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BABYLON CAPUT MUNDI.
“WHAT CITY IS LIKE UNTO THIS GREAT CITY?”

Introductory remarks

The history of Babylon unfolded, through various vicissitudes, over roughly two thousand years. From a minor administrative center in the second half of the third millennium B.C.E. it became the capital of Southern Mesopotamia in the eighteenth century and the imperial capital of Nebuchadnezzar and his successors about a thousand years later. The Persian conquest of Babylonia in 539 B.C.E. did not diminish Babylon's political importance: the Achaemenid kings, who acknowledged the prestige of the ancient city and valued its strategic position, made it one of the many capitals of their empire stretching from Central Asia to Egypt. After being also a royal capital of Alexander the Great, Babylon eventually disappeared completely from the political scene in 300 B.C.E., with the moving of the center of power to Seleucia-on-the-Tigris.¹

It is no exaggeration to state that no other city in ancient Mesopotamia – although it was a “land of many cities,” to employ A.L. Oppenheim's² celebrated definition – and no other city in the ancient Near East, with the exception of Jerusalem³, received as much attention as Babylon, whether by its contemporaries and by posterity; an attention that has endured down to our day.⁴

While in antiquity Babylon owed its prestige to its special political and religious status, the interest it drew even long after its demise is certainly ascribable to the fact that a strong memory of the city that had been “the glory of the Chaldeans' pride” (Is 13, 19) lingered on even after its disappearance as a political power and the center of a glorious civilization. This memory, partially mythical and legendary, has come down through the centuries as a set of mental and ideological representations that have allowed Babylon to survive the ravages of time, and have undoubtedly exerted a powerful fascination on later cultures, both eastern and western.

Ever since Herodotus' wonder-filled account,⁵ the fame of Babylon, numbered among the seven wonders of the world, has come down undiminished through time, becoming the paradigm of the gigantic and fabulous Oriental city.

In the Bible, however, the ample narrative space devoted to Babylon and its symbols – the Tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues, Chaldean magicians and astrologers, bloodthirsty and corrupt kings, mass deportations and liberator kings – clearly defines

a negative universe, a model of the arrogance of power and all sorts of moral degeneration. At the same time, however, these characterizations are informed by an awareness of the greatness and uniqueness of the ancient capital, and an essential admiration: “What city is like unto this great city?” reads the *Apocalypse* of John (18,19). This ambivalent combination of greatness and aberration that ancient sources as a whole project onto Babylon has had a strong impact on the Western world and become deeply rooted in its culture. Literature, painting, music, theatre and cinema have all been seduced by the memory and myth of Babylon.⁶ One can truly speak of a “Babylon after Babylon,” until its “resurrection”⁷ at the beginning of

¹ AS GEORGE 1997b, 125 convincingly argues, “the rise and fall of Babylon, from provincial town to seat of empire to field of ruins, is a history which offers, over a timespan of two millennia, an unrivalled paradigm of ideological continuity, change and breakdown”. For an assessment of the eclipse of Babylon and, more in general, ancient Mesopotamian cities, see VAN DE MIEROOP 1999, 229-247.

² OPPENHEIM 1969.

³ See however ALLARD 2008a, 437, fn.1: “Pierre Citron [*La Poésie de Paris dans la littérature française de Rousseau à Baudelaire*, Paris 1961, new edition 2006] s'est livré, pour Paris, à une comptabilité précise des comparaisons avec les cités antiques ou bibliques dans la poésie consacrée à Paris entre les années 1800 et 1860. Babylone est deux fois plus citée que Jerusalem”.

⁴ Three exhibitions dedicated to Babylon were hosted by the Louvre in Paris, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin and the British Museum in London in 2008-2009. In the 7th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, held in London in April 2010, one of the five main themes was “Mega-cities & Mega-sites”, and three papers in this section dealt with Babylon. On Saddam Hussein's invention of a “Babylonian” tradition reviving the myth and symbols of ancient Babylon (and, more in general, of Mesopotamian civilization) for ideological and propagandistic purposes in modern Iraq, see FALES 2004, 160-175.

⁵ I, 178: “Babylon had a magnificence greater than all other cities of which we have knowledge”.

⁶ ROLLINGER 1999, HAAS 1999, GLASSNER 2003 and more recently the various contributions in ANDRÉ-SALVINI 2008, 363-501 (“Les traditions ‘extérieures’ sur Babylone de l'antiquité à la fin du Moyen Âge” and “Babylone vue par l'époque moderne”). Films featuring Babylon, besides D. W. Griffith's famous *Intolerance* (1916; see now ALLARD 2008b), include *Slaves of Babylon* (W. Castle, 1953), *Io, Semiramide* (P. Zeglio, 1962), and *Ercole contro i tiranni di Babilonia* (D. Paoletta, 1964); all are informed by Babylon's negative fame.

⁷ KOLDEWEY 1990.

the twentieth century, when, paraphrasing G. Labrot,⁸ we could say that the physical Babylon reappeared alongside the narrated one, and the mythical and legendary Babylon was absorbed into the historical one – which, however, never completely replaced it.⁹

The only possible parallel for the fame, whether positive or negative, and the myth of Babylon is imperial Rome.¹⁰ Like Babylon, Augustus' Rome generated an enduring image of "Rome after Rome"¹¹ that lived on as a positive or negative model even after the "resurrection" of historical Rome.¹² It is the myth of Rome that provided the foundation for the periodic fluxes and refluxes of Romanity in Western society and culture,¹³ which ever since the Middle Ages, for a millennium and a half, have found expression in an archaizing rhetoric reviving symbols, myths and legends, both in a positive key, as a sign of continuity with the past,¹⁴ and in a negative one, to mark a distance. As with Babylon, tradition has handed down the notion that Rome is a city unlike all others,¹⁵ for good and for bad.

