

The Tower of Babel Before Archaeology. The Ziggurat of Babylon according to European travellers (XII-XVII centuries)

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Before 1913, when German archaeology would reveal the challenges of what was the Tower of Babel, a ziggurat which the Babylonians called Etemenanki, the only source of information that was available in Europe about Babylonia and its famous tiered tower was the Old Testament and the stories by classical authors such as Herodotus, Diodorus, or Strabo.

From Late Antiquity, and especially during the Middle and Modern Ages, various Europeans travelled to Near East, enlightened by reading the Greco-Roman and biblical texts. Most of them were religious, merchants, diplomats, soldiers, doctors, and botanists. This explains the diversity of reasons and motivations for their trips. However, almost all of them demonstrated an enormous interest in regard to the search for tangible evidence about the remote origins of Christianity. One monument would become the centre of their interests. This is none other than the Tower of Babel, which was described in some detail in the book of Genesis and by classical authors.

This search for the relics of Christianity dates back to Ancient history. A good example is Egeria, a nun from the time of the Emperor Theodosius, a native of *Gallaecia*, who used the Old Testament as a guide for her trip around the Holy Land¹. In her trip to Mesopotamia, the nun searched for, by means of the book of Genesis, the traces left

¹ Arce, A. (ed.), *Itinerario de la virgen Egeria*, Madrid, 1996.

by the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob². She even tried to reach the city of Ur, a visit that was not possible due to the IV century A.D. conflict between the Romans and the Sassanians. Although she does not make reference to it in her work, Egeria possibly had among her projects to search for the remains of the Tower of Babel. It is a task that would fit in well with that “exploration of biblical archaeology” which around the year 384 A.D. led her to the region of the Euphrates River.

In the XII century, and especially in the XVI and XVIII centuries, we can find many European travellers who demonstrated various degrees of interest in the discovery of the ancient Orient. Three historical places would be focused on: Babylon and the Tower of Babel; Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrians; and, finally, Persepolis, the great capital of the Persian Achaemenid dynasty. From this period, the stories of about forty authors are conserved, in which the mythical Tower of Babel, the ziggurat called Etemenanki in Babylonian language is described and situated³. It is not my objective in this article to analyze the total works of the authors, but a representative selection of those authors who wrote their works between the XII and the XVII centuries.⁴

One of these first Occidentals who thought he had located the famous Babylonian tower was the rabbi **Benjamin of Tudela**, who between 1165 and 1170 made an extensive tour of the Near East (Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt). The result of this personal experience is his *Travel Book* or *Séfer-massa'ot*, in which he contributes some interesting data about the archaeology of this region, albeit somewhat sporadic and occasional⁵. Benjamin of Tudela provides us with useful

² Montero Fenollós, J.L., “De Gallaecia a Oriente: monumentos y lugares visitados por Egeria en su peregrinación por la Mesopotamia del siglo IV d.C.”, in X. Leira (ed.), *Aulas no camiño. Diálogos nun camiño da cultura europea*, A Coruña, 2007, pp. 255-274.

³ An updated vision about the ziggurat of Babylon can be seen in Montero Fenollós, J.L. ed., *Torre de Babel. Historia y mito*, Murcia, 2010.

⁴ An exhaustive study about the European travellers from the XII to XVIII centuries and the discovery of the ancient Orient has been realized by Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *Il Genio Vagante. Viaggiatori alla scoperta dell'Antico Oriente*, Alessandria, 2005.

