

# From Babylon to Baghdad – On Hammurabi's Path

Edited by Nicola Laneri and Germana Barone - University of Catania Museum System 2024

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Piazza Università 2

ISBN: 979-12-210-7867-1

On the cover

Detail of the Stele of Hammurabi

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Francesco Priolo

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The University of Catania is proud to organize, in its Museum of Sicilian Knowledge and Mirabilia, located in the most important building of the University, the international exhibition “From Babylon to Baghdad—On Hammurabi’s Path”.

This is an event of international scope, which unites Italian, European and Iraqi institutions, and which represents the most prestigious showcase for the discoveries and findings of the archaeological excavations of the Baghdad Urban Archaeological Project, a research project led by our University in collaboration with the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage and with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, conducted for several years now in Tell Muhammad, on the outskirts of Baghdad.

For this initiative I would like to thank Prof. Nicola Laneri, professor of Archaeology and History of Art of the Ancient Near East and director of the archaeological mission at Tell Muhammad, and all his collaborators, some of whom are very young, and Prof. Germana Barone, delegate to the University Museum System, who enthusiastically welcomed the proposal to host in our spaces this evocative reconstruction of Mesopotamia from about 4 thousand years ago, at the time of the First Dynasty of Babylon of the great ruler Hammurabi, who would have marked the Mesopotamian tradition of the second millennium BC with numerous innovations. I would also like to thank the OELLE Foundation and all the other partners, starting with the Sicilian Region, for their financial and organizational support, together with the prestigious institutions that have allowed, through the concession of some of the most important finds, to further enrich the exhibition itinerary: the Vorderasiatisches Museum of Pergamon in Berlin, the British Museum in London, the Royal Museums of Turin, the Louvre in Paris.

Finally, a further thank you goes to the Einstein Center Chronoi center of excellence in Berlin, thanks to which the most renowned international experts will gather in our great hall to discuss, on the sidelines of the inauguration of the exhibition, the legacy of Hammurabi, monarch of the very powerful city-state of Babylon, and his influence on history and culture.

Finally, we will take this opportunity to celebrate not only the findings, but the daily and methodical activity of archaeological research conducted in the missions promoted by the University, from the excavation to the archaeometric analyses, to the management of data, to the valorization of research, fruition and digitalization, which also allows many of our young students, students of the three-year and master's degree courses, and specializing in Archaeology to gain fundamental work experience and growth in the field.

I imagine, in fact, and I ideally share their emotion in bringing to light, piece by piece, the complex system of fortifications and water management that marked the north-eastern side of the city of Tell Muhammad, an important military outpost along the north-eastern front of Babylon, or the monumental gate of the city walls of Hammurabi and dozens and dozens of finds dating back to the second millennium BC, blowing away dust and earth from pages of buried history. I am therefore certain, also by virtue of the enormous academic and media attention that these discoveries have aroused, that all this must be told and shown, in Catania and in a land like Sicily, also rich in history and traditions like the Near East, to shed light on the figure and role of Hammurabi of Babylon in the Baghdad area and to recall the history of the settlement of Tell Muhammad, for the benefit of the local and national public.

Germana Barone

Delegate to the University Museum System

Director of the Museum of Sicilian Knowledge and Mirabilia

With great pleasure, the Museum of Sicilian Knowledge and Mirabilia of the University of Catania hosts the exhibition “From Babylon to Baghdad—On Hammurabi’s Path”. The Museum is located in the Central Palace of the University, one of the most prestigious monuments of Catania’s historical architecture, a UNESCO heritage site, and is connected to the National Museum System. Established in 2019 with the aim of making available, in the form of a miscellany, the numerous materials (16th – 20th century) relevant from a historical, cultural and scientific point of view, belonging to the museums, collections and archives of the Catania University Museum System (SiMuA), the museum therefore presents itself as a central hub of a network of museums and collections, encouraging visitors to deepen their knowledge of the University’s museum heritage. Its location, in a particularly representative place, home to the Rectorate and central to the city, also allows it to play a role as a *trait d'union* with other museum structures, to share cultural initiatives and to co-design various activities. The Museum, next to the permanent exhibition rooms, set up in collaboration with the scientific directors of the various collections, is equipped with a section dedicated to temporary exhibitions, designed with the participation of institutions and associations, in order to further enrich the cultural offering. Since its opening to today it has been at the center of numerous initiatives, of an academic, informative, educational-laboratory nature and is in constant dialogue with the city, schools, tourist flows and certainly open to innovation. In continuity with this mission, this exhibition, unique in its kind, is placed which - like the permanent section - allows you to take an equally fascinating journey, through the history and culture of one of the most emblematic figures of antiquity.

The exhibition represents, in fact, an extraordinary opportunity to reflect on the lasting influences of Hammurabi and the crucial role that his legislation had in the development of subsequent civilizations, offering, at the same time, an in-depth look at the rich and complex history of Baghdad: a city that continues to be a crossroads of cultures and knowledge. It will be possible to admire some unpublished pieces, brought together for the first time thanks to the precious collaboration with the British Museum in London, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin and the Royal Museums of Turin. Among the works on display, archaeological testimonies of the highest value, original finds and historical documents that tell the story of the greatness of the Babylonian ruler and the evolution of his kingdom. This exhibition is therefore the result of an international synergy that underlines the importance of collaboration between cultural and scientific institutions in preserving and disseminating knowledge otherwise relegated to strictly academic fields. The presence of these works here in Catania is, in fact, an unrepeatable event: an invitation to explore the roots of Mesopotamian civilization and to reflect, equally, on how research must look – today more than ever – at the interdisciplinary dimension of knowledge.

