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IAMBLICHOS
EPITOMISED BY
PHOTIOS

BERENIKE & MESOPOTAMIA'S WEDDING

Greek text from: René Henry, ed., *Photius: Bibliotheque* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1960)

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THE TRANSLATOR

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I am the inventor of the Root & Branch translation method, which I developed to highlight the queerness of selected classical texts, drawing on my experience as a translator from Russian. I am the author of *SPQR in the USSR: Elena Shvarts's Classical Antiquity*, and the compiler and director of the verbatim play *Princess Dashkova, the Woman Who Shook the World*. I am currently researching receptions of Greek and Roman 'lesbianism' by Russian lesbians and bisexual women. I live in Scotland with my wife and my parrot.

ΊΑΜΒΛΙΧΟΣ / ΦΩΤΙΟΣ

Iamblichos wrote his novel *Babyloniaka* ('Babylonian stories') in the second century AD during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161–180 AD) and published it after the Roman defeat of the Parthian king Vologaeses III (166 AD).[1] What is known about Iamblichos's life derives ultimately from his account of himself within the novel (which may not be entirely truthful): that he was a native Syrian who was taught the Babylonian language and culture by his family's Babylonian slave; that he then learned Greek to a high standard, becoming a rhetor; and that he learned magic, foretelling the aforementioned Roman victory over the Parthians.[2]

The *Babyloniaka* is a lost novel. It survives mainly in epitome (summary) by the Byzantine scholar and patriarch of Constantinople, Photios (c. 810–893 AD), whose *Bibliotheke* (or *Myriobiblon*) epitomised hundreds of texts. Though Photios's epitome is extensive, the fragments of Iamblichos's actual text that have survived (as manuscript excerpts and quotations) 'reveal an elaborate and sophisticated narrative, and [...] expose just how reductive Photius' synopsis is'.[3]

The plot of the *Babyloniaka* centres on the couple Sinonis and Rhodanes, who in the novel's (probably) sixteen books[4] travel around the Roman Near East, pursued by agents of the king of Babylon, Garmos, who is in love with Sinonis. They undergo multiple near-death experiences (while the characters around them are gruesomely maimed and killed). But after Rhodanes kisses another woman, Sinonis breaks up with him and vows vengeance on the woman (and

[1] Morales (2006) p. 84; Stephens & Winkler (1995) p. 182.
[2] See Stephens & Winkler (1995) pp. 180–3 for quotations and analysis of the three slightly contradictory biographical accounts.
[3] Morales (2006) p. 79.
[4] The *Souda* says 39, but Photios – who is more reliable – finishes the story at 16, a more typical number; see Stephens & Winkler (1995) pp. 180–1.

attempts to enact it), then goes off to marry the king of Syria. Finally Rhodanes is sent (by Garmos, who had been crucifying Rhodanes and intends to double-cross him) with an army to get her back. Rhodanes wins both the battle and Sinonis, and himself becomes king of Babylon – the end.

But our business is not with the main plot, but with the subplot – or actually, a subplot of the subplot. The *Souda* summary of Iamblichos's *Babyloniaka* mentions just two plots: the main one, 'Rhodanes' and Sinonis's love', and the subplot, 'Zobaras the eunuch, the lover of Mesopotamia the very-good-looking'.[5] However, the epitome gives a large role to Mesopotamia (and her brother Euphrates), and only mentions Zobaras twice in one section,[6] so I am inclined to believe that Mesopotamia and Euphrates are in fact the protagonists of the subplot.[7] The story of Berenike and her relationship with Mesopotamia is a 'digression' from the Mesopotamia subplot.

