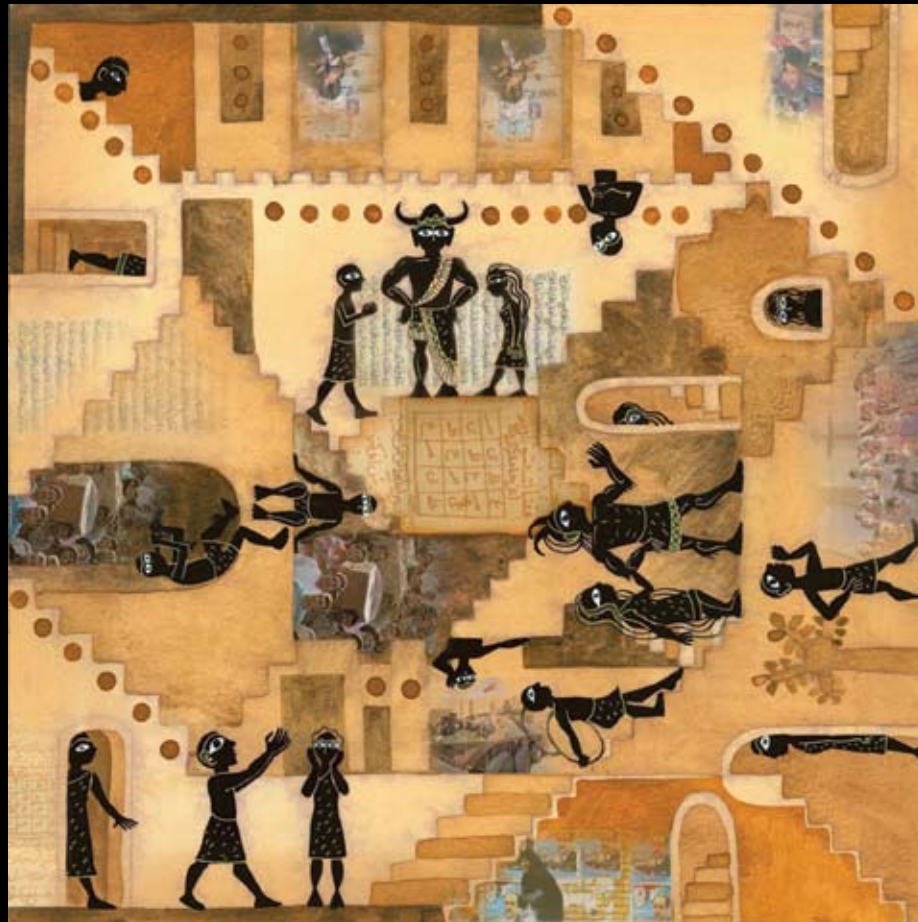


Gilgamesh

The Hero of Mesopotamia



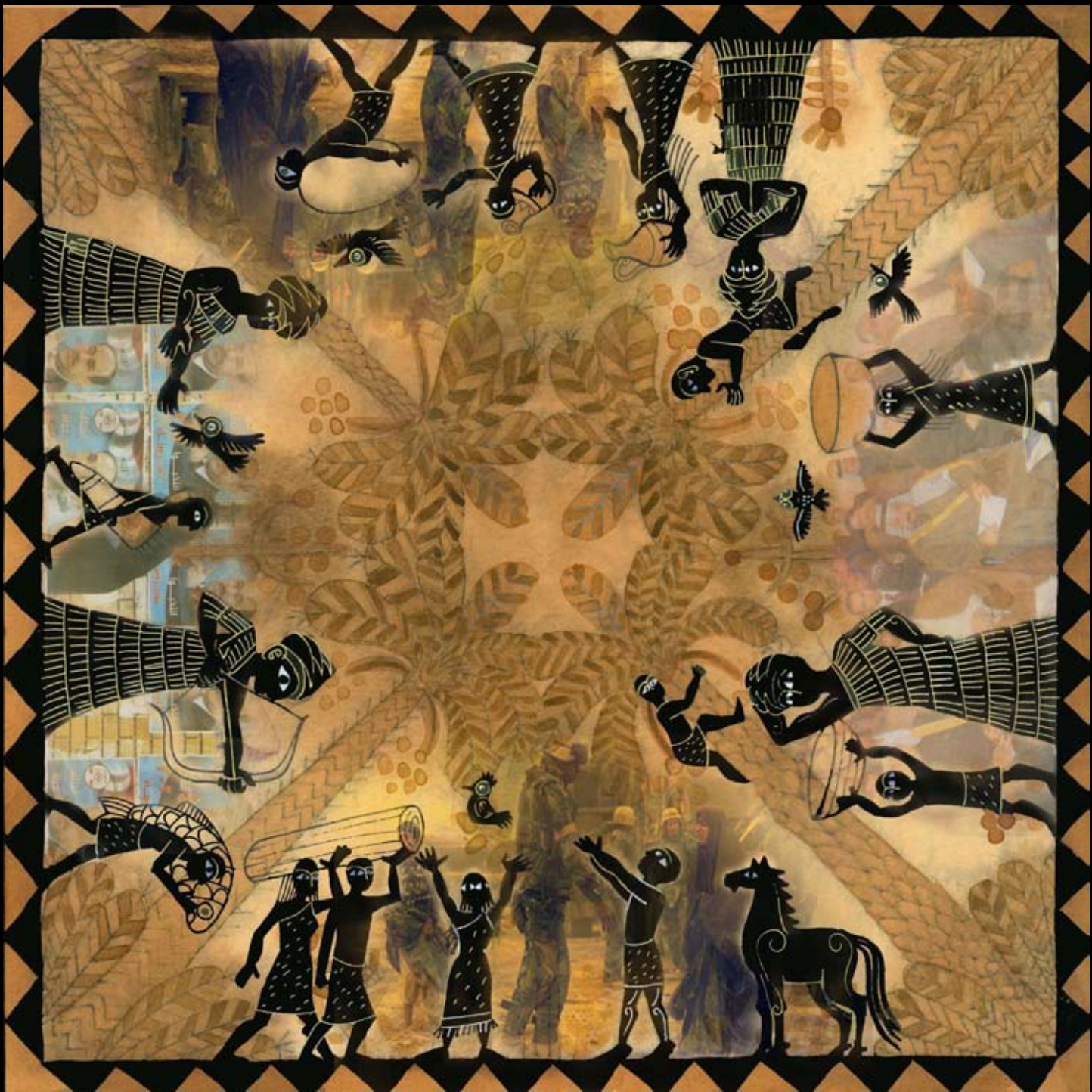
Lamia Aziz

Gilgamesh, the Hero of Mesopotamia

Retold and illustrated by: Lamia Aziz



Thousands upon thousands of years ago the gods of Sumer lived and worked on their land. They grew and harvested their crops by themselves. However, the gods were fed up and exhausted. One day they gathered together and decided to create a human from clay. Then they created a second human and a third and so on, these humans being created to do all of the work that once the gods had done. Over the centuries the human population rapidly expanded, and the land become crowded and turbulent. Then the gods decided to ascend to heaven and leave the earth.



Five thousand years ago in Uruk, Sumer, a king called Lugulbanda reigned. He governed with justice and tolerance, and his people loved him, as did the gods, especially the goddess Ninsun, whom Lugulbanda, for his part, loved in return. The great Ninlil, god of heaven, earth, and air, opposed the relationship though, and, in a fit of anger, forbade all relationships between humans and gods.

However, the goddess Ninsun so loved the life of humans that she decided to live amongst them. She left heaven and descended to earth, and, after she became pregnant, married her beloved king Lugulbanda. The great god Ninlil continued to oppose the marriage, however, and the gods agreed to force Ninsun back to heaven where they thought she belonged. The great Ninlil was determined that Gilgamesh, Ninsun's new-born child (who was two-thirds god and one-third human), should return to earth.



The goddess Ninsun begged Ninlil to allow her to keep her baby with her, but her tears did not affect him, and Gilgamesh was sent to earth; and his mother, the goddess Ninsun, resolved to return to earth too, to join her son. Gilgamesh arrived on earth on the wing of an eagle.



Upon his arrival the loving gods each gave Gilgamesh a gift. Utu, the god of sun, gave him the gift of beauty; Enlil, the god of wind and storms, gave him the gift of heroism; while Enki, the lord of water and wisdom, Inanna, the goddess of war and love, and Enlil, the lord of sky, gave Gilgamesh the gift of wisdom.



Gilgamesh grew strong, wise and handsome and a very powerful ruler

*He who has seen everything,
