

# Babylonia

## I.- INTRODUCTION

Babylonia (Babylonian Bābili, "gate of God"; Old Persian Babirush), ancient country of Mesopotamia, known originally as Sumer and later as Sumer and Akkad, lying between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, south of modern Baghdad, Iraq.

## II. - BABYLONIAN CIVILIZATION



### Kingdom of Babylonia

Babylonia was one of the first civilizations in the world. It formed around the region where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow in relatively parallel courses toward the Persian Gulf. The region is also part of what is known as the Fertile Crescent, so named because the people who lived in this crescent-shaped area developed rich, irrigated farmlands.

The Babylonian civilization, which endured from the 18th until the 6th century bc, was, like the Sumerian that preceded it, urban in character, although based on agriculture rather than industry. The country consisted of a dozen or so cities, surrounded by villages and hamlets. At the head of the political structure was the king, a more or less absolute monarch who exercised legislative and judicial as well as executive powers. Under him was a group of appointed governors and administrators. Mayors and councils of city elders were in charge of local administration.

The Babylonians modified and transformed their Sumerian heritage in accordance with their own culture and ethos. The resulting way of life proved to be so effective that it underwent relatively little change for some 1200 years. It exerted influence on all the neighboring countries, especially the kingdom of Assyria, which adopted Babylonian culture almost in its entirety. Fortunately, many written documents from this period have been excavated and made available to scholars. One of the most important is the remarkable collection of laws often designated as the Code of Hammurabi, which, together with other documents and letters belonging to different periods, provides a comprehensive picture of Babylonian social structure and economic organization. See Hammurabi, Code of.

## **A – Society**

Babylonian society consisted of three classes represented by the awilu, a free person of the upper class; the wardu, or slave; and the mushkenu, a free person of low estate, who ranked legally between the awilu and the wardu. Most slaves were prisoners of war, but some were recruited from the Babylonian citizenry as well. For example, free persons might be reduced to slavery as punishment for certain offenses; parents could sell their children as slaves in time of need; or a man might even turn over his entire family to creditors in payment of a debt, but for no longer than three years. Slaves were the property of their master, like any other chattel. They could be branded and flogged, and they were severely punished if they attempted to escape. On the other hand, because it was to the advantage of the master that the slaves stay strong and healthy, they usually were well treated. Slaves even had certain legal rights and could engage in business, borrow money, and buy their freedom. If a slave married a free person and had children, the latter were free. The sale price of a slave varied with the market, as well as with the attributes of the individual involved; the average price for a grown man was usually 20 shekels of silver, a sum that could buy some 35 bushels of barley.

### **A1- The Mushkenu**

The position of the mushkenu in society can be surmised from a number of legal provisions in the Code of Hammurabi. To cite comparative examples, if a mushkenu was injured in eye or limb, he was indemnified by the payment of a mina (roughly 0.45 kg, or 1 lb, of silver); in the case of an awilu similarly injured, the law of retaliation (lex talionis) was applied; whereas for an injured slave, the indemnity was to be half the slave's market value. If the injury required surgical treatment, the awilu had to pay a fee of ten shekels, but the mushkenu paid five shekels; and, in the case of a slave, the master had to pay a fee of only two shekels.

### **A2- Family Life**

The family was the basic unit of Babylonian society. Marriages were arranged by the parents, and the betrothal was recognized legally as soon as the groom had presented a bridal gift to the father of the bride; the ceremony often was concluded with a contract inscribed on a tablet. Although marriage was thus reduced to a practical arrangement, some evidence exists to show that surreptitious premarital lovemaking was not altogether unknown. The Babylonian woman had certain important legal rights. She could hold property, engage in business, and qualify as a witness. The husband, however, could divorce her on relatively light grounds, or, if she had borne him no children, he could marry a second wife. Children were under the absolute authority of their parents, who could disinherit them or, as has already been mentioned, could even sell them into slavery. In the normal course of events, however, children were loved and, at the death of the parents, inherited all their property. Adopted children were not uncommon and were treated with care and consideration.

