

The Juniper Garden of Babylon and the Funeral of Alexander the Great

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Abstract: The Juniper Garden (GIŠ.KIRI₆ 𒀭ŠIM.LI), or perhaps better the Juniper Orchard or Juniper Grove of Babylon, was a large shaded open area within the walls of the city. Sumerian 𒀭ŠIM.LI = Akkadian *burāšu*, is both the juniper tree and the aromatic substance obtained from the juniper tree. The word is translated as ‘cypress’ in Sachs-Hunger *Diaries I* where the garden is referred to as ‘the Cypress Garden.’ Later volumes translate ‘juniper.’

Dedication: to Professors Leonard Muellner, Douglas Stewart, and Dr. Martha Morrison of the old Classical and Oriental Studies Department at Brandeis University, my teachers who first taught me to love Greek and Akkadian, and supervised my B.A. thesis on Alexander the Great romances, Gilgamesh, and similar matters.

The paper is yet another by-product of the Cuneiform in Australia and New Zealand project (CANZ), which is tasked with making available editions of all the cuneiform tablets and inscribed objects in Australian and New Zealand collections. In fact, it is a direct by-product of our edition in this volume of *Buried History* of an astronomical diary fragment held at the Abbey Museum, Caboolture, Queensland (pp. 17). The reverse of this tablet closes with a historical notice for Month VI (*Ulûlu*, corresponding to the Hebrew month Elul, our August–September) that makes mention of the Juniper Garden of Babylon which is the topic of the current paper.

While I was researching the Juniper Garden for the paper on the astronomical diary fragment, an article by Katherine Hall of Otago University in Dunedin, New Zealand, appeared in press discussing the Death of Alexander the Great (Hall 2018). This led me to a parallel investigation of another Babylonian astronomical diary fragment, the British Museum tablet, BM 45962 for –322 (323–322 BC, Sachs–Hunger *Diaries I*: 204–219, Source B) (Figure 1). The report below is the result of these two parallel investigations.

The Juniper Garden of Babylon

The Juniper Garden (GIŠ.KIRI₆ 𒀭ŠIM.LI), or perhaps better the Juniper Orchard or Juniper Grove of Babylon, was a large shaded open area within the walls of the city. Akkadian *burāšu*, the juniper tree and the aromatic substance obtained from the juniper tree. The word is translated as ‘cypress’ in Sachs-Hunger *Diaries I* where the garden is referred to as ‘the Cypress Garden.’ Later volumes translate ‘juniper.’

The garden is mentioned a number of times in Babylonian chronicles and historical notices in the astronomical



Figure 1: Clay tablet, a fragment of a Babylonian diary recording astronomical and meteorological phenomena observed during the year 323–322 BC, month 2. Mention is made of the death on the 29th day of the lunar month of Alexander the Great (Alexander III), who is referred to simply as ‘the king’. BM 45962, 60x46x30. Image: British Museum, Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

diaries, as well as administrative tablets (van der Spek 2006: 275–76). The Juniper Garden is often the setting for formal events, sometimes in conjunction with nearby buildings including the Old Treasury (*bît bušē labîri*),