Certainly, unlike Babylon, of whose material and cultural greatness only the memory remained,¹⁶ the immense vestiges of imperial Rome survived plunder and destruction,¹⁷ enduring through the centuries as testimonies of the city's grand past in an often unremarkable present.¹⁸ And, unlike Babylon, Rome, although reduced to the shadow of its own self, was never abandoned.¹⁹

Without downplaying their distance in time, or their differences in ideological structure and political organization, I would argue that a parallel can be drawn between the two most celebrated capitals of the ancient world, notably as regards mental images, ideas, and representations of power. Such a parallel could appear too obvious and, from an historical standpoint, methodologically inappropriate, since in every place and time the images, ideas and symbols of power often coincide, although this does not necessarily mean that they are founded on the same cultural assumptions. To make just a single example, the ideology of Babylonian kingship bears only a generic resemblance with the Roman institution of the *principatum*. Rather, it shows more affinity with the Chinese imperial ideology, with which it shares the central assumption of the divine origin of royal power and the king's role as mediator between heaven and earth and preserver of the cosmic order.²⁰

A comparison between cultures that are different and far-removed in space and time becomes acceptable, however, when the purpose is to shed light on differences and similarities in the cultural mechanisms informing distinct historical experiences²¹ or the handing down of their memory. In our case, certain common traits, real or perceived as such, like the immense size and monumentality that made Babylon and Rome unique in their time, or the notion of universal power, gave rise to a mythical tradition, handed down from

⁸ *L'immagine de Rome: une arme pour la Contre-Réforme (1534-1677)*, CHAMPVALLON 1987, 68, quoted in GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, 90-91 and note 30.

⁹ Some stereotypes about Babylon are still reflected in modern linguistic usage: notably in the use of the noun "Babel" as a synonym of "confusion" or "noise" (as reflected, for example, in the adjectives *babélique* and *babelico*, respectively in French and Italian). For an "educated" use of this term in a metaphorical sense, see for example LIVERANI 1997, 103: "In such a 'Babel' of theories", with reference to the many disparate theories about the concept and definition of the ancient Near Eastern city circulating in the 1960s. More recently, the stereotype of Babylon evoking ruins and destruction still lives in the cover picture of a book on the risks of nuclear power (A. BARACCA 2011, *Scram, ovvero la fine del nucleare*, Milano) showing Bruegel the Elder's "Tower of Babel" with a nuclear plant at the top.

¹⁰ GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008 provides the most comprehensive treatment of the construction and enduring of the myth of Rome through the centuries. I am deeply indebted to this book, which inspired the topic of the present study.

¹¹ GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, VII and 13: "Roma riusciva a sintetizzare un impressionante quadro monumentale e un insieme di ricordi e di miti sui quali senza posa si innestavano nuove rivendicazioni ideologiche". See also 15-16 on the many legends that flourished since the eleventh century, notably one about the immense treasures buried under the city and its palaces by Roman emperors, recalling HDT. I, 187, 1-2 on the grave of Nitokris.

¹² MOATTI, 1992.

¹³ GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, X. For Rome in Shakespeare's theatre, see 89-90. A vast literature exists on Rome in the so-called "peplum" films (thus defined by J. SICLIER, "L'âge du péplum", *Cahiers du cinéma*, n° 131, mai 1962, 26-38): see recently JUNKELMANN 2004; IACCIO, MENICETTI 2009, especially 45-109, 135-150.

¹⁴ Periodically "(...) le élite dirigenti – che davano il tono al loro tempo – hanno ritenuto (...) che la possibilità di dominare il presente passava necessariamente per un ritorno a Roma e per il recupero dei ricordi e dei valori della sua civiltà.": GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, X-XI. See for example the title *Fridericus gratia Dei Caesar, imperator semper Augustus* assumed by Frederick II Hohenstaufen during his reign (1209-1250). However, it was Fascism that made the most blatant use of the myth of Rome to stress its continuity with that great past (212-296): "dopo la conquista dell'Etiopia, e in coincidenza con il bimillenario augusteo (1937), Mussolini divenne un vero e proprio *alter ego* di Augusto": (248).

¹⁵ GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, 106: "Roma non è una città come le altre".

¹⁶ PLINY, *Nat. Hist.*, VI, XXX remarks that Esagila was still visible in the flat, abandoned Mesopotamian plain at his time.

¹⁷ "Quanta Roma fuit ipsa ruina docet," as the literate cleric Hildebert de Lavardin (1055-1133) remarked.

¹⁸ On the decline of Rome between the sixth and eighth centuries, cf. GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, 5-12.

¹⁹ "Una delle costanti della storia di Roma è la sua capacità di rinascere periodicamente dalle proprie ceneri, come la fenice, e di risollevarsi dopo aver subito i peggiori oltraggi.": GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, 90.

²⁰ See for example FAIRBANK 1968, LOEWE 1987.

