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Literary Change in Mesopotamia *and* Beyond and Routes and Travellers between East and West. Proceedings of the 2nd and 3rd Melammu Workshops

Edited by Rocío Da Riva, Martin Lang and Sebastian Fink

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Assyrians and Babylonians in Classical Sources

Sebastian Fink / Kerstin Droß-Krüpe

Introduction[1]

Reflections of Assyrian and Babylonian history in classical sources have been treated extensively in recent research projects. Especially those on the depiction and reception of Babylon in classical antiquity up to modern ages have been flourishing during the last years.[2] The general consensus is that the image of Babylon in classical sources was a very powerful one, that Babylon tends to show up in contexts where one would not necessarily expect it, and that the image of Babylon was rather based on imagination than on actual historical facts. The latter becomes particularly important the bigger the time lag between the Assyrian-Babylonian rule and the respective ancient author is. All these observations apply likewise to the characters of both, Semiramis and Sardanapalus, who certainly are among the two most impressive, and most prominent rulers of the Ancient Near East in classical (and modern) literature.[3]

Concerning the numerous contact zones between the Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East in classical times we could ask with André Heller:[4] Why did the Greeks know so little about actual Assyrian and Babylonian History? He concluded that "the history of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empire is almost non-existent in the Histories of Herodotus"[5], a fact that is rather surprising, as we are well informed about manifold and fairly close contacts between the Greek world and the Near East from at least the fifth century onwards.[6] Heller argues that Herodotus did not treat the history of Mesopotamia in more detail as this would have led too far from his 'leitmotif', the causes and reasons of the Greco-Persian wars. Our second major Greek source of information of that time, Ctesias, in turn uses the Assyrian Empire as an earlier reflection of the Persian Empire and adds nothing substantial to our knowledge regarding historical facts.[7] Consequently, we are aiming at approaching this topic from a different angle and modify Heller's question: Why did the Greek historians write about Assyria and

[1] We owe thanks to Markus Diedrich (Marburg) for revising the English of this paper. All remaining mistakes are obviously our own.

[2] One may only think of the recent books by Michael Seymour, Kevin McGeough, Mario Liverani and Andrew Scheil: Seymour, 2014; McGeough, 2015; Liverani, 2016; Scheil, 2016.

[3] Cf. Simonis, 2013.

[4] Heller, 2015.

[5] Heller, 2015: 340.

[6] Heller, 2015: 332–334.

[7] See Heller, 2015: 340–341 with further literature.

Babylonia at all? To answer this question, we need to delve into the notorious question of the setting and the context of these texts in classical Historiography.[8] Therefore we will use the example of *Enūma Eliš* to demonstrate that reliable and instructive sources regarding the Ancient Near East were at least partially available to classical authors, who obviously decided not to bestow too much consideration upon them.[9]

The direct evidence for travellers and merchants on route between the Greek world and the Assyria or Babylonia one is rather meager for the sixth and fifth century and the tradition of travelling philosophers and historians is often doubted.[10] Therefore, one needs to focus on indirect evidence in order to enhance our knowledge about the kind information, the ways of life and the history of the Ancient Near East may have been accessible for the Greeks. This indirect evidence includes e.g. the evidence of 'oriental' goods in the west[11] and vice versa. However, we need sophisticated methods deriving from natural sciences to unequivocally detect where these goods originate. Moreover, even if we knew their exact place of origin, we may not automatically assume that this place of origin is identical with the place of origin of the person who brought the respective object to the place where it was found.[12] As a consequence, these foreign goods do tell us something about contacts between the Eastern and Western world but they do not provide a lot of information when we try to understand the nature of these contacts. Hence, we will rather focus on written evidence or more specifically Greek sources dealing with 'oriental' cities and rulers.[13] The main issues addressed are: are the stories the classical authors presented to their audience about

[8] Besides the abovementioned article of Heller, 2015, see also Tuplin, 2013 for an overview.

[9] Bachvarova, 2016 undertakes to analyze the agents of the transfer of "oriental motifs" to Greece with a special focus on Homer and Hesiod. However, the character of these agents is mainly deduced from similarities in the sources, as also no concrete information about historical individuals is available for that period.

[10] See Pòrtulas in this volume.

[11] The evidence is collected and analysed by Braun-Holzinger and Rehm, 2005.

[12] Cf. Droß-Krüpe, 2014: viii–ix.

[13] In late antiquity, especially the Chaldeans were in the focus of the scholarly interest, and they are often called the Babylonian philosophers – for example by Diogenes Laertius – but unfortunately the term Chaldeans is vague. Not only that the Mesopotamian Chaldeans are sometimes mixed up with the northern Chaldoi (they lived in the area of the Lake Van) but "Chaldean" also becomes a rather general term for "sorcerer / astrologer" at some point. So not every Chaldean has to be from Mesopotamia, as the term loses its ethnical character. Therefore, we will stick to the Babylonians and Assyrians as a treatment of the Chaldeans would take much space and would most probably result in the Socratic wisdom that we at least know that we know nothing. (This task was taken up by Johannes Haubold, 2013 and in his talk during the Melammu Session at the Deutscher Orientalistentag [DOT] in Jena, 2017: "Die Weisheit der Chaldäer: Variation über ein Thema").

