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BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

HISTORY OF BABYLON
The city of Babylon was built on the banks of the River Euphrates. The river ran through the middle of the city with a bridge linking the two halves. The city was home to the Babylonian kings as well as being the commercial, political and religious centre of the Babylonian empire. The name Babylon comes from the Greek version of the city’s ancient name (in the Akkadian language) which was Babilu. The city lay within a region known to the ancient Greeks as Mesopotamia (‘between the rivers’). Today most of ancient Mesopotamia is part of modern Iraq. The remains of the ancient city of Babylon lie near Al Hillah in Babil Province, Iraq, about 55 miles south of Baghdad.

Babylon began as a small town around the beginning of the third millennium BC. The earliest source to mention Babylon as a city may be a dated tablet of the reign of Sargon of Akkad (c. 24th century BC). It has been estimated that Babylon was the largest city in the world from c. 1770 BC to 1670 BC, and again between c. 612 BC and 320 BC.

OLD BABYLONIAN PERIOD: c. 2004 BC–c. 1595 BC
Around c. 2004 BC the Amorites (a Semitic people from the west of Mesopotamia) invaded Sumer in southern Mesopotamia and gradually moved northwards. In 1894 BC Babylon became the capital city of an Amorite leader called Sumu-abum – the first of a long line of kings who ruled from the increasingly prosperous city.

In about 1792 BC Hammurapi became the sixth king of Babylon, reigning until about 1750 BC. He conquered cities in north and south Mesopotamia and made Babylon the capital city of a Babylonian empire. One of his most important acts was to draw up a set of laws, some of which were based on older Sumerian laws. This has become known as Hammurapi’s law-code and demonstrated his commitment to standardised justice across the Babylonian empire. One copy of the code written in cuneiform on a stela (large stone block) was carried off by the Elamites during the 13th century BC to the city of Susa. It is now in the Louvre Museum in Paris.

After Hammurapi, the power of the Babylonian empire began to decline. Cities which were part of the empire rebelled and people from outside the empire invaded it. A Hittite raid from Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) in 1595 BC brought about the downfall of the king of Babylon and a Kassite king, Agum–Kakrime, seized the throne of Babylon for himself. The Kassite people were probably from the Zagros Mountains in modern-day Iran and they moved north to gain control of territory in southern Mesopotamia. The Kassites ruled Babylon for about 450 years. They maintained the Babylonian way of life, respected the Mesopotamian gods and goddesses alongside their own deities, and rebuilt their temples. They built a large new city at Dur-Kurigalzu in central Mesopotamia, though Babylon remained the capital city for the region. A group of tablets written using the cuneiform script (known as the Amarna Letters) indicates that during the 1300s BC Kassite kings in Babylon were in correspondence with pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty in Egypt.
ASSYRIAN PERIOD

In northern Mesopotamia the Assyrian people had established a kingdom, with its main city at Ashur, on the upper reaches of the Tigris River. During the 900s BC the Assyrian kings began to expand their territory and gradually took control of all of Mesopotamia. Assyrian rule was not welcomed by the Babylonians and during the reign of Sennacherib of Assyria (705–681 BC) Babylon was in constant revolt, leading to the complete destruction of the city in 689 BC when its walls, temples and palaces were razed to the ground. The next Assyrian king, Esarhaddon, rebuilt the city and made it his residence for part of the year. By 650 BC, under the rule of King Ashurbanipal, the Assyrian empire reached its greatest extent stretching from Mesopotamia across to the Mediterranean Sea and south to Egypt. Babylon was an important city within the empire with its own local king (usually a member of the Assyrian royal family). However, after the reign of Ashurbanipal the Assyrian empire fell apart. Cities and regions within the empire rebelled and by 612 BC, the capital at Nineveh fell to foreign invaders.

NEO-BABYLONIAN EMPIRE: 625–539 BC

As the power of the Assyrians declined, Chaldeans from southern Mesopotamia began to create their own empire, known today as the Neo-Babylonian empire. In 625 BC, the Chaldean military leader Nabopolassar revolted against Assyrian control of the city and became king of Babylon. In 612 BC the Babylonians and Medes (from western Iran) revolted together against Assyrian rule, destroyed the major Assyrian cities and divided the lands of the Assyrian empire between them.

