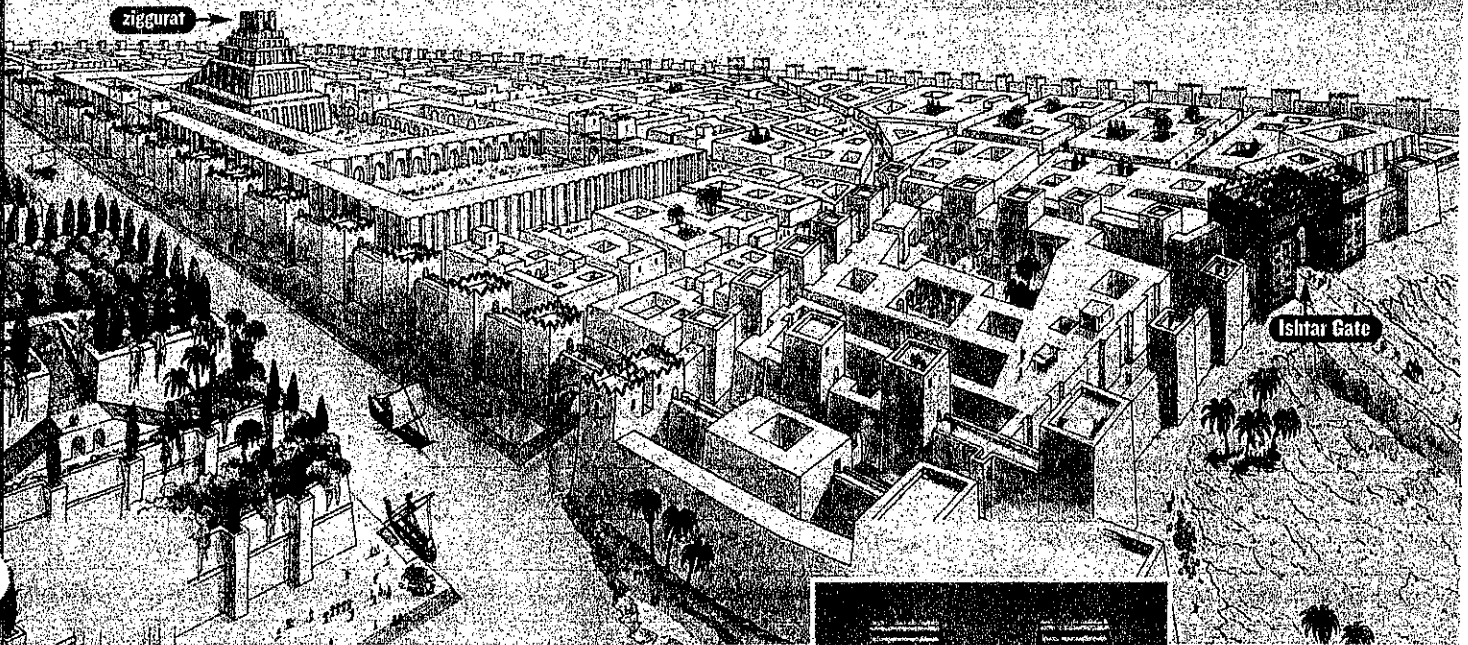


# BABYLON

## CITY AND LEGEND



## The rise and fall of one civilization's great city

by Bryan Brown

### Words to Know

**artifacts:** objects of historical significance that were produced by humans.

**Mesopotamia** (MESS-uh-puh-TAY-nee-uh) a region of Asia that included present-day Iraq and parts of Syria and Turkey. Its name means "between rivers."

**zigurat:** a tower built in stair-step stages.

**Zion:** a symbol of Jerusalem and the Jewish homeland.

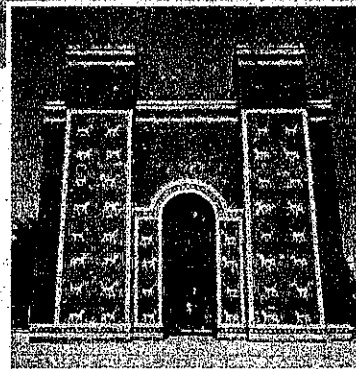
**F**or centuries, it has been a symbol of great glory, and even greater evil. Today, when U.S. tanks rumble over the sands south of Baghdad, Iraq, they raise dust from its ruins—and destroy its precious **artifacts**. It is Babylon, the once-magnificent city of **Mesopotamia** (see map).

