

Nebuchadnezzar, King of Assyria. Rewriting Ancient Mesopotamian History in Fiction

Davide Nadali
Sapienza Università di Roma

NABUCCO
*O prodi miei, seguitemi
S'apre alla mente il giorno;
Ardo di fiamma insolita,
Re dell'Assiria io torno!*

T. Solera, *Nabucco*, Part IV, Scene II

*Nebuchadnezzar, Sardanapalus, or Ninus himself,
for we don't know his actual identity, but the Assyrians' monarch,
in any case, sets foot on the banks of the Seine.*

L'Illustration, 1847
(Quoted by Bohrer 2003, 66.)

The depiction of the Ancient Orient, in literature and in images, began in Europe well before the actual discoveries of the ancient Near Eastern civilisations that once populated the regions of Mesopotamia. This imaginative repertoire of accounts and paintings sought to represent the cities, buildings, and people of the ancient Near East according to the canon of invention by adopting and re-interpreting Greek historians and the Bible as the most authoritative sources. Moreover, these reconstructions, although built upon clichés and stereotypes,

had longevity since they were in part used and adapted by archaeologists themselves immediately after the discoveries of the ancient past of Assyria in northern Iraq in 1842. It seems that the strong and well-anchored repertoire of imaginative images of the ancient Orient persisted, contrary to archaeological data (sometimes misinterpreted owing to the inaccuracy of archaeological methods at the time), and were, in some way, necessary to make the ruins of the cities of ancient Assyria visible and understandable to 19th century European audiences. The objective was now different but worked through the same system of references and representations to try to balance reality and invention.

The creation of stage sets for the operas which deal with stories and characters of the ancient Orient faced the same problems and therefore solutions, particularly in a period in which nothing was known of the forms of ancient cities and buildings: for that reason, the city of Babylon and the palace of Queen Semiramis were conceived by the mixing of Egyptian and Persian architectural features, even inserting Indian elements and details of the Ottoman architecture and fashion (in fact this was the Orient known by stage designers of 19th century Europe)¹.

Something changed after 1842, when the archaeological exploration of ancient Assyrian cities began with the French and British discoveries at the cities of Khorsabad and Nineveh, and the Assyrian galleries (with their displays of Assyrian and Mesopotamian sculptures) were opened in the Musée du Louvre and the British Museum. The quick diffusion, thanks to the publication of articles and pictures in popular newspapers and journals of the period, and the notoriety of the accounts by the British A. H. Layard², allowed the stage designers of the second half of the 19th century to glean materials and references for a more accurate and reliable representation of events involving, for example, Semiramis and Nebuchadnezzar. These were two of the

¹ See Nadali 2013.

² Bohrer 2003, 132-167.

most representative cases: respectively the subjects of two important operas by Gioachino Rossini (*Semiramide*, 1823) and Giuseppe Verdi (*Nabucco*, 1842).

In particular, the opera *Nabucco* by Giuseppe Verdi represents a very interesting moment in the change of stage sets from its opening at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan on the 9th March 1842, the same year as the first archaeological explorations by the French consul Paul-Emile Botta started in the site of Kuyunjik in northern Iraq. However, this production of *Nabucco* in Milan was too early for the archaeological works in Assyria which only started at the end of 1842, and the first news of the discoveries of the ruins of the ancient Assyrian cities and sculptures of the royal palaces of the Assyrian kings reached Europe after Paul-Emile Botta left Kuyunjik to begin the excavations in the village of Khorsabad, north-east from Kuyunjik, in the spring of 1843³.

It has already been observed how the stage sets for the later productions of *Nabucco* were positively affected by the discoveries of the ancient Assyrian past⁴: elements of Assyrian culture, in particularly the large bull colossi and the bas-reliefs, were immediately perceived as the best elements for the precise connotation of the scenes, since they referred to an ancient Orient finally known through its original features. If the ancient Orient was at first seen and mediated through ancient Egypt and Persia, it could finally have its own personality and systems of reference, although Egyptianizing and Persian style attributes and features would continue to be used in the construction of the places of Queen Semiramis and King Nebuchadnezzar. Indeed, if we want to be philologically precise, even the use of the recently discovered ruins of ancient Assyria was inappropriate since Assyrian sculptures, jewellery, and costumes were in fact adapted to represent Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon.

