

Ninus and Semiramis - Exploding the Myth

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Harpers Dictionary of Classical Antiquities describes Ninus and Semiramis as follows:

“**Semirāmis** (Σεμίραμις) and **Ninus** (Νῖνος). The mythical founders of the Assyrian Empire of Ninus or Nineveh. Ninus (the Greek name for Rimmon Mirari) was a great warrior, who built the town of Ninus or Nineveh about B.C. 2182, and subdued the greater part of Asia. Semiramis was the daughter of the fish-goddess Derceto of Ascalon in Syria by a Syrian youth; but, being ashamed of her frailty, she made away with the youth, and exposed her infant daughter. But the child was miraculously preserved by doves, who fed her till she was discovered by the shepherds of the neighbourhood. She was then brought up by the chief shepherd of the royal herds, whose name was Simmas, and from whom she derived the name of Semiramis. Her surpassing beauty attracted the notice of Onnes, one of the king's friends and generals, who married her. He subsequently sent for his wife to the army, where the Assyrians were engaged in the siege of Bactra, which they had long endeavoured in vain to take. Upon her arrival in the camp she planned an attack upon the citadel of the town, mounted the walls with a few brave followers, and obtained possession of the place. Ninus was so charmed by her bravery and beauty that he resolved to make her his wife, whereupon her unfortunate husband put an end to his life. By Ninus Semiramis had a son, Ninyas, and on the death of Ninus she succeeded him on the throne. According to another account, Semiramis had obtained from her husband permission to rule over Asia for five days, and availed herself of this opportunity to cast the king into a dungeon, or, as is also related, to put him to death, and thus obtained the sovereign power. Her fame threw into the shade that of Ninus; and later ages loved to tell of her marvellous deeds and her heroic achievements. She built numerous cities, and erected many wonderful buildings; and several of the most extraordinary works in the East, which were extant in a later age, and the authors of which were unknown, were ascribed by popular tradition to this queen. In Nineveh she erected a tomb for her husband, nine stadia high and ten wide; she built the city of Babylon, with all its wonders; and she constructed the hanging gardens of Media, of which later writers give us such strange accounts (cf. Herod. i.184). Besides conquering many nations of Asia, she subdued Egypt and a great part of Aethiopia, but was unsuccessful in an attack which she made upon India. After a reign of forty-two years she resigned the sovereignty to her son Ninyas, and disappeared from the earth, taking her flight to heaven in the form of a dove. The fabulous nature of this narrative is apparent. It is probable that Semiramis was originally a Syrian goddess, perhaps the same who was worshipped at Ascalon under the name of Astarté, or the Oriental Aphrodité, to whom the dove was sacred. Hence the stories of her voluptuousness, which were current even in the time of Augustus (Ov. Am. i. 5, 11). The stories that were current about

Semiramis and Ninus are told by Diodorus Siculus, who drew largely upon Ctesias (q.v.).”¹

These stories about Ninus and Semiramis are still quoted to this day without much deviation from the above. Diodorus suggested that they lived around 2,000 BCE.² No one seems to have challenged the fundamental belief that they were the progenitors of the Assyrian race.

The stories in their present form seem to have been started by Ctesias and by the time of Strabo and Diodorus, had become even more elaborate and fantastic, including fanciful stories of how she had conquered all lands as far as India:

“According to Nearchus, Alexander was ambitious of conducting his army through Gedrosia, when he heard that Semiramis and Cyrus had undertaken expeditions against India (through this country), although both had abandoned the enterprise, the former escaping with twenty, and Cyrus with seven men only. For he considered that it would be a glorious achievement for him to lead a conquering army safe through the same nations and countries where Semiramis and Cyrus had suffered such disasters. Alexander, therefore, believed these stories.”³

The stories of how she built whole cities start to appear from the time of Ctesias onwards. Strabo relates that:

“When the historians of the Syrian empire say that the Medes were overthrown by the Persians, and the Syrians by the Medes, they mean no other Syrians than those who built the royal palaces at Babylon and Nineveh; and Ninus, who built Nineveh in Aturia, was one of these Syrians. His wife, who succeeded her husband, and founded Babylon, was Semiramis. These sovereigns were masters of Asia. Many other works of Semiramis, besides those at Babylon, are extant in almost every part of this continent, as, for example, artificial mounds, which are called mounds of Semiramis, and walls and fortresses, with subterraneous passages; cisterns for water; roads to facilitate the ascent of mountains; canals communicating with rivers and lakes; roads and bridges. The empire they left continued with their successors to the time of [the contest between] Sardanapalus and Arbaces. It was afterwards transferred to the Medes.”⁴

We should bear in mind that this was long before female emancipation. In my opinion, the suggestion that a woman could be responsible for all these achievements at such an early period of history should have been challenged a long time ago.

Russell Gmirkin has deduced from all these stories that Ninus, the progenitor of the Assyrian race, should be identified as the Biblical Nimrod.⁵ Ninus, like Nimrod, was said to be the earliest Mesopotamian king who ruled over both Assyria and Babylonia. Ninus, like Nimrod, was connected with the foundation of Nineveh. Ninus, like Nimrod, was described as a hunter in Ctesias. He even claims that the Greek historian Berossus was “the probable source of the Nimrod story in Genesis”.⁶

It is worth reminding ourselves here of the Biblical story:

¹ *Harpers Dictionary of Classical Antiquities*, entry under Semiramis on pp.1438-9, Harry Thurston Peck, Harper and Brothers, New York 1898.

² “So the empire of the Assyrians, which had endured from the time of Ninus through thirty generations, for more than one thousand three hundred years, was destroyed by the Medes in the manner described.” Diodorus, *Library* ii.xxviii.8.

³ Strabo, *Geography* xv.i.5.

⁴ Strabo, *Geography* xvi.i.2.

⁵ *Berossus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus: Hellenistic Histories and the Date of the Pentateuch* pp.115-6, Russell R. Gmirkin, USA 2006.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.117.

“And Cush begot Nimrod; he began to be a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD; wherefore it is said: ‘Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD.’ And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. Out of that land went forth Asshur, and builded Nineveh, and Rehoboth the city, and Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah – the same is the great city.”⁷

First of all, Nimrod was a Cushite, hence was black. The Assyrians were descendants of Ashur son of Shem, hence they were a white, Semitic race. For some strange reason, the Babylonians are called Kassites by archaeologists, this despite the fact that, in the El Amarna Letters, both the Babylonians and the Ethiopians of Africa were called Kasi:

“In these letters Babylonia often occurs under the form *mâtKašī* . . . This should be compared with the Hebrew כַּיִשׁ (Gen. 10. 8 J) as the father of Nimrod, in contrast to כִּיֶּשׁ (Gen. 10. 6 P), the son of Ham. In fact it seems that at least one king of the Kassite dynasty, namely Karaindaš I, inserted Kaššu in his title as well as Karduniaš . . . But there is no doubt that *mâtKašī* in these same letters refers sometimes to Nubia in Africa.”⁸

Basically, the true Babylonians (i.e. the Kassites/Kushites) were the people the Greeks called ‘Eastern Ethiopians’. The name Ethiop means ‘black’. Josephus likewise called the African Ethiopians “western Ethiopians” and referred to the Ethiopian inhabitants of Babylonia (in contradistinction to the western Ethiopians) as descendants of Nimrod, son of Kush (var. Cush).⁹ In Hebrew, a black man is known as a Kushi (i.e. Kushite).

These Babylonians will have been the “eastern Ethiopians” of Herodotus, who he placed in his day in ‘Asia’, by which it is understood that he meant Beluchistan in India.¹⁰ They were “black with straight hair” in contrast to the Ethiopians of Africa who he called “southern Ethiopians”, who were black, and whose hair was “the crispiest and curliest in the world”¹¹ They later emerged as Kushans who formed the Kushan Empire in northern India in the first century CE. These Kushans therefore originated in Babylonia. They can be traced today to the Hindustani Indians, whose holy mountain, the Hindu Kush, betrays their ancestry. These people are black with straight black hair exactly as described by Herodotus.

