



Designating the King in the Womb of His Mother: From Assyrian through Sasanian Times

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The Peace of Nisibis in 298 CE was a major setback for the Sasanian imperial agenda. After a disastrous defeat in late 297 by the *Caesar* Galerius, who had even been able to capture the *šāhān šāh*'s wife and children, Narseh (293–302 CE) had to conclude a rather disadvantageous treaty with the Roman Empire. The treaty stipulated not only the loss of large parts of northern Mesopotamia but also the cession of substantial territories east of the River Tigris.¹ Although Narseh received back his family members and was eager to present this result as being in accordance with the Zoroastrian principles of the Sasanian Empire and probably as a new phase of his reign,² the territorial loss can be regarded as initiating an imperial crisis that also affected the person of the king and the ideological foundations of Sasanian kingship. This situation did not come to an end with the short reign of Narseh's son and successor Öhrmazd II (302–309 CE) but became even worse when Öhrmazd died and his succession caused turmoil and confusion. If he was inaugurated as *šāhān šāh* at all, the reign of the "shadowy person,"³ Ādur-Narseh, a son of Öhrmazd II, lasted only a few months before he and one of his brothers were killed. Since another brother fled to the Romans, there was only one legitimate heir left: the future *šāhān šāh* Šābuhr II (309–379 CE). This prince was in a specifically precarious position, at least if we believe the Greek historiographer Agathias, who wrote his *Histories* in the sixth century CE:⁴

(2) They (i.e., Narseh and Öhrmazd II) were succeeded by Šābuhr (Σαβόρης), who enjoyed an exceedingly long reign, the length of which coincided exactly with the length of his life. Indeed, when he was still in his

mother's womb, the future offspring was called to the throne (ἔτι γὰρ αὐτὸν κυούσης τῆς μητρὸς ἡ μὲν τοῦ βασιλείου γένους διαδοχὴ ἐκάλει πρὸς τὴν ἀρχὴν τὸ τεχνησόμενον). Since it was uncertain whether the queen would give (3) birth to a male or a female child, the nobles proposed a special reward for the magi (μάγοι) if they would foretell the future. Accordingly, they brought out a mare in the last stages of pregnancy and told the magi to predict what they thought would happen in its case. In this way, they would be able to find out in a few days whether the prediction had come true, which would enable them to form an estimate of the chances of fulfillment of whatever would be foretold in the case of the human being. Now I cannot say exactly what the precise nature of the prediction in the case of the mare was, since I have not received accurate information on that point, but, whatever it was, it proved correct. (4) When the nobles realized that the magi knew their art to perfection, they urged them to expound their knowledge of future events with regard to the woman as well. When the magi said that a male child would be born, they no longer delayed, but putting the diadem around the mother's womb, they proclaimed the fetus as emperor, conferring upon it the distinction of a name and a title when, I suppose, it had only just reached that stage of development at which it was capable of making a few slight jumping and throbbing movements inside the womb. (5) Thus, they took for granted what, in the natural order of things, is uncertain and obscure, though they were not far off the mark in their expectations, which were fulfilled to the letter and beyond it. Soon after, in fact Šābuhr was born. Possessed of the royal title at birth, he grew up on the throne and he grew old on it, living to the ripe old age of seventy (Agathias, *Histories* 4.25.2–5, after Frendo 1975 with slight changes).⁵

The passage is of utmost interest, since it conveys an entirely unparalleled procedure for selecting a new king in Sasanian history. It is important to note that the event unfolded within the context of a dire and accelerating state crisis, which demanded extraordinary countermeasures, either in reality or staged as a master narrative, in order to strengthen and reinforce the institution of kingship. The latter point is particularly important to emphasize, since our source is neither contemporary nor indigenous. Agathias wrote his *Histories* more than two hundred years after the event, and in his work, he adopts a perspective that looks at the Sasanian Empire from the outside. The passage in question is part of an extended excursus on Sasanian kings, starting with Ardashir (Artaxares) I (224–239/40 CE) and ending with Husraw (Chosroes) I (531–579 CE) (Agathias, *Histories* 4.24–29), “a complete chronological record of the reigns of the kings of Persia” (τῶν Περσικῶν βασιλέων διαδοχὴ καὶ ὁ τῶν ἐνιαυτῶν κατάλογος) as Agathias calls it (Agathias, *Histories* 4.30.2). There is a long-standing scholarly debate on Agathias’ sources and the historical value of this entire passage, but this is not our major concern here.

Instead, our focus is on the discourse rather than the “facts.” Henning Börm is the scholar who has most recently treated this passage in depth.⁶ However, he was predominantly interested in the question of historicity and in the historical context of the passage. Although he remained somewhat indecisive about whether the story as such – the selection of a new king while still in his mother’s womb – reflects a historical fact,⁷ he praised the “ingenious solution” of the contemporary magnates to end any factional conflict and harmoniously agree on the only prince who was still available. Moreover, Börm rightly highlighted that the elites’ capability to join forces and to overcome their differences was a feat of collective state leadership and obviously successful, since the child on the throne was not challenged by any rival until he (Šābuhr II) reached full age, about sixteen years later.

