

The Babylonian Empire

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The Tower of Babel, oil on panel, by Pieter Brueghel, 1563. Image from Wikimedia

The Babylonians built upon the advances of the Sumerians and established a vast empire. They gave the world, among other things: the first written system of laws, a tower that soared above the earth, and one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

The empire of Babylonia occupied the middle and southern part of Mesopotamia. It was positioned between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. It stretched from the present-day city of Baghdad, Iraq, south to the Persian Gulf.

The first written mention of Babylonia's famous capital city, Babylon, dates to about 3800 B.C. During that time, most of Mesopotamia was made up of Sumerian city-states. Babylon was one of these, and still lacked the political significance it would gain one day.

The First Empire

Over the next 1,500 years, the Mesopotamia city-states competed with each other for power and influence. It was not until Hammurabi, who ruled from 1792-1750 B.C., united most of this area after a triumphant military campaign that the city of Babylon reached its first great glory.

In the years during and following Hammurabi's reign, known as the First Empire, Babylonian rulers constructed temples, roads, and an extensive canal system. They also wrote down laws.

The rule of the Babylonian kings was quite different than the rule of the Assyrian kings. The Assyrian kings destroyed the first Babylonian Empire and left behind war and destruction in their wake. The Assyrians ruled in Mesopotamia from about 1400-600 B.C. After that, the Babylonians established a second great empire.

King Nabopolassar was a Chaldean. Chaldea was a region of southern Mesopotamia. He helped to conquer the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 606 B.C. and used the opportunity to establish his own kingdom in Babylon.

Nabopolassar's son, Nebuchadnezzar, succeeded his father in 604 B.C. During Nebuchadnezzar's reign, the Tower of Babel reached its greatest height. Also during this time, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were constructed. Babylonians destroyed the Great Temple in Jerusalem, and 7,000 Jews were brought back to Babylonia as prisoners.

The Tower of Babel

The Tower of Babel was a ziggurat, a pyramid-shaped temple built to a local god. The most important god of Babylon was Marduk, who outshone all other gods in the Babylonian religious system.

The Babylonians began building a tower in Babylon more than three thousand years ago, in 1100 B.C. It would become known as the Tower of Babel. When Nebuchadnezzar finished it, it reached a height of 295 feet. It was about as tall as the Statue of Liberty. According to a tablet left by the king, the tower was made of "baked brick enameled in brilliant blue."

The tower became famous, thanks in part to its mention in a Biblical story. In the Old Testament, the builders of the tower thought they could build a tower high in the sky. They were very proud of this, but it made God angry. As a punishment, the people of the world were divided by being made to speak different languages.

The Hanging Gardens

Nebuchadnezzar built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It was a gift for his wife, who missed her lush homeland.

The gardens did not "hang" literally. Its plants or trees didn't dangle from ropes. "Hanging" refers to the garden's terraces which overhung one another.

What makes a terraced garden special enough to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World?

Part of the answer has to do with the garden's amazing design. Babylon received little rain, so engineers designed a chain pump that brought water from the nearby Euphrates River to irrigate the gardens. Specially designed bricks kept the plants in place.

The result was a green oasis that today's scholars believe rose between 80 and 300 feet into the air. The gardens were a lush mountain of greenery in the middle of a flat, dry desert.

Ultimately, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon disappeared. The Tower of Babel and the Babylonian Empire were destroyed by the Persians around the year 478 B.C.

The sands of time cannot hide the magnificent accomplishments of the Babylonians, however. Thousands of years ago, they excelled in engineering, law, art, and architecture, helping lay a foundation for future civilizations.