

Marcel Friesen und Christoph Leonard Hesse (Hrsg.)

Antike Kanonisierungsprozesse und Identitätsbildung in Zeiten des Umbruchs

Tagungsband zur Internationalen Nachwuchstagung in Münster
(26.–27. Mai 2017)

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Wissenschaftliche Schriften der WWU Münster

herausgegeben von der Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Münster

<http://www.ulb.uni-muenster.de>



Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Dieses Buch steht gleichzeitig in einer elektronischen Version über den Publikations- und Archivierungsserver der WWU Münster zur Verfügung.

<http://www.ulb.uni-muenster.de/wissenschaftliche-schriften>

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Wissenschaftliche Schriften der WWU Münster, Reihe X, Band 28

Verlag readbox publishing GmbH – readbox unipress, Münster

<http://unipress.readbox.net>

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ISBN 978-3-8405-0196-8

(Druckausgabe)

URN urn:nbn:de:hbz:6-96159715337

(elektronische Version)

direkt zur Online-Version:

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Satz:

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Titelbild:

Die digitale Bildkomposition zeigt eine der von Dante Gabriel Rossetti angefertigten Gesichtsstudien von Jane Morris, Ikone der Präraffelittenschule, Vorarbeit zu ‚Mnemosyne‘, 1876, Pastell auf Papier.

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Umschlag:

ULB Münster



Sophus Helle (Aarhus)

Gilgamesh: A Subversive Foundation¹

Among the thousands of literary works that survive from the cultures of ancient Iraq, one, in particular, stands out. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has achieved a modern popularity unmatched by any other work of literature from the Ancient Near East. After the rediscovery of cuneiform literature in the nineteenth century, much scholarly effort has gone to making the uncovered works available in translation, but of these only *Gilgamesh* has attracted such remarkable admiration from artists all over the world. The epic has been adapted into novels, plays, poems, symphonies, operas, paintings, statues, installation art, literary parodies, science fiction, comic books, children's literature and much more – though not (yet) a Hollywood blockbuster.²

This popularity, which viewed against the comparable literary merits of other Babylonian works seems at least somewhat disproportionate, has not been fully accounted for in Assyriological scholarship. In this essay, I will attempt a partial answer to the question of how *Gilgamesh* has achieved its unique status, by drawing on Mads Rosendahl Thomsen's study of canonicity in world literature.³ *Gilgamesh* shares with the canonical works studied by Thomsen a conjunction of two seemingly contradictory properties: it is at one and the same time subversive and foundational.

In other words, it is today possible to read *Gilgamesh* both as a significant "first" in the history of literature, and as self-questioning, critical, and unorthodox. It is viewed as a bedrock of human culture but also as a particularly shifting and unstable bedrock. While not exactly accurate in a historical

¹ I would like to thank Mads Rosendahl Thomsen and David Damrosch for their valuable contributions to this paper, though all shortcomings of course remain my own.

² For an overview of these adaptations, see Ziolkowski 2011.

³ Thomsen 2011.

sense, though as I will show not entirely anachronistic either, the reading of the epic as a subversive foundation has contributed to its becoming the only cuneiform text to enjoy a canonical status in world literature.

1 A modern literary canon

Before turning to the concept of subversive foundations, it will be necessary to explicate what is meant by the broader concepts of canonicity and world literature. The contributions collected in this volume demonstrate that very different things can be meant by the words “canon” and “times of change”, and though those different meanings are not irreconcilable, and can indeed be fruitfully considered in relation to one another, it is nonetheless helpful to make clear exactly what is meant by their use.

The present essay takes the concept of the canon in its broader meaning, a sense somewhat alien to its Biblical origin and more at home in the field of literature. In this meaning of the word, canonicity does not refer to a state of textual fixity or a stable set of inclusions and exclusions, but to a widely acknowledged literary prestige, a cultural authority cemented and reproduced within institutional settings such as the university. When I claim that *Gilgamesh* is canonical, I mean that it is treated with special reverence and regularly included in university curricula (much more so, it seems to me, than is generally assumed by Assyriologists).

