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“LOVE THE CHILD WHO HOLDS YOU BY THE HAND”: INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE ODYSSEY AND THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

JONATHON M. RILEY

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For many years, scholars have noticed similarities between the texts of ancient Greece and texts from the ancient Near East, leading them to suggest that the Greeks may have borrowed literary elements from the ancient Near East in creating the works that would prove to be the foundation of western literature. As early as the 1600s, people have been trying to find the connection between ancient Near Eastern and Greek literature, and that pursuit has continued until the present day.¹ Many in the past noticed similarities between the Iliad and the Hebrew Bible, and with the decipherment of cuneiform and hieroglyphs the possibilities for literary comparison between the regions have become nearly endless.² Some scholars, such as Walter Burkert, have explored the many shared motifs in ancient Near Eastern and classical texts. However, it is possible that some texts may share more than just motifs. It is possible that The Odyssey may take much of its overall structure from The Epic of Gilgamesh.

Methodology

In order to make the assertion that The Odyssey borrows from The Epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh must meet a few basic conditions that could allow the reader to say with some confidence that Homer may have been familiar with it.³ A useful summary of basic conditions used to illustrate textual borrowing

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³ The Odyssey is generally attributed to Homer, so this piece will refer to Homer as the “author” of the text. It is more likely that the text is taken from an oral traditional which evolved over time and was eventually compiled by Homer, but because this piece is mostly
was originally laid down by Dennis R. Macdonald, but some of these conditions have been updated to conform to Lawson Younger’s propinquity rules to provide a more comprehensive set of conditions for textual comparison.

The conditions are as follows:

1. Linguistic availability
2. Geographical availability
3. Cultural availability
4. Chronological availability
5. Analogy
6. Density
7. Order
8. Interpretability

These conditions reflect the methodology that is common to this field and are very similar to the ones employed by Burkert in much of his work comparing the Near Eastern and Classical literature. In fact, many of the details regarding the relationship between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey* have already been explored in this way, and I will rely on those secondary treatments in this piece. However, this methodology may be able to uncover that *The Odyssey* relies more heavily on *Gilgamesh* than has previously been supposed.

The first condition is linguistic availability. For a text to be linguistically available, enough people must be able to understand the language that the hypotext is written in so that it becomes plausible that a given culture or person was familiar with it.

The second condition is geographic availability. For a text to be geographically available, copies of the hypotext must appear near where the final product is produced.

The third condition is cultural availability. Cultural availability means that the hypotext must come from a culture similar enough that it is logical for the author to use it in his text. This may often be determined by comparing the literature of both cultures.

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6. The text being alluded to.
The fourth condition is chronological availability. This indicates that copies of the text were found that date to around the same time the author was doing his writing.

The fifth condition is analogy. For this condition to be met, it must be fairly common for authors from the time and place being examined (Greece during the time of Homer in this case) to copy other texts from around the same time and place as the hypotext being proposed (the ancient Near East before Homer, in this case).

The sixth condition, density, means that there is more than one significant parallel between the texts, and this condition must refer to more than just the volume of parallels. Many insignificant parallels would not suffice; there must be many significant parallels.

Order, the seventh condition, means that the parallels must be basically in the same order, which is to say that the structure of the narrative events must be the same. The more often they are in the same order, the more likely it is that borrowing is taking place.

The eighth and final condition is interpretability, or the ability of the hypotext to explain the text being studied.

I propose that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* satisfies all of the above conditions for demonstrating a textual relationship between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey* and I will argue that *The Odyssey* borrows from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

**Linguistic Availability**

The first condition that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* meets in relation to *The Odyssey* is the condition of linguistic availability. This means that one must determine whether or not a large number of Greeks would have been able to read *The Epic of Gilgamesh* at all. Thanks to the significant distribution of copies of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* throughout the ancient Near East, this condition could be met in two primary ways: through the Levant or through Anatolia.\(^7\)

In the 8\(^{th}\) and 9\(^{th}\) centuries BCE, evidence of Achaean merchants begins to appear in the Levant. One of the best examples of this is the Greek settlement at Al Mina on the Orontes River in northern Syria. Most of the material culture of these people matches other things found in ancient Greece; in fact, we have enough evidence about them to know that they came from Naxos, Samos, and Euboea.\(^8\) Despite the people's obviously Greek background, however, their

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texts are a surprising hodge-podge of ancient languages. Based on the cuneiform tablets and ostraca available cataloging their economic endeavors, it is clear that these Achaeans in the Levant, or people they were associating with, were reading cuneiform texts in languages from ancient Mesopotamia. There is some evidence that many of these men returned to Greece, and this meant that there was likely a group of men in Greece who could have been familiar with the literary works of the East. It seems unlikely that these merchants were actually reading copies of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, as literacy in any language seems to have been uncommon for Greeks at that time.9

Another way that the Greeks could have gotten *The Epic of Gilgamesh* through the Levant is by way of the Phoenicians. In the above example, the Greeks could have gone to the Levant, learned Akkadian, and come back to Greece and passed along stories like *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. More likely, however, is the option that people originally from the East came to Greece and stayed there.

