The Ancient History Bulletin

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ANCIENT HISTORY BULLETIN

Volume 33 (2019) Numbers 3-4

Contents of volume thirty-three

Numbers 3-4

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Founder of Babylon and Master of Asia:
Semiramis and the Parthians in Strabo's *Geography*

Hamish Cameron

Abstract: *Strabo begins his description of "Assyria" at* Geog. *16.1 with an unusual historical excursus that centers the legendary Assyrian queen Semiramis as the most important ruler and builder in the region. Introduced into the Greek literary tradition by Herodotus and significantly developed by Ctesias, Semiramis became a well-known and traditional figure in the Greek imagination whose deeds and character could be expanded, alluded to, and deployed for various narrative purposes in later authors, including Diodorus Siculus, Pompeius Trogus, and Strabo. During the Augustan period, parts of the area formerly ruled by Semiramis were an inter-imperial borderland between Rome and the Parthian empire and most were under the rule of the Parthian Empire. In writing of this borderland, Roman authors were forced to negotiate between an ideology of limitless Roman power and a reality of a permanent, independent foreign power. Strabo was aware of the reality of Parthian control, but in his narrative treatment of Assyria he deployed the semi-mythological figure of Semiramis as a Roman ideological tool to minimise Parthian power and suggest that Rome was the dominant contemporary power in the region.*

Keywords: *Semiramis, Strabo, Parthia, geography, historiography, borderlands, imperial ideology*

Readers of Strabo's *Geography* would have been surprised by the opening of his sixteenth book. Rather than his customary geographical outline of the next region to be described, they found a historical excursus on the "Syrian Empire" (τὴν Σύρων ἀρχὴν) centred on the legendary queen Semiramis. This raises two questions: why did Strabo begin his description of the Fertile Crescent with a historical excursus, and why did he choose the deeds of an ancient queen as the focus of that excursus? Strabo could have started his description of Assyria with any number of important Assyrian, Babylonian, Seleucid, Achaemenid or Arsacid kings. In choosing Semiramis, Strabo was participating in a long tradition of manipulating and adapting the legendary queen for the particular ends of his own work. This tradition began with Herodotus' translation of a late-9th century BCE Assyrian queen and was vastly elaborated in the early 4th century by Ctesias' *Persica*. Subsequently, stories of her life were recreated for historical, literary and didactic ends by Greek, Roman, Medieval and Modern writers and artists. This paper discusses the appearance of Semiramis in Greek literature up to the Augustan

period, then examines how Strabo used her in the *Geography*.[1] I will argue that Strabo used the figure of Semiramis to centre the greatness of Mesopotamia's distant past and thus by comparison to implicitly minimize the contemporary political state of the region under Parthian power. Strabo's adaptation of the Semiramis legend indicates the selectivity and creativity that underlay his geographical narratives, as well as an aspect of his participation in a broader Roman project of ideological construction.[2]

Throughout the 17 books of Strabo's *Geography*, several narrative patterns are evident.[3] His work proceeds regularly around the Mediterranean, often dividing space according to broad provincial or ethnic units. Within each of these, he begins by defining the space to be described, its boundaries and any internal subdivisions. He then proceeds around those subdivisions, defining the space and then describing further internal subdivisions. Although historical matters appear frequently in his work, they are usually linked to the narrative according to their relationship with some geographical feature.[4] He seldom includes broader historical overviews and these rarely stand in a prominent place at the beginning of the relevant narrative.[5] Assyria is the exception.

At the start of book 16, Strabo defines the land of the Assyrians (οἱ Ἀσσύριοι) as the lowland Asian parts of the Fertile Crescent from the head of the Persian Gulf to the head of the Red Sea. Rather than immediately proceeding through a process of descriptive subdivision as he does in previous books, Strabo provides a historical overview of pre-Hellenistic history focused on Semiramis and the Assyrians.

> When those who have written histories of the Syrian empire (τὴν Σύρων ἀρχὴν) say that the Medes were overthrown by the Persians and the Syrians by the Medes, they mean by the Syrians no other people than those who built the royal palaces in Babylon and Ninus; and, of these Syrians, Ninus was the man who founded Ninus in Aturia, and his wife, Semiramis, was the woman who succeeded her husband and founded Babylon. These two gained the mastery of Asia; and as for Semiramis, apart from her works at Babylon, many others are also to be seen

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[1] For Strabo's biography and production, see Dueck (2000); and the introduction of Roller (2014). The most recent edition of the text is Radt (2002-2011); for the textual tradition and its problems, see Nicolai (2017).

[2] For the role of geographical conceptions and the processes of creating geographical works in ideological construction, and vice versa, see Nicolet (1991); Lewis and Wigen (1997); Clarke (1999); Cameron (2019). For those factors in Strabo's *Geography* in particular, see Dueck (2000) 107–29; Purcell (2017); Cameron (2018).

[3] The relationship between the *Geography's* theme and its structure are discussed by Dueck (2000) 165–80. Connors (2017) discusses several examples of how rivers and bodies of water shape and facilitate Strabo's narrative.

[4] For example: 16.2.4 where the foundations of several Seleucid kings are mentioned; 16.2.8 where Strabo refers to the locations of conflicts between Ventidius and the Parthians Pacorus and Phranicates, between Ptolemy Philometor and Alexander Balas, and between Pompey and Tigranes.

