

## Nabonid, King of Babylon (556-539 B.C.E.) in Arabia in Light of New Evidence

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Recently we received new data from the Arabian Peninsula concerning Nabonid, the last king of Babylon (556-539 B.C.E.). It comes from Southern Jordan, where a weathered relief of him with traces of an inscription were discovered,<sup>1</sup> and from the region of Taymā' in Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup>

As we know, the last king of Babylon, Nabonid was a devoted worshipper of the moon-god Sin, and especially the Sin of Harran, which possibly hints at his Assyrian or Aramaic origin. He was a usurper on the Babylonian throne, his relations with the Babylonian officials and priests, and first of all with the priests of the god Marduk, deteriorated, and he left Babylon in his third year (554), and went via Palestine to Arabia.<sup>3</sup> It is also possible that not only religious and economic reasons forced these steps, but also the deliberate obstinacy, from where the legend grew of the king's madness (cf. below). Nabonid left in Babylon the heir of the throne, his son Bel-šar-ušur (Belshazzar, Balthasar). At the same time several thousands of everyday life documents are dated by the regnal years of Nabonid.

The Babylonian Chronicle of his time relates that in his third year Nabonid conquered Edom (<sup>KUR</sup>*u]-du-um-mu*).<sup>4</sup> This fact is known now also from the discovery of his relief in southern Jordan.<sup>5</sup> We know also, that in his fourth year Nabonid conquered Dadanu (*da-da-nu*), biblical *Dedān*, modern *El-'Olā* in north-west Arabia.<sup>6</sup> And only in the fifth year, he reached and conquered Taymā'. Good evidence for it is that a text of the 5<sup>th</sup> day of Addaru of the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Nabonid, relates about selling of a dromedary for 150 shekels of silver, which was sent to Taymā', naturally, when the king was just there.<sup>7</sup> In his Harran inscription, Nabonid tells us that he went to Taymā' (<sup>URU</sup>*Te-ma-a*), Dadanu (<sup>URU</sup>*Da-da-nu*), Padaku

<sup>1</sup> St. Dalley and A. Gognel, The Sela' Sculpture: A Neo-Babylonian Rock Relief in Southern Jordan, ADAJ, XLI, Amman 1977 (appeared later), pp. 169-176.

<sup>2</sup> W.W. Müller and Said F. Al-Said, Der babylonische König Nabonid in taymanischen Inschriften, BN, 107/108, 2001, pp. 109-119. Unfortunately, we have no access to the original publications of Said F. Al-Said and Kh. M. Eskoubi containing the photographs of the inscriptions.

<sup>3</sup> The bibliography on Nabonid is very rich, but almost all events are given precisely in W.C. Lambert, Nabonidus in Arabia, Proceedings of the Fifth Seminar for Arabian Studies, London, 1972, pp. 53-64; P.A. Beaulieu, The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon (556-539 B.C.), New Haven, 1989, esp. Ch. III, pp. 149-232.

<sup>4</sup> A.K. Grayson, Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles, Locust Valley, 1974, Chronicle No. 7: I:17, Beaulieu, p. 166.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. note 1.

<sup>6</sup> Grayson, Chronicles, No. 7:V:20; Beaulieu, p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> Beaulieu, p. 53; Lambert, pp. 57-58; Text GCCI, I:294.

(<sup>URU</sup>*pa-da-ak-ku*), Ḫibrā (<sup>URU</sup>*ḫi-ib-ra-a*), Jādīḫu (<sup>URU</sup>*ia-di-ḫu*), “and till Jatribu” (*u a-di* <sup>URU</sup>*iá-at-ri-bu*).<sup>8</sup> The apparently anti-Nabonid “Verse Account”, composed at the beginning of the Persian times, which we quote here according to the translation of L. Oppenheim runs as follows:<sup>9</sup>

- 22) “The forces of Akkad set out with [him]
- 23) and he set his face to Taymā’ in the west.
- 24) He took the path to distant routes. When [he] arrived,
- 25) he killed the king of Taymā’ with the [sword]
- 26) and slaughtered the herds of the inhabitants of the city...
- 27) He entered and established his residence, while the forces of Akkad [...]
- 28) [That] city he made glorious and [built]...
- 29) Like the palace of Babylon he built... [...]
- 30) The treasure of the city and ... [...]
- 31) He went around it and a guard [ ... ]

We learn a lot from this, unfortunately, with *lacunae* text. Nabonid built in Taymā’ his palace, committed various atrocities to the local population, took the treasure of the city and performed various other activities. Regrettably the palace of Nabonid in Taymā’ is not yet excavated and we do not have any archives from there.

