

# 44

## Xerxes and the Tower of Babel

A. R. George

### Introduction

Among the great sites of ancient Persia the best known to visitors to Iran are certainly Persepolis and Pasargadae in the province of Fars, with their wonderful ruins of stone palaces and tombs built by the kings Cyrus and Darius. A less prominent place on the itinerary of archaeological sites is occupied by the ancient city of Susa in the plain of Khuzistan. Susa is its Greek name; the Elamites called it Shushun, the Babylonians knew it as Shushin, later Shushi(m) and Shushan, the Achaemenid Persians as Shusha. Its present name, Shush-i Daniel, combines the ancient toponym with that of the prophet Daniel, who (legend has it) saw in Shushan a vision of a ram and a goat that foretold the eclipse of Persia by Alexander of Macedon. Susa is vastly older than Pasargadae and Persepolis: it has a history going back well into the fourth millennium and was the lowland capital of a succession of independent states in the third and second millennia. Among these states was the Elamite kingdom of Shutruk-Nahhunte and his sons, Kutir-Nahhunte and Shilhak-Inshushinak, twelfth-century monarchs well known as conquerors of Babylon.

The French excavations at Susa, led by Jacques de Morgan at the turn of the nineteenth century, uncovered the citadel, palaces and temples of Achaemenid and Elamite kings. On the citadel (today often termed the acropolis) they also turned up an abundance of important ancient artefacts, including many not of local origin but from Susa's western neighbours in Mesopotamia (Harper 1992). Foremost among these were stone monuments of the Old Akkadian kings, Sargon, Manishtushu and Naram-Sîn, published by Fr Vincent Scheil in early volumes of *Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse*. The best known of them is certainly the great limestone stele of Naram-Sîn that depicted this king's defeat of the mountain-dwelling Lullubi people and was originally set up in Sippar on the Euphrates (Scheil 1900: 53–55). An added caption in Elamite reveals that Naram-Sîn's stele was taken to Susa by Shutruk-Nahhunte as spoils of war after his invasion of Babylonia, a period of hostilities that led to the fall of Babylon in 1157 BC. Another famous Babylonian monument found at Susa but originally from Sippar is the great stele of Hammurapi of Babylon, inscribed with the laws that so

impressed twentieth-century Europe (Scheil 1902: 11–162). The probability is that this and many of the other early Mesopotamian artefacts found at Susa were taken there as booty at about the same time as Naram-Sîn's stele, during the period of Elam's short-lived hegemony over Babylonia.

Such booty-taking was part and parcel of conquest. It is well known that Babylonian kings themselves accumulated in and around their palace statues and other objects looted from conquered peoples (Koldewey 1990: 162–169; Unger 1931: 224–228; Klengel-Brandt 1990). The exhibition at the British Museum that gave occasion for the conference whose proceedings appear in this volume included a stone bowl of Ashurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria (668–c.630). Its inscription shows that it once belonged to the Assyrian king's palace, but was excavated in the royal treasury at Persepolis (Schmidt 1957: pl. 49/1a–d; Curtis & Tallis 2005: no. 117). It was probably taken from Nineveh as loot when the Assyrian capital fell to the Babylonians and Medes in 612 BC. How it ended up in Persian ownership is a matter for speculation, but its presence in the treasury speaks for the Achaemenid kings' interest in the products of Mesopotamian royal power. A still more pertinent example of booty-taking comes from the time when Babylonia fell under the control of the Persian Empire. Many precious objects were removed from their proper locations in Babylonia to Persepolis and there also became part of the royal treasury (Schmidt 1957: 57–63). Especially noteworthy are several fine beads, cylinder seals and other votive objects originally presented to Babylonian temples by royal benefactors in the seventh and sixth centuries.

The eye-catching monuments of third- and second-millennium Mesopotamia from

Susa are not the only Babylonian objects that de Morgan found there. Less conspicuous as works of art, but noteworthy nevertheless, are three objects from a much later period: a damaged clay cylinder (Fig. 44.1) of Nebuchadnezzar II, who ruled the Babylonian empire in the sixth century BC (604–562), and a marble vase and stone slab bearing labels of the same king's household (Langdon 1905/1906). Unfortunately no exact provenances are recorded but since the cylinder fragment was already discovered in 1900, the citadel is the likely find spot. The citadel of Susa was obviously not the original location of these objects. The vase and slab can be presumed without more ado to have been pillaged from the palace at Babylon, but the presence in Susa of the cylinder fragment presents a larger problem.