[5] Regions described in the first instance by shape, descriptions and divisions (often with an ethnographic element): Iberia (Strabo *Geog*. 3.3), Gaul (4.1), Italy (5.1), Northern Europe (7.1), Asia generally (11.1), Scythians (11.2), Cappadocia (12.1), the southern coast of Anatolia (14.1), Ariana (15.2), Persis (15.3), the subdivisions of Syria and Arabia (16.2, 16.3, 16.4). Regions for which the first sections are methodological or historiographical: the Troad (13.1), Asia (15.1) as a prelude to India (which begins at 15.1.11), Egypt (17.1). Strabo's introduction to Greece (8.1) begins with a historiography then a linguistic ethnography. Assyria (16.1) is the only major area to start with a historical outline.

throughout almost the whole of that continent, I mean the mounds called the Mounds of Semiramis, and walls, and the construction of fortifications with aqueducts therein, and of reservoirs for drinking-water, and of ladder-like ascents of mountains, and of channels in rivers and lakes, and of roads and bridges. And they left to their successors their empire until the time of the empires of Sardanapalus and Arbaces. But later the empire passed over to the Medes.[6]

Strabo conflates into the reign of one royal couple the works of multiple empires, in particular the Neo-Assyrian (10th-7th centuries BCE) and Neo-Babylonian (7th-6th centuries BCE) empires which ruled the Fertile Crescent from centres around Ninus (Nineveh) and Babylon respectively.[7] He assigns the foundation of the former to Ninus and the latter to Semiramis. Although Strabo refers to this aggregated empire as Syrian rather than Assyrian, there is no doubt he is talking about the same people. Strabo considered "Assyria" to be a unitary area inhabited by "Syrians" who "extend from Babylonia to the Gulf of Issus"[8] The terms Syria and Assyria were used somewhat interchangeably by classical authors.[9]

The Greek figure of Semiramis appears to be an amalgamation of several historical and divine figures. The first is the Assyrian queen, Sammuramat, wife of Šamšī-Adad V (824-811 BCE). The rare attestation of Sammuramat as queen mother in Assyrian inscriptions of first years of the reign of her son, Adad-Nirārī III (811-783 BCE) attests to her continuing influence in the Assyrian court after her husband's death.[10] The second is another Assyrian queen, known by the West Semitic name Naqi'a, known also in Akkadian as Zakutu and in Greek as Nitocris. She was the wife of Sennacherib (705-681 BCE) and remained influential in the courts of her son Esarhaddon (681-669 BCE) and grandson Assurbanipal (669-627 BCE).[11] Both royal women were connected to

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[6] Strabo 16.1.2: "οἱ δ' ἱστοροῦντες τὴν Σύρων ἀρχὴν ὅταν φῶσι Μήδους μὲν ὑπὸ Περσῶν καταλυθῆναι, Σύρους δὲ ὑπὸ Μήδων, οὐκ ἄλλους τινὰς τοὺς Σύρους λέγουσιν, ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἐν Βαβυλῶνι καὶ Νίνῳ κατεσκευασμένους τὸ βασίλειον· ὧν ὁ μὲν Νίνος ἦν ὁ τὴν Νίνον ἐν τῇ Ἀτουρίᾳ κτίσας, ἡ δὲ τούτου γυνή, ἥπερ καὶ διεδέξατο τὸν ἄνδρα, Σεμίραμις· ἧς ἐστι κτίσμα ἡ Βαβυλών. οὗτοι δ' ἐκράτησαν τῆς Ἀσίας, καὶ τῆς Σεμιράμιδος χωρὶς τῶν ἐν Βαβυλῶνι ἔργων πολλὰ καὶ ἄλλα κατὰ πᾶσαν γῆν σχεδὸν δείκνυται ὅση τῆς ἠπείρου ταύτης ἐστί, τά τε χώματα – ἃ δὴ καλοῦσι Σεμιράμιδος – καὶ τείχη καὶ ἐρυμάτων κατασκευαί (καὶ συρίγγων τῶν ἐν αὑτοῖς καὶ ὑδρείων καὶ κλιμάκων) καὶ διωρύγων ἐν ποταμοῖς καὶ λίμναις καὶ ὁδῶν καὶ γεφυρῶν. ἀπέλιπον δὲ τοῖς μεθ' ἑαυτοὺς τὴν ἀρχὴν μέχρι τῆς Σαρδαναπάλλου καὶ Ἀρβάκου * *·μετέστη δ' εἰς Μήδους ὕστερον." The Greek text is that of Radt (2002) The penultimate clause is corrupt or perhaps has a lacuna, but the sense is clear, Radt (2002) 4.276; 8.253. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

[7] There is no secure reference to Assyria in classical texts before Herodotus, by which time the Assyrian and Babylonian empires are already significantly conflated, Rollinger (2017). Note also the traditional sequence of empires, first established by Herodotus (1.95ff.): Assyrian, Median, Persian; Rollinger (2017) 570, 574.

[8] Strabo 16.1.2; 2.1.31. Strabo defines Assyria as including the Roman province of Syria in theory, but then treats it differently in practice.

[9] For the use of "Syrian" and "Assyrian" in Greek and Roman authors, see Andrade (2014) 302–5; Andrade (2013) 6–8.

[10] Dalley (2013) 118–19; Dalley (2005) 11–13; Frahm, "Semiramis' *BNP*.

[11] Dalley (2005) 15–18; Melville (1999); Röllig, "Nitocris" *BNP*; Lewy (1952). The figure of Ninus may have been created from a blend of Šamšī-Adad V (husband of Sammuramat) and Sennacherib (husband of Nitocris). For a note of caution regarding such historicisation, see Rollinger (2017) 576. Dalley suggests that Ninus was a Greek creation arising from the Greek tradition of eponymous founders and thus the presence of Ninus in a story suggests a Greek element: Dalley (2013) 121.

Syria and held important positions in the courts of their young sons upon the death of their respective husbands.[12]

In the fifth century, Semiramis and Nitocris appear in Herodotus as separate queens of Babylon with active building programs. In this first appearance Semiramis' role is small: she built dykes (χώματα) to restrict the flow of the Euphrates and prevent flooding.[13] The deeds of Nitocris on the other hand receive a lengthy description: she altered the flow of the Euphrates to protect Babylonia from the Medes, built an elaborate bridge to allow access between the two sides of Babylon, and built her tomb above what Herodotus calls the most important gate of Babylon.[14]

In the Greek tradition, Ctesias of Cnidus seems to have been responsible for elaborating and focusing the legends surrounding these queens on the figure of Semiramis. To what extent this elaboration was Ctesias' own is unclear.[15] Dalley argues that the "confusion and conflation" between the figures of Sammuramat, Naqi'a/Nitocris and other queens reflect a tradition in Mesopotamian thought that identified people and events with idealised "archetypes", in this case an archetype of "queenship".[16] As a physician working in the court of Artaxerxes II (404-359 BCE), Ctesias drew on oral and written sources of history and legend circulating at the Persian court to write his 23 book *Persica*.[17] Although no longer extant, numerous fragments preserved especially in the first century BCE *Historical Library* of Diodorus Sicilus', suggest that Semiramis

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[12] Dalley (2013) 118–19; Dalley (2005); Weinfeld (1991); Lewy (1952).

