

Gilgamesh the King

It is thought that The Epic of Gilgamesh was first written down about 2100 BC in the library of King Assur-bani-pal in ancient Nineveh, now in Iraq. Undoubtedly, it was told by storytellers long before that. Not long after the twelve clay tablets that recorded the story of Gilgamesh were inscribed, Nineveh fell to invaders. In the tradition of conquering hordes, they burned the library and trampled the clay tablets into the dust under their horses' hooves.

Buried beneath the debris for nearly 4000 years, the broken tablets lay untouched until they were discovered and pieced together by European excavators in the nineteenth century. Part of the story is missing and we do not understand the ancient Assyrian language completely but the story of Gilgamesh shines through these difficulties.

Gilgamesh was a hero. He rescued the city of Erech from siege by an invading army, then he became its king. He was a brave and clever warrior, but as a ruler he was harsh and unrelenting. Everyone had to obey Gilgamesh's commands or they suffered pain and hardship. To the strong went the spoils, and Gilgamesh was strong. This was the way the people liked things to be, for while Gilgamesh ruled, they need not fear their enemies.

Gilgamesh was the son of the daughter of old King Sokkaros, but no one could say who Gilgamesh's father was. Was it the god of the sun? Was it the eagle that saved the baby's life when he was flung from the top of a high tower? Before Gilgamesh the gods restrained their anger. Strange warriors, whose fierce looks shrivelled other men, stood aside to let Gilgamesh pass. Surely Gilgamesh was related to the shining gods, or why else would his enemies tremble before him?

Like all other mortal men, Sokkaros died and his grandson, Gilgamesh, drove out the enemies who had been harrying the old man in his declining years. Gilgamesh wore precious jewels and gold necklaces, and his clothes were the finest that money could buy. He was a man of the city, and his glory dazzled the people.

However, there were some who forgot how recently the enemy

GILGAMESH THE KING



had been at the gate. They begged the goddess Aruru to send another hero – a man who would defy Gilgamesh, and frighten him into changing his harsh ways.

At last, tired of the constant whining and pleading, Aruru gave their request some thought. Inside her head she created a picture of a man totally unlike Gilgamesh. Then she washed her hands, took some clay, and shaped it in the likeness of that man. She threw the clay to the ground in a far mountain country. That was how Enkidu, the wild man, was created.

Enkidu lived just like an animal. He hunted for his food in the scrubland, eating plants alongside the herds of gazelles, and drinking at waterholes with the animals of the desert. His body was hairy all over, and the hair on his head reached to his waist like that of a woman. But, he wore the clothes of a god, for the goddess Aruru had created him.

Enkidu lived in the wilderness away from the protected life of the city and he grew strong and fierce. Tales of the wild man who ran faster than the animals and swam swifter than the silver fish reached Gilgamesh. Perhaps his father, Shamash, god of the sun, had warned him that Enkidu had been sent to humble him. Gilgamesh became suspicious, so he sent a skilled tracker, called Tsaidu, and a beautiful girl from the temple of the goddess Ishtar, Ukhut, to find Enkidu.

'Tempt him with stories of life in the city,' said Gilgamesh. 'Get him into your power, then bring him to Erech so that I may look at this rival.'

Tsaidu and the beautiful Ukhut travelled into the wilderness. They waited at the watering hole where Enkidu usually drank, and saw him lean down and lap water like the beasts. They walked in front of him in their graceful silks and lovely jewels. Ukhut's soft hair was shining and smooth, not stiff and rough like the hair of the creatures in the wilderness. Her skin, sheltered by the walls that surrounded the temple of Ishtar, was delicate, not coarse from the sun.

Enkidu fell in love with Ukhut. For six days and seven nights he stayed with her at the waterhole, listening to stories of life in the city. He longed to visit this place where men lived.

'Come with us to stay in the city and visit the great Gilgamesh,' urged Ukhut and Tsaidu.

Suddenly Enkidu remembered his friends – the gazelles, the water beasts and the herds of animals – and ran to speak to them. Some had moved on, while most of the rest had forgotten him in the short time he had spent with Ukhut. Those who did remember him would no longer obey him.

