

GILGAMESH AND HOMER. A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MOTIF SETS, DISTINCTIONS AND SIMILARITIES¹

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The Epic of Gilgamesh and Homer's Iliad and Odyssey: what genius can be found in both epics and yet they are such a world of difference². Homer's epics, however, have a lot of advantages over the Epic of Gilgamesh:

a) The Iliad and Odyssey are completely intact, whereas the Epic of Gilgamesh shows a lot of gaps;

b) Homer poses no real problems in understanding. The Epic of Gilgamesh requires a rather inaccessible tool, viz. the knowledge of oriental languages such as Sumeric, Akkadian, Hittite and Hurritic, in order to be fully understood.

The cuneiform script of the Epic of Gilgamesh has been taken from the standard volume by R. Campbell Thompson³. We also made grateful use of the transcription, transliteration, research, findings and interpretations of the Seminar for Cuneiform Philology at the Rijksuniversiteit Ghent.

Our investigation started with the lecture of Peter Jensen's extensive works⁴, in which he defends the bold thesis that almost all stories that have been handed down to us in the Old and New Testament, as well as the legends and tales of nearly all peoples would have undergone the literary influence of this epic poem either directly or indirectly. In this context, the musical terms 'motif' and 'motif sets' are therefore preferably used; in P. Jensen's opinion they have been derived from the Epic of Gilgamesh and always reappear in the same order. Not only the lives of Moses, David or Eliah, but also Jesus' life

¹ Translated from Dutch by Bert Cruysweegs, M.A. Germanic philology.

² A. Ungnad, 'Gilgamesch-Epos und Odyssee'. Kulturfragen 4 + 5, Breslau, 1923, 32p., in: K. Oberhuber, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos*. Darmstadt, 1977, p.104.

³ R. Campbell Thompson, *The Epic of Gilgamesh. Text, Transliteration and notes*. Oxford, 1930.

⁴ P. Jensen, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos in der Weltliteratur*. Teil I, Straatsburg, 1906 & Teil II, Marburg a. L., 1928.

as described in the Gospels, the apostle Paul's life, the Odyssey, the Iliad and even Mohammed's life in the Islamic tradition would (according to Jensen) depend directly or indirectly on our epic via such motifs and motif sets. As such, the influences that emanated from the Epic of Gilgamesh would have been of such an extension and importance as can never be found in any other poem in the world.

Exaggerations are always harmful, as became clear in the fate of this scholar, who had made himself quite useful by interpreting this epic. His statements have met nothing but contradictions, because of the obvious exaggerations. And yet, no one would deny the importance of a poem that causes a respected scholar to make such statements.

The spreading of the epic in its older form to even very remote areas (especially to the west) appears from the fact that fragments in no less than three different languages, dating back to the 14th century BC, have been recovered during excavations at Boghazköy, the one-time capital of the Old Hittite Empire in the centre of Asia Minor. The voyage of the hero Gilgamesh along the sun orbit, from east to west, thus equals the triumphal route of the epic itself that sings of this adventurous journey.

That the Epic of Gilgamesh and Homer's Iliad and Odyssey would not be closely connected seems very unlikely when we use our current knowledge of those times. Already in the externals do we find an obvious relationship with the Babylonian epic⁵, e.g. in the division of the day into twelve double hours on twelve tablets. The Odyssey has 24 songs, for the Greeks divided every double hour into two separate hours. The frequent introduction of a new day with the words 'As soon as the day was dawning'⁶ was also used by Homer, who turned it (in accordance with his more vivid and merry character) into 'But when Eos, the child of morning, rosy-fingered Dawn, appeared...'⁷

Another style characteristic we come across in both the Babylonian and the Homeric epic is the use of stereotypical repetition, not just of isolated parts, but also of complete parts of text. To our taste these repetitions are often quite tedious. We must not forget, though, that the classical people only heard these stories being told. Unlike us, they didn't have the possibility to check important text parts.

⁵ A. Ungnad in Oberhuber, *o.c.*, p. 134.

⁶ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, XI, 48.

⁷ Homer, *Odyssey*, II, 1.

Yet at first sight it becomes clear that this kind of connection cannot be very intense. Both epics are essentially different from one another⁸ : in the *Odyssey* we feel the warm sun of an aesthetically highly civilized time that was dedicated to a merrier lust for life and did not bother about the big questions of life. The ‘Seize the day’ of it applies to gods and human beings alike. The Epic of Gilgamesh, on the contrary, suffers from the pressure of a depressed, hopeless world view, that suffices with an ‘ignoramus’. In the *Odyssey* this is made explicit as follows: man lives, and therefore he has to use the short time interval he has been given by the gods to enjoy life and learn to know all about its pleasures. In the Epic of Gilgamesh the thinker, who wants to rise above the merely bestial, reaches the following conclusion: all striving and every struggle are profoundly useless, for⁹: ‘gods decreed the fates of all many years ago. They alone are let to be eternal, while we frail humans die as you yourself must someday do’¹⁰. That is the wisdom the divine Siduri passes on to Gilgamesh, together with her advice to enjoy his life. The hero, however, does not accept it. He goes on studying and striving for recognition and eventually will have to admit that the result is negative.

