The Idea of an Archetype in Texts Stemming from the Empire Founded by Cyrus

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The Idea of an Archetype in Texts Stemming from the Empire Founded by Cyrus

Gregory Nagy

Dedicated to Anthony M. Snodgrass

Introduction

The text of the so-called Cyrus Cylinder, as well as other writings that stem from the Persian Empire founded by Cyrus the Great, is based the idea of an archetype. When I say archetype here, I have in mind a text that is meant as a model for other texts that serve as copies of this model. As we will see, the idea of such a model text does not necessarily match the reality of an original text that is copied.

What I just said seems at first to be self-evident, since the act of copying something does not require the copying of an original. What you are copying may already be a copy. But the very idea of an archetype is not self-evident. As I will argue, this idea goes beyond the reality of some text that someone copies for the first time in order to make another text, which can then be copied again to make still another text, and so on.¹

When I say idea here, I will try to keep in mind the Theory of Forms as expounded in Plato's Republic and elsewhere, since the original Greek word idea is the primary term used by Plato’s Socrates for what we translate as Form. In terms of this theory, what is for us the real world is a mere copy of the ideal world of Forms, and, further, whatever we find in our world that we want to represent by way of picturing it in images or in words is a mere copy of a copy. So, if we applied Plato’s Theory of Forms to the idea of an archetype, we would be speaking of an ideal text existing in an ideal world. And, in terms of my argument, the text of the Cyrus

¹ My own text here is dedicated to my friend Anthony Snodgrass.
Cylinder was once upon a time considered to be such an ideal text, such an archetype.\(^2\) Or, to
say it from an anthropological point of view, the text of the Cyrus Cylinder was considered to
be an archetype because it was meant to be a cosmic model that was absolutized by its
ritualized meaning, lending its ritual authority to all copies made and used by the enforcers of
the Persian Empire in a wide variety of situations.

Besides the text of the Cyrus Cylinder, another example that I will cite is the Bisotun
Inscription. And, for a “reality check,” I will compare the contents of these two texts stemming
from the Persian Empire with relevant reportage from the Greek historian Herodotus.

Before I can begin my argumentation, however, I need to explain briefly how I got
interested in ideas about textual archetypes in the first place. It all started for me with
Homeric poetry, which I have studied in many projects over the years. The textual history of
this poetry, as I learned from my studies, needed to be analyzed in the context of the oral
traditions that shaped the compositions that we know as the \textit{Iliad} and \textit{Odyssey}. And such
analysis led me to conclude that no archetype could be reconstructed for this poetry. I needed
to reconcile such a conclusion, however, with a historical fact about the reception of Homeric
poetry in the ancient Greek world. The fact is, the mythmaking about this poetry is based on
the idea of a textual archetype, even if the reality of such an archetype is an impossibility. In
the course of my research, I was able to show that this idea is mythologized in a variety of
ancient Greek stories about a preclassical event known today as the Peisistratean Recension. In
these variations on a theme of textual genesis, I found, an oral tradition was aetiologizing itself
as a written tradition that supposedly goes back to a unitary archetype.\(^3\)

\(^2\) My thinking on the term \textit{archetype} has been enhanced by new perspectives that I derived from lively debates
with Shaye Cohen.

\(^3\) For a summary of my analysis of the so-called Peisistratean Recension, see Nagy 2010:314-325. For a comparable
approach to research on the mythological aetiologies of the Iranian \textit{Avesta}, I cite Skjærvø 2005.
But I will not dwell on Homer and the Peisistratean Recension here. Instead, I concentrate on the very idea of a unitary archetype. A case in point is the Rule of Saint Benedict.\textsuperscript{4} The Rule was written down in the sixth century CE, and Benedict’s manuscript was preserved at Monte Cassino by the Benedictine Order until 896 CE, when it was destroyed in a fire. An “improved” version of the Rule, known as the traditio moderna, was evolving ever since the inception of the text in the sixth century till the end of the eighth century. At that point, Charlemagne himself visited Monte Cassino and acquired a text copied from the original manuscript. This copy of the original Rule, which was much closer to the text as it originally existed in the sixth century, then became “the basis for the diffusion of the text throughout the reformed monasteries of the Carolingian kingdom.”\textsuperscript{5} Ironically, however, “the concern for the establishment of an accurate text led copyists to insert into the margins readings from the traditio moderna, thus recorrupting the text away from Benedict’s original.”\textsuperscript{6}

From this example, where we do have historical evidence for the existence of an original text that was used for making copies of further texts, we can see that any original text, as a historical reality, is not necessarily the same thing as an archetype, which is an idea that drives the need for making copies.

**The Cyrus Cylinder as a foundation deposit**

That said, I can now begin with my argumentation, focusing on the text of the Cyrus Cylinder as a notional archetype. The text was written on an object shaped like a “cylinder,” and the object itself is an example of what archaeologists call a foundation deposit. From an archaeological point of view, the purpose of this object is spelled out in the expression that

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\textsuperscript{5} Zetzel 1993:103.

\textsuperscript{6} Zetzel 1993:103.
archaeologists use in referring to it, *foundation deposit*. That is, a foundation deposit was an object meant to be deposited - and the place for such an act of depositing was the *foundation* of a building. From the standpoint of Mesopotamian archaeology writ large, the object to be deposited was embedded either in the city wall or in the foundations of a particularly important building, which was generally a temple.\(^7\) In the case of the object known as the Cyrus Cylinder, found in the nineteenth century at the ancient site of the great city of Babylon, the precise location of the original find cannot be ascertained, but the best guess is that this cylinder had been deposited within the temple-complex of Marduk, primary god of the Babylonians, or alternatively, inside the inner wall of the city; this guess is strongly supported by attestations of other Mesopotamian foundation deposits shaped like a “cylinder” and featuring inscriptions parallel in content to the inscription written on the Cyrus Cylinder.\(^8\)

So far, then, we have ascertained that the Cyrus Cylinder is a *foundation deposit* because it had been deposited as an object that served the purpose of a foundation. From an anthropological point of view, however, it is not enough to speak of this foundation as an *architectural* foundation of the inner wall of Babylon, or more specifically, of the sacred enclosure identified as the Temple of Marduk in this city. There is more to it, much more. The depositing of the Cyrus Cylinder as a foundation deposit was thought to be the very act of foundation. Or, to say it more precisely, the act of depositing the Cyrus Cylinder as a foundation deposit was thought to be the very act of re-founding a foundation.

