

**DOI:** 10.31857/S032103910001267-6

## SOME NOTES ON THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE *CAMBYSES* ROMANCE

Michal Habaj

*University of SS. Cyril and Methodius, Trnava, Slovakia*  
*E-mail: michal.habaj33@gmail.com*

*The Cambyses Romance* addresses the Persian/Assyrian attack on Egypt and Israel. In the text the attack is led by a king who is alternatively referred to as Cambyses and Nebuchadnezzar. The enemies do not attack Egypt directly; instead, they use trickery. They are afraid to launch a direct attack because they consider the Egyptians fearless warriors comparable to bears or lions. In this way, the story blends heroic narrative with Egyptian and Biblical traditions. To this day, the story and its historical background have been of interest to a number of experts, who have searched ancient historiographies to find the roots of the tradition which is evident within the Romance. In the present study the author recapitulates some of the conclusions that have been reached to date and presents a thesis of his own. He shows that the historical background of the Romance does not have direct roots in any classical tradition; instead, they reveal much about the persistent collective memory of the Egyptians, wherein many reports of Cambyses were preserved. Under the influence of Old Testament tradition and only indirectly affected by Herodotus, these Egyptian stories had been molded into the form they took in the Romance.

**Keywords:** Coptic literature, Cambyses Romance, Egyptian tradition, classical sources, Herodotus, Cambyses II

## НЕСКОЛЬКО ЗАМЕЧАНИЙ ОБ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОМ КОНТЕКСТЕ «РОМАНА О КАМБИСЕ»

М. Хабай

*Университет св. Кирилла и Мефодия, Трнава, Словакия*  
*E-mail: michal.habaj33@gmail.com*

---

**Author:** Michal Habaj – PhD, associated professor of Ancient History at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava.

«Роман о Камбисе» описывает персидское (или ассирийское) нашествие на Египет и Израиль под предводительством царя, которого текст попеременно называет то Камбисом, то Навуходоносором. Неприятели не атакуют Египет напрямую, а используют военные хитрости, боясь напасть открыто, так как считают египтян бесстрашными воинами, подобными диким львам или медведям. Исторический контекст романа уже давно привлекает внимание ученых, которые пытаются определить корни представленной в нем исторической традиции. В данном исследовании автор резюмирует все предшествующие точки зрения по этому вопросу и формулирует свою собственную, доказывая, что роман не имеет непосредственной связи с классической античной традицией. Напротив, это произведение демонстрирует устойчивую коллективную память египтян относительно Камбиса. Под влиянием ветхозаветной традиции и лишь непрямым — Геродота эти египетские рассказы приняли ту форму, в которой они представлены в «Романе о Камбисе».

*Ключевые слова:* коптская литература, «Роман о Камбисе», египетская традиция, классическая традиция, Геродот, Камбис II

The Coptic story of Cambyses' attack on Egypt was first published by Heinrich Schäfer in 1899<sup>1</sup>. The story had been recorded on six parchment folios that are now part of the Berlin collection. It is not known where the text originated: only fragments have been preserved, and the text has no introduction or conclusion.

The preserved text begins with a letter from Cambyses to an unknown addressee. Cambyses is trying to persuade the letter's recipient to defect to his side and not to rely on the Egyptians or their king for protection. Although the following few lines are fragmented, it is clear that they contain a declaration from Cambyses that the Egyptians will not protect the addressee, nor will they start a war for his sake. At the end of the first paragraph, the phrase "the entire coastal land" (I. 29) has been preserved. In the continuation of the letter, Cambyses threatens the addressee with total destruction: if the recipient's armies do not join Cambyses and instead rise up against him, no one will protect them from the Persian king. At the end of the letter Cambyses is no longer just threatening; he is simply notifying the addressee that he intends to attack the country.

The men who heard the letter did not lay down their arms. Instead, they were determined to rise up against Cambyses; in their initial fit of rage they almost killed the king's messengers. Indeed, the murder would surely have occurred had it not been for the experienced war hero Bothor. He addressed the soldiers as "the sons of those who live where the sun rises" (III. 17), and focused their attention on the message from their enemy. He suggested allowing the messengers to return to Cambyses with an answer.

This letter of reply was intended for Cambyses' subjects in the West and East. It describes the Egyptians as lions as they are defended against danger by their weaponry. The writers of the letter label Cambyses a coward and a slave, and they remind him that fear was not the reason why they did not kill his messengers; rather, they were acting out of self-respect and respect for their pharaoh's honour. They threaten to kill the Persian's family before his very eyes and to liquidate his

---

<sup>1</sup> Schäfer 1899, 727–744.

commanders and gods; finally, they declare that they will not hesitate to cook Cambyses' meat, and that they will tear him apart like bears or lions. They remind him in the letter that none of Egypt's enemies had ever withstood the Egyptian army, referencing the specific examples of the Assyrians, the Celts, the Hittites<sup>2</sup>, "those who live in the West", "those who live in the cold regions", and the Medes (VI. 15–17). These nations had risen up against Egypt and had, ultimately, become their slaves. They then ask Cambyses whether he trusts the Ammonites, the Moabites, and the Edomites, who were routed in their war against Israel. Thereafter, Cambyses appears in the text under the name Nebuchadnezzar (VII. 8).

