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THE INS AND OUTS OF GILGAMEŠ'S PASSAGE THROUGH DARKNESS

Marinus Anthony van der Sluijs

The vexing episode in the Epic of Gilgameš in which the titular hero enters Mount Māšu and traverses the 'path of the sun' in darkness has generated much discussion. Horowitz suggested that the protagonist was pictured marching in a straight line from Sumer to the sea surrounding the earth. George, seconded by Woods, identified this location as the earth's eastern edge. In this article, it is argued that the zodiacal light could have served as an inspiration for Māšu; that the 'north wind' Gilgameš encountered was a northeastern wind; that this interpretation enables a new insight into the way the romances of Alexander the Great could have drawn on the myth of Gilgameš; and that Gilgameš's venture can be studied in a wider comparative-mythological context, regardless of its ultimate explanation.

Mount Māšu

The standard Babylonian version of the *Epic of Gilgameš* contains a baffling episode in which Gilgameš's quest for immortality takes him to Mount Māšu, guarded by "scorpion-men":

> "When [he] arrived at Mount Māšu,
> which daily guards the rising [of the sun,] –
> their tops [*abut*] the fabric of the heavens,
> their bases reach down to Hades –
> there were scorpion-men guarding its gate,
> whose terror was dread and glance was death,
> whose radiance was terrifying, enveloping the uplands –
> at both sunrise and sunset they guard the sun …"[1]

[1] *Epic of Gilgameš* (standard Babylonian version), 9.38-45, tr. George 2003, 668-669. *Passim* this article: tr. = translation.

The mythical topography underlying this passage has long taxed scholars' minds. There is general agreement that the Babylonian cosmology of the pre-Hellenistic period featured the earth as a flat disc, with Māšu positioned at the boundary. The name means 'twin'[2], which explains the reference to "their tops" (*e-lu-šu-nu*) and "their bases" (*i-rat-su-nu*) and "can be taken to imply either that it had two peaks or that it was one of a pair of mountains"[3]. Because the scorpion-men are said to guard both sunrise and sunset, the twin aspect most likely related to the polarity of east and west. Māšu then expressed a *coincidentia oppositorum*[4], but this paradoxical identity does not necessarily suggest a physical absurdity. Huxley aired the imaginative idea that "a belief in a rotating sky", with a cycle of 24 hours, could account for the motif:

> "If heaven rotates, … the eastern gate through which Shamash entered the world in the morning would be waiting for him, together with its guardians, on the western horizon at the end of the day"[5].

> "… the door penetrating the stone vault of the sky through which Shamash arrived on the eastern horizon at dawn would, in the course of a day, move with the sky and be ready for the sun god's exit on the western horizon at day's end. Thus the Scorpion-Men patrolling a single entrance could be the sun's guardians at both dawn and dusk"[6].

However, this solution presupposes without evidence that the Babylonians regarded the gate – like a constellation – as a stationary fixture of the rotating sky which somehow moves independently from the sun instead of travelling with it throughout the day, as one would expect for a diurnal cycle. Nor is it clear, if Māšu and the sky were both solid, how the Babylonians would have distinguished the two. A much simpler possibility is that the Babylonian description of the earth, not the sky, included two separate mountains at opposite ends of the horizon which were conceptualised as a single phenomenon, in the same way that dawn and dusk are widely recognised as two poles of a single condition of twilight. The two contrasting peaks at east and west could even have been understood as conspicuous protrusions of a single extended chain of mountains. In this spirit, Heimpel commented:

> "This mountain guards sunset and sunrise; it was thus imagined as stretching from the eastern to the western horizon, presumably underneath, on the invisible side of the earth"[7].

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[2] Civil *et alii* 1977, 401-403 *s.v.* 'mâšu'.
[3] George 2003, 492, *cf.* 863.
[4] Woods 2009, 196-197.
[5] Huxley 1997, 193.
[6] Huxley 2000, 125.
[7] Heimpel 1986, 143.

The text expressly states that at least the two peaks reached into the sky, though the parts joining them may have been held to be subterranean or circumterranean at a height lower than the earth's surface. It has not yet been observed in this connection that the notion of an earth-encircling mountain has been attested directly in various traditional eastern cosmologies, albeit at much later periods – examples are Harā Bərəzaitī of Zoroastrian tradition[8], Qāf of Islāmic lore[9], "the mountain which encircled the whole world" in a Syriac version of the legend of Alexander the Great[10], and Lokāloka, the Cakravāla and the Kulācalas in Hindūism[11, 12].

An English writer suggested that Māšu represented the astronomical phenomenon known as the zodiacal light, which the Babylonians would undoubtedly have noticed[13]. At Near Eastern latitudes, this generally appears above the western

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[8] *Bundahišn* (*Primal Creation*; 8th to 9th centuries AD), 12.3, tr. West 1880, 35; *cf.* 5.5. Compare Zādspram (9th century AD), *Vizīdagīhā ī Zādspram* (*Anthology*), 7. 1-2, tr. West 1880, 174.

[9] "The veins of these mountains are connected with the veins of Mount Qaf, which is the range that surrounds the earth". Abū Isḥāq Ka'b al-Aḥbār (dated *ca.* AD 652), in Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn 'Abdullāh al-Kisā'ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (*Tales of the Prophets*; *ca.* AD 1200), 4, tr. Thackston 1978, 8; "Und Gott erschuf einen gewaltigen Berg aus grünem Chrysolith, von ihm stammt das Grün des Himmels. Er heißt der Berg Qāf, er legte ihn um die ganze Erde herum". Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (AD 601-661), in Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Ṯa'labī (AD 961-*ca.* 1038), *'Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* (*The Brides of Sessions about the Tales of the Prophets*), tr. Busse 2006, 6. The translation of the last few words of the latter quotation by Brinner (2002, 9) leaves it unclear whether it was the earth or the green sky which Qāf surrounded: "… and He surrounded (the chrysolith) all around with mountains". Wensinck (1916, 5) translated: "… and Allāh created a large mountain of green emerald, from which the green colour of the sky is derived; it is called mount Ḳāf and it surrounds the whole of the earth". According to another passage (Brinner 2002, 600), "Mount Qāf surrounded the world with green corundum". *Cf.* Abū Naṣr Muṭahhar ibn Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, *Kitāb al-Bad' wa'l-Ta'rīkh* (*Book of Creation and History*; *ca.* AD 966), 7, tr. Huart 1901, 44. See also Newbold 1839, 361.

[10] Pseudo-Jacob (of Serug), *Discourse upon Alexander, the Believing King, and upon the Gate which he Made against Āgōg and Māgōg*, 258 (*cf.* 217-240), tr. Budge 1889, 178 (*cf.* 176-177). As the "mountain which surroundeth the whole world" and "encircleth all the world like a ring" it also occurs in the Ethiopic version (138, 145 [*cf.* 139-144], tr. 1896, 242, 254 [*cf.* 243-253]).

[11] Gombrich 1975, 125-126; Mabbett 1983, 67. Compare further the Urals as a ring of mountains wrapped around the floating earth in a creation myth from the Mansi (western Siberia) – Adam 1874, 10.

[12] Kramer (1979, 24) professed that the Kur – a Sumerian designation of the netherworld-mountain – was "Below the earth, and surrounding it on all sides", but did not support this with primary sources.

[13] Jones 1993, 284. Jensen (1900, 578) came close to this suggestion, asking if the notion of the *šupuk šamê*, translated above as "the fabric of the heavens", could have been influenced by the western zodiacal light. However, more likely George (2003, 865) was correct in interpreting the expression as a reference to the supposedly solid fabric of the sky – the "firmament", with which Māšu was held to be contiguous. On this term see Horowitz 1998, 97, 233, 239-241.

Fig. 1. The zodiacal light (Helmbold 1906, 5).