This way of thinking is made clear by the text of the inscription written into the surface of the Cyrus Cylinder. The text proclaims that the historical occasion for the depositing of this foundation deposit was the conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE by the king of the Persians, Cyrus

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\(^7\) Finkel 2013:64. See in general Ellis 1968. For me the ideal introduction to the concept of foundation deposits is the concise analysis of Steinkeller 2004:135-137.

\(^8\) Finkel 2013:64-65.
the Great, and that this conquest was to be viewed as an act of *re-founding* the temple of Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonians. And why was there a need for a re-founding? The text of the Cyrus Cylinder gives an answer at lines 4-19. I paraphrase here: the temple of Marduk needed a re-founding, a restoration, because the rituals of worshipping this all-important god of Babylon had been supposedly abused by Nabonidus, the last native king of the Babylonians. At a later point, we will consider how Nabonidus abused Marduk. For now, I highlight only the god’s reaction: according to the text, Marduk was so angered by the persistent abuse of his rituals by Nabonidus that he summoned Cyrus, king of the Persians, to overthrow the king of Babylon, to occupy the city, and to restore the correctness of the rituals of worship that the god required. Notionally, Marduk is the divine initiator of the entire narrative about the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Persian.

Then, starting at line 20 of the Cyrus Cylinder, the great king Cyrus himself is quoted as making a proclamation in the first person. He proclaims that he has enhanced the rituals and the buildings of Babylon. At line 38, it is specified that Cyrus ‘strengthened’ the inner wall of Babylon, named Imgur-Enlil, and, after further details at lines 39-41, the perspective of the proclamation starts to zoom in, as it were, on the spectacle of the Temple of Marduk. Starting around lines 42 and 43, the text proceeds to give details about the renovating of the temple. Unfortunately, the lines here are too fragmentary to allow any precise translation or interpretation, but the readable details are quite striking: mentioned at line 42 are doors made of cedar wood overlaid with bronze, and then, at line 43, the description goes on to boast about the installation of the doors, of threshold slabs, and of door fittings made of copper.

Here I go back for a moment to an earlier part of the proclamation on the Cyrus Cylinder, starting at line 38, where we see a description of restoration work done on the great Inner Wall named Imgur-Enlil: some have taken this description to include the details about doors and
threshold slabs described in line 43. In terms of my analysis here, however, the description of restoration work done on the Inner Wall comes to a close at line 41, and, starting at line 42, the details come from a focused description of restoration work done specifically on the temple of Marduk. The details of this description come to a close at line 43, followed by the words of a prayer to be spoken directly by Cyrus to the god Marduk at lines 44-45. The prayer is in turn followed by the signature of the scribe, whose name is, most appropriately, Qīšti-Marduk, which means ‘Gift of Marduk’. On the basis of the overall contextual evidence, then, I maintain that the wording at lines 42 and 43 about the site that is being restored refers to the temple of Marduk.

In the context of lines 42 and 43 of the Cylinder, where the architectural restorations are being described, the text of the inscription goes on to say, in the first person, that Cyrus himself saw an inscription written on an earlier foundation deposit that was located within the space where the renovation was taking place. Here is a translation of the relevant wording: ‘I saw within it an inscription of Assurbanipal, a king who preceded me’. This reference to Assurbanipal, the last great king of Assyria (685-627 BCE), acknowledges the historical fact that this earlier king had also occupied Babylon and had undertaken projects of restoring buildings in the city. In terms of my analysis here, the wording that is translated as ‘within it’ in the Babylonian text refers specifically to the temple complex of Marduk, not to the general area of the Inner Wall, as the site where the earlier foundation deposit of Assurbanipal was found and supposedly seen personally by Cyrus.

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9 For a reference to this view, see Finkel 2013:26.
10 See Michalowski 2014, who argues persuasively that this reference to Assurbanipal in the text of the Cyrus Cylinder is one of many signs indicating an active adoption of Mesopotamian and even Assyrian precedents on the part of Cyrus.
On the basis of what we have seen so far, the Cyrus Cylinder as a foundation deposit is linked not only to specific parts of the city wall but also to the temple of Marduk. As I will go on to argue, this foundation deposit is thus *sacralized* because it is connected to the sacred temple.

**Sacral metonymy**

The idea that an object can be sacralized by way of being connected to something that is sacred, like a temple, can be explained in terms of a rhetorical concept, metonymy. Here is my cross-cultural definition of this concept: *metonymy is an extension of meaning by way of physical or at least notional contact or connectivity.*\(^\text{11}\) When X makes contact with Y, then a part of the meaning of X can extend to the meaning of Y. So, when something that is inherently sacred makes contact with something else, then the sacredness can extend to that something else. Such an extension of sacredness, or sacralization, is what I am calling *sacral metonymy*.

Within the framework of my interpretation so far, I am arguing that the wall of a city could be viewed as sacred to a god or goddess whose sacred space was contiguous with or even merely contained within this city wall. And then I will extend the interpretation: I will argue that, in terms of sacral metonymy, the foundation deposit for such a wall could be viewed as sacred as well.

I am well aware that this argument, as I develop it in the sections of the essay that follow this section, may not sit well with specialists in Mesopotamian civilizations, for whom the term *sacred* tends to be restricted to contexts centering on temples of gods and on the gods to whom these temples notionally belong. That is why I use the term *sacralized* as well as *sacred*. What I mean by *sacralized* is that the viewing of any given object as sacred does not mean that this object must be *inherently sacred*. Rather, the object can be sacralized in special contexts where

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\(^{11}\) Nagy 2013 4§32, 5§102, 14§16, 14§27, 15§23, 18§15.
it makes contact with the sacred. Nor do I mean to say that anything we may describe as sacred cannot be at the same time ideological and even practical. In terms of my long-term argument, the function of a foundation deposit can be ideological and practical as well as sacred.

