

Institute of Jewish Studies Studies in Judaica 16

**The Archaeology and Material Culture  
of the Babylonian Talmud**

*Edited by*

**Markham J. Geller**



BRILL

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

Yaron Z. Eliav

## 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.’<sup>1</sup> 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.’<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, material culture—unlike archaeology, for example—stands at the intersection where physical findings meet literature.<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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)<sup>6</sup> registered in the writings of

4 For a sample of studies on the convoluted relationship between art and texts, see Jaś Elsner (ed.), *Art and Text in Roman Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

5 Of the many discussions about these texts and others like them, see for example Franz Beckmann, *Geographie und Ethnographie in Caesars Bellum Gallicum* (Dortmund: Ruhfus, 1930); Mario Vegetti, 'Zoologia e antropologia in Plinio', in *Plinio il Vecchio sotto il profilo storico e letterario: Atti del Convegno di Como 1979* (Como: Banca Briantea, 1982), 117–31; Jaś Elsner, 'From the Pyramids to Pausanias and Piglet: Monuments, Travel, and Writing', in Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne (eds), *Art and Text in Ancient Greek Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 224–54; Sorcha Carey, *Pliny's Catalogue of Culture: Art and Empire in the Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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

Jewish scholars from Roman Palestine, collectively known as the Rabbis, and, if so, in what way. The Hungarian-born Samuel Krauss (1866–1948), considered by many the founding father of the scholarly field now known as Rabbinic Material Culture, began this type of inquiry nearly a century ago, which culminated in his 1948 monograph *Paras ve-Romi ba-talmud wvamidrashim* (Persia and Rome in the Talmud and Midrash). Here I follow in the footsteps of his pioneering and visionary research, building on and extending his conclusions, and at the same time revising some of the methodological strategies that were common at his time.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Communication Between Far Away Realms<sup>8</sup>

Although the rabbis in Babylonia lived hundreds of miles away from their colleagues in Roman Palestine and were separated by geographical, political, and cultural barriers, they maintained ties as close as the circumstances of the ancient world would allow. Similar intellectual proclivities, mainly the focus on legal learning, as well as shared textual foundations—the Torah, but even more so the acceptance of the third-century Palestinian text, the Mishnah, as the basis and source for future study—underlay the bond between these two distinct communities. Students and teachers traveled back and forth between the two realms, bearing their literary traditions, whether oral or written.<sup>9</sup> This

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Iranian plateau, i.e., Persia proper. But the cultural exposure to the Iranian/Persian realm that came with the Parthian and even more the Sasanian conquests, justifies the terminology I choose to use here. In other words, when the rabbis speak of 'Persian' they refer to the Persian reality known to them from Mesopotamian territories.

7 On Krauss and the field of Rabbinic Material Culture, see Yaron Z. Eliav, 'Samuel Krauss and the Early Study of the Physical World of the Rabbis in Roman Palestine', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 65 (2014), pp. 38–57.

8 This section owes much to the discussions among members of the research group on Communication and Jewish History that convened at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Jerusalem during the academic year 2004–5. My fellow colleagues in the group have explored the lines of communications in antiquity between Palestine and the West; see Arye Edrei and Doron Mendels, 'A Split Jewish Diaspora: Its Dramatic Consequences', *JSP* 16:2 (2007): 91–137, *idem*, 'A Split Jewish Diaspora: Its Dramatic Consequences II', *JSP* 17:3 (2008), 163–87. Here, with much debt to them and to other members of the group, I turn my gaze to the east.

9 Since the beginning of scholarly inquiries into ancient Judaism in the 19th century, the material, mainly from the Babylonian Talmud, testifying to these connections has been collected and discussed time and again; for some samples from the last generation, see Joshua Schwartz, 'Tension between Palestinian Scholars and Babylonian Olim in Amoraic Palestine', *JSJ* 11 (1980), 78–94; *idem*, 'Babylonian Commoners in Amoraic Palestine', *JAOS* 101 (1981),

intellectual and perhaps religious affinity, however, does not give us license to mix Babylonian and Palestinian rabbis together in the same pot, especially when it comes to the material environment etched in their minds. Rav and Shemuel (regardless of their time spent in Palestine), Abaye and Rava, and Ravina and Rav Ashi were all part of the Iranian/Babylonian/Mesopotamian dominion (בבלאי in the rabbinic jargon of the day). By contrast, Rabban Gamaliel, R. Aqiva, R. Yoḥanan and Reish Laqish were all firmly inhabitants, even if provincials, of the Mediterranean Roman realm. Some—perhaps as early as Hillel, but surely later scholars such as Ḥiya, R. Nattan, Eleazar b. Peddat, R. Ami and R. Asi, to name but a few—crossed back and forth between the two domains, at least this is how they are presented in the rabbinic sources that portray them.<sup>10</sup> Such porous cultural partitions make the situation more interesting and complicated without removing the cultural dividing lines. So, from this perspective, rabbinic literature offers an intriguing reservoir of cross-cultural discourses, where insiders and outsiders, locals and foreigners, intersect with and write about each other. The process by which the Babylonian Talmud incorporates rabbinic traditions from Palestine, which apparently traveled east and were available to students and then editors in Persian territories, has received wide attention in modern research.<sup>11</sup> But the time has come

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317–22; idem, 'Aliya from Babylonia during the Amoraic period (200–500 CE)', *Jerusalem Cathedra* 3 (1983), 58–69; idem, 'Southern Judaea and Babylonia', *JQR* 7 (1982), 188–97. See also the various studies collected in Aharon Oppenheimer, *Between Rome and Babylon: Studies in Jewish Leadership and Society*, ed. Nili Oppenheimer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), esp. 374–93, 409–31.

- 10 For the biographical details of the various rabbinic figures, the old prosopographic lexicons are still the best tools; see, for example, Aharon Hyman, *Toldoth tannaim ve'amoraim*, 3 vols (London, 1910; repr. Jerusalem: Makhon peri ha-arets, 1987); Mordechai Margalioth (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Talmudic and Geonic Literature Being a Biographical Dictionary of the Tannaim, Amoraim and Geonim*, 2 vols (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1976) [Hebrew]. The ongoing, never ending debate about the historicity of the rabbinic material or the role of the rabbis in ancient Jewish society has no bearing on the questions discussed here. I address these questions in Eliav, 'Realia, Daily Life, and the Transmission of Local Stories During the Talmudic Period'. For recent, and to a large extent opposing discussions and some updated bibliography, compare Stuart S. Miller, *Sages and Commoners in Late Antique Eretz Israel: A Philological Inquiry into Local Traditions in Talmud Yerushalmi*, TSAJ 111 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), esp. 1–28, 339–93, 446–66; Seth Schwartz, 'The Political Geography of Rabbinic Texts', in Charlotte E. Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75–96.
- 11 E.g., Zwi Moshe Dor, *The Teaching of Eretz Israel in Babylon* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1971) [Hebrew]; David Goodblatt, 'The Babylonian Talmud', *ANRW* 2.19:2, 285–8; Richard Kalmin, *Sages,*

to seriously consider the opposite direction as well, namely to systematically collect and piece together all references from and about the Babylonian orbit that appear in rabbinic sources from Palestine. The current paper cannot do justice to the necessary complexity of this task; rather, it provides some preliminary<sup>6</sup> observations, discusses a few examples, and raises some methodological considerations with special focus on the physical realm.

