

The epic *Gilgamesh* is based on the life of an ancient Babylonian king who ruled over the city of Uruk nearly five thousand years ago. In the epic, Gilgamesh is said to be superhuman: two-thirds god and one-third human. He is a harsh ruler of his people until he befriends Enkidu, a wild boy who was born and raised among the animals of the forest. Gradually, Gilgamesh and Enkidu form a bond that transforms each into a gentler, wiser being.

After becoming bored with life in Uruk, Gilgamesh plans an adventure for Enkidu and himself. They are to travel to the famous cedar forest to collect wood for

the city. In order to take the cedar, the friends will have to kill a monster named Humbaba, the keeper of the forest. Gilgamesh

and Enkidu are nervous about their impending encounter with Humbaba.

The translator of this selection, **Herbert Mason**, is a professor of history and religion at Boston University. In addition to his retelling of *Gilgamesh*, Mason has written several novels; a novella; collections of essays, reflections, and poetry; a dramatic poem; and translations of various texts. *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative* was a nominee for the 1971 National Book Award.

Clay mask of Humbaba's head from Sippar, Southern Iraq, c. 1800 BCE. British Museum, London, Great Britain.

The Head of Humbaba

from *Gilgamesh*

Verse Translation 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 Shamash¹
Saying, I have followed you in the way decreed;²
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 flailing³ 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's⁴ 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,⁵ 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

1. **Shamash.** The sun god of Sumerian mythology. Shamash has promised Gilgamesh's mother that he will look after Gilgamesh and guide him in his conflict with Humbaba.

2. **decreed.** Ordered or commanded, as in a law

3. **flailing.** Thrashing or swinging wildly

4. **porter's.** One who transports, or carries, objects

5. **contortion.** Twisted or malformed feature; deformity

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
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 squall⁶
I'll serve you as I served the gods, Humbaba said;

6. **squall.** Harsh storm that appears suddenly

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 mica⁷ in a riverbed.
In the slight breeze
55 The head of Humbaba was swinging from a tree. ♦

7. **mica.** Crystal-like mineral, often characterized by a colorful luster