

FACTS, PROPAGANDA, OR HISTORY?
SHAPING POLITICAL MEMORY IN THE
NABONIDUS CHRONICLE

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The *Nabonidus Chronicle* has proven invaluable for writing the early history of the Persian Empire.¹ Historians derive from it the “only chronologically fixed data” for Cyrus’s reign and an indispensable framework for understanding the fall of Babylon and the emergence of the Persian Empire in the wider context of the Near East.² In a year-by-year review of events, this unique cuneiform tablet discusses the reign of Babylon’s last independent king Nabonidus (r. 556–539 B.C.E.), the international stir caused by the rise of Cyrus, the fatal confrontation between the armies of Persia and Akkad in 539 B.C.E., and the first months (or perhaps years) of

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1. The most recent editions of the text are A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (TCS 5; Locust Valley, NY: J. J. Augustin, 1975), no. 7, and Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles* (SBLWAW 19; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), no. 28. A translation by R. J. van der Spek is available on www.livius.org.

2. The quote is from Amélie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* (London: Routledge, 2007), 47. The *Nabonidus Chronicle* is the key source in many reconstructions of the early history of the Persian Empire; among many examples: A. Leo Oppenheim, “The Babylonian Evidence of Achaemenian Rule in Mesopotamia,” *The Cambridge History of Iran 2* (1985): 529–87 (537–45); Pierre Briant, *Histoire de l’empire perse: De Cyrus à Alexandre* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 50–53.

Persia's rule over the territory formerly held by Nabonidus. Most historians use this text as a neutral witness of events as they happened, quarrying it for historical data. Those who recognize a political bias in it nonetheless believe that its apologetic distortions can easily be peeled away from a factual core. Both sides situate the *Chronicle's* value in its reliability as a source of historical fact, compiled at the time or in living memory of the events it reports.

Despite this confidence, it is a well-known (but barely acknowledged) fact that the only surviving manuscript of the *Nabonidus Chronicle* dates from the Hellenistic or perhaps even Parthian period.³ This means that our witness is at least two hundred years younger than the reality it is thought to reflect so adequately. Despite the enormous lapse of time, no unease about the text's reliability as a source on sixth-century history is expressed. This is because the *Chronicle* is held to be a "copy" of an "original" dated to the time of the events. As the copy is usually treated *as if it is* the (putative) sixth-century original, there is an implicit assumption that the transmission process happened smoothly and faithfully. Yet, Achaemenid historians have found at least one element in the text that calls for caution. In ii:15 Cyrus is called "king of Parsu" while this title only came into use under Darius I, some twenty years later.⁴ As this title is "of course not contemporary,"⁵ the relationship between copy and original might be more complicated than assumed.

In this paper I propose a different approach to the *Nabonidus Chronicle*. Instead of reading this text either as a factual report or as a piece of propaganda, I argue that the text is more suitably read as historical literature, or "history." As such, the text allows us to study first and foremost the practice of historiography, and only on a secondary level the historical course of events. The practice of historiography behind the *Chronicle* should be situated in Hellenistic Babylon. This is the cultural and histori-

3. As pointed out already by the first editor of the text: Sidney Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts Relating to the Capture and Downfall of Babylon* (London: Methuen, 1924), 98.

4. Peter R. Bedford, *Temple Restoration in Early Achaemenid Judah* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 120–21; Matt Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," *Iran* 42 (2004): 91–101; Daniel T. Potts, "Cyrus the Great and the Kingdom of Anshan," in *Birth of the Persian Empire* (ed. V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart; The Idea of Iran 1; London: Tauris, 2005), 7–28; Matt Waters, "Parsumaš, Šušān, and Cyrus," in *Elam and Persia* (ed. J. Álvarez-Mon and M. B. Garrison; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 285–96.

5. Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 50.

cal context that supplies the framework for understanding the text's meaning and function.

NEUTRAL WITNESS OR PROPAGANDA?

So far, discussions of the *Nabonidus Chronicle* have focused on the question of its historical reliability. How do the facts presented in the text relate to history as it happened? Two diametrically opposed answers have been formulated to this question: one group of scholars considers the *Chronicle* as a neutral witness of history while others discover in it an attempt to distort it. Both views, however, share the belief that the *Chronicle* gives access to reliable information, because it was drafted from observation or within living memory of the events. Before proposing a different approach to this text, I will review these perspectives on the *Chronicle*, starting with the most pervasive one.

It is striking how often and how easily historians insist on the *Chronicle's* status as an objective account of historical facts. Such statements usually serve to validate larger decisions of source criticism. The orthodoxy is that the *Chronicle* is a beacon of truth and clarity in a minefield of otherwise tricky and deceptive sources on Cyrus and Nabonidus.⁶ On the one hand, there are the so-called "propaganda" texts allegedly written in cuneiform by priests of Babylon eager to collaborate with the Persian conqueror and discredit Nabonidus's reign; the *Cyrus Cylinder* and *Verse Account* are the principal products remaining of this effort. On the other hand, there

6. E.g., Amélie Kuhrt, "Babylonia from Cyrus to Xerxes," in *Cambridge Ancient History* (2nd ed; vol. 4; Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1988): 112–38 (120, 122); Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "Nabonidus the Mad King: A Reconsideration of His Stelas from Harran and Babylon," in *Representations of Political Power: Case Histories from Times of Change and Dissolving Order in the Ancient Near East* (ed. M. Heinz and M. H. Feldman; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 137–66 (138); Amélie Kuhrt, "Cyrus the Great of Persia: Images and Realities," in *Representations of Political Power: Case Histories from Times of Change and Dissolving Order in the Ancient Near East* (ed. M. Heinz and M. H. Feldman; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 169–91 (176); Matt Waters, "Cyrus and the Medes," in *The World of Ancient Persia* (ed. J. Curtis and S. Simpson; London: Tauris, 2010), 63–71 (69); R. J. van der Spek, "Cyrus the Great, Exiles, and Foreign Gods: A Comparison of Assyrian and Persian Policies on Subject Nations," in *Extraction and Control: Studies in Honor of Matthew W. Stolper* (ed. M. Kozuh et al; SAOC 68; Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2014), 233–64 (254–55).

are accounts about the fall of Babylon in Old Testament and Greek historical literature, written long after the facts by communities with their own cultural and political agendas. The *Chronicle* is usually contrasted to these ideological writings as serving no other purpose than the objective recording of events as they happened. As a result, the *Chronicle* gives access to “reality,” whereas the other sources give access to an “image.” Among many authors, we can cite Amélie Kuhrt, who states that the *Chronicle* is “the sole reliable, indeed crucial document” on the period, “not written at the behest or in the interests of any political agency.”⁷ David Vanderhooft embraces the idea of the *Chronicle*’s reliability to the extent that he classifies it as “documentary evidence.”⁸

Two sets of arguments instill this level of confidence in the *Chronicle*’s reliability. Firstly, there is a good match between certain sections of the *Chronicle* and evidence from contemporary sources, in particular archival texts and royal inscriptions of Nabonidus and Cyrus. Archival texts help to corroborate the chronological outline of the Persian takeover of Babylonia. This is thanks to the fact that archival texts mention, in their dates, the king who reigned on the day, month and year of the deed. The information obtained in this fashion is almost perfectly in tune with the *Chronicle* in relation to the establishment of Persian rule in Babylonia.⁹ Another area where archival texts match the *Chronicle* is

7. The first citation is from Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 47. The second citation is from Kuhrt, “Cyrus the Great of Persia,” 176.

