DER GRABHÜGEL[*]

Wouter F.M. Henkelman
(Collège de France)

Es sind eben nicht die Fakten,
die in der Geschichte entscheidend sind,
sondern die Vorstellungen die sich
die Menschen von den Fakten machen
Marion Gräfin Dönhoff

1. *Introduction*

In one of the key passages of Aeschylus' *Persians*, the ghost of Darius the Great, risen from his tomb, sketches the history of his line from the first king instated by Zeus himself down to the reign of Xerxes, his own reckless son. The contrast between the latter and all former kings, Darius himself in particular, is enlarged to the extreme (vv. 779-86, translation G. Murray):

> *[Ghost of Darius]*
> *...*
> And lots were cast, and fell as I had need;
> and many lands with many hosts of war
> I swept withal, but never thus did mar
> My country's fortune. But my son ... in truth
> A young man's thoughts are but the foam of youth:
> The charge I gave him Xerxes hath forgot.
> O partners of my long life, well ye wot
> Not all who erst have held this ancient throne
> Such weight of ill have wrought as he alone.

No living fact could utter harsher criticism than this voice from the grave: it is the fact that the past is speaking and reproaching the present that adds real drama to the scene. The dead king's ghost rises to tear asunder the hopes and arrogance of the overconfident living. It is this clash between the then and the now that really defines Xerxes as a ruler who has failed, as a man who henceforth will have to live with the unbearable thought that his character and doings are but an unworthy shadow of those who preceded him.

The conflict between kings of old and the blind ruler of the present is not limited to tragedy. It recurs, in the naïve and charming tone of the folk-tale, in the *Persika* of Ctesias of Cnidus. The story is that of Xerxes' ill-fated opening of the tomb of Belitanas or Belos during his stay in Babylon. This time the event takes place prior to the Greek campaign and portends the disaster soon to be inflicted upon the Persian army. There are two sources for the story: an extensive

testimony in Aelian's *Varia Historia* and a much-abbreviated version in Photius'
resume of the *Persika*:

> Xerxes the son of Darius, having dug his way into the monument of ancient Bēl
> (τοῦ Βήλου τοῦ ἀρχαίου διασκάψας τὸ μνῆμα), found a glass sarcophagus (πύελον
> ὑελίνην), in which the body lay in oil. The sarcophagus was not full; the oil was
> perhaps an inch short of the rim. Near the sarcophagus lay a small stele on which
> was written: "For the man who opens the monument and does not fill the
> sarcophagus, things will not improve (οὐκ ἔστιν ἄμεινον)." When Xerxes read this
> he was afraid and gave orders to pour in oil at once. But the sarcophagus did not
> fill up. He gave orders to pour once again. But the level did not rise, and he gave up
> after wasting to no avail what was poured in. Closing the tomb (τάφον), he
> retreated in dismay. The stele did not lie in its prediction: for having assembled
> 700,000 men against the Greeks, he came off badly, and on his return he suffered a
> most shameful death, murdered one night in bed by his son.[1]

> Xerxes invaded Greece because of the men of Chalcedon, as has already been
> noted, had tried to destroy the bridge and destroyed the altar set up by Darius;
> also because the Athenians had killed Datis and not even returned his body. But
> first he went to Babylon and asked to see the tomb of Belitanas (τὸν Βελιτανᾶ
> τάφον). Thanks to Mardonius he did see it, but was unable to fill the sarcophagus
> (τὴν πύελον) with oil, as had been written. Xerxes set out for Ecbatana and
> received news of the revolt in Babylon and the murder of the local commander
> Zopyrus. This is what Ctesias says of the matter, differing from Herodotus. What
> the latter says about Zopyrus, apart from the incident of the mule that gave birth,
> Ctesias reports of Megabyzus, son-in-law of Xerxes and husband of Amytis.[2]

Of the above passages, Felix Jacoby only included the second among the *fragmenta*
of Ctesias' work. As Dominique Lenfant (2004: 265-6 n. 538) has argued
persuasively, however, the context, theme and vocabulary used make it most
likely that the story told by Aelian is at least indirectly based on the *Persika* too.[3]
This version seems to preserve more detail of the original and without it the
patriarch's resume would not, in fact, be fully understandable to us. Though
certain elements, notably the name of Belos and the murder of Xerxes, may have
been added by Aelian or the intermediate source he was using (see below), I will
work from the assumption that the two texts essentially render the same passage
of Ctesias' work. At the same time, it may be pointed out that the differences
between the two constitute a powerful reminder of the problems generally
involved in working with 'fragmenta' (cf. Lenfant 1999).

---

[1]   Ael. *VH* XIII.3 = F13b* Lenfant; translation adapted from N.G. Wilson (Loeb).

[2]   Photius *Bibl.* LXXII.39a Bekker = F13 (25)-(26) Lenfant; translation adapted from N.G.
      Wilson.

[3]   The same opinion was expressed, among others, by Marquart 1891/93: 574-5; Meyer
      1899: 489 fn. 1; Aly 1921: 56; Krappe 1928: 79-80; König 1972: 70. Though Ctesias is not
      explicitly mentioned by Aelian as a source of his *Varia Historia* (few names of authors
      are mentioned in this work), it seems very likely that the *Persika* was used. Ctesias is
      mentioned repeatedly in Aelian's *De Natura Animalium*; it seems that both his *Persika*
      and his *Indika* were among its sources (see overview with references in Henkelman
      [forthcoming]).

The story of Xerxes and the tomb of Belitanas/Belos have always been compared to the Herodotean tale of Darius and the tomb of queen Nitocris. Various approaches have been advocated: that the two narratives reflect the same historical event, that they are based on the same original tale (i.e. an oral tradition), or that one version is an adaptation or a pastiche of the other. In the latter case, it usually assumed that Ctesias reworked the Herodotean tale and that the passage is a typical case of his play with Herodotus.[4] The story on Nitocris' tomb, is as follows:[5]

> This same queen [i.e. Nitocris; WH] also contrived the following trick. She had a tomb (τάφον) made for herself and set high over the very gate of that entrance of the city which was used most, and had an inscription engraved on the tomb, which read: "If any of the kings of Babylon after me is in need of money, let him open this tomb and take as much money as he likes: but let him not open it unless he is in need; for it will be the worse for him (οὐ γὰρ ἄμεινον)." This tomb remained untouched until the kingship fell to Darius. He thought it a very strange thing that he should never use this gate, or take the money when it lay there and the writing itself invited him to. The reason he did not use the gate was that the dead body would be over his head as he passed through. After opening the tomb, he found no money there, only the dead body and an inscription reading: "If you had not an insatiable appetite for money (εἰ μὴ ἄπληστός τε ἔας χρημάτων), and had not a disgracefully greed of gain, you would not have opened the coffins of the dead (νεκρῶν θήκας)." Such a woman, it is recorded, was this queen.

Though the relation between the above story and the one told by Ctesias has often been noted and discussed, the function of the narrative(s) seldom has. Most commentators, as far as they ventured an interpretation, have looked for a historical core: a description of an actual gate and actual funerary taboo in the case of Herodotus and an actual attempt to open a structure that could be considered as the tomb of Belos in the case of Ctesias. The folk-tale element in the stories quoted above has received only limited attention; the most relevant remarks in this respect are from Wolf Aly in his *Volksmärchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen* (1921: 56-7; cf. *idem* 1930-33). Aly identified the ill-fated opening of the tomb and the inscription predicting the perpetrator's doom as a *Wandermotif* and pointed out the remarkable parallel between the story on the tomb of Belitanas/Belos in particular and a Märchen type named, after its title in the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* of the Grimm Brothers as, as "Der Grabhügel."[6]

It would seem that the connection with *Der Grabhügel* has not found the acclaim it undoubtedly deserves, perhaps partly because Aly himself did not elaborate upon his suggestion.[7] This paper aims to investigate the folk-tale

---

[4] Same historical core: Lehmann-Haupt 1898: 486. Same or related original (folk-)tales: Aly 1921: 56-7; König 1972: 70; Tourraix 1996: 114-5. Intentional variation with Herodotus: Marquart 1891/93: 574-6; Tourraix 1996: 114; Bichler 2004a and this volume.

[5] Hdt. I.187; translation adapted from A.D. Godley.

[6] I use the commented 1996 edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (KHM) by H.J. Uther. For "Der Grabhügel" (KHM 195) see vol. III, 164-8 (text) and IV, 359-61 (commentary).

[7] The only other study concentrating on the folk-tale character of the Belitanas/Belos story is, to my knowledge, that of Krappe (1928).

background of Ctesias' story and to reconstruct its original significance. First, individual elements of the story and their possible origins will be discussed (§2) before proceeding to the question whether it really presents a version of a widespread folk-tale (§3). In addition, the reports, by Herodotus and Deinon, on the killing of the Apis by Cambyses II and Artaxerxes III will be adduced as parallel to the Belitanas/Belos story (§4).

2. The tomb of Belitanas/Belos and its cultural context

A number of elements in Ctesias' story may be deriving from an Assyro-Babylonian or Persian narrative context, while others betray a distinct Greek outlook. It is not argued here that the purported Mesopotamian elements are as such purely historical or documentary, but rather that they are 'genuine' in the sense that they could have been part of an Assyro-Babylonian tale and that particularly a Mesopotamian or Persian audience would have appreciated them as familiar motifs.

2.1. The corpse floating in oil

The prime element that adds a distinct couleur locale to the story of the tomb of Belitanas/Belos is the oil in which the body is laid to rest. The use of oil to anoint the dead is known from the tomb inscription of a Neo-Assyrian queen, and laying corpses to rest in oil, undoubtedly intended as a preservative measure, is described in a Neo-Assyrian royal funerary ritual.[8] Apart from that, various classical authors report on the Babylonian custom of burying their dead in barrels or sarcophagi filled with honey (honey is known for its antibacterial properties).[9] If we are to believe various versions of the *Alexander Romance*, the corpse of Alexander the Great was treated in the same way: laid to rest in a golden sarcophagus filled with honey.[10] More pertinent for the present subject is that the motif of burial in a liquid substance also entered the popular traditions emanating from Mesopotamian culture. Thus, there is a story – very probably of Near-Eastern origin – of Glaukos, son of Minos of Crete, who drowned in a barrel

---

[8] Royal tomb inscription: Fadhil 1990b; funerary ritual: MacGinnis 1987 (cf. *idem* 1986: 77 [read "Xerxes" for "Alexander"]). See also Miglus 1996: 301, who surmises that the Neo-Babylonian kings may well have adopted the same funerary customs.

[9] Hdt. I.198; Strabo XVI.1.20. The custom of burying the dead in honey is admittedly also known in other regions (Sparta: Xen. *Hell.* V.3.19, Diod. XV.93.6; Iudaea: Ios. *Ant.Iud.* XIV.124; cf. Stob. *Ant.* III.6.36), but the practise seems to have been most at home in Mesopotamia and may have originated there.

[10] This is true for the Syrian (III.22 [Budge 1889: 141]) and the Armenian Romance (§283 [Wolohojian 1969: 158]), as well as for the Latin version by Leo Archipresbyter, the *Historia de preliis* (III.34). The latter text speaks of Nisiotean honey and myrrh from the country of the Troglodytes: *Iussit afferri mel de nisiotia terra et praecepit, ut post mortem illius (ut) ex eo ungueretur corpus eius, et murram terrae Trocloditicae. Haec duae causae incorrupta servant corpora mortuorum.* Eutychius, patriarch of Alexandria (933-40 AD), and Ferdowsī, in his *Šāh-nāma*, also note that Alexander's sarcophagus was filled with honey (see Nöldeke 1890: 42 fn. 2).

of honey in the palace basement and was revived with the herb of life taken from a snake.[11] Though hard evidence is necessarily always lacking in cases like these, they present a slight but meaningful indication that burial in a preservative liquid substance was not only a historical practice in first-millennium Mesopotamia, but also the subject of popular imagination. As such it may have been used in a Mesopotamian context or may have informed later traditions. In the specific case of Ctesias, it seems most plausible that the oil motif was derived from either a Babylonian or a Persian source.

