

# VU Research Portal

## Mesopotamia in Greek and Biblical Perceptions

Vlaardingerbroek, H.M.

2014

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Vlaardingerbroek, H. M. (2014). *Mesopotamia in Greek and Biblical Perceptions: Idiosyncrasies and Distortions*.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## 4 Customs and Habits



## 4.1 Introduction

Foreign societies are often perceived as showing strange characteristics and having exotic customs and habits. This chapter discusses what Greek and Judean authors have written about Mesopotamian society: about its wealth and decadence, about its bureaucracy, and about its religion, astrology and divination.

A description of the achievements, the marvels (θαυμάσια) and the customs (νόμοι, νόμιμα) of a foreign nation is usually found in Greek ethnographic writing.<sup>1</sup> Greek authors were as a rule especially interested in customs that were different from their own. They were sometimes even prepared to invent exotic customs which they thought appropriate for foreign nations to emphasize the differences between Greek society, with its proper customs and habits, and foreign societies, with their strange and often inappropriate customs and habits (see chapter one, page 6-7). The Assyrians and Babylonians were regarded as particularly remote and foreign, and some of their customs as exotic and strange. Greek historians and geographers have written, inter alia, about sexual customs in Babylonia, about wealth and decadence, about bureaucracy, and about astrology and divination. Babylonians were regarded as master soothsayers, diviners and astrologers. Even the invention of astrology was usually attributed to the Babylonians, and although it was not the only invention that was ascribed to them, it was certainly the most highly prized. Other inventions of the Assyrians and Babylonians were, according to the Greeks, the inventions of the Median dress and of castration, which were seen in a more unfavourable light, as clear signs of their decadence and unmanliness.

As far as we know, the Judeans and Israelites did not know ethnography as a genre in its own right. Yet, between the lines, the Hebrew Bible tells us much about how its authors saw the Assyrian and Babylonian societies and their customs. In the eighth, seventh and sixth centuries, Assyria and Babylonia were not only the most powerful nations in the Ancient Near East, they were also more accomplished and wealthier societies than Judah and Israel. The way in which they are depicted in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Bar-Kochva 1996: 10-11.

Hebrew Bible reflects much of the fears and prejudices of the inhabitants of a smaller nation against their mightier and wealthier neighbours. The first section of this chapter describes the way in which the Babylonians and the Babylonian society are characterised in the Hebrew Bible. Despite the role that the Assyrians played in the history of Israel and Judah, the Bible offers less material on the way the Assyrians were seen, and as a consequence they will play a smaller role in this chapter than their southern neighbours.

It will become clear that there is a wide gap between the Greek and Biblical views on Assyrian and Babylonian customs and society. Of course, the differences are real and manifest. Yet, it will also become clear that there are more similarities than at first meets the eye, especially centring on the idea of Babylonian society as a decadent society, saturated with astrology and magic.

## 4.2 Assyrians and Babylonians in the Bible

The Assyrians and Babylonians are often mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, and yet, in most texts we do not hear much about them, except that they were warlike and impetuous nations, and that resistance against Assyrian and Babylonian kings and their armies was futile. However, in a small number of texts, mainly from Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, we find a few other characteristics of the Chaldeans and the city of Babylon: their wealth and luxury, their bureaucracy, their worship of deities, and their practice of magic and divination. About the Assyrians even less is told, but as far as anything can be said, it seems that the Assyrians and Babylonians had more or less the same character in the eyes of the Biblical authors. Texts that give us a picture of how the Judeans saw the Assyrians and Babylonians are mainly found in the second book of Kings and in the Prophets. The Assyrians play an important role in 2 Kings and in the first part of the book of Isaiah, the prophet who lived when the Assyrian empire was at its pinnacle and its power extended over much of the ancient Near East. The Babylonians figure prominently in 2 Kings, deuterio-Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. What is said in these texts is often not based on actions of specific kings, but on the stereotypical image of the Assyrians or the king of Assyria.

### Warlike Nations

The Assyrians are foremost a military nation. In Machinist's words: '[T]he image of Assyria . . . is that of an overwhelming military machine, destroying all resistance in its path, devastating the lands of its enemies, hauling away huge numbers of spoils and captives'.<sup>2</sup> This image is found in many places in the Bible, in particular in the books of Isaiah and Nahum (Is. 8:7-8;<sup>3</sup> 10:5-11, 13-14;<sup>4</sup> Nah. 3:1), whose protagonists

---

<sup>2</sup> Machinist 1983: 722.

<sup>3</sup> The book of Isaiah has, as most biblical books, a complicated literary history. For almost every chapter and verse, the questions of authorship and date of origin are debated. Is. 8:5-15 is mostly regarded as a prophecy from (the period of) Isaiah of Jerusalem, save for the words 'the king of Assyria and all his glory', which could be a gloss (Blenkinsopp 2000: 240; Eidevall 2009: 37, 40). But even if these words are an addition to the text, it does not change its interpretation, as Eidevall rightly points out.

<sup>4</sup> These verses are probably from the eighth century. According to Blenkinsopp (2000: 254), Is. 10:5-19 was composed between the fall of Samaria (722) and the siege of Jerusalem (701),

lived in the heyday of Assyrian power. In Isaiah's words: 'The Lord is bringing up against [Judah] the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory. It will rise above all its channels and overflow all its banks. It will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck. And its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land' (Is. 8:7-8). This image of Assyria as a military nation is still found in texts from the period when Assyrian power was waning and its empire was crumbling, or even completely gone, for example in the book of Ezekiel (Ezk. 31:1-9<sup>5</sup>). Of course, the image of Assyria as an invincible nation is based on the events of the eighth and seventh centuries, but also, as Machinist and Eidevall have demonstrated by comparing Assyrian texts with prophetic texts from the Hebrew Bible, on Assyrian imperial propaganda.

The king of Assyria is regularly called proud in the Hebrew Bible, for example in Is. 10:13: 'By the strength of my hand I [sc. the Assyrian king] have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones'. To make things crystal clear, these words are preceded by an explanatory gloss: '[The Lord] will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride' (Is. 10:12). In the story of the siege of Jerusalem (Is. 36-37; 2K. 18-19), which will be discussed in one of the next sections, the pride of the Assyrian king – not against Hezekiah, but against Israel's God – is also an important theme.<sup>6</sup> This pride is found in the words of the captains of the Assyrian army (2K. 18:15; 19:10), it is condemned in Isaiah's prophecy (2K. 19:22, 28), and it is regarded as the cause of Sennacherib's eventual downfall (2K. 19:37).<sup>7</sup> This image of Assyria as a proud and arrogant nation persisted after the fall of the Assyrian empire (e.g. in Ezk. 31:10).

---

save for verse 12, which is a later addition (251). According to Eidevall (2009: 47-39), this chapter was composed shortly before the siege of Jerusalem, but was changed afterwards. Of course, there are also other opinions. Beuken (2003: 279) believes that it was created *after* the fall of Assyria, although it contains older material.

<sup>5</sup> The emendation of אשור (Assyrië) into תאשור (cedar, cypress, pine) in v3 is not convincing, as Block (1998: 185), Sulzbach (2004: 127) and Greenberg (2005: 323) rightly argue.

<sup>6</sup> Weissert 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The Babylonians regarded Sennacherib's sack of Babylon (689) and the desecration of its temples as cause of this infamous death (Dalley 2007: 62, 66), the Israelites his pride.

The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (605-562) and his army are, like the Assyrians before them, depicted as a military power against which every form of resistance is useless. The Judeans do not stand a chance against this foe from the North. This becomes clear from the description of the actual events in Kings and Jeremiah (2K. 24-25; Jr. 39 and 52), but even more from the prophecies of Habakkuk and Jeremiah, who call for submission to the king of Babylon, against whom resistance is futile (Hab. 1:6-11; Jr. 32:1-5; 34:1-5; 37:10). In the words of Habakkuk: ‘For I am rousing the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own. Dread and fearsome are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves. [...] At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport. They laugh at every fortress, and heap up earth to take it’ (Hab. 1: 6-7, 10). And not only Judah is in danger. Other nations, such as Edom, Moab, Tyrus and Sidon (Jr. 27:1-11; Ezk. 26:7-14), and even Egypt (Jr. 43:8-13; 46:13-26; Ezk. 29:17-21; 30:10-12) are as powerless in the face of the Babylonian threat as Judah. It seems that the king of Babylonian surpasses even the Assyrian kings in military prowess.