⁵ An excellent critical edition in Spanish is that of Magdalena Nom de Déu, J. R., *Libro de Viajes de Benjamín de Tudela*, Barcelona, 1989. Consult the same author, “Testimonios arqueológicos del Oriente

information for archaeological research. Among other things, he speaks about the Babylonian ruins, which occupied an area of 30 miles according to his calculations. About the Babylonian tower he wrote the following description:

«Desde allí [desde Hillah] hay cuatro millas hasta la Torre que edificaron los de la generación que vivió la separación de las razas, construida con ladrillos *ayûrra*. La longitud de su basamento es de como unas dos millas, su anchura como unos cuarenta codos y su longitud como unos doscientos codos. Cada diez codos hay caminos, y por ellos se sube, allí, en espiral, hasta arriba, viéndose desde allí una extensión de veinte millas, pues el país es llano. Desde los cielos cayó fuego en su interior partiéndola hasta lo más profundo.»⁶

As we can see, Benjamin of Tudela situated the Tower of Babel 4 miles from the town of Hillah. The rabbi made the mistake of identifying the ruins of the Birs Nimrud ziggurat (located a few kilometres south of Babylonia), instead of the monument described in the book of Genesis.

Between the end of the Middle Age and the Renaissance, the most popular travel book about journeys to the Orient was the one by **Sir John of Mandeville**, written in French in 1355 and translated into Latin and various modern languages. However, it is a work of fantasy and it is not the result of the impressions of a personal journey. With regard to the Tower of Babel, he claimed that it had a height of 114 *stadia* and it was located on the road that led to the kingdom of Chaldea in a region where people did not dare to enter because it was inhabited

Próximo reflejados en el *Séfer-Masa'ot* de Benjamín de Tudela (Siria, Mesopotamia y Egipto)", *Arbor* 180 (2005), pp. 465-488. The purpose of this long journey was none other than becoming knowledgeable of the situation of the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean basin and the Orient. He described the customs and the monuments of the cities where he came across these communities. His journey began in Tudela (Navarra, Spain) and via Marseille and Rome, he arrived in Constantinople. He visited, among other cities, Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo, Mosul, and Baghdad.

⁶ Magdalena Nom de Déu, J. R., *op. cit.*, 1989, pp. 96-97.

by dragons, snakes, and poisonous beasts. This author has absolutely no usefulness in terms of Babylonian archaeology.

«(...) quant la grande tour de Babel estoit commenciee a faire, ou les murs estoient ia fais lxiiii. Stades de haut; ui est es grans desers darrabe, sur le chemin quant on va vers le royaume de Caldee. Mais il y a lonc temps que homs nosa aller ne aprouchier a la tour, car elle est toute deserte et y a grans dragons et serpens et diverses bestes venimeues grant plante la entour.»⁷

Beginning in the XVI century, various travellers and adventurers, enlightened once again by reading the classics and the bible, offered us new stories with some interest in relation to Babylonia and its famous tower. The first of them was the Venetian merchant **Cesare Federici**, who between 1563 and 1581 accomplished a long journey between Venice, India, and Burma. He was the first European traveller who described in detail the Euphrates route he followed between Aleppo and the Persian Gulf, where he headed towards India. He situated Babylonia after the city of Fallujah, near Baghdad, and he described the Tower of Babel in the following manner:

«La Torre di Nembrot è posta di qua dal fiume verso l'Arabia in una gran pianura, lontano dalla città intorno a sette overo otto miglia, qual è da tutte le bande ruinata e con le sue ruine s'ha fatto intorno quasi una montagna, di modo che non ha forma alcuna; pur ve n'è ancora un gran pezzo in piedi, circondato e quasi coperto affato da quelle ruine. Questa torre è fabricata di quadrelli cotti al sole a questo mod: hanno posto una man di quadrelli e una di stuore fatte di canne, tanto forti ancora, ch'è una maraviglia ed è smaltata di fango invece di calcina. Io ho caminato intorno al piede di questa torre, nè gli ho trovato in alcun luogo intrata alcuna (...)»⁸

⁷ Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 85.

⁸ Pinto, O. (ed.), *Viaggi di C. Federico e G. Balbi alle Indie Orientali*, Roma, 1962, p. 5.

Based on his personal observation, Federici, with great precision, provided us with information about the construction technique of Mesopotamian architecture, and in particular the ziggurat. The building he described was denominated the Tower of Nimrod, a clear allusion to the brave hunter who exerted his dominance in that dark period between Noah and Abraham. In Genesis, it is affirmed that Nimrod ruled in Babel⁹. However, what Federici described were not the remains of the Tower of Babel, but rather those of a different ziggurat. Due to its location near Baghdad, he must have been describing the ziggurat of Aqar Quf (30 km west of Baghdad), which still conserves a great part of its nucleus. The construction technique is consistent with the description of the Venetian merchant.

