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From Clay to Stone and Back Again: The Unusual Biography of a Babylonian Letter*

Mary Frazer

In ancient Mesopotamia, texts written in cuneiform script are attested on objects made of clay, stone, metal, wax, parchment, and papyrus.¹ The material chosen depended on various practical factors, such as its cost, weight, and durability, but also on factors less easy to discern, such as habit or fashion, and so it is often difficult to determine why a text was written on clay tablets, for example, rather than wax-filled writing boards.² An exception is stone, which was a more costly writing material than clay and gives an impression of greater durability than clay or wax. Accordingly, texts inscribed on stone tended to be commissioned by kings, who had the means to do so, and targeted future as well as contemporary audiences.³ But even if a royal inscription's primary support was made from stone, there was plenty of reason for the text also to be written on clay; inscriptions intended for stone monuments frequently survive only on clay tablets.⁴

The text that is the subject of this paper illustrates the phenomenon of cuneiform text supports made of clay surviving over those made of stone. Though reportedly inscribed on both materials in antiquity, the text in question is only attested on a single clay tablet from the first century BC. The transmission history of the text, insofar as it can be reconstructed, is nevertheless conspicuous because the text takes the form of a letter, and letters are not otherwise attested inscribed on stone in Mesopotamia. Correspondingly, the main aim of this paper is to investigate the historical context of the letter's change in medium: when was it carved on stone, and why?

* I thank Babett Edelmann-Singer for inviting me to participate in the conference and for helpful references to recent secondary literature on the reign of Antiochus III. I am also grateful to Christopher Sprecher for his careful copy-editing work on the script.

1 According to textual evidence. Most metal text supports and all of those made from wax, parchment, and papyrus are not attested in the archaeological record.

2 For the attested uses of wax writing-boards in Mesopotamia, see Michele Cammorosano et al., They Wrote on Wax. Wax Boards in the Ancient Near East, *Mesopotamia* 54 (2019), 1–60, here 9–14.

3 Susan Pollock, From Clay to Stone. Material Practices and Writing in Third Millennium Mesopotamia, in: Thomas E. Balke / Christina Tsouparopoulou (eds.): *Materiality of Writing in Early Mesopotamia* (Materiale Textkulturen 13), Berlin 2016, 277–291, here 285–287.

4 Inscriptions were copied onto clay for archival and pedagogical purposes. For the former purpose one can cite many of the ca. 1,100 Assyrian inscriptions found on the royal citadel of Nineveh; on the latter, see, e.g., Mary Frazer, Evidence for the Copying of Earlier Inscriptions in Late Babylonian Nippur, in: Matthew Rutz / John M. Steele (eds.): *Cuneiform Scholarship at Nippur*, forthcoming.

1. The Letter from the Obedient Borsippans to Assurbanipal

The letter in question, published 15 years ago,⁵ is addressed to the Assyrian king Assurbanipal, who reigned 669–631 BC. Beginning in the late 10th century BC, the Assyrian empire grew from a state encompassing little more than the Assyrian heartland, the area centred on the cities of Ashur, Nineveh (modern Mosul), and Arbail (Erbil),⁶ to a territorial empire that by Assurbanipal's lifetime stretched from the Anatolian plain in the northwest to the Persian Gulf in the southeast, and from the southern Levant in the west to the Zagros mountains in the east (Fig. 1). Assurbanipal's reign was marked by several victorious military campaigns, but his intellectual pursuits have proven to be his most enduring legacy. The remains of the collections of scholarly texts amassed in the royal palaces and temples of his political capital, Nineveh, when viewed as a whole, constitute the largest body of scholarship yet discovered from the ancient world.⁷ Scholars have often considered the Library of Assurbanipal, as these collections are sometimes called, a source of inspiration for the later Library of Alexandria.⁸

Assurbanipal's correspondent in this letter is a group of people who identify themselves simply as the “obedient Borsippans” (*barsipāyū sanqūtu*). The city of Borsippa was one of several ancient cult centres located in the region of Babylonia, Assyria's southern neighbour and oldest rival. Despite their rivalry, the two regions had many cultural similarities: their urban elites used the same writing system, cuneiform; they spoke dialects of the same language, Akkadian; and with a couple of notable exceptions, the city-dwellers of both regions shared the same gods. Babylonia's cultural and economic capital was the city of Babylon, whose king was regarded as the legitimate ruler of the region and whose patron deity, Marduk, stood at the head of the Babylonian pantheon. Borsippa, located only 20 km from Babylon, enjoyed close social, economic, and theological ties with the capital, and by the 6th century BC at the latest was regarded as Babylonia's second most important city.⁹

⁵ Grant Frame and Andrew R. George, The Royal Libraries of Nineveh: New Evidence for King Ashurbanipal's Tablet Collecting, *Iraq* 67 (2005), 265–284, here 265–270.

⁶ Karen Radner, The Assur-Nineveh-Arbela Triangle. Central Assyria in the Neo-Assyrian Period, in: Peter A. Miglus / Simone Mühl (eds.): Between the Cultures: The Central Tigris Region from the 3rd to the 1st Millennium BC, Heidelberg 2011, 321–329, here 321.

⁷ Ca. 16,750 clay tablets and fragments containing scholarly texts have been discovered at Nineveh's royal citadel, according to the most recent estimate by Eckart Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries. Origins of Interpretation (Guides to the Mesopotamian Textual Record 5)*, Münster 2011, 276 n. 1315.

⁸ The “Library of Assurbanipal” consists, in fact, of several discrete archaeological assemblages. On its formation, rediscovery and reception, see Eleanor Robson, *Ancient Knowledge Networks. A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-Millennium Assyria and Babylonia*, London 2019, 10–23. On the question of its influence on the later Alexandrian Library, see Kathryn Stevens, *Between Greece and Babylonia. Hellenistic Intellectual History in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 2019, 165–195.

⁹ On Borsippa's status as “second city,” see Caroline Waerzeggers, *The Ezida Temple of Borsippa. Priesthood, Cult, Archives (Achaemenid History 15)*, Leiden 2011, 4–8.

