DESCRIPTION: In 1881 the Iraqi-born archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam discovered what became known as the Babylonian World Map while excavating a site near the ancient Babylonian city of Sippar. Rassam was looking for evidence of the biblical Flood, and because he could not read cuneiform text, he dismissed the tablet as of little importance. In fact, he did not even realize it was a map. It was only in the late 20th century that cuneiform scholars at the British Museum deciphered the tablet’s text and discovered its significance.

This later Babylonian clay tablet, dating from the Persian Period (seventh or sixth century B.C.), shows an asytocentric view of a flat, round world with Babylonia in the center. Its identity as a map attempting to depict the entire world is substantiated by the adjacent text, which mentions “seven outer regions beyond the encircling ocean”. This is a slightly different concept from that of the early Greeks, for whom the encircling ocean was outside of all known lands.

During the fifth century Babylon was still a flourishing city, regarded as the “hub” of the universe. Yet only with the rise to supremacy of the Babylonian kings, with Hammurabi toward 2000 B.C., had its claim to this position become possible. Previously the position was occupied by one of the former capitals of the earlier kingdoms. Probably the Sumerians made the city of Nippur, honored by them as a central shrine, a “Sumerian Rome”, the center of the universe from about 2500 B.C., for at that time supremacy was regarded as conditional upon the possession of Nippur.

Shown here is an unbaked clay tablet now in the British Museum (Gallery 55, Case 15 BM 92.687) that contains a text accompanied by a map. Although believed to have been found in Sippar or Borsippa, Iraq, the tablet is likely to have been made in Babylon in the seventh or sixth century B.C. A note inscribed on the tablet, however, indicates that it was copied from an older tablet made (it would seem from internal evidence) in the ninth century B.C. The tablet, somewhat damaged around the edges, measures 12.2 x 8.2 cm (5 x 3 inches). About a third of one side and all the reverse is filled with text and the map occupies the remaining two-thirds.

This Babylonian tablet contains a written description and a diagrammatic image of the world as conceived sometime after 900 B.C. Its provenance is uncertain, but its British Museum catalog number and the onomastics of the scribe who copied the tablet point to the city of Borsippa. The description written to accompany the map has an integral, but complicated, relation to the image. This world map is best matched with the category of medieval maps termed mappaemundi (see Book II). It depicts a geographic totality that includes the local environment but is not limited to it. Circles represent cities and parallel lines rivers as in the Nuzi map (#101). The largest demarcated area, shown as a rectangle on the upper central portion, is Babylon, the point of view from which the map was presumably made. Also on the map are the states of Urartu and Assyria, the latter written with the determinative KUR, “land.” The cities of Der and Susa and the territory of Bit Yakin are included. The regions, cities, and other geographic features such as the swamp and the water channel are all arranged inside a circle bounded by the waters of the ocean, designated as the Bitter River around the entire encircling band. Medieval mappaemundi typically show the world encircled by the “ocean sea” [Mare Oceanum] within a spherical world picture; equally, the “ocean river” [Alveus Oceanus] is sometimes shown as dividing the land zones. For want of
intermediary evidence, one can only note the cosmographical elements of the Babylonian world map without drawing conclusions about possible continuities.

Beyond the salt waters surrounding the known cities and lands are large triangular areas (only five survive of the original eight) representing lesser-known faraway places. They could be reached were one prepared to travel seven beru, but here the ordinary features of the known world are exaggerated or disturbed. One of these distant regions is described as a place where “a winged bird cannot safely complete its journey”. Another is home to horned cattle. A reference to the “Four Corners” of the world (kibrat erbetti) in the last section of the text is followed by the phrase “whose interior no one knows.” The inscribed portions of the map are lamentably damaged and incomplete. Even so, because they have a decidedly mythological literary character, with references to heroes and kings such as Sargon, Nur-Dagan of Purushhanda, and Utnapishtim—the only man to survive the great Flood and attain immortality, well known from the Epic of Gilgamesh—we are for certain in an imagined cosmical landscape.

