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# David S. Nivison, the *Bamboo Annals*, and the Chronology of Xia: Personal Reflections on Historical Method

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## Abstract

David Shepherd Nivison (1923-2014) devoted the last three and a half decades of his life to an attempt to reconstruct the original text of the *Bamboo Annals* and to use that text to reconstruct the absolute chronology of ancient China. Nivison's attempt to reconstruct that chronology involved astronomy; textual criticism, especially—though not exclusively—of the *Bamboo Annals*; and a considerable amount of historiographical conjecture concerning both the period of the Xia dynasty and of the Warring States period, during which, Nivison argues, the *Bamboo Annals* was undergoing multiple revisions. This attempt was also based on three major theses: (1) the Xia kings were named for the *tiangan* 天干 of the first day of the first year of their reign; (2) irregular gaps of zero, one, two, three, four, and even forty years recorded in the *Bamboo Annals* between the reigns of Xia kings should invariably have been two years; and (3) the final Xia king, Jie 桀, is completely mythical.

In this article, I first present Nivison's arguments and then present a critique of those arguments, based on my own study of the *Bamboo Annals*. My own study of the *Bamboo Annals* in turn has shown three points that are important for understanding its annals of Xia: that at least some of the manuscript was damaged or lost when it was taken from the tomb, that the Western Jin editors made some mistakes in their editing of the text, and that they added commentary to the text. Based on this discussion, I conclude that Nivison's hypothesis concerning the chronology of the Xia dynasty remains just that: a hypothesis.

## Keywords

*Bamboo Annals* – chronology – excavated texts – Xia dynasty – Yu the Great

David Shepherd Nivison (1923-2014) was born in Farmingdale, Maine, on January 17, 1923. In 1940, he entered Harvard College, intending to study the classics. However, his studies were interrupted when the United States entered into war against Japan. Nivison joined that effort, learning Japanese while serving in military intelligence throughout the war. After the war concluded in 1945, he returned to Harvard, graduating in 1946 with a degree in East Asian studies, with a focus on Chinese history. In 1948, he began teaching at Stanford University, where he remained for his entire career and the rest of his life. Nivison's early work was on traditional intellectual history, from Zhang Xuecheng 張學誠 (1738-1801) going back to Song dynasty [960-1279] thinkers and then further to Mencius (ca. 372-289 BCE). By the 1970s, his attention had turned to still earlier times, with his first tentative steps to read the oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang dynasty [ca. 1600-1046 BCE].

I first encountered Nivison in 1978, when I entered Stanford as a graduate student studying ancient China. A year later, I was a student in a class taught by Nivison on Western Zhou [1045-771 BCE] bronze inscriptions. Nivison himself subsequently recounted that one Sunday evening while preparing for this class, he came to the realization "that I was staring in disbelief at my major work for the rest of my life." This work, first focused on just the Wei 微-family bronzes that had been discovered just four years earlier at Zhuangbai 莊白, Fufeng 扶風, Shaanxi, but eventually expanded to involve two major discoveries: first, that "the BA [i.e., *Bamboo Annals* (*Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年)] thus was not a fake but a priceless historical source" and, second, that with it he could reconstruct the exact chronology of ancient China back to the beginning of the Xia dynasty [ca. 2100-1600 BCE]. He claimed that, "the seminar the next evening was exciting."<sup>1</sup> The seminar was indeed exciting, and for those who appreciate explorations in ancient history, so too were the last thirty-five years of Nivison's life, during which he pursued these two tasks, as well as many other topics in the historiography and chronology of ancient China.

Nivison became known over these last three and a half decades of his life for his attempt to reconstruct the original text of the *Bamboo Annals* and to use that text to reconstruct the chronology of ancient China. In doing so, he anticipated by some fifteen years the work of the Xia-Shang-Zhou Chronology Project in China. In many ways, his own work was even more ambitious than that of the Chronology Project and in some ways has proven to be of more lasting value. He certainly pursued his research far longer and with greater

1 David S. Nivison, *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals* (Taipei: Airiti Press, 2009), 8.

consequence than did that great state-sponsored project.<sup>2</sup> Nivison's work explored so many different aspects of ancient Chinese history that it would require another project to consider them all. However, it may be possible to consider just his attempts to reconstruct the chronology of that dynasty. Because I was personally implicated in much of that work, especially in some of Nivison's final reflections upon it, I also include some of my own responses to it.

