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HISTORY MAGAZINE

# Nebuchadrezzar: the builder king of Babylon

The Bible depicts Nebuchadrezzar II and his city as doomed, but to his own people, he restored Babylon to glory.

A snarling lion from the sixth century B.C. once lined Babylon's t Gate, built by Nebuchadrezzar II. Louvre Museum, Paris.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FRANCK RAUX/RMN-GRAND PALA

BY BARBARA BÖCK

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Nebuchadrezzar: A name rich with color, strength, and prestige belongs to one of the few Babylonian kings known by name today. Conqueror of kingdoms and restorer of Babylon, he left behind a lega like no other. Born in the seventh century B.C., he came to power as Babylonia was regaining its power in the region. He built on this momentum and took Babylonia to new heights, leaving behind Babylo beautiful Ishtar Gate and the grand Processional Way. His capture of Judah and exile of Jerusalem's Hebrews would have a profound impac Judaism's sacred texts, many of which were composed in Babylon. Nebuchadrezzar's empire would not long survive him. A short 22 yeau after his death, Babylonia fell to Cyrus the Great, king of Persia. (See <u>Inside the 30-year quest for Babylon's Ishtar Gate</u>.)

#### THE KING'S DREAMS

In the Bible, Nebuchadrezzar is plagued by bad dreams, and the Jewish exile Daniel is able to interpret for him. Mattia Preti's (II Cavaliere Calabrese) 17th-century oil painting depicts the moment when Danie explains their meaning to the king. Private collection.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIDGEMAN/ACI

## **Babylon rising**

Nebuchadrezzar's feats were built on those of his father, Nabopolassar, founder of the Chaldean empire. Governor of the regio Chaldea, Nabopolassar seized the throne of Babylonia around 625 B.(

### which until then had been controlled by the waning Assyrian Empire.



Nabopolassar forged a coalition with the Medes to the east and fought against the Assyrians for the next decade. In 612 B.C. they sac Assyria's then capital Nineveh and toppled their rule. Babylonia had l been in the shadow of Assyria, and now it was time for it to rise.

# **PAST PASSION**

Photographed in the 1920s, the ruins in Babylon of a palace of Nebuchadrezzar were found during the first major digs at the site in the 1880s and '90s.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AKG/ALBUM

The Chaldeans were fascinated by their place in history. Nebuchadrezzar II's urban renewal projects were inspired by Babylon's past glory, and he made sure he left a record for future kings detailing the wonders he built. Fascinated by the historic descriptions Nebuchadrezzar's Babylon, 19th-century archaeologists spent decades searching for their remains.

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Dubbed the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean Empire by historians, Nabopolassar's new kingdom faced strong threats, especially from Ec allies of the fading Assyrians. After the Battle of Megiddo in 609 B.C., Pharaoh Necho II took control of Judah, a small kingdom that would l play a large part in Nebuchadrezzar's story.

For the first years of Nabopolassar's reign, Egypt and Assyria continued to harass the new empire. His eldest son and crown prince Nebuchadrezzar became involved in the military as a young man. Sou say he began his career in his late teens or early twenties and became amilitary administrator around 610 B.C.

In several years, Nebuchadrezzar rose to commander. At first he armies with his father, but took on sole command when Nabopolassar returned to Babylon. In 605 B.C. the crown prince soundly defeated E and the remnants of the Assyrians at Carchemish in Syria. Returning Babylon with Syria secured for the empire, Nebuchadrezzar learned t his father had died. Within three weeks, Nebuchadrezzar was proclain king of Babylonia. (See also: <u>Beautiful Babylon: Jewel of the ancient</u> world.)

