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8 Kings and Queens

8.1 Introduction

From the middle of the eighth century until the sixth century the Assyrian and neo-Babylonian empires were the dominant powers in the ancient Near East. Decisions that were made in Nineveh or Babylon could have far-reaching consequences for the fate of Israel and Judah, and many Judeans and Israelites from this period had a first hand experience of the power and brutality of the Assyrian and Babylonian armies. Not surprisingly, Assyria and Babylonia and their kings played an important role in the historiography of Judah and Israel. Fifteen Assyrian and Babylonian kings are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. Most prominent amongst them are the Assyrian king Sennacherib (705-681), who laid siege to Jerusalem (701),¹ and the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (605-562), who captured and destroyed Jerusalem and led many of the Judean elite into exile (597, 586). Most Mesopotamian kings that are mentioned in the Bible reigned in the heyday of the Assyrian and neo-Babylonian Empires, eighth, seventh of sixth century BC. Little is said about the earliest history of Assyria and Babylonia. The little that is said is found in Genesis, where we find the legendary kings Nimrod and Amraphel.

Greece lay outside the reach of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, but some Greeks came in contact with these empires. As far as we know, the first encounters between Greeks and the armies of the king of Assyria date from the second half of the eighth century.² Greek soldiers fought as mercenaries in the army of the Assyrian kings, and in those of their enemies, and in the sixth century in the Babylonian army. There is ample proof that some of these Greek mercenaries fought in the Levant and Egypt, near Judah. Not only Judah's neighbours employed Greek soldiers, but Judean kings did the same, as is shown by archaeological evidence.³ These mercenaries must have heard the names of the powerful Assyrian and Babylonian kings of their time, such as Sargon, Ashurbanipal and Nebuchadnezzar. However, not many Greek writings from this period have survived and the few that have survived tell us precious little about Assyria and Babylonia and nothing

¹ Some scholars believe that Sennacherib twice besieged Jerusalem, e.g. Shea (1985).

² Kearsley 1999: 119-121; Niemeier 2001: 16-19; Rollinger 2007.

³ Stern 2001: 172, 317 (7th century); Wenning 2004: 31-32.

about their kings and queens (see chapter two, where Alkaios and Phokylides are discussed). The earliest Greek records of Mesopotamian kings that we have stem from the fifth century.

To most Greek historians, living and writing in the fifth century or later, Assyria was a far away country, both in space and in time. Assyrian kings were foreign and exotic characters from a distant past. About some of them strange, often incredible stories were told, while others were little more than names. In Greek historiography from the fourth century, especially in the *Persika* of Ktesias of Knidos, the stereotype of Assyrian and Babylonian kings and queens as decadent and luxury loving oriental monarchs was created. Dissenting voices such as Berossos, who lived in the late fourth and early third century in Babylon and who tried to correct the often erroneous Greek descriptions of the culture and history of his fatherland, were largely ignored. The Ktesian image of Assyrian and Babylonian kings as effeminate and decadent monarchs, who preferred to idle away in their harems, instead of defending and enlarging their empire as real princes did, remained the dominant image in Greek and Roman historiography.

This chapter contains an overview of the Assyrian and Babylonian kings and queens that are found in biblical and Greek historiography. Monarchs from Mesopotamia are mentioned by a number of Greek historians, among whom Herodotos, Ktesias and Arrian, but also by lesser known authors such as Kleitarchos, Megasthenes, Alexander Polyhistor, Diodoros, Abydenos and Kephalion (see section 1.3). In the Bible, Assyrian and Babylonian kings are mentioned in the books of Genesis, the Major and some Minor Prophets, Daniel, and in particular in the second book of Kings, which is part of the so-called *Deuteronomistic History* (see section 1.2). The nature of these sources will be discussed in chapter nine 'Biblical Historiography'. The current chapter contains an enumeration of the Assyrian and Babylonian kings and queens that are mentioned in biblical and Greek historiography.

8.2 Assyrian and Babylonian Kings in the Bible

In this section, the Assyrian and Babylonian kings that are mentioned in the Bible are studied, except for Nimrod (see chapter seven ‘Founders’) and the enigmatic Cushan-Rishathaim, king of Aram Naharaim (Ju. 3:7-11).⁴ It starts with an overview of all Mesopotamian monarchs that are mentioned in the Bible, and one king who is only found in the *Book of Giants* from Qumran: legendary kings such as Gilgamesh and Nimrod, kings whose identification is controversial such as Amraphel, Shalman and Osnappar, and historical kings from Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727) to Nabonidus (556-539). Aramaic inscriptions and documents are used beside biblical books to get a more complete picture, especially the books of Ahiqar (seventh or sixth century)⁵ and Tobit (third or second century),⁶ in which Assyrian kings play an important role. After this overview, the characterisation of Assyrian and Babylonian kings in the Bible is discussed, especially in the books of Kings and the major prophets.

A List of Kings

In the Bible, Assyrian and Babylonian kings are often mentioned in a matter of fact way, in connection with a campaign or a political decision. A list of names will give an idea which kings were known to the biblical authors.⁷

A note on Akkadian Phonology. In some respects, neo-Assyrian and neo/late-Babylonian differed in pronunciation. These differences are usually neglected in modern transcriptions of cuneiform texts, but ancient transcriptions of Akkadian names in West-Semitic scripts as a rule reflect the actual pronunciation and show these differences.⁸ The most important ones are:

⁴ Malamat 1954.

⁵ Niehr 2007: 11.

⁶ Fitzmyer 2003: 50-51.

⁷ Claims have been made for other Assyrian monarchs. E.g., Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076) has been read into Ps. 83 (Maisler apud Machinist 1983: 720-721).

⁸ Millard 1976: 3-4.

- written k = Bab. [k], Ass. [k] or [g];⁹
- written m = Bab. [m] or [w], Ass. [m];¹⁰
- written s = Bab. [s], Ass. [š];¹¹
- written š = Bab. [š], Ass. [s].

These differences in pronunciation lead to Assyrian and Babylonian names being differently transcribed in West-Semitic texts. In Assyrian names, cuneiform <s> is as a rule transcribed into ש (š) and cuneiform <š> into ס (s).

1. Nimrod, Hebrew נמרוד, נמרד *Nimrōd* (see section 7.2).

2. Gilgamesh, Aram. גלגמיש and גלגמיש [ג]. Gilgamesh is not mentioned in the Bible, but he is known from two Aramaic fragments from Qumran (4Q530 2.2; 4Q531 17.12).¹² These fragments probably belonged to the *Books of Giants*, which was written in the third or second century BC. The fragments in which Gilgamesh is mentioned are fragmentary and difficult to interpret, but it is clear that Gilgamesh is one of the giants, offspring of the angelic watchers and human women.

3. Amraphel, Hebrew אמרפל *'amrāpel* (Gen. 14). Amraphel is sometimes identified with Hammurabi of Babylon (1792-1750).¹³ Nowadays, not many scholars would suggest a connection between Genesis 14 and events from Hammurabi's days, as Cornelius did in 1960. Yet it seems likely that the author of Genesis 14 refers to this king. Glissmann has argued for classifying Gen. 14 as a diaspora novella.¹⁴ Although it differs too much in style and content from other diaspora novellas, such as the story of Joseph, or Esther, to be put in the same genre, it is likely that Gen. 14 was written by a Judean who lived in Babylonia and knew Hammurabi's name, and those of some other monarchs from a remote past.

⁹ It is not clear under which circumstances [g] is found; see Lipiński 1975: 97-99; Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 15-16; Mankowsky 2000: 155.

¹⁰ Mankowsky 2000: 158-159.

¹¹ Lipiński 1975: 96-97; Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 9-10; Mankowsky 2000: 155-156.

¹² Martínez and Tigchelaar 2000: 1062, 1066; Jackson 2007.

¹³ Cornelius 1960; Ziemer 2005: 95-96.

¹⁴ Glissmann 2009.

4. Shalmaneser III (859-824). It has been suggested that Shalman, Hebr. שלמן *šalman* (Hos. 10:14), is Shalmaneser III, but this is very uncertain.¹⁵ In a prophecy against Ephraim (Israel) Hosea says: ‘Because you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors, the tumult of war shall rise against your people, and all your fortresses will be destroyed, as Shalman destroyed Beth-arbel on the day of the battle when mothers were dashed in pieces with their children’ (Hos. 10:13-14). It is not clear who this Shalman is: Shalmaneser III (859-824), Shalmaneser V (727-722), Salamān, king of Moab, who is mentioned by Tiglath-Pileser III (around 734/732),¹⁶ or the Israelite king Shallum (2K. 15: 8-15).¹⁷ The events to which the prophets refers are not known from biblical or extra-biblical sources, which makes it difficult to identify Shalman with any degree of certainty.

5. Adad-Nerari III (811-783), Akk. *Adad-nērārī* (or *nārārī*). It has been suggested that Adad-Nerari is mentioned as משיע *mošī^{ac}* ‘saviour’ in 2K. 13:5.¹⁸ During the reign of Jehoahaz (818-802), Israel was oppressed by the Aramean king Ben-Hadad, but ‘the Lord gave Israel a saviour, so that they escaped from the hands of the Arameans’ (2K. 13:5). The identity of this saviour has been the subject of much debate and some very different characters have been suggested: Jehoash, son of Jehoahaz (802-787), Jeroboam II, son of Jehoash (787-747), the prophet Elisha, or the Assyrian king Adad-nerari III, whose campaigns against Damascus prevented Ben-Hadad from attacking Israel.¹⁹ Although decisive arguments are lacking, Adad-nerari seems a good choice.

6. Tiglath-pileser III (745-727), Akk. *Tukultī-apil-ešarra*, Hebr. תגלת פלאסר *Tiglat pil’ēser* (the second part of the name is also written פלאסר *pilnēser*, פלסר *p^elēser* and פלנסר *pilnēser*; 2K. 15:29; 16:7; 16:10; 1Chr. 5:6; 5:26; 2Chr. 28:20), Aram. תגלתפלסר *tgltplysr*,

¹⁵ Astour 1971. On Shalmaneser’s campaigns in the West: Galil 2002.

¹⁶ ANET p.282; COS II p.289; Cogan 2008: 58; Gass 2009: 116-117.

¹⁷ Wolff 1961: 243; Macintosh 1997: 428-430; Ben Zvi 2005: 219; Dearman 2010: 273, 373-374. See also Becking in DDD sv Shalman (1999).

¹⁸ Haran 1967: 267; Page 1968: 148-149; Millard and Tadmor 1973: 64; Cogan 2008: 40-41.

