

## A MESOPOTAMIAN OMEN IN THE CYCLE OF CYRUS THE GREAT

Antonio Panaino

Among the legends and stories concerning the ascent to the power by Cyrus the Great, Ctesias' account is doubtless very important. Although its historicity remains in many aspects problematic, it contains a number of data belonging to the heritage of the Ancient Near East and its folk history,<sup>1</sup> which deserve to be investigated anew. Ctesias, for instance, gives an alternative and significant report about the dreams concerning the royal destiny of Cyrus, with respect to the one mentioned by Herodotus (I, 107–108). In fact, according to Herodotus (and Pompeius Trogus), it was Astyages who dreamt that his daughter, Mandane, was urinating so copiously as to flood the entire town and even overflow the rest of Asia. Then, the dream interpreters (ὄνειροπόλοι), who were presented by Herodotus as Magi (I, 107; τῶν μάγων τοῖσι ὄνειροπόλοισι; see also Herodotus I, 108: οἱ τῆς ὄψιτος τῶν μάγων οἱ ὄνειροπόλοι ἐσήμαινον), explained this oneiric vision as containing a dangerous omen for the king himself, who was terrified by their crude interpretation. For this reason he did not give Mandane, who at that time was marriageable, to any of the Medes worthy of such an honour, but decided to wed her only to a Persian of good family, Cambyses, with the evident hope of removing any possible danger for the future. Herodotus implicitly assumes that Astyages did not conceive as possible the raising of the Persian blood on the same ruling position at that time gained by the Medes, and explicitly states (I, 8) that Cambyses was held by Astyages as to be much lower than a Mede of middling status. Although Herodotus does not openly describe the prediction, it is clear from the textual context that it concerned royalty and power. But (Herodotus I, 108) during the first year of marriage of his daughter, when she was already pregnant, Astyages had another vision (ὄψις): he dreamt that a vine<sup>2</sup> grew from the genitals of Mandane, covering the whole of Asia. Again he consulted the dream interpreters among the Magi (ὄνειροπόλοι),<sup>3</sup> who openly explained that Mandane's offspring should become the ruler instead of him. For this reason, having made the decision to kill the baby, he ordered his daughter to come from Persia to his palace, where she was kept guarded. After the

<sup>1</sup> See Drews 1974 for the thematic correspondences with the cycle of Sargon.

<sup>2</sup> About the vine as a symbol of kingship and power see Stuhmann 1981: 68, n. 2.

<sup>3</sup> See de Jong 1997: 396–397; cf. Stuhmann 1981: 64–69, 89–92.

birth, Astyages ordered Harpagos to kill the baby. Harpagos later decided to charge another man, named Mitrdates, with Cyrus' elimination (Herodotus I, 109–111). This well-known story goes on with the substitution of Cyrus with the stillborn child of Mitrdates and his wife Spako (Herodotus I, 111–113).

As already noted by Oppenheim,<sup>4</sup> according to Ctesias it was the mother of Cyrus who dreamt and not Astyages. Curiously enough, Oppenheim again mentions Mandane,<sup>5</sup> but in Ctesias' report (as collected and given by Nicolaus Damascenus in his *Excerpta de Insidiis*) Cyrus is not the grandchild of Astyages.<sup>6</sup> Here, he is only the humble son of Atrdates,<sup>7</sup> a poor person, and of his wife Argosté,<sup>8</sup> a shepherd of goats. In any case, Argosté informed Cyrus about her dream (ὄνειρον). She saw Cyrus urinating so copiously that the urine became like a great river submerging all of Asia, reaching the sea («Ἐδοξα γὰρ, ἔφη, οὐρῆσαι τοσοῦτον κύουσα, ὃ Κῦρε, σέ, ὥστε ποταμοῦ μεγάλου ῥεύματι ὁμοιον γενέσθαι τὸ πλῆθος τοῦ οὔρου, καὶ κατακλύσαι πᾶσαν τὴν Ἀσίαν· ῥυῆναι δὲ αὐτὸ ἄχρι θαλάττης»). Then, Cyrus' father ordered the consultation of the Chaldeans of Babylon (and not the Magi) [τοῖς ἐν Βαβυλῶνι Χαλδαίοις ὑπερθεῖναι], and Cyrus himself summoned the wisest interpreter (Κῦρος δὲ τὸν λογιώτατον αὐτῶν καλέσας ἐξηγήσατο), who explained the dream as a very good omen, attributing to Cyrus the highest honours in Asia (καὶ ὅς ἀποκρίνεται μέγα τε εἶναι τὸ προφαινόμενον ἀγαθὸν καὶ τὴν πρώτην αὐτῷ τιμὴν φέρον ἐν Ἀσίᾳ). The Chaldean also suggested that they keep this omen secret because Astyages would kill both Cyrus and the dream interpreter responsible for this prognosis («κάκιστα γὰρ σέ τε ἀποκτενεῖ, κάμῃ τὸν κριτῆρα αὐτοῦ»).

It is not the focus of this article to analyse all the complex details of the differences between these two versions (and the third one collected by Pompeius Trogus and preserved in one excerpt by Justinus)<sup>9</sup> or their thematic connections with the story of Sargon.<sup>10</sup> Nor does this article focus on the problem of their common *Vorlage*, its background (also involving the various psychoanalytic problems discussed in the technical literature on this precise subject)<sup>11</sup> or its later impact on the legendary story of the Sasanian king Ardashir<sup>12</sup> and his ancestor Sasan, or in the *Šāhnāme's*

<sup>4</sup> Oppenheim 1956: 265.

<sup>5</sup> Oppenheim 1956: 265.

<sup>6</sup> I follow the new edition of Ctesias' fragments edited by Lenfant 2004: 93–108. The *Excerpta de Insidiis* have been edited by de Boor 1905. See also FGtH 90.

<sup>7</sup> See Schmitt 2006: 150–152.

<sup>8</sup> See Schmitt 2006: 223–224.

<sup>9</sup> See Marcus Julianus Justinus, *Epitome*, 1, 4–7.

<sup>10</sup> This subject has been already treated by Drews 1974: 388–393.

<sup>11</sup> See Rank 1922: 38–53, 107–108, 117, 136–141 (English translation, Rank 2004: 20–30, 66–67, 73, 85–89).

<sup>12</sup> Harmatta 2002: 192–206.

cycles of Kay Khosrau<sup>13</sup> and Cyrus.<sup>14</sup> Within the limits of the present investigation I would like to concentrate on the fact that both Herodotus and Ctesias (as well as Pompeius Trogus) share a story according to which a dream or an oneiric vision concerning an extraordinary emission of urine was interpreted as a prediction regarding the birth of a great king (Cyrus). Oppenheim,<sup>15</sup> in the framework of his systematic investigation of the dream literature in the Ancient Near East, underlined the fact that such a symbolic oneiric pattern found some patent correspondences particularly in one omen attested in the Assyrian Dream-Book, where (K 6267+) it is stated after some related contents:

If his urine expands in front of (his) penis [and] he does obeisance in front of his urine: he will beget a son and he (i.e., the son) will be king.

Oppenheim noted that in this tablet we can find one of the rare occasions in which the Dream-Book “speaks the universal language of symbols”, noting the relevance of the identification between urine and offspring (i.e., semen), and emphasizing the meaning of the allusive act of *proskynesis*, which was “interpreted with unusual determination”. In particular, this sharp prediction, according to Oppenheim, had no direct parallel in the framework of Mesopotamian omen literature, but, for instance, it fittingly appears in these Greek sources concerning the Cyrus cycle. I would like to emphasize the significant evidence that Ctesias does not mention the Magi as dream interpreters, but only a Babylonian Chaldean. Although Herodotus probably considered in this case the Median Magi<sup>16</sup> as professional priests under some conditions similar to the Babylonian experts, Ctesias makes an evident distinction. The Persian Cyrus at the Median royal court does not consult any Magus, but a Babylonian professional expert (κριτηρα).

Another relevant remark raised by Oppenheim<sup>17</sup> concerns more generally the importance attributed to excreta and urine in dream literature, “as a rule, rewarded as favourable prognostics”. Oppenheim<sup>18</sup> clearly refers to psychoanalytic (mostly Freudian)<sup>19</sup> literature on the subject, showing the importance of the symbolic nature of this unconscious material and the significance of all the images breaking sexual taboo or human inhibitions.

It is, however, peculiar that in scholarly literature the fitting presence of another omen, reported by Ctesias just after the narration of Argosté’s dream, has not been focused on as it should have been. I would like to present this article to my colleague and friend Prof. Simo Parpola, who has contributed so much to the investigation of

<sup>13</sup> See Rank 1922: 50–51 (English translation, Rank 2004: 28).

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Duleba 1995.

<sup>15</sup> Oppenheim 1956: 265. Cf. also Bottéro 1982: 118, n. 8.

<sup>16</sup> See Stuhmann 1981: 93.

<sup>17</sup> Oppenheim 1956: 266.

<sup>18</sup> Oppenheim 1956: 266 and *passim*.

<sup>19</sup> See also Oppenheim 1956: 185. Cf. now the discussion offered by Zgoll 2006: 44–45, 510–516, *passim*.

the Assyrian civilization and to the importance of its impact on the later Eastern and Western cultures, in particular on the Iranian one.

This story, also contained in chapters 11–12 of Nicolaus Damascenus' *Excerpta de Insidiis*,<sup>20</sup> briefly summarized, runs as follows: Onaphernes, king of the Cadusians, a nation at war with the Medes, wants to betray his people and asks Astyages to send him a reliable person in order to establish an agreement. Astyages decides to send him Cyrus, who, in his turn, is encouraged by his dream interpreter to accept this mission (Καὶ ὁ τοῦ ὄνειρου κριτικῆς παρεθάρρυνεν αὐτὸν εἰς Καδουσίους ἀπελθεῖν, καὶ φρονήματος ἐνεπίπλα). Later on (ch. 12), Cyrus, having taken the decision to convince the Persians to revolt against Astyages, decided to trust again the Babylonian who had explained the dream of his mother Argosté, because he was a deep expert in the divine signs (πιστεύειν τε τῷ Βαβυλωνίῳ τὰ θεῖα κάλλιστα ἐξεπισταμένῳ). This Babylonian man comforted Cyrus declaring that his destiny was to remove Astyages, so becoming the new owner of the kingdom. From his side, Cyrus promised to cover the Babylonian diviner in honours if his reports were correct. When Cyrus was in the mountains of the Cadusians, a strange event happened to him under special circumstances. In fact, he was reflecting about the omens which, in past times, had announced to Arbakes (Ἀρβάκης) his success against Sardanapalos, assuming that “the fortune and the destiny” (τύχη δὲ καὶ μοῖρα) should appear to himself as they had appeared to Arbakes,<sup>21</sup> who eventually – thus, he was thinking – was not better than him. Just then Cyrus met a man, who had been whipped, carrying faeces in a basket (Ταῦτα ἐνθυμουμένῳ ὑπήντησε μεμαστιγμένος ἀνὴρ κόπρον ἐν κοφίνῳ ἐκφέρων). Deducing that this was a special omen (οἰωνισάμενος) for him, Cyrus decided to consult again the Babylonian expert (καθυπερτίθεται τῷ Βαβυλωνίῳ). The latter told him to collect information about the identity and the origin of that man. Cyrus discovered that he was a Persian, named “Oibaras” (Οἰβάρας ὄνομα). In his turn, the Babylonian expert became happy, because he interpreted that Persian name as meaning in Greek “bringer of good news” (ὁ γὰρ Οἰβάρας δύναται Ἑλλάδι γλώσση ἀγαθᾶγγελος). But the Babylonian was more precise in the explanation of his prognosis. He actually said that all the signs were favourable (τᾶλλα σύμβολα εἶναι ἄριστα); first, because that man was Persian as Cyrus; second, because he was carrying horse dung, which signifies richness and power; and third because of the meaning of his proper name (ἦτις πλοῦτον καὶ δύναμιν προσημαίνει, ὥσπερ καὶ τοῦνομα λέγει).

The Babylonian expert, then, was using at least three different types of data in the interpretation of this ominous event: the first concerned the nationality of

<sup>20</sup> Lenfant 2004: 96–97.

<sup>21</sup> Ctesias (F1b § 24), according to a passage attested in the *excerpta* transmitted by Diodorus (II, 24, 1–2), wrote that the Median Arbakes was supported by a Babylonian general, Bélesys (probably *Ba-la-su*), who was also a deep expert in astrology and divination; cf. Lenfant 2004: 55–56, n. 259; König 1972: 155–156. See Schmitt 2004: 129–130.

the man, second the interpretation of his name, third the meaning of the act of carrying horse excreta. We may also add the fact that Cyrus not only saw Oibaras, but actually met him (ὕπηγτησε).

According to Ctesias, this Oibaras played an important role in the ascent of Cyrus,<sup>22</sup> but we may focus on the evidence that a clear Iranian etymology can be given to his name, which is not far from the very “positive” meaning (ἀγαθάγγελος) attributed by the Babylonian expert. As R. Schmitt<sup>23</sup> has recently shown, correcting some older interpretations, Οιβάρας is nothing but a Greek spelling (and adaptation)<sup>24</sup> of an Old Iranian compound such as \**Vahī-bara-*, derived from an older form \**Vahya-bara-* “he who brings better things”,<sup>25</sup> with a quite explicable, and clearly attested, contraction of *-ya-* to *-ī-*.

This story, starting with the dream and its interpretation, presents us with a number of ominous events where the role played by the Babylonian interpreter is highly relevant; furthermore, the final meeting with Oibaras carrying horse faeces (κόπρον ἰππίαν φέρει) seems to correspond to the Mesopotamian textual pattern which was quite common in the omen literature of the basic type: if one sees X (or meets with X), then, Y will happen to him.

Thus, the possibility that the story of the meeting with Oibaras carrying horse faeces followed an Assyrian or Babylonian pattern – based on a long tradition in the interpretation of terrestrial omens as well as of dreams – is not improbable. The presence of fitting examples of ophiomancy in the Iranian – specifically Zoroastrian – framework is well documented, for instance, in Pahlavi and Persian sources.<sup>26</sup> These omens follow some patterns comparable with those attested in the series *Šumma ālu*<sup>27</sup> (in particular in Tablet 21a [KAR 386],<sup>28</sup> in Tablet 22b [CT 38, Pls.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, Oibaras decided to kill the Babylonian diviner because he suspected him and was afraid that the dream interpreter might inform Astyages about the content and meaning of the omen (see Nicolaus Damascenus 16–19; cf. König 1972: 47). Later, the wife of the Babylonian expert, who knew the content of Cyrus’ vision, informed the king of the Medes (ch. 24). See Lenfant 2004: 98–101. See also the passage concerning Oibaras, the στρατηγός, in Tzetzes (here named Οιβάρης; *Chiliades*, I, 89; see Lenfant 2004: 113, König 1972: 200). According to Nicolaus Damascenus, it was Oibaras who placed the crown on Cyrus’ head (Lenfant 2004: 108). In the version given by Photius (VII, 2), Oibaras immediately appears on the side of Cyrus (Lenfant 2004: 109, Henry 1959: 106, König 1972: 2). See also Schmitt 2006: 113–115. I cannot discuss in this article the interesting subject connected with the sacrifice offered by Oibaras to the Moon (Nicolaus Damascenus 18, Lenfant 2004: 99), which I hope to analyse in another contribution.

<sup>23</sup> Schmitt 2006: 113–115.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. also Gr. Ὠβάρης ← OIr. \**Va<sup>h</sup>u-bara-* “bringing what is good” (Huysse 1990: 63–64).

<sup>25</sup> A direct derivation from OIr. \**Va<sup>h</sup>u-bara-*, as in the case of Ὠβάρης, as suggested by Tavernier (2007: 341), is phonetically improbable.

<sup>26</sup> See Panaino 2005; see already Gray 1909–1910, 1918.

<sup>27</sup> Nötscher 1929: 83–154.

<sup>28</sup> Nötscher 1929: 83.

33–36]),<sup>29</sup> or again in the series *Iqqur īpuš*,<sup>30</sup> but still other examples belonging to different sources are at our disposal.<sup>31</sup> What is most astonishing is the fact that these traditions were apparently in strong contrast with some fundamental principles of the Zoroastrian doctrine, but their undeniable presence and continuity till modern times demonstrate their deep rooting in a popular *milieu*, where some traditions of Mesopotamian origin were probably commonly accepted and imitated.

Thanks to the Assyrian Dream-Book we also know that the vision of faeces was usually given a positive meaning; this is also true in the case of coprophagy.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the focus on the interpretation of the name also does not seem to be extraneous to the omen tradition.

Because of all these facts, it is reasonable to assume that Ctesias' narration regarding Oibaras – as well as the case of the dreams mentioned by Herodotus and Pompeius Trogus, and that of the one reported by Ctesias – took its basic inspiration from an Assyrian and/or Babylonian original model, adapted to an Iranian framework, where, the active presence of a Babylonian interpreter is in any case patently mentioned. In addition, it is not necessary to suppose a scholarly transmission of these reports. The kind of omens detected here might also be of popular origin,<sup>33</sup> and not necessarily of exclusively professional derivation; their circulation would have been a part of that rich tradition of folk stories<sup>34</sup> concerning the destiny of a simple person who was later elevated to kingship.

## APPENDIX ON CUNEIFORM SOURCES

Gian Pietro Basello

The study of omen series as a textual genre of cuneiform documentation is hindered by the difficult access to the sources, dispersed in a mass of published and unpublished tablets and fragments. The understanding of the ancient taxonomy as a means of classification for the extant sources is an equally demanding task.

The arrangement of omens in series is mainly based on associative groupings of the subjects of the protases.<sup>35</sup> Subgroupings are obtained by maintaining the focus on the same nominal or verbal form of the protasis. The focus is also maintained

<sup>29</sup> Nötscher 1929: 110–111; here both a menology and a hemerology occur.

<sup>30</sup> Labat 1965: 124–127.

<sup>31</sup> See SAA 8, nos. 162, 237, 243, 269, 567.

<sup>32</sup> Oppenheim 1956: 273. See also CAD, s.v. *zû*, where there are some omens, mostly from the series *Šumma ālu*, where “shit” indicates a positive result.

<sup>33</sup> Bottéro 1982: 123–133.

<sup>34</sup> Drews 1974: 388, 391, n. 25.

<sup>35</sup> A possible example of grouping according to the subject of the apodoses rather than that of the protases is provided by tablet 2 of *Šumma ālu* (Freedman 1998: 63).

by using the semantic opposite of a nominal form or negating the verb. Cumulative processes can be singled out in subgroupings where further nominal or verbal forms are added to an unchanged focus element. In these instances, we face complex protases where several incidents must happen in concomitance to make the apodosis true. As stressed already by Oppenheim, there is no formal difference between dream and non-dream omens.<sup>36</sup>

The omen of Cyrus as related by Ctesias involved a complex chain of incidents. It is difficult to single out a focus element with which the further incidents were progressively associated. The relevant circumstances contributing to the interpretation of the omen were the following: a whipped man, the basket of horse excrement he is carrying, his name and his being Persian like Cyrus. Besides these, the context has to be taken into account: even if already stated, Ctesias stressed that the location of the incidents was in the mountains of the Cadusians immediately after the mention of the whipped man with the basket.<sup>37</sup>

A first parallel in cuneiform sources may be represented by omens whose protases concern people, animals or events seen outdoors, generally along a street. In these omens distinction is made between sightings (logogram 𒌒) and meetings (logogram 𒌒), so it is relevant that Ctesias explicitly used the verb ὑπαντάω “to meet”. Some of these omens appear to be grouped in tablet 85 of the series *Šumma ālu* (“If a city”)<sup>38</sup>; unfortunately this tablet is badly damaged so that it is difficult to restore the entire sequence of omens. An attempt made by Köcher and Oppenheim divides the extant text into six sections: sections 4 and 5 (K 4134, Sm 332, Funck 3) regard meetings encountered “while walking along the street on business”, animals seen by a person, human beings encountered “while walking along the street in the morning”. Among these meetings or sightings, a person in fetters, people carrying reeds and a prostitute are mentioned.<sup>39</sup> Other documents (Sm 1139, Sm 1945, ND 4361) preserve a list of things, especially animals that may be seen; unfortunately, their protases are broken and the circumstances of the sightings are unknown.<sup>40</sup> A more specific group of omens concerns people, animals or events seen by an exorcist on his way to the house of a sick person: these omens can be found in the first two tablets of the series *Enūma ana bīt marši āšipu illaku* (“When the exorcist goes to the house of a sick person”) but no parallel can be found with the circumstances of the omen of Cyrus.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Oppenheim 1956: 238 and 242.

<sup>37</sup> The preceding mention of the Cadusians is in ch. 16.

<sup>38</sup> The first 21 tablets are published in Freedman 1998 and the following tablets 22–40 in Freedman 2006; the content of the whole series is reviewed in Moren 1978. See also Nötscher 1929.

<sup>39</sup> Köcher & Oppenheim 1957–1958: 67–77.

<sup>40</sup> Moren 1978: 246–247, sub ‘E’.

<sup>41</sup> Published in Labat 1951 and Heeßel 2000 (see also Heeßel 2001–2002).

A second typological parallel with cuneiform sources may be found in the omens having a form of the verb *našû* (“to carry”) as focus of the protasis. Among these, the following dream-omen may be mentioned:

DIŠ MA.SÁ.AB DINGIR *na-ši ma-mit* GAB-su, “If he carries a basket (*masabbu*) of the god: he will be relieved of the (evil) spell.”<sup>42</sup>

The series *Šumma ālu* contains several sections referring to animals. Horse-related omens, possibly belonging to tablet 43 of the series,<sup>43</sup> are published in CT 40, Pls. 33–37. Some of these omens involve the excrement dropped by the animal:

DIŠ ANŠE.KUR.RA *ana* IGI NUN *in-gu-ug-ma* ŠURUN-su ŠUB [...] UG<sub>7</sub>, “If a horse neighs before the prince and drops its excrement [...] will die.”<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately, the apodosis is damaged and we do not know if the death will strike the prince or his enemy. Other omens involving horse excrement are the following:

DIŠ ANŠE.KUR.RA *ana* É.GAL NUN *ina* NÍ-ŠÚ KAS<sub>4</sub>-ma TU ŠURUN-su [ŠUB ...] KÚR *ana* KUR [...], “If a horse races of its own volition toward the palace of the prince and enters it and drops its excrement [...] enemy toward the land [...]”<sup>45</sup>

DIŠ ANŠE.KUR.RA *ana* É.GAL NUN *ina* NÍ-ŠÚ KAS<sub>4</sub>-ma TU-ma ŠURUN[-su ŠUB ...], “If a horse races of its own volition toward the palace of the prince and enters it and [drops its] excrement [...]”<sup>46</sup>

The composite omen of Cyrus could be tentatively simplified by two parallel processes. The first follows a cumulative pattern of positive incidents: the meaning of the name Oibaras, the meeting of people of the same ethnicity in a foreign country, the personal context of absorption of mind and inner exaltation (nearly a religious one). The second process is based on the principle of polarity<sup>47</sup>: Oibaras, “bringer of good news” in name, is a carrier of excrement in fact.

In this connection, the whip (generally *qinnazu* in Akkadian, used both for animals and men as punishment<sup>48</sup>) can be interpreted both as a symbol of power and as the tool used to spur a horse. In the parallel world of omens, it is tempting to see in the whipped Oibaras the target of a semantic shift related to a horse (represented by its excrement) flogged in order to bring good news faster.

<sup>42</sup> Oppenheim 1956: 285; transliterated text in Oppenheim 1956: 329 (tablet C, r. ii 4). Other *naši*-omens are translated in Oppenheim 1956: 288–289 and 290.

<sup>43</sup> According to Freedman 1998; tablet 41 in Moren 1978.

<sup>44</sup> CT 40, Pl. 36:56 (K 3944); quoted in CAD K, s.v. *kabû* A a.

<sup>45</sup> CT 40, Pl. 36:58 (K 3944); quoted in CAD L, s.v. *lasāmu* I.c).

<sup>46</sup> CT 40, Pl. 37:63 (K 3944). See also CT 40, Pl. 37:70.

<sup>47</sup> If the event in itself is unpleasant, the apodosis is favourable (Guinan 1989: 229–230).

<sup>48</sup> See for example Codex Hammurabi, § 202.