



Gary Beckman

The Hittite Gilgamesh

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The Hittite Gilgamesh is the culmination of several decades of work by Beckman on the Akkadian, Hurrian, and Hittite fragments of the Epic of Gilgamesh found in Hattusa, the Hittite capital. Hittite philologists, the author's primary audience, will want to own this collection of texts, which are of importance not only to multilingualism in Hattusa but also to such diverse matters as the transformation of Mesopotamian mythology beyond Mesopotamia and, more generally, to cross-cultural interaction and literary history in antiquity. All scholars of the ancient world interested in the reception and reinvention of Gilgamesh in cuneiform traditions will profit from study of the material Beckman has conveniently gathered and expertly elucidated.

Two factors that make the tablets from Hattusa relevant widely are the relative abundance of evidence from the Hittite capital dating to the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE, a moment when the Epic of Gilgamesh was becoming standardized in Mesopotamia, and the occasional but distinctly Anatolian variations of the tale as attested in the Hittite texts. After a brief summary of the volume's contents, I expand below on how the tablets that Beckman has edited and analyzed here impinge upon these points, which are of interest and relevance to scholars of cuneiform literary traditions other than solely Hittite philologists.

After a short introduction that sets the Hittite-language texts of Gilgamesh in their Late Bronze Age context, Beckman turns to the relevant tablets. Transliterations of the extant Akkadian, Hurrian, and Hittite texts are each prefaced by a conspectus of modern editions and brief remarks about their editorial history, followed by a terse commentary. In the case of the better-preserved and -understood Akkadian and Hittite texts, Beckman also offers English translations. (More on

the Hurrian material below.) Beckman's edition of the fragments of the Epic of Gilgamesh proper is followed by similar treatment of two other sets of related texts: unplaced Hittite fragments mentioning the hero and Akkadian and Hittite fragments of the Mesopotamian Epic of Atrahasis, also found in Hattusa. The book ends with a bibliography and an exhaustive index of words used in the Hittite-language texts. (Photographs of the tablets can be consulted through the Hethitologie Portal Mainz website.)

Some of the contents of this book are not new: the introduction closely follows Beckman's essay "Gilgamesh in Hatti" (2003), and the English rendering of the Hittite texts is virtually unchanged from an earlier version published by Beckman as part of Foster, Frayne, and Beckman 2001. Although all of the tablets in question have been previously published and studied, it is welcome and useful to have an eminent Hittitologist collect, edit, and comment on all of the texts relating to Gilgamesh found in Hattusa.

Among the tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets unearthed in the Hittite capital, Mesopotamian mythological-epic texts are only scantily attested. However, as Beckman himself has pointed out, there are more relevant fragments of the Epic of Gilgamesh from Hattusa than from all other Late Bronze-Age sites combined (4; see also 2003, 41). A synoptic table of narrative motifs, originally accompanying Beckman's "Gilgamesh in Hatti" and reprinted in this volume, allows the reader to compare the narrative structure of the tale in the Standard Babylonian version of the epic found in the seventh-century BCE library of Assurbanipal not only to the extant fragments from Hattusa but also to Old and Middle Babylonian ones. As Beckman's table readily illustrates, the Hittite-language fragments provide insight into passages of the narrative that are not well represented by contemporary manuscripts found elsewhere, not even in Mesopotamia itself (in particular, episodes of tablet V of the Standard Babylonian version). Conversely, there are a handful of major episodes in the Standard Babylonian version not attested in the Hittite fragments (including, e.g., the adoption as well as the funeral of Enkidu and the deluge narrative). Beckman has suggested that the faster-paced Hittite retelling is at least partly the result of omitting and misunderstanding details that would have been relevant and familiar to a Mesopotamian audience but not to an Anatolian one (4–6; 2001, 157).

