

## **Kinglists and Archives, Epics and Propaganda: Near Eastern Historiography (A Background Briefing)**

### ***Topics:***

- ***Early Records***
- ***Introduction to Egyptian and Hittite Documents: The Battle of Kadesh***
- ***Giglamesh: Epic as Proto-Historical Memory***
- ***Complex Artifacts***
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### **1. Early Records**

In this background briefing we are going to examine records found in the Near and Middle-East. In Sumeria and Egypt these are found soon after writing was developed, certainly by the late-fourth millennium B.C.E., with more than 700 signs being attested in Sumer by 3,300 B.C.E. (Roaf 1996). The earliest records were used for a variety of purposes: to keep track of resources and goods, to record religious doctrines and myths, to celebrate events in the reign of a king, to commemorate victories and other decisive events, even to record treaties made between ancient peoples. Very soon these ancient documents begin to record data that is deeply concerned with the continuous history of these peoples, cities and 'nations'. They also betray a sense of time, usually preserved as dates within the reign of a king, and often linking these together in kinglists which claim to provide a coherent account of leadership that goes back to the time of the gods. These early distributive civilizations (relying on palaces and temples to distribute goods within a partly centralised economy) were also careful record keepers for administrative and taxation purposes. In many cases the kings or leaders who had documents made seem deeply concerned with recording their name for posterity, so that their greatness might be remembered in future generations. In ancient Egyptian conceptions, the recording and speaking of the name of the dead King, now viewed in a sense as the god Osiris, helped preserve the vitality and health of that king in the after-life.

Yet the question we can ask is whether they are examples of historiography or not, i.e. that they represent an explicit framework of historical analysis linking cause and effect within rational schema. Such documents (whether written on clay tablets, papyri or engraved on stone) are used by modern historians as evidence, and contain a wide range of useful information. But the writing of history is generally agreed to be something much more than listing events or glorifying the reign of a king. History as a discipline, moreover, is generally agreed to include a systematic investigation of events, their causes and the motivations of human societies over time (see Carr 1961; Marwick 1989). It also requires the collection of data, its verification, and its analysis in relation to specific hypotheses which help provide an enhanced understanding of the past, the present, and to a limited degree makes possible the formation of intelligent hypotheses concerning the future. Generally, historical analysis should also be relatively disinterested, and at least attempt to reveal and reduce its own biases.

One area in which the Egyptians seemed close to this kind of account was in their explanations for the origin of the universe, their religious cosmologies. These explanations, however, do not rest either on immediate observation, nor upon any contemporary records which can substantiate their accounts. Rather, they are closer to a very primitive form of philosophical analysis, though they remain clothed in the symbolic images that make abstraction and generalization difficult. In these mythic cycles, any hypothesis can be answered by the action of a powerful god or group of gods, often linked into family groups, and involved in acts of creation, destruction, and shaping the particular features of the world. They create order and fight chaos, but they are far from omnipotent. As such, most of these 'explanations' are neither verifiable nor falsifiable, falling thus outside scientific or historical notions of proof (for this narrower definition, even problematic for modern historians, see Popper 1991; Ayer 1990). As noted by R.C. Dentan, the Egyptians were concerned with historical events, to some extent with their causes and explanations, but fell short of a systematic or 'scientific' explanation because of 'their belief that the conditions of their existence as people had always been, and always would be, governed by the gods, whose will and purposes were utterly inscrutable.' (Dentan 1955, p32) This is perhaps some exaggeration: humans, through knowing and honouring the gods, could enroll their help, deflect their anger or negligence, or at least by acquiring wisdom accept the limited fate offered humans in this world. For example, the maxims found in Egyptian Wisdom texts and the 'Instructions' literature (principles that a man might want to pass on to the next generation) seem a mixture of moral injunction and fatalist acceptance of humankind's limited lot (see for example *The Instruction of Amen-Em-Optet*, in Pritchard 1973a, pp237-245). As a balance to this, the advantages and practicality of justice are noted in various Egyptian 'wisdom' texts, e.g. *Ptahhotep*, lines 84-98 (in Frankfort 1977, pp99-100; see further Pritchard 1973a, pp234-237). However, the cosmic order, the gods and cultic practice remained the underpinning and guarantor of this sense of justice (Morenz 1973, pp12-15).