2.2. *The funerary stele*

The case of the stele near the tomb of Belitanas/Belos is more complicated. We should, of course, not expect that archaeologists will ever excavate a monument with the text as given by Ctesias. In fact, the phrase οὐκ … ἄμεινον is obviously copied from Herodotus' rendering of Nitocris' funerary inscription and that, in turn, has been shown to reflect *Greek* oracular idiom (Dillery 1992: 31-3; cf. Asheri 1988: 376). One could even argue that Ctesias' story is still more dependent of Herodotus and that the motif of filling was inspired by the use of ἄπληστος, ("insatiable," lit. "not to be filled") in the second inscription of Nitocris' tomb. It may just as well be, however, that Herodotus' ἄπληστος is a residue of an original tale, of which Ctesias preserves a fuller and less reworked version (cf. §5 below). But apart from that, the use of a typical Greek phrase does not necessarily imply that the funerary stele as such is also an invention. After all, funerary inscriptions with curse formulae and admonitions to future kings to respect the tombs of the deceased are indeed known from Mesopotamia and its periphery. The Neo-Assyrian royal tombs at Nimrod have, for example, yielded a stone tablet with the inscription of queen Jabâ in which any future perpetrator who opens her tomb or takes her jewellery is cursed with a terrible fate (Fadhil 1990a).[12] Another inscription from Nimrod, this time by queen Mullissu-mukanniŝat-Ninua, admonishes future readers who find her tomb to cover her corpse, *anoint it with oil* and make a sacrifice for the deceased (Fadhil 1990b: 474-5, 478-9). The latter text in particular shows that an inscription stating the obligation to refill the oil in the tomb of Belitanas/Belos would not have been strange to a Mesopotamian audience.

Aside from the historical possibility of inscriptions in or near tombs, it is important to notice that special or hidden texts and inscriptions are a topos in Mesopotamian literature. The reader of *Gilgameš* is, for example, admonished to open the cedar box, take out the lapis lazuli tablet and read about the hero's

---

[11] See Apoll. *Bibl.* III.3.1 and Hyg. *Fab.* 136; cf. Palagia 1988 and Scherf 1998 for more references. As Astour (1965: 255-6) rightly observes, the combination of the snake-with-herb-of-life motif and the 'burial' in a jar of honey points to the oriental background of the story. It would seem that the *Arabian Nights* story of Ḫāsib Karīm ad-dīn, who was locked up in a honey cistern, but managed to escape by following the trail of a scorpion (Night 484 [Burton]) may also be loosely inspired on the burial-in-honey motif. For the ancient Near Eastern elements in this story see Segert 1963.

[12] For inscriptions relevant to Herodotus' story on Nitocris see fn. 63 below.

misfortunes.[13] Inscriptions by both Nabonidus and Cyrus famously attest to a vivid interest in the building inscriptions of kings of old that had been uncovered during their reconstruction activities.[14] That these inscriptions had actually been found does not alter the fact that we are dealing with a literary topos: the rulers pride themselves of having followed in the footsteps of mighty predecessors and express their awe for the old texts. By contrast, the reversed motif is found in the tomb story where the later king also finds an inscription, but fails to fulfil the command of his glorious predecessor.

2.3. *The glass sarcophagus*

As for the material the sarcophagus is made of: it can be excluded that actual *glass* cases existed in Ctesias' days: evidence for sheet glass does not occur before the first century BC (Pompeii). One might try to 'save' the historicity of the report by pointing out that ὑελίνη literally means "transparent" and could therefore denote alabaster or any kind of translucent stone. This option may be excluded, however, because the main point seems to be that the corpse was *visible* from the outside. Parallel reports on ancient burials in 'glass' focus on this aspect: that an (incorruptible) image of the (glorious) deceased is preserved for the living to admire. This is the case with the reports on Ethiopian mummies encased in transparent columns, Indians who 'glaze' their dead, the glass sarcophagus in which Alexander is said to have been laid to rest, and the glass sarcophagus with the remains of Sultan Qābus that was reportedly suspended from the high ceiling of a tower.[15] It should be pointed out in this context that the oil in the sarcophagus of Belitanas/Belos implies the notion that the latter's corpse had been preserved (like that of Alexander) and was to be seen as a 'beautiful dead,' resting as if at sleep. No material available in the fifth or fourth century BC could have served this purpose, but popular imagination may well have come up with the idea of fantastic chunks of rock-crystal (ὕελος/ὕαλος), that would have been big enough for the constructing of the marvellous resting places of special individuals. It hardly needs to be stressed that, with each of the above cases, we are in the realm of legend; not coincidentally only half-mythical people or special individuals are interred in glass. The glass sarcophagus may thus be identified as a *Wandermotif*: the sarcophagus of Belitanas/Belos need not be anymore real than the one in which the sleeping beauty in *Schneewittchen*

---

[13]   *Gilgameš*, Standard Babylonian Version I.24-8 (George 2003). Cf. lines 1-3 of the Late Assyrian version of the *Cuthean Narām-Sîn Legend* (Westenholz 1997).

[14]   Nabonidus: see, e.g., Schaudig 2001: 376-7, 392, 407-8, 444 (etc.). Cyrus: *ibid.* 556.

[15]   Ethiopians: Hdt. III.24; cf. Aly 1921: 83; *idem* 1934-40: 631; Tourraix 1996: 114-5. Note also Ctesias' 'correction' of the Herodotean report (Diod. II.15.1-2 = F1b (15.1-2) Lenfant). Indians: Luc. *De Luctu* 21 (ὁ δὲ Ἰνδὸς ὑάλῳ περιχρίει). Alexander: Strabo XVII.1.8. Qābus son of Vošmgir (978-1012) erected the Gonbad-e Qābus but there is no indication that his coffin was actually suspended from its ceiling as legend has it (Trümpelmann 1992: 10). Displaying a saint's embalmed body in a glass coffin has been practised by the western church since late medieval times as a way of suggesting the deceased's *moral* incorruptibility.

(KHM 53) or *Der gläserne Sarg* (KHM 163) is laid to rest.[16] As to the cultural background of the motif in Ctesias' story nothing can be concluded with certainty: it may have circulated in Greek, Persian, Babylonian and other cultural contexts.

2.4. *The opening of the tomb*

That a foreign ruler would open the tomb of a former king (if that is what Belitanas/Belos was) agrees with the expectations of a Mesopotamian or a Persian audience. One needs only to remember the grim and apocalyptic narration of the destruction of Susa (646 BC), including the tombs of the Elamite kings, as recorded in the annals of Assurbanipal:

> The sepulchres of the their earlier and later kings, who did not fear Assur and Ishtar, my lords, (and who) had plagued the kings, my fathers, I destroyed, I devastated, I exposed to the sun. Their bones I carried off to Assyria. I laid restlessness upon their shades. I deprived them of food-offerings and libations of water.[17]

Removing the remains of Elam's former kings is gruesome and extreme measure inflicted during the finale of a long period of Assyro-Elamite hostilities. The measure is extreme in that it "lays restlessness upon the shades" of kings of old, but even more so in that it effectively erases Elam's past and thus precludes any future attempt to resurrect the state from its ancient roots. This is, however, only one side of the story. The motif of opening the tombs of former kings gets a wholly different tone when it is presented from the side of the conquered. It is easy to imagine that in this case much stress would be laid upon the contrast between the former kings and the arrogant invader who does not respect tradition, who oversteps his human boundaries and whose fortune thus cannot be but ephemeral.

The above is certainly not to say that Xerxes actually desecrated the tombs of Babylonian kings, even though disfigurement of the remains of the death was occasionally practised by the Achaemenids like it was by the Assyrians.[18] If one insisted, it would not be too hard to find a fitting context for such a desecration.

---

[16] Note that in these early modern folk-tales the transparency of the glass coffin is again an essential element. On this and the motif of the glass sarcophagus in general see Aly 1934-40 (suggesting a possible link between the ancient and early-modern motif).

[17] Translation quoted from Luckenbill 1926-27: 310. For the text see Borger 1996: 55, 241 (A VI 70-5 = F V 49-54).

[18] Disfigurement of the corpse of Cyrus the Younger: Xen. *Anab*. I.10; Plut. Art. 13 = Ctes. F20 (13) (Lenfant); Phot. *Bibl.* LXXII.43a Becker = Ctes. F16 (64) (Lenfant). Compare Assurbanipal's treatment of the corpse of Te'Umman (Borger 1996: 107, 227 [B VI 66-9 = C VII 62-6]) and Nabû-bēl-šumāte (*ibid.* 60, 243 [A VII 45-50]). Note that the Persian kings had the unpleasant habit of cutting off the nose, ears and tongue of captured rebels before putting them to death. It has been argued that this disfigurement symbolically expelled the victim from the human cosmos (Pirart 1996: 15, 23). Being demonised like that, the deceased would not find rest in his afterlife. Disfigurement of dead bodies may have served the same or a similar purpose.

On could, for example, speculate that the body of Bēl-šimânni, who rebelled against Xerxes but may already have died before the latter regained control of Babylon (see Waerzeggers 2003/04), was exhumed and disfigured by the order of the Persian king. I am disinclined to press any hypothesis of this kind, however, because we are dealing, at least in my view, with a folk-tale, i.e. a form of literature with its own logic, rules and significance. Such a story may have originated in a particular historical context or reflect a certain historical attitude, but it would be a misapprehension of its folk-tale character to trace it back and explain it from a single historical *event*.

That the motif of opening the tomb of a king of old may indeed have been part of the stream of tradition appears from an unfortunately fragmentary literary text about Adapa and Enmerkar.[19] The text may date to the end of the second millennium (Picchioni 1981: 104), but is preserved in later copies. In it are mentioned the opening of a tomb that lies nine cubits deep in the earth, a corpse from the oldest times, a terrible clamour in the palace (?), the destruction of the tomb's door and subsequent attempt to re-seal it with copper. The evidence is tantalizing, for we may be dealing with a story about the unadvised opening of an ancient tomb, the terror rising from it and attempts to counteract the effects of the transgression. The text is too broken to be certain, but even so it warns us against a reductive explanation of the tomb story from a single historical event.

What really matters is that the accusation of desecration of a royal tomb as such would be credible and effective for a Mesopotamian audience as it would seem to allude to known practices[20] and, probably, familiar folk-tales. That powerful fake accusations of this kind were actually made as a form of anti-propaganda against the Persian kings is shown by the case of Cambyses and Artaxerxes and the Apis, to which I will return below (§4).

2.5. *The name of the deceased*

The problem with the identity of the owner of the tomb is that the tradition has preserved two alternative names, Belitanas and Belos. Only the latter is mentioned elsewhere in the surviving fragments of Ctesias' work. From this alone, it seems more likely that 'Belitanas' was changed to 'Belos' rather than the other way around. 'Belitanas' is therefore automatically the *lectio difficilior* that should, in principle, be preferred. Indeed, it can be demonstrated that 'Belos' fits the context of the story rather uneasily. In most cases where Ctesias mentions Belos, it is very clear that he is a god, i.e. Bēl-Marduk, Babylon's city-god.[21] The

---

[19] Edition: Picchioni 1981: 102-9; cf. Foster 1993: 435-6. I am grateful to G. Lanfranchi for drawing my attention to this important text.

[20] The practice must have been familiar, not only from the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian past, but also from the Persian period. The Achaemenids made sure that the gruesome punishments inflicted on rebels were widely known. Though the Bīsotūn inscription does not state this explicitly, the two Babylonian rebels that rose against Darius may have been treated in the same way. Note also the image of rebels taken captive by the Persian king which occurs on various seals, including some from Babylonia.

