

## **Fear of Finitude A tribute to the ancient history of Mesopotamia**

Nastaran Saremy

Featuring deeds of the gods and depicting the first written civilization's natural and social life, the story of Gilgamesh puts together myth, fiction, and history. Wrestling with the fear of death, the Gilgamesh journey offers deep insight into universal aspects of the human condition and speaks of the intricacies of life in Mesopotamia, a region with a long history of coping with tyranny as well as natural hazards. In the ancient Near East, where the world was inhabited by the gods and the human race was created to serve them, the unruly and rebellious nature of humans was encapsulated in Gilgamesh, the heroic semi-god king who conquered nature and its supernatural guardians to obtain fame and extend his sovereignty.

It is worth noting that this iconic story was discovered in 1872, after more than two thousand years of oblivion. This coincided with the emergence of the modern modes of communication, which led to the announcement of its recovery spreading across the world more rapidly than previously possible.[1] At the same time, Middle Eastern lands had been undergoing ecological collapse in the region. Since then, violent wars and unrest and the proliferation of → toxins have led to even more destruction.

But how has the oldest human epic contributed to our contemporary society, and what can it teach us as we go through all these changes? This question is central to Ayat Najafi "planting" Gilgamesh in this exhibition. Combining sporadic fragments of the epic, Najafi's work has incorporated the various ecological issues of the region presented in this exhibition in a poetical composition. In addition to scientific and technological solutions, we need to create a new "mental ecology" that can properly address this terrible situation. The Sandstorm exhibition is an effort to enrich our sensibilities in order to demand more responsible practices towards the environment.

Middle Eastern countries, the former so-called Mesopotamian lands, home to the world's first empire, are particularly bound to collapse due to repeated droughts, dust, floods, and →desertification. These are the very conditions the gods used in Gilgamesh to destroy human civilization, as they found humans overpowering and irrepressible.

As in other ancient worlds, Mesopotamian gods were woven into nature and human life. These were the sky god Anu, Enlil, god of earth, wind, air and storm, and Ea, who lived in freshwater oceans beneath the earth and sent the seven Sages to civilize mankind. The epic's symbolism illustrates the eternal conflict of nature versus nurture in a way that resonates in every single period of human history. Gilgamesh was known as both a tyrant king and as the powerful one who restored civilization and cultivated the lands. In the epic, Gilgamesh stubbornly goes against the Sage's counsel and conquers the Cedar Forest in search of everlasting fame. He and Enkidu fell the tallest cedar of the forest, kill Humbaba, the forest guardian, and use the wood to create the great gate of their city. This passage speaks to the central ecological theme in the epic,[2] which we continue to see in practices that extract the most out of nature and overuse land and water resources, causing major ecological issues in the region. This theme is present in Sinem Disli's Fields on Fire, which depicts how stubble burning as a farming method to quickly get the most

out of the soil has caused deterioration and the senseless use of water and soil have intensified desertification.

After the great Flood, Utnapishtim, the survivor of the Flood, instructs Gilgamesh to clean himself, wearing a new magic white garment that can never get soiled. This garment implicitly refers to Gilgamesh's new state of peace, achieved thanks to Utnapishtim, who helped him reach a sense of wisdom and humility before nature.[3] The great Flood, a mythological and perhaps historical event, has traditionally been considered an act of divine retribution. In more recent ecologically oriented approaches, it has been interpreted as a tool to emphasize human beings' role in preserving the nature that we have destroyed for so long. True to Mesopotamian ecology, water plays an important role throughout the story:[4] Gilgamesh found water by digging wells, and is apparently the inventor of the practice, a crucial advance in manmade technology in harsh Mesopotamian environmental conditions. He bathes after every single battle, perhaps as both a cleansing and a ritual ceremony. Above all, he ventures across the water of death to hear how Utnapishtim warned city-dwellers to empty the rivers to avoid the great Flood and finally managed to survive the disaster and save entire species in order to rebuild life on earth. In his installation, Najafi speaks to the importance of water by projecting interpretations of passages of the epic on its surface; a strong statement about the water's capacity for transmission in the region and in the project. Centering this vital natural element, when we look back on all of these adventures, we might realize that to us the temple of gods above the city-state (Uruk) now can be reimagined as a monument to water, the exhaustible source of life and the central element of socio-political life in the Middle East, where a more concerted effort is required to survive – the sort of efforts which ought to diminish any kind of life-threatening practices, beyond the existing tyranny and cruelty.

## Notes

Gilgamesh – Nastaran Saaremi

1 Damrosch, David, *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 45-46.

2 Theodore Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh Among Us: Modern Encounters with the Ancient Epic* (London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 123.

3 Andrew George, trans. and ed., *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The New Translation*. (London: Penguin Classic, 1999), xxxi-xxxii.

4 "Water Symbols in the Epic of Gilgamesh," Litcharts  
<https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-epic-of-gilgamesh/symbols/water>