

A MOTHER'S LOVE AND A RULER'S TEARS

THE LAST MESOPOTAMIAN KING

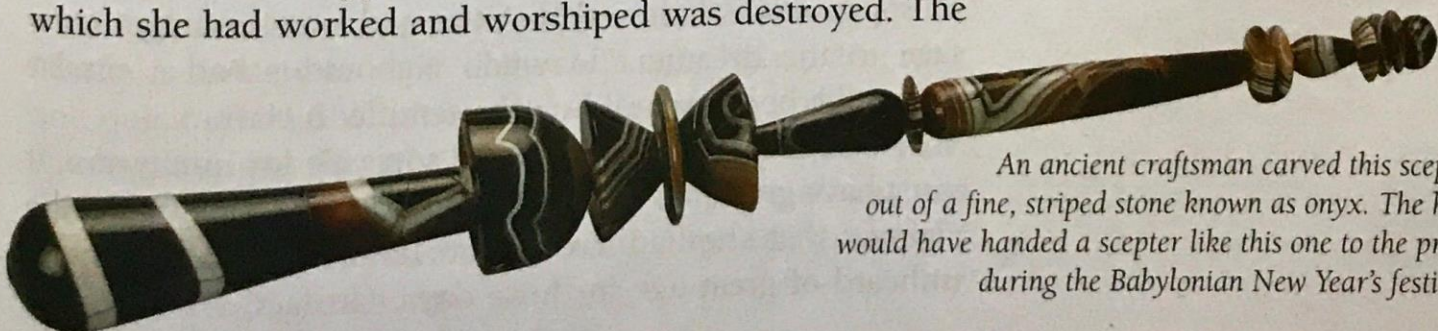
Even as a child, Adad-Guppi was devoted to the gods. She explained, in her autobiography carved on two paving stones, that she was “a servant of Sin, Ningal, Nusku, and Sadarnunna, my gods, for whose divinity I have cared since my youth.” She served all four gods, but the moon god Sin was the one she loved best.

Adad-Guppi was 37 years old when the Babylonians conquered the Assyrian Empire in 612 BCE. She lived in the Assyrian city of Harran, where she was a priestess in the temple of Sin. Even though the Babylonian victory was a major public event, it probably didn't affect her daily life very much. The Babylonians ran the empire pretty much the way the Assyrians had done. People still had to eat, sleep, and pay taxes. And the gods still needed her care and attention.

But in 610 BCE, something terrible happened. Adad-Guppi put it this way: “Sin, the king of all gods, became angry with his city [Harran] . . . and went up to heaven, and the city and the people in it became desolate.” Exactly what happened in Harran is a mystery because archaeologists haven't done much excavating there. But we know from inscriptions from other places that Harran was conquered by one of Babylon's allies, who captured the statue of the god Sin. Adad-Guppi was heartbroken. The temple in which she had worked and worshiped was destroyed. The

“ AN AUTO-
BIOGRAPHY, A NEW
YEAR'S FESTIVAL
PROGRAM,
AND TWO KINGS'
INSCRIPTIONS

“ Adad-Guppi, autobiography,
547 BCE



An ancient craftsman carved this scepter out of a fine, striped stone known as onyx. The king would have handed a scepter like this one to the priest during the Babylonian New Year's festival.

god she loved was gone. Adad-Guppi became obsessed with her wish to bring Sin back to Harran. She also wanted to rebuild the temple, but that would cost a fortune. She knew she couldn't do these things all by herself.

Adad-Guppi had to wait throughout Nebuchadnezzar's long reign before her dreams came true. Nebuchadnezzar spent huge amounts of wealth on Babylon, while almost ignoring Harran. Luckily, the priestess was a patient woman. She waited and prayed for 54 years. Then in 555 BCE, when Adad-Guppi was in her 90s, her long wait ended. In a surprising twist of fortune, her adored son, Nabonidus, became king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. How did this happen? He wasn't from the royal family. For his mother, the reason was obvious: Sin had answered her prayers. She had a scribe write in her autobiography:

Sin, the king of all the gods, looked with favor upon me and called Nabonidus, my only son, whom I bore, to kingship and entrusted him with the kingship of Sumer and Akkad, also of all the countries from the border of Egypt, on the Upper Sea, to the Lower Sea.