In our comparative study of motifs and motif sets in both epics, we will mention both the similarities and differences between both texts. We will support, complete or reject the statements, investigations and studies of the scholars. Since in most publications the original Akkadian and Greek texts are missing (although this is indispensable evidence), we will provide these texts with a translation of them.

In the introduction the plot of the epic and its main character are outlined¹¹. This introduction strongly brings to mind those of other great epics¹², where the Muse is urged to mention the name of the widely-travelled and heavily tried hero¹³. Now, it is a well-known fact that the start or opening words of hexametric poems are always utterly immaculate. The calling of the Muse is something typically Greek: to my knowledge there is no such thing in oriental literature that is comparable to the Muses. Ten of the 33 Homeric hymns start with

⁸ A. Ungnad in Oberhuber, *o.c.*, p. 105.

⁹ *Idem.*

¹⁰ F.M.T. de Liagre Böhl, *Het Gilgamesj Epos*. Amsterdam, 1958, p.79 – *Epic of Gilgamesh*, X, col.III, 3-5.

¹¹ M. Schipper, *Onsterfelijke Roem [Immortal Fame]*. Baarn, 1989, p.31.

¹² F.M.T. de Liagre Böhl, *o.c.*, p.21 and 22.

¹³ Homer, *Odyssey*, I, 1 – 10.

invoking the Muses¹⁴. In the *Odyssey* the hero's adventures are briefly announced¹⁵. Together, these verses form one big profile of the main character. Odysseus is characterized as a wise and widely travelled person. Gilgamesh, too, had wisdom, got to the bottom of mysteries and investigated everything¹⁶. Very much like Odysseus, who visited so many towns and people and who suffered great sorrows at sea¹⁷, Gilgamesh has set out on a long journey full of effort and grief¹⁸.

To raise the level of excitement, the hero's name is kept secret for a while. It was well-known to everybody in ancient Babylonia and Assyria, but we do not get to know it until verse 20. Now, leaving the hero's name unmentioned in the introduction is common practice¹⁹: the same occurs in Homer's *Odyssey*. As for the epic's contents, the poet²⁰ refers to his own notes on the hero²¹. In Homer's tales²², the authenticity of the story is assured by calling for a divine muse as a kind of 'guarantee' in lieu of a source of inspiration²³.

Summing up, we can state that the similarity between the introduction in Homer (*Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* comes down to the following:

a) assuring the authenticity of the story by invoking a divine muse as a guarantee (not as a source of inspiration²⁴). Author's own notes on the hero²⁵;

b) announcing the contents of the story. In Homer by conjuring up an episode as a specimen²⁶. In the introduction of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the subject and plot of the epic as well as its main character Gilgamesh are outlined;

¹⁴ F. Dirlmeier, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie, Neue Folge* 98, 1955, p.24.

¹⁵ Homer, *Odyssey*, I, 1 – 10.

¹⁶ R. Campbell Thompson, *o.c.*, p.11.

¹⁷ Homer, *Odyssey*, I, 3 & 4.

¹⁸ R. Campbell Thompson, *o.c.*, p.11.

¹⁹ As well as in Vergil's *Aeneid*. The introduction of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* also reminds of the *Nibelungenlied*.

²⁰ Whose age and environment were obviously of a higher literary level than the Homeric Age was in Greece.

²¹ R. Campbell Thompson, *o.c.*, p.11.

²² *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

²³ S. F. Bassett in *Classical Weekly* (29.1.1934).

²⁴ Homer, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

²⁵ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, I, 8.

²⁶ The many heroes that fall and become prey to dogs and carrion birds, which is particularly the case in *Iliad*, VII-XV and *Odyssey*, XII, 397-419 (the cows of the sun-god). Remark : the introduction of the Homeric poems are by no means meant as tables of contents.

- c) indicating the part of the Gods²⁷:
- Iliad: Zeus' will and Apollo's wrath
 - Odyssey: Poseidon's vengefulness and the pity on the part of the other gods
 - Epic of Gilgamesh: Ishtar with her great temple Eanna at Uruk, Gilgamesh' town.

Circe and Ishtar

Another comparison that forces itself upon us, despite all differences in details, is that between Ishtar²⁸ and Circe²⁹, the latter as we know her from the tenth song of the Odyssey³⁰. Just like Ishtar, Circe is a beautiful goddess with 'graceful plaits and a sweet voice'³¹. Ishtar is also 'lovely' and 'royal'³² – and her eyes have fallen on Gilgamesh' dazzling appearance.

