

# Imperium and Officium Working Papers (IOWP)



## *The Neo-Babylonian empire*

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Abstract: The paper surveys rise and fall of the Neo-Babylonian empire and its principal institutions and basic structure.

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## 1. Introduction

The Neo-Babylonian empire (ca. 612-539 BC) dominated the Near East for about seventy years, that is, for a comparatively short period.<sup>1</sup> Born out of a local revolt in southern Mesopotamia aimed against Assyrian (northern Mesopotamian) domination, it managed to gain control over all of lower and upper Mesopotamia, parts of southwestern Iran, much of what is modern Syria, and the Levant. It fell at the hands of the Persian king Cyrus the Great, who captured Babylon in 539 BC. This event brought to an effective end millennia of Mesopotamian self-government, while Mesopotamian and in particular Babylonian culture and society continued to flourish for several centuries thereafter.

The Neo-Babylonian empire's short existence and abrupt, violent end precluded a full development of its institutions and did not allow Neo-Babylonian influence in the imperial periphery, in particular in Syria and Palestine, to make its characteristic mark (in other than a destructive way). This severely compromises attempts to establish the distinct character of this state that distinguished it from its better known fore-runner, the Neo-Assyrian empire, and its successor, the Persian empire. Furthermore, we are hampered not so much by a lack of sources than by their uneven distribution. Written sources come mostly from Mesopotamia and are written in the cuneiform script. Non-cuneiform sources include some disjointed (and frequently unreliable) passages in Greek historians, such as Herodotus and Berossus, of whose important work unfortunately only a small part is preserved, and of course the Hebrew Bible, whose account of the destruction of the kingdom of Judah at the hands of the Babylonian army is exceedingly influential in shaping the legacy of the Babylonian empire, while its factual contribution to the reconstruction of the pertinent historical events is limited. Regarding the Babylonian sources, we are well informed on the economic and social history of the imperial core in southern Mesopotamia in this period owing to tens of thousands of clay tablets of administrative and legal content (Jursa 2005). These texts allow a reconstruction of the economic structures of the Neo-Babylonian empire, at least in its core, in considerable detail, and demonstrate the economic consequences of imperial rule (Jursa 2010a). On the other hand we lack state archives of the kind that have been found in Assyrian Nineveh and throw so much light on the history of the Neo-Assyrian empire. For most periods of Mesopotamian history, royal inscriptions are a major source of information on political history as well as on royal ideology and even matters of internal social and economic developments. The extant corpus of Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions however is rather

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disappointing in this respect (they are excellently surveyed in Da Riva 2008). While the number of texts is considerable, the range of their contents is limited: the principal intention of these inscriptions is to establish the kings' legitimacy by emphasising their being elected by the gods. They do so by focussing on the principal religious duty of the Neo-Babylonian kings, viz., their obligation to act as guarantors of the cult of the main deities of Mesopotamia. For this reason temple building, temple restoration work and to a lesser extent city reconstruction loom large among the subjects of the inscriptions. Another major interest of these inscriptions lies in establishing legitimacy through emphasis on (imagined) historical continuity. The Neo-Babylonian kings' frequent references to royal predecessors (of often the remote past) have to be seen in this light: the veneration for the Babylonian past played an important role in Neo-Babylonian royal ideology (see Schaudig 2002 and in particular 2003).

Military events are rarely touched upon in the royal inscriptions, in strong contrast to the Neo-Assyrian inscriptions of the eighth and seventh century BC. Internal political events are also largely absent in these texts, with the exception of some texts written in the name of the empire's last king, Nabonidus. His inscriptions have frequently been analysed for their bearing on the king's religious policy and the resistance this policy may have met in certain segments of the priesthood (e.g., Beaulieu 2007). Overall, political institutions, the forms of government and political history in general are not well known; reconstructions, such as the present paper, must make use of comparative data from earlier and later periods of Mesopotamian history if they do not want to limit themselves to a positivistic listing of the sketchy evidence. It is certainly significant that hitherto there is only one monographic political history of the Neo-Babylonian empire (von Voigtlander 1963: a doctoral thesis that was never published as a book).

Archaeology might be expected to fill some of the gaps left by the textual sources. Unfortunately, while a research programme for an "archaeology of (Near Eastern Iron Age) empires" has been formulated by Matthews (2003, 127-154), pertinent research simply is not yet sufficiently advanced to help historical reconstruction in more than details (see in general Baker [in press] and the references in Jursa 2010a, 6). For southern Mesopotamia, the core of the empire, we have important archaeological surveys that show us remarkable demographic growth and a rapid process of urbanization: about half of the population lived in cities of more than ten hectares (Adams 1981, 178). For other, peripheral parts of the empire, comparable information is largely lacking. This is particularly problematic with respect to the effects of Babylonian control over Syria and Palestine for whose analysis we largely have to

rely on archaeological data.<sup>2</sup> In general, there are few studies and most peripheral areas of the Neo-Babylonian empire have not been properly investigated for traces of the Babylonian imperial presence, but much important work has been done within the modern borders of Israel (e.g., Lipschits 2005; Lipschits and Blenkinsopp 2003).

## 2. Origins and fall

The Neo-Babylonian empire has its roots in Babylonia, in southern Mesopotamia. The political history of Babylonia in the first millennium BC can be divided into several distinct phases. The fall of the Second Dynasty of Isin at the end of the second millennium BC ushered in a period of roughly three centuries characterised by the weakness of the monarchy, a comparatively fast turnover of dynasties and rulers, and a resulting fragmentation of the political landscape.<sup>3</sup> Some of the old cities in the central alluvium seem to have enjoyed de-facto autonomy from the central government and its seat in Babylon, they were ruled by nearly independent ‘governors’ and/or city councils (e.g., Cole 1996a). Even in the subsequent period of Neo-Assyrian domination the city councils still play an important role: they are accepted as interlocutors and political players by the Assyrians (Barjamovic 2004). This period also saw the arrival of Semitic population groups of non-Babylonian origin, in particular Chaldeans and Arameans, and to some extent also Arabs. Some of these groups settled on the fringes of the country. Arameans dominated the Tigris area, Chaldeans the far south of Babylonia. Especially the latter, however, settled also further north, along the Euphrates and thus in the core of Babylonia. Of all the non-Babylonian groups, the Chaldeans had the strongest tendency to adopt urban life and, to some extent, Babylonian traditions, while apparently keeping their ‘tribal’ identity (e.g., Brinkman 1968, 260-288; 1975; 1984, 12-15; Cole 1996b, 17-34; Lipiński 2000, 416-422). Throughout most of this period Chaldeans competed for the throne in Babylon with pretenders from a ‘traditional’ urban Babylonian background. Possession of the throne may have rotated among the three major Chaldean tribes of Bīt-Dakkūri, Bīt-Amūkāni and Bīt-Yakīn (Brinkman 1984, 176). The tribal communities controlled much of the rural hinterland of the Babylonian cities in the southern alluvium, thereby severely restricting the control of these cities over their environment.

<sup>2</sup> In general, Iron Age archaeology in Syria seems to be an astonishingly neglected subject. The synthesis on “The Archaeology of Syria” offered by Akkermans and Schwartz (2003), of about 400 pages of text, treats the Neolithic in over 110 pages, but allots the Iron Age less than forty (the hunter-gatherers at the end of the Ice Age get twenty-eight).