Mesopotamia's story goes as follows. She was born on an island at Aphrodite's temple to the priestess of Aphrodite, along with her two identical brothers Euphrates and Tigris. She was born ugly but Aphrodite made her beautiful. Three lovers competed over whom she loved best – she'd given one her cup, another her garland, and the third a kiss – and killed each other.[8] Tigris eats a rose with a blister beetle in it and dies.[9] Sinonis and Rhodanes visit the island; Rhodanes is mistaken for the dead Tigris by their mother.[10] Damas (one of King Garmos's eunuchs pursuing Sinonis and Rhodanes) arrests their father the priest of Aphrodite, forcing him to become the public executioner.[11] He accuses Euphrates, mistaking his son

[5] *Souda* 2.603.18 *s.v.* Iamblichos. [6] 77b27–37.
[7] The *Souda*'s inaccuracy could be attributed to a wish to focus on the novel's heterosexual love narratives, so balancing Sinonis and Rhodanes not with Mesopotamia and her brother Euphrates but with Mesopotamia and Zobaras, who is the closest she has to a male lover in the main story.
[8] 75a36–b8. [9] 75b16–17. [10] 75b41–76a4. [11] 76a26–28.

for Rhodanes; Euphrates is arrested but Mesopotamia escapes. Under questioning, Euphrates has to identify Mesopotamia as Sinonis, and says she escaped.[12] Mesopotamia has a sexual relationship with Berenike (or Berenice), princess of Egypt. Sakas (the other eunuch pursuing Sinonis and Rhodanes) arrests Mesopotamia and Euphrates and takes them to Garmos.[13] Garmos realises Mesopotamia is not Sinonis, and orders the eunuch Zobaras to have her beheaded by the river Euphrates, so no other woman will call herself Sinonis. Zobaras falls in love with Mesopotamia and rescues her, taking her to Berenike, now queen of Egypt. Berenike either marries Mesopotamia or organises her marriage to someone else. Because of this Garmos almost goes to war against Berenike.[14] Euphrates is saved from execution because the executioner – his father – recognises him.[15]

Morales argues convincingly that Mesopotamia's story was intended as an allegory 'within a larger politicised narrative'.[16] She personifies the country of Mesopotamia, a region bounded by the rivers Euphrates and Tigris (personified by her brothers), imagined in the novel as an 'island'.[17] At the time of writing, Mesopotamia (the country) was between two warring empires, Rome and Parthia, and had just been subjugated as a Roman province (for a second time) following Parthia's defeat,[18] a context which Iamblichos deliberately writes about in the novel.[19] Contemporary readers would have been prepared to understand Mesopotamia (the character) allegorically, as there was 'a well-established iconographical and textual tradition of these geographical sites in particular [Tigris, Euphrates, and Mesopotamia], and rivers and regions in conquered lands more broadly, being represented in human form'.[20] So, Morales concludes,

[12] 76a29–39. [13] 77a20–23. [14] 77b29–37. [15] 77b38–39.
[16] Morales (2006) pp. 85–7 (p. 86).
[17] Mesopotamia is in present-day Iraq.
[18] Stephens & Winkler (1995) p. 183; Morales (2006) pp. 84–5.
[19] 75b27–40. [20] Morales (2006) p. 86.

when 'Mesopotamia is depicted as having sexual relations and as getting married, these actions are to be understood on both a realistic and a metaphorical level'.[21]

But what exactly her story allegorises is much harder to conclude. Morales hypothesises that Mesopotamia's possible marriage to Berenike symbolises her finding victory (because the name 'Berenike', meaning 'Bearer of Victory', may have been 'actively symbolic'), i.e. 'the liberation of the territory from Roman occupation'.[22] I suggest that – given the temporal vagueness of the novel – it could symbolise the opposite: with Garmos representing Babylonia representing Parthia, and Berenike representing ancient Egypt representing contemporary Rome, then Mesopotamia's affair with Berenike and subsequent escape from Garmos to Berenike (and marriage to either Berenike or Zobaras – who represents I-don't-know-where) could represent Mesopotamia's transfer of ownership along East-West lines from an Eastern empire (Babylonia/Parthia) to a Western one (Egypt/Rome); this even takes into account Mesopotamia's brief conquest under Trajan, return to Parthia under Hadrian, and final (at time of writing) reconquest under Marcus Aurelius. However, we are less interested in Mesopotamia and Berenike's historico-political implications and more interested in their lesbian implications...

