

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

BACKGROUND: One of the greatest cities in ancient Sumer was the city of Uruk. Legend says that once upon a time, on the banks of the Euphrates, in the great city of Uruk, there lived a king named Gilgamesh. In reality, a king named Gilgamesh may actually have existed. His name is on the Sumerian King List, a list written in cuneiform on clay tablets, recovered from the library at Nineveh by archaeologists.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a series of stories about King Gilgamesh, written thousands of years ago. The oldest version dates back to around 2000 BCE.

The stories recount the many adventures that our hero, Gilgamesh, experienced in his search for everlasting life. The narrator is quick to tell us that the king of Uruk, the great King Gilgamesh, was two-thirds god and one-third human. According to the narrator, Gilgamesh was not just a hero; he was a superhero. Gilgamesh fought monsters, moved mountains and rivers, rescued people in need, and generally protected the people of Sumer. Yet, he was also part mortal, which might be why Gilgamesh was determined to find everlasting life - so he could live forever like the other gods.

Tablet One:

This is the story of a man who knew all that could be known. He saw the hidden things from the time before the Flood. He built the walls of Uruk. Climb those walls. Within the city is a temple, and within the temple is a cedar box. Open the box. Take out the tablets and read the story of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh--the wild bull, perfect in strength, surpassing all others.

Gilgamesh, the hero--immense and terrible: two thirds god and one third man.

Gilgamesh was unmatched in strength and power. His tyranny and savagery grew. The women and the old ones complained to the gods, "Shouldn't Gilgamesh be our shepherd, the protector of our people?" They called to the sky god, Anu: "You made this king of ours. Now make us another who is strong enough to withstand him."



The god Anu heard the cries of the people of Uruk, and out of clay he fashioned a wild man named Enkidu.

Enkidu's hair was long and matted; he grazed on the grasslands with the gazelles and joined the animals at the watering hole. Gilgamesh knew that Enkidu must be tamed, before he destroyed livestock. Gilgamesh summoned Shamhat, a beautiful woman, so that she could tame him. When Shamhat saw Enkidu at the watering hole, she knew it would only take her touching the wild man to tame him.

When she tamed him, she told him of the great city of Uruk and its ruler.

Tablet Two:

When Shamhat told Enkidu about how cruel Gilgamesh was, Enkidu proclaimed, "I will go to Uruk. I will challenge Gilgamesh."

When Enkidu arrived in Uruk, the people whispered, "This is the wild man. He is the only one who can stop Gilgamesh."

Like two bulls they fought. The door post splintered. The walls shook. The floor trembled. At last, Gilgamesh wrestled Enkidu to the ground.

"You are the strongest," Enkidu said. Then the two embraced.

Then an idea came to Gilgamesh. "I need to increase my fame. I will obtain wood from the distant cedar forest. Come with me. The god Enlil has made the monster Humbaba the guardian of the cedar forest. It is written that I must slay this demon-ogre."

"The cedar forest is sacred to Enlil," replied Enkidu. "Humbaba's voice is like the roar of the Flood, his breath is like deathly fire. Who would risk his wrath?"

“Has your strength left you, Enkidu? Even lions were once afraid of you. No man can live forever. If I die in this battle, at least my children will be able to say that I fought Humbaba.”

Tablet Four:

Gilgamesh and Enkidu set out for the cedar forest atop Mount Lebanon. They traveled fifty leagues a day, resting only at nightfall as the dark and wooded mountain loomed ahead. Each night they dug a well and prepared a shelter against the wind. They sacrificed grain to the Dream god, and Enkidu kept watch while Gilgamesh slept. Each night, Gilgamesh dreamt: He dreamt of a huge mountain falling, of a fearsome bull bellowing, of a wild storm crashing, of a fierce eagle soaring.

Each night, Enkidu interpreted the dream: “You will slay Humbaba. Standing together, we two will prevail.”

Tablet Five:

The cedar forest stood ahead, cool, green, and fragrant. Gilgamesh and Enkidu entered; they felled a cedar tree with their axes. “Who has entered my forest?” roared Humbaba.