Likewise, the historical change described here is of a somewhat different kind than the culture-specific transformations addressed by other essays in this volume. The change I have in mind is the one that forms the very precondition for our engagement with *Gilgamesh*, that is, the historical process that has brought it from the cuneiform world, through its 19th-century rediscovery, and to our own modern reading of the text. I am here treating *Gilgamesh* as a work of “world literature” in the sense proposed by David Damrosch, that is, as a text that circulates across national, cultural, linguistic, and in this case not least temporal borders.⁴ Indeed, it is exactly the epic’s forceful transgression of the many borders separating 11th-century Uruk from 21st-century Münster that is the topic of this essay.

⁴ Damrosch 2003.

With this understanding of canonicity and times of change in mind, the task of this essay is to bring the two together and to ask how the canonical status of *Gilgamesh* is related to its diachronic movement across very different cultural contexts. It must be remembered that while *Gilgamesh* was certainly also “canonical” in the broader literary sense in ancient Mesopotamia, it was placed on equal footing with other works such as *Enuma Elish* or *Erra and Ishum*, and does not seem to have surpassed them much in popularity – certainly not so starkly as it does today. Accordingly, something must have happened since then, and more specifically in the cultural encounter between the ancient and the modern world, that propelled *Gilgamesh* to a canonicity now far beyond the reach of its former literary equals.

The canonicity of *Gilgamesh* is an issue deserving of special attention because it is unique not only within the field of Assyriology but also within world literature more generally. As Thomsen writes, the “*Epic of Gilgamesh* is an almost unique case in international canonization, because it is a work that is generally recognized as world literature without being supported by the reception of a living literary culture.”⁵ *Gilgamesh* is outstanding because it is a rediscovered classic and a relatively recent rediscovery at that. Its modern reception history is markedly different from that of, say, the *Odyssey*, which had been read, circulated, and interpreted for hundreds of years by the time *Gilgamesh* was brought back to light. This peculiar state of affairs makes the canonicity of the epic, and the connection between canonicity and cultural encounters across time, all the more striking.

Some obvious explanations for this modern canonicity present themselves. The epic is short and adventurous, good translations of it are widely available,⁶ and the dramatic circumstances of its rediscovery provided a foundation of early fame, as George Smith in 1872 announced to an overfilled lecture hall at the Society of Biblical Archaeology that a text of great significance for the historicity of Scripture had been uncovered.⁷ These factors are indeed the preconditions for its current popularity, but extrinsic criteria such as these cannot, by themselves, determine the canonicity of a given work. In

⁵ Thomsen 2008, 8–9.

⁶ George 2003a.

⁷ For the wider implications of this controversy, see Cregan-Reid 2015.

logical terms, they are its necessary but insufficient conditions. I will, therefore, attempt to account for the canonicity of *Gilgamesh* by considering what may be seen as the intrinsic criteria of canonicity. That is to say, I will be examining textual attributes of the narrative itself which recur across a number of other canonical works, and so may be plausibly assumed to be a defining aspect of the attainment of canonicity.

2 Imported foundations and subversive canonicity

Myriads of factors may be invoked to explain why one literary work and not another has made its way to prominence, and we lack the methodological criteria by which to discern the most decisive. However, Thomsen points to a recurring characteristic that is at least strikingly applicable to the case of *Gilgamesh*, which to my mind warrants further investigation.

Thomsen takes as his point of departure the “desire for the vernacular classic” as a defining aspect of national literary historiography.⁸ In other words, in the national formation of cultural identity there arises a need to establish a foundational “classic” on which the subsequent literary historiography of the nation may be based. In some cases, candidates for the role of a national literary cornerstone easily present themselves, such as Shakespeare in England or Dante in Italy, but in other cases, there are no obvious works of great, pre-Romantic literature on which the subsequent tradition may be said to rely.

As Thomsen puts it, the possession of a vernacular classic in one national literature has important effects on its cultural neighbors. “It produces a structure for other countries and cultures to imitate and long for, even when they discover that coming up with their own foundational texts is not a straightforward process.”⁹ In many cases, this is not because the nation in question lacks great works of literature, but because these are too recent creations to be properly assigned the role of a classic that is foundational in the sense of having no significant literary predecessor. Russia’s Dostoyevsky and Germany’s Goethe, for example, are simply too late to be foundational. This creates a void at the heart of the national literature, which is filled, according to Thomsen, through the import of foundations. In the Scandinavian context

⁸ Thomsen 2011, 207.

⁹ Thomsen 2011, 207–208.

he discusses, the absence of Renaissance masterpieces meant that the foundational role was assigned instead to the works of Shakespeare and Cervantes, adopted into national literature as “translated classics”.

