

EPIC OF GILGAMESH

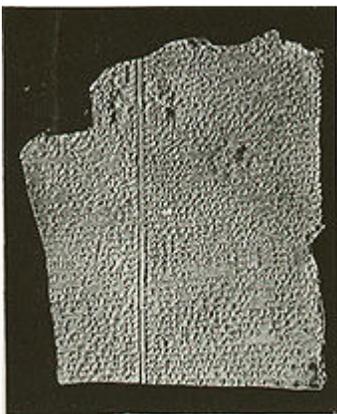


Gilgamesh was believed to be two-thirds god, one-third human

Mesopotamia, is amongst the **earliest surviving works of literature**. The literary history of Gilgamesh begins with five independent **Sumerian** poems about 'Bilgamesh' (Sumerian for **Gilgamesh**), king of **Uruk**. Four of these were used as source material for a combined epic in **Akkadian**. This first combined epic, known as the "Old Babylonian" version, dates to the 18th century BC and is titled after its **incipit**, *Shūtur eli sharrī* ("Surpassing All Other Kings"). Only a few fragments of it have survived. The later "Standard Babylonian" version dates from the 13th to the 10th centuries BC and bears the incipit *Sha naqba īmuru* ("He who Saw the Deep"). Fragments of approximately two thirds of this longer, twelve-tablet version have been recovered. Some of the best copies were discovered in the **library ruins** of the 7th-century BC. **Assyrian** king **Ashurbanipal**.

The story centers on a friendship between Gilgamesh and **Enkidu**. Enkidu is a wild man created by the gods as Gilgamesh's equal to distract him from oppressing the people of **Uruk**. Together, they journey to the Cedar Mountain to defeat **Humbaba**, its monstrous guardian. Later they kill the Bull of Heaven, which the goddess **Ishtar** sends to punish Gilgamesh for spurning her advances. As a punishment for these actions, the gods sentenced Enkidu to death.

The second half of the epic focuses on Gilgamesh's distress at Enkidu's death, and his quest for immortality. In order to learn the secret of eternal life, Gilgamesh undertakes a long and perilous journey. He learns that "Life, which you look for, you will never find. For when the gods created man, they let death be his share, and life withheld in their own hands". Nevertheless, Gilgamesh's fame lived on after his death, because of his great building projects, and his accounts of **Siduri's** advice and what **Utnapishtim** told him happened during the flood. The story has been translated into many different languages, and Gilgamesh has since become **adapted in works of popular fiction**.



The **Deluge** tablet of the Gilgamesh epic in **Akkadian**

Many distinct sources exist from over a 2,000-year timeframe. The old **Sumerian** poems, followed by a later **Akkadian** version, are important sources for modern translations, with the Sumerian version mainly used to fill in **lacunae** in the Akkadian version.

Although several revised versions based on new discoveries have been published, the epic remains incomplete.

The earliest Sumerian poems are now generally considered to be distinct stories, rather than parts of a single epic. They date from as early as the **Third Dynasty of Ur** (2150-2000 BC). The earliest Akkadian versions are dated to the early second millennium, most probably in the eighteenth or seventeenth century BC, when one or more authors drew upon existing literary material to create a single epic. The "standard" Akkadian version, consisting of twelve tablets, was edited by **Sin-liqe-unninni** sometime between 1300 and 1000 BC, and was found in the library of **Ashurbanipal** in **Nineveh**.

The Epic of Gilgamesh was discovered by **Hormuzd Rassam** in 1853 and is now widely known. The central character of Gilgamesh was initially reintroduced to the world as "Izdubir", before the cuneiform logographs in his name could be pronounced accurately. The first modern translation was published in the early 1870s by **George Smith**. Recent translations into English include one undertaken with the assistance of the American novelist **John Gardner**, and John Maier, published in 1984. In 2001, Benjamin Foster produced a translation in the Norton Critical Edition Series that uses new material to fill in many of the blanks in previous editions.

The most definitive translation is a two-volume critical work by **Andrew George**. George discusses the state of the surviving material, and provides a tablet-by-tablet **exegesis**, with a dual language side-by-side translation. This translation was published by **Penguin Classics** in 2000. Stephen Mitchell in 2004 supplied a controversial translation that takes many liberties with the text and includes modernized allusions and commentary relating to the **Iraq war** of 2003. The first direct Arabic translation from the original tablets was made in the 1960s by the Iraqi archeologist **Taha Baqir**.

