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SARGON, CYRUS AND MESOPOTAMIAN FOLK HISTORY

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THERE is something of a consensus among historians of historiography that the peoples of the ancient Near East, with the usual exception of Israel, had an "ahistorical" mentality. Such a generalization needs considerable refinement before it can be accepted. What holds for Egypt may not apply to the Hittites, and certain *kinds* of historical thought and historiographical activity may be attested while evidence for others is completely lacking.

In Mesopotamia there were obviously various literary genres (the most important being the chronicle-series) which stood in some relation to what is commonly called historiography. On the other hand, there is little evidence that the Mesopotamian public knew much or cared much about history. Certainly there was no such thing as popular written history, although that is not surprising since in Mesopotamia literacy was more restricted than it was among the Hebrews, Greeks and Romans. At any rate, literacy is no prerequisite for an interest in the past. During the last thirty years anthropologists, armed with tape-recorders, have assembled an impressive corpus of historical traditions gathered from "ahistorical" non-literate societies. What these non-literate peoples have to say about their past—their "ethnohistory" (or, less ambiguously, their "folk history")[1] —is in most cases of great interest to the whole community. For example, among the Gola of West Africa knowledge of the past is such a highly valued commodity that an elder who is entirely ignorant of it is dismissed as "a small boy," and tribesmen travel long distances in order to hear a sage famous for his knowledge of tribal history.[2]

Now it would be fallacious to assume that since even primitive societies are known to have a substantial folk history, therefore the illiterate element in Mesopotamia must have been conversant with a similar or more elaborate folk history. It may be, for example, that in primitive societies the "historical" traditions serve primarily as charters, in Malinowski's sense of the word, for existing social relationships,[3] and that for one reason or another such charter-stories were unnecessary in Mesopotamia. Accordingly, one had best say nothing more about folk history in Mesopotamia than can be supported by evidence. In fact, although most of us have taken for granted that non-literate Babylonians had *some* traditions about the past, even that assumption needs documentation.[4]

[1] "Ethnohistory" sometimes stands for scholarly reconstruction (from whatever sources are available) of a primitive society's history, whereas "folk history" invariably stands for what a primitive folk says about its past. See Charles Hudson, "Folk History and Ethnohistory," *Ethnohistory* 13 (1966): 52 ff. Neither term, of course, is interchangeable with the recent and unfortunate coinage, "oral history."

[2] W. L. d'Azavedo, "Uses of the Past in Gola Discourse," *Journal of African History* 3 (1962): 15–17.

[3] Hudson, "Folk History," p. 59.

[4] J. Laessøe, "Literacy and Oral Tradition in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Studia Orientalia Ioanni Pedersen . . . Dicata* (Copenhagen, 1953), pp. 205–18, remarked on the devotion of the Babylonians to the written word, and their remarkable concern for precision in copying old texts. Their faith in the reliability of the written word, however, need not have been as much of an inhibition to oral tradition as Laessøe implies, unless literary and oral traditions served the same purpose. Martin Braun, *History and Romance in Graeco-Oriental Literature* (Oxford, 1938) stressed the chauvinistic nature of several stories popular in the Near East (e.g., the stories of Sesostris and Semiramis), and was undoubtedly right in suggesting that the popularity of these legends resulted

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Professor Oppenheim has recently suggested that it was in the sanctuaries, the home of what he has aptly called "the stream of tradition," that oral as well as written traditions about the past were maintained.[5] Very likely in the sanctuaries and in the palaces one would be sure to find persons who knew the oral traditions; but could one also hear the same stories outside the temples and royal court? That the non-literate public not only told, but also shaped tales about the past is, I think, shown by the curious relationship between the stories of the young Sargon of Akkad and Cyrus the Great. In lieu of the anthropologist's tape-recorder we must here depend in part upon the Greek historians who practiced *historie* in Babylon, and that being the case perhaps a classicist can be excused for trespassing upon the Assyriologist's terrain.

The story of Sargon, as Güterbock has remarked, belongs to "dem Typus 'des Königs niederer Herkunft'."[6] It told how Sargon, born to non-royal parents, was cast adrift as an infant, but survived to reach the pinnacle of power and fame. This kind of story has been a favorite with peoples of every era and nationality. Whether true, like the tradition that Abraham Lincoln went from a log-cabin to the White House, or invented, like the story of Cinderella, or a mixture of fact and fantasy, like the tale of Dick Whittington, such stories are all but ineradicable from the popular memory.[7] In Mesopotamia there was also an appetite for such stories. Alongside the story of Sargon we find, in the first millennium, the legend of Semiramis.[8] Although in actuality Sammuramat may have been born to privileged parents in Babylon, and although she may never have been more than a highly conspicuous queen-mother in Assyria,[9] the Aramaean population of the Fertile Crescent eventually transformed her into a legendary type: abandoned at birth, she too survived to become not only a queen, but a world-conqueror. It may be that the legend of Semiramis grew more or less spontaneously, although its similarities to the story of Sargon suggest that some of it was borrowed from the latter.

More striking, however, are the parallels between the story of Sargon and the account of the rise of Cyrus which we find in the late Hellenistic historian, Nicolaus of Damascus. The parallelism was known and remarked upon in the days when Nicolaus was still read as an historical source on the ancient Near East.[10] But since Nicolaus has long been discredited as an authority in that field, and is therefore seldom read by Assyriologists,

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from the frustration which attended subjugation by Persian or Hellenistic ruling elites. On the same topic see S. K. Eddy, *The King is Dead: Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism 334–41 B.C.* (Lincoln, Neb., 1962), pp. 124–25. The stories with which we shall be dealing, however, had a very different appeal.

[5] A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago, 1964), p. 150, suggests that "the names as well as deeds, crimes, and victories of famous rulers seem to have been kept alive through some oral tradition that must have centered in sanctuaries rather than in palaces." This may be contradicted on p. 22, where as a habitat for the oral "legends spun around kings both loved and feared" Oppenheim points to the courts of the kings of Babylon. At any rate, since neither institution is interchangeable with the Mesopotamian folk (and since both institutions had access to written traditions), neither's oral traditions constituted genuine folk history. The question before us is whether these establishments shared their traditions with the general public.

[6] H. G. Güterbock, "Die historische Tradition bei Babyloniern und Hethitern," *ZA* 42 (1934): 65.

[7] By way of illustration, in the fifth volume of Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1957 edition) we find category "L," which covers reversals of fortune in hero-tales. Under L 111.2 are listed stories of foundling-heroes, and finally in L 111.2.1 comes the category, "Future heroes found in boat (basket, bush)." This very particular motif, in addition to its better known manifestations, is attested for Iceland, India, Japan.

[8] Neither of which, oddly, appears in the just mentioned *Index*.

[9] Her regency during the minority of Adad-nirari III has been disputed by W. Schramm, "War Semiramis assyrische Regentin?" *Historia* 21 (1972): 513–21.

[10] So, for instance, Sidney Smith, *Early History of Assyria* (London, 1928), p. 82.

it may be useful to summarize the similarities between his account of Cyrus's ascent to kingship and the traditions about Sargon.

1. Both Sargon and Cyrus were abandoned by their parents. The "Legend of Sargon" begins thus:

> Sargon, the mighty king, king of Agade, am I.
> My mother was a high-priestess, my father I knew not.
> The brother(s) of my father loved the hills.
> My city is Azupiranu, which is situated on the banks of the Euphrates.
> My mother, the high-priestess, conceived me, in secret she bore me.
> She set me in a basket of rushes, with bitumen she sealed my lid.
> She cast me into the river which rose not (over) me.
> The river bore me up and carried me to Akki, the drawer of water.
> Akki, the drawer of water, lifted me out as he dipped his e[w]er.
> Akki, the drawer of water, [took me] as his son (and) reared me.[11]