The first question to ask relates to communication. In a world almost entirely without media resources, how did the residents of Roman Palestine access the physical reality of a distant place? The answer is two-fold: through personal contacts and literary channels.<sup>12</sup> As for the latter, very little literary material from Persia that circulated in Palestine has survived, although one may count the book of Tobit,<sup>13</sup> and some of the stories about the Jews of Babylonia that Josephus incorporates into his writings.<sup>14</sup> These are small, but representative remnants of what presumably was a larger body of literature from Persia, both oral and written, known to the Jews of Roman Palestine. Rabbinic sources also testify that the literary channels between the Persian and Roman domains were far from clogged, and oral traditions from and about Babylonia were prevalent among Palestinian sages. To illustrate with one example of many: in the midst

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*Stories, Authors, and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia*, BJS 300 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 87–110; David Rosenthal, 'The Transformation of Eretz Israel Traditions in Babylonia', *Cathedra* 92 (1999), 7–48 [Hebrew], with references to earlier scholarship in Hebrew on this matter and with a strong focus on sources involving material culture. The process of identifying Palestinian material within the Babylonian Talmud is far from being clear-cut, and scholars debate the proper parameters that may allow such identification; for a recent assessment of this issue, see Richard Kalmin, 'The Formation and Character of the Babylonian Talmud', in Steven T. Katz (ed.), *The Late Roman—Rabbinic Period*, vol. 4 of *The Cambridge History of Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 860–1.

- 12 Many of the sources in the following analysis are gathered and discussed in Isaiah M. Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era: A Social and Cultural History* (Jerusalem, Zalman Shazar, 1990) [Hebrew].
- 13 Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia*, 55–61. For a current summary of the various views that scholars offered on the provenance of this text, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Tobit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 50–54.
- 14 For a thorough examination of both the various passages in Josephus and earlier scholarly views about their nature and place of origin, see David Goodblatt, 'Josephus on Parthian Babylonia' (*Antiquities* XIII, 310–379), *JAOS* 107 (1987), 605–22. See also Carsten Colpe, 'Die Arsakiden bei Josephus', in Otto Betz et al., (eds), *Josephus Studien: Untersuchungen zu Josephus, dem antiken Judentum und den Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1974), 97–108; Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia*, 61–8; Geoffrey Herman, 'Iranian Epic Motifs in Josephus', (*Antiquities* XVIII, 314–370), *JJS* 57 (2006), 245–68. I owe this last reference to Jeffrey Rubinstein.

of a discussion about ritual immersions that precede the studying of Torah, the editors of the Palestinian Talmud (the *Yerushalmi*) incorporate the sentence, 'there they said [תמן אמרין; that not only to engage in Torah study but] even to listen to Torah study is prohibited [prior to ritual immersion]'.<sup>15</sup> The Aramaic phrase *tamman 'amerin*, along with other similar terms such as *rabbanan dehatam* ('the rabbis from there'), when appearing in a Palestinian context, have long been recognized as the *termini technici* utilized by the editors of the Palestinian Talmud to signal the incorporation of a Babylonian tradition.<sup>16</sup> The compilers of this passage had evidently acquired some knowledge that, at least in their view, derived from the scholarly centers of their Babylonian counterparts.

The data about the personal channel of communication between the two centers, as opposed to the literary one, stands on firmer ground. A long and diverse line of visitors and immigrants, going back to the early days of the Second Temple period, embarked on the 750 mile journey from Babylonia to Palestine, first upstream along the Euphrates till somewhere around Dura Europos, then across the desert, probably through Palmyra, heading in the general direction of Damascus, and finally approaching the region from the north.<sup>17</sup> We hear of Persian officials coming as part of political delegations,<sup>18</sup> and we know of military expeditions, expanding at times into extended, if not extremely long, periods of occupation (the best known in 40 BCE).<sup>19</sup> But above all, scores of Jews traveled between the two regions, whether immigrants like

15 *y. Ber.* 3 (6c).

16 For example: Zacharias Frankel, *Introductio in Talmud Hierosolymitanum* (Breslau: Schlatter, 1870), 12–13 [Hebrew]; Alexander Kohut (ed.), *Aruch Completum* (New York: Pardes, 1926), 8:242, s.v. תמן; Yaacov Elman, 'Babylonian Baraitot in the Tosefta and the "Dialectology" of Middle Hebrew', *AJSR* 16 (1991), 4–5; Leib Moscovitz, 'The Formation and Character of the Jerusalem Talmud', in Katz (ed.), *The Late Roman—Rabbinic Period*, 675; idem, *The Terminology of the Yerushalmi: The Principal Terms* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 209), 549–52, 575–8 [Hebrew], with extensive bibliography about this phenomenon.

17 For the most recent study about such travels, see Getzel M. Cohen, 'Travel between Palestine and Mesopotamia During the Hellenistic and Roman Periods: A Preliminary Study' (in this volume).

18 *y. Ber.* 7 (11b); *y. Naz.* 5 (54b); *Gen. Rab.* 91:3 (Theodor and Albeck, 1115). Whether the story told in these sources is historically accurate or not, i.e., whether it indeed reflects the days of the Hasmonaean king Alexander Jannaeus, is secondary to fact that a delegation of "important men from the Persian kingdom" visiting Palestine seemed a natural occurrence to the author(s); see Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia*, 27 n. 41, with references to earlier discussions of these sources.

19 The main source about this Parthian expedition in Palestine is Josephus; see *A.J.* 14.330–351, 363–369; *B.J.* 1.248–273; Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus*

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Hillel, whose story of arrival in Jerusalem remains shrouded in legend,<sup>20</sup> or Naḥum the Mede, who lived in Jerusalem at the time of the destruction and, according to one rabbinic tradition (which others contested), held a judicial appointment of sorts there.<sup>21</sup> Herod assigned and then removed a Babylonian Jewish priest, Ananel (Ḥananel), to and from the office of the high priesthood in the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>22</sup> Herod also settled a Jewish-Babylonian paramilitary unit of cavalry and archers, led by a Babylonian Jew named Zamaris, on the border of Trachonitis, in the northern parts of his kingdom.<sup>23</sup> Decades later, members of this colony were still known as ‘the Babylonian Jews of Ecbatana’ (probably after the name of the district Batanaea, *Bashan* in Hebrew) and they continued to take an active role in Judaeian internal politics in Jerusalem and elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps from the same stock, a celebrated Jewish warrior, Silas the Babylonian, fled the forces of Agrippa II during the early engagements of the Great Revolt, joined the insurgents, and led their attack on the city of Ascalon, where he died in battle.<sup>25</sup> Undoubtedly, the largest group of visitors, at least in the days of the Second Temple, were pilgrims to the Jerusalem Temple. The author of the Book of Acts vividly captured the diverse, multi-national setting in Jerusalem when he reports that during the annual Temple festivals multitudes of people from Persia, as from other centers of the Diaspora, swarmed the streets of the city, filling it with a bubbling mix of foreign languages.<sup>26</sup>

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*Christ* (rev. & ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman), 3 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973–87), 1:278–80.

20 *Sifre Deut.* 357 (Finkelstein, 429); *y. Pesag* 6 (33a); *b. Pesahg* 66a. See Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 2:363–7; Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia*, 70–6.

21 *m. Naz.* 5:4; *t. B. Bat.* 9a; *b. Ketub.* 105a.

22 Josephus, *J.A.* 15:22, 39–40.

23 *Id.* 17: 23–31.

24 *Id.* 17: 29–31; Josephus, *Vita* 46–59 (the phrase Βαβυλωνίοι Ἰουδαῖοι ἐν Ἐκβατάνοις in 54). More on the geographical and historical details associated with this colony, see Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 1:336–8; Menahem Stern, *Studies in Jewish History: The Second Temple Period*, ed. Moshe Amit et al., (Jerusalem: Yad izhak ben-zvi, 1991), 196–8 [Hebrew].

25 Josephus, *B.J.* 2:520, 311, 19; see Daniel R. Schwartz, *Agrippa I: The Last King of Judaea*, TSAJ 23 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1990), 70–1. Schwartz’s suggestion that another Silas in the days of Agrippa I was also a Babylonian from the same military colony in Batanaea seems to be stretching the evidence, as one must keep in mind that even regarding the Silas discussed here, other than his Babylonian identity there is no mention of his connection to the Herodian military colony; even more so for the Silas in the days of Agrippa I, of which we know nothing.

