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14





In the Shade of the Palm

Studies on the Ancient Near East in Honor of Simonetta Ponchia

Edited by Luigi Turri, Sebastian Fink, Silvia Gabrieli, Giovanni-Battista Lanfranchi, Robert Rollinger and Silvia Salin

Zaphon

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Gilgamesh in Rome

Near Eastern and Persian Memories in Claudius Aelianus

Luisa Prandi

In the past I have studied Aelianus (2nd–3rd cent. AD) in order to evaluate his interest in Greek history, and saw that although his works *Varia Historia* and *De natura animalium* (below *VH* and *NA*) belong to the *varia* category and have deliberately fragmented external forms, lacking in logical structure and thematic consistency, they express the author's opinions, beliefs and deeply held convictions on a number of topics[1]. Among other things, Aelianus displays coherent ideas on atheism, tyrannical regimes and Alexander the Great[2].

References to personalities and matters regarding the Ancient Near East are numerically very scarce and apparently unimportant; there are only two passages in *VH* and three in *NA*[3]. However, I think that the presence among them of an account of the birth of *Gilgamos* (*NA* 12 21), which constitutes a *hapax* in *C*lassical literature, justifies paying closer attention to the Near-Eastern scenario[4].

In two cases the information recorded by Aelianus concerning the situation in the Near East prior to the Persians' arrival regards the Assyrians: the marriageable girls gathered together in the same city and the auction for those interested in marriage (*VH* 4 1); and the seizure of power by Semiramis, with reference to the historian Dinon as the source (*VH* 7 1). Aelianus then alludes briefly, without explicit localization, to the messenger eagle of the gods who signalled to Gordius that his son Midas would become king (*NA* 13 1)[5]. Lastly, *Elimaia chora* is said to be the seat of a temple of *Anaitis*, where domesticated lions dwell (*NA 12* 23)[6].

With respect to this information the passage concerning *Gilgamos*, located in Babylon (*NA* 12 21), takes on particular importance. It is often cited by scholars

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[1] Prandi, 2005. The first part of this paper's title clearly refers to the fact that although Claudius Aelianus wrote in Greek he was a Roman. See Kindstrand, 1998 and Henkelman, 2011 for a general account.

[2] Cf. respectively Prandi, 2005: 70–71, 71–80 and 80–90. Aelianus also manifests his opinions in his much less numerous references to Roman affairs, cf. Schettino, 2005.

[3] *VH* 4 1, 7 1; *NA* 12 21 and 13 1. Cf. Prandi, 2005: 126. To these must be added *NA* 12 23 which I have found recently.

[4] I am pleased to say that this paper has a small topical affinity with Ponchia, 2020.

[5] This tale is accompanied by that of the wolf that lured Gelon out of school, saving him from the building's collapse.

[6] Henkelman, 2011a: 162–163 suggests that Aelianus relied on the same source as for *NA* 12 21 on *Gilgamos*, taken to be Ctesias. Cf. note 38.

of the Ancient Near East but I believe that further detailed analysis and commentary on its various components is nevertheless justified. For comparisons with similar elements present in Near Eastern sources concerning the person of Gilgamesh I gladly accept the parallels that have already been identified. Much of the *NA* text is difficult to understand, and therefore also to interpret, but fortunately not in this case, except (as we shall see) for uncertainty about one of the proper names it contains.

This is the text of Aelianus[7]:

> ἴδιον δὲ τῶν ζῴων καὶ ἡ φιλανθρωπία. αἰετὸς γοῦν ἔθρεψε βρέφος. καὶ εἰπεῖν τὸν πάντα λόγον ἐθέλω, ὡς ἂν γένοιτο μάρτυς ὧν προεθέμην. Βαβυλωνίων βασιλεύοντος Σευηχόρου[8] Χαλδαῖοι λέγουσι τὸν γενόμενον ἐκ τῆς ἐκείνου θυγατρὸς τὴν βασιλείαν ἀφαιρήσεσθαι τὸν πάππον. καὶ Χαλδαίων μὴν ἦν τὸ εἰρημένον θέσπισηα. τοῦτο ἐκεῖνος πέφρικε, καὶ ἵνα εἴπω τι καὶ ὑποπαίσας Ἀκρίσιος γίνεται ἐς τὴν παῖδα· ἐφρούρει γὰρ πικρότατα. λάθρᾳ δὲ ἡ παῖς (ἦν γὰρ τοῦ Βαβυλωνίου σοφώτερον τὸ χρεών) τίκτει ὑποπλησθεῖσα ἔκ τινος ἀνδρὸς ἀφανοῦς. τοῦτο οὖν οἱ φυλάττοντες δέει τοῦ βασιλέως ἔρριψαν ἐκ τῆς ἀκροπόλεως: ἦν γὰρ ἐνταῦθα ἀφειργμένη ἡ προειρημένη. οὐκοῦν ἀετὸς τὴν ἔτι τοῦ παιδὸς καταφορὰν ὀξύτατα ἰδών, πρὶν ἢ τῇ γῇ προσαραχθῆναι τὸ βρέφος, ὑπῆλθεν αὐτὸ καὶ τὰ νῶτα ὑπέβαλε, καὶ κομίζει ἐς κῆπόν τινα, καὶ τίθησι πεφεισμένως εὖ μάλα. ὁ τοίνυν τοῦ χώρου μελεδωνὸς τὸ καλὸν παιδίον θεασάμενος ἐρᾷ αὐτοῦ καὶ τρέφει: καὶ καλεῖται Γίλγαμος, καὶ βασιλεύει Βαβυλωνίων. εἰ δέ [p. 304] τῳ δοκεῖ μῦθος τοῦτο, σύμφημι πειρώμενος ἐς ἰσχὺν κατεγνωκέναι αὐτόν: καὶ Ἀχαιμένη μὴν τὸν Πέρσην, ἀφ᾽ οὗ καὶ κάτεισιν ἡ τῶν Περσῶν εὐγένεια, αἰετοῦ τρόφιμον ἀκούω γενέσθαι.
>
> "A love of man is another characteristic of animals. At any rate an eagle fostered a baby. And I want to tell the whole story so that I may have evidence of my proposition. When *Seuechoros* was king of Babylon the Chaldeans foretold that the son born of his daughter would wrest the kingdom

[7] I follow the edition of García Valdés, M. / Llera Fueyo, L. A. / Rodríguez-Noriega Guillén, L., 2009. I have not taken into consideration the rewriting of Aelianus' text repeatedly proposed by Pettinato (cf. Pettinato, 1992a: 140–141; Pettinato, 1992b: 78–79 and Pettinato, 2004: LXXXVII–III), which adds arbitrary elements and interpretations not present in a literal translation of the manuscript (cf. also note 12). For a critique, see Silvestri, 2017: 142 note 10.

[8] Part of the manuscript tradition features Εὐηχόρου instead of Σευηχόρου, but other minor textual variants (Σευκχόρου or Σακχόρου) in any case contain an initial Σ. Both of the Teubner editions of Aelianus, Hercher, 1864 and García Valdés, M. / Llera Fueyo, L. A. / Rodríguez-Noriega Guillén, L., 2009, prefer the reading Σευηχόρου. Cf. also notes 12 and 21.

> from his grandfather. From the Chaldeans themselves came the prophecy. This made him afraid and (if I may be allowed the small jest) he played Acrisius to his daughter: he put the strictest of watches upon her. For all that, since fate was cleverer than the king of Babylon, the girl became a mother, being pregnant by some obscure man. So the guards from fear of the king hurled the infant from the citadel, for that was where the girl was imprisoned. Now an eagle which saw with its piercing eye the child while still falling, before it was dashed to the earth, flew beneath it, flung its back under it, and conveyed it to some garden and set it down with the utmost care. But when the keeper of the place saw the pretty baby, he fell in love with it and nursed it; and it was called Gilgamos and became king of Babylon. If anyone regards this as a legend, I, after testing it to the best of my ability, concur in the verdict. I have heard however that Achaemenes the Persian, from whom the Persian aristocracy are descended, was nursed by an eagle."