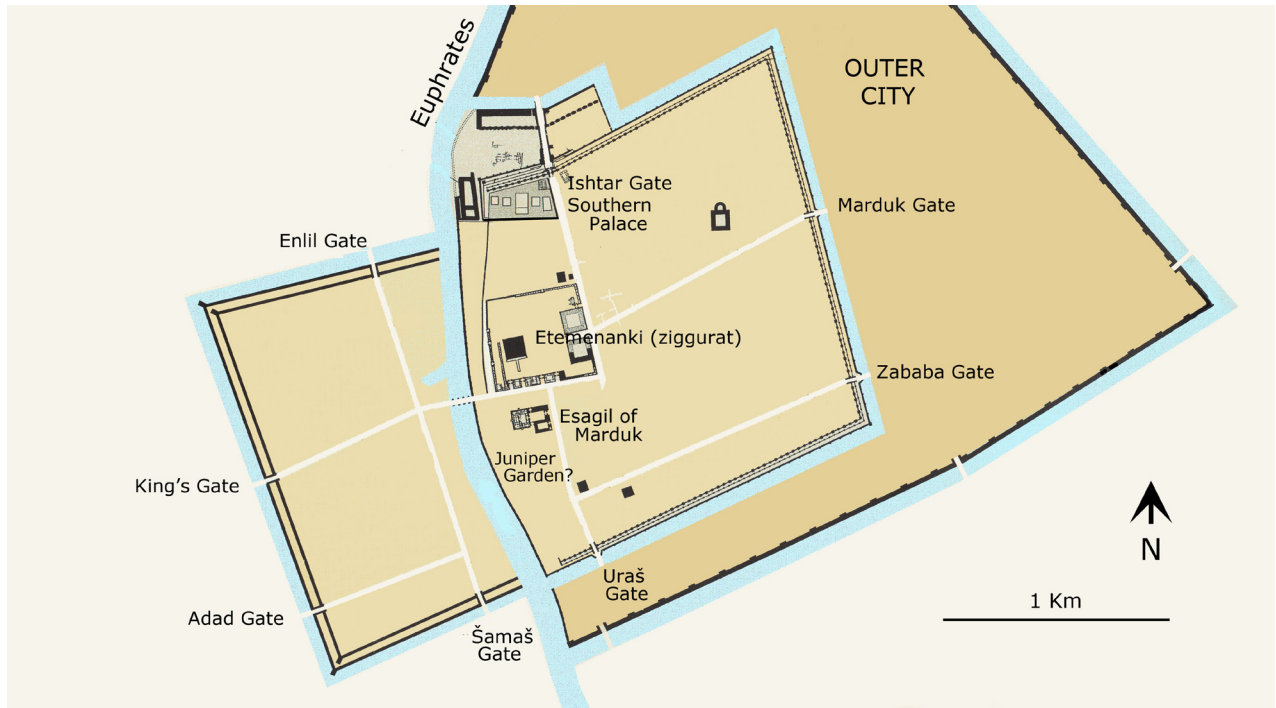


Figure 2: Plan of Babylon from recent archaeology.
 After Finkel (2008: 40), George (1992: 17, 24) and Boiy (2004: 65).

and the Council house (*bīt milki*) where the Temple Assembly of Babylon (*kiništu*) met under the supervision of the *šatammu*, ‘the chief temple administrator’ in the late period. Examples include a historical notice for Month VIII (*Arahsamna*, the fall of 169 BC) that relates that the *šatammu* and *kiništu* of Esagil made a decision regarding temple property that had been held in the ‘Old Treasury’ of the Esagil in the Juniper Garden,¹ and the notice of the reading of an edict demanding that an *ilku dannu*, ‘heavy work obligation,’ be imposed on the population of Babylon in the ‘Council House,’ in or by the Juniper Garden in Month V (*Abu*) during the Summer of 94 BC (Sachs-Hunger *Diaries III* 430–31). More information would have been available in a very fragmentary text from the Hellenistic Period now known as the ‘Juniper Garden Chronicle,’ although the Juniper Garden itself is only mentioned twice in the fragment’s surviving 33 broken lines (van der Spek 2006: 296–99).² These references place the Juniper Garden on the east bank of Babylon with one boundary point of the garden being the Uraš Gate along the southern part of the city wall.³ The Uraš Gate is the closest gate to the Esagil (Figure 2). On the basis of this spatial evidence Boiy (2004: 84, 88, 204) assigned the Juniper Garden to the Esagil complex, but it could have extended well beyond the boundaries of the area on the east bank of Babylon assigned to Esagil.

Juniper groves existed in other places and other periods as well, providing not only a pleasant setting for human activity, but also to supply juniper incense for the cult and private use (George 1992: 306).

Alexander the Great and the Juniper Garden

I. The Diary for Month VI (*Ulûlu*) Seleucid Era 41

Two generations after the death of Alexander the Great, Alexander and the Juniper Garden of Esagil are connected in some way in a historical notice that reports a ceremony involving the rebuilding of the Esagil temple by Antiochus I (324/3–261 BC) in the month of *Ulûlu* in the late-summer/early fall of 270 BC. Month VI of the Babylonian calendar corresponds to the Hebrew month *Elul*, our August-September. The 15th of *Elul* was ideally the date of the full moon of the fall equinox.

The translation and transliteration below are adopted from Sachs-Hunger *Diaries I*: 352–355.

