

Most of us in western society are more or less familiar with the great names of Classical mythology. Some of us were introduced to the heroes in storybooks when we were children; others have come to them later in life through the medium of television and its tongue-in-cheek portrayal of Hercules. For the most part, the heroes we are familiar with are the heroes of the ancient Greek world: Hercules himself (or Heracles as he was to the Greeks), Odysseus, Achilles, Jason, Theseus – the list goes on and on. But the Greeks were not the inventors of mythological heroes, and a prototype for many of the figures of Greek mythology can be found a thousand years earlier in Mesopotamia: Gilgamesh.

The tale of Gilgamesh, like those of some of the figures of Greek mythology, seems to have been inspired by a real person, a ruler of the Mesopotamian city-state of Uruk around 2700 or 2600 BC. But the historical figure has been completely overwhelmed by the mythology that attached to him, a mythology that made him a hero of the classic type: a man of divine ancestry and surpassing strength who performs deeds impossible for ordinary mortals, but who nevertheless suffers and dies, unlike the gods whom he emulates. His tale has much in common with that of Hercules, and may well have inspired many aspects of the portrayal of the Greek hero.

Gilgamesh is the child of a god and a mortal, like Heracles and Perseus, who were the sons of Zeus by mortal women. In the case of Gilgamesh, the deity involved is his mother, the goddess Ninsun; one could compare Achilles, also the son of a goddess. One general truth for heroes is that having a divine parent is only enough to bestow extraordinary and heroic characteristics – it is not enough, by itself, to bestow immortality. Hence all heroes ultimately die. Even Gilgamesh, who appears to be a fraction more “divine” than his Greek counterparts (he is a genetic curiosity, said to be two-thirds divine and only one-third mortal), must face the prospect of death. In the meantime, however, his elevated ancestry makes him a powerful figure and one destined to pursue a heroic course in life.

In fact, Gilgamesh’s heroic nature proves to be just a little too supercharged for his people to endure:

The men of Uruk muttered in their houses, “Gilgamesh sounds the tocsin for his amusement, his arrogance has no bounds by day or night. No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all, even the children; yet the king should be a shepherd to his people. His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior’s daughter nor the wife of the noble....”

Gilgamesh’s energies are simply too uncanny, too dynamic for the ordinary mortals around him. His people pray for help, and the gods respond to their appeal:

The gods cried to Aruru, the goddess of creation, “You made him, O Aruru, now create his equal; let it be as like him as his own reflection, his second self, stormy heart for stormy heart. Let them contend together and leave Uruk in quiet.”

So the answer to Uruk’s dilemma is to create a “sidekick” for Gilgamesh, a comrade who will draw off his energies in a more productive way. Hence the gods create Enkidu, who is to become Gilgamesh’s alter ego, literally his “second self”. Heroes very often have a close companion like this; one thinks not only of Hercules and Iolaus, but also of Achilles and Patroclus – or Frodo and Sam. The alter ego is usually a “lesser” figure than the primary hero, but he is there to help the hero, to reflect his glory, and, in psychological terms, to represent an alternate side of the hero’s own ego. Since the sidekick is in a sense a reflection of the hero himself, the bond between them is usually extraordinarily close. Should the sidekick die, it is as if the hero himself experiences death – Achilles felt intolerable anguish at the death of Patroclus, just as Hercules felt it (on TV anyway) at the death of Iolaus.

But for Gilgamesh and Enkidu, such fears are still in the future. For the moment, the two friends decide to embark on a quest of heroic adventure: they will journey to the great cedar forest known as the “Land of the Living” and do battle with the monstrous guardian of the forest, the wonderfully named Humbaba. Enkidu, slightly less heroic than Gilgamesh, expresses some trepidation at the notion of this undertaking:

“Enlil has appointed Humbaba to guard the forest and armed him in sevenfold terrors, terrible to all flesh is Humbaba. When he roars it is

like the torrent of the storm, his breath is like fire, and his jaws are death itself. What man would willingly walk into that country and explore its depths? I tell you, it is not an equal struggle when one fights with Humbaba; he is a great warrior, a battering-ram."

But Gilgamesh stiffens Enkidu's resolve by means of some fatalistic reasoning that will come back to haunt him:

"Where is the man who can clamber to heaven? Only the gods live for ever with glorious Shamash, but as for us men, our days are numbered, our occupations are a breath of wind. How is this, already you are afraid! I will go first, though I am your lord, and you may safely call out, 'Forward, there is nothing to fear!' Then if I fall I leave behind me a name that endures; men will say of me, 'Gilgamesh has fallen in fight with ferocious Humbaba.' Long after the child has been born in my house, they will say it, and remember."

So Gilgamesh reasons that since all men, even heroes, must die, it is better to die a glorious death and thereby achieve the only kind of immortality mortals can hope for: everlasting fame. Compare the sentiments of Achilles: offered a choice between a long but undistinguished life, or a short life of glory, he chose the heroic option and accepted an early death so that his name could live on forever.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu are successful in their battle against Humbaba. As a creature representative of death and chaos, he is symbolic of the first stage of the hero's struggle against death. At the last moment the monster begs for pity, but this time it is Enkidu who stiffens Gilgamesh's resolve. "Do not listen, Gilgamesh," he says, "this Humbaba must die." Gilgamesh then steps forward and slays Humbaba, in a way slaying death itself, if only in symbolic terms.

When Gilgamesh and Enkidu return to Uruk, they are resplendent in their glory, particularly Gilgamesh. Dangerously so, perhaps, for Gilgamesh's beauty, after he bathes and adorns himself, is such that it attracts the notice of the goddess Ishtar, goddess both of love and of war. She suggests to Gilgamesh that he and she could indulge in a spot of lovemaking, and Gilgamesh rather unwisely turns her down:

"How would it go with me? Your lovers have found you like a brazier which smoulders in the cold, a backdoor which keeps out neither squall of wind nor storm, a castle which crushes the garrison, pitch that blackens the bearer, a water-skin that chafes the carrier, a stone which falls from the parapet, a battering-ram turned back from the enemy, a sandal that trips the wearer. Which of your lovers did you ever love forever?"

He goes on, still more unwisely, to specify many of Ishtar's lovers and recount their grim fates. In a rage, Ishtar departs for the halls of her father, the god Anu, demanding permission to take vengeance on the man who has slighted her:

"My father, give me the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh. If you refuse I will break in the doors of hell and smash the bolts. I shall bring up the dead to eat food like the living; and the hosts of dead will outnumber the living."

Faced with such a persuasive argument, Anu grants his permission, and the Bull of Heaven is sent down to create havoc in Uruk:

With his first snort cracks opened in the earth and a hundred young men fell down to death. With his second snort more cracks opened and two hundred fell down to death.

This clearly is a case for the heroic Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The two come to Uruk's rescue and kill the Bull of Heaven. But this is an ambiguous act. The Bull of Heaven, terrifying as it is, is a creature of the gods; and Enkidu makes matters worse by tearing off the Bull's genitals and smacking Ishtar in the face with them. The gods cannot tolerate such hubris, and decide that punishment is in order for Gilgamesh and Enkidu. One of the two must die. *(To be continued)*