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1 Introduction and Overview

1.1 Introduction

Assyria and Babylonia were among the greatest nations of the Ancient Near East in the first millennium BC. In the eighth and seventh centuries, Assyria was the most powerful nation, and in its heydays, its kings ruled from the Zagros to Egypt, while during the first half of the sixth century, the king of Babylon ruled over most of the Ancient Near East. The Assyrians and Babylonians themselves have left us all kinds of records of their culture: legal and administrative texts, religious and scientific treatises, and royal inscriptions that testify to their deeds and conquests, and that glorify their kings and gods, but records of their history and customs have also been written by others, giving us outsiders' views on their deeds and civilisation. Among these outsiders are ancient Greek historians such as Herodotos, Xenophon, Ktesias and Megasthenes, and the anonymous authors of biblical books such as Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. These outsiders' views (often called 'hetero-images') complement the image that the Assyrians and Babylonians created of themselves ('auto-image'). In the next nine chapters, I will study how Greek and biblical authors perceived the Assyrians and Babylonians, what the similarities, differences and dependencies are between their ways of describing these nations and their kings, and how these similarities and differences can be explained.

In the ninth century, during the reign of Shalmaneser III (859-824), the kingdom of Israel was for the first time confronted with the Assyrian empire.¹ In the battle of Qarqar (853), Shalmaneser fought against a coalition of kings, among whom Ahab of Israel (871-852), and he claimed a decisive victory: 'I fought against them with the exalted strength that Ashur, my lord, had granted me, and with the mighty weapons that Nergal, who goes before me, had granted me. I defeated them from Qarqar up to Gilzau'.² His victory probably was not as decisive as he claims,³ but gradually he was able to consolidate his power in the West, and Jehu (845-818) submitted to the overlordship of the Assyrian king. At first, Assyrian interference in the affairs of

¹ Unless otherwise stated, dates are BC, and dates of monarchs' reigns are from Eder, Renger and Henkelman 2007.

² Cogan 2008: 15; cf COS II 264.

³ Kuhrt 1997: 488.

Israel and its neighbours was only incidental, but from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727) on, Assyrian involvement increased, and led to the incorporation of Israel in the Assyrian empire (722), while the Judean kingdom remained a nominally independent vassal state. After the demise of Assyria (612), its position was taken over by the Babylonian empire. During the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562), the Judean capital Jerusalem was besieged and captured twice (597 and 586) and the Judean elite was led into exile. The Babylonian empire was short-lived. It existed for some sixty years, and then its end came when the city of Babylon was captured by the Persians (539). Not surprisingly, the Assyrians and Babylonians are mentioned often in the Bible, especially in the books of Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Nahum, Habakkuk and Daniel.

The Greeks came into contact with the Assyrians in the eighth century. Greece and Western Asia Minor remained outside the reach of the Assyrian empire, but Greek mercenaries and merchants who traded and fought in the Levant encountered Assyrian officials and soldiers. We know about these first encounters mainly from Assyrian sources.⁴ The first Assyrian source that mentions Greeks (*Ia-ú-na-a-a*, i.e. Ionians) is a letter from a certain Qurdi-Assur-lamur to his king Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727).⁵ This official reports that Ionians had attacked a few coastal towns in the area of Tyre and Sidon, and that he had been able to drive them off. Greek authors from the seventh and sixth centuries rarely mention Assyrians or Babylonians. This is probably best explained by the fact that we do not have much literature from this period, and what we have is mainly epic and lyric poetry, while history writing and related genres such as ethnography had not yet come into being in Greece. In the classical period, from the fifth century on, when the Assyrian and Babylonian empires were already something of the past, they are mentioned more often, for example, in Herodotos' *Historiae*, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* and Ktesias' *Persika*.

The Greeks, the Judeans and the Israelites were small nations. They lived in the shadow of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires. They were influenced and

⁴ Helm 1980; Lanfranchi 2000; Niemeier 2001; Rollinger 2001; Luraghi 2006; Rollinger 2007; Van Dongen 2007.

⁵ Rollinger 2001: 237; Luraghi 2006: 30.

often threatened by these empires, but the historical experiences of the Greeks differed strongly from those of the Israelites and Judeans. The kingdom of Israel lost its independence to the Assyrians. Judah became a vassal state of Assyria in the seventh century, and Israel and Judah were both incorporated in the Babylonian empire in the sixth century. But the Greeks remained outside the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, and the mainland Greeks even outside the Persian empire. It is to be expected that these different historical circumstances will result in different images of the Assyrians and Babylonians. But before studying these images, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of 'image'.

Images and Stereotypes

Defining *image* is not straightforward. Beller defines image as a 'mental silhouette of the other, who appears to be determined by the characteristics of family, group, tribe, people or race'.⁶ Leerssen speaks of a 'mental or discursive representation or reputation of a person, group, ethnicity or "nation"'.⁷ Leerssen then distinguishes between *auto-image*, the representation of one's own group, and *hetero-image*, the image that outsiders have of a group. In this study, I will use a simplified version of Leerssen's definition: an image is a discursive representation of a nation, people or ethnic group. The concepts 'nation', 'people' and 'ethnic group' need clarification themselves (see next section), but first some remarks have to be made about discursive versus visual images, the truthfulness of images, their relation to facts, and the relation between hetero-images and auto-images.

Often, both in common speech and in scholarly discourse, an image is a visual representation. In general, studying visual representations of ethnic groups or nations can provide a meaningful complement to studying textual representations. For example, the representation of foreigners in Greek vase painting changes in the fifth century BC.⁸ In the archaic period, foreigners and Greeks are depicted in the same way. In the fifth century, foreigners become recognizable as such by clothing,

⁶ Beller 2007: 4.

⁷ Leerssen 2007: 342.

⁸ Miller 2005.

hairstyle and other attributes. This change in visual representation occurred in the same period when the representation of foreigners in Greek literature underwent a radical shift and has probably the same ideological roots. Pictures of Assyrians and Babylonians in Greek art, if they can be found, could perhaps add to our knowledge of the Greek image of the inhabitants of Mesopotamia, but for Judah and Israel the situation is different. Art objects – statues, paintings, seals – from pre-Hellenistic Judah and Israel are very scarce. Therefore, only discursive representations (more specific: only texts) will be studied here.

Images are not true. They are not facts. They do not give a truthful representation of reality. An image in the sense that the word is used in this study is not like an image of an object or a person in a mirror. It is subjective.⁹ Often the difference between image and stereotype is small. Images are not only based on what we see and hear, but also, and perhaps even more so, on prejudices and preconceived notions.¹⁰ For example, ‘the ancient Assyrians were ruled by kings’ is verifiable. It is a fact. ‘The Assyrians were ruled by effeminate, wily and untrustworthy tyrants’ is a characterisation of Assyrian kings and it was part of the ancient Greek image of the Assyrians. ‘The Assyrians were warlike and cruel’ was part of the Judean image of the Assyrians. The latter image is perhaps more in agreement of the prevailing modern view, based on Assyrian inscriptions in which they boasted of the number of enemies that they had killed or mutilated during their campaigns, but is still an image, not a verifiable fact.

The opinions that people have of other nations (‘hetero-image’) often mirror how they want to see themselves (‘auto-image’). The characteristics that strike us most in others (the ‘specter’), or that we ascribe to others, are those that we ourselves (the ‘spectator’) do not possess or do not want to possess. For example, the cardinal Hellenic virtues in the classical period ‘normally included wisdom or intelligence, manliness or courage, discipline or restraint, and justice’.¹¹ Non-Greeks (βάρβαροι ‘barbarians’) are in classical Greek literature often endowed with the corresponding

⁹ Leerssen 2007: 27-28.

¹⁰ Beller 2007: 4.

¹¹ Hall 1991: 121.

vices: stupidity (or the other extreme: excessive cunning), cowardice (or excessive confidence), abandonment and lawlessness.¹² In Greek literature, barbarians seem to come in two types: northern barbarians (e.g. Thracians, Celts), who are brave and warlike, but also uncivilised and not very intelligent, and barbarians from Asia (e.g. Persians, Lydians), who are over-refined, cunning and cowardly. It will be seen in this study that the image of the Assyrians and Babylonians incorporates many traits that are regarded characteristic of barbarians from the Near East in general.

The preceding paragraphs perhaps suggest that there is one single Greek image of the Assyrians – or of the Persians, or any other nation – but, probably needless to say, this is not the case. Herodotus' image of the Persians is not the same as Ktesias' image of the Persians. In fact, Herodotus is by his fellow-Greeks sometimes accused of creating a too positive image of other nations: Plutarch calls him disapprovingly a 'barbarian-lover' (φιλοβάρβαρος, *Moralia* 857a). The image of a foreign nation in ancient texts – or in modern texts – is neither fully individual nor fully collective, but the ways ancient Greek texts depict the Persians have enough in common to speak about the Greek image of the Persians.

To sum up, an image is in this study a discursive representation of a nation, people or ethnic group. Visual representations are not studied. Images, for example the Greek and Judean images of the Assyrians, are not mere representations of reality. They do not tell us how the Assyrians really were, but how they were seen by the Greeks or the Judeans. Their images of the Assyrians say often more about how the Greeks or Judeans saw themselves – and wanted to be seen by others – than about the Assyrians. As a consequence, the distinctions between foreign nations are often blurred, especially in Greek literature. Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Lydians and Syrians are all depicted as effeminate and luxury loving barbarians, ruled by despotic and wily kings, or even worse: by queens. There is often not much specifically Assyrian in the Greek image of the Assyrians.

¹² Hall: 1991: 122-127.

Ethnicity

In the previous sections, 'nation', 'people' and 'ethnic group' have often been used. Explaining what is exactly meant with these words is not easy and the differences are small. Often, 'nation', 'people' and 'ethnic group' seem to have more or less the same meaning. Yet, these words are used in different contexts. 'Ethnic group' (from Greek ἔθνος 'people, nation', adj. ἔθνικός 'national, foreign') is often associated with minorities and with historical processes such as colonisation, decolonisation and labour migration.¹³ 'Nation' often has legal, territorial or political overtones,¹⁴ but as often 'a nation' is the same as 'a people'. For example, the biblical 'Table of Nations' (Genesis 10) is a genealogy of the *peoples* of the earth. In this study, 'people' and 'nation' will usually be used interchangeable, while 'ethnic group' is more rarely used, because it sounds modern, almost anachronistic.

The division of people into nations or ethnic groups is called ethnicity. Definitions of ethnicity are manifold. According to Hall, 'ethnicity is a process by which a group conceptualizes its difference from others in order to heighten its own sense of community and belongingness'.¹⁵ According to Eriksen, ethnicity is 'defined as a social identity (based on a contrast vis-à-vis others) characterised by metaphoric or fictive kinship'.¹⁶ According to Toland, ethnicity is 'the sense of peoplehood held by members of a group sharing a common culture and history within a society'.¹⁷ Definitions vary, but most modern scholars agree that 'ethnic boundaries are [...] social constructs, not facts of nature, and as such are liable to be arbitrary and ambiguous'.¹⁸ Moreover, when discussing ethnicity, it is usually stated that peoples or ethnic groups do not exist in isolation, but only vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, that in some situations the relevance of ethnic distinctions is large, while in other

¹³ Eriksen 2010: 13, 18-19.

¹⁴ Goudriaan 1988: 8-9; Van der Spek 2005: 393; Eriksen 2010: 10.

¹⁵ Hall 1991: 165.

¹⁶ Eriksen 2010: 17.

¹⁷ Toland 1993: 3.

¹⁸ Hall 1991: 165.

situations it is small, that ethnic boundaries are sometimes flexible, and that myths of origin are often important in ethnic ideologies.

‘The first fact of ethnicity is the application of systematic distinctions between insiders and outsiders, between Us and Them’, as Eriksen writes.¹⁹ Ethnicity does not exist in isolation, but it is created in social contact, and in these situations of social interaction, people form an image of their own nation or ethnic group (‘auto-image’), and images of the foreign nations they encounter (‘hetero-images’), which strongly influence the way they behave towards members of these ethnic groups. In some situations it is important that the boundaries between ethnic groups are clear, because a specific form of behaviour towards members of other ethnic groups is expected, while in other situation ethnicity is not relevant. Sometimes, ethnic boundaries are even flexible: people may in some situations behave as if belonging to one ethnic group, and in other situations as if belonging to another one.²⁰

The characteristics that delineate ethnic boundaries vary. Ethnic groups or peoples feel often united by a common language, by customs, by religion, by a political organisation, by skin colour, or by common descent.²¹ Yet, ethnic classification cannot be reduced to one or more of these elements.²² Every one of them may be present or absent. Sometimes religion is important (e.g. the Jews). Sometimes skin colour plays a major role (e.g. the Afro-Americans). The ancient Greeks felt united by their language,²³ while the modern British and Irish are clearly different peoples, despite their common language and similar customs. Yet, ethnicity is a dimension of its own, not coinciding with language, religion or any other category.

It has been mentioned above that Eriksen defines ethnicity as ‘a social identity [...] characterised by metaphoric or fictive kinship’.²⁴ In Antiquity, this idea of kinship is

¹⁹ Eriksen 2010: 23.

²⁰ Goudriaan 1988: 11-13; Van der Spek 2005.

²¹ Eriksen 2010: 40-42.

²² Goudriaan 1988: 10.

²³ Nippel 2007: 34.

²⁴ Eriksen 2010: 17.

often expressed in a common myth of origin or the belief that a people or nation descends from a common ancestor.²⁵ This common origin is usually imaginary, but the belief in a common ancestor was widespread. For example, the Israelites believed that Jacob/Israel was their ancestor, and the Greeks thought that Hellen (Ἕλλην) was their ancestor. The Israelites believed that their forefathers had been led out of the land of Egypt, and the Romans thought that Aeneas had been saved out of the city of Troy, had gone to Italy and that his descendants had founded Rome. Such myths are, especially in Antiquity, often an important element of ethnic ideologies, because they give the idea of kinship an 'historical' footing.

