

# ACHAEMENID HISTORY XV

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**ACHAEMENID HISTORY XV**

**THE EZIDA TEMPLE OF  
BORSIPPA  
PRIESTHOOD, CULT, ARCHIVES**

BY

**CAROLINE WAERZEGGERS**



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## EDITORIAL FOREWORD

The Babylonian region is exceptionally valuable in tracking the impact of political changes by providing virtually continuous documentation from the beginning of the Neo-Assyrian empire (roughly 9<sup>th</sup> century BC) through into the early Parthian period (early first century BC). For much of this period, Babylonia was a constituent part of a series of different empires – Assyrian, Achaemenid, Macedonian, Seleucid, and finally Arsacid. Only briefly – no more than 70-80 years during this span of over eight hundred years – did it experience a phase of independent imperial glory in its own right: the time of the Neo-Babylonian empire, *c.* 620 to 539. That period is one for which documents in uncharacteristically large numbers survive, and this density does not wane with the Persian conquest of Babylonia, but continues unbroken down to 484, the second regnal year of the Achaemenid king Xerxes. This creates an unrivalled opportunity for studying the impact which, over time, the Persian regime had on one of its central and exceptionally rich provinces. A bulk of the textual information relates to, indeed derives from, two Babylonian temples: Eanna, the Ištar shrine in the southern city of Uruk, and Ebabbar, the Šamaš sanctuary of Sippar to the north of the main city of Babylon.

But this does not exhaust the documentary wealth of the area. Archives of families in Babylon itself reveal their social and economic life and the way in which they accommodated themselves to, and interacted with the new rulers as agents and merchants (see, e.g., Abraham 2004). Caroline Waerzeggers' focus in this study is on another set of archives, those of a group of families from Borsippa, Babylonia's second city, intimately linked – especially in the performance of the all-important New Year Festival – with the rites and ceremonies of Babylon, close to which it lay. The people, whose lives and activities are illuminated by texts of many different kinds, were closely involved in the management of the day-to-day cult in Borsippa's chief temple, Ezida. Although to us now their tasks seem, at first sight, mundane rather than partaking of the holy such a view is, as she shows, fallacious. The care of the gods, on whose continued well-being and survival that of the land and all in it depended, demanded not merely what we might define as religious worship (prayer, songs of praise, invocation, physical adoration), but also the preparation of foods for the daily divine meals (meat, fruit, bread, cakes, beer), the manufacture, cleaning and repair of the garments and jewellery, with which the cult statues were adorned, and the maintenance of the fabric of the divine dwelling

house and its security. All these tasks partook of the sacred, and only those with the right genealogical background and appropriate training were entitled to carry them out. Given the importance of having no disruptions in this diurnal round, the tasks had, of necessity, to be carried out on a rota system, shared among those entitled to perform them. In return, they had access to emoluments ('shares'), which constituted an income dubbed by Assyriologists, in imitation of the much later system in the Christian hierarchy of Western Europe, 'prebends'.

The four groups making up this study are the butchers, bakers, brewers and oxherds, for whom good evidence has survived from Borsippa. The highly structured and tightly monitored system and the cultic duties it entailed is very fully attested for the time of the Neo-Babylonian empire and the first roughly sixty years of Achaemenid rule. But this does not mean either that it only came into being with the inception of Babylon's empire or that it came to an end with Xerxes' reign in 484. It is clear from the genealogies that the specific temple duties of the élites documented here reach back into the earlier seventh century, perhaps the time of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (681-669), in whose reign and under whose auspices the prebendal system seems to have been reorganised in order to stamp out corruption. What seems to change in 484 is the identity of the prebend holders and, along with that, there will have been other transformations too. The ending of their archives indicates a change (an abrupt one) in the personnel who had rights of access to these tasks, the accompanying income and hence status. This may have been a direct result of the Achaemenid's régime's desire to break the grip of this particular set of individuals. The reasons for this are unclear: Was it a response to two short-lived revolts in Northern Babylonia datable to 484? Or were the revolts a response to governmental moves to reform the system? The evidence does not allow an answer either way. It is possible that, as Persian control was consolidated and stabilised through Darius I's and Xerxes' reign, the empire became less a mosaic of discrete former entities and more a complex polity whose functioning required reorganisation for the sake of efficiency. Part of such a refocusing of concerns, may well have been the desire of the régime to regularise local institutions and make them more effective, as part of which harnessing the potential wealth of the large Babylonian temples will have been central. There are signs that towards the end of the time covered by the Borsippa archives that the rota system became more fragmented, which suggests that the imperial government intervened to break the stranglehold these old families had on the lucrative posts and to promote instead others whose interests were more in tune with those of the régime (see Waerzeggers 2004). What is certain is that the system as such was retained, documented as it is in other cities and later, indeed much later, periods.

Wouter Henkelman and Amélie Kuhrt  
Paris, October 2010

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