

Section 9: The Neo-Babylonians

Kudurru of
Nebuchadnezzar I
(1125-1104 BCE)

n.b. astrological
symbols

M9-01



By the seventh century BCE, the Babylonians were well established in Mesopotamia. In the third millennium BCE when they were known as the Amorites, their distant ancestors had moved into the region. That immigration had clustered into townships, the most important of which was Babylon near the place where the Tigris and Euphrates are closest before they disgorge into the Persian Gulf. The city grew into a great power in the first centuries of the second millennium BCE and peaked during the reign of Hammurabi, famous for his law code. But the empire he built slowly dwindled until the city was sacked in a long-range raid by the Hittites in 1595 BCE, and power fell into the hands of the Kassite dynasty. As the next millennium dawned, Babylon could only rarely assert independence from the states around it, most of all the Assyrians with whom it had a dysfunctional relationship resulting in the city's destruction twice during the 600's BCE.

Thus, Babylon was at once the curator of a museum that looked back to the days of Sumer, a courier who bore that tradition to the modern age and the disgruntled employee of whatever regime happened to have inherited that legacy. In those days, keeping the Babylonians on your good side was as important as not losing the Pope's support during the waning days of the Middle Ages. That is, it was equally a matter of good appearances as power politics. So Assyrian nobles dutifully married Babylonian princesses, alliances that demonstrated courtesy as much as strategic diplomacy.

FIG. 8. Low relief carving on edge of throne base, Fort Shalmaneser, showing Shalmaneser III (right) sealing an agreement with Marduk-zakir-shumi, subservient king of Babylon. (Photo courtesy of Prudence O. Harper)



15

M9-02



M9-03

A relief on an altar carved during the reign of Shalmaneser III (r. 858-824 BCE) says it all. The kings of Assyria and Babylon meet in the center and shake hands. Note neither is shown larger than the other, no hierarchical perspective. They appear to be equals, but they are not. Marduk-zakir-shumi, the king of Babylon, is in all real ways the vassal of his Assyrian overlord. Shalmaneser allows his Babylonian counterpart the dignity due so venerable a state, and exactly nothing more.

Babylonian
king on
kudurru



M9-05

Once an economic and military powerhouse, the Babylon of the early first millennium BCE had fallen far. At one point during its long recession, the city couldn't even afford to put on its most important annual celebration, the New Year's festival. Through long stretches from the tenth to seventh centuries BCE, we hear only the names of kings, not their deeds or achievements or building projects. The strong probability is there were none. Indeed, during this time it's not local authorities who restored temples and refurbished cult sites at Babylon, the traditional prerogative of native royalty, but outsiders like Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III. Those were the officials who clothed the statues of Babylonian gods. The whole state was on welfare.

Babylonian
legal tablet, in
clay envelope



M9-04

Cuneiform
Tablets



M9-07

All the same, the prestige of the city still burned bright. Assyrian scribes continued to learn and write in the Babylonian language. Several of the Old Babylonian texts of Gilgamesh we have come from school books they used to practice composition and translation.

Assurnasirpal II



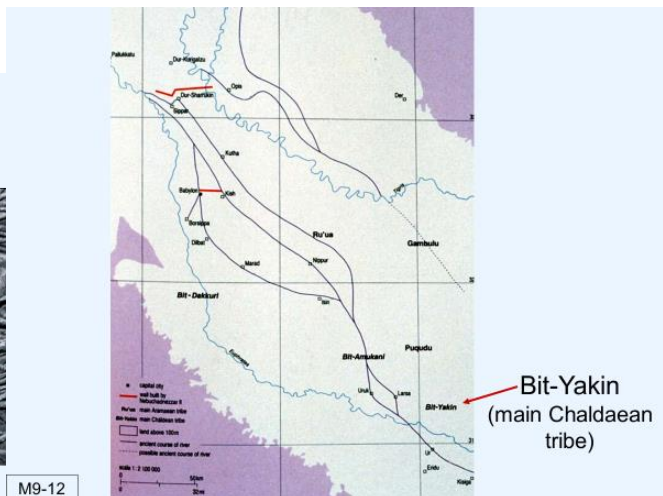
M9-06

And during this long downtime, there wasn't always bad blood between the Babylonians and the Assyrians. When help was needed to suppress revolts at the end of the 800's BCE, the Assyrian empire could count on Babylon for military assistance, but at some point things turned sour. Humiliating treaties and high taxes fostered two rebellions that Sargon II and his son Sennacherib had to suppress. The latter, as we noted in Section 8.2, ended in devastation, with thirteen thousand dead and political anarchy in Babylon. And it all happened again in the next generation when Ashurbanipal III fought his brother for control of the city. The door was wide open for a new group to move in and restore the city's long-lost reputation, and the Chaldeans stepped into the breach.

Assyrian relief: Chaldeans hiding in reed marshes



M9-11



M9-12

Kaldû in Babylonian, this clan came from lower Mesopotamia, around the lakes and marshes formed by the southern Euphrates. It was ruled by overlords, sheiks, who funded by a profitable trade in cattle, horses and also commodities like ebony and ivory from as far away as Africa along with gold, wood and elephant hides from India.

Astrological *kudurru*

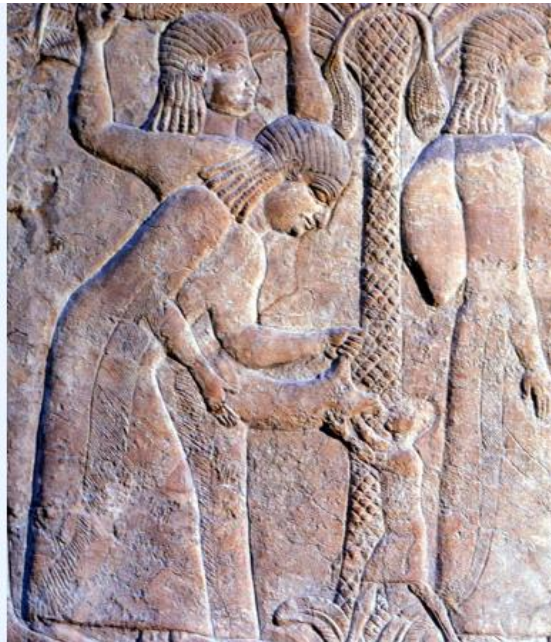


M9-13

The Chaldeans also had a special interest in magic, haruspicy (the use of animal entrails to make predictions) and astrology. Indeed, they would lend their name to the very Latin word for “astrologers,” *Chaldaei*. The *kudurru* above is filling with astrological signs and symbols of constellations like Scorpio, Hydra and Canis Major.