This is precisely the direction taken by the installation of the Multifunctional Room linked to the exhibition, born from a work of choral collaboration between professors, PhD students and students from various departments of our university. The desire to illuminate the many faces that make up the diamond of archaeological research has culminated in a collection of ideas and projects that range from mineralogical, chemical and physical analyses of materials to topographic research and the digital reconstruction of monuments and finds, up to the implementation of software dedicated to data management and the development of a circular economy that enhances cultural heritage.

Ornella Laneri

President of the OELLE Mediterranean Ancient ETS Foundation

“From Babylon to Baghdad—On Hammurabi’s Path” is much more than a simple exhibition: it represents a fascinating and meaningful journey through the origins of the civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean, emphasizing the universal value of cultural and historical connections, themes dear to the OELLE Foundation, which has always been committed to promoting dialogue and contamination between the different expressions of the Mediterranean.

This exhibition highlights the centrality of the figure of Hammurabi and the strategic role of the city of Babylon: through archaeological finds, multimedia reconstructions and a carefully curated exhibition path, the visitor is immersed in a distant era, but at the same time close in its human and social dynamics. The objects on display tell stories of everyday life, conquests and transformations that, although thousands of years away, still echo in our culture today. Every artifact, every inscription and every trace of the past that resurfaces from the excavations of Tell Muhammad tell us about a world in which political, economic and environmental challenges were already central, and invite us to reflect on how our cultural heritage can help us imagine new ways to address them.

The Foundation therefore sees in “From Babylon to Baghdad” an opportunity to strengthen the dialogue between past and present, underlining how knowledge of our common roots is essential to address the challenges of the contemporary world. In an era in which conflicts often seem to prevail over connections, remembering the value of cultural interactions and dialogue between peoples is more necessary than ever. The theme of cooperation between institutions, at the basis of this project, reflects a virtuous model of international collaboration that aims not only to protect cultural heritage, but also to disseminate it among the general public.

The Foundation’s commitment translates not only into support for this initiative strongly desired by the University of Catania, but also into an invitation to everyone to rediscover the importance of the Mediterranean as a space for exchange, discussion and shared growth. Sicily, the place that hosts this exhibition, is symbolically the perfect crossroads for this dialogue: an island that, even today, continues to be a cultural laboratory of extraordinary vitality. It is an invitation to look beyond geographical and temporal boundaries, rediscovering the universality of a heritage that belongs to all of us.

Nicola Laneri

Department of Humanities, University of Catania

### Exhibition Introduction

“From Babylon to Baghdad—On Hammurabi’s Path” invites visitors on a fascinating journey through time, exploring the historical and sociocultural landscape of Mesopotamia in the second millennium B.C.E. Through the combination of multiple perspectives, the figure and legacy of Hammurabi, one of the most celebrated rulers in history, are highlighted.

The collection of rare archaeological artifacts and architectural models, together with an evocative selection of prints and photographs, recall Hammurabi’s contributions not only as a king, but also as a pioneer of justice and social and cultural change. His famous Code, one of the earliest known collections of laws, laid the foundation for legal systems that still resonate in our world today.

This exhibition is more than a look back: it is a reflection on how the innovations and ideas of ancient civilizations continue to influence our present. By following Hammurabi’s path, we gain a new perspective on the timeless pursuit of justice, good governance, and human progress.

We invite you to explore this narrative, connect with a legacy that spans millennia, and reflect on how echoes of ancient Babylon resonate in the pulse of contemporary Baghdad.

## HAMMURABI BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT

Hammurabi's dress, the fulcrum of an installation that introduces visitors to the exhibition, faithfully respects the identity of its time starting from the raw material: the Babylonians were skilled weavers of linen, one of the oldest plant fibers used by man. Its processing was a complex and sustainable process, and its use was intended for the royal authorities.

While on the one hand the reconstruction of the Amorite sovereign's dress and headdress follow a careful philological approach, the transmedia integration of images makes it a projection canvas.

The bloody chapter opened by the terrorist organization DAESH between 2013 and 2019 has had a strong impact on the archaeology of Iraq, combining the religious ideology of jihadist Salafism with the extreme use of violence, amplified by a wise use of the media. The iconoclastic “performative destruction” of monuments and archaeological sites carried out by DAESH constituted a public strategy of cultural genocide carefully choreographed and propagated on the web, which has deeply affected not only the memory of the local community, but also international public opinion and universal cultural heritage.

The reconstruction of the costume makes the figure of Hammurabi the protagonist of a journey through time, composed of dark colors and strong sounds that evoke in the white linen the need for a renewed peace. The project, aimed at telling the image of the Mesopotamian region between past and present, invites visitors to enter the heart of recent Iraqi history and to dress in a new positive perspective in the knowledge of the history of Mesopotamia.



## THE CODE OF HAMMURABI

The creation of a code of laws inscribed on a stele (in Akkadian *naru*) represents the most prodigious of the works of the Babylonian sovereign, and perhaps the most famous Mesopotamian legacy. In fact, it reads:

*Every oppressed man, who has a dispute underway, comes to this statue of mine as the "king of justice", reads carefully what is written on my stele, listens to my precious words, my stele will clarify his case.*

His figure sculpted in bas-relief stands out on the lunar summit in front of the god of the sun and justice, Shamash, who appears seated on a throne in the shape of a temple, wearing a horned headdress, a traditional symbol of the Mesopotamian deities, in the act of offering the sovereign the insignia of power, which characterize him as a pious executor of divine will. Beneath this meaningful scene, in which Hammurabi is admitted to the direct vision of the divinity and humbly raises his right hand to his lips in a sign of devotion, the basalt monolith contains the first code of laws in history.