Around the same time, the physician and botanist **Leonhardt Rauwolff** of Augsburg travelled around the region of Mesopotamia, where between 1573 and 1576 he compiled various documents about subjects related to natural history (botany and pharmacology). Although his writings were of a relative value for archaeology, Rauwolff dared to make some interpretations of historical topography in the area of Fallujah, based on information garnered from the Bible and classical authors such as Ptolemy. Thus, as did Federici, he identified the Tower of Babel with the huge mass of adobe situated in Aqar Quf. He believed that this was the location of the Babylonian tower that the sons of Noah undertook to reach the sky, and which was half a league wide and in ruins.

«(...)hinderdemindernehederBabylonischehoheThurngestanden, den die Kinder Noah (welche erstlich dise landscafft nach der Sündflut bewohnet) biss an Himmel zuebawn angefangen (...)»¹⁰

New European travellers from the late XVI century repeated the mistake of confusing the Tower of Babel with Aqar Quf and situating

⁹ Genesis 10, 10.

¹⁰ Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 133.

the ruins of Babylon close to Baghdad, which they called the «New Babylon». This was the case with the Venetian **Gasparo Balbi**, who visited Baghdad in 1579 on his way to India. His description of the Babylonian tower was very similar to that of Cesare Federici:

«(...) incamminammo al nostro viaggio sempre per detta città vecchia di Babilonia, la qual lasciavamo sempre a man sinistra, e levato che fu il sole, vedemmo alcuni pezzi di muraglie grosse tutte rovinate, e ivi vicino un pezzo della grandissima torre di Babilonia in un luogo detto Carcuftate nemerù (...).

La torre di Nembrot è lontana da Babilonia più di otto miglia e è di qua dal fiume Tigris, la quale i Mori chiamano Disela in loro linguaggio, posta in una gran pianura verso l'Arabia e è tutta rovinata, con le suerovine si ha fatto intorno quasi una montagna. Pur ve n'è ancora un gran pezzo in piedi, che quasi è coperto da quelle rovine. Fu fabricata già con peitra cotta al sole e con stoie di canna anchora ese fortissime (...)»¹¹

A few years later, in 1583, the English merchant **John Elred**, on a trip from Aleppo to Baghdad (which he called «New Babylon»), once again repeated the assertion that the ruins of Aqar Quf were the remains of the Tower of Babel. Impressed by the size of the monument, whose height was comparable to that of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, he made notes about the construction technique, which was characterized by a structure where adobes alternated with layers of reeds:

«Here also are yet standing the ruines of the olde tower of Babel, which being upon a plaine ground seemeth a farre off very great, but the nerer you come to it, the lesser and lesser it appeareth; sundry times I have gone thither to see it, and found the remnants yet standing above a quarter of a mile in compasse, and almost as high as the stone-worke of Pauls steeple in London, but it sheweth

¹¹ Pinto, O. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1962, pp. 93 and 96.

much bigger. The bricks remaining in this most ancient monument be halfe a yard thicke, and three quarters of a yard long, being dried in the sunne onely, and betweene every course of bricks there lieth a course of mattes made of canes, which remaine sound and not perished, as though they had beene layed within one yeere.»¹²

Between 1605 and 1607, the Portuguese soldier **Nicolau de Orta Rebelo** embarked on a journey from Goa to Marseille. This route passed through Persia and Mesopotamia before reaching the Mediterranean. In the account of his adventures, he described Babylon as a great city surrounded by adobe walls, with mosques in its interior and bisected by the Tigris River. It is clear that this description did not correspond to the ruins of the Mesopotamian city but rather to the ancient city of Baghdad, which was founded in 762 by Arabs. From the city, the Portuguese traveller observed the remains of a very old tower that he interpreted as the biblical tower¹³. Based on his description and the location, Orta Rebelo was referring to the ziggurat of Aqar Quf, situated 30 kms west of Baghdad:

