

What Happened to Sam-kha in

The Epic of Gilgameš?

John R. Maier

Before a cave not far from the ancient Mesopotamian city of Uruk (Biblical Erech) rests an ancient poet and seer, grave in his turban and long beard, exiled, the poet says, "By his own will from all the haunts of men."<sup>1</sup> He is a suitably dignified personage for an epic poem. His name is Heabani--Enkidu, we would say today. He belongs to the excitement caused when a brilliant British Museum scholar, George Smith, unearthed the cuneiform tablets of an epic poem now known as The Epic of Gilgameš. In spite of his dignity, the seer Heabani is in a sense no longer with us. Gone is the turban; gone is the sage lover of Nature and Solitude: he belongs to a poem written in 1884 by a man, Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton, who intended to complete the fragments translated earlier by George Smith, to make a poem that was both ancient and yet strikingly modern. Its name: Ishtar and Izdubar, The Epic of Babylon. Unlike the famous Rubáiyát of Omar Khyám, the piece did not bring fame to the scholar-poet who labored so long to bring it

Maier 2

forth, and it inspired no cults. A hundred years of Gilgameš scholarship has passed it by. Today it is important mostly as a Nineteenth Century literary work reflecting an 1800s image of the Ancient Near East.

My interest in this paper is in certain names appearing in one short but important early section of Hamilton's poem. The section is from the third of twelve tablets comprising the epic. For the most part I will mention only those names which subsequent scholarship on the Gilgameš has found to be incorrect--almost ridiculous, some might say. But these names will serve as an introduction to the problems of translating names in ancient texts, and also as an indication of the way names deeply effect a narrative line and the concept of character in a literary work.

A few preliminary remarks are necessary. The language of the original epic is Akkadian, an ancient Semitic language. The Akkadian epic of Gilgameš--a version of which goes back to about 1800 B.C.--in turn draws upon the Sumerian Gilgameš stories. (Sumerian is a language unre-

Maier 3

lated to Akkadian but a language that influenced nearly all others in the Ancient Near East.) Hamilton, by the way, could not have known Sumerian or the influence of texts older than the Akkadian version.<sup>2</sup>

The Epic of Gilgameš is complex. Here we are interested in only one part: how a creature, Heabani, is seduced by a person called Sam-kha and makes his way thence to the city of Erech (Uruk) to meet the hero of the poem, Gilgameš, or as Hamilton called him, Izdubar. Doubtless the most moving part of the Gilgameš story is the grief of the hero at the loss of this friend Heabani, and the hero's subsequent search through the universe to find the answer to the problem of death. But the section we are interested in deals with a very fascinating early stage of the story, just before the friendship between the hero and Heabani develops.

Though modern scholars disagree about the interpretation of the events in the section (today it is Tablet I of the epic),<sup>3</sup> the events themselves are these. The people of Erech need someone to equal their restless king; in

## Maier 4

response to their prayer, Heabani (Enkidu) is formed from clay and thrown into the wilds where the creature grows up with wild animals. The seduction by the Šamhatu, or sacred prostitute, brings Heabani to manhood. Having become a man, he then abandons the wilds and enters the city, to meet the greatest of men, Izdubar (or Gilgameš).

So at least goes the story as it is known today, made rather sure by a hundred years of intense research and translation. Hamilton's 1884 version of the events is a bit different.

The incredible change in the characterization of the wild man, Enkidu, provides a remarkable example of translation problems involving names that have tantalized the student of the Gilgameš poem for nearly a century. For convenience I have chosen a few lines of the text that illustrate the problems, lines that have the advantage of being "nearly perfect" in the original, according to George Smith. The same lines in R. Campbell Thompson's transcription and translation show the modern concept of the wild man, which he calls "Enkidu" (see Appendix for

Maier 5

text, transliteration and translation).

Enkidu has just been seduced by a prostitute in the service of the goddess, I<sup>Y</sup>star. A savage being with no traces of human behavior, Enkidu is won over to humanity by the prostitute; for "six days and seven nights" she sleeps with the wild creature. At the end he has become a man. The prostitute then initiates Enkidu into the arts and ways of civilization. In this passage the prostitute is encouraging Enkidu to go to the glorious city of Erech, which has been oppressed by the mighty king, Gilgame<sup>Y</sup>. Enkidu's response, in true epic fashion, is to boast of her might. The passage anticipates the furious battle to follow, when Gilgame<sup>Y</sup> and Enkidu will wrestle-- and then suddenly become friends. The heroes will then go off together to a series of great epic adventures.

