

# BABYLONIAN CULTURE

## LOCATION

The Babylonians lived in the ancient country of Mesopotamia, a fertile plain located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, south of modern day Baghdad (Iraq). Before the Babylonians established themselves in Mesopotamia, Sumerians and Akkadians inhabited this region.

## HISTORY

Around 2050-2000 BC, the great kingdom of the Sumerians was attacked by external invaders. Sumeria had been a powerful kingdom in the western part of Asia, and it had roughly occupied the land that was one day to become Babylonia.

The history of Babylonia is considered to have started with Hammurabi, who became the king of the city of Babylon in 1792 BC. Hammurabi enlarged his kingdom and established a vast kingdom in the region that had been formerly occupied by the Sumerians. However, the relationship between the Babylonians and the Sumerians was similar to that which existed between the Romans and the Greeks. Babylonian people were very influenced by the older Sumerian culture.

Under the reign of Hammurabi's dynasty (that is called the First Dynasty of Babylon), which lasted about 200 years, Babylonia entered into a period of extreme prosperity and relative peace.

Between the 16th century and the 12th century BC other external invaders (the Kassites, Assyrians and the Elamites) gained control over Babylonia.

Towards the end of the 12th century BC, however, a Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, defeated the invaders and re-established the kingdom of Babylonia. Nebuchadnezzar added a good deal of land to Babylonia and eventually attacked Assyria. His dynasty (called the Second Dynasty of Babylon), helped by one of the most powerful tribes outside Babylon, the Chaldeans, ruled Babylonia until 539 BC. This is when the Persians conquered this region. Babylon fell to Persia and this ended Babylonian independence and also the history of the ancient Mesopotamian empires.

## RELIGION

The Babylonians believed in a pantheon consisting of powerful immortal gods, each of whom ruled a particular aspect of the cosmos, such as the earth, heaven, seas, mountains and rivers. Also, each Babylonian had a personal god to whom prayers were addressed.

In Babylonia religion was an important aspect of life. Every day sacrifices of food, drink or incense were offered to the gods. Each of the important deities had a large temple in which he or she was worshipped. Religious rituals were led by priests, a separate and important class in Babylonian society. Temple services were generally conducted in open courts containing fountains for washing oneself and altars for sacrifices. However, only the high priest and a member of the court were permitted to enter the inner part of the temple, which contained the statues of gods or goddesses.

Babylonian religious ceremonies were impressive. Priests, musicians, magicians, dream interpreters and astrologers were involved in their preparation. The celebration of the new year at the spring equinox was the most important religious festival of the year.

## SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

Babylon was one of the first urban civilizations. It had a dozen urban centers surrounded by villages. The fertile soil of Mesopotamia made agriculture the base of Babylonian economy.

A king, assisted by governors and other local administrators, was the ruler. A remarkable collection of laws, known as the Code of Hammurabi, ("An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth") regulated the punishment that was inflicted upon citizens who misbehaved. Babylonian society consisted of three classes: the upper strata (called awilu), the low strata (called mushkenu), and the slaves (called wardu). Babylonian women had some legal rights, such as the right to hold property or to engage in business. Men, however, were given more legal rights than women. They could quite easily divorce their wives and sell their wives and children into slavery if they could not provide for them.

## **CULTURE**

Babylonians inherited many of the cultural and technical achievements of the Sumerians. They used sophisticated techniques in irrigation and agriculture. Babylonians were also skilled engineers. They used the Sumerian counting system, which closely resembled the decimal system used in much of the world today. They used an advanced system of writing and developed a system of education similar to that created by Sumerians, their predecessors. Schools were important cultural centers, and the curriculum consisted primarily of copying and memorizing information in both the Sumerian and Babylonian languages.

Babylonian artisans were skilled in metallurgy and in making fabrics, cosmetics and perfumes. Babylonians also practiced medical surgery.