<sup>3</sup> Brinkman 1968 remains unsurpassed as a reference work for this period. The eighth-century letters from Nippur edited by Cole 1996a are the most important body of material published since the appearance of Brinkman’s book. They are contextualised in Cole 1996b and, importantly, in van Driel 1998.

Overall the impression one gets from the written sources originating in the Babylonian, city-based segment of society is one of crisis, or at least decline. Hence the country in its weakened state had insufficient resources to defend itself successfully when, beginning in the second half of the eighth century, Assyrian expansionism increasingly posed a threat to Babylonian independence and statehood. The kingdom of Elam likewise entered the scene, mostly as an ally of the Babylonians (e.g., Potts 1999, 259-288), but this did not prevent Elam from doing its share of damage, as in the case of the raid made by the Elamite king Halluš-Inšušinak into Babylonia (Grayson 1975, No. 1 II 39-45).

Babylonian history entered the new phase characterised by the conflict with Assyria after the comparatively stable reign of Nabû-nâsir (747-734 BC; e.g., Brinkman 1984a and Frame 1992), when a series of energetic and successful Assyrian kings more or less continuously waged war against Babylonia. The political centre of gravity in the country shifted to the south, to the Chaldean heartland; the north would only recover in the sixth century. The fighting culminated in 689 BC when the Assyrian king Sennacherib ordered Babylon and its temples to be sacked and destroyed: an act of unprecedented violence against a city of paramount cultural and religious importance also for the Assyrians. Sennacherib's successor Esarhaddon ushered in a comparatively peaceful phase of Assyrian-Babylonian relations; Babylon was reconstructed. Under Esarhaddon's son Assurbanipal however most of Babylonia rebelled again against Assyrian rule (652-648).

Assurbanipal's siege of Babylon and the subsequent sack of the city mark the nadir of the political fortunes of the country in the first half of the first millennium BC: the Assyrian king's inscriptions relate the deprivations experienced by the inhabitants of Babylon with characteristic relish (e.g., Borger 1996: 234f. §§ 38, 41). All of Babylonia suffered: the rebel cities at the hands of the Assyrians, the cities that remained loyal to Assurbanipal at the hands of the rebel coalition. After the final defeat of the rebels Babylonia was ruled for the Assyrians by the shadowy puppet-king Kandalānu. There are first signs of an economic recovery; Babylonia experienced a phase of relative stability and peace.

After Assurbanipal's and Kandalānu's death in 627, a new period of upheaval and war began. Intra-Assyrian strife destabilised the Assyrian hold on Babylonia, and the final blow to Assyrian domination came from inside the Assyrian system of government. Nabopolassar (Nabû-aplu-ušur in Babylonian), the instigator of a rebellion against the Assyrians that began in 626 BC in southern Babylonia, can with some plausibility be identified as the Assyrian governor of the southern city of Uruk. He was the descendent of a locally important family that had a tradition of serving the Assyrians and owned land and temple offices in Uruk (Jursa

2007a). At the same time, Nabopolassar may have been a Dakkurean, that is, of Chaldean, i.e., non-Babylonian, tribal origin, at least in the eyes of contemporaries from northern Babylonia (Jursa 2006, 161). After more than a decade of fighting Assyria was defeated and its major cities destroyed by a joint force of Babylonians and Medes from Iran (for details, see Fuchs, in press).

In this way Nabopolassar (626-605 BC) became the founder of the Neo-Babylonian empire which eventually took over much of the former Assyrian territory, both in Northern Mesopotamia and in Syria and the Levant.<sup>4</sup> The westward expansion of Babylonian rule towards the Mediterranean sea and the checking of the Egyptian expansion north-eastward were mostly achieved by Nabopolassar's son and successor Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BC). Nebuchadnezzar's rock inscriptions in Lebanon are the most impressive physical evidence for the Neo-Babylonian presence in this area and for the Empire's wish to control the region (Da Riva 2010a, Da Riva in press). Nevertheless the exact nature of Babylonian domination over the empire's western provinces is a matter of debate, as detailed sources comparable to the Assyrian state archives are mostly lacking (see below). Some scholars assume that Babylonian control amounted to little more than regular incursions of the Babylonian army into Syria and the Levant that were aimed at the collection of tribute. Others point to evidence that suggests a more stable and generally less destructive role of Babylonian rule in the West.

The dominion over Syria and the Levant, and booty from Assyria, filled the coffers of the Neo-Babylonian kings. Their building inscriptions, as well as archaeological data, give ample evidence for how they spent this wealth. Huge building projects were undertaken in all major cities, especially in the capital, Babylon, itself: temples were restored, huge palaces were built, city walls restored or newly constructed, and ambitious hydrological projects undertaken (Da Riva 2008, 109-113). The state was fairly 'strong' and centralised, and its institutions could cope with instability at the top of the governmental hierarchy. Royal succession was supposed to be hereditary, but there were two changes of dynasty within a short time, from Nebuchadnezzar's son and successor Amīl-Marduk (562-560 BC) to Neriglissar (560-556 BC) and from Neriglissar's son Lâbâši-Marduk (556 BC) to Nabonidus (556-539 BC), the last Neo-Babylonian king. Military leaders and the governors of peripheral (Chaldean and Aramean) tribal regions in the south and the east of Babylonia were probably the main cause of instability (see below). The Babylonian cities in the central alluvium on the other hand, which had been centres of unrest during the Assyrian period (both as enemies and

<sup>4</sup> The only monographic survey of the political history of the Neo-Babylonian empire is von Voigtlander 1963; more recent, but less comprehensive treatments include Vanderhooft 1999, Beaulieu 1989, Schaudig 2001, 9-27, Da Riva 2008, 2-19.

as supporters of Assyrian rule), were now generally loyal to whoever managed to secure the crown for himself. In any case the general structure of the state and its political unity were never in doubt within the imperial core.

Babylonia's thriving social and economic life was not seriously disrupted even in 539 when the last Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus, was defeated by the Persian king Cyrus and Babylonia was integrated into the Persian empire which, after defeating the Medes and Lydia, had in a short period of time become the most powerful state in the Near East and was on its way to 'world' dominion.<sup>5</sup>

The fall of Babylonia came rapidly, but no more rapidly, as far as we can tell, as that of the Lydian state for instance, which likewise did not manage to resist the Persians for long. Later pro-Persian propaganda texts aimed at a Babylonian audience paint a negative of the last Babylonian king, Nabonidus. There may have been internal divisions within Babylonia, owing to Nabonidus's attempts at religious reform: it has been assumed that owing to his preference for the Moon-god Sîn of his mother's native Harrānu over the traditional head of the pantheon, the city god of Babylon, Marduk, the disaffected Marduk priests basically opened the gates to Cyrus.<sup>6</sup> This is not confirmed by contemporary sources. These in fact suggest that the empire was basically stable until its very end as far as its institutions and power structures are concerned<sup>7</sup> – in fact, the principal 'villains' (apart from Nabonidus himself) of the Persian period propaganda texts directed against Nabonidus demonstrably retained their position as high officials and priests also during the reign of Cyrus: they would surely have been removed from office had there been a Babylonian 'resistance movement' against Nabonidus and his administration (Kleber 2007). In general Babylonian priests, even those of Marduk, did not wield sufficient independent power to have been able to challenge the king (Jursa in press a).

