

Review

Juan Luis MONTERO FENOLLÓS:

Breve Historia de Babilonia

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Isabel Almeida

Juan Luis Montero Fenollós is a distinguished Spanish scholar who has dedicated years of historical and archaeological work to the study of the ancient Near East. The author earned his PhD in 1996 at the Universidad de Barcelona, where he continued his research work at the Instituto del Próximo Oriente Antiguo for several years; he is now a professor of Ancient History at Universidad de A Coruña, Spain. He is also the director of the Proyecto Arqueológico Medio Éufrates Sirio (PAMES), a pioneer archaeological project in Spain whose international research team¹ is devoted to archaeological work in Syria; the project began in 2005 but the excavations *in situ* have been suspended since the Spring of 2011 due to the ongoing political problems in that country.

Juan Luis Montero's published articles and books cover a wide spectrum of issues related to the archaeological and historical aspects of the ancient Near East, but the author is perhaps best known for his thorough analysis of the *ziggurat* built by Nebuchadnezzar II, the Etemenanki, more commonly known as the Babel Tower. For more than ten years now, the author has devoted himself to the study of this famous monument, leading a research team at Universidad de

¹ The PAMES is a project which integrates members not only from Universidad de A Coruña but also scholars from the CSIC, Madrid; the CHAM/UNL&UAç, Portugal; as well as Syrian researchers. For news related to this ongoing project one can check its website/blog at: <http://arqueologiaoriental.blogspot.com/>

A Coruña which presented a new proposal about the shape and size of the *ziggurat*. This project has already received critical acclaims and awards; it also produced a magnificent exhibition last year in Murcia entitled “Torre de Babel. Historia y Mito”, which was reviewed previously in this Journal.

It thus comes as no surprise that Juan Luis Montero was the author chosen to write this brief history of Babylon, part of a Spanish collection that aims to elucidate the most captivating moments of the world history for a broader audience without losing the scientific rigor of the historical science.

The book is divided into eight chapters preceded by an introduction which details the (re)discovery of Mesopotamia during the 19th century, as well as the main features of this ancient civilization flanked by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers; which was constructed over centuries upon clay/adobe, leaving much of its legacy (material and written) within it.

After laying out the historical framework of Mesopotamia, the author launches us into a journey through the history of the city of Babylon. The first chapter enumerates the sources available to the modern researcher to study this famous *urbs*. Juan Luis Montero recalls the achievements, during the final years of the 19th century, of the German archaeological expeditions led by Robert Koldewey, which lead to the physical (re)discovery of the city; he also sums up what has been accomplished between World War I and the present days. Next, the author outlines the main written sources that allow researchers to learn about the history and the myths of Babylon: first, the secondary sources such as the Classical Greco-Roman *corpora* and the information transmitted by the Old Testament; then the primary sources, the cuneiform texts recorded in the baked clay tablets, once undecipherable but now readable thanks to the efforts of linguistic scholars. Juan Luis Montero is careful, informing the reader that the majority of the cuneiform texts to which we have access today were produced by a political or religious elite, and for that reason it is possible to find some

contradictions or even biased information. To achieve historical accuracy, one should always seek to counterbalance the written sources with the archaeological data. The author also addresses the problem of the division of the tablets between the museums and private collections throughout the world, which complicates scholar's access to the entirety of the written records. To conclude this first introductory chapter, Juan Luis Montero provides a timeline illustrating the different chronological periods of Babylon's history, which is a helpful supplement to the information presented in the following chapters.

Chapters 2 through 4 cover the main historical aspects of Babylon, since its first Amorite dynasty at the dawn of the second millennium BCE, to the conquest of the city by Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE, which led to a new civilizational framework in that geographical area. Throughout chapter 2, the author pays particular attention to the reign of Hammurabi, «el engrandecedor del nombre de Babilonia». This well-known historical figure became famous not only because of his military actions, which turned Babylon into the new political and economic axis of Mesopotamia during the 18th century BCE, but also due to the collections of laws that he instituted, known as the «Hammurabi Code». Juan Luis Montero explains in detail the background and contents of this ensemble of regulations, demystifying the (still) generalized idea that this was the first compilation of laws in History. At the same time he introduces the prologue and epilogue of the text, as well as the pictorial representation of the famous Louvre stele where the “code” is inscribed, which forms a tremendous resource for understanding the ideological and political matrix of the Babylonians. The author goes through the laws, presenting both the thematic division which organizes the 282 articles and the Babylonian social organization that an analysis of those articles can reveal. The chapter ends with a most pertinent question: was the Hammurabi code a real – as in modern terms – legal code, or was it a political testimony from a great ruler? The answer provided will deepen the reader's understanding of this magnificent Mesopotamian text.

