

GILGAMESH AND THE CEDARS OF LEBANON

Andrew George

8

If you fly over Lebanon today you look down on a denuded landscape. The great mountain ranges that raise their bare ridges to the sky either side of the rift valley are known these days as Jebel Libnan and Jebel Libnan ash-Sharqiyah. Formerly they were Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon, before that Libnanu and Saria or Sirion. It is hard now to imagine that these twin uplands were once forested with great cedars and other evergreen trees. A Babylonian poet, writing more than three thousand years ago, describes the spectacle of these wooded uplands in words that still echo with his awe:

*They stood there marvelling at the forest,
gazing at the lofty cedars,
gazing at forest's entrance . . .*

*They saw the Mountain of Cedar, seat of
gods and goddesses' throne.
[On the] face of the mountain the cedar proffered
its abundance,*

*its shade was sweet and full of delight.
[Thick] tangled was the thorn, the forest a
shrouding canopy . . .*

Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Tablet V 1-9

Tall and straight-trunked, the famous Cedars of Lebanon were a natural resource that ancient man steadily stripped from the earth until there were none left. These were the trees that put the keels in the mercantile fleets of the Phoenicians and other east Mediterranean peoples. But it was not only Levantines that found use for these massive timbers. The great powers of the ancient Near East, Egypt and Mesopotamia, both had few sources of timber of their own and none that could supply roof-beams and logs of the size needed for constructing imperial buildings on a monumental scale. For such wood they had to look elsewhere.

The oldest Mesopotamian records of expeditions to fetch timber from far-away lands are inscriptions of the kings of Akkade, a city near Baghdad. More than four thousand years ago King Sargon and his grandson, Naram-Sîn, left inscriptions that

record military campaigns in northern Syria. Both report how the middle Euphrates region and northern Syria were handed over to them by the god Dagan, at that time the head of the pantheon in Mesopotamian Syria:

*Sargon, the king, prostrated himself in prayer
before Dagan in Tuttul. He gave him the upper
land: Mari, Yarmuti, Ebla, including the Cedar
Forest and the Silver Mountains*

Sargon inscription no. 11, ed. Frayne 1993: 28-9

*Naram-Sîn, the mighty, smote Armanum and Ebla,
and in addition crushed the people that Dagan had
bestowed on him anew, from the bank of the
Euphrates as far as the city of Ulishum . . . and
also he took complete control of the Cedar
Mountain.*

Naram-Sîn inscription 5, ed. Frayne 1993: 133

The city of Mari lay on the Euphrates halfway between Babylon and Aleppo and commanded the route north-west from southern Mesopotamia. Ebla is Tell Mardikh, an hour's drive south of Aleppo in Levantine Syria, a mound best known for its twenty-fourth-century palace and archive of early cuneiform tablets discovered in 1976. The Silver Mountains were in the Taurus above Cilicia. Another inscription of Naram-Sîn identifies the Cedar Mountain more exactly, telling how he used timber felled on Mount Amanus, now in Turkish Syria, when rebuilding a temple of the goddess Ishtar (Frayne 1993: 140). The aim of these expeditions was not simply to express political power in military conquest. The mention of cedar and silver makes it clear that one objective was to gain control of essential natural resources.

Mount Amanus is 800 km from Baghdad as the crow flies. At this time the high, urban civilization of Mesopotamia was already ancient. One thousand years before Sargon and Naram-Sîn fetched cedars from Amanus, temples had been constructed in the Sumerian city of Uruk that would have required roofing with beams of at least ten metres. At that remote time other, less distant sources of building timber were probably used. There was a

tradition in Sumerian literature that the sun rose from the Mountain of Cedar. This places it firmly in the east. Probably the source of building timber that was most accessible for people of lower Mesopotamia in earliest times was the south-

