

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Mesopotamian Epic

2000-1600 B.C.E.



Poetic Forms – The Epic

Epic – *"A long narrative poem written in elevated style, in which heroes of great historical or legendary importance perform valorous deeds."*

A portion of the
Babylonian clay tablet
on which the epic of
Gilgamesh is recorded.



Poetic Forms – The Epic

- In an epic, “the setting is vast in scope, covering great nations, the world or the universe, and the action is important to the history of a nation or people.”



Poetic Forms – The Epic

- *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* are some great epics from world literature, and two great epics in English are *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*.



Poetic Forms – The Epic

- Figuratively, any task of great magnitude may be called “epic” as in an “epic feat” or an “epic undertaking.” (“epic”)



EPIC FAIL

Not for the weak of forehead

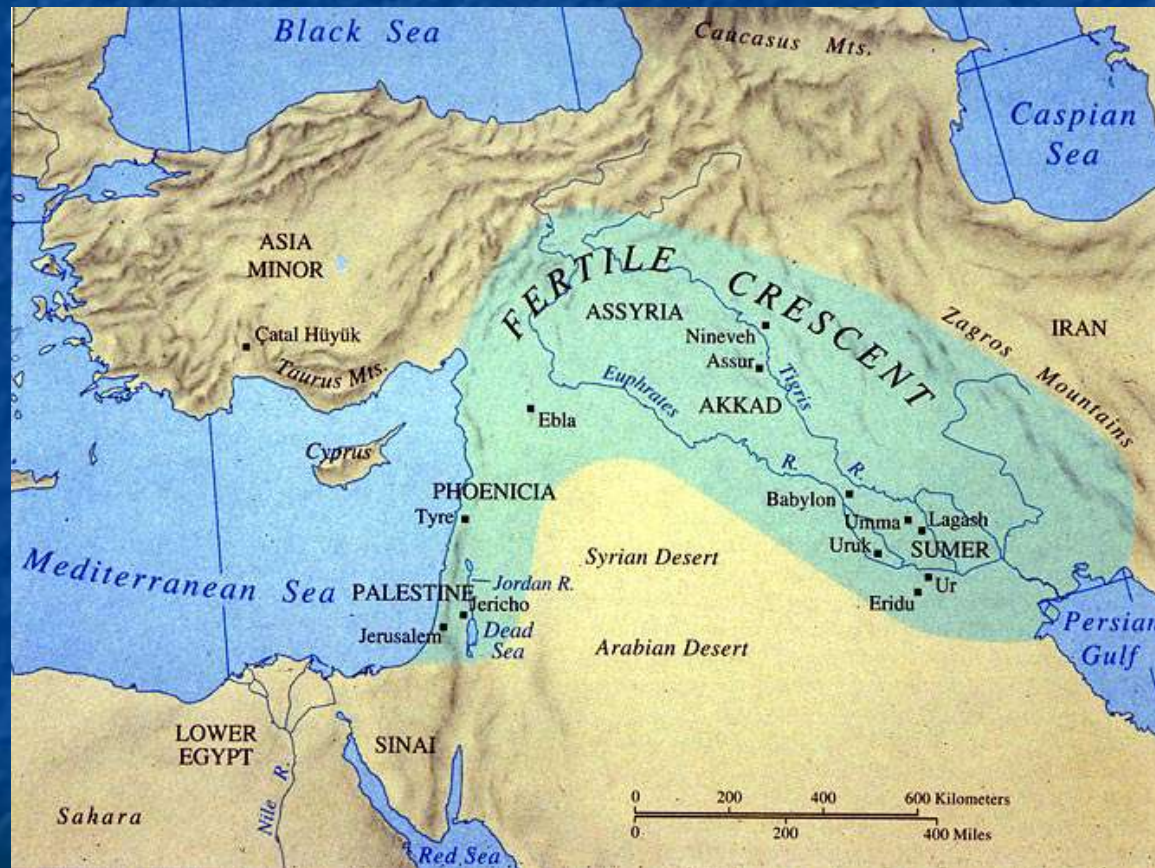
The Epic of Gilgamesh

- *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a long, narrative poem classified as an “epic”. First evidence of this poem about a legendary king appears in 2200 – 2100 B.C.E.
- (B.C.E. = “Before the Current Era”)

The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Gilgamesh was the king of Sumer (a forerunner of Babylonian and Assyrian civilizations). Located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, it is a land now centered in present day Iraq.