### **A3 - Cities**

The populations of the Babylonian cities cannot be estimated with any reasonable degree of accuracy, because the authorities, so far as extant documents reveal, took no census. The number of inhabitants of a city probably ranged from 10,000 to 50,000. The city streets were narrow, winding, and quite irregular, with high, windowless walls of houses on both sides. The streets were unpaved and undrained. The average house was a small, one-story, mud-brick structure, consisting of several rooms grouped around a court. The house of a well-to-do Babylonian, on the other hand, was probably a two-story brick dwelling of about a dozen rooms and was plastered and whitewashed both inside and out. The ground floor consisted of a reception room, kitchen, lavatory, servants' quarters, and, sometimes, even a private chapel. Furniture consisted of low tables, high-backed chairs, and beds with wooden frames.

Household vessels were made of clay, stone, copper, and bronze, and baskets and chests were made of reed and wood. Floors and walls were adorned with reed mats, skin rugs, and woolen hangings.

Below the house was often located a mausoleum in which the family dead were buried. The Babylonians believed that the souls of the dead traveled to the nether world, and that, at least to some extent, life continued there as on earth. For this reason, pots, tools, weapons, and jewels were buried with the dead.

### **B - Technology**

The Babylonians inherited the technical achievements of the Sumerians in irrigation and agriculture. Maintaining the system of canals, dikes, weirs, and reservoirs constructed by their predecessors demanded considerable engineering knowledge and skill. Preparation of maps, surveys, and plans involved the use of leveling instruments and measuring rods. For mathematical and arithmetical purposes they used the Sumerian sexagesimal system of numbers, which featured a useful device of so-called place-value notation that resembles the present-day decimal system. Measures of length, area, capacity, and weight, standardized earlier by the Sumerians, remained in use. Farming was a complicated and methodical occupation requiring foresight, diligence, and skill. A recently translated document written in Sumerian but used as a textbook in the Babylonian schools is a veritable farmer's almanac; it records a series of instructions and directions to guide farm activities from the watering of the fields to the winnowing of the harvested crops.

Babylonian artisans were skilled in metallurgy, in the processes of fulling, bleaching, and dyeing, and in the preparation of paints, pigments, cosmetics, and perfumes. In the field of medicine, surgery was well known and often practiced, judging from the Hammurabi law code, which devotes several paragraphs to the surgeon. Pharmacology, too, doubtless had made considerable progress, although the only major direct evidence of this comes from a Sumerian tablet written several centuries before Hammurabi.

### **C - Legal System and Writing**

Law and justice were key concepts in the Babylonian way of life. Justice was administered by the courts, each of which consisted of from one to four judges. Often the elders of a town constituted a tribunal. The judges could not reverse their decisions for any reason, but appeals from their verdicts could be made to the king. Evidence consisted either of statements from witnesses or of written documents. Oaths, which played a considerable role also in the administration of justice, could be either promissory, declaratory, or exculpatory. The courts inflicted penalties ranging from capital punishment and mutilation to flogging, reduction to slavery, and banishment. Awards for damages were from 3 to 30 times the value of the object to be restored.

To ensure that their legal, administrative, and economic institutions functioned effectively, the Babylonians used the cuneiform system of writing developed by their Sumerian predecessors. To train their scribes, secretaries, archivists, and other administrative personnel, they adopted the Sumerian system of formal education, under which secular schools served as the cultural centers of the land. The curriculum consisted primarily of copying and memorizing both textbooks and Sumero-Babylonian dictionaries containing long lists of words and phrases, including the names of trees, animals, birds, insects, countries, cities, villages, and minerals, as well as a large and diverse assortment of mathematical tables and problems. In the study of

literature, the pupils copied and imitated various types of myths, epics, hymns, lamentations, proverbs, and essays in both the Sumerian and the Babylonian languages.

