

The Epic of Gilgamesh



Generally held to be the earliest recorded epic poem in the world, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is based on stories that first appeared around 4,000 years ago in the Near East, where tales of Gilgamesh were written down in various editions by generations of Mesopotamian scribes. Like many early epics, these written forms probably grew out of oral compositions, recited by communal storytellers for generations before scribes set them down on clay tablets, in an archaic form of writing known as “cuneiform.” Any view of the world of the epic must take into account that it was not composed by a single author, but evolved over time, in four stages. First, a series of stories describing Gilgamesh’s adventures was transcribed in the Sumerian language sometime between about 2200 and 1800 B.C.E. Second, around 1700 B.C.E. Babylonian scribes composed the earliest version of the epic, known to modern scholars as the Old Babylonian (OB) Version. Embarking from some of the older Sumerian stories about Gilgamesh, these scribes created a unified poetic narrative in the Akkadian language. Next, generations of scribes and poets copied and adapted the OB Version, altering both its phrasing and themes and at times introducing new episodes. An edition written on 11 tablets and known today as the Standard Version seems to have become standardized between roughly 1200 and 1000 B.C.E. Lastly, at some point, perhaps in the early first millennium, a twelfth tablet was added to the Standard Version. This tablet consisted of an Akkadian translation of a Sumerian tale (composed in Stage 1) that had not previously

THE LITERARY WORK

An epic poem, set in the city of Uruk (the biblical Erech), around 2700 B.C.E., composed in stages between 1700 and 1000 B.C.E., translated into English in two volumes (1884, 1891).

SYNOPSIS

A king and his companion brave many dangers together; after his companion dies, the king seeks the secret of everlasting life from a man who became immortal.

been included in the epic. A copy of this 12-tablet version was kept in the city of Nineveh at the royal library of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria during the seventh century B.C.E. English archaeologists discovered this copy in the nineteenth century and made the epic known to modern scholars and readers. Additional tablets from earlier stages were subsequently discovered. The epic’s sensitive exploration of friendship, death, and the hope for immortality, along with its meditations on the nature of humanity, divinity, and community, give this ancient work an enduring appeal.

Events in History at the Time the Epic Takes Place

The real Gilgamesh and the evolution of the myth. Although little is known about the real

THE LANGUAGES OF GILGAMESH

The first stories about Gilgamesh were composed in the third and early second millennium B.C.E. in Sumerian, the language of southern Mesopotamia, which was also the language spoken by the historical Gilgamesh. Sumerian, which is not related to any other known language, was gradually displaced by Akkadian in the early to mid-second millennium B.C.E. However, Mesopotamian scribes continued to study and copy Sumerian texts up until the first century C.E.

The various editions of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* itself are all written in Akkadian, a Semitic language distantly related to Arabic and Hebrew. Akkadian was spoken by Semites who lived in Mesopotamia, and from the early to mid-second millennium it was the main language of the region. There were two major dialects, Babylonian (spoken in the southern region) and Assyrian (spoken farther north); the epic is written in the former. Akkadian was gradually replaced by Aramaic (another Semitic language closely related to Hebrew) in the mid-first millennium B.C.E., but, as they did with Sumerian texts, Mesopotamian scholars continued to study and read Akkadian texts until the first century C.E.

Akkadian and Sumerian documents were discovered by European travelers and archaeologists starting in the early nineteenth century; because some inscriptions in Akkadian were written alongside translations into Persian (which was still understood), European scholars were able to decipher Akkadian by the mid-nineteenth century. Working from Akkadian translations of Sumerian texts, scholars also deciphered Sumerian in the late nineteenth century.

Gilgamesh, historical evidence seems to indicate that he did indeed exist. The Sumerian king list, which purports to trace the royal lineage from the time when kingship was conferred by the heavens through the defeat of Uruk itself, names Gilgamesh (therein called by his original Sumerian name, Bilgamesh) as fifth in line of the First Dynasty of the kingship of Uruk; his reign supposedly occurred in the latter half of the third millennium—around 2700 B.C.E.—and lasted 126 years. Other traditions identify him as a great warrior and the builder of the great wall of Uruk, and claim that he was partly divine, for his mother was the goddess Ninsun, and his father was a demon-man, who served as high priest in Uruk. About a century after his death, Gilgamesh appeared on a list of gods found in a Sumerian sacred text. As the myth of Gilgamesh grew, he was referred to as a judge of the underworld, and later as king of the underworld. Prayers to Gilgamesh as king of the underworld are known from later periods of Mesopotamian culture, for example in the mid-first millennium.

