

Humbaba, Polyphemus and their critics:
Poetry and Visual Representation in Classics and Assyriology

This paper focuses on two mythological episodes - the slaying of Humbaba from the *Gilgameš* poem and the blinding of Polyphemus from the *Odyssey* - and their reception in the visual arts of Mesopotamia and Greece. In particular, I compare and contrast how scholars working in Classics and Assyriology have approached the difficulties of identifying a particular version of a particular myth in the arts. I suggest that, despite differences in material, they have faced similar problems. A comparative study of their approaches is able to show the affinity between two disciplines and help build a more robust methodology.

The Homeric poems and the preserved versions of the *Gilgameš* tradition represent only a fraction of the vast mythological apparatus, now mostly lost, surrounding the Trojan War and *Gilgameš*' exploits. It is therefore not surprising that scholars have eagerly sought additional evidence, not least in possible visual representations. Homeric scholars have long looked at depictions on vases, plates and other materials to supplement knowledge of the wider mythological context, while Assyriologists have examined cylinder seals and bas-reliefs in search for *Gilgameš*. In Mesopotamia, many putative representations of the slaying of Humbaba were identified, and several theories on the various versions of the *Gilgameš* poem were developed based on these (Ornan 2010, Seidl 2010; Lambert 1997). In early Greece, in the meantime, the blinding of Polyphemus proved to be the best candidate for Homeric inspiration on 7th century vases (Snodgrass 1998, Lowenstam 1997).

Nevertheless, in both cases initial elation gave way to skepticism as a number of problems for the proposed identifications arose. I concentrate on three problems shared by studies in both disciplines: (1) discrepancies between visual and textual representations; (2)

based on these discrepancies, difficulty in identifying the source of images; (3) difficulty of evaluating the importance and cultural centrality of these episodes in Antiquity, and, consequently, the likelihood of their inclusion in the visual representations.

First, images understood to represent the slaying of Humbaba and the blinding of Polyphemus often have many features clearly distinguishing them from the preserved texts of *Gilgameš* and the *Odyssey*. For instance, several visual representations have a different number of assailants from the *Odyssey*, and a different weapon is used for the blinding – an iron pitcher rather than an olive stake (see Snodgrass 1998: 94). On the other hand, images thought to represent the slaying of Humbaba also feature varying numbers of assailants, and the supposed monster itself is represented in different ways, sometimes looking disconcertingly human.

Second, even in the cases where it might be possible to determine that the character in question is indeed Odysseus or Humbaba (through an inscription, for example), we are forced to ask if these are indeed Odysseus and Humbaba from the extant literary record, or from alternative versions, or even based solely on iconographic traditions and without a particular literary version in mind. For instance, a Neo-Assyrian seal depicts Humbaba as bearded, and constrained by Gilgameš and Enkidu, who are stepping on him, which is not a feature in any of the written versions, and has provoked a discussion of the role of some lost Sumerian versions of the slaying, and of purely pictorial conventions.

Third, I also discuss recent trends in scholarship which argue that the cultural importance of both *Gilgameš* and the Homeric poems in Mesopotamia and early Archaic Greece has been overstated (Lambert 2010: 108; Burgess 2001). In some cases scholarship has attributed images to the Humbaba and the Cyclops episode because of the imagined centrality of *Gilgameš* and the

Odyssey in their respective cultures, and their reassessment, at least for the early period, leaves room for seeing alternative versions of the story depicted in the images.

In conclusion, by demonstrating the similarity of the problems facing Assyriologists and Classicists as they search for Humbaba and Polyphemus in the arts, this paper contributes to the ongoing dialogue about the necessity to look beyond Ancient Greek evidence to fully appreciate it.

References

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