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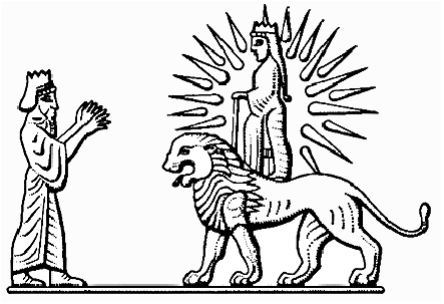

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Published in Melammu Symposia 2:

R. M. Whiting (ed.),
Mythology and Mythologies.
Methodological Approaches to Intercultural Influences.
Proceedings of the Second Annual Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project. Held in Paris, France, October 4-7, 1999 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project 2001), pp. 19-27.
Publisher: http://www.helsinki.fi/science/saa/

CRISTIANO GROTTANELLI Pisa

The Story of Combabos and the Gilgamesh Tradition*

with a contribution by Simo Parpola, Helsinki

1. Introduction

In 1993, I delivered a series of four lectures, the Haskell Lectures, at the University of Chicago. One day, I hope, these lectures will become a book called *Power Beyond Death: Sacred Bodies as a Site of Contestation*. My first lecture, and the future first chapter of my book, is dedicated to kingly continuity: I looked at how ancient texts shape certain specific bodies to construct (or to destroy) corresponding types of order; and more precisely at how they work with a peculiar configuration of bodies, dynastic continuity, the succession of a series of members of the same ruling lineage.

My two examples were a biblical example (the story of Absalom who tried to usurp his father David's throne and was killed by David's champion Ioab), and a Greek example, connected to the sanctuary of the Syrian goddess Atargatis in Hierapolis of Syria. This second story is found in the treatise *De Dea Syria* (of the Syrian Goddess) that should be dated to the second century AD and is attributed by some to Lucian, a witty intellectual who wrote many books in Greek and was born in Samosata in Syria. The author of this text is of course not Lucian: it is a Syrian man who says he was brought up in the neighbourhood of the sanctuary and dedicated his hair in the temple upon becoming an adult, as was the local custom. The treatise contains the story of Combabos, the first of the goddess's devotees who castrated themselves, dedicated themselves to the deity, and lived in the sanctuary.

This comparison (a merely structural, not a genetic comparison between these two stories, each of which is in many ways the reversed image of the other) is the basis, but not really the subject, of this paper, because a further comparative endeavour was suggested to me, and it is to this further comparison that I wish to turn today.

In the Spring of 1999 I met Simo Parpola, who was my colleague in a fruitful research group directed by our friend Ithamar Gruenwald at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I asked him to read my ex-lecture and future chapter. He read it with his usual attention and intelligence and immediately suggested to me that the Story of Combabos *could* be usefully compared to the biblical Story of Absalom, but *should* be compared to the narrative traditions about Gilgamesh. He saw this not just as a useful structural comparison, but as an actual historical connection, in the sense that, according to Simo Parpola, the Combabos story *derives* from the Gilgamesh tradition.

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* This paper is basically identical with the version delivered at Paris and retains the colloquial 1st person singular format of the oral presentation. However, since I am not an expert in matters Mesopotamian, Simo Parpola has kindly contributed the comments on the Gilgamesh epic at the end of section 4 (following Table 3), for which I thank him warmly. The references to Gilgamesh follow the line numbering of SAACT 1.

R.M. Whiting (ed.)
MELAMMU SYMPOSIA II (Helsinki 2001)
ISBN 951-45-9049-X

To tell you more about this comparison I need to proceed this way. First of all, I will of course tell you the story in question as I find it in the *De Dea Syria*. Second, I shall briefly comment upon that story, and I shall comment upon what I have already presented as the two possible meanings of the narrative. Third, I'll tell you something about my comparison between the story of Combabos and the biblical story of Absalom – but only enough to give you an idea of my interpretation of both stories as narratives about kingly continuity and dynastic succession. Fourth, I'll turn to the possible comparison between the story of Combabos and the narrative traditions centering upon Gilgamesh. In doing this, I'll depend heavily on my talks with Simo Parpola in Jerusalem; but I am also able to make some use of another scholarly treatment of the problem, namely, a few pages from Michael Astour's *Hellenosemitica*, a book that first appeared in 1965 and is now almost entirely forgotten. Fifth, I'll ask myself some questions about the comparison between the story of Combabos and the Gilgamesh narratives, and I shall conclude with those questions and some very tentative answers.

