

# Immortality Lies within the Legend: Is Gilgamesh Alive and Well?

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Louvre Museum, Department of Near Eastern Antiquities: Gilgamesh and Lion, Human headed winged bull, Assyria. (Jean-Christophe BENOIST/ [CC BY-SA 3.0](#))

In 1853, Hormuzad Rassam discovered fragments of an ancient Sumerian text which is now considered to be the first great work of literature our civilization ever produced. After its translation it was published in 1870 by George Smith. Although read by serious Mesopotamia scholars far and wide, it was generally consigned to oblivion in the popular press. As a matter of fact, it took an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* to spark any real public interest in the work.

The second episode of the fifth season of the popular TV show was entitled *Darmok*. In it, Patrick Stewart's character, Jean Luc Picard, quoted the line: "He who was my companion through adventure and hardship is gone forever". Soon after people all over the world rushed to find a copy of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* so they could learn more about the heroes Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, and Enkidu, a wild man of the forest. It was another triumph for those who trumpet the enormous impact, and resulting responsibility, of popular television shows.

## Gilgamesh and Enkidu

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* was composed more than 4,000 years ago. It tells the story of how two men as different as king Gilgamesh and savage Enkidu could triumph over adversity and develop a personal friendship. Enkidu was created by the gods specifically to keep Gilgamesh from subjugating and oppressing his people. But after an epic battle, the two became friends, and shared many adventures. Eventually, however, the now



*The Flood Tablet, the 11th tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic, describes how the gods sent a flood to destroy the world. Utnapishtim was forewarned and built an ark to house and preserve living things. (CC BY-SA 4.0)*

'civilized' Enkido was given a death sentence by the gods, partly as a consequence of failing to fulfill the purpose for which he was created. Depressed and disillusioned by his friend's death, Gilgamesh undertook a long and difficult quest to discover eternal life. He believed the gods to be unfair because they created humankind with the knowledge of eternity, but without the ability to ever achieve it. This, he came to believe, was an unforgivable act.



*The Deluge*, by John Martin, 1834. Yale University ([Public Domain](#))

### **The Deluge and the Gods' Destruction of Noisy Mankind**

Grieving for Enkido, and fearful of his own death, Gilgamesh decided to seek wisdom from Utnapishtim, one of the two survivors of the great flood which had destroyed most of humanity. This flood was brought about because of two gods named Enlil and Enki. They were half-brothers, prone to sibling rivalry.

Enlil was the one who had wanted to create the human race in the first place. He was interested in obtaining a race of slaves who would serve the gods. It worked for a time, but he eventually got tired of what the *Epic of Gilgamesh* calls human 'noise', so he decided to destroy them all with a great flood.

Enki, however, disagreed. He had done the actual work of creation, making humans out of a mixture of clay and blood, and was quite angry with his brother, not wanting to see his work go to waste.

So, he decided to help Utnapishtim and his wife escape the deluge by building a boat. Utnapishtim was given precise dimensions to follow, finally sealing the hull with pitch and bitumen. Just in time, he loaded it with 'all the animals of the field', gathered his family aboard, and was able to float to safety after a strong storm arose that was terrifying even to the gods, who retreated to the safety of the heavens. The boat eventually lodged on a mountain top, and Utnapishtim released first a dove, then a swallow, and finally a raven. The dove and swallow returned to the safety of the boat, but the raven didn't come back. This convinced Utnapishtim that there must be dry land somewhere, and he knew he could safely disembark.



*George Smith, the man who transliterated and read the Babylonian Flood Story of Tablet XI ([CC BY-SA 4.0](#))*