¹⁹ Gray 1980: 595 (Elisha); Hobbs 1985: 167 (Elisha); Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 143; Na^caman 1991: 87-88; Na^caman 2005: 24; Sweeney 2007: 355.

תכלתפּלסר *tgltplsr* (on two eighth century inscriptions from Zinjirli)²⁰ and תכלתפּלסר *tkltplsr* (in a seventh century Aramaic letter from Ashur, abbrev. AssB.).²¹ This king is also known as Pul, Akk. *Pūlu*, Hebr. פּוּל *Pūl* (2K. 15:19; 1Chr. 5:26). The origin of this name, which is also found in a Babylonian king list from the Seleucid period, is unknown.²² Perhaps it is a hypocoristicon, like older פּלסר *plsr* (in AssB. line 12).

7. Shalmaneser V (727-722), Akk. *Šulmānu-ašarēd*, Hebr. שַׁלְמַנְאֶסֶר *Šalman'ēser* (2K. 17:3; 18:9). This king also mentioned in Tobit (1:2, 13, 15v), but only in the translations: the Aram. shape of the name is not known.

8. Marduk-apla-iddina II (722-710, 703), Akk. *Marduk-apla-iddin(a)*, Hebr. מַרְדֻךְ-בַּלְאֲדָן *M'rodak-bal'dan* (Is. 39:1) and בַּרְאֲדָךְ-בַּלְאֲדָן *B'rōdak-bal'dan* (2K. 20:12), a Chaldean, king of the Sealand.²³ Marduk-apla-iddin probably sent his envoys to Hezekiah to try to get Judean support for his struggle against Assyria. He ruled Babylon for ten years, before he was expelled by the Assyrian king Sargon II. In 703, during the reign of Sennacherib, he regained the throne of Babylon for a few months.

9. Sargon II (722-705), Akk. *Šarru-kēn*, Hebr. סַרְגֹּן *Sargōn* (Is. 20:1), Aram. סַרְגִּין (on a seal from Khorsabad, Assyrian pronunciation) and שַׂרְכִין (on a tablet from Nineveh, Babylonian pronunciation).²⁴ It has been argued by Dalley, Frahm and others, that Isaiah's 'Daystar, son of Dawn' (בֶּן-שָׁחַר הֵלֵל *hēlel ben-šahar* in Is. 14:12), who is not buried properly (19-20), is Sargon.²⁵ Admittedly, Helel ben-Shahar is a Babylonian, not an Assyrian king, but despite this, the identification with Sargon is alluring, because it was widely known that Sargon's body had remained unburied, which elicited theological speculation about the cause of this disgrace. His ignominious death was by the Assyrians in Esarhaddon's time explained from his insufficient

²⁰ KAI 215.13, 15; 216.6; COS II p.158-160.

²¹ Hug 1993: 20 (AssB. 15).

²² Babylonian king list A (ANET p.272, COS I p.462); Millard 1976: 10; ABC p.248.

²³ Frame 1992: 42-43.

²⁴ Millard 1976: 8; Maraqtan 1988: 244, 248.

²⁵ Dalley 2007: 20; Frahm 2011: 278.

veneration of the gods ('the sin of Sargon').²⁶ There has been some discussion on the mythological background of Is. 14:12, Greek or Ugaritic. Poirier argues for the Greek Phaeton myth, Heiser for the Ugaritic Baal cyclus.²⁷ Probably, the motif of the fallen son of god is too widespread to make it possible to pinpoint the background of Is. 14:12.

10. Sennacherib (705-681), Akk. *Sîn-ahhē-erība*, Hebr. סַנְחֶרִיב *Sanḥerīb* (2K. 18-19; Is. 36-37; 2Chr. 32), Aram. שְׁנַחֲרִיב *šnh'ryb* (?*šnh'ryb*, Ahiqar 1,3-4; 2,27), סַנְחֶרִיב *snḥ'ryb* (Ahiqar 4,50-51; 4,55) and אֶסְרַחְדִּין *'srḥryb* (Tob. 1:22 = 4Q196 2.8).²⁸ He is one of the most famous, or perhaps most infamous, kings of Assyria, because he has laid siege to Jerusalem in 701. According to the Bible (2K. 19:37), he was murdered by his sons Adrammalech and Sharezer, apparently as a punishment for his crimes, but in modern literature, it has been suggested that his successor Esarhaddon was behind the murder.²⁹ The different shapes in which Sennacherib's name is handed down is perhaps a sign of his role in the popular imagination in the ancient Near East.³⁰

11. Esarhaddon (681-669), Akk. *Aššur-aḫ-iddin*, Hebr. אֶסְרַחְדִּין *'esar-ḥaddon* (2K. 19:37; Is. 37:38; Ezr. 4:2), Aram. אֶסְרַחְדִּין (Tob. 1:22 = 4Q196 2.8) and אֶסְרַחְדִּין (Ahiqar 1,5; 1,10-11).³¹ It is sometimes thought that the anonymous king of Assyria in 2K. 17:24-28 is also Esarhaddon, but the names of Sargon, Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal have also been put forward.³² It is even possible that this notice is a conflation of more than one historical event, which would make it impossible to identify the king.

²⁶ Tadmor, Landsberger and Parpola 1989; Nissinen 2001: 198; Weaver 2004; van der Spek 2014: 248-249.

²⁷ Poirier 1999; Heiser 2001; Albani 2004.

²⁸ Millard 1976: 9; Fitzmyer 2003: 116-117.

²⁹ Parpola 1980; Zawadzki 1990; Dalley 2007: 37-43.

³⁰ Milard 1976: 13.

³¹ Fitzmyer 2003: 117, 122.

³² Hobbs 1985: 236 (Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal); Hentschel 1985: 82 (Sargon, Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal); Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 209 (Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal); Cogan in DDD sv Sukkoth-Benoth (1999; Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal).

12. Ashurbanipal (669-631), Akk. *Aššur-bāni-apla*. Many scholars think that Osnappar, Hebr. אֲסַנְפָּר *'osnappar* (Ezr. 4:10), is Ashurbanipal,³³ but doubt remains.³⁴ Gunneweg thinks that Osnappar is Esarhaddon,³⁵ but it seems unlikely that Esarhaddon would be mentioned under two different names in Ezr. 10, under his own name in Ezr. 4:2 and under the name Osnappar in Ezr. 4:10. Some manuscripts of the Septuagint read Σαλμανα(σ)σαρος (i.e. Shalmaneser V), the king who besieged Samaria, but this reading finds no support in the Hebrew text. It is even possible that 'the great and noble Osnappar' was not a king at all, but a high ranking officer or representative of the king, who was perhaps called *Aššur-ēpir*.³⁶ Although many modern scholars opt for Ashurbanipal, the identity of Osnappar remains uncertain.

13. Nebuchadnezzar (605-562), Akk. *Nabû-kudurri-ušur*, Hebr. נְבוּכַדְנֶצְצַר and נְבוּכַדְנֶצְצַר *N^ebūkadreššar* and *N^ebūkadneššar* (often in 2K., Jr., Ezk., Est., Dan., Ezr., Neh., 1Chr., 2Chr.).³⁷ Occasional writings in אֲצִוִּיר- (Jr. 49:28K) and LXX Ναβουχοδονοσορ betray an older vocalisation, which is more in line with Babylonian *Nabû-kudurri-ušur*. He is mentioned more often in the Hebrew Bible than any other non-Judean or non-Israelite monarch, even more often than most Judean and Israelite kings. The reason is obviously that Nebuchadnezzar has captured Jerusalem, devastated the temple and made an end to the existence of the kingdom of Judah (see page 95).

14. Evil-merodach, Amel-Marduk (562-560), Akkad. *Amēl-marduk*, Hebr. אֵילִל מְרֹדַךְ *wīl m^erodak* (2K. 25:27), the king who released Jehoiachin. The Hebrew transcription is in accordance with the Babylonian pronunciation, where **m** between vowels was pronounced as **w** (ו), while Assyrian retained the **m**.³⁸

³³ Millard 1976: 11; Williamson 1985: 55; Blenkinsopp 1989: 113.

³⁴ Grayson in *ABD* sv Osnappar (1992).

³⁵ Gunneweg 1985: 90.

³⁶ Berger 1975: 229; Becking 2011: 33.

³⁷ Nebuchadnezzar is doubtless the most famous Babylonian king. Literature on the image of Nebuchadnezzar: Fensham 1982; Wiseman 1985; Sack 2004.

³⁸ Millard 1976: 3-4.

15. Neriglissar (559-556), Akkad. *Nergal-šarra-ušur*, Hebr. נֶרְגַל שַׂרְאֲצַר *Nergal šar-’ešer* (Jr. 39:3, 13). The high ranking official in the Babylonian army that is mentioned in Jeremiah was probably the future king Neriglissar.³⁹

16. Nabonidus (556-539), Akkad. *Nabû-nā’id*, Aram. נְבֻנִי and נְבֻנִי נֶאֱדַר.⁴⁰ Although this king is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, it is often argued that the image of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel is based to some extent on Nabonidus.⁴¹ Of course, he is mentioned by name (נְבֻנִי) in the *Prayer of Nabonidus* from Qumran.⁴²

17. Belshazzar, Akkad. *Bēl-šarra-ušur*, Aram. בִּלְשַׁצַּר *Belšaššar* (Dan. 5-8). In reality, Belshazzar had never been king. He was Nabonidus’ son, and replaced his father during his absence.

A first reading of the texts where these kings are mentioned shows that the authors of Kings, Isaiah and Ezra were familiar with most Assyrian and Babylonian kings from the late eighth to the sixth centuries BC. The Akkadian names are accurately transcribed, as far as the consonants are concerned. The Hebrew transcriptions of names of Assyrian kings are often in conformity with the Assyrian pronunciation, which differed from the Babylonian pronunciation: Ass. **g** (ג) instead of Bab. **k** is found in Tiglath-pileser and Sargon, Ass. **s** (ס) instead of Bab. **š** is found in Tiglath-pileser, Sargon and Esar-haddon.⁴³ These transcriptions, which are also found in some Aramaic documents, for example in the inscriptions from Zinjirli and the story of Ahiqar, date from the eighth and seventh centuries. After the fall of Assyria, during the Babylonian and Persian periods, transcriptions are as a rule in accordance with the Babylonian pronunciation. Transcriptions are usually accurate, but transcriptions of sibilants are not always consistent. Sometimes **w** is found where **ṣ** is expected (first

³⁹ Beaulieu 2013: 34-35. See also section 4.2, page 100, on the title Simmagir (Samgar).

