

CTESIAS OF CNIDUS.  
From Physician to Author.

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To my mother, Q.A.J. Stronk-van Kleeff, in loving memory

**Introduction**

Ctesias of Cnidus was one of the several fascinating authors (including Xenophon and, probably, the writer of the *Hellenica Oxyrhynchia*) writing in the first quarter of the 4th century BC (*sc.* between 400 and 375 BC) in the Greek world. He was the son of Ctesiarachus (or Ctesiochus: both names are mentioned, the last one, *e.g.*, by Lucian in the Introduction [1.3] of his *Veræ Historiae*<sup>1</sup>; cf. also *Suda* κ,2521; Jacoby 1922, 2032), from a family of physicians at Cnidus, a city in Caria. Being also a physician by training, he became the personal physician of Artaxerxes II Mnemon (cf. *Suda* κ,2521), but served the latter's wife, children and especially his mother, Queen Parysatis, as well (Plu. *Art.* 18; Phot. *Bibl.* [72] 44a30 *sqq.* and various *testimonia*: Lenfant 2004, 2-4)<sup>2</sup>. Having returned to Cnidus, *c.* 398/7 BC, after his service at the Persian court, Ctesias started his career as a writer. Apart from some works on his trade, which have not survived time<sup>3</sup>, he wrote a geography in three books (called alternately *Περὶ ὄρος*, *Περὶ πλοῦς* and *Περὶ γῆς*; *FGrH*, No. 688 FF. 55-60). He also wrote an *Indica* in one book, which has survived in an *epitome* by Photius and various scattered fragments (*FGrH* No. 688 FF. 45a-52). Another work, the *Περὶ τῶν κατὰ τὴν Ἀσίαν ἀπόρων* (*On taxes in Asia*), is mentioned twice by Athenaeus (2.67A, 10.442B). Ctesias' *magnum opus* was his *Persica* in 23 books (*FGrH*, No. 688 FF. 1a-44b) cf., *e.g.*, *Suda* κ,2521). A *Περὶ ποταμῶν* (*On Rivers*) and a *Περὶ ὄρων* (*On Mountains*), though attributed to Ctesias, are most probably not his (Jacoby 1922, 2036), though Lenfant is less sure (Lenfant 2004, clxi).

<sup>1</sup> According to Georgiadou and Larmour 1998, 54, the way Ctesias' name and origin is presented here "with its comical alliteration" was meant to ridicule him.

<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations of classical authors and their works are those of the *LSJ* for Greek authors and the *OLD* for Latin ones. Where those are lacking in these lexicons, I followed the lead of the *OCD*.

<sup>3</sup> Two rather insignificant fragments have been preserved: one through Oribasius on hellebore (cf. *FGrH* No. 688 F 68) and one through Galen (*idem*, F 67).

It is, however, not his works I intend to focus on directly in this contribution, but four other issues more or less connected therewith. They are:

- a. When did Ctesias enter Persian service?
- b. Were foreign physicians a common feature at the Persian court?
- c. What kind of sources, if any, did Ctesias use for his *Persica*?
- d. How reliable is Ctesias' information?

### **When did Ctesias enter Persian service?**

Ctesias is mentioned to have served 17 years at the Persian court (D.S. 2.32.4) and we can deduce from Ctesias' own writings as they are transmitted to us that he left Persia for his homeland in 398/7 BC.

The length of his reported stay at the court has caused some dispute. Müller (1844, 2) proposes to read 7 years instead of 17, though the manuscripts are here all in agreement that 17 is the correct number<sup>4</sup>. If Müller's suggestion would be, nevertheless, accepted, the most probable occasion of Ctesias' capture – that is, at least, if he were captured at all: it is conceivable that he voluntarily entered into Persian service and that Diodorus (2.32.4) made, by the association with Cyrus the Younger, a mistake - would have been in 404 BC, during the visit Cyrus the Younger paid to his dying father: during this trip Cyrus was accompanied by some 300 Greek mercenaries (cf. X. *An.* 1.1.2; Brown 1978, 3). The second best occasion, still assuming Müller is right, would have been around the time of the battle of Aegospotami in 405 (cf. Brown 1978, 2).

In line with Müller's suggestion, Jacoby thinks that Ctesias exaggerates his stay at the court: "Eine derartige Übertreibung seines Aufenthalts im Lande, auf den er seine Überlegenheit allen Vorgängern gegenüber gründete, ist K[tesias] sehr wohl zuzutrauen" (Jacoby 1922, 2033, 2035). On the other hand Brown (1978, 5, 7 *sqq.*) suggests to take Ctesias on his word: he was taken prisoner, he stayed 17 years at the court, and he left for Greece in 398/7 BC. Especially because of the clarity of the manuscript tradition I believe Brown is right. Moreover, both from Ctesias' own testimonies (Plu. *Art.* 11.3, 13.3, 14.1) and Xenophon's (X. *An.* 1.8.26, but probably based upon Ctesias' story: cf., e.g., Plu. *Art.* 13.4; also: Bassett 1998, 10), we know that Ctesias served among Artaxerxes' staff during the battle of Cunaxa. It is hardly conceivable that someone who had fairly recently entered Persian service would have been allowed such a vital and delicate position as Ctesias had (he tended the king's wound, inflicted by Cyrus the Younger), no matter how excellent a physician he may have been.

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<sup>4</sup>Cf., e.g., the *apparatus criticus* of the Teubner *editio maior* of Diodorus (vol. I) by Vogel/Fischer (repr. Stuttgart 1985) *ad locum*. Müller's suggestion that Ctesias remained only for a period of seven years at the Persian court is accepted by Bigwood 1978, 19.

I therefore think we have no option but to accept the version as preserved in Diodorus 2.32.4 as long as contradictory evidence is lacking and to look for other occurrences which may have caused Ctesias' capture by Persian forces. An, in my view attractive, option is that Ctesias may have been taken prisoner during the revolts of Pissuthnes, satrap of Lydia, about 420-414 BC (cf. *Ctes. Pers.* = *FGrH* No. 688, F. 15 § 53) and/or that of Pissuthnes' son Amorges in 414-412 BC (cf. *Th.* 8.5.5, 28.2-3)<sup>5</sup>. We know that Pissuthnes employed Greek mercenaries (a.o. led by the Athenian Lycon, who was bribed by Tissaphernes to leave Pissuthnes: *Ctes. Pers.* = *FGrH* No. 688, F. 15 § 53) and that physicians regularly accompanied armies. It is also known that Amorges employed a mercenary force, probably supported by Athens<sup>6</sup>: Thucydides, however, is remarkably silent on the relations between Amorges and Athens (Cawkwell 1997, 15), though he appears to admit that Amorges was in league with Athenian commanders in Ionia (*Th.* 8.54.2-3)<sup>7</sup>.