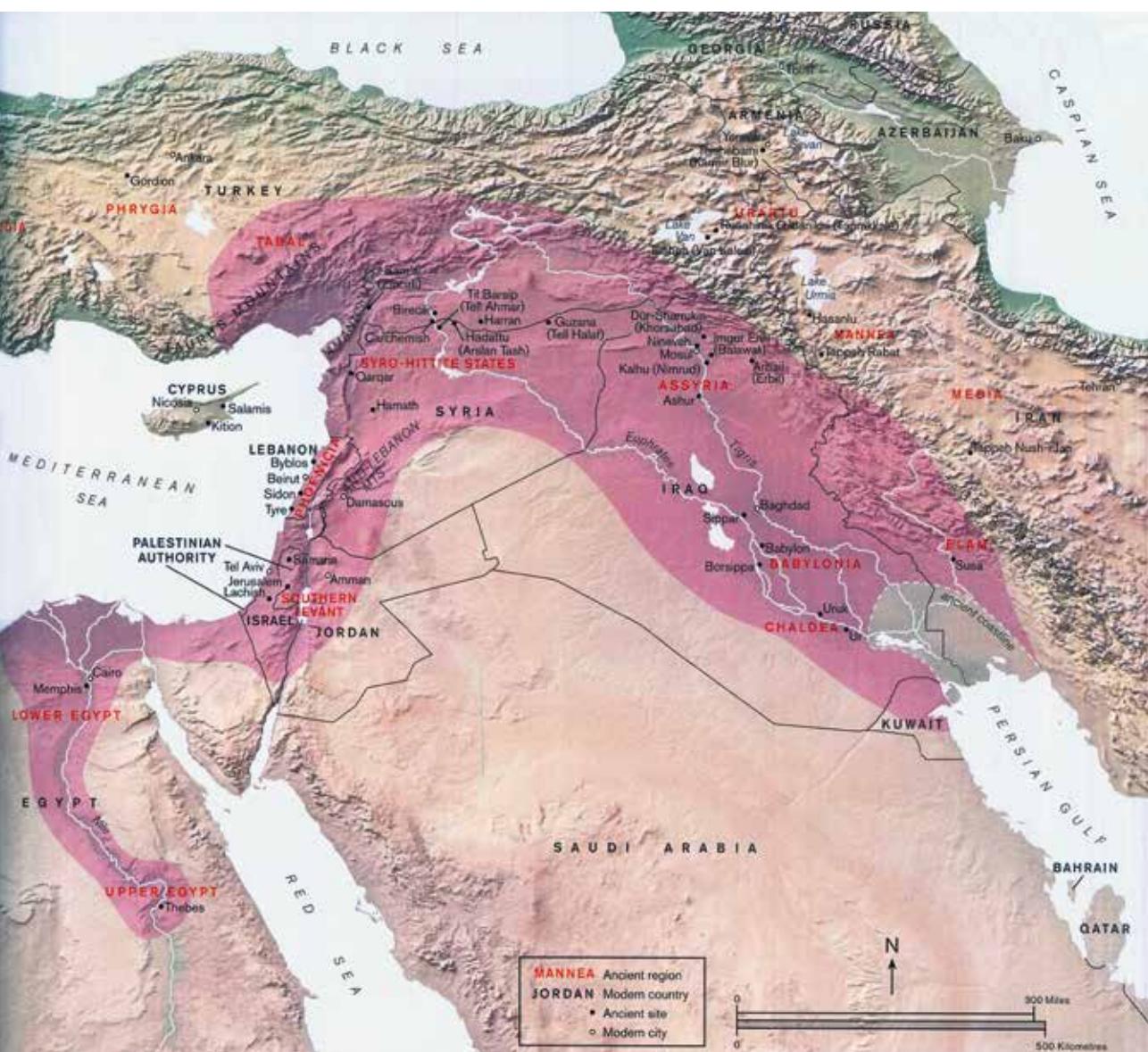


Fig. 1: Map showing the extent of the Assyrian Empire during the reign of Assurbanipal (669–631 BC)

The “obedient Borsippans” cannot be identified individually, but it is clear from the contents of the letter that they belong to the Borsippian priesthood, the city’s social and cultural elite, who not only ran the city’s temples but also occupied the city’s most important administrative positions and passed down from generation to generation tra-

ditional Babylonian scholarship.¹⁰ They open their letter with an address of sophistication. In letters addressed to Assurbanipal found at Nineveh as part of the Assyrian state correspondence, the standard address to the king is a succinct, “To the king, my lord.”¹¹ The “obedient Borsippans,” by contrast, address Assurbanipal using four traditional Assyrian royal titles before adding seven elaborately worded titles that stress the legitimacy of Assurbanipal’s rule and his connection with Borsippa:

“To Assurbanipal, great king, mighty king, king of the world, king of Assyria, king who achieves his wishes, t[o whom Marduk, inhabitant of E-sangil], charged and entrusted kingship of Assyria, (and on whom) he (i.e., Marduk) bestowed kingship of the entire land, (who) grasps in his hand the ri[g]hteous sceptr[e that subjugates] the unwilling, (who) bears in his right hand the staff that fells the foe, to whom Nabû, in[habitant of E-zida], gave broad understanding, and (who) like me is bowed to scribal learning, … [...]” (BM 45642, ll. 1–4)

The body of the letter begins with the Borsippans noting that they are responding to an order from Assurbanipal to supply him with new copies of all the scholarly texts belonging to Borsippa’s patron deity, Nabû:

“The obedient Borsippans report back to the king, their lord, regarding the message that he wrote as follows: ‘Write out all the scribal learning in the property of Nabû, my lord, (and) send (it) to me!’” (BM 45642, ll. 8–9)

“Nabû’s” scribal learning comprised the library in his temple, the E-zida. The size of this library is unknown, but if its holdings were even half the size of those in the Hellenistic-Parthian era library of the E-sangil, the temple of Marduk in Babylon, creating duplicates of its entire inventory would have been a considerable undertaking.¹² The Borsippans nevertheless vigorously assert their desire to comply with the king’s order:

“We shall not now shirk the command of the king, our lord. We shall strain and toil day and night to complete the instruction for our lord, the king. We shall write on boards of *musukkannu*-wood, we shall … *immediately* (tablet: stealthily¹³).” (BM 45642, ll. 11–12)

¹⁰ On the professions, hierarchy and organization of the Borsippa priesthood as it can be reconstructed from 6th and early 5th century documentation, see Waerzeggers 2011 (as n. 9), 33–60.

¹¹ E.g., Simo Parpola, The Correspondence of Assurbanipal Part 1. Letters from Assyria, Central Babylonia, and Vassal States (State Archives of Assyria 21), Helsinki 2018, nos. 109–113.

¹² For the E-sangil’s holdings, see Philippe Clancier, *Les bibliothèques en Babylonie dans le deuxième moitié du 1er millénaire av. J.-C.* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament 363), Münster 2005, 447–470.

¹³ The scribe seems to have made a mistake. On scribal mistakes in the manuscript see Frame / George 2005 (as n. 5), 266.

Next, the Borsippans focus on a specific text requested by Assurbanipal. They inform the king that the text in question can only be found in E-sangil and recommend him to write to the Babylonians. After a couple of poorly preserved lines, in which they seem to remark on their close relationship with the Babylonians, the Borsippans repeat their assertion that they will copy out the E-zida's scholarly holdings. They bring the letter to a close by wishing the king long life and good health.