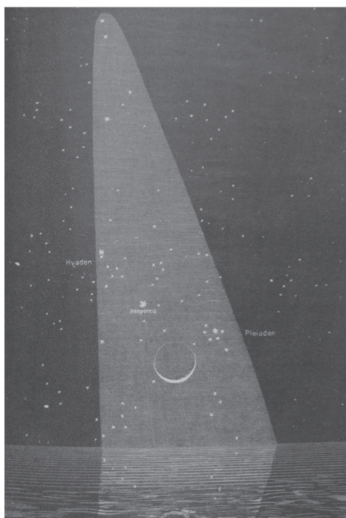

Fig. 2. The zodiacal light embracing Venus (Hesperos) and the moon (Helmbold 1906, 19).

horizon after sunset in spring and above the eastern one before sunrise in autumn (Figs. 1-2). The twin cones of the zodiacal light, which are the reflection of sunlight off interplanetary dust in the ecliptic plane of the inner solar system, could have been perceived as a single mysteriously alternating object belonging to the earth rather than the sky because they do not revolve around the celestial pole like the stars and planets do. Around midnight on exceptionally clear nights, the opposing zodiacal cones can even be seen simultaneously, joined by a continuous 'zodiacal band' – an inspiration for an encircling mountain above the horizon?[14] The two arachnid sentries could have moved along with the mountain, perhaps representing some currently unidentified feature at the base of the zodiacal light[15].

[14] The zodiacal light is white, however, so that a green colour for Qāf would contravene the interpretation. Perhaps the greenness was a secondary trait based on a belief that Qāf symbolised the sky itself. Then again, it may not be unrelated to the Rabbinical tradition that "*Tohu* is a green line that encompasses the whole world, out of which darkness proceeds" – *Babylonian Talmūd*: *Ḥagiga* (*Festival Offering*), 2 (12a), tr. Abrahams 1938, 63; *cf. Midraš Kōnēn* (Venice, 1601), tr. Wünsche 1909, 188: "… der Thohu gleicht einer grünen Messschnur und umgibt die ganze Welt wie ein Faden und bildet die Mitte zwischen den Enden der Himmel und den Enden der Himmel [*sic*]. Von da geht die Finsternis aus". *Cf. New Pəsīqta*, tr. 1910, 61-62; *Sēpẹr Yəṣirā* (*Book of Formation*; originally 2nd century AD?), 13 (MS. *Vaticanus* [10th century AD] and *Genizah Scroll* [10th century AD]), tr. Hayman 2004, 85.

[15] Alternatively, the scorpion-men could have signified Cancer as the constellation used by the sun god in the summer – Huxley 2000, 120, 124-128. This would imply that Gilgameš faced them in that season – see further below.

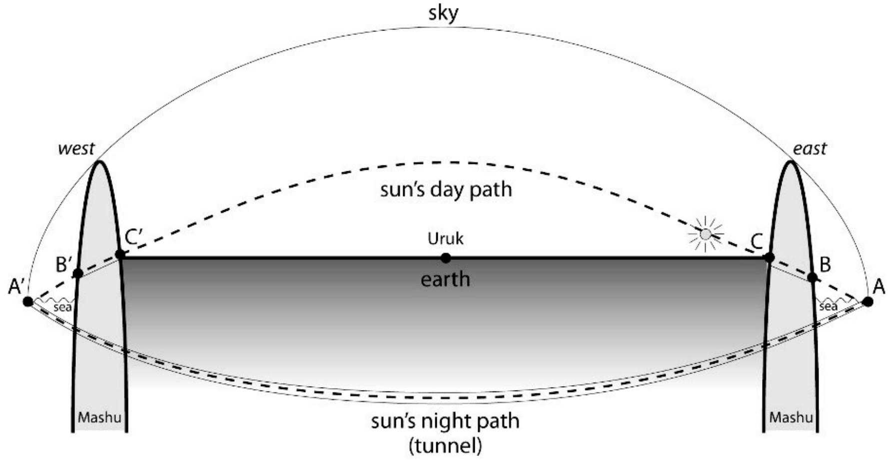

Fig. 3. 'Cosmogram' showing the peaks of Mount Māšu in relation to the sun's path, the earth and the surrounding sea. A-A´: sun leaves/enters the netherworld in the ocean. B-B´: sun enters/leaves Māšu. C-C´: sun leaves/enters Māšu (sunrise/sunset). © Marinus Anthony van der Sluijs & Jo Seong Hee (2019).

Gilgameš marching to the end of the world

Following the account of Mount Māšu and its sentinels, the epic continues with a severely damaged report of how Gilgameš followed "the path of the sun" (*ḫarrān* (kaskal) ᵈ*šamaš* (utu)) in darkness through the "interior" (*lib-ba-*) of the mountain for 12 *bēru*, apparently feeling "the north wind" (ⁱᵐ*iltānu* (si.sá)) in his face after 9 *bēru*, and exited "before the sun" (*la-am* ᵈ*šamši* (utu)*ˢⁱ*)[16]. Questions regarding the details of this itinerary abound. What was the "path of the sun"? Why was it dark? Did the strongman encounter the sun at any point? And what was the purpose of the undertaking?

At the source of the Tigris near Bylkalein was a natural tunnel through the Armenian mountains, 1000 to 1200 metres long and oriented in a north-south direction. Familiarity with this feature could have inspired the idea of a passage through Māšu[17], yet it cannot be identified as the very path taken by Gilgameš[18], as it bore no relation to the sun's course[19]. Indeed, the Tigris tunnel had this river flowing through it whilst there is no indication that Gilgameš's trail was wet.

[16] *Epic of Gilgameš* (standard Babylonian version), 9.82, 138-170, tr. George 2003, 670-673.

[17] Hartmann 1913, 749-750; *cf.* Gressmann 1926; Dalley 2000, 131 note 101; Foster 2019, 73 Fig. 8.

[18] *Contra* Gressmann 1926 and Lipiński 1971, 48-54.

[19] George 2003, 494 note 174.

And while the Babylonians – as argued – may have thought of Māšu as an earth-encompassing mountain range, they need not have pictured Gilgameš running between the places of sunrise and sunset either, whether above or below ground and whether directly or circuitously around the perimeter of the earth or the horizon[20]. The text states no more than that he entered a mountain at the place of sunrise or – with emendation, as some prefer – of sunset[21]. The still popular assumption that Gilgameš followed a subterranean tunnel between the east and the west runs into logical and practically unassailable difficulties: if he had to pass through the place of sunset in order to reach his intended destination, it would have been far easier for him to get there overland. What is more, he could not have entered this tunnel from Māšu because the sun's points of entry into and exit from it were not situated directly at the edges of the earth, like Māšu was, but beyond the surrounding sea (*marratu*), evidently at a somewhat lower level (AA′ via the tunnel in Fig. 3)[22].

Horowitz submitted the attractive proposition that the hero was blazing a trail from Uruk to the shores of the cosmic sea at the edge of the earth and one of the islands beyond, on which more will be said below[23]. George, seconded by Woods, refined this interpretation as a race along a straight line in an eastward direction towards the point on the horizon where Šamaš passes from the netherworld into the sky[24]. As this would mean that Gilgameš did not set foot in the netherworld and his horizontal trajectory merely intersected with the sun's vertically inclined one, the phrase "path of the sun" may have been used in a loose sense[25] or perhaps the verb – which is missing from the extant tablets – meant something like 'aimed for' rather than the currently restored "took" (*i*[*ṣ-bat* …]).

George and Woods prefer to interpret the units in *bēru* as a measure of time ("double-hours"), suggesting that Gilgameš's exploit was a type of contest in which he had to arrive at the point of sunrise before the sun god, who would fix the fates for the day[26]. Yet in that case one wonders why Gilgameš could not travel at leisure, as new fates are 'cut' every day. Moreover, if he entered Māšu at nightfall[27] and exited before sunrise, his passage could never have lasted more than 12 hours, contrary to a duration of 24 hours as required by the reading

[20] *Contra*, *e.g.*, Foster 2019, 71-73; Heimpel 1986, 141-143; Bottéro 1980, 31; Jacobsen 1976, 204; 1990, 240. Edzard (1985, 52) stated only that the road was subterranean.

[21] George 2003, 492, 863-865. George (2003, 492) and Woods (2009, 196) rejected the emendation.

[22] *Epic of Gilgameš* (standard Babylonian version), 1.40; 10.81-82, tr. George 2003, 540-541, 682-683, *cf.* 496.

[23] Horowitz 1998, 105-106; *cf.* Keel 1972, 19.

[24] George 2003, 496-497; Woods 2009, 194-200.

[25] Woods, personal communication, 18 January 2018.

[26] George 2003, 275, 494-497, 670-673; Woods 2009, 197-200.

[27] So Woods 2009, 198.

‘double-hours’. Instead, the measurements in *bēru* could have connoted distance rather than time, so that the import was not a crossing lasting 24 hours, but one of some 120 km[28].

