EPIC OF GILGAMESH - Curated Transcript of BBC In Our Time podcast
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In Our Time is hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Melvyn's guests on this podcast are:

Andrew George
Professor of Babylonian at SOAS, University of London

Frances Reynolds
Shillito Fellow in Assyriology at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford and Fellow of St Benet's Hall

and

Martin Worthington
Lecturer in Assyriology at the University of Cambridge

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Transcript:

[Melvyn Bragg] Hello. "He who saw the deep". That's a quotation. The first words of the Epic of Gilgamesh said to be the first great masterpiece of literature. A poem with roots more than 4000 years old in Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq, and rediscovered in the 19th century. It tells of Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, who with his best friend, his friend Enkidu, fights a giant and kills the bull of heaven and alone travels across the waters of death to meet the one man who survived the great flood in the vain hope of learning from him how to live forever. In his adventure, Gilgamesh becomes a wiser man and a better king and learns to accept his mortality. We've much, but not all of the ancient texts from clay tablets gathered near Mosul. And it's hoped more discoveries will continue to fill the gaps. With me to discuss the epic of Gilgamesh are Andrew George,

Professor of Babylonian at SOAS, University of London, Frances Reynolds, Shillito Fellow in Assyriology at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford and Fellow of St Benet's Hall and Martin Worthington, Lecturer in Assyriology at the University of Cambridge.

[Melvyn Bragg] Andrew George, where do we look for the origins of the Gilgamesh poem?

[Andrew George] We don't know much about the origins of the poem. The first thing we know about the poem is that it was written down on clay tablets in the cuneiform script in the very first centuries of the second millennium BC. That's nearly 4000 years ago. But we can judge, I think, from the style of the poem, from its use of features of oral poetry, oral epic poetry in particular. That it was once, I think, a poem that was told by minstrels, told by bards sung perhaps orally, before it became written down.

[Melvyn Bragg] So 4000 is the lower marker. It was [perhaps] a few hundred years, maybe a thousand or so years before then. But we don't know. But that's an educated guess.

[Andrew George] We just don't know. But that, as you say, is an educated guess. But what we do find is that because the material on which the epic is written, clay tablets in the Cuneiform script, is very durable. Then we find that we've got pieces of this poem for many centuries from that time, about the 19th Century BC, right down to 100 BC. So we can observe the evolution and development of the poem across an enormous time span, which is extremely exciting.

[Melvyn Bragg] You have a view about who wrote this poem...You thought that was a person, it wasn't an amalgam of folktales and this, that and the other. Can you develop that?

[2:29]
[Andrew George] Well, I think that both those positions are in some way correct. That certainly it seems to me that the the poem suggests itself that it is the work of a single creative genius. But on the other hand...

[Melvyn Bragg] How does that how do you arrive at that conclusion?

[Andrew George] Because it has an integrity of mood and thought behind it. It seems to me that it must be the work of one man. But on the other hand, the creation of literature in ancient Mesopotamia, as elsewhere, traditionally depends upon using the given material. And a lot of folk law existed, I think, in ancient Mesopotamia, which we don't know of, but which is used by the poet of Gilgamesh in constructing this great poem.

[Melvyn Bragg] So it was first written down as far as a letter, say 4000 years ago. And then you think about 1000 years later, another person got hold of it and changed it quite a lot.

[Andrew George] That seems to be the case. The poem that we have in the oldest fragments, it seems a very different mood from the poem that ... is much better

preserved from a thousand years later. And the Babylonians themselves gave us the name of the poet, a name that seems to be younger than the oldest version of the poem. So it seems that the mood changes from a ... poem about the glory of an epic hero, the glory of the greatest hero and king of old, to one that is essentially a meditation upon the facts of life and particularly on death. This, it seems to me, is an intervention in the poem, which is very considerable, changes it completely. And then I would think that this is also the work of an individual.

[Melvyn Bragg] How did the text reach us?

[4:39]
[Andrew George] The text reaches us on clay tablets. As I've said, these clay tablets have come to light since the 1850s, generally, in their tens of thousands. But the first great discovery in 1850 resulted in 20,000 clay tablets with cuneiform script on them being sent back to the British Museum. And there they sat for about 15 years until in 1866, the museum authorities appointed a young man to sort them. And this was George Smith, and by ten years after that, a period during which cuneiform script was properly deciphered, the languages which were used the script began to be properly studied and understood, he was able, ten years after beginning his work, to give a fair translation of the preserved parts of the epic, as it was then known, not necessarily in the right order.

[Melvyn Bragg] And that was the basis of your translation, which has been widely praised, as being quite wonderful. And I must say it reads beautifully and fluidly, as if it were fragments from a sort of wasteland, really.

[Andrew George] What's been happening since George Smith is that further discoveries of tablets have occurred and this is going on. We are essentially pioneers in assyriology, recovering the world's oldest literatures, not just Gilgamesh, but many other compositions. This is a work that continues. I've been the latest person to have had the privilege in bringing together the texts about Gilgamesh, but it's work that must continue. But our problem is that assyriology is not very well financed and always vulnerable to cuts. So we're not sure if this field has a future. We desperately hope that it has.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, Fran Reynolds, we'll wait and see for that one. Can you summarize the plot?

