

MESOPOTAMIAN INFLUENCES ON THE OLD PERSIAN ROYAL IDEOLOGY AND RELIGION: THE EXAMPLE OF ACHAEMENID ROYAL INSCRIPTIONS¹

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1. Introduction

The Achaemenid empire (ca. 550–330)² was one of the most powerful empires in the ancient world, and in its time the largest that the world had ever seen. The abrupt birth of the empire of the Persians in the middle of the sixth century demanded a whole set of new institutions to be created. In the designing of the new empire, the previously tribal and illiterate Persians lacked the experience of empire-planning and often had to rely on the help of more ancient and sophisticated civilisations, such as the neighbouring Mesopotamia with its 3000-year tradition. Although earlier cultural contacts between Mesopotamia and the Iranian area in the east were certainly already present – beginning already with Mesopotamian contacts with the state of Elam in the fourth millennium – the written sources that would specifically describe the Persian royal ideology and religion appear only during the Achaemenid period, and thus descriptions of earlier influences of Mesopotamia on the Persians remain highly hypothetical. It is also important to note that the Mesopotamian influences were definitely not the sole component of the Achaemenid literary sources, one also has to consider the earlier authentic Indo-Iranian influences that were later transformed by Zoroastrian reforms. The main purpose of this article is to ask whether the authentic elements of Mesopotamian royal ideology and religion can be traced from the Achaemenid inscriptions. The Achaemenid royal inscriptions often embraced the martial accomplishments of the Achaemenid rulers, as do the texts discussed in this article.

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² All dates in this article are BC.

In the following treatment, some of the most exemplary Achaemenid sources – the Cyrus Cylinder, the inscription of Darius I at Behistun and the inscription of Artaxerxes II at Susa – are discussed in chronological order. An attempt has been made to trace the possible influence of Mesopotamian royal and religious ideology on the Achaemenid royal inscriptions. Historical information regarding the background of the material is added.

2. The Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions

The Achaemenid royal inscriptions together with the Elamite administrative tablets from Persepolis and various archaeological findings are the most important sources if one is to reconstruct Achaemenid history, as they are both contemporary and Iran-oriented.³ Most of these inscriptions were trilingual⁴ and were found in Persis (Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam, Pasargadae), Elam (Susa) and Media (Behistun, Hamadan).⁵

The first problem that arises in discussing the Achaemenid royal inscriptions is the genealogy of the Achaemenid kings. There are various sources which can be used to reconstruct the Achaemenid lineages of rulers, none of which are entirely trustworthy. Of the kings prior to the empire founder Cyrus II (558–530), the information is scanty. The Cyrus cylinder lists the following line of kings: Teispes-Cyrus I-Cambyses I-Cyrus II⁶, while the Behistun inscription of Darius I (522–486) lists Achaemenes-Teispes-Ariaramnes-Arsames-Hystaspes-Darius I⁷ and states that there were eight kings in his family ruling before him⁸. The reason for the differing lineages can be explained by the usurpation of the throne by Darius I, who rose to

³ **Wiesehöfer, J.** 2005. *Das Antike Persien*. Düsseldorf: Albatros Verlag, p. 26.

Cf. **Malandra, W. W.** 1983. *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 47: “The Achaemenid inscriptions are a unique source of information about Old Iranian religion in that they can be dated and assigned to historical personalities.”

⁴ Written in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian. Sometimes also bilingual or monolingual.

⁵ **Wiesehöfer** 2005, p. 27.

⁶ **Schaudig, H.** 2001. *Die Inschriften Nabonids von Babylon und Kyros’ des Grossen samt den in ihrem Umfeld entstandenen Tendenzschriften. Textausgabe und Grammatik*. *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 256. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, p. 552.

⁷ Inscription of Darius at Behistun I § 2 [DB] = **Schmitt, R.** 1991. *The Bisitun Inscriptions of Darius the Great: Old Persian text*. *Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum I/1*, 1. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, p. 49.

⁸ **DB I § 4** = **Schmitt** 1991, p.49. However, Darius does not name the eight kings.

power after the death of Cyrus II's son Cambyses II (530–522) and the revolt of Gaumata in 522. It has been claimed that Darius utilised propaganda to justify his rights to the throne of the Achaemenids.⁹ By connecting his ancestors to the royal line of Cyrus II with the mutual ancestor of Teispes, Darius I presents himself as a member of a branch of the royal family and thus legitimises his claims to the throne.¹⁰ There are also two inscriptions on gold tablets from Hamadan (the ancient Median capital Ecbatana) attributed to Ariaramnes and Arsames as kings,¹¹ but most scholars have accepted them as not authentic on the basis of grammatical peculiarities and dated them to the late Achaemenid period.¹²

3. The Cyrus Cylinder

There are no inscriptions in the Old Persian language preserved from the time of Cyrus II¹³. Next to the mention of Cyrus in Deutero-Isaiah, the most important document concerning the founder of the kingdom is the so-called Cyrus cylinder, written in the Akkadian language.¹⁴ The text describes the misdeeds of Nabonidus (555–539), the last king of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty, who was not pious towards Marduk and who tortured the citizens of Babylon with a corvée. Marduk decides to punish Nabonidus, and chooses Cyrus II as the ruler of the world and sends him to Babylon. Cyrus takes the city without battle and the citizenry greets him with joy. Cyrus then returns the images of gods, restores the people connected with their cults to their

⁹ Cf. **Briant, P.** 2002. *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, p. 16.

¹⁰ The other tradition holds Darius' claims as truth and sees two lines of kings in Fars, divided by Teispes between his sons Cyrus I and Ariaramnes (See e.g. **Frye, R. N.** 1984. *The History of Ancient Iran*. München: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, pp. 90–91).

¹¹ AmH, AsH. See **Kent, R. G.** 1950. *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*. New Haven, Connecticut: American Oriental Society, p. 116.

