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An Introduction

There's not one atom on yon earth
But once was living man;
Not the minutest drop of rain
That hangeth in its thinnest cloud
But flowed in human veins ...
Thou canst not find one spot
Whereon no city stood.

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab*)

Babylon, the most famous city of central Mesopotamia, gave its name to the surrounding region, Babylonia, and to the ancient kingdom, culture, and language now known as Babylonian. It was one of many great cities clustering in that fertile land, where it rose to dominate the others and held its dominance for nearly 2,000 years. Long before Babylon rose to supreme power, other great cities had powerful kings, fine buildings, extensive literacy, and mighty gods, so it is surprising that Babylon was able to achieve and hold on to its exceptional status for such a long time.

Mesopotamian civilization in general is extraordinary for its unbroken traditions of cities and literacy, but it did not begin in Babylon. For more than a thousand years the land had nurtured great Sumerian cities such as Ur, Uruk, and Lagash, whose rulers were pioneers of architecture, art, and literature with a rich and complex cultural history. Monumental buildings stood proud in the centre of all the cities, elaborately built in mud brick. The region teemed with a fecund, well-fed population in huge old cities and was criss-crossed by a network of canals connecting them for irrigation and for transport. Irrigation protected the supply of food from episodes of drought that elsewhere could decimate populations and empty settlements. Babylonia the region inherited much of the early literature and architecture, for Babylon the city was a minor settlement in the ancient land of Sumer before it rose to prominence in the eighteenth century BC. When it did, many of the old Sumerian cities of the south, with literacy centred on the Sumerian language, continued to flourish.

Close to Babylon on its northern side were huge ancient cities, in particular Kish and Sippar, where the Babylonian language, also known as Akkadian, superseding Sumerian, had become the main language written in cuneiform before alphabets came into use. Most of the great centres of Sumerian (non-Semitic) language were in the southern cities. In the northern cities and in Babylon itself, Sumerian was studied and revered for its antiquity. In their literature, all the kings of Sumerian and Babylonian cities satisfied the need for indigenous heroes and great deeds from a legendary past, developing written literature from epic tales, hymns, and narratives of royal deeds. Their languages were also used for legal contracts, letters, and administrative records. Some sorts of inscription were bilingual in Sumerian and Babylonian. Linear alphabetic writing developed during the second millennium, but traces of it are rare because it was almost always used on organic materials that are not preserved.

The Sumerians and Babylonians were integrated into urban Mesopotamia. The relationship between their languages bears some similarities with that between ancient Greek and Latin, including the skilful reworking and transforming of old themes and forms. Bilgames the Sumerian adventurer-king became Gilgamesh the Babylonian hero-king, claimed by two different cities, Ur and Uruk, and publicly emulated by the kings of Babylon. In order to keep old traditions alive, the Babylonians became adept at producing bilingual inscriptions and at translating old Sumerian texts. They extended their expertise beyond Babylonia, teaching illiterate neighbours to develop their own literature, always written in a cuneiform script.¹

Babylon city lies in an alluvial plain on a branch of the river Euphrates, positioned 33 N by 44 E, about 85 km south of modern Baghdad in the middle of modern Iraq. Today the head of the Gulf lies roughly 450 km to the south of Babylon; how much the shoreline at the edge of the delta may have changed from time to time in antiquity is one of the most contested topics in research.² A change of climate around 2000 BC in the area stretching from Lake Van in eastern Anatolia to the Arabian Gulf caused rainfall to decrease by 20–30 per cent, and conditions of drought may have lasted for around 200 years, causing settlements to be abandoned in marginal zones.³ Towards the end of that period, the first dynasty of Babylon arose. Its position on a branch of the Euphrates surely kept it

¹ For the significance of this, see Feeney 2016: 1–44 and 199–235.

² Many studies are described by Potts 1997: 30–9.

³ An overview with detailed bibliography is given by Ristvet and Weiss, introduction to Eidem and Ristvet 2011: xxxix–xli.

safe from starvation as long as irrigation canals were dug and maintained, and floodwater controlled, but the same was true of other great cities nearby. Water management was a crucial duty of Babylonian kings.

