EXCAVATING BABYLON: ARCHAEOLOGY AND GERMAN IMPERIAL AMBITION 1899-1917

The project seeks to unearth the political, intellectual and scholarly forces which motivated the German excavation of Babylon. By examining the story of the Babylon-excavation I will investigate the interaction between archaeologists and ancient historians in this enterprise and the relation between their work and the geopolitical agendas of the political powers of the time. Through this analysis of Babylon, one of the largest excavations in modern history, the project will explore the significance of the contemporary intellectual environment for a reconstruction of the past.

Historiographic and archaeological reconstructions and representations of the ancient Middle East are in need of a reappraisal that takes such issues into account. The study raises fundamental questions about the place of identity in history writing. Does it matter who excavated, recorded and displayed Babylon? How did the directors understand their mandate? How did contemporary questions within their own field, their society and the political atmosphere influence their work? Who funded the project, and why? How does the historiography of any one 'present' in turn influence the body of knowledge that builds up about a specific subject, in this case, Babylon? By locating the Babylon excavation in its intellectual and political environment, this study contributes to the scrutiny of Western history of ideas. I will also relate the findings to issues of how we reconstruct and understand the ancient past in our own time. Put differently, this study will excavate the 'archives' of recorded Babylon.

The colonialist mindset and nascent nationalism are two significant contexts for European and, later, American archaeology. When Europe started to 'discover' the 'Orient' in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, the political impetus to carry out research, uncover treasures and carry through excavations was in part motivated by the modern enterprises of conquering the unknown and building a national identity. Babylon became important to Germany because it could provide a place in the race to acquire antiquities in which France and England had long been engaged. Germany entered the colonial game at a late point in time and had not made any spectacular discoveries such as the reliefs of Niniveh or the treasures of Egypt's pyramids. In the late nineteenth century Germany was able to negotiate favorable permits regarding antiquities with the Ottoman authorities, their allies, giving them a new advantage in the Near East.

Kaiser Wilhelm II's keen interest in antiquities and his travels in the Near East in 1898 are also relevant in understanding his role in the Babylon excavation. How do his motivations intersect and interact with the archaeologists' understanding of their mission, if at all? To what extent were the methods used developed to attain goals that the empirical material demanded, and to what extent were they developed to attain goals that may have been pre-defined? What was the relationship between the field workers, the funders and the decision-makers? For example, the intriguing role of James Simon, the Jewish philanthropist and business-man who initially funded both the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft (DOG) and the Babylon excavation, deserves attention and may cast new light on the inner working of Wilhelmine Berlin that is relevant to the project.

Significantly, the frantic expansionist policy of the Wilhelmine Empire was contemporaneous with an intellectual movement that has been called 'the second Orientalist renaissance'. This complex phenomenon has partly to do with a reaction against the dominating worship of the Classical past as the origin of Western civilization, a neo-Romanticist longing for the imaginative, evocative, particular, and an identification of the East with these aspirations. It also has concretely to do with the deciphering of cuneiform script at mid-century, and the discovery of large numbers of texts from, in particular, ancient Assyria and Babylonia. The strength of German philology provided scholars who could actually read Mesopotamian texts, opening up a whole new world of material from which the East could be understood through its own texts.

Throughout European cultural history, Babylon had been understood primarily through the Bible. Although mainly portrayed as the enemy of Israel, eventually taking on a symbolic meaning as the ultimate imperial enemy (representing Rome in the New Testament book of Revelations), the biblical view of Babylon is ambivalent. For example, king Nebuchadnezzar is portrayed as a convert to the Israelite god Yahweh in the book of Daniel, and in the book of Jeremiah, Babylon is portrayed both as an enemy of Yahweh and as his tool through which he punishes his own people. In European cultural history, the biblical stereotypes of Babylon as arrogant and sinful (the tower of Babel), Babylon as the captor of the Israelites (with whom the reader of the Bible identified) and Babylon as

the 'whore' of the book of Revelations, have dominated. Ancient Greek sources on Babylon have also contributed to the Western imagination of Babylon, such as the idea of the 'Hanging Gardens'.

When the Kaiser sent off the expedition to Babylon, he was not commissioning a dig at a hitherto little known city, but one about which many myths existed. In fact, like the excavation of other 'biblical' cities, Babylon raises acute methodological questions about issues concerning the appropriate criteria when using archaeology to reconstruct the ancient past. The often contentious interaction between the biblical and popular view of Babylon, and the Babylon that was excavated by archaeologists and assyriologists, is perhaps one of the unintended results of both the new interest in the East and the archaeological advances of the late nineteenth century. This interaction is worth investigating further.

