

THE 'OMINA MORTIS' IN THE HISTORIES OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

Alexander's attitude towards the Babylonian priesthood

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Whatever opinion one holds about the reality of omens, we have to consider that in Antiquity most people believed in their reliability. Surely, some have manipulated portents, but this does not imply that they considered omens in general to be valueless. Such a dichotomy is, on the contrary, typical for the *homo religiosus*.

Omens played especially a part in the foreshadowing of great events — also in literature.¹ Accordingly, the ancient writers describing the history of Alexander prepare their readers for his immature death by inserting some omens in their account. In this article it will be attempted to determine the historical setting of these omens and also to make some observations on the attitude of the Babylonian priesthood towards Alexander and his reaction on that attitude.² In my opinion the stories about these omens give new information about the way in which Alexander looked upon his Oriental subjects.

Research has been done. In Mederer 1936³ the omens have been discussed in full⁴, but the writer was almost exclusively interested in questions of *Quellenkritik*. Following Jacoby he attributed the known versions either to Aristobulus or Clitarchus and then determined their reliability. I do not think his method recommendable. It is impossible to reduce all the different versions to two sources only. The way in which the stories about Alexander have developed is far more complex than M. supposed. Unless new texts will be found, the historical Alexander ("wie er eigentlich gewesen") will remain an enigma for us. We cannot

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¹ On omens in general see e.g. the articles by Bulengerus and Riess mentioned in the list of quoted literature at the end.

² On Alexander's attitude towards mantic in general see Berve 1926 I 90–92.

³ For full reference see the list of quoted literature at the end.

⁴ Mederer 1936 120–133.

do more than point to certain elements in these stories which probably reflect actual knowledge. Especially when the authors have recorded events unclear to them, but clear to us because of our greater knowledge of the ancient Near East. So it was necessary to reexamine the accounts on the aforementioned omens in order to find these elements.

One of the omens ("our" omen no. 5) has already been studied in order to connect it with an Oriental ritual — we shall discuss that below. It deserves special attention, since connected with omen no. 1 it has been used by Eddy 1961 in order to reconstruct the attitude of the Babylonian priesthood towards Alexander. I hope to show that his analysis has to be reconsidered and that we have to interpret these events in a completely different way.

Alexander has just returned from his expedition to India, and is setting out for Babylon. At that moment the authors⁵ insert an account on the first inauspicious omen announcing Alexander's impending death.

1. *The warning by the Chaldaeans*

App. B.C. II, 153; Arr. 7, 16,5 ff.; Curt. 10,4⁶; Diod. 17, 112; Just. 12, 13,3 ff.; Plut. A. 73.⁷

The accounts given by the various writers show some differences, but the main point is clear: on his way to Babylon Alexander has been warned by Chaldaean astrologers not to enter the city, but for some reason Alexander did not follow their advice.

According to App., Arr. and Just. the Chaldaeans approached Alexander personally, according to Diod. and Plut., however, they used Nearchus as intermediary, because their leader Belephantes was afraid to

⁵ The omens described in the different versions of the Alexander-romance have been left out of consideration. Diodorus Siculus 17, 114, 5 states that when Alexander ordered to quench the sacred fires in Asia in order to honour his dead friend Hephaestio, public opinion regarded him to have predicted his own death unwillingly, since this was the Persian custom to mourn a king.

⁶ This passage is, however, an addition by J. Freinshem in his edition of Curtius in 1648 (and 1670), when he tried to fill up the *lacuna* in the *mss*, and therefore has been left out of consideration.

⁷ The following abbreviations have been used: App.=Appian, Arr.=Arrian, Curt.=Curtius Rufus, Diod.=Diodorus Siculus, Just.=Justinus and Plut. A.=Plutarch, Life of Alexander; moreover, Arist. indicates Aristobulus.

address himself to the king⁸. The reason for their intercession was, according to Arr., that they had received an oracle from the god Bel(us), i.e. Marduk, or (according to Diod.) that they had learned by interpreting the stars, that the king would die in Babylon. App. and Arr. state explicitly, that this point of time was very dangerous for the king, implicating that he could enter the city safely afterwards.

Alexander's reaction is described in different ways. According to Arr. and Plut. he disregarded their advice; according to App., Arist. (quoted by Arr.), Diod. and Just. he wanted first to follow the advice, but afterwards he reconsidered his plan and entered Babylon nevertheless. According to Diod. and Just. this was effected by the philosopher Anaxarchus, who in a typical Greek manner criticised the advice given by the Chaldaeans as being false and uncertain, and who succeeded to persuade the king to enter the city.

