CHANGING IDENTITIES AT THE TURN OF THE COMMON ERA: THE CASE OF SEMIRAMIS

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Babylon, a city of shifting identities, was a constant point of reference for the Mediterranean world. This article explores the portrayal of the Babylonian queen Semiramis in Greek and Roman sources, demonstrating how ancient Near Eastern identities were constructed from the external perspective of Mediterranean cultures. Herodotus first mentioned Semiramis in the fifth century BCE, associating her with Babylon's architectural wonders. Ctesias described her as an outstanding, but in many respects flawed military leader. In contrast, during the final stage of the Roman Republic, Diodorus Siculus reshaped Ctesias' narrative and portrayed her more positively, emphasizing her beauty, virtues, courage, and intelligence. During the Roman Empire, Semiramis remained a remarkable figure who accomplished great deeds, but later authors introduced negative aspects to her story. The Augustan Age portrayed her negatively, with new elements added, such as sodomy and murder, and used her as a stand-in for Cleopatra. Both queens were denigrated as female rulers and foreigners, emphasizing cultural differences between Mesopotamian and Roman identities. The portrayal of Semiramis served to categorize and describe Mesopotamian culture, rather than to understand it. Ultimately, this article shows how Semiramis reflects different perceptions of Babylonia/Assyria and how her portrayal shifted over time in ancient literature, serving as part of Augustan propaganda to pass judgment on Cleopatra and emphasize cultural differences.

Identity and alterity form two central aspects of Greco-Roman historiography.[1] How one's self is to be considered in analogy or in contrast to a foreign otherness is one of the core ideas of ancient historiographical considerations. Both concepts form dichotomous categories.[2] Also, the concepts of identity and alterity in the ancient world are constantly renegotiated within heterogeneous groups in a dynamic process and thereby given new significance. The foreign "other" forms a point of reference for the familiar world and is used to shift familiar norms and values to a

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2 See Derrida 1999: 332–347 or (with some reservations concerning the methodology) Gruen 2011.

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spatially or chronologically distant world. At the same time, Greco-Roman sources use images of the "other" also to legitimise their own superiority and warlike conflicts.

For many centuries, Babylon was regarded by both the Greeks and the Romans as the ultimate epitome of a city with many identities: image of the cosmos, gate of the gods, residence of kings, megalopolis, urban juggernaut, corrupt and decadent capital of tyrants—and not least place of human hubris and divine judgment. The cipher Babylon merges historical phenomena with different perceptions and interpretations that follow specific interests. Babylon has thus been a constant point of reference for the Mediterranean world throughout the centuries. Depending on the circumstances, it was perceived as a place of fascinating otherness, sometimes a place of longing, sometimes a place of horror—in other words, a place of shifting identities. Even when the texts of classical antiquity that give an account of Babylon were mostly lost, Babylon continued to be well known in the Christian world.

But the roots of the image of Babylon in the cultural memory of the Western world lie in the authors of Greek antiquity. The motifs and *topoi* created there were taken up by the Jewish and Christian texts. They were expanded and given new contexts of significance to make the city of Babylon a point of reference for the Western world to this day. One may think of the popular German TV series "Babylon Berlin," of which reviewers say: "Dieses Berlin ist ein Moloch; Sünde, Korruption und Gewalt lauern, wie im Mythos um die biblische Stadt, hinter jeder Ecke,"[3] while the New York Times celebrates Berlin (or Babylon) as a "fast-moving modern metropolis where artistic and sexual experimentation flourishes against a backdrop of organised crime, political street battles and a fragile democratic order".[4] Up to the present day the image of Babylon remains focused on its alterity and thus ultimately reflects the identities of those describing it.

Apart from Alexander III ("the Great") of Macedon, it is the queen Semiramis in particular who is inextricably linked with the city Babylon in Western thought. Semiramis appears in a large number of Greek and Roman sources—about 80 authors deal with her person and describe her in different ways: sometimes with admiration, sometimes with deep disgust (Droß-Krüpe 2020: 21–91). She consequently mirrors different perceptions from the Greek and Roman cosmos on Babylonia/Assyria.[5] She can thus be used as an example to demonstrate how ancient Near Eastern identities were perceived and constructed from the external perspective of the ancient Mediterranean cultures. The shifting portrayal of the queen at the turn of the Common Era will be used in this paper to demonstrate how Semiramis was remembered as the embodiment of Babylonia/Assyria and how her person could be reframed in the classical sources of that particular time.[6]

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3 "This Berlin is a Moloch; sin, corruption and violence lurk around every corner, as in the myth surrounding the biblical city"; Jens Balkenborg, <https://www.epd-film.de/themen/babylon-berlin-tanz-auf-dem-vulkan>, accessed 27 Jan. 2021.