[13] Hdt. 1.184: "Τῆς δὲ Βαβυλῶνος ταύτης πολλοὶ μέν κου καὶ ἄλλοι ἐγένοντο βασιλέες, τῶν ἐν τοῖσι Ἀσσυρίοισι λόγοισι μνήμην ποιήσομαι, οἳ τὰ τείχεά τε ἐπεκόσμησαν καὶ τὰ ἱρά, ἐν δὲ δὴ καὶ γυναῖκες δύο. Ἡ μὲν πρότερον ἄρξασα, τῆς ὕστερον γενεῆσι πέντε πρότερον γενομένη, τῇ οὔνομα ἦν Σεμίραμις, αὕτη μὲν ἀπεδέξατο χώματα ἀνὰ τὸ πεδίον ἐόντα ἀξιοθέητα· πρότερον δὲ ἐώθεε ὁ ποταμὸς ἀνὰ τὸ πεδίον πᾶν πελαγίζειν." (Now among the many rulers of this city of Babylon (whom I shall mention in my Assyrian history) who finished the building of the walls and the temples, there were two that were women. The first of these lived five generations earlier than the second, and her name was Semiramis: it was she who built dykes on the plain, a notable work; before that the whole plain used to be flooded by the river.) Loeb trans. He also refers to a Babylonian gate named for her at 3.155. Dalley notes the correspondence between Herodotus' description and the Aqueduct of Sennacherib: Dalley (2005) 16; Jacobsen and Lloyd (1935) 36–37.

[14] Hdt. 1.185-187. Compare this to Diodorus Siculus 2.8.1-3, where the bridge is the work of Semiramis rather than Nitocris. Some sign of the blending of the works of these two queens can already be seen in Herodotus. At 3.155, he lists several gates of Babylon, including a Gate of Semiramis, but no Gate of Nitocris. Note also the correspondences between these and the works of Sennacherib: Dalley (2005) 16; Lewy (1952).

[15] Waters (2017) 45.

[16] Dalley (2005) 20. Dalley also suggests a third "Semiramis" in Atalya, wife of Sargon II, a king who seems to be a source for some of the legends surrounding Ninus, Semiramis' husband, (2005) 14–15. In a later article, she argues for a Hellenistic addition to the "Semiramis archtype" in the form of Stratonice, wife of Seleucus I, Dalley (2013) 119–22. For Sargon as a model for Semiramis herself, see Waters (2017) 47–59.

[17] Recent editions and translations of Ctesias' *Persika* include: Auberger (1991); Lenfant (2004); Constantin et al. (2010); Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010); Stronk (2010). See also the studies in Wiesehöfer et al. (2011), Nichols (2011) on Ctesias' *Indika*, and the important recent study of the *Persica*'s Near Eastern context, Waters (2017). On Ctesias' sources, see Stronk (2010) 15–30; Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 55–65; Waters (2017) 10–11, 16–19, and on Semiramis, 45-59. On Ctesias' sources and orality, see Stronk (2011) 126–28. On the role of orality in the Babylonian intellectual tradition, see Beaulieu (2007); Dillery (2015) 57–58. For the influence of Babylonian folk history on Ctesias, see Drews (1974) 391. For Ctesias' Semiramis: Drews (1973) 108ff.

played a central role in Ctesias' work.[18] The information gained from his Mesopotamian sources would have been steeped in this tradition of archetypes, perhaps including a coherent, archetypal "Semiramis". Whether the creation of a unitary "Semiramis" was the work of Ctesias or of a Mesopotamian tradition, it was the former whose widely-read work was responsible for transmitting to the Greek world the coherent image of Semiramis which we see in later classical writers.[19]

Ctesias is the earliest extant Greek author to incorporate a divine element in the Greek tradition of Semiramis. In Diodorus's account of Semiramis' origins, she is born in Ascalon on the Syrian coast to Derceto, whom Strabo and Pliny equated with Atargatis.[20] In an article on the name and origin of Semiramis, Moshe Weinfeld teases out the Western Syrian links between Atargatis, Derceto and Semiramis to establish the background for these divine elements. Research on the Ugaritic tablets of the Late Bronze Age suggests that the Greek name Derceto is derived from the Ugaritic word *darkatu* (meaning dominion) which appears as an epithet of Atargatis alongside *šamīm ramīm*, "mistress of the high heavens".[21] Similar phonological correspondences exist between Semiramis and Iranian divinities associated with Behistun, where Ctesias had Semiramis carve her image.[22]

By drawing on and weaving together these diverse elements Ctesias selectively crafted an image of Semiramis suitable to his *Persica*. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones shows how Ctesias used the figure of Semiramis to reflect on the power of his contemporary, the Persian queen Parysatis, mother of Artaxerxes II and Cyrus the Younger and instrumental in the Achaemenid palace politics which surrounded Cyrus' invasion of

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[18] *FGrH* 688 F 1b = Diod. 2.1.4-28.7. Semiramis occupies 2.1.4-20.5. Diodorus credits Ctesias with the details of Semiramis' life at 2.20.3. On Semiramis' importance to Ctesias' project: Dillery (2015) 289.

[19] Andrade (2014) 304; Stephens and Winkler (1994) 24. The reception of Ctesias in antiquity and his ill-deserved modern reputation is discussed in Stronk (2007); Stronk (2010) 47–54; Stronk (2011) 128; Waters (2017) 12–14.

