

# Architectural Visual Language in the Epic of Gilgamesh

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## Abstract

The epic of Gilgamesh has proved to be more than just a legendary text as it provided us with valuable insight to the architectural design of its age. We are going to look, within our study, at what is known to be one of the most ancient journeys known in history inside the world of architect and design. According to my knowledge there has not been a text describing any such journey prior to the Gilgamesh epic containing the twelve chapters that form the body of the work. Most of the works mentioning such journeys were written almost ten decades after the release of the epic. The text of the epic is also unique in its length unmatched except by Homer's Odyssey and its crazy Phoenician journey passing by the Pillars of Hercules; this journey occurred on the Atlantic Ocean coast. I have been reviewing these texts in depth for over 39 years, since I first read the epic back in 1975. I have had the opportunity back then to look at what was once considered a taboo. Something that was prohibited for me to overview during my youth. The epic was one of the prohibitions due to the similarities it contains within its text with Monotheistic religions regardless of the style and the language used in the holy books. As a hungry reader back then I was only allowed access to texts mentioned within Quran. Since then I was obsessed with having the opportunity to embody the epic's architectural designs through forming surrealistic paintings reflecting my own view of this eternal epic. I will attempt through this humble study to embody the epic through ten paintings I have completed throughout last year. These paintings describe the Mesopotamian civilization; it also provides insight to that stage of history in addition to the time and place the epic took place. It also clarifies the identity of the place where the epic took place in the lights of the texts, archeological and historic data that could be compared to the epic's text. The rule adopted here is that any piece of art work needs to be predestined by critique conditions. Similarly, any critique article needs to be predestined by ethical terms that relate to art work ethics and its deployment in addition to its influence level in the yet to come personal experience or its influence in the experience of others.

**Keywords:** Epic of Gilgamesh, Mesopotamia, Immortality, Noah, Sumerians, Dilmun Island

## Introduction

If the 'Mesopotamian' thought is considered to be the result of a profound civilization of tens of thousands of years, then the epic of Gilgamesh represents a true and spectacular picture of that age. The epic is in line with the elements of that thought which was built mostly on realistic criteria. It was not based just on inner emotional assumptions that are covered in mystery as is the case usually with such monotonous and peaceful environments. The ancient man of Mesopotamia lived in a tough and hard environment which leads to a feeling of insecurity and being cautious of everything. This allowed him to have realistic views within his thought summed by the idea that that survival is temporary while death is permanent; order is the exception whereas chaos is deeply rooted within existence itself. This led him to form his own theory of life that nothing replaces work in order to push damage away and seek what is best, and that there is no way of avoiding dangers without having to pursue safety. This eventually led to his desire to explore and meditate aspects of nature. By doing so man aimed at finding answers for questions about life and its destiny, the universe and its system and the true nature of existence.

I have focused in my essay on the most important key aspects that formed the very unique nature of the epic of Gilgamesh. It differentiated the epic from its rivals by providing mental answers rather than mythological to the questions it raises despite the epic's mythical nature in general. Hence it is not surprising to see Gilgamesh trying his best to avoid death through trying to find any form of means to stop it, while realizing that life in itself is a system that produces death to allow for its own continuity. He then turns his failure into positive work through which he seeks moral immortality; this is through pleasant memory and fruitful deeds.

The authors of the epic were aiming at summarizing the key thought of the Mesopotamian civilization and placing it within people's reach so they can enjoy living a positive life. This makes us believe that the instruction to write the epic was not meant for a private purpose but rather has a double purpose given the reputation the Gilgamesh epic has had. Hence we should not ignore the historic nature of many of the epic's happenings despite its general mythical form containing an element of exaggeration in line with people's thoughts at the time, especially with the ability to inspect the information provided within the epic through historic and archeological evidences.

Let us start first with the existence of journeys such as Gilgamesh's; this has been confirmed through found historic drawings of sailing ships drawn on stamps and vases of clay (5). Such ships must have been made

for such trips and not just for river journeys, since rivers do not require ships of the kind using sail but rather canoes with oars being used for its movement. Even nowadays canoes are still being used to sail through rivers; we can see examples of this at present within the rivers of Iraq. So it is possible that Gilgamesh has embarked on these type of trips as there are trips through across the Gulf that have been executed in the exact same way in reach for far away districts and cities that had strong ties with the Mesopotamian civilization such as Dilmun, Makan and Melokha despite the controversy around the identity of these places. No real decisive opinion has been reached in this regard.

