

# THE BABYLONIAN WORLD



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Gwendolyn Leick

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# THE PALACE AND THE TEMPLE IN BABYLONIA



*Walther Sallaberger*

**T**wo institutions dominated Babylonia, the palace and the temple, representing the political power and the religious centre, respectively. As seat of the political power, the palace housed the king and his court. In the temples the dozens, even hundreds, of gods of Babylonia were venerated, the main city god or minor gods in smaller sanctuaries.

Both palace and temple can be regarded as oversized houses, since one of their functions was to serve as living place: for the king or for the deity. Therefore, the simple layout of a Babylonian house may also be seen in the gigantic dimensions of a palace or of a temple: the rooms placed around a central courtyard with one main reception room opposite the entrance. The master of the house lived in his fitting abode: the king with his family, including a large section of women, the wives, daughters, wet-nurses, their attendants, along with all the servants and officials in charge; and the god with his divine consort, the main point of reference for all women of the town, their children and their divine staff.

### THE TEMPLE IN THE CITY

In a larger Babylonian city one would find many temples, but only one palace. The latter was not necessarily restricted to the royal capital of a state, but the king disposed of palaces at several places and also provincial governors could build their palace.

The different roles of palace and temple in society become immediately clear after a look at the map of any Babylonian town (see Figure 18.1). As an example we take the city of Babylon in the first century, the time of its largest extension, which boasts the main palaces of the Chaldean kings, of Nebuchadrezzar and his dynasty. The palaces occupied a prominent position in the north-western corner of the town at the bank of the river Euphrates and at both sides of the main street. The living quarters were separated from the palace, which was itself surrounded by massive walls. This is a fitting expression of the distance and separation of royal power.

Marduk, Babylon's god and, by the first millennium, the divine ruler called Bel, 'Lord', venerated highly all over the country, occupied the centre of the town: the large temple precinct occupied a remarkable portion of the whole inhabited area of