Religious myths, of course, were often used to explain events known to have happened in the past. The Memphite Creation Myth (or *The Memphite Theology of Creation*) gives an unusual precedence to Ptah as a cosmic creator god and thus provides a reason for the sudden emergence of Memphis as the capital of Egypt after the establishment of the First Dynasty (in Pritchard 1969, pp4-6; see extracts in Pritchard 1973a). It is in their articulation and use of these myths and legends that Egyptian literature is often at its most inventive and insightful, but it does not really approach a consistent historical analysis. This does not mean that their statesmen and scribes were not accurate observers, nor clever 'molders of the truth'. By the New Kingdom they were able to record events and treaties in some detail, though official documents were always shaped by the need to show the Pharaoh in a positive religious and social light. Some of these accounts seem to have been among the most 'factual' in the ancient world, e.g. the documents dealing with The Battle of Kadesh between the Egyptians and the Hittites, and with subsequent treaty arrangements (see below). However, these documents provide clear evidence of a conscious use of the 'facts' for political purposes; they are in fact quite sophisticated examples of propaganda supporting the traditional and religious prestige of the Pharaoh Ramses II (sometimes transliterated as Ramesses II).

The Mesopotamian cultures, including those of the various city-states of the Sumerian, Akkadian and Babylonian cultures, were also intensely aware of their past and were careful record keepers. Kinglists, chronicles, annals, legends, contracts and omens had been inscribed on clay tablets or stone, and were often recopied for consultation and greater security of preservation. Here too,

historical events were often interpreted as the outcome of divine actions. Stories such as *The Curse of Akkad* and *Lamentation Over the Destruction of Ur* are presented as examples of divine retribution for failed human actions. Likewise, the fall of kings is often explained by divine intervention. The theme of the 'Weidner Chronicle', for example, is 'the divine punishment of disobedient princes' (Albrektson 1967, pp102-103). It follows from this that the gods can be appealed to and intervene to cause positive outcomes. In the *Legend of Sargon* (in Pritchard 1969, pp119), the hero king regards his success as at least partly due to the favour of the goddess Ishtar. Similar themes are found in Hittite records, such as the *Plague Prayers of King Mursilis* (the second, 1339-1306 B.C.E.) who states that the gods should be pacified because he has confessed his fathers' sins (in Pritchard 1969, pp394-396). The *Hittite Ritual Before Battle* likewise call upon the intervention of the gods in their favour (Albrektson 1967, p37).

From these diverse records two themes emerge: that the gods operate as key movers in history, and that they often act because of the wrongs done by men. The gods are seen as taking revenge and asserting a moral role in establishing some kind of order, which acts as a non-explicit form of social justice. Historical events, then, are often understood as part of a religious and moral story, and therefore remain closely allied to mythic forms of expression and explanation. In such a climate, comprehensive historical accounts do not emerge, as noted by Adam Watson: -

How did men first begin to be aware of the past beyond living human memory, as something to take account of in their lives? By what stages, in which civilizations, did men's ideas about their past move towards history as a fully self-explanatory system of cause and effect? Why was this concept of the past, which excluded chance and divine intervention, something that has been fully achieved only in the West? (in Butterfield 1981, p9)

These issues can be further explored by a brief assessment of one of the most famous battles in history, the Battle of Kadesh (also transliterated Qadesh, now usually dated to 1274 B.C.E. though different Egyptian chronologies will sometimes vary this by 10-25 years) in which Egyptian and Hittite interests clashed due to their expanding spheres of interest in Phoenicia and Syria.

