

TOMISLAV BILIĆ

*Arheološki muzej u Zagrebu
Trg Nikole Šubića Zrinskog 19
Hr – 10000 Zagreb
tomislav.bilic@zg.t-com.hr*

A NOTE ON THE CELESTIAL ORIENTATION: WAS GILGAMESH GUIDED TO THE CEDAR FOREST BY THE PLEIADES?

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The ‘Seven’ of the Sumerian poem describing Gilgamesh’s travel to the Cedar Forest represent the constellation of the Pleiades, akk. Sebittu, sum. Iminbi. This asterism served as orientation aid to the hero, given to him by the Sun-god Utu. The practice of celestial orientation in the Arabian Desert is attested in the writings of Diodorus Siculus.

In the Sumerian poem entitled *Gilgamesh and Huwawa* – a title attached to it in modern times – known from two versions that differ in a number of details, the hero, here named Bilgamesh, receives a curious form of assistance from the Sun-god Utu. ‘Young Hero Utu’ has given him the horrible ‘Seven’ in order to assist him on a voyage to the Cedar Forest, and probably also to overcome the ferocious Huwawa. Yet the latter motive is not attested in the poem, and one wonders why Bilgamesh and Enkidu did not use those fierce warriors in their battle with the guardian of the Cedar. ‘Seven’ were the offspring of Anu and Ki, the Heaven and the Earth, given to Erra in order to ‘wreak destruction, to massacre the black-headed folk and fell the livestock’ (*Erra* I.45–46¹), which they actually perform later in the poem. The ‘Seven’ from the *Erra and Ishum* are undoubtedly identical to the ‘Seven’ given by Utu to Bilgamesh, which becomes clear if one examines descriptions of their respective natures, as given in Version A (37–43) and B (38–44). It is enough to point out that their murderous characteristics are equally pronounced both in *Erra* and in the Sumerian poem. Yet *Bilgamesh and Huwawa* gives them quite a different function: they are to guide the hero to his goal, and are referred to as a some kind of asterism. Thus ‘in the heavens they shine... in the heavens they are stars blazing on high’ (Version B, 45–46²), and again ‘(in the heavens) they shine’ (Version A, 43). This imagery strongly alludes to their stellar nature. Associating the ‘Seven’ with stars is hardly a revolutionary argument; akk. *Sebittu*, sum. *Iminbi* (‘Seven’) is a name given to a group of demons, subordinate to the god Erra/Nergal, and also a name of beneficent gods astrologically identified wi-

1 Translation of *Erra and Ishum* from FOSTER 1995.

2 Translation of Sumerian poems from FOSTER 2001, GEORGE 1993 and etcs1.orinst.ox.ac.uk.

th the Pleiades, who were symbolized by the seven dots or stars, which is a further allusion to the asterism. Moreover, ‘seven dots’ appear as a symbol in close association with other clearly astral symbols (Black & Green 2000: 162; see Figure 1). Therefore: *sebittuliminbi* = ‘Seven gods’, ‘Seven demons’, ‘seven dots’ = the Pleiades. The description of the ‘Seven’ in the Sumerian poem fits well into this concept.