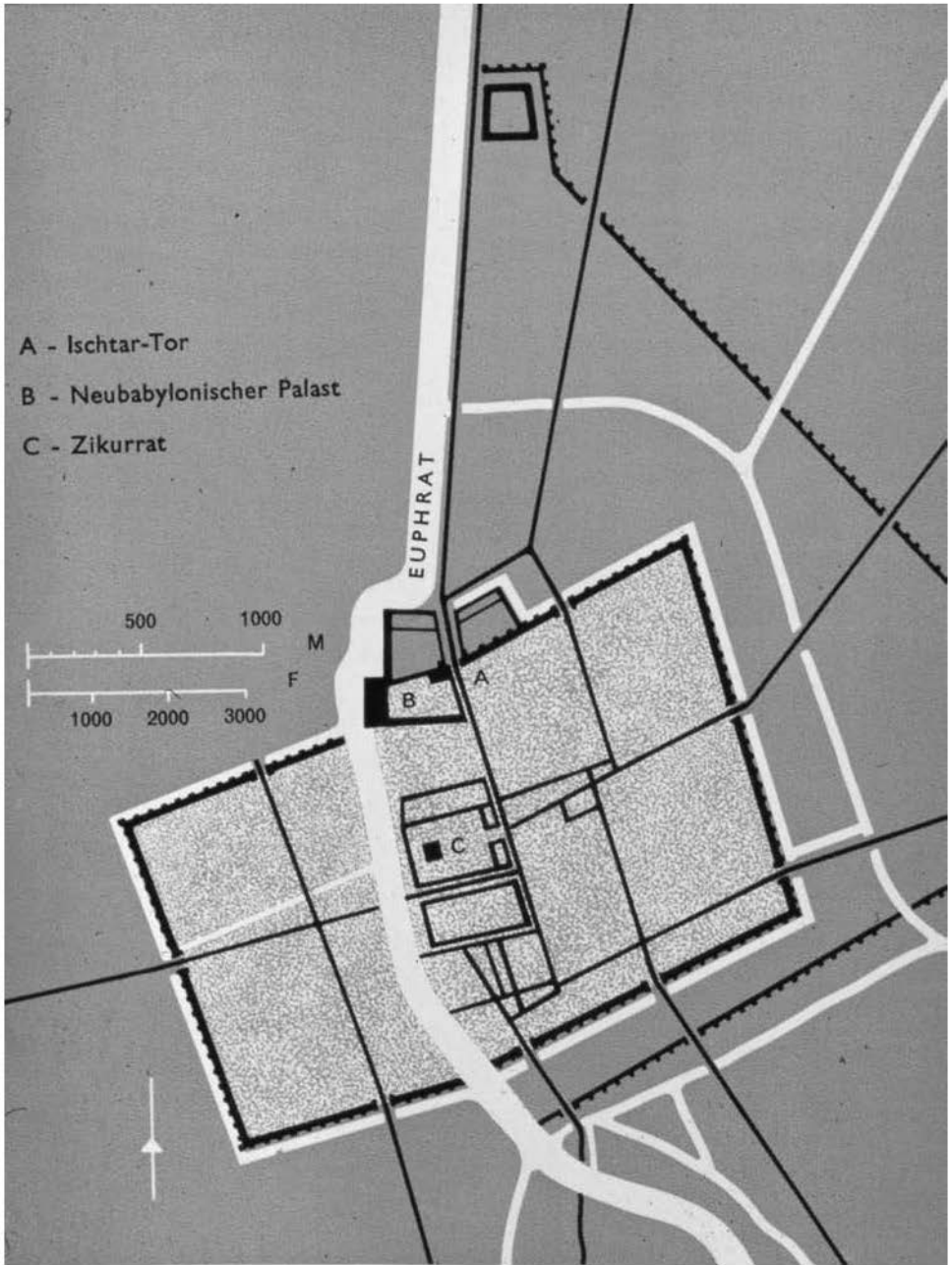


Figure 18.1 Reconstructed map of Babylon in the first millennium.

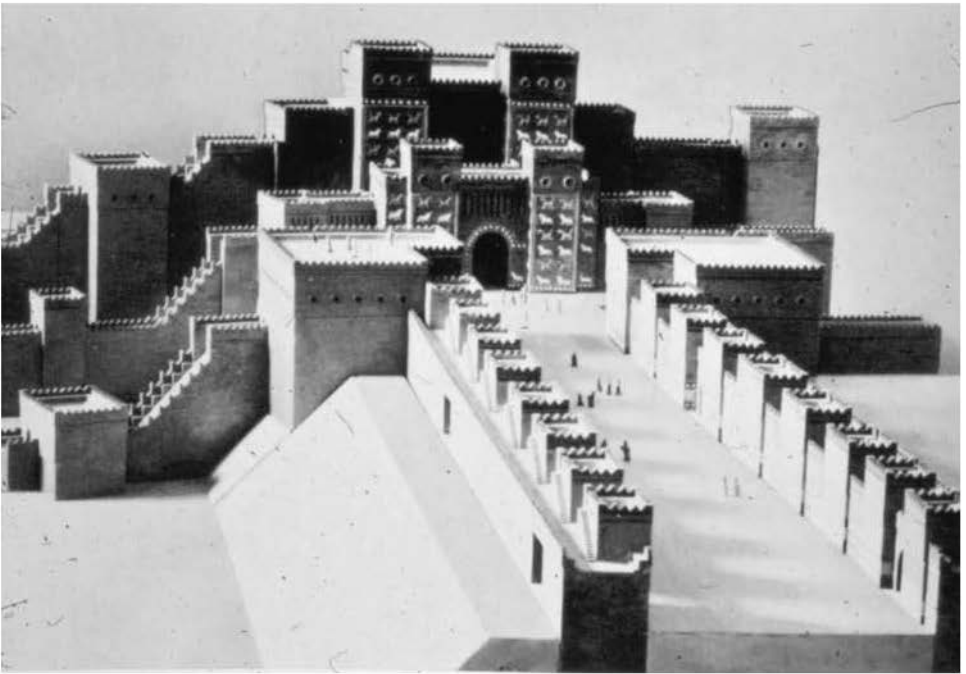
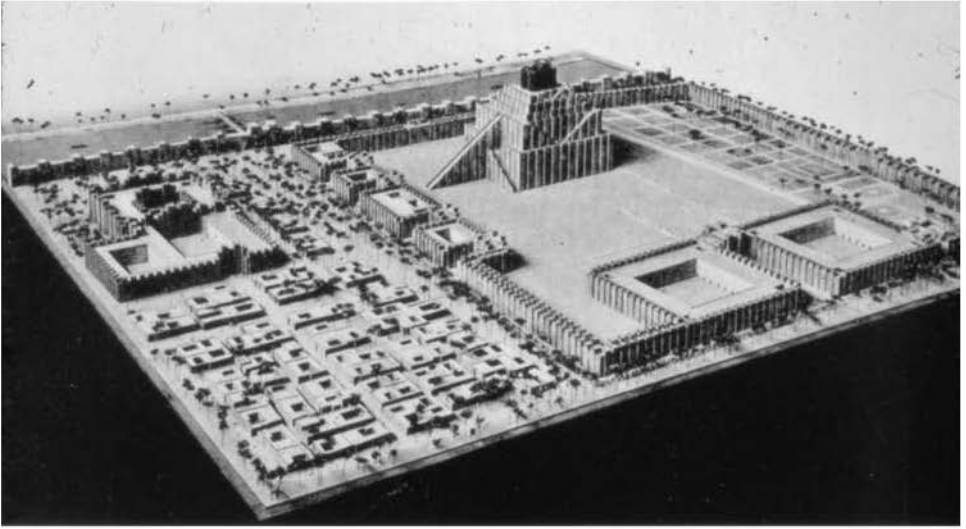