In the ninth century BCE, the Assyrians conquered Syria and Phoenicia, and we know from archeological findings throughout Lebanon that the Assyrians brought much of their literature with them, including *Gilgamesh*.10 At the same time, there is evidence for a significant amount of Phoenician economic and settlement activity throughout traditionally Greek regions such as Cyprus and Crete from the ninth century onward. Evidence of Phoenician contact has also been seen on Samos, Delos, and Rhodes.11 It is possible therefore that, rather than the Greeks having to learn Eastern languages in order to become acquainted with the literary tradition of the east, perhaps the Phoenicians learned Greek in order to communicate with the Greek portion of their trading network. As a result, the Phoenicians could have recited much of their literature orally in this way to a Greek audience, thus introducing the epics of the East to the Greeks.

The third possibility, which may be the most likely, also includes the settlement of Easterners in traditionally Greek areas. It is commonly accepted that the Hittite empire at its peak extended from Western Anatolia through Northern Syria, and that its influence extended throughout the entire Anatolian peninsula. However, this empire collapsed around 1200 BCE under the weight of numerous attacks from a mysterious group known as the Sea Peoples, a group of loosely-unified raiders whose origins ranged from Sardinia.

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to part of the western coast of Anatolia. Among these were some Achaeans, and it is likely that the story of the sack of Troy preserved in the *Iliad* reflects the activities of the Greek portion of the Sea Peoples.\(^\text{12}\)

At first glance, this seems to be largely irrelevant to a discussion of the possibility of *Gilgamesh* being linguistically available in Ancient Greece. However, a copy of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* written in Hittite was discovered in the heart of the Hittite capital, dating from the second half of the fourteenth century BCE, and since the Hittites were in control of western Anatolia at the time, it is reasonable to assume that the inhabitants of the west coast of Anatolia could have understood the Hittite version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* if it were told to them.\(^\text{13}\) Additionally, it is possible that the accounts of the Achaeans taking prisoners back to Greece after the Trojan War as slaves are mostly accurate. It is also possible that some of these prisoners, taken back to Greece, would have eventually learned Greek after being there for a time, thus being able to tell the story of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in Greek.\(^\text{14}\) Thus, it is possible that the very people whom the Greeks defeated in the *Iliad* may have contributed, years down the road, to the *Iliad*’s literary richness.

There is another possibility concerning the Hittites that relates to the Greek colonization of western Anatolia. During the decline of the Hittite Empire, there were a number of Greek trading centers in Western Anatolia where the Greek inhabitants were surrounded by the native population and likely had to learn Hittite in order to trade effectively.\(^\text{15}\) Thus it seems possible that these traders might have learned Hittite and known how to understand the story of Gilgamesh as told by the Hittites.

Because the issue of linguistic availability is one of the most difficult ones when it comes to the relationship between *Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*, it is essential to establish that there are multiple possibilities for how people in Greece might have been familiar with eastern languages well enough to be able to be familiar with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It seems possible that some Greeks knew eastern languages.\(^\text{16}\)


Geographical Availability

The second issue of availability that has to be addressed is the issue of geographic availability. How could something written in Mesopotamia make it all the way over to Greece? Once again, there are a few possible answers to this question based on which translation of Gilgamesh the Greeks might have had. One possible option is the Greek traders in northern Syria. There are copies of The Epic of Gilgamesh that have been discovered from around where these Greeks were settled, so bringing the story back with them to Greece would have been possible. Another possible option is the Phoenicians. As stated above, copies of The Epic of Gilgamesh have been found in Phoenicia, and since the Phoenicians had significant settlements in traditionally Greek areas, it is possible that they could have spread The Epic of Gilgamesh orally to the Greeks they interacted with in places like Crete and Cyprus. However, I will argue that the question of textual borrowing in this case can best be answered by the Hittites.

