

LEGEND,  
HISTORY AND  
THE ANCIENT CITY  
**BABYLON**

MICHAEL SEYMOUR



I.B. TAURIS

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**Michael Seymour** is Research Associate in the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Prior to joining the Metropolitan Museum he worked for the Department of the Middle East at the British Museum, where he was co-curator of the special exhibition *Babylon: Myth and Reality*. He is a consultant to the World Monuments Fund on the site of Babylon, and an editor of the journal *Iraq*. He is co-author (with I. L. Finkel) of *Babylon: Myth and Reality* (2008).

‘The city of Babylon and the idea of Babylon have co-existed as intertwined threads of intellectual and historical engagement for centuries. In the recent past Babylon was an emblem for Saddam Hussein’s control over Iraq’s past (ancient Babylon), present (reconstructed Babylon), and future (eternal Babylon). Since at least the sixth century BC, and up to modern times, Babylon has been entangled in discourses that transgress the boundaries between history, myth, fantasy and bias, while over the past century scientific archaeology has contributed to the mix. Michael Seymour teases apart the golden threads of Babylon’s discourses, tracing each one in meticulous detail before reweaving them into a new and brilliant tapestry, presenting us in this adroit and learned book with a Babylon fit for the scrutiny of our age.’

– Roger Matthews, Professor of Near Eastern Archaeology, University of Reading

‘In this ambitious and all encompassing account of how the ancient city of Babylon has been studied, interpreted and received throughout history, Michael Seymour offers an exemplary study in the reception of the ancient world. Multiple manifestations of the notion of Babylon are explored, revealing the extent to which ancient civilisations have been appropriated according to different cultural contexts and priorities. The book presents an intoxicating mix of mythology, interpretation and fact from a wide variety of sources: both textual and visual. Through each of the chapters we see the exciting and complex journey that antiquities undertake once retrieved from the earth in which they were buried. One of the most important findings of the work is the extent to which ancient Mesopotamian culture is shown to have “lived on” in a range of conflicting and successive contexts. In this thoughtful and probing analysis, Seymour unravels the very idea of Babylon, revealing it to be a complex bundle of meanings and significances. He does a great service to archaeology, ancient history and cultural studies in telling this story of entanglement.’

– Stephanie Moser, Professor of Archaeology, University of Southampton

‘This is a brilliant first book by a rising star in Ancient Near Eastern studies. It comes at a critical moment when the ancient city of Babylon is under the spotlight as never before. After the coalition invasion of 2003 Babylon was turned into a military camp to universal international condemnation. Now the World Monuments Fund is helping with the conservation of the site and application has been made for Babylon to become a World Heritage Site. There have also been three major exhibitions about Babylon in the last few years, in Paris, Berlin and London, all with sumptuous catalogues, and the famous Cyrus Cylinder, found at Babylon in 1879, is currently the subject of a touring exhibition. Yet until now there existed no book that traced the exploration and excavation of Babylon against the wider backdrop of developments in European intellectual thinking and understanding. Michael Seymour does this with great skill and clarity, and has produced a book that not only examines the importance and significance of Babylon in the western and eastern traditions, but also provides a readable account of the history and excavation of the city. This will be an indispensable book both for scholars in a number of different fields and for laymen interested in the Ancient Near East.’

– John Curtis, OBE, Keeper of Special Middle Eastern Projects, The British Museum

# BABYLON

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Already was he bending over to  
    Embrace my master's feet. 'Brother', said he,  
    'Don't, for you're a shade, and shade you view'.  
Standing, he said, 'You know now the degree  
    Of love that warms me to you when it brings  
Me to forget our insubstantiality:  
    I treat our shadows still as solid things'.

