

## ***Gilgamesh: The Sumerian Creation Story***

The story of Gilgamesh is over 4,000 years old. It was common to all the peoples of Mesopotamia, and it shows up in Sumerian versions and Babylonian versions. Unfortunately, we don't have a single really good ancient text that tells the whole story of Gilgamesh. Any version of the story has to be put together out of parts. Some are older, some are newer, and some are in different languages from different places. That's possible, more or less, so the story of Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, still lives.

### ***Gilgamesh the King: Big man in Uruk***

Gilgamesh was the legendary king of the city of Uruk. He was the son of the previous king Lugalbanda and the goddess Ninsun. According to the story, he was actually two-thirds god and one-third human, which is miraculous in itself. According to the Hittite version of the story, he was 11 meters (36 feet!) tall, but the other versions don't say anything about extraordinary height.

At the beginning of the story, Gilgamesh was bored. He was king, better looking and stronger than everyone else, but he didn't have enough to do. So he got into trouble and acted like a jerk. He abused his subjects, had sex with all their daughters and sons, and became increasingly unbearable until the people of Uruk begged the god Anu to do something.

#### ***A new drinking buddy who's a total animal***

Anu arranged for Aruru, a goddess of creation, to make a friend for Gilgamesh. This friend was Enkidu. At first, Enkidu was mostly an animal. He lived in the wilderness and talked to the other animals. But one day he ran across a prostitute from the city and had sex with her. After that, the animals wouldn't have anything to do with him.

So he went back to the prostitute, who taught him how to be civilized — he learned to stop drinking milk and start drinking wine, how to wear clothes, and how to comb his hair. Then he entered the city to find Gilgamesh, because he had heard that the king was being a jerk.

When Gilgamesh and Enkidu saw each other, they immediately fought. They punched and wrestled, and eventually Gilgamesh got the better of Enkidu. But the fight was so close that Gilgamesh knew that he had met his match. As guys will do, they stopped fighting and became best friends.

***A major hunting trip***

Enkidu suggested that they might enjoy having an adventure, so the two set off to kill Humbaba, a monster that lived in the great cedar forest to the west. They took their axes. As they walked, Enkidu had second thoughts, but Gilgamesh ridiculed him into continuing. But as they approached the monster, Gilgamesh himself got scared, and Enkidu threw his earlier words back in his face. In the end they held hands for moral support, approached Humbaba together, and killed him.

***Just say no to Ishtar***

When the two buddies got back to Uruk, Gilgamesh got all dressed up to let the people admire their heroic king. He looked *good*, and Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, saw him and developed a huge crush on him. But when she propositioned Gilgamesh, he laughed in her face: "Yeah, right!" he said, "I remember all the other guys you had sex with and look what happened to them!" Gilgamesh reminds Ishtar of how she turned one ex-lover into a wolf, and another into a mole. "Forget it!" he says.

Ishtar, disappointed and embarrassed, set the Bull of Heaven loose to tear up the crops and terrorize the people of Uruk. Actually, the god Enlil tried to stop her, but she threatened to open the doors of the underworld and let the dead have dinner with the living (which she had actually done once before), so Enlil gave in. Gilgamesh and Enkidu successfully killed the Bull.

***Bittersweet realizations: The price of male bonding***

But then Enkidu died. Gilgamesh was distraught. Enkidu's death reminded him that he, too, must die some day, despite being such a he-man. So he set out alone on another quest — to find the secret of immortality.

***Searching for immortality***

Gilgamesh traveled a long, long way, far outside the known world. On his journey, he fought various lions and dragons, negotiated with the Man-Scorpion to pass through the dark mountain, and finally came to a . . . restaurant.

The proprietor was Siduri, the Woman-Who-Makes-Wine. She first tried to talk Gilgamesh out of his journey, but eventually gave him a tip — why not go talk to the one guy who actually became immortal, Utnapishtim? So Gilgamesh went off to find Utnapishtim, which required crossing the Water of Death.

After a scary journey, Gilgamesh met Utnapishtim, who looked just like a normal guy. Gilgamesh and the journey he had just made didn't impress

Utnapishtim. Instead, he called Gilgamesh a fool and urged him to call off his search. But Gilgamesh insisted on hearing Utnapishtim's story.

### ***Utnapishtim tells a flood story***

Utnapishtim told Gilgamesh of a time long before, when the people on earth made too much noise and annoyed the gods, and the gods decided to kill everyone. But the god Ea tipped off Utnapishtim, so he built a boat and survived the flood. The flood was so fierce that it terrified even the gods, and Ea took that opportunity to suggest that (a) the gods think twice about doing anything like that again, and (b) that they make it up to Utnapishtim and his wife by making them immortal.

### ***Coming home***

After the story, Utnapishtim's wife suggested that Gilgamesh try a simple experiment — staying awake for six days. Gilgamesh said, "No problem," and promptly fell asleep six days. The point of this isn't particularly clear. Perhaps it means that immortality is like never, ever sleeping, and Gilgamesh wouldn't like it if he got it. Or perhaps the point is that Gilgamesh isn't remotely capable of acquiring immortality and is just wasting his time looking.