'Where were you for six days and seven nights?' they asked. 'One who comes and goes is no use to us.'

Ukhut and Tsaidu said again, 'Come with us. You are very handsome. Why waste your good looks on the beasts? Come to the great palace and meet Gilgamesh, that dazzling ruler of men.'

So Enkidu agreed to go to the town. On the way the gods whispered in his ear. 'You were created to humble Gilgamesh,' they said. 'Be prepared to fight him.'

Enkidu had a mind of his own. Life in the city sounded alluring and he wanted Gilgamesh to be his friend. Enkidu thought of the customs of the animals, the only customs he knew. When two strong animals met, they always fought before they could be friends. A combat would settle which of them was to be the leader. Perhaps I should challenge Gilgamesh to a duel so that we will know from the start which of us is the greater, thought Enkidu.

He asked the opinion of Ukhut, who knew about the ways of the city. 'Fight Gilgamesh, if you must,' she said, 'but remember he is strong and aggressive. He has an army of guards lining the walls of his palace. He is not a man to take orders from others, and most important of all, he is loved by the god, Shamash.'

Enkidu didn't mention fighting Gilgamesh again – he was a wise young man.

Meanwhile, Gilgamesh eagerly waited for the arrival of the



hairy man of the wilderness, whom the goddess Aruru had created especially to humble him. Should he kill him, or imprison him, or surround him with so much luxury that he would become a weakling? It was not an easy decision. He had to take care not to offend Aruru.

Even the plans of a powerful goddess may go awry. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu met, they found they liked each other. Gilgamesh gave up his plans to harm Enkidu and Enkidu never thought of humbling Gilgamesh. They loved each other like brothers from the first meeting.

Once, as was only natural, Enkidu became homesick for the freedom of the open country. When he spoke of leaving the city, the sun god, Shamash, intervened. He appeared as a vision to the two young men. 'Enkidu will stay in comfort in the palace,' he said. 'Gilgamesh will give him a seat next to the throne and the kings who come to pay tribute will kiss Enkidu's feet.'

So it was done and Enkidu stayed in the city of Erech.

Then Enkidu started to have a recurring dream. In his dream he saw a frightful monster pawing at the foot of the sacred cedar tree that guarded the forest home of the goddess Ishtar. At the same time Shamash whispered into Gilgamesh's ear, 'Do not rest here. Go to the forest and slay the monster, Humbaba.' Both young men knew that they had been set a terrible task.

Gilgamesh knew that the gods have devious ways, so he went to consult his mother, the priestess Rimat-belit. He asked her advice on how to reach the Forest of Cedars, and which path to take to the sacred tree and the home of Ishtar. Rimat-belit, who had kept company with the gods in her youth, told her dear son all that she knew. She watched him leave, and her heart went with him.

Then she turned and called out to Shamash, 'Why did you choose my son for this terrible task?' she asked. 'Couldn't you find someone else to risk his life? You have sent my dearest boy to fight that frightful monster. Now you must watch over him every moment he is away. Don't turn your attention to other things. Use all your superhuman powers to care for our son until he returns to his home.'

Gilgamesh and Enkidu found their way to the Forest of Cedars. It was a still, silent place, for Humbata's invisible power had spread through the trees like an ill wind. Anyone who entered the forest felt weak and sick long before they saw the

GILGAMESH THE KING



monster. After walking for only a short while, Enkidu collapsed at the wayside. 'I am ill,' he said. 'My arms are weak. My hands will not do what I tell them.'

No harm came to Gilgamesh because the god Shamash had heard Rimat-belit's prayers and was watching over him. Gilgamesh strode through the forest, unharmed, found the frightful monster and slew it. Enkidu struggled forward to be with his friend, but he was weak and helpless.

Gilgamesh returned in triumph to the city of Erech. He walked every step of the way wearing the blood-stained, torn clothes in which he had fought the monster, and his friend Enkidu trailed like a shadow behind him.