**An example of sacral metonymy in the Gilgamesh narrative**

For a point of comparison, I highlight an example of sacral metonymy in the text of the Gilgamesh narrative. At the very beginning of the narrative, in Tablet I line 10, the text says that Gilgamesh wrote down on a stone tablet or stele the entire story of his labors or mystical sufferings; this foundational act of writing as notionally performed by Gilgamesh himself is then linked at line 11 with his foundational building of the wall of the city of Uruk and, at line 12, with the concurrent foundational act of his building the wall of Temple Eanna, described at line 16 as the sacred space of the goddess Ishtar. At lines 13-14, the text tells its listeners to look at the wall of this temple of Ishtar, and, at line 15, to ascend the stairway at the wall.

Then, after describing at lines 16-17 the temple of Ishtar as an unequaled achievement in

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12 My citations are based on the edition of George 2003.

13 As Peter Machinist points out to me, the text does not explicitly distinguish between the wall of the city of Uruk and the wall of Eanna, the sanctuary of Ishtar. He goes on to say: “Perhaps the Gilgamesh epic is somehow eliding the wall of the city of Uruk, which is normally understood by scholars to refer to the city-wide wall, of Early Dynastic 1, ca. 3000-2900 BC, with the wall of the Eanna Temple of Ishtar in the Eanna District. I wonder, therefore, whether here in the Gilgamesh Epic the wall of the Eanna Temple of Ishtar is somehow being integrated into the wall of the city of Uruk.” In Nagy 1990:144-145 = 5§16, I have studied the semantics of integration in the historical context of ancient Greek and Latin references to city walls. A case in point is the semantic chain linking the following words in Latin: moenia ‘city wall’ and mūnus ‘communal obligation’ and commūnis ‘communal’.

14 George 2003 II 781 notes: “Though Eanna is situated in the middle of Uruk, the topography of the town is such that there are stretches of city wall that take one nearer to the temple area.” Following George, I render ṣāḇātu, as ‘stairway’. As for the verb ṣāḇātu, I interpret it to mean here simply ‘make one’s way’: in this case, to make one’s way up the stairway. I thank Kathryn Slanski for showing me parallel contexts. Also, I thank Piotr Steinkeller for sharing with me a preprinted version of his forthcoming paper “The Employment of Labor on National Building Projects in the Ur III Period,” where he analyzes in some detail the contexts of references to stairways. See also Ragavan 2010:26, 101, 152-153, 229. 235.
building monumental structures, the text at lines 18-19 tells its listeners to proceed from the
temple to the city-wide wall of Uruk and to walk around up there, looking around. Described at
lines 19-23 are the wonders to be seen inside this wall containing the city of Uruk, and the
most wondrous sight of them all, at line 22, is of course the temple of Ishtar. By the time the
reader reaches the end of the narrative, at lines 322-328 of Tablet XI, Gilgamesh himself has
come back to Uruk and now invites his companion Ur-šanabi to ascend the city-wide wall to
take a look at the same wondrous sights described at the beginning of Tablet I. “In this way,” it
has been noted, “Gilgamesh’s story is rounded off by the very words that introduced it.”

The question is, what exactly is to be found there at the city wall of Uruk? In my
interpretation, the answer is given by the text itself: there at the city wall, which is contiguous
with the temple of Ishtar, is a foundation deposit that actually contains the text of the
narrative of Gilgamesh.

To back up this interpretation, I start by highlighting what is said at line 19 of the
inaugural narrative in Tablet I: here the text refers to a temennu, which is the Akkadian word
for a platform of deposition (inherited from the Sumerian word temen).

As the Gilgamesh narrative proceeds, the text at line 24 instructs the listeners to find at this site a tablet box
made of cedar. This box, described at line 25 as bound in clasps made of bronze, is then to be
opened at line 26. Inside the box is a wondrous object: described at line 27, this object is a
tablet made of lapis lazuli, and now at line 28 the text instructs its listeners to read out loud
what is said in the inscription written on this tablet about all the mystical sufferings endured
by Gilgamesh. So, in the mythological “chicken-and-egg” mentality of this set of instructions,
the words that listeners hear from the very beginning of the Gilgamesh narrative are the same

15 George 2003 I 526.
to Kathryn Slanski for advising me about the uses of this word.
words that they are now reading out loud after having opened the tablet box and having gazed upon the inscription written on the wondrous tablet made of lapis lazuli.\textsuperscript{17}

We see here a \textit{sacral metonymy} at work in the Gilgamesh narrative. First, \textit{the function of the city wall is sacralized by way of its connectedness to the sacred function of the temple}. Then, the sacral metonymy extends further: \textit{the tablet of lapis lazuli is sacralized, since it connects to the sacralization of the wall where it was deposited}. Then, the sacral metonymy extends even further: \textit{the sacralization of the deposited tablet is connected to the sacralization of the inscription written on it}. And now the words of the inscription can finally reveal to the reader the exalted meaning of an object that archaeologists classify by resorting to that colorless modern term, \textit{foundation deposit}.

I see in the inaugural words of the Gilgamesh narrative a way of thinking that links the inauguration of this narrative with the sacralized function of a foundation deposit, which is, to inaugurate a sacred building or a sacred re-building. As we can read in the historically transmitted text of this narrative, the words that inaugurate the text in Tablet I are picturing this text as an inscription written on a foundation deposit - on a tablet of lapis lazuli contained within a precious casket contained within a temple contained within the inner wall of a great city. And this tablet, as we have just seen, is inscribed with a text that notionally contains the entire Gilgamesh narrative writ large. If we follow the logic of its inaugural words, the entire Gilgamesh narrative thus mythologizes itself as a foundation deposit.