### Nebuchadnezzar's cylinder fragment

The principal use of Neo-Babylonian cylinders was to bear pious texts reporting royal building work, typically of temples, city walls



**Fig. 44.1** Nebuchadnezzar II's cylinder fragment from Susa, Sb 1700. (Courtesy Musée du Louvre)

and other monumental construction projects. These building inscriptions often indicate that the cylinders on which they were written were intended for embedding at regular intervals deep in the foundations and superstructure of the buildings in question. Archaeology confirms this, for a good few cylinders have been found intact in hollow spaces in walls, untouched since their deposit and revealed only by archaeologists dismantling the building.

The text written on the cylinder found at Susa records Nebuchadnezzar's completion of Etemenanki, the ziggurat of the god Marduk at Babylon. This building was the enormous temple-tower that most accept inspired the biblical legend of the Tower of Babel. No spectacular ruin remains of the ziggurat of Babylon, for it was levelled in antiquity, but its foundations reveal it to have risen from a base 90 metres square. Ancient sources allow for approximate reconstructions of how it once looked (Schmid 1990). Just recently a stele of Nebuchadnezzar II came to light that includes a depiction of the tower in profile, which, even allowing for idealization, leaves no doubt as to the building's general appearance. It was a stepped pyramid consisting of six storeys with the sanctuary of Marduk making a seventh at the summit (see provisionally Schøyen 2007, and my drawing in Levy 2008: 31).

At least 12 exemplars of this king's Etemenanki cylinder have survived, including that found at Susa (tabulated in Da Riva 2008: 19–20, C41.1–12). None of them is complete. The fact that they are all broken can be explained as a result of the building's eventual demolition. Three exemplars (now in Philadelphia) were bought from dealers in London and Baghdad in the years 1888–1889 and are without secure provenance (CBS 33, 1125 and 1785). This was a time when people

from the villages near Babylon were digging out the remaining courses of baked bricks of the ziggurat's mantle for use as building material, and it seems likely that the Philadelphia cylinders came to light as a result of their excavations. Four further exemplars were excavated at Babylon between 1899 and 1913: (a) one at the north-west corner of the ziggurat's mud-brick core, in a pit left by the villagers; (b) another in Homera, the mound of rubble from the ziggurat's superstructure dumped in north-east Babylon by Alexander of Macedon and his successors; (c) a third (represented by two fragments) in disturbed contexts in the ruins of the palace complex (Qasr, Hauptburg); and (d) a fourth recovered from modern fill in the courtyard of the temple of Ninurta in the southern part of the city (Berger 1973: 295–296; the find spot of the last mentioned is more accurately reported by Koldewey 1911: 31, "im modernen Schutt"). An eighth exemplar is a fragment that came to light during Iraqi work at Babylon in the late 1970s (Al-Rawi n.d.: 23–24, Babylon 105–A).

What was an exemplar of Nebuchadnezzar's ziggurat cylinder doing in Susa? The discrepancy between the intended location of the cylinder and its actual provenance is a key issue in this paper, and for that reason I have conducted a statistical analysis of the find spots of 386 cylinders left by Neo- and Late Babylonian kings and other builders. Certainly there are more that have escaped attention and, of course, very many more that remain *in situ*, but the figure is an appreciable sample that will give a trustworthy picture. The data of this investigation are too extensive to include in this paper, but a brief summary of the pertinent results is instructive. Only 28 (7 per cent) of the 386 cylinders were certainly found at any distance from the buildings for which they were intended, including

the four exemplars of Nebuchadnezzar's ziggurat cylinder noted above as found elsewhere in Babylon; only 7 of the 28 seem certainly to have been excavated in cities where they did not belong, including the piece from Susa. Most of these 28 are fragments from very disturbed contexts and were probably removed there at some later date after the ruination of the buildings in which they had originally been buried. Exemplary are the pieces of Nebuchadnezzar's ziggurat cylinders found in Homera, Qasr (Hauptburg) and the temple of Ninurta. These are best understood as chance survivals of broken pieces dispersed to secondary locations after the demolition of the tower, whether in antiquity or later. Fragments of baked brick from the ziggurat's mantle ended up likewise strewn all over the city. The demolished remains at Homera were no doubt a resource much used by later builders happy to find there huge quantities of good-quality baked bricks ready-made and waiting, for reuse whole or for recycling as hardcore.