I will make known to the lands.
I will teach about him who experienced all things, ...
Alike, Anu granted him the totality of knowledge of all.
He saw the Secret, discovered the Hidden,
He brought information of (the time) before the Flood
He went on a distant journey, pushing himself to exhaustion, but
then was brought to peace.*

Gilgamesh became the greatest king on earth and the strongest that ever existed. However, he was young and oppressed his people harshly, and enslaved men to serve him and women to obey him



The people called out to the sky god Anu, the chief god of the city, to help them. The women wept for their lost virginity. In response, Anu created a wild man, Enkidu, out in the harsh wilderness surrounding Gilgamesh's lands. Enkidu, with the strength of dozens of wild animals, was the subhuman rival to the superhuman Gilgamesh.



One night Gilgamesh had two dreams. In the first a meteorite fell to earth, a meteorite so big that Gilgamesh could neither lift nor turn it. In his dream Gilgamesh saw the people gather and celebrate around the meteorite, and Gilgamesh embraced it. In the second dream Gilgamesh saw an axe appear at his door, an axe so large that Gilgamesh could neither lift nor turn it. The people gathered and celebrated around the axe, and Gilgamesh embraced it. The next day Gilgamesh asked his mother what these dreams meant. She told him that a man of great force and strength would come into Uruk, Gilgamesh would embrace him, and this man would help Gilgamesh to achieve great deeds.



Enkidu was a savage man. The whole of his body was hairy, he knew nothing of human beings, and was clothed in skins. Enkidu roamed with the beasts of the wilderness. He protected the animals, destroyed the hunters' traps, and lurked around the watering holes to protect the wild animals. These actions were much to the chagrin of local trappers.

A trapper's son discovered Enkidu while checking on traps in the wilderness. Enkidu was running naked with the wild animals. The boy rushed to tell his father what he saw.



The father advised his son to go into the city and from thence take one of the temple harlots, Shamhat, with him to the forest. When Shamhat saw Enkidu she was to offer herself to the wild man. If Enkidu submitted to her, the trapper said, then Enkidu would lose his strength and wildness.

