Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization

Paul Kriwaczek
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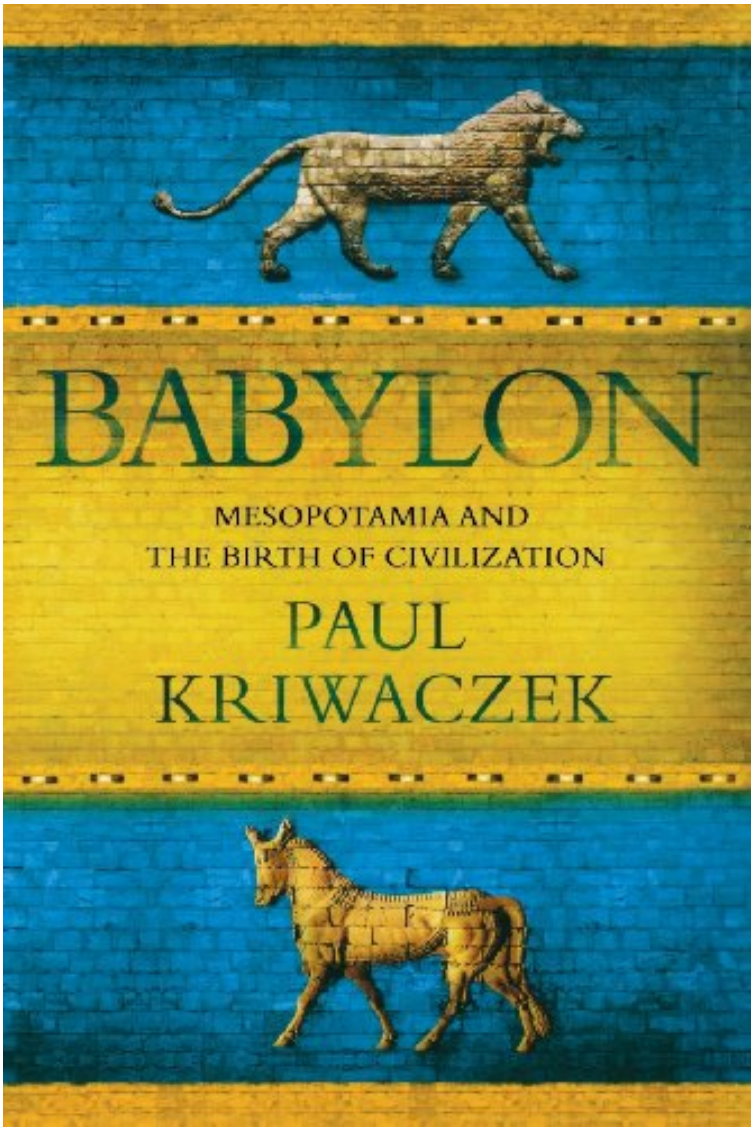

#113086 in Books Kriwaczek Paul 2012-03-27 2012-03-27Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 228.60 x .76 x 6.00l, 1.09 #File Name: 1250054168338 pagesBabylon Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization | File size: 46.Mb

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was not king.By Richard Stone, Cape TownI have read all of paul kriwaczek's books. In search of zarathustra convinced me to travel to iran. Babylon is a brilliant book in both its narration style and the ability to relate to the Mesopotamians through the ages with the same human frailties we have today.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Breezy narrative of the growth of Mesopotamian civilizationBy David A. DonnellyGood survey work that avoids the plodding detail of archeological pot shard dating for the most part. Makes for a good entry point into study of these fascinating cultures that reflect so many of our modern concerns in their detailed trade transactions and. Familial bickering. Leads, author to a sobering conclusion on the potential final stage of our own civilization.

Civilization was born eight thousand years ago, between the floodplains of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, when migrants from the surrounding mountains and deserts began to create increasingly sophisticated urban societies. In the cities that they built, half of human history took place. In Babylon, Paul Kriwaczek tells the story of Mesopotamia from the earliest settlements seven thousand years ago to the eclipse of Babylon in the sixth century BCE. Bringing the people of this land to life in vibrant detail, the author chronicles the rise and fall of power during this period and explores the political and social systems, as well as the technical and cultural innovations, which made this land extraordinary. At the heart of this book is the story of Babylon, which rose to prominence under the Amorite king Hammurabi from about 1800 BCE. Even as Babylon's fortunes waxed and waned, it never lost its allure as the ancient world's greatest city. Engaging and compelling, Babylon reveals the splendor of the ancient world that laid the foundation for civilization itself.

