

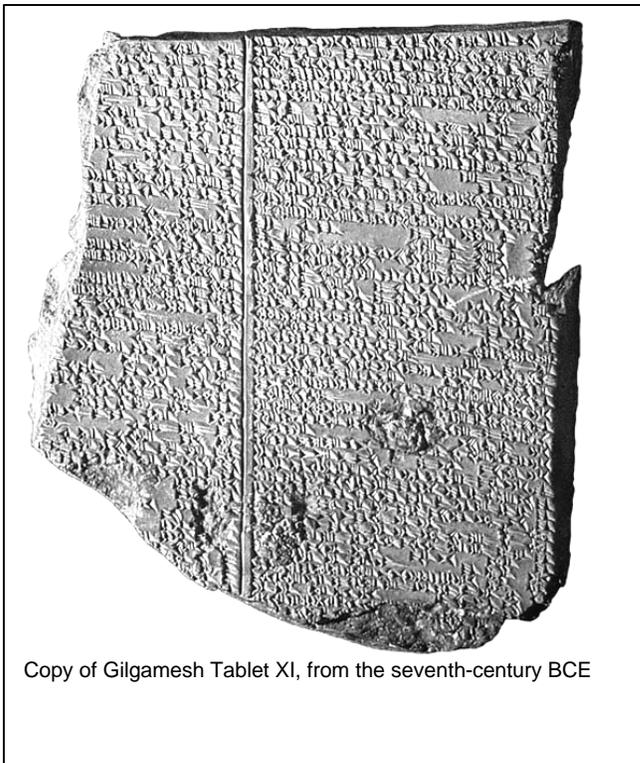
## EPIC OF GILGAMESH

### Date, language, and provenance

- Cuneiform tablets of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* were first discovered by archeologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE among ruins in Nineveh (once the capital city of the Assyrian Empire). Other copies and versions were found throughout the area now corresponding to the Ancient Near East, including Nippur and Ur in Mesopotamia, Emar and Ugarit in Syria, Megiddo in Israel and Bogüazköy in Turkey.
- The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a story about a Sumerian king. It was originally written in Akkadian. The earliest form of this source known to us, however, dates back to around 1900 BCE and is Babylonian (hence: it is often called the “Old Babylonian” version). About 75 different copies of this version survive, although they are fragmentary, such that the text cannot be reconstructed in full.

### Literary genre

- Gilgamesh is an historical figure. From the evidence of the Sumerian King List (ca. 2100 BCE), it seems that he was a Sumerian king who ruled Uruk almost a millennium before the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was composed (ca. 2700 BCE).
- The tales preserved in *the Epic of Gilgamesh*, however, are not historical in any strict sense, even if some elements may trace back to the myths and legends about the king that began to spread (in written and oral form) in his own time, perhaps even soon after his death.



Copy of Gilgamesh Tablet XI, from the seventh-century BCE

**BCE** – Before the Common Era (used by scholars and others in place of “BC”)

**CE** – Common Era (used by scholars and others in place of “AD”)

**Ancient Near East** – A broad term used to refer to the ancient cultures and groups in the general area that we now call the “Middle East”: ancient Mesopotamia (now = Iraq and Syria), Persia (now = modern Iran), the Levant (now = Israel, Jordan, Syria), and Anatolia (now = Turkey); the term sometimes includes Egypt as well.

**Mesopotamia:** A term commonly used to refer to the geographical area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

**Cuneiform:** From the Latin meaning “wedge-shaped,” a system of writing used throughout the Near East during the first three millennia BCE.

**Akkadian:** A Semitic language (i.e., from the same language family as Hebrew and Arabic) that was the common tongue of ancient Mesopotamia

- The *Epic of Gilgamesh* seems to reflect the redaction (i.e., editing) and combination of earlier and smaller Sumerian tales into a form that we might liken to an epic. We have evidence of much older Sumerian Gilgamesh stories and even collections, but these tales are short and unconnected. The author(s)/redactor(s) of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* seem to have taken these tales and weaved them together into a single story with a larger narrative arc and sustained themes.
- The author(s)/redactor(s) appears to have added material as well, using earlier traditions about Gilgamesh to create a sustained reflection on kingship, the human condition, and mortality.
- The text seems to have been composed in verse, rather than prose. Although it concerns humankind and the gods, it seems not to have been a sacred text in the sense of a text used in liturgies, festivals, etc. (in contrast, for instance, to *Enuma Elish*).

## Narrative Structure

The story of Gilgamesh, prefaced by a celebration of his achievements throughout his life (tablet I col. 1), falls into two parts:

1. The first (tablets I-VI) centers on Gilgamesh's heroic deeds, which include his conquest of the demon Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven; here the major subplot concerns Endiku and his journey from nature to civilization.
2. The second (tablets VII-XI) centers on Gilgamesh's attempt to grapple with death, as sparked by the death of Endiku (tablet VII), which marks a turning point both in the story and for Gilgamesh's character; these tablets tell of Gilgamesh's mourning and his journey searching for the secret immortality. The journey culminates with him meeting Utnapishtim, the sole survivor of the ancient Flood and the only immortal human being; accordingly, the major subplot is the story-within-a-story told by Utnapishtim, recounting the Flood (tablet XI).

Tablet XII is a later addition to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (added ca. 750 BCE). It is not narratively connected to the earlier plot, but picks up and further explores the theme of mortality and immortality by means of a tale about Endiku's journey to the underworld.