Shamhat found Enkidu at the watering hole where the wild animals gathered. She offered herself to him and Enkidu submitted.



After spending seven days with Shamhat, Enkidu returned to the beasts with which he had been living on friendly terms, but as soon as the gazelles smelled Enkidu, they ran away, and then the wild cattle disappeared into the woods, for Enkidu had become human and now smelled like bread and wine.

When Enkidu saw that the beasts had deserted him his knees gave way, and he could not run as before; but when he recovered from the shock he returned to Shamhat. She told him that he had changed and that the beasts no longer wanted to come near him; then she expressed her wish to take him back with her to Uruk, where the mighty Gilgamesh reigned. Enkidu listened as Shamhat told him of the glories of Uruk.



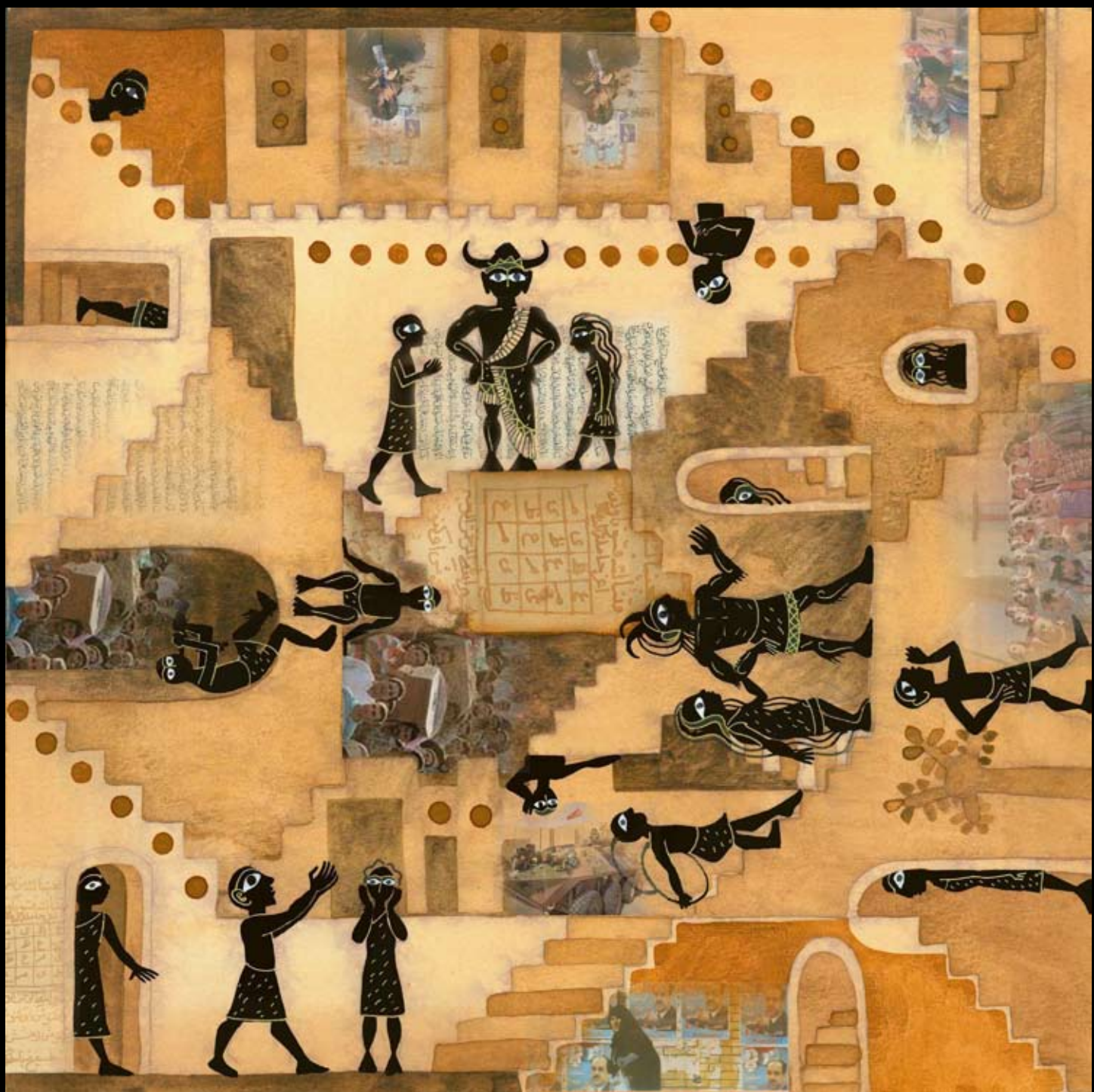
The harlot took Enkidu to a shepherds' village, where he was gradually introduced to civilization. He learned how to tend flocks, how to eat, how to speak properly, and how to wear clothes. When he was ready to go to Uruk, Enkidu asked for a weapon to beat off wolves and drive off lions. Enkidu, who was once the animals' companion, now protected men against the animals. Enkidu was no longer wild.



