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Writing History Under Empire: The *Babylonian Chronicle* Reconsidered

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Abstract: This article proposes to read the *Babylonian Chronicle* as historical literature. It argues that the text was composed in response to Babylonia's integration in the Persian Empire. The text presents itself as a self-conscious departure from the chronographic tradition by tracing the roots of Babylon's fate to the mid-eighth century, when a triangle of power is said to have emerged between Assyria, Babylonia and Elam—a configuration that reduced the Babylonian monarch to inaction and incompetence from the very start.

Keywords: Achaemenid Persian Empire, Babylonian chronicles, historiography, synchronism

In 500 BCE, a certain Ea-iddin, inhabitant of Babylon, copied a tablet: “In the third year of Nabonassar king of Babylon, Tiglath-pileser ascended the throne of Ashur . . .,” he began. By the end of the tablet, he had described nearly a century of turbulent history shared by Babylon, Ashur and Elam between the mid-eighth and mid-seventh century BCE. He continued his account on a new tablet, possibly until he reached his own time, but only his first tablet survives today. In scholarship, this

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work is known as the *Babylonian Chronicle*.¹ While modern-day historians often use the *Babylonian Chronicle* as a convenient source of information on the history of Babylonia from the mid-eighth to mid-seventh century BCE, it is clear that Ea-iddin's text is not a detached record of "what actually happened." The account manipulates the course of events in subtle ways. Most strikingly, it diminishes the Babylonian king to an incompetent ruler and describes an aggressive and victorious trajectory for Elam. The ambitious transnational scope of the work, involving the shared history of three synchronic states, eclipses that of other (known) works of Babylonian history available in Ea-iddin's time.

As an interpretation of the past, the text raises questions about the writing of history in Babylonia under the Persian Empire. By the time Ea-iddin sat down to write his tablet, Babylonia had been under Persian rule for nearly two generations. It had experienced conquest and annexation under Cyrus and Cambyses; it had lived through brief periods of liberation during the rebellions of the two Nebuchadnezzars; and it had re-entered the empire, by force and with due punishment, under Darius I. As Babylonia's autonomy receded into the past, and with it the memory of the traditions and institutions that had defined the status of those back then in power, new narratives began to be formulated that sought to re-use the past in the light of the present era. This article argues that the text written down by Ea-iddin—the text presently known as the "*Babylonian Chronicle*"—fulfilled such a function. It will be shown that the text self-consciously transforms features of the chronographic tradition in order to narrate history in a new way. In this history, the mid-eighth century is considered a formative period when three states (Assyria, Babylonia, Elam) began to compete in a particular configuration of power that would define the ensuing course of events and determine Babylon's fate as prey of the imperialistic ambitions of others. It will be argued that the Persian period offers the most likely context in which this work was composed in its particular shape and that it betrays some ambiguity in how the Babylonian cultural elite responded to Persian domination.

1 Literature and Facts

The text under consideration is often read by modern (academic) readers as a list of facts. Seldomly is it read as a literature of facts. As a chronicle, it is thought of

¹ The text was first published in two independent articles in 1887 (Pinches 1887; Winckler and Strassmaier 1887) and re-edited several times since, most recently by Grayson 1975 no. 1 (A) and Glassner 1993 and 2004 no. 16. The manuscript of Ea-iddin will be discussed in greater detail below.

primarily in terms of notation. In this article, I argue that we can fruitfully read the text as a literary interpretation of the past. The *Babylonian Chronicle* informs us not only about historical events, but also about how these events were perceived by its author(s), modified and told. In other words, in this paper, I will study the *Babylonian Chronicle* as a testimony of historiography. This will involve an analysis of its style, content, and shape, as well as the necessary reflection on the place in time when this work was composed.

The *Babylonian Chronicle* is one of several dozen chronicles preserved from first millennium BCE Babylonia.² It is fair to say that praise for these chronicles has been sparse. Their lack of literary achievement is a recurrent complaint. They are “frustratingly laconic,” “dry” and “rather crabbed.”³ They consist of “notes” with “restricted vocabulary and uniform syntax.”⁴ Their repetitive use of stock phrases is experienced as disappointing, not only aesthetically but also historiographically. With events robbed of their individuality, these texts reduce history to a slideshow of stereotypes. Above all, they are said to lack critical judgement and sustained argument. As pointed out by Amélie Kuhrt, the Babylonian chronicles “tend to be thought of as a rather uninspiring way of recounting events year by year, unlikely to raise interesting questions about the writing of history.”⁵ They show no “interest in nor even awareness of [causal] relationships [among events].”⁶ At best, they hold the raw materials for a history yet to be written.⁷

Despite these shortcomings, the Babylonian chronicles are admired for one quality. Their accuracy is deemed exceptional for ancient standards, because they report as readily on Babylonian defeats as on Assyrian victories. Not airbrushing national history, they are considered to be disinterested, “not trying to convince their readers of some particular idea.”⁸ Consequently, these sources have served as trusted companions in historical research.

Several scholars have cautioned against the notion of objectivity in chronicles. Frankness about the fate of one’s nation does not necessarily equate exactitude of

2 The texts are edited by Grayson 1975; Glassner 1993 and 2004. See for the Hellenistic chronicles I. L. Finkel and R.J. van der Spek, “Babylonian Chronicles of the Hellenistic Period,” <http://www.livius.org/cg-cm/chronicles/chron00.html>.

3 Quotes respectively by Kuhrt 2000, 266; Sack 1983, 63; Steele 2019.

4 Weissert 1992, 273; Glassner 2004, 39.

5 Kuhrt 2000, 266.

6 Drews 1975, 43.

7 Van der Spek 2003, 290 “The[se] chronicles are not examples of beautiful historical narrative; they are rather a database.”

8 Grayson 1975, 11.

reporting, warned Brinkman (1990, 75).⁹ Glassner called for a close(r) critical analysis of the *Babylonian Chronicle* because it renders the outcome of certain battles differently than royal inscriptions (2004, 50). Despite these warnings little or no effort has been made to study possible ideologies at work in chronicles. Did their authors interpret, argue, polemicize or moralize, despite the facticity of their prose? Brinkman questioned the default assumption that chronicles are more trustworthy than royal inscriptions, but left it to future researchers to study possible bias in the chronicles (1990, 84). Liverani remarks that Babylonian chronicles “look objective” (2011, 44) but leaves his suspicion of subjectivity unexplored.

A fruitful approach to the chronicles consists of evaluating what Glassner called their paradox of reality and discourse (2004, 49). These texts use historical facts but shape these into a narrative. Following the work done in recent decades on other chronographic traditions—from Biblical to Medieval and beyond—we may explore Babylonian chronicles as literatures of fact.¹⁰ This implies paying attention to how language shapes the history told in these texts. The conventions of chronography underscore facticity. For instance, the narrative focuses on a restricted cast of human actors (mostly royal) within a limited action board (mostly military). They use the year as fundamental unit of time and (mostly) obey the principle of chronological progression. Their prose style is sober with little or no subordination, few adjectives, and plenty of reiteration. They do not explicate causation or motivation, do not present themselves as the result of interpretation or investigation, and they identify neither author, audience, nor patron. These conventions create the impression that what is written down is simply what happened. We may well consider this effect as a rhetorical strategy in its own right — a strategy so powerful that even in the present day the over-arching response to these texts is to accept their veracity without question.

In this article I will ask how the *Babylonian Chronicle* constructs its version of the past from the sequence of events that it selects for the reader. My interest lies in decoding the logic and structure of the work as an expression of historical thought. While enumerative in style, I will show that the *Babylonian Chronicle* is an erudite composition that uses various techniques to create meaning beyond enumeration, through language, style, form, and content.

⁹ Drews 1975, 41 similarly characterized the *Babylonian Chronicle* as “a catalogue of disasters” (for Babylon) rather than as a fair and balanced account of its achievements and setbacks.

¹⁰ See among many others Graham and McKenzie 1999; Ben Zvi 2006; Spiegel 1983; Spiegel 1990; Kooper (Ed.) 2002. Lake 2015, 90–92 discusses the background of this approach in Medieval historiography.

2 Manuscripts

The text under consideration here is, confusingly, known as the “*Babylonian Chronicle*” — the same label that is used for the entire text genre of Babylonian chronicles, comprising several dozen works. Alternatively, scholars know this particular chronicle as ABC 1, in reference to the edition by Grayson who treated this text first in his volume of *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*.¹¹ I will refer to the work by both labels here, but will add an “a” to the numerical (ABC 1a) in order to indicate that my discussion is limited to a particular manuscript only—the tablet written by Ea-iddin.

In his edition of ABC 1, Grayson followed the then-common practice of combining the text of three manuscripts in a single reconstructed work.¹² Only the tablet written by Ea-iddin is more or less intact (ABC 1a). This well-preserved tablet served as chief witness of the reconstructed work, with the two smaller fragments (ABC 1b and 1c) used to fill in gaps where ABC 1a is broken or deficient. Because the large tablet identifies itself as “first section” (*pīrsu rēštū*), Grayson presented his composite text as the beginning of what he called the “Babylonian Chronicle Series.”¹³ He attributed a further 13 chronicles extant at the time to this Series and presented them as products of an ambitious project that started in the reign of the eighth century king Nabonassar (ABC 1) and that reached down into the Hellenistic period.

Both at the level of the work and at the level of the Series, Grayson’s reconstructions received criticism for conflating evidence from multiple sources. First, Brinkman cast doubt on Grayson’s assertion that ABC 1 survives in three copies. Comparing the manuscripts of ABC 1a and 1b, he concluded that they deviate so substantially that it is preferable to speak of at least “two major recensions” or “versions” of the text, if not of “two separate chronicles” (1990, 83–84). Of the third copy, ABC 1c, not enough text was preserved to draw conclusions about its relationship to either 1a or 1b. In the same article, Brinkman also expressed reservations about Grayson’s reconstruction of the “Babylonian Chronicle Series.” Texts assigned to the Series are not consistently linked by catchlines and display great variety in style and format. His cautionary remark that [while] “ABC 1a is labelled the opening tablet of a series, [...] it has yet to be established what this series was and whether there are other surviving tablets” (1990, 87) still stands today. The archival discontinuities between the works assigned to the Series cast further doubt on the matter (Waezegggers 2012).

11 Grayson 1975, 69–87 (see p. 70 for references to earlier editions). More recent French and English translations are found in Glassner 1993 and 2004 (no. 16), but note the mistake in the English rendering of the colophon.

12 This practice has very early origins in the long history of scholarship on this text. Strassmaier first labeled the large cuneiform tablet “A” and combined its testimony with two fragments of similar content (B and C) in *Dar. 559* (Strassmaier 1890).

13 ABC 1a’s self-identification as *pīrsu rēštū* will be discussed in greater detail below.

In view of these considerations, I will treat ABC 1a here as the sole surviving witness of an autonomous work of unknown length. ABC 1a contains the beginning of that work. It starts in the third year of Nabonassar with the ascent of Tiglath-pileser III to the throne of Assyria (745 BCE) and it ends in the accession year of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn (667 BCE). How much further the work stretched is not known.