Assyrian relief: captured Chaldaeans

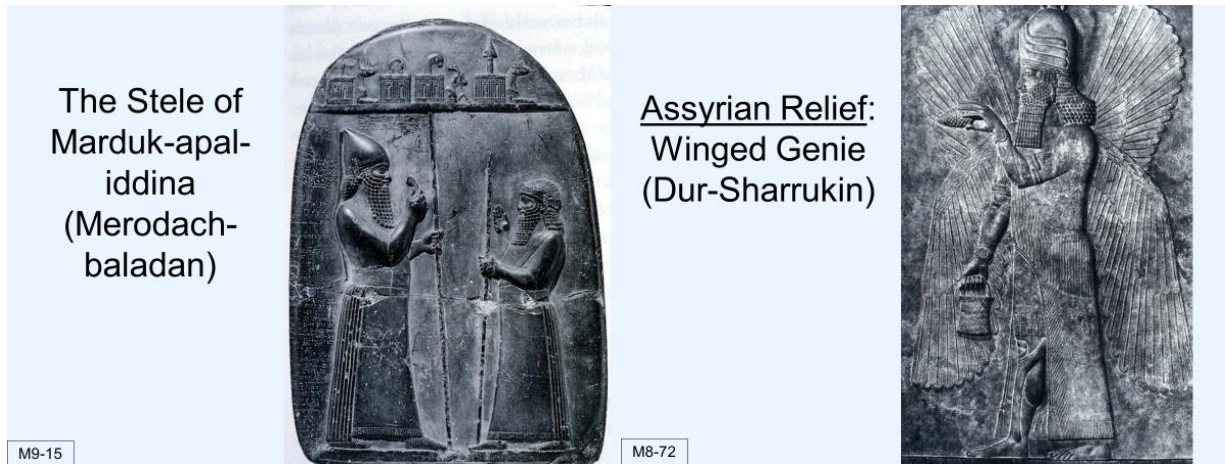
(Nineveh,
Sennacherib's
Palace)



M9-14

Nabonassar was an early Chaldean leader who ascended to the throne of Babylon around 747 BCE, though he may not have actually have belonged to the clan, only fought alongside them. We know very little about him, other than upon his death the Assyrians seized control of the city, and their king Tiglath-Pileser III claimed the throne, giving himself a new name Pulu (Pul in the

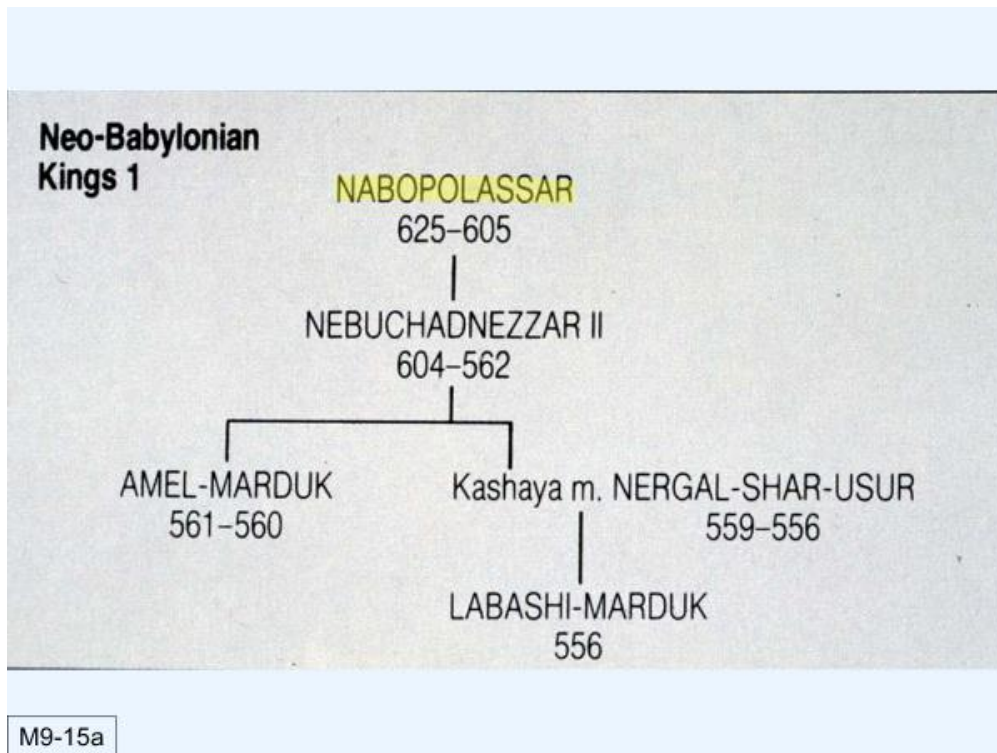
Bible). At this time, there seems to have been a division between northern and southern Babylonians. The northerners who were more directly exposed to Assyrian forces pushed for peace with Assyria, while their southern counterparts who could afford to be were more fiercely independent. Those factions were to divide the Babylonians for the next century, as the Assyrians rose to supremacy in Mesopotamia. This tension fomented a cycle of insurrection followed by brief periods of independence, first during the reign of Sargon II (720-710 BCE) and then again under Sennacherib (703 BCE). Each rebellion inspired a violent reassertion of Assyrian control, often accompanied by the city's devastation.



The Stele of Marduk-apal-iddina (Merodach-baladan)

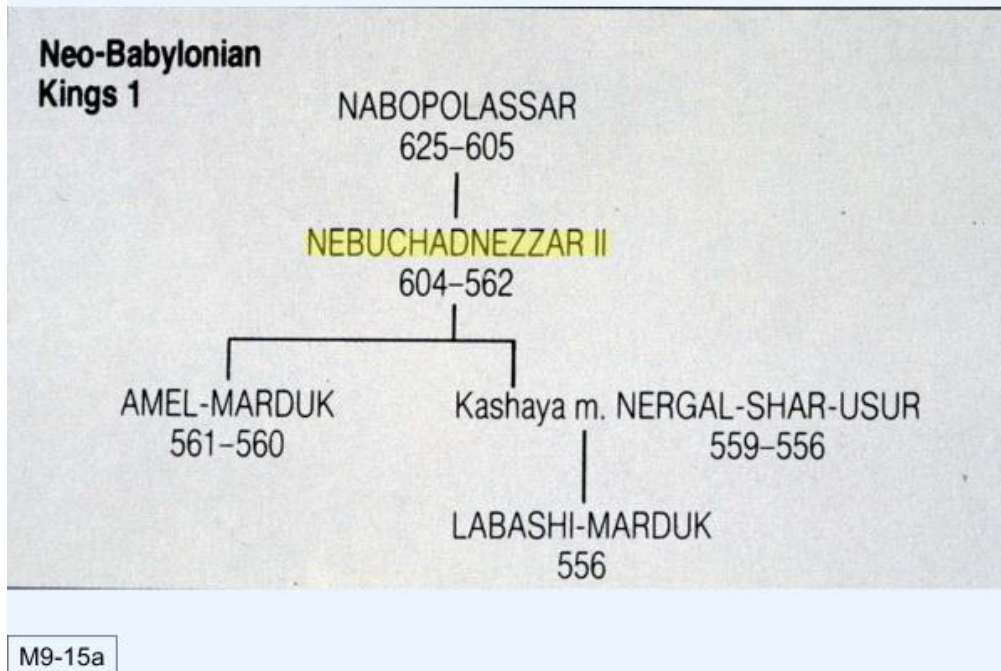
Assyrian Relief: Winged Genie (Dur-Sharrukin)

