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Archaeo-political Violence in the Shadow of the State: From Settler Colonialism to Entrepreneurism and Back

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Abstract

This article explores how archaeo-politics generates violence woven into everyday life by analysing Israel's archaeological apparatus in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt). In light of former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to the Tell Seilun archaeological site, I examine how state and non-state actors exploit archaeology to legitimise territorial claims. I argue that archaeo-politics is not limited to a revisionist self-awareness and the way that current politics uses, misuses, and abuses archaeology. It encompasses the subtle and pervasive ways in which violence is embedded in state structures, norms, and power dynamics, ultimately perpetuating not only spatial injustice and exclusion but also becoming a factor in fuelling ongoing cycles of Israeli settlers' oppression and direct violence against Palestinian subjects. The article investigates how archaeo-political violence is materialized through Israel's archaeological state and non-state apparatus operating within frameworks of settler colonialism and entrepreneurism. By scrutinising American officials' fixation on archaeological sites in internationally recognised occupied territories, I question the motives behind these activities and explore the forms of violence they engender that go beyond physical harm. This analysis contributes to understanding how archaeology is weaponised within contested landscapes, revealing the complex relationship between heritage, power, and structural violence in contexts of ongoing settler colonialism and military occupation.

Keywords

Archaeo-political Violence, Settler Colonialism, Entrepreneurism, (Non)-State Violence, Structural Violence

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht am Beispiel der israelischen Archäo-politik in den besetzten palästinensischen Gebieten, wie Archäologie Gewalt erzeugt, die in das alltägliche Leben eingewoben ist. Vor dem Hintergrund des Besuchs des ehemaligen US-Außenministers Mike Pompeo in der archäologischen Stätte Tell Seilun kann gezeigt werden, wie staatliche und nichtstaatliche Akteur*innen die Archäologie zur Legitimierung territorialer Ansprüche nutzen. Ich argumentiere, dass sich die Archäo-politik nicht auf eine revisionistische Selbstwahrnehmung und die Modalitäten beschränkt, wie die aktuelle Politik Archäologie nutzt, instrumentalisiert und missbraucht. Vielmehr umfasst sie auch subtile und allgegenwärtige Handlungsweisen, durch die Gewalt in staatliche Strukturen, Normen und Machtdynamiken eingebettet ist. Archäo-politik führt hier letztlich nicht nur zur weiteren Zurückdrängung und Ausgrenzung palästinensischer Interessen, sondern sie ist auch ein aktiver Faktor bei der anhaltenden Unterdrückung durch israelische Siedler*innen und der direkten Gewalt gegen palästinensische Menschen. In dem Beitrag wird untersucht, wie archäo-politische Gewalt durch staatliche und nicht-staatliche Instanzen, die im Rahmen von Siedlerkolonialismus und Unternehmertum agieren, ausgeübt wird. Mit Blick auf die Unterstützung und Aufwertung archäologischer Stätten in den international anerkannten besetzten Gebieten durch die US-amerikanische Politik sollen die Motive hinter diesen Aktivitäten und die Formen der Gewalt, die diese hervorrufen und die über physische Schäden hinausgehen, aufgedeckt werden. Die vorliegende Analyse zeigt, wie Archäologie in umkämpften Landschaften als Waffe eingesetzt wird, und offenbart die komplexe Beziehung zwischen Kulturerbe, Macht und struktureller Gewalt in Kontexten von anhaltendem Siedlerkolonialismus und militärischer Besetzung.

Schlagwörter

archäo-politische Gewalt, Siedlerkolonialismus, Unternehmertum, (nicht-)staatliche Gewalt, strukturelle Gewalt

Introduction

The former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited the Tell Seilun archaeological site in the West Bank, associated with Biblical Shiloh, in February 2024. In a short video posted on the X platform (formerly Twitter), Pompeo stated that the site represents the Jewish connection to the state of Israel and the 'Jewish nation.' While it is common for state officials to visit archaeological sites, Ashish Avikunthak (2021) argues that these visits are motivated by bureaucratic considerations rather than genuine interest in the past. However, such visits often involve efforts to manipulate the past, legitimise the present, and shape the future, labelled by Yannis Hamilakis as archaeo-politics (2016; also, Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022). Building upon these discussions, I question the American fixation on excavating and visiting archaeological sites in a territory that is internationally acknowledged as under military occupation. What types of violence do these visits and/or events produce? To answer this question, I argue that archaeo-political violence is embedded within the fabric of everyday life, permeates ordinary acts of living, and operates on multiple levels, from systemic inequalities to subjects' rights to place and landscape (Soja 2010). Violence encompasses more than just physical harm and can also be evident in archaeological activities. Archaeo-political violence is manifested in the shadow of the state; an analysis of it interrogates Israel's archaeological state and non-state apparatus and the way it operates and moves across the lines of settler colonialism and/or entrepreneurism, seeking to endorse and legitimise the manipulative use of archaeology. It raises questions concerning the relations between state and non-state actors, conflict, archaeology, and the forms of violence that archaeological activities produce.

Archaeo-politics is not limited to a revisionist self-awareness and how current politics uses, misuses, and abuses archaeology; it also encompasses the subtle and pervasive ways in which violence is embedded in state structures, norms, and power dynamics, ultimately perpetuating not only spatial injustice and exclusion but also fuelling ongoing cycles of Israeli settlers' oppression and direct violence against Palestinian subjects.

There is no longer a place where archaeology is perceived as a solely apolitical, academic discipline (Meskell 2002; Samuels and Daehnke 2023). Some view certain Western democracies as exceptions, a kind of self-deception, as the interplay between heritage/archaeology and democracy, citizens, state, and academic apparatus cannot maintain truly apolitical ramifications. In places rapidly undergoing fundamental change, politics represents the upper layer of archaeological interpretation, while nationalism, populism, and right and left-wing heritage mobilisation (Müller 2023) occupy even higher levels of influence over archaeological practice. This conceptual ground has been extensively explored by scholars, including Kletter (2006), Pollock and Bernbeck (2009), Hamilakis (2016), and Greenberg and Hamilakis (2022). Raz Kletter's critical examination of the development of Israeli archaeology and its ties to nationalism provides important insights into how the state has shaped and controlled narratives throughout history – spanning the past, present, and future – and across various geographical contexts. Kletter's subsequent work on the Western Wall Plaza in Jerusalem (2020) further demonstrates how archaeological practices intersect with political power structures and heritage management in contested spaces. A recurring theme in this extensive body of literature, as cited above, is how the State has shaped and dominated narratives over time and, indeed, over space. In Palestine, scholars have focused on exposing the illegality and politicisation of conducting archaeology in an occupied territory by the Israeli state apparatus and how such a practice corresponds to the dominating biblical narratives (Abu El-Haj 2001; Kletter 2006, 2020; Pollock and Bernbeck 2009; Taha 2010; Weizman 2012; Shihade 2012, 2015). Israeli archaeological activities have also been a legal battlefield. Appeals have been made by Israeli NGOs and activists, such as Emek Shaveh and Yesh Din: Volunteers for Human Rights, to the Israeli High Court to remove the management of a site like Tell Shiloh from the hands of a private Israeli settler NGO called "Mishkan Shiloh" and place it under the auspices of the Israeli Civil Administration (2017).

As distinct from other kinds of colonialism, settler colonialism aims for a large influx of people from the ‘core’ to the colony in order to replace a population; its enduring effects are evident in demography and in the ongoing violence that affects Indigenous identities (Maddison 2013). It operates as a persistent structural framework that shapes social and political relations (Glenn 2015), privatisation and nationalisation (Yacobi and Tzfadia 2017), environmental injustice (Whyte 2018), health (Pace and Yacobi 2021), and public management (Beeri 2020). As an extension of settler colonial practices, scholarly work highlights the multifaceted nature of archaeo-political violence, which is not confined to physical violence but includes symbolic, structural, and environmental impacts. The enduring impact of settler colonialism is evident in state practices and economic systems, perpetuating various forms of violence against Indigenous populations, which include forced displacement, cultural erasure, and systemic discrimination (Shihade 2015; Gniadek 2017; Mamdani 2020). These ongoing practices undermine the rights and autonomy of Indigenous communities, hindering their social, economic, and political progress.

More recently, a growing body of literature examines how entrepreneurism does not necessarily break with the logic of settler colonialism; rather, it can reproduce similar patterns of dispossession and marginalisation through economic means (Correa et al. 2021). In this article, I try to fill a void in the literature by examining how the Israeli settler colonial practice of archaeology in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (hereafter oPt) operates and moves across the lines of settler colonialism and/or entrepreneurism, seeking to endorse and legitimise the manipulative use of archaeology. In doing so, I examine the archaeological activities of the *Associates for Biblical Research* (hereafter ABR) as an apparatus of non-state archaeo-political violence in two archaeological sites in the oPt. The ABR is an American Evangelical group established for research and fieldwork in biblical archaeology in the Levant, focusing on the Holy Land. Their goal is to demonstrate the historical accuracy and reliability of the Scriptures while propagating the Christian faith. Through the lens of non-state archaeo-political violence, I explore the case studies of Khirbet el-Maqatir and Tell Seilun. The two sites are considered biblically significant; the former is regarded as a possible candidate for ‘Ai, which was – according to the Bible – invaded by Joshua (7–8), while the latter is associated with the Tent of the Congregation.

The cyclical transformation of place/space enacted in archaeological studies can be understood through the lens of archaeo-politics. This phenomenon emerges from the intertwining of archaeology and politics, representing a manifestation of power dynamics, structural violence, and the contested use of space rather than merely being a framework for analysing these issues. Instead of just individual acts of violence, archaeo-political violence refers to the covert and pervasive way in which violence is ingrained in settler colonialism, entrepreneurism, and power dynamics of state and non-state actors, ultimately perpetuating spatial injustice and exclusion. It displays its nature and practice in the oPt, even when it does not physically occur there, but in academic circles, foundations, think tanks, and discussions related to funding excavation campaigns. Attentiveness to archaeo-politics decodes the political substratum in archaeology that is hidden in its own ‘scientific’ terms, absconding in a scientific, neutral context that is, willingly and purposefully, removed from the political contest that is being fought over ‘discoveries.’

State violence, which consists of direct, indirect, visible, and invisible forms, has long been a subject of scholarly debate (Torres 2018: 381–383). Scholars do “not question whether states use violence but rather whether they do so intentionally, as part of coherently orchestrated plans or whether the individuals who enact state violence do so simply to achieve institutional goals” (Torres 2018: 383). I adhere to Pierre Bourdieu (1994: 9), who argues that states can be seen as “fields of power.” According to Bourdieu, states are not fixed; their structures constantly change due to economic, political, and other influences. He suggests that states establish and maintain systems of power to gain and retain control over resources and individuals. While Bourdieu’s theory of practice has been extensively studied in politics and other fields to comprehend power dynamics in different societies and to uncover the strategies people use to resist oppressive systems, it has also gained traction in post-processual archaeology, investigating how power structures are upheld and contested through archaeological practice.

Although “political violence often receives immediate attention due to its overt nature, structural violence, although less visible, can have deeper and long-lasting effects, perpetuating injustice and inequality in subtle ways” (Torres 2018: 381). Archaeo-political violence is manifested as a form of structural violence perpetrated against marginalised communities through the destruction of their cultural artefacts and sites. This article aims to position archaeo-politics within a broader scholarship that examines non-state actors and the practice of violence. This is also one of the main differences I posit from Yannis Hamilakis’ notion of archaeo-politics. He is undoubtedly correct when he reminds us that:

> "the recent avalanche of photographs and videos depicting the deliberate destruction of archaeological objects and sites in the Middle East, as well as the various attempts at virtual or actual reconstruction of these monuments in Western capitals, would not let us forget that antiquities are always entangled with politics, subjected to claims and counterclaims, and often projecting their agency." (Hamilakis 2016: 227)

While he emphasizes individual events of political-archaeological intersection, I argue for understanding archaeo-politics as a continuous, cyclical phenomenon that perpetually shapes both archaeological practice and political power.

A second remark is more attuned to my theorisation of archaeo-politics: Pompeo's visit is an instance. It was not just an interpretation of the past, an academic indulgence that could reach entertainment level – and lucrative spotlight – with a 'revisionist' option. While Pompeo, as a former state official, asserts that he has 'legalised' Israeli settlements (in conflict with international law), organisations like the Associates for Biblical Research occupy a more nuanced position. Though technically classified as non-state actors, their archaeological endeavours are supported by a meticulously coordinated system of state backing. This support includes obtaining official permits from the Israeli Civil Administration, receiving direct protection from the Israeli Army, collaborating with state institutions such as universities, and integrating into settler infrastructure and tourism networks. This perceived distance from official state structures enhances their effectiveness in promoting state objectives, allowing them to portray their work as 'neutral' academic research. By adopting this approach, they can engage with international evangelical networks and funding, operate with fewer diplomatic constraints, and provide 'scientific' legitimacy to expand settlements. The Pompeo visit thus reveals a complex relationship that transcends a straightforward state/non-state binary. It emphasises that archaeological practices in the oPt involve multiple layers of actors collaborating harmoniously. Formal state power not only enables and protects non-state-run archaeological work but also lends ideological support for state territorial claims.

This analysis aims to examine how archaeological practices shape both knowledge and power relations. My methodological approach transcends the mere documentation of ABR's activities by critically analysing how their archaeological work creates and validates specific interpretations of the past. In this context, Avikunthak's theoretical framework provides valuable insight: "The disciplining ability of the trench emerged from its ability to control the three-dimensional excavated volume surrounded by the trench walls" (2021: 157). He further explains that "the four walls of the trench served as the disciplining ontology within which the archaeological volume was epistemologically fixed" (2021: 158). The physical structure of archaeological trenches thus serves multiple functions. First, they provide boundaries that help archaeologists understand the spatial relationships between artefacts. Second, and more critically, they create frameworks through which archaeological knowledge is produced and interpreted. The trench walls not only physically contain and organise archaeological material but also serve as metaphorical boundaries that structure and legitimise particular political narratives about the past. In the context of the occupied Palestinian territories, these boundaries function to exclude Palestinian narratives while privileging interpretations that support Israeli territorial claims. Another example of this intersection can be found in the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, particularly regarding the U.S. Army's role in the destruction of Iraqi heritage and the looting of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad (Stone and Bajjaly 2008). This event demonstrates how archaeological sites and artefacts become entangled in larger political conflicts, increasing global awareness about the necessity of protecting cultural heritage during armed conflicts. In its revisionist investigation, archaeo-politics constantly digs out new bones and uncovers new evidence, creating an open-ended discovery that, like the neurological process of memory, continually reinterprets the past to serve the always-evolving needs of an unfinished present.

In the following sections, I will illustrate how an examination focused on archaeo-politics, understood as a process, can effectively decode how the discipline becomes politicised – along with its 'objects,' territory, and people – as well as its objectives. I will explore how discoveries and their subsequent repurposing contribute to the estrangement and alienation of a particular community, its history, and its sense of place. This process also involves the spatialisation of these dynamics and the contrasting, enduring rootedness experienced by another group. In the following section, I analyse two decades of ABR excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir and how the ABR's structural destruction of the site is manifested in total abandonment of the excavated areas, while, at the same time, such a practice excluded the rights of the local community to their cultural heritage. In the subsequent section, I analyse archaeo-political violence in a case study of Tell Seilun (Biblical Shiloh) and the ABR's collaboration with the Israeli settler entrepreneurship beyond the trench, which directly or indirectly reveals settlers not only arresting the past but also supporting their socio-economic activities – as an act of de-validation of everyday life for ordinary people across the West Bank.

Archaeo-political Violence in the Shadow of the State: Reflections on ABR's Excavations in Palestine

"It seems to me to be appropriate at this stage to apologise for my interfering in an almost completely biblical dispute and for the somewhat coarse use of the data." (Petit 2014: 41)

Even an apologetic tone from Western scholarship in biblical research always remains biased, mostly unaware of the local history, epistemologically repetitive, and unable to bring in the story of the people who live around a site. But then, aren't these local inhabitants merely relegated to background figures in archaeological narratives? They are often dismissed by archaeologists who view their presence as transient and merely part of the site's more recent stratigraphic layers, rather than as integral participants in the site's continuous historical narrative. Or, as Ashton Sinamai put it less brutally, "archaeologists have shaped cultural landscapes with what they know best: archaeological remains, often, in disregard of all other alternative interpretations" (2019: 45).

Biblical 'Ai is prominently featured in the Book of Joshua (7–8) as the second city conquered by the Israelites, after Jericho, during their supposed conquest of Canaan. For more than a century, archaeological interest in Tell el-Tell (near Ramallah) has centered on its potential identification as biblical 'Ai. However, archaeological evidence failed to support this identification, leading biblical scholars to seek alternative locations. This pattern of site identification and reinterpretation reflects how archaeological sites become intertwined with contemporary Israeli and various evangelical political and ideological agendas. ABR's commitment to locating and excavating these specific sites reflects a broader trend of using archaeology to establish physical connections between biblical narratives and present-day territorial claims.

The American Protestant interest in biblical archaeology and the Holy Land is deeply rooted in both religious and academic pursuits. As Emanuel Pfoh (2023) noted, the conservative-evangelical fascination with the Bible's historicity and the Holy Land's landscapes served as a crucial funding source and a driving force for regional exploration. The study of archaeological sites has its roots in the early nineteenth century when Westerners became fascinated with uncovering biblical locations, exemplified by Edward Robinson's journey to Palestine. These efforts intensified in the late 19th century, leading to the establishment of Western schools of archaeology, such as the British Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF), the American Palestine Exploration Society founded in 1870, and the American Schools of Oriental Research, established in 1900. The impact of American Protestant perspectives is particularly evident in the work of William Foxwell Albright (1891–1971), who was a leading figure in biblical archaeology for much of the twentieth century. Albright's approach exemplified how American Protestant biblical scholarship sought to validate the historicity of biblical narratives through archaeological evidence while also projecting a teleological vision of Judeo-Christian progress throughout history.

Decades later, following a different trajectory yet with similar motivations, ABR began its projects at the West Bank. One of these projects, Khirbet el-Maqatir, located near the Palestinian town of Deir Dibwan in the oPt, exemplifies how ABR attempts to reinvent the conquest theory in the Book of Joshua. Despite the Oslo Accords, the organisation continued its activities in the West Bank until the present time, excavating at Khirbet el-Maqatir, which they consider the alternative site of biblical 'Ai. After terminating the Khirbet el-Maqatir excavations in 2017, ABR started a new project at Tell Seilun (Shiloh) on the main road between Nablus and Ramallah.

On the other hand, Tell et-Tell, which is located in Area B, fell under the responsibility of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). The Oslo Accords established three administrative divisions in the West Bank: Area A, under full Palestinian control; Area B, under Palestinian civil control and joint Israeli-Palestinian security control; and Area C, under full Israeli control (Bauck and Omer 2013). This division has had significant implications for archaeological activities in these areas.

Recall that the conceptualisation of archaeo-political violence, whoever the agent is exerting it and whether this modality is linguistic or 'practical', demands a *recursive operation*. The ritualistic 'staging' of the ABR excavations on their YouTube channel, the dissemination of literature, the interactions with funders and Israeli state officials, as well as the recurring violence against Palestinians at checkpoints and the arbitrary searches and arrests conducted by the Israeli Defense Forces in the oPt, all exemplify archaeo-political violence. This form of violence, which operates independently of any *actual* physical violence, necessitates its continuous reassertion. This is an ongoing process of coercion, influence, and fear rather than an isolated act for a specific purpose or a sudden explosion of anger or a safety valve to the deadening boredom of checkpoints: archaeo-political violence constrains, almost as a Beckettian play, both victims and perpetrators, the subtlety of its ways equal to the lasting effects it has on individuals, communities, and the environment.

Beyond the Trench: Archaeological Structural Destruction in the Israeli Settler Entrepreneurship

A volunteer speaks to ABR's camera during an excavation at Tell Seilun in the West Bank: "Archaeology is a cynical world! We live and work in a business of tough competitors, but I love you! You complete me! Aye! Aye!" Another volunteer joins in: "Stop! Stop! You had me at archaeology!" (ABR 2019).

A professional archaeologist may be indulgent in the face of the easy banter of these two amateur volunteers. The hurt, however, is caused by the right they have to excavate an archaeological site on the threshold of my village, a right I do not have. Perhaps I am overreacting to a prevalent practice; this happens everywhere. I have heard words to this effect in India, Italy, Greece, and Spain. The access afforded to ABR archaeologists and volunteers in Khirbet Al-Maqatir and Tell Seilun is intrinsic and essential to their pre-conceptualization of the site and their objective of redefining the notions of place and space. As Avikunthak (2021: 156) put it with the calm endowed by theoretical jargon, "The ASI [Archaeological Survey of India] archaeologists, who worked daily at the site, rarely engaged with the site in its entirety; they conceptualised it as an abstract entity." This distance is required in all scientific fields; the ignorance it frequently shows to the surrounding environment is not. Indeed, it demonstrates how it is not just empirically counterproductive but also morally, one might even venture to say, deontologically wrong.

The ABR's archaeological practices in the oPt fulfil two interrelated objectives. First, these practices aim to assert that the territories are the rightful and eternal homeland of the Jewish people, relying on selective interpretations of archaeological findings that emphasise biblical narratives. Second, and perhaps more significantly, these practices systematically deny and erase Palestine as a lived and meaningful space by excluding Palestinian narratives and their access to cultural heritage. The work of the ABR serves as a clear example of these dual processes, particularly through their excavations at sites in the West Bank such as Khirbet el-Maqatir and Tell Seilun.

Critical literature has focused exclusively on the archaeological data of ABR excavations and other agencies that have worked at sites in the West Bank: the focus on the 'what' is correct insofar as it is partial. The 'how' of the production of this data and the 'for whom' are at least as important. Such a reading is compatible with the recent scholarship that examined the case of the ABR presented by Chemi Shiff (2024: 164). Shiff proposed examining how academic and public discussions about Tell Burnat in the West Bank are interconnected by introducing a revised concept of backdirt. This approach highlights how the move towards professionalization reinforces established power dynamics, particularly in conflict areas like the oPt. As Chemi Shiff (2024) illustrates, the concept of backdirt transcends its physical nature as discarded archaeological material, becoming a lens through which power dynamics and colonial practices can be examined. This is starkly illustrated in the dual acts of backdirt theft from Tel Burnat by the ABR.

I am concerned here with the materials/narratives and the debate over the (de)validation of the outcomes of these excavations and look at ABR projects beyond trench and backdirt. Non-state archaeo-political violence captures how the ABR includes not just academics, churches, or volunteers but also settler entrepreneurs and groups from different Israeli settlements in the West Bank in their archaeological projects. For example, the close cooperation between Israeli settlers and the ABR at sites across the West Bank includes but is not limited to volunteering. They may be foreigners or settlers, involved in seasonal archaeological excavations, touring teams working through Israeli settlements in the West Bank, who work in solidarity with the settlers' social and economic initiatives, such as the winery in the Bracha settlement near Nablus. Power, knowledge production, and mutual relations are central to the ABR archaeological projects in the West Bank, with dedicated websites, radio broadcasts, and TV shows that present these projects' causes and outcomes. For these ongoing archaeological projects, this power of performativity primarily targets Evangelicals worldwide, and particularly recruiting funds and volunteers in the U.S. agencies such as ABR cooperate with Israeli settler groups, intentionally and practically displacing areas of Palestine, essentially transforming them into spaces devoid of continuous human presence.