8. David Vanderhooft, “Cyrus II, Liberator or Conqueror? Ancient Historiography concerning Cyrus in Babylon,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (ed. O. Lipschits and M. Oeming; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 351–72 (352). Earlier, Ronald Sack situated the *Nabonidus Chronicle* and archival texts on the same level of historical reliability, cf. Ronald H. Sack, “The Nabonidus Legend,” *RA* 77 (1983): 59–67 (63–64).

9. There is only a slight mismatch. In Sippar, the scribe of CT 56 55 dated his record to Nabonidus (15-VII of year 17), while the *Chronicle* places that city under Persian control a day earlier (14-VII). As (according to the *Chronicle*) the Persian army had not yet reached Babylon, Nabonidus would still have held the kingship, so this information does not contradict the information in the *Chronicle*. Somewhat more problematic is that on 17-VII a scribe in Uruk dated his tablet to Nabonidus while Babylon had fallen to the Persians a day earlier according to the *Chronicle* (16-VII). As suggested by Parker and Dubberstein, this may be due to a communication lag between Babylon and the southern city of Uruk (Richard A. Parker and Waldo H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.–A.D. 75* [Providence, R. I.: Brown University Press, 1956], 13–14). In any event, the Sippar tablet CT 57 717 shows that no later than 19-VII

in its report about Nabonidus's collection of divine statues in Babylon in the months prior to the confrontation with Cyrus's army in 539 B.C.E.¹⁰ Royal inscriptions, a second major source of information on the period, also contain corroborative evidence. Those of Nabonidus confirm reports in the *Chronicle* about military and political events in his reign, including the campaign to Hume in the first year, his departure to Teima and his absence from Babylon, the Astyages-Cyrus episode, and the death of Nabonidus's mother. *The Cyrus Cylinder* can also be usefully compared with the *Chronicle*, e.g. in its reference to Cyrus's subjugation of Media and the peaceful surrender of Babylon. Moreover, besides validating historical "facts," the royal inscriptions help to authenticate the discursive framework of the *Chronicle*, such as the branding of Cyrus as "King of Anshan," a practice only known from mid-sixth century texts.¹¹ In a similar vein, the long interruption of the New Year festival under Nabonidus, which was clearly of deep concern to the authors of the *Chronicle*, is echoed (and hence validated as a contemporary sensitivity) in the *Verse Account*, a cuneiform literary text from the early Persian period.¹² Finally, there is extensive archaeological and epigraphic evidence to support the *Chronicle*'s statements about Nabonidus's stay in Teima.¹³ All these

Babylonian scribes recognized Cyrus as king of Babylon. This is three days after the *Chronicle* places the capture of Babylon. Based on this evidence, therefore, the chronology of the take-over presented in the *Chronicle* is reliable (cf. Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus King of Babylon* [YNER 10; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989], 230–31). Most problematic, however, is *Nbn.* 1054 which is dated to Nabonidus on 10-VIII, fully three weeks after the fall of Babylon, although John MacGinnis, who kindly collated the tablet, suggests that the year number can be read "16" as well as "17." See also Vanderhooft, "Cyrus II, Liberator or Conqueror?" 352 n. 2.

10. The Uruk evidence was discussed by Paul-Alain Beaulieu (*Reign of Nabonidus*, 220–24 and "An Episode in the Fall of Babylon to the Persians," *JNES* 52 [1993]: 241–61). Stefan Zawadzki recently adduced new evidence from a Sippar tablet about the dispatch of the god of Bās to Babylon in the same period ("The End of the Neo-Babylonian Empire: New Data Concerning Nabonidus' Order to Send the Statues of Gods to Babylon," *JNES* 71 [2012]: 47–52).

11. See Waters, "Cyrus and the Achaemenids," 94 for an overview of the royal titles used by Cyrus.

12. The latest edition of the *Verse Account* is by Hanspeter Schaudig, *Die Inschriften Nabonids von Babylon und Kyros' des Großen samt den in ihrem Umfeld entstandenen Tendenzschriften. Textausgabe und Grammatik* (AOAT 256; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2001), 563–78.

13. E.g. Ricardo Eichmann, Hanspeter Schaudig and Arnulf Hausleiter, "Archae-

matches between the *Chronicle* and contemporary evidence instill confidence in the general reliability of the *Chronicle* as fact-based and true to the events as they happened.

A second set of arguments in support of the *Chronicle*'s reliability is of a generic nature. The *Nabonidus Chronicle* is usually placed within a longer series of "Babylonian Chronicles" that, when complete, would have provided an uninterrupted history of Babylonia from Nabonassar down to the Seleucids. The Neo-Babylonian chronicles are generally thought to be "impartial historical documents" written by authors who were "not trying to convince their readers of some particular idea."¹⁴ This opinion finds wide acceptance in ancient Near Eastern scholarship, even if in other areas of history awareness has grown that ideas about the past are not only shaped by understandings of the present and *vice versa*, but also that selecting "facts" of history is in itself an act of interpretation.¹⁵ The conviction that the Neo-Babylonian chronicles constitute history pure and simple—history written for history's sake¹⁶—seems rather naive in this light. But despite occasional skepticism,¹⁷ this remains the majority opinion.¹⁸ It is fed by the idea that the chronicles were compiled from contemporary notations based on observation.¹⁹ According to this idea, the

ology and Epigraphy at Tayma (Saudi Arabia)," *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 17 (2006): 163–76.

14. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, 11.

15. See among many possible examples Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

16. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, 11.

17. John A. Brinkman, "The Babylonian Chronicle Revisited," in *Lingering over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (ed. T. Abusch et al; HSS 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 73–104 (74–75); Manuel Gerber, "Die Inschrift H(arran)1.A/B und die neubabylonische Chronologie," *ZA* 88 (1998): 72–93 (78); *ibid.*, "A Common Source for the Late Babylonian Chronicles Dealing with the Eighth and Seventh Centuries," *JAOS* 120 (2000): 553–69 (569); Johannes Haubold, *Greece and Mesopotamia: Dialogues in Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 133 n. 27.

18. Some examples include Robert Drews, "The Babylonian Chronicles and Berossus," *Iraq* 37 (1975): 39–55 (39–40); Robartus J. van der Spek, "Berossus as a Babylonian Chronicler and Greek Historian," in *Studies in Ancient Near Eastern World View and Society Presented to Marten Stol on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (ed. R. J. van der Spek; Bethesda, Md.: CDL, 2007), 277–318 (277–84).

19. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, 12–13; van der Spek, "Berossus," 284–287; Kuhrt, "Cyrus the Great of Persia," 176.

chroniclers excerpted their reports from running accounts, to be identified as the *Astronomical Diaries*. These texts, many of which survive, contain observations of a number of historical phenomena, including astronomical events, market prices, environmental conditions, and significant human activities, such as battles, coronations, festivals, diseases, rebellions and deaths of kings. The assumed connection with the *Diaries* enhances the aura of objectivity of the chronicles, as it anchors them in observation.²⁰

A totally different approach to the *Nabonidus Chronicle* is taken by a second, smaller group of scholars, who argue that the text was written, not for history's sake, but with a deliberate intention to mislead. These authors emphasize that the text emerged in a politically complex and sensitive period, shortly after Nabonidus lost control of Babylon and at the time when the Persians were seeking to connect to local power brokers and negotiate a new system of rule. Within this context, priests of Babylon's Esagil temple would have felt the need to rewrite the history of Nabonidus's reign in order to explain his failure and justify Cyrus's victory. Not only the *Cyrus Cylinder* and *Verse Account* resulted from this effort, according to these scholars, but also the *Nabonidus Chronicle*. In other words, rather than setting up a firm dichotomy between the *Chronicle* as truthful history on the one hand, and the *Cyrus Cylinder* and *Verse Account* as propaganda on the other, these authors classify all these works as tendentious.²¹ This opinion was first briefly formulated by Wolfram von Soden²² and later taken up by Reinhard Kratz, who insisted on the literary character of the *Chronicle* and the need to investigate its ideological premises rather than its historical accuracy, adding that ancient historical texts were "not composed to inform the modern historian, but rather to indoctrinate or instruct their contemporary readers."²³ The

20. The dependency of the chronicles on the *Astronomical Diaries* has been critiqued by Brinkman, "The Babylonian Chronicle Revisited" and Caroline Waerzeggers, "The Babylonian Chronicles: Classification and Provenance," *JNES* 71 (2012): 285–98 (297–98).

21. E.g., Muhammad A. Dandamaev and Vladimir G. Lukonin, *The Culture and Social Institutions of Ancient Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 377.

22. Wolfram von Soden, "Eine babylonische Volksüberlieferung von Nabonid in den Danielerzählungen," *ZAW* 53 (1935): 81–89 (82); *ibid.*, "Kyros und Nabonid: Propaganda und Gegenpropaganda," in *Kunst, Kultur und Geschichte der Achämenidenzeit und ihr Fortleben* (ed. H. Koch and D. N. Mackenzie; AMIE 10; Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1983), 61–68 (61).

23. Reinhard Kratz, "From Nabonidus to Cyrus," in *Ideologies and Intercultural*

Tendenz of the *Chronicle*, according to Kratz, lies in its selection of facts (particularly its insistence on the disruption of the New Year festival under Nabonidus) and in its narrative structuring of the material. Stefan Zawadzki recently gave further weight to this argument by pointing out that the *Chronicle* omits information favorable to Nabonidus and that it seeks to set up a contrast with Cyrus on various levels, including military failure and success, collection and restoration of cult statues, disregard and respect for the dead, and the interruption and celebration of the New Year festival.²⁴ These strategies resulted in a positive portrait of Cyrus and a negative one of Nabonidus. Zawadzki pays close attention to the multiple redactions behind the present version of the text, and in doing so he is the first to tackle this important issue in any depth.²⁵ He concludes that authors in the early Persian period modified and rewrote an earlier chronicle “undoubtedly on the orders of Cyrus.”²⁶ This rewritten version distorted the facts of Nabonidus’s reign contained in the original composition to suit the political realities after his fall. As the distortion took place only at the level of selecting (true) information and structuring it in a suggestive narrative format, the *Chronicle*’s ultimate reliability remains undisputed by Zawadzki. The report may be selective and incomplete, but it is not false.

Summing up, two contrasting evaluations presently mark the scholarship on the *Nabonidus Chronicle*. These evaluations assign fundamentally different motives to the ancient authors and also draw different linkages between the *Chronicle* and other literary texts created in the sixth century B.C.E. Historians, who appreciate the *Chronicle* as an objective source of historical facts, emphasize the text’s attribution to the genre of the chronicles, an affiliation that underscores its authority as an eye-witness report based on observation. Those who are sensitive to possible bias in the text notice a greater affinity between the *Chronicle* and propagandistic texts

Phenomena (Melammu Symposia III; ed. A. Panaino and G. Pettinato; Milan: Università di Bologna & Isiao, 2002), 143–56 (145).

24. Stefan Zawadzki, “The Portrait of Nabonidus and Cyrus in *Their(?) Chronicle*: When and Why the Present Version Was Composed,” in *Who Was King? Who Was Not King? The Rulers and Ruled in the Ancient Near East* (ed. P. Charvát and P. Maříková Vlčková; Prague: Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 2010), 142–54.

25. See his comments on the neglect of this topic in the present scholarship: Zawadzki, “End of the Neo-Babylonian Empire,” 47 n. 2.

26. Zawadzki, “Portrait of Nabonidus and Cyrus,” 143.

created under the influence, or even at the explicit request, of the Persians. Stefan Zawadzki recently pushed the discussion into a new direction by pointing out that the redaction process behind our present manuscript may be complex.

ORIGINAL, COPY, AND TRANSMISSION

Continuing on this last point, one aspect on which most commentators agree is that the surviving manuscript of the *Nabonidus Chronicle* is a late “copy” of an earlier text. Among the questions that such a label invokes, the most pertinent are that of the date of its production, its relationship to the “original,” and the intermittent process of transmission. I will begin with the first question: when was the surviving “copy” produced?

Authors following Wiseman date its creation to the reign of Darius I.²⁷ This is based on Wiseman’s suggestion that the *Nabonidus Chronicle* was written by the same scribe who wrote the *Babylonian Chronicle* in Darius’s twenty-second year (500 B.C.E.) because of similarities of *ductus* and layout.²⁸ This suggestion was rejected by Brinkman who pointed out that not only do the same signs have distinctly different shapes in the two manuscripts, but that the handwriting of the *Nabonidus Chronicle* is also much more slanted than that of the *Babylonian Chronicle*.²⁹ Even if Wiseman’s idea continues to attract supporters,³⁰ it cannot be seriously upheld. A much more likely proposal is that the manuscript is late Achaemenid, Seleucid, or Parthian in date.³¹ This is based on the manuscript’s location in collection Sp 2 of the British Museum, a collection made up of materials coming from the late Babylonian Esagil “library,” dug up in Babylon in the 1870s.³² This “library” was in active use between the reign of Artaxerxes II

27. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, 9 n. 7, 14, 21. Zawadzki, “Portrait of Nabonidus and Cyrus,” 143.

28. Donald J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (626–556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1956), 3.

29. Brinkman, “Babylonian Chronicle Revisited,” 86–87.

30. Zawadzki, “Portrait of Nabonidus and Cyrus,” 143.

31. This was first suggested by Smith, *Babylonian Historical Texts*, 98 and the idea has since been confirmed on the basis of museological considerations, cf. Philippe Clancier, *Les bibliothèques en Babylonie dans la deuxième moitié du Ier millénaire av. J.-C.* (AOAT 363; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2009), 448; Waerzeggers, “Babylonian Chronicles,” 291.

32. Clancier, *Bibliothèques*, 192. See also G. van Driel, “The British Museum

and c. 60 B.C.E.,³³ which gives us a broad but reliable time frame for situating the production of the present manuscript of the *Nabonidus Chronicle*.

Few scholars, if any, have reflected on the implications of the late date of our manuscript. An unproblematic process of transmission is imagined, linking the “copy”—the text that survives today—to its “original.” That original text is assigned, mostly without further comment, to the sixth century and held to be coterminous to, or written in living memory of, the reported events. The two evaluations of the *Nabonidus Chronicle* that I outlined above, while in some points sharply contradictory, share this basic assumption.

