

Historical Background and Further Reading on Sumer, Enkidu and the Gilgamesh Epic

by James Ferguson

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NB James Ferguson is a penname of R. James Ferguson who writes non-fiction, historical fiction and science fiction (see the author note below). *Death in Sumer* is available via Holand Press, [Amazon](#), Kindle Unlimited and from 12 July 2026 the E-book will be on special for one week at 99 p/c.

Enkidu was the heroic companion to Gilgamesh, the Sumerian King of Uruk (in Sumerian he was called Bilgames). Sumer, covering much of what is southern Iraq today, was one of the seminal civilizations of the ancient world, evolving into an advanced urban and temple culture through the fifth to third millennium BCE. At first Sumeria was not unified politically but consisted of a number of independent city-states that vied for pre-eminence, including the cities of Uruk, Kish, Ur, Lagash, Nippur and others. They shared an evolving bronze age culture with advanced abilities to work metals, pottery, jewellery, weapons, sophisticated brick architecture, and developed extended agricultural and irrigation systems. This was soon followed by record-keeping, the first writing system, scribal bureaucracies, and a complex literature and religion. Sumerian legacies shaped much of the Middle East, including social, political and ritual aspects of the subsequent Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Persian states.

Gilgamesh was a historic figure, ruling circa 2750-2500 BCE, and is attested in Sumerian King-lists and diverse but fragmentary historical documents. These documents indicate that he was a prominent war-leader who rebuilt the walls of Uruk and challenged the northern city of Kish for regional leadership. However, most of what we know about him is derived from early Sumerian stories, laments and songs. During the following Akkadian and Babylonian periods these were assembled and edited into eleven and twelve-part cycles, becoming the Gilgamesh story as we know it today. It is the earliest known tragic epic that reflected in detail on the human condition and remains one of the greatest legacies of world literature.

Uruk at its height was the largest of the Sumerian cities, with a population of over 50,000 and covering almost 1.6 square kilometres by 3,500 BCE. It had massive walls, prominent temples dedicated to Inanna (later called Ishtar, goddess of love and war) and Anu (the over-arching sky god), fine halls and palaces. It engaged in extended trade and diplomacy

networks reaching north across Mesopotamia into Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Anatolia, and Iran, with access to resources from as far afield as Afghanistan, Dilmun (on the Persian Gulf), Elam, Oman, and north-west India.

Uruk was a cauldron for technological and social invention, and it may have been the birth place of the urban and trade revolution which transformed West Asia and the Levant from 3,700 BCE onwards. It had a culture that sought to balance religious, political, elite and popular power through the use of assemblies, legal codes, specialized priesthoods and palace institutions. However, the rising power of military leaders such as Gilgamesh was often oppressive and authoritarian. Everyday beliefs focused on the great joys of life, including food, beer, natural beauty, laughter and sex (not necessarily in that order). Through their poetry and hymns, the Sumerians tried to grapple with the grimmer realities of suffering, death, warfare and famine.

This was the rich context which has made the Gilgamesh stories so fascinating to readers for over four thousand years. However, the remarkable hero Enkidu has not received the attention he deserves, and the current novel, *Death in Sumer*, provides an invented counter-narrative that explores these legends and themes in more detail than found in the main sources. Scenes, events and timelines have been added, edited and transformed, diverging from the received Gilgamesh epics. As such, the prose is my own, though enriched by ancient Middle Eastern ideas and texts that have evolved over several thousand years.

Further reading could begin with one of the more accessible versions of the Gilgamesh legend:

- N.K. Sanders *The Epic of Gilgamesh: An English Version with an Introduction*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1987
- Herbert Mason *Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative*, Boston: A Marine Book, 2003
- Gerald J. Davis *Gilgamesh: The New Translation*, Bridgeport: Insignia Publishing, 2014
- John D. Harris *Epic of Gilgamesh: An Annotated Prose Rendition*, Wabasha: Hungry Point Press, 2018
- Michael Schmidt *Gilgamesh: The Life of a Poem*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019

Excellent translations include:

- Stephen Mitchell *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*, London: Profile Books, 2004
- Andrew George *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*, London: Penguin, 2020

Other Mesopotamian literature can be found in the following:

- Edmund Gordon *Sumerian Proverbs: Glimpses of Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, N.Y.: Greenwood Press, 1968
- Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth: Her Stories and Hymns from Sumer*, New York: Harper & Row, 1983
- Betty de Shong Meador *Inanna: Lady of Largest Heart, Poems of the Sumerian High Priestess Enheduanna*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000
- Jeremy Black *The Literature of Ancient Sumer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006
- A wide range of sources and translations can be found via the online databases the *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (ETCSL) and the *Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative* (CDLI).

General histories of Sumeria and Mesopotamia are numerous. Some of the older works are still worth reading, including:

- Samuel Noah Kramer *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture and Character*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963
- A.L. Oppenheim *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977

Other useful overviews include:

- Jean Bottero *Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001
- Richard E. Averbeck et al. (eds) *Life and Culture in the Ancient Near East*, Bethesda: CDL Press, 2003
- Harriet Crawford *Sumer and the Sumerians*, Cambridge: CUP, 2004
- Stephen Bertman *Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, New York: OUP, 2005

- Benjamin Reas Foster and Karen Foster *Civilizations of Ancient Iraq*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009
- Paul Kriwaczek *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization*, London, Atlantic Books Ltd, 2014

For those of you with a linguistic bent, see:

- Joshua Bowen and Megan Lewis *Learn to Read Ancient Sumerian: An Introduction for Complete Beginners*, Mechanicsville: Digital Hammurabi Press, 2020.

Specialized focus studies include:

- Billie Jean Collins (ed.). *History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*, Leiden: Brill, 2002
- Jean-Jacques Glassner *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, Leiden: Brill, 2005
- Guillermo Algaze *The Uruk World System: The Dynamics of Expansion of Early Mesopotamian Civilization*, 2nd Edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005
- Susan Ackerman *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David*, N. Y.: Columbia University Press, 2005
- Zainab Bahrani *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia*, Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2008 (Ebook Edition 2025)
- Jean Bottero *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*, translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011

About the Author:

R. James Ferguson, also writing as Ron Ferguson and James Ferguson, has published short stories in Australian magazines (*Omega*, *Aphelion*, and *MJ*), as well as several novels: *Have Future*, *Will Travel*, *Cartesian Overthrow: Beyond First Contact*, *Baroque Space and the Lifeverse*, and *Death in Sumer* (with Holand Press), all available via Amazon. He has worked in libraries, been a guitar teacher, and then a systems-analyst before returning to academic studies. He has a PhD focused on the Hellenistic Age and Ptolemaic Egypt, taught history and international relations at Bond University (Australia), and has written, edited or co-authored numerous non-fictions (including *The Politics and Philosophy of Chinese Power*, *China's Eurasian Dilemmas*, *Greening China's New Silk Roads* and *Living Confucianisms: Strategies for Optimizing Harmony*). He has a life-long interest in the literature, mentalities and world views of diverse cultures, ancient and modern. He can be contacted at rjamesferguson7@gmail.com