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Introductory Concerns

The name Babylon still evokes ambivalent images. Symbol of corruption and depravity in the Judeo-Christian tradition, depicted in the Bible as arrogant imperial city, home to ruthless despots and doomed to destruction by the prophets of Israel, Babylon never fully reclaimed in the modern perception her legitimate status as one of the longest lived, and intellectually most creative civilizations of the ancient world. Indeed, if Babylon still casts its long shadow over our lives, it is not solely as epitome of moral decadence. Fundamental elements of time reckoning, such as the division of the hour into sixty minutes and the minute into sixty seconds, ultimately originate in the Babylonian sexagesimal system which used a base sixty rather than the base ten of our decimal system. The same Babylonian methods still survive in the division of the circle into 360 degrees. Many essential features of astrology, such as the practice of casting horoscopes and the division of the zodiac into twelve signs, began with the scientific and religious speculations of Babylonian astronomers. One must count as the most enduring contribution of Babylon to world civilization the development of an elaborate predictive mathematical astronomy which ranks as the earliest documented science in history. And indeed, the achievements of Babylonian scientists received ample recognition in antiquity, especially from the Greeks.

Beyond this legacy, the civilization of Babylon has emerged in a far more complex light since historians began more than a century and a half ago to study the rich epigraphic and material remains discovered in the soil of Iraq. Excavations have uncovered cities crowded with houses, temples, military compounds, and palaces. Many buildings have yielded spectacular textual finds amounting to tens of thousands of clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform, the writing system invented by the Sumerians five thousand years ago and inherited by the Babylonians. These are the sources on which we rely to reconstruct the history of Babylon. Before

modern excavations began little information was available on the civilizations of the ancient Near East. Those civilizations had vanished almost without a trace, obliterated from the collective memory of humankind. Babylon, for instance, was known mainly from the Bible. However, if the Bible contains some genuine historical material, such as the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar at the beginning of the sixth century and the deportation of Judeans to Babylonia, much that it preserves ranks either as historical romance, exemplified by the saga of Babylon's fall in the Book of Daniel, or as legend, first and foremost the tale of the Tower of Babel in Genesis. Some ancient Greek writers gave accounts of Babylonian history, but these must also be handled with caution. Herodotus probably never visited Babylon, as almost everything he writes on the city has been contradicted by cuneiform sources and archaeological excavations. The material found in the writings of Ctesias, a Greek physician who spent part of his life at the Persian court, ranks even lower. Ctesias became the most influential propagator of the legend of Semiramis, the Assyrian queen whom he credits with the foundation of Babylon (Figure 1.1). There is no basis for this tale, as for almost every alleged historical fact reported by Ctesias concerning Assyria and Babylon.

Among the Greeks, however, Ptolemy stands out as an exception. Hailed as the greatest scientist of the ancient world, Ptolemy lived in Alexandria in the second century of our era. His *Almagest* summed up ancient astronomical knowledge and remained the ultimate reference on astral science and cosmology until the Renaissance. Remarkably, Ptolemy quotes in detail a number of Babylonian astronomical observations, the earliest one being an eclipse of the moon which occurred in the first year of the Babylonian king Marduk-apla-iddina II, on March 19/20, 721. He also used for astronomical dating a list of kings who reigned in Babylon from the accession of Nabonassar. Known as the Ptolemaic Canon (Canon of Ptolemy), this list formed the essential chronological backbone for ancient Near Eastern history until the modern era. Other material was preserved in the writings of Berossus, a Babylonian priest who lived at the beginning of the third century at a time when Babylonia had become a province of the Seleucid Empire. Berossus wrote in Greek a compendium on Babylonian history and culture and dedicated it to the Seleucid ruler Antiochus I (281–261). The work, entitled *Babyloniaka*, has not survived in its original form and is known from quotations found in the writings of ancient authors. Berossus recorded little information that we can consider reliable as historical facts except for the period of the Babylonian empire in the sixth century.

Thus, very little of the history of Babylon was known until the rediscovery and decipherment of cuneiform texts: a chronology from the mid-eighth century onwards with names of rulers, and scattered historical facts about the Babylonian Empire and the fate of Babylon under Persian and Greek rule. This is not much if we consider that Babylon is already mentioned in cuneiform documents from the last centuries of the third millennium and rose to prominence as dominant political and cultural center of ancient Iraq under Hammu-rabi (1792–1750). To write a history of Babylon one therefore depends almost entirely on cuneiform texts, and this is the subject to which we must now turn our attention.



Figure 1.1 Semiramis. This imaginary portrait of the Assyrian queen who allegedly built Babylon was executed about 1639–40 for a portfolio of “World Marvels” (Les Merveilles du Monde) published by the French engraver Pierre Mariette. The Semiramis legend enjoyed wide currency as fact until the decipherment of cuneiform in the modern era revealed its shaky historical foundations. *Source:* The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC (MMA 53.601.112), Public Domain.

1.1 Assyriology and the Writing of History

Assyriology is the academic discipline devoted to the study of the ancient civilizations of Iraq. It emerged a century and a half ago in the wake of the decipherment of cuneiform. The word originally referred to the study of Assyria, where excavations first started and initial discoveries of cuneiform texts occurred. Soon,

however, digs began in the south of Iraq, revealing to the world the civilizations of Babylon and its predecessors, the Sumerians and Akkadians, but by then the term Assyriology had already become entrenched. From its inception Assyriology developed the strong philological orientation that still characterizes it today. The study of the Sumerian and Akkadian languages can absorb the energies of apprentice Assyriologists for many years, not to mention the added onus of mastering the writing system. Basically this does not seem so different from learning any other set of languages, but Assyriologists must also penetrate the world of a very distant and vanished civilization, entirely depending on the point of view of ancient scribes to do so. Therefore, Assyriology has defined itself primarily as the study of an ancient textual and intellectual tradition.

Historians rely on textual sources, but Assyriologists do not study archives neatly filed in a monastery, state ministry, or national library, accumulated through uninterrupted tradition until now. The recovery of textual sources from ancient Iraq is the direct outcome of the rise of archaeology in modern times. Cuneiform texts represent material remains of ancient human activity like every other artifact unearthed in an excavation, be it a piece of pottery, of jewelry, remnants of textiles, animal bones, or architectural structures. Analysis of the context in which cuneiform tablets are discovered provides crucial information bearing on their interpretation. It is therefore all the more deplorable that so many cuneiform tablets have come to light without proper recording of their find spots, often as the result of illicit digs. The contribution of archaeology is evidently not limited to recording the find spots of cuneiform tablets. Archaeology has long developed into an autonomous discipline which draws on a wide range of technical and scientific fields and is informed by a variety of theoretical approaches. Ancient Iraq has also left a rich visual record which tells us a story that often seems very different from the textual evidence. The interpretation of this record falls within the purview of art history. Archaeology and art history constitute separate humanistic fields but they also belong, like philology, to the auxiliary sciences of history, and all three disciplines must necessarily be integrated into historical research although no one can hope nowadays to master all of them. The present book is written from the point of view of an Assyriologist and relies mainly on the philological interpretation of cuneiform sources, but also integrates some of the findings of archaeology and art history.

