

Nebuchadrezzar's Campaign in Year 603 BCE

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The historical evaluation of the events of years 604-603 BCE is entirely dependent on the Babylonian chronicle series. According to the chronicle (BM 21946), Nebuchadrezzar marched in his first year (604 BCE) to Syria-Palestine and "all the kings of Hatti came into his presence and he received their vast tribute". Then he marched to the city of Ashkelon, captured and destroyed it and carried its king, its prisoners and its spoil to Babylonia (GRAYSON 1975:100 lines 15-20).

The description of the chain of events of year 603 is almost entirely damaged in the chronicle. WISEMAN (1956:70) estimated that about four lines are missing at the end of the tablet and about the same number are missing at the beginning of the reverse side. The description of the year covered about 12 lines and was relatively long and quite detailed.

In his editio princeps WISEMAN restored the first three lines as follows:

(21): "In the second [year] in the month of Iyyar the king of Akkad gathered together a powerful army and [marched to the land of Hatti].

(22) [.....] he threw down, great siege towers he [.....] (23) [.....] from the month of Iyyar until the month of ... he marched about unopposed in the land of Hatti".

This reconstruction of the 603 campaign was accepted by all scholars who discussed the Babylonian campaigns to the west in years 605-600 BCE. WISEMAN himself was aware of the fact that the objective of the campaign is missing, but assumed that "since Nebuchadrezzar marched to Syria in the preceding and following years it is likely that Syria was his goal in this year also". (WISEMAN 1956:29). As so often happens, later scholars sometimes tend to forget that textual restorations may be quite hazardous and should be treated with great caution. Thus, various suggestions have been offered for the name of the Palestinian or Phoenician supposedly attacked city in line 21: Jerusalem (VOGT 1957:90); Gaza (RAINEY 1975:54-55); Ashdod, Ekron, or Gaza (MA-

LAMAT 1957:131); Aphek (SHEA 1976); Sidon or Tyre (WISEMAN 1985:26-28); Ekron (GITIN 1989:46). WISEMAN's reconstruction of the 603 campaign even served as the basis for dating the submission of Judah to Babylonia in that same year (PAVLOVSKY and VOGT 1964:345-346; MALAMAT 1968:141-142; 1975:129-132, 144).

Did Nebuchadrezzar march to Syria-Palestine in 603 BCE? The key for the correct understanding of the broken passage is in line 22: *šāpāti rabāti ušbal[kit]*; "Large siege towers he moved ac[ross]". Which natural obstacle (such as a mountain range) was crossed over by the Babylonians when they "moved across" their large siege towers? The entire area of Syria-Palestine was already conquered by Nebuchadrezzar during his campaigns of 605-604 BCE, and there was no need to carry siege machines from distant bases into the captured territories. Trees for siege towers were abundant all along the coast of Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon and no natural barrier should have been traversed for siege operations either on the Phoenician coast or in southern Palestine. It seems that the campaign of 603 was directed to some other area not yet conquered by the Babylonians, and siege towers should therefore have been "moved across" in its direction from Mesopotamian bases.

Remarkable also is the relative length of the space dedicated to the events of 603 BCE in the chronicle (about 12 lines). A quick glance at the Babylonian chronicle series reveals that campaigns conducted either within the area of Mesopotamia or to neighbouring countries are usually described in detail whereas campaigns to Syria-Palestine are described in relative brevity. This is the result of the interest of the author who lived in Babylonia and was Mesopotamian-centric in his culture and historical outlook. He thus delineated the western campaigns of Nebuchadrezzar only schematically and summarily, omitting various details that looked redundant from his Babylonian point of view. Thus, the relatively long description of year 603 better suits a country bordering on Mesopotamia than the area of Syria-Palestine.

In my opinion, the most likely target for Nebuchadrezzar's campaign of 603 is the land of Kimuhu and possibly some other Anatolian countries. Babylonian operations against Kimuhu are first related in the chronicle's description of year 607 BCE. In the course of this campaign Nabopolassar crossed the Euphrates and captured the city of Kimuhu (modern Samsat). He placed a garrison there and returned to Babylon (WISEMAN 1956:20-21; GRAYSON 1975:97-98 lines 5-15). In the next year (606) the Egyptians attacked the city, besieged it for four months and conquered it. Nabopolassar reacted by crossing

the Euphrates north of Carchemish and plundering three cities in the land of Kimuhu. He left a garrison in Qurumati, a city located somewhere on the eastern bank of the Euphrates, and returned to Babylon. Soon afterwards, the Egyptian troops at Carchemish crossed the Euphrates, attacked the Babylonian garrison and pushed them back (WISEMAN 1956:21-23; GRAYSON 1975:98, lines 16-26). The Babylonians thus failed in their efforts to conquer the land of Kimuhu and as late as the end of year 606 BCE it remained in their rivals' hands.

This is the background against which we must understand the Babylonian campaign of 603 BCE. In years 605-604 Nebuchadrezzar defeated the Egyptians, drove them out of Ebir-nāri and subjugated all the Syro-Palestinian kingdoms. In 603 he returned to the northwestern front and completed what he failed to accomplish in the campaigns of 607-606 BCE. With the help of some parallel passages (GRAYSON 1975:93-94 lines 35-36, 42-43; 98, lines 19-20) we may restore the beginning of the campaign of 603 thus:

(21) [šattu ša]nitu itⁱAiiaru šār Akkadiki ummāni-šú kabittutú
ik-šur-ma [ina uruKi'-mu'-hu']

(22) [karas-s]u id-di ša-pa-a-ti rabāti^{meš} uš-bal-k[it-ma a-na
dūri]

(23) [uq-ta-rib ultu itⁱA]iiari adi itⁱ[... šal-tu ana libbi
āli ĩpuš]

Translation: "The second year: In the month of Iyyar the king of Akkad assembled a large army and pitched his camp in the city of Kimuhu(?). Large siege towers he moved across and brought it up to the wall(?). From the month of] Iyyar until the month [of MN he subjected the city to a siege(?)]".

The broken parts of the description may well have included details of the conquest of the city and the expansion of the campaign against some other Anatolian cities. The end of the 603 campaign (GRAYSON 1975:101 line 1) may tentatively be restored [...ú-maš-š]ir-ma x [...]; "[In the month of MN the king of Akkad left [troops(?)] and [.....]" (compare GRAYSON 1975: 95 line 64; 97 line 8).

We may conclude that no Babylonian campaign to Ebir-nāri was conducted in year 603 BCE and that the most likely date for Jehoiakim's submission to Babylonia is 604 BCE (as suggested by the majority of scholars). The destruction of Ekron by the Babylonians (GITIN 1989:45-48) may tentatively be dated

after Nebuchadrezzar's failure on the Egyptian border in his fourth year (601/600 BCE), possibly (but not necessarily) after year 595 BCE, that is, in the years when the Babylonian chronicle series, our main source for the history of Syria and Palestine in the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE, is no longer available for us.

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