[20] Diod. 2.4.1-6; Strabo 16.4.27; Pliny 5.81. Lucian (*De Dea Syria* 14) reports the same story of Semiramis' divine birth, but claims that Atargatis and Derceto and were different entities, but see Oden (1977) 69–70. F 1c = Anonymous, *On Women*, 1 (Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 139); F 1m = Athenagoras, *Embassy for the Christians*, 30 (Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 142).

[21] Weinfeld (1991). The two epithets are collocated in the Ugaratic text RS 24.252. Regarding Sammuramat's purported origin as a princess of Ascalon, Dalley judges that it was unlikely that an Assyrian king would have "wasted a royal marriage upon a city of slight diplomatic weight", (2005) 14.

[22] Diodorus describes the passage of Semiramis and her army though the Zagros Mountains including a stop at Mount Bagistanus where she had her image carved into the rock face along with one hundred spearmen and an inscription in "Syrian letters" (Συρίοις γράμμασιν) to commemorate her climbing to the top of the mountain. Diod. 2.13.1-2. Mount Bagistanus is better known as Behistun, the site of several impressive Achaemenid rock sculptures and inscriptions, including Darius' famous multilingual autobiography. Herzfeld identified Behistun with Mount Sumaira/Simirria and linked its name with the Kassite 'mistress of the gods' Šimalia/Shimaliya, Herzfeld (1968) 13–14, 160. The Aramaic name of the god was Shamiram, Phillips (1972) 167. The Assyrian king Sargon II (722 – 705 BCE) claimed to have climbed this mountain with a considerable, and appropriately royal, engineering effort: Phillips (1972) 166; Herzfeld (1968) 14. Herzfeld suggests that the similarity of the name to "Semiramis" prompted Ctesias to link the mountain to the queen. Phillips (1972) 164–65, proposed that the form of the rock carving described by Diodorus/Ctesias conforms to a style of Elamite rock relief which shows a pair of male and female divinities and ranked worshippers, perhaps suggestive to Ctesias of Ninus and Semiramis and their spearmen. For the role of an oral tradition in transmitting this information to Ctesias, see Stronk (2011) 121.

Babylonia in 401 BCE.[23] Semiramis and Parysatis respectively open and close his *Persica* and offer a compelling examination of the nature of power in the court of an absolute monarch.[24] Ctesias's elaboration and transmission of the Semiramis legend led to a diverse range of adaptations of that legend for various narrative purposes, including by our main source for Ctesias himself, Diodorus Siculus.

Diodorus does not simply repeat Ctesias' account. Diodorus actively summarised, selected and reworked his sources to present his own conception of historical reality.[25] We can see this at work when comparing the only extant verbatim fragment of Ctesias, *Papyrus Oxyrhynchus* 2330, with Diodorus' version of the same story.[26] The fragment comprises an eloquent suicide note from a spurned Median warrior to the Sacian queen Zarinaea.[27] Ctesias' fragment focuses on the tragic romance and muses on the nature of love, while Diodorus' account completely ignores the romance, instead making Zarinaea into an exemplary figure and Sacian hero.[28] This significant change to Ctesian material shows that Diodorus was willing to alter his source material to serve his own didactic purpose, as he did with the material on Semiramis which he drew from Ctesias.

Diodorus also drew from Cleitarchus, the historian of Alexander, for information on Assyrian and Median affairs, as well as from Cleitarchus' father, Dinon of Colophon, who himself wrote a *Persica* using Ctesian material.[29] Sabine Compoli has shown how Diodorus' account of Semiramis' campaign against India drew on Cleitarchus' description of Alexander's campaign.[30] For Diodorus, Semiramis was a moral exemplar while Ctesias' queen was probably a more brutal and realistic portrayal of the workings of palace politics in keeping with his comparison with Parysatis.[31]

Diodorus' reworking of the Semiramis legend can also been seen in his description of her conquests and travels. Iris Sulimani's examination shows that Diodorus used the narrative of Semiramis' journeys around Asia to illustrate sites and routes of importance to Achaemenid and Macedonian kings, including ancient sites which remained important in Diodorus' time like Babylon, Ekbatana and Persepolis, as well as sites important to Alexander's travels, like Bactra, India, and the oracle at

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[23] Stronk (2010) 60–72; Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 76, 84–86. Xen. *Anab*. 1.1. For Parysatis herself as an oral sources, see Stronk (2011) 127.

[24] Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 84–86.

[25] Compoli (2000); Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 39, 84; Stronk (2010) 67–69.

[26] Bigwood (1986).

[27] *FGrH* 688 F 8b. For discussion, see Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 37.

[28] Diod. 2.34.3-5 = *FGrH* 688 F 5 §34.3-5. Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 39–40. Nicolaus of Damascus also considered this episode significant enough to summarise in his *Universal History*, but while he retained the main points of the letter, he removed the literary flourishes including the personification of love, *FGrH* 90 F 5 = *FGrH* 688 F 8c*; Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 37–38.

[29] Stevenson (1997); Stronk (2010) 64–65; Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 38–39. Diodorus mentions Clietarchus in this connection at 2.7.3. Thirteen fragments of Dinon's *Persica* survive, spanning from the reign of Semiramis to the conquest of Egypt by Artaxerxes III (343/2 BCE): Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 53.

[30] Compoli (2000). *FGrH* 688 F 1b, §2.18-19 = Diod. 2.18-19. Semiramis' expedition was recalled by Nearchos by way of Arrian (*Anab*. 6.24.2-3 = *BNJ* 133 F 3a) and Strabo (*Geog*. 15.1.5-6 = *BNJ* 133 F 3b). Diodorus (2.6.7-8) uses the same trope of the successful capture of the unassailable fortress by means of a hidden path as was common in the stories of Alexander's campaigns in Bactria (e.g. Diod. 17.85.1-86.1.)

[31] Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 39.

