

**Three ancient sources:  
Gilgamesh, Hammurabi's laws , and the Westcar papyrus**

© Copyright Bruce Owen 2009

- With our background on Mesopotamia and Egypt in mind, let's look at some classic written sources from these early civilizations
- The epic of Gilgamesh
  - the oldest real story ever discovered
    - actually a collection of stories centering on Gilgamesh, a ruler of Uruk in Sumer
      - and his exploits together with his companion Enkidu
      - most scholars think that Gilgamesh was a real king of Uruk,
      - who was transformed into a mythical hero as these stories were composed, told, and evolved
    - As you see in the extract, Gilgamesh was supernaturally great himself, one-third human and two-thirds god
    - The gods created Enkidu to be his match and distract him from being an arrogant burden on the people of Uruk
    - The rest of the long story involves travels, fighting monsters, and eventually confronting death
      - Gilgamesh mourns the death of Enkidu
      - and seeks eternal life for himself
      - but fails to get it.
    - Along the way, there is a story about a universal flood, which is clearly an early version of the flood story in the Bible
  - the Gilgamesh stories clearly started as an oral tradition, in the Sumerian language
    - they are set during Gilgamesh's rule,
    - which would have been in the Sumerian Early Dynastic period
    - between around 2750 and 2500 BCE
    - the first stories were probably composed around that time or not long after
    - they are full of chunks of text that are repeated with slight modifications
      - this is a typical feature of oral traditions
      - it helps the teller fill out the story
      - helps the listener follow the story
      - lends a rhythmic, literary quality compared to regular speech
  - the oral stories apparently developed and multiplied for several centuries up to around 2100-2000 BCE
    - when the first known written versions were set down in cuneiform in the Sumerian language during the Ur III (Neo-Sumerian) empire
  - these and other Gilgamesh stories continued to be written down for centuries
    - some possibly copied from earlier written versions
    - some possibly dictated from an ongoing oral tradition
    - mostly in the Akkadian language

- they seem to have been pretty exactly established by not long after 2000 BCE
- with copies from different places and times all very similar to each other
- the most complete version we have was compiled between about 1300 and 1000 BCE by Sin-leqi-unninni
  - the first author of a literary text whose name remains connected to his work!
- what we actually have is a copy of this version, prepared at the order of Assurbanipal, the last significant king of the Assyrian Empire, around 650 BC
  - Assurbanipal sent experts out to comb the libraries of his empire and bring back copies of ancient texts for his library at Ninevah
  - miraculously discovered and excavated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century
  - other versions are used to fill in gaps where the tablets are broken
- Things to think about:
  - what does the first tablet of the Gilgamesh stories tell us about Sumerian ideas of kingship and hierarchy?
  - what does it suggest about their ideas about the supernatural world and religion?
  - what are some things that Early Dynastic Sumerians cared about, or thought were important?
- Law code of Hammurabi
  - about 1780 BCE
  - Hammurabi was the king of Babylon who conquered most of Mesopotamia and took Babylon from being one competing city among many to being the capital of the vast Babylonian empire
  - the law code was carved in cuneiform in the Akkadian language on a stone monument about the size of a person,
    - with a relief showing him receiving the law from the god Shamash
  - the stela was found in Susa, a distant city that defeated Babylon and took the monument some time after Hammurabi's reign
    - so we have no idea where it was originally located
  - but the stela looks designed for public viewing
    - it would have been good propaganda for Hammurabi
    - making him look impressive, claiming authority given by the gods
    - even though probably very few people could actually read the code
    - it probably made the laws (and Hammurabi's government) seem legitimate, permanent, unchangeable
  - what can we learn from this? Things to think about as you read it:
    - note the propaganda of the introduction
      - The gods made Babylon great, then called on Hammurabi to lead it, for the good of mankind
      - then Hammurabi lists all the wonderful things he has done at various cities and for various gods
      - Hammurabi is already a powerful king. Why is he bothering to puff himself up like this?
      - assuming that the text was sometimes read aloud, what might the impact of this be?

- note the structure of the laws: X crime requires Y punishment. This is “lex talionis”, or “law of retaliation”
- note the kinds of offenses that evidently did occur in Babylonian times
  - false accusations
  - stealing
  - receiving stolen property
  - harboring escaped slaves
  - failing to pay someone hired to go to war in your place
    - implies that people were often drafted to fight
    - and that they could hire stand-ins if they were wealthy enough
  - failing to maintain one’s section of a levee so that it breaks and others’ fields get flooded
  - cheating in marriage
  - cheating relatives of inheritance, dowry, etc.
  - breaking contracts
  - assault
  - shoddy construction
  - etc.
- what about the relative rights and values of landowners, workers, slaves, freed slaves, women, concubines...?
- so, what was life like in Imperial Babylon around 1800 BCE?
- Westcar papyrus
  - Egyptian papyrus documents usually don’t have titles
  - but this one is commonly described as something like “Three tales from the court of King Khufu” (also called Cheops)
  - this is the same Khufu who built the first and biggest pyramid at Giza
    - and the story refers to his father, Sneferu, who built the first true pyramid (at Dahshur), and was an even greater builder in total
  - so the setting is a real Egyptian court around 2600 BCE, in the Old Kingdom
    - theoretically contemporary with Gilgamesh
  - but the story was probably actually composed much later, between about 2000 and 1800 BCE, in the Middle Kingdom (12<sup>th</sup> dynasty)
    - roughly contemporary with Hammurabi’s law code (1780 BC), maybe a bit earlier
  - the copy we have was actually written on this papyrus between about 1650 and 1550 (Hyksos or Second Intermediate period)
    - when foreign invaders controlled Egypt for about a century
  - the papyrus was purchased, so we don’t know anything about its origin
    - but we can guess (only guess) that it might have been written in Avaris, the Hyksos capital of Egypt
  - experts say that
    - the handwriting is poor or childish
    - there are some inappropriately used words
    - and occasional words apparently left out

- suggesting that this may have been a practice text copied by someone in training who did not fully understand it
- unclear why the original text was written
  - this is not a common type of document, and only this one copy is known
  - maybe it was mostly a setup for the prophesy about Khufu's dynasty (the 4<sup>th</sup> dynasty) ending after his grandson
    - in fact, Khufu's dynasty lasted one generation longer than this prophesy
    - he was followed by two sons, first Kheper, then Khafre
    - then Khafre's son Menkaure
    - then Mankare's son Shepseskaf
      - but Shepseskaf did not build a pyramid, so he might have been unknown to a writer 500-700 years later in the Middle Kingdom
    - after that, there apparently really was a break
      - starting the 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty
      - although the founder of this new Dynasty, Userkaf, was a relative of the fourth dynasty kings
  - what can we learn from this?
    - the flavor of life in the royal court
    - power and wealth of the Egyptian pharaoh (king)
- how literally should we take these sources?
  - are they primary?
    - yes and no – they are closer to the events than almost anything else we have
    - but both Gilgamesh and the Westcar papyrus tales were written down long after the time described
      - and both have lots of unrealistic, supernatural content
      - they might reflect assumptions and views of the time they were written, in addition to the time they were written about
      - but those times are interesting, too
      - and are certainly more directly relevant to the times described than anything written later
  - Hammurabi's code really is primary
    - but undoubtedly biased, intended as propaganda
    - and including supernatural claims, that we can't treat as facts
    - still, it should accurately embody the assumptions and concerns of the time