But the question remains, what is the thinking that could actually motivate such an act of self-mythologizing? My answer is simple: it is the same kind of thinking that motivates the very idea of a foundation deposit. Figured as an archetypal object, a foundation deposit needs

\textsuperscript{17} See George 2003 I 446 for a critique of literal-minded modern interpretations of this passage: for example, some interpreters are worried about the very idea that the entire Gilgamesh narrative could have been written on a single tablet made of lapis lazuli.
to express itself in words that are likewise archetypal. A comparable formulation applies in the case of the Gilgamesh narrative, which was notionally written by Gilgamesh himself and which is thus figured as an archetype: such an archetypal text needs wording that is likewise archetypal.

An Egyptian parallel

I cite here a parallel deriving from a historically unrelated context. It is a ritual object found at Tell el Yahudiya in Egypt. The object is a miniature model of a temple founded by Sety I, Pharaoh of Egypt, who ruled in the era of the 19th Dynasty, around the early 13th century BCE. Only the model has survived, not the temple itself. And the question is, why was this miniature model a ritual object?

Before I answer this question, I highlight the fact that such a model was not merely an architectural model. The precious stones from which it was made do not correspond to the actual material used for the building of a temple, and, besides, the only part of the temple that the model represents is the façade. That said, I return to the question, why was this miniature model a ritual object? And the answer is this: because such models were used as foundation deposits for temples, authenticating the ritual act of founding a temple. So, this model of the temple founded by Sety I was a foundation deposit for that temple. And, just as the temple was sacred, so also the foundation deposit was sacred. For experts in Egyptian civilization, I surmise, my use of the word sacred in this context would not be problematic.

In the case of this miniature model for the temple founded by Sety I, the rituals that were prescribed for the foundation of this temple were actually recorded on the surface of the model, and the recording takes the form of a text combined with pictures. The text, carved in

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18 Badawy 1973:2, 7. In thinking about this model, I have benefited from conversations with Peter Der Manuelian.
sunk relief, combines with carved pictures to form a band of narrative extending along three of the four sides of the base that holds up the model (the fourth side was evidently flush with a wall).

There is a wealth of further archaeological evidence, both texts and pictures, concerning the observance of such Egyptian rituals centering on the founding of a temple. One such ritual, the name for which can be translated ‘To Present the House to Its Lord’ in the Egyptian language, is pictured in relief sculptures adorning the outside walls of some temples, and such outside reliefs are understood to belong in a zone that is known in Egyptian as ‘the Hall of Appearance’. The presentation of the ‘house’ to its ‘lord’ was the finalizing sacred act in the sacred procedural sequence of founding a temple, and the ‘house’ that is the temple of the god is conventionally pictured as the façade of the temple instead of the entire temple. And it is such a façade that we see represented by the miniature model of the temple of Sety I: this model must have been used in the actual performance of the rituals of foundation, and these rituals are in fact recorded in the narrative that is carved into the surface of the three sides lining the base of the model. This narrative, both textual and pictorial, shows eight ritual scenes, and what these scenes reveal is a heavenly template that ideologically prefigures the temple - and that guides the soul along a trajectory that replicates the path of the sun in both the upper sky of daytime and the lower sky of nighttime.

In terms of my interpretation, then, there is a sacral metonymy at work here. The heavenly form of the model is connected to the text and to the pictures that adorn it, and this

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21 Documentation provided by Badawy 1973:7.
24 There is an illuminating schematic illustration provided by Badawy 1972:16.
connection generates the archetypal meaning of this model as a foundation deposit. Further, such a meaning is not only archetypal: it is also sacral.

**Back to the Cyrus Cylinder**

Returning to the text inscribed on the surface of the foundation deposit that we know as the Cyrus Cylinder, I argue that this text too has a *sacred* or at least a *sacralized* meaning, much like the text that was written at the base of the Egyptian model or, closer to home, like the imagined text that was written on the lapis lazuli tablet containing the Gilgamesh narrative. And the sacred meaning of such texts corresponds to the sacred meaning of the foundation deposits upon which the texts are written.

To take the argument further, just as the supposedly original text of the Gilgamesh narrative was seen as archetypal, inscribed on the precious stone surface of a tablet that supposedly became the model for all future copies of the Gilgamesh narrative, so also the text inscribed on the Cyrus Cylinder had a sacred or at least sacralized meaning that was archetypal in its own right.

**Variations on a theme of copies and models**

In the case of the Cyrus Cylinder, there is historical evidence showing that the text inscribed on its surface corresponds closely if not exactly to other texts disseminated throughout the Persian empire of Cyrus. Fragments of a large flat oblong tablet housed in the British Museum reveal essentially the same wording that we find in corresponding parts of the Cyrus Cylinder, and it is evident that this particular tablet, unlike the Cyrus Cylinder, was not buried as a

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foundation deposit.\textsuperscript{26} It has been argued, plausibly, that the text of such a tablet “preceded” the text written on the Cyrus Cylinder, and, in general, that in each case where we see a match between the texts of cylinder inscriptions and “flat” texts, “the cylinder inscription would be copied from a ‘flat’ master copy (and not from memory).”\textsuperscript{27} So now we need to confront a new question: was the text of the Cyrus Cylinder really a model, if in fact it was copied from a corresponding text written on a “flat” tablet?

There are two sides to answering this question. One side is ideological, while the other side is practical. On the ideological side, we can say that the text of the Cyrus Cylinder was viewed as a model, an archetype, and that all other texts were viewed as copies of this model. On the practical side, however, we need to allow for the physical difficulties of writing the text on a clay cylinder, since such difficulties would have necessitated the writing out of a pre-existing “master” text that could then be copied into the cylinder. So the text of the inscription written on the Cyrus Cylinder would not have been the real “original” - from the standpoint of those who actually produced both the cylinder and the text inscribed on the cylinder. But the text written on the cylinder could still be viewed as an archetype from the standpoint of the ideology that drove the production of the cylinder in the first place.

