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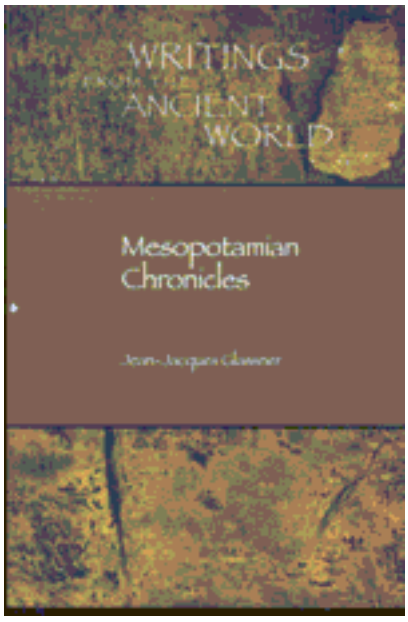

Glassner, Jean-Jacques
Edited by Benjamin R. Foster

Mesopotamian Chronicles

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Introduction

The book under review is a collection of chronicles from ancient Mesopotamia, first published in French by the same author in 1993 under the title *Chroniques mésopotamiennes* (Paris: Belles Lettres). The new book, however, is not a simple translation. While the French edition contained only translations, the English version also gives transliterations. In addition, the author took account of new material discovered after 1993. Hence, the English version is a new book and supersedes the French edition.

The collection contains chronicles from a long period, nearly two long millennia, the oldest dating from approximately 2200 B.C.E., the most recent from roughly 140 B.C.E. In this respect, the author, fortunately, disregards the definition of the "ancient Near East" ("from Egypt to Iran") as presented by the editor of the series, Theodore J. Lewis, in that it "ranged in time from the invention of writing (by 3000 B.C.E.) to the conquests of Alexander the Great (ca. 330 B.C.E.). Although the demarcation is quite common, it is dangerous and misleading. It perpetuates the common idea that the civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Iran came to an end due to Alexander's conquests. Although a great deal changed, the culture of Mesopotamia (characterized by cuneiform writing, religious

beliefs and practices, development of Babylonian science) persisted through the second century C.E. (cf. Geller 1997); the Egyptian pharaonic traditions of language, writing (hieroglyphs), architecture, religious beliefs and practices continued even longer (Frankfurter 1998).

Historiography and Chronicles

Chronicles are about history, but not all history writing can be defined as chronicles. Hence it is a good thing that the book starts with a chapter on Mesopotamian historiography (part 1, ch. 1, "The Future of the Past"). However, this brings us to a new problem of definition: What is historiography? Glassner is well aware of the ambiguity of the term apart from the etymological interpretation, "the writing of history." "The peoples of Sumer and Akkad had no such term, yet they produced a voluminous historical literature" (3). It is actually impossible to give a precise definition of "historiography." There are so many forms in which peoples make records of their past: oral traditions of bards, myths, king lists, royal inscriptions, historical epics, chronicles, moralistic-historical texts. In my teaching of "ancient historiography" (the history writing of the ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome), I usually present a ladder of characteristics of historiography, more or less in an increasing scale of sophistication, and then look, for the sake of comparison, at which features fit a particular text and which not. These characteristics are: (1) it is about the past; (2) it is about the deeds of humanity; (3) it is based on evidence (either accounted for, or not); (4) it tries to explain (in religious or secular terms); (5) there is a certain distance between author and object of study; (6) it is narrative; (7) it has a well-defined theme; (8) it has a single, well-defined author, preferably known by name; (9) it is written with a historiographic aim; (10) it is published; and (11) it tries to make sense of human history; it conveys meaning.

Glassner distinguishes two groups of historiographical works: copies and compilations as opposed to literary works. Under copies and compilations he subsumes copies of royal inscriptions, collections of royal letters, lists of year names, eponym lists, king lists, historical predictions, and (astronomical) diaries. The literary compositions are historical narratives (written in verse), annals (of the kings in the first-person singular), pseudo-autobiographies, and prophecies or apocalyptic writings. Strangely enough, the "chronicle" is missing in this list. The "chronicle," however, is discussed in part 2: "Analysis of the Composition," and is defined in chapter 2, "Definition" (37–53), as documents of which the main feature was interest in chronology. Three basic traits characterize chronicles: (1) they were written in prose, in the third person; (2) priority was given to time; (3) brevity was the norm (38). This definition also embraces what normally are called "king lists," which category is renamed by Glassner as "royal

chronicles" (nos. 1–6). I find this somewhat misleading and would prefer to speak about "chronographic texts," among which are king lists and chronicles.