⁴⁰ Maraqtan 1988: 241.

⁴¹ Henze 1999: 52; Niskanen 2004: 58; Sulzbach 2004: 131-132.

⁴² Martínez and Tigchelaar 2000: 487-488; COS I p.285-286 (4Q242 and 4QprNab). According to Henze (1999: 73), Nabonidus’ prayer and the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s madness in Daniel do not stem from a common *Vorlage*, as if often assumed.

⁴³ Millard 1976: 12. Cf. Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 9-10, 15-16.

sibilant in Shalmaneser, which perhaps was originally š and not š), or ʔ where ʔ is expected (in Sennacherib). Probably some of these forms are Babylonian and of a later date, as Millard argues. Especially the name of Sennacherib, whose image lived on in popular imagination, probably more than that of any other Assyrian king, is handed down in various forms.

Most biblical authors had a fairly accurate knowledge of the chronology of the late eighth to the sixth centuries: they knew which Assyrian and Babylonian kings were synchronous with which kings of Israel and Judah. Of course, there are some difficulties and inaccuracies in the chronology of Kings, for example in the dates of Hezekiah's reign,⁴⁴ but the overall picture and most details are reliable. The accuracy of the chronology suggests that the authors of Kings had written sources at their disposal. Oral traditions preserve stories, but not an accurate chronology or short notes about campaigns and political decisions. (The nature of these sources will be discussed later on). The authors of Daniel and Judith, who wrote in the second century, used other, often less reliable sources than the authors of Kings, Isaiah and Ezra. The author of Daniel may even have used Greek sources for his description of the wars between the kings of the south – the Ptolemies – and the kings of the north – the Seleucids – in Dan. 11.⁴⁵ In the next two sections the image of Mesopotamian kings in the Bible will be discussed.

Conclusion

In the Bible, the names of fourteen Assyrian and Babylonian kings are found, most of whom are easily identified with historical kings that are known from cuneiform records. And not only the names, but also the chronology of the monarchs from Tiglath-Pileser III to Neriglissar seems to have been known to the Judean scribes who wrote the Hebrew Bible. Most prominent among them are Sennacherib, who besieged Jerusalem in 701, and Nebuchadnezzar, during whose reign Jerusalem was twice besieged and taken. According to Kings and Isaiah, Sennacherib is finally punished for his crimes: he is murdered in a temple by two of his sons (see chapter

⁴⁴ Galil 1996: 98-104; Becking 2007: 129-136.

⁴⁵ Niskanen 2004: 43-46.

nine). Nebuchadnezzar is even more prominent, especially in the books of Kings, Jeremiah and Daniel, because his armies besieged and took Jerusalem twice. In Daniel, which was written in a period when the knowledge of the historical facts had faded, the Babylonian monarch is depicted as the tyrant and the ultimate oppressor of the Jewish people.

8.3 Assyrian Kings and Queens in Greek Tradition

In this section, the Assyrian and Babylonian kings and queens that are mentioned in Greek literature and their characterisation are studied, except Ninus (chapter seven 'Founders'). It starts with an overview of the most famous Assyrian and Babylonian monarchs in Greek historiography. Some of them are known from cuneiform literature and from the Bible, while others are Greek creations. This overview is followed by Kastor's king list, which contains more names of Assyrian monarchs, most of them not identifiable from cuneiform documents, or from any other source. After that follows a discussion of Semiramis, the most famous Assyrian monarch in Greek literature, and of the characterisation of Assyrian and Babylonian monarchs in Greek historiography.

Assyrian Monarchs in Greek tradition

A list of all Mesopotamian kings that are mentioned in Greek historiography would be a very long one. Listing all these kings may seem a tedious exercise, as Diodoros already remarked: 'There is no special need of giving all the names of the kings and the number of years which each of them reigned, because nothing was done by them which merits mentioning' (Diod. 2.22.1).⁴⁶ Yet it has to be done. At first follows an enumeration of the most important ones, kings about whom something noteworthy is told. Not included are the names of kings about whom nothing is told, for example kings that appear only in king lists. These will be enumerated in the next section.

1. Enmerkar, Greek Σευήχορος (Ael. *NH* 12.21) or 'Ευήχιος (Synkellos⁴⁷). Both forms are based on an older 'Ευήχορος (not attested). Enmerkar is a mythical king of Uruk, who is mentioned in several Mesopotamian sources.⁴⁸ According to Aelian (second century AD), Seuechoros was the grandfather of Gilgamesh.

⁴⁶ Translation by C.H. Oldfather (Loeb 1933).

⁴⁷ Synkell. *Chron.* ed. Mosshammer p.88-89 and p.101. According to Synkellos, Euechios is identical to Nebrod (Nimrod).

⁴⁸ Jacobsen 1973: 86-87 (n115), 170; Kuhrt 1997: 29-31; Vanstiphout 1998: 68-112; ABC p.146-147, 216; Black 2006: 3-11.

2. Gilgamesh, Greek Γίλγαμος (Ael. *NH* 12.21).⁴⁹ It is striking that Gilgamesh, the protagonist of Mesopotamia's most famous epic, is never mentioned before Aelian. The birth story that is attached to Gilgamesh is in origin the same story as is also told of Sargon, Semiramis and Moses.⁵⁰

3. Belos, Greek Βήλος. Belos is the Babylonian deity Marduk, also called *Bēlu* 'Lord', transformed into a human king.⁵¹ Euhemerus seems to have been the first to regard Belos as such.⁵² In some texts, it is not clear whether Belos is seen as a king or as a deity. According to Aelian (*VH* 13.3), Xerxes had excavated the tomb of Belos, and this became the cause of his misfortune.⁵³ This story is probably based on a real event: part of Etemenanki, Marduk's cult centre, was demolished by order of the Persian king.⁵⁴ The tomb of Belos is also mentioned by Diodoros (17.112.3) and Strabo (16.1.5).⁵⁵

4. Ninos, Greek Νίνος. Ninos is the eponymous hero of Nineveh. See section 7.3.

5. Semiramis, Greek Σεμίραμις (e.g. *Hdt.* 1.184; Ktesias;⁵⁶ Dinon;⁵⁷ Megasthenes;⁵⁸ *Strab.* 15.1.5-6; 15.2.5; 16.1.2; *Arr. An.* 1.23.7; 6.24.1-3; *Ael. NV* 7.1; 12.39; Abydenos⁵⁹; see sections 8.4 and 8.5). She is often identified with Sammuamat, wife of Shamshi-Adad V (824-811) and mother of Adad-Nirari III (811-783), but this identification is

⁴⁹ Binder 1964: 160; Lewis 1980: 169-170; Henkelman 2006.

⁵⁰ Binder 1964; Lewis 1980.

⁵¹ The name בל *Bel* is also found in the Bible, in *Jr.* 50:2 parallel with מרדך *M^erodak*, in *Is.* 46:1 parallel with נבו *N^ebō*. See: Abusch in *DDD* sv Marduk (1999).

⁵² Garstad 2004.

⁵³ Ktesias *FGrH* 688 F13b.

⁵⁴ George 2010.

⁵⁵ Belos' tomb is discussed in Garstad 2004: 256 and Van der Spek 2006.

⁵⁶ *Diod.* 2.4-20 (Ktesias *FGrH* 688 F1).

⁵⁷ Dinon *FGrH* 690 F7; *Ael. NH* 7.1.

⁵⁸ *Jos. Ant.Iud.* 10.227; *Jos. c.Ap.* 1.144; Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F1; *Strab.* 15.1.6; Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F11.

⁵⁹ Abydenos *FGrH* 685 F7.

not really convincing, as will be argued in the next section. It is a sign of Semiramis' fame that she has a birth story, while Ninos, the founder of the Assyrian empire and its dynasty, has not. Perhaps this indicates that Semiramis was once regarded as founder of a dynasty in her own right and that the stories of the founding of Babylon by Semiramis and that of the founding of Nineveh by Ninos once existed separately.

6. Ninyas, Greek Νινύας (Diod. 2.21). Like his father Ninos, Ninyas is an eponymous hero of Nineveh. His name resembles Ass. *nīnuwa* more closely than Νίνος.

7. Beletaras, Greek Βελιτανᾶς (Ktesias⁶⁰), Βελιτάρας (Polyhistor⁶¹) or Βελιταρᾶς (Synkellos⁶²). The Beletaras story has recently attracted some attention.⁶³ According to Agathias (sixth century AD), Beletaras had been a gardener, before he came to the throne. A gardener who became king is also mentioned in the Babylonian *Chronicle of Early Kings*, where it is related that 'Erra-imitti, the king, installed Enlil-bani, his gardener, as substitute king on his throne'.⁶⁴ But Erra-imitti died and Enlil-bani remained king. According to Ktesias, Xerxes visited the tomb of Belitanas, but the details of this story are not preserved (according to Aelian, Xerxes excavated the tomb of Belos, probably the same story). Of course, none of this explains the origin of the name Beletaras/Belitanas.⁶⁵ Perhaps, it is a Greek transcription of *Bēl-ētir* 'Bel is (my) saviour', but no Assyrian or Babylonian king of this name is known.

8. Teutamos, Greek Τεύταμος (Diod. 4.22). Teutamos is also called Tautanos. The name Teutamos looks like a name of Illyrian origin.⁶⁶ How it became attached to an Assyrian king remains unexplained.

⁶⁰ Ktesias *FGrH* 688 F13 (from Photios).

⁶¹ Agathias 2.25.4-5; Bion *FGrH* 89 F1; Alexander Polyhistor *FGrH* 273 F81.

⁶² Synkell. *Chron.* ed. Mosshammer p439-440.

⁶³ Huber 2005; Henkelman 2011. Older literature: Lehmann-Haupt in *RLA* sv Belêtaras; Drews 1974: 390.

⁶⁴ *ABC* p.155 (chronicle 20 A).

⁶⁵ Ktesias *FGrH* 688 F13 §26 (Photios). Probably, it was the same story as told by Aelian (*VH* 13.3) of the tomb of Belos (F13b).

⁶⁶ There is a Macedonian officer called Teutamos (Diod. 18.59.3).