'oriental' cities and their rulers fabrications and pure phantasy, or are they – at least partly – reliable? What kind of material was available to these ancient authors? And finally: Do we have Ancient Near Eastern evidence that either confirms or falsifies the information given by Greek authors?

This article consists of two parts. The first part is a case study of the transmission of *Enūma Eliš* into classical literature and the second part presents case studies of the outlines of Assyrian and Babylonian history in Herodotus, Ctesias, Berossus and Orosius. The treatment of Herodotus and Ctesias needs no explanation; Berossus is discussed here because he is generally seen as the only surviving Babylonian Historian writing in Greek. There would have been many later authors whose writings would have been interesting for our analysis, but as space and time is restricted, the decision went in favour of a particularly influential example, namely Orosius and his *Historia adversus paganos*, a history of mankind written from a Christian point of view.

The *Enūma Eliš* in Berossus and Damasius

We will start with the strange example of *Enūma Eliš*, a comprehensive Babylonian creation myth.[14] Two authors from classical antiquity treated this text in greater detail: the first author is Berossus,[15] who is often supposed to be a Babylonian priest,[16] who lived in Babylon and was born in the late 4th century BC and died in the 3rd century BC.[17] Unfortunately, as it is often the case with interesting authors, Berossus' *Babyloniaca* is lost and was handed down only fragmentarily by third parties.[18] The second, and much later, author is Damascius, the last head of the Platonic academy, who was born in 458 AD in Damascus and died at some point after 538.[19]

At first sight things seem to be clear: During Berossus' life time the Babylonian cuneiform archives still were available in the temples and an educated elite was still able to read and write cuneiform, a fact that can clearly be demonstrated by the many clay tablets with colophons from this late period. Even Sumerian

[14] The latest edition is provided by Lambert, 2013.

[15] On various aspects of the life and work of Berossus see the contributions in Haubold *et al.*, 2013.

[16] It is generally assumed that Berossus was a Babylonian priest and scholar. However, we decided not to take this information for granted for the following discussion. See the discussion in de Breucker, 2013 and van der Spek, 2008.

[17] "Berossus, a Babylonian, priest of their Belos, who was born in the time of Alexander, composed the history of the Chaldeans in three books for Antiochos, the third successor after him." (BNJ 680 T 2).

[18] The situation is perfectly described by Beaulieu, 2006, 116: "The *Babyloniaca* enyojed limited circulation in Antiquity. Most writers who quoted Berossus did so not from the original, but from such excerpts as they could glean form the works of other authors. As a result, the *Babyloniaca* are known largely from third and fourth hands quotations."

[19] For Damascius' life see Hartmann, 2002 with further references.

texts were still copied in the first century BC and we even have a cuneiform text that can be dated in the second half of the 1st century AD.[20] In contrast to that, Damascius lived almost one thousand years after Berossus and therefore we would assume that his summary of *Enūma Eliš* is less reliable. Concerning the story pattern in Berossus already Talon stated that "[t]he fragments which come down to us are relatively different from the account of *Enūma Eliš*, at least in the beginning."[21] As *Enūma Eliš* was most probably still copied long after Berossus' death in Babylonia,[22] we might thus consider the fact that Berossus used another version of *Enūma Eliš*, a version that is lost to us.

But let us look at things in greater detail: The extant fragments of Berossus (BNJ 680 F 1a/b) do not discuss the genealogy of the Babylonian gods, which is essential for the theological implications of the story, and consequently extensively dealt with in the cuneiform versions of *Enūma Eliš*. We are only presented with the name Omorka, which actually should be Tiāmat according to the cuneiform record, and, to make things even more complicated, Berossus explains her name as Thalatth.[23] Also the rest of the account has not much in common with the cuneiform text. Apsû, the spouse of Tiāmat is completely missing, and no information is given concerning the origins of Belos (Marduk) and his relation to the other gods. Also Lambert recognizes the numerous differences between Berossus' account and the cuneiform text. In the case of the monsters he argues that they "do not fit any known list of monsters, and since Berossus states that images of them existed in Marduk's shrine, he probably depended on these images rather than on a written source."[24] Unfortunately these depictions are not available to us, so we cannot decide if they have indeed been misinterpreted, as Lambert suggests, or if they have simply been made up by Berossus or one of his later copyists. The Greek version of the text – also an existing Armenian text with more or less the same content – reads as follows:

> "There was a time, he says, when everything was [darkness and] water and that in it fabulous beings with peculiar forms came into life. For men with two wings were born and some with four wings and two faces, having one body and two heads, male and female, and double genitalia, male and female. Other men were born, some having legs and the horns of goats, other with the feet of horses. Yet others had the hind parts of horses, but the foreparts of men and were hippocentaurs in form. Bulls were also engendered having the heads of men as well as our-bodied dogs having the tails

[20] See Geller, 1997 for a discussion of the end of cuneiform writing.
[21] Talon, 2001: 270.
[22] The dating of the extant manuscripts is not always easy to determine but Lambert, 2013: 4 states: "Some of these Late Babylonian collections are extremely late, Seleucid or Parthian, to judge from script, textual corruption and other factors."
[23] On these names, see Talon, 2001: 271.
[24] Lambert, 2013: 231.