The Epic of Gilgamesh was the product of several ancient cultures, all of which inhabited the region called “Mesopotamia,” the Greek term for

“between two rivers” (namely the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers); Mesopotamia today is divided among Iraq, eastern Turkey, and northeastern Syria. The climate of Mesopotamia was often harsh, marked by periods of drought and flooding. Nonetheless, cultivation of the rich soil in the river valley contributed over time to successful crops and the spread of thriving cities.

The Gilgamesh legend originated in the part of Mesopotamia known as Sumer, which extended from the area south of Baghdad to the Persian Gulf. This area was home to one of the world's earliest civilizations. The Sumerian region consisted of a vast, water-laid plain: its soil was alluvial silt deposited by the seasonal flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. During the sixth millennium, the inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia began to irrigate their land, a process that eventually led to the successful production of foodstuffs, which in turn gave rise to cities. By around 5000 B.C.E., these southern Mesopotamians had established an extensive infrastructure of canals, ditches, and basins to accommodate their growing population. The abundant harvests enabled farmers to feed their families and barter the surplus to neighbors who could devote

themselves to other pursuits: crafts like pottery and metalworking, administrative jobs in the earliest forms of governments, and worship of and service to the local deities. During the fourth millennium B.C.E. human settlements in the region underwent a rapid transformation: villages grew into cities with markets, palaces, and, most prominently, temples and ziggurats (stepped temple towers).

In Sumer, as in the rest of Mesopotamia, the temple structured the society, encouraging the development of writing, government, a judicial system, fine art, and architecture. Because, for example, temples were often the largest landowners in the cities, temple employees had to keep track of cattle and other temple property; so the people developed writing, originally to record business transactions in the temples. Temples played other administrative roles too, mediating and facilitating contact between the different groups populating the region. Despite the mediating influence of the religious centers, tensions frequently flared between the inhabitants of the new cities located in the fertile river valley and the nomadic and hill peoples who dwelt in the Mesopotamian hinterlands; moreover, the cities themselves also developed rivalries with one another.

Around 2800 B.C.E., territorial disputes between the various cities in southern Mesopotamia initiated a number of important changes throughout the region, including significant migration to the cities from the hinterlands; construction of massive fortifications; and the emergence of the palace, which became the second major urban institution (after the temples) and dominated the political and military arena.

The Epic of Gilgamesh illustrates this transformation of Mesopotamian society in the growth and might of Uruk (biblical Erech, modern Warka), the Sumerian city-state ruled by Gilgamesh around 2700 B.C.E.:

See its wall, which is like a copper band, /
Survey its battlements, which nobody else can
match, / Take the threshold, which is from time
immemorial . . . Go up on to the wall of Uruk,
and walk around! / Inspect the foundation
platform and scrutinize the brickwork! Testify
that its bricks are baked bricks! / One square
mile is city, one square mile is orchards, one
square mile is claypits, as well as the open
ground of Ishtar's temple. / Three square miles
and the open ground comprise Uruk.

(Dalley, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 50)

The poem also explores the conflict between wilderness and civilization through the character

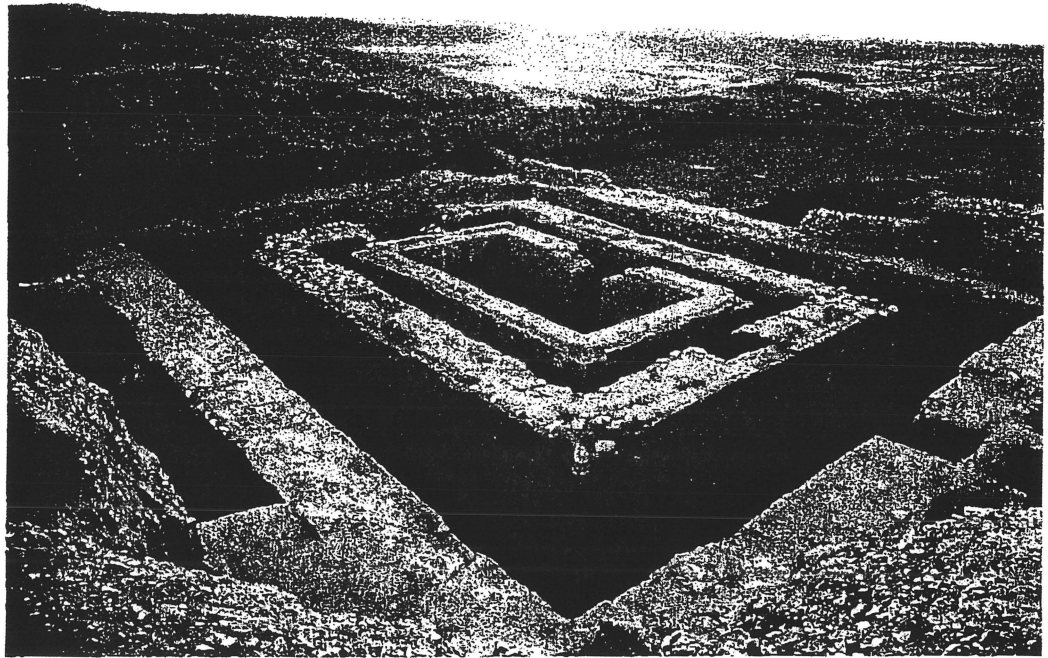
of Enkidu, a wild but innocent man who is civilized by a prostitute and who eventually befriends Gilgamesh. Later in the poem the gods punish Enkidu; they strike him down with a fatal illness because in a feat of heroism during his journey with Gilgamesh he killed a heavenly bull. As he lies dying, Enkidu at first curses the harlot who brought him to Uruk. Had she never initiated him into human society, he would never have embarked on his fatal journey. He would furthermore have been better off remaining uncivilized, for then he would not mourn his own death, any more than the wild animals do.