3 Programmatic Beginnings

The chronicle starts at a critical conjuncture in the past, when the dynastic histories of three kingdoms are said to align. I argue, in this section and the next, that the text meticulously constructs this moment in time from available materials. Moreover, its narrative economy imbues the opening lines with programmatic significance: the reader is introduced to the text’s vision from the outset and in the briefest possible way.

Section 1	[In the third year of Nabonassar], king of Babylon, [Tiglath-pileser (III)] ascended the throne of Assyria. The same year, [the king of Assyria] went down into Akkad, pillaged Rabbilu and Ḥamrana, and deported the gods of Šapaza.
Section 2	In the reign of Nabonassar, Borsippa revolted against Babylon, (but) the battle that Nabonassar had with Borsippa was not written down.
Section 3	The fifth year (of the reign) of Nabonassar, Ḥuban-nikaš (I) ascended the throne of Elam.
Section 4	The 14th year, Nabonassar became ill and went to his destiny in his palace. Nabonassar reigned 14 years over Babylon. His son Nādinu ascended the throne of Babylon.
Section 5	The second year, Nādinu was killed during an insurrection. Nādinu reigned two years over Babylon. Šuma-ukīn, a governor, leader of the insurrection, ascended the throne. Šuma-ukīn reigned one month and two (?) days over Babylon. Mukīn-zēri, the Amuka[nit]e, dethroned him and took the throne.
Section 6	The third year (of the reign) of Mukīn-zēri, Tiglath-pileser having gone down into Akkad, he ravaged the Bīt-Amūkāni and captured Mukīn-zēri. Mukīn-zēri reigned three years over Babylon. Tiglath-pileser ascended the throne of Babylon.
	etc.
	ABC 1a i 1–11 (translation based on Glassner 2004, 195)

Section 1. The first two lines of the chronicle introduce the king of Assyria (Tiglath-pileser III) as well as the king of Babylonia (Nabonassar). Significantly, these lines accord agency only to the first monarch while reducing the latter to a mere point of chronological reference. The inaction of the Babylonian king is a major theme of the chronicle, as we will see. Moreover, by identifying the Assyrian king's accession as the primordial event that sets in motion the history told in this work,¹⁴ the author¹⁵ introduces the theme of foreign domination of Babylonia: Tiglath-pileser III was the first Assyrian monarch to exercise the dual kingship of Akkad and Ashur, as every reader of the chronicle would have known. By contrast, Nabonassar's own accession is placed outside of the narrative, in prehistory so to say, three years before the start of the chronicle. A comparison with ABC 1b (in the next section) will show that it was a deliberate authorial intervention to cut up the historical continuum in this particular way.

After Tiglath-pileser's ascension, Section 1 continues with his intrusion into territory of Akkad "in the same year" (*mu.bi*),¹⁶ where he pillages two tribal areas in the periphery and abducts gods from a small bordertown (*Šapaza*).¹⁷ Here, the author describes behaviour typical of the Assyrian monarch. As we will see, the text uses formulaic language to connect its protagonists with specific action types, and raiding is presented as an activity typical for Assyria.¹⁸ The theme of god-

14 The text highlights the significance of the first event by identifying the tablet as the "first" *pirsu* in the colophon. The use and meaning of this paratextual label are discussed below.

15 I will use the singular in this paper for convenience sake, without suggesting that there was necessarily only one author involved in the creation of this work. In contrast to "author," the "scribe" is the person who produced the manuscript, in this case Ea-iddin, who identifies himself as such in the colophon. The identity of the author(s) is unknown but I will argue below that he should be situated in Persian-period Babylonia. The author used existing materials but re-created these to form a new text.

16 This expression is only used three times in ABC 1a: once here (the very first section of the tablet) and twice in the last column of the tablet, including in the very last section. The phrase is thus mirrored in the column structure of the tablet. It is unclear whether this is intentional. Several other sections of ABC 1a report activities in the same year without using the explicit marker "in the same year." ABC 1a iv 17 repeats "in month XII" from the previous line whereas the parallel chronicle uses "in that same year" (ABC 14 21; Brinkman 1990, 90). This could suggest that ABC 1a uses the phrase selectively. If this is indeed the case, Tiglath-pileser's immediate action against Akkad was of significance to the author, perhaps because it confirmed his inauguration as the primordial event, with instant effect on the course of history.

17 *Šapaza* is identified with the Northern Babylonian city of Bāš in the vicinity of Sippar (Beaulieu 2009–2011). On the god-napping event in this town under Tiglath-pileser III, see most recently Zaia 2015, 38 n. 73.

18 See the activity chart in the Appendix, which shows that the action of pillaging (*ḫabātu*) and ravaging (*ḫāpu*) is restricted to the Assyrian king. On Nergal-ušēzib, the Babylonian king who pillages Nippur and, by doing so, behaves in an anti-Babylonian fashion, see below.

napping will also be revisited and elaborated upon further on in ABC 1a. The scene at Šapaza, a minor town on the periphery of Akkad, will be followed by a similar scene in Uruk, a major town, several years later (iii 1). Section 1 thus foreshadows a later event of history. I will argue below that these events are intentionally connected through the layout of the text.

Section 2. Tiglath-pileser's aggression towards Akkad elicits no reaction from the Babylonian king. In fact, the only action recorded for Nabonassar's entire reign is his involvement in an internal war between Babylon and Borsippa, a war that "is/was not written down." Such a war between the principal cities of the kingdom would have posed a hazardous threat to Akkad's stability. I consider this section programmatic for two reasons. First, the paratextual note about the war's absence from the written record constitutes an explicit, but otherwise unique, intervention of the authorial voice in the narrative of ABC 1a. The note draws attention to the process of the work's compilation. It reveals that the (implied) author is, at the same time, a respectful follower of tradition and an active creator of text. Indeed, his creative hand manifests itself in multiple ways, as I will explain below. A second programmatic quality of the episode lies in its portrayal of the Babylonian king as inept ruler. The first section of ABC 1a had relegated Nabonassar's accession to prehistory, Section 2 now characterizes him as an incompetent, even dangerous, ruler.

Section 3. The third section is devoted to introducing the third player in the triangle of power: the Elamite king. We may recall that Section 1 introduced the Assyrian king, cast in the role of initiator of the action and aggressor towards his southern peer. Section 2 was devoted to the king of Babylon, Nabonassar, whose divisive internal war hardly constituted an effective response to the Assyrian offensive. Now, in Section 3, we are taken to Elam for the inauguration of Ḫuban-nikaš. In three successive sections, ABC 1a thus introduces its three protagonists. Significantly, the Elamite storyline, set up in Section 3, is subsequently left suspended in the narrative for the next 23 years: ABC 1a reports no further activity for Elam until Ḫuban-nikaš's victory over Assyria at the battle of Der in Section 9 (i 31–37). The inclusion of Ḫuban-nikaš's accession therefore seems to serve no other narrative purpose than to reveal the historical origins of the triangle of power (Assyria-Babylonia-Elam) and to foreshadow the moment when, at the battle of Der, Elam's military prowess will manifest itself. As I will argue below, Elam's successful pursuit of victory is a recurring theme in ABC 1a.

Sections 4–6 continue the account of incompetent rule in Babylonia. After Nabonassar's death (Section 4), his son exercises the kingship of Babylon, without any achievement worthy of report until his murder two years later. The year of Nādinu's death is a year of chaos in Babylon, with two short-lived kings vying for power (Section 5). Neither of these ephemeral figures engages in positive action. By

now a behavioral pattern typical for the Babylonian king has emerged. In Section 6, the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser terminates the period of chaos in Akkad by taking control of the throne of Babylon. The action pattern foreshadowed in Section 1 now achieves its first resolution.

In summary, from Sections 1 to 6, the reader is introduced to the core of ABC 1a's program: in the mid-eighth century, a triangle of power emerged between Assyria, Babylonia and Elam—a configuration that reduced the Babylonian monarch to inaction from the very start. Unable to provide security for his cities, population and gods, the Babylonian king saw his power increasingly contested. This situation led to, or perhaps even demanded, interventions from both of his peers — first from Assyria and later also from Elam. The chronicle thus presents itself as a meditation on the fate of Babylonian monarchy in an emergent imperial context.

4 Découpage, Selection, Omission, and Addition

The programmatic nature of ABC 1a's opening lines becomes apparent when we compare them with another work from the same chronographic tradition that treats the same subject matter, ABC 1b. Before examining this text, it is necessary briefly to address the question of how chronicles were composed and transmitted in the Neo-Babylonian period.

Nearly two dozen chronicles are known from Neo-Babylonian manuscripts dated roughly between the late seventh and early fifth centuries BCE. Most of these manuscripts attest to unique works but they share material with each other to varying degrees. In view of their shared content, it has been suggested that they derive from a common source, more specifically a register of events that was kept at a central location, like the palace or a major temple. This register has traditionally been identified with the *Astronomical Diaries*, or with a list derived from the *Diaries*.¹⁹ This idea was questioned by Brinkman in 1990, among other reasons, because a convincing concordance between a *Diary* passage and a Neo-Babylonian chronicle is yet to be found. The proposition has become even less tenable in the light of new developments in *Diary* studies. In a recent article, John Steele argues that the *Diary* project did not yet exist in the mid-eighth century but emerged

¹⁹ Wiseman 1956, 4; Lambert 1972, 71; Grayson 1975, 13–14; Grayson 1980, 174; Grayson 1983, 86. Van der Spek proposes a socio-cultural connection between chronicles and *Diaries* in the sense that these projects were carried out by the same scholars in the course of the same intellectual endeavours (2003, 291). Recent variations of these ideas are found with Liverani 2010, 170 and Millard 2010, 196–197.

perhaps as late as the Neo-Babylonian Empire (Steele 2019). This means that the *Diaries* cannot account for the contents of chronicles dealing with earlier periods of history, such as ABC 1a.

Instead of a common source for all chronicles, a more dynamic model is to be preferred. At least six chronicles share text with ABC 1a and with each other, but none presents entirely the same text. The similarities show that authors drew from a shared tradition, while the differences show that this tradition was not fixed. Adaptations, changes, corrections, re-workings, etc. were part of how these works “spoke” to each other. The chronicles that share content with ABC 1a are: ABC 1b and 1c; ABC 14 (the *Esarhaddon Chronicle*); ABC 16 (the *Akitu Chronicle*); ABC 15 (the *Šamaš-šuma-ukin Chronicle*); ABC 24 (the *Eclectic Chronicle*).

