

ORIENTAL AND GREEK TRADITION ABOUT THE DEATH OF SENNACHERIB

Stefan Zawadzki — Poznań

For a long time scholars investigating the circumstances of the death of Sennacherib could not answer two basic questions: which of the sons of Sennacherib was directly responsible for the assassination of the father and where this assassination took place.

As regards the first of these questions, it was suggested long time ago that one of the conspirators could be “Arad-Ninlil”, a son of Sennacherib mentioned in a contemporary economic text¹; however, nobody was able to relate his name to the names of the murderers known from the Bible as Adrammelekh and Sharezer². This identification became possible only later, when it was established that NIN.LÍL should be read as Mulissu³. As a result, the biblical Adrammelekh turned out to be Arda-Mulissi of ADD 201. Finally, E. Lipiński’s new interpretation of 2 Kings, 19:37 revealed that the murder was committed in Dūr-Šarruken⁴.

Parpola provided numerous arguments for the reading of Arda-NIN.LÍL as Arda-Mulissi and for his identification with Adrammelekh; also, he reinterpreted and re-edited the letter ABL 1091, showing that it deals with a conspiracy against Sennacherib. It follows from the letter that a group of inhabitants of Babylonia learnt about the conspiracy and that one of them tried to inform Sennacherib about it. In order to do this, the informer attempted to take advantage of an Assyrian law, according to which subjects could appeal to the king as the supreme judge. In this way, the person in

¹) ADD 201. Cf. the last edition T. Kwasman, *NALK*, no. 29 (with mistake in the month’s date in the heading).

²) 2 Kings, 19:37.

³) S. Dalley, ^dNIN.LÍL = mul(l)is(s)u, *the Treaty of Barga’yah, and Herodotus’ Mylitta*, RA 73 (1979), pp. 177-178, and S. Parpola, *The Murderer of Sennacherib*, in B. Alster (Ed.), *Death in Mesopotamia*, XXVI RAI (= *Mesopotamia* 8), Copenhagen 1980, p. 177 and fn. 21.

⁴) E. Lipiński, *Bet-Sarruk(in)*, in *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique de la Bible*, Tournous 1987, pp. 208-209.

question hoped to be given an opportunity to talk directly to the king. However, when the informer requested an audience with Sennacherib, he was visited by two officials, passing themselves off as king's messengers. The rest of the letter, in Parpola's translation, reads as follows:

"After Nabû-šuma-iškun and Šillâ had come and asked him: 'Whom does your king's word concern?', (and after) he had answered: 'Arda-Mulissi.', they covered his face with his cloak and took him before Arda-Mulissi himself, saying: 'Look, ... speak up!'. So he said: 'Arda-Mulissi, your son, is going to kill you!'. After they had uncovered his face and Arda-Mulissi had interrogated him, they killed him and his brothers."⁵

Nabû-šuma-iškun and Šillâ, professing themselves to be king's messengers, turned out to be members of the conspiracy of Arda-Mulissi. Since it was customary that the suppliant stood before the king with his face covered, the informer was led not to Sennacherib, but to Arda-Mulissi. Thus, the attempt to inform the king about the conspiracy against him was thwarted, and the conspirators could proceed with their murderous plans.

Parpola's conclusions make us reconsider two Greek accounts of the death of Semiramis, one of them written by Ctesias of Cnidos⁶, and the other by Nicolaus of Damascus⁷. It is generally assumed that the description of the death of Semiramis records the circumstances of the death of Sennacherib.

Ctesias first mentioned the death of Semiramis in a fragment describing her reputed conquest of Egypt and of a part of Lybia⁸. Being in Egypt, Semiramis visited the temple of Amon, where she asked for an oracle about her death. She was to learn then that she would be killed by a man. Anticipating the rest of the story, Diodorus remarks that the oracle came true, as her son Ninyas, born in her marriage with king Ninus, had designs on her life. From a more detailed description in Diod. II, 20,1-2, we learn that when Ninyas attempted to kill his mother, the queen, aware of the prophecy, did not punish her son, but transferred authority on him, obliging her officials to obey his orders. After that, she committed suicide. Diodorus remarks that there is another mythical story in which Semiramis changes into a pigeon, and flies away with a flock of birds that settled on her palace. Since then the Assyrians were supposed to worship pigeons as gods, as it is they that made Semiramis immortal. The queen died after 42 years of ruling the country, at the age of 62⁹.

⁵) Parpola, pp. 180-181.

⁶) The part interesting us has been preserved in Diodorus' excerpts — cf. F. Jacoby, *FgrHist* 90, fr. 1 = F.W. König, *Die Persika des Ktesias von Knidos*, AfO Beih. 18, Graz 1972, pp. 168f.

⁷) Ben Zion Wacholder, *Nicolaus of Damascus*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1962, pp. 67ff.

⁸) Diodorus, II, 14.

⁹) Most probably, this number is not accidental. The legendary Semiramis seems to have been equipped with the 42-year regnal span of Ashurbanipal, now confirmed also by a text from the times of Nabonidus — cf. C.J. Gadd, *The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus*, AnSt 8 (1958), p. 46.