2. The story of Combabos and the theme of kingly continuity

You'll notice I have carefully avoided the word *myth*. But this does not mean I wish to avoid the subject *myth*. Indeed, I think this is one of the more important questions we can ask in discussing these narratives, and so I shall leave this question for the very end.

So this is *The story of Combabos* in the treatise *De Dea Syria*:

> The ancient sanctuary of the Syrian goddess, we are told, fell in ruins during the reign of king Seleucus (the First), and it was rebuilt by the initiative of his wife, queen Stratonice. "Now this Stratonice dreamt that the Syrian goddess ordered her to (re)build her temple in Hierapolis (the name means 'The Holy City')." At first she ignored the dream, but then she fell ill, decided to obey the divine order, obtained her husband's consent to the project, and was healed. Seleucus sent her to Hierapolis with a rich treasure and a great host, some to build the sanctuary, others for her safety. Then Seleucus called one of his friends, a very handsome young man, called Combabos, and to him he entrusted his army, his treasure and his wife, as well as the responsibility for the construction of the new sanctuary and for the offering of the necessary sacrifices, because, he said, Combabos was the friend he loved most and the wisest and the most faithful of his subjects.
>
> When he heard this, Combabos beseeched the king not to send him forth, and not to entrust to him the treasure, the holy task, and the queen. He was especially worried, he said, about being sent to Hierapolis alone with Stratonice: surely some jealousy would arise because of that. But the king would not be convinced, and so Combabos made another request, asking Seleucus to grant him an eight-day delay, so that he could settle a most important matter before leaving. When this was conceded, the young man went home, cast himself to the ground, and cried: "Poor me! I shall be travelling alone with a beautiful woman; this shall create great mishap, unless I put away all cause of evil. I must perform a great deed, that shall free me of all fear." After having mourned thus he cut off his own genitals, put them in a little vase, filled the vase with myrrh, honey and other spices, sealed it with his own seal, and waited for his wound to heal. When he thought he was in condition to travel, he went to the king and, in the presence of many, gave the vase to him, declaring that the object was a jewel of great value he had kept until then in his home. "As I am now leaving for a long journey, he said to Seleucus, I entrust it to you. Please keep it for me securely, for it is more precious for me than gold, and as worthy for me as my own life." The king accepted the vase, sealed it with

his own seal, and gave it to his treasurer to keep.

Combabos left immediately after this, with the queen, the army, and the treasures entrusted to him. They reached Hierapolis, where the sanctuary was built in three years. In the meantime Stratonice fell in love with the young man, and her love soon turned to madness: this probably happened, we are told, because the goddess wanted to punish the queen for her delay in obeying the divine command. Soon Stratonice could not hide her passion any more, but cried and called Combabos's name all day long; and one night she made herself drunk with wine and went to Combabos's rooms, where she embraced his knees, adopting a supplicant's stance, and confessed her love. The young man refused to comply, reproached her for being drunk, and, when she threatened to do him great harm, told her what he had done before leaving for Hierapolis, and showed her the result of his deed. Soon the woman's fury subsided, but she did not forget her love, and she spent all her time with Combabos, thus solacing the desire she could not fulfill. "This kind of love, the text adds, is still practiced today in Hierapolis, where women and *galloi* are often crazy for each other, and nobody is jealous."

Soon a rumor reached the king's ears, that Combabos was his wife's lover. Some said Stratonice herself wrote to her husband to accuse the young man, as is told of the mythical Stheneboia and of Phædra of Cnossos, but the author of the *De Dea Syria* prefers to believe that the rumor was spread by men returning from Hierapolis to the court, who simply described what they saw. However this may be, Combabos was called back by the king before he had completed the sanctuary, with the accusation of having had intercourse with Stratonice. He went boldly, because he had left his alibi at home. Seleucus accused him of triple crime: he was an adulterer, a traitor and a blasphemous scoundrel who had offended the goddess. Many stood forward and witnessed seeing him and Stratonice embrace in public, and so the young man was condemned to death, for his deed deserved such a penalty. Until the very last, Combabos was silent; but as he was being led to his death, he suddenly spoke, and requested the treasure he had entrusted to the king, declaring that he was being killed not because he was an adulterer or arrogant and violent, but because the king coveted the object he had entrusted to his care before leaving for Hierapolis. Seleucus ordered his treasurer to bring the small vase; Combabos took it, broke the seal and explained its contents to the monarch. "And yet, he added, though I am a man no more, I am accused of a deed only a man can commit!"