    Statius, author of the *Thebaid*, meets Virgil in Purgatory (Dante,  
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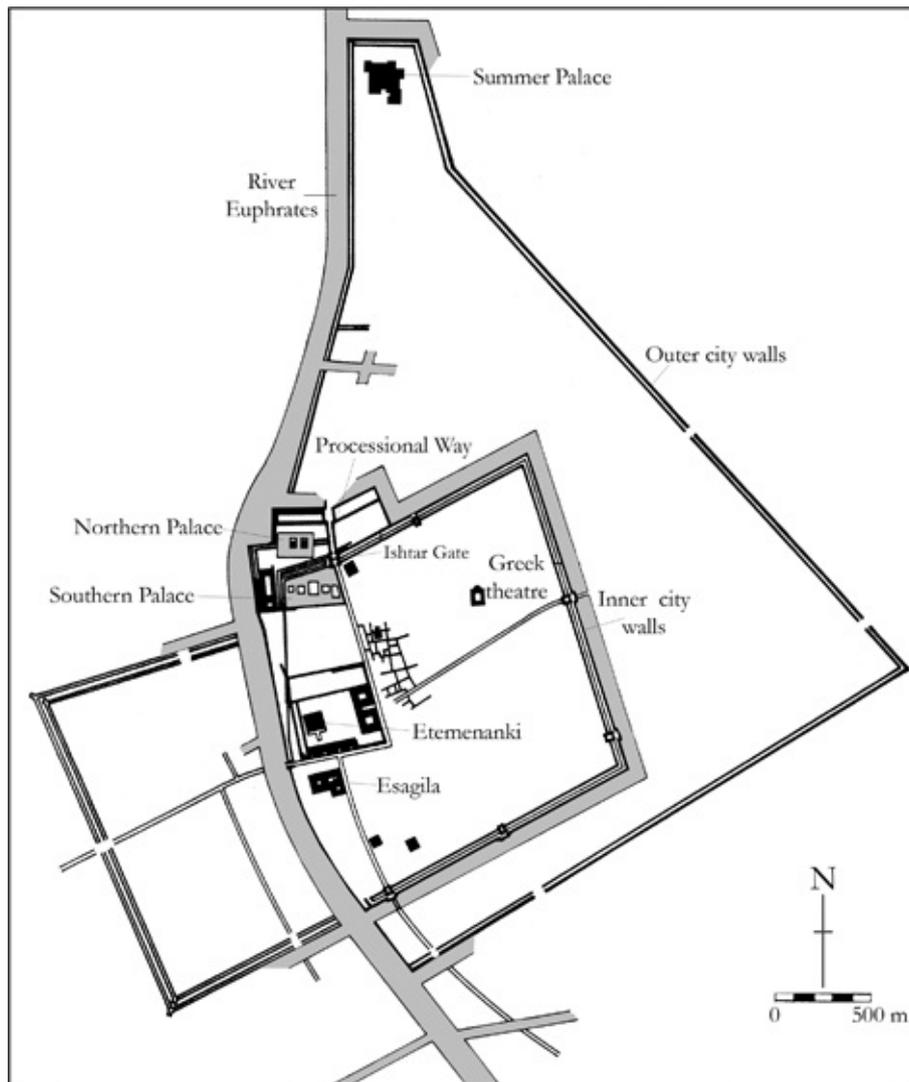
Recently I have been involved with the World Monuments Fund's work at Babylon, as a result of which I have been able to visit the site itself and to work with Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage staff there. I wish to thank both organizations for this opportunity, which has made it possible for me to visit Babylon at a time when this remains difficult for foreigners.

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**Map 1** Location of Babylon and other ancient sites in modern Iraq.



**Map 2** The city of Babylon in the Neo-Babylonian period (sixth century BC).

# CHAPTER 1

## A CITY AND ITS GHOSTS

Working on behalf of the recently formed Deutsche Orient Gesellschaft (German Oriental Society), Robert Koldewey began excavations at Babylon in March 1899. By the standards of his British and French contemporaries in Mesopotamia, the excavation techniques he applied were slow and conscientious; nevertheless, they quickly revealed monumental buildings and vivid glazed-brick reliefs. Before the first year was out, it was clear that Koldewey had succeeded: after 2,000 years Babylon was emerging from the dust.

In their methods, German excavations between 1899 and 1917 resembled modern excavations far more closely than those of any predecessor. Crucially, they succeeded in identifying, tracing and recording the mud-brick architecture of the city. (The failure of nineteenth-century excavators in this respect is still visible in the enormous pits dug into some of Iraq's most important urban sites.<sup>1</sup>) Beyond the technical success, however, lay a more emotive achievement. This first year of excavations at Babylon could be seen as the end of a search that had begun in classical antiquity. Two millennia of fantastic and diverse visions of the famous city were in one sense ended by the excavations. Koldewey had uncovered Babylon itself. When the cultural significance of this action is appreciated, it is easy to understand the excavator's famous devotion to his excavation. He spent the vast bulk of the project's eighteen years at the site and would readily have spent more, as his first words in *The Excavations at Babylon* attest:

It is most desirable, if not absolutely necessary, that the excavation of Babylon should be completed. Up to the present time only about half the work has been accomplished, although since it began we have worked daily, both summer and winter, with from 200 to 250 workmen.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the difficulties presented by the site, the results were spectacular. Brightly glazed brick reliefs showing dragons, lions and bulls quickly appeared as Koldewey's team excavated the monumental Ishtar Gate complex and the great Processional Way that ran through this, Babylon's grand northern entrance. The excavations also revealed the remains of temples, vast palaces and even the location of Babylon's ziggurat, the original Tower of Babel, but it was the blue-glazed bricks of the Ishtar Gate that would remain the strongest image to emerge from the ancient city. The discoveries culminated in Walter Andrae's painstaking reconstructions of the

Processional Way and Ishtar Gate, displayed in Berlin's Vorderasiatisches Museum from 1930.<sup>3</sup> The original excavation of these vividly coloured reliefs, the actual decoration of ancient Babylon in its prime, was a powerful and exciting experience for the archaeologists, as their eventual display in Berlin was and is for the public.

The German excavations transformed modern knowledge of Babylon, and could be held to represent the moment at which legend was superseded by physical reality and the city entered the empirical, scientific domain of archaeological research. The moment, however, is incomplete. Though of huge archaeological importance, Koldewey's discoveries patently did not consign existing ideas about Babylon to the scrap heap. They might more accurately be said to have joined the existing cacophony of interpretation with a certain authority of voice, yet even the basis and extent of that authority are hardly simple matters. This book aims to explore what such moments mean in practice. If not immediate and total transformation, what is the effect of archaeology on the identity of a place people already know through other channels? Is there any way in which the archaeological moment of discovery is absolutely different from others – the traveller's visit and account or the artist's representation, for example? How do multiple, sometimes conflicting forms of knowledge co-exist and interact in the understanding of a single place? To ask these questions it is necessary to adopt a broader cultural and historical perspective on archaeological work itself: to view the development of archaeological approaches in their cultural context, and to consider the roles played by other, non-archaeological ways of engaging with the ancient past.

Human interest in antiquity and origins is a phenomenon far older and more varied than the academic disciplines of history or archaeology. We might even consider it universal, an aspect simply of being human, since ideas about the past are to be found everywhere and amongst everyone. The forms that our interest takes vary greatly, however, and such diversity produces its own challenges for the researcher. There are inherent difficulties to address in investigating a topic so broad, ranging widely over time and space and taking in a riot of disparate sources that includes fine art, poetry, theatre and music as well as history and archaeology. One approach to the problem is to follow the biography of a specific subject, idea, person or place, as is the case here; another is to focus on a broader topic (a field of scholarship or culture) at a particular time. In either case it is necessary to work across multiple subject areas, and to seek out connections that disciplinary boundaries in the present might tend to obscure.

Babylon is a city buried under its own mythology, transported through biblical and classical accounts into new worlds, and an afterlife that is sometimes so strange as to obscure an origin in any real place at all. The city has travelled, spread and transformed, which is precisely what makes it so interesting. The subject of this book then is not primarily the gradual rediscovery of Babylon archaeologically, though this certainly forms an important part. Rather, it is the history of that broader interest that continued to sustain Babylon in culture many centuries after the city itself had faded into obscurity. Much of the appeal is rooted in myth, but the aim of this book is not to establish simply that much of what has been written about Babylon over the centuries bears little relation to the realities of life in the ancient city itself. Instead its purpose is

to explore the ways in which the stories created around Babylon in later times, with their varied and sometimes obscure connections to historical reality, can shed light on our own complex relationship with the ancient past. From an anthropological perspective legend and myth are useful, functional and necessary. One of the needs that they fulfil is that for frameworks into which present events can be fitted, and through which they might be understood. In this sense, historical narrative itself frequently plays a mythic role, selecting and drawing meaning from the mass of events with an eye to their understanding in the present.