The question of the map’s orientation has been discussed by Eckhald Unger. As already noted, the third-millennium Nuzi map is dearly oriented to the east (IM.ICUR, “mountain wind”). On this Babylonian mappamundi a mountain is drawn at the top of the circle of the world. From the vantage point of Babylon, the mountain could represent the east. If so, however, then other places are not arranged accordingly, Assyria, for example, is placed below and to the right of Babylon (in fact, it lies to the north), while Susa, shown at the bottom, should not be in the west (in fact, its location is southeast of Babylon). Altogether, places do not appear to be situated exactly in accordance with any given orientation of the map.

The tablet was made at a time when the Babylonian and Assyrian empires had reached their maximum extent and the map highlights the relationship of the most distant regions of the earth to the Babylonian heartland. Its features are clearly delineated and most are actually labeled. Orientated with north at the top of the map shows the world “as a disk surrounded by (or maybe floating in) a ring of water called the Bitter River”, marked on the map simply as ocean. The outer nagu (districts; possibly originally eight in number) are shown as triangles reaching out beyond the encircling salty sea. The distance of each from the other is given. Within the circle, the Babylonian world is clearly delineated. Babylon is singled out by a rectangular place sign. Other cities are shown, some so labeled in the center of the circular sign, some with just a central dot. Regions are identified, such as Assyria, Der, Bit-Yakin (territory of an Aramaean tribal group around the southern Euphrates); the name Khabban [Habban] to the upper left appears to denote an area of Elam southeast of the Zagros part of Kassite territory around Kermanshah, geographically out of place (it might also be another town of the same name otherwise unknown); and Urartu (eastern Turkey and Armenia, an independent kingdom in the Iranian-Turkish-Russian borderland). Mention of these last three helps date the original composition of the map to the ninth century B.C. at the earliest. The unnamed river, marked by parallel lines, appears to represent the Euphrates. It flows into a swamp (marked by a rectangle at the mouth of the river and labeled as such) before reaching the sea in two outflows (one so labeled). A canal or waterway (bitqu, possibly an antecedent of the modern Shatt-al-Arab) is shown. In the northeast, a mountain is also labeled. Other features belong to local history or cosmological belief, such as the Fort of the god, a city near the trumpet-shaped sea which may be Der [Badrah] at the foot of the Zagros Mountains. The reinstated text in Region 2
reads, rather unexpectedly, Great Wall. This, Dr. Finkel explains, is likely to refer to the “great wall” thought to be the birthplace of a demonic figure according to some Sumerian texts, and certainly not to the one in China. The literary figures and exotic animals mentioned in the texts, together with the description of conditions in far-away regions, suggest the ancient author was reflecting the general interest with distant areas characteristic of the first half of the last millennium B.C., when the Assyrian and Babylonian empires reached their maximum extents. The ancient author concluded by commenting that his sketch showed, as we would put it today, “the four corners of the world”.

The identified remote lands are said to be inhabited by legendary beasts. In one, it is noted that the sun is not seen. These various legendary beasts are named which were reputed to live in regions beyond the ocean that encircled the Babylonian world. A few ancient heroes reached those places, and the badly damaged text appears to describe conditions in them. The map is really a diagram to show the relation of these places to the world of the Babylonians.

This Babylonian plan of the world illustrates the idea concerning the world that was current in the late Babylonian period. It represents the region of Babylonia, Assyria, and the neighboring districts as a circular plain surrounded by the Persian Gulf (Ma-ra-tum). The city Babylon (Babylu) is indicated near the center, and next to it the land of Assyria (Ashshur). The position of certain other cities is indicated. The district toward the south, bordering the Persian Gulf, is represented as being full of canals and marshes. Toward the north is marked a district that is referred to as mountainous. Beyond the circle is represented the Persian Gulf, and a number of triangles pointing outward from the circular zone, each being labeled “region,” indicating a vague conception concerning the same.