4 Siobhán Dowling, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/07/arts/television/sex-drugs-and-crime-in-the-gritty-drama-babylon-berlin.html>, accessed 27 Jan. 2021.

5 On the amalgamation of Babylonia and Assyria in the Greco-Roman sources see Nathanael 2014: 299–317; Zaia 2019: 247–268. See further Bichler & Rollinger 2005: 153–217 and Droß-Krüpe & Fink 2020.

6 However, this paper does not discuss whether there was an historic archetype for the Greco-Roman stories about Semiramis but focuses exclusively on how Semiramis was remembered as a memorial configuration or "Erinnerungsfigur," see Assmann 1988: 12; 2013: 38 (with note 19) and 52. For the discussion of Šammu-ramat potentially forming a basis for the figure of Semiramis in Greek historiography see the summary in Rollinger 2010: 385.

It is Herodotus who first addresses Semiramis and the city of Babylon in the fifth century BCE, even if his presence in Babylon—like that of Ctesias—is to be doubted.[7] Herodotus' description of Babylon (Hdt. 1,178,2–183,3)[8] marks the beginning of his description of the New-Babylonian Empire (οἱ Ἀσσύριοι, see Droß-Krüpe & Fink 2020), against which the Persian Great King Cyrus waged war after having conquered Lydia and Ionia. Herodotus tells of enormous walls surrounding the city and forming a square, each side 120 stades long, 50 cubits wide and 200 high.[9] He associates most of the architectural wonders of the city with the figure of queen Nitocris, to whom he also attributes particular wisdom (Röllig 1969: 127–135; Streck 1998–2001: 590–591). According to Herodotus, Nitocris is the powerful mother of Labynetus, the last sovereign king of Babylon, whom Cyrus then overthrew. In the wake of Nitocris, Herodotus mentions another woman, who had previously ruled in Babylon—Semiramis (Hdt. 1,184–185,1):

(184) τῆς δὲ Βαβυλῶνος ταύτης πολλοὶ μέν κου καὶ ἄλλοι ἐγένοντο βασιλέες, τῶν ἐν τοῖσι Ἀσσυρίοισι λόγοισι μνήμην ποιήσομαι, οἳ τὰ τείχεά τε ἐπεκόσμησαν καὶ τὰ ἱρά, ἐν δὲ δὴ καὶ γυναῖκες δύο. ἡ μὲν πρότερον ἄρξασα, τῆς ὕστερον γενεῇσι πέντε πρότερον γενομένη, τῇ οὔνομα ἦν Σεμίραμις, αὕτη μὲν ἀπεδέξατο χώματα ἀνὰ τὸ πεδίον ἐόντα ἀξιοθέητα· πρότερον δὲ ἐώθεε ὁ ποταμὸς ἀνὰ τὸ πεδίον πᾶν πελαγίζειν. (185,1) ἡ δὲ δὴ δεύτερον γενομένη ταύτης βασίλεια, τῇ οὔνομα ἦν Νίτωκρις, αὕτη δὲ συνετωτέρη γενομένη τῆς πρότερον ἀρξάσης τοῦτο μὲν μνημόσυνα ἐλίπετο τὰ ἐγὼ ἀπηγήσομαι […]

Of this Babylon, besides many other rulers, of whom I shall make mention in the Assyrian history, and who added improvement to the walls and temples, there were also two who were women. Of these, the one who ruled first, named Semiramis, who lived five generations before the other, produced banks of earth in the plain which are a sight worth seeing; and before this the river used to flood like a sea over the whole plain. The queen who lived after her time, named Nitocris, was wiser than she who had reigned before; and in the first place she left behind her monuments which I shall tell of […]

Even though Semiramis is clearly overshadowed by Nitocris and is little more than a name in Herodotus (Rollinger 2010: 383–387; Lanfranchi 2011: 206–208),[10] she proves to be enormously significant for ideas about Babylon and the Assyrian Empire throughout the centuries. Until the early twentieth century, Semiramis was one of the most present female figures of antiquity in Western cultural memory, and was referred to when concepts of rule, gender or cultural identities and alterities were being debated.

The fame of Semiramis is not rooted in Herodotus, but in the description of Ctesias of Cnidus in the fifth century BCE, who makes her the paradigm of an oriental ruler. Ctesias focuses on her military identity and designs her as an outstanding military leader, who only fails in the conquest of India.[11] His *Persica* evidently unfolded an extraordinary power; most common

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7 Dorati 1995; cf. Jacobs 2011. For a different view, holding on to the autopsy of both, see, Nesselrath 1999.