Nabopolassar’s son, Nebuchadnezzar II (reigned 605–562 BC), rebuilt and enlarged Babylon and made it the capital of a new empire. This included rebuilding the great seven-storey ziggurat in Babylon known as Etemenanki. At this time Babylon was surrounded by a massive 18km wall. The royal palace was so grand that Nebuchadnezzar called it ‘the marvel of all people, the centre of the land, the shining residence, the dwelling of majesty’. It has been estimated that 15 million bricks were used to rebuild the official buildings in Babylon during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II. They were usually square and stamped with a cuneiform inscription. In legend he is said to have built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. This is described as a terraced garden full of trees and flowering plants, built to remind his wife, Queen Amyitis, of the green hills of her homeland in Media. It was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Nebuchadnezzar’s reign was followed by several weak kings. Nabonidus, the last Babylonian to rule at Babylon, was unable to resist an expanding Persian empire. The Neo-Babylonian empire gradually went into decline and over the next 20 years it began to break up. In 539 BC the Persian king Cyrus captured Babylon, made it his capital and incorporated the rest of Mesopotamia into the Achaemenid Persian empire.
LATER HISTORY
Persian rule left Babylon largely intact. Two hundred years later, the Persian empire was itself conquered by the Macedonian ruler Alexander the Great. After Alexander’s death in Babylon in 323 BC, his empire was divided up and Mesopotamia came to be ruled by the Seleucid dynasty founded by Seleukos, one of Alexander’s generals. Then, in 141 BC, the Parthian king Mithradates I took control of Mesopotamia. The Parthians, who came from eastern Iran, briefly lost control of Mesopotamia when it was invaded by the Romans in AD 115 but it was returned to the Parthians by the Roman emperor Hadrian in AD 117. The Parthian empire was overthrown by the Sasanian king Ardashir in AD 224–226. Mesopotamia was then ruled by Sasanian kings, also from Iran, until AD 637, when Muslim Arabs invaded and Mesopotamia became part of the Islamic world. From AD 1534 until 1918 Mesopotamia was part of the Ottoman empire ruled by the Ottoman dynasty from Istanbul in modern Turkey. Today most of Mesopotamia is the country of Iraq with its capital city at Baghdad, in central Mesopotamia. Babylon itself is no longer inhabited.

RELIGION
Ancient Mesopotamians believed that the universe was controlled by gods and goddesses who had to be obeyed and worshipped with prayers and offerings. There were many myths and legends about these gods and goddesses which survive today as cuneiform text in the Sumerian and Akkadian languages. Temples were the centres of religious activity where priests and priestesses served the particular god or goddess believed to live in the temple. All temples contained a statue of their god or goddess housed in a niche. Special feasts and festivals were held in honour of the gods and goddesses, such as Babylon’s grand New Year Festival. The patron deity of Babylon was the god Marduk who, as the city rose in power, was promoted to the head of the Babylonian pantheon. Marduk was often depicted together with his symbol, the snake-dragon or mushhushhu.

ZIGGURATS
In the major cities of ancient Mesopotamia the more powerful rulers built tall, stepped religious structures known as ziggurats. Ziggurats were built from layers of mud bricks, with a layer of baked bricks on the exterior, and held together with reed matting at regular intervals with weepholes to facilitate drainage. They rose on square platforms with a sacred shrine at the top. Long ramps or flights of stairs allowed the few authorised people to climb up from one stage to the next. Ziggurats were built by king Ur-Nammu (reigned c. 2112–2095 BC) in the Sumerian cities of Ur and Nippur. A ziggurat dedicated to the Mesopotamian god Marduk may have already been built at Babylon by 1750 BC. Nebuchadnezzar’s ziggurat at Babylon had seven platforms of bricks with a temple for Marduk on the summit. It is possible that this structure was the source of the biblical tradition of the Tower of Babel. The ziggurat at Dur-Sharrukin, built by the Assyrians about 710 BC, possibly had a spiral ramp leading to the top with each platform of bricks painted a different colour.
WRITING

Writing began in southern Mesopotamia well before 3100 BC. This first writing was developed to record the collection and distribution of food supplies in the cities. The very first Sumerian writing used pictograms. Pictograms are simple pictures which represent objects directly. Gradually, these pictograms evolved into a form of writing produced with a stylus pressed into clay, made up of wedge-shaped signs. This writing is known as cuneiform.

