That ancient Mesopotamians had a clear sense of historical tradition, and were wont to use that tradition for their own purposes, will come as no surprise to anyone who has followed the scholarly literature of the field. Studies of the reception of the third-millennium B.C. ruler Sargon of Agade, his sons, and his grandson Naram-Sin (e.g., Glassner 1986), for example, show how the dynasty was at times reviled, at times reified as a golden age of the past. The Babylonians of the mid-first millennium B.C.E. have actually been called “antiquarians”, particularly engaged with their past (Clay 1912; Unger 1931: 227); but the archaeological component of their activities has not been investigated systematically. In the present paper, I would like to move beyond issues of the availability of sources and an awareness of the past, to review the actual practice of excavation as both a technique and a strategy for recovery of the past in ancient times. The evidence is largely textual, and has generally been the concern of text-based historians, as distinct from archaeologists. Yet when this evidence is looked at from the perspective of ancient claims to knowledge it reinforces the premise that in the first millennium B.C.E. at least, under the guise of royal patronage and purpose, the Babylonian past was actively sought in the field. The resultant finds then served a variety of purposes that bear a rather striking resemblance to our understanding of the “uses of the past in the present” today.

What is demonstrable is that they, like us, mounted campaigns to actively recover ancient remains; and that they declared themselves as having dug in order to reveal works attributed to the ancients. Finally, they also, like at least some of us, proclaimed these finds to be the results of a (divinely directed) research design geared to an empirical

and positivist recovery of true “traces” of the past—that is, a decidedly processual as distinct from post-processual set of assumptions!

For late 20th century archaeologists of our era, excavations are expected to yield evidence of ancient systems of cognition through patterns of behavior manifest by material culture: architecture, artifacts and texts. So too the Babylonians. While they may not have subjected their finds to modern chemical, osteological, or paleobotanical analysis, they did very much claim to have discovered both ancient materials and evidence of ancient cognition, and to have studied them accordingly. In what follows, I shall cite a number of cases to demonstrate: I. The mounting of Field Campaigns, II. The exposure of Architectural Remains, III. The discovery of Texts and Artifacts, which, once found, were subject to analysis, and IV. The subsequent Display of a selected sample of finds.

I. Field Campaigns

The Babylonian king Nabonidus (556–539 B.C.E.) is the ruler perhaps best known for his field activities. Interpreting the motives for this engagement has proved to be a bit of a Rorschach test for the intellectual concerns and historical moments of interpreters—from “purely antiquarian interests” (e.g., Hommel 1885 to Albright 1946: 241–244), to an ascription of religious piety (Goossens 1948), to a more recent assessment of profane inclinations and/or overtly political agendas (Beaulieu 1989; Powell 1991). Given Beaulieu’s demonstration of the careful selection manifest in Nabonidus’ citation of previous rulers and attention to particular sites (1989: 138–142), I am inclined to see the ruler’s engagement as a reflection of a joint political-cum-religious strategy embedded within a system of beliefs that included the exposure of signs of the past as a means of serving divine intention. What is important for our purposes is that Nabonidus went about exposing those signs by excavation.

That these antiquarian/archaeological pursuits were not limited to Nabonidus, but rather were practiced by Neo-Babylonian rulers as a whole, particularly Nabopolassar (625–605 B.C.E.) and Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 B.C.E.), has been demonstrated by Goossens (1948: 149). Exactly where to excavate was often revealed by divinely-inspired dream or divination; a combination of exploration and subsequent building carried out in Babylon, Uruk, Nippur, Larsa, Sippar, Ur, Agade and