²¹ Such comparisons have often been carried out between the Roman and the Greek civilization. An innovative attempt to conduct a parallel study of the Roman and Chinese empires has been recently carried out in MUTSCHLER, MITTAG 2008 which elaborates on possible similarities, but also and especially on differences.

Judaism to Christianity, which assimilated the two cities and conveyed the notion of Rome as the "new Babylon." There is possibly no better synthesis of this notion than Bruegel's celebrated painting *The Tower of Babel*, where Babylon's most famous symbol assumes the appearance of Rome's most famous symbol, the Colosseum.

1. Babylon

1.1. Divine origin

From the beginning, Mesopotamian sources emphasize the sacred character of cities, whose foundation they ascribe to the gods, who choose the site, plan building operations, and lay down the foundations.²² The city is identified with its god and appears as a space in which the inhabitants and the gods live together in perfect equilibrium.²³

Babylon is no exception.²⁴ Ever since it came to the fore as the new capital city²⁵ of Southern Mesopotamia in the eighteenth century, it created mythical antecedents for itself to legitimate its rule and rival with the prestige of older cities.²⁶ In the Prologue to the Laws of Hammurabi, the great gods Anu and Enlil "called Babylon by an exalted name and made it supreme in the world, and within it established for Marduk an eternal kingship fixed on a base as solid as heaven and underworld".²⁷

1.2. The primordial city at the center of the cosmos

The myth-building process reached completion in the twelfth century,²⁸ when the origins of Babylon were projected all the way back to the time of the creation and organization of the world. As the final, culminating moment of Marduk's creative action, Babylon took on the status of the primordial city,²⁹ home to the gods and destined to extend to the whole world its action of bringing order and organizing chaos. A whole body of literary, theological and historiographic sources insists on the city's primordality³⁰ and its role as seat of kingship³¹ and political power.³² Babylon is the center of the cosmos,³³ the abode of order as opposed

ination at work in the light of historical day": GOODNICK WESTENHOLZ 1998, 49.

²³ For the concept of "capital city" in the light of Mesopotamian ideology see GEORGE 1997b, 125: "Not only did a city possess political and strategic significance, it was the seat of a god, and so occupied a place in the religious scheme of things, too".

²⁶ "Changes in the political and territorial dominion of a city were inevitably accompanied by corresponding alteration in urban theology to account for and justify the innovations. Babylon's rise to the pre-eminence provides an excellent example of this process, inventing the creation of both a fictional history and a new theological past to accommodate and reinforce its new status": GOODNICK WESTENHOLZ 1998, 51. On Babylon and its political role in Southern Mesopotamia in the first half of the second millennium in the light of new historical data concerning other contemporary Mesopotamian cities, see M.G. BIGA, "Babylon and Beyond Babylon in the 1st Half of the 2nd Millennium B.C.", in this volume.

²⁷ I, 16-26: English translation by GEORGE 1997b, 133.

²⁸ This process provides an excellent model of the construction of a foundation myth in the service of a new theology: In the twelfth century B.C.E., Enlil was replaced by Marduk, and hence Nippur by Babylon. Cf. GEORGE 1997a and 1997b, 132-134.

²⁹ For the Old Babylonian epithet *āl šī'ātīm* "the ancient city" and its occurrence with reference to Babylon in Kassite times (*āl šāti*), see GEORGE 1992, 245-247.

³⁰ *Enūma eliš* V, 117-130 and VI, 51-81; as GEORGE 1992, 6 has pointed out, "at this point the Creation Epic is as much concerned with explaining the mythological origin of Babylon as the religious centre of Babylonia, as it is with extolling the elevation of Marduk to supreme position in the pantheon". See also the bilingual myth *CT* 13, 35:12-36:2 (HECKER 1994), "The Creation of Marduk": The creation of the world begins with the building of Babylon and the Esagila. For Babylon having taken the identity of Eridu see *Tintir* = Babylon I, 21: GEORGE 1992, 38-39, 251-253 and GEORGE 1997b, 129-132. *Tintir* = Babylon I, 7: "Babylon, called into being by the heavens"; 8: "Babylon, the city whose brickwork is primeval"; GEORGE 1992, 38-39, 243-246. Also known as the "Topography of Babylon", the primary purpose of *Tintir* = Babylon is theological and cosmological, as GEORGE 1992 has convincingly demonstrated. Babylon's primordality is also emphasized in Nabopolassar's cylinder inscription concerning restoration work on the inner wall of Babylon: "Imgur-Enlil, the great wall of Babylon, the ancient boundary mark which has been famous since the beginning of time, the firm frontier as old as time itself": AL-RAWI 1985, 5-6. The role of Babylon as the primeval city is also stressed in *Genesis* 11, 4 where the episode of the Tower of Babel "concludes the Hebrews' assessment of mankind's history previous to the election of Abraham as the first patriarch of God's chosen people": SASSON 1980, 211. See also PEZZOLI-OLGIATI 2002, 191-199.

³¹ *Tintir* = Babylon I, 34: "Babylon, which establishes kingship": GEORGE 1992, 40-41, 260; "Babylon, the city of kingship": GEORGE 1997b, 137-145, BM 87224: 44 (Late Babylonian manuscript of *Tintir* = Babylon, Tablet I). Berossus, Book II: "Aloros, a Chaldean from Babylon, was the first king [of the land]": BURSTEIN 1978, 18.

