

# Ancient Literature Unit

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF ORAL TRADITION AND THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

# Beginnings of Literature

People first began by telling stories orally.

-- They could pass on news to people in other cities as they traveled from town to town.

-- Most often, **this oral tradition means important events were put into poems and songs** so they were easy to remember.

# Beginnings

For many centuries, **these poems and songs were passed from generation to generation.**

They were added onto and changed and became a part of the history of the people.

As goods and supplies were traded among various people, so were the songs and poems.

# Writing

Over time, as people lived in larger cities and traded farther and farther from home, they needed a way to keep better track of things.

1. First they drew pictures that represented items.

2. These pictures showed things and simple ideas.

# Writing

Here are some of the earliest examples of what was the beginning of writing. We call them pictographs today.



# Writing

- The first pictographs appeared in Sumeria about 3100 B.C. and dealt with inventories.
- Each of the Sumerian pictographs had a particular meaning. It would take hundreds of them to tell a story, so they were mainly used for simple record keeping.

# Writing

- By 2500 B.C. the pictographs were used in legal documents.
- Then by 2100, **scribes (people who were ancient writers)** began to use the pictures to represent not only actual things, but a sound associated with the picture.



# Writing



































1. As the actual picture became less and less important, they were not made as accurate.
2. The scribes began to use a stick like item, called a stylus to make wedge shapes in wet clay.
3. These new symbols were called cuneiforms because of their shape.



▲ Writing on a soft clay tablet with a reed pen.



# Writing

BIRD				
FISH				
DONKEY				
OX				
SUN				
GRAIN				
ORCHARD				
PLOUGH				
BOOMERANG				
FOOT				

The ancient Sumerians had more than 700 separate cuneiforms.

Obviously, this would have been a difficult and time consuming way to tell a story!

# Writing

Eventually, people learned that building words with sounds was easier than with pictures.

People developed alphabets from the last of the cuneiform languages.

	'aleph	[ʾ]		lamedh	[l]
	beth	[b]		mem	[m]
	gimmel	[g]		nun	[n]
	daleth	[d]		samekh	[s]
	he	[h]		'ayin	[ʾ]
	waw	[w]		pe	[p]
	zayin	[z]		tsade	[ʃ]
	heth	[h]		qoph	[q]
	teth	[t]		resh	[r]
	yodh	[y]		sin	[ʃ]
	kaph	[k]		taw	[t]

# Writing

Alphabetic Writing = sounds

Nonalphabetic Writing = whole  
words or syllables

# Prehistory

**Prehistory** is defined as all the time before written language.

Normally, this era is considered to cover a **time period from the beginnings of humankind up to about 8000 B.C.**

# Prehistory

During prehistoric times, people normally lived in small inter-related family groups.

They wandered from place to place following crops and animals to hunt.

Their lives were mainly concerned with finding food and shelter.

We know most of our information about these peoples through sculptures, paintings and debris.

# End of Prehistory

For unknown reasons, this lifestyle began to change in the Middle East around 7000 B.C.

- People began to grow their own crops and raise their own animals instead of just following them.
- People had easy access to food, which lead to more free time.



# End of Prehistory

As small groups of people developed into large groups, cities grew, and with the cities developed:

- Government
- Trade
- Artistry
- Organized religion
- Technology (the wheel about 5,500 B.C.)



# The Sumerian Culture

- Lived in mud houses
- Agrarian-based society
- CITY-STATES-the political structure
- ZIGGURATS-temples for worship
- CUNEIFORM-writing system: stylus +clay tablets



# The Sumerian Worldview

- ◉ Despite numerous achievements, Sumerians held a pessimistic worldview.
- ◉ Sumerian culture was exposed to dangers of flood, drought, and warfare.
- ◉ They believed that earthly life was fleeting and perilous.
- ◉ They held no consoling vision of salvation or happiness after death.