8 His description of the city in his Babylonian logos is of particular importance in the assessment of his historical work, since we are in the fortunate position of being able to compare Herodotus' text with a wealth of autochthonous cuneiform sources; cf. e.g., Rollinger 1993; 1998, 2011. Nonetheless, although cuneiform sources have contributed significantly to revising the history the city in late Babylonian times, the "idea" of a monumental Babylon is still often followed uncritically, since Herodotus' description of the city is often misinterpreted as an actual historical document. Cf. Heinsch, Kuntner & Rollinger 2011; Heinsch & Kuntner 2011; Heller 2010; Kuhrt 2001; Rollinger 2008; Wiesehöfer 1999. For a general overview on Herodotus and Babylon see also Rollinger 2014: 147–194.

9 Rollinger 1993: 67–137; Heinsch & Kuntner 2011. Philostratus, Pliny and Orosius repeat these figures, while Ctesias, Strabo, Dion Chrysostomus and Cassius Dio provide different numbers. See the overview in Boncquet 1987: 72–73.

10 Dalley 2005: 12–22 suggests an amalgamation of Nitocris with Semiramis.

11 For the reception of Semiramis' campaign towards Indian in Hellenism see Bosworth 1996: 113–127.

"Oriental" *topoi* originate here, especially those about luxury and wealth, murderousness and promiscuity.[12] Ctesias is thus a key figure when it comes to the formation of a collective Greek (and later Roman) memory of this part of the ancient world (cf. Heller 2010: 62).

At the same time, details of his narrative of Babylon and the ancient Near East in general are difficult to grasp as his works are not *transmitted* to us directly. All we have is a collection of fragments passed down to us through other authors. For a long time, ancient historical research has assumed—and sometimes still does—that Diodorus Siculus provides a more or less unaltered copy of Ctesias' remarks concerning Semiramis.[13] As a contemporary of Caesar, Diodorus—a Greek from Agyrium in Sicily—lived to see the political upheavals of the last phase of the Roman Republic.[14] His universal history, Βιβλιοθήκη Ἱστορική, consisted of 40 books and covered the historical events up to the first consulship of C. Iulius Caesar in 60 BCE. However, the situation is much more complex, as Diodorus does not provide an unmodified reproduction of Ctesias' description of Semiramis, but rather draws his own picture of the Mesopotamian queen (Comploi 2000; Droß-Krüpe 2020: 24–40).

The assumption that Diodorus 2,1–28 could be a more or less unaltered copy of the Ctesian text is largely based on Diodorus' own statement (Diod. 2,20,3: Κτησίας μὲν οὖν ὁ Κνίδιος περὶ Σεμιράμιδος τοιαῦθ᾽ ἱστόρηκεν) as well as on the frequent mentions of Ctesias in these chapters. It is striking, however, that Ctesias is mentioned almost exclusively when Diodorus refers to concrete numbers, while at the same time other sources for these chapters, such as Cleitarchus and Athenaeus, are mentioned.[15] It should further be noted that reliable conclusions about the exact wording of sources cited by classical authors are methodologically problematic, as Dominique Lenfant (1999) was able to demonstrate by comparing the transmitted fragments of Herodotus in other authors with the actual text of his Histories. This challenge is emphasised when taking a closer look at the fragments of Ctesias' Semiramis transmitted outside Diodorus, as these show clear deviations from Diodorus' narrative. These deviations affect all stages of Semiramis' life and portray her in a much more negative way than Diodorus, mentioning *inter alia* unbridled lechery, the murder of her lovers, the murder of her sons from her first marriage and her being murdered by the son from her second marriage with king Ninus.[16] It therefore seems more appropriate to regard Diodorus' account of Semiramis as an independent creation that, although based on older models establishes new ideas of Semiramis and the Neo-Babylonian Empire (Droß-Krüpe 2020: 26–35).

This said, I will turn to the actual contents of Diodorus' account: right from the start, he calls Semiramis the most important woman we know off (Diod. 2,4,1: τὴν ἐπιφανεστάτην ἀπασῶν τῶν γυναικῶν ὧν παρειλήφαμεν)—an opening that introduces great things to come.[17] Hereafter,

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12 Bichler 2011: 21–52; Briant 2009: 19–38; Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987. See further Seymour 2014: 64–66.

13 Diod. 2,1–28. FGrHist 688 F 1b § 1–28. Please note that all fragments of Ctesias refer to Lefant 2004, if not otherwise stated. See Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1987: 40–43; Pettinato 1988: 46; Questa 1989: 14; Sacks 1990: 76; Auberger 1993; Waters 2017: 45; Stronk 2017: 529. Further Comploi 2000: 227–228 with note 50.

14 For the dates of Diodorus' life and stay in Rome see Rathmann 2016: 18–22, 29–44.

15 Diod. 2,5,4; 2,7,1; 2,7,3; 2,7,4; 2,8,5; 2,17,1; see also Comploi 2000. It is a general rule, that classical authors mention their sources only sporadically. Usually, a source used is only made explicit, when the author wishes to depart from it.