[Frances Reynolds] Yes. As Andrew said, it is an amazing story. We start off with a very poetic prologue and a hymn. But when the narrative gets going, we have Gilgamesh as a king in Uruk who's abusing his power. It's a period of tyranny, the city can't function as it should, [and] as a result, there's an outcry. He's preoccupying the people, particularly the young, in martial exercises, he's abusing his rights, and, in response, the Mother Goddess actually creates a wild man Enkidu from clay to be a match to Gilgamesh. And the idea is that this will therefore absorb his energies, his aggressions.

[Melvyn Bragg] He's brought up with the herds, isn't he eats grass, he arrives at the waterhole with the herds. He is very much an animal when we meet him...

[Frances Reynolds] Exactly. Which is a fascinating idea of the king misbehaving in the city and the wild man with the gazelles. Obviously, then they need to meet. And the bridging device there is that a prostitute from the temple of the city of Urukum (we have to remember that the prostitute here is a high status cultic prostitute right in the heart of the city) is sent out to trap Enkidu. He is then meets Gilgamesh.

[Melvyn Bragg] Hold on. I mean, let's talk about the entrapment. I mean, it's worth talking about. He comes, she seduces him. It's very important that that he is humanized through contact with the woman, which takes place, as we hear unabashedly and unashamedly for seven days and seven nights.

[Frances Reynolds] Absolutely.

[Melvyn Bragg] And the end is humanized.

[Frances Reynolds] Absolutely. Indeed.

[Melvyn Bragg] And also, he's not as much the animal he was, he's more of a human because of this particular sort of contact.

[Frances Reynolds] Exactly.

[Melvyn Bragg] For so long.

[Frances Reynolds] Yes. It's an interesting fact that he then can't live with the gazelles anymore, but he has intelligence and wisdom to connect with humans.

[Melvyn Bragg] So he then sets off for the city and he meets Gilgamesh and he challenges him to a battle and it's a sort-of draw. Then they become very, very close friends

[Frances Reynolds] Indeed. And in a sense, the city isn't ... isn't big enough for the two of them. They then set off to the cedar forest where they fight the guardian, the Humbaba, and he is killed... after this victory...

[Melvyn Bragg] This is a great monster. We mustn't underestimate that. We are told that he rustles around the floor of the forest can be heard from one end of the forest to the other. ...So it's a great big epic monster that they face.

[Frances Reynolds] Absolutely.

[Melvyn Bragg] And they're told all the way along, you mustn't do this.

[8:51]
[Frances Reynolds] Yes, quite right. So the slaying of Humbaba is indeed an act of hubris. It's an offense to the gods. And, of course, Gilgamesh himself is this sort of semi human, semi divine figure. He's a giant. Enkidu matches him. They effectively meet another king in the sea of the forest in Humbaba. Then, after that encounter and victory, they then carry on. And when Gilgamesh is washing after the battle, the goddess Ishtar sees him and desires him and proposes marriage. We have a

wonderful inversion, then, of the classical proposal of marriage from a man to a woman, with the goddess proposing marriage to Gilgamesh. However, Ishtar is the goddess of sex and violence. A proposal from her is an extremely dangerous matter. Gilgamesh rejects her advaces...

[Melvyn Bragg] Because her previous lovers have come to a very... dire end.

[Frances Reynolds] Exactly...If one looks at her dating history, one is not encouraged to be the latest partner of Ishtar. However, he's extremely rude in his rejection. She's furious and calls on her father, the sky god Anu, to bring the Bull of Heaven down to kill Gilgamesh. But the heroes prevail and there is another slaughter and another act of hubris.

[Melvyn Bragg] And then two big things ...sorry to rush you a bit... but two or three big things. One big thing that happens is that Enkidu in dreams discovers he is going to die and does die and causes great ... grief to Gilgamesh. The owner is that Gilgamesh sets off in the path of the sun to find the man who has survived the flood and discover the secret of immortal life and gets there. And the man there ... gives him one test "If you're going to beat immortal life, you've got to beat sleep. Try not to sleep." He immediately falls asleep for seven days. And if he can't sleep, then he can't beat death.

[Frances Reynolds] Yes, absolutely. It's the kind of humiliation that he can't even manage to conquer sleep.

[Melvyn Bragg] And how would you say he ends? Then? He comes back. And what is the ending of this?

[Frances Reynolds] The ending is that Gilgamesh travels back to Urok with the ferryman who enabled him to cross the Waters of Death and reach the flood survivor. And when he reaches his city, he is able to reach a reconciliation that while every mortal individual will die, nonetheless, the human race is eternal and he can see the city as an expression of humanity and of future generations. So it's the classic story of a journey that ends where it's begun, but with different perception.