There are indications that the situation was more complex, however. A first sign is the *Chronicle*’s use of the anachronistic title “King of Parsu” for Cyrus. This should urge us, at the very least, to accommodate room for change and adaptation in the copyist’s work. Secondly, the use of “Elam” to refer to Persia³⁴ finds no parallels in contemporary literature but reminds us of the *Dynastic Prophecy*, a Hellenistic cuneiform text, which calls Cyrus “King of Elam.”³⁵ The use of this old geographic name carried connotations of threat and destruction by Babylonia’s age-old

Sippar Collection: Babylonia 1882–1893,” *ZA* 79 (1989): 102–17 (109) on the cuneiform materials excavated in Babylon in the 1870s. The tablets were found to the south of Esagil, near the temple precinct, but details about the findspot are not available. It is uncertain, therefore, whether we are dealing with the remains of a single collection of tablets or of a conglomerate of archives. It is clear, however, that the tablets were produced by persons closely affiliated to the Esagil temple, and in that sense the label “Esagil library” will be employed here. See Clancier, *Bibliothèques*, for an extensive discussion of the texts and their relationship to the Esagil temple.

33. Francis Joannès, “De Babylone à Sumer: Le parcours intellectuel des lettrés de la Babylonie récente,” *Revue Historique* 302 (2000): 693–717 (703).

34. That is if Elammiya in ii: 22 refers to Elam; see lately Zawadzki, “End of the Neo-Babylonian Empire,” 48 n. 4.

35. First edition by A. Kirk Grayson, *Babylonian Historical-Literary Texts* (Toronto Semitic Texts and Studies 3; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 24–37. See also Robartus J. van der Spek, “Darius III, Alexander the Great and Babylonian Scholarship,” in *A Persian Perspective: Essays in Memory of Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg* (ed. W. F. M. Henkelman and A. Kuhrt; Achaemenid History 13; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2003), 289–346 (311–24); Matthew Neujahr, “When Darius defeated Alexander: Composition and Redaction in the Dynastic Prophecy,” *JNES* 64 (2005): 101–7; Matthew Neujahr, *Predicting the Past in the Ancient Near East: Mantic Historiography in Ancient Mesopotamia, Judah, and the Mediterranean World* (BJS 354; Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2012), 58–63.

archenemy and may thus convey an anti-Persian sentiment.³⁶ Stephanie Dalley made a similar suggestion about the use of Gutium in relation to Ugbaru, the general whom Cyrus sent ahead to do the dirty work of capturing Babylon, according to the *Chronicle*.³⁷ This label evokes negative connotations: the Gutians were seen as the “archetypal sackers of cities, «a people who know no inhibitions», «like hordes of locusts».” Transposing this label to the army of Cyrus may thus have constituted criticism of Persian imperialism.³⁸

These instances caution us in two ways. First, they suggest that the text of our manuscript may not be identical to the (putative) sixth-century original. Second, they also suggest that a one-sided categorization of the *Chronicle* as pro-Persian propaganda may be too limiting. Several possibilities should be kept open: ideas about Persian rule might have been ambiguous already at the time of Cyrus or they might have become less clear-cut as time moved on. Sentiments about Persian rule did not remain static during the two hundred years of the Empire’s existence in Babylonia.³⁹ Authors may well have reworked the text of the *Chronicle* to speak to present concerns, especially if one realizes that the surviving manuscript dates from a time when Persian rule had already been dismantled and replaced. It should not come as a surprise, then, if the *Chronicle* contains a subtle, rather than a one-dimensional, judgment of Persian rule. For instance, it is generally assumed that the authors of the *Chronicle* applauded the celebration of the New Year festival by Cambyses (and Cyrus?) in 538 B.C.E. This idea is indeed supported by the narrative structure of the *Chronicle*, which sets up a contrast with the festival’s suspension under Nabonidus. At the same time, however, the authors of the *Chronicle* insert a remark that one of the royal protagonists of 538 B.C.E. appeared in Elamite dress, a gesture that may well have been perceived as

36. See John P. Nielsen in this volume.

37. Stephanie Dalley, “Herodotos and Babylon,” *OLZ* 91 (1996): 525–32 (527).

38. *Ibid.*, 527.

39. Two double revolts broke out in Babylonia, the first after Cambyses’s death and the second after Darius I’s death. On the former conflict, see most recently Paul-Alain Beaulieu, “An Episode in the Reign of the Babylonian Pretender Nebuchadnezzar IV,” in *Extraction and Control: Studies in Honor of Matthew W. Stolper* (ed. M. Kozuh et al.; SAOC 68; Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2014), 17–26 with earlier literature; on the revolts against Xerxes, see Caroline Waerzeggers, “The Babylonian Revolts Against Xerxes and the ‘End of Archives,’” *AfO* 50 (2003/2004): 150–73.

inappropriate, insulting, or oppressive in the context of the religious festival—not only because the dress was non-Babylonian but because it was from Elam, Babylonia’s perennial enemy. Do we need to choose between a pro- and contra-Persian reading of this passage, or can both readings be maintained?⁴⁰

CHRONICLE OR LITERATURE?

The notion of the “Babylonian Chronicle Series” has deeply influenced how scholars perceive the *Nabonidus Chronicle*. This notion originates with Grayson who selected fifteen of the twenty-four then-known Babylonian chronicles (1975)⁴¹ and sorted them in a single series ranked according to subject matter, chronicle “1” starting with the reign of Nabonassar in the mid-eighth century and chronicle “13” ending in the late third century B.C.E.⁴² Even though big parts of this time span are unaccounted for, Grayson insisted that the fifteen chronicles are the remnants of a once continuous, year-by-year, system of record-keeping begun under the auspices of the eighth century king. Placed within the context of this “continuous register of events”⁴³ the *Nabonidus Chronicle* becomes a natural, even necessary, link anchored in the sixth century through a continual tradition of record-keeping.

Several objections can be made against this classification of the *Nabonidus Chronicle*. Firstly, and perhaps superfluously, we need to recall that there is as yet no evidence of a sixth-century ancestor of the *Chronicle*. The last Neo-Babylonian king whose reign is discussed in a contemporary

40. Indeed, Hellenistic Babylonian audiences who looked back on the Persian period passed no single positive or negative verdict on the quality of Persian rule, cf. Caroline Waerzeggers, “Babylonian Kingship in the Persian Period: Performance and Reception,” in *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context* (ed. J. Stökl and C. Waerzeggers; BZAW 478; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), 181–222. Walter Pohl’s critical remarks about the tendency in modern historical narratives to identify consistent ideologies in Medieval texts are instructive, “History in Fragments: Montecassino’s Politics of Memory,” *Early Medieval Europe* 10 (2001): 343–74.

41. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*.

42. Chronicle 1 exists in three exemplars according to Grayson, so the total number of manuscripts selected and included in the Series is fifteen (Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*). Brinkman, “The Babylonian Chronicle Revisited,” questioned whether chronicle 1a, 1b and 1c represent the same text.

43. Van der Spek, “Berossus,” 277.

chronicle is Neriglissar, in *ABC* 6. It is certainly highly likely that later chronicles existed, for instance the (missing) continuators of *ABC* 1A, but as yet there is a gap in the preservation of chronicles between the reign of Neriglissar in the mid-sixth century and that of Artaxerxes III in the mid-fourth century B.C.E.⁴⁴ As our copy of the *Chronicle* was produced within the context of this second batch of texts, the assumption that its authors (or copyists) had easy access to a sixth-century original chronicle is rather optimistic. The validity of the over-arching framework of the “Babylonian Chronicle Series” is thus debatable.⁴⁵ It is correct that some chronicles were serialized in antiquity, but Grayson’s reconstruction groups together a lot of material that (as far as we know) never existed in the same place and time. The “Series” is a philological construct: it bundles texts from different places and times together into a single sequence based on genre and subject matter. As the “Series” is a modern construct, the *Nabonidus Chronicle* can, and perhaps should, be seen as something different than as a product of sixth-century record-keeping.