> of a fish from their behind parts, dog-headed horses and men and other beings having head and bodies of horses, but tails of fish and still other beings having forms of all sorts of wild animals. In addition to these there were fish and reptiles and snakes and many other marvellous creatures differing in appearance from one another. Images of these were also set up in the temple of Belos. Over all these a woman ruled named Omorka. This means in Chaldean Thalatth, in Greek this is translated as 'Sea' (Thalassa) (BNJ 680 F 1a) […]. When everything was arranged in this way, Belos rose up and split the woman in two. Of one half of her he made earth, of the other half sky; and he destroyed all creatures in her." (BNJ 680 F 1b, 6–7)

Undoubtedly, stories do change over time as can be easily demonstrated by the evolution of the Gilgameš Epic,[25] but we also know that texts belonging to a cultic context tend to be more stable than others because they were regularly performed.[26] This was also the case for *Enūma Eliš*, which "was read complete to the statue of Marduk by a priest on the fourth day of Nisan".[27] As outlined above, the fact that Berossus' *Babyolonica* are not preserved as a whole but only compiled by later Greek epitomes, complicates the situation further, as the authors of these summaries may simply have left out information that appeared less interesting or irrelevant to them. If one would still opt for the suggestion stated above, that Berossus used an alternative version of *Enūma Eliš* , then we would have to conclude that he, supposedly a priest from the main sanctuary of Mesopotamia's most important city at that time, used a non-standard versions of a text that was of utmost importance for the New-Years-Festival. Additionally, names usually do not just consist of meaningless sounds. In the Mesopotamian tradition, they all are supposed to have a meaning, so one would expect all the names given by Berossus to have a certain meaning.

As folktale research has abundantly demonstrated, story patterns easily travel around the world. This means that a wide distribution of a certain story pattern is in itself nothing extraordinary.[28] A genealogy of foreign gods however, is something that ought to rely on more accurate sources than traveling storytellers, who usually adapted their stories, to better suit the changing contexts in which they were retold. This means that foreign names were usually substituted with more familiar ones, unfitting scenes were replaced or omitted and often the whole story was transferred to a setting more familiar to the new audience.[29] Anyway, gene-

[25] See the chapters about the forerunners of the so-called 'standard version' in George 2003 and the classical study of Tigay, 1982.

[26] See Frahm, 2011: 362–363 for a discussion of *Enuma Eliš* in the times of Berossus.

[27] Lambert, 2013: 459.

[28] See for example the study of Henkelmann, 2006.

[29] One may want to consult Alberto Bernabé's work on the Hittite background of Hesiod, who has stressed the adaption of a text to its new setting. Bernabé, 2004. See now also

alogies of gods or rulers usually are not treated this way, which makes these name lists a very welcome test case for us, as they hint at "travelling written sources". If we are not too critical for now, they may even hint at persons who themselves actually travelled between East in West (or at least wanted their book to travel) and thereby were active as transmitters of these details and stories in a rather exact way.

However, how about Damascius, our second and much later Greek source reflecting *Enūma Eliš*? Different from Berossus, Damascius does present a genealogy of the Babylonian gods. The following illustration a comparison of the family trees as presented in *Enūma Eliš* and Damascius:

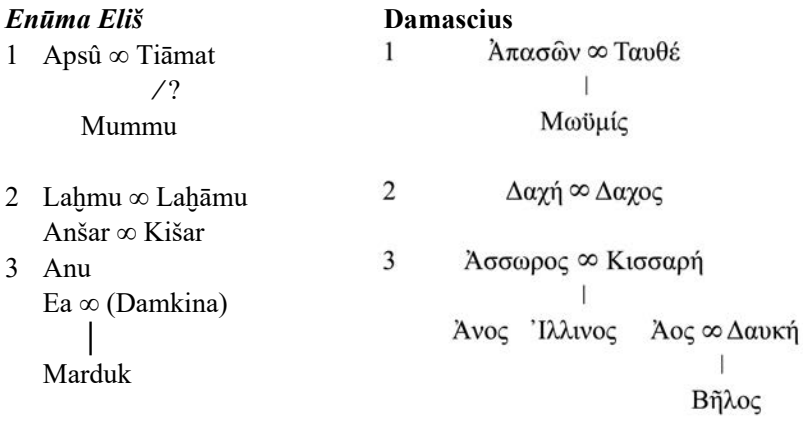

Fig. 1: The genealogy of the Babylonian goods according to *Enūma Eliš* and Damascius (based on Talon with own adaptions)

It is evident how well almost all the names of the gods Damascius mentions connect with the ones in the cuneiform text. Lambert even observed that Damascius explains things, which are not explicitly mentioned in the cuneiform text, such as the creation of Mummu by Tiāmat and Apsû. For him it is most striking that Damascius' account sticks to the rather unusual mother-father sequence of the cuneiform text.[30] This observation, combined with the date of origin of the Greek source material discussed earlier, raises the question of how Damascius was able to give an obviously more accurate account of the cosmological scheme of Babylon than Berossus one thousand years earlier.[31]

In theory, two possibilities ought to be considered: First that Damascius had access to the story in the original cuneiform text or in an Aramaic version of it.[32]

Bachvarova, 2016.

[30] Lambert, 2013: 422–423.

[31] Again, we have to remind ourselves that our understanding of Berossus is hampered by the transmission process.