Of these six works, ABC 1b parallels the history covered by the opening lines of ABC 1a.²⁰ A comparison between ABC 1a and ABC 1b reveals the literary processes used to mold the same history into a different narrative. It also shows which subject areas were of particular concern. I will not work from the assumption that the author of ABC 1a necessarily had access to ABC 1b or that he reacted specifically to this text; I do, however, work from the assumption that ABC 1b is representative of the kind of materials that would have been available to the author of ABC 1a. The direction and degree of dependence between these texts (if any) is, and remains, unknown.²¹

The most striking difference between ABC 1a and 1b is length. ABC 1a offers a more condensed and focused text. At least eight lines of history that ABC 1b places before the accession of Tiglath-pileser III are omitted in ABC 1a. These lines presumably reached back to the accession of Nabonassar.²² By leaving out those earlier events, ABC 1a presents a completely different periodization of the past. Whereas ABC 1b remains true to the cadence of Babylonian dynastic history, ABC 1a’s periodization implies that Tiglath-pileser III heralded a new phase of history, even its very beginning.²³ Because Tiglath-pileser III was the first Assyrian monarch to exercise the kingship of Babylon, this periodization signals a particular interest in the history of imperialism towards the throne of Babylon. Modern descriptions of the *Babylonian Chronicle* as a chronicle that starts with Nabonassar

²⁰ For a stand-alone edition of ABC 1b, see Brinkman 1990, 100–102.

²¹ Gerber 1998, 79 offers a useful visual representation of how ABC 1a and 1b relate to each other and to a (putative) common source.

²² The tablet containing the text of ABC 1b is damaged. For an estimate of the number of lines lost in the beginning of column i see Brinkman 1990, 81 n. 44. Since Landsberger and Bauer 1926, 63 the general assumption has been that the manuscript started with Nabonassar’s inauguration.

²³ In view of the fact that ABC 1a self-identifies as the *pīrsu rēštū* (“first section”). The function of this statement will be discussed in the next section.

thus miss an important point:²⁴ ABC 1a explicitly begins with an event that belongs to the dynastic history of Assyria.

Of the c. eight lines of ABC 1b that ABC 1a leaves out before the start of its narrative, only a small part of the last sentence is preserved on ABC 1b. The statement that “[x] did not come out” indicates that this line discussed the (non-) celebration of an Akitu festival. As is well-known, the New Year festival was of interest to many late Babylonian chroniclers.²⁵ Its omission from the beginning of ABC 1a seems intentional, because the work also suppresses other references to the New Year festival, as I will show below. Bypassing one of the staples of Babylonian chronography is a significant intervention in the tradition, which will certainly have caught the attention of readers.

Another striking feature of ABC 1a is its omission of at least seven lines of history that ABC 1b offers between the accession of Huban-nikaš in Elam and the illness and death of Nabonassar. Assuming that at least some of these seven lines concerned Nabonassar, their omission has the effect of removing Nabonassar from the action. Moreover, by leaving out materials, ABC 1a limits its opening lines to an introduction of the three protagonists of the triangle (Ashur, Babylon, and Elam). ABC 1b does not achieve such a degree of focus.

At least as significant as the omissions is the only addition that ABC 1a makes compared to ABC 1b. This is the notification about the civil war between Babylon and Borsippa, an event for which the author confesses to lack both a firm chronology and a written reference. As he is unable to date the event any more specifically than “at the time of Nabonassar,” inserting it at this place in the narrative is a deliberate choice. The author had other options available: he could have placed the note about the civil war after the Elamite accession, after Tiglath-pileser’s inauguration, or even before his current opening line. The thematic sequence Assyria-Babylonia-Elam in Sections 1–3 thus constitutes a deliberate attempt to structure the process of history. What motivated this decision? As a possible answer to this question, the order Assyria-Babylonia-Elam prefigures the structure of the ensuing narrative: Sections 4–8 elaborate on the relationship between Assyria and Babylonia before Section 9 adds Elam as active participant at the battle of Der.

What can we conclude from the comparison of ABC 1a’s opening sections with the parallel materials contained in ABC 1b? It is clear that the author of ABC 1a manipulated the fabric of historical “facts” in several ways. He chose a particular conjuncture in time as the primordial event of (his) history. *Découpage*, or the

²⁴ Grayson 1975, 69 (“Chronicle Concerning the Period from Nabu-nasir to Shamash-shuma-ukin”); Glassner 2004, 193 (“From Nabonassar to Šamaš-šuma-ukin”).

²⁵ Grayson 1970; Liverani 2010, 175–178.

sectioning off of the historical continuum, constitutes a creative intervention: by beginning his account with Tiglath-pileser III—the first Assyrian king to claim also the throne of Babylon—the author defined his work as a reflection on imperialism towards Babylon. Another historiographical technique used in the opening lines is the dual literary process of omission and selection. By leaving out the popular theme of the New Year festival, the author departed from the chronographic tradition. Omission also allowed him to place events, separated in time and place, in paratactical order and to suggest a connection between them. By selecting the bare minimum for inclusion, he crafted a clearly focused text that communicated its essential topics from the outset. Finally, by drawing attention to the new materials that he added to the narrative, the author revealed himself as an active creator of text.

5 The First Tablet of a Series

The colophon of ABC 1a contains a statement that may actually thematize the text's self-conscious status as a creative product. In the colophon the tablet is identified as the first *pīrsu* ("extract"), produced from an "original."²⁶ Chronicles do not usually sport colophons and ABC 1a is one of only two that do.²⁷ Its self-identification as first *pīrsu* has led to the conclusion, ever since Landsberger and Bauer (1926, 62), that a "series" of Babylonian chronicle-entries existed of which ABC 1a represents the first chapter. It is however not entirely clear how to interpret the information of the colophon. The label *pīrsu* has several nuances: it can be used in the same fashion as *tuppu* (referring to a numbered tablet in a series) as well as in the fashion of *nishu* (referring to an extract made for ad hoc purposes).²⁸ Whenever *pīrsu* occurs in colophons from the late period it is followed by a reference to the title of the series from which it was drawn.²⁹ ABC 1a, however, does not include such a reference. To my knowledge, it is the only *pīrsu* that does not identify the series to which it belongs. In other words, the tablet self-identifies as an excerpt, but it does not specify the work from which it is allegedly excerpted. The conclusion that ABC 1a is part of an existing series is therefore not without its problems.

²⁶ ABC 1a iv 39: *pīr-su reš-tu-ú ki-ma sumun-šú sar-ma ba-ru ù up-pu-uš*.

²⁷ The other one is ABC 15; Millard 1964, 30–32.

²⁸ An example of the first use is the "*pīrsu* recension" alongside the "*tuppu* recension" of the canonical Lamaštu series (Farber 2014), or the organization of the Bīt salā' mē series in *pīrsu* as well as *tuppu* (Ambos 2013 and Lenzi 2013); for an example of the second use, see Geller 2018, 50.

²⁹ This is based on the materials assembled in Hunger 1968; additional examples include SpTU 1, 44, 46, 47; SpTU 2, 18, 54; BM 42272 (Bácskay 2015). A representative example is offered by CT 12, 3 IV 44 (Hunger 1968 no. 124) which identifies itself as follows: "first *pīrsu* of dū = *banū*."

Another way to interpret the information in the colophon is to read it as an authorial statement: by giving his work the aspirational title of “first section,” the author not only ascribed to the authority that emanates from serialized works, he also marked the period discussed in his work as a self-contained unit of time. With this statement he *made* history begin with Tiglath-pileser III. This fits well with the programmatic nature of the beginning of the work, that I have discussed above. Moreover, by labelling his work as a *pīrsu* the author identified it as a creative product, made by excerpting text from unspecified original(s). In fact, as we have seen, the redactional process behind ABC 1a can perfectly be described in this way. Our comparison of ABC 1a with ABC 1b revealed that ABC 1a is crafted through selection from (a text similar to) ABC 1b. The only addition *vis-à-vis* ABC 1b was explicitly marked as not text-based. The relationship with ABC 14 is also one of selection and addition.³⁰

6 A Synchronistic History of Three Kingdoms

As we have seen, ABC 1a introduces three strands of dynastic history (Ashur, Babylon, Elam) in the first three sections and then follows each of these strands closely in the remainder of the work. The ambitious scope of this three-tiered structure and its meticulous implementation throughout the text are exceptional compared to other surviving chronicles and chronographic texts available at the time when Ea-iddin wrote his tablet.

The closest parallel is offered by the so-called *Synchronistic History*, an Assyrian work known from several copies in the library of Ashurbanipal.³¹ This text plots a border conflict between Assyria and Babylonia over a period of several centuries, with a clear bias in favor of Assyria. The synchronistic king lists, also from Assyria, enumerate the kings of Assyria and Babylonia in two parallel columns.³² The systematic pairing of two dynastic strands can be compared to the structural ambition

³⁰ E.g. the episode about Bēl’s absence and the 20-year long interruption of the New Year festival in ABC 14 is not included in the “extract” ABC 1a. Several reports included in ABC 1a are absent in ABC 14: the second Elamite massacre in Sippar (ABC 1a iv 9), the defeat of the Assyrian army in Egypt in Esarhaddon’s seventh year (ABC 1a iv 16), the capture of Memphis and its king (ABC 1a iv 26–27).

³¹ The text is edited as Chronicle 21 by Grayson 1975, 157–170 and as the *Synchronistic Chronicle* by Glassner 2004, 176–183. For a discussion of the genre, structure and function of the text, see Galter 1999. The border conflict was recently studied by Fuchs 2011.

³² For the texts, see Grayson 1983 nos. 12–17 (pp. 116–125); for a discussion of the nature and content of the synchronistic kinglist(s), see Brinkman 1968, 16; Grayson 1980, 182; Michalowski 2013; Chen 2020.

of ABC 1a. However, the latter text testifies to a different understanding of history by adding Elam as a systematic third player. The balance of power is no longer presented as determined by the interaction between a northern and a southern kingdom, but by a triangle that also included an eastern kingdom. ABC 1a thus achieves a larger transnational scope than the Assyrian synchronistic works.

ABC 1a's three-fold synchronism also stands out within the text group of Neo-Babylonian chronicles. The *Eclectic Chronicle* (ABC 24) offers a set of synchronisms between Assyria and Babylonia, but pays no attention to Elam. Its final lines (rev. 17–20) treat the same period as the first seven sections of ABC 1a (from Nabonassar to Shalmaneser V) but do not mention the Elamite king Huban-nikaš. The *Akitu Chronicle* (ABC 16) is interested in hostilities between Assyria and Babylonia and their impact on the celebration of the New Year festival; it pays no attention to Elam. The *Šamaš-šuma-ukīn Chronicle* (ABC 15) likewise foregrounds intersections between Assyria and Babylonia, without Elamite participation. Its opening line concerns the sixth year of Aššur-nādin-šumi, a fateful year in Elamite-Babylonian-Assyrian relations according to ABC 1a (ii 36–45). ABC 15 skips that entire conflict and instead opens with a note on the exile of the god of Der to Assyria (ABC 15 1). The remainder of ABC 15 offers “non-integrated” lines. It mentions the flight of an Elamite prince to Assyria but pays no sustained attention to Elam, its dynasty or its history.³³ ABC 25, focusing on earlier historical periods, also traces Assyrian and Babylonian relations, mentioning “fear of Elam” only once in 34 lines.