[Melvyn Bragg] And he has built this wall and that walling the city. Keeping the city going is his real legacy,

[Frances Reynolds] If one is thinking of a concrete legacy.

[Melvyn Bragg] Yes. Well, thank you very much....Sorry, we got all of it in just about ...we missed the Plant of Rejuvenation, which was stolen while he had a bath. But we've got to move on now to Martin Worthington. We speak about it as a poem. Did it come down to us as a poem?

[11:45]
[Martin Worthington] Well, the definition of poetry is highly controversial even today. In the particular case of Babylonia, we're very lucky because when they write things which we call poems, they lay them out in poetic lines, so that each line is a complete clause or sentence. So it's synctically complete. That's one indicator that this isn't just unvarnished prose. Also, what we call Babylonian poems have verses which are

normally constructed around three or four nuggets of meaning, meaning one principal word. And this makes them tremendously economical. If you take a verse of Babylonian poem translated into English, you often find the number of words doubles. So, for example, if we take a Babylonian verse that says ["hatsim narima elishu pachiru"??] that's a mere four words, but in English it becomes "an axe was lying there and people were gathering round it". And these are words you might not actually notice as a reader of an English poem, because they're not terribly important, but in the Babylonian they're not there to clutter you. And so Babylonian verses unfold one after the other in a sort of poetic march of words with a great power. They don't have rhyme in the way that we might expect from a poem, and they don't really have rhythm in the sense of... "dum de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum" in the way that English poems do. But at the same time, there's a great force in the words and there are often lots of subtle little tricks which are built in. So, for example, in the flood story, which is part of ... the Gilmesh poem, we have this line where the hero of the flood is told to destroy his house and he's also told to spurn riches. So it goes ["mushir meshram"?]. Now, that verbal form "mushir" wouldn't normally have an "m". So if you're a second year Akkadian student at one of our universities, or indeed any other university, then you're sitting there scratching your head, saying, why on earth is the "m" there? I wouldn't expect it to be there. It could sort of be there archaically, but what's it there for? But then you look at the next word, it's "mushir meshram". And because Akkadian, like Arabic, like Hebrew, like all Semitic languages, is above all interested in consonants, you suddenly see that "mushir" ("abandon") and "meshrama" ("wealth") are put side by side. So they look like they have the same consonants "me", "she", "re". So they've gone out of their way to sort-of reinvent an old consonant and take it somewhere it isn't really needed for the sake of achieving this play on the word's two roots. So there are lots of details of verbal artistry in the story of Gilgamesh. So I think that by any definition, we're more than comfortable in calling it a poem, even if the Babylonians themselves don't seem to have talked about poems in the way that the Western tradition does.

[Melvyn Bragg] One of the things that's very striking about this...in Andrew's translation, is that repetitions occur again and again and again. For instance, calling on the winds, the north wind, the east wind, the west wind, hurricanes, tornadoes, and how many leagues they walk when they stop to eat. And these are repeated again and again. Is that is that because of the way that the translation came to you? Or is it because of the way the poem was intended to be?

[14:59]
[Martin Worthington] Repetition is a very interesting feature of Mesopotamian poetry at large. It already starts in Sumerian, it carries through to Babylonian, and it can take many forms. You can have the repetition of an entire passage, so ten lines appear here and then they appear later. You can have repetition within a line. Or you could, for example, have a string of lines that start with the same word and at different times. Different poets use all of these strategies. And [it's?] something that we're not really used to. We can speculate about why it is, and you can construct different models which are based on your literary sympathies. One model might be it reminds people what's happening. The other idea might be, if you're telling the story ... orally, you can have the same passage told with different tones of voice so that the words acquire different resonances. We could talk a long time - repetition is a striking feature of Mesopotamian literature.

[Melvyn Bragg] You can't call to mind the great calling up of the winds, can you, in the in the language? It's a big ask, isn't it?

[Martin Worthington] We could get Andrew's book out, but I wouldn't like to try it off the top of my head. Andrew..

[Andrew George] My memory doesn't...

[Melvyn Bragg] It appears three or four times. It's terrific, isn't it? The curse of wind and tornadoes and hurricanes. No? That's fine. Fair enough. Thank you very much. Andrew, can you tell us a bit about Gilgamesh? What qualities does he have? What is he like at the start of the poem? It's been hinted at by Fran, but he's been talked about by Fran. Can we develop it?

[16:33]
[Andrew George] He starts out as a king and a bad king, and this ties in with political thought in ancient Mesopotamia, which if a king is going to exercise power properly and in everyone's advantage, then the king must be counseled. But our problem with Gilgamesh, this great giant hero living in Uruk, ...whose mother is a goddess, is that he's superhuman. He doesn't have a counselor, and therefore the story has to bring a counselor to him. And that's one of Ekidu's jobs, to make him a counselor. But later on in the poem, we discover that the kingship of Gilgamesh is not really an issue anymore, but that he becomes just one of us and the reason why this poem, I think, resonates for us is because we can identify with his human struggle as a man.