16 FGrHist 688 F 1δ*; F 1eα and F 1eγ (Stronk); F 1g; F 1i; F 1m; F 1n. All these fragments of Ctesias paint a negative portrait of Semiramis, while Diodorus focuses on the positive elements and omits this information, Cf. Comploi 2000; Droß-Krüpe 2020: 35–40.

17 A clear contrast to the marginal role she plays in Herodotus (Hdt. 1,184 and 3,155) and Berossos (BNJ 680 F 5 and F 9a [de Breucker]).

Diodorus describes her entire life from birth to death: Semiramis is the daughter of the goddess Derceto and a mortal.[18] The goddess—half fish, half human—abandoned the child out of shame at having become involved with a human, killed the young man and then turned into a fish. The child was fed by pigeons for a year until she was found and raised by a shepherd. She became the wife of the royal governor Onnes, with whom she had two sons. During the siege of Bactra, Onnes missed her and thus sent for her.

For her journey to Bactra, she designed clothes that did not reveal whether she was a woman or a man (Diod. 2,6,6: στολὴν ἐπραγματεύσατο δι' ἧς οὐκ ἦν διαγνῶναι τὸν περιβεβλημένον πότερον ἀνήρ ἐστιν ἢ γυνή).[19] Her military skills enabled the siege of Bactra, and in the aftermath she attracted the attention of the king of Babylon, Ninus, who was instantly captivated by her intelligence and beauty and wanted to take her as his wife. He offered Onnes his daughter as a substitute and threatened him so much that Onnes, who did not want to leave his wife, committed suicide. Ninus then fathered a son with Semiramis, Ninyas, and left her to rule after his death (Diod. 2,7,1: τὴν γυναῖκα ἀπολιπὼν βασίλισσαν). The following chapters are devoted to Semiramis' military and building activities: She fortified Babylon, erected a temple, two palaces and several infrastructural buildings (Diod. 2,7,2–9,8; 2,13,6–8; 2,14,1). She conquered Media and Egypt as well as large parts of Libya and Ethiopia and, finally waged war against India (Diod. 2,13–20). Only this final campaign is criticised by Diodorus as being without cause and motivated solely by ambition and the prospect of booty (Diod. 2,16,1–4). In all her wars Semiramis is portrayed as a cleverly acting military commander, who is only defeated by the Indian king Stabrobates by treachery (Diod. 2,19).

Later, her son Ninyas, threatend her life, whereupon Semiramis left him to rule Babylon. At the age of 62 she either withdrew from human sight and was elevated to the gods, or—as reported by Ctesias—turned into a dove and flew away. Finally, Diodorus mentions another variant of her narrative: Athenaios and others claimed, he states, that Semiramis had been a beautiful *hetaira* of the Babylonian king, who later became his wife and persuaded the king to let her rule for five days. During her reign she instantly had the king imprisoned and ruled until old age.

In his account of the Semiramis' life, Diodorus emphasises various aspects that are both central for her identity and for his view of her as an exemplary ruler: He stresses her beauty as well as her manifold virtues, paying particular attention to her courage and intelligence. In addition, Semiramis' activities as a builder receive special recognition, with not only palaces and magnificent buildings, but also religious and engineering structures mentioned. Diodorus clearly highlights her role as a servant of the gods and as a caring "mother of the nation," which she both fulfilled with equal wisdom and austerity. Semiramis' portrayal in Diodorus is a mostly positive one, even though there are some critical remarks, that are mostly placed in the context of the critical discourses on luxury typical of Diodorus' time (Droß-Krüpe 2020: 32). In contrast, negative aspects that were most likely part of Ctesias' *Persica* are either dismissed or marginalised.

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18 On Derceto see Jacoby 1875: 576; Eilers 1971: 13; Stobel 1976: 209–217; Frahm 2016: 432–450; Stronk 2017: 92 note 23.

19 Diodorus does not state that she wore male attire and/or wanted to disguise as a man but explicitly stresses how useful these garments were and that the Medes and Persians later wore similar garments (Diod. 2,6,6).

Exemplary individuals play a central part in Diodorus' narrative and structure his work. This particular focus runs through the entire Βιβλιοθήκη[20] and is programmatically phrased in its 10th book, excerpts of which have survived in the *Excerpta Constantiniana*.[21] Semiramis is part of Diodorus' overall efforts to present examples—*exempla*[22]—and is additionally interlinked in his narrative with two other outstanding rulers: the Egyptian pharaoh Sesostris/Sesoosis[23] and Alexander III of Macedon. The lives of these three rulers, who all were particularly successful military leaders, are interconnected at crucial points in Diodorus' work, who in this manner arranges them in a hierarchical order, as has already been noticed by Reinhold Bichler (Bichler 2014; Droß-Krüpe 2020: 33–35).