The two chronicles that share most of their material with ABC 1a are also less interested in Elam than ABC 1a itself. ABC 1b does not emphasize the three-fold synchronism in the same manner as ABC 1a does; ABC 14 leaves out one mention of Elamite aggression on Babylonian soil, betraying a less systematic interest in matters relating to Elam.³⁴ Only in the late Achaemenid or Hellenistic period do we find a historiographical work that matches the ambition of ABC 1a's three-fold synchronism, the so-called “Chronicle P.”³⁵

While none of the Neo-Babylonian chronicles can be firmly dated, chronicles ABC 24, 14, 15 and 16 represent a tradition that was slightly older, or at least contemporary, to the manuscript of ABC 1a (produced in 500 BCE) because all

³³ Millard 1964, 19. But note that Scurlock 2006, 463 reads ABC 15 as a subtle reflection on patterns in history, involving Elamite imperialism and non-Babylonian kingship.

³⁴ The second massacre at Sippar in the sixth year of Esarhaddon (iv 9) is not mentioned in ABC 14.

³⁵ The work is known from a manuscript kept at the British Museum in collections associated with the Esagil temple of Babylon. This text group is traditionally dated from the late Achaemenid period onwards, but the bulk of the tablets dates to the post-Persian period, i.e. between the third and mid-first centuries BCE (Jursa and Debourse 2017, 83). See Beaulieu 2017, 554 for the triangular nature of the political history told in *Chronicle P*.

these texts are found in archival contexts that date to the ‘long sixth century BCE’ (Waerzeggers 2012). This suggests that ABC 1a departs from the traditions of both Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian chronography by presenting history not as an affair of two states (Assyria and Babylonia) but as a triangle of power, incorporating Elam as a systematic third player since the beginning of the history it narrates.

7 The Dynastic Framework

We have seen that ABC 1a structures its account around three strands of dynastic history. Each of these strands is made up of a fixed combination of narrative elements: the king’s inauguration, his death, and a summary of his reign.³⁶ This template is implemented systematically for each reign in each strand. Of three kings no other information is supplied besides these three basic elements.³⁷

The text-structuring effect of this framework is enhanced by formulaic expression. Repetitive language helps the reader to navigate the text and to pick up subtle variations. Of two rebel kings it is said that they claim “the throne” instead of “the throne in Babylon,” as is otherwise the case.³⁸ Given the fact that their rule was contested, this variation in phraseology is probably intentional. Another instance of controlled repetition and variation occurs in the use of kingship labels. In principle, the summary statement links each king to the kingship associated with his throne. For instance, the Elamite king “ascends the throne in Elam” and “has performed the kingship of Elam” at the end of his reign. Similar pairings are used for the Babylonian king (throne in Babylon—kingship of Babylon) and for the Assyrian king (throne in Ashur—kingship of Ashur). However, when an Assyrian monarch exercises the dual kingship of Babylonia and Ashur, he is said to perform the “kingship of *Akkad* and Ashur.” The larger geographical unit (*Akkad*) is reserved only for the king of Ashur.³⁹ No Babylonian king is said to exercise the

³⁶ The author of ABC 1a takes care to include the three elements for each king. After the short reign of Nergal-ušēzib, he inserts a summary statement (iii 5–6), lacking in the parallel chronicle ABC 1b (iii 3’). Only Nabonassar is not treated in full, as we have seen: his inauguration is placed outside the narrative of ABC 1a. Note that of Sargon the death and summary phrase are broken off, of Sennacherib the inauguration phrase.

³⁷ Nādinu (i 13–15); Šuma-ukin (i 16–18); Ħuban-ħaltaš I (iii 27, 30–32). For Tiglath-pileser III as king of Babylon only the three basic elements are given (i 23–26); his reign as king of Ashur is treated in more detail. Of Šutruk-Nahhunte’s reign, a large part of the relevant section is broken off.

³⁸ ABC 1a i 16, 18.

³⁹ Perhaps also for the Elamite king (e.g. Cyrus), but that part of the chronicle is not preserved.

kingship of Akkad, nor is an Assyrian king said to exercise the kingship of Babylon. The reason behind this differentiation is unclear.

The royal death statement is subject to greater variation than the inauguration and summary phrases. The text describes a careful typology of royal deaths (Glassner 2004, 80). A death by “destiny” is a natural death, whether preceded by illness or not. Several deaths by disease are recorded: Nabonassar becomes “ill and dies in his palace,” Esarhaddon becomes ill and dies “on the road” (i 11; iv 31). Two consecutive Elamites suffer strokes (iii 20; iii 31), an odd coincidence of fate that the author elaborates upon: while the first king lost his speech and lived on for several more months, the second king died almost instantly, at sunset of the very same day. The successive strokes probably explain why the third consecutive king on the Elamite throne is, uniquely, said to have died in his palace “without becoming ill” (iv 11). It is unclear why these cases elicited such interest, as the illnesses of Assyrian and Babylonian kings were subject to less scrutiny. Waters plausibly suggests a connection with Mesopotamian omen literature (Waters 2013, 483–484). Below, I will argue that the episode also served a narrative function.

Besides illnesses, the work reports on other types of regnal ends. Many Babylonian kings simply disappear instead of dying, a sign of their general incompetence: they flee from an invasion (Merodach-baladan, ii 3), they are abducted (Bēl-ibni, Aššur-nādin-šumi, Nergal-ušēzib, Mušēzib-Marduk; ii 28, ii 42, iii 4–5, iii 23), they are removed in an unclear fashion (Šuma-ukīn, Mukīn-zēri; i 18, i 21). Violent deaths affect all dynasties but mostly the Elamite (Nādinu, Ḫallušu, Kutur-Nahḫunte, Šutruk-Nahḫunte, Sennacherib; i 14, ii 33, iii 8, iii 14, iii 35). It is striking that the first king of each dynastic strand is said to die by destiny (Nabonassar, Tiglath-pileser III, Ḫuban-nikaš I), while such natural deaths become rare later on. In Babylon, no natural deaths occur until the end of the manuscript, in Elam there is only one more death by destiny (iii 25), and in Assyria two (i 29, iv 31).⁴⁰ Two Elamite kings meet a peculiar end, when the “door is shut in their face” — an enigmatic phrase specific to Elam (ii 33; iii 7). Readers were probably meant to notice the coincidence of fate suffered by Ḫallušu: this king grabbed the throne by shutting the door in his brother’s face only to meet the same end, years later, at the hands of his own people (ii 33 and iii 7–8).

The structure of the dynastic framework is worth contemplating. Babylon’s dynastic history is presented as the target narrative and the dynastic histories of Ashur and Elam are woven across this strand, like a braid. The centrality of the Babylonian strand is borne out by the fact that the Babylonian regnal years dictate the structure of the narrative. This structure is apparent from the very first line of

⁴⁰ Note that the end of Sargon is not preserved on ABC 1a.

the work. “In the third year of Nabonassar, Tiglath-pileser ascended the throne in Assyria.” The Babylonian king provides the date, Tiglath-pileser the event. This year-count method allows for nuanced treatment of the modalities of domination over Babylon. Assyrian kings who take full control of Babylon’s throne, re-start the dating sequence of the chronicle. For instance, in the third year of Mukīn-zēri, Tiglath-pileser (who had been king of Ashur for 17 years) captures the throne of Babylon and prompts a new year-count (i 24). The same happens after Sargon becomes king of Babylon: although the manuscript of ABC 1a is broken, the mention of a “second year” in ii 11 indicates that a new year-count had begun after Merodach-baladan’s deposition in ii 4.⁴¹ After the sack of Babylon, the empty throne demands the insertion of “eight kingless years” (iii 28). These kingless years come to an end with the accession of Esarhaddon, who, although he is not said to have ascended the throne of Babylon, nonetheless kick-starts a new year-count in the chronicle (iii 39: “The first year of Esarhaddon ...”). This expresses the ambiguity that existed about Esarhaddon’s rule over Babylon rather well: while Esarhaddon sported the title “king of Babylon” in his inscriptions, he was only reluctantly awarded the title by contemporary Babylonians.⁴²

8 Action Types

Glassner expressed a widely shared opinion when he described the Babylonian chronicles as “hardly more than a word list” (2004, 84). Drews saw the repetitive nature of the entries as proof that the authors did not attempt to invest historical events with individuality and causality (1975, 44–45). Upon closer scrutiny, however, there appears to be far more variety and purpose in the formulary of ABC 1a. Its language is both less repetitive and more deliberate than assumed. Phrases are distributed strategically. The only truly repetitive phrases pertain to the dynastic framework—the principal structuring device of the text, as we have seen. Other content carefully balances repetition and variation. Each of the three royal protagonists is associated with a particular combination of phrases, together making up a palette of typical behavior (for an overview, see the Appendix). This literary strategy enabled the author to typify the trajectories of the three monarchs across single events.

⁴¹ ABC 1b, by contrast, continues the Assyrian year-count of Sargon after he became king of Babylon (“13th year”; ii 15’), which suggests that this chronicle used a different method of structuring time.

⁴² Frame 1992, 65.

8.1 Inactive Babylonian Kings

The Babylonian king is inactive throughout most of the chronicle. His passivity manifests itself in multiple ways. He fails to respond to aggression (Nabonassar, Bēl-ibni, Aššur-nādin-šumi), his ancestral territory is ravaged (Mukīn-zēri, Merodach-baladan), his capital city is sacked (Mušēzib-Marduk), he comes too late to join battle (Merodach-baladan), he has to sustain long-term belligerence from a rival (Merodach-baladan), he retreats and flees (Merodach-baladan). His autonomy is taken from him in various ways: he loses the throne of Babylon to the Assyrian monarch (Mukīn-zēri), he is a puppet of Ashur or Elam (Bēl-ibni, Aššur-nādin-šumi, Nergal-ušēzib), he is drafted into the Elamite army (Mušēzib-Marduk), he is captured and replaced by somebody else (Bēl-ibni, Aššur-nādin-šumi, Nergal-ušēzib) or by nobody at all (Mušēzib-Marduk). The Babylonian king's incompetence is portrayed as increasingly acute: what starts as simple passivity ends in replacement. In the beginning of the chronicle, Nabonassar fails to respond to an Assyrian raid; a few years later, Tiglath-pileser seizes the throne from one of his successors.