Many of Amorges' mercenary soldiers were "from the Peloponnese" (cf. *Th.* 8.5.5), probably to a large extent from Arcadia, as the so-called Xanthian stele seems to suggest (Meiggs/Lewis 1988, no. 93.10; Tod 1946, no. 93), but also people from other cities (probably including members of the Athenian confederacy, to which also Cnidus belonged<sup>8</sup>) may have enlisted. After Lydia had been taken by Tissaphernes, Amorges took refuge in Caria, where he was given shelter by the city of Iasus (another member of the Athenian confederacy). Iasus was stormed in 412 BC by a Spartan force, on the instigation of

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<sup>5</sup> Cawkwell 2005, 140, 141-2 argues that the dates of Pissuthnes' and Amorges' revolts are not certain: I am rather cautious in dating these revolts: they may well have ended as late as 411 and the starting point may have been as early as shortly after Darius II's accession to the throne (in 424/3), if the events as described by Ctesias in §§ 51-3 took place in chronological order.

<sup>6</sup> Cf., e.g., Andocides, *On the Peace* [=3], 29; *Th.* 8.28.2, 54.3; also: Kagan 1987, 29-30; Cawkwell 1997, 15, 77; Cawkwell 2005, 141-2. An Athenian general was present at Ephesus in spring 414 (*IG* i<sup>3</sup> 370. 78-9 = Meiggs/Lewis 1988, 77) and it is possible that an Athenian by the name of Melesandrus was involved with Amorges in 414/3 (*IG* i<sup>3</sup> 371.3, *TAM* i 44. a 45, 55). Athens' support for Amorges prompted the Persian King Darius II to side with Sparta in the second phase of the Peloponnesian War, (sparingly) placing part of Persia's enormous resources in Sparta's service (cf., e.g., Stronk 1990-1, 122-3). I have, so far, not yet come across any logical or even satisfactory explanation for Athenian support to Amorges (probably already beginning during the period of the Peace of Nicias), contemporary with or shortly after the Sicilian expedition, other than the hope that Amorges' revolt might be successful and Athens might benefit from it. It was a chance they took against all odds.

<sup>7</sup> From *Th.* 8.28.1-2 we may infer that Thucydides acknowledges a relation between Athens and Amorges and the city of Iasus, relating how the Peloponnesian fleet captured Iasus: καὶ προσβαλό ντες τῆ Ἰασφ αἰ φνίδι καὶ οὐ προσδεχομένων ἄλλ' ἢ Ἀττικὰ ζναυ ζ εἶναι αἰ ρῶσιν ("so they attacked Iasus and took it, as the people did not think otherwise but that the ships were Athenian").

<sup>8</sup> Cnidus was a member of the Athenian confederacy between 479-412 BC, generally

Tissaphernes (cf. note 7 *supra*): Amorges was captured and delivered to the Persians. Fields suggests that, after Amorges' defeat, many of his mercenaries promptly found employment in the enemy camp, *sc.* both the Spartan army (cf., *e.g.*, Th. 8.28.3-5) and that led by King Darius II's loyal satrap Tissaphernes (cf. Fields 2001, 120). Ctesias may have been among those captured, some time during the campaign but likely in 413, by Tissaphernes and was finally presented by the latter to King Artaxerxes II (Eck 1990, 432). Counting back from 413, 412, 411 to 397 including, one arrives at a total of 17 years. Accepting 398/7 BC as the terminal point for Ctesias' stay in Persian service the solution presented here has at least the appearance of being feasible. It has, moreover, the attraction of simplicity and is even compatible with Occam's razor<sup>9</sup>.

### **Were foreign physicians a common feature at the Persian court?**

For a long time foreign physicians appear to have been more or less common practice at the Persian court. Before the Persian kings employed Greek doctors, they were taken care of by Egyptian physicians. According to Huyse (1990, 144) it was logical that the Persian kings employed first Egyptian and later Greek physicians, because Persian medicine was not so much practical but rather magical-religious of character.

Of several of the Egyptian physicians at the Persian court we know the names. On a statue, presently in the Vatican Museum (inv. nr. 196), Udjahorresnet, formerly a naval commander under the pharaohs Amasis and Psammetichus, presents himself as the chief physician of Cambyses II and Darius I (cf. Brosius 2000, 15-7). Other Egyptian physicians at the Persian court we know the name of are Semtutefnakht and Wenen-nefer (Onnophris)<sup>10</sup>. As for Greek physicians, Ctesias fitted into a tradition starting with Democedes of Croton (the son of a Cnidian priest of Asclepius by the name of Calliphon), the personal physician of King Darius I (cf., *e.g.*, Huyse 1990, 142). Of this Democedes is known that he also cured this king's mother, Queen Atossa (cf. Hdt. 3.129-33; cf. also Eck 1990, 410 and n. 8).

Originally Democedes had been the personal physician of the tyrant Polycrates of Samos. In 522 BC both were captured by the Persian satrap

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. for a short exegesis of this maxim ("pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate", most often, by later writers, expressed as "entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem"), *e.g.*, Russell 1961, 462-3. Gilmore 1888, 1, suggests as date for Ctesias' capture a date *c.* 417 BC. I believe this date to be too early.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Burkard 1994. The name Unnefer (Wenen-nefer, Onnophris) means "He who is continually happy" and is a name given to Osiris after his resurrection. Both names occur also later: Semtutefnakht is also the name of an inhabitant of Heracleopolis who supported the Persians during the Second Persian Period (343-332 BC), the name of Onnophris appears on several Greek papyri.

Oroetes (Hdt. 3.125): Polycrates was executed but also Oroetes (who had displeased the new king Darius) was killed shortly later. Next we are informed that Oroetes' slaves and possessions (obviously including Democedes) were transferred to Susa; there Democedes became Darius' personal physician when he succeeded to do what Darius' Egyptian physicians (plural!: Hdt. 3.129) failed to accomplish: to cure Darius' foot after the king had fallen from a horse. When Darius sent out an expedition to explore Greece, several years later, Democedes was, thanks to the support of Queen Atossa, reluctantly allowed to join it (Hdt. 3.134). Having arrived at Tarentum Democedes escaped and fled to Croton, where he was protected by his fellow-citizens from being taken again by the Persians (Hdt. 3.136-7).

Some time after Democedes Apollonides of Cos appeared at the Persian court, serving Xerxes I and Artaxerxes I. He cured Megabyzus, the son-in-law of Xerxes (*FGrH* No. 688 F. 14 § 34), but, several years later and after Megabyzus' death, fell in love with the latter's wife, Amytis, the king's sister and daughter of Amestris (the king's mother), and became her lover. Unfortunately, he failed to notice the malignant character of a wasting disease that had struck Amytis (from Ctesias' account we may surmise a disease of the womb), in the meantime pretending intercourse was the perfect treatment under the circumstances. Mortally ill, Amytis asked her mother to requite Apollonides. Amestris approached the king and got a free hand. Apollonides was imprisoned, tortured, and finally buried alive, on the day Amytis died, two months later (*FGrH* No. 688, F. 14 § 44).

Already during Ctesias' stay at the court also Polycritus of Mende served Artaxerxes II as physician (cf. *Plu. Art.* 21.2). About his career and fate nothing further is known: it seems very unlikely that he may be equated with the historian Polycritus of Mende<sup>11</sup>, but they may well have been closely related.