Gilgamesh walked through the streets of Erech showing off his gory apparel and boasting of his valiant deed. Then he took off the torn clothes and washed away the blood. He put on his golden kingly robes and wore flowers of victory round his brow. He had never looked more noble or more handsome - and in that moment the seeds of his future sorrows were sown.

The goddess Ishtar looked down to see the hero who had slain the terrible monster at her door. When she saw how handsome Gilgamesh was, she fell in love with him. She came to the palace and asked Gilgamesh to be her husband. 'I am a goddess,' she said. 'Marry me and your flocks will increase, your enemies will flee and all nations will pay tribute to you.'

Gilgamesh laughed. 'That may be so,' he said, 'but for how long? You have had many husbands, and you have tired of all of them. You have cast them aside and taken their riches for your own. Why should my fate be different? I will not marry you.'

Ishtar returned to heaven in a rage at being scorned. She whispered spiteful words into the ears of the other gods and turned many of them against Gilgamesh.

'Gilgamesh must be punished for his impudence,' said Anu, the King of the Gods. At Ishtar's request, he created a mighty bull, the Bull of Heaven, whose breath would spoil the crops of the earth for seven years, and sent the bull to fight Gilgamesh.

'Kill the bull,' he said to Gilgamesh. 'If you do not, he will kill you. Then he will rampage through your lands and they will lie fallow for seven years.'

Gilgamesh was a hero. He felt not one moment of doubt and, taking up his weapons, went to face the bull. The fight was long and exhausting. Dirt kicked up by the bull choked Gilgamesh's throat, sweat ran down his forehead and blurred his eyes, and blood ran from his wounds. But Gilgamesh killed that huge bull before the bull could kill him.

Enkidu, who was still sick, could only stand and watch.

The scorned goddess Ishtar burned with fury. She stood on the walls of Erech and screeched at Gilgamesh, 'Curse you! Curse you, who have scorned me! How dare you be strong enough to defeat a bull sent by the gods! You will be punished!'

At that Enkidu found the strength to defy Ishtar. 'Gilgamesh defeated the bull in a fair fight,' he said. 'That should be the end of the matter. You are wrong to carry on with the feud. Leave Gilgamesh in peace.'

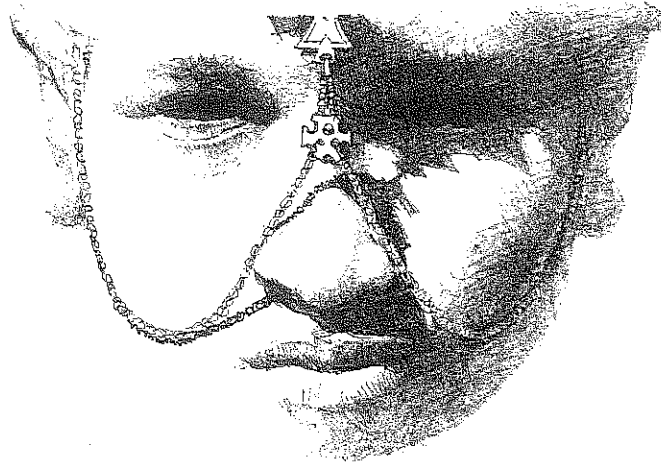
Ishtar turned flaming red with fury and her hair rose like a lion's mane about her head. 'Curse you too!' she hissed at Enkidu. From that moment there was no more hope for his life.

The beautiful Ukhut, who had seduced Enkidu beside the waterhole, was already dead. She came to Enkidu one night in a dream. 'Enkidu,' she said, 'it is time for you to come with me down to the land of the shadows. Come with me down the path of no return, to the house where no one who enters ever leaves. Now you must live in the land without light, where dust is our food and the feathers of the birds are our clothes.'

Enkidu did not rise from his bed again. Twelve days later, he was dead.

Gilgamesh was grief stricken. He would never walk in the sunlight with his dear friend again. No one was left with whom he shared the same memories because part of his own life was lying in the grave with Enkidu.

