

Babylon

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Coordinates: 32°32′11″N 44°25′15″E﻿ / ﻿32.53639°N 44.42083°E﻿ / 32.53639; 44.42083

Babylon (Arabic: بابل, *Babil*; Akkadian: *Bābili(m)*;^[1] Sumerian logogram: KÁ.DINGIR.RA^{K1};^[1] Hebrew: בָּבֶל, *Bāvel*;^[1] Greek: Βαβυλών, *Babylón*) was an Akkadian city-state (founded in 1894 BC by an Amorite dynasty) of ancient Mesopotamia, the remains of which are found in present-day Al Hillah, Babylon Province, Iraq, about 85 kilometers (55 mi) south of Baghdad. All that remains of the original ancient famed city of Babylon today is a large mound, or tell, of broken mud-brick buildings and debris in the fertile Mesopotamian plain between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The city itself was built upon the Euphrates, and divided in equal parts along its left and right banks, with steep embankments to contain the river's seasonal floods.

Available historical resources suggest that Babylon was at first a small town which had sprung up by the beginning of the 3rd millennium BC. The town flourished and attained independence with the rise of the First Amorite Babylonian Dynasty in 1894 BC. Claiming to be the successor of the ancient city of Eridu, Babylon eclipsed Nippur as the "holy city" of Mesopotamia around the time an Amorite king named Hammurabi first created the short lived Babylonian Empire; this quickly dissolved upon his death and Babylon spent long periods under Assyrian, Kassite and Elamite domination. Babylon again became the seat of the Neo-Babylonian Empire from 608 to 539 BC which was founded by Chaldeans and whose last king was an Assyrian. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. After the fall of Babylon it came under the rules of the Achaemenid, Seleucid, Parthian, Roman and Sassanid empires.



The upper part of the stela of Hammurabi's code of laws

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Name

The Greek form *Babylon* (Βαβυλών) is an adaptation of Akkadian *Babili*. The Babylonian name as it stood in the 1st millennium BC had been changed from an earlier *Babilli* in early 2nd millennium BC, meaning "Gate of God" or "Gateway of the God" (*bāb-ili*) by popular etymology.^[2] The earlier name *Babilla* appears to be an adaptation of a non-Semitic source of unknown origin or meaning.^[3]

In the Hebrew Bible, the name appears as בְּבֶלֶשׁ (Babel; Tiberian בְּבֶלֶ Bāvel; Syriac ܒܒܠ Bāwēl), interpreted in the Book of Genesis (11:9) to mean "confusion" (viz. of languages), from the verb בלבֵל *bilbél*, "to confuse".

History

An indication of Babylon's early existence may be a later tablet describing the reign of Sargon of Akkad (ca. 23rd century BC short chronology). The so-called "Weidner Chronicle" states that it was Sargon himself who built Babylon "in front of Akkad" (ABC 19:51). Another later chronicle likewise states that Sargon "dug up the dirt of the pit of Babylon, and made a counterpart of Babylon next to Akkad". (ABC 20:18–19). Van de Mieroop has suggested that those sources may refer to the much later Assyrian king Sargon II of the Neo-Assyrian Empire rather than Sargon of Akkad.^[4]

Some scholars, including linguist I.J. Gelb, have suggested that the name *Babil* is an echo of an earlier city name. Herzfeld wrote about *Bawer* in Iran, which was allegedly founded by Jamshid; the name *Babil* could be an echo of Bawer. David Rohl holds that the original Babylon is to be identified with Eridu. The Bible in Genesis 10 indicates that Nimrod was the original founder of Babel (Babylon). Joan Oates claims in her book *Babylon* that the rendering "Gateway of the gods" is no longer accepted by modern scholars.

By around the 19th century BC, much of Mesopotamia was occupied by Amorites, nomadic tribes from the northern Levant who were Semitic speakers like the Akkadians of Babylonia and Assyria, but at first did not practice agriculture like them, preferring to herd sheep. Over time, Amorite grain merchants rose to prominence and established their own independent dynasties in several south Mesopotamian city-states, most notably Isin, Larsa and Babylon.