The letter seems to reflect a drive, led by the Assyrian king himself, to increase the scholarly collections at Nineveh by means of large-scale copying projects in Babylonian temple libraries.¹⁴ An echo of the Borsippans' reference to the text in the E-sangil may be present in a longer but less well-preserved letter from Assurbanipal to the Babylonian priesthood which seems to deal with the same episode.¹⁵ In this second letter, Assurbanipal, after ordering the copying of a large number of scholarly texts, names the Babylonian scholars who should carry out the work, details how they should pay for the writing materials, and promises to grant the Babylonians certain tax exemptions when he comes to Babylon at an unspecified future date.

2. A Reminder of Better Days

The only surviving witness of the letter from the obedient Borsippans is BM 45642, an almost completely preserved clay tablet inscribed with 23 lines of continuous cuneiform script (Fig. 2). Several features of the tablet indicate that it was produced as a scribal exercise. Its format, with the lines of script running parallel with its longest sides, and a note written on its upper edge, invoking the blessing of the gods, are both typical of advanced scribal exercises in cuneiform ca. 600–50 BC; the scribal errors¹⁶ are consistent with the work of a young scribe; and a colophon on the tablet's reverse in which the tablet's scribe identifies himself as the son of the tablet's owner points in the same direction.¹⁷

The colophon is of further significance because the scribe, Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi son of Bēl-uballissu of the Mušēzib family, and his father, Bēl-uballissu son of Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi,¹⁸ are known from other sources. Thanks to a colophon on another tablet that Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi wrote for his father, which, unusually, concludes with a date, "year 242 of king Arsaces" (i.e., 69 BC), we can be confident that BM 45642 was produced

14 Frame / George 2005 (as n. 5), 265, 282.

15 Also published by Frame / George 2005 (as n. 5), 270–277. The opening of the letter is lost but Frame and George understand Assurbanipal as the recipient and the Babylonians as the senders. However, their roles should probably be reversed for reasons pointed out by Eckart Frahm, *On Some Recently Published Late Babylonian Copies of Royal Letters*, *Nouvelles Asyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* 2005, 43–36,

here 43 with n. 1, and elaborated on by Mary Frazer, *Akkadian Royal Letters in Later Tradition*, forthcoming.

16 See n. 13.

17 Scribal training in Mesopotamia was usually a family affair. See Andrew R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, Volume I, Oxford 2003, 37–38.

18 The scribe had the same name as his grandfather.



Fig. 2: BM 45642, obverse (above) and reverse (below), 14.5 × 8.1 × 2.8 cm (length × height × width)

in the first half of the 1st century BC.¹⁹ Assuming that the length of time during which Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi produced manuscripts of literary and scholarly texts for his father (i.e., the period of his scribal training) did not last more than twenty years, BM 45642

¹⁹ For the interpretation of this condensed form of the Arsacid date formula, see Enrique Jiménez, The Babylonian Disputation Poems (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 87),

Leiden 2017, 349, and Frances Reynolds, A Babylonian Calendar Treatise. Scholars and Invaders in the Late First Millennium BC, Oxford 2019, 119, both with references to earlier literature.

must have been written at some point between 89–49 BC. This timeframe is significant for our understanding of the text's function as a scribal exercise because it overlaps with the decades when the latest datable clay tablets to contain literary texts in cuneiform script were written.²⁰ Our Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi, the scribe of BM 45642, may well have been one of the last practitioners of non-astronomical cuneiform scholarship.²¹

The scribe's family was a priestly family active during the last centuries of cuneiform culture.²² As far as the cuneiform documentation indicates, the professional lives of members of this family were based around the E-sangil temple in Babylon. The nature of their temple duties is not always mentioned in the sources, but several Mušēzibs, including Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi's grandfather,²³ are attested in administrative documents bearing the title "astrologer," a role that involved recording observations of the appearance of the night sky and using this data to calculate the future movements of the planetary bodies. If Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi was destined to be an astrologer, the question naturally arises of why he was studying a letter concerned with the acquisition of scholarly texts by a long-dead king from neighbouring Babylon. The publishers of the letter attributed its use in scribal education to the cultural cachet associated with Assurbanipal's library:

"The reason for the inclusion of these texts in the scribal curriculum was surely a matter of intellectual prestige. When Ashurbanipal was collecting the greatest library the world had ever known, he turned for help to the learned and expert scholars of Babylon and Borsippa. Accordingly the texts inscribed on the tablets published here must have held a special place in the collective memory of the intellectual elites of these cities. Still passed down after perhaps half a millennium, they were proud reminders of the local scholars' finest hour."²⁴

From the perspective of later generations, the Borsippans' involvement in the formation of Assurbanipal's library may well have been their most prestigious assignment, but it is probably the strong contrast between their relationship with Assurbanipal and their relationship with the Parthian rulers of Mesopotamia that best explains the letter's appearance among the small number of works of cuneiform literature to survive until the 1st century BC. For Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi lived in very different times from those of the

20 For a list of the latest datable literary tablets see Joachim Oelsner, „Sie ist gefallen, sie ist gefallen, Babylon, die große Stadt.“ Vom Ende einer Kultur (*Sitzungsberichte der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-historische Klasse* 138/1), Leipzig 2002, 12 with n. 27.

21 Astronomical texts continued to be written in cuneiform for longer than other types of scholarly texts. The latest datable astronomical tablet – published by Hermann Hunger and Teije de Jong, Almanac W22340a from Uruk: The Latest

Datable Cuneiform Tablet, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und vorderasiatische Archäologie* 104 (2014), 182–194 – dates to AD 79/80.

22 See most recently Reynolds 2019 (as n. 19), 111–120, with reference to earlier literature.

23 See Eleanor Robson, Who Wrote the Babylonian Astronomical Diaries?, in: Johannes Haubold / John M. Steele / Kathryn Stevens (eds.): *Keeping Watch Over Babylon: The Astronomical Diaries in Context (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East* 110), Leiden 2019, 120–153, here 142–143.