In the words of Sandra Oster Baras, Director of Christian Friends of Israeli Communities (CFOIC) Heartland, the organisation "enables Christians to connect with the Jewish communities [settlements] in the heart of Biblical Israel. Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] are not occupied territories. These communities are the birthplace of the Jewish people" (CFOIC Heartland n.d.). The Shiloh Network News is a publication by the ABR that promotes their archaeological activities. One example of their inclusion of entrepreneurs from Israeli settlements in the West Bank is a video posted on June 3, 2019, in which the Director of the Israeli Office of CFOIC hosted a group of archaeologists and volunteers digging at Shiloh. The group was taken to visit the Tura Winery, located in the Israeli settlement of Bracha on the Mount of Gerizim near Nablus, which belongs to Erez Ben-Saadon and his wife Vered (Tura Winery n.d.). In the video, Oster Baras provided an overview of the area and Tell Balata, referring to them as the original Shechem from Ibrahim's time (ABR 2019). An important area for the ABR has been collaborating with Ariel University's Institute of Archaeology in the Israeli settlement of Ariel – one of the most prominent settlements in the West Bank – and one included in any plan for Israel's annexation.

The focus here is on analysing what guides the Association for Biblical Research to carry out their archaeological activities at sites in the West Bank. The ABR excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir near Deir Dibwan exemplify the perfect juxtaposition of exclusion and alienation of local communities from their landscape and archaeology – alienated from their past and excluded from their present. To criticise a flawed approach such as that of the ABR, the work of Doreen Massey is indispensable bringing to the fore how space is always structured by and layered with power relations and struggles. Her "power-geometries" highlight how power plays a central role in constructing spatial social practices, how it is embedded in the fabric of spatial social practices, leading to inequalities between different groups (Massey 1993: 76). Space is not neutral but is actively produced by the power dynamics of a society and its institutions. Massey advocates that "we need a local politics that thinks beyond the local, acknowledging that the local is globally produced and the global locally produced" (Massey 1991b, as cited in Mouffe 2013: 25). Contrary to those who think only in terms of the global and dismiss local and regional attachments, Massey's approach allows us to scrutinise the role of the local in the construction of broader power geometries, thereby opening new avenues for political engagement and challenging the strategy of exodus and desertion (Mouffe 2013: 25). The colonial implication of 'enlightened universality' is the neutralisation of lived place into 'a space,' one that could be anywhere, that is, nowhere that matters. This is done by flattening the differences between places and cultures into a homogenous space under the pretence of universalism. This erases the unique and specific histories, experiences, and knowledge embedded in different places. By denying the distinctiveness of places and cultures, 'enlightened universality' reinforces existing colonial power structures, treating all locations as irrelevant and disposable.

ABR Excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir: Structural Destruction and the Exclusion of Local Deir Dibwanians

In a YouTube video for the 2016 season at Khirbet el-Maqatir, a volunteer on the archaeological excavation gives a glimpse of how the ABR treats Palestinian locations as irrelevant and disposable. The volunteer describes the journey back from the site to the 'accommodation' at the Ritz Hotel in Jerusalem. Passing by the Palestinian village of Burqa, located a few kilometres south of Khirbet el-Maqatir, he points out that "the ride back [to the hotel] is an important part of the process. You are not just doing archaeology; you are actually in the land of Israel, which has come back to life in our time" (Idster's Channel n.d.). The objective extends beyond rendering the Palestinian place irrelevant; it also entails reanimating a temporality whose existence is known solely through the imagination, raising questions about its archaeological accuracy. Archaeo-political violence is at play, obliterating identities, locales, memories, and the present conditions.

A counterargument could be made that testimony from an amateur volunteer does not count. The archaeo-political violence, however, seems embedded in all ABR's media materials. Take, for example, *Digging for Truth*, one of ABR's TV shows that hosts biblical scholars discussing archaeological discoveries and biblical events. In *Episode*

Six: New Testament Discoveries at Khirbet el-Maqatir, archaeologist Scott Stripling takes the audience through the discoveries about the New Testament period, locating them in Israel – full stop. Commenting on what Stripling was explaining about the findings of the silos and cisterns in the site, the host Henry B. Smith, Jr., who was also part of the excavation team along with Stripling, points out how "this underground material that we found is going to talk a little later about some fascinating underground discoveries that we made, but this is what they needed to do in Israel to store water and to store their food" (ABR 2018). This eradication of Palestine to mere space is accompanied by a structural process of exclusion and alienation of the local community from its cultural heritage and landscape: non-ABR Palestine is a blank of ahistorical persons – immigrants, perhaps. This process of exclusion and alienation is implemented in various ways, such as through the demolition of Palestinian homes, the displacement of communities, the control of access to resources, and the restriction of the Palestinian population's movement. Palestine is reduced to a space rather than a distinct cultural entity – a fundamental and profoundly problematic process that directly affects the Palestinian population and its cultural identity and heritage.

The archaeological site of Khirbet el-Maqatir is located within the landscape of Deir Dibwan, ten kilometres north of Jerusalem and about one kilometre from the archaeological site of Tell et-Tell. According to the map of the Oslo Accords, the site is located in Area C and outside the fully approved urban plan of the village (Fig. 1).

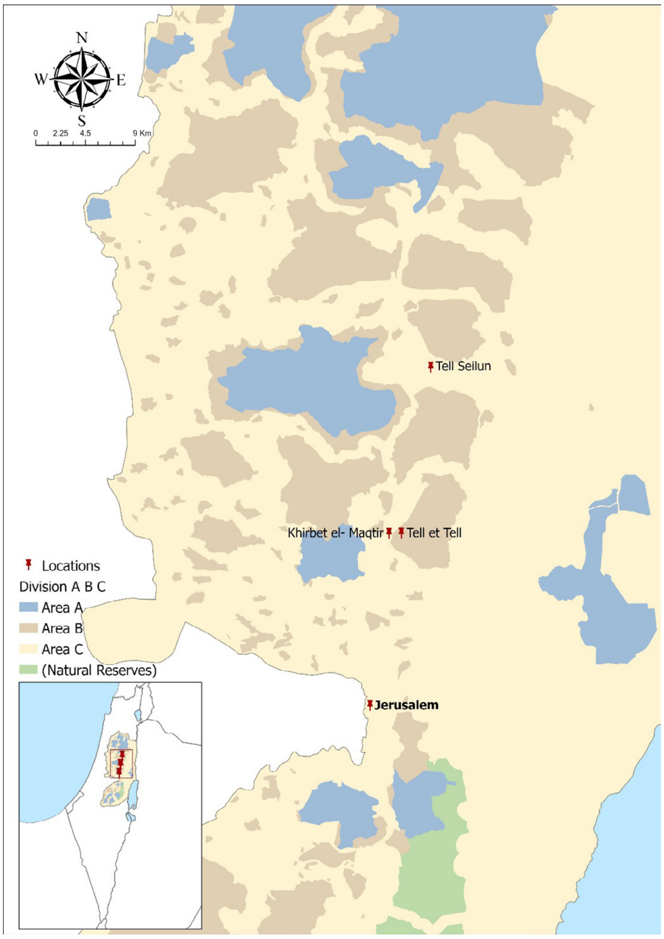

Fig. 1. Map of a portion of the Occupied Palestinian Territories showing the locations of Areas A, B, and C as defined by the Oslo Accords.

In the early 1990s, Bryant Wood visited the site of Khirbet el-Maqatir in an attempt to locate the archaeological site of ʻAi. For more than a century, there had been a consensus among most biblical scholars that Tell et-Tell was the site of biblical ʻAi. The first attempts to identify et-Tell as ʻAi began with Edward Robinson in 1838; William Albright's 1924 article set the identification of et-Tell as biblical ʻAi in stone (Wood 2008: 209). Wood explains that Albright's basis was that it is the only Canaanite ruins in the vicinity meeting the topographic requirements of being east of Bethel (Gen 12:8, 13:3; Josh 7:2, 8:9) and in the vicinity of Bethel (Josh 8:17, 12:9). However, no decisive evidence has yet been found, "a significant problem", according to Wood (2008: 205), to demonstrate the conquest of Canaan and the Israelites' presence since the Late Bronze Age.

This failure pushed mostly American evangelical groups, such as ABR, to carry out archaeological fieldwork in the West Bank to validate the conquest narrative in the Book of Joshua. The Israeli Archaeological Survey of the Hill Country of Benjamin, conducted a decade earlier, gave ABR key clues on how to locate 'Ai and revealed Late Bronze and Iron I sherds scattered at Khirbet el-Maqatir (Finkelstein et al. 1997: 520). These findings directed biblical archaeologists on a new path for an old goal: Finding Biblical 'Ai.

This iterative process, a cycle of multifaceted archaeo-political violence, had been at work in the continuous mechanisms of an archaeological fundamentalist practice before, during, and after the Oslo Accords: what needed to be found had to be dug again and again, for the goal was not just retrieving it, but the work itself, the excavation, the destruction, the estrangement that premised the discovery. The pursuit of validating historical/archaeological narratives frequently intertwines with contemporary political agendas, as exemplified by ABR's archaeological activities in the West Bank. These excavations aim not only to uncover the past, but also to assert claims, shape identities, and influence geopolitical realities. It must be stressed again how the displacement order of biblical archaeology sees and promotes the cooperation between the State of Israel and non-state agencies, such as the ABR, in excavating in the oPt. Case in point: ABR excavated this site from 1995 until 2017 in collaboration with the Israeli Staff Officer for Archaeology (SOA) in what the Israeli Government calls 'Judea and Samaria' and other Israeli and international archaeology agencies. Groups such as ABR are still conducting fieldwork in sites in the West Bank in collaboration with the SOA in 'Judea and Samaria' (Greenberg and Kenan 2009: 6), universities (Ariel University), Israeli settlers, and NGOs (Stahl and Zachary 2017).

Archaeo-politics does not just reinterpret the past, which is the remit of every historiographical enterprise. Rather, archaeo-politics repurposes the past by selectively emphasizing certain narratives and interpretations to serve present-day objectives. In other words, archaeo-politics re-juxtapose them. It is less about a current agenda and more a practice of making the past one needs and the future already at work in the present. Thus, archaeo-politics is inherently dynamic and instrumental in its purposes. Nowhere was this more visible than in the town of Deir Dibwan, where the two sites of Tell et-Tell and Khirbet el-Maqatir are located. Following the signing of the Oslo Accords, the twin cities of Ramallah and Al-Birah came under the rule of the PNA: the new Palestinian Department of Antiquities was able to begin to excavate and enforce protection agendas in the area of Tell et-Tell as a site located in area B.

And yet five consecutive seasons of ABR excavations took place, starting in 1995, because Khirbet el-Maqatir was in area C, under Israeli control. The prospect of revealing biblical Joshua, intertwined with the necessity to limit any Palestinian jurisdiction around Road 60 in the west, led to Khirbet el-Maqatir's past, present, and future being decided by archaeo-politics. Archaeological excavations at the site by the ABR resumed in 2009, following a long pause caused by the Second Intifada, which started in 2000, with the last season conducted in 2017. Bryant Wood was the director of excavations for the period 1995–2000 and 2009–2012, while the site excavations from 2013 to 2017 occurred under the direction of Stripling. Under Wood's direction, the project's primary aim was to provide archaeological evidence to support the exact location of Joshua's 'Ai and offer archaeological accountability to the biblical narratives and the Israelite conquest of Canaan. Stripling steered the project to pursue the search for Jesus' Ephraim. The site's prominence during the Roman and Byzantine periods informed this conclusion. For the Old Testament, Wood claimed the "problem of 'Ai" had been solved (2008); correspondingly, the dominant archaeological layers of the New Testament era elicited the invention of Jesus' Ephraim by Stripling. This appears to be an effort by the ABR to gain backing from Christian fundamentalist groups instead of depending solely on those associated with biblical archaeology tied to the Old Testament.

"For almost twenty years, American archaeologists and tourists visited and excavated Khirbet el-Maqatir. They come in big groups to visit and work in the site under the protection of the Israeli army" (interview, Mansour Mansour, September 2019). The question here is the role of the local community in two decades of archaeological excavations. An answer to such a question theoretically links to the ongoing debate on the role of the local community in archaeology and cultural heritage. How does the ABR perceive the local community? Beyond the excavated trenches and squares, how do archaeologists and volunteers structurally ignore and exclude the local community? And how broadly alienated are the Palestinians from their heritage and their narratives?

Scholars, too, have eventually begun to address the issue of what lies around and who lives by the excavation areas: "Over the last two decades, community archaeology has grown into a distinct sub-discipline of archaeology, with its specialist journal, the Journal of Community Archaeology and Heritage," according to Claire Smith, "community archaeology is much more than the simple involvement of non-archaeologists in archaeological work, as it entails the community having partial control over the project" (2017: 13). Moreover, "in practice, the archaeologist has to deal with an array of social and political context and sensitivities" (2017: 13). Engaged archaeology, on the other hand, "can be defined as archaeology that is shaped by the social and political concerns of the people with whom archaeologists intersect" (2017: 14). However, "in many situations worldwide, the term 'community archaeology' has come to be used more commonly and interchangeably with 'public archaeology' in public and professional discourses on public engagement" (Jameson and Musteaţă 2019: 6). Paradoxically, while ABR conducts archaeological work in Palestinian territories, their approach stands in direct opposition to these principles of engaged archaeology. Rather than being shaped by the concerns and interests of the local Palestinian community, ABR's archaeological practice serves to validate predetermined biblical narratives while systematically excluding and alienating the very people whose heritage and land they excavate. This fundamentalist archaeological practice represents a form of epistemic violence that not only ignores local knowledge and perspectives but actively works to overwrite them with a narrative that serves external political and religious agendas.

In one of the videos uploaded on YouTube from the 2016 archaeological season, an ABR volunteer narrates: "as some people, the local sheep and shepherds are not impressed by all this effort to rediscover the what, the where, and when of biblical history" (Idester's YouTube Channel 2016). This colonialist and orientalist re-invention eliminates how, for more than a century, Deir Dibwanians have seen biblical scholars' extensive interests in their archaeology and landscape but not in their connection to their cultural heritage. The mayor of Deir Dibwan, Mansour Mansour, reflected on his experience with Stripling and the ABR team. He stated, "Three years ago, when I became the mayor, I went to Khirbet el-Maqatir to meet this group and see what they are doing" (interview, September 2019). Mansour added that "they [ABR] introduced themselves as Americans, and in return, I told them I am also a Palestinian with American citizenship" (interview, September 2019).

The local encounter surprised the ABR team working on the site in the 2017 season, as it was the first of its kind. It must be stated clearly that wilful and dangerous ignorance runs both ways. According to Mansour, neither the Palestinian officials nor academics paid enough attention to the archaeological activities at the site. Stripling offered the mayor a professional explanation. The former stated that their work is evangelical and linked to a university in Texas (according to ABR's website, Stripling has an academic affiliation with the Bible Seminary in Katy (Houston), Texas). "They explained that Tell et-Tell is not the biblical 'Ai; instead, their work in Khirbet el- Maqatir is to demonstrate that the latter is the biblical 'Ai" (interview, September 2019). Stripling was 'generous' to give the locals a tour of the latter's landscape. Impervious to the irony of the situation, this colonial scholar was doing a performative orientalist act the premise of which was that the native was a stranger in his/her own land, with no rights to whatever archaeology would retrieve from the past, with no support, however patronising, for an effective control by the Palestinian villagers over their environment.

It turns out that the neutrality of archaeology as a discipline benefits those already in power where the excavation is taking place. An enquiry starting from archaeo-politics was not needed to know this; however, archaeo-politics enables us to detect in the detailed tour that Stripling gave to Mr Mansour Mansour "of the olive press and the site […] the strategic importance of Khirbet el-Maqatir, as it is very close to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea" (interview with Mansour Mansour conducted by the author, September 2019). These topographic necessities match the biblical narratives of the new 'Ai (el-Maqatir). Stripling added that "the commercial route follows the valley through Deir Dibwan and the site overlooked this area" (interview with Mansour Mansour conducted by the author, September 2019). Stripling explained to Mansour that when the conquest (by the presumed Israelites) took place, seven people took refuge inside the olive press and were killed there.

In collaboration with the "SOA in Judea and Samaria", the ABR has not only been preventing the Palestinian public from benefiting from their cultural heritage; they have also transferred some of the excavated material culture to the U.S. to be exhibited, amongst other places, at the Durham Bible Museum of Houston Baptist University. From

January to December 2014, the ABR held an exhibition of 42 artefacts from excavations in Israel called "Khirbet el-Maqatir: The History of a Biblical Site" (Ritmeyer 2013). As Stahl and Zachary report, "the SOA also refuses to provide a list of items on loan and the institutions that borrowed them" (2017: 30). The justification is that "this information could jeopardise Israel's foreign relations by exposing Israel's implementation of the Interim Agreement [of the Oslo Accords] and might even compromise Israel's position in future negotiations for a permanent status agreement" (Stahl and Zachary 2017: 30).

Mansour went on to testify that he searched online for the project, and what he discovered was shocking. He stated, "I found that they take the excavated material culture to the United States, and there is a pilot museum/exhibition called Khirbet El-Maqatir Museum" (interview with Mansour Mansour conducted by the author, September 2019). When informed during the interview about the exhibition that took place throughout 2014 at the Dunham Bible Museum at Houston Baptist University, featuring 40 objects from the site, Mansour contacted Stripling and brought to his attention that many Deir Dibwanians are American citizens. "The mayor asked, on what basis do you [Stripling] work here?" (interview with Mansour Mansour conducted by the author, September 2019). Stripling replied that they had permission from the Israeli side. This reply from the foreign archaeologist shocked the mayor, and the latter immediately contacted a lawyer in the States about this matter. Mansour added, "the lawyer's opinion was that an occupation force is prohibited from transferring material culture outside the occupied territories" (interview, September 2019), which goes hand-in-hand with Article 50 of The Hague Convention.

In terms of 'recovered' material culture, one can imagine how much fourteen seasons of archaeological excavations have produced that has been 'transferred' to Israel and/or the U.S. Returning to the theoretical rationale for this practical looting: for Emek Shaveh and Yesh Din, "archaeological artefacts discovered in the West Bank are documented in the database of the SOA's archive. A portion of the artefacts are displayed in three museums in the West Bank: The Good Samaritan Museum, exhibiting mainly mosaics; the Kedem Archaeological Museum in the Kedumim settlement; and the Eretz Yehuda Museum in the council building in Kiryat Arba" (Stahl and Zachary 2017: 30). Interestingly, two of the museums are located within Israeli settlements in the oPt, the access to which is forbidden to Palestinians (as with all settlements). In other words, the SOA provided artefacts for public display to museums in the Occupied Territories, but the Palestinian public is not entitled to exercise its right to benefit from them (Stahl and Zachary 2017).

Mansour's encounter with the ABR team underscores both moments of Palestinian resistance and the agency of local communities. However, it also exposes the significant power imbalances in archaeological practices in the oPt. The perceived neutrality of archaeology as a discipline tends to favour those already in power at the excavation sites. Stripling's interaction with the local community demonstrates that the claimed objectivity of archaeological methods often obscures and legitimises existing colonial power structures. This kind of exercise of power and obstructive behaviour towards local people is not the end of the story. In the following section, I show how performativity is used to make the dead speak, as in the case of the eight bodies stolen from the site and reburied in an Israeli settlement nearby.

Spatio-temporality of Khirbet el-Maqatir Revised: Digging for Joshua's 'Ai, Searching for Jesus' Ephraim

"Remembrance, critique, resurrection. For none of these reasons [Hicks clarifies], the present essay returns to Tim Ingold's paper 'The Temporality of the Landscape', first published in 1993" (Hicks 2016: 6). However, all of these reasons – remembrance, critique, and resurrection – are relevant to my recall of Albert Glock's article *Cultural Bias in the Archaeology of Palestine* published in 1995 after his assassination in 1992. Glock reflects on the confession of cultural and academic soul-searching in the Anglo-American West, which caused enormous distortions in the archaeological record traceable directly to the political and economic interests of those who paid the research bill (Glock 1995). Glock's article serves as a stark reminder of the power dynamics inherent in archaeology, highlighted by the inaccessibility of numerous archaeological sites to local communities and the absence of adequate consultation or inclusion of their perspectives in decision-making processes.

Glock's and Ingold's articles were published around the same time in the early 1990s. Although there appears to be no connection between the two authors, it is worthwhile to explore the epistemological exchange present in their work. The significance of their work in archaeology is reflected in the ongoing examination of power dynamics and the imperative of inclusive practices. Glock's critique of cultural biases and the exclusion of local voices remains pertinent, as archaeologists strive to decolonise the field and ensure that research benefits all stakeholders. Similarly, Ingold's keywords "landscape, temporality, dwelling, and taskscape – relied on a further overarching dichotomy: between modern Western and non-Western or counter-modern thought" (Hicks 2016: 8). Hicks (2016: 8) critiques Ingold's characterization of the "ancient inclination in Western thought to prioritize form over process," arguing that this reflects a problematic systematic bias, imposing an "insistent dualism, between object and subject, the material and the ideal, operational and cognized, 'etic' and 'emic'" (Ingold 1993: 154).

The theoretical framework of this study brings together three complementary perspectives on archaeological power dynamics. Glock's (1995) foundational critique exposes how cultural bias in archaeology serves financial and political interests, particularly how archaeological findings are interpreted and controlled by those who fund the research. Ingold's (1993) analysis of temporality and landscape provides the conceptual tools to understand how these biases are manifested in spatial and temporal interpretations of archaeological sites. Hicks' (2016) critical revision synthesizes and extends these insights, demonstrating how the combination of cultural bias and temporal-spatial control produces specific forms of archaeo-political violence against local communities, their material heritage, and their connection to the landscape. Together, these perspectives reveal how archaeological practice can become a tool for colonial power, not just in interpreting the past but in actively reshaping present-day territorial claims and political realities. This theoretical synthesis helps us understand how organizations like ABR employ archaeological methods to simultaneously erase Palestinian connections to the land while constructing alternative historical narratives that serve contemporary political objectives.

The location of Joshua's 'Ai remained a geographical and chronological puzzle for over a century until Wood's solution. In a similar vein, Stripling developed what can be characterized as a fundamentalist-driven interpretation regarding Jesus' Ephraim at the same site. At Khirbet el-Maqatir, the establishment of a Judeo-Christian chronological connection – claiming the site as both Joshua's 'Ai and Jesus' Ephraim – has proven to be ABR's most effective strategy for attracting volunteers and securing financial support for their archaeological work. Based on this interpretation, Stripling (2014: 80) suggests that Khirbet el-Maqatir should be promoted as the city where Jesus and his disciples sought refuge before his passion.

