

# Gilgamesh and Enkidu

## *A Middle East Legend*

Long ago, the youthful King Gilgamesh ruled over the land of Uruk. He was part god and part mortal. He was known as a great builder, and he always had a new project for his subjects to finish. Day after day he commanded his people to build walls, buildings, and temples. The overworked people tired of the tasks Gilgamesh demanded.

Gilgamesh was a great warrior as well as a builder. He liked nothing better than one-on-one battles with the young men in his kingdom. Gilgamesh was very strong and he always won.

The people of Uruk complained to the gods about the work and fighting they had to do for Gilgamesh. "Our king doesn't honor traditions," they said. "He does whatever he wishes."

The Earth goddess agreed. From a lump of clay, she created a man named Enkidu, who was the equal of Gilgamesh. "This man will be a companion for Gilgamesh and help him rule wisely," she said.

Enkidu was wild. He was as hairy as the beasts, ate grass like the animals, and had no knowledge of people.



A hunter from Uruk set traps in the grasslands where Enkidu lived. The next day, when the hunter returned to collect the animals caught in the traps, he found his traps destroyed. When the hunter walked near the water hole, he saw Enkidu drinking with the animals. As the hunter aimed his arrow at a gazelle, Enkidu yelled and charged. All the animals fled. The hunter, fearing for his life, ran also.

The hunter went to King Gilgamesh and told him about the wild man. "He is as strong as you are, my king."

"I must see this man and fight against him. This time, I will fight with one who is my equal. I will send a priestess from Goddess Ishtar's temple to teach him how to be human. She can then bring him to Uruk."

When the priestess found Enkidu, she said, "You are not like these animals. I will sing songs to you about life and tell you how to live like the people of Uruk."

When the priestess finished her songs and stories, Enkidu returned to the water hole to say good-bye to his friends the animals. They fled from him, knowing that he was no longer one of them. He was human and they feared him.

Enkidu followed the priestess to Uruk. Gilgamesh was waiting for him by the city gate. He pushed Enkidu aside and would not let him enter the city. The two men fought. Enkidu knew he was stronger than Gilgamesh, but he didn't wish to injure the king. "I can't defeat you," Enkidu said as the two men struggled. The fighting ended, and Enkidu went to the palace with Gilgamesh.

All the people of Uruk welcomed Enkidu. Now Gilgamesh had someone his equal to battle. The king's adventures with Enkidu kept him busy. He didn't have time to give the people new projects. He followed all traditions so that Enkidu could learn about them.

Gilgamesh wanted to accomplish great deeds so people would remember him after his death. He talked Enkidu into a trip to the Cedar Mountains to gather the strong, sweet-smelling wood. "I will challenge Humbaba, the monster who guards the trees," Gilgamesh said. "If I destroy this evil creature, my name will be recorded and remembered forever."

Enkidu, Gilgamesh, and soldiers from Uruk set out on the long journey. After several days they came to the towering cedar trees. Gilgamesh swung his ax at the tallest tree and began to chop it down.

Humbaba heard the noise and roared in anger. "Who dares to cut down my trees?" The sound of his voice made Gilgamesh tremble.

"Shamash, the god of the sun, will protect you," Enkidu said. His words gave Gilgamesh courage.

"I am Gilgamesh!" the king shouted. "I have come to rid this land of the evil Humbaba."

Together Enkidu and Gilgamesh fought Humbaba and killed him.

Not only was Gilgamesh strong, he was also very handsome. The goddess Ishtar fell in love with him and asked him to marry her. Gilgamesh refused, even though she promised great riches and power. "You have destroyed all men who have loved you," he said.

Ishtar asked her father for the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh. When she sent the Bull to Uruk, his roars cracked the earth. People fell into the chasms and died.

Enkidu seized the Bull of Heaven and fought against it. He and Gilgamesh killed the bull after a long struggle. Then Enkidu insulted Ishtar and threatened her. He spoke ill words about the other deities as well. The gods and goddesses decreed that Enkidu must be punished for his deeds and his words. An illness was sent to Enkidu and he died.

Gilgamesh grieved for his friend and gave Enkidu a funeral and burial worthy of a god. The people mourned Enkidu because he had tamed the wild King Gilgamesh and given him wisdom.