Anyway, when he woke up, Mr. and Mrs. Utnapishtim took pity on him and told him where he could find a plant called All-The-Old-Men-Are-Young-Again, which would enable him to live forever. Gilgamesh found the plant, but as he took (another) nap next to a river, a snake came along and ate it.

But the story has a happy ending after all. As Gilgamesh approached his city, Uruk, he looked at its impressive walls that he had built and realized that he *would* have a kind of immortality — he built a city and a civilization, which would survive him, and the story of his adventures will keep his name alive forever.

## ***Mesopotamian Gods: Okay, We Fear You . . . You Happy?***

The characters in Mesopotamian mythology worshipped their gods, but they didn't particularly like them. When the old man Utnapishtim offered a sacrifice to the gods after the Great Flood, he said that they "swarmed like flies over the sacrifice, attracted by the sweet smell." When the goddess Ishtar suggested that the hero Gilgamesh have sex with her, he said, "Are you crazy? Get lost!" See the earlier section "Just say no to Ishtar."

This attitude — fear mixed with contempt — may have come from the harsh environment of the world between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The summers were brutally hot and the winters were fiercely cold. While the Nile River in Egypt flooded in a predictable and beneficial way, bringing new rich soil to the people, the Tigris and Euphrates flooded at odd times, and it was

catastrophic. Check out the map of the region in Figure 16-3. Huge thunderstorms lashed the plains of Iraq. So perhaps it isn't too surprising to find the characters in the mythology of this harsh world offering sacrifices to appease the gods but not singing many hymns of praise to them. There certainly aren't any human heroes being buddies with the gods, such as Odysseus and his friend Athena.

**Figure 16-3:** The Ancient "Near East" was home to big important civilizations and some small important ones, too. What was it near? The Europeans, who gave it that name.



Who were these gods? Any list will have to be incomplete, because there were many civilizations over many thousands of years in Mesopotamia: Sumerians, Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians last of all. But the famous myths, the ones such as the *Enūma Elish* and the story of Gilgamesh, were common to Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, and they feature some of the following gods. You should note that most of these gods have different names in Sumerian and Akkadian; if one of the names occurs in another myth that we describe in this chapter, we put that one first. They are:

- ✓ **Anu** (or sometimes just An): The father of the gods, but not the king of the gods. He was the god of the top part of heaven. He was the most powerful god, but also the most remote — he didn't have much business with folks on earth. He mated with Ki.
- ✓ **Ki** (who also went by the names Ninhursag, Ninmah, and Nintu), who was the Earth. Her relationship with Anu produced Enlil.
- ✓ **Enlil**, who was the Air. Enlil was less powerful than Anu, but more active. He made things happen on earth. When Enlil was born, everything was dark and boring.

- ✓ **Nanna** (or Sin), who was the moon. She gave birth to Shamash.
- ✓ **Shamash** (or Utu), who was the Sun (the Arabic word for “sun” is still *Shams*). She, in turn, gave birth to Ishtar.
- ✓ **Ishtar** (or Inanna), the goddess of love and war.
- ✓ **Ea** (or Enki) was the wise god, the one who kept peace among the other gods. He had a lot of work keeping Ishtar in line, since she was usually nothing but trouble in the myths that survive from Mesopotamia.
- ✓ **Marduk**, the god of Babylon. In many of the earlier myths, Marduk doesn't appear at all. It seems that he was particular to Babylon, and came to rule the other gods when Babylon came to rule the other peoples of Mesopotamia. The “Babylonian Genesis,” or *Enûma Elish*, is the story of how Marduk came to be King, and that poem was probably written to legitimize Babylonian rule over other people — “Our god beat up your gods!”
- ✓ **Kur** was the god of the underworld. He shared the underworld with Ereshkigal.
- ✓ **Ereshkigal** was Ishtar's sister.

Some stories say that Ereshkigal was allowed to be queen of the underworld as a present, but others say that Kur raped her and carried her down there by force. One particularly nasty story shows how gods could raise sibling rivalry to new heights. Ereshkigal was married to Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven. When he died, the goddess Ishtar decided to go to his funeral — he was her sister's husband after all. The funeral was to be in the underworld, of course, but evidently Ereshkigal didn't like the idea of her sister entering her domain. So Ereshkigal told the guards of the underworld at each of the seven gates to demand that Ishtar take off one piece of her clothing before she could pass. By the time Ishtar got to the funeral she was naked. This was disrespectful, of course, so Ereshkigal killed her and hung her on the wall. Eventually, Ea rescued her and brought her back to life — it wouldn't do for a goddess to die for good. But Ishtar had to find someone to replace her among the dead. She picked Tammuz, the king of Uruk. He wasn't thrilled with the idea of being dead, so it was agreed that he would have to be dead only six months out of the year, and his sister Geshtinanna would be dead the other six (no one mentions what Geshtinanna thought about this “deal”).

Blackwell, Christopher W. and Amy Hackney Blackwell. Mythology for Dummies. Hoboken: Wiley Publishing 2002.