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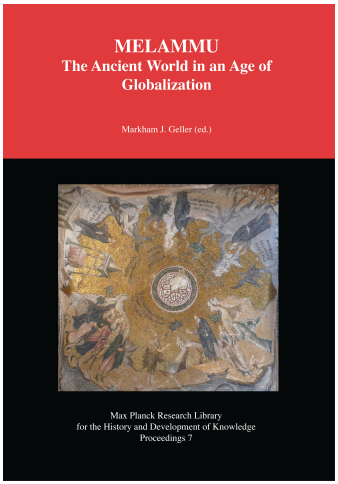

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Chapter 5
Globalization in Literature: Re-Examining the Gilgameš Affair

Cynthia Jean

5.1 Introduction

In his recent edition of the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, A.R. George wrote a chapter about the "life" of Gilgamesh after and outside the cuneiform tradition (George 2003, 54–70). This paper intends to re-examine the influences and the transmission of Gilgamesh—as an epic and as a character—in the Near Eastern World and beyond, and try to find out how to confirm or deny these resemblances from a theoretical point of view.

Some characters, such as Alexander the Great, Gilgamesh and antediluvian sages, have an extremely prolific afterlife in literature and many Near Eastern (in its broadest sense) cultures rewrote their stories at the crossroads of history and mythology. Regarding "the Gilgamesh affair," many scholars, mainly Classicists or Assyriologists, wrote about similarities between the Epic of Gilgamesh and other epics, folk tales or philosophical texts.[1] George made a harsh criticism of these statements and analyzed the question "*of the extent to which the Epic of Gilgamesh made a mark on later literature*" (George 2003, 54), following two lines of enquiry: the relationship between the Homeric poems and the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the legacy of Gilgamesh to the post-cuneiform literary world. His conclusions are clearly overcautious, since from his point of view, as far as we know, the Epic of Gilgamesh itself was not transmitted outside the cuneiform tradition and did not survive the death of cuneiform writing.

[1] For a bibliography on the subject, see references given by T. Abusch (2001, 1 (footnotes 1–9)), by M.L. West (1997, 334–437) and of course by A.R. George (2003, 54-69 *passim* in footnotes).

5.2 Homer and Gilgamesh

For George, the Homeric Epic and the Gilgamesh Epic are rather distant relatives, the similarities[2] owing to the epic genre and motifs, and to imagery imported in Greece from the East, and not to direct influences (George 2003, 57).

5.3 Continuity in Other Tales

George admits continuity of religion, traditional sciences and folk tales after the death of cuneiform literature, because this knowledge was, to sum up, "*sufficiently valuable that it survived to live on in other cultures*" (George 2003, 59) and because folk tales, being in essence oral and popular, are "*easily transmitted from culture to culture*."[3] On the other hand, he considers that literature was too close to a socio-cultural world and died out with its writing, leaving few survivors. Of course we must bear in mind that we know virtually nothing of the Aramaic and Levantine literatures, that a large part of Berossus' work is now lost—as George pointed out himself—and that George's analysis is a response to some overoptimistic studies. However, George considers as irrelevant the similarities found in different cultures and literary styles, such as (George 2003, 60–68):

- Gnostic references where both Gilgamesh and Humbaba became antediluvian evil giants corrupting mankind (*glgmyš* and *hwbbš* in the *Book of Giants* from Qumran and Manichean writings, *Jiljamiš* in Arabic conjurations);
- Similar episodes and motifs (for example, the Tale of Buluqiya in the *Arabian Nights*);
- Pseudo-historic stories written by the Nestorian author Theodor Bar Konai (where two Gilgamesh appear in his list of the twelve postdiluvian kings) and by classical authors (the miraculous survival of Gilgamos in Aelian's *On the Nature of Animals* and the story of Combabos and the king Seleucos in Lucian's *De Dea Syria*).

After reading this criticism, we may wonder what kind of occurrence but a translation would be worth the label of "survival" according to George's analysis. One characteristic of ancient literature, both during classical and oriental

[2] The main similarities are the wanderings of Gilgamesh and Odysseus, the separation by death of two friends (Gilgamesh and Enkidu *vs.* Achilles and Patroclus) and a talk with deceased loved ones (Enkidu's speech about the Netherworld and Odysseus interviewing his mother and other dead persons, known as the *Nekyia*).