Just like the Tigris tunnel connected the known ‘civilised’ world to the *terra incognita* beyond the northern limits, the Babylonians could have imagined a similar structure to the east. Taken literally, the statement that Māšu extended from the highest to the lowest regions of the cosmos, at the places of sunrise and sunset, implies that the sun was believed to make its way through its interior twice a day. It is reasonable to assume that the cross-section of Māšu through which Gilgameš hurried along – in the opposite direction to the sun – was one of the same cross-sections of Māšu.

The passageway was probably dark because it led through Māšu’s interior, as the text states, and Gilgameš was passing through during the night at a time when the sun had not yet entered it. Whether it was subterranean would be academic; Māšu’s peripheral location could equally mean that it was or was not a part of the earth. That said, if the sun continually rose between its place of emergence from the netherworld beyond the ocean and its exit from Māšu, the portion of its path traced by Gilgameš must have had a downward slope (CB in fig. 3). To the extent that the Babylonians would see the sun emerging from Māšu at the horizon, as viewed away from mountain ranges and high buildings, the surrounding circular sea must have occupied a lower level than the horizon or the earth’s surface – there is no way around it. The gradient would have depended on the sun’s angle of ascent this early in the morning and the distance between the gates in the netherworld and Māšu; it could have been quite low. At any rate, Gilgameš must have descended from Māšu in order to reach the shore of the circular sea.

If the mountain symbolised the zodiacal light, the implied impression that the sun passes through the zodiacal light before appearing in the morning or after disappearing in the evening is less preposterous than it may seem at first blush, considering the archaic *forma mentis*. The ‘tunnel’ does not need to have had a low ceiling; Māšu’s peak could have been conceived as a hollow space with transparent walls, like a giant glass chamber. If the Babylonians attributed the glow of the zodiacal light to the rays of the sun illuminating Māšu’s cave-like interior while the sun made its way through it, itself remaining hidden behind the sloped path or horizon, they would also have had an explanation for the fact

[28] Jacobsen (1976, 204) understood “twelve double miles”. George (2003, 494-495, 671 note 6) translated “double-hours”, but also allowed “league” as a translation of the term; *cf.* Oppenheim *et alii* 1965, 208-210 *s.v.* ‘bēru’: “‘mile’ (a measure of length – over 10 kilometers – used for measuring long distances)”; Lipiński 1971, 49-50. Huxley (1997, 192 note 8; 2000, 125) infers that the dark stretch traversed by Gilgameš – which she thinks represented a perforation through an otherwise solid sky – measured *ca.* 120 km in length.

that the zodiacal pyramids are not visible throughout the entire night. In the mornings, the momentary darkness between the disappearance of the zodiacal light and the sunrise could logically have been due to the sun's passage through Māšu's gateway on the side of the human world. Twilight, when the sky is already bright but the sun is not yet visible, would be the stage in which Māšu's portal is open and the sun's radiance bursts forth, but the sun itself is still on the other side. The inverse sequence would appertain to the evening situation. Nights on which the zodiacal light was invisible despite a clear sky would only have added to the mystery, perhaps fuelling speculation that the sun then bypassed Māšu or was weaker upon its emergence from the netherworld than on other days.

The idea that Māšu's gates remained shut when the sun was not going through them may have motivated the conception of Māšu as a 'perilous portal' granting limited access to the magical realm outside the earth – a type of Symplegades which only the radiant sun could hope to navigate safely. This difficult access would explain the 'hiddenness' in Gilgameš's report – in an Old Babylonian fragment of the epic – that he had come through "the mountains, the hidden road where the sun rises" (*ša-di-i ur-ḫa-am re-qé-e-tam wa-ṣa-ú* ^{d}*šamši*(utu)^{ši})[29]. Gilgameš would have beaten the system by persuading the guards to let him in well before the sun's arrival; his negotiation of the way through utter darkness would have enhanced his heroism, while his otherwise unexplained need to keep looking over his shoulder could have been necessitated by the risk that the doormen changed their minds. The sense of urgency in Gilgameš's crossing could further have resulted from the fear of being found out, should he run into Šamaš. Gilgameš would thus have been in a race of sorts against Šamaš, but only because his goal was to reach Ūta-Napišti's abode in the spirit world and the use of Māšu's cavity, through which this was – perhaps exclusively – accessible, was Šamaš's prerogative. The hero's aim would not have been to beat the god as a point in itself. In the same Old Babylonian fragment, Gilgameš indeed converses with Šamaš without a hint of enmity or competition, apparently just before he is about to enter into 'the heart of the earth' (*li-ib-bu er-ṣe-tim*)[30]. Presumably, it was his partly divine nature which enabled him to traverse these liminal zones.

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[29] *Epic of Gilgameš* (Old Babylonian version), 4.10-11, ed. George 2003, 280-281, *cf.* 495. However, *reqētam* may also be translated as 'distant' instead of "hidden", 2003, 277 note 143, 283-284; Reiner/Roth 1999, 265 *s.v.* 'rēqu'. The verb *saḫārum* ("to turn") used in this passage to describe Gilgameš's crossing of the mountains and translated by George as "came around" perhaps referred to the vertical differences Gilgameš had to negotiate in order to reach the tunnel, pass through it and come down from it.

[30] *Epic of Gilgameš* (Old Babylonian version), 1.1´-15´, ed. George 2003, 276-277. On the placement of this episode before the arrival at Māšu, compare Foster 2019, 69-70.

Gilgameš's march and the north

The famous Babylonian world map (originally probably late 8th or 7th century BC), too, mentions Ūta-Napišti[31] and cites distances in *bēru*[32]. On it, eight triangular outliers (*nagû*) are situated beyond the cosmic sea outside the earth. One is characterised by a phrase with an incompletely preserved subject ([x x x x] *a-šar ti-še-'-ru ina ḫa-an-du-ri-šú ⌜ú/šam⌝*-[x-x]) which has been translated as "the p]lace where … dawns at its entrance"[33]. According to Horowitz, this "island" was probably "located in the far east, where the Sun rises" and "may refer to a gate of sunrise at the eastern end of the earth's surface, or to part of such a gate.[34]" It would have been this *nagû* which Gilgameš visited[35].

The fragmentary line may also be restored and translated as "where storms whirl around?"[36] and this reading is perhaps preferable because any cartographer with even an inkling of astronomical knowledge knows that there is no fixed point of sunrise as this varies throughout the year, the variation increasing with latitude. Not noticed by Horowitz is that the whirling storms are redolent of the "north wind" blowing into Gilgameš's face three quarters through the journey. George's suggestion that this "north wind" was a draught signalling the approach of the far end of the tunnel[37] and Heimpel's idea that it was held to be the very wind which rekindles the sun every morning[38] are compelling, but do not explain why the wind should be a northern one, especially if Gilgameš was headed east.

The appearance of the north wind in this context is a major crux. Although the lines in question are severely damaged, enough survives to be confident that Gilgameš could sense the north wind in front of him towards the end of the dark road. That the four winds of the cardinal directions were an abstraction, be it a practically universal one, is evident. In a different context, Horowitz remarked that the north wind of Mesopotamian literature was probably the prevailing northwestern wind, that is to say, the one blowing from the northwest towards the southeast.[39] Such a direction would be impossible to square with Gilgameš's approach of the point of sunrise. Huxley concluded that "the sun's gate protected

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[31] British Museum 92687, *recto*, 10´, tr. Horowitz 1998, 23, *cf.* 36. Horowitz 1998, 20-42 supersedes 1988.

[32] British Museum 92687, captions 18-19, 22, tr. Horowitz 1998, 22, 25.

[33] British Museum 92687, *verso*, 25´, tr. Horowitz 1998, 24-25. The meaning of *ḫandūru*, tentatively translated as 'entrance', is obscure (Oppenheim 1956, 79 *s.v.* 'ḫandūru').

[34] Horowitz 1998, 39.

[35] Horowitz 1998, 100 note 12.

[36] Horowitz 1998, 39 note 31, not yet in 1988, 164 note 24. In this case, a word meaning "storms" is assumed to be the subject and *ti-še-'-ru* is derived from *še'ēru* ('to whirl' – Reiner 1992, 259 *s.v.* 'še'ēru') instead of *šêru* ("to rise early" – 1992, 335 *s.v.* 'šêru').

[37] George 2003, 867.

[38] Heimpel 1986, 142, 148-151, followed by Woods 2009, 198.