Figure 18.2 Model of the Marduk sanctuaries in Babylon (above); the Processional Way and the Ishtar Gate (below) (H. Schmökel, *Ur, Assur und Babylon* Tf. 114).

Babylon. A temple was bound to its traditional place and it was mandatory to keep the right spot of the cella at every rebuilding of the temple. The huge temple of a city's main deity is the main public building of any town, situated at its centre and providing the largest open space, perhaps even the only large open space. The stepped temple tower of Babylon, the ziggurat, extending over a square of ninety metres on the ground, rose in seven large steps to a height of probably sixty-six metres as an artificial massive mountain built of bricks and decorated at the outside (Allinger-Csollich 1998). The temple towers of the main Babylonian cities became thus the most prominent landmarks in the flat alluvial plain.

The position of the temple is an apt expression of its function as a focus of the city's identity. The main deity of a town together with his wife, his son and his divine staff could constantly protect the citizens, and the people would easily reach the gods. Everybody enjoyed the annual festival when the god left the temple in a procession and beer and food were generously distributed.

The city god's presence was felt in everyday life, too. Oaths were sworn by the city god, and not only lawsuits, but any simple legal transaction such as marriage, adoption or sale demanded an oath. The presence of the deity in legal cases could be guaranteed by bringing a symbol of the god such as a standard or a weapon (Veenhof 2003). The city god was often addressed in greetings, which are known to us only in a written version from private and business letters. A standard Babylonian letter to a colleague or a family member usually opened with good wishes, such as 'May god Marduk keep you in good health!' (Old Babylonian) or 'May Marduk and Nabû [i.e. Marduk's son] bless my father!' (Neo-Babylonian). Finally, any larger group of persons from a town would reveal the name of their city god by simply telling their names (Edzard 1998). Babylonian names most often included a divine name, and many citizens gave their children names that venerated the care and help of the city god; thus Babylonian names consisted of little phrases such as Marduk-apla-iddina 'Marduk has given me an heir', Ina-Esagil-shuma-ibni 'In Esagil [i. e. Marduk's temple] he created the name [i.e. offspring]', or Nabû-balata-iqbi 'Nabû pronounced life'.

The close connection between a god in his temple and his town remained basically constant through millennia, and so god and city could almost become synonymous. There is no doubt that the city god and his temple became the true symbols of a city for all its inhabitants. This connection between a god and his city in Babylonia can sometimes be detected in the cuneiform signs used to express a town or a god. So the sun god's city, Larsa, is written with a combination of the sign for 'sun(god)' and for 'abode'; if this sign for 'abode' or 'place' is combined with the standard of Inana, one gets the name of Inana's town Zabalam, or with the standard of the moon-god Nanna, the resulting ideogram is the one of the moon-god's city, Ur (Michalowski 1993). On the other hand, a main god could be just called 'Lord' of his city, like Ningirsu, that is 'Lord of (the city) Girsu' or Nin-Nibru 'Lady of (the city) Nippur'. These examples indicate that the close connection between city and its deity evolved at least in the first stage in the development of writing around 3000 BC or in the early third millennium.