The happenings of the journey make us wonder: were these trips regular or was it just personal adventures as is the case with Gilgamesh within the epic? the answer to this is derived from our own assumption that all human work starts with adventure and individual work, and then transforms into regular group activities that people find easy.

Sea journeys are no exception to that, and perhaps our friend's journey is one of those individual exploration trips that are aimed at exploring the mysteries of the sea. Gilgamesh's trip was not just a legendary one with a mythological purpose nor was it for a sole mental purpose. The journey probably had a commercial purpose aiming at exploring trade routes to ease the growing flow of trade and goods during that period. The information provided by sea exploration trips was of great importance given the lack of commercial trips that were full of dangers during the time. No wonder very few would pursue such commercial trips despite the tempting rewards it used to offer. A big part of the mystery surrounding such journeys was for sure raised by sea traders who tried to deter people away from going on such trips; this they did through exaggeration and raising fear.



Pattern (1) represents architectural formations visualizing the city of Uruk and its king Gilgamesh (2350 - 2750) B.C

A lot of studies have been conducted on this epic; we continue to see new studies coming out from time to time. I believe the secret to this is that the epic is still covered under a thick layer of myth and imagination; it provides diagnosis to man's most everlasting problems revolving around the eternal question of: what is the purpose of life?! and why do we die after having to walk the paths of life ?! There are no concrete answers to these questions. Real literature looks at what science fails to uncover. It encounters man's psychological crises, heals his pains and enlightens his path..from this lies the secret behind the global interest in the epic of Gilgamesh; the epic that takes us to unprecedented virtual realities away from our frustrating reality into an ideal world full of goodness, just and beauty.



Pattern (2) It also symbolizes the fight between good and evil.

This epic mixed reality and myth, reality and imagination; its reality was full of wisdom and its imagination was filled with symbolism. It was realistic in its portrayal of life and death; it is symbolic as its instances with deep significances. Its myth aims at high targets. Around this point and as Dr. Ali Al Qasbi exclaims ' Gilgamesh's agony, following the death of his close friend Enkidu, is a feeling that any man would experience at the loss of a beloved one.'

As for Gilgamesh's destroy of the well protected high walls and his fight with the bull of heaven along with his battle with Humbaba whom he encountered during his cedar forest journey; all of this symbolizes man's destroy of the obstacles that prevent him from reaching on to his manhood brother.

Written texts discovered throughout the ages describing Gilgamesh form a number of works detailed as follows:

### **1. The Epic of Gilgamesh and Power:**

This reflects on the phenomenon of power struggle within politics amongst the different Sumerian cities. It appears, from the sequence of events, that the city of 'Kesh' is where the first ruling dynasty appeared following the flood. It used to view the city of 'Uruk' as a power rival, especially during the time of its king, Gilgamesh. This is why 'Agha', king of Kesh, sent a warning to Gilgamesh demanding his surrender. Pattern (3) or suffer the consequences part of which would be an attack on 'Uruk' as he placed his troops on its borders. Although Gilgamesh was determined on resistance, he had to go back to his fellow citizens seeking advice prior to any final decision being taken.





Pattern (3) wars were part of daily life protecting the existence and expansion of the Sumerian kingdom

So he presented the matter in front of the congress reminding them of the need not to surrender to the demands of the king of 'Kesh' as well as for the need for resistance and carrying of arms. But the senates turned his request down and preferred to surrender rather than taking up arms. Gilgamesh turned then to the members of the 'city council' consisting of the city fighters and their response was direct and clear:

**'.. Do not surrender to 'Kesh', fight him back with arms..  
The city of 'Uruk' is built by the gods  
And the heavenly temple of 'Ayana' was built by the great God..  
And its great walls touch the clouds..'**

Gilgamesh was overly pleased with what he heard from his men, as narrated by the Sumerian story, Gilgamesh's face appeared from the top of the walls as he overruled his opponent Agha's army. When the soldiers of the enemy saw his appeal, they got frightened and withdrew from the battle field. Pattern (4).

