

The tragic tale of George Smith and Gilgamesh

In 1873, the Telegraph funded a groundbreaking expedition. Now, a new book by Vybarr Cregan-Reid tells the story of what happened when George Smith rediscovered *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.



Heroic commitment: in 1872, George Smith found and deciphered fragments of 'The Epic of Gilgamesh', a discovery extensively covered and supported by the Telegraph

By Vybarr Cregan-Reid

7:00AM BST 21 Sep 2013

When George Smith rediscovered *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in 1872, it earned him some fame, a little fortune, and led him towards a horrible, lonely death.

Few could have anticipated the media storm that would break when the Epic's discovery was sneakpreviewed in *The Daily Telegraph* on November 14, 1872. And without the enterprising public spirit of the paper's editor-in-chief, Edwin Arnold, the Epic might still be buried in the sands of Nineveh, just outside Mosul in Iraq. The poem went on to become one of the most important archaeological finds of the 19th century. Even today, it is still the oldest substantial epic that we have. So who was George Smith, and why is his discovery of this ancient text so enduringly significant?

The poem tells of the adventures of the king of Uruk in Mesopotamia from around 4,000 years ago. The reason that the Epic's rediscovery caused such a controversy in the 1870s was that the King's voyages were analogues for stories from the Old Testament, pressed into clay at least 1,000 years before the Bible's first books and many centuries before Homer. The impact of the discovery challenged literary and biblical scholarship and would help to redefine beliefs about the age of the Earth.

The "flood" tablet constituted the 11th part of the 12-book Epic, and belonged to a slush pile of shards shipped back to the British Museum from Ottoman Iraq by Sir Austen Henry Layard. There were so few people in the world able to read ancient cuneiform that the fragment lay undisturbed in the Museum for nearly 20 years.

Cuneiform is not a language, but an alphabet. The script's wedge-shaped letters (cuneus is Latin for wedge) are formed by impressing a cut reed into soft clay. It was used by speakers of several Near Eastern languages including Sumerian, Akkadian, Urartian and Hittite; depending on the language and date of a given script, its alphabet could consist of many hundreds of letters. If this weren't challenging enough, cuneiform employs no punctuation (no sentences or paragraphs), it does not separate words, there aren't any vowels and most tablets are fragmented and eroded.



A fragment of the epic (ALAMY)

Smith, an unlikely scholar, was the man for the task. Born of modest parents in Chelsea (his father was a carpenter), he left school at 14. He married young, moved to Crogsland Road in Camden, and had six children. Unsatisfied, he spent what spare time and money he had pursuing his interests of Assyriology and biblical archaeology. He was so often seen at the British Museum that Sir Henry Rawlinson (the discoverer of the Behistun monument, a “Rosetta Stone of cuneiform languages”) eventually employed him as a classifier. But even for such highly skilled and specialist work, he was paid little more than the cleaning staff.

On the evening he came across Layard’s fragment, Smith is said to have become so animated that, mute with excitement, he began to tear his clothes off. (Though much repeated, there is only a single source for this story, E!A! W Budge’s *Rise and Progress of Assyriology* – published 50 years after Smith’s death.) Smith quickly prepared a paper to present to the Society of Biblical Archaeology.

December 3 1872 was a cold and showery day. At 9 Conduit Street in Mayfair (now the doubleMichelin-starred restaurant Sketch) Smith stepped up to begin his lecture to the Society. Because The Daily Telegraph had previewed Smith’s discovery, the room was thick with reporters and members of the public – even the Prime Minister, William Gladstone, was in attendance.

Smith recounted to his audience how he’d read of a ship coming to rest on a hilltop “followed by the account of the sending forth of the dove, and its finding no resting place and returning”. In other words, he had discovered a Babylonian account of the biblical deluge – moreover, one that predated the Bible. He then read his translation of the entire fragment.