## **2. Introduction to Hittite and Egyptian Documents: The Battle of Kadesh**

Egyptian historical documents go back at least as far as the late fourth millennium B.C.E. with the representations on the Narmer Pallet, which go back to a founding king, King Narmer. Likewise, a huge body of official documents (kinglists, decrees, pronouncements) and literature (poetry, religious texts, wisdom documents, liturgical 'dramas') already existed by Egypt's Middle Kingdom period, though many extant examples come from the New Kingdom and Late Periods, including examples designed to imitate or refer back to earlier dynasties (see Lichtheim 1973; Pritchard 1973a; Murray 1962, pp225-252). Likewise, we even have Egyptian 'diplomatic archives' such as the Tell El Armana letters, which give a substantial insight into the events of the 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. (a selection can be found in Pritchard 1973a, pp262-277). It was also clear that by this time scribes in Egypt could operate across numerous languages and scripts, e.g. translating between Akkadian, Babylonian, Canaanite, Hittite and later on Aramaic. Many of these texts do classify as complex historical documents, but as we shall see, they do not provide a systematic or critical account of historical events. Rather, they are particular 'readings' or narratives made for particular functions and audiences. We can test this by looking briefly at a major series of events

that shaped Egyptian-Hittite relations in the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. and see how they are handled in the sources.

By the 16<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. Egypt had come to view Syria and Palestine as key strategic corridors that could either threaten or maintain Egyptian security. In summary: -

Egyptian interest in Asia was rooted in the trauma caused by the Hyksos invasion and domination of the Nile between the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries B.C. It began probably in the era of Tuthmosis I . . . and reached its maximum extent under Tuthmosis III . . . in the fifteenth century. Tuthmosis III's campaigns were in reaction to the expansion of a new power, the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni. After a brief imperialist expansion by the Indo-European Hittites, the Hurrians . . . spread westward and southward from the northern Zagros mountains and perhaps Armenia into Syria and Canaan, in the process creating a new state, called Mitanni. In the past, the Egyptians had regarded their Asiatic forays in terms of raids – to provide them with goods, or as punitive expeditions to avenge attacks by their Asiatic neighbors. Now, however, after the Hyksos, an Asiatic people who probably came from Canaan, had dominated their land, the Egyptians came to regard Canaan and the lands north of it as a strategic territory that could provide them not only with economic benefits (products, resources, and manpower), but also with a zone of security, a buffer, between their own land and a new Asiatic threat. (Santoso 1996, p426; see further Pritchard 1973a, pp175-182).

During the late 14<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Egypt and the Hittite kingdom, centered in Anatolia, were the two superpowers of the Middle East, engaging in a serious contest for control of Phoenicia, Syria, and the western access to the Euphrates river (Babylon and Mitanni were of declining importance, while Assyria would become a great power after this time). A more assertive policy towards Syria by Egypt was clearly announced by raids carried out by Sethos I that reached as far north as Kadesh, but Egyptian influence had been limited by eastern Hittite allies including Carchemish and Aleppo (Akurgal 2001, p85). Ramesses II took this policy even further, making more permanent claims to the control of Syria and bringing the Amurru, who had been Hittite allies, into alliance with Egypt (Akurgal 2001, p86).

The most important battle between these two powers occurred at the town of Kadesh on the Orontes, just to the north-east of the important Phoenician town of Byblos. This battle probably occurred in 1274 B.C.E. (Gurney 1990, p27, alternative datings include 1286/5 and 1300 B.C.E., depending on different link points for Egypt's New Kingdom chronology, which can vary from 10-26 years, see Akurgal 2001, pp88-89; Santoso 1996, p429, though relative chronologies within a reign are quite solid). This was early in the reign of Ramses II, who as a relatively new king may have wished to establish his own prestige, both within Egypt, and in the region of Palestine and Syria. It has been suggested that the “. . . battle of Kadesh resulted from the defection of Amurru to Egypt. While the Hittites wanted to bring Amurru back into their fold, the Egyptians tried to protect their new vassal.” (Dollinger 2007).

This specific conflict was also caused by ‘ambiguity’ over control of strategic routes that focused on Kadesh, i.e. the Bekaa Valley, the upper Orontes River (and its crossing points), and the Eleuthoros Valley that led towards the coast (Santoso 1996, p428). Kadesh was of some strategic significance since it lay on one of the easy routes into Syria from the coast, and was a suitable place for the Hittites to block the Egyptian advance. It had also been a vassal city of the Hittites, and Ramses II may have been attempting to change this situation by a show of force in the region. As noted by L. Cottrel: -

Kadesh was always a vital strong-point, because lying at the northernmost end of the B'kaa Valley, it was a point which any Egyptian army had to cross if approaching from the south along the valley - the obvious route. (Cottrel 1968, p112)