### **III. - HISTORY**

Long periods of the history of the Middle East in antiquity cannot be dated by an absolute chronology or according to a modern system of reckoning. The Sumerian King List gives a succession of rulers to the end of the dynasty of Isin, about 1790 bc, but it is quite unreliable for dates prior to the dynasty of Akkad, about 2340 bc. A relative chronology is well established for the era from the beginning of the dynasty of Akkad to the end of the 1st Dynasty of Babylon, about 1595 bc. This period, however, is followed by an obscure period of more than 700 years, during which dates are only approximate. Scholars follow at least three chronological systems for the ancient Middle East: high, middle, or low, depending upon whether the date assigned to the first year of the reign of Hammurabi of Babylon is 1848, 1792, or 1728 bc. The dates in this article and in that on Sumer follow the so-called middle chronology and date the first year of Hammurabi's reign to 1792 bc.

#### **A - The Sumerians**

Toward the end of the 3rd millennium bc, Sumer and Akkad was a kingdom of empire proportions ruled by a Sumerian dynasty known as the 3rd Dynasty of Ur. After a century or two, hordes of Semitic nomads, the Amurru, or biblical Amorites, who had migrated from the Arabian desert lands to the west, made themselves masters of some of the more important cities such as Isin, Larsa, Babylon, and Eshnunna (now Tell Asmar). About 2000 bc the last ruler of the 3rd Dynasty of Ur was carried off into captivity by the Elamites. The kingdom of Sumer and Akkad disintegrated, and civil strife became rampant. At first the city of Isin attempted to control Sumer and Akkad, but in the course of time its authority was challenged by Larsa, considerably to the south, and the two cities were constantly at war. About 1790 bc King Rim-Sin (reigned about 1823-1763 bc) of Larsa conquered and occupied Isin, an event considered so important that it actually marked the beginning of a new, though limited, dating era in the scribal annals.

#### **B - Hammurabi**



#### **Hammurabi**

Hammurabi, king of Babylon, united the diverse tribes in Mesopotamia by strategically conquering territory in the region. During his rule (circa 1792 to 1750 BC), he proved to be as able an administrator as a general. The Code of Hammurabi, a set of laws for the conduct of individuals and society that he codified, is one of the first bodies of written law.

THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Rim-Sin was unable to exploit his victory, because at the same time in the previously unimportant city of Babylon to the north, the ruler Hammurabi came to the fore. As king, Hammurabi combined astute diplomacy and military leadership; he defeated Rim-Sin, as well as the kings of Elam, Mari, and Eshnunna, and about 1760 bc became the ruler of a united kingdom extending from the Persian Gulf to the Habur River. The history of Babylonia is considered to begin with Hammurabi.

An unusually active and capable administrator, Hammurabi gave his personal attention to such details as the cleaning of irrigation canals and the insertion of an extra month into the calendar. He was an outstanding lawgiver; the Code of Hammurabi is one of the most significant legal documents ever uncovered. He was also an inspiring religious leader; during his reign the Babylonian city god Marduk became a recognized leader in the pantheon of deities.

### **C - The Kassites and the 2nd Dynasty of Isin**

During the reigns of Hammurabi and his son Samsu-iluna (reigned about 1750-1712 bc), who succeeded him, Babylonian civilization reached the zenith of its cultural development and political power. Some of the more important cities of Babylonia began to seek independence, however, and, in the reign of Samsu-iluna, the Kassites first invaded the country. Although Samsu-iluna succeeded in beating them off, the Kassites continued to infiltrate Babylonia in the centuries that followed. Samsu-iluna suffered another serious setback when a rebel leader, Iluma-ilum, founded a dynasty in the southern Babylonian district, bordering on the Persian Gulf, commonly known as the Sea-land.

Under Samsu-iluna's successors Babylonia suffered a serious decline in power and territory. When, about 1595 bc, a Hittite army penetrated as far south as Babylon and carried off Babylonian prisoners and wealth to far-off Anatolia, the kingdom became badly disorganized. Babylonia later fell under the rule of the dynasty of the Sea-land, at least for a brief period. Finally, toward the middle of the 16th century bc, a Kassite ruler named Agum (reigned about 1570 bc) became master of Babylonia and extended its territory from the Euphrates River to the Zagros Mountains.

Under Kassite rule, Babylonia once again became a power of considerable importance. At the beginning of the 15th century bc, for example, it was one of the four major powers of the Orient, the other three being the Egyptian, Mitanni, and Hittite empires.