Ammon.[32] It may be that India was only attached to the Semiramis legend after Alexander's campaigns: it appears in the works of Nicolaus of Damascus and Pompeius Trogus, but not in Herodotus or Dinon.[33]

At about the same time as Diodorus, Pompeius Trogus used the work of Ctesias to write the Assyrian sections of his *Philippic History*. This now survives only in Justin's *Epitome*, probably compiled in the late second century CE. It is difficult to separate Pompeius Trogus from Justin, but the work as it survived was concerned with themes of monarchy, succession, and empire. These themes are evident in the work's depiction of Semiramis.[34] In Justin's account, Semiramis feared that the empire which her husband Ninus had built would dissolve if the throne fell to their young son, so when Ninus died, she disguised herself as a boy and ruled Assyria herself. She eventually ruled openly as a woman, and was only undone when she attempted to seduce her son and was murdered by him.

Semiramis' relationships with her husband and son also offered fertile ground for authors to manipulate Semiramis to serve their particular narrative ends. Ctesias used a love triangle motif to embed romantic (and ultimately tragic) conflict within his novelistic treatment of the Semiramis story;[35] while Justin used Semiramis' disguised gender to contrast her active masculine rule with the decadent and effeminate latter Assyrian kings.[36] This continued into Imperial literature; the fragmentary remains of the Trajanic-era *Ninus Romance* show the novelist contrasting the courtship behaviours of Ninus and Semiramis to show a model of the appropriate expression of feminine desire.[37]

To these literary uses of Semiramis, we might add a Seleucid dynastic application. Dalley has argued that the appearance of Stratonice along with her husband Seleucus I

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[32] Sulimani (2005).

[33] Nicolaus of Damascus: *FGrH* 90 F 1; Justin 1.2.9; Hdt. 1.184; D(e)inon: *FGrH* 690 F 7 = Aelian. *V.H.* 7.1: Σεμίραμιν τὴν Ἀσσυρίαν ἄλλοι μὲν ἄλλως ᾄδουσιν. ὡραιοτάτη δὲ ἐγένετο γυναικῶν, εἰ καὶ ἀφελέστερον ἐχρῆτο τῶι κάλλει. ἀφικομένη δὲ πρὸς τὸν τῶν Ἀσσυρίων βασιλέα κλητὴ κατὰ κλέος τῆς ὥρας, ὃ δὲ ντυχὼν τῆι ἀνθρώπωι ἠράσθη αὐτῆς. ἣ δὲ ᾔτησεν ἐκ τοῦ βασιλέως τὴν βασίλειον στολὴν λαβεῖν δῶρα, καὶ πέντε ἡμερῶν τῆς Ἀσίας ἄρξαι, καὶ †τὰ ἀπὸ ταύτης προσταττόμενα δρᾶσαι· καὶ οὐδὲ τῆς αἰτήσεως ἠτύχησεν. ἐπεὶ δὲ ἐκάθισεν αὐτὴν ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου, καὶ ἔγνω διὰ χειρὸς καὶ γνώμης ἔχουσα πάντα, προσέταξε τοῖς δορυφόροις αὐτὸν τὸν βασιλέα κτεῖναι· καὶ οὕτω τὴν τῶν Ἀσσυρίων ἀρχὴν κατέσχε. λέγει δὲ ταῦτα Δείνων. Stronk argues that the appearance of Semiramis' Indian campaigns in both Diodorus and Nicolaus of Damascus suggests that this aspect of her legend was known to Ctesias and included in his *Persica*, Stronk (2010) 65. For Nicolaus of Damascus as a source for Ctesias, see Stronk (2010) 73–84.

[34] Justin 1.2. Yardley (1994) 7.

[35] Llewellyn-Jones and Robson (2010) 71. It may be telling that the only surviving fragment of verbatim Ctesias is part of a tragic romance, F 8c (see above).

[36] Justin 2.1-6 (Semiramis as a man); 2.11 (Semiramis's son as a woman); 3.1-5 (the last Assyrian king as a woman). Diodorus 2.6.6 (Semiramis wears ambiguous clothing); 2.21.2-7 (contrast with her son Ninyas); 2.23.1 (contrast with Sardanapallus). For Ctesias' interest in gender in the figure of Semiramis, see Waters (2017) 47–48.

[37] Anderson (2009). For the novel generally, see Stephens and Winkler (1994) 23–71. For the relationship between the novel and the historical figures of Ninus and Semiramis, see Dalley (2013). Trnka-Amrhein (2018) discusses a possible relationship between the legends of Ninus and Semiramis in the *Ninus Romance* and the Ninus Mosaics, and *The Alexander Romance*. López-Martínez (2017) examines corresponding archaeological evidence for the cultural resonance of the story of Ninus and Semiramis in Roman Imperial Asia Minor.

Nicator and son Antiochus I Soter on the latter's cylinder from Borsippa is a deliberate attempt to link the three rulers to the Semiramis legend.[38] The political and cultural position of the Seleucid dynasty between the Greek and Mesopotamian worlds makes the double allusion to an Eastern queen of great interest to the Greek world and to an ancient Mesopotamian tradition of archetypal queenship apt, especially at Borsippa where the cylinder was buried.

By the time Strabo was writing at the beginning of the 1st century CE, Semiramis had become both well-known and traditional; her story could be alluded to, directly referenced and understood without full explanation. Because of this expectation of audience familiarity, Semiramis was also available for adaptation and reuse to serve a wide range of narrative purposes and didactic ends. How then, did Strabo make use of her legend?

Semiramis' appearance at the start of book 16 is the most extensive of several appearances in Strabo's *Geography*.[39] In that passage, Semiramis appears as a conqueror alongside her husband Ninus, but more extensively as a builder of several notable Babylonian structures (fortifications, water systems and transportation works). This brief but relatively detailed reference to Semiramis is important for three reasons. First, it is one of the few occasions on which Strabo follows a broad regional overview with a historical episode from the pre-Hellenistic past. Second, it dwells specifically and personally in that bounded pre-Hellenistic past. Third, it prioritises the energetic building activity of Semiramis in Mesopotamia over her conquests and travels more broadly, thus focusing her power in that region. These three factors emphasise the antiquity of the region and prioritise that antiquity almost to the exclusion of present political conditions. In the remainder of this paper, I will expand on these factors and their implications for Strabo's representation of imperial power in the Mesopotamian borderland.

