

## Module 2: Ancient River Valley Civilizations

### Topic 1 Application: A Summary of Gilgamesh



Gilgamesh, although he thought that he "was wise in all matters," had to endure a journey of travail in order to find peace. Two-thirds human and one-third deity, the hero as king is unaware of his own strengths and weaknesses. He oppresses his own people. In response to complaints by the citizens of Uruk, the gods create Enkidu, a double, who becomes the hero's friend and companion. Initially described as a wild animal-like creature, Enkidu is transformed into a civilized being. No longer animal-like, he now possesses wisdom "like a god," a distinguishing characteristic of humans. After an initial confrontation, Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends and decide to

make a name for themselves by journeying to the Cedar Forest to fight against Humbaba, the giant whom the gods have placed as guardian of the sacred trees. The two kill the monster and take cedar back to Uruk as their prize. Back in Uruk, the goddess Ishtar sends the Bull of Heaven to destroy Uruk and punish Gilgamesh. But Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet the challenge and Gilgamesh slays the bull. The gods retaliate by causing Enkidu to fall ill and die. Gilgamesh, devastated by the death of his friend, now realizes that he is part mortal and sets out on a fruitless journey to seek immortality.

On his travels in search of the secret of everlasting life, Gilgamesh meets a scorpion man and later a divine female tavern keeper who tries to dissuade him from continuing his search. But Gilgamesh is arrogant and determined. Upon learning that Uta-napishtim, a legendary hero who had obtained eternal life, dwelt on an island across the "Waters of Death," Gilgamesh crosses the sea and is greeted by the immortal hero. Uta-napishtim explains to Gilgamesh that his quest is in vain, as humans were created to be mortal. But upon questioning, Uta-napishtim reveals that he was placed by the gods on this remote island after being informed that the world would be destroyed by a great flood. Building a boxlike ark in the shape of a cube, Uta-napishtim took on board his possessions, his riches, his family members, craftsmen, and creatures of the earth. After riding out the storm, he and his wife were granted immortality and settled on the island far from civilization. Devastated by this news and realizing that he, too, will someday expire, Gilgamesh returns to Uruk and examines its defensive wall. Finally, he comprehends that the everlasting fame he so vainly sought lay not in eternal life but in his accomplishments on behalf of both his people and his god.

Spar, Ira. "Gilgamesh". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gilg/hd\\_gilg.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gilg/hd_gilg.htm) (April 2009)