The discovery of artifacts (ca. 2600 BC) associated with **Enmebaragesi** of **Kish**, mentioned in the legends as the father of one of Gilgamesh's adversaries, has lent credibility to the historical existence of Gilgamesh.

Versions of epic from the diverse sources found two main versions of the epic have been partially reconstructed: the Standard Akkadian version, or He who saw the deep, and the Old Babylonian version, or surpassing all other kings. Five earlier **Sumerian** poems about Gilgamesh have been partially recovered, some with primitive versions of specific episodes in the Akkadian version. Others are with unrelated stories.

STANDARD AKKADIAN VERSION

The standard version was discovered by **Austen Henry Layard** in the library of **Ashurbanipal** in **Nineveh** in 1849. It was written in standard Babylonian, a dialect of Akkadian that was used for literary purposes. This version was compiled by **Sin-liqe-unninni** sometime between 1300 and 1000 BC from earlier material.

The standard version and earlier version have different opening words, or **incipit**. The older version begins with the words "Surpassing all other kings", while the standard version has "He who saw the deep" (ša nagba īmuru), "deep" referring to the mysteries of the information brought back by Gilgamesh from his meeting with Uta-Napishti (**Utnapishtim**) about **Ea**, the fountain of wisdom. Gilgamesh was given knowledge of how to worship the gods, why death was ordained for human beings, what makes a good king, and how to live a good life. The story of Utnapishtim, the hero of the **flood myth**, can also be found in the Babylonian Epic of **Atrahasis**.

The 12th tablet is a sequel to the original 11, and was probably added at a later date. It bears little relation to the well-crafted 11-tablet epic; the lines at the beginning of the first tablet are quoted at the end of the 11th tablet, giving it circularity and finality. Tablet 12 is a near copy of an earlier Sumerian tale, a prequel, in which Gilgamesh sends Enkidu to retrieve some objects of his from the Underworld, and he returns in the form of a spirit to relate the nature of the Underworld to Gilgamesh.

Content of the standard version tablets

TABLET ONE

The story begins by introducing Gilgamesh, king of **Uruk**. Gilgamesh, two-thirds god and one-third man, is oppressing his people, who are crying out to the gods for help. For the young women of Uruk this oppression takes the form of a **droit de seigneur** — or "lord's right" to sleep with newly married brides on their wedding night. For the young men (the tablet is damaged at this point) it is conjectured that Gilgamesh is exhausting them through games, tests of strength, or perhaps forced labor on building projects. The gods respond to their pleas by creating an equal to Gilgamesh in order to distract him. They create a primitive man, **Enkidu**, who is covered in hair and lives in the wild with the animals. He is spotted by a trapper, whose livelihood is being ruined because Enkidu is uprooting his traps. The trapper tells Gilgamesh about the man, and it is arranged for Enkidu to be seduced by a harlot. This seduction by **Shamhat**, a **temple prostitute**, is Enkidu's first step toward being tamed, and after seven days of making love with him, she proposes to take him back to Uruk. Gilgamesh, meanwhile, has been having dreams that relate to the imminent arrival of a loved new companion.

TABLET TWO

Shamhat brings Enkidu to a shepherds' camp, where he is introduced to a human diet and becomes the night watchman. Learning from a passing stranger about Gilgamesh's treatment of new brides, Enkidu is incensed and travels to Uruk to intervene at a wedding. When Gilgamesh attempts to visit the wedding chamber, Enkidu blocks his way, and they fight. After a fierce battle, Enkidu acknowledges Gilgamesh's superior strength and they become friends. Gilgamesh proposes a journey to the Cedar Forest to slay the monstrous demi-god **Humbaba**, in order to gain fame and renown. Despite warnings from Enkidu and the council of elders, Gilgamesh will not be deterred.

TABLET THREE

The elders give Gilgamesh advice for his journey. Gilgamesh visits his mother, the goddess **Ninsun**, who seeks the support and protection of the sun-god Shamash for their adventure. Ninsun adopts Enkidu as her son, and Gilgamesh leaves instructions for the governance of Uruk in his absence.

TABLET FOUR

Gilgamesh and Enkidu journey to Lebanon **Cedar Forest**. Every few days they camp on a mountain, and perform a dream ritual. Gilgamesh has five terrifying dreams they are about falling mountains, thunderstorms, wild bulls, and a thunderbird that breathes fire. Despite similarities between his dream figures and earlier descriptions of Humbaba, Enkidu interprets these dreams as good omens, and denies

that the frightening images represent the forest guardian. As they approach the cedar mountain, they hear Humbaba bellowing, and have to encourage each other not to be afraid.