The sources of the two great rivers Euphrates and Tigris are close together, then diverge to flow through very different terrains before joining again in the marshes of southern Iraq; there their beds often shifted, whether from natural causes or being diverted by human action, so the landscape constantly changed. Owing to the delta-like terrain of Lower Mesopotamia, it is not certain how the rivers and canals flowed at any particular period of history. Areas of marshland formed in different areas at different times, turning good agricultural land into reed beds with expanses of standing water.⁴ The whole area is very low-lying, and the rivers bring down silt which clogs canals, so that they must be cleared frequently; the canals and their banks thus rise ever higher above the level of the plain. Abandoned canals have left many long stretches of levees in the landscape. The two rivers flood at slightly different times, far too late to facilitate sowing and early growth of crops; their waters are hard to control, with unpredictable floods damaging crops and cities.⁵ A high water table and the difficulties of draining excess water from fields, combined with a high rate of evaporation in summer months, led to intermittent and localized salination, which could cause crops to fail. The southern terrain was difficult to manage when Babylon began to impose central government; the location of Babylon city did not give it particular advantages over rival cities such as Uruk and Larsa. According to the *Epic of Atrahasis*, the gods found the work of maintenance so hard that they created mankind to toil on their behalf:

The gods' load was too great, the work too hard, the labour too much. The gods had to dig out canals, had to clear channels, the lifelines of the land. For 3,600 years they bore the excess, hard work, night and day. They groaned and blamed each other, grumbled over the heaps of excavated soil.⁶

The nearby cities Kish, Borsippa, and Sippar were closely involved with the activities of the great capital at Babylon. Each had an illustrious past from earliest times, and had a patron deity of top prestige: the war-god Zababa, famous for oracles, at Kish; the creator god Tutu, later succeeded by Nabu, at Borsippa; and the Sun-god Shamash, lord of law and justice, at Sippar. They were all connected, with Babylon as the hub, by waterways,

⁴ See Cole 1994. ⁵ Ionides 1937.

⁶ Translations given in this volume are my own except where attributed.

processional streets, linked festivals and ceremonies in which the gods visited each other. Not far beyond lay many other cities of varying fame and continuity.

Further beyond Babylon, the Fertile Crescent arches from the foothills of western Iran, across the south-east of modern Turkey, down through the river valleys and mountains of the Amanus and Lebanon. In this great arc of land grew the wild plants domesticated during the Neolithic Age, which became a major source of prosperity in Mesopotamia: wheat and barley, lentils and chickpeas, bitter vetch, sesame and flax.⁷ Sheep, goats, and cattle were domesticated, not only allowing a steady supply of food, wool, and leather, but also enabling the textile industry for which Babylon became famous.⁸ Nowadays the region is best known for its petroleum oil, a plentiful resource still obtainable even from surface seepages. Exploited in ancient times in the form of bitumen, it was invaluable for waterproofing: for boats, for mortar, and for containers.

Upstream the Euphrates gave access by boat and donkey⁹ to north-west Syria, from where land routes led to the Levant and to the semi-desert of central Syria, through Palmyra to Damascus. The Tigris, on the other hand, was fed by many tributaries flowing fast from the Zagros Mountains, joining or intersecting land routes that extended into the eastern and northern mountains. So the twin rivers, beginning and ending so close together, gave completely separate access to different regions for resources, for trade, and for immigration, along the middle part of their courses. Those differences also meant that the Babylonians encountered a very wide variety of peoples, languages, and products. Sometimes unable to repel incursions, they had to absorb foreign immigrants into a diverse but assimilated population. The contrast with Egypt on the Nile, a single river with waterless desert on both sides, is striking: there the environment did not provide a comparable variety of immigrants.

To the east of both rivers in Babylonia, in the surrounding hills and the Zagros Mountains, lay rival foreign cities. Most persistent was the federation of rulers over an ill-defined land called Elam, one of whose capital cities was Susa in south-west Iran, at the edge of the Mesopotamian river lands.¹⁰ The Elamites were neither Semites nor Iranians – their language may be related to the group known as Dravidian, which includes Tamil.¹¹

⁷ Zohary 1996. ⁸ Breniquet and Michel 2014.

⁹ A hybrid wild ass crossed with the onager, now extinct: Mitchell 2018: 87–95.

¹⁰ See Potts 2016 and Alvarez-Mon, Basello, and Wicks 2018 for extensive information about Elamites.

¹¹ See briefly Stolper 2004: 61.