When he saw what the vase contained, the king wept, embraced Combabos and voiced his anguish at the young man's plight as well as his gratitude. He declared he would first of all put Combabos's slanderers to death, and then give his friend a great gift of gold, silver, Assyrian clothes and royal horses. His door, he said, would always be open to Combabos, and never would he refuse to see him, not even if he were in bed with his wife. The king's orders were promptly obeyed, and it was henceforward clear that Combabos had no peer for wisdom and happiness. Combabos then asked and obtained what was necessary to complete his work in Hierapolis, and died there after having built the goddess's sanctuary. "And because of his virtue and well-doing, the king had a bronze statue of Combabos erected in the sanctuary, that is still there today, the work of Hermocleos of Rhodes, and has the shape of a woman, but is dressed like a man."

What is this story? As I announced, I think it has two meanings and functions:

1. First, it is the foundation myth of the Atargatis sanctuary in Hierapolis, and, together with the sanctuary, it sanctions some aspects of that cultic system: the eunuch devotees, their behaviour, the sanctuary's connection to the Seleucid monarchy.
2. Second, it is a typical court tale, that is, a tale that tells us about a king and his faithful servant and friend, of how that faithful servant is slandered, condemned, and almost killed, until in a lucky *dénoument* he is proved innocent, promoted, and the king even guarantees his memory by the erection of a monument. The obvious examples of this *genre* go under the names

of Joseph in the biblical Book of *Genesis* and of Ahiqar.

It should be stressed that the story of Combabos is *both* things at the same time: a myth founding the Hierapolis sanctuary and cult, and a court tale. In my Chicago lecture, I concentrated on this second aspect only, and I treated the story as a tale of kingly power and kingly continuity through dynastic succession.

This was done mainly by comparing the tale in the *De Dea Syria* to the Story of Absalom, to which much attention was dedicated in the original lecture. Table 1 shows how this worked.

TABLE 1. The stories of Absalom and Combabos

The story of Absalom (*Samuel* 13-19)	The story of Combabos (*De Dea Syria* 17-27)
A.Z. Amnon, a son of king David, desires his half-sister Tamar, rapes her, and the king does not punish him.	
1. Absalom, another son of king David, rebels and usurps his father's throne,	1. Combabos, a faithful friend of king Seleucus, is entrusted with the king's wife Stratonice,
2. having intercourse with the king's concubines.	2. and refuses to have sex with her when she asks him to.
3. He is justly defeated in battle by the king,	3. He is slandered and unjustly condemned to death by the king,
4. and killed because his hair gets stuck in a branch.	4. but is spared because he proves he has castrated himself.
5. The king learns his son is dead and mourns.	5. The king mourns for is friend's virility and promotes him.
6. Stones are heaped upon Absalom's dead body;	6. Stones are heaped upon the dead bodies of holy eunuchs.
7. and, having no male offspring, he acquires continuity by way of a stele he has erected.	7. Having no offspring, Combabos is granted continuity by way of a statue erected in his honour by the king.
	A.Z. Antiochus, the son of king Seleucus, desires his step-mother Stratonice, and the king gives her to him together with his kingdom/ kingship

Absalom was presented as the rebel son of a powerful king, who disrupted the orderly functioning of monarchic succession by usurping the kings's throne, and in particular by sleeping with his concubines – or rather by publicly entering their forbidden apartments. Combabos was envisaged as the champion of kingly order and of dynastic succession who obeyed his king, and, in order to avoid the risk of betraying him and of having sex with his queen, castrated himself. This is shown by Table 2.

TABLE 2. Thematic comparison of the stories with the norms of kingly continuity

	Absalom	Correct royal continuity	Combabos
Royal women	Violation of king's concubines	Correct royal marriage	Refusal of king's wife
Offspring	Lack of male offspring	Male offspring	Lack of offspring
Continuity	Continuity granted by monument erected by self	Continuity granted by kingly succession	Continuity granted by monument erected by king

3. Astour's comparison between Combabos and Humbaba

I'll spend no more words on the comparison between Combabos and Absalom, because I have to dedicate all the space that is still available to the comparison between the story of the faithful eunuch and the narrative traditions about Gilgamesh.