Cuneiform signs were much more flexible than pictograms and allowed speech to be properly recorded. Individual cuneiform signs represented syllables which could be combined to make a word, or used by themselves to represent a complete word. Eventually, there were more than 600 cuneiform signs. The first cuneiform represented the Sumerian language. Later, the Akkadians, Assyrians, Babylonians in ancient Iraq, as well as other people such as the Elamites in Iran and the Hittites in Turkey, wrote down their languages using the cuneiform script.

Most writing from Mesopotamia is on small clay tablets. Damp clay was formed into a flat tablet, which could be held in one hand. The writer pressed a stylus made from reed, wood, metal or ivory into the clay to make the cuneiform signs, then left the tablet in the sun to harden. Early numbers were recorded by making circular or semicircular marks in the surface of a clay tablet with the other end of the stylus. From very early on special signs were developed for counting systems, the most common one being based on 60. From about 1300 BC ivory and wooden tablets covered with a layer of wax were also used for writing. These could be reused, since the wax could be smoothed over ready for the next piece of writing. Cuneiform signs were also carved into stone or cast in metal. Cuneiform writing was used in Mesopotamia for over 3,000 years. The last known use of cuneiform is a second-century AD Babylonian astronomical text.

LEARNING

Mesopotamian cities were centres of knowledge and learning. The first schools were places where scribes were trained to become state administrators. These schools used dictionaries with lists of words, gods, plants and animals. Later they investigated medicine, mathematics and astronomy. The Sumerians and their successors favoured a number system based on 60. To help with mathematical calculations, students used multiplication tables written on clay tablets. Surveying with measuring instruments was used to help construct irrigation systems. Babylonian astronomers studied the night sky and recorded the movement of the moon and planets. The Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (reigned 668–631 BC) collected a library of about 25,000 clay tablets at his palace at Nineveh. The tablets included letters, legends, dictionaries, histories, astronomical observations and medical texts. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (reigned 605–562 BC) was interested in objects and statues from earlier periods, as well as examples of the oldest writing he could find.
VISITING THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition *Babylon: Myth and Reality* is free for school groups. All visiting groups must pre-book through the Museum Box Office on +44 (0)20 7323 8181.

It is suggested that students move through the exhibition in small groups looking at and discussing objects, graphics and relevant text. This pack includes an exhibition briefing sheet for adults to help focus students’ thoughts in each section of the exhibition.

Please discuss the size of your group (students plus accompanying adults) with the Box Office staff when you book. Entrance to the exhibition is in 10-minute timeslots and your group may have to cover two or more slots.

Please bear in mind the entry time of the last group in your party as you will need to leave them about 60 minutes’ viewing time before going to your pre-booked lunch slot in the Ford Centre for Young Visitors.

Photography is not allowed in the exhibition. It is therefore suggested that students make sketches in the exhibition which can be used to support follow-up art and design work in the classroom, take photographs of objects in the Museum’s permanent Mesopotamian galleries or use the online resources available on the British Museum website back at school.

As well as collecting information to support follow-up activities at school, students may find it useful to have a big question to consider and discuss as they go round the exhibition. The question(s) could then be discussed back at school. Here are some example questions:

• What impression of ancient Babylon do I get from the exhibition?
• How do different artists create an idea of what ancient Babylon was like?
• What aspects of Babylon as a city are the same as or different from modern-day London?
• What have I found out about Babylon that I didn’t know before?
• What sources of evidence does the exhibition include and how useful are they?
The exhibition is arranged under three key themes which explore the city across time.

THE REAL BABYLON
This section looks at the ancient city of Babylon, the site of which lies in modern Iraq, south of Baghdad. It focuses on 605–539 BC, during which time the city was ruled by King Nebuchadnezzar II and his successors. During this period Babylon was the capital of a vast Babylonian empire and underwent a magnificent rebuilding programme which saw it develop into the largest and most spectacular city in the world.