Geographically speaking, the Hittite heartland is the closest place to Greece where The Epic of Gilgamesh has been found. Archeological investigations into the Hittite capital have yielded some possibilities for textual contact between the Greeks and the Hittites. The first thing that must be understood about the possible relationship between the Greeks and the Hittites is the probable Hittite name for the Mycenaean region: Ahhiyawah. The original reason people made this connection was because “Ahhiyawa” sounds suspiciously like “Achaea,” and on further investigation, it seems that this intuition may have been correct. In fact, when we see the Mycenaean Greeks in Hittite texts, they are called Ahhiyawans. This find allows scholars to see how the Hittites interacted with the Greeks and shows that they had a diplomatic relationship that would have made the geographical gap between Anatolia and Greece less of an issue.

One point that may validate this assumption is that even though the alphabet used by the Greeks was adopted generally from the East, the direction of the writing, left to right rather than right to left, was likely adopted from late Hittite Hieroglyphs. There is an abundant corpus of graffiti as evidence for the presence of Near Eastern languages in traditionally Greek territory from 900-700 BCE, so it seems possible that Hittites could have also come to Greece.

One problem with connecting the Hittites and the Greeks is a matter of literacy. We have copies of letters to the Greeks written on clay tablets in Hittite cuneiform from the Hittite heartland, demonstrating their relationship with the neighboring territory. However, no originals of these letters have survived in Greece. The likely reason for this is that these letters may have been written for ambassadors who would read them to Greek officials, who were likely illiterate.\textsuperscript{21}

This leads to a question that is crucial to our understanding of the connections between the Near East and Greece and the transmission of \textit{The Epic of Gilgamesh}. If \textit{The Epic of Gilgamesh}, or any Hittite writing of significance besides correspondence, actually made it to Greece, why have none of these writings survived? The answer to this question comes down to a discussion of how texts are transmitted in different cultures. In the ancient Near East, there is enough evidence for literature being written down on papyrus and clay tablets that it seems clear that writing down a text was the preferred mode of preserving it during certain periods. However, the habit of actually writing down literature comes late to ancient Greece, and it seems likely that an oral version of the epic could have made it to Greece in early times, taken there by the remnants of the Hittites as they fled their homeland. But once in a culture that was largely illiterate, nobody would have made copies of this into Greek, and the text would have been passed from a written version coming from a written tradition to an oral version in the Greek oral tradition. With this in mind, one would actually expect not to find any copies of \textit{The Epic of Gilgamesh} in Greece, even if the story were there in an oral form.

\textit{Cultural Availability}

Cultural availability is a criterion that is somewhat difficult to define. It is difficult to rank how close two cultures are to each other and how much one culture can understand another. However, literary connections between one culture and the next are easier to define, so I will explore cultural availability through the lens of literary borrowing, especially since literary borrowing is what is being discussed in this piece. If Greek literature borrows elements from Near Eastern literature on a somewhat regular basis, than it seems likely that their cultures are similar, perhaps similar enough that Homer could reasonably use elements from an ancient Near Eastern text as part of his works. Examples of such borrowing are actually visible in the corpus of ancient Greek literature.

\textsuperscript{21} Bryce, “The Trojan War,” 261.
One significant example is the relationship between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Heracles legends. Gilgamesh and Heracles are both partially divine, they both wear lion skins, they are both exceptional hunters, both are portrayed as being wanderers. Heracles wrestles with Zeus but neither one prevails, just as Gilgamesh and Enkidu do. Heracles wrestles the Marathon bull, Gilgamesh kills the Bull of Heaven, and both take their horns away as a trophy. They both do battle with lions in connection with descending into a deep cave in a high mountain which they both reach with the help of the sun-god. Gilgamesh must fight Humbaba, who guards a sacred tree, just as Heracles defeats Atlas and seizes the fruit of the sacred tree which he guards. Heracles gets the apples of Hera after fighting the dragon Ladon, just as Gilgamesh secures the plant of life from the deep sea; just as Herakles is forced to surrender the precious fruit on his return, so Gilgamesh loses the plant of life to a serpent.\footnote{22. Burr C. Brundage, “Herakles the Levantine: A Comprehensive View,” *JNES* 17/4 (1958): 227–28.}

**Chronological Availability**

The final aspect of availability is chronological availability, which means that *Gilgamesh* must be available during the time of Homer. Because, as I stated above, the Greek tradition is an oral tradition, no evidence of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* would be available in physical copies from the time of Homer in Greece. However, if *The Epic of Gilgamesh* remained popular in its written form in the Near East, one could assume that the oral version would remain popular in Greece, and such seems to be the case. Outside of Greece, *Gilgamesh* remained popular through the time of Homer. In fact, in the 7th century BCE in Assyria, copies of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* have been found that prove the epic managed to retain its popularity in certain areas for a significant amount of time, even past the time of Homer.\footnote{23. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 2.} It may be reasonable to suppose that if *Gilgamesh* remained popular in the Near East for a significant period of time, based on the archeological evidence, that the oral version in Greece would also have remained popular.