The modern way of looking at ethnicity was created in the late sixties.²⁶ At first, ethnicity was mainly studied as a modern phenomenon and in an anthropological context, but soon, ethnicity in the past was also studied. For example, Goudriaan has written about ethnicity in Ptolemaic Egypt,²⁷ ethnicity in ancient Israel has been studied by Sparks, Brett, Faust, and others,²⁸ the 48th Rencontre Assyriologique was dedicated to ethnicity in Mesopotamia,²⁹ and ethnicity in ancient Greece has been studied by Edith Hall, Jonathan Hall, and others.³⁰ Of course, studying ethnicity in the past differs methodologically from studying ethnicity in the modern world: anthropological fieldwork is not possible, but ethnicity has to be investigated on the basis of texts and archaeological remains from the period under study.

Research questions

What has been written about the Assyrians and the Babylonians by ancient Greek authors has been studied by many scholars, for example, Baumgartner, Drews, Kuhrt, Boncquet, Heller and Rollinger.³¹ What has been written about these nations

²⁵ Eriksen 2010: 7.

²⁶ Barth 1969.

²⁷ Goudriaan 1988.

²⁸ Sparks 1998; Brett 2002; Faust 2006.

²⁹ Van Soldt 2005.

³⁰ Hall 1991, Hall 1997.

³¹ Baumgartner 1950; Drews 1965, 1973, 1974; Kuhrt 1982; Boncquet 1990; Heller 2010; Rollinger 2011.

in biblical books has been studied by scholars such as Parrot, Machinist, Kratz, Vanderhooft, Eidevall and Frahm.³² Some of these studies investigate what Greek and biblical authors knew about Mesopotamia, its inhabitants and its history, and how wrong they often were, while other studies concentrate on the images of Assyria and Babylonia in ancient literature. In this monograph, I will compare what Greek and biblical authors knew about Mesopotamia and its inhabitants, how the Assyrians and Babylonians are depicted in the Greek tradition and in the Bible, and which images and stereotypes they created of the Assyrians and Babylonians. This is a less popular subject of study, perhaps because Greek and biblical tradition are thought to differ so much that comparing them is not regarded as a meaningful enterprise, but I hope to show that comparing them is a fruitful enterprise, despite these differences, which as a matter of fact are considerable.

Comparing what biblical and Greek authors have written about Mesopotamia and its inhabitants, and comparing the images that they have created of the Assyrians and Babylonians, will yield a (long) list of similarities and differences. Making such lists is interesting in itself, and this study contains a number of lists and enumerations. Yet, it must be made clear from the start of a comparative study why it is undertaken, i.e. what the significance or meaning of these similarities and differences is.³³ Not all similarities carry the same weight. They certainly do not always point to a common source. In this dissertation, comparing what Greek and biblical authors have written about Mesopotamia and its history is done for two reasons: first, to trace the origins of Greek knowledge of Mesopotamia, and second, to explore the origins and nature of biblical historiography and its relation to Greek historiography.

The first reason is to investigate if encounters between Assyrians or Babylonians and Greeks in the archaic period have left behind traces in Greek literature. The Greeks first came into contact with Assyrians and Babylonians in the archaic period in the Levant, i.e. in Canaan, Phoenicia and western Syria (perhaps apart from encounters between Minoans and Mesopotamians in the bronze age, for example on

³² Parrot 1955; Parrot 1958; Machinist 1983; Kratz 1999; Vanderhooft 1999; Vanderhooft 2008; Eidevall 2009; Frahm 2011.

³³ Van Dongen 2008: 235.

Cyprus, but if such encounters ever occurred, they have not left any traces in Greek literature). Yet, the knowledge that the Greek historians of the fifth century and beyond had of the Assyrians and Babylonians often seems mainly of eastern origin, based on Iranian and Mesopotamian sources from the Achaemenid period (539-333). It is difficult to single out elements that are of an older and perhaps Levantine origin. An important cause of this problem is probably the scarcity of literary sources from the early first millennium from the Levant. López-Ruiz, who in her study *When the Gods were Born* tries to demonstrate that oriental influence on Greek cosmogonies from the archaic period reached Greek authors through this area, speaks of ‘the near-total lack of literary records from Syria-Palestine that are contemporary with “orientalizing” Greece (roughly 750-650)’ as the biggest challenge that she faces in making her argument.³⁴ A way to search for knowledge or misconceptions of Levantine origin in what the Greek have written about Assyria and Babylonia is to compare Greek texts with the only corpus of literary texts of some size from this area from the first millennium, although of uncertain time of origin: the Hebrew Bible. If some knowledge or misconceptions about the Assyrians and Babylonians in Greek literature date from the archaic period, then it is perhaps possible to trace them by their similarity to biblical traditions. Of course, it is now generally held that most biblical books attained their final shape during or after the exilic period, but it is almost certain that they contain material from earlier periods, especially from the period of the (late) monarchy, which could make a comparison like this useful for singling out older, Levantine elements in what the Greeks have written about Mesopotamia.

The second reason is to gain a better understanding of the relation between Greek and biblical historiography. Discussing Greek and biblical historiography has mainly become an occupation of theologians, and not of historians. An older attempt by Momigliano to explain the similarities and differences between Greek and Jewish historiography as different responses to Achaemenid institutions and literature has found little resonance.³⁵ The nature of biblical historiography, its dependence on Greek examples, and even the question whether it is possible to speak of biblical

³⁴ López-Ruiz 2010: 4.

³⁵ Momigliano 1990.

historiography at all have been the subject of much theological discussion during the last decades.³⁶ Some scholars, such as Wesselius, Gmirkin and Lemche, think that historiography in the Bible has been modelled after Greek examples.³⁷ Others, such as Albertz, Becking and Blum, think that biblical historiography is rooted in Ancient Near Eastern culture, and largely independent of Greek models.³⁸ Of course, there are not many subjects that were of interest both to Greek and biblical historians, but the kings, the armies and the customs of the Assyrians and Babylonians are among the few subjects on which both Greek and biblical historians have written, and it is therefore a good subject to compare their knowledge and their methods.

A small number of Greek historical works and a larger part of the books of the Bible are used in answering these questions. The biblical books that are most often cited in this study are Genesis, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Nahum and Habakkuk. Books that are usually regarded as late, like Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel, are less often used. The most important Greek sources are works of historians and ethnographers such as Herodotos, Hellanikos, Ktesias, Megasthenes and Hekataios, but also of poets such as Homer, Hesiod and Alkaios. Greek *novels* that are set in Mesopotamia such as the anonymous *Ninos novel* (first century BC)³⁹ and Iamblichos' *Babyloniaka* (second century AD)⁴⁰ are not discussed. In the *Ninos novel*, Ninos and Semiramis, who are also found in Greek historiography, are the main characters, but 'they are portrayed [. . .] as Greeks through and through'.⁴¹ The protagonists of the second work are more 'oriental' in character, but the *Babyloniaka* has been written too late for our purposes. Biblical and Greek sources clearly pose different problems. In many cases, biblical books have reached their final form after a long and tortuous history. Disagreement on the dates of origin of biblical books and their sources, which is most acutely felt in Genesis, Kings and Isaiah, often complicates

³⁶ Van Seters 1992; Van Seters 1997; Grabbe 2001; Wesselius 2002; Gmirkin 2006; Brooke and Römer 2007; Blum 2008; Barstad 2008; Kirkpatrick and Goltz 2008.