Some have maintained that duplicates of cylinders were kept in archives as records (e.g. Ellis 1968: 112–113). The archaeological evidence for the retention of archival copies of cylinders (as opposed to draft texts on tablets) in the Neo-Babylonian period is slim, and not at all compelling for the period before Nabonidus (555–539). This king's antiquarian interests are well known and might have given rise to small collections of cylinders in the temple of Shamash at Sippar and, less certainly, the Hauptburg at Babylon. Nabonidus seems to have worked on the wall that surrounded the precinct of the ziggurat (Schaudig 2001: 474–475; George 2007: 88–89), but there is no reason to believe that he touched the superstructure of the tower itself; that being so, no cylinder embedded in the ziggurat could have found its way into his possession.

The data collected in my study of the provenances of Neo-Babylonian cylinders indicate that the number of cylinders that appear never to have been put to the use for which they were intended is very small indeed. With specific regard to the cylinder fragment found at Susa, the chances are very remote that it was kept at another location in Babylon, for example in one of the palaces. Very much more probably the cylinder was originally embedded in the brickwork of Babylon's ziggurat and remained there until the surrounding brickwork was dismantled. Consequently it becomes important to examine how this seemingly insignificant object might have found its way from a location inside Etemenanki to its final resting place in Susa. To address this problem further it is necessary to consider the history of Etemenanki. In doing so, the evidence of archaeology, cuneiform documentation and later tradition will be adduced, but it is the archaeological record that is most eloquent.

### The destruction of Etemenanki

The history of the ziggurat of Babylon in the mid- to late first millennium BC is known in outline (George 2007). Heavily damaged by Sennacherib of Assyria when he laid waste to Babylon in 689, the tower was partially rebuilt by his successors, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, and completed after the fall of Assyria by Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. According to later Greek historians, the structure was levelled by Alexander of Macedon in preparation for a rebuilding that never took place (Strabo, *Geographica* XVI 1; Arrian, *Anabasis* VII 17). Instead the site lay abandoned until a large building was erected on it, probably in the Sasanian period (Schmidt 2002: 283–290). Cuneiform records seem to confirm the general truth of

the Greek historians' assertion but suggest that the work of levelling was prolonged long after the great conqueror's death. They document the clearing of debris from the site of Marduk's cult-centre not only in the time of Alexander but also under his successors: Philip Arrhidaeus, Alexander IV, Seleucus I and the Crown Prince Antiochus (see in more detail George 2007: 91). The levelling of the tower was no small task and must have been undertaken only because the building was already irretrievably ruined. The question arises, was it ruined by erosion over time or by a more deliberate aggressor? The answer lies in archaeology.

When the levelled stump of the ziggurat at Babylon was laid bare by local people in the 1880s, they removed the baked bricks that faced it in order to reuse them, leaving only a mud-brick core surrounded by a pit and surmounted by the vestiges of Sasanian and later structures. The first German expedition to Babylon surveyed the remains in 1913 but it was not until the autumn of 1962 that a second expedition, led by Hansjörg Schmid, examined the pit and core with a modern archaeological eye for architecture and stratigraphy. In the summer of that same year the Assyriologist Franz Böhl published an influential article on the Babylonian revolts led by native insurgents against the Achaemenid emperor, Xerxes I (Böhl 1962). There he asserted that, after suppressing the revolts, the vengeful Persian desecrated the cult-centre of Marduk and partly demolished it. In this Böhl was relying not on Babylonian or Persian sources, but on the reports of Xerxes' destruction of Babylonian temples by late Greek and Roman authors, principally Diodorus, Strabo, Arrian and Aelian.

Whether or not Schmid knew of Böhl's article at the time of his excavation I do not

know, but he certainly relied on it when writing up the results of his excavation (Schmid 1981, 1995). He had found stratigraphic and structural evidence for deliberate damage to the ziggurat's superstructure, and sought to explain it. The damage consisted 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 (Schmid 1995: 76, pls 32–33, plan 6) (Fig. 44.2). 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. To Schmid it seemed that whoever had damaged the ziggurat had done so to prevent easy access to its superstructure, and had wanted to render it unusable. In his analysis, the resulting hole had been repeatedly washed by the floodwaters of the Euphrates while the rest of the structure still stood. The annual flood slowly undermined the tower so that, eventually, rebuilding was impossible and it had to be demolished. The original damage that permitted the ingress of water would then have preceded the building's levelling by many years and so occurred well before Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire. Adopting Böhl's reconstruction of the history of Babylon in the early fifth century, Schmid identified Xerxes I as the culprit.

