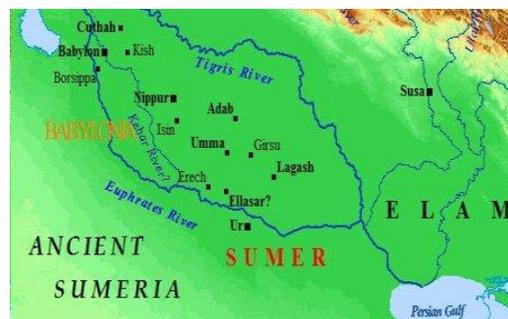


## The World's first Great National Legend

### The Legend of GILGAMESH

The World's first Great National Legend, The Epic of Gilgamesh, was created by the Sumerian people thousands of years before the birth of Christ. The story even predates the Bible.

Sumer was the southernmost region of ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq and Kuwait). It is generally considered the cradle of civilization. It was here that the first civilization arose – even before that of ancient Egypt.



The Sumerian civilization was well established in the region by 3600 BC. By that date, they had invented the wheel, writing, the sail boat, as well as agricultural processes such as irrigation and crop development. It is generally accepted that the first cities in the world rose in Sumer. The most important of these city states were Eridu, Uruk, Ur, and Kish. As a matter of fact, the city of Uruk is held to be the first true city in the world.

The Sumerians also created culture – a rich one.

The Legend of Gilgamesh is an epic poem from this culture of ancient Mesopotamia, and it is often regarded as the earliest surviving great work of literature. Dozens of stories about Gilgamesh circulated throughout the ancient Middle East. Archaeologists have discovered the earliest ones, inscribed on clay tablets in the Sumerian language before 2000 B.C. Despite its strange cast of gods, and its unfamiliar theory about the creation of the universe, the story of Gilgamesh is powerful and gripping to modern audiences. An exciting adventure that celebrates kinship between men, The Legend of Gilgamesh asks what price people must pay to be civilized and

the story questions the proper role of a powerful man. It both acknowledges and scrutinizes the attractions of earthly fame. Most of all, Gilgamesh describes the existential struggles of a superlatively strong man who must reconcile himself to his mortality and find meaning in his life despite the inevitability of death.

Here is a short version of the Legend

### **The Epic of Gilgamesh**

This immense epic of the Sumerian people tells of great Gilgamesh, king of the city of Uruk, who was two-thirds god and one-third man. He built magnificent temple towers, surrounded his city with high walls, and laid out its orchards and fields. He was handsome, immensely strong, and very wise.

Although Gilgamesh was godlike in body and mind, he ruled in his kingship as a cruel despot. He lorded over his subjects, taking any woman who struck his fancy, whether she was the wife of one of his warriors or the daughter of a nobleman. He built great temples, but he wrought his projects with slave labor.

Finally, his subjects groaned under his oppression. The people complained to the gods. "Stop Gilgamesh!" said one and all.

The gods heard his subjects' pleas and decided to keep Gilgamesh in control by creating a wild man named Enkidu, who was as magnificent as Gilgamesh. Enkidu came down to fight Gilgamesh, but he was so impressed by the hero that he stopped fighting and became Gilgamesh's great friend. They conquered the world together, but the gods became angry and decided to kill Enkidu.

Who was this Enkidu – friend of Gilgamesh? He was a creature of nature – he lived with the animals, suckling at their breasts, grazing in the meadows, and drinking at their watering places and eating their food. Following the commands of the gods, a hunter discovered Enkidu and sent a famous and beautiful prostitute into the wilderness to tame him with sex. At that time, people considered women and sex calming forces that could domesticate wild men like Enkidu and bring them into the civilized world.

When Enkidu sleeps with the woman, the animals of the wild reject him, since he is no longer one of them. Now, he is part of the human world.

Then the sex-woman taught him everything he needed to know to be a man. When his education was complete, she told him of Gilgamesh – of his power and his abuses. Enkidu was outraged by what he heard about Gilgamesh’s excesses, so he traveled to Uruk to challenge him.