Cruelty, pride and arbitrariness, qualities that are associated with Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel, are not explicitly attributed to Nebuchadnezzar by his contemporaries Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Although the image of Babylon is negative in many biblical books, Jeremiah and Ezekiel say little to the detriment of the Babylonian king, and even call him a servant of God (עבדי ‘*abdī* in Jr. 25:9 and 27:6; according to Fischer an *Ehrentitel*).<sup>8</sup> An exception is Jeremiah’s prophecy against Babylon (Jr. 50-51; see chapter six). For this reason, many scholars believe that these chapters are from another hand than the remainder of Jeremiah, and have been added afterwards, in another period, although they agree in style and language with the rest of the book.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Habakkuk seems genuinely incensed about the violence, cruelty and pride of the Babylonians.

---

<sup>8</sup> Fischer 2005: 739. Nebuchadnezzar is the only non-Israelite to be called ‘*abdī*. Cf. similar titles: *mōšīʿ* (2K. 13:5), perhaps said of Adad-Nirari III, *roʿī* ‘my shepherd’ (Is. 44:28) and *mʿšīhō* ‘his anointed’ (Is. 45:1), both of Cyrus.

<sup>9</sup> Fischer 2005: 568. According to Kessler (2003: 202-203), the authenticity question is ‘unproductive’; according to Lundbom (2004), these chapters are by Jeremiah.



To sum up, the stereotypical Assyrian king is a warlike prince, whose military successes sometimes go to his head and make him proud and arrogant. The texts are as a rule not very specific about their pride. Descriptions of the Assyrians and the Assyrian king show a clear dichotomy in biblical literature. In the second book of Kings, their acts are described specifically, but dispassionately. The name of the king and the date of the events are specified, but even the most appalling cruelties are mentioned without comment or emotion. In the prophetic books, at the other hand, much is said about the military prowess and invincibility of the Assyrians and about the pride of their king, but often he remains anonymous and what is said is not connected to specific events or acts. An exception is the story of the siege of Jerusalem, which speaks of a specific event and explains them from Sennacherib's pride. The Babylonians are also a warlike and impetuous nation, and their most famous king, Nebuchadnezzar, is as proud and powerful as the Assyrian kings before him. In the books of Kings and Jeremiah, the most cruel and appalling deeds of the king are mentioned without any comment or emotion.<sup>10</sup> The king is not described as hostilely as one should expect of someone who took and razed Jerusalem. He is even called a servant of the Lord by Jeremiah. His contemporary Habakkuk and the later tradition, especially Daniel, show more emotion and portray the Babylonian king as a cruel and proud tyrant.

### **Wealth, Luxury and Textile**

Just as the Assyrians, the Babylonians were regarded as a warlike nation. War had made Babylon a rich city, filled with the spoils of war (Jr. 50:37; 51:13; Hab. 2:8). But with plunder came luxury and decadence. Therefore, deuterio-Isaiah calls the inhabitants of Babylon tender, spoiled (Hebr. רכה *rakkā*; Is. 47:1), pampered, delicate (ענגה <sup>א</sup>*nuggā*; Is. 47:1) and accustomed to a good life (עדינה <sup>א</sup>*dīnā*; Is. 47:8). Babylon is depicted as a rich woman in Is. 47, called 'daughter Babylon' (בת־בבל) and 'daughter Chaldea' (בת־כשדים).<sup>11</sup> She feels secure and leads a life of luxury, but she will fall upon hard times, and will lose all she has. The numerous campaigns of the

---

<sup>10</sup> Harvey 2010: 53.

<sup>11</sup> The NRSV translates 'daughter Babylon' and 'daughter Chaldea', the KJV 'daughter of Babylon' and 'daughter of the Chaldeans'. See: Kartveit 2013: 151-154.

Babylonian kings did not only bring wealth into the city, but also people. The deportations that followed the Babylonian campaigns must have made Babylon, which was already bilingual – Akkadian and Aramean – a city of many languages. It seems likely that this diversity is reflected in the legend of the Tower of Babel.<sup>12</sup> Babylon, the great city, must have been a real metropolis in the eyes of many biblical authors from the exilic period onwards: a city of wealth, decadence and many languages.

War was not the only source of wealth. Commerce was the other one. In Ezekiel (16:29; 17:4), Babylonia is twice called אַרְצ־כְּנַעַן *'ereṣ k<sup>na</sup>an*. This expression means country of merchants. This is especially clear in Ezk. 17:4, where אַרְצ־כְּנַעַן is used parallel with עִיר רִכְלִים *'ir rok<sup>l</sup>im* ‘city of merchants’ (compare also כָּל-עַם כְּנַעַן *kal-<sup>c</sup>am k<sup>na</sup>an* in Zeph. 1:11, which clearly means ‘traders’).<sup>13</sup> The Assyrians were also seen as merchants: ‘You [Nineveh] increased your merchants more than the stars of the heaven’ (Nah. 3:16). Costly fabrics were their main merchandise: ‘Haran, Canneh, Eden, the merchants of Sheba, Ashur,<sup>14</sup> and Chilmad traded with you [Tyre]. These traded with you in choice garments, in clothes of blue and embroidered work, and in carpets of coloured material’ (Ezk. 27:23-24). Of course, the textile trade really played an important role in Mesopotamian economy from at least the old Assyrian period onwards.

The dress of the Chaldeans must have been distinctive, although the details are lost to us: ‘pictures of Chaldeans, outlined in bright red, who wore belts around their waists and flowing turbans on their heads’ (Ezk. 23:15). Although טְבוּל *t<sup>b</sup>ul* ‘turban’ is a hapax, it is clear from the context that it must have been some sort of headgear. In Jos. 7:21, Achan hides a mantle of Shinar (אֲדַרְת שִׁנָּר *'adderet šin<sup>c</sup>ar*). It is not clear what a mantle from Babylonia was, or how it looked, but apparently it was costly. The question whether the story or its details are historical is not important. The

---

<sup>12</sup> Beaulieu 2008: 7.

<sup>13</sup> HAL sv כְּנַעַן and כְּנַעֲנִי; Vlaardingerbroek 1999: 95. Greenberg 2001: 340. LXX leaves כְּנַעַן out, but this is probably due to an oversight. Like the Canaanites in biblical literature, the Phoenicians, who called themselves Canaanites (Hackett 2008: 82), are usually represented as traders in early Greek literature (López-Ruiz 2010: 27).

<sup>14</sup> In this text, Ashur could be a city (like Haran), or a region (like Eden).

narrator apparently expects his readers to know what a mantle of Shinar is. It must have been something recognisable for them. Garments ‘from Akkad’ (*ša akkidē*, litt. ‘from the Babylonians’) are sometimes mentioned in old- and neo-Assyrian texts, but it is not clear whether ‘from Akkad’ refers to the origin of the garment, or the pattern, or the way it was made.<sup>15</sup> But it is clear that these garments are sometimes quite valuable, as was apparently Achan’s mantle.

## Officials and Eunuchs

Babylonian and Assyrian officials are mentioned a number of times in the Bible. Sometimes they are called שְׂרִים *śōrīm* ‘officials’ or סְרִיסִים *sərīsīm* ‘eunuchs’, general terms that are used for Israelite and foreign officials alike. But some Mesopotamian dignitaries that are mentioned in the Bible bear Akkadian titles such as פַּחֹת *paḥōt* ‘governors’ and תַּרְתַּן *tartān* ‘commander in chief’, which were (at first) specifically used for officials serving Assyrian and Babylonian kings. These titles betray that the biblical authors had some knowledge of Assyrian and Babylonian bureaucracy.

