Announcements from the U.S. President are given from a lectern in a briefing room with a prominent oval plaque behind it that features a frontal representation of the White House. The plaque is more than just a locational sign. It is an object in which the realities of power, representation, institutionality and speech are collapsed. Already the ancient Egyptians would have been familiar with such a practice. The word pharaoh, which means 'great house,' referred not just to the king but also to the palace of the king, and its earliest cartouche represented the palace gate as if speech emanated from the gate. Parallel to such speculations, the cedar tree of ancient Mesopotamia can be considered another such spatial—and speaking—figure. I use as my evidence The Epic of Gilgamesh—about which there has been little discussion in the tradition of the architectural treatise. In The Epic of Gilgamesh, the cedar tree’s conquest, destruction and reconstitution into architecture—both as an exhibited symbol and as a numer for the temple gates—brings to light the imaginary of the city as not just a place bounded by walls and filled with palaces and temples, but also as a place that depends upon the dangerous far-off periphery—in mythology and in representation—as a demonstration of power beyond the palace and outside the city walls.

If a definition of empire is as an aggregate of different regional identities fused into a single political entity, it is also true that empires often sustain a center versus periphery dynamic. What we see described in The Epic of Gilgamesh through the context of the cedar, is perhaps the beginning of such an awareness. Unlike the Egyptian palace or the White House which both speak from the center outward, the Mesopotamian tree-cult in The Epic of Gilgamesh describes something of a greater organizational complexity. The cedar is not just an item with religious significance about which much has been written, but a symbol of alienation and reconstitution since cedars can only be acquired through risky military action in areas far from the city. Furthermore, as a living member of the spirit world the cedar tree speaks, in both a primary and a secondary sense, about the complex status of periphery as a subject of the center. FIG. 1

In The Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu, a forest dweller, and Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, plan their assault on the forest in meticulous detail. The initial decision to make the journey had not been easy, and the long march from the treeless marshes of Mesopotamia to the forested mountains of Lebanon (or so it is generally presumed) had been stressful, especially since the two heroes were aware that a fearsome deity protected the forest:

He is a power without rest, Humbaba, whose voice is
the Deluge. His speech is the inferno, and his breath is death. He can hear the movements of the forest at a double hour. Who would venture into his forest? Adad is the first, but Humbaba is the second. None among even the Igigi would oppose him, to keep safe the cedar forest, for Enlil has decreed him to be a seven-fold terror."

After a prolonged struggle Gilgamesh and Enkidu succeed in defeating Humbaba:

Enkidu opened his mouth to speak, saying unto Gilgamesh: "Thou hast felled the guardian of the forest by thy strength alone. Nothing can bring dishonor unto thee. Therefore, flatten the Forest of Cedar!"

Their aim, however, had been not only to the defeat of the deity but also to fell the forest for lumber. An armed group had accompanied the pair from Uruk, presumably to first assist in the conquest, and then afterwards to help extract and transport the wood:

To the sons of his city who accompanied him [Gilgamesh said], "Cut down the branches, bundle them up. Lay them at the foot of the mountain."

One of the trees was set aside so that Enkidu could build a huge temple door:

Find for me a tall cedar whose tip touches the sky,
I shall fashion from it a door as broad as the length of a reed, which shall have no pivot but instead shall sit within the door jamb.

Enkidu and Gilgamesh placed the door on a raft, piloting the vessel down the Euphrates to the Temple of Enlil, in Nippur. Enlil was a supreme deity of the Mesopotamian pantheon responsible for granting kingship, and the warriors had hoped to receive such a blessing in return for dedicating the door as an offering. It made sense, since, apart from the altar, the enormous gates of a temple, as the symbolic threshold between sacred and divine, were the next most important element of the building. Later, in the first century BCE, the Assyrian ruler Tiglath-Pileser III would record a similar description of the gates to his capital city of Nimrud in Upper Mesopotamia, as follows:

Double doors of cedar and pine, which bestow (great) pleasure on those who enter them (and) whose fragrance wafts into the heart, I overlaid with strips of shining silver alloy and [gold alloy] and set them up in the gateways.