[Melvyn Bragg] But is it unusual (you tell me...) to have a perm of such prominence at the time and since which criticizes the court, which criticizes the king from the beginning. I mean, he has the right of the first knight with all brides and so on. He takes sons away from their fathers. He's seriously described as a terrible tyrant. Is that usual or is it unique that we have?

[Andrew George] I wouldn't say that it's usual, but it's certainly not unique. I think in societies where we've lived under autocratic government, then as well as now, literature has a special role to play in being subversive, in being critical of power, speaking truth unto power, but in such a way that power doesn't quite realize it. Gilgamesh certainly does that, [but] it's not alone. There are other ancient literary compositions from Mesopotamia that bring the same critical analysis to power.

[Melvyn Bragg] Fran Reynolds we've come to Enkidu this man who was taken from the herd, ...humanized by Shamhat ... and so on.. He seems to be a complement to Gilgamesh. How is he? Can you describe that?

[Frances Reynolds] Yes, I think that operates on many levels. On one level, they complement one another physically in that we have wonderful descriptions of both Gilgamesh and Enkidu, their supreme physical beauty, their stature. They also complement one another in a sense of their abilities, their aggression, their energy. So ... Gilgamesh for the first time finds a peer, somebody with whom he can travel, with whom he can have these adventures. So I think there's a very nice physical parallelism. When they first go to the shepherds' camp, when Shamhat and Enkidu are

on their way back to Uruk, the shepherds say to Enkidu, "You look so like Gilgamesh. This is extraordinary." So I think there's a meeting on a lot of levels between those two.

[Melvyn Bragg] And the word love between them is used quite regularly in the poem, isn't it?

[Frances Reynolds] It is indeed.

[Melvyn Bragg] How do you interpret that?

[Frances Reynolds] Well, obviously this has been a matter of much debate, what the nature of the relationship actually was between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. And this obviously also reflects the responses to the poem of the readers of the time. But it seems clear that as well as a very close friendship, there was also a sexual relationship between them. So the relationship was also one on that level, as well as one of being companions.

[Melvyn Bragg] Because when Enkidu dies, the grief of Gilmeshi is unbounded, isn't it, really? You won't have him buried for days. He [has the] biggest funeral that there's ever been...

[Frances Reynolds] No, he is devastated. And of course, that then moves the action forward into the second part of the epic.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we develop that, Martin, this idea of relationship between the two? Because I mentioned the word love, because it's in Andrew's translation several times, they hold hands, they walk through things, and so on. But that two mighty men who slay great monsters. What else? What other parts of the relationship are important for us to know about?

[Martin Worthington] One of the wonderful things about Mesopotamian literature is that it often does things that aren't visible on the surface. So you have to look very carefully to see what messages are nestling between the spoken words. So, for example, Gilgamesh actually has dreams which prefigure Enkidu's arrival. And in the first dream... he sees a meteor, and in the second dream, he sees an axe. Now, people have sought to interpret these two dreams in terms of linguistic puns. So the word for axe sounds vaguely like the word for a male cultic prostitute and so on and so forth. And so in some sense, these two dreams prefigure the sexual relationship between the two. But it all becomes very unwieldy, doesn't it? I mean, you have these dreams about totally random objects just for the sake of introducing some sort of word play, and the words barely exist in the first place. So there's another way of looking at it, which is to say Enkidu is created by the gods from a pinch of clay, and then he's humanized by Shamhat in the six days and seven nights [you were] talking about earlier. So in the first dream, we have a meteor i.e. raw material that comes down from heaven. And in the second dream, we have an axe i.e. a humanized artifact made out of the raw material from the first dream. And so you can interpret these two dreams as a tacit prefiguration of Enkidu's transformation. And this would also explain why, in these dreams, there's no mention of the fact that Enkidu starts out as a wild creature and so on and so forth, because it's all there implicit. So this is something the story does a lot of. And there's a very nice bit with the axe, because we've said that in the second

dream, Enkidu is symbolized by an axe. And indeed, this is a theme that's picked up in the poem. So Enkidu is going to be Gilgamesh's axe because he's the friend at his side. He protects him, he's the ["musher zip iseli"?], he's the savior of his companion, and so on and so forth. And actually, so long as Enkidu is at Gilgamesh's side

[Melvyn Bragg] Or in front of him,

[Martin Worthington] Or in front of him! Very good ...

[Melvyn Bragg] Gilgamesh's mother says, "go in front of him because the front one gets the hit and my son is going to walk behind". ... She doesn't quite say that, but the implication is clear.

[Martin Worthington] At his side or in front of him, Gilgamesh doesn't have an axe. Once Enkidu is dead, suddenly Gilgamesh has an axe, the weapon in his hand. And of course, this is probably because so long as [Enkidu] was alive, the axe was symbolically present, in the form of Enkidu, and so Gilgamesh didn't need one. But once Enkidu is gone, then we need a replacement for the lost Enkidu. And so there are all these little games being played about the nature of their relationship which have to be rustled out. And I'm sure there are many more that we still have to rustle.