9. Chaldaios, Greek Χαλδαῖος (Dikaiarchos⁶⁷). Chaldaios is the eponymous hero of the Chaldeans (see chapter two).

10. Sennacherib (705-681), Greek Σαναχάριβος (Hdt. 2.141). Note that Herodotos mentions Sennacherib and Sardanapallos only in his Egyptian logos. According to Zawadzki, the murder of Sennacherib by his son(s), which is known from cuneiform literature, and is mentioned in 2K. 19:37, is echoed in the story of the conspiracy of two of Semiramis' sons against her life, which is told by Nikolaos of Damascus (first century BC).⁶⁸

11. Nitokris, Greek Νίτωκρις (Hdt. 1.185). Nitokris is often identified with Naqia, Sennacherib's wife and Esarhaddon's mother.⁶⁹ According to Röllig, Nitokris is Adad-Guppi, Nabonidus' mother.⁷⁰ According to Dougherty, Nitokris is Nabonidus' wife, a princess of Egyptian descent.⁷¹ Although Dougherty's arguments are not supported by any textual evidence, it must be admitted that Nitokris is an Egyptian name. Herodotos mentions in his second book an Egyptian Nitokris from an earlier period (Hdt. 2.100, Egypt. *Nt-ikr-ti* 'Neith is excellent').⁷² Perhaps, he has used the name of this Egyptian princess a second time.

12. Ashurbanipal (669-631), Greek Σαρδανάπαλλος⁷³ (mentioned very often, e.g. Hdt. 2.150; Hellanikos;⁷⁴ Kleitarchos;⁷⁵ Diod. 1.23-28; Strab. 16.1.2; Arr. *An.* 2.5 and

⁶⁷ Wehrli 1967: 26 (frg 55); Mirhady 2001: 68-71 (frg 60).

⁶⁸ Zawadzki 1990.

⁶⁹ Melville 1999: 2. Naqia's dates of birth and death are not known, but it is known that she was already married to Sennacherib, when he became king (705), and that she was still alive at Ashurbanipal's accession (669)

⁷⁰ Röllig 1969.

⁷¹ Dougherty 1929: 51-62.

⁷² Lloyd 1988: 13. See also Haider 2002.

⁷³ Often Σαρδανάπαλος. See Schneider 2000.

⁷⁴ Hellanikos *FGrH* 687a F2.

⁷⁵ Kleitarchos *FGrH* 137 F2; Athen. 12.39 p.530a.

other Alexander historians; Abydenos⁷⁶). Sardanapallos differs strongly from the warlike Ashurbanipal. In Greek literature, he is a typical luxury loving, effeminate and indolent Assyrian king. The Greek image of Sardanapallos is epitomized in a famous epitaph: ‘eat, drink, and play, for everything else in the life of a man is not worth this’ (Ar. An. 2.5).⁷⁷ On the other hand, Diodoros tells us that Sardanapallos valiantly defended his kingdom, when the Babylonians and Medes revolted against the Assyrian supremacy (Diod. 2.25-27).⁷⁸ This contrast is perhaps the origin of the idea, found in Hellanikos and Kallisthenes, that two kings of the same name had existed, one effeminate, and one brave.⁷⁹

13. Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562), Greek Ναβοκοδρόσορος (Megasthenes⁸⁰) or Ναβουχοδονόσορος (Abydenos⁸¹) and probably Herodotos’ first Babylonian king called Λαβύνητος (Hdt. 1.74; 1.188).⁸² In the sixth century, Greeks mercenaries had fought in Nebuchadnezzar’s army – for example Alkaios’ brother Antemenidas⁸³ – but no reminiscence of this period seems to have reached the Greek historians. According to Megasthenes, who must have had (indirect) access to Babylonian sources, Nebuchadnezzar had even conquered parts of Libya and Iberia (Jos. Ant. Jud. 10.227).⁸⁴

14. Nabonidus (556-539), Greek Λαβύνητος (Hdt. 1.77; 1.188), Ναβόννηδος (Jos. c.Ap. 1.151-153, from Berossos) or Ναβονάδιος (Ptolemy’s canon).

⁷⁶ Abydenos *FGrH* 685 F7.

⁷⁷ Aristobulos *FGrH* 139 F9; Athen. 12.39 p.350ab; Strab. 14.5.9; see Burkert 2009.

⁷⁸ Perhaps, the story of Sardanapallos’ death in the flames is based on Shamash-shum-ukin’s death (Macginnis 1988; Dalley 2007: 50).

⁷⁹ Hellanikos *FGrH* 4 F63; Kallisthenes *FGrH* 124 F34; see Schneider 2000; Burkert 2009: 507.

⁸⁰ Strab. 15.1.6; Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F11; Jos. c.Ap. 1.144; Jos. Ant. Jud. 10.227. Megasthenes widely exaggerates Nebuchadnezzar’s conquests (Bosworth 1996: 122).

⁸¹ Abydenos *FGrH* 685 F1 and F6.

⁸² According to Dougherty (1929: 33-42) and Beaulieu (1985: 129-132), the first Labynetos is Nabonidus, at a moment when he was not yet king (585). In that case, the second king of this name must be Belshazzar.

⁸³ Alkaios testimonium 1 (Strab. 13.2.23) and fragment 350.

⁸⁴ Iberia is either Iberia in the Caucasus (i.e. eastern and southern Georgia) or Spain. At first sight Spain sounds improbable, but the Assyrian king Esarhaddon had also claimed to have received tribute from Tarshish (Tartessos) in Spain (ANET p.290; Day 2012: 360-361).

Of these rulers, only Ninus, Semiramis and Sardanapallos have really captured the Greek imagination, and of those three only Sardanapallos has really reigned over Assyria. Real knowledge of Assyrian history is very slight. Numbers and dates are imprecise and generally lack any relation to real historical data. Greek historians seem as a rule more interested in characterising Assyrian kings as typically oriental monarchs – rich, decadent and effeminate, ruled by the women in their harems and by their craving for luxury – than in historical accuracy. When more reliable data become available through Berossos, Greek historians seem not very interested. Berossos was used by Polyhistor and Abydenos, and especially by Josephos and a few Christian authors, who saw Berossos as a useful confirmation of what they found in the Hebrew Bible, but he was unknown to most and perhaps ignored by some who knew about him.⁸⁵ Stories about Ninus, Semiramis and Sardanapallos remained the vulgate tradition about Assyria.

More names: Kastor's king list

According to Diodoros (2.22.1) and Kephalion⁸⁶, there is no use in enumerating all Assyrian kings, because most of them never did anything of consequence, but Greek and Syrian historians such as Ktesias, Kastor, Eusebios, Annianos, Synkellos and Elias of Nisibis,⁸⁷ thought otherwise. The works of Ktesias and Kastor are lost, but Eusebios has handed down Kastor's list, which probably was based on Ktesias' list, and many Christian historians followed Eusebios.⁸⁸ Here follows a list of Assyrian kings from the Armenian translation of Eusebios' *Chronicon*⁸⁹ (first column) and from Synkellos' *Chronographica*⁹⁰ (second column), with the number of years that every king has reigned behind the name:

⁸⁵ Drews 1975.

⁸⁶ Eus. *Chron. Arm.* ed. Karst p28-30; Synkellos ed. Mosshammer p.196; Kephalion *FGrH* 93 F1.

⁸⁷ Elias *Chronographia* ed. et trans. Brooks (1910, reprint 1962). Elias' list (eleventh century) is based on Eusebios, Annianos (fifth century) and Andronikos (sixth century). Elias gives the (often diverging) regnal years from his three sources, but he does not make a choice.

⁸⁸ According to Photios (§64), Ktesias' *Persika* contained a list of all kings from Ninus and Semiramis to Artaxerxes. On the reconstruction of Ktesias' king list, see Boncquet 1990.

⁸⁹ Eus. *Chron. Arm.* ed. Karst p.30-32; Kastor *FGrH* 250 F1d.

⁹⁰ Synkellos ed. Mosshammer p.109, 117, 124, 142, 171, 176, 181, 187, 193.

--	1. Βῆλος (55), ~Ogygos ⁹¹
1. Ninos (52)	2. Νίνος (52)
2. Šamiram (42)	3. Σεμίραμις (42)
3. Zames, Ninuas (38)	4. Νινύας, Ζάμης (38)
4. Arios (30)	5. Ἄρειος (30)
5. Aralios, Amyros (40)	6. Ἀράλιος (40)
6. Xerxes, Baleos (30)	7. Ξέρξης (30)
7. Amramithes (38)	8. Ἀρμαμίθρης (38)
8. Belochos (35)	9. Βήλωχος (35)
9. Baleas (12)	10. Βαλαιός (52)
10. Aladas (32) ⁹²	11. Σέθως (50) ⁹³
11. Mamythos (30)	12. Μαμυθός (30)
12. Machchaleos (30)	13. Ἀσχάλιος (28)
13. Spheros (22)	14. Σφαῖρος (22)
14. Mamylos (30)	15. Μάμυλος (30)
15. Sparethos (40)	16. Σπαρθέως (42)
16. Askatades (40)	17. Ἀσκατάδης (38)
17. Amyntas (45)	18. Ἀμύνθης (45)
18. Belochos (45)	19. Βήλοχος (25), Belimos, ⁹⁴ ~Perseus, Dionysos
Tratres, Achurard (17)	--
19. Balatores (30) ⁹⁵	20. Βαλατόρης (30)
20. Lamprides (32)	21. Λαμπρίδης (30)
21. Sosmares (8)	22. Σωσάρης (20)
22. Lampares (30)	23. Λαμπραής (30)

⁹¹ According to Kastor, Belos was a contemporary of Ogygos, Herakles and Dionysos (Eus. *Chron. Arm.* ed. Karst p.26-27; Kastor *FGrH* 250 F1a).

⁹² Elias: Atalos, Altadas.

⁹³ Probably a mistake. Sethos is the name of an Egyptian king.

⁹⁴ The synchronisms (indicated by ~) are from Eus. *Chron. Arm.* ed Karst p.28-30; Synkellos ed. Mosshammer p.196; Kephalion *FGrH* 93 F1. According to Kephalion, Belimos became king of the Assyrians 640 years after Ninos, which means that Belimos is identical to the second Belochos in Kastor's list.

⁹⁵ Perhaps identical to Beletaras.

