TRANSNATIONAL PRESS® LONDON

AVAR - July 2023 - Volume: 2, No: 2, pp. 229–264
ISSN: 2752-3527 (Print) ISSN: 2752-3535 (Online)
avarjournal.com

Received: 12 April 2023 Accepted: 1 May 2023
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33182/aijls.v2i2.2837

From Šulgi to Abraham: Encounters with Ur in the First Millennium BCE

Zachary Rubin[1]

Abstract

Of all the ancient cities that could have served as Abraham's hometown, why does the Hebrew Bible choose Ur? This article explores how different groups may have interacted with Ur and its legacy circa the exilic and postexilic periods of biblical authorship, to discern the ways different groups in Babylonia engaged with Ur, and how their interactions may have informed their perception of the city. It argues that Babylonian Judeans largely did not have direct access to the city or to the cuneiform artifacts that described its history. Instead, Judeans would have had to rely on information transmitted orally from Babylonians, whose interest in Ur may have been elevated due to the preponderance of artifacts from the Third Dynasty of Ur. As such, this article will evaluate how different forms of information traveled in the ancient world, and the ways they impacted the direction of cultural memory: through archaeological discoveries, word-of-mouth transmission, and scholarly rationalization.

Keywords: *Babylonian historiography; Assyriology and the Bible; Transmission of knowledge; Reception; Ancient historiography*

Introduction

The city of Ur is haunted by two ancient specters, summoned during the advent of modern archaeology. One is the specter of Egypt, with which the city and its finds are inevitably compared whenever they enter the Western eye. This apparition first emerged when the tomb of Puabi was promoted as a rival of Tutankhamun's tomb, discovered just

[1] Zachary Rubin, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. E-mail: Zachary.rubin@mail.huji.ac.il

a few years earlier,[2] and lingers on in a common trope to convey—or perhaps argue for—the antiquity of Iraq. It is not for nothing that the BBC should proclaim the Ziggurat of Ur "Iraq's answer to the pyramids,"[3] though its builders certainly did not have Giza in mind when they first constructed it.

The second specter, which is the subject of this article, is that of Abraham: ancestral patriarch of the billions-large religious traditions that bear his name. The Hebrew Bible famously claims that Abraham had been raised in the city of Ur Kaśdîm (אור כשדים), typically translated as "Ur of the Chaldees" or "Chaldeans." From this city, Abraham supposedly migrated northwest to Harran, and then south to the Promised Land. Ur Kaśdîm has been almost unanimously identified as the site of Tell el-Muqayyar since the late 19th century, when cuneiform inscriptions revealed that it had once been a city called "Urim" and later "Uru(m)."[4] This discovery only received significant attention in the 1920s due to the exploits of archaeologist and media savant Sir Leonard Woolley, who popularized the site as Abraham's hometown.[5] Woolley's storytelling and a city-wide séance (if there ever was one)

This article is written in memory of Douglas R. Frayne. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this essay for their feedback. I would also like to express my gratitude towards Shane M. Thompson and the rest of the editorial team of Avar for inviting me to publish an article in this issue.

[2] Jennifer Y. Chi and Pedro Azara, "Glam-UR-Ous: The Art and Archaeology of Aesthetics," in *From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics*, ed. Jennifer Y. Chi and Pedro Azara (Princeton University Press, 2015), 31; Jennifer Y. Chi and Marc Marín, "The Golden Image of Archaeology before the Second World War," in *From Ancient to Modern: Archaeology and Aesthetics*, ed. Jennifer Y. Chi and Pedro Azara (Princeton University Press, 2015), 60–61.

[3] Geena Truman, "Iraq's Answer to the Pyramids," BBC Travel, August 23, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20220822-the-ziggurat-of-ur-iraqs-answer-to-the-pyramids.

4 Harriet Crawford, *Ur: The City of the Moon God* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 3; Jonathan Taylor, "Sîn-City: New Light from Old Excavations at Ur," in *Ur in the Twenty-First Century CE: Proceedings of the 62nd Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Philadelphia, July 11–15, 2016*, ed. Grant Frame, Joshua Jeffers, and Holly Pittman (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021), 36–42.

[5] E.g., C. Leonard Woolley, *Abraham: Recent Discoveries and Hebrew Origins. By Sir Leonard Woolley*, London (Faber & Faber, 1936); C. Leonard Woolley, *Ur of the Chaldees: A Record of Seven Years of Excavation* (London: Penguin Books, 1938). Woolley's usage of the Abraham narrative is discussed in Chi and Marín, "The Golden Image of Archaeology before the Second World War," 70–71; Billie Melman, *Empires of Antiquities: Modernity and the Rediscovery of the Ancient Near East, 1914-1950* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 159–90.

ultimately paid off. In addition to its status as a UNESCO world heritage site, Ur is now a place of international religious pilgrimage, attracting thousands of tourists every year to the site of Abraham's supposed birthplace. It is for this reason that Pope Francis made his famous visit to Iraq, using the setting of Ur to reinforce his message of peace and tolerance among all Abrahamic faiths.

Of course, Abraham's long journey from Ur to the Holy Land has been found to contradict the setting as divulged in archaeological and cuneiform records. The most significant of these is the attribution of Ur to the Chaldeans, as Chaldean tribes are not known to have settled the southern marshlands around Ur until the early first millennium BCE. Throughout the mid-20th century, theologians and archaeologists interpreted Abraham's vast journey from Sumer to Canaan as reflecting some historic migration event that took place in the Middle or Late Bronze Age.[6] Such attempts have largely ceased following the critical assessments of Thomas L. Thompson and John Van Seters, who dismantled the more positivist arguments of the time and instead emphasized the anachronistic elements of the Abraham story, already explored in the early years of the Documentary Hypothesis.[7]

More recently, the concept of Abraham as a resident of Ur has been assigned to a priestly stratum, conventionally dated to the exilic (Neo-Babylonian) period or more commonly to the early postexilic (early

[6] E.g., Cyrus Gordon suggested Abraham's Ur was actually Ura, a city known from texts from Ugarit, while W. F. Albright suggested that the patriarch was involved in transregional trade during the Middle Bronze age. Cyrus H. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (1958): 28–31; W. F. Albright, "Abram the Hebrew a New Archaeological Interpretation," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 163 (1961): 36–54.

[7] Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974); John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

Achaemenid) period.[8] The emergence of Abraham from a foreign land was likely modeled after the earlier tradition of the exodus from Egypt, which was attested as early as the books of Hosea, Amos, and Micah in the late 8th century BCE. By making Abraham a native of Babylonia, the postexilic writers created a precedent for their own experiences as migrants from Babylonia into the former kingdom of Judah. In the process, the patriarch was made to travel over a thousand kilometers from Ur to Harran—his place of origin according to an earlier tradition—before resuming his journey to Canaan. The earlier narrative choice of Harran as the home of the patriarchs is likely reflective of the period between the 8th – 6th centuries BCE, when the city was at the height of its influence.[9] Indeed, Douglas Frayne had noted some similarities between the personal names of Abraham's male relatives (Serug, Nahor, Terah, Haran) with the names of toponyms in the Upper Euphrates region (Sarugi/Suruç, Naḫur or Til-Naḫiri, Til-ša-Turaḫi, Ḫarrān/Harran/Haran).[10]

But of all the cities of Babylonia that could have been chosen as the hometown of the Judean patriarch, why Ur? One recurring idea, first

[8] Discussions of the pre-priestly geographical scope of the Abraham narratives include Erhard Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte*, Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament 57 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1984), 274–89; André Lemaire, "Cycle Primitive d'Abraham et Contexte Géografico-Historique," in *History and Traditions of Early Israel. Studies Presented to Eduard Nielsen*, ed. André Lemaire and B. Otzen, Vetus Testamentum Supplements 50 (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Thomas Römer, "Abraham and the 'Law of the Prophets,'" in *The Reception and Rememberance of Abraham*, ed. Pernille Carstens and Niels Peter Lemche, Perspectives on Hebrew Scriptures and Its Contexts 13 (Piscatay, NJ: Gorgias, 2011), 87–101; Matthias Köckert, "Die Geschichte der Abrahamüberlieferung," in *Congress Volume Leiden 2004*, ed. André Lemaire, Vetus Testamentum Supplements 109 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 103–26. Discussions of the priestly context of the Abraham narratives as attested in the Hebrew Bible include Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Abraham as Paradigm in the Priestly History in Genesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, (2009): 225–41; Jakob Wöhrle, "The Un-Empty Land: The Concept of Exile and Land in P," in *The Concept of Exile in Ancient Israel and Its Historical Contexts*, ed. Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 404 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010); Albert de Pury, "Abraham: The Priestly Writer's 'Ecumenical' Ancestor," in *Abraham: The Priestly Writer's "Ecumenical" Ancestor* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 163–82.

[9] Nadav Na'aman, "The Jacob Story and the Formation of Biblical Israel," *Tel Aviv* 41 (2014): 99.