26 Acts 2:5–11. For more on pilgrimage to Jerusalem over the centuries with references to earlier studies, see Cohen, ‘Travel’; notes 34–35.

In the centuries following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, the stream of Babylonian visitors to Palestine persisted, even if on a diminished scale, as is evident from the numerous Babylonian students who join the learning circles of the Palestinian rabbis,<sup>27</sup> or the existence of a Babylonian synagogue in the Galilean city of Sepphoris.<sup>28</sup> The developing custom of seeking burial in Palestine, among certain wealthy Diaspora Jews of the era from Mesopotamia and elsewhere, further enhanced the presence of representatives of the Persian realm in Palestine.<sup>29</sup>

For the people of Roman Palestine, most of whom traveled rarely, if at all, these Babylonian visitors, especially those who decided to settle in their country, provided the most accessible channels for information about Persian territories. Normally, modern scholars tend to emphasize assimilation, the process by which immigrants absorb the new surroundings and ways of life they encounter. But the process actually moves in both directions: the Babylonian newcomers who settled in Palestine were, at least at first, living representations of the physical reality and the customs of their homeland. The clothes they wore, at least at first, the utensils they ate with, the merchandise they brought with them, and also the houses and furniture that at least some of them built in their new country, as well as the way they decorated them—all these ingredients of daily life provided a visual, tangible manifestation of Persian life. Furthermore, their living habits—that is, their manners and interactions with the physical realm of Roman Palestine—revealed the texture of their native Babylonian culture. To use a modern analogy, they were like miniature walking museums or live video clips of Persian life.

Equally important, however, is the fact that the visits went both ways, and, although few Palestinian Jews traveled to Babylonia, they were still not a rare sight there. Josephus informs us about the trips back and forth of the deposed Hasmonean high priest John Hyrcanus.<sup>30</sup> In later centuries, rabbinic traditions mention various individuals who traveled north and east to the areas of the Persian empire—R. Judah b. Bathyra and his circle of students migrate to

27 See in the literature cited above in note 9.

28 *y. Ber.* 5 (9a); *y. Šabb.* 6 (8a) = *y. Sanh.* 10 (28a); *Gen. Rab.* 33:3 (Theodor and Albeck, 305); *Gen. Rab.* 52:4 (Theodor and Albeck, 543). Other rabbinic sources from Palestine also refer to a Babylonian synagogue but do not reveal its location.

29 On this custom and its development, see Isaiah Gafni, 'Bringing Deceased from Abroad for Burial in Eretz Israel: On the Origin of the Custom and Its Development', *Cathedra* 4 (1977), 113–120 [Hebrew].

30 Josephus, *JA.* 15:14–15.





FIGURE 8.1 *Roman Near East, Mesopotamia and Babylonia in Late Antiquity (prepared by Lorene Sterner).*

Nisibis;<sup>31</sup> R. Aqiva arrives at Nehardea in one of his tours abroad and reaches as far east as the city of Gazaka in Medes;<sup>32</sup> Dostai and R. Yosi b. Keipar fall afoul of some Persian officials when they travel from Palestine to Nehardea in an attempt to retrieve a deposit of silver vessels;<sup>33</sup> and finally some rabbinic traditions place R. Josia, otherwise unknown, in Huzal.<sup>34</sup> Just as there was a Babylonian synagogue in Sepphoris, the Talmud records a synagogue of some foreigners, ‘Roman Jews’ (יהודאי רומאי) according to the uncensored textual witnesses, in Babylonia.<sup>35</sup> Even if entirely fictional (according to the extreme

31 E.g., *y. Sanh.* 8 (26b); *Sifre Deut.* 70 (Finkelstein, 146). For a detailed discussion of the sources about the center in Nisibis, the philological problems they raise, and the various scholarly opinions about them, see Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia*, 81–6.  
 32 *m. yebam.* 16:7; *b. Yebam.* 115a, 122a; *Gen. Rab.* 33:5 (Theodor and Albeck, 310); *b. Ta’an.* 11b; *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 34a, 39a. On this later tradition and its textual variants, see Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia*, 22.  
 33 *y. Git.* 1 (43d); *b. Git.* 14b.  
 34 *b. Git.* 61a; *b. Sanh.* 19a; Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia*, 84–5.  
 35 *b. Meg.* 26b.

skeptical position regarding rabbinic texts), these passages attest to the mindset of their authors, in which such travels are plausible and natural (and see the discussion in note 10).

### 3 Geography

This movement of individuals from one Jewish center to another stimulated a variegated, multifaceted, bi-directional process of cultural exposure. Jews from Roman Palestine who visited Babylonia acquired firsthand acquaintance with Mesopotamian landscapes and mores. On the most rudimentary level this involved knowledge of topography and geography, which always comes in handy to travelers, and usually figures prominently in their writings and memories. Indeed, Tannaitic and Amoraic accounts from Palestine occasionally offer geographical snippets about the regions of the Persian Empire. Much has been written about reflections of Mesopotamian geography in rabbinic literature, mainly in the Bavli, but no specific attention has been given to its depiction by Palestinian sources, nor has it been asked whether this latter material offers a unique perspective, that of outsiders, on the lands of the Babylonians.<sup>36</sup>

As may be expected, the rabbinic scholars known as the Tannaim, although residents of Roman Palestine, and thus, far removed from the physical landscape of Mesopotamia, possessed a basic grasp of the geography, which one needed in order to understand the spatial layout of the biblical stories. Hence they easily identify the territory of “Bavel”—the common geographical term in rabbinic literature to designate Mesopotamian and Persian territories—as the birthplace of the Patriarch Abraham. For example, a statement attributed to R. Yoḥanan b. Zakai and preserved in the Tosefta claims—‘For what reason were the people of Israel exiled [only] to Babylonia [rather than all] other countries? Because the house of Abraham our father is from there.’<sup>37</sup> There is nothing too surprising in rabbinic scholars displaying such knowledge.

36 For two central studies from the twentieth century on the geography of Babylonia as it is reflected in rabbinic literature, both of which include in their discussion Palestinian material alongside the Babylonian sources but pay no attention to possible distinctions between the two corpora, see Jacob Obermeyer, *Die Landschaft Babylonien im Zeitalter des Talmuds und des Gaonats: Geographie und Geschichte nach talmudischen, arabischen und anderen Quellen* (Frankfurt am Main: Kauffmann, 1929); Aharon Oppenheimer, Benjamin Isaac and Michael Lecker, *Babylonia Judaica in the Talmudic Period*, (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1983).

37 *t. B. Qam.* 7:3.

After all, the author of the book of Joshua, which was well known to them and written hundreds of years before their time, already locates the native land of Abraham in עבר הנהר ('beyond the river'), a familiar biblical designation for the regions east and west of the Euphrates.<sup>38</sup> This identification is prevalent in other Jewish texts from the Second Temple period.<sup>39</sup> Thus, by the time of the rabbis, such geographical knowledge was most probably widely known to students and scholars of the Bible.

But less obvious pieces of geographical information, the kind one cannot acquire from simple reading and contemplation of the biblical books, also surface in rabbinic traditions from Palestine. One of these, preserved in both Palestinian Midrash and Targum, seeks to identify the biblical site names of Erech, Accad, and Calneh (Gen 10:10) with the Mesopotamian cities Edessa, Nisibis, and Ctesiphon.<sup>40</sup> All three cities are located in Persian territories in northern and central Mesopotamia, for the most part outside the Roman orbit (not withstanding extensions of Roman conquest). But even more significant, they are arranged in a geographical line that stretches from northwest to

38 Josh 24:2. See Lawrence E. Toombs, 'Beyond the River', *IDB* 1.405–6.

39 E.g., *Jdt* 5:7; Pseudo-Eupolemus *apud* Alexander Polyhistor, *De Iudaeis*, *apud* Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9:17:3 (Mras, *GCS* 43:1, 503); Philo, *Abr.* 188; Josephus, *J.A.* 1:152. Implicitly, this tradition also surfaces in the works of the so-called Pseudo-Philo when he places Abraham among the builders of the Tower of Babel; see *L.A.B.* 6. Many have surveyed the early, mostly Second Temple commentaries and elaborations on the story of Abraham, although without paying too much attention to their geographical aspects; see, for example, Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. H. Szold (repr. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968), 1:186–9, 5:208–9; Samuel Sandmel, *Philo's Place in Judaism: A Study of Conceptions of Abraham in Jewish Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Ktav, 1971). A nice exception is James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 264–6.