«Está mais à vista desta Cidade hũa Torre muy antiga, a que os Judeos chamão de Membrolh, filho, ou neto, que foi de Noe, a qual elle fundou naquelle tempo pouco mais, ou menos, que foi fundada a Babilonia, estará della para a banda do Sul nove leguas, he feita como parece de tijolos cozidos ao Sol, e por cima destes tijolos vai outra cama de vimes, ou vara do que quer que he assim hũa cama de hũa couza, outra cama de outra liada de madeira, que ainda no pedaço que está em pé, pode haver vistigios para muitos mil annos, conforme aos que já tem durado; terña en redondo hum terço de meya Legoa.»¹⁴

¹² Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 149.

¹³ Serrão, J. Veríssimo, *Un voyageur portugais en Perse au début du XVIIe siècle, Nicolau de Orta Rebelo*, Lisboa, 1972, p. 154-158.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p. 158.

It seems that Orta Rebelo was a travelling companion of **Fray Gaspar de São Bernardino**, a Portuguese priest who in 1605 returned from India where he worked as a missionary¹⁵. He knew that the tower called Corcofa (*i.e.* Aqar Quf) by the Arabs was considered to be Nimrod's tower, but he was well aware of the story of the construction of the Tower of Babel from Genesis 11. This biblical passage indicates that the tower was built with bricks baked in kilns. However, the tower of Aqar Quf was constructed with raw sun-dried bricks. For this reason, the identification by some authors of these ruins as being those of the biblical Babel has to be ruled out.

«Outras tres legoas da cidade, da parte do Ponente alem do rio Tigris, na Mesopotamia està huma torre chamada Corcova, tamaña como a nosa de Bethlem, que alguns cuydão ser a de Nembroth, no que enganão, porque Corcova he de adobes secos ao sol, e a outra de ladrillos cozidos ao fogo (*Lateres coctos igni. Gene. c. 11*)...»

«(...) a tivemos pera vernos a torre de Babel, a qual està fora do caminho ordinario oyto legoas, e quando os que estiverão em Babylonia dizem que a virão, ha se entender que falão de Corcova, que fica à vista da cidade, e não da propia de Babel.»¹⁶

It was not until the beginning of the XVII century that for the first time a Western traveller denounced the confusion that reigned among the Europeans in distinguishing Babylon from Baghdad. This was the case of **Pedro Teixeira**, a Lisbon doctor from a Jewish Portuguese family, for whom the city situated next to the Tigris was founded long after the biblical Babylon, which, in addition, was bisected by the Euphrates River¹⁷. In 1610, Teixeira wrote that:

¹⁵ Invernizzi, A., "A la ricerca della torre di Babele con i primi viaggiatori", in *Andata e ritorno dall'antico Oriente*, Milano, 2002, p. 25.

¹⁶ Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 163.

¹⁷ Fuente del Pilar, J. J., "Pedro Teixeira y su viaje por Mesopotamia", *Arbor* 180 (2005), pp. 627-643.

«Esta ciudad Bagdad, confunden comúnmente los que Della tratan con Babilonia, movidos (á mi juicio) por la vizinidad del lugar adó aquella antiguamente estuvo; que de aquesta no dista mas que una buena jornada: y para entender que es cosa muy diferente una de otra, bastará saber que Babilonia estava sobre el rio Eufratres, y Bagdad está sobre el Tigris.»¹⁸

Pedro Texeira was, in addition, the first European author who did not consider the ziggurat of Aqar Quf to be the remains of the biblical Tower of Babel:

«(...) andadas como tres leguas dimos en las ruynas de una grande ciudad, de que aun hoy estan en pie una alta monara, o alcoran, y dos pedazos de grueso muro de cal y ladrillo, à la cual los Arabes llaman Karkuf.»¹⁹

