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The Day Before Cyrus Entered Babylon

BM 60916 was written in Sippar one day before Cyrus entered Babylon as its new king. Together with BM 101100, also edited here, this text can be added to a very small group of cuneiform tablets that informs us about the situation on the ground during Cyrus's attack on Babylonia in 539 BCE. The historical significance of this group of texts is, at least, twofold. On the one hand, the documents bear witness to the fractured nature of the Babylonian kingdom during its final moments, as inhabitants of Sippar, Babylon and Uruk experienced the takeover very differently. On the other hand, they show the quick adoption of new rhetoric in the exercise of power over Babylonia, as the defunct royal title of the Assyrians – “king of the lands” – was re-introduced for Cyrus, even before he had entered Babylon.

The Text Corpus

The *Nabonidus Chronicle* is the only source that provides us with a continuous time path for Cyrus's conquest of Babylonia (Grayson 1975, ABC 7 iii 12–18). It is well-known that this timeline agrees well with archival evidence contemporary to the events.¹ In the words of David Vanderhooft (2006: 352), there is no “room for skepticism” about the general chronology of the conquest.² The chronicle states that in the month of Tashritu, at the battle of Opis on the Tigris, Cyrus's troops defeated the army of Akkad and massacred the popula-

1 Parker and Dubberstein 1956: 29; Petschow 1987; Beaulieu 1989: 230–231; Schaudig 2001: 25–26; Tolini 2005 and 2014; Vanderhooft 2006; Waerzeggers 2015: 98–99.

2 It is a different question altogether how the *Nabonidus Chronicle* recounts the events within this time path, which elements it (de-)selects for inclusion in the narrative, and for which purposes or for which audience it was composed.

Note: In gratitude, I offer this brief note to Ran Zadok, whose extensive work on the cuneiform archives from first millennium BCE Babylonia has provided the very coordinates within which Neo-Babylonian studies operate today. This article was written in the framework of ERC CoG project Persia & Babylonia (P 682241). I wish to thank the Trustees of the British Museum for their permission to publish BM 60916 and BM 101100.

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tion.³ It may have been this prospect that left the city of Sippar – the first major town on the road to Babylon – no other choice but to surrender without a fight. This happened, still according to the *Nabonidus Chronicle*, on the 14th day of Tashritu. Cyrus's army then pushed on towards Babylon and, two days later, a contingent led by Ugbaru secured the city for two weeks, until, on the third day of Arahsamna, Cyrus joined his troops and entered Babylon with a message of peace.⁴ Besides the *Nabonidus Chronicle*, there are several, at times widely divergent, speculations in later historiography about the fate of Nabonidus at the hands of Cyrus and about the military tactics used by the conquerors; these topics fall outside the scope of the present contribution.⁵

So far, five cuneiform tablets are known that were drafted in Babylonia during the two critical weeks between the surrender of Sippar (14-VII) and the arrival of Cyrus in Babylon (03-VIII).⁶ BM 60916 and BM 101100 now bring this total up to seven. The table below offers an overview of all presently known texts, together with the date, place of writing and the royal title used in the dating sections. The royal title will be discussed later on in this article.

The archival texts offer some further details about the chronology of the Persian conquest as recounted in the *Nabonidus Chronicle*. On 15-VII, scribes at the Ebabbar temple of Sippar did not yet recognize Cyrus as royal authority,⁷ despite the fact that their city is reported to have surrendered the previous day. They did do so, however, by 19-VII as can be seen in CT 57: 717. This is the earliest evidence of Cyrus's recognition as ruler anywhere in Babylonia. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this text is dated a day after Ugbaru had secured Babylon on behalf of Cyrus. Hence, not only Sippar's surrender but also the siege of Babylon appears to have been relevant for the scribes of Ebabbar in making the decision to date their records after Cyrus, instead of Nabonidus.

3 Reports of mass murder are very rare in Babylonian chronicles; if reported, such violence is inflicted by Elam or, in this case, Cyrus. Given this patterned treatment of the topic, the historicity of the massacre at Opis can be doubted.

