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Reviews of Books

ESTHER'S REVENGE AT SUSA: FROM SENNACHERIB TO AHASUERUS. By STEPHANIE DALLEY, pp. xvi, 262. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.
doi:10.1017/S1356186308008316

This handsomely-produced book combines various strands of Stephanie Dalley's recent scholarship, notably her work on the relations between Assyria and Judah in the late eighth and seventh century BCE, on the later traditions of Assyria and especially the Assyrian royal family, and on the literary legacy of Assyria. The specialised reader encounters much that is already familiar as Dalley has presented most of the material over the last decade in articles in both academic journals and edited volumes. With this book, however, Dalley intends to reach a wider audience and this is also reflected in her prose: one of her strategies is to provide recurring characters in supporting roles with quasi-Homeric epithets: hence, we encounter "wily" Merodach-baladan, "the turncoat" Nabu-shumu-ishkun, "perfidious" Shamash-shumu-ukin and "fecund" Tashmetum-sharrat¹; this is an interesting technique that should indeed enable her readers to cope better with the wealth of confusingly polysyllabic personal names.

Dalley's central argument is that the Biblical *Book of Esther*, and the associated Purim festival, are informed by Assyrian traditions: "A sequence of events from the reign of Sennacherib to that of Ashurbanipal can broadly be paralleled in the Hebrew book of Esther and accounts for the location of the story in Susa" (p. 193). She sees *Esther* as the end product of an evolution that started with an Assyrian "description of the deeds of mortals", specifically the seventh-century BCE rulers of Assyria, Babylon and Elam, which was immediately transformed into "a myth of divine actions" featuring as its protagonists the gods Ishtar of Nineveh, Marduk and Humban; this myth was then, at a later stage, shaped into "a pseudo-historical tale of mortals", namely Esther, Mordecai and Haman (p. 206). A final chapter entitled 'From History into Myth: Evolution of a Story' (pp. 206–226) attempts to trace this development while the preceding eight chapters provide the foundations for the underlying assumptions.²

¹This case, however, highlights how subjective the choice of these epithets is: for Dalley, Tashmetum-sharrat is the first wife of Sennacherib and the mother of several sons – hence "fecund" – but other scholars see her as a young beauty for which the elderly king fell late in his life, e.g. E. Frahm, *Einleitung in die Sanherib-Inschriften* (Vienna, 1997), p. 4.

²Some corrections are necessary: p. 26, Urartu can hardly be described as North Syrian; p. 46: Characterising Shubria as a buffer against the Scyths would imply a location to the east of Assyria but it is situated at the Tigris headwaters, p. 47. Esarhaddon did not die on the way home from Egypt but rather en route to the Nile (correct p. 98), pp. 58, 110, 225. There is no evidence for Dur-Katlimmu's function as the main residence of Assyrian crown princes, and personal names with the element Yahweh are exclusively attested in those texts dated to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II and hence do not fit Dalley's argument, p. 67. Naqia is the grandmother, not mother, of Ashurbanipal, p. 109. My edition of an 8th-century letter is quoted to support the statement that "royal women often accompanied the king on campaign" but the letter simply concerns a journey of the queen and her household within Assyria, p. 120. The passage concerning possible lamentation priests in Samaria and Hatti is best deleted.

After a brief introduction which describes the genesis of the study (pp. 1–8), the first two chapters (pp. 11–59) offer Dalley's reconstruction of Assyria's political history from the reign of Sargon II (721–705 BCE) to that of his great-grandson Assurbanipal (668–627 BCE, according to Dalley), focusing on the royal family; her engaging narrative distinguishes itself by considering the Assyrian royal women as key protagonists. Dalley's confidence in her ability to correctly attribute various elements of the later Semiramis tradition informs her interpretations of seventh-century Assyrian politics to a high degree (e.g. pp. 42–43). But it must be stressed that when interpreting the sparse contemporary information Dalley does not always rigorously discern between the probable and the vaguely possible, especially when repeating her previous interpretations without retracing the original argument and disregarding critical reactions.³ Her key argument that due to their names, the queens Yaba and Atalya may / must have been related to the royal house of Judah (pp. 15–17, 33 fn. 68, 86–87, 92, 181), first advocated in 1998, remains far from certain and passages like the following cross the boundary to the purely speculative: "If Sennacherib's mother or stepmother and grandmother were Hebrew, he would have had a special sympathy towards the new province of Samaria and the still independent kingdom of Judah to its south" (p. 17). One might as well argue that his stepmother's country was certain to elicit Sennacherib's intense dislike! In addition, Yaba is extremely unlikely to have been Sargon's mother (and therefore Sennacherib's grandmother) if her identification with the later wife of his brother Shalmaneser V, Banitu (advocated by Dalley herself), is accepted. Dalley's historical reconstructions can easily be criticised in detail but this is also because, by including archival materials and later traditions, she steers away from simply repackaging the royal inscriptions in her own words, in contrast to many previous attempts; this makes these two chapters stimulating reading.