GILGAMESH THE KING



Suddenly Gilgamesh was seized with a great fear of death. He decided to seek out his ancestor, Ut-Napishtim, the only man ever to be made immortal by the gods. Ut-Napishtim must tell me the secret of everlasting life, thought Gilgamesh. Death must not take me to the land of shadows.

Finding the home of an immortal is not easy. Immortals never die – they do not live or eat or drink as other men do. And they guard their secrets carefully. Gilgamesh walked towards the lonely, forbidden place. The land rose from the plain into high mountains, and the rocky slopes of the valleys pressed menacingly on either side. Wild beasts grunted and stalked what looked like an easy meal. This was the country Enkidu had loved. The wild man would have known every trick used by the wild animals, but Enkidu was no longer with Gilgamesh.

Sin, the moon god, slipped down from the sky and, taking Gilgamesh by the hand, led him through that place of peril. When they came to Mashu, the Mountain of the Sunset, even the moon god would not stay. 'Go no further, Gilgamesh,' he said. 'This is a place of danger.'

Gilgamesh would not turn back. He looked towards the sky that was spread with the fires of sunset. By day and by night the pink and mauve clouds hung above Mount Mashu. No one could explain why, but they were always there. This was the entrance to the far world where life was different, where men were not as other men, and where the immortals lived.

Gilgamesh stepped forward and his path was barred by the Scorpion men. These terrifying creatures had a human shape, but were covered with shimmering, shining skin like that of a scorpion. They shrivelled men up with their gaze and to look on them was death. They guarded the slopes of Mount Mashu from



sunrise to sunset, as they were the servants of the sun. There were so many that they covered the mountainside.

Gilgamesh looked at them and was afraid. They dazzled him and he became confused, but he did not die under their gaze because he was partly a god. Seeing that this was no ordinary man, the Scorpion men came forward and spoke to Gilgamesh. He told them that he was seeking his ancestor, Ut-Napishtim, in order to learn the secrets of immortality.

'Go back,' counselled the Scorpion men. 'Ut-Napishtim does live beyond the slopes of Mashu, beyond the land of the sunset, but you will never survive the journey. After the sunset you will come to a land of darkness. For twenty-four hours you will travel through the night - a terrible choking night - and more barriers lie beyond that. If we let you through, we will be sending you to your death.'

Gilgamesh stumbled to his feet. 'I am going forward,' he said. His manner was rough and his eyes were threatening. Even in his grief and confusion, Gilgamesh was still the man who had ruled Erech with a hand of iron. The Scorpion men stood aside and let him walk through.

Gilgamesh walked under the flaming sunset and into the thick, choking darkness of the land of night. On and on he went and at last the blackness lightened. A faint gleam, then a strong light, filled the sky and Gilgamesh found himself in a beautiful garden. It was lovely, but it was strange because nothing was real. The leaves on the trees were made from lapis lazuli and the fruit was made of rubies and sapphires. These are the gardens of the gods, thought Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh was tired and dirty; his clothes were torn and his legs were bleeding from his many falls in the darkness. He still grieved for his dead friend, Enkidu, and he was anxious to find the right road to the home of his ancestor, Ut-Napishtim.

Siduri, the goddess of the sea, looked out from her palace on the seashore and saw the unhappy figure of Gilgamesh. She saw a desperate man torn by deep emotions, yet still ferocious and menacing. Siduri locked her doors and pulled down the shutters over the windows. This trouble I can do without, she thought.

Gilgamesh reached the shore and looked at the ocean before him. His father, Shamash, whispered in his ear, 'You must cross the sea to reach Ut-Napishtim. To do that you need the advice of Siduri, the goddess of the sea.'

Gilgamesh walked to the sea-bleached doors of the palace. He

knocked. He called. He hammered and shouted. Still Siduri would not let him in. A man who can get this far into our different world is a man to be feared, she thought.

She was right. The same fury that had made Gilgamesh the conqueror of Erech consumed him now. He raised his axe and brought it down with a crash, splintering the palace doors. 'Let me in or I will destroy your precious home,' he shouted.