[3] A.R. George gives the example of the *Poor Man of Nippur*, whose success is, according to him, linked with his oral transmission. The theme of the *Poor Man* is found in the *Arabian Nights*; (George 2003, 60).

Antiquity and to a certain extent, even in Western Middle Ages, is the rewriting of old ideas, oral motifs and well-known themes. As C. Grottanelli put it in a previous *Melammu Symposium* about the story of Combabos (Grottanelli 2001, 27), their success depended on their adaptation in a new literary form matching the new culture from a socio-political and aesthetic point of view. In this process, the core of the "*materia remota*" was often masked and the author's skill was his ability to combine traditional elements into a new story.[4] Moreover, even when translated, ancient texts were largely distorted because of the translator's interpretation (willingly or not), of the religious *interpretatio*, or because of the need of adapting foreign words or concepts. We know only few cases of sheer translations whose texts, original and translation, are both preserved in contemporary manuscripts. One of them is the *Legend of Tefnut*, whose Demotic and Greek versions were preserved on papyri.[5] This translation of the Myth of the Sun's eye is quite close and both the scripture and the register—using rare words and translating accurately technical terms (for example plants and animals) and philosophical concepts—betray the work of a scholar. Of course, some parts of the legend were altered by *interpretatio* (for example Thot is Hermes, Râ is Zeus, and so forth) and by the translator's editorial work.[6]

From a theoretical point of view, what may be considered as the influence, the survival and the globalization of a literary text? What elements are necessary to put a text into the dynamics of tradition of a literary masterpiece? Several specialists of ancient and modern literatures have pinpointed the problem of survival within an imitative literary tradition. In Ph. Hardie's study on the successors of Virgil's *Aeneid*[7] (Hardie 1993) and D. Davis's analysis of the relationship between classical Greek poetry and novels, and Persian poetry (Davis 2002), both scholars agree that some conditions are essential to reach the conclusion that two texts are connected. If the necessary elements of the self-conscious "imitation-text" are of course the fundamental motifs and themes of the "original," some extra features are required:

1. These motifs, themes and psychological dynamics must come in the same order;

[4] On *imitatio* in Western Medieval literature, see, e.g., (Busby 1989, 77–79).

[5] The Demotic version is Papyrus I, 384 (Leiden) and the Greek translation, dating from the third century CE, is P. Lit. Lond. 192 (London, British Museum).

[6] Some parts were deleted or paraphrased, such as Egyptian proverbs probably unknown to a Greek audience. The references to Egyptian myths were adapted in a Greek style, for example a Hellenized description of a griffon. For further information, see my forthcoming article on Greek novels inspired by Egyptian tales.

[7] The successors of Virgil are Lucan (*Bellum Civile*), Statius (*Thebaid*), Valerius Flaccus (*Argonautica*) and Silius Italicus (*Punica*).

2. Characters must display the same functions, as V. Propp defined the concept[8];
3. Characters or places should be connected by the onomastic;
4. Last but not least, both texts must share several details and/or places.

In this perspective, George is quite right when he says that the Epic of Gilgamesh itself has no Near Eastern successors in the texts that passed down to us. The Homeric Epic is from this point of view the best child we can find for Gilgamesh's quest.

However, as George and T. Abusch pointed out, Gilgamesh is an epic hero, but also a man, a king, and a god (George 2003; Abusch 2001, 2). If the Epic itself found only distant echoes in later tradition, the character of Gilgamesh is what we may call a good example of globalization in Eastern literature. George distinguished between the written and the oral tradition (unknown to us) of the Gilgamesh Epic. On the basis of the epic tradition but most probably of the oral tradition as well, the several identities of Gilgamesh evolved in a certain way in and outside Mesopotamia—see above the references quoted by George from Gnostic, Arabic, Syriac and Greek sources—and these developments are in my opinion worth tracking.

