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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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. 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. As this title is “of course not contemporary,” 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-
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. 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

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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.” David Vanderhooft embraces the idea of the Chronicle’s reliability to the extent that he classifies it as “documentary evidence.”

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. 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.
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. 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. 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. Finally, there is extensive archaeological and epigraphic evidence to support the Chronicle’s statements about Nabonidus’s stay in Teima. 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.


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

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

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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. 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. He concludes that authors in the early Persian period modified and rewrote an earlier chronicle “undoubtedly on the orders of Cyrus.” 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.


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


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

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 Babylone dans la deuxième moitié du 1er 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.,\textsuperscript{33} which gives us a broad but reliable time frame for situating the production of the present manuscript of the \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{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 Persia\textsuperscript{34} finds no parallels in contemporary literature but reminds us of the \textit{Dynastic Prophecy}, a Hellenistic cuneiform text, which calls Cyrus “King of Elam.”\textsuperscript{35} The use of this old geographic name carried connotations of threat and destruction by Babylonia’s age-old


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

archenemy and may thus convey an anti-Persian sentiment. 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. 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.

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. 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.
38. Ibid., 527.

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?  

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) 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. 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” 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


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.

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.\textsuperscript{48} Another literary device at work in the \textit{Chronicle} is the manipulation of narrative rhythm. Having reviewed events by years and months so far,\textsuperscript{49} the authors of the \textit{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 \textit{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 \textit{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.\textsuperscript{50}

In the light of its literary quality and deliberate design, it is hard to maintain that the \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{51} None of this applies to the \textit{Nabonidus Chronicle}. It

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{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.

\textsuperscript{50} It is debated whether the \textit{Chronicle} asserts that some of these gestures were performed by Cyrus (Andrew R. George, “Studies in Cultic Topography and Ideology,” \textit{BO} 53 [1996]: 363–95 [380]) or whether it asserts that only Cambyses was present at the festivities (see lately Gauthier Tolini, “La Babyloniie 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 \textit{Nabonidus Chronicle} iii:24–28).

\textsuperscript{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. 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. 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

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抄写者 (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. 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.

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*

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

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

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. 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

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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 1, 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;\(^6\) 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’).\(^6\) 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.\(^6\) Besides
the march to Hume, authors of the *Chronicle* may have taken other infor-
mation 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*.\(^6\) 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.\(^6\) It is strik-

\(^6\) 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 Ba-
bylo
niaca of Berossus* [Sources from the Ancient Near East 1.5; Malibu, Ca.: 1978], 28; Wil-
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


\(^6\) It is debated how far into Nabonidus’s reign the text reaches; see the discus-

\(^6\) Edition by Schaudig, *Inschriften*, 409–40. A copy of the cylinder was found
put 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 mon-
uments 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.

\(^6\) The title is used in ii:1, 4 of the *Chronicle* and i:27 of the *Ehulhul Cylinder*. See

This essay appears in Jason M. Silverman and Caroline Waerzeggers,
eds., *Political Memory in and after the Persian Empire*, ANEM 13 (Atlanta:
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. Members of Esagil’s learned community could easily have traveled there to consult the text. 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 possibility—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-
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-gidru-kalamma-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

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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.
of Nabonidus's use of the series Enûma 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,

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72. Both texts mention the king of Dadanu, cf. Royal Chronicle v.20 and Harran Stela 2.1.25 (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

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 \textit{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 \textit{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 Amyitis might have been inspired by this cultural background.\(^{81}\) It is striking that, like in the \textit{Chronicle}, this episode precedes a world-changing event in the \textit{Babyloniaca} (the fall of Nineveh). Comparing Berossus and the \textit{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 \textit{Nabonidus Chronicle} may have interacted with Herodotus's account of the death of Cyrus's wife Cassandane (2.1).\(^{82}\)

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

\(^{81}\) Haubold, \textit{Greece and Mesopotamia}, 174.

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 pretentions, 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.” 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...

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. 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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