

## CHAPTER 7

# THE FIRST SUPERHERO

## THE STORY OF GILGAMESH

“ THE EPIC  
OF GILGAMESH

King Gilgamesh was the world's first superhero. But not everything about him was heroic. In fact, at first, he wasn't someone you'd really want to know.

According to Mesopotamian legend, Gilgamesh ruled Uruk, one of the largest cities in Sumer, around 2600 BCE. The 12th-century BCE Babylonian poet Sin-leqe-unnini describes Gilgamesh as a wild, self-centered young man who ventured off with his best friend Enkidu to cedar forests hundreds of miles away from Uruk to fight a monster named Humbaba. Before the two left on their quest, Gilgamesh declared to his subjects,

Hear me, O elders of Uruk-the-Town-Square.  
I want to tread the path to ferocious Humbaba . . .  
I will conquer him in the Forest of Cedar . . .  
I will establish forever a name eternal.



*Humbaba, the monster who controlled and guarded the Cedar Forest, bares his teeth. The Gilgamesh epic tells how Gilgamesh and Enkidu cut off Humbaba's head.*

“ Sin-leqe-unnini, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 12th century BCE

Gilgamesh wanted to be famous.

When the two friends found Humbaba, the monster begged for his life, but “Gilgamesh struck him in the neck, [and] Enkidu . . . pulled out the [monster's] lungs.” When the heroes returned to Uruk, they entered the city gates in triumph. Even the goddess of love, Ishtar, was amazed and promptly fell in love with Gilgamesh. He must have thought he was as powerful as a god, because he not only rejected Ishtar, but he also insulted her. Ishtar “went up to heaven in a furious rage.” She asked her father, the god Anu, to send the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh.

But again, Gilgamesh and Enkidu were victorious. They killed the fierce bull. Now *all* the gods were furious. Humans were not supposed to have this kind of power. Someone must pay for this crime. The gods punished Enkidu instead of Gilgamesh, and Enkidu became ill because of their curse.

One night, Enkidu saw in a dream what existence would be like after death. He told Gilgamesh that his dream had led him to “the house of darkness, . . . on the path that allows no journey back, to the house whose residents are deprived of light.” He described the dismal life of the dead where “soil is their sustenance and clay their food, where they are dressed like birds in coats of feathers, and see no light, but dwell in darkness.”

A few days after telling his dream to Gilgamesh, Enkidu died. Gilgamesh refused to allow his friend’s body to be buried. He stayed by the deathbed, hoping that somehow Enkidu would miraculously come back to life. Later in the epic, Gilgamesh described his wait: “Enkidu, whom I love so much, who went through every hardship with me . . . Six days and seven nights I wept over him, I did not allow him to be buried until a worm fell out of his nose.” Finally, Gilgamesh had to accept his friend’s death, but he was heartbroken.

Gilgamesh began to long for immortality, the never-ending life that the gods enjoyed. He didn’t want to die—ever. He began a life of wandering, looking for some way to escape death. During his travels, Gilgamesh met an innkeeper who told him that he would never find immortality. She advised him to just enjoy the simple things in life: “Let your belly be full, . . . dance and play day and night . . . Gaze on the child who holds your hand. . . . For this is the destiny of mortal men.”

Gilgamesh rejected the innkeeper’s wise advice and continued his travels. Eventually he met a bearded old man named Ut-napishtim, who answered

*Gilgamesh kills the monster Humbaba. Scholars believe that when a hero—rather than a king or a god—appears in ancient Mesopotamian art, it is usually Gilgamesh.*

64 Sin-leqe-unnini, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 12th century BCE



Gilgamesh’s question about how to live forever with a long tale. He said that many, many years ago, the kind god Ea had warned him about a huge flood that was coming. Following Ea’s orders, Ut-napishtim had built a huge boat and boarded it just before the flood began, saving himself, his family, and animals of every kind on Earth. Ut-napishtim then told Gilgamesh how the god Enlil, who had caused the flood, decided to give Ut-napishtim and his wife the gift of eternal life. Ut-napishtim explained, though, that Gilgamesh couldn’t become immortal in the same way, because Enlil had promised that he would never again cover the earth with floodwater.

Ut-napishtim saw that Gilgamesh was determined to gain eternal life, so he gave him a test. He said that if Gilgamesh wanted to live forever, he would first have to stay awake for seven days and nights. Gilgamesh tried, but he failed completely. Instead of staying awake, he slept for the full seven days—proving to himself and Ut-napishtim that he was an ordinary mortal.

Ut-napishtim couldn’t help Gilgamesh live forever, so he gave him a consolation prize: clues about where to find a plant that would make him young again. Gilgamesh found the magical plant, but carelessly left it lying around and a snake stole it. In the end, after all his adventures, Gilgamesh was no closer to eternal life than he had been at the start of his quest. But he may have gained a bit of wisdom.

Sin-leqe-unnini’s version of the story ends with Gilgamesh going home. As his boat neared the shore, King Gilgamesh told the boatman about Uruk’s beauty and impressive size: “three square miles and a half is Uruk’s expanse.” Gilgamesh finally realized that he could be content without immortal life.