Let us begin to examine these similarities between the two narratives by quoting what Michael Astour, the main representative of a famous "pan-Semitic" school together with Cyrus Gordon, wrote of their interconnection in *Hellenosemitica* (Leiden ²1967):

> In the West-Semitic world, the motif of "the chaste youth" was very wide-spread. A classical example of it is the the corresponding episode of Joseph's story in Egypt, Gen. 39:7-20. After the discovery of the papyrus d'Orbiney, a quite similar plot was revealed in the Egyptian tale of the two brothers, and it was supposed that the biblical story of Joseph itself is an adaptation of a Phoenician topic. Bata, its hero, slandered by his sister-in-law and pursued by his angry brother, emasculated himself to prove his innocence. The same was told in Phoenicia of the young healer-god Eshmun, pursued by the love of the goddess Astronoe or Astronome (ʿAštart-naʾama), and in Syrian Hierapolis, of Combabos, the builder of the Atargatis temple, with whom queen Stratonice, the wife of an Assyrian king, fell in love. (Pseudo?) Lucian who transmitted this story to us, identified her with the wife of one of the Seleucids (*De Dea Syria* 17), but actually, as even demonstrated by her name, she was another avatar of Astarte. This Combabos can easily be recognized as *Ḫumbaba* (or *Ḫubaba, Ḫuwawa*) of the Gilgamesh epic, the guardsman of the cedar-forest of Lebanon, in the middle of which was situated the temple of Irnini, a hypostasis of Ishtar. He is a local West-Semitic personage, borrowed by the Mesopotamians together with the motif of the divine cedar-forest. In the Sumerian and Akkadian poems he appears as Gilgamesh's enemy and is depicted in odious terms, while in the Phoenico-Aegyptian version his counterpart Bata is the protagonist and is described sympathetically. However, the motif of self-castration is not a necessary part of the story. In the Canaanite myth of Ashertu and the Storm-God (Baal), which came to us in a Hittite translation, the motif of rejected love and vengeance on the part of the insulted goddess appears with classical clarity, but without self-castration. The same motif also appears in the Gilgamesh epic, tablet VI, where Ishtar fell in love with Gilgamesh and, after having been rudely rejected by him, turned herself to the supreme god Anu with a request to punish the hero.

Other aspects of Astour's comparative suggestion are specified in his footnotes. I shall quote two such aspects. First, Astour interpreted the name *Ḫumbaba/Ḫubaba* as "a West-Semitic name, a *qutal*-form of

ḥabab 'to love,'" probably 'the beloved,'" and quoted an article by Émile Benveniste, who "agreed that taken in itself, *Kombabos* is a transcription of *Ḫumbaba*, but he (Benveniste) objected that 'these personages are as dissimilar as possible' and preferred to derive *Kombabos* from the goddess *Kubaba*." Second, Astour explained that the points of resemblance between the stories of Combabos and of Bata in the Egyptian papyrus d'Orbiney were "1) location, 2) cedar forest, 3) dependence of the hero's life on a cedar which must be cut down in order to kill the hero, 4) self-castration of Bata = self-castration of Combabos, in the same circumstances, while the name of Combabos = Ḫumbaba." And Astour concludes: "All these heroes have this in common that they belong to the cycle of the 'dying gods' of fertility."

4. Parpola' s comparison between the stories of Combabos and Gilgamesh

In this particular version of the comparison, then, old themes that were familiar to scholars of bygone days are central: dying gods, queens who are really goddesses, Canaanite or Phoenician mythologies extending through millennia and influencing Egypt and Mesopotamia. I think we can accept the general lines of Astour's comparison, but it is more sensible to leave that scholar's phantoms alone and to turn to a simpler structural analysis of the narratives and to Simo Parpola's suggestions. Basically, all I have done is: 1) take note of those suggestions during our conversation in Jerusalem, 2) select nine out of his eleven descriptions of similar thematic elements in the two traditions, and 3) indicate the suggestions that had already been made – in a very different context and with very different meanings – by Astour (= A). In addition, I have pointed out the correspondences between the Combabos figure and no less than *three* figures of the Gilgamesh traditions: Enkidu, Humbaba, and Gilgamesh himself, because in this respect the correspondence between the two traditions posited by Parpola is more complex than the comparison suggested by Astour, who saw Combabos as a figure described "antipathetically" but identical with Humbaba. Here then, in Table 3, is my selection of Parpola's suggestions:

TABLE 3. Thematic parallels between the story of Combabos and Gilgamesh

1. King and faithful friend	Seleucus and Combabos ≈ Gilgamesh and Enkidu	I-XII
2. The name Combabos (A)	Combabos ≈ Humbaba	II-V
3. Building expedition	Combabos ≈ Gilgamesh and Enkidu	II-V
4. Beauty of friend	Combabos ≈ Gilgamesh (and Enkidu)	VI (I)
5. Temptation by female (A)	Stratonice ≈ Ishtar Combabos ≈ Gilgamesh (and Enkidu)	VI
6. Emasculation of friend (A)	Combabos ≈ Enkidu	VI
7. Cultic aetiologies	Dea Syria ≈ Ishtar; *gallos* ≈ Enkidu	VI
8. Death of friend	Combabos ≈ Enkidu	VII
9. King laments and honours friend, erects statue	Seleucus and Combabos ≈ Gilgamesh and Enkidu	VIII

The roman numbers in the right-hand column of the table refer to the tablets of the Gilgamesh Epic in which the themes are developed. It is easy to see that the two narratives not only share a considerable number of common thematic elements but these elements are also developed in the same *order*. Moreover, the shared elements, which are all central to the Combabos story, are also central to Gilgamesh. The theme of the friendship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu pervades the whole epic and is quintessential to its plot. Humbaba is the most frequently occurring name in the epic after Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and the slaying of the monster is the most common iconographic motif relating to the epic known from Mesopotamia. The expedition to the cedar forest, whose goal was to construct a gigantic door for the temple of Shamash, occupies almost one third of the entire epic. Ishtar's attempt to seduce Gilgamesh, which begins with a reference to the beauty of the latter and corresponds to Stratonice's attempt to seduce Combabos, is narrated in Tablet VI, the *middlemost* tablet of the epic; it culminated in the emasculation of Enkidu, which is euphemistically narrated at the end of the same tablet.[1] Finally, an entire tablet (Tablet VIII) is devoted to Gilgamesh's pain and sorrow after Enkidu's death. The erection of a memorial statue for the latter is conspicuously described at the middle of this tablet.

We may observe that stories about Gilgamesh circulated in the Seleucid period not only in Akkadian/cuneiform but in Aramaic as well, and hence were certainly known at a Syrian temple which perpetuated the cult of an ancient Mesopotamian goddess.[2] Because of its great importance to Mesopotamian religion and royal ideology, the epic was probably also known (in Greek translation) at the Seleucid royal court.[3] Hence it provides a very plausible model for the Combabos story, and considering the many thematic and structural similarities of the two stories, it can be hardly doubted that the former indeed served as a model for the latter. Emasculation of male devotees having been a prominent feature of the cult of Istar, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that the account of Enkidu's self-castration played a similar role in the cult of Ishtar (as an aetiology of the act) as Combabos' emasculation did in the cult of Atargatis.[4]

The figure of Combabos clearly is an amalgam of both Enkidu and Gilgamesh. This is not surprising considering that the figures

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[1] Gilg. VI 153-163, see the analysis in S. Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* (SAA 9, Helsinki, 1997), pp. XCVI n. 140 and XCLII n. 119. The key to the understanding of the passage is the euphemism "right hand" (for penis) in line 157, which corresponds to the "right hand" to be cut off in Matthew 5:29. As advised there, Enkidu had to perform the act of emasculation since, unlike Gilgamesh, he had succumbed to the attack of the "Bull of Heaven" (= desire, libido), "falling into a pit" like the rest of the "young men of Uruk."

[2] Gilgamesh and Humbaba are mentioned in the Qumran *Giants* fragments (4Q530 2 ii 2 [*Gilgamîs* and *Ḥôbabîs*] and 4Q531 22:12 [*Gilgamîš*], references courtesy Emile Puech), and the Standard Babylonian version of the Epic was well-known to the author of Daniel 1-5, see S. Parpola, "The Esoteric Meaning of the Name of Gilgamesh," in J. Prosecký (ed.), *Intellectual Life of the Ancient Near East. Papers Presented at the 43rd Rencontre assyriologique internationale, Prague, July 1-5, 1996* (Prague, 1998), 323-29. Syriac traditions about Gilgamesh still existed at the time of Theodor bar Qoni (c. AD 893). On the continuity of Mesopotamian religious traditions and cults in Graeco-Roman times see the article of Parpola elsewhere in this volume.