A map of Nebuchadrezzar II's empire shows its extension from the Mediterranean, through the valleys between the Tigris and Euphrates, and down to the Persian Gulf.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MERCHE HERNÁNDEZ

## **Building up Babylon**

In Akkadian, the new sovereign's name, Nabukudurriusur, mean

"Nabu [the Mesopotamian god of wisdom and writing], watch over my heir." He was named after Nebuchadrezzar I, Babylon's warrior king the 12th century B.C., and pursued a path of expansionism. By the en Nebuchadrezzar II's 44-year reign, the empire had grown immensely. stretched from Palestine and Syria, occupied the fertile valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris, and swept down to the Persian Gulf. Cities were sacked, nobles imprisoned, and peoples exiled to Babylon. The king, mindful of his legacy, recorded his achievements for posterity on fired cylinders. The following inscription, taken from one now held by the British Museum, suggests that keeping the "peace" was a considerab burden on Nebuchadrezzar:

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Far-off lands, distant mountains, from the Upper Sea to the Low Sea, steep trails, unopened paths, where motion was impeded, where there was no foothold, difficult roads, journeys without water, I traven and the unruly I overthrew; I bound as captives my enemies; the land in order and the people I made to prosper.

A cylindrical stela covered with close-written Akkadian inscriptions, details the three new palaces built by Nebuchadrezzar II. It was buried in the hopes that fure kings would discover it.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICH LESSING/ALBUM Vassal states would pay hear annual tribute to Babylonia and fe its growing treasuries with: "silve gold, costly precious stones, bron palmwood, cedarwood, all kinds o precious things, to my city Babylo brought."

Nebuchadrezzar II was a wa by necessity, but a builder by disposition.The funds collected fro his states helped finance his civic improvements. Nebuchadrezzar

focused much of his building energies on restoring Babylon to its forn glory. Years of war with the Assyrians the century before had led to th destruction of Babylon in 689 B.C. Nebuchadrezzar II was following in footsteps of his namesake, the first Nebuchadrezzar, who, centuries before, had exalted Babylon over other cities, such as Nippur.

Continuing the work begun by Nabopolassar, the king built a gromoat, defensive walls, and canals. He refurbished temples and sanctuaries, paved the Processional Way, and embellished his own legendary palace. Toward the end of his reign, around 575 B.C., he bu

what is probably Babylon's iconic ancient landmark: the Ishtar Gate, decorated with cobalt glazed brick reliefs.

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The splendid Ishtar Gate, as it may have looked in Nebuchadrezzar's time, welcomed people to Babylo its cobalt blue splendor.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SOL 90/ALBUM

In so doing, both Nebuchadrezzars exalted the god Marduk, Babylon's patron deity, over other gods in the Mesopotamian pantheo Inscriptions exalt Nebuchadrezzar II as the "favorite of the god Mard<sup>1</sup> the king of the universe, who has "no enemy from the horizon to the s creating a bond of greatness linking, god, king, and the city of Babylo

If the favor of the god was regarded as crucial to the city, a more mundane resource-water-was also central to Babylon's preeminence. The biblical Psalm 137, in which the Hebrew captives sit and weep "by the waters of Babylon," may be a reference to Babylon's irrigation canals, the lifeblood of its economy and strength. Inscriptions present Nebuchadrezzar's canal system as a labor of Herculean proportions: "Alongside Babylon, great banks of earth I heaped up. Great floods of destroying water like the great waves of the sea I made flow around it."

# GLORY TO MARDUK AND NABU

A sixth-century B.C. seal shows a priest p before symbols of Marduk, patron of Bak and Nabu, god of writing and learning. Nebuchadrezzar's name invokes the latte

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERICH LESSING/ALBUM

This irrigation system may have fed one of Nebuchadrezzar's me

famous and mysterious accomplishments: the <u>Hanging Gardens of</u> <u>Babylon</u>, a wonder of the ancient world. Descriptions of this palatial complex say it had five courtyards, residences for the king and his co sorts, and an ornate throne room. The gardens allegedly held species every tree and plant from the empire. Ancient Greek historian Herodc described it as the "most magnificent building ever erected on earth.' Ancient sources do not provide an exact location for the gardens, nor archaeologists found remains, leading some to wonder if they ever ex at all.