[21] F1b (8.7) (Belos = Zeus); F1b (9.4) (*idem*, temple of Belos); F1b (28.2) (vow to Belos); F1c (temple of Belos); F1pε (vow to the Great Belos); F6b (3) (oath to Belos and Molis).

only apparent exception is fragment F1a (Eusebius) where Belos is named as the father of Ninos; the same information is given by Herodotus (I.7; cf. Kuhrt 1982: 540). At first sight, the existence of a patriarch Belos would seem to fit the presence of his tomb at Babylon. It should be stressed, however, that Ctesias (or Herodotus) nowhere implies that Belos was a mortal king: he may well have been the god of Babylon who engendered the first king, Ninos. It is probably significant in this context that, though Ctesias mentions Belos as Ninos' father, he apparently did not include him in his list of Assyrian kings.[22] He also does not seem to have made an explicit distinction between the god and the father of Ninos. All this suggests that, for the author of the *Persika*, 'Belos' was the name of a god.

As for the passage on the tomb: there is nothing in Ctesias' work that suggests that Belos was a deified king (*vel sim.*) and that could somehow explain the existence of a funeral monument. Aelian, in his paraphrase of Ctesias, speaks of *ancient* Belos (τοῦ Βήλου τοῦ ἀρχαίου ... τὸ μνῆμα), which enhances the impression that a mortal, not a god is being referred to.[23] As I see it, this sudden reference to the tomb of a mortal king named Belos comes as an unexpected and unexplained surprise amidst all the references to the god Belos. In other words, the context of the *Persika* favours the reading 'Belitanas.'

That 'Belitanas' was substituted by 'Belos' is well explicable in the light of later Greek views of Babylon and its most prominent buildings. Both Strabo (XVI.1.5) and Diodorus (XVII.112.3) mention the "tomb of Belos" (τοῦ Βήλου τάφος), by which they refer to the ziggurat Etemenanki. As Alexander is mentioned in the context of both passages, their source may well have been an Alexander biographer.[24] This *late* tradition apparently considered the ziggurat as the tomb of Belos and this may in turn have confused Aelian or his source, causing the substitution of the original 'Belitanas' by 'Belos.'[25] As Miglus has rightly stressed, it is most unlikely that Ctesias himself referred to the ziggurat as

---

[22] Belos was added as first king in the Assyrian kinglist only by later chronographers, like Castor of Rhodes, who reworked Ctesias' list (cf. Boncquet 1990: 5-7).

[23] N.G. Wilson's translation (Loeb) of τοῦ Βήλου τοῦ ἀρχαίου ... τὸ μνῆμα in Ael. *VH* XIII.3 as "the monument of the ancient *god* Belus" (my italics; WH) is misleading in this respect; the text does not call 'Belos' a god.

[24] Perhaps Aristobulus or Cleitarchus; see Pearson 1960/1983: 181, 229-31. It may be that the Alexander biographer(s) was (were) in turn influenced by the *Sacred History* of Euhemerus who, as Garstad argues, may have been the first to present Belos as a mortal king (Garstad 2004, esp. p. 256 with fn. 72).

[25] Despite the fact that this had already been noted by Marquart (1891-93: 474-5), several commentators continued to equate the tomb of 'Belos' with the ziggurat Etemenanki (e.g., König 1972: 70; Lukinovich & Morand 1991: 190) and some even took Aelian's narrative on the opening of the tomb as 'evidence' for the purported (but unproved) destruction of the Babylonian temples, notably Etemenanki, by Xerxes. See, e.g., Schmid 1995: 4 ("Hinter diese Geschichte verbirgt sich die Zerstörung des Grabmals durch Xerxes"). Lehmann-Haupt (1898: 486, *idem* 1906 and *idem* 1932b) confidently read the episode on Belitanas as an illegal intrusion in the mysteries of "Bēl-Etana" [*sic*!] by Xerxes foreboding the latter's destruction of the Bēl temple. On the supposed destruction of Babylonian temples by Xerxes see Kuhrt & Sherwin-White 1987. Note also that the Achaemenids were actually quite ready to present themselves as endorsing the official cult of Bel: his name even replaced that of Auramazdā in the copy of the Bīsotūn inscription sent to Babylon (Seidl 1999a-b)!

the *tomb* of Belos. In the description of Babylon in the second book of his *Bibliotheca*, which is largely based on Ctesias, Diodorus exclusively refers to a *temple* of Belos (II.9.4).[26] The anonymous author of *De Mulieribus* likewise refers to the temple of Belos, this time explicitly citing Ctesias (*De Mul.* 1 = F1c Lenfant). We may therefore conclude that for Ctesias the temple of Belos (Esagila and Etemenanki) and the tomb of Belitanas were two different structures.[27]

As noted above, Belitanas does not occur elsewhere in the *Persika* (but see fn. 31 below). Ctesias does, however, provide us with a clue as to Belitanas' possible identity in referring to Βήλου τοῦ ἀρχαίου ... τὸ μνῆμα, "the tomb of *ancient* Belos." Though Βήλου is probably not original here, ἀρχαίου may well be (it is not an epithet expected for the god Belos). This may be taken to imply that Belitanas ('Belos') was considered as a king of old, a glorious ruler of the past or the founder of a dynasty. His name, apparently the Greek rendering of the common name Bēl-iddina, "Bēl has given",[28] does not occur in any kinglist (even though such documents do include legendary kings). Is it possible that the form given by Ctesias is not the original one? Without pressing the issue of the historicity of Belitanas, it may be useful to review the cases of two rulers whose names are vaguely reminiscent of 'Belitanas' and who seem to fit the right profile. My main concern here is the fact that these rulers enjoyed the status of ancient founders and figured in popular traditions. Their stories therefore demonstrate once again the folk-tale potential of the Belitanas story. As for a possible derivation of 'Belitanas' from either of their names, I think that such is certainly possible, but not essential for my line of argumentation.

The first ruler is Βελητάρας, mentioned by Agathias (II.25.4-6) as a royal gardener who gained the Assyrian throne and thus broke the line of succession of the dynasty founded by Semiramis and Ninos. His own dynasty is said to have continued until Sardanapallos, the last king. The origin of this story in its Greek form is a matter of some controversy: there are arguments pro and contra the assumption that Ctesias was its source.[29] That the ultimate origin of this gardener

---

[26]   See Marquart 1891-93: 474-5; cf. Miglus 1996: 301 and Lenfant 2004: lxxxviii-ix. On Diodorus' use of Ctesias in his second book see Bigwood 1978: 33; Boncquet 1987 (esp. pp. 89-90).

[27]   The case of the tomb of 'Belos' nicely illustrates how easily our image and appreciation of Ctesias can be deformed by inaccurate paraphrases of his work. If only Photius' rendering of the story would have been available, the narrative would hardly be understandable and would not have been recognised as a potentially genuine Babylonian tradition. Had, on the other hand, Aelian been our only source, the original name 'Belitanas' would have been lost for ever and Ctesias would have been reproached for inconsistently applying the labels "tomb" and "temple" to the sanctuary of Belos... On the problems involved in ancient citations see Lenfant 1999.

[28]   It remains mysterious to me how Auberger reaches the conclusion "Belitanas = Bel, sans doute" (1991: 157).

[29]   Agathias refers to Bion and Alexander Polyhistor as the sources for this story and seems to mention Ctesias only on the length of the period in which the Assyrian empire existed. In addition, Lehmann-Haupt and others have argued that Ctesias gave an *unbroken* succession of Assyrian kings and cannot have told the story of a second founder-king (Lehmann-Haupt 1906: 1007-9; *idem* 1932a: 474; Boncquet 1990: 9-10; Lenfant 2004: 249). The available testimonies (Diod. II.21.8 = F1b (21.8) Lenfant; Eusebius *Chron.* p. 29, 10-26 Karst = F1oα Lenfant) indeed state a succession of thirty kings "from father to son," but these accounts are highly epitomised and do not put

story lies in Mesopotamia can scarcely be doubted, however. Gardeners rising to kingship are well attested in ancient Near Eastern traditions, especially in the context of the (re-)founding of a dynastic line.[30] The archetypical founder-gardener would be a suitable character in a confrontation with an arrogant invader; the old suggestion that 'Belitanas' (Ctesias) is just a variant form of 'Beletaras' (Agathias < Ctesias?) may be reconsidered against this background.[31]

As for the name Βελητάρας, the Greek form may reflect Akkadian personal names like Bēl-eṭēra or Bēl-ēṭir.[32] The latter was a very common name and for that reason alone makes it hazardous to relate Agathias' story to one historical individual. Nonetheless, mention should be made of one Bēl-ēṭir son of Ibâ, apparently a Chaldean leader affiliated with the Elamites, who rebelled against Assurbanipal. Interestingly, this figure became he subject of two literary propagandistic texts found in Assurbanipal's library in which he is presented, in particularly mean terms, as a boastful yet despicable person. One of these texts is presented as "the stele, which the prostitute has set up for the son of Ibâ."[33] Bēl-

---

special weight on an unbroken succession. Conversely, stories about gardeners gaining kingship are more than once part of a type of story known as *the hero who was exposed at birth*. In this tale a royal child is exposed, is sometimes rescued by animals, lives among common people, works sometimes as a gardener or a courtier, and eventually takes his rightful place on the throne (cf. Binder 1964; Lewis 1980; Henkelman 2006). Two of the oldest manifestations of this folk-tale type, stories on Sargon and Cyrus, include the gardener motif. In other words, the original Beletaras story, paraphrased and perhaps misunderstood by Agathias, may not necessarily have implied a break in the dynastic line. A third argument is that Beletaras is mentioned in all known Assyrian kinglists given by late-antique chronographers. These lists are based on the one provided by Castor of Rhodes (FGrH 250 F1, 1a and 1d; survey of the later lists in Schwartz 1895: 6-7), which in turn was an adaptation of the kinglist of Ctesias (Boncquet 1990: 5-10). The evidence is admittedly late and not extremely reliable, but still the unanimous inclusion of Beletaras should be taken into account as an indication that Ctesias' list may have included this name too. Altogether, I would hesitate to rule out the possibility that Ctesias is the original source of the gardener story that was transmitted, via Alexander Polyhistor and Bion, to Agathias (and Syncellus). Note that a certain Βελιτάρας is mentioned as a servant of Stateira in the *Persika* (Plut. *Art.* 19.1 = F29b (19.1) Lenfant), so Ctesias was at least familiar with the name.

30 See Drews 1974: 389-90 on several 'gardeners' rising to kingship (Sargon, Bēl-ibni/Enlil-bani, Cyrus). Compare also the case of Abdalonymus of Sidon (Curt. IV.1.15-26; Diod. XVII.47.1-6; Plut. *Fort.Alex.* II.340c-d) on which see now Bosworth 2003: 181-6. On the gardener motif in the story of *the hero who was exposed at birth* see fn. 29 above.

31 Marquart (1891-93: 474-5) followed by Eduard Meyer (1899: 478 fn. 1) and Schmitt (2006: 236). As Marquart rightly notes, Ctesias' story on Belitanas seems to suggest that this individual was already known to the reader and therefore must have been mentioned before in the *Persika*.

32 Bēl-eṭēra: name of the ancestor of a Babylonian family or kin group whose ancestral house faced the Gate of the Entry of Gula; cf. Fales & Postgate 1995: 95-6 no. 153; Brinkman & Nielsen 1999. G. Lanfranchi tentatively suggest (pers.comm.) that a family grave of the Bēl-eṭēra family may have been located near the aforementioned gate and if so this may have informed the gate story later reworked by Herodotus (I.187). Bēl-ēṭir: cf. Luppert-Barnard 1999 for Neo-Assyrian attestations.

33 Text: Livingstone 1989: 64-6 (nos. 29-30). Cf. Frame 1992: 17, 118, 156 n. 107, 175; Luppert-Barnard 1999: 299 (no. 17); Brinkman & Luppert-Barnard 2000 (no. 1).

ēṭir may have stirred Assyrian imagination beyond such royal propaganda; if so, it would not be strange to find deformed echo's of this figure in later Babylonian traditions. One could imagine that the notion of an anti-Assyrian rebel merged with that of the founder-gardener. Likewise, it may also have inspired the tomb story in which Belitanas (= Beletaras?) confronts another foreign ruler. This, however, is mere speculation.