Though a number of 7 physicians, three Egyptian and four Greek, is not really impressive as a testimony to prove that foreign physicians were a common feature at the Persian court, it should be sufficient to prove that foreign physicians on more or less conspicuous positions were at the very least not exceptional. Their social position and the security of their existence may be a matter of contention: Apollonides' case shows that, like now, physicians had to observe certain rules of behaviour; the Egyptian physicians who had failed to cure Darius' twisted ankle were close to being impaled (Hdt. 3. 132), while Democedes enjoyed great fortune (Hdt. 3. 131) and the king's gratitude.

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<sup>11</sup> *FGrH* No. 559 and commentary, vol. 3b, Leiden 1955, 516; cf. K. Ziegler, *RE*, vol. 21.2, 1952, 1760-1, s.v.

The case of Democedes shows however that he did not serve voluntarily at the Persian court, but had to do so because he had been taken prisoner. Regarding Udjahorresnet we can only surmise the conditions under which he arrived at the Persian court: on that point we have no information whatsoever, but we know for sure that he somehow returned to Egypt. If we look at the text on his statue we are led to believe that his return occurred with consent of the Persian king. As for Ctesias, it is thoroughly possible (perhaps even likely) that he had been taken prisoner and afterwards served not entirely voluntarily as personal physician of Artaxerxes II. It may explain his efforts to assist Conon (*FGrH* No. 688, F. 30, §§ 73-4; F. 32 § 4 = *Plu. Art.* 21.4). Like the expedition of Darius to Greece offered Democedes the possibility to escape, assisting Conon made this possible for Ctesias. Regarding the other physicians we, once again, are hampered by the lack of evidence. From the fact that Ctesias and Polycritus both served at least for some time simultaneously as physicians at Artaxerxes II's court, one might surmise that Persian kings had several foreign physicians at the same time in their service (as the example of the Egyptian physicians of Darius also clearly suggests). It is, possibly, mainly the insufficiency of the sources we have to rely on that prevents us from knowing other names of Greek (and Egyptian) physicians employed by the Achaemenid kings.

### **What kind of sources, if any, did Ctesias use for his *Persica*?**

Ctesias himself is stated to have claimed that he has had access to (the) royal archives. These are called βασιλικὰ ἀναγραφάι, *basilikai anagrafai*, (D.S. 2.22.5) or βασιλικὰ διφθεραί, *basilikai diftherai* (D.S. 2.32.4). Ctesias' statement has been contested, e.g., by Rettig<sup>12</sup>. Jacoby (1922, 2047-2049) bluntly remarks that the sources Ctesias claimed to have used did not even exist: the historical value of Ctesias is, in his opinion, “gleich Null”, even “im Vergleich zu historisch so wenig hochstehenden Büchern, wie Xenophons Anabasis und Hellenika” (Jacoby 1922, 2047). The solution presented by Macan and cordially supported by Melchert (1996, 181) is quite ambiguous: “If (...) Ktesias had Persian documents and evidence before him, then so much the worse for such evidence”: either Ctesias is a charlatan or the sources are no good.

The statement that Ctesias consulted (the) royal archives raises a number of questions. The first and foremost of these questions is, of course, whether Persian royal records or archives did exist at all. As indicated above, this question has been answered in the negative by, e.g., Rettig and Jacoby. Also Briant, in his monumental *Histoire de l'empire perse*, is very careful: “Mais, de telles archives historiques perses, nous n'avons nul autre témoignage—mis à part

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<sup>12</sup>Rettig 1827, 16; cf. also Eck 1990, 411 and n. 12

une tradition tardive et suspecte, qui attribuait leur destruction à Alexandre” (Briant 1996, 14); the key word here is “telles”: Briant does not deny the existence of archives at Persian courts, but doubts whether their content could have been the basis for Ctesias’ stories<sup>13</sup>. However, absence of proof does not equal proof of absence. There is, moreover, what I would like to call at least circumstantial evidence for the contrary. All these scholars appear to neglect some Old Testament references: *Ezra* 4:15, *Ezra* 5:2 - 6:2 (written in Aramaic), *Esther* 6:1, and 10:2 (in Hebrew).

*Ezra* 4:15 states (in the translation of the Revised Standard Version): “... that search may be made in the book of the records of your [*sc.* King Artaxerxes I, JPS] fathers. You will find in the book of records and learn that this city [*sc.* Jerusalem, JPS] is a rebellious city, ...”. In the *Septuagint*-text<sup>14</sup> the phrase “in the book of records of your fathers” is rendered as follows: ἐν βιβλίῳ ὑπομνηματισμοῦ τῶν πατέρων σου. The Aramaic version says:

בְּסֵפֶר דְּכִרְנֵיָא דִּי אֲבָהֵתָךְ

(“*bi-sfar dokhranayya di avahatakh*”), meaning: ‘in the book of recollections of your fathers’<sup>15</sup>. *Ezra* 5:2 -6:2 relates the story of the permission for the reconstruction of the temple at Jerusalem. The Persian governor of “the province Beyond the River” asked the Jews to prove this permission. They referred to a decree by Cyrus the Great, for which was subsequently searched “in the house of archives where the documents were stored” (*Septuagint*: ἐν ταῖς βιβλιοθήκαις, ὅπου ἦ γὰρ ζακαῖ τῷ) in Babylon. This is a translation of the Aramaic

בְּבֵית סִפְרֵיָא דִּי גִנְזָיָא

(“*be-vet sifrayya di ginzayya*”), meaning ‘in the house of books<sup>16</sup> where the

<sup>13</sup> Earlier Briant has stated that Ctesias obtained the information from the *basilikai diftherai* only orally (Briant Paris 1982, 497), but that he used this information preparing two works now (almost completely) lost *sc.* on the roads and on the revenues of the Empire. The *Persica* would have been almost completely based on oral information. Even Lenfant 2004, xxxvi-xxxix doubts the existence of elaborate Persian royal archives (*cf.* also Stronk *Proceedings Kiel*).

<sup>14</sup> Rahlfs 1979. Since there may be some discussion concerning the faithfulness of the *Septuagint* to the Aramaic and Hebrew original (*cf.* Stegmüller 1975, 160) I have chosen to present both original and *Septuagint* next to the translation of the Revised Standard Version.

<sup>15</sup> ‘The book of recollections’ is generally translated as ‘book of records’, ‘chronicles’, ‘annals’, ‘memoirs’. The *Bible de Jerusalem* translates: ‘...des recherches dans les Mémoires de tes pères’.

<sup>16</sup> This expression means: ‘The house from where books (*i.e.* letters) were sent through-

treasures are’). Finally a record of Cyrus’ decree (ὁ πὸς κυροῦ) was found at Agbatana in Media<sup>17</sup>.