24 Frame / George 2005 (as n. 5), 283.

“obedient Borsippans”. Since the fall of the last native Babylonian dynasty to Cyrus the Great in 539 BC, the rulers of Mesopotamia had exercised a type of long-distance relationship with the Babylonian elites. Traditionally, the king of Babylon resided in Babylon, visited neighbouring Borsippa at least once a year as part of the ritual celebrations of the New Year’s Festival, and sponsored restoration work on the E-sangil, E-zida, and other Babylonian temples. However, the Persian, Seleucid, and Parthian rulers spent more time in other parts of their empires and participated only exceptionally in the New Year’s Festival. If the dearth of commemorative inscriptions is a reliable indicator, they sponsored very few building projects in Babylonia.²⁵ Indeed, as recently argued by Eleanor Robson, the revolts against Persian rule in 484 BC by Babylon, Borsippa, and other northern Babylonian cities probably mark a decisive end to royal sponsorship of Babylonian scholarly activity.²⁶ There is no record of a king interacting with Babylonian scholars until Alexander the Great arrived in Babylon over 150 years later, and evidence for Seleucid patronage of Babylonian scholarship is sporadic at best.²⁷

The change in status of the Babylonian temple elites under the Achaemenids and the Achaemenids’ subsequent defeat at the hands of Alexander the Great seems to have encouraged Babylonian priestly communities of the third and second centuries to compose historiographical literature centred on the figure of the king.²⁸ In the hope that the Seleucids would renew the role of the traditional Babylonian king and show more interest in the Babylonian temples than the Achaemenids had done, the Babylonians composed texts that depicted earlier rulers who supported the cult of the E-sangil as successful kings. Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi’s production of a manuscript of the letter from the obedient Borsippans is best explained by situating it in a similar cultural context. The letter was probably valued by the Mušēzibs because it was eloquent testimony to the role played by their predecessors in furnishing the king with valuable information, a role which they hoped would be revived by their current rulers.²⁹

25 The only royal building inscription attested after the reign of Cyrus the Great (539–530 BC) dates to the reign of Antiochus II. See Kathryn Stevens, The Antiochus Cylinder, Babylonian Scholarship and Seleucid Imperial Ideology, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 134 (2014), 66–88, with earlier literature.

26 Eleanor Robson, Ancient Knowledge Networks. A Social Geography of Cuneiform Scholarship in First-Millennium Assyria and Babylonia, London 2019, 173–179.

27 On the connection between Berossus and the Seleucid court see Stevens 2019 (as n. 9), 114–117.

28 Gert De Breucker, Heroes and Sinners. Babylonian Kings in Cuneiform Historiography of the Persian and Hellenistic Periods, in: Jason Silverman / Caroline Waerzeggers (eds.): Political Memory in and after the Persian Empire, Atlanta

2015, 75–94, here 90–91; Caroline Waerzeggers, Facts, Propaganda or History? Shaping Political Memory in the Nabonidus Chronicle: *ibidem*, 95–124, here 118–119; Michael Jursa and Céline Debourse, A Babylonian Priestly Martyr, A King-like Priest, and the Nature of Late Babylonian Priestly Literature, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 107 (2017), 77–98, here 84–89.

29 See the similar explanation by Eleanor Robson, Do Not Disperse the Collection! Motivations and Strategies for Protecting Cuneiform Scholarship in the First Millennium BCE, in: Mladen Popović / Lautaro R. Lanzillotta / Clare Wilde (eds.): Sharing and Hiding Religious Knowledge in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Berlin 2018, 8–45, here 38–39.

3. An Exercise in Diplomacy

Did the Babylonian priesthood always regard Assurbanipal's order to send copies of their scholarly texts to Nineveh in so positive a manner? The reverse of tablet BM 45642 contains a second scribal note that is relevant in this regard. Located between the letter and the colophon, demarcated from both by single horizontal ruling (Fig. 2), it runs as follows:

“This document was entered onto a *na[rû]* (or *narûs*) of alabaster (and) sent to all the KAN-*n[a]-'a'-tú*.³⁰

*šaṭāru annū ina muḥli^{na⁴}na[rē] ša^{na⁴} gišnugalli šūli ana KAN-*n[a]-'a'-tú gabbi šapir.**

Leaving to one side what is meant by the Akkadian term *narû*, an issue to which we shall return, when did this act of inscribing the letter onto an alabaster object occur? The publishers of BM 45642 assume the event in question took place during Assurbanipal's reign. According to them, the decision to inscribe the letter in stone could have been either Assurbanipal's or the Borsippans, but the motivation for the act was the same, namely: “to preserve on permanent monuments Ashurbanipal's choice of Borsippian scholars to execute his royal command, and thereby to enhance their scholarly prestige.”³¹ However, such a scenario invites an obvious objection: if the act occurred around about the time the letter was sent, why was the letter in which Assurbanipal communicated his commission not inscribed instead? In the cultural dynamics of the mid-7th century, a royal letter would surely have conveyed more prestige on the Borsippans than their response to it.

Moreover, despite the letter's enthusiastic tone, there are good grounds for doubting its sincerity. Since the 14th century, when Assyria had begun to assert itself among the other territorial powers of the day, Babylonia had had a complicated, often hostile relationship with its northern neighbour. In the late 8th and early 7th centuries, Babylonians had repeatedly resisted Assyrian attempts to decide who sat on the throne of Babylon. This resistance led to Assurbanipal's grandfather, Sennacherib, ordering the sack of Babylon in 689 and the removal of Marduk's cult statue from Babylon to Assyria. The statue was only returned in 668, and both its absence and the destruction of the city two decades earlier would still have been in living memory during Assurbanipal's reign.

30 The meaning of KAN-*n[a]-'a'-tú* is uncertain. Frame / George 2005 (as n. 5), 270, understand the word as a previously unattested writing of the plural of *kinattu*, “colleague.”

31 Frame / George (as n. 5), 266.

Physically, Borsippa seems to have escaped Sennacherib's wrath relatively unscathed, yet its temple communities would have felt the effects of the removal of Marduk's cult statue and the absence of a king of Babylon, for without them the annual New Year's Festival – partly celebrated in Babylon, partly in Borsippa – could not have taken place. Thus, despite identifying themselves as the “obedient” Borsippans, the senders of the letter had every reason to be sympathetic with the earlier independent-minded Babylonians who had so infuriated Sennacherib. Indeed, in 652 BC, when rebellion broke out in Babylon against Assurbanipal and Assyrian interference in Babylonia, Borsippa quickly sided with the rebels.

When viewed in this light, the letter seems less of an enthusiastic response to Assurbanipal's order and more of a diplomatic necessity. The Babylonians' and Borsippans' correspondence with Assurbanipal may have been a subject of Babylonian pride in the 1st century BC, but for their predecessors in the 7th century, finding the right words to respond to the king was a delicate issue. Keen to avoid upsetting the new Assyrian king despite his excessive demands, the Borsippans who composed this letter deployed every means in their rhetorical arsenal to persuade him of their loyalty.

4. The Intervening Years

Since the letter from the obedient Borsippans and its sister letter from Assurbanipal to the Babylonians are only attested in later exemplars, some doubt exists about whether these texts in their current form *really* date to Assurbanipal's reign. Most notably, Ronnie Goldstein has argued that the letters, while probably based on 7th-century originals, were reworked by Babylonian scholars during the Hellenistic period. The aim of their purported modification was to prove that the Ptolemaic Library of Alexandria – whose fame, Goldstein assumes, had reached Babylon – had been preceded by an institution of comparable scope and ambition in the form of the Library of Assurbanipal.³² Goldstein's argument rests, on the one hand, on supposed similarities of genre and content between the Babylonian letters and the Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates, a pseudographic Greek composition of the 2nd century BC that details the creation of the Library of Alexandria (Fig. 3), and on the other hand, on alleged discrepancies between the work described in the Babylonian letters and the evidence for the process by which Assurbanipal amassed texts according to 7th-century sources. According to Goldstein, the letters were reworked so that “the resemblance between the libraries was stressed, Ashurbanipal's project was magnified, and the Babylonian role in it was emphasized.”³³

To date, Goldstein's hypothesis has largely been cited uncritically.³⁴ But while the idea that the letters were studied in Babylon between the 5th and 2nd centuries is an

32 Ronnie Goldstein, Late Babylonian Letters on Collecting Tablets and Their Hellenistic Background – A Suggestion, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 69 (2010), 199–207, here 202.