Between 1614 and 1626, **Pietro della Valle**, a nobleman born in Rome, travelled around the Near East, visiting various areas containing archaeological ruins for pure pleasure. In 1616, he travelled to Baghdad in order to visit Babel, which according to him was the real Babylon, the place where the famous tower had been erected. On the 23rd of November in that same year, Della Valle headed for Babil, south of Baghdad, thinking, with the logical assumption of typonymic survival, that this hill of remains had to indicate the localization of the ancient Babylon²⁰. This deduction about Babylon was correctly arrived at because it is supported by a serious linguistic base, given the correspondence between the Arabic Babil and the Greco-Roman Babylon:

«Che si aquella Bâbel antica, e la torre di Nembroto, non c'è dubio, secondo me, perché oltre che il sito lo dimostra, da' paesani ancora

¹⁸ Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 179.

¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 180.

²⁰ Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *Pietro Della Valle. In viaggio per l'Oriente. Le mummie, Babilonia, Persepoli*, Alessandria, 2001, pp. 50-56.

hoggidì è conosciuta per tale, et in aravico chiamata volgarmente Babèl; stringendo però alquanto la pronuntia di quell'e dell'ultima sillaba, conforme al loro costume, onde è, che i Latini hanno usato di scriverla con y. Alla qual voce babèl in aravico, o Babyl, scrivendola alla latina, se si aggiunge in fine la doppia vocale come va, con la sua terminatione in caso retto, viene a punto a farsi Babelon, o Babylon, come da' Latini à estat chiamata.»²¹

However, the identification of the hill called Babil as the celebrated tower, from the point of view of both the toponym and the square design suggested by the ruins, was erroneous. In fact, the remains were from the summer palace which King Nebuchadnezzar II had built in the north of the city of Babylon, and not the Tower of Babel. This mistake seems minor to me because Della Valle was correct in locating the ruins of Babylon, but he did not have the necessary means to recognize the identity of the palace buried beneath that hill called Babil. The tower was situated 3 km south of the summer palace.

The description of the ruins that Della Valle interpreted as those belonging to the Tower of Babel is the following:

«In mezzo di una grande e pianissima campagna, vicino, circa a mezo miglio, al fiume Eufrate, che le passa in quel luogo quasi per ponente, si rileva infin'hoggi sprà terra una gran mole di fabrica rovinata, tutta d'un massiccio; o che fosse così da principio, come a me pare; o che le rovine l'habbiano cagionato, e ridottala comme si vede a guisa di un monte; di che però non apparisce molto segno. La sua forma è uadra, a punto da torre, o da pirámide; rivolta giusto, con le quattro faccie, allí quattro angoli del mondo; ma, se non m'inganno, o non procede dalle rovine (che può esser facilmente), apparice hora alquanto più lunga da tramontana a mezo giorno, che da levante a ponente. Il circuito attorno, misurato alla grossa, è mille e cento trenta quattro passi de i miei; che secondo me, fanno

²¹ *Idem*, p. 140-141.

intorno a mezzo miglio. Misura, sito e forma di fabbrica, che chiama Strabone Sepultura di Belo (Lib. 16); e che deve esser quella che nelle Sacre Lettere (Gen. 10 et 11) è detta la Torre di Nembrotto, nella città di Babilonia, o Babèl, come infin'oggi questo luogo si chiama. Come fosse a' suoi tempi questa bella fabbrica, Herodoto (Lib. 1), autore antichissimo, lo describe minutamente: cioè, che erano otto torri, una sopra l'altra, di fabbrica massiccia, con le scale di fuori attorno per salire: e molte altre cose che appresso a lui si possono vedere. Strabone non fa mentione né delle scale, né delle altre bellezze; perché, come egli dice (Lib. 16), era stata già rovinata da Serse; et Alessandro Magno, che la voleva ristaurare, fu prevenuto dalla morte. E' cosa da notare, che dal detto monte di rovine in poi, non si vede in quel luogo né pur segno di altra cosa, che mostri esservi stata una città così grande; vendendosi solo in alcuni luoghi certi fondamenti in terra di mura rovinate, cinquanta o sessanta passi dai monti lontani (...). La figura è difforme, come sogliono haver tutte le fabbriche rovinate: dove scoscesa, dove pianache si può salire, dove ha Segni di torrenti per l'acqua delle pioggie che corre abbasso; e dentro ancora, di sopra, dove concava, dove rilevata, in somma a guisa di un confuso monte. Non vi si vede segno alcuno di scala per salire, né di porta per entrare; di fuori, e come parti più deboli furon le prime ad esser rovinate, in modo che non ne apparisce più né vestigio, né segno.»