The Babylonian king is not always portrayed as inactive. Two times he is given an active, military role.⁴³ These exceptions, however, confirm the portrait of incompetence, for in both cases, the king's actions are disastrous for his country's well-being. Not incidentally, these episodes are placed at significant junctures of the story and of the physical tablet. The first episode is recounted at the beginning of the chronicle. Instead of responding to Tiglath-pileser's act of aggression, Nabonassar wages war against Borsippa, one of Akkad's principal cities. This civil war is the sole action reported for Nabonassar; it is also the very first statement made about any Babylonian king in the chronicle. The second episode takes place in the reign of Nergal-ušēzib. Without any apparent reason, this king destroys the city of Nippur, one of Babylonia's major centers, and invites (or perhaps even performs) violence against the inhabitants and gods of Uruk. Although there might well have been a reason for Nergal-ušēzib's deeds (for instance, revenge for Nippur's Assyrian sympathies), the chronicle suppresses any such contemplations.

The episodes about Nabonassar and Nergal-ušēzib stand out against the typical action regime that ABC 1a assigns to the Babylonian king. Other features mark these exceptional episodes as special too. First, their placement on the tablet seems deliberate. Nabonassar's internal war is the very first episode, and Nergal-ušēzib's exploits the very last episode, about a Babylonian king on the obverse.

⁴³ Nabonassar (i 7–8); Nergal-ušēzib (ii 47). I consider Merodach-baladan's presumed action against Bit-x in i 43–44 a misinterpretation of the text, as it is more likely that his name appears as part of the date formula ("The 10th year of Merodach-baladan: [x] ravaged Bit-x ...") than of the action episode ("The 10th year: Merodach-baladan ravaged Bit-x ...").

These events thus frame the first two columns of text. Second, the section about Nergal-ušēzib is cut up mid-sentence and continues on the reverse with the dramatic plundering of the inhabitants and gods of Uruk. This creates a particularly dark undertone for the reverse (where e.g. the sack of Babylon will be treated). Moreover, the scene at Uruk, placed in the first section of the reverse, mirrors the god-napping event at Šapaza, featured in the first section of the obverse. The physical layout of the tablet is used to suggest connections between non-sequential events.

In addition to their strategic placement on the tablet, these rare episodes of Babylonian action stand out stylistically and graphically. The entry about Nabonassar waging war against Borsippa is the only section beginning with *ana tarši* instead of *mu.x(.kam)*. It is also the only one where the author intervenes in the narrative with a remark about his redactional work. The episode about Nergal-ušēzib displays a particular orthography that involves the doubling of two successive signs (ii 47: *sar sar ir ir*). It also uses three expressions of aggressive military engagement that are not combined elsewhere in the work.⁴⁴ The episode is thus rendered with particular force. The fact that both episodes are marked at several levels of the text (placement, orthography, style, content, self-reflexivity) can be seen as a deliberate effort to draw a connection between these events.

8.2 De-activated Assyrian Kings of Babylon

The Assyrian king is associated with a particular palette of military actions: he descends upon Akkad and Elam, he ravages and plunders. However, his pro-active profile transforms once he is installed on the throne of Babylon. Tiglath-pileser III loses all initiative after he becomes king of Babylon. Because he only reigned two further years, this can be considered a (historical) coincidence. Shalmaneser V's five-year rule of Akkad and Assyria elicits no comments, except for his ravaging of Samaria in his inaugural year. Remarkably, the scribe ostentatiously left out "Babylon" from his royal territory immediately before reporting on his sack of Samaria (i 28); hence, if read literally, Shalmaneser performs this attack as king of Ashur alone.⁴⁵ This could, of course, be a scribal error,⁴⁶ but "Babylon" was not simply forgotten by the scribe; he left the space on the tablet deliberately blank, as

⁴⁴ See the Appendix for an overview of phrases used to describe royal action in ABC 1a.

⁴⁵ Grayson 1975, 73 restores "Akkad" in the open space, but "Babylon" seems more likely as the phrase describing a king's accession in Akkad always refers to the city of Babylon (or no territory at all, in the case of rebels, see i 16, 18).

⁴⁶ The manuscript does display another mistake in the same section: two lines earlier, Ea-iddin had left out the total of Tiglath-pileser's regnal years (i 25).

can be seen from his addition of the marker KI. It is unlikely that he was working with a defective *Vorlage* as he would have inserted *he-pí* at the place of the missing word.⁴⁷ Leaving out “Babylon” from the royal title could have been an attempt to make the episode fit within the text’s underlying ideology of the inactive Babylonian king.

As to Sargon, we do not know whether ABC 1a pictured him in an active capacity after he took the throne of Babylon from Merodach-baladan, because the manuscript is damaged at the crucial point. After the lacuna, the throne of Babylon is no longer held by the Assyrian king and we encounter the familiar pattern again: the Babylonian king is inactive and the Assyrian king is militarily engaged.⁴⁸

With Esarhaddon, a new phase begins. While not explicitly king of Akkad, he controls Akkad’s territory nonetheless. Curiously, the narrative displays an actor-switch at this point. A new cast of characters is introduced in the Babylonian realm: the governor of the Sealand, the mayor of Nippur, the major-domo, “Dakkurian” men, a judge. The text is largely in agreement with ABC 14 (the *Esarhaddon Chronicle*); possibly, the change of cast is due to the integration of an external text into the work. But regardless of the origins of this sequence, the result is consistent with the established pattern. The new cast is as ineffective as the Babylonian king: these men cause internal instability, they flee from enemies, and they are abducted and killed. Strikingly, whenever the action does refer to Esarhaddon, it is rendered in the passive voice (e.g. Sidon is captured; the heads of rival kings are cut off; Memphis is captured) or as being carried out by the Assyrian army instead of the Assyrian king (the army of Assyria captures Bazza and Shubria; the army marches to Egypt). Only his execution of Assyrian dignitaries and his fatal march to Egypt are framed as actions explicitly undertaken by Esarhaddon himself.

With Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, we encounter an Assyrian on the throne of Babylon again. The familiar pattern applies: the three events reported in his first year are all phrased passively or presented as happening without the king’s explicit involvement: Bēl and the gods of Akkad leave Ashur and enter Babylon, Kiribtu is taken, a judge is executed.

⁴⁷ He did so further on in the manuscript: *he-pí* in iv 19, 23. See also Grayson 1975, 73.

⁴⁸ Merodach-baladan’s response to Sennacherib’s attack is typically cowardice: he flees. Bēl-ibni remains passive while Sennacherib attacks the bordertowns of Ḫirimma and Ḫararatum (Fuchs 2011, 230, 264) before carrying off Bēl-ibni himself. Bēl-ibni’s successor, Aššur-nādin-šumi, is equally unable to assert himself: no activity is reported for him, until in his sixth year he is abducted after an Elamite attack. Nergal-ušēzib’s reign is presented as a particularly black page in Akkad’s history, as we already saw. This Babylonian king is active, but in the wrong ways. His successor Mušēzib-Marduk is, again, inactive. After the sack of Babylon (on which, see below) no new king is crowned in Babylon for eight years.

In conclusion, ABC 1a contrasts the Babylonian king (inactive) with the Assyrian king (militarily engaged) by applying a particular action palette to each agent. It also transfers the Babylonian profile upon the Assyrian king once the latter takes control of the Babylonian throne: the text de-activates the Assyrian king through the use of the passive voice and by introducing non-royal and collective actors.

8.3 Suppression of Assyrian Actor-Identity

A remarkable passage in ABC 1a concerns the sack of Babylon by Sennacherib in 689. At the crucial moment the text reverts to passive voice — “the city is captured” — a technique that veils Assyrian involvement in the event (iii 22). King Mušēzib-Marduk’s subsequent abduction to Assyria is also rendered in the passive voice, and the god-nap of Bēl and other gods to Ashur is omitted altogether.⁴⁹ The silencing of Assyrian agency in these dramatic events is striking and requires an explanation.

First, it may be relevant to note that ABC 1a not only suppresses Sennacherib’s contribution to the sack of Babylon but also the identity of Babylon itself. After nearly two dozen references to “Babylon,” the text switches to the generic label “the city” when it describes its devastation in 689. This obscures the specificity of the event. Another technique of obscurity is narrative framing. The text encapsulates the sack of Babylon in two stories of paralysis at the Elamite court. Immediately before the sack of Babylon, we hear of Huban-menanu’s loss of speech due to paralysis (iii 19–20). After the eight kingless years that follow the sack of Babylon, we hear of his successor’s death at sunset after becoming paralysed at noon-hour (iii 30–31). The topic of Elamite paralysis receives more elaboration than Babylon’s devastation.⁵⁰ This steers reader attention away from the sack of Babylon to the oddity of recurrent disease in Elam. The layout of the tablet also manipulates attention in this way. Like most chronicles, ABC 1a presents its materials in sections covering one year. Horizontal rulings mark the beginning of a new unit in the annual sequence. In the passage dealing with the sack of Babylon this practice is abandoned. The event is buried within a long rubric of four years that begins in the first year of Mušēzib-Marduk (iii 13), includes the battle of Ḫalule, the brief note about the sack of Babylon and the accession of a new

49 It is uncertain whether Marduk’s statue was taken away during the sack of Babylon; Esarhaddon would later claim that it had been, but the inscriptions of Sennacherib are unclear on the matter. See for a recent discussion of the questions involved, Nielsen 2018 (5.3.2).

50 Note that the precision with which the second king’s death is timed is unparalleled in chronicles.

king in Elam (iii 27). This manipulation of the regularity of annual rubrication has the effect of hiding the sack of Babylon as a brief event in a long section dealing with Mušēzib-Marduk. In conclusion, the entry “the city is captured” appears to have been subject to careful literary obscuration.⁵¹

Second, it may also be relevant to note that there are other instances of suppressed Assyrian actor-identity in ABC 1a. We already saw that in the reign of Esarhaddon most military actions are attributed to the Assyrian army. This technique is first applied at the plunder of Uruk during Nergal-ušēzib’s reign (iii 1) after two columns of text. Switching from Assyrian king to Assyrian army at this moment, when Uruk’s population suffers devastation, diverts agency away from the Assyrian monarch.⁵²

Why are these instances of Assyrian violence in Babylonia circumvented in ABC 1a? At first sight, the effort seems rather senseless in view of Assyria’s long list of hostile actions against Babylonia, starting with the very first events reported in the work. However, it is not Assyrian aggression *as such* that is suppressed, but rather aggression of a certain type—i.e., violent action in Babylonia against its urban populations. The Assyrian monarch’s trail of plunder affects borderland, tribal areas, and Elam.⁵³ His attacks on Uruk and Babylon, by contrast, are carefully redacted. I would tentatively suggest that the work creates a contrast with the Elamite king’s behaviour in Babylonia, whose two incursions are accompanied by bloodshed in an urban setting. The first instance happens in Sippar where king Ḫallušu massacres citizens before abducting Aššur-nādin-šumi (ii 40–41). The second instance takes place several years later in the same city on the orders of Ḫuban-ḫaltaš II (iv 9).