[10] Douglas Frayne, "In Abraham's Footsteps," in *The World of the Aramaeans: Studies in Honour of Paul-Eugène Dion, Volume 1*, ed. P.M. Michèle-Daviau, J.W. Wevers, and Michael Weigl, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series 324 (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 216–33.

suggested by Hugo Winckler, connects Abraham's two hometowns, Ur and Harran as cities dedicated to the moon god Nanna/Sîn.[11] Nabonidus (r. 556–539 BCE), infamous for his devotion to the moon god, sponsored significant building projects in both cities. It is for this reason that John Van Seters has suggested that the narrative reflects the political and social circumstances of his reign.[12] J.A. Emerton has pointedly asked in response: "Why should the favour shown by [Nabonidus] to these two cities have led a Jew to invent the idea that Abraham came from them?"[13] As this article hopes to show, this question is not as rhetorical as it first appears. Nevertheless, Ur and Harran were far from the only cities in Babylonia that Nabonidus renovated, as the king also sponsored building projects in Babylon, Sippar, Larsa, and others.

And since lunar gods were quite popular in the ancient Near East,[14] Ur and Harran were only two of many cities that were dedicated to lunar cults. The connection with the moon god seems to be a false lead.

Jakob Wöhrle presents what I find is a more feasible explanation:

> Based on the usual dating of P—at the earliest in the time of the exile, but more likely in the early postexilic time—the relocation of Abraham's origins from Haran to Ur can be explained by the fact that the priestly writers wanted to place Abraham's origins near to the residence of the Babylonian *golah*. Presumably, the old Babylonian city of Ur, and not Babylon the capital of the Neo-Babylonian empire, is thereby mentioned as Abraham's place of origin, because the priestly

[11] Hugo Winckler, *Geschichte Israels in Einzeldarstellungen* (Leipzig: E. Pfeiffer, 1895), ii 22-25.

[12] Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 264.

[13] J. A. Emerton, "The Origin of the Promises to the Patriarchs in the Older Sources of the Book of Genesis," *Vetus Testamentum* 32 (1982): 30.

[14] B. B. Schmidt, "Moon," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 585–93.

> writers knew that Ur was one of the most important centers of Mesopotamia during the late third and the first half of the second millennium and thus in the supposed "time of the ancestors."[15]

If that is the case, then what exactly did the priestly writers know about Ur, and how did they know it? While Ur was known as an ancient center of power, reaching the height of its influence in the late third millennium, why was it chosen over other ancient power centers, such as Akkad, Uruk, or the mighty Babylon itself? This paper will explore the ways Assyrians, Babylonians, and Judeans of the first millennium BCE may have encountered Ur and the embodiments of its memory.

Drawing from the studies of sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann has explored the distinction of collective memory from history. Unlike history, collective memory does not aim to be comprehensive or unbiased, nor does it attempt to take dissenting perspectives into account. Instead, it focuses on specific individuals or events that are important for the development from the perspective of an affective community (e.g., a people, nation), and consequently becomes colored by that group's biases, values, or narratives. Assmann has further differentiated between two kinds of collective memory: "communicative memory," a nebulous body of lived memory that is transmitted through everyday communication, and "cultural memory," which concerns people and events from before living memory. In order to be preserved from one generation to the next, cultural memory must be detached from everyday communication, generally through a process of formalization and institutionalization. Bearers of cultural memory may include oral tradition, texts, icons, monuments, institutions—any external carrier that allows the memory to become reembodied whenever accessed. Moreover, the

[15] Wöhrle, "The Un-Empty Land," 192–93.

creation of cultural memory requires the forgetting of any events and persons that are irrelevant to the culture in question. The strength of the memory therefore depends on the strengths of the social bonds and frames of reference that maintain it.[16]

Due to the underlying inequalities of the Mesopotamian empires its inhabitants had differing levels of literacy in cuneiform languages and differing levels of access to its sacred spaces. We may consider the embodiments of the memory of Ur—and the culture memories of Mesopotamian antiquity as a whole—to be present within the inscribed artifacts of its ancient rulers, cuneiform secondary literature describing the city and its rulers, and in the monumental spaces that represent the ancient city and its priorities. As such, this article will discuss how inhabitants of Babylonia would have encountered mementos of the ancient kingdoms of Ur through material finds and literary traditions, and how they were internalized into the prevailing ideologies surrounding contemporary Babylonian kingship and cosmology. Afterward, it will discuss how Judeans may have encountered Babylonian traditions concerning ancient Ur, and how these relatively scant memories were curated to reimagine it as the home of Abraham.

Ur and its Material Culture in Neo-Babylonian Times

Students of archaeology may be most familiar with Ur as the home of the so-called "First Dynasty of Ur," active circa the Early Dynastic IIIa period of Sumer (2600–2450 BCE). This royal family—or families, for almost no contemporary inscriptions survive explaining the relationship between each member of the ruling family—has been made famous from the exciting finds that were excavated in their mortuary complexes: the jewelry of queen Puabi, the gold helmet of

[16] Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Ansgar Nünning and Astrid Eril (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 109–18.

king Meskalamdug, and the scores of retainers who were entombed along with them. However, Babylonian writers of the first millennium never seem to have paid these early rulers any notice. Instead, their nostalgia was more concerned with the so-called Ur III Dynasty. Though it lasted little over a century (ca. 2112–2004 BCE), the Ur III dynasty has an outsized presence in the Mesopotamian archaeological record. Šulgi, its longest-reigning and most famous king (ca. 2094–2046 BCE), had expanded the administrative bureaucracy of the state to an extremely high degree, such that the Ur III dynasty produced cuneiform tablets at a higher volume than any other state before or since. Even now, the Ur III period remains the most documented time in Mesopotamian history. At least 120,000 published texts are known from the period.[17] The dynasty also made its mark by sponsoring numerous building projects throughout the kingdom, preserved mainly in building inscriptions left at their foundations. Most the building projects occurred in the heartland of the old kingdom in the deep south, particularly at the holy city of Nippur and the old capital of Ur.

Around the 7th century BCE, when the Assyrian empire had reached its apex under the Sargonid dynasty, the city of Ur played a significant role in deciding the political control over southern Babylonia. It lay within the territory of Bīt-Yakīn, the strongest of the five Chaldean tribes and a most persistent obstacle to the Assyrians' dominion. As such, the kings of Assyria asserted their control over Ur to safeguard their wider interests within the region. At least during the former half of the 7th century, the city was ruled by a dynasty of autonomous governors, who generally supported Assyrian interests in the region

[17] On the sheer extent of the Ur III corpus, see e.g. Manuel Molina Martos, "The Corpus of Neo-Sumerian Tablets: An Overview," in *The Growth of an Early State in Mesopotamia: Studies in Ur III Administration*, ed. S. J. Garfinkle and J. C. Johnson, Biblioteca Del Próximo Oriente Antiguo 5 (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2008), 19–53; Changyu Liu, *The Ur III Administrative Texts from Puzrish-Dagan Kept in the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East*, Harvard Semitic Studies 68 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1–5.

and prospered as a result. Likewise, the historic city of Nippur was revived as a counterbalance against the influence of Babylon.[18] Though Ur appears to have lost its strategic importance and its autonomy when the Assyrian empire fell, its temples continued to receive royal patronage throughout the Neo-Babylonian period, at least through the reign of Cyrus. However, it seems that the city was a relatively small temple town with no agricultural hinterland or significant trade relations.[19] Even at the height of the Neo-Babylonian empire, Ur seems to have had relatively little contact or communication with its neighbors, including the nearby metropolis of Uruk. Indeed, the road to Ur seems to have been frequented by bandits.[20] The city remained populated through the seventh year of Philip III Arrhidaeus (317 BCE), though its population had waned over time. It was presumably abandoned soon after, as disruptions of the local branch of the Euphrates made its survival untenable.[21]

Babylonian construction projects were likely to have uncovered finds from the Ur III period with certain regularity, particularly when they were conducted at the sites that the old kingdom had once funded. Indeed, individuals from first-millennium Babylonia were known to have engaged extensively with the artifacts of their more ancient predecessors, especially foundation deposits that had been left at the sites of ancient temples, palaces, and city walls. The act of digging up inscribed objects—a practice sometimes described as ancient

[18] S. W. Cole, *Nippur in Late Assyrian Times c. 755-612 BC*, State Archives of Assyria Studies 4 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1996).

[19] Beaulieu, "The City of Ur and the Neo-Babylonian Empire," 153.

[20] Michael Jursa, *Aspects of the Economic History of Babylonia in the First Millennium BC. Economic Geography, Economic Mentalities, Agriculture, the Use of Money and the Problem of Economic Growth*, AOAT 377 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 85–88.

