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The Babylonian Astronomical Diaries (henceforth ADs) encompass three of the hitherto six hefty volumes of “Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts” which H. Hunger has edited since 1988, partly drawing on the late A. J. Sachs’s work. They are well-known as a treasure-trove of historical information – and indeed, as the present volume shows through Y. Mitsuma’s edition of a new diary fragment (294–306), future work in the British Museum undoubtedly will yield additional surprises. The interest of these clay tablets goes well beyond the confines of cuneiform studies and Ancient Near Eastern History: they have engaged in nearly equal manner also ancient and economic historians and students of the history of astronomy and science in general. Specialized studies deal with numerous facets of the corpus, ranging from astronomy to the history of Babylonian commodity prices to the political history of the Parthian empire. However, for some time the lack of a convenient ‘go-to’ volume for a reliable up-to-date introduction to the corpus and a survey of the status quaestionis has been painfully obvious: a lack that clearly is – or was – owed to the wide and cross-disciplinary range of topics that these texts have a bearing on. It is unlikely that a single scholar could have provided such a volume, and we therefore have to be grateful to the editors of the book here under review for assembling a group of scholars for a conference in Durham in 2016 who collectively were able to achieve this task. The proceed-
ings of this conference, now elegantly published (and predictably over-priced) by Brill, may well turn out to mark a turning-point in the study of the ADs, presenting as they do syntheses of several decades of pertinent research. At the same time, they may open up new horizons for further study – in timely conjunction with the publication of R. Pirngruber’s digital editions of the ADs (http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/adsd/), J. Monerie’s synthesis on “L’Economie de la Babylone à l’époque hellénistique” (Berlin 2017) and the forthcoming “Babylonian Chronographic Texts from the Hellenistic Period” (2020; Writings of the Ancient World) by I. L. Finkel, R. J. van der Spek, and R. Pirngruber.

The editors’ introduction surveys past research and offers a convenient summary of the nature of the data: close to one thousand cuneiform tablets, overwhelmingly from the fourth to first centuries BCE (but with some forerunners from the seventh to fifth centuries), offering day-by-day information on selected celestial phenomena (“Section 1” of the standard-format ADs), price data for six staple commodities as encountered on the market in Babylon (“Section 2”), a summary of planetary positions in the zodiac at the time covered by the AD in question (“Section 3”), river level measurements (“Section 4”), and, finally, what is usually called ‘historical’ observations (“Section 5”). The principal topics of these are, first, occurrences of religious and political importance in Babylon, especially those with a bearing on the temple of Bêl-Marduk, Esangila, and second, information referring to the king and his representatives, again with a special focus on events with a bearing on Babylon. In the most general terms, the overall purpose of this unique body of data was “to facilitate correlations between events in heaven and those on earth” (7) – essentially a project rooted in divinatory interests. The following chapters elaborate on this general argument and place the ADs in their historical context.

One of the most important contributions in the volume is J. Steele’s investigation of the “early history” of the ADs (19–52). The ‘standard’ ADs described above are those of the fourth to first centuries, the few available earlier exemplars exhibit slightly (or more than slightly) different formats. Steele argues that the diary format – and thus, crucially, the diary ‘project’ – took shape only during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II, early in the sixth century BCE (albeit as a continuation and elaboration of seventh century forerunners). I would argue that Steele’s insights have ramifications that he does not explore here: in the final count, they allow placing the origin of the ADs securely into a political and intellectual setting, viz., into the framework of the administrative, ideological and religious (re-)construction of the Neo-Babylonian empire as a fiercely Babylon-centric imperial project from the mid-reign of Nebuchadnezzar onwards (as described, i.a., in my and Sh. Gordin’s papers in “Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel 7” [2018, 42–64] and “Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions 19” [2019, 35–54]). The
impetus for this venture must thus have come from the crown, but the major agent, especially on the intellectual/ideological plane, was the Marduk priesthood of Esangila – and this is where the ADs had their ‘Sitz-im-Leben’. R. Pirngruber’s paper on the AD’s “museum context” (186–197) has a bearing on this issue in that it discusses the setting of the ADs among the larger group of material that can be associated with the former ‘library’ of the Esangila temple as it is now preserved in the British Museum. Pirngruber argues that the distribution of the tablets among the Museum’s several collections reflects, albeit less clearly than one would wish, the original arrangement of the material at discovery, which seems to have been chronological.