³ Bohrer 2003, 71. Indeed, the discovery of the Assyrian palace and sculptures in Khorsabad was clearly described by Botta in letters he sent to Jules Mohl who published the correspondence in the *Journal Asiatique* as *Lettres de M. Botta sur ses découvertes à Khorsabad, près de Ninive* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1845). See Larsen 1996, 24-25.

⁴ Nadali 2010-11.

This confusion or, again, the mixing of different styles and cultures created a new hybrid subject, with crossed references to the ancient Mesopotamian world incorporating both Assyria and Babylonia: however, this interchangeable possibility was probably not so strange for both the stage designers and the audience that became familiar to these new representations which progressively (although not completely) substituted the Egyptian and Egyptianizing elements of the old (pre-1842) scenes.

The Italian poet Temistocle Solera (1815-1878) wrote the libretto of *Nabucco*: biblical references are explicit (each part of the libretto is preceded by a quotation of the prophet Jeremiah) and Solera used the original French tragedy *Nabuchodonosor* by Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornu (1836) as inspiration. A ballet built upon the same French text had already been staged at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan in 1838, four years before the first production of Verdi's *Nabucco*. However, the text by Solera, while depending strongly on the original French tragedy (they have similar plot and characters), introduces changes in the arrangement of the story and, as we will see, Solera interchanges Assyria for Babylonia.

Beyond the text by Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu, which sources did Solera use for the drafting of his *libretto*? Did he know the previous works entitled *Nabucco* which refer to the deeds of the ancient king of Babylon? If the Bible was undoubtedly a major source, why did Solera so often interchange Babylonia and Assyria?

As we have already noted, Solera's main source was the Bible⁵. In fact, many references to the Bible are clearly identifiable throughout the libretto, and some characters (differently, for example, from the French text of Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu) are created and modelled upon biblical figures: the figure of the High Priest Zaccaria recalls the main and authoritative prophets of the Old Testament (such as

⁵ Later, in 1879, Giuseppe Verdi himself would declare to Giulio Ricordi how the *libretto* of *Nabucco* by T. Solera immediately attracted his attention: «Mi rincasai e con gesto quasi violento, gettai il manoscritto sul tavolo, fermandomisi ritto in piedi davanti. Il fascicolo cadendo sul tavolo stesso si era aperto: senza saper come, i miei occhi fissano la pagina che stava a me innanzi, e mi si affaccia questo verso: 'Va', pensiero, sull'ali dorate'. Scorro i versi seguenti e ne ricevo una grande impressione, *tanto*

Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Daniel), with his influential role and his God-given ability to predict the future⁶.

In Part III, Scene V, after the famous chorus of the Jews along the river Euphrates («Va', pensiero, sull'ale dorate»), Zaccaria blames his people for the lament and curses the future of Babylon⁷:

ZACCARIA

Oh chi piange? Di femmine imbelli
Chi solleva lamenti all'Eterno?...
Oh, sorgete, angosciati fratelli,
Sul mio labbro favella il Signor.
Del futuro nel buio discerno...
Ecco rotta l'indegna catena!...
Piomba già sulla perfida arena
Del leone di Giuda il furor!
A posare sui cranî, sull'ossa
Qui verranno le jene, i serpenti,
Fra la polve dall'aure commossa
Un silenzio fatal regnerà!
Solo il gufo suoi tristi lamenti
Spiegherà quando viene la sera...
Niuna pietra ove sorse l'altiera
Babilonia allo stranio dirà!⁸

più che erano quasi una parafrasi della Bibbia, della cui lettura mi dilettao sempre («I went back home and with an almost violent gesture I threw the manuscript on the table, standing before it. The manuscript, falling on the table, opened: I do not know how, but my eyes stared at the page it was in front of me and this verse, 'Fly, thought, on wings of gold', immediately appeared to me. I scan the following verses and I am really impressed particularly *because they were nearly a paraphrase of the Bible* that I read with pleasure»). Emphasis mine. See the episode as registered by Pougin (1886, 63).

⁶ It has been suggested that the figure of Zaccaria might reflect, in role and temperament, the character of Moses in the opera *Mosé in Egitto* by G. Rossini (Petrobelli 1994). See also Ley 2010, 147-149.