In sum, the existence of the Neo-Babylonian empire cannot be disconnected from the vicissitudes of Assyrian rule over Babylonia and from the fate of the Assyrian empire in general. The rapid rise of the Neo-Babylonian empire was owed to the fact that it could fill the void left by the fall of Assyria at the hands of the Babylonians and the Medes, probably taking over what Assyrian institutions had survived in the west. The end of Babylonian

<sup>5</sup> See particularly the outstanding portrait of the Persian empire by Pierre Briant: Briant 1996 and 2002. For the problem of the supposed Median 'empire' see the essays collected in Lanfranchi *et al.* (eds) 2003.

<sup>6</sup> One example of many: Liverani 1988, 888-93. Detailed studies, with partly opposing results: Beaulieu 1989; Kuhrt 1990; Frahm in Braun-Holzinger and Frahm 1999, 150-151; Michalowski 2003 (and 2005, 177-178); Kleber 2008, 345-347; Da Riva 2010, 59-60; more references in Schaudig 2001, 9-23. See now also Kuhrt 2007, 70-87.

<sup>7</sup> As already pointed out by Kuhrt 1990, 154-155. See Jursa 2007b.

independence a mere seventy years later came after a military defeat. We do not have any convincing evidence for a decisive structural weakness or internal strife that might have brought about, or hastened, the collapse of the empire.

### 3. The structure of the Neo-Babylonian imperial core

The king and his tripartite state

The ‘emic’ view of the geographical subdivisions of the empire appears clearly in some of Nebuchadnezzar’s inscriptions. These texts distinguish the following principal parts of the empire. The Sealand in the south comprised the delta zone of the Euphrates and Tigris, i.e., the core area of Chaldean settlement including the old Babylonian cities of Ur, Uruk and Larsa. The land of Akkade consisted of central and northern Babylonia including regions east of the Tigris. It included some tribal regions (Aramean Puqūdu and Chaldean Bīt-Amukānu) and the most important old cities, Babylon, Borsippa, Nippur, Cutha and Sippar, which may have preserved part of their old semi-autonomy and certainly had a claim to special treatment on the part of the crown that was based on their religious importance. North and east of Akkad, along the Tigris, was the land of Assyria, which included the cities of Arrapha and Laḫīru. Beyond these regions, which delimit the traditional boundaries of Mesopotamia, the vision of Nebuchadnezzar’s inscriptions becomes vague. The king speaks of the “kings on the other side of the river (Euphrates), the governors of the land of Ḫatti (i.e., northern Syria)” and of “kings in distant regions” in the midst of the Upper and the Lower Sea (i.e., the Mediterranean and the Gulf) over whom he ruled (Da Riva 2008, 19-23). This suggests that the periphery of the Empire consisted of an irregular network of regions (‘provinces’) under direct Babylonian government and of semi-independent vassal states that owed tribute.

Regarding its institutions and administration, the structure of the Neo-Babylonian Empire is on its surface level that of a typical Ancient Near Eastern monarchy of the Iron Age. Conceptually, the supreme political power was vested in the king who derived his legitimacy from the fact that he acted as the gods’ vicar on earth. The royal ideology of the period differed markedly from the image of, e.g., the Assyrian king: ideally, a Neo-Babylonian king wanted to be seen “not as conquerer, administrator, or provider of social justice but as religious leader and teacher of wisdom” (Beaulieu 2007, 142). This image is projected by the royal inscriptions and the curriculum of the scribal schools that focussed strongly on the figure of the king and the greatness of Babylon (Frahm 2011, 360-361): it is aimed at a Babylonian urban audience. In the recently conquered western parts of the Empire on the other hand, the iconographic language of Babylonian rock reliefs (foremost at Brisa in

Lebanon) was based on Neo-Assyrian precedents and thereby implicitly claimed the legitimacy of the Babylonians' Mesopotamian imperial predecessors (Da Riva 2010a, 179).

In the available sources the dominance of the royal figure and the role of the capital Babylon are never questioned: the ideological framework of the Neo-Babylonian empire was stable and firm. In actual fact however the monarchy was but one of three distinct elements whose interaction and shifting balance of power defined the structure of the Babylonian state throughout the first millennium BC. The other two elements are the old Babylonian cities of the southern Mesopotamian alluvium, and the Chaldean and Aramean tribes, especially those settled east of the Tigris. Ethnic subdivisions had important political as well as social implications for the Neo-Babylonian empire. On the social plane this is apparent from the considerable care with which urban Babylonians kept themselves segregated, rigorously so on the level of marriage and lineage and less distinctly, but still in a noticeable fashion, on the level of economic interchange, from the surrounding Aramean part of society (Zadok 2003, 484). The role of the tribes is generally not emphasised in treatments of Babylonian history of the sixth century BC because they appear rarely in the written sources for this reason: the bias of the documentation is owed to its origin in a Babylonian urban milieu. The Assyrian state archives of the seventh century that prove the decisive role of the tribes in Babylonian politics in this period have no counterpart in the sixth century.

Even though the tribes are poorly documented in the sixth century their importance can be considered a given: it is extremely unlikely that such important social bodies should have disappeared within the course of a few decades after the collapse of the Neo-Assyrian empire. In fact we do have one unique source that illustrates clearly the tripartite structure of the state and the important role of the tribes. This text, known as Nebuchadnezzar's *Hofkalender*, is a building inscription of Nebuchadnezzar of 598 BC written on an unfortunately damaged clay prism. The inscription enumerates in an appendix the chief dignitaries of the state that had symbolically contributed to the construction of the palace that was the principal topic of the inscription in question:<sup>8</sup> These dignitaries can be divided into palace officials, that is, the men forming the king's entourage; governors of provinces and tribal areas; and officials in charge of the Babylonian cities of the alluvium: these three groups represent the three principal subdivisions of the Neo-Babylonian empire as set out above.

The highest officials of the Neo-Babylonian empire

<sup>8</sup> Edition and translations: Unger 1931, 284-285; Oppenheim 1969, 307-308.; see also Vanderhooft 1999, 41-42, 93-99 and Beaulieu 2002, 99-101. The latest treatment of the list of officials can be found in Jursa 2010b, 78-91.

Any discussion of the highest echelons of the Neo-Babylonian empire must necessarily start with the *Hofkalender*. This list names in first place the chief palace officials, that is officials working in the immediate vicinity of the king, his chief advisors and representatives (III 35'-40'). After a short gap in the text, there follow palace officials of secondary rank (IV 1'-19').

After the palace officials follow the so-called “magnates of the land of Akkad” (Akkad being an archaic designation of Babylonia): these are men who are in charge of certain territories. They can be divided into two principal categories:

First come the more important ‘magnates,’ the men who control large territories that are on the fringes of, or border on, the central alluvial plain and are not part of the traditional core of Babylonia. Most of these men are in fact leaders of Chaldean and Aramean tribes (IV 21'-33'). Among others, the list mentions: the governor of the Sealand; Nergal-šarru-ušur (= Neriglissar, the later king) the *simmagir* (governor of a large province east of the Tigris); the governor of the region of Tupliaš, likewise in the east; and the heads of the Puqūdu, Dakkūru, Gambulu and Amukkānu tribes. Dakkūru and Amukkānu are Chaldean tribes, Gambulu and Puqūdu are the two dominant Aramean tribes of the period (e.g., Frame 1992, 36-45). The head of the Puqūdu can probably be identified as the father of Neriglissar (see, e.g., Beaulieu 1989, 68, van Driel 1998-2001, 228<sup>9</sup>).