33 Goldstein 2010 (as n. 32), 202.

34 An exception is Stevens 2019 (as n. 8), 190 n. 181.



Fig. 3: Letter of Aristaeus, Latin translation by Mattia Palmieri, Manuscript from ca. 1480.
Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 627

appealing one, Goldstein's claim that they were reworked in the early 2nd century is questionable. He points out that the comprehensive nature of Assurbanipal's collecting in the letters (cf. "all scribal learning in the property of Nabû") does not appear "in the contemporary epistolary and administrative materials regarding the library," yet only a few letters and documents from Nineveh deal with the library, and their nature is such that one does not expect to find in them claims about the library's holdings, whether comprehensive or otherwise. Goldstein claims that the 72 writing boards in the letter from Assurbanipal bears a "startling resemblance" to the 72 Jerusalem priests sent to Alexandria in the Letter of Aristeas. However, as pointed out by Kathryn Stevens, the contexts are slightly different and the use of the same number could easily be coincidental.³⁵ Furthermore, there is no feature of the letters' language that is obviously anachronistic to Assurbanipal's reign. Their 7th-century flavour would be surprising if the letters had been modified at as late a point as Goldstein claims.³⁶ If the letters' texts are a product of post-7th-century reworking, the similarities between their language and the language of Assurbanipal's own inscriptions suggest an earlier date of modification, namely during the Neo-Babylonian empire (ca. 626–539 BC), a period when royal inscriptions were still composed in Akkadian on a regular basis.³⁷

Several letters between Assurbanipal and Babylonian communities are preserved in the state correspondence from Nineveh.³⁸ Ideally, some of these letters, whose credentials as 7th-century compositions are unimpeachable, would allude to the role played by these communities in Assurbanipal's drive to collect scholarship. However, the surviving letters date to the 652–648 BC Babylonian revolt and its immediate aftermath and are, understandably, political in focus. The gaps in our 7th-century sources mean that meaningful comparison with the letter from the obedient Borsippans or with its sister letter from Assurbanipal to the Babylonian priesthood is impossible. In turn, this situation severely limits our ability to pinpoint when these letters reached their current forms.

We can, however, say something further about the letter's reception. As argued earlier, the scribal note recording the letter's transfer onto stone is unlikely to date to Assurbanipal's reign. It could, therefore, reflect an event that occurred any time between the end of his reign and the early 1st century BC, when Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi copied it onto BM 45642. The rest of this paper is devoted to investigating this act's significance: when, where, and why did it occur?³⁹

³⁵ Stevens 2019 (as n. 8), 190 n. 181.

³⁶ As argued in Frazer forthcoming (as n. 15), a third letter whose text Goldstein cites in support of his thesis, the so-called Šaddūnu Letter, is unlikely to have been subject to Hellenistic reworking because it is preserved on tablets that probably pre-date the Hellenistic period.

³⁷ See n. 25 above.

³⁸ In addition to SAA 21 nos. 109–113, from the

Babylonians to Assurbanipal, mentioned in n. 11 above, see SAA 21 nos. 1–42, which are from Assurbanipal to Babylonian individuals or communities.

³⁹ Cf. Goldstein 2010 (as n. 32) 206 n. 41, who suggests that the statement has no bearing in historical reality and instead contributes to the letter's "pseudepigraphical essence".

4.1 Akkadian *narû*: stone tablet or stele?

The starting point of our investigation is the alabaster *narû* on which the letter was inscribed. The editors of BM 45642 assume it to mean “stone tablet.” In Mesopotamian contexts, such an object – a flat, rectangular slab of stone – is typically of relatively modest dimensions. The smallest stone tablets can fit in the palm of one’s hand and an unusually large one from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC) measures 50.0 × 56.5 × 9.5 cm,⁴⁰ but most lie somewhere between these two extremes. They are of eminently transportable size.⁴¹ In terms of its physical properties alone, a stone tablet would *prima facie* be an entirely appropriate *Textträger* for our letter.

Most surviving stone tablets are engraved with inscriptions commemorating a ruler’s sponsorship of restoration work on a building. Archaeological and textual evidence indicate that stone tablets of this type were often buried in the foundations of the building they commemorate, sometimes inside a coffer. The purpose of burying them in this manner is stated explicitly in several inscriptions on stone tablets, such as in an inscription of Assurnasirpal II (Fig. 4), which gives the following instructions to a later ruler:

“(when) this temple falls into disrepair (and) you see and read my *narûs*, restore its (i.e., the temple’s) weakened (sections); write your name with mine (and) return (the *narû*) to its place”⁴²

It is clear from this passage that the tablets’ intended audience was limited to future rulers who might happen to sponsor restoration work on the same building. The passage also indicates that the tablet would only be visible for a limited amount of time: if all went according to plan, it would be reburied in the foundations of the newly restored building.⁴³ For our letter, a text addressing no future audience and bearing no relation to any built edifice, to have been buried out of sight would have been a strange fate indeed (Fig. 5).

Although stone tablets often contain building inscriptions, they sometimes contained other types of royal inscription, such as the large stone tablet from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II mentioned above.⁴⁴ They are also occasionally attested as bearing

⁴⁰ The “East India House Inscription”: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1938-0520-1 [last access: 06.08.2020].

⁴¹ See the reference in the second scribal note of BM 45642 (cited above, Part 2) to the *narû* or *narûs* being sent.

⁴² Translation after Albert K. Grayson, Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114–859 BC), Toronto 1991, A.0.101.50, ll. 35–38.

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the evidence for tablet-shaped foundation deposits, including the evidence for the findspot of the stone tablets of Assurnasirpal II, see Richard S. Ellis, Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia (Yale Near Eastern Researches 2), New Haven 1968, 94–107. Interestingly, as Ellis points out, the available evidence points to Assurnasirpal II’s stone tablets *not* being buried in the foundations of a building. Stored as they were inside the stone coffer, they would nevertheless have been out of sight.

⁴⁴ See n. 40 above.



