

Press release

March 14–June 2, 2008

Napoleon Hall

Babylon



Votive statuette, *The Worshipper of Larsa*, dedicated to the god Amurru for Hammurabi (detail), Paleo-Babylonian period, copper and gold; H 19.6 cm x L 14.8 cm x W 7 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris © Photo RMN / Franck Raux

This exhibition is organized by the Louvre and the Réunion des Musées Nationaux in Paris, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, and the British Museum in London

It is made possible thanks to the generous support of Natixis



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Musée du Louvre / Marketing and Communications

Aggy Lerolle
aggy.lerolle@louvre.fr

Press relations

Céline Dauvergne
+33 (0)1 40 20 84 66 / Fax: 84 52
celine.dauvergne@louvre.fr

Natixis / Press relations

Estelle Laurentin
+33 (0)6 72 90 62 95
laurentin.estelle@neuf.fr

Through the centuries, the name “Babylon” has continued to ring with deep significance far and wide. Indeed, no city in world history has been more envied and feared, admired and reviled. And yet, beneath all of its trappings, from the most prestigious to the most vilified, Babylon is much more than a myth.

This unprecedented exhibition brings together a rich and varied treasure trove of nearly 400 works, on loan from collections in 13 countries, with the aim of reconciling the legend of Babylon with its history. Spanning five millennia (from the end of the 2nd millennium B.C. to the beginning of the 20th century), it pays tribute both to the historical and cultural importance of this ancient city and the way in which its reality was later transformed into the mythical Babylon.

To this day, no exhibition has ever been devoted to Babylon. Although several have referred to the Tower of Babel, none has attempted to bring to life the historic city of Babylon nor to acquaint museum visitors with the genuine Babylonian civilization whose influence spread throughout the entire ancient Near East. Museum visitors in France will thus be able to discover the first in-depth analysis attempting to reconstruct the history as well as the architectural and decorative aspects of this ancient city.

Moreover, legends and symbolic traditions relating to Babylon have never before been presented from a historical perspective, by returning to the actual facts that gave rise to them.

The conception of this major exhibition perceiving “Babylon” as a historical entity is therefore the culmination of an extensive research project bringing together findings and text sources unearthed at archaeological sites, but is also the result of studies on later traditions, some of which were little known previously. The Louvre thus aims to provide the full measure of Babylon’s cultural legacy, within contemporary as well as later civilizations, and to restore it to its rightful position as an essential element in the understanding of Western culture. Thanks to exceptional loans, both in quantity and in quality, particularly from German and British museums, the exhibition also allows visitors to discover a number of works, including a fascinating group of manuscripts, that have never been on view before in France.

Exhibition curators:

Béatrice André-Salvini, Curator in Charge, Department of Near Eastern Antiquities (chief exhibition curator), and Sébastien Allard, Curator, Department of Painting, Musée du Louvre.

The exhibition will travel next to the Pergamon Museum in **Berlin**, June 26–October 5, 2008 and, in a different presentation, to the British Museum in **London**, November 13–March 15, 2009.

Organized in three sections, the exhibition takes a historical approach to the works presented. It first delves into the ancient city, then explores Babylon's fame and reputation, from the earliest times to the beginning of the 20th century, and closes with the rediscovery of the Babylonian civilization made possible by archaeological excavations. The entire itinerary forms a highly coherent whole, during which all the objects shown speak to each other: from the actual city to the rediscovery of the ruins of the actual city, taking in developments in the myth of Babylon along the way.

I/ The historical city

For the first time in a museum exhibition, the impressive history and architecture of the ancient city of Babylon are appreciated for their own merits and underscored by the presentation of material and textual documentation provided by archaeological excavations. Thanks to studies still underway on these ruins, it is now possible to reconstitute a history of Babylon that does not refer mainly to Biblical or late classical sources, as was the case for a very long time. Contrasting with the distorted vision of Babylon, seen through the prism of its neighbors (friends or enemies, conquerors or conquered) or posterity, visitors now have the opportunity instead to explore a more comprehensive portrait of Babylon as perceived by the Babylonians themselves.

The history of this city of incomparable prestige and widespread influence is punctuated by four key periods, all of which are examined in the exhibition:

- *The reign of Hammurabi (early 18th century B.C.):* Under the leadership of this great king, the model of the ideal sovereign, Babylon became the capital of an empire and acquired prominence as a major religious and cultural center. Recognized as the true founder of Babylon, Hammurabi was largely responsible for its rise to power and increasing renown. The main temples, whose edification sites would constitute the central and immutable core of Babylon's city plan for more than 2,000 years, were built during this period.