[Melvyn Bragg] Andrew George, Gilgamesh kills the guardian of the Cedar Forest. Can you tell us why the Cedar Forest is so important and how they managed to kill this alarming monster and annoy the gods for killing one of their best monsters?

[23:31]
[Andrew George] The Cedar Forest in Mesopotamia is the name given to a remote forest far away in the east or the west whence kings and rulers got timber for big building projects. There was no timber in ancient Mesopotamia, it had to be brought in, imported from the mountains. So the Cedar Forest is a well known term in ancient Mesopotamia, but the poet of Gilgamesh visualizes it somewhat differently from how one would expect. And in fact, only recently a new manuscript has come to light which plugs a gap in the story and describes the Cedar Forest. To us, it's actually a jungle. It's a jungle filled with the shrieks of birds, the cacophony of insects and monkeys yelling in the trees, all entertaining the guardian, Humbaba, who lives in the middle like a king surrounded by his musicians. The forest itself is used in the poem to make a particular point. Gilgamesh ... and Enkidu go there with the intent of killing Humbaba and chopping down his trees. This is what they do. But the poet brings a sort of ambivalence into this episode which might be construed to be heroic and glorious, but in fact the heroes realize that what they're doing is against the will of the gods. And indeed, the new piece of tablet tells us at the end, after Enkidu and Gilgamesh have chopped down the trees, that Enkidu looks back and he says, "My friend, we've created this wasteland. What shall we tell the gods when we get back home?" So there's an awareness there that man lives in an environment and he can destroy and damage that environment and that is wrong. That is wrongful. The idea there in this episode is also that to invade someone else's country and kill the king and destroy their resources or pillage the resources and take them back to home, this is also somehow morally wrong. So the poet here is again critical of power.

[Melvyn Bragg] Do we have enough detail the way in which they kill this great monster, Hawawa or Humbaba, depending on which one you use? Is there enough detail to be convincing about it or are there pieces missing there which [could] have been illuminated ... rather more?

[Andrew George] There are still gaps in the story. As elsewhere in the story, we've only got about two thirds of this epic poem, but we know that the monster Humbaba was immobilized by the winds and then he pleaded for his life. Enkidu and Gilgamesh in the end, tired of his pleading, and Enkidu and Gilgamesh both cut his throat and rather gorally, extract his heart and lungs. An interesting thing they also do is they cut off his teeth, which is some reflection of Huwawa being elephantine in some way, and another reference to the trade in raw materials that the Mesopotamian kings indulged in.

[Melvyn Bragg] Then we have this scene, Fran Reynolds, where Ishtar, the goddess, sees Gilgameshan, proposes very powerfully, that she wants to marry him or take him or whichever word you wish to use - both, I presume - and he resists. Can you tell us about that scene?

[26:43]
[Frances Reynolds] Yes, this is one of the critical scenes in the epic, and it's an interesting encounter in that, first of all, we have Gilgamesh, in a sense, being very vulnerable. He's just won this great victory over Humbaba, as Andrew's been describing, and he's washing after the battle. And we often find that there will be an event when heroes are kind of relaxed. They're not expecting something to happen. And because of the display of his body, Ishita sees him and, as you say, there is this "strong desire". Being a goddess of love and war, one might also say "sex and violence". She's extremely direct; she's very aggressive. So she proposes to him, promising him wealth and power. But as we mentioned earlier, she does have this very, let's say "disencoriaging dating history" of this terrible fate that's met by all her previous lovers so Gilgamesh refuses. He doesn't want to be the latest in the list of casualties.

[Melvyn Bragg] And she tries to take a revenge...

[Frances Reynolds] Indeed, she's not used to not getting what she wants - to actually thwart Ishita is a very dangerous strategy. So she calls down from her father, the sky god, this great monster, the Bull of Heaven, to kill Gilgamesh and to destroy Uruk. This is a ferocious animal. It's breath withers vegetation, pits open up in the earth, it can destroy anything that's in its path. But Gilgamesh and Enkidu do prevail, and there's a very nice codicil to that where Ishtar is so angry, she goes up on the ramparts of Uruk and is actually sort of abusing the heroes. So Enkidu tears off the haunch of the bull's behind Leg and actually throws it at Ishtar. And this is part of the etiology for the constellation the Bull of Heaven, which is our Taurus, and how it appears in the sky to have one leg missing.

[Melvyn Bragg] [laughter] That's great, isn't it. I always wondered about that....Martin Worthington, how does the death of Enkidu affect Gilchemish and the course of the poem?

[28:53]

[Martin Worthington] Well, at the start of what we call tablet, meaning chapter, eight, Enkidu's dead and Gilgamesh pronounces a funeral elegy for him. And it begins, as you might expect, "O Enkidu..". Now, this is very surprising because if you look carefully, Gilgamesh has so far never actually spoken the name Enkidu.

[Melvyn Bragg] As far as we know, there are gaps in the text.