The second ruler is Bēl-bāni, an Old Assyrian king (ca. 1700 BC), who is invoked in the inscriptions of the late Assyrian king Esarhaddon as his earliest royal ancestor. One text speaks of "the eternal dynasty of Bēl-bāni, who established the kingship of the land of Assyria, whose ultimate origin was Baltil [= Assur]." The same description of the remote ancestor is given in an inscription by Esarhaddon's son and successor to the Assyrian throne Assurbanipal. Two inscriptions of Šamaš-šumu-ukīn, Esarhaddon's son on the Babylonian throne, also styled himself descendant of Bēl-bāni.[34] One could surmise that the late Neo-Assyrian tradition on Bēl-bāni survived the destruction of the empire (cf. Lanfranchi, this volume), was developed further and adapted to new contexts. Stories on the tomb of the ancient king may have emerged in this new milieu and resulted in the story that circulated in Ctesias' days. It may be noted that the change from 'Bēl-bāni' (or for that matter 'Beletaras') to 'Belitanas' would a mild corruption compared to forms like Labynetos and Sardanapallos.

2.6. *The ominous nature of the story*

In Aelian's summary of the Belitanas story, the opening of the tomb and Xerxes' failure to refill it foreshadow the Persian defeat in Greece and the death of the king.[35] This particular realisation of the οὐκ ... ἄμεινον prediction in the tomb inscription has, needless to say, an entirely Greek outlook.[36] Combined with the assumption that οὐκ ... ἄμεινον reflects *Greek* oracular idiom (cf. §2.2 above), it would seem that the ill-omened nature of the opening of the tomb is merely a Greek addition to the story. Photius has preserved an extra detail, however: the Babylonian uprising immediately after Xerxes has left the city for Ecbatana. As has become clear by the recent study of Caroline Waerzeggers (2003/04), this uprising must be dated to 484 BC. This means that Ctesias is not only correct saying that there was an uprising against Xerxes, but also in the sequence of

Another Bēl-ēṭir, a judge in Babylon, was executed under Šamaš-šumu-ukin in 668 BC (Grayson 1975: 86, l.38)

[34] On Bēl-bāni see Brinkman 1999 (with extensive references). For the inscriptions in which Bēl-bāni is said to have established kingship in Assyria see Borger 1956: 97 (rev.15-8) and *idem* 1996: 169, 255 (T V 40-1).

[35] Stevenson (1997: 72-3) argues that the information that Xerxes was murdered by his son, points to Deinon, not Ctesias, as the origin of the Belos story in Ael. *VH* XIII.3. There is little doubt, however, that this story was originally told by Ctesias (cf. §1 above). Xerxes' murder may therefore have been added from another source, possibly the one that also confused the tomb of Belos and that of Belitanas (cf. Lenfant 2004: 266). On the various sources regarding Xerxes' death see Briant 1996: 581-2.

[36] Cf. Briant 1996: 988 on the role of Mardonius in the story (Photius).

events: as Waerzeggers' study has now shown, the revolt indeed took place prior to the Greek expedition.[37]

Is the Belitanas story explicable from the context of the Babylonian revolt? I am convinced that a straightforward affirmative answer to this question would once more fail to pay attention to the folk-tale character of the story. In any case, I do not believe that the story should let us believe that Xerxes actually opened a tomb or committed a similarly sacrilegious act that provoked the uprising. Nor do I believe that the folk-tale was purposely composed to legitimise the revolt. Not only do its various constituent elements seem to be older, but there is a sound possibility that the theme of the disastrous opening of an old tomb existed before (cf. §2.4 above) and was simply re-used and adapted to the case of Xerxes. These caveats notwithstanding, the causal relation implied in the story and Ctesias' apparent well-informed source on the revolt retain their interest.

Omens portending the doom of kings and kingdoms are hardly restricted to the Greek world. Not only were such omens studied and collected by Babylonian scholars, but they were also part of the literary tradition (especially with regard to the kings of old) and may therefore have figured prominently in popular stories. One such tradition seems to have been preserved by Ctesias in his account of the death of Cambyses. As Dominique Lenfant has argued (1996: 371-3), the omens related in that story have parallels in various Babylonian omen series such as *Šumma izbu*. Likewise, the ill-omened opening of Belitanas' tomb may, in principle, have had a Mesopotamian background, even if the present form of the story is wholly Greek in character.

As I will try to argue below (§5), it could be that the Belitanas story at one point functioned as anti-Persian fiction and circulated in certain Babylonian circles that were dissatisfied with Persian rule. As such, there may have been a connection with the Babylonian uprising after all. Such a connection would only be secondary, however, and it would probably not have been productive anymore at the time of Ctesias. The important point is rather the causal relation implied between the ominous tomb story and disastrous events occurring during Xerxes' reign, for this relation may not be a Greek addition, but may just as well (if not more likely) point to the Mesopotamian *Sitz im Leben* of the story.

2.7. *A Mesopotamian story?*

Before we continue the analysis of the Belitanas story, it may be useful to summarise the observations made in the preceding sections. The element that is most clearly Mesopotamian is that of the corpse floating in oil; this element may

---

[37] Ctesias is the only classical author to have mentioned the Babylonian uprising under Xerxes. Though his report seems to have copied much of what Herodotus wrote about the uprising under Darius, I doubt whether he simply substituted 'Xerxes' for 'Darius' in his desire to outwit Herodotus (Bichler 2004a). I rather imagine that Ctesias eagerly noted down information on the uprising under Xerxes precisely because the *Histories* did not mention it; the event was very suitable for his 'alternative' history. In other words, I do not believe that the notion of Ctesias creating a pastiche of the work of his predecessor is in itself irreconcilable with the assumption that he preserved genuine traditions (regardless what their historicity may be). See also the discussion, with references, by Lenfant 2004: lxxxix-xci.

have been informed by actual funerary practise, but also by popular tradition on the use of liquid substances in burials. The *glass* sarcophagus seems to be a Wandermotif; though its background cannot be established, it is logically linked to the oil motif (the incorruptible dead to be seen and admired by the living). Disturbing the rest of a deceased king by opening his tomb is in itself not very specific, but it is well attested in the ancient Near East. In addition, there is a late second millennium literary text on Adapa and Enmerkar that already seems to include the theme of the disastrous opening of an old tomb. The text on the funerary stele partly has a Greek character, but the obligation to refill the tomb with oil would not be out of place in a Mesopotamian narrative. Moreover, there appears to have been a vivid interest in the inscriptions of the kings of old; the ancient text seems to have been a topos in Mesopotamian literature. The ominous nature of the story in its present form betrays a Greek outlook, but the causal relation implied between tomb story and subsequent disaster could also fit well into a Mesopotamian context and is reminiscent of literary omens portending the doom of kings (a type of literature also informed Ctesias' account of Cambyses' last days). Finally, there are several figures in Mesopotamian tradition that answer to the profile of archetypical founder-king and whose name, for what it is worth, is at least vaguely reminiscent of 'Belitanas.'

In short, if we abstain from trying to save the historicity of the Belitanas story, but concentrate instead on the individual elements that make up the narrative without pretending that we are dealing with facts, it appears that a background in Mesopotamian popular tradition is an attractive possibility. The real test as to whether the story reflects such a tradition lies, however, in the significance of the story as a whole. In order to establish its meaning we will now proceed to examine its folk-tale background.

3. *Belitanas in folkloristic context*

The assumption that some of the stories recounted by Ctesias are (adapted from) original Persian and Babylonian popular traditions is admittedly problematic from a methodological point of view (cf. Bichler 2004a; *idem* 2004b: 504-5). The main obstacle in this line of research is obviously that the relevant Near Eastern popular traditions were mostly handed down orally and are therefore lost to us. The problem is grave and should not be underestimated, but it should not paralyse us altogether, nor be seen as conclusive evidence that Ctesias was inventing.[38] In fact, there are partial solutions. One is that that related themes and motifs can sometimes be found in other literary texts, which renders their occurrence in popular traditions accessible to Ctesias at least credible. The other solution is that of a broad comparative investigation into the function, occurrence and spread of certain folk-tale types and motifs. Such an investigation may encompass much later traditions, as these may represent a continuation of older material.

---

[38] So already Momigliano 1998 [1931]: 79, "Unsere schmalen Kenntnisse in dieser Hinsicht lassen uns schnell geneigt sein, von unserem mangelhaften Wissen auf das Nichvorhandensein dieser Quellen zu schließen."

   A generic link with older material is not the only value of later traditions, however. It should be stressed that the vexed question of poly- or monogenesis (one or several "Urtexte") does not always have to be posed. The mere observation that a certain Ctesianic theme or motif also appears in popular traditions is as such of great interest for this type of parallel at least demonstrates the *possibility* that the author noted down a local tradition rather than inventing it. Moreover, this non-historical, comparative approach can sometimes elucidate the meaning of a story recorded in the classical sources. Needless to say, we are not dealing with an exact science here. Yet, the material that can be adduced for comparison with the Belitanas story seems relevant and should not be ignored.

3.1 *Der Grabhügel*

In 1847 a pastor named Philipp Hoffmeister published a Märchen that he had recorded in Schmalkalden (then in Hessen, now in Thüringen) under the title *Das Märchen vom dummen Teufel.* Three years later Wilhelm Grimm reworked the story and included it in the sixth edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* under the more evocative and mystifying title *Der Grabhügel* (KHM 195; cf. fn. 6 above). The Märchen type represented by the Hessian story has ever since been known by that name. As for the reliability of Hoffmeister's first record of *Der Grabhügel*: a second version, also from Hessen, was published in 1925. This version differs in some minor details, but basically has the same narrative structure.[39] The existence of the 1925 version shows that Hoffmeister did not invent or extensively rework the story or part thereof – as would not have been uncommon in those days –, but recorded more or less faithfully an oral tradition that existed in Hessen in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. *Der Grabhügel* (in the Grimmian version) may be summarised as follows:

> A rich farmer feels sudden remorse for having cared for nothing but his own wealth. When his poor neighbour comes and asks to lend him four measures of corn, the farmer instead gives him eight measures for free, on the condition that the poor man shall watch over the farmer's grave for three nights. Not long after, the farmer dies; the poor man goes into the churchyard at night and sits on his burial mound until dawn. Nothing happens during the first and the second night. On the evening of the third night, however, a soldier arrives at the churchyard and offers to join the poor man in his watch on the farmer's grave. At midnight the devil appears and attempts to scare off the two guardians, saying that the man in the grave belongs to him. The soldier makes it clear that the devil will not have it his way, but he accepts the devils offer of gold, provided that the latter will fill his entire boot with it. As the devil disappears to collect the gold, the soldier cuts the sole from his left boot and puts it over a hole in the ground near the grave. The devil vainly tries to fill the boot three times. At that moment morning breaks and the evil one flees off under loud shrieks. The soul of the farmer is saved.

The two Hessian stories are not the only examples of the folk-tale type *Der Grabhügel.* One Serbo-Croatian and two Swedish stories have the same narrative

---

[39]   For the text (with comments) see Merkelbach 1964: 228-32.

pattern and main motifs.[40] In all its manifestations, *Der Grabhügel* is easily recognisable as a contamination of two originally distinct folk-tale types, both listed in *The Types of the Folktale* by Aarne and Thompson (1964 [AaTh]).[41] The first, AaTh 815, *The deceased rich man and the devils in the church*, is a curious story about the devil's intend to flay the corpse of a deceased rich man and take the skin; the poor man guarding his grave during three nights manages to prevent this.[42] The other folk-tale type, AaTh 1130, *Counting out Pay*, tells about a man who sells his soul to the devil, but outwits the latter by demanding that the evil one first fills a bottomless case, a boot without sole, or a hat with a hole (etc.) with gold or money. Not being able to satisfy this demand, the devil does not get the soul promised to him.[43] Stories of this type are already attested in the 16th century.[44]

AaTh 1130 has been related by several scholars to the Danaid motif (daughters of Danaos filling leaking vessels in the Netherworld); Wolf Aly actually considered this motif as a link between *Der Grabhügel* (AaTh 815+1130) and the

---

[40] See Merkelbach (1964: 116-8, 225), who concludes (on rather feeble grounds such as the rationality of the German versions) that the folk-tale type must have originated in Germany and spread from there to Sweden and Croatia. Merkelbach also argues that other *Grabhügel* stories from Germany (Eifel), Austria (Steiermark), Ireland, Spain, and colonial Puertorico, are directly dependent of the printed tradition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (*ibid.* 232-56). In the case of the Spanish manifestations, notably the Castilian version published by Espinosa (1923: 155; 1946-47: I 159-60, II 344-5), independence from the Grimmian version may be considered, however.

