The face of Huwawa, whom Gilgamesh and Enkidu killed. The face is of unknown provenance and is now in the British Museum. It dates from around 700 to 500 B.C. and is about 3 inches (7.5 cm) high.

Problems, Hero, Versions

We viewed Enûma elish as a remarkable attempt to understand and accept the universe, to come to terms with the human condition. The author of Enûma elish was able to do so wholeheartedly, but his was by no means the only possible attitude, as may be illustrated from the only slightly older epic of Gilgamesh,[339] which also comes to terms with the human condition, but not easily and perhaps not altogether convincingly. Unlike Enûma elish its concern is not with the gods and the rule of the universe but with man; its problem is man's mortality, the fact that we must all eventually die.

Gilgamesh, as far as one can judge, was a historical figure, the ruler of the city of Uruk (the biblical Erekh) around 2600 B.C. It stands to reason that stories about him would have been current long after his death, but they only become graspable to us around 2100 B.C. when they were taken up by the court poets of the Third Dynasty of Ur. The kings of that dynasty counted Gilgamesh as their ancestor. We possess a number of short epical compositions in Sumerian, the originals of which must date to that revival of interest, but the Gilgamesh Epic proper, with which we are here concerned dates from around 1600 B.C., at the end of the Old Babylonian period, and was composed in Akkadian. Strictly speaking, we should perhaps not say the "epic" but the "contours of the epic," since what we have of Old Babylonian date are fragments, and may represent only separate songs of a loosely-connected Gilgamesh cycle.[340] These fragments do, however, cover all the essential — largely internally dependent — episodes that make up the tale in its later version. This version, made probably toward the end of the second millennium by one Sîn-liqi-unninnî, is preserved for the most part in copies from around 600 B.C. from the famous library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh. It contains much that is extraneous to the tale, and it lacks the freshness and vigor of the Old Babylonian fragments. In our retelling of the story here we shall therefore quote the older fragments whenever possible.

The Story

The story begins in the high style of "romantic epic," by introducing the hero to us. As the *Odyssey* begins with a characterization of Odysseus:

> Tell me, Muse, of that man, so ready at need,
> who wandered far and wide,
> and many were the men whose towns he saw
> and whose minds he learnt,

yea, and many the woes he suffered in his
heart upon the deep,
striving to win his own life and the return
of his company . . .[341]

so the Gilgamesh Epic opens with lines calculated to whet the listener's interest in its hero as a man who has had strange and stirring experiences and who has seen far-off regions:

He who saw all, throughout the length of
the land
came to know the seas, experienced all things. . . .

But there is a special note to the Gilgamesh Epic introduction not found in the *Odyssey*, a stress on something beyond mere unusual, individual experience, a focus rather on lasting tangible achievements, typified by the walls of Uruk, still extant,[342] still a cause for wonder when the introduction was written:

He built the town wall of Uruk, (city) of sheepfolds,
of the sacred precinct Eanna, the holy storehouse.
Look at its wall
with its frieze like bronze!
Gaze at its bastions, which none can equal!
Take the stone stairs that are from times of old,
approach Eanna, the seat of Ishtar,
the like of which no later king — no man —
will ever make.
Go up on the wall of Uruk, walk around,
examine the terrace, look closely at the brickwork:
Is not the base of its brickwork of baked brick?
Have not seven masters laid its foundations?

From our first meeting with the young Gilgamesh he is characterized by tremendous vigor and energy. As ruler of Uruk he throws himself into his task with zeal. He maintains a constant military alert, calls his companions away from their games, and harasses the young men of the town to the point where it gets black before their eyes and they faint from weariness, and he leaves them no time for their families and sweethearts.

The people of Uruk are understandably not very happy at this, and they begin to pester the gods with complaints and entreaties to do something about it. The gods divine with remarkable insight what is at the root of the trouble: Gilgamesh's superior energy and strength set him apart and make him lonely. He needs a friend, someone who measures up to him and can give him companionship on his own extraordinary level of potential and aspiration. So they call the creator Aruru and ask her to create a counterpart of Gilgamesh:

You, Aruru, created the wild bull (Gilgamesh)
now created his image,
in stormy heart let it equal Gilgamesh,
let them vie with each other,
and Uruk have peace.

Aruru forms a mental image of the god of heaven as a model, washes her hands, pinches off clay, throws it down in the desert, and thus creates Enkidu.