As we noted before in Section 7.2, the major political figure in Babylon during this time was Merodach-baladan whose stele (see above), erected in 714 BCE, boldly declares his city's independence. The artwork itself clearly reflects a strong sense of difference with Assyria. Note how the figures on the left slide are softer and more rounded than the stiff and hieratic, tough and muscled images seen, for instance, on Sargon's relief at Dur-Sharrukin (on the right). The crown Merodach-baladan is wearing is not Assyrian either, nor his hairstyle. If anything, this stele recalls the artwork seen on Kassite kudurrus, which you will recall functioned as boundary stones, markers that say "Do not cross this line!" None of this can be coincidence. It's a blatant message to Sargon that the Babylonians are not his to own or control. Twice, the Assyrians would disagree and punish the rebellious city for its insolence, and in the next two generations, Sennacherib and Assurbanipal both felt compelled to punish the city by razing it to the ground. Each time the Assyrians would regret that choice and expend a great deal of wealth and manpower to rebuild it.



By 625 BCE, the Assyrians were in severe decline, and at the same time another Chaldean chieftain Nabopolassar was emerging as a leader in Babylon. This marks the real rise of this dynasty. As we noted in the previous section (8.3), he led a Babylonian attack against the major Assyrian cities, beginning with Ashur, the southernmost capital. Then forging an alliance with the Medes in the Zagros mountains and their king Cyaxares, he spearheaded a combined assault on Nimrud first, and then with help from the Scythians as well, on Nineveh, taking and destroying it in 612 BCE. He tore down the city walls which meant it would be impossible for the Assyrians to mount any immediate counterattack. The former superpower now lay in the same state of ruin which it had perpetrated on so much of the Near East. Assyria's capital cities were left to molder in the dust.

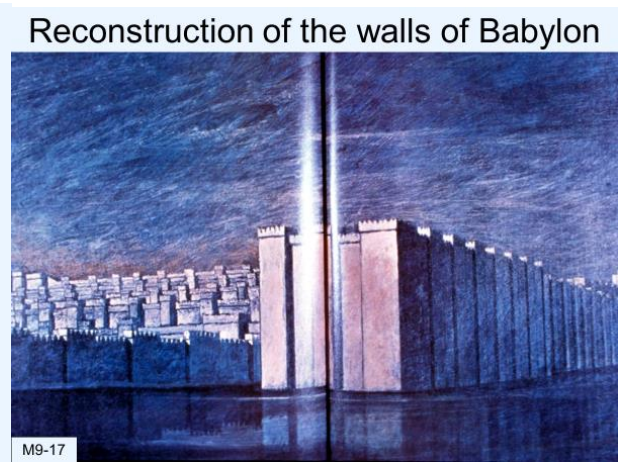
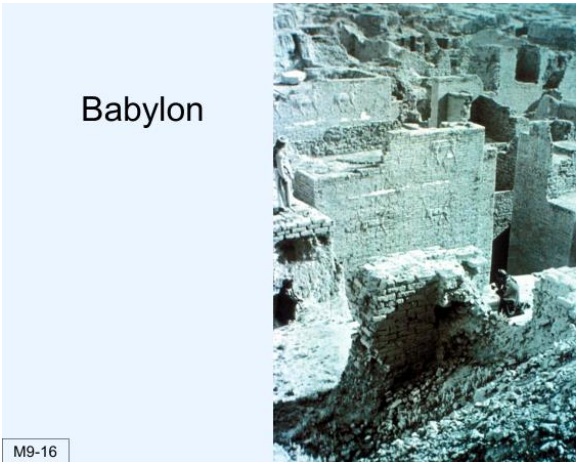
The Median-Scythian alliance with Babylon was short-lived. Each camp quickly returned to its natural home turf: the Babylonians to southern Mesopotamia, the Medes and Scythians toward the north and Armenia. The Babylonians, having watching the last remnants of the Assyrian army appeal to Egypt for help, could see the things to come. Clearly, the Egyptians dreamed of reclaiming Tuthmosis III's foreign empire, meaning they would have to be forced out of the Syro-Palestinian area. But that part of the world also had its own dreams of independence, all of which were ultimately squelched by the greater nations on either side of them fighting over control of their land. In 609 BCE, for instance, Josiah, the King of Judea, was killed by the forces of Necho, the reigning pharaoh of Egypt.



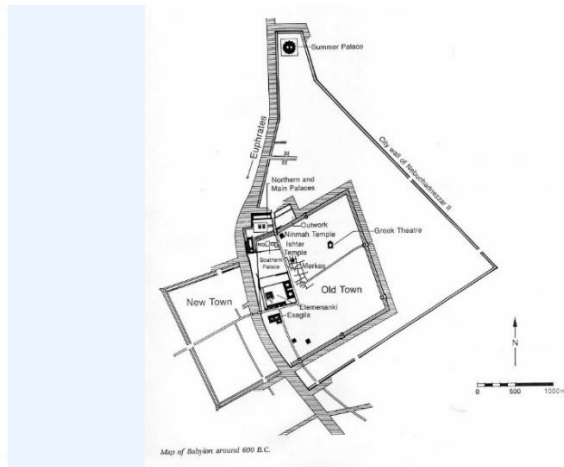
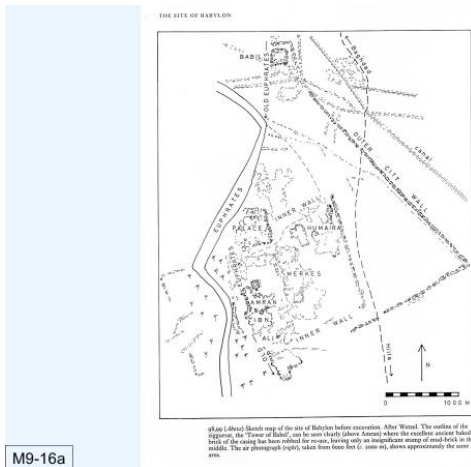
In 605 BCE, Nabopolassar’s son Nebuchadnezzar II (sometimes spelled Nebuchadrezzar) — his name is well-known from the Bible — was leading the Babylonian army toward the west under the pretense of “liberating” Palestine from Egyptian interference, when his father suddenly died. He had to rush back to Babylon to secure his rightful place on the throne. He was crowned king on September 23, 605 BCE — see how good the Babylonian chronicles are for this period! — and managed to return to the army at the frontier in a mere twenty-three days. From there, he had to put down one revolt after another, which consumed the early years of his reign.