In addition to the entire kingdom of Babylonia, which is schematically portrayed on this clay tablet, seven unnamed circles are depicted and an accompanying cuneiform text is found on both sides of the tablet. The front-side text contains names of countries and cities but, on the reverse side, the text is chiefly concerned with a description of the Seven Islands or regions which are depicted in the form of equal triangles (only one of which is entirely intact on the tablet) rising beyond the circle of the Earthly Ocean. Some scholars believe that there may have been eight “islands” originally. The tablet further states that these islands are at equal distances of seven miles (from either each other or from the Babylonian world), around the outer periphery of the Earthly Ocean. But the distance between them varies, being sometimes six, sometimes nine miles. The description of two of these islands, however, has not survived.

The Babylonians knew little about the nature of these seven islands. We hear chiefly only of their various degrees of brightness. From the text on the tablet and the inscriptions on the chart itself we learn that the first island lay in the southeast, the second in the southwest, and so on, in a clockwise sequence.

The descriptions of the first and second islands are not preserved. The third island is where the winged bird ends not his flight, i.e., cannot reach. On the forth island the light is brighter than that of sunset or stars: it lay in the northwest, and after sunset in summer was practically in semi-obscurity. The fifth island, due north, lay in complete darkness - a land where one sees nothing, and the sun is not visible. The Sumerians and Babylonians probably had some knowledge, possibly acquired from other people, of the northern high latitudes and of the polar nights. Highly remarkable is the sixth island, where a horned bull dwells and attacks the newcomer. An exactly similar presentation, true to
tradition, occurs in the same position in an astrolabe of the 17th century A.D. and has been used in the reconstruction of the tablet. The seventh island lay in the east and is thus described: *where the morning dawns*; meaning that it faces the sunrise.

According to Babylonian ideas, the islands said to lie between the *Earthly Ocean* and the *Heavenly Ocean* connected the heavens and the earth. These islands form bridges to the *Heavenly Ocean*, wherein are the various animal constellations, 18 of which are mentioned by name.

Thus round the heavens flowed the *Heavenly Ocean*, corresponding to the *Earthly Ocean* on the earth. And in the *Heavenly Ocean* were animal constellations, the “vanished” gods. These probably recur in the expression *belt of heaven*, Sumerian for which may be literally translated, *divine animals*. As the animal constellations also sank below the horizon, so the *Heavenly Ocean* extended beneath the earth, so that plenty of room existed below the Underworld for the passage of the sun, moon, and planets. After the overthrow of the old world order of *Apsu* and *Tiamat* or *Chaos*, the former gods, according to the Babylonian *Epic of Creation*, were deposed and banned as animals to the *Heavenly Ocean*, by command of the creator of the new world.

In the beginning everything was ocean - the *Apsu* - *Chaos*, whence arose a number of divinities, including *Tiamat* (the sea) and the gods *Anu*, *Enlil* and *Enki* (*Ea*), the later representatives of the tripartite world. Now *Apsu* desired to destroy his offspring, but was killed by *Enki*, who looked upon the *Apsu* as his home. Then *Tiamat*, who went forth to revenge *Apsu*, was vanquished in conflict with Sumer, Babylon and Assur, respectively. Now before the struggle, *Tiamat* had created, in place of *Apsu*, huge monsters in animal form. The late Sumerian ruler, *Gudea* of Lagash (2600 B.C.), records in his inscriptions seven such monsters; in Hammurabi's time (about 2000 B.C.) the number was eleven. The text of the Babylonian cosmos, however, enumerates eighteen animals, but the names of two of them are not known. Each of the last two texts named begin with the same three animals: *Basmu*, *Mushus* and *(Laha) mu*. It appears from these tests that in the course of time new kinds of animals were added.