4 Tolini 2005 offers a detailed, day-by-day reconstruction of the conquest of Babylonia, based on the *Nabonidus Chronicle* and the evidence of *Cyr 10*, an archival text showing that the Enlil gate of Babylon was damaged during the Persian offensive.

5 For a discussion of the fall of Babylon's reception in later historiography, see Beaulieu 1989: 231.

6 See already Parker and Dubberstein 1956: 29 with new texts from CT 56 and CT 57 added by Petschow 1987.

7 Petschow 1987 was reluctant to define the archival context of CT 56: 55 but Bongenaar's prosopographical study of the Ebabbar temple showed that it is part of the Ebabbar archive; Bongenaar 1997: 178.

Tab. 1: Cuneiform texts drafted in Babylonia between the surrender of Sippar (14-VII) and Cyrus's entry into Babylon (03-VIII).

CT 56, 55	Nbn 15-VII-17	lugal tin.tir ^{ki}	Ebabbar (Sippar)
GCCI 1, 390	Nbn 17-VII-17	lugal tin.tir ^{ki}	Eanna (Uruk)
CT 57, 717	Cyr 19-VII-00 ⁸	lugal tin.tir ^{ki}	Ebabbar
BM 101100	Cyr 20-VII-00	lugal [...]	Ebabbar
Cyr 1 (BM 60744; Zawadzki 2018 no. 100)	Cyr [x]-VII-00	lugal tin.tir ^{ki} (⁹)	Ebabbar
BM 60916	Cyr 02-VIII-00	lugal kur.kur	Ebabbar
CT 57, 697	Cyr 02-VIII-00	lugal kur.kur	Ebabbar

The new text BM 101100 was written one day after CT 57: 717 and confirms Cyrus's recognition in Sippar. At this point, the conquest of Babylon had not yet been fully accomplished, as Cyrus had not yet joined Ugbaru's troops. Despite the likely insecurity about Babylon's fate, the temple administration of Sippar continued its business as usual, producing three closely dated texts on 15, 19 and 20 Tashritu.

In the meantime, inhabitants of Uruk were less in tune with events in the north of Babylonia. They continued to date after Nabonidus at least until 17-VII, one day after Ugbaru had arrived at Babylon. It has been suggested that news of the fall of Babylon had not yet reached the southern city (Parker and Dubberstein 1956: 11; Petschow 1987). How much longer Urukeans remained loyal to Nabonidus, or ignorant of what was going on in Babylon, we do not know, as the next tablet from this city dates from after the final transfer of power on 03-VIII (YOS 7: 1).

Back in Sippar, local scribes continued to date their tablets to Cyrus throughout the two-week period until Cyrus's entry into Babylon. *Cyr 1*, dated to month Tashritu, is damaged so that its precise date is unknown. CT 57: 697 was written on 02-VIII, the day before Cyrus entered Babylon. The new text, BM 60916, was written on that very same day, confirming the routine-like manner of record production at the Ebabbar temple during the period of the Persian conquest.

From Babylon, no records dated to the critical period are preserved, but retrospectively, the text *Cyr 10* reveals that the gate of Enlil sustained damage

⁸ This is not the date of the document itself, but a date mentioned in the text; the document could have been drafted at a later point.

⁹ Contrary to Strassmaier's copy, the element "lugal kur.kur" is not present after "lugal tin.tir^{ki}" on *Cyr 1* (BM 60744) l. 15 (collated). The month sign is damaged, but is most probably to be read VII. The day is not preserved.

during the invasion (as argued by Tolini 2005), and texts from the Egibi and Nūr-Sîn archives show that at least these elite families had taken refuge outside of the city during the entire period of military engagement between Nabonidus and Cyrus (Tolini 2014).

