

Herodotus and Babylon Reconsidered

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I. Introduction

We owe the first full description of the city of Babylon to Herodotus' "Histories".¹ The reason for the excursus constituting the Babylonian *logos*, is Cyrus' conquest of "Assyria", whose most prominent city was, according to Herodotus, Babylon. The description of Cyrus' success comes only after a detailed description of the city and its topography. The Persian king's rapid victory is achieved through a trick: the course of the Euphrates, which flows through Babylon, is diverted, after which the Persians enter the otherwise heavily fortified city without even getting their feet wet.

Herodotus' description of the urban topography is impressive. He pictures a huge metropolis, whose dimensions dwarf all other cities in size (I.178–87). The city forms a gigantic square, each side measuring 120 stades (approximately 22 km) surrounded by a moat. It is enclosed by a wall 50 ells (c. 25 m) wide and 200 ells (c. 100 m) high. It is made entirely of baked bricks. On top of the wall are "small houses" (*oikemata*), which project outwards and inwards. Between them is a track wide enough for a four-in-hand to be driven around the town's circumference. 100 bronze gates are set into the wall. The Euphrates flows in a straight line through the centre of the city dividing it into two equal halves. In the middle of each of these halves is a massive building: one contains the royal palace, the other the temple of Zeus Belos. The temple area measures 2 x 2 stades (c. 380 x 380 m). At its centre is a tower, whose base is 1 stade square. It consists of eight separate towers standing on top of each other and is accessible via a spiral ascent, which winds upwards around the structure. It is so high that half-way up benches have been set to allow the ascending visitor to take a rest.

This picture of Babylon fascinated Herodotus' contemporaries and has continued to captivate subsequent generations. Aristophanes jokes about the gigantic dimensions of the encircling wall (Av. 552). Aristotle, too, used the image of Babylon as a *polis* which defies all reason: thus, part of the city was still unaware of the Persian entry three days after the invasion (Pol. 1276a 25–31). Within the traditions of antiquity, the topos of the giant city is repeated over and over again; among its wonders, the brick walls in particular are numbered (cf., e.g., Prop. III.11.21f.; Ovid Met. IV.57f.; Lucan. VI.49f.; Mart. IX.75.2f.; Iuv. X.171; Paulus Silentiarius AP V.252).

¹ On what follows, see further Bichler 2000; Bichler / Rollinger 2000; Heller 2010, 41–57; Kuhrt 2010; Kuhrt 2011; Rollinger 1993; Rollinger 1998; Rollinger 2004; Rollinger 2008a; Rollinger 2011; Wiesehöfer 1999.

The inevitable question faced by researchers again and again with respect to this description is the ‘reliability’ and hence ‘usefulness’ of the information transmitted. But the approach to this important question has not always been free of assumptions; more often than not, it has proceeded on the basis of certain tacitly assumed premises. Thus, for example, it was widely accepted that Herodotus personally visited Babylon. Similarly, it was axiomatic that Herodotus received his information from local informants, since he was regarded as a ‘proto-historian’ operating in accordance with the rules established for modern research and thus would only transmit information that he had himself received.

The Babylonian *logos* constitutes a perfect case for testing such inbuilt assumptions. Cuneiform sources have become available in ever increasing numbers, and the German excavations in Babylon have made visible the actual city to which Herodotus devoted such a detailed description – the most detailed, indeed, in his entire work. But even while the excavations were still in progress it became clear that the picture of the city revealed by the spade of the archaeologist bore little resemblance to the city painted by Herodotus. All that could be ‘verified’ were certain building techniques, such as the use of baked bricks, reed matting and asphalt for the quay walls. Further, not a single cuneiform document bears out Herodotus’ description of Babylonian customs. At first sight, one would have thought it easy to draw the obvious conclusions from this, but the premises which underlie the prevailing view of the “Histories” were already too well established. As a result, virtually no attempts were made to interrogate Herodotus’ account critically. Instead, complex explanatory models were developed in order to show why Herodotus’ statements should diverge so glaringly from the archaeological material and the cuneiform sources, given that he had been on the spot and carried out his researches to the best of his ability. This perspective was already present in, and dominated, interpretations of the emerging archaeological evidence, which again and again reflected the pressure to explain away the persistent differences. The shape of the argument remained relatively consistent. Thus, for each divergence a host of explanatory *possibilities* (sometimes presented in combination) was put forward, with the assumption that by merely demonstrating such *possibilities* the problem had been solved.

It is obvious that these explanatory models were incapable of providing satisfactory answers in the long term. For this reason, more specific answers were developed. The first of these may be summarised as follows: Herodotus does not describe the Babylon excavated by the Germans, i.e. that of Nebuchadnezzar II, but contemporary Babylon, i.e. Achaemenid Babylon of the fifth century. Achaemenid Babylon differed fundamentally from that of Nebuchadnezzar II’s time.

This immediately raises methodological issues, as the idea that Achaemenid Babylon differed fundamentally from that of Nebuchadnezzar II is not supported by any archaeological evidence whatsoever, which, in turn, necessitates that the posited changes receive a hypothetical explanation. Such is achieved by employing a second hypothesis: Babylon suffered extensive damage at the beginning of Persian domination. This changed the urban topography so lastingly and fundamentally, that it becomes possible to explain the inconsistencies.

With respect to the question of which Persian king was responsible for this transformation, opinions diverge. What counts is the basic trend: it must have been a Persian king, since otherwise – in view of the premise selected – the changes cannot be explained. Three ‘candidates’ figure in this context, sometimes in combination: Cyrus, Darius I and Xerxes.

Most recently, the thesis of the supposed destruction of Babylon by Xerxes in particular has been rearticulated. This is connected to the fact that several newly published cuneiform documents make it virtually certain that the two long-known revolts of Bel-šimanni and Šamaš-eriba are datable to Xerxes’ second year (484 BC). One response to this has been to assume that the suppression of the revolts had profound consequences for the city. The thesis is not new, however. Earlier researchers, too, argued this, sometimes vehemently, reasoning as follows:

1. Herodotus reports (I.183) the pillage of a statue from the sacred precinct of Zeus in Babylon by Xerxes. This was identified as the cult statue of Zeus (= Marduk) and hence it was concluded that the cult ceased.
2. Babylonian documents dated by the Persian kings normally use the formula “King of Babylon, King of Lands”, which indicates how important the Babylonian kingship was for the Persian rulers. With his suppression of the two Babylonian revolts, Xerxes pronounced the death of Babylonian kingship. The proof is that from his second regnal year on, the title “King of Babylon, King of Lands” disappears from documents.
3. As proof of the brutality of Xerxes’ destructive measures, it is repeatedly asserted that he diverted the Euphrates to flow through the middle of the city. These actions fundamentally transformed the urban picture – as only this assumption makes it possible for palace and temple to lie on opposite banks of the river, as Herodotus (but not the archaeological finds) states.
4. The Babylonian material documents the existence of two local usurpers. In the course of their suppression the city was devastated, the shrines desecrated and the Babylonian kingship ended. Babylon lost its status as the fulcrum of the world. The New Year Festival ceased to be performed. Only Alexander’s conquest led to a revival of Babylon’s cult and political significance.

With regard to the first argument, it was pointed out some time ago that Herodotus’ text refers merely to a “statue” (*andrias*), not the cult statue (*agalma*) in the cella; in other words, the statue purportedly stolen was a votive statue placed in the area of the temple.² Nor does Herodotus say anything about a cessation of the cult.

As for the suppression of the traditional title: newly published documents show that this argument is also unsustainable.³ The title is not only attested as in use throughout Xerxes’ reign, but also in the reign of an Artaxerxes – whether I, II or III is unknown. It may be that the title came to be used less frequently as Babylonia merged more and more into the empire, but if so this was a gradual process, not an abrupt measure.

2 Kuhrt / Sherwin-White 1987; Kuhrt / Sherwin-White 1994.

3 Rollinger 1998; Rollinger 1999.

Thirdly, there is not the slightest evidence that the Euphrates followed a new course in the Persian period; on the contrary: the cuneiform material informs us that it followed exactly the same course in the Persian period as it had done in the Babylonian period.⁴

As mentioned above, two revolts in the reign of Xerxes are attested, which can now be dated with considerable certainty.⁵ Both date to Xerxes' second regnal year, and both were limited to northern Babylonia. Bel-šimanni is attested by four, Šamaš-eriba by thirteen documents. The latest dating by Xerxes falls into the middle of Month IV, to be resumed only by the middle of Month X. Both revolts thus followed immediately after another, lasting for about half a year. Despite this, neither destruction nor cultic impairment can be demonstrated. This deserves emphasis. While the new cuneiform documents certainly place the revolts in Babylon and attest administrative and bureaucratic restructuring, they do not bear witness to harsh repressions or destructions with lasting consequences for the urban topography.⁶ The situation has plainly been misunderstood.⁷ While the survival of the title "King of Babylon" points to demonstrable continuities, Xerxes certainly did intervene in temple administration and deprived long-established prebend holders from traditional families of their privileges. These measures are likely to have been linked to the revolts. An important indicator of this is the fact that the numerous private archives of these families cease in Xerxes' second regnal year, i.e. the year of the revolts. However, the orderly and careful deposition of these archives indicates that this was not the result of some overhasty action taken in the context of the city's devastation. Xerxes wanted to assure himself of new loyalties, to fill posts in the temple administration with new incumbents and reorganise them. Xerxes did not diminish the cult itself by his actions. Nor was he the first re-organiser of temple élites: as a recent study suggests, the prebendal system at Borsippa already appears to have been thoroughly reorganised sometime during the seventh century, perhaps under Esarhaddon, in response to widespread corruption.⁸ Seen in this light, Xerxes' actions rather appear as yet another transformation of the temple administration, not as a total disruption by a hostile outsider.

The assertion that Babylon lost, under Xerxes, its position as the fulcrum of the world, too, remains unsupported. Modern scholarship too often follows uncritically the paths of the classical sources by contrasting Xerxes' alleged measures with those of Alexander III (see below). The Macedonian king thus became a counter image, a polar opposite, of the Persian despot.⁹ In contrast to Xerxes, Alexander is thought to have dealt with Babylonian sanctuaries "adequately" and to have had the intention to reinstall Babylon in its age-old position as a centre of the universe. Yet, this distorted and biased picture has to be corrected

4 Rollinger 1993, 143–166; Rollinger 2011; Van der Spek 1995.

5 Waerzeggers 2003/4; Oelsner 2007a.

6 On this see in detail Kuhrt 2010; Kuhrt 2011; Rollinger 2011; cf. also Kessler 2004.

7 As, for example, by Beckman 2008; Kleber 2008, 4; Kleber 2009, 183a; Harrison 2011, 78f. According to Beaulieu 2006a, 205–209, the Persian kings should be regarded as foreign rulers, who ceased to finance temple building. Elsewhere, however, he stresses the flowering of astronomy financed by the temples in the Late Achaemenid period (Beaulieu 2006b; Beaulieu 2006c, *passim* and especially 20, note 28). Seidl 1999 argues that the stele Darius I erected after the Babylonian uprisings at the beginning of his reign was destroyed in the course of Xerxes' suppression of the Babylonian revolt.

8 Waerzeggers 2010, 8, 282f.

9 Cf. Boiy 2010.

and Alexander's measures need to be set into the context of uninterrupted continuities as well. Like his predecessors, he was keen to preserve age-old traditions and present himself as the legitimate king of the country. Thus he ordered, in the traditional manner for Babylonian rulers, the refurbishment of temples, following negotiation with Babylon's urban élite and a ceremonial entry into the city¹⁰.

In spite of this rather clear picture and the transparency of the argumentation linked to it, voices continue to be raised in defence of the "traditional picture" – there was a profound disruption in Babylon resulting from the destructions initiated by Xerxes – against the "revisionist" perspective. Such more recent attempts claim support from "new" arguments.¹¹ They appear in the context of a "new appraisal" of Herodotean historiography, but also quite independent of it. The latter is particularly interesting as the image of Xerxes as a destroyer of temples and cities is exclusively derived from Greek historiography and has coloured the historical interpretation of Near Eastern archaeologists and Assyriologists. Thus the historical picture has become detached from its origins and established itself as an independent fact.¹² Blotting out the origins of the background thus leads to a merely apparent objectivity, with writers imagining, quite wrongly, that they are making independent use of primarily local evidence. In reality, the pattern of the interpretation they are applying is that of Graeco-Roman historiography, used unquestioningly and unwittingly. Thus, arguments put forward as new are used to breathe fresh life into the historical picture of antiquity.

II. Aelian and Xerxes' destruction in the light of the Greek tradition.

Most recently, a passage of Aelian, according to which Xerxes desecrated the tomb of Belos (V.H. 13, 3), has been summoned as a witness for his presumed order to destroy the Tower of Babel.¹³ This amounts to ripping a source, dating from the third century AD, out of its transmission context and ignoring its dependence on Ctesias and its evident folktales background, while simultaneously embarking on a very dubious line of argument. Thus the fact that Aelian does not say a word about any destruction and makes no mention anywhere of a temple, let alone Babylon's ziggurat, is tacitly ignored. Nevertheless, the passage is treated as though it provided decisive testimony for the assumption that the Persian king undertook the demolition of Babylon's great tower. The fact that Aelian wrote over 700 years after Xerxes' reign is not taken into consideration. This is particularly striking given the fact that at the same time any cuneiform sources referring to Etemenanki, i.e. Babylon's ziggurat, are dismissed because they are "late". They are taken to demonstrate exclusively "the durability of cuneiform scholarship which continued to produce new copies of ancient texts deep into the first century BC."¹⁴ Even the Esagil tablet, compiled in the Seleucid period, deals (in this view) with an imaginary building,¹⁵ as it is a 700 BC mathematical exercise text, lacking any practical application at the time it was written down.¹⁶ This is

10 Kuhrt 2007b.

11 George 2005/6; George 2010.

12 Biblical studies has also been affected by this phenomenon, cf. Höffken 2005.

13 George 2005/6, 90–92; George 2010, 477–479.

14 George 2005/6, 89.

15 George 2005/6, 86.

16 George 2005/6, 77f.

despite the simultaneous assumption that when pre-Achaemenid sources mention the lower temple Esagil it includes Etemenanki too¹⁷ – apparently this is no longer the case in the period following Xerxes, when Esagil is taken to refer only to the lower shrine.

Even if one is prepared to allow the late classical tradition such evidential weight, it should still be noticed that only two sources speak directly of a destruction of sanctuaries by Xerxes in Babylon: Strabo (XVI.1.5) and Arrian (An. III.16.4; VII.17.1f.). And even these two diverge as to which sanctuary/sanctuaries was/were supposedly affected. While Strabo seems to refer to the tower (*pyramos tetragonos*), Arrian speaks generally of *hiera*, sacred places, or of *tou Bêlou to hieron/ho tou Bêlou neôs*, the sanctuary of Bel, which may well refer to Esagil. Modern scholars have, however, rather surprisingly interpreted this as the ziggurat, while simultaneously speaking in no uncertain terms of the destroyed Marduk sanctuary as a whole.¹⁸

It is hard to resist the impression that such arguments are operating with an inbuilt assumption, which leads to an arbitrary evaluation of the material. Here it is important to stress, yet again, the absolute imperative of not considering Aelian's account in isolation, but in the context of the entire Greek tradition.¹⁹

If we consider the tradition of Xerxes' alleged misdeeds and assumed destruction in Babylon (Ctes. FGrH 688 F 13 §26; Diod. II.9.9; XVII.112.3; Strab. XVI.1.5; Arr. An. III.16.4; VII.17.1f.; Ael. V.H. XIII.3; Just. XII.13.6) more closely, we can make the following observations:

1. The attestations often completely contradict each other, and certainly diverge on details:
 - a. According to Ctesias and Aelian, whose information derives from the former,²⁰ Xerxes has the “tomb (*taphos*) of Belitanas” (Ctesias) or the “grave (*mnêma*) of Bel” (Aelian) resealed, after he fails to refill it with oil. According to Strabo, Xerxes destroyed the “tomb (*taphos*) of Bel”; the author refers to rumour (*hos phasin*: “so people say”).
 - b. While one author (Strabo) describes the “tomb” (*taphos*) of Bel (he is alone in identifying this with the ziggurat) as ruined, another (Arrian) presents the “temple” (*neôs*) of Bel in this state (is he referring to Esagil and Etemenanki or only to Esagil?); yet Ctesias is probably referring with his (undamaged) “tomb (*taphos*) of Belitanas” to a royal burial in the palace.²¹ This is certainly so in the case of Aelian.²²

17 George 2005/6, 88: “a wider cluster of religious buildings that made up the religious centre of Babylon.”

18 A further variant of the modern exegesis is presented by Baker 2008 (followed by, e.g., Kleber 2009), according to which Xerxes destroyed the temple of Ištar of Akkad in Babylon. A critical examination of the evidence shows this to be untenable; see the contribution of Heinsch / Kuntner / Rollinger, this volume.

19 On Aelian's “talent for invention”, cf. Bigwood 2009, 325.

20 Lenfant 2004, 128 (F 13b*); Stronk 2010, 178f. For Ctesias' description of Babylon, see now Jacobs 2011.

21 Miglus 1996, 301; Henkelman 2011, 119f. thinks that the two names, Belos and Belitanas, were conflated later because of the significance assigned to the presumed *taphos* of Belos by the Alexander his-

- c. Alongside the multiplicity of terms – Greek writers refer to the Marduk sanctuary as *mnêma* (Aelian), *taphos* (Diodorus XVII.112.3), *hieron* (Ctesias, Arrian) and *neôs* (Arrian) – the lack of understanding of the function of these structures is puzzling. Thus the ziggurat may have functioned in various ways, but Babylonians surely never regarded it as the god’s “tomb”.
 - d. Quite apart from the problem whether these accounts have a Babylonian background (cf. below), the writers also diverge about what went on in or near the building.²³
 - e. The nature and extent of the Persian anti-Babylonian measures, too, are reported in different ways. Some authors mention no destruction (Ctesias, Aelian, Justin),²⁴ others (Diodorus, Strabo, Arrian) make them massive; Strabo and Diodorus connect this directly to the “tomb of Bel” (in their eyes, Babylon’s main sanctuary). Strabo (see also Diod. II.9.9) further speaks of the total decline of the city (under Persians and Seleucids); both the archaeological and written evidence indicate the opposite.²⁵
 - f. Responsibility for the cultic destructions also varies. Diodorus speaks of Persians in general – only Strabo and Arrian make Xerxes into the perpetrator. One oddity should be noted: the Persian king figures in Arrian as the destroyer (*kateilen*) of numerous sanctuaries (*hiera*) in the city, among them (*ta te alla kai*) the “temple” (*hieron*) of Bel, yet at the same time the author emphasises the efforts made by the priests to instruct Alexander III in the correct performance of the rituals in the sanctuary, which would be nonsensical without the cult statue and set in a devastated temple. This reveals the author (or his informants) to be operating with a specific idea of Xerxes’ character rather than presenting his actual behaviour.
2. A causative link between Xerxes’ sacrilege, his defeat in Greece and murder by his son is sometimes made by the sources (definitely so by Ctesias, Aelian), a circumstance that should make historians very cautious. The Babylonian gods are shown to avenge the Persian ruler’s crimes, just as the Greek ones do in the course of the Persian wars (Ctesias, Aelian) and Alexander’s campaign (Arrian).
 3. As Xerxes’ destructions are not reversed by his successors, they, too, should have been labelled sacrilegious. However, neither Strabo nor Arrian consider this.

torians. Ctesias normally calls the sanctuary of Bel *hieron* (F 1b §9,4). George 2010, 477f. fails to note the difference between Bel and Belitanas, a god and a ruler, and between *taphos* and *hieron* (in Ctesias).

22 Kuhrt 2011.

23 George 2010, 478, allows that Ctesias’ and Aelian’s stories “may owe something to a motif of native folklore.” Nevertheless he sees the Babylonian colouring of the stories as a decisive indicator for “a picture of authenticity”. That is right and one of the hallmarks of folklore. But where George goes wrong is that this does not mean that therefore the stories themselves, the action and protagonists are historical; cf. below.

24 According to Trogus-Justin, Alexander III revives disrupted festivals; it remains unclear when the disruption had taken place. There is no mention of any Persian destruction.

25 Sherwin-White / Kuhrt 1993; Oelsner 2002; Oelsner 2007b; Van der Spek 2005. Cf. also the contributions of Heinsch / Kuntner / Rollinger and of Allinger-Csollich, this volume.

4. The pious Alexander would appear to have acted (in terms of religious policy) rather illogically: although the Persian authorities so obviously failed to restore the Bel sanctuary, he nevertheless appoints the Persian Mazaeus as satrap of Babylonia (Arr. An. 3,16,4; Curt. V,1,44). This was not a new departure in Alexander's policy: already early in his campaign his concern to woo the Persian nobility to his side can be observed.²⁶
5. A valiant attempt has been made to discern a historical kernel in Ctesias'/Aelian's oil and sarcophagus story.²⁷ But quite apart from the fact that Bel and Belitanas in Ctesias are not identical and that the tomb of Belitanas is definitely not the ziggurat, and aside from the question whether we can even consider Ctesias as an "eye witness",²⁸ the attempt to historicise a folktale, and more particularly, the motif of tomb desecration seems doomed to failure.²⁹ Rather, we may be dealing with an existing popular tradition, which was reworked in a Babylonian milieu and in response to the targeted measures taken by Xerxes in the wake of the revolts of 484.

There remains the issue of how one might understand the spread of such a story, generated by an anti-Persian stratum of the Babylonian population, in Ctesias, who may have served at the Persian court or, as some would claim, never left Cnidos. The real problem at stake here is, however, that the nature of Aelian's story, in its structure and outlook, defies historical interpretation: it is very much part of the world of folklore, not of history or semi-historical legend.³⁰ Its *Sitz im Leben*, as suggested by several details (such as funerary inscriptions and the use of oil to preserve the dead), seems to be Mesopotamian. It is perfectly possible that it was told, by certain Babylonians, about Xerxes in the aftermath of the rebellions. In this sense, and only in this sense, the story is "authentic." But authenticity of a literary tradition is not the same as historical accuracy. It is even less true that certain accurate elements are suggestive of a historiographic narrative, that has become blurred. What underlies the story of Belos/Belitanas is not the description of an historical event, but a pre-existing narrative structure, with a series of interconnected motifs. Both the structure and individual motifs are well attested beyond Mesopotamia. The Belos/Belitanas story uses a local setting and figures from local history, but that is all. Despite recent assertions to the contrary, it is simply not legitimate for a modern historian to use such a story for historical reconstruction because it "retains some accuracy in matters of detail".³¹ The matters of detail are not indicative of "some historical basis" (*ibid.*) and speaking of a "kernel of truth"³² surely misses the essence of the story.

The story of the tomb of Belos/Belitanas belongs to a tale regularly applied to foreign invaders who are, as it were, tricked by the kings of old of the land they are invading. By their disrespect for age-old traditions they fall into a trap of their own making. In more

26 Briant 2005, 93f.; cf. Briant 2010, 113f.

27 George 2010, 478f.

28 On this, cf. the contributions to Wiesehöfer / Rollinger / Lanfranchi 2011.

29 The assumption is that the stone statue of a royal builder and the instruction to anoint the inscription and statue 'buried' in the foundation deposit has been transformed by Ctesias/Aelian into a corpse preserved in oil resting in a crystal sarcophagus.

30 Henkelman 2011.

31 George 2010, 478.

32 George 2005/6, 91.

general terms, the story belongs to a folktale type known to folklorists as “der Grabhügel”. The story has the strong colours and sharp contrasts characteristic of the folktale. The invader is the embodiment of evil, a devil who defies the religious and civic order; the dead kings of old are by contrast emblems of just rule and high morale. The well-preserved body of the old Babylonian king is a symbol for this *moral* incorruptibility. He is, therefore, a mirror to Xerxes. The latter fits the role of the evil, yet easily outwitted, foreigner very well. Like the proverbially foolish devil and other malevolent foreign kings in parallel stories, he pays heavily for his behaviour. The Belos/Belitanas story explicitly connects Xerxes’ subsequent losses in Greece with his opening of the tomb; this link is the real key to a proper understanding of the nature of the story.

Among many other parallels, the purported behaviour of Cambyses and Artaxerxes III in Egypt is particularly instructive.³³ Their stories are exemplary cases of how slippery this kind of material is in the hands of modern historians. The accusation of misconduct vis-à-vis the Egyptian temples and priests is symbolised by the killing of the Apis, which effectively places the invader in the role of Seth. The preserved accounts dealing with Artaxerxes III are very explicit in this regard and as such help us to understand the stories about Cambyses as another manifestation of the same cliché, not as a blurred Herodotean account of an actual historical event. In this case, moreover, there are older traditions, centring on the Hyksos rulers of the mid-second millennium, which show that the accusation of Seth-worship was deeply rooted in Egyptian tradition and was a standard ingredient in the propaganda directed against foreign invaders.³⁴

The above allows us to draw the following conclusions:

- a. Both before and after Alexander, Greek authors aimed to present Xerxes as a desecrator (whose acts the pious Alexander tried to reverse). That the Alexander historians give us such a picture is hardly surprising. Alexander himself declared his Persian campaign to be an act of vengeance.³⁵ In addition, their image gains weight from the contrast drawn between Xerxes and Alexander (cf. Arr. An. VII.14.5). According to some Alexander historians, the Babylonian gods, seeking to avenge the crimes of the Persian king and regarding Alexander with benevolence, move to support the Macedonian who is similarly intent on taking revenge on the Persians for Xerxes’ evil acts.
- b. The Greek accounts cannot be used to prove deliberate destruction of the Marduk sanctuary (Esagil and Etemenanki) in Xerxes’ time. Is it not surprising that our earliest Greek reports, Herodotus and Ctesias, especially if we credit them with a period of residence in Babylon, are utterly silent about any act of destruction by Xerxes?
- c. Alexander, like earlier kings, including the Persians, undertook restoration work as demanded by the cult and appropriate in terms of religious policy.³⁶

33 See discussion in Henkelman 2011.

34 See Henkelman 2011 and Dillery 2005.

35 Seibert 1998. Besides, Alexander strove to present himself as an anti-Xerxes during his campaign: at the Hellespont, at Ilium, and perhaps at Persepolis (but see Briant 2005, 90–93); cf. Briant 2010, 107–111.

36 Kuhrt 2007b; cf. Van der Spek 2003 and chapter 3 below.

- d. It has recently become clear that Greek accusations made against the Persians, in particular Xerxes, of *hierosylia* and sacrilege have their *Sitz im Leben* in the Greek experience of temple destructions in the course of Xerxes' Greek campaign.³⁷ Yet it is clear that these destructions were part of the war strategy and not a religiously motivated act of vengeance by the Persians, as Herodotus and others have implied.³⁸ If proof of the "astonishingly enduring potency" (Funke) of these Greek accusations against the Persians, more specifically Xerxes, be needed, then it is provided by the Babylon episode discussed above. Seen, in this context, it matters very little whether they were exploited by Alexander himself or are due to a revitalisation of literary traditions.

III. Babylon's ziggurat and the archaeological evidence

The study under discussion assigns, alongside Aelian's literary evidence, central importance to archaeological evidence on Babylon's ziggurat in proving Xerxes' destructive actions.³⁹ The author's suggestion is that "stratigraphic and structural evidence for deliberate damage to the ziggurat's superstructure" exists in an unassailable form.⁴⁰ "The damage consists of an irregular depression in the southern façade of the ziggurat reaching well into the mud-brick core and plunging deep below the height to which the rest of the structure was levelled. Since the damage reached the mud-brick core it presupposed the prior destruction at ground level of the baked-brick mantle along a fair stretch of the building's southern façade and of the three staircases that abutted that façade. This destruction was not the work of natural dilapidation but of human intervention."⁴¹

Here H. Schmid's findings are repeated uncritically, and his interpretation accepted virtually in its entirety. Nor is the author content to accept the "depression" as merely attributable to human intervention. Instead, it is given a precise date and tied to the person of Xerxes, who ordered this as punishment following the quelling of the Babylonian revolts of 484, as the ziggurat served during the disturbances as a fortified position: "The destruction wrought on the tower was not only a symbolic attack on Babylonian religious and political identity. A more pragmatic reason would be strategic, as Schmid understood: with its staircases demolished the building was rendered temporarily useless as a place of refuge and defence. In human history many armies commanded to squash rebellions have smashed prominent religious buildings not only as a display of force but also to flush out resistance."⁴²

37 Funke 2007; cf. also Van der Spek 2006.

38 This important aspect is ignored by Harrison 2011, 78f., who, argues that, since the Persians had destroyed temples in Sardis and Athens they may also have devastated the sanctuaries in Babylon. Apart from blurring the different historical contexts of these events, Harrison is merely adducing a "possibility"; a possibility which lacks any support in the surviving sources. Yet, Harrison also ignores, like George 2010, evidence contradicting his view. Thus both authors do not mention the fact that, even after the revolts, Xerxes remained "King of Babylon" in the dating formulae of the Babylonian documents. See Rollinger 1999.

39 George 2010, 474–77. Cf. also the contribution of Allinger-Csollich, this volume.

40 George 2010, 475.

41 George 2010, 475. What the German archaeologists called "Senke" or "Mulde" is referred to by George as "depression".

42 George 2010, 477.

Several aspects of this argument require comment.⁴³ While the use of ziggurats as fortresses is certainly attested, there is no evidence for this earlier than the Parthian period, when these structures did gradually lose their cultic function.⁴⁴ The idea becomes even less persuasive in the historical context envisaged, as one would have to credit the Babylonians themselves with the transformation. This would make them responsible for the profanation of their central sanctuary. Not only is this hard to accept, but turning the ziggurat into a fortress can also hardly have been the work of a moment. The central problem in the argument summarized above lies elsewhere, however. It concerns the date assigned to the archaeological finds and its supposedly secure position in the chronological sequence. It is true that the “depression” and the levelling of the core resulted from a single operation. So the levelling work can be taken to be the *terminus ante quem* for the creation of the “depression”. Yet a problem arises when the relative chronology is transposed into an absolute one. Here the classical tradition again comes into play. It attributes to Alexander III clearing work on the ziggurat as part of a plan to rebuild the destroyed structure (Arr. An. VII.17.2f.). As it is unthinkable that Alexander could himself have been responsible for the depression, the reason for its existence is sought in the immediately preceding period. In addition, it is also assumed that the ziggurat was completed only in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, after decades of construction work, an assumption depending on an analysis of the relevant building inscriptions. Needless to say, this neat picture only works on the basis of a superficial examination.

1. The development of Babylon’s ziggurat assumed on the basis of the cuneiform sources is not supported by the archaeological finds. As not a single written document was found *in situ*, any dating of the surviving remains of the ziggurat must remain hypothetical. It should also be noted that not a single stamped brick of Nebuchadnezzar II has survived *in situ* from the ruins of the tower, while the Borsippa ziggurat was built entirely of stamped bricks.⁴⁵ The core and mantle are technically a single construction, which cannot be dated precisely. The size of the mud bricks in the core have measurements which diverge substantially from the standard of Nebuchadnezzar’s reign, as found in Borsippa. The building technique used is by no means limited to the Neo-Babylonian period, but is found right down to the Parthian period.⁴⁶
2. The attribution of the layer of levelling to Alexander’s work is untenable. It is supported by neither cuneiform nor archaeological sources. The layers (unit 2–4) situated above the core (unit 5) have sherds dating from the Parthian into the Early Islamic period.⁴⁷ This deprives the assertion that Alexander III initiated the levelling of any archaeological support. Such work may have taken place anytime between the time of Nebuchadnezzar and the Parthian/Early Islamic periods. Yet, the excellent state of preservation of the levelling work attested by the excavator H. Schmid favours a date much closer to the later periods. Connecting the rubble tips in Homera with clearing work assumed to have

43 Cf. already Rollinger 1993, 63f. note 185.

44 For Borsippa, cf. most recently, Allinger-Csollich / Kuntner / Heinsch 2010, 32.

45 Kuntner / Heinsch / Allinger-Csollich 2011, 265, 269f.

46 Kuntner / Heinsch / Allinger-Csollich 2011, 270; Allinger-Csollich / Heinsch / Kuntner 2010, 31.

47 Schmidt 1973; Schmidt 2002, 305–307; Kuntner / Heinsch / Allinger-Csollich 2011, 267.

been undertaken by Alexander must, too, remain pure speculation. The piles of rubble are dated only on the basis of the discovery of a few Nebuchadnezzar stamped brick fragments as well as a fragment of a cylinder of that king reporting his construction work on Etemenanki.⁴⁸ This can hardly be used to support the assertion that this was rubble from Etemenanki, since the remaining traces of the mantle show that it was constructed exclusively from baked bricks without any stamps. Thus the existence of baked bricks in the rubble cannot be regarded as relevant either for the dating of the rubble itself or for identifying the rubble's origins with Etemenanki. This applies also for the dating to Alexander III which lacks all archaeological support.

3. The written sources do not indicate that, following Alexander III, the tower lost its original function. We have already discussed the ideological bent of the classical sources. Undertaking restoration work was one of the obligations imposed on every king recognized as legitimate in Babylon. It is thus not surprising that, in such contexts, restoration work was presented as a new construction, and that the "ruins" of the building were particularly emphasized in order to exalt, in stark contrast, the new king's achievement. It drove home the legitimacy of his rule and set him apart from his predecessors.⁴⁹ Exaggerating the new ruler's achievements and contrasting them with those of his immediate predecessors is part of an "agonistic principle" – one familiar not only from Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions,⁵⁰ but also to be found in Megasthenes when he applies to Alexander the metaphor of "surpassing all others" (BNJ 715 F 14). In the process, predecessors were often discredited, as was the case with Nabonidus and Nebuchadnezzar II⁵¹ – a crucial point to remember in any critical assessment of the sources.
4. The mud-brick buildings of Babylonia constantly required maintenance; renovation work had to be undertaken probably at least every 40/50 years. So when there is mention of the "decay" of buildings and the clearing of rubble this does not *a priori* mean dilapidation caused by neglect, but rather the result of a natural process of decay, which needed to be countered by constant efforts, in turn confirming the legitimacy of the relevant ruler. "Staging" such an activity could be particularly effective in publicity terms and can be observed on the occasion of dynastic change and usurpations, i.e. when the pressure to demonstrate legitimacy was particularly strong.⁵² Alexander's action thus fits very well into the pattern of behaviour attested for other Mesopotamian kings. Similar behaviour was probably used in the Seleucid and Parthian period. The archaeological evidence now shows clearly that in these periods, too, work was carried out on the temples.⁵³ To connect the end of the ziggurat with Alexander III must remain pure speculation.

48 Koldewey 1990, 298. Kuntner / Heinsch 2011, 6. Kuntner / Heinsch / Allinger-Csollich 2011, 268.

49 Wiesehöfer 1999; Kuhrt 2007a.

50 Rollinger 2008b; Radner 2011.

51 Schaudig 2010, 155; for the creation of Alexander as the polar opposite of Xerxes, cf. Boiy 2010.

52 Kuhrt 2007 a; Schaudig 2010, esp. 143f., 151, 156, 161.

53 Heinsch 2007; Kuntner 2007; Boiy 2010; Kuntner / Heinsch / Allinger-Csollich 2010; Kuntner / Heinsch / Allinger-Csollich 2011. The same is true of secular building: according to Abydenos (BNJ

In summary: the uncertainties besetting the interpretation of the archaeological evidence concerning the tower remain, not only with respect to the chronology, but also concerning the assumption that its collapse is precisely datable. Another, more attractive, possibility takes the ziggurat as a never fully completed “eternal” building site, with the obligatory repairs only coming to an end at some point in Late Antiquity.⁵⁴

IV. Nebuchadnezzar’s Susa Cylinder and Xerxes’ destruction of the Ziggurat

A third indicator suggested to carry decisive weight with respect to Xerxes’ supposed destruction of the Babylonian tower is a cylinder fragment now in the Louvre (Sb1700). It bears a text that also appears on 11 other cylinder fragments including Nebuchadnezzar’s construction work on Etemenanki, hence its familiar designation as the “Etemenanki cylinder”.⁵⁵ Based on the Susa fragment, an entire edifice of ideas has been constructed, piling one deduction on top of another until Xerxes emerges as the one responsible for the catastrophe.⁵⁶ The steps of the argument can be described as follows:

1. Cylinders are *always* foundation documents deposited in the fabric of the building, in this instance Etemenanki.
2. When later kings encountered such commemorative cylinders, they were *inevitably* redeposited in the repaired structure.
3. As no complete example of the Etemenanki cylinder survives and all text representatives are broken, they must have come to light in the process of “demolition”, an assumption confirmed by the fact that they were not redeposited in the foundations.
4. As one of the fragments was found in Susa, the one responsible for this “demolition” is easily identified. It must have been a Persian king, and in this case, of course, Xerxes, who destroyed the ziggurat and displaced the cylinders. One of them was taken as booty to Susa.
5. Alongside the cylinder fragment from Susa, a number of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian inscribed objects (including ones mentioning the name of Nebuchadnezzar II) were found in the Persepolis treasury, which “were surely removed from Babylonian temples by one or more of the great kings of Persia and taken by him as booty, as in an earlier age Šutruk-Nahhunte of Elam had robbed Babylonian temples of many famous monuments.”⁵⁷

On closer examination all five assertions appear to be untenable. We will discuss them in the order of the original argumentation:

1. Clay cylinders are by no means inevitably used as foundation documents. In the Neo-Assyrian period such texts could also be “archivised” in particular buildings.⁵⁸ Thus, all

685 F 1a), Nebuchadnezzar’s city-walls survived into the Macedonian era.

54 Kuntner / Heinsch / Allinger-Csollich 2011, 270f.; Allinger-Csollich / Heinsch / Kuntner 2010, 30.

55 For representatives of the text, see Da Riva 2008, 19f., 121.

56 George 2005/6, 89f.; George 2010, 472–474.

57 George 2005/6, 89 followed by Waerzeggers 2010, 9; see also George 2010, 471f.

58 Frahm 1997, 36.

Sennacherib's inscriptions come from the so-called "House of Sennacherib's Son" (SH), which should probably be seen as a kind of scriptorium or royal epigraphic archive.⁵⁹ There is no reason to regard this as an exceptional situation. As for the Neo-Babylonian period: some of Nabonidus' cylinders come from the so-called "Schloßmuseum" at Babylon and an "exhibition" space adjacent to the Sippar ziqqurat.⁶⁰ Some cylinders may have been kept as archival copies,⁶¹ others may have been display copies intended for contemporary audiences.⁶² This is also true for Achaemenid building inscriptions, as is shown by the extensive distribution of copies of the inscription family known as DSf/DSz/DSaa: some of these were buried as foundation documents, others were placed on the palace walls, whereas yet others were archival copies.⁶³

2. The second point, formulated as a clearly established fact, can easily be disproved. Cylinder YBC 2181 (= RIMB 2, B.6.22.3), recording Sargon II's restoration work of Eanna, was found in Uruk, but its phraseology and structure shows that in its conception it is closely related to an earlier text of Marduk-apal-iddina II.⁶⁴ This inscription has survived (cylinder ND 2090 = RIMB 2, B.6.21.1), but was found in the Assyrian residence Nimrud. Unless Sargon had obtained an archive copy, which is perfectly possible, the situation can only be explained by the fact that during his renovations of Eanna he came across Marduk-apal-iddina II.'s cylinder and took it back to Nimrud.⁶⁵ In any case, the text served not only as a template for his own inscription, but was also not redeposited as a commemorative foundation document. Similar behaviour probably occurred in other situations too. Nabonidus, for example, came across a foundation deposit of Narām-Sîn including an inscription, various objects and a statue of the Akkade king in the course of restorations undertaken on the Ebabbar of Larsa. While the former were re-buried as a foundation deposit, the statue was set up in the temple.⁶⁶ This shows that foundation deposits could be handled in a variety of ways. In the light of these findings, we would be justified in regarding the Susa cylinder fragment, contrary to recent option, as proof of restoration work on Etemenanki carried out by the Persian king.
3. To regard the fragmentary state of the cylinders as due to a "demolition" is to take a very narrow view. Few texts can be shown to have been actual foundation documents or were found *in situ*. The majority come from illicit excavation and were acquired through the antiquities' trade.⁶⁷ Obviously, damage to the objects cannot be laid solely at the door of illicit diggers, it could also occur in antiquity. Yet, the precise circumstances remain hidden from us and there are manifold possibilities that could result in damaged

59 Frahm 1997, 36.

60 Schaudig 2001, 358, 412. See Klengel-Brandt 1990 on the complicated evidence for assuming the existence of a "museum" in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon (cf. Kuhrt 2001, 81f.). On "museums" in the ancient Near East see Calmeyer 1995.

61 Schaudig 2001, 44–47.

62 Da Riva 2008, 26.

63 Henkelman 2003; Root 2010, 179f., 189f.

64 Frame 1995, 146f.

65 Frame 1995, 136; Kuhrt 2011.

66 Schaudig 2010, 157.

67 Schaudig 2001, 46.

texts. To blame it exclusively on the “demolition work” of a Persian king seems very contrived.

4. We do not know how the text came to be in Susa. Nor do we know the reasons for its relocation. As said, there is not one, but a number of viable explanations. Among them is the possibility of restoration work on the ziggurat or an interest in the inscriptions of predecessors.⁶⁸ To this we can add a further aspect, so far totally ignored. It is taken as a matter of course that the relocation of the inscription dates to the Persian period, or even “more precisely” to the time of Xerxes, as is the assumption that the supposedly plundered piece was set up somewhere on the site. Yet, it is impossible to determine from which layer or location the fragment comes. The Acropole Mound is the more likely find spot than the Apadana Mound, given the very early publication of the piece.⁶⁹ It is not a priori impossible that it stems from a Hellenistic or even later level – there is certainly nothing to exclude this. G. Lampre describes the inclusion of *kudurrus*, (Elamite?) brick inscriptions and fragments of Achaemenid columns in a Greek wall excavated by Jacques de Morgan on the Acropole.⁷⁰ On the other hand, Morgan himself noted objects found in a layer that, as he insisted, dated between Susa’s destruction in 646 and the foundation of the Persian residence under Darius I. These objects included fragments of alabaster vessels inscribed in archaic (pre-exilic) West-Semitic script that are assumed to have been taken from Jerusalem to Babylonia in 586.⁷¹ Though Morgan’s stratigraphy is hardly known for its reliability, his explicit insistence on an Elamite date deserves some emphasis. An Elamite date could certainly work in the context of gift exchanges between the Neo-Babylonian and later Neo-Elamite rulers. At any rate, the available documentation simply does not allow us to formulate decisive counter-arguments to assume an Achaemenid date for the layer in question.⁷² A clear *non liquet* therefore imposes itself with regard to the inscribed alabaster fragments. In the case of the cylinder fragment the situation is basically the same: in principle, any date between the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and the Hellenistic period (or a later age) is possible. There are no archaeological arguments for an Achaemenid date. This effectively pulls the carpet from under the feet of the above construct of ideas.
5. As for the objects from the Persepolis Treasury: the comparison with the objects gathered by Šutruk-Nahhunte I is misleading and instructive at the same time. In the case of the Middle Elamite king we have solid evidence for raids and plundering in (northern) Babylonia. The surviving plunder consists of a number of stone monuments including the Hammurabi code, the Narām-Sîn victory stele and more than 50 *kudurrus*. A number of these monuments, possibly re-erected in a “museum” setting on the Susa Acropole, received additional inscriptions, stating appropriation by the victorious

68 Cf. Calmeyer 1994, 2f. on the vessel inscribed with the name of Assurbanipal in the Persepolis treasury. Note also the fragments of Assyrian annals (Esarhaddon?) found at Susa (see Henkelman 2008, 33, with references).

69 Scheil 1900.

70 De Morgan / Jéquier / Lampre 1900, 108.

71 See Clermont-Ganneau 1906, citing a personal communication from J. de Morgan (p. 295).

72 Amiet 1990, 213 assumes an Achaemenid date, but does not provide any real argument except for the unreliability of Morgan’s stratigraphy.

Elamite.⁷³ The materials from Persepolis, on the other hand, consist of inscribed votive beads and cylinders, hence small objects that are spread very easily through a variety of means. Elamite raids on Babylonian cities, such as the one on Sippar in 675/4,⁷⁴ are but one explanation for their presence in Iran. Another, and probably more important, background is the strategic alliance between southern Mesopotamia and Elam, a bond that was renewed time and again throughout the eighth, seventh and possibly sixth centuries and that involved the exchange of gifts. One case is particularly illuminating: during Sennacherib's reign, the inhabitants in Babylon are said to have sent silver, gold, and precious stones *from Esagila* to Elam, in order to secure military aide against Assyria.⁷⁵ Similarly, Šamaš-šumu-ukīn is accused of having sent an unspecified 'bribe' to Elam.⁷⁶ An inventory, probably drawn up during the reign of Assurbanipal, lists precious items which had previously been sent from Akkad to Elam; it includes an audience gift (*nāmurtu*) of 10 shekels presented to the king of Elam.⁷⁷ Finally, cult statues were from time to time returned to or from Elam, as during the reign of Nabopolassar, who sent back cult statues from Uruk to Susa in 626.⁷⁸ Gifts including 'precious stones' may have been a regular feature of these and other known diplomatic overtures. In this context it should be noted that there is now a growing consensus that Elam's history did not stop in the dramatically 640s BCE, but that a (semi-)independent Elamite state existed down to Cyrus or even Darius.⁷⁹ Elam would therefore have constituted a potential partner worthy of the attention of Neo-Babylonian kings. As for the fate of objects such as the precious stones from Esagila: they would have been received at Susa or other Elamite centres, whence they could, in the ensuing Achaemenid period, easily have been transferred to Persepolis. Though this scenario obviously cannot be proven for any individual object from the Persepolis Treasury, it is at least informed by Mesopotamian evidence. The thesis that the objects represent plunder taken by Persian kings is, by contrast, not founded on any primary evidence and can certainly not be construed to support the argument that the Susa cylinder fragment was booty taken by Xerxes.

V. Conclusion

There is not the slightest hint of a fundamental change in the cityscape of Babylon in the Achaemenid period. The available sources indicate rather its continued survival together with its main buildings. The same applies to the cult. In the light of this, all attempts to save Herodotus' description of the city as authentic are doomed. The fantastic description of its

73 See Calmeyer 1995 and Henkelman [forthc.], with references.

74 Grayson 1975, 78 (Chronicle 1, II 39–41). A later, Elamite-Babylonian conflict in the ninth year of Nebuchadnezzar II (596) may be alluded to in the Babylonian chronicle (*ibid.* 102). Note the existence of inscribed Nebuchadnezzar bricks from Susa, on which see Potts 1999, 291 (pointing out that the inscription is of a very general type, hence not indicative of any particular origin).

75 Borger 1956, 13 (Bab. A-G, Episode 4). Elamite gifts to Babylonian temples are attested in ABL 268 (see Waters 1999).

76 Borger 1996, 41/234 (A §36, III, 137), 109/229 (B §42, VII 8), 148/229 (C §53, VII 128).

77 Fales / Postgate 1992, 78–80 (SAA 7 60); the editors (*ibid.* xxiv–xxv) interpret the text as an inventory of items that had been sent to Elam and were returned to Mesopotamia during a thaw in the Assyro-Elamite relations. See also Waters 2000, 42f.

78 Grayson 1975, 88 (Chronicle 2, 16f.).

79 See survey in Henkelman 2008, 1–40; Henkelman, this volume.

customs and habits suggests a similar conclusion. This does not, however, mean that Herodotus' account is revealed as a tissue of lies and hence without value. Rather he created a fascinating picture, owing much to literary and poetic principles, and bearing witness to the far-reaching fame enjoyed by Babylon in the second half of the fifth century. This picture was to have an enormous impact. Further, some minor features appearing in his Babylonian *logos* which turn out to be correct. But what Herodotus' work is *not*, is a scholarly description of the twenty-first century kind, which can be simply read as history. It is, instead, a literary masterpiece, which betrays far more of the Greek image of matters than about such matters themselves. For these, we should rely first and foremost on the cuneiform sources and the archaeological material, while ensuring that we are not looking at them through the Herodotean filter.

This reservation particularly applies to the figure of the Persian king Xerxes. Herodotus has created a highly influential portrait of the ruler, already foreshadowed in Aeschylus' "Persians".⁸⁰ It could even be claimed that with their Xerxes, Aeschylus and Herodotus introduced the picture of the oriental despot into world literature, though Ctesias' contribution on this subject remains substantial. The setting for this dramatic portrait is, of course, the Persian Wars, whose climax is reached in the reign of Xerxes. It should really be obvious, but is too often forgotten, that this is a one-sided and "othering" image drawn by outsiders.⁸¹ The drawing of the figure fits a literary perspective and probably bears little relation to the historical Xerxes. But it enjoyed an immense power, as Xerxes the despot was identified with one central act, namely, the destruction of Greek sanctuaries in the course of the Persian army's advance on campaign. Over time, this became the defining image. Xerxes' picture is painted in ever darker shades in order to increase the potency of assumed counter-images. This must be remembered when considering Alexander's supposed restorations, as the main issue here was to present the Macedonian king as the "rightful" ruler and contrast him to Xerxes. The various sources, with their diverging descriptions of the destructions supposedly wrought by Xerxes, are simply variations of the same basic idea – to present Xerxes as the temple destroyer par excellence. Particularly notable is the fact that Herodotus knows nothing of any destruction, a fact scarcely noticed by scholars cherishing their picture (ultimately derived from Herodotus!) of a city in decay during the Persian period.

We have not the slightest doubt that the picture of Xerxes as the destroyer of Babylonian temples, with its supposed repercussions for the cult, for the theologically global position of Babylon, and for the city itself will continue to resurface time and again. The suggestive power of the tradition and the historical image it transmits will ensure as much.⁸² The same, after all, is true for the decline of Birs Nimrud, Borsippa's ziggurat, which the local Arab inhabitants still insist was struck by lightning on Allah's orders.⁸³

80 Garvie 2009.

81 Rollinger 2010, 619–22.

82 This polarity in evaluating Herodotus emerged in the various panels of the Babylon Exhibition in Berlin in 2008 (Marzahn / Schauerte 2008). Thus in the "historical" section under the title "Babylon in the Tradition of Antiquity", one could read the following: „Herodotus worked with literary and poetic principles that permitted him a more liberal treatment of history, and the question of whether he is lying or telling the „truth“ is entirely inappropriate. The value of his work lies in the immensity of his accomplishments. His literary genius and critical research require no explanatory models, and thus the image

Abbreviations

- AchHist = Achaemenid History
 AfO = Archiv für Orientforschung
 AMIT = Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan
 AOAT = Alter Orient und Altes Testament
 AoF = Altorientalische Forschungen
 BiOr = Bibliotheca Orientalis
 BNJ = Brill's New Jacoby
 CQ = Classical Quarterly
 MDP = Mémoires de la Délégation de Perse
 MEOL = Mededelingen en Verhandelingen van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap "Ex Oriente Lux", Leiden
 OLA = Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
 OrNS = Orientalia (nova series)
 RIMB = The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Babylonian Periods (Toronto 1995): RIMB 2 = Frame 1995.
 RLA = Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie
 SAA = State Archives of Assyria (Helsinki 1987ff.): SAA VII = Fales / Postgate, 1992.
 TCS = Texts from Cuneiform Sources
 WZKM = Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes
 ZA = Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie

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of Babylon offered by modern archaeological research does not need compliance with his description. Historical cuneiform documents and archaeological excavations in Babylon paint a much more precise picture, although significant gaps remain with respect to the late Babylonian period. Available evidence clearly supports an image of the city that has little in common with the descriptions of Herodotus, and the Babylonian customs mentioned by him are mentioned nowhere in cuneiform documents. Nor has evidence been found of destruction by the Persians. Quite the contrary, recent research suggests the existence of a considerable degree of continuity in many areas". In the section on the history of reception, on the other hand, the panel "Apocalypse" presented a different view: "There is no known historical evidence for a violent destruction of the city of Babylon as described in Genesis, the Prophetic Books and the Book of Revelations. After being taken by the Persian Cyrus the Great (539 B.C.), the city of Babylon lost its greatness of yore, ceding its prominence to other, newly founded centres of habitation."

83 Allinger-Csollich / Kuntner / Heinsch 2010, 32.

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