[41] Merkelbach's 1964 dissertation offers an elaborate survey and analysis of the two folk-tale types and their combination in *Der Grabhügel*. Cf. Bolte & Polívka 1918: 420; Lixfeld 1990; Uther 1996: IV 359-61.

[42] Cf. Bolte & Polívka 1918: 420; Mackensen 1940; Aarne & Thompson 1964: 276; Merkelbach 1964: 21-128 (esp. p.124); Brednich 1990. A version of AaTh 815 was recorded (but never published) by Jacob Grimm in 1813 (cf. Denecke 1971). The period of three nights (after which the soul is considered saved) is obviously inspired by the death of Christ and his resurrection on the morning of the third day. After the three-night period the soul of the deceased is safe.

[43] Cf. Bolte & Polívka 1918: 420; Aly 1930-33; Mackensen 1940; Aarne & Thompson 1964: 361; Merkelbach 1964: 129-222; Uther 1981; Lixfeld 1990. The following definition is given by Lixfeld: "Im Schwank AaTh 1130 befreit sich ein Mensch durch List aus einem Vertrag, den er zumeist mit dem Teufel, seltener mit anderen dämonischen Gestalten, um den Preis seiner Seele geschlossen hat. Auf geheiß des Menschen versucht der Jenseitige vergeblich, einen Stiefel ohne Sohle, einen durchlöcherten Hut, Sack, grundlosen Kästen oder sonstige Behälter mit Gold oder Geld zu füllen. Das bodenlose Gefäß ist gelegentlich über eine Grube im Erdboden, sehr viel häufiger aber in den hochgelegen Teilen des Hauses, auf dem Dach, dem Schornstein, über dem Tennenboden angebracht, was zu Folge hat daß der dumme Teufel seinem überlegenen Vertragspartner eine Unmenge Geldes in das Gefäß schüttet, bevor er geprellt das Weite sucht."

[44] AaTh 1130 occurs in a comic tale ("Der pawer mit dem podenlosen sack," 1563) and a lost *Meisterlied* ("Der podenlos pfaffensack," 1548) by Hans Sacks. For the text of the comic tale cf. Goetze *et al.* 1893-1913: 532-5. The folk-tale is also alluded to in Theobald Hock's *Schönes Blumenfeld* (1601), possibly on the basis of an older legend on St. Benedict. Cf. Aly 1930-33: 373; Mackensen 1940; Merkelbach 1964: 215-8; Lixfeld 1990: 70.

story of Belitanas' tomb.[45] The function of the Danaid motif in classical literature is wholly different, however, from what we find in the other two traditions: whereas Xerxes and the devil in *Der Grabhügel* are tricked, the Danaids are simply punished. The parallel concerns the *motif* of an impossible task only, not the *theme* or folk-tale type of saving one's soul by cleverly outwitting the opponent by imposing that impossible task. Thus, Aly may have been right that AaTh 1130, *Der Grabhügel* and the story on Belitanas are somehow related, but I do not believe that the Danaid motif is of direct relevance here.

It may be noted that folk-tales in which the devil or an ogre is cheated of the soul or life promised to him by imposing an impossible task (counting the stars, making a rope of sand, etc.) are legion and occur not only in Europe, but also in India.[46] It is within this wider context that a connection between the Belitanas story and AaTh 1130/*Der Grabhügel* may be sought. It may be that we are dealing with a continuous tradition that links Mesopotamia to early modern Europe and that, probably by chance, is not recorded in any known Greek or Roman tale. That assumption may seem far-fetched, but it is in fact not uncommon that traditions from the ancient Near East re-appear in the West in the mediaeval or early modern periods. Such is the case with the Babylonian story of *Etana* that recurs, with preserved narrative structure (introductory fable + flight on eagle's back) and a remarkable amount of detail in Finnish and Lappish folk-tales. Another startling case is that of the Sumerian *Tale of the Fox* and its well-discernable echo in the medieval *Reynard* cycle. A third example is the Medieval image of Babylon surrounded by snakes (in commentaries on *Daniel*), which finds its origin in Babylonian *kudurru* imagery and in ancient Near Eastern icono-graphy at large.[47] The two folk-tales (or folk-tale complexes) are not attested in the preserved corpus of classical literature; similarly the iconographic motif is not known from Greco-Roman art.

Apart from the theme of the trick with the impossible (AaTh 1130), *Der Grabhügel* and the story on Belitanas' tomb have another common element. As we have seen, *Der Grabhügel* actually consists of two combined stories, the first of which deals with the devil's attempts to steal the skin of the deceased (AaTh 815). In the case of Belitanas, the reason for opening the tomb is not explicated. Xerxes' motives may have been equally malignant, however, and some sort of desecration of the corpse would not be a strange element in a Babylonian or Persian story (cf. §2.4 above). There is no guardian to prevent the desecration, but this role is played by the funerary stele that assigns the impossible task of filling the tomb to Xerxes. Seen as such, *Der Grabhügel* and the story on Belitanas, have a similar structure. At the same time, the combination of AaTh 1130 with

---

[45] Aly (1921: 56; *idem* 1930-33 [suggesting a common Aegean background of the Danaid motif and the Belitanas story]). Danaid motif: Merkelbach 1964: 218-222; Uther 1981; Hansen 2002: 69-75.

[46] See AaTh 1170-1199 (*A Man Sells his Soul to the Devil. Saves it through deceit, usually by imposing an impossible task on the devil*).

[47] *Etana*: Haavio 1955; Levin 1966; Haul 2000: 75-87; Henkelman 2006: 839-43. *Reynard*: Vanstiphout 1988. Babylon surrounded by snakes: Bord & Skubiszweski 2000 (suggesting transmission *via* Spain).

the intended desecration of a tomb is in itself very logical, so we should probably not press this point too far.[48]

As for *Counting out Pay* (AaTh 1130) itself, there is a chance that its European manifestations are indirectly related to the tale of Belitanas, but in the absence of identifiable intermediates we can only guess that there may have been a network of stories connecting the two. Given this situation, the parallel cannot be used as a historical argument in the analysis of the Belitanas story. From a non-historical, comparative perspective there still are insights to be gained, however, for the similarity of theme and motifs in *Der Grabhügel* yields an interpretative model that may be applied to 'Belitanas' to see if the latter story works as a folk-tale that makes sense in its ancient context.

The basic notion underlying AaTh 1130 is that evil may be brutal, but is not very smart. The devil comes to disturb the rest of the deceased, but the bond between the living and the dead cannot be overcome and his malignant scheme backfires on the evil one. By not adhering to the very basic principle of respect for the dead, the devil truly exposes himself as an outsider who has no place in the human cosmos. It is this exposed demonic nature that is the real reason why the devil's power cannot hold sway over good people who keep their proper place in the divine order. All this fits the story of Belitanas' tomb. Whatever Xerxes' precise intentions may have been, they probably were malignant and in any case his action is disrespectful. By opening the tomb of an ancient king, Xerxes opposes himself not only to the deceased, but also to his living successors (the Babylonians). He therefore effectively places himself outside the normal order of human society, his action effectively reveals the demonic nature of a foreign ruler who does neither understand nor respect what is sacred to the Babylonians. At the same time, he is outwitted by the very past he disrespects for his evil intentions are not pared with caution or intelligence. Having failed to refill the tomb, Xerxes is taken by fear because he suddenly sees that the tomb is a mere forebode of worse to come. The loud shrieks uttered by the fleeing devil are not only an acknowledgement of temporal loss, but also foreshadow his final defeat. Likewise, Xerxes' fear announces disaster: a causal relation with the Babylonian revolt is implied in the story.

3.2. *Belshazzar, Hormozd, Roderic and Qin Shi Huang*

There is a second series of folk-tales that may be compared to the Belitanas story. These do not contain AaTh 1130, but do include the motif of an inscription portending the perpetrator's doom. Alexander Krappe, who collected the stories (1928), surmised that we might well be dealing with a continuous tradition that spread from Mesopotamia, via Arabian and Persian traditions, westwards to the Emirate of Córdoba and eastwards to China.

---

[48]   Similarly, the fact that in many stories of the type AaTh 1130 (including the known manifestations of *Der Grabhügel*) the bottomless vessel (mostly a boot without sole) is placed over a pitch close to the dead man's tomb is better explained as a spontaneous and logical elaboration rather than as an echo of the filling of the tomb itself as in the case of Belitanas.

Krappe's survey starts with the profanation of the temple vessels by Belshazzar at his feast in Babylon, the inscription appearing on the palace wall predicting the end of his kingdom and the ruler's subsequent death that very same night (*Dan.* 5). As in the story of Belitanas, the theme is not desecration as such, but desecration as a test exposing the true nature of the actor. What is absent in the Belshazzar story is a clear contrast between the voice of the dead and the blind arrogance of the ruler committing the sacrilege. This element, though, is present in the other tales of the same group. Hormozd IV (reigned 579-90) finds, according to Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma*, a little sealed black box in his treasury with a text written by his father and predicting his terrible end. Likewise, an Arabian legend, which exists in several versions, accounts that the last Visigoth king of Spain, Roderic, ignored the warnings of all his advisers and opened "the closed house of Toledo," which all his predecessors had respected and left sealed. In it he finds an inscription predicting the immanent Arabian conquest of his country.[49]

The most provocative parallel to the Belitanas story is a Chinese (!) folktale concerning emperor Qin Shi Huang (260-210 BC) and the tomb of Confucius. I quote this charming story *in extenso* from the German translation by Wilhelm:[50]

> Als einst der böse Kaiser Tsin Schï Huang alle andere Staaten unterjocht hatte und das ganze Reich durchzog, da kam er auch nach der Heimat des Konfuzius. Da kam er an sein Grab. Er wollte es öffnen lassen und sehen, was darin sei. Alle seine Beamten rieten ihm ab, aber er hörte nicht auf sie. So wurde denn ein Gang hineingegraben, und man traf in der Hauptkammer auf den Sarg. Das Holz schien nicht ganz neu zu sein. Wenn man daran klopfte, so klang es wie Erz. Links vom Sarg war eine Tür, die führte in ein inneres Gemach. Darin stand ein Bett, ein Tisch mit Büchern und Kleidern, alles wie für einen lebenden Menschen gehalten. Tschi Schï Huang setzte sich auf das Bett und Blickte auf den Boden. Da standen zwei Schuhe aus roter Seide, die an der Spitze ein gesticktes Wolkenmuster trugen. Sie waren neu und rein und ohne Staub. An der Wand stand ein Bambustab. Zum Scherze zog der Kaiser die Schuhe an, nahm den Stab und ging zum Grabe hinaus. Da erschien plötzlich eine Tafel, darauf standen folgende Verse: *Tsin Schï Huang hat sechs Reich' überrant | Öffnet mein Grab und mein Bett er fand, | Stiehlt meine Schuh', nimmt den Stock in die Hand: | Komt er nach Schakiu – sein Ende er fand.* Tsin Schï erschrak sehr und ließ das Grab wieder schließen. Als er aber nack Schakiu kam, da traf ihn eine hitzige Krankheit, an der er starb.

As in the case of Xerxes, Belshazzar, Hormozd IV, and Roderic, Qin Shi Huang has enjoyed a rather bad press in popular tradition and is credited, among other

---

[49] Krappe cites the version recounted in the work of Ibn Ḥabīb (ca. 796-853) and in the *Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms* by Ibn Khurradādhbig (ca. 820-911). For more versions, including later Spanish traditions, see Basset 1898. See also Menéndez Pidal 1958: xliii-xlvii). Apparently, the scholar Pedro Salazar y de Mendoza already compared this legend to the story told by Aelian on the tomb of 'Belos' in 1622 (*ibid.* xliv fn. 1).