As already mentioned, Börm left open the question of whether the selection of Šābuhr as a fetus took place as reported by Agathias or whether the story was just a post-festum invention.⁸ However, by also referring to earlier skeptical voices such as that of Otto Seeck, he considered it “much more likely” that the tale was a later construction.⁹ But

the issue was not really relevant for Börm, since he concentrated on the “power struggle in Ctesiphon” and its outcome. Nevertheless, the case remains important since the ways of argumentation and the language of power used in the narrative matter and shed new light on the historical context and on “deeper history” as well.

Let us begin with an analysis of the passage. There are at least three strata that constitute the story and must be described. First, there is the central scene: Šābuhr is elected king while still in his mother’s womb. The main actors here are the nobles at court, whereas the queen mother is completely passive. The leading role of the nobles is highlighted by a second stratum of the story that nevertheless forms an integral unit with the central scene. Since the nobles’ election process obviously follows traditional lines and, therefore, carries legal value, one immediately wonders what would happen if the queen were to give birth to a girl. Apparently, this would contradict the traditional law of succession and therefore had to be avoided. At the same time, it demonstrates that such a scenario was theoretically possible, since the election of an unborn female child would have carried legal force as well.¹⁰ In any case, to prevent such a result, another group of actors is introduced: the magi, with their expertise in soothsaying. In a moment that is somewhat Herodotean, their qualifications are tested and finally approved. This is the only moment in the entire story when even a hint of divine assistance comes into play. Although not explicitly mentioned, the magi’s apparent competence may be understood as being linked to divine guidance, as the test case itself explicitly is. The association of a horse with an oracle concerning kingship is deeply rooted in Iranian historical tradition, or at least our classical sources attribute this tradition to Iran.¹¹ The most prominent case of course is Herodotus’ famous story on how Darius I became king.¹²

The third stratum of the story is again of Herodotean quality and concerns Agathias himself. It is the way he presents the story as such and tries to lend credibility to his account. Agathias’ statement that he is unable to certify “the precise nature of the prediction in the case of the mare” since, as he frankly confesses, he has “not received accurate information on that point,” is a well-known literary strategy to claim credibility for the central point of his story, namely,

the election of Šābuhr as king while still in his mother's womb. Before we now widen our perspective, it is essential to remember that Agathias' story centers around a situation of serious crisis that affected the Sasanian state in general and the legitimation of the new king in particular. Thus, the question is not only whether the story was invented, but also whether it follows certain narrative patterns whose framework and *Sitz im Leben* form part of a genuine strategy that is rooted in ancient Near Eastern history and thus in deeper history. That this is indeed the case we shall strive to demonstrate in what follows.

In a famous sample of oaths, generally referred to as the "Succession Treaties of Esarhaddon," imposed on the imperial vassals and magnates in March–April 672 BCE, the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) regulated the future of his empire.¹³ Whereas his younger son Ashurbanipal was designated king of Assyria, his older son Šamaš-šuma-ukīn was installed as king of Babylonia. With Esarhaddon's death in 669 BCE, the two brothers took their offices.¹⁴ However, the intended harmony was soon blurred since the relationship between the siblings appears not to have been definitely fixed although the queen mother Zakitu had imposed an oath of loyalty to his brother on Šamaš-šuma-ukīn.¹⁵ This *de facto* had put him in the position of a vassal king.¹⁶ Against this backdrop, the period leading to the outbreak of civil war in 652 BCE can be defined as a time of smoldering crisis, when both brothers were eager to demonstrate their legitimate rule.¹⁷ It is during this time that the initial lines of a Sumerian-Akkadian bilingual inscription of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn (668–648 BCE), preserved on a clay cylinder from Sippar and reportedly "damaged by enemy disturbances,"¹⁸ provide detailed information on how the Babylonian staged his legitimacy:

RIMB 2, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, B.6.33.1, 1–8:¹⁹

(1–5) Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, mighty king, king of the Amnānu, king of Babylon, capable (and) judicious, shepherd, favourite of the gods Enlil, Šamaš, and Marduk, king of the land of Sumer and Akkad, I – (6–8) in the womb of (my) mother who bore me (lit. "in the place of creating of the mother who bore me"), the queen of the gods, the goddess Erua, gladly appointed me to be lord of the people.

Šamaš-šuma-ukīn is introduced as king of the Amnānu and king of Babylon, as well as king of the land of Sumer and Akkad, and he is legitimized by prominent Babylonian gods (Enlil, Šamaš, and Marduk).²⁰ However, a specific and exceptional form of legitimization follows in lines 6–8. Erua – another name for Zarpanītu, the consort of Marduk – is said to have "appointed" (ḥé-en-še₂₁-a; *tambi*) Šamaš-šuma-ukīn for exercising "lordship of the people" (nam-en-na lu-lu; *enūt nišī*) already "in the place of creating of the mother, the one who gave birth to me" (ki ulutim ama ugu-ṣu₁₀; *ašar nabnīt ummi ālittīya*). Although the latter expression is somewhat awkward,²¹ it clearly refers to the mother's womb.²² The passage, like the inscription itself, is replete with archaic and uncommon wording in genuine Babylonian style.²³ But, it is the parallel with similar phrasing and claims in the inscriptions of Ashurbanipal (see below) that leaves no doubt about its interpretation. Grant Frame's translation already prepared the ground for this comprehension of the passage, but he was too optimistic when he noted that "the motif of an individual being chosen by a deity to be a ruler while still in his mother's womb is well attested in ancient Mesopotamia."²⁴ As Ulrike Bock's detailed analysis of this motif has shown, the idea of being designated in one's mother's womb for a specific reason, namely, to become ruler of the land, is relatively rare in ancient Mesopotamia.²⁵ It is actually only attested for Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, his brother Ashurbanipal, and Rīm-Sîn of Larsa in the second millennium (nineteenth/eighteenth century BCE). However, Rīm-Sîn's case probably belongs to another group of motifs, in which the designation in the womb is not directly connected to kingship.²⁶ Thus, the motif of divine calling for a specific purpose is a peculiar phenomenon for the period of crisis and tension between the two brothers Šamaš-šuma-ukīn and Ashurbanipal. Apparently, it draws on legitimization models from ancient Mesopotamian tradition, specifically the motif of "designation in one's mother's womb" and increases them by directly adding the nomination for kingship. As already mentioned, the same motif is attested in three inscriptions of Ashurbanipal. All three texts were composed after the civil war in the mid to late 640s BCE, but they draw on older material and earlier text editions:

RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 9, i 1–5:²⁷

(i 1–5) I, Ashurbanipal, the creation of (the god) Aššur and the goddess Mullissu, the senior son of the king of the House of Succession, the one whom the god Sîn nominated in distant days, while (he was) in the womb of his mother, for shepherding Assyria and (the one for whom) the gods Šamaš (and) Adad declared the exercising of its kingship through their firm decision(s)

RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 11, i 1–7:²⁸

(i 1–7) I, Ashurbanipal, the creation of (the god) Aššur and the goddess Mullissu, the senior son of the king of the House of Succession, the one whom (the god) Aššur and the god Sîn – the lord of the (lunar) crown – nominated in distant days to be king (i 5) and created in the womb of his mother for shepherding Assyria, (and the one for whom) the deities Šamaš, Adad, and Ištar declared my exercising the kingship through their firm decision(s)

RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 13, i 1–25:²⁹

(i 1–14) I, Ashurbanipal, great king, [strong king], king of the world, king of Assyria, king of [the four quarters (of the world)], creation of the hands of (the god) Aššur (and) the goddess Mullissu; one who was chose[n by the gods Sîn, Šamaš, (and) Adad]; beloved of the god Marduk (and) the goddess Zarpanītu; (i–5) favorite of the god Nabû (and) [the goddess Tašmēt[u]; pious prince, [ca]pable govern[or], true shepherd, leade[r of a] widespre[ad population], one who prays piously [without ceas]ing; who (i 10) extols for [everlas]ting days the praise(s) of the gods Aššur, Mull[issu, Bēl (Marduk)], (and) Nabû; son of Esarhaddon, ki[ng of the world, king of Assyria]; (grand)son of Sennacherib, kin[g of the world, king of As]syria; descendant of Sargon (II), ki[ng of the world, king of Assyria], governor of Babylon, king of [the land of Sumer and] Akkad, (i 15–25) provider of cult centers, one who c[ompletes shrine]s, one who (re)confirms inter[rup]ted sattukku- (and) nindabû-offerings [...], one who reveres the deities Aššur, Mullissu, [Sîn, Šamaš, Adad, Mar]duk, Zarpanītu, Nabû, Tašmē[tu, Ištar of Nineveh], Ištar of Bīt-Kidmuri, [Ištar of Arb]ela, (i 20) Ninurta, Nergal, (and) Nusku; who constantly followed them from [his] ch[ild]hood until he became an adult and who continu[ally] re[vered] their [di]vinity. [I] cons[tantly] knelt do[wn] at their feet in supplication and prayer. While (I was still) in the womb of my mother, the great gods [nominated] me to [be king]; they spread their

benevolent protection over [me; ...] th[ey] r[equired] my [priestly servic]es.

In all three cases, Ashurbanipal (668–631 BCE) is designated and nominated as king while still in his mother's womb. In RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 9, it is the moon god Sîn who nominates (*izkaruš*) the unborn Ashurbanipal for the office of shepherdship over Assyria (*rē'ūt māt Aššur*; line i 4) already in his mother's womb (*ina libbi ummīšu*; i 4). In RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 11, Sîn is joined by the god Aššur. Together, they nominate (*nibīt šumīšu izkurū*; i 4) and create (*ibnūšu*; i 5) Ashurbanipal in his mother's womb (*ina libbi ummīšu*; i 5) for the purpose of exercising kingship (*šarrūtu*) and shepherdship over Assyria (*rē'ūt māt Aššur*, i 5). In RINAP 5/1, Ashurbanipal 13, the relevant passage (i 23) is somewhat damaged. However, the phrasing of the unborn's nomination appears to match that found in the case of Šamaš-šum-ukīn (*[ibbū]inni*) whereas the agents are described simply as "the great gods" (*ilāni rabūti*). They did so "in my mother's womb" (*ina libbi ummīya*) for a certain reason (*ana [šarrūti]*).