The Hittites under King Muwatallis fielded the largest force at this disposal, including federative forces from most of their allies in Anatolia and Syria (Gurney 1990, p89). These forces included people from regions such as Arzawa (from the region of Antalya), the Dardanoi from southwestern Anatolia, from Kariska in western Anatolia, from Lykia, from Wilusa (northwest Anatolia), as well as closer allies such as Carchemish, Halpa (Aleppo), Kadesh and Ugarit (Akurgal 2001, p89). One estimate suggests that Hittite forces totaled 35,000 troops and 3,500 chariots, while the Egyptian forces were around 20,000 (Akurgal 2001, p89; similar numbers are suggested by Dollinger 2007), though such numbers seem high for ancient, long-distance operations. Antonio Santosuosso suggests that Hittite forces would have numbered closer to 15-19,000, but accepts that 20,000 was possible for the Egyptian forces (Santosuosso 1996, pp436-438).

It was before Kadesh that a fierce battle occurred, with Ramses II and one of his army units (the Division of Amon) being attacked by superior Hittite forces. With the aid of reinforcements from the coast, perhaps special units and elements of the Ptah Division (see Breasted 1906, pp125-157; Santosuosso 1996, p432), and apparently due to the personal bravery of the Pharaoh, the Hittites withdrew from the field (see Dollinger 2007 for maps of the battle). The heroic tone of Egyptian claims can be found in the following sections from *The Poem of Pentaur*, as preserved in Papyrus Sallier III: -

They [the Hittite chariots] came forth from the southern side of Kadesh, and they cut through the division of Re in its middle, while they were marching without knowing and without being drawn up for battle. The infantry and chariotry of his majesty retreated before them. Now, his majesty had halted on the north of the city of Kadesh, on the western side of the Orontes. Then came one to tell it to his majesty

His majesty shone like his father Montu, when he took the adornments of war; as he seized his coat of mail, he was like Baal in his hour. The great span which bore his majesty called: "Victory-in-Tebes," from the great stables of Ramses II, was in the midst of the leaders. His majesty halted in the rout; then he charged into the foe, the vanquished of Kheta, being alone by himself and none other with him. When his majesty went to look behind him, he found 2,500 chariotry surrounding him, in his way out, being all the youth of the wretched Kheta, together with its numerous allied countries: from Arvad, from Mesa [12], from Pedes [3], from Keshkesh, from Erwenet, from Kezweden [13], from Aleppo, Eketeri [14], Kadesh, and Luka, being three men to a span, acting in unison. (in Breasted 1906, III, Section 306ff, access via <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/kadeshaccounts.htm#rem1>)

The Egyptian accounts and their copies occupy a major place on wall inscriptions at various sites; an 'official' account (recorded in seven sites in Egypt and Nubia), the 'poem' of the battle (recorded several times on temple walls, as well as partly in Papyrus Sallier III, see Schmidt 1973, p28, p31; Santosuosso 1996, p425), and drawings of the battle (carved on the first and second Pylons of the Ramesseum and at Luxor, see Davey 1976, p16). These all record a glorious Egyptian victory, and called the leader of the Hittites 'the wretched, vanquished chief of the Kheta <= Hittites>'. It is then reported in the poem that on the second day: -

The next morning Ramses drew up his battle lines and renewed the attack with such effect that the prince of Kheta <= Hittites> sent a humble letter suing for peace. (in Breasted 1906, p142)

What is interesting about the Egyptian records of the Battle for Kadesh is that although they give great prominence to the role of the king in securing a victory against the Hittites, this claim is not well supported by following events. First, the Egyptians did not manage to secure a more northern frontier against Hittite influence, as can be shown by later campaigns of Ramses II's, probably during regnal years 5-7, with clear proof of another round of campaigns in year 8 (Breasted 1906, p157; Schmidt 1973, p30). The revolt of the town of Askalon from Egyptian control probably also occurred during this period. Breasted believes that these documents disclose that 'the Hittites have pushed southwards since the battle of Kadesh and temporarily occupied the Tabor region, from which Ramses now ejects them.' (Breasted 1906, p159, section 357). At the least, Hittite control of Amurru and Upe seems to have been re-established shortly after the Battle of Kadesh (Santoso 1996, pp443-444)