The excavation of Babylon took place during a period that saw one of the most heated public debates involving assyriologists, which is often referred to as the Bibel-Babel controversy. The debate took place during a series of public lectures in Berlin given by Friedrich Delitzsch at which the Kaiser was also present. Delitzsch, a representative of the so-called Panbabylonists, claimed that most of the biblical texts had their origin in Babylonian mythology, such as the Gilgamesh epos which had been discovered in 1872. How did this debate, now seen as completely marginal, influence the Kaiser's understanding of the Babylon expedition, and did it at all affect Koldewey, the director of the dig?

Another crucial current to consider is the increasingly anti-Semitic character of the intellectual discourse in Germany during this period, whether expressed against Judaism as a religion or against Semitic culture in general. This trend affected scholarship in almost every field, including language, history, theology, biblical studies and assyriology. It expressed itself in many ways and one of them was the pressing need to deny the Jewish roots of Christianity. In the discourse about the pre-classical ancestors of the European nations, a similar drive to 'de-semiticize' Babylon continued far into the twentieth century. How did this dark current of European intellectual heritage intersect with the excavation and presentation Babylon at the time?

A few written accounts of the Babylon excavation are available today. In addition to project director Robert Koldewey's own field report and his book *Das wieder erstehende Babylon*, there are summary presentations in publications introducing German archaeology or the history of the German archaeological institutions. Koldewey published some findings from Babylon during the course of the excavation in the *Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft*. The findings from Babylon have also found their way into historical presentations of the city of Babylon and ancient Babylonia. What is lacking, however, is a critical history of the phenomenon of the Babylon excavation, setting it in its historical, political and intellectual context in Germany from our vantage point a century later. It is this gap which my proposed project is designed to fill.

The exhibit of the Babylon findings opened in 1930 in the Pergamon Museum, built especially to house the reconstructed Ishtar Gate from Babylon and the Pergamon altar (from Turkey). Under its director Walther Andrae, the museum's presentation of Babylon is a major phenomenon in archaeological exhibition. To my knowledge, a critical analysis of this exhibition is lacking. By this time we are at the end of the Weimar Republic and on the threshold of the era of Hitler. Although the period between 1917 and 1930 is not the main focus of the study, it too will also be briefly examined, for it is during this time that the findings were transported to Berlin, catalogued and exhibited (Part III).

I visited the ancient site of Babylon three times prior to 2003 and was then struck by questions that arise from the story of a site that was excavated 100 years ago by a super-power and later all but abandoned. The restoration by the Iraqi government in the 1980s is also full of controversy and I asked myself at the time: How is Babylon displayed in contemporary Iraq? Whose history is Babylon a part of? Saddam's Babylon is worth a probe as a relief against which to critique the established understanding of Babylon as a part of Western history. More recently, the insights gained from post-colonial thinking become highly relevant in present day Iraq as the military invasion of 2003 has brought to the table a whole new set of questions. The focus brought on Iraq by the war has also initiated a new awareness of ethical dilemmas of heritage protection. This development is illustrated by the recent increased attention given to the problem of the looting and illegal trafficking of antiquities. Some of these questions will be discussed in the final part of the study: here the issue of identity in history writing (discussed in Parts I and II) will be scrutinized from the vantage point of our own present.

Excavating Babylon: Archaeology and German Imperial Ambition 1899-1917

Part I (80pp)

Intellectual Environment

- European Archaeology and European Nationalism
- German Scholarship in the European Context

Political Environment

- Berlin on the World Stage
  - *Kaiser Wilhelm II*

Part II (90pp)

Discovering Babylon

- Mesopotamia and Assyriology in Germany in the Late Nineteenth Century
- German Academic Institutions and Organizations
  - *James Simon: Philanthropic German Jew*

Digging up Babylon

- Babylon in Mesopotamian Archaeology
- Babylon in European Cultural History
- Babylon in Late 19th Century Debate
  - *Robert Koldewey: Chief Excavator*

Part III (30pp)

Displaying Babylon

- From Babylon to Berlin: the Berlin Museums
  - *Gertrude Bell: Colonial Minister of Antiquities*
  - *Walter Andrae: Assistant Excavator, Drawer and Museum Director*

Saddam's Babylon

Whose Babylon?

Dr. Rannfrid Thelle