According to Arist. (and App.) the Chaldaeans gave two advices: firstly not to enter the city, secondly to enter Babylon from the West, in order that the king would not have to look towards the West. Alexander was willing to follow the second advice, but on account of the character of the landscape it proved to be impossible to enter Babylon but from the East, as happened. The reason for this second advice may have been that according to Mesopotamian belief the entrance to the Netherworld was situated in the West, and it would be dangerous in a time, when the king's life was threatened, to look towards the realm of the dead.⁹

But why did the Chaldaeans warn Alexander? According to Arr.¹⁰ Alexander suspected their incentive to be totally selfish. For Alexander intended to rebuild the temples of Babylon, once destroyed by Xerxes as a punitive measure, especially the temple of Bel¹¹; he had even given order to start with the operation¹², but as long as the king was out of Babylon, the priests could delay the rebuilding-activity and in that way

⁸ This is mentioned only by Diod.

⁹ Cf. also Lehmann-Haupt 1931 183 n. 5. The interpretation by Mederer 1936 121 f. is not convincing, when omen no. 5 is indeed to be understood as an attempt by the Babylonian priesthood to save Alexander's life.

¹⁰ It is not clear, if Arr. has derived this datum from Arist.

¹¹ Josephus (*c. Apionem* 1, 192) mentions also the restoration of the temple of Bel by Alexander.

¹² Cf. Arr. 3, 16, 4.

convert the money granted by the Assyrian (=Babylonian?) kings for the offerings and for the maintenance of the temple, to their own use. Alexander's arrival would mean, however, a quickened completion of the rebuilding and the end of their extra earnings. So Alexander believed them to have made up these evil portents in order to keep him away from the city. Most modern authors have been convinced by Arr. that the Babylonian priests were trying to prevent the rebuilding of their temple. Berve¹³ e.g. speaks about the sly Chaldaean priests and their "listige Berechnungen". Schachermeyr¹⁴ also connects the warning by the Chaldaeans with an attempt to stop the rebuilding of the temple. He is describing Alexander as a ruthless philanthropist, who wants to build a new Etemenanki, the famous tower of Babylon now in an Alexandrian fashion. The king only looking for self-glorification does not mind to ask his subjects whether or not they like this. But they did not and made up an oracle: in vain.

Diod., however, gives a completely different version. He states, that the Caldaeans also advised the king to rebuild the tomb of Bel, destroyed by the Persians. Now, there is some confusion about the sanctuaries in Babylon. The Esagila should be distinguished from the Etemenanki. The Esagila must have been the temple of Bel mentioned by Arr., since we know from the description given by Strabo¹⁵ that the tomb of Bel designates the Etemenanki, and the Esagila has always been dedicated to the cult of Marduk (=Bel). But according to Strabo Alexander intended to repair the Etemenanki, demolished by Xerxes, but because of his death could not implement his plan. This would indicate that Alexander followed the second advice mentioned by Diod. But which sanctuary Alexander actually intended to rebuild? Because of the aforementioned confusion in the literature, this is not clear. Possibly both.

Schachermeyr's analysis has undoubtedly been based on a remark by Meissner¹⁶ referring to a clay tablet in which a certain Baruqa states

¹³ Cf. Berve 1926 I 88 n. 4, 92 and 98 n. 3.

¹⁴ Cf. Schachermeyr 1976 60 f.

¹⁵ Strabo 16, 1, 5 (738); see also Langdon 1923 35 n. 5, Frankfort 1948 322 f. and Wetzel 1957 19. This designation as tomb is remarkable; if there is a connection with an assumed ritual of Marduk's death, I dare not to decide; possibly the name is only the result of a misunderstanding? A strange story about Bel's coffin found by Xerxes is given by Aelian V. H. 13, 3.

¹⁶ Meissner 1903 241 f.; Schachermeyr, however, does not mention this article; Berve 1926 I 88 n. 4 does.

to have contributed one *mina* silver to the expenses made for the removal of the rubble of the Esagila: "Wie man sieht, hat Alexander die Aufbringung der Kosten für die Reinigungsarbeit am Belstempel den Babylonern überlassen, den Ruhm des Werkes aber für sich selbst in Anspruch genommen." I do not consider, however, this text to give conclusive proof that Meissner and Schachermeyr are right in their thesis. We do not know, if Baruqa's contribution is symptomatic for the way of rebuilding proposed by Alexander, nor if the Babylonians would mind giving Alexander the honour, since he was their king, as appears also from late Babylonian king lists.¹⁷ So I do not see any reason to adopt Arrian's suspicion. As will be shown below, it is more probable that the Chaldaeans actually believed to see some portent in the constellation of the stars indicating that it was at that time very dangerous for the king to be in his royal residence¹⁸. It had been always customary to warn the king in such circumstances, so they did it also this time. They advised their king not to enter the royal residence in order that they could make arrangements to deceive the gods, and possibly also (following Diod.) to rebuild Marduk's temple-tower in order to propitiate the gods. The evil the gods had planned against Alexander would according to their belief only occur, when the king was in office, *i.e.* sitting on his throne in Babylon. As long as Alexander remained outside the city, they could try and avert the evil on the head of someone else. But since Alexander was a foreigner and moreover a Greek, he thwarted their plan.¹⁹

2. *The inspection of the entrails by Peithagoras*

App. B.C. II, 152; Arr. 7, 18, 1 ff.; Plut. A. 73.

