Nicolaas Verhelst MA

Universität Wien

a12021741@unet.univie.ac.at

Seleukid Lecture Series 5.4 (19 April 2023)

Uncommon Greek Personal Names  
along the Passageways of Gods, Kings, and Peoples

*What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.* Yet Romeo was still a Montague, by birth and by name. For though names do not define us, we are in large part defined by them.Even in the cuneiform source material, consisting of documentary texts, royal chronicles, and astronomical diaries, Greek personal names are found, albeit only in small number (111 names to 196 name bearers). This is highly significant, since these clay tablets come from and represent the most conservative part of Babylonian society and the one most closely connected to its religious and cultural traditions. For centuries, the Babylonians had already been using Aramaic and writing on leather scrolls and parchment, so much so that the use of cuneiform had become a cultural and almost political statement.

When we consider that over half of these names, representing one third of the name bearers, are uncommon in the rest of the Hellenistic world, namely in Egypt, and that many of them are connected to very specific parts of the Greek world, their presence gains in meaning. This research project argues on the basis of these names that the Greek cultural presence in Hellenistic Babylonia was far larger than hitherto assumed and that lower urban elites actively engaged with the Greek language, specifically its onomasticon, at a very sophisticated level to negotiate and demonstrate their own cultural and social affinities, distinct from both the traditional Babylonian “priestly” elites and the new Greco-Macedonian elites, through a threefold methodology. Firstly, it connects names and name variants to specific parts of the Greek and Hellenistic world through the use of various databases (LGPN; TM). Secondly, it contextualizes these names in their Babylonian context by looking at the social status of their bearers. Thirdly, it considers the structures and implicit values of uncommon and common Greek personal names so as to better understand their social and personal meanings. This not only leads to a better understanding of the Greek onomasticon and socio-cultural dynamics of Hellenistic Babylonia, but opens the path to similar research on local onomastica of other parts of the Hellenistic world.