23. Pannyas (42)	24. Πανυάς (45), ~Herakles
24. Sosarmos (19)	25. Σώσαρμος (22)
25. Mithreos (27)	26. Μιθραῖος (27), ~Medea
26. Teutamos (32)	27. Τεύταμος, Ταυτάνης (32), ~Trojan war ⁹⁶
27. Teuteos (40)	28. Τευταῖος (44)
--	29. Ἄραβῆλος (42), Ἄρβῆλος (Strab. 16.1.3) ⁹⁷
--	30. Χάλαος (45)
--	31. Ἄνεβος (38)
--	32. Βάβιος, Τιθωνός, Ταυτάνης (37)
28. Thineus (30)	33. Unknown ⁹⁸ (30)
29. Derusos (40)	34. Δέρκυλος (40)
30. Eupalmes (38)	35. Εὐπάκμης (38)
31. Laosthenes (45)	36. Λαοσθένης (45)
32. Peritiades (30)	37. Περτιάδης (30)
33. Ophrateos (21)	38. Ὀφραταῖος (21)
34. Ophatanes (50)	39. Ἐφεχερής (50)
35. Akrazanes (42) ⁹⁹	40. Ἄκραγάνης (42)
36. Sardanapalles (20)	41. Θῶνος, Κονκόλερος, Σαρδάναπαλος (20)

The origin of most of these names is obscure. As we have seen, Belos is a Babylonian deity. Ninos, Ninyas, Arbelos, Chalaos, and perhaps Babios are eponymous heroes. Xerxes is a Persian king. Sosarmos is also the name of a Median king (Diod. 2.32.4). Sardanapallos and Konkoleros – the latter is probably identical to the mysterious Kandalanu, who reigned over Babylon in the years after 648/647¹⁰⁰ – are historical Mesopotamian kings. Names that start with Bel, like Belimos (perhaps Bel-ibni) and Belochos (and also Beletaras and Beleous, which are mentioned in other sources)

⁹⁶ Diod. 2.22; Kephalion *FGrH* 93 F1; Synkellos ed. Mosshammer p196.

⁹⁷ Arbelos, Chalaos (eponymous heroes of Arbela and Kalah), Anebos and Babios (perhaps a mistake for Babilos) are also found in Abydenos' list of Assyrian kings (Eus. *Chron. Arm.* ed Karst p.25-26; Abydenos *FGrH* 685 F7), but Abydenos puts them between Belos and Ninos.

⁹⁸ The name is missing in the manuscripts.

⁹⁹ According to König (1972: 120), Akrazanes is Esarhaddon.

¹⁰⁰ The identity of Kandalanu is subject of debate. It has been suggested that he is identical to Ashurbanipal (Kuhrt 1997: 588-589).

sound Mesopotamian, but no real kings with these names are known, while many some other names sound Iranian. All in all, this king list looks almost as devoid of historical substance as Tolkien's list of kings of Gondor. Second or third in this list of Assyrian kings and queens is Semiramis, to whom the next section is devoted.

Semiramis

Semiramis is a composite character, who embodies much of what the Greeks regarded as oriental, and who seems to incorporate features of many oriental kings and deities: Ishtar, Marduk, Naqia, Sennacherib and Adad-Guppi. Yet, the historical Assyrian queen Sammuamat, wife of Shamshi-Adad V (824-811) and mother of Adad-Nerari III (811-783), is often regarded as the real Semiramis, but this idea has less to recommend it than is often thought. This section discusses the character and origin of the Semiramis legend.

The place and time of origin of the Semiramis legend has been subject of much debate, especially in older literature. According to Lehmann-Haupt, the Semiramis saga has arisen among the Medes, who in Sammuamat's time for the first time came in contact with the Assyrians.¹⁰¹ The Persians heard these stories from the Medes, and introduced them into Mesopotamia, where Greek travellers heard them. According to Eilers, stories about Semiramis originated in Urartu (the region which in later time was called Armenia) and in the adjacent mountainous areas of Iran, because in these regions the reminiscence of Semiramis was strongest.¹⁰² According to Röllig and Weinfeld, Semiramis' roots lie in the West, in Palestine or Syria: her name is perhaps West-Semitic, and she is told to have been born in Askalon.¹⁰³ According to Braun, Ninos and Semiramis were the protagonists of a cycle of Aramean stories from Syria or Mesopotamia.¹⁰⁴ According to Drews, the origin of Semiramis' birth narrative (Diod. 2.4) must be sought in Mesopotamia.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Lehmann 1901: 280; Lehmann-Haupt 1918: 253.

¹⁰² Eilers 1971: 68.

¹⁰³ Röllig 1974: 22-23; Weinfeld 1991: 103.

¹⁰⁴ Braun 1938: 6.

¹⁰⁵ Drews 1974: 388.

Carefully considered, it seems unlikely that Semiramis is Sammuamat.¹⁰⁶ Assyria was not in his heyday in Sammuamat's time. Only in the mid-eighth century, during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser (745-727), Assyria's expansion started. It is not likely that a queen from around 800 BC would still be remembered centuries later and would grow into a successful general and the founder of Babylon, though it is possible. The unusual fact that a woman wielded so much power as Sammuamat did may have saved her from oblivion. Or it may be no more than coincidence. In medieval Britain, an obscure character such as Arthur, about whom even less is known than about Sammuamat, who perhaps is not historical at all, grew into a legendary king.¹⁰⁷ The same could have happened to Sammuamat.

Yet, it is not likely that the Semiramis of the Greek historians was really a character from popular, oral tradition. Semiramis is mentioned first by Herodotos and in the *Histories* she is not yet the colourful character of almost mythical dimensions she is in Ktesias' *Persika*. Herodotos only tells us that Semiramis built embankments near Babylon: 'There were also two queens, the earlier, Semiramis, preceding the later by five generations. It was Semiramis who was responsible for certain remarkable embankments in the plain outside the city, built to control the river which until then used to flood the whole countryside' (Hdt. 1.184).¹⁰⁸ This text looks like a few lines from a guide for travellers and that is how Trajan read it more than five centuries later: 'When Trajan reached Babylon, he visited an enormous dike that Semiramis was reported to have built.¹⁰⁹ Its height was twenty-five feet, its width fifty feet, and its length two hundred stades' (Arr. *Parth.* frg. 74). Herodotos does not tell us any of the things that are attached to Semiramis in Ktesias' *Persika*: no birth legend, no campaigns, no founding of cities, no burying of lovers alive or doing other outrageous things, and no deification.

¹⁰⁶ Rollinger in *RLA* sv Semiramis.

¹⁰⁷ Ashe 1981; Barber 1990: 1-16.

¹⁰⁸ Translation by De Sélincourt.

¹⁰⁹ Perhaps Nebuchadnezzar's Median wall [#Xen. Strab. sugg. Kristin Kleber; >literature#].

If Herodotos had himself been in Babylon, the explanation of this text would have been easy: an inhabitant of the city had shown Herodotos an embankment that made quite an impression on him and his guide had called the builder something that sounded in Greek ears like Semiramis. But it is unlikely that Herodotos visited Babylon.¹¹⁰ His knowledge of the city is by hearsay. He could have heard something about Semiramis from some traveller or historian who had visited Mesopotamia and seen these embankments. It is impossible to determine what his source was and how reliable it was, but it seems unlikely that Sannuramat was ever mentioned as builder of something in Babylonia. Shamshi-Adad V has conducted a campaign against Babylon, and Adad-narari III seems to have had some say in Babylonian politics,¹¹¹ but there is no indication that Sannuramat ever built anything in Babylonia, and it seems unlikely that the Assyrians found time during a military campaign to build dikes in foreign territory.

This Semiramis, only a minor character in Herodotos *Historiae*, seems to have been transformed into an important character by Ktesias. Ktesias often employs this technique; it is known as *ekphrasis*.¹¹² He uses stories that were originally told of kings and goddesses from the ancient Near East and attaches them to Semiramis. An important source are stories about the deity Ištar. A good example is the campaign against Bactriana (Diod. 2.5.6), where Semiramis in person leads the attack on the citadel and takes it, which is strongly reminiscent of descriptions of Ištar as a war goddess in Assyrian literature.¹¹³ Semiramis having a horse for a lover also points to Ištar. The resemblance between Ktesias' Semiramis and the Assyrian Sannuramat is limited and could be coincidence.

Attributing the foundation of Babylon and the building of its palaces and temples to Semiramis must also have been a Greek invention. The Babylonians themselves seem to have ascribed the founding of their city and its main temple Esagila to the gods, especially to Marduk. Nevertheless, Ktesias' story contains a motif that is of

¹¹⁰ Fehling 1989: 243; Rollinger 1993: 184-187; Van der Spek 2008.

¹¹¹ ABC p.168-169, 243-245; RIMA III p.187-188, 191, 213; Kuhrt 1997: 577-578.

¹¹² Meister 1990: 64; Bleckmann 2006: 23.

¹¹³ Dalley 2007: 74-75.

Babylonian origin. According to the Greek historian, the length of Babylon's outer wall was 360 stades (Diod. 2.7.3) and its building was done in an unusual way: 'In order to expedite the building of these constructions [Semiramis] apportioned a stade to each of her friends, furnishing sufficient material for their task and directing them to complete their work within a year' (Diod. 2.8.1).¹¹⁴ Semiramis in Ktesias' *Persika* has Babylon completed in a year by her friends, exactly as Marduk in *Enuma elish* by the Anunnaki: 'When Marduk heard this, his face lit up greatly, like daylight. 'Create Babylon, whose construction you requested! Let its mud bricks be moulded, and build high the shrine!' The Anunnaki began shovelling. For a whole year they made bricks for it. When the second year arrived, they had raised the top of Esagila in front of the Apsu. They founded a dwelling for Anu, Ellil, and Ea likewise' (*Enuma elish* 6.44-47).¹¹⁵ An echo of the Babylonian tradition that the city and its main temples were built within a year by the Anunnaki is found in Ktesias story that the outer walls of Babylon were built within a year by Semiramis' friends.

To sum up, Herodotos, the first Greek historian who mentions Semiramis, does not speak about her warlike character or sexual escapades, which are characteristics of the Ktesian image of Semiramis. In the *Historiae*, she is a Babylonian queen who has built embankments to contain the rivers in the vicinity of Babylon. Babylonian water works were famous in the ancient world and are often mentioned in Greek descriptions of the city and the surrounding country. Quintus Curtius Rufus' life of Alexander contains a description of the embankments that had been built to contain the Euphrates (Curt. 5.1.28). And Strabo elaborately describes the dams, locks and embankments that are necessary for agriculture in Babylonia (Strab. 16.1.9-10). Embankments, dams and irrigation works belong to the most important Babylonian achievements, and the original Semiramis was one of the many officials and monarchs who built them. It is not possible to determine who this Semiramis was, but she became a focal point for all Greek ideas about the East.

¹¹⁴ Translation by C.H. Oldfather.

¹¹⁵ Translation by Stephanie Dalley.

