

Museum Exhibitions and their Catalogues:

***Babylon: Myth and Reality*, eds I.L. Finkel and M.J. Seymour, 2008, London: The British Museum Press, 238pp, £25, ISBN 9780714111704.**

***Babylon and Beyond: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.*, eds Joan Aruz, Kim Benzel, and Jean M. Evans, 2008, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York: Yale University Press, 524pp+xxiii, USD 50, ISBN 9781588392954.**

Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

The end of 2008 saw a number of significant Museum exhibitions in the United States and United Kingdom. New York Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted an exhibition opening on 18 November entitled *Babylon and Beyond: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.*, while in London The British Museum exhibition entitled *Babylon: Myth and Reality* also opened in November. Meanwhile the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was presenting the exhibition *Art and Empire: Treasures from Assyria in the British Museum*. The editor was able to visit these exhibitions recently.

The Boston exhibition included many items that The British Museum has had difficulty displaying recently because of climate issues in a basement gallery. The palace reliefs on display in the ground floor galleries at The British Museum remained in London, but other reliefs and many artefacts from Layard and Mallowan's excavations were on display. One section of the exhibition was devoted to Layard and his wife who was pictured wearing refashioned Assyrian jewellery. Displays of Assyrian material are nearly always successful, as they are in this instance, because there are bold and substantial reliefs, statues and inscriptions together with the smaller detailed seals, tablets, jewellery, pottery, ivories etc. There was a substantial attendance when I visited, but as the Museum had made adequate space available and set the material out systematically, the crowd was not uncomfortable.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition, *Babylon and Beyond: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.*, is breath-taking in scope, as may be deduced from the substantial size of the catalogue. The exhibition follows the 2003 *Art of the First Cities*, which focussed on the third millennium. Forty-one museums and private collectors are listed to have contributed to the exhibition and the contributors to the catalogue are a Who's Who of Near Eastern Bronze Age scholarship.

The exhibition aims to present the global character of the Eastern Mediterranean in the second millennium BC by illustrating trading, cultural and diplomatic networks through archaeology and artefact. There are objects from the Uluburun shipwreck; in fact the Bodrum Museum of

Underwater Archaeology contributed the largest number of objects to exhibition and they represent a focus of the exhibition. The artefacts including raw materials such as copper, tin and bronze, utensils and objects of art are displayed in the hold of a mock ship.

The second major focus was to be material from Syria, and in particular Ebla and the Royal Tombs of Qatna. Objects from these sites are in the catalogue, but are not on display. Instead objects from Ugarit and Mari in the care of the Louvre were present.

There is a discreet notice near the beginning of the exhibition stating that the Met thanks the Syrian government for its willingness to lend important objects to the exhibition, but expresses 'deep regret that recent legislation in the United States has made it too difficult and risky for the planned loans to proceed'. It seems that in January 2008 an amendment to the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act permits private individuals claiming to be victims of state-sponsored terrorism to file liens against property belonging to that state while the property, which could include museum loans, is in the United States. It presents a sad irony that the world today may not be as 'global' as it once was.

Significant Mesopotamian items that were on display included the Old Babylonian Kneeling Worshipper (Louvre), the Nude Goddess (BM), the pyxis lid with the Mistress of Animals (Louvre), the cult pedestal of the God Nuska (Berlin). The Byblos material from Beirut was also impressive and there is a box of foreign objects from the temple of Tod near Luxor. Any one of these sites would have justified an exhibition, but to have objects from all of them in one place is unprecedented.

The lasting influence of the exhibition will be the magnificent catalogue. The images are of 'coffee table' quality and the commentary is documented and was prepared by international authorities. Around the catalogue entries are succinct contextual pieces describing the current understanding of the political and economic history, and cultural and technical development.

The fact that the book extends to over five hundred pages is an indication of the intricate knowledge that we now possess about the period. Long known sites of Babylon (Béatrice André-Salvini), Mari (Jean Claude-Margueron), Ugarit (Bassam Jamous), Byblos (Susy Hakimian) and Kultepe (Mogens Trolle Larsen) are described together with more recent investigations at Tell el-Dab'a (Manfred Bietak), Ebla (Paolo Matthiae), Qatna (Michel Al-Maqdissi and Danièle Morandi Bonaccossi) and Uluburun (Cemal Pulak). There are articles on ivory, vitreous material, jewellery, lapis lazuli, cedar, board games and so on. Metallurgy, pottery, carpentry and stone working are not covered. The main reference to raw materials is found in the discussion of the Uluburun ship-wreck. The maps are of exceptional quality and the drawings of the Qatna palace, Tell el-Dab'a and the Uluburun ship are useful and help set the scene.