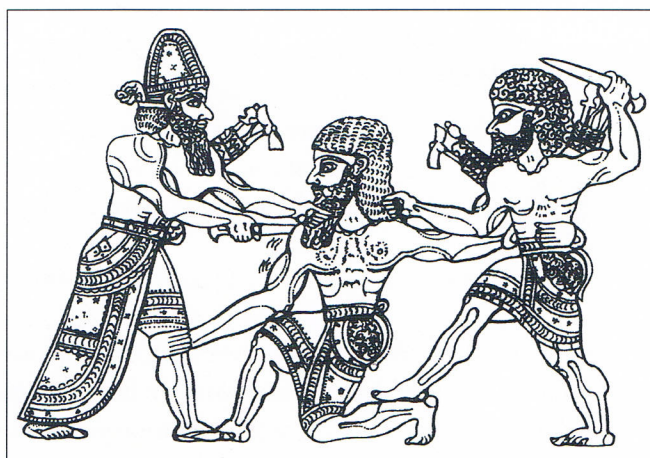
ern end of the Zagros mountains, the highlands of Persia. In one Sumerian poem about Gilgamesh, the legendary king of Uruk, the hero desires to fell timber on 'Cedar-Cut Mountain'. He is guided by seven constellations that know 'the road to Aratta'. Aratta was a town in the Persian interior that occurs in other ancient legends about the early kings of Uruk. Following the lead of his celestial guides Gilgamesh travels through mountainous country:

*Taking the road of Cedar-Cut Mountain,
he crossed the first mountain range,
he did not find the cedar he wanted,
he crossed the second mountain range,
he did not find the cedar he wanted,
he crossed the third mountain range,
he did not find the cedar he wanted,
he crossed the fourth mountain range,
he did not find the cedar he wanted,
he crossed the fifth mountain range,
he did not find the cedar he wanted,
he crossed the sixth mountain range,
he did not find the cedar he wanted,
but crossing the seventh mountain range,
he found the cedar he wanted.
Gilgamesh felled the cedar,
his servant Enkidu turned it into logs,
the sons of his city who had come with him
set them in a pile.*

Gilgamesh and Huwawa B 59-65

The story goes on to tell how Gilgamesh dupes the guardian of the cedars, the ogre Huwawa, into surrendering the supernatural 'auras' that represent his power over the cedar. These are conceptualized as great trees that, one by one, Gilgamesh's men turn into logs. Huwawa himself, exposed and denuded, is no match for the crafty Gilgamesh, who tricks Humbaba into trusting him and then, making as if to kiss him, takes him captive. Eventually he is put to death, an episode that found

expression in Babylonian art.



A. George *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, London, 2000 p. 45.

The literary tradition of an eastern Cedar Mountain reflects an ancient reality. The mountains of Persia that lie to the east of Mesopotamia were once forested, like Amanus and Lebanon, with evergreen and deciduous timber-bearing trees. Some fifty years after Naram-Sîn of Akkade sacked Ebla, Gudea, a pious ruler of the Sumerian city-state of Lagash in the twenty-first century BC, began gathering material for the reconstruction of the temple of his city, the Eninnu of the god Ningirsu. Lagash lay on the eastern fringe of Sumer, on a branch of the Tigris near the marshes that led to the sea. Great powers controlled the trade routes inland and it was more expedient for him to seek out the raw materials he needed on the shores of the Arabian Gulf and in its hinterland. So when it came to timber, stone, precious metals and gemstones, his cylinder inscription tells us he looked not to Amanus but to the east, to Elam (Khuzistan), to Magan and Meluhha (Oman) and to Dilmun (Bahrain) and other trading posts on the Gulf (Edzard 1997: 78). For him the 'Cedar Mountain, where no man had entered', was in the east.

In the early second millennium BC, for one reason or another, the source of timber-bearing trees switched again to the west. Perhaps the Persian forests became exhausted or difficult to reach. Certainly it was easier for north Mesopotamian rulers to march to the Levant. This was the case for King Yahdun-Lim of Mari on the Euphrates. His inscription reports as a proud achievement an expedition to the Mediterranean and the 'mountains of cedar and boxwood' in the late nineteenth century BC:

He entered the mountain of cedar and boxwood, great mountains, and felled boxwood, cedar and juniper — these trees. He made a monument and set up his inscription, and (so) he proclaimed his power.