*Esther* 6:1 runs as follows: “On that night the king<sup>18</sup> could not sleep; and he gave orders to bring *the book of memorable deeds [the chronicles]* (in the *Septuagint*: γράμματα μνημό σανα τῶ νῆ μφῶ ν), and they were read before the king”. In Hebrew that is:

סֵפֶר הַזְכֵּרֹנוֹת דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים

(“*sefer ha-zikhronot divre ha-yamim*”). In this clause the Hebrew words ‘*zikhronot*’ match the Aramaic ‘*dokhranayya*’ of *Ezra* 4:15, ‘the book of the recollections’. The expression ‘*divre ha-yamim*’ (literally “the words of the days”) means ‘the events or deeds from the past’ and is generally translated as ‘history’ or ‘chronicles’. It is the Hebrew phrase designed for the *Book of Chronicles*, and the phrase also frequently occurs in the *Book of Kings*, e.g. 1 *Kings* 14:29. *Esther* 10:2 says: “And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the full account of the high honour of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written *in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?*” (*Septuagint*: γέ γραπτα ἐ νβιβλί φβασιλέ ωνΠερσῶ ν καὶ Μήδων εἰς μνημό σων). For the ‘*biblios basileôn Persôn kai Médôn*’ we read in Hebrew:

עַל-סֵפֶר דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים לְמַלְכֵי מְדַי וּפָרָס

(“*al-sefer divre ha-yamim le-malkhe maday u-faras*”), meaning ‘in the book of the words of the days (= chronicles) of the kings of the Medes and Persians’. The *Septuagint* does not translate, unlike in *Esther* 6:1, ‘*divre ha-yamim*’,

<sup>17</sup> It is, by the way, noteworthy that both the Greek and the Aramaic, and, for that matter, the King James Bible, refer to treasures (“*ginzayya*” is the plural of “*genaz*”, treasure, and the Greek “*gaza*” is stated to be a derivative of this word), while the RSV mentions, instead, documents as the contents of the library: the context offers no clue for the deviant translation in the RSV. The RSV calls the city where the record was found Ecbatana: however, I will follow Ctesias’ spelling of this city: Agbatana.

<sup>18</sup> In the RSV text the name of this king is given as Ahasuerus. It is believed that Ahasuerus is identical with King Xerxes. In the *Septuagint*, however, the name of this king is Artaxerxes. In the Hebrew text of *Esther* the king’s name is given as Achashverosh (=aleph, cheth, shin, vav, resh, shin), generally considered to be the Hebrew representation of the Persian Khshayarsha (=Xerxes), and that the specific king intended was Xerxes I (486-465). The *Septuagint* probably originated in the 2nd century BC (somewhere between 250 and 130: cf. Stegmüller 1975, 160). Since knowledge on the Persian kings was already greatly diminishing by that time (to disappear almost completely somewhat later: cf., e.g., the mistakes of Flavius Iosephus on Persian kings: *AJ* 11.6.1), Achashverosh was then identified as Artaxerxes, to be more specific Artaxerxes II Mnemon (404-359). Like all protestant Bibles, the RSV of the Bible is translated directly from the Hebrew original. We find therefore in the RSV ‘Ahasuerus’. As a matter of fact the historical background of the book *Esther* is highly complex and fascinating: cf., e.g., Roth e.a.



directly but by circumscription εἰς μνημό στων, ‘for memory’s sake’. Reviewing this evidence, we have a first clear documentary evidence that some kind of ‘royal archives’ of narrative character did exist within the Persian Empire.

Correspondence between the King of Kings and the provinces was a vital link in the administration of the Persian Empire as is shown, *e.g.*, by the so-called *Q-series* from Persepolis, written in Elamite and known as the ‘travel-texts’, a number of letters written in Imperial Aramaic (including the correspondence of Arsham, the Persian *satrap* of Egypt, and a translation of the Behistun-inscription of Darius) and found in Elephantine (Egypt), still apart from the existence and maintenance of the ‘Royal Road’ between Sardis and Susa and described by Herodotus (5.52-4; cf. also Dusinberre 2003, 2-3 and note 9 for an archive at Sardis). That the Persian kings communicated by letter is mentioned by Hellanicus (*FGrH* No. 4, F. 178). The practice of ‘government by letter’ appears to be confirmed in the Old Testament. *Nehemiah* 2:7-9 runs as follows: “(7) And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah; (8) and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house which I shall occupy”. And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. (9) Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and gave them the king’s letters. ...”.

Such a system of government, if it is to be somehow efficient and consistent, only can survive for a prolonged time if there is at least an elementary, though functional, archival system, run by an able chancery. That the Persians maintained such a system may be shown, *e.g.*, by the so-called *Treasury Tablets*<sup>19</sup> and the *Persepolis Fortification Tablets*<sup>20</sup> (cf. fig. 1). Moreover, such a practice would fit in with customs at other courts throughout the ancient Near East (including Egypt, as is shown by the (much earlier) El Amarna-archive: cf. figs. 2 and 3) and even of trade-houses or businessmen like the Murašū fami-

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<sup>19</sup> Except for a small number of tablets probably carried off and dropped by plundering Macedonians, the rest of these tablets were found in Room 33 of the Persepolis Palace, probably a 2-level room, measuring about 10 x 18.50 meters: supposedly this room housed the archives of the regional treasury of *Parsa*. In the same room a collection of 200-odd *bullae* with seal impressions, possibly fastened to containers of various goods or Aramaic papyri, were found. Cf. Schmidt 1953, 173-5 and Schmidt 1957, 4-7. Cf. also Cameron 1948 and Bowman 1970.

<sup>20</sup> The Persepolis Fortification Tablets consist of thousands (some 8,000 of which some 2,000 are published) of clay tablets, almost all written in Elamite, recovered from the fortification wall at the NE corner of the terrace. They date to the years 509-494 (during the reign of Darius I) and deal with food commodities. Cf. Hallock 1969.

