CHAPTER THREE

SYRIA-MESOPOTAMIA

1. INTRODUCTION. INCENSE IN HISTORICAL TEXTS

Concerning the use of incense in Syria-Mesopotamia it is useful quoting a passage from the ritual series ŠURPU preserved on tablets in the library of Assurbanipal. In tablet IX we read certain invocations of the means of the ritual such as tamarisk, reed, cedar, and juniper. Concerning incense in general we are told (the text is wholly in Sumerian):

96 Incense (na.izi), dwelling in the mountain, created in the mountains,
97 you are pure, coming from the mountains.
98 (Fragrance of) juniper, fragrance of cedar, incense dwelling in the mountains.
99 The powerful incense has been granted to us,
100 the high mountain provide it for purification(?)
101 in the pure censer (nig.na), filled with aweinspiring splendor,
102 the sweet oil, the choice oil, worthy of the table,
103 and the pure ..., the materials of the purifying craft.
104 Make the incense fumes, their purifying product, issue forth:
105 May he be clean like heaven, may he be pure like the core of heaven,
106 may the evil tongue stand aside!144

This text shows clearly that incense in the minds of the Assyro-Babylonians (henceforth As.-Bab.) is connected with mountains. Since there are no mountains in Mesopotamia proper, we have to look elsewhere for the incense mountains. Historical texts tell us in which direction we have to go.

In the first Nimrud tablet Tiglatpileser III mentions cedar beams 'whose fragrance is as good as that of the cypress tree, products of Amanus, Lebanon and Ammanana (Antilebanon)'145 He is by no means the first king in Mesopotamia who takes an interest in the Amanus mountains which are situated in upper Syria at the north-eastern corner of the Mediterranean. Already Sargon of Agade is said to make his way to the cedar forest.146 Also Naram Sin is recorded as having reached the Amanus Mountains.147 The Gudea cylinder A recounts how the ensi of Lagash 'made a path into the Cedar mountain (kur giš-erin-na) which nobody had entered before; he cut its cedars with great axes.'148 He did this to provide building material for the temple of Ningirsu. Gudea's 'statue B' mentions that Gudea (or rather Ningirsu) established trade
routes between the upper and the lower sea, i.e. between the Amanus and the town of Lagash.\textsuperscript{149} The ambitious building projects in the As.-Bab. royal cities created an enormous demand for wood, especially odoriferous wood like cedar and cypress. In endless military campaigns into Syria the kings of Mesopotamia saw to it that the architects and builders at home never lacked that kind of wood. If they did not have the cedar cut down by direct order, they often imposed tribute on the subdued peoples of this region, which compelled them to pay in cedar logs. It was, however, not only as building material the As.-Bab. were interested in wood from Syria. The cedar can produce a sap which was highly regarded as incense material, \textit{dam erini}, the blood of cedar.\textsuperscript{150} This incense was much appreciated and is often mentioned in As.-Bab. sources.

In Egypt we saw Queen Hatshepsut attempt to transplant \textit{šntyw} trees from Punt to Egyptian soil. In the same way some Assyrian kings wanted to transplant odoriferous trees from their natural habitat to Assur and other cities in connection with the building of palaces. Thus Tiglatpileser I transplants some cedar trees from Syria to Assur, ‘trees the like of which none of the kings, my ancient fathers, had ever planted.’\textsuperscript{151} Sennacherib’s palace in Niniveh is said to have been surrounded by gardens with odoriferous plants like those on the Amanus.\textsuperscript{152}

However, it was not only from the north-west the kings of Mesopotamia provided incense. In neoassyrian times Tiglatpileser III receives ‘all kinds of spices’ from the Arabian queen Samsi and from several other conquered Arabian tribes. Among these spices the south Arabian resins frankincense and myrrh may have been present. Already more than 100 years earlier, we hear that Tukulti-Ninurta II receives 1 talent of myrrh as tribute from a town like Hindanu at the Euphrates,\textsuperscript{153} and the same amount from Sirku, and finally 1 talent of myrrh from Dur-Katlimmu at the Habur River.\textsuperscript{154}

Frankincense seems to be mentioned in an Assyrian medical handbook, which records \textit{riq la-ba-na-tu}.\textsuperscript{155} Frankincense, however, seems to be entirely absent from historical texts as they have come to light until now.

2. TERMS FOR INCENSE IN SYRIA-MESOPOTAMIA

Already during the 3rd dynasty in Ur aromata were used for various purposes. Ebeling mentions a recipe consisting of such ingredients as šara erin (Accadian \textit{erinnu}), šu-úr-me (Acc. \textit{šurnenu}), gír (Acc. \textit{asu}), šim (Acc. \textit{riqqu}), and šim-dùg (Acc. \textit{riqqu šabu}).\textsuperscript{156} As for šim = \textit{riqqu}, it is normally interpreted as aromata in general. Here it seems to refer to a specific kind or a special category of aromata, perhaps bitter or penetrating or sharp,