A second and, in my opinion, more fundamental objection has to do with the literary quality of the work. Stefan Zawadzki and Reinhard Kratz have already argued that the *Chronicle* is not simply a dry enumeration of facts but a literary text that was written to serve a particular political purpose. Because the genre of the “chronicle” is ill-defined,⁴⁶ we run the risk of tilting at windmills here: can any of the Babylonian chronicles be rightfully described as a “data base of historical facts in strict chronological order”?⁴⁷ In any event, in the case of the *Nabonidus Chronicle*, such a definition is particularly ill-suited. The narrative quality of the text emerges, first of all, in the connections it draws and the contrasts it sets up between Nabonidus and Cyrus. Whereas Nabonidus does not show up at his mother’s funeral, Cyrus calls for an official period of mourning after his wife’s death. Whereas Nabonidus disrupts the New Year festival years on end, Cyrus allows the festival to go ahead. Whereas Nabonidus collects the cult statues of Babylonia’s provincial deities in the capital, Cyrus sends

44. Waerzeggers, “The Babylonian Chronicles,” 297.

45. See in particular Brinkman, “Babylonian Chronicle Revisited” and Waerzeggers, “Babylonian Chronicles.”

46. On the problematic definition of the “chronicle” as a separate genre of Babylonian historiography, see in particular Brinkman, “Babylonian Chronicle Revisited.”

47. The quote is from van der Spek, “Berossus,” 280.

them back home.⁴⁸ Another literary device at work in the *Chronicle* is the manipulation of narrative rhythm. Having reviewed events by years and months so far,⁴⁹ the authors of the *Chronicle* switch to a day-to-day mode of narration for the dramatic climax of Babylon's fall to the Persians. By slowing down the release of information, the authors create suspense at this critical moment of the text. The rhythm stalls even more in the episode about Cambyses and the New Year festival. We now get a gesture-by-gesture account of a single ritual act, which has the effect of highlighting the solemnity of the event. This effect is enhanced by the use of spatial and plastic descriptions that create a sensory and sensual texture, unlike the more sober way of reporting that we find elsewhere in the *Chronicle*. Cambyses moves into the Sceptre House of Nabû, receives the scepter from Nabû's priest, and comes out into the temple courtyard. All these movements take place in sacred areas that are unknown and inaccessible to all but the most high-placed priests and royalty. The reader of the *Chronicle*, allowed to view this hidden space, is treated to a spectacle of the senses as the authors dwell not only on the gestures but on the implements (the scepter), the garments (Elamite attire) and the weaponry (lances and quivers) used at the scene.⁵⁰

In the light of its literary quality and deliberate design, it is hard to maintain that the *Chronicle* is a (standard) chronicle. Bert van der Spek recently said of the Neo-Babylonian chronicles that they "are not narrative; there is no story, no plot, no introduction or conclusion, nor is there any attempt to explain, to find causes and effects, to see relations between recorded events."⁵¹ None of this applies to the *Nabonidus Chronicle*. It

48. See also Zawadzki, "Portrait of Nabonidus and Cyrus," 144 who argues that the text consciously seeks to contrast Nabonidus's military passivity with Cyrus's military success.

49. The exception is, not accidentally, I would say, the episode about the death of Nabonidus's mother (ii.13–15) which plays a crucial role as evidence of Nabonidus's moral downfall.

50. It is debated whether the *Chronicle* asserts that some of these gestures were performed by Cyrus (Andrew R. George, "Studies in Cultic Topography and Ideology," *BO* 53 [1996]: 363–95 [380]) or whether it asserts that only Cambyses was present at the festivities (see lately Gauthier Tolini, "La Babylonie et l'Iran: Les relations d'une province avec le coeur de l'empire achéménide [539-331 avant notre ère]" [Ph.D. diss., Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2011], 135–45 on this interpretation of the passage of the *Nabonidus Chronicle* iii:24–28).

51. Van der Spek, "Berossus," 280.

narrates, it values, it compares, it explains and it argues. Its format may be that of a chronicle, but it breaks free of the limitations of the genre. By suggestively contrasting the protagonists and by playing with rhythm and detail, the authors structure the materials and assign meaning to it. Not only what is *in* the text offers clues in that direction, also what is left out. For the eighth year of Nabonidus, the *Chronicle* supplies a heading but not an entry. The reason behind this silence is debated, but we may be certain that information only needed to be suppressed because it was considered irrelevant or unwanted within a structured argument.⁵² In short, the *Chronicle* does not simply report facts but it tries to explain them. Von Soden, Kratz, and Zawadzki already argued in this direction. But what, then, does the text explain, and for whom? Should we seek its purpose in propaganda, as von Soden, Kratz and Zawadzki did? Does the *Chronicle* address urgent political needs of the emergent Persian Empire? Or does it speak to an altogether different time and place? Above, I already indicated why an interpretation of the *Chronicle* as a straightforwardly pro-Persian piece of propaganda is too limiting. I will now turn to the manuscript and its environment to formulate an alternative approach to the question of the text's purpose and audience.

THE MANUSCRIPT AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

The manuscript of the *Nabonidus Chronicle* was produced in one of the archives or libraries connected to the Esagil temple of Babylon, roughly in the period between Artaxerxes II and 60 B.C.E.⁵³ As it is uncertain whether these texts were part of a physical collection of works, held at a single location, I will use the label “library” with some reservation, to refer to the body of literature that was produced in the margins of Esagil by its affiliated staff and deposited in its immediate vicinity. This literature offers a rich textual context for reading and interpreting the *Chronicle* within its own social and cultural setting. Rather than fixing our eyes on a putative, unrecovered and uncertain, sixth-century source, I propose to look at the environment of the manuscript for clues about its function and its audience. I will draw different intertextual circles around the *Chronicle* than those proposed so far. Neither sixth-century chronicles, nor sixth-century pro-Persian propaganda, but

52. On this issue, see Zawadzki, “Portrait of Nabonidus and Cyrus,” 148–50.

53. Joannès, “Babylone à Sumer,” 703.

texts produced in the manuscript's present (however broadly this present is defined) will constitute my frame of analysis. Every act of copying, however mechanical we imagine it to be, is also an act of actualization and appropriation. If we want to know why the manuscript was produced, we need to understand the concerns and interests of the copyists (or, indeed, authors).

