

Revaluating the Sardanapalus Monument in Cilicia Greek Travelogues and Ancient Near Eastern Hedonism

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Abstract. *This article presents a novel interpretation of the famous hedonistic monument of Sardanapalus, as depicted by numerous Greek and Roman authors, particularly within historiography related to Alexander. The argument unfolds in two steps. First, the Greek tradition regarding Sardanapalus and the inscription is discussed in detail, and then the description of foreign monuments in Greek travelogue texts and their relation to ancient Near Eastern texts will be analysed. It is argued that the image of the hedonistic king Sardanapalus was inspired by one of Ashurbanipal's inscriptions, rather than being solely attributed to an inner-Greek discussion.*

Rezumat. *Acest articol prezintă o nouă interpretare a faimosului monument hedonist al lui Sardanapalus, descris de numeroși autori greci și romani, în special în cadrul istoriografiei referitoare la Alexandru. În primul rând este discutată în detaliu tradiția greacă referitoare la Sardanapalus și la inscripție, iar apoi se analizează descrierea monumentelor străine în textele jurnalelor de călătorie grecești. Se susține că imaginea regelui hedonist Sardanapalus a fost inspirată de una dintre inscripțiile lui Ashurbanipal, mai degrabă decât să fie atribuită exclusiv unei discuții interne grecești.*

Keywords: Sardanapalus, Alexander, Ashurbanipal, Hedonism.

Several Greek and Roman authors mention that Alexander III and his troops saw a monument in the vicinity of Anchiale in Cilicia, bearing an inscription of the mythical king Sardanapalus.³ This king was widely known in Classical and Hellenistic times for his hedonistic character.⁴ Based on the accounts of Greek writers on the ancient Near East, scholars tried to unearth historical nuggets of information on this ruler. Due to the Aramaic rendering SRBNBL, which closely matches the Greek Σαρδανάπαλος, the ancient ruler most likely to be identified with the mythical ruler is the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal.⁵ However, while much suggests that Ashurbanipal could be the historical inspiration for some aspects of the figure of Sardanapalus,

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³ BERNHARDT 2009, 13–15 provides an overview on the extant descriptions of this inscription in Greek and Latin literature.

⁴ See BERNHARDT 2009; BURKERT 2009; WEIßBACH 1920.

⁵ STEINER, NIMS 1985, 71 vol XVIII.

neither the moralistic assessments of Classical authors nor the historical context align with what is known about Ashurbanipal from Assyrian sources.⁶ As it is so often the case with legendary kings, the image of the hedonistic king Sardanapalus might have been originally fashioned after a historical figure, but soon after that, the fictional king Sardanapalus developed an identity of his own. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the debate is complex, as it revolves around Greek ideas of the East and the impact of Assyria's intellectual heritage on its surrounding world.⁷

One aspect of this debate is the monument and its inscription described by some of the Greek writers who joined Alexander on his expedition. Departing from their accounts, scholars made several attempts to identify ancient monuments in Asia Minor that these authors might have seen.⁸ Walter Burkert has offered an alternative interpretation by suggesting that Alexander and his troops saw an inscription that they interpreted as belonging to Sardanapalus.⁹ Aside from that, the inscription mentioning Sardanapalus has been viewed as an imaginative creation, a product of a Greek intellectual discourse on proper conduct.¹⁰ With having said that, however, we are now facing a new set of challenges. Concepts like hedonism are commonly associated with Greek philosophy, which is why potential ancient Near Eastern connections to the Sardanapalus inscription have not been explored thus far.¹¹

Given the epistemological context of this debate, it is worth highlighting that most interpretations are based on two assumptions. Firstly, the Greek authors described an inscription that they actually saw, or they engaged it as a subject of philosophical debate. Secondly, the idea that philosophical concepts such as hedonism were alien to ancient Near Eastern societies, as the Greek world is thought to be the cradle of philosophy. Remarkably, the validity of these assumptions remained largely unchallenged. Thus, we think it is time to liberate the discussion from the structures that have dominated it and provide some new contexts for this gridlocked debate.

In what will follow, we will review in the first step the manner in which the first Greek writers who joined Alexander described the Sardanapalus monument by locating the fragments aligned with their now lost works in the wider framework of descriptions of the Near Eastern cultural landscape in Greek Classical literature. In the second step, we will provide a critical commentary on the widely accepted assumption that philosophical thinking began with the Greeks by tracing the concept of hedonism in ancient Near Eastern texts. Based on a new contextualisation, it is being argued that an inscription of Ashurbanipal could be the core

⁶ LANFRANCHI 2011; MACGINNIS 1988.