Enkidu is, as it were, man in a state of nature. He is enormously strong goes naked, and hair covers all of his body; his locks are long like a woman's and grow as luxuriantly as grain. He knows nothing about the country and people but roams with the gazelles in the desert, eating grass and slaking his thirst in the evening with the animals at the drinking places. As their friend he helps protect them by filling in pits dug to catch them and destroying traps set for them. This brings him into contact with man. A trapper in the neighborhood finds his livelihood severely threatened by Enkidu's actions, but since Enkidu is so big and strong there is nothing he can do. Dejected, he goes home to his father and tells about the newcomer and how he prevents him from carrying on his trade. The trapper's father advises him to go to Gilgamesh in Uruk and ask for a harlot who will go along and try to seduce Enkidu away from his animals. The trapper makes his way to Uruk and appeals to Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh listens to his story and tells him to take along a harlot to use her wiles on Enkidu.

So the trapper finds a harlot and together they walk out into the desert until, on the third day they reach the watering place where Enkidu likes to come with the animals, and here they sit down to wait. One day passes, then a second, and on the third Enkidu and the animals appear and go down to drink. The trapper points Enkidu out to the harlot and urges her to take off her clothes and try to attract Enkidu's attention. In this she is eminently successful. For six days and seven nights Enkidu enjoys himself with her, oblivious to everything else. When at last satisfied, after the seventh night, he wants to go back to his animals. But they shy away. He runs after them, only to find that he no longer has his old power and speed and can no longer keep up with them.

In part, of course, that may be simply because he is by then a bit tired, but almost certainly the author of the story saw more in it. Something magical and decisive has happened. The easy, natural sympathy that exists between children and animals had been Enkidu's as long as he was a child, sexually innocent. Once he has known a woman he has made his choice, from then on he belongs to the human race, and the animals fear him and cannot silently communicate with him as they could before. Slowly, Enkidu comprehends some of this. "He grew up," says the author, "and his understanding broadened."

So Enkidu gives up trying to catch up with the animals and returns to the harlot, who is very kind to him, saying:

I look at you Enkidu,
you are like a god!
Why do you roam
the desert with animals?
Come, let me lead you
into Uruk of the wide streets,
to the holy temple, the dwelling of Anu,
Enkidu, rise, let me take you
to Eanna, the dwelling of Anu,
where Gilgamesh is administering the rites.
You could do them too, instead of him,
installing yourself!

This speech pleases Enkidu, and he takes her suggestions very much to heart. She then undresses, clothes him in the first of her garments, herself in the second, and, holding him by the hand, leads him through the desert until they come to a shepherd's camp where they are kindly and hospitably received. Here Enkidu has his first meeting with civilization and its complications. The shepherds set food and drink before him, something he has never seen before.

He was wont to suck
the milk of the wild beasts only;
they set bread before him.
He squirmed, he looked,
and he stared.
Enkidu knew not
how to eat bread,
had not been taught
how to drink beer.
The harlot opened her mouth
and said to Enkidu:
"Eat the bread, Enkidu,
it is the staff of life!
Drink the beer
it is the custom of the land!"
Enkidu ate bread,
until he was full up,
drank beer —
seven kegs —
he relaxed, cheered up,
his insides felt good,
his face glowed.
He washed with water

his hairy body,
rubbed himself with oil,
and became a man.
He put on a garment,
was like a young noble.
He took his weapon
and fought off the lions,
and the shepherds slept at night.

For some days Enkidu stays with the shepherds. One day, however, as he is sitting with the harlot, he sees a man hurrying by and asks the harlot to bring the man to him that he may hear why he has come. The man explains that he is bringing wedding cake to Uruk, where Gilgamesh is about to be married.[343] This upsets Enkidu; he grows pale, and immediately sets out for Uruk with the harlot. Their arrival creates a stir. The people gather around them gaping at Enkidu, noting his tremendous strength and stature. He is slightly shorter than Gilgamesh but equally as strong.

As they admire him, Gilgamesh approaches with his nuptial procession going to the house of his father-in-law for his wedding, but as he nears the door Enkidu bars the way and does not let him in to his bride. The two seize each other, fighting like young bulls, destroying the threshhold and shaking the walls. Eventually, Enkidu gains the upper hand, and Gilgamesh sinks down on one knee; but as the defeated Gilgamesh subsides and turns his back, Enkidu speaks to him — not gloatingly as a victor, but full of admiration and respect:

Matchless your mother
bore you,
the wild cow of the corral
Ninsûna,
raised above men is your head,
kingship over the people
Enlil assigned to you!