Hammurabi's decrees are listed in approximately 3,500 columns of text in the Akkadian language, followed by a set of 282 laws. These covered various areas, from commercial regulations to those on property and family, often based on the principle of the law of retaliation (the biblical "eye for an eye": Exodus 21, 24). What emerges is a precious cross-section of Babylonian society, rigidly stratified into social classes, with punishments applied in proportion to the rank of each individual: an *awilum* was a free man of the landed aristocracy, a *mushkenum* was a palace employee, and a *wardum* was a slave.

The Codex was discovered in 1901-1902 by the French archaeologist Jacques de Morgan during excavations in the city of Susa (now in Iran), but it was originally erected in the city of Sippar, near the sanctuary of Shamash. Copies of the text were also produced in Nippur and Babylon and preserved in the temples of Enlil and Marduk.

## MESOPOTAMIA: PERCEIVING, RECONSTRUCTING AND MEASURING THE PAST

The development of chronologies and the definition of historical periods in ancient Mesopotamia are constantly evolving themes from the time of the deciphering of the first cuneiform writings to the present day. The problems related to the measurement of time, the perception of temporality, as well as the concept of periodization, are among the main lines of research of the Einstein Chronoi Center.

Before the great discoveries of the Assyrian capitals brought the attention of historians to ancient Mesopotamia, this civilization, seen through the lens of classical authors and the biblical text, was considered alien and monolithic, flattened in a temporality filtered by different cultures at different moments of historical memory. Current scientific research based on the deciphering of cuneiform texts, supported by archaeological data, has achieved, after just over a century from the beginning of these disciplines, a very detailed vision of fragments of temporality, often, but not always, placeable in a broader chronological framework, anchored in a unique and precise way to our era or, better, to our methods of measuring time.

### Measuring Time in the Times of Hammurabi

Archaeological chronology, based on technical innovations, such as the discovery or use of certain metals, and on datings detected by scientific analyses of dendrochronology, i.e. the measurement of growth rings in wood, or by measuring radiocarbon in organic remains, combined with stratigraphic sequences given by modern excavations, has produced broad-spectrum datings, which are still gradually being refined with the collection of new data. These datings measure the temporal distance from the present, offering a measurement of time mainly relative to the vision of the Western world of the 21st century.

On the contrary, cuneiform texts report an emic perspective of time measurement, offering very detailed but discontinuous temporal cross-sections. In the state archives and scribal schools of Mesopotamia, sequences of names of months, years, lists of eponyms, that is, officials who lent their name to a year, and lists of kings, organized by genealogies and geographical origin, represented the fundamental tools for the punctual recording of political events and economic transactions, as well as a medium-long range historiographical reflection, in the perception of one's own temporality. Furthermore, elements of synchronicity between dynasties of adjacent regions, as in the case of a list called by modern scholars the "synchronic list of kings" including the names of the sovereigns of Assyria and Babylon from the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC until the fall of the Assyrian Empire in 612 BC, provided the basis for the creation of the first local chronologies.

In southern Mesopotamia until the middle of the second millennium BC, therefore also in the time of Hammurabi, the years were named according to a political or religious event by the sovereign in office, an event that usually occurred in the previous year. For the reign of Hammurabi, 43 names of years are known, corresponding to all his years of reign. Fortunately, the scribal tradition of the time has transmitted to us lists with the precise sequence of the names of years, something not always obvious in the Mesopotamian tradition. Some synchronisms, such as that between the first years of the reign of Hammurabi, corresponding to the last years of the sovereign Samsi-Addu I, who reigned over northern Mesopotamia, or the political conquests of Hammurabi and the consequent change of local calendar by the subjugated city, have allowed us to correlate different local chronologies in an increasingly broader interregional framework.

### When Did Hammurabi Live?

According to the Mesopotamian royal lists, Hammurabi represents the sixth ruler of the First Dynasty of Babylon. The chronological placement in the first part of the 18th century BC between 1792 and 1750 BC,

reported in most history books, is far from obvious. Even today, these dates, which can probably be considered the most correct, are used in scientific dissemination as a convention. The debate on the choice of a Long Chronology (1848-1806 BC), Medium (1792-1750 BC) or Short (1728-1686 BC) arises from the need to place in an absolute chronological framework, that is, measurable with Western parameters contemporary to us, all those temporal sequences known from ancient texts. The process of anchoring a relative chronology, i.e. a sequence given by the Mesopotamian calendars, to an absolute chronology was possible thanks to dated cuneiform texts, which report astral observations, which can be dated absolutely by modern astronomical sciences. The observation of such events in antiquity allowed, with a fair, but not perfect, degree of precision, the placement of certain dates in a temporal framework, determined by time measurement parameters known to us.

As regards the era of Hammurabi, the observations of the movements of the planet Venus, recorded during the reign of the tenth sovereign of the Babylonian dynasty, Ammi-Saduqa (1646-1626 BC), successor of Hammurabi, were decisive. The dating of the conjunctions of the planet Venus with the Sun, observed by astronomers of the time, occur cyclically, every 64 years, giving rise to possible datings. The Middle Chronology is currently preferred, based on the combination of astral data with some datings of events that occurred during the time of Hammurabi, such as the death of the ruler Samsi-Addu I and the destruction of the city of Mari, on the middle Euphrates, recorded by different local calendars, data that can be supported by dendrochronological datings of southern Turkey.



The Einstein Chronoi Center, funded by the Einstein Foundation in Berlin, was born thanks to the interdisciplinary cooperation of various academic institutions in Berlin, with the aim of investigating the concept of time and its perception. The project "The Thousand Lives of Hammurabi" aims to analyze the historiographical tradition, the periodization and the historical reception of the historical-political figure of Hammurabi in the 20th and 21st centuries.

