HOW MESOPOTAMIA SHAPED THE CLASSICAL WORLD

SELENA WISNOM explains what classicists may learn about their own field by travelling back to the extraordinary world of Mesopotamia

ABOVE Clay tablets from the Library of Ashurbanipal displayed in a 2019 exhibition at the British Museum
© Trustees of the British Museum

On 3 December 1872, a lecture at the Royal Asiatic Society announced an astonishing discovery made among piles of tablets in the British Museum: an account of a great flood that had swept the earth, told to a man who had journeyed across the waters of death to learn the secret of immortality. This was Gilgamesh, the classic hero of Mesopotamian literature, brought back to life after 2,000 years of oblivion.

His re-entrance onto the world stage was a sensation. It was not only scholars who gathered to hear of it, but also journalists who carried the news to the public, and even the Prime Minister, William Gladstone. Many were captivated by the parallels with the Biblical story of Noah, but Gladstone was more impressed by what this epic had in common with Homer. After the lecture, he stood up and addressed the audience with his thoughts on *Gilgamesh's* story and the Homeric epics, struck by the resemblances to a world he knew so well.

This was exactly my own experience when I first read Gilgamesh as a student immersed in Classics; I was immediately hooked. The interwoven themes of immortality, fame, friendship and loss so compellingly evoked the concerns of a world I was already fascinated by, but the epic also contained much that was strange and new. I wanted to go further back in time to learn what had come before Homer, and what it meant for his poetry. When I got there, I was not disappointed.

From the earliest days of its discovery, people have been struck by the parallels between the Ancient Near East and the Classical World. The similarities (and differences) between the Homeric epics and Babylonian classics are still hotly debated, but they are just the tip of the iceberg. Hesiod's *Theogony*, composed at a similar date to the *Odyssey*, is even more clearly indebted to Near Eastern influence, with its power struggles among successive generations of gods as they vie for their place in the emerging hierarchy. Walter Burkert declared that the 8th century in Greece had been an 'Orientalising Revolution', while Martin West's monumental book, *The East Face of Helicon*, collected an extraordinary number of correspondences, bringing home his earlier provocative statement that 'Greek literature is Near Eastern literature'.

Nowadays it is common to see Greece and Rome not as isolated entities but as part of a much bigger world. These were cultures that developed in response to interactions with others around them – they were influenced by their neighbours as well as influencing them in turn. Whether there was a cultural continuum spanning East to West in which similar ideas circulated, or a direct influence from specific traditions and even texts, the Near Eastern context of Greek literature helps us to understand how these motifs were adapted and made especially Greek through cultural comparison.

It turns out that it is not only the literature. Greek art, religion and philosophy all bear the hallmarks of Near Eastern thought. The famous Gorgon – whose gaze turned all who met it to stone, and whose severed head Perseus then carried with him into battle – is probably indebted to depictions of the monster slain by Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu on pottery. Foreign cults and their personnel travelled from Mesopotamia to Greece – changing on the way, but shaped by their origins. Aphrodite was originally a Near Eastern goddess, the Mesopotamian Ishtar, who influenced the cult of Phoenician Astarte, which influenced the cult of Aphrodite in turn.

In the 6th century BC, pre-Socratic philosophers began advancing ideas that sound very similar to Mesopotamian ones. Thales of Miletus believed that the world emerged from water, as stated in the Babylonian creation epic, while Heraclitus reasoned that opposite concepts were fundamentally connected, a pattern found in Mesopotamian lexical lists. Some of these exchanges of ideas may have been direct rather than simply 'in the air' or coincidental.

The more I journeyed into Mesopotamia, the more I came to appreciate it not only for its comparative value, but for its own sake. I fell in love with its poems, whose sophistication matches those of the Hellenistic era and Golden age of Latin literature. I was intrigued by the abundance of manuals on reading the future and their complex, inscrutable codes.

Cuneiform writing was invented in Mesopotamia around 3100 BC and continued to be used until the first century AD, as Babylonian priests kept watch over the heavens for messages from their gods and carefully recorded all they observed. Mesopotamian history thus spans 3,000 years in writing – a much longer timespan than our own 'Western civilization' with its Latin and Greek alphabets. Although much of Greek culture before Homer and Hesiod was oral, the Mesopotamian sources give us the chance to read written sources long before we have them in the classical world, and give context to how the latter emerged.

One of the most remarkable things about the Mesopotamian material is that it was written on clay tablets. Clay does not decay in the ground, and if a library of clay tablets burns down, it is preserved all the better, since the fire acts as a giant kiln and hardens the clay. As a result, half a million sources survive, and counting, as new tablets continue to be discovered. We can trace the development of genres of literature, seeing how texts changed or stayed the same over the thousands of years they were copied.