1.1.1 Cuneiform Texts as Historical Sources

Interpreting cuneiform documents presents a number of challenges. The sources discussed in the present book are written for the most part in Babylonian, a branch of Akkadian, the ancient Semitic language spoken in Iraq. As the result of more than a century of philological and linguistic research, Babylonian is now surprisingly well known for an extinct language, but many uncertainties remain. Problems of vocabulary, for instance, can sometimes impede historical research. What is the precise meaning of this one word describing a technical

term for irrigation? And how about that other word which refers to an institution that appears in several documents, but none of which gives us enough background information to determine its nature? Babylonian belongs to the Semitic language family, and often cognates in other Semitic languages such as Arabic, Aramaic, and Hebrew have helped determine the basic meaning of an Akkadian word. Indeed, this information played a crucial role in the decipherment of Babylonian cuneiform. But the limitations of this method are obvious. Words change meaning throughout their history, and therefore, in the absence of ancient native explanations, the semantic range of a word must ultimately be determined from the multiple contexts in which it occurs. Also, we must always remember that in Babylonia, as in all ancient civilizations, the sphere of writing was limited. Only certain people acquired literacy, mostly professional scribes, and few things were recorded in writing. Babylon, like all ancient societies, functioned mostly as an oral society, which means that knowledge and information circulated preferably in oral form rather than in writing. Texts fulfilled a basic function as aids to memory. One of the dominant characteristics of the Babylonian written legacy is the near complete absence of explanatory and analytical contents. These belonged to the oral sphere. To be sure, Babylonian scholars created a rich lexical corpus listing thousands of words with entries detailing basic facts such as spellings, synonyms, translation in Sumerian and other languages, but without providing definitions such as we find in our dictionaries and encyclopedias.

Even when words are clear, however, the information gleaned from cuneiform texts can still prove difficult to contextualize. For instance, an exchange of official letters may contain essential data, but as is always the case in epistolary exchanges, there is a considerable amount of information that is not expressed in the body of the letters because it was assumed to be common knowledge by the correspondents. To us, however, such knowledge is no matter of course and we often wish letter writers had detailed the entire context of their exchange. Other problems stem from the complexity of the cuneiform script. Cuneiform belongs typologically to logo-syllabic writing systems. Such systems still flourish today, notably Chinese and its derived scripts of East Asia. In a logo-syllabic system, each sign has multiple values and can express an entire word, a syllable, or a determinative. For example, the cuneiform sign we conventionally call GIŠ can be used either for the word *īšu* “wood, tree,” or for its syllabic values (*giš*, *īš*, *eš*, *is*, *es*, *iz*, *ež*), in which cases the values are purely phonetic and do not carry the meaning “wood” or “tree.” In addition, GIŠ belongs to a restricted group of signs which can also serve as determinatives, signs which precede or follow a word to indicate its semantic class. When it fulfills this role, GIŠ precedes names of trees and wooden objects. The cuneiform script includes hundreds of signs with multiple values, and requires several years of study before one can confidently read a cuneiform text.

The cuneiform script displays a highly abstract appearance; each sign being composed of a number of wedges with horizontal, vertical, and diagonal orientation, with the addition of a small triangular sign impressed with the top of the stylus and conventionally called the *Winkelhaken*. The name cuneiform means “wedge-shaped, nail-shaped” and derives from Latin *cuneus* “wedge.” Clay tablets

were molded into shape probably by an assistant, and while the clay was still wet the scribe impressed the signs on the tablet with a sharpened reed stylus. A cuneiform tablet characteristically displays the outward appearance of a piece of terracotta covered with a network of short strokes and small triangles, with many signs having a similar look. On the whole the cuneiform writing system, except for the earlier periods of its development, poses no major quandary for Assyriologists. However, some difficulties may arise if the document is sloppily written or not well preserved. Indeed, many clay tablets have come to us in a damaged state, with erosion of the surface or chunks missing. In such cases the script can be hard to read, and sometimes Assyriologists scrutinizing the same damaged surface will come up with different results. Missing pieces present a particular challenge because part of the text is lost and must be restored from parallels or plausible guesses as to what should have been present in the gap. If the damaged or missing portion belongs to the crucial section of a text that has great historical relevance, such as a list of kings, a chronicle, or a royal letter addressed to an official, this can lead to repeated collations of the text and the publication of conflicting theories about the lost passage.

While clay tablets make up our main documentary source for the history of Babylon, we must not lose sight of the fact that they did not constitute the sole medium for cuneiform writing. Cuneiform is found on other clay artifacts such as cylinders and barrel-shaped objects which were generally preferred for building inscriptions. Stone monuments of various shapes also bear cuneiform inscriptions, notably the famous Law Code of Hammu-rabi inscribed on a black basalt stele preserved in the Louvre. We know that small wooden or ivory boards filled with wax were widely used for writing as well. Wooden boards have nearly all perished but one damaged set dating from the eighth century and inscribed with astrological omens has survived; it was found in a well in the Assyrian city of Nimrud (ancient Kalhu). The use of writing boards for scholarly texts is amply documented; we know they made up a substantial portion of the library amassed by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in his capital Nineveh in the seventh century. Writing boards were also used in the administration of large compounds such as temples. Clay tablets had to be inscribed relatively fast before they dried out and became unusable as writing surface. Wax, on the other hand, could be softened again at will, making writing boards an ideal support for texts which needed periodical update such as inventories and running accounts. Unfortunately, all this documentation has vanished.

1.1.1.1 Archival texts

Cuneiform texts from ancient Babylonia are mostly of a practical nature. These may be categorized as archival, in that they record the day to day running of an administration, private business, or household unit, and were filed temporarily to be discarded later, when their relevance to the conduct of affairs had ceased. Among these archives we find a broad typological distribution of administrative texts (accounts, memoranda, inventories, receipts, disbursements, lists of expenditures),

legal documents (bills of sale, exchange, real estate transactions, marriage contracts, wills, promissory notes, loans, business partnership agreements, court decisions), as well as private and official letters. Except letters, archival documents are usually dated, which considerably enhances their value as historical source. The quantity of archival documents from the ancient Near East is unparalleled in the ancient world. A rough estimate of cuneiform tablets and fragments discovered in the past two centuries may easily reach half a million, of which the archival documentation from Babylonia forms the larger part. Archives are particularly rich during the time of Babylon's rise to political leadership under its First Dynasty (1880–1595), and for the era covering the century of Assyrian hegemony (731–626), the Babylonian empire (625–539), and the first decades of Persian rule (538–485).