Imagine the astonishment, then, at taking up George Smith's translation of 1876 and the fuller account by Leonidas Hamilton (1884)!<sup>4</sup> The character here is called "Heabani," not "Enkidu." There is really little to dispute there, though. The modern reading is Sumerian. Hamilton's

## Maier 6

"Heabani" is a rendering of the same cuneiform signs in Akkadian. The older suggestion was that the name meant the god "Hea" (modern "Ea") "begot" or "created" X--as in a name like Assurbanipal. "Enkidu," similarly, could carry the same meaning in Sumerian, the Sumerian god "Enki" being the equivalent of the Akkadian "(H)Ea."<sup>5</sup>

The so-called temple "Ellitardusi" indicates a second, but related, problem in dealing with Akkadian names. Campbell Thompson reads two words, el-lim qud-du-š̄i, "holy (and) sacred," adjectives describing the dwelling of god Anu and the goddess Ištar (Appendix, line 44). In this case "lim" and "li" are possible for the same (IGI) sign. "Qud" is a reading of a sign that could be "tar; tara; ṭar; tir; ṭír; kud/t; qud/t; ḥas/š̄/š̄/z; š̄il or sil."<sup>6</sup> Notice that the texts do not indicate a break between the words in line 44.

These are typical problems. In a sense they are very minor ones, especially because they do not seriously effect the meaning of the passage or the work as a whole. But Hamilton's handling of "Sam-kha" (mentioned in the

## Maier 7

sixth line of his version) and the "middannu" beast are serious indeed. The astonishing transformation of "Heabanī" can be seen in these two names.

"Sam-kha," as Hamilton takes her, is both a person (she is Smith's "Samhat") and "sweet Joy" mentioned in the fourth line. Another woman--the one with the flashing eyes "half languid" is called Kharimtu. Kharimtu's description of the "giant" Izdubar has persuaded somewhat the seer to meet the giant. But what really excites the wild man to go to Erech is not to match his strength against Izdubar. (In fact, he does not fight the great king of Erech, in Hamilton's version.) What excites him is the delicious woman, "Sam-kha." The allegorizing tendency--as her name means "Joy"--does not fully develop. But the distinction between "Kharimtu" (or "Seduction") and "Sam-kha" ("Joy") is based on a misconception that has very serious consequences. The two names actually describe one person--and neither is a proper name. Both refer to the prostitute sent to seduce the wild man. The confusion comes when the names are written together, without any sign of punctuation

Maier 8

or coordination, Samhatu as an epithet of the prostitute, harimtu. One odd consequence is that Hamilton knew what was happening to Kharimtu as he read George Smith's version, but Smith's version did not mention Samhat at the point where the women had been brought before Heabani's "cave." Hamilton solves the problem by asking a question, in his usual florid way:

But where hath Joy, sweet Sam-kha, roving gone?  
 When they arrived at setting of the sun  
 She disappeared within with waving arms;  
 With bright locks flowing she displayed her charms.  
 As some sweet zir-ru did young Sam-kha seem,  
 A thing of beauty of some mystic dream.  
 (III.III.48-53)

Well, where did she go? Into a mystic dream while the other girl waited? According to Hamilton, Sam-kha enters the "cave" where the turbaned seer, a hermit by choice, it should be recalled, lives. The lines which describe the sexual encounter between the wild man and the prostitute are very graphic and possibly reach as close to our idea of pornography as Akkadian literature approaches, it seems. The Victorian scholar, George Smith, knew what to do: he simply deleted twenty-two lines of "directions"

Maier 9

which he disguises in an innocuous comment buried at the end of his chapter: "I have omitted some of the details in columns III. and IV. because they were on the one side obscure, and on the other hand appeared hardly adapted for general reading." The Reverend A.H. Sayce, who revised Smith's book, deciding that even such an innocuous a comment as that was unnecessary, silently dropped even that.<sup>7</sup>

So Hamilton faced the problem of the seduction by inventing a scene that is delightfully vague.