[21] For the history of Ur in the first millennium, see J. A. Brinkman, "Ur A. III. Philologisch. Mitte 2.-1. Jahrtausend," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 14, 364–67; Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "The City of Ur and the Neo-Babylonian Empire," in *Ur in the Twenty-First Century CE: Proceedings of the 62nd Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Philadelphia, July 11–15, 2016*, ed. Grant Frame, Joshua Jeffers, and Holly Pittman (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021), 153–70.

archaeology—had numerous uses in Babylonian political society, as first-millennium kings used ancient inscriptions as a means of emulating venerable rulers of the past.[22] This was especially pronounced in the case of Nabonidus, the last autonomous ruler of Babylon and an infamous antiquarian. In his building inscriptions, Nabonidus describes how he often labored to uncover the exact foundations of ancient temples before he began renovating them. Thanks to his attention to detail, he had numerous encounters with inscribed artifacts that his royal predecessors had deposited at temple sites before him, often paraphrasing their inscriptions in his own reports.[23] During his renovation of the ziggurat of Ur, for instance, he uncovered inscriptions by Šulgi, in which Šulgi claimed to have completed construction work begun under his father, Ur-Namma (ca. 2112–2094 BCE). He then paraphrases the inscription:

> Elugalgalgasisa, the ziggurat of Ekišnugal, which is inside Ur, which Ur-Namma, a king of former times, had built, but had not completed: Šulgi, his son, completed its construction. I read in the inscriptions of Ur-Namma and Šulgi, his son... Now, that ziggurat had become old so, on top of the original foundations that Ur-Namma and Šulgi, his son, had built, I

[22] Studies of Mesopotamian antiquarian practices and "archaeology" include Irene J. Winter, "Babylonian Archaeologists of The(ir) Mesopotamian Past," in *Proceedings of the First International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Paolo Matthiae et al. (Rome: Università degli Studi di Roma, 2000), 461–75; Christopher E. Woods, "The Sun-God Tablet of Nabû-Apla-Iddina Revisited," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 56 (2004): 23–103; Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "Mesopotamian Antiquarianism from Sumer to Babylon," in *World Antiquarianism - Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Alain Schnapp et al., Issues & Debates (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), 121–39.

[23] Hanspeter Schaudig, "Nabonid, der 'Archäologe auf dem Königsthron'. Zum Geschichtsbild des ausgehenden neubabylonischen Reiches," in *Festschrift für Burkhart Kienast zu seinem 70. Geburtstage dargebracht von Freunden, Schülern und Kollegen*, Alter Orient und Altes Testament (Münster: Ugarit, 2003), 447–97.

> repaired the damage of that ziggurat with bitumen and baked bricks, as (it had been) in ancient times.[24]

Nabonidus's fascination with Ur and the cult of its moon god extended to revitalizing its ancient institutions. Most infamously, he installed his daughter as *entu* (high priestess) of the moon god, lavishing upon her the antiquating Sumerian name Ennigaldi-Nanna, meaning "*entu* desired by Nanna." The position had been vacant for centuries. In his "Ennigaldi-Nanna Inscription,"[25] Nabonidus justified his decision to revive the practice through the discovery of an inscription of his predecessor Nebuchadnezzar I (1121–1100 BCE) at Ur, which included a depiction of an *entu* that the older king had installed. As he renovated the domicile of the *entu*, the Egipar, he also uncovered a number of other ancient inscriptions that supported his move. The oldest of these was an inscription of Enanedu, an *entu* who was the sister of king Rīm-Sîn of Larsa (r. 1822–1763 BCE). Curiously, the inscription identifies Rīm-Sîn as king of Ur, rather than Larsa.[26] I will discuss this peculiarity in the next section.

While Nabonidus is the most famous antiquarian, allusions to Šulgi's Ur and the world of Sumerian antiquity appear throughout the imperial period. An early example of this is attested during the reign of Marduk-apla-iddina II or biblical Merodach-baladan (r. 722–710 and 703–702 BCE), a ruler of Bīt-Yakīn who seized Babylon from the Assyrians. In a cylinder inscription recounting his renovation of the Eanna temple of Uruk, Marduk-apla-iddina was careful to name Šulgi

[24] Frauke Weiershäuser and Jamie Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Amēl-Marduk (561–560 BC), Neriglissar (559–556 BC), and Nabonidus (555–539 BC), Kings of Babylon*, Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (RINBE) 2 (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020), Nabonidus 32: i 5–23.

[25] Weiershäuser and Novotny, RINBE 2, Nabonidus 34. See also commentary in Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon 556-539 B.C.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 127–28; Schaudig, *Die Inschriften Nabonids*, n. 2.7; Marten Stol, *Women in the Ancient Near East* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 574–77.

[26] Weiershäuser and Novotny, RINBE 2, Nabonidus 34: ii 2.

as its previous builder.[27] After seizing Babylon back from Marduk-apla-iddina, Sargon II (r. 722–705 BCE) likewise performed renovations on the Eanna temple, also mentioning Šulgi as its previous builder, while ignoring the work done by his Chaldean rival.[28] While Šulgi and his brethren are not known from the inscriptions of the rest of earlier Assyrian rulers, their artifacts strongly informed the iconographic program of Ashurbanipal (r. 669–631 BCE). In steles found in the Babylonian city of Borsippa, Ashurbanipal and his brother Šamaš-šumu-ukīn (king of Babylon, r. 668–648 BCE) are depicted holding work baskets over their heads, the tips of their crowns awkwardly jutting into the foots of their baskets. These steles revive a third-millennium artistic motif in which the king depicts himself as a pious workman, who labors to build the temples of the gods himself. This old motif is best exemplified in Ur III foundation figurines, one of which may have informed the brothers' royal images.[29]

The motif was likely introduced to the Assyrian court by Sîn-balāssu-iqbi, the energetic governor of Ur who served during Ashurbanipal's early reign. Like Nabonidus after him, Sîn-balāssu-iqbi significantly rebuilt the temples of Ur, generally striving to uncover their original foundations before renovating them. An antiquarian in his own right, Sîn-balāssu-iqbi adopted the Ur III title of šagina or *šakkanakku* (governor-general)[30] and composed numerous foundation inscriptions in Sumerian.[31] Though he may have seen himself as a contemporary

[27] Grant Frame, *Rulers of Babylonia from the Second Dynasty of Isin to the End of the Assyrian Domination (1157-612 BC)*, Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Babylonian Periods (RIMB) 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), B.6.21.1: i 1: 3.

[28] Grant Frame, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II, King of Assyria (721-702 BC)*, The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period (RINAP) 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2020), 125: i 18.

[29] Natalie Naomi May, "'I Read the Inscriptions from before the Flood…'. Neo-Sumerian Influences in Ashurbanipal's Royal Self-Image," in *Time and History in the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the 56th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Barcelona, 26-20 July 2010*, ed. Lluis Feliu, J. Llop, A. Millet Albà, and Joaquin Sanmartín (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 199–210.

[30] Beaulieu, "The City of Ur and the Neo-Babylonian Empire," 159 with fn. 27-28.

[31] Frame RIMB 2, B.6.32.2001-2014.

ruler of Ur, his inscriptions do not directly allude to any of the kings who reigned before him. This may be because he was not a king in his own right; he may have felt that the act of naming the ancient kings would have put himself in an unflattering comparison with them due to his lack of royal status. Or perhaps he was taking care not to assert himself as a king of Ur in his own right, as Ashurbanipal would have certainly seen this as a challenge to his own rule.[32] Nevertheless, his building work must have uncovered numerous votive artifacts from the Ur III period and later. A concrete example of this is a copy of an inscription of Amar-Sîn (ca. 2046-2037 BCE), Šulgi's immediate successor, found on a drum-shaped object from the Egipar. In an Akkadian-language colophon, the copyist of the inscription noted that it had originally been found on a baked brick, and that S-b-i had recovered this brick from the debris of Ur as he searched for the original foundations of the temple of the moon god.[33]

Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605–562 BCE) seems to have been more reluctant to allude to the earlier rulers of Babylon. Though he used archaic sign forms in his monumental inscriptions as a nod to the antiquity of his city, he rarely paid lip service to any of his royal predecessors aside from his father Nabopolassar (r. 626– 605 BCE),[34] placing his Babylon in a sort of historical void that had been untouched since sacred antiquity. We may understand his reluctance as a reaction to the fact

[32] Likewise, Assyrian magnates of the eighth century BCE were reluctant to allude to some of the defining facets of royal iconography, despite their relative autonomy and ability to represent themselves in styles typically reserved for royalty. Shana Zaia, "How To (Not) Be King: Negotiating the Limits of Power within the Assyrian Hierarchy," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 77 (2018): 207–17.

[33] Amar-Sîn inscription edited in Douglas R. Frayne, *Ur III Period (2112-2004 BC)*, Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods (RIME) 3/2 (University of Toronto Press, 1997), 3/2.01.03.11. Akkadian colophon edited in Frame, RIMB 2, B.6.32.2001-20142.6.32.2016. Woolley (*Abraham*, 204) suggested that this object served as an early "museum label," which he attributed to a collection that Ennigaldi-Nanna supposedly curated.