The "library," or libraries, of the Esagil temple were discovered in the 1870s during unregulated digs at the site of Babylon. Not much is known about the place and the context of the find, except that it produced a very large amount of cuneiform texts (ca. 10,000). These texts were sold in Baghdad and then shipped to the British Museum in London, where they can still be consulted today. Recent studies of the collections of the British Museum have revealed that most of the find consisted of astronomical tablets and other scholarly texts.⁵⁴ Although only a minority in quantitative terms, historical texts are fairly well represented in the "library" and these provide a first context for understanding the production of the *Nabonidus Chronicle*. The *Babyloniaca* of Berossus is the best-known example of this historical literature, but several compositions in Babylonian cuneiform survive on clay tablets recovered in excavations in the nineteenth century C.E.⁵⁵

What emerges clearly from this textual environment is that there was a lively interest in Nabonidus and Cyrus among scholars of Esagil. Several texts in their "library" deal with this historical episode. Some of these works visit Nabonidus's downfall and Cyrus's victory in the context of a long-term overview of Babylonian history, such as Berossus's *Babyloniaca*

54. See in particular the detailed study by Clancier, *Bibliothèques*.

55. Berossus's social identity as a Babylonian scholar of the Esagil temple is discussed by van der Spek, "Berossus"; Geert De Breucker, "Berossos and the Mesopotamian Temple as Centre of Knowledge during the Hellenistic Period," in *Learned Antiquity: Scholarship and Society in the Near-East, the Greco-Roman World, and the Early Medieval West* (ed. A. A. MacDonald et al; Groningen Studies in Cultural Change 5; Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 13–23; Paul-Alain Beaulieu, "Berossus on Late Babylonian Historiography," in *Special Issue of Oriental Studies: A Collection of Papers on Ancient Civilizations of Western Asia, Asia Minor and North Africa* (ed. Y. Gong and Y. Chen; Beijing: University of Beijing, 2006), 116–49; Geert De Breucker, "Berossos between Tradition and Innovation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* (ed. K. Radner and E. Robson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 637–57; Geert De Breucker, "De Babyloniaca van Berossos" (Ph.D. diss., Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2012); Geert De Breucker, "Berossos: His Life and His Work," in *The World of Berossos* (ed. J. Haubold et al; CLeO 5; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 15–28.

and the *Dynastic Prophecy*, both written under Seleucid rule.⁵⁶ Others offer a more focused discussion, such as the *Royal Chronicle* and an unidentified fragment of a literary text.⁵⁷ It is quite possible that a copy of the *Verse Account* was available as well.⁵⁸

A first conclusion to be drawn from this evidence is that the topic of the *Nabonidus Chronicle* was alive in this environment: it was written and rewritten multiple times and in multiple formats. These texts all deal with the same historical period, but they focus on different aspects of that history, and they express different opinions about it, in different genres.⁵⁹ This was a past that mattered in the present—and not only to the learned community of Esagil. The *Prayer of Nabonidus* from Qumran, the *Shulgi Chronicle* from Uruk, and the book of Daniel all speak of a similar, and widely shared, interest in this crucial turning point in history, when mighty Babylon was integrated in an even more powerful empire. How inadequate, then, is the idea that the *Nabonidus Chronicle* was the product of an unimaginative Babylonian scribe, mechanically copying out an old and obsolete text? Clearly, the *Chronicle* spoke to actual, contemporary concerns that were widely shared within the learned community of Esagil and beyond. Might it not be more fruitful, then, to give credence to the creative imagination of this audience and entertain the possibility that the *Chronicle* was actually produced in Hellenistic Babylonia?

This possibility does seem to hold a certain attraction. Inquisitive historians in Hellenistic Babylon had access to a lot of source materials that would have informed them about events that happened at the time of Nabonidus and Cyrus. Many royal inscriptions of Neo-Babylonian kings had long since been buried in walls and foundations, but some were still around and could be consulted. We know that Berossus reworked content from surviving inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus in

56. For the *Dynastic Prophecy*, see n. 35 above.

57. See for an edition of the *Royal Chronicle* and the fragmentary literary text Schaudig, *Inschriften*, 591–95 and 474–75.

58. The manuscript is located in a collection of the British Museum (80-11-12) that holds significant amounts of material produced by Esagil's learned community (Mathieu Ossendrijver, personal communication), but overall the collection is mixed in content and also includes texts from other sites, cf. Julian E. Reade, introduction to *Catalogue of the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, vol. 6: *Tablets from Sippar I*, by Erle Leichty (London: British Museum, 1986), xx–xxi.

59. On the multivocality of these texts, see Waerzeggers, “Babylonian Kingship in the Persian Period.”

his book;⁶⁰ it is not at all unreasonable to assume that more historians in his circle did so. In fact, when we put this idea to the test, it appears that much of the *Chronicle's* account about Nabonidus could easily have been culled from authentic monuments of this king that were still present in Babylon's cityscape. The march to Hume in Nabonidus's first year (i:7'), for instance, is mentioned in the *Babylon Stela* (ix:32').⁶¹ This original inscription of Nabonidus also inspired Berossus's account of Nabonidus's rise to power. The stele stood near the Ishtar Gate and the North Palace, where those curious about the past could have read it. The text is, in fact, a treasure trove of historical information: it starts with a long preamble to Nabonidus's reign—from Sennacherib's destruction of Babylon and the fall of Assyria, to the troubled succession of Neriglissar—and it ends with an extensive report on the major events in his first year(s) of rule.⁶² Besides the march to Hume, authors of the *Chronicle* may have taken other information about Nabonidus's first year from this source, but the manuscript is too badly broken to pursue this thought any further. Another original inscription from Nabonidus's reign available in Hellenistic Babylon was the *Ehulhul Cylinder*.⁶³ This text could have taught the authors of the *Chronicle* about the authentic title "King of Anshan," which disappeared from Persian royal self-representation after the reign of Cyrus.⁶⁴ It is strik-

60. Notably in his account of Nabonidus's rise to power, which is based on the *Babylon Stela* (also known as the *Istanbul Stela*; cf. Stanley M. Burstein, *The Babyloniaca of Berossus* [Sources from the Ancient Near East 1.5; Malibu, Ca.: 1978], 28; William Gallagher, "The Istanbul Stela of Nabonidus," *WZKM* 86 [1996]: 119–26 [123]; Beaulieu, "Berossus," 141; De Breucker, *De Babyloniaca*, 110, 556; Haubold, *Greece and Mesopotamia*, 82) and in his assertion that Nebuchadnezzar built his palace in fifteen days, which was taken from (a copy of) the *Basalt Stone Inscription* (van der Spek, "Berossus," 296).

61. Edition by Schaudig, *Inschriften*, 514–29.

62. It is debated how far into Nabonidus's reign the text reaches; see the discussion by Schaudig, *Inschriften*, 515.

63. Edition by Schaudig, *Inschriften*, 409–40. A copy of the cylinder was found together with other antiquarian epigraphic materials (including Nabonidus's *Babylon Stela*) near the North Palace and the Ishtar Gate of Babylon. On this collection of monuments and inscriptions, see most recently Francis Joannès, "L'écriture publique du pouvoir à Babylone sous Nabuchodonosor II," in *Babylon: Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident* (ed. E. Cancik-Kirschbaum et al.; Topoi 1; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 113–20 (118) with earlier literature. This assemblage used to be known as the "museum" of Nebuchadnezzar's palace, but this notion has been revised.

64. The title is used in ii:1, 4 of the *Chronicle* and i:27 of the *Ehulhul Cylinder*. See

ing, moreover, that the title occurs in the same episode in both texts, that is, in the context of Cyrus's victory over the Medes. Even if the *Chronicle* places this event in a different year than the *Cylinder*, the use of this title in this specific context is significant because elsewhere the *Chronicle* uses the anachronistic title "King of Parsu" (ii:15). Such inconsistency could have resulted from a cut-and-paste adaptation from sources of different genres and from different times. At least one more royal inscription of Nabonidus was available in the Hellenistic period: a copy of the *Harran Stela*, which was reused during the renovation of the temple of Larsa at the time.⁶⁵ Members of Esagil's learned community could easily have traveled there to consult the text.⁶⁶ It would have provided its readers with knowledge of Nabonidus's decade-long exile in Teima, a piece of information that is basic to a large part of the *Chronicle's* second column. Finally, if a library copy of the *Cyrus Cylinder* was around—a distinct possibility⁶⁷—it could have served as a source for the *Chronicle's* report about the collection and return of cult statues and the peaceful surrender of Babylon.