[32] Frahm, 2011: 364 considers the option that Damascius knowledge might be based on

Damascius came from the East, he was born in Damascus, and after the academy had been closed, he and some of his fellow-philosophers from the academy, went to the court of Khosrau I of Persia.[33] So, at least theoretically, Damascius might have had access to the royal libraries of Sasanians – unfortunately we have no clear idea what they contained and also the remaining writings of Damascius do not give us any details concerning this question. Considering the time lag between the usually assumed end of cuneiform writing in the first century AD and the life of Damascius it would be rather surprising if he (or one of his contemporary middlemen) still had been able to read cuneiform. Consequently, an Aramaic (or Syriac) version of the Enūma Elis would be the more probable option. The second option is that the source used by Damascius is a Greek one: Eudemus of Rhodes, who was either a contemporary of or slightly older than Berossus, could have been the source of this passage. But as Talon already stated, this attribution is not absolutely certain,[34] as Damascius does not explicitly say that his information comes from Eudemus. In his short chapter on the Babylonian Gods, Damascius does not mention any source and only in the following chapters, which treat Persian, Sidonian and Egyptian theology, does he mentions Eudemus along with other sources.[35]

If we – despite these uncertainties – assume that Damascius source really was Eudemus it leads to the question why someone from the school of Aristotle, most probably writing in Athens, had better sources available on Babylonian mythology than a contemporary Babylonian priest, namely Berossus. An answer to this question is quite difficult, if not impossible and forces us to question the common picture of Berossus as a Babylonian priest. Nevertheless, we might assume that at least during the lifetime of Eudemus (maybe fostered by the military campaigns in the east of Alexander III of Macedonia) reliable knowledge on Mesopotamian mythology already was or became available to Greek authors. This in turn means that this information must have been available in Greek, both, to reach a broader audience and, as there is little evidence for a broad knowledge of foreign languages among the Greek elites.[36] Obviously, some people were able to collect and translate cuneiform texts into Greek language – unfortunately, we can only speculate about these agents of this cultural transfer. In addition, with due care, we may assume the same for other Mesopotamian material. However – and here things get confusing – who else should have translated Mesopotamian accounts

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something that he had read or heard in Syrian centers of learning. No Aramean version of the text is known, but it seems quite probable that one existed, as Aramean was the vernacular language of a large part of the Babylonian population at least since Persian times.

[33] For this episode, see Hartmann, 2002.

[34] Talon, 2001: 273.

[35] For a translation of the text, see Damascius, *Problems & Solutions Concerning First Principles*. Translated by Sara Ahbel-Rappe, Oxford 2010, 418.

[36] See Werner, 1992.

of creation into Greek than a Mesopotamian scholar or priest? This supposed translator-priest, being slightly older than Berossus, was able to give a completely accurate account of *Enūma Eliš*. As unfortunately Eudemus' work on the Babylonian cosmology is lost, Damascius is the only source providing us with some information about this part of Eudemus's work. It might well be that Eudemus' work, like so many of the highly scholarly works connected to the school of Aristotle, was rather unpopular in later times and was consequently consulted only by very few scholars.

Vitruvius informs us that Berossus was a travelling philosopher who moved to the island of Kos, where he founded a school, mainly occupied with casting horoscopes.[37] This information is mostly regarded as unreliable as Vitruvius is the only extant source, which tells us so. If we are willing to believe that Vitruvius found this information in some sources available to him and lost today, we could imagine that this Berossus, who knows if he is identical with the author of the of the *Babyloniaca*, as a charlatan who just pretended to be one of the famous Babylonian astronomers and used some half-knowledge he picked up somewhere about the Orient in order to make his claim more credible. To drive that line of argumentation even further, we could argue that it might have been sufficient for him to read what was available in Greek literature at his time. Obviously, the source situation makes it almost impossible to give a final judgement on the nature and quality of Berossus' original work.[38]

What we may conclude from the rather complex discussion above with its many assumptions is that the literary dependencies of the above mentioned authors are really hard to determine, especially if we consider the fact that an enormous part of literature circulating in Hellenistic times is simply lost. Even if we encounter such a straightforward evidence for a dependency on a cuneiform text like in the case of Damascius, we cannot be sure how the information was transmitted from Mesopotamia to Damascius. Therefore, the result of the first part of this investigation is a mostly negative one. We can find no clear evidence for travellers as cultural transmitters in these texts. Rather – not unlike in the case of Mesopotamian archaeological evidence – we find evidence for the knowledge of Mesopotamian text in Greek texts and are at loss to explain with certainty how this knowledge got there.

Despite the fact that *Enūma Eliš* was one of the most important Mesopotamian texts in the first millennium, it is mentioned only twice in the extant Greek texts: in Berossus and in Damascius. Berossus seems to touch this text only in passing, again, if we are not mislead by the fragmentary evidence, while he evolves his

[37] *De architectura* 9, 6, 2.

[38] Cf. Haubold, 2013: 5: "The present collection as a whole suggests that the issue of authenticity in the *Babyloniaca* is far less straightforward than has often been assumed, and that the question of what is authentically Babylonian in Berossos is intimately bound with his attempt to engage a political dominant Greek readership."

own account of how civilization came into being and Damascius describes it in a few lines in his encyclopedic approach to the question of the first principle.