[34] The one other exception I am aware of is in his inscriptions pertaining to the renovation of the Lugal-Marada temple in Marad, which names Narām-Sîn of Agade (ca. 2254–2218) as the previous builder of its foundations (Rocío Da Riva, *The Neo-Babylonian Royal Inscriptions: An Introduction*, Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record (GMTR) 4 (Münster: Ugarit, 2008), nn. C210 and C32). Nebuchadnezzar may have made this exception due to how ancient this king was from his perspective.

that Babylon had only recently been liberated from Assyrian rule, thanks to his and his father's endeavors. Artifacts from the Ur III period may have served as a bitter reminder that Babylon had often fallen under foreign rule, perhaps undermining the authority he had as its king. Nevertheless, Nebuchadnezzar gave a curt nod towards the antiquity of Ur. In an inscription on BM 91005, a diorite weight that is now in the British Museum, he briefly notes that it had been copied after a template by Šulgi:

> Two minas, of correct (weight), property of Marduk, king of the gods, copy of a weight that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, son of Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, had made with due precision as a copy of a weight of Šulgi, an earlier king.[35]

As property of Marduk, the weight is marked by the god's characteristic spade emblem. Michael Jursa has demonstrated that this weight was part of an endeavor of the kings of Babylon, to promote the Esangil temple of Marduk as a model temple which set the standards of the rest of the economic sphere. As such, he regards the invocation of Šulgi as:

> ...not, or not merely, an act resulting from 'antiquarianism' or reverence due to a legendary king of lasting fame in Mesopotamian cultural memory. The purpose was future reference and the creation of calibration models. The fact that the standard thus enshrined came with the authority of great antiquity was an obvious plus.[36]

Nevertheless, the weight places itself in a difficult position in Nebuchadnezzar's ideology, both as a testament to the importance of

[35] Edition and translation in Michael Jursa, "Standards, Metrology, and Politics in Babylonia in the Imperial Age," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 55 (2022): 77–78. Note that the British Museum instead interprets BM 91005 as being the property of a person named Marduk-šar-ilāni ("Marduk is king of the gods").

[36] Jursa, "Standards, Metrology, and Politics," 78.

Babylon as a center of an idealized world order, and as a tacit omission that it had not always been independent.

This paradoxical invocation of Šulgi may be understood not as an homage, but as a response, perhaps reconciling Nebuchadnezzar's image of an eternal Babylon with the discovery of artifacts of the Ur III kingdom. Indeed, Nebuchadnezzar's weight and its corresponding inscription visually resemble AO 22187, a diorite half-mina weight of Šulgi now in the Louvre. Šulgi had dedicated this weight and others he had made to the moon god Nanna, his divine patron as tutelary god of Ur. Though the findspot of this weight is uncertain, it had likely been installed in Nanna's temple in Ur, Egišnugal.[37] The one major visual difference between this weight and the weight dedicated by Nebuchadnezzar, aside from the orientation of the script, is the divine emblem: Nebuchadnezzar's weight is marked with the spade emblem of Marduk, while Šulgi's is marked with the crescent moon emblem of Nanna. Since Nebuchadnezzar had rebuilt the Egišnugal temple during his reign, we may surmise that his workers had uncovered one or more weights that Šulgi had once dedicated to his god. This weight would have served as a template from which Nebuchadnezzar modeled his own weight. It may have also inspired him to emulate Šulgi by installing his own weight in the temple of his own patron god, setting the standard for the rest of his empire to follow.

Interpreting Ur in Neo-Babylonian Times

Perhaps inspired by the influx of finds, Babylonian scholars of the first millennium intensely studied the Ur III period, which they called "the dynasty of Šulgi."[38] Their considerations are reflected in a body of historiographical texts, known from Neo-Assyrian and Late Babylonian collections. These texts reinterpret the lives of early kings in light of

[37] Edition and translation in Frayne, RIME 3/2.1.2.50. Other Šulgi weights edited in RIME 3/2.1.2.51–53.

[38] I. J. Gelb, "The Early History of the West Semitic Peoples," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 15 (1961): 32.

more contemporary political-cosmological developments, which held Babylon as the most important center of kingship and religion in the world. As such, they imagine encounters that these ancient rulers had with Babylon and its cults, particularly the cult of its supreme god Marduk, centuries before the historical rise of the city and its gods had really occurred.[39]

For instance, a pseudepigraphic text known as the *Weidner Chronicle* or *Esangil Letter* argues that Marduk had always been regarded as the arbiter of kingship. It anachronistically puts forward examples of third-millennium dynasties as examples of kings who had either gained the ability to exercise power through Marduk's support or squandered his favor and lost power as a result. Most of the dynasties within the text are represented by its founders and final rulers, who are said to either win or lose Marduk's favor. In contrast, all five kings of the Ur III dynasty are represented: Ur-Namma (ca. 2112–2094 BCE), Šulgi, Amar-Sîn, Šu-Sîn (ca. 2037–2028 BCE), and Ibbi-Sîn (ca. 2027–2004 BCE):

> He (Marduk) gave kingship over all the lands to Šulgi, son of Ur-Namma. He did not perform his rites perfectly, and he defiled his purification rituals, so he made his sin manifest in his body (in the form of a skin disease). Amar-Sîn, his son, changed the offerings of large oxen and sheep of the New Year's festival in Esagila. It was foretold that he would die from goring by an ox, but he died from the "bite" of his sandal. Šu-Sîn furnished Esangil like the celestial writing for his well-

[39] See overviews of these traditions in e.g. Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, ed. Benjamin R. Foster (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 3–29; Caroline Waerzeggers, "The Babylonian Chronicles: Classification and Provenance," *Journal of Near Eastern Civilizations* 71 (2012): 285–98; Odette Boivin, "The Many Arts of Writing a Babylonian National History," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* Forthcoming Issue (July 12, 2022).

> being, and so he increased his lifespan. But he imposed the punishment for what Šulgi had done upon his son Ibbi-Sîn.[40]

Šulgi and Ibbi-Sîn are more expected in this selection. Both kings are well known from the cuneiform historiographic tradition; the former usurping his father's role as the august founder and namesake of the dynasty, the latter as the unfortunate final king who lost control of his domain. Historical omens recounting anecdotes in the lives of both kings circulated in the scribal curriculum for centuries afterwards. Extispicy omens associated with Šulgi were generally taken as signs of victory and world domination, though a few seem to allude to less fortunate events in the king's career, including illness and abdication. Omens associated with Ibbi-Sîn were taken as unambiguous harbingers of disaster.[41] The new, Babylonianizing historical tradition acknowledges the success previously attributed to Šulgi by framing it in terms of the Marduk cult. However, it also qualifies it by claiming that the king lost the god's trust, thus bringing about the fall of his dynasty generations later in the reign of Ibbi-Sîn.

The *Weidner Chronicle* and most other forms of cuneiform historiographic literature generally focuses on the most famous members of each dynasty, usually pertaining to the kings who elevated their cities to hegemonic status or kings who were conquered by their rivals. The fall of Ur is succinctly explained by the misdeeds of its former champion Šulgi, and the delayed punishment for his misdeeds in the time of Ibbi-Sîn. As such, the inclusion of the intermediate kings Amar-Sîn and Šu-Sîn is unusual. While their own fortunes are

---

[40] Translated after A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Reprint, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), n. 19: 70-75; Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, no. 38: 70-75; Hanspeter Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster: Tradition and Transformation of the "Catastrophe of Ibbi-Sîn" in Babylonian Literature*, Dubsar 13 (Münster: Zaphon, 2019), source 35: 70-75. See discussion of the text as the *Esagil Chronicle* in Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster*, 113–173, especially 156–65 on the kings of Ur.

[41] See discussion of omens of Šulgi in Frayne, RIME 3/2, 105; omens of Amar-Sîn and Ibbi-Sîn in Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster*, 89–99; and omens of all three of these kings in Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Le Devin Historien En Mésopotamie*, Ancient Magic and Divination 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 344–62.

attributed to the ways they treated the Marduk cult, they are only held responsible for their own fates and do not seem to have any ability to save Ur from its fate. Šu-Sîn's failure to appease Marduk poses thorny theological questions about the limits of divine forgiveness, which probably would not have been imposed if the list had simply omitted the king out of convenience.[42] Moreover, these two kings had a much smaller footprint in Mesopotamian historiographical texts than their glorious predecessor or their unfortunate successor. The bizarre death of Amar-Sîn by either the goring of an ox or a "bite of his sandal" is known from omen tradition, but Šu-Sîn is largely absent from the rest of the historiographical corpus. We may speculate that the composer of the *Weidner Chronicle* felt obliged to include these two obscure kings, even if it complicated its intended message. Since both kings left behind a large quantity of votive inscriptions, including the inscribed brick that Sîn-balāssu-iqbi had excavated, it is possible that the composer had become aware of both kings through the discovery of their artifacts. For this reason, the composer may have been compelled to appropriate every king of the dynasty, rather than stick to its most infamous members.

The motif of Šulgi as a powerful but impious ruler is echoed in a chronicle of early rulers known from Neo-Babylonian Borsippa and duplicated in an independent fragment from the same city.[43] While acknowledging that Šulgi provided for the ancient cultic center of Eridu, it also claimed that he had plundered Esangil and Babylon, for

[42] In Schaudig's reconstruction the text skips from the vilified Enmerkar to the lionized Gilgameš with no mention of Gilgameš's father Lugalbanda. It also skips from Sargon of Akkad to his son (really his grandson) Narām-Sîn without including the second generation of Akkadian kings or any of Narām-Sîn's successors, as is omission in first-millennium accounts of the Sargonids. *Explaining Disaster*, source 35: 40–69.