Enkidu's magnanimity wins Gilgamesh's heart, and out of their battle grows a lasting friendship. Gilgamesh takes Enkidu by the hand, leads him home to his mother, and she accepts Enkidu as a son, a brother for Gilgamesh.

Thus all problems are solved. Enkidu is happy in Uruk, Gilgamesh has found a friend but — as so often — the happiness does not last. In his new life Enkidu is going soft. The hardness of his muscles is disappearing; he feels flabby, out of condition, no longer fit as in the old days in the desert. Gilgamesh comes upon him one day weeping and instantly divines what to do. What they both need is a good strenuous expedition with lots of hardship and high adventure. They ought, he proposes, to set out to

gether to kill a terrible monster called Huwawa, who lives far away in the cedar forest in the west.

Much as Enkidu may deplore the loss of his old hardihood, this way of regaining it seems rather more than he bargained for. For while Gilgamesh has only heard of Huwawa, Enkidu has actually seen him in the days he was roaming the desert, and he has acquired a healthy respect for him:

> Huwawa, his roar is a floodstorm,
> his mouth very fire,
> his breath death.
> Why do you want
> to do this?
> An irresistible onrush
> is the trampling of Huwawa!

But Gilgamesh is not to be dissuaded. He chides Enkidu for lack of courage and shames him into going along. They have mighty weapons forged for them, take leave of the elders of the town, who give them much paternal advice about how to travel, and say goodbye to Gilgamesh's mother.

Their trip is told in great detail, and we especially hear of Gilgamesh's dreams, all of which are terrifying warnings of disaster. But Enkidu is headstrong and with unconscious impiety interprets every one of them to mean that they will overcome Huwawa.[344] The section of the story that deals with their actual encounter with Huwawa is unfortunately badly preserved in all the versions we have, but it seems clear that in one way or other Huwawa loses out, begs for his life, which Gilgamesh is inclined to spare, and is eventually killed at Enkidu's insistence. The most complete account of the episode we have is earlier than the epic, a Sumerian tale which probably was among the sources that the author of the epic had at his disposal.[345] It tells how Gilgamesh at first succumbs to the terror encompassing Huwawa and is unable to move. From that perilous situation he saves himself by pretending to Huwawa that he has not come to fight him but to get to know the mountains where he lives and to offer him his older sister as wife and his younger sister as handmaiden. Huwawa is taken in, divesting himself of his armor of rays of terror. Thus defenseless, he is set upon by Gilgamesh, who smites and subdues him. Huwawa pleads for his life and Gilgamesh — as a gentleman — is inclined to spare him, until Enkidu, with a peasant's distrust, speaks thus:

> "The tallest who has no judgment
> Namtar (death) swallows up,
> Namtar who acknowledges no (excuses).
> Letting the captured bird go home,
> the captured lad return to his mother's lap,
> you will never make it back
> to your (own) city and mother who bore you."

Huwawa, furious at this interference, cuttingly asks whether Enkidu, "a hireling who, to the detriment of the food supply, walks behind his companions," is thus to put him in the wrong, at which Enkidu, stung by the insult, cuts off Huwawa's head.

When Gilgamesh and Enkidu return to Uruk — we are now back with the epic — Gilgamesh washes the grime of battle and travel off his body and dresses in fresh clothes. Thus arrayed he is so attractive that the goddess of Uruk herself, Ishtar, becomes enamored of him and proposes marriage: If he will become her husband she will give him a chariot of gold and lapis lazuli, kings will kneel before him, his goats will have triplets, his sheep twins. Gilgamesh though, will have none of it and seems to rather panic at the thought. Instead of quietly and calmly refusing, he heaps insults upon her: she is an unfinished door which does not keep out wind and drafts, pitch that dirties the one who carries it, a water skin which leaks on the one who carries it, a shoe that pinches the foot of its owner, and so on. Worse yet, all her previous lovers have come to a bad end. There was Dumuzi, or Tammuz, the love of her youth, for whom she instituted laments year after year. There was the varicolored bird she loved, only to break its wing so that it now runs round in the forests and cries *"kappee! kappee!"* ("my wing! my wing!"). There was the lion, for which she dug pits, and the war-horse, for which she destined whip and spurs. There was the shepherd whom she loved and then turned into a wolf so that his own dogs set upon him, and there was her father's gardener, Ishullānu, who came to grief at her hand when he refused her advances.