Thereafter come the officials governing cities in the central alluvium: royal commissioners, city governors and the chief priests of the principal temples of the cities in question (V 1'-12' and V 13'-22'). Owing to the damage suffered by the prism, there is no mention in the list of the representatives of the most important Babylonian cities, Babylon, Borsippa, Cutha, Kish, Uruk, Nippur and Sippar. The list is concluded by seven vassal kings from the Levant (V 23'-29'). It mentions, i.a., the kings of Tyre, Gaza, Sidon, Arwad and Ashdod.

The structure of the state administration can be deduced to some extent from the list of the highest-ranking royal officials, most of which are mentioned in the *Hofkalender* (references and discussion: Jursa 2010b, 80-91; for the military commanders see also Joannès 2000, 64-66). We can distinguish officials who work within the palace, in close proximity to the king, and have duties within the administration of the king's household, from office holders whose duties are concerned with state administration. Some titles are ceremonial, their literal meaning stands in no relation to the actual duties attached to the office.

<sup>9</sup> But cf. Schaudig 2001, 13.

– The “Chief Supervisor of Irrigation Installations and Public Works” (*mašennu*) is also in charge of the collection of agricultural dues from the heartland of Babylonia. He is responsible for the agricultural backbone of the Babylonian economy and thus of the state’s revenues.

– The “Chief Baker” (*rab nuḫatimmī*) is one of the highest-ranking officials working within the palace establishment. He is in charge of the royal table and the provisioning of the royal household and all its dependants.

– The “Chief Treasurer” (*rab kāširī*, literally: “Chief Tailor”, a ceremonial title) is responsible for the non-agricultural revenues of the king; his tasks and those of the Chief Supervisor of Irrigation Installations and Public Works are complementary.

– The “Palace Superintendent” (*ša pān ekalli*) is in charge of the palace establishment, that is, of the royal household in a narrow sense. This includes responsibilities for the construction and maintenance of the huge palace buildings themselves.

– The king’s “Major Domus” (*rab bīti*) is responsible for the royal estates and their agricultural production.

– The “Commander of the Royal Guard” (*rab tābiḫī*) takes also part in military campaigns outside Babylonia. He may have been the commander in chief of the core units of the military, the standing army, which probably included a significant contingent of mercenaries or in any case non-Babylonians.

– The Chief Chamberlain (*rab-ša-rēši*, literally: “Chief of Courtiers”) was the overall commander in chief of the Babylonian army including the various levies furnished by the Babylonian cities and presumably by the Chaldean and Aramean tribes. The “courtiers” (*ša-rēši*) were the backbone of the royal administration. It has been assumed on the basis of Assyrian evidence that they, and by extension, their chief, were eunuchs, but this is not uncontested even for the Assyrian empire and in any case not supported by internal Babylonian evidence. One recently identified text states explicitly however that the principal characteristic of a *ša rēši* was seen in the fact that he had been cut off from his own family and therefore owed all his personal allegiance to the king: a clear indication of the patrimonial nature of this level of royal administration (De Zorzi and Jursa, in press; on the *ša-rēši* in general see Jursa, in press [b]).

– The *rab mungi*, whose title cannot be translated literally, was another high military commander; he may have been in charge of the chariotry; in the Assyrian empire, he could also function as a military governor (Radner 2002, 12f.).

– The supervision of the civil administration of the heartland lay chiefly in the hand of three men: the *sartennu*, the “Chief Judge,” the *sukkallu*, another official with juridical obligations, and the “Royal Secretary” (*zazakku*), possibly the chief supervisor of bureaucratic matters.

In addition to these top officials, one could mention a number of slightly lower-ranking men with practical or ceremonial responsibilities, such as the chief of royal merchants (*rab tamkāri*), the man in charge of royal flocks (*rab būli*), and the chief singer (*rab zammāri*).

The large majority of these titles are either of Assyrian origin, as is revealed by their linguistic form, or are at least first attested during the period of the Assyrian domination of Babylonia. The basic tasks of the Assyrian officials in question and of their Babylonian equivalents were in fact the same, as far as we can tell: structurally, the Neo-Babylonian court was built according to an Assyrian model (Jursa 2010b, 97-99).

There was however a significant difference in the way these official positions were conceptualized in Assyria and in the Neo-Babylonian empire. Under the Neo-Babylonian empire at least all those Babylonian officials who were active outside the palace proper could dispose of an entourage of their own that was based on their household and their estates. They were rich and to a certain degree also powerful in their own right. However, there is no evidence that these palace officials in the king’s vicinity were in independent control of means that could potentially have threatened the power of the king: in contrast to Assyrian practice, these palace officials were not at the same time heads of important provinces – this is also evident from the *Hofkalender*. Local and decentralised power outside the capital and the immediate presence of the king and his representatives lay in the hand, not of the high palace officials, but of dignitaries of local, in particularly tribal origin. These magnates were not necessarily linked to the monarchy by a tight bond, nor did they necessarily have to spend much time at court, in default of a formal courtly office of their own. The Neo-Babylonian king’s court therefore did not exercise well one primary function that is usually attributed to royal courts, following the model developed by Norbert Elias, Werner Paravicini and others (see, e.g., Hirschbiegel 2010, 20), viz., that of ‘domesticating’ and controlling the state’s elites by binding them to the person and office of the king through offices, gifts and physical proximity. Herein lies a structural weakness of the Neo-Babylonian empire, as we will see.

#### Local administration in Babylonia proper

The Babylonian cities had distinct local institutions of their own and a tradition of semi-autonomous self-government through much of the first centuries of the first millennium BC.

The institutions of urban administration were to some extent located in the local temples: the highest-ranking priests (*šangû* “Chief Priest”, *šatammu* “Bishop”<sup>10</sup>) always played an important role. Their power was balanced in larger cities by city governors or mayors (*šākin tēmi*) who, just as the chief priests, were recruited from the locally dominant families: large cities had *šatammus* (“Bishops”) and *šākin tēmis* (“City Governors”), smaller cities only *šangûs* (“Chief Priests”). These local authorities acted on their own or jointly with local assemblies (*puḫru*) in which some discretionary power could be vested. In their heyday in the seventh century these institutions possibly may have been true citizen assemblies in which all free males of a city participated but it is more probable that even then they were bodies depending on an oligarchy of powerful local families.<sup>11</sup>

In the sixth century, under the Neo-Babylonian empire, these organs of local power were still extant, but they had been harnessed by the central royal government. Chief priests and city governors, for all their local background, were royal appointees. They were kept in check by ubiquitous royal commissioners (*qīpu*, *bēl piqitti*) that the central government placed in key positions: local administration typically depended on the close interaction of local dignitaries of Babylonian origin and ‘outsiders’ brought in by the king. The royal officials were often ‘courtiers’, *ša-rēši*; in the texts they are never identified by the characteristic double filiations (father’s name and ‘ancestor’s’ or family name) that are typical of Babylonian dignitaries, in particular priests: royal officials do not come from the class of urban landowners and priests to which local officials invariably belong. Many courtiers were demonstrably of non-Babylonian, mostly Aramaic (or Chaldean) origin (Jursa in press [b]) – in fact the royal administration always used two languages, Babylonian and Aramaic, and at least from the late reign of Nebuchadnezzar onwards tended to favour the second over the first, while local administration in the Babylonian cities, and in particular the temple administrations, continued to write nearly exclusively in Babylonian, using the Cuneiform script (Hackl in press; Jursa in press [c], [d]).