**Analogy**

The next main criterion that must be discussed is the criterion of analogy. If motifs from ancient Near Eastern literature appear in the *Iliad*, particularly if those motifs seem to be taken from *Gilgamesh*, then it would be more likely to find the same thing in *The Odyssey*. One example of this comes from the relationship between the *Iliad* and Sennacherib’s account of the Battle
of Halule, an ancient Assyrian text from 691 BCE. In Sennacherib’s annals, there is a significant chariot-riding scene in which the king rides his chariot through the ranks of his enemies, “My prancing steeds, harnessed for riding, plunged into the streams of blood as into a river; the wheels of my chariot, which brings down the wicked and the evil, were bespattered with blood and filth.” This scene is very similar to a scene in the Iliad, where Achilles does almost the same thing, “Thus under great-hearted Achilles his single-hoofed horses stepped on corpses and shields alike: with blood the whole axle was bespattered, and the rails around the seat, which the drops from the hoofs of the horse were hitting.” Thus it seems likely that borrowing is taking place in this case. However, there is an example which is even more illuminating, also found in the Iliad.

In book five of the Iliad, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, is wounded on the battlefield by Diomedes. Aphrodite then retreats to Olympus and complains to her mother and father about her treatment at the hand of a mortal. Dione comforts her, but Zeus, the sky god, tells her that it was largely her fault for trying to fight when she has had no experience in doing so. This is remarkably similar to The Epic of Gilgamesh. After Gilgamesh kills Humbaba, Ishtar, the goddess of love, tries to seduce him, but Gilgamesh snubs her and catalogues all of the lovers whom she has rejected in the past, implying that he would end up like they had. Ishtar then goes to Anu and Antum to complain about her treatment at the hands of Gilgamesh, and Anu, the sky-god, tells her it was largely her fault for provoking Gilgamesh. Despite a few differences, the parallels here are almost unmistakable. It seems likely, based on this, that Homer was familiar with ancient Near Eastern texts, including Gilgamesh, and used them in the Iliad.

Density

There are a number of occasions where The Odyssey seems to draw from The Epic of Gilgamesh, such that it seems possible that Homer may have taken the overall structure of The Odyssey from Gilgamesh. The Epic of Gilgamesh begins with an invocation of a third party to remember and recite what is about to be read. The Odyssey similarly begins with an invocation of the muse, a third party who is supposed to be able to help Homer recite the story. All references to Gilgamesh follow the translation of Stephen Mitchell, Gilgamesh: A New English Version (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 69–70.

All references to The Odyssey follow the translation of Robert Fagles and Bernard Knox, The Odyssey (New York: Penguin Group, 1996), 77.
Epic of Gilgamesh then goes on to introduce Enkidu, Gilgamesh’s partner, who will eventually fight by his side. The same is true of The Odyssey, where Telemachus is introduced shortly after the introduction, and he will also fight alongside Odysseus. Shortly after the introduction, Gilgamesh discusses Enkidu and his sexual amours with Shamhat, which is what begins to move the plot along, because without this event, Enkidu likely would never have encountered Gilgamesh. Similarly it is Calypso’s desire for a sexual relationship with Odysseus that prompts her to spare him when he is shipwrecked, and it is this which finally allows the plot to continue along in The Odyssey.

Another similarity is the description of the Cyclops compared to the description of Humbaba. Both are described as giants who eat humans, no one ever returns from their lairs, and in both cases their relish for entrails is specifically noted. The gods are upset about the death of Humbaba in Gilgamesh, but they choose not to respond. The same is true in The Odyssey. Poseidon is angry at Odysseus, but Zeus does not permit him to do Odysseus any harm. In Gilgamesh, Ishtar then seems to be somewhat impressed by Gilgamesh’s feat in killing Humbaba, as it is after this event that she chooses to seduce Gilgamesh. When Gilgamesh spurns her, Ishtar decides to send down the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh and Enkidu. This attempt is unsuccessful, however, as the heroes kill the Bull of Heaven. It is after this that the gods curse the pair, and kill Enkidu. Similarly, in The Odyssey, when Odysseus’ companions kill the cattle of the sun the gods kill them in retaliation. It may be significant that in both texts, it is the death of divine livestock that calls down the wrath of the gods. The relationship here seems unlikely to be coincidental.