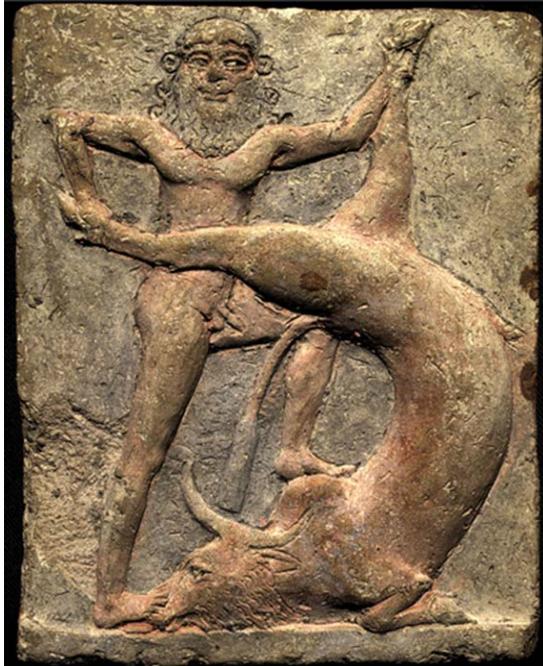
His first order of business was to offer a sacrifice to the gods. When they: "smelled the sweet savor" of the sacrifice, the gods responded with kindness. Surprisingly, it was Enlil himself who bestowed the gift of immortality as a reward. It seems that even a god can sometimes change his mind about things.

Thus, Utnapishtim and his wife were the only two humans ever granted eternal life on earth by the gods as a result of their faithfulness. Although they themselves could not impart immortality, they did share a great secret with Gilgamesh. They told him about a plant that grew only at the bottom of the sea. It was called *Ur-shanabi*, the 'Plant of Heartbeat'. If Gilgamesh could only find this plant and partake of it, he would regain his youthfulness and live forever.

### **Gilgamesh's Quest to Find Immortality**

Eventually, and at great risk, Gilgamesh tied stones to his feet, allowing him to walk across the sea floor. He finally found the plant and returned to the shore, where he decided to share it first with some respected elders. Whether or not this was done out of kindness or as a precaution remains unclear.

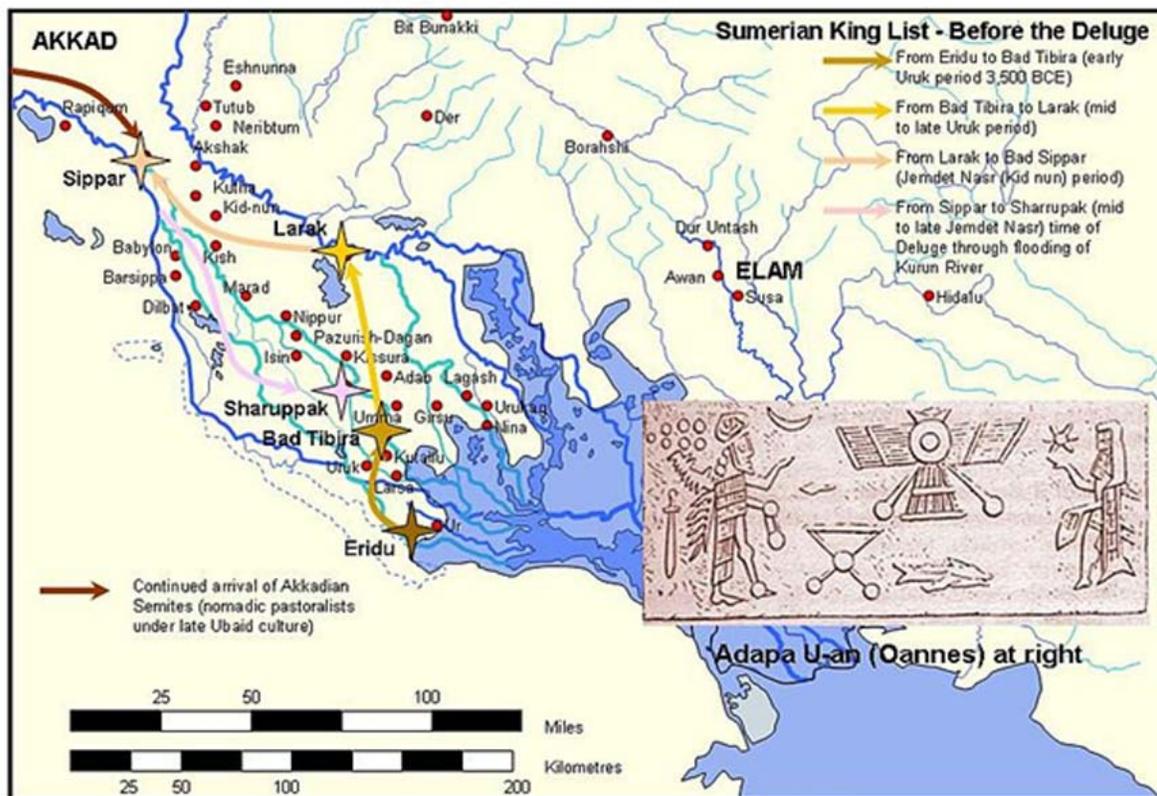
Unfortunately, when Gilgamesh stopped to bathe and wash off the exertions of his task, a snake stole the plant, shedding its skin as it slithered away. The fruit of eternal life was thus taken from him. He returned home to Uruk, sadder but wiser, and was finally able to tell his story.



