Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh was an historical king of Uruk in Babylonia, on the River Euphrates in modern Iraq; he lived about 2700 B.C. Although historians (and your textbook) tend to emphasize **Hammurabi** and his code of law, the civilizations of the Tigris-Euphrates area, among the first civilizations, focus rather on Gilgamesh and the legends accruing around him to explain, as it were, themselves. Many stories and myths were written about Gilgamesh, some of which were written down about 2000 B.C. in the Sumerian language on clay tablets which still survive; the Sumerian language, as far as we know, bears no relation to any other human language we know about. These Sumerian Gilgamesh stories were integrated into a longer poem, versions of which survive not only in Akkadian (the Semitic language, related to Hebrew, spoken by the Babylonians) but also on tablets written in Hurrian and Hittite (an Indo-European language, a family of languages which includes Greek and English, spoken in Asia Minor). All the above languages were written in the script known as cuneiform, which means "wedge-shaped." The fullest surviving version, from which the summary here is taken, is derived from twelve stone tablets, in the Akkadian language, found in the ruins of the library of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria 669-633 B.C., at Nineveh. The library was destroyed by the Persians in 612 B.C., and all the tablets are damaged. The tablets actually name an author, which is extremely rare in the ancient world, for this particular version of the story: Shin-eqi-unninni. You are being introduced here to the oldest known human author we can name by name!

This summary is derived from several sources: translations, commentaries, and academic scholarship on the Shin-eqi-unninni tablets. Verses are derived from several English and French translations in consultation with the English and German language commentaries and with the Babylonian text. For the entire text, you should turn to *The Epic of Gilgamesh* , trans. by Maureen Gallery Kovacs (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), or *Gilgamesh* , translated by John Maier and John Gardner (New York: Vintage, 1981)

As you read this short summary, ask yourself the following questions:

1. **Themes**. The first things you want to sort out are the ideas which seem to animate the work. One of the problems with literature, art, mythology,

etc., is that you can never be quite sure that you've correctly identified the central ideas or philosophy of the work, but you should take a stab at it anyway. Keep in mind that there is no such thing as one and only one idea in a work of literature, and that in most art and literature, like life, there is no one correct answer concerning any single issue. To identify an idea, question, or theme that the work seems to treat, look for specific places where that idea seems to be a concern; mark these passages and combine and contrast them when you begin to try to resolve what the work seems to be about. The questions I provide in these reading notes are meant to organize the families of questions you can bring to these texts.

2. **Structure**. Try to define for yourself the overall structure of the story. This narrative has two distinct parts; what are these parts and how are they separated? How do events in the second part of the narrative repeat or develop ideas in the first part of the narrative? Do these events contrast with or develop themes and values articulated in the first part of the narrative?

3. **The Nature of the Heroic**. When you read the myth, notice how Gilgamesh is presented as superhuman, so powerful that the gods create a counterpart to moderate his desires and actions. Do you get the sense that Gilgamesh and Enkidu should have spared the demon of the cedar forest? Despite all of Gilgamesh's power, he is unable to prevent Enkidu's death, and the narrative changes direction. How can one describe Gilgamesh as a hero in the last half of the work? What has he achieved at the end of the poem? Why is this important?

4. **The Gods**. The gods in Gilgamesh are a bit problematic. How do the gods behave? What is their relation to humans? How much freedom do humans have, or are they merely subject to the will of these gods?

From the Epic of Gilgamesh

I

Beside the sea she lives,
the woman of the vine, the maker of wine;
Siduri sits in the garden at the edge of the sea,
with the golden bowl and the golden vats that the gods gave her.
She is covered with a veil;
And where she sits she sees Gilgamesh coming towards her,

wearing skins,
the flesh of the gods in his body,
but despair in his heart,
and his face like the face of one who has made a long journey.

She looked,
and as she scanned the distance she said in her own heart,
'Surely this is some felon;
where is he going now?'
And she barred her gate against him with the cross-bar
and shot home the bolt.

But Gilgamesh, hearing the sound of the bolt,
threw up his head and lodged his foot in the gate;
he called to her,
'Young woman, maker of wine,
why do you bolt your door;
what did you see that made you bar your gate?
I will break in your door
and burst into your gate,
for I am Gilgamesh
who seized and killed the Bull of Heaven,
I killed the watchman of the cedar forest,
I overthrew Humbaba who lived in the forest,
and I killed the lions in the passes of the mountain.'