## 2. Gilgamesh and the land of Life

Its content serves as a summary of the details within ' The Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh' about the hero's adventures in the cedar forest..and in this story we find that Gilgamesh made up his mind on taking a journey to the remote 'Land of Life' in order to chop down its famous trees to take it to the city of 'Uruk'. So his friend Enkidu advised him to take the matter up to 'Oto', the god, who was responsible for the 'Land of Life'. It seems that 'Oto' was not sure of Gilgamesh's ability to perform this dangerous journey. Following Gilgamesh's insistence, 'Oto' promised to assign the seven heavenly demons who, except for his interference, would have placed severe dangers on the journey.



Pattern (4) Gilgamesh's consultations with the congressmen.

The text states that Gilgamesh was pleased with Oto's approval and has chosen an elite fifty of his men to accompany him. Together they marched to the 'Land of Life' after getting equipped with loads of supply and weapons. Gilgamesh traveled long distances crossing seven mountains until he reached the Cedar forest. When he started chopping down its trees with the help of Enkidu, whilst the rest of the men were piling the tree stumps one on top of the other. When 'Humbaba' learned about it, he placed Gilgamesh to sleep and for a long time using his super natural powers. After he awakes, Gilgamesh swore by his mother, the goddess, and his father the holy warrior 'Logal Panda' that he will not return to 'Uruk' before he destroys the monster 'Humbaba' who was monitoring Gilgamesh and his men from a distance.

Despite his many attempts to frighten Gilgamesh the latter remained solid and the story ends in Gilgamesh's victory and Enkidu slaughtering the beast. Then all returned to 'Uruk' carrying the head of the beast. It seems Enlil, the god, was angry about the killing of 'Humbaba' so he cursed Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu. To avoid the curse Gilgamesh obtained seven 'rays' each named by Sumerians as 'Milam', according to a study by Dr. Fadel Abdul Wahed Ali, though the aim of the story ending is still mysterious.





Pattern (5) Cedar Forest and the blessing of the Gods, a sleep following the harvest leading to total loss.

### 3. Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the underworld

This epic story starts by talking about the creation of the universe by separating heaven and earth, then man's creation and the fight between the Sumerian god of the water 'Anke' with the underworld represented by a dragon. The poet then starts the plot by talking about a tree called 'Kholobo' which may have been a willows tree that used to grow on the Euphrates river bank. One day south winds blew and took out the tree and ended up being driven away by the river; it was picked up later by the merry virgin 'Inanna'. She decided to replant it in her garden Pattern (5) in the hope that it will grow to become a throne for her to sit and sleep on. The tree grew but was never able to produce leaves as a snake built its nest inside its roots.

Enzo, the bird, raised its little ones on the top of the tree while 'Lilly', the genie built its home within it. Innana, the goddess, asked the God of the Sun, her brother, to relieve her from those evil intruders Pattern (6) but her brother 'Oho' never responded to her appeal. She reached out to Gilgamesh, the hero, for help and he responded by killing the snake at the bottom of the tree. Enzo the bird flew to the mountains after witnessing what has happened while Lilly, the genie, fled far away. After that Gilgamesh and his men chopped the tree and presented it to the goddess, Innana. Feeling gratitude Innana presents Gilgamesh with a gift of a drum and a stick.

He then overuses it and because of the screams of women both the drum and stick dropped from the hands of Gilgamesh to the underworld. Feeling sad he seeks the help of his friend Enkidu who, without hesitation, went down to the world of the dead to recover both the drum and stick Pattern (7). It seems Enkidu had to avoid a lot of things that he could not. Hence he was not able to escape from the underworld to return back to the world of life. Gilgamesh tried to save him from the underworld through the intervention of some of the gods but he failed. All what 'Anky', the god of wisdom, could do was to create a hole leading to the underworld through which Enkidu's ghost could pass to the world of life, and that was all what was left of him. The two then hugged each other; Gilgamesh questioned him about what he has seen in the horrific underworld, the world of the dead.





Pattern (6) Gilgamesh's heroic acts leading to victory.

#### 4. Gilgamesh's death

It is understood from the remaining of the story that Gilgamesh needs not build hopes on gaining immortality, since 'Enlil', the father of the gods, has not destined Gilgamesh to be eternal. Instead he was destined to be a strong and elite royal having courage in the battle field. After which there was a sign of Gilgamesh's death and him presenting offerings and gifts to a number of gods. Round the end of the story it appears impossible for Gilgamesh, the hero, to become immortal despite his strengths and unique attributes.