[3] Seleucid copies of the epic are known from Uruk. It can be taken for granted that story of Gilgamesh was included in the *Babyloniaca* of Berossus (written in 281 for Antiochus I Soter, who in 268 commemorated his work on Esangil and Ezida in a cuneiform inscription), even though the relevant portion of the work is no longer extant. It is even possible that Berossus had prepared a Greek translation of the entire epic, since in the prologue to his work he says that "he <translated> many books which had been preserved with great care at Babylon" (S. M. Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus* (Sources from the Ancient Near East 1/5, Malibu, 1978), 13.

[4] See Parpola, *Prophecies*, pp. XXXIV and XCVIf.

of Gilgamesh and Enkidu are very similar in the epic too.[5] On the other hand, the name Combabos clearly derives from a monster Humbaba.[6] This does constitute a problem, since Humbaba was, after all, a figure very different from Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

5. Structures, figures, meanings, and reductions

I think the main question we are confronted with at this stage is precisely the question of why Combabos seems to correspond to *no less than three different figures* of the Gilgamesh narrative tradition. For this question, I have a simple answer; but, as simple answers are never good answers, I also have a more complex explanation of my simple answer, that makes it not so simple.

My simple answer is that the Combabos narrative is a short story, with two rather elementary functions, told in a short text about the Syrian sanctuary of Hierapolis. Its very scope and, if you like, its very *genre* imply that it must be a simple story, and that it will *condense*, *compress*, the much broader material of the huge, alluvial textual tradition dealing with the adventures of the hero Gilgamesh.

But to take the complexity of the situation into due account, I think we should look at the *meanings and functions* of the two narrative traditions, and of the *themes* that are central in each and correspond to the meanings and functions. I have already stated more than once that the Combabos story of the *De Dea Syria* had a *double* quality: it was both a foundation myth of the cultic place and of its rituals and a court tale about kingship and continuity. This involved two figures: Seleucus as the typical monarch and Combabos as the typical devoted friend and servant of that monarch, but also as the first eunuch devotee or *gallos*.

I have also stated that both these themes have counterparts in the Gilgamesh epic tradition, and such counterparts involve both the narratives about the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and their common adventures in retrieving the cedar from the forest. But these themes are *two among many*. For example, an important theme that runs through the tradition is the contrast between the wild and the civilized (that may be compared, but with care, to Lévi-Strauss's contrast between *nature* and *culture*); and this theme involves not only a contrast between a perfect man who is a king and a wild man who is almost an animal, but also a kind of triple series, from wild to civilized, made up of Humbaba, Enkidu, and Gilgamesh.

Since this theme is not present in the Combabos narrative, and since many other themes (e.g. immortality, heroic strength and valour, the boundaries between men and gods, etc.) are also not present or at least not central, what I have called a *reduction*, a *compression*, a *condensation* from the Gilgamesh material to the Combabos tale is not just a *reduction* in the dimension of the text, but also a reduction in the impact of the narrative, in its import and scope. This should be compared to what Max Lüthi once wrote in presenting folk tales or fairy tales (*Märchen*) as "reduced" myths (*Mythen*). This abridgment, however, coexists with a *reduplication* on the level of the female figure: the goddess and the queen in

[5] On Enkidu's beauty and similarity to Gilgamesh see Tablet I 190 and II 32.

[6] For the rendering of Akkadian /ḫ/ with /k/ compare, e.g., Ḫamban vs. Cambadene, Ḫilakku vs. Cilicia. The final *-os* in Combabos is, of course, simply the Greek masculine nominative suffix.

the Combabos story, Ishtar – queen and goddess – in the Gilgamesh tradition.

In general, I think this is the correct way of looking at the comparison between the story of Combabos and the Gilgamesh tradition, and of explaining why the motifs connected to Combabos in the Greek text of the *De Dea Syria* are attributed to three different figures in the Gilgamesh texts. The transformation of the Gilgamesh tradition into the story of Combabos would seem to be paradigmatic of what happened to the Mesopotamian/Ancient Near Eastern cultural heritage at the transition to the Hellenistic and Roman age. Old ideas were taken over and preserved, but reworked into a completely new literary form which better corresponded to the new social and political order but at the same time largely masked the origin of the inherited ideas. The same observation has been made in other papers presented here, and I have the feeling that we are in for a long series of similar discoveries in the future.