All the lesbian activity in the *Babyloniaka* centres on Berenike, the princess/queen of Egypt. 'Berenike' was a common name among the Ptolemies, and it is unlikely that she was intended as a specific historical figure.[23] What is likely is that the name was chosen for its

[21] Morales (2006) p. 85. [22] Morales (2006) p. 87.
[23] Stephens & Winkler (1995 p. 196 n. 31) list the daughters of Ptolemy II (Berenike Syra), Ptolemy [IX] Soter II (Berenike III), and Ptolemy [XII] Auletes (Berenike IV Epiphaneia) as possibilities. Of these, only Berenike III was 'queen of Egypt after her father's death' (*Babyloniaka* 77b33). (Berenike Syra was queen of Syria; Berenike IV Epiphaneia usurped her father's throne.) She ruled Egypt with her uncle-husband 101–88 BC, and as sole ruler 81–80 BC – which doesn't really fit the story.

titillating connotations: 'given the proclivity of the Ptolemies for brother-sister marriage, any one might be regarded as engaging in outré sexual practices'.[24]

Photios states that Berenike **συνεγίνετο**, 'was having sex / associating', with Mesopotamia[25] – a verb that is 'one of the least specific' Greek words for sex.[26] We are given no further details in the epitome – unless the preceding phrase **ἀγρίων καὶ ἐκθέσμων ἐρώτων**, 'wild and unconventional/abnormal/lawless loves', describing Berenike, actually describes her relationship with Mesopotamia. (In this case, the phrase may convey the relationship as depicted by Iamblichos: a wild affair. Or it may hint the relationship was non-reciprocal and coercive.[27] Or it may express Photios's own opinion of the relationship, and perhaps of any lesbian relationship: unacceptable.) However, the early-fifth-century physician Theodorus Priscianus prescribed the *Babyloniaka* (among other texts) as a 'remedy for impotence'[28] – i.e. erotica – which means that the sex between Mesopotamia and Berenike was almost certainly depicted in some detail.

Berenike's next appearance[29] in Mesopotamia's story is as a protector: she harbours her from Garmos's wrath after Mesopotamia escapes his death sentence with the help of her intended executioner, the eunuch Zobaras, who has fallen in love with her. Mesopotamia then gets married, to one of two unusual prospects – Berenike, a woman; or Zobaras, a eunuch slave.

The cause of the confusion is the muddled grammar of **γάμους Μεσοποταμίας ἡ Βερενίκη ποιεῖται**, 'Berenike makes/does for herself

[24] Stephens & Winkler (1995) p. 196 n. 31. [25] 77a22.
[26] Morales (2006) p. 80; see also my note on 77a22 below.
[27] Casting Berenike as 'a predatory ruler' like Arsace in the later novel the *Aithiopika*: Morales (2006) p. 80.
[28] *Euporista* 2.11.34; Morales (2006) pp. 95, 101 n. 73. [29] 77b33–37.

Mesopotamia's wedding/marriage', which mixes up two different formulas for marrying, **γάμους ποιεῖσθαι**, 'get married', and **γάμους τινος ποιεῖν**, 'do someone's wedding'.[30] Corrected, the two possible versions mean either 'Berenike gets married ~~to Mesopotamia~~' (**γάμους ~~Μεσοποταμίας~~ ἡ Βερενίκη ποιεῖται**), or 'Berenike marries Mesopotamia [to someone else]' (**γάμους Μεσοποταμίας ἡ Βερενίκη ~~ποιεῖται~~ <u>ποίει</u>**). The first version makes sense without any changes, but is fundamentally flawed – there is no grammatical place for Mesopotamia in it. The second version has a more probable mistake, which needs only a minor correction to make sense. Grammatically, therefore, Zobaras is the slightly likelier groom.

Narratively – since Mesopotamia's suitors make for equally unsuitable husbands (eunuchs were feminised, so marrying one was 'not much less controversial for a woman than marrying another woman'[31]) and have been given apparently equal weight in the novel as her lovers (I discount the *Souda*'s privileging of Zobaras[32]) – the two interpretations are equally likely. In favour of Zobaras, Cameron argues 'Iamblichus's purpose may have been to exploit the dramatic irony of Berenice hosting the wedding of a woman she loved herself – irony that would be only heightened if the groom were a eunuch'.[33] In favour of Berenike, Morales argues that Garmos's anger against Berenike makes it more likely she herself married Mesopotamia.[34]

Two fragments of Iamblichos's original text tentatively assigned to this section of the epitome may shed some light on the question.