⁷ When quoting the names of the characters, I have chosen to follow the Italian spelling when I refer to the *libretto* by Solera and the French one when I refer to the tragedy by Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu, accordingly.

⁸ T. Solera, *Nabucco*, Part III, Scene V: «Oh, who is it that weeps? Who is it raises lamentations, / as of timorous women, to the Everlasting? / Oh, rise up, brothers in anguish, / the Lord speaks from my lips. / In the obscurity of the future I see... / Behold, the shameful chains are broken! / The wrath of the Lion

His words find a nearly perfect parallel in the curses of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah:

«And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.

It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there.

But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there.»

(Isaiah 13:19-21)

«Babylon hath been a golden cup in the Lord's hand, that made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore the nations are mad.

Babylon is suddenly fallen and destroyed: howl for her; take balm for her pain, if so be she may be healed.»

(Jeremiah 51:7-8)

The role of Zaccaria, as High Priest with prophetic prerogatives and skills, is in fact unanimously acknowledged by his people:

TUTTI

Oh, qual foco nel veglio balena!
Sul suo labbro favella il Signor...⁹

of Judah / already falls upon the treacherous sand! / To settle upon the skulls, upon the bones, / hither come the hyenas and the snakes; / midst the dust raised by the wind / a doomed silence shall reign! / The owl alone will spread abroad / its sad lament when evening falls... / Not a stone will be left to tell the stranger / where once proud Babylon stood!».

⁹ T. Solera, *Nabucco*, Part III, Scene V: «Oh, what a fire burns in the old man! / The Lord speaks through his lips!».

However, as we will see later, this undoubted reference to the Bible (almost a direct quotation) does not explain some incongruities in the libretto of the opera which are, on the contrary, absent from the French text.

Solera changes some other parts of the plot of the tragedy of Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu, concerning the relationships between Fenena and Ismaele, whose love story is slightly shortened and concentrated; again, other characters (Noemi; the women of the palace of Babylon; Manassès, Ismail's brother and ally of Abigaïl) are absent and one of the most incisive changes made by Solera concerns the role and temperament of Abigaille who, since the beginning, contrasts her sister Fenena and acts against the authority of Nabucco, king of Babylon¹⁰.

In fact, Abigaille in Solera's text, more than in the French tragedy, is a main protagonist of the story being a rival of her sister Fenena, since she also loves Ismaele and pretends to claim the power as the favourite daughter of the king of Babylon. In the opera, the sentimental rivalry between the two sisters is a classical situation occurring between two sopranos: the political rivalry increases and inflames the opposition between the two women, with the final Abigaille's sentence to death of her sister, the real daughter of the king of Babylon and, for that reason, the favourite. In the French tragedy by Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu, in the last scene of the Act Four, Phénenna is killed by her sister (then, thanks to divine will she returns to life) and Abigaïl is in turn killed by Nabuchodonosor himself with his sword. In the text by Solera, Fenena is saved by the sudden arrival of Nabucco before being sacrificed by the Babylonian priests and Abigaille commits suicide by swallowing poison.

In the opera by Verdi and Solera, Abigaille is a heroine with a great thirst for power: from her condition of slavery she became the queen of Babylon with the support of both the priests of the god Belo and the

¹⁰ In the French tragedy, *Nabuchodonosor*, Abigaïl first saves her younger sister Phénenna who was prisoner of the Jews. Then, Abigaïl's lust for power transforms the love for her sister into hate up to condemn her to death together with the Jews, after she usurped Nabuchodonosor's throne.

soldiers of the army. In particular, it seems that the figure of Abigaille, as shaped by the words of Solera and strengthened by the music of Verdi, recalls the temperament and behaviour of the Assyrian Queen Semiramis. This parallel seems particularly significant since Abigaille, although in Babylon and claiming the power of her father Nabucco, is named queen of Assyria.