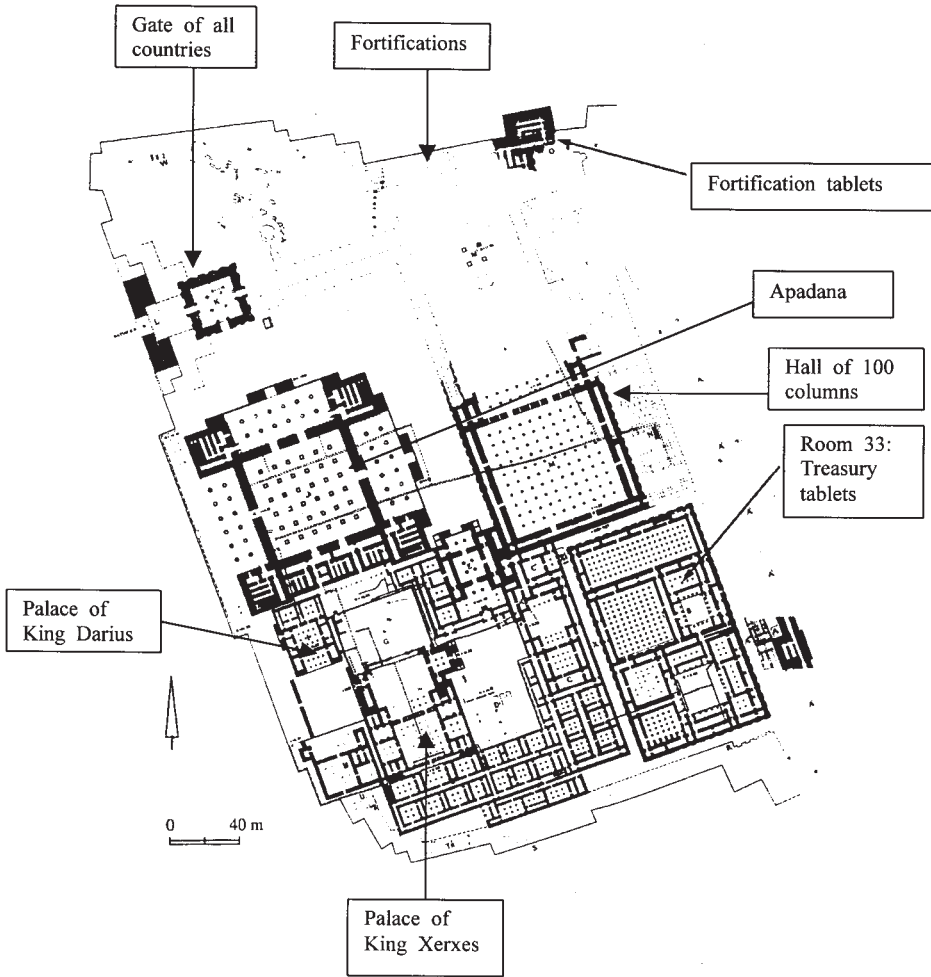

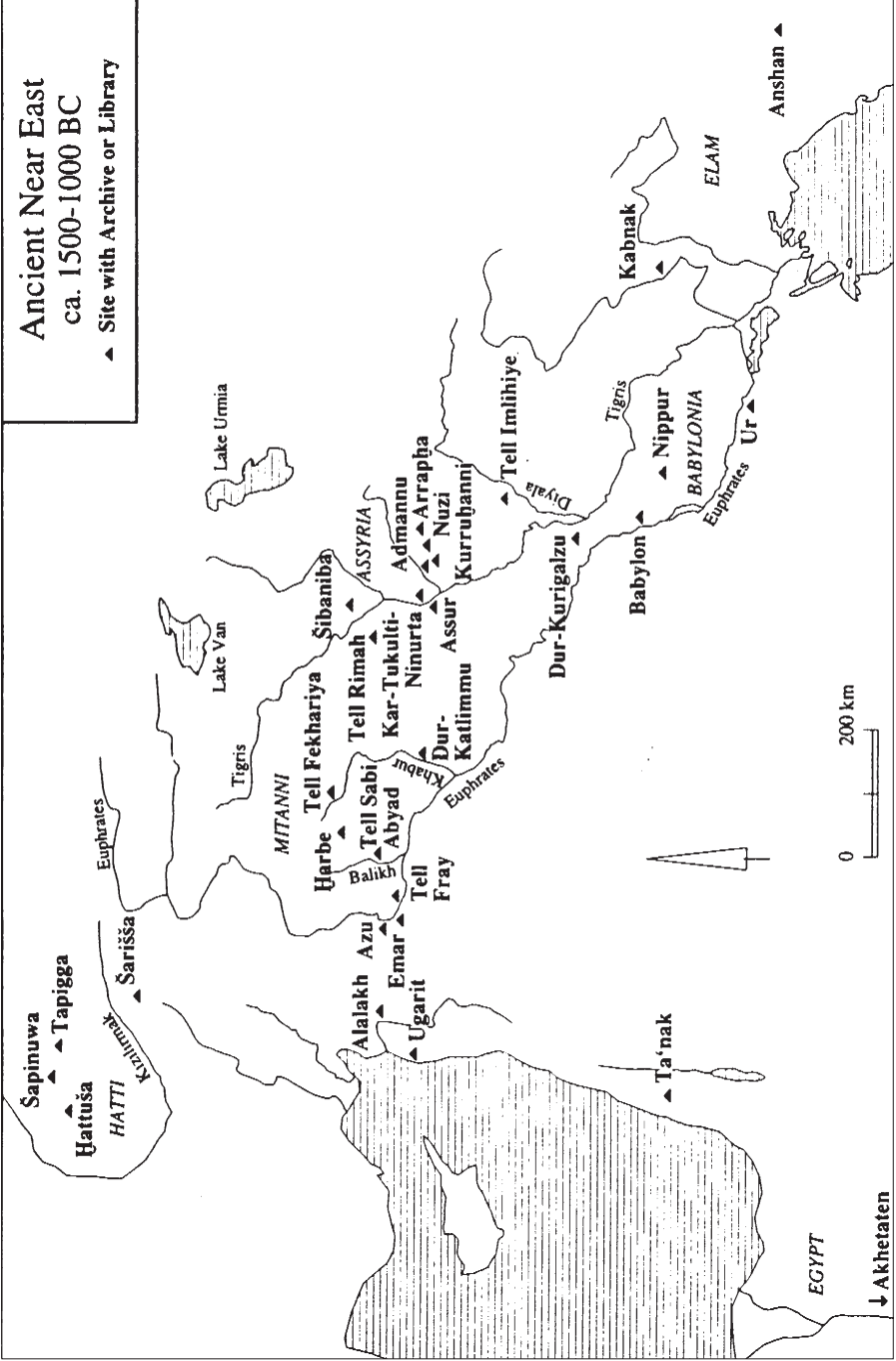


Fig. 1. Some of the main features of the palaces of Perspolis (after E.F. Schmidt, *Persepolis*, Vol. I, Structures, Reliefs, Inscriptions, Chicago 1953f, fig. 21)

Fig. 2. Archives and libraries in the ancient Near East: c. 1500-1000 BC. From: Pedersén 1998, Plan 1. 



ly<sup>21</sup>. All such collections of texts, controlled by the state or state-officials, could, some way or another, be styled as *basilikai apografai* or *basilikai diftherai*, be it that the latter term seems to be more suited to documents written on perishable material such as hides or papyrus, *i.e.* documents written in Imperial Aramaic. I think that both the Old Testament evidence and the general practice of efficient rule make it virtually certain that there were archives of some kind at the Persian courts: the fragment of book *Esther* 6:1 suggests moreover that among these archives were also items with a more or less narrative character. Posner puts it as follows: “No remnants of the *central* [my italics, JPS] archives of the Persian kings have been discovered to date, but we can be sure that archival arrangements at the highest level of government were more than adequate. Royal archival establishments existed in Babylon and Ecbatana and probably also in Susa and Persepolis, the other royal residences”<sup>22</sup>. Piecing together all shreds of evidence we may begin to fathom the extent and content of these archives.

The next question that directly emerges - once the problem concerning Persian archives is solved - is whether Ctesias really had access to these sources. This question may be split in two parts, *i.e.* physical access and intellectual access. As to the first part of the question we are not able to say anything at all with any certainty. All we have are Ctesias' words that he had access to them and we just have to believe him. It certainly is possible that, during years of service at the Persian court, Ctesias would have met with people that could provide him access to (parts of) what we might call, one way or another, ‘royal archives’.

The second part of the question is even more challenging. I am inclined to assume that Ctesias understood and spoke Persian<sup>23</sup>. First, because he himself seems to suggest as much (cf. *Plu. Art.* 13.4 about Ctesias as supposed interpreter). Second, because of the fact that for a physician to the royal family it was at least convenient (and probably also safer) to be able to communicate directly with his patients. But could he write it, could he read it? And if so, what could he read? Akkadian, Elamite, Old-Persian, Imperial Aramaic, to name only a few of the languages used in the Achaemenid Empire - and no doubt present as well in the royal archives (still assuming that these did exist)?