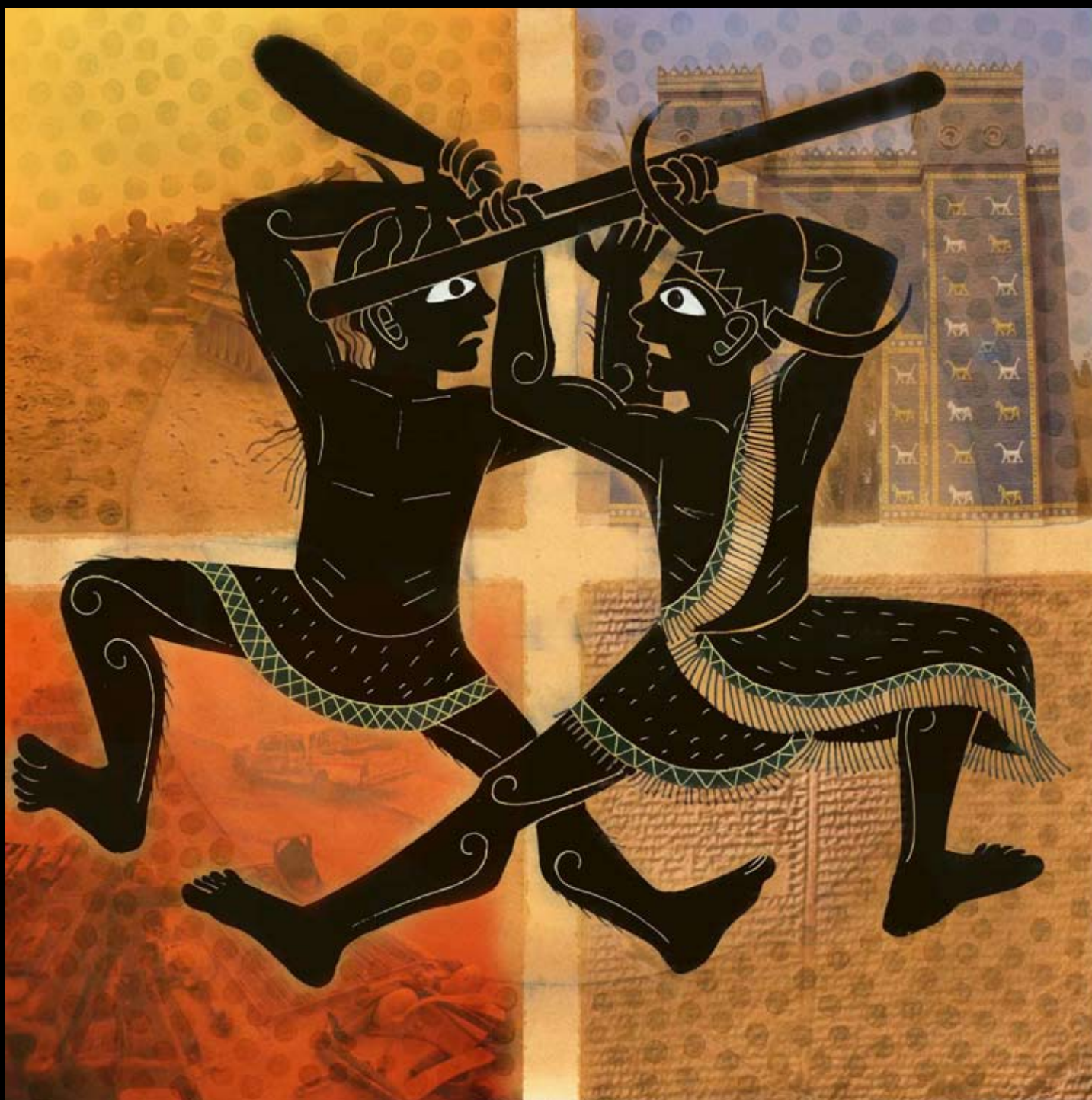
One day when Enkidu was walking with Shamhat in Uruk, they saw a young man who was sitting and crying. Enkidu approached him and asked, 'Young man, why are you crying, what is your trouble?'

The young man explained: 'The time has come and I have chosen a bride, but, before I may sleep with her, Gilgamesh will sleep with her first, within the grand temple. He claims this as his right. It matters not that I do not want this to happen. It matters not that she does not want this to happen. My dear bride ...' The young man's face was pale.

Touched by the young man's anguish, Enkidu decided to help him, and, as Gilgamesh approached the grand temple's entrance, Enkidu blocked his way. Enkidu barred Gilgamesh from entering the door of the temple. The people were enchanted: 'At last we have found one who can challenge Gilgamesh,, they said.



Gilgamesh and Enkidu wrestled with each other at the door. They wrestled in the street. They wrestled in the public square. Door frames shook and walls quaked. Gilgamesh and Enkidu fought and fought. Gilgamesh fought with the strength of a man who is two-thirds god and one-third human, and Enkidu fought like a fierce lion. Their shouts were as loud as thunder. They smashed carts and wagons. They frightened horses and dogs while the people watched from a distance. They fought for hours. Finally, Gilgamesh was exhausted. He could not wrestle with Enkidu because his strength had finally failed him. Enkidu was also tired, but not as tired as Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh realised then that his dreams had become reality, and his mother Ninsun's prophesy was right. Gilgamesh and Enkidu embraced and kissed each other. 'Let us not be foolish any more. Let us live the lives of heroes and do great deeds for which we will be fondly remembered for all time,' they exclaimed.



