NO PREP

Babylon and the Hanging Gardens

Myth or Reality?

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Babylon and the Hanging Gardens: Myth or Reality?

The City That Became a Symbol

Babylon was one of the great cities of the ancient world, but it was also something more: it became a symbol. To the Hebrews, it was the city of exile and oppression — the great wicked city. To the Greeks, it was a wonder, home to legendary gardens and a massive ziggurat they may have understood as the Tower of Babel. To modern audiences, 'Babylon' still evokes decadence, power, and eventual ruin. The gap between the historical city and the mythological one is enormous, and archaeology has spent more than a century trying to close it. The historical Babylon sat on the Euphrates River south of modern Baghdad. It became the

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Nebuchadnezzar II: Builder of a World

Nebuchadnezzar II was one of the ancient world's great builders. Under his reign, Babylon was rebuilt on a scale that stunned ancient visitors. The city was surrounded by a double wall so massive that ancient sources claimed chariots could race side by side on top of it. The Processional Way (a magnificent boulevard paved with glazed blue and yellow bricks) ran from the city's main gate to the great temple of Marduk. Lining its walls were relief images of lions (symbols of Babylon), dragons, and bulls made from glazed brick in vivid blue, yellow, and white. At the end of the Processional Way stood the Ishtar Gate, one of the ancient world's most extraordinary architectural achievements. The gate was faced entirely with deep

blue glazed bricks decorated with alternating rows of striding dragons and bulls, approximately 120 animal figures in total. The original gate stood nearly 14 meters high. German archaeologist Robert Koldewey excavated Babylon between 1899 and 1917 and found the Ishtar Gate in pieces, which were then reconstructed and reassembled in Berlin's Pergamon Museum. Visitors today can walk through a full-scale reconstruction of the gate in Berlin, though whether it should be in Berlin or in Iraq is a debate that has grown more pointed in recent decades.

The Hanging Gardens: Ancient Wonder, Missing Evidence

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Ancient writers described a massive terraced garden visible from afar, its irrigated trees and flowers cascading down stepped stone terraces like a mountain of greenery in the middle of a flat city. The gardens were said to have been built by Nebuchadnezzar II for his wife Amytis, who missed the green hills of her Median homeland. There is one significant problem: no archaeological evidence for the Hanging Gardens has been found at Babylon. Despite extensive German excavations and subsequent work by Iraqi archaeologists, no structure at the site matches the ancient descriptions. This has led some scholars to conclude that the gardens never existed: that they were a literary invention, perhaps a composite of real Babylonian architecture exaggerated by Greek travelers who had never visited the city themselves. But Stephanie Dalley, a British scholar, has proposed an alternative explanation: the Hanging Gardens were not in Babylon at all. They were in Nineveh, built by the Assyrian king Sennacherib, who explicitly described creating a spectacular garden with complex irrigation machinery. Dalley argues that the confusion arose because ancient writers sometimes used 'Babylon' loosely to refer to all of Mesopotamia, and that Sennacherib's own description of his gardens matches the ancient accounts more closely than anything found at Babylon. The debate remains open and active.

Babylon in Berlin — and the Repatriation Question

The reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin is one of the most impressive museum displays in the world. The full-scale reassembly of the gate, along with extensive sections of the Processional Way's wall, creates an immersive encounter with ancient Babylon that would be impossible if the pieces were displayed as fragments in a storage room. Millions of visitors have passed

through it. But the presence of Babylon in Berlin raises questions that Pergamon's administrators are increasingly unable to avoid. The excavations that removed the gate's glazed bricks were conducted under Ottoman-era permits that have since been challenged as inadequate. Iraq has repeatedly requested the return of the gate and the associated reliefs. The museum's position — that the reconstruction can only be properly maintained in Berlin — has been criticized as paternalistic. The argument is the same one that surrounds the Elgin Marbles, the Benin Bronzes, and dozens of other major artifacts: who has the right to decide where the past lives?