Here I must introduce a general observation that affects the way we look at the making of copies of texts. \textit{Any written transmission of words that are meant to be performed is subject to variation in both form and content.} This observation holds, as research in living performance traditions has shown, even in situations where the words have been written down in order to be read out loud in performance.\textsuperscript{28} In terms of the results achieved by way of such research, the relationship between copies and models becomes more difficult to ascertain. Also, we must

\textsuperscript{26} Finkel 2013:20.
\textsuperscript{27} Finkel 2013:23.
\textsuperscript{28} As I noted at the beginning, I have studied such situations in Nagy 1996.
allow for the possibility that a given model, used for copying, could have been a copy of an earlier model for copying. So, we can expect situations where no archetype can be empirically ascertained - only copies, or copies of copies.

But here is where the inner logic of myth and ritual can decide what is archetypal and what is not. That is what we saw in the text at the very beginning of Tablet I of the Gilgamesh narrative, where this narrative figures itself as the archetype of a sacred core of narrative that comes to life each time a copy of it is read out loud to its listeners. And that is also what we see in the narrative of the Cyrus Cylinder, which figures itself as an archetype that communicates its own fixed message by way of copies that were notionally derived from it.

I argue, then, that the text of the Cyrus Cylinder authenticates itself by claiming to be a sacred archetype, and its archetypal sacredness is guaranteed, ideologically, in three ways:

1) by the sacredness of the site in which it is embedded

2) by the sacredness of the object itself, and

3) by the sacredness of the wording that is written on the surface of the object.

From the standpoint of myth and ritual, the deposited text of the Cyrus Cylinder is so sacred that it should not even be seen, once it is in place, except by the sacred cosmic powers that receive the archetype and are archetypal in their own right. From a practical standpoint, I could add, the act of depositing the text of the Cyrus Cylinder would keep it safe from the depredations of the profane.

**Authenticating the text and the speaker of the text**

The self-authentication of the text of the Cyrus Cylinder extends to the first-person speaker of the text, who is figured as Cyrus himself. Cyrus too is authenticated by the sacredness of the
archetype. Conversely, any rival claimant to the kingship claimed by the king must be a mere copy and not the original - not the real thing. That is why the son of Nabonidus, Belshazzar, who was in charge of Babylon as a representative of his father at the time of the city’s capture by Cyrus, is described by the text of the Cyrus Cylinder as a ‘counterfeit’ king of the Babylonians. I quote here directly from the text:

... ta]m-ši-li u-ša-áš-ki-na se-ru-šu-un

‘he [= Nabonidus] set a counterfeit [= Belshazzar] over them [= the Babylonians]’

Cyrus Cylinder line 4

Moreover, even the temple of Marduk had been supposedly ‘counterfeit’ before the sacred space of the temple, named Esagil, was restored by Cyrus. I quote again directly from the text of the Cyrus Cylinder, where the claim is made that Nabonidus had made a ‘counterfeit’ temple:

ta-am-ši-li é-sag-il i-te-[pu-uš-ma ...]

‘he [= Nabonidus] made a counterfeit for Esagil’

Cyrus Cylinder line 5

The negative rhetoric of this declaration makes it seem as if Esagil, that is, the temple of Marduk as maintained by Belshazzar representing Nabonidus, was not even the same building as the Esagil that Cyrus claims to have restored. There are comparable claims about such a falsification of Esagil in another cuneiform text, the so-called Verse Account of the reign of Nabonidus: at column ii lines 11-18 of that text, Nabonidus the last king of the Babylonians is accused of tampering with the sacred architecture and adornments of Esagil, mentioned by
that name at line 15, and this accusation is framed in the context of references to the king’s
neglect of the New Year Festival, as at line 11, and of his privileging the divinity Šīn over the
divinity Marduk, as at column i lines 23 and 25 and at column v lines 11 and 22.

In translating the Akkadian word *tamšišu* as ‘counterfeit’ in the text of the Cyrus Cylinder, I
am following the interpretation of Irving Finkel.²⁹ I should note, however, that there is some
ambiguity in play here, since this word means ordinarily ‘likeness, image, copy’. Similarly with
Plato’s Theory of Forms: a copy of the ideal, achieved by way of *mīmēsis*, comes under suspicion
as something that is potentially counterfeit.

The meaning ‘counterfeit’ has to be inferred from the context of the Cyrus Cylinder, the
text of which accuses Nabonidus of falsifying the temple of Marduk - just as he allegedly
falsifies his own kingship by setting up his son Belshazzar as a counterfeit king of Babylon.
Such a false king is presented as a foil for Cyrus as the authentic king in charge of caring for
the god Marduk and for the god’s temple. By caring for Marduk, Cyrus as the self-proclaimed
authentic king makes the temple of this god authentic as well, in contrast with the counterfeit
king who had cared badly for the god and, by extension, for the god’s temple, thus making the
temple itself a counterfeit site, as we saw in the wording of the declaration I quoted from line 5
of the Cyrus Cylinder. In subsequent wording at lines 6 through 8, as we have already noted,
the text of the cylinder goes on to say that the temple of Marduk needed a re-founding, a
restoration, since the rituals of worshipping this god had been supposedly abused by
Nabonidus. According to the text, as we have seen, the god Marduk was so angered by the
persistent abuse of his rituals that he summoned Cyrus, king of the Persians, to overthrow the
king of Babylon and to occupy the city, so that Cyrus could proceed to restore the correctness
of the rituals of worship that the god required.

²⁹ Finkel 2013:4-5.
Following up

So far, then, I have made two major points about the Cyrus Cylinder. The first point is that the text of the inscription written on the surface of the cylinder presents itself as an archetype that authenticates the kingship of Cyrus, thereby legitimizing it. Such an archetype, as I have been arguing from the start, is viewed as a cosmic model that is absolutized by its sacredness, lending its sacred authority to all copies made and used by the enforcers of the Empire in a wide variety of situations. And the second point I have been making about the Cyrus Cylinder is that the act of legitimizing the king by way of an archetypal text has the effect of simultaneously delegitimizing any potential rival kings, declaring such rivals to be counterfeit, fake. As I indicated at the beginning, I will now follow up by citing another example of such a notionally archetypal text that legitimizes the king and delegitimizes any potential rival kings.