Text Editions

The two new texts dating to the period between the surrender of Sippar and the fall of Babylon are BM 60916 and BM 101100. Both texts have been mentioned in print before but remained unpublished so far.¹⁰

BM 60916 (AH. 82-9-18, 892)

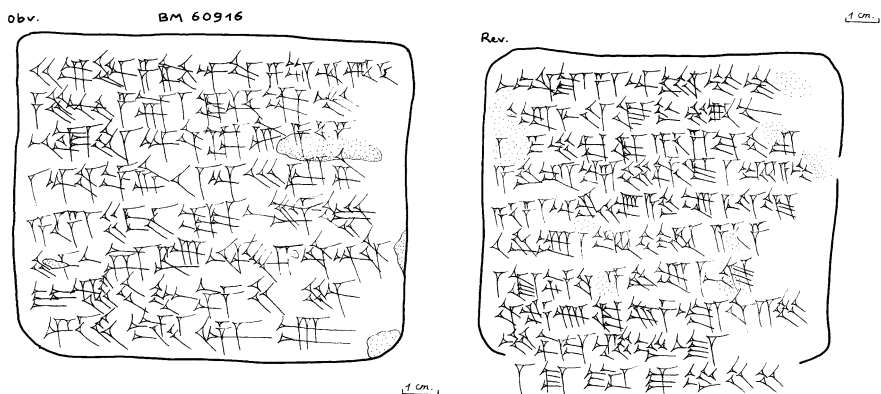


Fig. 1: BM 60916, obverse (left) and reverse (right).

Transliteration

obv.

1. 20 gur še.bar níg.ga^dutu šá ta hu:re-šú
2. šá še.numun šá é¹di-hu-um-mu

¹⁰ BM 60916 features in the catalogue by Leichty and Grayson 1987: 25. Irving Finkel offers a summary of BM 101100 in his recent article on the *Cyrus Cylinder* (2013: 118); the text was also included in the catalogue by Leichty *et al.* 1988: 396.

3. *ina muh-hi* ^{Id}utu-nigin^{ir} a-šú šá
4. ^{Id}utu-zálag^{ir} u ^{Id}30-ib-ni
5. a-šú šá ^{li}šir ina ^{iti}sig₄
6. še.bar ina é gur₇meš a-na ^dutu
7. i-nam-din-u' e-lat še.bar
8. re-hi mah-ru-ú

rev.

9. *ina gub^{zu} šá* ^{Id}amar.utu-mu-mu
10. ^{lú}sanga sip-par^{ki} ^{lú}mu-kin-nu
11. ^{Id}ag-mu-si.sá a-šú šá ^{ba}laṭ-su
12. a ^{lú}sanga-^dinnin-tin.tir^{ki} ^{Id}en-a-mu
13. a-šú šá ^{Id}kaskal.kur^ú a ^{lú}sanga-sip-par^{ki}
14. u ^{lú}umbisag ^{Id}en-tin^{it} a-šú šá
15. ^{ki}rib-tú a ^{lú}sanga-sip-^{<par>}^{ki}
16. ud.kib.nun^{ki} ^{iti}apin ud.2.kam
17. mu.sag.nam.lugal.la

u. e.

18. ^{ku}ra-áš lugal kur.kur

Translation

20 kurru barley, property of Šamaš, from his rest for the arable land in Bīt-Dihummu, due from Šamaš-upahhir son of Šamaš-unammir and Sîn-ibni son of Lišir. (5) In the month of *simanu* (III) they will deliver the barley to Šamaš in the storehouse. (7) This does not include the remaining barley received. (9) In the presence of Marduk-šumu-iddin, the administrator (*šangû*) of Sippar. (10) Witnesses: Nabû-šumu-lišir son of Balāssu of the Šangû-Ištar-Bābili family; Bēl-aplu-iddin son of Balihû of the Šangû-Sippar family. (14) And scribe Bēl-uballiṭ son of Kiribtu of the Šangû-Sippar family. (16) Sippar, day 02, month *arahsamna* (VIII), inaugural year of Cyrus, king of the lands.

