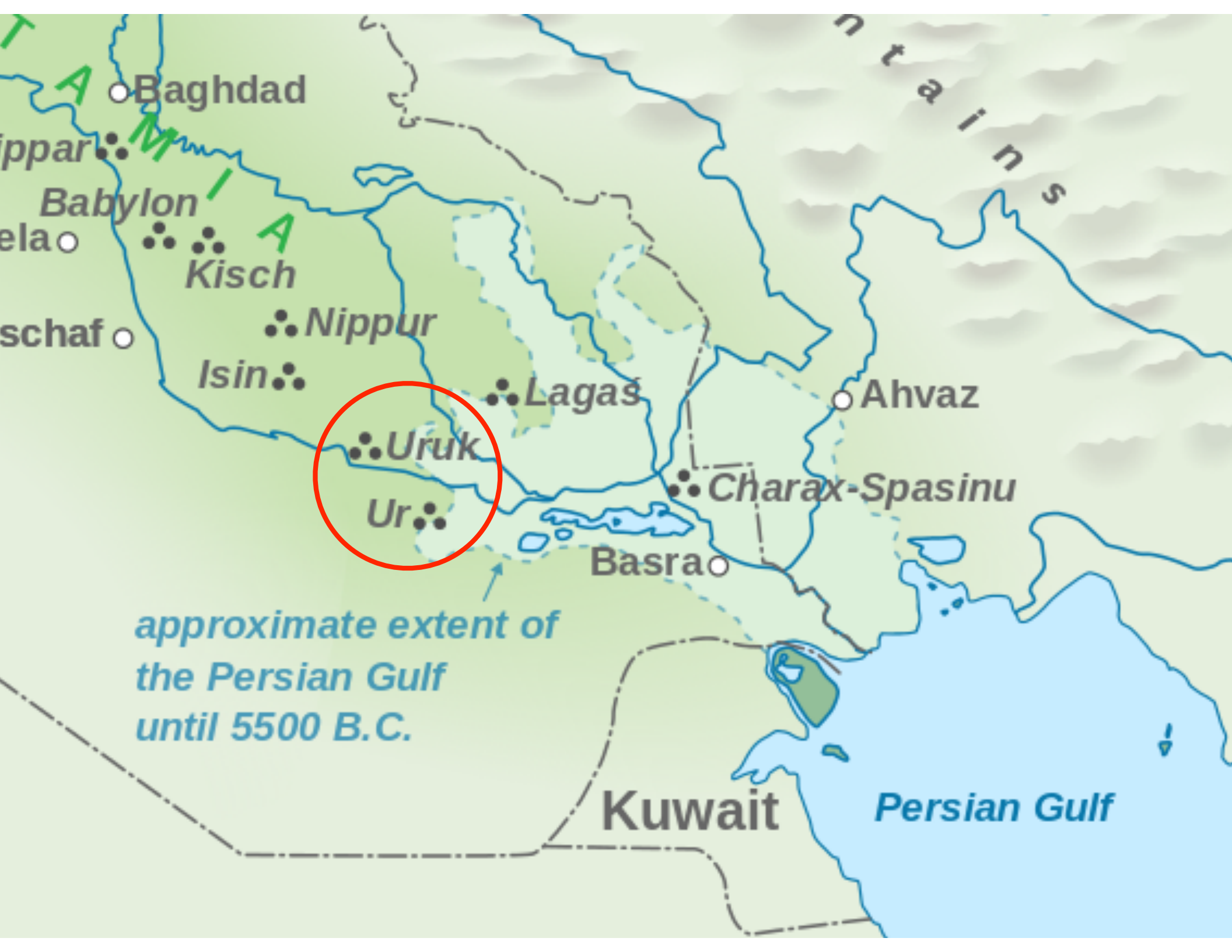
approximate extent of the Persian Gulf until 5500 B.C.

Kuwait

Persian Gulf

Jordan

300 km



Baghdad

Uppar

Babylon

ela

Kisch

Nippur

schaf

Isin

Lagas

Ahvaz

Uruk

Charax-Spasinu

Ur

Basrao

*approximate extent of  
the Persian Gulf  
until 5500 B.C.*

Kuwait

Persian Gulf

Mountains

# ANCIENT WRITING

- *Gilgamesh* is written in cuneiform, writing made by punching a wedge shape into clay, which then dries—it lasts a long time (if it doesn't break)
- Like other ancient writing systems, cuneiform is not alphabetic, but consists of a mix of *pictograms* and *syllabograms*—different characters represent *syllables*, combinations of letters (as with Egyptian hieroglyphics), not single sounds. A *lot* of characters to learn (~600), so that only a *mašmaššu*, or professional scribe, could read and write.
- So, alphabetic systems became successful very fast. People forgot cuneiform—and *Gilgamesh*—around 100 BC.