[Martin Worthington] There are gaps...

[Melvyn Bragg] Might have done in the gap...

[Martin Worthington] Might have done in the gaps, but it's also interesting that, in the text we have, Enkidu has never spoken the name Gilgamesh, whereas other characters have used the people's names and the two chaps have used other people's names. So it rather looks as if there was some sort of convention which, for reasons we don't understand, acted as a constraint on how they called each other. And as soon as Enkidu dies, this constraint is lifted, there's a paradigm shift, it's transformative. And so suddenly the name is preserved, and of course this makes sense because what do we put on our tombstones? You know...the name is the one thing that's going to preserve you forever. And so the first thing that Gilgamesh does is he preserves Enkidu's name. Now, we know from an earlier version of the story that Gilgamesh is very reluctant to give Enkidu up the burial for a long time, "Adi tulto imkultam in abishi" [meannig] "untill a worm drops from his nose" and then finally he realizes, okay, it's time to move on. And then he starts thinking about himself. And of course his friend having died means, oh dear, am I going to die too? Well, the one person who can give me advice on that is the one man who became immortal, the flood hero so let's go and find him. And so Gilgamesh embarks on this quest to find a flood hero but along the way he becomes a bit like Enkidu himself. He starts roaming the wild, he wears lionskins and in fact this is something the god Shamash, the sun god, had foretold to Enkidu on his deathbed, saying, "after you die, Gilgamesh will start implicitly behaving like you". And this seems to be some comfort to the dying Enkidu.

[Melvyn Bragg] And these journeys he takes are massive journies as described - enormous journeys in terms of distances, time taken, following the path of the sun or whatever it is, going over the waters of death, abd so on. Andrew George, he goes in search of Ut-napishtim, the one man who survived the Great Deluge, and then we have a story within a story, in a way. Could you tell us about that? How did he survive?

[Andrew George] Yes, the story of Ut-napishtim is found elsewhere in Babylonian literature. But the poet of Gilgamesh has used it as a story within a story and for a very good reason, which we'll give you in a moment that Ut-napishtim is asked by Gilgamesh, "how is it that you became immortal"? And he tells the story of how a long time ago the gods had sent a great flood, but he had been told in advance to prepare a boat and bring in to it all the seed of all living things and his family and kith and kin, and thus to survive The Deluge. The Deluge came, Ut-napishtim and his family and seed of all living things were preserved in the boat floating on the water. And there's a very moving bit here where Ut-napishtim describes how when the rain ceased and things had gone quiet, he opened a hatch and looked out and he could see only water. And then he reflects on his position, on what has happened. He sees that all men have died, and he says, "ukta misma atashaba baki eldori apia ilakadi maya" [?] [meaning] "I

knelt me down and sat there weeping over the sides of my cheeks. The tears did flow". And when I read this with my students, many students say they're actually moved by the original Babylonian here, which is interesting in a poem that's 4000 years old. But the purpose of the poet has other emotional parts as well. But the purpose of the flood story, then, is to tell Gilgamesh, look, Ut-napishtim... became immortal through a one-off event long time ago in history. It's not going to happen to you. There is no secret. There is nothing I can tell you more than that. Except that Ut-napishtim does have more to say, which is that he teaches Gilgamesh about life and about death. He teaches Gilgamesh that life is something the gods have given to mankind. But for each individual - they're like a mayfly on the river. They're there for a moment and then they die. But the human race, symbolized by the family, recreates itself cyclically, so that the human race is immortal, but the individual is mortal; the individual must die. And I think we must remember that Babylonia was probably a society a lot more like many Asian societies than European ones which privileged the individual. In many Asian societies, it's society, the community, that's privileged. And the individual has to find his way, his path in the community, and to the community's advantage. There's something there in the poem of that, too.

[Melvyn Bragg] And then, as a compensation, he gives him a plant, which would rejuvenate him. The snake steals the plant, sheds the skin on the way into back into the bush. He gets back, as we've said earlier, gets back to Uruk. Fran Reynolds, what impact did The Deluge story have on the 19th century... scholars and people? Everybody would know about it... Christians and Jews know about Noah. Was it instantly compared with [that] or what happened?

[Frances Reynolds] Well, as you can imagine, it was an extremely high impact when George Smith and British Museum first deciphered the flood story in 1872. I mean, the shock on him was extraordinary. We have this account about how he was in the British Museum that [he]undressed and ran about the room. This may have just been ....

[Melvyn Bragg] In the British Museum?

[Frances Reynolds] In the British Museum

[Melvyn Bragg] When he discovered the story of the Deluge?

[Frances Reynolds] Exactly.

[Melvyn Bragg] Anybody else there at the time? Never mind. That's a trivial question. [laughter]

[34:37]
[Frances Reynolds] And we have to note that this may have been slight early Victorian PR. Possibly he just loosened his collar. But the idea of him running round undressed..