The invention has been developed due to the site's material culture and structural remains that date predominantly to the Roman and Byzantine periods, which have according to Stripling, rendered the site a laboratory for comprehending the New Testament era. Through the Digging for Truth TV series, ABR aims to reach Evangelical audiences in the U.S. and around the world and demonstrate the historical accuracy of the Bible, promoted in *Digging for Truth-Episode 6: New Testament Discoveries at Khirbet el-Maqatir*, co-hosted by Henry B. Smith, Jr. In the same episode, Stripling claims that considering the size of the site from the Roman and Byzantine periods, Khirbet el-Maqatir is regarded as a little Jerusalem. Stripling points out that,

> "we have the modern city of Jerusalem that covers most of the ancient city of Jerusalem. To give biblical archaeology audiences a picture of the site [Khirbet el-Maqatir] in the time of Jesus and the Second Temple era, this myth had to be imagined and reconstructed in a 3D model. It was also necessary to reconstruct the fortification system that Joshua destroyed. What we have ten miles north of Jerusalem is a little Jerusalem." (Stripling 2018)

Stripling explained that with what "we learned from the New Testament city, there we can extrapolate the material culture back and then understand in a larger sense what Jerusalem was like in the days of Jesus" (2018).

The naming of the site was controversial during the excavation. The modern name, Khirbet el-Maqatir, had to be replaced with a biblical one from the New Testament, considering that this significant and fortified site turned out to be 'a little Jerusalem.' According to Stripling, the answer can be found in Josephus, Eusebius, and the Book of John 11–54. In his article published in the ABR's journal *Bible and Spade*, Stripling concludes,

> "Maybe Oprah = Ephraim does not hold up under scrutiny. However, Khirbet el-Maqatir, a fortified city that was destroyed the exact year that Josephus indicates the demise of Ephraim, is an attractive candidate. As a result, Khirbet el-Maqatir can be considered the late Second Temple period city of Ephraim." (Stripling 2014: 94)

Stripling attempts to provide more certainty to this hypothesis in *Digging for Truth-Episode Six* by giving a more historical link between Josephus, Eusebius, and John 1:54. As he points out,

> "Josephus is talking north of Jerusalem about a site named Ephraim, and he always mentions it with Bethel. Bethel and Ephraim, of course, in the Old Testament, you have doublets or couplets; it is always Bethel and Ai. As we shall see, Khirbet el-Maqatir is the earlier Ai, and now it is associated with Bethel if we are right." (Stripling 2018)

In the winter of 2022, I visited the site during fieldwork to monitor the current state of the areas excavated by the ABR. The exposed area is estimated at 3.4 hectares following ABR's completed excavations in 2017. After consulting with the Palestinian Department of Antiquities – Ramallah office, they proposed aerial monitoring using a UAV to photograph the site, monitoring both the general conditions of excavated and exposed areas and potential damage from natural and human factors. The first critical issue is that the site's classification as Area C means archaeological features cannot be included in any protection plans; neither the local community nor the Palestinian National Authority can protect the site, with only the Staff Officer for Archaeology having jurisdiction. While archaeological excavations inherently involve systematic destruction to reveal archaeological layers, it is imperative to incorporate protective strategies for remaining layers. The discipline has evolved alongside technological advancements, with drones now being employed specifically for surveillance of looting and to record and monitor sites, thereby reducing the impact of physical excavation. The data collected provides a more comprehensive understanding of the archaeological landscape that needs mending. The World Archaeological Congress (WAC), a global network of archaeologists, has established the Dead Sea Accord, outlining thirteen key ethical points for safeguarding cultural property during armed conflict. These points serve as fundamental guidelines for sound archaeological practices, ensuring sites are protected from looting, destruction, and other damage during armed conflict. The code also guides archaeological research conduct, including responsible and respectful handling of artefacts and human remains.

In the post-excavation phase, the backfilling of excavated areas is fundamental. Besides protecting the site, this process allows the former land use to continue after reburial (Canti and Davis 1999: 75). Backfilling also helps to maintain the site's integrity while protecting it from natural elements such as weather and erosion. Additionally, it helps to protect the site from looters and other disturbances. Even though Geomolg's land classification of Khirbet el-Maqatir for agricultural activities is low, seasonal agriculture still occurs around the site. However, the landowners of the site cannot resume any agricultural activities, which, without reburial, may lead to further destruction. ABR's archaeological activities have contributed to the systematic destruction of heritage but also of private and public land in the West Bank. The process of leaving the structures uncovered is a conscious and integral part of the excavation and is performed for practical and ideological reasons. For practical purposes, it is shown as a reward to volunteers, proof of the Bible, and as encouragement to donors. From an ideological perspective, ABR believes its actions are legal, legitimate, and praiseworthy. In addition to published primary reports, articles, blogs, and social media reports, ABR produces TV and radio interviews, presentations, public relations (PR), and promotional videos. Performative materials/narratives are key to understanding the structures that establish and govern the consortium of such activities. These performative narratives, in the form of short videos of archaeologists, volunteers, settlements, community groups and individuals, are designed to promote and support conducting seasons of fieldwork and for recruiting the hundreds of volunteers who gather from fifteen countries and around thirty states of the U.S. to participate, for instance, in the 2018 Shiloh excavations (ABR 2017).

On a less technical level, the municipality team filed a lawsuit after ABR excluded the local community and displayed archaeological materials abroad. During my interview with Mayor Mansour (September 2019), he summarized the main points of his correspondence with Stripling. According to Mansour, the municipality and the landowners are pursuing legal action against the archaeological activities. Yet, no communication has occurred between the ABR and the landowners regarding permission to conduct any work. This triggered fear among the owners that the Israeli Army might confiscate their land. This fear was raised when the Israeli Army ordered some Bedouins who are seasonally settling near the site to evacuate, as the area is of archaeological significance (interview, September 2019). Mansour brought to Stripling's attention that the landowners in Khirbet el-Maqatir are Palestinian American citizens, and they were filing a lawsuit against ABR and the Archaeology Institute at The Bible Seminary in Katy, Texas. Stripling emailed the mayor of Deir Dibwan stating that he was planning a visit to Palestine, and a meeting could be arranged. In an email sent a week later, Mr. Mansour was informed that the ABR had finished its work at el-Maqatir and would not return to the site (interview, September 2019).

The exercise of legal power by Palestinian-Americans represents a unique intersection of citizenship, heritage rights, and transnational justice. When Mansour discovered ABR's unauthorised removal of artefacts to the U.S., he leveraged his and other Deir Dibwanians' American citizenship to challenge these practices through the U.S. legal system. The threat of legal action in U.S. courts – where ABR is vulnerable as a U.S.-American organisation – proved more effective than appeals through Israeli or Palestinian authorities. This case illustrates how Palestinians can strategically use their American citizenship to contest archaeological colonialism and to assert heritage rights, even as it also highlights the profound inequities in access to legal recourse.

How to Make the Dead Speak? Archaeology at the Service of Settler Colonial Entrepreneurism

Let's start with a tangential anecdote that illustrates how archaeology and politics intersect through public performances. As Hamilakis (2016: 228) describes, "At the end of September 2015, the Greek Minister of Defense, Panos Kammenos, participated in a ceremony that attracted much public and media attention in the country. It was part of the annual festival organized by the Municipality of Salamis, the Salaminia." The event's historical significance was emphasized through careful choreography, as "[d]elegations of friendly and allied countries were represented, and their flags were carried by local women dressed in traditional costumes before a line of replicas of ancient sarisas (long spears used in ancient Greek warfare) and shields" (Hamilakis 2016: 228). The ceremony reached its climax when participants gathered as "speeches were made, red carpets were laid, and wreaths were thrown into the sea" (Hamilakis 2016: 228).

A brief philological observation is worth noting here: the use of red carpets carried ominous historical resonance. In Greek mythology, Clytemnestra laid out a red carpet to welcome her husband Agamemnon – an act of hubris that preceded his murder. His fatal decision to walk on it, despite its implications, demonstrated the kind of pride that invited divine punishment.

My point here is how that 'show,' that 'representation' was, indeed, a performative act, bringing "a contemporary configuration of sovereignty into being" (Butler 2004: 61). The act conjures and constrains the actors in how they want to be seen and treated. In less post-modernist terms, George Orwell wrote how, partaking of the structures of the empires, of their established and legitimate violence, "trying to impress the 'natives'", the white man, "becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalised figure of a sahib", having to perform "what the 'natives' expect of him. He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it" (Orwell 2009: 420). Once the language of empire has been taught to the natives, it rebounds on those who speak it: they cannot refrain from the only words they can now say. If performativity extends beyond, and at times even contradicts, the intentions of those enacting it, this ritual action becomes unstoppable, as its essence is rooted in its continual repetition. The language of the spell has, somehow, taken over the disciple of this magic. In this perspective, I can now more readily reference the hypothesis that the staging of the ABR, the ritualistic repetition of its discoveries, or its propagation as another instance of non-state archaeo-political violence usurps the will of its perpetrators. The mechanism the ideological adherents believe in does not permit them to maintain a distanced, cynical position; they cannot abstain from participating in it.

In 2017 *The Times of Israel* online published an article entitled *A 2,000-year-old murder leads to an illicit burial in the heart of the West Bank* (Borschel-Dan 2017). The newspaper reported how the settlers from the Ofra settlement secretly stepped in to illegally pay their last respects to eight bodies from Khirbet el-Maqatir. According to the newspaper, a Jewish Temple Mount activist group, which decades ago sat in jail for planning to blow up the Dome of the Rock, planned and carried out the secret burial in the settlement of Ofra on February 6, 2017. According to the newspaper, Stripling stated that he had intended to rebury the bones at the site. Then, some 'old friends' from the very same nearby settlement of Ofra stepped in with a 'proposal' to give them a proper burial. Stripling added,

> "These people were eyewitnesses of the Second Temple, and it gives me great joy to know how they have finally been properly laid to rest. According to the Journal, 'proper', however, may not exactly be the word to describe their illegal burial at Ofra." (Borschel-Dan 2017)

It was in *Digging for Truth-Episode Six* that Stripling provided important details regarding the fascinating discovery of those eight human skeletons, people who were wiped out by the Roman Tenth Legion led by Vespasian in that region around 69 CE. According to Stripling's description in this episode, the human skeletons were tested by an anthropologist from Hebrew University in Jerusalem and were dated by C14 to the mid to late 1st century. In short, 'science' and the bible could go hand-in-hand, one building the settlements, the other authorising them.

For Stripling, the discovery of the human remains confirmed the reliability of the Bible as a serious historical document. Such a discovery moved ABR and Yaakov Erlich (surveyor, volunteer, and Ofra resident) to bury the remains at the nearby Israeli settlement of Ofra. Putting aside the historical accuracy and discrepancies between the Bible's account of events and other historical records, let us ignore the scholarly debate about whether the Old Testament was written contemporaneously with or centuries after the events it describes. Returning to archaeology and its enactment of archaeo-political violence and performativity, the journalist will help us grasp who Erlich – the surveyor – is. After the analysis of the eight bodies was finished, Erlich and a member of the settlement's burial society, Yehuda Etzion, "organised a large ceremony at Ofra, complete with Knesset members and other VIPs, and bury the bones next to a memorial for soldiers from an elite IDF unit who fell in Ofra in 2003" (Borschel-Dan 2017).

As I have advocated elsewhere, the act of reburial, involving the placement of stolen bodies under a layer of concrete with a ceremony, initially appeared as a straightforward act of thievery. While this interpretation holds some truth, it fails to fully capture the underlying motivations. The effort to provide a proper burial indicates more profound intentions. The eight bodies served an ideological function, acting as instruments to mend the state's historical narrative. The contemporary burial aimed to establish an uncontested past retroactively, anchoring the foundation of Israeli presence in archaeological 'evidence.' This reburial transcended mere religious observance; it represented an endeavour to forge historical continuity between ancient and modern claims to the land. By physically embedding these remains within the current Israeli settlement territory, the act sought to materialize and legitimize present-day territorial claims through archaeological practice. Thus, the reburial functioned as both a religious ritual and a political statement, transforming archaeological findings into evidence for contemporary territorial sovereignty. This process exemplifies how archaeological practice can be utilized to construct historical narratives that serve current political objectives. Such a retrojection aimed to permanently link the State to the present, enhancing the cycle of violence and, ipso facto, securing the settlement and any effort at moving forward (Iwaisi 2024).

What we see, aided by the detailed report of the journalist, is how archaeo-politics is embedded within the various bodies of the Israeli colonial regime in the West Bank and how archaeology is at the heart of it. The reburial ceremony, organised by Erlich and Etzion (a former member of the Jewish Underground who had been imprisoned for plotting to blow up the Dome of the Rock), brought together Knesset members and VIPs to bury the bones next to a memorial for fallen IDF soldiers near Ofra. This strategic placement of the ancient remains alongside modern military memorials demonstrates how archaeo-political violence operates through multiple layers – connecting historical narratives to contemporary territorial claims while simultaneously excluding Palestinian access to and interpretation of their cultural heritage. Such acts of archaeo-political violence persist even when recognised as counterproductive by Israeli museum officials, because the narrative mechanism requires all actors to play their assigned roles in this ongoing performance of settler colonial legitimacy.

Such acts of archaeo-political violence persist even when recognised as counterproductive by Israeli museum officials, because the narrative mechanism requires all actors to play their assigned roles in this ongoing performance of settler colonial legitimacy. This performance is particularly evident in the work of the Associates for Biblical Research (ABR) at Tell Seilun, which they promote as 'Israel's First Capital.' The organization's presence on this archaeological site – what some volunteers describe as 'ABR on my doorstep' – represents a direct connection between biblical narratives and contemporary territorial claims. At this excavation site, sitting next to his teacher in square 30A-F in Tell Seilun (Shiloh), a junior volunteer from West Kevin School (North Carolina) is enthused over his adventure of knowing another country, another culture, seeing what God is doing here, how this adventure is making him passionate about archaeology, and how professional archaeologists can uncover what the Bible talks about (ABR 2019). The second testimony comes from Michael Ludden, a dig photographer describing Israel's archaeology as a time machine: "You can go back there. You can live it, and you can touch it. It is about the book you have been reading and studying, the Holy Bible, God's word" (ABR 2017).

These words of young, old, male, female, foreigners, and settler volunteers from Tell Seilun's excavations are just the tip of the iceberg of a long list of performative narratives at another site of ABR's activities. Pedantic presentations openly describe ABR's performative archaeo-political violence on Palestinian archaeology in the West Bank. These representations combine ideology and rituals, walking with Israeli settler-colonial policies across the West Bank.

The Israeli settlement of Shiloh was established in 1978 on lands belonging to the villagers of Qaryut, which were confiscated using a military seizure order. The military order "allow[ed] the army to seize land solely for imperative and urgent military purposes [and] was exploited to establish the settlement under the guise of an archaeological excavation camp" (Stahl and Zachary 2017: 21). This order was used to bypass the legal protection of Palestinian land. The military employed the construction as a facade to establish the settlement. The excavation camp served as a guise to obscure the actual objective of developing a settlement in the area. "In January 1978, approximately 40 caravans were installed, and eight families along with yeshiva students took residence" (Stahl and Zachary 2017: 21). This contrasts with Avikunthak's two distinct categories of spatiality – the excavation site and the campsite – within the framework of ASI's archaeologists in the field (2021: 106). The dual intertwining nature of the excavation site and campsite in Tell Seilun is evident. Stahl and Zachary further emphasized that the action "was undertaken pursuant to the decision of the Minister of Agriculture, Ariel Sharon, and with the approval of Defense Minister Ezer Weizman, but without an official decision by the Israeli government to establish a new settlement" (2017: 21).

Turning the Tables

The enduring tradition of archaeological excavations has developed into a practice imbued with performative significance. These excavations operate as ritualized activities that organize not only the work pace and rhythm but also the daily routines of both seasoned archaeologists and newcomers. This structured methodology establishes a disciplinary framework that regulates both the physical engagement with the territory and the individuals conducting the work. Hamilakis and Theou (2013: 182) extend this understanding by illustrating that "archaeological sites are arenas that can allow other forms of cultural production, beyond archaeological, to unfold and to thrive." Building on this perspective, Avikunthak (2021) further challenges conventional archaeological interpretations by recognizing these sites as active agents of cultural production rather than passive spaces of excavation. This theoretical framework transcends traditional academic discourse, moving beyond the usual focus on publication metrics, tangible aspects, dating disputes, and institutional rankings. Instead, as Jess Bier (2022: 672) argues, the interpretative approach to archaeological sites as places of performances enables "a greater engagement with dimensions beyond the quantifiable." This multidimensional analysis opens up new possibilities for understanding archaeological sites, allowing for more holistic and interdisciplinary approaches that can help decolonize archaeological practice. In this context, Palestine emerges as an 'ideational landscape,' encompassing both imaginative and emotional dimensions, representing a mental construct that evokes spiritual and idealistic values (Knapp and Ashmore 1999: 12). This framing of the Palestinian landscape, while appearing to preserve cultural memory, actually reinforces colonial power structures through the archaeological practices imposed upon it. While Keith Basso's (1996: 7) concept of 'the construction of the past' through oral history was originally developed to understand how the Ifugao people preserved their heritage, in the Palestinian context, these practices of memory and landscape interpretation become subsumed within and appropriated by the colonial framework, rather than enabling resistance to it. The local connection with the landscape, though maintained through oral traditions and cultural practices, continues to operate within rather than outside the constraints of colonial dominance.

This approach also allows us to see the landscape – and the archaeological trench – not as 'pre-history' but, instead, as the history of those who have no (more) records for it (Acabado and Martin 2022: 7–8). The landscape is, in short, not 'a space', certainly not any space, the location for an imaginary universal person; it is, rather, the meaning-maker place, the story-teller place, a physical place, a *lieu de memoire* (Nora 1989) where history, identity, and culture intersect and therefore are still being formed. This active agency of memory, this living memory, makes it possible to create a home, a meaningful place not just 'to survive' but to be alive, a homeland, perhaps. Living memory is significant as it underscores the notion that the landscape is not static but continually changes and evolves as people interact with it over time. It is a dynamic living entity constantly shaped by human activity, making it an important part of the human experience.

This article underscores the continuous operation of archaeological fundamentalism before, during, and after the Oslo Accords, demonstrating the enduring nature of these practices in service of political agendas. Symbolic acts, such as the reburial ceremony of ancient remains next to IDF military memorials near Ofra, exemplify the complex layering of archaeological, military, and political claims to territory. This study demonstrates that archaeo-political violence transcends mere physical displacement, encompassing systemic inequalities, bureaucratic constraints, and narrative silencing.

The interplay between settler colonialism and entrepreneurism by Israeli state and non-state actors, both foreign and Israeli, has established an apparatus that systematically erases Palestinian heritage while elevating Israeli historical claims. This phenomenon has led to the obliteration of cultural heritage and the exacerbation of economic disparities, thereby compromising the capacity of Palestinian communities to maintain their connection to their heritage and to foster sustainable futures. The ramifications of my research extend beyond the realm of archaeological practice, posing a challenge to the foundational aspects of power dynamics, legitimacy, and historical narratives in contested territories. This underscores the urgent need for a thorough re-evaluation of the utilization of archaeology in advancing Israeli settler colonialism, as well as the integration of entrepreneurial endeavours within the Israeli colonial framework in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Postscript

This article is partially adapted from a chapter of my PhD thesis titled *Archaeo-politics in the Making of the Palestinian National Spatial Plan*, which I defended in May 2023 at Queen's University Belfast. The devastating events in and concerning Palestine since October 2023 underscore the urgency of examining how archaeology and heritage are weaponized in contexts of ongoing occupation and settler colonialism, making the analysis presented in this article even more relevant today.

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Theme Issue

Unearthing Resistance – James C. Scott's Legacy for Critical Archaeologies and Histories

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Unearthing Resistance – James C. Scott's Legacy for Critical Archaeologies and Histories

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FKA Editorial Collective

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James C. Scott: A Tribute

FKA Editorial Collective

James C. Scott, political scientist and anthropologist, passed away on 19 July 2024 at the age of 87. He was Sterling Professor of Political Science and Director of the Agrarian Studies Program at Yale University – and a farmer. His scholarship focused on agrarian societies, state power, and forms of political resistance. Scott conducted extensive fieldwork in southeast Asia. A prolific writer (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_C._Scott), Scott’s books inspired scholars across many fields – and many of us in the editorial collective of *Forum Kritische Archäologie* (FKA) as well. His work has influenced our perspectives on the mechanisms of state power and ways of resisting or avoiding it. His challenges to traditional narratives of state formation and state control and the alleged powerlessness of the marginalized have helped us as archaeologists to think about material traces of ‘everyday forms of resistance’, ‘hidden transcripts,’ and ‘weapons of the weak.’

Not only have we engaged individually with his work, we also have done so collectively. In June 2017, shortly before the publication of his book *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, FKA invited him to an afternoon discussion. Together with the nearly 30 participants, Jim enlightened and entertained us with his erudition, down-to-earth approach to intellectually challenging issues, his kindness, and his wit.

The plan to invite Jim was originally a bit of a shot in the dark. One of us had corresponded with him briefly by email. Our original idea was to invite him for a lecture, leaving open the precise topic but indicating that we were particularly interested in his notion of hidden transcripts and their implications for resistance. As we wrote in the initial invitation:

> “[…] it has always bothered [us] that ancient empires are depicted as polities without any opposition. Your input in changing that would be important.”

Jim replied promptly to the email, expressing a willingness to come to Berlin to give a talk if he could combine it with one or more other engagements in Europe. He also mentioned his forthcoming book (*Against the Grain*) and suggested that he would like to orient his talk – which was ultimately entitled “Barbarians and States” – to some part of it. As our email exchange began to take shape, we asked whether he would be willing to follow up the talk the next day with a discussion with a group of interested persons, mostly archaeologists:

> “What we propose is to get a group of people together who have read your Mesopotamia MS (if we may distribute it to them) and then have an open discussion, likely with questions from our side. […] If you prefer having beer and visiting Kreuzberg [Berlin], that’s fine, too!”

With his usual generosity Jim wrote in reply: “The workshop/seminar you propose for the 14th is fine. As I see it, the schedule is not so crowded that I shall be unable to find time for a beer in Kreuzberg.” And then, once the dates had been confirmed: “Good, I’ve got it carved on my stone calendar.”

As the time got closer, the planning moved into a more concrete phase. Jim wrote:

> “Incidentally, close friends also visiting Berlin will be joining me for dinner on the 11th. […] many many years ago my wife and I were fond of a Kreuzberg restaurant that employed exclusively released convicts – the food was also very good!”

The seminar/discussion was planned for a nearly three-hour slot. The room was full, the discussion lively. In addition to speaking about various aspects of his forthcoming book as well as his previous work, Jim was not averse to addressing questions about his personal acts of resistance in the face of state repression and injustice.