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## Life in exile

Nebuchadrezzar's name echoes down through time not only due his restoration of Babylon but also for his place in Judeo Christian Scripture. He plays a major role in several important episodes in the Testament, including the sacking of Jerusalem and the 70-year exile o Jewish people to the city of Babylon. After the defeat of the Egyptians and Assyrians at Carchemish ii 605, the kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem fell under Babylo control. Like other vassal states, Judah had to pay tribute to Babyloni Unhappy with this arrangement, Judean kings rebelled several times, Nebuchadrezzar's retribution was swift and brutal. Babylonian forces razed Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. Powerful Judeans were al captured and forcibly deported to Babylon three times: in 597, 587, a 582 B.C.

# DEPORTATION AND DESTRUCTION

Chaldean prisoners are captured by Assyrians on a seventh-century B.C. stone relief from the palace of Sennacherib, Nineveh.

PHOTOGRAPH BY UIG/ALBUM

Razing a city following its conquest was standard practice in ancient Mesopotamia. Exactly the same fate had befallen Babylon when the Assyrians took it a century before the siege of Jerusalem. When the Chaldeans revolted, the Assyrian king Sennacherib laid siege to Babylon in 690 B.C. and defeated the rebels. "The corpses of men with no one to bury them filled the squares of Babylon," an inscription relates. Sennacherib exacted a more terrible punishment on the survivors: Babylon's temples were destroyed, their ruins flooded, and even the city's topsoil was hauled away. Like the Jews of Jerusalem, the Chaldean nobility of Babylon were also taken from the city into exile.

In the Bible, the Prophet Jeremiah warns these Judean kings tha God is unhappy because they have permitted the return of pagan wor They must return to the ways of God, or risk his vengeance: God will "Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, [God's] servant," to "bring [the Babylon against this land and its inhabitants, and ... will utterly destroy them" (Jeremiah 25:9). The Judeans, however, fail to heed Jeremiah's warnir and the Babylonians descend.

Jeremiah was spared, but most of Judah's survivors went into exile in Babylonia. The pain of separation from home runs through the books of the Bible devoted to this time, resulting in some of its most beautiful passages. In his allegory of the Exile, Ezekiel casts Nebuchadrezzar as a "great eagle, with great wings and long pinions, rich in plumage of many colors." The eagle king is presented as an instrument of God, who carries away the Jews and plants them as a seedling in "fertile soil; a plant by abundant wat

#### PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

Jewish communities in Babylonia and Pal each created their own Talmud, a book o Jewish law, history, and scholarship. In its shown in a 17th-century edition below, Je would find an indispensable guide to the heritage no matter where they lived.

PHOTOGRAPH BY NATHAN BENN/GETTY IMAGES

in "fertile soil; a plant by abundant waters, he set it like a willow twig (Ezekiel 17:35). The experience profoundly shaped Jewish religious an national identity.

Hebrew culture took root and flowered in Babylon as the exiles a community centered on religious life. Despite later being allowed to return to rebuild Jerusalem, many Jews stayed in Babylon. For centur the Babylonian community was a strong center of the Jewish faith. Th Babylonian Talmud, one of the central texts of Jewish religious law an theology, was produced there.

# **POWER OF FAITH**

A relief from a fourth-century A.D., sarcophagus lid, depicting a Jewish exile in Babylon refusing to worship the gods of Nebuchadrezzar II.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RMN-GRAND PALAIS

In the Old Testament of the Bible, the Book of Daniel recounts Nebuchadrezzar's treatment of the Jewish captives in Babylon. A story in its third chapter, depicted on the relief above, tells of a miracle that happened when Nebuchadrezzar orders the Jewish exiles to worship an idol. They refuse, and the king orders them thrown into a fiery furnace, but they emerge unscathed. Astonished, the king decrees toleration of their faith.

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Nebuchadrezzar died in 561 B.C. He was succeeded by three, sł lived weak <u>rulers</u>, the last of which, a child king, was murdered by Nabonidus, the last of the Chaldean rulers. Despite this violent power grab, Nabonidus was a scholarly man uninterested in politics, which ( him his throne. In 539 B.C. Cyrus the Great of Persia used Babylon's canals to breach the city and seize it. The long reign of the Persians began, the Jewish exile was ended, and Babylon began a new chapter under new rulers, still regarded as the greatest city in the ancient wo



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