# GENRE

- *Gilgamesh is an epic*
  - No one agrees on a single, strict definition (as with any genre), but epics tell stories of great deeds (such as founding a nation, traveling to the underworld, killing a monster), heroism, sacrifice, loyalty, renown. They should be *long*
  - The epic tries to elicit our *admiration* for great men
  - *Friendship* is often the key relationship; also *grief* if/when companions die (see *The Iliad*)
  - *Transgression*: the epic hero goes beyond the norm, achieving greater deeds, and entering forbidden spaces.



# FORM

- 12 tablets = 12 books. Tablets do appear to represent formal divisions. Tablet 12 is almost always ignored, since it breaks continuity and form
- What we call poetry today is largely determined by meter (rhythm) and rhyme; in the time of *Gilgamesh*, more about repetition and elevated language (also true of the Bible)
- Divided into paired lines (verses), but without rhyme or regular meter
- Much still missing, fragmentary
- New pieces discovered every few years (in 2015, in 2019...), occasionally significant, such as 20 new lines





'The mightiest [in the land, strength he possesses.]  
[His strength is as mighty as a] rock from the sky,  
he is tall in [stature, *proud* as a battlement.],  
The mother of Gilgamesh [opened her mouth to speak,] saying to [her son -]  
Wild-Cow Ninsun [opened her mouth to speak,] [saying to Gilgamesh:]  
'My son, in his gate....., bitterly you.....'  
'You hold....., ...in his gate.....  
'Bitterly he.....,  
Enkidu possesses no [*kith or kin.*]  
Shaggy hair hanging loose.....  
he was born in the wild and [*has*] no [*brother.*],

Broken tablet,  
filled in from  
other tablets

Filled in, but  
uncertain; an  
educated guess

'The mightiest [in the land, strength he possesses.]  
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Enkidu possesses no [*kith* or *kin*.]  
Shaggy hair hanging loose.....  
he was born in the wild and [*has*] no [*brother*.],

Missing  
material, no good  
guesses

..... *skilfully worked,*  
..... he provided for his friend.  
..... he provided for his friend,  
.... of  $x+10$  minas of gold he provided for his friend.  
.... of  $x$  minas of gold he provided for his friend.  
.... of  $x$  minas of gold he provided for his friend.  
.... of  $x$  minas of gold he provided for his friend.  
.... between them, mounted in thirty minas of gold,  
.... was their ... , he provided for his friend.  
.... was their ... , he provided for his friend.  
. . . . . was their thickness,  
.... was their ... , he provided for his friend.  
..... large  
..... he provided for his friend.  
..... of his waist  
..... he provided for his friend.  
..... he provided for his friend.  
..... he provided for his friend.  
..... he provided for his friend.

# STYLE

- Repetition:
  - repetitive parallelism
  - incremental repetition
- Ritualistic:
  - demands preparation
  - circular structure
  - literature as magic



# STYLE

- Repetition:
  - **repetitive parallelism**
  - incremental repetition

He roamed all over the wilderness,  
naked, far from the cities of men,  
ate grass with gazelles, and when he was thirsty  
he drank clear water from the waterholes,  
kneeling beside the antelope and deer.

“Father, I have seen  
a savage man at the waterhole.  
...I have seen him outrun  
the swiftest animals. He lives among them,  
eats grass with gazelles, and when he is thirsty  
he drinks clear water from the waterholes.”

# STYLE

- Repetition:

- repetitive parallelism

Deep in his heart he felt something stir,  
a longing he had never known before,  
the longing for a true friend.

- **incremental repetition**

The trapper's heart pounded, his face went white,  
his legs shook, he was numb with terror,  
...fear gripped his belly.

# STYLE

- Ritualistic
  - the prologue and its imperatives: to see, follow, inspect, examine, observe, find, unlock, etc.
  - prologue opens Book 1, ends Book 11
  - formula of “figure and fulfillment”: Anu tells Aruru to create a double of Gilgamesh, and Aruru creates a double of Gilgamesh
  - This is literature as *magic*: a word that creates a world (in the beginning was the Word...)



# PROLOGUE: THE DEEDS OF GILGAMESH

He had seen everything, had experienced all emotions, from exultation to despair, had been granted a vision into the great mystery, the secret places, the primeval days before the flood. He had journeyed to the edge of the world and made his way back, exhausted but whole. He had carved his trials on stone tablets, had restored the holy Eanna Temple and the massive wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun.



# PROLOGUE: WORD BECOMES DEED

Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than mind can imagine,  
approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar,  
a temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty,  
walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course  
around the city, inspect its mighty foundations,  
examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built,  
observe the land it encloses, the palm trees, the gardens,  
the orchards, the glorious palace and the temples, the shops  
and marketplaces, the houses the public squares.

# PROLOGUE: WORD BECOMES DEED

Find the cornerstone and under it the copper box that is marked with his name. Unlock it. Open the lid. Take out the tablet of lapis lazuli. Read how **Gilgamesh** suffered all and accomplished all.