[43] Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, n. 20A; Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, n. 39: 28–30; Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster*, source 48. See discussions of the origins and ideological purposes of the chronicles of early kings in Caroline Waerzeggers, "The Babylonian Chronicles: Classification and Provenance," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 71 (2012): 292–95; Odette Boivin, "The Many Arts of Writing a Babylonian National History," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 10 (2023): Forthcoming.

which Marduk punished him with a deadly disease. A similar tradition is known from a text from Late Babylonian Uruk, in which Šulgi is said to have mistreated the rites of the local cult of Anu and received divine retribution in response.[44] Other traditions, generally known from longer texts with fewer manuscripts, describe more favorable encounters between Šulgi and Babylon. One of these is the fragmentary *Šulgi Prophecy*, known only from Neo-Assyrian sources. Narrated in the voice Šulgi himself, the text describes events that would someday befall Babylon and the earlier religious capital of Nippur, likely taken from events that had actually occurred in the interim.[45] Though Šulgi's exact relationship with Babylon is unclear within the text, its ultimate pro-Babylonian bias is made transparent by his promise to posterity, that "To the king of Babylon and Nippur, all the lands are given as one."[46] Like other Akkadian prophecies, it was presumably used to legitimize the actions of a specific monarch, for whom the text was composed. Though the fragmentary state of the text hampers our comprehension of its purpose, we may suggest it was used to support either Esarhaddon or Ashurbanipal. Both kings

[44] Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, no. 48; Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster*, source 49. Further discussion in Kathryn Stevens, *Between Greece and Babylonia: Hellenistic Intellectual History in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 351–52.

[45] Edited with commentary in Matthew Neujahr, *Predicting the Past in the Ancient Near East: Mantic Historiography in Ancient Mesopotamia, Judah, and the Mediterranean World*, Brown Judaic Studies 354 (Providence: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 41–50. Translation in Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), 357–59. Discussions of the context of this text within ancient Near Eastern prophetic and autobiographical traditions in Tremper Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 142–45; Matthijs J. de Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets: A Comparative Study of the Earliest Stages of the Isaiah Tradition and the Neo-Assyrian Prophecies*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 424–26; Benjamin D. Thomas, *Hezekiah and the Compositional History of the Book of Kings* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 134; Martti Nissinen, *Prophetic Divination: Essays in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 87–103.

[46] Neujahr, *Predicting the Past*, 44: iii 17'-19'.

sponsored building projects in Nippur after a long period of royal neglect, and rebuilt Babylon after its destruction by Sennacherib.[47]

Another example can be found in a Neo- or Late Babylonian Akkadian inscription found in Ur (UET VI/3 919), which was copied from an earlier manuscript from the Nabû temple in Borsippa.[48] It purports to have been copied off a stele that Šulgi had once erected, though the anachronisms are readily apparent. It has the king declare himself ruler over Babylon, assiduous towards the rites of Babylon's chief gods Marduk and Nabû, and vanquisher of Assyria, Sutû, and Scythia—none of which were significant powers in Šulgi's time. Moreover, he is said to have repaired a temple located on the processional street in Babylon in honor of Nabû, emphasizing the fact that the statue of Nabû was brought there from the Ezida temple in Borsippa during the Babylonian New Year's Festival. Though the inscription acknowledges Šulgi as king of Ur, its political and religious setting brings him into the context of the first millennium. His priorities are made to align with the temple communities of first-millennium Babylon, with whom the historical Šulgi probably did not engage.

In these inscriptions, Šulgi is domesticized into Babylonian historiography as something of a pious overlord. Though they acknowledge that he did not rule from Babylon, they nevertheless claim that he offered the city its due respect as center of the world

[47] See the engagements of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal in Nippur in Cole, *Nippur in Late Assyrian Times c. 755-612 BC*. Note that Nielsen considers the Marduk Prophecy, which was part of the same series that contained the Šulgi Prophecy, to have been an original product of the era of Esarhaddon. See John P. Nielsen, "Marduk's Return: Assyrian Imperial Propaganda, Babylonian Cultural Memory, and the Akitu Festival of 667 BC," in *Memory and Urban Religion in the Ancient World*, ed. Martin Bommas, Juliette Harrisson, and Phoebe Roy (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 3–32; John P. Nielsen, *The Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I in History and Historical Memory* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[48] Edited and translated in Eckart Frahm, "Šulgi sieger über Assur und die Skythen?," *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* 2006/25, 22. For the context of this text within the ideological program of the Babylonian New Year Festival in the Late Babylonian period, see Céline Debourse, *Of Priests and Kings: The Babylonian New Year Festival in the Last Age of Cuneiform Culture*, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 127 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 70.

order. According to the prevailing ideology of Babylon at the time, it would mean that Šulgi had established himself as an ideal king, in accordance with the will of Marduk and Nabû. Through this interpretation, Babylonian scholars would have seen Šulgi's long and successful reign as evidence that the gods of Babylon had favored him. This optimistic interpretation seems to be reflected in the first-millennium commentary Murgud,[49] as it appears to identify Šulgi-Nanna—historically, a fortress that Šulgi had erected in the Diyala region—as an epithet of Babylon.[50] It seems to reflect a historiographic tradition that identified Šulgi as one of the many kings that built up Babylon and its temples, making his kingdom a functional forerunner to Hammurabi's dynasty (ca. 1792–1750 BCE) and all subsequent regimes based in Babylon itself.

Babylonian historians may have also associated Ur with the states of Isin and Larsa, which had assumed hegemony over southern Mesopotamia between the fall of the Third Dynasty of Ur and the rise of the First Dynasty of Babylon. This seems to be the case with two late inscriptions concerning Rīm-Sîn I, king of Larsa, who Hammurabi had famously defeated to establish Babylon as the only hegemonic city of southern Mesopotamia. As mentioned earlier, an inscription of Nabonidus instead identified Rīm-Sîn as king of Ur. Moreover, another chronicle of early rulers from Neo-Babylonian Borsippa records that "Hammurabi, king of Babylon, mustered his army and marched against Rīm-Sîn, king of Ur. Hammurabi captured Ur and Larsa and took their property to Babylon."[51] Though the text tacitly acknowledges Larsa as

[49] Eckart Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation*, Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record 5 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2011), 249–53; Niek Veldhuis, *History of the Cuneiform Lexical Tradition*, Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record 6 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2014), 363–66.

[50] SpTU 3 116: ii 19, ^{d}*šul-gi-*^{d}*nanna* = ŠU = *ba-*ˈ*bi*ˀ-[*lu*]. We may compare its identification of Ištar's lost cultic center of Zabalam with her more famous and enduring cultic center of Akkad several lines earlier (l. ii 13). On the historic fortress of Šulgi-Nanna, see Fabienne Huber Vulliet, "Šulgi-Nanna," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie 13*, 248–49.

[51] Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, n. 20B; Glassner, Mesopotamian Chronicles, n. 40: 8-11.

one of Rīm-Sîn's capitals, his kingship over Ur seems to hold precedence.

The succession of the Ur III kingdom had been a significant component of royal ideologies of the early second millennium, prior to the rise of Babylon.[52] The kings of the city of Isin were the first to lay claim to succession; even though Isin was one of the first cities to declare independence to Ur, it would later conquer the city from the Elamite armies that had overthrown its last king, Ibbi-Sîn. As such, kings of Isin also identified themselves also as kings of Ur.[53] When Isin lost Ur to its ascendant rival of Larsa, its kings began to identify themselves as kings of Ur as well. Though this title is not known from any of Rīm-Sîn's extant inscriptions, he is identified as such in a prayer from Ur that was composed on his behalf.[54] He may have also been given this title in the Enanedu inscription that Nabonidus had cited. Even after Isin lost control of Ur, its kings nevertheless claimed continuity with the Ur III kings. A most vivid expression of this is found in the *Ur-Isin King List*, which lists the all the kings of both cities as members of a single continuous dynasty.[55] By the end of the 18th century, however, Ur and the rest of the Mesopotamian deep south went into significant decline, and many of the old cities of Sumer underwent severe depopulation. The kings of Babylon consolidated power in their northern heartland, which would remain the center of politics for centuries afterwards. At

[52] Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster: Tradition and Transformation of the "Catastrophe of Ibbi-Sîn" in Babylonian Literature*, 49–53, 81–88; Katrien De Graef, "Bad Moon Rising: The Changing Fortunes of Early Second-Millennium BCE Ur," in *Ur in the Twenty-First Century CE: Proceedings of the 62nd Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Philadelphia, July 11–15, 2016*, ed. Grant Frame, Joshua Jeffers, and Holly Pittman (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2021), 49–90; Klaus Wagensonner, "The Middle East after the Fall of Ur: Isin and Larsa," in *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East: Volume II: From the End of the Third Millennium BC to the Fall of Babylon*, ed. Karen Radner, Nadine Moeller, and D. T. Potts (Oxford University Press, 2022), 190–309.

[53] De Graef, "Bad Moon Rising," 51–52.

[54] UET 6 106/ETCSL 2.6.9.7 (Rim-Sin G): 20.

[55] A. K. Grayson, "Königslisten und Chroniken. B. Akkadisch," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 6, 90.

Grayson 1983, 90, § 3.2. See discussion the ideology of Isin as heir of Ur in Schaudig, *Explaining Disaster*, 49–53.

least for the kings of Babylon, the city of Ur no longer had special importance for royal ideology.