Of course, the reference to Semiramis reflects European feelings towards the ancient Assyrian queen, and, more generally, women of the East: her description implies moral judgement on sexual behaviour and despotic behaviour¹¹. In particular, Abigaille's warrior tendencies are pointed out (maybe with tacit allusions to possible sexual intercourse with the soldiers of her army, as is often also said of Semiramis)¹²: the support of the soldiers seems to be really important for her career of leader and queen of the city. This aspect can also be recognised in a passage of the text of Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu, when Abigaïl speaks to her sister, making clear the differences between their behaviours:

ABIGAÏL

Faible enfant, tu veux lutter contre moi? Mais tu ne sais donc pas que la tendresse de Nabuchodonosor faisait toute ta puissance?... qui te soutiendra, qui te défendra maintenant?... le peuple? t'a-t-il jamais vue descendre jusqu'à lui? Ou, par un sourire, une faveur, l'as-tu jamais élevé jusqu'à toi? Non... Toujours enfermée dans ton palais... toujours entourée de tes femmes, t'es-tu jamais montrée aux soldats de notre père?... non... Moi, je suis connue du peuple qui m'a vue souvent le défendre et le proté-

¹¹ On how the figure of Queen Semiramis has been transformed and transposed in Europe since the 18th century, see the detailed analysis and considerations by Asher-Greve 2007. On Semiramis as the main character in theatre and opera since the 16th century, see Ranzini 2012. See also Pinnock (2006, 233-248) and Seymour 2013.

¹² As reported by the Greek historian Ctesias (4th century BC) who, inventing the idea of the "Oriental Court", says that the Assyrian Queen Semiramis was used to physically eliminate all those soldiers with whom she had sexual relations. See Lanfranchi 2010, 42.

ger: de l'armée qui m'a vue combattre avec elle: j'aurai donc pour moi le peuple et l'armée... que te restera-t-il, à toi?¹³

Phénenna is devoted to palace life, sharing (wasting, in Abigail's opinion) her time with the women of the palace, as in fact happens in Scene II of Act II when the script expressly remarks that: «au lever du rideau, toutes ces femmes sont gracieusement étendues sur des divans ou sur de riches tapis. *A la mollesse de leur pose, à la richesse de leurs costumes, on reconnaît les femmes de Nabuchodonosor.* Des esclaves font brûler des parfums à leurs pieds»¹⁴, a very typical oriental scene according to the eyes and feelings of Europe at that time, full of prejudices and implicit judgments, as is clearly pointed out by the description of sluggishness of their poses.

Also in the text of Solera, Fenena is a weak woman who, having fallen in love with the Jewish Ismaele, converts herself to Judaism and frees the Jewish prisoners of Babylon. This act is harshly reproached by the High Priest of Belo, the god of Babylon, and for that reason Abigail is deserving of power:

GRAN SACERDOTE

Orrenda scena
S'è mostrata agli occhi miei!
[...]
Empia è Fenena.
Manda liberi gli Ebrei;
Questa turba maledetta
Chi frenar omai potrà?
Il potere a te s'aspetta...¹⁵

¹³ A. Anicet-Bourgeois and F. Cornu, *Nabuchodonosor*, Act II, Scene XIII.

¹⁴ Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ T. Solera, *Nabucco*, Part II, Scene I: «My eyes have witnessed/a terrible sight! / [...] Fenena is a wicked woman, she is setting the Hebrews free! / Who now can check/this accursed rabble? / Power awaits you...».

When dealing with this passage of power, from Nabucco (through Fenena) to Abigaille (by means of an insurrection supported and sided by the priests and soothsayers), Solera always refers to Assyria as the region and land claimed by Nabucco and his usurper daughter Abigaille. In fact, the words “Babylon” or “Babylonians” occur only three times in all of the text: it is interesting to notice that, although the plot is set in the city of Babylon and, at least once, Nabucco expressly addresses the Babylonians, the name of the city is never associated with the concept of king and kingship. Nabucco, for example, is never named, by himself or by others, as king of Babylon or Babylonia. On the contrary, Solera always prefers to refer to Assyria: the terms Assyria and Assyrian(s) occur fifteen times in the text and this is the preferred wording when Solera needs to identify the royal power of either Nabucco or his daughters. Both the Jews and the Babylonians refer to Assyria as the originating region of the power of Nabucco.