Mesopotamia was in the "Fertile Crescent" region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Historians

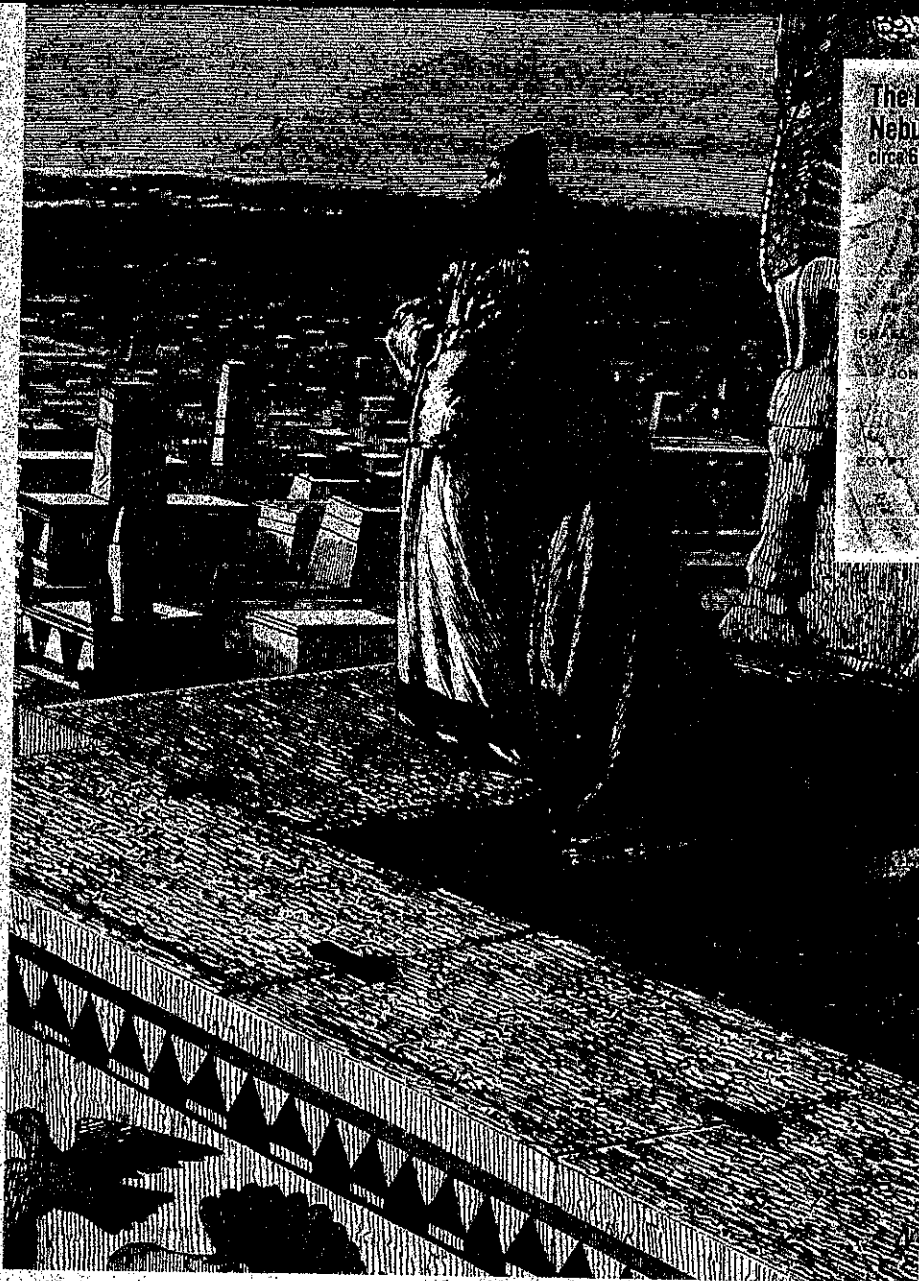
often call it the "cradle of civilization" because farming and animal herding developed there earlier than anywhere else—nearly 8,000 years ago.

The first important societies of Mesopotamia, called city-states, were constantly at war. About 1792 B.C., a king named Hammurabi seized control of southern Mesopotamia. His capital was a city on the Euphrates River called Babylon.

Under Hammurabi, Babylon



Above: The zigurat of Babylon rises over the Euphrates River. Travelers entered the city through the massive Ishtar Gate. Left: The reconstructed gate stands at the Iraq Museum in Baghdad.



King Nebuchadnezzar II looks out over Babylon.

became one of the ancient world's great centers of culture, trade, religion, and law. The famous Code of Hammurabi is one of the earliest and most influential systems of laws.

Soon after Hammurabi's death in 1750 B.C., the kingdom of Babylonia began to fall to invaders. But Mesopotamians remembered the former greatness of Babylon, the city. Then, around 605 B.C., a new ruler claimed its heritage. He

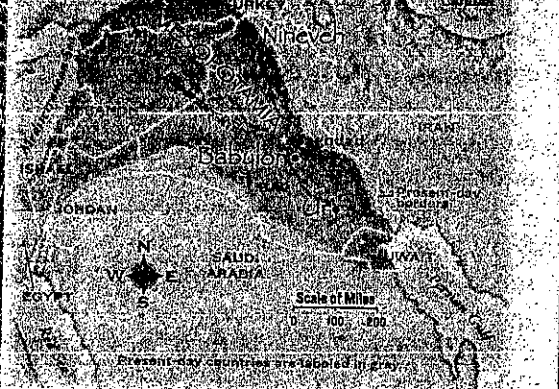
called himself Nebuchadnezzar (*nehb-uh-kuhd-NEHZ-uh*) II.