[Melvyn Bragg] Oh no, I think he went all the way. Stick with the original...[laughter]

[Frances Reynolds] But as you can appreciate, discovering this flood story, which nobody would have predicated and came from sources much older than any known sources of the Bible was extremely high impact. This went beyond the limited world of

scholarship. This became a matter of national discussion involving prime minister's, heads of state. It was internationally discussed and of course, for some people it was seen as a threat. The question was, was it something that somehow undermined the Bible, or indeed, was it something that supported the Bible? Could it be seen as sort of supporting the belief in the Bible as a literal text? So it was very controversial. This went way beyond the realms of just a scholarly matter.

[Melvyn Bragg] ...Does the argument still continue, Martin Worthington, between Noah and The Survivor in Gilgamesh ... an argument for who came first?

[Martin Worthington] In a sense it's an argument which will go on forever and can never be resolved... I think ultimately you'll find assyriologists saying that Gilgamesh comes first and you'll find some Old Testament scholars saying that... Andrew?

[Andrew George] I'm just going to add that - sorry to interrupt, Martin - I was just going to add simply that the evidence of archaeology is clearly that these tablets on which the flood story survives in Mesopotamia date back 4000 years from now. There's nothing that suggests that the story in Genesis of Noah dates back anything like that long. So in terms of precedence, the Mesopotamian story, both as an independent story and probably also in Gilgamesh, is rather older, considerably older, than the story in Genesis.

[Melvyn Bragg] Is the idea of ... a human being seeking immortality. Is that a given? Did it happen before Gilgamesh with whatever we had before Gilgamesh, or does he introduce that idea?

[Martin Worthington] I think that is a new idea. And what's very interesting is we don't really know how close he came to it. If you ask Gilgamesh, he'll probably tell you, "Oh, I was so close, I had this plant, it would have given me youthful eternal life, or something, and the damn snake bore it off and here I am without it". But actually he had to go and get that plant down in the subterranean waters called the Apsu, which are the realm of the god Ea who's the trickiest of Mesopotamian gods. So it's quite possible that when Ut-napishtim, the flood hero, said go and find the plant down in the Apsu, he knew that Ea would take care of the matter and arrange things so that they'd pan out. And of course it's in a pool of fresh water that Gilgamesh loses the plant. And again, fresh water is Ea. So it's quite possible that we have the hand of Ea in Gilgamesh's ultimate failure.

[Melvyn Bragg] We've touched on this, but I'd like to develop it as we come towards the end of the program, Andrew. How's the Gilgamesh who returns to Uruk, different from the Gilgamesh we see at the start of the poem?

[37:43]
[Andrew George] That's very interesting and not very much explored. It seems that he must be different because it's the end of the poem. But the end of the poem has been thought unsatisfactory by some people, and indeed, they have tried to add other bits of other poems to it, to have ... Gilgamesh dying at the end. But in the poem himself, he doesn't die, he simply returns home and then he tells his companion to go up onto the wall and look at the city. But a close reading of the very beginning tells us, I think, what's going on, because his epic career is described there in a few lines, and the

words that relate to his homecoming have no action in them. Before, he's all action, there's process involved, he's doing things. When he gets home, everything stops. All the verbs are in what we call a stative form that describe inaction, as if when he got to the end of his journey, which you might think is the end of a human life, he stops doing anything and he doesn't do anymore. He's like Pierre Bezukhov in War and Peace. He suddenly finds contentment in actually observing life and not doing anything himself.

[Melvyn Bragg] Is that regarded as an improvement? Is that regarded as a step up? Is that regarded as an ascension to wisdom?

[Andrew George] I think perhaps it might be and certainly there are many people who think that the epic of Gilgamesh has a spiritual side to it and does give lessons for attaining wisdom.

[Melvyn Bragg] Fran Reynolds, what happened to ... it [after it] was rediscovered in, let's say, 1850? What happened to it since? Has it been added to it? More discoveries? Can you give us more information?

[Frances Reynolds] Yes, ... I mean, since the the first discoveries of cuneiform tablets in the 19th century, as Andrew has indicated, we're basically engaged as assyriologists on one of the world's greatest jigsaw puzzles. So more tablets are coming up all the time that increase our evidence, often attesting to earlier versions of the story - for instance, material from Ugarit and from other sites in modern day Syria. Also a tablet, which was in the news quite recently, that came into the museum in Suleimania, that gave us a lot of new information about the Cedar Forest. So the story certainly isn't over, and let's hope those gaps in the story are going to keep shrinking.

[Melvyn Bragg] Martin what would you say is the special appeal of Gilgamesh these days?

[Martin Worthington] Well, to somebody who does assyriology, it's an incredibly exciting intellectual adventure. As Fran was saying, new finds, new words, new meanings, new patterns, new grammatical rules. Assyriology is an expanding field, which is tremendous. If you're outside assyriology, then Gilgamesh has something for everyone. You talk to people who specialize in Dante and they say, "Dante is so great because you can never get to the bottom of him. You can always reread him". Talk to people who study Thucydides and they say exactly the same. And I think we can say the same about Gilgamesh... You've got everything you've got sex, you've got the gods, you've got loss, you've got getting old, you've got youthful adventure, you've got a monster. What isn't to like?