13. [. . . . lúMA]Š-MAŠ^{mes} u lúLAGAR^{mes} né-pe-šú šá a-ra-mu šá li- [li-si x x] x [. . . .]
- 14'. [x x x (x)] ù ^mA-lex-sa-an-dar ana lúDUMU^{mes} É^{ki} ú-x [. . . .] (traces) [. . . .]
- 15'. [. . . ina ^{gis}K]IRI⁶ ^{sim}LI i-te-ri-mu-ú ITU BI U₄-10-KÁM [. . . .]
- 16'. [lúMA]Š-MAŠ^{mes} u lúLAGAR^{mes} šá É-sag-gíl né-pe-šú šá e-nu-m[a]
- 17'. ʿlibʿ-bú ú šaṭ-ri ina pa-ni-šú DÛ-uʿ

- 13'. [. . . . The conj]urers and lamentation-priests, the ritual of the covering of kett[le-drum. . .] . [. . .]
- 14'. [. . . .] and Alexander to citizens of Babylon . . [. . . .] . . . [. . . .]
- 15'. [. . in the Ju]niper Garden they then covered it. That month on the 10th [. . . .]
- 16'. [the conj]urers and lamentation-priests of Esagil the ritual of Whe[n]
- 17'. as written in front of it performed.

The rituals in the passage above have been identified as the ritual for the covering of the kettle–drum (*lilissu*), and the ritual *enûma Anu ibnû šamê*, ‘When Anu Built the Heavens,’ the latter of which is a first-brick ritual for the building and restoration of temples. Both are attested in contemporary Hellenistic period Babylonian ritual instruction texts (Linszen 2004: 92–100, 100–109).

Although this historical notice dates some 50 years after the death of Alexander, we surmise that Antiochus I makes mention of Alexander in this context as his own reconstruction work on Babylonian temples, including the Esagil in Babylon and Ezida in Borsippa, was an attempt to complete projects planned by Alexander the Great more than half a century earlier. Alexander’s plans to rebuild Esagil have been published by Linszen (2004: 108). Bricks from the ruins of Esagil inscribed with the name of Antiochus were published by Horowitz (1991a) and the Antiochus I Soter Inscription where the king speaks in first person of his reconstruction of Esagil temple of Marduk in Babylon and the Ezida temple of Marduk’s son Nabu in Borsippa can be read at (www.livius.org/sources/content/mesopotamianchronicles-content/antiochus-cylinder/). George (1995) gives a more general study of the bricks of Esagil.

The Juniper Garden near Esagil was, of course, a very appropriate place for the priests of Esagil to celebrate the rituals for Esagil named in the astronomical diary.

II. The Diary for Month II (Ajaru), Alexander III year 12

A report of the death of Alexander the Great is found in a historical notice on a fragment of the Babylonian astronomical diary for Month II (*Ajaru*) of 323 BC. (The second month after the month of the Spring Equinox, May/June, corresponding to the Hebrew month *Iyar*). The actual death of Alexander is recorded on the 29th of *Ajaru* (June 11, 323 BC), with some further information provided afterwards (Sachs-Hunger *Diaries I* 206–207, the diary for –322, Source B). The relevant portion of the diary, known now only from the small fragment, BM 45962 (= SH.81–7–6, 403, copy LBA 209), is translated as follows in the Sachs-Hunger edition (Figure 1):

B ‘Obv.’ 7–12’

- 7'. [. . . .] clouds crossed the sky. Night of the 27th, clouds crossed the sky. The 27th [. . . .]

- 8'. [. . . .] stood [to] the east. The 29th, the king died; clouds [. . . .]
- 9'. [. . . .] ; cress 1 sût 4 qa, sesame 3 1/2 qa [. . . .]
- 10'. [. . . . Saturn was in Ge]mini at the end of the month in Cancer, Mars was in Vir[go]
- 11'. [. . . .] the Gate of Bel [. . . .]
- 12'. [. . . .] [. . . .]

(Fragment breaks off following line 12’)

This very brief notice of the death of the king (Alexander’s death) is sandwiched between astronomical observations. Before is part of the observations for the 27th of the month and what is presumably the broken away portion of the diary for the 28th. We then move on to the 29th of the month, where we find the King’s (Alexander’s) death: LUGAL NAM^{mes}, a euphemism with the sense of ‘the King (went to his) destiny.’⁴

This is then followed on the same line by a notice of clouds (DIR AN):

. . . . 29 LUGAL NAM^{mes} DIR AN [. . . .]

. . . . The 29th, the king (went to his) destiny, clouds [. . . .]

