

BOOK REVIEW

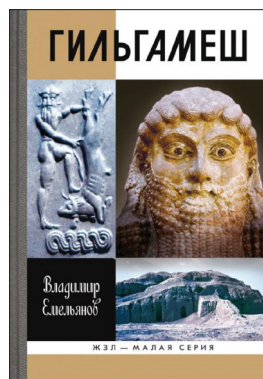
GILGAMESH AS CALENDRIC YEAR

Vladimir Emelianov 2015. *Gil'gamesh: Biografiia legendy*. Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia. 358 pp. In Russian.

In 2015 Vladimir Emelianov published a book on the Gilgamesh legend¹ in the very famous Russian book series *Zhizn Zamechatelnyh Lyudei* (The Lives of Outstanding People).

In the cultural legacy of the ancient Near East there are several legendary kings and heroes but probably the most famous among them was Gilgamesh, heroic ruler of the 1st Uruk dynasty (ca. 27th century BC). We have no firm evidence that he was even a real historical figure but he is a key character in several Sumerian epic songs and the main character of the Akkadian Gilgamesh epic. He was granted divine status posthumously and was worshipped for many centuries in the ancient Near East. Undoubtedly, the figure of Gilgamesh played a very important role in the Sumerian-Akkadian civilization and beyond: in cults, in royal ideology and in literary legacy. Sumerian epic songs about Gilgamesh, written ca 2100–2000 BC, were probably the most popular literary works in the Mesopotamian cultural space from the late 3rd to the 1st millennium BC. In the second millennium BC, based on several of these short Sumerian epic songs (*Gilgamesh and Akka*, *The Death of Gilgamesh*, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*, etc.), the famous *Epic of Gilgamesh* was written in the Akkadian language.²

Emelianov's book *Gil'gamesh: Biografiia legendy* (Gilgamesh: Biography of the Legend) is a comprehensive and solid monograph on Gilgamesh and his role in ancient Near Eastern history, his religion, ideology, literature, and his cultural legacy from ancient times until the modern day. The most significant and innovative contribution of this author in the field of Ancient Near Eastern studies is the idea or concept of Gilgamesh and calendrical time³ where, amongst other things, he showed that in the Early Dynastic period the Sumerian Bilgames cult was connected with the important autumnal festival of Bau. In Nippur, during the Ur III period, Bilgames was seen as a hero of the 5th month and sporting games. Much later, in the Neo-Assyrian version of this Akkadian epic, all 12 months of the Nippur-Babylonian year and calendar belonged to Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh thus became a man-year. According to Vladimir Emelianov, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* we see the calendar being anthropomorphised and this crucial phenomenon was connected with the great scholar Nabû-zuqup-kēnu.⁴ Additionally, Emelianov points out parallels between the 12 tablets of the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the 12 phases of the life of Buddha. He shows that this construct of life, consisting of 12 parts, is an idea which originated from the Axial Age. The author also focuses on several other important issues related to the Gilgamesh epic, for example, Gilgamesh



as a historical person, the development of the Gilgamesh cult, connections between Gilgamesh's genealogy and Gudea as cause for the deification of Gudea, etc.

The book is divided into three chapters and contains a conclusion, appendices, and a bibliography as well as extensive notes.

The first part of the book, "**Bilgames, en of Uruk**" (pp. 12–105), provides a profound overview of the Sumerian Bilgames, some historical background, and puts all known sources of Bilgames/Gilgamesh under the microscope. It begins with an introductory chapter on Unug (Uruk) (pp. 12–27), in which the author gives a historical overview of the ancient Sumerian city of Uruk and its role in Mesopotamia. In the second chapter, "Bilgames in History" (pp. 27–48), the author discusses several questions related to the role of the Sumerian Bilgames in history, and makes several interesting observations on the appearance of the name *Pabilga*, *Bilga*, *Bilga-du*₁₀ in Sumerian sources. Based on this analysis, the author comes to the conclusion that Bilgames lived no later than in the 27th century BC and had already been deified very early in Early Dynastic times (pp. 29–30).

The very interesting topic of the deification of the Sumerian Bilgames (Akkadian Gilgamesh) is discussed by Vladimir Emelianov richly and deeply. In this book he makes several crucial observations (e.g., p. 33):

In royal inscriptions from the Old Sumerian period and in inscriptions of Akkad, Bilgames is never mentioned. From this we can draw certain conclusions about the secundarity of his cult at the time when these inscriptions were composed (25th–23rd centuries BC). The deity who was connected with burial tombs and cemeteries was hardly able to provide military might to the rulers of the I dynasty of Lagash. This deity (Bilgames) was able to inspire the soldiers to win or to die heroic deaths in battle (as testified by inscriptions at the top of their maces), but was hardly able to make the ruler "king of the four corners".