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<sup>21</sup> This archive, found at Nippur, consists of about 800 tablets, primarily ranging from Artaxerxes I year 10 to Darius II year 7. The family's main (official) occupation seems to have been land-management for absentee landowners, *i.e.* Persian nobles or the state. Cf. Cardascia 1951 and Stolper 1985.

<sup>22</sup> Posner 1972, p. 125; cf. also Pedersén 1998. V. also Eck 2003, xxii-xxiv.

<sup>23</sup> If he did so, he was no exception. We are told, *e.g.*, that it took the Athenian Themistocles one year to learn to speak Persian sufficiently fluently to be able to communicate with the Persian King (probably Artaxerxes though also the name of Xerxes is mentioned: *Plu. Them.* 27.1 touches upon this problem) without an interpreter: *Plu. Them.* 29.5.

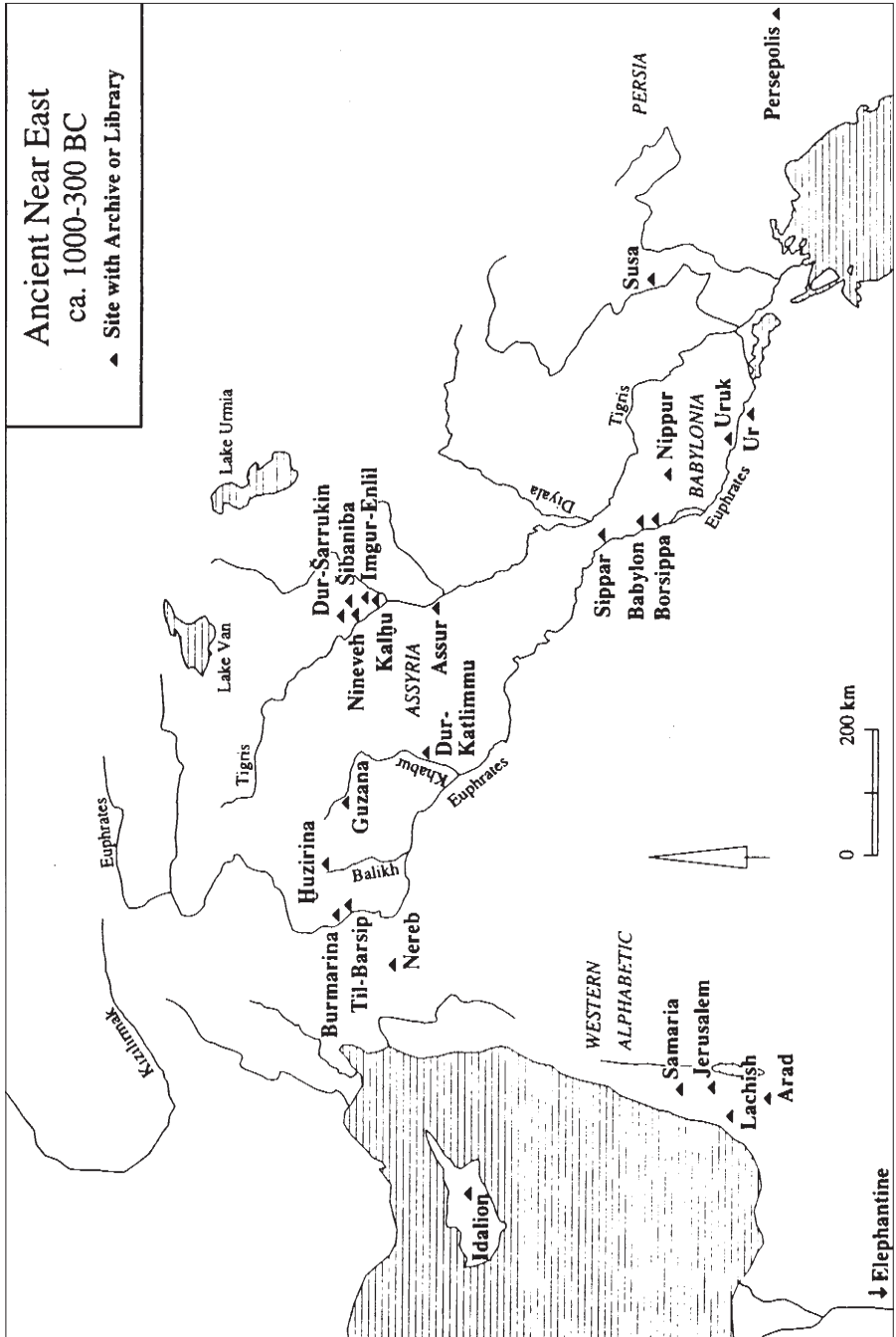


Fig. 3. Archives and libraries in the ancient Near East: c. 1000-300 BC.  
From: Pedersén 1998, Plan 61.

We have no final answers to those questions, though we may have our suspicions. In this respect one of the most revealing, if not essential, pieces of information is provided by a passage of Diodorus of Sicily (D.S. 2.22.5). It reads as follows: ... τοιταῦτ' ἐν ταῖς βασιλικαῖς ἀναγραφαῖς ἱστορεῖται φασι οἱ βάρβαροι (the barbarians say that such is the account ... that is given in the royal records). Who precisely those barbarians are remains in the dark. They probably were Ctesias' informers, be it of Persian or Babylonian origin. One fact, however, clearly emerges: for the use of royal archives regarding this period (*sc.* the Assyrian history) Ctesias obviously depended on hearsay.

Most of Ctesias' Persian story appears to be set at the court, cradle of many intrigues linked with the interests of the persons involved. It seems to be partly based upon rumours, court-gossip, stories by hearsay and other, more formal, expressions of oral history. Actually, Ctesias himself admits, according to Photius, that he heard certain facts directly from Parysatis (*cf.* Phot. *Bibl.* [72] 42b11-13). Though the importance of such information may, in itself, be enormous and the power of informal forces working at courts can hardly be overestimated, there is a major problem. Such situations may generate saucy stories, but they are historically hardly (if at all) verifiable since they are not likely to be documented. The practice is that court intrigues keep the court moving, may even determine the course of history, without the origin of the action being documented. Only some successful results of pulling strings may become visible in time and become reflected in historical sources. In this respect Ctesias' work is revealing and at the same time down to earth. But even if Ctesias were telling the truth all the time we would not be able to prove (or disprove!) it.

An extra complication in the assessment of Ctesias' value for Persian history is the very fact that his subject, and, perhaps, his intended audience, determined his scope and indeed - as far as we can see - the nature of his work. Persian history, like many Oriental histories (*cf.*, *e.g.*, for a convenient summary Van de Mieroop 1999, *passim*), was focused on the vicissitudes and successes of individual kings or heroes: "it expressed the life of societies deliberating and acting with clear purposes under the leadership of far-seeing men" (Momigliano 1990, 17). Moreover, the nature of the tradition quite differs from the sources modern historians generally prefer, but that is not uncommon.

