

# House of Egibi

The **House of Egibi** was a family from within ancient Babylonia who were, amongst other things, involved in mercantile activities.

The family's financial activities are known to archaeologists via an archive of about 1,700 clay tablets spanning five generations of the family, dating to a period from around 600 to 482 BCE. The tablets give us a glimpse of the exchange of goods within southern Mesopotamia and abroad. Many documents found in the archive show shipments of barley, dates, and other bulk items. Enterprises of this nature were financed by the house of Egibi, among other later houses from within Babylon.<sup>[1]</sup>

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## Familial identity

The word *Egibi* is a transliteration of the Sumerian e.gi-ba-ti.la, a full form used occasionally in archival records. In a text on ancestral names, Babylonian scribes equated it to *Sin-taqisha-liblut*, which is translated as 'O Sin (the moon god), you have given (the child), may he now live and thrive'. The family's name occurs in Babylonian records at a time beginning sometime during the eighth century BCE. By the sixth century BCE more than 200 individuals are known to history who claimed to be descendants of Egibi.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

The founder of the house was thought in earlier scholarship to be an individual known called Jacob, *therefore of Jewish origin* (Rainey; A. H. Sayce;<sup>[4]</sup> Delitzsch<sup>[5][6]</sup> ), thought at one time being active at the earliest during the late 7th century. F. El Peiser (1897) thought the family had *nothing to do* with Jacob and under later reconsideration the issue with regards to Jacob is thought inconclusively proven by Wallis Budge. The family are thought instead active during the 9th century BCE (Boardman, Edward, Hammond 1991), and being proved instead Sumero-Babylonian origin not Jewish.<sup>[7][8][9][10][11][12][13][14]</sup>

## Members of the family

The head of the house during 528 BCE was Itti-Marduk-balatu, active in Opis during that time (Darius I began in reign during 520 BCE<sup>[15]</sup>). The inheritance of the house was divided amongst sons of the family during 508. Itti-mardu-balātu (son to Nabū-Aḥḥē-iddin<sup>[16]</sup>) passed his inheritance to three sons. The eldest Marduk-nāšir-apli received half, Nergel-ušēzib and Nab-(a)ḥḥē-bullit the remainder divided between them. Marduk-nāšir-apli was presumably the head during the period 521 to 487 BCE. In the chronology of Moore and Lewis the house Egibi is contemporary with Iranu.<sup>[17][18][19][14][20][21][22][23]</sup>

## Families activities

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A business house of Neo-Babylonia and Achaemenid Babylonia, the earliest known of to archaeology, were involved in selling, buying and exchanging houses, fields, slaves and banking operations; as creditors , accepted deposits for safe keeping , financing international trade, and founding commercial companies. All monies the members of the family used for these purposes were from the houses' own monies rather than the members of the family instead using money which they had from deposits made by others. They accepted deposits, provided loans, paid off clients' debt, and enabled the acquisition of goods for future payment by providing credit. The family was very successful in its trade of agricultural products, which enabled it to acquire large tracts of land, and some of its members became leading officials in Babylon.<sup>[24][25][18][19][1]</sup>

The family were involved in land management sometime between 518 and 501 for the treasurer to the king.<sup>[26]</sup>

A notable ruler who helped the House of Egibi become more powerful was Nebuchadnezzar II (c. 605 BCE – 562 BCE). Nebuchadnezzar formed his military by giving people land, allowing people to possibly free up time to not farm, therefore a need for farming the land was brought up. This is where the house of Egibi came in. They were a form of property management during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in the Neo-Babylonian period. This let the men who owned land go and fight in the military for Nebuchadnezzar's purposes.<sup>[1]</sup>

Some of members also were employed by Persian royalty (for instance Nebo-akkhi-idin<sup>[27]</sup> as judges<sup>[28]</sup>).

## The Egibi archive

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The archive are tablets documenting five generations of the family's life, written by its members beginning in 602 BCE and ending in 486 BCE. The earlier generations of Egibis derived their wealth from agricultural activity rather than participation in temple based employment. The Nūr-Sin (577-480 BCE) are documented in the Egibi archive.<sup>[29][30][31]</sup>

The archive was discovered sometime during the late 19th to early 20th century, the very large number of archaeological artifacts (the largest extant source from Neo-Babylonia) pertain to the firm at a time beginning during the time of Ashur-ahu-iddina (680-669 BCE).<sup>[32][33][34][35]</sup>

During the time of Theophilus G. Pinches, the known tablets related to a period 605-517 BCE.<sup>[36]</sup>

J.N.Strassmier and A.Ungnad made separate copies of various texts, including some of the Egibi archive.<sup>[37][38][39]</sup>