STORIES ABOUT BABYLON
Archaeological exploration of Babylon began in earnest in the early 1900s. Before the cuneiform script was deciphered in the 1850s, knowledge about Babylon relied on the Bible and the writings of ancient Greek historians. Babylon became a popular subject for artists who combined what they knew from these sources with ideas and images from their own time. This section of the exhibition looks at the best-known stories and legends that have developed around the city.

BABYLON TODAY
This section looks at three key aspects of Babylon's legacy today: elements of science, mathematics and astronomy from Babylon; its continued presence in art, film and music; and the site of the city today with particular reference to the effect of recent political regimes and military conflict in the region.
CURRICULUM LINKS

KEY STAGE 2
A WORLD HISTORY STUDY

The ancient Mesopotamian cultures of Sumer and Assyria are specifically mentioned as possible case studies in the Key Stage 2 History National Curriculum study unit for a past world society.

The key features of this unit are: the society in relation to other contemporary societies; chronology; the reasons for the rise and fall of the civilisation; significant places and individuals; distinctive contribution to history.

The key aspects of everyday life studied are: houses and cities; arts and architecture; technology, work and leisure; food, health and medicine; pictures, words and communication; rulers and ruled; beliefs, customs and legends, gods and goddesses; temples and tombs; wealth and economy; transport and exploration; wars and warfare.

Ancient Mesopotamia and the case study of the city of Babylon are an excellent starting point for single-subject and cross-curricular work in a number of areas.

• Buildings: ziggurats, palaces, walls, gates

• Historical interpretation: sources of evidence about Babylon, ways in which Babylon has been represented across time, bias in sources

• Citizenship: Babylon as a heritage site, looking after the past, using the past in the present

• Art and design: Babylonian art as a source of inspiration for own artwork, artworks representing Babylon through the ages

• Religion: gods and goddesses, temples/ziggurats, forms of worship

• Archaeology: material culture as a source of evidence, archaeological processes used at Babylon, role of museums, issues of world heritage
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The following is a list of suggested activities which can be undertaken in the classroom to support a visit to the exhibition as either preparatory or follow-up work.

• Locate the area covered by ancient Mesopotamia in an atlas. Which modern countries form ancient Mesopotamia? What are the key geographical features of the area? Which modern countries are neighbours to modern Iraq?

• Look at the Mesopotamian objects on the Explore section of the British Museum website. The region of Mesopotamia covers a long period of history and several different cultures so you may want to divide your searches down into objects relating to Sumer, Babylon or Assyria. Print out a selection of objects and arrange them chronologically. Use this as a starting point to discuss chronology.

• Discuss different sources of evidence available to archaeologists and historians. What is the difference between primary and secondary evidence? What sources of evidence will be available in the exhibition?

• Make a list of the all the materials used to make things in the 21st century. Make a list of the different materials used to make objects in the exhibition. Do students think the list represents all the different materials used in ancient Babylon? Use the Explore section of the British Museum website to identify further ancient materials and add them to the list. Compare the two lists. Which materials are the same on each list and which materials are different? What are the sources (mineral, animal, plant) for materials in ancient and modern times? Do the students think materials are local or imported?

• Choose an object from the exhibition and discuss what skills and processes might have been used in its manufacture (for example, a cuneiform tablet would need clay to be dug and shaped and a stylus made before the scribe could begin the writing; the tablet would then be sun-dried). Create a flow diagram to chart the processes and stages in the manufacture of particular objects seen in the exhibition or on the Explore section of the British Museum website. This notion could be extended to larger projects such as building a decorated city gateway which might involve different specialist skills and a wider range of raw materials to be processed. You might like to begin by thinking about the process today so that students can draw on their experience of local building or observation of modern construction work to establish a working model before they research the process as it might have occurred in the past.

• Use the exhibition PowerPoints to view images which can be used as a starting point for activities around History, Art & Design and Citizenship. The PowerPoints can also be used as preparation for a visit or a way to remind students of some of the objects and images in the exhibition.