As with most of the accounts in *NA*, the key feature of the episode discussed by Aelianus is a characteristic of animals, in this case their innate *philanthropia*, in particular the feeding and raising of a child by an eagle. The story itself is enclosed between an introductory sentence and a final comment that do not appear particularly consistent with each other: first Aelianus says that he wants to recount the whole *logos* (story) because it constitutes *martys* (evidence) for his initial statement, which suggests that he finds the episode credible; then, however, he says that if someone considers it a *mythos* (fable), on closer inspection he is in agreement. This scepticism, which could be a matter of style[9], seems diminished by the comment that he has also heard that Achaemenes, founding father of Persian power, had an eagle as a nurse. It should also be noted that in the *Gilgamos* story the eagle did not actually feed the child, but carefully saved him from certain

[9] Henkelman, 2006: 820 notes this internal contradiction and goes so far as to hypothesize the need for a negation before the verb *symphemi* (I agree). However, intervening on texts is always a risky operation and methodologically not decisive. On the other hand, it seems more useful to note that in NA Aelianus repeatedly discusses the credibility of a tradition defined as *mythos* and adopts different positions on it (I had a fruitful conversation on this with Arnaud Zucker, whom I thank). In particular, expressions similar to those at 12 21 are found at 1 47: τοῦτο ἔοικε μύθῳ μέν, εἰρήσθω δ' οὖν τῇ τοῦ θεοῦ αἰδοῖ (this looks like a fable but is referred to the divinity in homage) and 12 38: τοῦτο δὲ εἴ τῳ δοκεῖ μῦθος εἶναι, δοκείτω, ἐμὲ δ' οὖν περὶ ζῴου λεχθὲν καὶ μὴ λαθὸν οὐκ ἐλύπησεν εἰρημένον (if to some this seems like a fable, let them believe this; as for me, I do not regret having reported this account). Although he then writes 15 11: μύθους δὲ ἐῶ καὶ μυθολογίαν ἄλλοις (but I leave the fables and fantastic tales to others) this is evidently in conflict with the confidence with which elsewhere he recounts tales and traditions he himself defines as *mythoi*. I wonder if Aelianus also wanted to demonstrate *polikilia* (variety), his programme as a writer, in the way he expresses himself and comments on the truthfulness of his accounts.

death, laying him down in a garden where the person in charge found him and then raised him – whereas the brief reference to Achaemenes is based on the supposed perfect correspondence between these tales[10]. These narrative discrepancies should perhaps not be over-emphasized, but neither should they be ignored.

The *Gilgamos* episode is clearly set in the city of Babylon, whose name is mentioned three times: his grandfather *Seuechoros* was king of the Babylonians and is referred to using the Babylonian ethnos; *Gilgamos* later became king of Babylon. Furthermore, it is the Chaldeans who officially prophesy to *Seuechoros* that his daughter's son would take control of his kingdom.

Aelianus explicitly parallels the situation of *Seuechoros* with that of Acrisius, referring with this name to the story of Danaë. The comparison appears appropriate only for the part relating to the woman's segregation and her pregnancy, because whereas Danae's union with Zeus generated Perseus, the anonymous daughter of *Seuechoros* had *Gilgamos* from an unknown father. The *Gilgamos* story also clearly resembles that of Cyrus, exposed by his grandfather Astyages in response to a very similar omen (Herodot. 1 107–130).

If we consider the basic contents of the narrative, shorn of the author's premise and comments, it presents *Gilgamos* as an exceptional figure: the prophecy of his rise to power, his miraculous rescue, his charm as a child and the success he achieved as an adult.

The Near-Eastern attestations of the stories involving Gilgamesh do not refer to a single epoch, geographical origin or group of events[11]. On the other hand, the stories that have come down to us tell little or nothing of his birth and therefore do not allow careful comparison with the passage just discussed. The testimony of Aelianus contains certain peculiarities that do not seem in line with this tradition, even in its varied entirety.

– The name of the king who is the basis of this story, *Seuechoros*, shows no indisputable similarity to the names in the Gilgamesh saga[12].
– *Gilgamos* was the son of a king's daughter and an unknown man[13]. Gilgamesh's origin is variously narrated, from divine on the part of the mother, the goddess Ninsun, to merely human and in no way illustrious. Gilgamesh is in

[10] Already noted in Henkelman, 2006: 821 and 837.

[11] I lack the preparation – and also the motive – to discuss in detail this material and the problems it raises. For an outline see George, 2003. Cf. also Pettinato, 1992b and Pettinato, 2004; Sallaberger, 2008.

[12] Although proposals for such similarities have been made. Cf. Pettinato, 1992b: 140; De Breucker, 2010; Silvestri, 2017: 143, who in the Aelianus manuscript tradition prefer the reading Εὐηχόρου (see note 8), considered a transcription of the name Enmerkar. Cf. Henkelman, 2006: 819 for motivated reservations and doubts.

