

The Epic of Gilgamesh

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First written down around 2000 BCE, The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the oldest surviving works of world literature. Based on a real historical figure, King Gilgamesh of Uruk (r. ca. 2700 BCE), it tells the story of Gilgamesh's travels, adventures, and search for immortality. It is also a story about "becoming": becoming civilized and the price that humans paid for that process. In a sense, this is how the Ancient Sumerians would have explained the "history" of civilization up to that point.

- Perry, *Sources of the Western Tradition*

Tablet I

He who has seen everything, *I will make known* (?) to the lands.
I will teach (?) about him who experienced all things,
... alike,
Anu granted him the totality of knowledge of *all*.
He saw the Secret, discovered the Hidden,
he brought information of (the time) before the Flood.
He went on a distant journey, pushing himself to exhaustion,
but then was brought to peace.
He carved on a stone stela all of his toils,
and built the wall of Uruk-Haven,
the wall of the sacred Eanna Temple, the holy sanctuary.
Look at its wall which gleams like *copper*(?),
inspect its inner wall, the likes of which no one can equal!
Take hold of the threshold stone--it dates from ancient times!
Go close to the Eanna Temple, the residence of Ishtar,
such as no later king or man ever equaled!
Go up on the wall of Uruk and walk around,
examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly.
Is not (even the core of) the brick structure made of kiln-fired brick,
and did not the Seven Sages themselves lay out its plans?
One league city, one league palm gardens, one league lowlands, the
open area(?) of the Ishtar Temple,
three leagues and the open area(?) of Uruk it (the wall) encloses.
Find the copper tablet box,
open the ... of its lock of bronze,
undo the fastening of its secret opening.
Take and read out from the lapis lazuli tablet
how Gilgamesh went through every hardship.
Supreme over other kings, lordly in appearance,

he is the hero, born of Uruk, the goring wild bull.
He walks out in front, the leader,
and walks at the rear, trusted by his companions.
Mighty net, protector of his people,
raging flood-wave who destroys even walls of stone!
Offspring of Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh is strong to perfection,
son of the august cow, Rimat-Ninsun;... Gilgamesh is awesome to
perfection.
It was he who opened the mountain passes,
who dug wells on the flank of the mountain.
It was he who crossed the ocean, the vast seas, to the rising sun,
who explored the world regions, seeking life.
It was he who reached by his own sheer strength Utanapishtim, the
Faraway,
who restored the sanctuaries (or: cities) that the Flood had destroyed!
... for teeming mankind.
Who can compare with him in kingliness?
Who can say like Gilgamesh: "I am King!"?
Whose name, from the day of his birth, was called "Gilgamesh"?
Two-thirds of him is god, one-third of him is human.
The Great Goddess [Aruru] designed(?) the model for his body,
she prepared his form ...
... beautiful, handsomest of men,
... perfect
...
He walks around in the enclosure of Uruk,
Like a wild bull he makes himself mighty, head raised (over others).
There is no rival who can raise his weapon against him.
His fellows stand (at the alert), attentive to his (orders ?),
and the men of Uruk become anxious in ...
Gilgamesh does not leave a son to his father,
day and night he arrogant[y(?) ...
[The following lines are interpreted as rhetorical, perhaps spoken by
the oppressed citizens of Uruk.]
Is Gilgamesh the shepherd of Uruk-Haven,
is he the shepherd. ...
bold, eminent, knowing, and wise!
Gilgamesh does not leave a girl to her mother(?)
The daughter of the warrior, the bride of the young man,
the gods kept hearing their complaints, so
the gods of the heavens implored the Lord of Uruk [Anu]
"You have indeed brought into being a mighty wild bull, head
raised!
"There is no rival who can raise a weapon against him.
"His fellows stand (at the alert), attentive to his (orders !),
"Gilgamesh does not leave a son to his father,