Cuneiform archives that have survived to this day owe it to exceptional circumstances. Archives sometimes survived because the building which housed them suffered sudden destruction, with no immediate reoccupation. The tablets lay in the destruction level under accumulations of debris until their rediscovery in modern times. In a situation involving violent destruction, the fire could bake the tablets into ceramic, enhancing their durability. In other cases documents have come down to us because their owners saved them in containers or storage rooms where their existence was forgotten. Parts of archives also survived because they were recycled as fill in the foundations of buildings. However, most archival documents are lost to us; they were simply destroyed in ancient times during periodic clean-ups of storage rooms. The term archive is therefore misleading, because ancient Near Eastern societies rarely maintained archives over long periods of time, carefully filed for later reference.

In order to use archival documents as historical source, we must evaluate the contents of the entire archive and what it represents in relation to the administration or private household that generated it. Often the absence of specific documents will be as revealing as their presence. A family archive that would include only loans, promissory notes, a few letters, and a handful of business partnership agreements, all spread over a period of thirty years, would immediately be recognized as a group of documents discarded by its owners, not as the main archive. Indeed, we would normally expect the main archive not only to cover a longer period of time, but also to include perennial documents such as sales, gifts, real estate transactions, and marriage contracts. Such family archives do exist, notably the archive of the Egibi from Babylon, spread over five generations between 606 and 484. Archives that are found more or less in the form they were left in before a sudden interruption of activities are called "living archives," while collections of documents that were discarded in ancient times receive the label "dead archives."

The royal archives of Mari constitute one of the most spectacular archaeological discoveries from the ancient Near East. The powerful city of Mari, located in Syria on the Euphrates near the border with Iraq, was captured by the armies of the Babylonian king Hammu-rabi in 1761 and its royal palace sacked and later destroyed. French excavators discovered in the palace more than 20,000 cuneiform tablets, including a few thousand letters belonging to the official and

private correspondence of the kings of Mari. The texts cover about fifty years, but the bulk of them dates to a period of twenty years corresponding to the last part of the reign of Yasmah-Addu and the whole reign of Zimri-Lim, the last king of Mari. The documents which cover these last twenty years, up to the conquest by Hammu-rabi, make up the living archive. A clean-up of the storage rooms probably occurred under Zimri-Lim, when they disposed of most documents except records of the current reign and part of the preceding reign. Whatever earlier documents survived belonged to smaller batches that had become dead archives, used as fill under the floors or forgotten in storage. Initially, the contents of the diplomatic correspondence of Zimri-Lim perplexed researchers because it contained mostly letters back and forth with unimportant kingdoms north of Mari, whereas almost nothing seemed to have survived of the epistolary exchanges between Mari and such important cities as Babylon and Aleppo, the two leading powers of the Near East at that time. However, it was realized later that all such correspondence must have been removed from the palace after its capture and taken to Babylon. Indeed, we know that Babylonian scribes sorted through the archive after the fall of Mari, because clay tags originally attached to tablet containers were found in the palace inscribed with the formulas “tablets of the servants of Zimri-Lim” and “tablets of the servants of Samsi-Addu” (the father of Yasmah-Addu). One tag was found at the gate of the palace where it had probably fallen when Babylonian soldiers left with the containers. Thus, while historians may lament the loss of a crucial source, having identified the reason for the absence of these letters also constitutes an important historical fact. It demonstrates the care with which ancient chanceries handled critical diplomatic information. This work of sorting documents and reflecting on the configuration of an ancient archive may seem painstaking, yet it is essential. Archival texts constitute an exceptional source, providing a wealth of first hand information on the history, society, law, economy, and material culture of the ancient Near East.

1.1.1.2 Royal inscriptions

Royal inscriptions form the second type of historical source. These inscriptions were sometimes carved on larger monuments such as stone steles, and therefore the label “monumental texts” has also been applied to them. Most royal inscriptions belong to the genre of building inscriptions, official texts commemorating the construction or repair of various buildings and public works, temples being by far the most frequent recipients of royal benefactions. In Assyria building inscriptions developed into the genre of Annals in which the king, taking as pretext the dedication of a building, detailed his personal achievements in chronological sequence, chiefly in the military sphere. This specifically Assyrian genre provides the historian with crucial information in spite of the bias inherent to such kind of self-generated and self-centered narration. The Assyrians became a major factor in the history of Babylon in the late second and first millennia, and their royal Annals constitute an important source for those periods.

Babylonian royal inscriptions also exhibit a high level of egocentric boasting. However, cultural and religious reasons dictated a far greater restraint in the report of military achievements and a more pronounced emphasis on the moral qualities of the ruler, his piety, humility in the presence of the gods, care for his subjects, and ritual scrupulousness. The result seems more disappointing for the historian. On the other hand, the inscriptions of Babylonian kings constitute a valuable source for the study of religion and culture. The corpus is particularly rich for the reigns of Hammu-rabi (1792–1750) and Samsu-iluna (1749–1712), which correspond to the apex of Babylonian power under the First Dynasty. In the ensuing period of Kassite rule (1595–1155) royal inscriptions revert to a terse style recalling Sumerian inscriptions of the third millennium. After the end of Kassite rule sources become very sparse until the mid-eighth century, and from this long period only a handful of royal inscriptions have survived. The century of Assyrian hegemony (744–626) saw a major increase in the building activities of the monarchy, reflected in a number of very elaborate inscriptions often commissioned by the Assyrian kings themselves.

The genre of building inscriptions reached its zenith at the time of the Babylonian empire (625–539), a period of intense architectural activity. The inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562) represent the largest corpus in that genre for the entire history of Babylon. Building inscriptions of this era emulate earlier models but also innovate in some areas; sometimes they also mention the discovery of inscribed foundation deposits of earlier rulers. They report, for instance, on the discovery of inscriptions of the Old Akkadian rulers Sargon and Naram-Sin, of the Neo-Sumerian kings Ur-Namma and Shulgi, of Hammu-rabi, and of the Kassite kings Burna-Buriash and Shagarakti-Shuriash. The last king of Babylon, Nabonidus (555–539), even provides chronological estimates for these rulers, sometimes with errors in the range of several centuries. He claims that Hammu-rabi reigned 700 years before Burna-Buriash, and that the distance between his own reign and that of Shagarakti-Shuriash was 800 years, and as many as 3,200 years back to the time of Naram-Sin (Figure 9.4). Such statements, though usually incorrect, testify to a greater interest in historical and chronological data in the later phases of the history of Babylon, even as the city lost its political power with the Persian conquest of 539. Afterwards foreign rulers abandoned the practice of royal inscriptions for Babylonia, the only two exceptions being Cyrus the Great (reigned 538–530 as king of Babylon) and the Seleucid ruler Antiochus I (281–261).

1.1.1.3 Scholarly texts

The third category of cuneiform source with historical data are scholarly texts. Under this label we include all texts other than royal inscriptions that were meant for transmission to later generations, such as literature, science, divination, lexicography, rituals, magic, religious and theological texts. Because of its apparent perennial nature this corpus is often labeled as the “stream of tradition,” and the invariability of certain compositions through time has also earned it the brand

“canonical.” Such designations certainly reflect important facets of the corpus, but may at the same time create the misleading impression of a monotonous flow of static works endowed with an eternal life of its own, almost impervious to the influence of the surrounding society. In fact, scribes and scholars never ceased to create new texts and even entirely new genres. Regional variations also often prevailed in the configuration of an accepted corpus. In certain periods many texts ceased to be copied and disappeared from the official cultural memory, while others were modified, abridged, expanded, or edited.

A number of scholarly texts can be considered strictly historical because they consist essentially of narratives about the past. As all ancient societies, the Babylonians produced historical epics and literary narratives portraying their rulers as heroes and paragons of wisdom. Such texts must be approached critically, all the more so when a composition is attested in a period that is very distant from the events it reports. We will return to this important question below. In the course of time Babylonian scribes also produced a substantial corpus of chronographic documents which include King Lists, Astronomical Diaries, Chronicles, and Lists of Year Names.

1.1.1.3.1 *King lists*

King lists supply the basic chronographic scheme. It is therefore important to discuss them in some detail. In addition to the Ptolemaic Canon, which is preserved in Greek, several cuneiform king lists contain data that are relevant and for the most part reliable. For the history of Babylon, the most important such documents are:

King List A: this text is known from a single Neo-Babylonian manuscript preserved in the British Museum (BM 33332). In its complete form, King List A contained the names of all the kings of Babylon from the beginning of the First Dynasty in the early nineteenth century until at least the rise of the Babylonian empire at the end of the seventh century. The beginning and end of the text are lost and the surface is worn. The list groups the kings into dynasties, called *palû* in Babylonian, and provides the length of each reign. It remains to this day the most important chronographic document for the history of Babylon.

King List B: this smaller list, also in the British Museum (BM 38122), records the names of the kings of the first two Babylonian dynasties (1894–1475), adding lengths of reigns only for the First Dynasty. The document dates from the Neo-Babylonian period and labels the two dynasties as *palû*.

King List C: this document lists the first seven rulers of the Second Dynasty of Isin (1153–1065) with the lengths of their reigns. The manuscript is Neo-Babylonian, although probably a copy of an original dating shortly after the last king mentioned in the list.

Synchronistic King List: this list is so named because it runs parallel lists of kings who reigned in Assyria and Babylonia, proposing synchronisms between them. The list comes from Assur and dates to the seventh century, ending with Ashurbanipal and Kandalanu. The synchronisms it proposes are often erroneous, especially for the earlier parts of the list. Nevertheless each of the

two lists taken independently generally agrees with other chronographic material as to the names of rulers and their order of succession.

King List 14: this is a fragment of a synchronistic list quite different in format from the previous one. It is important because it preserves the names of some poorly attested Babylonian rulers of the first millennium.

Uruk King List: this list came to light during the German excavations at Uruk and is now in the Iraq Museum (IM 65066). The top and bottom parts of the tablet are lost. The preserved section includes kings with lengths of their reigns from Kandalanu (647–627) to the Persian king Darius I (522–486), and after a gap continues from Darius III (335–331) down to the Seleucid ruler Seleucus II Callinicus (246–226). There is no division into dynasties.

King List of the Hellenistic Period: this tablet is preserved in the British Museum (BM 35603) and almost certainly comes from Babylon. It mentions kings with the lengths of their reigns beginning with Alexander the Great and going at least as late as the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164). The text also supplies the filiations of kings and short notes concerning their deaths, but does not arrange them into dynasties.

King List A expresses a key concept of Babylonian historiography; this concept is denoted by the Babylonian word *palû*, loosely translated as “dynasty.” The term came into Babylonian as loanword from Sumerian *bala*, which means “to rotate, to turn over” and in third millennium Sumerian texts also denotes “term of duty” and “turn of office.” From example, the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur, who ruled Babylonia from 2112 to 2004, enforced a redistributive system called the *bala*, by which a select number of provincial cities were obligated in turn to provide goods and services to the state. As we will see later, Babylon belonged to that group of cities. More important, the term *bala* also acquired the meaning “reign” (of an individual king or a ruling house) and eventually entered the sphere of chronographic writing. The Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur, a Sumerian literary composition which bemoans the collapse of the Third Dynasty of Ur and the sack of its capital at the end of the third millennium, reflects on the conclusion of the city’s hegemony in the following terms:

Ur was granted kingship, but it was not granted an eternal reign (*bala*); from time immemorial, since the land was founded, until the population multiplied, who has ever seen a reign (*bala*) of kingship that would forever take precedence?¹

The same philosophy is reflected in the Sumerian King List (SKL), in which every city in turn exerts hegemony over Sumer and Akkad (i.e. Babylonia). Some manuscripts of the List refer to these periods of hegemonies as the *bala* of a city. The later Babylonian historiography borrowed the concept and applied it to the succession of kings and royal houses recognized in Babylon.

The Sumerian term *bala* and its Babylonian form *palû* mirror a concept of time and history that is cyclical rather than linear. All ancient civilizations share this rotating view of historical time which appears to deny the possibility of change and progress. New kings and dynasties merely repeat patterns established

Table 1.1 The Ten Babylonian Dynasties

I	First Dynasty of Babylon	1880–1595
II	First Dynasty of the Sealand	1732–1475
III	Kassite Dynasty	1594–1155
IV	Second Dynasty of Isin	1153–1022
V	Second Dynasty of the Sealand	1025–1005
VI	Dynasty of Bazi	1004–985
VII	Elamite Dynasty	984–979
VIII	Dynasty of E	978–732
IX	Ninth Dynasty of Babylon	731–626
X	Neo-Babylonian Dynasty	625–539

in primeval times by gods and civilizing heroes. Indeed, their political ideal is to emulate them. The periodization of Babylonian history into *palûs* appears to have been largely abandoned after the seventh century. The later king lists, such as the Uruk King List and the King List from the Hellenistic Period, proceed from the basic assumption of a continuous succession of rulers. The change must probably be attributed to the rise of linear concepts of time during the second half of the first millennium, culminating in the adoption of dating according to the Seleucid Era at the end of the third century.

If we take King Lists A and B as matrix and fill their textual gaps with the data culled from other king lists and chronographic texts, we arrive at the division of the history of Babylon into ten dynasties (Table 1.1).

These names derive partly from modern conventions and do not always reflect ancient usage. For example, the First Dynasty of Babylon is never called by this name in ancient sources; King List B simply calls it *palê Babili* “Dynasty of Babylon.” The name for the First Dynasty of the Sealand in King Lists A and B is *palê Urukug* “Dynasty of Urukug,” presumably after its place of origin, but other sources refer to some of its individual rulers as “king of the Sealand” and therefore the term has been applied to the entire dynasty. The label “First” was added by modern historians to differentiate it from the Second Dynasty of the Sealand, called *palê tamti* in King List A. The entry naming the third dynasty in King List A is lost. However, another source refers to that historical era as *palê Kasshi* “Dynasty of the Kassites.” King List A lists the Second Dynasty of Isin as *palê Ishin* “Dynasty of Isin,” probably its city of origin, but it is necessary to number it as “Second” in order to differentiate it from the First Dynasty of Isin, which ruled Babylonia for about a century between the collapse of the Third Dynasty of Ur in 2004 and the beginnings of Babylon as independent polity after 1880.