Among other artifacts, the exhibition presents portraits of the king and his contemporaries (stelae, stone, copper and clay statues and statuettes), victory stelae, samples of royal offerings made at Babylon's temples (statuettes in precious metals, seals and semi-precious stone jewelry) but also documents allowing us to partially reconstruct the map of the city that archaeological excavations have yet to reveal. The *Code of Hammurabi*, inscribed on a stela more than two meters high, the most complete and perfect surviving collection of Babylonian laws, is the emblematic work of this part of the exhibition's first section.

- *The second half of the second millennium B.C.:* During this period, Babylon suffered a political decline but remained a cultural center of far-reaching influence through the dissemination of the teachings of its scribes. The Babylonian language was in fact at this time the *lingua franca* from Iran to Egypt, the language of diplomats and cultural expression, thus enabling the widespread and penetrating circulation and diffusion of Mesopotamian material civilization and thought. The works brought together for this exhibition highlight the extensive network of contacts with other Near Eastern civilizations (for example, the dissemination of major literary themes, such as the epic of Gilgamesh).

- *Babylon at the height of its glory during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 B.C.):* The collapse of the Assyrian empire and a resurgence of nationalism helped to restore Babylon to prominence, even surpassing its former renown to become a cosmic center.

Nebuchadnezzar II endowed his capital with an unequalled splendor. Babylon was at this time considered as the symbol of the harmony of the world, born of the power of Marduk, its supreme deity. The city's architectural and decorative scheme had its basis in this cosmological vision. Archaeological excavations have revealed rich architectural decorative elements made of bricks with colored glazes, a small portion of which has been reconstituted in the exhibition galleries. This decorative scheme depicts the symbolic figures of the Babylonian religion: the lion associated with Ishtar, the goddess of love, fertility and war; the dragon of Marduk; and the bull of Adad, the god of thunder and storms. Texts, watercolors executed during the excavations by the architect Walter Andrae, and objects from Marduk's sanctuary round out the topographic and social exploration of the historical city, dominated by its ziggurat, which would give rise to the legend of the Tower of Babel. The learning and wisdom of the Chaldean sages was then at its zenith.

Historical note: This also was the period of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem (587 B.C.), an event that would have a considerable impact on the reputation of this sovereign and his capital.

- *Loss of independence under the Persian Empire:* Following its capture by Cyrus the Great in 539 B.C. and the resulting loss of independence, Babylon remained an important city in the Persian Empire and subsequently became a conservatory of Babylonian culture under the Greek successors of Alexander the Great (who conquered the city in 330 B.C.) and later under Parthian domination (Roman period). The city therefore retained its status as an international capital of culture, even in the darkest hours of its history.

II/ Babylon's fame and reputation

The second section of the exhibition seeks to explain the importance and profundity of Babylon's cultural heritage, seldom fully appreciated, and to establish the close connection between legendary and symbolic traditions and ancient Babylon. Retaining historical reality as its main theme, the exhibition therefore attempts to scrutinize the creation of the myth of Babylon, its passage into written and graphical form, exploring its development and its adaptations, both parallel and successive, over the ages.

- The lasting imprint of Babylonian civilization

In numerous fields, Babylon's legacy to other civilizations is of capital importance. Until the Middle Ages, from Rome to India, it influenced both Western and Eastern literature and science. Manuscripts of late Antiquity and the medieval Middle East bear witness to its prominence, conveying Babylonian historical traditions and the wisdom of Chaldean sages. Object and texts presented in the exhibition, both Babylonian works and Babylonian-inspired ones discovered far from Babylon, document this extraordinary heritage.