Pattern (7) Gilgamesh's fear and confusion after losing Enkidu who went searching for the drum.

The ending was deployed directly in the Babylonian epic, stressing the certainty of man's death as destined by the gods and those actions and good deeds are immortal.



Spizer, the scientist, comments on the nature of the epic of Gilgamesh: the epic of Gilgamesh deals with things related to our world such as man and nature, love and adventure, friendship and war..it was possible to uniquely mix all to form the background for the core topic of the epic which is 'the absolute reality of death'.

The strive of the epic's hero to change his inevitable fate, through seeking the secret of immortality, from 'Utnapishtim' eventually fails. But with this failure comes a silent feeling of surrender and for the first time in history we are in front of a deep experiment at this level of heroism written in an elegant poetic style. Thus it gained people's admiration across all times. This is why parts of the epic were later found in many places outside Mesopotamia; it was translated into many languages. Researchers noticed its influences over Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Achilles, Iliad's hero, and his friend Patroclus were similar to Gilgamesh and his companion, Enkidu.

In a study by Dr. Ali Al Qasmi on 'Gilgamesh's Return', he views that the Gilgamesh epic tackled three topics which are: life, love and death. Let us start with the ending being death since it is no less important than the beginning itself..

Enkidu's death made Gilgamesh, his friend, sink in sorrow and loneliness. Gilgamesh dipped into sad thoughts about how could man get rid of death and become immortal. If man knew how, similar to the gods, his friend Enkidu would have not died and he would not have feared the awaited death. And for all that Gilgamesh embarked on a journey full of risks and dangers. He was after the plant of 'life' at the bottom of the oceans Pattern (9).



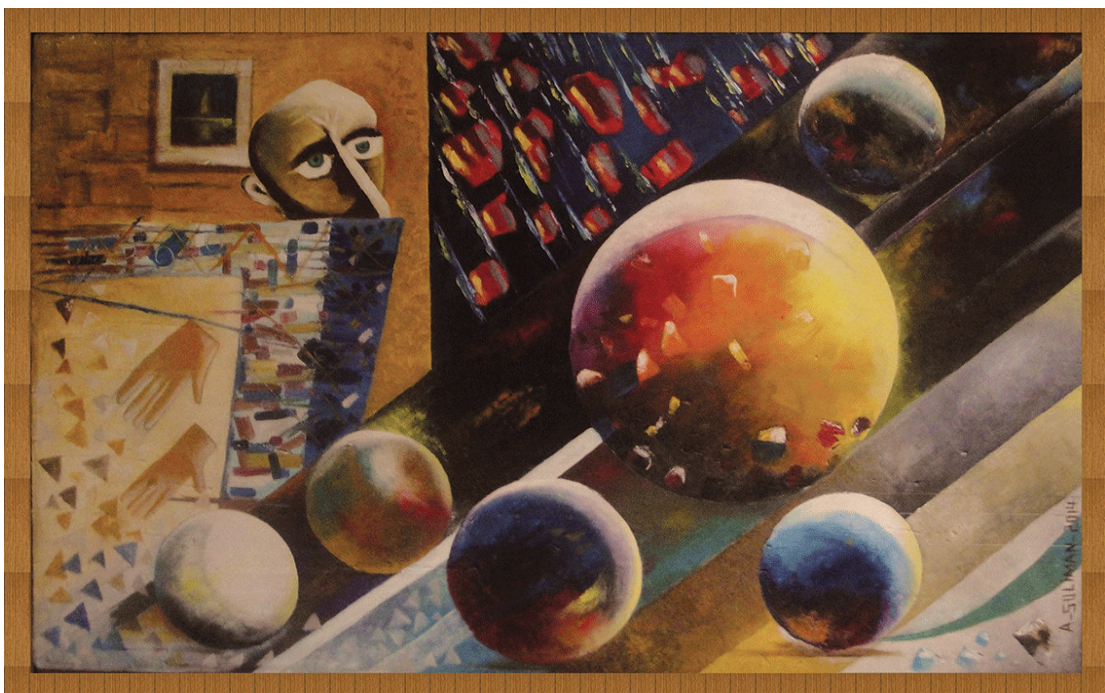
Pattern (8) the continued struggle within Gilgamesh's imagination between immortality and inevitable death.