Documents from years 8-21 of the regnal years of Ramses II are not numerous. During this period it is likely that the Hittite King Muwatallis died, and that an estrangement occurred between the general Hattusilis and the new king, Urhitesupas (= Urhi-Teshup), who was his nephew and had the throne name Mursilis. Eventually Hattusilis 'banished him across the sea' and completely removed his enemies at home, thus taking the throne as Hattusilis III (Sturtevant & Brechtel 1935, pp79-81; Akurgal 2001, p95). Ramses II may have pledged to support Urhitesupas (Schmidt 1973, p177), and it is possible that the deposed king had taken refuge in Egypt (see Akurgal 2001, pp94-95). During this period of instability in the Hittite realm, Ramses II waged war in southern Canaan, not far from Beth-shean, where we find a basalt stela recording that he 'made to retreat the Asiatics' (in Pritchard 1969, p255; Schmidt 1973, p177). It seems likely that Ramses II may have been seeking to influence the internal politics of the Hittites, whether to support the weaker party, or to use such leverage to reach a more amiable accord with the Hittites in return for some understanding over Syria and Palestine.

Clauses in the later treaties cover such possibilities, including the idea that the Pharaoh shall guarantee the chosen crown prince of the Hittites on his throne if the current king should die (see Pritchard 1969, p200; see further below). Bearing in mind that Hattusilis III had only won his throne after a revolt against the designated royal successor and after a hard war, this draws Egyptian policy directly in Hittite affairs (Schmidt 1973, p114; *Apology of Hattusilis*, Section 11, lines 66-79 in Sturtevant & Bechtel 1935, p77)

A Hittite document (*Hattusilis on Muwatallis' War Against Egypt*), may contradict the Egyptian version, though the particular battle is not specified: -

At the time that Muwatallis took the field against the king of the land of Egypt and the country of Amurru, and when he had then defeated the king of the land of Egypt and the country of Amurru, he returned to the country of Apa. (in Pritchard 1969, p319)

This general view is also supported by *The Apology of Hattusilis*, which seems to infer that the Hittites moved south towards Egypt at this time (9:69-79).

In any case, by 1258 B.C.E. comprehensive defensive treaty arrangements had been made between the two powers (though there were also two earlier, less complete treaties, Gurney 1990, p63). The agreement included a guarantee that each would ensure the accession of their proper heirs, enforced

the extradition of fugitives, and made terms of equal friendship as brothers (Gurney 1990, p63). Thirteen years later this was further strengthened by a marriage between Ramses II and the eldest daughter of the Hittite ruler, the woman being given the Egyptian name Maatnefrure (Akurgal 2001, p99). This suggests that by this time relations had greatly improved between the two regional 'superpowers' (Gurney 1990, pp28-29).

It seems likely that some mutual accommodation must have been made after the Battle of Kadesh, but it was not a Hittite surrender - as far as we can tell they still held the town of Kadesh itself and territory to the north. Indeed, O.R. Gurney argues that:

The tactical genius of the Hittites kings is best known from the battle of Kadesh, which is described in great detail in an Egyptian text. The Hittite army based on Kadesh succeeded in completely concealing its position from the Egyptian scouts; and as the unsuspecting Egyptians advanced in marching order towards the city and started to pitch their camp, a strong detachment of Hittite chariotry passed round unnoticed behind the city, crossed the river Orontes, and fell upon the centre of the Egyptian column with shattering force. The Egyptian army would have been annihilated, had not a detached Egyptian regiment arrived most opportunely from another direction and caught the Hittites unawares as they pillaging the camp. This lucky chance enabled the Egyptian king to save the remainder of his forces and to represent the battle as a great victory; but the impartial student will scarcely allow him much credit for the result. (Gurney 1990, p91)

Gurney may be correct, but note that his simple account of so-called facts is actually a complex interpretation based on conflicting interpretations in primary sources, and rests on a much wider reading of the historical context than original documentation shows. Thus Gurney has drawn the last conclusion from a wide assessment of the situation in the Middle East at the time, e.g. the eclipse of the power of Mitanni in early years leading to a more direct engagement between Egypt and the Hittite Kingdom, including the issue of whether the border between their zones of influence should be set at the Orontes River (see Gurney 1990, pp21-27). It is possible that the Hittites had intentionally mislead 'Egyptian intelligence', drawing her forces into a position in the open where their heavier chariots could make a decisive attack (Gurney 1990, p27).