But Egypt was always his major target. Nebuchadnezzar saw that part of the former Assyrian empire as part of what the Babylonians were owed for all that Ashurbanipal had put them through. But between him and Egypt lay Judea, one of the few remaining semi-independent states in the Syro-Palestinian area. Just as Nebuchadnezzar was poised to make his first foray into Egypt, the ever-restless Jews tried to throw off the yoke of indentureship to Babylon— very bad timing! — and the king turned on them and unleashed the full fury of his army. A few years earlier he had taken Jerusalem by force and deported many important and high-ranking people, including the prophet Ezekiel, but he’d left the city itself standing. This time he spared nothing. His army invested the town, waited out a siege that lasted a year and a half as the population slowly starved, and finally entered the city in June of 586 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar ordered it demolished, and the Temple of Solomon burnt down. The Hebrew king Zedekiah was forced to watch the slaughter of his own children, then blinded and carted off into exile. This time, something on the order of fifty thousand Hebrews were deported from their homes to Mesopotamia. The infamous Babylonian Captivity had begun. Nebuchadnezzar’s royal chronicles put it succinctly: “Judea was carried away out of the land.” It would be fifty years before they were allowed to return.

Now well established on the throne, Nebuchadnezzar stopped campaigning so vigorously. In the last decades of his reign, he wrangled the desert tribes of Arabia and instituted a long siege of the Mediterranean coastal fortress of Tyre — it took thirteen years before the city fell! — and there was one last half-hearted attempt to take Egypt, which went nowhere. The king, instead, turned the majority of his attention to ensuring that Babylon was once again the city of all cities in the Near East. The result was one of the greatest architectural triumphs of early humankind, a treasure trove of marvels and a site so large many parts of it have yet to be excavated.



The defensive walls of Babylon were surrounded by a moat and had a thick outer skin of baked brick that shone from miles away. A later Roman satirist joked that the city had been built by potters. These fortifications sported an outer wall almost four meters thick and an inner one raised above it and twice the size. The top was crenellated with buttresses and towers. The moat itself, ranging between twenty and eighty meters across and lined with bitumen, was actually an extension of the Euphrates river redirected so that it flowed around and through the city.



There were bridges leading out to the surrounding community and connecting the districts within Babylon proper.

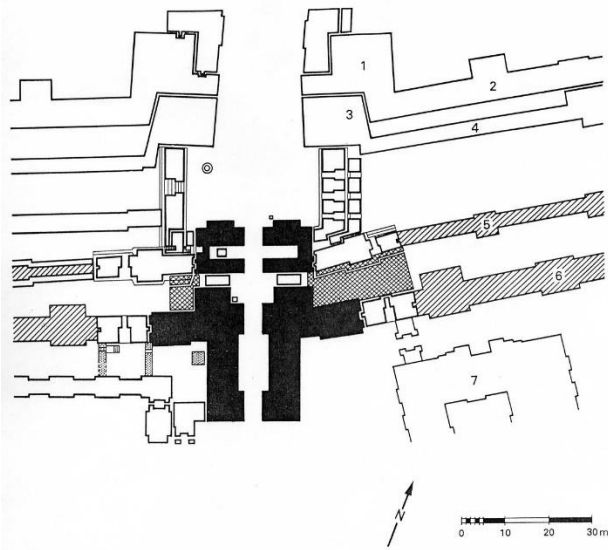


Fig. 8 Ground plan of the Ishtar Gate and its vicinity recovered during the excavation; it shows the second building phase which served as the foundation for the third phase

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1 Younger, northern part of the Bastion opposite the Gate | 5 Nemeti-Ellil City Wall |
| 2 Younger Moat Wall of Nebuchadnezzar II | 6 Ingar-Ellil City Wall |
| 3 Older southern part of the Bastion | 7 Temple of Ninmah |
| 4 Older Moat Wall of Nebuchadnezzar II | |

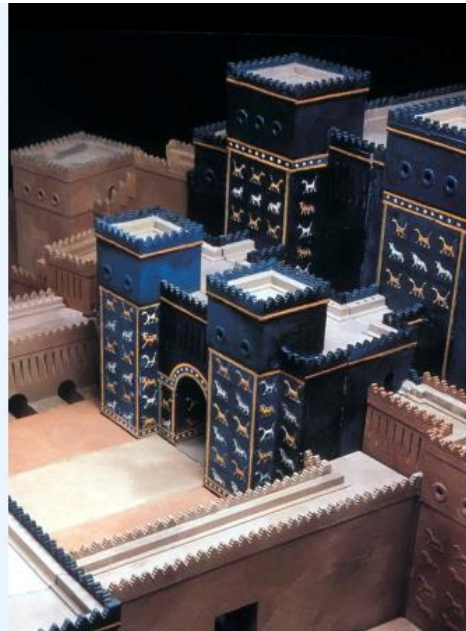
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M9-18

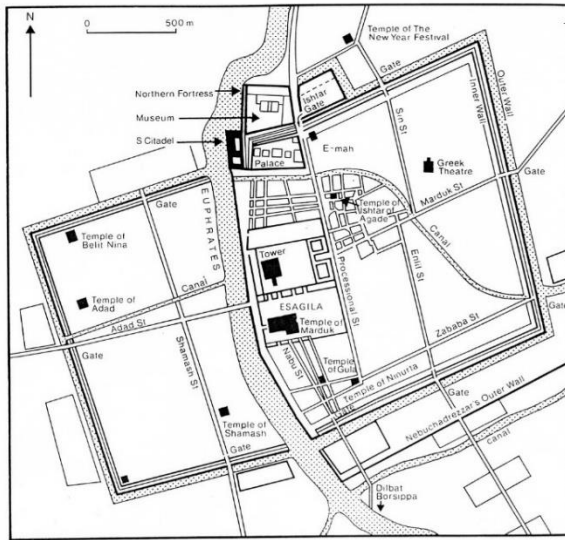
Eight large gates with inner and outer guardrooms stood at the entrances — note no lamasu orthostates, too Assyrian! — each named for a deity. Only four have been excavated.

Reconstructed Model of the Ishtar Gate

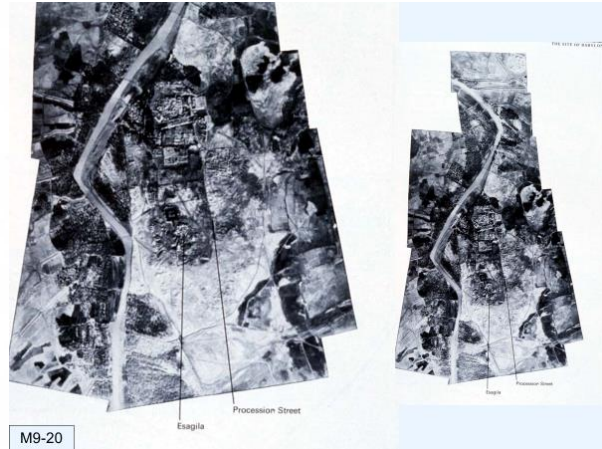


M9-19

The best preserved is the Ishtar Gate which was on the north side of Babylon. The German archaeologist Robert Koldewey, who worked there in the early 1900's, carefully disassembled it, brick by brick, and had it reconstructed in the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin where it is still visible today. The reconstruction above is, of course, based on modern conjecture, especially the upper part, but it gives a sense of the gate's monumental grandeur.