### City on the Plain

Nebuchadnezzar was a man in a hurry. Conquering his neighbors, he seized control of important trade routes from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. With the wealth of this second Babylonian Empire, he built the Babylon of legend.

"In magnificence there is no

### The Empire of Nebuchadnezzar II circa 605-539



other city that approaches it," wrote Herodotus (*hib-ROD-uh-tubs*), the great Greek historian. Herodotus described a fortress of towers, temples, palaces, and grand avenues designed for gods and wealthy citizens. Rising dramatically above the plain of Mesopotamia were walls thick enough, Herodotus claimed, for a four-horse chariot to turn around on top of them.

Inside the walls, a huge ziggurat dominated the skyline. Scholars believe that it served as the model for the Bible's Tower of Babel. The city's many other marvels of engineering included the multilevel "Hanging Gardens." Water for the gardens was pulled up from the Euphrates by an ingenious pump system. The Greeks called the Hanging Gardens one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Babylon was also the source of much of the ancient world's advanced learning. The Babylonians were obsessed with predicting the future by the stars. This passion led to some of the first maps of constellations and the foundations of modern astronomy (study of the stars and the universe). Babylonian mathematicians helped introduce the 60-minute hour, the 4-week month, and the 360-degree circle.

### By the Rivers of Babylon

In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish kingdom of Judah. Thousands of Jews were **deported** (expelled) to Babylon as slaves. The result was a historical period of great significance—the Babylonian captivity of the Jews.

The Bible has much to say about Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar. The stories of Daniel and the **prophecies** (predictions) of Jeremiah came from those dark days. To the captive Jews, Babylon was a wicked city that worshipped false gods. One of the most famous Psalms describes the sorrow and shame of the imprisonment:

*“By the rivers of Babylon  
there we sat down, yea, we wept,  
when we remembered Zion.”*

The Jews were finally freed after the Persians conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. When they returned home, however, they took the influence of Babylon with them. The Bible’s accounts of the creation and the flood were probably influenced by Mesopotamian myths. Other important cultural developments, including Hebrew script and the Jewish calendar, were developed as a result of the captivity.

Most important, according to H. G. Wells, historian and author of *The War of the Worlds*, Babylon was where the Jews first started to develop their own traditions. “The people who came back to Jerusalem... were a very different people,” Wells wrote. “They had learned civilization.”

### A Great City Falls

Nebuchadnezzar died in 561 B.C., after ruling for 44 years. That was the beginning of the end for Babylon. Bitter rivalries divided the people of the city. In 539 B.C., Cyrus the Great of Persia captured Babylon without a struggle.

Throughout the ages, historians, dreamers, and tyrants have preserved the legend of Babylon. Alexander the Great planned to base his empire there, and died in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar in 323 B.C. Twenty-



The Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

three centuries later, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein installed a huge portrait of himself and Nebuchadnezzar at the entrance to Babylon’s ruins.

Time and the desert sands have taken their toll on the once-mighty city. Yet its legend has refused to die. In the cradle of civilization, a battle for the soul of Iraq continues to rage. **JS**

U.S. Marines walk past a re-creation of Nebuchadnezzar’s palace. British scholars say that the war between coalition forces and Iraqis has damaged the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon.

### Your Turn

#### WORD MATCH

- |              |                       |
|--------------|-----------------------|
| 1. artifact  | A. study of the stars |
| 2. ziggurat  | B. prediction         |
| 3. astronomy | C. expel              |
| 4. deport    | D. tower              |
| 5. prophecy  | E. significant object |

#### THINK ABOUT IT

Where did the culture of the Babylonians come from? How did it spread?

JERRY LAMPEN/REUTERS/CORBIS



THE HANGING GARDENS OF BABYLON  
[www.unmuseum.org/hangg.htm](http://www.unmuseum.org/hangg.htm)

# **Babylon: City and Legend**

**Directions: Answer each of the following questions in complete sentences**

- 1) Why do historians call Mesopotamia the “Cradle of Civilization?”**
- 2) What is the Capital of Mesopotamia?**
- 3) What was Hammurabi’s Code?**
- 4) What aspect of Mesopotamia’s geography caused it to be so easily invaded?**
- 5) What did the Greek Historian Herodotus say about the city of Babylon?**
- 6) Why did the Babylonians build walls around their city?**
- 7) How were the “hanging gardens” of Babylon watered?**
- 8) List 3 contributions of Babylon’s mathematicians:**
  - A –**
  - B –**
  - C –**
- 9) What two rivers run through the land of Mesopotamia?**
- 10) What present day country is located in what was once the land of Mesopotamia?**