Sesostris takes the lead, as he is said to be the one who, of all kings up to Diodorus' time, has accomplished the most brilliant and significant deeds.[24] He surpassed both Semiramis and Alexander III in various aspects. This becomes particularly evident in the war against India that all three wage: Semiramis is ultimately defeated by the Indian king Stabrobates, while Alexander III defeats the Indian king Poros and thus surpasses the queen of Babylon (Diod. 17,87–89). But both are outperformed by Sesostris, who not only conquered the territories that Alexander III later conquered, but advanced into even more distant regions and reached places, where Alexander never set foot,[25] crossing the river Ganges and reaching the Pacific Ocean.[26]

Sesostris surpasses Semiramis not only with regards to their Indian campaigns:[27] Both had important buildings erected, Diodorus states, but Semiramis' projects took a back seat to those of Sesostris. Sesostris had a temple built in every single city in Egypt, while Semiramis had only one temple in Babylon erected (Diod. 1,56,2 Sesostris and Diod. 2,9,4 Semiramis). Sesostris' irrigation system ran through the entire region from Memphis to the shore and, in addition to providing a better life for the peasants, ensured security and peace in his entire dominion, while Semiramis only had a cistern built in Babylon and an irrigation tunnel in Ecbatana (Diod. 1,57,2 Sesostris and Diod. 2,9,1, and 2,13,6–8 Semiramis). In the east of Egypt, Sesostris had a wall of 1,500 stadia erected to protect his country from attacks from Syria and Arabia, running through the desert from Pelusium to Heliopolis whereas the walls commissioned by Semiramis only surrounded the city of Babylon and had a length of 360 or 365 stadia (Diod. 1,57,4 Sesostris and Diod. 2,7,3 Semiramis).

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20 Examples in Diod. 1,1–2; 11,46,1; 14,1–3; 15,1; 15,88,1; 23,15,1. Cf. Sacks 1990: 23–35; Camacho Rojo 1994: 63–69; Chamoux 1997: 57–65; Stylianou 1998: 3–4; Piccirilli 2000: 114; Cohen-Skalli 2012: 380–381 note 53; Schorn 2014: 135–162; Rathmann 2014: 49–113 and Rathmann 2016: 272 and 306.

21 Diod. 10,27,1 (Cohen-Skalli). Cf. Cohen-Skalli 2012: 177–181, 363–378; Schorn 2013: 179–259; 2014: 135–162.

22 Cf. Rathmann 2016: 272, Hofmann 2018: 103–116; on Diodorus' didactic concept see further Laqueur 1958: 290; de Romilly 1979: 255; Sartori 1984: 492; Rathmann 2014: 49–113; 2016: 306.

23 Compare Hdt. 2,102–109; cf. Obsomer 1989. Egyptology knows of three pharaohs (all 12th dynasty) bearing the name Sesostris/S(j) n Wsrt, who waged war in Nubia and the Ancient Near East and stood out as patrons for major building activities. In later centuries, the narratives of these historical rulers were enriched by the deeds and character traits of other famous pharaohs. Cf. Napp 2017: 76; Rollinger 2016: 129–164.

24 Diod. 1,53,1: Σεσόωσιν […] ἐπιφανεστάτας καὶ μεγίστας ὧν πρὸ αὐτοῦ πράξεις ἐπιτελέσασθαι. See Ivantchik 1999; Muntz 2017: 191–214.

25 Diod. 1,55,3: Οὐ μόνον γὰρ τὴν ὕστερον ὑπ' Ἀλεξάνδρου τοῦ Μακεδόνος κατακτηθεῖσαν χώραν ἐπῆλθεν, ἀλλὰ καί τινα τῶν ἐθνῶν ὧν ἐκεῖνος οὐ παρέβαλεν εἰς τὴν χώραν.

26 Diod. 1,55,4: καὶ γὰρ τὸν Γάγγην ποταμὸν διέβη καὶ τὴν Ἰνδικὴν ἐπῆλθε πᾶσαν ἕως ὠκεανοῦ καὶ τὰ τῶν Σκυθῶν ἔθνη μέχρι Τανάιδος ποταμοῦ τοῦ διορίζοντος τὴν Εὐρώπην ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀσίας.

27 Likewise, Ryholt 2013: 59–62 and Bichler 2014: 55–71. See also Plut. mor. 243C (de virt. mul.): εἰ τὸν αὐτὸν ἔχει χαρακτῆρα καὶ τύπον ἡ Σεμιράμεως μεγαλοπραγμοσύνη τῇ Σεσώστριος.