Conclusion

Greek historians that have written about Mesopotamia are many: Herodotos, the father of history, Ktesias, the unrivalled authority on Assyrian history, and many others. These Greek historians mention a great number of Assyrian and Babylonian kings and queens, but most of them are mere names, and, a bit surprisingly, many of them do not bear Assyrian or Babylonian names at all. Of all these kings and queens, only Ninos, the first king and founder of Nineveh, Semiramis, the founder of Babylon, and Sardanapallos, Assyria's last and most decadent king, have captured the Greek imagination. The questions who Semiramis is and what the origin is of her name have been subject of much discussion in modern scholarly literature. These questions are the subject of the next two sections.

8.4 Sammuramat

Despite Greek beliefs to the contrary, politics were men's business in Mesopotamia, as they were everywhere in the ancient Near East. Still, a few women have played an active part in the politics of their times. Egypt has had several women rulers. The most famous of these female pharaohs (there is no distinct word for reigning queen in Egyptian) are probably Hatshepsut and Nubkheperre Intef. In the Sumerian king list, a female ruler is mentioned as well: Kubaba, a barmaid who became king and reigned for 100 years.¹¹⁶ More famous are the Assyrian queens Sammuramat and Naqia. It is often thought that Semiramis and Nubkheperre Intef, both mentioned by Herodotus (1.184-187), are Sammuramat and Naqia, but these identifications are uncertain, as has been argued in the previous section. Much is known about Naqia, who was the wife of Sennacherib (705-681) and who played an important role during the succession of her son Esarhaddon (681-669), and again during the succession of her grandson Ashurbanipal (669-631).¹¹⁷ Less is known about Sammuramat, who was the wife of Shamshi-Adad V (824-811) and the mother of Adad-narari III (811-783). What is known about Sammuramat from contemporary inscriptions is discussed briefly in this section.

Sammuramat and her time

A stele from Ashur testifies to Sammuramat being the wife of Shamshi-Adad V (824-811) and the mother of Adad-narari III (811-783).¹¹⁸ This stele is found among a number of similar stelae, erected to commemorate Assyrian monarchs and officials. The text reads in the translation of Grayson: 'Monument of Sammuramat, the palace woman [of Šam]šī-Adad, king of the universe, king of Assyria, mother of Adad-nārārī, king of the universe, king of Assyria, daughter-in-law of Shalmaneser, king of the four quarters'. It is remarkable that Sammuramat has her own stele, because most of the stelae from Ashur are erected in honour of men of authority, but Sammuramat is not the only woman in this predominantly male assemblage. Two

¹¹⁶ Jacobsen 1973: 105.

¹¹⁷ Melville 1999.

¹¹⁸ Andrae 1913: 10-11; Miglus 1984; Pettinato 1991: 37; Reade 2004.

other queens, wives of Sennacherib (705-681) and of Ashurbanipal (669-630), are among the honoured.¹¹⁹ These latter stelae are from the Sargonic period, when the position of highborn women was slightly better than in earlier times,¹²⁰ but still they show that erecting a stele for a woman was not unique and not necessarily points to a position of power.

Another text that mentions Sammuramat is inscribed upon a statue of the deity Nabû. This statue has been donated by Bel-tarši-ilumma, governor of Kalah, to the temple of Nabû. The paragraph in which Sammuramat is mentioned reads in the translation of Grayson: 'For the life of Adad-nārārī, king of Assyria, his lord, and (for) the life of Sammuramat, the palace woman, his mistress: Has Bēl-tarši-ilumma, governor of Calah (and) the lands Ḫamedu, Sirgāna, Temenu, (and) Ialuna, had (this statue) made and he dedicated (it) for his life'.¹²¹ The position of a *palace woman* at the Assyrian court in this period is not clear. It has been suggested that she was the most important – according to Landsberger in Sammuramat's time even the only – wife of the Assyrian king, the mother of the crown prince. From other sources it is known that she had her own staff and rooms in the palace.¹²² Why Sammuramat, the wife of the previous king and the mother of the present king, is mentioned in this inscription, and not Adad-narari's wife, is not clear. According to Pettinato, the reason could be that Sammuramat acted as regent.¹²³ According to Lehmann-Haupt, the reason is that Sammuramat originally came from Babylon and that she was closely involved in the introduction of the cult of the Babylonian deity Nabû in Assyria.¹²⁴ Unfortunately, neither Pettinato's explanation nor that of Lehmann-Haupt is supported by the text of the inscription.

¹¹⁹ Andrae 1913: 6-10. The names are only partially readable, cf. Pettinato 1991: 35.

¹²⁰ Reade 1987. Only from Sennacherib's reign on, royal women are regularly mentioned in inscriptions. Before that period it was unusual (Dalley 2007: 26; *RIMA III* p.200).

¹²¹ *RIMA III* p.226-227. The pronunciation of the word that is translated as *palace woman* and that is written MUNUS.É.GAL, MÍ.É.GAL, MÍ.KUR has been subject to much discussion: *ekallitu*, *sinnišat ekalli*, *ša ekalli* or *issi ekalli*. Hebr. שֶׁגַל *šegal*, an Assyrian loan, points to *issi ekalli* (Hebr. Š = Assyr. s; Parpola 1988, Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 9-10; Svard 2010; Mankowsky 2000: 137-138; *pace* Millard 1976:4; *HALAT* sv *šegal*).

¹²² Landsberger 1967: 202; *CTN III* 11; Kuhrt 1997: 526-528; Melville 1999.

¹²³ Pettinato 1991: 33.

¹²⁴ Lehmann-Haupt 1901.

The most intriguing inscription in which Sammuamat is mentioned is the Pazarcık stele. This inscription reads in the translation of Grayson: ‘Boundary stone of Adad-nārārī, king of Assyria, son of Šamšī-Adad, king of Assyria, (and of) Sammuamat, the palace woman of Šamšī-Adad, king of Assyria, mother of Adad-nārārī, strong king, king of Assyria, daughter-in-law of Shalmaneser, king of the four quarters. In the days of Ušpilulume, king of the Kummuhites, they [Ataršumki and his allies] caused Adad-nārārī, king of Assyria, (and) Sammuamat, the palace woman, to cross the Euphrates’.¹²⁵ A king on campaign was sometimes accompanied by his wife or mother.¹²⁶ For example, after the battle of Issos, the mother, the wife and several children of Darius were found in the Persian camp (Arr. An. 2,12). But it is unusual that the king’s mother is mentioned in an Assyrian royal inscription, or that a woman is mentioned in connection with a campaign.¹²⁷ This inscription suggests that Sammuamat had taken an active part in the events. Only when the fighting starts, the text switches to the first person singular (*amdaḥiṣ*). The question is, as it was in the inscription on the Nabû statue, why is the king’s mother mentioned in the Pazarcık stele? According to Boncquet, it shows that the queen played an active role in politics and that she was perhaps regent.¹²⁸ Oded also regards it as an indication of her influence on her son’s reign, but regards a regency as unproven.¹²⁹ Unfortunately, the inscription itself does not support these interpretations and caution about drawing conclusions is advisable.

The idea that Sammuamat had been regent for her infant son, which has been mentioned two times in the preceding paragraphs, was in first in the first instance based on another inscription, the Saba’a stele. The sentence in question: *ina ḥamušti šatti ina kussî šarrūti rabiš ūšibu-ma*.¹³⁰ Unger translated it in 1916 as: ‘Als ich mich im

¹²⁵ RIMA III p.204-205, changed after Hasegawa 2010. Cf. Timm 1993.

¹²⁶ According to Dalley (2007: 108-109), royal women regularly accompanied the king on his campaigns, travelling on wagons. Proof of this custom is very limited.

¹²⁷ RIMA III p.200; Svard 2010: 67.

¹²⁸ Boncquet 1987: 19-20.

¹²⁹ Oded in PNA sv Adad-Nerari III (1998) 31.

¹³⁰ RIMA III p.208 r 11-12.

5. Jahre auf den Thron meiner Majestät erhaben [set]zte'.¹³¹ In this interpretation, Adad-narari only took to the throne five year after the death of his father.¹³² This led him to the conclusion that Sammuramat had been regent for five years. But the cited sentence is grammatically problematic: *ūšibu* is a subjunctive and subjunctives are only used in subordinated clauses. Other editors solve this problem by adding *ša* between *šatti* and *ina*. In Grayson's translation: 'In the fifth year *after* (*ša*) I had ascended nobly the royal throne'. The discussion is complicated somewhat by a number of ambiguities in the chronology of Adad-narari's reign, but in 1972, after a thorough examination of the evidence, Schramm reached the conclusion that the sources leave us no room for a formal regency.¹³³ But he assumes that Sammuramat exerted some political influence during her son's reign.

Conclusion

Only a few things are known for certain about Sammuramat: she lived around 800 BC, she was the wife of Shamshi-Adad V (824-811) and the mother of Adad-narari III (811-783), and she is mentioned several times in inscriptions of her son, which was unusual in that period. Several explanations have been put forward: Adad-narari was still a minor when his father died and Sammuramat was regent for five years;¹³⁴ Adad-narari was not the eldest son and his mother had engineered his succession;¹³⁵ the legitimacy of Adad-narari's succession was debated;¹³⁶ Sammuramat had much influence in politics during her son's reign.¹³⁷ These explanations are all plausible, but the sources do not support any of them. It seems certain that Sammuramat had a special position during her son's reign, but the nature and cause of her position remains uncertain.

¹³¹ Unger 1916: 9-11.

¹³² Unger 1916: 19-20; cf. Pettinato 1991: 41.

¹³³ Schramm 1972; cf. Tadmor 1973: 147; contested by Siddall 2010 (*non vidi*).

¹³⁴ Unger 1916: 19-20; Boncquet 1987: 19-20.

¹³⁵ Ben-Barak 1987; Gadaut 2009: 244-245.

¹³⁶ Kuhrt 1997: 491.

¹³⁷ Schramm 1972; Oded in PNA sv Adad-Nerari III (1998).