[13] The expression ἔκ τινος ἀνδρὸς ἀφανοῦς might also be taken to indicate a mysterious birth, hence perhaps divine, as suggested by Henkelman, 2006: 830 note 52 and Silvestri, 2017: 143 note 11.

fact earthly in the Hittite tradition[14], while the notion of his obscure origin is clearly present in the *Sumerian King List*: in the series of the rulers of Uruk, after Enmerkar are listed, with the notation "divine", Lugalbanda and Dumuzi and Gilgamesh himself, of whom however it is specified that his father is unknown[15].

– The kingship of *Gilgamo*s and that of his maternal grandfather are linked with the city of Babylon, while Uruk was Gilgamesh's seat of power.
– *Gilgamos* was saved by an eagle, while in the saga of Gilgamesh this creature has no role.

Instead, contacts of various kinds, however superficial, exist with other Near Eastern personages or topical situations. An eagle is present and acts as an assistant to Etana, ruler of Kiš and protagonist of another great saga, although not in events closely resembling that narrated by Aelianus[16]. The exposure of a child destined for kingship, with uncertainties about his ancestry and with a role for a gardener figure, is a widespread narrative situation, from Sargon to the aforementioned Cyrus[17].

As for comparisons with other accounts from the Greek-Latin world, they simply do not exist; Aelianus is the only Classical author we know of who mentioned *Gilgamos*[18]. This exclusivity clearly raises questions regarding the channels of provenance and conservation of this record that emerged in the Roman imperial era. In my opinion, a possible answer may be obtained by reconsidering from this perspective the meagre material concerning the Near East to be found in the works of Aelianus. In fact, while it would be risky to propose a source for information on Gordius and Midas, or on the Assyrians' matrimonial practices[19],

[14] Cf. Pettinato, 1992b: 79.

[15] This affinity is noted in Pettinato, 1992: 78–79 and Pettinato, 2004: LXXXVII–III; cf. also Silvestri, 2017: 142–143.

[16] Kinnier Wilson, 2007: 51 thinks that Aelianus's story derives from confusion between Gilgamesh and Balih, son of Etana, because his birth took place after Etana had helped an eagle that risked death and had been guided by it to the tree of life, necessary for his wife to give birth. Critical reflections in Henkelman, 2006: 840 note 77, which also do not deny the affinities (840–841). Silvestri, 2017: 142 note 10 only reports the relationship with the eagle in the cases of Achaemenes and Etana.

[17] Cf. Henkelman, 2006: 832–833, 836–837 and 845–846; Silvestri, 2017. Cf. also note 45.

[18] No doubts have been expressed that *Gilgamos* refers to Gilgamesh. The widely-noted absence of other passages in Greek or Latin literature is confirmed by research in the *TLG* and *TLL*. But this lack of evidence does not mean a lack of knowledge, in particular with regard to Ancient Greek culture. There is an extensive modern bibliography on the influence of Near Eastern sagas on Greek epics. For discussion on Gilgamesh cf. Di Benedetto, 1994: 312–318 and Vetta, 1994.

[19] On the Elamite temple of *Anaitis* (*NA* 12 23) cf. note 43.

the author himself indicates that what he writes about Semiramis came from Dinon.

To my knowledge, the proposals advanced to date concerning the source of the *Gilgamos* episode put forward either Ctesias, author of *Persikà*[20] or Berossus, author of *Babyloniakà*[21]. Of the two, the latter is more tenuous, since it should be remembered that Berossus does not mention Gilgamesh in the surviving fragments of his writing, and neither does Aelianus mention Berossus as a primary source of his work[22]. The former seems more likely, not least because Aelianus repeatedly cites Ctesias[23].

The possibility that Aelianus drew from a tradition present in a work on Persian history is certainly worthy of consideration, but I believe there are reasons to propose a different author, namely Dinon. He is known to us as the writer of *Persikà* active in the 4th century BC[24]. Aelianus attributes to him information regarding Semiramis, and therefore the history of the Assyrians. The inclusion of this people in a work on the Persians, however, ties Dinon to his predecessor Ctesias and may seem to be a professional cliché[25]. In any case, it leaves open the possibility that other peoples who preceded the Persians were also included in his work. There is also evidence to suggest that Dinon enjoyed a certain fortune between the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire[26] and may have interested

[20] Henkelman, 2006.