Fig. 4: Stone tablet from the reign of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BC), documenting the restoration of the temple of the god Mamu in the city of Balawat, BM 90980, 31.8 × 20.3 cm

incantations, such as a Sumerian incantation against gall; like the letter from the obedient Borsippans, the incantation against gall is preserved on a clay tablet, but the tablet's colophon refers to the incantation as being written on a *naru*.⁴⁵

The term *naru* can, however, refer to stone objects other than tablets. Until at least the 6th century BC, it functioned as the main Akkadian word for stele.⁴⁶ Physically, there is a lot of overlap between stone tablets and stelae. Both are made of stone and both are engraved with a text and sometimes imagery, the latter in low relief. While stelae from Babylonia standing over head-height are attested, many are considerably smaller. Three

45 BM 47859, published by Bendt Alster, A Sumerian Incantation Against Gall, *Orientalia Nova Series 41* (1972), 349–358.

46 Etymologically, *naru* derives from the Sumerian word for stele, *na₄.na.rú.a* (literally “erected stone”).



Fig. 5: Stone coffer containing the tablet in Fig. 4 and two others, BM 13512

from the reigns of Šamaš-šuma-ukin and Assurbanipal stood only 30–40 cm high,⁴⁷ and the height of most Babylonian stelae recording royal land grants is 40–45 cm (Fig. 6).⁴⁸ For this reason, stelae were eminently transportable and, as in the case of our *narû*, are attested as being sent from one place to another.⁴⁹ In physical terms, a stele would therefore also have been an appropriate *Textträger* for the letter.

47 Jutta Börker-Klähn, *Altvorderasiatische Bildstelen und vergleichbare Felsreliefs* (Baghdader Forschungen 4), Mainz am Rhein 1982, nos. 224–226.

48 Susanne Paulus, *Die babylonischen Kudurru-Inscriften von der kassitischen bis zur frühneubabylonischen Zeit* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament 51), Münster 2014, 30.

49 See, e.g., a letter from Nabonidus, king of Babylon 555–539 BC, published by Erich Ebeling, *Neubabylonische Texte aus Uruk*, Berlin 1934, 4–5, no. 4, ll. 6–12, in which the king, presumably in Babylon, instructs the recipients, located in the southern Babylonian city of Uruk, to “set up those stelae that I sent you in the houses of the gods, where it is suitable!”



Fig. 6: Stela recording a land grant from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (r. 1125 – 1104 BC) or Enlil-nadin-apli, BM 102485

The evidence for the original display contexts of stelae is patchy but consistently points to a location inside temple complexes.⁵⁰ When the evidence is specific, it often indicates temple courtyards, multi-functional spaces that would have afforded the monuments a degree of protection from the natural elements, and their audience the space and light needed to appreciate them.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Kathryn E. Slanski, The Babylonian Entitlement *narûs* (*kudurrus*). A Study in Their Form and Function (American Schools of Oriental Research Books 9), Boston 2003, 55–64, with earlier literature.

⁵¹ On the different uses of “Courtyard A” of the E-zida according to textual evidence, see Waerzeggers 2011 (as n. 9), 11, 182–183.

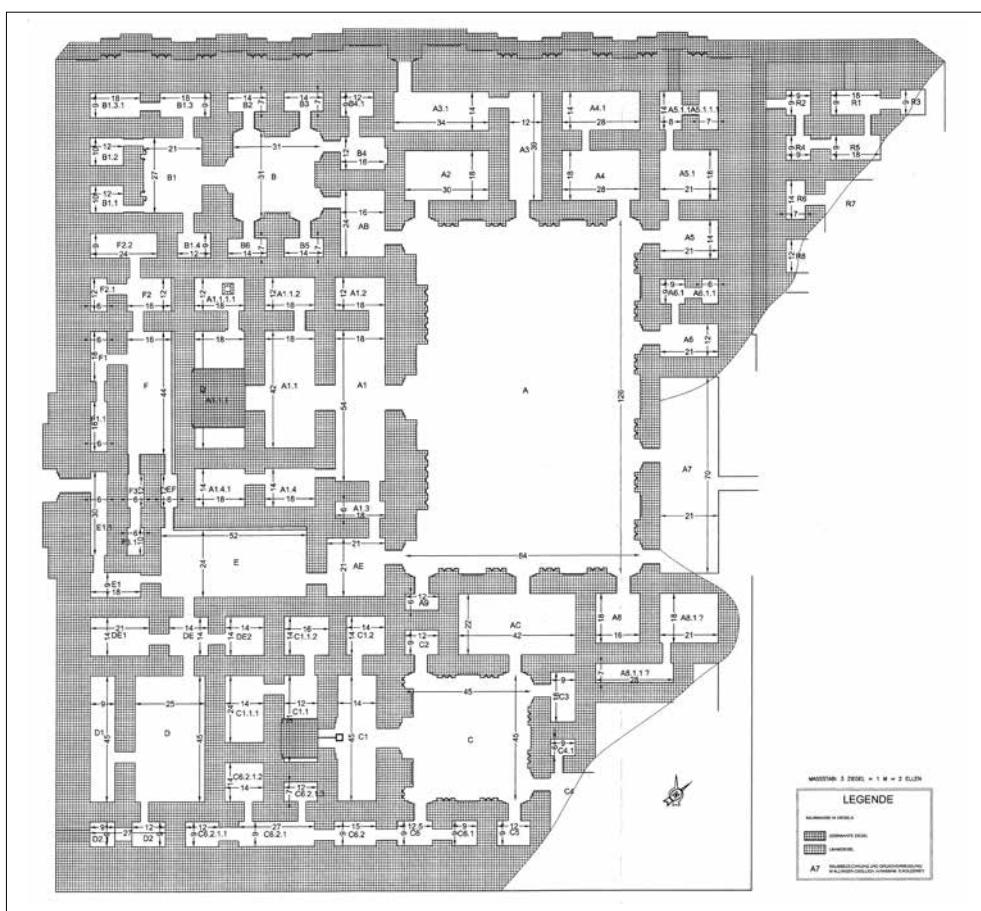


Fig. 7: Preliminary brickplan of the E-zida temple, Borsippa

The evidence for temple courtyards as an intended display location for stelae dates as late as 236 BC, when the bishop and the assembly of the E-sangil decided to commemorate a grant of royal land to the temple by erecting a stela in the E-kisalbanda, a courtyard of the E-sangil.⁵² This late date contrasts with the time period for which stone tablets are attested. No foundation deposits on stone tablets are attested in Mesopotamia after the reign of Assurbanipal's father, Esarhaddon (681–669 BC),⁵³ and no stone

52 The so-called “Lehmann Text”, edited most recently by Ronald Wallenfels and Robartus van der Spek in: Ira Spar / Michael Jursa, Cuneiform Texts in the Metropolitan Museum of Art IV, New York 2001, no. 148, here Text A ll. 32–33, Text B ii 9'–11'.