A considerable number of persons, especially of the 'better' families took part in the daily provisioning of the temple (Jursa 1995; Bongenaar 1997). The deity literally lived in the temple and, therefore, had to be served beverages and food several times a day. These daily offerings were prepared by citizens who held the respective rights

and who were entitled to use the left-overs of the divine meal. Such prebends, income from the daily services, could be inherited or even sold (van Driel 2005). Also the temple personnel received regular food rations from the temple's income. A temple housed craftsmen, such as carpenters or basket weavers, for its upkeep and eventual repair, millers, bakers or brewers in the food production, guards, gate keepers and courtyard sweepers for the care of the temple. The temple's fields were cultivated by ploughmen and their attendants. Furthermore, a temple cared for orphans, blind or elderly people; apparently, by sustaining the temples, the ruler fulfilled his promise to care for the poor and neglected and for the widows and orphans of his country (cf. Zettler 1992). All these persons linked to a temple who did not perform priestly duties lived on the temple's resources.

Temples employed singers and musicians, and they must have sung regularly the hymns and prayers praising the gods. The priests served the food to the gods and assisted in the rites which were performed by the high priest and purification priests (Sallaberger and Huber-Vulliet 2005). In approaching the temple from the perspective of the persons living on the temple's holdings and income of food, it becomes obvious that a Babylonian temple was much more than a home of the deity. The temple as an important employer is certainly only one aspect of its social relevance, but it is not the least one which can be added to the points addressed above.

## RELIGION AT THE PALACE

As we have seen, a Babylonian temple was much more than a religious institution. On the other hand, as we are going to discuss presently, religion was not at all restricted to the temple. Religion may be seen as a salient feature of Babylonian culture, which could not exist independently of the culture: being a Babylonian meant believing in the Babylonian gods. So the so-called political centre of the country, the palace, was always a centre of religion, too. The king acted for his land and his people before the gods, and the immortals bestowed well-being and fertility to the king as representative of his country. In this role the king participated in the state festivals at the temple, first and foremost the New Year's festival at Babylon. Every year the king returned his insignia to the god and, after swearing that he had not done any harm to Babylon, he was set in office again. The divine ruler Marduk and the earthly ruler left the cella hand in hand for the festival's procession, and at the 'socle of destinies' in the central courtyard of Marduk's monumental sanctuary at Babylon, the god pronounced the destiny of the king for the coming year. So in the annual festival at Babylon the king was presented as the one crowned and protected by the divine ruler (Black 1981; Pongratz-Leisten 1994).

The king as sole representative of his people needed special protection, and so religious specialists were present at the palace to explore the will of the gods and to dispel evil. Religious life at the royal court is best known for the Assyrian palace of the seventh century BC, but since the rituals of the diviner and the exorcist were, as a rule, of Babylonian origin, we may safely assume a similar religious life at the palace of Babylon, too. This is confirmed by inscriptions of Babylonian kings or by incidental references in various kinds of texts. The diviner had to disclose the decisions of the gods, be it past or future events. The usual way to obtain this knowledge was by means of extispicy, that is the observation of a lamb's liver and other intestines

(Maul 2003 and this volume). In this technique of future-telling, the formation and wrinkles of the fresh liver were regarded as a message of the gods which could only be deciphered by highly trained specialists, the 'seers'. And they had to work quickly since after a very short period the uneven surface of the liver became smooth and so the 'writing' disappeared. The diviner was consulted before important decisions such as a military expedition or the appointment of an official. In the case of any evil that had befallen the king, an illness or even a malicious ominous sign, the exorcist or incantation priest was called to perform the appropriate rituals to dispel the evil and to let the king's personal god return. These religious specialists were not affiliated to a temple and they performed their services for every person who could afford it. The most able specialists, however, were employed by the palace.