[21] The Berossus fragment is 680F5a, that preserves a list of kings but which, it must be borne in mind, derives from the Armenian version of the work of Eusebius. See Henkelman, 2006 for bibliography. See also Pettinato, 1992a, 140–141, who is sure of the identification of *Euechsios* in the list with Enmerkar (as noted above, cf. note 12, he has reconstructed a text by Aelianus in which the name Enmerkar appears). De Breucker, 2010's comment on 680F5a expresses agreement with Pettinato in identifying one of the kings mentioned (whose name is *Evexios*) with Enmerkar; on another, I think unfounded, identification see note 12. Sallaberger, 2008: 42 and 122, suggests Berossus as the source and cites correctly the text of Aelianus. No one has given a methodologically clear demonstration of this dependence.

[22] Cf. Henkelman, 2006: 821–823, who has already refuted the arguments made in favour of Berossus as the source.

[23] Cf. note 30. Cf. Henkelman, 2006: 823–824.

[24] Cf. Lenfant, 2009: 51–253, who underlines the value of his work and what is known about him, and Almagor, 2018, which instead is minimalist in attributing credibility to the scarce biographical information on the author and in evaluating the originality of his work.

[25] Cf. Lenfant, 2009: 128–130, who notes that Ctesias' work on the Persians also began with the Assyrians, and also considers 690F8 to be similar, although with great caution.

[26] Cf. Almagor, 2018, at the end of *Biographical Essay*.

a writer such as Aelianus[27]. The latter mentions his name explicitly only twice[28], but we should not overlook the fact that information about the Persian empire is frequent (if anonymous) and occupies a special place in the disparate and apparently random *mare magnum* of his works[29]. Not only do Persian events comprise a considerable overall volume compared to those concerning other non-Hellenic peoples, but in these accounts Persian characters, often the kings themselves, are the main protagonists.

Such a conspicuous presence suggests that Aelianus paid careful attention to sources of information about Persia. In order to ascertain whether Aelianus cites Herodotus, Xenophon or Ctesias – all writers that he mentions many times – more for news regarding Persia[30] and whether there is reason to hypothesize other sources, it seems to me most interesting and useful to focus on a single significant passage (rather than considering the results of a quantitative review). This is the episode of Xerxes and the tomb of Belus in Babylon (*VH* 13 3), which in a manner not entirely different from that regarding *Gilgamos* considered above conserves echoes of a remote past[31] and about which a paradigmatic assessment may be made with regard to its provenance[32].

This is the text of Aelianus:

> Ξέρξης ὁ Δαρείου παῖς τοῦ Βήλου τοῦ ἀρχαίου διασκάψας τὸ μνῆμα πύελον ὑελίνην εὗρεν, ἔνθα ἦν κείμενος ὁ νεκρὸς ἐν ἐλαίῳ. οὐ μὴν πεπλήρωτο ἡ πύελος, ἐνέδει δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦ χείλους ἐς παλαιστὴν ἴσως. παρέκειτο δὲ τῇ πυέλῳ καὶ στήλη βραχεῖα, ἔνθα ἐγέγραπτο ΄τῷ ἀνοίξαντι τὸ μνῆμα καὶ μὴ ἀναπληρώσαντι τὴν πύελον οὐκ ἔστιν ἄμεινον.᾽ ἀναγνοὺς δὲ ὁ Ξέρξης ἔδεισε, καὶ προσέταξεν ἐπιχέαι ἔλαιον τὴν ταχίστην: οὐ μὴν πεπλήρωτο. ὃ δὲ πάλιν προσέταξεν ἐπιχέαι. αὔξησιν δὲ οὐκ ἐλάμβανεν, ἕως ἀπεῖπε μάτην ἀναλίσκων τὸ ἐπιχεόμενον. κατακλείσας δὲ τὸν τάφον, ἀπηλλάγη ἀδημονῶν. οὐ διεψεύσατο δὲ ἡ στήλη ὅσα προεῖπεν: ἀθροίσας γὰρ ἑβδομήκοντα

[27] Another author of a *varia* work, like Athenaeus, cites Dinon many times, in combination with references to Ctesias and Heraclides, another *Persikà* author, cf. Zecchini, 1989: 185–187 for an assessment of the passages.

[28] In *VH* 7 1 (690F7) for Semiramis and in *NA* 17 10 (690F22) for information on Ethiopian animals.

[29] Cf. Prandi, 2005: 121–126 and relative notes for a review of the passages, and 155 for a summary. The quantity of information about Persia is also evident from the list prepared by Henkelman, 2011 (esp. 162–169 and 172–174).