In a next step, we will turn to the above mentioned classical authors who present us with some information about Assyria and Babylonia, in particular information on the most prominent rulers of Mesopotamia, Semiramis and Sardanapalus.

Assyria and Babylonia in Classical Historiography

Assyria and Babylonia are 'concepts' that are not kept strictly apart by basically all classical authors, but there is a rather general agreement among them – and here some actual knowledge about historical facts might have been available – that the oldest empire was Assyria.[39] In contrast to that, Plato and Herodotus consider Egypt to be the oldest culture on earth.[40] According to the vast majority of Greek authors history seems to begin when kings try to expand their ancestral dominion and 'interstate-conflicts' arise.

It seems that the particular charm to write about Assyria or Babylonia lay in the fact that these empires did not exist anymore during the lifetime of the Greek authors. Despite their immense power and wealth, they decayed and crumbled.[41] Thus, they were often used to demonstrate how empires grow and fall. Not unlike in the recent discussion on empires also the ancient historians were tempted to extract general rules from their historical case studies. Therefore it is quite clear that the occupation with past empires already in antiquity also was an attempt to analyze and understand contemporary empires or empire-like structures and the laws of their rise and fall.[42]

Herodotus is the first Greek author available to us who extensively wrote about the Assyrian Empire. Although we do not have his Assyrian logos, which is either lost or was never written, his Histories contain quite a lot information on Assyria.[43] One has to keep in mind that for Herodotus the causes for the rise and fall of empires are quite obvious: manly, warlike behavior is necessary to make a

[39] In world history begins with Ninus, king of the Assyrians (BNJ 618 F 1b). See Rollinger, 2011: 325. Orosius sees Ninus as a contemporary of Abraham (1, 1, 5: *sunt autem ab Adam primo homine usque ad Ninum 'magnum' ut dicunt regem, quando natus est Abraham, anni III:CLXXXIIII, qui ab omnibus historiographis uel omissi uel ignorati sunt.*) and states that most Greek and Latin authors see Ninus as the one who started history, namely the series of conquests that we call history (1, 1, 1: *Et quoniam omnes propemodum tam apud Graecos quam apud Latinos studiosi ad scribendum uiri, qui res gestas regum populorumque ob diuturnam memoriam uerbis propagauerunt, initium scribendi a Nino Beli filio, rege Assyriorum, fecere*). See Rollinger, 2011: 312 for a detailed analysis and further references.

[40] See Hdt. 2, 142 and Plato *Nomoi* 2, 656–657.

[41] On the riches of Assyria and Babylonia see Bichler, 2007, Ruffing, 2011 and 2016.

[42] See Bichler, 2004 and 2008.

[43] For a short overview, see Rollinger, 2011: 333 with further literature.

country strong and great, whereas exaggerated luxury, decadence as well as imperial/royal hubris lead the path to disaster and demise.[44] This determines his perspective on all Empires, also on the Assyrian one.

In 1, 178, 1 Herodotus states that Assyria has many huge cities, of which Babylon is the most famous and most important after the destruction of Ninus.[45] Herodotus also mentions king Sanacharibus and his campaign against Egypt and then recounts the story of the fall of Ninus.[46] It is likewise in Herodotus that king Sardanapalus appears for the first time in a Greek source, though he is mainly mentioned because of his enormous treasures and not dealt with in detail.[47] According to Herodotus he is the son of Ninus, the founder of the royal dynasty after whom the city of Ninus (Nineveh) is named. Finally, Ninus falls and Assyria is defeated by the Medes, with the exception of the Babylonian part.[48] Again, it is demonstrated that Herodotus regards Babylonia and Assyria not as two different empires but as a unity.

The royal names of Assyrian kings and queens we encounter in Herodotus reoccur in the other Greek sources. Chronologically next in line is Ctesias, whose Persian history (*Persika*) is only known from later compilations of fragments and excerpts.[49] His work is particularly remarkable as – despite all obvious implausibility of most of his stories – he was able to create certain 'oriental' prototypes and topoi that have proven extremely powerful in later times.[50] Among others he is to be held responsible for painting the picture of the 'oriental' ruler to be considered the archetype of all oriental effeminate despots, Sardanapalus,[51] as well

[44] See Bernhardt, 2003 for a study of the motif of the ruinous influences of luxury in classical authors. For a detailed treatment of Herodotus' ideas about the rise and fall of empires see Ruffing, 2016a.

[45] Again, we can see that it was hard for classical authors to make a difference between Babylonia and Assyria, they rather conceive them as a unity.

[46] 2, 141.

[47] 2, 150, 3.

[48] 2, 7, 2.

[49] As with Berossus (and many other ancient authors) this fact makes dealing with this source particularly tricky as any later author presenting passages stated to originate in Ctesias' *Persica* follows his own general intentions, thus all these fragments are not necessarily to be considered as unaltered reproduction of Ctesias' record but better considered as being "only an interpretation and/or adaption – or at best an unbiased and reliable quotation or epitome". Stronk, 2010: 3. Likewise Lenfant, 2004: CXC and note 784.

[50] "Ctesias has been assigned a large measure of responsibility for popularizing among his contemporaries and later generations the concept of Eastern decadence." Gorman/Gorman, 2014: 270. Likewise Madreiter, 2011: 130.