Heaven itself was deemed to have gates, and Shamash, the Mesopotamian sun god, was the gatekeeper. Shamash is described as "he who [drews back] the bolt of the heavens, who opens wide the doors of the earth." But things did not go as planned; Enlil, surprisingly, rejects the door. Later in The Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu—embittered and on the verge of death—speaks to the door "as though It were a man," speculating that maybe he should have offered it to the temple of Shamash at Sippur (Ebabbarra) instead:

Had I but known how you would reward mine effort, I would have used my axe to cut you down and set you adrift as a raft to Ebabbarra to place you as portal to the temple of Shamash, who heard my words and gave me my weapon. O, door, if I raised thee, might I also destroy thee? May some king who follows me burn with hatred for thee, or remove my name from thy wood, and install his own.

Yet the problem may not have been the temple to which the door was dedicated, but the fundamental act of cutting the tree. In one of The Epic of Gilgamesh fragments, the cutting was described as nothing less than "murdering the cedar," pointing to the fundamental tension underlying the enterprise.

At the beginning of the story, Enkidu is portrayed as living alone in a forest and as "a murderous fellow from the midst of the wild."
He knew not the land and the inhabitants thereof: he was clothed with garments as the god of the field. With gazelles
he ate herbs, with the beasts he soothed his thirst, with the
creatures of the water his heart rejoiced.\textsuperscript{15}

But Enki does not simply a wild man. He should be
understood as a mythologized "First Society" person,
perhaps a member of a forest tribe the likes of which were
still relatively common throughout Asia before the advent
of the modern world.\textsuperscript{16} A recently discovered text
suggests that in his youth Enki had spent time with Humbaba,
implying that Enki's origins might have been in that very
forest and that Humbaba, when he heard of the young
man's arrival, even assumed that Enki was merely returning
home.\textsuperscript{17} Humbaba is also clearly not an isolated deity
but also functions as a mythological personification of the
forest temple that was sacred to local villagers. Why else
would the two warriors travel a thousand kilometers with
a cadre of well-armed soldiers if not to defeat the chiefdom
that would have typically protected such a temple? But
the important outstanding question posed by \textit{The Epic of
Gilgamesh} is, why is Enki, a man who came from and
truly belonged to the forest, portrayed as deciding to turn
against his own sacred domain so fiercely?

The question that first needs to be answered is, what
exactly is the nature of a sacred forest? Despite the abun-
dant scholarly writing on the epic as an archaeological or
historical text, there has been notably little discussion about
the sacred forest as a spatial or architectural concept.\textsuperscript{18}

It is generally thought that sacred forests originated in
the time following the introduction of agriculture: as land
was opened for fields, certain areas were ritualistically des-
ignated as special. Today there are so few of these places
left that we could be forgiven for failing to adequately place
them in the registers of history, but for millennia sacred
forests were an established part of societies throughout
Europe, Asia, and Africa.\textsuperscript{19} In some cases groves encom-
pass a large territory, and in others they are just a few
trees. The Celts possessed hundreds of such groves, as
did the people of Germania, whose rituals were described
by Tacitus, the Roman historian of the first century CE:

Their holy places are woods and groves, and they apply
the names of deities to that hidden presence which is
seen only by the eye of reverence. ... They carry with
them into the fight certain figures and emblems taken
from their sacred groves.\textsuperscript{20}

Sacred forests were associated with rain and thunder de-
ities as well as divination. In terms of the interrelationship
between agricultural deities and groves there was both rel-
ative autonomy and a special kind of mutual dependence.
Agricultural deities reigned supreme in the fields, but
ancestral and fertility deities needed forests and groves.
Groves also served political purposes through their links to
land tenure, moral order, and political legitimacy. A grove of
Diana near Rome provided a safe place for rival communi-
ties to meet.\textsuperscript{21} The tweeting of the birds, the rustling of the
leaves, and the activities of animals were all taken seriously
as oracular pronouncements. The grove as a whole was
considered even to speak in some cases. For example,

Cicero recounted how not long after a battle with the Gauls
a voice issued from the sacred grove of Vesta, at the base
of the Palatine Hill: "The walls and gates must be repaired:
unless this is done, the city will be taken."\textsuperscript{22}

