

Vanquishing Humbaba

THE CEDARS OF EARLIEST HISTORY

Text YD Bar-Ness

◆◆◆ The Epic of Gilgamesh

Translated by Maureen Gallery Kovacs
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*He who has seen everything, I will
make known (?) to the lands.
I will teach ... about him, who expe-
rienced all things ... alike,
Anu granted him the total-
ity of knowledge of all.*

*He saw the Secret, discovered the Hidden,
He brought information of (the
time) before the Flood.*

*He went on a distant journey,
pushing himself to exhaustion,
But then was brought to peace.*

*He carved on a stone stela all of his toils,
And built the wall of Uruk*

--

*Haven, the wall of the sacred Eanna
Temple, the holy sanctuary.
Look at its wall, which
gleams like copper ...*

*Inspect its inner wall, the likes
of which no one can equal!*

Take hold of the threshold stone

--

It dates from ancient times!

*Go close to the Eanna Temple,
the residence of Ishtar,*

Such as no later king or man ever equalled!

Go up on the wall of Uruk and walk around,

*Examine its foundation, inspect
its brickwork thoroughly*

*Is not (even the core of) the brick
structure made of kiln?*

--

Fired brick,

*And did not the Seven Sages them-
selves lay out its plans?*

*One League City, one league palm
gardens, one league lowlands, the
open area ... of the Ishtar Temple,
Three leagues and the open area ...
of Uruk it (the wall) encloses.*

Find the copper tablet box,

Open the ... of its lock of bronze,

Undo the fastening of its secret opening.

*Take and read out from the
lapis lazuli tablet*

*How Gilgamesh went through
every hardship.*

Supreme over other kings,

lordly in appearance,

He is the hero, born of Uruk,

the goring wild bull.

He walks out in front, the leader,

And walks at the rear, trusted

by his companions.

Mighty net, protector of his people,

Raging flood

--

Wave who destroys even walls of stone!

Offspring of Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh

is strong to perfection,

Son of the august cow, Rimat

--

Ninsun ... Gilgamesh is

awesome to perfection.