³² *Tintir* = Babylon, I, 19, 38, 51: GEORGE 1992, 38-41, 251, 263, 266-267. VAN DE MIEROOP 1999, 260: "in Babylonia the cities created political power".

³³ *Tintir* = Babylon, I, 6: "Babylon, the bond of the heavens"; 23: "Babylon, which grasps the bridle of heaven and underworld"; 29: "Babylon, the abode of Anu, Enlil and Ea"; 35: "Babylon, the bond of heaven and underworld". See GEORGE 1992, 38-41, 243-244, 256-257, 258-259, 261-262, and GEORGE 1997b.

²² LIVERANI 1987; MICHALOWSKI 1993; GOODNICK WESTENHOLZ 1998; PEZZOLI-OLGIATI 2002. For a general overview of the divine character of ancient Near Eastern cities see also XELLA 1994.

²⁵ PEZZOLI-OLGIATI 2002, 97-99. Cf. also LIVERANI 1987, 78-79. On the history of studies on the concept of the ancient Near Eastern city, see LIVERANI 1997, particularly 106-107, focusing on how to build a general model of it, and PEZZOLI-OLGIATI 2002, 1-14. For the ancient Mesopotamian city in the context of the urbanism in the ancient Near East and in the ancient world in general, see VAN DE MIEROOP 1999.

²⁴ "Babylon provides a clear illustration of the theological foundation of a city, since it gives us a unique opportunity to observe the crystallization process and to see the mythic imag-

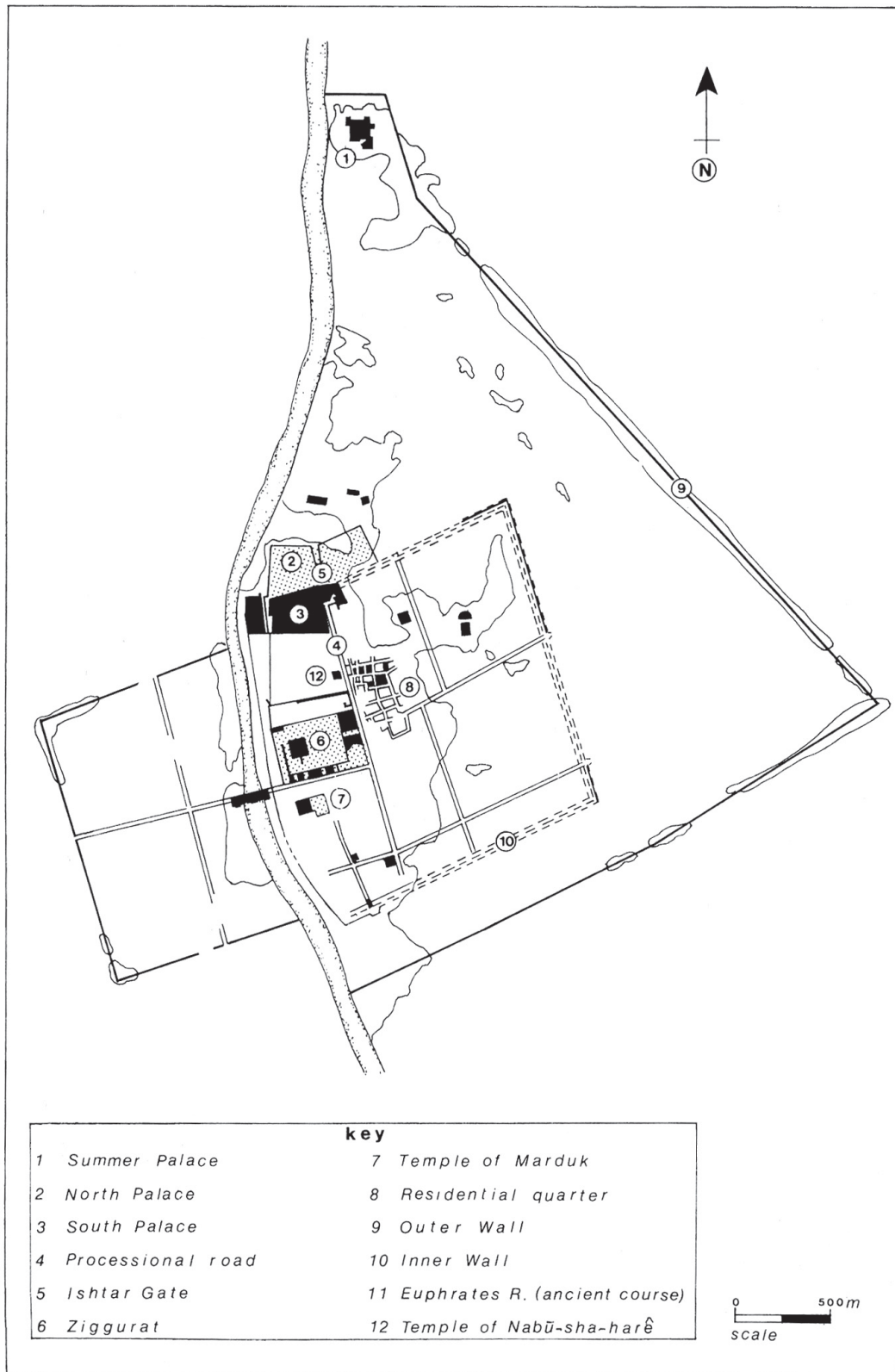


Fig. 1 - Plan of the inner city of Babylon in the Neo-Babylonian period (After VAN DE MIEROOP 2003, 266, fig. 7).

