

**Three ancient sources:
Gilgamesh, Hammurabi's laws , and the Westcar papyrus**

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- With our background on Mesopotamia and Egypt in mind, let's look at some classic written sources from these early civilizations
- The epic of Gilgamesh
 - the oldest real story ever discovered
 - actually a collection of stories centering on Gilgamesh, a ruler of Uruk in Sumer
 - and his exploits together with his companion Enkidu
 - most scholars think that Gilgamesh was a real king of Uruk,
 - who was transformed into a mythical hero as these stories were composed, told, and evolved
 - As you see in the extract, Gilgamesh was supernaturally great himself, one-third human and two-thirds god
 - The gods created Enkidu to be his match and distract him from being an arrogant burden on the people of Uruk
 - The rest of the long story involves travels, fighting monsters, and eventually confronting death
 - Gilgamesh mourns the death of Enkidu
 - and seeks eternal life for himself
 - but fails to get it.
 - Along the way, there is a story about a universal flood, which is clearly an early version of the flood story in the Bible
 - the Gilgamesh stories clearly started as an oral tradition, in the Sumerian language
 - they are set during Gilgamesh's rule,
 - which would have been in the Sumerian Early Dynastic period
 - between around 2750 and 2500 BCE
 - the first stories were probably composed around that time or not long after
 - they are full of chunks of text that are repeated with slight modifications
 - this is a typical feature of oral traditions
 - it helps the teller fill out the story
 - helps the listener follow the story
 - lends a rhythmic, literary quality compared to regular speech
 - the oral stories apparently developed and multiplied for several centuries up to around 2100-2000 BCE
 - when the first known written versions were set down in cuneiform in the Sumerian language during the Ur III (Neo-Sumerian) empire
 - these and other Gilgamesh stories continued to be written down for centuries
 - some possibly copied from earlier written versions
 - some possibly dictated from an ongoing oral tradition
 - mostly in the Akkadian language

- they seem to have been pretty exactly established by not long after 2000 BCE
- with copies from different places and times all very similar to each other
- the most complete version we have was compiled between about 1300 and 1000 BCE by Sin-leqi-unninni
 - the first author of a literary text whose name remains connected to his work!
- what we actually have is a copy of this version, prepared at the order of Assurbanipal, the last significant king of the Assyrian Empire, around 650 BC
 - Assurbanipal sent experts out to comb the libraries of his empire and bring back copies of ancient texts for his library at Ninevah
 - miraculously discovered and excavated in the 19th century
 - other versions are used to fill in gaps where the tablets are broken
- Things to think about:
 - what does the first tablet of the Gilgamesh stories tell us about Sumerian ideas of kingship and hierarchy?
 - what does it suggest about their ideas about the supernatural world and religion?
 - what are some things that Early Dynastic Sumerians cared about, or thought were important?
- Law code of Hammurabi
 - about 1780 BCE
 - Hammurabi was the king of Babylon who conquered most of Mesopotamia and took Babylon from being one competing city among many to being the capital of the vast Babylonian empire
 - the law code was carved in cuneiform in the Akkadian language on a stone monument about the size of a person,
 - with a relief showing him receiving the law from the god Shamash
 - the stela was found in Susa, a distant city that defeated Babylon and took the monument some time after Hammurabi's reign
 - so we have no idea where it was originally located
 - but the stela looks designed for public viewing
 - it would have been good propaganda for Hammurabi
 - making him look impressive, claiming authority given by the gods
 - even though probably very few people could actually read the code
 - it probably made the laws (and Hammurabi's government) seem legitimate, permanent, unchangeable
 - what can we learn from this? Things to think about as you read it:
 - note the propaganda of the introduction
 - The gods made Babylon great, then called on Hammurabi to lead it, for the good of mankind
 - then Hammurabi lists all the wonderful things he has done at various cities and for various gods
 - Hammurabi is already a powerful king. Why is he bothering to puff himself up like this?
 - assuming that the text was sometimes read aloud, what might the impact of this be?

- note the structure of the laws: X crime requires Y punishment. This is “lex talionis”, or “law of retaliation”
- note the kinds of offenses that evidently did occur in Babylonian times
 - false accusations
 - stealing
 - receiving stolen property
 - harboring escaped slaves
 - failing to pay someone hired to go to war in your place
 - implies that people were often drafted to fight
 - and that they could hire stand-ins if they were wealthy enough
 - failing to maintain one’s section of a levee so that it breaks and others’ fields get flooded
 - cheating in marriage
 - cheating relatives of inheritance, dowry, etc.
 - breaking contracts
 - assault
 - shoddy construction
 - etc.
- what about the relative rights and values of landowners, workers, slaves, freed slaves, women, concubines...?
- so, what was life like in Imperial Babylon around 1800 BCE?
- Westcar papyrus
 - Egyptian papyrus documents usually don’t have titles
 - but this one is commonly described as something like “Three tales from the court of King Khufu” (also called Cheops)
 - this is the same Khufu who built the first and biggest pyramid at Giza
 - and the story refers to his father, Sneferu, who built the first true pyramid (at Dahshur), and was an even greater builder in total
 - so the setting is a real Egyptian court around 2600 BCE, in the Old Kingdom
 - theoretically contemporary with Gilgamesh
 - but the story was probably actually composed much later, between about 2000 and 1800 BCE, in the Middle Kingdom (12th dynasty)
 - and the copy we have was actually written on this papyrus between about 1650 and 1550 (Hyksos or Second Intermediate period)
 - contemporary with Hammurabi
 - when foreign invaders controlled Egypt for about a century
 - unclear why it was written
 - this is not a common type of document, and only this one copy is known
 - maybe it was mostly a setup for the prophesy about Khufu’s dynasty (the 4th dynasty) ending after his grandson
 - in fact, Khufu’s dynasty lasted one generation longer than this prophesy
 - he was followed by two sons, first Kheper, then Khafre
 - then Khafre’s son Menkaure

- then Mankare's son Shepseskaf
 - but Shepseskaf did not build a pyramid, so he might have been unknown to a writer 500-700 years later in the Middle Kingdom
- after that, there apparently really was a break
 - starting the 5th dynasty
 - although the founder of this new Dynasty, Userkaf, was a relative of the fourth dynasty kings
- what can we learn from this?
 - the flavor of life in the royal court
 - power and wealth of the Egyptian pharaoh (king)
- how literally should we take these sources?
 - are they primary?
 - yes and no – they are closer to the events than almost anything else we have
 - but both Gilgamesh and the Westcar papyrus tales were written down long after the time described
 - and both have lots of unrealistic, supernatural content
 - they might reflect assumptions and views of the time they were written, in addition to the time they were written about
 - but those times are interesting, too
 - and are certainly more relevant to the times described than anything written later
 - Hammurabi's code really is primary
 - but undoubtedly biased, intended as propaganda
 - and including supernatural claims, that we can't treat as facts
 - still, it should accurately embody the assumptions and concerns of the time