40 *GenR* 37:4 (Theodor and Albeck, 346); *Tg. Ps.-J.* (= *Tg. Yer. I*), *Frg. Tg.* (*Tg. Yer. II*), and *Tg. Neof.* to Gen 10:10. Some versions of the Targum, both pseudo-Jonathan and at least one textual witness of the fragmentary Targum (Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale Hébr. 110) identify the three cities—Edessa, Nisibis, and Ctesiphon—'in the land of Pontus', unlike other versions of the Targum and that in Genesis Rabbah which translate the Hebrew of Genesis ארץ שנוער as 'the land of Babylon'. This textual variant was also added as a gloss to the margins of Neofiti 1 (see in the *apparatus criticus* of the Diez Maco edition, p. 55). Ms. Paris of the Fragmentary Targum also has Haran instead of Edessa. These perplexing textual traditions require a separate study. The specific identification of Calneh with Ctesiphon appears also in *LevR* 5:3 (Margulies, 104); *NumR* 10:3. For the adaptation of this exegetical tradition by patristic authors, see Louis Ginzberg, 'Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern und in der apokryphischen Litteratur', *MGWJ* 43 (1899), 461–70.

southeast, along the main route to the Persian empire from the Roman world (see map, fig. 8.1).

Such a visualization of the region stands in contrast to that of the locals as preserved in the Babylonian Talmud: an exegetical tradition dealing with the same three site names in the book of Genesis offers a strikingly different set of identifications, centering on cities of southeast Babylonia—Nippur, Uruk, and Bashkar/Kashkar.<sup>41</sup> The land—Mesopotamia—remains the same in both traditions, but the human interaction with its geography, as registered in contemporary sources, reflects the different perceptions of two distinct communities. The foreigners from Roman Palestine visualize it according to the spatial layout visitors from the Roman world would have encountered, namely moving from the outside to the inside; whereas the local Babylonians see it from the inside, that is, from the Babylonian districts in which they lived, moving southeastern toward the exterior (see map, fig. 8.1).

#### 4 Food

The most common Persian trait that surfaces in Tannaitic sources from Palestine relates to food and dining habits. A halakha in the Mishnah shows knowledge of the recipe of a Babylonian dip—כתח הבבלי—and is able to determine that its ingredients include breadcrumbs.<sup>42</sup> The same tradition is also familiar with ‘imported’ Median malt—שכר המדי.<sup>43</sup> Another passage in the Tosefta recognizes the limited availability of olive oil, a distinctive Mediterranean commodity, in the Persian world and is also aware of its substitutes—sesame oil in Babylonia and nut oils in the northern elevated territories of Media (מה יעשו אנשי בבל שאין להם אלא שמן שמשמין, מה יעשו אנשי מדי שאין להם) אלא שמן אגוזים בלבד.<sup>44</sup>

41 *b. Yoma* 10a.

42 *m. Pesah* 3b.

43 *Id.*

44 *t. Šabb.* 2:3 (Lieberman, 7). For a good summary on the production of olive oil in the Roman Mediterranean, see Marie-Claire Amouretti and Jean-Pierre Brun, *La production du vin et de l'huile en Méditerranée* (Paris: Boccard, 1993); David J. Mattingly, ‘First Fruit? The Olive in the Roman World’, in John Salmon and Graham Shipley (eds), *Human Landscapes in Classical Antiquity: Environment and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1996), 213–53. For a discussion of the other side of the equation, namely the shortage of olive trees and olive products in Mesopotamia and the botanical reasons behind it, see, for example, Meir Malul, ‘Ze/irtu (se/irdu): The Olive Tree and Its Products in Ancient Mesopotamia’, in M. Heltzer and D. Eitam (eds), *Olive Oil in Antiquity: Israel and Neighboring Countries from*

The source of this information remains unclear. Over half a millennium before the Tosefta, the Greek historian and native of Anatolia, Herodotus, recorded similar details, specifically the (relative) lack of olive trees in Assyria and the tendency of the local population there to replace olive oil with sesame oil.<sup>45</sup> These similarities suggest that some general information about oil products and their geographical distribution circulated throughout the ancient world and found its way into different literary and oral formats—although this is merely a conjecture. In any event, the passage from the Tosefta does reflect the perception of outsiders about food distribution and culture in the Mesopotamian regions. In fact olive trees and products based on olives such as oil may have been much more prevalent in the lands of Babylon than the Tosefta and Herodotus lead us to believe.<sup>46</sup> But their supposed scarcity registered in the mind of outsiders as a trademark of those faraway regions.

## 5 Dining Culture

Far more illuminating than talk of olive oil are the observations that Palestinian sages made about the eating practices of their brethren from the territories of Mesopotamia and beyond. One tradition praises the polite table etiquette of the Persians, portraying them as *tsnu'in be'akhilatan* (modest in their eating; צנועין באכילתן).<sup>47</sup> *Tsanu'a* should probably be translated in this context as 'having decent, polite eating habits', but it also contains a corporal meaning, in

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*Neolith to Early Arab Period* (Haifa: University of Haifa Press, 1987), 146–58. On the widespread usage of sesame in those regions, see Marten Stol, 'Remarks on the Cultivation of Sesame and the Extraction of Its Oil', *Bulletin on Sumerian Agriculture* 2 (1985): 119–26. Information about olives, their manufacturing and products, in Jewish sources has been gathered and discussed more than once, but without reference to the aspect of distribution mentioned here and to its significance; see, for example, Samuel Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie*, 3 vols. (Leipzig: G. Fock, 1910–12), 2. 214–27; Immanuel Löw, *Die Flora der Juden*, 4 vols, Veröffentlichungen der Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation 2–4, 6 (Vienna & Leipzig: R. Löwit, 1924–34), 2.286–95.

45 Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.193.

46 A point well made by David Asheri; see David Asheri, Alan Lloyd, and Aldo Corcella, *A Commentary on Herodotus Books I–IV*, trans. by Barbara Grazioso et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 209.

47 A *baraita*, i.e., an early tanaitic tradition preserved in a later, amoraic compilation, in *b. Ber.* 8b.

the sense of bodily 'modesty' or 'chastity'.<sup>48</sup> Another tradition elaborates on the good table manners of the Medians, saying that they do not consume their food by grabbing and tearing it with their hands and teeth, but rather slice it first on the table and only then place it in their mouths (שאינ מושבין ואוכלין אלא חותכים ואוכלין).<sup>49</sup>

These statements should be read against the background of the rowdy and promiscuous table culture of the private banquet in the Graeco-Roman world, known in the west as *convivium* (not to be confused with the much larger public feast, the *epulum*, irrelevant to the discussion here).<sup>50</sup> By the second and third centuries CE, this practice, which had its origins in the ancient Near East before becoming a hallmark of *Romanitas*, the Roman way of life, had dispersed far and wide throughout the Mediterranean, and, despite some variations, with notable uniformity.<sup>51</sup> The vast majority of the numerous depictions of meals from this period, both in mosaics and wall paintings, focus on the drinking and entertainment portion of the party—the famous *symposion*. Although many mosaics depict both food and tableware, they rarely show people actually eating, and so do not reveal much about how the guests devoured the food that was served in the early part of the feast.<sup>52</sup> But here and there, when a picture does capture an eating scene, we always see large portions consumed with bare

48 Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature* (London: Trübner, 1886; repr. New York: Pardes, 1950), 1291–2, s.v.