A slightly different interpretation, still denying an Egyptian victory, is possible: -

The battle was a disaster for both sides. For all that the writings and pictures on the Egyptian temples in question talk of a victory for the pharaoh's army, the result was a draw and it was Muwattalis who profited from this situation. After the battle Ramesses retreated; the Hittites appeared before Damascus and pillaged the area. The state of Amurru, a neighbour of Egypt, again became a satellite of the Hittites; Bentesina, the disloyal king of Amurru was deposed and taken to the Land of Hatti as a prisoner. After this there was no longer mention of the Egyptians in Syria. (Akurgal 2001, p90).

The question we might ask is to what extent do the Egyptian accounts of the battle include direct forms of propaganda? Can we tell from such material whether an Egyptian defeat, rather than draw or stalemate, occurred at Kadesh? Another parallel conclusion of military affairs of the battle reads thus: -

He [Ramesses] clearly lost the war and at least for some cuneiform scholars also the battle. However, to argue that Ramesses lost at Kadesh is probably going too far. At least initially, he must have remained master of the battlefield, which meant, according to the battlefield rules of most periods, that he was the winner. However, did he lose the second day? This is a question that we

cannot answer with certainty. In any case, as most scholars agree, he was compelled to withdraw, pursued by the Hittites. (Santosuosso 1996, p444)

It is in this context that we can understand later, improved relations between the Hittites and Egyptians, leading to a comprehensive treaty and even a royal marriage. The copies of the treaty that we have (from 1258 B.C.E.) include one Egyptian version (from the temple walls at Karnak), one Hittite (from an Akkadian tablet at Boghazhöy that is an Akkadian edition of the text perhaps prepared by the Egyptians), and a silver tablet translated into Egyptian by the Hittites and perhaps prepared in duplicate for Ramesses II (Akurgal 2001, pp98-99; Breasted 2003, pp437-438). In these we have parallel clauses for both parties, and it seems a strict policy of 'Great King' equality ruled, a kind of dignified détente.

It is clear that even such detailed documents have a commemorative function. In the Egyptian case they suggest a need to show the Pharaoh in the time honoured fashion as a glorious conqueror, smiting his enemies, protecting Egypt from all enemies, fearful and gracious in victory. On the other hand, treaty records do seem to show a need to preserve the details of a contract between two leading states, a document powerful enough to be acted upon and the form the basis of a future peace. Such treaties were guaranteed by oaths, curses, and invoked the gods as witnesses (Gurney 1990). Thus, they were also a type of covenant that ensured order, linking them back to mythic concepts of justice and balance.

Cuneiform documents of Assyrian traders in Hittite lands date back to as early as 1900 B.C.E. while royal Hittite texts from as early as 1600 B.C.E. (Gurney 1990, p15). Royal decrees, annals of military campaigns, treaties, oaths of loyalty and letters were sometimes preserved, with some degrees proclaiming laws of succession and elite conduct, plus some legends, myths (e.g. *The Telepinus Myth*), and ritual documents (see Gurney 1990, pp18-19, p141, pp148-158; see Pritchard 1973a, pp87-91). Documents were often written in Akkadian (an international language for this period), and there is a surprising range of material, e.g. four tables from Boghazhöy concern 'the training and acclimatization of horses by a certain Kikkuli of the land of Mitanni', texts with technical terms similar to Sankrit (see Gurney 1990, p86, p104). The gods were usually called on to witness for support these agreements, and in some cases a curse would be laid on anyone destroying or altering a document, perhaps originally a stela but copied on a tablet (Gurney 1990, p141). A wide range of other material was found in these Hittite archives:

We possess charters, or letter patent, in which certain individuals or institutions are declared free of tax and other imposts; deeds of gift, by which great estates are conveyed to new owners by royal decree; rescripts settling disputed frontiers or indicting rebellious vassals for treasonable conduct; minutes of courts of inquiry; and standing orders for various officials and dignitaries. (Gurney 1990, p147).