The lively mixture of topicality, politics, history, myth and culture in this anecdote is typical of Babylon at its best. The Independent (UK) Historical detail gives authority to this tale of human misery and military magnificence. The Times (UK) Eloquent and consistently thought-provoking account of ancient Mesopotamia. Scotland on Sunday An outstanding survey of a civilization that endured against great odds but has now essentially vanished. Booklist (starred) on Yiddish CivilisationA landmark book. Library Journal on In Search of ZarathustraLively and fast-paced. Publishers Weekly on In Search of ZarathustraAbout the AuthorPAUL KRIWACZEK was born in Vienna. He travelled extensively in Asia and Africa before developing a career in broadcasting and journalist. In 1970, he joined the BBC full-time and wrote, produced, and directed for twenty-five years. He also served as head of Central Asian Affairs at the BBC World Service. He is the author of Yiddish Civilisation: The Rise and Fall of a Forgotten Nation, which was shortlisted for the Jewish Quarterly Wingate Literary Award, as well as In Search of Zarathustra: The First Prophet and the Ideas that Changed the World.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.BABYLON (Chapter 1)Lessons from the Past: An IntroductioncThey hanged Saddam Hussein on the first day of the Feast of the Sacrifice, 'Eid ul-Adha, 30 December 2006. It was not a dignified execution. Reading the newspaper reports of that grisly - and botched - act of barbarism, more revenge than justice, and seeing the mobile-phone video images distributed immediately afterwards, I cannot have been the only one to feel that the language of daily journalism was inadequate to encompass such extravagant, larger-than-life events.The cruel tyrant's army crumbles away. He himself escapes, disappears from sight for a time, but is eventually discovered, filthy and heavily bearded, cowering like an animal in a hole in the ground. He is taken captive, publicly humiliated, held in solitary confinement for a thousand days and put on trial before a tribunal whose verdict is a foregone conclusion. Hanging him, his exultant executioners almost tear off his head.As in biblical times, God took to speaking to men again, instructing the makers of history. At a secret meeting between senior army officers in Kuwait during the run-up to the First Gulf War, Saddam had explained that he had invaded Kuwait on heaven's express instructions: 'May God be my witness, that it is the Lord who wanted what happened to happen. This decision we received almost ready-made from God...Our role in the decision was almost zero.'In a BBC documentary, broadcast in October 2005, Nabil Sha'ath, Foreign Minister of the Palestinian authority recalled that 'President Bush said to all of us: "I'm driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, 'George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan.' And I did; and then God would tell me 'George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq...' And I did. And now, again, I feel God's words coming to me."'It would have come as no real surprise had the conflict begun with a voice booming out from heaven, crying 'O President Saddam,' and continuing, as in the Book of Daniel, 4:31: 'to thee it is spoken; The kingdom is departed from thee. And they shall drive thee from men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field.' It takes the language of the Old Testament, the Book of Kings perhaps, to depict the details of Saddam Hussein's end in their full, almost mythic, dimensions. Thus:It was the morning of the Sabbath, before the sun rose. And they brought him into the city, even unto the place of execution.And they bound his hands and his feet as was the custom among them in the way of execution. And they reviled him saying, how are the mighty fallen, and may you be cursed by the Lord.And they placed the rope about his neck and they reviled him again, praising the names and titles of his enemies, and saying, may God curse you, may you go down to hell.And he replied, saying, Is this your manhood? This is a gallows of shame.And again they spoke unto him, saying, prepare to meet God. And he prayed to God, saying, there is no God but the Lord.And so they hanged him. And a great shout went up in the place of execution and in the streets and in the markets. It was the morning of the Sabbath, as the sun rose over the walls of Babylon.Seeing George W. Bush's Iraq War through biblical eyes is not just

