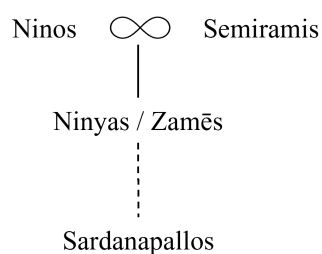


91) On the historicity of the Assyrian royal family in Classical and Byzantine historiography —



***Figure 1. Ninos' family
in Classical sources***

Assyria's imperial ascent and decline was envisaged by Classical authors as a family drama (Fig. 1). In Diodōros (*Bibliotheca historica* 2.1.1–28.8), Ninos is founder of Assyria and the city *Ninos* (Ninūa, i.e. Naynawā, Iraq), marrying the doughty Semiramis, who bears him, in turn, the slothful Ninyas (later equated with one *Zamēs*). Upon Ninos' death, Semiramis energetically rules Assyria through her son before her own abrupt disappearance (or demise), after which Ninyas leads a cloistered palatial existence, delegating governance to eunuchs. After generations of unaccomplished kings, Assyria finally falls to Medo-Babylonian rebellion in Sardanapallos' scandalous reign.

This narrative belies various confused Greek traditions—consider Hēllanikos’ two *Sardanapalloi* (BNJ 4 f63b), Kastōr of Rhodos’ bookending of the dynasty with *Ninōi* (BNJ 250 f1a), or Phoinix of Kolophōn ascribing Ninos Sardanapallian vice (Gerhard 1909: 184–185). In turn, traditions of Ninyas’ incest with Semiramis might be explained by conflation of the names *Ninos* and *Ninyas*—the latter seems a diminutive of the former. For all these accounts’ fancy, comparison with the actual Assyrian royal family from the 9th to 8th centuries BC (Fig. 2) does yield an historical kern.

Like Semiramis with Ninyas, Sammu-rāmat ruled during her son Adad-nārārī III’s minority (*ina šelprīšu*, RIMA 3, 0.104.1: 2), even campaigning alongside him (RIMA 3, 0.104.3). Like Ninyas, Adad-nārārī III’s adult reign was sequestered, and dominated by eunuchs, particularly his probable half-brother Šamši-ilu, who *de facto* ruled Assyria for nigh forty years as field marshal (*turtānu*)—explaining later equations of Ninyas with one *Zamēs* (or *Zamesea*)—until a prince Pūlu took the throne as Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* in 745 (Edmonds 2025: 141–162). Ninos, the *pater familias et imperi*, could be equated with Sammu-rāmat’s spouse Šamši-Adad V, whose early life has parallels in the Ninos and Semiramis-romance (Edmonds 2025: 99), and whose untimely death reminds of that of Ninos according to Paulus Orosius (*Historiarum adversum paganos* 1.4.3). Yet, a Ninos/Ninyas-analogy also evokes Adad-nārārī II, a patron of Ninūa and the early Neo-Assyrian state’s emic founder (Edmonds 2025: 117–122). Finally, Sardanapallos conflates the empire’s terminal rulers, as seen in his various deaths: Self-immolation (e.g. Ktēsias BNJ 688 f1pα) courtesy of Šamaš-šuma-ukīn; death in exile (Kleitarchos BNJ 137 f2) according with that of Aššur-uballiṭ “III” (*pace* Reade 2024; for Aššur-uballiṭ II*, see Edmonds 2025: 113–119); or murder at a Mede’s hands (Douris BNJ 76 f42) ... as befell Aššur-bāni-apli?

The 6th-century AD Syrian Iōannēs Malalas supplies a late and complex Assyrian dynasty in his *Chronographia* (1.8–12), incorporating a 4th-century AD euhemerising equation with Graeco-Roman gods (Garstad 2002’s ‘Picus-Zeus narrative’), but also biblical and other easter genealogies. It presents seven Assyrian kings: **Damnōs/Kronos – Pikos/Zeus – Bēlos – Ninos – Thouras/Ares/Bēlos – Lamēs – Sardanapalos** (Fig. 3).

