## Epic of Gilgamesh History >> Ancient Mesopotamia

The most important and famous example of Sumerian literature is the Epic Tale of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh was likely an actual Sumerian king who ruled over the city of Uruk, but the tale tells the story of an epic hero along the lines of Hercules from Greek Mythology. King Gilgamesh by Unknown.

### Who was the author?

The story was first recorded by a Babylonian scribe around 2000 BC, but the tale itself tells of Sumerian people and myths. Likely the story was created much earlier and the scribe was just telling his version of it.

### The Story

There are a few different versions and poems about Gilgamesh. Here is an overview of the main plot from the stories:

The story begins telling about the strongest and most powerful man in the world, King Gilgamesh of Uruk. Gilgamesh is part god, part human. He could defeat any enemy in battle and even lift mountains.

After a while, Gilgamesh gets bored and starts to mistreat the people of Uruk. The gods see this and decide that Gilgamesh needs a challenge. They send him a challenger in a wild man named Enkidu. Enkidu and Gilgamesh battle, but neither can beat the other. Eventually they stop fighting and realize that they respect each other. They become best friends.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu decide to go on an adventure together. They travel to the Cedar Forest in hopes of doing battle with the fearsome monster Humbaba. At first they did not see Humbaba, but when they started chopping down cedar trees, Humbaba appeared. Gilgamesh summoned the great winds to trap Humbaba and then killed him. They then cut down a number of cedar trees and brought the valuable logs back to Uruk.

Later in the story, the two heroes kill another monster, the Bull of Heaven. However, the gods become angry and decide that one of them must die. They choose Enkidu and soon Enkidu dies.

After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh is very sad. He is also worried about dying someday himself and decides to search for the secret to eternal life. He goes on a number of adventures. He meets with Utnapishtim who had earlier saved the world from a great flood. Gilgamesh eventually learns that no human can escape death.

### Interesting Facts About the Epic of Gilgamesh

- It was written in Akkadian, the language of the Babylonians at the time it was recorded.
- The story was first translated by archeologist George Smith in 1872.
- Many tablets telling the story of Gilgamesh have been recovered from the famous Assyrian library in the ancient city of Nineveh.
- Gilgamesh's mother was the goddess Ninsun. He was said to have gotten his beauty from the sun god Shamash and his courage from the storm god Adad.

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## Quiz

**1. What civilization is the setting for the Epic Tale of Gilgamesh?**
a. Sumerian
b. Babylonian
c. Greek
d. Assyrian

**2. Who was Gilgamesh in real life?**
a. King of Babylon
b. A priest
c. King of Uruk
d. A scribe

**3. In the story, why do the gods send Gilgamesh a challenger?**
a. Because they grow scared of Gilgamesh
b. Because Gilgamesh says he is stronger than the gods
c. Because the gods think it would be fun
d. Because he is bored and is mistreating the people of Uruk

**4. What is the name of the wild man that the gods send to challenge Gilgamesh?**
a. Enkidu
b. Shamash
c. Humbaba
d. Bull of Heaven

**5. What happens when Enkidu and Gilgamesh fight?**
a. Enkidu kills Gilgmesh
b. They both end up dying in the fight
c. They end up destroying the city of Uruk
d. They fight to a draw and the become best friends

**6. Where do the two friends travel in order to fight the monster Humbaba?**
a. The city of Babylon
b. The Cedar Forest
c. The Dry Desert
d. The Euphrates River

**7. True or false: The gods decided that one of the two heroes must die and they kill Enkidu.**
a. TRUE
b. FALSE

**8. What does Gilgamesh go in search of in the latter part of the story?**
a. The meaning of life
b. Eternal life
c. The Holy Grail
d. The Secret Gardens of Babylon

**9. True or False: Gilgamesh learns how to defeat death by the end of the story.**
a. TRUE
b. FALSE

**10. From what god did Gilgamesh get his courage?**
a. Murdok
b. Shamash
c. Ninsun
e. Adad

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