Not long after the publication of Schmid's preliminary report in 1981, Böhl's reading of history was shot down. The first salvo was fired by Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, who pointed out that the accounts of Greek and Roman historians were tendentious and partisan, in that they



**Fig. 44.2** The irregular depression that Hansjörg Schmid discovered in the southern façade of the ziggurat in 1962. The depression is clearly visible in the curved strata that interrupt the brickwork of the ziggurat's core (left and right) and underlies later, more level strata, including brickwork probably of Sasanian date (middle). The broad water-filled ditch in the foreground is where the baked-brick mantle once stood; it gives some idea of the depth of solid brickwork that originally fronted the core. (Reprinted from Schmid 1995: pl. 33a)

deliberately sought to contrast Greek civilization with Persian tyranny, and so were unreliable as historical sources (Kuhrt & Sherwin-White 1987). Without native evidence for the destruction of Babylonian temples under Xerxes, the Greek accounts carried no weight. When Schmid repeated his accusation against Xerxes in his final report (Schmid 1995), he elicited a hostile reaction among ancient historians, who criticized his adherence to Böhl's discredited reconstruction of history. But they offered no alternative explanation for the archaeological evidence that Schmid reported.

It is indeed difficult to find an explanation for the huge hole Schmid found in the ziggurat's side that does not attribute it to deliberate violence. The damage sustained by the mud-brick core could not have occurred without the prior destruction of a long section of the baked-brick mantle. This mantle faced the core to a thickness of between 13 m at its deepest point below ground and 18 m at a point 5.5 m higher than that (Schmid 1995: 56, 75). In addition, the thickness of the mantle of the southern façade was supplemented by the width of the abutting staircases, so that here the depth of baked brick measured as much as 25.5 m on

the horizontal plane (1995: 75). As Schmid saw, no natural force can have penetrated such a mass of baked brick bonded with bitumen; damage resulting in a hole in the core can only be attributed to human intervention, but when and in what circumstances?

The strata that covered the hole in the core were similar in composition to those that overlay the levelled areas of the core, being notably free of fragments of mud brick (Schmid 1995: 76). They indicate that the depression was cleared out at the same time as the core was levelled, during work that removed the debris to another place leaving nothing behind. Therefore the hole was made either at the time of levelling or some time before. The contrast between the rest of the mud-brick core carefully levelled to a uniform height and the irregular depression in its southern side makes it highly improbable that the hole was made by the tower's eventual levellers, that is, by Alexander and his successors. Since they planned a rebuilding, it made sense to level the core to form an even platform suitable to take the new brickwork. It would not have been sensible to excavate a deep pit on one side. Finally, had the hole been made after the core was levelled, for example by treasure-hunters, fragments of mud brick from the excavation would have littered the strata around the hole's edges. Schmid found no sign of any such disturbance. The intervention represented by the hole thus occurred after the completion of the structure under Nebuchadnezzar II (c.590) and, so it seems, well before the mid-fourth century.

In this period the most plausible event to occasion violence against Babylon's most prominent building remains the suppression of one or other of the fifth-century revolts led in the cities of north Babylonia by the pretenders Bel-shimanni and Shamash-eriba. It

is now certain that these revolts took place in the reign of Xerxes, probably both in his second year, 484 (Waerzeggers 2003/2004). As Schmid explains, the location of the damage, on the tower's south façade, points to the concomitant ruination of the tower's staircases. 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.

### Xerxes and the “tomb of Belos”

The discovery of the hole in the tower's side led Schmid also to reconsider a legend told by Ctesias and Aelian. Ctesias was writing in the early fourth century BC, less than 100 years after Bel-shimanni's revolt. Aelian flourished nearly 600 years later. The story they relate tells how Xerxes visited (Ctesias) or broke open (Aelian) the “tomb” of Belitanas (Ctesias) or Belos (Aelian), that is, Marduk as Bel of Babylon. Schmid concluded that the story was based on a true event—the making of the hole in the ziggurat's side—but did not pursue the matter further (1981: 134–136).