Other Hittite documents look something like a foreign affairs archive, recording relations with other states and correspondence with their leaders. Thus, war was often carefully declared, based upon suitable pretexts, with letters of complaint justifying war and invoking the help of the gods (Gurney 1990, p94). One of the letters of King Mursilis (II?) to the King of Arzawa summarizes these stages:

My subjects who went over to you, when I demanded them back from you, you did not restore them to me; and you called me a child and made light of me. Up then! Let us fight, and let the Storm-god, my lord, decide our case! (in Gurney 1990, p95).

In the case of royal pre-ambles to key treaties or proclamations, these sometimes include useful historical summaries, and the case of the *Annals of Mursilis* and the *Annals of Huttusilis* we have virtual autobiographies (see Gurney 1990, pp144-146), though these are clearly political documents rather than a confessional piece in the modern personal sense.

### **3. Gilgamesh: Epic as Proto-Historical Memory**

In the case of the epic of *Gilgamesh* we have a very different form of memory, one which at first seems far removed from Graeco-Roman history writing (see the Sandars 1987 and George 1999 editions). It has been viewed as one of the world's primary epics, and thus often contrasted to Homer's *Iliad* or even Virgil's *Aeneid*. Its story revolves around two heroes, the primordial but now civilized Enkidu, and the King of Uruk, Gilgamesh. After numerous adventures together, Enkidu dies and Gilgamesh goes on an ultimately unsuccessful quest to find the source of immortality, thereby overcoming the 'lot of death' that the gods had assigned to human beings. The tale is thus a mythic representation of the human condition, replete with helpful gods, dangerous goddesses, fearful monsters, heroic fights, death and tragedy.

However, the story may retain some elements of transmitted historical memory. There is indeed a King Gilgamesh in the early Kinglists of Sumeria, perhaps at a time that fits some of the conditions listed in the story. Thus:

He [Gilgamesh] appears as a god in the early lists of deities and in the later third millennium he benefited from a cult. Later tradition made it his function, as explained in one of the Sumerian poems, to govern the shades of the dead in the Netherworld. Because we have actual records from kings whom the ancients held to be his contemporaries, it is possible that, as perhaps there was once a real King Arthur, so there was once an actual King Gilgamesh. Certainly the native historical tradition held this to be the case, for Gilgamesh appears in the list of Sumerian kings as the fifth ruler of the First Dynasty of Uruk. He would thus have flourished about 2750 BC, though some would place him a century or so earlier. His reign, which the list of kings holds to have lasted a mythical 126 years, falls in the shadowy period at the edge of Mesopotamian history, when, as in the Homeric epics, the gods took a personal interest in the affairs of men and often communicated with them directly.' (George 1999, pxxxii)

Certain aspects of the story seem to fit the conditions of the early third millennium. The journey to the remote cedar mountain may indeed reflect trading expeditions that sought to bring back precious cedar wood from northern Mesopotamia or Syria. Such cedar might have come from the Amanus mountains in Syria, perhaps from Lebanon, or from the Taurus region of the Anatolian highlands, with the logs then floated down the Euphrates (see Algaze 1989; Sandars 1987): all would have been long and potentially dangerous expeditions. The conflict with monster Humbaba may reflect battles with hostile tribes before secure trade conditions prevailed. The politics of the story seems to show the conflict of power between the rights of an exceptionally strong king, one of its main temples (to Ishtar), and the collective wisdom of military and elder assemblies (see Maisels 1993, p278; Abusch 2001). Likewise, the reference to the building of high and powerful walls may also bear some real reflection of the deeds of a historical Gilgamesh, perhaps even the one so-named in the story.