The next chapter gives an account of the centuries in which Babylon, after the collapse of the great realm built by Hammurabi, fell under Kassite domination. The reader is guided through the main features of these new rulers, who were originally from a region outside Mesopotamia, but who were quickly assimilated into the local Babylonian culture. Between the last quarter of the 16th century and the middle of the 12th century BCE, Babylon was the capital city of the Kassites, who played their cards in the international plateau, among the great powers of that time, namely, the Hatti, the Mittani, the Assyrian and the Egyptian New kingdom powers. The latter provides one of the most important *corpus* for understanding the position of the Babylon Kassite within this new political framework of the ancient Near East: the famous Amarna letters. Juan Luis Montero surveys the international affairs that marked this 400 years period in the Fertile Crescent, not forgetting to mention some of the cultural features that one could easily recognize as Babylonian Kassite characteristics. The end of this domination was followed by roughly three centuries of political disturbance, in which Babylon fell under the power of several local dynasties until, at the dawn of the first millennium BCE, Assyria became a great imperialistic power, and thus the new rival of Babylon. The author sums up the relationships between these two realms from the 9th to the 7th centuries BCE, describing the turmoil that characterized this period, which ended with the death of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal and the rise of Nabopolassar to the throne of Babylon. This ruler was responsible for the beginning of a new age for this city: a period marked by its rising to an imperial status in ancient Near East.

The following chapter deals with this new imperial atmosphere, and the author describes the political and military accomplishments of both Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II across the Mesopotamian and the Syrian-Levantine corridor, where they conquered several city-states, filling the void that the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire left behind. The political context of the post-Nebuchadnezzar II era is explained thoroughly, though what stands out of this chapter is the

picture that Juan Luis Montero draws of Nebuchadnezzar II, the ruler responsible for catapulting the city of Babylon to a cultural capital, and “the center of the universe”. This is the focus of chapter 5 and 6.

In chapter 5, the main architectural characteristics of Babylon are presented in such an articulated way that one actually feels oneself within this ancient *urbs* admiring its walls, its splendid gates (particularly the Ishtar’s gate, which is partially reconstructed at the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin), its streets, its palace and its temples. This feeling is achieved by a masterful combination between words, images (including maps, pictures, drawings and 3D reconstructions), and quotations from the ancient classical authors and from Babylonian texts. It should be stressed out that the entire book balances modern images and quotations with those of the ancients, which surely makes the reading easier and more appealing. In chapter 6, Juan Luis Montero focuses his attention on the Babel Tower, starting from a simple question: what is a *ziggurat*? The author gives a systematic explanation of this Mesopotamian religious building, presenting its aspects and functions. Next, he moves on to a detailed presentation of the Babel Tower, the Etemenanki, recounting the different proposals about the size, shape and appearance of its temple (situated on top of the *ziggurat*). Since the first proposal presented in 1892 by William Lethaby, the author leaves no hypothesis out, explaining each in detail to the reader. Lastly, he presents his own team’s proposal and the main arguments that support it.

After dealing with the architectural features of the religion, Juan Luis Montero dedicates an entire chapter to this topic, which revolves around Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon. However, the author first scans through the main characteristics of the Mesopotamian religion, so that the reader is familiarized with this central aspect of Mesopotamians’ lives. Then, he presents *Enuma Eliš*, the Babylonian Creation Poem which exalts Marduk, as well as the *akitu* festival, or New Year’s festival, stressing the importance of both to Marduk’s cult.

Finally, Juan Luis Montero surveys the last period of ancient Babylon, in which the city and its surroundings were part of the Persian Empire, until Alexander the Great's conquest in 331 BCE. This period was marked by new introductions in the customs, but also a survival of the Babylon culture. The last days of Babylon, as the author calls them, began when one of Alexander's generals named Seleucus proclaimed himself king of Babylon in 305 BCE, initiating a new Hellenistic era in the region.

In the appendix, the author presents a more detailed chronology, a very helpful glossary, and a synthetic but pertinent bibliography which gives the reader access to deeper understanding of the Babylon and Mesopotamian History.

This brief history of Babylon is the perfect book for those who want to learn more about this ancient city, its most important moments and protagonists. The author's written style is involving, though scientifically rigorous, which make its reading a pleasant experience. To conclude this review we will paraphrase Professor Jean-Claude Margueron, who wrote the prologue of this book: thanks to the thorough work of Juan Luis Montero, Babylon returns to the present days displaying all its historical greatness.