The eighth and ninth dynasties form the most problematic groups. The era of the Dynasty of E (*palê E*) emerges from contemporary sources as one of relative political instability. The term “E” itself seems obscure. The most likely hypothesis views it as a reference to Babylon, as the sign E followed by the determinative KI for geographic names is a frequent designation of the city in cuneiform texts of the first millennium. The Dynasty of E included in fact several separate groups of rulers, a fact which is recognized in another important work of Babylonian

historiography, the Dynastic Chronicle, which breaks it up into smaller dynasties. The Ninth Dynasty also formed a grab bag of independent rulers since King List A attaches separate labels for dynasties to many of its rulers. Most historians have in fact dropped the designations Dynasty of E and Ninth Dynasty of Babylon altogether. It still seems preferable, however, to adhere to the tradition of King List A because the manuscript of the list clearly separates the two groups by the same horizontal rulings dividing the previous rulers into dynasties. Finally, the designation *palû* for the Neo-Babylonian Dynasty never occurs in our sources. This is because these rulers appear in king lists created during the Hellenistic period, when that chronographic genre abandoned the concept of *palû*. Historians often refer to this dynasty as the Chaldean Dynasty, after its presumed ethnic origin. The term Neo-Babylonian Dynasty is also a modern creation and never occurs in ancient sources.

Although ancient scribes assumed that these dynasties all ruled in succession in Babylon, we know that the First Dynasty of the Sealand overlapped partly with the First Dynasty of Babylon and the Kassite Dynasty. Indeed, southern Babylonia seceded at the end of the eighteenth century to form a separate polity ruled by the First Dynasty of the Sealand (Sealand is an ancient name for the southernmost part of Iraq, bordering on the Persian Gulf). After the end of the First Dynasty our sources become very sparse for a period of uncertain length during which the rulers of the Sealand and the Kassites competed for power. The contest ended in the fifteenth century when the Kassites eliminated the Sealand dynasts and reunified Babylonia under their rule. The dates given here for the First Dynasty of the Sealand and the beginning of the Kassite Dynasty are uncertain.

It would be erroneous to view Babylonian dynasties as ancient equivalents of the Valois and Bourbon dynasties of France, or the Tudor in England. Agnatic succession was not the sole legitimate means of acceding to the throne in Babylon. While the First Dynasty fits the traditional understanding of a dynasty, our sources record numerous usurpations and changes of ruling families within each *palû*. The *palûs* of the first millennium do not even form dynasties at all, even in the loosest understanding of the term. We must understand the term dynasty more as a cycle, or as an era characterized by the hegemony of an ethnic or tribal group (the Kassites), a city (Babylon, Isin), or a region (Sealand). However, regardless of the origin of a *palû*, it is probable, yet not assured, that all the kings recorded in the Babylonian King Lists were believed in ancient times to have ruled in Babylon, forming a continuous line of rulers.

Babylonian King Lists are not free of the usual errors that pepper ancient manuscript traditions. The data from King Lists A and B are sometimes at variance with more dependable sources; the names of some kings are misspelled, and the lengths of reigns at times slightly incorrect. On the main points, however, the data from king lists are substantiated by external sources, and we must therefore take their view of Babylonian history seriously. A recent epigraphic discovery has in fact enhanced their status. Until a few years ago the First Dynasty of the Sealand was documented by only a couple of oblique references outside king lists,

Table 1.2 Babylon under Foreign Rule

XI	Achaemenid (Persian) Dynasty	538–331
XII	Argead (Macedonian) Dynasty	330–307
XIII	Seleucid (Macedonian) Dynasty	305–141
XIV	Arsacid (Parthian) Dynasty	141 BC–AD 224

to the point that some historians even questioned the existence of some of its rulers whose names ring like artificial Sumerian expressions, typical of philological speculations of later Babylonian scholars and unlikely to have been borne by real people. A few years ago, however, such doubts evaporated subsequent to the publication of archival texts bearing dating formulas of two of these rulers with abstruse names, Peshgaldaramesh and Ayadaragamma. Thus, a dynasty known almost exclusively from later king lists has now emerged as truly historical. This should remind us that, if ancient traditions should always be handled critically, they must never be dismissed lightly.

The history of Babylon did not conclude with the loss of political independence. Later king lists, such as the Uruk King List, the King List of the Hellenistic Period, and also the first portion of the Ptolemaic Canon, simply record in succession all rulers recognized in Babylon, native or foreign, acknowledging no particular break in the Persian conquest of 539. Persian rulers from Cyrus the Great (538–530) to Xerxes (485–465) still claimed the title of “king of Babylon.” The Seleucid monarchs of the Hellenistic period considered Babylonia a core area of their empire, and one with which they often interacted even on a personal level. We can therefore supplement the ten Babylonian *palūs* with the four dynasties that ruled Babylon as a regional center of their empire. The list must end with the Arsacid Dynasty, as Babylonian civilization became extinct in the first two centuries of our era, with the cuneiform writing system falling into disuse and Babylonian temples being destroyed or abandoned (Table 1.2).

Another periodization of the history of Babylon which is often encountered is the division into three cultural eras: Old Babylonian (2004–1595), Middle Babylonian (1595–1000), and Neo-Babylonian (after 1000). The same division also applies to the three stages of the Babylonian language, with another phase called Late Babylonian after 626. Babylonian historiographers did not recognize this periodization.

As Babylon did not end abruptly in 539, it did not come into existence suddenly in 1880. Textual evidence shows that Babylon existed long before that date as provincial town under successive lines of Sumerian and Akkadian rulers. The history of Iraq in the third millennium is not well known because of the scarcity of contemporary sources and the vagueness of later, native traditions. The situation is particularly acute when we reach the remotest periods, before the rise of the Sargonic dynasty in the twenty-fourth century. Table 1.3 provides a general chronology for this formative period when Babylon evolved within the framework of Sumero-Akkadian civilization.

Table 1.3 Babylon under Sumerian and Akkadian rule

Early Dynastic III Period	2600–2335
Sargonic (Old Akkadian) Dynasty	2334–2154
Third Dynasty of Ur	2112–2004
First Dynasty of Isin	2017–1794

1.1.1.3.2 *Astronomical Diaries*

The so-called Astronomical Diaries are also useful to the historian. They compile daily astronomical observations, mainly eclipses and the position of the moon and planets as well as meteorological phenomena. They also record market prices for basic commodities such as barley, dates, sesame, and wool; and contain occasional notes on political and historical events as well as occurrences of omens. For example, the Diaries for the year 331 report on the triumphal entrance of Alexander the Great into Babylon one month after his decisive victory at Gaugamela against Darius III. The Diaries come from Babylon and most of the information they record is centered on the capital. The two earliest preserved Diaries date to the years 652 and 568, and a handful cover the early Persian period. However, the majority dates between the fourth and second centuries, and a smaller number to the early part of the first century down to the year 60–59. Most scholars agree that the Diaries began with the reign of Nabonassar in 747. In a sense they represent the ancient historian's dream come true, recording data that are reliable and securely anchored in an absolute chronology, even if the sum of really crucial information preserved in the extant Diaries is not extensive. Some entries are introduced by the verb *alteme* "I heard that," reminding us that in the ancient world almost all information circulated orally.

1.1.1.3.3 *Chronicles*

Chronicles form the third genre of chronographic source for the history of Babylon. A chronicle can be defined as a chronologically ordered account of history written from the perspective of an observer rather than participant. In this respect chronicles differ fundamentally from royal inscriptions and annals which highlight the monarchical ego as maker of history. These are composed usually in the first person, chronicles in the third. Many cuneiform chronicles have been recovered, and they vary widely in terms of historical reliability. Although some chronicles were produced in Assyria, the genre is more typical of Babylonia. Most Babylonian chronicles were produced in two specific periods and places: Borsippa in the middle of the sixth century and Babylon during the Hellenistic period. The systematic compiling of chronicles in Babylonia was in fact a late phenomenon, a conclusion which seems inescapable if we look at the Borsippa production. Chronicles of the Babylonian empire of the sixth century are roughly contemporary with the scribes who compiled them; they record continuous, year by year information with specific dates for events. Chronicles which deal with the seventh century still give precise chronological data, with years of reign, months and even days when events occurred. However, these events can be separated by

gaps of several years. On the other hand, chronicles dealing with events prior to the seventh century tend to record information that is increasingly patchy as we recede back in time; precise chronological data are usually lacking and events are recorded as having occurred “in the time” of a given king. Therefore it seems unlikely that the Borsippa Chronicles are copies of older manuscripts. Rather, they were mostly created in the sixth century using whatever sources at hand. This explains why recent events are better documented. The chronicles of the Hellenistic period form a distinct group which is close in formulation and thematic interest to the Astronomical Diaries. In this book chronicles will be referenced mostly by numbers according to the recent edition by J.-J. Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles* (Atlanta, GA: 2004). A table of chronicles is provided in the Appendix.

One chronicle deserves particular attention: the Dynastic Chronicle. This chronicle, preserved in a fragmentary state, ranks as one of the most ambitious chronographic document produced in Babylon. In its complete state, it probably offered nothing less than a survey of Babylonian history from the creation of the world until the heyday of imperial Babylon in the seventh and six centuries. It is known from two seventh-century manuscripts from the Library of Ashurbanipal and two more from Neo-Babylonian libraries. The two Neo-Babylonian manuscripts are intra-linear bilinguals, with one line in the Sumerian language followed by another line giving the translation in Babylonian. The Sumerian language lent an aura of great antiquity to the composition, which in fact largely borrows its material from SKL for the third millennium, and also from the Eridu Genesis (another Sumerian literary composition) for the opening section dealing with primeval history. Indeed, the narrative begins when the gods ordained the plans of heaven and earth and bestowed on humankind the institution of kingship. For the part dealing specifically with Babylon the Dynastic Chronicle appears to agree with King Lists A and B, except that it breaks the Dynasty of E into smaller dynasties. The Dynastic Chronicle entirely revolves around the concept of *palû*, which it applies retroactively even to the antediluvian period, when mythical rulers reigned for tens of thousands of years. Berossus may have drawn some of his inspiration and source material from the Dynastic Chronicle for the composition of his *Babyloniaka*.

1.1.1.3.4 Year names and date lists

In the second half of the third millennium a new method of dating appeared in Iraq: year names. Until the end of the Early Dynastic III period, scribes dated documents computing the years of a ruler with numbers. The method is well documented in the kingdom of Lagash, where we find such dates as “Lugalanda, prince of Lagash, (year) 2” and “Urukagina, king of Lagash, (year) 1.” The Old Akkadian (Sargonic) dynasty generalized the system of year names, which consisted of christening new years with a formula referring to a recent or ongoing event. For example, we find in archival documents from the reign of Sargon of Agade (2334–2279) and his grandson Naram-Sin (2254–2218) such year names as “the year Sargon went to Shimurru,” “the year Naram-Sin laid the

foundations of the temple of the god Enlil in Nippur and of the temple of the goddess Ishtar in Zabalam,” and “the year Naram-Sin was victorious over Shimurru at Kirasheniwe and captured Baba, governor of Shimurru, and Dubul, governor of Arame.” Year names contain no indication of their placement within a reign, so ancient scribes compiled lists of year names (date lists) to classify dated documents in chronological order. Many such date lists have been recovered and they constitute the fourth class of chronographic document from Babylonia. They represent a priceless source for the historian, especially in cases where year names record events of particular historical significance. One must be careful of course not to confuse the year name with the year of the event, which in most cases took place in the preceding year. Thus, the thirty-third year of Hammu-rabi, which corresponds to the year 1760, is named after the conquest of Mari. That event, however, occurred in the year 1761, during the thirty-second year of Hammu-rabi. The practice of year names was abandoned during the Kassite Dynasty, when dating by year numbers of the current ruler came back into fashion. From that period on, year numbers remained in use until the institution of the Seleucid Era at the end of the fourth century. Date lists may have provided the basic chronological material for king lists. Unlike other chronographic documents, however, their status as scholarly texts is open to debate. Many date lists continued to be copied after they had lost any practical value, but transmission of these lists stopped after the middle of the second millennium.

1.2 Historical Science and the Handling of Sources

Historical science recognizes a broad division of sources into primary and secondary. Because all cuneiform tablets were discovered in excavations and provide first hand information on the ancient Near East, Assyriologists tend to treat them all as primary sources, but this creates a lot of confusion. A primary source is a source that was created during the period that is being studied by the historian. A secondary source is a later interpretation of the events of a period, often on the basis of primary sources which may no longer be available to us. Historical research relies preferably on primary sources. Secondary sources belong to the study of historiography, namely the writing of history and how perceptions of the past evolved within a given society. This must not create the impression that primary sources necessarily reflect the objective truth. Even the most trite and dispassionate archival document mirrors the point of view of the administration that produced it. What counts is that the point of view reflected in primary sources is at least contemporary with the period under study and not a later understanding by individuals with no immediate knowledge and experience of it. The greatest pitfall of historical research is presentism, the anachronistic rewriting of the past in accordance with the ideas and sensibilities of the present time. Presentism has flourished in all ages. Ancient secondary sources abound in reinventions of history, some deliberate, others more accidental but no less misleading.