[39] Horowitz 1998, 196-197, 204.

by the Scorpion-Men, the gate through which the north wind could blow, was the gate on the summer solstice", which she thought was located by the Babylonians in Cancer, the northernmost constellation in the zodiac.[40] The association with a particular grouping of stars might explain the connection with the scorpion-men, as noted, but irrespective of that, a mid-summer timing affords a possible answer to the question of the relationship between sunrise and the north wind. At the latitude of Babylon, the sun's maximum amplitude – the angular difference between true east and the direction of sunrise – approximates 28º, so that a northeastern wind, originating from beyond the cosmic sea, could have fanned Gilgameš's face if he was travelling towards the place of sunrise around the summer solstice. In practical terms which would have been meaningful to ancient travellers in this part of the world, a feasible candidate for this wind was the easterly or trade wind, which blows predominantly from the northeast in the northern hemisphere, especially in winter, and is the prevailing wind in Iran and the Persian Gulf – to the east of Babylonia.

The northeastern angle generates other puzzles, however. How would the Babylonians have envisioned the tunnel in relation to the cyclical change of the places of sunrise? It stands to reason that they believed it to alter its location in the course of a year, a slow swaying or rocking between northern and southern extremities which is consistent with the appearance of the zodiacal light and perhaps also reminiscent of the motif of the Symplegades. For Near Eastern latitudes, the morning appearance of the zodiacal light is typical of late summer or of autumn. This creates a dilemma. If the event transpired at summer solstice, the point of sunrise would have been well north of east, but the trade wind would have been weaker and the pre-dawn variant of the zodiacal light would have been less likely to be discerned. Conversely, around the autumn equinox the sun's rising would have been due east, but the trade wind would have been pronounced, with a marked northeastern origin, and the morning zodiacal light would have been expected. If it can be assumed that the Babylonians, at least in this case, employed the word for the north wind not in a strict geometric sense, but more practically as the name for the trade wind, wherever it happened to blow, perhaps in the belief that it fans the sun's fire in the morning, the second alternative recommends itself.

Woods compared the dark region traversed by Gilgameš to the caption "where the Sun is not seen" (*a-šar* ^{d}*šamaš la innammaru* (nu.igi.lá)) inscribed in another one of the outliers on the *mappa mundi*[41]. Although Woods located this outlier to the northeast, he felt – as did Huxley before him[42] – that the designation "may equally apply to all the *nagû*s that radiate from the cosmic sea". However, the

[40] Huxley 2000, 126, *cf.* 128, 133, 135. Huxley argued further that the Babylonians associated the north with kingship.

[41] British Museum 92687, caption 18, tr. Horowitz 1998, 22; Woods 2009, 199.

[42] Huxley 1997, 191.

idea that the darkness was believed to surround the entire earth remains purely hypothetical, plausible though it is. In addition, the outlying regions were beyond the sea, so that Gilgameš could not yet have reached them at the stage when he was inside Māšu. The identifiable features on the map rather suggest that this region lay to the north[43], if not the northwest. In describing the north as sun-free, the map maker could have been motivated by the simple observation that, as seen from the northern hemisphere, the sun never appears in that quadrant of the sky[44] – or perhaps some knowledge of the polar night had percolated into Mesopotamian culture. With Gilgameš this may not have had anything to do. As seen, his trail was probably dark because the sun had not yet entered Māšu or been 'lit', not because it was subterranean or distant from the sun.

Gilgameš and Alexander the Great

A very similar landscape was visited by that other legendary explorer of the earth's furthest reaches – Alexander the Great (356-323 BC)[45]. The central questions will be in which cardinal direction this scenery was to be found and to what extent the accounts drew on the Gilgameš traditions, whether in textual or oral format, as opposed to historical fact or sheer fancy.

According to the romances, Alexander went on a quest for the "land of the blessed" or the fountain of life, which took him from Persia towards "the end of the world, where the sky touched the earth"[46]. The earliest extant versions – Greek and Armenian – contain enough hints to indicate that their authors located this destination in the remote north. The king and his entourage were guided by a star or constellation which the Greek version identified as "the chariot of the pole/sky" and "the chariot of the stars" (τὴν ἀμαξαν τοῦ πόλου and τὴν ἀμαξαν των ἀστέρων)[47], which is Ursa Major, and the Armenian version as "Arcturus",

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[43] Horowitz 1998, 32-33, 100.

[44] Horowitz 1998, 33.

[45] The comparison was made as early as Meissner 1882, II (*non vidi*); 1894a, 11-19; 1894b, 189; Jeremias 1887, 89 note 1; Lidzbarski 1892, 109-116; 1893, 263-275. For an up-to-date, though poorly edited, discussion of parallels between the sagas of Gilgameš and Alexander, beyond the narrow focus investigated here, see Henkelman 2010.

[46] Alexander the Great, *Letter to Olympias*, in pseudo-Callisthenes (originally probably 3rd century BC), *Historia Alexandri Magni* (*Romance of Alexander the Great*; Greek version, MS. L [5th century AD or later]), 2.41, tr. Stoneman 1991, 123. Nawotka (2017, 31, 188) claimed that "Alexander's journey through the land of darkness and his search for the water of life", missing from the Syriac version, was an innovation of recension ß (5th century AD), which was ancestral to the extant Greek versions. However, the Armenian and Syriac versions do include accounts of this journey, as seen below – compare the comments in Henkelman 2010, 326-327.

[47] Alexander the Great, *Letter to Olympias*, in pseudo-Callisthenes, *Historia Alexandri Magni* (Greek version), 2.32, 40, ed. Gargiulo in Stoneman/Gargiulo 2012, 128, 136; *cf.* 425. Stoneman (1991, 115, 122) translates respectively "the constellation of the Plough" and "the Plough".

which is in the adjoining constellation of Boötes[48]. Like Gilgameš, the travellers passed through darkness, but in the Greek version – not the Armenian one – this experience is drawn out into two parts separated by Alexander's diving episode:

> "We soon came to a land full of ravines, where the way was very narrow and precipitous, and it took us eight days to cross it. In this place we saw beasts of all kinds, all quite unfamiliar to us. After we had crossed it, we came to an even more desolate place. … We set off again and made for the sea through the desert. … We could not even see the sun, and the sky remained black for a period of ten days. Then we came to a place by the sea and pitched our tents; we stayed in camp here for several days. In the middle of that sea, there was an island"[49].

Following Alexander's descent in a diving bell, the Greek text goes on:

> "After we had advanced for another two days, we came to a place where the sun does not shine. This is, in fact, the famous Land of the Blessed. … I counted the passing of time not by the sun, but by measuring out the leagues we covered and thus calculating both the time and the distance. … the darkness was impenetrable. … we had entered the Land of Darkness … Then we saw a light that did not come from sun, moon or stars"[50].

The tenebrous region visited by Alexander was thus, at least in this version, one where the sun never shines – in contrast to the Gilgameš tradition as explained above. Arguably, the description of this mysterious landscape incorporates rare travellers' impressions of the polar night interrupted intermittently by the *aurora borealis*. It was in this land that two fabulous birds with human faces admonished Alexander to pursue the far east instead of the north, which he did. Note also the thematic connection between Alexander's counting time in leagues and the *bēru*-problem in the *Epic of Gilgameš*.

A Syriac version dated to the period AD 628–636 has Alexander, in the wake of his sojourn in Egypt, discover "the terrible seas which surround the world",

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[48] Alexander the Great, *Letter to Olympias*, in pseudo-Callisthenes, *Historia Alexandri Magni* (Armenian version; 5th century AD), 209, tr. Wolohojian 1969, 112, 116.

[49] Alexander the Great, *Letter to Olympias*, in pseudo-Callisthenes, *Historia Alexandri Magni* (Greek version), 2.32, 38, tr. Stoneman 1991, 115; *cf.* Armenian version, 209, tr. Wolohojian 1969, 112, 115.