We feel privileged to have gotten to know Jim personally and to have been enriched and inspired by his work. In a modest tribute to him, we have gathered here six brief contributions by scholars who for the most part work in archaeology and related ancient studies. They reflect on how Jim's work has impacted their own scholarship as well as that of others in the field. Current political events demonstrate how topical and meaningful Scott's work and the contributors' comments are. Dismantling of the state is turning before our eyes into a dismantling of the protection of already impoverished and/or discriminated segments of society. It is making all too clear that there is a fundamental difference between an ideology of libertarianism and the kind of anarchism that Jim Scott advocated.

Feminist Archaeology and the Legacy of James Scott: Interventions in the Writing of Women’s History

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Feminist Archaeology and the Legacy of James Scott: Interventions in the Writing of Women’s History

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Introduction

At the time of working on this paper (December 2024), I attended a session organized by Bidar Research Institution in Tehran, where a young feminist was presenting the results of her M.A. dissertation on the Iranian women’s movement, One Million Signatures Campaign, in the 2000s. When I questioned the application of theories developed to study the agency and political action of subaltern groups, particularly Asef Bayat’s work, one member of the audience responded that this is not relevant to feminism and women’s movement. Nobody provided a counter argument, but a young male student mentioned another work by Bayat, *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam*, where he discusses the agency of ordinary women in the Iranian post-revolutionary society. He briefly discussed the relevance of Bayat’s work to the exploration of women as a subaltern group.

In *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Asef Bayat (2010) introduces the quiet encroachment of the ordinary. Drawing on James Scott’s everyday forms of resistance, Bayat discusses how subaltern groups such as the poor and women seek “life chances” through quiet encroachment in daily life in post-revolutionary Iran. He claims that “in many authoritarian Muslim states, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, where conservative Islamic laws are in place, women have become second-class citizens in many domains of public life. Consequently, a central question for women’s rights activists is how to achieve gender equality under such circumstances” (Bayat 2010: 96). Bayat answers this question in the framework of Scott’s theory: “Women resisted these policies, not much by deliberate organized campaigns, but largely through mundane daily practices in public domains, such as working, playing sports, studying, showing interest in art and music, or running for political offices” (Bayat 2010: 97). Bayat calls this “feminism of everyday life” (2010: 96).

This short narrative brings me to the point that I want to discuss in this paper: the application of theories of political action and the resistance of subordinate groups in feminist and gender archaeology. I briefly discuss the relevance of subaltern studies generally and James Scott’s “everyday forms of resistance,” then turn to the methodological and socio-political outcomes of this expansion for feminist and gender archaeology. Finally, I discuss two examples to demonstrate the significance of daily life as a site of conflict and resistance.

Different Standpoints and Different Actions of the Subaltern

Anthropologist James Scott dedicated most of his professional life to the investigation of marginalized communities such as peasants and rural communities in non-Western societies. Scott (1989: 33) criticizes the tendency to ignore everyday forms of resistance in favor of the emphasis on “open political action.” He discusses the less visible, everyday forms of resistance, particularly among lower classes and subordinate groups, such as socially, politically and economically underprivileged women. He calls these strategies “the ordinary means of class struggle […]. When they are widely practiced by members of an entire class against elites or the state, they may have aggregate consequences all out of proportion to their banality when considered singly” (Scott 1989: 34). Effectively, “acts of resistance are so deeply integrated into social life that they become an ordinary part of people’s existence" (Kazmi 2022: 61). Scott's research reveals the significance of resistance strategies in daily life as a "prosaic but constant struggle" between the subordinate and the powerful (Scott 1985: 29; see also Bayat 2013; Chaudhary et al. 2017). A prominent aspect of everyday forms of resistance is their cumulative impact, which participates in massive socio-political transformations (Scott 1989: 42).

As I have remarked elsewhere, feminist scholarship also argues for the significance of daily life and "raising resistance from a gendered perspective" (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 23). Gayatri Spivak also considers women's experience, representing female subaltern persons "as subject to even greater degrees of economic, cultural, and political marginalization" (Moore-Gilbert 2005: 454).

In seeking to make visible women's political activities outside of conventional masculine institutions, feminist scholarship has revised scholarly understandings of what constitutes politics (Murphy 2010: 20–21) and has argued for an alternative understanding of power. Hartsock (1997: 607) has pointedly argued that "to be without the power of dominance is perceived as being very nearly without the power to act at all, or at least as being without the power to act effectively". Defining power as "capacity", or, as Hanna Pitkin suggests, replacing "power over" with "power to," brings our attention to other aspects of power, especially the "powers of the allegedly powerless" (Pitkin 1985: 276; Mohaghegh Neyshabouri 2020: 43).

As the aforementioned arguments suggest, we need to apply theoretical frameworks that bear a capacity to demonstrate the power and agency of subaltern groups such as subordinated women. Indeed, we should start our investigation of power relations from the standpoint of women. Feminist standpoint theory has put forward striking methodological arguments in terms of women's different lived experiences. According to this theory, knowledge is socially situated, and research should begin with the lives of the subordinate (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 24). Feminist standpoint theory seeks to uncover the hidden knowledge that women have acquired "from living life on the margins" (Brooks 2007: 77). The feminist historian Bettina Aptheker argues that a different kind of resistance has been "shaped by the dailiness of women's lives" (1989: 173). She defines this concept as "the patterns women create and the meanings women invent each day and over time as a result of their labors and in the context of their subordinated status to men" (Aptheker 1989: 38). She argues that this kind of resistance comes from the responsibility of women in everyday life to sustain their children, families and communities. "It is a resistance that exists outside the parameters of those politics and outside the purview of any of the traditional definitions of progress and social change" (Aptheker 1989: 173). Interestingly, Aptheker's words in terms of women's resistance are very close to Scott's ideas: this kind of political action "is not openly declared in the usually understood sense of 'politics'" (Scott 1989: 33). Just as Scott considers the cumulative impact of everyday forms of resistance, Aptheker also believes that women's resistance in daily life "has a profound impact on the fabric of social life because of its steady, cumulative effects" (Aptheker 1989: 173).

Connecting the links between standpoint feminism and the theory of everyday forms of resistance allows us to consider the dynamism of ordinary women's life in community and society, particularly in marginalized communities. Accordingly, we can "see" the potentials of daily activities (such as household chores) and different strategies in daily life that women adopt to resist and survive. In *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, Silvia Federici emphasizes the significance of daily life and "activities that reproduce our lives" as the starting point for women's resistance and the organization of politics (Federici 2019: 142). As I have argued, "a multi-scalar focus on women's daily life can draw attention to the overlooked aspects of resistance and new ways of looking at resistance" (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 25).

Archaeological Knowledge and the Study of Women as Subaltern

The study of women in archaeology was chiefly established in the 1970s by feminist scholars inspired by the contemporary women's movements, which influenced social science and humanities. "Gender archaeology was born out of feminist reflections on the discipline" (Montón-Subías and Meyer 2018: 6). These theoretical and critical shifts in archaeology problematized the absence of women in archaeological interpretations.

Since then, feminist and gender archaeologists have tried to develop concepts and methodologies to explore the life of ordinary women. Subfields such as household archaeology have introduced the world(s) of women and particularly daily life to archaeological research. “Only *Gender Archaeology* (Gero – Conkey 1991), with its focus on the areas of women’s experience and its feminist concern for housework […] has begun to regard the chores and tasks comprising maintenance activities as a field worthy of study” (Montón-Subías 2010: 25). The concept of maintenance activities, introduced by Spanish archaeologists, refers to “the basic tasks that regulate both the course of human life and social stability on a daily basis, and are therefore crucial for the reproduction, cohesion, and welfare of human groups. […] indeed, they are all life-supporting activities connected with the welfare of every member of the social group” (Montón-Subías 2010: 24–26).

What women in daily life do is far more complex than physical care in the domestic space. The “dailiness of women” (Aptheker 1989: 7) is socio-politically charged, and daily tasks or maintenance activities may convey political implications. The strategies women apply in daily life are usually defensive in their objectives. Scott remarks that the purpose of “these defensive strategies from below” is usually to “avoid notice and detection” (Scott 1989: 34, 46). Maintenance activities can be observed, controlled or even be the subject of interventions by dominant groups. Montón-Subías (2018) discusses how the Spanish colonizers and missionaries changed the gender system and the daily life of women of the Chamorro community in Guam, with a focus on maintenance activities.

Such approaches offer considerable potentials as a departure point to deconstruct the duality of public and private. “The domestic sphere has been deemed irrelevant to the configuration of the dynamic social processes involving creativity and historical change – hence its exclusion from most social studies” (Montón-Subías 2010: 24). What Scott (1989: 33) calls “open political action” is usually connected to the public sphere and conceived as the action of male political elites “performed within narrowly defined political institutions” (Murphy 2010: 21).

Scott (2008: 34) believes that “the more typical forms of political conflict dominate the historiography of the peasantry and other subordinate groups”. He emphasizes the piecemeal encroachment of subordinate groups and its contrast with open political action. He states that “such techniques are relatively safe, they often promise vital material gains, and they require little or no *formal* coordination let alone formal organization” (Scott 1989: 35). Indeed, subaltern studies indicate that a conservative understanding of political action usually cannot explain the nature of the resistance of subordinate communities. Therefore, we need to deconstruct the conservative androcentric discourse on political action and resistance to comprehend the different nature of political action by women.

The exploration of women’s resistance and the political implications of their actions in daily life is still in its infancy in archaeology. The development of theoretical concepts such as Scott’s has provided archaeology with insights into the life of non-elite groups including ordinary and subordinate women. Indeed, the alliance between Scott’s theory and feminism on the significance of daily life as a site of resistance in women’s life have resulted not only in the production of micro-scale archaeological narratives about the ignored and less-investigated aspects of women’s life but also critical interventions in writing the histories of different societies and communities. These critical narratives usually present a more dynamic image of social life and avoid the reduction of socio-political changes to the decisions of a small group of political (male) elites.

Below, I briefly discuss two examples, one from my recent research on the 19th century women’s resistance in Iran and the other from Montón-Subías’s study on the colonized Chamorro community in Guam.

Daily Life as the Site of Conflict and Resistance

In the 19th century Iran was governed by the Qajar dynasty. It was a time of growing economic conflicts between Iranians and Europeans that resulted in a deep economic stagnation and the rise of resistance in Iran (Keddie 1972: 73). “By the mid-nineteenth century, the import of Western manufactured goods has accelerated the bankruptcy of the craftsmen in most branches of traditional industries” (Malek 1991: 75). In fact, one of the fundamental axes of Western dominance was through the prevalence of consumption among the (world’s) population (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 11).

While male politicians initiated various strategies to counter the economic problems through political institutions, "women approached the economic crisis through the concept of household management, *tadbir-e manzel/tartib-e zendegi*. They claimed the importance of home management and the promotion of women to the household managers" (Najmabadi 1998: 91). Drawing on Scott's everyday forms of resistance, I have considered forms of resistance and strategies invented by women as a group outside the institutional political structure. In doing this, I adopted the term "maintenance activities" introduced by Spanish archaeologists (Montón-Subías 2010, 2018; Montón-Subías and Sánchez-Romero 2008) to avoid the duality of public and private and to transcend the limiting and biased nature of conservative terms, such as domestic activities.

Frugality and economy as science and less consumption turned into critical words in women's literature and writings. It was proposed that a proper daily routine and less consumption could support *mam-e vatan*, the homeland, and the economy. Drawing on home management they insisted on women's education and its critical role in sustainable household consumption (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 11).

I have argued that women actively reacted to a national economic crisis and organized activities against Western economic encroachment. These strategies included the establishment of organizations and campaigns and the encouragement of women to restructure the family economy, where they usually made the decisions (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 135). From women's perspective, the country's major problems and crises were relevant to troubles and mismanagement in families and in individual decision making. Women's resistance was organized around two main issues: promoting domestic production and the boycott of Western manufactured goods. To achieve these goals, women adopted two main and interwoven strategies based on their concrete experiences in everyday life: the promotion of home management skills (the defensive strategy) and the launching of a series of organized activities, including the establishment of associations, cooperatives and educational institutions (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 137). In these ways, women developed a series of strategies based on their lived experiences and around the notion of politicized domesticity.

The relative absence of women in the historiography of 19th and early 20th Iran has not only impaired women and women's research in contemporary Iranian society. It has also led to the removal of parts of political, social and economic history of the country which can be understood through the lens of daily life.

In a second example, Montón-Subías (2018) demonstrates how Spanish missionaries in the 17th century intervened in the daily life of the indigenous people in Guam (Marianas Islands) in the name of a "civilizing enterprise". The oppression targeted two main aspects of Chamorro people: gender arrangements and maintenance activities. Montón-Subías observes that there were lesser differences in gender asymmetries between men and women in Guam prior to the incursions of the Spanish, and "men would have participated in some maintenance activities" such as children's socialization (Montón-Subías 2018: 410). Significantly, in the Chamorro community "the gap between the social value attached to maintenance activities and other types of activities was usually non-existent, or at least very minor" (Montón-Subías 2018: 412). Participation in maintenance activities did not result in a lower social status and less prestige for women.

The Spanish colonizers intervened severely in different aspects of indigenous life to incorporate "Guam into the colonial network of the Spanish empire" (Montón-Subías 2018: 405). Forced conversions to Christianity and the Spanish colonial version of Christian values concentrated chiefly on "living spaces, children's socialization, foodways, careways, dress and corporeal habits, kinship, healing practices and sexuality" (Montón-Subías 2018: 405).

"Jesuits used all the means at their disposal to destructure more equal relations between Chamorro men and women" (Montón-Subías 2018: 423). The missionaries introduced engendered schools for children and more specialized sexual division of labor to Chamorro people. Gradually, "colonization gendered maintenance activities female" (Montón-Subías 2018: 422). Chamorros' ancient conception of woman underwent massive changes, and a new type of woman, the "demure Spanish lady", emerged, who was associated with the new form of domestic space (*reducción*) and the nuclear family. Eventually, the colonial intervention in the Chamorro community reduced women's participation in politics (Montón-Subías 2018). Montón-Subías's discussion demonstrates the socio-political aspect of daily life, which can be turned into a site of conflict and resistance, and the subordination of women "through forced restructuration" (2018: 3) of daily life on the other hand.

Discussion: Women's Resistance Through the Lens of Everyday Life

What is feminism, and what is not feminism? Evidently, questions such as these still concern feminists in terms of what can be called a feminist piece of research and/or act. Such questions also deeply influence the theoretical and methodological perspectives that we apply to consider women's movements and resistance.

This paper has been inspired by my lived experiences as a subaltern and second-class citizen, which is the product of an intersection of my gender, class, political attitudes and many other factors. So, I approach feminism, or what I understand as feminism, from this standpoint. I think the definition of feminism as a separate, isolated framework that should avoid any connection to non-feminist research and perspectives is the reduction of feminism and the ignorance of the dynamism of women's life. Doing so leads in turn to biased methodologies. It should be clarified that our concentration on feminism should not overlook the contributions that other theoretical approaches and "non-officially" feminist scholars such as Scott and Bayat have made to the studies of subaltern groups, including women.

The intellectual reach of Scott's work has extended well beyond anthropology. Scholars of diverse disciplinary backgrounds have taken an interest in his theories on subaltern and non-institutional ways of resistance and political action. So why not feminist and gender archaeologies? Everyday forms of resistance could provide feminist and gender archaeologies with a powerful analytical tool to engage with the life of ordinary women (and men). Scott's works deconstruct the focus of knowledge on elite groups and problematize the key role of these groups in socio-political transformations, which have been usually taken for granted as "self-evident" in conservative discourses, not only in anthropology but also in history and archaeology. The dominant conservative discourse usually considers political, economic and social institutions established by elite groups as the units of analysis and ignores the roles, strategies and resistance of subaltern groups.

Third-wave feminism with its consideration of pluralism, non-white women, and the intersection of social factors overcomes the limitations of the earlier versions of feminism and provides a proper basis for self-criticism and dialogue with other theoretical approaches. Undoubtedly, it helps feminism to be more inclusive and to reach beyond women's issues or methodologically being isolated. Critical engagement in feminism can enrich it and provokes more inclusive perspectives in favor of subordinated women.

"A set of theoretical, methodological and, of course, political issues are involved in the absence and the downplay of women" (Dezhamkhooy 2023: 25). It is noteworthy that because of its different form, women's resistance has often been omitted from the history recorded and told by those in power (Aptheker 1989: 169). In this regard, Aptheker's words are significant: "There is a women's resistance that is not 'feminist', 'socialist', 'radical', or 'liberal' because it does not come out of an understanding of one or another social theory, and it is not informed by experience in conventional politics" (Aptheker 1989: 173). The writing of the history of women should democratize history and contribute to the reinterpretation of the role of marginalized groups and "what the supermodern power machine does not want to be shown" (González-Ruibal 2008: 247).

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Remembering Scott as a Political Theorist

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Remembering Scott as a Political Theorist

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James C. Scott was the most incisive theorist of the state for people who are ambivalent about the state's existence. He was a major theorist of power, revealing the covert weapons that groups without formal, coercive power wield against the state and its representatives. He pioneered ethnography in political science, insisting throughout his career on dangers of neglecting local context and knowledge. In doing so, he expanded our understanding of politics to include the politics of peasants, pre-state, and stateless people.

Despite Scott's eminence and his relevance to central questions in the field, his thought remains at the margins of political theory. The field has barely begun to mine the potential of Scott's scholarship for new insights and research programs. If there is a theme that unifies Scott's major works, it is the need to dispel state myths and to uncover and examine social and political life that are omitted or distorted by state agents (among whom are academics, especially political scientists). Scott dedicated his career to overcoming a major blind spot: that much of our evidence is produced by states. He consistently applied an "anarchist squint" to political life, illuminating features that otherwise remained invisible (Scott 2014).

Scott began his career as a southeast Asian specialist during the Vietnam war. Like many, he became disillusioned with the outcome of the wars of national liberation, which in most cases resulted in more powerful, authoritarian states (Vinthagen 2017). His intellectual journey took him through peasant studies, anthropological investigations of non-state peoples, and, ultimately, to archaeology and geology. While researching his first book, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1977), he came to see the inadequacy of the archives, which captured only the official story. Largely absent were the peasantry, whose politics occurs primarily outside the hearing of government officials and landlords – what Scott calls "the hidden transcript."

In response, Scott took an unusual step for a political scientist, conducting ethnographic research in a Malaysian rice-growing village. We know about peasant rebellions when state authorities note them, but not about peasant resistance that occurs undetected by their feudal lords. Scott's pioneering use of field work in political theory resulted in *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), chronicling the conflicts arising from the introduction of combine-harvesting machines. It is a classic study of resistance under non-democratic conditions where overt political action – labor organization, petitions, marches, and so on – was not possible. Instead, peasants engaged in what Scott termed "infrapolitics," foot-dragging, sabotage, slander, feigned ignorance, and other tactics that often led to change without overt confrontation. Scott synthesized these insights in a major contribution to political theory, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1980).

His investigations of the state continued in *Seeing Like a State*, on how states bureaucrats develop homogenous simplifications to measure and thereby control their populations and environments. This erases local differences and knowledge, often with disastrous effects. *The Art of Not Being Governed* serves as a foil to *Seeing Like a State*, presenting the anti-state rationality of non-state peoples. Toward the end of his career, he also engaged deeply with archaeology, especially in his penultimate book, *Against the Grain*, an exercise in deep history, beginning with the use of fire 400,000 years ago. In *Praise of Floods: The Untamed River and the Life It Brings* appears posthumously in 2025 (Scott 2025).

The mark of a great theorist is that they teach you to see the world differently. *The Art of Not Being Governed* transformed my perception. I was working on a book on the political philosophy of human migration that attempted to break free from state-centered perspectives. Inspired by writings that centered the nomad or the migrant (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Nail 2015; De Genova 2017), I urged that political theorists should try to "see like a migrant" as a heuristic for reevaluating their normative theories (the phrase "see like a migrant" was indebted, of course, to Scott's *Seeing Like a State*).

Quickly, I encountered a difficulty: how *not* to see like a state? We are socialized by state institutions, including universities, in which much of our curriculum and our sources of funding addresses problems articulated by states. In the political theory of migration, one of the major issues is state force against migrants. How do we theorize state coercion and violence without privileging the perspective of state administrations and legal regimes? It is difficult to imagine how to not to see like a state in the contemporary world, in large part because there does not seem to be a viable alternative.

The Art of Not Being Governed was a revelation. In the popular imagination, stateless societies are small groups of primitive peoples whose limited contact with state authorities has left them ignorant of the advantages of modernity. In response to this misconception, *The Art of Not Being Governed* synthesizes the literature on Zomia, a term put forward by Willem van Schendel (2005) to describe an area in the highlands of southeast Asia largely independent of state control. Zomia spans ten countries and includes perhaps a hundred million people.

Building on Pierre Clastres' research in Latin America (Clastres 2022), Scott contends that the people of Zomia should not be understood independently of the state; rather, they are fleeing state taxation, conscription, and slavery. They have constructed ways of life to resist state incorporation, so that features of non-state societies that initially seem like deficits, such as shifting cultivation or the absence of writing, become advantages. After reading *The Art of Not Being Governed*, I began to see houseless people resisting police efforts to place them in shelters or cooperatives run on barter as a conscious strategy to evade state discipline and coercion. As Scott observes in *Against the Grain*:

> "Yet there is massive evidence of determined resistance by mobile peoples everywhere to permanent settlement, even under relatively favorable circumstances. Pastoralists and hunting-and-gathering populations have fought against permanent settlement, associating it, often correctly, with disease and state control." (Scott 2017: 8)

This allows us to see mobile people eluding state surveillance and forming the mutual aid networks for migrant journeys across continents as efforts to construct spaces against state violence.

The Art of Not Being Governed is a major work by a political scientist (albeit one closely associated with anthropology). It provides a template for thinking about the state through the eyes of people who consciously elude its grasp. Nonetheless, this anarchist history of Zomia has not had a major impact on political theory. In an otherwise perceptive response, Stephen Krasner ends with a paean to the contemporary, well-governed state, rehearsing the familiar narrative of its role in the scientific and industrial revolutions and modern medicine: "There is more wisdom in Hobbes, or at least Locke, than Scott allows" (Krasner 2011: 83).

Krasner's remark is a common reaction among political scientists responding to Scott's work, especially *The Art of Not Being Governed* and *Against the Grain*. It misses the mark. Nowhere does Scott advocate a reversion to pre-state forms of social organization or the creation of more Zomias to evade existing states. Scott's work should not be read as a paean to non-state societies, which have their own pathologies (though he affirms some of their advantages). Rather, he is best read as a critical theorist, focusing our gaze on subjects and societies that have been largely neglected. In doing so, he reveals problematic logics of dominant institutions.

I suggest three reasons for political theorists' comparative neglect of Scott. First, Scott's work eludes easy incorporation into any political ideology. Carelessly read, *Seeing Like a State* plays well into the hands of libertarians, as it provides a trenchant critique of state planning. There may be some overlap with Frederick Hayek's insights on the failures and dangers of state planning, but Scott is just as critical of the market and large-scale capitalism. Corporations also impose control through simplification and quantification, oblivious to or contemptuous of local expertise and ways of life.