Homer also tells us that the sorceress-goddess Circe turned her guests into wolves and lions³³. Odysseus' 22 companions, however, are turned into swine by her sorcery³⁴. Eurylochus³⁵ returned at once and told Odysseus³⁶ about the gruesome fate his friends had met; the latter soon set out to Circe's great palace³⁷. On his way there he ran

²⁷ Vergil might have had several reasons to invoke the Muse in the introduction of the *Aeneid* (I, 1-11):

1. the epic tradition required that the Muse should be invoked in the introduction of an epic poem;
2. the invocation extricates the reader from all earthly things and immediately moves him to the epic's atmosphere;
3. it increases the story's majesty by raising the poet's dignity to a Musarum sacerdos (cf. Horace, *Carmina* III, I, 3);
4. it more or less justifies the use of a miraculous element, since the poet is considered to have been initiated in the secrets and knowledge of the divine world, being a Muse-priest.

²⁸ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, VI.

²⁹ J. Cors y Meya, 'Homer y l'influx de la mitologia oriental'. In : *Faventia* VII, 1, 1985, p.7-19.

³⁰ Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 210ff.

³¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 220-221.

³² A. Schott, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos, neu herausgegeben von W. von Soden*. Stuttgart, 1984, p.55, Song VI, 6.

³³ Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 212-213.

³⁴ Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 229-240.

³⁵ who had stayed outside,

³⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 244-260.

³⁷ Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 274ff.

into Hermes³⁸, messenger of the gods. Hermes promised to help him and protect him from the witchcraft of the heartless poisoner. He handed over a noble and peculiar herb³⁹ to Odysseus. This wonderful plant that protects from the bewitching change inevitably reminds us of the little herb that is found by Gilgamesh with the help of Utanapishtim⁴⁰. If Gilgamesh would manage to take a little shrub from this 'herb of life' (which only grows in the deepest depths of the well of rejuvenation), bring it home and put it into water, he would be able to grow its fruits in his hometown of Uruk and achieve the same as Utanapishtim did on his island of the blessed, viz. the dearly craved immortality.

It should be admitted that also in this case the differences are more numerous than the similarities with the *Odyssey*⁴¹. In Circe's story Odysseus receives the wonderherb from the god Hermes in order to protect him from sorcery, whereas in the Epic of Gilgamesh Gilgamesh is offered 'his' herb as a farewell gift so as to 'become young again when man is an old greybeard'. It has already been pointed out that Circe's guests were turned into lions, wolves and swine, and locked up in stables. In Ishtar's case we are not dealing with ordinary 'guests' but rather with 'suitsors' who have suffered misfortunes caused by her and who have been transformed into beasts. The first of these suitsors is also known from a great many legends and myths: it is her lover Dumuzi (or Tammuz according to later pronunciation), who was betrayed by his beloved and dragged to the realm of the dead by the demons. Every year on set times he was bemoaned and bewailed by women and virgins. He corresponds with Adonis, the god of spring flowers and green and of the young lambs of the flock.

According to F. M. T. de Liagre Böhl, Circe is consumed by a longing for 'matrimonial union' with the epic's hero⁴². It is quite obvious that Circe wants nothing more than making love to Odysseus without thinking of so much as a marriage. It is striking how indifferently she behaves towards Odysseus. She does give him the wanted inquiries, but only at the explicit command of the gods. As compared to the sweet, devoted Calypso, who loved Odysseus dearly

³⁸ According to myth he is the son of Zeus and Maia. He is the god of everything that involves tricks, agility and swiftness. So: messenger to the gods, and patron saint of shepherds, thieves, travellers and their roads, merchants, and players;

³⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 286-288.

⁴⁰ A. Ungnad, *o.c.*, p. 136.

⁴¹ F. M. T. de Liagre Böhl, *o.c.*, p. 145.

⁴² *Idem*.

and treated him in the most affectionate way, Circe gives an impression of sadness. Her desire for Odysseus' embrace does not alter that. The fact that Circe gives Odysseus immediate leave to go on his demand and without the gods' order, and all that without uttering a single word of regret or disappointment, reveals her cold heart which can only be softened by the cold steel of Odysseus' bravery⁴³.

In the sixth song of the Epic of Gilgamesh the goddess Ishtar⁴⁴ declares her love to the king of her own town⁴⁵. She promises to take him to the temple in her own coach; there he will take up residence and be inaugurated as a god. As a goddess of fertility she also conjures up before him fertile herds and strong draught animals. In that respect, too, her seduction was powerful. Ishtar lusts after sexual intercourse with Gilgamesh. She even puts this very frankly, but Gilgamesh does not yield to this temptation. He therefore makes a morally stronger impression than his friend Enkidu used to do in front of one of the attractive servants of the same goddess of beauty and love. This shows the power of his chastening, but his indignity towards the goddess is typical of his rashness he still has not been able to curb. What a paradox! The king slanders and scoffs at the goddess of his own city! In Jensen's opinion⁴⁶ no one could fail to notice that the sorceress Circe also resembles Siduri (and Calypso) and even Utanapishtim's conjuring wife.