³⁷ Wesselius 2002; Gmirkin 2006; Lemche 2001.

³⁸ Albertz 2001; Becking 2007: 1-22; Blum 2008.

³⁹ Holzberg 1995: 38-39; Stephens 2003: 663-665.

⁴⁰ Holzberg 1995: 85-87; Johne 2003: 184-185.

⁴¹ Holzberg 1995: 39.

the discussion. It is often difficult to say whether a certain biblical text is earlier than, contemporary with or later than the Greek text with which it is compared. Greek sources pose, as a rule, other problems. Of the works of most of the authors mentioned only fragments have been handed down to us. It is often difficult to say in what context these fragments originally occurred, where the fragment ends, and how accurately it has been cited.

I will not join an existing 'school' when dating biblical texts. At the moment, there is no generally accepted paradigm for source analysis or establishing the date of origin of a given text. This is most acutely felt in the discussion of the Table of Nations (Genesis 10). The classical Documentary Hypothesis, which explained how the Pentateuch had come into being, has lost much of its support, and until now there is no new paradigm that has won general acceptance. Therefore, for each text that is discussed arguments for its date of origin, if necessary for my argument, will have to be derived from an analysis of that particular text.

Overview

This introduction ends with an overview of what is to come. The next two sections are introductory in character and give overviews of modern scholarship on two issues: the first one discusses the *Deuteronomistic History*, the biblical books Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, and the second one is a survey of the most important Greek historians who have written about Assyria and Babylonia.

The first question which was formulated in this section – whether the encounters between Assyrians or Babylonians and Greeks in the archaic period in the Levant have left behind traces in Greek literature – will receive a great deal of attention in the chapters two, three and four. These chapters discuss what Greek and biblical authors knew, or more precisely, what they thought they knew about the regions, the cities and the customs of Assyria and Babylonia. The subject of the second chapter is the use of geographical and ethnic names by biblical and Greek authors. It discusses the use of names such as Assyria (Hebr. 'Aššur, Gr. Ἀσσυρία), Chaldeans (Hebr. *Kaśdīm*, Gr. χαλδαῖοι) and Mesopotamia in the Hebrew Bible and in Greek literature. The next two chapters are about cities and towns (chapter three) and

customs and habits (chapter four). These chapters focus on the differences and similarities between the biblical and Greek images of Mesopotamia and their origins and interpretation.

The next five chapters of this study deal with historiography. The fifth chapter discusses genealogies. Greek historians were often particularly interested in the origins of cities, nations and peoples, and their mythical founders, primeval ancestors and eponymous heroes.⁴² The protagonists of these myths are often connected to each other by genealogical ties. In the Bible, myths of origin, their protagonists also connected by family ties, are found mainly in Genesis. Among these genealogies is the Table of Nations (Genesis 10), a genealogy of the eponymous heroes of the peoples from Israel's world. In this Table of Nations, the ancestors of the Assyrians and Chaldeans are found alongside Nimrod, king of Babylon and Uruk and founder of Nineveh and Kalah. In the fifth chapter Greek and biblical genealogies will be compared and the question if biblical authors have used Greek examples and whether they borrowed elements from Greek mythical and historiographical literature will be discussed. The sixth chapter, about the use of Elam, Media and Persia in the Hebrew Bible, is an excursus, offering background material on the question how to interpret the names Elam and Media in the Table of Nations.

The seventh chapter discusses the founders of the city of Nineveh and of the Assyrian empire. In Greek tradition, Nineveh is founded by Ninos, the eponymous hero of the city. In the Bible, Nimrod is the founder of Nineveh, Kalah and two other Assyrian cities. Both in ancient historiography and in modern research Ninos and Nimrod have sometimes been identified. Although this identification is untenable, the mythical hunter and primeval king Nimrod and the eponymous hero Ninos share certain properties that make a confrontation interesting.

In ancient historiography, history consists mainly of the deeds of kings and great men, and occasionally women. Nimrod and Ninos were followed by a large number

⁴² Bickerman 1952.

of Assyrian kings and queens. Their names, deeds and characters are discussed in the eighth chapter. This chapter also contains two sections about Semiramis, the most famous Assyrian queen, and according to many Greek historians, the founder of the city of Babylon. Most connections between the Bible and Semiramis are a bit far fetched, but a connection between Semiramis and the Levant exists. Her place of birth is Askalon and her name is often explained as West Semitic, not Akkadian. This is enough excuse to discuss the origin of the name Semiramis, and the origin of the character Semiramis.

The ninth chapter discusses the development of biblical historiography, and in particular two conjectured biblical 'authors' who have written about Assyrian and Babylonian history: the Jahwist and the Deuteronomist. Many scholars think that the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, which describe the history of Judah and Israel in Canaan from the *Landnahme* until the fall of Jerusalem, were written as a single work, the Deuteronomistic History, because in these books the same ideas and the same idiom are found as in the book of Deuteronomy. This Deuteronomistic History contains many references to the Assyrians and Babylonians. Theories about the date and place of origin of this work are discussed in this chapter.

1.2 The Deuteronomistic History

In the Bible, Assyrian and Babylonian kings are mentioned in the books of Genesis, Kings, the Major and some Minor Prophets, and Daniel. Genesis and Kings are part of the so-called *Primary History*, the first nine books of the Bible, which are sometimes regarded as a unity, although it is controversial whether they really form a unit and in what way.⁴³ This *Primary History* (or *Enneateuch*) starts with the creation and primeval history, followed by the story of the patriarchs, the story of Moses and the conquest of the promised land, the period of the Judges, the reign of David and Solomon, the divided monarchy, and finally the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile. According to many scholars, the last four books – Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings – which describe the history of Judah and Israel in Canaan from the *Landnahme* until the fall of Jerusalem, form a unit within the *Primary History*, the so-called *Deuteronomistic History* (DtrH).⁴⁴ Biblical scholars have formulated a number of theories about the place and time of origin of this work. The most important views are: in the period of the late monarchy (more specific: during the reign of the Judean king Josiah [639-609]), in the exilic period (more specific: not long after the release [562] or death of Jehoiachin),⁴⁵ and during the Persian or the Hellenistic period.

The German scholar Martin Noth proposed in his *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (1943) the hypothesis that the *Deuteronomistic History* was a unified work, created in the exilic period by a single author, the *Deuteronomist*. According to Noth, it was not only a description of the history of Israel and Judah, but also an attempt to explain why these kingdoms had perished: as a punishment for their disobedience to their God. Additions and changes that were made after the work was written, and even its division into six separate books, do not disguise its original character: a unified history of Israel and Judah and a theologico-historical explanation of their demise.

⁴³ Römer 2011; Blum 2011.

⁴⁴ There is a number of abbreviations in use: Dtr¹, DtrG or DtrH tot refer to the original (pre-exilic or exilic) deuteronomistic author or work, Dtr², DtrP or DtrN for redactors or editors. I will only use DtrH.

An important critic of Noth's view is the American scholar Frank Moore Cross, who thinks that the first version of the *Deuteronomistic History* was written during the reign of the Judean king Josiah (639-609) and that it was intended as a justification of Josiah's reformation (622).⁴⁶ The optimistic tone that according to Cross is found in many parts of the *Deuteronomistic History* does not point to it originally having been a work about the decline and fall of Israel and Judah. During the Babylonian captivity, it must have been complemented and edited and given its current size and character. In this period, the passages about the sins of Israel and Judah and about the exile as result of these sins must have been added.

Recently, Thomas Römer has proposed a synthesis of both views.⁴⁷ Römer believes that a library of separate deuteronomistic writings existed in the late monarchical period. A group of scribes from the exilic period must have edited and joined these writings into a single work about the history of Israel and Judah from the *Landnahme* until the Babylonian captivity. According to Römer, the *Deuteronomistic History* was not created by a single author (Noth), or by two authors (Cross), but by a school or group of scribes who thought and wrote in the same spirit. Like his predecessors, Römer reckons with additions and changes during the Persian period.

Some scholars place the origins and development of the *Deuteronomistic History* in the Persian period, e.g. Jan-Wim Wesselius.⁴⁸ In his view, the *Deuteronomistic History* is part of a larger entity, the *Primary History*, which consists of Genesis to Kings, and which narrates the history of Israel and Judah from the creation to the Babylonian exile. This work was, according to Wesselius, written in the Persian period, and it was inspired by Greek historiography, especially by Herodotos' *Histories*, entailing that it must have been written in the second half of the fifth century. Like Noth before him, Wesselius believes in a single author, someone who created this history

⁴⁵ Harvey (2010: 52) correctly notes that 'all the days of his life' (2K. 25:29) suggests that this text was written after Jehoiachin's death.

⁴⁶ Cross 1973.

⁴⁷ Römer 2007.

⁴⁸ Wesselius 2002.

of Israel almost single-handedly, in contrast with the currently popular opinion that biblical books were written by groups or schools or scribes.⁴⁹ But Wesselius dates this author to the Persian period, not to the exilic period, as Noth does.

Even more radical than Wesselius are Lemche, Thompson, Davies and their allies – known as the Copenhagen school, although some of its prominent members teach in Sheffield, and also known as minimalists. They believe that the Hebrew Bible was almost in its entirety written in the Hellenistic period.⁵⁰ Like Wesselius and Van Seters before them, members of the Copenhagen school point to the similarities between the narrative ('historical') books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis through Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Tobit, Judith) and Greek historiography. They believe that biblical historiography arose in response to Greek historiography, and that Greek influence on Jewish thought is only possible after Alexander, which leads to the conclusion that the Hebrew Bible is at the earliest from the third century. If older material has been used to write biblical books, it is not possible to recognise or isolate it, and for that reason it is certainly not possible to use the Hebrew Bible as a source for the history of pre-exilic Israel and Judah. Noll, another scholar who is of the opinion that Kings contains hardly any reliable information about the history of the monarchical period, has formulated this view very clearly: 'Kings in final form barely presents a past at all. To the extent that it does, it has inadvertently preserved the history writing from its earliest compositional stage'.⁵¹ According to these scholars, Kings and other narrative books tell us a lot about the ideas that Jews of the Hellenistic period nurtured about their early history, but very little about the real history and culture of Israel and Judah in the Iron age.

These views on the dating of the *Deuteronomistic History* all have their supporters, but the first two opinions – in the late monarchical period (Cross)⁵² or during the Babylonian exile (Noth) – more than the other ones. Decisive arguments to establish the time of origin of the Deuteronomistic History do not exist. In the words of

⁴⁹ Van der Toorn 2007.

⁵⁰ Lemche 2001. Criticism: Albertz 2001; Becking 2007: 1-22; Barstad 2008: 70-89.

⁵¹ Noll 2008: 38.

⁵² E.g. Knoppers 1994: 5-6; Machinist 1994: 53.

Thomas Römer, one of the leading scholars in this field: 'It is no secret that we have not much evidence for dating the Deuteronomistic History'.⁵³ Of course, there are more points of dissent: the sources (if any) that have been used in creating the *Deuteronomistic History*, the position of Judges,⁵⁴ the extent to which the text has been changed and edited during the Persian and Hellenistic periods (provided that the original text was written earlier), the reason why the *Deuteronomistic History* was divided into separate books (perhaps simply the maximum size of a scroll), and many more. There is even a growing group of scholars who feel that *deuteronomistic* is not a useful concept.⁵⁵ The delineation of literary works in the Hebrew Bible in recent years has more and more become the subject of discussion.⁵⁶ Many scholars study the books that are usually regarded as part of *DtrH* separately, or as part of a larger *Primary History*, or *Enneateuch*, consisting of Genesis to Kings.

To sum up, there is no unanimity and little consensus among biblical scholars about the origins and history of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, but many scholars believe that these books were in one phase of its history or another part of the *Deuteronomistic History*, or at least of a collection of writings from the Deuteronomistic school. It has probably obtained its present size in the exilic period, when the recollection of the fall of Jerusalem was still vivid and the release of the Judean king Jehoiachin still seemed significant.

⁵³ Römer 2009.

⁵⁴ Amit 2009.

⁵⁵ Leuchter and Adam 2010: 5; Person 2010: 2-9.

⁵⁶ Dozeman, Römer and Schmid 2011.

1.3 Assyria in Greek Historiography: An Overview

Monarchs and events from Mesopotamian history, both historical and fictional, are mentioned by a number of Greek historians, among whom Herodotos and Arrian, but also lesser known authors such as Ktesias, Dinon, Kleitarchos, Megasthenes, Polyhistor, Diodoros, Abydenos and Kephalion. The works of many of these authors have not been preserved in their entirety. We possess only fragments of what they have written, most of them quotations in works of Josephos and Christian authors such as Eusebios and Georgios Synkellos. Of these authors, Ktesias of Knidos, who wrote his *Persika* in the early fourth century, has influenced the image of Mesopotamia in Greek historiography more than anyone else. His seven(teen) years' stay in Persia earned him a reputation as an expert on oriental history. He was often regarded as the foremost authority on Assyria and Persia, although historians such as Megasthenes and Alexander Polyhistor had a better knowledge of Mesopotamian history. Therefore it is convenient to make a distinction between Assyrian history before and after Ktesias. However, very little is left of accounts of Assyrian history before Ktesias. Babylon and Nineveh are mentioned by Phokylides and Alkaios, two poets from the archaic period (see chapter two), but in the fragments of early Greek historians such as Hekataios of Miletos, Dionysios of Miletos, and Charon of Lampsakos, nothing is found on the history or geography of Mesopotamia.⁵⁷ The first author who has left us a description of Mesopotamia is Herodotos, which brings us to the mid fifth century BC, but even in this period, descriptions of Assyrian and Babylonian history and geography are scarce. Herodotos' contemporary Hellanikos is mentioned by Kephalion, an author from the second century AD, as one of the authorities on Assyrian history. Kephalion tells us that Hellanikos has written about Assyria in his *Persika*, but precious little of it has been preserved. This paucity of sources makes it difficult to ascertain what Greek historians from the fifth century other than Herodotos knew, or thought to know, about Assyria.

⁵⁷ Drews 1973: 14; Kuhrt 1982: 539-541.

Kephalion's sources

Kephalion lived in the second century AD and wrote a universal history in nine books, called *Σύντομον Ἱστορικόν*, covering the period from the kingship of Ninos and Semiramis till the time of Alexander the Great.⁵⁸ Kephalion's history is lost, but two summaries of what he wrote on Assyrian history have been handed down to us, a more extensive one in the *Chronikon* of Eusebios and a shorter one in the *Ecloga Chronographica* of the Byzantine chronographer Georgios Synkellos.⁵⁹ It is possible that Synkellos only knew Kephalion from Eusebios' chronicle: Synkellos' summary does not contain anything that is not found in Eusebios' *Chronikon*.

According to Kephalion, Assyrian history had started with Ninos, the son of Belos, who performed great deeds. After Ninos, Semiramis ruled the Assyrians, and she built the famous walls of Babylon. She was killed and succeeded by her son, called Ninos by Kephalion, although he is usually called Ninyas. Ninyas was the first of a long series of inactive and effeminate rulers, who did not do anything worth mentioning. Finally, after more than a thousand years, Nineveh was captured by the Medes, and the last Assyrian king Sardanapallos was killed. This outline of Assyrian history given by Kephalion is in accord with what is found in other universal histories, like those of Diodoros of Sicily (a Greek historian of the first century BC) and Marcus Junianus Justinus (a Roman historian from the second century AD), although some of the details and names that are mentioned differ.

Kephalion mentions three authors from the fifth and fourth centuries as his main sources on Assyrian history: Hellanikos of Lesbos, Ktesias of Knidos, and Herodotos of Halikarnassos. It is not clear why Hellanikos and Ktesias are mentioned first, and Herodotos afterwards. This order is not chronological. Probably it indicates that Kephalion had more trust in Hellanikos and Ktesias than in Herodotos. After this introductory remark Kephalion mentions the great deeds of the Assyrian king Ninos, which makes it clear that his account relies more heavily on Ktesias than on

⁵⁸ Kephalion *FGrH* 93 T1, 2, 4; Miller 1971: 84-85; Hose 1994: 463-469.

⁵⁹ Eus. *Chron. Arm.* trans. Karst p.28-30; Synkellos ed. Mosshammer p.195-196; Kephalion *FGrH* 93 F1. See also: Hellanikos *FGrH* 4 F177 (=687a F6); Ktesias *FGrH* 688 F1a; Dinon *FGrH* 690 T5 and T8; Lenfant 2009: 87-88, 128-130.

Herodotos, for Herodotos does not narrate any deeds by Ninus. In a fragment on the construction of Babylon's walls by Semiramis, Kephalion mentions Ktesias, Zenon and Herodotos as his sources. Zenon, not known otherwise, is probably a mistake for Dinon, an author living in the late fourth century. Again, the inclusion of Herodotos is surprising. Although he mentions Semiramis twice in his *Histories* (1.184; 3.155), he does not speak about her constructing the walls of Babylon, but only about 'certain remarkable embankments in the plain outside the city, built to control the river' (1.184).⁶⁰ Apparently, Kephalion mentions Herodotos, because he is one of the acknowledged authorities on Assyria, although not as highly esteemed as Hellanikos and Ktesias, but he does not seem to have read the *Histories*, at least not very accurately. MacQueen's suggestion that the Assyrian Logos of Herodotos was still known in Kephalion's time, that it contained stories about Ninus, and that it was lost afterwards, lacks proof.⁶¹ Kephalion's most important source is Ktesias, or perhaps a vulgate version of Assyrian history, relying heavily upon Ktesias, and he has tried to give his account more weight by mentioning a few other fifth and fourth century authors who were seen as authorities on Assyria. Therefore, the Kephalion fragment is of little use for reconstructing the views of those earlier authors on Assyrian history. Its value lies mainly in the fact that it makes clear who were seen as authorities on Assyria in the second century AD: Herodotos, Hellanikos, Ktesias and Dinon, to put them in the proper chronological order. Ktesias's *Persika* had clearly become the authoritative source on Assyrian history, and Herodotos and Hellanikos were only mentioned to add more weight to the account.

Herodotos

Herodotos has not written a history of the Assyrian empire, but an outline of his views on its history can be obtained from his *Histories*. According to Herodotos, once the Assyrians had been masters of Asia (1.102-103), but they had lost their hegemony to the Medes, who had succeeded in taking the Assyrian capital Nineveh (1.106). However, part of Assyria, centred on Babylon, the new Assyrian capital, remained independent (1.178). After the Persian king Cyrus had defeated the Medes

⁶⁰ Translation by Aubrey de Sélincourt.

⁶¹ MacQueen 1978.

and the Lydians, and the hegemony of Asia had passed to the Persians, Cyrus besieged and captured Babylon and the remnant of Assyria became part of the Persian empire (1.153; 178; 188-191). Herodotos had heard the names of a number of Assyrian and Babylonian kings and queens, some historical, some legendary: Sennacherib (2.141), Sardanapallos (2.150), Semiramis (1.184), Nitokris (1.185-187), Labynetos (1.74; 1.188), and a second king with the same name (1.77; 1.188). What he tells us about these kings and queens consists mainly of anecdotes and descriptions of their monuments. Of these Assyrian and Babylonian monarchs, Semiramis has a special place in Greek historiography. She is more often mentioned than the other ones. As we will see, Ktesias was the most extensive source on Semiramis' life, but Herodotos was the first to mention her (Hdt. 1.184). It is uncertain whether Herodotos knew more about Mesopotamian history than is found in the *Historiae*. He does not keep his promise to tell us more about the history of Assyria (1.184), the name he uses to refer to the whole of Mesopotamia, but he has much to tell about the wonders of Babylon (1.178-200). His description of the city has been the subject of much discussion,⁶² and it remains disputed whether it is founded on autopsy or on a combination of hearsay and imagination, although the latter seems more likely. If Herodotos has ever been in Babylon, he must have been a very casual observer. It seems more likely that he never visited the city.⁶³

Hellanikos

Hellanikos was probably a contemporary of Herodotos. Already in Antiquity there were different opinions on which author being the earlier, and this debate has continued in modern scholarship, but the prevailing opinion is that they were contemporaries.⁶⁴ Hellanikos was probably an armchair scholar and he has written a great number of books, including a *Persika*, a history of the Persian empire. In his *Persika* he must have written about the history of the Assyrian empire. This is not only confirmed by Kephalion, but also by Photios, a Byzantine bishop from the ninth century. Photios tells us in his *Myriobiblion* that Hellanikos in his *Persika*

⁶² E.g. Baumgartner 1950; Rollinger 1993; Boiy 2004: 67-69.

⁶³ Fehling 1989: 243; Rollinger 1993: 184-187; Van der Spek 2008.