[51] Bernhardt, 2009 gives a highly interesting overview of the development of this motif. On the possible oriental background of Sardanapalus' hedonism, see Fink, 2014 with further literature.

as the dangerous, power-hungry and man-devouring 'oriental' queen Semiramis. A more or less complete history of reception regarding these two figures still has to be written. Both occur in countless novels, paintings, plays, operas and even (though to a lesser extent) in films.[52]

In Ctesias, world history does begin in Assyria. As Diodorus' account of his *Persica* informs us, Ninus is the first king of the Assyrians, who forms a warlike people and subjugates neighboring countries. He successfully overruns Babylonia, Armenia, Media, Persia and the whole of Asia Minor and likewise succeeds in conquering the entire area of Asia between the Nile and Tanais in as little as 17 years. Only Bactria and India are not part of his empire. In Assyria, he founds a capital for his new empire (Nineveh), marries Semiramis, becomes a father of a son and finally dies. His widow Semiramis takes over his throne. She, as well, achieves fame by founding a city – Babylon. In the footsteps of Ninus, Diodorus depicts her as successful warrior queen who adds Egypt, Libya and a huge part of Ethiopia to the Assyrian Empire. Only India manages to escape her grasp, though she also tries to conquer this part of the world. Only after losing the decisive battle against the Indians, does she hand over the reign to the son she had born Ninus, Ninyas.[53]

Until recently, it was a common agreement, that Diodorus' account is a more or less unaltered transcript of the *Persica*.[54] But in fact it is difficult to distinguish between Ctesias' and Diodorus' characterization of Semiramis, as it seem they take slightly different perspectives on this 'oriental queen' par excellence. Diodo-

[52] For Semiramis: 1910 *Sémiramis* (director: Camille de Morlhon); 1954 *La cortigiana di Babilonia* (director: Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia) and 1963 *Io Semiramide* (director: Primo Zeglio); for Sardanapal: 1910 *Sardanapalo, Re dell'Assiria* (director: Giuseppe De Liguoro) and 1962 *The Seven Thunderbolds* (director: Silvio Amadio), also released as *Syria against Babylon*, *War Gods of Babylon* and *La sette foglori di Assur* (cf. Solomon, 2001, 240–241).

[53] Diod. 2, 1–28= F 1b § 1–28 Lenfant.

[54] So for example Krumbholz, 1886: 327 regarding Diod. 2, 20, 3. Also Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1987: 40–43 and Stronk, 2017 think along similar lines. Stronk states: "Diodorus claims that his account of 'Semiramis' is completely based upon Ctesias' story" (Stronk, 2017: 529) – this statement is rather surprising in a new, commented edition oft he text as Diodorus explicitly refers to Ctesias, but with little exception only when it comes to numbers. Additionally he refers to other sources (Cleitarchus, Athenaius) and never clearly states, that his account is based on Ctesias only. Diod. 2, 20, 3 (Κτησίας μὲν οὖν ὁ Κνίδιος περὶ Σεμιράμιδος τοιαῦθ' ἱστόρηκεν) does not necessarily refer to the whole part on Semiramis, it is also possible that it only refers to the transformation of Semiramis to a dove. Accordingly Gerhard Wirth and Otto Veh translate "Dies erzählt Ktesias aus Knidos." (Diodoros, Griechische Weltgeschichte Buch I–X, erster Teil, transl. by G. Wirth and O. Veh, Stuttgart 1992 [Bibliothek der griechischen Literatur 34]), while Jan P. Stronk decided to translate that passage with a much broader implication "Such, then, is the account that Ctesias of Cnidus has given about Semiramis" (Stronk, 2017). See also Comploi, 2000: 227–228 with n. 50.

rus' account, dating to the 1st century BC is rather ambivalent: Semiramis certainly commands his admiration – he calls her "τὴν ἐπιφανεστάτην ἁπασῶν τῶν γυναικῶν ὧν παρειλήφαμεν – the most famous of all women". Several times he emphasizes her beauty[55] and reflects on her manifold virtues, and puts particular emphasis on courage and intelligence.[56] As Sabine Comploi rightly stressed, his description lacks any negative undertone, in particular he fails to characterise her husbands, Onnes and Ninus, as weak, effeminate men that are submissively dependent on Semiramis.[57] Semiramis' building activities for both aesthetic and practical purposes are especially commended – Diodorus describes palaces and other representative architecture but devotes particular attention to sacral buildings and engineering structures.[58] It becomes clear that Semiramis is not only presented as a warrior queen but also as a pious sovereign, a thoughtful mother of her country, acting wisely and conclusively.[59] Whenever Didorus includes notes of criticism, they are to be seen in the wider context of public discourses criticising luxury and decadence[60]: During her stay in the Median city of Chauon, she is supposed to have enjoyed sundry luxuries (πάντων τρυφὴν) – without further specification. And describing her military campaign against India, Diodorus states that her sole motivation were the riches and luxuries of India (τρυφή καὶ πλοῦτος) that enticed her to commence hostilities (ὑπὲρ ὧν τὰ κατὰ μέρος ἡ Σεμίραμις ἀκούσασα προήχθη μηδὲν προαδικηθεῖσα τὸν πρὸς Ἰνδοὺς ἐξενεγκεῖν πόλεμον)[61], although the Indians had not harmed her.[62] Also another remark of Diodorus contains a rather sinister undertone, even though his wording is neutral: Legal marriage, he states, has not been an option for Semiramis, as she feared by re-marring her rule might come to an end (γῆμαι μὲν νομίμως οὐκ ἠθέλησεν, εὐλαβουμένη μήποτε στερηθῇ τῆς ἀρχῆς).[63] Instead, Diodorus continues, she had chosen her most beautiful soldiers as lovers and had them killed after she had enjoyed their company.[64]

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[55] Diod. 2, 4, 5; 2, 5, 1; 2, 5, 2 and 2, 6, 9. His emphasis of her beauty is rather uncommon. Simonetti Agostinetti, 1991 was able to demonstrate that Diodorus usually omits the appearance of exemplary women, but focusses on her strengths in character.