Although there are some differences, it is clear that the three writers followed one tradition or even used one source²⁰, which was according to Arr. Arist., who had heard it from Peithagoras himself, as is stated. So, the historicity of this account seems to be warranted.

¹⁷ Cf. ANET 566 f.

¹⁸ Cf. App. and Arr. who emphasize that it was perilous to enter Babylon at that moment.

¹⁹ It is interesting, however, that Diod. (17, 112, 2, 4 and 17, 116, 4) shows great respect to the wisdom of these Chaldaeans and considers this prophecy as a proof of their ability.

²⁰ Contra Jacoby *F Gr Hist* II D 523.

The seer Peithagoras (or Pythagoras) inspected the entrails of a victim on behalf of his brother Apollodorus, who wanted to know, if he had to fear any danger on the part of Hephaestio and Alexander. The prophet could assure his brother that he had nothing to fear, because the liver of the victim showed no lobe in the case of Hephaestio as well as in that of Alexander; this was according to ancient belief an evil omen²¹. When Hephaestio indeed died, Apollodorus warned Alexander. As the king reached Babylon, he spoke with Peithagoras himself about this matter, and enquired what this sign portended. Something very serious, was the answer. Arr. adds, that this seer also announced the death of Perdiccas and Antigonus. According to App. Alexander just smiled, but Plut. claims, that Alexander was sorry, that he had not followed the advice of the Chaldaeans and henceforth passed most of his time outside of Babylon. This is in contradiction to the assertion by App. and Arr. that Alexander yeered at the Chaldaeans, when he went out of the city in order to inspect the river Pallacotta, because he had gone into Babylon and sailed out of it safely.²²

The coincidence of the warnings obtained by Chaldaean and Greek divination is remarkable here, but the following story also introduces the prediction of an Indian sage.

3. *Minor portents*

a) Arr. 7, 18, 6; Cic. De Div. 1, 47; Plut. A. 69, 3; Val. Max. 1, 8, ext. 10.

In 7, 3, 1-6 Arr. has described the self chosen death of the Indian wise Calanus²³; here in 7, 18, 6 he relates that Calanus greeted all Alexander's companions before going to his funeral pyre, but not Alexander,

²¹ Cf. Euripides Electra 827 f., Cicero De Div. 2, 32 and Xenophon Hell. 3, 4, 15; see also Bulengerus 1696 397 f. and Pease 1963 94 ff. and 311, who give an extensive bibliography on this matter. According to Cicero De Div. 1, 119 Caesar's death has been predicted in the same way; cf. also App. B.C. 2, 152.

²² According to App. B.C. 2, 153. His version is probably a distortion of Arr. 7, 21 (Alexander sails to the river Pallacopas) and the beginning of ch. 22, where Arr. states that Alexander was in good spirits, when leaving Babylon for a trip by boat without having been harmed (the story of the loss of the diadem; omen no. 4).

²³ On this sage see Kroll in RE X, 1544 ff.

because—he said—he would meet him at Babylon and greet him there. Plut. mentions in his description of Calanus' death the remark, that he would soon see the king in Babylon; also the versions of Cicero and Valerius are slightly different, but clear in the main point, that Calanus predicted Alexander's death in covert terms.

b) Plut. A. 73, 2 and 6.

Describing the ominous character of Alexander's last days, Plut. mentions two other, minor portents not to be found in the works of the other authors. Arriving at the walls of Babylon, Alexander saw ravens fighting with each other, and some of them fell dead at his feet. An evil omen, since the raven is an ominous bird and fighting between birds, moreover, a clear sign of mischief, according to ancient belief.²⁴

A second portent is given by Plut. as an example of the many omens Alexander was troubled by: the largest and handsomest lion in his menagerie was attacked by a tame ass and kicked to death. Since the lion stands for kingship²⁵, this omen probably symbolizes the poisoning of Alexander by an unworthy, one of the versions of his death. The historical background of these three omens is difficult to ascertain; similar stories are of course likely to arise, when a (famous) person dies prematurely, but, on the other hand, such accidents can be saved from oblivion when the portent is realized soon afterwards.

²⁴ In Mesopotamian omen-lists the raven is to be found, cf. Hunger 1909 33–37 and Nötscher 1930 154–159. These lists do not offer an exact parallel, but they mention some interesting omens concerning a fight between a falcon and a raven in the presence of the king, one of these foretelling the defeat of the king's army. More parallel is the omen described by Val. Max. I, 4, 2 (epit. by Nepotianus): Tiberius Gracchus met three ravens, who were screaming and fighting in such a way that a tile fell down before his feet; he was killed very soon afterwards; cf. also *ibidem* I, 4, 5 and 6. On fighting between birds in Classical literature see Homer Od. 20, 2, 150 ff. (two eagles), Aeschylus Pers. 205 ff. (an eagle with a falcon) and Sophocles Antigone 999 ff. (birds in general). Ravens are also connected with Alexander's journey to Shiwa, cf. Strabo 17, 1, 43 and Plut. A. 27, 2 f.