The question arises whether the contrast between Assyrian and Elamite behaviour on Babylonian soil is a deliberate effect in ABC 1a. Two features tentatively suggest that this might be the case. First, the text uses the verb *dāku* (to kill) selectively for the Elamite massacres at Sippar. The Assyrian attack on Uruk’s population is phrased as plunder and abduction (*ḫabātu*, iii 1; *emēku* iii 3). Second, a few episodes before Elam’s first massacre in Sippar, ABC 1a reports that Sennacherib “did not scatter the Babylonians” during an attack (ii 19). The passage is damaged and should be treated with caution. It does seem safe to say that the

⁵¹ This in contrast to Galter, who considers the chronicle’s treatment of the episode as non-literary (Galter 1984, 170).

⁵² It should be noted that Sennacherib’s own inscriptions are unclear on whether he was personally present at the attack (Dewar 2016, 33), so the passive voice may have suited the historical conditions of the event.

⁵³ i:4 (Rabbilu, Ḫamranu); i:21 (Bit-Amūkānu); i:28 (Samaria); i:44 (of Bit-...); ii:21 (land of Merodach-baladan); ii:25 (Ḫirimma, Ḫararatum); ii:27 (Akkad); ii:38–39 (cities in Elam); iii:11 (cities in Elam).

author considered not only the pursuit of violence but also the absence of violence noteworthy, and, that he remarked on such absence in relation to the same party (i.e. Assyria) whose aggression towards Babylonia he also circumvented elsewhere in the chronicle.

8.4 Elam

This brings us to the question of how Elam is portrayed in ABC 1a. Four episodes of Elamite action are reported. The first scene takes place in Der, where Ḫuban-nikaš I defeats Sargon of Assyria single-handedly after Merodach-baladan fails to show up in time (i 33–37). The second scene is set in Sippar, where Ḫallušu massacres the population before abducting Aššur-nādin-šumi and effecting a retreat of Assyria (ii 39–42). The third scene⁵⁴ is at Ḫalule, where Ḫuban-menanu defeats the Assyrian army for the third time, now with the assistance of Akkad's army (iii 16–18). For the fourth scene, we are back in Sippar where Ḫuban-ḫaltaš II causes another massacre (iv 9–10).

These episodes have puzzled modern scholars. Of the battles at Der and Ḫalule reports are extant that contradict the positive outcome for Elam. Sargon and Merodach-baladan both claim victory at Der; Sennacherib claims victory at Ḫalule.⁵⁵ The second massacre at Sippar “seems odd and out of place” (Waters 2013, 484). Indeed, the *Esarhaddon Chronicle* knows of no such event. As ABC 1a repeats the account of the earlier massacre at Sippar almost literally, scribal error has long been suspected, especially since both massacres are dated in a sixth regnal year (Brinkman 1990, 92).

Modern historians have tackled the problem of the divergent accounts in the *Babylonian Chronicle* and the royal inscriptions in various ways. Usually the royal inscriptions are discredited as untrustworthy sources. In the words of Grayson, the Assyrian account of the battle of Halule is “a prodigious falsehood” while the chronicle is “an objective historical document” (Grayson 1965, 342). Recently,

⁵⁴ It is unclear if and how the Elamites were involved in the events at Uruk reported in iii 2. Who is “the Elamite” referred to in this line? The ensuing abduction of gods and people from Uruk (iii 2–3) is usually understood as an action undertaken by the Assyrians (see e.g. Levine 1982, n. 52; Frame 1992, 59; Glassner 2004, 199) even though the gods of Uruk return from Elam. In any event, the battle at Nippur that takes place in the aftermath of this abduction is waged (and lost) only by Nergal-ušešib (iii 3–4).

⁵⁵ There is an extensive literature on these “problematic” battles, e.g. Grayson 1965; Levine 1982, 49–50; Carter and Stolper 1984, 45; Grayson 1991, 108; Mayer 1993, 320; Laato 1995; Scurlock 1997; Ridley 2010; Fuchs 2011, 319–320; Liverani 2014, 530; Melville 2014; Glassner 2019, 263.

more nuanced studies have tried to salvage the different versions as different perspectives on complex and evolving historical realities.⁵⁶

A dimension that is ignored in this discussion is how Elam is treated *within* the chronicle. The four episodes coalesce into a coherent portrait of the eastern kingdom as a victor over Assyria and as an aggressor on Babylonian soil. Elam's path constitutes a unique storyline in the chronicle. No other power "inflicts a defeat" (*dabdû šakānu*) or "effects a retreat" (*nabulkutu šakānu*)—let alone multiple ones. These phrases constitute the exclusive action board of the Elamite king. Other activities have limited applications too, such as "to massacre" (*dāku* combined with a collective object) and "to enter a city," which is used twice for the Elamite king (at Sippar) and once for the Assyrian army (at Uruk). The specific combination of phrases thus creates a profile unique of Elam's king.

How far the four episodes reflect factual reality is difficult to say. The question of who won at Der and Halule may never be solved. Indeed, as argued by Melville (2014), it may be the wrong question to ask. But whereas Melville attributes the divergent accounts to the complex nature of the battles, I would add that these accounts serve particular functions in their respective works. The *Babylonian Chronicle* sets up a narrative of three kingdoms that each behave in a certain way. Seen against this backdrop, the report of the battle of Der illustrates these typologies rather well: Merodach-baladan's failure to show up in time is a striking instance of the Babylonian king's inactivity and Elam's victory over Assyria is the first manifestation of its trajectory of military success.

9 Themes of Interest

The opening sections of ABC 1a identify a number of themes that appear to be of particular interest to the author of the text.

9.1 Absence of Akitu

A remarkable trait of ABC 1a is its neglect of one of the most popular themes of Neo-Babylonian chronography: the Akitu (or New Year) festival. We have seen that ABC 1a omits an Akitu festival that, according to ABC 1b, happened right before the inauguration of Tiglath-pileser III. This omission may be considered programmatic because ABC 1a suppresses this theme also at other places. It leaves out from its account the twenty-year-long interruption of the Akitu festival between the

⁵⁶ Scurlock 1997; Fuchs 2011, 319–320; Melville 2014.

destruction of Babylon in 689 and the ascent of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn—an event that is heavily accentuated in Neo-Babylonian chronicles (the *Esarhaddon Chronicle* and the *Akitu Chronicle*) as well as in royal inscriptions.⁵⁷ The well-known celebration of the Akitu festival by Sargon is possibly omitted in ABC 1a, but the tablet breaks off at the crucial place.⁵⁸ Two Akitu festivals that Tiglath-pileser III presided over while king of Babylon have also gone unrecorded in ABC 1a.⁵⁹ The pattern is sufficiently consistent to support the conclusion that the history of this festival was actively downplayed, if not altogether suppressed, in this work.

9.2 Gods Abducted and Returned

The theme of abducted and returned deities also carries special significance. By omitting certain episodes from his text and including certain others, the author of ABC 1a carefully crafts a history of divine abandonment and return.

ABC 1a does not mention the abduction of the gods of Memphis during the Egyptian campaign of Esarhaddon, an episode reported in the parallel text of ABC 1c.⁶⁰ Twice, ABC 1a refers to the return of gods without having mentioned their earlier exile, even if those episodes were known in the chronicle tradition. In column iii, ABC 1a discusses the return of Ištaran to Dēr under Esarhaddon (iii 44) but his exile to Assyria does not feature at its expected place in column ii.⁶¹ In iii 22, ABC 1a fails to mention the abduction of Marduk/Bēl during the sack of Babylon by the Assyrians, but does include the return of “Bēl and the gods of Akkad” from Ashur under Šamaš-šuma-ukīn in the last episode of column iv (iv 35–36). The absence of Bēl for 20 years following the sack of Babylon is a well-known chronographic theme (ABC 14 and ABC 16) but it is left out from ABC 1a. In all, there are at least three god-napping events involving the Assyrians that ABC 1a does not include, despite the narrative logic of the text and despite the fact that these instances were known to the chronographic tradition (Memphis, Babylon, Der).

Why were these events omitted? This question is hard to answer given that two other god-nappings involving the Assyrians found a place in ABC 1a. The first instance happened under Tiglath-pileser III at Šapaza, and the second under

⁵⁷ Babylon stele of Nabonidus; Schaudig 2001, 514–529.

⁵⁸ Both ABC 1b and the *Eponym Chronicle* include Sargon’s Akitu celebration.

⁵⁹ These instances are known from the *Eponym Chronicle*.

⁶⁰ ABC 1a iv 25–26; ABC 1c iv 3’ (Brinkman 1990, 103). See also Grayson 1975, 85 on this discrepancy.

⁶¹ According to ABC 15 1 the exile of “Anu rabû” to Assyria happened in the sixth year of Aššur-nādin-šumi. This year is discussed at length in ABC 1a ii 36–45 but it does not mention Der or its god. See also Grayson 1975, 128.

Sennacherib at Uruk. These god-nappings may have served to illustrate the failure of the reigning Babylonian monarch, respectively Nabonassar and Nergal-ušēzib, to protect Akkad. The events are linked through their placement on the tablet: the scene at Šapaza features in the first section on the obverse and the scene at Uruk features in the beginning of the reverse. The fact that the placement of the second episode was forcefully achieved by cutting up an entry mid-sentence is testimony to the intentionality of this mirror-effect.

9.3 Dates and Dating

A peculiar feature of ABC 1a is its tendency to disagree with other chronicles on matters of chronology. It places the death of Kutur-Naḥḥunte on 17-V whereas ABC 1b places it on 08-V.⁶² It places the death of Ḫuban-ḫaltaš II on a different day (07-VI) than ABC 14 (05-VI).⁶³ The capture of Shubria is dated by ABC 1a to a “broken day” (*ḫe-pī*) in month X, whereas ABC 14 dates this event to 18-XII.⁶⁴ ABC 1a dates the death of Esarhaddon’s queen to 05-XII, whereas ABC 14 dates it to 08-XII.⁶⁵ It mentions a triple massacre by the Assyrians in Egypt on 03, 16 and 18-IV, whereas ABC 14 only mentions one massacre on a different date (03-VII).⁶⁶ It places the return of Bēl to Babylon on either 14 or 24-II, whereas ABC 14 places the same event on 25-II. Not all dates in ABC 1a diverge from those in other chronicles. For instance, there is agreement on the date of Ḫallušu’s death (26-VII),⁶⁷ on the month when the gods of Der returned in the first year of Esarhaddon (VI),⁶⁸ on the day when Bazza was captured (02-VII, Esh 05),⁶⁹ and on many other dates.

It is unclear whether the divergent dates are significant, but the number of disagreements points to the affirmative. This is supported by the fact that in certain passages ABC 1a exhibits an awareness of chronological matters. This is apparent already in the opening sections, where the time reference “at the time of

⁶² ABC 1a iii 13; ABC 1b iii 11'. Note that in the following discussion only the dates from ABC 14 are based on collation of the original; the other two tablets (ABC 1a and ABC 1b) were not available in the British Museum for consultation (June 2019). For these, the edition of Grayson was used.

⁶³ ABC 1a iv 10; ABC 14 16 (collated).