The extraordinary library of Ashurbanipal, an Assyrian king who lived in the 7th century BC, preserves a great store of these sources. Hundreds of years before the Library of Alexandria was constructed, Ashurbanipal set out to gather all the knowledge of Mesopotamia under one roof at his palace at Nineveh, now in northern Iraq. He sought out ancient tablets written in the now-dead language of Sumerian, obscure knowledge from the temples of Babylon, and commissioned his scholars to produce up-to-date editions, such as his cutting-edge medical encyclopaedia. Some 33,000 of the library's tablets survive to this day, sitting largely on the shelves of the British Museum, precisely because the library was burned down when Nineveh fell. It was among these tablets that the epic of Gilgamesh was first found – and the library has more copies of the epic than any other collection in Mesopotamia.

ABOVE Plaque of Humbaba, Mesopotamia, c. 2000–1600 BC
© Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs Elias S. David, in memory Elias S. David and Edward S. David, 1974

Much of what we know today about Mesopotamian culture is thanks to Ashurbanipal's library in one way or another; the vast number of texts it contained helped scholars to decipher the cuneiform writing system in the 19th century. The library held works 1,000 years older than the library itself, including the laws of Hammurabi, written in the 18th century BC, epics about Gilgamesh's ancestors, and the oldest known observations of the planet Venus. It preserved the revered classics of Babylonian poetry, and newer Assyrian takes on it. It was a repository of knowledge that helped Ashurbanipal to govern his empire with traditional wisdom and technical innovation – from rituals that helped ensure divine favour and success on the battlefield, to omen texts counselling him on whether to go to war in the first place and which of his advisers he could trust. Every type of Mesopotamian scholarship was here, including genres as diverse as astronomy, magic and lamentation, a kind of technology to get the gods on side. It was, and remains, a treasure trove that helps us to understand how the Mesopotamians made sense of the world on every front – a window not only into the 7th century BC, but into the even more remote past.

The library is also an archive, preserving letters between the king and his scholars that show us how knowledge was put into practice and what it meant to the people who used it. The hardy nature of cuneiform tablets means that some intriguing ephemeral texts survive – letters from Ashurbanipal himself throwing his weight around with foreign kings, protocol instructions for state banquets, and pleas from desperate exorcists who have fallen from favour – and that's just in the archives from Nineveh.

We may see that these ancient people shared many of the same concerns as we do – from academics complaining about being overwhelmed with admin at the expense of research and teaching, to doctors who are overworked and in desperate need of time off. We can follow them as they advise the king through the library's resources and use texts to solve problems – both personal and political – at the very centre of power.

Because of its enormous holdings, the library is the ideal gateway to understand the vast expanse of Mesopotamian culture – and how it relates to the rest of the world. The practice of hepatoscopy (the study of livers), so vital to the Roman state, is evidenced here in abundance. But whereas we know little about how entrail divination was conducted in the classical world, the Mesopotamian texts are brimming with detail. Comparisons between the extensive divination manuals of the library and scraps of Greek papyri found in Egypt prove that the Greeks borrowed hepatoscopy from Mesopotamia, and show that interpreting the entrails in Greece was as exactingly detailed a 'science' as it was in Mesopotamia.

Ashurbanipal's medical encyclopaedia turns up surprisingly specific parallels with recipes in the Hippocratic corpus and with later Roman medicine, suggesting that physicians shared their knowledge far and wide. Mesopotamia was famed in antiquity for its expertise in magic and astrology, and its influence can be seen everywhere, from the Greek magical papyri sprinkled with the names of Eastern deities, to the astrologers who were frequently cast out of Rome for predicting the death of the emperor. To understand Mesopotamia is to understand a key part of the jigsaw of the ancient world. Through it we can understand where many of these ideas originated and how they were adapted to produce something resolutely classical.

The long time span of Mesopotamian history means that so much more is out there, and even more is still waiting to be discovered. New texts are published on a regular basis – new myths that no one had previously heard of, new archives detailing everyday life in cities across the region, new evidence that constantly updates our understanding of how these cultures worked. It is a thrilling field to work in, and one for Classicists to watch. Who knows what new developments could change our understanding of the ancient Mediterranean again, just as Gilgamesh first did 150 years ago. A

BELOW A Greek Gorgoneion painted by Kleitias on a pot by Ergotimos, c. 570 BC, Attic
© Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1931