In 1961 Jan Vansina published a pioneering work on oral tradition that was translated into English in 1965 and elaborated in 1985. Vansina defines oral tradition as follows: "Oral traditions consist of all verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past" (1965, 19-20). Typical for orally transmitted stories is the (very) frequent occurrence of '*formulae*' (like epitheta, [quasi]-statistics, reiterations, recurrent themes (like meetings, dreams,

sending or receiving messengers, the abandoning of a (royal) child etc.) and, occasionally the compression of time (*telescoping*). Another problem, as Murray 2001 observes, is that the memories handed over in narratives tend to serve certain needs of later generations: in the process the narratives are likely to be coloured or distorted. Reading the Persian histories as written by Herodotus and Ctesias one may notice differences suggesting such changes (cf. Lenfant 1996).

Like the mediaeval world of W. Europe, the Oriental world was, and to a large extent still is, mainly an oral world. The traditions were - and still are - kept in stories and “in the international society of the Persian Empire people told stories on an international scale” (Momigliano 1990, 15). Even today, at campsites, in *hans*, in coffeehouses, or on the market-place in villages and even bigger cities throughout the Orient, the storyteller is welcome, both as entertainer and bringer of news, very much like the *troubadours* in mediaeval Western Europe. The storyteller’s style is even reflected in the broadcasted speeches delivered by modern politicians, like those of the former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein during the third Gulf War of 2003, after an U.S. American helicopter had crashed in a farmer’s field.

It seems only natural that a major part of Persian history, let alone that of its predecessors, was transmitted orally. In this respect it seems hard to avoid that the nature of the tradition had at least some effect on the result of its reflection. We should, therefore, be ready to expect that the *Persica* shows traces of the oral origin of, at least part of, the stories related. As a matter of fact it is, in so many words, reflected in Demetrius’ judgement on Ctesias (*On Style*, 213): “Ὅπερ δὲ τῷ Κτησίᾳ ἐγκαλοῦσιν ὡς ἀδολεσχοτέροισι τὰς διλογίας, πολλαχῆ μὲν νῦν ὡς ἐγκαλοῦσιν ὁρθῶς, ... (“The charge of garrulity often brought against Ctesias on the ground of his repetitions can perhaps in many passages be established”). The use of repetitions is, as indicated by Vansina, one of the distinctive features of an (originally) orally transmitted text: repetition is one of the characteristics of the largest preserved fragment of Ctesias’ *Persica*, sc. *P.Oxy.* 2330.

To blame Ctesias for the nature of his sources seems not the adequate way to deal with him. Moreover, the status of oral information in the Greek world was considerably higher than it is today. As Munn puts it: “That which is *alethes*, “true” in Greek, is, etymologically, that which is “unforgettable”. That which has proved itself memorable, therefore, is *alethes*. Such a subjective construction of truth gave first place to the test of time ... Critical scholarship about the past, among Greeks both before and after Thucydides, was less concerned with systematic criteria for separating the verifiable past from legend than it was with determining which legends deserved credence, ..., and which ones had been distorted” (Munn 2000, 15-6). And, somewhat further:

“An event that had not passed through the filters of communal telling and retelling could not be measured by the standards of consensus. A reliable account of recent events depended upon the established wisdom and veracity of the source or informant” (Munn 2000, 16). We might, therefore, as well state that Ctesias preserved, or reflected, the spirit of the Orient better than Herodotus did, though also Herodotus (as Forsdyke 1956, 75 notices) primarily relied on what he heard (cf. also Evans 1991, 89-146; also Slings in: Bakker e.a. 2002). The truth, however, to judge after the content of Herodotus’ *Histories* and the apparent content of the *Persica*, appears to be that their objectives were, to a large extent, different. Finally, we should consider that also the taste of the audience had changed. Their works are, therefore, to some extent, incomparable.

### **How reliable is Ctesias’ information?**

We now have arrived at the last and most difficult of the questions we set out to describe: the reliability – in *our* perception - of Ctesias’ *Persica*. The first problem we meet is the fact that less than one quarter of a page in modern print of the original *Persica* has been preserved, *sc. P.Oxy.* 2330 and some sentences in Demetrius’ *On Style*, 213-6 (cf. Stronk, *Proceedings Kiel*). Everything else nowadays labelled ‘*Persica*’ is either an *epitome* or an adaptation by a third writer. The largest portion ‘*Persica*’ has been preserved by four authors: Nicolaus of Damascus (adaptation), Diodorus of Sicily (adaptation), Plutarch of Chaeronea (adaptation), and Photius of Constantinople (*epitome*). Apart from these, some 40 odd authors have transmitted minor fragments. Each and every one of these authors fitted his selected fragments into his own story, adapting it to his own taste. An example may serve to illustrate the point: Ctesias relates in the *Assyriaca* (the name given to books 1-3 of the *Persica*) the death of King Sardanapallus. In the fragments this death is described as αἰσχρῶς (“disgraceful”) by Diodorus of Sicily (2.23.4), but as γενναίως (“noble, glorious”) by Athenaeus (12.529D).

Brunt observes: “‘Fragments’ and even epitomes reflect the interests of the authors who cite or summarize lost works as much as or more than the characteristics of the works concerned. (...) Only long excerpts reveal something of an author’s quality, and then we need to be assured that they are representative” (Brunt 1980, 494). However, even then personal values of the excerpter may play a role in his choice, as appears from Photius’ *epitome* (cf. Stronk, *in press*; Stronk, *in preparation*, ch. II). A similar phenomenon has been demonstrated by Lenfant for the work of Herodotus (Lenfant 1999). As for Ctesias we will never be sure which faults or mistakes are the responsibility of the epitomizer or of the author and which errors are to be attributed to Ctesias himself. The practice is that, by most modern authors, only Ctesias is blamed for all errors.



One way of attempting to solve the problem of Ctesias' reliability is to look into the possibilities he had to acquire sufficient 'genuine', let us say reliable, information. Forsdyke argues that Ctesias was not likely to acquire authentic Assyrian information at Susa or any other residence of the Persian king, since prehistoric peoples usually did not preserve native traditions of aliens with whom their own relations had been hostile. Their memories of such predecessors hardly went back beyond the moments of contact (Forsdyke 1956, 75). If, however, he continues, Ctesias had opportunities to orally consult the temple-scribes at Babylon, as Herodotus did, his story of the Assyrian Empire might very well have had some historical content. Whether or not Ctesias did use (oral) sources from Babylonia we can not determine with certainty, though it seems very likely, if we may believe his own account (cf. D.S. 2.22.5, *supra*).

As it was, he has been generally stated to have had no knowledge, or at least a limited knowledge, of any events in Babylonia or Assyria before the Median conquest<sup>24</sup>, on the basis of the extracts of the chapters dealing with this part of Ctesias' story by Diodorus of Sicily<sup>25</sup>. An additional complication is noted by Momigliano (while writing on Greek influence on Roman historiography): "The main negative consequences of the Roman assimilation of Greek historiography were two. The first was that the Romans inherited the Greek inability to do real research on the intermediate period between origins and contemporary events. Like the Greeks the Roman historians remained essentially equipped either to collect and criticise mythical traditions or to observe and

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<sup>24</sup> Assyria had suffered a severe defeat in 612 against the Mede Umakištar (Cyaxares). About 550 it was incorporated in the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great. It is not certain what the position of Assyria has been between these dates: this question is closely connected with the problem whether a Median *Empire* has ever existed. Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg 1988 argues that neither literary sources nor archaeological evidence prove beyond reasonable doubt that such an empire ever existed. Cf. also Amélie Kuhrt 1995, 654-6.