The community of Malshugu, in the Northern Region of
Ghana, has a sacred grove that houses the deity Kpalevorgu,
where all forms of farming and grazing are prohibited. Only
the priests and their aides have regular access to pray to
the god on the community's behalf. Others are permitted
entry only during biannual rituals honoring Kpalevorgu or
on other special occasions with advance consent of the
priest and village leaders.\textsuperscript{23} Groves are the abodes of the
ancestors of local elites and thus central to the identity of
the neighboring community. The relation between the grove
and ancestor cults is so foundational that the death of an
elder or chief is usually communicated to the people as
"a great tree has fallen."\textsuperscript{24} Some villages in Madagascar
differentiate between ancestor-burial forests and those
where spirits reside.\textsuperscript{25} Communities in Rajasthan respect
sacred groves, called \textit{oran}, in honor of a local deity. A
recent survey of chiefdoms in the Moyamba District of
Sierra Leone showed that of 392 sacred groves over half
are dedicated to women and a third to men, with others
devoted to fetal burials or mythical deities.\textsuperscript{26} On the island
of Okinawa sacred forests, called \textit{utaki}, are usually associ-
ated with villages positioned to the south of the grove. \textbf{Fig. 3}
It is believed that when a woman dies her spirit goes back
to the \textit{utaki} and is transferred to a granddaughter, so
the forest is a medium of contact between generations.\textsuperscript{27}

Stated plainly, sacred groves are never simply compo-
nents of nature. Despite their perceived wilderness, they are
institutions that control ancestry, marriage, puberty, and
the cycles of agriculture. Monitored and tended, they
have active and important roles in village and urban rituals.
Ancient Greek groves (\textit{alos}, plural \textit{aisle}) were linked to
towns by wide paths allowing for festivals to pass back and
forth on ritual days.\textsuperscript{28} In other words, groves were located
at one end of a spatial, urban, and spiritual continuum with
the urban temple at the other. The two, grove and temple,
were held in an evident and necessary tension maintained
through cultural traditions in the form of rituals and taboos.
In the villages of southern India, according to John Freeman,
the grove and temple are seen as functioning together:
"They take their food here [in the city-temple] and take
their rest there [in the grove]."\textsuperscript{29}
A pig is to be sacrificed, and the following prayer uttered: "Whether thou be god or goddess to whom this grove is dedicated, as it is thy right to receive a sacrifice of a pig for the thinning of this sacred grove, and to this intent, whether I or one at my bidding do it, may it be rightly done. To this end, in offering this pig to thee I humbly beg that thou wilt be gracious and merciful to me, to my house and household, and to my children. Wilt thou deign to receive this pig which I offer thee to this end."³³

Entering groves is a risky act even in the best of circumstances, since groves defend themselves through psychological warfare. The Romans had a phrase to describe it, *mysterium tremendum*, a terrifying shake that the deities can transmit to humans. Indeed, though Gilgamesh starts off unafraid of the voice of the forest, Enkidu is predictably nervous. He knows that "to enter his forest is to be seized by shaking," and, during the journey to the forest, Gilgamesh has a series of three dreams in which the spirit world of the forest tries to warn him off:

Why art my muscles trembling? Enkidu, my friend, I have had a dream. The dream that I dreamed was very terrible; in the valleys between the mountains we were walking. A great mountain fell down upon us.³⁰

Despite the risks, the warriors would have known that it was not impossible to remove trees. Permission would have to be granted not just by the priests but also by the tree itself.³¹ Spirits would have to be consulted, omens interpreted, blessings made, and offerings given. In Ghana in former times, before any big tree was cut, a libation was poured for the gods to ask for their blessing and guidance so that no bad omen would befall the community.³² In Japan, even today, the trees that are felled to construct the Ise Grand Shrine have to be asked their permission. Fig 4-6, The elaborate rituals are part of Yamaguchi-Sai ("mountain entrancing ceremony"). Cato the Elder, writing on Roman agriculture in the second century BCE, recounts a special ritual used by the husbandman when cutting down a tree for timber:

Even today the power of these groves is not to be trifled with. In Java, the tree spirits Gendruwo and Weewe, male and female deities respectively, if not properly respected, can make one become ill or go insane.³⁴ At the Mawphlang Sacred Forest in north India, Fig 7 large warning signs spell out the proper course of behavior for the unsuspecting visitor. Fig 8

Enkidu thus knows full well that one cannot just take an ax to a tree, as Humbaba reminds him: "If any mortal, Enkidu, knows the rules of my forest, it is you. You know that this is my place, and that I am the forest's guarding." Even Gilgamesh knows the importance of protocol. It is told how on the march he goes to a nearby mountaintop, pours a sacrificial meal into a hole, and says: "Mountain, bring a dream unto me! Let me see dream-visions. O Shamash." But when his dream turns out to be more of a nightmare, Enkidu steps up and misinterprets it:

Enkidu heard this dream and said to him: "My friend, this dream is favorable, for it tells us that we shall triumph over Humbaba. The mountain which thou sawest in thy dream is Humbaba. The dream foretells that we shall kill Humbaba and dispatch his corpse to the wasteland. Come morning Shamash shall send us a favorable omen."³⁷
It is impossible to miss Enkidu's deception since he repeats it in various ways for all three dreams. And in the end, after Enkidu had turned the tide of the battle leading to the destruction of Humbaba, the great deity Enlil even inquires:

"Why have you acted so?" asks the god. "Why, by what is done his name [Humbaba] is destroyed from the earth! You should have seated him before you, You should have given him food from your food. You should have given him drink from your drink." 38

And indeed they should have, for it is the failure to have acted properly that leads to Enlil's rejection of the door.

The refusal to perform the usual supplications and the subsequent violence toward the forest, and its related temple protectors, was not the foolhardy act of two young men. It was purposeful. Grove destruction was a well-known way to defeat an enemy and was used repeatedly throughout history.9 In the Bible (Exodus 34:13) Moses was told by none other than Jahwe, "Ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves." Julius Caesar systematically destroyed the sacred groves of the Gauls to force them into the embrace of Roman deities. When his army came to one particular grove, Caesar seized an ax and began to chop at a tree. To offset the nervousness of the soldiers, he promised to absorb any guilt they may subsequently experience into his own person: *iam ne quis uestrum dubitet subuertere silium/credite me fecisse nefas* ("Now let none of you hesitate to fell the wood. [You should believe that I] alone have committed the unspeakable crime.") Similarly, when the Roman general Gaius Suetonius Paulinus wanted to wipe out the resistance of the Welsh tribes, he went to the sacred island of Mona (today known as Anglesey) to massacre the druids and burn the sacred groves.40 The aim was simple: to disenfranchise locals from their attachment to place and ancestors. It was the first step toward pacification since the destruction of the forest meant that those who held it sacred were now essentially homeless. As was true throughout the tribal world, without a connection to ancestors, a person's future is that of a slave, whether in real terms or in cognitive terms, and this can extend to an entire clan or village.

In Europe, the destruction of scared groves was a key element in Christianization. So thorough were the Christians that few groves have survived. One that did survive, however, is the Forest of Sainte-Baume, which according to ancient sources was inhabited by the goddess of fertility.41 Another is Mount Śleża, in Poland, which was apparently dedicated to a sun deity by the Celts and Vandals. The Old Slavic holiday Kupala Night was reportedly celebrated on the mountain with bonfires called Sobótki into the eleventh century. The hagiographers of Saint Boniface record the destruction of sacred woods in the Anglo-Saxon mission to convert the Germanic parts of the Frankish Empire during the eighth century.42 As recounted by Willibald in *The Life of St. Boniface*:

Now many of the Hessians who at that time [the year 723] had acknowledged the Catholic faith were confirmed by the grace of the Holy Spirit and received the laying-on of hands. But others, not yet strong in the spirit, refused to accept the pure teachings of the Church in their entirety. Moreover, some continued secretly, others openly, to offer sacrifices to trees and springs, to inspect the entrails of victims; some practiced divination, legerdemain and incantations; some turned their attention to auguries, auspices and other sacrificial rites; whilst others, of a more reasonable character, forsook all the profane practices of heathenism and committed none of these crimes. With the counsel and advice of the latter persons, Boniface, in their presence attempted to cut down, at a place called Gaesmere, a certain oak of extraordinary size called by the pagans of olden times the Oak of Donar. Taking his courage in his hands (for a great crowd of pagans stood by watching and bitterly cursing in their hearts the enemy of the gods), he cut the first notch. But when he had made a superficial cut suddenly the oak's vast bulk, shaken by a mighty blast of wind from above, crashed to the ground shivering its topmost branches.
into fragments in its fall. As if by the express will of God
(for the brethren present had done nothing to cause it)
the oak burst asunder into four parts, each part having
a trunk of equal length. At the sight of this extraordinary
spectacle the heathens who had been cursing ceased
to revile and began, on the contrary, to believe and
bless the Lord. Thereupon the holy bishop took counsel
with the brethren, built an oratory from the timber of the
oak and dedicated it to St. Peter the Apostle.\textsuperscript{42}

Although the text describes that Boniface was killed by
bandits, the attackers were more likely members of a pagan
resistance movement. Nonetheless, his death made Boniface
into a Christian martyr and saint.\textsuperscript{43} The history of the de-
commissioning of ancient groves is not yet over. The ongo-
ing Christianization of Africa and Asia has resulted in the
destruction of numerous “heathen” forest shrines.\textsuperscript{44} Urban
development has also come into conflict with forests and
groves in these contexts.

Returning to \textit{The Epic of Gilgamesh}, we can see the
larger implications in the destruction of the forest, namely
in the severance of regional and village elites from their
power bases to make them subservient to new urban-based
realities.\textsuperscript{45} Some scholars still refer to Enkidu as a hero who
wins fame but dies early, yet from another point of view he
was just the opposite, a traitor to his people and ancestors,
as Humbaba clearly points out in his dying breath.\textsuperscript{46}

\begin{quote}
Enkidu, thou art the spawn of the fish, a man who
knoweth no father, the hatchling of a turtle, who
suckled not his mother’s milk. In thy youth, I saw and
watched thee, though I did not go over unto thee ... in
my belly, Traitor! Thou bringest before me Gilgamesh
and standest before me as warrior and stranger.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

By understanding the sacred forest as a type of institution
and its destruction as a geopolitical act rather than one
of youthful heroism and folly, we can see that \textit{The Epic of
Gilgamesh} is at its most schematic the struggle between
what we might call “organized” religion practiced in city
temples and the ancient world of village animism with its
emphasis on mountains, springs, and groves.

The first-century BCE bronze bands that decorated
the hinges on the huge cedar gates of the Temple of Mamu
at Imgur-Enlil, in Balawat, Iraq show the aftermath of the
conquest of Syrian mountain tribes by the Assyrians.\textsuperscript{48}
One band depicts the conquered people dutifully offering
goods to the new Assyrian overlords; another part shows
soldiers carrying logs, clearly a prized possession, on spe-
cial harnesses over rough wooded terrain. In all likelihood
these logs came from a sacred forest controlled by the town.
They may also be the very logs used to make the gate of
the Temple of Mamu.

The historical and ideological distinctions between
urban temple and remote village, in Mesopotamia at least,
emerged under the Ubaid culture (4,500–3,600 BCE),
credited with developing the shift to urban temples. This
also reflected a shift in geography: from the ninth millennium
BCE onward villages grew on the slopes overlooking the
rivers and valleys, and by the fifth millennium BCE consti-
tuted a network extending from the Levant to the northern
edge of the still largely unpopulated Iraqi marshes. Though
often called the Fertile Crescent, the name is a falsification
of late-nineteenth-century archaeology.\textsuperscript{49} The and slopess
were ideal, however, for wheat and barley that could thrive
in relatively low-nutrient environments. Settlements rarely
exceeded two hundred people, with each village most
certainly having its own sacred grove or spring somewhere
in the nearby hills. The marshes farther south could not
support a complex village life—there was no stone, no
lumber, no metal, and a limited supply of dry land for cattle.
Over time various groups entered into the marshes to take
advantage of what was missing from the thousands of years
of agricultural development in Mesopotamia: fertile soil.
Archaeologists identify these groups as the Ubaid and the
later Sumerians. Their success in agriculture and garden-
ing led to the rapid intensification of economic trade and,
of course, to the first cities, all of which forms the backdrop of
\textit{The Epic of Gilgamesh}. Indeed its opening is an eloquent
advertisement for the city:

\begin{quote}
Of Uruk, its great rampart he [Gilgamesh] built, and the
wall of the sacred Eanna temple, the holy sanctuary.
Behold the outer walls which gleam with the brilliance
of copper, see the inner wall which none might rival.
Touch the threshold stone—it is from ancient days.
Goest thou into the Eanna temple, yea, the dwelling
place of Ishtar, the like of which no subsequent king or
living man might equal. Ascend and walk about on the
wall of Uruk, inspect the corner-stone, and examine
its brick-work, whether its wall is not made of burned
brick, and its foundation laid by the Seven Sages. One
third for city, one third for garden, one third for field,
and a precinct for the temple of Ishtar. These parts and
the precinct comprise Uruk.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

By the time of Sargon in the twenty-third century BCE—more
or less when the first Gilgamesh stories were conceived—
the wealth of the city and its temples depended primarily
on commercial expansion, supported in part by an admin-
istrative and military apparatus.\textsuperscript{51} However, the ancient
hill villages did not just disappear. What changed was their
status. Villages were no longer at the formative upper end
of cultural life but at a lower, subservient register, with
a familiar status to that of today. Similarly, people left the
villages, whether unwillingly as slaves or willingly to be-
come devotees of an urban temple, working in the fields or
in various capacities within the structure of the temple economy. There are parallels in this to the premodern temple-cities of South India, where the temples are something like agro-corporations ruled over by priests with ceremonial fanfare. It was not just agricultural labor that was required but everything from weavers, cooks, and pot makers to musicians and dancers. As the Mesopotamian temples became more powerful, villages came to be assigned special tasks relating to the ever more expansive needs of the city, if they were not outright depopulated.

One of the primary material needs of the developing cities was lumber—for buildings, kilns, metalwork, and so on. Deforestation was compounded by erosion accompanying the rapid proliferation of goat herding. The effect on the landscape was devastating, attested to also by the fact that Enkidu and Gilgamesh had to cross seven mountains to locate a satisfactory forest. The wanderers even came upon a place described in the text as “Land of the cut-down Erin (Cedar)-trees.” The scarcity of suitable trees only enhanced their mythological and geo-political status. It also meant that by the third millennium BCE forested peripheral territories had become a source of wealth. Gold and copper are better known as luxury commodities today, but wood was certainly on this list during the third millennium BCE. The problem was that unlike metal, which could be brought to urban centers, the procurement of wood inevitably required territorial conquest. Wood from residual sacred groves would have had a particularly special place. As a living entity, its inner spirit could be ceremoniously reembodied through the civilizing forces of carpentry into the form of architecture. Once the sacred tree becomes sawed, planed, and assembled into a temple gate, it is reincarnated as a symbol of the power of the temple and city. The legitimacy of urban deities was at stake in this effort, for rulers were expected to build and dedicate temples as a sign of their potency, meaning that the acquisition of roofing beams and doors became a symbolic extension of power. Showing off things that came from remote places, either through conquest or trade, was to become a trope of Near Eastern kingship, later exotic animals were added to the list. The cedar tree, however, was of a different order. For early Mesopotamian cities, foreign conquest and the acquisition of lumber were symbolically intertwined.

The Epic of Gilgamesh thus revolves around the temple not just as the prime consumer of sacred lumber but also as the urban replacement of the distant mountain. The temple of Enil was known as é-kur, or “mountain house,” implying that in the flat plains of the marsh the man-made temple had to supplant the ancient natural residences of the gods for it to succeed. In India, every shikhara (Sanskrit for “mountain peak”) of a Hindu temple replicates the sacred mountain and places the deity within the urban realm and its expectations and demands. For the city to serve as a theocentric space, the architectural mountain has to proclaim its symbolically compressed superiority over the rest thing. This means that the temple gates represent not just the distinction between sacred and profane but also a liminal space between the spirit world of the remote grove and that of the urban temple. The temple consumes the ancient forest as an index of its supremacy.

