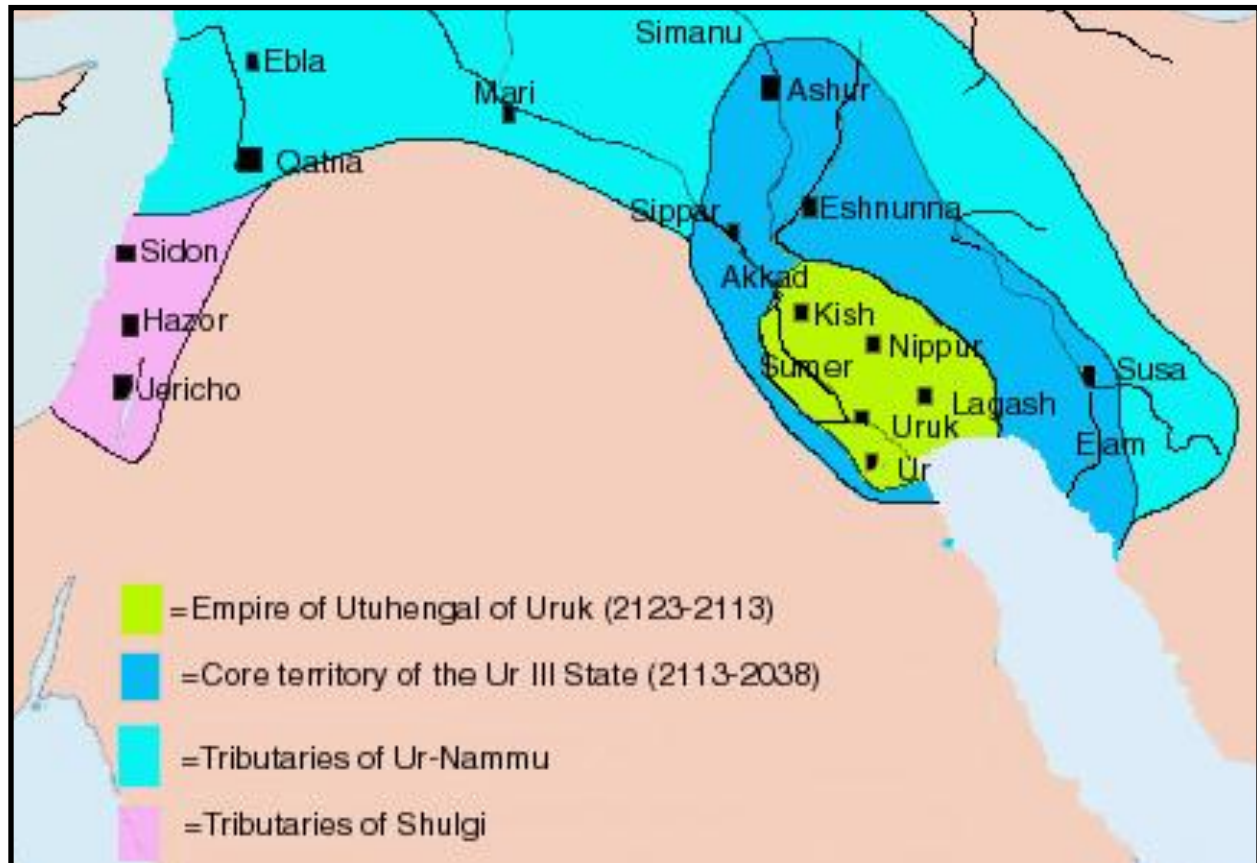


# The Sumerian Stories about Gilgamesh

[During the NeoSumerian period when Ur dominated Sumer, the Sumerians began telling stories about a certain Gilgamesh of Uruk.]

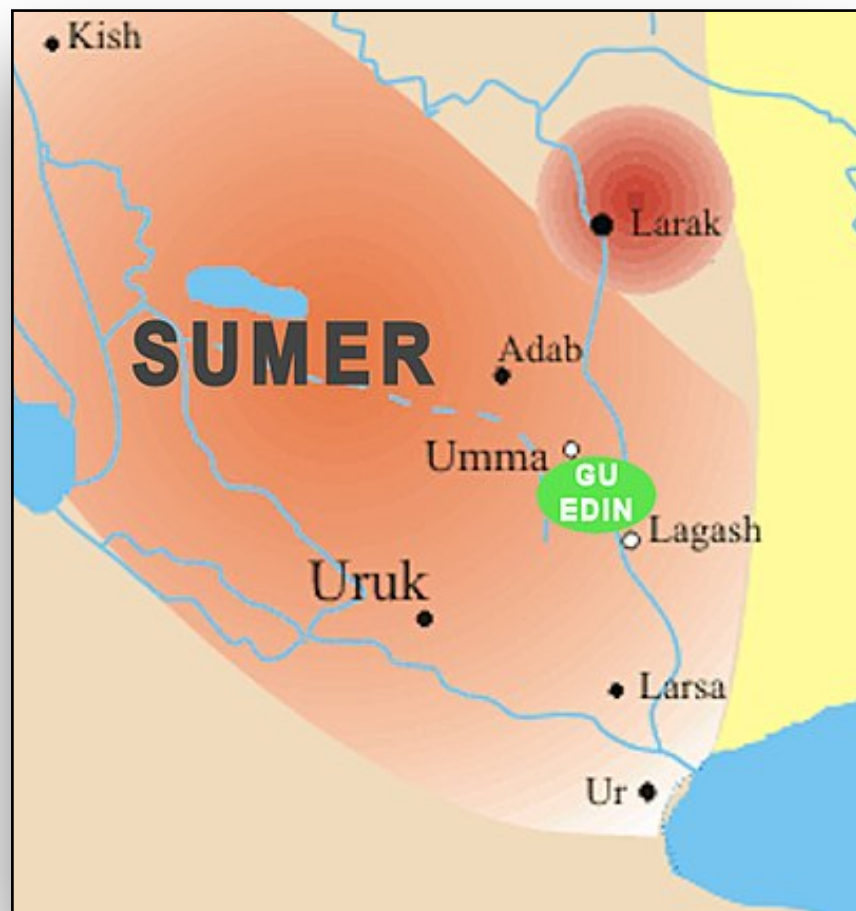


## 1. Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Underworld

As the wise god Enki sailed his boat down the Euphrates through a very violent storm, the storm's winds uprooted a single halub tree, which the goddess Inanna then brought to her city of Uruk, where she planted the tree. Inanna hoped that, once the tree matured, she could use its wood to make herself a throne. Yet when the tree finally matured, Inanna could not harvest it, because a snake, bird, and demon had made the tree their home. In frustration, she asked the sun god Utu for help. Yet even though

he was her brother, he refused to help her. Then, she asked for help from the warrior Gilgamesh, who also was her brother. Gilgamesh killed the snake, drove off the bird & demon, and cut down the tree for her. Out of the tree's wood, she made herself a throne, and she let Gilgamesh keep the leftover scraps of wood from the tree.

For himself, Gilgamesh made a war drum & drumsticks out of the leftover wood from the tree. Yet displeased with his drumming, the women



of Uruk complained to the gods, and so the gods caused Gilgamesh's

drum & drumsticks to fall into the underworld. Gilgamesh tried to reach for his drum & drumsticks, but he was unable to retrieve them, so his servant Enkidu volunteered to fetch them. Yet even though Gilgamesh provided Enkidu with very strict instructions on how to behave down there, Enkidu ignored his lord's instructions, and he accordingly became trapped in the underworld. To help free Enkidu, Gilgamesh asked the god Enlil for help, but Enlil completely ignored Gilgamesh. Yet when Gilgamesh asked Enki for help, Enki commanded the sun god Utu to bring Enkidu back from the underworld. Once Enkidu returned to the world of the living, he told Gilgamesh what he had seen down below in the underworld.

## 2. Gilgamesh and Huwawa

Gilgamesh announced to his servant Enkidu that he would set off for the mountains to do great things so that he would become famous. Yet since the Cedar Forest in the mountains was owned by the sun god Utu, Enkidu suggested that Gilgamesh ask for Utu's permission to enter the Forest. Gilgamesh asked Utu for permission, and Utu granted permission. Gilgamesh then recruited 50 men to help him. The group travelled over six mountain ranges



to the Cedar Forest, where they began harvesting trees, but the forest's guardian Huwawa used his spells against them. Huwawa's spells caused

Gilgamesh & his 50 men to fall into a deep sleep. Yet for some reason, the spells did not work on Enkidu, who remained awake.