49 *GenR* 74:2 (Theodor and Albeck, 858–9); *b. Ber.* 8b. Other versions of these traditions are listed and discussed in Albeck's notes. A third group of rabbinic traditions, although apparently only from Babylonia, seems to be aware of the Zoroastrian requirement to eat in silence; see Shaul Shaked, 'No Talking During the Meal: Zoroastrian Themes in the Babylonian Talmud'; in Carol Bakhos and M. Rahim Shayegan (eds), *The Talmud in Its Iranian Context*, TSAJ 135 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 161–77. Jeffrey Rubinstein brought this study to my attention.

50 The secondary literature about the Roman banquet is vast; on top of the references provided in the following notes, for comprehensive recent summaries see Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Elke Stein-Hölkeskamp, *Das römische Gastmahl: Eine Kulturgeschichte* (Munich: Beck, 2005). On the *epulum*, see John F. Donahue, *The Roman Community at Table During the Principate* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

51 On the history of the banquet and the convoluted routes of its dissemination throughout the Mediterranean world, see Walter Burkert, 'Oriental Symposia: Contrasts and Parallels'; in William J. Slater (ed.), *Dining in a Classical Context* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 7–24; Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet*, 11–13, 34–35.

52 For a good collection and discussion of such mosaics, see Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet*. This artistic convention stems, I think, from Roman sense of cultural inferiority toward their Greek predecessors and the acceptance of the Greek model, which highlighted the

hands.<sup>53</sup> When it came to cutlery, it was very common in the Roman world to utilize spoons—*cochlearia* and *ligulae*—mainly for liquids and sauces as well as the soggy portions of the meal, so they would not dribble through the fingers. Also very popular were drinking vessels, in a wide array of shapes and materials—cups, goblets, horns, and the like. But other utensils, such as small knives and forks, were not widely employed before the Middle Ages.<sup>54</sup>

Nor were individual plates fashionable, at least not in the context of the *convivium*.<sup>55</sup> Even when they do show up, as in the fourth-century painting from the Tomb of the Banquet in Constanza or the mosaic of the banqueting women from the Tomb of Mnemoysne in Antioch, the participants still eat with their bare hands.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, hundreds of years before these pictures were drawn, near the turn of the first century CE, the Latin poet Martial refers in one of his epigrams to cabbage served in a large, black dish and eaten with one's fingers.<sup>57</sup> About a century later, Athenaeus quotes a passage in which philosophers having dinner are described as sticking their hands overloaded with food into their mouths.<sup>58</sup> Despite their satirical intent, the colorful descriptions of Petronius in his *cena Trimalchionis*, a chapter of a novel set in the second half of the first century CE, do offer a glimpse at the messy and untidy nature of food distribution and consumption during these banquets. Throughout the

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drinking and conversational stages of the meal, as the prototype for the production and arrangement of these mosaic pictures.

- 53 A nice example for such artistic representation comes from the east wall of room r in the House of the Triclinium at Pompeii (Reg. V, 2, 4; now at the Museo Nazionale Archeologico; inventory number—120029), where the figure to the far right is seen consuming a large piece of meat right off a skewer; see Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet*, 58–9 and fig. 28. Another example from a fourth-century mosaic from Carthage shows a large banquet with slaves bussing huge trays and handing out chunks of food hand to hand; see *ibid.*, 90–3, and fig. 47–48 (now in the Musée du Bardo, Tunis; inventory number—A.162).
- 54 For good summaries and bibliographies about these topics, see the various entries in Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (eds), *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopedia of the Ancient World—Antiquity*, English edition (Leiden: Brill, 2002–10), esp. 'Cutlery' (vol. 3, 1030–1032) and 'Table Utensils' (vol. 14, 88–89). See also Keith Bradley, 'The Roman Family at Dinner', in Inge Nielsen and Hanne Sigismund Nielsen (eds), *Meals in a Social Context: Aspects of the Communal Meal in the Hellenistic and Roman World* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998), esp. 38–39. For an exception to these rules, namely of a unique type of a spoon-knife combination, see David Sherlock, 'The Roman Combination Knife and Spoon', *JRA* 16 (2003), 331–5.
- 55 Plutarch, *Mor.* 2.10 (642F–643A).
- 56 Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet*, plates XIII (Constanza) and XIV (Antioch).
- 57 Martial, *Ep.* 5.78.6–10.
- 58 Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 4.161d–e.

account, slaves serve the main courses of the meal—sizeable chunks of fish, meat, and chicken—on huge trays, but other than long carving knives wielded by the servants and spoons used to crack the shell and consume the yolk of soft boiled eggs, the guests dive in, consuming the food greedily.<sup>59</sup> It was quite normal not to return the leftovers from these hefty chunks of food to the trays but rather to toss them on the floor, onto which the guests spat out wine, vomited, and at times even urinated. This grimy reality of the floors was captured in the mosaic motif known as ‘the unswept room’ (*asarotos oikos*) and in Cicero’s description of a banquet (quoted by Quintilian): ‘The floor was filthy, swimming with wine, littered with wilting garlands and fishbones.’<sup>60</sup>

The licentious atmosphere prevailing at Roman banquets adds another dimension to the aforementioned rabbinic commentary. Reclining, three or more bodies packed on each of the *triclinium* couches, brought the men and women who attended these events into physical proximity that must have triggered sexual arousal. Indeed various artistic depictions of the banquet, whether fantastic or real, present the members making out with one another as with the slaves who attended to their needs (and in the Greek convention with their high-end female companions, the *hetairai*, as well).<sup>61</sup> Many written sources testify to the same sexually suffused atmosphere, the most extreme of which may be the so-called ‘moralist’ from Pompeii who inscribed his admonition right before the eyes of his guests, on the wall of the dinner hall: ‘Keep your licentious looks and seductive eyes away from another man’s wife; let modesty be printed [all over] your face.’<sup>62</sup>

The Palestinian rabbis belonged to the Graeco-Roman dining orbit and readily embraced many, although not all, of its features. They adopted the practice

59 Petronius, *Sat.* 26–78, esp. 31, 33 (spoons), 35–36 (carving knives), 40, 49–50.

60 Cicero *apud* Quintilian, *Inst.* 8.3.66; trans. in Donald S. Russell, *Quintilian: The Orator’s Education*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.379. See also Horace, *Sat.* 2.8.11–13; Vitruvius, *De architectura* 7.4.5; Pliny, *N.H.* 28.26–27 (with the emendation of Walters brought in the Loeb edition, note d); Martial, *Ep.* 3.82.15–17, 6.89, 7.20.17. For the *asarotos oikos* mosaics and the cultural realities behind them, see Waldemar Deonna and Marcel Renard, *Croyances et superstitions de table dans la Rome antique* (Brussels: Latomus, 1961), 113–37 (and plate 15, fig. 19–20); Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet*, 64–7 (and fig. 33), 159 (and fig. 92).

61 E.g., Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet*, plates 1–11.

62 *CIL* 4.7698b: *Lascivos voltus et blandos aufer ocellos coniuge ab alterius, sit tibi in ore pudor*. For other examples, see Ovid, *Amores* 1.4; id., *Artis amatoriae* 1.230–250; Suetonius, *Aug.* 69.1. For a recent discussion, one of many, of both literary and artistic sources, see Matthew Roller, ‘Horizontal Women: Posture and Sex in the Roman *convivium*’, *AJP* 124 (2003): 377–422.



of reclining on couches in the *triclinium* and its etiquette, the multiple course meals, and the slaves attending to the needs of the diners.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless these same rabbis express disdain for certain practices common in their time and place by voicing appreciation for foreign manners. Unlike the untamed atmosphere of the *convivium*, where people processed large chunks of food with their hands, the reserved manners of the Persians and Medes, who cut their food on the table before eating, earned the rabbis' praise. In contrast to the promiscuity that prevailed in Roman banquets, the rabbis described the Persians as 'modest in their eating', a phrase echoing sexual restraint.