Looking back into the jumbled history of the early second millennium, Neo-Babylonian scholars may have reimagined the multipolar political situation to have been a simple contest between two political entities: the kingdom of Ur in the south, versus the kingdom of Babylon in the north. Since the mightiest kings of Isin and Larsa had laid claim to the kingship of Ur and had contributed to building projects within it, they may have been perceived simply as kings of Ur in their own right. The reckoning of these rulers as kings of Ur first and their own cities second would have had precedent within contemporary Babylonian historiography, which saw the kingship of Babylon being passed along from one ruling dynasty to the next—often in quick succession. Though the Babylonian king list tradition styled all rulers of Babylon as "kings of Babylon," it also identified them by the geographic origins of their dynasties (Amorite, Sealand, Kassite, Isin, etc.). This was the case even if said rulers had resided in Babylon, as almost all of them did.[56] As such, it would not be difficult for Babylonian scholars to imagine the old kings of Isin and Larsa as kings of Ur, albeit as members of different ruling families that were not related to Šulgi's line.

Within this modified historiography, Hammurabi's conquest of Rīm-Sîn is recontextualized to represent Babylon's conquest of the kingdom of Ur. As such, Babylon is made an immediate heir to Šulgi's extended dynasty, rather than a more distant successor. Closing the gap between the two, the chroniclers placed the two divinely appointed dynasties in juxtaposition; the last Sumerian occupier of Babylon followed by the first autonomous kingdom of Babylon in non-mythical history. Since first-millennium historiographers believed Babylon to be the first kingdom in existence, founded by Marduk himself at the beginning of

[56] Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "Up for Grabs: Babylonian Kingship during the Iron Age," *The Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies Journal* 8 (2013): 5–15.

time, the ancient world of Sumer seems to have been regarded less as a foundation of Babylonian civilization and more as an early episode within that civilization. It was a time when Marduk had decided to allow dynasties who lived outside of Babylon to rule over his city, which assuredly had existed before any of their kingdoms had existed.

As such, the kingdom of Ur is made to represent the end of an era of remote antiquity—remote in that it had occurred before the first postdiluvian kingdom of Babylon, and that the physical nexus of the kingdom was removed from Babylon itself. Its extraordinary wealth and power, commemorated in countless artifacts found in the old cities of this kingdom, became appropriated as a moralizing lesson about Babylonian cosmology, conveying that obedience towards Marduk leads to prosperity, while disobedience towards Marduk leads to ruin. This lesson probably lingered in Babylonian memories of the Assyrian occupation, which saw the repeated construction and devastation of Babylon and ended triumphantly in the conquest of Nineveh. It may have echoed even longer, as Babylonian scholars pondered their foreign rulers from the Persians onward and wondered when the gods would grant them kingship again.

Biblical and Rabbinic Ur Kaśdîm

Ur Kaśdîm only appears briefly as a setting in a pericope in Genesis 11:27–31, which describes the origins of Abram, the future patriarch Abraham. The pericope occurs towards the end of an extremely productive chapter, which also tells the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) and the list of generations between Shem and Abraham (Gen 11:26). It reads in its entirety:

וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת תֶּרַח תֶּרַח הוֹלִיד אֶת־אַבְרָם אֶת־נָחוֹר וְאֶת־הָרָן וְהָרָן הוֹלִיד אֶת־לוֹט: וַיָּמָת
הָרָן עַל־פְּנֵי תֶּרַח אָבִיו בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹלַדְתּוֹ בְּאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים: וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָם וְנָחוֹר לָהֶם נָשִׁים שֵׁם
אֵשֶׁת־אַבְרָם שָׂרָי וְשֵׁם אֵשֶׁת־נָחוֹר מִלְכָּה בַּת־הָרָן אֲבִי־מִלְכָּה וַאֲבִי יִסְכָּה: וַתְּהִי שָׂרַי עֲקָרָה
אֵין לָהּ וָלָד: וַיִּקַּח תֶּרַח אֶת־אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וְאֶת־לוֹט בֶּן־הָרָן בֶּן־בְּנוֹ וְאֵת שָׂרַי כַּלָּתוֹ אֵשֶׁת
אַבְרָם בְּנוֹ וַיֵּצְאוּ אִתָּם מֵאוּר כַּשְׂדִּים לָלֶכֶת אַרְצָה כְּנַעַן וַיָּבֹאוּ עַד־חָרָן וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם:

> This is the lineage of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran, and Haran begot Lot. Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram and Nahor took wives for themselves. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah, daughter of Haran, father of Milcah and father of Iscah. Sarai was barren. She had no child. Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Harran, they settled there.

The chapter then concludes with the death of Terah in Harran (Gen 11: 32). The narrative of Ur of the Chaldeans may be seen as an interpolation inserted into the patriarchal genealogy at a much later date. No attempt is made to synchronize Abram/Abraham with any specific ruler of Ur. Perhaps the writer of this passage found no need, as his intended Babylonian Judean audience may have understood the antiquity of the city in its own right.

This narrative of Ur is only referenced in two other places in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 15:7, in the middle of a chapter describing Yahweh's covenant with the patriarch, the deity declares: "I am Yahweh who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession."[57] In Neh 9:7, when the postexilic leaders of Jerusalem recount Yahweh's past dealings with Israel and pledge to observe his purity laws, they mark the exodus of their patriarch from Ur as the beginning of their history as a distinct people: "You are Yahweh the divinity, who chose Abram and brought him from Ur of the Chaldeans and made his name Abraham." While Harran is revisited

[57] On the formation of Genesis 15, see Ruth Fidler, "Genesis XV: Sequence and Unity," *Vetus Testamentum* 57 (2007): 162–80; Matthias Köckert, "Gen 15: Vom 'Urgestein' der Väterüberlieferung zum 'Theologischen Programmtext' der späten Perserzeit," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 125 (2013): 25–48.

in the Jacob cycle (Gen 29-35), Ur is never revisited by any other character in the Hebrew Bible. It seems to exist within the biblical world solely as a place for Abram/Abraham to leave from. Once left, it is never reentered.

While Ur continued to function as a cultic center through the end of its occupation, it does not appear to have housed a significant Judean presence. At the time this article was composed, no persons bearing identifiable Judean or Israelite names had been identified in cuneiform archives from Ur.[58] Given that Judeans are otherwise attested throughout Babylonia during the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods, their apparent absence from this city is striking. This phenomenon may be explained by the economic roles that Judeans occupied during this period: poorer Judeans largely served as tenant farmers in the area of Nippur, while wealthier Judeans earned a living as merchants. Judean merchants are particularly well attested in some of the larger economic hubs of the region, from Sippar to Susa.[59] But as mentioned earlier, the city of Ur was isolated from the rest of Babylonia, even under the Neo-Babylonian empire, since it was not a significant agricultural center, nor was it a significant center of trade. As such, Judean farmers and merchants alike probably had little reason to conduct their affairs there.

Contemporary scholars have considered the possibility of Babylonian intellectual influence in the Hebrew Bible at least since the time of Friedrich Delitzsch. However, more recent studies of Babylonian and Assyrian scholarship have challenged the notion that the writers of the Hebrew Bible had direct access to higher learning in cuneiform. In particular, the traditions of exclusivity that prevailed throughout Babylonian scholarly culture strictly forbade non-initiated members of

[58] Personal communication with Jan Safford, January 17, 2023.

[59] Laurie E. Pearce, "Babylon and Israel: Cultural Contact and Cultural Impact," in *The Ancient Israelite World*, ed. Kyle H. Keimer and George A. Pierce (London: Routledge, 2022), 718–19.

society from reading scholarly texts. As such, there is no evidence that foreign-born individuals were offered cuneiform education.[60] We may imagine some exceptions, such as a non-Babylonian merchant becoming semi-literate, learning enough about the cuneiform arts to know if the information recorded in economic tablets was correct. For the most part, however, I find it unlikely that the Judean community of Babylonia had any direct access to cuneiform sources of Babylonian history, especially as they were not members of the palace and temple communities where such sources were archived.

Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of engagement between individual Judeans and Babylonians. Cuneiform documents from the Neo- and Late Babylonian periods attest to economic and personal ties between both groups, including instances of intermarriage among Judeans and Babylonians.[61] While most of the encounters were presumably facilitated in Aramaic, the common vernacular language of the ancient Near East throughout the Iron Age, we may suppose that some well-connected Judeans had some command over Akkadian. If

---

[60] On traditions of secrecy in ancient Babylonia and Assyria, see Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "New Light on Secret Knowledge in Late Babylonian Culture," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 82 (1992): 98–111; Laurie E. Pearce, "Secret, Sacred and Secular: Mesopotamian Intertextuality," *Canadian Society of Mesopotamian Studies Journal* 1 (2006): 11–21; Alan Lenzi, *Secrecy and the Gods: Secret Knowledge in Ancient Mesopotamia and Biblical Israel* (Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2008); Gonzalo Rubio, "Scribal Secrets and Antiquarian Nostalgia: Tradition and Scholarship in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Reconstructing a Distant Past: Ancient Near Eastern Essays in Tribute to Jorge R. Silva Castillo*, ed. Diego A. Fracaroli Barreyra and Gregorio del Olmo Lete (Barcelona: Editorial Ausa, 2009), 155–82; Alan Lenzi, "Advertising Secrecy, Creating Power in Ancient Mesopotamia: How Scholars Used Secrecy in Scribal Education to Build and Perpetuate Their Social Prestige," *Antiguo Oriente* 11 (2013): 13–42.