Cambyses was surprised by the reply. He gathered his advisors and requested counsel. One of his advisors suggested that he subjugate the Egyptians using trickery: he should distribute letters — signed in the name of the Pharaoh and Apis — calling all Egyptians to a religious festival. There, Cambyses would surprise his unarmed enemies and overpower them. Cambyses' advisor warns the king that he must avoid a war, because it would be dangerous to fight with these bears and lions, as he calls the Egyptians (VIII. 16–17). According to the advisor, all Egyptians are warlike, and he reminds Cambyses that even Egyptian women know how to use a sling, and that they teach this skill to their children (VIII. 21–26). The king, once again named Cambyses (IX. 16), acted according to this advice and distributed letters throughout Egypt. The letter once again referred to the king as Nebuchadnezzar (X. 18; XI. 22), although the name Cambyses was used once again at the end (XII. 21). The Egyptians did not trust what they were reading, and they doubted that the letters had come from the Pharaoh. They called together their elders and turned to fortune tellers for advice; they received news that the letters had come from the Assyrians. The letters dubbed Nebuchadnezzar a rebel (XI. 22) who was seeking revenge for a past defeat. The fortune tellers advised the Egyptians to take their weapons to the gathering. The text finishes with the following image: Pharaoh Apries learns that Cambyses has crossed the border; he then asks his high-ranking officials who had advised them to bring their weapons to the gathering.

The text raises many questions: who was the writer? What was his background? Under what conditions was the text composed? When and where exactly was it written? Although it is not possible to answer these questions with certainty, the contents of the text testify to the answers. In the following study, I will explore only one of these problems, namely what sources gave rise to the tradition upon which the historical background of the *Romance* was founded?

The author clearly based the story on a blend of different traditions. The text involves the character of Cambyses and describes his attack on Egypt. The Persians attacked and conquered Egypt in 525 BCE; as a result, the country was under Persian control for more than a century. At the same time, the text mentions Nebuchadnezzar, who was attacking an Egyptian ally in the East, evidently Israel. Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem for the first time in 597 BCE, and ten years later he destroyed the city. He also attacked Egypt several times, and his Babylonian

---

<sup>2</sup> Dubbed "Chettieim" in the text; most authors consider this to mean "the Hittites", although Thissen theorized that it referred to the Cypriots of Kition: Thissen 1996, 148.

empire was a grave threat for Necho II, and later for Apries and Amasis II. In this way, the text of the *Romance* combines two traditions into one whole, and it is for this reason that the *Romance* alternates between discussions of the Assyrians, Cambyses, and Nebuchadnezzar.

It is important to remember that the writer of the *Romance* did not create this historical background alone. Rather, he adopted it to a considerable degree from other sources<sup>3</sup>. Several investigators have attempted to elucidate the source of these traditions and their origins. Below, I will mention some specific innovative solutions to this problem. At this point, I will simply summarize the situation by stating that researchers have focused their search for sources within classical historical writings, Egyptian tradition, and the Old Testament. I will attempt to preclude the possibility that the writer drew from tradition based upon classical historiography and to provide evidence that the exclusive sources for tradition included in the *Romance* were stories transmitted in the collective memory of the Egyptians in addition to well-known reports from the Old Testament, while the role of classical tradition was only indirect.

#### HOW HAVE THE LINKS TO TRADITION BEEN UNDERSTOOD TO DATE?

One of the first experts to research the origins of the *Romance*, O. von Lemm, assumed that the writer had not founded the story on the historical context of existing traditions. Instead, von Lemm claimed that he had created the historical background of the story on the basis of classical and biblical sources. Specifically, the anonymous writer had mainly concentrated on Herodotus; for example, it is likely that the author based his concept of Cambyses, as well as his praise for Egyptian military training, on the reports in *The Histories*. According to von Lemm, the writer's description in this regard is similar to Herodotus' portrayal of Persian training (VIII. 24–26, cf. I. 136)<sup>4</sup>. However, at certain points, events in the *Romance* differ from those described by Herodotus. In von Lemm's opinion, this is because the author of the *Romance* used the information from his sources rather freely, combining it with other material as he saw fit<sup>5</sup>. In terms of the biblical tradition, von Lemm states that the author drew the information from the Book of Jeremiah; for example, it was from this text he took his descriptions of Nebuchadnezzar's attacks on Egypt and Israel<sup>6</sup>. In this way, von Lemm claimed that the author of the *Romance* had, on the basis of these sources, easily adapted various traditions to create a version of events that

---

<sup>3</sup> When the *Romance* is compared to Book LI of John of Nikiu's *Chronicle*, the two authors began with similar traditions. However, the works were not directly linked to each other so the *Romance* could not have been written using the *Chronicle* and vice-versa. Furthermore, Cambyses is portrayed in a completely different way in the two texts, probably because the nature of the texts differs, and because, as was pointed out by Cruz-Urbe (1986, 52), the authors of the texts may have been familiar with each other's work. It follows that both authors worked from a template that they changed. However, they may have used different templates containing variants that had developed over time.

<sup>4</sup> Von Lemm 1900, 96.

<sup>5</sup> Von Lemm 1900, 93.

<sup>6</sup> Von Lemm 1900, 110.

was suitable to his own intentions and interests. As a consequence, he created the specific historical context mentioned above.

H. Jansen advanced another hypothesis, whereby there must have been an original text that was based on Herodotus' description of events. This original story was then reformulated by the author of the *Romance*, whose understanding arose from biblical reports of Nebuchadnezzar's relationship with Egypt and Israel<sup>7</sup>. In this way, Jansen simply expanded von Lemm's understanding of the *Romance* as a bipolar text based on classical and biblical reports. He also agreed with von Lemm that the author had drawn upon Herodotus while writing the text. Specifically, the writer of the aforementioned original text likely learned from Herodotus about Cambyses' attack on Egypt; this information was then reformulated by another author or editor, who added the story of Nebuchadnezzar's attack on Israel. Jansen recognized Herodotus' influence within the context of the *Romance* as a whole (Cambyses' attack on Egypt), as well as in a number of details: according to Jansen, the *Romance's* description of the Egyptians as renowned fighters must have been based on Herodotus' description; the researcher also stated that the mention of Apis in the *Romance* points to *The Histories* as well<sup>8</sup>. The original story, thus formulated, found its way into the hands of an Aramaic-speaking editor of Jewish origin living in Egypt. In his enthusiastic patriotism, this author reformulated the story in accordance with the Old Testament accounts of Jeremiah and the Book of Kings. On the basis of this thesis, Jansen divided the *Romance* into two independent bodies, the classical and the biblical, connected in a single story.