The Sirens and the Scorpion giants

The two mixed shapes of the Sirens remind us of the two Scorpion men Gilgamesh encounters at Mount Mashu or the so-called Twin. In the Babylonian depictions, this 'Twin-mountain' in the extreme west contains the gates through which the sun descends to the underworld every evening⁴⁷. These gates are being guarded by two gigantic scorpion creatures, male and female, half man, half scorpion. They belong to the most fantastic fabulous creatures in ancient mythology⁴⁸.

⁴³ Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 480 – 489.

⁴⁴ Ishtar is the goddess of the temple at Uruk with its lecherous cult practices.

⁴⁵ viz. Gilgamesh.

⁴⁶ P. Jensen, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos und Homer*, ZA 16, 1902, p. 127-128.

⁴⁷ One should think of related Greek representations of Hercules' pillars and of the giant Atlas.

⁴⁸ Already in his natural size, the scorpion rightly belongs to the most feared animals in oriental countries.

Homer does not tell us what the Sirens look like; we really should discard the common representations that are of a later date, not only the image of the mermaids, which they have nothing to do with, but also that of the half-woman, half-bird figures from later mythology; Homer might have imagined the Sirens as unwinged⁴⁹. That is why we cannot side with A. Ungnad's statement about 'die mischgestaltigen beiden Sirenen'. Just like there were two scorpion giants (male and female), there were also two Sirens (both female, however). Contrary to the horrifying scorpion monsters, the Sirens and their soprano singing are of such unparalleled beauty that their listeners become utterly indifferent to all material needs : not only do they forget to eat and drink, but they literally 'listen themselves to death' and let themselves shrivel to skin and bone. Again, P. Jensen goes a step further here by making these vainly enticing Sirens correspond to the vainly enticing goddess of love, Ishtar⁵⁰.

Calypso and Siduri

Yet another passage that reveals the influence of the Babylonian epic on Homer! The writer of the Calypso-story⁵¹ was obviously acquainted with the story of Gilgamesh and Siduri⁵². The latter has a duty of preparing the nectar or divine beverage, which guarantees immortality to the gods, out of the blossoms⁵³ and fruits of the manycoloured noble corals. To P. Jensen⁵⁴, the nymph Calypso, in the middle of the sea, calls up the divine maid Siduri, seated at the heavenly mountain of Sabu, on the throne of the ocean. The situation is equal in both cases. The travelling hero craves the final destination of his journey⁵⁵. Gilgamesh is not allowed to remain there⁵⁶. The goal of his journey lies across the big water⁵⁷. Odysseus, too⁵⁸, craved his

⁴⁹ F. Van Ommeslaeghe, *Homerus, Uit de Odyssee*, p.39-40.

⁵⁰ P. Jensen, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos und Homer*, ZA 16, 1902, p.127.

⁵¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, V, 1-277.

⁵² *Epic of Gilgamesh X*; the court of the gods is, according to the Babylonian world view, situated in the east on the shores of the great Ocean. The earth, which was imagined as a round disc, is surrounded on all sides by the ocean. Here the divine pourer/giver Siduri is dwelling among a coral reef.

⁵³ Mintflowers.

⁵⁴ P. Jensen, ZA 16 (1902), p. 127.

⁵⁵ K. Oberhuber, *o.c.*, p.136 (i.e. article by A. Ungnad, *Gilgamesch-Epos und Odyssee*).

⁵⁶ F.M.T de Liagre Böhl, *o.c.*, p.75.

⁵⁷ I.e. on the island of Utanapishtim.

coming home (his final destination) and his consort Penelope, but Calypso kept him on the island of Ogygia. A second meeting of the gods is necessary⁵⁹, because Calypso loves Odysseus so dearly that she will never have him leave voluntarily⁶⁰. Once more the differences are to be found in the details⁶¹. Following Hermes' request, Calypso urges Odysseus to cut down the trees right away. Gilgamesh⁶² descends into the wood through the agency of Ur-Shanabi⁶³. In the *Odyssey* the number of trunks is twenty⁶⁴. The *Gilgamesh* epic brings up 120 trees which are used as 'steering poles' during the voyage across the ocean to the island of Utanapishtim⁶⁵.

The voyage from the island of Calypso to the Phaeacians⁶⁶ takes seventeen days⁶⁷. Gilgamesh' and Ur-Shanabi's trip to the island of the blessed takes one a half months⁶⁸, but the miraculous ship achieves it in no more than three days⁶⁹.