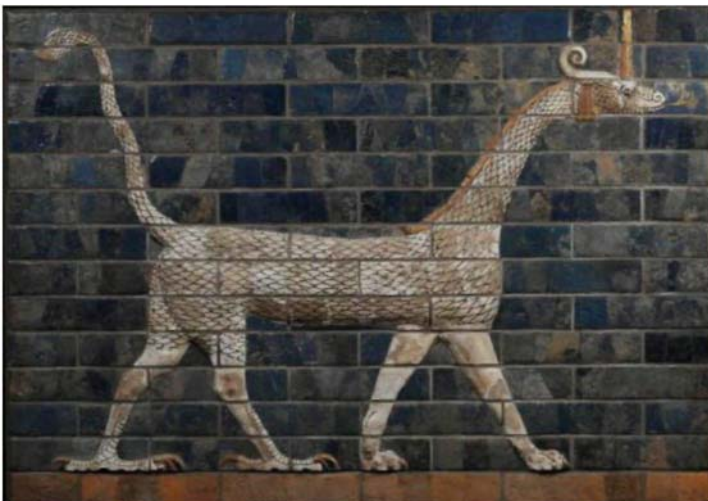
The exhibition thus highlights the main elements of Babylonian civilization that have survived the test of time, either directly or by way of secondary sources: its **conception of history** (principle of dynastic lists and chronicles that inspired the writers of the Bible as well as classical authors), its **teachings** (multilingual dictionaries that appeared throughout the ancient Near East), its **sciences** (laws, weights and measures, astronomy, astrology, divination: the key contribution of the Chaldean sages to Western civilization is the sexagesimal system, in other words the division of the circle into 360 degrees, and the twelve months of the year), its **literature** and its **iconographic themes** that would influence the Biblical writers (theme of the Flood, literature of wisdom, historical books) and Greek literature (Homer, fables). Literary compositions and other artistic creations of Antiquity, the Middle Ages and modern times have been influenced by different aspects of Babylonian civilization and history. Babylon also bequeathed a **model of government and architectural design** (for later great cities: Seleucia, Ctesiphon, Samarra and Baghdad, including Frank Lloyd Wright's project for the reconstruction of Baghdad in the 20th century).

- Western and Eastern legends and traditions of Babylonian inspiration

Babylon is unique in history, in the eyes of its inhabitants as in those of its neighbors. The mythical dimension is essential to the city and its history. Although there are many legends, two major traditions may be clearly distinguished.

For the Biblical world, the city is synonymous with admiration and evil. Although the historical books of the Bible (Kings, Chronicles) recount real events, at the same time a number of myths were created such as that referring to Babel/Babylon, the accursed city, the city of confusion, whose famous Tower symbolizes overweening pride, or that of Nebuchadnezzar, the archetype of the cursed king. This explains why Babylon later became, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, one of the symbols of evil (the *Apocalypse* of John: Babylon as the city of the devil, the "mother of prostitutes") and the antithesis of Jerusalem. A 14th century Flemish manuscript of Saint Augustine's *City of God* highlights this aspect, representing Babylon as invaded by diabolical creatures, the embodiments of its vices.

Conversely, for ancient historians, Babylon was an immense and splendid city, home to two of the original seven wonders of the world (its hanging gardens and its walls). The fascination born of this magnificence rapidly resulted in the distortion of historical facts, which gave rise to the legends of Semiramis and Sardanapalus, among others.



Relief of glazed bricks: *Striding Dragon of Marduk on the last version of the Ishtar Gate*, reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, panel of glazed bricks, L 167 cm, H 116 cm, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin, VA Bab 4431 ("Reisedrachen") © Olaf M. Teßmer / SMB-Vorderasiatisches Museum Berlin

Over the centuries, myth thus took precedence over history, abetted during all this time by the absence of archaeological evidence. Even today, the image we have of Babylon results from the interweaving and interpenetration of Biblical and classical traditions.

The history of the city provides the guiding principle and the rationale for the choice of the legendary themes addressed by the exhibition: the Tower of Babel, whose pictorial and printed destiny is considerable (in this context, visitors will be able to view, among others, the “*Little*” *Tower of Babel* by Peter Bruegel the Elder, exceptionally loaned for this occasion), Nebuchadnezzar, Balthazar’s Feast, Semiramis, the Hanging Gardens, etc.

Miniatures from the Western and Eastern Middle Ages, manuscripts, drawings and paintings evoke the substantial iconographic richness of these legends while also bearing witness to the proliferation of the Babylonian theme in all of its variants and transformations.

III/ The rediscovery of Babylon and its civilization

Never in history has the trace of the site of Babylon been lost (Tell Babil, Iraq). Although Eastern travelers have always visited the area, it was in the 16th century that their Western counterparts rediscovered Babylon, and their perspective began to be reflected in painting and the graphic arts. During the 17th and 18th centuries, literary and scientific works were inspired by the proliferation of political contacts with these regions (A. Kircher, Voltaire, among others) and by the translation of the *Thousand and One Nights*. It was at this time that the first Babylonian objects brought back to the West began to appear.

Beginning in the middle of the 19th century, the first archaeological excavations in Mesopotamia (at the sites of the former Assyrian kingdom), followed by the decoding of cuneiform inscriptions in the second half of the 19th century, had repercussions in literature and the arts: music, painting and architecture.