⁷ On the impact of Assyrian on its surrounding world and afterworld, see LANFRANCHI 2000; NOVOTNY 2023.

⁸ BURKERT 2009, 509–510; WEIßBACH 1920. See also WÖRRLE 1998.

⁹ BURKERT 2009.

¹⁰ BERNHARDT 2009.

¹¹ An exception within this stream of research is FINK 2014.

around which the image of the hedonistic king Sardanapalus emerged. We shall begin by closely examining the descriptions of the Sardanapalus monument in Greek Classical literature.

The Anchiale Inscription and Sardanapalus

Around September 333 BCE, Alexander III of Macedon and his troops made their way through Cilicia as part of their campaign towards Syria and the Levant.¹² Upon reaching the satrapal city of Tarsus, it is said that an inscription near Anchiale piqued the interest of the Greeks and Macedonians. In reviewing the traditions surrounding the description of the monument and inscription in the available sources, we can identify two distinct branches.

The now-lost account of Aristobulos of Cassandrea represents the first branch of tradition. He was an author who accompanied Alexander on his expedition to the East and wrote a history of his reign during the era of the Diadochi.¹³ Aristobulos' description of the inscription has been preserved as a fragment in the works of Apollodorus, Strabo, Arrian, and Athenaeus.¹⁴ Although the fragments vary in the details of the inscriptions, they still align with the overall theme. By comparing the extant fragments, it becomes evident that Arrian presents the most detailed and comprehensive version to his reader:

Later on he (*scil.* Alexander) left Tarsus and on the first day he reached Anchialus, founded, as the legend says, by Sardanapalus the Assyrian. The circumference and the foundations of the walls show that the city was large when founded, and grew to great power. Sardanapalus' monument was near the walls of Anchialus; over it stood Sardanapalus himself, his hands joined just as if to clap, and the epitaph was inscribed in the Assyrian script; the Assyrians said that it was in verse. In any case its meaning according to the words was: 'Sardanapalus son of Anakyndaraxes built Anchialus and Tarsus in one day; you, stranger, eat, drink and be merry, since other human things are not worth *this*' – the riddle referring to the noise of a hand-clap. (It was said that the words 'be merry' had a less delicate original in the Assyrian.)¹⁵

¹² BOSWORTH 1994, 805.

¹³ POWNALL 2024.

¹⁴ BNJ 139 F9a–c.

¹⁵ BNJ 139 F9c (= Arr. An. 2.5.2–4): αὐτὸς δὲ ὕστερος ἄρας ἐκ Ταρσοῦ τῇ μὲν πρώτῃ ἐς Ἀγχιάλον πόλιν ἀφικνεῖται. ταύτην δὲ Σαρδανάπαλον κτίσαι τὸν Ἀσσύριον λόγος· καὶ τῷ περιβόλῳ δὲ καὶ τοῖς θεμελίοις τῶν τειχῶν δήλη ἐστὶ μεγάλη τε πόλις κτισθεῖσα καὶ ἐπὶ μέγα ἐλθοῦσα δυνάμεως. καὶ τὸ μνήμα τοῦ Σαρδαναπάλου ἐγγὺς ἦν τῶν τειχῶν τῆς Ἀγχιάλου· καὶ αὐτὸς ἐφειστήκει ἐπ' αὐτῷ Σαρδανάπαλος συμβεβηκῶς τὰς χεῖρας ἀλλήλαις ὡς μάλιστα ἐς κρότον συμβάλλονται, καὶ ἐπίγραμμα ἐπεγέγραπτο αὐτῷ Ἀσσύρια γράμματα· οἱ μὲν Ἀσσύριοι καὶ μέτρον ἔφασκον ἐπεῖναι τῷ ἐπιγράμματι, ὃ δὲ νοῦς ἦν αὐτῷ ὃν ἔφραζε τὰ ἔπη, ὅτι Σαρδανάπαλος ὁ Ἀνακυνδαράξου παῖς Ἀγχιάλον καὶ Ταρσὸν ἐν ἡμέρᾳ μᾶ ἐδείματο. σὺ δέ, ὦ ξένε, ἔσθιτε καὶ πίνετε καὶ παῖζε, ὡς τᾶλλα τὰ ἀνθρώπινα οὐκ ὄντα τούτου ἄξια· τὸν ψόφον αἰνισσόμενος, ὄνπερ αἱ χεῖρες ἐπὶ τῷ κρότῳ ποιοῦσι· καὶ τὸ παῖζε ῥαδιουργότερον ἐγγεγράφθαι ἔφασαν τῷ Ἀσσυρίῳ ὀνόματι (Loeb).