Comments

- (1) The last part of this line is problematic. I wish to thank Michael Jursa for suggesting the present reading (*hu:re-šú* for *re-hu-šú* ‘his remainder’).
- (2) For Ebabbar’s estates at the village of Bīt-Dihummu, see Jursa 2010: 325–326.

- (3) Šamaš-upahhir son of Šamaš-unammir may have been the person by the same name who was stationed at the estates of Šamaš in the Hābūr area during the reign of Nabonidus. That Šamaš-upahhir is well-known from a dossier about his efforts to establish an arable farm and a vineyard on these distant lands while keeping his superiors in Sippar informed about his progress. The dossier was presented by Jursa and Wagensonner 2014. They point out that this Šamaš-upahhir may have returned to Sippar to work at Bit-Dihummu around the 13th year of Nabonidus's reign (Jursa and Wagensonner 2014: 112; Jursa 1995: 33). That last Šamaš-upahhir son of Šamaš-unammir is certainly the same person as the one encountered in our present text. Whether he is also identical to the Šamaš-upahhir active on the Hābūr river remains uncertain.
- (4) For Sîn-ibni, farmer at Bit-Dihummu, see Jursa 1995: 31, 217.
- (9–15) It is unusual that a transaction of this scale is concluded in the presence of all of Ebabbar's highest ranking officials, the šangū and three college scribes.

BM 101100 (83-1-21, 2761)

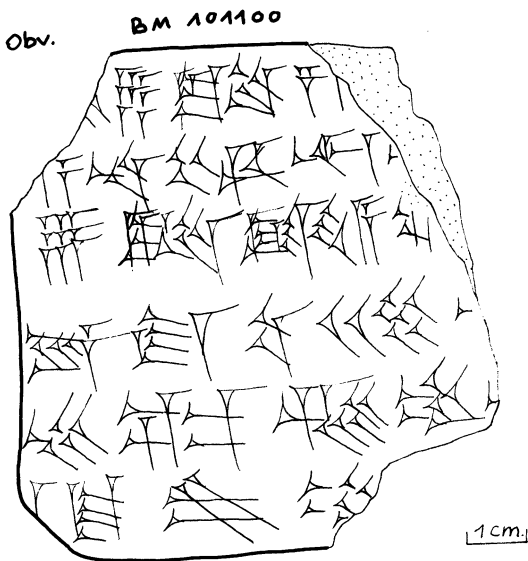


Fig. 2: BM 101100, obverse.

Transliteration

obv.

1. [x]+27 udu.níta šá ¹[x-x]
2. *a-na sat-tuk ina igi* ¹[x-x]
3. 9 udu.níta u₈.hi.a x [x]
4. ^{iti}du₆ ud.20.kam ((mu))
5. mu.sag.nam.lugal.la
6. ¹ku-raš lugal [x x]

The reverse is uninscribed.

Translation

[x]+27 sheep of [PN₁] for the regular offerings, at the disposal of [PN₂]. (3) Nine ewes [...]. (4) Month *tašrītu*, 20th day, inaugural year of Cyrus, king of [Babylon?].

Comments

- (6) The royal title is probably to be restored [tin.tir^{ki}] or [e^{ki}] “king of Babylon.” See the discussion below.

King of the Lands

In the course of the two weeks that separated the surrender of Sippar and Cyrus’s entry into Babylon, we observe a change in the royal title used for Cyrus in cuneiform tablets (see Table 1, above). As noted by Stefan Zawadzki (1995) and Gauthier Tolini (2014), the scribes of Ebabbar initially accorded Cyrus the title “king of Babylon,” in keeping with local practice. From 02-VIII onwards, however, Cyrus appears as “king of the lands.” This latter title was subsequently maintained for the remainder of his inaugural year, before the co-regency with Cambyses in his first full year required further adaptations and the re-introduction of the element of “king of Babylon.”¹¹ Here, I will focus on the introduction of the title “king of the lands” during the inaugural year of Cyrus. For later developments of the titulary, readers are referred to the work by Tolini.