Private habitations could include small shrines in the early periods of Babylonia and, in the same way, a palace could house sanctuaries for the protective deities of the royal family. In Babylonia, this seems to be restricted to the early periods until the early second millennium. Also the cult of the ancestors of the family was a religious duty performed in the palace as in any other house: the forefathers of the master of the household were venerated and their names were called and thus preserved from oblivion, as every person would hope for his own future (Radner 2006).

In summary, the palace was an important centre of Babylonian religion. This religious role, however, differed mainly in scale but less in substance from the private houses and their inhabitants. The uniqueness of the figure of the king in Babylonian society, however, implies a unique importance of the king as religious person.

## THE PALACE IN THE LIFE OF THE BABYLONIANS

In Babylonia, 'the palace' was not only a building but also an institution that could, for example, 'sell' goods or 'write tablets' to testify the ownership of a field. The palace as seat of the ruler controlled law and order in Babylonia, and the king himself was the highest juridical authority. So the palace issued various regulations to the country, but it served also as the highest law court (Westbrook 2003). In this regard, the royal palace of Babylon was very much respected by the inhabitants: it was hoped that a legal dispute would not end up in Babylon. The private letters of the Old Babylonian period allude to this function at various occasions, and one may find threatening phrases such as 'if this is not the case, I will write to the palace' or 'you will not be able to meet the claims' of the palace at Babylon (Sallaberger 1999: 251).

The respect paid to the palace by the Babylonians is not only based on its juridical role. Because of its concentration of economic means, the palace employed the most able and most influential persons of the state. So it seems to have been the Babylonian dream to 'go up' to Babylon to enter the palace, and whoever had managed this was accompanied by the good wishes of his relatives and his clients. This is expressed in the greetings of an Old Babylonian letter: 'The protective deities of my daddy may grant you, my father, a long life (still) as old man and with a good name in the palace where you are walking about!' (Kraus 1964: no. 15).

Also in an economic sense the palace was central in the life of the Babylonians: the ultimate owner of the land was the king who gave it to his subjects who were



obliged, in exchange, to perform *corvée* work. The palace collected taxes from various brands. In the Old Babylonian period, various economic sectors were not directly controlled by the palace, but entrusted to entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs had to deliver either the products of agriculture, cattle-breeding, cultivation of dates or fishing directly, or an equivalent in silver (Renger 2004). Thus, the surplus of the economy of the country was collected by the palace. Only a part of the incoming goods was stored, since they had to be used to meet the state's expenses.

## THE TREASURES OF THE PALACE

The cuneiform archives of administrative texts found in palaces are primarily concerned with a specific category of goods that one may term prestige or luxury goods. This shows clearly that the administration of goods, such as the storable textiles and precious stones, well as delicacies, formed a central task of the palace. This can be observed in the whole ancient Near East in impressive continuity and constancy.

These prestige goods, of course, did not serve the basic needs of food, clothing and tools of everyday use, but they stand out both for their 'uselessness' and their immense value. The least obvious case is, perhaps, the character of meat as a luxury good; we should not forget that meat was usually not offered at the ordinary man's table. Of the delicacies served at the palace, one should also mention that wine was served instead of the more ordinary beer. Objects of silver and gold were of high value because of the material used. Precious metals had to be imported, but silver was the standard currency in Babylonia, only interrupted by a short phase of gold prices. Textiles are more difficult to evaluate, but here the enormous amount of labour spent to produce more valuable textiles has to be accounted. Also precious metals were transformed into masterpieces of handicraft, such as vessels or jewellery, and the texts abound in references to figurative decoration, inlays or granulation. The female weavers or the goldsmiths working at the palace had to be sustained by the income of the country, too, and the amount of labour spent added to the high value of the goods of the palace's treasury. Although only the palace could acquire and produce these luxury goods at a high level, the production involved many more craftsmen and specialized workers and in this way segments of the population participated in the economy of the palace.

The precious goods were not only kept in inaccessible treasure chambers of the palace. This would contradict the character of prestige goods, which have to be shown in order to have an effect of excessive splendour and thereby power. This principle of the conspicuous consumption, the multiple presentation of the acquired goods, is dealt with in the brilliant analysis by Thorstein Veblen in his 'Theory of the Leisure Class' (1899). As a matter of principle, prestige goods are always diametrically opposed to the useful and productive. This concerns not only the character of the goods but also their users. Veblen points in his contemporaneous world to women, serving for prestigious purposes and relieved of the ordinary duties; to the army of liveried servants; the members of an elite class who are not occupied with productive work.