On the other hand, Jansen recognized that this version of events raised several problems. Firstly, he realized that a direct comparison of the two texts did not give the impression that the author had drawn upon Herodotus. Furthermore, he saw that the author had used *The Histories* only loosely. For this reason, Jansen describes Herodotus as a source of inspiration rather than the origin of the author's account<sup>9</sup>. Secondly, he mentions that the author used two names, Cambyses and Nebuchadnezzar, beginning with the eighth paragraph. This does not fit with his theory that the two texts were created gradually. The names alternate in this passage without apparent logic, and therefore it is not possible to apply Jansen's theory. For this reason, Jansen attempted to explain the phenomenon in the following way: either the author of the *Romance* was ignorant of history, or his illogical alternating use of names arose from his attempts to combine Egyptian and Israelite history. Jansen believed that the latter was more likely<sup>10</sup>. However, neither explanation is satisfactory. It is clear that the author of the *Romance* was not a chronicler, and that his knowledge of history did not go beyond an awareness of the tradition. Nonetheless, if the author had alternated the names because he was ignorant of history, or because of an attempt to combine Egyptian and Israelite history, how is it that the later editor of the text worked so painstakingly with both names in the preceding seven paragraphs? On this point, Jansen's theory does not seem to work out.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jansen 1950, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Jansen 1950, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Jansen 1950, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Jansen 1950, 37.

The theory that two sources (classical and biblical) had been used in tandem was advocated by several historians since Jansen. For instance, E. Cruz-Urbe pointed out that Apis' name had been mentioned together with Cambyzes', and that this could be considered sufficient evidence that the author of the *Romance* had used Herodotus<sup>11</sup>. A.B. Lloyd altered this understanding of events. Since it is not entirely clear that there is a connection between the *Romance* and *The Histories*, he deviated from the school of thought that had existed until then and spoke only of "the Herodotean tradition", rather than of the Herodotean influence. Within this Herodotean tradition, which was encouraged by the Judeo-Christian environment, he included Strabo, Plutarch, and Justin<sup>12</sup>. P. Venticinque came to a similar conclusion<sup>13</sup>. He realized that if we wish to explain the historical background of the story as resulting from the use of alternating traditions, we must find other sources, as Herodotus and other Greco-Roman historians cannot fully explain this background. For this reason, Venticinque attempted to account for this background by appealing to other possible antique traditions. In his search for the sources of the *Romance*, Venticinque turned first to the *Antiquities of the Jews* by Flavius Josephus. The Jewish historian blended the classical and biblical traditions, making Cambyzes the main hero of the story, wherein the Persian ruler, after a complaint from Syria and Phoenicia, forbids the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, even though in the book of Ezra (11:2) Artaxerxes played this particular role. However, to preserve the historical chronology of the Persian rulers that was known from Greek historiographers, Josephus replaced Artaxerxes with Cambyzes. Furthermore, in Venticinque's opinion, Josephus considers Cambyzes a likely candidate for the man who stopped the construction of the temple: an act that made the Persian king guilty of godlessness. Indeed, well-known legends from antiquity dub him the "evil son" of the good Cyrus. With this report, the Jewish historian rendered Cambyzes an enemy of Jerusalem, placing him, in Venticinque's view, immediately beside Nebuchadnezzar — another destroyer and enemy of the Jewish city. In this way, according to Venticinque, Josephus was attempting to incorporate the Old Testament into the known tradition of Greek historiography. Subsequently, Venticinque suggested several more possible texts demonstrating that the tradition developed into a form that may have matched the historical background of the *Romance*. Following this analysis, the historian classified novel about Cambyzes into the genre known as "Chaosbeschreibung", which includes several Egyptian stories depicting the Assyrians and the Persians as they attacked Egypt. They described how evil entering a country carries with it violence, chaos, and despair. Venticinque concludes in the following way: "The author of the Cambyzes Romance tapped into Greek, Biblical and Egyptian traditions to create an image of Cambyzes that is all three: at once a classical conqueror, Biblical archenemy of God's chosen people, and a symbolic force of disruption in the land"<sup>14</sup>. Venticinque also mentions that the reader should not interpret the remarkable background of the story as simply

---

<sup>11</sup> Cruz-Urbe 1986, 53.

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd 1994, 200–202.

<sup>13</sup> Venticinque 2006, 139–158.

<sup>14</sup> Venticinque 2006, 156.



a figment of the author's imagination. Instead, it should be considered within the literary and historical context of the *Romance*.

I. Ladynin and A. Nemirovsky moved research regarding the traditions contained within the *Romance* into a markedly different area. They sought their roots in the Egyptian tradition, which, in their opinion, preserved all the elements concerning Cambyzes and Nebuchadnezzar that were necessary for the *Romance*. In this way, the *Romance* constitutes a historical record of Nebuchadnezzar's invasion (568/567 BCE)<sup>15</sup> and is an expression of Egyptian collective memory rather than biblical tradition<sup>16</sup>. A. Banschikova explored this idea in more detail by showing many parallels between older Egyptian texts and the elements of the *Cambyzes Romance*. I will return to this idea later.