"day and night he arrogantly ...
"Is he the shepherd of Uruk-Haven,
"is he their shepherd...
"bold, eminent, knowing, and wise,
"Gilgamesh does not leave a girl to her mother(?)"
The daughter of the warrior, the bride of the young man,
Anu listened to their complaints,
and (the gods) called out to Aruru:
"it was you, Aruru, who created mankind(?),
now create a *zikru* to it/him.
Let him be equal to his (Gilgamesh's) stormy heart,
let them be a match for each other so that Uruk may find peace!"
When Aruru heard this she created within herself the *zikru* of Anu.
Aruru washed her hands, she pinched off some clay, and threw it into
the wilderness.
In the wilderness(?) she created valiant Enkidu,
born of Silence, endowed with strength by Ninurta.
His whole body was shaggy with hair,
he had a full head of hair like a woman,
his locks billowed in profusion like Ashnan.
He knew neither people nor settled living,
but wore a garment like Sumukan."
He ate grasses with the gazelles,
and jostled at the watering hole with the animals;
as with animals, his thirst was slaked with (mere) water.
A notorious trapper came face-to-face with him opposite the watering
hole.
A first, a second, and a third day
he came face-to-face with him opposite the watering hole.
On seeing him the trapper's face went stark with fear,
and he (Enkidu?) and his animals drew back home.
He was rigid with fear; though stock-still
his heart pounded and his face drained of color.
He was miserable to the core,
and his face looked like one who had made a long journey.
The trapper addressed his father saying:"
"Father, a certain fellow has come from the mountains.
He is the mightiest in the land,
his strength is as mighty as the meteorite(?) of Anu!
He continually goes over the mountains,
he continually jostles at the watering place with the animals,
he continually plants his feet opposite the watering place.
I was afraid, so I did not go up to him.
He filled in the pits that I had dug,
wrenched out my traps that I had spread,
released from my grasp the wild animals.

He does not let me make my rounds in the wilderness!"
The trapper's father spoke to him saying:
"My son, there lives in Uruk a certain Gilgamesh.
There is no one stronger than he,
he is as strong as the meteorite(?) of Anu.
Go, set off to Uruk,
tell Gilgamesh of this Man of Might.
He will give you the harlot Shamhat, take her with you.
The woman will overcome the fellow (?) as if she were strong.
When the animals are drinking at the watering place
have her take off her robe and expose her sex.
When he sees her he will draw near to her,
and his animals, who grew up in his wilderness, will be alien to
him."

He heeded his father's advice.
The trapper went off to Uruk,
he made the journey, stood inside of Uruk,
and declared to ... Gilgamesh:

"There is a certain fellow who has come from the mountains--
he is the mightiest in the land,
his strength is as mighty as the meteorite(?) of Anu!
He continually goes over the mountains,
he continually jostles at the watering place with the animals,
he continually plants his feet opposite the watering place.
I was afraid, so I did not go up to him.
He filled in the pits that I had dug,
wrenched out my traps that I had spread,
released from my grasp the wild animals.
He does not let me make my rounds in the wilderness!"

Gilgamesh said to the trapper:

"Go, trapper, bring the harlot, Shamhat, with you.
When the animals are drinking at the watering place
have her take off her robe and expose her sex.
When he sees her he will draw near to her,
and his animals, who grew up in his wilderness, will be alien to
him."

The trapper went, bringing the harlot, Shamhat, with him.
They set off on the journey, making direct way.
On the third day they arrived at the appointed place,
and the trapper and the harlot sat down at their posts(?).
A first day and a second they sat opposite the watering hole.
The animals arrived and drank at the watering hole,
the wild beasts arrived and slaked their thirst with water.
Then he, Enkidu, offspring of the mountains,
who eats grasses with the gazelles,
came to drink at the watering hole with the animals,

with the wild beasts he slaked his thirst with water.

Then Shamhat saw him--a primitive,
a savage fellow from the depths of the wilderness!

"That is he, Shamhat! Release your clenched arms,
expose your sex so he can take in your voluptuousness.

Do not be restrained--take his energy!

When he sees you he will draw near to you.

Spread out your robe so he can lie upon you,
and perform for this primitive the task of womankind!

His animals, who grew up in his wilderness, will become alien to
him,

and his lust will groan over you."

Shamhat unclutched her bosom, exposed her sex, and he took in her
voluptuousness.