Pinches at some time translated at least a portion of the Egibi Tablets.<sup>[40]</sup>

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## The Egibi/Nūr-Sîn archive

The Egibi/Nūr-Sîn archive is the biggest private archive to have survived from the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid period. Dating to ca. 606–484 BCE, the archive contains about 1,700 tablets, but when one includes fragments and duplicates of tablets, the number can rise close to 2,000. According to first counts, however, the estimated total number of tablets had been about three to four thousand. The archive was found by the locals in the ruins of ancient Babylon in the 1870s–1880s, and then sold to various museums around the world. A small portion of the tablets was reportedly found in a pot, which possibly had been used as a fumigation vessel and only secondarily as a vessel for tablet storage.



**Figure 1:** Inscribed pots from Babylon. Some legal tablets from the Egibi archive are said to have been found in one of these pots (BM 92421). Both the tablets and the pot was sold to the British Museum. © Trustees of the British Museum



## ARCHIVES IN CONTEXT

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tablets have been published by Kathleen Abraham (2004). Besides these main publications, a handful of tablets have been published in various articles by other researchers. One can also read about the content of the documents in the Egibi archive, both published and unpublished, via the [NaBBuCo website](#).



**Figure 2:** George Smith (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

The Nūr-Sîn archive was partially merged with the Egibi archive when Nuptāya, daughter of Iddin-Marduk, descendant of Nūr-Sîn married Itti-Marduk-balātu, son of Nabû-ahhē-iddin, descendant of Egibi. The archive of the Egibis covers the activities of five generations, and mentions the sixth by name (Nabû-zēru-ukīn).





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**Figure 3:** The six generations of the Egibi family (the reconstruction follows Wunsch 1995/1996: 34). The individuals on the left side are the (“eldest”) sons that were in charge of the family business, the individuals preceded by ‘f.’ are women. Created with [Lucidchart](#).

The archive contains documents about family matters, such as marriage and inheritance related documents, but the majority of the tablets is related to the entrepreneurial activities. The Egibis owned urban real estate, fields, gardens, boats and hundreds of slaves. Many of these slaves acted as agents for the family, helping them run their business with a mixture of dependency and freedom. The Egibis established business partnerships (Akk. *harrānu*), which were concerned with trade in commodities, such as barley, dates and onions, but also wool. Several members of the Egibi family collected taxes and tolls for the state. The taxes were collected from individuals, families or other units, based on the tax type. Marduk-nāšir-apli, for example, was collecting indirect taxes, such as payments for bridges (Akk. *gimru/gišru*), but also direct taxes, such as payments replacing service (Akk. *ilku*), payments for military equipment (Akk. *rikis qabli*), payments from bow units (Akk. *pānāt qašti*), and collection of flour (Akk. *qēmu*).

## EGIBI & Co., THE OLDEST BANKERS

**Figure 4:** New York Times article headline (Source: [New York Times](#))

In 1979, November 30, The New York times wrote an article titled ‘[Egibi & Co., The Oldest Bankers](#)’. However the Egibis were not bankers, but entrepreneurs. It is true that the majority of the documents in their archive are





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trade or land lease and simply record an obligation to deliver commodities (e.g. barley, dates, onions). Besides that, they could also be connected to payment of taxes (e.g. *ilku*) – the Egibis paid the tax in silver, and the landowners had to pay the Egibis a share of their harvest. When the harvest failed, farmers ran into debts, and sometimes had to pledge their land or slaves. In case they could not repay after all, they had to sell their property in order to do so.

Due to the wide range of their business activities, the Egibis had high mobility in Babylonia and beyond. The Egibis were mainly active in the cities of Babylon and Borsippa, and the surrounding villages, but they also travelled to other locations, most notably the village of Šahrīn. Nabû-ahhē-iddin appears in the documentation from Opis (ca. 76 km from Babylon), and both his son, Itti-Marduk-balātu, and his grandson, Marduk-nāšir-apli, travelled to Susa in Elam in order to secure and enlarge their business – activities which needed royal favour (cf. Wunsch 2007).



**Figure 5:** The maximal reach of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (626–539) (Source: [Wikipedia](#))

Besides covering a large geographical area with their activities, the Egibis were also socially well connected. They had contacts in the highest levels of the Neo-Babylonian empire. One of their family members, Nabû-ahhē-

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son Nidinti-Bēl, the Egibis might have faced some difficulties. The archive was sorted out and deposited by Nidinti-Bēl during the first years of Xerxes I (486–465 BCE). The 'end date' of their archive, around 484 BCE, suggests that they might have been supporting the Babylonian revolts against Xerxes I.

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