100 Schematic plan of the inner city of Babylon in the New-Babylonian period. The excavations have been concentrated largely in the western portion of the older part of the city, east of the Euphrates. After Unger.



M9-20

The road leading through the Ishtar Gate and into the heart of the city was called the Processional Way. Passing by the great ziggurat of Marduk and over a canal, it ran south to the palace of Nebuchadnezzar all the way down to the banks of the Euphrates. This thoroughfare was sixty-three feet wide and made of white limestone and red breccia.



Fig. 1 The beginning of the excavation at the southeastern section of the El-Kasr hill; the picture shows the first excavated part of the second building phase of the Ishtar Gate (for comparison see Fig. 6)

M9-21

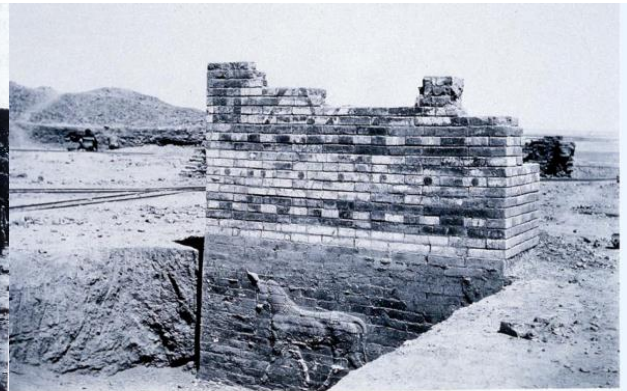


Fig. 6 Remains of one of the gate towers of the Ishtar Gate during the excavation. Clearly visible is the transition from the first colorless building phase (below) to the second building phase in which coloured glazed bricks were used

M9-22

All along the Processional Way were walls decorated with colorful glazed brickwork. The photos above show them emerging from the sand during excavation. It's important to note these are not tiles, but baked bricks, a traditional Kassite artform, thus another demonstration of Babylonian nationalism and anti-Assyrian propaganda. While there is little art from the Kassite period left for us to see today, there was still probably quite a bit in Nebuchadnezzar's time so these wall panels are both a glorification of the day and a remembrance of splendors past.

Glazed Lion Relief



M9-23



M9-25

The images on these murals feature sacred animals striding into the city. Against a background of crushed lapis lazuli, they march across the towers and down the Processional Way. The lions represent Ishtar, the bulls Adad (a storm god). Over one hundred such images of lions have been recovered.

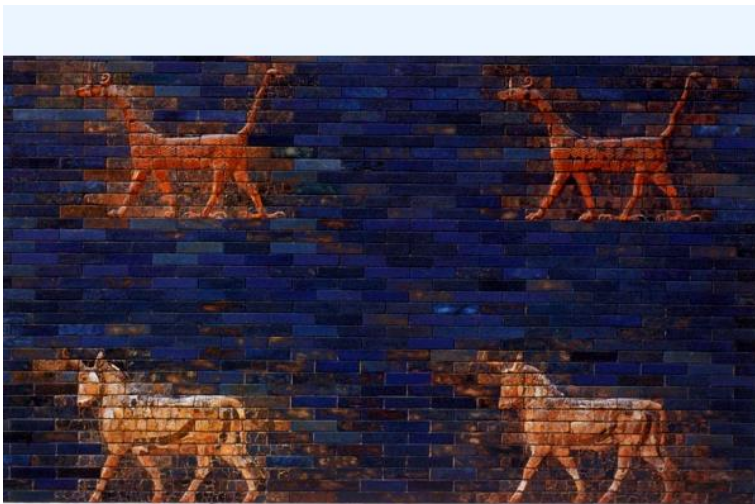


Fig. 10 Dragon and bull reliefs from the covering of the Ishtar Gate's facade, third building phase

M9-24

M9-26

Head of a
mushushshu
(dragon
sacred to
Marduk)



And there be dragons too, the avatar of Marduk. Called *mushushshu*, meaning “furious snake” in Babylonian, they are mixed creatures, a conglomeration of serpent, bird and lion parts. Again, it’s worth noting the differences between these images and artwork done earlier in Assyrian style. See how the horns of the bulls are not overlarge or over many? No multiple sets, everything’s more natural, nothing overblown or hyper-macho. Here, nature itself is impressive enough to convey the animal’s divinity.

Glazed Lion Relief



M9-27

Assyrian Relief: lion-hunt (Nimrud)



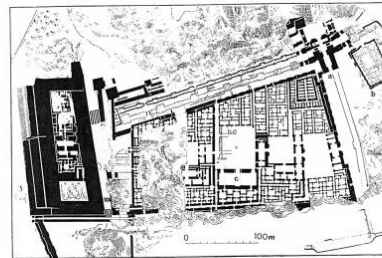
M8-113

The lions show that better than anything. Compare a Babylonian lion (above left) and an Assyrian one (right). Both are roaring but one looks like the real animal — plenty ferocious enough! — on the other, tendons strain in a stiff stance. Frankly, the Assyrian lion looks like what it is, a relief, not a lion. In all this Babylonian artwork, there’s a clear sense of exhaustion with Ashurbanipal’s strongman posturing and steroidal muscle-flexing. The message seems clear: “The workout is over. It’s time to cool down.”

Ruins of the Palace at Babylon



M9-29



M9-27a

101 The main of Southern Palace at Babylon lies between the Processional Way to the east, from which it was entered, and the thickly walled citadel to the west. Part of the same city wall can be seen to the north of the palace adjoining the famous Ishtar Gate (2). Nebuchadnezzar's throne room (1) is situated on the southern side of the third or central courtyard, approached through a monumental gateway to the east. To the east of the Processional Way lies E-mak, the temple dedicated to Ninmah (3). After Koldewey

And Nebuchadnezzar had indeed a fine place to do just that, his Southern Palace. It was simply huge, nine hundred by six hundred feet, with five courtyards and a throne room off the big one.