[50] Alexander the Great, *Letter to Olympias*, in pseudo-Callisthenes, *Historia Alexandri Magni* (Greek version), 2.39-40, tr. Stoneman 1991, 119-121; *cf.* Armenian version, 209, tr. Wolohojian 1969, 115-116. In the late γ-version of the Greek text, Alexander travels from Egypt to a "river of sand" before embarking on his expedition to the north (2.29-30, tr. Stoneman 1991, 175) and the island in the sea, with giant crabs, is perhaps located in India (2.34-35, tr. Stoneman 1991, 178-179).

which included "the foetid sea", in the direction of India before turning back to "the lofty mountain Mâsîs", from where "by the way of the north" – though without mention of an asterism – the party proceeds to "the Land of Darkness" with "the fountain of life" and finally the earth-encircling mountain range mentioned above, in which the king builds a massive gate[51]. With this combination of sites and the specific mention of the name 'Mâsîs', clearly related to 'Māšu'[52], this version approximates Gilgameš's itinerary even more closely. From a philological viewpoint, the episode of the circular ocean in this text looks like a counterpart of the incident with the sand river in the γ-version. This Syriac report is consistent with another, concise one, according to which the king "zog umher auf der Erde und stieg nach Osten hinab und ging bis zum Meer, das 'Feuer der Sonne' genannt wird" before relocating its native population to "die Grenzgebiete des Nordens innerhalb des Einganges, der das Tor der Welt im Norden ist"[53]. Yet another, earlier Syriac source relocates what is unmistakably the same series of explorations to the remote east entirely: venturing from "the Caspian gates", Alexander encounters "a desolate wilderness", the bitter river and the earth-encircling ocean before being encouraged to return by the anthropoprosopic birds[54]. The incidents associated with the circular ocean and its island reveal that this episode correlates with that of the sea and island in the Greek romance, which were there – except perhaps in the γ-edition – situated to the north. A fourth Syriac account is even more convoluted. Sailing a long way from Egypt in an unspecified direction, Alexander arrives at the "Fetid Sea" at the end of the world and proceeds to a place which can only be the far west:

> "… Alexander and his troops went up between the fœtid sea and the bright sea to the place where the sun enters the window of heaven; for the sun is the servant of the Lord, and neither by night nor by day does he cease from his travelling. The place of his rising is over the sea, and the people who dwell there, when he is about to rise, flee away and hide themselves in the sea, that they be not burnt by his rays; and he passes through the midst of the heavens to the place where he enters the window of heaven; and wherever he passes there are terrible mountains, and those

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[51] Pseudo-Jacob (of Serug), *Discourse upon Alexander, the Believing King, and upon the Gate which he Made against Āgōg and Māgōg*, 45-377, tr. Budge 1889, 166-184. See further Reinink 1983 (*non vidi*). Budge (1889, lxxxii) understood that it was "in India" that Alexander "begins to march in a northerly direction", but if Mâsîs' Armenian location was common knowledge – as it was for the "Masius" of classical antiquity – the starting point to the north would have been there. The Ethiopic version (129-150, tr. 1896, 228-262) features the same components of the expedition, but in a different order, while the name of the mountain appears as "Mûsâs".

[52] For a more sceptical assessment, see Henkelman 2010, 331 note 32, 335-336.

[53] Pseudo-Methodius, *Apocalypse* (Syriac; late 7th century AD), 8.3, 6, tr. Reinink 1993, 21-22. The same sea is also mentioned in 3.4, 5.8 (tr. 1993, 6, 14).

[54] Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Historia Alexandri Magni* (Syriac version; late 6th to early 7th century AD), 3.7, tr. Budge 1889, 96, 100-101.

> who dwell there have caves hollowed out in the rocks, and as soon as they see the sun passing [over them], men and birds flee away from before him and hide in the caves, for rocks are rent by his blazing heat and fall down, and whether they be men or beasts, as soon as the stones touch them they are consumed. And when the sun enters the window of heaven, he straightway bows down and makes obeisance before God his Creator; and he travels and descends the whole night through the heavens, until at length he finds himself where he rises"[55].

Descent from there along a Mount 'Mûsâs' curiously precedes a sequence of events similar to that in the versions cited above: reaching Armenia, the king travels to "the confines of the north", again passes a mountain by the name of "Mûsâs" and builds the famous gate against the barbarians of the north[56]. Comparison with the other versions suggests that an early editor changed the "window of heaven" to which Alexander travelled from one of sunrise to one of sunset.

Arabic legend probably built on Syriac tradition[57] in similarly locating the "Gebiet der Finsternis" – where Ḏū al-Qarnayn ("he of the two horns"), who is Alexander, sought the spring of life – in "einem Gebiet, das am Horn der Sonne liegt", which is also described as "den Ort des Untergangs der Sonne"; the darkness turned out to be "wie Rauch, nicht wie die Finsternis der Nacht", while mention is also made of the light "das nicht wie das Licht der Sonne und des Mondes war"[58]. The same text references a tradition that Alexander reached Qāf, where he learned of mountains of ice and hail in the regions beyond[59]. To complete the confusion, finally, the *Babylonian Talmūd* has Alexander visit "the Mountains of Darkness" on his way to Africa[60].

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[55] *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander* (after AD 628), tr. Budge 1889, 148.

[56] *A Christian Legend Concerning Alexander*, tr. Budge 1889, 148-149.

[57] Compare Stoneman 1991, 29.

[58] Al-Ṯa'labī, *'Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*, tr. Busse 2006, 465-466. Confusingly, Brinner (2002, 617) renders the first indication of the place as "the land that is on the first ray of the sun", which rather suggests the east. Presumably, the horn was one of the "two rays (horns) of the sun" which Alexander had seen in a dream and which prefigured his journeys "to the ends of the Earth, eastward and westward", tr. 2002, 609.

[59] Wahb ibn Munabbih al-Ṣana'anī (AD *ca.* 655-*ca.*732), in al-Ṯa'labī, *'Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*, tr. Brinner 2002, 9. In this same compilation of folklore, a Bulūqiyā "reached Mount Qāf and lo! an angel was standing on Mount Qāf, and Mount Qāf surrounded the world with green corundum" – 'Abdallāh ibn Salām al-Isrā'īlī (AD 663), to Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn 'Abdallāh al-Ḥazraqī'ī, in al-Ṯa'labī, *'Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*, tr. 2002, 600. Bulūqiyā, too, was told of magical worlds beyond Qāf. Dalley (1991; 1994; *cf.* Brinner 2002, XXV, 593 note 4) argues that he owed his name and much of his *mythos* to Gilgameš, but George (2003, 65-68; *cf.* Henkelman 2006, 829 note 49; 2010, 341-342 note 77) would concede no more than that the two stories share some "points of detail" which are little more than "the stuff of fairy tales".

[60] *Babylonian Talmūd*: *Tāmīd* (*Always*), 4 (32a), tr. Simon 1948, 28.

To Anderson, it was clear that the northern direction was original in both the legends of Gilgameš and Alexander: "The northern journey of Alexander in his romance was in large measure due to the influence of his identification with Gilgamesh, even though Gilgamesh was not credited with having built a gate"[61]. Lipiński, in remarking on the parallels between the pursuits of Gilgameš and Alexander, discerns a conflation of two traditions regarding the location of the "land of the blessed", in which Gilgameš's journey was eastbound and northbound respectively, in the former case associated with the direction of the sunrise and in the latter with the Tigris tunnel[62]. The analysis given above modifies this hypothesis insofar as the contradiction would have been absent from the earlier Gilgameš tradition, as still reflected in the standard Babylonian version. The directional differences in the later transmission of either the Gilgameš or the Alexander stories could have sprung secondarily from alternative readings of the *Epic of Gilgameš*. The ancient editors of the respective variant versions could have overlooked the sun's rising north of east in summer or the possibility that the 'north wind' as an easterly could well be felt when facing east in the autumn. In interpreting tablet 9 of the epic, some could have settled for due east because of the link with sunrise and others for north based on the mention of the north wind and identification of the Tigris tunnel in the northern 'mountains of darkness' as the passage through Māšu's interior.

The divergence of interpretation could also have taken place in the domain of orally transmitted folklore – that "broad stream of tales that were subject to constant adaptation, variation and contamination and that circulated within an ancient cultural continuum stretching from the Aegean to Iran and beyond"[63]. After all, "the assumption of existence of popular, oral traditions (not necessarily independent from, but rather being informed by, and influencing more literary, textual traditions) in traditional societies should … be axiomatic, even though such traditions will never be as tangible as one would like"[64]. Stoneman prefers to derive Alexander's search for immortality from purely Greek instead of oriental literary sources, while other motifs would owe more to Egyptian than Babylonian or Levantine input[65]. He raised valid points, but Henkelman's argument that Babylonian influence is not so much indicated by shared individual motifs as by a more comprehensive narrative chain takes the edge. It does not necessarily require an extreme geographical voyage for a hero

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[61] Anderson 1928, 141. Gilgameš did construct the famous wall of Uruk.