Malalas has elaborated on an earlier, simpler account preserved in the 8th-century AD *Excerpta latina barbari* (1.6.1), whereby Pikos/Zeus is equated with Ninos, and Semiramis/Rhea (ruling in her own right) corresponds to Hēra. Its list of 39 Assyrian kings (2.1.2–3) begins **Bilus – Ninos/Picus – Semiramis/Rea – Zanis – Arius – Aranus – Xerses/Balleus** (...), but lacks Malalas’ mysterious Thouras and Lamēs, who thus warrant further investigation (*Chronographia* 1.12; Gk: Thurn 2000: 12–13; Engl. after Jeffreys et al. 1986: 8):

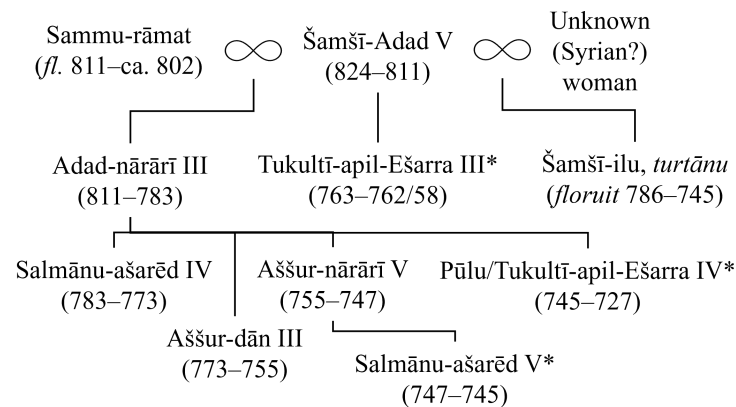


Figure 2. The Assyrian royal family 824–727 (after EDMONDS 2025)

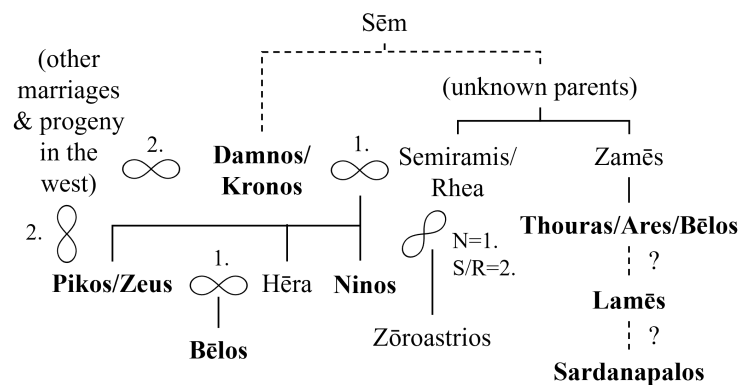


Figure 3. The Assyrian dynasty according to Iōannēs Malalas’ *Chronographia*

Μετά δὲ Νίνον ἐβασίλευσεν Ἀσσυρίων Θούρας ὀνόματι, ὅντινα μετεκάλεσεν ὁ τοῦτου πατὴρ Ζάμης, ὁ τῆς Ῥέας ἀδελφός, εἰς ὄνομα τοῦ πλανήτου ἀστέρος Ἄρεα. οὗτος ἐγένετο πικρὸς πολεμιστής, ὅστις ἐπολέμησεν ἐπὶ τὰ ἀρκτῶα μέρη. ἐπελθὼν Καυκάσῳ τινὶ καὶ αὐτῷ δυνατῷ ἀνθρώπῳ γιγαντογενεὶ καὶ πολεμικώτατῳ, καταχθέντι ἐκ τῆς φυλῆς τοῦ Ἰάφεθ, τοῦ υἱοῦ Νῶε, καὶ πολέμησας τὸν αὐτὸν Καύκασον ἐνίκησεν αὐτὸν καὶ ἔλαβεν τὴν αὐτοῦ χώραν. καὶ ἐλθὼν ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ ἐκεῖ τελεντήσας κεῖται. ὅτινι Ἀρεὶ ἀνέστησαν πρώτην στήλην οἱ Ἀσσύριοι καὶ ὡς θεὸν προσεκύνουν αὐτόν, ὃν καὶ εἰς τὴν νῦν καλοῦσι περσιστὶ τὸν Βάαλ θεόν, ὃ ἐστὶν ἐρμηνευόμενον Ἄρης πολέμων θεός. τοῦτου μνημονεύει <ῤ> προφητικὴ φωνὴ τοῦ Δανιὴλ καὶ τῶν γ' παίδων, ὅτι ἡναγκάζοντο προσκυνεῖν αὐτῷ. καὶ μετὰ τὴν τελευτὴν Ἀρεως ἐβασίλευσεν ὁ Λάμης καὶ μετὰ Λάμην ἐβασίλευσεν Ἀσσυρίων Σαρδανάπαλος ὁ μέγας, ὅντινα Περσεὺς ὁ Δανάης ἐφόνευσεν καὶ ἀφείλατο τὴν βασιλείαν ἀπὸ Ἀσσυρίων. καὶ βασιλεύσας αὐτῶν εἰς τὸ ἴδιον αὐτοῦ ὄνομα ἐπεκάλεσεν αὐτοὺς Πέρσας. ἅτινα συνεγράψατο Μεμβρόνιος Βαβυλώνιος Πέρσαις.