¹² **Dandamaev, M. A.** 1989. *A Political History of the Achaemenid Empire*. Translated by W. J. Vogelsang. Leiden: Brill, p. 8. Cf. **Schmitt, R.** 2007. *Pseudo-Altpersische Inschriften: Inschriftenfälschungen und moderne Nachbildungen in altpersischer Keilschrift*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, p. 28.

¹³ There are two inscriptions CMA and CMc from Pasargadae attributed to Cyrus II (see **Kent 1950**, p. 116), but they are considered to be later additions by Darius I (**Waters, M.** 2004. *Cyrus and the Achaemenids*. – Iran, Vol. 42, p. 94).

¹⁴ **Ahn, G.** 1992. *Religiöse Herrscherlegitimation im achämenidischen Iran: die Voraussetzungen und die Struktur ihrer Argumentation*. Acta Iranica 31. Leiden: Brill; Louvain: Peeters, p. 135.

original dwellings¹⁵ and initiates building activity. The text ends with the report of Cyrus finding an inscription by Aššurbanipal. This could be interpreted as Cyrus's attempt to connect himself to an earlier prosperous ruler.¹⁶

This propagandistic text directly reflects the Mesopotamian influences on the Old Persian royal ideology. The physical shape and literary genre of this text was already a few thousand years old when this particular text was written, as it belongs to the tradition of Mesopotamian building texts, a subgenre of royal inscriptions.¹⁷ In fact, there are no genuinely Old Persian components that appear in this text. E.g. "The Cyrus Cylinder is a document composed in accordance with traditional Mesopotamian royal building texts and apart from the incontrovertible fact that the main protagonist is a Persian no foreign and/or new literary elements appear in it."¹⁸ The traditional way to substantiate this kind of Mesopotamian character of Cyrus II's text would be the concept of the Achaemenids new tolerant policies towards subdued peoples.¹⁹ Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg doubts the emergence of a new political philosophy of tolerance and argues that the Achaemenid kings only followed local customs and acted as local kings.²⁰ The cylinder has also been attributed to the priests of Marduk who were concerned about their privileges under Nabonidus and thus sustained the propaganda of Cyrus, the alleged restorer of Marduk's cult.²¹ From the evidence under discussion, it could be

¹⁵ This is traditionally associated with "Cyrus's edict", the Book of Ezra 1:2–4 where Cyrus initiates the building of a temple in Jerusalem and releases the Jews from captivity in Babylon.

¹⁶ **Kuhrt, A.** 1992. *Usurpation, Conquest and Ceremonial: From Babylon to Persia. – Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies.* Ed. by David Cannadine and Simon Price. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 51.

¹⁷ **Kuhrt, A.** 1983. *The Cyrus Cylinder and the Achaemenid Royal policy. – Journal for the Study of Old Testament*, 25, p. 88.

¹⁸ **Kuhrt** 1983, p. 92.

¹⁹ **Sancisi-Weerdenburg, H.** 1993. *Political Concepts in Old-Persian Royal Inscriptions. – Anfänge politischen Denkens in der Antike: Die Nahöstlichen Kulturen und die Griechen.* Herausgegeben von Kurt Raaflaub unter Mitarbeit von Elisabeth Müller-Luckner. München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, p. 156.

²⁰ *Ibid.* Cf. **Beaulieu, P.-A.** 1993. *An Episode in the Fall of Babylon to the Persians. – Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 4, p. 243: "Such ability to cater to local cultures and ideological systems distinguished the Achaemenid rulers, Cyrus in particular, and no doubt facilitated the integration of many diverse components into a centralized empire."

²¹ **Piras, A.** 2002. *Preliminary Remarks on Melammu Database: The Continuity of Mesopotamian Culture by Iranological Evidence. – Ideologies as Intercultural Phenomena.* Proceedings of the Third Annual Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project. Held in Chicago, USA, October 27–31, 2000. *Melammu Symposia* 3. Ed. by A. Panaino and G. Pettinato. Milan: Università di Bologna & IsIao, p. 207.

concluded that the Cyrus Cylinder was closer in genre to the royal inscriptions of the Mesopotamian kings than it was to those of the Achaemenid rulers.

If one were to trace back the more specific model of the Cyrus cylinder, the somewhat surprising result would be that the text is dissimilar to most of the Neo-Babylonian building inscriptions, resembling only a few inscriptions regarding his antagonist Nabonidus.²² Taking into account that the texts of Nabonidus were written following the example of the inscriptions of the Assyrian kings, it can be concluded that the closest Mesopotamian ‘relatives’ to the Cyrus Cylinder (besides texts from Nabonidus) are actually the inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian kings Esarhaddon and Aššurbanipal.²³ The aforementioned text of Aššurbanipal found by Cyrus may be important in this context.

The most obvious way to emphasise the genuinely Mesopotamian character would be the analysis of the royal titles in the text:

(20) *a-naku* ¹*ku-ra-áš* lugal *kiš-šat* lugal gal lugal *dan-nu* lugal tin.tir^{ki} lugal kur *šu-me-ri* *ù ak-ka-di-i* lugal *kib-ra-a-ti er-bé-et-ti*

(21) *dumu* ¹*ka-am-bu-zi-ia* lugal gal lugal uru *an-ša-an* *dumu dumu* ¹*ku-ra-áš* lugal gal luga[* u]ru* *an-ša-an* šà.bal.bal ¹*ši-iš-pi-iš* lugal gal lugal uru *an-šá-an*²⁴

(20) I am Cyrus, king of the universe, great king, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters,

(21) son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, offspring of Teispes, great king, king of Anshan

This passage is similar to the Cylinder of Cyrus II’s arch enemy Nabonidus:

(1) *a-na-ku* ^d*Na-bi-um-na-’-id* šarru *ra-bu-ú* šarru *dan-nu*

(2) *šar kiš-ša-ti šar Bābili*^{K1} *šar kib-ra-a-ti er-bet-ti*²⁵

(1) I, Nabonidus, great king, mighty king,

(2) king of the universe, king of Babylon, king of the four quarters

²² Kuhrt 1983, p. 91.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁴ Schaudig 2001, p. 552.