Glassner sees two important innovations in ancient Near Eastern historiography. In the first place, he observes the start of a more genuine historiography in the days of Naram-Sin, king of Akkad, at the end of the third millennium. "The innovation consisted of committing to writing remembered facts in the form of a hitherto unattested literary genre. … The monarchy of Akkade … commissioned men of letters to formulate the principles of its organization and to write its history" (4). It was historiography linked to political motivation; "it offered a programmatic vision of political institutions and their functioning. A second innovation appeared much later, by the authors of certain Neo-Babylonian chronicles, "giving rise to a new form of discourse, a historiography deliberately avoiding tales of origins" (4).

This is a sound observation, but it makes his discussion of the phenomenon "chronicle" hard to read. Glassner tries to give general characteristics of all chronicles, but since there are so many kinds of chronicles, it is difficult to say which feature characterizes all chronicles and in which respects they differ from each other. This is especially the case as regards the so-called Neo-Babylonian Chronicle series, which according to tradition was somehow connected to the Babylonian king Nabonassar (747–733). In his reign a new impetus was given to astronomical research as well. This tradition is echoed in the classical tradition in various ways, such as in the fact that Claudius Ptolemy's list of kings started with Nabonassar and that a new era supposedly had started on 26 February 747 at midday. There are more arguments for the idea that the reign of Nabonassar was the starting point of two probably parallel enterprises: the astronomical diaries (Sachs and Hunger 1988–96); and lists of celestial phenomena (list of lunar eclipses; cf., e.g., Sachs and Hunger 2001, no. 1, starting with the eclipse of 6 February 747 B.C.E.; cf. Hallo 1984/5 and 1988). Glassner is cautious in accepting the attribution of all this to Nabonassar (111–13) but admits: "During the first millennium, intellectual life was marked by the development of a new branch of historical research. The Neo-Babylonian chronicles by their greater chronological precision, their style, and their choice of subject, contrast with previous historiography" (111). So, whether or not starting with Nabonassar, a new development started in the Neo-Babylonian period. This Neo-Babylonian Chronicle series is also discussed on pages 77–84. In this section Glassner presents the quality of the new genre: it had acquired a certain autonomy (i.e., history writing independent from the direction of the kings). Four features characterize the first series: greater control of chronology, predilection of the recent past, a desire to hold strictly to the facts, and construction of similar series (77–84).

At the same time, other chronicles were made about the remote past (84–88). The focus of these chronicles differs from the chronicles mentioned above. A minor difference with the chronicles of the recent past is that the chronology was less precise: by reigns rather than by years of reign. The topics are the same in both: wars, the accession of kings, the death of kings, civil disturbances, and the interruption and alteration of cult practices. A major difference is that the authors of the chronicles of the remote past wanted to explain events. They were not satisfied with simply mentioning numerous facts. The explanans is the retributive will of Marduk. "In other words, the chronicles exemplify an attempted interpretation of events of human history, according to which they were the consequences of divine anger aroused by some impious deed of a human ruler" (85).

In my view, the Neo-Babylonian Chronicle series is a unique and outstanding piece of historiography. It is not narrative, it does not have well known authors, it does not discuss its sources, it has no interest in causality, but its merit is that it is an objective enumeration of facts, not dictated by royal ideology. The most remarkable fact, especially in the light of Near Eastern historiography, is that it is extremely secular. Although the authors certainly have interest in the vicissitudes of the temple and its cult, there is not a single reference to an action of any god. No support of Marduk for the enterprises of the king, no punishment of rebellious people by angry gods. The only exception might be in the chronicle concerning the invasion of Ptolemy III in Babylon in 246/5 B.C.E. (not yet in this volume, but to be consulted here: http://www.livius.org/cg-cm/chronicles/bchp-ptolemy_iii/bchp_ptolemy_iii_01.html), where it is stated that the Ptolemaic troops, "who did not fear the gods," entered Esagila, the temple of Marduk.

Another salient feature is the distance between author and object of study. There is hardly any wish to give judgments of kings, neither favorably nor negatively. Victories and defeats are mentioned as dry facts; no effort is made to suppress defeats of Babylonian kings. In both respects, this series is contrasted with Neo-Babylonian Chronicles concerning earlier periods. So they cannot be seen as one genre.

As a matter of fact, it is difficult to treat even the Neo-Babylonian Chronicle series as one genre. The first distinction to be made is the existence of larger tablets containing records of longer periods and short notes on tablets in the form of administrative documents concerning only one year or even one month. Glassner considers these small chronicles as "excerpts" of the larger ones. I would rather argue for the opposite. The chroniclers made short notes about months (e.g., no. 28) or (part of) a reign (e.g., no. 25), which they later combined into larger compositions. It is interesting to note that these "shorter notes" become increasingly detailed over time. This is especially true for the documents of the Hellenistic period, most of which treat only a few months or a few years. This suggestion must remain tentative as long as we have no larger tablets that contain quotes of these

smaller documents. As a matter of fact, the so-called Diadochi Chronicle (no. 30) is the last extant chronicle covering a longer period.