The Bisotun Inscription as an archetype

The text I have in mind is written in three languages: Elamite, Babylonian, and Old Persian. It is a set of cuneiform inscriptions combined with a set of relief sculptures - all carved into a vertical limestone surface near the top of a towering mountain located in the region of Kermanshah in Iran. This mountain is named Bisotun in the Kurdish and in the Persian languages. The name, I must emphasize, is derived from the Old Persian form Bagastāna, which means, literally, ‘the place of the gods’. The entire trilingual set of inscriptions carved into the rock face of Bisotun Mountain is commonly known today as the Bisotun Inscription, and this is how I will refer to it from here on.

The Bisotun Inscription proclaims, in the three languages of its text, the victories of Darius I, king of kings, over his enemies, all of whom threatened his rule as king of the Persian Empire. The proclamation is delivered in the first person, and the relief sculptures that accompany the inscription complement with their own visual narrative the verbal narrative of
the text. Both narratives, the verbal and the visual, link each one of the king’s victories with the defeat of nine of the enemy kings who threatened his own kingship. The major part of the narrative covers historical events that took place in the years 522 and 521 BCE. A minor part of the narrative extends accretively into later years, down to a date that may be as late as 518 BCE, concerning a victory of Darius over a tenth enemy king, and, in the ensemble of relief sculptures, the abject figure of this king is correspondingly added to the comparably abject figures of the nine other defeated enemy kings. Here is a line drawing of the Bisotun Inscription, showing the placements of the texts and of the sculpted figures:

Like the inscription written on the Cyrus Cylinder, which was meant to become inaccessible to the human eye after the cylinder was set in place as a foundation deposit, the Bisotun Inscription was deliberately cut off from the view of mortals. This cut-off must have happened sometime after 518 BCE or so, that is, after all the text and all the accompanying
relief sculptures had been carved into the sheer surface of the mountainside. When I say “cut-off,” I mean that any human access to the text and to the accompanying images was thereafter made impossible. Sometime after the work of carving the inscriptions and the relief statues had been completed, the stairway leading up to the carvings was deliberately removed, and the path that led to the stairway along the cliff was deliberately sheared off. So, until modern times, there was simply no human access to the Bisotun Inscription and to its accompanying reliefs.

The inaccessibility of the Bisotun Inscription must be analyzed in the context of its self-declared function. In the words of the Old Persian text of this inscription, at paragraph §70, the contents of the text were meant to be copied on clay tablets or on parchment and then disseminated throughout the Persian empire. The importance of this paragraph and of the entire Old Persian text has been carefully analyzed by Rahim Shayegan, and I will follow closely his analysis as I develop my argumentation.30

What I will argue is this: the text of the Bisotun Inscription figures itself as an archetype, a model, and the transcripts of this model are understood to be copies. And there are in fact attestations of copies. For example, parts of the text of the Bisotun Inscription have been found inscribed on free-standing stelae excavated at Babylon. The language of these inscriptions is Babylonian, matching one of the three languages in which the text of the Bisotun Inscription is written.31

Also, a fragment of the text of the Bisotun Inscription has been found written into a papyrus excavated in Upper Egypt and dated to the fifth century BCE. In this case, however, the language of the text is Aramaic, not Elamite or Babylonian or Old Persian, which are the

three languages featured in the text of the Bisotun Inscription. So the question arises, how can the Aramaic version be a copy of the model? Also, there is a larger question here when we consider the fact that the Elamite and the Babylonian and the Old Persian versions of the text are not the “same,” either.

As we saw in the case of the Cyrus Cylinder, there are two sides to answering such a larger question. Here too, in the case of the Bisotun Inscription, one side of the answer is ideological, while the other side is practical. On the ideological side, we can say that the text of the Bisotun Inscription was intended to be a model, an archetype, and that the other texts were copies of this model. On the practical side, however, we need to allow once again for the possibility that the model text may have been a copy of a pre-existing “master” text, and that the text of the Bisotun Inscription may not have been the real “original” - from the standpoint of those who actually produced the inscription and the accompanying relief sculptures. And, once again, the observation applies: any written transmission of words that are meant to be performed is subject to variation in both form and content. This observation, as I have already noted, applies even in situations where no archetype can be empirically ascertained - only copies, or copies of copies.

But here, once again, is where the inner logic of myth and ritual can decide what is archetypal and what is not. As in the case of the inscription written on the surface of the Cyrus Cylinder, the Bisotun Inscription figures itself as an archetype that communicates its own fixed message by way of copies that were notionally derived from it.

As before, in the case of the Cyrus Cylinder, I can now offer a comparable formulation in the case of the Bisotun Inscription: the text of this inscription authenticates itself by claiming to be a sacred archetype, and its archetypal sacredness is guaranteed, ideologically, by the

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sacredness of the site where the inscription is made, by the sacredness of the carvings that produce the cuneiform inscription and its accompanying sculptural reliefs, and by the sacredness of the wording that is written in the inscription. From the standpoint of myth and ritual, the text of the Bisotun Inscription should not even be seen, once it is in place, except by the sacred cosmic powers that receive the archetype and are archetypal in their own right.

So, the Bisotun Inscription legitimates itself by way of its self-presentation as a sacred archetype, as a heavenly model that achieves its heavenliness by cutting itself off irreversibly from the world of mortals. The inaccessibility of the Bisotun Inscription is what guarantees, from the perspective of myth and ritual, the authenticity of its text as a model for copies that circulate far and wide throughout the world of the Persian Empire. And the authenticity claimed by this text is linked to the authenticity of the king who is quoted as speaking in the text.