From Egypt to Persia and from Greece to Babylonia, Gilgamesh was known as a great king or as a magical power and divine judge of the Netherworld. These roles are already attested in Assyrian and Babylonian sources featuring a Gilgamesh who is slightly different from the hero of the canonized version of the Epic. Among the top-ranking scholars of the Neo-Assyrian court[9] or in the Babylonian literary tradition,[10] the hero Gilgamesh was living his life as a king of ancient times and as a ruler and judge of the Netherworld in the realm of rituals, omens, literature, and theology.[11] If we take this new path of investigation, others sources such as folk tales, novels, and syncretic texts may yield new occurrences of Gilgamesh' influence on "Mediterranean" literature. These so-called popular texts have often been regarded by modern scholars as parts of lesser literature, especially among classicists. However, we must bear in mind that if these texts were considered interesting enough to be inked on papyri or written in clay, it is precisely because they were also worth of interest for literate persons, taking into account that not everyone could read in Antiquity. Folk tales, texts labelled as "non-canonical," and fragments of novels, when found in libraries of

[8] Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action (Propp 1977, 21). It doesn't matter which character performs it and how.
[9] See, e.g., SAA 10, 274, r. 5: the exorcist Nabû-nadin-šumi mentions the use of a small statue of Gilgamesh in a *Maqlû* ritual.
[10] For example in the well-known Letter of Gilgamesh; cf. STT 40–42 and (George 2003, 117–119).
[11] "Literary, Historical and Religious Traditions about Gilgamesh," in (George 2003, 91–137).

Mesopotamian scholars or in collections owned by Egyptian priests, were perhaps not that "popular" (in the etymological sense). This is why, being in essence living memories of ancient times, medieval and modern Near Eastern tales are definitely a corpus to investigate.[12]

In another literary genre, gnostic and esoteric writings are often known to preserve ancient traditions when power and politics passed to another cultural group, exactly as romances and novels have a tendency to reveal an interest in foreign patterns. For example, the above-mentioned translation of the *Legend of Tefnut* is considered as a literary product of the hermetism. Another interesting text preserved on a Graeco-Egyptian papyrus[13] mixed different traditions in a gnostic fashion to rewrite an episode of the *Myth of Horus*. This mythological story is inspired by the struggle between Horus and Seth, resembling the famous ones found on papyri preserved in the Demotic collection of Berlin. The Greek contribution to this story—unfortunately badly preserved—is of course the language, the introduction of Giants and the *interpretatio* (Isis is called Aphrodite). The role of Giants in the *Horus* is explained by a chapter of Plutarch (*Isis and Osiris*, 25), who considers that wars between Titans and Giants are similar to the stories of Osiris and Typhon, that is, Seth,[14] and have the same meaning.

In this syncretic myth of Horus, a tricky sentence has a Mesopotamian touch:

> [Ὁ] πάτηρ ἐτήρ[ει τὸ?] ὄρος τῶν κέδ[ρ]ων κ[αὶ ἀπεκτίνεν] τὸν μέγαν γί[γ]αντα τὸν φον[έ]α τοῦ π[ατρὸς αὐτοῦ]
>
> The father watched the Mountain of the Cedars and killed the big Giant, the slayer of his own father. (P. Jena 1, Myth of Horus, col. II, lines 24–26)

The father should be Horus and the Big Giant, Seth, the slain father being of course Osiris. Horus is never called "the father" in Egyptian versions of the myth. As cedars do not grow in Egypt, the detail must come from a Levantine or Mesopotamian motif and the mention of the "Cedar Mountain" is reminiscent of

[12] About a Near Eastern epic still sung today, see in this volume N. Lamassu's paper "Gilgamesh's Plant of Rejuvenation and Qāṭīne's Sīsīsāmbur."

[13] The papyrus comes from Edfou (P. Jena 1, preserved in Jena at the Friederich Schiller Universität). This long fragmentary codex of papyrus has two texts: on the verso the fifth book of Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* (copy dating from the late third / early fourth century CE) and on the recto, a syncretic story based on the myth of Horus (copy dating from the third century CE). The copyist of Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* used the whole papyrus on the recto-side, then turned the volumen and found three columns of a "pagan" text on the verso. However, he kept on copying Irenaeus after the older text. This is quite unusual because the first text inked on a papyrus is normally written on the recto, i.e., along the fibres of the papyrus. There is no obvious link between the two texts.

[14] This association between Typhon and Seth is known in Greek literature since classical times; see, e.g., Aeschylus, *The Suppliants*, v. 559–560.

the famous episode in the Gilgamesh Epic. This small fragment shows us, I hope, that a new investigation of gnostic and syncretic material should provide us with new distant offsprings of the success character of Gilgamesh. Just as the Epic of Gilgamesh found its way to Homer, I think that the memory of Gilgamesh, as a king or as a supernatural power, undoubtedly found a place in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern imaginary.

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