The island of Ogygia⁷⁰, too, bears traces of the divine garden in which Siduri lives⁷¹. In the *Odyssey*, however, the grapevines are covered with natural, purple grapes⁷². In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the garden of the gods, paradise as the ancient Babylonians imagined it, is situated on the spot that is first sunlit every morning. Trees and shrubs that consist of manycoloured stones are growing there: first of all the grapevine, furthermore possibly the fig tree⁷³. Here no natural and purple grapes are hanging on the vines, however, but precious stones

⁵⁸ Homer, *Odyssey*, I, 11-15.

⁵⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, V, 29-32.

⁶⁰ Hermes informs her about the order of the gods.

⁶¹ G.K. Gresseth, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer*, CJ LXX, 4 (1975), p.14.

⁶² *Epic of Gilgamesh*, X, col. III, 40-47.

⁶³ Utanapishtim's ferryman.

⁶⁴ Homer, *Odyssey*, V, 241-244.

⁶⁵ Since the waters are deep and the poles must not be touched again once they have been moistened by the water, every pole should be replaced after a single use. After using the last of his 120 poles, Gilgamesh tears his clothes off and uses them as a kind of sail.

⁶⁶ K. Oberhuber, *o.c.*, p.136.

⁶⁷ Homer, *Odyssey*, V, 278-280.

⁶⁸ The Hittitic text KUB VIII nr.50 col. III is remarkably briefer yet partly corresponds literally with this passage, even as to the period of one and a half months.

⁶⁹ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, X, III 47-49.

⁷⁰ Ogygia is the name of the island where Calypso dwells.

⁷¹ J. Fortes, 'L'Odissea y l'Épopée de Gilgamesh'. In : *Aula Orientalis*, I (1983), p.114.

⁷² Homer, *Odyssey*, V, 59-73.

⁷³ In song X we learn more details about these 'objects of stone' or these 'stone trees'.

and corals⁷⁴. The pourer, Siduri, turns out to be a temptress⁷⁵. Her words at this point not only imply the rash advice to enjoy life, but to enjoy it together with her⁷⁶.

No matter how well meant this piece of advice, the hero obviously does not deign to refute it. Gilgamesh has had to learn things the hardest way. His purification has been completed. With a profound hate he has turned away from the voluptuous life in his hometown around the goddess Ishtar⁷⁷. His god is and will remain the great Sungod Samas, protector of truth and justice. The hero, who has just confessed his faith in this god with passionate words, can resist this blunt kind of temptation without an answer. In the *Odyssey*, Calypso offers Odysseus immortality. Probably Siduri as well offers to Gilgamesh the immortality she can dispose of⁷⁸, being the one who prepares the nectar.

Mockingly and suspiciously the hero rejects the offer that is made to him by his former foe in her new shape. He flies into rage and crushes the stone trees in the garden. In this way, his chance to receive eternal youth from the hands of the temptress has gone by. Odysseus, however, is not at all hostile in his answer to Calypso⁷⁹.

Charon and Ur-Shanabi

In fact the ferryman⁸⁰ is called Sur-sunabu⁸¹ in the ancient Babylonian version. This name, probably as foreign as Siduri's, is turned into Ur-Shanabi⁸² in the Akkadian speech by the younger poet. As a matter of fact, Sanabi means 'two thirds'; the god Ea was called like that, because his holy number, forty, was two thirds of sixty, the number of the celestial god.

⁷⁴ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, IX, V 47-51.

⁷⁵ F.M.T. de Liagre Böhl, *o.c.*, p.164.

⁷⁶ R. Campbell Thompson, *o.c.*, p.53/4.

⁷⁷ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, VI, 7ff.

⁷⁸ The Ugaritic goddess Anat promises the hero Aqhat immortality as well. He does not want it, though. We can rightly refer to Calypso-Odysseus here (V, 136). While Homer does not convey Odysseus' reply but solely the goddess' offer for well-considered reasons, we can hear the whole scene as a dialogue in Ugaritic (ANET 152). The main difference, however, is that Calypso is in love, whereas Anat remains completely 'matter-of-fact'.

⁷⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, V, 215 – 224.

⁸⁰ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, X, col. IV : Gilgamesh' encounter with Ur-Shanabi.

⁸¹ F. M. T. de Liagre Böhl, *o.c.*, p.164.

⁸² Ur-Shanabi means 'worshipper of the god Ea'.

The realm of the dead is separated from the land of the living by the waters of death⁸³, comparable with the Acheron⁸⁴ to the Greeks. Yet our ferryman should not be called the Babylonian Charon, for the destination of the voyage is the island of the blessed with the water of life and the herb of life⁸⁵. This island lies within the realm of the dead. Behind this paradox lies the basic thought of ancient mysteries: that true life is found in the depths of death⁸⁶. In addition to that, a comparison is out of the question, since in the *Odyssey* there is no such thing as a ferryman⁸⁷.