It is important to note that only the palace was able to distribute such treasures. Of course, the court followed the common social norms and conventions, and thus presents can be found at other levels of society, too. But only at the palace did the expenditure

of goods take place on such a scale that it was regularly documented in administrative texts. And, here, only the palace was able to distribute such treasures, not the other institutions of Mesopotamia, including the temple. Temples managed the agriculture, they received rich donations by the ruler, including gold and silver, and thus served as a kind of treasure-chamber, but temples could not pass on these goods.

Not all the treasures delivered to the palace were stored there, but a part of them was distributed. Interestingly, not only the materials treated by the administrative texts from palace archives, but also the recipients of the goods, were strikingly similar throughout the history of Babylonia.

A large amount of goods were delivered to the gods in the temples: meat or other delicacies for offerings, or silver and gold as dedications. This meets our expectations, since the ruler owed his office, the stability of his rule and the welfare of the country to the gods. Therefore, the gods received a fitting share of the precious goods that had been produced by the combined forces of the whole population.

The palace also spent some of its treasures for 'purchases'. But, perhaps contrary to our expectations, the palace did not only invest the silver to buy necessary goods and materials, especially tin to produce bronze, but spent it for luxury goods such as lapis lazuli, expensive riding animals or textiles. The Mesopotamian merchants acquired the materials that could not be found in the alluvial plain, namely wood and resins, stones and metals, in the Eastern mountain ranges. A large part of trade was thus linked to the prestige economy of the palace.

Textiles or jewels could be presented as gifts to persons. In large part, the presents left the country and were given to other rulers and their courts, or they were presented to messengers and representatives from abroad who came to visit the royal court. The scribes of the pertinent administrative texts sometimes noted that these presents were sent at birth, marriage, illness and death in the family. Of course, after an appropriate time, the recipients of the gifts repaid their debt with a counter-gift according to the habit and expectations; and these gifts were noted in the administrative documents as incoming goods. Seen in a strictly economic perspective, this might look like an exchange without any profit or loss, but at least products typical for their provenience were exchanged. To mention just one example: in the Later Bronze Age, the fourteenth century BC, some documents shed light on the exchange between the courts of Babylon and of Egypt. Here, Babylon sent lapis lazuli, which it acquired from the East, and horses, which were especially used for battle-chariots, to Egypt, and the Egyptian pharaohs returned the much desired gold to Babylon. The letters exchanged between the courts give a vivid description of the exchange. The Babylonian king complains:

But now when I sent a messenger to you, you have detained him for six years, and you have sent me as my greeting-gift, the only thing in six years, 30 minas of gold of the quality of silver . . . When you celebrated a great festival, you did not send your messenger to me, saying, 'Come to eat and drink'. Nor did you send my greeting-gift in connection with the festival. It was just 30 minas of gold that you sent me.

And he ended the letter: 'for 10 wooden chariots and 10 teams of horses I send to you as your greeting gift' (Moran 1992: EA 3). The letters make no secret of the purpose of the gift exchange: it is for the good 'brotherly' relations that are maintained

by the constant exchange of gifts. So the given away riches prove to be clever investments in the political future of the own state.

Another group of recipients mentioned in the administrative texts are persons from the ruler's own country. To understand these presents, we have to be aware of the ambivalent character of the gift. The material benefit is always connected with the obligation to repay the debt. This debt need not be repaid materially as by the equal, but the status of debt can be kept forever and thus it implies a permanent obligation. The ruler generously distributing gifts by this means obliged his people, thereby acquiring a symbolic capital which only enabled his exertion of power. Who received the precious presents of textiles and jewellery from the royal court? First, there was the family of the ruler, his wife and the queen-mother, sons and daughters, and the wet-nurses. Birth, marriage, festivals, illness and death offered the occasions for presents to other courts as well as to members of the family or the highest dignitaries of the palace. Personal occasions, not political deeds, provided the background for gifts; but the close relations within the family and with the highest officials was the firm fundament of any exertion of power.

