

Ctesias and the Fall of Nineveh

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The *Persica* of Ctesias are not extant but fragments are preserved in the works of many other ancient writers, notably Diodorus Siculus and Photius; König 1972 is an excellent edition of these excerpts.¹ The purpose of this article is to suggest that certain elements in Ctesias' description of the fall of Nineveh (best surviving in Diodorus II.xxiv-xxviii) go back to details actually derived from an earlier siege and fall of Babylon. This is not to deny that the narrative of Ctesias—insofar as it is historical—does preserve material genuinely traceable to the fall of Nineveh, only that it has further incorporated extraneous particulars. Thus the barest outline of a Babylonian and a Median king uniting to bring about the end of the Assyrian empire is correct (Smith, 126–31; Roux 1980, 343–47) though the exact chronology has been much disputed (see J. Oates in the forthcoming volume 3. 2 of the new Cambridge Ancient History). Furthermore, the names of the protagonists are confused: Belesys could just be a corruption of Nabu-aplatur (Nabopolassar) but Arbaces cannot be Umakishtar / Cyaxares, and in fact the suggestion of Jacoby (col. 2049) that Ctesias has inserted the names of two leading Persian officials of the time known from Xenophon, namely the Arbaces who commanded at Cunaxa and the Belesys who was satrap of Syria, is convincing. Another mistake in the Greek accounts is making the last king of Assyria Sardanapallos, that is Ashurbanipal. In fact the last king was Sinshar-ishkun; among the writers of antiquity only Abydenus names him correctly in the form Sarakos (Gadd 1923, p. 18 & n. 8).

The other conflict of interest to us here is the revolt of Shamash-shum-ukin, the brother of Ashurbanipal. The background to this is as follows (cf. Smith 1925, Wiseman 1958, Roux 1980, 303–08, Grayson 1980): in 672 Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, convened ambassadors from all over his realm to swear cooperation with his plan for the succession by which one son, Ashurbanipal, was to be crowned king of Assyria and another, Shamash-

¹ I would like to thank Rupert Macey-Dare for his assistance in the writing of this article. The abbreviations used are those of the two modern Akkadian dictionaries: CAD (The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary) and AHW (the *akkadisches Handwörterbuch* of W. von Soden).

shum-ukin, king of Babylon. This arrangement was put into effect following the death of Esarhaddon in 669 B.C. and worked peacefully until Shamash-shum-ukin rebelled against Assyria in 652; after some initial success Babylon was placed under siege in 650 and fell in 648 B.C. The sources for this are the annals and royal correspondence of Ashurbanipal, the Babylonian Chronicle and contemporary legal and economic documents.

What interests us here is that there are correspondences between events in this rebellion and in Ctesias' account of the fall of Nineveh.

Firstly, the length of the siege is given as two years by Ctesias (Diod. II.xxvii.1): the siege of Nineveh in 612 lasted only two and one-half months (Gadd 1923, p. 17) whilst the siege of Babylon during the Shamash-shum-ukin rebellion lasted from April 11, 650 until at least February 29, 648 (when a legal document from Babylon records that "the enemy is encamped against the city"), if not in fact until April 15 of that year—the latest known date of Shamash-shum-ukin (Grayson 1980, p. 234–38). Gadd made the suggestion that the figure of two years in Diodorus might be traced back to the fact that the siege of Nineveh was begun in 614 B.C., abandoned and recommenced successfully in 612, so that the whole operation was of two years' duration (Gadd 1923, p. 9 & 12, followed by Wiseman 1956, p. 14); or that somehow "the three months occupied by the final siege had been expanded by tradition into three years" (Gadd 1923, p. 17). This is a clever suggestion, though there is no firm evidence to support it, but even if it is correct it remains true that the reason for the transposition could be memory of the 650–648 siege.

Secondly, the composition of the allies fits better the forces of Shamash-shum-ukin than those of Nabopolassar. They are given in Diodorus (II.xxiv.5) as the Medes, Persians, Babylonians and Arabs, and whilst it is true that Cyaxares and the Medes were at the forefront of the attacks on Assyria, there is nowhere in the cuneiform evidence any suggestion of the Arabs or Persians being involved in the fall of Nineveh. When on the other hand we look at the allies of Shamash-shum-ukin, we find that although the list includes Akkad (particularly Babylon, Borsippa and Sippar), the Chaldeans, the Arameans, the Sea-land, Elam, Gutium, Amurru and Meluhha (Luckenbill no. 789), it is clear that the Elamites and Arabs were the most important as it was they whose subjugation Ashurbanipal describes most conspicuously. In Elam the kings involved were, successively, Humban-nikash II, Tammaritu, Indabigash and Humbanhattash II (Carter & Stolper, p. 51); in Arabia it was Uaite' who "like Elam listened to the rebellious words of Akkad" (Luckenbill no. 817) and gave troops to Abiyate' and Ayamu to help Shamash-shum-ukin (Eph'al, p. 143–44 & 155–56).

Now of course the Elamites were not the Persians, but it is not unlikely that Ctesias used this appellation for them since part of the area subsequently occupied by the Persians was the former Elam (viz. the region from Susa to Persepolis) where the two peoples lived in symbiosis (Carter

& Stolper, p. 54–59); since he will have realised that no Greek will have known where Elam was; and, not least, since he was writing at the Persian court and would have had an interest in playing up the role of the Persians. Finally, Diodorus claims that the revolt was started by the leaders of the army (Goosens, p. 39), which corresponds well with the epigraph on a sculpture of Ashurbanipal (Luckenbill no. 1076).