One may consider whether the nomination of an unborn child for kingship is due to Egyptian influence on Assyrian and Babylonian royal ideology. This would perfectly fit the historical context, since both Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal successfully campaigned against Egypt and temporarily incorporated the Nile Valley into the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Egyptian influence has also been suggested in other cases,³⁰ and there was a considerable Egyptian community in Mesopotamia, as well as Assyrian presence in Egypt.³¹ But in this special case, the Egyptian impact may have served as a *stimulus* at best. It is true that the nomination of the unborn heir apparent for kingship was an integral part of ancient Egyptian royal ideology, at least since the New Kingdom. But this nomination is generally expressed in a way that does not play a crucial role on the mother's womb. Instead, Egyptian texts assign a prominent role to the god Amun, thus highlighting the divine father's role in the king's conception and legitimacy. When the divine father is not foregrounded, an abstract concept such as the divine "egg" (or "nest") as the place of the unborn is introduced,³² as the example of the triumphal stele of Pi(anch)ye demonstrates:

"I am born from the womb, grown in the divine egg. God's seed is with me."³³

At least in Egyptian texts, the womb remains also a somehow abstract concept since it is not further specified. This is demonstrated by two examples from the time of the New Kingdom:

Thutmosis III (Pillar in the temple of Wadi Halfa, Urk IV, 807):

“He (Amun) bestowed upon him his heritage (already) in the womb, because he knew that he (the king) would take care of him.”³⁴

Amenophis II (Sphinx stele, Urk. IV, 1278):

“Grown out of the womb he (already) wears the White Crown. He has conquered the world when he was still in the egg.”³⁵

This only changes with texts from ancient Kush when the abstract womb becomes the “mother’s womb” and thus more specified.³⁶ A very early example is stele SNM 1851 from Jebel Barkal. Since the name of the king has been erased the monument can only roughly be dated to the Third Intermediate Period.

SNM 1851 § 2.³⁷

“I said about you (when you were still) in the womb of your mother: You will be lord of Egypt. I recognized you (already) as son, when you were (still) in the egg: You will be lord of what I have created.”

A similar example is attested on a stele of Pi(anch)ye, where an inscription appears in the gabled triangle at the top:³⁸

“I said about you (when you were still) in the womb of your mother: You will be lord of Egypt. I recognized you (already) in the seed, when you were (still) in the egg: You will be lord.”

All these examples share the “recognition/choice” of the presumptive pharaoh by Amun already in the “mother’s womb.” Thereby, the unborn becomes the son of a god.³⁹ This is very similar to the “nomination” of the unborn in Mesopotamian texts, although in those cases, other gods take over this task. We also face this recognition in combination with a specific purpose, namely, becoming lord of Egypt. But, this is also enhanced by specific Egyptian elements,

particularly the prominent role of the divine egg. As far as Šamaš-šuma-ukīn and Ashurbanipal are concerned, the idea of nomination and installation as future kings while still in the womb may well have been inspired by ancient Egyptian conceptions. Yet it was realized within the framework of a specifically Mesopotamian language of power. This distinction is important since our next example also originates from Egypt but appears to have been driven by Mesopotamian ideas and conceptions.

An exceptional source of Darius I’s (521–486 BCE) self-presentation as a legitimate king is the so-called canal steles from Egypt. They can be divided into two groups. Whereas the trilingual Kabrit and Kubri (or Suez) steles appear to represent nearly the same text, the hieroglyphic Maskhuta stele exhibits a different tradition, with different phrasing and wording.⁴⁰ All monuments are related to Darius’ ambitious and successful project of interlinking the River Nile with the Red Sea by means of a gigantic infrastructural undertaking that combined artificial canals and natural lakes, thereby creating a connection between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.⁴¹ Unfortunately, all texts are badly damaged and contain many lacunae. The Maskhuta stele has parallels with the hieroglyphic text of the famous statue of Darius from Susa, although both texts are far from being duplicates.⁴² Apparently, on the Maskhuta stele, Darius is presented as the son of the goddess Neith, whereas the Darius statue introduces him as the offspring of the god Atum.⁴³ In any case, it is the special relationship between Darius and his “mother” Neith that deserves our special interest here. It is the topic immediately at the beginning of the Maskhuta stele:⁴⁴

[... King (Darius) ...], born of Neith, mistress of Sais, image of Re, who has placed him on his throne in order to complete what he has begun here below.

[... master] of all that the sun’s disc encircles. While he was still in the womb (of his mother) and had not come forth on earth, she (Neith) knew him to be her son and ordered him [...]

¹[nṯr nfr ...n] mšī.n Nī.t nb(.t) š:w twt n(.i) R^c rdi.t.nṣf ḥr nš(.t)ṣf r smnḥ.t š:ṣ.nṣf

²[... nb] n(.i) šnī(.w) nb n itn iwṣf m ḥ.t n prī.nṣf tp.ī t: rḥ.nṣ n.tt s:ṣ pw wd{.t}ṣ nṣf [...]⁴⁵