## THE I DYNASTY OF BABYLON (1894-1595 BC)

At the end of the third millennium BC, the collapse of the Third Dynasty of Ur, accelerated by the pressure of hordes of populations coming from the West (MAR.TU in Sumerian, Amurru in Akkadian), led to the decline of Sumerian hegemony in Mesopotamia, but above all to the emergence of a new power elite with Western Semitic origins: the Amorites. In this changing political scenario, after a period in which sovereignty had been held by two southern city-states (Isin and Larsa), it was central Mesopotamia, and in particular the cities of Babylon and Eshnunna, that rose to become the nerve center of Mesopotamian political power.

Not much is known about the history of Babylon during the reign of the first five rulers (from Sumu-abum to Sin-muballit, 1894-1793 BC). With the sixth ruler of the dynasty, Hammurabi, Babylon asserted itself on the international scene by undertaking a process of conquest and unification of the southern city-states (Isin and Larsa), and later also of the urban centers along the Tigris and the Diyala, destroying the rival city of Eshnunna with a flood.

Finally, further north, under the leadership of Hammurabi, the Babylonian armies defeated the kingdoms of Assyria, Yamkhad and Mari, thus unifying all of Mesopotamia. Hammurabi then assumed the title of "King of the Four Parts of the World".

The climate of conflict, in particular against Eshnunna, also marked the reigns of Hammurabi's successors. The ruler Samsu-iluna strengthened the Babylonian borders by building a military outpost along the Diyala, in Khafajah, and succeeded in finally defeating the kingdom of Eshnunna.

The last phase of the Babylonian kingdom, that of the ruler Samsu-ditana, was instead characterized by a political fragmentation that is clearly visible in the texts found at Tell Muhammad. The end of Babylon was the work of the Hittite ruler Mursili I, who, moving his troops from Anatolia, sacked the capital in 1595 BC and stole the statue of Marduk from its temple.

## A NEW VISION OF THE DIVINE

In the Mesopotamian world, the sovereign is the pious executor of the will of the divinities: the divine world therefore represents the fundamental star for the orientation of the king and his people. The essence of the divinity (ALAN in Sumerian, salmu in Akkadian) resides within its statue, which is placed in the most sacred sector of the temple. Each Mesopotamian city was the seat of a primary divinity: for example, the god of the storm Enlil resided in the sacred city of Nippur, the god of the sky Anu in Uruk, the divinity of fresh water Ea in Eridu.

During the reign of Hammurabi, a new vision of the divine world was affirmed through religious reforms that placed Semitic and Amorite divinities alongside the prestigious Sumerian tradition. Alongside the traditional triad of the Sumerian pantheon (i.e., Anu, Enlil, Ea), the astral triad Sin/Moon, Shamash/Sun, Ishtar/Venus asserts itself, while deities such as Adad and Amurru rise to the rank of national deities.

In the renewed Mesopotamian pantheon, the centrality of Marduk, the god of Babylon, most likely begins to emerge, who will then be canonized about 500 years later, under the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (12th century BC).

This process will culminate in the writing of the religious poem Enuma Elish ("When on High"), which narrates the deeds of Marduk in his clash with the monster Tiamat, from whose victory the elements useful for the creation of the world will emerge.

The poem was recited during the New Year's Festival (Akitu), which took place in the month of Nisan (April) and also fulfilled the need to renew the kingship of the Babylonian ruler through the intercession of Marduk.

## THE POWER OF THE SOVEREIGN

The royal lists (Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian) represent fundamental texts for understanding the history of ancient Mesopotamia and the succession of dynasties, narrating, as in the case of the famous Sumerian Royal List, the movement of royalty within the various Sumerian city-states, starting from the moment in which "royalty descended from heaven" in Eridu, and then moving to Kish after the Flood.

The sovereign was the pinnacle of Mesopotamian society, able to administer the cities, lead his troops into battle, but, above all, to interact with the deities. This relationship was consolidated thanks to the hierogamy (sacred marriage) that was celebrated between the sovereign and the first priestess during the festivities at the beginning of the year, held in spring. To gain the benevolence of the divine world, the sovereign had statues and steles created to be placed inside the god's cell (as in the case of the Stele of Hammurabi placed in the temple of Shamash in Sippar), on which ritual scenes or victories on the field were represented (an example is the famous Victory Stele of the Akkadian sovereign Naram-Sin - ca. 2300 BC).

With the advent of the Amorite dynasties during the second millennium BC, the sovereign's power seems to be influenced by the tribal logic that will determine the future of Mesopotamian royalty in Babylon and Assyria.

## CYLINDER SEALS

In ancient Mesopotamia, seals played a fundamental administrative and magical-ritual role, but they were also an identifier of the person who played a prominent role within the Mesopotamian social organization, such as the sovereign and members of the royal family. In fact, seals (KISHIB in Sumerian and *kunukku* in Akkadian) served as an official and binding signature to guarantee the authenticity of a document, legitimize a commercial transaction, sanction a property or limit access to warehouses and containers. They were mainly made of semi-precious stones, such as hematite and lapis lazuli, or of metal, skillfully carved and worn on cords or pinned to clothing.

Compared to the stamped seal, the cylindrical seal offered a larger surface for the creation of more complex iconographic motifs, which could include representations of deities, mythological scenes or religious symbols.

The spread of the use of cylinder seals saw a substantial increase from the 4th millennium BC, with the growth of bureaucracy, and remained significant even after the introduction of cuneiform writing, which could replace the name of the owner or symbols related to his title, his occupation, the ruler or the deity served. These tools therefore combined practicality, art and spiritual power, playing a crucial role in the social, economic and religious organization of Mesopotamia.