⁶⁴ ABC 1a iv 19; ABC 14 24 (collated).

⁶⁵ ABC 1a iv 22; ABC 14 23 (collated).

⁶⁶ ABC 1a adds several details about the Egyptian campaign of Esarhaddon that are not present in ABC 14; see for a discussion Spalinger 1974, 300–301 and Kahn 2006, 252. Dates in Esarhaddon’s reign are particularly problematic in view of contrasting evidence in the annals, see Eph’al 1982, 53–54.

⁶⁷ ABC 1a iii 6; ABC 1b iii 3'.

⁶⁸ ABC 1a iii 44; ABC 14 3 (collated).

⁶⁹ ABC 1a iv 5; ABC 14 13 (collated).

Nabonassar” is included for an event that the author is unable to date. This kind of expression is known from the Assyrian synchronistic tradition but uncommon in Neo-Babylonian chronicles. As it is the only entry of ABC 1a not starting with a year count (mu.x or mu.x.kam), the passage draws attention to itself. Another instance where ABC 1a exhibits awareness of chronological issues is the event reported in iv 14 where it adds the remark “in an unknown month” while the parallel chronicle ABC 14 (l. 22) lacks a time indication in the corresponding section. ABC 1a also supplies an exact date for the return of Ištar and other gods of Akkad from Elam (10-XII), whereas ABC 14 leaves the event undated. ABC 1a engages in ultra-exact dating in the case of Ḫuban-ḫaltaš’s death, which is said to have happened on a specific day at sunset, after the king became paralysed at the noon hour. These passages betray a particular interest in the issue of dating. However, it is unclear which historiographical ambitions ABC 1a served by proposing alternative dates or how it arrived at these proposals.

10 Columns as Structuring Devices

The layout of the manuscript in four columns seems to offer possibilities to structure historical events beyond the limitations of parataxis. Twice, the beginning of a new column refers back to, and expands upon, events reported at the same position of a previous column. Column I and column II both begin with the Assyrian king “descending” upon Akkad, but whereas Tiglath-pileser III’s unprovoked descent remained unanswered by Nabonassar, the descent of Sargon came after a long period of belligerence with Merodach-baladan and led to the latter’s flight into Elam. This episode also expands on Tiglath-pileser III’s second descent into Akkad, mid-way in column I (i 19–21), which led to the capture of Babylonia’s usurper-king Mukīn-zēri, the destruction of his homeland Amukanu, and the Assyrian take-over of the Babylonian throne. This foreshadows the fate of Merodach-baladan, recounted exactly opposite on column II (ii 19–21), whose homeland was plundered by Sennacherib and whose kingship was transferred to the Assyrian puppet king Bēl-ibni.

The beginning of column III also refers back to the beginning of column I through the theme of god-napping. Tiglath-pileser III’s first descent into Akkad led to the deportation of the gods of the bordertown of Šapaza. In column III, the rubric that started already at the end of column II is uncharacteristically broken up mid-sentence so that the new column starts with the plunder of the gods and inhabitants of Uruk by the Assyrian army. By drawing a comparison with the earlier event, Babylonia’s deteriorating safety is highlighted: at first, god-napping affected its borderlands, now it had moved to one of its chief cultic centres.

11 The Manuscript, its Milieu and its Origins

According to the colophon, Ea-iddin produced the manuscript of ABC 1a for his father Ana-Bēl-ēreš in Babylon in the 22nd year of Darius I (500 BCE). The identification of Ea-iddin as scribe and his father as owner of the tablet situates its production in the context of advanced scribal training.⁷⁰ Ea-iddin wrote the tablet under the supervision of his father and teacher Ana-Bēl-ēreš, “according to an older exemplar.” Of this original, neither title, author, date or origin are known. This leaves us with one certainty and one uncertainty about the production of ABC 1a: we know when the copy was prepared (and by whom), but we do not know when the original work was created (and by whom). Let us first focus on the copy.

The archival provenance of the manuscript is unknown. The tablet of ABC 1a is curated in the British Museum as number BM 92502 in collection 84-2-11. This collection contains some material associated with the temple of Babylon, Esagil. This text group is usually dated late in the Achaemenid period and beyond, with the majority of texts stemming from the third century BCE and later.⁷¹ If ABC 1a is part of this library collection, the tablet would have outlived its time of production for several centuries.⁷² But there is another archival connection to consider. While no other tablets of either Ea-iddin or his father are known so far, Ea-iddin appears with reasonable certainty in a document of a minor priestly family of Babylon (Nappāḫū), where he acts as a witness to a legal transaction.⁷³ Collection 84-2-11 contains a large batch of tablets from the archive of the Nappāḫū family.⁷⁴ Perhaps Ea-iddin’s manuscript was retrieved with or near the Nappāḫū archive, in which case it would not have circulated in Babylon beyond the revolts against Xerxes.⁷⁵

As to Ea-iddin’s social milieu, his and his father’s command of the scribal arts bear witness to their elite status in the city of Babylon. The Ur-Nanna family to which they belong is well-attested in the city.⁷⁶ The connection to the Nappāḫū situates

70 See Ossendrijver 2011 for the formula *tuppi PN₁ qāt PN₂*.

71 On the date of this material, see recently Jursa and Debourse 2017, 83; the Esagil ‘library’ is discussed by Clancier 2009 and its origin in priestly homes rather than Esagil proper by Robson and Stevens 2019, 328–329.

72 Waerzeggers 2012. For the Esagil temple library, see Clancier 2009.

73 VS 3 229: 7’–8’, Baker 2004 no. 205, p. 258 (where the name is mistakenly read Ea-apla-iddin).

74 Baker 2004, 382; van Driel 1989, 112.

75 See Baker 2008 for the impact of the events of 484 BCE on archival practice in Babylon.

76 The family name of Ea-iddin and his father appears in the colophon of ABC 1a. For the Ur-Nanna family in Babylon, see recently Gordin 2016 and Nielsen 2011, 174. The family may have enjoyed a certain reputation for their literary achievements in earlier times: Ur-Nanna, the exorcist and scholar from Babylon, is listed as author of the Fable of the Poplar in the Catalogue of Texts and Authors from Ashurbanipal’s library (Lambert 1962 and Nielsen 2011, 175).

them in a priestly milieu. Admittedly, these faint clues do not help us to describe the setting of ABC 1a much closer than “elite,” “Babylon-city,” and possibly “priestly.” The date of the colophon adds “Achaemenid period” to these labels.

12 A Persian-Period Work

Written in 500 BCE, the copy of the *Babylonian Chronicle* presently known to us was made at a time when Babylon had been under Persian rule for two generations. But when had the work, copied by Ea-iddin, been composed? The most important clue that would have guided us towards an answer, i.e. the endpoint of the chronicle, is unavailable to us because only the first tablet of the work has survived. We do not know where the history told in the chronicle leads to. However, the programmatic beginning of the work offers some clues. I will elaborate on three. (a) We have seen that the *Babylonian Chronicle* presents a history of Babylonian monarchy since its first submission to empire, by Tiglath-pileser III. The work explicitly identifies this moment as its point zero, by proclaiming itself the first *pīrsu* of an unnamed, novel series. By comparing ABC 1a with other chronicles, the work can be shown to offer its readers a unique way of structuring the past. The nature of this new periodization, starting with Tiglath-pileser III, is premised on the experience of imperial submission. As a clue about the date of the composition, the fact that this periodization is newly and deliberately constructed tells us that imperial subordination was a theme that held enough urgency or relevance to prompt the redaction of the work. (b) Apart from offering a new periodization of the past, the text also presents its readers with a new type of synchronism. Instead of considering history as an affair of two states (Assyria and Babylonia), as had been the tradition in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian chronography so far, the *Babylonian Chronicle* carefully inserts Elam as a third player, present on the scene since the point zero of history in the mid-eighth century BCE. This three-fold synchronistic structure is an intentional departure from tradition. It betrays a worldview where Elam holds enough significance to be considered a structural competitor of Assyria and Babylonia. (c) A third feature of the text that is visible from its very first lines, is its attempt to sort out patterns or constants in history. It does so by assigning each of the three states a typical set of behaviours. In this typology, the Babylonian monarch emerges as a passive actor unable to maintain his independence in the face of, first, Assyrian offensive and then also Elamite aggression. Elam, moreover, stands out for being pictured as consistently successful in its pursuit of victory.

What do these clues, culled from the work’s programmatic beginnings, tell us about the possible historical context in which it was composed? First, in view of its peculiar place within the chronographic genre, a date in the later sixth century

makes most sense. As we have seen, the three-fold synchronic structure is a departure from both Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian traditions, while a late or post-Achaemenid work (Chronicle P) follows in its footsteps. This positions the *Babylonian Chronicle* towards the end of the Neo-Babylonian tradition of chronography. Second, the focus on Babylon's experience of imperial submission, combined with the importance assigned to Elam and its successful trajectory, is a reason to date the *Babylonian Chronicle* more specifically to the Persian period, a time when an empire emerging from "Elam" had forced Babylonia into submission. According to this interpretation, the *Babylonian Chronicle* offers a reflection on Babylon's current fate by tracing the ascent of Elam in the transnational configuration of power since the mid-eighth century BCE.

A weakness of this proposition is that there are no other Babylonian texts dating to the later sixth century BCE that refer to the empire founded by Cyrus as "Elam." That practice is known from later Babylonian historiography, where the Persian emperors were known as "kings of Elam."⁷⁷ However, as shown by John Nielsen, the region of the Iranian plateau had traditionally been associated by Assyrian and Babylonian scholars with "Elam" as its dominant power, and the label would thus have been an obvious choice for an author working in the early Persian period.⁷⁸ Another unresolved question is how, and indeed if, the *Babylonian Chronicle* weaved the Teispid and Achaemenid dynasties into the (Neo-) Elamite strand of the composition, or how it would have positioned the Medes, who were well known in Babylonian historiography, in this storyline.⁷⁹ These matters will remain unresolved as long as the next *pîrsu* of the *Chronicle* remain missing.

Despite these uncertainties, a Persian date for the work does help to clarify another peculiar feature of the work, besides its focus on Babylon's submission and Elam's successful bid for supremacy. As we have seen, the text actively suppresses the memory of the Akitu festival. The New Year festival had been central to the justification of power before and during the Babylonian Empire. Huge resources were invested by Nabopolassar and his successors to celebrate this annual festival, from the supply of lavish offerings to the refurbishment of entire cityscapes to stage its processions and rituals. The festival already had a long history by the time Nabopolassar liberated Akkad from the Assyrian yoke, and chronicle-writers had been keenly interested in the history and continued celebration of the

⁷⁷ Dynastic Prophecy (van der Spek 2003 text no. 5); Jursa and Debourse 2017.