Due to its fragmentary character, the passage leaves room for some interpretation. This becomes especially clear when we focus on the way David Klotz analyzed the two lines, i.e., by combining them with another passage only attested on the Susa statue.⁴⁶ It remains open for discussion whether the phrasing “[master] of all that the sun’s disc describes” refers to universal rulership⁴⁷ or is just an epithet describing the sun disc.⁴⁸ It is also unclear whether this line is directly related to the subsequent specification of the unborn king. Be that as it may, it is rather plain that the unborn Darius is not only acknowledged and thus nominated by his mother when still in her womb; he is also made future king for a certain reason and according to orders that are related to his future obligations as pharaoh. The passage is part of Egyptian tradition since it only mentions the unspecified “womb.” But it also lacks Egyptian traits such as the divine egg, and Amun plays no role at all in this context. In other respects, however, the passage is related to the motif that we have already observed with Šamaš-šuma-ukīn and Ashurbanipal, although the differences are also striking. For it is only here that the mother receives exceptional agency. It is not her “passive” womb as the setting of decisive events that matters; rather, she is the active figure who takes care of the nomination and is responsible for assigning tasks to the future king. Apparently, the Maskhuta text is especially interested in fostering Darius’s legitimacy for which there was an obvious need.⁴⁹ Darius was not only an usurper in a Persian context, but also in a pharaonic Egyptian one.⁵⁰ Against this backdrop, he created a new model of a legitimate Egyptian pharaoh by applying a special strategy that combined ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian traditional concepts in a unique way.

Let us now return to Agathias’ description of how Šābuhr was nominated king. With the Near Eastern examples in mind, we gain a much more nuanced view of the strategy employed to boost the *šāhān šāh*’s legitimacy. We can safely assume that the coronation event is an invention *post festum*. It is an artificial construction, like the nominations of Darius, Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, and Ashurbanipal. What we are seeing are master narratives that convey royal ideology rather than historical fact. It should also be clear that the Agathian narrative was not invented from scratch, but drew on motifs and components deeply rooted in ancient

Near Eastern history. This, in itself, is not new. Recent research has demonstrated on many levels the vibrancy of ancient Near Eastern traditions throughout Sasanian times. This is especially true for conceptions of kingship, royal performance, and rituals.⁵¹

The historical setting for the motif under discussion is a period of crisis, when legitimacy and royal succession were seriously challenged. Such a situation demanded an adequate and vibrant response. This applies to all the cases we have discussed: those of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, Ashurbanipal, Darius I, and Šābuhr II. From a comparative point of view, the case of Šābuhr II is the most difficult to analyze as it is the only one for which we do not have a contemporary and native testimony of this kind of response, but only a later report from outside Iran that merely *reflects* the story and its patterns. As we have seen, there is also an Agathian footprint in the story, as classical historiography left its marks. But beyond this specific “twist,” there is still enough substance in the narrative to recognize the constitutive elements of an “ancient” story pattern. This is also true for other parts of Agathias’ excursus on Sasanian kings and their deeds (Agathias, *Histories* 4.24–29).⁵²

In Late Antiquity, there must still have been a certain awareness of this pattern, at least enough that the circles at court who assigned it to Šābuhr II and disseminated it in the empire could be confident that it would meet a certain degree of credibility. Even Agathias appears to have been convinced that its general outline was based upon “truth.” But the master narrative around Šābuhr also has its own special traits, and these characteristics reveal interesting details about the specific historical circumstances, as well as the peculiarities of the inventors of the story. These inventors had access to historical tradition and were closely connected to the court and to kingship. The story of Šābuhr II is the only one, in comparison with its predecessors, in which human agency is highlighted and divine agency is almost entirely absent. No god or goddess is mentioned. Instead, it is the nobles at court who are said to have been entirely responsible for what transpired. Only with the magi a hidden divine element is added as a kind of appendix that does not really matter. The role of the mother is also reduced to that of a passive auxiliary, an altogether insignificant presence.

It is the nobles at court who are the central players in the story, and this is entirely different from what we have seen in the cases of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn, Ashurbanipal, and Darius I. These nobles are presented as a collective, without any prominent individual figure, but their joint action well corresponds to what we know from the constitutive role of aristocratic councils in elevating a candidate to the Sasanian throne.⁵³ It is true that we are unaware of the details of agreements that must have been made in 309 CE.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, we may discern traces of them from the inscription ŠPs-I, set in Šābuhr's second year in Persepolis, when the *šāhān šāh* was a two-year-old toddler (311 CE).⁵⁵ The inscription was set by an adult (half-)brother of Šābuhr II, also named Šābuhr, who is introduced as "Sagānšāh, (ruler of) India, Sagestān (Sīstān), and Tūrān up to the coast of the sea."⁵⁶ He was en route from Staxr to his eastern territories when he paused at Persepolis (called *Sadstōn* "[Hall of a] Hundred Columns") – an old and renowned place of legitimate kingship – in order to feast with his retinue, a group of distinguished magnates, all of whom are mentioned by name and title.⁵⁷ Some of them may well have been among the agents behind the extraordinary and homogeneously acclaimed measures of 309 CE. The inscription, its placement at the southern entrance of the Tačara in Persepolis, the collective feasting of some of the leading magnates in the retinue of the *Sagānšāh*, both honoring ancestors who were responsible for building the visible vestiges of past grandeur, and paying homage to the newly crowned, infant *šāhān šāh*, all show an awareness of the crisis that was just overcome. What is more, one may argue the need was felt to enhance the ideological foundations of the still fragile kingship by showing in simultaneity the narrative of royal continuity (from the unnamed rulers of the past called merely "those who build this house [i.e., *Sadstōn*]" to the infant, Šābuhr II, who is explicitly praised). All of this is also reflected in Agathias' story, but shrouded in elements of an established narrative tradition.