The Assyrian kings often derogatorily referred to the Babylonians as the “black-headed” race. It is interesting to note that Shalmaneser I was chosen “to (rule) properly the black-headed people”.¹² Shalmaneser I was therefore an Assyrian king ruling over the Babylonians. Tukulti-Ninurta I, who was the son of Shalmaneser I, likewise claimed to have “shepherded the extensive black-headed people like animals”.¹³

⁷ Gen. 10:8-12.

⁸ The Tell El Amarna Tablets Vol. 2, Excursus 1 - *Babylonia in the Tell El-Amarna Tablets*, p.816, Samuel A. B. Mercer, The MacMillan Company of Canada Ltd., Toronto 1939.

⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* – i.vi.2.

¹⁰ Herodotus, *Histories* iii.94. Alfred Denis Godley in fn. 1 on p.383 of Vol. 4 of his translation (William Heinemann. London and Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1938) in connection with the mention of eastern Ethiopians in Herodotus vii.70 suggested that the eastern Ethiopians lived in or near Beluchistan in India. This may well have been the case in the time of Herodotus. These people later became the Kushans who came from this region.

¹¹ Herodotus, *Histories* vii.70.

¹² Assyrian Royal Inscriptions Vol. 1, p.81, §.527, Albert Kirk Grayson, Otto Harrassowitz, 1972.

¹³ *Ibid.* Vol. 1, p.102, §.689.

Herodotus never once mentioned Ninus and Semiramis. Whilst Ctesias, Diodorus and Strabo all tell us that Semiramis was responsible for the construction of the city of Babylon, Herodotus tells us that there were only ever two women involved in this enterprise. These, he tells us, were Semiramis and Nitocris the mother of Labynetos (i.e. Nabonidus), the former living “five generations” before the latter.¹⁴ This makes the Semiramis in question the mother of Adad-nirari III, who, according to conventional dating, ruled 811-782 BCE. Herodotus, however, emphasises that Nitocris “was a more intelligent ruler than her predecessor”,¹⁵ a trait which Diodorus accredits to Semiramis:

“And she, endowed as she was with understanding, daring, and all the other qualities which contribute to distinction...”¹⁶

Semiramis, Diodorus tells us, built the city of Babylon,¹⁷ for “in those times, the present city of Babylon had not yet been founded”.¹⁸ She is said to have built the city with the Euphrates river running through its centre.¹⁹ It should be stressed that the city of Babylon which the Greeks saw was that built by Nebuchadnezzar II.

“The older city was badly damaged by the sack of Sennacherib (c. 689 B.C.). The same ruler, however, commenced the work of rebuilding it, a task which was continued by successive kings of Assyria. The Chaldean Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 B.C.) further embellished it, making it the most magnificent city of Asia, and it is his city which was known to the classical writers.”²⁰

With this in mind, let us start looking at what the classical writers are actually telling us.

One of Semiramis’s crowning achievements was the construction of a bridge across the river Euphrates to join the two parts of the city of Babylon:

Diodorus: “...[Semiramis] took for herself the construction of a bridge five stades long at the narrowest point of the river, skilfully sinking the piers, which stood twelve feet apart, into its bed. And *the stones, which were set firmly together, she bonded with iron cramps, and the joints of the cramps she filled by pouring in lead...*

...This bridge, then, floored as it was with beams of cedar and cypress and with palm logs of exceptional size and having a width of thirty feet, is considered to have been inferior in technical skill to none of the works of Semiramis.”²¹

According to Herodotus, this bridge was built by Nitocris, the mother of the Chaldean king Labynetos (Nabonidus):

Herodotus: “...[Nitocris] also used the quarried stones to build a bridge, more or less in the centre of the city, and *she joined the stones together with braces of iron and lead.* During the day squared-off planks of wood used to be laid on it, so that the Babylonians could walk across on them, but at night these planks would be removed so that people did not cross over and steal from one another.”²²

¹⁴ Herodotus, *Histories* i.184.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* i.185.

¹⁶ Diodorus, *Library* ii.vi.5.

¹⁷ Diodorus, *Library* ii.vii.2.

¹⁸ Diodorus, *Library* ii.i.7.

¹⁹ Diodorus, *Library* ii.vii.3.

²⁰ fn 2 on p.371 of Diodorus Siculus Book I, Loeb Classical Library, translated by C.H. Oldfather, Harvard University Press - 1989 Edition

²¹ Diodorus, *Library* ii.viii.2. (Emphasis mine.)

²² Herodotus, *Histories* i.186. (Emphasis mine.)

Which one of the two writers was correct? The answer, surprisingly, is neither!

Remains of this bridge have been discovered by the German excavator Robert Koldewey who identified it as the bridge which was mentioned by both Herodotus and Diodorus.²³ He also points out that the bridge is mentioned in the *E-ulla Cylinder* in which Nebuchadnezzar II informs us that it was constructed by his father Nabopolassar:

“The embankment wall of Arachtu . . . from the Ishtar Gate to the Urash Gate, my father, my begetter, had built with asphalt and brick, had erected piers of burnt brick for the crossing over of the Euphrates.”²⁴

A similar problem is encountered with the quays at Babylon whose construction Diodorus attributes to Semiramis and Herodotus attributes to Nitocris:

Diodorus: “And on each side of the river she [Semiramis] built an expensive quay of about the same width as the walls and one hundred and sixty stades long.”²⁵

Herodotus: “This [the altering of the course of the river] was quite a feat she [Nitocris] accomplished. Another one was to have an embankment built along both sides of the river; this is well worth seeing for its bulk and height”.²⁶

Anyone familiar with the excavation reports from Babylon will be aware that these ‘quays’ or ‘embankments’ were started by Nabopolassar and expanded upon by Neriglissar and Nebuchadnezzar. These are what the Greek writers visiting Babylon would have seen and have been impressed with. To use the words of Nebuchadnezzar, as quoted by the Book of Daniel: “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built for a royal dwelling-place, by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?”²⁷

Diodorus: “After this Semiramis picked out the lowest spot in Babylonia and built a square reservoir, which was three hundred stades long on each side; it was constructed of baked brick and bitumen, and had a depth of thirty-five feet.”²⁸

This lake was called “*Yapur Shapu* – the great reservoir of Babylon” by Nebuchadnezzar who informs us that it was built by his father Nabopolassar. The use



The remains of one of the piers to the bridge built by Nabopolassar, which Herodotus claimed was built by Nitocris, the mother of the Chaldean king Labynetos (Nabonidus) and which Diodorus claimed was built by Semiramis.

²³ *The Excavations at Babylon*, pp.197-199, Robert Koldewey, MacMillan & Co. Ltd., London 1914.

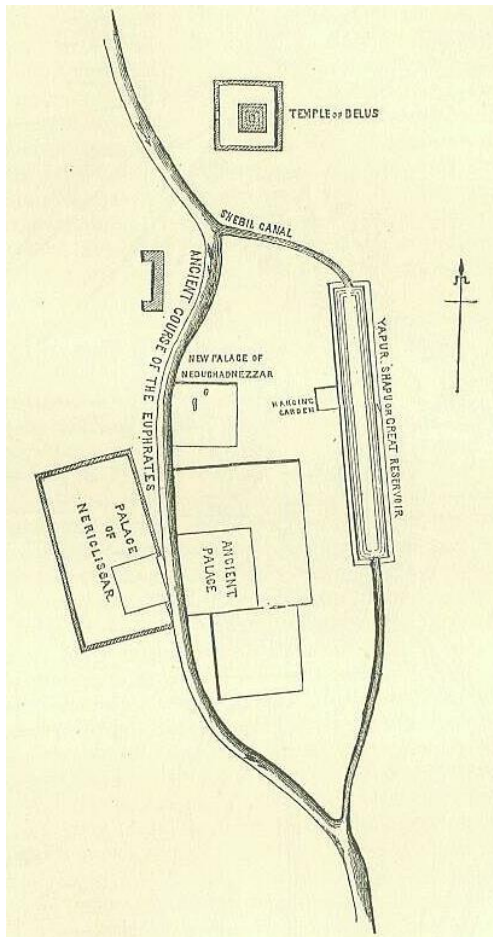
²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Diodorus, *Library* ii.viii.3.