Besides original source materials available in Hellenistic Babylonia, there were a number of literary texts with which the *Chronicle* could engage. For instance, in contrast to (sixth-century) Neo-Babylonian chronicles, which rarely include other actors besides the king, the *Nabonidus Chronicle* assigns a prominent place to the *ahu rabû* or *šešgallu* as the dutiful priest who protects the continuity of cultic life in the absence of Nabonidus. There is only one other chronicle that allows the same figure into its narrative, even in the same context of interruptions to the New Year festival. This is the so-called *Religious Chronicle*, a text that—not inci-

on the role of Anshan in early Persian royal ideology Potts, "Cyrus the Great and the Kingdom of Anshan" and Waters, "Parsumaš, Anšan, and Cyrus."

65. Schaudig, *Inschriften*, 532.

66. Babylonian scholars traveled widely in pursuit of knowledge, see Eckart Frahm, "Headhunter, Bücherdiebe und wandernde Gelehrte: Anmerkungen zum altorientalischen Wissenskultur im ersten Jahrtausend v. Chr.," in *Wissenskultur im Alten Orient: Weltanschauung, Wissenschaften, Techniken, Technologien* (ed. H. Neumann and S. Paulus; CDOG 4; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 15–30.

67. Recently, two fragments of a Neo-Babylonian library copy were discovered, showing that the text of the *Cyrus Cylinder* circulated more widely than previously assumed; see Irving J. Finkel, "The Cyrus Cylinder: The Babylonian Perspective," in *The Cyrus Cylinder: The King of Persia's Proclamation from Ancient Babylon* (ed. I. J. Finkel; London: Tauris, 2013), 4–34.

dentally in my opinion—was available at Esagil.⁶⁸ Besides their manner of reporting on the *akītu* festival,⁶⁹ both texts share an interest in the E-gidrukalamma-summa shrine of Babylon. Another text to which the *Chronicle* seems to speak is the *Verse Account*. Both compositions refer to Amurru in the context of the king's departure to Arabia.⁷⁰ Like the *Babylon Stela*, the *Verse Account* is rich in historical detail. Today, much of the text is lost because the only surviving manuscript is heavily damaged, but in what remains one finds significant overlap with the *Chronicle*: Nabonidus's departure from Akkad to Teima in the third year, the subsequent interruption of the New Year festival, the delegation of power to his unnamed first-born son, the entrustment of the army to this son's command, a military confrontation with Cyrus (unfortunately badly broken in the *Verse Account*), a lengthy discussion of the New Year festival of 538 B.C.E., the use of exact days to structure key parts of the narrative, and Cyrus's return of the statues of the gods to their shrines after reestablishing peace in Babylon. It is thus within the limits of the possible that the authors of the *Chronicle* used the *Verse Account* as one of their sources. Most unfortunate are the breaks in columns iii–iv–v of the *Verse Account* as it would have been interesting to know whether it delivered as meticulous an account of the conquest of Babylon as did the *Chronicle*. Though less focused on chronological detail, the *Verse Account* does supply indications of time and duration (ii:17'; iii:2'; v:28'). A third literary text available in the Esagil "library" (or libraries) that we can connect to the *Chronicle* is the so-called *Royal Chronicle*. Besides the general topic of Nabonidus's reign, this text notes in the third year of this king the same event in Ammananu (iv:29) as does the *Nabonidus Chronicle* (i:11).

These literary contacts are part of a larger web of intertextuality. The *Royal Chronicle*, for instance, entertains an argumentative relationship with the *Verse Account* in proposing a completely different evaluation

68. ABC 17. On its provenance, see Waerzeggers, "Babylonian Chronicles."

69. The *akītu* festival was of course a common topic in the Neo-Babylonian chronicles (A. Kirk Grayson, "Chronicles and the Akītu Festival," in *Actes de la XVIIe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* [ed. A. Finet; Ham-sur-Heure: Comité belge de recherches en Mésopotamie, 1970], 160–70) but the particular manner of reporting on the interruptions and the role of the *ahu rabû* are unique to the *Nabonidus Chronicle* and the *Religious Chronicle*.

70. *Nabonidus Chronicle* i:16 and *Verse Account* i:23.

of Nabonidus's use of the series *Enūma Anu Enlil*.⁷¹ Like the *Nabonidus Chronicle*, it also has a connection to the *Harran Stela* of Nabonidus, a copy of which was available in contemporary Larsa as we have seen.⁷² The interest in the E-gidri-kalamma-summa shrine of Babylon that we observed in the *Religious Chronicle* and the *Nabonidus Chronicle* is also in evidence in the *Babylon Stela* (vii:23'). The *Babyloniaca* of Berossus engages with several of these texts, including the *Babylon Stela*, the *Dynastic Prophecy* and the *Nabonidus Chronicle*, though with various degrees of contrast and agreement.⁷³

It is senseless to try to untangle which text served as a source for which other text within this intertextual web. What we can say, however, is that the literature spun from this web seems at its most vibrant in the Hellenistic period, when at least two new historical works saw the light of day (Berossus's *Babyloniaca* and the *Dynastic Prophecy*). I suggest that other narratives about Nabonidus, including the *Chronicle*, emerged at the same time. It cannot be excluded that sixth-century chronicles somehow survived, but this remains unproven—and moreover, I would argue, such originals would be insufficient to explain the *Chronicle*'s existence. There was an active pool of historical “facts” which authors tapped, plied, and integrated in new works. These facts derived from a variety of sources including original inscriptions and literary works. That pool constituted the raw material from which Esagil's intellectual community shaped its memory of the past, not once but through multiple literary creations. In my opinion, the *Chronicle* should be seen as a product of that effort, whether or not parts of it derive from a sixth-century source.

Before looking more closely at this process, one more issue remains to be addressed: If the *Nabonidus Chronicle* is a Hellenistic Babylonian text, can it have been influenced by Greek literature? The *Nabonidus Chronicle* is now often used as a yardstick to measure the reliability of authors like Xenophon and Herodotus on the fall of Babylon, but if we take the possibility of a post-Persian date for the *Chronicle* seriously, as I think we should,

71. Peter Machinist and Hayim Tadmor, “Heavenly Wisdom,” in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo* (ed. M. E. Cohen, D. C. Snell, and D. B. Weisberg; Bethesda, Md.: CDL, 1993), 146–51 (149).

72. Both texts mention the king of *Dadanu*, cf. *Royal Chronicle* v.20 and *Harran Stela* 2.I.25 (Schaudig, *Inschriften*, text 3.1).

73. De Breucker, *Babyloniaca*, 546–56.

this procedure is of doubtful legitimacy. Could it be that the *Chronicle* is not independent from these Greek texts, but in dialogue with them?