And this brings us to the most recent discoveries in the region of Taymā’, where four Thamudic inscriptions were discovered and edited by M. Eskoubi, partly by A. van den Branden, and reedited by W. Müller and S. F. Al-Said.<sup>10</sup> These texts, according to Macdonald, should be considered as Taymanitic.<sup>11</sup>

The edition of the four Nabonid inscriptions by W.W. Müller and S.F. Al-Said includes a detailed and well-founded philological commentary and only a few remarks concerning the translation of the text Taymā’ 1 can be proposed.

Taymā’ 1. The inscription was discovered at a rock surface at al-MuÁamraÆa, 10 kilometers southwest from Taymā’ (Müller-Al-Said, p. 110).

- 1) *’n mrdn ḫlm nbnd mlk bbl*
- 2) *’twt m ’rbsrs kyt*
- 3) *nm ḫfls tlw bdt l ’q*

(In general we follow the translation of Müller-Al-Said with some corrections).

- 1) I am Māridān, the official (companion?) of Nabonid, king of Babylon.
- 2) I came with the Rāb Sārīs (Chief eunuch) in order that he de-
- 3) ploys (forces) (= to help him to deploy (forces)) in an operation of expelling in

<sup>8</sup> C.J. Gadd, The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus, AnSt, 8, 1958, pp. 35-92, Nabonidus H<sub>2</sub>, A and B:24-25; *Padakku*-modern *El-Ḥuwuyyit?*: *Ḫibra*-modern *Ḥaybar*; *Yadiḫu*-modern *El-Ḥayit* in northwest Arabia; Beaulieu, pp. 170-173.

<sup>9</sup> A.L. Oppenheim, in ANET, 1965, pp. 312-316; cf. also Lambert, p. 56. We take the corrected translation of Lambert.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Note 2.

<sup>11</sup> M.C.A. Macdonald, Reflections on the Linguistic Map of pre-Islamic Arabia, AAE 11/1, 2000, pp. 28-791 esp. p. 43.

pursuit of the Bedouin up to the bank (of the wādī).

Line 1. *mrdn* = Māridān is both a North- and South-Arabian personal name.

*hlm* can be interpreted in two ways: 1) it is a local Arabic (quasi?) title of a functionary at the court of a king or a chieftain, which the author of the inscription adopted to the structure of the Babylonian administration. In this case the Müller-Al-Said translation “*Gefährte*”, i.e., companion, fits well; it is a translation of a Babylonian civilian or military title interpreted according to the local Arabian conditions. In this case an appropriate English translation would be ‘official’ or ‘officer’. By all means we do not know any Akkadian or Aramaic title which could be regarded as a counterpart of this term, if there such existed.

*nbnd* – the name of the Babylonian king *Nabū-na’id*. The spelling *nbnd* appears for the first time known. This name appears in the Qumrān “Prayer of Nabonid” (cf. below) spelled *nbny* in Aramaic.

*mlk bbl* – “King of Babylon”, Akk. *šar Bābili*, has its Hebrew biblical form *melek Bābel*

*Māridān*, in all probability a Taimā’ese, well acquainted with geographical conditions of the region and with the social organization of the local Bedouin tribes, could be attached to the Babylonian army on purpose to help the *Rab Sārīs* in his military operations.

Line 2. *rb srs* – Akkadian, esp. Neo-Assyrian, *rab ša rēši*, “chief eunuch” appear numerous times in documentary sources. From *ša rēši* was derived the word *sārīs* (*srs*’, *srys*) in Aramaic, quite in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and in Hebrew.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the chief eunuchs reached very high military or court positions in Assyria and were even chief military commanders.<sup>13</sup> Concerning Babylonia we see this title in Hebrew in Jer. 39,13 *Nebūšazbān* (i.e., *Nabū-šezibanni*) *rab-sārīs* “the chief eunuch”. So we see here in the inscription that the chief eunuch of Nabonid had also military powers.

Line 3. South Arabian epigraphic texts contain essential additional material for interpretation of the roots *fls* and *ʿwq*.

The root *fls* appears in South Arabian inscriptions with the meaning ‘to expel’ (II form), reconstructed on the base of Ethiopic *falasa* (I form *evadere*), *ʿafasa* (IV form *expulere*). Since the existence of the sound *ś* in Protoarabic is far from being proved, the Thamudic *fls* should be regarded as a counterpart of the South Arabian *fls* and the meaning ‘to expel’ can be accepted for this verb in Thamudic. Grammatically *fls* is an infinitive of the II

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<sup>12</sup> H. Tadmor, Was the Biblical *sārīs* a Eunuch? Solving Riddles and Untying Knots. Biblical, Epigraphic and Semitic Studies in Honor of J.C. Greenfield (ed. Z. Zevit, S. Gitin and M. Sokoloff), Winona Lake, 1995, pp. 317-325.