[50] Cf. Wilhelm 1927: 59-60. As Krappe surmises (1928: 85), the story may have reached China via Sassanian or Arabian merchants. Unfortunately, Wilhelm's edition does not state when the story was first recorded in Chinese. The preface to the *Chinesische Volksmärchen* stresses though that the selected folk-tales are mostly taken from the oral tradition (Wilhelm 1927: 1).

misdemeanors, with the massive burning of Confucian literature. It is no great surprise, then, to find him as negative actor in the above story, which shares a number of elements with the story of Belitanas. Again we find the contrast between the voice of the dead and the arrogant ruler. The motif of the desecration of the grave is included as is the tomb with magical features. In both cases the 'living' qualities of the deceased are underlined: whereas Belitanas' corpse is preserved in oil in a fantastic glass sarcophagus, Confucius seems to be alive in his cosy subterranean retreat. These dead are "safe in their alabaster chambers,"[51] they have preserved their living glory and incorruptibility and therefore present a counter-image of the intruder whose doom they predict. The Chinese emperor is not really tricked, like Xerxes, but the text he finds does underline the all-knowing and all-seeing superiority of Confucius and adds and ironic twist to the story. Qin Shi Huang is struck with terror: the evil action of disturbing the grave planned by the evil, yet not very wise ruler immediately backfires on him.

As stated above, Krappe believed in a distant historical connection between 'Belitanas' and the story of Qin Shi Huang. Assessing such a claim will not be attempted here, if only because the present author is not competent to do so. It may be clear, however, that the Chinese and other stories do once again underline that the sequence of motifs and narrative structure present in 'Belitanas' make perfect sense as a folk-tale.

3.3. *Xerxes and Belitanas: a folk-tale*

Regardless of the question of historic links between the various traditions mentioned in the preceding sections, it has been shown that the story on the tomb of Belitanas would work very well as a folk-tale. Though definitive proof is simply impossible with material as slippery as popular traditions, I think that the comparative approach does yield a viable interpretation of the story. This still leaves the question unanswered *why* such a negative tale would have been told about Xerxes. To answer this question of historical context, we may briefly turn our attention to Egypt and the purported misbehaviour of Cambyses II and Artaxerxes III *vis-à-vis* the cult of the Apis.

4. *Siding with Seth*

Herodotus famously records how Cambyses killed the young Apis bull by stabbing the animal with his dagger (III.27-29). The action marked the start of the king's insanity and the first step towards his death in Syrian Ecbatana as a result from a self-inflicted wound in his thigh, the same place were he had stabbed the Apis. Nowadays, the historicity of the story is generally doubted, not only for the lack of Egyptian evidence but also because it is at variance with what we know about

---

[51]   "Safe in their Alabaster Chambers | Untouched by Morning | And untouched by Noon | Lie the meek members of the Resurrection | Rafter of Satin | and Roof of Stone!" (E. Dickinson).

Cambyses' Egyptian policy.[52] The historical Cambyses is not our concern here, however. As for the reasons *why* the malignant story was told about Cambyses, we may tentatively assume that the (occasional) plundering of Egyptian sanctuaries by the Persian victors and the limitations on temple income that Cambyses seems to have introduced may have played a role.[53] But why the Apis, why would this particular story be introduced (or adapted and re-introduced) to portray Cambyses as an evildoer? The answer may be found in the story of another Apis murder, this time purportedly committed by Artaxerxes III after the reconquest of Egypt in 343/42 BC.

The second Apis story is preserved in the works of Aelian and apparently derives, perhaps via Apion's *Aigyptiaka*, from Deinon's *Persika*.[54] The amount of additional detail precludes the assumption that Deinon simply copied Herodotus' story; rather, he must have used independent sources.

Aelian refers to the Apis story several times. According to the main passage, the Egyptian followers of the cult of Serapis hate the Ass. Artaxerxes III, knowing about this, purposely slew the Apis and deified the Ass in order to offend the Egyptians as much as possible (*NA* X.28). Elsewhere, we read that the Egyptian called Artaxerxes "the Ass," and thus provoked Artaxerxes' anger and his "sacrifice of Apis to an ass god" (*VH* 4.8). Citations from lost parts of Aelian's work add the detail that the Persian had his cooks prepare the dead Apis for a meal.[55] Like Cambyses, Artaxerxes paid a terrible price for his sacrilege, for he was murdered by the Egyptian eunuch Bagoas, his body was cut to pieces and fed to the cats and his thigh bones were used as knife handles (*VH* VI.6).[56]

It is of course no coincidence that both Persian conquerors of Egypt were credited with the murder of the Apis. The tradition could instantly be re-used to demonise any new invader. That a real and intentional demonisation is at stake here is very clear from the claim that Artaxerxes III worshipped an Ass god and even sacrificed the Apis to this god. This information is not only essential to Deinon's version, but provides the key to the correct understanding of the Herodotean story as well. For Egyptians, the (wild) ass is associated with Seth,

---

[52] See discussion and references in Briant 1996: 66-72, 915-6; *idem* 1997: 49-50; Cruz-Uribe 2003, esp. 43-4.

[53] But see now Agut-Labordère 2005 (with references), who argues against the traditional interpretation of the Demotic text known as the *Decree of Cambyses*.

[54] Apion is mentioned in *NA* X.29, following the main paragraph on the Apis murder (*NA* X.28). As Aelian often gives series of testimonies from the same author, both paragraphs may well derive from Apion, whose work seems to have been used extensively by Aelian. For the ascription of the original story to Deinon compare Plut. *De Isid.* 31.636c. See also Henkelman [forthcoming], with references.

[55] The preserved text of Aelian's *Varia Historia* is partially an epitome. Citations from the original text are found in Stobaeus and *Suidas Lexikon*; these fragments are now available in a new Teubner edition by Domingo-Forasté (1994). Fragments relating to the sacrileges committed by Artaxerxes III in Egypt are: fr. 38a-b ([Art.] kills the sacred ram of Mendes; deportation of Egyptians); fr. 39a-b ([Art.] desecrates cult-statues and rites); fr. 40a-b(-c-d) ([Art.] has the Apis prepared for dinner; his associate kicks the dead bull and gets gangrene); fr.41 ([Art.?] falls to the ground entering the hall/court).

[56] On the Egyptian background of this tradition see Schwartz 1969: 68-70, 74-5; Stricker 1967: 39-42; *idem* 1971: 22-3.

who was sometimes depicted as such and who was considered, from the late period onwards, as the evil god *par excellence*. Apis, on the other hand, is strongly connected and partially identified with Osiris, who was murdered and cut to pieces by his brother Seth. In other words, 'killing the Apis' or 'venerating an ass-god' puts the accused in the position of Seth, of demonic anti-religion. It contrasts the invader with the divine order and its human defender, the Pharaoh who is intimately associated with Osiris and the cult of Apis. As such, the Apis story serves perfectly as anti-Persian propaganda.

Incidentally, the accusation of Seth-worship was probably not new, but may have its roots in earlier popular traditions from the late New Kingdom. One literary text from that period portrays Hyksos rulers, introduced as "intruders" (Goedicke 1983: 31), as refusing to worship any god but Seth.[57] In other words, the story told about Cambyses and Artaxerxes probably existed before.[58] This once again confronts us with the fact that pinpointing stories like these as direct reflections of a specific historical event runs the risk of missing a large part of their significance as older folk-tale traditions.

Aelian also records a story "from the Egyptian priests" that the Apis cult was instituted by a king whose name is not preserved in the manuscripts, but may be reconstructed as [Menes]. Menes was the legendary first Pharaoh of unified Egypt (*NA* XI.10). Though this particular passage may not derive from Deinon, it does show that the Egyptians thought of the Apis cult as a linked to the very basis of kingship and civilisation. The original Egyptian stories on Cambyses, Artaxerxes and the murder of the Apis may well have included a topical contrast between the founder and the invader.[59]

It is hard to assess whether the Apis story is a real folk-tale. It may have been built upon an existing story, but it also seems to have been heavily informed by the Osiris myth, which may point to a partial background in priestly circles. Be that as it may, there are a number of interesting functional parallels with the story of Belitanas. Both stories can be seen as a test that demasks the invader as a veritable outsider whose reign will be disrespectful of local custom and whose behaviour has demonic traits. By contrast, the ancient national rulers are presented as morally or intellectually superior. The good founder-king Menes is the opposite of Cambyses and Artaxerxes, whereas Belitanas (probably also a

---

[57]   As appears from the late 13th century papyrus Sallier I (I owe the reference to Amélie Kuhrt). In it, the Seth worship of the Hyksos king in the Delta is recounted in some detail and sharply juxtaposed to the Amon worship of the Egyptian ruler of the Southern City (Thebes). The text is a tale about an impossible task imposed by the Hyksos king on the southern city-ruler; only the first half of the story is preserved. For the text, with translation and commentary, see Maspero 1879: 195-216 (stressing, on pp. 197-8 its character as "conte historique, analogue aux contes qu'Hérodote entendit") and Goedicke 1983 (pointing out the unholy nature of the rites for Seth); for a recent translation see E.F. Wente in Simpson 2003: 69-71, 547-8.

[58]   Cruz-Uribe (2003: 44-5) suggests that a story on pharaoh Bocchoris' attempt to kill the sacred Mnevis bull may have informed the Apis story on Cambyses. Though the Bocchoris story is only known from Aelian (*NA* XI.11) and focuses on the embarrassment the failed attempt caused for the pharaoh, it does indeed open the possibility that the killing of sacred animals was a *topos* in stories about evil kings.

[59]   Cf. the contrast between native Egyptian and Hyksos ruler in papyrus Sallier I (on which fn. 56 above).

founder-king) outwits Xerxes even from his grave. The stories also include a promise of revenge: the invader will not remain unpunished. Cambyses' action provokes his self-inflicted death, Artaxerxes is killed by the *Egyptian* eunuch Bagoas and Xerxes is confronted with an uprising in Babylon and will be murdered in his bed.

Against the above background, it is hardly a surprise that 'mad' Cambyses too was accused of opening the tomb of a former king. According to Herodotus (III.16), the king gave orders to remove the mummy of Amasis from his tomb, to desecrate it and to burn it. This story – for it probably is not much more than that – underlines the popularity of the motif in traditions on invader kings.[60]

5. *Conclusion: Xerxes (and Darius) in Babylon*

One of the most effective claims in ancient propaganda is that the adversary behaved improperly, particularly in cultic affairs. Famous cases include Cyrus *vs.* Nabonidus and Darius *vs.* Bardiya. The latter example is of particular interest, because the oral traditions that existed parallelly to the Bīsotūn inscription and that portray Bardiya as an evildoer with demonic qualities, are partially built on older folk-tale traditions.[61] The effect of this particular type of anti-propaganda should not be underestimated: there is hardly anything as attractive and convincing as an accusation that seems to confirm familiar patterns and themes. At the same time the term 'propaganda' should be qualified, for stories like the one on Bardiya are like mercury in the hands of rulers. They will not easily betray their folk-tale character and continue to live their own lives once they spread outside the circles that revitalised and adapted them for political reasons. I think the Apis stories on Cambyses and Artaxerxes essentially operate in the same way: they may, at some point, have resonated a certain political background, but the key to understanding them remains their *longue durée* existence as folk-tales.

