CHAPTER TWO

ENKIDU’S FIRST STEPPE:
COMPETING PORTRAITS OF ENKIDU
IN YALE AND PENN

The starting point for our analysis is the character of Enkidu, which is presented in sharply different terms in the Penn and Yale tablets. Although the two texts were copied as part of one Gilgamesh series, they offer mutually exclusive accounts of Enkidu’s origins and associations. The contrasting renditions of Enkidu are generally treated as reflecting his development in the Penn text from a wild man to an awilum (“gentleman”). What has been overlooked, however, is that the Yale tablet’s portrait of Enkidu’s life in the steppe does not match the account of this life in Penn. At precisely those moments where Yale appears to recall the events described in Penn, the details do not match, and it becomes evident that Yale does not assume the contents of what precedes it in the sequence created by combination with Penn. Enkidu’s supposed evolution in Penn is thus an inadequate explanation for the contrasting depictions of his experience in the steppe. Instead, we conclude that the two versions of Enkidu reflect the work of two different authors, one of whom recast an existing narrative. The tension between the Penn and Yale tablets has been obscured by the fact that these belong to one Gilgamesh series, the clearest indication of an OB epic. It is thus appropriate to begin

1 In terms of phrasing, only the recurrent discourse formulae show significant similarity, evidently demonstrating the same copyist’s hand without further signs of deeper compositional unity. When Gilgamesh or Enkidu is about to speak, the Yale tablet frequently introduces the discourse by the phrase, “he opened (more literally, ‘used, readied?’) his mouth” (pišu ṣuṣammma, II 83, 89; III 104, 117, 127; IV 138; VI 232), a formula that appears twice in the Penn tablet (III 94, the harlot to Enkidu; IV 147, the traveler to Enkidu). There are a variety of possible ways to introduce direct speech in Old Babylonian literary texts, as seen in Gilgamesh alone. This particular turn of phrase occurs commonly with speech by a single person, with many examples also found in the OB copies of Atrahasis (I 47, 85, 91, 105, 111, 118; etc.).

2 In the following analysis, the contrasting logic of each text is significant for the very fact that the two tablets were certainly produced by the same scribe. Their characteristics do not therefore reflect variation from two scribal renditions of the same narrative, and they must derive instead from prior developments.
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are evaluation of the OB material with the two texts that long have been assumed to represent expressions of a single voice.

The competing portraits of Enkidu in Penn and Yale are most striking in references to his origin in the steppe. Penn excludes any human company from Enkidu’s early life, while Yale assumes that he moved in the circles of herdsmen. In particular, the Yale text places Enkidu with bûlum, livestock kept by human herders. Because the word bûlum takes on a broader range of meaning in the first millennium, we devote a separate section to its usage in the OB period. In the Huwawa narrative as a whole, Enkidu represents the best of herdsmen, those who inhabit the dangerous back country far from city centers. In the epic, as reflected in Penn, the steppe that Enkidu inhabits is identified only with the wild and its beasts. This contrast between how Enkidu is portrayed in Penn and Yale lays the foundation for a sweeping reevaluation of all the OB Gilgamesh evidence.

I. Enkidu in the Steppe

The question of Enkidu’s origins holds no interest in any of the five Sumerian Gilgamesh tales. There is never reason to doubt that he, like Gilgamesh, hails from Uruk. In contrast, the Penn and Yale tablets of the OB Gilgamesh present Enkidu as some polar opposite or complement to the city. Because both Penn and Yale set up these dual identities, based in city and steppe, it has been easy to miss the contrast between the two tablets. In fact, the two tablets offer deeply divergent pictures of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, both of which are rooted in the portrayal of Enkidu. The Penn tablet introduces Enkidu as one born in the wild, nursed by beasts, while Yale presents him as the progeny of herdsmen. Whereas the former is raised among animals and must be introduced to human company, the latter is familiar with the wild but needs no special acculturation in order to join society.

According to the Penn tablet, Enkidu “was born in the steppe (šērum), and the highlands (šadûm) raised him” (I 18–19). While making love with the harlot Shamkat, Enkidu forgets the land of his birth (II 47). Shamkat then tells Enkidu that he is “like a god” and challenges his way of life: “Why do you roam about the steppe (šērum) with the beasts (nammaštûm)?” (II 54–55). She leads him to a community of herdsmen, defined not by grazing lands but by the enclosures of their camps. In Penn’s account, Shamkat’s choice represents a first step toward a change