²⁵ Kienast, B. 1979. Zur Herkunft der Achämenidischen Königstitulatur. – Die Islamische Welt Zwischen Mittelalter und Neuzeit: Festschrift für Hans Robert Roemer zum 65. Geburtstag. Herausgegeben von Ulrich Haarmann und Peter Bachmann. Beirut: In Kommission bei Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden, p. 354.

All the five titles used by Nabonidus are similar to the ones used by Cyrus II. The cited passages are comparable to the prism inscription (Edition B) of Aššurbanipal:

- 1 ¶a-na-ku (I)ašur-bâni-apli šarru rabû šarru dan-nu
- 2 šâr kiššati šâr (mātu)ašur(ki) šâr kib-rat irbitti(tim)
- 3 ši-it lib-bi (I)ašur-aḥa-iddina šâr (mātu)aš-šur(ki)
- 4 šakkanak bâbili(ki) šâr mât šumerî u akkadî(ki)
- 5 liplipi (I.ilu)sîn-aḥḥê(meš)-irîba šâr kiššati šâr (mātu)aššur(ki)²⁶

- 1 I, Aššurbanipal, great king, mighty king,
- 2 king of the universe, king of Assyria, king of the four quarters,
- 3 offspring of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria,
- 4 governor of Babylon, king of the land of Sumer and Akkad,
- 5 grandson of Sennacherib, king of the universe, king of Assyria

Here Aššurbanipal who ruled a century earlier uses five of the six titles used by Cyrus on his cylinder. Both kings also list their ancestors. The only difference appears in the title concerning Babylonia. While Cyrus II presents himself as the *lugal tin.tir^{ki}* (“king of Babylon”), Aššurbanipal settles for the role of *šakkanak(um)* (“governor”), also an ancient Mesopotamian title, having its roots in the third millennium.²⁷

The Cyrus Cylinder follows the example of the age-old Mesopotamian titles:

1. LUGAL *kiššat* = *šar kiššatim* (“king of the universe”). This title dates back to the Early Dynastic Sumerian title LUGAL KIŠ²⁸ = “king of Kiš”. In the Early Dynastic period it designated the ruler of the city-state Kiš and in the broader sense a powerful ruler who “could exert his power during

²⁶ Piepkorn, A. C. 1933. Historical Prism Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal I: Editions E, B1-5, D and K. The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Assyriological Studies, No. 5, Chicago, Illinois, The University of Chicago Press, p. 28.

²⁷ GİR.NITA in Sumerian, first used by Lugal-zagesi (Hallo, W. W. 1957. Early Mesopotamian royal titles: A Philologic and Historical Analysis. New Haven: American Oriental Society, p. 127).

²⁸ Appears in the first known Mesopotamian royal inscriptions by (En)mebaragesi, see Frayne, D. R., 2008. Presargonic Period (2700–2350). The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Early Periods, Volume 1 (=RIME 1). Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, pp. 56–57; Steible, H.; Behrens, H. 1982. Die Altsumerische Bau- und Weihinschriften. Teil II. Kommentar zu den Inschriften aus Lagaš, Inschriften außerhalb von Lagaš, Freiburger Altorientalische Studien 5/I–II (=FAOS). Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, pp. 213–214.

- conflicts between the city-states”²⁹. From the times of Sargon of Akkade (2334–2279) and the Akkadian dynasty, the Sumerian title LUGAL KIŠ was translated into Akkadian as *šar kiššati(m)* and started to be used as a universalistic royal title³⁰ meaning “king of the universe”.³¹ This title was later used by e.g. Hammurabi (1792–1750), Šamši-Adad I (1808–1776), Tukultī-Ninurta I (1244–1208) and Kurigalzu I (ca. 1400).³²
2. LUGAL GAL, *šarru rabû* in Akkadian (“great king”). LUGAL GAL is a far-spread Mesopotamian title from the third millennium. Used in the inscriptions of Assyria from Aššurbēlkala (1074–1057), in Babylonia from Kurigalzu I.³³ Later used by e.g. Aššurnasirpal II (883–859), Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727), Esarhaddon (680–669), Aššurbanipal (668–ca.630) of Assyria.³⁴
 3. LUGAL *dannu* or *šarru dannu* in Akkadian (“mighty king”). Dates back to the Ur III period, first used in Sumerian form LUGAL KALAGA by Amar-Su’ena (2046–2038), replacing the earlier title NITA KALAGA, “mighty man”.³⁵ The remaining Ur III kings and all kings from Isin, as well as Hammurabi and his successors from the First Dynasty of Babylon, all bore the title.³⁶ Later it was used by e.g. Arikdēnili (1319–1308), Sennacherib (704–681) and Aššurbanipal of Assyria and Nabopolassar (626–605) of Babylonia.³⁷
 4. LUGAL *tin.tir*^{ki} (=KÁ DINGIR RA^{ki}), *šar bābili* in Akkadian (“king of Babylon”). This title was used by the Old Babylonian kings, then later by the Assyrian kings, e.g. Tukultī-Ninurta I, Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib; the Babylonian kings Marduk-apla-idinna (721–710),

²⁹ See **Maeda, T.** 1981. “King of Kish” in Pre-Sargonic Sumer. – *Orientalia* 17, pp. 1–17.

³⁰ About universalistic royal titles see **Stadnikov, S.** 1998. Universalism kui fenomen. – *Vana-Egiptuse kultuurilugu: Valitud artikleid, tõlkeid ja esseid*. Tallinn: Kodutrükk, pp. 93–142.

³¹ **Sazonov, V.** 2008. Akkadi kuningavõim kui arhetüüp. – *Ajalooline ajakiri*, 3(125), p. 196f.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 208.