To a large extent, I agree with the conclusions of Venticinque, Ladynin, Nemirovsky, and Banschikova. However, I would argue that the *Romance*, together with the elements contained therein, is more complex, and that it should not be approached simply by searching for parallels. After all, various traditions contained within the *Romance* arose in different periods of time rather than simultaneously in one place, and this complicates our search. I concur with the opinion that classical tradition was not involved during the composition of the *Romance*<sup>17</sup>. However, as I explain below, this tradition reveals the genesis of one element of the story: the conflation of the Cambyzes and Nebuchadnezzar characters.

#### SOME NOTES ON THE TRADITION CONTAINED WITHIN THE STORY

As I have mentioned above, Venticinque's conclusion — that the historical background of the *Romance* was taken from a literary context — seems uncontested. Almost every researcher who examined the text recognized that it originated in Egypt. In this regard, Banschikova conducted some very detailed work. By highlighting many parallels, she pointed out the association between the *Romance* and older Egyptian literary and historical tradition<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, the text itself indicates that it was written in a Christian or Jewish environment<sup>19</sup>. In this regard, T.S. Richter performed some exceptionally important work. He pointed out the similarity between the *Romance* and the deuterocanonical Book of Judith<sup>20</sup>. Both works set out their narrative against a background of historical events. However,

---

<sup>15</sup> Ladynin, Nemirovskiy 2004, 66.

<sup>16</sup> Ladynin, Nemirovskiy 2004, 72.

<sup>17</sup> I. Hoffmann (1981, 199) also downplayed the importance of ancient tradition in the *Romance*. He suggested that the story is based only on elements of ancient Near Eastern traditions, but he did not offer any deeper argumentation in connection to the *Romance* itself. Moreover, since Hofmann's article was written, significant progress has been made in researching the construction of the *Romance* (see below), and Hoffmann's thesis is untenable at this point.

<sup>18</sup> She mainly compared the text with the First stela of Kamose and Annals of Thutmose III. She pointed to a number of similarities, such as the organization of the rulers' military ranks (Banshchikova 2015, 48–53), the representation of young warriors, and the depiction of a wise man (*ibid.*, 57).

<sup>19</sup> *Contra* Ladynin, Nemirovskiy 2004, 72.

<sup>20</sup> Richter 1998, 59.

they also freely interpreted these events, without trying to depict the history more accurately. In the book of Judith, Nebuchadnezzar, named “the King of the Assyrians”, circulates a message to various countries challenging them to submit to Babylon (Judith I, 11 cf. *Romance* II. 17). This threat does not inspire the expected response, and Nebuchadnezzar’s messengers return without having fulfilled their goal (Judith 1:11 cf. *Romance* IV. 3). Therefore, Nebuchadnezzar decides to resolve the situation through military might and he swears revenge upon his enemies (Judith 1:12 cf. *Romance* II. 16–20). The writer of the *Romance* was clearly familiar with this story in the Book of Judith. Moreover, Richter reminded us of one fact that Schwartz had realized before him; namely, that ancient commentators on the story of Judith identify Nebuchadnezzar as Cambyes. For instance, St. Jerome (*PL* 878) and John of Antioch (I. 28) speak of Cambyes as a second Nebuchadnezzar, and Eusebius wrote the following in his *Chronicles*: *Cambyes aiunt ab Hebraeis secundum Nabuchodonosor vocari, sub quo historia Judith, quae Holofernem interfecit, scribitur*. According to Schwartz and Richter, several commentators on the book of Judith replaced Nebuchadnezzar with Cambyes because the deuterocanonical book was chronologically unclear<sup>21</sup>.

The literary tradition we possess indicates that the first writer to link these two characters was Sextus Julius Africanus. He was a Christian who apparently came from Palestine, built the Pantheon library, worked and studied in Egypt, and spoke Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Moreover, he knew Egyptian, Persian, and Jewish history, he was familiar with the Old Testament, and he had undoubtedly learned about the local tradition in Egypt<sup>22</sup>. Several authors report that Africanus was the one to claim that the story of Judith took place under Cambyes; in the eponymous deuterocanonical book, the events occurred under Nebuchadnezzar II. In this regard, the Byzantine scholar Syncellus named Africanus as one of his sources (*Sync. Chron.* 282), and Suda (s.v. Ἰουδῆθ) spoke directly of Africanus as the source of this report. Other authors, including Eusebius (*Chron.* II. 204), Sulpicius Severus (*Chron.* II. 14. 3), ps.-John of Antioch (*Chron.* F 37), *Chronicon Paschale* (270. 2–4), and John Malalas (*Chron.* VI. 13–14) did not mention Africanus explicitly, but they adopted his chronology and placed the story of Judith under the rule of the king Cambyes. In Eusebius’ *Chronicle*, as well as in the *Chronicon Paschale*, we read that it was the Jews who used the name Nebuchadnezzar to refer to Cambyes. From this perspective, ps. John of Antioch is even more interesting; unlike the other authors mentioned here, he does not speak from the Greek perspective, but from the Jewish perspective. For example, Eusebius wrote that the Jews called Cambyes “Nebuchadnezzar”, while ps. John of Antioch stated that the Greeks called Nebuchadnezzar “Cambyes”. This information is quite important. Gelzer assumed that this part of John’s account was based on Africanus<sup>23</sup>; Mariev also saw a connection to Africanus, not a direct,

---

<sup>21</sup> In this regard, Richter (1998, 57, n. 19) is quoting the apt words of Schwartz: « Un point est certain: le roi Nabuchodonosor du livre de Judith ne pouvant pas, pour quelques commentateurs, être celui du livre de Daniel, on a cherché ailleurs et accepté l’assimilation avec Cambyse ».

<sup>22</sup> For life of Africanus, see Wallraff 2007, XIV–XVI.