When Enkidu arrived, Gilgamesh was about to force his way into a bride’s wedding chamber to take her from her new husband. Enkidu stepped into the doorway and blocked his passage. A great struggle erupts. The two men fight fiercely for a long time, and Gilgamesh finally prevails. It is then that Enkidu comes to appreciate Gilgamesh’s power, courage, and greatness - and resolves to serve him.

They become great friends, and set about looking for an adventure to share. Gilgamesh and Enkidu decide to steal trees (so precious to a desert people) from a distant cedar forest, a forest beloved by the gods and forbidden to mortals. A terrifying demon named Humbaba, the devoted servant of Enlil, the god of earth, wind, and fire, guards it. The two heroes make the perilous journey to the forest, and, standing side by side, fight with the monster. With assistance from Shamash the sun god, they kill him. Then they cut down the forbidden trees, fashion the tallest into an enormous gate, make the rest into a raft, and float on it back to the city of Uruk.

Upon their return, Ishtar, the goddess of love, is overcome with lust for Gilgamesh, and demands that he become her lover. But Gilgamesh

turns her down. Enraged, the goddess asks her father, Anu, the god of the sky, to send the Bull of Heaven to punish him. Her father agrees.

The bull comes down from the sky, bringing with him seven years of famine. But Gilgamesh and Enkidu wrestle with the bull and kill it. They have defeated even the agent of the gods!

The gods meet in council and agree that one of the two friends must be punished for this transgression, and they decide Enkidu must die. He takes ill, suffers immensely, and shares his visions of the underworld of death with Gilgamesh. When he finally dies, Gilgamesh is heartbroken at the loss of his best friend.

Gilgamesh can't stop grieving for Enkidu, and he can't stop brooding about the prospect of his own death. He seeks immortality. So Gilgamesh sets off into the wilderness, determined to find Utnapishtim, the man who survived the flood that had once destroyed the world (the Mesopotamian Noah). After the flood, the gods had granted Utnapishtim eternal life, and Gilgamesh hopes that Utnapishtim can tell him how he might avoid death too.

Gilgamesh's journey takes him to the twin-peaked mountain called Mashu, where the sun sets into one side of the mountain at night and rises out of the other side in the morning. Utnapishtim lives beyond the mountain, but the two scorpion monsters that guard its entrance refuse to allow Gilgamesh into the tunnel that passes through it. Gilgamesh pleads with them, using his great intellect to persuade them. They relent and let him pass.

After a harrowing passage through total darkness, Gilgamesh emerges into a beautiful garden by the sea. There he meets Siduri, a veiled tavern keeper, and tells her about his quest. She warns him that seeking immortality is futile and that he should be satisfied with the pleasures of this world. However, when she can't turn him away from his purpose, she directs him to Urshanabi, the ferryman of death.

Urshanabi takes Gilgamesh on the boat journey across the sea and through the Waters of Death to Utnapishtim. Here at last is the man

who survived the flood. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood — how the gods met in council and decided to destroy humankind. Ea, the god of wisdom, had warned Utnapishtim about the gods' plans and told him how to fashion a gigantic boat in which his family and the seed of every living creature might escape.

When the waters finally receded, the gods regretted what they'd done and agreed that they would never try to destroy humankind again. Utnapishtim was rewarded with eternal life. Men would die, but humankind would continue.

When Gilgamesh insists that *he* be allowed to live forever, Utnapishtim gives him a test. "If you think you can stay alive for eternity," he says, "surely you can stay awake for a week."

Gilgamesh tries and immediately fails. Mortality is to be his fate — as it is for all of us. Utnapishtim orders him to clean himself up, put on his royal garments again, and return to Uruk where he belongs. When Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, he is empty-handed but reconciled at last to his mortality. He knows that he can't live forever but that humankind will. Now he sees that the city he had repudiated in his grief and terror is a magnificent, enduring achievement — the closest thing to immortality to which a mortal can aspire. He becomes again Gilgamesh - the Great King of Uruk.