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## Mesopotamia V. Literature

Thomas Römer, Steven L. McKenzie

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was no clear idea of the great Mesopotamian Empires.

Pre-modern Muslims had little information on pre-Islamic Mesopotamian culture or history, either, and Muslim historians were aware of only a few Babylonian or Assyrian kings, which they mainly knew through biblical history. In Arabic and Persian literature, the stories of Abraham and his father Azar (already in S 6:74–83), Nebuchadnezzar, and Nimrod are well attested and Sennacherib and Semiramis are occasionally mentioned, but little was known about them.

Sūra 2:102 connects the two angels Hārūt and Mārūt in Bābil with magic, and based on this and the Late Antique reputation of the Chaldaeans as possessors of esoteric wisdom, Babylonia was seen as a country of magic. However, the names of these angels seem to come from Iran (Avestan Haurvatat, Amrtat) rather than Mesopotamia.

Al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), al-Bīrūnī (d. ca. 1050), and some other historians have preserved in their works lists of the names of Mesopotamian rulers. These go partially back to Greek sources, partially they are products of imagination. In his history of sciences, Ṣāʿid al-Andalusī (d. 1070) dedicates a short chapter to the Chaldaeans, but is unable to give a single genuine Mesopotamian name, listing instead a few esoteric authors and Greek scholars as Chaldaeans.

Persian national history, inherited by Muslims, was the frame of reference for world history, and this historical model followed the reigns of Persian kings as world rulers from the Creation until the Arab conquest of Iran. Hence, Muslim historians had problems in finding a place for Mesopotamian kings. Usually they were taken to have been sub-rulers or governors to the legendary Persian dynasty of the Kayanids, at times they were identified with some of them, and rather rarely seen as a separate dynasty, perhaps preceding the Kayanids – this last, and rarest, view coinciding with the biblical and Greek historiographical understanding as well as real history.

While Persians derived their origin from an ancient Empire, it seems that only the somewhat obscure Iraqi author Ibn Waḥshiyya (d. 931) attempted to revive, or create, the idea that the Aramaic-speaking population of Iraq and Syria, the Nabaṭīs, were descendants of a great and ancient civilization, but his efforts had little influence on his contemporaries.

There have been attempts to find traces of direct Mesopotamian cultural influence in the Arab-Islamic culture, but few of these attempts can be substantiated with unequivocal evidence (Hämeen-Anttila 2014), and whatever influence Nabonidus' sojourn in the oasis of Tayma may have had on 6th-century BCE Arabs, nothing of this was transmitted to the Arab-Islamic culture that was born more than a millennium later.

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Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila

## V. Literature

Mesopotamia as a subject of interest in its own right surfaced in novels and popular writings only after the first archaeological excavations and discoveries at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

Before that, references to Mesopotamian figures were mainly limited to those mentioned in biblical texts. That is the case, for instance, in Lord Byron's poem “The Destruction of Sennacherib,” which was part of a collection of poetry entitled *Hebrew Melodies* (first published 1815). Byron composed this collection in order to provide texts for musical compositions of the synagogue cantor Isaac Nathan who wrongly claimed that these melodies dated back to the time of the first temple of Jerusalem. Some passages of Byron's poem about the fall of Sennacherib have become famous, especially the beginning (“The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, and his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold”) and the end (“And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail, And the idols are broken in the temple of Baal; and the might of the Gentile, unsmeared by the sword, hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!”). They are quite often quoted in other (especially popular) works (Ashton). The poem is based on the biblical account in 2 Kgs 18–20 (Isa 36–37) which recounts the failure of the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE; in the poem, this failure becomes the sign of the inferiority of the pagan civilization of Mesopotamia in comparison to Judaism and Christianity.

