The Ancient City of Babylon* 

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Abstract

This module discusses the ancient city of Babylon, specifically the archaeological remains from the period of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The city is placed in its cultural context and some historical background is given. The importance of the city as a religious and cult center is discussed in detail. Written by Dr. M. Feldman, professor in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, Johns Hopkins University, and M. Lewis, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Near Eastern Studies, Johns Hopkins University.

1 An Overview of Babylon

Babylon was excavated by a German team in the early 20th century before the onset of World War I, and then by the Iraqis in the 1970s, although its ruins had been known and explored much earlier. The city of Babylon is located on the Euphrates river in the north of southern Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) and lies about 60 miles south of Baghdad (fig. 1). The ancient city itself was roughly square, and covered about 900 hectares of space, though only a small amount of this has been excavated (fig. 2). Politically, it first rose to prominence in the second millennium BCE as the capital city of king Hammurabi’s state, a ruler best-known for his law-code (fig. 3). During the second millennium BCE, Babylon became the cultural, religious and political capital of southern Mesopotamia. Despite the varying importance of the city in the political arena, Babylon remained a center of cultic significance into the Hellenistic period (c. 300 BCE). Unfortunately, due to the high water-table present at the site very little is preserved prior to the Neo-Babylonian period (626-539 BCE). The works of the Neo-Babylonian kings will therefore be the focus of this module. For a lecture on the ancient city of Babylon, please see Figure 4.

The importance of Babylon in the Mesopotamian world-view is illustrated clearly in the so-called ‘Babylonian Map of the World,’ an inscribed cuneiform tablet dating to the 6th c. BCE in which Babylon is shown to be at the cosmic and geographic center of the world (fig. 5). The religious nature of the city is also shown clearly in a cuneiform text called ‘Tintir = Babylon.’ The tablets that preserve this composition date to between 700 and 61 BCE but it is likely that the text itself was composed centuries before these copies were written (George 2008: 60). The text opens by equating Babylon with various religious epithets and then continues to list the names and gods associated with various shrines in the Esagil temple, the temple of Marduk (George 2008: 60-61). Then the names of 43 temples in Babylon are given, followed by 55 shrines of Marduk. The text ends with the names of gates, walls, streets and waterways found in Babylon, which were given ceremonial names due to their religious significance as locations of processions and festivals (George

*Version 1.1: Nov 8, 2015 3:44 pm -0600 
†http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Far from being a topographical list, this composition highlights the unmistakably religious nature of the city.

In antiquity Babylon was known for its size, wealth and cosmopolitan nature and was written about by several early historians. The Greek writer, Herodotus, lauded the marvelous city in the 5th century BCE, especially its fortification walls, which he described as being so big that a four-horse chariot could drive between the inner and outer walls (Herodotus 1: 179\(^1\)). These, along with the so-called hanging gardens, were described as two of the seven wonders of the ancient world (fig. 6). The hanging gardens were said to have been built by the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 BCE) for his Median wife, who missed the mountainous terrain of her native land. The actual location of these gardens is widely disputed by scholars, with some suggesting that they did not exist, or that they were actually located at Nineveh (fig. 1).

Since little has been recovered archaeologically from any period earlier than the Neo-Babylonian Empire (626-536 BCE), our understanding of the layout of the city is therefore limited to the works of the Neo-Babylonian kings, and the city itself can be understood as one of the most impressive monuments left by these rulers. The building inscriptions of the Neo-Babylonian kings, which themselves follow a long-standing Mesopotamian tradition, also provide us with information on the city and the building activities of these kings.

The city was sacked in 689 BCE by the Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib (688-681 BCE), following the deportation of his son to the Elamite king by the Babylonian citizens, most likely resulting in his death at the hands of the enemies of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (Van de Mieroop 2007: 255). Sennacherib not only destroyed the city, including the temples, he also deported the cult statues of Babylon to Assyria. The destruction of the city was later viewed as a sacrilegious act due to the cultic significance of the city, and Sennacherib's successor, Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE), began to rebuild the city. Esarhaddon also placed his two sons on the thrones of Assyria and Babylonia, creating a dual monarchy that he hoped would resolved the tensions between the two regions. This attempt was unsuccessful and Shamash-shum-ukin (667-648 BCE), king of Babylonia, staged a rebellion against his brother, Ashurbanipal (668-627 BCE), king of Assyria, which lasted for four years. Ashurbanipal won the struggle for power and took over the throne of Babylon. Following his death, the throne of Babylonia was once more held by a Babylonian ruler.

\(^1\)http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hh/hh1170.htm
Figure 1: Map of Mesopotamia showing the locations referenced in this module. Image created by M. Lewis using Google Earth.
Figure 2: Map of Babylon. Image created by M. Lewis, after Van de Mieroop 1999.
Figure 3: The Stele of Hammurabi. Image courtesy "Mhzt" via Wikimedia Commons. Stele currently housed in the Louvre.
Babylon: A Wonder of the Ancient World

**Figure 4:** A lecture on Babylon, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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3 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:P1050763_Louvre_code_Hammurabi_face_rwk.JPG
4 http://www.louvre.fr/oeuvre-notices/code-de-hammurabi-roi-de-babylone
Figure 5: The so-called 'Babylonian Map of the World'. Image courtesy of the British Museum⁵.

⁵http://tinyurl.com/pvmushx
1.2 The Neo-Babylonian Empire

The new ruler of Babylonia was a Chaldaean named Nabopolassar (626-605 BCE). The Chaldeans were a tribal group who had settled in Babylonia and were integrated into Babylonian society to the extent that they gained political control at several points (Van de Mieroop 2007: 212). It took Nabopolassar ten years to solidify his control over Babylonia as a whole, but by 616 BCE he was campaigning in Assyria and raiding the cities of Nimrud and Assur. In 612 BCE a coalition of Medes and Babylonians, joined by others including the Scythians, sacked the Assyrian capital city of Nineveh, and the last Assyrian king was defeated by this coalition at Harran in 609 BCE (fig. 1).

Nabopolassar and his son, Nebuchadnezzar II, restored the city to its former glory after its destruction by Sennacherib. In the beginning of Nebuchadnezzar II’s reign, Babylon was a large city of roughly 400 hectares (Pedersen 2011: 12). By the end of his reign, the city had grown to 800 hectares and many new or renovated monumental buildings had been constructed (Pedersén 2011: 13). Nebuchadnezzar II is responsible for the major building projects at Babylon during this period, including finishing the Southern Palace started by his father, and building the Ishtar Gate and Processional Way (fig. 7). A digital model of Babylon, based on the archaeological evidence, is being produced by Olof Pedersén of Uppsala University and can be viewed

http://wellcomeimages.org/
1.2.1

Figure 7: The current state of the site of Babylon (as of November 2015). Image created by M. Lewis using Google Earth.

2 The City and the King

The Neo-Babylonian kings chose to emphasize their power and prestige through cultic means—specifically building projects that were intended to please the gods—rather than through publicizing their military campaigns. Despite obvious military successes by the Neo-Babylonian rulers, their service to the gods as builders was seen as more important in the Babylonian royal ideology. This is evident in the numerous foundation cylinders which record building activity, but not military activity. The royal ideology of the Neo-Babylonian rulers was displayed not only in their architectural endeavors but also in their artistic output, which followed in the Mesopotamian tradition of representing cultic and divine motifs, emphasizing an iconic rather than narrative pictorial mode. The city itself can be understood as both an expression of the king’s power and the royal Babylonian ideology. An inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II from the Ishtar Gate (see below) illustrates this royal ideology:

"King of Babylon, the pious priest appointed by the will of Marduk, the highest priestly prince, beloved of Nabu, of prudent deliberation, who has learnt to embrace wisdom, who fathomed their godly being and pays reverence to their majesty, the untiring Governor, who always has at heart the care of the cult of (the temples of) Esagil and Ezida and is constantly concerned with the well-being of (the cities of) Babylon and

\[\text{http://www.lingfil.uu.se/staff/olof_pedersen/Babylon_Model/}\]

\[\text{http://cnx.org/content/m58118/1.1/}\]
Borsippa, the wise, the humble, the caretaker of (the temples of) Esagil and Ezida, the first born son of Nabopolassar, the King of Babylon, am I.” (Marzahn 1992: 29-30) (fig. 8).
Figure 8: The inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II on the Ishtar Gate. Image courtesy of "Gryffindor", via Wikimedia Commons. Currently housed at the Pergamon Museum, Berlin.
2.2 Akītu Festival

Part of Babylon's cultic significance derived from its status as the location of the akītu\(^{11}\) festival – the Babylonian New Year's festival. This was the most important festival of the year - held in spring at the beginning of the agricultural season – in which the Babylonian king had to take the hand of Marduk in order to legitimize his rule. The festival lasted for 11 days and included the procession of the cult statues of Babylonia and the ritual humiliation of the king by the priests of Marduk. After the king ‘took the hand’ of Marduk, all of the cult statues processed out of the city to the akītu temple, then returned to Babylon on the 11th day by way of the Processional Way. This festival signaled the start of the agricultural season and ritually insured the prosperity of the coming year. The festival was considered essential for the country to prosper, but could only happen when both the cult statue of Marduk and the king were present. The city of Babylon served as the stage on which this festival, central to Babylonian religion and ideology, took place. The akītu procession began at the main city temple of Babylon and the ziggurat of Marduk in the heart of the city (fig. 2).

2.3 The Ziggurat and the Temple

The akītu procession began at the dual temples of Marduk, city god of Babylon. The Processional Way ran between the lower temple of Esagil\(^{12}\) (“the temple of the raised head”) and the ziggurat, Etemenanki\(^{13}\) (“the temple of the foundation of heaven and earth”). Esagil was elaborately niched and buttressed in longstanding Mesopotamian tradition (fig. 9). It included subsidiary sanctuaries that were used to house the cult statues of gods who visited Babylon for the akītu festival. The cult statues of Mesopotamia have not survived in the archaeological record, either because they were made of a wooden core and decomposed, or because they were made of precious materials and were reused. Herodotus described Marduk’s cult statue as being made of pure gold, but there are few other descriptions of these statues making it challenging to know what they would have looked like.

The ziggurat was a step-pyramid, whose shape was the culmination of the Mesopotamian practice of building new temples on top of the foundations of earlier ones (fig. 10). The base of the ziggurat measured around 90 by 90 meters and modern calculations have estimated its finished height at 90 meters (Marzahn 1992: 38). The temple at the top of the ziggurat was said to have been clad in blue tiles (fig. 11). Herodotus described the ziggurat as having 8 layers with the temple on the very top, and a staircase winding around the outside of the platforms. This structure most likely served as the inspiration for the biblical ‘Tower of Babel,’ which has been the subject of many modern artistic endeavors (fig. 12). Alexander the Great was in the process of restoring it when he died at Babylon in 323 BCE. The ziggurat is not well preserved in the archaeological record as its baked bricks were pillaged by later peoples for use as building materials.

2.4 The Processional Way

The Processional Way was the route by which the akītu-procession left the city to reach the akītu temple, and then return to the city temples at the end of the festival. The 20 to 24 meter-wide street was paved with white limestone and red breccia slabs that each had a building inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II stating that the street was built for Marduk’s procession during the akītu festival. The Processional Way was flanked by high walls that extended out to the north of the city for nearly 250 meters and were punctuated by buttresses and towers (fig. 13). The walls were decorated with glazed bricks depicting rows of striding lions (symbol of the goddess Ishtar) and served an apotropaic, protective function (fig. 14, 15). Each lion is 2 meters in length and made of up to 46 different bricks; they face away from the gate as if processing out from it. On

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Gryffindor
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pergamon_Museum_Berlin_2007085.jpg
http://tinyurl.com/pis27tw
http://www.livius.org/articles/religion/akitu/
http://www.livius.org/articles/place/esagila/
http://www.livius.org/articles/place/etemenanki/
one wall they have their left foot forward and on the other they have their right foot forward. They also alternate white fur with yellow manes and yellow fur with red manes, though the red manes have now turned green due to the copper used in the glaze.