She was not restrained, but took his energy.

She spread out her robe and he lay upon her,
she performed for the primitive the task of womankind.

His lust groaned over her;

for six days and seven nights Enkidu stayed aroused,
and had intercourse with the harlot
until he was sated with her charms.

But when he turned his attention to his animals,
the gazelles saw Enkidu and darted off,
the wild animals distanced themselves from his body.

Enkidu ... his utterly depleted(?) body,
his knees that wanted to go off with his animals went rigid;
Enkidu was diminished, his running was not as before.

But then he drew himself up, for his understanding had broadened.

Turning around, he sat down at the harlot's feet,
gazing into her face, his ears attentive as the harlot spoke.

The harlot said to Enkidu:

"You are beautiful," Enkidu, you are become like a god.

Why do you gallop around the wilderness with the wild beasts?

Come, let me bring you into Uruk-Haven,

to the Holy Temple, the residence of Anu and Ishtar,

the place of Gilgamesh, who is wise to perfection,

but who struts his power over the people like a wild bull."

What she kept saying found favor with him.

Becoming aware of himself, he sought a friend.

Enkidu spoke to the harlot:

"Come, Shamhat, take me away with you

to the sacred Holy Temple, the residence of Anu and Ishtar,

the place of Gilgamesh, who is wise to perfection,

but who struts his power over the people like a wild bull.

I will challenge him ...

Let me shout out in Uruk: I am the mighty one!"

Lead me in and I will change the order of things;
he whose strength is mightiest is the one born in the wilderness!"

[Shamhat to Enkidu:]

"Come, let us go, so he may see your face.
I will lead you to Gilgamesh--I know where he will be.
Look about, Enkidu, inside Uruk-Haven,
where the people show off in skirted finery,
where every day is a day for some festival,
where the lyre(?) and drum play continually,
where harlots stand about prettily,
exuding voluptuousness, full of laughter
and on the couch of night the sheets are spread (!)."
Enkidu, you who do not know, how to live,
I will show you Gilgamesh, a man of extreme feelings (!).
Look at him, gaze at his face--
he is a handsome youth, with freshness(!),
his entire body exudes voluptuousness
He has mightier strength than you,
without sleeping day or night!
Enkidu, it is your wrong thoughts you must change!
It is Gilgamesh whom Shamhat loves,
and Anu, Enlil, and La have enlarged his mind."
Even before you came from the mountain
Gilgamesh in Uruk had dreams about you.""

Gilgamesh got up and revealed the dream, saying to his mother:

"Mother, I had a dream last night.
Stars of the sky appeared,
and some kind of meteorite(?) of Anu fell next to me.
I tried to lift it but it was too mighty for me,
I tried to turn it over but I could not budge it.
The Land of Uruk was standing around it,
the whole land had assembled about it,
the populace was thronging around it,
the Men clustered about it,
and kissed its feet as if it were a little baby (!).
I loved it and embraced it as a wife.
I laid it down at your feet,
and you made it compete with me."

The mother of Gilgamesh, the wise, all-knowing, said to her Lord;
Rimat-Ninsun, the wise, all-knowing, said to Gilgamesh:

"As for the stars of the sky that appeared
and the meteorite(?) of Anu which fell next to you,
you tried to lift but it was too mighty for you,
you tried to turn it over but were unable to budge it,
you laid it down at my feet,
and I made it compete with you,

and you loved and embraced it as a wife."

"There will come to you a mighty man, a comrade who saves his friend--

he is the mightiest in the land, he is strongest,
his strength is mighty as the meteorite(!) of Anu!

You loved him and embraced him as a wife;
and it is he who will repeatedly save you.

Your dream is good and propitious!"

A second time Gilgamesh said to his mother: "Mother, I have had another dream:

"At the gate of my marital chamber there lay an axe,

"and people had collected about it.

"The Land of Uruk was standing around it,

"the whole land had assembled about it,

"the populace was thronging around it.

"I laid it down at your feet,

"I loved it and embraced it as a wife,

"and you made it compete with me."

The mother of Gilgamesh, the wise, all-knowing, said to her son;

Rimat-Ninsun, the wise, all-knowing, said to Gilgamesh:

""The axe that you saw (is) a man.

"... (that) you love him and embrace as a wife,

"but (that) I have compete with you."

"" There will come to you a mighty man,

"" a comrade who saves his friend--

"he is the mightiest in the land, he is strongest,

"he is as mighty as the meteorite(!) of Anu!"

Gilgamesh spoke to his mother saying:

""By the command of Enlil, the Great Counselor, so may it to pass!

"May I have a friend and adviser, a friend and adviser may I have!

"You have interpreted for me the dreams about him!"

After the harlot recounted the dreams of Gilgamesh to Enkidu
the two of them made love.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Tablet II

Enkidu sits in front of her.

[The next 30 lines are missing; some of the fragmentary lines from 35 on are restored

from parallels in the Old Babylonian.]

"Why ..."(?)

His own counsel ...

At his instruction ...

Who knows his heart...

Shamhat pulled off her clothing,

and clothed him with one piece

while she clothed herself with a second.

She took hold of him as the gods do'

and brought him to the hut of the shepherds.

The shepherds gathered all around about him,

they marveled to themselves:

"How the youth resembles Gilgamesh--

tall in stature, towering up to the battlements over the wall!

Surely he was born in the mountains;

his strength is as mighty as the meteorite(!) of Anu!"

They placed food in front of him,

they placed beer in front of him;

Enkidu knew nothing about eating bread for food,

and of drinking beer he had not been taught.

The harlot spoke to Enkidu, saying:

"Eat the food, Enkidu, it is the way one lives.

Drink the beer, as is the custom of the land."

Enkidu ate the food until he was sated,

he drank the beer-seven jugs!-- and became expansive and sang with joy!

He was elated and his face glowed.

He splashed his shaggy body with water,

and rubbed himself with oil, and turned into a human.

He put on some clothing and became like a warrior(!).

He took up his weapon and chased lions so that the shepherds could eat

He routed the wolves, and chased the lions.

With Enkidu as their guard, the herders could lie down.

A wakeful man, a singular youth, he was twice as tall (?) (as normal men

[The next 33 lines are missing in the Standard Version; lines 57-86 are taken from the Old Babylonian.]

Then he raised his eyes and saw a man.

He said to the harlot:

"Shamhat, have that man go away!
Why has he come'? I will call out his name!"

The harlot called out to the man
and went over to him and spoke with him.

"Young man, where are you hurrying!
Why this arduous pace!"

The young man spoke, saying to Enkidu:

"They have invited me to a wedding,
as is the custom of the people.
... the selection(!) of brides(!) ..

I have heaped up tasty delights for the wedding on the ceremonial(!)
platter.

For the King of Broad-Marted Uruk,
open is the veil(!) of the people for choosing (a girl).
For Gilgamesh, the King of Broad-Marted Uruk,
open is the veil(?) of the people for choosing.
He will have intercourse with the 'destined wife,'
he first, the husband afterward.

This is ordered by the counsel of Anu,
from the severing of his umbilical cord it has been destined
for him."

At the young man's speech his (Enkidu's) face flushed (with anger).
[Several lines are missing.]

Enkidu walked in front, and Shamhat after him.

[The Standard Version resumes.]

He (Enkidu) walked down the street of Uruk-Haven,
... mighty...

He blocked the way through Uruk the Sheepfold.

The land of Uruk stood around him,
the whole land assembled about him,
the populace was thronging around him,
the men were clustered about him,
and kissed his feet as if he were a little baby(!).

Suddenly a handsome young man ...

For Ishara the bed of night(?)/marriage(?) is ready,
for Gilgamesh as for a god a counterpart(!) is set up.

Enkidu blocked the entry to the marital chamber,
and would not allow Gilgamesh to be brought in.

They grappled with each other at the entry to the marital chamber,
in the street they attacked each other, the public square of the land.

The doorposts trembled and the wall shook,

[About 42 lines are missing from the Standard Version; lines 103-129 are taken from the Old Babylonian version.]

Gilgamesh bent his knees, with his other foot on the ground,
his anger abated and he turned his chest away.

After he turned his chest Enkidu said to Gilgamesh:

"Your mother bore you ever unique(!),
the Wild Cow of the Enclosure, Ninsun,
your head is elevated over (other) men,
Enlil has destined for you the kingship over the people."

[19 lines are missing here.]

They kissed each other and became friends.

[The Old Babylonian becomes fragmentary. The Standard Version resumes]

"His strength is the mightiest in the land!

His strength is as mighty as the meteorite(?) of Anu,

The mother of Gilgamesh spoke to Gilgamesh, saying;

Rimat-Ninsun said to her son:

"(I!), Rimar-Ninsun...

My son...

Plaintively ...

She went up into his (Shamash's) gateway,
plaintively she implored ...:

"Enkidu has no father or mother,
his shaggy hair no one cuts.

He was born in the wilderness, no one raised him."

Enkidu was standing there, and heard the speech.

He ... and sat down and wept,

his eyes filled with tears,

his arms felt limp, his strength weakened.

They took each other by the hand,

and.., their hands like ...

Enkidu made a declaration to (Gilgamesh').

[32 lines are missing here.]

"in order to protect the Cedar Forest

Enlil assigned (Humbaba) as a terror to human beings,

Humbaba's roar is a Flood, his mouth is Fire, and his breath is Death!

He can hear 100 leagues away any rustling(?) in his forest!

Who would go down into his forest!

Enlil assigned him as a terror to human beings,
and whoever goes down into his forest paralysis(?) will strike!"

Gilgamesh spoke to Enkidu saying:

"What you say . . ."

[About 42 lines are missing here in the Standard Version; lines 228-249 are taken from

the Old Babylonian.]

"Who, my Friend, can ascend to the heavens!"

(Only) the gods can dwell forever with Shamash.

As for human beings, their days are numbered,
and whatever they keep trying to achieve is but wind!

Now you are afraid of death--

what has become of your bold strength!

I will go in front of you,

and your mouth can call out: 'Go on closer, do not be afraid!'

Should I fall, I will have established my fame.

(They will say:) 'It was Gilgamesh who locked in battle with Humbaba
the Terrible!'

You were born and raised in the wilderness,

a lion leaped up on you, so you have experienced it all!

[5 lines are fragmentary]

I will undertake it and I will cut down the Cedar.

It is I who will establish fame for eternity!

Come, my friend, I will go over to the forge

and have them cast the weapons in our presence!"

Holding each other by the hand they went over to the forge.

[The Standard Version resumes at this point.]

The craftsmen sat and discussed with one another.

"We should fashion the axe...

The hatchet should be one talent in weight ...

Their swords should be one talent...

Their armor one talent, their armor ..."

Gilgamesh said to the men of Uruk:

"Listen to me, men...

[5 lines are missing here.

You, men of Uruk, who know ...

I want to make myself more mighty, and will go on a distant(!) journey!

I will face fighting such as I have never known,

I will set out on a road I have never traveled!

Give me your blessings! ...

I will enter the city gate of Uruk ...

I will devote(?) myself to the New Year's Festival.
I will perform the New Year's (ceremonies) in...
The New Year's Festival will take place, celebrations ...
They will keep shouting 'Hurrah!' in..."

Enkidu spoke to the Elders:

"What the men of Uruk...

Say to him that he must not go to the Cedar Forest--
the journey is not to be made!

A man who...

The Guardian of the Cedar Forest ...

The Noble Counselors of Uruk arose and
delivered their advice to Gilgamesh:

"You are young, Gilgamesh, your heart carries you off
you do not know what you are talking about!

...gave birth to you.

Humbaba's roar is a Flood,

his mouth is Fire, his breath Death!

He can hear any rustling(!) in his forest 100 leagues away!

Who would go down into his forest!

Who among (even!) the Igigi gods can confront him?

In order to keep the Cedar safe, Enlil assigned him as a terror
to human beings."

Gilgamesh listened to the statement of his Noble Counselors.

[About 5 lines are missing to the end of Tablet II.]