The British excavations in Mesopotamia inspired Agatha Christie to write her Hercule Poirot crime novel *Murder in Mesopotamia* (first published in the UK in 1936). The story takes place in the context of an archaeological excavation in Iraq, and the details derive from Christie's visits to Ur and other places in Mesopotamia. During her first trip to Ur she met Leonard Woolley, the director of the British excavation. On her second trip she was introduced to Max Mallowan, Woolley's assistant, who later became her second husband. In her memoir she ex-

pressed her fascination for Ur and archaeology, which is also perceptible in her book:

I fell in love with Ur, with its beauty in the evenings, the ziggurat standing up, faintly shadowed, and that wide sea of sand with its lovely pale colors of apricot, blue and mauve, changing every minute ... The carefulness of lifting pots and objects from the soil filled me with a longing to be an archaeologist myself. (Quoted in Márquez-Rowe: 34)

The site of Ur also plays a role in the first volume of Thomas Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers* (first published in German between 1933 and 1943). Mann started to write his most important work after a trip to Palestine in 1925. He was quite interested in biblical and archaeological research, and he used the results of the excavations in Ur to depict the hometown of Abraham's family with as much historical information as possible (Leich).

Mesopotamia is the background of the Jewish writer Jakob Wassermann's historical novel *Alexander in Babylon* (first published in 1905), which reflects the new public interest in Mesopotamia. Kafka knew this novel by Wassermann but did not appreciate it much.

Hans Henry Jahnn's expressionist novel, *Perrudja* (1929; his style is sometimes compared to Joyce), although taking place in Norway, is largely inspired by Mesopotamian mythological motifs and topics. The ambiguous hero of the novel, Perrudja, wants to create a better world and tries to organize a second Flood; he has a close but complicated relationship to a woman named Signe, who has been understood by many critics as referring to the goddess Ishtar. More generally, one can read the entire novel as heavily inspired by the Gilgamesh epic.

The figure of Gilgamesh is certainly the most important Mesopotamian figure that appears in literature, including graphic popular novels (Ziolkowski). This is the case, for instance, in Marvel and DC comics in which Mesopotamian deities and heroes, such as Ishtar/Inanna, Lugalbanda, Ereshkigal and especially Gilgamesh appear. The Marvel comic book hero of Gilgamesh was created by Jack Kirby, and has then been employed by many other authors. Gilgamesh is a member of the Avengers, Marvel's team of superheroes, and some of his conflicts are inspired by the original epic.

In 2014, the Ukrainian writer Serhji Zhadan wrote a novel about his hometown Kharkiv, translated into German (2015), under the title *Mesopotamien*. The author compares his city, which is located on two rivers, to a modern Mesopotamia or Babylon. In this book, which has become a best-seller in Ukraine, Zhadan describes a growing and changing city that is reminiscent of some ancient fantasies about Babylon.

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Steven L. McKenzie and Thomas Römer

## VI. Visual Arts

**1. Ancient Art and Archaeology.** Remains of ancient Mesopotamia were first systematically uncovered by English and French-led archaeological teams in the mid-19th century. Very soon afterwards, their numerous artifacts, initially consisting of many tons of Assyrian reliefs and other carved-stone, were put on display in each country's national museum: the British Museum and Louvre. By the early 20th-century Germany had matched, if not outdone, this imperial contest with the discoveries of ancient Babylon now enshrined in Berlin's Pergamon Museum. Other archaeological discoveries in the region continued the swelling of knowledge, as did the deciphering of cuneiform writing. The antiquities of Nineveh, Nimrud, Khorsabad, Lagash, Babylon, and many other places in modern-day Iraq posed a striking intervention in previous Western suppositions about the ancient past. Resembling neither ancient Egyptian nor Greco-Roman artifacts (the paradigms of the time), they presented a virtually new antiquity, an intimation of the many other varieties of the past known today.

But whatever opening to new paradigms they offered, Mesopotamia's artifacts were also quickly absorbed in preexisting beliefs and desires. Hardly least among them was the incipient discourse of race. Racial theorists found much to weigh and distinguish between Semitic and Aryan "tendencies" in the immensely varied and non-unified peoples and cultures of ancient Mesopotamia, however dubious, if not dangerous, their beliefs may now appear.

But surely the most overarching belief, the first and longest-lived of any of the interpretations of Mesopotamian artifacts, and one shared widely throughout different social classes, was as a validation of the literal truth of the Bible. This drive was particularly powerful in Protestant-dominated countries, then struggling with both textual and