By no means should we conclude that all the inhabitants of the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean 'ate like pigs', or that all Babylonians exhibited manners that would have gained the approval of Emily Post. Surely, at least some people in the Roman world exhibited elegant table behavior, abiding by the long list of worthy dinner manners enumerated in great detail, for example, throughout Clement of Alexandria's *Paedagogus*.<sup>64</sup> By the same token, local descriptions of Parthian and Sasanian feasts portray quite a rowdy scene, no less lively and concupiscent than its counterpart in the Roman world. In the Persian version of the upper class banquets, known as *bazm*—etched on silver platters and illustrated on Manichaean manuscripts as well as described in great detail in Middle Persian texts such as *Xusro ud Redag* (Khurso and the Page) and *Sūrī Suxwan* (Banquet Speech)—the nobility and the king consume vast amounts of food while listening to music, drinking wine, and enjoying the performances of dancing girls and the intimate attentions of courtesans.<sup>65</sup>

63 The sources for Jewish (or perhaps one should say 'rabbinic', as most of the written material comes from their literature) dining habits during the High and Late Empire have been collected and discussed time and again; for two recent studies, see David Noy, 'The Sixth Hour is the Mealtime for Scholars: Jewish Meals in the Roman World', in Nielsen and Nielsen (eds), *Meals in a Social Context*, 134–44; Jordan D. Rosenblum, *Food and Identity in Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

64 For summary of and references to the entire list, see Keith Bradley, 'The Roman Family at Dinner', in Nielsen and Nielsen (eds), *Meals in a Social Context*, 42–5. Bradley is correct in asserting (p. 44) that Clement did not invent these proper routines for the sake of Christian children, but rather he is modeling them on the common etiquette among the Graeco-Roman elite in Alexandria.

65 For a handful of nice examples (mainly from the 7th century) of silver platters depicting banquet scenes, see Prudence O. Harper, 'Sasanian Silver Vessels: The Formation and Study of Early Museum Collections', in John Curtis (ed.), *Mesopotamia and Iran in the Parthian and Sasanian Periods: c. 238 BC–AD 642* (London: British Museum Press, 2000), 46–56, and plates 19–25. The information from Persian literary sources is summarized in Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia: The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London: Tauris, 2009),

By no stretch of imagination could the Palestinian rabbis have viewed these parties as less offensive than their Roman equivalent. However, discourse about eating practices, especially when relating to others, is not meant to be an objective report but rather an expression of ideology and a definition of identity. In the words of Peter Garnsey:

The literary sources of Antiquity . . . contrast the food choices and eating customs of the urban elite, to which they themselves belong and those of societies at the farthest reaches of the Graeco-Roman or beyond its limits . . . The construction is ideological, the details inaccurate or imaginary, and the purpose of the exercise is to emphasize the identity, singularity and superiority of the dominant culture of Greece and Rome over those of sundry 'barbarians'.<sup>66</sup>

Applying this model to the Tannaim highlights the uniqueness and complexity of their statements. Whereas most Graeco-Roman writers denigrated the eating habits of others in order to elevate their own culture,<sup>67</sup> the rabbis embraced the outsiders in order to militate against the dominant culture of their realm. Indeed, the very same Persians whose eating practices the rabbis praise, are scorned by mainstream authors of Roman society, many times for exactly the same traits that the rabbis applaud. Thus, for example, the first century BCE historian Pompeius Trogus integrates the detail about the dainty way the Parthians handle their food into a larger condescending critique of their culture.<sup>68</sup> Also illuminating are the occasions when Roman authors sneer

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50–2; *ibid.*, plate 13 offers a nice example from the illustrated Manichaean manuscripts. The Persian custom of dining with courtesans is also recorded in Macrobius, *Sat.* 7.1.3.

66 Peter Garnsey, *Food and Society in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 62. Applying this model to rabbinic sources about food and dining is Rosenblum, *Food and Identity*, who nevertheless does not discuss the aspect and examples of food-discourse studied here.

67 Examples are plentiful; many are gathered and discussed in Garnsey, *Food and Society*, 62–81. Admittedly, the rhetoric about food in Graeco-Roman literature extends beyond the relative narrow spectrum—depictions of foreign table manners—that I present here. One cannot dismiss, for example, the fact that on numerous occasions Roman writers disapprove of their own habits, including those related to eating. To do justice to this topic, one must consult broader and more nuanced presentations of the subject; for one example out of many, see Emily Gowers, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

68 Pompeius Trogus *apud* Justinus, *Epitome historiarum Philippicarum* 41.3.9. For more on this passage with references to earlier discussions, see Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of*

at foreigners for precisely the same reasons that led foreigners to look down on them. In one example, Athenaeus quotes a lost passage where the Celts are ridiculed for eating 'with a lion-like appetite', namely 'grasping whole joints with both hands and biting them off the bone'.<sup>69</sup> With these utterly different takes on the same practice, we see yet again how beauty, along with disgust, grace, and proper comportment, are in the eye of the beholder.

Cultural discourse—in antiquity and today—employs convoluted cycles of differing perspectives to justify conflicting ideologies. Such opposing visions, easier to discern in the discourse of distant times and places, provide a valuable warning about the way our own look at the material culture of another era may be rife with our own biases. A comparative perspective is all the more valuable, since the examination of multiple interpretations of a given object can clarify the biases inherent in each of them.

The rabbinic statement, therefore, exemplifies the distinctive—what may be called a subversive—'provincial voice' of minorities in the Roman world. On the one hand, the rabbis belonged fully to the Mediterranean cultural realm, but, on the other hand, they strove to differentiate themselves from it in order to carve out and define their own character.<sup>70</sup> Read in this way, the rabbis share the critical attitude toward Roman eating habits shown by other writers who came to the center from the periphery, such as the second-century CE Syrian

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*Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 377–8, and n. 41. For another good example of a negative portrayal of Persian eating habits from the third century CE (although quoting much earlier sources such as Herodotus and others), see Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 4.143–146. For more on Roman knowledge of Persian food, with some positive assessments of it, see Otto Kurz, 'Cultural Relations Between Parthia and Rome', in Ehsan Yarshater (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, *The Seleucid, Parthian, and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 564–6. Also St. John Simpson, 'Mesopotamia in the Sasanian Period: Settlement Patterns, Arts and Crafts', in Curtis (ed.), *Mesopotamia and Iran in the Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, 62–6.

69 Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 4.151e; trans. Charles Burton Gulick, *Athenaeus: The Deipnosophists*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928; repr. 2002), 2.191. Cf. the same author who in another passage describes his fellow Romans with similar gusto, Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 1.5e–f.

70 Recently argued in detail regarding food in Rosenblum, *Food and Identity*. For the same argument regarding other facets of life in the ancient world, see Yaron Z. Eliav, 'A Scary Place: Jewish Magic in the Roman Bathhouse', in Leah Di Segni et al., (eds), *Man Near a Roman Arch: Studies Presented to Prof. Yoram Tsafir* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2009), 88–97, esp. 94–5, and the bibliography in note 8. Cf. also Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society?: Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

orator and author Lucian of Samosata or the fourth-century Greek native who became a Roman army officer and then a prolific historian, Ammianus Marcellinus.<sup>71</sup>

Even if exaggerated and distorted, the assertions of the Palestinian Tannaim about the Persians offer a glimpse into the mechanisms of cultural discourse. Perceptions and images of ‘others’, in this case foreigners, are modeled on behaviors people encounter, whether among their foreign neighbors, in their travels, or in stories that circulate about these outsiders. The material culture of the Babylonians, and in particular their engagement with food, migrates through Palestinian traditions and is filtered through the rabbis’ sensitivities. We see the Babylonians not just through the eyes of their Roman Palestine brethren, but also through their biases and predilections and interpretive needs.

