

# The most famous city of antiquity:

## A glance at the vestiges of Babylon

>Text and photographs:  
Walid Abdul Amir Alwan

While walking through the vestiges of Babylon, I remembered two old Arab verses:  
"O my feet stand steady in this place where a person could loose his senses  
Sands and ruins of broken down edifice, where it is difficult to distinguish its top from  
its foundations"

I wondered what this poet would say if he saw the vestiges of the most famous city of antiquity, Babylon is a city which had been prosperous for 15 centuries. Its walls and gardens were among the Seven Wonders of the World. The first laws were promulgated there and the city became famous due to the captivity of the Jews. Alexander the Great died at the threshold of the gate of one of its palaces. It was quoted with its famous tower in the Torah, the Bible and Koran. It is to its inhabitants that mankind owes the discovery of the solar and lunar years, as well as the solar and lunar eclipse. The Babylonians established the basis of astronomy, and subdivided the day into 24 hours, the hour into 60 minutes and the minute into 60 seconds. The Greek historian Herodotus described it with admiration, regarding it as a wonder due to its majestic dimensions.

### The site and its name

The ruins of the historical city of Babylon are 88 km to the south of Baghdad and five km to the north of Hilla (Babel), on the old bed of the Euphrates, today known as "Shatt al-Hilla", the most fertile zone of Mesopotamia. Etymologically, its name comes from "Bab-ilim" or Babel in Acadian, meaning "The Gate to God".

Much ink was spilt over the origin of its name. According to the Old Testament (Genesis) "Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth:

and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth".

### Creation and history of the city

Babylon was founded as a village, then a ▶



Part of the old city wall

جانب من سور المدينة القديم



The surrounding area which is full with date palm trees  
المنطقة المحيطة بالمدينة القديمة ويلاحظ كثافة الأشجار



Figures and inscriptions on the walls of the palaces  
رسوم ونقوش على جدران قصور المدينة

city at the end of third century BC, close to the Holy city of Kish. According to historians the Amorites, a Semite tribe, conquered it at the beginning of the second millennium BC. After having extended their domination to the neighbouring kingdoms, they founded the first dynasty of Babylon. Hammurabi, the most famous of its kings, succeeded in unifying these kingdoms and made Babylon his capital. But, thereafter it was captured by the Hittites, then the Kassites, the Assyrians and the Chaldeans, who restored it to its former glory. Babylon then became the most famous city of antiquity, especially under the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar where it extended to the two banks of Euphrates.

The city had a rectangular form, surrounded by two gigantic walls and a trench filled with water. There was also an internal wall with eight gates.

The streets of the city were broad and built in the form of a network, whose principal axes were parallel to the Euphrates which ran through the middle. The temple of Marduk the Great and his Zakura known as "Tower of Babylon" was also called "Etemenanki". It is a great construction in honour of the God of the sky (Marduk), consisting of seven levels with a temple at

its top covered with bricks encrusted with blue glass. Nothing remains of this tower except its base, following its destruction by bad weather. Its more famous street, Procession Street, had walls decorated with coloured lions. It was directed north, through Ishtar Gate, decorated with bulls and coloured dragons; then towards Akito House, a small temple located out of the city. To the west of Ishtar Gate, one finds two palace complexes.

To the east of Procession Street, is a zone which dates back to the time of Hammurabi. Residential houses were built around central patios and surrounded by several walls, one of which ends at the Euphrates, to the south and the north of the city, and surrounds another palace in the north. Between the two walls (internal and external), was cultivated ground, equipped with irrigation canals, trees and domes: these are the "Hanging Gardens" that king Nebuchadnezzar built to create an environment similar to that where his wife lived. The king wanted to be sure she felt at home. The German archaeologist R. Koldewey, discovered the bases of these gardens and part of the palace at the beginning of the 20th century.

Some historians regard the famous Lion of Babylon as symbol of force and sign of the

domination of the Babylonians over the peoples they conquered; others see it as a symbol of fertility.

Archaeological excavations discovered four temples in the eastern zone of the city, and along the Euphrates. They also found port quays where commercial boats were moored. Documents attest that Babylon was a shopping centre for grain. On the river there was a bridge of bricks and stones, spreading out from the western zone of the city.

### Principal sites of the city

The main sites are the palaces, namely the Summer Palace, located in the northern zone of the city; the Middle Palace, located in the north to the side of Ishtar Gate; and the South Palace, located to the southwest of Ishtar Gate.

There were eight gates Ishtar Gate being the most important. It was located at the north of the internal wall. The Gate of Marduk was located at the west of the city and Awash Gate was in the south.

The city also sheltered 35 large temples and 36 small temples. The Greek theatre was built during the time of Alexander the Great and remained intact up to the year 130 BC.

### Procession Street

Procession Street was built during the time ▶

of king Nebupolassar. It was renovated and its level was raised on several occasions by his son Nebuchadnezzar. The street is 1430m by one meter, built with bricks and coloured stones. It was used for official and religious festivities, particularly the festivals of the Babylonian New Year's Day. The walls to the north of Ishtar Gate were decorated with representations of lions and other gypsum decorations encrusted with coloured glass.

### The South Palace

The South Palace was built by king Nebupolassar and restored by his son Nebuchadnezzar II (562-605 BC). Of an area of 52,000m<sup>2</sup>, its principal eastern entry opened onto Procession Street. It had five principal squares, five halls and 200 rooms. The main room was the 1000m<sup>2</sup> throne room from where the old empire was directed. It had interior and external decorated walls and three gates. There were also walkways and patios separated by large internal gates.

### What happened to the city?

When the archaeological excavations started at the beginning of the 20th century, nobody envisaged the extent of destruction which had touched this great city. Many of the brick buildings were strongly affected by rain and water. The course of the Euphrates, which changed through time, destroyed the remaining constructions. The excavations led to the discovery of the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, and the Temples of Ishtar, Nabu and Tinmak. The northern part of the Street of Processions, Ishtar Gate and the Greek theatre were among the other discoveries.

### What remained of the city?

The current site is a vast field of ruins, including several high hills. Most important are the Hill of Babylon, which constitutes the ruins of the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, in the northern part of the external wall; Al-Asr Hill, including a palace which was renovated during the Persian conquest, Ishtar Gate and the Image temple; the Hill of the Center, an old residential area; Jamrah Hill, sheltering ruins removed from the



The remains of Babylon

أطلال بابل



The remains of Babylon

أطلال بابل

Tower of Babylon by Alexander the Great who intended to rebuild it and a theatre built by Alexander. Finally, there is the Black Ishan hill, where two other temples are found. There are also the ruins of a fort indicating the place of an old tower.

In addition to the effects of time which destroyed Babylon, the occupying forces, which entered the city on 9 April 2003,

destroyed the remains by using heavy machinery to create sand defences at the entrances and to cover wide areas with gravel. The previous regime created lakes constructed buildings, roads and a palace. UNESCO has now removed Babylon from its World Heritage list. Efforts are being made to rehabilitate this historical city and ensure its regains its heritage listing. ■