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The Role of Translations in the Study of Literature of Ancient Times: *Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad*, and *the Bible*

Teaching ancient literature through translations is a challenge that arises for a comparatist. Very few know the ancient languages, especially those that were spoken in the ancient Near East, such as the Akkadian, Sumerian, and Hittite. The author of this essay regrets not knowing these languages and as many other scholars have to rely on translations in modern languages, especially English, French or German. *Gilgamesh* was written some four thousand years ago. It is considered the oldest literary work of mankind. As a parameter of this, it is enough to remember that the famous Homeric poems appeared about 1500 years after this Sumerian epic. The legend tells the story of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian king and founder of the Mesopotamian city of Uruk (Iraq today) who ruled the region around the year 2700 BCE, and his journey in pursuit of glory and honor, whose ultimate goal was to conquer immortality. Among the various themes in *Gilgamesh* epic, for the purposes of this essay, two are highlights for a close reading: friendship and flood in comparison with the *Iliad* and the Old Testament, respectively. Gilgamesh's lament for the death of his friend Enkidu keeps striking similarities with Achilles' lament for the death of Patroclus, killed in battle in the Trojan War: 'Hear me, O young men, hear [me!] / Hear me, o elders [of teeming Uruk,] hear me! / I shall weep of Enkidu, my friend, / Like a hired mourner-woman I shall bitterly wail." The great flood by which gods sought to destroy mankind also appears in the Old Testament, 'For six days and [seven] nights, / There blew the wind, the downpour, / The gale, the Deluge, it flattened the land." The immortal Uta-napishti fills the role of Noah of Genesis. The translations into modern languages beginning in the mid-19th century greatly contributed to the knowledge of the once unknown Sumerian epic.