## 6 Latrines

Moving through the digestion experience, and from smaller, mobile objects—groceries and cuisine—to larger stationary structures, the next example discusses the human experience associated with toilets. In the passage where the Palestinian sages celebrate the dining habits of the Persians, Rabban Gamaliel also applauds their modesty in the bathroom:

תניא, אמר רבן גמליאל בשלושה דברים אוהב אני את הפרסיים: צנועין באכילתן,  
צנועין בבית הכסא, וצנועין בדבר אחר.

It was recorded in a baraita: Rabban Gamaliel said—for three things I love the Persians: they are modest in their eating, they are modest in the toilet [lit. the house of the seat] and they are modest in [the] other thing [=sex].<sup>72</sup>

Lurking behind this terse statement is the colorful—or should I say smelly and exposed—restroom scene of the Roman Mediterranean. Today we in the industrial world are accustomed to public bathrooms with dividers separating urinals, enclosed cubicles, and most of all strict separation between men

71 Lucian, *Nigr.* 33; Ammianus Marcellinus, *Hist.* 14.6.16. See Veronica E. Grimm, ‘On Food and the Body’, in David S. Potter (ed.), *A Companion to the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 357.

72 *b. Ber.* 8b.

and woman. The situation in the Roman world was far from such proprieties. In the large cities, people urinated in the middle of the street into jars set up by laundry shops (*fullonicae*), which collected the urine and used it as a detergent (known as *urina fullonia*).<sup>73</sup> In banquets it was not uncommon for attendees to snap their fingers at one of the slaves signaling him to bring a pot and a urine flask (*matella*), and then relieve themselves right there among the other guests.<sup>74</sup>

Apparently, the concept of privacy, a word unknown to the Romans (not to be mistakenly confused with the totally different term 'private'), as well as the social and cultural norms associated with it were poles apart from what is common today in the western world, as were the customs associated with nudity and bodily exposure.<sup>75</sup>

What transpired in the public toilets of Roman cities was not much different. Most men and many women in the ancient world spent long hours each day out and away from their homes, making a place to relieve oneself, especially in large towns and cities, a crucial municipal and sanitary need. Indeed, latrines (*latrina/forica* in Latin; בית המים or בית הכסא in rabbinic terminology), could be found in abundance in every urban center. A typical public latrine in Graeco-Roman times consisted of a large open room with lavatory seats arranged one next to the other all along the walls (see fig. 8.2). Often, water would run in a channel underneath the seats, washing the excrement into the city sewer; at

73 Pliny, *N.H.* 28.66, 174; Martial, *Ep.* 6.93.1–2, 12.48.8; Suetonius, *Vesp.* 23.3; Macrobius, *Sat.* 3.16.15. Abundant archaeological evidence corroborates this custom; see Mark Bradley, 'It All Comes Out in the Wash': Looking Harder at the Roman *fullonica*, *JRA* 15 (2002), 30–32, and the secondary literature listed in note 85; it is also documented in inscriptions, see Ann Olga Koloski-Ostrow, 'Finding Social Meaning in the Public Latrines of Pompeii', in Nathalie de Haan and Gemma C.M. Jansen (eds), *Cura Aquarum in Campania: Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress on the History of Water Management and Hydraulic Engineering in the Mediterranean Region*, Annual Papers on Classical Archaeology, Supplement 4 (Leiden: Stichting Babesch, 1996), 79–86, esp. 85, n. 14. The wide usage of urine for cleaning purposes is documented in Jewish sources as well; see for example *t. B. Meš'a* 11.32, and the baraita in *b. Rosh Hash.* 33a.

74 Seneca the Younger, *Ben.* 3.26.2; Martial, *Ep.* 3.82.15–17, 6.89; cf. Petronius, *Sat.* 47. On the *matella* and its usages, with further references and bibliography, see Farouk Grewing, *Martial Buch VI: Ein Kommentar* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 565–6.

75 In regard to nudity, I concluded elsewhere: '(B)ody parts that we today tend to conceal were, in the pre-underwear age, much more on display'; see Eliav, 'A Scary Place', 91. For a similar conclusion in regard to latrines, see Barry Hobson, *Latrinae et foricae: Toilets in the Roman World* (London: Duckworth, 2009), 79–87.



FIGURE 8.2 *A Latrine in the city of Scythopolis, in Roman Palestine (Courtesy of Gideon Foerster).*



FIGURE 8.3 *A closer look at the seats of a Latrine from Ostia Antica, Italy (Courtesy of Shelly Martin).*



other times it would be up to slaves to clean the ever-growing cesspools in the evenings or before dawn. A sponge tied to a stick functioned as toilet paper, with buckets of water in the center for cleaning between uses. Nothing concealed one person from the other as they went about their business.<sup>76</sup>

Even more striking, at least to our modern sensibilities, was the lack of separation between the sexes. Some, admittedly few, bathhouse establishments in the ancient world offered a partial division, occasionally through different bathing hours for each gender, and rarely through a distinct structure for women (although both of these methods were far from the norm).<sup>77</sup> In the public latrines, however, neither literary sources nor archaeological remains ever hint at any sort of separation, making it probable, although lacking explicit proof, that men and women routinely shared the space.<sup>78</sup>

This situation, very apparent in Roman Palestine, where archaeological excavations have unearthed numerous such public *latrinae*,<sup>79</sup> helps explain Gamaliel's enthusiasm about the modesty of the Persians. In many other statements, Palestinian rabbis express their discomfort with the physical exposure—in their terminology, the 'lack of modesty'—that prevailed in the public latrines.<sup>80</sup> Here, Gamaliel articulates the same apprehension negatively, by applauding the foreign, Persian custom that he and his rabbinical brethren found more tasteful.

The rabbis do not tell us how the Babylonians maintained their modesty in the latrines. Were they like the Essenes in second-century BCE Jerusalem,

76 For the most updated summary about Latrines in the Roman world, see Richard Neudecker, *Die Pracht der Latrine: Zum Wandel öffentlicher Bedürfnisanstalten in der kaiserzeitlichen Stadt*, Studien zur antiken Stadt 1 (Munich: Pfeil, 1994); Hobson, *Latrinae et foricae*. See also Gemma C.M. Jansen, 'Social Distinctions and Issues of Privacy in the Toilets of Hadrian's Villa', *JRA* 16 (2003), 137–53, esp. her conclusions on 151–2.

77 For further discussion and references to both primary and secondary sources, see Eliav, 'A Scary Place', 91.

78 For the same conclusion, see Garrett G. Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 77–8; Hobson, *Latrinae et foricae*, 81–2.

79 For a good collection of most of the material from the various sites, see Eyal Baruch and Zohar Amar, 'The Latrine (Latrina) in the Land of Israel in the Roman and Byzantine Period', *Jerusalem and Eretz-Israel* 2 (2004), 29–32 [Hebrew].

80 References have been gathered and studied more than once; see Julius Preuss, *Biblischtalmudische Medizin: Beiträge zu Geschichte der Heilkunde und der Kultur überhaupt* (Berlin: Karger, 1911), 648–50; Baruch and Amar, 'The Latrine', 38–9. Cf. also Michael L. Satlow, 'Jewish Constructions of Nakedness in Late Antiquity', *JBL* 116 (1997), 429–54. Satlow is correct, even if a bit too extreme, when he speaks of 'rabbinic disgust at men going naked' (p. 437), but he fails to consider the reality of bodily exposure against which this statement was made.

who relieved themselves only outside the city borders and were known to refrain from going to the bathroom on the Sabbath?<sup>81</sup> Or did the Babylonians have some other way to preserve their modesty? Whatever the reality, attending to textual sources alongside the physical evidence, and placing them both in the broader context of Mediterranean norms provides a unique opportunity to explore the rabbis' point of view as that of outsiders to the Persian cultural milieu. Furthermore, beyond the alleged modest hygienic practices of the Babylonians, the rabbis' perceptions of bathroom behavior offer insight into the dynamics of ancient Palestinian Jewish culture and its relation to the Roman environment surrounding it.

