



Wheat, E. (2009) 'Babylon: Myth and Reality at the British Museum, London: Exhibition Review', *Rosetta* **6**: 106-110.  
<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue6/babylon-myth-and-reality/>

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***Babylon: Myth and Reality* at the British Museum, London**  
**Exhibition Review**

Reviewed by Elizabeth Wheat

*University of Birmingham*

The *Babylon: Myth and Reality* exhibition, recently hosted by the British Museum, following a tour of the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin and the Louvre in Paris, sets out to illuminate the reality behind many of the most enduring myths surrounding the city, through the extensive Near Eastern collections from all three museums.

Known only from Greek and Biblical sources before the decipherment of cuneiform in the nineteenth century, the city of Babylon has long been associated with vice, excess and impiety. Often seen as a paragon of moral degeneracy, Biblical tales of the monstrous Babylon conveniently served as a vessel for nineteenth-century moral and religious anxieties, inspiring many great works of art that have been included in the exhibition, alongside artefacts from the city itself that reveal the true scientific and artistic achievements of a lost civilisation.

The first part of the exhibition contains the iconic blue glazed brick facades from the Ishtar Gate in Babylon, depicting lions and the mythical Mushhushu, a composite creature with the head of a snake and talons of an eagle. These are accompanied by a large glazed brick panel with a royal inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BC), which heralds the presence of an unusually large amount of cuneiform inscriptions in the exhibition. The curators apparently made a conscious decision to include more tablets than is usual for a public exhibition of this size, although the majority of tablets on display admittedly have an aesthetic quality that many of the usual simple clay texts lack (I. Finkel, pers. comm.). There are a number of maps, for example, in which the cuneiform writing is accompanied by careful diagrams ranging from small sections of Babylonian city districts, to the sixth-century BC *Mappa Mundi*. Even the *East India House Inscription*, in which Nebuchadnezzar's

building and restoration programmes are commemorated, is as elegant and beautiful an example of cuneiform script as it is possible to find in Mesopotamia. Carved onto a piece of stone made to look like a large clay tablet, the scribe clearly intended to archaize Babylonian epigraphy in an attempt to imitate the inscriptions of Hammurabi's golden age, hinting at the myths created by the Babylonians themselves that form a subtle parallel narrative in the exhibition (Reade 2008: 30).

The myth/reality theme is most explicitly addressed in the exhibition's treatment of the Tower of Babel story, an apparently cautionary tale from Genesis that appears to have been inspired by the colossal Etemenanki ziggurat in Babylon. Initiated by Nabopolassar (626-605 BC) and completed by Nebuchadnezzar, the ziggurat was dedicated to Marduk, patron deity of the city and head of the Babylonian pantheon. An incredibly detailed 1:150 scale model of the building shows an elaborate square complex that was typical of the design for Mesopotamian ziggurats.

This is clearly contrasted, however, with numerous paintings by European artists from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, who were inspired by the Genesis account of Babylon's hubris in attempting to build a tower that could reach heaven. The imagined appearance of the tower seems to have been highly standardised at some point, and received wisdom dictated to the majority of the artists displayed in the exhibition that the ziggurat was a round structure with classical arches. It is only in Maarten van Heemskerck's 1569 engraving, *Tower of Babel*, that the ziggurat has a much more accurate square base. The artist apparently attempted to render the ziggurat accurately by studying Herodotus' description of the Temple of Zeus Belus in Babylon, which was almost certainly the Etemenanki ziggurat.

Pursuing the theme of Babylonian reception in later art, the exhibition continues with an almost self-contained gallery of paintings that further explore the myth of Babylon. William Blake's *Nebuchadnezzar* stands out as the most immediately recognisable modern image of any Babylonian king, based on the description of the ruler's madness in The Book of Daniel. The

wild and barbarous Nebuchadnezzar crawling on hands and knees depicted by Blake is, to a certain extent, another modern myth of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar has been consistently confused with the later King Nabonidus (556-539 BC), who abandoned Babylon and travelled to Teima in Arabia where he lived in the wilderness for ten years (Leick 1999: 111-112). Blake's Nebuchadnezzar is therefore a composite character, filtered through two thousand years of Biblical writing that has moulded an arguably great king into a figure that embodies both the alleged supreme arrogance of Nebuchadnezzar and the political impotence of his successor, Nabonidus, in the face of Persian invasion.

Babylon was first characterised as a place of sin and corruption in Genesis, a theme which is later revisited in Revelation where the city assumes the role of metaphor for Imperial Rome (Seymour 2008: 183). Some of the most powerful textual imagery centres on the adulterous Whore of Babylon, again the subject of woodcuts and paintings by Hans Burgkmair, Albrecht Dürer and William Blake, all of which appear in the exhibition. The Whore embodies Babylon, and in Blake's painting sits semi-naked on a beast with seven heads, again a probable metaphor for the seven hills of Rome. It seems that at this point in history the reality of Babylon had been buried far beneath the political agenda of another culture, where it would remain until centuries later.

Some visitors may be disappointed by the lack of large scale Babylonian art in the exhibition, or the fact the curators chose to concentrate on a relatively small period of Mesopotamian history. Yet the aim of *Babylon: Myth and Reality* is to highlight the dissonance between our understanding of what Babylon is, heavily influenced by Greek and Biblical writers who either misunderstood Babylonian culture or sought to demonise it for their own purposes, and what Babylon was in reality. The importance of addressing this problem should not be underestimated; Assyriologists are still relatively few in number and, despite the massive advances in our understanding of the ancient Near East, Babylonian culture is still as mysterious for some people as it was a century ago.

Highlighting the difference between representations of Babylon and the historical reality could have resulted in a rather unsubtle and heavy handed trawl through the injustices done to Near Eastern history. Fortunately, the curators have been careful not to be overly prescriptive, and the result is an informative and interesting new approach to exploring Western Asia.

Hosting *Babylon: Myth and Reality* has also provided an opportunity for the British Museum to experiment with exhibition design in a way that is rarely seen in major European museums, which are often too long established to be influenced by the more modern and innovative design approaches recently taken by provincial galleries such as the Liverpool World Museum. The lighting is soft and unobtrusive, while the rich turquoises and blues used on the walls of the exhibition rooms perfectly compliment the facades from the Ishtar Gate, dispensing with the often blindingly sterile white that is frequently used as the standard 'neutral' background.

The exhibition is set out in a series of small linked sub-rooms, which essentially serve as wide corridors where each group of artefacts or paintings is displayed. This seemed to be effective in creating a steady flow of traffic between each of the displays, since there was a large volume of visitors in a relatively limited space. It was described by some, however, as too 'warren-like'.

At the end of the exhibition there is a small collection of items from modern Iraq, including a stamp commemorating the Babylon Festival illustrated with a picture of Saddam Hussein side by side with Nebuchadnezzar, a connection that Hussein was clearly keen to promote. It seems that not only are myths about Babylon explored in this exhibition, but also Babylonian myths, both ancient and modern. This reminded me of the Babylonian *Mappa Mundi*, the first item on display at the beginning of the exhibition. The map depicts the world with Babylon at its centre and describes the universe according to Near Eastern thought, full of fantastic mythical creatures at the peripheries, all looking toward Babylon. After visiting the exhibition, it would seem that we are doing the same, and show no signs of losing interest in the near future.

## **Bibliography**

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