Like all good stories, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has generated a lot of heated religious and philosophical discussion. Although there is no indication that this was ever considered to be a religious text, Biblical scholars were quick to jump on the similarities between Utnapishtim and Noah. Was the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the basis for the story of Noah's Flood, a familiar tale that had been told for untold generations and was considered by many Christians around the world to be an historically accurate account? Was the beloved Genesis story merely a copy of a much older Sumerian version? If so, what implications did that hold for theological perspectives concerning inspired scriptures?

Ancient Mesopotamian terracotta relief showing Gilgamesh slaying the Bull of Heaven, an episode described in Tablet VI of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels ([CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/))

## SUMER, AKKAD AND ELAM



Sumer before the deluge, or Uruk and Zdemdet Nasr periods in ancient Mesopotamia. (John D. Croft/ [Public Domain](https://publicdomain.org/))

Philosophers, too, wanted to examine this story. Was Gilgamesh selfishly looking for immortality? If so, why didn't he just eat the plant as soon as he reached shore? Or did the fact that he wanted to first give the plant to elders who had need of it, demonstrate that he was selflessly, no doubt inspired by the loss of his friend Enkidu, trying to bring the gift of immortality to the human race, thereby rectifying what he considered to be an unjust act of the gods? In other words, was Gilgamesh selfish or selfless?

Whatever the case, his story, like mythology from around the world, can be read on many different levels. But one level is especially important. Gilgamesh undertook what the mythologist Joseph Campbell called a hero's journey. While living a normal life, if you consider the life of an oppressive king normal, the loss of a valued friend caused him to confront an essential, spiritual problem. Concern about the nature of death and eternal life led him to depart from what was, for him at least, an average life experience and undertake a spiritual quest.



*Gilgamesh mastering a lion. Relief from the façade of the throne room, Palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad (Dur Sharrukin), 713–706 BC. (Public Domain)*

True to the nature of the traditional hero's journey, he traveled to unfamiliar landscapes, battled strange creatures, and triumphed over adversity. He looked death in the face. He sought out other-worldly entities while looking for his own holy grail, the precious gift of immortality that could be bestowed only by the gods. That is the nature of the hero's journey - a call to adventure, departure from the familiar into the unknown, triumphal fulfillment of the quest, and a return home, bearing the gift of wisdom. Everyone from Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* to Galahad in the *Arthurian Saga* and Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* has made this journey. Joe Campbell insists it's a journey each and every one of us should make as well if we are to live an authentic, fulfilling, life.

There are those who insist that the *Gilgamesh Epic* is based on a real, historical person whose story was eventually exaggerated to mythic proportions. Others insist it is purely an example of classic mythology. Many, no doubt, read it is a fairy story meant for children. However we read it, it sheds light on an ancient and venerable truth. No matter how far back in history we go, and this

story takes us back a very long way, it seems as though people have always been concerned with the same spiritual problems: *Who are we, why are we here, and how should we live?* These are the essential questions concerning what it means to be alive and a functioning member of the human race. They are as ancient as our origins. In light of questions such as these, the things that usually attract our attention seem pretty trivial.



A modern statue of Gilgamesh stands at the University of Sydney ([CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

### Immortality Lies within the Legend

In the end, Gilgamesh achieved his quest and returned to his people, bringing wisdom. But it was not the wisdom he sought. It was far greater. What was that wisdom? Simply this: The object of his quest did not lie in his immortal body, but rather in his immortal story. What we leave behind is not biological in nature, but spiritual. As long as there are those who tell our story, we live forever. The proof of this insight lies in the fact that the first great work of literature our civilization produced is still being told and retold, argued about, studied and discussed. Gilgamesh lives! He lives in his deeds. He lives in his ideas. He lives in his story. And if Jean Luc Picard of *Star Trek* fame is any indication, Gilgamesh will live on well into future centuries as well.

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