Furthermore, both had mounds constructed: According to Diodorus, Sesostris did so to relocate cities from the valley or the plain to a better spot, (Diod. 1,57,1 Sesostris and Diod. 2,14,1 Semiramis) whilst Semiramis likewise had cities built on exposed mounds but additionally used these mounds as burial sites for her military leaders.[28] In a similar way, Diodorus interlinks the narratives of Semiramis and Alexander beyond their military expeditions to India: Both visit the oracle of Ammon in the Siwa Oasis,[29] both start their campaigns against India from the city of Bactra (Diod. 2,16 Semiramis and Diod. 17,86 Alexander) and apart from Ethiopia Alexander and his army conquer all regions Semiramis had conquered before (Diod. 2,16,1 Semiramis and Diod. 17,52,7 Alexander; Sulimani 2005: 53; Szalc 2014: 495–508).

Diodorus' image of Semiramis is thus determined by his concept of ideal rulership. Neither Semiramis nor Sesostris are independent figures within Diodorus' narrative, but both gain their significance with regard to Alexander III. The lives of both are intimately linked and constructed with respect to Alexander's life. The fact that an Egyptian pharaoh is presented as the ultimate example of a ruler's might, on the one hand, be due to Diodorus' possible stay in Egypt.[30] On the other hand, this observation might allow one to draw cautious conclusions about the time of writing of Diodorus' Βιβλιοθήκη. His appraisal of an Egyptian pharaoh might be a hint at Diodorus' position in the ongoing antagonism between the Ptolemies and Seleucids as successors of Alexander's empire (Bichler 2014: 66).

Diodorus' aggrandisement of the pharaoh might then be read as an alignment with the Ptolemies. If this were the case, his hierarchy of rulers (Semiramis—Alexander III—Sesostris) would suggest that he composed his Βιβλιοθήκη, at a time when the conflict between Octavian on the one hand and Marcus Antonius and the last Ptolemaic pharaoh Cleopatra VII on the other had not yet been concluded (Droß-Krüpe 2020: 39–40). Dating Diodorus' work to the mid-30s of the first century CE, as Michael Rathmann (2016: 168 has likewise recently suggested—albeit using different arguments—thus seems most plausible.[31]

It would seem that Diodorus' portrayal of the Babylonian queen is not so much set against the background of Mesopotamian realities as against his ideas of Alexander III and Sesostris. In a similar way Semiramis' memory and identity are used and reframed only a few years later due to the historical developments during the transition from the Roman Republic to the Principate. The authors of the Age of Augustus take a great interest in Semiramis, enriching her narrative with several new elements: In Hyginus' *fabulae* she is listed among the women who have murdered their husbands (Fab. 240).[32] Neither Diodorus nor Ctesias, at least as far as we can tell from the preserved fragments of his *Persica*, contain corresponding remarks.

But this is not the only new element emerging at this time in the context of Semiramis. Hyginius further states that she committed suicide on a pyre after her beloved horse perished (Fab. 243,8: *Semiramis in Babylonia equo amisso in pyram se coniecit*). This episode is particularly remark-

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28 Another fragment of Ctesias, transmitted by Synkellos, mentions χώματα; however, these are said to be the burial sites of Semiramis' lovers (FGrHist 688 F 1i).

29 Diod. 2,14,3 (Semiramis) and Diod. 17,40,2 u. 49,1–2 (Alexander). Cf. Sulimani 2005: 53; Szalc 2014: 495–508.

30 Marincola 1997: 108–109; Rathmann 2016: 91 with note 300. More sceptical Kunz 1935: 79–80.

31 The dating of the Βιβλιοθήκη depends on the dating of the deduction of the *colonia* Tauromenium as the most recent event mentioned in Diodorus (Diod. 16,7). Suggested dates are 36 BCE (based on App. BC 5,109) and 21 BCE (based on Cass. Dio 54,7,1); cf. Rathmann 2016: 18–20 with further literature.

32 This accusation is taken up by Aelian (referring to Dinon) and Plutarch in the second century CE: Ail. var. 7,1 and Plut. mor. 753D–E. Even if this episode were included in Dinon, as Aelian claims, this motif apparently had no decisive relevance before the Augustan period.

able since ancient historiography usually attributes death by self-immolation to rulers, who find themselves in a hopeless military situation. Self-immolation thus forms an alternative to suicide by the sword (Dietrich 2017: 60–115). The motif itself is much older and already appears in Greek tragedy, where it is always associated with great love (Eur. Suppl. 984–1031). Against this background, Hyginus' remark about Semiramis' suicide after her horse died, is a clear reminiscent of sodomy.