The accounts of Arrian and Strabo are consistent regarding the text of the inscription, albeit differing in some additional details.¹⁶ It is noteworthy that Arrian mentions that Assyrian translators interpreted the text for the Macedonians, a detail omitted by Strabo. The description of the translators as Assyrian does not necessarily mean they were from Assyria, but rather individuals of Syrian descent. This was common in Anchiæ, situated on the border with Syria.¹⁷

Interestingly, Strabo adds that a certain Choirilos also referenced this inscription, including the famous lines: “Meat and drink, wanton jests, and the delights of love, these I have enjoyed; but my great wealth I have left behind.”¹⁸ Very little is known about the life of Choirilos, though he appears to have been an Athenian playwright from the 5th century BCE who lived at the Macedonian court.¹⁹ This suggests that Sardanapalus’ hedonistic lifestyle was a widely recognised theme among both Macedonians and Greeks in the 4th century BCE. This is further supported by the fact that Amyntas, a Macedonian writer accompanying Alexander on his campaign, previously mentioned Choirilos in his now-lost work when describing the monument of Sardanapalus.²⁰ Another noteworthy detail is the connection between Choirilos and Amyntas, who link two versions of this inscription to Sardanapalus, with one situated in Niniveh and the other in Anchiæ.²¹ We will return to this point in a moment.

The second branch of tradition is represented by Clitarchus, whose version of the event has been passed down to us through the *Deipnosophistae* of Athenaeus. Clitarchus likely crafted his narrative on Alexander within the intellectual atmosphere of the royal court under the first Ptolemaic rulers. This places him as part of the second generation of authors describing Alexander’s exploits by drawing on the testimonies of those who accompanied the expedition.²² As Clitarchus’ work survives only in fragments, our understanding of his narrative is quite limited, leading to much conjecture. Athenaeus, however, states that Clitarchus portrayed Sardanapalus as meeting his end due to old age after losing control over the Syrians.²³ This means that Clitarchus diverges from the established narrative regarding Sardanapalus’ demise. During the 4th century, Ctesias of Cnidus penned his account on Asian rulers, depicting Sardanapalus indulging in hedonistic pursuits before ultimately facing his fatal end on a pyre.²⁴ Ctesias seemingly introduced a fresh interpretation of the famous ruler’s end that aligned with

¹⁶ See BERNHARDT 2009, 13–14; BURKERT 2009, *passim*.

¹⁷ On the differences between the ethnic labelling Assyrian and Syrian, see ROLLINGER 2006.

¹⁸ BNJ 139 F9b (= Strab. 14.5.9): μέμνηται δὲ καὶ Χοιρίλος τούτων: καὶ δὴ καὶ περιφέρεται τὰ ἔπη ταυτὶ “ταυτ’ ἔχω, ὅσο’ ἔφαγον καὶ ἀφύβρισα, καὶ μετ’ ἔρωτος τέρπν’ ἔπαθον, τὰ δὲ πολλὰ καὶ ὄλβια κείνα λέλειπται” (Loeb).

¹⁹ HECHT 2017, 155–174; HUXLEY 1969.

²⁰ BNJ 122 F2 (= Athen. 12.39 p. 529e–530a). See BERNHARDT 2009, 14. On Amyntas see TZIFOPOULOS 2013.

²¹ BNJ 122 F2 (= Athen. 12.39 p. 530a).

²² MÜLLER 2014, 90–95.

²³ BNJ 122 F2 = BNJ 137 F2 (=Athen. 12.39 p. 530a).

²⁴ FGrH 688 F 1q (= D.S. 2.24–27; Athen. 12 p. 528f–529c). See BERNHARDT 2009, 2; STRONK 2018, 129.

his overall depiction of decadent Asian monarchs. Yet, the existence of a fragment attributed to Hellanicus indicates a tradition dating back to the 5th century BCE portraying two distinct Sardanapali, one virtuous and one malevolent.²⁵ This suggests that by the time of Ctesias, at least two narratives about Sardanapalus were circulating among the Greeks, underscoring his status as a figure of common knowledge.