Second, anarchism remains intellectually disreputable among the liberals and Marxists. Political scientists, whose subject is state politics, tend to see anarchist leanings (at least outside of international relations) as naïve, utopian, and irrelevant. Furthermore, anarchist practices such as mutual aid and consensus-based decision-making resist systematization and reduction to general principles. Anarchism sympathies best suit those, like Scott, who value local knowledge and thick description over abstract principles.

Third, political theory is still in the thralls of a founding myth: pre-political "man" lives in a state of nature, with no law, no political authority. Thomas Hobbes described this state as a time of war. To escape, pre-state people come together and form a social contract in which they give away their rights to a sovereign, in exchange for security. The state of nature and the character of social contract comes in many variations, whether it is Hobbes' absolutist sovereign, John Locke's sovereign bound by the law of nature, or John Rawls' appropriation of Immanuel Kant for 20th century liberal egalitarianism.

Social contract theory has two notable features. First, the social contract and the state of nature are fictions, not historical events or diligent descriptions of pre-state life. Second, the social contract serves to legitimize state power by insisting that people are better off. The state is a benefactor, imposing law, upholding natural rights, and solving coordination problems.

The stories we tell matter. The social contract has always been a pro-state story that obfuscates the role of usurpation and conquest, something historically minded political philosophers, starting with David Hume, observed. Like contemporary political scientists, though, Hume ultimately justified the state, despite its bloody origins, rejecting its fiction but endorsing its benefits. Scott, in contrast, writes:

> "If the formation of earliest states were shown to be largely a coercive enterprise, the vision of the state, one dear to the heart of such social-contract theorists as Hobbes and Locke, as a magnet of civil peace, social order, and freedom from fear, drawing people in by its charisma, would have to be reexamined." (Scott 2017: 26–27)

In *Against the Grain*, Scott established that, compared to the alternatives, the state did not benefit most people for most of human history.

Doesn't Scott commit the genetic fallacy, dismissing the modern, administrative state's achievements because of its bloody origins? This criticism goes astray. First, *The Art of Not Being Governed* shows that *millions* of people today prefer to forgo the advantages of life outside of the state. This is not a detail to be dismissed, but rather confronts us with the question of whether compulsory incorporation into even well-governed states is just. Second, Scott's target is social-contract ideology, not the contemporary state. Political theorists often miss this distinction because they conflate the story they tell about the state with its reality.

In this respect, his criticism is akin to the observation that the social contract has often been a sexual, racial, or settler contract, legitimizing the domination and oppression of female, non-white, and indigenous people (Pateman 1988; Mills 1997; Nichols 2013). Actually-existing liberalism (rooted in social contract theory) has been a long history of providing apologetics for imperial and colonial projects (Losurdo 2011). To this we can add that state-building is historically and presently to the benefit of some people at a cost to others.

This does not entail abolishing the state, no doubt the sort of utopian project that would have earned Scott's scorn. But it does call for recognizing the limits of state logics and the need for zones of autonomy. Today, governments and corporations are relentlessly quantifying every aspect of our lives to surveil and control. Scott reminds us of what quantification fails to capture, but also how in its quest to bend people and the world to its metrics, it destroys much of what gives life value. The removal of all possibility of exit from state discipline diminishes human freedom and flourishing. As he observes,

> "The real damage of relying mainly on quantitatively measured merit and 'objective' numerical audit systems to assess quality arises from taking vital questions that ought to be part of a vigorous democratic debate off the table and placing them in the hands of presumably neutral experts." (Scott 2014: 121)

Scott's other contribution to political theory is methodological. Recent calls to incorporate fieldwork into political theory are very much in dept to Scott (Longo and Zacka 2019). Fieldwork teaches us about the value of local, informal processes that necessarily sustain much of social and political life. It reveals the limitations of theoretical abstractions and the danger that these abstractions, if imposed by force, will impoverish the lives of local communities.

Furthermore, Scott brings history – including deep history – into the conversation. Political theory has a limited time horizon. At most, it dates back 2500 years to the ancient Greeks. In most cases, its subject is political life beginning in the 17th century, where we begin to see the emergence of something like the modern state. But political life throughout human history took place outside of states. Much of this history is invisible to official state histories and to the social sciences that are funded and shaped by state prerogatives. Scott shows us how non-state histories can open our minds to the full breadth of human possibility and transform our understanding of politics.

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Flipping the Script: Upending Approaches to Power in the Work of James C. Scott

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Flipping the Script: Upending Approaches to Power in the Work of James C. Scott

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Introduction

> “Lacking a comprehensive anarchist worldview and philosophy, and in any case wary of nomothetic ways of seeing, I am making a case for a sort of anarchist squint. What I aim to show is that if you put on anarchist glasses and look at the history of popular movements, revolutions, ordinary politics, and the state from that angle, certain insights will appear that are obscured from almost any other angle.” (Scott 2012: xii)

When you read about James Scott, you commonly come across words such as ‘provocative,’ ‘contrarian,’ alongside ‘counter-narrative’ – such are the attempts to place his histories as outside the mainstream of thought. For this reason alone, his work is so worthwhile. He has always offered a striking perspective that can have a lasting influence on how you view things thereafter. In a way, he finds the blind spots in much of historical and cultural perspectives, and shows us how much we miss when not shining the light in such directions.

I maintain here that it is the anarchistic elements of Scott’s thought that leads him to address the blind spots of others. He developed his anarchist perspective increasingly throughout his books, culminating in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) and *Two Cheers for Anarchism* (2012). At first, he described how he characterized political organizations in his lectures and seminars in ways in which he found himself noticing how much they shared with anarchist perspectives, finding himself saying, “Now, that sounds like what an anarchist would argue” (Scott 2012: ix; see also 2020: 64; Holmes 2023). So, he began to explore anarchist theorists more closely, and in the process he even taught a course on anarchism at Yale.

We should note that his anarchism is not at full throttle. After all, he did only offer “two cheers” (2012) for it, not three, but the weight of his scholarship is surely towards the anarchist side. In this sense, Scott represents one of the few prominent intellectuals that opted to work in this vein, alongside the contributions of Noam Chomsky (2005, 2013) or David Graeber (e.g., 2004, 2009, 2020). There are also several works that collect together scholars working in this direction for the social sciences, social movements, and theory (e.g., Shukaitis et al. 2007; Klausen and Martel 2011; Lilley and Shantz 2015; Levy and Newman 2019), all of which reveals that there’s been an increasing turn to this line of thought, after a period in which Marxist thinking was more common in the academy.

Here, I discuss how Scott’s lifework has had an important influence on archaeology, anthropology, political science, and history through his theoretical approach in addition to several concepts that he developed that have been useful for considering political dynamics at various scales, in ancient early states (and their peripheries) to contemporary states and non-state regions such as the *zomias* of Southeast Asia. Throughout, I emphasize how Scott’s thinking upends so many common perspectives about political dynamics.

Scott "Flips the Script"

> "A great many barbarians, then, were not primitives who had stayed or been left behind but rather political and economic refugees who had fled to the periphery to escape state-induced poverty, taxes, bondage, and war." (Scott 2017: 234)

One of the main aspects to Scott's thought is that he commonly flips the script in contrast to most approaches towards cultures of the present and the past. He does not take the perspective of the apex position, or that of the *arché*. Instead of views from the top of the temple mound, Scott views things from the perspectives of the bulk of people in society. Or, when he does look from above, as with *Seeing Like a State* (1998), it's to demonstrate the problems with the State's gaze.[1] In this way, he shares in the notion of a "people's history" like that pioneered by Howard Zinn (1980), to shift away from a perspective that is not from that of pharaohs or kings, presidents and prime ministers; Zinn's work, of course, has influenced others (e.g., Bass 2009; Dunbar-Ortiz 2013; Harman 2017), and it aligns with Eric Wolf's (1982) recounting of "people without history," also oriented to portray the history of those left out of traditional narratives, those without monuments to etch their accomplishments. Yet, while most "people's histories" are a chronicle from another vantage point, Scott goes much further than most do. Scott analyzes the actions of what they do in practice, in specific historical settings, such as the highlands of Southeast Asia or the lowlands of early Mesopotamia, even as those studies uncover patterns that are applicable for analyses in other situations. In the process, he develops concepts of the 'hidden transcript,' 'weapons of the weak,' or what he referred to more generally as 'infrapolitics' (Scott 1985, 1990). Plus, he has offered alternate perspectives upon numerous cultural aspects, whether it concerns the anarchic structure of 'barbarian' regions hovering in the peripheries of states, *zomia* as ungoverned zones, or the fragility of the power of state governments themselves (Scott 2009). It's worthwhile to consider some examples of how he upends common approaches to political analyses.

Many have regarded 'barbarian' areas as simply undisciplined, or even precisely what happens in the absence of a Hobbesian Leviathan. But Scott (2017: 255) shows how the so-called 'barbarians' – a loose characterization of non-state peoples generally – were healthier and freer than those within states. They lived longer, were taller, and ate healthier, in part due to a subsistence that relied upon a much broader basis of foods. Plus, they had more leisure time, and were generally not subject to the classes of superiors. In this sense, he does what Marshall Sahlins (1972) did for foragers in presenting the 'original affluent society', in contrast to the idea that hunter-gatherers were in a constant struggle for existence.

Similar studies apply to recent treatments of pirate societies, which also engage in what Scott (2009: 89, 2017: 172) would call, after Max Weber (2013 [1930]), "booty capitalism." This refers to how groups basically can pursue, typically through militant means, profit from plundering trade routes or other peoples. The loot is re-distributed among the group's members in a manner like a "joint-stock company" (Scott 2017: 172). Pirates often operated in such ways. Peter Leeson (2007, 2014) has shown that pirates organized themselves in ways that promoted the redistribution of goods and prevented captains from accumulating excessive amounts of wealth. They also developed institutions to maintain order among the crew. In so doing, Leeson applied an anarchist a proach to pirate cultures, as others have done, such as Gabriel Kuhn's (2009) study of Caribbean pirates and David Graeber's (2023) research on pirate societies in Madagascar from their heyday in the late 1600s through 1700s. For groups that were often violent towards others, they treated each other in remarkably egalitarian ways – this led to Graeber's (2023) suggestion of a "pirate Enlightenment."

Another example of how Scott flips the script is the way he treats the 'collapse' of states throughout the past. In conjunction with words like 'fall' or 'decline' in regards to societies, such terms reveal their bias right on the surface as to which kind of sociopolitical structure is preferred by the author (Borck and Sanger 2017: 11). Similar biases are seen as well in describing periods of 'cultural climax,' 'high point,' or 'peak.' Such terms do not reveal a scientific or neutral attitude toward the archaeological record. Scott (2017: 209) is quite good at undermining these common tropes, writing, "Why deplore 'collapse,' when the situation it depicts is most often the disaggregation of a complex, fragile, and typically oppressive state into smaller, decentralized fragments?" Further, these periods

1 Hereon, I'll use the capitalized form of 'State' to refer to the reified state forms in common with much of Scott's description, which aligns with much of anarchist thinking. I do think that emerging within these are other forms that do not advance such aims of the centralization of power; that unions, civil rights, suffragette, abolitionist, and other sociopolitical movements have institutionalized many protections that constrain the aspects of States.

may have "represented a bolt for freedom by many state subjects and an improvement in human welfare" (Scott 2017: 209).

Scott's theoretical contributions extend beyond the shifting of vantage-points for analysis. His work has also provided critical tools for analyzing how resistance manifests in material culture and social practices, influencing a broad range of archaeological studies as well. Alfred González-Ruibal (2014) has applied Scott's work in his analyses of the borderlands of Ethiopia and other areas, where communities such as the Gumuz, Bertha, and Mao exert efforts to resist the imposition of state authority. He argues that such expressions of resistance are apparent through their material culture and practices. Scott's (1985, 1990) emphases on hidden transcripts describes how oppressed peoples find ways to not overtly critique authorities, that these are "veiled forms of resistance that allow the subaltern to get their way to a point, without openly opposing power (which can be dangerous)" (González-Ruibal 2014: 9); for this reason, González-Ruibal refers to this as "resilience, rather than resistance." He makes useful distinctions between resilience, resistance, and rebellion. Resilience occurs a lot, but is not overt, and for this reason, González-Ruibal (2014: 9–10) refers to it as politically acting on an "unconscious level, beyond discourse," where traditional and local practices continue despite the presence or impositions of oppressive authorities. Resistance is more politically conscious and tactical, challenging structural authorities through syncretic adaptations of local and external symbols in material culture or through symbolic aspects of their practices. Rebellions are the overt and politically explicit actions that leave archaeological remnants in weapons or defensive sites; "rebellion implies a political consciousness"; these three forms embody "different forms of being against domination" (González-Ruibal 2014: 10). In this way, we see how foundation for further theoretical applications towards traces of resistance throughout the past.

In overturning common approaches, Scott has opened the perspective to further such analyses. Indeed, many have explicitly applied analyses in a Scottian vein, such as Bengt Karlsson's (2013) ethnographic study of subaltern peoples in Northeast India, Mark Hauser and Douglas Armstrong's (2012) archaeological study of settlements in the Caribbean as "arts of resistance", or Richard Horsley's (2004) "hidden transcripts" approach towards early Christianity.

The State as Separate from Society

Scott describes States as parasitic sociopolitical formations, where many within the scope of the polity are unfree. His work, along with Graeber's (e.g., 2006), highlights the degree of unfreedom within most states. In this way, Scott helps us think more concretely about the construction of the State form itself. Those subjected to the exploitative nature of power often evade the reach of the State, seeking refuge in the margins – going 'off the map' into so-called barbarian regions, forming maroon societies, or retreating to places like the Great Dismal Swamp of North Carolina and Virginia (Sayers 2014). In this way, Scott has detailed how 'barbarians' form in conjunction with States, such that the periphery is important to the State as a core (Scott 2017).

Scott also helps us remain conscious that States are separate from society, much as Pierre Clastres (1987) emphasized, in his *Society Against the State*. Accordingly, the State concerns the interests of a subset of society (i.e. elites). States structure power to ensure their continuing position, combined with the perpetual pursuit of finding ways to increase their profits and surpluses from the rest of society. In this sense, all States are oligarchies.

In his discussions of the fragility of states, Scott suggested that political forms have a Leachian quality, meaning that the political formations can readily shift over time. In Edmund Leach's (1954) classic study of Burmese societies, which Scott often discussed, there was a fluidity in their political forms over time, involving alterations or oscillations between *gumsa gumlao* political structures. Accordingly, the *gumsa* formation was a nascent hierarchy, but unstable. The *gumlao* form, however, was resistant to hierarchy, and formed an example of active state prevention (Scott 2009: 214–216); Jonathan Friedman (1998) developed this argument, adding historical or diachronic contexts and dynamics to Leach's (1954) synthetic model, which Scott (2009: 355) cited with approval. In this active prevention of the centralization of power, we find affinities to Clastres' (1987) arguments. As Scott turns to the archaeological record, he finds the innumerable chronicles of States rising and collapsing due to war, droughts, epidemics, and so on (Scott 2017: 7), and the Leachian dynamics and oscillations are present. While, ideologically, those ruling states always imagine some perpetuity, they succumb to collapse like any and all other political formations. As archaeologists know well, everything that has a beginning also has an ending (Rosen 2019).

Assertions of Power are Met with Resistance

> "The condensation of history, our desire for clean narratives, and the need for elites and organizations to project an image of control and purpose all conspire to convey a false image of historical causation. They blind us to the fact that most revolutions are not the work of revolutionary parties but the precipitate of spontaneous and improvised action […], and that the great emancipatory gains for human freedom have not been the result of orderly, institutional procedures but of disorderly, unpredictable, spontaneous action cracking open the social order from below." (Scott 2012: 141)

Scott has often reoriented our focus towards other forms of power, those of the oppressed or governed. While power is often viewed as applicable to those 'in power,' in positions of authority, with the ability to coerce, as 'power over' others, Scott focuses on the power from below, more in alignment with Hannah Arendt's (1958) notions of power, in reference to collective action, to 'act in concert' with others. Some have expanded upon Scott's approach to describe the dynamics of non-state polities operating as actively working against concentrations of power, in contrast to states. Raúl Zibechi (2010: 55), for instance, describes Bolivian Aymara communities as "dispersal machines" that actively inhibit the concentration of power; in this sense, he highlights the significance of the work of Clastres (1987) and Scott (2009) for such dynamics.

Archaeologists increasingly are focusing on bottom-up aspects of power, as the title of T. L. Thurston and Manuel Fernández-Götz's (2021a) recent edited volume indicates: *Power from Below in Premodern Societies*. As the editors state, "The point of raising issues of self- or co-organization and self- or co-management [from the bottom up or local scales] is not to reject the existence of inequality or the power of leaders and rulers, but to grant reasonable agency to others, gaining a more realistic view of the past and a better reading of our data" (Thurston and Fernández-Götz 2021b: 5). They also draw explicitly upon Scott's (1985, 2009) work to highlight opposition to "those 'above'," particularly through the act of departing to join other communities or establishing new ones (Thurston and Fernández-Götz 2021c: 298).

Scott often grappled with Michel Foucault's theories, for whom social relationships were imbued with power. For Foucault, even relations of dominance entail the giving of power to the person claiming it, even if they are planning for rebellion or abandonment of their situation at some point in the future. In this way, power is never totalizing, for then it would no longer be a form of power. There is always some degree of freedom present on any side of a power relation; hence, one could not exert power over a robot, due its lack of existential consciousness and freedom. Furthermore, Foucault (Gordon 1980: 142) stated that, "there are no relations of power without resistances." Therefore, one could say that Foucault presented a social science variant on Newton's third law of motion, "To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction," which would be: "To every application of power there is an opposing resistance" – even if generally not always an equal reaction or at the same time. Scott's focus on the "weapons of the weak" and the "arts of resistance" adds ethnographic and historic cases that complement and expand upon Foucault's analyses of power.

The Seeming Eruption of Politics from Below

> "When the first declaration of the hidden transcript succeeds, its mobilization capacity as a symbolic act is potentially awesome. […] It portends a possible turning of the tables. […] At the level of political beliefs, anger, and dreams it is a social *explosion*." (Scott 1990: 227; emphasis added)

Geo Maher is one scholar who has recently expanded upon the power of the oppressed. In his excellent *Anticolonial Eruptions* (Maher 2022), he draws on Scott at many points, as well as heavily on Frantz Fanon (2007 [1963], 2008 [1952]), when he discussed how the power of the underclass is not just in the foot-dragging, the work-only-to-the-rule practices, or other infrapolitics. Rather, Maher focuses on cases where the oppressed groups appear to explode outright, upending assertions of power from oppressors. The metaphor that Maher finds to be commonly used to describe revolutionary moments, such as the Haitian Revolution circa 1800, is 'eruption.' To use such allusions, the oppressors reveal that they are not very good at seeing the resistance of the oppressed. The colonizers have a blind spot, which comes with their ideology of superiority: they assume that the oppressed are no threat because they deem them to be inferior. They imagine themselves as intelligent and rational and those they enslave as akin to lesser animals, relegating them essentially to a "zone of nonbeing", in Fanon's words (2008: 2). For such reasons, any acts of resistance appear as "cunning" and unexpected. In a dialectical reversal, Maher (2022) highlights how the ideologies of colonists, for instance, are also their Achilles' heel, providing opportunities for the oppressed to seemingly appear as if rebellion is sudden. Their blindspots afford the oppressed a "second sight" into the nature of the overt thinking of the oppressors, as servants within the house knowing the master closely. Maher's recounting moves from minor strategies of resistance to full-out forms of revolution. With his notion of the "second sight" of the oppressed, Maher (2022) detailed how the state is viewed from the perspective of the oppressed.

For James Martel (2022), the State 'sees' things from the perspective of the *arché*, or an 'archist' position. The state is only one of many archist positions, as others can be marked by lineage patriarchs, bosses, CEOs – or really anyone acting in authoritarian ways. The State as an empire is simply the largest scale of authoritarian expressions. In contrast to Scott's (1998) "seeing like a state," he shifts the vantage point to "seeing like an anarchist." Martel (2022: 18) offers that "anarchist sight organizes just as much as archist sight does, but it organizes horizontally among and between the community rather than from above." Furthermore, he argues that such views are much more common than realized, since grand narratives take on the State-centric position. As he puts it:

> "If Scott's account is credible and if it can be generalized, it suggests once again that it is not anarchism but archism that has to swim against the current of a universe given to entropy and diffusion rather than to stasis and control […]. Archism in this view has to work very hard to keep itself in power, and anarchism has the advantage of being a political form that requires no coercion, no mythic violence, and no spectacularity, none of that extra effort that archism must ceaselessly engage in to be able to 'exist' at all." (Martel 2022: 269)

Here, Martel (2022: 269) reiterates a point strongly made by Scott (2017) that early states, for instance, were fragile, constantly working to support their claims of sovereignty: building temples to justify their divine sources of authority; building walls to keep barbarian threats out (and their taxable citizens within), and so on. Martel (2022: 269–270) writes that oppressed communities, for Scott, are "always resisting archism." Yet, while agreeing with Scott, he also builds upon and emphasizes that:

> "collectivities do not only engage in resistance. They also engage in collective forms of politics in their own right; whenever they speak to each other, whenever customs arise, whenever collective judgments are engaged with, whenever people have a chance to experience themselves as a collectivity, even – or maybe especially – one marked by disharmony and disagreement, some kind of alternative form of political power is being exercised and created as well. This too is anarchy." (Martel 2022: 269–270)

For Martel (2022: 292), archists are a political "parasite, a vampire that feeds off the life it oversees," which for him helps to explain the fragility of early states that Scott describes. Over millennia, however, States seemed to have lost much of their fragility.

On the State as Not Necessarily Centralized (Or So Separate from Society)

> "Unlike many anarchist thinkers, I do not believe that the state is everywhere and always the enemy of freedom." (Scott 2012: xiii)

Some superficial readings of Scott might regard him as entirely opposed to the state, but he clearly was not. We could say that he was opposed to the capital-S State, with a reified oligarchy that maintains its separation from the masses. As one example, he emphasized that one "need only recall the scene of the federalized National Guard leading black children to school through a menacing crowd of angry whites in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 to realize that the state can, *in some circumstances*, play an emancipatory role" (Scott 2012: xiv, emphasis in the original). This shares Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) notion that capitalism in its neoliberal instantiation aims to tear down collective laws that have been established in such institutions.

Scott (2012: xiv) argued that such rights as protected by the state have only been a recent phenomenon in the history of states, that "only in the last two centuries or so has even the possibility arisen that states might occasionally enlarge the realm of human freedom." Such developments only occurred, Scott (2012: xiv) maintained, when "disruption from below" formed a threat to the State itself.