A persisting shift in the perspective towards Semiramis and Mesopotamia is likewise demonstrated in the universal history of Pompeius Trogus, the first universal history in Latin, written during the late first century CE. His *historiae Philippicae* cover the events from the foundation of the Assyrian Empire to Augustan times. Like Diodorus, Trogus' narrative focuses on outstanding individuals, stressing their personal (in-)capacities. Particular attention is given towards their capacity for temperance (*moderatio*), an aspect Trogus holds responsible for the rise and fall of world empires (Cf. Müller 2016: 60; Borgna 2018: 214–215). However, Trogus' work is again lost, except for a few fragments and is known to us only through the later epitomes of Justin. The date of Justin's epitome of the *historiae Philippicae* is likewise debated. Suggestions range from mid-second century to the end of the fourth century CE, with a certain preference to a later dating.[33] We are thus faced with problems similar to those of Ctesias/Diodorus but cannot make use of parallel transmissions of the original text by other authors except Justin. Again, it is almost impossible to decide whether and to what extent the later author made literary interventions in the text, that is, to what extent Justin not only distilled the Trogus' text, but also changed it according to his own agenda.[34] If nothing else, there is agreement among scholars that Justin adopted the structure and chronological order of Trogus (Hofmann 2018: 23–62, 223) and drastically trimmed it to about 10% of its original length (Seel 1972: 1; Hofmann 2018: 14 with note 6).

Unlike in Diodorus, Semiramis plays no significant part in the account of Trogus/Justin before the death of Ninus (Droß-Krüpe 2020: 44–50). Neither a preceding marriage nor the siege of Bactra are mentioned. Only after the death of Ninus, when she dresses as a man and disguises as her son Ninyas, whom she resembles,[35] she accomplishes great deeds (Just. 1,2,5: […] *magnas deinde res gessit* […]) and wages successful war campaigns. According to Trogus/Justin, her disguise was necessary, as the rule of a woman would not have been accepted in Babylon (Just. 1,2,1: […] *tot actantis gentibus vix parentibus viro, nedum feminae parituris* […]). Yet contrary to this claim, her later unveiling does not diminish her fame, but actually increases it, since as a woman she has surpassed all men in *virtus* (Just. 1,2,6: […] *quod mulier non feminas modo virtute, sed etiam viros anteiret.*). Consequently, she retains dominion (Just. 1,2,6: *Nec hoc illi dignitatem regni ademit* […]). In the end, however, she is murdered by her son after reigning for 32 years, as probably also in the *Persica* of Ctesias.

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33 Galdi 1922: 108: 130–180 CE; Steele 1917: 41: 144/145 CE; Schmidt 1979: 23: 2nd cent. CE.; Seel 1972: 346 and Yardley & Heckel 1997: 1: about 200 CE; Yardley 2010: 470–473: late 2nd/early 3rd cent. CE; Nieto 2009: 36: 3rd cent. CE; Borgna 2018: 124–127: early 4th cent. CE.; Klotz 1913: 548, Emberger 2015: 11 and Hofmann 2018: 25, 224: 4th cent. CE; Syme 1988: 365: about 390/395 CE.

34 Research here falls into two groups: While some grant Justin's epitome creative drive and a distinct intention (Brunt 1980: 477–494; Jal 1987; Yarrow 2006: 111–116; Yardley 2010; Borgna 2014; Borgna 2018; Hofmann 2018), others think little of his own literary ambition and achievements (Seel 1955; Forni 1958: 50–140; Goodyear 1982: 1–2; Forni & Bertonelli 1982: 1298–1358).

35 Just. 1,2,2–4: *Nam et statura utrique mediocris et vox pariter gracilis et liniamentorum qualitas matri ac filio similis.* […] *Sic primis initiis sexum mentita puer esse credita est.*

Trogus/Justin likewise adds a new element to her narrative: As the reason for this matricide incestuous intentions of Semiramis are mentioned (Just. 1,2,10: […] *cum concubitum filii petisset* […]). This element was particularly taken up in later times and determined the portrayal of Semiramis for centuries, especially for Christian authors (Droß-Krüpe 2020: 47–48, 55–60). For Trogus/Justin, Semiramis is still in many respects a remarkable woman, who performed great deeds. But Trogus is somewhat skeptical about female rule in general and Semiramis in particular (cf. Hofmann 2018: 121–136) and mentions more negative aspects than Diodorus only a few years earlier.

Trogus'/Justin's skepticism has its origin not least in the narrative of another ruler propagated since the Augustean times (Müller 2016: 76), namely the last ruler of the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt, Cleopatra VII. Her role as the last Pharaoh of Egypt, her relationships with Caesar and Marc Antony as the foremost Roman men of the late Roman Republic and her involvement in a conflict that reshaped the power dynamics of the Mediterranean world have made her a popular subject for history and fiction.

Cleopatra had initially been *amica et socia populi Romani* (cf. Heinen 2009: 288–296), but because of her alliance with Marc Antony she had been declared an enemy of Rome (*hostis rei publicae*).[36] After Octavian's victory at Actium in 31 BCE and the capture of Alexandria and the suicide of Cleopatra in the following year, the victor's perspective determined the narrative. Consequently, Roman epic of the early imperial period emphasises her "unnatural" behaviour as a woman, especially with regards to Cleopatra's role in the events surrounding Actium.[37] The majority of the Augustan authors focus their narratives about Cleopatra on two aspects: her power as a queen and her identity as a woman. Both aspects contradicted the traditional, patriarchal values of Rome, but their combination was considered a particular affront and a threat (Jones 2012: 165; Pyy 2011: 78–79).