Thus, what we have is an ancient story pattern, "updated" and presented in a "modern" guise, tailored to the specific imperial needs at the heart of the Sasanian Empire in the early fourth century CE. As we have seen, the first years of the fourth century were marked by a profound crisis, and, as Henning Börm has ably demonstrated, this crisis was overcome only through the collective

endeavors of the Sasanian nobility. Against this backdrop, the master narrative is as much linked to the past as it is bound to the circumstances of the time of its revitalization and adaptation.

Notes

* Robert Rollinger's research on this topic was supported by a grant PPN/PRO/2020/1/00009/U/00001 of the NAWA Chair 2020 Programme "From the Achaemenids to the Romans: Contextualizing Empire and Its Longue-durée Developments" (Wrocław, Poland) and by a grant from the National Science Centre (Poland) 2021/01/1/HS3/00006. Moreover, this research was also partly funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [10.55776/COE8]. We are grateful to Orell Witthuhn (Göttingen) for his assistance in Egyptological questions, and to M. Rahim Shayegan (UCLA) for his comments on the Šābuhr Sagānšāh Inscription, Persepolis (ŠPs-I).

1. Mosig-Walburg 2009: 91–155. Weber 2012; Weber 2024.

2. Shayegan 2020; Shayegan 2012; Weber 2024.

3. Schindel 2013: 816.

4. For Agathias, see Cameron 1969/1970; Bleckmann 2021: 39–46.

5. ἀλλὰ Σαβὼρ μετὰ τούτους ἐπὶ πλείστον ὅσον καὶ μήκιστον χρόνον ἀπόνειο τῆς βασιλείας, τοσούτοις ἔτεσι κρατήσας, ὅποιοι καὶ διεβίω. ἔτι γὰρ αὐτὸν κυούσης τῆς μητρὸς, ἡ μὲν τοῦ βασιλείου γένους διαδοχὴ ἐκάλει πρὸς τὴν ἀρχὴν τὸ τεχθῆσόμενον. ἦν δὲ τὰ τῶν ὠδίνων ἀμφίβουλα ἐς ὅποιαν γονὴν ἀν' ἀποβαίειν. τοιγάρτοι ἅπαντες οἱ ἐν τέλει ἄθλα προὔτιθεσαν. καὶ γέρα τοῖς μάγοις ἐπὶ τῇ προαγορεύσει τῶν ἐσομένων' καὶ τοῖνυν ἦγον ἐς μέσον κύουσαν ἵππον, καὶ ὡς πλησιαίτατα προελθοῦσαν τοῦ τόκου, ἐκέλευόν τε αὐτοὺς ἐπ' αὐτῇ πρώτῃ μαντεύεσθαι, ἅπερ ὄντο ξυνεχθῆναι. οὕτω γὰρ ὀλίγαις ὕστερον ἡμέραις γνώσεσθαι ἤγουντο τὴν πρόρρησιν ἐς ὃ, τι χωρήσει, ταύτῃ τε εἰκάζειν παραπλησίως ἐκβήσεσθαι καὶ ὅποσα σφίσιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἀνθρώπῳ προαγορευθεῖη. ἃ μὲν οὖν αὐτοῖς ἐπὶ τῇ ἵππῳ μεμάντευται, οὐκ ἔχω σαφῶς ἀποφύνασθαι· οὐ γάρ μοι τὸ ἀκριβὲς τούτου γε περὶ ἀπήγγελλται· πλὴν ἀλλ' οὕτω ἕκαστα προὔβη, ὅπως ἐκείνοις ἐτύγχανεν εἰρημέναι. γνόντες δὲ ἐνθένδε οἱ ἄλλοι, ὡς ἄγαν τοῖς μάγοις διηκρίβωτο τὰ τῆς τέχνης, προὔτρεπον καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ γυναιῳ, ἅττα ἔσεσθαι γνοῖεν, διεξιμέναι. τῶν δὲ φησάντων ἄρρενα παῖδα τεχθήσεσθαι, οὐκ ἔτι ἐμέλλησαν, ἀλλὰ τῇ γαστρὶ περιθέντες τὴν κίδαριν, ἀνείπον βασιλέα τὸ ἔμβρυον· ὀνόματί τε ἀπέκριναν τὸ ἄρτι ἐκτυπωθὲν καὶ διοργανομένον, ἐς ὅσον, οἶμαι, διάττειν ἔνδον ἡρέμα καὶ ὑποπάλλεσθαι. οὕτω δὲ τὸ ἀφανὲς τῇ φύσει καὶ ἄδηλον ἐς τὸ βέβαιόν τε καὶ ἀνωμολογημένον τῇ δοκῇ μεταλαβόντες, ὅμως οὐ διήμαρτον τῆς ἐλπίδος, ἀλλὰ καὶ λίαν ἔτυχον τοῦ σκοποῦ, πολλὰ πλέον τῶν δοκηθέντων. τίκεται γὰρ οὐκ ἐς

μακρὰν ὁ Σαβώρης σὺν τῇ βασιλείᾳ, ἐννεάζει τε αὐτῇ καὶ ἑγγηράσκει, εἰς ἑβδομήκοντα αὐτῷ ἔτη διανυσθέντος τοῦ βίου.