Babylonian scholarly influence has been especially sought in the book of Ezekiel, with inconclusive results. See discussion in Martti Nissinen, "(How) Does the Book of Ezekiel Reveal Its Babylonian Context?," *Die Welt des Orients* 45 (2015): 85–98).

[61] Discussion of Judean-Babylonian contact in the Neo-Babylonian period are plentiful, e.g., the studies in Uri Gabbay and Shai Secunda, eds., *Encounters by the Rivers of Babylon: Scholarly Conversations Between Jews, Iranians and Babylonians in Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014) and Jonathan Stökl and Caroline Waerzeggers, eds., *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 478 (Boston: de Gruyter, 2015); Tero Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE*, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 109 (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Pearce, "Babylon and Israel: Cultural Contact and Cultural Impact"; Cornelia Wunsch, *Judeans by the Waters of Babylon: New Historical Evidence in Cuneiform Sources from Rural Babylonia Primarily from the Schøyen Collection*, Babylonische Archiv 6 (Dresden: ISLET, 2023).

the Judeans were to learn anything about Babylonian history, it was likely transmitted directly from their Babylonian neighbors. Indeed, the inability to read cuneiform would not have prevented Judeans from learning knowledge of Babylonian cosmology that was presented in public forums. This would especially be the case during major festivals, including the famous Babylonian New Year's festival, when the foundational mythology of Babylon was laid bare for all to witness. Moreover, the retelling of foundational stories is a well-attested facet of oral storytelling cultures. It is through this method that the Judeans of Babylonia may have been made acquainted with the myth of the Great Flood and other elements of local folklore.[62] We may suppose the Judeans of Babylonia were accustomed to stories of Babylon's mythic past, both through the extravagant ceremonies of Babylonian state religion and in particular the New Year's Festival, and through conversation with Babylonian storytellers.

Having no memory of Ur as an imperial power, and no access to documents describing its time as such, the only way for Judeans to understand its history was by gauging the ways their Babylonian neighbors regarded it: as an ancient center of wealth and power, that had in some way preceded the kingdom of Babylon as Judeans of the age knew it. Since the former kingdom of Ur had an outsized place in contemporary Babylonian discourse, being perhaps invoked more often in contemporary scholarship than the Sargonic or Early Dynastic rulers of Mesopotamia, they may have been aware of the city as an ancient center of power. Indeed, the myth of a city's prominence is easily conveyed in storytelling or through oral conversation, even if the specific details of that prominence may be exaggerated or

[62] It should be noted that like "Ur of the Chaldeans," the Great Flood is very rarely mentioned in the Bible, except in the Noah narrative itself (Gen 6:1–9:17), a few references in the genealogy of his descendants (Gen 10:1, 32; Gen 11:1), and a reference in Deutero-isaiah (Isa 54:9). On the biblical adaptation of the Babylonian flood myth and the possible prehistory of the Noah narrative, see Idan Dershowitz, "Man of the Land: Unearthing the Original Noah," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 128 (2016): 357–73.

simplified. As such, the fame and antiquity of Ur would have made the city seem suitably ancestral enough for the writer of Genesis 11:27–31 to serve as a brief home for the patriarch Abraham. The rest of the details of Ur and its Third Dynasty probably did not translate well into Judean historiography. The struggle between Babylon and Ur may have been seen as an internal affair between two Babylonian (or "Chaldean") cities that had ended long before, with no bearing on the Israelite and Judean peoples or the cult of Yahweh.

Nevertheless, the priestly redactors of Genesis seem to have accepted a core argument of Babylonian historiography, that Babylon was older than Ur. For instance, Ur is not present among the significant cities of Shinar (Babylonia) in Genesis 10:10, in which the mainstays of the kingdom of Nimrod are listed as Babylon, Erech (Uruk), and Akkad. The sequence of these three cities broadly reflects contemporary Babylonian historiography, which perceived Babylon as the first city and the first seat of power, Uruk as an early ruler over Babylon under the dynasty of Enmerkar and Gilgameš, and Akkad as a hegemonic successor of Uruk under the Sargonic dynasty.[63] The story of the Tower of Babel is told in Genesis 11:1–9, before the first appearance of Ur in the text.[64] While the narratives tacitly reject the notion that Babylon was founded by the gods, they do not contradict its status as a truly ancient city. Indeed, Babylon is the first city in the entire Hebrew Bible to be mentioned by name, aside from the enigmatic city of Enoch that appears in Genesis 4:17.

[63] The Cuthean Legend of Narām-Sîn, for example, sets up Akkad as a successor to the kingdom of Uruk, as it bridges the deeds of Enmerkar of Uruk with Narām-Sîn of Akkad (Joan Goodnick Westenholz, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade: The Texts*, Mesopotamian Civilizations 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 264). Already by the time the *Cursing of Agade* was composed, circa the Ur III period, we find Akkad was set up as an immediate successor to Uruk, ignoring the short-lived dynasties after Uruk in the Sumerian King List (ETCSL 2.1.5:1–9).

[64] See Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, 264–68 on the Tower of Babel narrative as a counter-text to *Enūma eliš*.

While the priestly writers probably did not have access to Ur, the remoteness of the city may have added to its allure, as a city of times gone by. Indeed, Ur Kaśdîm presented a sustained curiosity for rabbinic authors to interpret. As already noted by Abraham ibn Ezra, Genesis 22:22 recounts the birth of the Chaldeans' eponymous ancestor of Chesed (כשד), identified as a son of Abraham's brother Nahor. Since this announcement is made a number of chapters after Abraham's exodus from Ur, it seems to suggest that Abraham had been raised in a city whose namesake had not yet been born. Ibn Ezra solved this problem by claiming that Moses had written the name of the city as it was known by his own time—a solution that seems to challenge the status of the Hebrew Bible as a wholly revealed text.[65] Writers of the Second Temple period seem to have been aware of the anachronism as well, as the Book of Jubilees ignores Abraham's nephew and posits that a patriarch named Chesed lived sometime between Noah and Abraham (Jub 8: 9). It also gives Chesed a son named Ur, who names the city after himself and his father (Jub 11:7). Another Midrashic interpretation (e.g., in Shir HaShirim Rabbah 8:9) held that Ur was not the name of a city, but a word for fire. Informed by the mysterious death of Abraham's brother Haran in Ur Kaśdîm, this interpretation helped form the basis of the Midrashic story of Abraham and the furnace, which became symbolic of the struggle between Abrahamic monotheism and pagan polytheism.

The numerous interpretations of what Ur was—and whether it was even the name of a city—likely stem from the fact that Abraham's descendants largely did not have access to it. Writing at the end of the first century CE, Josephus remarked that Abraham's brother Haran died "in a city called Ur of the Chaldeans" (ἐν πόλει Οὐρῆ λεγομένῃ τῶν Χαλδαίων),[66] the phrasing of which suggests that the historian

[65] Abraham ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, on Genesis 11:26.

[66] Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 1.151.

thought the city to be obscure. Its location was certainly forgotten by the late second century CE, when the Talmudic rabbi Rav Ḥisda identified Ur Kaśdîm as the "smaller side" (עיברא זעירא) of Kutha.[67] Kutha is now identified as the site of Tell Ibrahim, located on the Habl Ibrahim canal roughly 30 kilometers northeast of Babylon. Unlike Ur, this city remained populated and continued to serve as a center of polytheistic worship through the Late Antique period. Its ancient patron god Nergal continued to be identified as a warlike deity, equated with the planet Mars: early Mandaic texts identify Nerig as the militant demon of Mars and as master of Kutha,[68] and a pagan folktale related in the *Nabatean Agriculture* of Ibn Waḥšiyya continues to identify Kutha with Mars.[69] Indeed, the *Nabatean Agriculture* lends a great deal of significance to Kutha ("Kuṯā Rabbā"), such that it claimed that a Canaanite ruler named Sūsaqyā took the kingship of Babylon to this city.[70] During the Sassanian period, Kutha lay comfortably within

[67] Bava Batra 91a. The same passage relates a story that Nimrod imprisoned Abraham for three years in Kutha and seven in Qardu (Corduene), or the opposite. On Talmudic engagement with Kutha and other ancient Babylonian cities, see Isaiah Gafni, "Biblical 'Archaeology' and Babylonian Rabbis: On the Self-Image of Jews in Sasanian Babylonia," in *The Archaeology and Material Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. M. J. Geller, IJS Studies in Judaica 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 326–27. On the boundaries of Jewish Babylonia ("of pure lineage"), see Geoffrey Herman, "Babylonia of Pure Lineage: Notes on Babylonian Jewish Toponymy," in *Sources and Interpretation in Ancient Judaism*, ed. Meron Piotrkowski, Geoffrey Herman, and Saskia Doenitz, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 104 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 191–228.