# Epic Conventions

- **epic**— long narrative poem about a larger than life hero who embodies the values of his or her people
- **invocation**—formal plea for inspiration
  - “O’ glorious Sun god—Shamash!”
- **epithet**—elaborate nicknames for characters
  - “glorious master of all” to describe Gilgamesh
- **epic simile**—longer and more elaborate simile
- **epic hero**—legendary, larger than life figure whose adventures form the core of the poem

# The Epic of Gilgamesh

- Greatest surviving literary work of ancient Mesopotamia
- Series of separate tales describing the hero, Gilgamesh
- Gilgamesh-ruled ancient Uruk around 2700 BCE
- Fascinating insight into the evolution of storytelling
- **ORAL TRADITION**—the transmission of songs, tales, or myths from one generation to the next by word of mouth

# The Epic Hero's Journey

- ◎ **Birth—hero** has fabulous circumstances surrounding conception, birth and childhood (establishes pedigree)
- ◎ **Call to Adventure—hero** is called by some external event or messenger
- ◎ **Helper—hero** will often receive aid from a protective figure
- ◎ **Crossing the Threshold** —hero must undergo an ordeal to pass from the everyday world into the world of adventure

# The Epic Hero's Journey, Cont'd.

- ◎ **Tests**— hero must undergo a series of tests
- ◎ **Helpers** —hero is often accompanied by a helper who assists in the series of tests
- ◎ **Climax/Final Battle** —critical moment in which the hero battles a monster, wizard, warrior, etc.
- ◎ **Flight** —after accomplishing the mission, hero must return to everyday world

# The Epic Hero's Journey, Cont'd.

- ◎ **Return** —hero crosses the threshold of adventure and returns to everyday world
- ◎ **Elixir** —the object, knowledge or blessing the hero acquired during the adventure

# Sumeria

The best known story of the Sumerians is the ***Epic of Gilgamesh***.

- It is the first known **Epic Poem** (a long narrative poem that relates the great deeds of a hero).
- It tells the story of the first known **Epic Hero** (the larger-than-life main character whose mighty deeds reflect the values admired by the society).

# MESOPOTAMIA

- ⦿ “Land between two rivers”-Greek Origin
- ⦿ TIGRIS & EUPHRATES
- ⦿ Present day Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey
- ⦿ “Fertile Crescent”
- ⦿ CULTURES
  - Sumeria
  - Babylon
  - Assyria



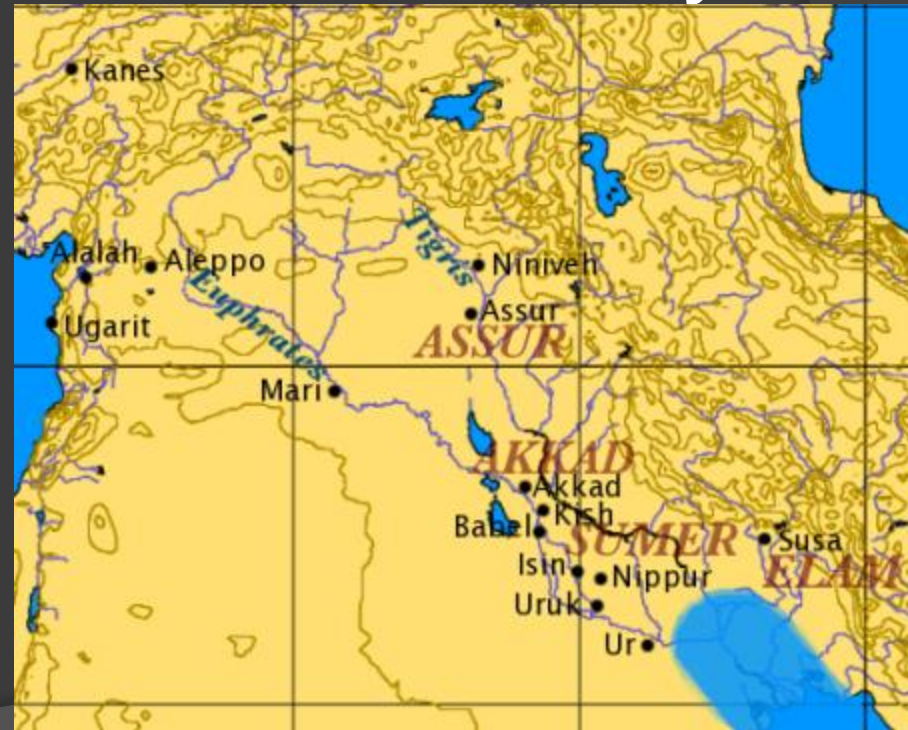


# Mesopotamia

One of the first areas where civilization developed was in **Mesopotamia**.