<sup>13</sup> S. Parpola, The Assyrian Cabinet, Fs. W. von Soden, AOAT, 240, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1998, pp. 379-401, esp. p. 389; K. Deller, The Assyrian Eunuchs and their Predecessors (K. Watanabe, ed.), Priests and Officials in the Ancient Near East, Heidelberg, 1999, pp. 303-311.

form, formed without prefix t<sup>14</sup> – so we cannot accept the translation of Müller-Al-Said.

The last word of the text *l'q* is interpreted by Müller-Al-Said as a proper noun *la'aq* or as a combination of the preposition *l-* and a verbal noun of the root *ʿwq* with the meaning 'hindern, abhalten, zurückhalten' (a parallel to the Arabic verb 'āqa) or 'abwehren' (as in Sabaic *w-ʿwq-hw* in J 2834, 4). However, the Sabaic dictionary by Beeston, Ghul, Müller, J. Ryckmans (1982) interprets *ʿwq* (in J 2834,4) as 'bank, embankment/berge, talus/ḡiffatun (bank)' and even 'ḡidārūn wāqin 'alā ḡiffati nahrin 'aw wādīn 'aw qanātin (a defending wall on the bank of a river, a wādī or a canal)'. These meanings of *ʿwq* are characterized by the authors of the dictionary as 'dubious'. However, they are congruous with the general meaning of our inscription and can be accepted.

Taymā' 2. (Müller-Al-Said, p. 113). The inscription is in the same place as the previous one.

1) *Skrtsl bn srtn 'tw*

2) *m'rb[srs]*

1) Skrtsl, son of Srtn came

2) with the Rab [Sārīs] (chief [eunuch])

Line 1. The personal name *skrtsl* is explained by the authors as an Anatolian and more exactly Karian. By all means, the etymology is doubtful.

The authors try to explain the name *srtn* from Kilikian or Lykian. No definite answer. *rb [srs]* – see the explanation to Taymā' 1.

Taymā' 3. The inscription was discovered in Wadiḥa, 15 kilometers southwest of Taymā'.

*'n 'nds sdn mlk bbl nśrt*

I am *'nds*, *sdn* of the king of Babylon, I stood on watchguard. (??)

*'nds* is according to the Müller-Al-Said interpretation not a local personal name, possibly Greek-*Endios*. By all means it is clear that Nabonid had taken with him courtiers or officials, accompanying and escorting him which were of various ethnic/origin.

*sdn* – the meaning of the term seems to be close to *ḥlm* – a certain title (cf. below). We would add that in Akkadian, Hebrew and Aramaic we have no word derived from the root *sdn* with a meaning of a title.

Taymā' 4. The inscription comes from Sufat al-Marida – 12 kilometers southwest of Taymā'.

*'n 'nds ḥlm nbnd mlk bbl*

I am *'nds* the officer (companion?) of Nabonid, the king of Babylon.

*'nds* – cf. Taymā' 3.

*ḥlm* – cf. Taymā' 1.

Again, we see here the name of Nabonid and his title.

These short inscriptions give us a lot of material for conclusions and conjectures.

- 1) All inscriptions are written not before the fifth year of Nabonid (552/1 B.C.E.) and not later than the 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> year, when he returned to Babylon (543/2 B.C.E.).
- 2) The fact that Nabonid was accompanied by the *rb srs* "chief eunuch" confirms the above source, that he built a palace in Taymā', for this gives evidence, that the king had there

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. in Arabic, W. Wright, A Grammar of the Arabic Language, Cambridge-London, etc., 1977, I, § 202.

one of his highest officials and possibly also a harem.

Māridān is described as *hlm* of the king (Taymā' 1) and 'Andas as *hlm* (Taymā' 4) and *sdn* (Taymā' 3). Although 'Andās appears in Taymā' 3 and Taymā' 4 with different titles, there can be no doubt that the same person is meant in both texts. The inscriptions are located at a relatively short distance from one another – 3 kilometres – and were, in all probability, carved during one military campaign. Both persons – Māridān and 'Andās – occupied high positions at the Babylonian royal court. *Sdn* seems to be a more narrow term than *hlm* and possibly designates certain specific functions of *hlm*. Māridān is an Arabic name and its bearer was in all probability of local origin, though it cannot be excluded that he had joined the Babylonian administrative or military staff in Mesopotamia, before Nabonid came to Taymā'.