As I discussed above, Strabo's standard procedure is to give a broad geographical outline of a region, then narrow his focus to the specific areas within that region. Historical episodes are usually embedded within the narrative at the places where the episode intersects with the topography of the space. In his description of Assyria, Strabo begins with the specific historical excursus with which we began.

> When those who have written histories of the Syrian empire (τὴν Σύρων ἀρχὴν) say that the Medes were overthrown by the Persians and the Syrians by the Medes, they mean by the Syrians no other people than those who built the royal palaces in Babylon and Ninus; and, of these Syrians, Ninus was the man who founded Ninus in Aturia, and his wife, Semiramis, was the woman who succeeded her husband and founded Babylon. These two gained the mastery of Asia; and as for Semiramis, apart from her works at Babylon, many others are also to be seen throughout almost the whole of that continent, I mean the mounds called the Mounds of Semiramis, and walls, and the construction of fortifications with aqueducts therein, and of reservoirs for drinking-water, and of ladder-like ascents of mountains, and of channels in rivers and lakes, and of roads and bridges. And they left to their successors their empire until

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[38] Dalley (2013) 119–22. For the cylinder, see Kuhrt and Sherwin-White (1991).

[39] Strabo *Geog.* 16.1.2 (quoted above); 2.1.16; 2.1.31; 15.1.5-6; 15.2.5.

the time of the empires of Sardanapalus and Arbaces. But later the empire passed over to the Medes.[40]

In book 16, Strabo is about to treat the main region of contact between Parthia and Rome; Parthia and the Seleucids; and Alexander and Persia. By choosing to highlight the history of the region, Strabo highlights his own selective processes. Instead of giving the prominent beginning place to one of these historical episodes or using Semiramis to begin a broader examination of the region's history, Strabo looks back further, to a single period that was ancient history for his own audience.

Having immediately drawn the reader's attention to the distant past, Strabo brings that past into sharp definition with the specificity of his description of Semiramis' deeds as a builder. Strabo gives her credit for not just the foundation and construction of Babylon, but for a wide range of engineering works throughout Asia. The rest of his description of Southern Mesopotamia refers to such works repeatedly, especially Babylon itself and the canal system of Babylonia.[41] These works are seldom specifically tied to Semiramis in those later references, but they are seldom attributed at all, except when Alexander of Macedon is involved. Thus, primed by the introduction, the occasional reminders of past construction serve to recall the Assyrian past and remind the reader of Semiramis' role in the region.[42]

Strabo' technique of foregrounding Semiramis' building achievements and intratextually highlighting them contrasts somewhat with his treatment of her conquests elsewhere in his work. In his introduction to book 16, Strabo refers to Ninus and Semiramis as masters of Asia (οὗτοι δὲ ἐκράτησαν τῆς Ἀσίας).[43] This role, and Semiramis' expeditions and conquests in her own right, were a considerable part of the traditional Semiramis legend.[44] Strabo mentions her expedition against India in his discussion of the difficulties of trusting prior authors on India.[45] However, he refers to it in order to dismiss it, citing Megasthenes' opinion that only Heracles and Dionysus had invaded India before Alexander. Strabo refers to the stories of Semiramis' conquests in methodological sections, but never links them specifically to locations outside Assyria. Semiramis is only linked positively to a specific geographical space in Strabo's description of Assyria. Within Strabo's narrative, Semiramis is confined to the spaces at the edge of Roman power where contemporary Parthian power would have been most

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[40] Strabo 16.1.2. For the Greek text, see n. 6.

[41] Strabo 16.1.5 (Babylon); 16.1.9-10 (Babylonian canals).

[42] Strabo 16.1.5 (the wonders of Babylon); 16.1.15 (Babylon as metropolis of Assyria); 2.1.26 (the Wall of Semiramis); 2.1.31 (foundation of Babylon and construction of the royal palace).

[43] Strabo 16.1.2.

[44] Summarised and discussed in relation to the expeditions and conquests of Sargon by Waters (2017) 48–58.

[45] Strabo 15.1.5-6, esp. 6: "Ἐκεῖνος μὲν δὴ ἐπίστευσεν· ἡμῖν δὲ τίς ἂν δικαία γένοιτο πίστις περὶ τῶν Ἰνδικῶν ἐκ τῆς τοιαύτης στρατείας τοῦ Κύρου ἢ τῆς Σεμιράμιδος; συναποφαίνεται δέ πως καὶ Μεγασθένης τῷ λόγῳ τούτῳ κελεύων ἀπιστεῖν ταῖς ἀρχαίαις περὶ Ἰνδῶν ἱστορίαις· οὔτε γὰρ παρ' Ἰνδῶν ἔξω σταλῆναί ποτε στρατιάν, οὔτ' ἐπελθεῖν ἔξωθεν καὶ κρατῆσαι πλὴν τῆς μεθ' Ἡρακλέους καὶ Διονύσου καὶ τῆς νῦν μετὰ Μακεδόνων." (But as for us, what just credence can we place in the accounts of India derived from such an expedition made by Cyrus, or Semiramis? And Megasthenes virtually agrees with this reasoning when he bids us to have no faith in the ancient stories about the Indians; for, he says, neither was an army ever sent outside the country by the Indians nor did any outside army ever invade their country and master them, except that with Heracles and Dionysus and that in our times with the Macedonians.) Loeb trans.

visible to a Roman reader. Thus, Assyria is framed by Semiramis' ancient power and is the only area of her legendary domain to be framed as such.

While Strabo is interested in historical matters, one of his foundational claims is the importance of the present and practical implications of his work.[46] As the work of Daniella Dueck and others has shown, this is particularly manifest in how he presents the impact of Roman power on the world.[47] Dueck notes that Strabo does attend to political entities external to Rome, such as the Parthian Empire, but that they are presented as subordinate to Roman power.[48] This is especially true in book 16, covering the region Strabo calls "Assyria", a significant proportion of which fell under Parthian rule. The Parthians appear in three places in this book: in Strabo's description of Ctesiphon, in his description of the various "oppressors" of northern Mesopotamia, and in a discussion of the Romano-Parthian border at the end of his description of Assyria. In each of these locations, the Parthian role in the space under discussion is vague and underplayed, in contrast with that of Semiramis.