Nivison recounted that he had been drawn to the question of the chronology of the Xia dynasty by early work of David W. Pankenier showing that there had been a conjunction of the five visible planets in February 1953 BCE. Assuming that this marked the beginning of Xia, he noticed that 1953 BCE was seventy-six years later than 2029 BCE, the date given in the *Bamboo Annals* as the beginning of that dynasty. Because in ancient Chinese calendrics seventy-six years was regarded as one *bu* 部, he assumed that an editor of the text had inserted seventy-six years of extra material into the text. He subsequently worked together with Kevin D. Pang, an astronomer at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, and an amateur historian, identifying the famous Zhong Kang 仲康 solar eclipse recorded in the *Book of Documents* [*Shangshu* 尚書] with a solar eclipse that occurred on October 16, 1876 BCE. Beginning with these astronomical observations, Nivison went on to develop an extremely complicated argument for the absolute dates of the entire Xia dynasty. His argument is based on his own reconstruction of the *Bamboo Annals* and, in turn, on three major theses involved in that reconstruction: (1) that the Xia kings were named for the *tiangan* 天干 of the first day of the first year of their reign; (2) that irregular gaps of zero, one, two, three, four, and, once, forty years recorded in the *Bamboo Annals* between the reigns of Xia kings should invariably have been just two years; and (3) that the final Xia king, Jie 桀, is completely mythical.

The fullest exposition of Nivison's attempt to reconstruct the chronology of the Xia dynasty is in his book *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals*. The argument involves astronomy; textual criticism, especially—though not exclusively—of the *Bamboo Annals*; and a considerable amount of historiographical conjecture

2 Nivison's first major publication on these topics was his lengthy article "The Dates of Western Chou," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 43, no. 2 (1983). Twenty-six years later, he published his most detailed study of the *Bamboo Annals*. A Chinese translation of this book was published posthumously: David S. Nivison 倪德衛, *Zhushu jinian jiemí* 竹書紀年解謎 [*Solving the Mysteries of the Bamboo Annals*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015). Subsequently, a collection of unpublished papers was also published posthumously: David S. Nivison, *The Nivison Annals: Selected Works of David S. Nivison on Early Chinese Chronology, Astronomy, and Historiography*, ed. Adam C. Schwartz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

concerning both the period of the Xia dynasty and of the Warring States period [475-221 BCE], during which, Nivison argues, the *Bamboo Annals* was undergoing multiple revisions. Perhaps the fairest way to present his argument is simply to quote his own most succinct account of it, which he published in an article titled “Epilogue to *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals*.”<sup>3</sup> In the following lengthy quotation, I delete only one short passage that strikes me as explanatory but not crucial to the explication and also four footnotes. The years mentioned are all BCE.

How were Xia dates in the BA created, starting with what I assume to be the original dates? I assume that reign-lengths in the BA for Xia are accurate, and that interregnums between reigns were all two years each (for completion of mourning for the preceding king). At some time in Warring States, probably in the Lu 魯 stage of the text when the first year for Yao was being pushed back from 2026 to 2145 (a *bu*-1st-year for the ancient Lu intercalation calendar), and while the first year of Shang was still 1589 (back from 1554, but before the invention of the reign of Di Gui), the Xia chronology was altered so as to make the reigns of the original sixteen kings be exactly four hundred years, beginning with the de jure reign for Yu, 1989.

The de facto beginning of Xia (Shun’s transfer of power to Yu in Shun 14) was moved back one *bu*, seventy-six years, from 1953 (Pankenier’s conjunction year) to 2029, giving Xia the 471 years in the BA summary for Xia. The first forty years (to Shun 50, then mourning for Shun) were counted as de facto years for Yu. Thus the beginning of Yu’s de jure eight-year reign became 1989. (From here on, think of these dates as fixed.)