## CITY ADMINISTRATION

*Shumma Awilum... If a man...* is the incipit that introduces the laws of the Code of Hammurabi, exemplifying the importance of managing the members of Mesopotamian society and, above all, its vital center: the city. Since its birth during the 4th millennium BC in Uruk, the Mesopotamian city overturned human relationships traditionally linked to family relationships.

The birth of the city brought with it the creation of new professions, places dedicated to the worship of divinities (temples), to the representation of political and administrative power (palaces) and to the exchange of goods (karum, port in Akkadian). The city walls, gates and canals for navigation and irrigation of the lands became a source of pride for the Mesopotamian sovereigns.

Obviously, the needs of management and administration of public affairs determined a greater organizational complexity that led to the use of a written language (first Sumerian and then Akkadian, with its Babylonian and Assyrian variants). The creation of ideograms and syllabograms, engraved with a stylus on clay supports (the tablets), made it possible to draft mainly economic texts, but also historical and mythological poems. The clay tablet, inscribed in cuneiform characters, therefore became a fundamental tool for the administration of the Mesopotamian city by the scribes, who learned the language in special schools (eduba: house of the tablets). At the same time, it today represents a precious resource for modern scholars, allowing them to reveal the secrets of ancient history.



## THE EXACT SCIENCES

The Babylonians, while adhering to a theistic conception of life, developed a notable interest in understanding the natural world, defining an embryonic form of scientific method. This, combined with a taste for empirical observation, laid the foundations for further developments in the centuries to come. For example, astronomical investigation, initially developed in the form of divinatory practices, proved to be very useful for the creation of a lunisolar calendar, crucial for the continuation of the civil and religious life of the state, as well as for the development of a sexagesimal positional numbering system, the basis of today's temporal scansion.

The observation of lunar and solar cycles represented a precious temporal reference, becoming fundamental for the definition of an absolute chronology by modern scholars, thanks to the synchronisms with the datings of eponyms. A significant example is represented by lunar eclipses, which allow us to place the sack of Babylon by the Hittite ruler Mursili I in 1595 BC (Middle Chronology).

Another aspect highlighted by the tablets found in important centers of the second millennium BC, such as Tell Harmal in Baghdad, is the surprising knowledge of geometry, thanks to the creation of techniques for solving equations, complex calculations and practical methods for determining surfaces and volumes.

In the medical field, moreover, important innovations were introduced in the way of conceptualizing disease: in particular, a nosological system based on the association between the patient's symptoms and the divinity believed to be responsible for causing them, and a prognostic system based on empirical experience linked to magical therapies based on herbs considered medicinal.

## MESOPOTAMIAN SOUNDS

Music was an essential component of religious, cultural and social life, especially during the 2nd millennium BCE, when the Amorite kings of Babylon played a significant role in revitalizing musical practices. Since music was closely linked to religious rituals, an elite group of highly skilled priests, scholars and musicians were responsible for composing and performing official sacred songs, hymns and epics.

These compositions were believed to be divinely inspired, particularly by the god Ea, patron of wisdom and art.

Hammurabi introduced several changes in musical practices, including the integration of the lute into official iconographic representations. Hammurabi's creation of new art forms legitimized a new vision of Mesopotamian royal culture that, while maintaining traditional temple music in the Sumerian language, began to introduce a more “secular” vision of music. The latter is well recognizable in the production of votive terracotta plaques depicting musicians, also found in domestic contexts.

Hammurabi's involvement in the definition of music and liturgy also helped to consolidate Semitic cults, such as those dedicated to goddesses like Ishtar and Nanaya.

The most notable creation was the innovative song of Agushaya, dedicated to the goddess of love and war, Ishtar, and probably composed by the king himself:

Hammurābi, with this song  
your praise has been fulfilled  
under his reign,  
let him live forever!

## TELL MUHAMMAD

The site of Tell Muhammad, located in the south-eastern outskirts of Baghdad, can be considered a classic example of the cultural transformation that led to the emergence of the political power of Babylon and, a few centuries later, to its collapse at the beginning of the 16th century BC. Thanks to the first archaeological investigations by J. F. Jones and A. H. Layard, conducted in the mid-19th century, and especially to the excavations of the Iraqi scholars of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) since 1978, it has been possible to reconstruct the development of the settlement of Tell Muhammad during the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1900-1600 BC).

The city was characterized by mighty protective walls, a series of canals and the presence of a sacred quarter located in the highest part.

The interest of scholars of ancient Mesopotamia in this site is certainly due to the extraordinary preservation of the elevations of the buildings constructed in mud bricks, but also to the discovery of archives with tablets that use a formula interpreted as proof of the fall of Babylon at the end of the Old Babylonian dynasty, a fundamental clue to reconstructing the history of this prestigious royal lineage.

Furthermore, the brief research conducted by the British in the mid-19th century brought to light some mace heads in copper alloy, two of which with the cuneiform inscription É.GAL ḫa-am-mu-ra-bí ("Palace/Fortress of Hammurabi"), which confirm the strategic importance of the site of Tell Muhammad during the reign of Hammurabi as a military outpost along the north-eastern front of Babylon.

Texts discovered by Iraqis inside buildings dating to the end of the occupation of the site (Level II, ca. 1700-1600 BC) again show elements connected to the events of Babylon, as demonstrated by the formula mu-x-kam-ma ša KÁ.DINGIR.RAki uš-bu ("year x since Babylon ushbu").

The formula has long been interpreted as a record of the fall of Babylon (translation of the verb ushbu) at the end of the First Dynasty, during the reign of Hammurabi's last successor, Samsu-ditana. However, it remains of uncertain interpretation because the event that is remembered šattu ša Bābilim ušbu (preceded by the numbers 36 to 41) could have Babylon as its subject or object and also have a plural subject ushbu.