# OVERVIEW

- Book I: Gilgamesh is cruel; Enkidu is created
- Book II: Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet, struggle, become friends
- Book III: They decide to kill the monster Humbaba
- Book IV: The trip to Humbaba and prophetic dreams
- Book V: The battle with Humbaba



# GILGAMESH

- Gilgamesh is  $\frac{2}{3}$  god (?)
- He is 17-18 feet tall (Mitchell omits this); evidently, he keeps a lion as his pet cat
- He is the best and the greatest—and an unbearable tyrant. The question of his *morality* doesn't arise; it is irrelevant whether or not he is good because he is *great*
- He transgresses social custom (*jus primæ noctis*) and religious boundaries (the sacred Cedar Forest) for fame. The author gives no moral judgment, but admires. Admiration without moral approval







MARCO LORENZETTI

# ENKIDU

- the equal of Gilgamesh, but not his equal (less courageous, less strong, more mortal)
- He is also a giant among men
- Creation scene familiar
- Enkidu seems to be a way of exploring two oppositions: human and animal; civilized and wild. In the oldest work of Western literature, human and civilized are not things you *are*, they are things you *become*

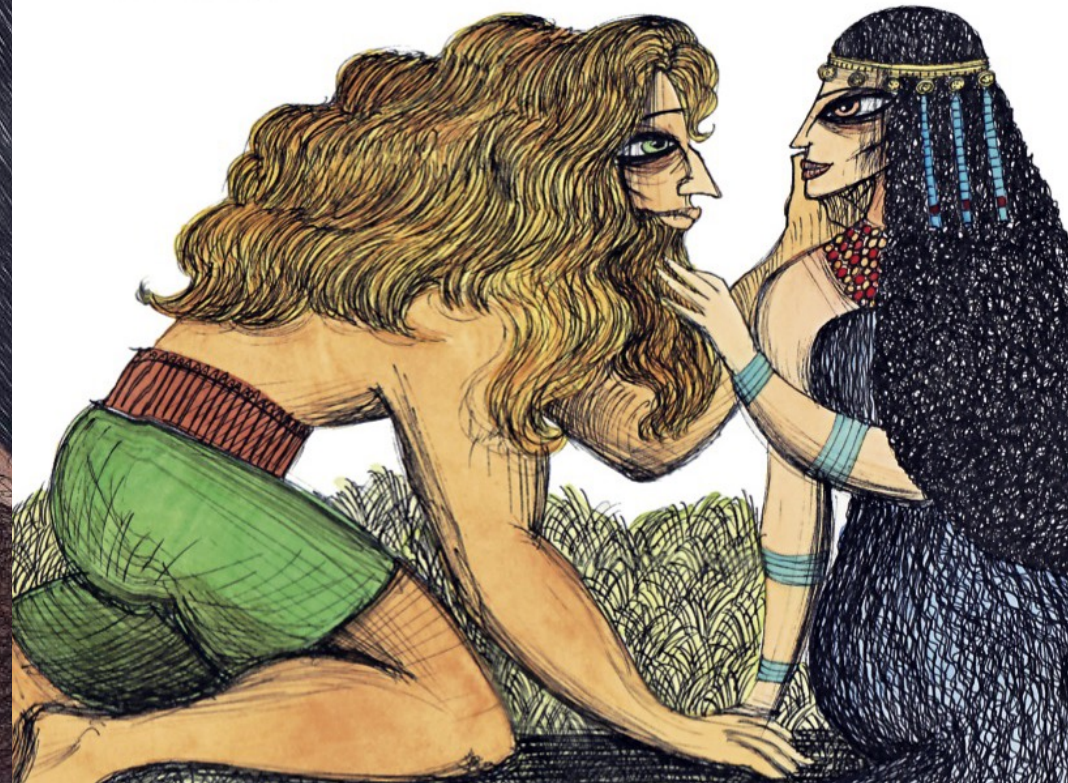


# ENKIDU

- What starts to make Enkidu human rather than animal? *Sex*.
- What completes the process? *Beer*.
- Enkidu also eats bread, cuts his hair, shaves, oils his skin, bathes. But beer and bread are *culture* — as in the (relatively) recently invented *agriculture*.
- And sex? Sex may be natural, but culture is defined by how it shapes, represses, directs, amplifies, and exploits “the natural” — sex becomes sexuality.







# GILGAMESH & ENKIDU

- These are not “two types” as they would be today (Enkidu does not have a stable personality or set character, nor does Gilgamesh)
- A way of exploring two boundaries: human and divine on the one hand (Gilgamesh), and human and animal, on the other (Enkidu)
- And a way of thinking how men might relate to each other: rivals, enemies, friends, lovers...





# STRANGENESS

- Gilgamesh is  $\frac{2}{3}$  god; impossible
- Mother, Ninsun, is a goddess; she prays to the god Shamash. Wait: gods pray to other gods?
- temple prostitute/priestess of Ishtar, Shamhat; explicit public sexuality
- A pre-moral universe? Gilgamesh does things that are *bad* (harmful), but it is not clear that those things are *wrong*. He is not punished for his transgressions, nor does the text express any surprise over this
- the gods get angry, horny and drunk; no sense of *respect* or *reverence* for gods (there is fear, however)
- everyone goes to hell