Classical dating

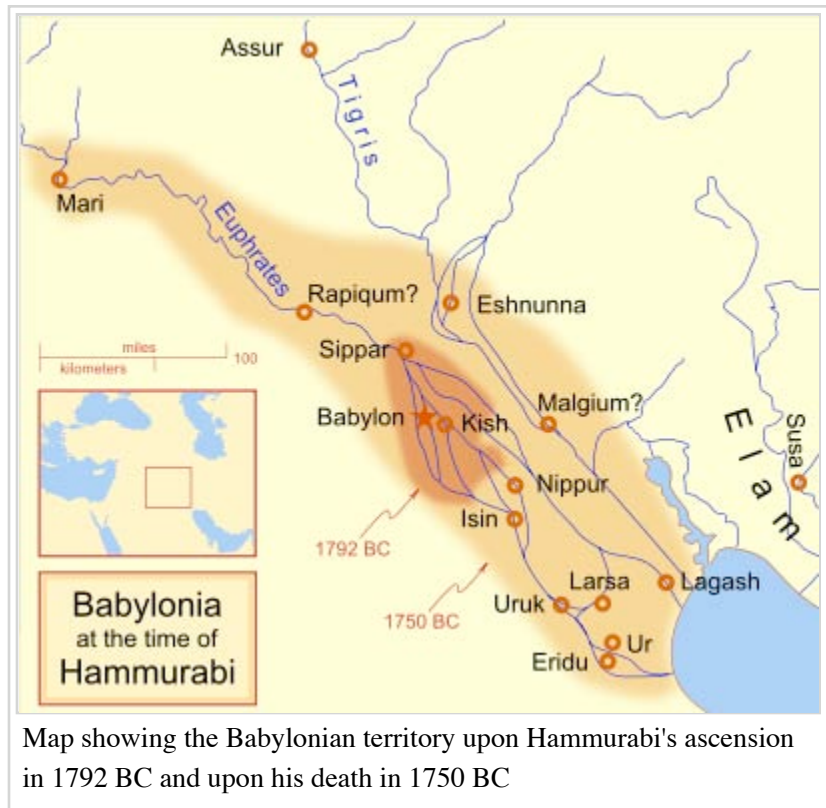
Ctesias, who is quoted by Diodorus Siculus and in George Syncellus's *Chronographia*, claimed to have access to manuscripts from Babylonian archives which date the founding of Babylon to 2286 BC by Belus who reigned as Babylon's first king for fifty five years.^[5] Another figure is from Simplicius,^[6] who recorded that Callisthenes in the 4th century BC travelled to Babylon and discovered astronomical observations on cuneiform tablets stretching back 1903 years before the taking of Babylon by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. This makes the sum $1903 + 331$ which equals 2234 BC as the founding date for Babylon. A similar figure is found in Berossus, who according to Pliny,^[7]

stated that astronomical observations commenced at Babylon 490 years before the Greek era of Phoroneus, and consequently in 2243 BC. Stephanus of Byzantium, wrote that Babylon was built 1002 years before the date (given by Hellanicus of Mytilene) for the siege of Troy (1229 BC), which would date Babylon's foundation to 2231 BC.^[8] All of these dates place Babylon's foundation in the 23rd century BC; however, since the decipherment of cuneiform in recent centuries, cuneiform records have not been found to correspond with such classical (post-cuneiform) accounts.

Old Babylonian period

The First Babylonian Dynasty was established by an Amorite chieftain named Sumu-abum in 1894 BC, who declared independence from the neighbouring city-state of Kazallu. The Amorites were, unlike the Sumerians and Akkadian Semites, not native to Mesopotamia, but were semi nomadic Semitic invaders from the lands to the west. Babylon controlled little surrounding territory until it became the capital of Hammurabi's empire a century later (r. 1792–1750 BC). Hammurabi is famous for codifying the laws of Babylonia into the *Code of Hammurabi* that has had a lasting influence on legal thought. Subsequently, the city of Babylon continued to be the capital of the region known as Babylonia. Hammurabi's empire quickly dissolved after his death, although the Amorite dynasty remained in power in a much reduced Babylonia until 1595 BC^[9] when they were overthrown by the invading Hittites from Asia Minor.

Following the sack of Babylon by the Hittites, the Kassites invaded and took over Babylon, ushering in a dynasty that was to last for 435 years until 1160 BC. The city was renamed *Karanduniash* during this period. The Kassites, a people speaking a Language Isolate, originated from the Zagros Mountains to the north east of Mesopotamia in what is now Iran. However, Kassite Babylon eventually became subject to



Map showing the Babylonian territory upon Hammurabi's ascension in 1792 BC and upon his death in 1750 BC

domination by Elam to the east and the fellow Mesopotamian state of Assyria to the north, both nations often interfering in or controlling Babylon during the Kassite period. The Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I took the throne of Babylon in 1235 BC, becoming the first native Mesopotamian to rule there.