²⁵ Cf. e.g. Script. Hist. Aug. Diad. 5, 6; an interesting parallel in Amm. Marc. 23, 5, 8: the killing of a lion predicts the death of a king.

4. *The loss of the royal diadem*

App. Syr. 9, 56; Arr. 7, 22 and Diod. 17, 116, 5 ff.²⁶

There have been different versions of this story; Arr. (and App. who in this and similar instances probably depends on him²⁷) mention some, Diod. still another. The general tendency is that Alexander was sailing in the neighbourhood of Babylon. For some reason he lost his royal diadem. One of his sailors jumped into the water in order to rescue it; he managed to get it, but he had to put it on his head when swimming back to the boat. The portent is clear: Alexander will loose his kingship and will be succeeded by a stranger, not by his son. Arr. gives a nice setting: the diadem carried off by a breeze was caught on a reed in the marshes near a tomb of an ancient Assyrian (=Babylonian) king, symbolizing of course Alexander's impending death, as also Arr. remarks.

About the fortune of this sailor, who unwillingly committed a great sacrilege by putting the diadem on his head, the versions differ. Diod. only mentions the advice of the soothsayers to make sacrifices. Arr. remarks, that most of his sources state that Alexander gave the man a talent as reward and then ordered to cut his head off, following the advice of the soothsayers. But Arist. says, that Alexander restricted himself to flogging him after giving him the aforementioned reward. Arist.'s version is unlikely, because according to ancient belief the sailor had become king by putting the diadem on his head, and only his death could restore Alexander in his former position.²⁸ Probably Arist. wanted to picture Alexander in away more pleasing in Greek eyes²⁹. He also states, that the man was a Phoenician sailor, but there are people, Arr. remarks, who allege that it was Seleucus. Historically this is very improb-

²⁶ Arr. has been followed here, Diod. first mentions omen no. 5.

²⁷ Cf. Mederer 1936 127.

²⁸ Cf. Curt. 8, 4, 15 where Alexander remarks that sitting on the king's throne was—according to Persian law—to be punished by death. See also Val. Max. 1 ext. la, Frontin. Strat. 4, 6, 3 and below omen no. 5. On the throne as symbol of kingship see Weinstock 1957 148, Wolff Windegg 1958 159–166, Suet. VII Galba 18, 3 and for Mesopotamia Labat 1939 371. The strange proceeding to reward first and then to behead is paralleled by the story Herodotus tells in 8, 118, 4 (Xerxes). Interesting is also Suet. VII Vitellius 9: the laurel crown which Vitellius had put on with due ceremony fell into a running stream (cf. Suet. VII Galba 18, 3 too). The omen of the loss of the royal ring has the same meaning, cf. Script. Hist. Aug. Hadr. 26, 7.

²⁹ Cf. n. 33 below.

able; as Eddy³⁰ says: "officers don't jump into the water: they send enlisted men". It must have been an attempt to procure proof, that the gods wanted Seleucus to be Alexander's successor³¹, so this version of the story must have been made up at the Seleucid court. The original version(s) of the story, however, can reflect an actual event, remembered because afterwards interpreted as an omen.

5. *The stranger on the throne*

Arr. 7, 24, 1 ff. (from Arist.); Diod. 17, 116, 2 ff.; Plut. A. 73, 7-9. Although these three writers evidently are describing the same event, their versions differ considerably³². The general tendency is that Alexander has left his throne for some reason; a stranger sits down on it and (according to Diod. and Plut.) puts on Alexander's diadem and clothes lying on the throne. When the king returns, he questions the man and consults the soothsayers about the meaning of this event. It is considered to be an evil omen; the man is to be killed³³ and Alexander makes sacrifices.

The stranger is described by Arr. as an obscure person, who was according to some, a prisoner under open arrest (not chained)³⁴, by Diod. as a native, who had been chained, but whose fetters were undone automatically³⁵, and by Plut. as a Messenian, called Dionysius, who was brought to Babylon because of some charge, and had been in chains for a long time, but who was freed by the god Sarapis³⁶.

³⁰ Eddy 1961 108.

³¹ Cf. the omen mentioned by the Script. Hist. Aug. Sept. Sev. 1, 9 and that in Just. 15, 3, 11-14.

³² An excellent survey of these versions is given by Montgomery 1969 8-10.

³³ According to Diod. and Plut. A.; Arr. (=Arist.) does not mention the execution, probably because Arist. wants to present a more pleasing Alexander (as already remarked); see also Montgomery 1969 10 and Pearson 1960 158 f.

³⁴ This is probably an *Entmythologisierung* of the other version that the man had been chained, but that his fetters were undone automatically; cf. Montgomery 1969 10.

³⁵ For this miracle compare Acts 12, 7; 16, 26 but also Euripides Bacchae 447 f. and Ovid. Met. 3, 699 f.