The tablets from Hattusa illustrate the plasticity of the tale, specifically how the exploits of the hero were reinterpreted in the periphery of Mesopotamia. The Hittite texts occasionally "make nods to local Anatolian tastes and interests" (10). The seemingly unstable geography of the epic in its various reworkings show that the tale was variously anchored in actual places as it was rewritten, reread, and simply retold beyond Mesopotamia. In the Hittite-language tablets, topographic features local to Anatolia include, for instance, the Mala River (or Upper Euphrates), which is mentioned twice. One wonders how those Hittites who wrote and read the Epic of Gilgamesh imagined the places through which the hero traveled. How would scribes in central Anatolia have envisioned the place that has come to be known, by convention, as the Cedar forest? The twenty-

five “new” Akkadian lines published in 2014 by Al Rawi and George conjure an almost tropical jungle (with mention of shrieking birds and monkeys) rather than a Levantine mountain forest. When scholars in Hattusa wrote and read about the awe that Gilgamesh and Enkidu felt before a nearly impenetrable wall of trees in what they called the Mountain of Huwawa, did any of them picture the evergreen pines of the southeastern shores of the Black Sea, in other words, the landscape of the Kaska, enemies of the Hittites?

Differences from the Akkadian version extend beyond matters of geography. In the Hittite-language tablets, for instance, the hero is not the direct descendant of a king and a goddess but rather divinely crowd-sourced, as it were: Ea and the Great Gods make his frame, the Sun-God of Heaven gives him manliness, and the storm-god gives him “heroic qualities.” Beckman suggests that the impulse to include local gods in the story may be the cause of the notion that the hero was created by committee (5).

The Hurrian fragments are poorly preserved. Only proper names secure the identification of the texts as relating to the Gilgamesh narrative. Even when enough cuneiform characters survive to hazard a reading, Beckman deems their translation “nearly impossible” (23). Still, he tentatively proposes interpretations of their content. Disjointed and opaque as the Hurrian texts remain, however, they provide glimpses into the history of transmission and to idiosyncratic takes on the Gilgamesh Epic beyond Mesopotamia. The relationship between the Hittite and Hurrian versions is intriguing. Beckman notes that the declension of Huwawa’s name in the Hittite tablets reveals its Hurrian origin (13). Further, colophons in the Hittite-language tablets indicate that there may have been different Hurrian compositions involving the hero. From those colophons, Beckman concludes that “there was originally a significant amount of Hurrian-language text pertaining to the epic.” (23) Indeed, Klinger has argued that the Hittite versions are rendered from the Hurrian (2005, 113–23, esp. 115–16; contra Klinger, see Bachvarova 2016, 54–78, esp. 64ff.). What is certain is that Hurrian gods and monsters are prominent: Teshub, the Hurrian storm-god is a protagonist, as is the monster Huwawa, who was a “denizen of the Hurrian’s own neighborhood” (4).

The Epic of Gilgamesh circulated in several languages in scribal circles in the Hittite capital. Its existence beyond those circles is harder to gauge. In Beckman’s words, “there is absolutely no evidence that the hero of Uruk was familiar to the Hittite in the street” (1); however, mentions of Gilgamesh in a text for a healing ritual (as well as in a possibly related omen text) suggest that the hero’s name could have conceivably been uttered and heard by ritual experts and, more generally, by people other than scribes alone (Bachvarova 2016, 72–99). What is incontrovertible is that all of these texts, as Bachvarova has noted, are the tip of a multimedia iceberg. Even if the tale was restricted to scholars in Hattusa, it was surely recited elsewhere among speakers of many languages. It is hard to make much of the lack of visual representations of Gilgamesh in Hittite art; the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE, the visual representation of Hittite kings was also rare. The tale may be attested in Neo-Hittite sculpture: a tenth- or ninth-century BCE orthostat from

Tel Halaf depicting two men overcoming a bearded enemy has been interpreted as showing Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeating Huwawa. Evidently in Anatolia as elsewhere, we have mere flashes of insight into a complicated history of transmission that has oral, textual, and visual dimensions.

Gilgamesh as attested in cuneiform scripts in the Late Bronze Age was not an exclusively Mesopotamian creation; the Hurrian and Hittite paraphrases of the tale demonstrate that much. Uruk was indeed a Mesopotamian city, and Gilgamesh was a Mesopotamian hero, but already in antiquity the tale was reanimated in idiosyncratic ways far from Mesopotamia. With his edition of these fragmentary but fascinating texts, Beckman allows his readers to explore how that process occurred in the Hittite capital.

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