Gilgamesh raised Enkidu to the highest position in Uruk, and Gilgamesh and Enkidu lived calmly in the big city, though they gradually weakened and grew lazy. Enkidu felt bored and missed his days in the wilderness, so Gilgamesh proposed a great adventure: they would journey to the great Cedar Forest and cut down all the cedar trees, to rebuild the walls of Uruk. but, before that, they would need to kill the Guardian of the Cedar Forest, the great demon, Humbaba. Enkidu knew that Humbaba was a vicious creature, from his days running wild in the forest, and tried hard to convince Gilgamesh not to undertake such a dangerous journey.



Gilgamesh and Enkidu had weapons made for this special battle. The elders of the city protested Gilgamesh's adventure, but after a while they reluctantly agreed that it could go ahead. Gilgamesh's mother farewelled her son in a prayer to the sun god Utu, who promised her that he would watch out for Gilgamesh's life. Enkidu again tried to convince Gilgamesh not to undertake the journey, but Gilgamesh was confident of success.



On each day of their six-day journey, Gilgamesh prayed to Utu. In response to these prayers, Utu sent Gilgamesh dreams during the night. These dreams were all ominous. In one dream, Gilgamesh dreamed that he wrestled a great bull that split the ground with its breath. Enkidu interpreted the dream for Gilgamesh: it meant that Utu, the sun god, would protect Gilgamesh. In another dream, Gilgamesh dreamed that the skies roared with thunder and the earth heaved, then came darkness and a stillness like death. Lightning smashed into the ground and fires blazed and death flooded from the skies. Enkidu again told Gilgamesh that the dream was a sign of victory in the upcoming battle.



At the entrance to the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh and Enkidu killed two guards.

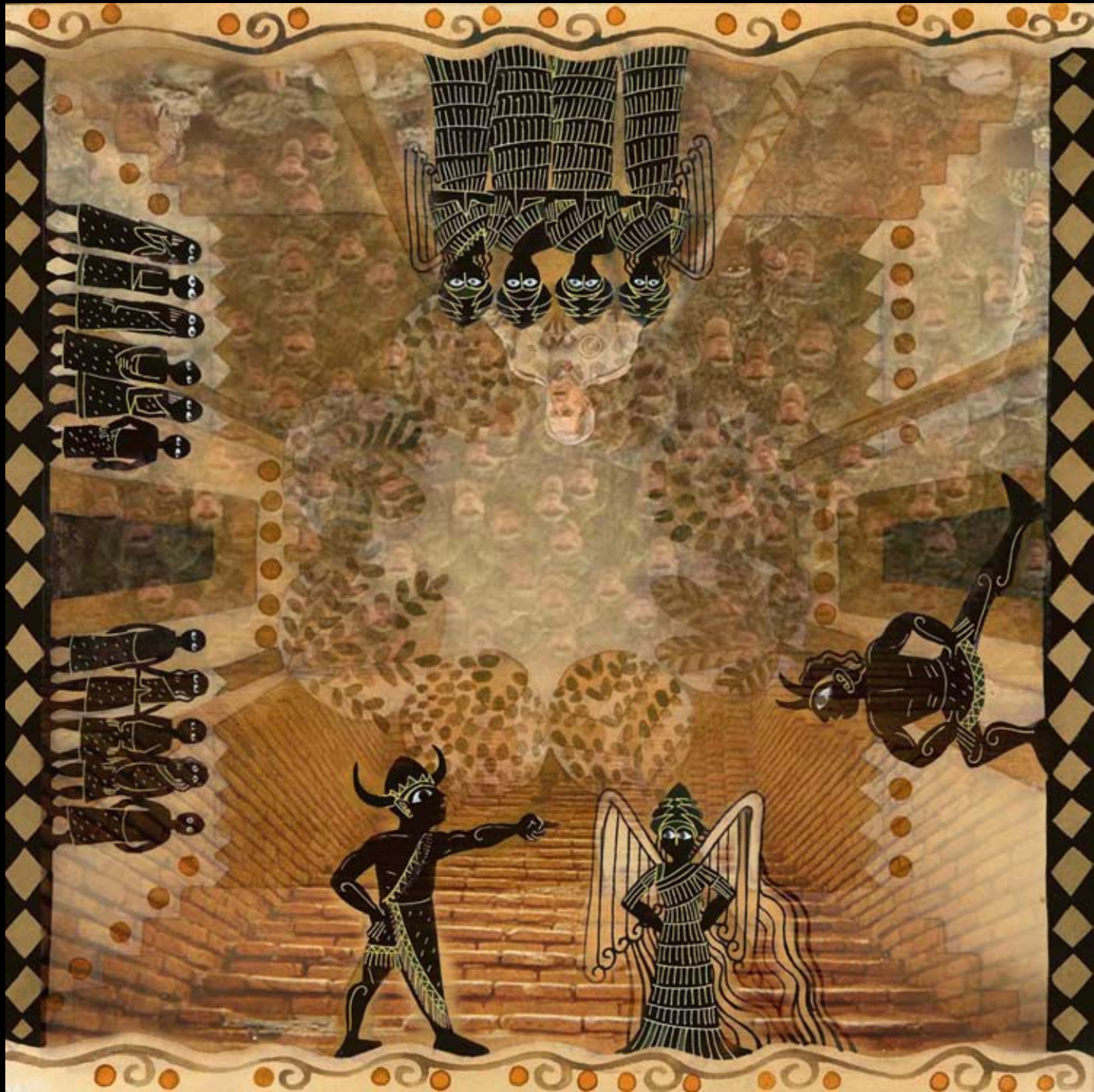
Eventually they entered the gloriously beautiful Cedar Forest and began to cut down trees. Hearing the sound, Humbaba came roaring up to them and warned them off. Enkidu lost his courage and wanted to turn back, but Gilgamesh convinced Enkidu that they should stand together against the demon. Humbaba threatened the pair, and Gilgamesh ran and hid. Enkidu shouted at Gilgamesh, inspiring him with courage, and Gilgamesh reappeared from hiding and the two began their epic battle with Humbaba. Utu helped the pair by sending strong winds, and, finally, Humbaba was defeated. He fell to his knees, with Gilgamesh's sword at his throat. Humbaba begged for his life and offered Gilgamesh all the trees in the forest. While Gilgamesh was thinking this over, Enkidu intervened, telling Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba before any of the gods arrived and stopped him from doing so. Gilgamesh, with a great sweep of his sword, removed Humbaba's head. Before he died, Humbaba screamed out a curse on Enkidu: 'Of you two, may Enkidu not live longer, may Enkidu not find any peace in this world!'