- 3) As Zadok points out *Mar-du-u* appears as an Arabic name in Neo-Assyrian times, but it can be treated also as a Nabatean (*Mrdw*, *Μαρδου*) and Northwest Semitic in general.<sup>15</sup>
- 4) But the other personal names, as 'nds, *Srtn*, *Skrtsl* do not seem to be North (or South) Arabic, not West Semitic, and not Babylonian. Possibly, they are Anatolian. As for 'nds it could belong to a Greek in Anatolia. This, possibly, gives us evidence, that Nabonid took with him to Arabia people in his service of non-Babylonian origin, for he did not trust Babylonians, who were partly hostile towards him.
- 5) And this can possibly strengthen the view of Gadd<sup>16</sup> that "those who accompanied Nabonidus into Arabia were contingents from the "Hatti-land, rather than native Babylonian soldiers." And "...Jews, whether from among the captives in Babylonia or from those remaining in their homeland, were strongly represented among these soldiers and settlers in Arabia." The conclusions of Gadd came as a result of the edition and interpretation of the Harran-stelae of Nabonid. The "Prayer of Nabonid" (cf. below) gives also evidence in favour of it.
- 6) We see from the newly published inscriptions that Nabonid was in conflict with the local tribes, at least with a part of them, as we know also from the "Verse-Account" and therefore he had to garrison some oases.
- 7) *rb srs* (rab sārīs) is an Aramaic term.
- 8) This brings us to the "Prayer of Nabonid" among the texts of Khirbet Qumrān (4Q Or Nab).<sup>17</sup> According to this fragmentary text Nabonid, written *nbny* was punished by God with leprosy in Taymā'. His sins were forgiven by a Judean wise man, from the sons of the Babylonian Exile. Here we see Nabonid, living in Taymā' according to the legend – 7 years. We do not know the end of the legend. But we see here Nabonid, Taymā' and a Judean appearing in one text. As it is known and explained in the scholarly literature it

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<sup>15</sup> R. Zadok, *Arabians in Mesopotamia, during the Late Assyrian, Chaldean, Achaemenian and Hellenistic Periods Chiefly According to the Cuneiform Sources*, ZDMG 131, 1981, pp. 42-84, esp. p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> C. Gadd, *The Harran Inscriptions...*, pp. 85-86. I. Ben-Zvi, *Les Origines de l'établissement des tribus d'Israel en Arabie*, "Le Museon", LXXIV, 1961, pp. 143-190.

<sup>17</sup> Reedition and bibliography and translation. I.D. Amussin, *Teksty Kumrana, I, Moskva*, 1971, pp. 326-335 (Russian); R. Meyer, *Das Gebet des Nabonid, Eine in den Qumran-Handschriften wiederentdeckte Weisheitserzählung*, Berlin, 1962 (Sitzungsberichte der Sächsischen Akademie, Philolog.-Hist Klasse Bd. 107, Heft 3.)

coincides in some details with the story about Nebukadnezar's madness in Chapter IV of the book of Daniel. It is also clear that in the following decades or centuries this story (legend) was transplanted from Nabonid, to Nebukadnezzar, better known in the people's memory than Nabonid.

- 9) The royal chronicle of Nabonid speaks about his illness before the beginning of his military campaign in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year. The king became ill (mentally?). He had quarrels with the clergy of all Babylonian gods and first of all with the clergy of Marduk, for he was a fanatical devotee of the god Sin of Harran. Maybe it was the main cause that he was forced to leave Babylonia, to establish himself in Taymā' and to sojourn and stay there for a number of years. It seems that he was considered by the people as a deliberate obstinate worshipper of Sin and this brought besides the historical facts to folk-lore motives, that the king was crazy, for it was difficult for the Babylonians to accept that the king acted normally.

A very interesting moment is also the dating of the Thamudic (Dedanite) inscriptions from Dedan and Taymā'.

So we see that these small texts enrich our knowledge of the history of the VI Century B.C.E.

#### Abbreviations

AAE	Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy
ADAJ	Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan
ANET	J.B. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament, <sup>2</sup> Princeton, 1955
AnSt	Anatolian Studies
BN	Biblische Notizen
GCCI	R.D. Dougherty, Gousser College Cuneiform Inscriptions, I, New Haven, 1923.
J	A. Jamme, Carnegie Museum 19074/1975 Yemen Expedition, Pittsburgh, 197.
SD	A.F.L. Beeston, M.A. Ghul, W.W. Müller, J. Ryckmans, Sabaic Dictionary, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1982.
ZDMG	Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft