THE BABYLONIAN CITIES: INVESTIGATING URBAN MORPHOLOGY USING TEXTS AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Heather D. Baker

ABSTRACT

This article examines new approaches to investigating the fabric of the Babylonian cities, based on both archaeological and written sources. It focuses on the physical composition of the non-monumental sectors of the city, emphasising the agency of the local inhabitants in shaping their immediate environment and examining the processes by which houses and neighbourhoods were transformed over time.

1. INTRODUCTION

Discussions of Mesopotamian urbanism tend to centre around the emergence of cities in the later fourth millennium BCE and their early development. Relatively little attention has been paid to the longer-term trajectory of urban development beyond this initial phase. It might be argued that ancient Mesopotamia presents remarkable potential for examining the changing form of cities within one specific geo-cultural environment over a period of roughly three millennia (taking the end of the cuneiform writing tradition as the conventional stopping point). However, this potential has yet to be realised. For the earlier second millennium BCE, studies of Mesopotamian cities have tended to focus on general spatial organisation, or on housing/residential areas/neighbourhoods. By the time we arrive in the first millennium BCE, we find that a great deal of attention has been paid in recent years to the archaeology and history of certain cities, especially the capitals Babylon, Nineveh, and Nimrud and the religious

---

1 This paper is based on research conducted under the auspices of the START Project on “The Economic History of First Millennium BC Babylonia” led by Michael Jursa at the University of Vienna and funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF).
5 Collon / George 2004–5.
6 Curtis et al. 2008.
centre Assur, but urbanism as a phenomenon in its own right is addressed only selectively and there is a persistent focus on the role of the ruler in shaping the city. Such a skewed perspective not only directs attention to the monumental elements of the city at the expense of others, it also tends to turn the creation of urban form into a series of historically-documented planned acts associated with the building (or rebuilding) of individual structures or building complexes. This in turn can create an impression of urban development as something large-scale and episodic, obscuring parallel processes which operate on a smaller scale, at a local level and at a slower pace. The approach I shall discuss here is concerned especially with these smaller scale “bottom-up” processes, and with developing methods of describing and investigating urban morphology in such a way as to facilitate the identification and analysis of long-term trajectories of development in the less well studied parts of the city.

In a recent article, Michael E. Smith has reviewed eight different bodies of empirical urban theory which he considers to be of particular applicability in the study of ancient cities. He terms them “middle-range theory” in the sense coined by the sociologist Robert K. Merton in the 1950s (and not as used by the archaeologist Lewis Binford), and considers them to be particularly useful in bridging the gap between, on the one hand, purely descriptive accounts with little wide-ranging explanatory value, and on the other hand high-level social theory which is more comprehensive but has little empirical content. He stresses that archaeologists who frequently have trouble applying abstract, high-level theory in their work tend to be more comfortable with “middle-range theory”, and that the latter is ideally suited to the study of ancient cities and the built environment. The eight bodies of theory that Smith identifies are: environment-behaviour theory; architectural communication theory; space syntax; urban morphology; reception theory; generative planning theory; normative urban theory, and city size theory. These bodies of theory are by no means mutually exclusive, rather, there are significant overlaps and points of contact between some of them. I think that Smith is right to stress the potential contribution of these approaches to the study of ancient urbanism, and in this article I shall examine the application of some of them in the study of the Babylonian cities of the first millennium BCE. In recent years I have

---

7 Marzahn / Salje 2003.  
8 Baker 2011a.  
9 Smith 2011.