³⁶ It is remarkable to hear about this Egyptian god in a Babylonian surrounding. He is mentioned again in Arr. 7, 26, 2 and Plut. A. 76, 9 (allegedly an abstract of the Royal Diaries); he is said there to have a temple in Babylon and appears as a saviour-god with an incubation-oracle in the same way as the Sarapis known from

The reason for him to sit down on the throne was according to Arr. that this idea just came into his mind (interpreted as divine inspiration), according to Diod. he did not know when questioned afterwards, but according to Plut. he got the order from Sarapis, who lead him to this spot bidding him to put on the robe and diadem and sit on the throne and hold his peace.

In describing this incident all authors appear to suggest, that this stranger was mentally deranged³⁷. This makes him very suited for this occasion, since lunatics were supposed to be in close contact with the supernatural. Therefore it can be a literary design. It is also possible to suggest that since a madman actually can get such an idea, it concerns a historical event here, that was interpreted as an evil omen after Alexander's death³⁸. But since Arr. remarks, that owing to some Persian custom the eunuchs, who were standing round about the throne, did not drag the stranger off, but rending their garments beated their breasts and faces as if a great disaster had happened, and I cannot find a reason why Arr. or his source would have made up such a detail, it is necessary to search for some Oriental ritual, during which a stranger was sitting

other sources. Lehmann-Haupt 1931 183 n. 5 is of the opinion that Ea is meant here, also called *šar apsi*, the Lord of the Apsu. His opinion has been criticised by Wilcken 1922 80 f. Welles 1962 defends the thesis that Sarapis has already been worshipped by Alexander and that this king brought the Sarapis-cult also to Babylon; it is, however, incredible that if Alexander built a temple for Sarapis or disowned an already existing sanctuary on behalf of this god, his action would not have been recorded for us. The most probable solution is therefore to suppose that a Babylonian god has been identified with Sarapis, not necessarily in the first version of the Diaries. But that this god was Marduk (as Wilcken 1922 81 f. and Bosworth 1971 120 propose) is most improbable, because Marduk is always called Belus. Cf. also Hamilton 1969 212 f. and Vidman 1970 20 f., 23 n. 67.

³⁷ Arr.: when tortured the man can only say that it came into his mind to do so; Diod.: he is sitting on the throne motionless, and when questioned does not know why he was sitting there; Plut.: he is sitting on the throne in silence, and when questioned he remains speechless for a long time; cf. also Mederer 1936 131.

³⁸ The throne symbolizing kingship (cf. n. 28 above) the act by the stranger indicates that Alexander will be succeeded soon and not by his son. Related omens are to be found in the Script. Hist. Aug. Sept. Sev. 1, 7 and 9. Two interesting omens featuring a madman are described by Dio 50, 10, 2 (a madman rushes into a theatre and seizes the crown of the former Caesar and puts it on) and 56, 29, 1 (during a horse race at the Augustalia a madman seats himself in the chair which has been dedicated to Julius Caesar, and taking his crown, puts it on: Augustus dies soon hereafter).

on the king's throne, in order to elucidate this story.³⁹ Berve⁴⁰ sees connection with the festival of the Sacaea, but this appears to be impossible for several reasons⁴¹.

Eddy⁴² connects this event⁴³ with the *Akitu*-ritual, the Babylonian New Year Festival. The man on the throne would be the mock-king put there by the Babylonian priests of Marduk, who—according to Eddy—were plotting against Alexander, grieved by his actions. Like other interpretations given by Eddy, this one is not very likely, since the *Akitu*-ritual was usually performed in the month of Nisan (March/April), and according to the chronology of events given by Arr. this incident took place in May. Secondly, the assertion that a mock-king played a part in the festival, has never been proven. The only thing we know is that the real king humiliated himself in front of Marduk⁴⁴. What the writers relate, moreover, about the attitude of the Babylonian clergy towards Alexander, does not suggest a plot against the king, rather the reverse.

But there is a third Oriental custom that has been associated with this story: the ritual of the substitute king⁴⁵. At first, there was much confusion about this ritual⁴⁶, but since some new texts have been published, it is possible to reconstruct it in a fairly coherent manner.⁴⁷ Those new texts contain partly letters from the royal correspondence⁴⁸,

³⁹ There exists a curious interpretation of this incident by Derchain and Hubaux 1950: Dionysius was a dead man abiding in the nether world, but who returned to this world accompanied by Sarapis, the god of the dead. Their argumentation is very weak and they do not discuss the version by Arr.

⁴⁰ Berve 1926 II 145, adopted by Mederer 1936 132 n. 25.

⁴¹ Cf. Fox 1973/5 548.

⁴² Cf. Eddy 1961 108–112.

⁴³ As Pearson 1960 158 n. 50 already did.

⁴⁴ Cf. Montgomery 1969 13 and Kümmel 1968 289.

⁴⁵ The first to make this association was Jacobsen 1957 139 n. 115; afterwards adopted by among others Beek 1966 29 f., Kümmel 1967 184 ff. and 1968 293, Montgomery 1969 13, Parpola 1971 55, 59 ff, 65, Seibert 1972 174, Fox 1973/5 459 f. and Lauffer 1978 185 f. This association, however, has been made by these authors without much argument.