<sup>23</sup> Gelzer 1898, 109.



but a mediated one<sup>24</sup>; Wallraff also attributed this note to Africanus<sup>25</sup>. The note is presented from a Jewish perspective, which is exactly how Africanus expressed himself. He talks about the Aelia Capitolina (Jerusalem) as “the old homeland” (Cest. V. 51), and about Herodotus’ Arabs as “those near us” (VII. 5). Some authors labeled Africanus a Jew<sup>26</sup>, although it is possible that he developed his particular rhetoric and worldview because he had been born in Palestine. For our purposes in the present study it is important that the conflation of the Cambyeses and Nebuchadnezzar characters in later tradition almost certainly came from him.

It follows that the tradition perpetuated by Eusebius and others came through Africanus. However, Africanus does not appear to be its creator. Indeed, Bagoas’ famous letter of 407 BCE, part of the Aramaic correspondence of the Jewish settlement in Elephantine, mentions that temples were destroyed in Egypt under Cambyeses. In this way, even though the Jewish temple in Elephantine was not destroyed, the letter reflects Cambyeses’ reputation in Egypt: Cambyeses had penetrated into the Jewish consciousness as the Egyptian symbol of evil. The question is, what happened after the arrival of Alexander the Great and the Ptolemaic rise to power in Egypt. Jews who were already in Egypt, as well as those that had come to Egypt during the Hellenistic period, defected *en masse* to the Greco-Macedonian side. Despite this, local traditions concerning Cambyeses still resonated in the Roman period, and many Jews learned about them<sup>27</sup>. Nonetheless, it seems that in Ptolemaic Egypt, as mentioned above, Cambyeses was not a particularly interesting figure to either the Greeks or the Jews. In fact, this not only applies to Egypt, but to Judea as well, and it is surprising that Cambyeses does not appear in the Old Testament, which mentions several Persian rulers<sup>28</sup>.

However, this Jewish silence does not necessarily imply that they had lost the knowledge of Cambyeses’ story; quite the contrary, the latter was circulated throughout the Hellenistic world in the form of Greek literature, and although it is true that there was no reason for his character to capture the interest of the Jews, Herodotus’ characterization of Cambyeses — as a godless madman who had transgressed all laws and subsequently died — acted as a paradigm<sup>29</sup>. In fact, Herodotus’ Cambyeses was mentioned quite explicitly in the Book of Daniel, which was composed during the rule of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the first half

---

<sup>24</sup> Mariev 2008, 42.

<sup>25</sup> Wallraff 2007, XLI.

<sup>26</sup> Vieillefond 1970, 41ff.; Habas 1994, against Wallraff 2007, XV–XVI.

<sup>27</sup> Many immigrating Jews, especially those from higher class families, kept their distance from local Egyptians and instead sought connections with the socially superior Hellenistic strata. However, many who came as prisoners, slaves, etc. did establish close relations with Egyptians. See *e.g.* Barclay 1995, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Identification with Ahasuerus in the Book of Ezra (4:6–24) is not sustainable, see *e.g.* Shaeder 1972, 269–270; Grabbe 1998, 17.

<sup>29</sup> For Herodotus’ work, when constructing the story of Cambyeses, his intentions and way of thinking, see Brown 1982; Balcer 1987, 70–101; Lloyd 1988 and Asheri’s introduction to the commentary of the third book in Asheri, Lloyd, Corcella 2007; for damaging *oikos* as a precondition to damaging the state, see Blok 2002, 242.

of the second century BCE<sup>30</sup>. This time was particularly difficult for the Jewish community due to some of Antiochus' regulations and actions<sup>31</sup>. The author of the Book of Daniel considered Antiochus a Jewish enemy who had transgressed Jewish laws, committed blasphemy and desecration (Dan. 7:25; 9:31, 36). He dealt with the character accordingly, starting with the real historical context, but ultimately having Antiochus pay for his actions — in the style of the Herodotus paradigm for Cambyzes. Specifically, in the Book of Daniel Antiochus embarks on a third journey to Egypt, which has no foundation in historical fact. In Egypt, Antiochus learns of problems in the East, hurries back, and dies. It is clear that this is an adaptation of the story as told by Herodotus, and the tradition preserved around Cambyzes' death is used as a model<sup>32</sup>. Thus, Cambyzes, even though he is not mentioned here, clearly served as a symbol of godlessness and of someone who had transcended all laws; his character provided a formula to deal with such figures.

It is noteworthy that, in addition to the Cambyzes motif, the Book of Daniel also features a typically Jewish symbol — Nebuchadnezzar, who in this context appears to represent the figure of Nabonidus. Apparently, the author of the biblical book used the *Prayer of Nabonidus* as the basis for his account. However, he changed the template to incorporate his own symbolism<sup>33</sup>. The transformation of the mad Nabonidus to Nebuchadnezzar in the Book of Daniel clearly indicates that the author considered Nebuchadnezzar a cultural symbol of madness, and that he played with the character in the manner of Herodotus' Cambyzes. The mad ruler is subject to his uncontrolled hubris, resulting in his downfall<sup>34</sup>. Thus, in one book, both of these symbols meet<sup>35</sup>, although Cambyzes is not mentioned explicitly. In a later period, the symbols will be merged. In this way, the Book of Daniel suggests that the Nebuchadnezzar/Cambyzes tradition, which is evidently based on the Jewish tradition and Greek sources, developed in the Jewish-Hellenistic environment.

The adoption of Cambyzes as an archetypal Jewish enemy is reflected later in the work of Josephus Flavius, who modified the Old Testament chronology from the Book of Ezra to match the Greek chronology and to make Cambyzes the ruler who stopped the construction of the temple in Jerusalem<sup>36</sup>. However, it was only possible to put Cambyzes into this position on the grounds of his reputation of a godless

---

<sup>30</sup> The book crystallized sometime before 165 AD, see Knibb 2001, 16.