Late in the third millennium they adopted the Babylonian language and script for writing and education, and were conversant with its literature, before evolving their own tradition to record their language in an adapted form of cuneiform script. When the first dynasty of Babylon began, Elamite settlements were scattered, their people opportunists as raiders, or as foreign militias specializing in archery who would serve any master according to need. A few centuries earlier, when their royal capital Susa had been ruled by a governor appointed by the kings of Ur, the Elamites had rebelled and sacked the city of Ur, and would remain a looming presence on the eastern border of Mesopotamia throughout its history, as traders, invaders, and foreign soldiers, according to the balance of power at any particular time. Later they coalesced into a centralized kingdom rivalling Babylonia and managed briefly to take over the rule of Babylon on more than one occasion, as is known mainly from Babylonian records. From Susa they had two main routes into Mesopotamia: either directly westward across the rivers and marshy lands to the Lower Tigris, or by the uplands along the foothills of the mountains to the city of Der, gateway to the Diyala river valley, down to fertile land and the city of Eshnunna, the 'princely sanctuary'. Both routes gave easy access to the heartland of Babylonia; but the Elamites never established a long-lived dynasty in Babylon, perhaps preferring to raid and occasionally to control from a distance, until the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus in 538.

Various other ethnic or language groups contributed to the diversity of Babylonia, and founded successful dynasties there. Invading hordes of (West Semitic) Amorites – hardy soldiers from the western deserts – were held at bay for centuries until they established the First Dynasty of Babylon, and played a formative role in the history of the city. Perhaps from the Zagros Mountains between Iraq and Iran came the (non-Semitic) Kassites. They had served in militias during the First Dynasty of Babylon, and eventually took up the reins of power in Babylon itself, successfully integrating into Babylonian traditions, bringing very little evidence of their own origins. None of those groups – Elamites, Amorites, and Kassites – showed any aversion to royal marriages outside their own ethnic or language group.

When Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon, he behaved as a king chosen by the Babylonian gods, inserting himself into Mesopotamian tradition. As an Elamite with Persian links, he was hardly different from earlier foreign usurpers such as the Kassites, who founded a new dynasty in Babylon. The Persian Darius I, however, began an era of relative neglect for the city in 521, giving local priests an opportunity to take over duties previously

expected of the king. Then Alexander the Great, before his untimely death there, clearly intended to foster the city's existing glory rather than forcing Macedonian culture upon its people. When his successors managed to restore firm rule, their Seleucid dynasty treated the city with respect, and business continued, though use of cuneiform writing was declining in favour of alphabetic Aramaic. Neither the Achaemenid Persians nor the heirs of Alexander absorbed Babylonian culture in the way that previous foreign kings, notably the Kassites, had done. Significantly, however, neither the Persian language nor Greek managed to displace Babylonian literature, which continued even when the Parthian (Arsacid) kings took over. Even under Parthian domination, which began in 141 BC, Babylon's influence was slow to wane, still to be traced early in the Christian era. Knowledge of the cuneiform culture emanating from Babylon became the preserve of priests and temples, still innovative in mathematics and astronomy, for several centuries before it came to an end. Little of its finest literature written in cuneiform script was translated into non-Semitic languages written in alphabetic scripts.

To the north up the Tigris was Assyria, with its traditional capital city Ashur. When Babylon's first dynasty arose, the people of Ashur had formed colonies of merchants based in Anatolian towns, and they profited from trade chiefly in tin and textiles, carried overland in caravans of donkeys. Their main language was a dialect of Babylonian. Eventually they established other royal cities such as Nineveh, further up the Tigris, from which they could set out on campaigns to forge an empire, leaving Ashur as a mainly ceremonial centre. They were great admirers of Babylonian culture, and treated it with reverence, even when they ruled the city of Babylon.

Further to the north were the Indo-Aryan Hittites, rough people from the harsh environment of the Anatolian highlands, who formed a centralized kingdom there during the latter half of the First Dynasty of Babylon, apparently content to raid cities in the fertile lowlands of Mesopotamia without governing there, but accepting instruction in Babylonian script and language from visiting scholars. Through the scribal curriculum they learnt some of the great works of cuneiform literature and creatively adapted them to their own civilization.