Key Information: Babylon

Detail	Information
Location	On the Euphrates River, south of modern Baghdad, Iraq
Peak Period	Neo-Babylonian Empire, c. 626-539 BCE
Most Famous King	Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BCE)
Ishtar Gate	Glazed blue brick gate with dragon and bull reliefs; reconstructed in Berlin's Pergamon Museum
Hanging Gardens	One of the Seven Wonders; no archaeological evidence found at Babylon
Dalley's Theory	Hanging Gardens may have been in Nineveh, not Babylon
Excavator	Robert Koldewey, German excavations 1899-1917
Current Controversy	Iraq has requested return of Ishtar Gate materials from the Pergamon Museum

Case Study: The Tourist at the Pergamon

Tariq Mahmoud was visiting Berlin for a conference on heritage law. He had two hours free on a Wednesday afternoon, and he spent them at the Pergamon Museum. He had seen pictures of the Ishtar Gate many times. He had studied it in photographs, in academic papers, in reconstruction drawings. He had never walked through it before. Standing in front of it, he understood something he hadn't before. The scale was different in person. The blue was different — a deep lapis blue that photographs couldn't quite capture. The dragons and bulls were larger than he expected, and the way they repeated down the long wall of the Processional Way created a rhythm that felt almost musical. For several minutes he forgot everything he knew about the legal and ethical arguments and simply looked. Then he took out his notebook. He was there, after all, as a heritage lawyer representing the Iraqi Ministry of Culture in ongoing discussions with the Pergamon about a possible long-term loan arrangement — not repatriation, just yet, but a beginning. He wrote: 'The argument that the reconstruction can only be maintained here is not purely technical. It is also territorial. The gate was built in Babylon. It belongs in its landscape.' He paused, then added: 'Though I understand why millions of people who will never visit Iraq have stood where I am standing. That is also not nothing.'

1. Tariq finds himself genuinely moved by the gate before returning to his professional analysis. How does his reaction complicate the legal and ethical debate about where the Ishtar Gate should be located?

2. Tariq writes that the argument for keeping the gate in Berlin is 'territorial' as well as technical. Based on the reading, what does he mean, and why does the distinction matter for how we evaluate museums' claims about preservation and access?

Multiple Choice

1. What is the main archaeological problem with the traditional account of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon?

    a) Ancient descriptions of the gardens contradict each other in every detail

    b) The gardens were destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar II himself after a military defeat in his reign

    c) No physical evidence of the gardens has been found at Babylon despite extensive excavation

    d) The gardens were built by a Persian king, not a Babylonian one

2. Stephanie Dalley's alternative theory about the Hanging Gardens suggests they were located in:

    a) Persepolis, the Persian capital

    b) Ur, as part of the ziggurat complex

    c) Egypt, built by a Babylonian king in exile during the Persian period

    d) Nineveh, built by the Assyrian king Sennacherib

3. The Ishtar Gate is currently in Berlin because:

    a) Nebuchadnezzar II gave it as a diplomatic gift to a German king

    b) Iraq donated it to the museum as a symbol of international cultural exchange and mutual respect

    c) It was moved to Germany for protection during World War I

    d) German archaeologist Robert Koldewey excavated it and it was reassembled at the Pergamon Museum

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Nebuchadnezzar II	A) Magnificent glazed blue brick entrance to Babylon decorated with dragon and bull reliefs
2. ___ Ishtar Gate	B) A grand ceremonial boulevard in Babylon paved with glazed bricks leading from the main gate to the temple
3. ___ Hanging Gardens	C) Neo-Babylonian king (605-562 BCE) who rebuilt Babylon on a grand scale
4. ___ Pergamon Museum	D) One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World; no archaeological evidence found at Babylon
5. ___ Processional Way	E) Berlin museum housing the reconstructed Ishtar Gate and sections of the Processional Way

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Ishtar Gate was decorated with alternating rows of two animals: _____ and bulls, both sacred symbols in Babylonian religion.

2. Scholar Stephanie Dalley has proposed that the Hanging Gardens were actually built in _____, not Babylon, by the Assyrian king Sennacherib.

3. German archaeologist Robert _____ excavated Babylon between 1899 and 1917, discovering the glazed brick sections that were later reassembled in Berlin.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why is the debate over the Hanging Gardens of Babylon significant for how we evaluate ancient historical sources? What does it reveal about the reliability of those accounts?

2. Using the Ishtar Gate as an example, explain why the repatriation debate is more complicated than simply asking 'who owns it?'

3. Nebuchadnezzar II is remembered primarily as a builder rather than a conqueror. Based on the reading, what does his construction program at Babylon tell us about how rulers in the ancient world used architecture as political communication?