It was he who opened the mountain passes,

Who dug wells on the flank

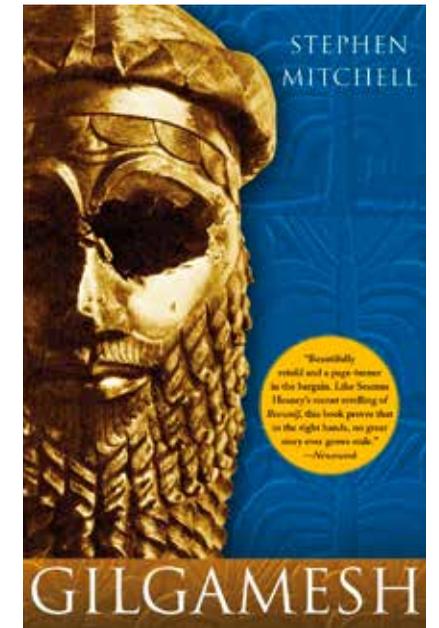
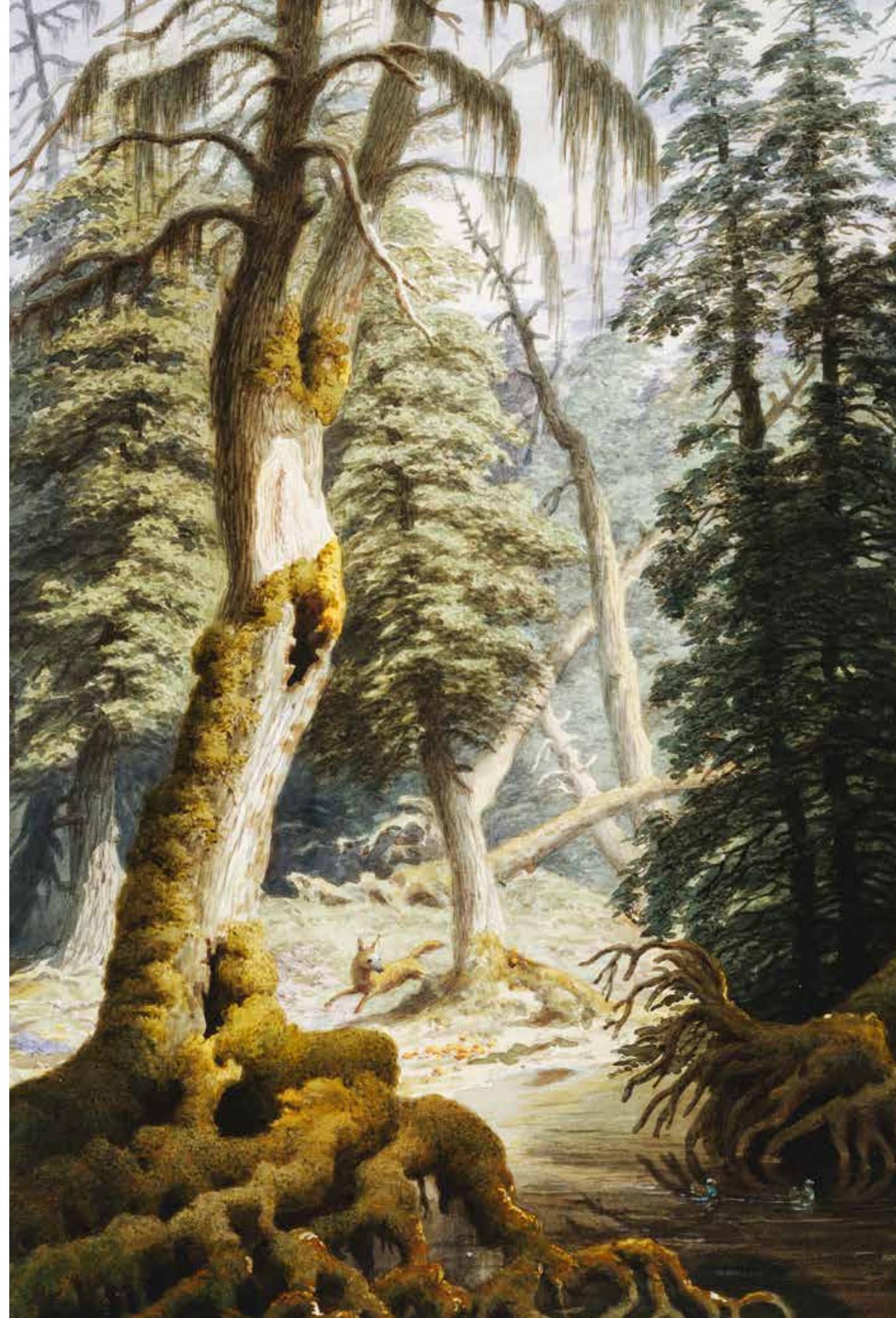
of the mountain.

It was he who crossed the ocean,

the vast seas, to the rising sun,

Who explored the world

regions, seeking life.



An 1839 illustration of a cedar forest by George Harvey: The inspiration for the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, considered the world's first truly great work of literature

*It was he who reached by his own sheer
strength Utanapishtim, the Faraway,
Who restored the sanctuaries (or:
cities) that the Flood had destroyed!
... For teeming mankind
Who can compare with him in kingliness?
Who can say like Gilgamesh: "I am King!"?
Whose name, from the day of his
birth, was called "Gilgamesh"?*

Two

--

Thirds of him is god, one

--

*Third of him is human.
The Great Goddess [Aruru]*

*designed(?) the model for his body,
She prepared his form ...*

*... Beautiful, handsomest of men,
... Perfect*

--

*He walks around in the enclosure of Uruk,
Like a wild bull he makes himself*

mighty, head raised (over others).

There is no rival who can raise

his weapon against him.

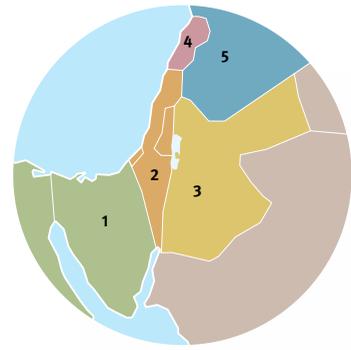
His fellows stand (at the alert),

attentive to his (orders),

And the men of Uruk become anxious in ...

Gilgamesh does not leave a son to his father,

Day and night he arrogantly ...