At the same time, the [mourning periods] for the Class-A sage kings Yao, Shun, and Yu were increased from two years to three years. Since Shun died during Yu’s de facto tenure, this was an increase of two years for Xia. To compensate for this, the two-year mourning-interregnum for the second Xia king Qi was (temporarily) reduced from two years to zero.

The date of the fourth king Zhong Kang’s solar eclipse had been put back one *bu* (seventy-six years, with the set-back for Xia 1). If the correct date of the eclipse—on the first of the Xia ninth month—was 1876, it must have been set back to 1952. But this needed to be a year when on the

3 David S. Nivison, “Epilogue to *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals*,” *Journal of Chinese Studies* 53 (2011). This article was a rejoinder to a lengthy review of *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals* that I had written, as noted in n. 4.

*shuo* 朔 of the ninth month the sun was in Fang 房 (*Zuozhuan* 左傳, Zhao 昭 17.2).<sup>4</sup> The date was tested by subtracting one *ji* 紀 of 1,520 years, to 432, which failed the test. The first date that did pass the Fang test after 432 was 428, and the *shuo* of the Xia ninth month was day *gengxu* 庚戌. (There was an intercalary eighth month in this year; so Zhang Peiyu's twelfth month is the Xia ninth month.) So the date selected was 428 + 1520, = 1948, the day being *gengxu*, as in the *Annals*.... This four-year move down required inserting four years at an earlier point in the BA Xia chronicle. The "zero" interregnum after Qi's reign was used for this, giving the second king Qi an interregnum of four years—the only four-year interregnum in the BA Xia chronicle. (This calculation matches Kevin Pang's eclipse date, 16 October 1876.) The net ongoing set-back is now 76 minus four years = 72 years.

The forty-year Han Zhuo 寒浞 interregnum after Xiang 相 was invented, replacing a two-year interregnum. This filled in thirty-eight years of the remaining seventy-two-year set-back, cutting it to thirty-four years.

This made the period from the beginning of Yu's de jure reign through the end of mourning for the eighth king Fen 芬 be 202 years. So, Fen's mourning-completion-interregnum of two years was eliminated, increasing the set-back to thirty-six. Thus the first eight Xia kings were allotted two hundred years, so the last eight were allotted two hundred-years, making 1789 year 1 for the ninth king Mang 芒, and 1589 the first year of Shang.

A two-year interregnum was inserted after the reign of eleventh king Bu Jiang 不降, forgetting that he had retired. This moves the set-back down again to thirty-four.

Counting back from 1589, it was found that the last eight kings (Mang through Fa) had 201 years, including interregnums; so the interregnum after the ninth king Mang was reduced from two years to one year. This moves the set-back up to thirty-five.

It was then noticed that there ought *not* to have been a two-year interregnum after Bu Jiang; so this was eliminated, and the kings before and after (Xie 泄 and Jiong 扃) had their mourning-completions (i.e.,

4 Shisanjing zhushu zhengli weiyuanhui 十三經注疏整理委員會, ed., *Chunqiu zuozhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義 [Proper Annotation on the Zuo Commentary], vol. 19 of *Shisanjing zhushu zhengliben* 十三經注疏整理本 [Redacted Edition of Commentary and Annotation on the Thirteen Classics] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), 1563.

interregnums) increased from two years to three years, so as to keep the year-count the same as before.<sup>5</sup>

This “Epilogue to *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals*” was provoked by a review I had written of that book and published in the same journal in which the “Epilogue” was published.<sup>6</sup> I began that review by evaluating his well-known thesis that Western Zhou kings routinely used two separate regnal calendars, one beginning the year immediately after the death of the preceding king (when the new king was “installed” [*li* 立]) and one to two years after this, when the king “assumed place” (*jiwei* 即位), perhaps having completed the required three years of mourning. I concluded that this thesis may well be the key to unlocking the riddle of Western Zhou chronology. However, I also went on to criticize Nivison for extending this thesis from the Western Zhou a thousand years back in time to the Xia dynasty, which was many centuries before the advent of written records.