This is indicated in a stone-carved frieze showing the Sumerian king Ur-Nammu standing before the seated deity Enil, the very same whose temple received Gilgamesh’s doors. Between the two figures is a cedar tree, sitting in a huge pot into which Ur-Nammu pours water. As the trophy of a distant conquest, the tree is more than an image of primitive devotion—it symbolizes a complex set of risk-related actions. Most importantly it evidences the existence of the far-off tributary kingdoms that supplied various types of goods, including slaves. There is another dimension to Enil that should not be ignored. The deity may have been the god of wind, air, earth, and storms, but he also invente the mattock (the pickax) which he gave to humans so they could clear land to build cities. In the band just below the seated deity, we see a man carrying just such a mattock on his shoulder, making the link between the mattock and the deity unmistakable. Researchers have even argued that here the deity is giving Ur-Nammu instructions on how to build temples.
The interpretation of this essay suggests that Enkidu was no hapless primitive “wild man” of the forest, but a tribal mountain warrior who sought out an alliance with urban elites as a way to control the lucrative economy in timber and slaves. Situations like this were common and have been recorded even in modern times. Enkidu was perhaps a traitor from the very start, bringing to the city in his very persona the imaginary of a far-off grove that would lure Gilgamesh into becoming the “muscle” in their alliance. That may explain why Enkidu strikes the first blow when he sees Gilgamesh trying to negotiate a deal with Humbaba rather going after the trees in a more direct fashion—the cedars little more than a cover for actions behind the scenes. How then do we interpret the miscalculation between Nippur and Sippar? Since Mesopotamian deities were closely allied with cities, it is quite possible that Enkidu somehow misunderstood the nature of the alliance. We cannot speculate further without added insights into the murky zone of such implied contestation.

Sumerian scholars largely accept the proposition that events recounted in Sumerian epics may have some form of historical basis. I am not making such a claim specifically, but if we add historical and anthropological evidence about sacred forests to the discussion, we begin to recognize a possible framework for the story as much about buildings or sites as it is about trees that serve as a vital element in the newly forming urban imaginary. In ancient Mesopotamian visual culture we often see the colonized subject offering tribute to authorities interpreted as a symbol of passivity, or at least acquiescence. But as the bearer of divine meaning translated and transplanted into the materiality of architecture, the tree—as seen by the urban elites—served a more important purpose as the spiritual embodiment of the geopolitics of remoteness and the refashioning of power.

In a place where an empire is constructed upon narratives of heroic action, the transposition of the forest from the natural to the man-made environment demands a real and simultaneously a mythological conquest of the tribal world, represented by the destruction of forests and its assimilation into urban architecture. Scholars drawing on literary and archaeological evidence have tended to study Mesopotamia from the perspective of the city. For example, we know quite a bit about Assyrian urbanism since the annals describe founding cities, constructing canals, planting orchards, opening quarries, and resettling conquered populations. The Assyrian state also inscribed their identity on rock reliefs and stelae in symbolically charged foreign landscapes to incorporate them into narratives of the empire. Though the periphery is spatially as such, when encountered in histories of conquest and imperial imaginaries, I argue that early Mesopotamian contexts described a tribal periphery with a narrative and architectural “voice” that reverberates, however mythologically, in the form of the cedar from the sacred forest. In its simplest terms, the act of defiling the sacred forest and celebrating the predictable “wrath of the gods” was a method to demonstrate the domestication of the hill tribes. The city’s conquest of the periphery is thus not just a consequence of territorial claims or the need for security and resources, it is part of the substantiation of a “civilizing” imaginary.
Geopolitics articulates itself variously through texts, actions, and strategies but also through architecture. In a sense, every Mesopotamian temple embodies this strategy of violence and replacement. In taming the tree—placing it in a pot, planting it on an artificial mountain, sawing it into lumber for a temple gate, or even representing it in a story inscribed into a clay tablet—a reading backward in time and space is required to find everything it implies. The Epic of Gilgamesh is a story not only about humans and deities but also about the changing and contested nature of the tree as the material unit and figural embodiment of power beyond the city walls and the power inherent in the alien world of trilobiety. And the great cedar forest is quite likely the earliest symbolic abstraction of this geopolitical contestation in history.