Thirdly, there is the celebrated story of Sardanapallos collecting together all his possessions and eunuchs into the palace, setting it alight and perishing in the flames (König, p. 127, 130 & 165; Diod. II.xxvii.2) which recalls Ashurbanipal telling how the Assyrian gods “cast Shamash-shum-ukin my hostile brother who had rebelled against me into the burning flames and destroyed him” (Luckenbill no. 794). This parallel has long been noted (e.g., Gadd, p. 19, Smith, p. 124, Goosens, p. 39) but not pursued. Gadd dismisses its importance in emphasising that “the end of Sin-shar-ishkun is expressly indicated” in the chronicle (p. 13) but in fact, as both his and Grayson’s (1975 no. 3) editions of the text agree, the relevant line 44 is broken and reads “At that time Sin-shar-ishkun king of Ass[yr]ia . . .)” and whilst the death of that king may be inferred from the fact that a new king, Ashur-uballit, is installed in Harran (line 50), nothing is said of the manner of his death: our only other clue is the tradition in Nicolaus Damascenus and Athenaius that he was slain by Arbaces (Gadd, p. 18 & n. 9). This again could refer to Shamash-shum-ukin as a fragment of the annals of Ashurbanipal excavated at Nimrud talks of *md*GISH.SHIR.MU.GI.NA / [*sha ina* M]E₃ *ina u₂-si mah-su*, that is “Shamash-shum-ukin [who in a bat]tle was wounded by an arrow” (E. Knudsen *Iraq* 29 (1967), p. 53, l. 5–6). On the other hand, the detail of the story in which Sardanapallos gathers together his treasure and staff to destroy them cannot wholly apply to the case of Shamash-shum-ukin as we know that Ashurbanipal reviewed the goods, vehicles, horses, furniture and retainers of his brother after his death (Luckenbill nos. 795 & 1036). Accordingly, that part may well be pure fantasy. Nevertheless, the likelihood remains that the story of Greek tradition is an embellished version of the death of Shamash-shum-ukin.

There are a few minor points to consider in addition: both Ashurbanipal in his dealings with Shamash-shum-ukin (Luckenbill no. 790) and Greek tellings of the fall of Nineveh (Diod. II.xxv.8; Xenophon *Anab.* III.iv.8) recount an ominous eclipse; Diodorus (II.xxvi.6 & xxvii.1) places the besieged Ninos (Nineveh) not on the Tigris but on the Euphrates as would be true of Babylon; the story of Belesys transporting the rubble of Nineveh to Babylon (Diodorus II.xxviii) sounds like a folk-tale explaining the presence of the zigurrat, which still existed as a ruined mound at the

time of Ctesias, not yet having been cleared away by Alexander the Great.² Perhaps to note in this context is Ashurbanipal's claims to have collected earth from the cities of the conquered Elamites (Luckenbill no. 811), a symbolism also known from classical sources (e.g. Herodotus VI. 48).

In summary, it might then be that elements of Ctesias' story of the fall of Nineveh owe their origin to the siege of Babylon during the Shamash-shum-ukin rebellion. Ctesias was the court physician to Artaxerxes II in the early fourth century B.C. and would have been able to travel to Babylon. Indeed, on the basis of his description of the palace (excavated by the Germans in the early years of this century), Goosens (p. 29 f.) followed by Drews (1965, p. 140) is certain that he did. So, in addition to the Persian "royal leather recordbooks" that Ctesias himself says that he used (Drews 1965, p. 140: Diod. II.xxxii.4) he will have been able to consult the keepers of the Babylonian archives, and Goosens (p. 37) and Drews (1965, p. 138-40) have shown that he did just that.³ This was denied by Jacoby who held that "von Quellen kann man hier eigentlich nicht reden" (col. 2047), but as it is hardly likely that all of Ctesias' *Persica* is fictitious he must have had sources of some sort, and perhaps Jacoby is nearer the mark when he goes on to name Herodotus as one of the major ones (col. 2051).

As far as cuneiform sources go, we do not know whether or not any of the contents of the Assyrian libraries were taken to Babylon after the fall of Nineveh⁴ (though note that Goosens, (p. 38), thinks that Ctesias could only have used Babylonian, not Assyrian, material), but even if not, much of Ashurbanipal's siege of Babylon must have been preserved in popular memory if not in written Babylonian sources. It is transparent that much of the story of the fall of Nineveh of both Ctesias and other classical writers is fantasy, but it may well be that it was not invented by the authors but records the tale as current in Babylon at the time.⁵ At any rate there is no reason to doubt that a tradition that included much fantasy and may well be derived directly from the popular fabulary could have included in its handling of the fall of Nineveh memorable details from an earlier war.⁶ Specifically,

² Wiseman 1985, p. 71.

³ Similarly it is beyond doubt that Berossus made use of the Babylonian Chronicle (Drews 1975, 54).

⁴ The recent discovery by Iraqi archeologists at Sippar of an intact Babylonian library of the first millenium may eventually throw light on this matter.

⁵ A hint of this is given by Abydenus when he uses the phrase "an army like locusts" to describe the multitude of the host coming against Sarakos: this translates a common semitic idiom (cf. *erbu c2'* in CAD for Akkadian, *arbh* on page 916 of Brown, Driver & Briggs' Lexicon for Hebrew) and the phrase must reflect the Akkadian wording, whether from a written text or oral narration.

⁶ Other examples of such telescoping of tradition in Mesopotamian folklore have been demonstrated in the cases of Semiramis (Eilers 1971), Cyrus (Drews 1974) and Nabonidus (Sack 1983).

the type of synthesis outlined above would suggest that—at any rate for his history of the end of the Assyrian empire—Ctesias relied mainly on oral tradition. Inasmuch, then, as he failed to correct this tradition through his use of the cuneiform sources, Sayce's judgement that Ctesias was "devoid of critical power" (p. 362) must be considered exact.

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