²⁶ Herodotus, *Histories* i.185.

²⁷ Dan. 4:27.

²⁸ Diodorus, *Library* ii.ix.1.



Map of Babylon showing the location of the Yapur Shapur (right of picture), which Diodorus says was built by Semiramis.

of burnt brick and bitumen can also attributable to Nebuchadnezzar who made extensive use of these materials.

Herodotus: "Then a long way above Babylon she [i.e. Nitocris] dug the reservoir of a lake, a little way off from the river, always digging deep enough to find water, and making the circumference a distance of fifty two miles [400 stadia]; what was dug out of this hole, she used to embank either edge of the river."²⁹

It is not clear where this particular lake was located, but the embankments were built by Nabopolassar, so any suggestion that Nitocris used the soil from the site to build those embankments is also shown to be spurious. This lake, which is said to have been upstream from Babylon, may possibly have been constructed to reduce the water level in the river to enable the building of the aforesaid bridge and embankments.

Diodorus also mentions a palace built by Semiramis:

"On both the towers and the walls [of the palace] there were again animals of every kind, ingeniously executed by the use of colours as well as by the realistic imitation of the several types; and the whole had been made to represent a hunt, complete in every detail, of all sorts of wild animals, and their size

was more than four cubits. Among the animals, moreover, Semiramis had also been portrayed, on horseback and in the act of hurling a javelin at a leopard, and nearby was her husband Ninus, in the act of thrusting his spear into a lion at close quarters. In this wall she also set triple gates, two of which were of bronze and were opened by a mechanical device."³⁰

Koldewey identifies this palace with what he calls the Persian Building. Among the fragments of glazed bricks depicting a chase of wild animals, he found traces of only one human face: that of a woman in white enamel.³¹ This palace could not possibly have existed earlier than Nebuchadnezzar. We are told that he built the palace for his queen Amyhia (also known as Amyhis, Amytis or Amyrtis) who is said to have been a daughter of Cyaxares king of the Medes.³²

Again, we are able to show that Diodorus was drawing his inspiration extensively from works which date to the time of Nebuchadnezzar II onwards. Such was the state of

²⁹ Herodotus, *Histories* i.185.

³⁰ Diodorus, *Library* ii.viii.6.

³¹ *The Excavations at Babylon* op. cit. pp.129-131.

³² *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology* Vol. 1, p.908, entry under Cyaxares, edited by William Smith, Boston 1870.

deception by this late date that the true historical facts had become corrupted beyond recognition.

“Since the undertakings of Ninus were prospering in this way, he was seized with a powerful desire to subdue all of Asia that lies between the Tanais (Don) and the Nile... ..and within a period of seventeen years he became master of them all except the Indians and the Bactrians.”³³

Nebuchadnezzar conquered pretty much the same territories as these accredited to Ninus, though according to the Bible, he took Jerusalem in the nineteenth year of his reign.³⁴ The suggestion that Ninus, alias Nebuchadnezzar, conquered the whole of Asia in seventeen years is therefore also shown to be wrong. When one considers the countries that Diodorus tells us Ninus is supposed to have subdued – Phoenicia, Caria, Phrygia, Lydia, Cappadocia the lands of the Cadusii – many of these countries and peoples arrived on the scene at a fairly late date. They did not exist much before the time of Nebuchadnezzar II.

I should perhaps point out that the designation Hatti originally only applied to Anatolia. Over time, north Syria became known as Hatti. When Nebuchadnezzar conquered the land of Israel, the designation of Hatti extended to include the whole of the lands of Israel and Judah. Archaeologists usually associate the name Hatti with the Biblical Hittites. It should be stressed, however, that the Biblical Hittites were a Hamitic (i.e. black) race. The Hatti were NOT Hittites!