Cyrus was said to have had a similar experience. Herodotus reported (1. 108) that King Astyages ordered that the infant be taken from his parents, be removed to the wilderness and abandoned; a shepherd, however, substituted his own still-born son for the royal grandchild, and raised Cyrus as though he were his own son. Nicolaus's story is not so well known:

> It was customary among the Medes that for his bringing-up a pauper could go to an affluent man and put himself in his hands, that he might thus be properly nourished and clothed. . . . Now by and by a young lad by the name of Cyrus, a Mardian by nationality, comes up to a royal attendant who was in charge of beautifying the royal estate. The lad was Cyrus, son of a certain Atradates who, because he was so impoverished, had become a highwayman; his wife, the mother of Cyrus, was a goatherdess named Argoste. Well, then, in order to be reared Cyrus gives himself . . . .[12]

Herodotus's version is closer to the Legend of Sargon in presenting Cyrus as a foundling, but Nicolaus ascribes to Cyrus the same humble parentage which legend attributed to Sargon.

2. Once safely in the hands of a foster-father, Sargon became a gardener. In his "autobiography" he tells us, "Akki, the drawer of water, appointed me as his gardener." Cyrus too, Nicolaus seems to say, became a gardener:

> . . . and he beautified the royal estate and was sollicitous about his task. The superintendent therefore gave him a better suit of clothes and transferred him from the crew which worked outdoors to that which worked indoors, right near the king . . . .[13]

Now the elevation of a gardener to kingship was a favorite for Mesopotamian story-tellers. One version of the story appears in a chronicle-text:

> Irra-imitti, the king, installed Bel-ibni, the gardener, on his throne as a 'substitute king' and he (Irra-imitti) (even) placed his own royal crown on his (i.e. Bel-ibni's) head. Irra-imitti died

[11] This composition belongs to what Güterbock styled "*narû*-literature," a term which A. K. Grayson and W. G. Lambert, "Akkadian Prophecies," *JCS* 18 (1964): 8, find less satisfactory than "Poetic Autobiography." The translation given above is E. A. Speiser's, in *ANET*[2], p. 119.

[12] Nicolaus of Damascus (=no. 90 in Felix Jacoby's *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*) fragment 66, 2–4. That Cyrus was a young child at the outset of this story is implied throughout. Eventually (66, 7) he was adopted by Artembares.

[13] Frag. 66, 4.

in his palace while sip[ping] hot porridge, and Bel-ibni who was (still) sitting on the throne did not rise (any more), he (thus) was elevated to (real) kingship.[14]

Bel-ibni, otherwise known as Enlil-bani, was a king of the First Dynasty of Isin. C. F. Gadd was undoubtedly right in dismissing this chronicle-entry as "a slight anecdote."[15] Still another text which describes the coronation of a gardener is a passage in the history of the Byzantine writer, Agathias:

The line of Semiramis stopped with Beleous. For a certain fellow named Beletaras, a gardener and, in fact, in charge of the king's orchards and gardens, reaped for himself a surprising harvest—the throne![16]

All of these gardener-stories undoubtedly reflect the Assyrian practice of putting a 'substitute king' upon the throne when omens foretold the king's death.[17] Whether or not a gardener ever became king in fact, the *possibility* that such a thing might happen undoubtedly stirred the hopes and fears of the populace, and suggested itself as a plausible anecdote about Sargon, and then about Cyrus. Since even at the beginning of the second millennium tradition held that Sargon's father was a date-farmer,[18] it is not surprising that by the time the "Legend of Sargon" was written down, Sargon had become a gardener. How it was that Cyrus, born into the royal family of Anshan and apparently a grandson of Astyages, had by 400 B.C. been cast in the gardener's role is more difficult to explain. The answer is, I think, that in Mesopotamian folk tradition the entire story of Sargon was transferred to Cyrus by the late fifth century.