Additional support for this view comes from a fragment from the lost account of Callisthenes. It indicates that he incorporated the concept of the two Sardanapli when describing the monument in Cilicia.²⁶ Callisthenes served as the author responsible for conveying Alexander's exploits to be transmitted and disseminated in Greece.²⁷ This implies that Alexander's visit to the monument in Cilicia was integral to the official report dispatched from the expedition to audiences in Greece and Macedonia.

Considering the fragment aligned with Callisthenes on Sardanapalus' inscription, a stemma of the tradition of the episode on Alexander and this inscription can be drawn. During the Classical period, two tales surrounding the mythical figure of Sardanapalus circulated among the Greeks. While Hellanicus in the 5th century BCE was aware of an older tale on two Sardanapali, the 4th century BCE writer Ctesias is the first one to tell the tale of the spectacular death of Sardanapalus the hedonist. Depicting Sardanapalus in this manner aligns with Ctesias' idea of ancient Near Eastern monarchy, characterised by cruel and greedy despots.²⁸ Only a few decades after Ctesias composed his work, Callisthenes wrote an account of Alexander to which he most likely added the episode of the Sardanapalus monument. Based on Callisthenes, Aristobulos included this episode in his account, and thus it made its way into the accounts of Strabo and Arrian.²⁹ Perhaps one generation after Alexander's conquest, Clitarchus composed his work on Alexander, in which he sought out spectacular and improper episodes as well as anecdotes similar to that of the Sardanapalus monument.³⁰ Having clarified the tradition of this episode, the question arises: Why did Callisthenes make Sardanapalus and the Anchiale monument a topic in his work?

Ancient Near Eastern Monuments in Greek Travelogues

Despite the general problems surrounding the modern concept of literary 'genre', something like a travelogue literature has never been established in Greek prose.³¹ For instance,

²⁵ *FGrHist* 4 F3.

²⁶ *BNJ* 124 F34. See BOSWORTH 1995, 194 meeting the association of this fragment with Callisthenes with criticism.

²⁷ DEVINE 1994; HOWE 2022; ZÄHRNT 2016; ZÄHRNT 2006.

²⁸ ROLLINGER 2010, 584–619; WATERS 2017, esp. 45–59.

²⁹ The account of Callisthenes is considered the primary source for all authors who wrote about Alexander, whether shortly after his death or much later. See BICHLER 2020; DEGEN 2022, 159–174; DEGEN 2019.

³⁰ On Clitarchus as an author, see MÜLLER 2014, 90–95.

³¹ BICHLER 2017 (travelogues) *contra* SCHULZ 2020; MADREITER 2020 (problematics of 'genre' in ancient Greek literature).

Herodotus frequently assures the accuracy of his reports by claiming autopsy. Although the meaning of such statements varies among ancient authors, in the case of Herodotus, having seen something does not necessarily indicate accuracy.³² The same applies to statements of having heard something, as they are often related to common knowledge rather than the actual acquisition of information.³³ An excellent example of the perception of the Near East in the context of traveling is the experience report of Xenophon, today known as the *Anabasis*. Xenophon went to Mesopotamia in the company of Cyrus the Younger, himself rebelling against Artaxerxes II in 401 BCE. However, even though Xenophon visited Mesopotamia, he did not contribute significantly to Greek geographical knowledge of the ancient Near East in his account of the expedition that had not been previously known.³⁴ With this in mind, it is crucial to critically evaluate the numerous instances of Classical authors describing ancient Near Eastern monuments with inscriptions. Two distinct groups of such descriptions can be identified.