Alcinous	–	Arete	–	Nausicaä
Utanapishtim	–	Spouse	–	Daughter

Alcinous, king of the sailing Phaeacians⁸⁸ (who come from far away, viz. a land of Poseidon's), and his wife Arete and daughter Nausicaä correspond⁸⁹ with Utanapishtim⁹⁰, his spouse and their daughter⁹¹. They live – at least according to Berossus⁹² – on the island of the Blessed⁹³ and just like Alcinous they originate from the 'Sealand', 'the land of the seagod'. It can be hardly a coincidence – according to Ungnad⁹⁴ – that Alcinous' holy power is talked about in the same way as Utanapishtim's⁹⁵. And finally the voyage home on

⁸³ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, X, col. III 50 : describes the voyage by boat to the island of Utanapishtim. The most dangerous part of this faraway voyage are the Waters of Death, in which everything that lives will perish once it has come into contact with them.

⁸⁴ Acheron : cf. The Oxford Classical Dictionary, p. 4 : 'a river of Thesprotia in southern Epirus'. The access to the Hades was located there.

⁸⁵ F. M. T. de Liagre Böhl, *o.c.*, p.165.

⁸⁶ A. M. Frenkian, 'L'épopée de Gilgamesch et les poèmes homériques'. In : *Studii si Cerc.Ist.Veche*, 1950, p.268.

⁸⁷ Cf. Homer, *Odyssey*, XI. In Vergil, on the other hand, we find an extensive description of Charon, the ferryman: Vergil, *Aeneid*, VI, 384-425.

⁸⁸ Homer, *Odyssey*, VI/VII/VIII.

⁸⁹ A. Ungnad, 'Gilgamesch-Epos und Odyssee'. In K. Oberhuber, *o.c.*, p.134.

⁹⁰ According to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Berossus.

⁹¹ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Songs X and XI; B. Gemser, 'Odysseus – Utanapishtim'. In: *AfO* III (1926), pp. 183-185.

⁹² Berossus or Berosus, priest of Bel, author of a history of Babylonia in three books, dedicated to Antiochus I.

⁹³ P. Jensen, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos und Homer*, ZA 16 (1902), p.128.

⁹⁴ Ungnad, *o.c.*

⁹⁵ We should like to add that it was not our intention to underestimate the huge gap that separates both texts in linguistic and aesthetic respect. Such 'details' as we have quoted do provide valuable information, though.

the Phaeacians' ship⁹⁶ is comparable to Gilgamesh' return on Utanapishtim's ship⁹⁷. Ungnad also asserts⁹⁸ that the Phaeacians' ships – just like those of Utanapishtim – are ships of miracle⁹⁹, which do not need a helmsman, although we have not found this *expressis verbis* anywhere in the Epic of Gilgamesh.

The underworld

Gilgamesh'¹⁰⁰ and Odysseus'¹⁰¹ descent to the underworld can hardly be unconnected¹⁰². The theme of the underworld is after all a primaeval theme¹⁰³. The *katabasis*¹⁰⁴ as literary genre has an oriental origin¹⁰⁵. In Greek literature, the series of *katabaseis* starts with the *nekylia* in the *Odyssey*¹⁰⁶. From there the genre came over to Rome, where it proliferated¹⁰⁷. Relations with the *Odyssey* are on hand:

a) Sitting down while talking

Homer, *Odyssey* XI, 81 & 82

In the underworld, Odysseus first encounters the shadow of his friend Elpenor, whose body was left behind unwept for and unburied in Circe's palace¹⁰⁸. After Elpenor's request to bury him and Odysseus' promise to accomplish everything, we read¹⁰⁹: 'Thus, then, did we sit and hold sad talk with one another.'

⁹⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, XIII, 75-124.

⁹⁷ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, XI, 283ff.

⁹⁸ A. Ungnad, *o.c.*, p.136.

⁹⁹ *Idem*.

¹⁰⁰ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, XII.

¹⁰¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, XI.

¹⁰² A. Ungnad, 'Gilgamesch-Epos und Odyssee'. In Oberhuber, *o.c.*, p.137.

¹⁰³ Innana's descent to the underworld, Sumeric, ANET 52-57; Nergal and Ershkigal, Akkadian, ANET 103-104; Baal in the Underworld, Ugaritic.

¹⁰⁴ Greek: 'descent'.

¹⁰⁵ Babylonia and Egypt.

¹⁰⁶ In fact rather an exorcism of the dead than a descent into the underworld.

¹⁰⁷ It has even lived on as far as mediaeval literature (best known example: Dante).

¹⁰⁸ Homer, *Odyssey*, XI, 51-80.

¹⁰⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, XI, 81-82.