### a. Main Thematic Poles of Tablets I-VI

**Divine vs. human** – Gilgamesh is perched uncomfortably between divine and human; in the first part of *Gilgamesh*, this manifests in his arrogance, such that gods intercede against him on behalf of his people and such that he rebukes Ishtar, leading to the death of his friend – which brings powerfully to bear the fact that his own mortality and hence his humanity.

**Animal vs. human** – Endiku moves from animal to human by means of sex.

**City vs. wilderness** – Endiku's entry into civilization is marked by his geographical movement from wilderness to city. His participation in the battle against Humbaba, guardian of the cedar forest, emblemizes his switch of loyalties. In the second part, Endiku's death leads Gilgamesh to move in the other direction – from city out into the wilderness on his journey – to return only at the very end of the story.

### b. Plot and Characters of Tablets I-VI: Gilgamesh vs. Endiku

Gilgamesh	Endiku
Although the preface introduces Gilgamesh as a great king responsible for building projects in Uruk (e.g., city walls) and although we learn at the beginning of Tablet II that he is 2/3 divine and a mighty warrior, the narrative proper begins with his oppressive despotism – he is likened to a wild bull both in strength and in lack of control and lack of care for the weak. His peoples' complaints against him motivate the first cycle of action in the story: the gods hear their pleas and decide to create Gilgamesh's double – Endiku – an equal for him to fight.	
	Endiku is raised and lives in the wilderness among the animals and like them ("He knew neither people nor homeland").
The Stalker (an unnamed hunter who moves between – and mediates – the worlds of the wilderness and the city) sees Endiku and tells Gilgamesh, who tells him to bring a temple courtesan to Endiku, so that he will be drawn to her and "his animals will turn from him."	
	Endiku has sex with the temple courtesan for six days and seven nights. The animals recoil from him, and with talk of Gilgamesh and his power (and Uruk and its riches), she convinces him to go to Uruk to try and conquer him.
Endiku comes to Uruk, and Gilgamesh and Endiku fight; Gilgamesh wins, but the two become friends.	
Questing for adventure and fame, the two set off to fight the demon Humbaba, who guards the cedar forest. They are victorious and return to Uruk as heroes.	
The goddess Ishtar, impressed, asks Gilgamesh to marry her. He refuses, and she unleashes the Bull of Heaven upon him.	
Endiku and Gilgamesh together fight the Bull of Heaven and win.	
	For Gilgamesh's hubris, however, the gods decide that Endiku must die. He grows ill, first lamenting his departure from the wilderness into civilization then coming to accept its goods.
Gilgamesh is devastated by the loss of his friend, questioning the apparent inevitability of death.	

### c. Main Thematic Poles of Tablets VIII-XI

**Divine vs. human vs. animal** – In the second part of the text, these themes are explored by means of reflection on human mortality and hopes for immortality. Although Gilgamesh does not achieve immortality, the text does give answers as to what constitutes immortality for humans, namely civilization and fame. As for the purpose in our limited lives, it lauds friendship, on the one hand, and wisdom, on the other.

**City vs. wilderness** – Gilgamesh makes the opposite movement as does Endiku in the first part, abandoning city for the wilderness; it is only through journeying through uncertainty and darkness that he arrives at wisdom. At the end, he returns to the city, a more mature individual and a better king for having experienced, not just strength and victory, but also loss and failure.



[Mask of Humbaba, From Sippar, southern Iraq, ca. 1800-1600 BCE]

### d. Plot and Characters of Tablets VIII-XI

- Tablets VII-IX recount Gilgamesh's eulogy for Endiku and his decision to leave Uruk to search for the secret of immortality by speaking to Utnapishtim, who is rumored to be the only human to have escaped death.
- Tablets IX-X recount his journey, with imagery of hardship and darkness underlining its difficulty, together with repetition, which serves to evoke the journey's length, as well as to underline key points:
  - For instance, he tells of his quest to each whom he encounters (e.g., scorpion-demons that guard the mountain, Siduri [manifestation of Ishtar, who functionally parallels the temple courtesan in the first part] near the shore of the waters, the boatman on the waters of death); each time, he retells his reason, stressing that he is compelled by a need to *know*.
  - All tell him that his journey is pointless – he will find nothing: humankind is mortal, there have been no exceptions to this rule, and no act of heroism can change this simple fact of human life. The extreme repetition also serves to express Gilgamesh's endurance and persistence; here, we see a very different hero and a very different kind of heroism than we did in the first part of the tale, when Gilgamesh prevailed through strength and was arrogant as a result.
- In Tablet XI, the journey culminates with Gilgamesh's success in traveling to see Utnapishtim, who first tells him the story of the Flood:
  - The god Enlil sends the Flood upon humankind without consulting with the rest of the gods. The god Ea gets around the requirement not to tell any humans by speaking to Utnapishtim through a reed wall and helping him to think of a way to explain why he's building a big boat.
  - Utnapishtim and his family survive the Flood, carrying with them seeds of animals as well.
  - After the Flood, Ea convinces Enlil only to punish the wicked, not all humans, in the future, and there is a trade-off – instead of the threat of total destruction, humankind receives hardship in life, and only a single man (Utnapishtim) is freed from the fate of death.
- Utnapishtim notes that Gilgamesh too can ask the council of gods for eternal life, provided that he pass a test of not sleeping for six days and seven nights (the same amount of time that Endiku had sex with the temple courtesan). Gilgamesh fails.
- Utnapishtim then tells him how to find a plant, the eating of which may bring immortality. Gilgamesh fails again: he finds the plant, but a serpent eats it.
- Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, still mortal but wiser for the journey.