[62] Lipiński 1971, 48-50. See 1971, 44-48 for other literary evidence for the land of the souls beyond 'northern mountains of darkness', which Lipiński locates in the northeast of Anatolia. For direct links between Alexander and the Tigris tunnel, see Hartmann 1913, 749.

[63] Henkelman 2010, 323-324 and *in toto*; 2006, 810-815, 825-828, 847. *Cf.* George 2003, 17-18, 20-22; Dalley 1994, 263; and already Lidzbarski 1892, 112; 1893, 265-266, 270.

[64] Henkelman 2010, 343 note 81.

[65] Stoneman 1992, 95-101, 106.

to deal with his desire to overcome death; it is in the combination of a partly failed quest for immortality and a successful journey to the ends of the earth, with striking common elements such as daunting mountains, fabulous beasts, gates, the surrounding ocean, darkness and an eastern or northern direction, that dependence of the Alexander romances on oriental lore is most manifest – and, granting that a strictly textual link between the respective bodies of Gilgameš and Alexander literature is problematic, it is in the slippery reservoir of oral traditions that the connection was most likely forged. The Alexander romances, like Gilgameš's tale, presuppose a crude flat-earth cosmology – on which the edge of the earth and the places of sunrise are fixed geographical locations – despite being written during the Hellenistic period and later, when the earth's sphericity was commonplace among *literati*. This very anachronism demands a predominantly foreign source; by contrast, truly classical reworkings of Greek myth tended to dress up the stories in language *au courant* with science, such as the earth's or sky's globularity, division into five latitudinal zones, relation to the ecliptic and so forth[66].

The matter of transcultural narrative tradition is further compounded by that of historicity. As it turns out, a plausible foundation in historical fact at least in their general outlines is also available for the respective northern and eastern itineraries supplied for Alexander by the romances[67]. The legend of a northern orientation for the excursion already circulated within Alexander's lifetime, for in a speech dating to 330 BC Aeschines remarked that "Alexander had withdrawn to the uttermost regions of the North, almost beyond the borders of the inhabited world …" (ἔξω τῆς ἄρκτου καὶ τῆς οἰκουμένης ὀλίγου δεῖν πάσης)[68]. Most likely, the episode alluded to occurred in the spring of 330 BC and informed the following passage in the history of Curtius (1st century AD?):

> "Alexander himself with 1000 horsemen and a light-armed force of infantry made for the interior of Persia just at the setting of the Vergiliae, and although troubled by frequent rains and almost intolerable weather, he nevertheless persisted in pushing on to his destination. He had come to a road blocked by perpetual snows, which the violence of the cold had bound with frost, and the horror of the places and the pathless solitudes terrified the wearied soldiers, who believed that they were looking upon the end of the habitable world.

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[66] Examples are too numerous to cite – *e.g.*, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.32-51; Virgil, *Aeneid*, 4.480-486; 6.791-800; *Georgics*, 1.231-251.

[67] Stoneman (1992, 97-98) made this point for the general notion of Alexander's thirst for exploration and immortality, but not for the geographic direction of his travels.

[68] Aeschines, *Against Ctesiphon*, 165, tr. Adams 1919, 436-437.

In amazement they beheld everything desolate and without any trace of human cultivation, and they demanded that they should turn back, before even daylight and the sky should fail them. The king forbore to rebuke his frightened men, but he himself sprang down from his horse, and on foot began to advance through the snows and over the hard-frozen ice. … At last, after passing through almost pathless forests, they found sporadic traces of human cultivation … on the thirtieth day after he had set out from Persepolis the king returned to the same place"[69].

Considering the distance the soldiers could reasonably have covered in a month, the region with perpetual snow must have been the Alborz range, which is almost exactly due north from Persepolis. The association in Greek astronomy of cold weather and darkness with the north could have played a role in the genesis of the legend.

Other aspects of Alexander's legendary journey must have been based on subsequent experiences further east. The same narrator tells that the army later – this will have been in May 329 BC – crossed the land of the Parapanisadae, now called the Hindu Kush, and found it to be a forlorn "land of darkness":

"They look in great part toward the very cold northern pole, on the west they are adjacent to the Bactriani, on the south their territory slopes toward the Indian sea. … But such deep snows cover the ground and are bound so fast by ice and almost perpetual cold, that no trace is to be found even of birds or of any wild beast. What may be called a dim shadow of the sky rather than light, and resembling night, broods over the earth, so that objects which are near at hand can hardly be made out. The army, then, abandoned in this absence of all human civilization, endured all the evils that could be suffered, want, cold, fatigue, despair. … such was the darkness that the only thing which revealed the buildings was their smoke"[70].

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[69] Curtius, *Historiae Alexandri Magni* (*Histories of Alexander the Great*), 5.6. 12-19, tr. Rolfe 1946a, 382-385. The Vergiliae are the Pleiades.

[70] Curtius, *Historiae Alexandri Magni*, 7.3. 7, 11-12, 15, tr. Rolfe 1946b, 144-149. Stoneman (1991, 13; and in Stoneman/Gargiulo 2012, 434) claims that the motif of the "Land of Darkness seems to derive from accounts of the Hindu Kush or the Zagros Mountains". Although his inclusion of this land among "*The Wonders of the East*" is correct from a Hellenocentric perspective, this passage and the earliest versions of the romances – as seen – situated it to the north of Alexander's Persian base and this could have been the actual impression of the soldiers involved. Woods (2009, 184, *cf.* 199) probably relies on Stoneman as he places the "Land of Darkness" of the Greek romance at the "eastern frontier" of India. Note that the Greek scientists of the time, having only recently embraced a spherical model of the earth, were only just beginning to understand latitude.

The dim light, mythologised as the pall associated with the world's northern frontier, was probably caused by nothing more marvellous than persistent fog. And towards the end of the conquest, in December 326 or early 325 BC, the pioneers sailed out into the Ocean – south of Pattala in modern Pakistan: "… the pilots made known to the king that they felt sea air and that the Ocean was not far distant. … without bloodshed, they were taking the very edge of the world; not even Nature could go farther; soon they would see what was unknown except to the immortals. … It was nearly the third hour, when the Ocean, in its regular change, began to be carried on a flood-tide into the river …"[71]. According to Plutarch, it was at the Ganges that Alexander was "eager to behold the ocean, and having built many passage-boats equipped with oars, and many rafts, he was conveyed down the rivers in a leisurely course"[72]. Presumably, Plutarch was using the name 'Ganges' (Γάγγην) for the Indus River.

Tension between the historical and the legendary information needs not be absolute, however. Not every great warrior or coloniser inspired enduring legends and the process of mythologizing Alexander's eastern conquests must have started somewhere. The historic occasions cited above, combined with Alexander's narcissism and overweening ambitions, could collectively have formed the narrative basis for Alexander's fictional trek towards mythical realms – even if the highest latitudes Alexander reached in his campaigns were hardly much further north than Macedonia. Alexander did aspire to divinity and visit the northern recesses of the Far East, but the former was not his motivation for the latter in the sense that some magic water or herb from the orient was needed to fulfil the dream. Some template in folklore must have supplied that notion and thereby adapted the purpose of Alexander's marches, turning him from a historic hero into a legendary tragic anti-hero in the process. The more fantastic elements of the legends – such as the zone of absolute darkness, the association with the land of spirits and the missed opportunity to obtain everlasting life – could have taken shape conjointly under the influence of the Gilgameš traditions, prompted by the northern or eastern orientation towards the limits of the known world which they shared with the Macedonian's real undertakings. As noted, a written version of the *Epic of Gilgameš* does not need to have been involved in such traditions.

The ancient composers of the Alexander romances would thus unanimously have interpreted Gilgameš's passage through the darkness as a straightforward

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[71] Curtius, *Historiae Alexandri Magni*, 9.9. 3-5, 9, tr. Rolfe 1946b, 442-445, *cf.* 4.8.3; 9.1.3; 9.2.26, 28; 9.3.7, 13-14; 9.4.17-21; 9.6.20; Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri* (*Alexander's Upward Expedition*), 5.26.1; Seneca the Elder, *Controversies*, 7.7.19; *Suasoriae* (*Suasory Speeches*), 1.1-16.

[72] Plutarch, *Vitae Parallelae* (*Parallel Lives*): *Vita Alexandri et Caesaris* (*Life of Alexander and Caesar*; 17): *Vita Alexandri* (*Life of Alexander*), 63, tr. Perrin 1919, 402-403. Θάλασσαν is better translated as 'sea' than "ocean".

expedition from the earth's perceived centre to a point on its outermost boundary and this reinforces the take on the episode promoted by Horowitz, George and Woods.