Her glorious arms she opens, flees away,  
 While he doth follow the enticer gay.  
 He seizes, kisses, takes away her breath,  
 And she falls to the ground--perhaps in death  
 He thinks, and o'er her leans where she now lay;  
 At last she breathes, and springs, and flees away.  
 But he the sport enjoys, and her pursues.  
 (III.IV.21-27)

Thus "sweet Joy" prompts him. Smith knew nothing of any great love of the wild man for this girl (developed in this scene). The only love which he shows again and again is the wild man's love for Izdubar. The curious line in Smith, "I join to Samhat my companionship," (line 42) is as far as Smith would go. For Hamilton, though, a romantic

Maier 10

affair was a must for an ancient epic. He invents a love interest for Izdubar, a girl, Mua, and even beyond that the love interest between Izdubar and the goddess Ishtar. The separation of "Samkha" and "Harimtu" becomes the chief motivation for Heabani's entry into Erech.

More curious than Sam-kha is the beast called mid-dan-nu. The hunt for the "midannu" beast is one of the fascinating chapters in early Assyriology. Smith thought it was a tiger. Sayce added more information, calling it a "fierce carnivorous animal allied to the lion and leopard;" the "midannu he found associated with the dumamu or cat.<sup>8</sup> A famous Khorsabad sculpture showing a hero holding a lion, was taken to be Izdubar strangling the midannu. Hamilton even took the beast to be a pet of Heabani! Because the pet, which guarded the cave of Heaban, terrifies a certain "Prince Zaidu," who had been sent by Izdubar to persuade Heabani to come to Erech, the king had had to send the two girls to seduce the hermit. Notice that (1) Heabani will take his pet to Erech in order to test Izdubar's strength; and (2) he will interpret a dream if Izdubar destroys the

Maier 11

beast. In column V Hamilton does indeed describe the fight between the Herakles-figure, Izdubar, and the lion; Heabani then agrees to interpret the puzzling dream for the king.

What is astonishing about this is that no midannu beast existed--at least in this epic. A glance at Campbell Thompson's text and transliteration will reveal the reason. The first line of column 5, the boast of Enkidu, includes the emphatic (and rather unusual) form of the first person pronoun: "I, too, am mighty!"--anaku-mi together with the ordinary Akkadian word for strength, dannu. Smith, with a corrupt text, had read across anaku-mi to mi-dan-nu. Once that was done, the beast is described as begotten "in the desert" with great strength. It was but a short step to the idea that the beast would contest Izdubar, and the "prize" would an interpretation of his dream.

Hamilton's Heabani is, we see, not a primitive savage after all. A famous "barb" and seer, Heabani had lived in Erech, had sung of the defeat of the city at the hands of the Elamites, and had sung of Izdubar's victory over the

## Maier 12

Elamites thereafter--this long before the episode we have been considering. But the seer had retired to his solitary cave. Indeed, Hamilton invents an "ode to solitude" in the manner of Coleridge for Heabani to sing when the seer discovers (through a divine revelation) he must go to Erech (Tablet II, column VI). Even Sam-kha's seduction of him had been foreseen by this more than "natural man." With his turban and long beard, the seer Heabani was the archetypal poet-seer.

Needless to say, perhaps, the concept of Heabani as a poet, as a seer, as the interpreter of dreams, has since been exploded. There was support for it in fragmentary texts, it seemed, but the laborious task of joining fragments of tablets, of establishing the sequence of tablets, led to a creature fashioned by the gods to test Gilgameš. Campbell Thompson's translation shows the modern concept. The wild man describes, not his pet midannu but himself in the passage. Hardly a seer, Enkidu is entirely ignorant of mankind until the prostitute initiates him. Indeed, this passage is the first one in which Enkidu shows the human

Maier 13

capability of intelligible speech.

Thus a misplaced sign sequence and a split of one common name into two proper names has produced the midannu-beast and Sam-kha. Both in turn develop the image of the poet seer, sensitive, a mystic and a loner, with a romantic's feeling for Nature and Love. What happened to Sam-kha? In her disappearance The Epic of Gilgames lost a first-rate pre-Raphaelite love interest--and a poet.

John R. Maier

State University of New York

College at Brockport

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton, Ishtar and Izdubar, The Epic of Babylon (London: W.H. Allen, 1884), Tablet I, Column IV, line 3.

<sup>2</sup>On the Sumerian sources of The Epic of Gilgameš, see Paul Garelli, ed., Gilgameš et sa légende (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1960), pp. 39-97.