But Enkidu relents from his imprecations against the harlot when the sun-god Shamash reminds him: "Enkidu, why are you cursing my harlot Shamhat, / Who fed you on food fit for gods, / Gave you ale to drink, fit for kings, / Clothed you with a great robe, / Then provided you with Gilgamesh for a fine partner?" (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 87). The pleasures of civilized life—not only food and clothing but most of all human companionship—trump the ignorant bliss of the wild.

The Epic in Focus

Plot summary. The following summary is based on the Standard Version, which among the several versions of the epic has been most faithfully preserved. The poem opens with a prologue describing Gilgamesh—king of the great city of Uruk, two-thirds a god, one-third a man—telling of his wisdom and his exploits. As a young man, Gilgamesh is wild and unrestrained, especially in his pursuit of women. His subjects ask the mother-goddess Aruru to make the king a fitting companion: "You, Aruru, you created [mankind (?)! / Now create someone for him, to match (?) the ardour (?) of his energies! / Let them be regular rivals, and let Uruk be allowed peace!" (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 52). (A question mark in parenthesis is how the translator indicates scholars' uncertainty about the exact meaning of a word in the ancient text.)

In answer to this prayer, Aruru creates Enkidu, a hairy wild man destined to be Gilgamesh's companion. Enkidu lives on the grasslands with the wild beasts, running with them and eating grass himself. One day, a hunter sees Enkidu at a watering-hole and complains to his father that this wild man has been setting free the prey in the hunter's traps and snares. The hunter's father advises his son to go to Gilgamesh with his complaint and ask for a temple prostitute



Sumerian ruins at Uruk, where *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is set.

who can turn Enkidu from his wild ways. The hunter obeys; his request is granted; and he and the prostitute, Shamhat, return to the grasslands together. Shamhat seduces Enkidu, who lies with her for seven days, after which he can no longer run as fast as the wild beasts, who now shun his company. Bewildered by these changes, Enkidu is taken in hand by Shamhat, who persuades him to accompany her to Uruk. Hearing about the might of Gilgamesh, Enkidu declares his intent to challenge and defeat the king. Shamhat tells Enkidu that Gilgamesh had a dream that presaged Enkidu's coming, in which a meteorite fell to earth and Gilgamesh was strangely drawn to it.

On their journey, the prostitute teaches the former wild man about bathing, wearing fine clothes, and eating cooked food. After the travelers arrive in Uruk, Enkidu and Gilgamesh meet on the threshold of a bridal chamber and engage in a mighty wrestling match throughout the city. When they finish wrestling, Gilgamesh recognizes Enkidu as his long-desired companion; they kiss and take each other by the hand.

Seeking fame and honor, Gilgamesh and Enkidu decide (against the advice of the elders of Uruk) to go on a quest to slay Humbaba, a demon who guards the Cedar Forest. Gilgamesh's mother, the goddess Ninsun, is saddened by her

son's restless heart, and she makes offerings to Shamash, the sun god, to ensure Gilgamesh's safety. Fully armed, Gilgamesh and Enkidu set out on their quest, the latter using his knowledge of the wilderness to find water and build shelter for them. Every night, they make offerings to Shamash, and Gilgamesh has disturbing dreams, which Enkidu interprets as fortunate. They reach the Cedar Forest and do battle with Humbaba. Despite their individual fears, together Gilgamesh and Enkidu—with some assistance from Shamash—prevail against Humbaba. The defeated demon offers his services as guardian if they spare his life, but Enkidu persuades Gilgamesh not to listen. The two companions slay Humbaba and return to Uruk in triumph.