My claim is that *Gilgamesh* today has acquired the role of such an “imported foundation”, and particularly so in an American context where pre-Romantic classics are of course absent. The resultant canonical void in the national literary history is increasingly being filled with the Babylonian epic, which at least in chronological terms is even better suited for the role of a cultural point of origin than Shakespeare or Cervantes. I would by no means claim that *Gilgamesh* plays this role in an American context only,¹⁰ but cautiously suggest that it does so to a somewhat greater degree there than, for example, in a British context, where no such canonical void exists.

However, having shown that Shakespeare and Cervantes function as imported foundations in a Scandinavian context, Thomsen then goes on to ask: “why these texts? In what ways are they foundational, canonical cornerstones?”¹¹ This question cuts to the heart of the issue addressed by this essay. Rummaging among the world’s oldest texts for an ancient cultural foundation, why should one settle on *Gilgamesh* in particular? Thomsen’s answer to the question is intriguing though also somewhat counter-intuitive. Foundational status is awarded, he argues, to texts that refuse the role of an authoritative cultural foundation.

Works such as those of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Montaigne are all largely anti-authoritative. They offer no simple or enchanted vision of the universe, only skepticism, irony, and the critique of appearances. Rather than cementing cultural values, they seem to subvert them at every turn. Thomsen points for example to the “strange canonicity” expounded by literary critic Harold Bloom, who argues that the “West’s greatest writers are subversive of all values, both ours and their own.”¹² Bloom thus explicitly equates cultural canonicity with cultural critique.

Gilgamesh was perfectly suited to its modern rediscovery to meet the contradictory demands for imported canonicity proposed by Thomsen. In the fol-

¹⁰ In Helle 2017, I present evidence of a similar cultural fascination with the foundational character of *Gilgamesh* in a Danish context.

¹¹ Thomsen 2011, 211.

¹² Thomsen 2011, 212.

lowing, I will explore each facet in turn, arguing that the epic's modern reception has foregrounded its status as a literary "first" to a degree far beyond what can be defended historically, and that a number of the themes in the epic have resonated with modern and post-modern forms of cultural critique.

3 *Gilgamesh* as bedrock

"The oldest epic tale in the world", "the earliest work of literature", "one of the first truly great works of literature", "the oldest story ever written" – such claims abound in the popular literature that now surrounds the epic. Most attempts to promote its literary importance highlight its "firstness", and if a translation is to be advertised, for example, publishers will often fall back to the claim that *Gilgamesh* is the oldest work of literature in existence. It is an impressive claim, if also a wrong one.

The epic is generally made much older than it is through a lack of distinction between its various versions. Non-Assyriologists read the epic almost exclusively in its Standard Babylonian version, which dates to the last centuries of the second millennium BCE, but the text is often presented as dating to the third millennium BCE (or more generally as being "over 4,000 years old") when its earliest forerunners were composed. This conflation makes the epic a thousand years older than the version actually being read by most contemporary readers. But even allowing for this anachronism, the actual oldest exemplars of Sumerian literature still antedate the very earliest version of *Gilgamesh* by upwards of half a millennium. The claim of it being the first *great* work of literature is, of course, more difficult to refute, but no less suspect, obscuring as it does earlier literary masterpieces such as *Atra-hasis* or Enheduana's *Exaltation of Inanna*.

I am particularly intrigued by the unspecified nature of the "firstness" typically attributed to the epic. The adjectives attached to the epic in the claims listed above stay within the same range of synonyms ("earliest", "first", "oldest"), whereas the nouns employed to qualify this aspect are much more diverse. It is, after all, far from the same thing to claim that *Gilgamesh* is the world's oldest text, the world's oldest story, the world's oldest work of literature, the world's oldest *great* work of literature, and so on. The actual content of the claims seems strikingly interchangeable, what matters, rather,

is their canonizing operation. The varying degrees of historical accuracy in the claims are irrelevant, for their content is subsumed by their function: they establish *Gilgamesh* as a cultural foundation, a first without predecessors.