The first group comprises of monuments that contain texts referenced by Greek authors as *Assyria grammata*. This latter term serves as a broad categorisation for the diverse writing systems of the ancient Near East, including cuneiform and alphabets.³⁵ Within this category, there are numerous examples of *Assyria grammata* worth exploring, with two specific examples warranting closer examination. A fragment in Diodorus that echoes Ctesias' now lost account is a description of a monument with an inscription and relief on a mountain known as Bagistan, i.e. Bisitun. While the general description aligns with the famous Bisitun Inscription, Ctesias attributed this monument to the Assyrian queen Semiramis rather than Darius I.³⁶ This attribution to Semiramis may not have been a misunderstanding on Ctesias' part, but rather an intentional variance. It is likely that the Bisitun Inscription was known among the Greeks, as evidenced by Darius' command to disseminate the inscription, Herodotus' playful retelling of Darius' ascension to the throne, and the discovery of an Aramaic copy in Elephantine, in the Achaemenid satrapy of Egypt.³⁷ Semiramis was also familiar to the Greek audience of Ctesias. She first appears in Herodotus' *Histories* and becomes a prominent figure in the Ctesian

³² For the general debate, see BICHLER 2017; BICHLER 2013. Case studies are DEGEN 2024a (Babylon and Athens); ROLLINGER 2004 (the winged snakes of Arabia).

³³ LURAGHI 2001.

³⁴ DAN 2014.

³⁵ SCHMITT 1992, 35. WEISSBACH 1896, 64 has speculated, though in the absence of any concrete evidence, that the stelae at the Bosphorus perhaps were written in various ancient Near Eastern languages along with Greek, as Darius placed inscriptions at Suez that were written in Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian, and Egyptian.

³⁶ *FGrHist* 688 F1 § 13.2 (= D.S. 2.13.1–2). See STRONK 2018, 109 fn. 107: "The earliest reference in Greek historiography to Bisitun."

³⁷ ROLLINGER 2018a (Herodotus and Bisitun); ROLLINGER 2016 (dissemination of Achaemenid royal texts). Remarkably, among the Judean societies in Elephantine we can observe similar creative responses to the Achaemenid royal inscription as in the case of the Greek world. See GRANERØD 2013.

writings.³⁸ Ctesias' description of the Bisitun Inscription can be viewed as a metanarrative, drawing on existing knowledge to construct a new historical narrative. This approach is not unique to Ctesias, as he similarly engages with and playfully responds to the *Histories* of Herodotus, a well-established account at the time of his own composition.³⁹

An additional instance of an inscription featuring *Assyria grammata* is purportedly found on the tomb of Cyrus the Great, as noted by Aristobulos and Onesicritus.⁴⁰ This inscription has sparked scholarly discussion regarding the accuracy of Greek travel accounts, as neither the location identified by modern scholars as Cyrus' tomb nor the available translations include text that aligns with known ancient Near Eastern inscriptions.⁴¹ The terms used in the translations such as 'founder of the Persian Empire,' 'ruler of Asia,' and 'king of kings' reflect Greek conceptualisations of Persian monarchy and the information they had on this topic.⁴²

It seems that Greek authors who travelled through the Near East were not particularly keen on providing accurate descriptions of monuments, often appearing either uninformed or disinterested. This applies also to translators as mentioned by Arrian. Since Greek authors frequently refer to locals acting as translators, it would be wrong to explain differences between ancient Near Eastern inscriptions and Greek translations by blaming such translators for offering erroneous translations of the texts. It is worth noting that translators often serve as narrative tools in Greek literature that facilitate and support the storytelling of authors.⁴³ Concerning translations, there is, however, one instance of an accurate translation of an Achaemenid royal inscription found in Greek literature. Onesicritus, who joined Alexander in his expedition to the East, presents a translation of Darius' tomb inscription that closely resembles the original Old Persian.⁴⁴ He used only a few words to convey the extensive inscription, which primarily focuses on the Great King's royal virtues, which writers such as Herodotus and Xenophon previously depicted as Persian cultural norms.⁴⁵ And again, the common knowledge of the Greek world is alluded to rather than providing an exact translation. This suggests that Greek writers who purported to have explored the ancient Near East employed monuments with inscriptions as a means to draw upon the shared knowledge of their

³⁸ DROß-KRÜPE 2021, 23–40.

³⁹ BICHLER 2011; BICHLER 2004.

⁴⁰ BNJ 134 F34 = BNJ 139 F51a (= Strab. 15.3.7). See SCHMITT 1992, 32–33.

⁴¹ HEINRICHS 1987 argues that an inscription was originally placed at Cyrus' tomb, while most scholars do not believe that any inscription was attached to the tomb. See ROLLER 2018, 880; SCHMITT 1988; SEIBERT 2004.

⁴² E.g., NAWOTKA 2012 discusses the various titles of the Great King known to Greek writers.