Beholding Gilgamesh's beauty, the goddess Ishtar asks him to be her husband. The language of Ishtar's offer, however, is full of loaded terms; it seems that she is craftily offering him not only marriage but also death (Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal," pp. 148-60). Gilgamesh flatly refuses, taunting her by listing her former lovers, each of whom suffered disaster after his encounter with the goddess. Offended, Ishtar asks her parents, the gods Anu and Antum, to give her a ferocious heavenly animal known as the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh, threatening to release the dead from the Underworld if her request is



Sculptural portrayal of the epic warrior Gilgamesh.

denied. Her father, Anu, consents, and the Bull of Heaven is released in Uruk, killing hundreds of people. Again working together, Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay the Bull. When an enraged Ishtar appears on the city wall and curses Gilgamesh, Enkidu throws one of the Bull's haunches at her and threatens her in turn.

That night, however, Enkidu has a dream in which the gods meet in council and decree that one of the men—Gilgamesh or Enkidu—must die for killing the Bull of Heaven. Enkidu is chosen. After awakening and informing Gilgamesh of his dream, he falls ill; bitter over his encroaching demise, Enkidu initially curses the hunter and harlot who introduced him to civilization, but repents his harsh words after Shamash reminds him of the pleasures he has known as a civilized human and as Gilgamesh's companion. After suffering nights of terrible dreams, Enkidu dies. A grief-stricken Gilgamesh mourns his companion for a week until a worm crawls out the corpse's nose. Donning the skins of wild animals (and thus, in some sense, becoming the wild man that Enkidu had originally been), Gilgamesh leaves Uruk and wanders through the wilderness, grieving for Enkidu's death and the fate all mortal beings must share.

Hoping to avoid death, Gilgamesh resolves to seek out Utnapishtim, the only mortal granted eternal life by the gods, and to learn his secret. After a long and perilous journey, Gilgamesh arrives at the mountain portal to the land of the gods, which is guarded by Scorpion Beings. Gaining entrance into the mountain, Gilgamesh travels for 12 leagues through the darkness until he emerges into an Edenic garden, where "brightness was everywhere. / All kinds of [thorny, prickly] spiky bushes were visible, blossoming with gemstones. / Hanging in clusters, lovely to look at, / Lapis lazuli bore foliage, / bore fruit, and was delightful to view" (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 99).

Continuing on his quest, Gilgamesh encounters Siduri, a divine tavernkeeper, who gives him food and shelter. On hearing Gilgamesh's tale, Siduri initially dissuades him from seeking Utnapishtim, but eventually she directs Gilgamesh to the boatman Urshanabi, the only one who can ferry him across the treacherous sea to the place where Utnapishtim and his wife dwell.

Arriving at Urshanabi's home, Gilgamesh breaks the Stone Things (unidentified in the poem) that the boatman guards. Urshanabi rebukes him for having made his journey to Utnapishtim more difficult by this act, but instructs him to cut down trees for punting poles to protect himself from the waters of death they are about to cross. After a long and perilous journey, Gilgamesh reaches the distant shore and at last meets Utnapishtim, who informs him that death is inevitable for all humans, for the king Gilgamesh as well as for a fool.

Utnapishtim then tells Gilgamesh his own story of how the god Enlil decided to destroy the world by sending a great flood to cover the earth. Thanks to the advice of the god Ea, Utnapishtim escaped death by building a great boat and stowing his family and instances of every living thing on board. The flood lasted for six days and nights and everything on earth was destroyed except for the creatures on Utnapishtim's boat. After seven more days, Utnapishtim freed, by turns, a dove, a swallow, and a raven; the first two returned to the boat, but the third did not, meaning that dry land had been found. Utnapishtim then released the other birds, went ashore himself, and offered a libation for the gods.

The gods, who had been deprived of sacrifice for more than a week, were famished. They gathered around Utnapishtim's sacrifice "like flies," but Enlil's presence at the ritual was forbidden (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 114). Enlil came nonetheless and was angered to see that some-

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one had escaped the flood. Ea rebuked Enlil for his cruelty and decreed that all humanity should never again be forced to suffer for the evil acts of a few. Enlil then conferred eternal life on Utnapishtim and his wife and led them to their present dwelling-place.

Concluding his tale, Utnapishtim scornfully asks Gilgamesh what he has done to merit eternal life but nonetheless offers him the chance to earn immortality by staying awake for six nights and seven days. Exhausted by his journey, however, Gilgamesh instantly falls asleep. Utnapishtim's wife bakes a loaf of bread for every day the king sleeps. On the seventh day, Gilgamesh wakes up. Seeing the seven loaves (some of which are already crumbling and moldy), he is devastated by his failure. Utnapishtim's wife pities Gilgamesh and persuades her husband to offer the king some compensation for his terrible journey. Utnapishtim then tells Gilgamesh about an underwater plant that will make an old man young again. Gilgamesh dives underwater and picks the plant, then, cleansed and clad in fine raiment, he sets off with his prize for Uruk, accompanied by Urshanabi. However, Gilgamesh stops to bathe along the way, and a serpent steals away with the magic plant, shedding its skin (and hence becoming young again). Weeping over this latest loss, Gilgamesh acknowledges that his journey has been in vain and he must abandon what he sought. The poem ends as Gilgamesh returns to Uruk and invites Urshanabi to view the high walls, mason work, fields, orchards, and temples of his great city.