As a result of this double administrative structure, the cities’ resources – which includes the temples, their estates and their personnel – were at the full disposal of the crown. This does not mean that the urban elites who dominated the cities and the temples did not resent to some extent the centralising power of the monarchy. In fact aspects of Nabonidus’s policy in religious and administrative matters can be understood best as an attempt to strengthen the

<sup>10</sup> This is a function that unites executive duties in temple administration and cultic functions in a way that allows applying this deliberately anachronistic translation. See Kleber 2008, 6 for the various translations that have been proposed. ‘Bishop’ was first suggested by B. Landsberger.

<sup>11</sup> See provisionally Dandamaev 1988, 1995 and 1997; Barjamovic 2004.

hold of his administration on the Babylonian cities and their temples, acting against the particularizing self-interest of the Babylonian urban landholders who traditionally controlled all city-based institutions (Kleber 2008, 344-348). This however does not amount to a systemic conflict between the kings and the priesthood (or between the ‘palace’ and the temples, to invoke an Assyriological cliché),<sup>12</sup> the latter was but one social institution dominated by the urban elites whose interests were at stake. Overall the Neo-Babylonian kings were successful in controlling the old Babylonian cities. We have to look forward to the period of Achaemenid rule over Babylonia to see these cities and their elites acting independently of the rulers – the severe Persian reprisals against the Babylonian urban bourgeoisie and the temples after the crushing of the Babylonian rebellion against Xerxes in the early fifth century show that it had been precisely these sectors of Babylonian society that had been the core of the uprising (Waerzeggers 2003/2004; Kessler 2004).

The tribes and the changes of the royal line

While the cities of the central alluvium had thus been brought into line by the government the same cannot be said for the important tribal areas in the south and south-east of the country. We have already seen that according to the *Hofkalender* there was a distinction between the king’s entourage of palace officials – powerful men no doubt, but without a real powerbase of their own – and the “magnates of the land of Akkad,” in particular the governors of the trans-Tigridian provinces and the leaders of the Aramaic and Chaldean tribes. In all likelihood it is here, in an unfortunately badly documented part of the core area of the Neo-Babylonian empire, that the real source of at least military power was located (see below). We have already emphasised above that while the kings necessarily had to harness this power in one way or another, there was no systematic attempt of integrating the tribal leaders who wielded it in the first place into the royal court by giving them court offices.

We have seen that the founder of the Neo-Babylonian empire himself, Nabopolassar, certainly originated in southern Babylonia and was apparently considered by at least some contemporaries to have been a Chaldean of the Dakkūru tribe. His son Nebuchadnezzar and his grandson Amīl-Marduk continued his line. Then Neriglissar, the fourth Neo-Babylonian king, toppled Amīl-Marduk after a brief period of contentious rule. This Neriglissar was in charge of a large province east of the Tigris (the *bīt simmagir*) and most likely the son of the chief of the Aramean Puqūdu tribe (see above for the data of the *Hofkalender*); he was also a

<sup>12</sup> On the alleged conflict between Nabonidus and the Marduk priests see above p. 6 and the references given in note 6.

military commander who had been present at the siege of Jerusalem (Jursa 2010b, 85). His connections via marriage are extraordinarily suggestive of the real distribution of power in the Neo-Babylonian empire. According to the later historian Berossos, a well-informed Babylonian writing in Greek in the third century BC (Verbrugghe and Wickersham 2001, 60), Neriglissar was Nebuchadnezzar's son in law. We cannot prove this by contemporary sources, but Berossos is a credible witness, and in any case the information is entirely plausible: such a union would have been an attempt by the royal house to harness the power of the Puqūdu – an attempt that was proved futile by subsequent events. Neriglissar himself chose another type of alliance, by marrying his daughter to the chief priest of the important town of Borsippa (*Ner.* 13). In view of the endogamy normally found in such priestly circles and the complete absence of evidence for similar unions involving other princesses, this marriage has obvious political implications: the new king, of Aramean origin, wanted to find a way to assure the loyalty of the Babylonian urban elite of Borsippa in this manner (Waerzeggers 2010, 72).

A final change in the royal line came when the last Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus, and his son rose against Neriglissar's son and heir, Lābāši-Marduk, in 555 BC. Nabonidus's origins have been discussed frequently. We know that he was the son of an Aramaic priestess from Ḥarrān in Syria. Nabonidus was born most likely in this city while it was still under Assyrian control, well before the Babylonian conquest. His mother was born in 649 BC and was close to forty when Ḥarrān fell to Nabopolassar in 610 BC: she is unlikely to have given birth to a child after this event (Schaudig 2001, 9-14): Nabonidus was probably over fifty years of age when he ascended on the throne. His inscriptions name also his father Nabû-balāssu-iqbi but do not identify him any further; they may give him the same attributes ("grandee" and similar expressions) that Neriglissar in his inscriptions attributed to his father, the Aramean tribal leader Bēl-šumu-iškun, but this is not entirely certain owing to linguistic ambiguity.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand it is a priori certain that Nabonidus's father was a man of some importance. Given the chronology of events, the most plausible hypothesis is to assume that he was an Aramaic tribal leader who came to Babylonia in Assyrian service and changed sides when Nabopolassar's revolt broke out: a renegade like Nabopolassar himself.<sup>14</sup> This

<sup>13</sup> For these titles see Schaudig 2001, 13, who, with good, but not completely compelling arguments, departs from scholarly consensus by attributing these titles not to the kings' fathers, but to the kings themselves. Both interpretations are possible.

<sup>14</sup> The Assyrian letter corpus of the seventh century actually offers us a possible candidate for identification with Nabonidus's father: according to the letter SAA 18, 181, probably written in the 630ies, the military officer Nabû-balāssu-iqbi served the Assyrians in southern Babylonia (see Radner 2001, 807 s.v. Nabû-balāssu-iqbi 14). Writing to the Assyrian king in Babylonian and referring to an earlier missive in Aramaic, he complains about enormous personal grievances and unjustified loss of

would have allowed his son to enter the service of Nebuchadnezzar, as he did according to his own inscriptions.<sup>15</sup> Independent evidence for Nabonidus's activities before his usurpation of the throne shows him bearing responsibility for matters of military recruitment and the financing of the army both in the south of the Babylonia and in the north: he was undoubtedly a high-ranking military commander.<sup>16</sup> The army, and possibly a tribal background, were the basis that enabled Nabonidus and his son to stage their coup d'état.