Hebr. שֶׂר *śōr* (pl. שְׂרִים *śōrīm*; etymologically identical to Akk. *šarru* ‘king’) is a general term, used indiscriminately for Israelite and foreign officials alike (e.g. in Jr. 38:17: מַלְכ־בָּבֶל *śōrē mēlek-bābel* ‘the officials of the king of Babylon’). Traditionally, סְרִיסִים *sərīs* – a loan from Akk. *ša rēši*, with the Assyrian pronunciation of <š> as [s]<sup>16</sup> – is sometimes translated as ‘official, courtier’, and sometimes as ‘eunuch’. *Sərīsīm* are often mentioned in court romances: Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 37-50: Potiphar, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker are all *sərīsīm*), Daniel at the Babylonian court (Dan. 1; 7x) and Esther (12x). In the book of Esther, *sərīsīm* attend the king (1:10; 7:9) and Esther (4:5), *sərīsīm* are in charge of the women and concubines (2:3, 14), and *sərīsīm* conspire against the king (2:21; 6:2). In Daniel, the *rab sərīsīm* oversees the schooling of a number of Judean boys in the ways of the Babylonian court. Neither Daniel nor Esther, which were written in the late Persian or Hellenistic period, are known for their historical accuracy, but they show that *sərīsīm* were regarded as a normal part

---

<sup>15</sup> Michel and Veenhof 2010: 222, 234, 237; Villard 2010: 394. [#transcriptie klopt#]

<sup>16</sup> Meyer 1992: 150 (§38.6); Mankowski 2000: 123-125. The plural סְרִיסִים *sərīsīm* (not *s̄rīsīm*) is puzzling. It suggests an older *\*sarrīs* or *\*sārīs*, while Akk. *ša rēši* has a short **a** and a single **r**.

of Babylonian and Persian palace life. In Kings and Jeremiah, there are Babylonian (2K. 20:18 = Is. 39:7)<sup>17</sup>, but also Israelite and Judean *sārīsīm*. The latter attend the king (1K. 22:9) or the queen (2K. 9:32). Two are even mentioned by name: Nathan-melech (2K. 23:11) and Ebed-melech (Jr. 38:7-13). It seems that *sārīsīm* were also a regular part of Judean and Israelite court life.

As was said in the previous paragraph, סָרִיס *sārīs* is sometimes translated as ‘official, courtier’, and sometimes as ‘eunuch’ (castrated male).<sup>18</sup> Tadmor has argued that a *sārīs* is always a eunuch.<sup>19</sup> It is obvious that in some texts *sārīsīm* are castrated males (e.g. Is. 56:3-4). According to Tadmor, there is no reason to assume that in other texts a *sārīs* is a (not necessarily castrated) courtier. At first sight, the existence of Potiphar’s wife seems to prove otherwise, but this is a *non sequitur*: some other texts mention eunuchs that were married and had adopted children.<sup>20</sup> Assyriologists have a similar discussion about the meaning of Akk. *ša rēši*: ‘eunuch’, ‘official, courtier’, or sometimes the first and sometimes the latter.<sup>21</sup> At the moment, most scholars are of the opinion that a *ša rēši* is a ‘courtier’, regardless of his physical constitution. Since *sārīs* is an Akkadian loan, this could be relevant to the discussion about the meaning of the Hebrew word. Perhaps ‘official, courtier’ is the oldest meaning in Hebrew, from which ‘eunuch’ developed later.

Less common are the Akkadian loans פָּחֹת *paḥōt* ‘governors’ (2K. 18:24; Jr. 51:23, 28, 57; Ezk. 23:6, 12, 23; Ass. *bēl pāḥiti* ‘provincial governor’, from which *bēl* was dropped in speech)<sup>22</sup> and סָגְנִים *s’gōnīm* ‘officials’ (Is. 41:25; Jr. 51:23, 28, 57; Ezk. 23:6, 12, 23; Ass. *šaknu* ‘governor’).<sup>23</sup> These terms are used of Assyrian and Babylonian (and even Persian) officials, but the Hebrew forms represent the Assyrian pronunciation (*g* for

---

<sup>17</sup> 2K. 20:18: סָרִיסִים בְּהֵיכַל מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל *sārīsīm b<sup>h</sup>hēkal melek bābel* ‘eunuchs (officials) in the palace of the king of Babylon’.

<sup>18</sup> HAL sv סָרִיס; Cilliers 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Tadmor 1995; Everhart 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Nikolaos *FGrH* 90 F66 §6 = Ktesias *FGrH* 688 F8d §6; Lenfant 2012: 285.

<sup>21</sup> Grayson 1995; Siddall 2007; Jursa 2011; Pirngruber 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Mankowsky 2000: 128-129.

<sup>23</sup> Mankowsky 2000: 106-107.

k, s for š), which shows that they were borrowed during the Assyrian period.<sup>24</sup> In some texts, especially in Jr. 39 and 2K. 18-19 (Is. 36-37), more specific titles are used.<sup>25</sup> A short list follows:

- רב־טבחים *rab-ṭabbəḥīm* ‘chief cook’ (2K. 25:8-20; Jr. often);<sup>26</sup>
- רב־מג *rab-mag*, Akk. *rab-mugi*, *rab-mungi* (Jr. 39:3, 13);<sup>27</sup>
- רב־סריס *rab-sarīs*, Akk. *rab ša rēši* ‘chief eunuch’ (2K. 18:17; Jr. 39:3, 13);<sup>28</sup>
- רב־שקה *rab-šəqē*, Akk. *rab šaqê* ‘chief cup-bearer’ (2K. 18-19; Is. 36-37);<sup>29</sup>
- סמגר *smgr*, Bab. *simmagir* (Jr. 39:3 conj.);<sup>30</sup>
- תרתן *tartən*, Akk. *tartānu* ‘commander in chief’ (2K. 18:17; Is. 20:1).<sup>31</sup>

It is notable that *rab-šəqē* represents the Babylonian pronunciation, although this Rabshakeh is an Assyrian official. Some of these titles have alternative forms:

- שר טבחים *šar ṭabbəḥīm* (Genesis: Potiphar) instead of רב־טבחים (Nebuzaradan);
- שר סריסים *šar sarīsīm* (e.g. Dan. 1:7) instead of רב־סריס and רב סריסים (Dan. 1:3).

In these combinations, *šar* is typically Hebrew, while *rab* is due to Assyrian or Babylonian influence: Akk. *rabû* is used in the same context.<sup>32</sup>

Despite their colourful titles, most of these officials were high ranking military officers: in Assyria, the official called *rab ša rēši* was the commander of the royal corps (2K. 18:17; Jr. 39:3, 13) and the Rabshakeh (*rab šaqê*) was the commander of the northeastern army.<sup>33</sup> These Assyrian and Babylonian officials being mentioned by

---

<sup>24</sup> Millard 1976: 4; cf. Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 15-16.

<sup>25</sup> Vanderhooft (1999: 149-152) and Mattila (2000) discuss these officials in detail. Origin and meaning of שר טבחים are not clear.

<sup>26</sup> Vanderhooft (1999: 150) translates ‘chief cook’, Fischer (2005: 356) ‘captain of the guard’. What exactly Nebuzaradan’s function was is not clear, but he must have been a high-ranking Babylonian official.

<sup>27</sup> Mankowsky 2000: 134-135.

<sup>28</sup> Mattila 2000: 61-76, 153-154, 163-164. The translation ‘chief eunuch’ is traditional, but controversial (*vide supra*).

<sup>29</sup> Mattila 2000: 45-60, 155, 163.

<sup>30</sup> Vanderhooft 1999: 150-151; Mankowsky 2000: 120-121; Jursa 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Mattila 2000: 107-125, 153-154, 165.

<sup>32</sup> Rüterswörden 1981: 89.

<sup>33</sup> Mattila 2000: 45-60, 155, 163.

name in the Hebrew Bible shows that the Judean scribes had some knowledge of Assyrian and Babylonian administration.

## Deities and Divination

Babylon was a city of gods, or, in the eyes of the Judeans, a city of idols: 'for it is a land of images, and they go mad over idols' (Jr. 50:38). These deities, and the statues of these gods, are denoted in various ways: frightful images (אימים *'ēmīm*; Jr. 50:38), idols (גלולים *gillūlīm*; Jr. 50:2), images (פסילים *p<sup>e</sup>sīlīm*; Is. 21:9; Jr. 50:38; 51:47), idols (עצבים *ʿabbīm*; Is. 46:1; Jr. 50:2), or gods (אליים *'elīm*; Is. 46:6). None of these words are used exclusively for Babylonian deities. Sometimes, they denote gods that were venerated by the Israelites and Judeans, or by other nations. A few Assyrian and Babylonian gods are mentioned by name: Nebo (נבו *n<sup>e</sup>bō*; Is. 46:1; Akk. *Nabū*), Marduk (מרדך *m<sup>e</sup>rodak*; Jr. 50:2), also called Bel (בל *bel*; Is. 46:1; Jr. 50:2; 51:40; Akk. *bēlu* 'Lord'), Tammuz (תמוז; Ezk. 8:14), Nergal (נרגל), and the Assyrian god Nisrok (נסרך), whose name remains unexplained.<sup>34</sup> In 2K. 17:30-31 a list of lesser known deities is found: Succoth-benoth, Ashima, Nibhaz, Tartak, Adrammelech and Anammelech.<sup>35</sup> The names of some of these deities are unexplained, Ashima is connected to Hamath in Syria, Nibhaz and Tartak are perhaps Elamite, but (Succoth-)Benoth is an Akkadian deity (Akk. *Bānītu*), which is found in Assyrian and Babylonian personal names.