The excavations at the site of the ancient city, first limited in scope followed by more in-depth and scientific studies from 1899 (German project) gave a new reality to Babylon, without displacing the myth. For example, some “historical” paintings follow, in part, the descriptions given by travelers (John Martin, *The Fall of Babylon*, *Belshazzar’s Dream*), and later the first results of the Mesopotamian excavations (George Rochegrosse, *The Fall of Babylon*). D.W. Griffith’s film *Intolerance*, inspired by these paintings, also demonstrated knowledge of the German excavations at Babylon. The exhibition presents documents relating to this film as well as some of the scenery used.

This history of the rediscovery of Babylon by travelers and the first investigations, followed by archaeological excavations in the early 20th century, is also tied with political developments and changes in mindsets that influenced the conception of Babylon common among European intellectuals.



Peter Bruegel the Elder: *The “Little” Tower of Babel*, 1563, oil on panel, 60 x 74.5 cm, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, © **Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam**

Related events and publications

Publications

- Exhibition catalogue, edited by Béatrice André-Salvini, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Hazan, about 580 p., €49.

- Exhibition album, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Hazan, 48 pages, €8.

These two works are printed on Arjowiggins papers.

Documentary film

B ... comme Babylone !

France, 2007, 52 min., color

Written by Christine Tomas and directed by Bernard Georges.
Produced by Les Films du Tambour de Soie, Musée du Louvre and Arte.

This film will be screened in Alvéole 7 (meeting area for groups) for the duration of the exhibition.

DVD available, produced by Montparnasse Edition and Musée du Louvre, about €28.

Events in the Auditorium du Louvre

- **Series of three conferences: “Babel et la diversité des langues : mythes et réalité”**, March 6, 20 and 27 at 6:30 p.m.;

- **Conference presenting the exhibition**, with its curators, Béatrice André-Salvini and Sébastien Allard, March 26 at 12:30 pm.;

- **Films on art: “Jean Bottéro, nouvelles de Mésopotamie”**, March 12 at 12:30 pm., and **“Il était une fois la Mésopotamie”**, March 17 at 12:30 p.m.;

- **Reading: “Autour de Babel”**, April 7 at 8:30 p.m.;

- **Art on Stage: The “Queen of the Night”, a Babylonian clay relief (18th century B.C.)** April 9 at 12:30 p.m.;

- **Colloquium: “La tour de Babylone”**, April 19, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.;

- **Film: *Intolerance (Love’s Struggle Throughout the Ages)***, April 20 at 3 p.m.;

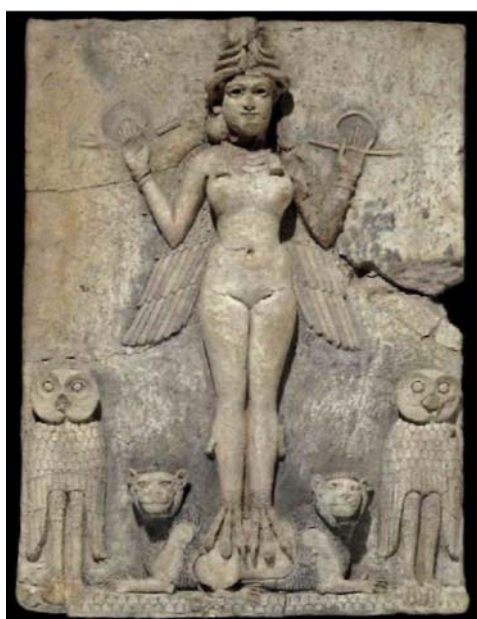
- **Concert (oeuvre)²**, May 5 at 8 p.m.

Guided tours of the exhibition

For further information call +33 (0)1 40 20 52 63 or visit <http://www.louvre.fr/>.

Guided tours of the exhibition are offered by specialists in the field.

The Babylon exhibition is made possible thanks to the generous support of Natixis.



The “Queen of the Night” Relief, clay plaque, Paleo-Babylonian period, H 49.5 cm x W 37 cm x Thickness 4.8 cm (max.), Mesopotamia, British Museum, BM, ANE 2003-7-18,1 © The Trustees of the British Museum

Visitor information:

Place:

Musée du Louvre, Napoleon Hall

Press opening:

Tuesday, March 11, 2008, from 2:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Hours:

Open daily except Tuesdays, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and until 10 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays

Admission fees:

Babylon exhibition only: €9.50

Permanent collections + *Babylon* exhibition: €13 before 6 p.m., €11 after 6 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays

Free admission for youths under 18, the unemployed, and holders of the “Louvre Jeunes”, “Louvre Professionnels”, “Louvre Enseignants”, “Louvre Etudiants Partenaires” or “Amis du Louvre” cards.

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