<sup>31</sup> The Book of the Maccabees describes Antiochus behaving like a wild animal against Jerusalem (2. Macc. 5:11).

<sup>32</sup> See Niskanen 2004, 71–72, who focuses on this motif in Herodotus' reception of Antiochus' story in the Book of Daniel. J.C.H. Lebram (1975, 737–772) found other parallels, but not all of them are relevant, see Niskanen 2004, 69, n. 38. Lebram (1975, 769–770), also assumed that Herodotus is not quoted in the Book of Daniel, but the Egyptian tradition is. P. Niskanen (2004, 116) promoted Herodotus. In this case, I incline towards the latter option, because the context is clearly Herodotean.

<sup>33</sup> Eshel 2001, 387, with biblical references in n. 3.

<sup>34</sup> See also Henze 2001, 552.

<sup>35</sup> For more on Cambyzes or Nebuchadnezzar as a symbol of evil see Cruz-Urbe 1986, 53, primarily n. 17.

<sup>36</sup> *Ant. Jud.* XI. 2. 1–2, 19–30 adjusts the chronology in Ezra 2:15–25.

ruler, which was already well-known in the Judeo-Hellenic environment. In the view of P. Venticinque, this moment was significant in the tradition of Cambyses/Nebuchadnezzar, because both were responsible for acts against the temple, and thus were symbols of evil. This proposal of Venticinque's is compelling, but in no way does it imply that Josephus' was the only chronology that introduced Cambyses into Jewish and subsequently Christian symbolism. As I have pointed out above, the tradition in the Book of Daniel apparently had older roots reaching into the Hellenistic period and possibly beyond. Thus, this tradition did not originate with Flavius Josephus. Instead, his view of Cambyses is only symptomatic — it indicates that this tradition already existed in some form in the Jewish environment.

By analyzing Cambyses/Nebuchadnezzar, we have addressed part of the material contained in the *Romance*. It is clear that anonymous author was either a Jew himself, or that he was familiar with the Jewish tradition or with Africanus (or some of his followers).

The following question remains: how important was the role of classical traditions within the *Romance* itself? O. von Lemm and H. Jansen were certain that Herodotus had directly influenced the authors; however, they could not explain the fact that the *Romance* lacks any direct connection with *The Histories* of Herodotus. Cruz-Urbe, as I have mentioned, did not doubt Herodotus' influence either, mainly because Apis and Cambyses were juxtaposed in the text; after all, it was Herodotus who had "glorified" Cambyses' murder of the sacred bull. Other authors realized that Herodotus had only a very small influence on the *Romance*<sup>37</sup>, others claimed that this had no influence<sup>38</sup>, and I agree to a large extent. In my opinion, the attitude towards Herodotean influence is rooted in anachronistic assumptions. It attempts to apply a modern understanding to the historical and cultural context of the writer of the *Romance*, namely, that Herodotus had an omnipresent influence on the ancient conception of Cambyses. After all, we learn about Cambyses from Herodotus and therefore assume that the traditions contained within the *Romance* were formed on the same basis. In this way, we apply our own understanding to a different environment in a different era. We also forget that Herodotus did not fabricate the story of Cambyses; of course, he modified it to fit his worldview in the spirit of Ionian rationalism<sup>39</sup>, but he based it on reports that undoubtedly came from Egypt. Therefore, I see no reason to search for Herodotean roots in a tradition that arose in Egypt, even though the historian was well known in the ancient world; indeed, a considerable space in the library of Alexandria was devoted to his writings. Rather, I would suggest that the tradition articulated in the *Romance* depicts an image of Cambyses that was engraved into the collective memory of the Egyptians as a result of the Persian ruler's attack of 525 BCE, namely, that he was first and foremost a desecrating madman, the incarnation of all evil. His attack had serious consequences for the Egyptians. For example, Herodotus stated that the Libyans, Cyrenians, and Barcans submitted voluntarily to vassalship out of fear of what had happened to the Egyptians. The Greek historian claimed that this testified

---

<sup>37</sup> Hoffmann 1981, 199; Lloyd 1994, 196; Döpp 2003, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Ladynin, Nemirovskiy 2004; Banskchikova 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Habaj 2016, 11–21.

to the harshness of the Persian attack (Hdt. III. 13). The advancing victors left behind them the bodies of those they had executed (Hdt. III. 13)<sup>40</sup>. John of Nikiu in his *Chronicle* (LI. 25) describes the conquest of the country in a literary fashion, although his depiction is not without a historical core. In his interpretation, the takeover of Egypt was accompanied by murder and bloodshed. In their conquest, the Persians had no respect for sacred ground, as is evidenced in Udjahorresnet's autobiography when he describes what happened in the temple of Neith in Sais<sup>41</sup>. Cambyses' men took over the temple and occupied it. Diodorus also mentioned that Cambyses had burned down temples (I. 46. 4.), and Ammianus Marcellinus later wrote that the Persian king had pillaged the temple in Thebes (XVII. 4. 3.). St. Jerome reported that Cambyses had carried 2,500 statues away from Egypt, and archeologists discovered many of these stolen objects in Persepolis and Susa<sup>42</sup>. In addition to precious objects, people also left the country. Ctesias (F 13 (30) reported that 6,000 Egyptians had been transported to Susa, and Dandamaev discovered evidence in Babylonian cuneiform tablets that the captured Egyptians had been removed to Babylon<sup>43</sup>. As the Persian attack had led to such serious consequences, Cambyses became the incarnation of all evil that was threatening the country. This representation of the Persian ruler can be seen in Herodotus' histories, as well as in the Greek and Latin inscriptions on the Colossus of Memnon, which speak of Cambyses as a godless barbarian<sup>44</sup> and an arrogant ruler<sup>45</sup>. It is evident that the Egyptians saw him this way. He influenced the religious life in many temples in the country, many key posts in the governments were occupied by Persians, and a number of important positions arose as a result of Cambyses' attack on the country: the office of high priest in Memphis, the position of vizier, high-priestly positions in Thebes, and that of governor of Upper Egypt<sup>46</sup>. The arrival of an extensive military force, obligatory tributes, and changes in administration almost certainly affected all classes of society. Cambyses' notoriety persisted in the minds of a broad range of groups in Egypt. The stories of Cambyses' invasion survived into subsequent periods. In fact, they spread on, and through local tradition, events that had occurred in other periods were attributed to Cambyses. For instance, Strabo (XVII. 1. 21) learned in Heliopolis that local temples had been destroyed, especially under Cambyses. Julia Balbilla, a Roman aristocrat and a writer who accompanied Hadrian on his journey to Thebes in AD 130, provides another example. Balbilla inscribed four Greek epigrams on Memnon's Colossi; in one of them she wrote that Cambyses had cut the tongue and ears off the statue<sup>47</sup>. The reports of Cambyses from Thebes were also recorded by Ammianus Marcellinus (XVII. 4. 3), who wrote that the Persians had plundered the city during Cambyses' invasion.

