

ON THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH IN ESTONIAN¹

***Gilgameši eepos. Akkadi keelest tõlkinud ja seletused kirjutatud Amar Annus 2010.* [The Epic of Gilgamesh: Translated from the Akkadian language and commented by Amar Annus.] Bibliotheca Antiqua, Tallinna Ülikooli Kirjastus, 242 pp.**



The Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*² is one of the oldest and most famous epics in the history of mankind, which was extremely popular in ancient Near East during the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE and probably even later. Along with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*³, another Babylonian epic *Enūma eliš*⁴ has supposedly influenced the most well-known heroic epic or epic poems of Ancient Near Eastern cultures and countries, such as Babylonia, Assyria, Hittite kingdom, kingdom of Mitanni (Khanigalbat), Amorite kingdom of Yamhad, kingdom of Nuzi, kingdom of Kizzuwatna, kingdom of Urartu, and also city-states, such as Mari, Ugarit, Emar, Carchemish and Halab (modern Aleppo), as well as other Syrian, Palestinian, Anatolian or Mesopotamian city-states and kingdoms. The poem was well known in the scribal tradition in Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, Palestine, Urartu, and Iran (Achaemenid Persia) during the reign of Alexander the Great and later in Hellenistic Seleucid Empire.

Some elements of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* could also be found in Greek-Roman mythological legacy and in literature: theogonies, myths, poems, and the like, as well as later on in Late Antiquity and supposedly partly also in the medieval Near Eastern literature: in Arabic and Persian poems, tales literature, for example *Odyssey*, *Cycle of Heracles*, *Alexander romance*, Persian national epic *Shahnameh*, etc. (see, for example, Dalley 1991: 1–17).

The Epic of Gilgamesh has been published many times in English, French, German, Russian, and other languages (see, for example, Diakonov 1961; George 1999, 2003, 2007). This very famous epic poem was also published in Estonian by Boris Kabur in 1994 (Kabur 1994). Although Boris Kabur (1917–2002) was an author and translator, he was not an Assyriologist or philologist in the field of ancient Near Eastern studies and he did not know the Akkadian language; hence, his translation was mainly made on the basis of Russian (I. M. Diakonov's translation: Diakonov 1961) and English versions.

In 2010, the second Estonian translation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was published. The original text was translated and commented by Assyriologist Dr. Amar Annus. He has published several articles, translations and a book in the field of Assyriology.

The new Estonian translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* by Amar Annus includes *Acknowledgments*, *Introduction*, *Estonian translation of the Epic* (altogether 12 tablets), *Commentaries*, *Hittite "Gilgamesh"* (written by Jaan Puhvel), *Bibliography*, *Glossary*, and *List of Illustrations* – altogether 242 pages. It is the only scientific translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in the Estonian language.

Amar Annus's translation is quite accurate, made directly from the Akkadian language. Amar Annus is a very talented translator and he is also an expert in deciphering Akkadian and Sumerian cuneiform texts (see, for example, Annus 2001; MKA: 23–47, 55–95, 137–202, 239–254; 260–271; Annus & Lenzi 2010).

This is not only a good translation from Akkadian, but also a profound analysis of the epic and it is one of the reasons why this translation can be designated as scientific. However, the translator has neglected the Akkadian transliteration in this work. In my opinion it would have been very good if this edition of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* had also incorporated Akkadian transliteration of all the 12 tablets. It is certainly understandable that this edition is meant not only for the orientologists and specialists in the field of Near Eastern Studies, but also for other readers who are interested in reading this literary masterpiece. However, with Akkadian transliteration it would be more useful for specialists and scholars who work with this epic, and it could also be very helpful for students in learning the Babylonian dialect of the Akkadian language. The second critical remark concerns the fact that the book does not include an index part, which could also be very useful for working with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Having discussed the abovementioned shortcomings, I have to point out that the translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* by Amar Annus has a very profound introduction (Gilgameši epos 2010: 11–58) and commentaries (Gilgameši epos 2010: 193–226), which also include some remarks about Hittite Gilgamesh provided by an eminent Hittitologist and linguist, professor emeritus of the University of California, Jaan Puhvel (Gilgameši epos 201: 223–227).

The first known version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* – the survived fragments of cuneiform texts – was written in the Old Babylonian dialect of the Akkadian language. It can be traced back to the Old Babylonian period based on *ductus* (Ger. *Schreibstiel*) and the style of cuneiform signs – the so-called Pennsylvania Tablet (dates from approximately 18th or 17th centuries BCE). It seems that the Standard Version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* originated from a later period – from the end of the Middle Babylonian period (ca. 13th–11th centuries BCE) (Gilgameši epos 2010: 33).

The opening words of the Standard Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* are *ša naqbu imuru* – “He, who saw the Deep” (Gilgameši epos 2010: 33). The author of this Standard Version is a Babylonian scholar and scribe *Sîn-lēqi-uninni*, who edited *the Epic of Gilgamesh* and unified it in one poem that consists of 12 tablets. *Sîn-lēqi-uninni* was probably a historical figure who lived in the Middle Babylonian period approximately during the epoch 1300–1100 BCE; however, we cannot exclude the possibility that he could have lived even some centuries earlier, most probably only after a few ruling generations after the reign of Hammurabi (1792–1750), who was the most famous king of the First Dynasty of Babylon and the founder of the Old Babylonian Empire.

Many motives, storylines and roots of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* are older than the Old Babylonian or Middle Babylonian periods and they originate from the Sumerian period – 3rd millennium BCE. From the Ur III period (2112–2004 BCE) we have 5 independent short stories or, to be more precise, epic heroic songs on Bilgamesh (Sumerian form of the name Gilgamesh). Those five epic songs (probably more stories about the divine hero and King Bilgamesh and his deeds existed in Sumer, but those have not been found yet) were written in the Sumerian language (Neo-Sumerian dialect) in the Ur III period or later during the Isin-Larsa period, when Sumerians already assimilated with the Akkadians and Amorite people. Hereby it is necessary to mention that these Sumerian short epic songs or poems about the adventures and heroic deeds of the king of Uruk Bilgamesh, such as *Bilgamesh and Akka* (see, for example, the Estonian translation of *Bilgamesh and Akka* by Vladimir Sazonov and Raul Veede in MKA: 49–53; see also

Sumerian original, the ETCSL transliteration: c.1.8.1.1; see also the edition Römer 1980), *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven* (ETCSL transliteration: c.1.8.1.2), *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld* (ETCSL transliteration: c.1.8.1.4; Shaffer 1963), *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* (ETCSL transliteration: c.1.8.1.5 and c. 1.8.1.5.1) and *The Death of Gilgamesh* (ETCSL transliteration: c.1.8.1.3; see also Espak 2009: 25; Cavineaux & Al-Rawi 2000: 241–242) were extremely popular in earlier times – in Old Sumerian (or Presargonic, ca 2900–2335 BCE) and Old Akkadian (2334–2154 BCE) oral tradition, and they belong to the folklore legacy of Sumerians and Akkadians. In my view they obviously existed in Sumerian oral tradition in very early times – in the Presargonic period (2900/2800–2330 BCE). It seems quite possible that the first stories – epic songs about Bilgamesh – were already composed in one-two or at least three generations after the death of the hero, the most famous king of the First Dynasty of Uruk – Gilgamesh, who hypothetically lived and reigned in Southern Sumerian city-state Uruk approximately in 2700–2600 BCE.⁵

Nevertheless, Gilgamesh was deified after his physical death, people prayed to him as God in the hope of getting help and support in the fight against demons and illnesses. In Ancient Mesopotamia he was not only a protector of the mankind and civilization, who fought with zoomorphic demons (bulls or lions with human heads: several motives can be found in Mesopotamian art, especially in cylinder seals; see about the cylinder seal, for example, Moortgat 1940), but also in Neo-Sumerian period he was a patron or friend and brother of the ruling king – as in the reign of Ur-Namma (2012–2094) or Šulgi⁶ (2093–2046).⁷ Additionally, Gilgamesh was also represented as a very important deity in the Netherworld⁸. But whether Gilgamesh really was a historical figure or not is a complicated question that we cannot discuss here in this short review.⁹

To conclude, we can say that it is very important and necessary to publish a new commented edition of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in Estonian with a profound historical-philological introduction and analysis. Let us hope that in the future several translations of other important and significant oriental poems, epics, myths, and epic songs such as *Atra-hasis*¹⁰, *Enki and Ninmah*¹¹, and others, will be published in Estonian.

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Notes

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² See about The Epic of Gilgameš in George 2003.

³ George 2003; Schaffer 1963.

⁴ See the new edition of *Enūma eliš* by Thomas R. Kämmerer and Kai A. Metzler (Kämmerer & Metzler 2012); see also Espak 2010: 191–192.

⁵ IDV I: 168–170; Sallaberger 2008: 46–49; Selz 2005: 43–44.

⁶ About Šulgi see, for example, Sazonov 2008: 84–107.

⁷ Klein 1976: 271.

⁸ About the Netherworld see Katz 2003; Sazonov 2012: 87–98; Espak 2009: 19–29.

⁹ See more about Gilgamesh in, for example, Annus 2012: 44–45; Sallaberger 2008.

¹⁰ See, for example, Espak 2010: 189–190.

¹¹ See, for example, Espak 2010: 186–188.

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