TABLET FIVE

The heroes enter the cedar forest. **Humbaba**, the ogre-guardian of the Cedar Forest, insults and threatens them. He accuses Enkidu of betrayal, and vows to disembowel Gilgamesh and feed his flesh to the birds. Gilgamesh is afraid, but with some encouraging words from Enkidu the battle commences. The mountains quake with the tumult and the sky turns black. The god **Shamash** sends 13 winds to bind Humbaba, and he is captured. The monster pleads for his life, and Gilgamesh pities him. Enkidu, however, is enraged and asks Gilgamesh to kill the beast. Humbaba curses them both and Gilgamesh dispatches him with a blow to the neck. The two heroes cut down many cedars, including a gigantic tree that Enkidu plans to fashion into a gate for the temple of Enlil. They build a raft and return home along the Euphrates with the giant tree and the head of Humbaba.

TABLET SIX

Gilgamesh rejects the advances of the goddess **Ishtar** because of her mistreatment of previous lovers like **Dumuzi**. Ishtar asks her father **Anu** to send **Gugalanna** the Bull of Heaven to avenge her. When Anu rejects her complaints, Ishtar threatens to raise the dead who will "outnumber the living" and "devour them". Anu becomes frightened, and gives in to her. Ishtar leads the bull of heaven to Uruk and it causes widespread devastation. It lowers the level of the Euphrates River, and dries up the marshes. It opens up huge pits that swallow 300 men. Without any divine assistance, Enkidu and Gilgamesh attack and slay it, and offer up its heart to Shamash. When Ishtar cries out, Enkidu hurls one of the hindquarters of the bull at her. The city of Uruk celebrates, but Enkidu has an ominous dream.

TABLET SEVEN

In Enkidu's dream, the gods decide that one of the heroes must die because they killed Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Despite the protestations of Shamash, Enkidu is marked for death. Enkidu curses the great door he has fashioned for Enlil's temple. He also curses the trapper and Shamhat for removing him from the wild. Shamash reminds Enkidu of how Shamhat fed and clothed him, and introduced him to Gilgamesh. Shamash tells him that Gilgamesh will bestow great honors upon him at his funeral, and will wander into the wild consumed with grief. Enkidu regrets his curses and blesses Shamhat. In a second dream however he sees himself being taken captive to the Netherworld by a terrifying Angel of Death. The underworld is a "house of dust" and darkness whose inhabitants eat clay, and are clothed in bird feathers, supervised by terrifying beings. For 12 days, Enkidu's condition worsens. Finally, after a lament that he could not meet a heroic death in battle, he dies.

TABLET EIGHT

Gilgamesh delivers a lamentation for Enkidu in which he calls upon mountains, forests, fields, rivers, wild animals, and all of Uruk, to mourn for his friend. Recalling their adventures together, Gilgamesh tears at his hair and clothes in grief. He commissions a funerary statue, and provides grave gifts from his treasury to ensure that Enkidu has a favorable reception in the realm of the dead. A great banquet is held where the treasures are offered to the gods of the Netherworld. Just before a break in the text there is a suggestion that a river is being dammed, indicating a burial in a river bed, as in the corresponding Sumerian poem, The Death of Gilgamesh.

TABLET NINE

Tablet nine opens with Gilgamesh roaming the wild clothed in animal skins, grieving for Enkidu. Fearful of his own death, he decides to seek **Utnapishtim** ("the Faraway"), and learn the secret of eternal life. Among the few survivors of the **Great Flood**, Utnapishtim and his wife are the only humans to have been granted immortality by the gods. Gilgamesh crosses a mountain pass at night and encounters a pride of lions. Before sleeping he prays for protection to the moon god Sin. Then, waking from an encouraging dream, he kills the lions and uses their skins for clothing. After a long and perilous journey, Gilgamesh arrives at the twin peaks of Mount **Mashu** at the end of the earth. He comes across a tunnel, which no man has ever entered, guarded by two terrible scorpion-men. After questioning him and recognizing his semi-divine nature, they allow him to enter it, and he passes under the mountains along the Road of the Sun. In complete darkness he follows the road for 12 "double hours", managing to complete the trip before the Sun catches up with him. He arrives at the Garden of the gods, a paradise full of jewel-laden trees.

