

**Sophus Helle:** *Gilgamesh. A New Translation of the Ancient Epic.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2021. xxx, 286 S. XXX × XXX cm. ISBN 9780300251180. Preis: US\$ 25,00 (Hardcover)

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A translation of the Akkadian Gilgamesh epic is an ambitious task: the text is long, indeed the longest Akkadian text at all, its literary history is complicated and has produced many manuscripts, there is a lot of secondary literature and, although we have an excellent edition by A. R. George,<sup>1</sup> many difficult passages require a lot of philological skills.

H's translation starts with a long introduction (pp. vii–xxx), followed by the translation of the epic into English (pp. 3–120) and five essays (pp. 123–218). Notes (pp. 219–258) and a bibliography (pp. 259–284) close the book.

The introduction and the essays address numerous different topics, not all of which can be repeated here. “A poem for the Ages” (pp. 123–146): history and reception of the Gilgamesh epic, echoes in other cuneiform texts, rediscovery in modern times. “Study the brickwork” (pp. 147–163): the wall of Uruk, symmetries in the epic, sound of the epic, repetition, alliterations, puns, text genre, questions in the epic. “The storm of his heart” (pp. 164–181): Gilgamesh's aggression, the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Gilgamesh's effeminate behavior. “Dying to be read” (pp. 182–200): death and immortality in the Gilgamesh epic. Kings, women, monsters (pp. 201–218): Gilgamesh as a king, the role of women and monsters in the epic.

All this, primarily addressed to a wider public, reads well and might prove interesting also for the specialist, e. g., when H. compares the length of Gilgamesh with the epics of Iliad, Beowulf, Shahnameh or the Mahabharata (p. xvii): Gilgamesh, by far the longest Mesopotamian epic text, is considerably shorter than all these epics (but not extremely short: also the present translation fills 117 pages). But length is not decisive for determining the text genre, and the reviewer agrees with H. that Gilgamesh is an epic text, a narrative poem (p. xvi). That some parts of the text are not narrative (p. 158 f.) – consider only the introductory hymn in Standard Babylonian I or the long lament of Gilgamesh on Enkidu in Standard Babylonian VIII – does not contradict this statement, because text genres are classified *a potiori*: a text with more narrative than hymnic passages is an epic, a hymn with some narrative parts (e. g., the Agushaya hymn) is a hymn. Also the Iliad is not a purely narrative text. Gilgamesh shares the focus on dialogues (p. 160) with the Greek epics.

In some cases, the reviewer does not follow H's views. The concept of the author (p. 133 f.) is an anachronism in the Ancient Near East: neither lists of scholars associated with literary works, nor the Akkadian words describing their activity (e. g., *kašāru* “to knot”), prove that one distinguished between the composer, the compiler and the copyist of a literary text. The reason for the journey into the cedar forest is not “muddled” (p. 165) but, according to Standard Babylonian II 149–150, the desire for a “name”, i. e., enduring fame. This desire corresponds with the main motif of the entire epic, namely that man cannot achieve immortality other than through heroic deeds. The achievement of Gilgamesh that ensures his posthumous fame and thus a kind of immortality is his magnificent wall around the city of Uruk, which is still visible today. H's statement (p. 195), “by failing to become immortal, Gilgamesh learns to tell stories”, is a misinterpretation of Standard Babylonian I 8, “he brought tidings from before the flood”: the point is not his capacity of story-telling as such, but his comprehensive wisdom, which also includes antediluvian secrets.<sup>2</sup> The travel to the cedar forest is first and foremost a reminiscence of the usual journeys of Mesopotamian kings to the coast of the Mediterranean, to fetch large timber. Allusions to the underworld or to rituals in Uruk (p. 157), if present at all, play a secondary role at best.

Regarding the translation of the epic text itself, H. uses the Standard Babylonian (henceforth SB) Version as a basis, which he supplements with older versions where there are larger gaps – a common and acceptable practice for translations aimed at a broad audience. However, restored or unclear passages are not marked as such (see H's statement on p. xxxvii), which is problematic because it gives the illusion of a secure text where in fact it does not exist. E.g., SB II 47–48 (p. 16) are translated as “No one had taught him how to eat bread, he did not know how to drink beer”. However, both lines are almost completely destroyed; only a *-ma* “and” and the word *idē* “he knows” are preserved. The rest has been tentatively restored<sup>3</sup> after tablet II 90–93 of the Old Babylonian (henceforth OB) version, where the word order is chastic and the verbs *idē* and *lummud* are reversed.

<sup>2</sup> See N. Wasserman, *At the House of Ūtanapišti. An Interpretive Essay* (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> George, *Gilgamesh* p. 560, with many question marks.

<sup>1</sup> A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (Oxford 2003)

H. tries to present a poetic translation and makes a particular effort to imitate phonetic assonances, mostly alliterations, of the Akkadian text in the English translation (p. xxvii). In principal, a beautiful “poetic” translation is to be welcomed. Nobody wants to read any more a translation which is “bis zur Geschmacklosigkeit wörtlich”.<sup>4</sup> To quote D. O. Edzard: “Schöne Sprache eines Originals muß auch in schöner Sprache ... übersetzt werden.“ (OBO 160/4, 2004, 561). However, this effort is limited by the great gap between the different languages, and it becomes problematic when the translation is beautiful at the expense of philological accuracy. E.g., OB version II 101–102, *šikaram šitī šimti māti* is rendered by H. as “drink the beer, the people’s pleasure”: the Akkadian alliteration with three *š* is imitated in English by one *b* and two *p*. But the Akkadian word *šimtu* does not mean “pleasure”, but rather “fate”, “custom”, or “norm”: Beer, like bread, is the basis of nutrition in Mesopotamia. By drinking it, Enkidu becomes a normal (Mesopotamian) man.