Unfortunately, in the case of the book presently under review, Nivison has taken a good idea and, in my opinion, tried to make it bear far more weight than it can. He believes that the origin of this calendrical practice extends back a thousand years before the Western Zhou to the very beginning of the Xia dynasty. Of course, there is no contemporaneous written evidence of this dynasty, and so the only evidence that Nivison has to support this assertion is the much-maligned *Bamboo Annals*. Given the evidence that he produces to show that portions of the *Bamboo Annals* are historically accurate, this might be persuasive—if the evidence were in fact in the *Bamboo Annals*. Only some of the reigns mention an interregnum at the beginning of the reign, sometimes of one, sometimes of two, and sometimes of three years—as Nivison notes, “about a third of them 2 years”. From this, he asserts that, “it is reasonable to suppose that all of them ought to be just two years.” Why is this “reasonable”? Indeed, it seems more reasonable to me that an earlier irregular practice might have become regularized, but only over time. In any event, the evidence, such as it is (the text of the *Bamboo Annals* as we have it), does not, it seems to me, support Nivison’s hypothesis. Nivison argues that there is other evidence to support it—that these regular two-year interregnums are required by the chronology that he has reconstructed

5 Nivison, “Epilogue to *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals*,” 17-18.

6 Edward L. Shaughnessy, “Of Riddles and Recoveries: *The Bamboo Annals*, Ancient Chronology, and the Work of David Nivison,” *Journal of Chinese Studies* 52 (2011).

for the dynasty. One might find this reasoning circular, even if it did not require Nivison to argue that the final king of the Xia, the infamous Di Gui 帝癸 or Jie, “is a fiction. There was no such king.” The *Bamboo Annals*, again as we have it, includes annals for thirty-one years of this king, but Nivison states that his reconstruction of the text shows these to be a later insertion into the original text (apparently inserted at the court of King Xiang'ai of Wei about 300 BCE).<sup>7</sup>

Below I will say more about the *Bamboo Annals* in general. Here, I will simply address further the following two points regarding the interreign gaps in the text concerning the Xia kings and the annals for the last Xia king, Jie. From Qi 啟, the son of Yu the Great 大禹, through Jie, the *Bamboo Annals* includes sixteen Xia kings. The text does not state explicitly that there were gaps between the various reigns. However, by correlating *ganzhi* 干支 designations inserted in the text for the first year of each king and the reign year recorded for the death of the king, it is possible to calculate the following gaps between these reigns: 4, 2, 2, 40, 2, 2, 0, 1, 3, 0, 3, 2, 2, 2, and 0. Thus, seven of the fifteen transfers of kingship show a gap of two years, more than the “third” claimed by Nivison. Nevertheless, eight transfers involved either no gap at all (three cases) or one, three, four, or even forty years. I still see no reason for all these other transfers to have a gap of exactly two years; without any textual support for it, this strikes me as an arbitrary editorial decision by Nivison. As for the suggestion that Jie “is a fiction. There was no such king,” this still strikes me as an even more arbitrary intervention by Nivison. I am prepared to believe that much of what little we know of Jie is the stuff of legend. But the annals for Jie in the *Bamboo Annals* are in no qualitative way different from either the other annals in that work or other mentions of Jie in other Warring States works. What basis is there for deleting the thirty-one years of his reign, other than that this is required to fit Nivison’s chronology for Xia?

Nivison was clearly stung by this review. He concluded the portion of his “Epilogue to *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals*” by detailing his direct response to my review with the following passage.

So he says, “How is it that Nivison has been able to do so much, and yet still be so wrong?” (Review, p. 289). With this he grants himself the status of historical sage: he is “quite sure” of this, “quite sure” of that,<sup>8</sup> does “not

<sup>7</sup> Shaughnessy, “Of Riddles and Recoveries,” 274.

<sup>8</sup> Nivison has added a footnote here (n. 26) that reads: “Shaughnessy insists that I am too sure of myself. I am too amused by this to be annoyed.”

believe” this, does “not believe” that, condemning my entire pre-Zhou chronology (with no criticism of a single detail of it), his only argument being that it must be wrong because I worked it out “[as] part of a complete system based on [my] reconstruction of the *Bamboo Annals*.”<sup>9</sup>

This criticism addresses one paragraph on the next-to-last page of my review. I stand by it and am reasonably sure, if not “quite sure,” that with it I do not grant myself the status of a historical sage.

