Babylon was an ancient city in the Middle East built on the banks of the Euphrates River. From 2000 to 500 B.C. it was the capital of the Babylonian Empire and a major center for religion and trade. The Greek writer Herodotus visited the city around 450 B.C.—after it had been conquered by the Persians—and claimed that it "surpasses in splendor any city of the known world." The glories of the capital included a tall pyramid-temple that inspired the legend of the Tower of Babel, and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon that were considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

The site of Babylon lies in Iraq, 55 miles (88km) south of the city of Baghdad. Between 1899 and 1913, Babylon was excavated by the German archaeologist Robert Koldewey and his team. Brick by brick, they gradually built up a picture of the ancient city. Their research revealed Babylon as it had been in its final years, during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar II. Below the ruins of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon lay the remains of cities from even earlier eras.

During the 1700s B.C., Babylon had been the center of a large empire under King Hammurabi. Koldewey's team found that Hammurabi's Babylon contained fine temples and palaces, and a maze of narrow streets lined with houses. All the buildings were made of

▲ The ancient city of Babylon was built on the Euphrates River, shown here as it is today, fringed by palm trees. The Euphrates provided water for the citizens, and also for irrigating the surrounding land. In addition it was an important means of transport for trading items.
mud bricks set on top of burned brick foundations. Hammurabi's capital was protected by strong walls.

After the reign of Hammurabi, Babylon passed into the hands of people called the Kassites, who ruled Babylon from about 1600 to 1150 B.C. Then, in the seventh century B.C., the Assyrians captured and sacked the city.

Nebuchadnezzar's City
It was not until the Babylonian general Nabopolassar defeated the Assyrians in 626 B.C. that Babylon was restored to its former glory. He and his son Nebuchadnezzar rebuilt the capital and transformed it into the finest city in the ancient Middle East. Nebuchadnezzar's capital covered an area of 2,100 acres (850ha), which

▲ A map of Babylon in the time of King Nebuchadnezzar. It shows the outer walls, main streets, and the sites of the palace, temples, and ziggurat.

► This tiny bronze and gold statue, made in the 18th century B.C., shows King Hammurabi kneeling in prayer.
made it larger than many modern towns. In its heyday, up to 250,000 people lived there.

The rectangular city was enclosed by a double line of mighty walls. The outer walls were 85 ft (26m) thick. The inner walls were equally substantial—according to Herodotus, two chariots pulled by four horses each could ride side by side along the top of them. Eight bronze gates led into the city.

**THE ISHTAR GATE**
The most magnificent gate was the Ishtar Gate. The walls and gateway were decorated with bright blue glazed tiles and with reliefs of animals that symbolized the Babylonian gods. Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, was represented by a lion; Adad, the god of storms, was symbolized by a bull. A horned dragon represented Marduk, an important god and patron of the city.

In Nebuchadnezzar's time the Euphrates River flowed through the city, dividing it in two. The two halves were linked by a stone bridge over the river. The western part contained houses for many of the citizens. The eastern part contained palaces and temples. Nebuchadnezzar's palace stood near the Ishtar Gate. Known as the "Marvel of Mankind," it was built around five courtyards and was

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**Divination**

Divination—attempting to predict the future by observing physical signs—was a fundamental part of Babylonian society. The Babylonians believed that certain behavior, both natural and man-made, meant that certain events would follow. Individuals, government administrators, kings, and even armies would consult experts in divination, called diviners. The diviners had many different ways of trying to read the future. They observed all sorts of things—animals' intestines, the behavior of birds and animals, oil in water, incense smoke, and the stars and planets. Hail, thunder, and earthquakes, and unusual animal behavior in or near important city buildings, were all considered to be of particular significance. Purification rituals, called *naburbi*, could be carried out to stop unwanted predicted events from happening.
This inscription, found on a wall in Babylon, commemorates in Nebuchadnezzar’s own words the successful completion of the king’s great building project for the capital city.

I have completed the construction of Babylon, the sublime city, the city of his majesty (Marduk), and its great walls. By its entrance doors I have put giant bulls, a thing that no one had ever done before. My father surrounded the city with two walls made of tar and fired bricks. I erected a third strong wall, made of tar and fired bricks, and joined it to the walls of my father.

The towering brick ziggurat was thought to be the original Tower of Babel

The archaeologists could find no trace of the famed Hanging Gardens of Babylon. According to ancient writers, the gardens were built by Nebuchadnezzar to please his wife, a princess from Media who missed the forests and meadows of her native land. The gardens probably grew on rooftop terraces that have long since crumbled.

After Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon’s power faded. The city first fell into the hands of the Persian Empire in 539 B.C., and then in 331 B.C. it was conquered again, this time by the Macedonian general Alexander the Great. It became his capital; but when Alexander died, the region passed to his general Seleucus. Seleucus built a new capital, Seleucia, on the Tigris River, and Babylon was abandoned.