53 For a comprehensive list of stone tablets used as foundation deposits, see Ellis 1928 (as n. 43), 187–197.

tablets at all after Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562).⁵⁴ Because of the temporal distribution and display context of stone tablets and stelae respectively, it seems probable that our letter was inscribed, not on a stone tablet or tablets as previously assumed, but on a stele (or stelae).

4.2 When and where? Narrowing the scope

Since the possible date when the text of the letter reached its present form ranges from the mid-7th (i.e., during Assurbanipal's reign) to the early 2nd century BC, considerable uncertainty shrouds the date when the letter was transferred onto a stele. It is, however, possible to narrow down the date of the act by drawing on a couple of pieces of evidence.

The first piece of evidence consists of the colophon of BM 45642, which has proven itself such a rich source of information for the context in which the manuscript was produced (Part 2). To reduce the timeframe of the letter's inscription onto stone, however, the perfectly preserved lineage of the scribe is not of primary importance, but rather the opening phrase "Written according to an earlier exemplar." This phrase is a standard formula in colophons and indicates that the preceding text was copied from an earlier manuscript. For our purposes, it is precisely the phrase's non-specificity that renders it significant. If Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi had encountered the text on a stela, one might have expected him to have replaced "earlier exemplar" with the more specific "*narû*," a practice of other colophon writers who copied texts from *narûs*.⁵⁵

There is, of course, no means of knowing how often the scribes of clay tablets copied texts from *narûs* without identifying the exemplar as a *narû* in their colophons – or, indeed, without writing a colophon at all. In the exploratory spirit of the current endeavour, we will, however, assume that Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi's decision to refer simply to the "earlier exemplar" suggests he encountered the letter on a clay tablet similar to the one he himself produced. Various explanations why Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi did not copy the letter from the *narû* are possible, but the most obvious is that the stela was no longer visible during the period of his scribal training, i.e., ca. 89–ca. 49 BC.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ The sole candidate for a text written on a stone tablet after 539 is the incantation against gall mentioned above (see n. 45). Yigal Bloch assumes that the incantation's inscription on a *narû* is a "late" phenomenon. See: Yigal Bloch, A Letter of Nebuchadnezzar I to the Babylonians. Literary and Historical Considerations, in: Amitai Baruchi-Unna et al. (eds.): "Now it Happened in Those Days". Studies in Biblical, Assyrian, and ANE Historiography Presented to Mordechai Cogan on His 75th Birthday, Winona Lake Ind. 2017, 493–523, 2017, here 496–498. However, the *narû* in question probably pre-dates the first

millennium BC. According to Alster 1972 (as n. 45), 349, the scribe of the surviving clay copy of the incantation wrote in "a Neo-Babylonian imitation of the archaic script" and so the *narû* from which it was copied "must have been of Old Babylonian or even older origin."

⁵⁵ In addition to the colophon of the tablet mentioned above, n. 45, see Hermann Hunger, Babylonische und Assyrische Kolophone, Alter Orient und Altes Testament 2, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1968, nos. 419 and 442.

⁵⁶ On these approximate dates for when his scribal education took place see Part 2.

If we turn to the earlier end of the spectrum, we can be relatively confident that the act did not occur before the period of Achaemenid rule over Babylonia (539–331 BC). The evidence for excluding the years 669–540 BC is supplied by the manuscript of the sister letter from Assurbanipal to the Babylonians, which seems to deal with the same episode.⁵⁷ Like the letter from the obedient Borsippans, the letter from Assurbanipal to the Babylonians is preserved in one exemplar dating to the Parthian period that contains two scribal notes: a colophon identifying the owner and scribe of the tablet, followed by an undated note that describes the letter's reception.⁵⁸ This second scribal note runs as follows:

“[When] this oblong tablet [came] to Babylon, [...] the *uppu dētu*-official (and) five thousand men, the citizens of Babylon, [went] to E-[sangil] ... a great shout went up among the Babylonians.”

For present purposes the critical word in this scribal note is *uppu dētu*. This is a Persian loanword (from Old Persian *upa-dī*, “to oversee”), which must have entered the Babylonian lexicon after the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539 BC.⁵⁹ Since the transmission of the letter from Assurbanipal to the Babylonians seems in other respects to have been very similar to the letter from the obedient Borsippans, it is likely that the events described in both scribal notes occurred around the same time. If one assumes that the term *uppu dētu* remained in continuous use between the dates of its earliest and latest attestation, i.e. ca. 539 and ca. 124 BC, then the event involving the *uppu dētu*-official and correspondingly the transferral of the letter from the obedient Borsippans on to stone could have taken place any time between 539 and ca. 89 BC.⁶⁰

The question arises whether the stele was erected in a courtyard of the E-sangil (Babylon), in or near where Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi probably produced BM 45642, or in a courtyard of the E-zida (Borsippa), where the text may have been drafted in Assurbanipal's reign (Fig. 7). It is difficult to choose between the two. On the one hand, Borsippans seem more likely than Babylonians to have converted a text written in the name of earlier Borsippans into a monument. On the other hand, Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi's handiwork, BM 45642, proves that the text was capable of arousing the interest of Babylonians in the 1st century BC, and it is conceivable that the identities of the Borsippans and Babylonians, already closely connected in the 7th century BC (see Part 3), grew

57 See above with n. 15.

58 On the date of the exemplar see Frahm 2005 (as n. 15), 45.

59 Ran Zadok, Geographical, Onomastic, and Lexical Notes, Archiv für Orientforschung 46/47 (1999–2000), 208–212, here 211–212.

60 Although cf. Matthew Stolper, Iranica in

Post-Achaemenid Babylonian Texts, in: Pierre Briant / Francis Joannès (eds.): La transition entre l'empire achéménide et les royaumes hellénistiques vers 350–300 av. J.-C. (Persika 9), Paris 2006, 223–260, here 231–232, who thinks that the title was not in continuous use ca. 539–ca. 89 BC.

closer in the aftermath of the Persian conquest. The letter – which in any case refers to the god Marduk, the E-sangil, and the Babylonians – may have been known to and studied by the Babylonians long before the 1st century BC.

4.3 A Monument to Impress an Absentee King

Having settled on “stele” as the most probable object onto which the letter from the obedient Borsippans was inscribed, having established the timeframe of the stela’s inscription with the letter as 539–ca. 89 BC, and having identified the main courtyard of either the E-zida or the E-sangil as the location where it was probably displayed, we are several steps closer to identifying the historical circumstances behind the act of inscription. To whittle them down still further, we need to address the obvious question: what might have motivated the Borsippans or the Babylonians during these centuries to transform a letter to a long-dead king, preserved on clay, into a stone monument?

As mentioned above (Part 2), the letter’s survival into the early 1st century BC is likely due to its depiction of the king relying on the skills of Borsippa’s priestly elite. This depiction could have been a source of pride to the Borsippans (or Babylonians) at any point after the memory of the interfering, vengeful, but – relatively speaking – culturally engaged Assyrians had been replaced by the reality of the Persians and Seleucids, who exploited the temples economically, but were relatively disengaged from the traditions of Babylonian temple life.