to chaos, a life-guaranteeing space,³⁴ “Bond of the Lands”.³⁵

The city is right in the middle of the temporal axis.³⁶ It is a bridge between past and future. Babylon is eternal.³⁷

1.3. *The holy city*

On the religious plane, the centrality of Babylon is manifested in the image of the city as the “great holy place”³⁸ where the gods dwell.³⁹ As such, it is the model that other cult cities look up to.⁴⁰ This status, at the same time, makes Babylon unique, so that any attempt to reproduce the city elsewhere is condemned as sacrilegious.⁴¹

1.4. *Conquest as organization of the world*

On the political and ideological plane, Babylon’s cosmic role is manifested in the ordering and civilizing action of the king, who, like Marduk, imposes his rule on external chaos⁴² through conquest, vastly expanding the ordered space, which becomes a sort of *oikoumène* where the victors and the vanquished are integrated.⁴³ The transformation of chaos into order translates into the extending of peace and security to the limits of the world.⁴⁴

1.5. *The cosmopolitan city*

This ideology reflects the cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic character of the city,⁴⁵ which its inhabitants were well aware of and proudly emphasized, as in a famous Neo-Babylonian letter to the Assyrian king Assurbanipal:

The words which the people of Babylon spoke before the king:

“Ever since the kings, our lords, sat on the throne, you have been intent on securing our privileged status and our happiness. But what of us, who have had our fill of safeguarding those of (our) Elamite, Tabalite and Ahlamite women!

When the kings, our lord, did their elementary studies, the gods bestowed great wisdom and magnanimity on you. ‘Dimkurkurra, Babylon, (is) the Bond of the Lands’. Whoever enter inside it, his privileged status is secured. Also, Babylon (is) ‘the bowl of the Dog of Enlil.’ Its very name is set up for protection. Not even a dog that enters inside it is killed!”⁴⁶

In this sense, Babylon is an “open city”, because it welcomes the whole world within its walls.

1.6. *The representation of the urban space*

The cosmic centrality of Babylon also found strong symbolic expression in the city’s geometric layout (Fig. 1), which was a physical materialization of the order reigning in the city as opposed to the chaos outside.⁴⁷ Babylon’s double-walled enclosure bounded and protected the civilized space. Its four sides alluded to the extension of order to the four corners of the universe,⁴⁸ a visual manifestation of the ancient royal title “king of the four quarters of the universe”.

³⁴ *Tintir* = Babylon, I, 3: “Babylon, the seat of life”; 43: “Babylon, which ensures the life of the land”: cf. GEORGE 1992, 38-41, 240-241, 264. For other names and epithets referring to Babylon as place of abundance, wealth and well-being in *Tintir* = Babylon cf. the overview in GEORGE 1997b, 126, 3. In *Erra and Išum*, IV, 42 (CAGNI 1969, 108-109) Babylon is described by Marduk as ³⁵*kirī nuḫši* “garden of abundance”.

³⁵ For *dimkurkurra rikis māṭāi*, one of Babylon’s ceremonial names, cf. *Erra and Išum*, IV, 2 (CAGNI 1969, 104-105): “You (Erra) have undone Dimkurkurra, ‘the bond of the lands’, the city of the King of the gods” (English translation by FOSTER 1993, 794); *Tintir* = Babylon I, 51: GEORGE 1992, 41, 266-267; GEORGE 1997b.

³⁶ PEZZOLI-OLGIATI 2002, 99.

³⁷ SOMMERFELD 1985, 1: 4 *du-ru-uš ta-ku-un-x-x-nu* “dem Fundament von Dauer”, and commentary on p. 9. On the “eternal Babylon” see VAN DE MIEROOP 2003, 273-274.

³⁸ *In praise of Babylon*, V: 11. Cf. SEUX 1976, 122-124; FOSTER 1993, II, 768-769. “Babylon, the sacred city”: *Tintir* = Babylon I: 49, GEORGE 1992, 40-41, 266. The role of Babylon as holy city is particularly stressed in *Tintir* = Babylon, whose purpose is to glorify the city as a great religious center.

³⁹ “Babylon, the abode of [Marduk]; Babylon, the abode of Anu, Enlil and Ea”: *Tintir* = Babylon I: 28-29, GEORGE 1992, 40-41, 258-259; “Babylon, the house of the gods”: GEORGE 1997b, 137-145, BM 87224: 42.

⁴⁰ *tam-ši-il-šu KA*, DINGIR.RA.KI “Its likeness is Babylon”: *Hymn to the City of Arbela*: 17, cf. LIVINGSTONE 1989, 20.

⁴¹ See for example the *Babylonian Chronicles of Ancient Kings*, focusing on the greatness and holiness of Babylon and Marduk. Sargon of Akkad “took earth out of the ground and, facing Akkade, made a city and named it Babylon. Because of the [sacrilege] he had committed, Enlil changed the word he had said and, from the East to the West, there was a revolt against him, and he was afflicted with restlessness”: *Chronicle of the Esagila*, 60-61. *The Chronicle of Ancient Kings*, 17-23 reports that the same king “took earth away from the clay pit of Babylon and built, near Akkade, a replica of Babylon. Because of (this) fault that he had committed, the great lord Marduk, overcome with rage, diminished his people by famine. From the East to the West there was a revolt against him, and he was afflicted with restlessness”. Cf. GLASSNER 2004, 263-271, NN. 38-39. In the *Verse Account II*, 28’-29’ (SCHAUDIG 2001, 568), the Babylonian king Nabonidus is condemned for having built a replica of the royal palace of Babylon at Tayma’, the north-western Arabic desert oasis where he resided for ten years.