Epic of Gilgamesh XII, 92

The goal has been reached, the friends have been reunited¹¹⁰. Yet the joy cannot be but fleeting; for the law of the realm of the dead does not allow anyone to remain in the light once he has been sentenced by the court of the dead¹¹¹: “Not willingly do I speak of death,” said Enkidu in slow reply. “But if you wish to sit for a brief time, I will describe where I do stay.”

- b) the embrace and lamentation are also present¹¹²;
- c) the digging of a hole;
- d) the sword used during the exorcism of the dead.

In connection with this, we would like to elaborate on the hereafter:

In Mesopotamia ¹¹³

The way people imagined the situation in the hereafter can be read in the myth of Ishtar’s journey to the realm of the dead¹¹⁴, which is partly quoted in song VII of the epic and of which the Sumeric original has also been recovered¹¹⁵. To the ancient belief, the realm of the dead is strictly separated from that of the living¹¹⁶. Getting into contact with it is perilous. It was the exorcists’ task to exorcize and expel the ghosts. Plenty of rituals and texts on exorcism that suit this purpose have been found. Conjuring up the ghosts of dead people, however, was regarded as ‘black magic’ and severely condemned. The deceased live on as shadows in the land of no return, where they feed on dust and loam, wear a dress of wings like the birds and live in darkness¹¹⁷. Thus in Mesopotamia life in the hereafter is presented as

¹¹⁰ I.e. Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

¹¹¹ *Epic of Gilgamesh*, XII, 92.

¹¹² Homer, *Odyssey*, XI, 204-214; D. Granados de Arena, Lopez de Vega, Larranaga de Bullones H.D., ‘Il descenso a los infiernos en la epopeya de Gilgamesh’. In: *REC*, XVI (1982), 86.

¹¹³ Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians.

¹¹⁴ JEOL 15, 155.

¹¹⁵ F.M.T. de Liagre Böhl, *o.c.*, p.137.

¹¹⁶ R. Stefanini, ‘Da Gilgames a Petronio’. In: *Paideia*, XXII (1967), 294.

¹¹⁷ This view on life in the hereafter is fundamentally opposed to that of the Ancient Egyptians. According to them, life in the hereafter was generally a mere continuation of a happy life on earth, as they had known it during lifetime.

being rather pessimistic and dreary. The ghosts of the deceased linger on in the underworld eternally, there being no such thing as a resurrection of the dead. The underworld was imagined to be similar to earth, with a king Nergal and a queen Ereschkigal and a court. According to their religious beliefs, the hierarchy in the other world was entirely based on earthly life, along the same lines. The offers that were given to the dead were not so much a sign of piety, but rather a precaution so as not to be tormented by the ghosts of the deceased.

With the Greeks

These notions almost correspond with the Greek ones as we know them from the 11th song of the *Odyssey*¹¹⁸. In that song, Odysseus conjures up the shadows from Hades by means of a mysterious offering. He speaks with the deceased there¹¹⁹ and sees the shadows of famous women of the prehistoric era. Much like in Mesopotamia, we have an atmosphere¹²⁰ of emptiness and uncomfortableness. Homer does not describe the landscape: as the whole of the action is unrealistic, details about the environment would just bother the reader¹²¹. He does mention the Cimmerians, but in very vague terms. The only indications that are not altogether negative are: covered in mist and clouds; dreary atmosphere. The rest is described only negatively: a land where the sun never rises. This lack of light is described in three continuing verses. To a Greek this must be even less bearable than to us, who are less acquainted with the Mediterranean light. There could not have been a better image to express the total absence of life.

¹¹⁸ A.M. Frenkian, 'L'épopée de Gilgamesch et les poèmes homériques'. In: *Studia si Cerc. Ist.* (1950), 268; Veche.

¹¹⁹ Elpenor, Teiresias and his own mother.

¹²⁰ Homer, *Odyssey*, XI, 13-22.

¹²¹ cf. the surroundings in a dream, which are not relevant either.

Concluding remarks

Despite differences in time and culture, a hero's life seems to have striking points of similarity all over the world¹²²:

The hero is a man

<i>Iliad</i>	Achilles
<i>Odyssey</i>	Odysseus
<i>Epic of Gilgamesh</i>	Gilgamesh

Origin and birth of the hero

The hero is of special origin, e.g. son of a god(dess) and a human being. Gilgamesh is said to be a god for two thirds and a man for one third. Achilles is the son of the seagoddess Thetis.

The hero and his opponents

Heroes are people with particular qualities. They have superhuman possibilities, but they also excel remarkably in human talents. Often there is a combination of magical and human power. A point of discussion used to be sometimes whether magical gifts could play a role for real heroes. In this respect the researcher's cultural alignment plays a part again. When the Christian God is on the hero's side¹²³, he is not considered as a magical assistant, whereas other sorts of supernatural assistance are definitely regarded as such. Besides, what remains of the Iliad if (magical) interference of the gods is not supposed to happen, because in an epic it should be replaced by typically human acts?