8.5 The Origin of the Name Semiramis

Although Semiramis is an Assyrian queen, she is also connected with the Levant in ancient Greek and in modern scholarly literature. According to Ktesias, Semiramis was born in Askalon. According to some modern scholars, her name is West-Semitic, which in itself does not say anything about her origins, because Aramaic was spoken all over the ancient Near East, but, more importantly, it could be explained from names or elements which are also known from Ugarit or from the Hebrew Bible. In this section, the origin of the name Semiramis is discussed to see if it can contribute something to explain the origin of the Semiramis legend. In antiquity, some people thought that the name Semiramis was connected to the Syrian word for pigeon. According to Semiramis' birth narrative (Diod. 2.4, probably from Ktesias), she was abandoned by her mother in the wilderness, and she only survived, because pigeons fed her with milk and cheese, stolen from shepherds in the vicinity. When the girl was found, she was called Semiramis after the pigeons. In modern research, the connection between Semiramis and the word for pigeon has been abandoned. Some modern explanations of the name Semiramis are based on the Semitic word for heaven (Akk. *šamû*, Hebr. *šamayim*, Phoen. *šamēm*), others on the word for name (Hebr. *šem*, Aram. *šūm*, Akk. *šumu*), but most scholars explain it from the name of the Assyrian queen Sammuamat, of which the etymology is also controversial. It is sometimes regarded as Aramaic, sometimes as Akkadian, and sometimes even as Indo-Iranian. The difficulty with all these explanations is the same: each of them is plausible, but none of them is supported by decisive arguments.

Semiramis and Sammuamat

According to Diodoros (2.4.6), who probably follows Ktesias, Semiramis is derived from the Syrian word for dove (κατὰ τὴν Σύρων διάλεκτον). The question is, what is 'the language of the Syrians'? Greek authors often seem to use Ἀσσύριος, Σύριος and Σύρος indiscriminately (see chapter 1), which makes it difficult to determine which language is meant. None of the West-Semitic languages yields a word for pigeon or dove that resembles Semiramis: Hebr. יוֹנָה *yōnā* 'dove', Aram. *yaunā*, Ugar. *ynt*; Hebr. גֹּזַל *gōzāl* 'turtledove', Aram. *zūgallā* 'young pigeon'; Hebr. תּוֹר *tōr* 'turtledove', Ugar.

tr; and Hebr. *יְמִימָה* *yēmīmā* (personal name, daughter of Job). None of these words resembles Semiramis, but Akk. *summu* and *summatu* “dove, pigeon” do.¹³⁸ Eilers and Boncquet attach no value to this similarity. Eilers thinks that Sammuamat was of Urartian descent, and Boncquet that she was of Aramean stock, making a Babylonian (folk) etymology less desirable. Yet, the resemblance between *summ(at)u* and Semi(ramis) is at least as large as the resemblance between Sammuamat and Semiramis, which they both readily accept. If Ktesias has heard about Semiramis in Babylon, as Drews believes,¹³⁹ he could have heard this explanation of her name from someone who knew (some) Akkadian.

Most explanations of Semiramis start with Sammuamat, the name of an Assyrian queen who lived around 800 BC. But the name Sammuamat (written ^f*sa-am-mu-ramat*) itself is also difficult to explain. There are a number of explanations, but none of them is broadly accepted. The first one is Albright’s explanation: Sammuamat is a West-Semitic name,¹⁴⁰ the Ass. form of Aram. *šammurāmat* ‘šammu is exalted,’¹⁴¹ a name like Abram, Abiram (Hebr. אַבְרָם *’abrām* or אַבִּירָם *’abīrām* ‘[my] father is exalted’) or Ahiram (Hebr. אַחִירָם *’ahīrām* ‘[my] brother is exalted’), in which ’ֹב ‘father’ and ’ֹחַ ‘brother’ refer to gods.¹⁴² The obvious weakness of this explanation is that an Aramaic goddess *šammu* is not known from any source available to us.¹⁴³ Explaining these names from שֶׁמֶשׁ *šemeš* ‘sun’ (the solar deity) is also unlikely, because the second š is missing.

A second possibility is to derive Sammuamat from Akkad. *rāmu* ‘to love’, which is for example found in the Babylonian name *Nabû-rāmat* ‘Nabu she holds dear’.¹⁴⁴ Of course, the question is how to explain the first part of the name. According to

¹³⁸ Eilers 1971: 39; Boncquet 1987: 57; Fossum in *DDD* sv Dove περιστερά (1999).

¹³⁹ Drews 1974.

¹⁴⁰ Albright 1945: 101-102; Boncquet 1987: 20; Zadok 1977: 85; Pettinato 1991: 55.

¹⁴¹ An š in Aramaic corresponds to an s in Assyrian (Hämeen-Anttila 2000: 9-10).

¹⁴² Noth 1980: 66-75.

¹⁴³ Eilers 1971: 40. The name of the Hellenistic deity Sim(i)a is derived from Greek σημῖον ‘sign’ and does not help to explain Sammuamat (Oden 1977: 116-121).

¹⁴⁴ Tallqvist 1914: 191, 157 and 305.

Mattila, it is the name of a deity,¹⁴⁵ but a Mesopotamian deity *Sammu* is not known. According to Dalley, the first part is *sammû* ‘lyre, harp’ and *Sammuramat* means ‘the lyre is beloved’.¹⁴⁶ At first sight, this is not a very convincing explanation, but a man’s name *Sammû-rām* does exist, in which *sammû* is spelled ^{GI5}ZÀ.MÍ, which makes it clear that it has to be interpreted as ‘lyre’. Despite the difference in spelling, Dalley’s explanation is a serious possibility.

A third explanation is based on the idea that *Sammuramat* is not Semitic, but Indo-Iranian or proto-Armenian. According to Pisani, it is the Akkadian rendering of **samara-vat-*, derived from a word that is related to OI. *samará-* ‘battle’, with the common adjective suffix *-vant-/-vat-*.¹⁴⁷ Indo-Iranian words are sometimes found in the ancient near eastern texts, in particular in texts from Mitanni, a nation that played an important role in international politics of the fifteenth to the thirteenth century.¹⁴⁸ It is possible that an Indo-Iranian name has survived the end of Mitanni in Urartu, which was located north of Assyria, near Mitanni, but it is speculative, because it would be the only example of such names that is found.

A West-Semitic Origin

Other scholars connect ‘Semiramis’ (but not ‘Sammuramat’) with names from the ancient Near East that are composed with ‘heaven’ or ‘name’. A Hebrew name that closely resembles Semiramis is שמירמות *šēmīrāmōt* (1Chr. 15:18, 20; 16:5; 2Chr. 17:8). The meaning of this name is not known.¹⁴⁹ Perhaps it is derived from Hebr. שם *šem* ‘name’ and רמות *rāmōt* ‘elevated places’, linked with the *ī* that is often found in names.¹⁵⁰ The resemblance to Semiramis is of course striking, but it is not clear what this likeness means. *Semiramot* is a man’s name. The first *Semiramot* is a Levite and

¹⁴⁵ Mattila in *PNA* sv *Sammuramat* (2002) 1083 n 258.

¹⁴⁶ Dalley 2005: 19.

¹⁴⁷ Stamm 1968: 82 n 2; Pisani 1975.

¹⁴⁸ Mayrhofer 1966.

¹⁴⁹ Noth 1980: 259 (nr 1365); *HAL* sv שמירמות; recent commentaries often keep silent about the meaning of this name (Knoppers, Williamson, Japhet).

¹⁵⁰ E.g. in ^abīrām (beside ^aabrām) and ^ahīrām. According to Noth (1980: 33-36), it is a genitive ending which has lost its function and not an enclitic possessive pronoun.

a singer from David's time, the other one is a Levite from Jehoshaphat's reign. A connection with Semiramis or Sammuamat is unlikely. Perhaps, if the meaning of the name Semiramot were known, it would help to explain the origin of the name Semiramis. Unfortunately it is not known.

Names or phrases composed with 'heaven' (Phoen. 𐤌𐤍𐤗 *šamēm*, Hebr. שָׁמַיִם *šamayim*, Aram. *šamayin*, *šēmīn*, *šemayyō*, Akkad. *šamû*) could perhaps contribute more to the explanation of the name Semiramis. The earliest text that could be cited in this context is a Ugaritic hymn to Rapiu 'the Healer, the Saviour' and to other gods.¹⁵¹ In this hymn, the goddess Anat is called *b^clt drkt*, *b^clt šmm rmm* (*ba^clatu darkati*, *ba^clatu šamīma rāmīma*) 'mistress of power, mistress of the high heavens'. According to Virolleaud, *drkt en šmm rmm* immediately remind us of the goddesses Derketo and Semiramis, which were venerated in Syria in late antiquity.¹⁵² The view that Derketo and Semiramis are in one way or another connected to these epithets has been received with some enthusiasm,¹⁵³ although the distance between a Ugaritic hymn and Greek historical texts is great.

Similar names are known from other periods. Cuneiform texts yield *šamēramu* (written *ša-me-e-ra-mu*), in a document from the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-424/3),¹⁵⁴ and *šamērammat* (^MAN-*e-ra-am-ma-ta*), in a Hellenistic dedication from Uruk.¹⁵⁵ Similar names are also found in Greek texts: Σεμηρώνιος, probably a scribal error for Σεμηρῶμος, the name of a Babylonian or Persian historian about whom nothing is known,¹⁵⁶ and Σαμηροῦμος, ὁ καὶ Ὑψουράνιος (Eus. *PE* 1.10.9, from Philo of Byblus).¹⁵⁷ According to Eissfeldt and Baumgarten, this Samemroumos is the personification of a quarter in Tyre, which must have borne the same name as the quarter in Sidon that is mentioned in an inscription of Bod^caštar, king of Sidon (*KAI*

¹⁵¹ KTU 1.108 (tekst); Virolleaud 1968; Wyatt 2002: 395.

¹⁵² Virolleaud 1963: 109; Virolleaud 1968: 555.

¹⁵³ Boncquet 1987: 20-21; Pardee 1988: 103.

¹⁵⁴ Hilprecht 1898: 23-24; Zadok 1977: 85.

¹⁵⁵ Doty 1977: 87-89; Wallenfels 1994: 15 (no. 23); Boiy 2005: 50.

¹⁵⁶ Chron. Pasch. p.68 ed. Dindorf = Semeronios *FGrH* 686 F1; Hilprecht 1898: 23-24.

¹⁵⁷ Eus. *PE* 1.10.9 = Philon *FGrH* 790 F2 = Attridge and Oden 1981: 42-43.

15).¹⁵⁸ It is not always clear whether the second part of these names is W-Sem. *rūm* ‘to be exalted’ or Akk. *rāmu* ‘to love’, but in most cases a W-Sem. origin seems more likely.¹⁵⁹ This means that these names are Aramaic, Phoenician or Hebrew, not Akkadian. Some of the bearers of these names are men, others are women.

Conclusion

It is not possible to make a choice from these explanations of the names Semiramis and Sammuamat, but it is possible to draw a few conclusions.