As I have tried to argue above, the story on the tomb of Belitanas makes sense as a folk-tale (§3) and seems, Greek additions and deformations notwithstanding, to be at home in a Mesopotamian milieu (§2). That the story, which probably existed before, at one point came to be told about *Xerxes* is explicable from evidence that has recently become available. Though I see no reason at all to revive the old idea of Xerxes' general anti-Babylonian policy, there are certainly groups that were negatively affected by changes introduced by this king in the wake of the revolt in the second year of his reign (484 BC). The punitive measures that must have been taken afterwards to restore Persian authority may explain the phenomenon known as 'the end of archives,' which occurred in 484. According to Caroline Waerzeggers, the people whose archives ended and who may be taken to have been affected by the reprisals were the urban elites connected to the great temple institutions in northern Babylonia. The reprisals were selective in that some archives did not end after 484,

---

[60]   Cf. Cruz-Uribe 2003: 37-9 (with references) on the Amasis story.
[61]   See Krappe 1933; Bickerman & Tadmor 1978.

especially in southern Babylonia were the rebellion apparently had not found wide support.[62]

If the Belitanas story, like the Apis story, had, in the form in which it has come down to us, a special political relevance, it must have been in the period of the Babylonian uprising and its aftermath. This is in fact what is implied by the mention of the uprising by Ctesias. Obviously, a story juxtaposing an ancient king to a disrespectful invader who does not honour the great Babylonian past would certainly seem to be at home among the traditional urban elites. This does not mean that the story was purposely crafted, but rather that an existing folk-tale came to be told about Xerxes as a post-eventful legitimating of the revolt. When Ctesias recorded the story, almost a century after the revolt, it had, naturally, lost most of its propagandistic flavour. That it still circulated proves, in my view, its strength as a folk-tale and the need to consider it as such.

At the beginning of this paper, I have pointed out that Herodotus' story on Darius and the tomb of Nitocris is sometimes assumed to have been the muster on the basis of which Ctesias constructed the Belitanas story. I have no doubt that Ctesias indeed enjoyed telling a related, yet different story in which the actor was Xerxes, not Darius. In addition, there is no denial that the Cnidian copied certain elements from Herodotus (οὐκ … ἄμεινον). At the same time I firmly believe that the Belitanas story is not largely an artificial reworking based on the *Histories*. Rather, the analysis of its individual components, several of which are absent from Herodotus' story, as well as the comparison with other folk-tale traditions brings me to the conclusion that Ctesias has preserved a fuller version that is closer to the same original Babylonian folk-tale that may also have served as inspiration for Herodotus' Nitocris story. The latter still preserves the basic scheme of evildoer outwitted by a ruler of old while disturbing her tomb. It the motif of a funerary inscription mentioning precious materials contained in the tomb, a motif that echoes Levantine inscriptions and may have been a topos in West-Asiatic popular traditions.[63] But the story also shows signs of *extensive*

[62] Cf. Waerzeggers 2003/04: 161, "It is *exactly* the fact that the break is *not* general that lends the phenomenon its most poignant political flavour in my opinion. (…) the break only affects the archives of the traditional Babylonian aristocracy from the north of the country, the most likely supporters of the rebels." Additional evidence is adduced by Kessler (2004), who discusses the abrupt changes among North-Babylonian elites at Uruk during the reign of Xerxes.

[63] The inscription on the sarcophagus of Ešmunazzar II of Sidon speaks of funerary gifts; according to the deceased king there are none: "Whoever you are, be you ruler or be you commoner, let none such open up this resting place or seek anything in it, for they did not lay anything in it; and let none such lift up the box in which I lie or carry me away from this resting-place to another resting-place! Even if men speak to you, do not listen to their talk" (Gibson 1982: 105-14). The text also contains an elaborate curse formula directed at anyone who might open the tomb. Very similar is inscription 1B (8th-7th century BC) from the Silwān necropolis near Jerusalem: "Dies ist [das Grab des ..]yāhû, des Haushofmeisters. [Hi]er ist kein Silber und kein Gold, [n]ur [seine Gebeine] und die Gebeine seiner Dienerin mit ihm. Verflucht sei der Mensch, der dies öffnet" (Renz 1995: 264-5; I owe the references to the Levantine inscriptions to A. Kuhrt and G. Lanfranchi). If there existed, as these inscriptions indicate, a topos in funerary literature concerning the absence of precious goods, it would only be a small step to a popular tale in which the inscription tricks the perpetrator into

reworking. As Dillery has shown (1992), there is a fundamental inconsistency in Herodotus' report: Darius at first does not want to pass through the gate because of the presence of a corpse and then actually proceeds to open the tomb. Another spurious element is 'Nitocris,' a mere duplicate of the Egyptian queen of that name (Hdt. II.100).[64] Finally, the intention of the story as told by Herodotus is clearly to underline Darius' greed, in line with the historian's characterisation of the king as κάπηλος (III.89).

It may be that Herodotus reversed the central motif of the story he heard in order to impose this outlook to the story. Note that the adjective used for Darius, ἄπληστος, ("insatiable," lit. "not to be filled"), presumably worked as an allusion to the motif of the leaking vessel for a Greek audience. Plato already used the expression ἄπληστος πίθος, a saying explained by Zenobius both as a description of a glutton or greedy person and as a reference to the leaking vessels carried by the Danaids (see Hansen 2002: 71-2). It seems therefore at least possible that ἄπληστος is a residue of an older (Greek) version in which money or gold had to be filled into, rather than taken out of the tomb (cf. the modern manifestations of AaTh 1130).

Like his son, Darius had to deal with Babylonian uprisings, so there is a historical context in which the story could have had special relevance. Subsequently, the story may have been adapted and applied to Xerxes, not by Ctesias but by the Babylonians. Such a development would be paralleled by the tradition on the killing of the Apis, which was told about Cambyses and later about Artaxerxes. All this is only explicable if one acknowledges the folk-tale character of the stories. Caution is warranted, however, for the case of Nitocris' tomb is in fact far too obscure to allow for any safe conclusion.

That brings us back to Belitanas once more. Ctesias may have had neither the vision nor the historical scrutiny of Herodotus, but in his eagerness to present new and different accounts he has preserved a number of genuine traditions. Perhaps the most telling and amazing example is that of the *Indika*, clearly reflecting a *Persian* outlook on a half-mythical country. It would be a misunderstanding of the nature of this material to reconstruct a historical core from it. It should be remembered that the important point is not the existence or non-existence of Ctesias' unicorn, nor its possible origin in rumours about the Indian rhinoceros: the only thing that matters is that the unicorn was part of Persian imagination and that we have to thank Ctesias for preserving this colourful and precious piece of evidence.[65] The same is true for stories like the one discussed in this study. Comparative analysis can show that they are historical, but mainly in the sense that they are informed by genuine Babylonian and Persian popular traditions. Thus, by staring into Belitanas' tomb, we get a glimpse of Ctesias' own form of historical objectivity: not to document and reconstruct the history of Persia and Babylonia, but to record how Persians and Babylonians imagined their past.

---

opening a tomb, finding nothing and being cursed, like Darius in the Herodotean story on Nitocris.

[64] It is striking that Plutarch 'corrected' the name of Nitocris to that of the other great founder-queen, Semiramis, when he copied the story told by Herodotus (*Mor.* 173a-b).

[65] On the unicorn traditions in Mesopotamia, India and Iran and its reception in Ctesias' *Indika* and elsewhere see Panaino 2001.

Bibliography

Aarne, A. & Thompson, St. 1964, *The Types of the Folktale. A Classification and Bibliography* (Folktale Fellows Communications 184), Helsinki [second, revised edition].

Agut-Labordère, D. 2005, Le sens du Décret de Cambyse, *Transeuphratène* 29: 9-16.

Aly, W. 1921, *Volksmärchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen. Eine Untersuchung über die Volkstümliche Elemente der altgriechischen Prosaerzählung*, Göttingen [second edition, with commentary, 1968].

— 1930/33, s.v. Danaiden, in: L. Mackensen, J. Bolte *et al.* (eds.), *Handwörterbuch des Deutschen Märchens*, vol. 1, Berlin – Leipzig: 371-4.

— 1934/40, s.v. Glassarg, in: L. Mackensen *et al.* (eds.), *Handwörterbuch des Deutschen Märchens*, vol. 2, Berlin: 630-2.

Asheri, D. 1988, *Erodoto, Le Storie*, vol. I: *Libro I, La Lidia e la Persia*, Milano.

Astour, M.C. 1965, *Hellenosemitica. An Ethnic and Cultural Study in West Semitic Impact on Mycenean Greece*, Leiden.

Auberger, J. 1991, *Ctésias. Histoires de l'Orient*, Paris.

Basset, R. 1898, *Légendes arabes d'Espagne: La maison fermée de Tolède*, Oran.

Bichler, R. 2004a, Ktesias "korrigiert" Herodot. Zur literarischen Einschätzung der *Persika*, in: H. Heftner & K. Tomaschitz (eds.), *Ad Fontes! Festschrift für Gerhard Dobesch zum fünfundsechzigsten Geburtstag am 15. September 2004 dargebracht von Kollegen, Schulern und Freunden*, Wien: 105-16.

— 2004b, Some Observations on the Image of the Assyrian and Babylonian Kingdoms within the Greek Tradition, in: R. Rollinger & Chr. Ulf (eds.), *Commerce and Monetary Systems in the Ancient World: Means of Transmission and Cultural Interaction. Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project Held in Innsbruck, Austria, October 3rd-8th 2002* (Oriens et Occidens 6 = Melammu Symposia 5), Stuttgart: 499-518.

Bickerman, E.J. & Tadmor, H. 1978, Darius I, Pseudo-Smerdis, and the Magi, *Athenaeum* 56: 239-61.

Bigwood, J.M. 1978, Ctesias' Description of Babylon, *AJAH* 3: 32-52.

Binder, G. 1964, *Die Aussetzung des Königskindes* (Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 10), Meisenheim am Glan.

Bolte, J. & Polívka, G. 1918, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, vol. 3, Leipzig.

Boncquet, J. 1987, *Diodorus Siculus (II, 1-34) over Mesopotamië. Een historische kommentaar* (Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Letteren, 49.122), Brussel.

— 1990, Ctesias' Assyrian King-list and his Chronology of Mesopotamian History, *Ancient Society* 21: 5-16.

Bord, L.-J. & Skubiszewski, P. 2000, *L'image de Babylone aux serpents dans les Beatus. Contribution à l'étude des influences du Proche-Orient antique dans l'art du haut Moyen Age*, Paris.

Borger, R. 1956, *Die Inschriften Asarhaddons Königs von Assyrien* (AfO Beih. 9), Graz.

— 1996, *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals. Die Prismenklassen A, B, C = K, D, E, F, G, H, J und T sowie andere Inschriften*, Wiesbaden.

Bosworth, A.B. 2003, Plus ça change... Ancient Historians and their Sources, *Classical Antiquity* 22: 167-198.

BREDNICH, R.W. 1990, s.v. Grabwache, in: R.W. Brednich *et al.* (eds.), *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, vol. 6, Berlin – New York: 79-80.

BRIANT, P. 1996, *Histoire de l'empire perse. De Cyrus à Alexandre*, Paris.

— 1997, Bulletin d'histoire achéménide I, in: J. Andreau, M.-F. Boussac *et al.* (eds.), *Recherches récentes sur l'empire achéménide* (Topoi 7, Suppl. 1), Lyon: 5-127.

BRINKMAN, J.A. 1999, s.v. Bēl-bāni, in: K. Radner (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, vol. I.2, Helsinki: 288-9.

BRINKMAN, J.A. & NIELSEN, J.P. 1999, s.v. Bēl-eṭēra, in: K. Radner (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, vol. I.2, Helsinki: 298.

BRINKMAN, J.A. & LUPPERT-BARNARD, S.M. 2000, s.v. Ibâ, in: H. Baker (ed.), *Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire*, vol. II.2, Helsinki: 498.

CRUZ-URIBE, E. 2003, The Invasion of Egypt by Cambyses, *Transeuphratène* 25: 9-60.

DENECKE, L. 1971, "Der Grabhügel" (KHM 195) aus dem Munde der Viehmännin, *Fabula* 12: 218-28.

DILLERY, J. 1992, Darius and the tomb of Nitocris (Hdt. 1.187), *CPh* 87.1: 30-8.

DOMINGO-FORASTÉ 1994, *Claudii Aeliani Epistulae et Fragmenta*, Stutgardiae & Lipsiae.