³³ **Kienast** 1979, p. 356. This title also appears on a letter sent to Šamši-Adad I (1813–1781) (*ibid.*).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ **Hallo** 1957, p. 127.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ **Kienast** 1979, p. 356f.

- Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562), and the Achaemenid ruler Cambyses II (in 538³⁸).³⁹
5. LUGAL *šumeri ù akkadī* (=šar māt šumeri u akkadī), LUGAL KI-ENGI KI-URI in Sumerian (“king of Sumer and Akkad”). First attested under the Ur III king Ur-Namma (2112–ca.2095).⁴⁰ Later used by e.g. Šulgi (2094–2047)⁴¹, the Old Babylonian kings, the Middle Assyrian king Tukultī-Ninurta I⁴², the Neo-Assyrian kings Šamši-Adad V (823–811)⁴³ and Tiglath-Pileser III⁴⁴.
 6. LUGAL *kibrati erbēti* (=šar kibrātim arba'im), LUGAL AN-UBDA LIMMUBA in Sumerian (“king of the four quarters”). First attested under Narām-Su'en (2254–2218).⁴⁵ This title signals a change in the idea of kingship, as Narām-Su'en started to stress the idea of military expansion to distant territories.⁴⁶ The title is partly synonymous with another universalistic title *šar kiššati* as both stand for the political program of universal control.⁴⁷ The title is also borne by e.g. the Sumerian king Utu-hegal⁴⁸

³⁸ Cyrus II probably appointed his son Cambyses as king of Babylon in 539/538. The title “king of lands” (*šar mātāti*) was attributed to Cyrus II, while “king of Babylon” (*šar bābili*) was attributed to his son Cambyses (**Peat, J.** 1989. Cyrus “King of Lands,” Cambyses “King of Babylon”: The Disputed Co-Regency. – *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, Vol. 41, p. 210). This institution of co-regency was probably one of the Assyrian influences on the Achaemenid royal ideology (See **Frankfort, H.** 1948. *Kingship and the gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society & Nature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 243f.).

³⁹ **Kuhrt** 1992, p. 25.

⁴⁰ **Hallo** 1957, p. 126.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² **Cifola, B.** 1995. *Analysis of Variants in the Assyrian Royal Titulary from the Origins to Tiglath-Pileser III*. Napoli: Instituto Universitario Orientale, Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici, Series Minor XLVII, p. 42.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁴ **Cifola** 1995, p. 138.

⁴⁵ **Hallo** 1957 p. 124f.

⁴⁶ **Maeda, T.** 1984. “King of the Four Regions” in the Dynasty of Akkade. – *Orientalia* 20, p. 80.

⁴⁷ **Cifola** 1995, 141f.

⁴⁸ **Hallo** 1957, 125.

(2119–2113), the Old Babylonian king Hammurabi⁴⁹, the Middle Assyrian king Tukultī-Ninurta I⁵⁰, and the Kassite king Kurigalzu I⁵¹.

The Cyrus Cylinder follows the example of earlier Mesopotamian conceptions also in the religious realm. The king is seen as the restorer of cults and a great builder. He holds an exclusive relationship with the god Marduk who chose him as his favourite. All these concepts reach back to the third millennium Mesopotamia. The ideas of the Cyrus Cylinder are also present in another text from the same time and probably written for the same purposes, the so-called verse account of Nabonidus.⁵²

4. The Inscription of Darius I at Behistun (DB)

Cyrus II died in the summer of 530 in the battle with the Massagetai, east of the Caspian Sea.⁵³ After him reigned his son Cambyses II, who managed to conquer Egypt in 525. The inscription at Behistun reflects the events that took place after the death of Cambyses (530–522) in 522. Cambyses had secretly killed his brother Bardiya⁵⁴ before setting off to Egypt.⁵⁵ Cambyses himself died on his way back from Egypt when a revolt was initiated against him in Fars, Media and other provinces.⁵⁶ The leader of the revolt was Gaumata the *magus*⁵⁷, who presented himself as Bardiya, the brother of Cambyses. Gaumata was overthrown by Darius in 522. According to Muhammad A. Dandamaev, the Behistun inscription was created between November 521 and March 518.⁵⁸ Apart from containing some historical facts, the inscription

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ **Sazonov, V.** 2010. Die Königstitel und -epitheta in Assyrien, im Hethiterreich und in Nordsyrien (Ugarit, Emar, Karkemiš) in der mittellassyrischen Zeit: Strukturelle Gemeinsamkeiten, Unterschiede und gegenseitige Beeinflussung. *Dissertationes historiae Universitatis Tartuensis* 21, Tartu: Tartu University Press, p. 115.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁵² For the text of the verse account of Nabonidus see **Law, G. W.** 2010. *The Identification of Darius the Mede*. North Carolina: Ready Scribe Press, pp. 209–217.

⁵³ **Frye** 1984, p. 95.

⁵⁴ Smerdis in Greek.

⁵⁵ **DB** § 10.

⁵⁶ **Frye** 1984, p. 98.

⁵⁷ Member of the hereditary priesthood in Media.

⁵⁸ **Dandamaev** 1989, p. 134.

is also a propagandistic piece of self-justification by Darius and thus should not be considered to be an entirely adequate depiction of history.