One might describe the wedding Berenike organises[35]:

[30] See my note on 77b35 below.
[31] Morales (2006) p. 82.
[32] See my reasoning above (p. 2).
[33] Cameron (1998) p. 152.
[34] Morales (2006) p. 81 – who ultimately remains neutral on Berenike vs. Zobaras.
[35] Or it could describe the wedding preparations of Garmos for the farmer's daughter, whom he has captured in error for Sinonis (77a8–10), or the wedding that perhaps takes place between Sinonis and the king of Syria (78a5 / 78a28–29).

καὶ ἅμα τῇ κόρῃ παρεσκεύασε πομπὴν ἐπιφανῆ, ἁρμάμαξάν τε λαμπρὰν καὶ ἐσθῆτα σοβαρὰν καὶ θεραπείαν συχνὴν εὐνούχων τε καὶ θεραπαινίδων

And at the same time, for the maiden s/he prepared a splendid procession: a gleaming covered carriage and stunning clothes and a thronging retinue of eunuchs and maidservants.[36]

If this fragment does belong here, then the richness of the wedding and the presence in the retinue of eunuchs seems to suggest Berenike rather than Zobaras as the 'groom'.

The other might describe Zobaras:

πάντας μὲν ἀνθρώπους ἐξίστησιν ἔρως, εὐνούχους δὲ ποιεῖ φονικωτέρους ὥσπερ οἶνος Σκύθας· φονᾷ γὰρ Σκύθης μὲν πιών, εὐνοῦχος δὲ ἐρῶν

Passionate love stimulates all human beings, but it makes eunuchs more murderous, just as wine does to Skythians. A Skythian commits murder under the influence of drink, a eunuch under the influence of passionate love.[37]

As Stephens and Winkler point out, 'The collocation of eunuch, passion, and murder suggests that the following excerpt belongs here [77b31–32]. Zobaras, however, is not a lover of Mesopotamia turned murderous against her [...]; he is simply ordered by the king to kill her. He might turn murderous later, in Egypt, when Berenike tries to steal her away from him.'[38] I find the latter explanation most compelling; this would place the fragment around 77b35 and suggest that Berenike is either marrying Mesopotamia herself, or attempting to prevent Zobaras from marrying her, and therefore still erotically entangled with her.

[36] Fragment 84 = *Souda* 4.170.9 *s.v.* **πομπήν**, and 4.483.3 *s.v.* **συχναῖς**. Stephens & Winkler (1995) pp. 218–19.
[37] Fragment 96 = codd. Laur. 57,12 and Vat. 1354. Stephens & Winkler (1995) pp. 218–19.
[38] Stephens & Winkler (1995) p. 219 n. 74.

In a novel with the vicissitudes of love as its main narrative focus, Mesopotamia's journey towards marriage is clearly one of the most important strands, and her relationship with Berenike clearly an important – if not the most important – part of that journey. The extant ancient novels generally prioritise heterosexuality, and while some do depict male homosexuality,[39] depictions of female homosexuality are vanishingly rare. Petronius's *Satyricon* – already unusual for being in Latin and for focusing on male homosexual relationships – is the only other ancient novel to show any lesbian activity.[40] And, as far as we can extrapolate from the epitome and other evidence, Iamblichos dedicated more attention to his lesbian couple – and went into far more explicit detail – than any other ancient novelist. He maybe even gave them a 'happily ever after' to match the marriage of the main, heterosexual couple – but he certainly gave them a goodly dose of drama on the way to whichever marital conclusion.

[39] See especially Dubé (2004).
[40] See LESBIANTIQUITY 15.

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ROOT & BRANCH
READING GUIDE

Our translations branch out to explore
a variety of options for the text:
any variants in the original ⟨Greek / Latin⟩ texts
and the various possible meanings in English.
Our translations are rooted in the words
of the original text, replicating when possible
word order, root meanings of words, and
grammatical gender ([n] / [f] / [m]) of words about people.
You, the reader, will choose which branches you prefer to follow.

