

LECTURE 2, Intro to the Environmental Humanities Ecocriticism, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

The Epic of Gilgamesh

He had seen everything, had experienced all emotions, from exaltation to despair, had been granted a vision into the great mystery, the secret places, the primeval days before the Flood. He had journeyed to the edge of the world and made his way back, exhausted but whole. He had carved his trials on stone tablets, had restored the holy Eanna Temple and the massive wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun. Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine, approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar, temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty, walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built, observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares. Find the cornerstone and under it the copper box that is marked with his name. Unlock it. Open the lid. Take out the tablet of lapis lazuli. Read how Gilgamesh suffered and accomplished all.

Uruk, Gilgamesh's Capital City

After taking an imaginative walk around the city, which has nicely been laid out for us by our author(s), how would we describe Uruk?

Like many ancient cities, Uruk is surrounded by a wall (in this case the greatest so far in history) designed to protect it from other human beings and the environment, both of which are seen as a threat. The environment has been seen as a danger throughout human history.

With respect to the wall, "observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, / the gardens, [and] the orchards," as the city is, even agriculturally, a modified, built environment--which is clearly boasted of here.

This distinction, between the country and the city, which was obviously in place 5000 years ago, is still a part of our cultural memory, as it very much shapes what we mean by "nature."

This is a good example of how a modern concept, in this case what is understood as "natural," first began to emerge long ago, in this case in a distinction between the country and the city, which has in part shaped our modern conception of what is "natural" & "unnatural."

Interestingly, in the past 5000 years (and in this course we will see exactly when this happened; it is more recent than you might think) this binary structure has become largely inverted, as we now tend to privilege the "natural" (country) over the "unnatural" (city).

In the Myth of Gilgamesh, however, the city is clearly privileged:

Walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations,

examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built,
observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens,
the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops
and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares

The Character Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh was likely an actual person, a Sumerian king, who lived 4600 years ago. Like other great epics, such as the Iliad, Odyssey, & Beowulf, The Epic of Gilgamesh was spoken (sung) before it was written.

Outside of the Epic, we know very little about Gilgamesh, other than a few stone inscriptions.

How would we describe Gilgamesh as a king? Was he a good king? What, for example, was his attitude toward his people, especially women, at least early in the epic?

The city is his possession, he struts
through it, arrogant, his head raised high,
trampling its citizens like a wild bull.
He is king, he does what he wants,
takes the son from his father and crushes him
takes the girl from her mother and uses her
the warrior's daughter; the young man's bride,
he uses her, no one dares to oppose him. (72)

Note that part of the objection here is that the daughter and bride are the possessions of some other man.

The fact that Gilgamesh abuses power in general, and is moreover a rapist, is altogether ironic given that he is called "protector of the people" (71).

By the conclusion of the epic (which we did not read) the character Gilgamesh will in fact become a protector of the people.

As a consequence, Gilgamesh is especially interesting when compared to his double (doubling is a literary convention), Enkidu, who repeatedly seeks out and takes on the role of protector.

The Character Enkidu

Who is Enkidu?

In addition to being a wild man, Enkidu is a protector. In order of their appearance, who or what does Enkidu protect?

1. Animals: he "tears out / the traps" and "frees the animals" (76).

2. A Bride: "When Gilgamesh reached the marriage house / Enkidu was there. He stood like a boulder, / blocking the door" (89).

3. Gilgamesh:

a. "The elders turned to Enkidu and said / 'We leave the king in your care. Protect him.'" (103).

b. He repeatedly "sprawled like a net across the doorway" to protect Gilgamesh (107 and elsewhere).

c. He protects Gilgamesh in the fight against Humbaba.

4. And, immediately after being fed by the shepherds...

Enkidu went out with sword and spear.
he chased off lions and wolves, all night
he guarded the flocks, he stayed awake
and guarded them while the shepherds slept. (86)

When Enkidu makes the transition from wild to human, he inverts the role of protector, now protecting human beings from animals rather than the other way around.

Gilgamesh is not the only double for Enkidu in the epic, which is especially interesting, when we consider that Enkidu is--and Gilgamesh should be--first and foremost a protector...

The Character Humbaba

Who is Humbaba?

Humbaba is the protector of the Cedar Forest, placed there to protect the forest by the great god Enlil.

In many ancient religions, certain features of the environment, such as rivers, mountains, and forests, had a "protector of place," a genius loci, appointed to guard the place. Humbaba is such a genius loci.

Interestingly, a genius loci does not protect a place against animals or gods, but rather against human beings who would violate it, which assumes a binary between human beings and certain places.

Consequently, a genius loci is a conspicuous feature of religions that call for the worship of the earth, rather than the worship of a metaphysical god.

Genius Loci Figures

From an environmental perspective, the belief in genius loci figures is profoundly important, as it reflects a belief in deities that very much belong to, and are part of, the earth, rather than some sort of metaphysical realm.

Because in religions of this type the earth and all its many features (rivers, mountains, forests, etc) are in fact sacred, they are protected from violation and exploitation by human beings.