The inscription of Behistun is typical of the Achaemenid trilingual inscriptions, written in Old Persian, Elamite and Akkadian. Old Persian was a south-western Old Iranian dialect spoken by the king and his subjects in Fars, with the written form probably invented under Darius I.⁵⁹ The Old Persian language is expressed most elaborately and substantially in the inscription of Behistun. The inscription is also noted for being the device by which to decipher ancient Near Eastern scripts. In the traditional manner of the ancient Mesopotamian inscriptions, it starts with the royal titles given by Darius and the listing of his genealogy:

- 1 : adam : Dārayavauš : xšāyaθiya : vazraka : xšāyaθiya : xshāyaθiy
- 2 ānām : xšāyaθiya : Pārsaiy : xšāyaθiya : dahyūnām : Vⁱšt
- 3 āspahyā : puça : Aršāmahyā napā : Haxāmanišiya : θātiy :
- 4 Dārayavauš : xšāyaθiya : manā : pitā : Vⁱštāspa : Vⁱštāspahyā : pitā : Arš
- 5 āma : Aršāmahyā : pitā : Ariyāramna : Ariyāramnahyā : pitā : Cišpiš : Cišp
- 6 āiš : pitā : Haxāmaniš : θātiy : Dārayavauš : xšāθiya : avahyarā
- 7 diy : vayam : Haxāmanišiyā : θahyāmahy : hacā : paruviyata : āmātā : ama
- 8 hy hacā : paruviyata :hyā :amāxam : taumā : xshāyaθiyā : āha : θ
- 9 ātiy : Dārayavauš : xšāyaθiya : VIII : manā : taumāyā : tyaiy : paruvam
- 10 xšāyaθiyā : āha : adam navama : IX : duvitāparanam : vayam : xšāyaθi
- 11 yā : amahy⁶⁰

§1 1.1–3. I am Darius the Great King, King of Kings, King in Persia, King of countries, son of Hystaspes, grandson of Arsames, an Achaemenian.

§2 1.3–6. Darius the King says: My father was Hystaspes; Hystaspes' father was Arsames; Arsames' father was Ariaramnes; Ariaramnes' father was Teispes; Teispes' father was Achaemenes.

§3 1.6–8. Darius the King says: For this reason we are called Achaemenians. From long ago we have been noble. From long ago our family has been kings.

§4 1.8–11. Darius the King says: there were eight of our family who were kings before me; I am the ninth; nine in succession, we have been kings.⁶¹

The titles used here are similar to the titles used by the earlier Mesopotamian rulers:

⁵⁹ **Wiesehöfer** 2005, p. 26. Based on the peculiarities of the grammar it has been suggested that it is an artificial language.

⁶⁰ **Kent** 1950, p. 116f.

⁶¹ **Kent** 1950, p. 119.

1. *xšāyaθiya* (“king”) – a title derived from the verbal root *xšay* – “to rule”.⁶² This title is probably a Median loanword into Old Persian and, as such, probably a title coined by the Medes.⁶³
2. *xšāyaθiya vazraka* (“great king”) – the title *xšāyaθiya* (“king”) is often accompanied by the title *vazraka* (“great”), which also is probably taken over from Media and follows the Mesopotamian example (cf. Akkadian *šarru rabû*, also appearing on the cylinder of Cyrus).⁶⁴ The Medes, in turn, probably took over the title from the Urartian kings (starting with Sarduri I (–ca. 825) and Ishpuini (–ca. 810)) who bore the same title in the 9th century.⁶⁵
3. *xšāyaθiya xšāyaθiyānām* (“king of kings”) – also a title of Mesopotamian origin, taken over by the Persians from the Medes, who in turn borrowed it from the Urartians.⁶⁶ It was a universalistic title written *šar šarrāni*⁶⁷ (also MAN MAN.MEŠ⁶⁸ and LUGAL LUGAL.MEŠ⁶⁹) in Akkadian.⁷⁰ In the Mesopotamian inscriptions it was first used by the Middle Assyrian king Tukultī-Ninurta I.⁷¹ The title first appeared in the name of the Akkadian

⁶² **Schmitt, R.** 1977. Königstum im Alten Iran. – Saeculum 28, p. 386: “/.../ sich bei der Analyse als eine Adjektivableitung von dem primären (erschlossenen) Nomen actionis *xšay-aθa- „Herrschaft” (mit dem suffix ar. *-atha-, iran. *-aθa-) zu der Verbalwurzel ar. *kšay, iran. *xšay „herrschen” erweist. Der König wird also einfach benannt als der, der charakterisiert ist durch die Herrschaft.”; Cf. **Wiesehöfer** 2005, p. 53, who translates *xshāyathiya* as „den eine Herrschaft auszeichnet”.

⁶³ *Ibid.* Though studies have provided no firm proof of the Median provenience, Schmitt gives two justifications for the Median background of the title. Firstly, he suggests that it is historically coherent while there was no kingdom ruled by the Iranians prior to the Medes. Secondly, he also cites Strabo (11, 13, 9), who has said that “the worship of kings” came to the Persians from the Medes.

⁶⁴ **Wiesehöfer** 2005, p. 53.

⁶⁵ Schmitt 1977, p. 386.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ See e.g. **Grayson, A. K.** 2002. Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC (to 1115 BC), The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods, Volume 1 (=RIMA 1). Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, A.0.78.7, l. 1, p. 248.

⁶⁸ See e.g. *Ibid.*, A.0.78.24, l. 7, p. 275; A.0.78.13, l. 3, p. 257.

⁶⁹ See e.g. *Ibid.*, A.0.78.39, l. 3, p. 289.

⁷⁰ **Sazonov, V.** 2012. Die mittelassyrischen, universalistischen Königstitel und Epitheta Tukultī-Ninūrtas I. (1242–1206). – Identities and Societies in the Ancient East-Mediterranean Regions: Comparative Approaches. Henning Graf Reventlow Memorial Volume. Alter Orient und Altes Testament 390, Thomas R. Kämmerer (ed.). Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, p. 257.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