Archival cuneiform texts fall squarely within the category of primary sources. Royal inscriptions, for all their bias, also rank as primary sources. Problems arise mainly with the third category, scholarly texts. Some literary compositions give accounts of history which appear entirely fictional and thus can claim no value as primary sources. One such composition is the Letter of Samsu-iluna studied by apprentice scribes in Neo-Babylonian schools. Allegedly addressed by the Babylonian king Samsu-iluna to an official named Enlil-nadin-shumi, the letter accuses the priesthood of Babylonia of sacrilegious behavior and threatens them with the direst punishment, including roasting in an oven; the text even contains instructions to inscribe the encyclical admonition on steles. Basic common sense suggests the letter is apocryphal, and it would be naive to search through primary sources from the reign of Samsu-iluna hoping to find corroboration of this imaginary episode, evidently created for the edification of junior scribes and instilling in them obedience to the monarchy. In typical presentist fashion, the depiction of the royal figure in the text fits the political climate of the Babylonian empire in the sixth century, not that of the First Dynasty of Babylon one millennium earlier. Not all literary texts with historical content can be so easily dismissed, however, especially if they were composed not long after the events they describe. A case in point is the Verse Account of Nabonidus, a pamphlet written to vilify the rule of the last king of Babylon. Even though the text is highly tendentious and the single manuscript of it we have dates from much later, it clearly contains first hand information probably recorded by the author from personal experience. Indeed, correlations can be established between the claims of the Verse Account and sources contemporary with Nabonidus, including details which would have been almost impossible for a later compiler to retrieve. Still, however, the manuscript we have might represent a later, embellished edition, yet one preserving substantial original information.

Even genres that seem to record absolutely secure data can be questioned, for instance chronicles of the Neo-Babylonian and Hellenistic periods. Should we consider them as primary or secondary sources? Historians tend to treat them as primary, and indeed their apparent objective and dispassionate recording of events, advancing no interpretation of history or value judgment has reinforced the notion that they simply concatenate basic facts. However, manuscripts of these chronicles are rarely contemporary with the events they describe, and sometimes the time distance can be significant. For instance, the chronicle of the reign of Nabonidus (Chronicle 26) probably dates to the third century (Figure 1.2). Was it composed at that time, or is it an exact copy of an earlier manuscript contemporary with the events it describes? In the first instance the chronicle would qualify as a secondary source and we would have to address the issue of the sources used by its author, the Astronomical Diaries being the most likely candidate. However, if we posit that the author just compiled entries from the Diaries, Chronicle 26 still represents an original composition, if only because it would have endowed disconnected notices in the Diaries with fresh meaning by taking them out of context and framing them within a narrative; the compiler might also have inserted elements of his own to adapt his narrative to the outlook

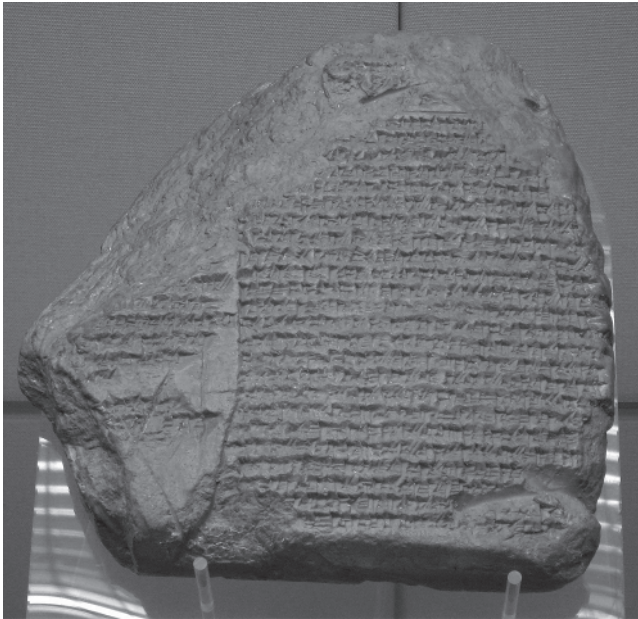


Figure 1.2 Nabonidus Chronicle (Chronicle 26). This fragment of a larger tablet preserves parts of a chronicle about the reign of Nabonidus. Such chronicles provide crucial information on political events, but not all can be considered absolutely reliable. In this particular case the chronicle may have been written long after the events it reports, raising the questions of the sources used in its composition. *Source:* © The Trustees of the British Museum.

of his time. Unfortunately we cannot verify this hypothesis because no Diary covering the time of Nabonidus has survived. From a strictly methodological point of view, most historians would classify Chronicle 26 as a secondary rather than primary source.

These remarks should not instill irrational doubts as to the value of all ancient sources. The information contained in the Neo-Babylonian and Hellenistic chronicles is generally considered reliable. The point should only be stressed that historians must be circumspect in handling the textual production of ancient scribal cultures. The ideal scenario for the historian of Babylon is a combination of all three categories of cuneiform sources: archives from the palace (state archives), from temples, and from private families, in addition to royal inscriptions and well-preserved scholarly texts (chronicles and literary compositions). The possibility of correlating the claims of a chronicle or royal inscription with the information gleaned from archival texts instills more confidence that we tread on solid grounds in our effort to resurrect the past. This ideal scenario does not occur very often, and many centuries still bathe in relative obscurity. On the other hand, some crucial periods, such as the reign of Hammurabi (1792–1750) and the time of the Babylonian empire (625–539) have emerged into fuller light because of the relative abundance of primary and secondary sources.

1.3 Chronology

There is no history without chronology, and accordingly we take for granted that historical discourse proceeds from a secure chronological framework. When we read that the storming of the Bastille, conventionally understood as the start of the French Revolution, took place on the fourteenth of July AD 1789, we can precisely estimate the time distance which separates us from that event. The reason is simple: we use the same calendar as they did in France in 1789, the Gregorian calendar, and the same era for the count of years, the Christian Era (AD is from Latin *Anno Domini* “the year of the Lord”), also called the Common Era (CE). The Gregorian calendar originates in a decree by Pope Gregory XIII in AD 1582 to reform the Julian calendar, instituted by Julius Caesar in 46 BC. The two calendars are basically the same except that over centuries a discrepancy of a few days accumulates between them (three days every four centuries) because of their different calculation of the length of the equinoctial year. We refer to dates after the reform as Gregorian dates, and before as Julian dates. When we date events before our era, we use Julian dates and the BC negative year count (“Before Christ;” alternatively BCE “Before the Common Era”). However, Babylon had different year counts and calendars. How can we relate our chronology to theirs? In other terms, when a cuneiform document is dated to the fifth day of the seventh month in the forty-second year of Nebuchadnezzar II, how can we translate that date into a Julian date? First we must find a synchronism between our own year count and the ones used in Babylon, and then take into account the fact that the Babylonian calendar was lunisolar.