To the south of Babylon the great cities of deeper antiquity included Ur 'of the Chaldees', city of the Moon-god, and Uruk, home of the legendary hero Gilgamesh and the great goddess Inanna. They lay close to the sea with access to harbours and the Gulf; they were surrounded by marshland full of fish, birds, and reeds, so the region was generally known as the Sealand. Above all, the date palm flourished, providing so many resources, from

food to rope, that its origin at the behest of the god Enki was celebrated in the Sumerian myth of *Inanna and Her Gardener Shukaletuda*, in which a raven watered the first date palm with a *shaduf*,¹² and climbed up it using a harness:

Its brittle leaves enclose its palm heart. Its dried palm fronds serve for weaving. Its shoots are like a surveyor's shining line; they are fit for the king's fields. Its branches are used in the king's palace for cleaning. Its dates, which are heaped up alongside pure barley grains, are fit for the temples of the great gods.¹³

Its versatility is emphasized in the Babylonian *Dispute between the Date Palm and the Tamarisk*:

In those days, on those nights, in years long ago,
 When the gods made the land firm and created cities for long-ago people,
 When they poured out mountains and dug out rivers, life of the land ...
 They loved the black-headed people and gave them a king ...
 The king planted a date palm in his palace;
 All around he planted a tamarisk ...
 The trees were enemies, tamarisk and date palm became rivals ...
 'You, tamarisk, are a useless tree. Why, tamarisk, do your branches
 Bear no fruit? Our fruits are fit for the king's table,
 The king eats and the public says they are my gift.
 Thanks to me, the orchard gardener makes a profit and provides for the
 queen.
 As a mother, she raises her baby, it eats the gift of my fertility,
 And grows up.
 My fruit is always there for royalty'.¹⁴

The fecund goddess herself was sometimes envisaged as a female date palm. Date palms grow happily around Babylon, too, but lose their ability to produce ripe fruit at more northerly latitudes.¹⁵ In the marshes of the south, many settlements were built from the reeds which grew abundantly in reed beds within the marshes, and cannot now be located by surface survey or excavation, for they were organic and disintegrated easily, leaving no trace. On alluvial land the efficient use of canals, tree plantations, and fish ponds presumably had a beneficial effect on the

¹² A *shaduf* consists of a pole moving on a pivot on top of a vertical beam. One end of the pole has a bucket suspended from it, the other has a weight acting as a counterpoise.

¹³ See 'Inana and Shu-kale-tuda', ETCSL, also Volk 1995.

¹⁴ My own translation after Cohen 2013: 177–98.

¹⁵ Depending on precise climatic conditions, see Giovino 2007: 91–102.

local microclimate, providing shade and local water in the great heat of summer.

To the west, on the Middle Euphrates lay Mari, capital of early kings ‘of Mari and Hana’.¹⁶ Although Mari declined swiftly when Babylon sacked the city about 1760 BC, its power shifted to nearby cities, and the region became known simply as Hana, a kingdom that lasted for a further half-millennium. Among its major cities were Harran and Guzana (the biblical Gozan). Hana benefitted not only from the east–west trade on the great river, but also from the desert road to Palmyra, and to the fertile lands bordering the river Habur, which flowed into the Euphrates from the long mountain range in the north known as the Tur Abdin. Hana maintained a very conservative tradition of writing records, keeping to the scribal habits of the early eighteenth century for several hundred years.¹⁷

All of those groups admired and emulated the literate culture of Babylon and adapted some of its written works to their own needs. With deep roots in the written literature of ancient Sumer, the Babylonians were already developing a varied range of compositions that were not simply aping those of earlier times: they were innovative, producing works of science and narrative that were admired throughout the known world.

Many of the itinerant tribes on the fringes of Babylonia included not only the hunter-gatherers of prehistory, but also pastoralists, whether semi-nomadic tent dwellers (in Mesopotamia) or cave dwellers (in mountainous and rocky areas), who were available for seasonal labour such as digging and clearing canals, making mud bricks, sowing and harvesting crops in exchange for cereal, beer, oil, and dates, the staples of daily diet. The ability to make tents would have been an innovation that changed and extended the patterns of semi-nomadic lifestyle in a region lacking caves and rock shelters. For much or all of the region’s history, Mesopotamian cities would have had tented encampments outside the city walls. The pastoral tent dwellers relied on a symbiotic relationship with the city: they could pasture their flocks on fields at certain times of year, and were available for labour, especially for sowing and harvesting. The *Law of Hammurabi* §58 refers to how an aspect of this interaction was regulated to mutual benefit:

If, after the flocks have come up from the irrigated land when the rope has been wound around the city gate, the shepherd has left flocks on the field and allowed the flocks to graze the field, the shepherd shall guard the field

¹⁶ The kingdom of Hana was later known as Hanigalbat or Habigal; see Podany 2002, Fales 2014, and Da Riva 2017b.