---

<sup>40</sup> See Briant 2002, 59–60.

<sup>41</sup> Posener 1936, n. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Schmidt 1953, 25, 182.

<sup>43</sup> Dandamaev 1989, 73.

<sup>44</sup> Bernand 1960, n. 29, l. 9–10.

<sup>45</sup> Bernand 1960, n. 72, l. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Habaj 2016, 156–157.

<sup>47</sup> Bernand 1960, n. 29, 9–12.

However, the *Romance* may not simply have been a story of Cambyses' territorial expansion, the rumors of which circulated throughout Egypt in various forms. Indeed, Ladynin and Nemirovsky noted that the Egyptian tradition may also have given rise to the character of Nebuchadnezzar, as well as to the conflation of the Cambyses and Nebuchadnezzar characters and the elements of the *Romance* that concern their military missions. For example, the two authors observed that in the *Chronicle* of John of Nikiu it is Cambyses who kills Apries, even though the latter was a contemporary of Nebuchadnezzar rather than Cambyses<sup>48</sup>. Banschikova emphasized this point further by mentioning that in John of Nikiu's *Chronicle* Cambyses leads two wars in Egypt<sup>49</sup>. Before the first of these, he destroyed Jerusalem; he then killed Apries. These elements imply that the story is referencing Nebuchadnezzar. In addition, during his description of the first war, John of Nikiu feels the need to mention that Cambyses was a second Nebuchadnezzar. The story of the second war may have arisen from traditions surrounding the invasion of Cambyses. Thus, according to Banschikova, the hybrid Cambyses/Nebuchadnezzar character arose from the conflation of narrative elements of the military escapades of both rulers in Egypt<sup>50</sup>. At the same time, Banschikova assumes that it was the Egyptian tradition that allowed these two characters to be conflated. After all, this tradition sought to emphasize Nebuchadnezzar's significance in the country, as indicated in the depiction of Nebuchadnezzar that appears in the work of Josephus Flavius<sup>51</sup>.

It is likely that, to a certain extent, some elements associated with Nebuchadnezzar's conflict with Egypt were circulating<sup>52</sup>. However, in my opinion, the conflation of Nebuchadnezzar and Cambyses arose in a Jewish context (as I explained above), within which the Nebuchadnezzar motif was well known. At the time of Nebuchadnezzar's aggression, there was already a Jewish diaspora community living in Egypt, and they were surely more sensitive to the theme of a Babylonian attack, because Jerusalem and Judea had fallen to Babylonian aggression only a few years earlier. Thus, the Jewish environment could exaggerate the news of Babylonian forays to the point<sup>53</sup> where Nebuchadnezzar's expansion had been conflated with that of Cambyses. This created a situation in which individual elements of both conflicts were blended together. Later, in the Hellenistic period, the characters themselves were conflated, under the influence of Herodotus.

---

<sup>48</sup> Ladynin, Nemirovskiy 2004, 69.

<sup>49</sup> Banschikova 2015, 61.

<sup>50</sup> Banschikova 2015, 63.

<sup>51</sup> Banschikova 2015, 66.

<sup>52</sup> I do not assume (*contra* Ladynin and Nemirovsky) that Nabuchadnezzar invaded Egypt itself, but some conflict with Egypt is likely. See *e.g.* Wiseman 2006, 236.

<sup>53</sup> In several parts of the Old Testament, Nebuchadnezzar is represented as the great enemy and destroyer of Egypt, as described by I. Ladynin and A. Nemirovsky (2004, *e.g.* 65). The authors present this as evidence of Nebuchadnezzar's military mission in Egypt (568/567 BCE). Thus, their goals when using these texts are different from my own, but the context is the same, particularly when they try to show how the Jewish tradition approached Nebuchadnezzar in an Egyptian context.



On the basis of the arguments mentioned above, it would appear that the *Cambyses Romance* arose from a tradition that was itself formed within several different historical contexts: those of the Babylonian aggression, the Persian expedition, Egyptian literary tradition, and the multiethnic Egyptian environment. The story is further complicated by the fact that, although its main elements are based on traditions that were preserved in Egypt in a predominantly Jewish context, various elements, such as the aforementioned conflation of the Cambyses and Nebuchadnezzar characters, clearly arose during the Hellenistic period in the spirit of Greek literature.