In other words, *Gilgamesh*'s firstness is a key aspect of its emerging modern canonicity. By pointing to the anachronism of this claim, I wish not so much to highlight that it is not a natural given nor to suggest that the emphasis on its foundational value is somehow unfairly imposed on *Gilgamesh* from without. To the contrary, the epic itself also revels in the fantasy of foundations, particularly in the prologue that sets the mood for the ensuing text. "Foundation" is, in fact, the fourth word of the epic, as the opening line reads: "[He who saw the Deep, the] foundation (*išdi*) of the country"¹³. The opening line or *incipit* is a particularly important part of any Babylonian text, forming its title and prefiguring its theme. In the case of *Gilgamesh*, the beginning of the text foreshadows its end, where the eponymous hero will descend to the subterranean sea known as the Apsû, abode of Ea, god of wisdom. The epic thereby suggests that the wisdom Gilgamesh eventually gains is to be found at the very bottom of the world, the bedrock of the land in a literal as well as a metaphorical sense.

Having established this association between foundations and knowledge, the text goes on to describe two magnificent works of art attributed to Gilgamesh: the mighty walls of his city Uruk, and the story of his travails, that is, the very epic that we are about to read. As argued by Annette Zgoll, the description of walls and epic are folded together, nested chiasmatically within one another, so that the two come to serve as metaphors for each other.¹⁴ Accordingly, Zgoll argues that the prologue's detailed instructions for how the reader is to approach the walls functions as a cipher for how the reader is to interpret the text. So it is not surprising to find that the emphasis again falls on foundations:

"Go up on the wall of Uruk and walk around,
survey the foundation platform (*temennu*), inspect the brickwork!
(See) if its brickwork is not kiln-fired brick,
and if the Seven Sages did not lay its foundations (*uššūšu*)!"¹⁵

¹³ I 1, George 2003b, 538–539.

¹⁴ Zgoll 2010.

¹⁵ I 18–21, George 2003b, 538–539.

In encouraging us to read the epic, the prologue urges us to seek out the solidity of its foundations, and, like Gilgamesh himself, acquire the wisdom that lies in the depth of such ancient bedrock. If the modern reception has overstated *Gilgamesh's* claim to old age, it is a negligible exaggeration compared to the one insinuated by the epic itself, which implicitly asserts that its symbolic origin is as old as the beginning of time itself, when the Seven Sages laid the foundations of human civilization.

Literary foundations clearly do not symbolize the same thing in the ancient as in the modern world. The passage quoted above exalts the walls of Uruk by claiming that Gilgamesh constructed them on a foundation first laid by somebody else, the Seven Sages, long before he lived, and indeed most Akkadian literature was produced this way, by reworking and reinterpreting older texts. In other words, literary value in the Babylonian context lies in the text *having* an ancient foundation, while literary value in the modern context lies in the text *being* an ancient foundation.

Such differences aside, the two periods clearly share a fascination for historical foundations, literary “firsts”, and cultural origins. In this sense, one may argue that the text is *amenable* to the anachronism imposed on it today. The chronological rearrangement that would make *Gilgamesh* the first story ever told is not explicitly resisted or encouraged by the text, rather, the cultural imagination displayed by the prologue may be said to leave room for modern attempts to excavate a literary foundation in the text of the epic.

4 *Gilgamesh* as subversive

Gilgamesh comes to the underwater bedrock that will grant him wisdom rather by accident. He travels down into the Apsû because he is looking for a plant that will keep him young forever, and it is this urge to defeat death that has proven particularly resonant with contemporary readers, to the point that Giuseppe Furlani already in 1946 noted that the importance of immortality in *Gilgamesh* had been exaggerated by its modern reception.¹⁶

Since then, this focus has grown only more dominant, and I believe it is due not only to Gilgamesh's desire for attaining immortality but also to the

¹⁶ Furlani 1946.

impossibility of that desire. Many people share the hero's wish for immortality, what makes Gilgamesh exceptional is the spirit of rebellion he displays in actually pursuing it. He seeks the impossible, railing against the ultimate limit imposed on humanity and questioning the very nature of a universe divided into mortals and immortals. This lends an appealingly anti-authoritative mood to the epic, as the hero dares challenge no less an authority than the world order established by the gods.

Gilgamesh' quest fails, and his rebelliousness is ultimately curbed. By the end of the epic, he is forced to accept his mortality, and a number of scholars have taken this ending as a literary weakness in the epic.¹⁷ But Thomsen's comments suggest the opposite. The canonical texts he examines offer no uplifting or enchanted view of the world, only the stark irony of human existence. The bleakness of *Gilgamesh*' ending is no aesthetic fault, or at least no impediment to modern canonicity. Rather, the combination of rebelliousness on a truly global scale and a failure cementing our critical understanding of the world have made the epic subversive in Thomsen's sense, perhaps already to an ancient audience, but certainly so to a modern one.