The survey of Assyrian political history is continued in the next two chapters, but now with a focus on specific regions: the third chapter considers the uneasy three-way relationship between Assyria, Babylon and Elam in the seventh century BCE ('Troubles in Babylon and Retribution in Susa', pp. 60–82), which according to Dalley provides the historical background for the *Book of Esther*, while the fourth chapter explores how Assyrian narratives may have reached audiences in Egypt and Palestine by analysing Assyria's military, political and cultural presence in these regions ('Dissemination in Palestine and Egypt', pp. 84–111). The emergence of the 26th Dynasty, the successors of Nekho of Sais whom Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal selected as their vassal ruler of Egypt, is too roughly sketched, and Psammetichus I⁴ cannot quite so easily be seen as a loyal Assyrian ally. That he led the Egyptian troops into the battle of Harran in 610 BCE to assist the last Assyrian ruler Ashur-uballit II in his last stand is insufficient evidence for this assertion (p. 103): rather, this was the beginning of the decade-long Babylonian-Egyptian war for the control over Syria and the Levant which Babylon eventually decided in its favour. Whether it was really Assyrians and Babylonians who manned garrisons in Upper Egypt with Judean soldiers (p. 150) is to be doubted; in my mind, Psammetichus I and his successor Nekho II are more likely to be responsible for this.

The fifth chapter ('Some Literature and Its Genres', pp. 112–136) explores various literary genres that may have played a role in Dalley's assumed evolution of the *Book of Esther* (pp. 112–129), notably the so-called *Cultic Commentaries*, Assyrian court narratives surviving in Demotic and Aramaic versions – a fascinating subject that is in need of further and in-depth research – and letters to and from gods. Dalley then examines "certain characteristics of the narrative [of *Esther*] and its participants, showing

There is no doubt that the profession in question is the "Third Man" of a chariot team, p. 146. The Elamite ritual text stems from the mid to late second millennium, not the first millennium.

³A rare instance in which an alternative interpretation is mentioned is on p. 25 fn. 40 where J.E. Reade, "Alexander the Great and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon". *Iraq* 62 (2000), pp. 195–218 is said to be 'a spoof'. It is not.

⁴See most recently O. Perdu, "Psammetique Ier, restaurateur de l'unité nationale et initiateur de renouveau saïte". *Egypte: Afrique et Orient* 28 (2003), pp. 3–12.

that they had good antecedents in cuneiform Babylonian and Assyrian literature of the seventh century” (p. 129), focusing on the role of the heroine, the foreigner abroad and the jester (pp. 129–136); there is no evidence at all from the Neo-Assyrian period that the *aluzinnu*, Dalley’s jester, was “attached to the palace” (p. 132); an unpublished text from mid-second millennium Babylonia can hardly be used as proof of this assumption (p. 132 fn. 52)⁵ and to speak with confidence about “the viewpoint of the Assyrian jester’s art” is rather bold (p. 197). For the acceptance of Dalley’s key hypothesis her thoughts about the *Cultic Commentaries* (pp. 112–120), a Mesopotamian text group of the 1st millennium BCE that summarises the cultic requirements for particular days, are of crucial importance. I remain reluctant whether “in these *Cultic Commentaries* we have the evidence that certain real events were transposed into myths” (p. 118); on the contrary, I am inclined to argue that they show how myth could be reinterpreted to fit contemporary events – this is quite different as it presupposes the existence of the myth, and the case of the *Ordeal of Marduk* (pp. 113–116) is clearly an example for this. Ashurbanipal’s account of the sack of Susa in his royal inscriptions could then be seen to make use of an existing myth about Ishtar and Marduk fighting Humban, rather like Sennacherib’s version of the battle of Halule in 691 alludes to the *Epic of Creation* (E. Weissert’s important work on this topic is used by Dalley herself on pp. 30–31, 115–116).

The sixth chapter is devoted to “Ishtar-of-Nineveh and her Feasts” (pp. 137–162). Many different goddesses are worshipped under the name Ishtar but Dalley is confident that the dates mentioned in the *Book of Esther* (p. 190) enable her to deduce that the Ishtar in question is the goddess of Nineveh, and that the Babylonian month name Tebet is mentioned rather than its Assyrian counterpart Kanun (mentioned briefly as a mere alternative spelling in p. 145 fn. 37) does not seem to trouble her. Dalley is eager to find links between Ishtar’s festivals and Purim and, indeed, there are parallels: alcohol consumption, honey cakes and men and women swapping clothes; but she warns us that “there are such enormous and plentiful gaps in our knowledge of how Purim was celebrated in different times and places” (p. 153) and our knowledge of Ishtar’s feasts is not much better. Nevertheless, elsewhere she is characteristically confident that “the Hebrew book of Esther . . . arose from a festival celebrated by Israelites who had lived in Assyria since 721 BC. In their own way they observed an Assyrian festival of Ishtar, and adopted the rites of Purim into their own culture” (p. 205).