The study of administrative archives leads to the recognition of the important role of the army: generals are among the most important recipients of gifts; military success is the occasion for festivals where gifts are distributed, and even the messenger bringing good news is rewarded. Large quantities of the best food, especially of meat, are given to the army when 'invited' by the palace. The 'meal of the king' in the palace of Mari was an opportunity to show off the wealth of the palace, through the richness of the food that was offered. It was also a chance to display the elite of the country, who were invited to the banquets with generals of the army and foreign messengers.

The administrative personnel of the palace received such goods only occasionally and priests are rarely mentioned among the recipients. Without doubt, the cultic personnel received its share of the offerings brought to the temple, but apparently the king was not interested in obliging the highest priests with the bribe of precious goods.

And finally, one group also appears regularly among the recipients of prestige goods, namely performing artists such as singers, musicians, dancers and acrobats. Art is linked to the palace, and the artistic decoration of metal vessels and, probably, of textiles is another instance of this connection.

Even if the prestige goods are concentrated at a restricted upper class, they determine the economy and society of the whole country. Their acquisition by ways of trade and gift exchange, and their production require all available resources. These goods could be distributed to more persons than just a small group in the centre of power, if one considers recipients such as messengers or the army. And, furthermore, festivals offered occasions to distribute the precious goods of the palace to all the people. These goods served a more important purpose than the economic one, because the gifts of the ruler consolidated and strengthened the society.

## THE RULER AND THE TEMPLE

The palace was the home and the governmental centre of the king and so his treasures were used to erect buildings of the largest dimensions and to embellish them with

the best works of art or to assemble collections of rare plants and animals there. Interestingly, the building of a palace is hardly a main topic in inscriptions of Babylonian kings, a fact that distinguishes them from the Assyrians. Babylonian kings dedicated more efforts to the large and venerated temples of the gods and to their equipment, with cultic objects such as a throne or a harp for the deity. This programme concurs with the self-presentation of Babylonian kings in their texts as being protected and guided by the gods and whose deeds are considered a more or less cogent consequence of their status and power, but not historical deeds. Royal inscriptions are mostly written on durable materials such as stone, metal or baked clay objects, so that the name of the ruler may be preserved forever in the context of his dedication to the eternal gods.

The care of the ruler for the gods was based on ideology but was not restricted to that. Ideology always determines the distribution of resources, and so the dominant role of the gods in the world view of Babylonian rulers led to the most impressive royal building programmes being the erection and equipment of temples. Furthermore, the sacred furniture was donated by the king, and, at various occasions precious objects such as vases of gold and silver or jewels were dedicated to the temples. Together with dedications of new buildings or of cultic objects, the king usually funded the temple with grants of land or other sources of income so that continuous offerings were ensured. In this way the temple was enabled to care for its dependants as outlined above.

On the preceding pages, various aspects of the main institutions of Babylonia, temple and palace have been discussed. One could easily add other related topics, outline the personnel of each institution, the rules to be obeyed within the palace or the regulations to become a priest. Instead the focus has been laid on the basic functions as they emerge from a contrastive discussion of the two realms: for example, the restricted religious role of the palace and the economic supremacy of the palace deriving from its control of prestige goods.

The two institutions can hardly be imagined independent of each other for most of Mesopotamian history. But Babylonia experienced a major change in 539 when the rule of the last Chaldean king Nabonidus was ended by Cyrus the Great of the Persian Achaemenids. From then on, no indigenous Babylonian king ruled over Babylonia, and the fact that hardly any building inscriptions of the Achaemenids exist reveals that the close relationship between palace and temple had changed. It is surely no coincidence that, after the end of a Babylonian royal palace, the temples gained a larger importance in the tradition of knowledge in Babylonia, and that all scholarly experts were linked to the temple. Only now priests controlled the Babylonian literary and scholarly texts written in cuneiform, and our sources document their scribal productivity until the first century BC. The learned priests of the temples, furthermore, became experts in astronomy-astrology, which included both mathematical calculations and the omens to predict the impact of the celestial bodies. This science was the foundation of the later fame of Babylonia in the West (see Brown in this volume). So after a long tradition of coexistence between temple and palace, the Babylonian temple outlived the latter by half a millennium, thereby preserving and developing the culture and scholarship which was once prominent at the palace.

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