¹¹ Tolini 2014 provides an overview of the texts dated to Cyrus’s inaugural year. The texts dated before his entry into Babylon on 03-VIII can be found in the table above.

At the time of Tolini's writing, the switch of title from "king of Babylon" to "king of the lands" was first visible on O2-VIII, in CT 57: 697. This testimony is now confirmed by BM 60916, which was written on the same day and likewise uses the title "king of the lands." After O2-VIII, the title "king of Babylon" is no more in evidence until the beginning of the month of Nisan of Cyrus's first full regnal year.

Only Tolini has commented on the switch of royal title so far. He interprets it as a political decision by Cyrus, aimed at placating local sensitivities. On the eve of his entry into Babylon, the would-be king decided to abandon the hoary title "king of Babylon" out of respect for the Marduk priesthood of the Esagil temple. He would have done so in an attempt to court the goodwill of Babylon's powerful priests, giving them the honor of conferring the title upon him at the future celebration of the Akitu festival in Nisan. While this interpretation has its merits, it should be remarked that this gesture would have been ill-suited if Cyrus meant to present himself as a king "soucieux des traditions babyloniennes" (Tolini 2014). The local custom was for a new king to adopt the title "king of Babylon" immediately upon claiming power, without waiting for the first Akitu festival. This custom was applied to Cyrus shortly after the battle of Opis. However, abandoning the title "king of Babylon" after a few days clearly constituted a departure from tradition.

The reason why Cyrus (or the Babylonian scribes who drafted cuneiform records) refrained from using the title "king of Babylon" after initially allowing it, remains unknown. It seems relevant to consider not only the title's elision but also its replacement by the title "king of the lands." Strikingly, this aspect of Cyrus's titulary has received little or no comment so far, perhaps because "king of the lands" was to become the normative title born by the Persian kings of Babylonia and, as the norm, its introduction may have escaped attention.¹²

The origins of this title are to be sought in the Assyrian period.¹³ Esarhaddon was the first king for whom the title was used in legal documents drafted under his rule in Babylonia.¹⁴ The practice continued under Ashurbanipal and became defunct once the Babylonian Empire emancipated itself from Assyrian

12 On the normative nature of the title "king of the lands" for Achaemenid kings in Babylonia, see Shayegan 2011: 46–47. For the continued use of the title in the early Hellenistic period, see Boiy 2002. For a matter-of-fact discussion of Cyrus's adoption of the title "king of the lands," see Olmstead 1948: 50.

13 The history of the title is discussed Seux 1967: 315 and by Redford 1998: 107–112, with special reference to Esarhaddon's policy towards Egypt. See Frame 2013: 77 for further comments and literature.

14 The earliest document to use the title so far is found in the archive of Mušēzib-Marduk, Frame 2013 (text no. 1).

rule.¹⁵ The history of the title is therefore closely linked to the most recent experience of imperial rule over Babylonia.

The history of the title, its explicit universalist ambition, and its almost immediate application after the siege of Babylon, all suggest that Cyrus was seen (or made himself to be seen) as heir to Assyria's world dominance very early in his reign. Rather than underscoring continuity with the practices of the Babylonian Empire, the adoption of the title speaks of a new vision for Babylon, a vision that imagines Cyrus as the political and cultural successor of the Assyrians. This ascription to Assyrian royal ideology, particularly that of Ashurbanipal, is well-known from the Cyrus Cylinder and other royal inscriptions that Cyrus left in Babylonia (Harmatta 1974; Kuhrt 1983; Michalowski 2014). The adoption of the title "king of the lands" therefore fits a wider program that seeks to communicate Babylon's dependence on a new world order, modeled after the Assyrian Empire.

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¹⁵ For its use under Ashurbanipal, Ashur-etel-ilāni and Sîn-šarru-iškun, see Seux 1967: 315 n. 262 and San Nicolò 1941: 23 n. 5. The title is not used by the kings of the Babylonian Empire: Berger 1973: 72–82; Da Riva 2008: 99–107.

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