

Mesopotamia

Before You Read

THE HEAD OF HUMBABA

Background

The men and women who lived four thousand years ago would be astounded by the world we live in, and we, very likely, would be astounded by theirs. Obviously, the world has changed in countless ways. Science and technology have transformed the physical world we inhabit, and social and political evolution have altered the way we live. Nations, empires, religions, and languages have come and gone. People now have different beliefs, different worries, different problems.

So you would expect a story four thousand years old to have little to do with you or anything around you today. Your life is so different from the lives of the storyteller and his characters that you might have nothing in common, no shared experience. *Gilgamesh*, for instance, is such an ancient story—a poem, as all stories

were in those days. The story was recorded on clay tablets around 2000 B.C. in Sumer, a part of ancient Mesopotamia.

Gilgamesh is the king of Uruk, an ancient Sumerian city. His great friend is Enkidu. Craving an adventure that will bring fame, Gilgamesh convinces Enkidu to journey with him to the cedar forest. There they confront the forest's guardian, the evil giant Humbaba.

Reading Skills and Strategies



Responding to the Text

As you read this adventure from the epic *Gilgamesh*, take notes on a separate piece of paper. Record your responses to what you're reading. Write down any questions you have about the text. Note any details that remind you of *Beowulf*, or of other monster-slaying stories.



Gilgamesh. Relief (8th century B.C.) from Temple of Sargon II. Khorsabad, Iraq. Louvre, Paris.

The Head of Humbaba

from *Gilgamesh*: A Verse Narrative

retold by Herbert Mason

- At dawn Gilgamesh raised his ax
And struck at the great cedar.
When Humbaba heard the sound of falling trees,
He hurried down the path that they had seen
5 But only he had traveled. Gilgamesh felt weak
At the sound of Humbaba's footsteps and called to Shamash⁶
Saying, I have followed you in the way decreed;
Why am I abandoned now? Suddenly the winds
Sprang up. They saw the great head of Humbaba
10 Like a water buffalo's bellowing down the path,
His huge and clumsy legs, his flailing¹¹ arms
Thrashing at phantoms in his precious trees.
His single stroke could cut a cedar down
And leave no mark on him. His shoulders,
15 Like a porter's¹⁵ under building stones,
Were permanently bent by what he bore;
He was the slave who did the work for gods
But whom the gods would never notice.
Monstrous in his contortion, he aroused
20 The two almost to pity.
But pity was the thing that might have killed.
It made them pause just long enough to show
How pitiless he was to them. Gilgamesh in horror saw
Him strike the back of Enkidu and beat him to the ground
25 Until he thought his friend was crushed to death.
He stood still watching as the monster leaned to make
His final strike against his friend, unable
To move to help him, and then Enkidu slid
Along the ground like a ram making its final lunge
30 On wounded knees. Humbaba fell and seemed
To crack the ground itself in two, and Gilgamesh,
As if this fall had snapped him from his daze,
Returned to life

6. **Shamash** (shā'māsh'): the sun god. The god has been guiding the hero.

11. **flailing**: swinging.

15. **porter's**: A porter is a person who carries things.

And stood over Humbaba with his ax
 35 Raised high above his head watching the monster plead
 In strangled sobs and desperate appeals
 The way the sea contorts under a violent squall.^o
 I'll serve you as I served the gods, Humbaba said;
 I'll build you houses from their sacred trees.
 40 Enkidu feared his friend was weakening
 And called out: Gilgamesh! Don't trust him!
 As if there were some hunger in himself
 That Gilgamesh was feeling
 That turned him momentarily to yearn
 45 For someone who would serve, he paused;
 And then he raised his ax up higher
 And swung it in a perfect arc
 Into Humbaba's neck. He reached out
 To touch the wounded shoulder of his friend,
 50 And late that night he reached again
 To see if he was yet asleep, but there was only
 Quiet breathing. The stars against the midnight sky
 Were sparkling like mica^o in a riverbed.
 In the slight breeze
 55 The head of Humbaba was swinging from a tree.

37. **squall**: sudden, brief storm.

53. **mica** (mī'kə): colored, translucent mineral.

FINDING COMMON GROUND



Review the notes you took as you read this ancient story. Did you find common ground between yourself and Gilgamesh and his friend? What other responses to the story did you record? Did you have any questions about the story—any details that you did not understand?

Read the story a second time, still taking notes. When you finish the second reading, review your understanding of the story. Are your questions answered? Do you have any different responses?

Now meet with other readers and compare notes.

- Is the text clear?
- Does it remind you of any details in Beowulf's story?
- Have you ever experienced any of Gilgamesh's feelings?
- Does the story have anything to say to people today?

Stone statues of Mesopotamian god Aby and his wife, from Tell Asmar (2600 B.C.).
 Iraq Museum, Baghdad.