⁴⁶ See Kümmel 1967 170.

⁴⁷ Cf. Beek 1966 24 ff., Kümmel 1967 169–183 and 1968 291 f., Parpola 1971 54–65.

⁴⁸ Cf. Schott 1941, Von Soden 1956, Landsberger 1965 45–51 and Parpola 1970.

partly rituals⁴⁹. Moreover, it has become certain that this ritual was also known outside of Mesopotamia: in the Hittite Empire⁵⁰ and possibly also in Syria-Palestina⁵¹.

This ritual is based on the idea that when the king's life is jeopardized by an evil omen, a scapegoat is able to attract the mischief portended to himself, when he takes over the king's rôle. Thus Hooke calls the substitute "a potential lightning conductor"⁵². The gods are supposed to be misled by this set-up and direct the evil towards the substitute, in order that the king's life will be saved.

"The man who was given as the king's substitute shall die and [...] the bad omens will not affect that [ki]ng. Things will go well with that [king] and his land will prosper."⁵³

We mentioned already the idea that kingship as an institution is not connected with the person of an individual king in the sense that taking the king's seat and wearing the king's clothes is sufficient to become king; it is also found in Herodotus Histories 7, 15 (Xerxes)⁵⁴ and Diod. 2, 20 (Semiramis).⁵⁵

The ritual itself has been reconstructed in the following way: When evil portents have been reported (mostly lunar eclipses of a certain kind)⁵⁶, and the king's life is considered to be in danger, the king's counselors⁵⁷ send him a message, e.g. this one from the king's personal exorcist Adad-šumu-ušur⁵⁸:

"To the king, my lord, (from) your servant Adad-šumu-ušur: Good health to the king, my lord! As regards the substitute king [*ina UGU LUGAL pu-u-ḫi*] of Akkad, order should be given to enthrone (him). (...)"

⁴⁹ Cf. Lambert 1957/8 and 1959/60.

⁵⁰ According to Kümmel 1967 188–198 (cf. idem 1968 308 f. and Gurney 1977 58) the Hittite rituals of the substitute king are adaptations of Babylonian originals.

⁵¹ Cf. Gray 1955 181–183, Kümmel 1967 186 f., Beek 1966; see, however, also Kümmel 1968 290 n. 13, 315 n. 85.

⁵² Cf. Hooke 1952 4. The idea of substitution in general has been discussed by Kümmel 1968 294–297.

⁵³ Cf. Lambert 1957/8 110 col. A, 1. 6–8.

⁵⁴ Cf. Germain 1956.

⁵⁵ See above omen no. 4 and n. 28.

⁵⁶ Cf. Parpola 1971 56–59, especially 57.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem* p. 60.

⁵⁸ Cf. Parpola 1970 text no. 134 (p. 108 f.).

The substitute is designated, mostly a criminal or a simple person⁵⁹; cf. for the latter a letter from the time of the Assyrian king Esarhad-don⁶⁰ which mentions the custom to choose a ^{LÚ}*sa-ak-lu* to be the substitute-king. It is, however, a problem how to interpret this Akkadian word. According to Labat *saklu* designates 'un homme irresponsable intellectuellement ou physiquement'⁶¹, but according to Landsberger it would mean 'einfach', ordinary, relating to descent.⁶² Labat's interpretation fits best in this situation: a simple-minded person will not make objections against the fatal outcome of the ritual, nor will he menace the power of the real king.

Once a son of a Babylonian bishop was chosen: Damqi, but this was done in order to frighten conspiring Babylonians⁶³, which incentive was accomplished⁶⁴. From the reaction by the contemporaries we can argue that this choice of an influential person to be the substitute, was extremely extraordinary.

The substitute was clad in the royal clothes, equipped with the royal diadem and other insignia, and eventually seated upon the throne.⁶⁵ A virgin was given to him as his queen, while a figurine of him (*šalam pūhi*) was made and given to the nether world.⁶⁶ But also all evil omens threatening the real king were written down and recited to the substitute king, who in this way took the omens upon himself.⁶⁷ So he reigned as a king, although the real power was still in hands of the real king, who was called now "the farmer", and had to stay in his palace and avoid for leaving for open country before the term of the evil omen was over⁶⁸. But he controlled his realm by giving edicts⁶⁹ and remained in contact

⁵⁹ Cf. Parpola 1971 61.

⁶⁰ Cf. Parpola 1970 text no. 280 (p. 228 ff.).

⁶¹ Cf. Labat 1945/6 139 n. 5; see also Kümmel 1967 177.

⁶² Cf. Landsberger 1965 61 (=359) n. 114. Von Soden 1972 II 1012 translates it as "einfältig, schwerfällig, töricht"; Bezold 1926 212 as "dumm, töricht (...) Dummkopf, Tor, Narr".

⁶³ Cf. Parpola 1970 text no. 185 rev. 1. 21 ff. (p. 136).