3. Both of our heroes became cupbearers to the king. This is one of the oldest elements in the story of Sargon, being attested in the Sumerian king-list and perhaps also in the Weidner Chronicle. In the king-list[19] we read that Sargon was "cupbearer of Ur-Zababa(k)," whom the list had earlier identified as a king of Kish who ruled for 400 years.[20] The note in the king-list does not imply that Sargon unseated Ur-Zababa, and in fact presents the Akkadian as wresting the kingship from Lugalzagesi of Uruk. In the Weidner Chronicle, however, Lugalzagesi has disappeared, and Sargon is the immediate successor of Ur-Zababa, the king whom he had once served as cupbearer.[21] Cyrus too, according to Nicolaus, was once a cupbearer to the lord whom he would one day replace:

Gaining a good reputation in these matters he (i.e. Cyrus) transferred himself to Artembares, who not only was in charge of the cupbearers but also personally handed the king the cup to

[14] The so-called "King Chronicle I", BM 26,472, translated by Oppenheim in *ANET*[2], p. 267.

[15] *CAH*[2] I, 2, p. 632.

[16] *Histories* 2. 25. Agathias cites as his authority Alexander Polyhistor (Jacoby, *Die Frag. d. gr. Hist.* no. 273, frag. 81), who gleaned some of his stories from Berossus. L. W. King, *Chronicles Concerning Early Babylonian Kings* 1 (London, 1907), pp. 62–64, suggested that 'Beletaras' is a corruption of Bel-ibni. But Agathias's story might be used as evidence that the Babylonians told the same story about a king named Bel-eter as they told about Sargon, Bel-ibni and Cyrus. For individuals named Bel-eter see Simo Parpola, "A Letter from Šamaš-šumu-ukīn to Esarhaddon," *Iraq* 34 (1972): 29 and n. 36.

[17] So far as I know, this ritual is attested only for the Late Assyrian period. See W. von Soden "Beiträge zum Verständnis der neuassyrischen Briefe über die Ersatzkönigsriten," *Festschrift Viktor Christian* (Vienna, 1956), pp. 100–117.

[18] Either his father or his guardian. On col. vi, line 32 of the king-list see T. Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List* (Chicago, 1939), p. 111, n. 238.

[19] Col. vi, line 33.

[20] Col. vi, lines 12–14.

[21] As restored and translated by Güterbock, *ZA* 42, p. 54, this text reads:

> "Ur-Zababa [befahl (?)] [seinem Mundschenken Sargon], d . . . der Trankopfer von Esagila zu vertausch[en]. Sargon vertauschte nicht, er zeigte sich fromm und brachte [. . .] eilend (?) nach Esagila. Marduk, der Sohn (?) der Wassertiefe, sah ihn mit Freuden an und gab ihm das Königtum über die vier Weltgegenden."

drink. He (i.e. Artembares) warmly welcomed him, and bade him be cupbearer to those who dined at the king's table. . . . Now Artembares was old; and once, when suffering from a fever he asked permission to go home until he should recover. "Instead of me," he said, "this young lad of whom you think so highly shall fill your cup." . . . And Cyrus attended the king, and day and night poured his wine and handed him his cup.[22]

Eventually, of course, Cyrus overthrew Astyages and became Great King.

Classical scholars are agreed that Nicolaus's history of the East, and especially his story of Cyrus, was taken from Ctesias's *Persica*, a work written early in the fourth century B.C.[23] This work has with justification been denounced by both Assyriologists and classicists as a totally unreliable guide to Mesopotamian history. It does, however, shed some light on Mesopotamian folk history. Diodorus Siculus (2. 32. 4) says that Ctesias was a physician in the king's service for seventeen years, and there is good reason to think that most of those years were spent not at Susa or Ecbatana but in Babylon. According to his own statement (frag. 27), Ctesias was physician to Parysatis, queen of Darius and queen-mother of Artaxerxes. Since during the years 409–392 B.C., the probable years of Ctesias' employ, Parysatis is invariably found in Babylon, Ctesias will have attended her there.[24] And it was there, undoubtedly, that he heard the story of Cyrus which we find in Nicolaus. Quite apart from its similarities to the tale of Sargon listed above, it has a Babylonian bias.[25] As I have shown elsewhere, Ctesias did not invent the plots for his narratives; his originality was limited to the detail with which he elaborated upon received traditions.[26] The bare bones of Nicolaus's story of Cyrus must reflect a

[22] Frag. 66, 5–6.