6. Börm 2024.
7. See the discussion below.
8. Börm 2024: "... either actually still unborn or – more plausibly – only a few weeks old."
9. Börm 2024: 34 n. 70. Seeck 1920: 2334.
10. Indeed, as later Sasanian history shows, especially in times of crisis, even females could become "king." Wiesehöfer 2021.
11. Rollinger 2018.
12. Rollinger 2018.
13. Fales 2012; Lauinger 2012; Lauinger 2013.
14. For a general overview on the history of this period, see Brinkman 1984: 85–104; Frame 2007; cf. also Beaulieu 2018: 211–17.
15. SAA 2, No. 8 (Parpola and Watanabe 1988: 62–64).
16. The situation is perfectly described by Frame 1995: 248: "The exact relationship between the two brothers is unclear, but Šamaš-šuma-ukīn seems in effect to have been a vassal of the Assyrian king, though an especially favoured vassal."
17. Cf. Zaia 2019 who shows Šamaš-šuma-ukīn's eagerness to perfectly act as a "Babylonian" king.
18. Frame 1995: 249.
19. The first line of each verse is Sumerian, the second Akkadian. Text and translation by Frame are also reproduced at <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/ribo/babylon6/withlem>.
20. For the archaic title "king of the Amnānu," see Zaia 2019: 254.
21. Frame 1995: 250 n. 6.
22. Bock 2012: 24f.
23. Zaia 2019.
24. Frame 1995: 250 n. 6.
25. Bock 2012: 24–26: "Motiv i/B/β: GN beruft PN im Mutterleib zu einem bestimmten Zweck."
26. Bock 2012: 22–24: "Motiv i/B/α: GN beruft PN im Mutterleib ohne Erwähnung eines besonderen Zwecks." This motif is deeply embedded within Mesopotamia's tradition and very well documented by Bock. For Rīm-Sin's text (prayer 'E'), see Bock 2012, 319 (text "B.I.1.20"), and ETCSL transliteration: c.2.6.9.5 (lines 3–4): The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (<https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>), with the translation: "whom you summoned from the holy womb ... has been elevated to lordship over the Land."
27. The text is traditionally referred to as "Prism F." It "reworked the contents of all earlier reports of the military campaigns" and is "dated to the post canonical eponymy of Nabû-šar-aḫḫēšu, governor of Samaria

(probably 645)," Novotny and Jeffers 2018: 179–82. For text and translation, see also <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/riao/pager>.

28. Generally referred to as "Prism A" or "Rassam Prism." It "made full use of the contents of earlier inscriptions" and "could have been written on clay prisms during either 644, 643, or 642," Novotny and Jeffers 2018: 222.

29. Often referred to as "Prism J"; "it was likely written on prisms no earlier than Ashurbanipal's thirty-first regnal year (638)," Novotny and Jeffers 2018: 271f.

30. Kaelin 1999.

31. Huber 2006; Karlsson 2022.

32. Lohwasser 2000: 96 with references. The idea of the "divine egg" (*swḫ.t ntr*) is attested since the 18th dynasty (Blöbaum 2006: 185).

33. Pi(anch)ye, Triumphal stele, lines 1–2. See Blöbaum 2006: 185, n 3., and Lohwasser 2000, 95 with slightly different translations of the passage.

34. Lohwasser 2000: 96.

35. Lohwasser 2000: 96.

36. Lohwasser 2000: 96.

37. Lohwasser and Sörgel 2020: 18 (transliteration and translation), 161 (commentary).

38. Lohwasser 2000: 95: "Piye, Stele, 3. Jh., Giebel-feld, Z. 1-6."

39. Cf. Lohwasser 2000: 94f. with further examples (Senkamaniskēn, Anlamani, Irikeamanote).

40. Wasmuth 2017: 125–35. Mahlich 2020: 25–37. For the Serapeum stele(s), cf. Wasmuth 2017: 133f.

41. See also Klotz 2015.

42. Mahlich 2020: 55.

43. Mahlich 2020: 143.

44. For text and translation see Wasmuth 2017: 144; Mahlich 2020: 136. Cf. also Blöbaum 2006: 190, n. 39.

45. Transliteration after Mahlich 2020: 135.

46. Klotz 2015: 280: "[The good god, who delights in Maat,] / [chosen by Neith, Lady of Sais] / [to be lord] of the whole circuit of the sun, / While he was still in the womb, / And had not come forth on earth." For a translation of the inscriptions on the Susa statue, see Kuhrt 2007 478f. Cf. also Wasmuth 2017: 100–24; Mahlich 2020: 66–74, 139–41.

47. So Wasmuth 2017: 144: "[...] von allem, was die Sonne umkreist."

48. So Mahlich 2020: 136, n 373: "[... Herr] des gesamten Umkreises der Sonne."

49. Wasmuth 2017: 144. Cf. also Blöbaum 2006: 176 who highlights that there are only two examples in Egyptian history attested where the concept of being the son of god is part of the pharaoh's official name: Amasis and Darius I.