Emelianov rightly shows that the Bilgames cult only began to flourish in the Sumerian-Akkadian world during the second Lagash dynasty (pp. 33–34), and I agree to such argumentation. He makes an interesting observation about Bilgames' connection to Gudea of Lagash. According to the Gudea royal inscriptions, Gudea liked to compare himself to the divine hero Gilgameš⁵ (Bilgames), anticipating the later Neo-Sumerian (Ur III)⁶ king Šulgi (2093–2046 BC).⁷ Emelianov also rightly remarks (p. 34) that Gudea was referred to in his own text as "god of his city", "son of Ninsun" (Bilgames was also Ninsun's son). For example, on *Cylinder B*, Gudea uses the very interesting epithet "ensi (city ruler), the god of his city" (Cyl. B I 15: énsi-ke₄ diġir-iri-na-ke₄) to describe himself, and Emelianov's hypothesis is that this constitutes evidence for his deification. Gudea was the first king to make Bilgames his friend (pp. 34–35). According to the author, "this indicates Gudea's obsession with the idea of immortality"⁸, leading him to the very interesting conclusion:

Gudea was the first ruler after the legendary Bilgames to be revered as a god in the era of Ur III and had several days consecrated to him for worship. He was depicted on the seals of the nobles, and the name of Gudea on these seals was preceded by the "god" determinative DINGIR.⁹

As is well known already, Gilgamesh was deified after his physical death; people prayed to him as if to a god in the hope of receiving help and support in the fight against demons and illness. Later on, in the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh*¹⁰ from the 2nd millennium BC, Gilgamesh is referred to as a divine person in the *Sumerian King List*. In the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, however, he is presented as being two thirds god and one third human being (Gilgamesh I: 47–48): “Gilgamesh was his name from the day he was born, two-thirds of him god but a third of him human.”¹¹

In Ancient Mesopotamia, Gilgamesh was not only a protector of mankind and civilization, who fought with zoomorphic demons (bulls or lions with human heads; several motifs can be found in Mesopotamian art, especially in cylinder seals), but also in the Neo-Sumerian period he was a patron or friend and brother to the ruling king, as, for example, during the reign of Ur-Namma (2012–2094) or Šulgi (2093–2046) (e.g., p. 65). Additionally, Gilgamesh was also represented as a very important deity in the Netherworld; all these and other important aspects not listed here are also discussed in detail in this book by Vladimir Emelianov.

Whether Gilgamesh really was a historical figure¹² or not is a rather complicated question that goes beyond the scope of this short review. I shall, however, mention here that V. Emelianov discusses this issue very thoroughly (pp. 28–29) and presents several interesting pieces of evidence which could be seen as supporting arguments for the hypothesis that Gilgamesh might indeed have been real. Vladimir Emelianov mentions the personal godly name from Early Dynastic Ur (late 27th century BC), *Pabilgames-Utu-pada*¹³, the crucial element being *Bilgames* or *Pabilgames*, explaining that Bilgames could therefore have been deified at this time, thus showing that there exists some probability that he was a real historical person. Emelianov concludes that the person with the name *Pabilgames* was chosen as *lugal* (king) in his city-state by the will of the sun-god Utu. He argues that the first evidence we have for the deification of Bilgames in Ancient Mesopotamia is to be found in the god list from Shuruppak, from which it is known that Bilgames had already been deified as early as in the 26th century BC (p. 29).¹⁴

In the third chapter of the first part of the book, titled “Bilgames in the Literature and Art of Sumer” (pp. 49–105), the author analyses several Sumerian epic songs about Bilgames: “Bilgames and Akka”, “Bilgames and the Bull of Heaven”, “The Death of Bilgames”, “Bilgames and the Netherworld”, and also looks into the evidence referring to Bilgames and Enkidu in Sumerian-Akkadian art. But probably the most interesting chapter in the first part of the book is the very difficult text, “The Death of Gilgamesh”¹⁵, translated (pp. 318–324) and very successfully interpreted by V. Emelianov (pp. 73–82). “The Death of Gilgamesh” is followed by the story “Bilgames and the Netherworld” (pp. 82–95), which can be considered a logical continuation of the former.

The second part of the book “**Gilgamesh, King of Uruk**” (pp. 106–207) also contains several chapters (“From Bilgames to Gilgamesh”, “The Akkadian Epic of Gilgamesh”, “The Assyrian Portrait of Gilgamesh”) and is, in my opinion, the most crucial, strongest, and most original part of this monograph in which the author makes many significant observations and conclusions. Here the author deeply analyses the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, including its composition and structure, also making interesting observations and presenting findings on the codes of the epic. Emelianov argues (p. 138) that

in the epic four codes could be highlighted, one especially interesting example of which is a solar-spatial code: the path of the Sun and Gilgamesh through different countries.

