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Lugalbanda and Hermes

In recent years, scholars have increasingly come to recognize the pervasive influence of the Near East on nascent Greek culture. In particular, a large number of stylistic, structural and thematic parallels between Akkadian and Greek poetry have been identified. This paper adds to the list of parallels by exploring the similarities between the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* and the Neo-Sumerian epic *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave*. Both poems focus on the hero's attempt to prove his mettle and gain glory through his clever exploits. In both poems the hero begins at an apparent disadvantage, lying immobile in a mountain cave, but leaves the cave in search of cattle. Each protagonist uses his own ingenuity, making use of whatever materials come to hand to aid his mission. Each captures cattle, builds a fire from scratch, digs a pit and slaughters the cattle. Each presides at a meal intended for the gods. In both poems the action involving the cattle is carefully described as taking place within the period of one night. Finally, in both poems these actions form a rite of passage through which the late-born protagonist is able to prove himself to his elder fellows and win greater honors.

These are striking similarities, yet nobody has noted them before. In his study of Mesopotamian poetry and Greek epic, Penglase (1994) insisted that the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* was utterly lacking in parallels; nor is Lugalbanda discussed in detail in West's magisterial *The East Face of Helicon*. While preliminary versions of *Lugalbanda and the Mountain Cave* have long circulated among Assyriologists, it has only recently become available to non-specialists.

Whether the apparent similarities between Lugalbanda's and Hermes' exploits are to be counted more than a coincidence must be left to the judgment of the reader. At the same time, however, the significance of the Lugalbanda text goes beyond a mere addition to the long list of Greek-Near Eastern parallels. Scholars of the Lugalbanda text have suggested that it provides aetiologies for human control of fire, the domestication of wild cattle, and the origin of sacrifice, themes that have also been recognized in the *Hymn to Hermes* and are important in the Hesiodic corpus. *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave* will provide valuable comparative material for the study of mythic representations of sacrifice and its origins.