Gilgamesh was a legendary character, and Mesopotamians had been telling tales and writing about him for 1,500 years before Sin-leqe-unnini recorded his adventures as a story-poem, or epic. Sin-leqe-unnini’s poem was 3,000 lines long and covered 11 cuneiform tablets. It is the world’s first-known epic. For centuries, professional storytellers performed at banquets and often must have told the tale of

Scientists have shown that no flood ever covered the entire Earth, but there’s evidence in Mesopotamia of several huge floods long before writing was invented, and for the Mesopotamians, their land was the whole Earth.

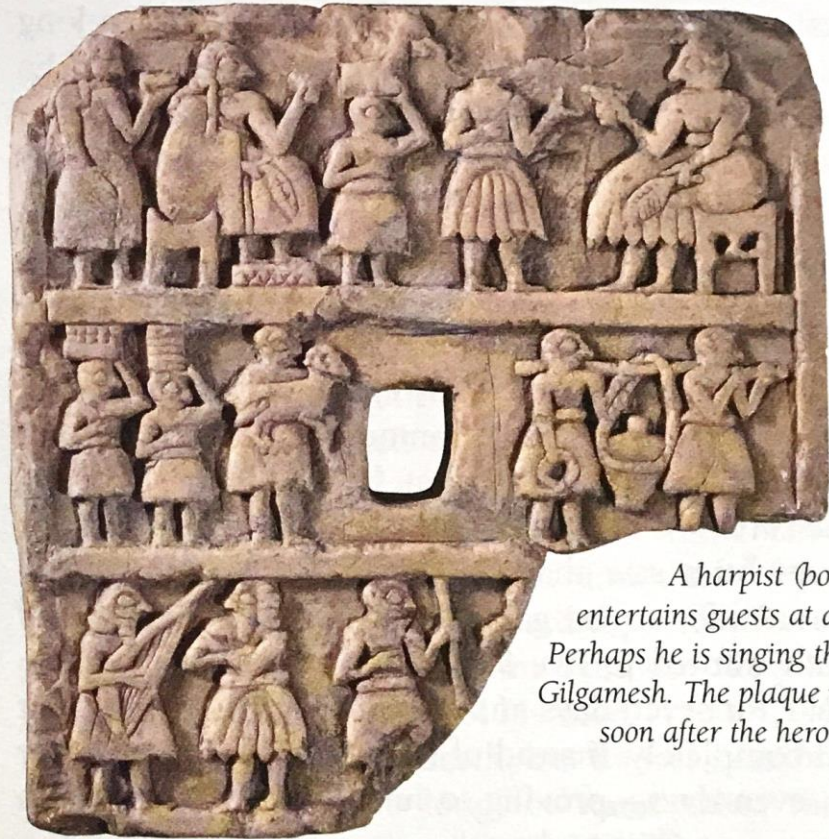
#### VIEWS OF THE BEYOND

The Mesopotamians believed that the gods rewarded and punished people for good or bad behavior while they were still alive. Good people would have health, large families, and property, but the gods would punish the evil ones with sickness and early death. The afterlife, they believed, was a dark, grim place where people ate dirt. And everyone, good and bad, went there. The Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans also believed in a grim afterlife. Of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern peoples living before 600 BCE, only the Egyptians expected the afterlife to be a wonderful place—if the gods allowed you to go there.

## EPIC EMOTIONS

The same problems that troubled Gilgamesh, the world's first superhero, turn up in later books and films. In the *Iliad*, a Greek epic written in the ninth century BCE, the hero Achilles is devastated because his friend has died. Achilles says, "Then let me die at once since it was not my fate to save my dearest comrade from his death!" In J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Frodo—much like the innkeeper in Gilgamesh—reassures a friend whom he has to leave: "You cannot always be torn in two. You will have to be one and whole, for many years. You have so much to enjoy and to be, and to do." Like Gilgamesh, these characters all have to struggle with human mistakes and worries, which makes them stronger and wiser in the end.

Gilgamesh's name appears on the King List, which was written down five hundred years after Gilgamesh supposedly ruled. But no tablets dating from his reign have ever been found. Was Gilgamesh a real king?



*A harpist (bottom row) entertains guests at a banquet. Perhaps he is singing the story of Gilgamesh. The plaque was made soon after the hero's lifetime.*

Gilgamesh. Music would have accompanied the story, and some parts of it might have been sung. The Mesopotamians loved banquets. We know because Mesopotamian cylinder seals and other works of art show people at banquets where singers performed to music played on a lyre or harp, a flute, and a drum. Other musical instruments included lutes, horns, and clackers. Sometimes dancers performed at these events. The guests sat around large vases and sipped drinks through long straws made of reeds. They probably listened for hours to the exciting tales and the lively music, and may even have joined in, singing along to familiar sections and choruses.

The story of Gilgamesh is not just about an adventure. It's also a story about ideas. And people have been writing about these same thoughts, asking these same questions ever since. What is a hero? Why do people die? What is the meaning of friendship? How can we live our lives in the best way? The story of Uruk's ancient king brought these questions to people's minds. Did they talk about them as they sat together under the stars?