History was jealous of Romance until last week; but then suddenly she gave to the world, by the marvellous skill of a scholar in the British Museum, a fragmentary story far more wonderful and entertaining than any work of fiction. Everybody of intelligence has by this time read that narrative which Mr. George Smith has deciphered from the tablets of Assurbanipal. With what a magic spell those strange broken sentences carried our minds backward! How far backward? Nobody can safely answer that question within ten centuries or so; but very cautious people among the learned speak of six, seven, or even eight thousand years, and we know that the story of Izdubar and his sailor Urhamsi, with the immortal Sisit, is but a copy made from records immeasurably older than even Assurbanipal. Five-and-twenty years ago Mr. Layard disinterred and brought to Europe the mighty winged bulls and graven slabs from the Palace of the Assyrian kings at Birs Nimroud. In presence of those stupendous monuments, what we had previously called antiquity grew youthful. Many of the mummies of Egypt were not in their swaddling clothes when those stone bulls were hewn. Daniel, who interpreted dreams, never comprehended the wedge-shaped letters upon the thighs or dewlaps of those massive monsters. Belshazzar sate drinking under them wine of Chaldean grapes from Judah's gold. Homer's song and the marbles of Pheidias are modern compared to them; and Alexander himself has gazed upon them as rural visitors to the British Museum

months.

A report of Smith's find in 'The Daily Telegraph'

Digging began on May 7, and within three days he believed he had discovered more broken fragments of the "Deluge". In fact, he had discovered another long-lost poem: The Epic of Atrahasis. In Smith's own words, "The proprietors of *The Daily Telegraph*, however, considered that the discovery of the missing fragment of the deluge text accomplished the object they had in view, and they declined to prosecute the excavations further... desiring to see it carried on by the nation." The brief excavation was over. The question of future funding would depend on Gladstone.

Permission was granted and on a second dig (in 1874) Smith discovered Babylonian accounts of the creation, the fall of man, the pestilence, the Tower of Babel, and fragments of many other legends. But it was on the third excavation in 1876 that Smith ran into difficulties.

He left England in 1875, and was so delayed by Ottoman officials that he did not arrive at Nineveh until July 1876. By then, with temperatures already in the mid-40s, it was too late to dig. He fell ill.

Rawlinson contributed to the discussion, suggesting that the date of the Epic might be as early as 5150 BC (this was, in fact, Smith's own estimation). To loud applause, Gladstone rose to respond with enthusiasm to the paper, but also to quash Smith's appeal for a publicly funded excavation to find more parts of the poem.

Gladstone celebrated the "individual effort" which was "the pride of this country", and joked about "the vulgar expedient" of applying for public funds. In the days that followed, the story was reported widely on both sides of the Atlantic. But it was not until January 1873 that the Telegraph stepped in to offer the British Museum £1,000 for Smith to conduct further excavations. Taking travel advice from Arnold, Smith departed for Ottoman Iraq later that month.

His journey was not an easy one. Smith had never travelled before, and his letters home (illustrated for his children) demonstrate that he suffered chronic seasickness. On his arrival, Smith found himself beset by officialdom. His permissions were not valid, the papers had not been signed by the right people. He was delayed for

Smith's notebooks in the British Library recount his descent into delirium, and the final pages make for heartbreaking reading. He set off for England, but died before he got as far as Aleppo. He was 36, only four years into his career as an Assyriologist. The newspapers mourned Smith's early passing. They explained that he had died exercising a heroic commitment to the science. The dedications and obituaries, though, masked a slightly darker story; one where Smith may have been subject to coercion in his decision to delay.

Smith had previously written to request curtailment of the dig because "plague" was sweeping the lowlands of Syria and Iraq. Permission was refused. He was told by the museum secretary that the trustees would consider it to be "very objectionable" if he were to terminate the excavation early. It is impossible to imagine the same being said to Rawlinson or Layard.

Tragic as it was, Smith's brief spell as an Assyriologist has enduring significance. Many more digs followed in his footsteps (including some led by Max Mallowan, Agatha Christie's husband). Initially, the rediscovery of the Gilgamesh poem encouraged the Victorians to revisit what we might now call the creationism debate. Whether the Earth was created on October 23, 4004 BC, or at some other point in a deep and unrecoverable past, was a question that hung in the air throughout the 19th century like a long-sustained note. Gilgamesh also deepened the focus of documented history by taking us closer to the very beginnings of written records.

And finally, the horizon of natural history also retreated. Later in the period, the Epic became part of a new philosophy that postulated an even greater age for the Earth than had been hitherto estimated. The geologist Eduard Suess used the implications of the poem's discovery as part of an introduction to his massive, four-volume, *The Face of the Earth* (1885-1901).

Had he not died so young, Smith could have gone on to become the Darwin of archaeology. As it is, even the little work that he was able to do still refashioned the landscape of his own and other disciplines forever.

Discovering Gilgamesh, by Vybarr Cregan-Reid (Manchester University Press, £70) is available from Telegraph Books at £70 + £1.35 p&p. Call 0844 871 1514 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk.

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