After Ninus, one named Thouras reigned over the Assyrians. His father Zamēs, the brother of Rhea, renamed him Ares, after the planet. He became a savage fighting man, who campaigned against the northern regions. He attacked a certain Kaukasos, who was also a strong man of the race of the giants and very warlike; he was descended from the tribe of Iapheth, son of Nōe. Thouras fought Kaukasos, defeated him, and took possession of his land. He came to Thrace where he died and is buried. It was to Ares that the Assyrians erected the first statue, and they worshipped him as a god; to this day, they call him the god Baal in Persian, which means when translated “Ares, the warrior god”. The prophetic words of Daniēl and the three young men refer to him, saying that they were forced to worship him. After the death of Ares, Lamēs reigned, and after Lamēs the Assyrians were ruled by Sardanapalos the Great, whom Perseus, the son of Danaē, slew and took the empire from the Assyrians. When he had become their ruler, he named them Persians after himself, as Membrōnios (var. Semerōnios) of Babylōn has written for the Persians.

Malalas’ Ninus marries his own mother Semiramis (echoing Ninyas), and is succeeded by his brother-in-law Zamēs’ son Thouras. Spelt Θούρας, Θούρρας, Θούρος, Θύρας, and Θάρρας in Malalas’ epigones (Thurn 2000: 12), Thouras’ identification with Ares rests on assonance with the god’s Homeric epithet θούρος ‘impetuous’ (van Beek 2022: 256–257); Hēraklēs’ giant opponent *Thouros* is also born of this epicleresis (Kruse 1936). Thouras’ Thracian death plays on Ares-lore, and his assonance with biblical Tīrās (as *Theirēs*, the Thracian progenitor in Flavius Josephus’ *Antiquitates Iudaicae* 1.6.1). Thouras’ foe Kaukasos endures in Georgian chronicles as *K’avk’avsosi* (კავკასოსი), seventh son of *Targamosi* (თარგამოსი, biblical *Togarmā*) (Rapp 2014).

Table 1. *Pūlu*’s attestations (compare Brinkman, 1968: 240–241, fn. 1544)

Language	Writing	Source
Akkadian	^m <i>pu-lu</i>	Babylonian King List A iv 8
Armenian	Փուղնու (<i>Powlos</i>)	Berōssos (BNJ 680 f5a)
Hebrew	<i>pwl</i>	1 Chron. 5:26; 2 Kings 15:19
Greek	Φουλ	4 Kings 15:19
	Φάλυχ, var. Φάλυς	1 Paralipomenon 5:26
	Πώρος, var. Πόρος	Ptolemaic Canon
	Φούλος, vars. Φούλλος, Φύλος	Fl. Josephus, <i>Ant. Iud.</i> 9.9
	Πύλας, var. Πύας	Fl. Josephus, <i>Ant. Iud.</i> 9.
Latin	<i>Phoiulus</i>	Fl. Josephus, <i>Ant. Iud.</i> 9.9
Phoenician	<i>pʿl</i>	İncirli Stele: 1

As Ninus/Ninyas’ successor, Thouras could correspond to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*, son of Adad-nārārī III (Ninyas) and toppler of Šamšī-ilu (Zamēs). His unstable name *Thouras* resembles Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s by-name *Pūlu*, which might have attained its Byzantine form through further development of its demonstrable spirantisating and rhotising tendencies (Tab. 1). Thouras besting Kaukasos would then echo Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s victories over Sarduri II of Urartu, and his worship as a statue of Ba’al would recall not only Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s unique creation of a golden statue of himself and the gods at Ḥazzat (Ġazza, Palestine) in 732 (RINAP 1, TP 42: 10’–12’; 48: 16’–17’; 49 r. 13’–15’), but also SAA 20, 49: 12’s curious mention of a “Tukultī-apil-Ešarra’s statue” (nu ^m*tukul-ti-a-é-šār-ra*, note the name’s NA spelling) among those of the gods in the Aššur-temple’s *sanctum sanctorum*.

The identity of Malalas' next-to-last Assyrian king Lamēs is suggested by Perseus' defeat of his successor (*Chronographia* 2.13–19), initiating the Persian Empire (Garstad 2014). This name bears a neat assonance with the first element of the Neo-Babylonian Empire's penultimate ruler Lâbāši-Marduk, Berōssos' (BNJ 680 f9a) *Laborosoardocho* (Λαβοροσοάρχοδος), leaving Nabû-na'id as Sardanapalos "the Great". Perhaps Membrōnios/Semerōnios of Babylōn (BNJ₂ 686) is Malalas' source for Thouras and Lamēs—if a Syriac author, confusion between initial *mīm* and *semkaṭ* could explain his confused Greek name. Regardless, even for garbled Classical accounts, these findings suggest keener historical memory of Assyria than erst thought. Work must begin anew.

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