By legitimizing itself through its inaccessibility, this text also legitimizes its copies. Knowing that the copies are copies of a sacred text that is inaccessible makes the copies sacred too - even if their sacredness may be of a lower order. After all, these copies are now the only way to have any access to the sacred archetype.33

**True kings and false kings**

In the text of the Bisotun Inscription, we see a stark contrast between the authentication of Darius as king of the Persian Empire and the de-authentication of ten enemy kings who were defeated and killed by him. Foremost among these enemy kings is Gaumāta the Magus, as he is called in the text of the Bisotun Inscription. This text humiliates as well as demonizes Gaumāta, and the verbal abuse extends to visual abuse in the accompanying relief sculpture, where he is pictured at the moment when he is about to be punished by Darius for daring to

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33 I owe this formulation to Peter Machinist.
claim kingship over the Persian Empire. In the relief sculpture, we see the evil Magus Gaumāta lying flat on his back and abjectly awaiting his execution. Standing over him is the victorious Darius, who triumphantly plants his foot on his defeated enemy’s chest. Let me show a close-up of the picture:
Of all the ten kings defeated and killed by Darius, I concentrate here on this enemy king Gaumāta because of a striking similarity I see between him and the so-called ‘counterfeit’ king defeated by Cyrus in the narrative of the Cyrus Cylinder. As we recall from that narrative, Nabonidus the king of Babylon had set up his son Belshazzar as a ‘counterfeit’ ruler of the city, and this act of setting up a false king was linked with the pollution of the rituals of worshipping Marduk, the chief god of the Babylonians.

Similarly in the case of Gaumāta as a false king in the narrative of the Bisotun Inscription, his threat to the rule of Darius is treated as a stylized pollution - or let us call it desecration - of the whole Persian Empire. The text of paragraph §14 of the Old Persian inscription makes it explicit: Gaumāta, pretending to be Bardiya the brother - and thus the legitimate heir - of the king Cambyses, was desecrating the empire by abusing sacred places and rituals, and then, after Darius finally succeeded in killing Gaumāta, which happened on September 29, 522 BCE, the successful king was now able to undo the desecration by initiating a program of restoring sacred places and rituals throughout the empire; and this program of religious restoration, as the text proudly declares, restored simultaneously the prosperity and even the fertility of the land.34

I focus on an antithesis we see built into the Old Persian narrative here. On the one hand, caring for sacred places and rituals is the mark of an authentic king, while not caring for such things is the mark of a counterfeit king. And I focus also on the expression caring for as I use it here. Earlier, I used this same expression in paraphrasing the description of Cyrus in the text of the Cyrus Cylinder. In that text, Cyrus too is described as an authentic king who cares for sacred places and rituals, as opposed to Nabonidus, who allegedly abuses them and thus shows that he is a counterfeit king.

34 See the translation and commentary of Shayegan 2012:127.
Caring for a king

I see a parallel here with the traditional uses of the Greek verb *therapeuein*, which means ‘care for’ in contexts where the subject of this verb refers to an attendant in a temple while its direct object refers to the sacred space of a divinity or to the temple of the divinity or, even more specifically, to a statue of this divinity. The Greek noun that corresponds to this verb *therapeuein* is *therapōn*, conventionally translated as ‘attendant’, and these two Greek forms *therapeuein* and *therapōn* are borrowings, as Nadia van Brock has shown, from the corresponding Anatolian forms *tarpaska-*, and *tarp(an)alli-*, both of which have the basic meaning of ‘ritual substitute’, referring either to a human or to an animal victim.

When I say “Anatolian” here, I am referring to the language family that includes Hittite and Luvian. As we see from Hittite texts referring to rituals of substitution, the victim in such rituals is either killed or banished as a ritual substitute for the king; similarly in the Homeric *Iliad*, as van Brock has argued, Patroklos as the *alter ego* of Achilles is described as his *therapōn* because he is doomed to be killed as a ritual substitute for Achilles.

The concepts of ritual substitution and substitute kingship

The Hittite tradition of ritual substitution derives from earlier Babylonian rituals that marked the festival of the New Year. A related tradition, attested in texts stemming from the neo-Assyrian empire of the first millennium BCE, was the practice of periodically appointing and subsequently killing a substitute king, and the period of such a substitute king’s tenure could be measured astrologically. Especially relevant to this concept of substitute kingship are the

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35 I collect examples in Nagy 2013 6§54.
36 Van Brock 1959, 1961; also Nagy 2013 6§§9-23.
descriptions found in the correspondences of the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE) and Assurbanipal (668-627 BCE).\(^{39}\)

Sadly, the attested evidence is meager. Still, even on the basis of what little we have, patterns emerge. Here I adduce again the work of Rahim Shayegan, who summarizes in the following words the patterns that emerge in Mesopotamian rituals of substitute kingship:

The principles of [...] substitute kingship are simple: when the life of the rightful sovereign was deemed to be threatened by an evil omen, especially an eclipse, a surrogate king (šar pūḫi) [...] could be chosen by the king's counselors to replace him for the period during which the surrogate would be exposed to the danger of the bad omen.\(^{40}\)

### Similarities and differences between substitute kingship and counterfeit kingship

As Shayegan argues, such Mesopotamian rituals of substitution could have influenced the Persian narrative, as recorded in the Bisotun Inscription, about Darius in the role of the true king who defeats a counterfeit king, the evil Magus named Gaumāta, who claims falsely to be Bardiya, brother of Cambyses and thus the legitimate heir to the kingship.\(^{41}\) As we are about to see, there are elements of stories about substitute kings that have influenced the stories we read about counterfeit kings.

Let us consider a cognate version of the story, as reported by Herodotus (3.61-88): here too, as in the story reported by the Bisotun Inscription, we see Darius in the role of the true king who defeats a counterfeit king. It is vitally important to add that the counterfeit king in this

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40 Shayegan 2012:35.
41 Shayegan 2012:35-41.
story of Herodotus is an evil Magus named Smerdis, and that Smerdis is also a name of the brother of Cambyses.