In both texts the heroes also have periods of wandering. Gilgamesh wanders through the world and meets many people, as Odysseus does. There is also a sense in which Gilgamesh descends into the underworld. Gilgamesh goes down into the roots of the mountains, where the sun goes to die, and the text specifically says that the mountain reaches into the underworld. Odysseus also has a descent into the underworld, during which he encounters his friend who has died. There are enough similarities like these that it seems possible that Homer is taking the overall order of his text from Gilgamesh.

31. Fagles and Knox, The Odyssey, 156.
Order

Below is a chart of the order of some of the similarities which I noted above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Epic of Gilgamesh</th>
<th>The Odyssey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3\textsuperscript{rd} Party Invoked</td>
<td>Muse Invoked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enkidu Discussed</td>
<td>Telemachus Discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enkidu's Encounter with Shamhat</td>
<td>Odysseus’ Encounter with Calypso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilgamesh Kills Humbaba</td>
<td>Odysseus Blinds the Cyclops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilgamesh and Enkidu Kill the Bull of Heaven</td>
<td>Odysseus’ Men Kill the Cattle of the Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enkidu Dies in Retaliation for Bull of Heaven</td>
<td>Odysseus’ Men Die Due to Cattle of the Sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilgamesh Wanders</td>
<td>Odysseus Wanders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilgamesh Descends into Underworld</td>
<td>Odysseus Descends into Underworld</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilgamesh Returns Home</td>
<td>Odysseus Returns Home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although there are certainly differences in order (the second half of The Odyssey seems to be basically unconnected to Gilgamesh), the order of these corresponding elements may indicate that much of the format of the first half of The Odyssey was taken from The Epic of Gilgamesh.

Interpretability

One final element is interpretability, which is the ability of The Epic of Gilgamesh to make sense of The Odyssey. If The Epic of Gilgamesh can help to inform The Odyssey, then textual comparison likely had taken place. This also seems to be the case, as The Epic of Gilgamesh can help to explain one of the most important elements of The Odyssey.

In The Odyssey, Odysseus spends half the epic trying to return home to Ithaca. When the reader first meets Odysseus, he is weeping on a beach on the island where Calypso, a goddess lives. Odysseus is shipwrecked on the island, where Calypso states that she “welcomed him warmly, cherished him, even vowed to make the man immortal, ageless, all his days.” Yet Odysseus “wept for his foiled journey home.”

him. Odysseus’ attitude may be a comment on a significant scene in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh travels through the world after Enkidu dies, trying to find eternal life. He is unable to attain the eternal life he seeks and eventually in his travels he encounters a barkeeper named Shiduri, who tries to convince him to go back home:

> Gilgamesh, where are you roaming? You will never find the eternal life that you seek. When the gods created mankind, they also created death, and they held back eternal life for themselves alone. Humans are born, they lie, then they die, this is the order the gods have decreed. But until the end comes, enjoy your life, spend it in happiness, not despair. Savor your food, make each of your days a delight, bathe and anoint yourself, wear bright clothes that are sparkling clean, let music and dancing fill your house, love the child who holds you by the hand, and give your wife pleasure in your embrace. That is the best way for a man to live.³³

Gilgamesh struggles to find eternal life and is told that it is better to “love the child who holds you by the hand and give your wife pleasure in your embrace.” Odysseus on the other hand is offered eternal life, yet rejects it. Gilgamesh travels far and wide in a quest for eternal life and never achieves it. Odysseus wants to love the child who used to hold him by the hand and give his wife pleasure in his embrace. When he returns home to Ithaca, this is the most important thing to him—to return the honor of his wife and child who have been disgraced for so long by the suitors. There are other Greek heroes who specifically leave their homes in search of adventure or gold, as in the *Iliad*, so it seems out of place that Odysseus would be willing to give up immortality in order to return to his family. However, in light of *Gilgamesh*, Odysseus’ desire to return home makes sense.

**Conclusion**

It seems reasonable, based on the evidence, that it would not only be possible for Homer to have been familiar with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, but it is likely that he used the epic as his model for the first half of *The Odyssey*. He draws on the *Epic of Gilgamesh* throughout the work, and such intertextuality can explain Odysseus’ constant search for him home in Ithaca, which might be difficult to understand otherwise.

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