Yahdun-Lim brick inscription 52-9, ed. Frayne 1990: 606

In leaving his monuments on the Cedar Mountain Yahdun-Lim of Mari was doing what was established royal practice. It was customary for ancient kings to commemorate the reach of their power by erecting monumental inscriptions in far-flung places, particularly on mountain passes. A good example of this is the cliffs above the Nahr al-Kelb in Lebanon, which bear the monuments of a whole series of passing armies: Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, Mamluk and Napoleonic French (Weissbach 1922, Hrouda 1976-80). The habit of leaving one's name in a remote spot, reached only with difficulty, is perennial in human experience, as countless graffiti scratched in unlikely places attest. As a custom of ancient Mesopotamian armies the practice of depositing monuments finds a literary reflection in the Sumerian poem of Gilgamesh and Huwawa. Before departing on his expedition, the hero speaks to the Sun God of how he will leave his name on the Cedar Mountain. The passage articulates very well the human need to leave behind some written memorial:

"O Utu, let me speak a word to you, give ear to what I say!

Let me tell you something, may you give thought to it!

In my city a man dies, and the heart is stricken, a man perishes, and the heart feels pain.

I raised my head on the rampart, my gaze fell on a corpse drifting down the river, afloat on the water:

I too shall become like that, just so shall I be!

"No man can stretch to the sky, no matter how tall, no man can compass a mountain, no matter how broad!"

Since no man can escape life's end,

I will enter the mountains and set up my name.

Where names are set up, I will set up my name,

where names are not yet set up, I will set up gods' names."

Gilgamesh and Huwawa A 31-3

New evidence for this practice comes from a newly published literary autobiography written on an Old Assyrian tablet found in a merchant's archive at Kültepe (ancient Kanesh) in Cappadocia. The text tells how Sargon of Akkade commemorated his campaign against northern Syria:

I smote Mount Amanus in two and between them set up a representation of myself as if it were a peg marking ownership.

Kt. j/k 97, 47-50, ed. Günbattı 1997: 135

Early in the second millennium BC the legends about Gilgamesh were recast into Akkadian poetry as a continuous epic narrative by some Babylonian poetic genius. In this poem the Cedar Forest lies in the west, no doubt as a reflection of the exploits of the kings of Akkade as well as the realities of everyday trade. An excerpt of the Old Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh on an eighteenth-century tablet found at Ishchali, near Baghdad, mentions Libnanu and Saria as local to Huwawa's forest. An important new source of the same epic has recently come to light that adds to our knowledge of the legendary source of cedar. The text describes the progress of the hero's journey to the Cedar Forest. He is accompanied by his friend and companion, the wild man Enkidu:

A journey of one whole day, two and three, they drew near to the land of Ebla. Gilgamesh climbed up to the top of a hill, he looked around at all the mountains.

SC 3025, 25-8, ed. George forthcoming

For this poet the place where cedar came from was the 'land of Ebla'. We have already encountered Ebla as the north Syrian town sacked by Sargon and Naram-Sîn. The upper levels of the site's citadel are early second millennium, showing that Ebla continued to be a place of some importance in the Middle Bronze Age. The mountain source of timber local to Ebla was Amanus, where Sargon left his monument. The forest of Mount Amanus continued to supply large timbers to

Mesopotamian kings until the fall of Babylon in 539 BC. But already in the early second millennium an alternative source of cedar was being tapped: the even more distant ridges of Lebanon.

The version of the Babylonian Gilgamesh current in the first millennium BC alters the geography to make the heroes' journey longer and more epic. Instead of making for the land of Ebla, Gilgamesh and Enkidu head for a new destination:

*At twenty leagues they broke bread,
at thirty leagues they pitched camp:
fifty leagues they travelled in the course of a day,
by the third day a march of a month and a half;
nearer they drew to Mount Lebanon.*

Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Tablet IV 1-5 and parallels

The journey to Lebanon overland from Uruk in the far south of Mesopotamia took Gilgamesh and Enkidu fifteen days, divided into five non-stop marches with a rest every third night. In this version of the epic the guardian of the Cedar Forest is called Humbaba. He had been placed in the forest by the head of the southern pantheon to deter men from entering, as Gilgamesh was warned by the city elders before he set out:

*This Humbaba, his voice is the Deluge,
his speech is fire, his breath is death!
He hears the forest murmur at sixty leagues' distance:
who is there would venture into his forest?*

*Humbaba ranks second to the Storm God only:
who is there would oppose him among the great gods?
So to keep safe the cedars,
the god Enlil made it his lot to terrify men.*

Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Tablet II 291-9

Here and elsewhere in the epic there is a strong sense that felling timber in the forest amounts to desecration, that it was not men's right to pillage the ancient trees for his own purposes. This speaks of an atavistic awe of trees that crops up in many

cultures.