a writer's conceit, the reaction of someone like me, introduced as a child to Middle-Eastern history by the Bible. Saddam too saw himself as a successor to the rulers of antiquity. He particularly modelled himself on Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BCE), conqueror and destroyer of Jerusalem and its temple, describing him, in a multiple anachronism, as 'an Arab from Iraq', who fought, like Saddam himself, against Persians and Jews. (Nebuchadnezzar was not an Arab but a Chaldean, there would be no Iraq for another two and a half millennia, and Judaism as we know it did not yet exist.) The emblem of the 1988 Babylon International Festival showed Saddam's profile superimposed on Nebuchadnezzar's; according to a New York Times journalist, the outline of his nose was lengthened to make him resemble the Mesopotamian king more closely. Saddam also honoured Hammurabi (c. 1795-1750 BCE), the ruler of the Old Babylonian Empire renowned for his eye-for-an-eye legal code, and named the most powerful strike-force in the Iraqi army the Hammurabi Republican Guard Armoured Division; another unit was the Nebuchadnezzar Infantry Division.The Iraqi leader was, said the BBC's John Simpson, 'an inveterate builder of monuments to himself', undertaking great construction projects in conscious emulation of his illustrious predecessors. Giant images of the Iraqi leader showed him, like an ancient Sumerian monarch, carrying a building-worker's basket on his shoulder, although the ancients would have been pictured bearing the first load of clay for brickmaking, while Saddam was represented bearing a bowl of cement. He began a massive reconstruction of the site of ancient Babylon, although his rebuilding, said one architectural historian, was 'poor quality pastiche and frequently wrong in scale and detail...' Like the monarchs of antiquity, Saddam had the bricks inscribed with his name; thousands bore the rubric: 'The Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar was rebuilt in the era of the leader President Saddam Hussein'. Never one to display unnecessary good taste, he had the text written in modern Arabic rather than Babylonian cuneiform.The political reasons for Saddam Hussein's concern to connect with the far distant, pre-Muslim, past of his country are plain. As in the case of the Shah of next-door Iran, who in 1971 famously declared his kinship with Cyrus the Great, founder of the first, Achaemenid, Persian Empire, any pitch for leadership of the Middle East demands that the pretender first neutralize the claims of holy Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia, the cities of the Prophet, to be the sole ultimate source of Islamic legitimacy.There is much irony in the fact that Anglo-American Middle East policy, from Operation Ajax, the deposing of democratically elected, socialist, secularist Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq in Iran in 1953, to Operation Iraqi Freedom, the overthrow of secular nationalist dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, has served in fact, if not intention, to ensure the continuing hold of Islam over nearly all the countries of the region. Thus inevitably boosting the claim of Salafi Islam, which looks to the immediate successors of the Prophet for its political models, to provide the only authentic principles on which to build a legitimate political system.Perhaps Saddam - whatever else he might have been, he was neither stupid nor unperceptive - also recognized another, even greater, truth of Middle-Eastern power-politics. Our way of life and understanding of the world may have changed utterly since ancient times, but we flatter ourselves unduly if we think that our behaviour is in any way different, or that human nature has altered much over the millennia.History tells us that the region the Greeks called Mesopotamia, because it lay 'between the rivers' Tigris and Euphrates, was fought over by Romans and Parthians, by Byzantines and Sassanians, by Muslims and Magians, until rank outsiders, Mongols and Turks, conquerors from distant Central Asia and beyond, created a desert and called it peace. Nobody with even a passing acquaintance with the history of the land could have been surprised at its reversion to confusion after the heavy Ottoman yoke was lifted from Iraq's neck in the 1920s, or the collapse into chaos after the deposition of the modern Ba'ath tyranny that held together the three former Ottoman provinces, mutually antagonistic and seemingly united only by the League of Nations to allow the great powers to extract oil.But the attempts to grab control over the fertile Mesopotamian plain go back much further even than Roman times. Twice as far, in fact. And while the ancient powers who vied for sovereignty have long since crumbled to dust, their clashes still ring faintly in the air.The bustling, thriving town now called Shush in south-west Iran, where the foothills of the Zagros Mountains run down on to the Mesopotamian Plain, is no more than 55 kilometres from the Iraqi border, another 70 from the Tigris. The streets are strung out either side of a slackly flowing branch of the Karkheh River, the air tinged grey-blue by the exhausts of the poorly maintained cars, which fight for space with crowds of pedestrians, bicycles, and men pushing heavily laden carts. Shush, ancient Susa, is the setting for the biblical Books of Nehemiah, Esther and Daniel: 'I was in Shushan the palace,' states the account of his visions in Daniel 8:2, '...and I saw in the vision that I was by the river Ulai.' Stand today on the main street that runs parallel to the river and you cannot escape reminders of the place's great antiquity.In front of you, between the road and the river-bank stands the reputedly ancient tomb of Daniel himself - nothing Hebraic about it, but an unremarkably Islamic building topped out with an unusual spiral cone rendered in white plaster. (Daniel's story was supposed to take place some time in the sixth century BCE, and this sepulchre dates from 1871.) The shrine is greatly honoured by local Shi'a Muslims; visitors enter the building in a steady stream, to fall on their knees, recite prayers and kiss the elaborate gilded metal grille that protects the sarcophagus.Across the street rises the gigantic mound that is the site of the ancient city, bearing at its top the fragmented stone remains of the Persian Achaemenid kings' winter capital. Walk around the ruins and you crunch over fragments of brick and pottery that may be as much as 5,000 years old, for Susa is one of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements anywhere in the world, probably founded not much later than 5000 BCE. From the middle of the second millennium BCE it was the capital of a state called Elam, master of this part of Iran

long before the advent of the Persians, and founded by a people who may just possibly, from the linguistic evidence, have been related to the speakers...