⁶⁴ *Ibidem* text no. 280 rev. 1. 7-9 (p. 230) and *idem* 1971 62, Kümmel 1967 177.

⁶⁵ Cf. Parpola 1971 62.

⁶⁶ Cf. *ibidem* 63; see on the distinction between the terms *šar puhi* and *šalam pūhi* Kümmel 1967 171 ff. and Parpola 1971 63 n. 1.

⁶⁷ Cf. Parpola 1971 63.

⁶⁸ Cf. *ibidem* 64.

⁶⁹ Cf. Kümmel 1967 171.

with his counselors. It is remarkable that according to Hittite ritual⁷⁰ the king had to kneel daily before the sungod of heaven in the early morning and had to pray: "Sungod of heaven, my lord, what have I done? Thou hast taken the throne away from me and give it to another." Thus it is suggested that the substitute king has usurped the throne and is liable for divine punishment.

The reign of the substitute king was due to last a hundred days, since this was the period of time during which the evil portended by an eclipse of the moon was thought to be valid⁷¹. During this period a noble was expected to die instead of the king⁷². If this was the case possibly the substitute king could resign, and give away for the real one. But if not, the noble who had to die instead of the king, would be the substitute and his death would not be natural⁷³. Besides, the period of a hundred days was not always respected: in that case the substitute was killed before, in order that the evil omen would be taken with him to the nether world, and the real king could come back without being in danger anymore⁷⁴. After his execution the substitute was buried together with his queen and with due ceremonies⁷⁵. All his *regalia* (including his throne) were to be burnt⁷⁶. The real king could take his seat again upon his throne after purification, and the ritual had been completed.

Most texts about this ritual date from the period of king Esarhaddon, but in a chronicle, sometimes called the Sargon Chronicle⁷⁷ or the Chronicle of Early Kings⁷⁸ one can read:

"Irra-imitti, the king, installed Bel-ibni, the gardener, on his throne as a 'substitute king' and he (Irra-imitti) (even) placed his own royal crown on his (i.e. Bel-ibni's) head. (During the ceremonial rule of Bel-ibni) Irra-imitti died in his palace while sip[ping] hot porridge, and

⁷⁰ Cf. Kümmel 1967 62 f. and 1968 303, Gurney 1977 58.

⁷¹ Cf. Parpola 1971 59.

⁷² Cf. *ibidem* 57.

⁷³ There has been much discussion as to if the substitute king was to be killed as part of the ritual, when he did not die by an 'act of god'; there is, however, no reason to doubt he was to, see Parpola 1971 61.

⁷⁴ Cf. *ibidem* 59.

⁷⁵ Cf. *ibidem* 64.

⁷⁶ Cf. Lambert 1957/8 110 col. B 1. 5 f.

⁷⁷ Cf. ANET 266 f.

⁷⁸ Cf. Grayson 1975 152-156.

Bel-ibni who was (still) sitting on the throne did not rise (any more), he (thus) was elevated to (real) kingship."⁷⁹

This incident is dated 1860 B.C.⁸⁰, so the ritual must have been substantially older than the Neo-assyrian period⁸¹. It is, however another question, if the ritual still existed in 323 B.C., as suggested. But if one wants to accept this, one can make the following reconstruction of this event:

Seeing that Alexander was not willing to listen to their advices and using an opportunity that Alexander was not sitting on his throne, the Babylonian priests, warned by an ill-omened celestial constellation installed a *saklu*⁸² as a substitute king in order to turn the predicted evil onto his head. For that reason the eunuchs, instructed by the priests, began to lament, when the stranger sat down on the throne: they were reciting the evil omens as part of the ritual⁸³. Having returned Alexander saw the man, questioned him, but he could not give a rational answer, being a *saklu*. The priests⁸⁴ recommended of course to kill the man in order that the trouble forecast might light upon his head, in that way finishing the ritual in the conventional way. Whether, however, the ritual was not performed in the right way⁸⁵, or the gods were not to be fooled this time, it failed to rescue Alexander's life.

The arguments for identification are therefore: the fact that (according to Arr.) the eunuchs refrained from dragging the stranger away on

⁷⁹ Translation by A. L. Oppenheim in ANET *l.c.*; see, however, Grayson 1975 155: he calls the gardener Enlilbani and the king Erra-imitti.

⁸⁰ Cf. Parpola 1971 55.

⁸¹ Cf. Kümmel 1967 181 ff.; the historicity of the account has been challenged by Edzard 1957 140 f., but has been defended by Kümmel 1967 182 f.; I follow Kümmel.

⁸² Whether *saklu* means 'simple of mind' or 'ordinary of birth', it fits perfectly, since the stranger is described as mentally deranged and as a common person (Arr.).

⁸³ See above; Montgomery 1969 18 gives a different interpretation.

⁸⁴ Diod. who gives this detail, calls them 'soothsayers'; since Alexander used to have Babylonians with him in order to purify him (Plut. A. 57, 3), I do not see any objection to assume Babylonian soothsayers are meant.