The opera begins with the desperate shout of the Jews who fear that Nabucco «il rege d’Assiria» (the King of Assyria) has fallen on them: in response, the virgins invoke God to destroy «d’Assiria le schiere» (the legions of Assyria). Immediately afterwards, Ismaele arrives and tells that Nabucco, «dell’Assiria il re» (the King of Assyria), is entering the city. As a consequence of the fact that Nabucco is king of Assyria, his daughters are named as Assyrians: Fenena is «prima fra le assire» (this first among Assyrian damsels) in the words of the High Priest Zaccaria. Even Abigaille addresses her sister Fenena as «assira donna» (Assyrian maid); and Abigaille herself is claimed as queen of Assyria by both the high priest of Babylon and the king Nabucco himself:

GRAN SACERDOTE

Eccelsa donna, che d’Assiria il fato
Reggi, le preci ascolta
De’ fidi tuoi¹⁶.

¹⁶ T. Solera, *Nabucco*, Part III, Scene I: «Peerless lady, ruler of / Assyria’s fate, hear the prayers / of your faithful subjects.»

and

NABUCCO

Te regina, te signora
Chiami pur la gente assira¹⁷.

Although unbalanced, it might be stated that the definition of Assyria and Babylonia is used interchangeably, but it must be pointed out that Assyria is always linked to the power and authority of the king.

In particular, this exchange is much more frequent in the text by Solera than the original French tragedy¹⁸: if the sources used by Solera are taken into consideration – the French tragedy *Nabuchodonosor* by Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu, staged at Paris in 1836, the ballet by Antonio Cortesi, staged at Teatro alla Scala in Milan in 1838, and the Bible – what inspired Solera to this rewriting of the story of Nebuchadnezzar, changing him from the king of Babylon to the king of Assyria?

As has already been stated, this “confusion” might also be traced to the sources (the Bible included)¹⁹ used by Solera for the writing of his *libretto*: it also occurs in previous works, entitled *Nabucco*, where the king of ancient Babylon is referred to as the king of Assyria, even if the plot is clearly set in the palace of Babylon and in the celebrated Hanging Gardens of Babylon²⁰.

¹⁷ T. Solera, *Nabucco*, Part III, Scene III: «Then let the people of Assyria / call you lady and queen.»

¹⁸ In fact, the text by Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu refers only once to «the kingdom of Assyria», a definition used by Abigaïl when she claims the throne of her sister claiming that she is «la souveraine du royaume d'Assyrie» (Act II, Scene XII). It seems interesting to point out that this refers to Abigaïl, maybe an implicit reference to the legendary figure of Semiramis, queen of Assyria, also in the French tragedy (as it was previously argued for the figure of Abigaille in Solera's text). In fact, Anicet-Bourgeois and Cornu regularly refer to Babylon (the city), Babylonia (the region), and Babylonians (the people) in their text: Nabuchodonosor is in fact labelled as King of Babylon and his daughter, Phénenna, is called «la Babylonienne» (the Babylonian).

¹⁹ As, for example, for what concerns the prophecy by Isaiah (13-14) where the fall of Babylon may refer to the fate of Nineveh (Dalley 2008: 32), or the reference in the Book of Chronicles of the deportation of the Judean king Manasseh by Esarhaddon to Babylon that must be read as Nineveh (Dalley 1994, 47; Van De Mieroop 2004, 1). Lastly, see Dalley 2013, 107-126.

²⁰ Among the previous works, see *Il Nabucdonosorre* by Gaetano Polidori (1807), *Nabucco* by Giuseppe Urbano Pagani-Cesa (1816), and the best known (probably also by Solera and Verdi) *Nabucco* by Giovan Battista Nicolini (1816, published for the first time in London in 1819), where the figure of Nabucco, king of Babylon, is reinterpreted, in accordance with the contemporary period, as an alter ego

It is interesting to note that it appears that these works, dealing with the history and life of Nebuchadnezzar, were affected by the tradition and transmission of Greek historians (from Herodotus onwards), who often misplaced Babylon and Nineveh, and indeed in some way founded the legend that the city of Babylon had Assyrian origins thanks to the building activities carried out by the Assyrian Queen Semiramis. In particular, the accounts by Diodorus of Sicily and Ctesias – whose *Persika* are indeed mostly known thanks to their citation by Diodorus – precisely explain and show this confusion between the two regions and cities of ancient Mesopotamia, saying that Babylon was built by the Assyrian Semiramis. According to a legend widely diffused in the Hellenistic world, Semiramis was also responsible for the legendary Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Diodorus of Sicily gives a different version admitting that Semiramis did not plan the Hanging Gardens, but that they were built by a «Syrian king» (*History*, II.10.1), information also reported by Quintus Curtius Rufus (*History of Alexander*, V. 1.35).