For the purposes of historical narrative, however, these insights remain problematic. We do have some contextual data that seems to support the type of story portrayed, e.g. the role of warfare and inter-city conflict as a mechanism that may have increased the power of kings and military leaders (Maisels 1993, p278). Furthermore, archaeological evidence from Sumer from the fourth millennium shows that Uruk was indeed already a prominent city with major temple complexes and with trade needs that would have stretched across a large part of the Middle East (see Van de Mierop 1997, p38; Crawford 2004). The building of walls was ritually and militarily important in Sumeria and Akkadia, and it may be hard to distinguish hard data from the literary convention with dramatic impact (see George 1993; Crawford 2004; Oppenheim 1977). This sense of the universal and symbolic present looking back at the past can be found in the Prologue to the Epic: -

In Uruk he [Gilgamesh] built walls, a great rampart, and temple of blessed Eanna for the god of the firmament Anu, and for Ishtar the goddess of love. Look at it today: the outer wall where the cornice runs, it shines with the brilliance of copper; and the inner wall, it has no equal. Touch the threshold, it is ancient. Approach Eanna the dwelling of Ishtar, our lady of love and war, the like of which no later-day king, no man alive can equal. Climb upon the wall of Uruk; walk along it I say; regard the foundation terrace and examine the masonry: is it not burnt brick and good? The seven sages laid the foundations. (*Gilgamesh Prologue*, translated by Sandars 1972 & 1987)

However, once we come to details, we run into major problems. The name and legends associated with Gilgamesh are quite common in Near Eastern documents, but only after a body of legend had accrued about the king and he came to have his own cult. Likewise, images of him and Enkidu on seals are well-known and may represent aspects of the story (see Sandars 1987, p36). In the early Sumerian form Gilgamesh's name was Bilgames, indicating something like 'the Ancestor is a Hero' (see Mitchell 2004; Lothian 1998), and several short episodic myths are found in Sumerian texts. They would only be put together and form the more continuous narrative of the epic in its Akkadian and Babylonian retellings. Thus, earlier fragmented legends about Bilgamesh have been put together to create a longer, sustained epic rather than being left as short tales, perhaps of an entertaining or humorous kind (e.g. the 'harlot' episodes, see Moran 1991). Of the numerous sections, two seem to be appended with little cohesion to the main story line (the flood and the descent to the underworld), while a prologue praising Gilgamesh sets the scene at the start (see Ackerman 2005, pp38-39). After a somewhat uniform version appeared, perhaps created by scribes of the Middle Babylonian period, the epic was retranslated into a large number of languages, including Hittite and Hurrian (Ackerman 2005, pp38-39; Gurney 1990, p103, p149).

Thus, we have received a complex document that may have had its origins in historical memory, but one that has also been subject to transformation, accretion, editing and an unknown degree of invention. The figures in the story have become symbols that have attracted a wide range of literary and artistic innovation, while reflecting on the meaning of life and death in the Mesopotamian world. The document is already a sophisticated and complex creation that is no mere collection of memories or facts. It cannot be easily or directly mined for a 'true' historical narrative of events.

#### **4. Complex Artifacts**

On the basis of these few examples, it is clear that there is a real difference between the kind of records preserved in the ancient Middle East and the writing that begins to emerge in Greece after

the sixth century, perhaps a little prior to Herodotus but well shaped as political history by the time of Thucydides, born circa 450s B.C.E. (see Fornara 1988; Kurke 2001).

However, this does not mean that we should view all Graeco-Roman accounts as 'genuine' history (many include ethical, mythic and propaganda aspects), nor see earlier documents as mere resources to be mined for historical 'facts'. On the contrary, the religious and political documents of Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Hittites are already sophisticated constructs serving particular needs and directed to particular audiences. Some seem to be diplomatic archive materials (including letters between sovereigns), others are administrative and legal mechanisms, others commemorative deeds or events declared in monuments for public memory, some are even royal propaganda. Each reveals a great deal about the society that produced them, but their value as historical accounts can only be understood in a properly perceived context.

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## 6. Internet Resources:

A useful range of materials can be found at DOLLINGER, Andre *An introduction to the history and culture of Pharaonic Egypt*, 2000-2008 [Web access via <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/index.html> and <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/ramseskadeshcampaign.htm>

*Egyptian Accounts of the Battle of Kadesh* can be found at <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/kadeshaccounts.htm#rem1>

The Ancient History Sourcebook has an alternative translation of Ancient History Sourcebook of *Pen-ta-ur: The Victory of Ramses II Over the Khita* at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/1326khita.html>

Images and general data about The Narmer Pallet can be found at <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/narmer.htm>

A range of useful materials on the Hittites, including some translations, can be found at *The Hittite Homepage* <http://www.mesas.emory.edu/hittitehome/>