⁶⁴ Drews 1973: 23-24; Fowler 1996: 65-66.

argued the existence of two Assyrian kings bearing the name Sardanapallos, one brave and warlike, one decadent and effeminate.⁶⁵ However, the number of fragments handed down from the *Persika* is small.⁶⁶ None of these mentions Ninos or the founding of Nineveh, except the Kephalion fragment. It is impossible to decide which particular elements in Kephalion's sketch of Assyrian history come from Hellanikos. However, the Kephalion fragment suggests that Hellanikos described the great deeds of Ninos, perhaps including the foundation of Nineveh, but that he did not describe the founding of Babylon by Semiramis, as Hellanikos is omitted from the sources for the reign of Semiramis. This would be in accordance with Hellanikos' interest in eponymous heroes and aetiology, as Ninos is an eponymous hero and Semiramis is not.⁶⁷ However, Kephalion is not a very reliable witness, as his handling of Herodotos shows us, and it would be unwise to build too much on him.

Ktesias and Diodoros

The most extensive history of Assyria that has come down to us from Antiquity, including a life of the three most famous Assyrian monarchs, Ninos, Semiramis and Sardanapallos, is found in the *Bibliothēke*, a universal history written by Diodoros of Sicily, a Greek historian from the first century BC. Diodoros made use of a number of older historical works to compile his *Bibliothēke*, among which works of Hekataios of Miletos (1.37.3), Hellanikos (1.37.3), Herodotos (1.37.4; 2.15.1), Hekataios of Abdera (1.46.8), Kleitarchos (2.7.3) and Euhemeros (6.1), but his account of Assyrian history, which is in the second book,⁶⁸ is to a large extent based on Ktesias' *Persika*.⁶⁹ A number of times, Diodoros explicitly calls on Ktesias to authenticate implausible numbers: the size of the Assyrian army (2.5.4; 2.17.1), the size of Ninos' tomb (2.7.1), and the dimensions of Babylon's inner and outer walls (2.7.3-4; 2.8.5). And at the end of his account of Semiramis' life and reign, Diodoros tells us that Ktesias has been

⁶⁵ Hellanikos *FGrH* 4 F 63.

⁶⁶ Hellanikos *FGrH* 4 F 59-63, 177-184 = *FGrH* 687a F 1-11.

⁶⁷ Drews 1973: 8-10 (n 27), 22.

⁶⁸ Diodoros' second book has been translated by Oldfather (Loeb, 1933), Murphy (1989) and Eck (Budé, 2003).

⁶⁹ On the way Diodoros uses Ktesias, see: Comploi 2000.

his main source: ‘Such, then, is the account that Ktesias of Knidos has given about Semiramis’ (2.20.3).⁷⁰ The view that Diodoros did not use Ktesias directly, but through an intermediate source, which gained some popularity in the nineteenth century, has hardly any adherents anymore.⁷¹ Almost certainly, Diodoros has used Ktesias’ *Persika* directly. Although Ktesias is the main source for his Assyrian history, he is not the only one. In his second book, Diodoros also refers to Athenaios (2.20.4), to Kleitarchos, the Alexander historian (2.7.3-5), and to Herodotos (2.15.1).

Ktesias of Knidos was a Greek physician from the late fifth and early fourth century, who, according to his own account, had lived seventeen years at the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes II Mnemon (404-359).⁷² After he had returned to Greece, he wrote a history of the Assyrians, Medes and Persians, known as the *Persika*. Ktesias’ *Persika* is historically not very reliable.⁷³ Much of what Ktesias writes seems to stem from his longing to embellish or contradict Herodotos. Sometimes it seems simply based on fantasy. There are a number of explanations for Ktesias’ inaccuracy. Often, he is regarded as an outright liar, but sometimes his lack of reliability is explained from his sources. According to Drews, Ktesias has written down what he had heard in Babylonia and at the Persian court, and his work reflects the lack of historical knowledge of the majority of the Babylonians and Persians.⁷⁴ According to Stronk, Huber and others, Ktesias did not intend to write a historical work, but a novel or a didactical work or something between historiography and fiction.⁷⁵ In doing so, he made use of both historical material and fictional elements alike, but, as he did not intend to write a historical work, he cannot be blamed for his inaccuracy. In this view, the *Persika* is more similar to Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* or the Hellenistic Ninos

⁷⁰ Translation by C.H. Oldfather (Loeb).

⁷¹ Bigwood 1980: 196-197; Boncquet 1987: 15.

⁷² It is disputed how long Ktesias has been at the Persian court, seven or seventeen years. See Jacoby in *RE* sv Ktesias; Brown 1978; Eck 1990. The fragments of his *Persika* have been edited by Jacoby (*FGrH* 688), König (1972) and Lenfant (2004). They have been translated by König (1972), Auburger (1991), Lenfant (2004), Nichols (unpublished dissertation, 2008), Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2009), and Stronk (2010).

⁷³ Jacoby in *RE* sv Ktesias; Drews 1973: 108; Kuhrt 1982; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987; Young 1997: 23; Bleckmann 2006: 21-29. A more positive view: Lenfant 2004; Kuhrt 2010: 7-8.

⁷⁴ Drews 1975.

⁷⁵ Stronk 2007; Huber 2009: 25-27; Stronk 2011.

novel (see page 13) than to Herodotos' *Histories*. Based on the surviving fragments of Ktesias' *Persika*, it is difficult to say what type of work Ktesias intended to write, but it is clear that most Greek authors who cite Ktesias regard him as a historian. Even if it was not his intention to write history, his work was certainly read as history.

Modern historians know that Ktesias' Assyrian history is unreliable, because they are in a position to compare his account with the cuneiform sources, but even in antiquity, when historians could not check Ktesias' stories against other sources, his reliability was sometimes doubted. According to Plutarch (ca. 50 – 120 AD), 'he has put into his work a perfect farrago of extravagant and incredible tales' (Plut. *Artox.* 1.2).⁷⁶ More often, however, he was considered an authority on Assyrian and Persian history and many ancient historians refer to his work, not only Diodoros of Sicily, but also Nikolaos of Damascus, court historian of Herodes the Great, Eusebios of Caesarea and Georgios Synkellos. As far as we know, only a few authors that wrote about Assyrian and Babylonian history are not (totally) dependent on Ktesias' work: Megasthenes, Dinon,⁷⁷ the father of the Alexander historian Kleitarchos, Berossos, who was a Babylonian himself, and a certain Athenaios. But generally, Ktesias seems to have enjoyed more confidence as an authority on Assyrian and Babylonian history than any of these authors, although undeservedly so. At first, it seems amazing that even authors like Nikolaos and Eusebios, who had more reliable sources at hand – not only the writings of Berossos, but also the biblical books of Kings and Jeremiah – relied so heavily upon Ktesias, but apparently they did not have the means to determine on which sources they could rely, and on which not. Ktesias' stay at the Persian court – the distinction between Assyrian, Babylonian and even Persian was not very clear to most Greeks – must have given his readers the idea that he knew what he was talking about.

Despite Ktesias' authority in all matters Assyrian, one of his stories often met with disbelief: the story of Semiramis' campaign against India (Diod. 2.16-2.19). Despite

⁷⁶ Translation by Bernadotte Perrin (Loeb 1926).