As William Remley (2018: 2) has argued, anarchist thought does not aim for no government at all, but "it puts into question the type of government allowing for the peaceful coexistence of all human beings while safeguarding individual freedom." So, Remley (2018: 11) is clear that anarchists have often criticized the state, as Scott does, but "nothing precludes a state from becoming legitimate." In this way, Scott's thinking in this regard has parallels with others.

Scott (2012: xv) does point to the 'structural violence' inherent in the presence of States, emphasizing that "huge disparities in wealth, property, and status make a mockery of freedom."

> "This, of course, […] is the great dilemma for an anarchist. If relative equality is a necessary condition of mutuality and freedom, how can it be guaranteed except through the state? Facing this conundrum, I believe that both theoretically and practically, the abolition of the state is not an option. We are stuck, alas, with Leviathan, though not at all for the reasons Hobbes had supposed, and the challenge is to tame it." (Scott 2012: xvi)

This shows that Scott is not just a scholar who applies anarchist thought, but that he is one who is also providing critique to better hone anarchist theory.

Overarching Theme: Dialectical Relations

> "So, apropos of the counter-narrative theme, it seems to me, I'm rather proud that I did not follow the forced march of my discipline, and that I decided for personal and intellectual reasons to do things that were heterodox and at the margin of my discipline, and at least as a topic and as methodology that is not respected, and I ended up making a pretty good career out of being a dissident, if you like. And if I'm proud of that—I think I'm proud that I did it, of course, but I'm also proud that I hope that encourages other people to take similar kinds of risks, and not to sort of knuckle under to the orthodoxy." (Scott 2020: 111–112)

Here, I have considered the works of a thinker who set out in dissident directions within his discipline, resulting in broad influences on other social sciences. This is all the more surprising, given that he had spent some of his early career writing reports for the CIA about Burma and other countries (Scott 2020: 9). It is quite the irony. Perhaps those experiences, in a dialectical kind of way, spurred him to reconsider his "Seeing for the State" and to focus on non-State dynamics for the rest of his career.

It is clear that Scott demonstrates the utility of an anarchist perspective, or 'squint,' for historical and archaeological studies. In his work, he was always willing to challenge predominant perspectives, to take an outsider perspective. In the process, he expanded our understanding of the workings of power and set the foundation and example for other scholars to proceed. He offers ways for archaeologists to think through the agency and power of oppressed peoples as they express their aims through hidden transcripts, infrapolitics, and other weapons of the weak, including tactics of State evasion and prevention.

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State Borders, Other Orders

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Jim Scott[1] returned time and again to the topic of how states produced land cadasters (and vice-versa). “[A] state cadastral map,” he wrote in *Seeing Like a State*, “created to designate taxable property-holders does not merely describe a system of land tenure; it creates such a system through its ability to give its categories the force of law” (1998: 3). This is lyrical and axiomatic. But best of all, not content to point out the artificiality of a system, Jim pressed on to pursue the *purpose* states had in simulating powers. The cadaster performs a kind of ontological alchemy: it not only helps to create state capacity, but it grounds it in ways of knowing (as law, as science) which are discursively fixed and unquestionable, with obvious political benefits. As he did with everything from moral economies to grain baskets, Jim always forged ahead to think through why forms of control worked – how they served state projects – and not just expose them.

Whether Jim’s legions of readers always follow along to the ends of his arguments is less clear. A man much cited and oft quoted has given us subtleties which do not always precipitate into post-Scottian investigations of ancient states. Nowhere is this so true as for misunderstandings of the sotto voce distinctions he made between landscape, territory, and sovereign land at various levels of analytic control. Jim was sensitive to the difference, for instance, between how ancient grain states conceived of land in terms of production, whereas early modern states rationalized it in areal terms. He was always on the lookout for practical outcomes: how cadastral information produced grain yields, and then how those rents were shaped to state satisfaction by baskets and strickles.

The political borders and boundaries of states are among their technologies of control, forms of “synoptic data [which] are the points of departure for reality as state officials apprehend and shape it” (Scott 1998: 83). Yet he was equally aware that the geography of ancient states could not be so easily bounded, “fragmented” as its productive zones were by “fiscally sterile” and unincorporated populations (Scott 2020: 230).

Notwithstanding, it is routine for historians of Mesopotamia to speak of state “borders.” The conundrum represented itself to me recently as I sat in a conference about migration and population movements in antiquity. Virtually every paper enjoined some concept of borders and boundaries in one way or another. The same papers all took trouble to put daylight between ancient and modern concepts of borders: they identified ancient boundaries as socio-political constructs; admitted that they were emically un- or under-defined; proclaimed their limited applicability to ethnic, linguistic, and economic identities and activities. Yet, having made these disclaimers, everyone still bounded ahead to treat geographic borders as an analytically valid concept.[2]

But what if they’re not? Can we give more serious attention to the conception of state territory in the pre-cadastral world? Is our interest in defining ancient states so “scientific” that we must impute to them a geographic integrity so misleading that it pins them to a board like so many butterflies? I will try here to give body to some of the ways in which concepts of borders are profoundly anachronistic to ancient Mesopotamian contexts and then consider a potential way to think about the geographic embeddedness of ancient states in relation to their “Others,” the great and little-documented world of non-state people, places, and production.

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1 Jim was the one person whom I and my sister Sophie Richardson (a scholar of and advocate for human rights in the very modern world) both knew professionally, which made for a nice point in common.

2 The online catalogue of the Research Archives of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (Chicago) returns more than 200 works published since 2010 on ancient Near Eastern topics with “border” (not “borderlands”), “boundary,” or “frontier” in their titles.

One is struck by the insufficiency of Mesopotamian technologies for the purpose of controlling territorial integrity in two related senses: neither for Latin *fines* or *limes* as boundaries of *extent* on the one hand, or the modern sense boundaries as *enclosing* a politically defined space on the other. This is to say nothing about the imaginative and mathematical capacities of Mesopotamian cultures, which developed many sophisticated methods for measuring and accounting. But these skills were little turned to the production of territoriality such that state (or even city-state) borders were operable attributes prior to the first millennium BCE. "Insufficiency" here does not mean incapability, only that the task of drawing borders to which the relevant technologies might have been put was irrelevant. This is demonstrable for Mesopotamia along many lines, some of which I list below. Many of these points will be long familiar to archaeologists in spirit, if not detail, but I think there is a purpose to bring them together in this way.[3]

1. There is an absence of cartographic representations of space in Mesopotamia much beyond depictions of fields or individual buildings – plans rather than maps, spatial illustrations largely divorced from relative and absolute spaces. A few well-known city plans (and the late, so-called 'Babylonian Map of the World'[4]) notwithstanding, this culture never created any larger relational system to represent geographical space. In this respect, no borders could ever be fixed in relation to other places or spaces contained within them.
2. Nor do we have actual cadasters beyond lists of fields in local districts. Even the 21st century BCE "Ur-Namma Cadaster" only defines specific tracts of land which were parts of various temple estates, not anything like the "lands of the state".[5] The highly detailed documentation of fields in Ur III Umma (Molina and Steinkeller 2017, with literature) and Old Babylonian Larsa (Richardson 2008, 2015: 279–292) were limited to describing tracts under production. We should take seriously the implications of sustained and long-lived projects to document specific productive fields and districts but never *all* land of the state.
3. Nor again do we have any catalogs of toponyms from any period with pretensions to give a textual picture of individual states or the known world. In fact, most place-names are very poorly integrated into the world of textuality generally. Textualized representations of topographical space, such as itineraries or sections in word lists such as Ur$_5$-ra,[6] were written for purposes of trade or scribal education, not for the sake of transforming toponymy into geography. And the way toponyms were used generally presents an even more bewildering picture: for instance, we know of about 2,000 toponyms for the Old Babylonian period, derived from about 19,000 texts. These large numbers might lead one to believe that both ancient scribes and modern scholars had/have a lot of knowledge about ancient geography. But about 62% of those 2,000 toponyms are attested only one, two, or three times; 41% are attested only once. Despite this ubiquity of poorly attested place, there are virtually no indications that scribes had any trouble knowing *where* these places were, how to get there, or knowing how to spell their names. In no way do we get the sense that the location of unusual places was unknown or problematic. We thus face the confusing situation that there was a high degree of fidelity in documenting place names at the same time there was a very low concern about documenting *where* those places were. The conception of the toponymized world, sophisticated and specific as it was, did not translate into any interest in its spatial composition. To this problem I will return briefly below.
4. Few ancient *linear* boundary markers are known from ancient descriptions or modern archaeological surveys. The levees, meadows, and wadis, which made up most portrayals of boundaries, occupied discrete areas and were non-contiguous, only partial boundaries. Man-made border markers were single-point features – shrines, wells, and monuments – visible only at their *in situ* locations, unrelated to areal space, and perishable (indeed, one of the very first things we ever learn about these early and impermanent boundary markers is that they

3 I make no pretension here to a full study; for more comprehensive attention to theory and detail, see, for example, the collections of essays edited by Osborne and VanValkenburgh 2013 and d'Alfonso and Rubinson 2021.

4 For an original take on this unique object, see Delnero 2017.

5 The fragmentary text (RIME 3/2 1.1.21) describes the borders of the fields of various gods. Excluding some long, broken sections, this includes the fields of the gods Numušda of Kiritab (Ex 1 i 13), Numušda of Apiak (Ex 1 ii 21), Sîn of an unknown city (Ex 1 iv 21), and Lugal-marda of Marad (Ex 2 iv 30). The first two fields shared one contiguous boundary, but adjacency cannot be established for any other tracts.

6 For OB itineraries, see Goetze 1953 and Hallo 1964; on toponyms in various scholarly lists, Veldhuis 1997: 125 writes that "geographical names hardly function as a set..."

got ripped out all the time[7]). Even if we understand that "boundary stones" would have identified important points in the landscape, we have to admit that those with secure provenances were all found *within* cities and not standing out in their hinterlands at the supposed boundaries. The Early Dynastic Lagaš inscriptions imply that monuments like these measured off linear borders, but their text does not actually make reference to their location in relation to any other geographic point(s); they more or less float in undefined space, boundaries only in loose conceptual terms.[8]

5. There was little that was systematic about the points chosen to mark and describe the borders of early Mesopotamian states. In addition to the kinds of features already mentioned, boundaries were marked by towers, villages, fields, swamps, rivers, canals, and purely conventional and self-referential limits just called "the boundary of god/place {X}." Especially given the protean character of shifting waterways in the lower alluvium, a reliance on such features points strongly towards boundaries as both improvised and constantly shifting.[9]

6. Despite much attention the thematic importance of state frontiers in the Lagaš-Umma "border war" story – which I have pointed out is the exception to early city-state competition, not the model[10] – *Grenzterminologien* are weakly and inconsistently attested prior to the MA/MB periods, when they gradually began to take on more extensive meanings. In the Old Babylonian period, for example, we have many words for "border" or "boundary," but most of these refer to the edges of individual fields, streets, or buildings,[11] occasionally the outskirts of cities.[12] Two terms do indicate the edges of state control but mostly designate borderlands regions (*aḫītu*) or towns (*āl pāṭi*) rather than lines marking off territories between two political powers. This accords with the sense we get in Mari letters that various powers tried to fix their mutual borders at single points (e.g., Ḫaradum between Mari and Ešnunna, or Ḫit between Mari and Babylon), not with enclosing and linear borderlines. Only a few uses of *pāṭu* by itself in the OB refer to a geopolitical border, attested only at Mari. The term shows up only twice in the inscription of any OB king, and only to suggest vague extents of the kingdom, not a hard border.[13] Thus, even for a period best known for its interstate warfare, there was little expressed concern for boundaries as lines to defend, police, or use for any purpose of administration, taxation, or trade control (Richardson 2012). The uses of *pāṭu* to mean a state border show that the idea was conceptually available, but of limited use.

7. Relatedly (and combining two points made above), virtually all mensuration technologies related to land were focused on areas and edges of houses and fields. An enormous amount of administrative, legal, and even ritual[14] attention was paid to the specific measurement of the properties that belonged to households, not to political units. To my knowledge, no boundary of any Bronze Age field was ever identified as belonging to another polity.

8. There was little administrative or intelligence apparatus to police interstate borders and territories. This may

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7 See E-anatum RIME 1 9.3.2: ii 5–6 (i$_3$-bu$_x$ [PAD], "ripped").

8 Described chiefly with the Sumerian verb ki sur, "to demarcate," lit. to "divide off" (sur) a "place" (ki); also im-dub, "to divide off." The sense that an identifiable border existed is given by the inscriptions' repeated accusations that leaders of Umma had "crossed" or "transgressed" it (with bal). Enmetena in one inscription claims that Mesilim had "stretched out the measuring rope (eš$_2$) on the field" (RIME 1 9.5.1 i 9–12) but uses the measurement to erect a single-point monument rather than a border*line*. Jerry Cooper (1983: 33) – acknowledging that "only a small number [of these place names] can be identified with precision" – made an educated guess as to the location of the Lagaš-Umma border, tentatively identifying a "ca. 50–60 km" line between the Tigris and the Nun-canal.

9 Note the many concerns that boundary canals could be actively "shifted" (RIME 1 9.3.1 rev. v 2–3) or dried up (RIME 1 9.5.1. iv 30–33); cf. NB *suḫḫû* v., "to disarrange" a boundary.

10 Richardson 2012: 10–14. Note further that the meaning "boundary stone" for *narû* A is only attested from the Middle Babylonian period on and is only indicated by usage; strictly speaking, the Akkadian word just means "stone." Cf. MA/MB *kudurru* A, from the verb *kadāru*.

11 Including (from CAD) *idu* A, *itû* A, *limītu*, *miṣru* A (in OB), *nēru* B, *pilku* A (pl. only; cf. *palāku* A, only with fields), and *pūtu*. The term *miṣru* A came to designate a state border beginning in the MA/MB and increasingly into the NA/NB; in the OB, however, the word only described the edges of fields. Similarly, the verb *nabalkutu*, "to cross (over)," only came to mean crossing territorial borders in SB/MB dialects; in OB times, at most it meant to scale the wall of someone's house. OB *pulukku* only designated a kind of tool.

12 I.e., *aḫītu* ("outside" [a city]).

13 RIME 4 3.6.6: 9' (Ḫammurabi, the *pāṭu* of Gutium) and 3.7.8: 5'–6' (Samsuiluna, *ištu pāṭ* Gutium *adi pāṭ* Elam).

14 Richardson 2021a: esp. 45–47 and 50–51 (quoting Scott).

have begun to change by the time of first-millennium empires, when spies, lookouts, and watchposts were more systematically employed (see Dubovský 2006). But even if Bronze Age states had intimate knowledge of hinterlands and boundaries (already doubtful), they had little ability to surveil it. We know of a few terms for scouts (e.g., *āmiru*) and safe-conduct letters; at OB Mari, we know of mobile corps of *bazaḫātū*, "border guards," who spied on enemies and seized fugitives. Omens were used to scry unseen movements in the landscape (Richardson 2022). But no set of documents, checkpoints, or other technologies existed to make border crossing a certifiably legal (or, therefore, illegal) act. Nor was there any way to establish the identities of anyone crossing a border, should they even have been enforceable to begin with. Various accusations in early inscriptions of boundary "crossing" or "transgression" were really political accusations.

9. What references we do have to frontiers in state letters or royal inscriptions suggest that they were often one-sided projections of the city-state doing the talking. This is certainly the case when Enmetena, Ur-Namma, or Ḫammurabi talk about borders. There is almost no evidence outside of the Mari letters for the mutual recognition of state boundaries prior to MA/MB times.
10. The documentation of interstate economic activity was focused on end-point transactions rather than transit points – on what happened where people bought and sold things, not where goods passed through borderlines. We do have some evidence about such things as caravan tolls, pass-through treaties, and smuggling (especially for the Old Assyrian trade), but the focus of most commercial texts is on sites of procurement and sale – at marketplaces, not frontiers with import/export controls.
11. There was virtually no legal attention paid to borders as such; laws like Ḫammurabi's rarely ventured to imagine let alone attempt to adjudicate anything that happened beyond the urban environment (Richardson 2021b: esp. 46–52). A few laws were concerned with foreign jurisdictions for property sales, but nothing related to borders per se.
12. Our knowledge of provincial systems *inside* of major Mesopotamian states – i.e. of their internal territorialization – is very spotty. It would be easy to assemble the positive evidence we do have for a subset of departments and officers representing them. A rather long list of men called *šagina*, ensi$_2$, *šāpiru*, *bēl pīḫāti*, etc. could be assembled for a variety of places in historical states, with an equally heterogeneous set of attested functions. But if we were to invert the exercise for the Sargonic, Ur III, Old Babylonian states, etc., and make a list of the places for which there are *no* attested governors – for powers *not* demonstrably exercised from evidence – we would arrive at a much longer list. A true inventory would show that the regulable units we sometimes imagine to make up the working insides of states are much more unattested than attested. This suggests forms of organization which were not really provincialized but made up of elite networks governing through household clientage rather than territorial authority.
13. Given the intersection of low rates of literacy and the largely textual fund of information about where places and borders were, there was an overall communicative barrier to making borders known to anyone who might cross them. Most places and borders begin by being known from only a very small number of sources, often texts beyond the access of the very people most likely to cross the lines. How were most Mesopotamians to *know* where those borders were?

This is all quite enough to make the main point, so I will stop beating a *sīsû mīti*. The arguments against the salience of frontiers are generalizing and all subject to qualification or exception; they will surprise least of all archaeologists familiar with the long and longstanding theoretical literature about territory and borders. The kinds of state boundary lines we find in our texts at most marked specific points or zones of extent, not the *shapes* of whole states; nor did they order any spaces theoretically enclosed within or between those points and zones; nor again did those boundaries express the relation of the states laying them down to the homologous shapes and territorial claims of neighboring states. Such borderlines conveyed no "calculative grasp of the material world" (to quote Stuart Elden's elegant wording: Elden 2013: 325–327), constructing neither relations between states nor administrative legibility within them.

But what Scott would have done with these kinds of observations would not have been to stop and simply say, "See? Borders are not a useful concept," but instead go on to ask: "What *does* the sense of all these caveats tell us about how states *were* thinking about and using geography?" If not in the ways we might expect of a state, how did territoriality work as a component of sovereign power?

There are some familiar points one could make. Yes, our evidence points to an intense focus on nodality rather than territory, networks of people and resources rather than oil-stains of controlled land. There is a real case to be made that territoriality did gradually emerge as a real infrastructural power, while notably also appearing as a concept from a very early point, long before it could be made efficacious. And there is much yet to mine on how local concerns for the borders of fields and houses *do* fall within the ambit of the political: something yet to be written about neighbors, factions, and squabbles about owned and occupied land as the actually important political questions for ancient cities.

But there is also a newer takeaway: if we take seriously the implications from nodality, clientage, and locality, what must be modeled more strenuously in future are the competing and collaborating relationships of state networks with *non*-state populations, resources, and places, quite possibly forming the majority footprint within the Mesopotamian alluvium. Early states did not merely compete and come into conflict with *each other* for finite assets but with a whole non-state sector which receded into the landscape, interacting with states on only occasional and conditional terms.

I will zoom in on point 3, about toponyms, to illustrate what I mean. Let me posit that the paradigm of few attestations for most toponyms suggests low levels of interaction between most places and the central states which give evidence for them (the vast majority of texts having been written, after all, in those cities). This hypothesis about low interactivity is a way of explaining the distribution of evidence that some Assyriologists disagree with. The sense of their objection, if I may characterize it, is that the attestation-frequency pattern mostly implies low *knowledge* on the part of modern scholars rather than low interaction in antiquity. If only we had more texts, they opine, or the right texts, we would know where these places were, what happened there, why they were important! On the contrary, I am impressed by the apparent paradox between few mentions of most places and the texts' overall unconcern for the where-what-why. People writing cuneiform texts in virtually every case where a unique toponym is mentioned simply say "Go to X and collect my silver" (or what have you), without any expressed worries about how to pronounce the name of the town, how to get there, whether it "belonged" to the state, or whether it was dangerous to go there. We are looking at a world in which economic and administrative systems routinely interacted with places at *all* points of the sovereignty spectrum: a few places under direct control, followed by an ever-larger number of places with which they had regular, occasional, sparse, and rare interactions.[15] Despite this, the atmosphere of unconcern about geographic location suggests an immense amount of casual and everyday knowledge, *grosso modo*, about where places were.

These little-mentioned places were the clients yet to be recruited, the harvests yet to be taxed, the workers yet to be levied.[16] This is the "dark matter" of socio-economic life for early states, glowing like little lanterns of textualized order in a dimly lit landscape.[17] The paradigm needs structured documentation and theoretical attention on the textual side, both of which are achievable goals. Yes, we should abandon romantic ideas about great and powerful ancient states, jealously guarding and ever-expanding their frontiers and control of land. But we can swap that out for admiring a managerial mindset which was endlessly sophisticated and flexible when it came to recruiting sometime-clients, calving-off rents where they could, and knowing where the places of their world were – whether they controlled them or not – Jim's "barbarians," with their history yet to be written.

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15 One is tempted to follow the regression pattern and argue that one type of toponym would even outstrip the number of places attested only once: places never mentioned at all!

16 One hears a cynical version of the Yeats aphorism: "There are no strangers here, only friends you haven't yet met."

17 Richardson 2007: 21–23 with Fig. 2.1, a map inverting the traditional model of state control over productive areas, showing states to be have been discontinuous and (geographically) archipelagic entities.

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Hidden Transcripts of the Christian Century: Power and Global Goods in Early Modern Japan

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Hidden Transcripts of the Christian Century: Power and Global Goods in Early Modern Japan

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Introduction

This essay employs James Scott’s (1990) concepts of *hidden* and *public transcripts* to explore shifting power relations during the Iberian encounter with early modern Japan. Introduced by Charles Boxer (1951), the term ‘Christian Century’ is sometimes used to refer to the dynamic period of contact between Europe and Japan between 1543 (the first recorded arrival of Europeans in Japanese waters) and 1639 (the expulsion of all Iberian merchants and missionaries from the archipelago). This was Japan’s first global moment, a time of intense cultural contact with Europe and new links with India, Southeast Asia, coastal Africa and the Americas. While the dynamism of the period makes the phrase ‘Christian Century’ inapt in certain respects, it will be used here (without scare quotes) as a convenient label.

The question of the nature of power is central to my discussion. Japanese archaeologists and premodern historians often work with a view of power which, in the terminology of Michael Mann, is both *intensive* and *authoritative*. *Intensive power* “refers to the ability to organize tightly and command a high level of mobilization or commitment from the participants”, while *authoritative power* is “actually willed by groups and institutions” comprising “definite commands and conscious obedience” (Mann 1986: 7–8). Such a view of power is arguably appropriate for the ‘absolutist’ regime of the early modern Tokugawa era (1603–1868), but can hardly be applied to the Kofun period (250–700) when an early state first appeared in the Japanese Islands. For instance, the influential proposal made by archaeologist Yukio Kobayashi in the 1950s that the distribution of a particular type of bronze mirror in the third century reflected the spread of state power now seems like a clear over-interpretation (cf. Edwards 2006). In Mann’s (1986) IEMP model of the sources of social power (ideological, economic, military and political) situated within overlapping networks, the bronze mirrors analysed by Kobayashi were a source of *ideological* power, but the extent to which they also supported *economic*, *military* and *political* power remains an open question.