⁴² “The city of Babylon contained a myriad of signs to the visitor, but one message seems to have been dominant: it was the place of order in a world of chaos. (...) The city constantly played this role by its sheer physicality and by its name. The time of creation was constantly repeated in it, and time itself was reformulated in it: and creation to the Mesopotamians was organization, the bringing of order”: VAN DE MIEROOP 2003, 273.

⁴³ See for example Nebuchadnezzar, Wadi Brissa inscription, IX, 13-14, 23-30, 33-37 (LANGDON 1912, Nbk no.19 and recently DA RIVA 2008, 12-13 and fn. 63) and the Etemenanki cylinder, 85-132 (LANGDON 1912, Nbk no.17) now reconstructed on the basis of new fragments by DA RIVA 2008, 12, 19-22.

⁴⁴ Nebuchadnezzar, Wadi Brissa inscription, IX, 47-49.

⁴⁵ On foreign people (Jews, Arameans, Anatolians, Iranians, Ionians) living in Babylonia in the Neo-Babylonian period, cf. WEIDNER 1939, BRINKMAN 1977, ZADOK 1977 and 2003, EPH’AL 1978, DANDAMAEV 1992, LIVERANI 2003.

⁴⁶ ABL 878: 1-11 cf. REYNOLDS 2003, 131.

⁴⁷ LIVERANI 1987, 78, and in particular the “semiotic reading” of Babylon in VAN DE MIEROOP 2003.

⁴⁸ VAN DE MIEROOP 2003, 265.

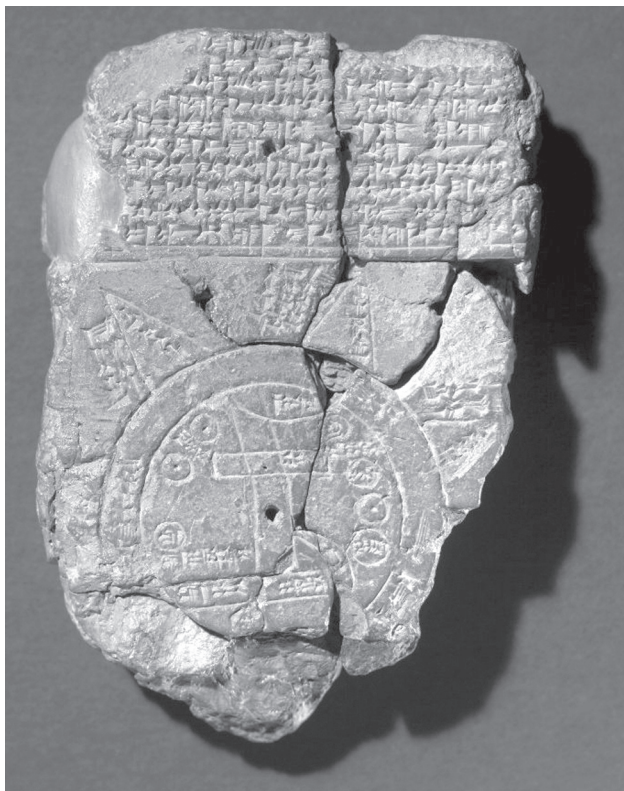


Fig. 2 - BM 92687: The Babylonian "Map of the World" (© Trustees of the British Museum).

In the heart of the city, side by side, were the citadel where the king resided and the sacred area of the Esagila, housing Marduk and the other gods. Here stood the Etemenanki, whose verticality gave a visible form to its function of connecting the different levels of the cosmos. From here, the center of the ordered cosmos, Marduk, accompanied by his cortege of gods, went out into chaos every year during the New Year Festival to symbolically renew his mythical battle against Tiamat and his organization of the universe.

1.7. The representation of Babylon as the center of the world

Finally, Babylon's central role in the cosmos is highlighted in the "Map of the World"⁴⁹ (Fig. 2). Here the city is pictured as a rectangle – reflecting its actual geometric layout – crossed by two parallel lines representing the Euphrates. Babylon is in the center of the civilized world, conceived as a closed circular space enclosing Assyria, Elam and other known lands. A circular waterway labeled "Salt Sea", the Ocean, rings the known world. Several triangles, probably eight originally, labeled "Region" or "Island" and marked with the distances one from the other, surround the outer rim of the sea. The very damaged cuneiform texts on the upper part of the obverse and the reverse of the tablet describe these regions as mythical and

probably inhabited by strange fantastic beasts as well as great heroes.

1.8. Order subverted by chaos

Babylon's centrality and holiness, however, did not make it immune from periodic invasions and destructions. When chaos entered Babylon in the form of enemy invasions or epidemics and cataclysms bringing horror and destruction, the trauma was violent, because it was the very space that guaranteed life that was being violated and dramatically annihilated.⁵⁰ The only acceptable explanation for this subversion of order by chaos was a divine will to punish the city.⁵¹ Order could only be reestablished by restoring the proper relationship with the celestial world.