BABYLONIAKA 77A20–22, 77B35

77a20–22

(interval / digression / opinion) about Berenike, she who was daughter of the <ruler / king>
of Egyptians, and her wild and (abnormal / unconventional / lawless) loves:
and how with Mesopotamia [she] was <having sex / associating>

77b35

and Berenike (gets Mesopotamia <married / wed> / <makes / does> for herself Mesopotamia's <wedding / marriage> / gets <married / wed> to Mesopotamia).

77a20–22

Διάληψις περὶ Βερενίκης, ἥτις ἦν θυγάτηρ τοῦ βασιλέως Αἰγυπτίων, καὶ τῶν ἀγρίων αὐτῆς καὶ ἐκθέσμων ἐρώτων· καὶ ὅπως Μεσοποταμίᾳ τε συνεγίνετο

77b35

καὶ γάμους Μεσοποταμίας ἡ Βερενίκη ποιεῖται.

NOTES

77a20 *Berenike*: a common name of Ptolemaic queens, meaning 'Bearer of Victory', from the Greek *pherein* and *nikē* (see also above, p. 4).

77a21 ***ἐκθέσμων***; *unconventional/abnormal/lawless*: literally, 'outside of what is customary/lawful'. '*Ekthesmos* is a highly unusual word to use in this context. It can range in meaning from "lawless" in a literal sense, i.e. illegal, to "lawless" in a more abstract sense: "inordinate"' (Morales 2006 p. 80).

77a21 ***ἐρώτων***; *loves*: sexual.

77a22 *Mesopotamia*: her name means 'land between rivers', and also the country Mesopotamia (see also above, pp. 2–4).

77a22 ***συνεγίνετο***; *[she] was having sex / associating ... with*: **συγγίνομαι** is an unspecific, but very common and unambiguous, verb for having sex with someone. Adams (1982 p. 177) gives various examples of similar Greek verbs (as well as Latin) meaning 'be with' in a sexual sense (and in context obviously about sexual intercourse): **σύνειμι**, Aristophanes *Peace* 863 (also in Lucian *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 5, LESBIANTIQUITY 25); **συγγίγνομαι**, Herodotus 2.121e; **γίγνομαι μετά**, Lucian *Dialogues of the Courtesans* 6.1; and also **συνουσία**, **συνουσιάζω** (found in Plato *Symposium* 191c & 192c, LESBIANTIQUITY 5; Hephaistion *Apotelesmatika* 2.16.8b, LESBIANTIQUITY 33). The imperfect tense indicates that Berenike's liaison with Mesopotamia was prolonged, not a one-off.

77b35 ***γάμους Μεσοποταμίας ἡ Βερενίκη ποιεῖται***: this either means 'Berenike marries Mesopotamia [herself]' or 'Berenike marries Mesopotamia [to someone else]'. It is an ungrammatical phrase, combining two formulas for 'marrying' – **γάμους ποιεῖσθαι** (middle), which means 'get married', and **γάμους τινος** (genitive) **ποιεῖν** (active), which means 'perform/host/organise someone's wedding'. The problem with **γάμους ποιεῖσθαι** is that it is an absolute construction, i.e. cannot take an object, but here apparently has an object, the genitive **Μεσοποταμίας**, 'to Mesopotamia'. Substituting the middle **ποιεῖσθαι** for the active **ποιεῖν** with **γάμους** was a fairly common mistake; Cameron (1998 p. 151) gives an example of a fourth-century BC historian, Chares of Mytilene, mistakenly using the middle voice for someone else's wedding (Athenaeus 13.575c = FGrHist 125 F 5), so this would make it likelier that Photios meant 'Berenike married Mesopotamia to someone else'. However, the opposite mistake – adding the genitive to clarify who she married – seems possible too. Hence I give both versions in my translation, along with a hyper-literal and therefore not totally sensical version. For narrative arguments for and against each version, see above (pp. 6–7).

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