This area is between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers, in what is **modern day Iraq**.

This area is called **The Cradle of Civilization**.



# Mesopotamia

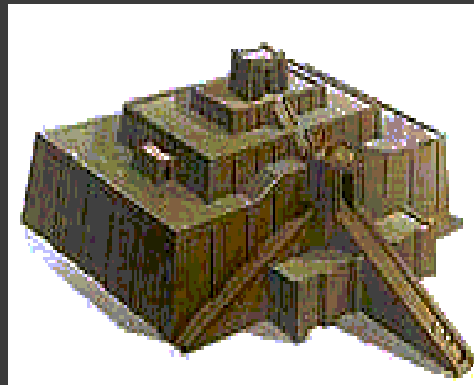
As civilization developed in this area, laws were developed and irrigation systems were created to grow crops.

Eventually, individual cities grew into states that were collected into one main society.

The first of the known societies in **Mesopotamia** was that of the **Sumerians**.

# Sumeria

1. There was a **Polytheistic Society**. They had many gods instead of one.
  - Each city-state had its own set of gods.
  - There were temples in each city called ziggurats.
2. They created the first known written language, cuneiform.



# Sumeria

They developed many new technologies

- The potter's wheel
- Sailboat
- Plow
- Seven day week
- The lunar year
- The sixty minute hour and sixty second minute



# Sumeria

**The *Epic of Gilgamesh* tells the story of Gilgamesh, the “God-King” of Uruk.**

**Gilgamesh is supposedly  $\frac{2}{3}$  god and  $\frac{1}{3}$  human, which makes him mortal.**

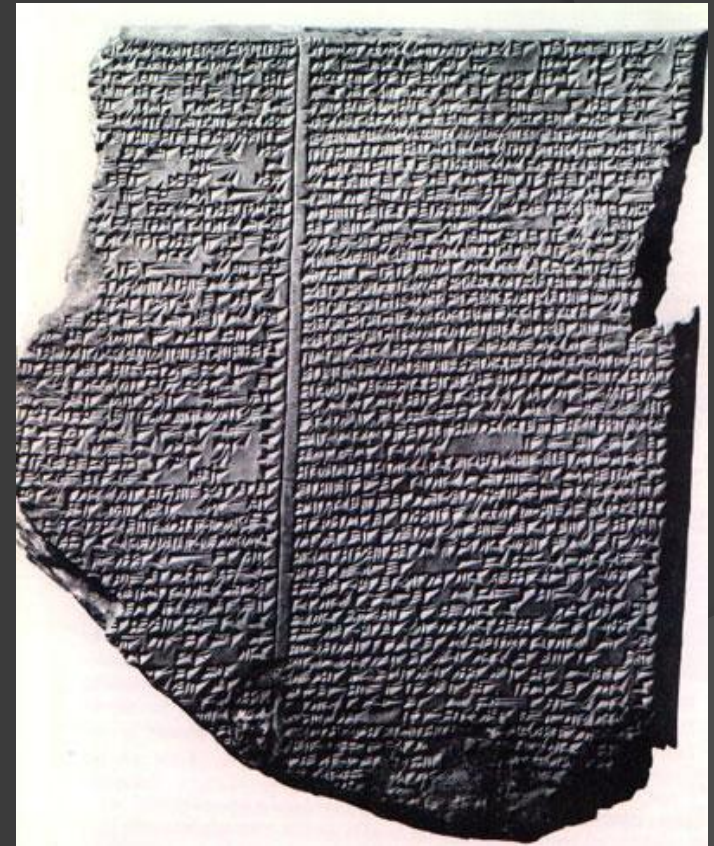
**This poem tells of his great quest, a journey, to search for immortality and to find answers to his questions about life and death.**

# The Epic of Gilgamesh

This epic is one of the oldest known stories to be put preserved in written form.

The events occurred somewhere between 2750 and 2500 B.C.

It was originally composed on 12 clay tablets in the Sumerian cuneiform.





# Gilgamesh

The story as engraved on the tablets is the writing down of an oral retelling.

The story is supposedly being narrated by Gilgamesh at the end of his life, after his adventures and his journey.

# Gilgamesh

**Gilgamesh is a hero because he is more beautiful, powerful, and courageous than us – but he is mortal, just like us.**

The epic is the story of his search for immortality and his search to understand why he must die.