Perhaps the memory of the elders' words of warning came flooding back when Gilgamesh finally stood face to face with Humbaba in the depths of the forbidden forest. In the Babylonian epic the capture of Humbaba is a more epic struggle than it was in the Sumerian poem, as the two mighty giants wrestle each other on the mountain top amid a great storm cloud. The Sun God comes to Gilgamesh's rescue, sending winds to immobilize Humbaba, and Gilgamesh finally captures his foe. Such was the fury of the fight that the Cedar Mountain split in two. As the poet puts it:

*At the heels of their feet the earth burst asunder,
they shattered, as they whirled, Mounts
Sirion and Lebanon.
Black became the clouds of white,
raining down on them death like a mist.*

Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Tablet V 133-6

This passage preserves a little myth about the mountain ranges of Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon. The twin ranges were reckoned to have split apart when Gilgamesh and Humbaba wrestled in the Cedar Forest. Clearly ancient man recognized the Levantine Rift Valley for what it was, a gigantic split in the earth's surface. Only for them, the cause was expressed in mythological terms not geological (George 1990).

In the epic Humbaba meets the same fate as he did in the older, Sumerian poem. But there is an interesting new detail. When the heroes kill him they remove his teeth as booty. This detail is a literary reflection of another trade, for in antiquity herds of Syrian elephants still roamed the Levant. Their tusks were another local resource that the Phoenicians put to good use, becoming as renowned for their expertise in ivory carving as in seamanship. The guardian of the forest was thus symbolically an elephant as well as a tree spirit. He embodied at one and the same time both the local resources most prized by men.

Gilgamesh eventually cut down his cedar, trampling through the gods' private groves to do so. He and Enkidu rafted the logs down the Euphrates to Nippur, with Humbaba's head on board as their trophy. Rafting was the time-honoured way of transporting timber from Syria to Babylonia. Back home Enkidu made the tallest cedar into a great

door for the temple of Enlil, thinking that the gift would lessen his anger over the death of Humbaba. It did not. In the next episode the heroic pair compounded their act of desecration in the Cedar Forest by slaying the Bull of Heaven.

Immediately the gods condemned Enkidu to die, punishing Gilgamesh by thus depriving him of his dearest companion. Wild in grief and dismay at the thought of his own death, Gilgamesh scoured the ends of the earth in search of immortality. But that is another story.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

Except where otherwise indicated translations of Sumerian and Babylonian Gilgamesh texts are taken from Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh. A New Translation*. Harmondsworth: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1999, re-issued as a paperback in the Penguin Classics series, 2000.

OTHER REFERENCES

Edzard 1997. Dietz Otto Edzard, *Gudea and his Dynasty. Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods 3/1*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Frayne 1990. Douglas R. Frayne, *Old Babylonian Period (2003-1595 BC). Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods 4*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Frayne 1993. Douglas R. Frayne, *Sargonic and Gutian Periods (2334-2113 BC). Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods 2*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

George 1990. A. R. George, 'The Day the Earth Divided: A geological aetiology in the Babylonian Gilgameš epic', *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 80. Berlin: de Gruyter, pp. 214-19.

George forthcoming. A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgameš Epic*. Oxford: OUP.

Günbatti 1997. Cahit Günbattı, 'Kültepe'den Akadlı Sargon'a ait bir tablet', *Archivum Anatolicum* 3 (Bilgiç Memorial Volume). Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi, pp. 131-55.

Hrouda 1976-80. Barthel Hrouda, 'al-Kalb, Nahr', *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 5. Berlin: de Gruyter, pp. 290-1.

Weissbach 1922. F. H. Weissbach, *Die Denkmäler und Inschriften an der Mündung des Nahr el-Kelb*. Berlin and Leipzig, 1922.



Wild Cedars of Lebanon. E. Benecke, 1852.
(Private collection, Philippe Jabre).