TABLET TEN

Meeting the ale wife **Siduri**, who assumes, because of his disheveled appearance, that he is a murderer or thief, Gilgamesh tells her about the purpose of his journey. She attempts to dissuade him from his quest, but sends him to **Urshanabi** the ferryman, who will help him cross the sea to Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh, out of spontaneous rage, destroys the stone-giants that live with Urshanabi. He tells him his story, but when he asks for his help, Urshanabi informs him that he has just destroyed the only creatures that can cross the Waters of Death, which are deadly to the touch. Urshanabi instructs Gilgamesh to cut down 120 trees, and fashion them into punting poles. When they reach the island where Utnapishtim lives, Gilgamesh recounts his story asking him for his help. Utnapishtim reprimands him, declaring that fighting the common fate of humans is futile and diminishes life's joys.

TABLET ELEVEN

Gilgamesh observes that Utnapishtim seems no different from him, and asks him how he obtained his immortality. Utnapishtim explains that the gods decided to send a great flood. To save Utnapishtim the god Ea told him to build a boat. He gave him precise dimensions, and it was sealed with pitch and bitumen. His entire family went aboard, together with his craftsmen and "all the animals of the field". A violent storm then arose which caused the terrified gods to retreat to the heavens. Ishtar lamented the wholesale destruction of humanity and the other gods wept beside her. The storm lasted six days and nights, after which "all the human beings turned to clay". Utnapishtim weeps when he sees the destruction. His boat lodges on a mountain, and he releases a dove, a swallow, and a raven. When the raven fails to return, he opens the ark and frees its inhabitants. Utnapishtim offers a sacrifice to the gods, who smell the sweet savor and gather around. Ishtar vows that just as she will never forget the brilliant necklace that hangs around her neck, she will always remember this time. When Enlil arrives, angry that there are survivors, she condemns him for instigating the flood. Ea also castigates him for sending a disproportionate punishment. Enlil blesses Utnapishtim and his wife, and rewards them with eternal life. This account matches the flood story that concludes the Epic of **Atrahasis**. The main point seems to be that when Enlil granted eternal life it was a unique gift. As if to demonstrate this point, Utnapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to stay awake for six days and seven nights. Gilgamesh falls asleep, and Utnapishtim instructs his wife to bake a loaf of bread on each of the days he is asleep, so that he cannot deny his failure to keep awake. Gilgamesh, who is seeking to overcome death, cannot even conquer sleep. After instructing Urshanabi the ferryman to wash Gilgamesh, and clothe him in royal robes, they depart for Uruk.

As they are leaving, Utnapishtim's wife asks her husband to offer a parting gift. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that at the bottom of the sea there lives a **boxthorn**-like plant that will make him young again. Gilgamesh, by binding stones to his feet so he can walk on the bottom, manages to obtain the plant. He

intends to test it on an old man when he returns to Uruk. Unfortunately, when Gilgamesh stops to bathe, it is stolen by a **serpent**, which sheds its skin as it departs. Gilgamesh weeps at the futility of his efforts, because he has now lost all chance of immortality. He returns to Uruk, where the sight of its massive walls prompts him to praise this enduring work to Urshanabi.

TABLET TWELVE

This tablet is mainly an Akkadian translation of an earlier Sumerian poem, Gilgamesh and the Netherworld (also known as "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld" and variants), although it has been suggested that it is derived from an unknown version of that story. The contents of this last tablet are inconsistent with previous ones: Enkidu is still alive, despite having been killed off earlier in the epic. Because of this, its lack of integration with the other tablets, and the fact that it is almost a copy of an earlier version, it has been referred to as an 'inorganic appendage' to the epic. Alternatively, it has been suggested that "its purpose, though crudely handled, is to explain to Gilgamesh (and the reader) the various fates of the dead in the Afterlife" and in "an awkward attempt to bring closure", it both connects the Gilgamesh of the epic with the Gilgamesh who is the King of the Netherworld, and is "a dramatic capstone whereby the twelve-tablet epic ends on one and the same theme, that of "seeing" (= understanding, discovery, etc.), with which it began."

Gilgamesh complains to Enkidu that several of his possessions (the tablet is unclear exactly what — different translations include a drum and a ball) have fallen into the underworld. Enkidu offers to bring them back. Delighted, Gilgamesh tells Enkidu what he must and must not do in the underworld if he is to return. Enkidu does everything which he was told not to do. The underworld keeps him. Gilgamesh prays to the gods to give him back his friend. **Enlil** and **Suen** don't reply, but **Ea** and decide to help. Shamash makes a crack in the earth and Enkidu's ghost jumps out of it. The tablet ends with Gilgamesh questioning Enkidu about what he has seen in the underworld.