In fact, the expression could also be interpreted as symptomatic of a vacant power in the capital, suggesting that some local rulers in Tell Muhammad had arrogated to themselves power over Babylon!

## THE UNICT EXPEDITION TO TELL MUHAMMAD

Starting from the first mission in 2022, the archaeological investigation of the University of Catania at Tell Muhammad has focused on understanding the development of the settlement during the time of the First Dynasty of Babylon (Paleo-Babylonian period), already brilliantly investigated by the Iraqi archaeologists of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) in the 1970s and 1980s. The archaeologists had brought to light a large sacred area delimited by a road, at the center of which was a raised temple with a rectangular courtyard, an antechamber and a cell with an altar and an elbow entrance. A second minor temple, with a double cell, was located to the west of the first. The stratigraphy identified during the excavations highlighted how this sacred area could be dated to the end of the Paleo-Babylonian period, a dating confirmed by the tablets (Level II). : The excavation activities of Unict were therefore concentrated along the western edge of the mound, where the presence of a projecting body in raw bricks of about 40 meters in length and approx. 5-6 meters in width is evident, protruding along the perimeter wall of the ancient city. The excavation revealed that, at the center of this structure, there was a monumental gate with a projecting external buttressed bastion. The gate represents the terminal part of a complex sewer system marked, in its terminal part, by ceramic pipes that flowed into the canal in front, onto which the gate itself overlooked. An internal staircase provided access to a higher level located to the north of the entrance gate. As previously highlighted, the presence of the bastion along a canal that must have brought water from the north towards Tell Muhammad reinforces the idea of a system of "waterways" that connected nearby settlements and were used for all activities, such as travel or trade as well as, obviously, agricultural production. In terms of chronology, the bastion and the gateway would be placed in the earliest phase (perhaps during the early phase of the Old Babylonian period, Level IV-III, ca. 1900-1700 BC) and preceding the construction levels of the sacred area and the tablets, when the Babylonian rulers (including Hammurabi and Samsu-Iluna) had begun military campaigns against the Kingdom of Eshnunna. The presence of royal and divine iconography on some cylinder seals discovered inside the buildings of Level III would confirm this reconstructive hypothesis. It can therefore be assumed that the massive projecting body that constituted the gateway was originally erected as an entrance to the city during the early phase of the Old Babylonian period.

## UNICT SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AT TELL MUHAMMAD

The research activities at Tell Muhammad are supported by the Department of Biological, Geological and Environmental Sciences of the University of Catania, which provides an important scientific contribution through archaeometric analyses on samples taken from the site. Archaeometric analyses can provide clues about the construction and production practices and the environmental characteristics of the ancient territory. The research is developed on two fronts: the in-depth study of the production methods linked to pyrotechnology in the 2nd millennium BC and the geoarchaeological analysis for the identification of ancient water basins, such as canals and ports.

The archaeometric results could prove useful for investigating a production context that emerged in 2024, namely an imposing kiln for the production of baked brick ceramics with a vaulted roof.

The rubefaction of the earth, the greenish color of the bricks and the presence of production waste, together with the layers of burnt and vitrified plaster, are elements to be analyzed with chemical characterization techniques and mineralogical-petrographic techniques (X-ray fluorescence, optical microscopy on thin sections, X-ray diffractometry, infrared spectroscopy and Raman spectroscopy) to understand the heat exposure temperatures and firing conditions of the ceramics, as well as raw materials and sources of supply.

In parallel, the geoarchaeological study of the soil and sediments, through petrographic (microscopy on thin sections) and geochemical (multi-elemental characterization) analyses, aims to identify ancient water basins, crucial for water supply, local travel and sustainable agriculture in the first cities of human history.

## THE THOUSAND LIVES OF HAMMURABI

The discovery of the Hammurabi Code in 1901 in the city of Susa, in southwestern Iran, began the multiple temporal paths that have allowed the historical-political figure of Hammurabi, ruler of Babylon in the 18th century BC, to cross eras and cultures from antiquity to the present day.

The stele bearing the code of laws, currently preserved at the Louvre Museum in Paris, has represented for decades not only the first example of legislation in the ancient world, but also an important cross-section of society in the early centuries of the 2nd millennium BC, contributing to the understanding of the socio-economic dynamics of the time. Initially placed in the temple of the solar deity of Sippar, protector of justice, it remained on display in this location not far from Babylon, from the 18th to the 12th century BC. Subsequently, it was stolen as spoils of war and taken to Susa, capital of the kingdom of Elam, where it probably remained on display from 1155 BC. until at least the 6th century BCE, in the Persian era.

The charismatic personality of Hammurabi, who reigned for 43 years between 1792–1750 BCE, became the spirit of his age and remained imprinted in the memory of the civilizations of the ancient Near East for hundreds of years. The law code, along with much of the historical and literary production, was copied and passed down for generations, reaching the major cultural and political centers of Assyria and Babylonia. Some cuneiform tablets dated to the 7th and 6th centuries BCE from the libraries of Sippar, the religious and cult center of Achaemenid Babylonia, and from the famous library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, report that texts from the time of Hammurabi were preserved and passed down. The ancient texts may have served as models for stylistic exercises, to imitate the orthography and literary style of Hammurabi's time.

In addition to the cultural impact on the Mesopotamian tradition in antiquity, the discovery in modern times of the personality and cultural and political innovations of Hammurabi, such as the deciphering of the stele in the early twentieth century and the beginning of the German excavations in Babylon in 1899, played a fundamental role in the intellectual debate of that era, influencing the Western perception of the past and the development of theories on the origin of modern cultures.