• Look for examples of Britain’s past being used today. For example, what emblems and people are used on British coins and banknotes? What periods of British history/historical events are popular for dramas and documentaries on television? Why do you think this is?
• What level of responsibility do we have for looking after remains and sites from the past? Set up a scenario to be debated such as 'We should stop adding new objects to museums', 'We should raise money for social care projects by selling museum objects', 'Everybody should be able to walk among the stones at Stonehenge', or 'It is okay to use historic sites for new building projects'. What are the arguments for and against? What might be the social, economic and cultural consequences (positive and negative) of accepting or rejecting these ideas? Research, debate and vote.

• Use the British Museum’s ancient Mesopotamia website www.mesopotamia.co.uk

The following sections directly support some of the exhibition themes:

**Astronomers of Babylon** – this covers Babylonian astronomy and the role of astronomers in advising the king and creating the calendar

**Trade and transport** – find out about the different goods traded into Mesopotamia from other regions of the ancient world

**Geography** – covers the landscape and environment of Mesopotamia

**Gods, goddesses, demons and monsters** – covers key figures in Mesopotamian mythology and religion

**Time** – find out about archaeology in Mesopotamia

**Writing** – introduces cuneiform writing
OBJECTS FROM BABYLON

- Babylonian writing tablet
  Babylonian Chronicle, Neo-Babylonian, about 550–400 BC, from Babylon, southern Iraq

- Babylonian map tablet
  Babylonian, about 700–500 BC, probably from Sippar, southern Iraq

- Stela of Nabonidus
  Neo-Babylonian dynasty, 555–539 BC, possibly from Babylon, southern Iraq

- Glazed bricks with raised relief dragon motif
  Image courtesy of the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin

- Model reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate
  Image courtesy of the Pergamon Museum, Berlin
ARTISTS AND BABYLON

• Tower of Babel
  Jean de Courcy, c.1350–1431, universal history, *La Bouquechardiere*
  Image courtesy of British Library, London

• The Tower of Babel
  Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1563
  Image courtesy of Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

• Babylon
  JMW Turner after a sketch by Sir Robert Ker Porter c. 1835–6
  Image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

• Hanging Gardens of Babylon
  Mario Larrinaga c.1955, film scenery painting

• Babel Revisited
  Julee Holcombe, 2004
  Image courtesy of the Conner Contemporary Art, Washington DC

• Babel Flower: Dusk
  Anne Desmet, 2005
  Flexograph print, indented plywood print and collage on paper
  Image courtesy of the Hart Gallery London
BABYLON AS A HERITAGE SITE

• Stamp from Iraq
  10 fils stamp issued 1967 as part of the International Tourist Year series, shows the Ishtar Gate
  Image courtesy of www.iraq-stamps.com

• Banknote from Iraq
  5 dinar note issued in 1974 showing Babylonian king Hammurabi (reigned c. 1792–1750 BC)

• Coin from Iraq
  1 dinar coin issued in 1982 showing the Tower of Babel ziggurat

• Postcard view of Babylon
  Photograph shows the site of Babylon post-1918

• Modern reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate
  Image courtesy of the Encyclopaedia of the Orient

• Aerial view of site of Babylon
  To the left of the photograph is the modern reconstruction of part of Nebuchadnezzar’s Southern Palace in Babylon. To the right of the photograph is a military base build during current conflict in Iraq.
  ‘This is tantamount to establishing a military camp around the Great Pyramid in Egypt or around Stonehenge in Britain’. John Curtis, Keeper of the Middle East Department, British Museum.
  Photograph by John Russell.

• Newspaper article from The Guardian
  Article published 15 January 2005
  The hand-written sign in the centre of the picture was made by local Museum staff.
FURTHER RESOURCES

• British Museum websites

The British Museum’s website has an online database of over 5,000 objects from the Museum’s collection. To investigate Mesopotamian objects, click on Explore at

www.britishmuseum.org

The Museum’s interactive Ancient Mesopotamia website features text, images and maps relating to the civilisations of ancient Mesopotamia.

www.ancientmesopotamia.co.uk

• Books

For children


For adults