«Dentro, andando per di sopra, si trovano alcune grotte; ma tanto rovinate, che non se discerne che cosa fossero; e di alcune sto anche in dubbio, se siano cose fatte con la fabbrica, ovvero dapoi, da genti di campagna per ricovrarvisi, il che mi par più verisimile (...); ma torniamo all'ordine della torre. La materia di che è composta tutta la fabbrica è la più curiosa cosa che vi sia, e da me fu con diligenza osservata, rompendola con picconi in diversi luoghi. Son tutti mattoni molto grandi e Grossi di terra cruda, seccati, come io credo, al sole, a guisa delle tappie di Spagna; e son murati, non con buona classe, ma pur con teraccia; e per più fortezza, tra mattone

e mattone, mescolate con quella terra che serve di calce, vi sono come a solaio certe annucce palustri spezzate, ovvero paglie dure da fare stuoie. A luogo a luogo poi, vi sono mescolati in diversi parti, massimamente dove più importa per sostegno, molti mattoni della medesima grandezza, ma cotti e sodi, e murati con buona calce, o con bitume: però li crudi sono senza dubbio assai più.»

«Di tutti questi mattoni, cotti, e crudi, co'l bitume attaccato, e di quelle cannuccie che hanno in mezo, io hebi gusto di pigliarne, e ne porto meco per mostrarli in Italia a gli antiquarii curiosi, che certo mi par sia una bella antichità; facendosi mentione dell'uso in queste paese di fabricar con bitume in vece di calce, non solo da Giustino (Lib. 1), abbreviator di Trogo nelle fabbriche di Semiramide, ma dalla Sacra Scrittura (Ge. 11.3) medesima nella fabrica a punto di questa stessa torre e città; l'edificio della quale la Scrittura Sacra a Nembrotto (Gen. 10), et i profani a Belo attriuiscono; onde non male il Bellarmino (Ann. Mundi 1791) nella sua Chronologia stampatagli anni a dietro, che io vidi la prima volta in mano di un padre giesuita in Costantinopli, crede che Belo e Nembrotto siano tutto uno; e Strabone (Lib. 16), con Herodoto (Lib. 1), e gli altri ethnici, chiamò, come dissi di sopra, sepoltura de Belo questa stessa pirámide, che dagli scrittori sacri bien detta Torre di Babilonia, o di Nembrotto. Hebbi gusto ancora di far ritrar Babèl dal mio pittore in prospettiva, e là proprio ne fece il disegno da due parti, che erano le più belle vedute, e contengono tutti quattro i suoi lati; en ne farà poi quadri, con più diligenza.»²²

Pietro Della Valle proved to be very knowledgeable of classical sources. He examined the monument with a modern scientific spirit in the sense that he identified the building materials and techniques (adobe, bricks, reeds, and bitumen), he attempted to interpret the construction (not identifying any access, neither stairs nor a door), and

²² Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2001, pp. 137-140.

he raised the issue of dating. It seems like he was the first Westerner to realize small excavations in Babylon, more out of a desire to increase his knowledge rather than to appropriate archeological artefacts. In 1769, the Jesuit Father Atanasius Kircher would make two panels of the Tower of Babel based on the description and the design of Della Valle, and with illustrations by *Turrus Babel*.²³

This correct localization of the Babylonian ruins realized by the Roman patrician would still take some time to prevail. New travellers of the XVII and even the XVIII would continue to refer to Aqar Quf as the location of the remains of the Tower of Babel. This was the case of **García de Silva y Figueroa**, the Spanish ambassador of Felipe II to the Shah of Persia²⁴ between 1614 and 1624. In his writings, he first situated the Babylonian ruins, which he never visited, in the Euphrates near Fallujah, but he was doubtful of a popular interpretation which placed the Babylonian tower in this place, and, citing Cesare Federici, he eventually opted for Aqar Quf.