In any case, they were not the result of the building activity of a Babylonian king: indeed, only Berossos, a Babylonian priest living in the 4th/3rd century BC, states with certainty that the Hanging Gardens were built by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylonia trying to readjust the false, but by then widespread, Greek tradition that the main works, buildings, and evocative hanging gardens of Babylon were the result of the intervention of the (legendary) queens of Assyria Semiramis and Nitocris²¹.

Recently, the original location of the Hanging Gardens has been questioned and debated. This originates with the consideration that Herodotus does not mention them in his description of Babylon,

of either Napoleon (in Nicolini's tragedy) or the Habsburg Kaiser Franz I (in Pagani-Cesa's text). Other times, the text refers to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and the presence in Babylon of the Prophet Daniel (Polidori's text), with Nebuchadnezzar's name used for Nabonidus. In general, on the genesis of many poems and tragedies centred on King Nebuchadnezzar as an allegorical figure of European history and politics, before the creation of the libretto by Solera, see the detailed reconstruction by Ley 2010.

²¹ Haas 1999; Bichler and Rollinger 2005, 202-206; Seymour 2008, 104-109; Rollinger 2008, 374-377; De Breucker 2011.

and takes into account the observation by S. Dalley that the Persians diverted the river Euphrates when they captured the city²². Thus it seems that the argument of the existence of the Hanging Gardens in Babylon, referred to by Ctesias (and so Diodorus), Berossos, Strabo, and Curtius Rufus, is not valid and may have its origins in the above-mentioned confusion between Nineveh (Assyria) and Babylon (Babylonia)²³. This confusion probably derived from Mesopotamian sources themselves, since it was quite common to label other Mesopotamian cities as “Babylon”, as happens with the city of Nineveh, the so-called “Old Babylon”²⁴. In the Assyrian period, particularly during the reign of Sennacherib, the rewriting of the Epic of the Creation saw the national Assyrian god Aššur chosen as the victorious hero, substituting the Babylonian god Marduk²⁵.

Thus, exchange and confusion was also frequent in ancient times, and perhaps Greek historians might have been affected by this way of writing the history of the cities favoured by the Assyrians and Babylonians. However, if the ancient cuneiform sources give Babylon predominant importance (since it becomes the name for other cities, even for Nineveh), Greek historians seem to reverse the practice by giving more importance to Assyria, its kings, and its cities. Taking into consideration Ctesias (although his mistakes are clear), the absence of any reference to the Neo-Babylonian kings and kingdom is evident (differently from Herodotus who mentions Babylonian kings and queens after the Assyrian hegemony). In Ctesias’ opinion, a cultural continuity between the Assyrians, the Medes, and the Persians might be delineated, excluding the Babylonians (such an exclusion expresses Ctesias’ thought about the insignificant role of the Babylonian empire, motivated by the attribution of the foundation of Babylon to an Assyrian queen like Semiramis)²⁶.

²² Dalley 1994: 46; see also Bichler and Rollinger 2005.

²³ See in particular the studies by S. Dalley (1994; 2008) concerning the location of the Hanging Gardens at Nineveh, on the one hand, and the origin of the confusion between the two Mesopotamian cities, on the other.

²⁴ Van De Mierop 2004; Dalley 2008; 2013, 107-126.

²⁵ Dalley 1994, 49; Porter 1997.

²⁶ Lanfranchi 2010, 48; 2011: 195.

Looking through Solera's *libretto*, a pattern similar to the exchange made by Ctesias and other Greek historians can be recognised, with Assyria (the region) as the term for Babylon (the city): it is difficult to ascertain whether Solera used classical sources that, in fact, strongly affected the perception and vision of Babylon in the Europe of 18th and 19th centuries (starting from the several legends and texts dealing with both Semiramis and Nebuchadnezzar, as has already been noted)²⁷. Surely, given his education in literature and music, and his activity as poet and novelist, he must have been familiar with Greek and Latin texts. If Solera took historical information for his plot from both classical sources and the Bible, it seems he relied more on the tradition passed down by Greek historians (accepted also by other previous and contemporary authors), since the Bible is much more precise, at least in defining Nebuchadnezzar as the king of Babylon (with the exception of the Book of Judith where Nebuchadnezzar becomes king of Assyria and ruler of Nineveh)²⁸.