Global parallels to Gilgameš's march

Incontestably, Gilgameš's penetration into the far ends of the earth was by no means historical, but a motif springing from the inexhaustible fount of living mythical tradition. Casting the net wider still than even Alexander's horizon, a credible mythological *Sitz im Leben* of this episode in the *Epic of Gilgameš* is the global storyline of one or more male mortal heroes or a demigod undertaking a terrestrial journey towards the distant point of sunrise or sunset, either to visit the sun or the magical spiritual realm beyond. Recurrent elements in such stories are that the protagonist wishes to meet the sun, his missing father or grandfather, a distant ancestor or a combination of these; that he is not supposed to do so as a living human being but is enabled by magical powers; that he negotiates mountains, a dark zone, a great sea or a combination of them; that he arrives around the time of sunrise or sunset or meets the morning star; that the journey takes him through a narrow aperture in the sky or an equivalent of the Symplegades; that wind blows through this passage; that the hero attacks the sun or additional unwanted suns with arrows, a club or a noose for being too hot, too low or too fast; and that he forces some concession from the sun. While this theme, in all its kaleidoscopic variety, is widespread indeed[73], the notion of a mortal hero pursuing the sun along its path in the sky or netherworld is very rare, if at all existent in the latter case[74].

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[73] *E.g.*, Bartens 2003, 75 (Saami); Dolidze/Chikovani 1999, 36 (Georgia); Li/Luckert 1994, 107-110 (Hui); Grimble 1972, 132-133 (Kiribati); Drabbe 1940, 317-318 (Tanimbar); Hewitt 1928, 792-796 (Onondaga); Lowie 1924, 60-62 (Ute), 142-147, 198, 227 (Paiute); Curtin/Hewitt 1918, 607-626 (Seneca, Iroquois); Boas 1917, 43-44 (Nlaka´pamux); Gutmann 1914, 144-145 (Chaga); Evans 1913, 433 (Dusun); Cole 1913, 126-127 and Benedict 1913, 20-22, with Raats 1969, 61, 86-90, 102-103 (Bagobo); Hofmeyer 1910, 332 (Shilluk); Mooney 1900, 247, 255-256 (Cherokee); Laufer 1899, 749-750 (Nanai); Stevenson 1891, 279 (Diné); Turner 1884, 200, 292 (Polynesia); Powell 1881, 24-25, 54-56 (Ute); Gill 1876, 61-62 (Mangaia); Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1.773-779 (Phaethon's myth is clearly Greek heritage, though likely adapted to Graeco-Roman taste). Compare van der Sluijs 2012, 21-24; 2018a, 11, 41, 44-45, 150-151, 207, 221-222 note 680, 222-223, 230-234, 240-241, 250-253; 2018b, 99-100, 138.

[74] *E.g.*, Koch-Grünberg 1916, 52 #13, 230-238 (Pemon). The Warao (Venezuela) base their custom of smoke-induced shamanic trance on the example of a mythical child-ancestor who – in ecstatic flight – traced a path of solidified smoke from the centre of the earth towards the zenith and thence towards the "House of Tobacco Smoke" forged in the east by the "Creator Bird of the Dawn" (*Domu Hokonamana Ariawara*), Wilbert 1972, 65-70. At the latitude of the Warao territory, a path from the zenith to the east could overlap with the sun's diurnal course. Curtin (1912, 383) presents a Modoc tale of the creator who travelled overland to the east before following the sun's road to the middle of the sky; however, this appears to be a creation myth reporting how the sun itself came to be in the sky.

For example, the Abaza (Caucasus region) related the tale of the Nart Sosruquo, whose mother Satanaya advised him how to retrieve a wineskin with millet seeds stolen from the Narts:

> "… you must overcome sixty mountains on your way, from sunrise until the sun reaches late morning. From late morning until midday, you will cross sixty rivers. From midday until sunset, you will cross three big seas. When you cross these three seas, you will see the place in which the sun sets, in a big valley. You should go up to its edge …"[75].

The hero then "went out and he crossed sixty mountains, sixty large rivers, and three seas. In the evening, when the sun was ready to set, he saw the picture Satanaya told him about, and he stepped up to the edge of the valley".

The concept of a "sun path" at the fringes of the known world, whether it be one travelled by the sun or in order to reach the sun, is more developed in other parallels. In the mythology of the Menominee (northeast Wisconsin), a "boy … started out to where the Sun's path touched the earth"[76]. The Niitsítapi (Great Plains, North America) describe the peregrinations of the legendary hero Poïa ('Scarface') on his way to his grandfather, the sun:

> "Poïa resolved to go to the home of the Sun God. … Poïa journeyed alone across the plains and through the mountains, enduring many hardships and great dangers. Finally he came to the Big Water (Pacific Ocean). … On the evening of the fourth day, he beheld a bright trail leading across the water. He travelled this path until he drew near the home of the Sun, when he hid himself and waited"[77].

In another version of this myth, Scarface reaches the sun by crossing "a big water", "Very deep and black", with the help of two swans and then following a trail on which he meets A-pi-su´-ahts ('Early Riser'), who is the morning star and the sun's son; the sun "took Scarface to the edge of the sky, and they looked down and saw it. It is round and flat, and all around the edge is the jumping-off place [or walls straight down]"[78].

The difficult portal is a common motif in tales of this nature. According to a version of a common myth along the Pacific coast of northern North America,

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[75] Colarusso 2002, 205.
[76] Hoffman 1896, 181-182.
[77] McClintock 1910, 497.
[78] Grinnell 1892, 97-99, 101. Note that the motif of viewing the earth from above is also present in the Alexander legends (see, conveniently, Stoneman 1991, 123) and just possibly even in a garbled Gilgameš tradition preserved in Greek (Henkelman 2006, 838, 844-847).

“Raven decided to go to the Chief of the Sky’s house to obtain daylight. He traveled east, going through a crashing door to enter the bright sky world”[79]. The Chukchi (northeastern Siberia) contended that one “way to reach the upper world is to go in the direction of the dawn, and ascend a long, steep path that leads to the sky”[80]. Of special interest is that these same people traced the “winds, which blow from all sides of the horizon”, to the repeated opening and shutting of “moving gates” at the “four corners” of the horizon[81]. The Odawa (mostly Ontario) had a small group of young men traverse much forest, cross “an immense body of water”, pass through “another land” and finally jump across the dark chasm between the earth’s edge and the descending sky with the aim of reaching the “beautiful plain” beyond:

> “… it is the sky descending on the edge, but it keeps moving up and down … and when it moves up, you will see a vacant space between it and the earth. … A chasm of awful depth is there, which separates the unknown from this earth, and a veil of darkness conceals it.
>
> … when the sky came down, its pressure would force gusts of wind from the opening, so strong that it was with difficulty they could keep their feet, and the sun passed but a short distance above their heads. They, however, approached boldly, but had to wait some time before they could muster courage enough to leap through the dark veil that covered the passage”[82].

The travellers meet the great benign spirit Manabozho just before the prohibitive crossing, who tells them how to proceed and bestows upon them the extended lives they wish for, though not quite in the way some of them expect. This twist in the expected attainment of longevity resembles the fate of Gilgameš, who was granted the opportunity to enjoy everlasting life by Ūta-Napišti but let it slip. Having leaped across, the remaining members of the group make the moon’s acquaintance and, coming “upon an immense plain, declining in the direction of the sun’s approach”, are allowed to follow the sun on his morning trajectory – a rare motif, as noted – and be lowered from the sky directly above their home[83]. The story bristles with similarities to Gilgameš’s exploits, but a version recounted

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[79] Vogt 1996, 43.

[80] Bogoras 1904, 331.

[81] Bogoras 1902, 60; 1904, 332. Compare the discussion in Erkes 1925-1926, 51-52.

[82] Schoolcraft 1839, 42-54. As told, the great sea in this myth is evidently the Atlantic Ocean and the land immediately beyond it, though itself still far from the earth’s edge, Europe. Krickeberg (1924, 377) recognises the Symplegades motif and the Chukchi parallel regarding the winds.

