Reader’s Guide to Gilgamesh

On the Reading schedule, you will see listed two things to read for this lecture. It is often the case that we will assign two or three readings some of which will be primary, some will provide background context.
I will, as often as I can, for my lectures, post some helpful reading guidelines like this one. They may not be this long. It depends on time.

So, for the Mesopotamia lecture readings:

For this lecture, the most important thing is the Epic of Gilgamesh from your Norton Anthology of World Literature.

The “Code of Hammurabi” posted on the website is brief and includes a couple of the codes inscribed on the Stele of Hammurabi. For the background on this, see Stokstad, p.39. You don’t have to know these rules. Just read the codes to get a sense for what sorts of rules were on the Stele.

Guide to Gilgamesh

Note on The Norton Anthology of World Literature:
The six-volume Norton Anthology of World Literature is an amazing collection of the greatest and most significant (by someone’s guess) pieces of literature in world history. By the time we complete the Humanities Honors Program, you will have read many of the great works contained in the collection. This will render you well-versed in literature for as long as you remember your experience in this program. Each piece of literature has an introduction (usually only 3 or 4 pages long) that insightfully explains the author, the work, and the social context of the work. We almost always include these introductory sections with the reading assignment. You would do well to read them. These brief introductions make the work more accessible and can make the reading experience more rewarding as a result.
The Norton Anthology of World Literature is a core text in the Humanities Honors program and one that we hope you will cherish even beyond the completion of the series. These really are among the best things that people have written in any place, at any time. As amusing as the Twilight novels may be, they are no match for Paradise Lost.

In the introduction to The Epic of Gilgamesh you will learn that this is possibly the world’s first substantial piece of literature. Consider that as you read it. What would you expect to find in the earliest known written story? You will also learn a little about Mesopotamia and Mesopotamian culture. The introduction also contains some helpful interpretation of sections of the text that may not make sense to a modern reader. You will also learn that this story predates anything written by the Hebrews (another Mesopotamian society) by a thousand years. This is interesting to keep in mind as you read the story of the flood.

Here are a few things you might want to think about or focus on as you read the text. If it doesn’t all make sense, trust that we will go over this in greater detail in lecture and seminar. This is just to help get you through the reading.
The story begins with some background of Gilgamesh himself. We see that he is a hero, that he has done great things, and that he is a person of significance. These are the sorts of characters that are the focus of any epic.

A couple of pages into the story, you may have the sense that you are reading the same passages over and over again. Notice on page 101 that lines 57-66 are the same as lines 71-80. Over the next few pages you will see the same thing in lines 114-125 and 142-153, again in lines 134-137 and 155-158. We will explain the purpose of all of this repetition in lecture. It has an important function.

Gilgamesh is a great king but maybe a little too powerful. He abuses his power. In this we have one of the first themes of the text (there are many). Pay attention to see how it is addressed throughout the story.

The creation of Enkidu has a few functions. One way to think about him is to consider that it is common in ancient epics to think about civilization itself. Characters often move from a natural state to a civilized state. Why does Shamhat (a harlot or prostitute) play a significant role in civilizing Enkidu?

There are many gods mentioned in the story and their names are not likely to be familiar to you. Don’t worry about keeping track. The footnote on page 105 lists the main ones.

If you don’t get how Gilgamesh is abusing his power, see the footnote on p.108.

Immediately after Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends (p.109), Gilgamesh suggests they go on a dangerous quest. Why?

Pay close attention to lines 175-180 on p.111. Here is another common theme in ancient literature. We will often speak of “the human condition.” This is an early allusion to that.

On page 118 you will notice the first of many allusions to missing sections or lines of the epic. Since it is found on (badly broken) clay tablets, some sections remain missing. You might be pleased to know they are still looking. It is a career possibility to consider.

What is Humbaba? Why does Gilgamesh feel the need to defeat him? How does he?

Why does Gilgamesh reject Ishtar’s advances? How does she react? Consider the way both Enkidu and Gilgamesh treat Ishtar. She is a god. Is this any way to treat a God? Do they have good reason for doing so? What are the consequences?

In thinking about these questions, we are exploring the relationship between gods and humans. That relationship is not the same in all religions.

Ishtar threatens a zombie apocalypse (p.126). “Walking Dead” is not a new idea.

As Enkidu is dying, he first curses the trapper and harlot and then praises them. What is the significance of his reversal?
On page 131, lines 132-152, Enkidu describes the afterlife (as commonly understood among early Mesopotamian cultures). What is it like? Is it something to fear or is it something to look forward to? Who goes there?

How does Gilgamesh react to Enkidu's death?

Gilgamesh has a lengthy conversation with Siduri pp.138-139. This too might be seen as reflection on the “human condition.” What is the wisdom offered by Siduri? (remember this as we read other ancient stories including the Hebrew Bible. This is fairly common wisdom in the ancient world)

Utanapishtim has more to say on the matter p.142, lines 218-246

On pages 143-148 you read the story of the flood. Again, this precedes the account in Genesis by a thousand years. Consider the similarities and differences (if you are not familiar with that account, we will read it for next class). What is the function of a flood story. Why does Enlil grant Utanapishtim immortality? (pp.147-8)

Gilgamesh is given a test to stay awake for six days. This section is a little hard to follow. This is to prove that he is worthy of the secret of immortality. He falls asleep almost immediately. The point of the loaves of bread is to show him how long he has been asleep (because you don’t really notice time when you are sleeping). Gilgamesh thinks he has just nodded off for a second.

The mysterious plant described on page 150 is a plant that grows deep underwater and has the power to make someone young again. That's not immortality but it would be pretty good. Gilgamesh gets some but it is stolen by a snake.

Snakes are common in Mesopotamian stories and they do sneaky things like this. Why a snake? What do you think snakes represent in Mesopotamian stories? What is the connection, if any, between this snake and the one that messes with Eve in Genesis?

Notice that the final lines of the epic repeat lines 18-24 from the beginning of the story. What do you suppose this means?

These points and questions are just meant to enhance the reading of the story and draw your attention to some significant features. This isn’t the easiest story to read because of the style but you might agree that it is an engaging story (could be a good movie) and that it is not so foreign to our modern concerns that it has nothing to say to us. Isn't it amazing that the very first piece of literature addresses so many of the same concerns that still engage us today? In an important sense, we are not so different from Mesopotamians 4000 years ago.