OLD-BABYLONIAN VERSIONS

This version of the epic, called in some fragments surpassing all other kings, is composed of tablets and fragments from diverse origins and states of conservation. It remains incomplete in its majority, with several tablets missing and big **lacunae** in those found. They are named after their current location or the place where they were found.

THE PENNSYLVANIA TABLET

Surpassing all other kings Tablet II greatly correlates with tablets I-II of the Standard version. Gilgamesh tells his mother Ninsun about two dreams he had. His mother explains that they mean that a new companion will soon arrive at Uruk. In the meanwhile the wild Enkidu and the priestess (here called Shamkatum) are making love. She takes him in company of the shepherds by offering him bread and beer. Enkidu helps the shepherds by guarding the sheep. They travel to Uruk to confront Gilgamesh and stop his abuses. Enkidu and Gilgamesh battle but Gilgamesh breaks off the fight. Enkidu praises Gilgamesh.

THE YALE TABLET

Surpassing all other kings Tablet III, partially matches tablets II-III of the Standard version. For reasons unknown (the tablet is partially broken) Enkidu is in a sad mood. In order to cheer him up Gilgamesh suggests going to the Pine Forest to cut down trees and kill Humbaba (known here as Huwawa). Enkidu protests, as he knows Huwawa and is aware of his power. Gilgamesh talks Enkidu into it with some words of encouragement, but Enkidu remains reluctant. They prepare, and call for the elders. The elders also protest, but after Gilgamesh talks to them, they agree to let him go. After

Gilgamesh asks his god (Shamash) for protection and both equip, they leave with the elder's blessing and counsel.

PHILADELPHIA FRAGMENT

This is possibly another version of the contents of the Yale Tablet, practically irrecoverable.

THE NIPPUR SCHOOL TABLET

In the journey to the cedar forest and Huwawa, Enkidu interprets one of Gilgamesh's dreams.

THE TELL HARMAL TABLETS

Fragments from two different versions/tablets tell how Enkidu interprets one of Gilgamesh's dreams on the way to the Forest of Cedars, and their conversation when entering the forest.

THE ISHCHALI TABLET

After defeating Huwawa, Gilgamesh refrains from slaying him, and urges Enkidu to hunt Huwawa's "seven auras". Enkidu convinces him to smite their enemy. After killing Huwawa and the auras, they chop down part of the forest and discover the gods' secret abode. The rest of the tablet is broken. The auras are not referred to in the standard version, but are in one of the Sumerian poems.

PARTIAL FRAGMENT IN BAGHDAD

Partially overlapping the felling of the trees from the Ishchali tablet.

THE SIPPAR TABLET

Partially overlapping the Standard version tablets IX-X.

Gilgamesh mourns the death of Enkidu wandering in his quest for immortality. Gilgamesh argues with Shamash about the futility of his quest. After a lacuna, Gilgamesh talks to **Siduri** about his quest and his journey to meet **Utnapishtim** (here called Uta-na'ishtim). Siduri attempts to dissuade Gilgamesh in his quest for immortality, urging him to be content with the simple pleasures of life (Gilgamesh, whither are you wandering? Life, which you look for, you will never find. For when the gods created man, they let death be his share, and life withheld in their own hands. Gilgamesh, fill your belly. Day and night make merry. Let days be full of joy, dance and make music day and night. And wear fresh clothes. And wash your head and bathe. Look at the child that is holding your hand, and let your wife delight in your embrace. These things alone are the concern of men.) After one more lacuna, Gilgamesh smashes the stone creatures and talks to the ferryman Urshanabi (here called Sur-sunabu). After a short discussion, Sur-sunabu asks him to carve 300 oars so that they may cross the waters of death without needing the "stone ones". The rest of the tablet is missing.

The text on the Old Babylonian Meissner fragment (the larger surviving fragment of the Sippar tablet) has been used to reconstruct possible earlier forms of the Epic of Gilgamesh, and it has been suggested that a "prior form of the story - earlier even than that preserved on the Old Babylonian fragment - may well have ended with Siduri sending Gilgamesh back to Uruk..." and "Utnapishtim was not originally part of the tale."

THE SUMERIAN POEMS

There are five extant Gilgamesh stories in the form of older poems in **Sumerian**. These probably circulated independently, rather than being in the form of a unified epic. Some of the names of the main characters in these poems differ slightly from later Akkadian names, e.g. "Bilgamesh" is written for Gilgamesh, and there are some differences in the underlying stories (e.g. in the Sumerian version Enkidu is Gilgamesh's servant):



From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia