

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Epic of Gilgamesh was written on clay tablets in cuneiform (wedge-shaped) script at least 1300 years before Homer wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. However, the first of these tablets was not discovered until excavations at Nineveh, begun in 1845, uncovered the library of Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria (668-627 B.C.). Among the 25,000 tablets was the Assyrian version of *Gilgamesh*.

The epic gained international importance in 1862, when an expert in cuneiform published an outline of *Gilgamesh* along with his translation of part of the Assyrian version of the flood. The similarity between the flood story in the *Gilgamesh* epic and the description of the flood in the Bible led archaeologists to intensify their search for more cuneiform tablets.

Today scholars have available tablets containing portions of the *Gilgamesh* epic from many of the ancient countries in the Middle East, dating from 2100 to 627 B.C.—including some recently found in the library of Ebla, the latest ancient kingdom to be discovered. Scholars believe that stories of the adventures of Gilgamesh that existed in the oral tradition of Sumer were first written down in approximately 2100 B.C.

Between 1600 and 1000 B.C., the epic had been inscribed in Akkadian (Babylonian), Hittite, and Hurrian translations, some following the Sumerian versions and some branching off into wider variations, but all keeping the Sumerian names of characters and gods. A priest by the name of *Sin-leqi-unninni*, who probably lived during this time, is given credit for creating the late Akkadian version of the epic. Scholars think that he took the available Sumerian tales and imposed a uniform focus upon them, so that a series of separate adventures became the dramatic story of Gilgamesh's search for immortality. *Sin-leqi-unninni* integrated the Sumerian flood story into the epic and also created the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

Gilgamesh apparently was a real king of Uruk, in southern Mesopotamia, sometime between 2700 and 2500 B.C. At that period Sumer had city-states, irrigation, laws, and various forms of literature. The writings of the time reveal that the people valued justice, freedom, and compassion. The strong walls of Uruk are attributed to Gilgamesh, and he may well have ventured into the wilderness in order to bring timber to his region, for wood was a valuable building material that this region lacked.

The Sumerian view of the gods as unpredictable and therefore frightening reflects the unpredictable and disturbing nature of the world in which they lived. For example, the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers often radically changed their paths from season to season, a phenomenon that must have wreaked havoc on the farms and cities in the area. The flood in *Gilgamesh* is probably the specific, catastrophic flood that scholars think occurred in southern Mesopotamia in approximately 2900 B.C. It became a popular subject in the literature of the time.

Traces of an earlier, matriarchal religion remain in *Gilgamesh* as well as in *The Enuma elish*, the Babylonian creation epic. For example, the Temple of Anu and Ishtar belongs to Ishtar alone. The priestess from the temple who is chosen to civilize Enkidu is highly esteemed in her society. Her role in the temple closely connects her with the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess and sanctifies her sexual relationships.

In addition, *Gilgamesh* depicts Ishtar as a Great Goddess. When she wants Gilgamesh to marry her, he refuses because he knows that marriage to the Great Goddess will bring him certain death. He further insults Ishtar by listing the ways she has killed many of her previous mates. Ishtar becomes furious with Gilgamesh and retaliates by contriving to cause his death. However, his friend Enkidu dies instead, unwittingly serving as a substitute sacred king.

THE EARLIEST HERO

Gilgamesh is an unusual hero in that his major quest has an intellectual purpose: the acquisition of knowledge. In addition to possessing courage, he must have great determination, patience, and fortitude in order to reach his destination. After enduring physical hazards, he must wage a battle against despair when he learns that he cannot become immortal. He must find experiences that make life worthwhile, and he must find ways of perpetuating his name. Later heroes start by accepting what Gilgamesh questions; they are born into societies that have already determined the acceptable ways in which a person can achieve fame and an immortal name.

APPEAL AND VALUE

Gilgamesh is the earliest major recorded work of literature, and Gilgamesh is the first human hero in literature. The epic has universal appeal among Western cultures because it reaffirms the similarities in human nature and human values across time and space. The epic reveals the importance of friendship and love, pride and honor, adventure and accomplishment, and also the fear of death and the wish for immortality. It speaks as clearly to us as it spoke to those who lived when it was written, almost four thousand years ago.

Gilgamesh learns that the only type of immortality that he or any other mortal can achieve is lasting fame through performing great deeds and constructing enduring monuments. He also learns that life is precious and should be enjoyed to the fullest. His discovery during his long and arduous journey is a lesson that we too must learn in the course of our own lives.

Like Gilgamesh, we must fight the despair of failure and death, and we must choose what we will value in life and have the freedom to make these choices.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

GILGAMESH: king of Uruk who searches for immortality

LUGALBANDA: heroic father of Gilgamesh; earlier king of Uruk

NINSUN: goddess mother of Gilgamesh; priestess of Shamash

ENKIDU: best friend of Gilgamesh

HUMBABA: giant who guards the Cedar Forest of Lebanon

SIDURI: alewife whom Gilgamesh meets on his journey

UTANAPISHTIM: king of Shurippak; survivor of the Sumerian flood

URSHANABI: Utanapishtim's boatman

(See the earlier readings on *The Enuma Elish* for a more complete list of Sumerian gods.)