In the cultural context of the well-known diatribe, called Babel-Bibel Streit ("controversy between the Bible and Babel"), according to which the Mesopotamian culture asserted itself as a forerunner of the biblical tradition, the historical figure of Hammurabi, compared with the biblical one of Moses, earned the progenitor of the origin of legislation. This debate pitted a secular state against divine laws, using the figure of Hammurabi as a model against the conservatism of the Christian Church and, unfortunately, as a figure to contrast with biblical characters, in the evolution of anti-Semitic theories.

A satirical representation, which appeared in a well-known German magazine in 1903, demonstrates how quickly Hammurabi had become a well-recognized figure in the culture of the Prussian Empire. Hammurabi, together with Abraham, depicted with evident physical features attributable to a Semitic stereotype, Moses, Homer, Kaiser Wilhelm I and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, a well-known anti-Semitic ideologist, is represented on reliefs placed to decorate a street in Berlin, designed at the beginning of the century.

The figure of Hammurabi survived these dark moments in European history. Modern historiography, mainly based on more recent archaeological discoveries from various centers of Mesopotamia and Syria, has partly scaled down and reshaped the historical perception of the sovereign. Nevertheless, his figure as a positive example of an enlightened legislator and ruler continued to be passed down, remaining one of the few elements of Mesopotamian culture known in primary school teaching.

In 1950 his image was included among those of the great legislators, represented at the Capitol of the United States of America.

Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum

Cinzia Pappi

Felix Wiedemann

## EXPOSED OBJECTS

1. Fired brick with a cuneiform inscription impressed in nine lines on the face and one side

BM 90135

Early Babylonian period (1792-1750 BC), fired clay

33 x 33 x 9/7.5 cm

Larsa (Iraq)

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1. ḫa-am-mu-ra-pí

2. lugal-kala-ga

3. lugal-

4. KÁ.DINGIR.RA.KI

5. lugal-an-ub-da-limmu-ba-ke 4

6. ba-dím

7. é-babbar

8. é-dutu

9. larsa.KI-ma-ta

Translation:

1. Hammurabi

2. mighty ruler

3. king

4. of Babylon,

5. king of the four parts,

6. builder

7. of the Ebabbar,

8. temple

9. of the god Utu [Shamash] in Larsa



2. Anthropomorphic figure in the round. Male deity with horned tiara and an aryballos in his hands from which streams of water flow

VA Bab 00559

Early Babylonian period (first half of the 2nd millennium BC), medium-fine clay

5.4 x 7.3 x 3.4 cm

Babylon (Iraq)

©Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Photo: Olaf M. Teßmer

3. Fragment of a relief plaque with a male figure in profile with a skullcap

VA 11569

Early Babylonian period (end of the first half of the 2nd millennium BC), ceramic

4.2 x 5.8 x 1.8 cm

Uruk (Iraq)

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4. Anthropomorphic figure in the round. Male head with skullcap and wide brim

VA Bab 03086

Early Babylonian period (first half of the 2nd millennium BC), ceramic

2.8 x 3.7 x 3.1 cm

Babylon (Iraq)

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5. Cylinder seal with representation of the ruler holding a mace in front of the suppliant goddess. Three-line cuneiform inscription ("Burriya, son of Shiramabu, servant of Sin")

BM 89123

Early Babylonian period, brown and white jasper

3.2 cm, diameter 1.85/1.75 cm

Sippar? (Iraq)

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6. Cylinder seal with representation of a goddess in a long robe walking to the right in front of a four-line inscription

VA 06939

Early Babylonian period (1850-1595 BC), quartz - rock crystal

2.5 cm, diameter 1.1 cm

Babylon (Iraq)

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7. Cylinder seal depicting a bearded figure in a skirt and pointed hat (probably the priest), with his hair gathered in a ponytail. The figure is in a regal position behind the suppliant goddess and a deity in a flounced robe with clasped hands. They face the bearded, flounced-robe sun god who is holding a blade beneath a sun disk and crescent, followed by a goddess in a flounced robe who is holding out a hand to him in a frontal position. The scene includes various animal elements, such as a fly, a fish, a hedgehog and a monkey, as well as a disk and a staff

BM 89368

Early Babylonian period, hematite

2.75 cm, diameter 1.55/1.45 cm

Sippar (Iraq)

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8. Cylinder seal depicting a scene of worship. On the right, a male figure in a long robe prays in front of a figure armed with a sickle-shaped sword and a club, probably the so-called warrior god-king, characterized by a clear modeling of the arm muscles. Behind him, two scorpions and a deity in a long robe and horned tiara who sits on a throne-like stool

VA 03271

Old Babylonian period (1850-1595 BC), hematite

0.90 cm, diameter 0.70 cm

Unknown provenance

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9. Cylinder seal with a presentation scene, in which a deity in a long robe and horned tiara takes by the hand another praying figure behind him and leads him in front of a figure in a short robe (probably the warrior god-king). Between the two figures, at the top, a crescent moon can be seen. Next, a suppliant goddess in a long, flounced dress, with both arms raised and a horned tiara.