<sup>25</sup> This does certainly not imply that Ctesias had no direct knowledge of Assyrian or Babylonian history at all: cf., e.g., Wilamowitz 1912, 98; Drews 1965, 129-142, 138: "It is almost certain that Babylonian records were the ultimate source of Ctesias' report of an Assyrian empire of more than 1300 years duration". Also J. Bonquet is not altogether negative concerning Ctesias' knowledge of Assyrian and Babylonian history: cf. Bonquet 1990, 5-16, and Bonquet 1987. The same goes for Gardiner-Garden (1987, 39). Dominique Lenfant argues that Ctesias gives evidence of the rewriting of history either by the Persian court or by the diverse local traditions within the Empire (Lenfant 1996, 348; cf. also 360 *sqq.*). Cf. also Holzberg 1993, 81 and his n. 14. Also Gilmore (1888, 10-1) argues that Ctesias may have had ample time, during the frequent stays of the court at Babylon, to converse with prominent Babylonians, adding that Ctesias' researches would not have been very deep: "all he wanted was to compose a plausible and interesting narrative", especially regarding Semiramis, who had been specially named by Herodotus. Quite positive regarding Ctesias' knowledge of ancient oriental affairs are König (1972) and

report contemporary history. They were hardly able to examine the historical as opposed to the mythical past, if by examination we mean a systematic (not an occasional) study of primary evidence. They could collate and criticise reports by preceding historians, but their study of more remote history never had the value and the cogency of their study of contemporary events” (Momigliano 1990, 106-7).

Another way to assess the value of the *Persica* as a historical source is to look at the remarks on the work by those who had read the whole work and to try and value the nature of the work as they saw it. So far we have discussed Ctesias as if he were a pure historian<sup>26</sup>. Is it, however, right to look upon Ctesias, primarily or even exclusively, as a historian or is his position more complex? I believe there is evidence that it is. One of the most neglected remarks from antiquity on the qualities of Ctesias is to be found in Demetrius’ *On Style*, 215. Demetrius states that: καὶ ὅλως δὲ ὁ ποιητὴ ζούτος (ποιητὴν γὰρ αὐτὸν κκαλοῖ ητις ἄν νεί κό τω) ἐναργεῖ α δημιουργό ζέ σιν ἐν τῇ γραφῇ συμπά σῃ (“In general, this *poietês* - for it would be normal to call him [*i.e.* Ctesias, JPS] a *poietês* - is a practitioner of vividness throughout his work”). Elsewhere (Stronk, in press), I have argued that Demetrius’ use of the word *poietês* should be connected with the role of the poet as described in Aristotle’s *Poetica*: the poet has to describe ‘universals’, the ‘matter’. He does not need to bother with precise events, but has to instruct the reader with knowledge that will enable him to act properly. In Ctesias’ *Persica* historiography may have – at least partly - become a creative narration on the basis of an - in itself *potentially* reliable - historical nucleus (cf. Gomme 1954, 55-6). Writing history (like, *e.g.*, Thucydides<sup>27</sup> and, to a lesser extent, probably, Herodotus) changes into a description of events in a more or less

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<sup>26</sup> I agree completely with Gomme 1954, 102, that from ancient and modern historians one expects honesty, intelligence, and diligence. In this respect we may judge ancient writers by our modern standards. However, our possibilities and techniques for textual criticism, both internal and external, of the sources generally differ so much from those of the ancient world that to apply modern standards seems an impossible demand (cf. also Momigliano 1990, 106-7, quoted *supra*). If one takes into account the very nature of the sources many ancient writers had to rely on, information only from hearsay, *c.q.* originally orally transmitted sources, it will be clear that I take a more liberal point of view in this matter. What we *hope to find* is of course honesty, intelligence, and diligence, but we are allowed to show forgiveness, or at least understanding, if the result of the attempts of ancient writers does not meet our standards.

<sup>27</sup> Cf., however, Cornford 1907. Gomme 1954, 116-164, shows that Thucydides frequently adapted techniques of narration which were basically not different from Homer’s or Aeschylus’; we might say that he, too, sometimes composed his narration like a *poietês*. Cf. in this respect Rood 1998. Critical remarks regarding Thucydides’ method and present-

free interpretation of occurrences, perhaps occasionally even approaching a historical novel<sup>28</sup>.

Dealing with the *Persica* of Ctesias we should, I think, henceforth constantly bear in mind that we are not facing a historical work *stricto sensu*, but the didactical work of a ‘poet’, treating historical persons and events in a, perhaps, more or less invented historical context (of which, of course, many or even most parts may be quite accurate). We even might, perhaps, consider him as a kind of Tragic Historian, a kind of forerunner to that style, a mixture between novel-like literature and ‘genuine’ historiography, which was ultimately defined by Duris of Samos in the *prolegomena* to his work<sup>29</sup> but is, regularly, also visible in a number of stories related by Herodotus (cf. Marasco 1988). In this respect Greek historiography shows a continuous tradition in which modern authors discover time and again ‘new’ developments which are, more often than not, generally just nuances in approach and/or style. I firmly believe that many modern authors underestimate the strength of tradition and continuity in the Greek world, literature certainly not excluded.

In this contribution I have discussed some of the problems involved with a fair assessment of the *Persica* by Ctesias. It may be clear that I believe that this work is to be treated with care: as a historical source it *may* at times be suspect, sometimes outright dubious, though we have to consider the possibility that the value of the *Persica* as a historical source increases as Ctesias proceeds in time (seemingly quite in line with Momigliano’s idea: *v. supra*; an identical view has been proposed by Stevenson 1997). However, apart from its value as a source, diverse as that is, the *Persica* have gained another interest: together with Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia*<sup>30</sup> it starts a new way in Greek literary tradition. If only because of this, the work merits more interest than it has received, apart from some exceptions, over the last century.

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<sup>28</sup> For the definition of ‘novel’ I follow Schmeling (Schmeling 1996, 1, 2) and the definition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Other definitions of what kind of prose exactly is to be considered as a ‘novel’ are in my view too restrictive, like, *e.g.*, that of Morgan (1997, 130).

<sup>29</sup> Duris states in his *prolegomena* that history should describe life (βίος) like tragedy does; like tragedy it should evoke the passion (πάθος) of its audience.

<sup>30</sup> W. Miller, who translated the *Cyropaedia* for the Loeb Classical Library, described this work in the Introduction (viii) as follows: “It is historical, but not history; it has much Socratic dialogue, but it is not philosophy; it has discussions of many questions of education, ethics, politics, tactics, etc., but it is not an essay. It is biographical, but it is not biography; it contains also, ..., one of the most charming love stories in literature. We

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