All that being said, I do have some critical remarks to make. On pages 153–154 the author discusses one of the most interesting and mysterious characters in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* – Ur-šanabi (the issue is related to his name and his role in the epic). The author does not take into account the very interesting observations about Gilgamesh and Ur-šanabi made by Sebastian Fink in his *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie orientale* (2014), which proposes interesting readings and interpretations of the name Ur-šanabi and more generally of Ur-šanabi's role in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.¹⁶ Other critical remarks about this book concern the absence of any summary in English. Readers unfamiliar with the Russian language will unfortunately be unable to read this excellent study on Gilgamesh, or even to get a short overview of the main points of the book and findings of the author.

The third and last part of the book, **“Gilgames, Izudbar, and Gilgamesh Again”** (pp. 208–310), offers interesting information on the role of Gilgamesh in antiquity, the Middle Eastern medieval literary tradition, and also its role in modern Europe and Russian and West-European literature. We can also read about several important issues from the history of Assyriological studies that deal with Gilgamesh the person. In this last profound chapter of the study, which can even be seen as a separate research topic in itself, the author provides a summary of all evidence of Gilgamesh from antiquity and its parallels in Greek and Roman mythology and literature. He also provides analyses of Gilgamesh in the Near East (e.g., Qumran), and in Arabic and Persian medieval literature.¹⁷ Last but not least, the author also focuses on the role of Gilgamesh in modern European and Russian literature.

The book is then crowned with a neat overall summary (pp. 311–316) in which the author comes to several important conclusions and sums up his findings and observations.

The book comes accompanied with several appendices, among them an annotated translation of “The Death of Gilgamesh” (pp. 318–324) that has been reconstructed and translated very well into Russian from the Sumerian language, containing no mistakes that I could find. The translation seems to be excellent, even scrupulous. It is followed by a translation of one Neo-Assyrian incantation (pp. 324–325) which mentions Gilgamesh,¹⁸ also translated by V. Emelianov, and this appendix ends with the cycle of poetry on Izdubar, written by Russian poet A. Kondratyev in 1905 (pp. 325–336). The book also contains extensive notes and commentary of important events related to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (pp. 337–354).

So, to conclude, it has to be said that it was very necessary and useful to carry out a new critical analysis of all the sources and evidence about Gilgamesh that we have from Mesopotamia, more widely from the ancient Near East, Greco-Roman antiquity, Arabian-Persian cultural spaces, and also from modern Europe and Russia. This study on Gilgamesh provides us with an innovative approach to these questions. I am therefore convinced that the book written by Vladimir Emelianov, *Gilgamesh: Biography of the Legend*, is a very solid and original contribution to the field of Assyriological studies that I have no hesitation to recommend for translation into English in the near future.

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Notes

- ¹ For more on Gilgamesh see Falkenstein 1957–1971; Annus 2012: 44–45; Cavigneaux & Al-Rawi 2000; Fink 2013: 81–107; Fink 2014: 67–69; Klein 1976: 271–292; Römer 1980; Sallaberger 2013 [2008]; Schaffer 1963; Sazonov 2013: 193–197; Foster 2001.
- ² See, e.g., Gilgamesh 1961; George 2003; 2007: 237–254.
- ³ See Emelianov 1999.
- ⁴ See more on Nabû-zuqup-kēnu in May 2018.
- ⁵ See, e.g., Cyl. B – RIME 3/1: Gudea E3/1.1.7CylB, col. xxiii, 16: “Grown as tall as Gilgameš”.
- ⁶ For more on the kings of Ur III dynasty see RIME 3/2; Michalowski 2008: 33–45.
- ⁷ See *A praise poem of Šulgi* (Šulgi C), Segment A, lines 106–107 (ETCSL transliteration: c.2.4.2.03): “Like my brother and friend Gilgameš, I can recognise the virtuous and I can recognise the wicked”; see also Klein 1976: 271–292.
- ⁸ See also Emelianov 2016: 64.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ George 2003; Foster 2001; see also Schaffer 1963.
- ¹¹ See, e.g., Fink 2013: 82. Since the question of the deification of Gilgamesh has been thoroughly discussed in Fink’s article and Vladimir Emelianov’s book (2015), there is no need to focus on it here.
- ¹² See also George (1999: xxxi): “*Certainly the native historical tradition held this to be the case, for Gilgamesh appears in the list of Sumerian kings as the fifth ruler of the First Dynasty of Uruk. He would thus have flourished about 2750 BC, though some would place him a century or so earlier. His reign, which the list of kings holds to have lasted a mythical 126 years, falls in the shadowy period at the edge of Mesopotamian history, when, as in the Homeric epics, the gods took a personal interest in the affairs of men and often communicated with them directly.*”
- ¹³ See, e.g., Sallaberger 2013 [2008]: 47.
- ¹⁴ See Krebernik 1986: 161–204.
- ¹⁵ Cavigneaux & Al-Rawi 2000.
- ¹⁶ See Fink 2014: 67–69.
- ¹⁷ See, e.g., Dalley 1991: 1–17.
- ¹⁸ Translated by Alan Lenzi (2011: 136–141).

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