In a swirl of confusion, the demon surrounded them, changing faces, changing places, now here, now there. The heroes were frightened. “The forest is dark,” trembled Enkidu. “The Shamash, sun has abandoned us.”

“Standing together, we two can prevail,” countered Gilgamesh. “All men must die, but I am not ready to die yet. Shamash, protect us.”

Shamash heard the prayers of the two heroes and sent seven winds to buffet Humbaba, winds from the North, South, East and West, frost-winds, fire-winds, whirlwinds. Humbaba could not move. “Enkidu, I knew you in the wild. Tell Gilgamesh to spare my life. I will serve you, Son of Uruk. The cedar forest will be yours.”

“Do not listen to this demon, Gilgamesh,” said Enkidu. “He will block your way back to Uruk. He will rob you of your fame.”

Humbaba cursed Enkidu. “Neither of you will grow old; Gilgamesh will bury you.” But Gilgamesh struck the monster, cutting off his head.

Tablet Six:

Gilgamesh and Enkidu returned, triumphant, to the city of Uruk. Gilgamesh washed and perfumed his hair, put on his purple cloak and his crown. And the goddess Ishtar was stunned by his beauty. “Be my husband, Gilgamesh,” she begged. “I will give you riches in abundance, chariots of lapis lazuli with wheels of gold. Princes will kneel to you; kings will send you tribute from far and wide.”

“You are the Queen of Love,” Gilgamesh replied. “You will use and discard me as you have all of your men.”

Furious, Ishtar went to heaven, to complain to her father Anu that Gilgamesh had insulted her.

Anu shrugged. “Maybe you gave him reason, daughter.”

“Give me the Bull of Heaven, father,” she insisted. “I want to trample Gilgamesh, the arrogant one.”

“The Bull of Heaven will not only trample Gilgamesh,” warned Anu. “The city of Uruk will suffer seven years of drought.”

Ishtar assured her father that she would prepare the city for the coming drought, so Anu released the Bull of Heaven to his angry daughter. With each stamp of the huge bull’s hoof, the ground in Uruk opened up, swallowing its people.

“I’ll grab him by the tail,” called Enkidu to Gilgamesh. “You cut him down. Standing together, we two can prevail.”



And so the two heroes slew the Bull of Heaven. Ishtar stood on the walls of Uruk, wailing, "Gilgamesh has killed the Bull of Heaven."

Enkidu cut off one of the bull's legs and threw it toward Ishtar. "I would do the same to you."

"I am the strongest here," Gilgamesh exulted, and the people of Uruk rejoiced with their king. But that night, Enkidu had a foreboding dream.

Tablet Seven:



This was Enkidu's dream: The gods of the heavens held a council. Anu and Enlil blamed Shamash the Sun. "You helped Gilgamesh, and he killed Humbaba, guardian of my cedar forest," claimed Enlil, the ruler of the earth.

"And now he has killed my Bull of Heaven," added Anu, father of the gods. "One of these two must die."

"Let it be Enkidu," Enlil decreed.

Enkidu began to waste away. Neither brother wanted to lose the other.

Enkidu's sleep was troubled. In his dreams, he journeyed to the dark Underworld, to the House of Dust. Day after day, he withered. On the twelfth day, he begged Gilgamesh: "Do not forget how we stood together. Alas, I do not die in battle. I am cursed. Who will remember my name?" With those last words, Enkidu died.

Tablet Nine:

Gilgamesh wandered the wild plains outside the walls of Uruk. Howling his grief, he said, "How can I rest? I am stalked by death. Alone, I can never prevail. I must find Utanapishti, he who survived the Flood. Only Uta-napishti can tell me how to escape death."

Gilgamesh resolved to find Uta-napishti. After a long and wearisome journey, he finally arrived at the great mountains where the sun rises and sets. Two scorpions guarded the mountain pass. With a terrible gaze, they doled out death. And yet, Gilgamesh mustered his courage and walked toward them. "Only a god would dare approach us," said one of the scorpions.