It has been estimated that Babylon was the largest city in the world from ca. 1770 to 1670 BC, and again between ca. 612 and 320 BC. It was perhaps the first city to reach a population above 200,000.^[10]

Assyrian period

Throughout the duration of the Neo Assyrian Empire (911 BC to 608 BC) Babylonia was under Assyrian domination or direct control. During the reign of Sennacherib of Assyria, Babylonia was in a constant state of revolt, led by a Chaldean chieftain named Merodach-Baladan in alliance with the Elamites, and suppressed only by the complete destruction of the city of Babylon. In 689 BC, its walls, temples and palaces were razed, and the rubble was thrown into the Arakhtu, the sea bordering the earlier Babylon on the south. This act shocked the religious conscience of Mesopotamia; the subsequent murder of Sennacherib by two of his own sons whilst praying to the god Nisroch was held to be in expiation of it, and his successor in Assyria Esarhaddon hastened to rebuild the old city, to receive there his crown, and make it his residence during part of the year. On his death, Babylonia was left to be governed by his elder son, the Assyrian prince Shamash-shum-ukin, who, after becoming infused with Babylonian nationalism, eventually started a civil war in 652 BC against his own brother and master Ashurbanipal, who ruled in Nineveh. Shamash-shum-ukin enlisted the help of other peoples subject to Assyria, including Elam, the Chaldeans and Suteans of southern Mesopotamia, and the Arabs dwelling in the deserts south of Mesopotamia.



Sennacherib of Assyria during his Babylonian war, relief from his palace in Nineveh

Once again, Babylon was besieged by the Assyrians, starved into surrender and its allies violently crushed. Ashurbanipal purified the city and celebrated a "service of reconciliation", but did not venture to "take the hands" of Bel. An Assyrian governor named Kandalanu was entrusted with ruling the city. After the death of Ashurbanipal, the Assyrian empire began to unravel due to a series of bitter internal civil wars. Three more Assyrian kings Ashur-etil-ilani, Sin-shumu-lishir and finally Sin-shar-ishkun were to rule. However, eventually Babylon, like many other parts of the near east, took advantage of the anarchy within Assyria to free itself from Assyrian rule. In the subsequent overthrow of the Assyrian Empire by an alliance of peoples, the Babylonians saw another example of divine vengeance. (Albert Houtum-Schindler, "Babylon," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th ed.)

Neo-Babylonian Chaldean Empire

Main article: Neo-Babylonian Empire

Under Nabopolassar, a Chaldean king, Babylon threw off Assyrian rule and destroyed the Assyrian Empire between 620 and 605 BC, in an alliance with Cyaxares, king of the Medes and Persians together

with the Scythians and Cimmerians. Babylon thus became the capital of the Neo-Babylonian (sometimes and possibly erroneously called Chaldean) Empire.^{[11][12][13]}

With the recovery of Babylonian independence, a new era of architectural activity ensued, and his son Nebuchadnezzar II (604–561 BC) made Babylon into one of the wonders of the ancient world.^[14] Nebuchadnezzar ordered the complete reconstruction of the imperial grounds, including rebuilding the Etemenanki ziggurat and the construction of the Ishtar Gate – the most spectacular of eight gates that ringed the perimeter of Babylon. A reconstruction of The Ishtar Gate is located in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. All that was ever found of the Original Ishtar gate was the foundation and scattered bricks.

Nebuchadnezzar is also credited with the construction of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world), said to have been built for his homesick wife Amyitis. Whether the gardens did exist is a matter of dispute. Although excavations by German archaeologist

Robert Koldewey are thought to reveal its foundations, many historians disagree about the location, and some believe it may have been confused with gardens in the Assyrian capital, Nineveh.

Chaldean rule did not last long and it is not clear if Neriglissar and Labashi-Marduk were Chaldeans or native Babylonians, and the last ruler Nabonidus and his son and regent Belshazzar were Assyrians from Harran.

