

The Epic of Gilgamesh

**A spiritual journey from youth to maturity
Heroism of arrogance and rebellion to heroism of wisdom and realism**

General Introduction

Civilization Sequence Courses:

- General education looking at civilizations from the ancient epochs till our contemporary world.
- A better understanding of the individual and his place in the universe.
- C.S. courses are based on reading primary texts.
- Text interpretations and analysis.
- Thinking together about the individual and the questions he raises in his quest to understand himself and others, the natural and the supernatural world
- CVSP courses:
Sequence one courses: 201-202-205- ancient world up to the renaissance.
Sequence two courses: 203-204-206- pre-modern to contemporary world.

The Epic of Gilgamesh: The most significant literary creation of the whole of ancient Mesopotamia.

I- What is an epic?

- The epic is a long narrative poem that celebrates the great deeds of legendary heroes.
- Epic poetry is often said to be divinely inspired, a tale of long ago where we are taken to a world of enchantment and super reality.
- Exhausting quests and difficult journeys, battles against monsters, supernatural beings, forces of nature..

II- Ancient peoples in Mesopotamia

- Mesopotamia is a Greek name meaning (the land) "between the two rivers", The Tigris and the Euphrates.
- The early inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia were the Sumerians. They discovered the earliest writing system: the cuneiform script. They spoke a language, Sumerian, that cannot be compared to any known language.
- Gilgamesh was a Sumerian. .king of Uruk . He lived around 2700 B.C.
- The Akkadians are a Semitic people who spoke a language close to Arabic. They lived with the Sumerians in Southern Mesopotamia. Around 2000 B.C. their language replaced Sumerian as a spoken language

III- Background of the Epic

- After the death of Gilgamesh, oral transmission of his great deeds..
- Short , unconnected episodes or tales about Gilgamesh were written in Sumerian language .
- First integrated and coherent version of the Epic was written in Akkadian towards the middle of the second millennium B.C.
- Several copies or versions of the epic were found in various cities of the ancient Near East.. The standard version which we are reading was written on 12 clay tablets. These were found in the library of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal in Nineveh.

IV- Brief Summary of the Epic

V- From Youth to Maturity

The Epic of Gilgamesh is a journey from youth to maturity where we accompany the hero in his existential change through encountering the different characters, gods and humans, and his experiences that led to this change. This is how as we walk along with the hero, the meanings and themes project from every winding giving us a panorama of the different stages or episodes in Gilgamesh's growth and development.

a- Heroism of Youth : Arrogance and Rebellion

- Power of a king: arrogance and injustice-imbalance in the city
- Primitiveness and civilization- role of the harlot.
- Fame and adventure: restlessness and anxiety- Forest Journey and killing of Humbaba
- Killing the bull of heaven- consequences-role of Ishtar
- Enkidu's dream: Idea of the underworld in ancient Mesopotamia.
- Gilgamesh's fear of death... Existential anxiety, withdrawal

b- Gilgamesh's Search for the Truth- Towards a New Self

On leaving Uruk Gilgamesh reverses Enkidu's journey from wilderness to civilization, Gilgamesh puts animal skin and leaves Uruk thus abandoning all privileges and responsibilities... He steps across the boundary of youth and will return to Uruk as an adult...

- Man Scorpion
Shamash
Siduri
Urshanabi
Uthnapishtin

- Death is inevitable
- He is worn out and his cheeks pale
- Encounter with Siduri
- Gilgamesh stands before his last hope Uthnapishtin. Same questions and same answers..
- The story of the flood and old Testament parallels.
- Gilgamesh's failure in overcoming sleep for seven days is an indication of his limitations.
- His last hope, the plant of youth (Gilgamesh calls it when speaking to Urshanabi: "the antidote to the fear of death") is lost to a serpent.
- Gilgamesh's transformation has begun from egoism to altruism... instead of eating the plant, he wants to take it to Uruk.
- The plant is eaten by a snake.
- Gilgamesh in front of two roads: despair or freedom

c- Heroism of Maturity

- Gilgamesh chooses freedom.
- The change came gradually as a result of his experience, advice of others, but above all he has come to wisdom by himself.
- Going back to the city restoring human balance.
Heroism in accepting reality.
- Gilgamesh says to Urshanabi" this is the wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal". The poem ends where it began...

Conclusion

Gilgamesh returned to Uruk acting as a responsible, compassionate king. Out of the depths, somehow, Gilgamesh has managed to "close the gate of sorrow". Only when he is freed from his restless heart can he fully return to the place he started from. Gilgamesh has absorbed the deeper wisdom of accepting reality, coming back to his city and enjoying the works of his hands.

"This too was the work of Gilgamesh, the king, who knew the countries of the world. He was wise he saw mysteries and knew secret things, he brought us a tale of the days before the flood. He went on a long journey, was weary, worn out with labor, and returning engraved on a stone the whole story"(The Epic of Gilgamesh, ed. by N.K. Sandars, - Penguin Books, 1972), p.117

"O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab, great is thy praise" (p.119)

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