The unfavourable portrayal of Cleopatra is likewise reflected in the *Carmen de Bello Actiaco* (or *Carmen de Bello Aegyptiaco*), preserved on a papyrus from the *Villa dei Papiri* in Herculaneum.[38] Its exact date is contested, but Cleopatra's death in 30 BCE and the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE form the termini post and ante quem (Zecchini 1987: 12–13, favouring a Flavian date for the *Carmen*). The surviving fragments of the Carmen focus on the events from the Battle of Actium to the double suicide of Cleopatra and Marc Antony. The *Carmen* just as the Augustan authors paints a portrait of Cleopatra as a minatorial woman, whose craving for power and moral concepts threaten Rome's peace and security.

All depict the Egyptian queen as a double-gendered personification of all aspects antithetical to Roman ideals of womanhood. From this time onwards Cleopatra is at the heart of the Roman narrative of Egypt's otherness, while Octavian/Augustus is painted as Rome's saviour, who protected Rome, supported by the Gods, from the daunting rule of a woman (cf. Schäfer 2006; Wyke 1994: 103–129; Nebelin 2011: 36–39). The negative characterisation of Cleopatra in the post-Actian texts not least reflects Octavian's efforts of justifying his campaign and the conquest of Egypt ex post (cf. Vitale 2013).

Roman poets of the Augustan Age created and established powerful and influential images and stereotypes—not only about Egypt, but also about Mesopotamia. Even though almost every impor-

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36 On the *damnatio memoriae* of Marc Antony: Tac. ann. 318; Plut. Antonius 86; Plut. Cicero 49; Cass. Dio 51,19, 3–5; Vittinghoff 1936: 21–27; Wendt 2008, 100; on the *hostis* declaration: Cass. Dio 50,4,4; Plut. Antonius 60,1; cf. Lange 2009: 65–69, 87–88; Wendt 2008: 92–93 with note 391.

37 Pyy 2011: 90–93. See Virg. Aen. 8,678-–688 and Lucan. Phars. 10,75–81.

38 P.Herc. 817; cf. Zecchini 1987 and Dubit 2018 with further literature.

tant author of the Augustan period mentions Semiramis, they refer to her in a completely different way than Diodorus only a few years earlier. In the age of Augustus, the portrayal of Semiramis is significantly amended, stressing not merits and virtues, but failures and vices. In the light of the political events of the day, it is not surprising that the suicide of a queen is attached as a new element to the memorial figure Semiramis in Augustan times—it is an element that further connects her to the fate of Cleopatra. With the accumulation of new elements such as sodomy and murder of her husband, incest and male disguise in the age of Augustus Semiramis' narrative is now significantly amended, stressing not merits and virtues, but failures and vices. Only her role as a builder and founder of cities retained universal significance, regardless of the overall interpretation of her figure.

Semiramis' portrayal is now used as a moniker for Cleopatra VII and thus, just like the latter, she falls prey to the negative transformation of Augustan propaganda. Propertius refers to her as *femina trita* and makes her precursor of the Egyptian queen in order to emphasise that female rule is inappropriate and a threat (3,11,21–49; probably referring to Diod. 2,9,1–3),[39] while Juvenal uses similar techniques to connect and denigrate both queens (Iuv. 2,108–109 and 2,82). In the early first century CE, Semiramis is used to emphasise the idea of a physical and cultural differences between Mesopotamian and Roman identities. She is turned into a negative and daunting example of female rule by reframing her narrative and by adding new, negative elements to it.[40] This procedure ultimately aims at passing judgment on Cleopatra, whom Horace calls a fatale monster (*fatale monstrum*, Hor. carm 1,37,21). In the long run what François de Callataÿ (2015: 11) observed for Cleopatra VII, is likewise true for Semiramis:

> Le portrait qu'il en dresse porte la trace de la propagande augustéenne et des deux préjudices irrémédiables que celle-ci s'emploie é stigmatiser: elle est femme et elle est étrangère.

Thus, Semiramis was used as a foil to make assessments of others in the last phase of the Roman Republic as well as at the beginning of the Imperial Age. As their predecessors, the Greco-Roman authors at the turn of the Common Era did not seek to understand Mesopotamian culture, history or identity, but rather to categorise and describe it in accordance with their individual methods of thought and political agenda that were subject to change at that time.

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39 Cf. Flach 2011: 162; Grimal 1981: 21–23.

40 However, her rule could very well arouse admiration again in later imperial times, as is shown by later remarks on Semiramis of Plutarch and Dio Chrysosthomus (Plut. mor. 336C [de Alex. fort.] u. 243 C [de mul. virt.]; Dion 64,2).

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