At this catalogue of her shortcomings, Ishtar — never very patient — rushes to her father, Anu, the god of heaven, tells him that Gilgamesh has insulted her, and begs him to let her have the "bull of heaven" to kill him. Anu is not eager to comply, suggesting that probably Ishtar herself has invited the scolding, but Ishtar is so incensed that she threatens to break the gates of the netherworld and let the dead up to eat the living if Anu does not let her have her way. Anu points out that the bull of heaven is such a destructive animal that, if let loose, there will be seven years of famine. But Ishtar assures him that she has stored enough grain and hay for man and beast for seven years, and in the end, Anu gives in to her.

As Ishtar takes the bull of heaven down to Uruk it shows itself a terrible threat. Its first snort blows a hole in the ground into which fall a hundred men, its second traps two hundred more. But Gilgamesh and Enkidu prove old hands at handling cattle. Enkidu gets behind the bull and twists its tail — an old cowboy trick — while Gilgamesh like a matador plunges his sword into the neck of the bull.

The death of the bull of heaven shocks Ishtar. She mounts the city wall, treads a mourning measure, and curses Gilgamesh. At this Enkidu tears off a hind leg of the bull and hurls it up at her, shouting: "You! Could I but get at you I would make you like unto it." Ishtar and her women set up a wail over the shank of the bull, while Gilgamesh calls together the craftsmen so that they can admire the size of the bull's horns before he presents them as a votive offering to his father, the god Lugalbanda. Then he and Enkidu wash themselves in the Euphrates and return to Uruk in triumph. The entire population of the city come out to gaze at them and Gilgamesh exultantly sings out to the maids of the palace: "Who is noblest of youths? / Who, most renowned of swains? and they answer: "Gilgamesh is noblest of youths! / Enkidu most renowned of swains!"

At this point in the story the two friends stand at the pinnacle of power and fame. They have killed the terrible Huwawa in the remote and inaccessible cedar forest, in their arrogance they have treated a great goddess with disdain, and in killing the bull of heaven they have proved they could get the better of her. There seems to be nothing they cannot do.

Now, however, things begin to catch up with them. Huwawa was appointed guardian of the cedar forest by Enlil, and in killing him Gilgamesh and Enkidu have incurred Enlil's anger. In a dream that night Enkidu sees the gods assembled to pass judgment on him and Gilgamesh for killing Huwawa. Enlil demands the death penalty but the sun god — god of fairness and moderation — intercedes and is able to save Gilgamesh. Enkidu, however, perhaps as the more palpably guilty one, has to die. And so Enkidu falls ill. Horror-stricken at what he knows is happening to him, he wishes he had never come to Uruk and curses the trapper and the harlot who brought him. The sun god, again speaking up for fairness, points out to Enkidu how much he has gained in his new life of luxury with Gilgamesh for a friend, and Enkidu then balances the harlot's curse with a long blessing. But, reconciled or not, Enkidu is doomed and dies.

Up to this point, it will have been noted, Gilgamesh has lived by the heroic values of his times. Death was a part of the scheme of things, so, since you had to die anyway, let it be a glorious death in battle with a worthy foe so that your name and fame would live. Thus, when he proposed their venturing against Huwawa to Enkidu, and Enkidu proved reluctant, he sternly upbraided his friend in just such terms:

> Who, my friend, was ever so high
> (that he could)
> rise up to heaven
> and lastingly dwell with Shamash?
> Mere man, his days are numbered,
> whatever he may do, he is but wind.
> You are — already now — afraid of death.
> What about the fine strength of your courage?
> Let me lead,
> and you (hanging back) can call out to me:
> "Close in, fear not!"
> And if I fall I shall have founded fame
> "Gilgamesh fell (they will say)
> in combat with terrible Huwawa"

He goes on imagining how in later years his children will climb on Enkidu's knee, and how Enkidu will then tell them how bravely their father fought and what a glorious death he died.