As Oliver Gurney explains:

“The name ‘Hittite’ was given to this language by modern scholars as being the official language of the Land of Hatti, and has been universally accepted; but it is strictly speaking incorrect... ..It is now generally agreed that the true name of the language is ‘Nesite’ or ‘Nesian’, the language of Nesa or Kanesh, but despite this the name ‘Hittite’ is now so well established that it will probably never be abandoned”.³⁵

The name Hatti is preserved in the German name Hesse.³⁶ When therefore Nebuchadnezzar claimed to have “conquered the whole area of Khatti-land”,³⁷ he was actually claiming to have conquered the whole of Hesse-ia. In other words, the name Hatti, when transliterated into Greek, becomes Asia!

The Greeks were being fed with lies and deceptions and they have transmitted those lies and deceptions on to us, an unsuspecting audience, and no one seems to have challenged what we have been told. What I find amazing is that no one has contested these stories earlier. It is not even as though these excavations at Babylon are recent!

Ninus, the progenitor of the Assyrian race, turns out to be Nebuchadnezzar II, who was actually a Chaldean. He may have been an Assyrian king, but he was not a descendant, let alone the progenitor, of the Assyrian people. Semiramis (that is, the Semiramis who purportedly conquered many foreign lands and built the city of Babylon) turns out to be an invention of the Greek writers.

³³ Diodorus, *Library* ii.ii.1.

³⁴ 2 Kings 25:8. Nebuchadnezzar’s first year coincided with the fourth year of Jehoaichin son of Josiah - Jer 25:1.

³⁵ *The Hittites* p.101, Oliver R. Gurney, Penguin Books, 1990.

³⁶ *The Hittites - People of a Thousand Gods* p.80, Johannes Lehmann, William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, 1977.

³⁷ *Egypt of the Pharaohs* p.358, Sir Alan H. Gardiner, Oxford University Press, 1964.

“Such is the account given by Berosus of this king [i.e. Nebuchadnezzar], besides much more in the third book of his *History of Chaldaea*, where he censures the Greek historians for their deluded belief that Babylon was founded by the Assyrian Semiramis and their erroneous statement that its marvellous buildings were her creation. On these matters the Chaldaean account must surely be accepted.”³⁸

This statement by Josephus says it all. Yet there are still many people who hold to these false teachings concerning Semiramis!

APPENDIX

The following excerpt from Nebuchadnezzar’s inscription is taken from Volume 4 of George Rawlinson’s *The Seven Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World*:

“The double inclosure which Nabopolassar my father had made but not completed, I [Nebuchadnezzar] finished. Nabopolassar made its ditch. With **two long embankments** [i.e. the aforesaid quay walls which Herodotus tells us was built by Nitocris, and Diodorus says was built by Semiramis] of brick and mortar he bound its bed. He made the embankment of the Arahha. He lined the other side of the Euphrates with brick. He **made a bridge** (?) over the Euphrates [i.e. the aforesaid bridge], but did not finish its buttresses (?). From . . . (the name of a place) he made with bricks burnt as hard as stones, by the help of the great Lord Merodach, a way (for) a branch of the Shimat to the waters of the *Yapur-Shapu*, **the great reservoir** of Babylon [i.e. the aforesaid reservoir referred to by Diodorus], opposite to the gate of Nin. The *Ingur-Bel* and the *Nimiti-Bel* – the great double wall of Babylon – I finished. With two long embankments of brick and mortar I built the sides of its ditch. I joined it on with that which my father had made. I strengthened the city. Across the river to the west I built the wall of Babylon with brick. The *Yapur-Shapu* – the reservoir of Babylon – by the grace of Merodach I filled completely full of water.”³⁹

³⁸ Josephus, *Against Apion* 1.20 (Whiston) or 1.142-3 (Loeb Classical Library).

³⁹ *The Seven Great Monarchies of the Ancient Eastern World*, Vol. 4, pp.189-190, George Rawlinson, 1876. (Emphases mine.)