All of these animal constellations, though not to be confused with our zodiac, knowledge that, in this form, has not been traced beyond about 420 B.C., may nevertheless be approximately equated with our zodiacal signs; among other things and changes, however the names have naturally altered in the course of time. The chief animals are also shown on some post-Babylonian tablets of an astronomical nature. Karl Maasz has therefore made use of these drawings in his reconstruction, in which pictures of the so-called boundary stones have served as guides. According to the drawings of the clay tablet in question, the order of the animal constellations run from right to left - from north to west, then around to the east. The text contains the following full list of “animals” in the *Heavenly Ocean*: (1) the adder (*Basmu*); (2) the red serpent (*Mushus*) - a typical name for the dragon of Babylon which the god *Marduk* borrowed from the god *Enlil* of Nippur; this dragon appears as a decoration on the Ishtar Gate of Babylon. He is of special interest because the four animal elements which compose him are borrowed from the neighboring animal constellations: the front legs from the lion standing before him; the back legs from the raven or eagle standing behind him; the scorpion’s sting on his tail from the scorpion next to him here. The dragon himself represents in principle a serpent - the *hydra*; (3) the *Lahamu*, a serpent with the front feet of a lion, also reminiscent in this respect here of its neighbor, the lion (the hydra); (4) the gazelle; (5) the bull (in the late Sumerian period, a wild bull); (6) the panther; (7) the ram; (8) unknown; (9) the
lion (the constellation Leo); (10) the jackal (the constellation Cassiopeia); (11) the stag (the constellation Andromeda); (12) the fowl (? the falcon); (13) unknown; (14) the monkey; (15) the he-goat, also known as the goat-fish; (16) the ostrich (probably the crane); (17) the cat; (18) an insect, possibly the grasshopper. The numbers 1-18 correspond to the numbers on the illustration, except that numbers 8 and 13 are not preserved in the text of the clay tablet.

These divine animal constellations which dwell in the Heavenly Ocean are there named the departed gods (in another cuneiform document they are referred to as the gods of the night and the goddesses of the night) because they were derived from the earlier “vanished” gods of the Sumerians, which, as the result of a reform in prehistoric times, were deposed and replaced by human gods. The Epic of Creation is the acknowledgment of this reform.

All of this - the Seven Islands, the animal constellations and the Heavenly Ocean - encircle the primary focus of the tablet, the “world map”. The earth proper, again, is displayed as a circular disc. Enclosed by the circle of the Earthly Ocean lies an oblong marked Babylon with two parallel lines running to it from mountains at the edge of the enclosure, and running on to a marsh which is identified by two parallel lines near the bottom of the circle. The marsh can be identified as the swamp of lower present-day Iraq, its identity secured by the name Bit Yakin at its left end, the so-called “Sea Country” and known to be a tribal territory covering marshland.

At the top, in the north, are the mountains, whence the Euphrates descends, in a southeasterly direction. In the center lies Babylon - the “hub of the universe”. Encircling the earth is the Earthly Ocean, entitled the Bitter River, creating a gulf (the Persian Gulf of today), it flows across the earth as far as the Euphrates. For the rest, the map gives various nameless places indicated only by blank ovals. It is oriented towards the northwest. From other Babylonian sources it can be learned that for the Babylonians, the Bitter River or Earthly Ocean was enclosed by a double range of mountains, those to the east and west - the sunrise and sunset range, respectively being specially mentioned.

Obviously this is not so much a topographical map as it is an attempt to illustrate ideas expressed in the accompanying text, greatest attention being paid to the remote regions. The Babylonians evidently viewed the earth as flat, in common with other ancient peoples. Their references to the “four corners” relate to the directions of the winds and should not be taken as implying that they thought it was square.

In summary, the Babylonian cosmos comprises a world map executed in cartographic manner, a contour sketch of the Seven Islands complete with descriptive text, and finally, a descriptive text (only) of the Heavenly Ocean and its animal constellations. Although the map is unique, its cartographic conventions point to established conceptual and mapping traditions. Moreover, the historian of cartography is spared doubt as to the interpretation of the schematic representation by the labeling of the various lines and circles.

Although cuneiform maps may not be forerunners from which later Western maps originate, they share characteristics with other cartographic traditions in their graphic imaging of territorial, social, and cosmological space. Cuneiform texts provide several varieties of evidence for the ancient Mesopotamian efforts to express order by describing, delimiting, and measuring the heaven and earth of their experience, producing house, temple, plot, and field plans, city maps, and, with respect to the celestial landscape, diagrammatic depictions of stars. Various orders of power are implicit in the expression of these aspects of order in the environment. Administrative
and economic powers support, or even require, the making of maps, as well as determining overtly the topographies that maps depict.