Gilgamesh and Enkidu cut down the tallest of the cedar trees and returned with it to Uruk. The people celebrated their safe return.



After these events, Gilgamesh and Enkidu celebrated their victory. They washed, dabbed their bodies with oil, and adorned themselves in their best attire. With Gilgamesh resplendent in his clothes, he attracted the attention of the goddess Inanna, who came to Gilgamesh and offered to become his lover. Gilgamesh refused, listing all the mortal lovers that Inanna had had and recounting the horrible fate they had met at her hands. Deeply insulted, Inanna returned to heaven and begged her father, the sky god Anu, to let her have the Bull of Heaven, a creature, created by the Anu, that caused drought and shortage of food, and with which she planned to take revenge on Gilgamesh and his friend, or, she threatened, she would open the underworld gates and let loose the dead upon the living.



The sky god Anu reluctantly gave in, and the Bull of Heaven was taken by the goddess Inanna down to Uruk. Every time the bull breathed, its breath was so powerful that an enormous flame of fire ensued and the earth opened up and hundreds of people fell through the crust to their deaths.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu slayed the mighty bull. Utu, the sun god, was enraged and threatened them with revenge, but Enkidu turned on her, saying that she would be next to die.



Seven days after they celebrated the big victory, Enkidu fell ill after having a number of ominous dreams. The chief gods had met and decided that someone should be punished for the killing of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, so, of the two heroes, they decided that Enkidu should pay the penalty. Enkidu was enraged at the injustice of the decision. He cursed the temple harlot, Shamhat, and the trapper, for introducing him to civilisation. The sun god, Utu, reminded him that, even though his life had been short, he had enjoyed the fruits of civilisation and known great happiness. Enkidu then blessed the harlot and the trapper. In a dream, a great demon came to take Enkidu and dragged him to the underworld, the House of Dust where all the dead end up. Enkidu commended himself to Gilgamesh, and, after suffering terribly for twelve days, he finally died. Gilgamesh sat at his feet, sobbing. For seven days and seven nights he wept for his friend, until the worms started feeding on Enkidu.



Enkidu's spirit visited Gilgamesh in a dream and described what it was like in the underworld. He said that the dead wandered aimlessly and that there was an hierarchical system: those who had only one or two sons in life were the worst off, those who had more sons were happier, while the ones who had seven sons were allowed to be companions to the gods and to sit on thrones and give judgments in the afterlife. Gilgamesh wept and decided not to accept his fate, that of a mortal doomed to die, and decided instead to search for immortality.



Gilgamesh commissioned a lamentation for Enkidu. He ordered the people of Uruk – from the simplest farmer to the most respected temple priests – to mourn Enkidu.. Gilgamesh also ordered statues to be built to memorialise his friend.

Observing his behaviour the people of Uruk grew worried about their king. Gilgamesh's life fell apart; he stopped washing, shaving, and taking care of himself. He was deep in grief for his friend, and because he realised that he too must die and the thought had panicked him.



Gilgamesh decided that he could not live unless granted eternal life, so he decided to undertake the most dangerous journey of all: the journey to Utnapishtim and his wife, the only mortals to whom the gods had ever granted eternal life. Utnapishtim was living at the mouth of all rivers, at the ends of the world. Utnapishtim was the great king of the world before the great Flood and, with his wife, was the only mortal preserved from the Flood by the gods.

After an ominous dream, Gilgamesh set out. On his first night in the wilderness he felt exhausted and fell to sleep under a tree, and he dreamed he was surrounded by a flock of lions. When he awoke he saw lions around him, and instantly jumped on them, killing some and letting the others flee. Then he resumed his journey until he arrived at Mount Mashu.



When Gilgamesh arrived at Mount Mashu, which guards the rising and the setting of the sun, he encountered two large scorpions who guarded the way past. They recognised Gilgamesh and tried to convince him that his journey was useless and fraught with danger, but still they allowed him to pass, though they advised him to walk only straight forward, not to turn to the left or right.



Gilgamesh walked for a day or so, past Mount Mashu, to the Land of Night, where no light ever appears. Gilgamesh journeyed eleven days before the light began to glimmer again, and after twelve days he emerged into day, when he entered into a brilliant garden of gems, where every tree bore precious stones.



Gilgamesh came to a tavern by the ocean shore. The tavern keeper, Siduri, was frightened by Gilgamesh's ragged appearance. She locked the tavern door and refused to let him in. Gilgamesh proved his identity, however, and Siduri let him in and offered him some wine, whereupon Gilgamesh told Siduri his story and asked her how to find Utnapishtim. Siduri told Gilgamesh that his journey was extremely dangerous and that he should go back to his people, bringing happiness to them and enjoying what was left of his life. However, she directed Gilgamesh to Urshanabi, the ferryman, who worked for Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh thanked Siduri and left.

Gilgamesh approached the ferryman Urshanabi with great arrogance and violence, and in the process destroyed the sacred stone that was critical for the journey to Utnapishtim. When Gilgamesh demanded to be taken to Utnapishtim, the ferryman told him that it was impossible since the sacred stone had been destroyed. Nevertheless, he advised Gilgamesh to cut down twelve trees and to coat them with tar to use as punting poles.

The waters they were to cross were the Waters of Death. Should any mortal touch the waters, that person would instantly die. Using the punting poles, Gilgamesh pushed the boat along and never touched the dangerous waters.



Gilgamesh and Urshanabi sailed in the dangerous sea of death. The wind started to blow and the waves dashed high. Urshanabi again warned Gilgamesh to be careful not to touch the waters and to use the punting poles to push the vessel.

Gilgamesh used the poles one after the other until there were none left.

After forty-five days in the dangerous waters, Gilgamesh arrived at the land of Utnapishtim.



Upon his arrival, Gilgamesh encountered an old man. He told the man that he was looking for Utnapishtim and the secret of immortality, and told the story of his friend Enkidu. The old man advised Gilgamesh that death was a necessary fact because of the will of the gods; all human effort was only temporary, not permanent. By then, Gilgamesh realised that he was talking to Utnapishtim himself, but he had not expected an immortal human to be ordinary and aged. Gilgamesh asked Utnapishtim about the secret of immortality, and Utnapishtim told him: ‘I will tell you the great secret hidden from humans: In the time before the Flood, there was a city, Shuruppak, on the banks of the Euphrates. There the council of the gods held a secret meeting in which they resolved to destroy the world in a great flood. The gods were under oath not to reveal this secret to any living thing, but Ea, the god that created humanity, came to Utnapishtim’s house and told the secret to the walls. Thus, technically, he did not violate his oath. He also advised the walls of Utnapishtim’s house to build a great boat, its length as great as its width, and to gather up and bring all living things into the boat.

Utnapishtim got straight to work and finished the great boat by the New Year. Utnapishtim then loaded the boat with all the living things of the earth. But when he called on people to embark on his boat they refused to leave the prosperous life in Shuruppak. The god Ea ordered Utnapishtim into the boat and commanded him to close the hatch behind him. The black clouds arrived.



With the thunder god Adad rumbling within, the earth split like a clay pot, and all the light turned to darkness. The flood lasted for seven days and seven nights, and finally light returned to the earth. Utnapishtim opened a window to see that the entire earth had been turned into a flat ocean, and all the humans had been turned to mud. Utnapishtim then released a dove from the boat. It flew off, but circled around and returned the same day, for it could not find a perch. Then Utnapishtim released a swallow from the boat. It flew off, but, likewise, circled around and returned the same day. At last Utnapishtim released a raven from the boat. It flew off, but did not return. Utnapishtim realised that the raven must have found a perch on land.

The gods realised the importance of his deeds, and begin to gather around Utnapishtim. Enlil, who had originally proposed to destroy all humans, arrived then, furious that one of the humans had survived, since the gods had agreed to wipe them all out. But, in the event, Enlil acknowledged Utnapishtim's deeds and blessed him and his wife and converted Utnapishtim into an immortal god.

Towards the end of Utnapishtim's story Gilgamesh fell asleep.

Utnapishtim told his wife that all men were liars. Gilgamesh, he said, will deny having fallen asleep. Utnapishtim then asked his wife to bake a loaf of bread every day and lay the loaf at Gilgamesh's head. Gilgamesh slept without waking for six days and seven nights, then Utnapishtim woke him up. Startled, Gilgamesh said, 'I only just dozed off for half a second.' Utnapishtim pointed out the loaves of bread, showing their states of decay from the most recent, fresh bread, to the oldest, mouldy, stale bread that had been laid at Gilgamesh's head on the very first day. Utnapishtim told Gilgamesh to return to his kingdom and give up his quest: 'Go and wash infresh water, and wear the clothes that suit you as a king, and head back to Uruk.'

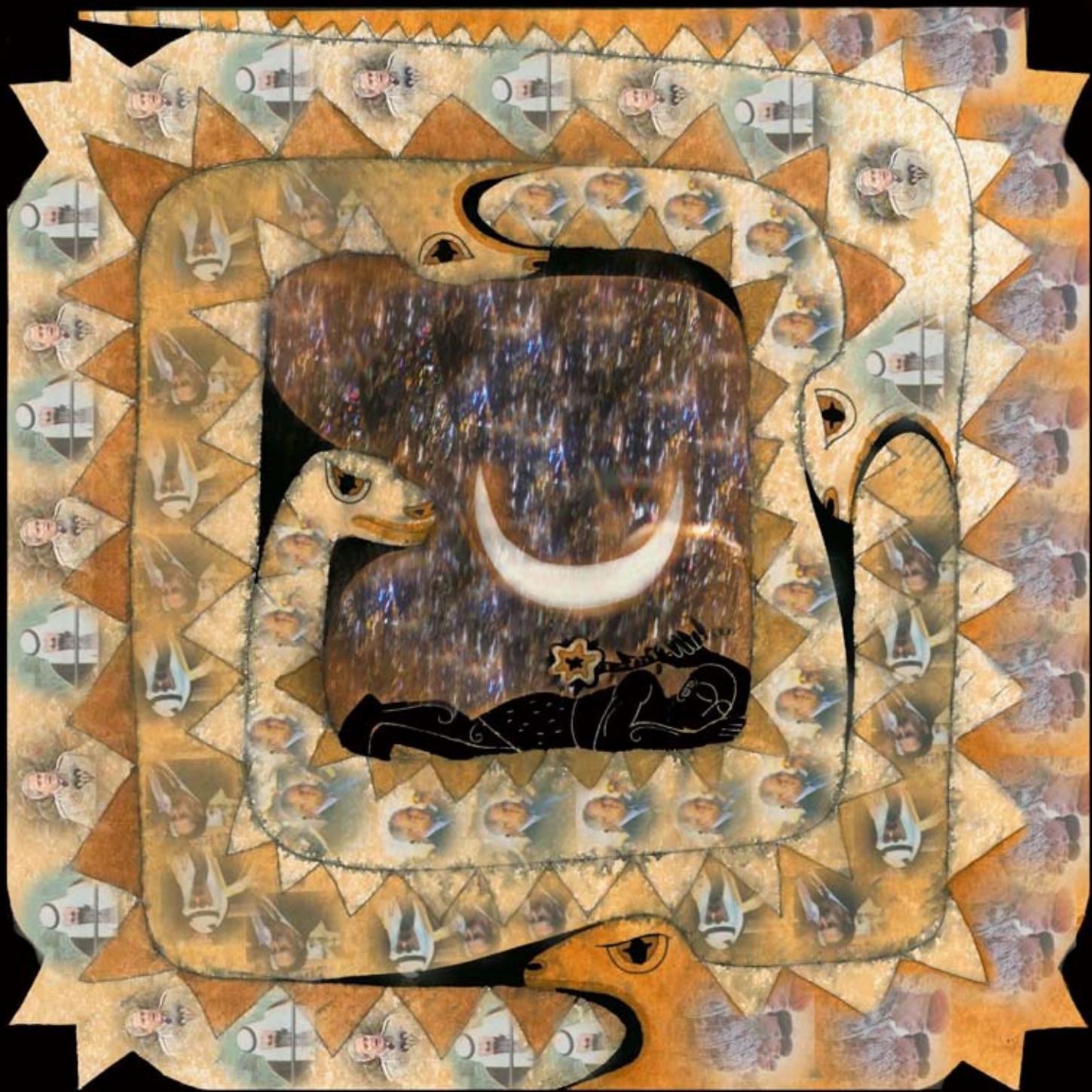


Utnapishtim then offered Gilgamesh, in place of immortality, a secret that no human knew of: at the bottom of Apsu, the Ocean of Wisdom, he would find the Plant of Life that would make him young again. Gilgamesh farewelled Utnapishtim and his wife, and went with Urashnabi to the ocean of Apsu. He tied stones to his feet, sank to the bottom, and plucked the magic plant. He wanted to take the magical plant to Uruk and let all the people share it.



Urshanabi took Gilgamesh across the Waters of Death, and thus they reached the road back to Uruk. After walking for three days Gilgamesh and Urshanabi stopped to eat and sleep near a well. While they were sleeping, a snake slithered up and ate the magic plant. The snake shed its old skin, and replaced it with a new shiny one, then it shed its skin again and again (hence snakes since his time have shed their skin).

Gilgamesh awakened to find the plant gone. He fell to his knees and wept, perceiving the will of the gods, and faced his fate as a mortal.



After three days and four nights, and at the end of his journey, Gilgamesh stood before the gates of Uruk, inviting Urshanabi to look around and view the greatness of the city, its high walls, its masonry, and the palm trees growing high amongst the barley fields.



The god Enlil told Gilgamesh about his mortal fate. Enlil, who gave Gilgamesh heroism and his reign as a king in life, also crowned Gilgamesh a king in the underworld.



Gilgamesh lay down on his royal bed, ready and willing to face his mortal fate.



The Epic of Gilgamesh

The Epic of Gilgamesh was written around 5000 years ago and discovered in 1853 in Nineveh (Iraq), in the excavated library of the Assyrian King Assurbanipal.

Miraculously preserved on clay tablets which were deciphered in the last century, The Epic of Gilgamesh is at least 1,500 years older than Homer... The epic volume contains an adventures of great King of Uruk in his fruitless search for immortality and of his friendship with Enkidu, the wild man from hills. Also included in the epic is another legend of the Flood which agrees in many details with the Biblical story of Noah (N. K. Sandars, 1972).