Then Siduri said to him,
'If you are that Gilgamesh
who seized and killed the Bull of Heaven,
who killed the watchman of the cedar forest,
who overthrew Humbaba who lived in the forest,
and killed the lions in the passes of the mountain,
why are your cheeks so starved
and why is your face so drawn?
Why is despair in your heart
and your face like the face of one who has made a long journey?
Yes, why is your face burned from heat and cold,
and why do you come here wandering over the pastures
in search of the wind?'

Gilgamesh answered her,
'And why should not my cheeks be starved
and my face drawn?
Despair is in my heart
and my face is the face of one who has made a long journey,
it was burned with heat and with cold.
Why should I not wander over the pastures
in search of the wind?
My friend,
My younger brother,
he who hunted the wild ass of the wilderness and the panther of the plains,
my friend,
my younger brother
who seized and killed the Bull of Heaven
and overthrew Humbaba in the cedar forest,
my friend
who was very dear to me
and who endured dangers beside me,
Enkidu my brother
whom I loved,
the end of mortality has overtaken him.
I wept for him seven days and nights
till the worm fastened on him.
Because of my brother I am afraid of death,
because of my brother I stray through the wilderness
and cannot rest.
But now
young woman, maker of wine,
since I have seen your face
do not let me see the face of death
which I dread so much.'

She answered,
'Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to?
You will never find the life for which you are looking.
When the gods created man
they alloted to him death,
but life they retained in their own keeping.
As for you, Gilgamesh,
fill your belly with good things;

day and night, night and day, dance and be merry,
feast and rejoice.
Let your clothes be fresh,
bathe yourself in water,
cherish the little child that holds your hand,
and make your wife happy in your embrace;
for this too is the lot of man.'

But Gilgamesh said to Siduri, the young woman,
'How can I be silent,
how can I rest,
when Enkidu whom I love is dust,
and I too shall die
and be laid in the earth for ever.'

II

Utnapishtim said,
'As for you, Gilgasmesh,
who will assemble the gods for your sake,
so that you may find that life for which you are searching?
But if you wish,
come and put it to test:
only prevail against sleep
for six days and seven nights.'

But while Gilgamesh sat there resting on his haunches,
a mist of sleep
like soft wool teased from the fleece
drifted over him,
and Utnapishtim said to his wife,
'Look at him now,
the strong man who would have everlasting life,
even now the mists of sleep are drifting over him.'

His wife replied,
'Touch the man to wake him,
so that he may return to his own land in peace,
going back through the gate by which he came.'
Utnapishtim said to his wife,

'All men are deceivers,
even you he will attempt to deceive;
therefore bake loaves of bread,
each day one loaf,
and put it beside his head;
and make a mark on the wall to number the days he has slept.'

So she baked loaves of bread,
each day one loaf,
and put it beside his head,
and she marked on the wall the days that he slept;
and there came a day
when the first loaf was hard,
the second loaf was like leather,
the third was soggy,
the crust of the fourth had mould,
the fifth was mildewed,
the sixth was fresh,
and the seventh was still on the embers.
Then Utnapishtim touched him
and he woke.

Gilgamesh said to Utnapishtim the Faraway,
'I hardly slept when you touched and roused me.'
But Utnapishtim said,
'Count these loaves
and learn how many days you slept,
for your first is hard,
your second like leather,
your third is soggy,
the crust of your fourth has mould,
your fifth is mildewed,
your sixth is fresh,
and your seventh was still over the glowing embers
when I touched and woke you.'

Gilgamesh said,
'What shall I do, O Utnapishtim,
where shall I go?
Already the thief in the night has hold of my limbs,

death inhabits my room;
wherever my foot rests,
there I find death.'

