

# A comparison of cultures: the worlds of 'popol vuh' and 'the epic of gilgamesh'



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The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Popol Vuh are two fictional and religious texts from the ancient world. The Epic of Gilgamesh is regarded as the earliest great literature, written in 2100 BC, while the Popol Vuh was written in approximately 1550 after being passed down for centuries through speech; indeed, comparable themes are evident in the story of the Maya Hero Twins in part three of the Popol Vuh, and all 12 tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh. These two stories reveal a lot about Mayan and Mesopotamian culture, and are surprisingly similar in theme and structure, including the two hero dynamic, and the importance of the texts in common culture. The stories have differences in the cultural ideas of family, and in the goal of the heroes journeys. Mayan ideas about death and afterlife are in line with those of the people for Uruk, but are not exactly the same.

In terms of narrative structure, The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Popol Vuh feature plots surrounding the gods, but these figures are viewed slightly differently, as are the religious ideals. The hero dynamic of both stories is very important, the heroes have complementing skills and rely on each other. Enkidu was created by Aruru just to give Gilgamesh competition, but ended up being his only true friend and partner in crime, which Gilgamesh expresses when saying " Enkidu, whom I love deeply, who went through every hardship with me." Xbalanque and Hunahpu have been together since birth, and were given a mission that required them to work together. Both pairs have a brotherly bond and are close in terms of battle skill. The Hero Twins, Xbalanque and Hunahpu, are included frequently Mesoamerican art as are Gilgamesh and Enkidu, representing them as figures in popular culture. Gilgamesh was a real king of Uruk, though he may not have actually

gone on some of the adventures mentioned. The Hero Twins were purely fictional and used for religious storytelling, and were drawn for centuries after the original Popol Vuh was created. Hunahpu was usually drawn with spots, to show that he had died and been in the underworld, and Xbalanque had stripes or a beard to be a more animal like and aggressive. The families shown in the two texts were dissimilar. It seemed that Hunahpu and Xbalanque were very devoted to their family. Hunahpu and Xbalanque were summoned to the underworld by the words of their grandmother, " So your grandmother says you must come. Truly your grandmother cries, she calls out to you to come." Gilgamesh had little connection to his family, his mother was one of the very few people who liked him, and his father was rarely mentioned. Enkidu, created alone, became Gilgamesh's only committed family. Gilgamesh and Enkidu's goal in traveling was to kill the guardian of the Cedar Forest, Humbaba, because Humbaba was a threat to humans. The overall goal for the mighty King of Uruk, Gilgamesh, was to be rich, famous, and to have a good legacy. The unnamed narrator in the first tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh praises Gilgamesh saying " Supreme over other kings, lordly in appearance...There is no rival who can raise a weapon against him." suggesting that Gilgamesh was remembered by the public, and praised for his deeds.

The goal of the Hero Twins was more personal, to avenge their father and uncle, since they were defeated and killed by the gods of Xibalba. The twins' goal was to be victorious in a ballgame against the gods of the underworld with extreme stakes. The Hero Twins went through sets of trials such as dark hose and bat house, where Gilgamesh and Enkidu traveled more freely,

without a set mission on more than one quest. There are no signs of fear of death in the Maya Hero Twin story, Xbalanque and Hunahpu travel to the underworld of Xibalba specifically to challenge the gods of death. The Mayan people saw death as a natural, but tricky process that could be manipulated by passing the trails of the gods of Xibalba. The Hero Twins die in the end, and ascend to become the sun and moon since they are part god, which is a positive outlook on death as compared to the wrath of the terrifying gods of the underworld. The K'iche people also believe in reincarnation, or at least coming back from the dead. In this quote from the Popol Vuh, Hunahpu dies. " And then his head was taken off by a snatch-bat, leaving Hunahpu's body still stuffed inside" and then was given a squash head to substitute his head and " His strength was just the same, he looked handsome, he spoke just the same. " In the Epic of Gilgamesh, after Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh goes on a journey to achieve immortality, scared of the mysterious afterlife, and begging for more time to live. Gilgamesh says just before fighting Humbaba, " Who, my friend, can ascend to the heavens? (Only) the gods can dwell forever with Shamash. As for human beings, their days are numbered." This suggests that the people living in Uruk were wary of death, but understood it could not be avoided since there was only one immortal man in the epic, and even he did not recommend being immortal. Gilgamesh had a clear fear of death, saying " I fear death and now roam the wilderness," just after Enkidu dies. Enkidu's ghost appears in tablet 12, and Gilgamesh asks Enkidu about the underworld, revealing that there is an underworld that people's souls can reach, but you cannot come back from the dead completely. The ballgame mentioned several times in the story of the Hero Twins was played in real life ancient Mesoamerica, which gave the people listening to the story a sense of

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reality. This story was used to paint a picture of the underworld, and how a regular K'iche citizen could overcome the gods of the underworld for a good afterlife.

For the culture of the Popol Vuh, the story of the Hero Twins also serves as a creation story about how the sun and moon were created. The Mesopotamians avoided the wrath of the gods in a different way, by giving small but frequent sacrifices in mortal life, but both were a shortcut when compared to adhering to moral principles like in Buddhism or Christianity. War and conflict were regarded as necessary and rewarded acts in Mesoamerica and Mesopotamia. Stories of previous hardship are included in the Epic of Gilgamesh, such as the great flood. "The hearts of the Great Gods moved them to inflict the flood." is a quote from Utnapishtim, the man with eternal life who speaks to Gilgamesh about why the flood occurred. The Hero Twins' family had endured torment from the gods of death before, and fought with them, "And the first to die, a long time before, had been their fathers, One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu. And they saw the face of their father again, there in Xibalba," which is why Hunahpu and Xbalanque had to avenge their predecessors. Gilgamesh is  $\frac{2}{3}$  god and  $\frac{1}{3}$  human, it is known that his mother is a human but very wise. Enkidu is  $\frac{1}{3}$  human and  $\frac{2}{3}$  beast. The Hero Twins are part god as well, and are referred to today as demigods. The Popol Vuh is a genuine religious text, while the Epic of Gilgamesh only gives examples of the religious norms of the time.

Ancient Mesoamerica and Mesopotamia both adhered to polytheistic religious, with many specific gods. The gods of the underworld, Xibalba, had menacing names like Blood Gatherer and Bone Scepter. The Epic of <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-of-cultures-the-worlds-of-popol-vuh-and-the-epic-of-gilgamesh/>

Gilgamesh did not mention multiple gods of death, only Ereshkigal, the queen of the underworld. Both texts are structured in the same way- introduce heroes, establish goal, achieve, and face aftermath. The Epic of Gilgamesh is known to have created this formula, and has been used in myths ever since. The Popol Vuh uses that idea of having two heroes, which is uncommon in ancient storytelling. The reference to gods and religion is similar because they both use sacrifice and battle to get a good afterlife rather than morals, and recognize the underworld as the place where many people go when they die. The largest difference is the importance of blood related family in the Popol Vuh is not seen in the Epic of Gilgamesh, it is more of a story of friendship. The other substantial difference is Gilgamesh's goal in his quests is worldly rewards, while the goal of the Hero Twins is to retrieve their father's body and bring him back to earth, which shows the divide between the morals of the main characters. These stories come from cultures separated by time and location, but are more common than not.