Despite all of these contributions, I have been quite critical—one might even say harshly critical—of *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals* throughout this review. How is it that Nivison has been able to do so much, and yet still be so wrong? I think the answer is simply that he has tried to do too much. He has managed to convince himself that the text he has reconstructed for us is perfect (recall the words of his Introduction: “Now I know exactly what the first five-sevenths of the original looked like, 303 strips, word after word” [p. 11]). I myself have worked with the text of the *Bamboo Annals* almost as much as has Nivison, but I am as unsure of what the text looked like as he is sure. On the other hand, I am sure, or at least pretty sure, of some things, things that I think are pretty important. For instance, I don’t know whether most of the commentarial material that Nivison includes as an integral part of the text was found in the tomb or not, and if it was, whether or not it was written together with the annals (in whatever format); the narrative portions may have been, but I’m quite sure that the explanatory commentary was added by the Western Jin editors. I don’t know how much of the manuscript was damaged or lost, but I’m quite sure that at least some of it—including some of the five-sevenths that Nivison reconstructs—must have been. Finally, I’m also quite sure that the Western Jin editors made at least some mistakes in their editing; some of these mistakes were errors of omission, but others were errors of commission—designed to make the unearthed manuscript conform to their own understanding of early Chinese history. Given my own various uncertainties about the *Bamboo Annals* and how it has come to us, I simply don’t believe that any reconstruction of any more than relatively brief, discrete passages of the text is possible, and I certainly don’t believe that Nivison’s reconstruction is tenable.<sup>10</sup>

9 Nivison, “Epilogue to *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals*,” 15.

10 Shaughnessy, “Of Riddles and Reconstructions,” 289.



The only claim to authority that I make here is that, like Nivison, I too have devoted considerable research to the *Bamboo Annals*,<sup>11</sup> on the basis of which I claimed certainty about three points concerning the text:

- “that the explanatory commentary”—such as “Mang is otherwise called Di Huang” (*Mang huoyue Di Huang* 芒或曰帝荒) for King Mang—“was added by the Western Jin editors”
- “that at least some of the manuscript was damaged or lost” when it was taken from the tomb, for which there is explicit testimony in the contemporary reports of the tomb’s discovery
- “that the Western Jin editors made at least some mistakes in their editing,” which can be demonstrated by the competing versions of the text quoted in various medieval sources.

Despite being chastised for doing so, I am still willing to claim that I am “quite sure” that these three points are true. As for my disbelief “that any reconstruction of any more than relatively brief, discrete passages of the text is possible,” I would be delighted to be proved wrong, but I suspect that it is more likely that another manuscript of the *Bamboo Annals* will be unearthed than it is that a convincing reconstruction of the *Bamboo Annals* that was robbed from the tomb Jizhong 汲冢 in 279 CE will be reconstructed on its own.

According to Nivison, the disagreement between us concerning the *Bamboo Annals*, particularly the chronology of ancient China, including especially the chronology of the Xia dynasty, derived more from philosophical differences between us than from textual research. In his posthumously published *The Nivison Annals: Selected Works of David S. Nivison on Early Chinese Chronology, Astronomy, and Historiography*, he included a chapter titled “The Nivison-Shaughnessy Debate on the *Bamboo Annals*,” at the beginning of which he states:

11 One of my first published studies was “On the Authenticity of the *Bamboo Annals*,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 46, no. 1 (June 1986); this was published in Chinese as “Ye tan Zhou Wuwang de zunian: jianlun Jinben zhushu jinian de zhenwei 也談周武王的卒年—兼論今本竹書紀年的真偽 [Discussion on King Wu of Zhou’s Death Year and a Secondary Discussion of the Authenticity of the Modern Version of the *Bamboo Annals*],” *Wenshi* 文史, no. 29 (1988). A more comprehensive study was “*Zhushu jinian de zhengli he zhengliben* 竹書紀年的整理和整理本 [Collation and Collated Works of *Bamboo Annals*],” in *Chutu wenxian yanjiu fangfa lunwenji* 出土文獻研究方法論文集 [Collected Papers on the Research Method of Excavated Literature], ed. Cai Guoliang 蔡國良, Zheng Jixiong 鄭吉雄, and Xu Fuchang 徐富昌 (Taipei: Taiwan daxue chuban zhongxin, 2005), which was also included as a chapter in my *Rewriting Early Chinese Texts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 185-256.

