The Legend of Sardanapalus: From ancient Assyria to European stages and screens

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Abstract

“Adieu, Assyria! / I loved thee well”. These were the last words of king Sardanapalus, the last king of Assyria, according to Lord Byron. Throughout the centuries, Europe was confronted with the tragic story of Mesopotamia’s last monarch, a king more effeminate than a woman, a lascivious and idle man, a governor who loathed all expressions of militarism and war. But this story was no more than it proposed to be: a story, not history. Sardanapalus was not even real! The Greeks conceived him; artists, play writers, and cineastes preserved him.

Through the imaginative minds of early Modern and Modern historians, artists and dramaturgs, Sardanapalus’ legend endured well into the 20th-century in several different media. Even after the first excavations in Assyria, and the exhumation of its historical archives, where no king by the name of Sardanapalus was recorded, fantasy continued to surpass history.

Keywords: Reception of Antiquity, Mesopotamia, Greek Mythology, Opera, Italian Cinema.