



xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā

Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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Ctesias 'Sources: A Suggestion'¹

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Ctesias of Cnidus' huge—23 book-long—*Persika* is at once a frustrating and important work, a situation that is made worse by its being lost except for a handful of epitomes and fragments. On the one hand, it provided the model for writing universal history in antiquity (Drews 1965: 129-142) according to the scheme of the succession of empires—Assyrian, Median, and Persian—and portraying the courts of these empires as dominated by corrupt eunuchs and intriguing queens (Waters 2017: 20-44). On the other hand, however, it would be impossible to write much of the history of Achaemenid Persia without the fragments of the *Persika*.

Until recently, assessments of the *Persika* as history were predominantly negative with most scholars agreeing that Ctesias' claim that he spent seventeen years in residence at the Persian court as royal physician was, if true, a wasted opportunity. More recent evaluations, however, have become more nuanced as scholars have verified some of Ctesias' claims of autopsy and identified aspects of the *Persika* that seem to derive from Mesopotamian and Iranian sources (Lenfant 2004: XXVII-XXXIX; Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2010: 55-65; Nicols 2011: 21-27; Stronk 2011: 394-396).

The evidence for autopsy is particularly clear. Ctesias, for example, provided the first accurate account in Greek literature of the use of trained Asian elephants in warfare (Bigwood 1993: 542-544; Trautmann

¹- I would like to thank Professor C. Tuplin for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

2015: 220-223) and the only reference in classical literature to the Behistun inscription, albeit crediting it to the Assyrian queen Semiramis instead of Darius I (Diodorus 2.13.1-2 = Ctesias F 1b.13 Lenfant). More important, however, has been the recognition of themes derived from authentic Assyrian tradition in the fragments of Ctesias' history of Assyria that was contained in the first three books of the *Persika*, the so-called *Assyriaka*. So, while it has been recognized since the decipherment of cuneiform in the nineteenth century that the basic narrative of Ctesias' Assyrian history was largely fiction (Drews 1973: 105-111), J. D. A. MacGinnis (1988: 37-41) demonstrated the existence of significant connections between Ctesias' account of the fall of Nineveh and Assyrian accounts of the rebellion of Shamash-shum-Ukin against his brother Ashurbanipal (652 BCE-648 BCE). Similarly, G. B. Lanfranchi (2011: 211-219) showed that much of Ctesias' description of the effeminate life style of Sardanapallus, supposedly the last king of Assyria, can be explained in terms of what is known of the Assyrian royal cult of Ishtar.

Little progress, however, has been made in explaining how this Assyrian material reached Ctesias. Ctesias himself claimed to have used the royal archives for his Assyrian history, but this is unlikely since virtually none of the kings mentioned by him is found in Assyrian or Babylonian records. Not surprisingly, therefore, recent scholars maintain that "oral tradition" was the principal source for the Assyrian elements in the *Assyriaka*, but with little clarity about its character beyond that it reflected "traditions circulating in 5th century Persia concerning the past before their domination" (Lenfant 2004: LIII-LIV). Missing from recent discussions of Ctesias' sources, however, has been consideration of the possibility that traditions concerning Assyrian history were preserved in textual sources circulating in the Persian Empire that were available to him. In fact, hitherto unnoticed parallels between the *Assyriaka* and a unique late fourth century BCE papyrus, *P. Amherst* 63, raise that possibility.

P. Amherst 63 is a large—3.5 meters long—papyrus discovered near Thebes that contains a miscellany of Aramaic literary texts written in demotic script (Depauw 1997: 40-41; Steiner 1997: 309-327; Kottsieper 2009: 426-429). Most important for the question of Ctesias' sources is the final text in the collection, a versified narrative of the Babylonian revolt of Shamash-shum-Ukin against his brother Ashurbanipal that focuses on the unsuccessful effort by their sister Sarit(ah) to reconcile the brothers. Although its narrative differs radically from Ctesias' sensational account of the overthrow of the Assyrian empire by an alliance of Medes and Babylonians, the accounts of the preparations for the deaths of their main characters, Shamash-shum-Ukin and Sardanapallus, both share a common feature, the construction of a room as part of the pyre in which the king and his entourage would be burned.