⁴³ At least in the case of the *Histories*, translators are a tool of the narrator Herodotus. See BRANDWOOD 2020, 32

⁴⁴ BNJ 134 F35 (= Strab. 15.3.8). For the debate on accuracy of Onesicritus' translation, see DEGEN 2019, 76 fn. 108.

⁴⁵ Onesicritus (BNJ 134 F35) states that archery and horsemanship were virtues of Darius. These virtues are also mentioned in the Old Persian inscription on the lower part of Darius' tomb in Naqsh-e Rostam (Dnb) and were recognised as integral to Persian education by Herodotus and Xenophon (Hdt. 1.136.2; Xen. Cyr. 1.2.8).

Greek audience. These monuments effectively serve to enhance the narrative and provide a Persian décor for Greek accounts.

The second set of descriptions detailing ancient Near Eastern monuments with inscriptions in Classical Greek literature serve as tools to bolster the narratives put forth by their authors. Reinhold Bichler and Stephanie West have shown that Herodotus references inscriptions to uphold his assertions regarding ethnic practices and political structures.⁴⁶ This is evident in his discussion of the inscription attributed to Pharaoh Cheops regarding the construction of the Great Pyramid, as well as his portrayal of the tomb of Alyattes in Lydia as an edifice erected by prostitutes.⁴⁷ These instances demonstrate how monuments were utilised by Herodotus to reinforce the themes and arguments he presented in his work. In addition to these examples of monuments being utilised to support Herodotus' narrative, there is an intriguing case in the *Histories* where an Ionian rock relief, likely identified with Karabel A, is linked to the Egyptian pharaoh Sesostris.⁴⁸ It has been proposed that local inhabitants divided into two opposing factions held differing interpretations of this monument. One faction associated it with Memnon, expressing a pro-Persian sentiment, while the other connected it with Sesostris, representing an anti-Persian sentiment.⁴⁹ Even if this interpretation remains speculative, Herodotus skilfully used the debate surrounding the historicising of the monument to his advantage, effectively shining a critical light on the assertions of universalism made by the Teispids and Achaemenids regarding their empire.⁵⁰

Herodotus, Xenophon, and Ctesias are not the only authors who relied on the collective knowledge of the Greeks to craft historical accounts of the ancient Near East and depict its monuments. One such example is Callisthenes and other writers associated with Alexander, who linked Xerxes I to the destruction of temples in Babylon, a claim that lacks confirmation from both ancient Near Eastern and Classical sources.⁵¹ Similarly, in the 2nd century AD, Pausanias provided a description of the religious landscape of Ionia, attributing the destruction of numerous sanctuaries to the Persians. Nevertheless, archaeological findings have indicated that some of these sanctuaries were actually destroyed at a later period, casting doubt on the

⁴⁶ BICHLER 2007; WEST 1985. See further ALLGAIER 2022, 17–86 for an extensive discussion of all inscriptions mentioned in the *Histories*.

⁴⁷ Hdt. 1.93.2–4 (tomb of Alyattes), 2.125.6–126 (inscription on the pyramid). See also BICHLER 2008. Another example is the tomb inscription of queen Nitrocris (Hdt. 1.187) that Darius saw in Babylon, which serves Herodotus as an opportunity to highlight this ruler's greedy character.

⁴⁸ Hdt. 2.106.2.

⁴⁹ SERGUEENKOVA, ROJAS 2016–17, 154–155.

⁵⁰ ROLLINGER 2021, 200–201. On the Achaemenid concept of universalism, see DEGEN 2022, 332–402; ROLLINGER, DEGEN 2021, and its reflection in Herodotus' *Histories*, see BICHLER, ROLLINGER 2017, 7–10.

⁵¹ See DEGEN 2022, 279–294. An overview on the debate concerning Xerxes' alleged destruction of Babylonian sanctuaries is provided by DEGEN 2024b, 1–3; ROLLINGER 2018b; WAERZEGGERS 2018.

accuracy of Pausanias' account.⁵² When considering this tradition while evaluating the value of Greek literature as a source for the cultural landscapes of the ancient Near East, it is fair to say that Greek authors were inclined to narrate stories more connected to specific monuments rather than providing strictly historically and archaeologically accurate descriptions.