Recent work on the social and intellectual milieu of Berossus shows that this Babylonian “priest” of Esagil was versed in two historiographic traditions: that of the cuneiform world and that of the Greek world.⁷⁴ He was able to draw from both traditions in his own work, eloquently and creatively, through processes of adoption, transformation, and rejection. Johannes Haubold situates his work in an archival “contact zone,” where Greek and Mesopotamian views were forged into a “new synthesis.”⁷⁵ For instance, Berossus would consciously have reworked Greek traditions about the Hanging Gardens of Babylon to meet the expectations of a Greek audience while integrating these views within a framework informed by cuneiform sources.⁷⁶ He subtly but firmly rejected Herodotus’s idea that the Persians diverted the Euphrates in order to take Babylon by surprise.⁷⁷ He would have engaged with Ctesias’s scheme of the succession of empires, but turned it on its head to suit local sensibilities about the primacy of Babylonian history.⁷⁸

Berossus’s intimate knowledge of Greek literature did not exist in a vacuum. Other members of his circle must have shared his level of access to these traditions. If one member of Esagil’s intellectual community engaged with Greek historical writing, it cannot be too fanciful to assume that more will have done so. As Berossus combined Greek and Babylonian knowledge in a work addressing a Greek audience, the possibility should at least be considered that authors writing for a Babylonian audience might have combined these two traditions as well. I would like to point to one feature in the *Nabonidus Chronicle* that may indeed have spoken to ideas circulating in a Greek cultural background.⁷⁹ The *Chronicle*’s concern with

74. Van der Spek, “Berossus”; Beaulieu, “Berossus”; De Breucker, *Babyloniaca*; Haubold, *Greece and Mesopotamia*.

75. Haubold, *Greece and Mesopotamia*, 167. See also Johannes Haubold, “Berossus,” in *The Romance Between Greece and the East* (ed. T. Whitmarsh and S. Thomson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 107–16 for a discussion of Berossus’s intimate knowledge of Greek historical fiction.

76. Haubold, *Greece and Mesopotamia*, 173–76.

77. Van der Spek, “Berossus,” 297 n. 36.

78. Haubold, *Greece and Mesopotamia*, 177.

79. The rise of Cyrus’s empire in three crucial battles (in Media, Lydia, and Babylonia) is a scheme that the *Chronicle* possibly shared with Herodotus (Zawadzki, “The Portrait of Nabonidus and Cyrus,” 146–47), but the reading of the place name

the death of royal women fits Hellenistic interests at least as much as Babylonian ones, if not better. Mesopotamian chronicles make little mention of queens and princesses. They are given brief tablet space as mothers in notices of royal pedigree, as brides in Assyrian-Babylonian negotiations, and in reports of their deaths.⁸⁰ This last issue is taken up rarely; besides in the *Nabonidus Chronicle* it only occurs in two chronicles about Esarhaddon's reign. In those two chronicles, the death of the Assyrian king's wife is mentioned in passing, between battle reports. In comparison, the *Nabonidus Chronicle* is much more intensively interested in the topic. It treats the deaths of Nabonidus's mother and Cyrus's wife in detail, assigning over two lines of texts to each event (ii:13–15 and iii:22–24). Moreover, these stories occupy key positions in the narrative structure of the text. Both deaths are placed immediately before the New Year festival, and given moral weight: the death of Nabonidus's mother served to further illustrate her son's immorality, while the death of Cyrus's wife served to enhance his credibility as legitimate king of Babylon. Within the wider argument of the text, the deaths also seem to accompany major turning points in the history told by its authors: the downfall of Nabonidus and the victory of Cyrus. The importance assigned to these royal women is uncommon in the Mesopotamian chronicle tradition, but it does fit the interests of Hellenistic literature. Johannes Haubold suggested that Berossus's digression on princess Amytis might have been inspired by this cultural background.⁸¹ It is striking that, like in the *Chronicle*, this episode precedes a world-changing event in the *Babyloniaca* (the fall of Nineveh). Comparing Berossus and the *Chronicle* thus reveals a third interlocutor: these texts share a narrative strategy with each other and with Greek literature on Oriental kingship. More specifically, the *Nabonidus Chronicle* may have interacted with Herodotus's account of the death of Cyrus's wife Cassandane (2.1).⁸²

where Cyrus achieved his second victory according to the *Nabonidus Chronicle* remains contested.

80. Women in royal genealogies: *ABC* 21 i:9'–10', *ABC* 22 i:6, 12, *ABC* 1 i:40, *Shulgi Chronicle* line 10 (Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, no. 48 with previous literature); women in Assyrian-Babylonian relations: *ABC* 21 ii:33'–37' and iii:17; Esarhaddon's dead wife: *ABC* 1 iv:22 and *ABC* 14 26. I would like to thank Jacqueline Albrecht for these references.

81. Haubold, *Greece and Mesopotamia*, 174.

82. Muhammad Dandamaev, "Cassandane," *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 5/1 (1990): 62; Kuhrt, *Persian Empire*, 106.

MEMORY IN THE *NABONIDUS CHRONICLE*

Much remains uncertain about the *Nabonidus Chronicle*, but it does seem sensible to conclude that the manuscript that survives today is an instance of Hellenistic Babylonian historiography. The rich intertextual web between the *Chronicle*, other historical writings about Nabonidus and Cyrus produced by Esagil's learned community (including the *Babyloniaca*), original epigraphic materials in cuneiform available in Hellenistic Babylonia, and Greek historical texts, indicates that the *Chronicle* belongs in an active, living literary field. Of course, it remains entirely possible that some parts, big or small, were based on a sixth-century chronicle. But even so, its topic, its narrative structure, its explanatory pretensions, and its contact with other texts (Babylonian and Greek) all indicate that we are looking at a product of creative engagement, not at the result of a passive act of copying.

In order to understand the function of the *Chronicle*, this text should be read neither as a factual report, nor as a piece of propaganda, but as history—that is, in the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's famous definition, as “the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.”⁸³ Put within its proper context, the *Chronicle* offers a window on how one particular community in Hellenistic Babylon constructed its past. This is not a polished, authoritative account; rather we should see the *Chronicle* as one voice among many. When we look beyond our individual text and into its wider context, we discover that it was one of multiple attempts at structuring history in meaningful sequences and in convincing formats. The meaning that these texts tried to convey should not be sought in how well these texts succeeded in reporting “actual” sixth-century events, but in how these texts mattered in the contemporary, Hellenistic Babylonian, world. The Nabonidus-Cyrus episode and the emergence of the Persian Empire may have raised interest among Esagil's learned community in view of that more recent global transformation, the one brought about by Alexander, which equally redrew the political map and Babylon's place therein. As the priestly community of Esagil found itself once again in the position of renegotiating its position within a new set of power relations, the past may have served both as a source of *exempla* for the present

83. Johan Huizinga, “A Definition of the Concept of History,” in *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer* (ed. R. Klibansky and H. J. Patton; Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), 1–10.

and as a means to forge community bonds and group identity. They did not only write about Nabonidus and Cyrus, but also about other historical “royal pairs” whose confrontations had resulted in significant power shifts in the past.⁸⁴ It is reasonable to explain this concern as a product of hopes and realities in the present. This was a community that saw its history intimately linked to the history of royalty, and it wished to maintain that legitimizing bond also in the future. The rich web of texts that these scholars wrote on the topic of Nabonidus should be seen as a conscious attempt to shape memory of this event in a world where native Babylonian kingship had vanished since the time of this very king.

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84. Waerzeggers, “Babylonian Kingship in the Persian Period.”

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