Further, many of the themes explored in the epic are exceptionally resonant with contemporary cultural criticism, allowing both scholars and artists to articulate critiques of modern social values based on their reading of the text. Queer theory and queer literature have viewed the relation between Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu as erotically charged,¹⁸ while eco-critical perspectives have taken the epic as an illustration of the violence that civilization, represented by Gilgamesh and his city, inevitably wreaks on nature, represented by Humbaba and his forest.¹⁹ Finally, as a non-Western work of art, *Gilgamesh* lends itself to post-colonial approaches that would challenge the cultural myopia of the West.

The epic is thereby recruited for a critique of dominant modern values such as heteronormativity, Eurocentrism, and the value of civilization itself,

¹⁷ Jacobsen 1990, 248–249.

¹⁸ Walls 2001; Bjelke 1974.

¹⁹ For nature in *Gilgamesh* see Feldt/Koch 2011, for a more eco-critical but also more fanciful approach see Christman 2008. An overview of artistic adaptations of *Gilgamesh* focused on ecology can be found in Ziolkowski 2011, 123–135, in the section “Gilgamesh Drums for the Greens”.

and like the popular dating of the epic, these readings are patently anachronistic. But in this case, that is a strength rather than a weakness of the argument. *Gilgamesh* obviously predates modern heteronormativity, Eurocentrism, and ecological crises – indeed, that is an important reason why it can today be used to critique them. By virtue of its transhistorical encounter with our modern world, *Gilgamesh* offers an outside perspective on our values, exposing their constructedness.

Once again, however, the subversiveness of the epic is no modern imposition on the ancient text, which is itself rich in strangeness and social critique. Peter Machinist argues that *Gilgamesh* is fascinating in part because it is “an epic that undermines itself” in two important ways.²⁰ The first is the search for meaning that is consistently subverted in the course of the epic. Gilgamesh first searches for eternal fame through heroic exploits, but this is revealed as a hollow pursuit by the death of Enkidu. He then strives for physical immortality, but this is also denied him. Instead, he embarks on the quest to find the plant of youth, but in this too he fails. Through this “accumulated disappointment,”²¹ the epic constantly turns back to question the grounds of the hero’s actions, retroactively exposing the futility of his previous pursuits.

The second subversion, according to Machinist, one highly significant in an ancient context but less apparent to the modern reader, is that of the ideal of divine kingship, with which *Gilgamesh* definitively breaks. According to this ideal, the stability of human existence was guaranteed by the king’s personal union with the gods of his city. The king’s direct access to the gods secured the divine favor necessary for human life. But not so in *Gilgamesh*, where the union with the divine is repeatedly called into question, most forcibly by the king’s virulent rejection of Ishtar, goddess of his city.

To this one may add the argument proposed by Tracy Davenport, namely that the epic is particularly critical of the imperialist exploits of Babylonian kings.²² Gilgamesh’s expedition against Humbaba is no monster-hunt like any other, but an idealized, larger-than-life version of the campaigns actually undertaken by many Mesopotamian monarchs to acquire the valuable cedar timber of the Lebanese forests. Accordingly, the epic’s critique of Gilgamesh’s

²⁰ Machinist presents this argument in an oral response to a lecture by Andrew George, available on youtu.be/Rd7MrGy_tEg (retrieved on 23 November 2017).

²¹ Vanstiphout 1990, 54.

²² Davenport 2007.

mission reflects negatively on this real-life *Vorlage* as well. Though Humbaba is initially portrayed as an unambiguously evil monster, hated by the gods, his moral status is increasingly nuanced as Gilgamesh draws nearer to him. When Humbaba is eventually forced to beg for his life, Enkidu encourages Gilgamesh to kill him “before [Enlil] the foremost learns (about it), and the great gods become angry with us”²³ – suggesting that the murder is not exactly morally crystal-clear. In fact, the gods will later sentence Enkidu to death for the killing of Humbaba.

