CHAPTER 8

The Material World of Babylonia as Seen from Roman Palestine: Some Preliminary Observations

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1 Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of a new field of study: Material Culture. Unlike earlier modern interests in the physical realm of the ancients, which focused on unearthing, documenting, and understanding the basic function of man-made objects and structures, scholars of material culture shifted their attention to the wide range of human experiences and perceptions embedded in and associated with these tangible artifacts. In the words of one leading scholar, ‘this field of study centers on the idea that materiality is an integral dimension of culture.’1 He goes on to define the goals of this field as the study of ‘the manner in which things relate to conscious ideas and intentions held by persons or subjects’, as well as ‘the manner in which things relate to unconscious structures of thought and affect, unacknowledged conditions, habits, or experiences . . . and social life.’2

Consequently, material culture—unlike archaeology, for example—stands at the intersection where physical findings meet literature.3 Needless to say, the architectural structures and other objects, whether large or small, which surface in excavations remain the basis for the study of material culture; but they offer an incomplete picture. Only written documents, and to some extent

* All translations are mine unless otherwise stated. My thanks to Jeffrey Rubenstein and the late Getzel Cohen who read a draft of this article and provided some valuable comments and corrections.

1 Christopher Tilley et al. (eds), Handbook of Material Culture (London: Sage, 2006), 1. See also Shelley Hales and Tamar Hodos (eds), Material Culture and Social Identities in the Ancient World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

2 Tilley, Handbook, 4.

3 In what follows I am both extending and refining some of my early thoughts on the theoretical framework of this subject; see Yaron Z. Eliav, ‘Realia, Daily Life, and the Transmission of Local Stories During the Talmudic Period’, in Leonard V. Rutgers (ed.), What Athens has to do with Jerusalem: Essays on Classical, Jewish and Early Christian Archaeology In Honor of Gideon Foerster (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 235–65.
visual art, can provide insight into the multifaceted ways in which ancient people engaged their inanimate, physical world: what they thought about their material environment, and what human experiences evolved around it. Normally, therefore, we rely on texts from the immediate surroundings of a certain artifact in order to glean information about how individuals, groups, and communities perceived and interacted with that object.

It has long been recognized that foreigners and strangers, people who stand outside the direct context of a particular material domain, offer no less an intriguing view about it than the natives. Caesar’s writing about the Gauls and their physical world in his De bello Gallico, or Pliny the Elder’s observations of far away realms scattered throughout the thirty-seven volumes of his Naturalis historia, are famous examples of the contributions outsiders can make to the study of cultural settings other than their own. Such ethnographically inclined sources possess two major assets: at times they offer the only written documentation about a specific element, particularly from a society that either did not produce its own literature or whose literature did not survive; and on other occasions these outside views give us a comparative tool. Along with records made by the locals, they allow for a more nuanced understanding of the material landscape (Pliny’s depictions of the Essenes [N.H. 5:15] here come to mind as one example out of many).

The current paper wishes to explore a similar pattern of cross-cultural references evolving around physical reality in one corner of the ancient world, a discourse that brought together the Mesopotamian regions (at the time under the rule of Parthia, later to become Sasanian Persia), and Roman Palestine. In particular I wish to ask whether the material environment of Mesopotamia/Persia (or ‘Babylonia’ in rabbinic terminology) registered in the writings of

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6 In the current article I use all three geographical designations interchangeably. Geographically speaking, most of the Jewish communities known to us from rabbinic literature were confined to the regions of southern Mesopotamia, also known as Babylonia, with only a few, spreading northwest to the area of Nisibis (see map, fig. 8.1), and close to non existing in the