Within Japanese historiography, naïve approaches to power continue to be noticeable for the Christian Century era. Both native and international scholars frequently assume power to have been both *intensive* and *authoritative* at this time. American historian James Huffman (2010: 57) describes the arrival of “hundreds of gun- and Bible-bearing Westerners who had come to make a profit and save souls”, a rendition that glosses over the complex social relations of the period. Some historians even entertain the fantasy of a potential Iberian colonisation of early modern Japan (cf. Ucerler 2022; Hudson 2024). To borrow Scott’s (1998) terminology, such arguments are a clear example of *seeing like the Japanese state*, because that state generated fear of a military and ideological threat from the Europeans to cement its own power (Paramore 2009). During the Christian Century period, it was Japan that was the most aggressive military state in East Asia, invading Korea in 1592 and 1597 (precipitating the largest sixteenth-century war anywhere in the world), conquering the Ryukyu Islands (1609), attacking Taiwan (unsuccessfully) in 1609 and 1616, and planning an invasion of Luzon – an idea that was still being entertained in 1637 (Hudson 2024). A utopian scheme for a joint Iberian-Japanese invasion of China was promoted by Spanish Jesuit Alonso Sánchez (1547–1593) but encountered strong opposition and was abandoned after the defeat of the Spanish Armada in the English Channel in 1588 (Ucerler 2022: 118–141). As I have noted elsewhere (Hudson 2024: 57), this *empresa de China* necessitates a careful reading of some Jesuit public transcripts. Alessandro Valignano (1539–1606) warned against any invasion of Japan, not only because the Japanese were militarily so strong, but also because “the land is the most barren and poor that I have ever seen” (Ucerler 2022: 119). The latter comment stands in stark contrast to other European accounts which stress the fertility of the land and (by implication) its potential for conversions.

Iberian and other European (English and Dutch) operations in Japan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were centred on seaborne trade managed from small coastal enclaves, a pattern that characterised other European colonial activities in Eurasia and Africa at the time (Darwin 2007; Roy 2025). As a result, the power wielded by Europeans in Japan was (again, in Mann's terminology) *diffused*. Diffused power spreads in a "spontaneous, unconscious, decentered way throughout a population, resulting in similar social practices that embody power relations but are not explicitly commanded" (Mann 1986: 8). The power of the Catholic Church and especially the Society of Jesus in Japan might be regarded as *intensive* over its European members, who were controlled from Rome and by the Church in Goa, but more *extensive* within the world of Japanese converts. At a time of enormous historical change in both Japan and the world, one size did not fit all.

Japan's Christian Century was a period of state-building through war. It also marked a shift from a decentralised, mercantilist society to one based on 'agrarian fundamentalism' (Amino 2012). Like the Nichiren and True Pure Land schools of Buddhism, Christianity in sixteenth-century Japan can be considered as a religion linked with seafaring and urban-based merchants (Amino 2012: 100–102). The iconoclastic medievalist Yoshihiko Amino (1928–2004) was in certain respects a Japanese James Scott. Although the dominant, *seeing like a state* view of historiography has emphasised Japan as an agrarian nation, Amino explored the archipelago's *barbarian* (*sensu* Scott) past. What Scott (2017) termed the 'Golden Age of the Barbarians' lasted in Japan until the early seventeenth century when the Tokugawa shoguns finally managed to establish a secure 'grain state'. More precise dates for the end of what I have termed the 'barbarian niche' (Hudson 2022) in the Japanese Islands can be linked with Japan's 1609 invasion of the Ryukyu kingdom (which had been a major medieval trading state), the 1637–38 Shimabara peasant revolt (which took on a Christian aspect), and the 1669–72 Shakushain war of the Indigenous Ainu people of Hokkaido against the Japanese.

Given this dynamic background of shifting power relations, Scott (1990) provides us with a language to discuss the manifold ways in which domination and resistance were expressed (or hidden) in the lived experiences of people in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Japan. In my view this provides an important antidote to the rigid approaches that command the literature. For some Japanese, Christianity had a strong spiritual appeal, in part because it seemed to provide a way to resist dominant structures of political and patriarchal power. Many female converts were likely attracted to Christianity in opposition to Buddhist teachings that, due to menstruation and childbirth, they would be condemned to a 'Lake of Blood' after death, with little hope of salvation (Ward 2009). Over 300,000 Japanese are thought to have converted to Christianity during a period of a few decades. Many of these converts had little choice but to follow the lords of their domains, although in private there was no doubt a range of opinions between support and opposition. Other Japanese embraced the new faith in a fervent way. One example here comes from Jesuit descriptions of a Corpus Christi procession in Nagasaki in 1614:

> "Some walked dressed in the same hempen rice bags tied up with many ropes as they had heard had been the punishment of the Christians elsewhere in Japan. Other went about as if crucified, carrying large crosses […]. Again others carried muskets that had been lashed to their legs so tightly that it looked like the barrels had penetrated their flesh…. [Others had their naked] torsos wrapped in thorny vines […]. Others used oyster shells strung tightly together […] and suffered great pains in this way. […] There was one man who carried two entangled snakes over his naked flesh that would bite him from time to time […]." (Hesselink 2016: 148)

This remarkable procession is not simply a case of Japanese believers following practices that had 'diffused' from Counter-Reformation Europe. It was, above all, a performance of resistance against the Tokugawa regime wherein the violence of the procession comments publicly – yet in a way perhaps hidden or ambiguous to non-Christians – on the violence of the state. The re-purposing of weapons of persecution into acts of resistance gives a new nuance to the phrase 'weapons of the weak' (cf. Scott 1985).

Materiality, Display and 'Global Goods'

Both archaeology and history have taken a 'material turn' in recent years (e.g., Gosden and Marshall 1999; Gosden 2005; Joyce 2012; Aram and Yun-Casalilla 2014; Gerritsen and Riello 2016; Richardson et al. 2016). Morgan Pitelka (2016) has discussed the role of the accumulation, exchange and display of *meibutsu* (famous objects) in the establishment of the Tokugawa regime. Timon Screech (2020) looks at the role of European objects, trade and gift-giving during the same period. Even if they did not convert to Christianity themselves, Japanese élites used the 'global goods' brought by Europeans in political theatres of accumulation and display. In fact, fascination with such global goods seems to have been widely shared – albeit no doubt in different ways – across Japanese society. A 1594 letter by Francisco Pasio explained that:

> "[The warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi] has become so enamoured of Portuguese dress and costume that he and his retainers frequently wear this apparel, as do all the other lords of Japan, even the gentiles, with rosaries of driftwood on the breast […] and with a crucifix at their side […]; some of them are so curious that they learn by rote the litanies of *Pater Noster* and *Ave Maria* and go along praying in the streets, not in mockery or scorn […] but simply for gallantry, or because they think it is a good thing and one which will help them to achieve prosperity in worldly things." (Boxer 1951: 207–208)

Late medieval Christianity had developed a strongly material aspect (Bynum 2020), and this also influenced Japan.

In his article "What do objects want?", archaeologist Chris Gosden (2005) has discussed how things can lay down certain 'rules' or 'trajectories' of use. The Christian Century provides numerous examples of this process. One fascinating case is recorded by John Saris (c. 1580–1643), captain of the first English ship to reach Japan. Saris had purchased a painting of Venus for his cabin and noted in his official diary that it was "somewhat wantonlie". Upon arriving in Japan in 1613, Saris gave a tour of his ship for local ladies "of the better sort" who, mistaking Venus for the Virgin Mary, began to "worship" the painting, even though they were not Christians themselves (Screech 2020: 134). In the meeting of very different cultures, the material provided points of familiarity to negotiate the encounters. Catholic and Buddhist rosaries, for example, were outwardly rather similar, and the Virgin Mary became linked with the Kannon bodhisattva, the 'goddess of mercy'. Jesuit João Rodrigues' (c. 1561–1633) *Historia da Igreja do Japão* revels in deep details about the materiality of Japanese life, providing an account that is at once strange yet familiar (Cooper 2001).

The familiarity of some material objects could also, however, hide complexities, contradictions and resistance. Even new food crops might encounter resistance, for both economic and symbolic reasons (e.g., Levi 2014; Pelloli 2023; Findley and Roberts 2024). All artefacts can be said to have a range of performers and audiences. Sometimes the object provides or attempts to provide a "*self*-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen" (Scott 1990: 18). In other cases, the object is more evasive; it may not be hidden itself but its meanings are fluid and potentially incorporate readings linked to hidden transcripts. An example is provided by Izumo no Okuni (c. 1578–c. 1613), a female performer who is said to have begun the *kabuki* style of theatre in Japan. A painting of Okuni now in the Tokugawa Art Museum shows her dressed as a samurai with a rosary and crucifix around her neck (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Izumo_no_Okuni). Is the painting a critique of the shallow 'cosplay' of contemporary samurai, or does it depict an 'authentic' Christian retainer? From an initial openness, indeed embrace, of such ambiguities, in the early seventeenth century the Tokugawa regime began to see Christianity as an ideological threat to its dominance (Elison 1973; Paramore 2009). In a sense, the regime began to concern itself with the hidden transcripts of the Christian Century. Christian decorative art, previously used by a range of people and classes in Japan became a means to enforce anti-Christian regulations. In the late sixteenth century, devotional metal medallions became an important element in Counter-Reformation practices (Riordan 2015). Numerous such medallions have been discovered in Japan, often as grave goods (Gotō 2023). From the late 1620s, the Tokugawa Inquisition (*shūmon aratame yaku*) began to use these medallions and other images in *e-fumi* displays of obedience whereby people were forced to stamp on devotional objects to demonstrate their rejection of Christianity (see below).

Jesuit Casuistry: Public Deliberations on Hidden Transcripts

Jesuit writings from Japan's Christian Century provide us with fascinating material to consider the issue of the relations of power discussed in Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. In sixteenth-century Japan, Christian teachings were potentially revolutionary; yet the Society of Jesus was essentially opposed to a major *social* transformation. Spanish Jesuit Pedro Gómez (1533–1600) explained this clearly in a 1595 work written in Latin and Japanese:

> "[…] even if a Christian's lord is a pagan, one should obey him with regard to most things. […] In Matthew 22 we read: *Reddite ergo quae sunt Caesaris, Caesari* ['Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's']. […] Everyone is thus obliged to obey one's superiors. The reason is that the purpose of the incarnation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, was not to abolish the natural law […] but to bring it to completion." (Ucerler 2022: 52)

There were, however, exceptions to this obligation, expounded through the Jesuit method of *casuistry* – the moral theology of individual cases (*casus*) – which was designed to provide 'solutions' to moral dilemmas (Friedrich 2022: 173–184). In England and other Protestant countries, casuistry became notorious as a way to hide the truth through 'equivocation', considered as little more than deception. John King, Bishop of London from 1611–21, condemned the Jesuits as "changelings, chameleons […] ambiguous in their answers […] with their meandering turnings and windings, their mental reservations, their amphibolous, amphibious prepositions, which live, as these creatures, part in the land, part in the water" (Screech 2020: 192). In Scott's terms, we might say that Jesuit casuistry was thought to undermine the 'official' distinction between public and hidden, thus posing a perceived danger to the social order.

Japanese 'public transcripts' of the sixteenth century said little about the social or theological aspects of the encounter with Europe, especially as it affected the broader population of the archipelago. By contrast, Jesuit records afford invaluable materials to understand *both* the public transcript of how the Church saw the relationship between secular rulers and their subordinates *and* hidden-transcript insights into how converts attempted to negotiate the demands of their new faith with requirements imposed by non-Christian lords. Ucerler (2022) has discussed at length a section in Gómez's 1595 text structured in question-and-answer format. Gómez built on principles dating back to Aquinas' thirteenth-century *Summa theologiae* but his approach differed from contemporary decisions by the Church in Goa (from where the Japanese mission was administered), which rejected any authority by 'pagans' over the faithful and tried to restrict contact between the two groups (Ucerler 2022: 55). In Gómez's explanation, "acts that are neither good nor bad, i.e. those that are of an 'indifferent' nature, are admissible." This meant that making Shinto or Buddhist images or constructing temples was forbidden, but "cutting wood or transporting stones for these purposes is not in itself a sin." Participation in various Japanese festivals was accepted ("To perform dances is not forbidden at all"), but the point was not to acknowledge that the ritual would accrue any religious benefits (Ucerler 2022: 52, 57). As the Tokugawa persecution of Christianity gained force, Japanese believers were instructed that "it was not sinful to deny Christ if professing Him would cause the death of a Christian (including oneself), and neither was it sinful to conceal rosaries, images, or other 'meritorious objects' (*kuriki no mono*)" (Screech 2020: 193). All transcripts of Christian belief were now forced into hiding.

Hidden Transcripts of the Crypto-Christian Era: *e-fumi* and Burials

After extensive persecutions in the early seventeenth century, Christianity in Japan went underground (Elison 1973). Communities of crypto-Christians continued to maintain their faith in several locations until the late nineteenth century when the ban on Christianity was lifted (Turnbull 1998). Sites related to crypto-Christians in northwest Kyushu were inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage in 2018 (Delakorda Kawashima 2021). This section will briefly introduce two contrasting hidden transcripts of this period: burials and the *e-fumi* ceremonies whereby Christians were forced to publicly renounce their faith.

The term *e-fumi* means 'stepping upon an image' and refers to the procedure introduced by the Tokugawa regime whereby Japanese people were required to put their feet on Christian images – most frequently of Jesus or Mary – in order to demonstrate their rejection or indifference to that faith.[1] The images used were initially paper pictures that had been confiscated from the printing press established in Kyushu by the Society of Jesus; wood and copper images were later produced especially for the purpose (Hesselink 2016: 212), though paper prints continued to be made throughout the nineteenth century (Montanari et al. 2025). First introduced in 1629, *e-fumi* was but one of many measures through which the Tokugawa regime attempted to eradicate Christianity from Japan. It was a highly symbolic attempt to inscribe rejection of the faith into the public transcript. Historians have noted that the

1 Although often conflated, the terms *e-fumi* and *fumi-e* can be distinguished as process and object. *E-fumi* refers to the ceremony of trampling on the image whereas *fumi-e* denotes the image itself.

'mental reservation' of Jesuit casuistry undermined this measure in a fundamental way – and "The alternative was to be killed" (Screech 2020: 193). Yet Japanese believers also adopted their own symbolic 'reservations' or resistance. The *e-fumi* ceremony required that shoes – in practice straw sandals – be worn while stamping on the image since the failure to remove footwear was itself a type of defilement in Japanese culture. After the ceremony, some groups of crypto-Christians on Fukue Island (Nagasaki) would first burn the sandals, then mix the ashes with water in a bowl and drink the mixture in penitence (Whelan 1996: 134).

As there are relatively few written texts relating to the crypto-Christians of Japan, research on those communities has often taken an ethnographic approach (Whelan 1996; Turnbull 1998). Archaeology provides another perspective and the field of *Kirishitan kōkogaku* ('Christian archaeology') has a long history in Japan, dating back to the early years of the twentieth century with surveys of gravestones in Kyushu from around 1902 (Tanaka 2023). Beginning in 1917, Kyoto University's Department of Archaeology carried out more systematic investigations, which were published with long English summaries (Hamada and Umehara 1923; Shimmura 1923; Shimmura and Hamada 1923).[2] 'Christian archaeology' in Japan has remained almost totally separate from 'mission archaeology' as practiced in the Americas and from new work on the global archaeology of Iberian colonialism (cf. Graham 1998; Montón-Subías et al. 2016). In her review of the former approach, Elizabeth Graham (1998) stressed the novelty of employing archaeology to explore the role of Christian missions and missionaries beyond Europe. Although she explicitly limited that new field to the Americas, Graham noted the important potential of archaeology in understanding "changing cultural imagination and reordering of a conceptual universe." From the perspective of Japanese research on the Christian Century, Graham (1998: 29) makes the interesting point that views which emphasise Christianity as a "religion of the state" encourage the assumption that "pre-Columbian elements in religious material culture [were] resistance phenomena". This resonates closely with influential opinions in Japanese historiography that Christianity existed in a single 'authentic' form which Japan lacked. 'Folk' responses to Christianity meant Japan did not produce "full-fledged European-style Christians" (Higashibaba 2001: xv) or that "the Christianity prevalent in Japan during this period should not be regarded as true 'Christianity' but as a unique Japanese religion called 'Kirishitan'" (Oka 2021: 1) – *Kirishitan* being a Japanese word derived from the Portuguese *Cristão*. The term *Kirishitan* does, however, develop some resonance by the late nineteenth century since, by that time, some crypto-Christians had come to regard their faith as differing significantly from European Catholicism (Whelan 1996: 133).

The question of interaction between native and Christian beliefs is an important one in both Japan and other parts of the world. Robert Ricard (1966: 278) had already noted that many native 'superstitions' found in the Americas were in fact European in origin, a point made for Japan by Turnbull (1998). Based on earlier observations by Royall Tyler (1993), I recently discussed the possibility of Christian influence on folk beliefs related to Mount Fuji (Hudson 2024: 35–37). Although medieval Europe had a long tradition of heart burials, at least amongst the aristocracy (Weiss-Krejci 2010), Alice Kehoe (1979) made the suggestion that beliefs about the Sacred Heart were influenced by native Mexican iconography. We can thus agree with Graham's (1998: 29) insistence that "Archaeologists must be careful not to adopt the simplistic approach of colonial Catholic priests and interpret the material culture of mission sites as manifestations of either acceptance or rejection of Christianity." European missionaries quickly realised that Japan possessed a civilisation that was in many ways as complex as that of Europe; how they attempted to propagate their faith in that context was anything but 'simplistic' (Ucerler 2022).

European visitors to Japan in the Christian Century made surprisingly few comments about burials and mortuary customs (Moriwaki 2023). João Rodrigues (1561/2–1633/4) left exhaustive descriptions about numerous aspects of Japanese society and history but had almost nothing to say about funerals (Cooper 2001). In a 1585 work usually known as the *Tratado* ('treatise'), Luís Fróis (1532–1597) noted four differences in the burial customs of Japan as compared to Europe. First, "[o]ur deceased depart with their hair as it is when they die; in Japan the deceased (both men and women) must go with their heads entirely shaved." Second, "[o]ur caskets [i.e, coffins] are elongated; theirs are round, that is, in the form of a half-barrel." Third, "[o]ur deceased are buried face up in a reclining position; theirs are seated and bound with their face between their knees." Finally, "[w]e bury our dead; the Japanese generally cremate theirs" (Danford et al. 2014: 120). Fróis' text was likely compiled as a guide to Japanese

2 This research was re-published as a book with the English title *Studies on the Christian Relics in Japan* by Tōkō Shoin, Tokyo in 1926. Citations here follow the romanisation of names in the original. The files can be downloaded from: https://repository.kulib.kyoto-u.ac.jp/dspace/handle/2433/180759.

culture for Jesuit missionaries. His comments apply especially to the aristocracy and warrior class; in general, there was considerable diversity in burial customs in early modern Japan (Tanigawa 1992; Suzuki et al. 2014).

Fróis' *Historia de Japam* described a lavish funeral for an important Japanese Christian. The body was wrapped in golden damask fabric. A procession consisting of a hundred Christians, each with a lit candle, was led by a gilt gold and silver calvary (a cross with encrusted skull and bones) and followed by twelve white silk flags bearing insignia of the Passion. Moriwaki (2023: 36) suggests that the use of the flags may have been inspired by Buddhist or military-style vertical flags of the period. According to Fróis (1981: 336–337), this elaborate burial "caused many Gentiles to become Christians, as they later did."

As seen from archaeology, the main features of the Christian mortuary style adopted in Japan were rectangular burial pits, headstones inscribed with Christian symbols such as crosses or the Christogram IHS, and grave goods such as crucifixes, rosary beads and devotional medallions (see Hudson 2024: 25–26). Although grave goods are relatively rare in practice (Gotō 2023), the Christian mortuary style was adopted quickly and widely, with the earliest dated headstone from 1581. In the context of the present essay, it is especially interesting that these mortuary customs were continued in some areas *after* the prohibition on Christianity. Northwest Kyushu remains the best-known region in this respect (Ōishi 2023). Endō (2023) has summarised evidence from the Tohoku region of northeast Honshu. Excavations at the Nihongi site in Ōshū city, Iwate prefecture uncovered 15 graves from the early modern period. Grave SK14 produced remains of a seated, barrel-like coffin together with a number of grave goods. Though heavily encrusted on the surface, a small metal object (1.7 x 1.0 x 0.2 cm in size) appears to be a Catholic medallion. The presence of this probable medallion in turn suggests that the 54 glass beads from the burial came from a rosary. Other grave goods included pieces of a pipe and 11 coins. The coins date the burial to the eighteenth century or later (Endō 2023: 89–90), long after Christianity had been banned in Japan.

Concluding Comments

This essay has sketched, in a provisional fashion, a few ideas for future research based on Scott (1990). For me, discovering the rich debates in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* has nevertheless been an exciting journey. I had previously paid greater attention to Scott's more archaeological and anthropological writings, especially *Against the Grain* and *The Art of Not Being Governed*, works that Scott (2024: 5) himself categorised as "leaps into the abyss." Many archaeological studies of early modern European colonialism have contrasted European 'domination' with native 'resistance' (e.g., Panich and Schneider 2015). My recent book on Japan's Christian Century (Hudson 2024) is not the first to argue that this framework needs careful nuancing in the Japanese context. Scott's concepts of public and hidden transcripts provide one productive approach to this question – and indeed to other periods of Japanese history. Reading the work of James Scott is always stimulating and quickly suggests new research projects and framings. Although several of Scott's works have been translated into Japanese, as far as I am aware *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* is not one of them. Yet in my view the book offers enormous potential for critical analyses of the archaeology and history of Japan. The public/hidden transcript framing would, I believe, provide new angles on a range of diverse topics in Japanese history from the decorative tombs of Late Antiquity (Zancan 2023) to the vexed question of premodern meat consumption (Hudson and Muñoz Fernández 2023) to peasant revolts (Vlastos 1986). Excavating the hidden transcripts of Japanese history is a compelling task for future research.

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A Southeast Asian Archaeologist's Perspective on James Scott's Contributions to the Field

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More than an entire archaeological generation has passed since "post-processual" critiques up-ended the world of archaeological theory, and we now travel through a rich and varied theoretical landscape that draws inspiration from scholarship from the natural sciences to the humanities. Our collective obsession with new methodologies still threatens to overwhelm our interpretive frameworks, as advances in science, geomatics, and AI offer ever more precise tools for data recovery and analysis. Against this backdrop, and with metrics looming ever larger as the primary criterion of intellectual success, it is perhaps not surprising how few archaeologists today read the source literature from which we draw our dominant theoretical frameworks. Like their predecessors a generation ago, most archaeologists still engage in the mining-and-bridging strategy that Norman Yoffee and Andrew Sherratt (1993: 3) described during the peak of the post-processual era: grab a current approach from the social sciences or humanities and cobble it into archaeological shape, without fully understanding the source field from which it originated. Few archaeologists today cite Immanuel Wallerstein when they invoke some revisionist world-systems model, and still fewer mention Benedict Anderson when discussing variations on imagined communities. We are not unique among scholars in doing this, as such ideas become deeply embedded in our interpretive world. Yet understanding how this intellectual current shape-shifts as it wafts across the field of archaeology requires returning to its source. James Scott has been a more important contributor to these currents of the last several decades than I suspect most archaeologists recognize.