- king Šarkališarri (2217–2193).⁷² Later it became a title *par excellence* for the Iranian rulers (Middle Persian *šāhān šāh*, New Persian *šāhanšāh*).⁷³
4. *xšāyaθiya Pārsaīy* (“king of Persia”) – a rare title in the Old Persian royal inscriptions, appearing besides DB only in one minor inscription⁷⁴ which copies the beginning of DB⁷⁵ and in the two aforementioned suspicious inscriptions from Hamadan⁷⁶. It is probably impossible to follow the probable models for this title, as this kind of combination (designation of a ruler + topographical name) is widespread.⁷⁷
5. *xšāyaθiya dahyūnām* (“king of countries”)⁷⁸ – the title was used by all of the Achaemenid kings who left behind royal inscriptions, starting with Darius I.⁷⁹ It has only rare counterparts in Mesopotamia as *šar mātāti šarḫu* (“the glorious king of lands”) in Akkadian, appearing during the reigns of the Neo-Assyrian kings Aššurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III.⁸⁰ A version of this title, *xšāyaθiya dahyūnām vispazanā* is comparable to the Akkadian titles *šar kibrātim arba'im* and *šar kiššatim* in the demand for world dominion.⁸¹

11 /.../ vašnā : Auramazd

12 āha : adam : xšāyaθiya : amiy : Auramazdā : xšačam : manā : frābara⁸²

§5 1.11–2. /.../ By the favor of Ahuramazda I am King; Ahuramazda bestowed the kingdom upon me.⁸³

⁷² The name can be translated as “king of all the kings.”

⁷³ Wiesehöfer 2005, p. 53f.

⁷⁴ DBa.

⁷⁵ DB 1.1–11.

⁷⁶ AmH, AsH, see Kent 1950, p. 116.

⁷⁷ E.g. titles like LUGAL KIŠ, LUGAL TIN.TIR^{ki} from Mesopotamia.

⁷⁸ This title also has some variants, Schmitt 1977, p. 388: “(a) *xšāyaθiya dahyūnām vispazanānām* „König der Länder, (die) alle Stämme (umfassen)”; /.../ (b) *xšāyaθiya dahyūnām paruzanānām* „König der Länder, (die) viele Stämme (umfassen)”; /.../ (c) *xšāyaθiya dahyūnām tayaišām parūnām* „König der vielen Länder”.”

⁷⁹ Nagel, W. 1975. Herrscher. § 9. Könige der Länder (Achämeniden). – Reallexikon der Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie 4, p. 356.

⁸⁰ Kienast 1979, p. 358.

⁸¹ Schmitt 1977, p. 388.

⁸² Kent 1950, p. 117.

⁸³ Kent 1950, p. 117.

This is a typical formula of the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, probably influenced by Mesopotamian ideology.⁸⁴ The Achaemenid divine investiture contained the idea of a king chosen by the top deity of the pantheon which is similar to the Mesopotamian idea of sacral kingship.⁸⁵ In the Mesopotamian inscriptions, the king was similarly chosen by the most prominent gods of the pantheon – Enlil, Marduk and Aššur. This kind of investiture appears in Mesopotamia already in the third millennium. Lugalzagesi, the king of Uruk was granted the kingship of the land by Enlil in a similar manner in the 24th century:

- 36) u₄ en-líl
- 37) lugal-kur-kur-ra-ke₄
- 38) lugal-zà-ge-si
- 39) nam-lugal-
- 40) kalam-ma
- 41) e-na-sum-ma-a⁸⁶

i 36–37) When the god Enlil, king of all lands,

i 38–41) gave to Lugal-zage-si the kingship of the land⁸⁷

In this text the Sumerian title *lugal-kur-kur-ra* (“king of all the lands”) appears. In the Sumerian texts it was used as a title of the gods Enlil and An. The title could be a distant predecessor of the Old Persian title *xšāyaθiya dahyūnām* (“king of countries”).

The Behistun inscription is illustrated with a relief depicting a life-sized Darius with his foot on the prostrate Gaumata and attended by two servants and nine figures with their hands tied and ropes around their neck, representing the conquered peoples. Also appearing in the scene is a figure within the winged disk, handing Darius the ring of kingship. The relief has similarities with earlier Mesopotamian depictions of victorious royalty. Various rock reliefs and other pictorial representations have been suggested as the models for the Darius relief. For example, the Sar-i Pul relief of the king Anubanini from ca. the late third millennium is the most obvious example in the vicinity.⁸⁸ The motif of the king placing his foot upon a prostrate enemy,

⁸⁴ **Gnoli, G.** 1988. Babylonian Influences on Iran. – Encyclopædia Iranica. <<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/babylonia-ii>>, (24.09.2012).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ **Frayne** 2008, E.1.14.20.1, p. 436.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ **Westenholz, J. G.** 2000. The King, the Emperor, and the Empire. Continuity and Discontinuity of Royal Representation in Text and Image. – The Heirs of Assyria. Proceedings of the Opening Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project. Held

the pose of the bound enemies, as well as the king being offered the ring of kingship on the Behistun monument might have been directly borrowed from the Sar-i Pul relief.⁸⁹ The Sar-i Pul relief, in turn, might have been influenced by earlier Mesopotamian prototypes.⁹⁰ The Victory Stele of Narām-Su'en⁹¹ has also been suggested as a possible model for the Darius relief. On the stele, Narām-Su'en's foot is also placed upon the enemy and he is pictured larger than the other human actors, as is Darius on the Behistun relief. Joan Goodnick Westenholz has suggested that Darius might have seen the Narām-Su'en stele with his own eyes, as it was plundered and brought to Susa, and was probably still standing there in his days, among the other Akkadian stelae.⁹² The Neo-Assyrian prototypes have also been considered important influences for the style of the Behistun relief.⁹³ Margaret Cool Root considers the Neo-Assyrian stelae and palace reliefs to be the possible influences for the Behistun relief.⁹⁴

5. The Inscription of Artaxerxes II at Susa A (A²Sa)

The trilingual (Old Persian, Elamite, Akkadian) inscription of the late Achaemenid period king Artaxerxes II (404–359) commemorates the building of a palace:

3 /.../ imam : apadāna : Dārayavauš : apan^ayākama : ak

4 unaš : ab^ayapara : upā : Artaxšačām : n^ayākama : +++++ : vašnā : AM :
Anahata : utā : Mithra : imam : apadāna : adam : akunām : AM : A

in Tvärminne, Finland, October 8–11, 1998, Melammu Symposia 1, ed. by Sanno Aro, R.M. Whiting. Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Corpus Project, p. 122. The Sar-i Pul relief is located on the same road from Babylon to Ecbatana.