Persia captures Babylon

In 539 BC, the Neo-Babylonian Empire fell to Cyrus the Great, king of Persia, with an unprecedented military engagement known as the Battle of Opis. The famed walls of Babylon were indeed impenetrable, with the only way into the city through one of its many gates or through the Euphrates, which ebbed beneath its thick walls. Metal gates at the river's in-flow and out-flow prevented underwater intruders, if one could hold one's breath to reach them. Cyrus (or his generals) devised a plan to use the Euphrates as the mode of entry to the city, ordering large camps of troops at each point and instructed them to wait for the signal. Awaiting an evening of a national feast among Babylonians (generally thought to refer to the feast of Belshazzar mentioned in Daniel V), Cyrus' troops diverted the Euphrates river upstream, causing the Euphrates to drop to about 'mid thigh level on a man' or to dry up altogether. The soldiers marched under the walls through the lowered water. The Persian Army conquered the outlying areas of the city's interior while a majority of Babylonians at the city center were oblivious to the breach. The account was elaborated upon by Herodotus,^[15] and is also mentioned by passages in the Hebrew Bible.^{[16][17]}

Cyrus later issued a decree permitting captive people, including the Jews, to return to their own land (as



Detail of the Ishtar Gate

explained in 2 Chronicles 36), to allow their temple to be rebuilt back in Jerusalem.

Under Cyrus and the subsequent Persian king Darius the Great, Babylon became the capital city of the 9th Satrapy (Babylonia in the south and Athura in the north), as well as a centre of learning and scientific advancement. In Achaemenid Persia, the ancient Babylonian arts of astronomy and mathematics were revitalised and flourished, and Babylonian scholars completed maps of constellations. The city was the administrative capital of the Persian Empire, the preeminent power of the then known world, and it played a vital part in the history of that region for over two centuries. Many important archaeological discoveries have been made that can provide a better understanding of that era.^{[18][19]}

The early Persian kings had attempted to maintain the religious ceremonies of Marduk, but by the reign of Darius III, over-taxation and the strains of numerous wars led to a deterioration of Babylon's main shrines and canals, and the disintegration of the surrounding region. There were numerous attempts at rebellion and in 522 BC (Nebuchadnezzar III), 521 BC (Nebuchadnezzar IV) and 482 (Bel-shimani and Shamash-eriba) BC native Babylonian kings briefly regained independence. However these revolts were relatively swiftly repressed and the land and city of Babylon remained solidly under Persian rule for two centuries, until Alexander the Great's entry in 331 BC.

Hellenistic period

In 331 BC, Darius III was defeated by the forces of the Ancient Macedonian Greek ruler Alexander the Great at the Battle of Gaugamela, and in October, Babylon fell to the young conqueror. A native account of this invasion notes a ruling by Alexander not to enter the homes of its inhabitants.^[20]

Under Alexander, Babylon again flourished as a centre of learning and commerce. But following Alexander's death in 323 BC in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, his empire was divided amongst his generals, and decades of fighting soon began, with Babylon once again caught in the middle.

The constant turmoil virtually emptied the city of Babylon. A tablet dated 275 BC states that the inhabitants of Babylon were transported to Seleucia, where a palace was built, as well as a temple given the ancient name of Esagila. With this deportation, the history of Babylon comes practically to an end, though more than a century later, it was found that sacrifices were still performed in its old sanctuary.^[21] By 141 BC, when the Parthian Empire took over the region, Babylon was in complete desolation and obscurity.

Persian Empire period

Main article: Babylonia (Persian province)

Under the Parthian, and later, Sassanid Persians, Babylon (like Assyria) remained a province of the Persian Empire for nine centuries, until after 650 AD. It continued to have its own culture and people, who spoke varieties of Aramaic, and who continued to refer to their homeland as Babylon. Some examples of their cultural products are often found in the Babylonian Talmud, the Gnostic Mandaean religion, Eastern Rite Christianity and the religion of the prophet Mani. Christianity came to Mesopotamia in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, and Babylon was the seat of a Bishop of the Church of the East until well after the Arab/Islamic conquest.

Arab conquest

In the mid 7th century AD Mesopotamia was invaded and settled by the Arabs who brought with them Islam. A period of *Arabisation* and *Islamification* followed. Babylon was dissolved as a province and Aramaic and Church of the East Christianity eventually became marginalised, although both still exist today (more so however among the Assyrians of northern Iraq) as does Mandeism. A Babylonian/Mesopotamian/Assyrian identity is still espoused by the ethnically indigenous Mesopotamian and Eastern Aramaic speaking members of the Chaldean Catholic Church and Assyrian Church of the East to this day.