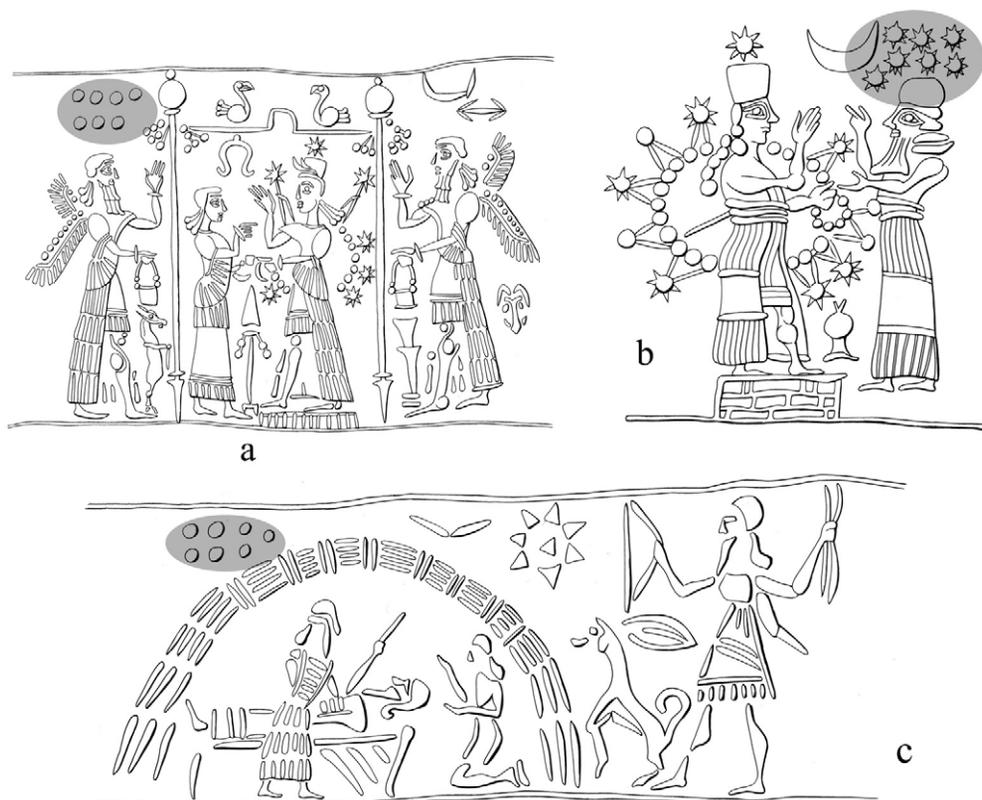


Fig. 1. Neo-Assyrian cylinder seals depicting the Pleiades as seven dots (a, c) or stars (b) (BLACK – GREEN 2000: 55, fig. 49, 67, fig. 54, 108, fig. 87).

But the main purpose of the ‘Seven’ in the *Bilgamesh and Huwawa* was to guide the hero to the Cedar Forest. Thus it is emphasized how ‘on earth they know the paths’ (Version B, 45) and further how ‘on earth (they know) the roads to Aratta; (like) merchants they know the pathways; like pigeons they know the nooks and crannies of the mountains; through the mountain passes let them lead you’ (Version B, 47–50). Version A has a similar description: ‘on earth they know the paths; (on earth) let them reveal the path (to the east)... through the mountain passes let them lead you’ (43e–f, 45; cf. 59–60: ‘(on earth) let them reveal the path (to the east)... through the mountain passes it did lead him’). The verse 50 in Version B (= vss. 45 and 60 in Version A) is paralleled in the *Erra and Ishum*, where the ‘Seven’ (demons) complain how they, ‘who know the mountain passes, have forgotten how to go...’ (*Erra* I.90). Thus it is clear that the ‘Seven’ in the *Erra* also had the knowledge ‘of the mountain passes’, that is they were considered to be some kind of guides. This is much more emphasized in the Sumerian poem, though. Therefore, we can conclude that Bilgamesh was led to the Cedar Forest by the Pleiades – which is a clear case of celestial orientation, definitely the earliest

mention of such practice in human history³. From Diodorus Siculus we know that the dwellers in the Arabian deserts, ‘spacious as the air in magnitude’, relied on celestial orientation in their voyages. Those who journey through the vast desert ‘must, even as voyagers upon the seas, direct their course by indications obtained from the Bears’ (D. S. II.54.2⁴). If the celestial orientation was a common practice in the Arabian deserts during the late Hellenistic period, as indicated by Diodorus, there is no object in Bilgamesh’s use of the same skill two millennia earlier – especially in the light of the evidence in the Sumerian poem.

It is a pity we do not know where to exactly have the Pleiades led Bilgamesh, because the precise location of the Cedar Forest is much disputed. I do not know what led B. Foster to add the words ‘to the east’ in vss. 43f and 59 of Version B; Version A, vs. 47 mentions Aratta, which might point to the east, but also to the north – in this context it is probably a mythical destination, similar to Dilmun in the Sumerian Deluge epic found on a tablet from Nippur. Therefore it seems presumptuous to speculate on the direction Bilgamesh took from Uruk, guided by the Pleiades.

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3 For the use of the Pleiades in celestial navigation during the Antiquity see BILIĆ 2006: 41. In the Sumerian epic poem *Enmerkar and the lord of Aratta*, Enmerkar’s messenger »during the night journeyed by the stars, during the day journeyed with Utu of heaven« (161–162, trans. KRAMER 1956, ETCSL). It is significant that here again one travels from Erech to Aratta with a help of celestial orientation. Moreover, Utu is mentioned both times, once

as a provider of the Seven, once as a daily guide. Was this the only way to arrive to Aratta?

4 Loeb translation. Cosmas Indicopleustes claims that the stars serve as an orientational aid both for those sailing upon the seas and those »travelling through deserts« (Topogr. Christ. II.150 Migne; McCRINDLE 1897: 76; cf. III. 169 Migne; McCRINDLE 1897: 105).

SAŽETAK

OPASKA O STELARNOJ ORIJENTACIJI: DA LI SU GILGAMEŠA
DO CEDROVE ŠUME VODILE PLEJADE?

Sumerska poema *Bilgamesh i Huwawa* opisuje kako junaka, kojeg će kasnije generacije poznavati kao Gilgameša, do Cedrove šume, gdje živi strašni Huwawa, vode »Sedmero«, koji se u drugoj mezopotamskoj poemi, *Erra i Išum*, opisuju kao nemilosrdni ratnici. No, oni u sumerskoj poemi imaju drukčiju ulogu. Naime, tu su opisani stelarnim epitetima te vjerojatno prikazuju zvijezde Plejada. Taj se asterizam često prikazuje na mezopotamskim cilindričnim pečatima kao sedam točaka, često u lako prepoznatljivom astralnom kontekstu. Iz opisa »Sedmero« u sumerskoj poemi očito je značenje tog asterizma kao orijentacionog pomagala na Bilgamešovu putu. Nažalost, kako se (mitološka) lokacija Cedrove šume ne može argumentirano povezati s bilo kojom »zemaljskom lokacijom«, rekonstrukcija samog putovanja nije moguća.

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