2. Rome

2.1. Divine origin and the eternal city

"Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento".⁵²

In the collective imaginary, the idea of Rome undoubtedly coincides with what is commonly defined as the Roman "empire", although the term *imperium* refers to the "domination" that follows conquest, and is never used in Latin sources to designate the system of government inaugurated by Augustus in 27 B.C.E.,⁵³ which was called, instead, the *principatum*.⁵⁴

With the Augustan age, a new phase in the history of Rome began.⁵⁵ From 30 B.C.E. onward, official poetry attributes to Rome a destiny of universal empire: Jupiter prophesizes for the city an empire without end,⁵⁶ in either the spatial or the temporal sense,

⁴⁹ BM 92687: HOROWITZ 1988 and 1998, 20-42, with previous literature. See ZACCAGNINI, forthcoming, which is the first attempt to focus on "its striking similarities with a well-known group of *mappaemundi* produced in European milieus from the Early Middle Ages until ca. the fifteenth century". The real purpose of the map – dated not earlier than the mid-eighth century – is to explain the Babylonian view of the (mythological) world.

⁵⁰ As for example *Erra and Išum*, IV, 2-49 (CAGNI 1969, 104-111), describing horrors and devastation at Babylon in dramatic terms, and Marduk's lamentation over the destruction of the city (36-46). See also *Chronicle of the Esagila*, 60-61 and *The Chronicle of Ancient Kings*, 17-23, quoted above, fn. 41. On the recurring theme in Sumerian and Akkadian literary texts of the vulnerability of the city as cosmos, see PEZZOLI-OLGIATI 2002, 125-173.

⁵¹ *Erra and Išum*, I, 82, 120-192; III d, 15; IV, 113.

⁵² VERG., *Aen.*, VI, 851.

⁵³ CRACCO RUGGINI 1987, 127; NICOLET 1989, 3.

⁵⁴ For a theoretical definition of the Roman Empire see MATTINGLY 2011, especially 3-42 "From Imperium to Imperialism. Writing the Roman Empire".

⁵⁵ See the *incipit* of the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*: "rerum gestarum divi Augusti, quibus orbem terrarum imperio Populi Romani subiecit".

⁵⁶ "Imperium sine fine dedi": VERG., *Aen.* I, 279.

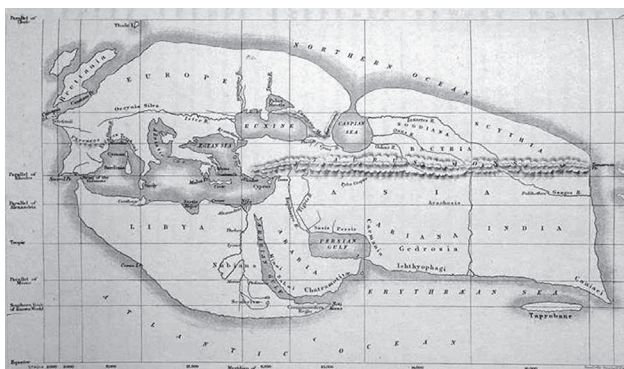


Fig. 3 - Strabo's *oikoumenè*
(After NICOLET 1989, fig. 26).

and Romulus, after ascending to the sky, destines Rome to become *caput mundi*.⁵⁷ Augustus' empire is thus presented as the result of a divine will that had destined Rome to conquer and dominate the whole world as well as to pacify and organize it: “*per totum imperium populi Romani terra marique*”.⁵⁸

2.2. Conquest as organization of the world

The *pax augustea* was only the final act in a process of organization of the conquered world. In a context of universal concord, the destiny of all mankind coincided with that of Rome.⁵⁹

2.3. The cosmopolitan city

The oecumenism of the Roman state⁶⁰ is reflected in the cosmopolitanism of Rome, an “open city” welcoming many ethnic groups from the Empire.⁶¹ Greeks, Sarmatians, Germans, Ethiopians, as well as rebels and fugitives, formed a multicolored and multilingual population that the city housed and protected, following an ancient tradition that went all the way back to the city's own origins, as borne out by Plutarch's narration of the myth of the god Asylum: “As soon as the city's was first founded, they instituted a sacred place as a shelter for rebels and named it after the god Asylum”;⁶² a tradition that finds visual expression in the symbol of Rome itself, the Capitoline Wolf.

2.4. Rome, “mother of the cities”, center of the world

Rome's centrality in the conquered world is repeatedly stressed in ancient sources. The *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, the emperor's celebrative autobiography, lists no less than 55 geographical names – a true “inventory of the world”⁶³ –, the names of places to which Augustus had extended his civilizing and pacifying action, as no one had “before him” or “so far” from Rome.⁶⁴

The universalistic concept of the world and the place that Rome assigned itself in the center of it, however, are most eloquently expressed in the *Geog-*

raphy by Strabo⁶⁵ – an Asiatic Greek whom Rome had made welcome. Strabo portrays a world (Fig. 3) that is open and at the same time enclosed within the boundaries of Roman peace.