The Standard Version originally ended here; however, in the version preserved, the text continues with a tale that does not fit the plot of the epic but continues its themes. In this tale, a cherished drum and drumsticks belonging to Gilgamesh fall into the Nether World, and his faithful servant Enkidu volunteers to go there to bring back his king's possessions. Gilgamesh gives Enkidu a list of provisos to follow to ensure his safe return, but Enkidu disregards them all and finds himself a prisoner in the Nether World. Gilgamesh appeals, in turn, to the gods Enlil, Sin, and Ea (three leading gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon) for help in attaining Enkidu's release. The first two ignore his plea, but Ea intercedes on Gilgamesh's behalf. Ukur (apparently another name for Nergal, the god of the underworld) releases Enkidu's spirit into the Upper World. Gilgamesh and Enkidu's spirit then engage in a question-and-answer dialogue about the arrangement of things in the Nether World.

The great flood. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* first attracted modern scholars and critics because of its flood narrative. Utnapishtim, the one mortal man to achieve immortality, is sometimes referred to by these scholars as the "Mesopotamian Noah."

The flood story does not seem to have been found in the OB Version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, but it has been added to the Standard Version from an older mythological text known as *Atrahasis*. The Standard Version follows *Atrahasis'* flood story with minor variations: for example, the name of the main human character in the older text was Atrahasis ("extra-wise"), but in the Standard Version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* his name is usually "Utnapishtim" ("he found life"), which is an Akkadian translation of the Sumerian name for this character (Zi-Usudra). Written in Akkadian in southern Mesopotamia around 1700 B.C.E., *Atrahasis* is a creation epic in three tablets that focuses on the origin and lot of humanity. Before humanity existed, lower-ranking gods had to perform backbreaking work for the higher-ranking gods, and the former revolted. The god Ea proposed creating a slave race, thus obviating the need for divine labor altogether. Ea and the goddess Belet-Ili (also known as Aruru or Ninhursag) created humanity from the blood of the god executed for leading the revolt. Humans then began toiling on behalf of the gods, but as they became more numerous, their noise bothered the gods (especially the chief god, Enlil), who repeatedly attempted to destroy them. Ea, whether out of compassion for humans or (more likely) the realization that destroying this labor force was not in the gods' long-term interests, always saved them. The third tablet of the story describes the gods' final attempt to destroy humanity by means of a flood; this section of *Atrahasis* served as the basis for the flood story in the Standard Version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. After the flood, the gods decide to limit human population through stillbirths, diseases, sterility, and crib-deaths, rather than continuing their shortsighted plan of universal genocide. Striking parallels exist between these Akkadian flood stories and the biblical account of the flood in the Book of Genesis. In both traditions, a lone man and his family are singled out for salvation from the deluge that will destroy the rest of humanity. That man is divinely instructed to build a great boat that will carry specimens of all living things. The flood covers the earth, killing everything not safely on board a ship that, after the flood has ebbed, comes to rest upon a mountain.

Utnapishtim and Noah both send out birds—doves and ravens—to search for dry land. Finally both narratives conclude with the human race being renewed and the survivors of the flood receiving special blessings from the god who decreed the flood, along with the assurance that no such punishment will ever be visited upon humanity again. The setting and terminology of the Hebrew-language flood story in *Genesis* indicate that it is based on Mesopotamian stories similar to those found in *Atrahasis* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The differences between the two flood narratives, however, are no less remarkable. The capriciousness of the Mesopotamian gods is reflected by their sudden decision in council, prompted mainly by Enlil's dislike of loud noise, to obliterate mankind. In *Genesis*, God decrees the flood because mankind has grown sinful and wicked. Moreover, *Atrahasis*/Utnapishtim and Noah are spared for different reasons: the former because he is a favorite of another god, Ea; the latter because of his moral righteousness. Finally, Noah and his descendants are instructed merely to repopulate the earth after the flood, while in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* Utnapishtim and his wife are permitted to join the company of the gods.