50. Rollinger 1998; Rollinger and Degen 2021a.

51. Rollinger 2012: 732–37; Shayegan 2012; Rollinger and Wieseheöfer 2022; Rollinger and Wieseheöfer 2023.

52. This important aspect deserves further investigation, which, hopefully, will be undertaken elsewhere. Here, we highlight just two examples that may illustrate the case. A) In chapter 24, Agathias describes the campaigns of Šābuhr I in a way that could have directly emerged from a Neo-Assyrian royal inscription: “The carnage was so terrible that he (Šābuhr I) actually filled in the mountain gorges and ravines with the corpses of the slain and levelled the sloping summits of the hills and rode over them, crossing mountain ridges as though they were level plains.” Compare this, e.g., with how Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) staged one of his campaigns into the Zagros region in 884/3 BCE: “For three days the hero explored the mountain. His bold heart yearned for battle. He ascended on foot (and) overwhelmed the mountain. He smashed their nest (and) scattered their flock. I felled 200 of their fighting-men with the sword (and) carried off a multitude of captives like a flock of sheep. With their blood I dyed the mountain red like red wool, (and) the rest of them the ravines (and) torrents of the mountain swallowed” (RIMA 2, A.O.101.1, i 50b-53 = ‘Ashurnasirpal II 001’ on <https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/riao/pager>). See also Rollinger 2014. B). In chapter 29, Agathias presents a rare example in classical historiography for staging the Achaemenid king Xerxes in a positive way as a hero of the past. He does so by referring to two of Xerxes’ feats: “... the famous Xerxes who opened up the seas to cavalry and the mountains to shipping.” In contrast to the outside, Hellenocentric perspective of classical historiography, Agathias interprets the bridging of the Bosphorus and the erection of the Athos canal not as examples of “oriental” hubris but as major achievements in mastering nature. This is exactly how Xerxes and his Persian entourage may have perceived these activities, revealing an “eastern” perspective on history and tradition. There are further examples that show the quality of Agathias’ excursus in offering a Persian inner perspective and good knowledge of contemporary practices. Again, in chapter 24, Agathias notes: “Now since the Segestani were subdued by his father Vahram II it was only natural that the son should be given the title Saghanshah, which is Persian for “king of the Segestani.” This perfectly reflects the title “Sagānšāh” as documented in contemporary Sasanian inscriptions (see below). For larger contexts on Agathias’ knowledge of ancient Near Eastern traditions, see also Huber 2004: 380–87.

53. On succession in Sasanian Iran, see more recently

Shayegan 2023: 241–43: “Altogether, it appears that the designation of the royal successor had to be approved through an acclamation by Persian and Parthian grandees, in order to be effective. The inscription [of Paikuli] suggests that the right to contest an undesired candidate by the nobiliary council was based on procedural precedence from the time of Šāpūr I and encompassed the possibility of contestation by a rival candidate. The non-observance of this procedure could invalidate the king’s accession ... The factors, which seem to matter throughout the Sasanian empire, were certainly (1) the king’s belonging to the royal house of Sasan; (2) his being the elected choice of the leading faction(s) of the nobility; (3) his being of (ethical and religious) rectitude (protector of the Mazdean faith); and (4) possessing the ability to protect the empire of the Iranians, Erānšahr, which we may ascribe to the king’s military prowess. Bodily soundness and the concept of primogeniture might have been at work circumstantially.”

54. Börm (2024: 38) notes: “We do not even know how exactly the Sasanian Empire was governed between 309 and 325.”

55. See Back 1978: 492–94; <https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/sabuhr-sakansah-inscription-persepolis-sps-i/>; and especially Shayegan 2012: 437f. with discussion. There is a slight confusion concerning the placement of the inscription. Back 1978: 518, n. 360 states: “Aus Persepolis und zwar vom südlichen Eingang zum Thronsaal (Hundert-Säulen-Saal) des Darius.” This is misleading, since Darius’ palace, the so-called Tačara, is not identical with the “Hundert-Säulen-Saal” (*Hall of a Hundred Columns*). Shayegan 2012: 437, clarifies that the inscription was: “on the north wall of the portico of Dareios’ Tačara palace at Persepolis.” The website (<https://sites.uci.edu/sasanika/sabuhr-sakansah-inscription-persepolis-sps-i/>) does not give any information about the text placement. According to Erich Schmidt, the inscription is carved “on the southern face of the east jamb of the doorway which links the portico with the main hall” of Darius’ Tačara (Schmidt 1953: 223, n. 11). See also Schmidt 1953: 217, fig. 90, 219, fig. 92, and plate 157, where he notes “on the southern doorway of the main hall” (of the Tačara).

56. The phrasing “up to the coast of the sea” (*tā drayā danb*) may imply the notion of a rule reaching as far as the eastern borders of the world. This ancient Near Eastern concept was connected by the Achaemenids with India but also with regions to the east of the Caspian Sea bordering the Sakā (Scythians); see Rollinger and Degen 2021b; 2021c.

57. The text localizes the event at Sadstōn “[Hall of a] Hundred Columns,” which may refer either to the Apadāna or to the place terrace in general. As Shayegan 2012: 438 highlights, “the name of Persepolis (*Parsā*) appears to have been unknown to the Sasanians.”

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Abbreviations

RIMA: The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia. Assyrian periods (2 = Grayson A. K. 1991).
RIMB: The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Babylonian Periods (2 = Frame 1995).
RINAP: The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period (5/10 Novotny and Jeffers 2018).
SAA: State Archives of Assyria (2 = Parpola and Watanabe 1988).

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