Who was intended to see the stele? If it stood in Courtyard A of the E-zida, the E-zida priesthood would have had the opportunity to contemplate its inscription as they performed their cultic duties. However, the display of a letter to an earlier king on a stele represents an exceptional act: no other letters, let alone letters to earlier kings, are attested on stelae in a Mesopotamian context. We should, therefore, reckon with a special occasion, such as a royal visit to the temple, and a specific target audience, namely the king. The priests must have hoped that the king would recognise their contemporary needs, such as tax-relief, funding for building work on the temple, or royal participation in cultic events.

But which king? If the act occurred between 539 and ca. 89 BC, we are confronted with 29 options: the 10 kings of the Achaemenid empire (539–331), Alexander of Macedonia and the first 12 Seleucid kings (ca. 331–141), the first 5 Parthian rulers to rule Babylonia (141–89), and the Characene ruler Hyspaosines. Large though this number of candidates might seem, most of these kings would have been unsusceptible to the intended impact of the stele. Cambyses, the second Achaemenid ruler, is an exception. He was sufficiently interested in earlier stelae that he sent a messenger to study those housed in the E-anna temple in southern Babylonia,⁶¹ and he must have known of Assurbanipal,

⁶¹ Kristin Kleber, *Tempel und Palast. Die Beziehungen zwischen dem König und dem Eanna-Tempel im spätbabylonischen Uruk (Alter*

Orient und Altes Testament 358) Münster 2010, 269–271.

since the official image of his father, Cyrus, intentionally emulated that of the Assyrian king.⁶² A second exception is Alexander, who seems to have been favourably disposed towards Babylonian scholarship during his two brief spells in Babylon in 331 and 323.⁶³ A third exception is Hyspaosines, who during his brief reign in Babylon (ca. 127–124) employed one of Nabû-mušētiq-ūdi's older relations at his court in Babylon.⁶⁴

If, for the sake of argument, we assume that the stele was erected by the Borsippans in the E-zida, one issue speaks against all three of these candidates, namely the fact that none of them is known to have visited Borsippa. In fact, of the 29 rulers of Babylonia between 539 and 120 BC, a connection with the E-zida temple is documented for just two. The first is Antiochus I (r. 281–261 BC), whose sponsorship of the restoration of the E-zida in Borsippa and the E-sangil in Babylon during 270/the early 260s is documented by a commemorative inscription.⁶⁵ As Eleanor Robson has pointed out, however, the wording of the inscription suggests that Antiochus I never went to Borsippa.⁶⁶ The second king for whom an E-zida connection is recorded is Antiochus III (r. 222–187 BC), whose presence in the E-zida temple is attested twice: first in 205 BC, when he participated in the New Year's Festival, and again in 187 BC, when he visited Babylon and Borsippa just before his death in Elam.⁶⁷ According to the fragmentary account of Antiochus' III second visit, the Babylonians showed him a garment and a crown associated with Nebuchadnezzar II, an act which has been interpreted as intending to “renew the compact between the king and his city.”⁶⁸ Comparisons with Greek accounts of the arrival of Seleucid kings in cities further west suggest that these were significant performative occasions and a “privileged moment for benefaction and the confirmation or transformation of its status by royal grant.”⁶⁹ We can therefore assume that both of

62 See Piotr Michalowski, *Biography of a Sentence. Assurbanipal, Nabonidus, and Cyrus*, in: Michael Kozuh / Wouter Henkelman / Charles E. Jones / Christopher Woods (eds.): *Extraction and Control. Studies in Honor of Matthew W. Stolper* (Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 68), Chicago 2014, 203–210, with earlier literature.

63 Robson 2019 (as n. 26), 176–177.

64 Robson 2019 (as n. 26), 179–180, 193–194.

65 See n. 25 above.

66 Robson 2019 (as n. 26), 178.

67 Both visits are recorded in Astronomical Diaries: Hermann Hunger / Abraham J. Sachs, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia*, Volume II, Vienna 1989, no. 204, ll. 14–19 and Hermann Hunger / Abraham J. Sachs, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia*, Volume III, Vienna 1996, no. 187, r. 3'–18'.

68 Johannes Haubold, *Converging Perspectives on Antiochus III*, in: Boris Chrubasik / Daniel King (eds.): *Hellenism and the Local Communi-*

ties of the Eastern Mediterranean 400 BCE–250 CE, Oxford 2017, 111–130, here 122. See also Babett Edelmann-Singer, *Material Culture, Ritual Performance and Seleukid Rule: Antiochos IV and the Procession at Daphne in 166 BC*, in: Altay Coşkun / Nicholas V. Sekunda / Richard Wenghofer (eds.): *Seleukid Ideology and Warfare. Selected Papers from Seleukid Study Day VI (Responses to Seleukid Ideology) and VII (Seleukid Warfare)* (*Studia Hellenistica*), Leiden 2022 (forthcoming) and Laetitia Graslin-Thomé, *La regne d'Antiochus III vu depuis Babylon: Antiochus III dans les sources cunéiformes*, in: Christian Feyel / Laetitia Graslin-Thomé (eds.) 2017: *Antiochos III et l'Orient*, Paris, 211–242, here 231–232, who suggests that the king's main aim in visiting Babylon on the second occasion was more practical, namely to requisition objects from the temple treasury to fund his financial needs.

69 Paul J. Kosmin, *The Land of the Elephant Kings. Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire*, Cambridge, MA 2014, 154–155.

Antiochus III's visits were important to the Borsippans and that they would have prepared to receive him accordingly. Showing the king a stele inscribed with a letter from their earlier counterparts to the great Assyrian king Assurbanipal would have conveyed a similar message to the curious monarch as their neighbours' display of Nebuchadnezzar's royal insignia: in both cases venerable earlier rulers were evoked and continuity with the present was implied.

5. Summary

The "life" of the letter from the obedient Borsippans opened and closed in a manner unusual for a Babylonian letter. If the analysis offered here is correct, the letter was composed in the mid-7th century BC as a diplomatic response to a traditional foe and ended its days in the 1st century BC as a scribal exercise studied for its depiction of the priesthood of a Babylonian temple responding to an important request of a famous king. The most unusual episode of the letter's life, however, occurred in the intervening period, when it was transformed into a stone monument. An investigation of the nature of this monument indicates that it was probably a stele that was carved with the letter's text at some point between 539 and ca. 89 BC and displayed in the main courtyard of either the E-zida temple in Borsippa or the E-sangil temple in Babylon. If the stele was displayed in the E-zida then the motivation for its creation could have been one of the two attested visits of Antiochus III to Borsippa in 205 and 187 BC. This unusual episode may represent an attempt by the Babylonian priesthood to demonstrate their value to a Seleucid ruler.

Anhang

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