But all of this was when death was known to Gilgamesh only in the abstract. Now, with the death of Enkidu, it touches him in all its stark reality, and Gilgamesh refuses to believe it:

> My friend, the swift mule,
> the wild ass of the mountain,
> the panther of the plain,
> Enkidu, my friend, the swift mule,
> the wild ass of the mountain,
> the panther of the plain,
> who with me could do all,
> who climbed the crags,
> seized, killed the bull of heaven,
> undid Huwawa dwelling in the cedar forest,
> now — what sleep is this that seized you?
> You have grown dark and cannot hear me!
> But he was not raising his eyes,
> (Gilgamesh) touched his heart,
> it was not beating.
> Then he covered the face of his friend,
> as if he were a bride . . .
> Like an eagle he was circling around him;
> as does a lioness when (returning and) meeting its whelps,
> he kept circling in front and back of his friend;
> tearing the while his hair and scattering the tufts,
> stripping and flinging down the finery off his body.

The loss he has suffered is unbearable. He refuses with all his soul to accept it as real:

> He who ever went through all hazards with me,
> Enkidu whom I love dearly,
> who ever went through all hazard with me,
> the fate of man has overtaken him.
> All day and night have I wept over him,

and would not have him buried —
as if my friend might yet rise up
at my (loud) cries —
for seven days and nights,
until a maggot dropped from his nose.
Since he is gone I can no comfort find,
keep roaming like a hunter in the plains.

Death, fear of death, has become an obsession with Gilgamesh. He can think of nothing else; the thought that he himself must die haunts him day and night and leaves him no peace. He has heard about an ancestor of his, Utanapishtim, who gained eternal life and now lives far away at the ends of the world. He decides to go to him to learn the secret of immortality.

So Gilgamesh sets out on his quest. It takes him through the known world to the mountains where the sun sets in the West. The gate the sun enters is guarded by a huge scorpion man and his wife, but when Gilgamesh tells them of Enkidu's death and his quest for life, they take pity on him and let him enter the tunnel into the mountains through which the sun travels by night. For twelve double miles, then, Gilgamesh makes his way through the dark tunnel; only as he nears the gate of sunrise at the other end does he feel the wind on his face then at last sees the daylight ahead. At the gate of sunrise is a wondrous garden in which the trees bear jewels and precious stones as fruits, but its riches hold no temptation for Gilgamesh whose heart is set on one thing only, not to die. Beyond the gate lie vast deserts over which Gilgamesh roams, supporting himself by killing wild bulls, eating their flesh, and dressing in their skin. To get water he digs wells where wells never were before. Without any goal he follows the prevailing winds. Shamash, the sun god — always the soul of moderation — becomes vexed at seeing him thus, and he reasons with Gilgamesh from the sky. But Gilgamesh will not listen to reason, he just wants to live:

Is it (so) much — after wandering and roaming
around in the desert —
to lie down to rest in the bowels of the
earth?
I have lain down to sleep full many a time
all the(se) years!
(No!) Let my eyes see the sun
and let me sate myself with daylight!
Is darkness far off?
How much daylight is there?
When may a dead man ever see the sun's splendor?

Roaming thus, Gilgamesh eventually comes to the shore of the sea that encircles the earth and here he finds an inn kept by an alewife. His

unkempt looks and hide clothing frighten the alewife and she hastens to lock her door, thinking him a bandit. As Gilgamesh comes close, however, he tells her who he is and speaks of Enkidu who died and of his own quest for eternal life, the secret of which he hopes to learn from Utanapishtim. The alewife — as had Shamash — sees the hopelessness of his quest and tries to dissuade him:

Gilgamesh, whither are you roaming?
Life, which you look for, you shall
never find.
(For) when the gods created man, they set
death as share for man, and life
snatched away in their own hands.
You, Gilgamesh, fill your belly,
day and night make merry,
daily hold a festival,
dance and make music day and night.
And wear fresh clothes,
and wash your head and bathe.
Look at the child that is holding your hand,
and let your wife delight in your embrace.
These things alone are the concern of man.

But Gilgamesh cannot be reached:

Why, my (good) alewife, do you talk thus?
My heart is sick for my friend.
Why, my (good) alewife, do you talk thus?
My heart is sick for Enkidu!

and he asks her to tell him the way to Utanapishtim. She does so. The boatman of Utanapishtim, Urshanabi, happens to be on the mainland to cut timber, perhaps he will let Gilgamesh cross over with him. Gilgamesh finds him, but there are difficulties at first. Gilgamesh, it seems, has broken in anger the stone punting poles that Urshanabi uses to propel his boat across the waters of death, probably because Urshanabi did not immediately grant his request for passage. So now he has to cut a considerable number of wooden (and so perishable) punting poles needed to make up for the durable stone ones. But in the end he is taken across to the island on which Utanapishtim lives.