[68] Christa Müller-Kessler and Karlheinz Kessler, "Spätbabylonische Gottheiten in spätantiken mandäischen Texten" *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 89 (1999): 78–80. Nergal also maintained political importance as a patron of the dynasty of Characene. See Yakir Paz, ""Meishan Is Dead": On the Historical Contexts of the Bavli's Representations of the Jews in Southern Babylonia," in *The Aggada of the Bavli and Its Cultural World*, ed. Geoffrey Herman and Jeffrey L. Rubenstein (Providence: Brown University Press, 2018), 56.

[69] Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq: Ibn Waḥshiyya and His Nabatean Agriculture*, vol. 63, Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 303.

[70] Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 315. It is unclear what "Canaanite" refers to in the *Nabatean Agriculture*: Namrūd is said to have led them in an invasion of the land previously occupied by the Chaldeans, and Abraham is said to be one of them. According to the text cited by Ibn Waḥšiyya, narrated by a Chaldean, the rulers of Iraq at the time of its writing were still Canaanite. It also claims that the Canaanites and Chaldeans had a complicated relationship, with the Canaanites insisting that the Chaldeans had banished them from their homeland in Babylonia to the edges of Syria, and the Chaldeans claiming that God had sided with them against the Canaanites. The author also claims that the Canaanites and Chaldeans feuded over who was the first to develop

the boundaries of the province of Ard Babil, where the rabbinic community largely resided.[71] Babylonian Jews certainly must have been familiar with this city, though rabbinic taboos against engaging with foreign gods and their holy places may have limited their interactions with it.

Kutha was particularly infamous within rabbinic literature due to its connection with the Samaritans. 2 Kings 17 asserts that upon conquering Samaria, the Assyrians deported all the inhabitants of the northern kingdom of Israel into the peripheries of their empire. They were then resettled with people from "Babylon, Kutha, Awwa, Hamath, and Sephervaim," who did not worship Yahweh until an onslaught of lions prompted them to worship the god of the land. Nevertheless, they continued to venerate their own deities, much to the displeasure of the chronicler. As such, rabbinic literature denies the Samaritans' own claims that they were descended from the original inhabitants of the northern kingdom of Israel, who had remained in the land even after the Assyrian conquest. Sources as early as Josephus assert that the Samaritans are actually "Kutheans" or "Kutîm," and not valid members of the Israelite community.[72] In this regard, Kutha is taken to represent a wellspring of idolatry, which continued to oppose the proper rites mandated by God for centuries after the fall of Israel.

certain agricultural practices (Ibid., 280-83). Ultimately, he claims "This opposition between Kanʿānites and Kasdānians is an ancient one, from before the time the Kanʿānites came to rule over this clime, because they are well known among other peoples for their excessive envy. They envy the Kasdānians for the sciences which the gods have given them and which the Kanʿānites have been unable (to invent). But now they are our kings and rulers and both they and we receive the same reward. Thus, we are thankful to them because they have ruled us well" (Ibid., 304). The Chaldeans of the *Nabatean Agriculture* are understood to be the pagan inhabitants of Babylonia. Could the Canaanites then refer to Jews? If that is the case, then this text may offer us a unique reflection of native Babylonian views towards their Jewish neighbors and *de facto* overlords in the Sassanian period.

[71] St John Simpson, "The Land behind Ctesiphon: The Archaeology of Babylonia during the Period of the Babylonian Talmud," in *The Archaeology and Material Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, ed. M. J. Geller, IJS Studies in Judaica 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 18.

[72] Andrew Tobolowsky, *The Myth of the Twelve Tribes of Israel: New Identities Across Time and Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 69.

Ironically, Kutha's infamy as a center of pagan worship may have helped support its identification as Abraham's Ur: though it was old enough to have served as the prophet's residence for a time, its idolatrous practices made it spiritually polluted, and thus unworthy to serve as his permanent home.

The identification of Kutha as an early home of Abraham persisted well past the Late Antique period. The *Nabatean Agriculture*, though narrated from a pagan Babylonian perspective, claims that Ibrahim was born in Kutha.[73] In a melding of different early traditions, the prophetic biography of Ibn Saʿd claims that Ibrahim's mother's family were natives to Kutha, that his maternal grandfather Karanbā dug the canal there, and that Ibrahim himself grew up there.[74] By the time Al-Ṭabarī wrote his universal history, local traditions had identified Ibrahim with the sites of Susa, Babylon, Kutha, Warka, and Harran—that is, just about every former center of traditional worship in the region that could still be identified by name. Still, the most detailed traditions of Ibrahim's upbringing that he cited revolved around Kutha, generally agreeing with Ibn Saʿd.[75] Medieval scholars such as Maimonides accepted the identification of Kutha as the patriarch's birthplace without further dispute.[76] This tradition is reflected in the modern name of the site of Kutha: Tell Ibrahim. The fact that Abraham's Ur Kaśdîm could be reidentified as a city some 300 kilometers northwest of the historic Ur—in the wrong direction from Babylon—speaks volumes over how little engagement the Judean population had with the original site.

[73] Hämeen-Anttila, *The Last Pagans of Iraq*, 279–80.

[74] Muhammad ibn Saʿd ibn Maniʿ al-Hashimi, *Book of the Major Classes*, Vol. 1, 21.

[75] Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, Vol. 2, 252-53, 346.

[76] Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed,* Vol. 3, 29.

Conclusions

Babylonians living circa the 8th – 6th centuries BCE would have been well familiar with Ur as the old capital of the dynasty of Šulgi, known in modern scholarship as the Ur III dynasty. Although the city had not been a significant center of power in well over a thousand years, memories of the ancient kingdom lingered on in contemporary historiographic traditions. They were bolstered by the discovery of texts and artifacts that the ancient dynasty had left behind, particularly as foundational deposits that were placed in the most important cities in their southern domain: Nippur and Ur. A flurry of activity in southern Babylonia uncovered large quantities of foundational deposits and other mementos of the Ur III kings. Assyrian and Babylonian rulers alike co-opted these tangible reminders of the ancient dynasty, hoping to position themselves as their rightful successors.

Though the kingdom of Ur was not the oldest state in Mesopotamia, nor was it particularly long-lived, the abundance of witnesses ensured that it had a prominent place in popular consciousness. Perhaps spurred by the evidence of Ur's prosperity in days gone by, Babylonian scholars of the first millennium sought to reconcile its rise and fall with their own theories of history, which were centered around the cosmic primacy of Babylon. The resulting historiographical traditions acknowledged that the kingdom of Ur once exercised sovereignty over Babylon, while also exaggerating the significance Babylon had for its earlier sovereigns. They propose that its kings had significant interactions with the cults of Babylon, which either led to fortuitous or disastrous consequences for their respective reigns. Moreover, they may have also reinterpreted the kings of Isin and Larsa as kings of Ur in their own right, perhaps drawing on the claims that they made in their own lifetimes. Through this manipulation of earlier historical

trends, Babylon is positioned as the direct successor of the kingdom of Ur—as well as its direct predecessor.

Judean residents of Babylonia, for the most part, do not appear to have had direct access to Ur or its material legacy. As outsiders to the traditional scribal and priestly communities of Babylonia, they were probably not taught how to read cuneiform, and so had no means of accessing the records of the Ur III kings or the corresponding secondary literature. And even if some Judeans were afforded the opportunity to learn to read cuneiform, they probably had no access to the temples and palace archives where the records of the kings of Ur were kept, as these were very restricted spaces. Since Ur was not a significant economic or agricultural hub during the early first millennium, there was likely little to no Judean presence there even when it was still inhabited. The lack of direct engagement may explain how the location of the historic Ur was lost to later Jewish memory, and why the surviving cultic center of Kutha was identified as Ur in its place.

However, since many interactions between Judeans and Babylonians are known in the cuneiform record, it is feasible that at least the more cosmopolitan members of the Judean community had access to more popularized accounts of Babylonian history, perhaps transmitted through word of mouth. As such, their social connections may have made aware of the outsized importance of Ur and how it related to their new home in Babylonia. And as ancient as Ur was, the imaginary Ur that served as Abraham's hometown was nevertheless informed by contemporary consensus. This may explain why Genesis remembers Ur as "Ur of the Chaldeans," who inhabited it at the time the pericope was written, rather than "Ur of the Sumerians" or "Ur of Šulgi," who had no significance to the world as the Judeans knew it. Given that the Judean account was likely informed by Babylonian cultural memory, as transmitted through oral tradition, we may wonder how common

knowledge of ancient Sumer was among Babylonian classes who were not part of the temple or palace institutions.

Overall, we may see the choice of Ur as the hometown of Abraham, rather than any other similarly ancient city of Mesopotamia, as an appropriation of first-millennium Babylonian historiography: it would have been informed by contemporary archaeological finds, which overrepresented the Ur III state over all its predecessors and successors, as well as discussions among Babylonian scholars, who saw Ur as the immediate predecessor of their own kingdom. We may compare the Babylonians' obsession with ancient Ur to modern preoccupations with ancient Egypt, fueled by its bountiful archaeological finds and the media blitzes that follow. The new lives of Ur, inspired by what may be called the earliest archaeological craze in history, provides a cogent example of how the peoples of the ancient world reimagined their own pasts, over and over again.