After many attempts at waking his master, Enkidu finally awakened Gilgamesh. Yet when Gilgamesh woke up, he was outraged by the spell, and he wanted to find the culprit. Enkidu tried to talk him out of it, but Gilgamesh would not listen to his faithful servant. Alas, they went to face Huwawa, who again casted spells at them (and taunted them). Somehow able to resist the spells, Gilgamesh charmed Huwawa by making the beast promises of gifts, as he slowly moved closer. Yet when Huwawa was in range, Gilgamesh punched the monster, tied him up, and took away his spells. Huwawa begged for mercy, and Gilgamesh was prepared to let him



go, but Enkidu urged Gilgamesh to kill the beast so that Gilgamesh would become famous. Nonetheless, Gilgamesh continued to hesitate, and so Enkidu ultimately killed Huwawa himself.

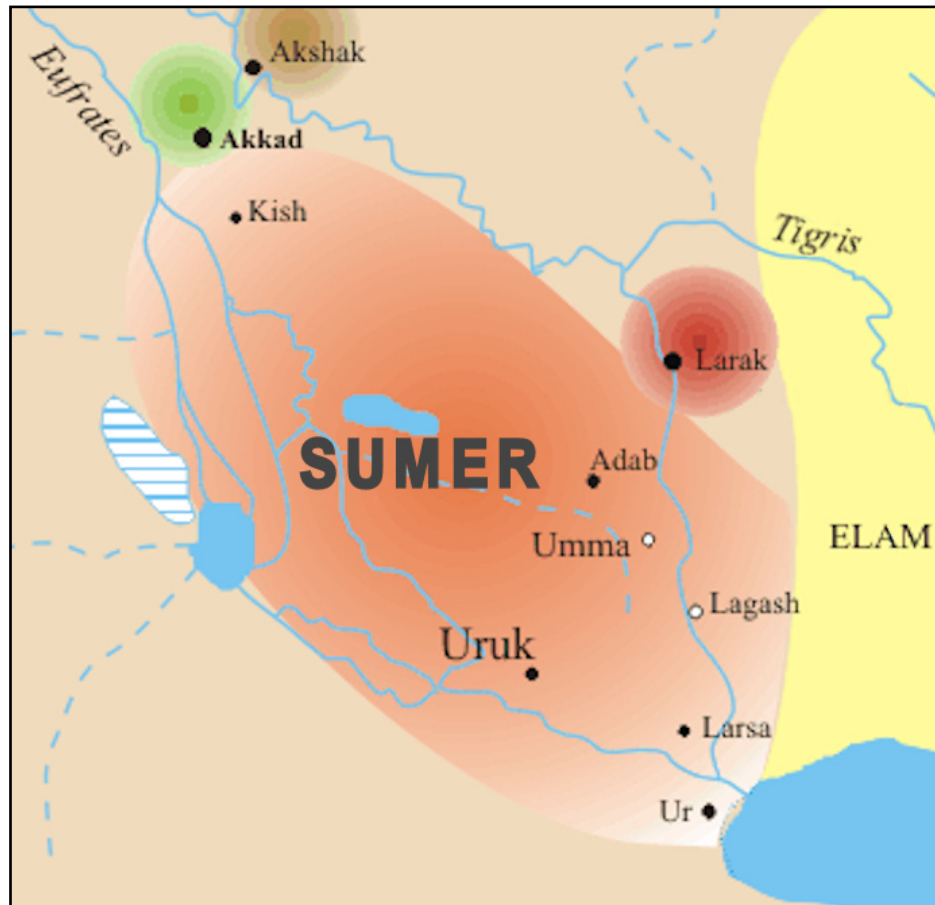
Seeming to expect a reward, Enkidu & Gilgamesh brought Huwawa's head to the great god Enlil. Yet rather than reward them, Enlil condemned them for killing Huwawa. Alas, Utu had not given them permission to harm (let alone kill) Huwawa. Accordingly, Enlil took Huwawa's spells from Gilgamesh, and he gave them to lions and to different places where dangers have lurked to plague humanity ever since. Nonetheless, the people praised Gilgamesh & Enkidu for killing Huwawa, because doing so has made it much safer for people to cut down the trees of the forest.

### **3. Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven**

The goddess Inanna refused to let Gilgamesh enter her temple. In response to her refusal to grant him access to her temple, Gilgamesh said, "I have no desire to take your place, and you have no right to interfere with me!" In reaction to Gilgamesh's apparent disrespect, Inanna asked the sky god An to let her borrow the Bull of Heaven so that she could punish Gilgamesh, and she ultimately scared An into giving her what she wanted. The Bull of Heaven proceeded to drink up rivers & to destroy pastures & trees. At first, Gilgamesh tried to ignore the creature. Yet eventually, he and his servant Enkidu attacked the Bull. To distract it, Enkidu climbed up the Bull's tail, and then Gilgamesh killed it with a blow to the head. After that, he hurled the bull's corpse at Inanna, who had been watching the battle from the walls of her city. Then, he threatened to do to Inanna what he did to the Bull. Yet in the end, Gilgamesh was not punished.

#### 4. Gilgamesh and Aga

During his reign as King of Kish, Aga not only ruled over the city of Kish but also ruled over the city of Uruk. During that time, he saved Gilgamesh's life, and he appointed Gilgamesh to be his governor of Uruk.



Yet not long after he appointed Gilgamesh as Lord of Uruk, Aga demanded that Uruk's people work as slaves for Kish's people. Aga's demand made Gilgamesh angry. Speaking to the elders of Uruk, Gilgamesh suggested rebelling against Aga, but the elders advised him to obey Aga. Yet despite their advice, Gilgamesh was not satisfied, so he repeated his suggestion to rebel. Ultimately, the elders gave in to Gilgamesh, and they elected him to be King of Uruk.



Ten days later, Aga led Kish's army to Uruk, and they surrounded the city. Uruk's people were frightened, so Gilgamesh asked for a volunteer to face Aga, and Gilgamesh's bodyguard Birhurtura duly volunteered. When Birhurtura walked out of the city, he was captured & brought to Aga, who interrogated and tortured Birhurtura. Speaking to Birhurtura, Aga asked, "Am I your king?" Birhurtura replied, "No, you are not my king. When my true king appears, your army will be defeated, and you will be captured." This angered Aga, who continued to torture Birhurtura.

Taking charge of the situation, Gilgamesh stepped up onto the wall of Uruk, and his divine glow radiated down on the enemy army. Even though Gilgamesh's divine glow did not frighten Aga at all, it caused Aga's soldiers to become greatly confused. Taking advantage of the confusion, Gilgamesh's servant Enkidu led Uruk's army in an attack on Aga's army. Uruk's army defeated Aga's soldiers, and Aga was taken prisoner. Yet remembering how Aga once had saved his life, Gilgamesh declared that Aga is his superior. Aga withdrew his demand to make Uruk's people work as his slaves, and he begged Gilgamesh to return the favor of saving his life. In an act of mercy, Gilgamesh freed Aga, who then safely returned to Kish in defeat.

## Questions about the Sumerian Gilgamesh stories.

1. In the story “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Underworld”, was it wrong for Gilgamesh to have let Enkidu travel to the underworld to retrieve the drum & drumsticks? *Why* or why *not*? Explain.
2. In the story “Gilgamesh and Huwawa”, what does Gilgamesh’s reason for going into the Cedar Forest tell us about his character? Was he humble? *Why* or why *not*? Explain. Was he a coward for not killing Huwawa? *Why* or why *not*? Explain. Should he have killed Huwawa? *Why* or why *not*? Explain. Does the story have a hero, a villain, both a hero & a villain, or neither a hero nor a villain? Explain.



3. In the story “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven”, why do you think Gilgamesh at first tried to ignore the Bull of Heaven? What does that say about his character? Was he being cowardly? *Why* or why *not*? Explain. Was he being dispassionate? *Why* or why *not*? Explain. By ultimately killing the Bull of Heaven, was he heroic? *Why* or why *not*? Explain.
4. In the story “Gilgamesh and Aga”, was it wrong for Gilgamesh to have disobeyed Aga? *Why* or why *not*? Explain. After his army defeated Aga’s army, was it wrong for Gilgamesh to have shown Aga mercy? *Why* or why *not*? Explain.

5. Based on the four stories that you've read about Gilgamesh, was he a **good** person, a **bad** person, or *neither* a **good** person *nor* a **bad** person? For your answer to that question, make sure to provide evidence from at least two of the four stories. (For example, consider whether or not Gilgamesh ever knowingly put himself in danger.) As part of your answer, explain what you think it means for someone to be a **good** person, and explain what you think it means for someone to be a **bad** person. (If you believe that there's *no such thing* as a **good** person or a **bad** person, explain why you think so.)