This fact would contradict the comment by Verdi who defined the libretto by Solera as a paraphrasing of the Bible. Another anecdote concerning how the Bible has been important and fundamental for the drafting of the libretto tells that Verdi told Solera to write the prophecy of Zaccaria in place of a duet between Fenena and Ismaele in the third act, saying:

«Chiusi a chiave l'uscio, mi misi la chiave in tasca, e tra il serio e il faceto dissi a Solera: 'Non sorti di qui se non hai scritto la profezia: eccoti la Bibbia, hai già le parole bell'e fatte'»²⁹.

Other reasons might explain this confusion and, probably, this was also due to the cultural milieu of the time when the history of the ancient Orient was filtered through indirect sources (albeit considered both direct and authoritative).

²⁷ See McCall 1998, 185-192.

²⁸ Dalley 1994, 47.

²⁹ «I locked the door, I put the key in my pocket, and speaking half in jest, I said to Solera: 'You do not get out of here before writing the prophecy: here's your Bible, you already have the words written for you'». See the anecdote as related in Pougin 1886, 66-67.

* * *

Despite the inconsistencies and the continuous confusion between Assyria and Babylon, by quoting Assyria and defining Nabucco as the king of Assyria, the *libretto* of Solera must have been seen as a great invention and a blessed coincidence by the stage designers. If at first they had to invent the places and buildings of the unknown ancient Babylon³⁰, later they could make use of the recent discoveries made by French and British archaeologists at the Assyrian cities of Khorsabad and Nineveh³¹. It was not Babylon, but what did it matter? The text described Nabucco as king of Assyria, and the discoveries in northern Iraq were just waiting to be used to build the perfect setting for the opera. The stage designers must have been delighted!

The rewriting of Mesopotamian history found its perfect realisation in fiction with an almost contemporary overlapping of words and pictures. In particular the case of the 1846 production of Verdi's *Nabucco* at Her Majesty's Theatre in the Haymarket in London where the title of the opera was changed into *Ninus, King of Assyria*³². Once the British archaeological discoveries had been publicly announced, and the Assyrian galleries in the British Museum had been opened, later staging must surely have benefitted from the new title and the king of Assyria (regardless if he were Nebuchadnezzar, Sardanapalus, or Ninus) really did set foot in London.

³⁰ At the time of the first staging of *Nabucco* in March of 1842 in Milan, nothing was known about the shape and nature of the ancient Near Eastern cities and palaces: stage designers were thus obliged to resort to imaginary pictures mixing Egyptian, Persian, Indian, and Ottoman elements.

³¹ See the stage scenes made by Filippo Peroni who introduced elements of the Assyrian architecture and sculptures for the representation of *Nabucco* in 1857, by which time the Assyrian antiquities were well-known to the audience. See the discussion in Nadali 2010-11.

³² Ley 2010: 228-230; Seymour 2013: 15.

Bibliography

- ASHER-GREVE, Julia M. 2007. "From 'Semiramis of Babylon' to 'Semiramis of Hammersmith'". In S. W. Holloway (ed.), *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd: 322-373.
- BICHLER, Reinhold and ROLLINGER, Robert 2005. "Die Hängenden Gärten zu Ninive – Die Lösung eines Rätsels?" in R. Rollinger (ed.), *Von Sumer bis Homer. Festschrift Manfred Schretter zum seinem 60. Geburtstag am 25. Februar 2004* (AOAT 325). Münster: Ugarit-Verlag: 153-218.
- BOHRER, Frederick N. 2003. *Orientalism and Visual Culture. Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Cambridge: University Press.
- DALLEY, Stephanie 1994. "Nineveh, Babylon and the Hanging Gardens: Cuneiform and Classical Sources Reconciled". *Iraq* 56: 45-58.
- DALLEY, Stephanie 2008. "Babylon as a Name for Other Cities Including Nineveh" in R. Biggs, J. Myers and M. T. Roth (eds.), *Proceedings of the 51st Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale Held at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago July 18-22, 2005* (SAOC 52). Chicago: the University of Chicago: 25-33.
- 2013. *The Mystery of the Hanging Garden of Babylon. An Elusive World Wonder Traced*. Oxford: University Press.
- De BREUCKER, Geert 2011. "Berossos between Tradition and Innovation" in K. Radner and E. Robson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*. Oxford: University Press: 637-657.
- HAAS, Volkert 1999. "Die literarische Rezeption Babylons von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart" in J. Renger (ed.), *Babylon. Focus mesopotamischer Geschichte, Wiege früher Gelehrsamkeit, Mythos in der Moderne. 2. Internationales Colloquium der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 24.-26. März 1998 in Berlin* (CDOG 2). Saarbrücken: Saarbrücker Druckerei und Verlag: 523-552.