Thus even within the core area of the Neo-Babylonian empire there were centralising as well as centrifugal tendencies which could not easily be harmonised. Conflict occurred along the lines of ethnic division. The crown pushed for centralisation and bureaucratic control, probably successfully so in the case of the old Babylonian cities of the alluvium whose landed elites in the final count bowed to royal demands. The tribal leaders on the other hand could not be integrated easily into the palace-based royal administration; they and provincial governors in general retained independent power bases. The highest royal officials could not act a stabilising factor for internal politics since they, in difference to Assyrian practice, were not given provinces of their own to govern in the name of the king. The successful coups of the military commanders Neriglissar and Nabonidus show that control of the army and, at least in the case of Neriglissar, the availability of tribal backing were the principal sources of political power: the second was probably a necessary precondition of the first.

The fiscal basis of the state and the army

Long-term stability and success of an empire depend, on the one hand, on the potential of its ideological foundation for elite integration and identity formation, and on the other, on its coercive power (e.g., Goldstone and Haldon 2009). We have noted both the unchallenged ideological primacy of the monarchy and the only partial success of elite integration, in that the tribes remained an element of instability. Regarding the coercive power of the empire, it is essential to the understand its fiscal structure and the means employed for levying soldiers

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property: problems that are similar to those that lay behind the rising of Nabopolassar in Uruk (Jursa 2007a, 125-127).

<sup>15</sup> A single text, *Nbk.* 70, from early in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar may attest Nabonidus as a "man of the crown prince;" however, the reading is uncertain, see Beaulieu 1989, 82.

<sup>16</sup> One letter can be attributed to Nabonidus the general (*NBDMich.* 67, correctly translated [as far as the important first few lines are concerned] and equally correctly dated to the second decade of Nebuchadnezzar's reign by Ebeling 149, 150, pace Beaulieu 1989, 185 and Kleber 2008, 232 note 641). The letter, which is written in an imperious tone, is addressed to the 'Bishop' of the city of Uruk, and deals with matters of recruitment and the financing of military expenses. A new edition of the letter by the author is forthcoming. Nabonidus is mentioned before his accession to the throne also in another letter from Sippar in northern Babylonia, CT 22, 185, which likewise deals with matters of recruitment (Beaulieu 1989, 83).

and corvée workers (syntheses and surveys of the rich data: e.g., Joannès 2000; van Driel 2002; Jursa 2010, 252-256, 645-660; Jursa [in press e], MacGinnis 2010).

Taxation and tribute (for the latter of which see below, section 4) were the principal sources of state revenue; the yield of royal domain land seems to have been of less importance. Taxation in Babylonia developed continuously during the time of the Neo-Babylonian empire and after the Persian conquest of Babylonia 539 BC. There is no fundamental break between the two periods and systems. The bulk of the evidence from the Neo-Babylonian period concerns Babylonian urban society. In this sector of society, direct taxation of (agrarian) income, as well as extraction of labour and military service, is attested in three forms, with respect to three distinct categories of social agents or groups: we hear of taxation and service obligations (a) in the realm of the temples; (b) with respect to agricultural land that the crown had granted to individuals or groups who in return owed the king taxes and/or labour and military service; and (c) with respect to private urban households (references for the following can be found in Jursa [in press e]).

Temples were important landowners. Taxes levied on the income of their estates were collected by an official attached to the Esangila temple in Babylon. The Esangila, the principal temple of Babylon, served as a collection point for this type of agricultural income, which is attested first during the reign of Nabopolassar, before 600 BC. Under Cyrus and Cambyses (around 530 BC, after the fall of the Neo-Babylonian empire) the tax amounted to 3.33 percent of the temples' harvest (*AnOr* 8, 63, 9 Cyr; YBC 4164, 6 [Camb]). The royal administration also accepted, or perhaps indeed encouraged, payments in silver money rather than in kind. The king also drew on temple resources over and above the regular taxation of the temples' agricultural income by requesting manpower for royal building projects and for the army and victuals for the provisioning of royal palaces. These royal demands were met by the temples in part with their own funds and by drawing on the reservoir of dependent labour at their disposal, in part the obligation was passed on to free members of the temple community, such as priests (and generally to the heads of private urban households?) in the form of service obligations or obligations to pay for substitute labour: obligations that were usually shouldered by tax units of ten (or more) households, which typically would pay for one soldier or corvée worker.

Estates granted by the crown to soldiers/workers, often of foreign extraction, were generally situated in zones that had suffered demographic and economic decline: the new settlers were supposed to reclaim the area, and they owed the state their military service and some taxes. In this way, this 'land-for-service system' served both to integrate foreign groups

into the society and the fabric of the state and to extend the range of state-controlled agriculture into otherwise under-exploited areas. The best evidence comes from the Persian period, but we do know also of settlements of, e.g., men from Gezer in Palestine, of men from Iranian *Hindānu*, of Arabs and of Judeans from the period of the Neo-Babylonian empire (see, e.g., Magdalene and Wunsch 2011, 115-117).

We are well informed on the taxation of the urban population of Babylonia in general and therefore on the potentially most important domestic tax base of the empire: not only did probably more than half the population live in cities (see the end of section 1 above), urban landowners were probably the only stratum of society, apart from the institutional households and royal officials, that could dispose of a sufficient surplus over and above basic needs that could be claimed by the state. The relevant modes of taxation remained structurally unchanged throughout the late sixth and early fifth century, from the late reign of Nebuchadnezzar to the end of the reign of Darius. The chief burden imposed on tax units made up by members of this class was always conceptualised as a service obligation rather than a straightforward tax. For the fulfilment of these service obligations invariably substitutes were hired. These substitutes were sent to do the state's *corvée* work or serve as soldiers in lieu of the tax payer or tax unit that had hired them: some professional soldiers maintained stable business relationships with their (private) employers on such a basis over a considerable amount of time (Jursa 2010a, 650-652). The assessment of obligations owed to the state by city dwellers was based on the possession of certain types of agricultural land or urban real estate or on the affiliation to a certain social or professional group. The most important of type of landownership in this respect consisted of shares in regular field systems (*hanšûs*, literally "fifties") in the hinterland of the cities. These 'fifties' were as a rule situated on land which had been reclaimed late in the seventh or early in the sixth century through state intervention (or at least on royal instigation) and had been shared out to the urban elites, who in turn had to accept certain tax and service obligations. Taxation levied on the basis of urban residence (in distinct city wards, *bābtu*<sup>17</sup>) was likewise dependent on the creation of tax units (of ten or fifty men/households) sharing service and tax obligations. Furthermore, tax units formed by professional colleagues (priests) are known from Achaemenid Borsippa, but they probably existed already earlier (Jursa and Waerzeggers 2009, 252-253).

Direct taxes paid in cash were largely absent, as was direct taxation of agricultural income of the population at large – the main commodity extracted by the state was man-power. There is however good evidence for indirect taxation and for various fees collected by the

<sup>17</sup> In the Persian period, we hear explicitly of "levies of the city ward," Jursa 2010a, 248-249.

government, or by tax farmers on behalf of the government. This includes the taxation of real-estate sales and indirect taxes levied on the transport of goods and for the use of harbours, bridges and gates.