- 1 Egypt
- 2 Israel
- 3 Jordan
- 4 Lebanon
- 5 Syria

LEBANON



Stuff of Legends

Described by Homer, Plato, and the Old Testament, these once-richly forested mountains – and their most famous inhabitant, the Lebanese cedar (*Cedrus libani*) – have inspired writers and poets throughout the centuries



Cedars have a graceful strength that has been linked to myth and divinity since the earliest human stories. From Morocco to China, the trees of the genus *Cedrus* grow in dark, solemn groves on the mountain slopes, and from the earliest days of agricultural civilisation, they have been the wild and magnificent forests above and beyond familiar farm fields and fertile river valleys.

The cedar forest is an important setting for the action in the very oldest of all legends: the 4,000-year-old Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In this story, the King of Ur, Gilgamesh, and his wild companion Enkidu travel “seven mountains distant” from the river valley up to the cedar forests, the domain of the gods. Upon their arrival, they audaciously begin to cut at the tallest of the trees and are attacked by the forest’s defender, the terrifying demon Humbaba

After a battle of great physical and supernatural energies, Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeat the demon among the towering trees. As he is begging for mercy, Gilgamesh kills him. By vanquishing Humbaba, he gained dominion – and thus utilisation – of the wild forest.

In his last breath, Humbaba cursed Gilgamesh to outlive Enkidu and to never know peace. Four thousand years later, we can perhaps cast

ABOVE *Cedrus libani* is a tall evergreen tree, which has been prized for its high quality timber, oils and resins for thousands of years

LEFT A close-up of a cedar of Lebanon cone: Turning from green to brown when mature, the female cone is covered in broad “seed scales”, each of which covers two winged seeds which are released when the cone breaks up at maturity

—
These massive trees (genus *Cedrus*) of the Asian and African mountains are among the very largest and tallest of all trees, but few old-growth forests remain.
—

Humbaba in a new light. This demon was a protector of the forest, and Gilgamesh himself a merciless threat to a pristine landscape. Humbaba's curse can be seen as a warning to wisely conserve our life-giving forests.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* offers a tantalising glimpse of the once-extensive *Cedrus libani* forests that grew above the lands of the Fertile Crescent. Now referred to as Lebanese cedars after their last refuge on Mount Lebanon, they evoked a mystery and magic to the Sumerians that we can still detect today. If you pay a visit to wild stands of their near relatives, the Himalayan deodar cedars (*Cedrus deodara*) and North African atlas cedars (*Cedrus atlantica*), you can feel the same sense of monumental sanctity that Gilgamesh would have experienced.

To the Hindu people, the cedars are sacred to Shiva and are known as deodar, or *dev daru*, meaning “the divine tree”. In Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the cedar trees are remembered primarily as the construction material for Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. The ancient Egyptians connected the god Osiris to the cedar trees. After teaching all useful skills to humanity, but before his resurrection, his coffin floated down the Nile River and northwards, where it became lodged in the trunk of a massive tree.

These massive trees (genus *Cedrus*) of the Asian and African mountains are



among the very largest and tallest of all trees, but few old-growth forests remain. Despite the respect in which these trees were held, they were not immune to exploitation. Today, large areas of atlas and deodar cedars remain in their mountain holdouts, but the Lebanese cedar forest has been reduced to tiny fragments. On the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, you can see the last remaining groves of the endangered *Cedrus brevifolia*, another species that humans have used since prehistoric times.

The march of civilisations – Sumerian, Babylonian, Phoenician, Assyrian, Hebrew Roman, Arabic, Crusader, Ottoman, British and others – have all found these forests to be a bountiful gift and a valuable resource. The trees reliably provided the timber for shipbuilding, the beams for palaces, the material for

railways and, most consistently, the fuel for fireplaces.

Today, the Lebanese Government has protected the largest of the remnant forests in the World Heritage-listed “Forest of the Cedars of God” (Horsh Arz el-Rab) reserve and the cedar tree is proudly shown on the national flag.

A premier component of Lebanon's tourism and cultural resource, the cedar forests also help preserve a critical biogeographical link midway between the Himalayan deodars and the African atlas cedars. They can remind us of the cool, evergreen forests that stretched clear across the highlands of Asia and North Africa. While their survival is still subject to serious threats, after thousands of years silently serving humans, Humbaba's cedar forests can once again become a place of reverence and mystery. ♦ AG

ABOVE Cedars in other parts of Asia: The great Jageshwar temple complex in India is located in a beautiful valley covered with thick forest of cedar trees. The complex was built by the Chand and Katyuri rulers between the eighth and 12th century AD

LEFT The national emblem of Lebanon, the cedar was famously used to build the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, as well as the ships and temples of the Egyptian pharaohs

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