A wider perspective may also help to address a recurring problem in studying the history of archaeology. It is common practice, particularly when writing of areas outside Europe, to treat the history of archaeology principally in terms of a succession of travellers and explorers, and if we are interested in Babylon we must certainly look at the people who visited and described the site. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that the history of archaeology is one of intellectual development as well as physical exploration. We seek to understand why descriptions of Babylon by European travellers were written in the first place; why these changed over time; why, at a certain point, observation began to be supplemented by more formal survey and even excavation. The answers to these questions are often to be found not in the accounts of travellers themselves, but in the broader currents of European intellectual and cultural history. From this perspective, archaeology is a late arrival on a crowded stage, emerging only in the nineteenth century to vie with long-established traditions on the ancient past whose roots lay in theology, classical history, art, literature and more. Two millennia of accumulated thought, tradition, speculation, fantasy, philosophy and above all fascination preceded the first archaeological excavations at Babylon, and have since continued to flourish alongside archaeological approaches.

To explore a topic so rich imposes its own constraints: I have had to be selective in the material discussed, and even then to treat too briefly a great many interesting individuals and stories. Some compensation, I hope, will be found not only in the breadth of the subject matter but also in the strange and revealing experience of following a city all the way from antiquity to the present day. Most of the journey takes place among ghosts and echoes: the fragments of the living city that in various ways survived its end. This, however, is no funereal procession. Babylon's ghosts are colourful and oddly creative – they take on lives of their own. Frequently they find new forms unimagined in the ancient Iraq where their journey begins. One wonders what the inhabitants of ancient Babylon would have made of the warlike Queen Semiramis of later tradition, or of the 'marriage market' of prospective wives described by Herodotus. They would certainly have been confused by talk of 'hanging' gardens, and much more so to discover that their city had gained a permanent association with the end of the world! Even the city's cataclysmic fall is a myth: the great destruction of popular imagination was for the Babylonians nothing more dramatic than a change of government. Yet all of these ideas have survived and developed in culture over the centuries, and even the most fantastic can contain echoes of a world with which the ancient Babylonians would have been much more familiar. As distant from the original as they might sometimes appear, they are still very much

Babylon's ghosts.

Most ancient Mesopotamians, as far as we are able to tell, held rather pessimistic views on the next life. Myths describe a grey netherworld with no pleasures, whose inhabitants live in darkness and for whom the only food is dust. It is comforting to think that in one case at least they were mistaken: for the great city of Babylon itself, the afterlife has proven astonishingly rich.

## CHAPTER 2

# ANCIENT BABYLON

Very little is known of Babylon's earliest history. The city first appears in texts in the later third millennium BC,<sup>1</sup> one among many then thriving in southern Iraq. References of any kind to Babylon before the final century of the third millennium are very rare, but records of large offerings made to the temple of Enlil in Nippur during this century (while Babylon was part of an empire ruled from the southern city of Ur) suggest a city already of some size and wealth.<sup>2</sup> In the middle of the eighteenth century BC Babylon would emerge from relative obscurity to become the political centre of southern Mesopotamia, a position it was to maintain almost continuously for the next 1,400 years.

The site of Babylon lies on the Euphrates, approximately 85 km south of Baghdad. It is located towards the northern end of the great alluvial plain of southern Iraq, a landscape made of silts deposited by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers into a vast trough created by tectonic movement as the Arabian plate slips slowly east and north below the neighbouring Eurasian plate. The same collision is responsible for the creation of the Taurus and Zagros mountain ranges that define the northern and eastern borders of an area including all of Iraq as well as parts of modern Syria and Turkey. This area, known as Mesopotamia, thus incorporates several environmental zones, but it is in the flat alluvial plain of southern Iraq itself that Babylon is located. Home to the world's earliest cities,<sup>3</sup> the plain is subject to several important environmental constraints that have, since long before the foundation of Babylon, shaped its human occupation. The area is subject to very high temperatures and lies well beyond the reach of rain-fed agriculture. Even the small amount of precipitation this part of Iraq does receive is unevenly and unpredictably distributed: the bulk of a season's rain can fall in a single downpour, itself as harmful to crops as severe drought.<sup>4</sup> Human habitation is therefore entirely dependent on the two great rivers, and permanent settlement requires a system of irrigation. Once established, however, such a system could reap the benefit of rich alluvial soils and support extremely productive agriculture on the levees of canals. Most explanations of the region's early urban and associated economic development assume that the ability to produce large agricultural surpluses played an important role, though in quite what way is hotly disputed.<sup>5</sup> Herodotus was certainly impressed. In his fifth-century BC description he writes that:

As a grain-bearing country Assyria [meaning Mesopotamia] is the richest in the world. No attempt is made there to grow figs, grapes, or olives, or any other fruit trees, but so