¹⁷ Podany 2016.

on which he allowed them to feed, and at harvest he shall measure out 60 *kor* (perhaps 18,000 litres) of barley per *iku* (acre) of land to the owner of the field.

When flocks are allowed to graze on young barley shoots, only a small loss of the crop results, especially if the sowing has been deliberately crowded to allow for grazing when the plants are immature.¹⁸ The lifestyle of desert Bedouin known in recent times, dependent on camels, could not develop until the camel was domesticated for transport, around 1000 BC; that was one of many striking changes that would have transformed some of the city's facilities.¹⁹

Babylon's competitors were many, yet, as we shall see, it succeeded in rising above them by various different strategies, architectural, religious, literary, educational, and legal. Although the city suffered some terrible episodes of defeat and subsequent impoverishment, yet it managed each time to regenerate, building on the strength of its deep-rooted culture, invoking a history of past success and prosperity while helping its conquerors to adapt to their new circumstances. Many were the changes of dynasty, some of them founded by immigrants or invaders from other ethnic groups: Amorites, then Kassites from western Iran, later Persians from south-western Iran, and then Macedonians. Throughout those influxes Babylon continued to maintain and adapt its traditional cuneiform script and literature: culturally, the city did not yield to its conquerors, but won them over.

So who were the real Babylonians? Were they the kings who sat on the throne of Babylon, regardless of their ethnic origins? In fact, it was the city itself, its temples, scholars, and written culture, that kept the line of tradition going for two thousand years, instilling in its rulers a strong sense of duty, but able to thrive without royal patronage. Foreigners who settled became Babylonians.

Monarchy was the only form of government in Babylonia. Ostensibly kingship was hereditary; as an institution the gods had sent it from heaven at the dawn of history, and imposed heavy responsibilities which the king shared with his advisers. If a king proved irresponsible, the gods would withdraw kingship from him: in the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, when the young king of Uruk behaved atrociously, his people prayed to the gods rather than deposing him. A good king took counsel from a group of men who could act for him in his absence. By means of public ceremonies, prayer, royal art, and religious rituals, kings kept in

¹⁸ Oates and Oates 1976, quoting Adams 1965: 169. ¹⁹ Magee 2014: 204–13.

close contact with the gods. Their main duties were to feed the gods and their people, to create wealth through trade, and to protect the land from flooding and invasion. In early times, legitimate succession (not necessarily by the first-born son) was so important officially, and ancestry so crucial, that a usurper would manipulate his genealogy to prove that he was not 'son of a nobody'. The word 'son' had a wide meaning implying not only direct descent but also the relationship of any male to his ruler, including adoption.

Every ruler had a duty to revere his royal ancestors as well as the gods, for his success depended on the support from the grave of predecessors. This duty exerted a strong control on the king's exercise of power. In royal inscriptions the influence of deceased predecessors is manifest in the claim by the king to understand old inscriptions which were kept on display, or were found when great buildings were repaired. The link of direct descent weakened over time, so eventually a king could admit to being 'son of a nobody', but an emphasis on local heritage and the importance of past history is evident at all periods from the use of archaic script on a new statue of a god, or a foundation inscription. On old statue bases, inscriptions were copied and studied, to perpetuate the fame of successes long past. Cuneiform writing as well as statuary played an important role in confirming continuity, stability, and royal control.

To extend and maintain domination over a widespread group of cities rather than just raiding them, a ruler needed clear communication with a common language and good connections by road, canal, and river. Perhaps the greatest achievement of ancient Mesopotamia was to spread its Babylonian language through the written word, backed up by a systematic education, far beyond home territory, among peoples whose many languages and dialects were entirely different: Elamites, Hittites, Kassites, and others. This unity allowed business contracts, treaties, and letters to facilitate a broad economy to the benefit of the central power. Babylon was neither the first nor the only city to have and use written language: nearby Kish and Sippar, for instance, were no different in that respect. By contrast, peoples of the mountains and deserts surrounding Mesopotamia, isolated from each other by harsh terrain, presumably lacked a common native tongue. Even city dwellers of adjacent lands such as the Elamites did not develop an independent literature. Babylonia is extraordinary for developing by far the richest and most varied literature in the pre-Greek world. This feat is all the more remarkable because, as Feeney remarks, 'Although nothing seems more natural