⁷⁷ Deinon or Dinon: it is disputed what his name was (Binder 2008: 60-65; Lenfant 2009: 51). Dinon was the father of Kleitarchos (Plin. *NH* 10.136 = *FGrH* 690 T2, F30) and his *Persika* was probably written in the 330's (Lenfant 2009: 51).

her meticulous preparations and the enormous size of her army – more than three million soldiers – Semiramis was beaten by the Indian king Stabrobates. According to Diodoros, probably following Ktesias, she went back to Bactriana, but according to other sources, she returned to Mesopotamia through the Gedrosian desert, i.e. Baluchistan. Alexander, when returning from India, marched through the Gedrosian desert, ‘because’, if we are to believe his admiral Nearchos, ‘apart from Semiramis on her retreat from India, no one, to his knowledge, had ever before succeeded in bringing an army safely through’ (Ar. An. 6.24, cf. Strab. 15.1.5; 15.2.5).⁷⁸ Not only Semiramis’ route of retreat was controversial, it was also debated whether she had attacked India at all. According to Megasthenes, who lived shortly after Alexander, India was not invaded by an outside army before Alexander’s time, except by Herakles and Dionysos.⁷⁹ Semiramis had prepared an attack on India, but she died before she could carry it out. Megasthenes was probably polemising against Ktesias, because the invasion of India must have been in the latter’s *Persika* (Diod. 2.17.1).

Other Sources on Semiramis

An historian who has written about Semiramis, and who did not depend on Ktesias, was a certain Athenaios. He is mentioned by Diodoros: ‘Such, then, is the account that Ktesias of Knidos has given about Semiramis; but Athenaios and certain other historians say that she was a comely courtesan and because of her beauty was loved by the king of the Assyrians. Now at first she was accorded only a moderate acceptance in the palace, but later, when she had been proclaimed a lawful wife, she persuaded the king to yield the royal prerogatives to her for a period of five days’ (Diod. 2.20.3-4).⁸⁰ Of course, she used these five days to seize the throne. This story is also told by Aelian (*VH* 7.1), who mentions Dinon as his source,⁸¹ and, in a slightly different version, by Plutarch (*Mor.* 753de). This account of Semiramis’ rise to power must have been known in the fourth century, because that is when Dinon lived. It is often thought to have been based on a Babylonian festival, called *Sacaea*, which is

⁷⁸ Translation by Aubrey de Sélincourt (1971).

⁷⁹ Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F11a; Strabo 15.1.5-6; Ar. *Ind.* 5.4.

⁸⁰ Athenaios *FGrH* 681 F1; translation by C.H. Oldfather (Loeb).

⁸¹ Dinon *FGrH* 690 F7.

mentioned by Berossos and Ktesias.⁸² During this festival, which lasted five days, the roles of masters and slaves were reversed and one slave in every household wore royal robes and ruled the house. However, it is more likely that this story about Semiramis' rise to power is based on the Mesopotamian practice of letting a substitute king take the place of the real king at the moment that a bad omen indicated danger to the king.⁸³ A story about a substitute king, a gardener called Enlil-bani, remaining in power because of the sudden death of the real king, is already known from a Mesopotamian chronicle.⁸⁴ It is a beautiful story, and it is a typically Babylonian story, in contrast to most stories about Semiramis, which are typically Greek.

In the Hellenistic period, knowledge of Mesopotamia increased, especially of its geography (Strabo). Knowledge of its history also increased, and the names of some Assyrian and Babylonian kings are mentioned for the first time by Greek authors from this period. Megasthenes (third century) had heard of Nebuchadnezzar and his fame among the Babylonians (Strab. 15.1.6; Jos. *c.Ap.* 1.20; *Ant.Jud.* 10.11.1). Aelian (second century AD) knew of Gilgamesh (Ael. *NH* 12.21). Alexander Polyhistor (first century BC), Flavius Josephus (first century AD) and Abydenos had heard the names of the neo-Babylonian kings after Nebuchadnezzar. Abydenos also knew about the legendary Babylonian kings who were believed to have reigned before the flood, from Aloros to Xisuthros (Ziusudra).⁸⁵ These authors, except Megasthenes, owed their knowledge to Berossos, himself a Babylonian, who knew more about the history of his country than Greek historians did. Yet, Greek knowledge of Assyrian and Babylonian history remained limited, and often erroneous, as is illustrated by the Hellenistic king lists. The literary genre of the king list is oriental in origin. King lists are known from the Ancient Near East, but not from early Greek historians. The oldest king list of which we know in Greek historiography is from Ktesias' *Persika* (Photios §64), but it has not been handed down to us. Kastor's king list, which is

⁸² Berossos *FGrH* 680 F2; Ktesias *FGrH* 688 F4. Cf. Oldfather 1933: 418-419 n 1.

⁸³ Boncquet 1987: 125-127; Bottéro 1992: 138-155; Maul 2000; Huber 2005.

⁸⁴ Jacobsen 1973: 145; *ABC* p.155 (*Chronicle of Early Kings*).

⁸⁵ Abydenos *FGrH* 685 F2; Eus. *Chron. Arm.* trans. Karst p.15-16; Berossos *FGrH* 680 F3; Syncell. *Chron.* ed. Mosshammer p.39.

found in Eusebios' *Chronicle*, was perhaps based on Ktesias.⁸⁶ It consists of many names, only a few of them Assyrian or Babylonian, and it contains even less real, historic Assyrian and Babylonian kings (see chapter eight). Yet, this king list is used by later historians such as Georgios Synkellos (in his *Ecloga Chronographica*).

Conclusion

The Kephalion fragment shows that Herodotos, Hellanikos, Ktesias and Dinon were regarded as the main authorities on Assyrian history, but Kephalion's description of the history of the Assyrian empire is based mainly on Ktesias. The works of two of Kephalion's predecessors – Dinon and Hellanikos – are lost to us, as are the works of most Greek historians who have written about Mesopotamia, but Herodotos' *Histories* have been preserved and of Ktesias' *Persika* enough fragments remain to give an idea of its content and its character.

Herodotos has written about Mesopotamian customs, especially customs that were exotic in Greek eyes, but very little about the history and geography of Assyria and Babylonia. The earliest Greek account of Assyrian history that has been preserved is Ktesias' colourful and romantic, but highly unreliable collection of stories about legendary Assyrian kings and queens such as Ninus, Semiramis and Sardanapallos. Ktesias was above all interested in the founding of important cities such as Nineveh and Babylon, the origin of the Assyrian empire (the first real empire in history according to many Greek and Roman historians), the characterisation of its rulers, and the fall of Nineveh and Babylon. The remainder was deemed of less interest. Historians after Ktesias often had more trust in his *Persika* than it deserved and their image of Assyria and Babylonia was to a large extent based on Ktesias, whose stay at the Persian court had earned him the name of an authority on the history of Asia.

As Ktesias knew very little about the history of Mesopotamia, and authors who had more knowledge of its history such as Megasthenes, Berossos and Polyhistor received little attention, Greek historiography is only to a very limited extent based

⁸⁶ Kastor *FGrH* 250 F1d; Eus. *Chron. Arm.* trans. Karst p.30-32. Synkellos' list of Assyrian kings is clearly based on Kastor's king list.

on real knowledge of Assyrian and Babylonian history. Knowledge of Mesopotamian geography increased in the Hellenistic period, but knowledge of its history hardly so. Greek historians never abandoned the explanations and misconceptions about Mesopotamian history inherited from an earlier period.