By placing the inscription of Sardanapalus within this context, it appears that Callisthenes purposefully connected a monument in Cilicia to this legendary ruler. The story of Sardanapalus was well-known among the Greeks, with references to this mythical figure found in the works of Herodotus, Aristophanes' play *Birds*, as well as writings by Hellanicus, Choirilos, Amyntas, and finally Ctesias.⁵³ To be sure, the inscription associated with Sardanapalus does not offer any new insights beyond what was already familiar to a Greek audience, but only reconfirmed their existing knowledge about this hedonist king. Ctesias' depiction of Sardanapalus as a decadent ruler aligns closely with that of Callisthenes.⁵⁴ As a respected author even prior to his involvement with the Macedonian court, Callisthenes was likely familiar with the works of Ctesias and other writers who delved into the legend of Sardanapalus. Therefore, it is not surprising that he depicted an ancient Near Eastern monument in a style reminiscent of Classical Greek authors, instead of reflecting on appropriate conduct in a report designed for a Greek readership.

If our interpretation is correct, the Greek authors' portrayal of the inscription of Sardanapalus adheres to established literary conventions by building on the shared knowledge of the Greeks rather than offering an exact representation of an existing monument or historical events. Thus, the available descriptions serve as something other than evidence for a contemporary Greek discourse shaped in reaction to the ancient Near Eastern context or the actual content of inscriptions found on monuments of ancient Near Eastern rulers. It would be wrong to view hedonism solely as a concept stemming from Greek philosophy based on this inscription. In the next step, we shall explore evidence of hedonism within ancient Near Eastern thought and its potential connection to Sardanapalus.

Ashurbanipal and Sardanapalus as Hedonistic Kings

As outlined above, the image of a hedonistic king Sardanapalus clearly existed in Greek literature before Ctesias. However, it is hard to judge what stories about Sardanapalus already circulated before Ctesias. If we assume for the moment that the alleged inscription of Sardanapalus is somehow based on a real inscription from the ancient Near East and if we take Strabo's reference to Choirilos into account the *terminus ante quem* for the transfer of the hedonistic inscription of Sardanapalus to Greek literature is the moment when Choirilos wrote

⁵² KÖSTER 2020.

⁵³ Hdt. 2.150; Aristoph. Av. 1021.

⁵⁴ *FGrHist* 688 F1.23–27 (= D.S. 2.23.1–2).

about this inscription and informed us that such an inscription is found at least in two places. If this holds true, it seems most probable that the later accounts built on Choirilos and took the information from him that this inscription exists in various places as well.

As one of the authors has argued earlier, hedonism is not a sophisticated philosophy, but rather a very natural and simple approach to life. Enjoy what is good and avoid what is bad might be a kind of natural philosophy that most people would agree to. The idea that life should be enjoyable is found in the earliest Sumerian literary texts and the reminder “Enjoy life!” is also connected to ideas of the brevity of life.⁵⁵ A recent survey and discussion of the Neo-Assyrian evidence for feasts has demonstrated that banquets and feasts played a prominent role in royal self-presentation.⁵⁶ Therefore we can clearly state that the Neo-Assyrian kings, at least sometimes, presented themselves as hedonistic kings, with a taste for luxury and consumed the best food and drink. Based on these findings, arguments about the special Greekness of Sardanapalus’ hedonistic inscription can no longer be upheld.

However, we can still ask how Sardanapalus became the prototype of a hedonistic king. The publication of Papyrus Amherst 63 demonstrated that stories of Ashurbanipal and his brother Šamaš-šuma-ukīn also circulated outside the Greek tradition – and this also hints at the possibility that these stories about hedonistic kings reached the Greeks via Aramaic texts. In Papyrus Amherst 63 it is not Ashurbanipal, but rather his brother to whom a hedonistic lifestyle is attributed and the early Greek tradition that distinguishes two distinct Sardanapali might be influenced by such stories. The papyrus states that he resides in Babylon drinking the best wine and eating the best food while his only duty is to send the tribute to Nineveh (Col. XVII) and he later ends his life in a fire.⁵⁷ However, we do not know exactly how old these traditions are, as the papyrus dates to the 3rd century BCE the possibility that it was influenced by Greek accounts of these events cannot be excluded. However, it seems more probable that it contains older material as it still distinguishes two kings, while in the later Greek traditions elements of both brothers blur into the figure of Sardanapalus.