“Y como estos pedaços de çimientos que agora se veen y muestran se van continuando por mas de tres leguas, en medio del dicho espacio a quedado un altissimo cinborrio ó cúpula, sobre gruesas paredes de ladrillo, tenido vulgarmente por todos por la torre de Babel y confusión de las lenguas, aunque algunos, con mas aparencia y similitud de verdad, y entre ellos Cesar Federici, veneçiano, dizen ser rreliquia suya un grande y levantado collado con muchas rruinas de ladrillos crudos al derredor, que se vee desde muy lexos en medio de aquella llanura, pudiendo ser con mas certeza el dicho collado la pirámide arruinada que Alexandro quiso rrestaurar en Babilonia, sigun Strabon, libro 16. La memoria de la torre, aunque su principio nadie podrá ni se atreverá á negallo, pero como obra de la primera antigüedad del mundo y tan propinqua á la universal

²³ Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2005, fig. 35-36.

²⁴ Córdoba, J. M., “Un caballero español en Ispahán. La embajada de don García de Silva y Figueroa al sha Abbás el Grande (1614-1624), *Arbor* 180 (2005), pp. 645-670.

inundación del diluvio, ella mesma con el discurso de tantos siglos del todo la consumo, pues no solo en tiempo de Alexandro, pero ni en el que alcanço Herodoto, se halla algún rraastro della.”²⁵

Similarly, for the rich and famous Parisian merchant **Jean Baptiste Tavernier**, who between 1632 and 1668 realized a series of trips to the Orient, the tower of Aqar Quf was not the Tower of Babel but rather a tower constructed by an Arab prince in times of war, according to a local tradition. In 1652, he visited the region between Basra and Mosul and he wrote the following about the Babylonian tower:

«Le vulgaire, comme j’ay dit, croit que ce sont les restes de la tour de Babylone: mais il y a plus d’apparence à ce que disent les Arabes qui l’appellent Agarcouf, et qui tiennent que cette tour fut bâtie par un prince Arabe qui y tenoit un fanal pour assembler ses sujets en temps de guerre... ce reste d’édifice appelé vulgairement Tour de Babylone, et qui ne merite pas qu’on prenne la peine de l’aller voir. Car enfin il n’y a aucune apparence que se soient les restes de l’ancienne Tour de Babylone, selon la description que Moysse nous en fait dans l’histoire de la Genese.»²⁶

In 1658, the Carmelite Father **Vincenzo Maria de Santa Caterina de Siena**, and six years later, another religious named **Giuseppe Sebastiani** in their pilgrimage to oriental lands, visited the region of Baghdad and ruled out the option of Aqar Quf. They identified the Tower of Babel with the current Birs Nimrud²⁷.

«Passammo vicini ad un monticello, qual dicono alcuni sij reliquia dell’antica Torre di Babele (...) m’arrendo all’opinione degl’Arabi, che questo fosse un luogo fabricato dagli antichi Assirij per dar segno

²⁵ Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 219.

²⁶ *Idem*, p. 280.

²⁷ Invernizzi, A. “Les premiers voyageurs”, in B. André-Salvini (dir.), *Babylone*, Paris, 2008, p. 506.

col fuoco alle terre cinconvicine, (...) mà più dalle reliquie della Torre, la quale sin'al giorno d'hoggi è chamiata di Nembrot.»²⁸

«(...) per la vicina torre, che si chiama di Nembrod (benche altri voglino che la vera si aquella che si vede presso à Bagdad (...))»²⁹

The debate and the uncertainty about the location of the Tower of Babel continued throughout the XVIII and XIX centuries. In 1899, a German archaeologist entered on the scene. Robert Koldewey realized the first methodical exploration of the ancient city of Babylonia, for the purpose of finding the true location of the Tower of Babel. Influenced by the reading the classics and with the help of the topographic maps made by the English and the French, he began to unearth the principal buildings of the city from the Neo-Babylonian era: the palace, the walls, the Ishtar Gate, the processional way, the temples, etc. And finally, in 1913, the excavation of the ziggurat, the famous tiered tower of the Bible, took place³⁰. After a long search, there was an absolute certainty of having found the exact location of the Tower of Babel, the monument that the Babylonians called Etemenanki.