The remainder of the fragment belongs to the summary section of the diary for Month II, consisting of the surviving pieces of a list of prices of commodities for the month, a report of planetary positions, and in obv. 11’–12’, at the very bottom of the fragment, what we take to be two most fragmentary lines from a historical notice for the month of Alexander’s death. The insertion of the very brief historical note (three cuneiform signs!) within the framework of the astronomical observations for the 29th of the month, rather than in the soon to come summary of historical events at the end of the monthly section is unusual, but can be explained by the momentous nature of the news.

Alexander the Great and BM 45962: 11’–12’

The Sachs-Hunger edition of lines 11’–12’ is able to read and translate only a single phrase, ‘the Gate of Bel,’ in BM 45962: 11’. Otherwise, Sachs-Hunger *Diaries I* 206–207 offers a trace from the end of a single sign before ‘the Gate of Bel’ in line 11, and traces of what appear to be three more signs in the transliteration for line 12’, without any translation or interpretation of these broken signs.

In 2018, Katherine Hall of Otago University in Dunedin, New Zealand, published a new theory concerning the death of Alexander the Great. In a convincing article entitled, ‘Did Alexander the Great Die from Guillain-Barré Syndrome,’ the question posed in the article’s title is given an affirmative answer based on the reports of Alexander’s death in classical sources including those of Arrian, Plutarch, Diodorus, and Curtius (Hall 2018: 107–108). These sources note that Alexander became

increasingly paralysed as his fatal illness progressed from the 18th to the 28th of the month, and Curtius reports that Alexander's body did not putrefy for six days after his death despite the Mesopotamian heat, bringing us into the early days of the next month (Month III, *Simânu*).⁵ Hence, the diagnosis of Guillain-Barré Syndrome.

Soon after Katherine Hall's article was brought to my attention, I found myself in the British Museum in London with the opportunity to collate the tablet BM 45962. Based on the Sachs-Hunger traces, the photograph in Sachs-Hunger *Diaries I* pl. 34, the British Museum website photograph, and my own collations of the last lines of BM 45962, I propose the following reading for the two lines of the historical notice at the very bottom of the current fragment:⁶

- 11'. GÁ]N? KA.GÁL⁶EN . . . the fie]ld² at the Gate of Bel [. . .
 12'. . . .] x⁶ KIRI₆ [imLI]] the J[uniper?] Garden [. . .

The sign KIRI₆ (SAR) as copied in Sachs-Hunger *Diaries I* 206, at first glance, has more the shape of the Neo-Assyrian form which is what probably triggered my idea of reading KIRI₆ in this late-Babylonian text. Upon collation, and re-inspection of the photographs, the traces do allow for the set of *Winkelhaken* that form the first element of late-Babylonian form of KIRI₆. The traces copied in LBA 209 show a *Winkelhaken* and can be read . . . K]IRI₆ [im These traces may be more reliable than later photographs and collations as they go back to hand-copies prepared at the very end of the 19th century when the tablets were most likely in a better physical state of preservation than today.

The gate-name 'Gate of Bel,' is one of a repertoire of popular names assigned to Babylonian city-gates in the late period. The exact correspondence between this repertoire and the traditional Babylonian names of the gates known from Tablet V of the series Tintir^{ki} remains uncertain, but this is almost certainly the same gate as Herodotus' 'Bel Gate' which can be identified with Tintir^{ki}'s 'Marduk Gate' see for example Boiy (2004: 68). The Marduk Gate was located along the eastern part of the city-wall and offers the closest access to the area of the Esagil from that direction, and so to the Juniper Garden by the Esagil as well (Boiy 2004: 56–58; George 1992: 22–23).

Unfortunately, the very truncated nature of the two lines does not allow us to know exactly what is happening here, nor when in the month of Alexander's death the events of lines 11'–12' took place, since historical notices at the end of monthly sections can summarize noteworthy events that happened at any time of the month. Yet, given the reference to Alexander's death on the 29th we suggest that lines 11'–12' refer in some way to this event. One possibility is that the restoration of the Juniper Garden in

line 12', together with the reference to Gate of Bel in line 11', might indicate that Alexander's body was brought to the Juniper Garden inside the city by way of this gate after his death on the 29th, and lay there in state until the end of the month and beyond. If the trace of the first sign in line 11' is read correctly, perhaps Alexander's body was brought to the Juniper Garden from open space outside the city wall by way of the Gate of Bel. However, it remains possible that these lines refer to the movements of Alexander himself, or others at the time of Alexander's illness and ensuing death, such as those reported in the classical accounts, in particular Plutarch (Plut. *Alex.* 76). In either case, BM 45962: 11'–12' appears to provide the first evidence from cuneiform sources for the events surrounding the death, funeral, and/or preparations for the funeral of Alexander the Great, which are known from the classical sources.