3 Enkidu is a slave in the earliest versions of The Epic of Gilgamesh; later he is identified as a companion. See John R. Maier, Gilgamesh and the Great Goddess of Uruk, https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/sunyweb/4, 295.
4 In other versions of the story, the forest seems to be located to the east of Uruk, in Elam (now Iran), while in later accounts it is located to the far north and west of Uruk. See Maier, Gilgamesh and the Great Goddess, 157.
6 Epic of Gilgamesh/William Mass-Arnolt/Tablet V.
8 Epic of Gilgamesh/William Mass-Arnolt/Tablet V.
12 Epic of Gilgamesh/William Mass-Arnolt/Tablet VII.
15 Epic of Gilgamesh/William Mass-Arnolt/Tablet VII.
16 Such characters pop up in a range of ancient texts, even the Bible, but the Enkidu story is particularly important since it is the first recorded account of the encounter between an aboriginal and a self-proclaimed “civilization.” Gregory Moblly has pointed out that Enkidu is the oldest extant literary repre-
17 sentative of the wild man. This characterization appears to be an innovation of the Old Babylonian version of Gilgamesh since in the earlier Sumerian versions Enkidu was merely a colorless servant & companion. See Gregory Moblly, “The Wild Man in the Bible and the Ancient Near East,” Journal of Biblical Literature 116 (Summer 1997): 217–33.
19 A great amount of scholarly effort has been dedicated to determining the location of the forest. Suggested places range from Elam (to the east of Babylonia), the mountains of North Syria and southern Turkey, and of course Lebanon. See Vykinas Vaitkūvičius, “The Sacred Groves of the Baalu: Lost History and Modern Research,” Electronic Journal of Folklore 42 (2009).
21 C. M. C. Green, Roman Religion and the Cult of Divus Aricia (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 90.
30 Epic of Gilgamesh/ William Muss-Arnott/Tablet IV.
31 Sacred groves in ancient Greece and Rome were protected by strict regulations against violation. See Darice Elizabeth Birge, Sacred Groves in the Ancient Greek World (PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 1982).
35 Ovid, Metamorphoses VIII, 738–78. Translated by A.S. Kline (Ann Arbor Mi: Borders Classics, 2004), 146.
36 Peter Boomgaard, "Sacred Trees and Haunted Forests in Indonesia," Asian Perceptions of Nature: A Critical Approach, ed. Ole Bruun and Arne Kalland (London: Routledge, 1995), 51. Among the Iban in Indonesia, anyone wanting to fell trees within such a site had to perform proper ritual offerings. Farming on or near such land was said to result in illness for the family. See Reed L. Wadley and Carol J. Pierce Colfer, "Sacred Forest, Hunting, and Conservation in West Kalimantan, Indonesia," Human Ecology 32 (June 2004): 313–38.
37 Epic of Gilgamesh/ William Muss-Arnott/Tablet IV.
41 In the town of Fritzlar, not far from the church he built, there is a statue of Boniface standing on a tree stump holding a giant ax in one hand and a model of the church in the other. This representation could easily be emulated in the thousands around the world. See Linda Kay Davidson and David Martin Gitlitz, Pilgrimages: From the Ganges to Gracetland, an Encyclopedia, vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2002), 562.
45 It is astonishing that the geopolitical implication of the sacred forest’s destruction has rarely been raised. Even in Michael Williams’s book Deforesting the Earth there is not a single mention of deforestation as a ritual act.
47 Epic of Gilgamesh/ William Muss-Arnott/Tablet V.
48 Archaeologist James Henry Breasted popularized the term fertile crescent, beginning with the books Outlines of European History (1914) and Ancient Times: A History of the Early World (1916). Today scholars tend to shy away from that term since Mesopotamia, with the exception of the marshes, was not technically fertile.
49 Epic of Gilgamesh/ William Muss-Arnott/Tablet I.
52 Sacred trees existed within the city itself of course, as the opening of the epic implies, but they were planted in gardens not designed for harvesting lumber.
56 Epic of Gilgamesh/William Muss-Arnott/Tablet V.