The account of the assassination of Semiramis, as presented by Nicolaus of Damascus, is markedly different. According to this author, the conspiracy against the queen was hatched by her two sons from her first marriage with Onnes. The sons acted on the instigation of the eunuch Satibaras, who convinced them that if their mother died and Ninyas ascended the throne, their lives would be seriously endangered by the new king. The eunuch advised them to take advantage of their mother's stay on a high mountain in order to throw her down. It follows from the account that the brothers decided to swear their conspiracy at a temple. Their conversation was overheard by a Median resting behind the altar, who wrote it down and sent the script to the queen. Semiramis read the Median's letter on the following day, but pretending that nothing had happened she summoned her sons on the mountain, where revealed in harsh words that she knew their iniquitous plans. At this moment, unfortunately, Nicolaus' account ends.

It is generally known that Nicolaus of Damascus knew the work of Ctesias. The striking differences between the account of the death of Semiramis, as presented by these two authors, make us conclude that Nicolaus' account was based not on Ctesias', but on somebody else's work. Admittedly, Diodorus points out that Ctesias presented also other versions of the death of Semiramis, but it is doubtful that the version reported by Nicolaus was among them. They are so clearly contradictory that we should rather expect Diodorus to comment on these differences in his excerpt. According to Ctesias, the conspiracy against Semiramis was hatched by Ninyas, her son from her second marriage with Ninus, whereas according to Nicolaus, it is her two sons from her first marriage with Onnes that conspired against her. In the account of Ctesias, the queen, having learnt about the conspiracy of Ninyas, committed suicide, whereas in the account of Nicolaus she intended to punish her perfidious sons. The differences are so serious that, in my opinion, we should exclude both, the mutual dependence of the text and the existence of a work of some earlier author serving as their common source.

It is worth noticing that if we replace the name Semiramis by the name Sennacherib¹⁰, the account of Nicolaus of Damascus proves to agree with real facts concerning the circumstances of the death of that king. Nicolaus' report about the conspiracy planned by the sons of Semiramis from her first marriage agrees with a suggestion, best documented by S. Parpola¹¹, that the conspiracy against Sennacherib was hatched by his two sons from his first marriage. The conspiracy aimed at preventing Esarhaddon, the heir-designated, son of Naqi'a-Zakutu, the second wife of Sennacherib, from succeeding to the throne. The aim of the sons of Semiramis was identical: to eliminate not only their mother, but, first of all, Ninyas, who — according to the eunuch Satibaras — intended to kill them after his succession to the throne. In his work, Nicolaus presents a

¹⁰) König, p. 40.

¹¹) Parpola, p. 175.

conflict between the sons of Semiramis from her first marriage and their step-brother; accordingly, in reality, there was a conflict between Sennacherib and his older sons, and between the sons and their step-brother Esarhaddon. Consequently, we should identify Ninyas from the work of Nicolaus with Esarhaddon, the youngest son of Sennacherib, born in his marriage with Naqi'a-Zakūtu.

The letter published by S. Parpola confirms at last the validity of the information given by Nicolaus and Ctesias that the conspiracy against Sennacherib was discovered by a group of supporters of the king, and that they tried to thwart it. In reality, as in Nicolaus' account, one of the people who discovered the conspiracy sent a letter to Sennacherib, asking for an audience with him. It cannot be excluded that, in accordance with Nicolaus' suggestion, the letter was written on skin, i.e. on parchment, in which case it was in Aramaic. Also the information about the conversation of the son of Semiramis at a temple may echo indirectly the death of Sennacherib, killed during his prayers at a temple. Finally, the eunuch Satibaras and the role that — according to Nicolaus — he played in the conspiracy may be compared to the role played by Nabû-šuma-iškun and Šillā. In any case, the possibility that an influential eunuch or a coterie of palace eunuchs played an important part in the conspiracy is very probable, especially considering the role and the position of eunuchs at court and in the Assyrian administration.

If we compare the account of Ctesias of Cnidos and of Nicolaus of Damascus we see that the Damascene author was much closer to the truth. In the work of Ctesias, as it has been preserved, there is no mention of a conflict between Semiramis and her sons from her first marriage with Ninus. If we were to identify Semiramis of this account with Sennacherib, we would also have to identify Ninyas with Esarhaddon and to consider him one of the conspirators. Although such suggestions were put forward in the past¹², there are no sources that could confirm that. Nicolaus' version differs so essentially from that of Ctesias that although the Damascene author knew the work of the latter, he based his account of the death of Semiramis on some other source, better covering Assyrian history. The fact that according to Nicolaus, the conspiracy was discovered gives us reasons to doubt that he had obtained this information from the work of Berossus¹³, which was certainly known to him, but probably not in its original form. Thus, it seems most probable that Nicolaus — apart from Ctesias — used also some other work, whose author was familiar with the work of Berossus.

¹²) Cf. Parpola, pp. 171-172 and 176, fn. 8.

¹³) Cf. Wacholder, p. 67, who presents arguments supporting the suggestion that Nicolaus used the work of Berossus with regard to Jewish history.