

Babylonia: Recessions, Epidemics, Environmental Crises

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The history of independent Babylon (1894–539 B.C.) was not one sustained rise from humble beginnings as a local dynasty to the glorious empire of the biblical Nebuchadnezzar. Rather it may be viewed as a series of peaks and troughs, as political power and economic strength waxed and waned. The two high points—politically and culturally—seem to have been in the Old

Babylonian era around and shortly after the time of Hammurabi (1800–1650 B.C.) and in the New Babylonian kingdom under the dynasty founded by Nebuchadnezzar's father (625–539 B.C.) The intervening period is much less well known, but its stretch of more than one thousand years during which cultural and political traditions were transmitted between high points is worth investigating. This millennium itself,

though not as successful as the absolute peaks, shows a distinctive profile of reduced-scale high and low points. There were times of demonstrable political strength, as when the various rival segments of southern Mesopotamia coalesced for the first time into the unified nation state of Babylonia in the 15th century. There were times of political weakness, as in the 8th century when the king in Babylon was a local tribesman and the old cities of the realm fought civil wars. My researches recently have been concentrating on the mechanisms of crisis in Babylonian society: the periods of economic depression and recession, times of pestilence and depopulation, eras marked by environmental shifts that signalled agricultural and social collapse.

One of the main difficulties in studying economically impoverished eras is that these leave considerably fewer traces than prosperous years, especially in the way of written documents. So one must search for new types of evidence and new methodologies to deal with scanty documentation. The reader may be interested in the types

of questions we are beginning to ask.

Recessions, declines in living conditions, and impoverishment are all relative terms and imply a standard against which high, medium, and low points can be measured. One of the tasks I have been engaged in this year was to construct a chart recording relative density of economic activity over a 990-year span from 1595 to 605 B.C. The number of dated economic transactions per year is being plotted on something akin to a graph, yielding figures roughly comparable to the number of sales made annually on a stock exchange. This fluctuating volume of economic activity bears interesting correlations to political ebbs and flows, reflecting military successes and disasters, tribal disruptions, crop failures, and the like. More important it gives an approximate index of relative prosperity in different periods when internal conditions in Babylonia might otherwise be hard to compare to a single standard. The procedure still has many shortcomings, and one must be cautious not to over-interpret movements, espe-

cially for very short time spans or for under-represented locales. But this is a beginning in an attempt to subject long-term economic trends in Babylonia to quantitative analysis.

Declines can also be seen in other ways. There are drops in population size and shifts in population distribution; some of these can be detected archaeologically as well as in documents. Archaeological surveys in some sections of lower Mesopotamia have suggested sharp population declines in Babylonia between 1200 and 625 B.C. I have noted passages in documents from both Assyria and Babylonia during this time range which allude to drought, crop failure, movements of hungry populations, and outbreaks of plague. It may not be pure coincidence that the only known major literary work composed in Babylonia between 1000 and 700 B.C. has as its central actor Erra, the plague god. On another plane, one must also consider whether Babylonia might not have

been experiencing part of a broader pattern of (global?) climatic change as evidenced by drought phenomena for the decline of the Mycenaean age in Greece and the waning Late Bronze age farther east (c. 1200–1000) and by monsoon failure in northwest India in the same general time range. A major shift westward of the Euphrates channel(s) probably also took place at some point in the late second millennium B.C., though even an approximate date has yet to be satisfactorily determined. These and other environmental changes could have caused severe dislocations in urban and agricultural patterns in Babylonia.

These are fairly wide-ranging observations over a broad spectrum of inter-related and interdisciplinary problems. The study of processes of decline may in the long run turn out to be as significant as the study of classical high phases in illuminating the total career of mankind.