At once Siduri ordered the doors to be opened and food was set before Gilgamesh. Trembling with fright, she asked him what he wanted.

'Tell me how to cross the water to reach my ancestor, the immortal Ut-Napishtim,' he replied.

'Do not go,' said Siduri. 'It is too dangerous. Already you have come too far into this strange land. You do not know the peril you are in. Return to your home while you still have the strength.'

Gilgamesh would not listen.

'Very well then,' said Siduri, 'Adad-Ea is the ferryman of Ut-Napishtim. He is the only one who can take you across these treacherous waters. Ask him to ferry you to the far shore.'

Adad-Ea was as reluctant as Siduri to help this desperate man who had come out of the great darkness. 'Go home and do not bother me,' he said.

Gilgamesh raised his axe and smashed the rudder from Adad-Ea's boat. Then he turned and looked at the ferryman. 'Take me across to Ut-Napishtim or I will smash the rest of your boat and you will never take anyone anywhere again,' he said.

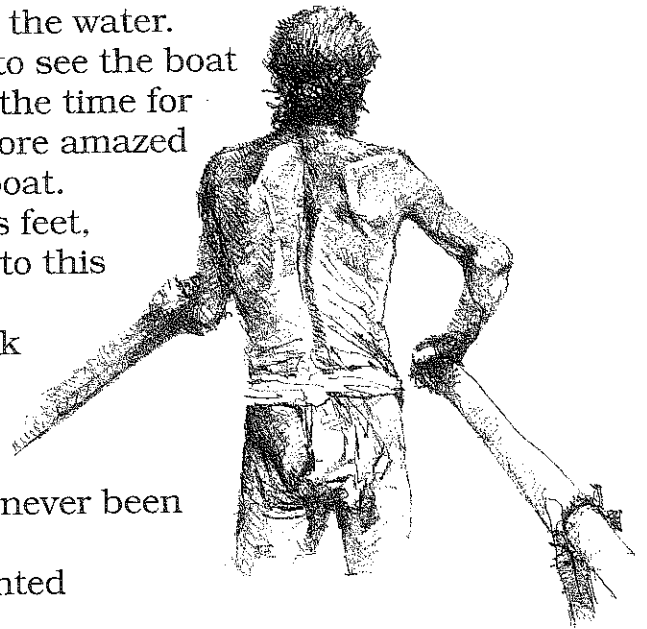
Adad-Ea hastily agreed. Gilgamesh cut him a new rudder from the forest and they sailed across the water.

Ut-Napishtim was surprised to see the boat approaching because it was not the time for Adad-Ea to visit. He was even more amazed when he saw Gilgamesh in the boat.

Eagerly Gilgamesh rose to his feet, planning to wade ashore to talk to this man who knew the secret of immortality, but he was too weak to scramble over the side of the boat. He felt sick.

'Seasick!' he groaned. 'I must be seasick. How strange! I have never been seasick before.'

Adad-Ea looked at his unwanted



passenger. 'It is not seasickness that ails you,' he said. 'Look at your skin.' Gilgamesh looked down and found that he was covered in sores.

'You should never have come,' said Adad-Ea. 'Everyone told you that, from the Scorpion men onwards, but you knew better.'

Gilgamesh gripped the side of the boat and pulled himself up so that he could talk to his ancestor. I have come so far and suffered so much, and I will find out the secret, he thought.

'Greetings, noble ancestor,' he called, 'I am Gilgamesh, a great warrior and worthy descendant of your noble self. The gods granted immortality to you. Tell me why, so that I too may earn this precious gift.'

Ut-Napishtim shifted from foot to foot. 'You look unwell,' he said. 'This is not the time to talk. Sleep for a while. We will discuss your question later.'

Gilgamesh would not be deterred. 'Tell me the secret of immortality!' he shouted.

'Be reasonable!' begged Ut-Napishtim. 'How can I do such a thing? The gods would be furious. Death is the destiny of all mankind. Man cannot avoid death, or know when it will strike. The gods decide these things. It is not for you or me to interfere. Take my word for it, immortality is not so desirable a thing.'