The Babylonians – and probably also the Assyrians – were known for their sorceries (כשפים *k<sup>e</sup>špīm*; Is. 47:9, 12; Nah. 3:4),<sup>36</sup> their spells and enchantments (חברים *ḥ<sup>a</sup>ḇarīm*; Is. 47:9, 12), their practice of divination (קסם *qesem*; verb קסם *qsm*; Ezk. 21:26-27; Is. 44:25<sup>37</sup>), their wisdom (חכמה *ḥakmā*; Is. 47:10; Jr. 50:35) and their knowledge (דעת *da<sup>c</sup>at*; Is. 47:10). These sorceries are meant to make evil disappear (שחר *šḥr* 'to cause to disappear by magic'; Is. 47:11). Practitioners of these arts are called oracle priests (בדים *baddīm*; Is. 44:25; Jr. 50:36),<sup>38</sup> soothsayers (חרטמים *ḥartummīm*; Dan. 1:20; 2:2),<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Uehlinger in *DDD* sv Nisroch (1999); Frahm 2011: 274-275.

<sup>35</sup> All these deities are discussed in *DDD*.

<sup>36</sup> In Nah. 3:4, *Nineveh* is called a mistress of sorceries (witch).

<sup>37</sup> In Is. 44, the Babylonians are not mentioned explicitly, but they are probably intended.

<sup>38</sup> In Hos. 11:6, this word is used of oracle priests in Israel.

herbalists (מכשפיים *m<sup>e</sup>kašš<sup>e</sup>pīm*; Dan. 2:2), exorcists (אשפיים *'ašš<sup>e</sup>pīm*; Dan. 1:20; 2:2; from Akk. (w)*āšipu(m)*),<sup>40</sup> and chaldeans (Dan. 2:2), in this context meaning astrologers or magicians. Although חכמה and דעת often have a positive meaning, here they clearly have a negative connotation. It is not clear to what extent these sorceries were considered typically Mesopotamian. Hebr. כשפיים *k<sup>e</sup>špīm* is perhaps an Akkadian loan (*kišpum* 'sorcery, evil'),<sup>41</sup> but it is used often in the Bible for sorceries that are not connected in any way with Babylon or the Chaldeans. Both אשפיים *'ašš<sup>e</sup>pīm* and שחר *šḥr* are also Akkadian loans (*saḥārum* 'to turn, to bewitch'),<sup>42</sup> but they are used only a few times and it is not possible to conclude whether they were in Judean eyes specifically connected to the Chaldeans.

Most biblical texts do not tell us anything about the way divination was practised, but some do. Looking at the stars as a means of divination is mentioned in Isaiah: 'Let those who study the heavens stand up and save you, those who gaze at the stars, and at each new moon predict what shall befall you' (Is. 47:13). But the most detailed description of divination techniques is found in Ezekiel: 'For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the fork in the two roads, to use divination. He shakes the arrows, he consults the teraphim, he inspects the liver' (Ezk. 21:26). Use of arrows or teraphim for divination is not found in Babylonian sources, but it is known that hepatoscopy – divination by inspecting the liver of an animal – was much practised by the Babylonians.<sup>43</sup> This is the only text in the Hebrew Bible where liver divination is mentioned, but it is not justified to conclude that the prophet had specific knowledge about Babylonian divination techniques, because he also mentions use of arrows and teraphim, which were both unknown as a means of divination in Babylonia, as far as we know.

---

<sup>39</sup> This word is an Egyptian loan – also known from Assyria (Jeffers 1996: 44-49). In Genesis and Exodus it is used of Egyptian soothsayers.

<sup>40</sup> Mankowsky 2000: 43-44.

<sup>41</sup> Jeffers 1996: 65-70; Mankowsky 2000: 74-75.

<sup>42</sup> Almost everything about שחר is uncertain (*HAL sv*).

<sup>43</sup> Greenberg 2005: 58-59.

## Conclusion

The Assyrians and Babylonians were seen as warlike nations. War was one source of wealth, commerce was the other. Together they made the Babylonians prosperous and rich. But wealth and luxury were believed to lead eventually to weakness and decadence, and that is how the Babylonians are sometimes depicted, for example in Is. 47. Depicting the Babylonians as pleasure loving and weak is, of course, at odds with the warlike character which is usually ascribed to them, but this charge against the Babylonians of being decadent, tender and spoiled comes from deuterio-Isaiah, who lived when the power of the Babylonians was waning, while their military prowess is a recurring theme in the words of or ascribed to proto-Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who lived in a time when Judah was confronted with the power of the Assyrian and Babylonian armies.

Assyria and Babylonia were governed by a host of officials. The number of officials mentioned in the Hebrew Bible suggests that the Babylonian state was regarded as a bureaucracy by the Judeans and Israelites, who themselves had a more modest state apparatus. But the most striking characteristic of the Babylonian and Assyrian culture was probably their proficiency in astrology, divination and magic. Of course, the prophetic writings condemn these practices, but not because they are powerless. They are depicted as something powerful and dangerous, especially in Nah. 3:4 and Is. 47, although, in the end, they cannot save Nineveh or Babylon from destruction.





### 4.3 Assyrians in Greek Literature

Greek authors saw Assyrians, and especially their kings and queens, often as typical barbarians: very rich, effeminate and decadent. Women, especially Semiramis, and eunuchs, were believed to wield much power in the Orient, another evil in Greek eyes. This section will concentrate on what the Greek thought to know about Assyrian society: wealth and decadence, sexual customs, apparently a subject of special interest to many Greeks, and Assyrian inventions, especially of astrology and astronomy, but also of castration and the Median dress. Greek historians were often especially interested in who founded what and who invented what, ascribing important inventions in human history to famous men and women of primeval times, called κτισταί (founders) or πρωτοὶ εὐρεταί (first inventors). The Assyrians and Babylonians were seen as the inventors of fine linens, the so-called Median dress, castration and astrology. Of these inventions, only the last one earned praise in Greek eyes. Of course, not all Greeks were impressed by Babylonian astrologers. Diodoros tells us that the philosopher Anaxarchos advised Alexander the Great not to listen to the Chaldeans (Diod. 17.112.6).<sup>44</sup> But as a rule, Babylonian soothsayers were respected in the classical world.

#### **Weak Kings and Strong Queens**

According to Greek historiography, the character of the first Assyrian monarchs, Ninus and Semiramis, strongly contrasts with that of their successors. Ninus is an archetypical empire builder, warlike and energetic, but he is an atypical Assyrian. His successors, except Semiramis, are luxury loving, effeminate and sluggish. They hold their empire together, not by valour, but by wiliness, and instead of waging wars and enlarging their realm like real kings, they pass their time in luxury and idleness in their harems, while women and eunuchs rule the Assyrian empire. Ktesias paints the same picture of the Achaemenid empire and its kings.<sup>45</sup> The Assyrian as well as the Persian kings are what constitute in Greek eyes typically eastern monarchs.

---

<sup>44</sup> Van der Spek 2003: 49-51.

<sup>45</sup> Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987.

Ninos is a typical conqueror and city founder. He trains the strongest of the young men of his realm, creates an army, attacks his neighbours, conquers an empire and founds a city. In fact, he is the first monarch in history to do so, according to many ancient historians: 'the first [king of Asia] to be handed down by tradition to history and memory for us as one who achieved great deeds is Ninos, king of the Assyrians' (Diod. 2.1.4). Justinus says basically the same, but he judges Ninos' achievements more negatively: 'The dominions of each [king] were confined within his own country. The first of all princes, who, from an extravagant desire of ruling, changed this old and, as it were, hereditary custom, was Ninos, king of the Assyrians' (Just. 1.11).<sup>46</sup> Ninos does not differ much from other founders of nations or empires, such as Cyrus the Great. Even Moses, as founder of the Judean nation, is sometimes described in the same vein in Hellenistic Jewish historiography.