Ctesias' account of the room survives in two versions: a brief one in Diodorus' *Library of History* and a more detailed one in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*.²

- a. (Diodorus 2.27.2 = F 1b.27.2 Lenfant): So, he built an enormous pyre in the palace and heaped all the gold and silver on it as well as his royal clothing and, after shutting his concubines and eunuchs in the room he had prepared in the middle of the pyre, burnt himself and all the others to death and razed the palace to the ground.
- b. (Athenaeus 12.38, p. 529bd = F 1q Lenfant): He made a wooden room inside the pyre 100 feet

2- Translated by Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2010: 137, 147.

long, and there laid out couches and reclined—not only his wife but his concubines, too, reclining on the other couches. Seeing that things were going badly, he had sent his three sons and two daughters to Ninus to the King there, giving them 30,000 talents of gold. He roofed the room with large thick wooden beams and then put a number of thick pieces of wood in a circle so that there was no way out. He then placed on the pyre 10,000,000 talents of gold, 100,000,000 talents of silver, clothing, purple cloths, and all sorts of apparel. Then he ordered the fire to be lit and it burned for fifteen days.

Verbally identical accounts of the construction of a similar room occur twice in *P. Amherst* 63, first as part of the advice given to Shamash-shum-Ukin by his sister Sarit(ah) after he refused to abandon his revolt and again after his defeat by Ashurbanipal's forces. In the most complete version (Steiner 1997: 325), Sarit(ah) advised her brother to “go from the house of Bel, away from the house of Marduk. Let there be built for you a house of boughs; a house of sticks do construct.³ Throw down tar and pitch and sweet-smelling Arabian perfumes. Bring in your sons and your daughters and your doctors who have made you act brashly. When you see how (low) they have sunk on you, let fire burn you together with your sons and your daughters and your doctors who have made you act [bra]shly.”

Comparison of these passages is revealing. Despite differences in detail resulting from the differing character of the works in which they were embedded and the intentions of their authors, they share three specific similarities that are too close to be accidental. First, unlike the most important Assyrian sources for the revolt of Shamash-shum-Ukin, the *Rassam Cylinder* (Luckenbill 1927: 2, 794) and Ashurbanipal's *Cylinder A* (Chavalas 2006: 366), which state only that the Assyrian gods threw Shamash-shum-Ukin into the fire, both Ctesias and *P. Amherst* 63 depict the deaths of their protagonists as carefully staged suicides. Second, these suicides take place within wooden structures specially built for that purpose. Third, both kings force members of their family and entourage to accompany them in death, Shamash-shum-Ukin his children⁴ and his doctors and Sardanapallus his queen, concubines, and eunuchs.

These specific similarities between the preparations for the suicides of Sardanapallus in Ctesias' *Assyriaka* and Shamash-shum-Ukin in *P. Amherst* 63 require explanation, and the most obvious one is that both authors used closely related sources, presumably an Aramaic account of the revolt of Shamash-shum-Ukin similar to that found in *P. Amherst* 63. As elsewhere in his work, however, Ctesias freely adapted his source for his own purposes, but evidence of its character is provided by the relationship between his account of the revolt against Sardanapallus and the revolt of Shamash-shum-Ukin that was identified by MacGinnis. Equally important, this work was not unique but, as the Aramaic *Ahikar* papyrus proves, other literary works in Aramaic with Assyrian themes existed during the Persian period and might, therefore, also have been accessible to Ctesias (Dalley 2007: 121-131, Kottsieper 2009: 410-430).

3- I have substituted literal translations of the Aramaic description of the structure for the translators more literary “bower” and “booth.”

4- It is likely that Ctesias' explicit claim that Sardanapallus arranged for the escape of his children reflects his awareness of a version of the story in which they died with their father as in *P. Amherst* 63.

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