After Assyria made itself independent of Mitanni domination early in the 14th century bc, its rulers began to interfere in the affairs of Babylonia and sought to control it politically. They were eventually successful, and Babylonia became so weak that it fell prey to the Elamites who invaded it from the east, deposed its Kassite king, and practically reduced it to a state of vassalage. A revolt then broke out in southern and central Babylonia, and a new dynasty, known usually as the 2nd Dynasty of Isin, was founded. Toward the end of the 12th century bc, Nebuchadnezzar I (reigned about 1125-1103 bc), one of the Isin kings, defeated the Elamites and even attacked Assyria. Not long afterward Aramaean nomads began swarming into Babylonia. For about two centuries thereafter the country was in a state of political chaos.

### **D - The Chaldean Period**

Among the surrounding tribes was one powerful group known as the Chaldeans. They settled in and dominated the district along the Persian Gulf. Beginning in the 9th century bc, the Chaldeans were destined to play an important political role in the history of the Orient; their

rulers helped destroy the Assyrian Empire and, at least for a brief period, made Babylonia, or, as it gradually came to be known, Chaldea, the dominant power of Mesopotamia.

One of the outstanding Chaldean kings was Merodach-baladan II (r. 722-710 bc), who fought bitterly and bravely, if unsuccessfully, against four mighty Assyrian monarchs: Tiglath-pileser III (r. 745-727 bc), Shalmaneser V (r. 727-722 bc), Sargon II (r. 722-705 bc), and Sennacherib (r. 705-681 bc), the destroyer of Babylon. Sennacherib's successors, Esarhaddon (r. 681-699 bc) and Ashurbanipal, retained political control of Babylonia in spite of numerous rebellions and defections. In 626, however, when Assyria was in turmoil and menaced by the Medes, the Scythians, and the Cimmerians, a Chaldean named Nabopolassar proclaimed himself king of Babylonia. Acknowledged as king in 625, Nabopolassar allied himself with the Medes and helped to destroy Assyrian might.

With Assyria no longer to be feared, Egypt began to menace Palestine and Syria. Nabopolassar's son Nebuchadnezzar II marched against the Egyptians and defeated them at Carchemish. Nebuchadnezzar, who reigned for 43 years, extended Babylonian political control over practically all of Mesopotamia. To students of the Bible he is known as the destroyer of Jerusalem and as the king who took the captive Jews to Babylonia. To archaeologists and historians he is known as the great builder and restorer. He reconstructed Babylon, his capital, in elaborate style and restored many temples throughout Babylonia.

The Babylonian revival did not long endure. After Nebuchadnezzar's death (562 bc), a struggle for power apparently went on among various parties and individuals for several years. In 556 bc Nabonidus, one of Nebuchadnezzar's governors, became king of Babylonia (r. 556-539 bc). A somewhat enigmatic figure, he in some way antagonized the influential priestly class of Babylon. Nabonidus left the city of Babylon under control of his son Belshazzar and lived for a while in the city of Harran and later in the oasis of Teima, in the Arabian Desert. In 539 bc the Babylonians were defeated by the Persian king Cyrus the Great, who had defeated Media. Nabonidus was captured at Sippar (near modern Baghdad, Iraq), and the Persians entered Babylon without resistance. Babylonia was then annexed to Persia and lost its independence for all time.

### **E - The Babylonian Legacy**

More than 1200 years had elapsed from the glorious reign of Hammurabi to the subjugation of Babylonia by the Persians. During this long span of time the Babylonian social structure, economic organization, arts and crafts, science and literature, judicial system, and religious beliefs underwent considerable modification, but generally only in details, not in essence. Grounded almost wholly on the culture of Sumer, Babylonian cultural achievements left a deep impression on the entire ancient world, and particularly on the Hebrews and the Greeks. Even present-day civilization is indebted culturally to Babylonian civilization to some extent. For instance, Babylonian influence is pervasive throughout the Bible and in the works of such Greek poets as Homer and Hesiod, in the geometry of the Greek mathematician Euclid, in astronomy, in astrology, and in heraldry.

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