[56] Diod. 2, 5, 2; 2, 6, 5; 2, 6, 9; 2, 7, 2; 2, 13, 5; 2, 16, 1.

[57] Comploi, 2000: 223.

[58] See also Rollinger, 2008.

[59] Cf. Comploi, 2000: 225–226.

[60] Scheil, 2016 focusses on these few negative aspects of Diodorus' account along with Semiramis' efforts in further expanding her empire, when he judges Semiramis an "ambitious imperial leader" (25), who is anxious to expound her ambitious plans by monumental buildings and by doing so aims at immortality. However, Diodorus' words of praise and admiration go unmentioned.

[61] 2, 16, 3.

[62] 2, 16, 4.

[63] 2, 13, 4.

[64] 2, 13, 4. Cf. Auberger, 1993: 260.

To cut a long story short, in Diodorus' she is not an entirely bad queen, but – as it seems to be the fate of women taking over typically male tasks – her exuberant sexuality seals her fate. However, fragments of Ctesias' account recorded elsewhere suggest that Diodorus' tends to whitewash Semiramis.[65] It seems that Ctesias' version was much more bloodthirsty and sexually charged, creating a somewhat stronger negative image of the Babylonian queen.

Ninyas, the son of Ninus and Semiramis, is thoroughly designed as an oriental despot. As Ctesias confines, he does not further expand the empire but rather decides to stay, or even hides himself in the palace to enjoy all his riches. It seems that Assyrian history, in reference to the history of an impressive and independent Empire, ends at this point, as Ctesias informs us that there are no deeds of the 30 kings who follow Ninyas, which are worth mentioning.[66] By not providing any more information about the kings to follow, Ctesias neglects most of Assyria's history. Nevertheless, his model of Assyrian history becomes very influential.[67] The dynasty ends with the infamous Sardanapalus who surpasses all his predecessors in decadence. Ctesias states that he completely gave up any male way of living and even dressed like a woman.[68] But when Sardanapalus is pressed to go to war he successfully defeats his foes three times,[69] but all this victories are futile and finally he loses two battles, Ninus is besieged and Sardanapalus burns himself with all his treasures.

According to Ctesias, the succession of the rulers of the Assyrian Empire was as follows:

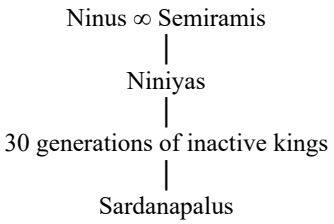

Fig. 2: The rulers of the Assyrian Empire according to Ctesias

[65] FGrHist 90, 1 – Nicolaos of Damascus: her sons from her first marriage with Onnes plan to kill Semiramis, as they consider her lechery a disgrace; BNJ 93, 1a and 1b – Kephalion: Semiramis kills her sons from her first marriage and is finally killed by her youngest, Ninus; FGrHist 688, 1 i – Syncellus, making reference to Ctesias: under the pretext of flood protection Semiramis has dikes tipped; in truth these dikes are her lovers burial mounds; cf. Comploi, 2000: 233–234.

[66] FGrHist 688 1b (ed. Lenfant; = Diodorus 2, 22 [1]).

[67] Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 1987 and Bichler, 2010. See also Heller, 2010: 62: "Es war Ktesias selbst, der das Bild eines dekadenten Orient maßgeblich prägte und für seine Tradierung bis auf den heutigen Tag verantwortlich ist."

[68] See Bernhardt, 2009.

[69] FGrHist 688 1b (ed. Lenfant; = Diodorus 2, 24 [5]); Lenfant, 2004: 56.

Having said this, we will return to Berossus. It is interesting to observe that Berossus does not follow this account of Ctesias. Following Robert Rollinger one might even interpret his book as a kind of counter-project to Ctesias' *Persica*, as it is rather organized by dynasties than giving a sequence of empires.[70] An impressive part of his book, which is in some way dependent on Mesopotamian king lists, is supposed to have contained up to 163 names of different kings before Semiramis (BNJ 680 F 1b).[71] It is quite remarkable that Semiramis shows up here. A fact which is – at least according to our opinion – demonstrating that Berossus writes in a 'Western' tradition, where it has become more or less obligatory to mention Semiramis, the famous queen of Assyria.[72] Nevertheless he explicitly criticizes the idea that it was Semiramis who founded Babylon.[73] After Semiramis Berossus lists 45 kings, altogether reigning for 526 years. Somewhat later he mentions Senecherib, who is said to have conducted war against Asia and Egypt and to have invaded Babylonia. For Berossus the last king of the Assyrian Empire is not Sardanapalus as in Ctesias but a certain Sarkos, who is the king of the Chaldeans. He has to suffer the same fate as Sardanapalus in Ctesias and ends up burning himself in his palace.

How influential Ctesias' picture of Assyrian history has been, can be demonstrated by looking at authors from late antiquity, who picked up upon his topoi without explicitly mentioning Ctesias as their originator. Orosius for example, who has written his *Historiae adversum paganos* between the years 416 and 418, mentions that nearly all Greek and Roman scholars let world history begin with Ninus, son of Belus. In Orosius, Ninus is a contemporary of Abraham – and this fact paves the way for him (and Semiramis) to enter all late antique and medieval chronicles.[74] According to Orosius, Ninus wanted to increase his domination and thus conducts war for a period of 50 years. After his death he is succeeded by his former wife Semiramis, who is also depicted as a successful warrior-queen – up to that point the narrative resembles Ctesias/Herodotus. Orosius, however, puts emphasis on the very negative aspect that holds the tendency to dominate the later picture of Semiramis up until Humanism and Renaissance: her appetite for man without any regard to moral standards. She not only has sex with a huge number of men, but she even has her lovers killed afterwards.[75]

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[70] Rollinger, 2011: 330. See Tuplin, 2013 for a careful discussion of Berossus' often-supposed engagement with Greek historians.

[71] For the historical events, which we can reconstruct from the extant parts of this list, see Rollinger, 2011: 331–332.

[72] E.g. Ctesias (BNJ 688 F 1 b and more often), Megasthenes (BNJ 715 F 11a) or Nearchus (BNJ 133 F3a and b) – and marginally mentioned in Herodotus (1, 84).

[73] FGrHist 680 F 8 (142) – Josephus.

[74] 1, 1, 5.

[75] 1, 4, 7.

After Semiramis, Orosius mentions 50 kings. In contrast to Ctesias account, these 50 kings are occupied with warfare. Only the last king of the Assyrians, for Orosius Sardanapalus, is depicted as an inactive king, surrounding himself with harlots and spinning purple wool.[76] Again Sardanapalus is depicted as a completely feminized ruler who finally loses his rule (and life) due to an uprising.

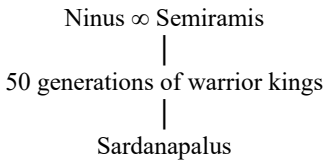

Fig. 3: The rulers of the Assyrian Empire according to Orosius

Conclusion

As the case studies chosen have shown, the ideas of the classical authors about Assyrian and Babylonian mythology and history are very vague. They use the Assyrian Empire mainly for two reasons: to describe the 'first empire in world history' and to teach their readers lessons about both empires and kings. The Assyrian Empire was founded by Ninus, a great warrior king, followed by his wife Semiramis. Semiramis was either succeeded by her son, whose deeds are described in some detail, or by a certain number of anonymous unimportant kings. Only later sources, as Orosius, paint these follow-up kings as also warlike, clearly aiming at further elaborating on the contrast to Sardanapalus. The end of the Assyrian empire is usually marked with this very Sardanapalus, the most decadent of all kings. So the lesson to learn is clearly one of moral nature: Rulers should be modest and warlike, if they do not take care of their manly qualities, things might go bad for them – especially if a strong and manly foe arises.

The discussion regarding the sources of Herodotus is a never-ending one.[77] It is clear that he had some information on the Ancient Near East available, but in most cases it is impossible to retrace where this information came from, in which form it reached Herodotus and how he transformed it. If Herodotus actually travelled to Mesopotamia, being a traveller between east and west himself therefore, is also highly disputed. Mainly because of the density of factual errors regarding Mesopotamia, it seems rather unlikely that his writings are based on his own expertise as an eyewitness.[78]

The case of Ctesias is somehow more promising as he – and his reader Xenophon[79] – states that he was a physician at the Persian court.[80] If this information

[76] I, 19, 1.
[77] See the controversial positions in Dunsch/Ruffing, 2013.
[78] So, with many details, Rollinger, 1993 – but the discussion is never-ending.
[79] *Anabasis* 1, 8.
[80] Suda, κ, 2521. Cf. Tuplin, 2004.

is correct, what might be doubted, Ctesias would actually have to be considered being one of those travellers between east and west we are looking for. Unfortunately, many of his stories are obviously exaggerated or even inaccurate and above all the fragmentary conditions of his work encumbers our understanding of this author.

Berossus claims to be a Babylonian priest – an inhabitant of Mesopotamia, who, according to Vitruvius, later moved to the island of Kos. If this was the case, Berossus would also be a traveller between east and west. However, as in the case of Ctesias, the fragmentary condition of Berossus' works causes more problems than solutions for our investigation and our understanding of the nature of his writings. In addition, the problems with his version of *Enūma Eliš*, as discussed above, confronts us with serious problems (if we do not want to blame all the errors on corrupt translations and manuscripts).

So, what does this examination of some important classical sources on the Near East tells us in the context of a workshop (and a resulting anthology) that aims at collecting information on routes and travellers between East and West? Maybe that historiography is not the best or most reliable genre to look for accurate information or even for indirect evidence concerning actual persons travelling between East and West.

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