- LANFRANCHI, Giovanni Battista 2010. "Greek Historians and the Memory of the Assyrian Court" in B. Jacobs and R. Rollinger (eds.), *Der Achämenidenhof / The Achaemenid Court. Akten des 2. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema »Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen«, Landgut Castelen bei Basel, 23.-25. Mai 2007*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz: 39-65.
- 2011. "Gli ΑΣΣΥΡΙΑΚΑ di Ctesia e la documentazione assira". In J. Wieshöfer, R. Rollinger and G. B. Lanfranchi (eds.), *Ktesias' Welt/Ctesias' World*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz: 175-223.
- LARSEN, Morgens Trolle 1996. *The Conquest of Assyria: Excavations in an Antique Land*. London: Routledge.
- LEY, Klaus 2010. *Latentes Agitieren: »Nabucco«, 1816-1842. Zu Giuseppe Verdis früher Erfolgsoper, ihren Prätexten, ihrem Modellcharakter*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- McCALL, Henrietta 1998. "Rediscovery and Aftermath" in S. Dalley (ed.), *The Legacy of Mesopotamia*. Oxford: University Press: 183-213.
- NADALI, Davide 2010-11. "L'archeologia di Nabucco: l'Oriente antico in scena". *Studi Verdiani* 22: 73-88.
- 2013. "Invented space: Discovering Near Eastern Architecture Through Imaginary Representations and Constructions" in L. Feliu *et al.* (eds.), *Time and History in the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the 56th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Barcelona, 26-30 July 2010*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns: 391-404.
- PETROBELLI, Pierluigi 1994. "From Rossini's Mosè to Verdi's Nabucco". In P. Petrobelli (ed.), *Music in the Theater: Essays on Verdi and Other Composers*. Princeton: University Press: 8-33.
- PINNOCK, Frances 2006. *Semiramide e le sue sorelle. Immagini di donne nell'antica Mesopotamia*. Milano: Skira.

- PORTER, Barbara Nevling 1997. "What the Assyrians Thought the Babylonians Thought about the Relative Status of Nabû and Marduk in the Late Assyrian Period" in S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (eds.), *Assyria 1995. Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project Helsinki, September 7-11, 1995*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki: 253-260.
- POUGIN, Arthur 1886. *Verdi. Histoire anedoctique de sa vie et de ses œuvres*. Paris: Calmann Levy Editeur.
- RANZINI, Paola 2012. "Fantômes sur la scène. Horreur vs merveilleux, tragédie vs opéra" in C. Favre (ed.), *L'Opéra ou Triomphe des Reines. Tragédie et Opéra* (Travaux et Documents 53). Paris: Université Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis: 97-122.
- ROLLINGER, Robert 2008. "L'image et la posterité de Babylone dans les sources classiques" in B. André-Salvini (ed.), *Babylone. À Babylone, d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*. Paris: Musée du Louvre Éditions: 374-377.
- SEYMOUR, J. Michael 2008. "Classical accounts" in I. L. Finkel and M. J. Seymour (eds.), *Babylon. Myth and Reality*. London: The British Museum Press: 104-109.
- 2013. "Power and Seduction in Babylon: Verdi's *Nabucco*" in S. Knippschild and M. García Morcillo (eds.), *Seduction and Power. Antiquity in the Visual and Performing Arts*. London and New York: Bloomsbury: 9-20.
- VAN de MIEROOP, Marc 2004. "A Tale of Two Cities: Nineveh and Babylon" in D. Collon and A. George (eds.), *Nineveh. Papers of the 49th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Part One (Iraq 66)*. London: British Institute for the Study of Iraq: 1-5.