⁸⁹ **Root, M. C.** 1979. The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire. *Textes et Mémoires*, Volume IX. Acta Iranica 19. Leiden: E. J. Brill, pp. 199–201.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 199: “It is probably true that the planners of the Behistun relief derived the motif of the king placing one foot upon a prostrate enemy directly from the Sar-i Pul relief of Annubanini. The appearance of the motif at Sar-i Pul may, in turn, be due to the influence of a series of Akkadian and Ur III monuments which display the same motif of the king placing his foot on prostrate, living, captive enemy in a symbolic gesture of supremacy.”

⁹¹ However, one thing that Darius and Narām-Su'en did not have in common was divine status. The Achaemenid kings were not deified, nor were they of divine origin (cf. **Schmitt, R.** 1983. Achaemenid Dynasty – *Encyclopædia Iranica*.

<<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/achaemenid-dynasty>>, (24.09.2012)).

⁹² **Westenholz** 2000, p. 122.

⁹³ **Root** 1979, p. 200.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 202–210.

5 nah^ata : utā : Miθra : mām : pātuv : hacā : vispā : gastā : upā : imam : tyā : akunām : mā : vijanātiy : mā : vināθayātiy⁹⁵

This palace Darius my great-great-grandfather built; later under Artaxerxes my grandfather it was burned; by the favor of Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mithra, this palace I built. May Ahuramazda, Anahita, and Mithra protect me from all evil, and that which I have built may they not shatter nor harm.⁹⁶

In the inscriptions starting from Artaxerxes II (404–359), a triad of gods appears instead of only Ahura Mazda. Scholars have usually interpreted Artaxerxes II's inclusion of Anāhitā and Mithra to his inscriptions as an abrupt change in the religious policies of the Achaemenids.⁹⁷ In the Darius inscription of Behistun, the actions of the king were brought into life by the favor of Ahura Mazda. However, in the inscriptions of Artaxerxes II⁹⁸, three gods are invoked. In no way can this be interpreted as a development from monotheism towards polytheism, as Darius mentions other gods already in the Behistun inscription.⁹⁹ This could more likely be a sign of the increased transcendence of Ahura Mazda as proposed by William W. Malandra.¹⁰⁰ In Malandra's interpretation, Ahura Mazda had become a *deus otiosus*, a god whose level of transcendence was too high to actively participate in everyday religious concerns.¹⁰¹ So the inclusion of Anāhitā and Mithra in this inscription could be based on the need to support the royal ideology with gods who took a more active part in human affairs. This development has its similarities with the usually abstract and inactive role of the sky god An in the Mesopotamian religion. An had become a *deus otiosus* while Enlil and Enki/Ea remained

⁹⁵ Kent 1950, p. 154.

⁹⁶ Kent 1950, p. 154.

⁹⁷ Jacobs, B. 2006. Anahita. – Iconography of Deities and Demons in the Ancient Near East. Electronic Pre-Publications. <<http://www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/idd/prepublication.php>>, p. 1 (26.09.2012).

⁹⁸ Also in the inscriptions of Artaxerxes III (359–338).

⁹⁹ Cf. Frye 1984, p. 120f.: “Both the followers of Zoroaster and the Achaemenids concentrated their worship on the great god Ahura Mazda and both did not deny the existence of other deities.”

¹⁰⁰ Malandra 1983, p. 47.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* About *deus otiosus* see Eliade, M.; Sullivan, L. 1987. *Deus Otiosus*. – The Encyclopedia of Religion. Volume 4, [Conc – Ecol], Mircea Eliade, editor in chief. New York: Macmillan; London: Collier Macmillan.

active figures in the Mesopotamian religion and mythology.¹⁰² However, these parallels cannot be taken too far, as there is absolutely no proof that the example of An had anything to do with the changing role of Ahura Mazdā in the religion of the Achaemenids.

The parallel of Ahura Mazdā with the Mesopotamian deities Enlil, Marduk and Aššur has been noted above. Another possible parallel with Mesopotamian religion could be found in the divine pairings of gods. As the Mesopotamian royalty had tight connections with divine pairings such as Enlil-Ninlil, Aššur-Ninlil (Ishtar) and Marduk-Zarpanitu, the emergence of Anāhitā in the Achaemenid inscriptions (to pair Ahura Mazdā) during the reign of Artaxerxes II could have been introduced through the Mesopotamian influence.¹⁰³

Anāhitā and Mithra require closer examination in connection with the Mesopotamian influences, as there are some recognisable similarities with some Mesopotamian deities. In the detection of possible influences, it should be kept in mind that religious influences are never unambiguous in topics such as the Achaemenid religion. The absence and imbalance of sources can never lead to exhaustive conclusions or a clear determination of the influences. Despite this, it can be stated that the religion during the Achaemenids was essentially syncretistic. Richard N. Frye lists the major elements of the fusion:

Three general factors can be singled out as the background for discussion about the religion of the Achaemenids, first the general Iranian beliefs and practices inherited from Indo-Iranian ancestors, second the message of Zoroaster grafted onto, or mixed with, the former, and finally ancient Near Eastern religions with temples, priests and ancient practices. In time, under the empire the third factor obviously grew in importance /.../¹⁰⁴

The Mithra and Anāhitā of the Achaemenids seem to be examples of this threefold fusion. As this article focuses on the Mesopotamian influences, the argumentation is mainly connected with the third basis layer of the Achaemenid religion suggested by Frye.

¹⁰² Enlil and Enki eventually lost their prominence to Marduk in the theology of the Babylonian creation epic, *Enūma eliš*.