Typically in these religions human beings could use the resources of the place, but only to a limited extent, after paying homage or tribute to the genius loci of the place.

As genius loci, Humbaba insured that the Cedar Forest was not destroyed.

(In fact, this was a real cedar forest, which is also referenced in the Bible, that remained intact until it was actually clear cut in Gilgamesh's era.)

The Cedar Forest

"They cast huge weapons that ordinary men could never carry; axes that weighed two hundred pounds each, knives with cross guards." (p. 17)

Note that the principal weapons that Gilgamesh and Enkidu carry into battle are not swords or spears, as one might expect, but axes.

While the trip to the Cedar Forest is described as a battle, literally (and historically we know that this actually happened) it is an expedition to cut the forest. Hence the need for axes.

Consequently, the Epic of Gilgamesh is the story of a how a genius loci protecting a place was defeated so that a great forest could be cut and exploited.

They took their axes and penetrated deeper into the forest, they went chopping down cedars, the wood chips flew, Gilgamesh chopped down the mighty trees, Enkidu hewed the trunks into timbers. Enkidu said... "We have chopped down the trees of the Cedar Forest, we have brought to earth the highest of the trees" (p. 32).

This is not the description of an epic battle, but rather of a logging operation, which sent the logs of the Cedar Forest "down the Euphrates" River to Uruk (p. 32). Gilgamesh cut the trees down, while Enkidu processed them on site, which was standard logging practice.

The heroes here are not just two men, but stand for the thousands of men who historically took part in the deforestation operation, which as Gilgamesh noted, brought wealth and fame to Uruk. This is not unlike George W. Bush's planned expedition a few years ago to Alaska for oil...

In short, the battle is a metaphor for--and in some sense a cover story that conceals--deforestation.

"Gilgamesh...yelled, he lifted his massive axe, he swung it, it tore into Humbaba's neck...and at the axe's third stroke he toppled like a cedar and crashed to the ground" (p 31-32).

Throughout the epic Humbaba is repeatedly associated with the Cedar Forest. By the end, he is toppled like one of the cedars. Making clear that his defeat not only makes the cutting of the forest possible, but also that Humbaba is the forest's double.

Incidentally, the epic makes clear that this was an old-growth forest; Enkidu, "We have chopped down the trees of the Cedar Forest, we have brought to earth the highest of the trees, the cedar whose top once pierced the sky" (p. 32).

Genius Loci in Gilgamesh

What is provocative about the Epic of Gilgamesh is that the title character (who stands for the city of Uruk) attempts and succeeds at nothing short of sacrilege, at defacing a sacred site, a ancient forest place protected by a genius loci.

Even though Gilgamesh is a reformed rapist (as he understands by way of the genius loci Enkidu that he too must protect rather than violate his people) his forced entrance into the Cedar Forest clearly echoes rape.

In fact, even the language of the epic suggests forcible penetration: "Gripping their axes, their knives unsheathed, / they entered the Forest... They took their axes and penetrated / deeper into the forest" (p. 118, 128)

Earth Deities

Eco-feminists have long argued, with varying degrees of success, that a shift from female (often a trinity of maiden, matron, & crone, such as Persephone, Demeter, & Hecate) to male deities occurred sometime before the Epic of Gilgamesh was composed.

From a feminist perspective, the Epic of Gilgamesh reveals a shift from a matriarchal deity (the Cedar Forest is home to the temple of the goddess Ishtar) to a male one, Gilgamesh's champion, the sun god Shamash.

Moreover, as in many early religions, it is a female deity, Aruru, that is (not surprisingly) given the power of creating life, as she fashions Enkidu, and presumably all other human beings, of clay. (This is an early version of the creation myth that will appear Genesis, though recast with a male deity.)

Even without the eco-feminist perspective, the Epic of Gilgamesh records a decisive moment in human history when earth deities were, in the metaphorical imagery of the epic, "defeated" by human beings with the aid of a metaphysical deity.

When human ambition (which Gilgamesh has in abundance) and needs became strong enough, earth deities, such as the genius loci characters, protecting the environment were cast out. In their place came metaphysical gods, such as the sun god Shamash, Gilgamesh's champion.

Read in this sense, the Epic of Gilgamesh is truly an environmental epic; however, one that records how a desire to use the resources of the environment overcame an earlier religion based on the earth.

In short, this is the moment when human beings proclaimed that they were stronger than the environment--and the deities protecting it.

Epilogue to the Myth of Gilgamesh

Deforestation followed Western civilization out of Mesopotamia 5000 years ago to sweep through Europe and then into North and South America.

(John Perlin's *A Forest's Journey* provides an excellent history of this phenomenon.)

Mass deforestation significantly contributes to global warming as trees (and in fact all plants) are highly efficient at carbon sequestration.

The good, and somewhat surprising, news is that for over a century now we have been experiencing reforestation in certain parts of the globe. New England, for example, has far more forests now than it did 100 years ago.

This largely began in the Renaissance, in part through reforestation practices introduced in places like France and England.