Until this archaeological discovery was made, Western travellers had proposed three hypotheses about the location:

- Birs Nimrud (fig. 1). Today we know that it is the ziggurat of the ancient Mesopotamian city of Borsippa, south of Babylon³¹.
- Aqar Quf (fig. 2). It is the ziggurat of the ancient city of Dur Kurigalzu, a monument built by the Kassite dynasty in the XIV century B.C.³²

²⁸ Invernizzi, A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 270.

²⁹ *Idem*, p. 266.

³⁰ Koldewey, R. *The Excavations at Babylon*, London, 1914, p. 188.

³¹ Allinger-Csollich, W., "Birs Nimrud I. Die Baukörper der Ziqqurrat von Borsippa. Ein Vorbericht", *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 22 (1991), pp. 383-499.

³² Gullini, G., "New Suggestions on Ziggurat of Aqarquf", *Sumer* 41 (1981), pp. 133-137.

- Tell Babil (fig. 3). The identification of the hill called Babil with the famous tower, because of the toponymy and the square form of its ruins, was an error. In fact, the remains were from the summer palace of King Nebuchadnezzar in the north of the city of Babylon.³³

Why were these mistakes made when searching for the Tower of Babel? I think that part of the reason can be found in the classical sources and other part in the archaeology. The key is the poor state of conservation in which the ziggurat of Babylon has arrived to us and mentioned by authors such as Strabo and Arrian³⁴, who described the dilapidated state of the monument, attributing it to the demolition carried out by the Persian King Xerxes around 482 B.C. They claim that in the times of Alexander the Great the monument had already been at a very advanced state of destruction. The Macedonian conqueror planned to rebuild it.³⁵

In the Middle Ages, there would hardly have been visible remains of the ziggurat of Babylon, meaning that it was difficult if not impossible to carry out the identification on the part of the travellers who visited the region.

Today, after almost two millennia of neglect, looting, and destruction, far from it being the impressive monument described in Genesis, the Tower of Babel is nothing more than a simple adobe core. Because of its precarious condition, its remains are very far from what the human imagination constructed over centuries, reflected very well by the works of Peter Bruegel or Gustave Doré.

European travellers from the XII to the XVII centuries reached Baghdad by two routes: one from the north passing near the ruins

³³ Nasir, M., "The so-called summer palace (Nebuchadnezzar's life palace)", *Sumer* 25 (1979), pp. 156-159.

³⁴ *Anabasis* VII, 17; *Geography* XVI, 1, 5.

³⁵ «(...) for merely the clearing away of the mound was a task for ten thousand men for two months, so that he could not finish what he had attempted; for immediately the king was overtaken by disease and death», declared the geographer Strabo (XVI, 1, 5).

of Aqar Quf, and the other one from the south which ran near Birs Nimrud. It is logical, therefore, that both Mesopotamian ziggurats, conserved at a height of about 50 meters, were identified because of their monumental resemblance with the Tower of Babel, which only had its foundations remaining (fig. 4).



Fig. 1: The ziggurat of Birs Nimrud (Andrae, E.W.; Boehmer, R.M., “Die Orientbilder von Walter Andrae, *Baghdader Mitteilungen* 20, 1989, taf. 61).



Fig. 2: The ziggurat of Aqar Quf (Photo: J.-C. Margueron).



Fig. 3: Tell Babil (Andrae, E.W.; Boehmer, R.M., *op. cit.*, 1989, taf. 60).



Fig. 4: The ziggurat of Babylon today (Photo: R. Kolinski).