<sup>3</sup>The earliest complete text of the epic is Paul Haupt, Das Babylonische Nimrodepos (Leipzig, 1884-1890), which Hamilton had seen. The standard text today is still R. Campbell Thompson, The Epic of Gilgameš, Text, Transliteration and Notes (London, 1929).

<sup>4</sup>George Smith, The Chaldean Account of Genesis (London, 1876), pp. 167-294.

<sup>5</sup>An 'Ay(y)a-bani ('Ayya-Is-My-Creator) is attested in Old Akkadian (Sargonic Period) by J.J.M. Roberts, The Earliest Semitic Pantheon (Baltimore, 1972), pp. 19, 6; see also the banu article in Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, vol. 2, pp. 81-95.

<sup>6</sup>Rykle Borger, Akkadische Zeichenliste (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1971), p. 78 (#449).

<sup>7</sup>Smith, p. 205; George Smith, The Chaldean Account of Genesis, ed., rev., corrected A.H. Sayce (London, 1880), p. 214. Hamilton used Sayce's edition.

<sup>8</sup>Smith, pp. 205-206; Sayce, p. 214.

## Appendix

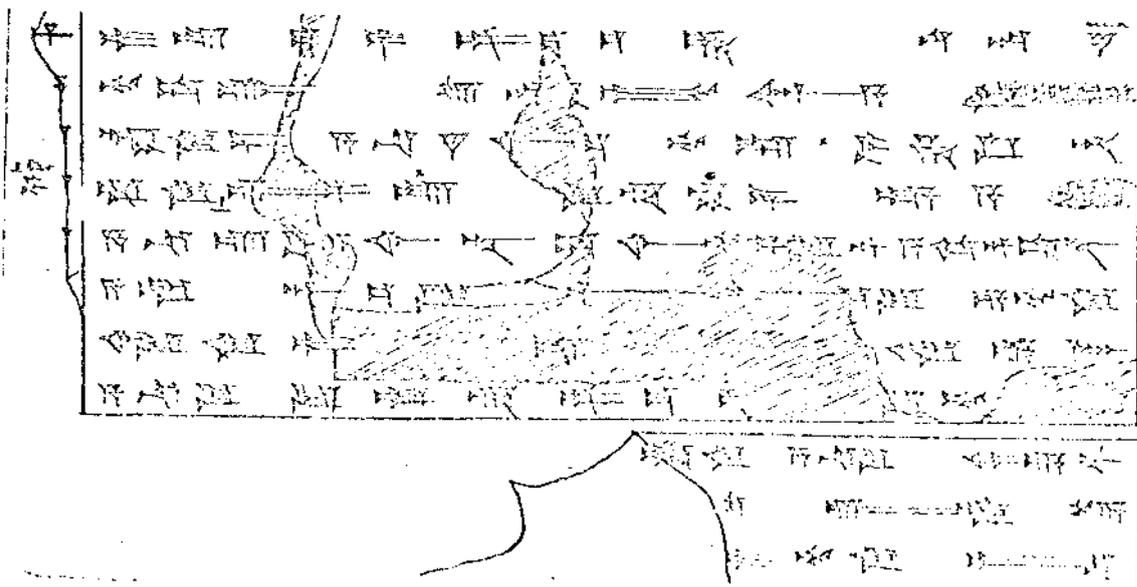
Leonidas La Cenci Hamilton, ISHTAR AND IZDUBAR,

## THE EPIC OF BABYLON (1884)

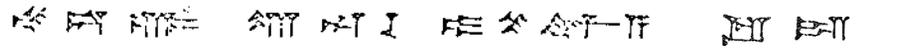
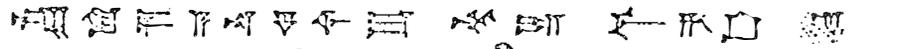
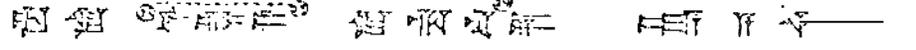
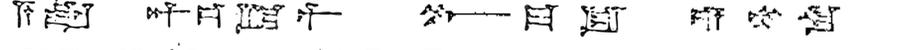
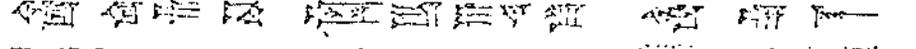
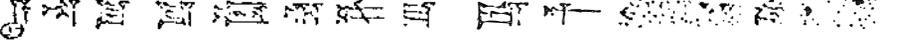
Tablet III, Column IV:

Her flashing eyes half languid pierce the seer,  
 Until his first resolves all disappear.  
 And rising to his feet his eyes he turned  
 Toward sweet Joy, whose love for him yet burned;  
 And eyeing both with beaming face he saith,  
 "With Sam-kha's love the seer hath pledged his faith;  
 And I will go to Elli-tar-du-si,  
 Great Anu's seat and Ishtar's where with thee,  
 I will behold the giant Izdubar,  
 Whose fame is known to me as king of war;  
 And I will meet him there, and test the power  
 Of him whose fame above all men doth tower.  
 A mid-dan-nu to Erech I will take,  
 To see if he its mighty strength can break.  
 In those wild caves its strength has mighty grown;  
 If he the beast destroys, I will make known  
 His dream to him--e'en all the seer doth know;

Paul Haupt, DAS BABYLONISCHE NIMRODEPOS [1884], I, IV &amp; V



R. Campbell Thompson, THE EPIC OF GILGAMISH [1929], I, IV

43		40.
		
		
		
		
45		45.
		
		

George Smith, THE CHALDEAN ACCOUNT OF GENESIS (1876)

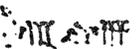
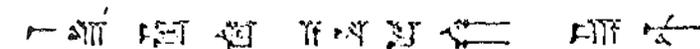
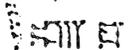
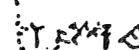
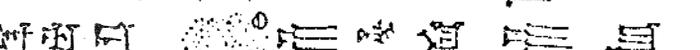
Tablet III, Column IV:

39. She spake to him and before her speech,
40. the wisdom of his heart flew away and disappeared.
41. Heabani to her also said to Harimtu:
42. I join to Samhat my companionship,
43. to the templs of Elli-tardusi the seat of Anu and Ishtar,
44. the dwelling of Izdubar the mighty giant,
45. who also like a bull towers over the chiefs.
46. I will meet him and see his power,

Column V:

1. I will bring to the midst of Erech a tiger,
2. and if he is able he will destroy it.
3. In the dessert it is begotten, it has great strength,

R. Campbell Thompson, THE EPIC OF GILGAMISH [1929], I, V

## R. Campbell Thompson, THE EPIC OF GILGAMISH [1929]

## Tablet I, Column IV

40. i-ta-ma-as-sum-ma ma-gir ka-ba-sa  
 41. mu-du-u lib-ba-su i-se-'-a ib-ra  
 42. ilu<sup>U</sup>EN.KI.DU a-na sa-si-ma izakkara(ra) sa<sup>l</sup>ha-rim-t[a]  
 43. al-ki sa<sup>l</sup>sam-hat ki-ri-en-ni ia-a-si  
 44. a-na biti el-lim kud-du-si mu-sab ilu<sup>A</sup>-nim ilu<sup>U</sup>Is-tar  
 45. a-sar ilu<sup>U</sup>Gilgamis git-ma-lu e-mu-ki  
 46. u ki-i rimi ug-da-as-sa-ru eli nise<sup>p</sup><sup>l</sup>  
 47. a-na-ku lu-uk-ri-sum-ma da-an-n[is l]u-kab-[bi-ma]

## Tablet I, Column V

1. [lu-us]-ri-ih ina lib Uruk<sup>ki</sup> a-na-ku-mi dan-nu  
 2. [a-na-ku]-um-ma si-ma-tu u-nak-kar  
 3. [sa i-n]a seri '-al-du [da-a]n i-mu-ki-su

## R. Campbell Thompson, THE EPIC OF GILGAMISH [1928]

## Tablet I, Column IV

40. Her counsel  
 E'en as she spake it found favour, (for) conscious he was  
 of his longing  
 Some companion to seek; so unto the courtesan spake he:  
 "Up, then, O girl, to the Temple, the holy (and) sacred,  
 invite me,  
 45. Me, to the dwelling of Anu and Ishtar, where, highest in power,  
 Gilgamish is, and prevaieth o'er men like an aurochs--for I, too,

## Tablet I, Column V

1. I, I will summon him, challenging boldly (and) crying through  
 Erech,  
 "I, too, am mighty!" Nay, I, forsooth (I), will (e'en) destiny  
 alter--  
 (Truly), 'tis he who is born in the desert whose vigour  
 (is greatest!)