Flood narratives also appear in Sumerian texts that predate *Atrahasis*. The prevalence of these narratives throughout the Middle East has inevitably fueled speculation about whether there was indeed a historical great deluge that obliterated humanity or, at least, one civilization. In 1929 one prominent British archaeologist, Sir Leonard Woolley, went so far as to surmise that the great flood had occurred near the region of Ur during the late Ubaid times (5000 B.C.E.), covering much of Sumer and destroying hundreds of towns. This disaster, Woolley contended, gave rise to Sumerian accounts of the deluge and thus to all the later versions of the story. Later archaeologists amended Woolley's theory, arguing that the deluge that inspired these later accounts of the flood might have taken place more recently. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, links the flood to the Sumerian king Utnapishtim, who reigned at Shurruk, 70 miles north of Ur, during the third millennium (2000s) B.C.E. Archaeological excavations at Shurruk did indeed reveal evidence of a flood around that time. It has also been argued that seasonal overflows from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers led to frequent flooding in the Sumerian region and that any incident in which flooding was particularly severe might have found its way into

history and then legend as an account of a great deluge.

Sources and literary context. The first Sumerian tales of Gilgamesh appeared to circulate not long after his death, becoming part of the oral tradition of storytelling. As is often the case when history shades into legend, the king's lineage and deeds became much embellished; his father was now identified as Lugalbanda, another divinized ruler of Uruk. Five such tales have been uncovered (they are translated in George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation*, pp. 141-208). In these tales, Gilgamesh embarks on various adventures, often accompanied by faithful retainers, who include Enkidu. These Sumerian tales stood alone as independent compositions, some focusing on Gilgamesh as heroic warrior and king, others on themes of the fate of humans after death.

The Sumerian tales were first transcribed upon clay tablets around 2500 B.C.E. Later scribes combined elements of some of these tales to create the Old Babylonian (OB) Version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Written in Akkadian, the OB Version focused especially on the theme of Gilgamesh as Everyman grappling with mortality. Initially the hero disdained death and sought immortality through fame, but the death of Enkidu (now portrayed as Gilgamesh's trusted friend and almost his double) became the catalyst for a type of quest unknown in the original Sumerian tales. After wandering in frenzied pain and embarking on an unsuccessful search for eternal life, Gilgamesh accepts that death is the fate of all mortals, and that the brief pleasures of this life—companionship, food, clothing, sex, and family—are the most humans are permitted. The central theme of the OB epic is articulated by an alewife whom Gilgamesh meets on his journeys:

Gilgamesh, whither do you rove? / The life that
you pursue you shall not find. / When the gods
created mankind, / Death they appointed for
mankind. / Life in their own hands they held.
/ You, Gilgamesh, let your stomach be full. /
Day and night keep on being festive. / Daily
make a festival. / Day and night dance and play.
/ Let your clothes be clean, / Let your head be
washed, in water may you bathe. / Look at the
little one who holds your hand, / Let a wife ever
be festive in your lap. / These things alone are
the concern of man.

(Abusch in Maier, p. 111)

The Standard Version of the poem expands considerably the OB Version. Its prologue adds

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material about Gilgamesh's wisdom, while the OB prologue concentrates on his heroism. The Standard Version adds the stories of Ishtar's rejection by Gilgamesh, the slaying of the Bull of Heaven, and, most significantly, the entire story of the flood. (The OB epic probably limited itself to Gilgamesh's journey to meet the man who saved humanity from the flood, without recounting the whole tale, though we cannot be sure of this since the OB tablets are incomplete.)

The thematic focus of the Standard Version differs radically from the OB Version. No longer is Gilgamesh grappling with the sad but inevitable fact of mortality—no longer is he Everyman. The Standard Version alludes to the fact that Gilgamesh came to be regarded in Mesopotamia as a god of the underworld. Of mixed human and divine parentage, Gilgamesh is a strange sort of deity, and his position is an odd form of immortality: for as god of the underworld, he spends eternity among the dead. As the Assyriologist Tzvi Abusch has shown, the Standard Version depicts Gilgamesh's attempts to avoid not his mortality but the peculiar nature of his divinity. When Ishtar subtly presents an offer of kingship in the underworld (disguising it as a proposal of marriage), Gilgamesh rejects her offer out of hand. By the end of the epic, however, he realizes that he will not achieve immortality among the gods in heaven. Rather, his fate is to rule a city—not merely Uruk on the earth, but ultimately the Land of No Return beneath it. The addition to the Standard Version of tablet 12, in which the dead Enkidu describes the underworld to Gilgamesh, underscores this theme. The tablet seems to make little sense in terms of plot, for Enkidu here is Gilgamesh's servant, not his friend, and his death is described quite differently from his death earlier in the Standard Version. But it makes perfect sense in terms of theme. Gilgamesh, having accepted his role as god of the dead, learns the ways of the realm he is destined to rule. Significantly, the alewife's speech in the OB Version (according to which death is the lot of all humanity) is cut out of the Standard Version, for the Standard Version is concerned not with a typical human but with a peculiar god. Thus a single story was used by different Akkadian writers to explore very different themes (the nature of humanity in the OB Version, the nature of a specific deity in the Standard Version). In this respect, the evolution of the Gilgamesh epics serves as an outstanding example of textuality in the ancient Near East: a text was ever in flux, ever usable and adaptable,

with no one author, no one historical context, and thus no one immutable theme.