How did the Palestinian sages learn about Persian behavior? The two options presented before—first-hand observations of travelers to Mesopotamia or the conduct of Babylonian visitors and immigrants in Palestine—may both have contributed. Note that neither Rabban Gamaliel nor any other Palestinian source show any knowledge about the particular bathroom facilities of the Babylonians; they only pronounce their admiration for their modesty, thus revealing the immodesty of their own environment. This leads me to believe that they are basing their assessments on observations of the way Babylonian newcomers adjusted to the limitations of Graeco-Roman facilities. Just the same, some of this knowledge about Persian norms and ways of life could have circulated as popular lore, the common knowledge of one culture about another, without any concrete first-hand experience (or, indeed, corroboration). As with the aforementioned information regarding the relative lack of olive oil in Persian territories, Herodotus takes up the case of latrines as well. Some six hundred years or so prior to the rabbis, when discussing Persian meal manners and contrasting them to common practices among the Greeks, he comments that Persians neither vomit nor urinate in front of others.<sup>82</sup> No matter how the information was obtained and transmitted, it illuminates the potential for cross-cultural discourse that revolves around material culture, stemming from the ways one group perceives the other's interaction with the physical realm.

81 Josephus, *BJ*. 2:148–149, 174; Cf. the Temple Scroll from Qumran—11Q19 xlv:13–16; Baruch and Amar, 'The Latrine', 35–7.

82 Herodotus, *Hist.* 1:133.



## 7 Methodological Considerations

On the heels of these specific, and very visceral, examples, I would like to offer three broader, methodological caveats, important to keep in mind for this kind of study. First, when comparing Graeco-Roman and Persian cultural realms, we need to remember that these were not diametrically opposed, mutually exclusive entities, as the political and military conflicts between the two may lead modern observers to believe. Historical circumstances over centuries in the Near East gave rise to many overlaps and shared features in the physical reality of the Roman and Persian worlds. Following the conquests of Mesopotamia and Persia by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, Macedonians (later identified with the dynastic term Seleucids) governed these territories for nearly three generations; in Mesopotamia their rule continued till 129 BCE. This prolonged Graeco-Macedonian hegemony deeply impacted the cultural textures of the region, at least in the cities and among the middle and upper classes.<sup>83</sup> The Seleucid kings, together with the multitudes of new people who settled in the area—merchants from the Mediterranean basin, retired army veterans, and a plentiful blend of settlers who left their homelands in the west in search of a better future—established Greek colonies, later turned into *poleis*, which came with the full gamut of institutions and norms that represented Greek life.<sup>84</sup> The Parthians who took over the reign of Persia and then Mesopotamia, establishing an empire that would last nearly five centuries, continued to embrace, at least to a certain extent and more in the beginning than toward the end, Graeco-Macedonian culture (Dura Europos, a Hellenistic Settlement coming under Parthian hegemony and then converted into a Roman garrison in the days of Trajan, is a well-documented example).<sup>85</sup> Even the Sasanians, who zealously promoted the Iranian, Mazdean religion and were generally known for their anti-Roman sentiment, were unable and never meant to completely eradicate Graeco-Roman characteristics from the Persian landscape.<sup>86</sup> And so, it would be a mistake to claim that Graeco-Roman

83 For some nuanced studies on this topic, see, for example, Getzel M. Cohen, *The Hellenistic Settlements in Europe, The Islands, and Asia Minor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 63–71; Nathanael John Andrade, *Syrian Identity in the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

84 Josephus, *J.A.* 18:372–375, about Seleucia on the Tigris is a good example.

85 Kurz, 'Cultural Relations', 559–67, and the literature listed in the following note.

86 Convincingly argued with many examples in Nina Garsoïan, 'Byzantium and the Sasanians', in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3, 568–92. More specific studies, illus-

material culture was entirely absent from the Persian world and vice versa. We need only note the existence of the Roman-type bathhouse, the so-called *garmābag*, deep in Persian territory to be aware of the abundance of physical manifestations of Graeco-Roman life in the Persian realm.<sup>87</sup>

Second, within the vast territories of the Persian empire, the cultural situation was never uniform. One cannot compare the Graeco-Roman substance of a city like Nisibis (נִצְיִבִּיז), for example, which was strategically located on the western border of the Persian empire and changed hands many times over the centuries, with extended periods of direct Roman rule (not to mention other conquerors such as the Armenians and Palmyrenes), to places like Pumbedita, Nehardea, Sura, and Mehoza, all hundreds of miles down the valley of the Tigris and Euphrates, deep in Persian territory.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, one should not expect the same perspectives on the material environment and the cultural surroundings from Judah b. Bathyra of Nisibis on the one hand and Rav and Shemuel or Abaye and Rava on the other. Needless to say the passage of time brought with it further disparities, and the cultural situation in the early days of Judah b. Bathyra under the Parthians is very different from the Sasanian times of the later Amoraim.

Last but not least, a reminder about the problematic nature of the sources: Many scholars have recognized the multiple challenges that face anyone who wishes to exploit rabbinic sources for any kind of study about the past. All this is true here as well. In particular, the seamless blend of Palestinian and

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- trating the complex cultural nature of the frontier regions of the Middle Euphrates are abundant and go back to Rostovtzeff, A.H.M. Jones, and, a bit later, Fergus Millar; for a more recent study analyzing the situation in four cities on the seam between Rome and Persia, namely Edessa, Hatra, Dura Europos, and Palmyra, with many references to earlier studies, see Michael Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2005).
- 87 For a variety of bathhouses unearthed in archaeological excavations around Ctesiphon, see Simpson, 'Mesopotamia in the Sasanian Period', 62; id., 'Ctesiphon', *OEANE* 2:79. For their appearance in various religious texts from Sasanian Persia, see Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 65, and no. 136–137. Bathhouses in the Persian realm are also documented in the Babylonian Talmud; see, for example, *b. Šabb.* 41a. Finally, Sasanian mythological history credits the ancient Persian kings with the invention and the establishment of the first bathhouses, reflecting the centrality of this institution in their culture; see Ehsan Yarshater, 'Iranian National History', in *The Cambridge History of Iran III*, 371. To the best of my knowledge, a comparative study between the Persian bathhouses and those in the Roman world, which might determine lines of influence and interaction, has never been carried out.
- 88 For a good summary of Nisibis' history, see Cancik and Schneider (eds), *Brill's New Pauly*, s.v. (9.778–9). For other examples, see Sommer, *Roms orientalische Steppengrenze*.

Babylonian traditions in the Bavli hinders the ability of modern investigators to communicate with the subjects of their research—is a *baraita* in the Bavli an authentic reproduction of the Tannaitic, Palestinian tradition? What about statements of Palestinian sages preserved in a Babylonian literary context? I do not pretend to solve these issues. Rather, I am simply pointing them out as topics for further research.<sup>89</sup>

To summarize, despite the difficulties just acknowledged, Palestinian traditions do offer us a revealing look into to the material world of the Babylonians. As material culture becomes a more significant means of understanding the ancient world, I believe we must simultaneously push the field farther. It is easy to fall into the conceptual trap of seeing the physical reality of a given culture as having only a fixed, single meaning. However, if we broaden our methodology to plumb the written sources alongside the physical ones, and if we pay particular attention to the voices of outsiders, we will find that the interpretations of a given object are at least as revealing as the object itself. Examining such outsider statements, placing them alongside relevant archaeological data, and viewing them within a transcultural context, sheds new light on the cultural mechanisms that shaped different peoples' views of the physical realm. Rabbinic literature in these case studies functions not only as a resource for the study of material culture, but even more so as a way to discover and interpret the layers of cross-cultural discourse that abound but are often ignored or undervalued in our material and written worlds alike.

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89 For a recent assessment of these problems, see the section on 'Methodological Issues' in Catherine Hezser (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and the literature listed above, in note 10.

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