The Epic of Gilgamesh



Map of probable location of Sumer and surrounding kingdoms.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Provided that Gilgamesh was based on an actual person (and not simply a myth created by the ancient Sumerians), he reigned between 2700 and 2500 B.C.E.
- Conveying the tale of friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the epic also deals with themes of mortality and loss.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

- In the epic, Gilgamesh is the king of Uruk, a Sumerian city. Gilgamesh is initially presented as arrogant and desiring of fame.
- To test him, the Sumerian gods and goddesses provide tests for him.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

- The goddess Aruru creates a half-man, half-beast named Enkidu as a test for Gilgamesh.



The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Eventually, Enkidu challenges Gilgamesh's leadership and the two fight in a heated wrestling match which Gilgamesh ultimately wins.
- The two become friends, despite their original conflicts.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Enkidu and Gilgamesh experience many adventures together including a battle with a giant named Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven.



The Epic of Gilgamesh

- In the epic, Gilgamesh and Enkidu battle Humbaba; a giant protector god of the cedar forest that may represent man's opposition to nature.



The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Sumerian gods such as Humbaba “had human or humanlike forms, were male or female... and reacted to stimuli with both reason and emotion. Being similar to humans, they were considered to be unpredictable and oftentimes capricious. Their need for food and drink, housing, and care mirrored that of humans. Unlike humans, however, they were immortal and, like kings and holy temples, they possessed a splendor called *melammu*. *Melammu* is a radiance or aura, a glamour that the god embodied. It could be fearsome or awe inspiring.” (Spar)

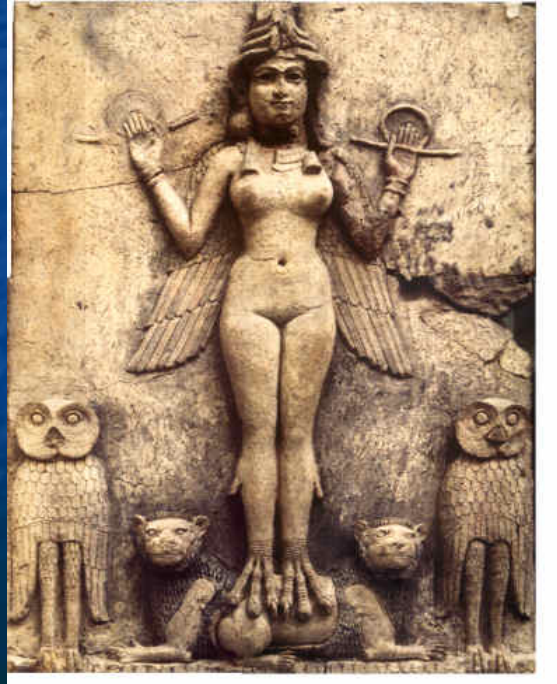
The Epic of Gilgamesh

- The god of earth wind, air and agriculture; Enlil was enraged by what Gilgamesh and Enkidu had done to Humbaba and his forest and he distributes Humbaba's "splendor" after his death.



The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Because Gilgamesh rejected the advances of Ishtar, the goddess of love, she sends the Bull of Heaven to threaten Uruk – Gilgamesh's city.



The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Gilgamesh and Enkidu are able to defeat the Bull of Heaven, but Enkidu eventually dies as punishment for his involvement with the death of the Bull and Humbaba.



The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Following Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh goes on a quest for immortality and ends up with Utnapishtim who has gained the secret of living forever after he and his family survive a great flood (similar to the story of Noah).



The Epic of Gilgamesh

- The epic was lost until the mid-1880's, when it was re-discovered in the library of an ancient Assyrian king; Ashurbanipal.
- The epic was "Printed" on clay tablets using a dead writing form called, "cuniform," that utilized reeds to create wedge shaped symbols in clay.



Works Cited

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