

<b>Institution:</b> SOAS University of London		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 28 – History		
<b>Title of case study:</b> The Epic of Gilgamesh: Ancient Poem as Modern Inspiration		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2000–2017		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Andrew George	Professor of Babylonian	1985–2020
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> August 2013–July 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The Epic of Gilgamesh is the oldest long poem in history, with universal themes that make it much read today, 150 years after its rediscovery. Research at SOAS transformed the understanding of the epic, both by the first decipherment of many new parts of the poem, and by making translations which took this new knowledge outside academia. This work inspired novelists, poets, musicians, visual artists and performers, and produced reference resources for university teachers and students worldwide. Through media coverage and public events, the research also increased awareness and appreciation of the epic among the general public.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The Epic of Gilgamesh is an ancient Babylonian narrative about a hero who tried to escape death. It originated in Mesopotamia in the 18th century BC and for two thousand years was passed down on clay tablets in cuneiform writing. It was then lost entirely before being rediscovered as fragments in the 19th century. By the 1980s all previous scholarly editions were very out of date, partly because of advances in knowledge of the language and writing system, and partly because of the steady accretion of many dozens of additional clay tablets.</p> <p>Professor Andrew George's work on the epic began in 1985 when he joined SOAS and has continued to the present. The research started with reading and drawing all existing manuscripts to create a critical edition. This involved study of cuneiform tablets in many museums worldwide. George's 2003 critical edition [3.1] assembled in one place not only all the Gilgamesh fragments that had been published previously, but also added a large number of previously unpublished pieces, which he deciphered for the first time. This was completely original work. The increase in sources, from 112 in 1930 to 217 in 2003, changed modern understanding of the poem in major ways, by adding many new lines and even whole passages. The critical edition aimed not only to present the new material as an original contribution to Gilgamesh studies, but to do it in such a way that scholarship was provided with a definitive decipherment and a modern philological and critical response to the problems posed by the text. The key achievement was not just to bring knowledge of the poem completely up to date, but also to set new standards in Assyriological text-editing.</p> <p>The discovery since 2003 of further manuscripts, and a continuing engagement with the epic as a literary composition, have prolonged George's work on the poem, so that his research has continued throughout the period of eligibility, with further decipherments of texts and fragments of the poem in private collections in California and Norway, the archaeological museum in Suleimaniyah and the Near East seminar at Cornell University. Subsequent to the critical edition, George's research on the epic has produced eight journal articles and seven book chapters [3.2–3.7], and digital online publication of the primary sources in transliteration.</p>		

The major outcomes of this continuing work have been important advances in modern knowledge of the text, showing more clearly than before that the poem is the work of a great poet and profound thinker. The most substantial of these advances have been two fragments which fill large gaps in the existing text in unexpected ways. One reveals that the 'Wild Man' Enkidu was tamed not by one week of sexual intercourse, as was previously assumed, but by two separate weeks. The different narrative strategies deployed in describing them are one of the ways in which the poem explores Enkidu's psychological development as he changes from wild man to socialized man [3.6]. A second surprise was a passage which describes the Cedar Forest. Formerly it was imagined as an empty wilderness guarded by an evil ogre. The new lines describe a jungle presided over by a king entertained by a chorus of monkeys and birds. The passage counters received ideas of 'king' and 'court' with a different model – emerging as a nuanced study in the 'foreign other'. The same fragment reveals that when the heroes kill the king and cut down his trees, they suffer doubts about the morality of their actions, thus adding to the poem's capacity for criticizing the exercise of power [3.5].

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

3.1. George, A.R. (2003). *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*. Oxford: OUP, 2003 (Critical Edition). ISBN: 8601400348055. Available on request

**Positive reviews:** 'The most substantial text edition in the history of Assyriology, sets a lofty standard of excellence in all respects . . . the Epic... has gone from being one of the worst texts of a major work of cuneiform literature to the best' (B.R. Foster, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 125 [64]); 'Le travail est d'une qualité exceptionnelle' (D. Charpin, *Revue d'Assyriologie*, 100 [191]); 'A monument of brilliant Assyriological scholarship that laid the groundwork for the [poem's] reception in the twenty-first century' (T. Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh Among Us*, 153).

3.2. George, A.R. (2007). 'The Epic of Gilgamesh: Thoughts on Genre and Meaning'. In J. Azize and N. Weeks, eds, *Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria*. Leuven: Peeters, 2007, pp. 37–66. ISBN: 9789042918023. Available on request. **Full-text downloads from public-access repository: 9,335**

3.3. George, A.R. (2009). 'The Civilizing of Ea-Enkidu: An Unusual Tablet of the Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic'. *Revue d'Assyriologie*, 101, pp. 59–80. ISSN: 9782130566021. Available on request. **Peer-reviewed**

3.4. Texts Nos. 4–6, in George, A.R. (2010). *Babylonian Literary Texts in the Schøyen Collection*. Bethesda, Md: CDL Press, pp. 28–41. ISBN: 9781934309339. Available on request. **Positive review:** 'Non-Assyriologists will find this publication format very accessible . . . with the kind of philological erudition that we have come to expect from George' (A. Lenzi, *Review of Biblical Literature* 2011/1).

