

FOURTH BABYLON FESTIVAL FOR INTERNATIONAL CULTURES AND ARTS

The New Babylon Festivals (Babylon Foundation) were initiated four years ago by Dr Ali ash-Shallah, MP for the province of Babylon, presently Director of Media for the Republic of Iraq, and an acclaimed poet.

There is no relation whatsoever between the Babylon Festivals organised by Saddam Hussein and the present occurrences. The new festivals include international cultural exchanges, devoid of any propagandist events, and integrate all forms of the arts and cultures without any political, religious, or other dictates. It is all about peace, human rights, gender equality, reconciliation. One of the objectives of the festivals is the inclusion of the site of Babylon in the UNESCO World Heritage List from which, astonishingly, it has been excluded to this day.

The Babylon Foundation which organise the Babylon Festival also work actively in the restoration of 'Abbasid, and Ottoman architecture and have just completed the reconstruction of a typical late Ottoman house in Old Baghdad (Abu Nuwas) which is now the site of concerts, exhibitions as well as offering accommodation for international students, scholars and artists.

The main events of the festival take place in the 'neo-hellenistic' theatre at the site of Babylon where around 1,500 spectators gather for both opening and closing evenings. All other events take place either in the museum courtyard at the site of Babylon, at a school at Hillah and in other local theatres. Participants of the festival are usually hosted in the palatial infrastructures built, in the gardens of Babylon just below Saddam Hussein's outrageous palace built on top of an artificial tell. The well-worn apartments are still furnished with Husseinian taste.

The Babylon Festivals are covered by the Iraqi national and other TV channels and by the daily local and national press. The Festivals are highly regarded throughout the country and appease differences through a shared culture.

One of the main concerns with the Babylon festivals is funding which is a difficult task in a country at war, and where the conservation of culture is felt as a luxury that people cannot afford.

The BISI grant enabled myself, Ahmed Mukhtar (Oud master) and Dr John MacGinnis (Current BISI Council Member) to travel to the festival to give a lecture to students of archaeology of Babylon University, in the museum yard at the site of Babylon and we were invited by the chancellor of the university, Professor al- Baghdadi, to speak at the main lecture theatre of the university which was packed with professors and students. The event was presented on national television.

The focus of my talk was on the contribution of Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian theory of music, to the development of Western music.

During the Akkadian Period, mathematical cuneiform texts excavated at the Temple Library of Nippur, by Wolfram Hilprecht at the beginning of the twentieth century and dated from about 2300 BC, showed lists of regular numbers* extracted from the sexagesimal mathematical system. These numbers gave values to the nine notes of the Akkadian scale: 36; 40; 45; 48; 54; 60; 64; 72 and 81. Most interestingly these numbers can be taken as units of string lengths or reciprocally as units of frequency. The ratios which they generate between them, that is $40/36$, can be converted into musical cents, a method developed in the late nineteenth century by Alexander John Ellis, from an earlier eighteenth century method devised by the French scientist Prosnier. $40/36 = 182$ cents which is the minor tone; $45/40 = 204$ cents which is the just major tone and $48/45 = 112$, which is the semitone. These numbers which were conceptualised over 4,000 years ago give the exact values of the harmonic, or natural scale, a scale which was invented about 1,500 years before Pythagoras was born.

The Old Babylonian period produced a tablet excavated from the site of Ur by Sir Leonard Woolley. (Fig. 1) This text is a method by which nine different scales, or sets, can be generated from a fundamental set by simple re-arrangement of some of the pitches in each set. The resulting scales have been wrongly named 'modes' by some scholars, for reasons which are beyond the purpose of this short text. Other texts were written during the Assyrian period, in the first millennium, but would have been copies of much earlier Babylonian originals. These texts give the names of intervals of fifths and thirds which were the forerunners of the Arabian Ajnas of the Maqam system. Another cuneiform text of unknown provenance, hosted at the University Museum of Philadelphia (Fig. 2) has the earliest evidence for the construction of a heptatonic scale system of eight 'modes' in all points similar to the seven liturgical 'modes' of our Western Middle Ages. The tablet has a drawing etched onto it describing a tuning device consisting of two discs rotating one against the other to generate the seven modes based on the heptatonic system. (Fig 3) This tablet is the earliest evidence of the construction of a heptatonic scale by means of alternation of fifths and fourths, much before Euclid.

