

Title: Babylonian Empire
Source: *Gale Encyclopedia of World History: Governments*. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 2008.
Document Type: Topic overview

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Babylonian Empire

Type of Government

Located on the banks of the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), the city-state of Babylon was the capital of two empires over the course of its long history. Both were absolute monarchies. The first was marked by the king's personal involvement in even the most trivial affairs of state. An ever-expanding bureaucracy, a more powerful priesthood, and greater interaction with distant powers distinguished the second empire from its predecessor.

Background

Because the term *Babylonian Empire* can be misleading, a few clarifications are necessary. First, it is important to note that *Babylon* and *Babylonia* are not identical. For much of its history, the city of Babylon was only one of a number of independent states in the region called Babylonia. Indeed, it was the conquest of those neighboring states that created the empires. Second, many of the most familiar features of Babylon did not exist until the second empire, often called the Chaldean or neo-Babylonian Empire, arose more than a thousand years after the first. Strictly speaking, however, the term *Babylonian Empire* refers only to the first incarnation, which began in about 1894 BC and ended three hundred years later.

Urban civilizations had existed in Mesopotamia for more than a thousand years when Babylon first rose to prominence. Because the land between the Tigris and Euphrates was a fertile and well-watered enclave in a barren landscape, it proved extremely attractive to a variety of nomadic peoples. Among those who stayed, abandoning nomadism for a more settled life of farming and trade, were the Amorites. Their union with the more established residents of northern Babylonia, an area known as Akkad, led to the establishment of a new dynasty in Babylon itself. The new king, Sumu-Abum (c. 1894–c. 1881 BC), was an Amorite.

His administration probably resembled those in nearby cities such as Kish and Kazallu. Construction of defensive walls, irrigation canals, and temples was a major preoccupation. Strong city walls were an obvious need in a land crowded with rival states, but the other projects were critical to royal power as well. No king or city in Mesopotamia could survive without active, centralized management of their water resources through canals, levees, and dams. As Sumu-Abum himself understood, one of the most effective ways of waging war against an enemy downstream was to simply divert the river. Less obvious to modern eyes, perhaps, is the benefit Sumu-Abum, his successors, and his rivals derived from their continual construction and reconstruction of temples, an activity that absorbed enormous manpower and a large share of government revenue. However, the basis of a Mesopotamian king's legitimacy was the perceived closeness of his relationship with the gods. A king who neglected the temples was inviting the wrath of heaven and the fury of his people.

The other major focus of Mesopotamian kings was warfare, usually in the form of temporary, small-scale raids against neighbors. So it was with Sumu-Abum and the first four of his successors. The sixth, however, was Hammurabi (d. 1750 BC), one of the most famous rulers of antiquity. It was Hammurabi's sustained military success, particularly against Larsa, Babylon's powerful southern rival, that transformed the relatively prosperous city-state into a major regional power. He is better known, however, for the so-called Code of Hammurabi, a series of hypothetical if-then statements that judges could use as a guide in adjudicating the real cases before them. The code illustrates Hammurabi's lifelong interest in law and the importance he accorded it in his administration. It also reveals something of his philosophy of kingship, a philosophy that permeated the structural framework of his government.

Government Structure

A king's closeness to the gods should not prevent his personal involvement in the most mundane, trivial, or unpleasant affairs of state. Or so the extensive records of Hammurabi's administration suggest. These include letters to other heads of state, instructions to subordinates,

and propaganda. The overwhelming impression is a paradox: a large bureaucracy designed to bring the smallest details of every facet of government activity to the attention of the king. While most bureaucracies exist to remove from the king or chief executive the burden of routine business, Hammurabi seems to have welcomed it, for reasons about which can only be speculated. Even though most Mesopotamian kings would have handled some legal cases as the court of last resort, Hammurabi involved himself in land disputes between farmers, contract disputes between merchants, and other routine legal business. A personal interest in law may have played a role. Most historians believe, however, that he simply took to heart the king's traditional role as the guardian of justice. His involvement in diplomatic and military affairs might have had the same motive, if he believed that one of his neighbors was abusing the rights of the people.

Hammurabi's attention to detail had a significant effect on the structure of his government. Scribes and literate clerks were the foundation of his administration, for it was only through their efforts that he could be kept abreast of state affairs with the thoroughness he demanded. Accurate records were crucial, particularly in the management of the frequent military drafts and the *ilkum*, a kind of compulsory labor service. After conquering a new territory, the king would send out a small corps of specialists under his immediate command to handle its integration into the empire. Such tasks were ideal training for future monarchs. Hammurabi is known to have sent his sons on diplomatic missions, just as he gave at least one daughter in marriage to an ally. Serious illness toward the end of his life forced Hammurabi to transfer most duties to Samsu-Iluna (eighteenth century BC), his son and successor. Even though it may well have been a difficult decision for Hammurabi, the transfer to Samsu-Iluna was useful in clarifying the succession and avoiding a bitter fight for the throne after the great king's death.

Despite the turmoil of the centuries between the first and second empires, a basic conservatism prevented radical change in the political structure. Like many other ancient peoples, Babylonians revered the traditions and habits of their ancestors, whom they regarded as closer to the gods. Some change, including the expansion of the bureaucracy as a result of increased trade and territory, was accepted as inevitable. However, any other deviation from perceived tradition was likely to meet resistance.

Political Parties and Factions

Most political intrigue in the first empire had external roots, as neighboring kings tried to undermine each other's authority. It is likely that tax burdens and compulsory labor provoked some purely internal dissatisfaction, but little is known for certain. The king's prestige as the semidivine embodiment of divine order undoubtedly stifled the expression of dissent. Some kings went further, declaring themselves wholly immortal. Many historians suspect that declarations of immortality were primarily a tool of weak or troubled kings to enhance their authority; Hammurabi himself apparently never felt the need to issue one.

Perhaps the most important distinction between the first and second empires is a dramatic increase in the power of the various priesthoods, particularly that of Marduk, Babylon's patron god. Ironically, the priests' new power stemmed largely from their ability to harness the people's reverence for the past. If the authority of the gods was eternal and inviolate, went the argument, the authority of their priests ought to be as well. In fact, many early kings, particularly Hammurabi, kept tight control of the priesthoods. Religion and politics were inseparable in Mesopotamia, but the most successful kings took care to assert their authority over the temples and the priests who staffed them. Over time, this became an increasingly difficult task.

Major Events

After a period of increasing turmoil and internal weakness, Babylon fell to the invading Kassites, an Iranian people, in about 1575 BC. Their rule seems to have had little discernable effect on Babylon's political structure, but the lack of written records from this period makes certainty impossible. By the middle of the twelfth century, power had passed to another Iranian people, the Elamites, though the powerful Assyrians were soon threatening from the north. They would dominate Babylon for the next five hundred years, until their downfall in about 625 BC at the hands of Nabopolassar (d. 605 BC), the leader of the Chaldean people, who came from what is now Kuwait. During their rule some of the most familiar events of Babylonian history occurred, including the construction of the Hanging Gardens and the conquest of Jerusalem, both of which were the work of Nabopolassar's son, Nebuchadnezzar II (c. 630–562 BC).

Aftermath

In 539 BC the Persians, in concert with the priests of Marduk, seized Babylon without a fight. The city's economic and cultural prominence continued until the Persian king Xerxes I (c. 519–465 BC) plundered it and destroyed its walls after a failed rebellion in 482 BC. The effects of Xerxes' revenge were permanent.

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Source Citation

"Babylonian Empire." *Gale Encyclopedia of World History: Governments*. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 2008. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 28 Nov. 2011.

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Gale Document Number: GALEICX3048600004