⁸⁵ Fox 1973/5 suggests that Alexander made a mistake by having the man killed; since, however, the substitute was probably always put to death, this seems not to have been the case. Montgomery 1969 13 is of the opinion that Alexander interrupted the ceremony by questioning the stranger.

account of some Persian custom—we have to suppose that not a Persian but a Mesopotamian ritual is meant—, the fact that the stranger was mentally deranged, as was customary in Assyrian times, the fact that the seers ordered to kill him in order that the evil might light upon his head (Diod.) and the warning by the Chaldaeans not the enter Babylon on account of an ill-omened celestial constellation (Diod.).

In a way the evidence is scanty, and there are weak points in the argument, especially the fact that the writers do not state that the man was put there by the Chaldaeans (*cf.* however Plut.). They describe it as an accident: Alexander happened to have left his throne for a moment. Still the resemblances are too striking to be accidental.

In summary, although the authors in the first place had literary reasons to insert stories about omens foretelling Alexander's premature death, we have to assume that some of them are reflecting an actual endeavour by the Babylonian priesthood to rescue the king's life by means of an ancient ritual. First they tried to keep Alexander out of Babylon in order that they could install a substitute king, who would attract the predicted mischief, while Alexander would be hidden away from the danger. This plan having been thwarted by the king, they had (with the help of the eunuchs) a substitute king sitting on Alexander's throne—although for a short period of time—in order that the evil would turn onto his head. So we reach two conclusions: legendary tales can sometimes reflect misunderstood rituals⁸⁶; secondly, the Babylonian priesthood has accepted Alexander as their new king and they have even tried to save his life.

In contrast to this loyalty the Greeks were full of suspicion towards their new subjects or even compatriots⁸⁷. When the Chaldaeans advised Alexander to keep out of the city, the king suspected ulterior motives on their part (according to Arr. at least). The Babylonians would only have been interested in money. By this the attitude of the conqueror is undoubtedly more characterized than that of the Babylonian priests. The Greek state of mind is also evident from the pedantic verse of Euripides Alexander quoted according to Arr. (7, 16, 6): "Prophets, who prophesy the best, are best", and from the words Anaxarchus

⁸⁶ *Cf.* also Germain 1956 311.

⁸⁷ *Cf.* also Kümmel 1968 293.

has spoken according to Diod. and Just.⁸⁸: the Greeks showed only contempt and distrust regarding the Chaldaeans. The ritual of the substitute king being accomplished, they do not try and understand its religious meaning, but—in conformity with the Greek view—consider it to be an evil omen, if not a conspiracy against the king's life.

As already stated, the Greek attitude contrasts very much with the loyalty of the Babylonian priests, who, however, must have concluded that Alexander was due to die, since they did not want him to be transported to the temple of Sarapis⁸⁹ — unless here also a Babylonian ritual is to be detected. This loyalty is not remarkable *in se*; it is paralleled by the attitude of the Babylonian priesthood towards Cyrus⁹⁰ when he entered Babylon, who was saluted then as a Saviour sent by Marduk in a way that resembles the entry made by Alexander at the same city in 331 B.C. very much.⁹¹ Their enthusiasm towards Cyrus was based on the hope that he would restore religion after the heretical king Nabonidus. Likewise, they had reason to consider Alexander to be a deliverer sent by the gods. The power of the by now sacrilegious Persian kings, who had destroyed sanctuaries and murdered priests, had come to an end. The new king showed himself willing to rebuild what had been demolished. So they welcomed and enthroned the new king of Babylonia⁹² with great rejoicings and expectations, so they mourned when he died "non ut hostem, sed ut parentem".⁹³

If the interpretation here defended is correct, we have now a new datum in connection with the difficult problem of the supposed Oriental nature of Alexander's kingship. His misunderstanding and distrust towards the Babylonian priesthood show once more his Graeco-Macedonian prejudice against Barbarians and Babylonians in particular⁹⁴. If indeed he was dreaming of a brotherhood of mankind or advocating

⁸⁸ Cf. Diod. 17, 112, 4 f. and Just. 12, 13, 5. According to Plut. (*de Alex. fort.* 331 E) Alexander considered Anaxarchus the most valuable of his friends; cf. Edmunds 1971 388.

⁸⁹ Cf. Arr. 7, 26, 2 and Plut. A. 76, 4.

⁹⁰ Cf. ANET 306 f., 314 ff.

⁹¹ Cf. Arr. 3, 16, 3; Curt. 5, 1, 17–23 (the most elaborate) and Diod. 17, 64, 3.

⁹² Cf. Schachermeyr 1976 60.

⁹³ Cf. Just. 13, 1, 1.

⁹⁴ The Greeks had a very low opinion on the contemporary Babylonians, cf. Eddy 1961 105 f. (to be checked!) and also Curt. 5, 1, 36–38.

a policy of fusion, as some authors want us to believe, I am afraid that this dream will be best characterized with Orwell's famous slogan:

"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."

Haarlem, Ripperdastraat 32

K. A. D. Smelik

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