The first task is relatively easy back to the year 747, thanks to the Ptolemaic Canon and the Seleucid Era. The Seleucid Era began when Seleucus I, one of the generals of Alexander the Great, seized power in Babylon in 305 and calculated retroactively the beginning of his reign to the year 311. However, the Era began effectively only when Antiochus I, upon the death of Seleucus I in 281, continued with the regnal count of his father instead of starting anew with his own. Cuneiform documents from the Hellenistic period are always dated to the Seleucid Era. The Era survived the demise of the Seleucid kingdom at the hands of the Romans and continues to be used even to this day among Near Eastern Christians. In late antiquity, it was used concurrently with the Christian era and also with the Roman dating system by consular years. These eras overlap as interlocking year counts; they are synchronic. We can therefore recede back in time and translate all Seleucid Era years into AD and BC years. For the period before the institution of the Seleucid Era back to 747, we use mainly the Ptolemaic Canon. The Canon lists all kings recognized in Babylon from Nabonassar (747–734) until Alexander IV, son of Alexander the Great (316–305), and then switches to rulers recognized in Alexandria in Egypt starting with Ptolemy I (305–285) until the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius (AD 138–160). Since the Canon overlaps with the count of the Seleucid Era after 311, we can project our count of BC years back to 747, the first year of Nabonassar. The data from the Canon are

supplemented by cuneiform chronographic documents such as King List A, the Uruk King List, and the King List of the Hellenistic Period, Neo-Babylonian, and Hellenistic chronicles, the Astronomical Diaries and other cuneiform astronomical texts, and also with the Babylonian observational data preserved in Ptolemy's *Almagest*. Ptolemy facilitates our task by dating astronomical phenomena according to an era starting with the accession of Nabonassar. The chronology back to 747 is thus basically secure.

The next step is the calendar. The Julian calendar is purely solar and based on the equinoctial year, the time elapsing between two vernal equinoxes. The equinoctial year includes approximately 365.25 days. The Babylonian calendar was lunisolar, based on lunar months with periodic intercalations ordered by state authorities. Months coincided with lunar cycles and began with the reappearance of the lunar crescent on the horizon. Since lunar months last on average either twenty-nine or thirty days, a year based on twelve lunar months included about 354 days. This means that after three years the calendar accumulated a discrepancy of about thirty days with the equinoctial year. This was solved by inserting an intercalary month on average every three years. In Babylon this month was added either after the sixth or the twelfth month. With the combined data from the Astronomical Diaries and dated documents, scholars have compiled tables reconstructing the Babylonian calendar between 626 BC and AD 75 and synchronized it with the Julian calendar. With the help of these conversion tables, we can translate all Babylonian dates starting in 626 into Julian dates. Thus, when Chronicle 26 tells us that the capture of Babylon by the Persians took place on the sixteenth day of the seventh month in the seventeenth year of Nabonidus, we can easily convert that date into a Julian date: October 12, 539. We must also keep in mind that the Babylonian year began in the spring (March or April), and therefore one Babylonian year overlapped with two Julian years. Thus the third year of Nebuchadnezzar II must be reckoned as 602–601, since it began on April 10, 602 and ended on March 29, 601. To simplify matters, most histories reckon that year simply as 602.

Before 747 the chronology becomes more uncertain. Babylonian documentation is astonishingly poor for the early part of the first millennium. At that point Assyrian sources supply most data. In Assyria dating was by eponyms; an official gave his name to the year, like the consuls in Rome. The Neo-Assyrian Canon of Eponyms is a year-by-year list of eponyms with notes on various events of importance. It extends from 910 until 649 and can be synchronized with the Ptolemaic Canon and Babylonian chronographic sources after 747. The Canon records an eclipse of the sun in the ninth regnal year of the Assyrian king Ashur-dan III (772–755): “Eponymy of Bur-Saggile from Guzana; revolt in the citadel; in the month of Simanu the sun had an eclipse.” The entry almost certainly refers to the near total solar eclipse which occurred on June 15, 763. This allows us to establish a secure chronology for Assyria back to 910. As we move into the second millennium chronographic sources become much less dependable. King List A and the Assyrian King List supply the basic chronology, but

they are known from later manuscripts and not free of errors. Between ca. 1400 until 910, our chronological placement of reigns and events accumulates an error of a few years by the turn of the century, and possibly more as we reach the first half of the fourteenth century.

The main chronological issue concerns the middle of the second millennium. King List A is not entirely preserved at this point; it also assumes that the first three Babylonian Dynasties reigned in succession, whereas they overlapped for an unknown period of time. Therefore our only source for Babylonia becomes useless. Considerable amounts of data have been marshaled to settle the issue: astronomical dating, archaeological and art historical evidence, synchronisms with other parts of the Near East, dendrochronology, but to this day the puzzle remains unsolved. By and large four chronologies have been proposed: high (Hammu-rabi reigned 1848–1806), middle (1792–1750), low (1728–1686), and ultra-low (1696–1654). This book adheres to the middle chronology, conventionally used by almost everybody, although the evidence now speaks increasingly in favor of a slightly lower chronology.

The relative chronology from the beginning of the Third Dynasty of Ur until the end of the First Dynasty of Babylon seems more or less established thanks to the survival of king lists and lists of year names, as well as vast numbers of dated archival texts, although there are still many issues awaiting solutions, in particular synchronisms between competing dynasties before the unification of Babylonia by Hammu-rabi. According to the middle chronology this period covers the years 2112 to 1595, and it would move together as a unit if another chronology was adopted (e.g. 2048 to 1531 in the low chronology). For the third millennium the chronology becomes very uncertain. We cannot estimate the time gap between the end of the Sargonic Dynasty and the beginning of the Third Dynasty of Ur, and the length of Sargonic reigns is provided by SKL, which contains unreliable numbers. Before the Sargonic Dynasty, archaeological periods supply the basic chronological scheme.

NOTE

1. After Michalowski 1989: 59, lines 366–8.

FURTHER READING

For a general introduction to the cuneiform script see Finkel and Taylor 2015 and Walker 1990. On the use of cuneiform texts as historical sources see Van de Mieroop 1999 and Grayson 1980, and for ancient archives in general Brosius 2003. Charpin 2011 offers an excellent survey of the place of cuneiform texts, literary and archival, in the daily life of Babylonia. A list of chronicles and king lists, with editions of the latter, can be found in Grayson 1980–1983, and a convenient list of Mesopotamian rulers with their dates is compiled by Walker 1995. For editions of the chronicles see Grayson 2000 and Glassner 2004

(see also the Appendix in this book), and for recent discussion of their origins Waerzeggers 2012 and 2015. Translations and editions of chronicles are also found on the Livius Web Site. Year names are compiled by Sigrist and Damerow CDLI. An excellent introduction to ancient chronology in general is Bickerman 1980, to be complemented by Parker and Dubberstein 1956 for late Babylonian chronology; the Livius Web site has a useful introduction to Mesopotamian chronology.

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