The temple-tower of Babylon was often identified as a tomb by classical historians, not only on account of its superficial resemblance to the familiar Egyptian pyramid but perhaps also because of the persistence of the story related by Ctesias and Aelian. The legend tells in detail how Xerxes found inside the “tomb of Belos” a corpse lying in a sarcophagus full of oil, accompanied by a stele holding a text

that enjoined its discoverer to replenish the sarcophagus with oil. When Xerxes tried to do so, he found he could not. This story is reminiscent of a much older tale told about two prominent figures of Mesopotamian legend, Adapa and Enmerkar, which survives only as a fragment (Picchioni 1981: 102–109; Foster 2005: 531–532). King Enmerkar desecrated a tomb 9 cubits deep, destroying its entrance but failing to find a corpse. Pierre Briant has noted that the “motif of a king violating sepulchres is very widespread” (Briant 2002a: 963). Thus Ctesias and Aelian’s story may owe something to a motif of native folklore; but I have shown elsewhere that it reports many details that recall genuine Neo-Babylonian ritual practice (George 2007: 90–91). The argument is summarized in the following paragraph.

Inscribed cylinders of the kind discussed earlier were a minimal foundation deposit; on important occasions grander gestures were made. Statues of royal builders could be built into the brickwork, like the stele of Ashurbanipal in Babylon and Borsippa that depict him in canephorous pose (Ellis 1968: 24–25; Reade 1986a: 109). Or they might be buried deeper in the structure. Nabonidus is reported to have found a damaged statue depicting Sargon of Akkade in the foundations of Ebabbarra at Sippar (Lambert 1968/1969: 7 ll. 29–36), but it is unclear whether the statue was part of some very ancient foundation deposit; it might have been cast aside when broken and later incorporated in the structure as fill. An explicit instance, however, of the formal deposition of a statue in the structure of a building occurs in the case of the ziggurat of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar’s father, Nabopolassar, records in his own Etemenanki cylinder that he “fashioned representations of [his] royal likeness bearing a soil-basket, and positioned them variously in

the foundation platform” of the ziggurat (BE I 84 ii 57–61, ed. Weissbach 1938: 42). In the first millennium, run-of-the-mill cylinders were placed in simple baskets and buried in hollows in walls, but we know that important stone monuments were given more elaborate treatment. They were interred in lidded terracotta boxes known as *tupshennu*, like the one used to bury the stone tablet of Nabû-apla-iddina as part of an elaborate foundation deposit beneath the temple of Shamash at Sippar (Woods 2004: 28, fig. 3, 34–35). Finally, it is a commonplace injunction in the building inscriptions of Neo-Assyrian kings of Babylonia for a future builder to secure a blessing by anointing foundation statues and inscriptions with oil. This detail completes a picture of authenticity. A human image in a box, an admonitory inscription, a rite involving oil: the Greek story preserves these salient elements of Babylonian foundation deposits and the rituals associated with them.

The suggestion, then, is that the story of Xerxes and the tomb of Belos is not only based on truth but retains some accuracy in matters of detail. In other words, while in this story the narratives of Ctesias and Aelian are essentially literary, they have some historical basis. With the archaeological evidence for the building’s destruction in mind, it is legitimate to use the story, as Schmid did, to suggest that a Persian ruler, probably Xerxes, did indeed damage Marduk’s cult-centre at Babylon, specifically by demolishing the baked-brick staircases on the ziggurat’s south façade. I further propose that during this work the demolition teams came across at least one composite foundation deposit, comprising a royal statue in a box and an inscribed object calling for the ritual pouring of oil. Perhaps it was one of the foundation deposits left by Nabopolassar, as described in his cylinder inscription, perhaps it included



the very stele of Nebuchadnezzar II that depicts him in front of the ziggurat (awaiting publication, see above), or perhaps it was a legacy of earlier building work by Esarhaddon or Ashurbanipal. The inscription was deciphered with the aid of local informants, and the Persian king, or his representative, was duly summoned to conduct the appropriate ritual. The event became distorted in the retelling, acquiring an element of the supernatural and the literary motif of the ill-starred ruler. The stone statue glistening with oil in its terracotta box turned into a human corpse miraculously preserved in a crystal sarcophagus. The blessing in the inscription turned into a signal of royal doom that could not be averted.