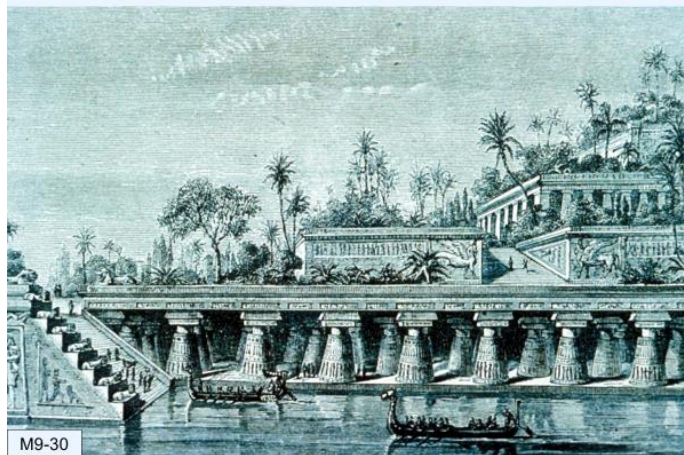
Façade of the Throne Room



M9-28

The inner wall of the throne room was immensely tall, decorated in a brick mosaic pattern that had crenellations at the top, a reflection of the city walls perhaps. In the center are stylized depictions of the tree of life, a symbol of fertility, and below another procession of striding lions, no doubt, having strolled in from the Processional Way. Beneath the palace are crypts, fourteen rooms with vaulted roofs to support the weight of the superstructure above. To judge from the number of broken tablets found in them, these served as storerooms and work spaces. It's here that archaeologists uncovered a cuneiform tablet listing the rations given to Jewish exiles living in captivity there, elegant confirmation of the biblical account.

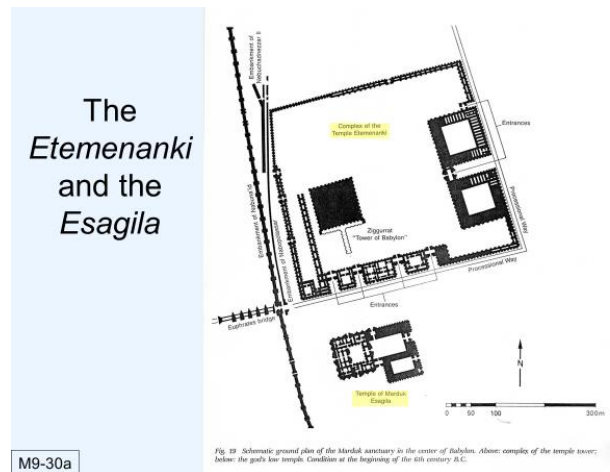
Fanciful Reconstruction of the Hanging Gardens



M9-30

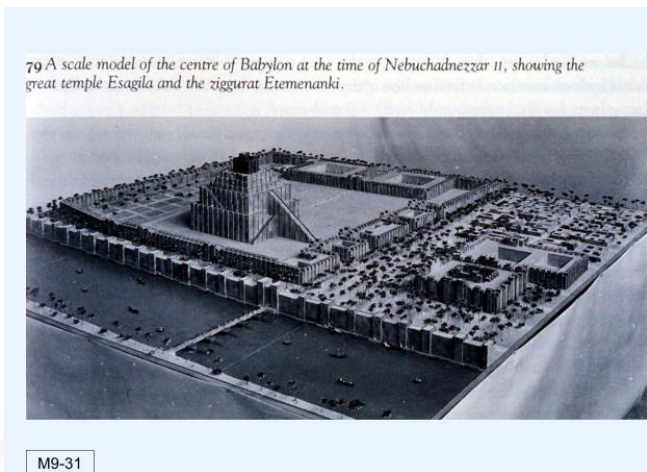
One abiding question about ancient Babylon is where the celebrated Hanging Gardens were located, if indeed they were ever there at all. Listed among the wonders of the ancient world, one

would think they'd be easy to find on the map — no one's had any problem finding other wonders like the Great Pyramid — but they're nowhere to be seen. Ancient accounts are less than helpful, attributing their construction to everyone from Semiramis to Nebuchadnezzar who, according to one account, built them for his Median wife who missed her homeland in the mountains, which seems high unlikely if only because royal wives rarely had that kind of pull. Could the Hanging Gardens have been on the terraces next to the palace? If so, it would have taken an industrial effort in water hauling to keep them from drying out, which lessens the likelihood of that. One novel suggestion is that the reason we can't find them at this site is they were never there. Instead, the legend of the Hanging Gardens is a recollection of Sennacherib's complex of well-watered parks at Nineveh, a story later translated to Babylon after the Assyrian site was a long-forgotten stretch of desert. That would have given the wonder greater relevance in later times. That Herodotus, the Greek historian, who visited the city in the next century, is utterly silent about having seen any "hanging gardens" adds considerable weight to this theory.



M9-30a

Fig. 30 Schematic ground plan of the Marbil sanctuary in the center of Babylon. Above: complex of the temple tower; below: the gate's low temple. Condition at the beginning of the 6th century B.C.



M9-31

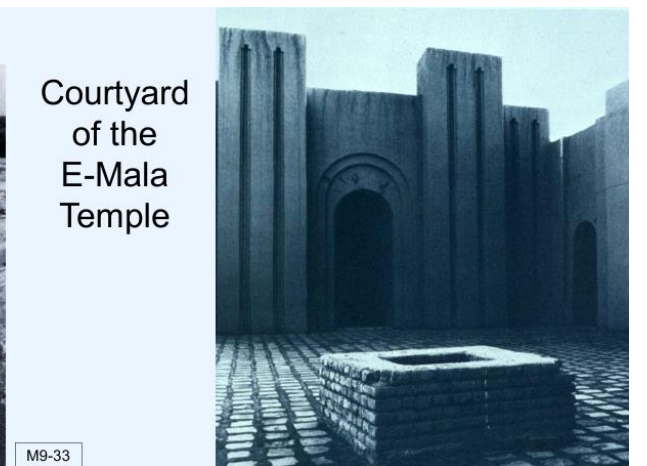
79 A scale model of the centre of Babylon at the time of Nebuchadnezzar II, showing the great temple Esagila and the ziggurat Etemenanki.

The two great centers of worship at Babylon were the temple of Marduk, called the Esagila, and the holy temenos (sacred district) which housed the Etemenanki, the ziggurat of Babylon.