After Nebuchadnezzar's death, three men claimed the throne in turn, and each one ruled for a year or two. Nabonidus was the fourth man to become king of Babylon in just six years, and he may have murdered King Number 3. But to Adad-Guppi, his kingship was a gift—not from the Babylonian god Marduk, but from Sin.

Soon after Nabonidus took the throne, his mother dreamed that “Sin, the king of all the gods, . . . said: ‘The gods will return because of you. I will entrust your son, Nabonidus, with the divine residence of Harran; he will rebuild the temple.’” When a god appeared in a dream, the Mesopotamians believed that the god was sending a message to the dreamer. So when Nabonidus had a similar dream, he began rebuilding the temple in Harran.

Adad-Guppi lived to see her son rule for nine years. It must have given her great joy to see Sin's temple rebuilt. She claimed that she had lived to be 104 years old, an almost unheard-of great age in those days. (In fact, she seems to

66 Adad-Guppi, autobiography, 547 BCE

66 Adad-Guppi, autobiography, 547 BCE

A priest stands, in a gesture of prayer, before symbols of the gods Marduk and Nabu. This blue clay seal was made during the Neo-Babylonian period.

have died at 102 or 103.) Nabonidus invited governors and princes from all over the empire to attend his mother's funeral. He described these events in a P.S. to his mother's autobiography. The visitors mourned for seven days, “their heads hung low, dust strewn” after which Nabonidus bought them all new clothes, “treated them with food and drink, . . . poured scented oil over their heads, made them glad again” before sending them home.

Nabonidus was not typical of Mesopotamian kings. For one thing, he rarely lived in Babylonia, the land that he ruled. In an inscription carved on stone slabs in his mother's city of Harran, he blames the god Sin for this: “He made me leave . . . Babylon. . . . For 10 years, I . . . did not enter my own city.” Kings were expected to live in their capital cities. In Mesopotamia, this was especially important because of the New Year's Festival held in Babylon each year. The Mesopotamians, like people in many ancient societies, celebrated the new year at the beginning of spring. They believed that the city's prosperity and, in fact, the safety of the entire universe depended upon this ritual. And the king played the leading role in this yearly drama.

The New Year's Festival took place in Marduk's temple. For four days, the priests sang hymns and performed rituals to free the temple of all impurities. On the fifth day, the king and a high priest were called into the room where Marduk's statue was kept. This was a very holy place, dark and quiet, scented with incense, with the gold of the god's statue glinting in the light from their oil lamps. Once inside, the high priest took away the king's scepter, crown, and sword and slapped him on the cheek. Next the priest was supposed to drag the king



66 Nabonidus, royal inscription, around 542 BCE

66 Temple Program for the New Year's Festival, Babylon, 3rd to 1st century BCE



MEANWHILE IN EGYPT...

