

H-Net Reviews

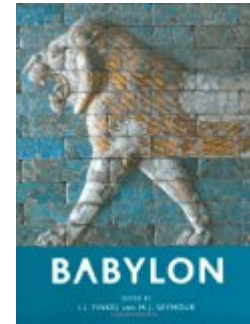
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Irving L. Finkel, M. J. Seymour, eds. *Babylon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 238 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-538540-3.

Reviewed by Gwendolyn Leick (Chelsea College of Art and Design)

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Review of Babylon

In 2008 the three European museums with the most substantial spectacular collections of Mesopotamian artifacts—the Louvre in Paris, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, and the British Museum in London—agreed to combine forces in mounting an exhibition devoted to the city and the civilization of Babylon, subtitled “Myth and Reality.” Each museum was to draw on its own material but the temporary loan of some notable examples was to be facilitated by staggering the exhibitions, beginning at the Louvre, continuing in Berlin, and ending in London (from November 2008 until March 2009). The respective curators agreed on a common theme, the presentation of Babylonian material and intellectual culture coupled with the examination of the “myths” and legends associated with the ancient city. At the same time, to avoid complete duplication and to maximize the impact of the particular collection, the keepers and curators at each of the three exhibitions could highlight certain aspects. The Louvre capitalized on one its most famous objects, the stone stela inscribed with the laws of King Hammurapi that presents the early history of the city, while the Berlin museum, with its famous reconstituted remains of the Nebuchadrezzar’s Ishtar Gate and Throne Room, focused on the Babylon of the first millennium. This period was also the focus in London although the pride of the British Museum’s Babylonian holdings lies in its tablet collection rather than architectural pieces.

Each exhibition was accompanied by its own catalogue, written by the respective curatorial teams and local specialists, naturally drawing on their particular

areas of interest and expertise. The volume under review was published by Oxford University Press to accompany the British Museum show. The main editors are Irving Finkel, assistant keeper of the Department of the Middle East, and Michael Seymour, who is a specialist in the history and politics of archaeology of the Middle East, as well as special assistant at the British Museum. These two authors wrote the majority of the short articles that make up the volume. Seymour deals with non-Mesopotamian art history and Finkel provides the Assyriological point of view. Other past and present keepers of the British Museum, such as Julian Reeder, John Curtis, C. B. W. Walker, and Jonathan Taylor, also contributed. One article by Joachim Marzahn, the head of cuneiform collections at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, was translated from the German exhibition catalogue.

It is in the nature of such exhibitions to be temporary. As soon as they close, the carefully assembled objects return to their respective holding places and can never be experienced in the quite the same way again. A good catalogue not only provides more detailed information than the text displayed next to the exhibits but constitutes a record of the curatorial effort. The book *Babylon: Myth and Reality* is a beautifully produced memento of the London exhibition. It contains mainly color illustrations of every single object that had been on display. As such it is a complete record and allows the more than casual visitor to go back to particular exhibits and learn more of their context and importance and often

get a much better look at the things themselves, especially at the smaller items, such as cuneiform tablets. It also contains the list of all exhibits, complete with their museum collection number where appropriate, as well as a bibliography and index. This handsomely produced hardback book, sold at \$40.00, is a very good catalogue to accompany the London exhibition, which, given the rather cramped and awkward rooms that had been made available—by no means to best exhibitions room of the British Museum—had been somewhat uncomfortable to experience.

How well does it work as a book? This is a question that often arises for catalogues of exhibitions whose main purpose is to attract new groups of visitors. Given that Mesopotamian artifacts lack the mystique and visual beauty of Egyptian and classical works, and that knowledge of this part of the ancient Near East is the preserve of a small group of specialists, the “truth” (or better, “fact”) part of the exhibition was unlikely to attract significant numbers of visitors. The “myth and legend” side however, could draw on beautiful or at least spectacular objects, from medieval manuscripts to film posters and modern art, to fill the gap of attractiveness. It could also appeal to visitors who were interested in the Jewish or the general Old Testament angle evoked by the word “Babylon.” In a book the same conceit does not necessarily work. The main title displayed on the cover is simply *Babylon* and only the flyleaf informs that this is an exhibition catalogue. Hence it appears that the target audience for the publication is people interested in Babylon. The image on the front cover is a close-up of one of the resplendent lions of the Ishtar Gate, the majuscule “A” of the word Babylon even sports a ziggurat-like insert. The back of the cover reproduces Pieter Breughel’s famous painting, *Tower of Babel*.