Unlike such epics as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was introduced to modern readers comparatively recently. Indeed, the poem was lost for thousands of years until archaeologists discovered the ancient clay tablets during the nineteenth century. Moreover, some portions of the story are missing because sections from the tablets were broken off or obscured; modern scholars and linguists have had to reconstruct the narrative at such points. Owing to its age and incompleteness, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* can be difficult to analyze or classify. However, the poem is usually categorized as an epic, possibly the first composed in the known world.

Events in History at the Time the Epic Was Written

From the Sumerians to the Akkadians. Some three centuries after the purported reign of Gilgamesh, Sumer underwent dramatic changes. During the 2300s B.C.E., a ruler by the name of Sargon rose to power and amassed an army that conquered the city-state of Kish—Uruk's great rival—and eventually the rest of Sumer. Unlike earlier rulers of southern Mesopotamia, Sargon was not a Sumerian but a Semite (i.e., a member of an ethnic group speaking Akkadian, a language distantly related to Arabic and Hebrew). Sargon then led his troops to victories that extended his domain to what is now Iran in the east and to the cedar forests on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea and Asia Minor (now Turkey) in the west. (The journey Gilgamesh takes to the cedar forest in the epic probably echoes real expeditions to Lebanon in search of wood, which was less available in Mesopotamia.) Establishing his base of power in central Mesopotamia, Sargon built a great capital city called Agade (Akkad). He reigned for 56 years, during which period Semites replaced the Sumerians as the most powerful inhabitants of Mesopotamia. These Semites and their language became known as Akkadian, after Sargon's capital.

But while the Akkadians may have conquered the Sumerians, they did not eliminate Sumerian culture but, rather, absorbed it into their own. For example, the Akkadians worshipped not only the gods of their own cities but also Sumerian gods (some under slightly different names). The Akkadians were also quick to adopt cuneiform writing, invented by the Sumerians, and

countless Sumerian tales, including those of Gilgamesh.

After Sargon's death, his empire endured for over 60 years before invaders overran it. Around 2100 B.C.E., Sumerian speakers from Ur seized control of southern Mesopotamia for about 100 years, then laid claim to neighboring Assyria and Elam. Their reign represents the final flowering of Sumerian culture. Many Sumerian texts known today were composed, edited, and copied during this period. After the fall of the dynasty of Ur, Akkadian speakers regained control of Mesopotamia, and the Sumerian language slowly ceased to be spoken. Nevertheless, Akkadian-speaking scribes throughout Mesopotamia continued to cultivate Sumerian as a learned and prestigious language; they studied and copied Sumerian texts, and priests continued to recite prayers in Sumerian as well. As late as the first century C.E., Sumerian prayers were still being recited in Mesopotamia.

Babylon was the center of the next major empire of southern Mesopotamia. A city located north of both the Sumerian area and of Akkad, Babylon's empire flourished from 1800 to 1600 B.C.E., during which the Old Babylonian Version of the Gilgamesh story came to be written. Other empires exerted control over Mesopotamia for the next millennium, including the Assyrians (who were dominant in the fourteenth through early twelfth centuries B.C.E. and again from the ninth through the seventh) and the neo-Babylonians in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E.; both groups extended their influence as far north as Asia minor and as far west as Egypt. Indeed, so important were the Mesopotamians that Akkadian became the diplomatic language of the entire Near East. Mesopotamian culture, religion, myths, and terminology spread throughout the entire region, as scribes in Canaan, Israel, Egypt, and the Hittite empire studied Akkadian texts. The influence of Mesopotamian culture on the Hebrew Bible is profound, as the flood story in Genesis attests, and early Greek writers such as Homer and Hesiod were clearly, though indirectly, influenced by Mesopotamian myths. In 539 B.C.E., the Persians invaded Mesopotamia, and the era of Mesopotamian hegemony came to an end.