Gilgamesh broke into a cold sweat and the sickness made his head ache. The sores on his body stung, but still he clung to the side of the boat and shouted across the shallow water, 'Undesirable or not, I notice you did not refuse immortality when it was offered to you. Why is it good for you, but not for me?'

'I was very special,' protested Ut-Napishtim. 'I was picked out by the god Ea. He ordered me to build a big ship and take people and animals into it. I did as I was told and when a great flood covered the earth, everyone on my boat lived. If it had not been for me, all animals and humans would have perished. The gods made me and my wife immortal in thanks. I cannot ask them to do it for you. You may be a great warrior, but so are other men.'

Gilgamesh was disappointed. For once his ferocious spirit flagged and his head drooped. Ut-Napishtim felt sorry for him. 'Come ashore and I will try to heal you,' he said.

Gilgamesh was carried to a bed. Ut-Napishtim ordered sleep to breathe upon him. For six days and nights Gilgamesh slept, while Ut-Napishtim's wife treated his sores with ointment.

When Gilgamesh woke up, he was taken to a special spring where he bathed. His sores were finally healed and his strength

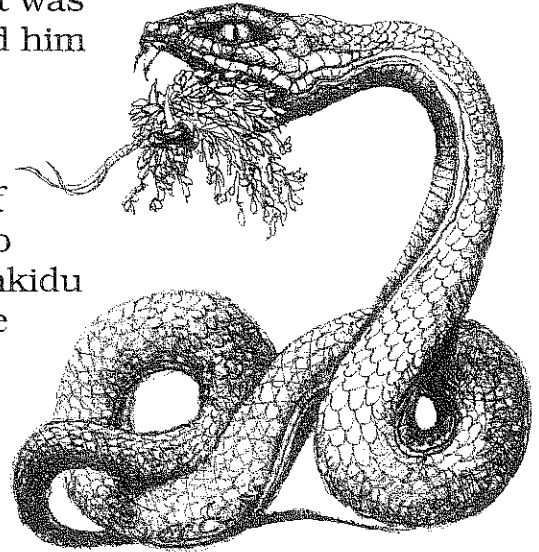
restored. Once more he asked for the secret of immortality. 'The gods will not grant it to you,' replied Ut-Napishtim. 'It is useless to ask.'

Ut-Napishtim's wife smiled at Gilgamesh's handsome face. 'There is a plant growing at the bottom of the sea,' she whispered, 'Adad-Ea knows where to find it. Eat this plant and you will never grow old.' With this Gilgamesh had to be satisfied.

Adad-Ea showed him how to collect the prickly sea-plant from the bottom of the ocean. They made a great bundle of it and then Adad-Ea guided Gilgamesh back to the land of men.

As he came within sight of Erech, Gilgamesh found a spring of sweet water. He knelt and put the precious bundle down beside him. Then he gave thanks to the gods for bringing him safely home from such a perilous journey. As Gilgamesh prayed, a serpent scented the sea-plant and, slithering forward, carried the bundle away in its mouth. Gilgamesh never saw the magic herb again. He wept bitterly because it was clear that the gods did not intend him to be immortal.

Gilgamesh strode into Erech. Everywhere he looked he was reminded of Enkidu and his grief returned. He went from temple to temple begging the gods to let Enkidu come back to him. At last Ea, the god of wisdom, agreed. A hole opened up in a hillside, a cold wind blew and suddenly Enkidu was standing in the sunlight – a pale grey shadow of the living Enkidu.



'Do not waste your time in grief,' he said to Gilgamesh. 'I am a fortunate spirit. You gave me proper burial and put furnishings and clothes and food in my tomb. In the land of shadows I live in luxury with delicious meals to eat and fine clothes to wear. You saved me from the shame of those whose bodies are left to rot in the fields. They are beggars in the other world and have no comforts.' Enkidu smiled, turned away and then was gone.

So ends the story of Gilgamesh. Hopefully he found happiness during the rest of his life. Or did he spend his time gazing at the eternal sunset over Mount Mashu, longing for immortality?