First, Semiramis is not derived from Akk. *summ(at)u* ‘dove, pigeon’, but Ktesias or another Greek historian could have heard a folk etymology or learned explanation of the name Semiramis, which was based on the likeness with *summ(at)u*.

Second, the interpretation of ‘Sammuamat’ as ‘*Sammu/Šammu* is exalted’ (Albright) or ‘beloved’ (Mattila), is unlikely, because a goddess *Sammu* or *Šammu* is not known, neither from Mesopotamia nor from Syria.

Third, the explanation of Sammuamat as an Indo-Iranian name is unlikely, because Indo-Iranian words and names are not known from Mesopotamia from the time around 800 BC, when Sammuamat lived.

This leaves us with two possibilities. First, Semiramis is a West-Semitic name, which is derived from *šamēm* ‘heaven’ or *šem* ‘name’ and *rūm* ‘to be exalted’, and is not in any way connected to Sammuamat. Second, Semiramis is the Greek rendering of Sammuamat, an Akkad. name meaning ‘the lyre is beloved’. Philologically, both explanations are possible. The similarity between Semiramis and *šamē(m)-ram(u)* is greater than the similarity between Semiramis and Sammuamat, but the Greek rendition of eastern names is usually rather imprecise. Sammuamat cannot be excluded, and a choice must be made on other than philological grounds.

¹⁵⁸ Attridge and Oden 1981: 82-83 n. 56; Baumgarten 1981: 159-165.

¹⁵⁹ Noth 1980: 52, 145-146.

8.6 Assyrian Kings in Biblical and Greek Tradition

Both in the Hebrew Bible and in Greek historiography, a large number of Assyrian and Babylonian monarchs are mentioned. The authors of the books of Kings and of the Major Prophets knew the names of most Assyrian and Babylonian kings from Tiglath-pileser III onwards and they even knew when they had reigned, as is proven by synchronisms with Judean and Israelite kings. Genesis adds two more names: Nimrod and Amraphel, who are historically more difficult to place. The number of Mesopotamian monarchs in Greek historiography is larger and more variegated. It includes historical kings such as Sennacherib, Sardanapallos and Nebuchadnezzar, mythical figures such as Gilgamesh, Greek inventions, often eponymous heroes, such as Ninus, Ninyas and Arbelos, a deity, Belos, a Persian king, Xerxes, and two queens whose origins are debated, Semiramis and Nitokris. The number of names that is found both in Judean and in Greek historiography is surprisingly small. The most important are Gilgamesh, the Assyrian king Sennacherib and the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar.

Sumerian Kings

The Sumerians were probably not known to the Greeks and the Israelites, but the legendary Sumerian king Gilgamesh was widely known in the ancient Near East. His name is mentioned by Aelian (second century AD) and it is found in the *Book of Giants* from Qumran (third or second century BC). Aelian's story and what is told about Gilgamesh in the *Book of Giants* have little in common, but they show that his name was still known in the Hellenistic period.

Assyrian Kings

The Bible mentions at least seven Assyrian kings by name: Nimrod, Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal. They are depicted as proud and powerful monarchs, and, except Nimrod (see chapter seven), they are all known from cuneiform records. Greek authors mention many Assyrian monarchs, too many to enumerate here. The most important are Ninus, Semiramis, Sennacherib, Nitokris, and Sardanapalos (Ashurbanipal). Most of them are depicted

as weak and decadent, and only a few are known from cuneiform records. One of the few that is mentioned both in Greek and biblical traditions is Sennacherib.

Not only is Sennacherib mentioned both in the Bible and in Herodotos, even the stories that are told about him are similar: the deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib's army (2K. 18-19; Is. 36-37) and the victory of the Egyptian pharaoh Sethos over Sennacherib (Hdt. 2.141), both by divine intervention. A shared origin for both stories has often been postulated, but it is not easy to determine what the connection between these stories exactly is.¹⁶⁰ According to Herodotos (2.141), the Assyrian king marched against pharaoh Sethos, who had lost the support of his soldiers and had to face Sennacherib with a ragtag army. In despair, Sethos turned to his god Hephaistos, who in a dream promised the pharaoh his support. Sethos marched out to meet the Assyrian army. When both armies were facing each other, an army of mice destroyed during the night the quivers, bowstrings and leather shield handles of the Assyrians. Sennacherib and his army had to retreat and Sethos was saved. To commemorate this event, a statue of Sethos with a mouse in his hand was erected in the temple of Hephaistos. The biblical story (2K. 18:17-19:36) is also about a campaign of Sennacherib, this time against the Judean king Hezekiah. Sennacherib devastated Judah's cities and twice he sent an embassy to Jerusalem to require Hezekiah's surrender. The Judean king did not answer, but he turned to Isaiah. The prophet promised divine aid and predicted that Sennacherib would return to Assyria empty-handed. At night, an angel descended from heaven and killed 185.000 Assyrians. The Assyrian king returned to Nineveh and was murdered by two of his sons. In both stories Sennacherib and his army are driven back by divine intervention, but the reason why his army has to turn back is different. It is unlikely that the biblical story has been taken from Herodotos' *Historiae*, as Wesselius tentatively suggests,¹⁶¹ or the other way around, because the differences are too great.¹⁶² It seems more likely that both stories are based on the same event, a setback that the Assyrian army suffered in the south of Palestine, as Evans thinks.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Grabbe 2003.

¹⁶¹ Wesselius 2002: 94-96.

¹⁶² Grabbe 2003.

¹⁶³ Wesselius 2000: 95-96; Evans 2009: 183-184.

About the other Assyrian king who is (perhaps) mentioned in the Bible and in Greek historiography, Ashurbanipal (Hebr. Osnappar, Gr. Sardanapa(l)los), there are no stories common to both traditions. The Bible tells us hardly anything about him. It is not even absolutely certain that Ashurbanipal is mentioned at all.

Babylonian Kings

The Bible mentions at least six Babylonian kings by name: Amraphel, Marduk-apla-iddina II, Nebuchadnezzar II, Evil-Merodach, Neriglissar, and Belshazzar. Like the Assyrian kings, they are depicted as proud and powerful monarchs, especially Nebuchadnezzar, and they are all known from cuneiform records. Greek authors also mention a number of Babylonian monarchs: Belos, Chaldaios, Nebuchadnezzar, and Nabonidus. Of course, Semiramis and Nitokris could also have been mentioned here, because often Greek authors do not distinguish between Babylonian and Assyrian monarchs. Only a few of them are known from cuneiform records. The most important of these are Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus.

The most important Babylonian king that is mentioned in the Bible is of course Nebuchadnezzar, because he conquered Jerusalem twice and led the Judeans into captivity. In early Greek historiography he is called Labynetos. Herodotos mentions two kings called Labynetos, the Greek rendering of Nabuna'id. The first one is probably Nebuchadnezzar. This confusion of Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus is also found in the book of Daniel. Only in Megasthenes' *Indika*, which was written in the late fourth or early third century,¹⁶⁴ Nebuchadnezzar is found under his own name. Megasthenes knew how important this king had been, and how much he was held in esteem by the Babylonians,¹⁶⁵ but as far as we know, he was one of the few among Greek historians. Nebuchadnezzar is also mentioned by the geographer Strabo, the Jewish historian Josephos (*Ant.* 10.228) and the Christian author Eusebios, and a few

¹⁶⁴ According to the tradition view, Megasthenes' *Indika* was written between 300 and 290, but Bosworth (1996) has argued convincingly that it must have been around 310. See also Parker 2008: 42-47.

¹⁶⁵ Megasthenes *FGrH* 715 F1 en 11 (see page 261 of this study).

Greek historians whose works are lost. Why this king, who was a contemporary of Alkaios and Hesiod, received so little fame remains an enigma.

Explanation

It is not difficult to explain why these kings – Gilgamesh, Sennacherib, Ashurbanipal (Sardanapallos) and Nebuchadnezzar/Nabonidus – were remembered in particular in Judean and Greek historiography. Gilgamesh was the hero of the widely known epic which bears his name. Nebuchadnezzar is the founder of the neo-Babylonian empire, and Nabonidus its last king. Ashurbanipal, called Sardanapallos by the Greeks, was the last powerful king of Assyria. Being the first king of a nation, or its last, makes a historical figure interesting. And Sennacherib must also have appealed to the imagination. His ignominious death – being murdered by two of his sons – became a source of speculation about the cause of such an infamous death. The fact that Sennacherib and Ashurbanipal both have fought in the West – Sennacherib during his campaign of 701, when Egypt supported revolts in the Levant against Assyria, and Ashurbanipal in 667 and 664, during his campaigns against Egypt – has probably also contributed to the Greeks being acquainted with these kings. The Egyptian connections explain why they are mentioned in Herodotus' second book, about Egypt, and not in his first, which contains the Babylonian logos.

Of course, some stories (or perhaps better: literary motifs) of Babylonian origin are found both in Greek and biblical literature. The most famous is probably the story of the hero who was exposed at birth. This story, which was first told of Sargon of Akkad, reappears with different protagonists in biblical and Greek literature: Moses, Oedipus, Semiramis, Cyrus and Gilgamesh are all heroes who were exposed at birth.¹⁶⁶ But this motif is almost omnipresent and, although it is told of a number of Assyrian monarchs in Greek literature, it does not show any relevance for this investigation.

¹⁶⁶ Binder 1964; Lewis 1980.

Conclusion

As has been said in the introduction, one reason to compare Greek and biblical images of Mesopotamia, its history and its monarchs is to investigate whether the encounters between Assyrians or Babylonians and Greeks in the archaic period have left behind traces in Greek historiography. It is clear that the image that Greek historians of the fifth century and beyond created of the Assyrian and Babylonian history is partly based on Iranian and Mesopotamian sources from the Achaemenid period, and partly invented by these authors themselves, but it is to be expected that it also contains names or events that were known from the archaic period and that were heard in Egypt or the Levant. But in this chapter it has become clear that comparing Greek and biblical historiography of the Assyrians and Babylonians does not yield many common elements or traces of knowledge about Assyrian and Babylonian monarchs that are demonstrably from the archaic period or from the Levant. Some Mesopotamian monarchs, such as Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar, are mentioned both in biblical and in Greek historiography, but the similarities are few. It is likely that the names of Sennacherib, Ashurbanipal (Sardanapallos) and Nebuchadnezzar/Nabonidus (Labynetos) were first heard by Greek merchants and mercenaries in the Levant or in Egypt in the seventh and sixth centuries, but there are no similarities with biblical accounts of these kings to support this assumption.