The ancient and the contemporary critiques of social values are not the same, exactly, and it is inevitably unclear which of the aspects highlighted by a modern emphasis on subversion would have been read that way by an ancient audience. The episode of the Cedar Forest illustrates this clearly. It is beyond doubt that the epic questions, complicates, and implicitly critiques the heroism of Gilgamesh’ mission against Humbaba, but the modern and the ancient reading bring different aspects of this critique to the fore. The ecological disasters that are becoming ever more catastrophic in the 21st century naturally make a modern reader more responsive to the horror of Gilgamesh and Enkidu felling a once mighty forest. Meanwhile, the association between Gilgamesh’ mission and the westward campaign expected of Mesopotamian kings, unknown to most contemporary readers but obvious to a Babylonian audience, makes this aspect of the critique more salient.

In Bloom’s words, canonical texts “are subversive of all values, both ours and their own”. What is revealing about this statement is that Bloom both distinguishes and juxtaposes the synchronic and diachronic subversions. While the two operations are not the same, they are not contradictory either; one seems to invite the other. Again, the concept of amenability aptly describes this situation. Despite their differences, the two aspects co-exist in the text, and the critiques that the epic directs at its own historical context make it less than resistant to critical readings of other kinds.

5 “The right to mysteries”

In the preceding sections, I have outlined two sources for the fascination with *Gilgamesh* evinced by its modern reception, and shown that these are not

²³ V 269–270, George/al-Rawi 2014, 80–81.

exactly determined, but rather enabled on a more general level by the ancient text itself. The first is an emphasis on the epic's foundational qualities: the messy insistence on the epic being the world's oldest story, and the association of historical depth with broader insight. The second is an emphasis on the epic's subversive qualities: the combination of rebellious ambition and bleak failure, and the critique of a wide host of social values, ancient as well as modern. Thomsen's theory suggests that these twin amenabilities make the epic a likely candidate for canonicity.

This may go some way to explaining why *Gilgamesh* does not share its recent fame with any of the Babylonian works with which it once stood on equal footing. *Enuma Elish*, on the one hand, is full of firsts, origins, and foundational moments. Also known as *The Babylonian Epic of Creation*, the text could hardly appeal more to our fascination for the earliest beginnings of culture. However, it is also authoritative in the very highest degree, being, in essence, a story about the making of the divine order, and there is no strangeness or subversiveness to be found in its well-ordered universe (or at least, none that would be immediately recognizable as such to a modern reader).

Erra and Ishum, on the other hand, practically overflows with social critique, narrative irony, and the questioning of cultural values.²⁴ It is subversive on a global scale, upturning everything there is to upturn in a scene of fiery chaos. But for the same reason, there is nothing foundational about the text, and it is chronologically an even less likely candidate than *Gilgamesh* to being made the world's oldest story. Its strength lies not in being without predecessors, but in openly acknowledging and insistently referring to predecessors such as *Enuma Elish*, only to then turn them upside down.

Gilgamesh, I have argued, is somewhat unique among Babylonian texts in managing to reconcile this now appealing contradiction. But how does it do so? After all, the operation is far from simple. As Thomsen writes, the "combination of strangeness and culture-bearing canonicity is in many ways a counter-intuitive thought. Can strangeness and subversiveness be the foundations of a culture?"²⁵ In fact, the epic itself offers us an illustration of how that may be the case.

²⁴ See e.g. George 2013.

²⁵ Thomsen 2011, 212.

The prologue of *Gilgamesh* invites us, as I noted above, to examine the walls of Uruk and gaze upon its ancient foundation, lain by none others than the Seven Sages, and I argued with Annette Zgoll that this instruction also serves as a cipher for how we are to approach the text itself. However, it must be added that the epic here demands the impossible of us. We cannot, even by the imaginary conceit of the scene, see the foundation of the wall – after all, the wall itself would be in the way.²⁶ The same logic applies also to our reading of the text itself, as we are both promised and denied access to the deepest layers of its meaning. Foundations both demand and resist our gaze.

Thomsen writes that subversive foundations are appealing to us because “foundational texts protect the right to mysteries by denying that complete transparency will ever be available to human beings.”²⁷ Their strangeness belies the illusion that we will ever understand them completely. The invitation to view the buried foundations of the text brings out this paradox in full force, at one and the same time stimulating our fascination for the earliest beginnings of culture and subverting our quest for meaning. This leaves the readers frustrated in their attempt to achieve full transparency – and enchanted by that frustration. In the bleakness of this denial lies a glimmer of mystery.

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²⁶ Zgoll 2010, 447.

²⁷ Thomsen 2011, 213.

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