The ADs’ socio-economic and intellectual ‘Sitz-im-Leben’ is the principal topic of E. Robson’s chapter 4 (120–153) on the ADs’ authors. She searches for the ‘diarists’ among the ṭupšar Enuma Anu Enlil, the “astrologers/astrologers”, but points out that the former are only a subset of the erudite Babylonians interested in celestial matters. In her diachronic survey she discusses the ADs’ origins in Babylonia of the long sixth century. She rightly points to the temples and the priesthood, but in her discussion underestimates the exceptionality of Babylon, or rather, she overestimates the intellectual potential of the ‘provincial’ temples (also in the light of Steele’s contribution and the pertinent remarks above). In a newly published letter (Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 108, 2018, 74–80) that belongs to the dossier she discusses on p. 130–132, a functionary of the Eanna temple in Uruk explicitly states that no one in his city is capable of making the elementary observations necessary to establish the beginning and end of months (the temple and the city therefore being dependent on pertinent communications from Babylon): there was no school of astronomy/astrology in Uruk in the sixth century. For the later periods, and in particular for the Seleucid/Parthian period, the nexus with Esangila is dominant also for Robson: the ‘diarists’ were priests of the Marduk temple. Given the ‘exceptionality’ claimed by Babylonian priests in this period – in terms of purity of descent, mostly, which finds its expression in very tight group-specific endogamous marriage patterns – this point cannot be overemphasized. In comparison, the label ‘scholar’ that modern historians often (also in the present volume) ascribe to the Babylonian priestly astronomers/astrologers has little heuristic value in ‘emic’ terms and should therefore best be avoided.

The divinatory nature of the intellectual enterprise underlying the ADs is addressed indirectly by Ossendrijver’s paper on Babylonian Market Predictions (53–78). Referring to the AD’s implicit correlation of prices with astronomical data, he demonstrates an interest in the assumed connection between celestial phenomena and economic data also in other compositions of the Late Period. This includes compositions that aim at predicting market rates by drawing on
the ‘goal year’ method for predicting the recurrence of celestial phenomena and then referring to the market rates linked to these phenomena. This is an excellent exemplification of the grounding of the ADs in a wider intellectual context interested in divination and astronomy.

Several papers focus on the ‘historical’ sections of the ADs which have traditionally drawn the attention of most scholars apart from the historians of science in a more narrow sense. Ch. Tuplin’s contribution (79–119) is the most ‘macroscopic’. His appendix listing ‘historical’ passages in the ADs will serve as a very welcome index to the material. In his analysis, he identifies “royal, military and religious as the three big categories of intelligible material” (84) and sets out to chart the diachronic distribution of these themes throughout the period covered by the ADs. This is essential information, but a possibly clearer sense of what these passages are about comes from the cumulative impact of the remaining papers, in particular those of L. Dirven, K. Stevens, and J. Haubold. Stevens discusses the geographical perspective of the ADs (198–236), Dirven presents a microstudy of the ADs’ probably single-most fascinating ‘historical’ vignette, which is about 133 BCE, when a boatman’s apparently spontaneous prophesizing and the resulting public commotion caused the temple authorities to intervene (154–179); Haubold deals with the period of transition from Seleucid rule to the Parthians, a period of crisis in which also the prophetic mariner is to be situated (269–293).

All these contributions show – albeit with slightly differing emphasis – the rootedness of the ‘historical’ notes in the overarching interests of their priestly authors: these texts are about the priests themselves, about their place and that of Babylon, Esangila and Marduk in the non-Babylonian empires that govern the region. In particular, there is a great deal of attentiveness to royal action – or absence thereof – with respect to Babylon, Esangila and the priests. Through much of the period, the figure of the king is conspicuously absent (this is also discussed in M. Visscher’s paper, 237–268). The resulting tension between the priests’ aspirations to royal patronage, or at least attention, fuelled by the traditional Babylonian view of kingship, and their pragmatic management of daily affairs with at best intermittent reference to imperial authorities is underlying the choice of ‘historical’ material and the mode of its presentation. Indeed, notwithstanding its probable origins in the imperial project of the Neo-Babylonian period, the whole intellectual enterprise of the ADs in its heyday is bound up with the struggle of the Babylonian priesthood for its sense of identity and its place, politically, economically and intellectually, in a changing world. The ADs clearly fall in the wider context of “Late Babylonian Priestly Literature” (M. Jursa – C. Debourse, Late Babylonian Priestly Literature from Babylon, in: P. Dubovsky – F. Giuntoli [eds.], Stones, Tablets and Scrolls, Tübingen [in press]). This corpus of original compositions from Hellenistic Babylon includes, i.a., historical-literary
texts, chronicles and rituals, including the New Year’s Ritual (re-interpreted in C. Debourse’s Vienna PhD thesis, 2020). All these texts share the same priestly preoccupations that are present in the ADs.

The present volume’s collective contribution to achieving a better understanding of the ADs in the particular context of Hellenistic Babylon is substantial, and the editors and contributors should be congratulated on their achievement.