[83] Schoolcraft 1839, 55-57. The participation in the sun’s journey cannot be construed as a parallel to the old hypothesis that Gilgameš raced through the sun’s subterranean tunnel, because it is the sun’s course in the day sky that is followed, not the night sky, and the actors do so in order to go home, not on the outward journey. An appropriate comparison is rather to the celestial ascents of Scarface, Alexander, Etana and their congeners.

by two Potawatomi informants from Parry Island (Ontario), who were fellow Algonquians, presents even more points of agreement. In this, the incentive for the journey at the outset is explicitly to obtain "long life" from beings in the spiritual world and the tricky gateway behind the "great water" is not an intermittent aperture between the sky and the earth but a mysterious tunnel inside a mountain:

> "Once an Indian decided to walk east to the place of sunrise in order that he might obtain the blessing of long life. He selected five lads to accompany him, and bade them ask their mothers to make them many moccasins, both large and small, since they would travel for a very long time. A sixth lad asked permission to join the party, and after long hesitation the leader consented. Each lad was exactly five years of age. As soon as their moccasins were finished the party set out to the eastward. … Finally they reached the great water. There also was a canoe, in which they embarked and paddled eastward. They paddled steadily for ten days, or ten years according to human reckoning, for they were journeying like *manidos*, and a year is but a day in *manido*-land. Now they came to a mountain. The lads could see nothing on it, but after their leader had walked around it four times a door opened into its interior, and an old woman, *Nokomis*, the moon, invited them to enter"[84].

The comment that the boys journeyed with the supernatural prowess of *manido*s conveys a similar sentiment as the Babylonian conviction that Gilgameš accomplished his feats because of being divine for two thirds[85]. As in the Odawa tradition, the visitors – once on the other side – meet the sun and traverse a section of its path:

> "When they had stayed in *Nokomis*' home for ten days, that is to say ten years, the sun said to them, 'Today you shall walk with me across the sky; but first I shall take you to the home of *Madji Manido*, the Bad Spirit.' The leader told the boys to walk exactly in his footsteps, and they all followed the sun to the home of the Bad Spirit. … The Bad Spirit himself seemed to be of fire, transparent. He said to them, '*Nokomis* has approved of your desires for long lives, and I give my consent.' Next they travelled to the home of *Kitchi Manido*, the Good Spirit, which was fronted with a pathway and trees of silver. The Good Spirit said to them likewise, '*Nokomis* has approved of your desires. I also assent.' The party continued to follow the sun, and at noon came to a hole in the sky where the sun rests at mid-day. … The hole was exactly over the centre of the earth, and the sun bade the Indians descend through it to their home. They

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[84] Jenness 1935, 31. Hints that the travel led across the Atlantic Ocean and through Europe are lacking from this version, suggesting that these elements were originally absent from the Odawa version, too.

[85] *Epic of Gilgameš* (standard Babylonian version), 1.48, tr. George 2003, 540-541.

> descended by a pathway invisible to mortal eyes, the five youths still treading in their leader's footsteps"[86].

Unlike Gilgameš, the youths in the Potawatomi myth manage to retain the gift they received in their audience with the two spirits, although one of them – the sixth boy – earns his bold wish of gaining immortality by being changed into the permanent spot on the moon. An Australian example of a similar arduous journey undertaken in order to reach the spirit world, relayed by the Yolngu (east Arnhem Land), is the story of Yaolngura, who visited "the other side of the waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria, where the sun gets up", saw there how the morning star Barnumbir is launched into the sky on a string, "knew that this was the land of the ghosts" and so earned fame as a man who "had come back from the land of the dead as a true human being"[87].

From the viewpoint of the Wichí (Argentinian Chaco), "to visit the sun" was an exclusively spiritual endeavour, reserved for the shamans equipped to face the many obstacles on their way. These include a narrow trail and clashing gates:

> "To protect the entrance to his abode the Sun has made a slippery trail. … The medicine-men know how to escape this danger. They transform themselves into wax and thus stick to the trail, crossing it without running the risk of being devoured by the Sun. The Sun closes the entrance to this abode with a sort of trap. This trap consists of two beams which knock against each other and crush those who try to get between them. Medicine-men who have had no experience get crushed. Those who are skilful transform themselves into humming birds (*cinax*) and thus pass quickly between the beams before they have time to close together. Behind the beams the Sun has stretched traps … The Sun's abode is surrounded by a palisade of cacti with only one small window … The Sun is very surprised when medicine-men come to him in spite of beams, traps and fences … When a medicine-men arrives at the Sun's house, after having overcome all the obstacles, he is welcomed by the Sun, who is no longer angry …"[88].

However such folk stories and their universality are to be explained, they almost indisputably are the stuff out of which the legend of Gilgameš was originally composed[89]. One has to steer clear of a tunnel vision which would dismiss out of

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[86] Jenness 1935, 31.

[87] Warner 1937, 524-528.

[88] Métraux 1939, 95-96.

[89] In addition to a hypothetical association with the zodiacal light, possible partial explanations are in James/van der Sluijs 2016, 72, 83-84 (cometary) and van der Sluijs 2012, 21-24 (auroral). On a psychological instead of an astronomical plane, Schroter-Kunhardt (1993, 225-226) interpreted Gilgameš's adventures in search of immortality as a clinical near-

hand their possible distant resonance in Gilgameš's passage through the darkness. Just how persistent oral traditions can be over long periods of time is indicated by phylogenetic studies of folklore suggesting an age of 6000 years or more for some – and only some – motifs[90] and the accuracy with which quite a few myths describe natural events which occurred millennia ago but were only recently discovered independently through scientific research[91]. Gilgameš's historicity as a king of Uruk datable to the early 3rd millennium BC does not impede this conclusion any more than that the legendary details of Alexander's roaming preclude the real historical existence of this king; mythical motifs attach themselves to historical personalities in labyrinthine ways.

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Postscript
Just as this issue went to press, an early traveller's report came to light which provides remarkable support for the hypothesis advanced above regarding Mount Māšu. Edward Warren Hastings Scott-Waring (1783-1821) was a Bengal civil servant who frequently observed what was locally known as the 'false daybreak' (*ṣubḥ-i kāẓib*) during his sojourn in Persia and India. This experience prompted him to relay the following Persian folklore:

> "They account for this phenomenon in a most whimsical manner. They say, that as the sun rises from behind the Kohi Qaf (Mount Caucasus), it passes a hole perforated through the mountain, and that darting its rays

death experience (NDE). While his discussion is clumsy, the idea merits careful consideration and can be applied to other instances of the general cross-cultural theme outlined above. The notions of rapid travel through a dark passageway, a lush paradise in splendid colours, a congregation of disincarnate souls, a benevolent radiant being, acquisition of wisdom and a liminal river are classic components of near-death experiences, which are known to have occurred universally and throughout history; van der Sluijs (2009) analysed some classical examples. The impressions on rare recipients of such experiences may well have fed into traditional cosmological paradigms (*e.g.*, Shushan 2009; for Gilgameš, see especially pp. 144-147, 150-151, 158-160, 167, 172, 189), along with sensory observations of nature such as the phenomena listed above. Gilgameš's journey to the far reaches of the earth while alive could have been one which Babylonians believed the soul of every person to make upon death.

[90] *E.g.*, Tehrani/d'Huy 2017; da Silva/Tehrani 2016, 8.

[91] An example is the mythical memory of the formation of the Crater Lake by an eruption of Mount Mazama (Oregon) – Vitaliano 2007, 2-3; Masse *et alii* 2007, 18-19; Shanklin 2007, 166; Barber/Barber 2004, 6-10, 13, 27, 29, 43.

> through it, it is the cause of the *Soobhi Kazim*, or this temporary appearance of day-break. As it ascends the earth is again veiled in darkness, until the sun rises above the mountain, and brings with it the *Soobhi Sadiq*, or real morning." (Scott Waring 1807, 107).

That the 'false dawn' is a designation of the zodiacal light in the Islāmic world is beyond dispute. Recorded long before the archaeological discovery of the *Epic of Gilgameš*, the cited tradition thus links the zodiacal light to Mount Qāf in a manner strongly evocative of that suggested above for Mount Māšu. The main difference is that this snippet of Persian belief has the sun pass over the distant mountain instead of through it, as argued here. Regardless, the astounding implication is that the cosmology underlying the *Epic* survived in some form until the early 19th century.

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Marinus Anthony van der Sluijs
Vancouver, Canada

Consulting Scholar
University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology
Philadelphia, PA
United States of America
marinus@mythopedia.info