[30] Herodotus is mentioned 14 times, Ctesias 11 and Xenophon 7, cf. Prandi, 2005: 52–53 and 57–59 for a list of passages and their contents.

[31] Cf. George, 2010, esp. 477–479 with respect to the Mesopotamian reminiscences (which also regard King Enmerkar) and the ritual precedents.

[32] Taking up again what I wrote in Prandi, 2005: 134–136, and enquiring more deeply into the source of the information.

μυριάδας ἐπὶ τοὺς Ἕλληνας, κακῶς ἀπήλλαξεν, εἶτα ἐπανελθὼν αἴσχιστα ἀνθρώπων ἀπέθανεν, ἀποσφαγεὶς νύκτωρ ἐν τῇ εὐνῇ ὑπὸ τοῦ υἱοῦ.

"Xerxes, the son of Darius, having dug his way into the funerary monument of the ancient Belus, found a glass sarcophagus, in which the body lay in olive oil. The sarcophagus was not full, the oil was perhaps an inch short of the rim. Near the sarcophagus lay a small stela on which was written: "For the man who opens the tomb and does not fill the sarcophagus, things will not get better!" When Xerxes read this, he was afraid and gave orders to pour in oil at once. But the sarcophagus would not fill. He gave orders to pour once more. But the level would not rise, and he gave up after wasting what was poured in fruitlessly. Closing the tomb, he retreated in dismay. The stela did not lie in its prediction: having gathered 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."

The narrative seems simple and clear. Xerxes entered the tomb of Belus and found the corpse immersed in olive oil inside a glass sarcophagus; a nearby inscription threatened an unpleasant fate for one who opened the tomb and did not top up the oil. Notwithstanding prompt and repeated attempts, the oil poured in was never enough and Xerxes – at first frightened and then worried – gave up trying. The prophecy written on the stele was fulfilled: his military expedition against the Greeks was unsuccessful, and then he was murdered by his son.

The pre-Aelianus reports of Xerxes' behaviour in Babylon fall into two neat categories: accounts of Persian history by writers such as Herodotus and Ctesias[33], and those narrating the story of Alexander the Great, such as Diodorus, Strabo and Arrian[34]. The latter mostly attribute to Xerxes the destruction of a building in Babylon, sometimes said to be a temple and sometimes a tomb of considerable size, and refer to Alexander's plan to restore it. Aelianus has no real points of contact with these[35]. Comparison with Herodotus leads to a similar result. The historian, declaring that he follows a Chaldean tradition, writes of imposing buildings and recounts that Xerxes stole a solid gold statue and had killed a priest who opposed him[36].

For his part, Ctesias, in whose text the tomb is said to be of *Belitana*, spoke of a glass case that Xerxes was unable to fill with oil but also of the Babylonians' defection, and seems to frame the episode in a matter of internal Persian politics[37].

[33] Herodot. 1 181.2–5 and 183.3; Ctes. 688F13(26), known from the summary by Photius.
[34] Diod. 17 112. 3; Strab. 16 1. 5; Arrian. 7 17. 1–4.
[35] For an overview cf. Prandi, 2013: 193.
[36] The Persian king is presented as one who stole statues from temples; Aelianus also presents Xerxes negatively in his work but without reference to this or other topical anti-Persian notions.
[37] Cf. Waerzeggers, 2018 for the relationship between the king and the city.

The fact that we know of this passage by Ctesias only through the summary of Photius makes a complete and definitive comparison with Aelianus impossible, but it may have been used by the latter[38]. However, Aelianus mentions various particularities that do not seem to have been in Ctesias' account[39]: the noticeably different spelling of the name *Belitanas*/*Belos*; Xerxes' brooding existential reflection, not suitable for a desecrator; the prophetic inscription near the sarcophagus; the adverse destiny not only of the expedition against Greece, but also of the king's reign and indeed his life; the number of men who invaded Greece, given as 800 thousand men by Ctesias (688F13.27) and 700 thousand by Aelianus. These are perhaps too many details of which there is no trace in Photius's summary.