The conflict between us is actually quite interesting on a philosophical level. Ed (perhaps without realizing it) has a visceral commitment to a one-problem-at-a-time Baconian historical method, and has no patience with anything else. I am guided by “inference to the best explanation” of total evidence, by Collingwood’s concept of “rethinking,” and Popper’s strategy of discovery by trying to refute far-reaching theories. Ed can’t stand it, and can only see me as “getting ahead of my sources.”<sup>12</sup>

In his “Epilogue to *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals*,” Nivison had already called attention to his methodology of “inference to the best explanation.”

In my book (pp. 3-5) I replied that in the arguments to which he objected I was fitting together logically various items having low initial probability, and that it was the *coherence* of the whole structure (and the virtual impossibility of that coherence being accidental) that had proof value, provided that some elements were tied down empirically. But let me now focus attention directly on Shaughnessy’s review. He objects that irregular breaks between Xia reigns seem more reasonable to him than the regular two-year breaks that I propose. His intuitions are relevant only in revealing that he doesn’t see what is going on: my argument structure is *hypothesis* followed by *confirmation*, and the two-year interregnums are part of my *hypothesis*.

Where, then, is the circularity that Shaughnessy saw as invalidating my work, two “unknowns” proving each other, the editorial process and the claimed true dates? I do *conclude* that I have proved them; but I begin by offering them as *hypothesis*. Each *must* assume the other; otherwise my hypothesis would be inconsistent, and therefore false before I had gone any farther. Shaughnessy has simply confused the *consistency* required in my hypothesis with a supposed *circularity* invalidating my whole argument.<sup>13</sup>

Returning to the question of the irregular gaps between the reigns of the various Xia kings, my objection to Nivison’s proposal to emend them all to two-year gaps is not fundamentally about what is “more reasonable”; my objection is that the text of the *Bamboo Annals* that has come down to us has irregular gaps. If reading the text as it stands is “Baconian historical method,” then I am happy to stand together with that bona fide sage. I know something about hypotheses,

12 Nivison, *The Nivison Annals*, 614-15.

13 Nivison, “Epilogue to *The Riddle of the Bamboo Annals*,” 14-15.

but it seems to me that confirmation requires either new evidence not previously used in the construction of the hypothesis against which to test the hypothesis itself or, in the absence of such new evidence, reproduction of the same results by some neutral third party. As far as I know, no new evidence has yet been found against which we can test Nivison's hypothesis. And also as far as I know, no third party has come forward to replicate his results. Thus, Nivison's hypothesis concerning the chronology of the Xia dynasty—among other hypotheses—remains just that: a hypothesis. No matter how coherent it may be, that coherence does not rise to the level of confirmation.

To conclude this contribution to the *Journal of Chinese Humanities* special issue on the Xia dynasty, let me quote the last paragraph in Nivison's article "The Nivison-Shaughnessy Debate on the *Bamboo Annals*":

Ed needs to count his costs. And he won't, because the cost of counting costs is to accept the principle that everything that could be relevant must be at least consistently explainable if not actually explained, and he won't do that, nor will he suffer anyone else trying it. Is this why he bridles at my offering him a brief note providing evidence for dating reigns in early Xia? And at my publishing a book daring to work out the changes in the chronology of Xia and Shang? These are things he just knows can't be done. So he asks, "How can Nivison be so wrong?"<sup>14</sup>

If I "bridle" at "a brief note providing evidence for dating reigns in early Xia," it is in part because I do not think that the evidence currently available supports that chronology or, indeed, any chronology of the Xia dynasty. It may well be that new evidence uncovered in the future will provide the key to unlock that riddle, and I very much look forward to that day—sorry only that David Nivison, who passed away in 2014, will not be able to contribute his very great passion to the effort.

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<sup>14</sup> Nivison, *The Nivison Annals*, 654.

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