The only piece of textual evidence that clearly connects Ashurbanipal with the hedonistic Sardanapalus is found in the accounts of the seventh campaign of Ashurbanipal. The sixth and the following seventh “campaign,” as recounted in the text, are rather a reaction to Elamite attacks than proper campaigns. In the first part of the text, the evil deeds of the Elamite king Urtaku are described, who responded to Ashurbanipal’s friendship and help during a famine with an attack, which was easily repelled by sending out an Assyrian army. The text does not report anything about a battle but rather states that fear overwhelmed Urtaku and that he returned to Elam with his army. However, this is not the end of the story as Urtaku and his

⁵⁵ FINK 2014, 242–246.

⁵⁶ TARHAN 2024.

⁵⁷ STEINER, NIMS 1985.

minions are heavily punished by the gods and they all die by divine punishment at the same time.⁵⁸

While these miracles should have signalled the Elamites that the gods do not want them to confront Ashurbanipal, Teumman, the successor of Urtaku, gathers an army and attacks Assyria. The war against Teumman is described in the seventh campaign. And here we encounter the hedonistic advice of the goddess Ishtar. Ashurbanipal is residing in Arbela, where one of the main sanctuaries of Ishtar was situated, and during festivities for the goddess, the king is informed about the attack of Teumman. He falls into despair, speaks a prayer to Ishtar and asks her for help. Ishtar now speaks to Ashurbanipal and tells him that he should not fear and that she will accept his prayer (Ashurbanipal 3, v 45b – 48a). The hedonistic message, which is the focus of our interest here, is delivered through a dream interpreter, who received a night vision from Ishtar and reported it to Ashurbanipal. Ishtar informs Ashurbanipal that she will take care of this battle and gives him the following order:

*akanna lū ašbāta ašar maškanīka akul akalu šiti kurunnu ningūtu šukun nu 'id
ilūtī*

You will stay in your palace where you are residing. Eat food, drink the choicest drink, make party, revere my divinity.⁵⁹

Conclusion

As we see, Ishtar tells Ashurbanipal to behave the way the classical authors depict Sardanapalus. He is told to stay in his palace, not to go on campaign, which is troublesome for him, and to focus on food, drink, party, and worship of Ishtar. Combined with the above-mentioned Aramaic rendering of Ashurbanipal as SRBNBL, which provides us with a link between the names Ashurbanipal and Sardanapalus, this passage provides us with a good explanation of the origin of the hedonistic king Sardanapalus. Greek authors may have gained access to this story through their contacts with the Assyrian Empire, either through raids in the Levant or as mercenaries in the service of Saïte kings against the Assyrians.⁶⁰ Additionally, texts such as Ashurbanipal's account of his campaigns were widely disseminated throughout the Empire,⁶¹ and as the tale of two brothers mentioned above demonstrates, also an Aramaic interface between the Assyrian and Greek traditions is probable. Given that Greek authors had

⁵⁸ RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 3, IV 15–IV 61.

⁵⁹ Ashurbanipal 3, v 61–63. Translation slightly adapted from RINAP 5/1, 70. While RINAP translates “Eat food, drink wine, make music” we opt for “make party” or “celebrate a festival” which makes more sense for Ashurbanipal, who is perfectly capable of organizing a festival, but not necessarily of performing music. Compare CAD N2, 218 s.v. *nigūtu* where the phrase *nigūtu šakānu* is rendered as “to hold a festival”. The word *kurunnu* is translated as “wine” or “beer”, but the context makes it clear that it is “a choice kind” (CAD K, 579) of drink.

⁶⁰ FANTALKIN, LYTLE 2016; SCHÜTZE 2023, 21–25; 35–43.

⁶¹ PARKER 2011, 364–365; RADNER 2005, 234–250.

access to a version of this story the thing that would have struck them most is that the male king is sitting in his palace while a woman is taking over his manly duties. The fact that the king stayed in his palace is somehow blurred in the inscription, as the story of Ishtar is told, but then the text continues in the first person as if Ashurbanipal himself went on campaign. While it is impossible to give a final proof that this extraordinary passage actually is the nucleus around which the stories about Sardanapalus emerged. It seems to us that it provides us with the 'best explanation'⁶² for the emergence of the image of Sardanapalus as an effeminate and hedonistic king in Greek historiography.

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⁶² See FINK 2022, 67 where five criteria for the evaluation of literary parallels are suggested and discussed.

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