Biblical narrative

In Genesis 10:10, Babylon is described as a neighboring city of Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh, in Shinar.^[22]

Archaeology

The site at Babylon consists of a number of mounds covering an oblong area roughly 2 kilometers by 1 kilometer, oriented north to south.^[*citation needed*] The site is bounded by the Euphrates River on the west, and by the remains of the ancient city walls otherwise. Originally, the Euphrates roughly bisected the city, as is common in the region, but the river has since shifted its course so that much of the remains on the former western part of the city are now inundated. Some portions of the city wall to the west of the river also remain. Several of the sites mounds are more prominent.



Babylon in 1932

These include:

- Kasr – also called Palace or Castle. It is the location of the Neo-Babylonian ziggurat Etemenanki of Nabopolassar and later Nebuchadnezzar and lies in the center of the site.
- Amran Ibn Ali – to the south and the highest of the mounds at 25 meters. It is the site of Esagila, a temple of Marduk which also contained shrines to Ea and Nabu.
- Homera – a reddish colored mound on the west side. Most of the Hellenistic remains are here.
- Babil – in the northern end of the site, about 22 meters in height. It has been extensively subject to brick robbing since ancient times. It held a palace built by Nebuchadnezzar.

Occupation at the site dates back to the late 3rd millennium, finally achieving prominence in the early 2nd millennium under the First Babylonian Dynasty and again later in the millennium under the Kassite dynasty of Babylon. Unfortunately, almost nothing from that period has been recovered at the site of Babylon. First, the water table in the region has risen greatly over the centuries and artifacts from the

time before the Neo-Babylonian Empire are unavailable to current standard archaeological methods. Secondly, the Neo-Babylonians conducted massive rebuilding projects in the city which destroyed or obscured much of the earlier record. Third, much of the western half of the city is now under the Euphrates River. Fourth, Babylon has been sacked a number of times, most notably by the Hittites and Elamites in the 2nd millennium, then by the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the Achaemenid Empire in the 1st millennium, after the Babylonians had revolted against their rule. Lastly, the site has been long mined for building materials on a commercial scale.

While knowledge of early Babylon must be pieced together from epigraphic remains found elsewhere, such as at Uruk, Nippur, and Haradum, information on the Neo-Babylonian city is available from archaeological excavations and from classical sources. Babylon was described, perhaps even visited, by a number of classical historians including Ctesias, Herodotus, Quintus Curtius Rufus, Strabo, and Cleitarchus. These reports are of variable accuracy and some political spin is involved but still provide useful data.

The first reported archaeological excavation of Babylon was conducted by Claudius James Rich in 1811–12 and again in 1817.^{[23][24]} Robert Mignan excavated at the site briefly in 1827.^[25] William Loftus visited there in 1849.^[26]

Austen Henry Layard made some soundings during a brief visit in 1850 before abandoning the site.^[27] Fulgence Fresnel and Julius Oppert heavily excavated Babylon from 1852 to 1854. Unfortunately, much of the result of their work was lost when a raft containing over forty crates of artifacts sank into the Tigris river.^{[28][29]}

Henry Creswicke Rawlinson and George Smith worked there briefly in 1854. The next excavation, a major one, was conducted by Hormuzd Rassam on behalf of the British Museum. Work began in 1879, continuing until 1882, and was prompted by widespread looting occurring at the site. Using industrial scale digging in search of artifacts, Rassam recovered a large quantity of cuneiform tablets and other finds. The zealous excavation methods, common in those days, caused much damage to the archaeological context.^{[30][31]}

A team from the German Oriental Society led by Robert Koldewey conducted the first scientific archaeological excavations at Babylon. The work was conducted every year between 1899 and 1917 until World War I intruded. Primary efforts of the dig involved the temple of Marduk and the processional way leading up to it, as well as the city wall. Hundreds of recovered tablets, as well as the noted Ishtar Gate were sent back to Germany.^{[32][33][34][35][36][37]}

Further work by the German Archaeological Institute was conducted by Heinrich J. Lenzen in 1956 and Hansjörg Schmid 1962. The work by Lenzen dealt primarily with the Hellenistic theatre and by Schmid



The Queen of the Night relief. The figure could be an aspect of the goddess Ishtar, Babylonian goddess of sex and love.

with the temple ziggurat Etemenanki.^[38]