Most of Ninos' successors were cast in an entirely different mould. Kephalion's characterisation of Assyrian kings is shared by many ancient historians: 'As for the remaining kings, they ruled for a period of 1000 years, son succeeding father to the throne, and not one of them died after having the rule for less than twenty years. For their unwarlike, unadventurous, and effeminate character kept them secure. Indeed, they stayed indoors; neither was there anything that they accomplished, nor did anyone even see them, except for the concubines and effeminate men'.<sup>47</sup> The first Assyrian king to lead this life of luxury and idleness was Ninyas, Ninos' son (Diod. 2.21.1-2) and the last and perhaps most decadent was Sardanapallos, 'who outdid all his predecessors in luxury and sluggishness. For not to mention the fact that he was not seen by any man residing outside the palace, he lived the life of a woman' (Diod. 2.23). All Assyrian kings from Ninyas to Sardanapallos, according to Ktesias twenty-three in number, live up to the Greek expectations of an oriental monarch: luxury loving, effeminate and degenerate. The focal point of their courts is the harem, a source of intrigues and conspiracies.

---

<sup>46</sup> Translation by John Selby Watson.

<sup>47</sup> Synkellos ed Mosshammer p.195-6. Translation by Adler and Tuffin. Kephalion *FGrH* 93 F1b = Hellenikos *FGrH* 687a F6 = Ktesias *FGrH* 688 F1a = Dinon *FGrH* 690 F8. Cf Diod 2.22.1.

Semiramis ruled between Ninos, the warlike empire founder, and Ninyas, the first of the degenerate oriental kings. Like Ninos, Semiramis is brave, as the story of the campaign against Bactriana – now Afghanistan – shows (Diod. 2.4.1; 2.5.1-2.7.2).<sup>48</sup> This story explains how Semiramis became the wife of Ninos. At first, she had been the wife of the Assyrian official Onnes, who had seen her in Askalon, where she was born, and had married her. When Onnes accompanied Ninos, who besieged Bactra, the capital of Bactriana, and the siege dragged on, Onnes sent for his wife. Immediately after her arrival, Semiramis gathered a small force of mountaineer soldiers and captured the citadel. Ninos was greatly impressed with her courage, resourcefulness and beauty, and fell in love with her. Onnes killed himself, rather than giving in to the pleas and threats of the king, and Ninos and Semiramis married. They returned to Assyria and they got a son, called Ninyas. Ninos died and Semiramis buried him in an enormous tomb that she built in the city of Nineveh. Semiramis is not only brave, she is also a city founder. After Ninos' death, Semiramis founded Babylon, according to Ktesias (Diod. 2.7-2.12). She built a wall of three hundred and sixty stades to protect the city, an impressive bridge at the narrowest point of the river, quays along the river, two palaces, and a temple with enormous golden statues of Zeus, Hera and Rhea.<sup>49</sup> She called the city Babylon. And apart from Babylon and its temples and palaces, Semiramis was believed to have built many more cities, roads, and gardens all over Asia, known to the Greeks as the ἔργα Σεμιράμιδος (Diod. 2.11, 2.13-2.14; Strab. 16.1.2). And yet, her courage and her building activities often earned her only grudging respect from Greek authors. In the classical period, 'womanly behaviour was characterized [...] by submissiveness and modesty'.<sup>50</sup> In the Hellenistic period, women could play a more public role than in the fifth century,<sup>51</sup> but even then, warfare and city building as a rule remained masculine pastimes.

---

<sup>48</sup> Diodoros writes Bactriana. It is possible that Bactriana is Hellenistic and that Ktesias called this country Bactria. See Bigwood 1980: 200-201.

<sup>49</sup> According to Dalley (2005: 16-17) and König (1972: 38-39), details from Herodotos and Diodoros correspond to deeds that Sennacherib has recorded in his inscriptions.

<sup>50</sup> Pomeroy 1994: 98.

<sup>51</sup> Pomeroy 1994: 125-131.

To sum up, there is a clear dichotomy in the descriptions of Assyrian monarchs in Greek historiography. Ninus is warlike and brave, as befits a king. His successors are effeminate and luxury loving. Semiramis shows qualities of both. She is brave and decadent, but even her audacity and valour aroused mixed feelings, because these qualities were regarded as appropriate for men, nor for women. Assyrian gender roles in Greek literature are a reversal of what the Greeks saw as proper gender roles. This clearly illustrates how the image that one people (i.c. the Greeks) has of another nation (i.c. the Assyrians) often mirrors their own, idealised society (see chapter one, page 6-7). To make things worse, Semiramis was in Greek eyes not only brave, but also, as will be seen in the next section, as debauched and depraved as any of the Assyrian monarchs after her.

### **Sexual customs**

Greek historians seem often particularly interested in the sexual customs of foreign nations. Barbarians, among whom the Babylonians and Assyrians, are often accused of improper sexual behaviour,<sup>52</sup> and the worst of their crimes is incest: ‘That is the way all barbarians are: father lies with daughter and son with mother and brother with sister, nearest kin murder each other, and there is no law to stop any of this’ (Eur. *Andr.* 174-175).<sup>53</sup> This interest in foreign sexual customs manifests itself in stories about Semiramis’ lovers and her incestuous passion for her own son. It also manifests itself in Herodotos’ Babylonian logos. In 1.196 Herodotos tells his readers in short something about Babylonian customs (νόμοι). The customs that he mentions include marriage by auction (1.196), postcoital ritual purification (1.198) and sacred prostitution (1.199). The same customs are also mentioned by Strabo (16.1.20), which illustrates how little the knowledge of Babylonian customs, real or imagined, had changed in five centuries, a clear example of the tenacity of ethnic stereotypes. These and other Babylonian customs that have to do with marriage or prostitution, which are related by Herodotos and other Greek historians and

---

<sup>52</sup> Hall 1991: 188-190.

<sup>53</sup> Translation by David Kovacs (Loeb).

ethnographers, are often not confirmed by cuneiform sources, and are probably for the greater part Greek inventions.<sup>54</sup>

According to Diodoros, Semiramis took lovers from among her soldiers, but afterwards made away (ἠφάνιζε) with them (Diod. 2.13.3-4). The story is also found in Georgios Synkellos' *Chronography*, with more details: 'In many places, [Semiramis] erected earth embankments, seemingly because of the floods. But these embankments were really tombs of her lovers buried alive, as Ktesias records' (Synkell. *Chron.* 71).<sup>55</sup> The sad fate of Semiramis' lovers recalls the fate of Ishtar's lovers, who all met a sorry end.<sup>56</sup> Her lovers are also hinted at in a fragment from the *Histories* of Nikolaos of Damascus, court historian of the Judean king Herodes (40-4).<sup>57</sup> Nikolaos tells us about a conspiracy of the two sons of Onnes and Semiramis against their mother, which was motivated by fear of their half-brother Ninyas, but also by their mother's debaucheries. The conspiracy was revealed, and here the fragment ends, but other sources tell us how the story ended. According to Kephalion, cited by Eusebios and Synkellos, she killed her sons in retaliation.<sup>58</sup> According to Zawadzki, the source of this story, which is inspired by the murder of Sennacherib by his sons, is Berossos.<sup>59</sup> Zawadzki wants to prove too much. The difference between Diodoros and Nikolaos does not prove that this story was not from Ktesias. It is probably best explained by Diodoros' tendency to leave out the more unsavoury details from his sources.

Pliny recounts another strange story about Semiramis. He tells us that she had a horse for a lover (Plin. *NH* 8.42). This story has a parallel in the *Gilgamesh epic* (6.2), where Ishtar has a horse for a lover.<sup>60</sup> But there is even worse to come. According to Agathias, a Byzantine historian from the sixth century, Ninyas killed Semiramis,

---

<sup>54</sup> Roth 2006: 22.

<sup>55</sup> Translation by William Adler and Paul Tuffin.

<sup>56</sup> *Gilgamesh VI* i-iii (Vanstiphout 2001: 93-97; Dalley 2000: 77-79).

<sup>57</sup> Nikolaos *FGrH* 90 F1.

<sup>58</sup> Kephalion *FGrH* 93 F1.

<sup>59</sup> Zawadzki 1990.

<sup>60</sup> Hommel 1921.

because of her incestuous passion for him (Agath. 2.24.2-3). This story is also found in Justinus' *epitome* of Pompeius Trogus' *Historiae Philippicae* (Just. 1.2) and in Augustinus' *City of God* (18.2). This makes it likely that this motif was already found in Ktesias' *Persika* and that Diodoros has omitted it.<sup>61</sup> Agathias thought that incest was normal among the Persians of his time. The story about Semiramis and Ninyas shows that people in the East had not always been so depraved. Semiramis merely foreshadows the perversion of later times.