And so at long last, after incredible hardships, Gilgamesh has reached his goal. There on the shore of the island is his forbear Utanapishtim, and he can ask him how one obtains eternal life.

Yet, the moment Gilgamesh lays eyes on him, he senses that things are not quite what he had thought, something is subtly wrong:

I look at you Utanapishtim,
your proportions are not different,
you are just like me!
Nor are you different,
you are just like me!
My heart was all set
on doing battle with you,
but you in idleness lie on your back.
Tell me, how came you to stand
in the assembly of gods and seek life?

Utanapishtim then tells him the story of the flood, how he alone was warned by his lord Ea, built an ark and saved his family and pairs of all animals in it and eventually, after the flood, was granted eternal life by the gods as a reward for having saved human and animal life. It is the story of a unique event which will never recur, not a secret recipe or set of instructions for others to follow. It has no relevance for Gilgamesh and his situation, and so destroys utterly all basis for the hope that drove him on his quest:

But for you, now, who will assemble
the gods for you,
that you might find life, which you seek?

Utanapishtim leaves Gilgamesh no time to answer. Perhaps this is because he wishes to bring his point home through an object lesson, the contest with sleep that is to follow, perhaps it is merely an indication that the flood story was a not too skillful insertion in a shorter tale that originally had only the object lesson. At any rate, Utanapishtim immediately suggests to Gilgamesh that he try not to sleep for six days and seven nights. Gilgamesh accepts the challenge — a contest, it would seem, with Death's younger brother Sleep — but as he sits down Sleep sends a blast down over him and Utanapishtim sardonically says to his wife:

Look at the strong man who craved life!
Sleep is sending a blast down over him
like a rainstorm.

Utanapishtim's wife, however, takes pity on Gilgamesh, knowing that from this sleep he will never waken by himself, that fighting it is in fact fighting death; and she begs her husband to wake him, that he may go back in peace. Utanapishtim is not too keen. He knows only too well that man is by nature deceitful, and he expects that Gilgamesh will prove no exception. He therefore tells his wife to prepare food for Gilgamesh each day and to mark the days on the wall behind him. She does so, and on the seventh day Utanapishtim touches him and he wakes. His first words — as Utanapishtim had foreseen — are:

As soon as sleep poured down over me
you quickly touched me
so that you awakened me.

but the marks on the wall and the food portions in various states of staleness bear witness to a different truth. There is no hope, then, and terror holds Gilgamesh in its grip more desperately than ever.

Gilgamesh said to him, to the faraway Utanapishtim:
"What can I do, Utanapishtim, where will I go?
The one who followed behind me,
the rapacious one,
sits in my bedroom, Death!
And wherever I may turn my face,
there he is, Death!"

Utanapishtim has no solace to offer, only tells the boatman Urshanabi to take Gilgamesh to a place where he can wash, and to give him clean clothes for the return journey. These clothes will stay fresh until he gets home. Then Gilgamesh and Urshanabi launch the boat once more, but as they move off, the wife of Utanapishtim again intercedes for Gilgamesh, asking her husband what he will give Gilgamesh now that, after so many hardships, he is on his way home. Gilgamesh brings the boat back to shore and Utanapishtim tells him of a thorny plant growing in the Apsû, the sweet waters deep under the earth, which has power to rejuvenate. Its name is "As Oldster Man Becomes Child." Gilgamesh, overjoyed, makes haste to open the valve down to the Apsû, ties stones to his feet, as do the pearl divers in Bahrein, to drag him down, finds the plant and plucks it, through it stings his hand, cuts loose the stones, and lets the flood carry him up and cast him ashore. Delighted, he shows the plant to Urshanabi — both, apparently, are now on the shore of the Persian Gulf rather than at Utanapishtim's island — and tells him of its qualities and how he is taking it back to Uruk where he will eat it when he grows old and thus return to childhood.

But the weather is warm and as he travels back Gilgamesh sees an inviting, cool pond, doffs his clothes, and goes in to bathe. A serpent smells the odor of the plant which he has left with his clothes, comes out of its hole, snatches, and eats it. As it disappears again into its hole it sloughs off its old skin and emerges new and shiny and young.