In more recent times, the site of Babylon was excavated by G. Bergamini on behalf of the Centro Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia and the Iraqi-Italian Institute of Archaeological Sciences. This work began with a season of excavation in 1974 followed by a topographical survey in 1977.^[39] The focus was on clearing up issues raised by re-examination of the old German data. After a decade, Bergamini returned to the site in 1987–1989. The work concentrated on the area surrounding the Ishara and Ninurta temples in the Shu-Anna city-quarter of Babylon.^{[40][41]}

It should be noted that during the restoration efforts in Babylon, some amount of excavation and room clearing has been done by the Iraqi State Organization for Antiquities and Heritage. Given the conditions in that country the last few decades, publication of archaeological activities has been understandably sparse at best.^{[42][43]}

Reconstruction

In 1983, Saddam Hussein started rebuilding the city on top of the old ruins (because of this, artifacts and other finds may well be under the city by now), investing in both restoration and new construction. He inscribed his name on many of the bricks in imitation of Nebuchadnezzar. One frequent inscription reads: "This was built by Saddam Hussein, son of Nebuchadnezzar, to glorify Iraq". This recalls the ziggurat at Ur, where each individual brick was stamped with "Ur-Nammu, king of Ur, who built the temple of Nanna". These bricks became sought after as collectors' items after the downfall of Hussein, and the ruins are no longer being restored to their original state. He also installed a huge portrait of himself and Nebuchadnezzar at the entrance to the ruins, and shored up Processional Way, a large boulevard of ancient stones, and the Lion of Babylon, a black rock sculpture about 2,600 years old.

When the Gulf War ended, Saddam wanted to build a modern palace, also over some old ruins; it was made in the pyramidal style of a Sumerian ziggurat. He named it Saddam Hill. In 2003, he was ready to begin the construction of a cable car line over Babylon when the invasion began and halted the project.

An article published in April 2006 states that UN officials and Iraqi leaders have plans for restoring Babylon, making it into a cultural center.^{[44][45]}



World Monuments Fund video on conservation of Babylon



Plan of the city of Babylon during the time of the king Nebuchadnezzar II, 600 BC.

As of May 2009, the provincial government of Babil has reopened the site to tourism.



Panoramic view over the reconstructed city of Babylon

Effects of the U.S. military

US forces under the command of General James T. Conway of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force were criticized for building the military base "Camp Alpha", comprising among other facilities a helipad, on ancient Babylonian ruins following the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

US forces have occupied the site for some time and have caused irreparable damage to the archaeological record. In a report of the British Museum's Near East department, Dr. John Curtis describes how parts of the archaeological site were levelled to create a landing area for helicopters, and parking lots for heavy vehicles. Curtis wrote that the occupation forces

"caused substantial damage to the Ishtar Gate, one of the most famous monuments from antiquity [...] US military vehicles crushed 2,600-year-old brick pavements, archaeological fragments were scattered across the site, more than 12 trenches were driven into ancient deposits and military earth-moving projects contaminated the site for future generations of scientists [...] Add to all that the damage caused to nine of the moulded brick figures of dragons in the Ishtar Gate by soldiers trying to remove the bricks from the wall."



US Marines in front of the rebuilt ruins of Babylon, 2003

A US Military spokesman claimed that engineering operations were discussed with the "head of the Babylon museum".^[46]

The head of the Iraqi State Board for Heritage and Antiquities, Donny George, said that the "mess will take decades to sort out".^[47] In April 2006, Colonel John Coleman, former Chief of Staff for the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, offered to issue an apology for the damage done by military personnel under his command. However he claimed that the US presence had deterred far greater damage from other looters.^[48]

Babylon in popular culture

Due to the importance of Babylon in its time as well as the stories in the Bible the word "Babylon" in various languages has acquired a generic meaning of a large, bustling diverse city. As such, the word "Babylon" is used for various entertainment events or buildings. For example, sci-fi series *Babylon 5* tells a tale of a multi-racial future space station. Babilonas (Lithuanian name for "Babylon") is also a name for a major real estate development in Lithuania.

In the video game *Age of Empires*, 8 Babylon campaigns are available. Babylon is mentioned in the history section and in the victory aftermath campaigns.

See also

- Akkad
- Babel (disambiguation)
- Cities of the ancient Near East
- Code of Hammurabi
- Etemenanki
- Jehoiachin's Rations Tablets
- List of Kings of Babylon
- Short chronology timeline
- Tomb of Daniel
- Tower of Babel

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Notes

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