The setting of the Juniper Garden of Babylon for the funeral of Alexander the Great would fit the requirements for such a major event. The Juniper Garden was near the Esagil, the holiest site in Babylon, and was a traditional venue for important events. Further, the sweet aroma of the juniper in the garden, or juniper-based perfume, might have been desirable to mask any unpleasant odours emanating from the body of Alexander.

Finally, one last personal point for the Australian audience of *Buried History* and their neighbours one step to the east in New Zealand. The coincidence that the CANZ project brought the astronomical fragment W00589 at the Abbey Museum in Caboolture, Queensland to our attention, and the fact that the latest discussion of Alexander's death is by a scholar based at Otago University in Dunedin, the site of the largest collection of tablets in Australia and New Zealand, is, of course, pure coincidence. Horowitz and Zilberg (2016) have most recently discussed the Otago Museum's collection, which will be published as CANZ vol. II.

However, without access to the tablet W00589 in Australia by way of the CANZ project, and my interest in reading an article by a scholar based at Otago University on a subject that I have been interested in since my B.A. thesis on Alexander the Great at Brandeis University way back in 1975, it is unlikely that I would have had the opportunity to generate the discussion given above. This may serve as a reminder that it is always a good investment of time to read cuneiform tablets whenever and wherever you happen to find them, since as we see here, reading even a fragment of a cuneiform tablet in a small museum in rural Australia can lead to the development of important new information about one of the most famous personages of the ancient world, Alexander the Great.

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Abbreviations:

Assyriological abbreviations in this article are as in the CAD (*Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*).

Sachs-Hunger *Diaries*: A.J. Sachs and H. Hunger, 1988 *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia*, (Österreichische Akademie Der Wissenschaften Philosophisch–Historische Klasse Denkschriften 195), Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

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Endnotes

- 1 Sachs-Hunger *Diaries II* 476–77. For the *šatammu* and *kiništu* of Esagil see Boiy 2004: 194–204. Akkadian *kiništu* is cognate to Hebrew *knisset*, the name used for the modern parliament of the State of Israel. The role of the *kiništu* in Persian and Hellenistic period Babylonia, and the adoption of this institution in the early Jewish Babylonian diaspora will be discussed in the forthcoming PhD thesis of Yehoshua Greenberg of the Hebrew University.
- 2 Soon to be republished as I.L. Finkel, R.J. van der Spek, R. Pirngruber, *Babylonian Chronographic Texts from the Hellenistic Period*, announced for 2020. Here the text will appear as BHP no. 8. For now see the online edition www.livius.org/sources/content/mesopotamian-chronicles-content/bchp-8-juniper-gardenchronicle/. Mention is also made in the Judicial Chronicle (BHP no. 17) in connection with theft, most likely from the 'Old Treasury,' (see the same web address but ending: . . . / [bchp-17-judicialchronicle/](http://www.livius.org/sources/content/mesopotamian-chronicles-content/bchp-17-judicialchronicle/)).
- 3 See The Juniper Garden Chronicle rev. 19': . . . ⁶KIR]I₆ ^{sim}LI *pa-na-at* KÁ.GAL ^dURAS x [. . . , . . . the Juniper [Garde]n in front of the Uraš Gate . [. . . The middle vertical stroke of the sign URAS (IB) is small and slightly tilted to the right on the photograph provided by the Livius on–line edition who therefore most cautiously read URAS[?] (with the question mark). Earlier, van der Spek (2006: 298) read without the question mark.
- 4 For this idiom and numerous examples see CAD ^šIII 16–18, *šimtu* 3, with identical formulations for the deaths of Sennacherib, Nabopolassar, and Nabonassar, who like Alexander were kings of Babylon (*ibid* 18 3 h).
- 5 For Curtius see *ibid* 107. The diary's section for Month III, with any possible historical notices, is not preserved.
- 6 In the spirit of full disclosure, I must admit that my collations did not take place under ideal conditions in the Student's Room as the tablet was on display when I visited the British Museum. Nonetheless, the signs in question were very clear and my readings could be confirmed by Ipad photographs that I took of the tablet through the glass of the display.