3.5. Al-Rawi, F.N.H. and George, A.R. (2014). 'Back to the Cedar Forest: The Beginning and End of Tablet V of the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh'. *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 66, pp. 69–90. <https://doi.org/10.5615/jcunestud.66.2014.0069> **Peer-reviewed. Full-text downloads from public-access repository: 13,861.**

3.6. George, A.R. (2018). 'Enkidu and the Harlot: Another Fragment of Old Babylonian Gilgamesh'. *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, 108, pp. 10–21. <https://doi.org/10.1515/za-2018-0002> **Peer-reviewed**

3.7. George, A.R. and Al-Rawi, F.N.H. (2019). 'Gilgamesh Dreams of Enkidu: An Old Babylonian Tablet of Gilgamesh in the Suleimaniyah Museum'. *Revue d'Assyriologie*, 113, pp. 131–38. <https://doi.org/10.3917/assy.113.0131> **Peer-reviewed**

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Andrew George's research achieved extensive impact on creative people, teachers and students in university, as well as on the general public. The 2003 critical edition [3.1] is the most popular download from the SOAS repository; between 2013 and 2020 it was downloaded more than 23,000 times by readers in 91 countries. George's other outputs on the epic [3.2–3.7] were downloaded between them more than 20,000 times. However, the key vehicle of impact was a definitive translation that George made with non-academic readership in mind: *The Epic of*

Gilgamesh (Penguin Classics, 2000; 2003; revised and extended in 2019 to account for the most recent discoveries of text). This translation had sold 260,000 copies as of June 2020 – of which 100,000 after 2013. It was translated into Spanish and spawned a growing progeny of secondary editions and reprints, including a Kindle edition (2016).

*Influencing the thought and practice of creative people*

George's work has reached novelists, performance artists and other creative people. From 2010 a London-based artist, produced a series of illustrations of the epic. Having read about the new fragment of the Cedar Forest episode in The Times in October 2015 [5.14], she tracked down George's 2014 article [3.5]. She explained how '[George's] illuminating translation and informative introduction really enhanced my creative process. Although I thought my work on Gilgamesh was completed, I kept in touch with the scientific "developments" and when the "Monkey Tablet" (Tablet V) was identified by [George] and a colleague, I added a picture to the series' [5.1a].

Having had his work on Gilgamesh exhibited in California (2016–2018) and New York (2018–2019), an award-winning Guyanese photographic artist indicated that George's work had been 'an incredible source and guide in my creative journey with Gilgamesh' [5.1b].

An acclaimed London-based storyteller who has been performing Gilgamesh on public stages for more than 30 years, also used George's translation to keep abreast of new knowledge. In particular, the 2014 article [3.5] led him to adapt his telling of the Cedar Forest episode. He wrote that it 'completely changed my imagining of this section of the story' [5.2a]. An award-winning composer developed a musical based on the Epic of Gilgamesh. He indicated that George's work had 'guided me a great deal' and 'helped me with my current project' [5.2b].

An author used passages from the Penguin translation in his To the House of the Sun (2015), telling George 'I never quite felt like I was at home until I found your translation . . . I simply trust it more than others' [5.3a]. Working on a novel inspired by Gilgamesh, writer George Monbiot acknowledged George's translation, especially in terms of 'triggering new ideas' [5.3b]. Poet Jenny Lewis, whose own version of the Gilgamesh epic was published as Gilgamesh Retold by Carcanet Books in 2018, wrote in another of her volumes of poetry, 'I should also like to acknowledge my debt to Andrew George for the inspiration his translation of the Epic of Gilgamesh (Penguin Classics, 2003) has provided for my own re-visioning' [5.3c].

Finally, in June 2020, to mark Galway's term as European Capital of Culture, performance company Macnas intended to stage a series of street events based upon Gilgamesh and other characters from the epic, using a script by Irish playwright Marina Carr based on George's work. Though the live event had to be cancelled Marina Carr wrote to George: 'I am deep in Gilgamesh and love your translations of the fragments and also the poems. I find them incredibly beautiful and so moving. Not to mention all your notes and essays above and around [the] work. Clearly it is a labour of love and a lifetime of expertise and work. I go back to you all the time' [5.3d].

*Informing university teaching*

A survey of Gilgamesh teaching by the Modern Language Association of America (MLA) found that George's The Epic of Gilgamesh was highly popular in university classrooms throughout the world. The MLA editor explained that '[This] translation continues to be taught across four continents, at both top-level and local universities, and in courses on world literature, religion, ancient history, comparative literature, and philology' [5.4]. The survey found that countries in which the translation was used included the US, Japan, UK, the Netherlands, Taiwan, Australia, France, Germany and Denmark.

The Professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard University, stated that 'it is in no small measure thanks to [George] that Gilgamesh has become the most often taught premodern text in American world literature courses' [5.5]. One teacher of Lewis & Clark College, described how George's translation 'has proven to be the most successful introduction with students to things

ancient Near Eastern. They love it' [5.6a]. A few years later, he added that the Penguin edition 'really stands out for me as perfectly done for teaching . . . I only wish it had been there when I was a graduate student' [5.6b]. A University of Vermont's student encounter with George's Penguin translation in class inspired him to want to translate it into Nepali, for publication in Nepal [5.7].

Spikes in sales of the Penguin translation at amazon.com occurred in August–September and January of each year, coinciding with the beginning of each semester. These spikes propelled it as high as 232nd best-seller in an enormous market [5.8a and b]. George's translation is the chosen text in online sites like the Annenberg Learner, which provides online teacher resources and professional development [5.9a and b].

*Enhancing the knowledge and appreciation of the epic among the general public*

High-volume sales of the Penguin translation and downloads from SOAS repository were instrumental in disseminating George's research to the public, but other media also played a major role. The new knowledge on the Cedar Forest episode [3.5] was the subject of a large spread in the Times in October 2015, and in November 2018 the newly discovered fragment described in [3.6] led to articles in both the Times and the Guardian [5.10a and b]. On 3 November 2016 the BBC radio programme In Our Time featured George on Gilgamesh and was subsequently voted by listeners as no.3 of the top 10 editions of In Our Time out of 750 [5.11]. By May 2020 a YouTube video of George's lecture on Gilgamesh at Harvard in September 2016 had been viewed 1.1 million times, with 7,200 likes and many highly positive comments [5.12a and b].

A public lecture on Gilgamesh during the York Festival of Ideas in June 2018 elicited comments on Twitter, with one user describing it as 'pure magic' [5.13 p7]. In November 2019, another public lecture was attended by more than 200 people and drew comments such as 'George's review was fantastic – so comprehensive and engaging – wonderful' [5.14 p31] and 'George's take of the poem is so very interesting! I see it in a new light' [5.14 p54]. As of 2020, several hundred individuals have written directly to George as the 'go-to' scholar on Gilgamesh. Many expressed admiration and gratitude for his translations; some went further. A bookseller thanked George 'for your translation for your translation and introduction to Gilgamesh, which was my first experience of the poem and still knocks me over when I go back to it' [5.15a]. A translator from Ohio wrote that George's translations had inspired in her an ambition to 'do what you do' and 'become a translator of ancient Babylonian texts' [5.15b].

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 5.1. Feedback from visual artists: **a)** Letter from illustrator, November 2018; **b)** Email from photographic artist, December 2018.
- 5.2. Feedback from performers: **a)** Email from performance storyteller, June 2016; and **b)** Letter from composer (guinnmusic.com), 16 September 2015.
- 5.3. Feedback from poets, writers and playwrights: **a)** Letter from poet and writer, 2015; **b)** Thank you email from George Monbiot, journalist and environmentalist, June 2018; **c)** acknowledgement in Singing for Inanna: Poems in English and Arabic (Cardiff: Mulfran Press, 2014), p. 5.; **d)** Email from playwright, Marina Carr, 16 November 2019.
- 5.4. Email from editor of Approaches to the Teaching the Epic of Gilgamesh (MLA), 8 June 2019.
- 5.5. Email from Director of the Institute of World Literature, Harvard University, September 2018.
- 5.6. Emails from Assistant Professor at Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon: **a)** Email - 26 November 2014; **b)** Email - 31 July 2019.
- 5.7. Email from student, University of Vermont, November 2019.
- 5.8. Screenshots of sales graph from amazon.com: **a)** in August–September; **b)** in January.
- 5.9. Screenshot of 2 pages from the Annenberg Learner website www.learner.org (a-b)
- 5.10. Media File **a)** The Guardian, 28 Nov 2018 – 'Could a 2100 BC sex epic show us how to handle Trump?' **b)** The Times, 9 Oct 2015 - Ancient epic yields a new chapter.

- 5.11. Screenshot of BBC top 10 editions of In Our Time. 3 Nov 2016
- 5.12. **a)** Video of The Epic of Gilgamesh, Lecture by Andrew George 30 Jan 2017  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rd7MrGy\\_tEg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rd7MrGy_tEg) and **b)** screenshot
- 5.13. Feedback from Youtube Twitter and Amazon
- 5.14. Feedback forms from 'Being Human – a Festival of the Humanities" event, 19 November 2019.
- 5.17. Emails from individual readers: **a)** London Review Bookshop and Carcanet Publishers, 3 October 2019; **b)** Poet (Centerville, Ohio), 29 September 2018.