M9-32

E-Mala Temple



M9-33

Courtyard of the E-Mala Temple

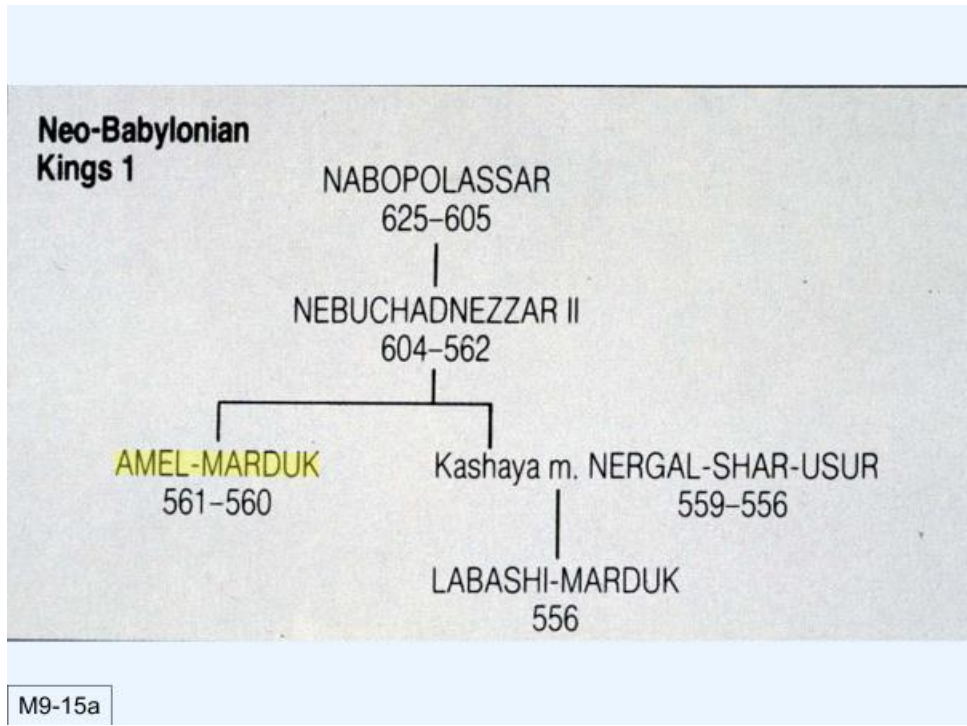
In the temenos was the Temple of E-Mala, dedicated to mother-goddess Ninmah, an on-access shrine with a large courtyard. It has been partially reconstructed.

Aerial View of the Great Ziggurat of Marduk



M9-34

The ziggurat, now a great muddy depression overgrown with vegetation, was called “the House that is the Foundation of Heaven and Earth.” In Neo-Babylonian times, its renovation had been begun by Nabopolassar and was completed by Nebuchadnezzar. During one of the earlier periods when it lay in a state of decay — there were several — it may have stimulated the biblical tale of the Tower of Babel. Again, Herodotus who did indeed see this in person describes it in his *Histories*. His verbal account is sadly now our best information about what the Etemenanki looked like in its original splendor. Modern archaeological work on the site of Babylon has been inhibited by the rising water table in the area, the presence of an important Moslem tomb on the Esagila, and a series of wars in recent history. It’s a puzzle awaiting future scholars.



Our information on the end of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign is blurry. About his son and successor Amel-Marduk’s brief stay on the throne, next to nothing is known. Clearly, some sort of internal disorder ensued — a harem conspiracy perhaps? — as is shown by the fact that his successor was his brother-in-law, one Neriglissar (Nergal-shar-usur). He died shortly after seizing the throne, leaving behind only an infant son, Labashi-Marduk, who was quickly displaced by a general in the Babylonian army, Nabonidus (Nabu-na’id, “He who reveres Nabu”).



82 This stele represents King Nabonidus. In a text summarising Babylonian history since the devastation wrought by Sennacherib, Nabonidus is presented as the true pious successor of other Neo-Babylonian kings.

M9-35

This Nabonidus, an Aramaean by birth, would be the last independent Babylonian king ever. In the next generation, the Persians would conquer and take over Nebuchadnezzar’s legacy and henceforth the city would be the property of one outside force or another. The stories we’re told

of Nabonidus' madness and inconstancy as a king, are probably lies for the most part, concocted by later Babylonian scribes to please their new Persian overlords and to justify the usurpation of the land by foreigners. Somehow these scurrilous tales wove themselves into biblical tradition and show up in the Book of Daniel which features a mad Babylonian king named Nebuchadnezzar, but that's likely to be a substitute for Nabonidus. Nebuchadnezzar's name would resonate much longer in the popular mind so it makes sense that he was later inserted into the tale to give it greater currency.

Stele celebrating
the moon god Sin
at Harran



M9-36

To judge from the evidence, the real history of Nabonidus is actually not that much less sensational. He was raised by a mother, Adad-guppi, who was a devotee of the moon god Sin, later equated with Nanna in Ur. We know this from a biography of her preserved on an inscription found in Harran, a center of Sin worship. Her fanaticism, if such it was, influenced her son to impose heavy taxes on institutions like the priesthood of Marduk. Remember this is probably all propaganda invented after the fact by forces in Babylon that opposed Nabonidus.

Left: Reconstructed glazed brick panel from the facade of the main throne room of the Southern Citadel at Babylon built by Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 bc). Height 12.4 m.

Right: Stele with a relief of a Babylonian king. The inscription records the return of plenty after a drought. The name of the king is missing, but it was probably Nabonidus, as the figure is similar to that of Nabonidus on his stela found at Harran, with the same symbols carved in front of the king. They are the moon, sun and planet Venus, representing the deities Sin, Shamash and Ishtar, respectively. Height 58 cm, width 46 cm.



M9-38

Whatever the truth, the economy in Babylon in this age went south for some reason. From commercial tablets dating to the reign of Nabonidus, it's clear that the price of male slaves jumped twenty percent from Nebuchadnezzar's day. Also, land prices doubled and there is

evidence of crippling inflation. But instead of trying to alleviate these woes, Nabonidus, we are told, fixated on religion and the past. Indeed, when excavating Ur, Leonard Woolley discovered a room containing a weird mix of artifacts: Kassite items, a statue of Shulgi, a clay cone from Larsa. Because Nabonidus' daughter had lived there while she was serving in the same capacity as Sargon's daughter Enheduanna had almost two millennia earlier, Woolley dubbed it "Nabonidus' museum." Your textbook notes that some today call him "the first archaeologist."



Toward the end of his life, Nabonidus made a vain attempt to retire from his kingship and join a religious community. In his place he enthroned his son Belshazzar (Bel-shar-usur, "May Marduk protect the king"). The plan failed horribly, and when outside forces began to stir up trouble on the borders of the empire, Nabonidus was forced to return to Babylon. This time the external pressure came from the Persians, yet another newly arrived Indo-European group who had merged with the Medes and had seized most of Asia Minor along with large parts of Iran. They attacked Babylon, killing Belshazzar and chasing Nabonidus into exile. Eventually the king was captured and probably died at their hands since that's the last we hear of him. With that, the Neo-Babylonian kingdom came to end, but more than that died with the Persian conquest. Mesopotamian culture itself would soon face the winds of change and be blown into the same dust that covered its sites.