Where once such maps would not have been admitted within a general history of cartography, a new view of the meaning of the map can embrace them. The historiography of maps and cartography has emerged from criticisms similar in nature to those made against the modernist or presentist historiography of science, namely, that in reifying science or sciences such as cartography, false evolutionary histories are liable to be constructed. Some originating point is identified, such as the origins of science in Greece, or of mapmaking in Babylonia, from which a continuous history may be written from a presentist perspective, a tale of a discipline’s inexorable progress from its originating moment to the present. Critical cartographic history, however, has laid aside such ideas, and we no longer look to (in the words of Denis Wood), “a hero saga involving such men as Eratosthenes, Ptolemy, Mercator, and the Cassinis, that tracked cartographic progress from humble origins in Mesopotamia to the putative accomplishments of the Greeks and Romans”.

By no means do all ancient Near Eastern maps display metrological finesse or even the use of measurement, though some characteristically do, such as the agrarian field and urban plot cadastral surveys. Concern for orientation is attested in a number of maps, but not always in the same way, although with a tendency toward an oblique orientation northwest to southeast. Ancient Near Eastern maps may not have invariably been meant as exact or direct replications of territory, but there can be little doubt that they distinctively reflect the conceptual terrain of their social community and culture at large. The maps of buildings and fields focus on the urban and agricultural environment, matters of critical importance to whatever political and economic powers prevailed.

The maps of cities with their waterways and surrounding physical landscape combine cartography of sacred space, seen in the temple plans, with that of economic space, seen in the field surveys. The cities of Nippur and Babylon had a religious and cosmological function as well as a political and economic one. In the periods of their supremacy each was viewed as the center of the universe, as the meeting ground between heaven and the netherworld. The map of the principal temple in Babylon, E-sagil, which was the earthly abode of the national deity Marduk, represents the terrestrial counterpart to the celestial residence of the great god Enil, designed, figuratively speaking, on the blueprint of the cosmic subterranean sweet watery region of the Apsu.

The Babylonian world map is an attempt to encompass the totality of the earth’s surface iconographically: land, ocean, mountain, swamp, and distant uncharted “regions” This said, it represents more of an understanding of what the world is from the viewpoint of historical imagination than an image of its topography against a measured framework. It offers a selective account of the relationship of Babylon to other places, including those that were at the furthest reach of knowledge.

The diversity of cultures that have sought to preserve their maps, putting them on clay, papyrus, parchment, and other writing media, points to a near universality of making maps in human culture. Cognitive psychologists claim that we come into our physical world mentally equipped to perceive and describe space and spatial relationships. The linguistic act of spatial description is perhaps a proto-mapmaking function of our very desire and attempt to place ourselves in relation to the physical world. By extension, we should not doubt that mapmaking too, in all its historical subjectivity, is a universal feature of human culture. The interest of the cuneiform maps
lies in their rich articulation of such a feature, uniquely shaped by the particular social norms and forces that emerged and changed within ancient Mesopotamian history.

**LOCATION:** British Library, London

**SIZE:** 4.75 x 3.25 inches (12 cm x 8 cm)

**REFERENCES:**
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*illustrated*
Babylonian World Map

Reconstruction
also, the symbol of Imago Mundi

Babylonian Clay Tablet: World View, 500 B.C.
Map of the world on an unbaked clay tablet from Babylonia, with the newly-restored piece (center-right).
(Courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum. No. 92687.)
Identification, in English, of the major features of the Babylonian map of the world as drawn by R. Campbell Thompson and amended by C. B. F. Walker. The pecked line indicates the piece reinstated in 1995 by I. Finkel. Except for the label within Region 2 (Great Wall), translations are from W. Horowitz.
In 1881, the Iraqi-born archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam discovered what became known as the *Babylonian World Map* while excavating a site near the ancient Babylonian city of Sippar. Rassam was looking for evidence of the biblical Flood, and because he could not read cuneiform text, he dismissed the tablet as of little importance. In fact, he did not even realize it was a map. It was only in the late 20th century that cuneiform scholars at the British Museum deciphered the tablet’s text and discovered its significance.

▲ This diagram shows the mix of Babylonian mythology and geography depicted on the map.