DREWS, R. 1974, Sargon, Cyrus and Mesopotamian Folk History, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 33: 387-393.

ESPINOSA, A.M. 1923, *Cuentos populares españoles recogidos de la tradición oral de España y publicados con una introducción y notas comparativas* (Stanford University Publications, Language and Literature 3.1), Stanford.

— 1946-7, *Cuentos populares españoles recogidos de la tradición oral de España*, 2 vols., Madrid.

FADHIL, A. 1990a, Die in Nimrud/Kalḫu aufgefundene Grabinschrift der Jabâ, *BagM* 21: 461-70.

— 1990b, Die Grabinschrift der Mullissu-mukanništat-Ninua aus Nimrud/Kalḫu und andere in ihrem Grab gefundene Schriftträger, *BagM* 21: 471-70.

FALES, F.M. & POSTGATE, J.N. 1995, *Imperial Administrative Records*, vol. 2: *Provincial and Military Administration* (State Archives of Assyria 11), Helsinki.

FOSTER, B.R. 1993, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 2 vols., Bethesda.

GARSTAD, B. 2004, Belus in the *Sacred History* of Euhemerus, *Classical Philology* 99: 246-57.

GEORGE, A.R. 2003, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Introduction, Critical Editions and Cuneiform Texts*, 2 vols., Oxford

GIBSON, J.C.L. 1982, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 3: *Phoenician Inscriptions: Including Inscriptions in the Mixed Dialect of Arslan Tash*, Oxford.

GOEDICKE, H. 1983, *The Quarrel of Apophis and Seqenenreᶜ*, San Antonio.

GOETZE, E. *et al.* (eds.) 1893-1913, *Hans Sacks, Sämtliche Fabeln und Schwänke in chronologischer Ordnung nach den Originalen,* vol. 6, Halle.

GRAYSON, A.K. 1975, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Texts from Cuneiform Sources 5), Locust Valley.

HAAVIO, M. 1955, *Der Etanamythos in Finnland* (Folklore Fellows Communications 154), Helsinki.

HANSEN, W. 2002, *Ariadne's Thread. A Guide to International Tales Found in Classical Literature*, Ithaca – London.

HAUL, M. 2000, *Das Etana-Epos. Ein Mythos von der Himmelfahrt des Königs von Kiš* (Göttinger Arbeitshefte zur altorientalischen Literatur 1), Göttingen.

HENKELMAN, W.F.M. 2006, The Birth of Gilgameš (Ael. *NA* XII.21). A Case-Study in Literary Receptivity, in: R. Rollinger & B. Truschnegg (eds.), *Altertum und Mittelmeerraum: Die*

antike Welt diesseits und jenseits der Levante. Festschrift für Peter W. Haider zum 60. Geburtstag (Oriens et Occidens 12), Stuttgart: 807-56.

— [forthcoming], Élien de Préneste [contribution to a volume on Greek historiography on Persia, edited by D. Lenfant].

KESSLER, K.H. 2004, Urukäische Familien versus babylonischen Familien. Die Namengebung in Uruk, die Degradierung der Kulte von Eanna und der Aufstieg des Gottes Anu, *AoF* 31: 237-62.

KÖNIG, W.F. 1972, *Die Persika des Ktesias von Knidos* (AfO Beih. 18), Graz.

KRAPPE, A.H. 1928, La vision de Balthassar (Dan. V), *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 98: 78-86.

— 1933, Solomon and Ashmodai, *AJP* 54: 260-8.

KUHRT, A. 1982, Assyrian and Babylonian Traditions in Classical Authors: a Critical Synthesis, in: H.-J. Nissen & J. Renger (eds.), *Mesopotamien und seine Nachbarn* (CRRAI 25.2), Berlin: 539-553.

KUHRT, A. & SHERWIN-WHITE, S. 1987, Xerxes' Destruction of Babylonian Temples, in: H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg & A. Kuhrt (eds.), *Achaemenid History II: The Greek Sources*, Leiden: 69-78.

LEHMANN-HAUPT, C.F. 1898, review Johannes Nikei, Herodot und die Keilschriftforschung ... Paderborn 1896, *Berliner Philologische Wochenschrift* 18.16 (16/iv/1898): 485-7.

— 1906, ΒΗΛΙΤΑΝΑΣ und ΒΕΛΗΤΑΡΑΣ, in: C. Bezold (ed.), *Orientalische Studien Theodor Nöldeke zum siebzigsten Geburtstag (2. März 1906) gewidmet von Freunden und Schülern*, vol. 2, Gieszen: 997-1014.

— 1932a, s.v. Belêtaras, in: *RLA* 1, Berlin – Leipzig: 474-7.

— 1932b, s.v. Belitanâs, in: *RLA* 1, Berlin – Leipzig: 480.

LENFANT, D. 1996, Ctésias et Hérodote ou les réécritures de l'histoire dans la Perse achéménide, *REG* 109: 348-380.

— 1999, Peut-on se fier aux «fragments» d'historiens? L'exemple des citations d'Hérodote, *Ktèma* 24: 103-121.

— 2004, *Ctésias de Cnide, la Perse, l'Inde, autres fragments*, Paris.

LEVIN, I. 1966, Etana: Die keilschriftlichen Belege einer Erzählung. Zur Frühgeschichte von AaTh 537 (= AaTh 222 B* + 313 B). Eine textkritische Erörterung, *Fabula* 8: 1-63.

LEWIS, B. 1980, *The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian text and the Tale of the Hero who was Exposed at Birth*, Cambridge (Ma).

LIVINGSTONE, A. 1989, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* (State Archives of Assyria 3), Helsinki.

LIXFELD, H. 1990, s.v. Grabhügel, in: R.W. Brednich *et al.* (eds.), *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, vol. 6, Berlin – New York: 69-72.

LUCKENBILL, D.D. 1926/27, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. II: *From Sargon to the End*, London [reprint 1989].

LUKINOVICH, A. & MORAND, A-F. 1991, *Élien, Histoire variée*, Paris.

LUPPERT-BARNARD, S.M. 1999, s.v. Bēl-ēṭir, in: K. Radner (ed.), *Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire* I.2, Helsinki: 298-300.

MACGINNIS, J. 1986, Herodotus' description of Babylon, *BICS* 33: 67-86.

— 1987, A Neo-Assyrian Text Describing a Royal Funeral, *SAAB* 1.1: 1-13.

MACKENSEN, L. 1940, s.v. Grabhügel, in: L. Mackensen, J. Bolte *et al.* (eds.), *Handwörterbuch des Deutschen Märchens*, vol. 2, Berlin: 658.

MARQUART, J. 1891-3, *Die Assyriaka des Ktesias* (Philologus Suppl. 6: 501-658), Göttingen.

MASPERO, G. 1879, *Études égyptiennes*, vol. I, Paris.

Menéndez Pidal, R. 1958, *Floresta de leyendas heroicas españolas. Rodrigo, el último godo*, vol. 1: *La edad media*, Madrid.

Merkelbach, V. 1964, *Der Grabhügel* (diss. Johannes Gutenberg-Universität zu Mainz), Mainz.

Meyer, E. 1899, *Forschungen zur alten Geschichte*, vol. 2: *Zur Geschichte des fünften Jahrhunderts v. Chr.*, Halle.

Miglus, P.A. 1996, review H. Schmid, *Der Tempelturm Etemenanki in Babylon* (BagF 17), Mainz 1995, *ZA* 86: 294-301.

Momigliano, A. 1998, Überlieferung und Erfindung bei Ktesias, in W. Nippel (ed.), *Arnoldo Momigliano: Ausgewählte Schriften zur Geschichte und Geschichtsschreibung*, vol. 1: *Die Alte Welt*, Stuttgart – Weimar: 77-109, 394-7 [=Tradizione e invenzione in Ctesia, *Atene e Roma* 12, 1931: 15-44].

Nöldeke, Th. 1890, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Alexanderromans* (Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Classe 38.5), Wien.

Palagia, O. 1988, s.v. Glaukos [II], in: *LIMC* IV.1, Zürich – München: 273-4.

Panaino, A. 2001, Between Mesopotamia and India: Some Remarks about the Unicorn Cycle in Iran, in: R.M. Whiting (ed.), *Mythology and Mythologies: Methodological Approaches to Intercultural Influences. Proceedings of the Second Annual Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project Held in Paris, France Oct. 4-7, 1999*, Helsinki: 149-79.

Pearson, L. 1960/1983, *The Lost Histories of Alexander the Great*, Philadelphia [quoted after the reprint edited by F.R. Walton, Chico 1983].

Picchioni, S.A. 1981, *Il Poemetto di Adapa* (Assyriologia 6), Budapest.

Pirart, E. 1996, Le sacrifice humain. Réflexions sur la philosophie religieuse indo-iranienne ancienne, *JA* 284.1: 1-35.

Renz, J. 1995, *Die althebräischen Inschriften*, vol. 1 (Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik 1), Darmstadt.

Schaudig, H. 2001, *Die Inschriften Nabonids von Babylon und Kyros' des Großen samt den in ihrem Umfeld entstandenen Tendenzschriften. Textausgabe und Grammatik* (AOAT 256), Münster.

Scherf, J. 1998, s.v. Glaukos [3], in: *DNP* 4, Stuttgart – Weimar: 1091-2.

Schmid, H. 1995, *Der Tempelturm Etemenanki in Babylon* (BagF 17), Mainz.

Schmitt, R. 2006, *Iranische Anthroponyme in den erhaltene Resten von Ktesias' Werk* (Iranica Graeca Vetustiora III = SbÖAW 736), Wien.

Schwartz, E. 1895, *Die Königslisten des Eratosthenes und Kastor mit Excursen über die Interpolationen bei Africanus und Eusebios* (Abhandlungen der königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen 40.2), Göttingen.

Schwartz, J. 1949, Les conquérants perses et la littérature égyptienne, *BIFAO* 48: 65-80.

Segert, St. 1963, Zu den altorientalischen Motiven in "Tausend und einer Nacht," *ArOr* 31: 630-4.

Seidl, U. 1999, Ein Monument Dareios' I. aus Babylon, *ZA* 89: 101-14.

— Eine Triumphstele Darius' I. aus Babylon, in: J. Renger (ed.), *Babylon. Focus mesopotamischer Geschichte, Wiege früher Gelehrsamkeit, Mythos in der Moderne, Colloquien der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft* 2, Saarbrücken 1999: 297-306.

Simpson, W.K. 2003, *The Literature of Ancient Egypt. An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, Stelae, Autobiographies, and Poetry*, Cairo.

Stevenson, R.B. 1997, *Persica. Greek Writing About Persia in the Fourth Century BC* (Scottish Classical Studies 5), Edinburgh.

STRICKER, B.H. 1967, Asinarii II, *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden – Nuntii ex Museo Antiquario Leidensi* 48: 23-43.

— 1971, Asinarii III, *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden* 52: 22-53.

TOURRAIX, A. 1996, L'apatè de Nitocris (Hdt. I 187), *DHA* 22.2: 109-125.

TRÜMPELMANN, L. 1992, Zwischen Persepolis und Firuzabad. Gräber, Paläste und Felsreliefs im alten Persien, Mainz.

UTHER, H.-J. 1981, s.v. Danaiden, in: K. Ranke *et al.* (eds.), *Enzyklopädie des Märchens. Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, vol. 3, Berlin – New York: 267-70.

— 1996 (ed.), *Brüder Grimm, Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, 4 vols., München.

VANSTIPHOUT, H.L.J. 1988, The Importance of the Tale of the Fox, *Acta Sumerologica Japonica* 10: 191-227.

WAERZEGGERS, C. 2003/04, The Babylonian Revolts Against Xerxes and the 'End of Archives,' *AfO* 50: 150-73.

WESTENHOLZ, J.G. 1997, *Legends of the Kings of Akkade*, Winona Lake.

WILHELM, R. 1927, *Chinesische Volksmärchen*, Jena.

WOLOHOJIAN, A.M. 1969, *The Romance of Alexander the Great by Pseudo-Callisthenes*, New York – London.