There is yet another cognate version preserved in a story reported by Ctesias (F 13.12): in this version, an evil Magus named Sphendadates conspires with Cambyses in arranging for the secret murder of the king’s brother. For the moment, the conspirators get away with the deed because Sphendadates, who looks very much like the brother of Cambyses, had arranged for a royal edict that called for his own beheading, supposedly in punishment for disloyalty to the king. Then, the head of the brother of Cambyses, who as I noted had been secretly murdered, is publicly displayed as if it were the head of his evil look-alike Sphendadates, who can now impersonate the brother of Cambyses, even wearing his regalia.\textsuperscript{42}

A substitute king, unlike the counterfeit king described in the story reported by Ctesias, impersonates the true king in order to shield him from danger. The danger that threatens the true king must be absorbed by the substitute king. By contrast, a counterfeit king is the embodiment of the danger that must be eliminated.\textsuperscript{43} In terms of these definitions, the stories that are meant to legitimate the kingship of Darius are driven by the idea that Gaumāṭa, taking the place of Bardiya the brother of Cambyses, was really a counterfeit king. But there is an alternative possibility: that Gaumāṭa was originally a substitute king for Bardiya.

Limitations of time and space prevent me from exploring at length here the historical truth behind the variant stories about the death of the man who was declared to be a counterfeit king. Suffice it to say that there are basically two scenarios for viewing the cause of his death:

\textsuperscript{42} Shayegan 2012:40-41.

\textsuperscript{43} This formulation derives from an exchange with Peter Machinist.
1. According to one scenario, as promoted by the narratives of the Bisotun Inscription and of Herodotus and Ctesias, Cambyses had arranged for his brother to be murdered, thus removing a rival to the kingship, and he somehow managed to keep this murder a secret while he was engaged in his grand project of invading Egypt. But then, during the absence of Cambyses from Persia, a counterfeit king seized power there, claiming to be the brother of Cambyses, and this counterfeit king managed to hold on to power because Cambyses had in the meantime unexpectedly died before he could ever return to Persia. This counterfeit king was eventually overthrown by Darius.

I find it relevant at this point to compare a detail in the visual narrative of the relief sculptures that are part of the Bisotun Inscription with a most telling detail about the brother of Cambyses in the verbal narrative of Herodotus. In the Bisotun Inscription, the sculpted figure of the triumphant Darius is shown holding a bow in his hand. In the story of Herodotus about the killing of Smerdis by Cambyses, there is mention of a wondrous bow that no Persian could string except for Smerdis, and this feat of Smerdis so unnerved Cambyses that it led him to plan the murder of his brother (3.30.1). In the same context, Herodotus mentions something else that unnerved Cambyses: the king dreamt that his brother Smerdis, sitting on a throne, looked so majestic that his head touched the sky (3.30.2). The picturing of Darius in the celestial heights of Mount Bisotun conjures, I suggest, a parallel image of authentic majesty.  

44 In making this point about the king’s dream as narrated in the passage from Herodotus (3.30.2), I have benefited from observations made viva voce by Samantha Blankenship about this passage.
2. According to an alternative scenario, Cambyses did not murder his brother Bardiya, known as Smerdis in the story of Herodotus, and this brother could thus become king of the Persian Empire after the death of Cambyses. But he was eventually overthrown and killed by Darius himself, a kinsman. So, if the killing of Bardiya / Smerdis was perpetrated not by Cambyses but by Darius, then the story of a counterfeit king who is also named Bardiya / Smerdis was likewise perpetrated by Darius. By way of this story, Darius would be killing not a kinsman but a counterfeit king who was merely impersonating Bardiya / Smerdis. From the standpoint of Bardiya / Smerdis, however, Darius himself would be the counterfeit king who was replacing the real king.\textsuperscript{45} I offer a parallel formulation in the case of the Cyrus Cylinder: from the standpoint of Nabonidus, Cyrus himself would be the counterfeit king who was replacing the real king.

I highlight here one thing that both these alternative scenarios about the kingship of Darius have in common: both of them require a death by substitution. In the case of the first scenario, a counterfeit king attempts to substitute himself for a would-be real king and dies in making the attempt. In the case of the second scenario, Darius the newer king overthrows and kills Bardiya the earlier king, who is then re-thought as a counterfeit king - an evil Magus pretending to be Bardiya. This Magus, named Gaumāta, could once have been the substitute king for Bardiya, but then he could have double-crossed him, becoming the counterfeit king by claiming to the true Bardiya. I should emphasize here that the true Bardiya was in any case not

\textsuperscript{45} In summarizing this alternative scenario, I have benefited from the incisive observations of Shayegan 2012:xii, 41.
the same person as Gaumāta, although the text of the Bisotun Inscription attempts to merge their identities.⁴⁶

Weighing the comparative information that can be gleaned from the variant stories about the accession of Darius to kingship by way his killing a rival king, Shayegan offers this useful formulation:

In the light of this information, the relevance of the substitute king ritual for Darius’ literary subterfuge, which was intended to mask the reality of his own coup d’état against Bardiya and Gaumāta, becomes apparent. In Darius’ account it is presumed that Cambyses, threatened by an omen predicting the loss of his sovereignty to his brother, ordered his assassination and replaced him with a substitute, who by assuming power indeed fulfilled the promise of the omen. Thus, in our context, far from deflecting the omen from himself, Cambyses is accused of countering it by replacing the hostile Bardiya with a friendly substitute, a substitute who, following the death of Cambyses, became sole ruler of the Persian empire.⁴⁷

According to such a scenario, this sole ruler who then gets killed by Darius is a substitute king, not a true king.

**Back to the Cyrus Cylinder**

What we have seen, then, in the variant stories about the accession of Darius to kingship is a narrative gesture of ritual substitution, comparable to the narrative gesture of describing Belshazzar as a counterfeit king in the text of the Cyrus Cylinder. In the case of Belshazzar and

⁴⁶ On the historicity of both Gaumāta and Bardiya, see Shayegan 2012:27–33.
⁴⁷ Shayegan 2012:41.
his father Nabonidus, last king of Babylon, their authenticity is invalidated by Cyrus, whose archetypal text legitimizes him as the real king and delegitimizes his predecessor as a false king - as a counterfeit king. Once the empire is restored, the false king can be eliminated by the king - and by the archetypal text that speaks for the king.
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