Herodotos (1.196), Nikolaos of Damascus, Strabo (16.1.20), and Aelian (*VH* 4.1) all four mention the Assyrian custom of putting up the marriageable girls for auction. Once a year, the girls of each village were offered for sale, the most beautiful girls first. 'The rich men who wanted wives bid against each other for the prettiest girls, while the humbler folk [. . .] were actually paid to take the ugly ones [. . .]. The money came from the sale of the beauties, who in this way provided dowries for their ugly or misshapen sisters' (Hdt. 1.196.2-3).<sup>62</sup> According to Baumgartner, the ultimate source of this story must have been an older historian, probably Hekataios of Miletos.<sup>63</sup> It seems unlikely that this custom really existed. Babylonian sources never mention it.<sup>64</sup> This story is probably based on Greek ideas about endogamy and the redistribution of wealth, masqueraded as a foreign custom.<sup>65</sup>

Another custom that Herodotos mentions is purification after sexual intercourse: 'When a Babylonian has had intercourse with his wife, he sits over an incense to fumigate himself, with his wife opposite doing the same, and at daybreak they both wash' (Hdt. 1.198; also in Strab. 16.1.20). Ritual purification by fumigation or by ablution with water was common practice in Mesopotamia,<sup>66</sup> but it seems somewhat

---

<sup>61</sup> Cf Comptoi 2000: 235-236. Probably, Diodoros wants to give a positive image of Semiramis, and this story does not fit in with his intentions. The accusation of incest is also levelled against the Persians (Ktesias *FGrH* 688 F44).

<sup>62</sup> Translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt (2003).

<sup>63</sup> Baumgartner 1950: 80.

<sup>64</sup> Asheri 2011: 210.

<sup>65</sup> McNeal 1988; Thomas 2000: 139; Griffiths 2007: 167; Asheri 2011: 210.

<sup>66</sup> Van der Toorn 2004: 501.

unlikely that normal sexual intercourse required ritual purification. Origin and meaning of this story are not clear.

The third custom, sacred prostitution, was very shameful in the eyes of the Greeks. According to Herodotos, every Assyrian or Babylonian woman had to go once in her life to the temple of Mylitta (i.e. Aphrodite).<sup>67</sup> She was not allowed to leave the temple before a man had chosen her, and she had no choice, but to lie with the first man who was willing to pay her (Hdt. 1.199; also in Strab. 16.1.20). Most modern scholars are convinced that this custom never existed.<sup>68</sup> How Herodotos came by this strange story is not clear.

Greek authors write about Semiramis' licentiousness, her lovers and her incestuous passion, which were regarded as typically barbarian. Herodotos does not say much about Semiramis, but he mentions three Babylonian customs related to sexuality: marriage by auction, which he regards as admirable, but which did not exist in Babylonia; sacred prostitution, which Herodotos regards as shameful, and which did not exist either; and ritual purification after sexual intercourse, which is neither praised nor condemned. It seems a somewhat random collection of strange customs, one that is exemplary, one that is shameful, and one that is merely exotic. These three customs are related also by Strabo, who lived five centuries after Herodotos. Strabo knew much more about Mesopotamia than Herodotos and yet he repeats unchanged what Herodotos had written, illustrating the longevity that images of foreign peoples often show. These so-called customs clearly mirror Greek ideas of proper behaviour: Semiramis' licentiousness and the fictitious custom of sacred prostitution are the opposite of the modesty and chastity the Greeks (and not only the Greek) required from their wives. This contrast between foreign customs and proper behaviour is often seen in ethnic stereotypes.<sup>69</sup> Herodotos (the 'barbarian-lover') also gives his readers a positive example, the custom of the marriage market.

---

<sup>67</sup> About Mylitta, see Stol in *DDD* sv Mulissu; Madreiter 2011: 132; Kuhrt 2010: 550-551; Allen 2011: 311-325. The name <sup>d</sup>NIN.LIL<sub>2</sub>, the consort of Aššur, was probably pronounced *Mu(l)liššu* (Babylonian), *Mulliltum*, or *Mulissu* (Assyrian). She was sometimes identified with Ištar.

<sup>68</sup> Westenholz 1989; Nyberg 2008; Budin 2008. Differently: Dalley 1998: 109-110.

<sup>69</sup> See the previous section and the introduction (p.6-7).



The use of foreign customs as a positive example is less typical, but it is sometimes found in Greek literature and later. Both the positive and the negative stereotypes tell us more about the Greeks than about the Mesopotamians.

### **Wealth, Decadence and Textiles**

A number of Greek and Roman sources (most late sources) link Babylonia to luxury textiles and embroidery. Strabo (16.1.7) mentions the city Borsippa as a centre of linen manufacturing. According to Eusebios, robes of fine linen (βύσσος) were for the first time made in the time of Semiramis (*PE* 10.6.13), but he does not tell us what his source is, nor where or by whom they were invented. The word βύσσος is borrowed from a Semitic language (cf. Hebr. בִּיֶּשֶׁת *būš* ‘byssus, a fine, costly, white fabric’ that was used in making the temple veil, Akk. *būšu* idem). The Babylonians were in the Hellenistic and imperial periods famous for their textiles, which were known for their variegation of colours and for their exorbitant prices (Plaut. *Stich.* 2.2.54 = *Stich.* 378; Plin. *Nat.* 8.196; Jos. *BJ* 5.212; Sil. 14.658; Apul. *Flor.* 9.19; Philostr. 1.25.1). *Babylonica* even became a generic name for ‘figurative woven decoration or tapestry’, as Plin. *Nat.* 8.196 shows.<sup>70</sup> Of course, the textile trade really played an important role in Mesopotamian economy from at least the ancient Assyrian till the Roman period. This fact was apparently widely known.

According to Diodoros, Semiramis had invented the Median dress (Diod. 2.6.6). The Median dress is often mentioned by Greek authors writing about the Persians or the Ancient Near East (Μηδική ἔσθῆς in Hdt. 1.135; στολή Μηδική in Xen. *Cyr.* 8.1.40). It is now also known as ‘riding habit’ or ‘cavalry costume’ and it consisted of a felt cap, a sleeved coat, a sleeved tunic, trousers and footgear.<sup>71</sup> This sort of dress was well suited for people who passed much time on horseback. According to Diodoros it was devised for travelling (which is correct), but also to conceal the difference between men and women (which is probably incorrect). The latter reason is articulated even more eloquently by Justinus: ‘Semiramis [. . .] pretended that she was the son of Ninus instead of his wife, a male instead of a female. [. . .] She accordingly clad her

---

<sup>70</sup> Lee 2005: 107.

<sup>71</sup> Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones 2013: 62.

arms and legs in long garments, and decked her head with a turban; and, that she might not appear to conceal any thing by this new dress, she ordered her subjects also to wear the same apparel; a fashion which the whole nation has since retained. Having thus dissembled her sex at the commencement of her reign, she was believed to be a male' (Just. 1.2).<sup>72</sup> Greeks wrote sometimes somewhat deprecatory about the way the Persians and Medes were dressed: long robes and trousers were considered effeminate and not suited for a soldier (Hdt. 5.49; Strab. 11.13.9).

In Greek eyes, the Assyrians and Babylonians were ruled by tyrannical kings, who were degenerate, luxury loving and effeminate. This is not only seen in their behaviour, but even in the clothes they wear: the Median dress, which was despite its name believed to have been invented by the Assyrian queen Semiramis to conceal that she was a woman. Men and women did not accept their proper places, but men behaved like women and hid themselves in their harems, while women sometimes usurped roles that belonged to men. As Arrian states it disparagingly: 'from Semiramis down, it had been accepted in Asia that women should actually rule men' (Arr. An. 1.23.7). Almost seven centuries earlier, Herodotus had made the Persian king Xerxes say the same: 'my men have turned into women, my women into men' (8.88).

### **Eunuchs and Officials**

According to Ammianus Marcellinus, Semiramis had invented castration: 'Anyone who sees wherever he goes troops of these maimed creatures [eunuchs] must curse the memory of queen Semiramis of old, who was the first to castrate young males, laying violent hands as it were upon nature and wresting her from her ordained course, since it is nature who in our very infancy implants in us the original source of our seed, and points out by a kind of unwritten law the means by which we are to propagate our race' (Amm. 14.6.17).<sup>73</sup> The link between Semiramis and the invention of castration is found also in Claudianus' *Against Eutropius*: 'It was from fear of being betrayed by her shrill woman's voice and her hairless cheeks that clever Semiramis,

---

<sup>72</sup> Translation by John Selby Watson (1886).