The catalogue is intended for non-specialist readers however, someone without a general knowledge of the period and the geography of the Eastern Mediterranean will take time to read comfortably. All the information such as maps and timelines needed to gain such familiarity is in this catalogue.

The British Museum's *Babylon: Myth and Reality* is based on a completely different rationale. The focus is Babylon of the mid-first millennium, from Nebuchadnezzar II (602-562 BC) until the arrival of the Persian army under Cyrus II in 539 BC and the concept is interesting, drawing on archaeology, history and mythology, ancient and modern. The result is a fascinating journey through the history as we know it to the role Babylon plays in contemporary art and culture.

Twenty-six organisations and private collections are listed to have lent objects. The long history of German sponsored excavations at Babylon means that the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin is a major contributor, providing glazed brick reliefs from the Ishtar Gate, much inscribed material and the amazing onyx sceptre. Some of this material has never before been lent outside Germany.

The catalogue is well illustrated and documented. The object descriptions are not easy to read, the font used is a couple of points too small. The commentary is interesting and there are break-outs dealing with specific subjects such as the Fiery Furnace, the Neo-Babylonian kings of Babylon and the Hanging Gardens. The catalogue begins by explaining how Babylon was found and the slow realisation that the myths behind much mediaeval art may relate to a real civilisation. Robert Koldewey's excavations are described and the plan of Babylon he constructed is discussed together with the associated objects in the exhibition. Neo-Babylonian history and writings are covered before the subsequent history and legend are examined.

The Classical accounts of Babylon lead to discussions about the hanging gardens, to which archaeology can contribute little, and the walls of Babylon, also a contender as a wonder of the ancient world. Babylon at the time is reputed to have been fifteen miles square and surrounded by a moat and a series of walls, the main one having enough room on top for a four horse chariot to turn. The amount of baked brick involved was prodigious.

Also involving vast amounts of baked brick was the ziggurat. The discovery of the site of the ziggurat and the ancient descriptions of it are discussed, with Irving Finkel and Michael Seymour suggesting that the reference to baking bricks in the Genesis account of the Tower of Babel reflects a Neo-Babylonian construction technique. However the fact is that no structure with the vertical elevation of the Babylon ziggurat as it is described in the Esagil tablet could stand without baked bricks, and it maybe that the baking was done in earlier times by leaving the bricks in the sun for an appropriate length of time as opposed to kiln firing. Sun drying, after all, is a form of baking.

There are an intriguing discussions of the Jewish exile, Babylon under Nabonidus, and Belshazzar. The Stela of Nabonidus from Tiema, Saudi Arabia, is in the exhibition; this was published less than two years ago. There is an interesting discussion of Rembrandt's Belshazzar's Feast. The Cyrus Cylinder is seen as one of many possible carefully worded documents aimed at turning the inhabitants of Babylon against their tyrannical leadership. The subversive literature seems to have worked as Cyrus passed through Babylon's impregnable walls and took the city without a fight.

The Tower of Babel in art is discussed. Most portrayals draw on Roman architecture and the Colosseum in particular. The frontispiece is a 2004 digital artwork by Julee Holcombe depicting a collage of New York buildings occupying the Athenian Acropolis. This image returns to the economic vision of Babylon in the Book of Revelation where it is the merchants who weep over the city's destruction. Babylon as a city of sin is a recurring theme. The idea that when people congregate wrong-doing results has been around since the Garden of Eden and is behind many ideas of prison reform where prisoners are isolated. However the biblical stories of isolated nomads such as the Patriarchs show that this is not an Old Testament concept.

I remember one scholar arguing that Babylon was the Paris of the ancient world and kings who destroyed it, such as Sennacherib, were never forgiven; it also seems to be Rome and New York, a religious and a financial centre. The latter function does not get much space in the catalogue which sees Babylon's legacy in learning, mathematics, astronomy and medicine.

The Keeper of Western Asiatic Antiquities at the British Museum, John Curtis, has visited Babylon and contributed to reports detailing of environmental and archaeological damage by the occupying armies. These reports prompted international outrage, and while there are still problems, some initiatives are being taken to reduce the threat. Recently as part of a joint Iraq – British Museum team facilitated by the British Army he visited Sumerian sites in the south of the country and was able to report that looting had ceased. Curtis says that 'It is hard to overstress the insensitivity involved in establishing a military camp in the middle of one of the most famous sites of the ancient world' (216). If the West's political leadership had an appreciation of the history and culture as it is presented in this exhibition and book, it is unlikely that they would have embarked on such a tragic adventure in Iraq.