The army the Babylonian empire fielded was a composite body reflecting the make-up of the empire, just as that of the Assyrian empire. The sources are scarce, however. A good point of departure is the statement of the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings 24:2), according to which Nebuchadnezzar's army that marched against Jerusalem included troupes (*gdūd*) of "Chaldeans" (which can mean the Chaldean tribes as well as Babylonians in the strict sense of the word), Arameans, Moabites and Ammonites – in other words, Chaldean and Aramean tribal contingents, Babylonian units and units composed of natives of western vassal or client states or provinces (Joannès 2000, 67).

There was no *levée en masse* of the Babylonian urban population in general for military expeditions in other parts of the empire. The Babylonian cities contributed to the Babylonian army in two ways: the temples made their own levies among their personnel (Kleber 2008, 198-235; MacGinnis 2010), and, as we have seen, the urban property owners were grouped together in tax and service units that joined forces to pay on a personal basis for men fulfilling in their stead their service obligations. It is conceivable that not only the urban land-owning classes contributed to the royal army in this way: also village communities, about which we know little, may have had the obligation to contribute a certain quota of men for the king's service (service obligations on a village level are attested in a few cases: Jursa 2010a, 57 note 253; 649-650). These militia-like levies consisted of infantry (the Babylonian term is "archer," which may designate simply a common foot-soldier), but of at least one temple it is known that it contributed also horses, if not cavalry (Kleber 2008, 200 with note 553).

The urban militias we find documented in the cuneiform record undoubtedly did not form the backbone of the army. Following Assyrian models, the Babylonian kings probably also relied on substantial numbers of mercenaries, who were hired either on an individual basis or as collectives, in which case the border between a straightforward hiring and more or less forced 'conscription' will have been fluid. The documentation is sparse, but sufficiently clear. A post-Neo-Babylonian propaganda text directed against Nabonidus makes a most likely correct distinction between the "forces of Akkad (= Babylonia)" that had followed Nabonidus on an expedition against Arabia and the "troops of the (other) lands" that had remained under the command of the Crown Prince (Beaulieu 1989, 190-191). Regarding the documentary evidence, crown grants of land to collectives of non-Babylonian extraction have already been mentioned as a source of sustenance for such groups of foreign soldiers. Lists of disbursement

of food to palace personnel that were found in Nebuchadnezzar's palace attest to the presence of large groups of foreign specialists, mostly of western origin (e.g., Phoenicians and 'Jonians'; Pedersén 2005): such men will have been employed also elsewhere. There is also pertinent Greek evidence (Rollinger and Korenjak 2001, 327; Joannès 2000, 67): the Greek archaic poet Alkaios speaks of his brother's service as a mercenary in Babylonia.

The Chaldean and Aramean tribes were the third and quite possibly the most important source of men for the Babylonian army (cf. Joannès 2000, 67): after all, they had been the backbone of Babylonian resistance against Assyrian domination throughout much of the seventh century. As heads of communities characterized by strong patrimonial hierarchies the tribal chiefs could most likely field their forces more easily than Babylonian kings could call up urban militias through the bureaucratic means explained above. The career of the Neriglissar, tribal chief and general turned king, can be taken as confirmation of the military power of the tribes. Also the career and background of Nabonidus, another military commander who achieved kingship, may be of relevance here, as there is a distinct probability that also this king had an Aramaic background.

#### The administration of justice

Maintaining the internal stability of the realm and guaranteeing the rule of traditional law were essential duties of Babylonian kings in all periods of Babylonian history; the Neo-Babylonian empire is no exception.<sup>18</sup> The way in which this was attempted to be achieved is therefore directly indicative of the nature of the state. One particularity of our period should be emphasised especially: the important role of royal judges. Courts of law could be presided by the king himself, in important cases, and in theory any subject could appeal directly to the monarch. Other courts of law were presided by high-ranking royal officials, in particular by the Chief Judge (the *sartennu*) and his colleague, the *sukkallu*. Local affairs could be settled by local courts drawn from citizen assemblies and presided by chief priests and/or city elders. Such courts were thus backed by the highest religious authorities on a city level, nevertheless they had to yield to royal judges. As can be shown through their surviving correspondence, these royal officials wielded an authority that clearly was in disproportion to their own personal status but resulted from their function (Hackl and Jursa, forthcoming). The judicial system thus displays a clear tendency towards centralisation that was promoted by 'rational' and 'bureaucratic' means (in Weberian terms). This ties in well with the fact that in the sixth

<sup>18</sup> A survey of the evidence can be found in Oelsner, Wells and Wunsch 2003, 915-21; see also Holtz 2009.

century BC there are no traces of legal particularism or special features of local law that would distinguish one Babylonian city from another: in the core of the empire, legal procedures were standardized. The development of a distinct body administrative law that governs the relation of local administrative bodies to the royal sphere, as posited by some authors (Magdalene, Wells and Wunsch, forthcoming), points into the same direction: the state wished to assert itself in the legal sphere.

#### **4. The extension of the empire and the form of control over its periphery**

The previous section discussed the empire's core areas – regions that for the most had been part of the Babylonian state throughout the first millennium BC, at least during the phases of Babylonian independence from Assyrian dominion. We are less well informed about the structure of Babylonian rule in those parts of the Near East that had been conquered in one way or another after the fall of Assyria.

The military conquests of the Babylonian empire in the west occurred because the fall of Assyria had left a void. As pointed out above, the ideological superstructure of the Neo-Babylonian monarchy lacked the expansionist impetus that characterised Neo-Assyrian royal ideology. The Babylonian king was the legitimate vicar on earth of the chief god Marduk, but in contrast to the Assyrian kings of the seventh century, the Neo-Babylonian kings had no divinely ordained mission to extend the borders of their realm; instead, it was their principal religious duty to provide for the gods of Babylonia through temple building programmes and similar activities. This in fact the kings did to an unprecedented extent: the spoils of empire were used to a large degree for extremely ambitious construction programmes that transformed the face of the major Babylonian cities (the building inscriptions of the Neo-Babylonian kings are summarily catalogued in Da Riva 2008, 109-113). The local communities had to contribute to this huge effort, but much of the funding undoubtedly came from the provinces. Nabonidus claims in one of his inscriptions to have given over three tons of silver and about 160 kilograms of gold to the three main temples of Babylonia, a gift that was part of the “gift of submission taken from the riches of the lands, the property of the mountain ranges, the possessions of all the cities and the gifts of homage made (to me) by (vassal) kings” (Schaudig 2001, 521 and 527): a clear, if ideologically coloured, reference to the flow of imperial spoils and tribute to the capital and the monarchy. These favourable circumstances combined with demographic growth and agrarian and generally economic expansion in the core regions of Babylonia and caused even a modicum of economic growth in terms of per-capita production (Jursa 2010; see also, e.g., Joannès 2000, 73-75). For its

core regions, the Neo-Babylonian empire was successful in its government: it established stability and provided the institutional framework that led to an exceptionally prosperous phase of Babylonian social and economic development. The consequences of Babylonian conquest and rule in the periphery of the empire are less well known.

The mid-reign of Nebuchadnezzar, forty years after the empire's foundation, should probably be seen as the point at which, if ever, the Neo-Babylonian empire crossed the Augustan threshold, making a transition from aggressive growth towards consolidation. There were no major conquests after this period, although we do hear of campaigns in Cilicia conducted by Neriglissar and Nabonidus and of the latter's campaign to Arabia which culminated in a long sojourn in the oasis of Tayma.