Besides assonances, Akkadian literary texts often use stylistic devices that involve word order. Parallelism can easily be imitated in English translation. Chiasm, on the other hand, causes difficulties with English word order: OB II 115 *uttappiṣ barbarī labbī uktaššid* is translated accordingly by H. (p. 16) “he butchered wolfs and battled lions”. The German language, with its less fixed word order, makes the task of the translator easier and is well able to imitate chiasm: “Er zerschmetterte Wölfe, Löwen jagte er davon”.

The third group of stylistic devices in Akkadian literary texts are the semantic ones, especially similes and metaphors. In cases where different languages use similar images translation is relatively easy: everybody understands the comparison of the gods gathering around the sacrificer *kīma zumbē* “like flies” SB XI 163. However, it becomes interesting when languages use culturally bound images. The sacrifice is offered *ina muḥḥi ziqqurraṣ šadī* (SB XI 158). *ziqqurraṣ šadī* is a genitive metaphor with metaphorical identity of *regens* and *rectum*:<sup>5</sup> the mountain is a ziggurat, the typical Mesopotamian temple tower. The *tertium comparationis* is not only the height, but also the cultic ritual at the top of building and mountain. H’s translation (p. 106) “mountain peak” instead of “mountain-ziggurat”<sup>6</sup> loses the metaphorical force of the Akkadian original.

H. claims not to offer a translation of translations but a new translation based on the original text. However, phil-

ological progress is hard to recognize in his translation. H. closely follows the previous editions everywhere, especially the edition of George. This explains why the commentary on the translation itself (pp. 226–229) is so short.

This review ends with an attempt to suggest new readings and interpretations of two passages. SB XII 30//50 (p. 114): The goddess Ereškigal lies in the underworld: *irassa kī(ma) pūr(i) šappati/šikkati lā/ul šaddat*. H. translates “her bare breast sagged) like jars of stone”. This translation makes no sense (how can a jar sag?) and does not fit the semantic range of *šadādu*. The Sumerian parallel *n u - u m - b ú r* ‘Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld’ 203 proves that the line is, as the previous one (“her shining shoulders are not covered by a garment”), about nakedness. The oil vessels *šappatu* and *šikkatu* are covered by leather. But the breast of the goddess is like a precious alabastron without such a cover, and the negation *ul* is not part of the *tertium comparationis*. All this leads to the translation: “her breast is not covered like an alabastron”.<sup>7</sup>

Ugarit version I 32 (p. 5): H’s translation “his teeth glinted like the rising sun” follows the reading of George:<sup>8</sup> *i-nam<sup>1</sup>-bu-ṭa šī<sup>1</sup>-na-šu ki-ma ni-pi-iḥ<sup>1</sup> <sup>d</sup>šá<sup>1</sup>-am<sup>1</sup>-š[i]*. However, this reading requires an emendation of no less than five signs, described by George himself as “drastic”. Moreover, the text never uses *šá* elsewhere, but always *ša*. Therefore, I suggest a different reading which only needs a single and small emendation:<sup>9</sup> *igāru(I.ZI) arku(GÍD.DA) pe-na-šú ki-ma né-bé-ḥi atri (DIRI) pī<sup>1</sup>(text: GA)-š[ú]* “his thighs were a tall wall, his mouth like an oversized belt”. Note that the Ugarit Gilgamesh text uses many logograms. Thus the line describes Gilgamesh’s extraordinary size as in the following lines 34–37. The comparison with an oversized belt presupposes that the mouth is closed. Ugarit version I 31 (p. 5) shows that also in SB I 60 we have to read [*ap-pa*]t *pērtišu* instead of [*it-q*]í *pērtišu*,<sup>10</sup> so not “his locks” but “the tips of his hair”.

To sum up: H. presents an English translation of the Gilgamesh epic noteworthy for its effort to render the poetic quality of the text, sometimes with more and sometimes with less success. However, he misses the opportunity to improve our philological understanding of the text. The well-written introduction and essays around this new translation aim at a broad audience and are recommended to everybody interested in this fascinating old literary text.

4 P. Jensen, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos in der Weltliteratur*, Band 1 (Strassburg 1906) XIX.

5 Streck, *Die Bildersprache der akkadischen Epik* (Münster 1999) 108 f.

6 M. G. Kovacs, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Stanford 1989) 145. See also K. Hecker, *TUAT 3/4* (1994) 734 “Turmbau des Berges”.

7 See already Streck, *Bildersprache* p. 68 f. in detail.

8 AuOr. 25 (2007) 240 with commentary on p. 244.

9 For the first half of the line see already Streck, *Supplement to the Akkadian Dictionaries* Vol. 1. LAOS 7,1 (2018) 81 s. v. *pēmu*, and my edition of the text on <https://seal.huji.ac.il/no.1577> from 2017.

10 Thus George, *Gilgamesh Epic* p. 542 and AuOr. 25 (2007) 244.