Impact. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* had considerable literary impact in ancient times. Archaeologists have uncovered copies of the OB and Standard Versions (and some intermediary versions) not only throughout Mesopotamia itself but in Hattusas, the capital of the Hittite empire (located next to today's town of Boghazköy in

Turkey), the Amorite city of Ugarit (on the coast of present-day Syria), and Megiddo (or Armageddon, in present-day Israel). Further, Gilgamesh stories were translated into at least two other ancient Near Eastern languages, Hittite and Hurrian (both spoken in what is today Turkey). As late as the first century B.C.E. the Dead Sea Scrolls (Hebrew and Aramaic texts written by a Jewish sect roughly contemporaneous with Jesus) include the names Gilgames [sic] and Hobbabish (apparently a corrupted form of Humbaba) on a list of ancient giants.

Even when the influence was indirect, the epic and its sources had a great impact on ancient literature. The flood story in Genesis is certainly based on Mesopotamian forebears; further, the Hebrew Bible contains a passage (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10) strikingly similar to the alewife's advice in the OB version. The many themes and narrative elements that the various versions of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* share with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* likely result from some form of indirect influence. Note the intimate friendship of Achilles and Patroclus (whose death is the crucial turning point in *The Iliad*), Odysseus's refusal to accept a role as the eternal lover of a goddess (first Circe, then Calypso, the latter of whom resembles not only Ishtar but also Sidduri), the visit to Odysseus by Achilles' shade from the underworld, as well as the monsters and giants that Odysseus encounters on the journey. Similarly, a medieval Arabic tale found in *The Arabian Nights* is strikingly similar to the Standard Version of the epic. A young king named Buluqiyah (the name itself may be an echo of the original, Sumerian, form of the name Bilgamesh) embarks with a close friend on a quest to find the secret of immortality, but after the friend dies, Buluqiyah wanders, ultimately meeting an ancient sage who has achieved immortality. From this sage the young king hears the early history of the world; he then returns to his native city.

Nonetheless, after the decline of classical Mesopotamian culture at the end of the first millennium B.C.E., both the texts describing Gilgamesh and the languages in which they were written were lost. The texts were rediscovered in the 1850s C.E., during archaeological excavations in which the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal was unearthed. In 1872 George Smith, a young Assyriologist from England in charge of reading the tablets, reported with great excitement to the Biblical Archaeology Society his discovery of a partial flood narrative—the Utnapishtim story contained within *The Epic of*

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CUNEIFORM WRITING

In the mid-fourth millennium B.C.E., the economy of southern Mesopotamia grew more complex, and it became necessary to keep records of surpluses and exchanges. A writing system was invented to allow scribes or accountants (they were in fact originally a single profession) to do so. This writing system consisted of picture-like symbols scratched on lumps of clay. These symbols were later modified to produce cuneiform writing, which was in use as late as about 75 C.E. The writing system was soon used not only for accounting purposes but to record other sorts of texts in Sumerian as well. Eventually cuneiform writing was adopted by speakers of Akkadian, Hittite, and other languages. Archaeologists have found thousands of cuneiform tablets throughout the ancient Near East. These include historical and legal documents, letters, economic records, literary and religious texts, and studies in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and magic. Each of the cuneiform symbols (usually called *signs*) can represent a word or a syllable; in fact, most signs represent several different words and syllables depending on their context. This writing system needs many more symbols than an alphabetic system (in which each symbol stands for a vowel or a consonant, not a whole syllable or word). Standard neo-Assyrian cuneiform has 495 signs, most of which have several possible meanings. Not surprisingly, literacy in ancient Mesopotamia was a highly specialized and rare skill. Only two kings (Shulgi, a Sumerian who ruled Ur in the twenty-first century B.C.E., and Ashurbanipal, who ruled over the Assyrian empire in the seventh) claimed in their inscriptions that they knew how to read; these boasts, whether truthful or not, indicate that literacy was almost unheard of even among royalty.

Gilgamesh—that bore striking parallels to the version found in the Bible. The academic world was fascinated; Smith's discovery prompted the *Daily Telegraph* of London to sponsor an expedition to find the rest of the fragment. Smith recovered the fragment in 1873, publishing a translation of his findings in 1876. Further fragments were unearthed in other excavations during the next century. Enough of the poem was recovered to warrant an English translation—by Paul Haupt—which was published in two volumes (1884, 1891). Initially, modern scholars were most interested in the many parallels between the *Gilgamesh* epic and the Hebrew Bible, but readers quickly came to realize the depth and sensitivity of the epic itself.

Of the many fine modern translations, those of Stephanie Dalley and Andrew George are especially useful. They carefully distinguish among versions of the epic, whereas other translations mix and match to create a version that never really existed in the ancient world or translate only the Standard Version, thus missing many beautiful passages found only in

the OB Version. Attention to the epic has grown considerably in recent years, as new translations, studies, and poetic paraphrases have multiplied. After spending centuries buried beneath the earth, the epic has again been granted new life.

—Benjamin D. Sommer and Pamela S. Loy

For More Information

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