¹⁰³ **Panaino, A.** 2000. The Mesopotamian Heritage of Achaemenian Kingship. – The Heirs of Assyria. Proceedings of the Opening Symposium of the Assyrian and Babylonian Intellectual Heritage Project. Held in Tvärminne, Finland, October 8–11, 1998, *Melammu Symposia* 1, ed. by Sanno Aro, R.M. Whiting. Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Corpus Project, p. 36.

¹⁰⁴ **Frye** 1984, p. 121.

Affirmation of the possible introduction of the Anāhitā cult by Artaxerxes II could be found in the works of classical authors. Berossos, the Babylonian priest of Marduk, reports through a quotation of Clement of Alexandria¹⁰⁵ that Artaxerxes, the son of Darius (II), introduced the adoration of anthropomorphic figures to the Persians, set up the statues of Aphrodite Anaitis in Babylon, and demanded their worship from the Susians, Ecbatanians, Persians and Bactrians and from Damascus and Sardis.¹⁰⁶ A contrasting remark is made by Herodotus, who describes the Persian customs: “The erection of statues, temples, and altars is not accepted practice among them, and anyone who does such thing is considered a fool, because, presumably, the Persian religion is not anthropomorphic like the Greek”.¹⁰⁷ So it seems that Artaxerxes II introduced a new trait to the traditionally non-iconographic Achaemenid religion. Taking into account the Achaemenid inscriptions and classical sources, it could be concluded that the inspiration for the images of Anāhitā came from outside the Iranian culture, probably in the figure of the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ishtar.¹⁰⁸ The similarities also appear in the description of the garments of Arədwī Sūra Anāhitā¹⁰⁹, which could be based on the observation of a cult image.¹¹⁰ It is known that Inanna/Ishtar was also elaborately dressed for worship.¹¹¹ The Mesopotamian influences are also noticed by Herodotus, who says that the cult of Uranian Aphrodite was learned from the Assyrians and Arabians.¹¹² The Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar also is a probable influence on the seals, rings and tablets depicting Anāhitā.¹¹³

¹⁰⁵ Proptrepticus V, 65.2–3, for translation see **Kuhrt, A.** 2007. *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*. New York: Routledge, pp. 566–567.

¹⁰⁶ However, the excavations have not revealed any statues of the Persian deities and the identification of Aphrodite Anaitis with Anāhitā could be problematic (**Brosius, M.** 2006. *The Persians: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, pp. 66–67).

¹⁰⁷ Herodotus I. 131.

¹⁰⁸ **Panaino** 2000, p. 37; Cf. **Malandra** 1983, p. 118.

¹⁰⁹ Described in Yasht 5 sentences 126–129; see **Malandra** 1983, pp. 129–130 for translation.

¹¹⁰ **Malandra** 1983, p. 18.

¹¹¹ See **Leemans, W. F.** 1952. *Ishtar of Lagaba and her Dress*. Leiden: Brill. About Inanna’s garments see also the Sumerian narrative “Inanna’s Descent to Netherworld” (ETCSL c. 1.4.1.: **Black, J.A., Cunningham G., Ebeling J., Flückiger-Hawker E., Robson E., Taylor J., and Zólyomi G.**, *The Electronic Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>), Oxford 1998– .

¹¹² Herodotus I. 131. However, in the same paragraph Herodotus equates Aphrodite with Persian Mitra, which is clearly a mistake.

¹¹³ **Briant** 2002, pp. 253–254.

Mithra was identified with the Mesopotamian sun-god Šamaš. Though the Iranians had their own sun-god Hvar Khšaēta (“the Radiant Sun”) in the Avesta, Mithra was equated with Šamaš and gained prominence as a solar god.¹¹⁴ Mithra and Šamaš were very similar in the first millennium.¹¹⁵ Both were solar deities and in the Mesopotamian calendar¹¹⁶, the seventh month (*Tašrītu*) was dedicated to Šamaš. In the Iranian calendar the seventh month (*Bāgayādiš*) was dedicated to Mithra.¹¹⁷ Like Šamaš, who is accompanied by companions Bunene and Mišaru (“Justice”), Mithra in the tenth Yasht is accompanied by a retinue of the deities Sraoša (“Obedience”) and Rašnu (“Judge”).¹¹⁸ The later Mithraic mysteries in the Roman Empire most probably had a connection with Iranian Mithra, but the exact nature of the relation remains open.¹¹⁹

6. Conclusion

In conclusion it could be stated that many elements of the Old Persian royal inscriptions are very similar to their Mesopotamian predecessors and in all probability were influenced by them. In the context of the present work, the topics reflected in the Achaemenid inscriptions, especially the relations between the ruler and god(s) and the royal titulary, had their antecedents in the distant history of the third millennium Mesopotamia. The core features of the Mesopotamian royal ideology and religion always showed signs of utmost durability. This is proven by the fact that elements of Mesopotamian culture survive in the artefacts of a people with a completely different ethnic, linguistic and religious background, such as the royal inscriptions of the Achaemenid Persians. Only a fraction of the possible Mesopotamian influences on the Old Persian royal ideology and religion were discussed in this article. Parts of some exemplary Achaemenid royal inscriptions were analysed and compared to the earlier Mesopotamian royal inscriptions in an

¹¹⁴ **Boyce, M.** 1982. *A History of Zoroastrianism, Volume Two: Under the Achaemenians.* Leiden, Köln: E.J. Brill, p. 28.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Babylonian calendar was used throughout the Achaemenid empire (**Frye** 1984, p. 133).

¹¹⁷ **Gnoli** 1988.

¹¹⁸ **Puhvel, J.** 1996. *Võrdlev mütoloogia. Eesti mõttelugu* 12. Tartu: Ilmamaa, p. 109.

¹¹⁹ **Jong, A. F. de** 1999. *Mithras. – Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible.* Edited by Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Pieter W. van der Horst. Second Extensively Revised Edition. Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill; Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 579.

attempt to ascertain possible influences. A more detailed view is possible on many of the topics, as the current observation attempted to show.

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