

You wanted to know what happened to the Tower of Babel...?

ANCIENT CITIES AND TEMPLES

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Translated from the French

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Ionians and Sardians. The goldsmiths who wrought the gold, those were Medes and Egyptians. The men who wrought the wood, those were Sardians and Egyptians. The men who wrought the baked brick, those were Babylonians. The men who adorned the wall, those were Medes and Egyptians. Saith Darius the King: At Susa a very excellent (work) was ordered; a very excellent (work) was (brought to completion). Me may Ahuramazda protect, and Hystaspes, my father, and my country.'

The famous palace of Darius at Persepolis, built shortly afterwards, was in many respects similar to that at Susa and was the work of the same craftsmen. Here, on the terrace, his successor Xerxes erected a huge structure flanked by winged human-headed bulls resembling those that guarded the palace entrances of the Assyrian rulers. And in his great 'hall of a hundred columns', unfinished at the time of his death, the king was represented in bas-relief in the form of a hero triumphing over monsters, a favourite theme in Babylonian art recalling the ancient Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh.

The Achaemenian Empire of Persia was destined to last for another two hundred years after the fall of Babylon, though its influence gradually declined towards the end. With the rise of Alexander the Great it was finally overthrown; and in the course of his last campaigns the Macedonian entered Babylon, where he was hailed as a deliverer. The Persian governor was retained in accordance with the usual policy of Alexander, but he gave orders to rebuild the great temples destroyed by Xerxes. The restoration of the staged tower of Babylon appears however to have been an impossible undertaking; 'It was thought that ten thousand men would not be able to remove the fallen rubbish in two months.' Alexander planned a great rebirth of the city as a maritime trading centre linking India and Egypt. But on his return to Babylon in 323 B.C., in the course of preparing a new campaign in Arabia, he developed a fever and died. And with his death, Babylon was abandoned.

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Of the art of the Babylonians we have relatively few examples; in the two major destructions of the city, first by the Hittites and later by Sennacherib, much of the treasure of Babylon was lost. From Assyria there is far more material, particularly in the form of bas-reliefs and sculpture, many examples of which can be studied in the Louvre or the British Museum. In touching briefly on this

declare—but I for my part do not credit it—that the god comes down in person into this chamber, and sleeps upon the couch.'

The staged tower here described by Herodotus was the Biblical Tower of Babel: 'And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime (bitumen) had they for mortar. And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven. . . .' To the Babylonians the tower was known as Etemenanki, 'House of the foundation of heaven and earth'; it was the most famous of all the *ziggurats* of ancient Mesopotamia, dating in all probability from the third millennium B.C. and many times restored. What Herodotus refers to as 'solid masonry' was in fact a huge construction of mud-brick, with layers of reed matting inserted at intervals to afford drainage as well as extra strength. The tower became a ruin at the hands of Xerxes before the rest of the city fell into decay, but its fame was such that many later travellers exploring the neighbourhood described in fanciful detail the phenomenal 'Tower of Babel' they were convinced they had seen. Not far from Baghdad the ruins of the red *ziggurat* of Aqarquf, like a huge heraldic sign, still rise to a height of 187 feet above the level of the plain, and right up to the end of the eighteenth century this tower was commonly mistaken for that of Babylon. The confusion of mounds and ruins in the locality, and the equally confused legends that were attached to them, are evident from the narrative of John Cartwright, who visited Baghdad and the neighbouring area in 1605: 'Two places of great antiquity did wee throughly view in the Countrey; the one was, the ruins of the old Tower of Babel (as the inhabitants hold unto this day) built by Nimrod, the Nephew of Cham, Noah's Sonne. And now at this day, that which remayneth is called the remnant of the Tower of Babel; there standing as much as is a quarter of a mile in compass, as high as the stone-worke of Paul's Steeple in London. It was built of burnt Bricke, cimented and joyned with bituminous mortar, to the end, that it should not receive any cleft in the same. The Bricks are three-quarters of a yard in length, and a quarter in thicnesse, and betweene every course of Bricks there lieth a course of Mats made of Canes and Palme-tree leaves, so fresh, as if they had been layd within one yeere.

'The other place remarkable is the ruines of old Babylon, because it was the first citie which was built after the Flood. Some doe

thinke that the ruines of Nimrod's tower, is but the foundation of this Temple of Bell, and that therefore many Travellers have beene deceived who suppose that they have seene a part of that tower which Nimrod builded. But who can tell whether it be one or the other? It may be, that confused chaos which wee saw was the ruines of both, the Temple of Bel being founded on that of Nimrod.' (*Purchas his Pilgrimes*, Vol. VIII, pp. 520 ff.)

The 'Temple of Bell', or 'Bel', is presumably that which Herodotus called 'the sacred precinct of Jupiter-Belus'. The god Bel, which meant 'Lord', was Marduk, whose temple Esagila, associated with the founding of Babylon, stood close to the *ziggurat*. The temple and tower, though separate constructions, together symbolized Babylon, home of the gods and centre of worship, around whose precincts grew up the great capital city bearing the same name.

The outer city wall built by Nebuchadnezzar was a double construction crowned with look-out towers, and had a circuit of just over eleven miles. A remarkable feature was its magnificent causeway along the top. This was large enough to allow a chariot along it with a team of four horses abreast, and even for two chariots to pass each other quite easily. This aerial avenue was, like the 'Hanging Gardens', one of the wonders of the ancient world, and one can imagine that the Babylonian chariots, 'swift as the wind', must have been an impressive sight aloft upon such a fantastic highway. There was also an inner encircling wall, again a double fortification, extending along both banks of the Euphrates. This construction was of unburnt brick, and its two component walls were known as the *Imgur-Enlil* and the *Nimid-Enlil*. Their building and restoration are chiefly associated with the work of Assurbanipal, Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus.

Nebuchadnezzar records the completion of his outer defensive system with evident satisfaction: 'That no assault should reach *Imgur-Enlil*, the wall of Babylon; I did, what no earlier king had done, . . . at a distance so that it (the assault) did not come nigh, I caused a mighty wall to be built on the east side of Babylon. I dug out its moat and I built a scarp with bitumen and bricks. A mighty wall I built on its edge, mountain high. Its broad gateways I set within it and fixed in them double doors of cedar wood overlaid with copper. In order that the enemy who devised (?) evil should not press on the flanks of Babylon, I surrounded it with mighty floods, as is the land with the wave-tossed sea.'