Gilgamesh crosses the deserts, seas of death and dives into the ocean to recover this plant..the immortality plant to take it back to the land of 'Uruk' to replant it there. He wanted to grow it there so all people of the city of 'Uruk' could have it. The plant here symbolizes life, knowledge and the secret of immortality. However Gilgamesh loses the plant on his way back home; it is swallowed by the snake while he was asleep. When he wakes up he encounters a revitalized snake sliding into her ground hole leaving behind its changed old skin. At this point, Gilgamesh's heart is filled with pain, as he drops by a pub where he drinks until he becomes drunk; he then starts shedding tears. The pub owner feels sorry for him and asks him to take advantage of life and enjoy the morning while he can. But Gilgamesh decides to do something to create his own legacy if he cannot be immortal. He returned back to 'Uruk' and placed foundations of a judicial system throughout the country. He expanded schools and education amongst his people, since knowledge gives life a renewed taste and meaning Pattern (10).





Pattern (9) Gilgamesh dwells in thought and is lost amongst sorrow, sadness and loneliness following the death of Enkidu.



Pattern (10) death is coming no doubt. This was Gilgamesh's final realization.

### Conclusion

We can conclude the following:

### Fictional Value

- The narrative explaining Gilgamesh's crossing of the sea of death is more of an old sea journey.
- The text detailing the journey, part of the Gilgamesh epic, is considered the eldest ever description of a sea journey in history.

- The target of this journey, according to information we have, is the island of Bahrain which, according to researchers, is probably 'Dilmun' which is considered the paradise according to Sumerian myth. The journey is linked to Mesopotamian thought and its materialistic desire that views an eternal end in death where there is no escape.

- According to Zakria Satchin, a world historian whose able to read Sumerian, the reason behind the American invasion of Iraq is the attempt to uncover secrets, mentioned in details, within Sumerian civilization and is still unknown to our present world. He links the Sumerian doctrine of religions, that assumes the landing of the 'Anonaki' on earth, to the rise of mankind on the Sumerian land and the spread of mankind from there to the whole of the earth. Then he links all of that to Gilgamesh's journey to the other world and how he possessed the key of the entrance to the other world. The world described within the Gilgamesh epic as the underworld and described by Zakria as the world crossing to outer space !

This character is not a legendary one but rather real, that had accurate scientific knowledge that was way beyond people's minds during the time. Debate about some of the aspects of the epic is still ongoing throughout modern time science. Gilgamesh managed to launch himself into outer space through excessive speed using certain machines. The study even goes beyond that suggesting that Gilgamesh has embarked on an actual space trip since the epic contained information on the nature of space, velocity relativity and geomagnetic. This makes it impossible to assume that this is just a mere coincidence with no scientific experiments involved.

### **Philosophical Value**

- According to 'Lafton' and 'Olson' any human being expresses usually the need for this symbolic immortality through five types:

1. Biological Immortality: this includes continuity through sons and grand sons (stressing the continuity of body cells).

2. Theologian Immortality: this includes religious and philosophical symbols of life after death.

3. Normal Immortality: through permanence of nature (came from dust and will have to return to dust).

4. Procedural Immortality: includes one's feeling of health and happiness being alive; it focuses on full participation in everything that life has to offer and living largely within the present.

5. Creative Immortality: allows people continuity and permanence through art, literature and acknowledged achievements throughout their lives.

I do believe that all these forms of symbolic immortality provide a human being with a feeling of belonging to his predecessors and the generations to follow. Importantly these are ways of controlling the anxiety related to death.

### **Art Value**

- Understanding and deciphering its color combinations, with its visual values, are considered serious challenges for any artist or architect.

- Color changes within the drawings were in line with the epic's rhythm portraying the mood changes of its heroes during their successes as well as their falls.

- We cannot prove the success of these color combinations due to the lack of the approach element for such works, except for some of the illustrative drawings produced at times.

- The architectural success of any art work depends solely on the reach out of such color combinations to the receiver, or at least having a psychological effect on the receiver.

- The creation of different atmospheres and environments for each of the drawings separately, according to its position within the epic, was the basis for the cold and warm color distribution and the mix of both in addition to the color contradictions created at times.

- Creative immortality, as mentioned earlier, is considered one of the aspects of continuity as it is with physical immortality.

This study of mine could maybe be considered one of the faces of my own human continuity for generations yet to come. Generation those believe in progress and creativity.

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