

39) “Chaldean” as *kalû*? — It is generally assumed that the Greek term *khaldaios* (χαλδαῖος), “Chaldean,” translates the Akkadian term *kaldû* or *mât kaldû*, a socio-ethnic designation for a group residing in southern Babylonia that was traditionally connected with the kings of the Neo-Babylonian empire.¹⁾ In Classical sources, the Chaldeans are often depicted as being renowned for their skills in astrology and astronomy; indeed, the term “Chaldean” was sometimes used as a by-word for “astrologer.” One might then reasonably assume that, during the Late Babylonian period, “Chaldean” became a catch- all term for Babylonian culture, and that Babylonian culture was in turn reduced to the practice of astrology—which was indeed a prevalent interest among the surviving centers of cuneiform scholarship during this period. Dietz-Otto Edzard (1980, 296), for example, claims that in Classical sources, the term “Chaldean” simply serves as a synonym for “Babylonian,” with the Chaldeans “par excellence” being those who were interested in astrology and related matters.

However, there are problems with this interpretation, and chief among them is the fact that several Classical sources explicitly refer to the Chaldeans as a sub-group among the Babylonians, and specifically as a group of scholarly professionals. The third-century CE historian Diogenes Laertius notes that, just as the Greeks have their philosophers, so do the Persians have their magi, the Celts their druids, and the Babylonians and Assyrians their Chaldeans (Hicks 1959, 3). This statement seems to contradict the notion that the Chaldeans just were the Babylonians; so while that simplistic view might be found in some Classical authors, it was not universal. For Diogenes, one group was clearly distinct from and nested within the other, but it should be noted that Diogenes has his own agenda: he consistently seeks to portray non- Greek groups as equivalent to Greek philosophers, highlighting the aspects of those groups that resemble philosophers while suppressing those that do not. It would thus be in Diogenes’s interest to portray what was an originally ethnic affiliation as a scholarly profession. But with that caveat in mind, his description does leave open the intriguing possibility that the Chaldeans were a group of Babylonian scholar-priests, not just the Greek term for the Babylonians.

Likewise, the recent essay by Alexander Jones and John Steele (2018) on Diodorus’s first-century BCE description of the Chaldeans makes clear that Diodorus too viewed them as “a specific scholarly community in Babylon” (334). He compares the Chaldeans to Egyptian priests and notes that, “having been assigned to the cultivation of the gods, they practice philosophy for all the time of their life, having a very great repute in astral science” (336)—hardly a description of the entire Babylonian population. Diodorus further writes that the Chaldeans perform various forms of divination as well as apotropaic and purifying rituals; remarking that, by contrast to Greek students, the Chaldeans were taught by their fathers (337). The latter point was part of Diodorus’s larger polemic against Greek philosophy, as he praised the supposed stability of a family-based knowledge transfer in contrast to the supposed opportunism of the Greek educational system, which focused on rhetorical argument.

There is only one real candidate for a scholarly community that, in the Late Babylonian period, specialized in astrology and divination, performed purifications and apotropaic rituals, passed on the profession along family lines, could be compared to Egyptian priests, and bore a name that sounds like *khaldaios*—and that is the *kalû*’s.²⁾ Granted, both Diogenes and Diodorus describe the Chaldeans with their respective agendas in mind, so they are not uninterested witnesses. But their accounts at least show that there was an ambiguity inherent in Classical uses of the term “Chaldean,” as it could refer to a priestly- scholarly group of specialized astrologers within the Babylonian population at large. Johannes Haubold is currently preparing a new and much-needed study of the Chaldeans and their place in the Classical afterlife of cuneiform culture—a study that can be expected to clear up many of the doubts that currently cloud this troubled term. For the time being, I would propose that, during the Late Babylonian period, a translingual confusion arose by which the Akkadian words *kalû* and *kaldû* merged into a single Greek term, *khaldaios*, thereby enmeshing the notion of an ethnic group associated with the Neo-Babylonian empire with that of a priest-like community of expert stargazers. The dynamics of this confusion remain unclear to me. It might be a simple misunderstanding on the part of Greek writers, it might be a conscious attempt by the *kalû*’s to present themselves as the rightful heirs to cuneiform culture, or it might be some mixture of these and other factors. Whatever the case, it should be clear that, far from a simple synonym for “Babylonian,” the word “Chaldean” carried a complex history and contradictory set of connotations, referring sometimes to the Mesopotamia tradition and population as a whole, and sometimes to a delimited group of scholars. But to me, it seems highly likely that some Classical authors meant by “Chaldean” what we mean by *kalû*.

Notes

1. For an overview of the Chaldeans and their possible connection to the ruling dynasty of the Neo-Babylonian empire, see Beaulieu (2013, 32–45). On the position of the Chaldeans and Chaldean thought in the Classical tradition, see the overview in Haubold (2020). I would like to thank Johannes Haubold for his constructive feedback on this note.

2. For an overview of the various priestly and scholarly professions' involvement in astrology-astronomy during the first millennium BCE, see Robson (2019).

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