This spells the end of Gilgamesh's quest. It has come to nothing. The serpent, not he, has obtained the power of rejuvenation. And so at last he has to admit defeat, final and utter defeat:

On that day Gilgamesh sat down and wept,
tears streaming down his cheeks:
"For whose sake, Urshanabi, did my arms tire?

For whose sake has my heart's blood been spent?
I brought no blessing on myself,
I did the serpent underground good service!"

The mood in which he meets this final defeat, however, is new and other than what he has been capable of before; it is one of composure, one of resignation, even humorous, self-ironical resignation, not of terror and despair. It is a mood not unlike Dryden's:

Since ev'ry man who lives is born to die,
And none can boast sincere felicity,
With equal mind, what happens, let us bear,
Nor joy nor grieve too much
for things beyond our care.
Like pilgrims to th' appointed place we tend;
The world's an inn, and death the journey's end.[346]

This late and dearly won resignation, this acceptance of reality, finds symbolic expression in the epic in a return to where we began, to the walls of Uruk which stand for all time as Gilgamesh's lasting achievement. Man may have to die, but what he does lives after him. There is a measure of immortality in achievement, the only immortality man can seek.

And so, when Gilgamesh finally arrives home, his first act is to show the walls to Urshanabi.

Gilgamesh said to the boatman, Urshanabi:
"Go up, Urshanabi, on the wall of Uruk,
walk around!
Examine the terrace, look closely at the
brickwork!
Is not the base of its brickwork of baked
brick?
Have not seven masters laid its foundations?
An acre town and an acre orchards,
an acre riverbed,
also precinct of the Ishtar temple.
Three acres and the precinct comprises Uruk."

This ends the story.

Sources

To clarify to ourselves what this ancient story is about and what its author was driving at, we may profitably ask two fundamental questions, one about sources and another about the theme. The question about sources asks what the author had to work with or — if the Old Babylonian fragments do not yet represent an epic, merely a cycle of tales — within

what frame of reference, within what world of traditional Gilgamesh lore, the telling of these tales moved. The question about theme probes further. It asks what the author (or authors) did with those materials: how they were aimed, what meanings were seen in them or given to them. What made them the stuff of poetry?

The sources — what is known about them or can be surmised — we have tried to present succinctly in a diagram headed "Gilgamesh Tradition." It begins with the "historical Gilgamesh," a ruler of Uruk at circa 2600 B.C., in the period known as Early Dynastic II. The reason we assume that the Gilgamesh traditions cluster around an actual historical figure is that the tradition seems to be remarkably informed about the period with which it deals. Personages encountered in the episodes, such as Enmebaragesi, the father of Agga of Kish, mentioned in the tale "Gilgamesh and Agga," have been proved to be historical by contemporary inscriptions.[347] The name Gilgamesh itself is composed of elements that were current in proper names at that time, but fell out of use later; the custom of burying a ruler's court with him when he died, implied in the tale of "The Death of Gilgamesh," is actually known to us from the only slightly younger Royal Tombs at Ur, after which time it was abandoned.

As ruler of Uruk in the Early Dynastic period the historical Gilgamesh would have had the title of e n and would have united in his person the two distinct aspects of that office, magical and martial, which we have called on the chart respectively, the Heros and the Hero aspects.

The magical, or Heros, aspect of the office of e n we have touched upon earlier, in our discussion of the yearly rite of the sacred marriage, in which a human e n priest or priestess married a deity. In Uruk, the e n was male and was the ruler of the city. In the rite he took on the identity of Dumuzi-Amaushumgalanna and married the goddess Inanna, or Ishtar. Their union magically ensured fertility and plenty for all. As shown by the famous Uruk Vase on which the rite is pictured, it was celebrated in that city as early as Protoliterate times.

The magic powers of the e n were not limited to his ritual role in the sacred marriage. They belonged to him in his own right and continued to be effective after his death when he dwelt in the underworld, in the earth from which emanated the powers that made trees and plants, orchards, fields, and pasturage all grow and thrive. Notably successful e n priests, in whose time there had been years of plenty, continued, therefore, to be worshiped with funerary offerings after their death to insure that they would continue their blessings. The historical Gilgamesh, we may assume, was such a figure, credited with the power to produce plentiful years and continuing to be worshiped after his death. Our first tangible indication that this was so comes from account texts from Girsu of around 2400 B.C. They show that funerary offerings for successful dead e n priests and