In my opinion, this is a traditional picture[40] which in no way excludes the possibility that Aelianus' source was not Ctesias but another writer of *Persikà*. And an author such as Dinon, who combined dependence on his predecessor with originality[41], would seem to be an interesting candidate. I believe that at this point a certain weight may also be given to the fact that (as we have seen above), at the end of the account of *Gilgamos* and in close connection with it, Aelianus recalls the tale that Achaemenes, founder of the Persian dynasty, had been fed by an eagle. The combination of a story from the remote history of the Near East and another from Persian history suggests that Aelianus's perspective was indeed Persian, as were his information channels[42].

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[38] Cf. Lenfant, 2004: LXXXVIII and 265–266, who takes this passage to be F13b of Ctesias. Cf. also Henkelman, 2009: 171; George, 2010: 477–479; Kuhrt, 2014. The possibility that Ctesias had modelled his account of this episode on that of Herodotus 1 187, concerning Darius I and the tomb of Queen Nitocris, is not without interest. Cf. Henkelman, 2011b: 113, 115, 133–134.

[39] Cf. Lenfant, 2004: 265–266, which notes the story's similar trend in these two authors but does not exclude the possibility of other sources in addition to Ctesias. George 2005/2006: 90 also expresses the same opinion; however subsequently George, 2010: 477–479 repeatedly refers to Ctesias and Aelianus together, as if their accounts were identical. Henkelman, 2011b: 114–117 offers an analysis of the concrete details but minimizes the differences and traces back all the story to Ctesias.

[40] I note here that the identification of the buildings of which Herodotus speaks, and of those mentioned by the Alexandrographers, are thorny questions that do not concern my present theme. In Ctesias and Aelianus the narrative makes sense if the king entered a tomb; whether this was an independent construction or located within another, larger structure, is not relevant. The same is true of the Babylonian revolt: how many were involved and when has no consequences for my inquiry; what matters is that Ctesias spoke of it and Aelianus did not.

[41] As noted by Lenfant, 2009: 67–72; cf. also Almagor, 2018, in *Biographical Essay*, who is more inclined to see only imitation.

[42] Cf. Henkelman, 2006: 820 who suggests that the two accounts were derived from the same source.

The hypothesis that Aelianus made use of traditions preserved by Dinon for two events set in Babylon, the story of the birth of *Gilgamos* and the episode of Xerxes and the tomb of Belus[43], merits one further last comment. What seems a small echo of the Gilgamesh saga, perhaps present – if what I have written so far makes sense – in an author like Dinon, derived from previous sources of which we know nothing[44], resurfaced many centuries later, completely isolated and probably not understood[45], in a miscellaneous work by Aelianus. A random, chance occurrence.

What might have brought together two writers that were (as far as we know) so different was perhaps an interest in the Near East. This was a professional interest in a *Persikà* author. It could instead have been due to the contemporary situation of Aelianus, who in his choice of episodes and personages from the Roman world manifests many convergences with themes that were current in the Severian period, in the early 3rd century AD[46].

Addendum

I want to mention here a paper with a very similar title but a very different focus: Smith, S. D., 2022: "Gilgamos in Rome: Aelian NA 12.21". In A. König / R. Langlands / J. Uden (eds.): *Literature and culture in the Roman Empire, 96–235: cross-cultural interactions*. Cambridge / New York. Pp. 328–343.

The scholar closely follows Henkelman 2011 – except for an analytic critic to his emendation to the Aelianus' text (pp. 335–337) – and agrees on Ctesias as the sole source. He mainly lingers on the eagle's role and deals with questions of cultural (and royal) legitimacy, in some way concerning the time in which Aelianus lived.

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[43] The tale about the temple of *Anaitis* (*NA* 12 23) might come from the same source, cf. note 19.

[44] Cf. Henkelman, 2006: summary 847–848, who draws attention to the possibility of oral transmission, which would explain both the differences with the various versions of the Gilgamesh saga and the ingredients shared with other Near-Eastern sagas.

[45] Henkelman, 2006: 836–837 rightly considers both the garden where the newborn *Gilgamos* is laid by the eagle and the gardener who raises him to be "blind" motif. The gardener was an important figure in Near Eastern culture and was often connected with royalty.

[46] Cf. Schettino, 2005: 299–304, who clearly identified the traces of this convergence and comments convincingly on them, and Campanile, 2006: 429, who suggests a link between Aelianus's information on the Persians and the formation of the Sasanian empire in 224 AD. Although he identifies a relationship between Aelianus and the Severian era, the interpretation of Smith 2014 does not seem to contribute elements pertinent to this discussion, because it concerns a level that is ethical rather than political.

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