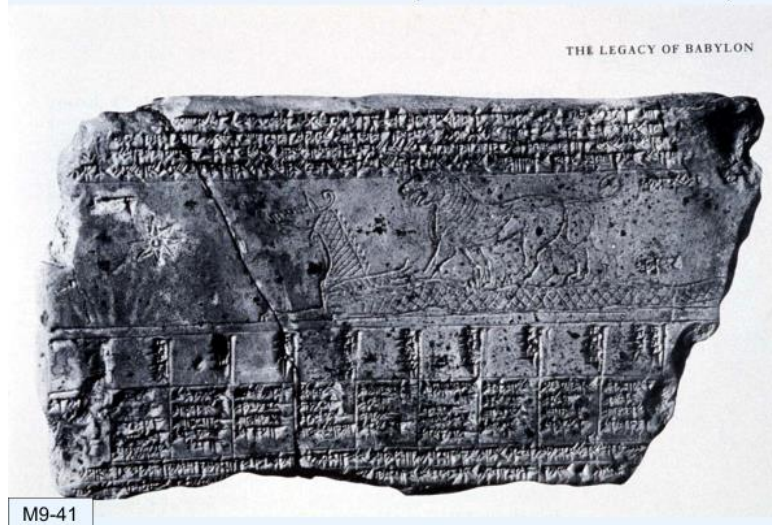
Scene from D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*



Unlike the long and glorious history of their city, the Neo-Babylonian civilization was nearly as short-lived its “Old Babylonian” counterpart a millennium before. It lasted barely more than two generations and, much the same way Hammurabi owned the previous age, its glory really belongs to one man, Nebuchadnezzar. But short-lived as they were, the Neo-Babylonians were a critical force in ancient civilization. In looking backwards, they maintained the ancient traditions of writing in cuneiform and handed it down to the Persians. Granted, the Persians used the script largely to inscribe monuments, not as a tool in daily life, but at least this form of script didn’t die out completely on the Babylonians’ watch.

Looking forward, the impact of this age on the formation of the Bible as we know it cannot be overstated. The Babylonian Captivity is almost certainly the driving force behind the composite text we call the Old Testament. Moreover, exposure to the dualistic beliefs that roamed the streets of Nebuchadnezzar’s metropolis — that is, religious cults that see life as a battle between good and evil — are, no doubt, the inspiration behind the creation of Satan. Although the Hebrews painted the Babylonians as decadent and immoral, as is depicted above in a still from the early silent movie *Intolerance*, Jewish religion and text owe much of their form and content to these their captors.

Astronomical Text (Seleucid Period)



Whatever you may think of it, astrology is also the gift of Babylon. To many it's comforting to imagine a universe that cares enough about us, about each of us individually, to send messages down from the stars forewarning what lies ahead. Modern capitalism, too, finds its roots in Nebuchadnezzar's world which realized that to have a stable economy there must be clearly defined standards. Babylonians for the first time assessed the value of metals like gold and silver at ratios like 1:10. Only after that are coinage and money possible. Roux says it well:

Private business on a scale hitherto unknown flourished in Babylonia during the 6th c. B.C. . . . Usury, mortgage and enslaved debtors followed the new medium of exchange wherever it was introduced . . . a few 'dynasties' of capitalists and businessmen — such as the Egibi family in Babylon — made a fortune in real estate, the slave trade . . . and banking operations, such as loans and the handling of deposits on behalf of their clients.

Now monied, the world would never be the same, which is true of all of Mesopotamia's heritage. As the physical culture died — the Roman emperor Trajan visited Babylon in 115 CE and saw a city in grave disrepair, Septimius Severus a century found it totally deserted — its legacy lived on. The basis of civilization in the area changed so dramatically over the next centuries, first the Greeks, then the Romans, then the Sassanids, and finally the Moslems so thoroughly rewrote the book of the fate there could never be as simple a solution as just turning things over and rereading the numbers. The entire premise of life changed again and again, and people's memory of Mesopotamia became buried under the layers of one new culture after another, the way the archaeologists find its cities in layers today.

What happened, and why? To begin with, there never was a national, unified government or culture which managed to consolidate Mesopotamian beliefs and lifestyles and package them the way Rome did, which is why we can still feel the heartbeat of Greco-Roman civilization pulsing through our own veins. The Greek world Alexander imposed on the Near East was more than a paint job; it was a complete floor-to-ceiling cultural renovation. New writing, new myths, and new temples killed cuneiform, Gilgamesh and the ziggurat. These invaders were not like those of

old: the Guti, the Aramaeans, the Sea Peoples. The Greeks were technologically advanced and uninterested in ancient things for their own sake, especially someone else's version of antiquity. As far as we can tell, not one single ancient Greek ever heard of the name Ur-Nammu or Shulgi or Enheduanna. To them, the dust of this history was only good for trampling.

Yet it's not that the Greeks and their kind saw nothing of worth in the Mesopotamian past — many were fixated on astrology —but they saw only what they wanted to, and of what they saw, they wanted very little. Not everyone loves a fossil, and that's what Mesopotamia was fast becoming by the time of classical Greece. Again, Roux says it masterfully:

The crucial period for Mesopotamia, the Hellenistic period, can be compared with the sixteenth-century Renaissance, or indeed, with our own age. The new world heralded by Alexander was a fast-changing world bent on extensive commercial intercourse, bursting with curiosity, eager to reappraise most of its religious, moral, scientific and artistic values. There was no room in such a world for a literature which none but a few scholars could read, for an art which drew its inspiration from outdated ideals and models, for a science which evaded rational explanations, for a religion which did not admit skepticism. The Mesopotamian civilization, like its Egyptian counterpart, was condemned. If it were permissible to enclose a highly complex phenomenon into one single and necessarily inaccurate formula, one could say that it died of old age.

But that's not the whole truth.



Modern mathematics is rooted in Mesopotamia, especially where we use the sexagesimal systems as with clocks and globes. We crown kings, an Assyrian habit. We decorate things with crescents, crosses and trees of life, all symbols Mesopotamians invented. We still use their very words: “cane” (from Akkadian *qānu*), “alcohol” (*guhlu*), gypsum (*gassu*), myrrh (*murru*) and saffron (*azipiranu*), which is not to mention all their contributions to the stories and language of the Bible.

But measuring the Mesopotamians only by their pieces leaves us nowhere close to the sum of their existence. Again, Roux says it well: “To reckon only with those Mesopotamian relics that have survived up to now is like counting the pieces of furniture inherited from remote ancestors, forgetting that these ancestors have shaped the lives of our forefathers and, indirectly, our own life.” This part of the ancient world gave us more than patterns in mathematics, it paved the way for Pythagoras and the revolution he sparked in that science. Sumerian and Akkadian myths somehow seeded the fables of Aesop and opened the door to a rich store of narrative — remember that it’s through narrative we express our understanding of the world — Gilgamesh was Hercules’ real father, not Jupiter.

And that’s to look down only one path. More and more we are coming to see that Mesopotamian culture leaked out in all directions, not just west. As the great historian Michael Rostovtzeff wrote, “We are gradually learning how great was the influence of Babylonian and Persian Art on the artistic development of India and China.” That new avenue and so many more, like newly discovered passages in Egyptian tombs, are revealing the breadth and depth of the Mesopotamian heritage the whole world shares. Let’s end with Roux one more time:

So many *tells* in Syria and Iraq are awaiting the spade, so many tablets and other inscriptions need to be published, revised or republished, so many points in the long history of ancient Mesopotamia require elucidation that generations of Assyriologists, archaeologists and historians will be kept fully busy for centuries to come.

Dissertation anyone?