The form in which Babylon governed its empire's western provinces after the initial conquest is a matter of debate. Detailed sources comparable to the Assyrian state archives are lacking. It has been assumed that Babylonian rule amounted to little more than regular yearly incursions of the Babylonian army which levied tribute from vassal states, while only a few strategically important cities, such as Karkemish, which controlled the upper Euphrates, or Ḥarrān on the Balīḥ, were under permanent Babylonian control.<sup>19</sup> Archaeological evidence from Palestine suggests wide-spread (but not universal) destruction and demographic decline in the area, presumably owing to the destructive activities of Babylonian armies. The interpretation of the archaeological data in question has not gone unchallenged however, and suggestions have been made that the case for attributing a merely negative effect to Babylonian rule in the Levant has been overstated.<sup>20</sup> We do see in the case of the old Assyrian city of Dūr-Katlimmu in the Khabur basin how within a few years early in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar Assyrian traditions of writing and administration were replaced by Babylonian ones (Radner 2002, 16-19, Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 389). In a similar vein, the Babylonian presence was more firmly established at least in parts of the west than the *communis opinio* would allow. There is now evidence for the royally promoted establishment of Babylonian rural enclaves in the Khabur basin and perhaps even in the vicinity of Tyre under Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus (see Kleber 2008, 141-154 and Jursa and Wagensohnner [in press]). Especially the (richer) Khabur evidence, which dates to the

<sup>19</sup> See Joannès 1997, 146; Vanderhooft 2003 and other authors in Lipschits and Blenkinsopp 2003 are likewise sceptical about the presence of a well-developed Neo-Babylonian imperial organisation in the West.

<sup>20</sup> On the archaeological evidence for the Babylonian presence in Syria and the Levant see, e.g., Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 389 and especially Lipschits 2005 and the articles in Lipschits and Blenkinsopp 2003 (whose introduction offers an excellent introduction to the problem).

reign of Nabonidus, is significant as it suggests a genuine process of planned colonisation was taking place. We cannot tell how widespread this phenomenon was, however.

In sum, currently no comprehensive and entirely convincing reconstruction of the nature of Babylonian imperial control over the empire's periphery can be given. It is certain that the Babylonian empire's extension depended on that of its Assyrian predecessor. Even though we have seen the evidence in favour of assuming Babylon took a more active role as imperial power in the west than has sometimes been assumed, it is uncertain whether it could have matched Assyria's success by achieving the considerable stability of control this earlier empire had over its provinces. As the Neo-Babylonian empire demonstrably re-created many Assyrian institutions and may internally have even been modelled on its precedent to a large extent, we would assume that Neo-Babylonian imperial rule tried to emulate Assyrian practice also in the western provinces. Owing to the lack of data, this has to remain an unproven hypothesis however.

## **5. Reactions and perceptions of the Neo-Babylonian empire by others**

Within the framework of Ancient Near Eastern history proper, the clearest case of a literary reflection of the rise and fall Neo-Babylonian empire is found in the pro-Persian propaganda texts referring to the last Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus. They show this king in an extremely unfavourable light, attributing to him, and to his minions, various religious improprieties and aberrations from good cultic practice. The obvious intention is to highlight the piety and appropriateness of the actions of the new ruler, Cyrus the Great. These texts cannot be taken as literal truth. They do contain some elements of information that can be considered to be historically accurate, but the overall picture they draw cannot be given credence (see above p. 6 with note 6).

The image of the Neo-Babylonian empire that is drawn in the Hebrew Bible, and the Jewish re-elaboration of Babylonian motifs originating in the Neo-Babylonian period, are without doubt the most enduring legacy of our period. Together with the contribution of Greek historiography (e.g., Herodotus), these Jewish traditions have determined the form in which Babylonian history was transmitted in the West up to the beginning of the modern exploration of Mesopotamia in the nineteenth century, and they continue to dominate the perception of Babylon in Western, i.e., Judeo-Christian, collective memory – which is not to deny that 'Babylon' has inspired an independent tradition of historical memory and culture-specific elaboration in the world of Islam (e.g., Janssen 2003; Haase 2008).

The two Babylonian sieges of Jerusalem, the final conquest of the city and its aftermath, the deportations of many of its inhabitants to Babylonia, mark of course a decisive rupture in Judean (Jewish) history. It is impossible to explore all references to these events, and their manifold echoes in the Hebrew bible, in the *aggadot* and generally in Rabbinical and later Jewish literature, let alone in Christian sources that were inspired by this Jewish material (see, e.g., Herrmann and Ilan 2008, Kratz 2008, Friedlander 2008). The image of the Babylonian empire and of its most important king, Nebuchadnezzar II, is even today inextricably linked with these events and their literary aftermath – events, one should say, that in the perception of the Babylonians were nowhere nearly as momentous as they appear in the Jewish tradition and thus in Western cultural heritage.

The second important motif that Judeo-Christian tradition drew from Babylonian history and culture and its reflex in the Hebrew Bible is that of the Tower of Babel, the inspiration of which was Etemenanki, the temple tower in Babylon that was rebuilt in the time of the Babylonian empire. The actual form and intention of the Babylonian building have little bearing on the later evolution of this motif (the pertinent bibliography is vast; see, e.g., Uehlinger 1990, Seipel 2003).

## 6. The reception history of the Neo-Babylonian empire

We see the Neo-Babylonian empire essentially as an incidental heir of Assyrian imperial control. This should not preclude an appreciation of the achievements of this state. It gave peace and economic prosperity to an important part of the Near East for more than half a century. Its most important historical legacy consists in its having served, together with Elam, as a cultural bridge: it transmitted important forms of government and imperial rule that had been developed in the Assyrian empire to its Achaemenid successor (we might mention techniques of population management, a dense communication network, as well as certain forms of taxation, organisation and army conscription – see the contribution of K. Radner to this volume).<sup>21</sup> The Neo-Babylonian empire saw a distinct flowering of the millenarian Babylonian culture, marked by intensive scribal activity and scholarly and literary production (the breakthrough in the field of mathematical astronomy however, the principal legacy of Babylonian science, occurred after the fall of the Neo-Babylonian empire). Finally one should mention the effects of the material benefits of empire on the Babylonian environment and economy. The cities were transformed by royally-sponsored building programmes, and the

<sup>21</sup> The bibliography on the Assyrian legacy that was transmitted in various ways to the Persian empire is substantial; see Rollinger (this volume). The specifically Babylonian contribution in this respect is discussed in Jursa 2003.

economy underwent a fundamental change towards an innovative, highly monetised system, thereby allowing Babylonia to experience a phase of unprecedented prosperity. Many of these effects of the Neo-Babylonian empire survived the fall of the empire and continued to make themselves felt under Persian rule.

While pinpointing the concrete legacy of the Babylonian empire in later Near Eastern states is a matter of historical debate, there can be no doubt about the principal focus of its reception history in the realm of religious and intellectual history. Here, the image created by the Hebrew Bible and its later interpretations is overwhelming; however, this tradition and its later elaborations are entirely distinct from the historical reality of ancient Babylon

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