[23] See, for example, Felix Jacoby's comments on Nicolaus's sources (*Die Frag. d. gr. Hist.* II C, p. 233; cf. the same scholar's "Ktesias," *Paulys Realencyclopädie* XI, cols. 2040–41). More recent studies of both Nicolaus and Ctesias have upheld the conclusion: B. Z. Wacholder, *Nicolaus of Damascus* (Berkeley, 1962), p. 67, and Joan Bigwood, "Ctesias of Cnidus" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard, 1964), pp. 14–19. That Nicolaus's story of Cyrus's rise to power was taken from Ctesias is virtually beyond dispute, since it agrees so well with Photius's bald summary of Ctesias's seventh book. For that summary see Ctesias (*Die Frag. d. gr. Hist.* no. 688) frag. 9.

F. W. König, *Ktesias* (*AfO* Beiheft 18; Graz, 1972) thought he found in Ctesias's *Persica* an intimate familiarity with Persian institutions, above all with "die persischen Altersklassen," and on pp. 34–37 argues that Ctesias's Assyrian and Median history reflects what fifth-century Persians had to say on the subject. His arguments, though at times ingenious, are for the most part unconvincing, and somewhat negligent of scholarship on Greek historiographical practices.

[24] We cannot discover much about Ctesias's whereabouts prior to his presence at the battle of Cunaxa in 401 (Parysatis was at the battle too, according to Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 14. 4–5), but the queen should have been in Babylon when Darius died there in 404. In the aftermath of the battle Ctesias and Parysatis were in Babylon, doing what they could for the captive Greek general, Clearchus (frag. 27). Artaxerxes ordered Parysatis to stay in Babylon from ca. 400 to ca. 395, and she was happy to comply (Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 19. 6 and 23. 1), perhaps because her own mother was a native Babylonian. In late 395 the king had made up his quarrel with his mother, but instead of finding Parysatis at Susa, we find Artaxerxes in Babylon, for that is where the Athenian admiral, Conon, met with him (Diod. 14. 81. 4–5). That Ctesias was in Babylon as late as 392 is suggested by his report that eight years after Clearchus's death his grave was covered with date-palms (frag. 27).

[25] Especially on those points where it diverges from Herodotus's account. In Nicolaus frag. 66, 9 Cyrus's father turns to "the Chaldaeans in Babylon" for help in interpreting his wife's dream. The Babylonian who reveals the significance of the dream for Cyrus plays a prominent role in the subsequent story through paragraph 18, at which point he is treacherously killed by a Persian. Similarly, Ctesias's story of the Medes' triumph over the Assyrians featured the Babylonian Belesys, who had an exceptional knowledge of the mantic arts, as the instigator of the whole affair (frag. 1b, 24).

[26] Well put by Arnaldo Momigliano, "Tradizione e invenzione in Ctesia," *Atene e Roma* ser. II, 12 (1931), p. 25: "La fantasia di Ctesia . . . sussiste nella lussureggiante abbondanza dei particolari che trasformano la semplice leggende in vero romanzo d'avventure." In *The Greek Accounts of Eastern History* (Washington, D.C., 1973), pp. 108 ff., I have shown that Ctesias's stories of Semiramis and Sardanapalus were based on the fruits, however slight, of his *historie* in the East.

genuine Babylonian tradition of the late fifth century: Cyrus was a homeless child, became a gardener on the king's estate, then a cupbearer to the king, and then king.[27]

This tradition, in turn, implies something about the survival of the story of Sargon. Neither Herodotus nor Ctesias heard anything about Sargon, and that must mean that by the late fifth century he had been forgotten in the levels of society open to Greek visitors. Yet the *story* of Sargon, with Cyrus in the place of Sargon as protagonist, was still being told in Ctesias's milieu. Such a substitution could have occurred only if the story of Sargon, with Sargon in it, had been current when, in the sixth century, Cyrus's origins became a subject of interest. The milieu in which the Sargon-story became the Cyrus-story cannot, I think, have had access to a written tradition, for the written word (the four[28] late copies of the "Legend of Sargon," for example) would have held the story for Sargon against the claims of Cyrus, the new usurper.

Similarly, it seems, the original evolution of the Sargon-story would have taken place not in sanctuaries but among the non-literate public. The Weidner Chronicler, of course, was a partisan of Esagila. But the traditions which he exploits to enhance the sanctuary need not have, and in the instance under discussion could not have evolved in Esagila, which did not become a significant center until centuries after the destruction of Akkad. More important, the evolution of the tradition reflected in the Weidner Chronicle is understandable only on the hypothesis that it occurred in a milieu which was not checked by a written tradition about Sargon.

As noted above, the Sumerian king-list presented Sargon as Lugalzagesi's conqueror:[29]

In Uruk Lugal-zage-si
became king and reigned 25 years.
1 king
reigned its 25 years.
Uruk was smitten with weapons;
its kingship
to Agade was carried.
In Agade Sharru(m)-kin-
(etc.)

Another Sumerian composition, also inscribed during the Isin period, presents the same story in more elaborate and dramatic detail, with Lugalzagesi's daughter figuring in somehow as the *casus belli*.[30] Given the scrupulous fidelity with which the scribes maintained the literary "stream of tradition," it is unlikely that a mutation of the Sargon-story would have occurred in any place where the above version was known. But among the non-literate public, Lugalzagesi's name would not have been long remembered, and once it had been lost folk history naturally made Sargon the immediate successor to

[27] Thus Ctesias's Cyrus-story, like his anecdotes about Semiramis and Sardanapalus, was not quite so fictitious as commonly supposed. Jacoby, "Ktesias," col. 2058, believed "dass die ganze Jugendgeschichte des Kyros eine freie Schöpfung des Ktesias auf herodoteischer Grundlage ist." König, *Ktesias*, p. 49, says much the same, "griechisch sind das langsame Aufsteigen des Kyros bei Astyïgas und der 'Babylonier'."

[28] For the existence of a fourth copy see Grayson and Lambert, "Akkadian Prophecies," p. 8.

[29] Col. vi, lines 24–31.

[30] V. Scheil, "Nouveaux renseignements sur Šarrukin," *RA* 13 (1916): 175–79.

Ur-Zababa, and then, economically, his rebellious vassal.[31] It was this stage of its evolution that the tradition had reached in the days of the Weidner Chronicler. The chronicler need have done nothing more than reinterpret the usurpation of Ur-Zababa's position by Sargon as Marduk's punishment of sacrilege and reward of piety.

All along the line, it would seem, the story was preserved by the "folk historians," and at the same time was gradually altered by them. At any point the current version could be committed to writing, thus entering the literary "stream of tradition." The various forms which the Sargon-story takes reflect successive stages of a continuously evolving oral and public tradition: the tag in the Sumerian king-list, the entry in the Weidner Chronicle, the "Legend of Sargon," and Ctesias's story of the rise of Cyrus.

[31] The Naram-Sin story underwent an analogous development. In the Sumerian king-list Naram-Sin is still the son of Manishtushu, and Shar-kali-sharri (who reigned 25 years) is the last king prior to chaos. In the tradition known to the Weidner Chronicler, the two minor kings have disappeared, and Naram-Sin is son of Sargon and the last of the kings of Akkad. Still another example of the simplifying of history in folk memory comes from the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods. When the obscure Assyrian kings who reigned from 626 to 609 B.C. had been forgotten, "Sardanapalus" (a hybrid which apparently combines the names of the two last famous kings of Assyria—Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal) was remembered as the last king at Nineveh, and therefore as the king who presided over its fall. Cf. Güterbock, *ZA* 42, pp. 75–76, who draws the parallel between Naram-Sin and Sardanapalus, and J. J. Finkelstein, "Mesopotamian Historiography," *Proc. of the Amer. Philos. Soc.* 107 (1963), p. 467.