It is good to make a comparison with the so-called Astronomical diaries. Astronomical diaries are daily reports about celestial phenomena, historical events, commodity prices, ominous events, particular cultic celebrations, and other things of local interest. Though direct quotation from chronicles or vice versa cannot be established, it is clear that the historical reports of the astronomical diaries and the chronicles are written in the same style. The astronomical diaries exhibit, just like the chronicles, a growing interest in detailed historical information. While in earlier periods the historical information is very limited, in the later period, especially in the Parthian period (from 141 B.C.E.), the historical record goes into great detail, describing, for instance, court proceedings on a daily basis. This need not surprise us. Even if we consider the Babylonian Chronicle series to be one genre, it is understandable that some developments take place. A "newspaper" from 1850 differs in many respects from its counterpart of 1950.

Since the publication of this Glassner's book, the chronicles of the Hellenistic period have been published in a new edition (Van der Spek and Finkel 2004). This collection contains not only new editions of published texts but also various new hitherto unpublished documents, found by Finkel in the depots of the British Museum. All texts are collated and photographed, and the authors present many new readings of the documents published by Grayson (1975) and the book under review.

Authors of the Neo-Babylonian Chronicles

Unfortunately, we have no names of authors. Some tablets mention names, but they belong to the owners of the tablet and/or to the scribe who wrote, that is, copied the tablet. In his discussion (40–41) Glassner leaves it at that. Yet we might speculate what kind of people these composers were. In my view, the authors belonged to the wide world of Babylonian scholarship. They were not royal appointees; they were not professional historians; rather, belonged to the world of diviners, doctors, and astrologers/astronomers. Babylonian scholarship was possessed by the pursuit of knowledge of divination, as was observed by the authors of the Hebrew Bible (see, e.g., Isa 47:10–13). These people were consulted by kings, as was still the case in the time of Alexander the Great (cf. Plutarch, *Alexander* 75; Van der Spek 2003). To this end, the Babylonians compiled huge databases. The most conspicuous are the so-called astronomical diaries (Sachs and Hunger 1988; 1989; 1996), already referred to. The chronicles contain historical events much in the same style as the historical notes in the diaries. The style also comes close to the apodoses of omens, especially in the word order: object, subject, verb. It has sometimes been argued that the sources for these chroniclers were in fact the diaries, but

that is not so, or only partly so. But I argue that chronicles, diaries, omens, astronomical, astrological, and other scholarly texts were written by the same persons (cf., e.g., Rochberg 2000). The chronicles are also an example of the Mesopotamian tradition of making lists, including endless lists of omens. So I assume that the chronicles were (like the diaries) databases of historical facts to be used for the science of divination. This does not exclude that these people gradually developed an (antiquarian) interest in history for its own sake.

Chronicles and Biblical history

For students of biblical history, the Babylonian chronicles provide important information. One of the most quoted chronicles is number 24, a chronicle concerning the death of Nabopolassar and the first years of Nebuchadnezzar II (605–595), especially reverse 11–13:

> The seventh year (of Nebuchadnezzar II), in the month of Kislev (= 18 December 598–15 January 597), the king of Akkad (= Babylonia) mustered his troops, marched on Hatti (= Syria), and set up his quarters facing the city of Yehud (URU Ia-a-hu-du = Judah = Jerusalem). In the month of Adar, the second day (16 March 597), he took the city and captured the king. He installed there a king of his choice. He colle[cted] its massive tribute and went back to Babylon.

Another much-quoted chronicle is the so-called Nabonidus Chronicle (no. 26) describing the last years of Nabonidus and the conquests of Cyrus. A much disputed line is Cyrus's conquest of Lydia, supposedly mentioned in II:16: ana <KUR> Lú-ú-[di il-li]k, "(Cyrus) marched on Lydia." Grayson read ana KUR /Lu\-u[d-di(?) ...] (ABC 7, II:16), which represent quite different signs, which shows how controversial the interpretation is and how we like to read "Lydia" while it may be not there. It must be said that the use of the sign lú as a syllable instead of as a determinative for "person" is very unusual if not impossible. The campaign in question took place in month II of Nabonidus's year 9, May 547, that is, a month after Cyrus had crossed the Tigris below Arbela. Hence, the only thing we can confidently say is that Cyrus campaigned east of the Tigris (cf. Cargill 1977).

Conclusion

The book is a very useful collection of Mesopotamian chronicles, useful both for scholars and interested lay readers. We have to thank Dr. Glassner and Dr. Benjamin Foster, the editor of the English edition, for their efforts. It is, at the same time, an ungrateful task, because many tablets are difficult to read and specialists constantly suggest new readings

and interpretations. In addition, it is very difficult to make an exhaustive collection, since new tablets keep showing up from the depots of especially the British Museum. Finally, the historical information in the astronomical diaries can be viewed as chronicle-like texts. The work will never end.

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