3. “Rome, the new Babylon”

If on a general plane a comparison between Rome and Babylon highlights, as we have seen, certain common features as regards the idea of universal dominion and the symbolic representation of the city's role as the center of the ordered world, a convergence between the history of the two cities can undeniably be found in their respective experiences in the land of Judah, at the limits of their empires. The conquests and destructions of Jerusalem, the holy city, and its temple, and the deportation of its population first by the Babylonians and later by the Romans,⁶⁶ formed the

⁵⁷ “*Roma caput orbis terrarum sit*”: TIT. LIV., *Ab urbe condita* I, 16, 7.

⁵⁸ *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, 13.

⁵⁹ NICOLET 1989, 4.

⁶⁰ CRACCO RUGGINI 1987, 127-130; NICOLET 1989, 4-13.

⁶¹ GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, 265-268. “I romani (...) non attuarono mai una sistematica politica di discriminazione delle minoranze etniche né fecero mai ricorso a persecuzioni razziali come quelle conosciute dalla storia moderna e contemporanea”: 265.

⁶² *The Life of Romulus*, 9, 3. For Rome as “*patria comune*” see CRACCO RUGGINI 1987, 127; for the enduring myth of Rome as “*patria comune*” in Western culture, see GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, 100-102.

⁶³ NICOLET 1989, 4-17; the *Res gestae* describe “precisamente uno spazio geografico e sociale ormai concluso, inscrivendosi pertanto, come ultima tappa, in quel movimento che aveva assegnato a Roma la conquista e il dominio dell'ecumene” (4) and are “il testo politico per antonomasia scritto da Augusto poco prima di morire” (69). On the so-called “Map of Agrippa”, the first and most accurate map of the known world in Roman times, and its relationship with the *Res gestae* see 95-114 and fig. 41.

⁶⁴ On the formal analogy of the *Res gestae* (first person narration, titles, etc.) with Near Eastern celebrative inscriptions, cf. NICOLET 1989, 8-9, and the literature quoted in fn. 15.

⁶⁵ For Strabo's “political geography” cf. NICOLET 1989, 68-70.

⁶⁶ The many anti-Roman revolts in the land of Judah in the first and second centuries AD were brutally put down. The repression was particularly bloody under Hadrian (135/136): Roman sources as well as Christian and Judaic ones agree on the atrocities committed by the Roman legions during the war against bar Kokhvah (132). A large majority of the population was killed or enslaved and the region remained depopulated for a long time. Moreover, to annihilate Jewish identity in the entire region, the Roman emperor rebuilt Jerusalem like a Roman city and renamed it *Aelia Capitolina*, as well as changing Judah's name to *Palaestina*. For a recent historical synthesis on Roman Palestine during the first Roman imperial age, see LACERENZA 2009. On the alleged Roman “Judeophobia” or “Judeopathia”, see GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, 266-267.

common thematic nucleus of a negative image that led to the assimilation of Rome to Babylon in the Judaic-Christian tradition.

The negative myth of Babylon runs throughout the Old Testament, from *Genesis* to the historical and prophetic books. It was generated by the traumatic impact of Babylonian imperialism on the Jewish people, and was fully espoused by the Christians, since Christianity first emerged and developed in the geographical and cultural milieu of Judaism, with which it shared the experience of foreign imperialism. The *Apocalypse of John* draws on the negative tradition on Babylon to express a radical condemnation of Rome's power and of the cult of the emperor, which clashed with the new faith in one god.⁶⁷ "That great city Babylon, that mighty city" (18, 10), "clothed in fine linen, and purple, and scarlet, and decked with gold, and precious stones, and pearls" (18, 16), but also "the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth" (17, 5): this is a representation of Rome, using Babylon as its pseudonym.⁶⁸ Patristic exegesis inherited and amplified the negative image of Babylon, identifying it as Satan's kingdom.⁶⁹

The equation of the two cities continued to be a recurring *leit motiv* even after Rome had become the capital of Christianity. The opulent Rome of Julius II (1503-1513) and his successors aspired to being the capital of the whole Catholic world and represented itself as a "holy city".⁷⁰ In the eyes of Martin Luther (1483-1546), however, it appeared as a city of corruption and lechery, home of the great whore: the "new Babylon".⁷¹ Accordingly, the atrocious sack of

Rome by Charles V's lansquenets in 1527 was interpreted by contemporaries as divine punishment of the city and the papacy.

Conclusions

Thus, the myth of Babylon and that of Rome have run parallel and intertwined over the centuries. Insistence on the negative stereotype of Babylon as the paradigm of a condemnable power system has not so much as tarnished the memory of its past greatness, which made it unique in the ancient Near East. Babylon's assimilation to Rome, of which it was the only possible *alter ego* in the perception of posterity, can only be explained by the fact that, before Rome and like Rome, Babylon was, and was regarded as, *caput mundi*.

⁶⁷ The historical backdrop of this apocalyptic text is that of the Christian communities of Asia Minor around the end of the reign of Domitian (81-96 AD). For the condemnation of Babylon in *Genesis* and in the *Apocalypse of John* cf. PEZZOLI-OLGIATI 2002, 191-217.

⁶⁸ 1 *Ptr.* 5:13 "The church that is at Babylon."

⁶⁹ The negative image of Babylon throughout the Middle Ages goes back to Origen, Augustine and Orosius.

⁷⁰ On Rome as "città spettacolo" in the Renaissance, cf. GIARDINA, VAUCHEZ 2008, 78-82.

⁷¹ *De captivitate Babylonica* (1520) and *Wider das Papsttum zu Rom, vom Teufel gestiftet* (1545).

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