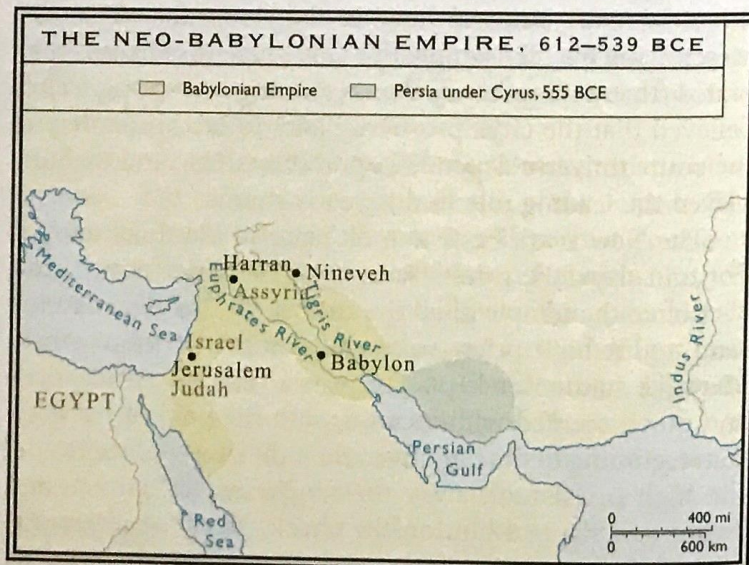
Like the Mesopotamians, the ancient Egyptians honored their dead by a long period of mourning. When members of the Egyptian royal family died, their bodies were mummified. The process took about six weeks. First, the internal organs were removed and preserved—all except the brain. It was cut into pieces, which were pulled out through the nose and thrown away. After that, the body was packed in salt for 40 days to completely dry out. Then it was wrapped in linen strips, with magical charms and jewels placed inside the bandages. A mask that represented the dead person was placed over the mummy's face, and the mummy was placed inside a stone coffin. And then, like the Babylonians of Nabonidus's time, the Egyptians held a great feast to honor the dead.

by the ears and make him bow down to the ground. . . . The king shall say [to Marduk] . . . "I did not sin, lord of the countries. I did not neglect the requirements of your godship. . . . I watched out for Babylon; I did not smash its walls."

After this humble speech by the king, the high priest returned the symbols of his royal power. But then he slapped the king's face again—hard. According to the "script," if "the tears flow, it means that the god . . . is friendly, but if no tears appear, the god . . . is angry." A king's dry eyes meant that his enemies would soon defeat him. (It's likely that most kings had the good sense to cry.)

Why would a king allow himself to be treated as though he were less important than the high priest? The ritual made sense only if the king actually believed that he was saving his people and the world from chaos, that his show of humility truly made Marduk happy. Once the yearly ritual had assured the people that Marduk would protect them in the year ahead, the parades and parties began.

When Nebuchadnezzar was king, he played his part in the New Year's Festival. He probably believed that it worked. But Nabonidus, like his mother, honored the moon god,



and was much less interested in Marduk. Was that why he stayed away from Babylon for so long?

By the time Nabonidus finally returned to Babylon in 542 BCE, his people must have hated him. The festival had been cancelled for 10 years. He had risked the peace and prosperity of the entire world—was he a madman? Nabonidus probably wasn't crazy, but his terrible reputation in Babylon suited one person very well: King Cyrus of Persia.

Early in his reign in Persia, in the highlands to the east of Mesopotamia, Cyrus began a propaganda campaign against Nabonidus. He wrote inscriptions claiming that Marduk was unhappy with Nabonidus and wanted Cyrus to rule over Babylonia. Cyrus promised that he would return Marduk to his rightful place as king of the gods.

In fact, Cyrus probably wasn't much interested in Marduk. He honored his own Persian god above all others. But he made a convincing case. No one knows what the Babylonians actually thought about Cyrus. Maybe they fell for his promises, maybe not. Cyrus claimed in an inscription carved on a barrel-shaped tablet that "All the inhabitants of Babylon as well as of the entire country of Sumer and Akkad, princes and governors included, bowed to Cyrus and kissed his feet, jubilant . . . with shining faces." In Cyrus's version of the story he was welcomed with open arms. Other records tell us that, in 539 BCE, Cyrus had to fight a battle before he could take power in Babylonia. So maybe the Babylonians *didn't* rush to kiss his feet.

Near Eastern history might have been different if Nabonidus had been more interested in the beliefs of his people. But Cyrus wasn't much better than Nabonidus. Despite his claims, he had no intention of living in Mesopotamia. He lived in Persia. After defeating the Babylonians, Mesopotamia became just one of his provinces, ruled by a governor. And Nabonidus? He survived, but in exile. Was he glad that his mother didn't live to see the sad end to his promising reign?



The dragon was the symbol of the god Marduk. This molded brick serpent-like dragon decorates the Ishtar gate in Babylon.

66 "Cyrus Cylinder," inscription, around 539 BCE