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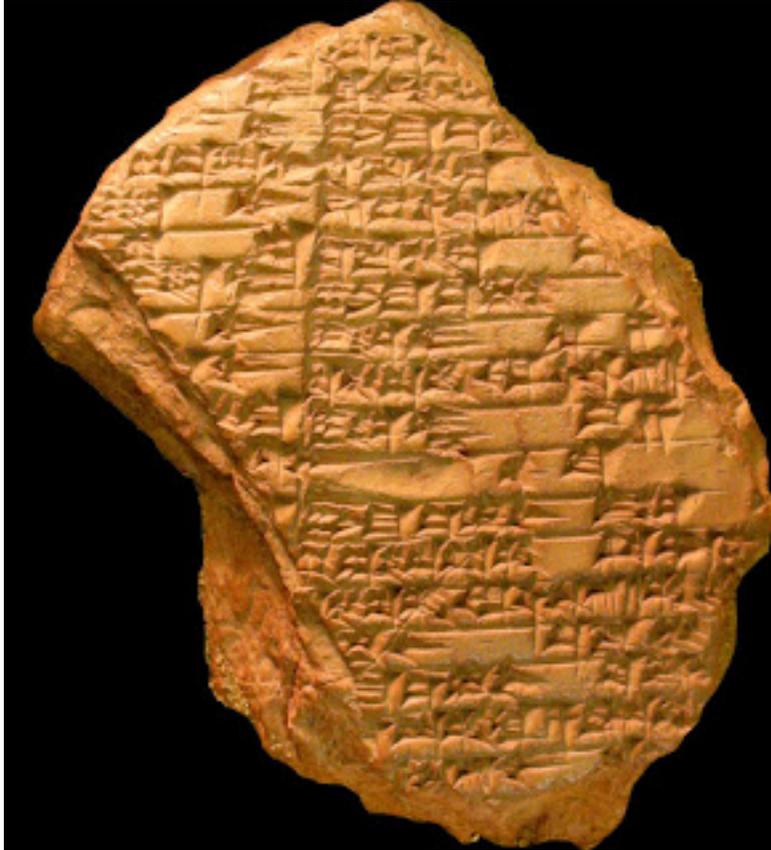


Fig 1

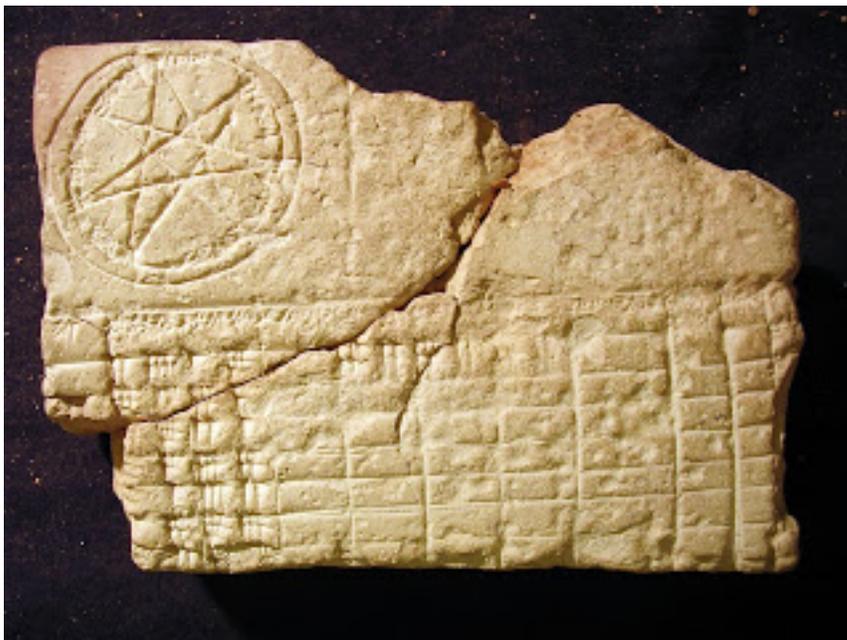


Fig 2



Fig 3