

The Mighty Gilgamesh

Directions: *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is an ancient Mesopotamian epic poem about an early king, Gilgamesh, ruler of Uruk. It's a story of fierce battles, larger-than-life heroes, sex, death, and a dangerous journey. The epic tells us a lot about ancient Mesopotamian rulers and their societies. Here are some excerpts from it. Read the excerpts and answer the question that follows each one.

First, the epic introduces us to Gilgamesh.

He [Gilgamesh] ordered built the walls of Uruk. . . .
 Gilgamesh endured everything harsh,
 He overpowered famous, powerful kings.
 He is a butting bull, the strongest one of all.
 He leads his army and protects its rear guard.
 He is a flood that washes away the walls of enemy cities. . . .
 Two thirds of him is divine, one third human.

1. How does the excerpt above express the Mesopotamian ideal of a king?

Next, Gilgamesh sends a priestess to tame the "hairy-bodied wild man" Enkidu, who lives with the grassland animals. Once Enkidu has been intimate with the woman, his life begins to change.

Seeing Enkidu, the animals of the grasslands fled.
 Enkidu's body had grown weak; he could not follow the creatures.
 Yet his mind had grown wider, had gained knowledge. . . .
 The woman said to him, to Enkidu:
 "You have become wise, like a god.
 Why did you roam the wilderness with wild animals?
 Come with me to the city, to Uruk. . . ."
 Then Enkidu, with new knowledge in his heart, longed for a friend. . . .
 The woman took off part of her clothing and covered him.
 She took his hand and led him like a child to the camp of the shepherds. . . .
 They set cooked food before him, and strong wine.
 Enkidu stared at it. He had not known about these things before.
 The woman said, "Eat and drink, Enkidu. This is the custom of men."
 Enkidu ate his fill and drank the wine, seven goblets.
 He became like a child; his heart became light.
 He washed his hairy body and was massaged with oil.

(continued)



The Mighty Gilgamesh *(continued)*

2. What aspects of Mesopotamian history and culture does this passage tell about—not literally, but in a figurative way?

Enkidu arrives in Uruk as a wedding is being celebrated. He challenges Gilgamesh's right to sleep with the bride before her new husband does.

Enkidu blocked the threshold with his foot, not letting Gilgamesh in.
They wrestled with one another, like wild bulls with horns locked.
They shook the walls and shattered the doorposts.
They wrestled and staggered, and Gilgamesh
Forced the wild man Enkidu to his knees.
The rage of Gilgamesh abated and he turned away.

3. What does the fight express about the relationship of Mesopotamian people with their ruler? (Think of Enkidu as representing the Mesopotamian people.)

The fight makes Gilgamesh and Enkidu fast friends. Now they challenge the terrifying demon, named Humbaba, that the gods have set in place to guard the cedar forest.

Enlil [a chief god] has set Humbaba to guard the cedar forest,
To terrify mankind, to terrify anyone who goes up to the forest.
His roar is the storm-flood, his mouth is fire,
His breath is death. . . .
Weakness will overcome anyone who goes up to the forest.

4. What does the excerpt about Humbaba tell you about Mesopotamian religious beliefs?

Extra Challenge: Read the entire *Epic of Gilgamesh*. How does the challenge to Humbaba turn out? What more do you learn about Mesopotamian culture and beliefs from the epic?

