

Ancient genetics—Was Gilgamesh a mosaic?

To the Editor:

The Ancient Mesopotamian poem entitled the Epic of Gilgamesh (ca. 27th century BC)¹ is famed as being the first corpus of epic literature known to man. It is also a source of much conjecture, for the hero king on whom the story is based, Gilgamesh is quoted as being two-thirds god and one-third human.

In the poem, Gilgamesh is described as the son of a minor Sumerian goddess Ninsun and her mortal consort, the postdiluvian king Lugulbanda “the shepherd.” The figure of two-thirds god and one-third human is, however, unique in the ancient world and stands out by this exact fraction described for inheritance.

Other examples of human-god offspring follow the trend of the much more frequent concept of half-man half-god. A Mesopotamian example of this would be Adapa U-an, whereas a later well-known example would be the Greek demi-god Heracles.²

The figure of two thirds could imply that Gilgamesh was either a genetic chimera or mosaic. Although the ancients Mesopotamians were aware of the concept of chimeras and regularly used them in everyday art, their understanding of the genetic mechanisms involved in chimerism and mosaicism were nonexistent.

A closer look at the history of Gilgamesh reveals that although in the poem his father is listed as the mortal king Lugulbanda, if one cross-references his paternity with another ancient text, the Sumerian King List,³ one finds that Gilgamesh is also listed as the son of the “divine phantom lord of Kulaba.” We are fortunate in that both the Gilgamesh Epic and Sumerian King List mention Gilgamesh in correct name and also in correct time (i.e., postdiluvian or postflood). They also both name his father (Lugulbanda) at the same time period/cycle of kingship lending legitimacy to such cross-referencing.

If Lugulbanda and the divine lord of Kulaba were both considered to be the fathers of Gilgamesh as a result of the well-known ancient concept of dual paternity,⁴ then it would imply that the ancients Mesopotamians would consider that two of his three parents were divine (the lord of Kulaba and the goddess Ninsun). This could then explain the number of two thirds and would imply that the ancient Mesopotamians worked on a purely arithmetic rule of inheritance.

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References

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