III

Gilgamesh, the son of Ninsun, lies in the tomb.
At the place of offerings he weighed the bread-offering,
at the place of libation he poured out the wine.
In those days the lord Gilgamesh departed,
the son of Ninsun,
the king,
peerless, without an equal among men,
who did not neglect Enlil his master.
O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab,
Great is thy praise.
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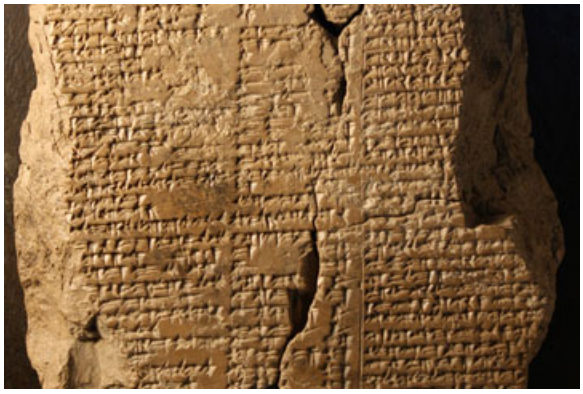
Lost 'Epic of Gilgamesh' Verse Depicts Cacophonous Abode of Gods

by Elizabeth Palermo, Associate Editor | October 02, 2015 04:31pm ET



This clay tablet in inscribed with one part of the Epic of Gilgamesh. It was most likely stolen from a historical site before it was sold to a museum in Iraq.
Credit: Farouk Al-Rawi

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A serendipitous deal between a history museum and a smuggler has provided new insight into one of the most famous stories ever told: "The Epic of Gilgamesh."

The new finding, a clay tablet, reveals a previously unknown "chapter" of the epic poem from ancient Mesopotamia. This new section brings both noise and color to a forest for the gods that was thought to be a quiet place in the work of literature. The newfound verse also reveals details about the inner conflict the poem's heroes endured.

In 2011, the Sulaymaniyah Museum in Slemani, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, purchased a set of 80 to 90 clay tablets from a known smuggler. The museum has been engaging in these backroom dealings as a way to regain valuable artifacts that disappeared from Iraqi historical sites and museums since the start of the American-led invasion of that country, according to the online nonprofit publication Ancient History Et Cetera.

Among the various tablets purchased, one stood out to Farouk Al-Rawi, a professor in the Department of Languages and Cultures of the Near and Middle East at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. The large block of clay, etched with cuneiform writing, was still caked in mud when Al-Rawi advised the Sulaymaniyah Museum to purchase artifact for the agreed upon $800. [In Photos: See the Treasures of Mesopotamia]

With the help of Andrew George, associate dean of languages and culture at SOAS and translator of "The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation" (Penguin Classics, 2000), Al-Rawi translated the tablet in just five days. The clay artifact could date as far back to the old-Babylonian period (2003-1595 B.C.), according to the Sulaymaniyah Museum. However, Al-Rawi and George said they believe it's a bit younger and was inscribed in the neo-Babylonian period (626-539 B.C.).

Al-Rawi and George soon discovered that the stolen tablet told a familiar story: the story of Gilgamesh, the protagonist of the ancient Babylonian tale, "The Epic of Gilgamesh," which is widely regarded as the first-ever epic poem and the first great work of literature ever created. Because of the time period when the story was written, the tale was likely inscribed on "tablets," with each tablet telling a different part of the story (kind of like modern chapters or verses).

What Al-Rawi and George translated is a formerly unknown portion of the fifth tablet, which tells the story of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, and

Enkidu (the wild man created by the gods to keep Gilgamesh in line) as they travel to the Cedar Forest (home of the gods) to defeat the ogre Humbaba.

The new tablet adds 20 previously unknown lines to the epic story, filling in some of the details about how the forest looked and sounded.

"The new tablet continues where other sources break off, and we learn that the Cedar Forest is no place of serene and quiet glades. It is full of noisy birds and cicadas, and monkeys scream and yell in the trees," George told Live Science in an email.

In a parody of courtly life, the monstrous Humbaba treats the cacophony of jungle noises as a kind of entertainment, "like King Louie in 'The Jungle Book,'" George said. Such a vivid description of the natural landscapes is "very rare" in Babylonian narrative poetry, he added

Other newfound lines of the poem confirm details that are alluded to in other parts of the work. For example, it shows that Enkidu and Humbaba were childhood buddies and that, after killing the ogre, the story's heroes feel a bit remorseful, at least for destroying the lovely forest.

"Gilgamesh and Enkidu cut down the cedar to take home to Babylonia, and the new text carries a line that seems to express Enkidu's recognition that reducing the forest to a wasteland is a bad thing to have done, and will upset the gods," George said. Like the description of the forest, this kind of ecological awareness is very rare in ancient poetry, he added.

The tablet, now mud-free and fully translated, is currently on display at the Sulaymaniyah Museum. A paper outlining Al-Rawi and George's findings was published in 2014 in the Journal of Cuneiform Studies.

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