2.5 Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar II

Once the gods left the temples, the procession followed the Processional Way north, past the Southern Palace (fig. 16). The palace, located at the northern periphery of the inner city wall, was started by Nabopolassar but then extensively renovated and expanded by Nebuchadnezzar II. It was built around several massive courtyards, the largest of which was in the center of the palace. Off this courtyard was the main throneroom which was around 50 by 50 meters and possibly barrel-vaulted. The throne was placed in the center back wall of the throneroom, immediately opposite the main doorway, making it the first thing a visitor would have seen when entering the room. The throneroom also had a façade decorated with glazed brick with representations of stylized palm trees and lions (fig. 17).

2.6 The Ishtar Gate

After passing by the Southern Palace, the gods passed through the Ishtar Gate, and then out of the city (fig. 18). Situated where the Processional Way passed through the inner city walls, this was the main ceremonial gate of the city (fig. 19). It took the form of a huge double gate, around 48 meters long and decorated with no fewer than 575 figures of bulls (symbol of the god Adad) and mushushu dragons (symbol of the god Marduk) (fig. 20). The gate showed evidence of three phases of rebuilding, all done in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II. Images of this can be seen on the ‘Digital Model of Babylon’ website14. The earliest version of the gate was completed in unglazed relief bricks (fig. 21). The second was created in flat glazed bricks, and the final phase was made of colorfully glazed and relief bricks. Due to the successive rebuildings of the gate, it stood well above the rest of the city and had to be approached on each side by a sloping ramp.

The final part of the procession, from the Ishtar Gate and the city itself to the akitu temple, cannot be fully understood as the akitu temple has not yet been located. Judging by the northerly direction in which the Processional Way exits the city, it was probably located to the north.

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2.7

Figure 9: A reconstruction of the Esagil temple at Babylon. Image created by Jona Lendering\textsuperscript{15}, courtesy of Livius.org\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{15}http://www.livius.org/contributor/jona-lendering/
\textsuperscript{16}http://www.livius.org/pictures/iraq/babylon/esagila-model/
Figure 10: A reconstruction of the Etemenanki at Babylon. Image created by Jona Lendering\textsuperscript{17}, courtesy of Livius.org\textsuperscript{18}.

\textsuperscript{17}http://www.livius.org/contributor/jona-lendering/
\textsuperscript{18}http://www.livius.org/pictures/a/maps/etemenanki/
Figure 11: A reconstruction of temple on top of the Etemenanki. Image courtesy of "Xdon elias", via Wikimedia Commons\(^9\).

\(^9\)https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mosaico_babilonia6_copia.png
Figure 12: An artist's impression of the Tower of Babel. Image created by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, via Wikimedia Commons. Artwork currently housed in the Kunsthistorisches Museum.
Figure 13: A reconstruction of the Processional Way, leading to the Ishtar Gate. Image courtesy of "Magnus Manske"\textsuperscript{23}, via Wikimedia Commons\textsuperscript{24}.

\textsuperscript{23}https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:File_Upload_Bot_%28Magnus_Manske%29
\textsuperscript{24}https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mus%C3%A9e_de_Pergame_%28Berlin%29_%2826349358381%29.jpg

http://cnx.org/content/m58118/1.1/
**Figure 14:** Glazed lion relief from the Processional Way. Image courtesy of M. Lewis, object currently housed in the British Museum.

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**Babylonian Glazed Bricks**

**Figure 15:** Video on the glazed bricks from the Processional Way, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art\(^{25}\).

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\(^{25}\)[http://www.metmuseum.org/](http://www.metmuseum.org/)
Figure 16: The reconstruction of the Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar II. Image courtesy of Edward G. Marten via Wikimedia Commons\textsuperscript{26}.

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The Ishtar Gate and Processional Way

Figure 17: A video on the Ishtar Gate and the Processional Way, courtesy of Khan Academy\textsuperscript{27}.

\textsuperscript{26}https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_historical_city_of_Babylon.jpg
\textsuperscript{27}https://www.khanacademy.org/
Figure 18: The facade from the throneroom of the Southern Palace. Image courtesy of "Hahaha", via Wikimedia Commons. Currently housed at the Pergamon Museum, Berlin.
Figure 19: The Ishtar Gate. Image courtesy of "Radomir Vrbovsky", via Wikimedia Commons\(^30\). Currently housed at the Pergamon Museum\(^31\), Berlin.

\(^{28}\)https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pergamonmuseum_Ishtartor_07.jpg
\(^{29}\)http://tinyurl.com/p4e27mw
\(^{30}\)https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ishtar_gate_in_Pergamon_museum_in_Berlin..jpg
\(^{31}\)http://tinyurl.com/p4e27mw
Figure 20: Glazed brick reliefs on the Ishtar Gate. Image courtesy of "Miguel Hermoso"\textsuperscript{32}, via Wikimedia Commons\textsuperscript{33}.

\textsuperscript{32}https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:MiguelHermoso
\textsuperscript{33}https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berl%C3%ADn_Mushussu_01.JPG
3 The End of Neo-Babylonian Rule and Modern Babylon

The final king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire was king Nabonidus (555-539 BCE). This king appears to have been devoted to the moon-god, Sin, and paid more attention to renovating Sin's temples than supporting the worship of Marduk (Van de Mieroop 2007: 278-280). This culminated in 552 BCE when he moved to the oasis of Teima in Arabia, causing the cessation of the akitu festival at Babylon (Van de Mieroop 2007: 280). The festival did not take place for ten years due to the king's absence, and upon his return he gave over several temples, including that of Marduk at Babylon, to the worship of Sin. This greatly angered the powerful Marduk priesthood and likely led to his historical reputation of being an impious king. He was so unpopular in later traditions that the view arose that Cyrus the Great of Persia (559-530 BCE) was sent to liberate Babylon from the ungodly Nabonidus by the Babylonian gods. This view was probably fostered by Cyrus who may have wished to have been seen as a liberator rather than an invader, but an anti-Nabonidus sentiment seemed to exist among the native Babylonian population also. Most importantly, Cyrus restarted the akitu festival that was so central to Babylon's identity.

34 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Radomil
35 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Babylon_detail2_RB.JPG
The remains of Babylon today are unimpressive when compared to its ancient importance. The Ishtar Gate has been relocated to the Pergamon Museum\(^{36}\) in Berlin, and the ziggurat is greatly diminished. This has not stopped the site from being appropriated for political means, however. During the 1980s, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein initiated the ‘Archaeological Restoration of Babylon Project,’ restoring the Southern Palace of Nebuchadnezzar and using the ancient authority of the city to lend legitimacy to his own rule (Curtis 2008: 213). Saddam Hussein even had a lavish palace built on a raised terrace overlooking the site (Curtis 2008: 216) (fig. 22). Following the Second Gulf War in 2003, an American military camp was established at Babylon that eventually grew to 150 hectares in size. These modern usages caused extensive damage to the exposed remains of the site, and quite probably also to those remains that are still buried (Curtis 2008: 217). As a result of the damage caused to the archaeological remains, the World Monument Fund\(^{37}\), working with Iraq’s State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, has started a project to preserve and restore the remains of the ancient city.

\(^{36}\) [http://tinyurl.com/p4s27nw](http://tinyurl.com/p4s27nw)

\(^{37}\) [https://www.wmf.org/project/future-babylon](https://www.wmf.org/project/future-babylon)
3.1

Figure 22: Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s Palace. Image courtesy of James Matise, via Wikimedia Commons.

http://cnx.org/content/m58118/1.1/
4 Bibliography


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