## Conclusion

The reassertion of the essential truth of the Greek story of Xerxes and the “tomb of Belos” brings us back to our place of departure, the problem posed by the inscribed clay cylinder intended by Nebuchadnezzar for the temple-tower of Babylon but found instead at Susa. The cylinder’s provenance has also been overlooked as evidence for the building’s history. We have seen that it was almost certainly originally buried deep in the tower’s structure. In the absence of an exact archaeological provenance I cannot prove that it was not recovered from the ziggurat’s ruins by Alexander or his successors at the time of the building’s demolition and then taken to Susa, but equally I cannot imagine a reason for any of them taking it there. In the light of the results of Schmid’s careful fieldwork it is more sensible to attribute the cylinder’s removal to Xerxes, the mighty destroyer of the Tower of Babel. I suggest that it fell out of the ziggurat’s brickwork as his men proceeded in their demolition of the tower’s staircases. It was then presented

to the authorities, who had it sent back to Susa as dramatic proof of a job well done. There Nebuchadnezzar’s cylinder joined other items of booty from Babylonia, in a stark display of Persian hegemony over a more ancient land.

The exhibition that occasioned this volume included a piece that throws up a neat parallel. This was a sixth-century bronze weight inscribed in archaic Greek with a dedication to Apollo of Didyma (Haussoullier 1905; Curtis & Tallis 2005: no. 445). It was originally the property of the famous sanctuary of Apollo near Miletus in Ionia, but it was excavated far from there, on the citadel of Susa. Historians agree that the weight surely fell into Persian hands either when, in 494 bc at the end of the first Ionian revolt, Miletus was sacked and the temple of Didyma was emptied of its valuables and burnt (Herodotus VI 9, cited by Briant 2002*a*: 494), or 15 years later when the same temple was looted in the aftermath of the Persians’ defeat at Mycale (Ctesias §27, cited by Briant 2002*a*: 535). Even more certainly than the cylinder of Etemenanki, Apollo’s weight was taken to Susa as booty of war.

Nebuchadnezzar’s Susa cylinder seems a mundane thing but it would not have been the first such object to have been removed from its original location by conquerors. In this way a cylinder deposited by Warad-Sîn of Larsa in the wall of Ur in 1825 bc (middle chronology) turned up in Babylon after Samsuiluna had captured Ur 85 years later and dismantled its wall. And a cylinder embedded by the Babylonian king Merodach-baladan II (721–710) in the temple Eanna at Uruk was found in the north-west palace at Kalah (Nimrud), the Assyrian capital of Sargon II (721–705), who gained control of Uruk in 710 and subsequently continued work on the temple (see Radner 2005: 236–240). Following their recovery both these

cylinders evidently served as models for subsequent royal inscriptions. But, in a land where there was no interest in emulating Babylonian building inscriptions, that was hardly the destiny of Nebuchadnezzar's cylinder. What, then, did this object mean to Xerxes?

In the Ancient Near East the collection of looted objects provided conquerors with concrete symbols of supremacy over defeated peoples and kings. In accumulating trophies of victory in their palaces, the great kings of Persia displayed the same penchant for the symbolism of triumph that was shown before them by Shutruk-Nahhunte of Elam and several kings of Babylon. Objects with labels of royal ownership or other royal inscriptions (like Nebuchadnezzar's cylinder) made the transfer of power and prestige particularly explicit, for to ancient minds name and self were indistinguishable. The ownership of conquered kings' names, in the guise of looted inscriptions, in some sense gave power over the very personae of those kings, and over the countries they had ruled.

Sometimes, but not always, the transfer of power to the conqueror was emphasized by the deliberate mutilation of looted statues and erasure of inscriptions (on this topic see recently Bahrani 2003: 149–184). As Karen Radner shows in her book *Die Macht des Namens*,

the preservation of a predecessor's name was part of the business of securing legitimation, while the expunging of an enemy's name was a demonstration of contempt (Radner 2005). In the treatment of objects taken as booty both activities can be seen, so that some such artefacts were preserved entire, but others defaced or smashed. Conquerors thus had an ambivalent attitude to the monuments of the vanquished. This brings us to the sorry state of Nebuchadnezzar's Susa cylinder, which survives as just a fragment. It might have been broken accidentally, either as it came out of the ziggurat or later in Susa. Or it might have been deliberately smashed by the victorious Persians as an act symbolic of their triumph over Babylon and their scorn for the great name of Nebuchadnezzar.

Sceptics will remark that the foregoing reconstruction of what happened at Babylon in 484 BC is founded on circumstantial evidence and hearsay. Admittedly, it lacks the decisive evidence that would make it incontrovertible. I present it here as an hypothesis: a reading of history that in my mind makes the most coherent sense of all the information that we have at our disposal, archaeological and documentary, historical and literary. It is for others, if they can, to come up with better explanations for that information.