

OLLI
Heroes Across Cultures and Eras:
Gilgamesh

Professor Rutledge
Spring, 2016

Ancient Uruk

- A major metropolis by 3000 BCE
- *Gilgamesh* is the product of an urban explosion of creativity

The Textual History of *Gilgamesh*

- 2100 BCE: Sumerian epics
- 1700 BCE: The Akkadian (Old Babylonian) Versions
- 1300 BCE: The Standard Version
- 800 BCE: The Oldest Tablets of the Standard Version

The Hero as a Social/Cultural Construct

The "traditional" (aristocratic warrior) hero:

- is human, not divine, but may be possibly semi-divine;
- is a "marked" person, and must be *named*;
- possesses or develops "larger than life" qualities;
- is defined by the existence of some cultural framework, but tends to be a liminal figure in terms of the community;
- confronts obstacles/ordeals, and tends to be tested to destruction;
- elicits awe, not commiseration; is triumphant even in defeat.

Heroic Trajectories

Cuchulainn

- supernatural begettings and births→
- naming after a "monster fight"→
- multiple single combats→
- healing by divine father, (Lugh)→
- tragic combat with his best friend→
- sparing the enemy
- (outside *Táin*--a heroic death once his *geas* is violated)

Gilgamesh

- Text begins with his unruly adolescence→
- "Tamed" by Enkidu→
- The heroic quest→
- Loss of his companion, and subsequent futile grief→
- Search for immortality→
- Temporary success→
- Loss of the magical flower→
- Resignation to his true role as king of Uruk

Gilgamesh: Heroic Adventures as "Training"

- "But it is one of the lessons of fairy-stories (if we can speak of the lessons of things that do not lecture) that on callow, lumpish, and selfish youth peril, sorrow, and the shadow of death can bestow dignity, and even sometimes wisdom."

(J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories,"45)

The Major Players

- Gilgamesh, the Shepherd-King of Uruk
- Enkidu, his best friend and battle comrade
- Humbaba, magically-endowed guardian of the cedar forest
- Ishtar (Akkadian Inanna), Goddess of the Moon
- Utnapishtim, survivor of the primeval flood

The three significant female interventions:

- (I and II) Shamhat, the temple priestess, who prepares Enkidu for his encounter with Gilgamesh;
- (VI) Ishtar, the goddess of love; who sets the term of the heroes' triumph;
- (IX) Siduri, the tavern-keeper, an independent business-woman whose advice, predictably, is scorned by Gilgamesh.