The book seems to appeal to buyers interested in the ancient Mesopotamian city or civilization and it is doubtful whether the chapters on Babylon in contemporary art and culture, or indeed much of “Legend” parts, will be either expected or appreciated. The crowd-pulling factor, once translated into print, could be seen as alienating rather than attracting the interested reader. The focus on the first-millennium city is rather narrow and the dichotomy between archaeology, epigraphy, and history on the one hand, and the rubric “popular culture” on the other, coexist precariously in this volume. Even the individual entries by the eminently specialist contributors show the tendency to address the “general public” with result of sometimes sounding either bland or condescending. There are no seriously scholarly contribu-

tions, such as one finds in many art history catalogues, but there is much to tempt the curious into further readings.

The book starts with an introductory section of two chapters. The main curators of the exhibition, Finkel and Seymour, contribute a general introduction. This is followed by a magisterial overview by Julian Reade called “Disappearance and Rediscovery.” This fascinating account of gradual discovery of the site of Babylon is especially good on the late eighteenth-century explorers. After these chapters, the contributions are divided into three sections.

The first major section of the book, “The City of Babylon,” contains five short chapters. Julian Reade takes up the thread of his introductory article by continuing the story of the site’s identification and discovery during the nineteenth century. He gives a careful and much-needed clarification of the complicated topography of the mound and gives credence to the important work done by British Resident in Baghdad, Claudius Rich. The invaluable contributions of the indefatigable German excavator Robert Koldewey, who was responsible for uncovering much of Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon, is discussed in two articles, including the one by Joachim Marzahn from the Berlin museum. Andrew George brings his own expertise to bear on the discussion of Babylonian topographical texts and takes on the role of a virtual tour guide through the ancient city, retracing the route taken by the god Nabû during the New Year Festival.

A subsection entitled “Life and Letters” puts the great wealth of the British Museum’s tablet collection into focus. Julian Reade explains how and under what circumstances cuneiform sources were acquired and traces the story of their decipherment, and Finkel discusses what they tell us about life in the cosmopolitan city of Babylon. Since the exhibition focused on the Neo-Babylonian dynasty, there is not much room for history; Jonathan Taylor gives a brief overview of what is known about the six kings who ruled before the city was incorporated into the Persian Empire. Andrew George and Irving Finkel make use of cuneiform sources to examine the ritual and religious involvement of Babylonian kings (George) and the development of divination, which in the last centuries of the first millennium showed a “dawning of a new sense of individual identity” (p. 95).

The second main section, “History and Legend,” looks at the “images” commonly associated with the Babylon of the Bible and classical Greece. This takes in the Wonders of the World, the Tower of Babel, the Jewish cap-

tivity, the various narratives of the book of Daniel, and the Whore of Babylon from the book of Revelations. In each subsection dedicated to these themes, Michael Seymour presents the non-Babylonian evidence, including translated passages from classical writers. His comments on the various paintings and other art historical material explain the sociocultural context of these images, while the Assyriologists and archaeologists use these images as entry points to a whole range of specialist concerns. Julian Reade, for instance, takes up the subject of Babylon's walls and the stepped temple tower ("ziggurat") to set out how various generations of explorers and excavators came to map the different defensive structures that surrounded the inner and outer city and traces the long search for the Tower of Babel, which happened to have become so denuded as to be submerged by the waters of a pond. George examines the importance of the Esagil tablet, while Taylor and Christopher Walker survey what the cuneiform tablets reveal about the Jewish exile, now to be dated from 597-539 BCE. The subject of Daniel the Seer gives an opportunity for Finkel to look at the importance of Babylonian divination and the interpretation of dreams; the biblical account of the madness of Nebuchadrezzar leads to the case history of King Nabonidus, whose absence from Babylon may have been caused

by a disfiguring disease.

In a rather short third section, "Legacy of Babylon," Finkel summarizes Babylonian intellectual achievements that have continued to enrich human culture, especially in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. He argues that the origins of scientific methods owe much to the "Babylonian compulsion to predict" (p. 190). Hollywood movies, Pre-Raphaelite paintings, some modern art projects, as well as reggae music, provide material for the brief and rather weak chapter, "Babylon in Contemporary Art and Culture." The real punch of the show, and the last impression before leaving the gallery, was left to John Curtis and his display of "Babylon Today." He also has the last word in the book and makes a very strong point about the abuse the site had suffered under Saddam Hussein and his amateurish attempts at rebuilding some of Nebuchadrezzar's palaces. Hussein's actions were then trumped by U.S. occupying forces, who installed a military base right in the middle of the mound, causing substantial and irreparable damage from contaminating sandbags, deep trenches, heavy vehicle traffic, fuel contamination, and vandalism. Having shown the sometimes tenuous but vital relevance of the often vaunted "cradle of civilization" across the millennia, the book ends by showing up the barbarity of our own age.

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