[Melvyn Bragg] Do you have anything to add to that, Andrew?

[Andrew George] I would say that this is the one work of ancient Near Eastern literature that we can engage with as individuals. This is something... this is a hero who is very human. He's always getting it wrong, he's always doing wrong. His career ends in failure. And we're all like that, we all have to come to terms with that mortality and that failure within us. And the trigger is often, as with Gilgamesh, the death of someone extremely close.

[Melvyn Bragg] Your translation has been hugely and widely admired and it reads so fluently. Was it hard to... Robert Graves once said, "if I'm simple to read it's because it was hard to write", are you in that position?

[41:25]
[Andrew George] I remember getting the proofs from Penguin and I wanted it to read better as a poem. So I read it out loud to myself on a hotel balcony in Baghdad and I think that helped a lot...[laughter]

[Melvyn Bragg] Can't end any better than that! Thank you, Andrew George, Frances Reynolds and Martin Worthington.

And the In Our Time podcast gets some extra time now with a few minutes of bonus material from Melvyn and his guests.

[Martin Worthington] I think people might like to hear about time in Gilgamesh and how difficult it is to know how long things last. So with a poem like Beowulf, if you actually sit down and read it start to finish, you can total up.... there are so many days here and so many days there and, I don't know, the whole thing lasts a week. With Gilgamesh, I think we have absolutely no idea. There are a few days mentioned here, a few days mentioned over there. But does the whole thing last? In theory, it could last a month or it could last a century, it could last a thousand years. There are all sorts of ways you can tie this in to ... "scare-crows of the Mesopotamian mind". People in the ancient Near East probably didn't know how old they were. They didn't normally have to apply for jobs in the same way we do. So age was ... much less of a factor and so it wasn't something they were interested in. And so they're probably less interested in measuring time in works of literature. So that's something that I find interesting...

[Andrew George] I think, too, there's more to be had out of exploring the business of immortality in Gilgamesh because you mentioned, you asked the question, is there another story in ancient Mesopotamia where someone is in quest of immortal life? And I don't think there is. The question that the poet wants us to ask is actually "is immortality worth having?". The poet tells us about the gods, how the gods live forever, but humans don't. And it explores all sorts of issues to do with human life. What is the difference between men and gods? between men and animals? between civilized men and uncivilized men? between Babylonians and foreigners? One thing it also explores that doesn't seem to have been very much touched on is, would it be good to live forever? But if you look at the circumstances in which the flood hero is placed after he's made immortal by the gods, having survived the flood, he lives against a landscape that is not described. It's a blank sheet. And he lives there forever with his wife. They have no company. The poet doesn't say, but he asks this question between the lines "Isn't this an extremely lonely place to be, immortality?" And I think if we think about the problem of immortality, when people say, "oh, I'd like to live forever", in fact, and it's been explored in other literatures, living forever is probably hell on Earth.

[Melvyn Bragg] What would you have liked to go into, Fran?

[Frances Reynolds] I think one of the interesting things in Gilgamesh is the fact, of course, that it's in this very polytheistic society. So we have all these different gods occupying different roles, and we have the interaction between them. And I think that's something that's very interesting. For example, we can see how Gilgamesh himself, of course, has this semi-divine nature. His mother is a goddess. She gets the sun god to protect him. We have the encounter with Ishtar, with aggression, and then the wonderful interplay between the different deities and the flood story, where Enlil wants to wipe out the human race. But the god Ea, whom Martin was talking about, who's a very tricky god and often the god of sort-of cunning solutions, manages to let the flood hero know that this is going to happen, to build the ark and then the whole business after the flood of the reconciliation of gods and men. Somehow life has to go on after the flood. So Enlil is very angry. He didn't want survivors, but Ea manages to reconcile them. So I think that's another interesting aspect of this epic is that it's in such a polytheistic world.

[Martin Worthington] Yeah. And one has to think of the gods not only as sort of superhuman personalities, but they're also forces of nature. So you can see that when mankind offends against the gods, actually mankind is offending against nature. You find that in the Cedar Forest, as we've discussed, but also in the flood story. You have the same idea coming that somehow the expansion of human numbers is such that the gods are disturbed. It's a kind of way of saying that too many people overpopulation ... overburdens the Earth and the Earth will do something about it. There's a kind of early notion of Gaia theory here, that the Earth will respond as a self regulating mechanism and get rid of the plague. In Gilgamesh, of course, it's the gods who respond to the overpopulation of mankind in the flood story and try to wipe mankind out. So embedded there is the idea of a view of ecology or the environment in which human beings do not, as in the Bible, have dominion over the Earth, but they're actually part of a world which is very carefully balanced. And there are opportunities for them to endanger this balance by cutting down the Cedar Forest, by growing too fast in numbers, which I think is a very sophisticated notion, and anticipates modern ideas about humans on the planet, too.