Ctesiphon, the Parthian's Mesopotamian capital, receives a dismissive treatment. Strabo arranges his description of Assyria to emphasise the importance of Babylon and Seleucia. In his initial description of Babylonia, Strabo notes that the formerly-great city of Babylon has since been eclipsed by the Macedonian foundation of Seleucia.[49] His description of the Parthian capital is delayed until halfway through the chapter; only then does he describe the contemporary situation, begrudgingly admitting that Ctesiphon is an important city in the region through the piecemeal revelation of relevant details.[50] Among these details, the city's foundation is collectively and impersonally attributed to the Parthian kings (οἱ τῶν Παρθυαίων βασιλεῖς), in contrast to the credit Strabo grants to Semiramis for her works. Compared to Semiramis' foundation of Babylon, Ctesiphon has the sense of being an accidental accumulation. While this may be a more realistic description of urban formation processes, it is a stark contrast to the usual attribution of urban foundations to the energy of a single founder that we usually find in Hellenistic and Roman authors and which is implicit in this passage in the

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[46] Strabo 1.1.16; 2.5.13.

[47] Dueck (2000) 107–29.

[48] Dueck (2000) 112–15.

[49] Strabo 16.1.5 names Seleucus Nicator as founder of Seleucia on the Tigris and notes that it is now larger than Babylon.

[50] Strabo 16.1.16: Πάλαι μὲν οὖν ἡ Βαβυλὼν ἦν μητρόπολις τῆς Ἀσσυρίας, νῦν δὲ Σελεύκεια ἡ ἐπὶ τῷ Τίγρει λεγομένη. πλησίον δ' ἐστὶ κώμη Κτησιφῶν λεγομένη, μεγάλη·ταύτην δ' ἐποιοῦντο χειμάδιον οἱ τῶν Παρθυαίων βασιλεῖς φειδόμενοι τῶν Σελευκέων, ἵνα μὴ κατασταθμεύοιντο ὑπὸ τοῦ Σκυθικοῦ φύλου καὶ στρατιωτικοῦ·δυνάμει οὖν Παρθικῇ πόλις ἀντὶ κώμης ἐστὶ * καὶ τὸ μέγεθος, τοσοῦτόν γε πλῆθος δεχομένη καὶ τὴν κατασκευὴν ὑπ' ἐκείνων αὐτῶν κατεσκευασμένη καὶ τὰ ὤνια καὶ τὰς τέχνας προσφόρους ἐκείνοις πεπορισμένη. εἰώθασι γὰρ ἐνταῦθα τοῦ χειμῶνος διάγειν οἱ βασιλεῖς διὰ τὸ εὐάερον· θέρους δὲ ἐν Ἐκβατάνοις καὶ τῇ Ὑρκανίᾳ διὰ τὴν ἐπικράτειαν τῆς παλαιᾶς δόξης. ὥσπερ δὲ Βαβυλωνίαν τὴν χώραν καλοῦμεν, οὕτω καὶ τοὺς ἄνδρας τοὺς ἐκεῖθεν Βαβυλωνίους καλοῦμεν, οὐκ ἀπὸ τῆς πόλεως, ἀλλ' ἀπὸ τῆς χώρας· ἀπὸ δὲ τῆς Σελευκείας ἧττον, κἂν ἐκεῖθεν ὦσι, καθάπερ Διογένη τὸν στωικὸν φιλόσοφον. (Long ago Babylon was the metropolis of Assyria; but now Seleuceia on the Tigris has that name. Nearby is a village called Ctesiphon, a large one. The kings of the Parthians made this their winter residence, sparing the Seleuceians, so that the Seleuceians might not be oppressed by the requirements of billeting Scythian people and soldiers. Because of Parthian power, Ctesiphon is a city rather than a village; its size is such that it receives a multitude of people, and it has been equipped with buildings and furnished with goods and arts suitable to them. For the kings are accustomed to spend the winter there because of the good air, and the summer at Ecbatana and in Hyrcania because of the superiority of its ancient glory.) For a full analysis of this passage, see Cameron (2019) 308–9.

toponym Seleuceia. Moreover, while Ctesiphon eventually receives description, that description is immediately followed by further mentions of Babylonia and Seleuceia (16.1.16) to draw the focus back to those cities. Thereafter Babylon and Seleucia remain the primary reference points among the southern Mesopotamian cities: Babylon marks the beginning of an eastward journey at 16.1.17 and both Babylon and Seleucia mark the end of the trade route from Antioch at 16.1.27. Strabo keeps the focus on the distant past at the expense of the contemporary masters of Mesopotamia.

Strabo continues this minimising characterisation of Parthian power in their two subsequent appearances in his description of Assyria (16.1). In a description of the Arabian Skenitai, tent-dwelling nomads of the north Syrian desert, Strabo notes that:

> The people who live alongside the [Taurus] mountains are harassed not only by the Skenitai, but also by the Armenians, who are situated above them and, through their might, oppress them; and at last they are subject for the most part to the Armenians or else to the Parthians, for the Parthians too are situated on the sides of the country and possess both Media and Babylonia.[51]

In this account of political and military power in northern Mesopotamia, Strabo suggests that the Parthians are just one of the groups that hold power over the sedentary, urban centres between the Taurus Mountains and the North Syrian Desert (cities like Nisibis, Edessa, and Carrhae). These groups includes the Skenitai, characterised as bandits and impermanent raiders, and the Armenians, characterised as a rebellion-prone Roman client state.[52] Strabo's description of the competing power interests in northern Mesopotamia is not wrong: Tigranes II of Armenia (95-55 BCE) seized much of this region from the Parthians after the death of Mithridates II (121-91 BCE) and it was probably not recovered until the campaigns of Orodes II (57-37 BCE) against Armenia accompanying and following Crassus' Parthian campaigns (54-53 BCE).[53] Nevertheless, by compressing the chronology of those exchanges and removing the nuance of Tigranes' seizure, Strabo implies an atemporal state of territorial dispute that continues in Strabo's own time, subsequent to Germanicus' settlement of eastern affairs in 18 CE. [54] That settlement included the symbolic reiteration of Armenia's subservience to Rome in Germanicus' crowning of Artaxias III.[55] Strabo's description of regional power relations in northern Mesopotamia reflects an accurate view of the previous century in aggregate, but the collapsing of historical detail gives a misleading description of conditions in Strabo's own time, to the disadvantage of the Parthians.

Strabo's final reference to the Parthians in his description of Assyria comes immediately before his narrative moves to Roman Syria. The final reference is a description of the border between Roman and Parthian territory in which Strabo sharply defines a limit to Parthian power (the Euphrates) while giving a more

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[51] Strabo 16.1.26: τοῖς οὖν παρορείοις ὑπό τε τούτων κακοῦσθαι συμβαίνει καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν Ἀρμενίων· ὑπέρκεινται δὲ καὶ καταδυναστεύουσι διὰ τὴν ἰσχύν· τέλος δ' ὑπ' ἐκείνοις εἰσὶ τὸ πλέον ἢ τοῖς Παρθυαίοις (ἐν πλευραῖς γάρ εἰσι κἀκεῖνοι τήν τε Μηδίαν ἔχοντες καὶ τὴν Βαβυλωνίαν).

[52] Strabo 6.4.2; 11.14.15. For further discussion of the *skenitai* in Strabo, see Cameron (2019) 203–10.

[53] Tigranes: Strabo 11.14.15. Parthian recovery of Mesopotamia: Dio 40.28.1.

[54] Pothecary (2002) dates Strabo's *Geography* based on references to Germanicus' activities.

[55] Tac. *Ann*. 2.56.

ambiguous presentation of the limits of Roman power that accords with the Augustan imperial ideology of *imperium sine fine*.[56]

Strabo claims to know more about the Parthians than survives in the *Geography*. When describing the geographical region of Parthia, he writes: "But since I have said much about Parthian usages in the sixth book of my *Historical Commentaries* and in the second book of my *History of events after Polybius*, I shall omit discussion of that subject here, lest I may seem to be repeating what I have already said."[57] Because those works are lost, it is difficult to judge how well informed about the Parthians Strabo was.[58] Nevertheless, he definitely knew more of the reality of Parthian power in Mesopotamia than his treatment of the region would suggest.[59] Although Strabo gives no single extended discussion of Parthian power, Drijvers' marshalling of Strabo's scattered references to the Parthians and their empire gives a framework for the extent of Strabo's knowledge.[60] As well as the nominal border of Parthian power at the Euphrates, he knew of several significant and equal interactions between Roman and Parthian power in the vicinity of the Euphrates, including the sequences of invasions by Crassus, Pakores, and Antony and the diplomatic exchanges between Augustus and Phraates IV (all of which appear in 16.1.28). Strabo's elision of Parthian power can only have been a matter of deliberate selection.

Geographic writing can tend to be treated as an objective description of space, but the processes of selection, generalisation and aggregation that underlie geographic projects are inherently subjective. While all space is ideologically constructed, borderland spaces are particularly ripe for ambiguous and selective description between competing narratives. It is in this light that Strabo's treatment of Semiramis and Assyria should be seen. In Strabo's Assyria, the Parthian present was relegated to a begrudging acknowledgement, comparison with bandits and Roman clients, and limited by Rome. Semiramis' Assyrians had once been masters of Asia and founders of Babylon. During the Augustan period, parts of Semiramis' Assyria were an inter-imperial borderland between Rome and the Parthian empire. Strabo defines Assyria as including the Roman province of Syria in theory, but then treats it differently in practice. The western edge of "Assyria", between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean was within the Roman sphere; the rest of this region was under the political sway of the Parthians. By the first century CE, this was Rome's only border with a state of similar size and military resources. In writing of this borderland space, Strabo was forced to negotiate between an ideology of limitless Roman power and a reality of a permanent, independent foreign empire. Strabo's *Geography* relies heavily on a legacy of Hellenistic knowledge and action, but the world he presents is centred on Rome.[61] In his *Geography*, Strabo orientates his geographical description of Assyria towards past political power rather than current political power, adapts the Semiramis legend to this ideological purpose,

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[56] Strabo 16.1.28. On the ideology of universal dominion, see Whittaker (1994) 31–37. On the idea in Strabo that the limits of Roman power correspond to the *oikoumene*, see Dueck (2000) 109–11. On Strabo's reflection of this ideology in this passage, see Cameron (2019) 310–13.

[57] Strabo 11.9.3: "εἰρηκότες δὲ πολλὰ περὶ τῶν Παρθικῶν νομίμων ἐν τῇ ἕκτῃ τῶν ἱστορικῶν ὑπομνημάτων βίβλῳ, δευτέρᾳ δὲ τῶν μετὰ Πολύβιον, παραλείψομεν ἐνταῦθα μὴ ταυτολογεῖν δόξωμεν..."

[58] On Strabo's historical work generally, including discussion of this passage, see Malinowski (2017).

[59] Cameron (2019) 313–16.

[60] Drijvers (1998).

[61] Roller (2014) 16–24.

and configures Semiramis as a foundational figure in the region, literally and figuratively. By implicitly contrasting the long-standing tradition of this legendary semi-divine queen with the vague and ambiguous presence of the Parthians in the borderland, Strabo minimises the importance of Parthian power to his readers and implicitly shows Rome as the dominant force in a border region where their military ambitions had been repeatedly thwarted. Strabo's representation of Semiramis reveals the deliberate and selective nature of his geographic narrative, as well as contributing to our understanding of how Roman geographical authors conceived of the relationships between Rome, Parthia and the intervening borderland.

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HAMISH CAMERON
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY, WELLINGTON

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