<sup>73</sup> Translation by Walter Hamilton (1986); cf. De Jonge 1972: 143.

to disguise her sex from the Assyrians, first surrounded herself with beings like her' (Claud. *In Eutr.* 1.348-351).<sup>74</sup> According to Claudianus, Semiramis surrounded herself by eunuchs to blur the distinction between men and women, a motive which is also brought forward to explain the invention of the Median dress.

Eunuchs (Gr. εὐνοῦχοι) were often regarded as a characteristic of oriental court life by Greek authors.<sup>75</sup> Greek feelings about eunuchs are often ambivalent. On the one hand, eunuchs are regarded as faithful servants of the king, because their loyalty lay with the king only (Xen. *Cyr.* 7.5.60-65). On the other hand, they were neither men nor women, sometimes commiserated, and often despised by other men (Hdt. 8.105). Ktesias regularly mentions eunuchs at the Assyrian court, but the invention of castration is found nowhere in the fragments of his *Persika*. Probably Ktesias regarded eunuchs as a regular part of court life.<sup>76</sup> Ninyas, Semiramis' successor, was 'seen by no one but his concubines and the eunuchs who attended him' (Diod. 1.21.1).<sup>77</sup> Living in an oriental palace, eunuchs in Greek literature have their share of the intrigues which Greeks believed to be so common in oriental court life. According to Nikolaos, in a fragment probably based on Ktesias' *Persika*, Semiramis was betrayed by a eunuch called Satibaras (Gr. Σατιβάρας, a Persian name),<sup>78</sup> and when her son Ninyas conspired against her, it was 'by the agency of a certain eunuch' (Diod. 1.20.1), but nothing indicates that Ktesias regarded eunuchs as more or less trustworthy than other people at the Assyrian court.

## Astrology and Divination

The Assyrians may have been weak, effeminate and degenerate, they had one redeeming quality in Greek eyes: their knowledge of the stars and their proficiency in astrology. The Babylonians or the Chaldeans are often mentioned as inventors of astronomy and astrology. Pliny mentions Belos as 'the discoverer of the science of

---

<sup>74</sup> Translation by Maurice Platnauer (Loeb).

<sup>75</sup> Pirngruber 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Lenfant 2012.

<sup>77</sup> Ktesias *FGrH* 688 F1b (=Diod. 1.21.1); 1n (=Athen. 12.528ef); e.a.

<sup>78</sup> Nikolaos *FGrH* 90 F1; Schmitt 2006: 186-188.

astronomy' (Plin. *NH* 6.30) and Hyginus ascribes this discovery to Oannes (Hyg. *Fab.* 274.16). Oannes (sum. **u-an**)<sup>79</sup> is a creature from the sea, mentioned by Berossos and Abydenos,<sup>80</sup> who was believed to have brought civilisation to the inhabitants of Chaldea. Even Diodoros, after his diatribe against the decadence of the Assyrians, finds praise for the astrological knowledge of the Chaldeans: '[The Chaldeans] spend their entire life in study, their greatest renown being in the field of astrology. But they occupy themselves largely with soothsaying as well, making predictions about future events, and in some cases by purifications, in others by sacrifices, and in others by some other charms they attempt the averting of evil things and the fulfilment of the good. They are also skilled in soothsaying by the flight of birds, and they give out interpretations of both dreams and portents. They also show marked ability in making divinations from the observations of the entrails of animals, deeming that in this branch they are eminently successful' (Diod. 2.29.2-3).<sup>81</sup> Diodoros then proceeds to praise their training above that of their Greek counterparts and gives us a summary of their philosophy (Diod. 29-31).

## Conclusion

There is a clear dichotomy in the descriptions of Assyrian kings and queens in Greek historiography. At the one hand, Ninus is an archetypal founder of a large empire, a great general and an able organiser. At the other hand, most of his successors are effeminate and decadent and spend most of their time in their harems, and of these successors, Sardanapallos is the most decadent. Semiramis is more like Ninus than the other Assyrian monarchs: she fights at the head of her army and expands her empire. Yet, despite her valour, the judgment of Greek historians on Semiramis is ambivalent. Her behaviour is appropriate for a man, not for a woman. This is probably Ktesias' most severe reproach to the world of the Orient: men and women do not play their proper roles. At the one hand, there is a long line of effeminate Assyrian kings, from Ninyas to Sardanapallos, at the other hand, Semiramis usurps a

---

<sup>79</sup> Van Dijk 1962; Verbrugghe and Wickersham 2000: 17.

<sup>80</sup> Berossos *FGrH* 680 F1 and F2; Abydenos *FGrH* 685 F2.

<sup>81</sup> Translation by C.H. Oldfather. It is not known which source Diodoros has used for this *excursus* on the Chaldeans and on Babylonian astronomy. Posidonios is often mentioned, but also Kleitarchos, Berossos and Agatharchides (Boncquet 1987: 170-173).

male role and breaks the natural order of society. This blurring of the distinction between men and women is according to the Greeks also manifest in the invention of the Median dress, which makes it impossible to see whether its wearer is a man or a woman, and the invention of castration, which created a class of eunuchs, who are neither men nor women. Robes of fine linen and luxury textiles of Babylonian origin receive more appreciation, but the invention of astrology impressed the Greeks and Romans more than anything else that Mesopotamian civilisation had produced. The Babylonians' knowledge of astrology was usually highly valued by the Greeks and Romans.

#### 4.4 The Assyrians: Soldiers or Eunuchs?

At first sight, the differences between the biblical and the Greek images of the Mesopotamians are enormous. In the eyes of most biblical authors, the Assyrians and Babylonians were warlike and impetuous, while Greeks as a rule regarded them as effeminate and debauched barbarians. The founders of the Assyrian empire, Ninus and Semiramis, get a positive judgment – Greek historians find some fault with them, but at least they were brave – but their successors were effeminate men who idled away their time in their harems. This difference is easily explained from the Judeans and Israelites having had a first hand experience with the armies of the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the Greeks not having had this experience. Much knowledge and even written sources from the period when Assyria and Babylonia were powerful nations were preserved in Judah, but very little in Greece. Contacts between Greeks and Mesopotamians had existed in the seventh and sixth centuries, as we know from cuneiform sources and a few fragments of Greek literature from the archaic period, but Herodotos, Ktesias and their contemporaries seem largely ignorant of this fact. In their lifetime, Mesopotamia was part of the Persian empire, and its inhabitants were attributed the same negative traits which the Persians possessed in Greek eyes, and this image remains dominant during the whole of Antiquity. And yet, similarities between the biblical and the Greek images of the Mesopotamians exist, and will be discussed in this section.

##### **Luxury textiles and embroidery**

Both in the Bible and in Greek and Roman works from the Hellenistic period, the Assyrians and Babylonians are seen as manufacturers and merchants of textiles. In the Hebrew Bible, Assyrians and Babylonians are associated with luxury textiles. Ezekiel knows the Assyrians as merchants in luxury textiles, coloured cloth and embroidery, and after the fall of Jericho, Achan steals a costly Babylonian mantle. Greek sources regard robes of fine linen (βύσσοϛ) as an Assyrian invention and Roman authors mention Babylonian textiles as a prized luxury item. According to Josephus, who is part both to the biblical and the Greek tradition, the veil in the temple was of Babylonian origin: ‘But before these doors there was a veil of equal

largeness with the doors. It was a Babylonian curtain, embroidered with blue, and fine linen, and scarlet, and purple, and of a contexture that was truly wonderful' (Jos. *BJ* 5.212). Josephus' description is an elaboration of the biblical one (Ex. 26:31; 2Chr. 3:14). That the veil in the temple was a *Babylonian* curtain is an addition of Josephus, prompted by the fame of the Babylonians for embroidery and luxury textiles in his own time.

## **Decadence**

Babylon was a prosperous and wealthy city. With wealth and luxury came also, according to a number of Greek and biblical authors, weakness and decadence. In Greek literature this image of Assyria as a decadent, debauched and effeminate nation, which was created in the early fourth century by Ktesias, is very common. Herodotos' image of Assyria and Babylonia still shows more shading, a mixture of good and bad, of positive and negative, but after Ktesias, always the same image of decadence and weakness is found. In the Bible, it is mainly found in deuterio-Isaiah, who lived in Babylon in the mid-sixth century, the period of the emerging Persian supremacy, and in the book of Daniel, which was written in the Hellenistic period.