"Two thirds god," corrected the other. "One third man."

"Why have you traveled so far?" demanded the first scorpion.

"I need to question Uta-napishti about the secret of life and death," answered Gilgamesh.

"No mortal has ever crossed these mountains," warned the scorpions. "No light shines within them, and the darkness is dense."

"I must cross these mountains. Let me pass," the king replied.

The scorpions stepped aside. "You may go, Gilgamesh. May the mountains allow you to pass safely."

Gilgamesh entered the mountain pass alone. Utter darkness pressed him from all sides.

At twelve leagues, the sun finally rose on a glistening garden. Beyond the garden stretched the sea.



Tablet Ten:

Gilgamesh reached the edge of the sea and knew that no one could cross the waters of death alone. After much searching, he found Urshanabi, the ferryman who could take a boat across the waters.

“Who are you?” shouted Urshanabi.

“I am Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk.”

“Why are your cheeks so hollow?” asked Urshanabi, “and your heart so heavy?”

“My cheeks are hollow and my heart is heavy because my brother is dead. Enkidu, my beloved companion, is dead. And I am tormented by one question: Must I die too? I have journeyed this long way to find Uta-napishti and to learn the secret of life and death.”

Pointing to the broken rigging, Urshanabi explained that Gilgamesh had destroyed the only way across the ocean. But together, they fashioned poles to ferry across the waters of death.

When Gilgamesh finally reached the other side, he found Uta-napishti, the immortal one. Gilgamesh told Utanapishti his story.

“Ah Gilgamesh,” sighed Uta-napishti. “Stop chasing sorrow. Death takes all—the handsome young man and the old one as well. Life and death the gods have established.”

Tablet Eleven:

“How are you different?” challenged Gilgamesh. “Why did the gods grant you immortality?”



So Uta-napishti told this story: *“A long time ago, the gods lived in the city of Shuruppak, on the banks of the Euphrates river. But they left the city because it grew too crowded and too noisy. The gods decided to send a Flood to destroy the city. But Ea, the ocean god, whispered their plans to me. Ea told me to build a boat and gave me the dimensions. I followed his directions. When the time came, I sealed myself inside my boat, along with everything that I owned and all my household people. Adad the Storm God came riding on a black cloud, stirring up a terrible storm. For six days and six nights, the storm raged, and the flood waters swept my boat away. On the seventh day, the storm calmed, and my boat grounded on the top of a mountain. The waters stretched endlessly all around us. I set loose a bird and it returned, for there was no place to land. I kept sending out birds until one did not return, for it had found dry land. I sacrificed to the gods, but Enlil, ruler of the earth, was angry. ‘How is it that this man survived?’ Ea defended me, but Enlil condemned me and my wife to live forever in this faraway place.”*

“If you think you deserve immortality,” said Uta-napishti to Gilgamesh, “let’s see if you can stay awake for a week.” But as soon as Gilgamesh sat down, sleep crept over him like a fog. The wife of Uta-napishti baked a loaf of bread for every day that Gilgamesh slept, seven in all. Discouraged, Gilgamesh prepared to return to Uruk. As the King and the ferryman were leaving, the wife of Uta-napishti said, “Gilgamesh journeyed a long and weary distance to find you. Can’t you give him something to take back with him?”

Uta-napishti told Gilgamesh how to dive under the water to find a plant that would restore his youth, and Gilgamesh was able to find the plant. However, on the way back to Uruk, Gilgamesh rested, and soon fell asleep. As he slept, a snake slithered out and stole the plant, shedding its skin, and becoming beautiful. When Gilgamesh woke, he wept, “Oh, for all my labors I have achieved nothing.”



When Gilgamesh arrived back in Uruk, he climbed the city walls, examined their foundations, and marveled at their brickwork. Weary from journeying, Gilgamesh the King surveyed his city and inscribed his story that would be told for generations and generations; his story that would live forever.