⁷⁸ Nielsen 2015, 57; see also Nielsen 2018. The Persian Empire was not known under any (other) specific territorial label in Babylonian sources of the late sixth century BCE. In contemporary legal contracts, the Persian king as emperor was simply referred to as "king of the lands," following an earlier Assyrian tradition. Shortly before and after the conquest of Babylon, the title "king of Anshan" was used for Cyrus in Babylonian texts.

⁷⁹ On the Medes in Babylonian texts from the sixth century BCE, see Rollinger 2020.

festival as a performance indicator of the Babylonian monarch. The author of ABC 1a, by contrast, effectively writes the festival out of history, which indicates that in his time the festival was not considered a necessary accoutrement of monarchy in Babylonia. This context fits the Persian period, when a new type of composite kingship had come into existence that rendered the once-essential rituals of Babylonian kingship obsolete. The first and last New Year festival celebrated under Persian rule, which we have on record, was the one of 538, immediately after the conquest.⁸⁰ Possibly, later celebrations escaped documentation, but it is certain that by the second decade of Darius I's rule at the latest the festival, as it was once known, had become defunct.

Note that my proposal of a Persian-period date for ABC 1a does not imply that the entire text was made up or crafted from scratch at that time. As seen in the multiple instances of ABC 1a sharing materials with other chronicles from the Neo-Babylonian period (discussed at length above), it is clear that ABC 1a constitutes an adaptation and re-working of existing texts into a new work.

13 Interpretation and Causality

Babylonian chronicles are often thought to lack interest in causality and interpretation. Bert van der Spek, for instance, maintains that chronicles do not give arguments or explanations because they make no value judgments, do not use words like “because” or “consequently,” and start new information with every new sentence with no relation to the preceding sentence (2015, 455–456). In this article, I have tried to show that ABC 1a structures and interprets the events of history in various, though subtle, ways. First, omission served as a technique to manipulate the fabric of history without violating facticity. By leaving out events well-known to the reader (i.e. the Akitu festival), the author commented upon current affairs. Omission also created focus and guided readers to key topics and main interests. We have seen that in the opening sections large sections of chronographic material were left out in order to reveal the triple synchronistic structure of the text. Second, through *découpage* (the cutting off of historical sections) the text identifies the point zero of its historical narrative as the moment when three kingdoms came into conflict. In this way, the roots of the contemporary situation are traced back to the beginning of history. This ambition is revealed explicitly by means of paratextual notation (“first *pirsu*”). Third, the text type-casts actors by using patterned formulaic language: the Babylonian king is portrayed as inactive and incompetent, the Assyrian king as offensive but non-violent towards Babylonia, and the Elamite

⁸⁰ Tolini 2011, 135–145.

king as aggressive and violent towards Babylonia. Fourth, the physical shape of the tablet, arranged in two columns on both sides, was used to connect non-consecutive events and to transcend the limitations of paratactical presentation. Rubrication too was amenable to meaningful modification: by omitting rulings, the annual time-structure could be replaced with larger units of time. Fifth, several literary techniques were used to hide actor-identity at crucial moments in the narrative. The passive voice allowed the text to bypass agency. Use of collectives (like the army) allowed to divert individual responsibility to an anonymous group. Use of a generic label (“the city”) steered attention away from the specific entity (Babylon). Other techniques that are observed in ABC 1a include: framing, orthographic marking, and authorial reflexivity.

14 The *Babylonian Chronicle* as Literature and Historiography

In conclusion, I would like to defend the proposition that the *Babylonian Chronicle* can be read both as literature and historiography. Earlier, I made a similar argument about the *Nabonidus Chronicle*, which was rejected by Bert van der Spek.⁸¹ Although I agree with van der Spek that the chronicles are “not examples of beautiful historical narrative” (2003, 290), I hope to have shown that, at least in this one particular case, they can be submitted to literary analysis with good results. The language of ABC 1a may not have literary ambition, it may also be “dull” (van der Spek 2015, 455), but it uses a range of literary techniques that all serve a function in the text. Together with non-literary features—such as orthography, column structure and rubrication—these techniques were used to indicate significant patterns in history. It re-uses chronographic materials, adds new elements and combines these in a new text.

Which meanings does ABC 1a find in history? According to my interpretation of the text, the work offers a reflection on Babylon’s fate as the prey of the imperialist ambitions of others. I argued that the early Persian period offers the most likely context for the work’s composition. While the work incorporates earlier materials, I consider it unlikely that the work in its particular shape could have emerged earlier, as neither its disbelief in Babylon’s capacity to determine its own destiny nor its belief in Elam’s ability to define the course of history fit earlier conditions. Moreover, the text’s relationship to the chronographic traditions of the Neo-Assyrian and

⁸¹ Waerzeggers 2015, van der Spek 2015.

Neo-Babylonian periods positions it towards the end of the sixth century, rather than at an earlier moment in time.

Compared with chronicles of the Neo-Babylonian period, it is especially the passivity of the Babylonian monarch that strikes me as significant in the *Babylonian Chronicle*. No longer does he determine the course of history (as he did, for instance in ABC 5). The king of ABC 1a fails to take action in the face of Assyrian offensives and, later, Elamite aggression. As such, the work is critical of Babylonian monarchy, or at least not confident that its restoration is something to be wished for. At the same time, the text can be interpreted as delivering a subtle criticism of Babylon’s current rulers in typifying Elam as prone to massacre, possibly in contrast to its former enemy, Assyria, which is less violently portrayed. This ambivalent evaluation of the institution of Babylonian kingship fits well in the context of the first decades of Persian rule in Babylonia, when the question whether the dynasty of Nebuchadnezzar II should be restored resonated in society without receiving a unified answer.⁸²

Appendix: Activity Chart of the Three Royal Protagonists⁸³

Assyrian king		
<i>abāku</i>	to abduct	i:5 (gods of Šapaza)
<i>alāku</i>	to go	iv:30
<i>arādu</i>	to descend upon	i:3 (Akkad); i:20 (Akkad); ii:1 (Akkad); ii:27 (Akkad); ii:37 (Elam); iii:10 (Elam)
<i>ašābu</i> (Š)	to make sb ascend the throne	ii:23 (Bēl-ibni); ii:31 (Aššur-nādin-šumi)
<i>dāku</i>	to kill	iv:29 (magnates)
<i>dāku</i> (N)	be killed	iii:35 (Sennacherib)
<i>galū</i> (Š)	to lead in exile	ii:28 (Bēl-ibni and his magnates)
<i>(hubtu)</i>	to plunder	i:4 (Rabbilu, Hamranu); i:44 (of Bīt-...); ii:21 (land of Merodach-baladan); ii:27 (Akkad); ii:39 (cities in Elam); iii:11 (cities in Elam)
<i>habātu</i>		

82 On the revolts of the “Nebuchadnezzars” in 522–521 BCE and their divisive effects in society see Beaulieu 2014 and Waerzeggers 2016.

83 Note that actions carried out by collectives (e.g. the army, the people) or by non-royal actors are not included in this chart. It also does not include the inauguration, death and summary statements of their reigns. For these, see the discussion above.

(continued)

<i>ḥapû</i>	to ravage	i:21 (Bīt-Amūkānu); i:28 (Samaria); i:44 (of Bīt-...); ii:25 (Hirimma, Ḥararatum); ii:38 (cities in Elam); iii:11 (cities in Elam)
<i>kašādu</i>	to capture	i:21 (Babylonian king)
<i>maruṣ</i>	(king) becomes ill	iv:31
<i>nakāru</i>	to be belligerent	i:42 (against Babylonian king)
<i>ṣaltu epēšu</i>	to wage battle	ii:2 (against Babylonia)
<i>(lā) sapāḥu</i>	not to scatter	ii:19 (the Babylonians)
Babylonian king		
<i>alāku</i>	to go	i:37 (too late to help Elam)
<i>dekû</i>	to remove	i:18 (a rival from the throne)
<i>(ḥubtu)</i>	to plunder	ii:47 (of Nippur, by Nergal-ušēzib)
<i>ḥabātu</i>		
<i>ḥalāqu</i>	to flee	ii:3 (to Elam)
<i>(lā) kašādu</i>	not to arrive	i:37 (in time at the battle)
<i>naḥāsu</i>	to withdraw	i:37; ii:23
<i>ṣabātu</i>	to capture	i:18 (the throne from a rival); ii:47 (of Nippur, by Nergal-ušēzib)
<i>ṣaltu epēšu</i>	to wage battle	i:7–8 (against Borsippa, by Nabonassar); iii:4 (against Assyria)
<i>šillatu šalālu</i>	to sack	ii:47 (of Nippur, by Nergal-ušēzib)
<i>ṣabīt ... abik</i>	(king) is seized and abducted	ii:42 (Aššur-nādin-šumi, to Elam); iii:4–5 (Nergal-ušēzib, to Assyria); iii:23 (Mušēzib-Marduk, to Assyria)
Elamite king		
<i>alāku</i>	to go	ii:40 (to Akkad)
<i>ašābu (Š)</i>	to make sb ascend the throne	ii:44 (Nergal-ušēzib)
<i>dabdu šakānu</i>	to inflict a defeat	i:35 (on Assyria)
<i>dāku</i>	to slaughter	ii:41 (people of Sippar); iii:42 (governor of the Sealand); iv:9 (people of Sippar)
<i>dekû</i>	to muster troops	iii:17 (of Elam and Akkad)
<i>erēbu</i>	to enter	ii:40 (city of Sippar); iv:9 (city of Sippar)
<i>maḥiṣ</i>	(king) slain by illness	iii:31
<i>maruṣ</i>	(king) becomes ill	iv:11 (without becoming ill)
<i>nabulkutu</i>	to effect a retreat	i:35 (of Assyria); ii:45 (of Assyria); iii:18 (of Assyria)
<i>šakānu</i>		
<i>peḥû</i>	to close	ii:33 (of door, in the king's face)
<i>ṣabātu</i>	to capture	ii:33 (king by his own brother); iii:42 (governor of the Sealand)
<i>ṣaltu epēšu</i>	to wage battle	i:34 (against Assyria); iii:17 (against Assyria)
<i>ṣabīt ... dīk</i>	(king) is seized and killed	iii:14 (Kutur-Naḥḫunte)

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Addendum: In the time when this article was under review, Yuval Levavi published a paper on ABC 1a's near omission of the sack of Babylon by Sennacherib in 689 BCE (Levavi, Y. 2021. "Sound of Silence: The Destruction of Babylon by Sennacherib and the Babylonian Chronicles" In *Submission in Written Sources and the Archaeological Record*. Gorgias Studies in the Ancient Near East 16, edited by K. Streit and M. Grohmann, 165–187. Piscataway N.J.: Gorgias Press). Levavi attributes this silence to cognitive dissonance on the part of the Persian-period author of the chronicle, who would have been hard-pressed to reconcile his positive experience of Persian rule with the memory of extreme violence under the Assyrians. Levavi's dating of ABC 1a to the Persian period is in line with my present argument; however, I am less convinced that the chronicle's appreciation of Elam was overall positive, as explained above.