VA 03049

Old Babylonian Period (1850-1595 BC), carnelian

1.6 cm, diameter 0.70 cm

Unknown provenance

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10. Cylinder seal with the representation, on the left, of a deity with a long robe and horned tiara facing a male figure with a knee-length skirt. Above the two figures, a crescent moon stands out. On the left, a female figure facing frontally, with her face turned to the right and long hair, with both hands on her chest. Next to the female figure, a sickle-shaped sword and lion's crown that occupies the entire height of the seal

VA 08462

Old Babylonian period (1850-1595 BC), stone

1.8 cm, diameter 0.90 cm

Babylon (Iraq)

©Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Photo: Olaf M. Teßmer

11. Cylinder seal with a scene of adoration with three anthropomorphic figures. On the left, a nude female figure depicted frontally with her two hands on her chest. On the right, a male figure in a knee-length robe, identifiable as the warrior god-king, faces a staff crowned with a star. The third figure in a long robe addresses the warrior god-king with his left arm bent against his body

VA 03267

Old Babylonian Period (1850-1595 BC), hematite

1.6 cm, diameter 0.80 cm

Unknown provenance

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12. Cylinder seal with the representation of an ascending storm god holding a harp-sword behind him and a lightning pitchfork in his right hand, and striding over a trapezoidal mountain on which he rests his foot. Behind him is a fight scene between a rearward-facing goat rampant against a lion-griffin

BM 89301

Early Babylonian Period, hematite

1.75 cm, diameter 0.85 cm

Babylon (Iraq)

©The Trustees of the British Museum

13. Cuneiform tablet dating back to the twenty-first day of the fifth month of an eponymous year of Samsuiluna that refers to the delivery of silver shekels on the occasion of the abu festival

MR 21.M380-1.774 - MAT 756

Early Babylonian period (1900-1600 BC), clay

3.3 x 4 x 2 cm

Unknown provenance

©Courtesy of MiC - Musei Reali, Museo di Antichità

14. Cuneiform tablet dating back to the third day of the seventh month of the year of Samsu-iluna 8, indicated in the text as the year of the royal podium. The text refers to the output of residues from the preparation of beer

MR 21.M380-1.776 - MAT 758

Early Babylonian Period (1900-1600 BC), clay

2.7 x 3 x 1.5 cm

Unknown provenance

©Courtesy of MiC - Musei Reali, Museo di Antichità

15. Tablet with cuneiform inscription dating back to the thirtieth day of the first month of the year Samsu-iluna 23, indicated in the text as the year “Samsu-iluna the king through the terrible Power”. The text refers to eighty-four harvesters employed to cultivate the agricultural field under the control of General Marduk-nasir

MR 21.M380-1.779 - MAT 762

Early Babylonian Period (1900-1600 BC), clay

3.8 x 4.5 x 2.5 cm

Unknown provenance

©Courtesy of the MiC - Royal Museums, Museum of Antiquities

16. Cuneiform tablet with references to a loan of silver

MR 21.M380-1.765 - MAT 745

Early Babylonian Period (1900-1600 BC), clay

4 x 5.5 x 1.2 cm

Larsa (Iraq)

©Courtesy of the MiC - Royal Museums, Museum of Antiquities

17. Fragmentary tablet with mathematical cuneiform inscription and geometric design

VAT 07621

Paleo-Babylonian period (1850-1595 BC), clay

6.5 x 7.4 x 3 cm

Uruk (Iraq)

©Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Photo: Olaf M. Teßmer

18. Cast of an Akkadian cuneiform mathematical tablet. The original, dating from the 19th-18th century BC, comes from Tell Harmal (Baghdad)

Reg. no. C255

1950-2000, plaster

©The Trustees of the British Museum

19. Cast of an Akkadian cuneiform mathematical tablet. The original, dating from the 19th-18th century BC, comes from Tell Harmal (Baghdad)

Reg. no. C256

1950-2000, plaster

©The Trustees of the British Museum

20. Clay tablet, smooth on the recto and with four lines of inscription on the verso; plan of a house; repaired

BM 86394

Early Babylonian Period, clay

10.16 x 7.62 cm

Unknown provenance

©The Trustees of the British Museum

21. Plaque with erotic scene, where a male figure is almost upright and embraces the hips of the female figure, who is slightly bent forward. With her left hand she holds a straw that protrudes from a jug on the floor in front of her, while her right hand reaches around her lover's waist from behind

VA Bab 03576

Early Babylonian Period (first half of the 2nd millennium BC), ceramic

7.7 x 13 x 0.99 cm

Babylon (Iraq)

©Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Photo: Olaf M. Teßmer

22. Plaque depicting a musician with a harp

VA Bab 03302

Early Babylonian period (2nd millennium BC), medium-fine or fine-mix pottery tempered with straw

3.6 x 8.1 x 3 cm

Babylon (Iraq)

©Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Photo: Olaf M. Teßmer

23. A flattened spherical mace head with a flange at the top and a hole in the centre for the handle. A cuneiform inscription on the side corresponds to a reference to Hammurabi's palace

BM 22455

Early Babylonian period (18th century BC), copper alloy: cast

4.6 cm, diameter 6.4/2.75 cm

Tell Muhammad (Iraq)

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24. A flattened spherical mace head with a flange at the top and a hole in the centre for the handle. A cuneiform inscription on the side corresponds to a reference to Hammurabi's palace

BM 22456

Early Babylonian period (18th century BC), copper alloy: cast

4.35 cm, diameter 6.23/2.75 cm

Tell Muhammad (Iraq)

©The Trustees of the British Museum

25. Flattened spherical mace head, with a flange at the top and a hole in the centre for the handle

BM 91315

Early Babylonian period (18th century BC), copper alloy: cast

4.5 cm, diameter 6.35/3 cm

Tell Muhammad (Iraq)

©The Trustees of the British Museum

26. Bracelet or anklet, open (now folded), with some of the original polish. Decoration incised on the ends with chevrons between simple circular bands

Reg. no. 592

Early Babylonian Period (18th century BC), copper alloy: cast, engraved

0.7 cm, diameter 11.45/9.9 cm

Tell Muhammad (Iraq)

©The Trustees of the British Museum

27. Bracelet or anklet, open (now folded), with some of the original polish. Incised decoration on the ends with chevrons between simple circular bands

Reg. no. 593

Early Babylonian Period (18th century BC), copper alloy: cast, engraved

0.7 cm, diameter 11.15/9.25 cm

Tell Muhammad (Iraq)

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