Ancient Clay Tablet Offers New Insights into the Gilgamesh Epic

Tablet V of the ancient Mesopotamian Gilgamesh Epic tells the story of the heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu as they combat Humbaba, the monstrous guardian of the Cedar Forest. Two ancient clay tablets securely represent the story that unfolds in Tablet V: a Neo-Assyrian tablet from Nineveh and a Late Babylonian tablet from Uruk. Now, an ancient clay tablet acquired in recent years by the Sulaymaniyah Museum in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq offers new insights into the adventures of Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, and his companion Enkidu.

The earliest known texts of the Gilgamesh Epic were written by the Sumerians, the first literate civilization in Mesopotamia, in the third millennium B.C.E. By the end of the second millennium B.C.E., the epic story developed into an 11-tablet text. Assyrian scribes added an additional tablet describing Gilgamesh’s preparations for death and journey to the underworld in the eighth century B.C.E.

The Sulaymaniyah Museum tablet is a copy of Tablet V of the so-called Standard Babylonian version of the Gilgamesh Epic. Assyriologists Farouk Al-Rawi and Andrew George, both of SOAS, University of London, studied the tablet together over five days in the Sulaymaniyah Museum and published their findings in 2014. Inscribed by hand in cuneiform, the writing system of “wedge-shaped” signs used throughout the Near East in the first four millennia B.C.E., the partially broken tablet measures 4.3 by 3.7 inches and is 1.2 inches thick.

While the provenance of the Gilgamesh tablet is unknown, the researchers state in their paper that it’s “highly probable that [the tablet] was unearthed at a Babylonian site.”

“The only evidence for the time of writing of an undated cuneiform tablet is paleography,” Andrew George told Bible History Daily. “In my opinion, having read many tablets of Old Babylonian and Neo-
Babylonian date, the script of the Sulaymaniya Gilgamesh tablet [...] is a typical Neo-Babylonian script, probably—and here things are more subjective—not later than the sixth century B.C.E.”

Al-Rawi and George discovered that the Sulaymaniya tablet duplicates what’s written on known fragments of Tablet V of the Gilgamesh Epic—thus confirming the order of the passages. The new tablet also fills in gaps in the text and adds some 20 additional lines to the epic.

Vivid literary devices abound in the Sulaymaniya Gilgamesh tablet, according to the researchers:

The most interesting addition to knowledge provided by [the Gilgamesh tablet] is the continuation of the description of the Cedar Forest, one of the very few episodes in Babylonian narrative poetry when attention is paid to landscape. The cedars drip their aromatic sap in cascades (ll.12–16), a trope that gains power from cedar incense’s position in Babylonia as a rare luxury imported from afar. The abundance of exotic and costly materials in fabulous lands is a common literary motif. Perhaps more surprising is the revelation that the Cedar Forest was, in the Babylonian literary imagination, a dense jungle inhabited by exotic and noisy fauna (17–26). The chatter of monkeys, chorus of cicada, and squawking of many kinds of birds formed a symphony (or cacophony) that daily entertained the forest’s guardian, Humbaba. The passage gives a context for the simile “like musicians” that occurs in very broken context in the Hittite version’s description of Gilgamesh and Enkidu’s arrival at the Cedar Forest. Humbaba’s jungle orchestra evokes those images found in ancient Near Eastern art, of animals playing musical instruments. Humbaba emerges not as a barbarian ogre and but as a foreign ruler entertained with music at court in the manner of Babylonian kings, but music of a more exotic kind, played by a band of equally exotic musicians.

The Sulaymaniya tablet also offers a new angle into the mindset of the Gilgamesh Epic heroes following their slaying of Humbaba:

The previously available text made it clear that Gilgameš and Enkidu knew, even before they killed Humbaba, that what they were doing would anger the cosmic forces that
governed the world, chiefly the god Enlil. Their reaction after the event is now tinged with a hint of guilty conscience, when Enkidu remarks ruefully that [...] “we have reduced the forest [to] a wasteland” (303). The anxiety about offending the gods seems to a modern reader compounded by ecological regret. Enkidu goes on to imagine the angry questions that Enlil will ask them when they arrive home: [...] “what was this wrath of yours that you went trampling the forest?” (306). In the theme of the angry gods, the poems about Humbaba in both Sumerian and Akkadian already displayed an ethical ambivalence toward the expedition to his Cedar Forest, arising from what one commentator has called the “double nature” of the forest’s guardian as ogre and servant of Enlil (Forsyth 1981: 21). This newly recovered speech of Enkidu adds to the impression that, to the poets’ minds, the destruction of Humbaba and his trees was morally wrong.³

Read more about the Sulaymaniyah Gilgamesh Epic tablet at Ancient History Et Cetera.