These images of the Babylonians as a weak and decadent nation did not develop in the Levant, where people remembered the power and atrocities of the Babylonian armies. It is not found in pre-exilic biblical texts, or in Herodotos, who has never visited Mesopotamia, but has heard about it in Egypt and perhaps in the Levant. It could have developed in the eastern parts of the Near East, perhaps even in Babylon itself. Both Ktesias and deuterio-Isaiah have lived in Mesopotamia and have perhaps seen the wealth and riches of the city and its temples with their own eyes. It is even possible that this image of the Babylonians as a decadent nation was part of Persian propaganda, and was picked up by deuterio-Isaiah, who clearly favoured the Persian king Cyrus, and by Ktesias, who ca. 150 years later lived at the Persian court.

Yet, it is questionable whether an historical connection exists between these Greek and biblical images of the Babylonians as a weak and decadent nation. The Greek image of the Babylonians is not very specific. Persians and other peoples from the Near East are, like the Babylonians, also often depicted as cowardly and over-

refined, given to luxury, and ruled by kings who listen to women and eunuchs. This image of the Mesopotamians and Persians is often nothing more than a counter-image to the idealised image of the courageous, disciplined and free Hellenes (see chapter one, page six and seven) and can be explained from Greek stereotypes only. There need not be any connection with deutero-Isaiah's image of the Babylonians.

## Eunuchs and Officials

Grayson wrote in 1995 that 'the attitude in modern scholarship towards eunuchs has been almost universally the same: the matter is to be avoided entirely, or, if that is impossible, it is to be dismissed as a trivial and unsavoury institution'.<sup>82</sup> Things have changed since then and eunuchs seem to have become a popular subject for scholarly discussion, as recent articles by Siddall, Jursa, Pirngruber and Lenfant prove.<sup>83</sup> In Assyriological literature, the discussion is mainly about Assyrian *ša rēši* officials (and biblical *sarīsīm*) being eunuchs or not necessarily castrated courtiers, or eunuchs in some texts and courtiers in others texts, and about officials without beards on palace reliefs being *ša rēši*, eunuchs or perhaps young men. There is a similar debate about Gr. εὐνοῦχοι in texts about the Persian court.<sup>84</sup>

There is considerable overlap in meaning between Gr. εὐνοῦχος and Hebr. *sarīs*, but *sarīs* has also the meaning "high official, courtier", which εὐνοῦχος has not. Despite this distinction, εὐνοῦχοι and *sarīsīm* often play the same roles in the texts that have been examined in this chapter. They attend to the king and the queen, both in biblical and Greek literature. Of course, that is not really remarkable, because attending to the king and queen is what royal servants do. They are involved in plots against the king, both in Esther and Greek historiography. Ktesias' *Persika* contained at least two conspiracies in which eunuchs were involved against Semiramis and many more against Persian kings.<sup>85</sup> Of course, this is not surprising either. Eunuchs at court were in an eminent position to conspire against the king.

---

<sup>82</sup> Grayson 1995: 85.

<sup>83</sup> Siddall 2007; Jursa 2011; Pirngruber 2011; Lenfant 2012.

<sup>84</sup> Briant 2002: 268-277.

<sup>85</sup> Briant 2002: 268.



And finally, the education of Daniel and his friends by the Babylonian *rab-sārīs* recalls Plato's remark that royal children, as long as they were very young, were raised by eunuchs in Persia: 'After the birth of the royal child, he is tended, not by a good-for-nothing woman-nurse, but by the best of the royal eunuchs, who are charged with the care of him' (*Alk.* 121d).<sup>86</sup> Which roles eunuchs and high officials played in raising royal children at the Persian court is not known,<sup>87</sup> yet the view that they played an important role is found both in Daniel and in Greek literature. As Daniel was written in the Hellenistic period and influenced by Greek literature, this element perhaps rests on Greek ideas.

The Assyriological discussion about the precise meaning of *ša rēši* falls outside the scope of this study. Biblical texts in which *sārīsīm* are mentioned could be relevant to this debate, if only the meaning of *sārīs* were clear, which it is not. Greek texts are also sometimes considered relevant for this discussion, but this is very unlikely, as Lenfant rightly maintains.<sup>88</sup> What Ktesias and other Greek historians narrate about eunuchs perhaps says something about the Persian court, and even there caution should be exercised, but he certainly was not in any way informed about the relations at the Assyrian court. To Ktesias' readers, εὐνοῦχος referred to a castrated male, whatever his position at the Assyrian or Persian court may have been.

## **Astrology and Magic**

Greek and biblical authors agree on the Assyrians, Babylonians and Chaldeans being great sorcerers and astrologers. The Greeks often admired Babylonian astrology and philosophy, and even their divination and magic. Biblical authors were as a rule less enthusiastic. Nahum calls Nineveh as a 'mistress of sorceries', which carries very negative undertones, and deuterio-Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel depict Babylonian magic and astrology as something evil and dangerous. Jewish authors from the Hellenistic period who wrote in Greek often shared the Greek admiration for Babylonian astrology and showed this by making Abraham versed in Babylonian

---

<sup>86</sup> Translation by Benjamin Jowett.

<sup>87</sup> Briant 2002: 273.

<sup>88</sup> Lenfant 2012.

astrology, for example in pseudo-Eupolemos: '[Abraham] excelled all men in nobility of birth and wisdom. In fact, he discovered both astrology and Chaldean wisdom. . . . While Abraham was living in Heliopolis with the Egyptian priests, he taught them many new things. He introduced them to astrology and other such things, saying that he and the Babylonians had discovered these things'.<sup>89</sup> Artapanos also believed that Abraham introduced astrology to Egypt<sup>90</sup> and Flavius Josephus (*Ant. Jud.* 1.167-168) writes the same.<sup>91</sup> Astrology was seen as the most important contribution of the Babylonians to civilisation. Abraham, who came from Babylonia, was made an intermediary who brought their knowledge to Palestine and Egypt. Of course, Babylonian love for divination, magic and astrology really existed, a fact which was apparently known to Greek and biblical authors.

## Conclusion

Both biblical and Greek sources mention Babylonian luxury textiles, eunuchs and bureaucracy at the Assyrian court, and Babylonian astrology and magic. Of course, these similarities are not a source of amazement, because textile trade, bureaucracy and astrology were real characteristics of Mesopotamian society. Yet the gap between the biblical and the Greek appreciations of Mesopotamian society remains wide, although the contrast between the Greek and the Judean images of the Babylonians and Assyrians is not always as pronounced as is often suggested. In deutero-Isaiah, especially in chapter 47, the Babylonians are pictured as delicate and luxury loving, while in Greek historiography, Sardanapallos in his last days manages to stage a brave defence of Nineveh during the final siege of the city (see chapter eight). While the Greek picture of Mesopotamia does not change in time – certainly not after Ktesias – the biblical image seems to do so. The authors of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Kings saw the Assyrians and Babylonians mainly as warlike and impetuous, while in deutero-Isaiah and perhaps in the prophecy against Babylon in Jr. 50-51, which probably originate from the last days of the Babylonian empire under Nabonidus, they are called decadent and luxury loving, despite their still

---

<sup>89</sup> Eus. *PE* 9.17; Holladay 1983: 170-175; *FGrH* 724 F1.

<sup>90</sup> Eus. *PE* 9.18; Holladay 1983: 204-205; *FGrH* 726 F1.

<sup>91</sup> Cited in Eus. *PE* 9.16.

obvious power and wealth. But not even in biblical books from the Hellenistic period, such as Judith and Daniel, the inhabitants of Mesopotamia are ever depicted as weak and decadent as in Greek historiography, because the difference between Biblical and Greek historiography is not only one of period of origin, but also of outlook. To the Greeks, the Assyrians and Babylonians were barbarians, wealthy and decadent, while the Biblical authors probably did not see them as essentially different from themselves, despite their greater power and wealth. Assyrians and Babylonians, Israelites and Judeans lived in the same world and shared many ideas and beliefs. The Greeks, who were never subject to the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, and those living in mainland Greece not to the Persian empire either, imagined themselves being different from the barbarians living in Asia, although they were often strongly influenced by Ancient Near East culture.