The seventh chapter analyses “Assyrian Words, Phrases, and Customs in the Hebrew Story of Esther” (pp. 165–184) while the eighth chapter explores “Links between Seventh-Century Assyria, the Hebrew Story of Esther, and the Kingdom of Adiabene”, to use the title given in the table of content rather than the much shorter version heading the chapter itself (pp. 185–205). There are some oddities here, such as the earnest consideration whether eating a pastry called “Haman’s ears” may constitute cannibalism (p. 188) and especially the idea that “three very influential groups in the diaspora from the seventh century BC onwards” were devoted to the cult of Ishtar of Nineveh and lobbied for the inclusion of *Esther* into the canonical Bible and the incorporation of Purim into the Jewish calendar (pp. 188–189); this thought is explored later in the book (pp. 219–220) when a passage in the *Samaritan Chronicle II*, stating that the sacred books were taken to Nineveh, is interpreted as indicating that Sargon II [*sic!*] took “the literature as a trophy of conquest” and therefore “had a high regard for Samaritan writings and an interest in studying them” (p. 219); a simpler interpretation would be that it was the resettled people of Samaria who took their scriptures with them to their new home, without any royal involvement. Dalley then turns her attention to the kingdom of Adiabene (pp. 198–203), situated east of the Tigris and with Arbela as its capital: an exiting subject, and not only due to the fact that some members of the royal family converted to Judaism in the first century CE – Dalley suspects them of being “influential in gaining acceptance for the *Book of Esther* and the Purim festival”

⁵The most recent discussion of this rather obscure profession is M. Stol, “Schauspieler und Flechter als Bedienstet”, in G.J. Selz (ed.), *Festschrift für Burkhard Kienast* (Münster 2003), p. 644 (courtesy F. van Koppen).

(p. 205, also pp. 221–224). The survival of Assyrian culture in Adiabene has recently attracted some attention but deserves much more research: in addition to the rather dated literature that Dalley relies on, one should now consult the recent works by J.E. Reade and J.T. Walker.⁶ In stating that Ecbatana (modern Hamadan) was a part of Adiabene (p. 201) Dalley follows the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus but this has long been identified as a mistake⁷ and makes very little sense geographically; Dalley's discussion of a shrine at Hamadan linked by local tradition to Esther is therefore not relevant in this part of her argument (pp. 3, 201–202).

The final chapter combines Dalley's key points of the preceding chapters and then suggests that "Purim was a Samaritan festival and the Hebrew book of Esther took shape among a branch of Samaritans who lived in Assyria from 721 BC onwards" (p. 219); these Samaritans followed an unorthodox tradition and "Arbela, and perhaps also Nineveh, had presumably become centres for unorthodox communities which persisted for at least eight hundred years" (p. 222). In this section especially, the boundaries between the probable and the possible appear to be rather blurred. The book concludes with a bibliography (pp. 227–248), a glossary (pp. 249–250) and the indices (pp. 251–262).

Dalley's book makes stimulating reading; while I found myself occasionally at odds with her arguments, I was intrigued by this thought-provoking exploration of Near Eastern literature and festivals, Assyrian history and its reception – surely the effect Stephanie Dalley was aiming for.

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LES OTTOMANS EN ÉGYPTE. HISTORIENS ET CONQUÉRANTS AU XVI^E SIÈCLE. By BENJAMIN LELLOUCH. pp. xxix, 423. Paris and Louvain, Peeters, 2006.
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In this excellent book, Benjamin Lellouch sets out to understand the changes which Egypt went through in the period of the Ottoman conquest by examining the Turkish chronicle of 'Abdüssamed Diyarbekri written in the early 1540s. Lellouch is concerned with three questions in particular: the impact that the Ottoman conquest had on the writing of history; the cultural identity of a Turkish chronicler of Egypt; and legitimisation of Ottoman rule.

The first section of the book is a clear coherent outline of the conquest itself and the period immediately afterwards in which Lellouch examines the reasons behind the battle of Marj Dabiq, related to the antagonism between Cairo and Istanbul brought about by Ottoman expansion in central and eastern Anatolia, and the Iranian factor, an element which could either exacerbate antagonism or favour rapprochement. He considers the phases of Ottoman–Mamluk relations which led up to the conquest: the 1460s culminating in the war of 1485–91; the period of renewed tensions from 1507, and the post-1515 period. In each of these periods it was Ottoman action which broke the equilibrium, Mamluk policy being in favour of the status quo (p. 20). He then takes the period 1517–22 and discusses Selim's use of a double protectorate for Egypt and Syria and the reinstallation of Mamluks, a policy which was not without its risks (p. 52) but one which was determined by fear of the Safavids. In the period 1523–25,

⁶J.E. Reade, "More about Adiabene". *Iraq* 63 (2001) pp. 187–199 (in her bibliography but not quoted in the book). J.T. Walker, *The legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian heroism in late antique Iraq* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 2006); *id.*, "The Legacy of Mesopotamia in Late Antique Iraq: The Christian Martyr Shrine at Melqi (Neo-Assyrian Milqia)". *ARAM: Journal of Syro-Mesopotamian Studies* 18–19 (2006–2007) pp. 471–496.

⁷M. Z. Chaumont in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* Vol. 1, fasc. 9 (London and Boston, 1986), p. 978.