It is agreed among scholars that the epic is about the hero that surpasses other people in qualities everybody can dispose of to some extent. In cultures where magic belongs to everyday reality, it can be more or less acquired by anyone and in that respect it can be said to form a generally human quality. The greatest heroes are the best warriors. Sometimes their beauty is praised as well, as in Gilgamesh' or Achilles' case, but more often their looks are not mentioned. The stress lies on their deeds, which are very much alike, although their

¹²² Georg von Hahn in *Arische Aussetzungs- und Rückkehr-Formel*.

¹²³ *Song of Roland*.

goals may differ. The heroes need to have to accomplish a spectacular task, and in order to emphasize their excellent qualities even more, they need formidable opponents of (almost) equal strength¹²⁴. Sensitivity to honour is inherent to being a hero and leads to accepting the challenge made by the opponent. The hero often dies young, as in Achilles' case¹²⁵. Or he returns victoriously after breathtaking fights and adventures. In this way heroes reap the fame that makes them immortal during lifetime and even more so after they have died.

The theme of friendship

Pairs of friends, like Achilles and Patroclus (Iliad)¹²⁶, often play a role in heroic epics. In the epic of Gilgamesh this friendship becomes a motif of the entire work. Its origins are shown, as well as its highest triumphs, but also – something less often observed – the smouldering danger of the private character of this friendship becomes significant. For a) Enkidu is the one who kills Chumbaba/Choewawa, against the will of the merciful Gilgamesh; b) it is also Enkidu who gravely offends Ishtar; c) it might also be the case that Gilgamesh does not fulfil his royal duty to the Holy Marriage with Ishtar – a duty he is expected to fulfil – because of his exclusive friendship with Enkidu. The motif of friendship also implies the profound sadness connected with losing it.

The themes of the oriental epics were not adopted by the Greeks, but the expression form of the oldest non-individualistic ideas was. A development such as that of the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Odyssey can never be traced out entirely. There is a huge gap between the humankind of oriental epics and that of the Greeks, what the current state of our knowledge is concerned anyway. That is why a transition to the Greek-human in the sense of a 'metabasis kata mikron' is unlikely to have happened: we should rather suspect a once-only act of genius here. There is only one such act to be found: the invention of Greek letter script. R. Harder has irrefutably proved this to have been a non-collective achievement¹²⁷. Until about 1200 BC the Greeks used the Minoic script. By then a brilliant man must have appeared, one

¹²⁴ Achilles/Hector & Gilgamesh/Chumbaba.

¹²⁵ Cf. Siegfried, Roland.

¹²⁶ Cf. Gunther and Hagen (*Nibelungen*); Roland and Olivier (*Song of Roland*).

¹²⁷ The mastering of script by the Greeks in: *Nieuwe wegen tot de Antieken I* [New ways to the Classics], (1942), 91-108.

who knew different writing systems, from which he chose the Phoenician one. He then adjusted this script form to the Greek one, since it had the greatest capacity for abstraction. It has often been suggested that the Greeks could not have been able to know anything of the oriental literatures in their original languages; yet we can assume that around 1000 BC there should at least have been one man who was capable of turning an aleph into an alpha. By analogy with this we can imagine the transposition of the oriental world of epics to the Greek view of mankind.

We do not have early stages of Homer from the second millennium. And we cannot tell precisely yet through which channels the old Asian material came to Greece. And yet we do have a concrete proof of this influence: the very renowned liongate at Mycene¹²⁸. In that age, too, the first Greek legends may have been formed within that fortress. The heraldic group of lions is regarded as a Minoic achievement and the gate proper as a Greek one, since such a monumental thing can't be seen on Crete. The outlook on Crete, though, does not solve the problem at all. The gates' monumentality is only paralleled by the liongate at Boghazköy, which Goetze considers to be Hurritic. As a result the origin is laid even closer to Mesopotamia. Comparable to Mycene is only the enormous, monolithic way of building and the fact that in both cases it is two lions that look the approaching people in their faces.

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After this comparative study about the motifs in both epics we can conclude with a little certainty that we have only little evidence to prove the influence of the Epic of Gilgamesh on Homer's epics. In this respect we should bear in mind that there can be no question of a direct borrowing and assimilation. The Greeks did know the Babylonian legends¹²⁹, but they recast them and adjusted them to their own attitudes. In doing so, they created a work that has not met his equal in originality yet.

I do hope that this study may offer new material for further investigation.

¹²⁸ Unique in Greece because of its relief. It originated in the second half of the second millennium, exactly in the age when the Ugarit-Epics flourished and when the Hurrites and Hettites brought the Mesopotamian inheritance further west.

¹²⁹ Cf. the archeological excavations at Boghazköy.