## References

- Asheri, D., Lloyd, A., Corcella, A. 2007: *Commentary on Herodotus Books I–IV*. Oxford.
- Balcer, J. 1987: *Herodotus and Bisitun*. Stuttgart.
- Banshchikova, A.A. 2015: *Perelomnye epokhi v istoricheskoy traditsii i soznanii drevnikh egiptyan* [Crucial Periods in Ancient Egyptian Historical Tradition and Consciousness]. Moscow.
- Баншикова, А.А. Переломные эпохи в исторической традиции и сознании древних египтян. Москва.
- Barclay, J. 1995: *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*. Edinburgh.
- Bernand, É. 1960: *Les inscriptions grecques et latines du colosse de Memnon*. Paris.
- Blok, J. 2002: Women in Herodotus' Histoire. In: E. Bakker, I. De Jong, H. Wees (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Herodotus*. Leiden, 225–245.
- Briant, P. 2002: *From Cyrus to Alexander. A History of the Persian Empire*. Winona Lake (Indiana).
- Brown, T. 1982: On Herodotus Portrait of Cambyses. *Historia* 31, 387–403.
- Colin, G. 1995: L'Egypte pharaonique dans la Chronique de Jean, évêque de Nikiu. *Revue d'Egyptologie* 46, 45–53.
- Cruz-Uribe, E. 1986: Notes on the Coptic Cambyses romance. *Enchoria* 14, 51–56.
- Dandamaev, M. 1989: *A Political History of the Achaemenid Empire*. Leiden.
- Döpp, S. 2003: Kambyses' Feldzug gegen Ägypten: Der sogenannte Kambyses-Roman und sein Verhältnis zu griechischer Literatur. *Göttinger Forum für Altertumswissenschaft* 6, 1–17.
- Eshel, E. 2001: Possible Sources of the Book of Daniel. In: J. Collins, P. Flint (eds.), *The Book of Daniel. Composition and Reception*. Leiden–Boston–Köln, 387–395.
- Gelzer, H. 1898: *Sextus Julius Africanus und die byzantinische Chronographie*. Leipzig.
- Grabbe, L. 1998. *Ezra — Nehemiah*. London.
- Habaj, M. 2016. *Kambyśes II. Od tradície k histórii*. Krakov.
- Habas, R. 1994: The Jewish Origin of Julius Africanus. *Journal of Jewish Studies* 45, 86–91.
- Henze, M. Nabuchadnezzar's Madness (Daniel 4) in Syriac Literature. In: J. Collins, P. Flint (eds.), *The Book of Daniel. Composition and Reception*. Leiden–Boston–Köln, 550–573.
- Hoffmann, I. 1981: Kambyses in Ägypten. *Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur* 9, 179–201.
- Jansen, H. 1950: The coptic story of Cambyses' invasion of Egypt. A critical analysis of its literary form and its historical purpose. *Avhandlingar utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi i Oslo* 2, 1–70.
- Knibb, M. 2001: The Book of Daniel in its Context. In: J. Collins, P. Flint (eds.), *The Book of Daniel. Composition and Reception*. Leiden–Boston–Köln, 16–37.
- Ladynin, I.A., Nemirovskiy, A.A. 2004: [567 BC campaign of Nabuchadnezzar II in Egypt in Egyptian and Old Testament tradition]. In: E.E. Kormysheva (ed.), *Kul'turnoe nasledie Egipta i khristianskiy Vostok* [Cultural Heritage of Egypt and Christian Orient]. Moscow, 63–76.
- Ладынин, И. А., Немировский, А.А. Поход Навуходоносор II на Египет 567 г. до н.э. в сведениях египетской и ветхозаветной традиций (Предварительные замечания). В кн.: Э.Е. Кормышева (ред.), *Культурное наследие Египта и христианский Восток*. Москва, 63–76.
- Lebram, J.C.H. 1975: König Antiochus im Buch Daniel. *Vetus Testamentum* 25, 737–772.



- Lemm, O. von 1900: Bemerkungen zum koptischen Kambyseßroman. Kleine koptische Studien. *Bulletin de l'Académie imperiale des sciences de St. Petersbourg* 8, 64–115.
- Lloyd, A. 1994: Cambyseß in late tradition. In: C. Eyre, A. Leahy, L. Montagno Leahy (eds.), *The unbroken reed. Studies in the culture and heritage of ancient Egypt in honour of A.F. Shore*. London, 195–204.
- Mariev, S. 2008: *Ioannis Antiocheni fragmenta quae supersunt omnia*. Berolini–Novi Eboraci.
- Niskanen, P. 2004: *The Human and Divine in History. Herodotus and the Book of Daniel*. London.
- Posener, G. 1936: *La première domination Perse en Égypte*. Le Caire.
- Richter, T.S. 1998: Weitere Beobachtungen am koptischen Kambyseß-Roman. *Enchoria* 24, 54–66.
- Shaeder, H. 1972: *Iranische Beiträge*. Tübingen.
- Schäfer, H. 1899: *Bruchstück eines koptischen Romans über die Eroberung Aegyptens durch Kambyseß*. Berlin.
- Schmidt, E. 1953: *Persepolis*. Chicago.
- Thissen, H.J. 1996: Bemerkungen zum koptischen Kambyseß-Roman. *Enchoria* 23, 145–149.
- Venticinque, P. 2006: What's in a Name? Greek, Egyptian and Biblical Traditions in the Cambyseß Romance. *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 43, 139–158.
- Vieillefond, J.R. 1970: *Cesti*. Firenze.
- Wallraff, M. 2007: *Iulius Africanus Chronographiae*. Berlin–New York.
- Wiseman, D.J. 2006: Babylonia 605–539 B.C. In: J. Boardman et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*. Vol. 3. Pt. 2. Cambridge, 229–252.