Contributors to this issue have been asked to consider how James C. Scott's work has influenced the field and also our scholarship. As a Southeast Asian archaeologist who studies ancient states, I have been particularly drawn to James Scott's scholarship on power relations and the state. Surprisingly, relatively few archaeological colleagues outside of historical archaeology engaged with his work before his 2017 publication, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*. This publication both represented conventional archaeological thought to the public and drew ample and occasionally heated responses from archaeologists (e.g., Campbell 2019; Stark 2019a). Scott's work has, however, also impacted archaeological interpretation for several decades, both indirectly (through our adoption of methodologies based on his conceptual framework) and – more rarely – directly through archaeologists' use of his theoretical constructs.

My goal in this essay is to highlight elements of his research program that align with archaeological research themes and review some examples of his influence in the field and my research program. Despite my most earnest efforts, readers will surely find gaps in my citation of archaeological works for which I apologize in advance. I will also explore other elements of James Scott's work that could enrich archaeological interpretation if we paid more attention to them.

Elements of James Scott's Research that Align with Archaeological Themes

James Scott was a social scientist whose scholarship on Malaysia and Burma/Myanmar crossed multiple disciplinary lines to understand agrarian studies and peasant societies. His PhD in political science analyzed Malaysian civil servants in an emerging post-colonial state. Following the publication of several books – and (he notes) in response to the Vietnam War movement – he turned his attention to peasant studies, where two years of ethnographic fieldwork among Malaysian rice farmers provided him with material for more than half a dozen subsequent books. Each has developed a specific premise that argued against the efficacy of centralized state power, Marxist or otherwise, about hegemony and resistance, offering provocative insights at an increasingly broader scale. The same macro lens and taste for master narrative that has drawn collegial ire in some circles (e.g., Lieberman 2010; Aung-Thwin 2011; D'Altroy 2019) or at least disquiet in others (e.g., Pollock 2019: 705) has also wrought significant global impact: more than 32,000 publications have cited his *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* alone. Citations to his work appear in research as distant from anthropology as the financialization of housing, urban informality, and the constitution of postgenomic life. Myriad obituaries and memorials attest to his scholarly corpus's impact on interpretive social science in the study of agrarian societies, but I contend in this article that Jim Scott's work has influenced archaeological interpretation in ways that may not be immediately recognizable to our community of practice.

It is James Scott's foray into ethnographically-tinged agrarian studies that holds the greatest potential for archaeologists, both because so many of us seek to understand power relations and the state and because so many archaeologists study agrarian societies. Scott's work is ready-made for archaeology because of his insistence that power relations are "firmly anchored in material practices" (Scott 1990: 188) and because so much of what we study – from people's latrines, their trash dumps, and their abandoned houses – offers insights on what people did, not what they said or wrote. His materialist focus and interest in the tensions created from efforts at state domination and bottom-up resistance and in the kinds of subversive techniques that people employ (which he termed "everyday forms of resistance") offer interpretive scaffolding to archaeologists who study power relations using the archaeological record. We cannot directly identify the acts of resistance that Scott describes using ethnographic and documentary records – poaching, squatting, desertion, evasion, foot-dragging, disloyalty, slander, theft, or sabotage (e.g., Thurston 2007: 274) – but we can track the emergence of discrete groups that may have acted against the state. We can also study efforts by ancient states to bolster elite control through simplification and standardization, even when these same measures often produce instability and impel resistance (Yoffee 2019: 2).

Much of James Scott's work concentrated on the historical development of institutionalized modern state power and domination, and at least five of his books are considered broadly influential in understanding state development (e.g., Scott 1985, 1990, 1998, 2017). Scott was particularly interested in how subordinate groups resisted power more frequently through covert than through public acts of resistance. His two-year ethnographic sojourn among Malay farmers gave him insights into life under direct state hegemony where people could not organize openly. Within this setting, he observed community members collaborating regularly to resist state directives through what he called "infra politics" that created "hidden transcripts" that actively resisted state mandates (1990). Such actions, undertaken with a tacit conspiracy of silence toward the authorities, were far more common than public revolts but still had a kind of agency that, under some circumstances, generated social change.

Scott uses the concept of "legibility" to describe the process of institutionalizing the means to extract labor, goods, and services from a subject population through bureaucracy and personal domination, including serfdom and slavery (1998). Historically documented and contemporary states inscribed their power on populations through censuses, taxes, enslavement, conscription, resettlement, roads, and environmental reconfiguration, such as re-routing waterways. Such legibility brought benefits to elite citizens (and notably literacy) while providing the state with the tools to track and conscript its citizens.

Scott's Southeast Asian expertise led him to explore the politics surrounding the retreat from state power (2009). He began his area studies in Burma, home to both lowland populations involved in intensive rice cultivation and upland Indigenous groups. These upland regions, labeled as Zomia (as discussed in Michaud 2010) or as the Dong World (Anderson and Whitmore 2015), were inhabited by numerous large populations who practiced swidden agriculture. Their lands spanned contemporary southern and southwestern China and northern Southeast Asia, allowing these populations to move seamlessly across a vast montane region. Drawing from the work of earlier ethnographers and historians, Scott viewed these upland groups as refugees from lowland state systems. He argued that subsistence choices within these state systems could be politically motivated rather than merely environmentally constrained. Some groups chose to escape the state by relocating to non-state spaces, which in Southeast Asia were primarily upland areas but could also include other environmental settings, such as swamps, marshes, and oceans. Scott contended that both governed (state) and ungoverned (nonstate or extra-state) spaces developed alongside each other throughout history.

Archaeologists are likely more comfortable with his generalist-comparative monograph, *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, than with any of his other books because of its subject matter, which reflects close consultation with Mesopotamian specialists before writing the volume. Some of us might laud him for his unusually faithful reflections of archaeological interpretations in his specific case studies, particularly in contrast with other "public intellectuals" who have written about archaeology. One might, however, conclude that this 2017 publication is the least useful of all his works for archaeological theory precisely because he has reflected what we consider common knowledge effectively, rather than offering new ideas for archaeologists to apply to their case studies. There is no question that his previous works offer far more insights for interpreting the archaeological record for scholars like me, and the following section suggests that I am not alone in this belief.

How Archaeologists Have Used James Scott's Ideas

Any social scientist might argue that Scott's focus on domination and resistance in multiple forms aligns with work by archaeologists of many stripes, but it is primarily historical archaeologists and archaeologists who study state-level societies who have used some of his concepts directly, particularly in contexts of contact and colonialism (but see Singh and Glowacki 2022 for a late Pleistocene exception). His framework of private/public transcripts has been particularly fruitful for historical archaeologists, while both historical archaeologists and those who study ancient states have benefited from his focus on the emergence and maintenance of non-state spaces by subalterns. At the broadest level, archaeologists have focused on how documentary records offer evidence of resistance to colonial demands as in the 18th–19th century Outer Hebrides (Symonds 1999) or in skaldic/court poems and public documents crafted by the medieval elite of southern Scandinavia (Thurston 2007). A growing number of practitioners have also operationalized Scott's concepts using archaeological evidence.

One clear example of this lies in using material culture as two kinds of texts or, in Scott's terminology, transcripts. Using this approach, hidden transcripts counterbalance the documentary records produced by the state and can include the maintenance and even development of locally manufactured goods despite state pressure to acculturate. Where public transcripts can include architecture and even church seating in European colonies (Hall 2000: 31), hidden transcripts in the archaeological record may involve private spaces and their material contents in plantations (Ruppel et al. 2003), sloppily-decorated ceramics among colonial Pueblo societies (Spielmann et al. 2006), 17th-century clay pipes in Ireland (Hartnett 2004). Subjugated populations may be innovative by manufacturing new local ceramic wares (Zeitlin 2015) or continue to use traditional ceramics in the face of colonization, such as large steatite *ollas* (jars) and *comals* (griddles) among post-contact Chumash communities (Gamble 2015). Sixteenth-century local Irish chieftains assumed some trappings of their English overlords but continued to include tower houses based on traditional spatial grammars (Delle 1999).

Another concept that Scott introduced in describing forms of resistance might be termed "escape agriculture" (e.g., Walker 2022), a pattern that archaeologists can sometimes trace on physical landscapes. Distinguishing state vs. non-state/extra-state spaces has thus provided historical archaeologists with more useful tools. Some regions like the Great Dismal Swamp (Sayers 2014), large wetlands that straddle southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, were non-state spaces that offered refuge to self-emancipated Black and displaced Native peoples in the 18th and 19th centuries. Others were multicultural early 19th-century Maroon communities in the United States, as in Angola (Baram 2012). But archaeologists also suggest that 18th century enslaved people in Narragansett (Rhode Island) crafted their own non-state spaces, from houses owned by free blacks to wooded areas that were used as gathering places to maintain African cultural traditions like storytelling, dance, and ritual (Fitts 1996: 64). The Ifugao Archaeological Project's focus on this Philippine uplands region as a colonial refugium from Spanish domination efforts (Acabado 2018) is the only published Southeast Asian historical archaeological application of Scott's (2009) work – and draws direct parallels to the pattern he describes in mainland Southeast Asia to this island setting to the south.

James Scott's work has also contributed substantially to the broad intellectual currents that swirl around our fields, perhaps nowhere else so clearly as in the analytical scale and theoretical focus of archaeological research. Archaeologists' relatively recent embrace of "bottom-up" perspectives for understanding culture change includes theoretical approaches like the "collective action" theory that draws from Scott's work (e.g., DeMarrais and Earle 2017) and applications to agrarian societies in ancient states (Erickson 2006: 348; Nichols 2015). Scott's focus on individual actors and small-scale interactions has also permeated our methodological focus, as practitioners of household archaeology credit him as one proponent of the microscalar approach (e.g., Robin 2003; Robin et al. 2014). Increasing numbers of archaeologists working on state-level societies who wish to challenge conventional Marxist interpretations cite Scott's work in studies of resistance in particular case studies of specific shatter zones (González-Ruibal 2014, drawing from Scott 2009) and more broadly to understand changing power relations in the archaeology of empire (Düring et al. 2020; see also Rosenzweig and Marston 2018: 90–91 for a recent review).

Although archaeologists who seek to understand the development of social stratification may learn new details as much from Scott's (2017) *Against the Grain* monograph, more of them benefit from his research on the nature and durability of state infrastructures and infrastructural power (Yoffee 2016). He specifically contended that early states were fragile, with limited control, and questioned the effective power of more recent (and perhaps even contemporary) states to effect change. Although relatively few colleagues have embraced Scott's anarchism full-throatedly (but see Angelbeck and Grier 2012), his work has played some part in the emerging archaeological interest in anarchism (e.g., Flexner and Gonzalez-Tennant 2018; Furholt et al. 2020). Whether couched in anarchist terms or offered as a case study, James Scott's work consistently illustrates the potential power of the bottom and the decidedly limited power of the top. This career-long sustained exploration into the contingent and fragile nature of institutional power, which must routinely negotiate resistance from agents within and beyond the polity, is perhaps the most useful scholarship for archaeologists who study ancient states.

Scott's (1998) central contention – that states seek power over their subordinates through simplification to make them "legible" – is one of his key theoretical contributions to archaeological theory: not because he is alone in suggesting this, but because he steps away from purely Marxist models in his framework. Drawing from Michael Mann's analysis of power, scholars agree that ancient states and empires depended on collaboration with local elites to naturalize power relations through strategies like inverting traditions and historical forgetting (Richardson 2016). So the very process of simplification or bureaucratization that made citizenry visible to the state also produced bottom-up resistance and infrastructural fragility (Pollock 2019: 704; Yoffee 2016, 2019: 2): generating complex and nonlinear histories of long-lived 'civilizations' characterized by the collapse and regeneration of a variety of early states, many of which were too weak to exercise effective power (Schwartz and Nichols 2006).

Excepting the previously mentioned Ifugao research on post-colonial "escape agriculture" and my work on the fragility of Angkorian states (Stark 2019b), few Southeast Asian archaeologists have used Scott's concepts to explain our archaeological patterning. One might, with some stretching, consider including Matthew Spriggs' Lapita case study (Furholt et al. 2020), which views the Remote Pacific as a kind of Zomia from Southeast Asia. What are we to make of this relative absence of James Scott from the archaeological literature of his source area? The fact that his work resonates most strongly with historical (rather than "prehistoric") archaeologists globally partly explains this absence, since few Southeast Asian archaeologists engage in historical archaeology as defined in the West. A growing handful of archaeologists work in Southeast Asia's earliest literate societies, but these predated Western contact by more than 1400 years and align more closely with South Asia's Early Historic period (Stark 2014). Remarkably few Southeast Asian archaeologists research post-16th century occupations (outside of "shipwreck archaeology"), where little theoretical work has developed, because most practitioners work in heritage management with limited opportunity to publish. Those who do are constrained by historiographic paradigms like royal chronicles that restrict interpretation in ways that resemble Chinese archaeological research (von Falkenhausen 1993). Western-originating historical archaeological concerns with contact and colonialism, therefore, have little resonance in Southeast Asian archaeological practice beyond the Philippines research noted previously (see Acabado and Hsieh 2020).

Another reason for this "Scott silence" in the archaeology of the very region where he worked might lie in the hegemony of Western paradigms in Southeast Asian archaeological research, producing a long-term focus on "prehistoric" rather than historic research (in which state dynamics can be studied). One might blame the region's spectacular early hominin finds as much as foreign researchers' embrace of Anglo-European conceptual frameworks, using Thailand as the basis for offering generalizations for regional developments (Shoocongdej 2011, 2017). Resistance to these culture history paradigms (which draw largely from now-disputed European models based on historical linguistics) has come both from the region's archaeologists (Kanjanajuntorn 2020) and from a small band of anthropological archaeologists working in the region (e.g., Stark 2015; White 2017) for different but overlapping reasons that intersect over the need to view Southeast Asia's archaeological record on its own terms. Both Southeast Asian and foreign critiques of a Three Age system emanate not simply from a concern to decolonize the field, but also from an increasingly robust archaeological record that does not parallel trends found in the Western hemisphere. The field is changing rapidly as more Southeast Asians move into researching their past, and one change is in the number of scholars studying the region's ancient "historic" states in both the lowland and upland regions. Such work might well attract interest in Scott's concepts and provide his ideas with more historical depth.

James Scott's Contributions to Archaeological Thought

Jim Scott's ideas have permeated the public conversation and also archaeological discourse and affected both how scholars and the public talk and think about the past. This is clearest, of course, in his 2017 *Against the Grain* monograph. Throughout his career, however, he made an explicit commitment to making his key ideas accessible to a wider audience rather than remaining in the ivory tower to converse with different theorists (Gilman et al. 2014: 117). It was certainly his willingness to generalize about long-term social and political processes – which he chalked up to his positivist beginnings – that formed such a powerful tool for reaching an educated audience across the social sciences and humanities. That this same tendency frustrated many of his colleagues is clear from one prominent scholar's query, in a review of Scott's (2009) *Art of Not Being Governed*, "But how far is it real, and how far does it hang together?" (Brookfield 2011: 491).

Like many archaeologists, James Scott appreciated the need for generalizing models. He concentrated on broad similarities, despite critiques from his peers that his broad brush ran "roughshod over differences and specific conditions that others would consider essential" (Scott 1990: 22). Scott's effort to understand peasant societies was grounded in a fundamental objection to state forms that oppressed the individual and founded in the microscale of ethnography. His work has helped humanize the present and the past as a virtual palimpsest of everyday acts: not some Marxist historical dialectic of proletariat vs. bourgeoisie, but instead of farmers and merchants, artisans and individuals across the social spectrum. These agents did not engage consciously in class struggle and rarely resisted in public, but they regularly took steps to assert their will in the world and occasionally electrified the collective to create meaningful change. James Scott was a self-avowed anarchist who dedicated his *Domination and Arts of Resistance* (1990) to the Moorestown Friends' (Quaker) School that he attended as a youth. Some observers have characterized his work as "in the end, deeply romantic" (McClellan 2024), and archaeologists such as Tim Denham (2018: 265) have used his approach to argue for the resilience of small-scale community-based polities that required no overarching state to function.

James Scott was also, finally, a humanist who liked talking with and learning about people. He may not have agreed to interact with Southeast Asian colleagues who critiqued his (2009) *Art of Not Being Governed Book* in print (Dove 2011), but he was pleased to engage with archaeologists when the opportunity presented itself. Let me close with two personal examples. The first was the 2017 Getty Museum conference on State Fragility (that produced the Yoffee 2019 volume), where he took issue with some of our contentions – and our genial disagreements carried on throughout the sessions. The second lies in the (2019) *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* review section of his *Against the Grain* monograph, where he not only agreed to submit a response to our varied comments but also thanked us for the feedback, and concluded that "the best we can hope for is to make a rich contribution to the compost heap of scholarship so that those who plough these fields after us may have richer fertilizer" (Scott 2019: 717). May his work continue to reverberate through our field.

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Emancipatory Struggles in the Age of Identity Politics: The Precolonial Maya Past in Constructing the Revolutionary 'Authenticity' of the Zapatista Movement

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Emancipatory Struggles in the Age of Identity Politics: The Precolonial Maya Past in Constructing the Revolutionary 'Authenticity' of the Zapatista Movement

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Abstract

Despite being, by their own description, 'the product of five hundred years of struggle,' some external supporters of the Zapatistas have attempted to search for historical precedent for the movement, composed mainly of indigenous Maya people from Chiapas, Mexico, in pre-conquest Maya societies. This article interrogates the credibility of such interpretations and considers the motivations and assumptions underlying attempts to identify continuities between the Precolumbian Maya past and the Zapatista movement. It is argued that, besides from advocating a prefigurative politics that represents a radical departure from the Marxist revolutionary ideology that characterised the twentieth century, part of the novelty and appeal of *neo-Zapatismo* is that it is said to be rooted in indigenous Maya practices and traditions. The fixation on identity politics and hostility towards alternative political or economic possibilities in recent decades had resulted in an overemphasis on the 'indigenous Maya-ness' of the movement, to make public discourse more amenable to the Zapatistas' wider goal of radical democratic transformation and struggle against neoliberal capitalism. The identification of links between the Precolumbian Maya and the Zapatistas form part of such attempts to 'prove' the indigenousness of the movement, which has become integral in constructing its revolutionary 'authenticity.'

Keywords

Zapatistas, indigeneity, Precolumbian Maya, direct democracy, identity politics

Zusammenfassung

Obwohl sie sich selbst als „das Ergebnis von fünfhundert Jahren Kampf" bezeichnen, versuchen einige externe Unterstützer*innen der Zapatistas – einer Bewegung, die sich hauptsächlich aus indigenen Maya aus Chiapas, Mexiko, zusammensetzt – historische Vorläufer dieser Bewegung in den Maya-Gesellschaften vor der spanischen Eroberung zu finden. Dieser Artikel hinterfragt die Glaubwürdigkeit solcher Interpretationen und untersucht die Motive und Prämissen, die den Versuchen zugrunde liegen, Kontinuitäten zwischen der präkolumbianischen Maya-Vergangenheit und der Zapatista-Bewegung zu identifizieren. Es wird argumentiert, dass neben der Befürwortung einer präfigurativen Politik, die eine radikale Abkehr von der marxistischen revolutionären Ideologie des 20. Jahrhunderts darstellt, der Reiz des Neuen und die Anziehungskraft des Neo-Zapatismus zum Teil darin besteht, dass er angeblich in den indigenen Maya-Praktiken und -Traditionen verwurzelt ist. Die Fixierung auf Identitätspolitik und die Feindseligkeit gegenüber alternativen politischen oder wirtschaftlichen Möglichkeiten in den letzten Jahrzehnten haben zu einer Überbetonung der „indigenen Maya-Identität" der Bewegung geführt, um den öffentlichen Diskurs für das übergeordnete Ziel der Zapatist*innen, eine radikale demokratische Transformation und den Kampf gegen den neoliberalen Kapitalismus, empfänglicher zu machen. Die Identifizierung von Verbindungen zwischen den präkolumbianischen Maya und den Zapatist*innen ist Teil solcher Versuche, die Indigenität der Bewegung „zu beweisen", die für die Konstruktion ihrer revolutionären „Authentizität" von zentraler Bedeutung geworden ist.

Schlagwörter

Zapatistas, Indigenität, präkolumbiaische Maya, direkte Demokratie, Identitätspolitik

Introduction

Since their uprising against the Mexican government on 1st January 1994 first propelled them to global attention, there has arguably been no political movement in recent decades rivalling the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN; henceforth Zapatistas) in their significance to the international Left. Composed mainly of indigenous Maya people from the state of Chiapas, the Zapatistas' initial insurrection, lasting 12 days until a ceasefire was brokered, was in protest against the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement in Mexico, which would have resulted in the privatisation of communal lands and the dispossession of indigenous populations (Subcomandante Marcos 1994a). In the years that followed, the Zapatistas established *de facto* autonomous territories in Chiapas (Fig. 1), within which communities practice egalitarian, bottom-up forms of decision-making that rely on discussion and consensus, and engage in mutual aid and collective work (Baschet 2022). Having emerged on the global political scene just as Marxist doctrine was becoming increasingly delegitimised following the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the Zapatistas revolutionised the idea of revolution itself, abandoning the notion of seizing control of the state and focussing instead on the creation of a system of autonomous, stateless self-governance. The Zapatistas' autonomous municipalities in Chiapas are thought of by many on the Left as one of the few real 'utopias' to exist in the world today, and the movement is argued to have inspired the directly democratic and prefigurative practices that have come to characterise many twenty-first century revolutionary movements (Graeber 2002, 2009; Dupuis-Déri 2019; Baschet 2022).

Fig. 1. Map of southeastern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize, with the state of Chiapas highlighted in grey. Map by the author, based on Esri, TomTom, Garmin, GEBCO, National Geographic, NOAA, and the GIS User Community, Esri, GEBCO, Garmin, NaturalVue.

The relative uniqueness of the Zapatistas' political philosophy – *neo-Zapatismo* – at the time of the movement's emergence has sparked much debate among scholars, journalists, and supporters worldwide on its origins and development. It is generally agreed that *neo-Zapatismo* represents a mixture of indigenous Maya beliefs and practices, Marxism-Leninism, and Catholic liberation theology (Paz 1994; Le Bot and Subcomandante Marcos 1997; Mignolo 2002). As Subcomandante Marcos (1997: 149–151), former spokesperson of the Zapatistas, himself stated, *neo-Zapatismo* emerged as a result of the 'cultural shock' experienced by *mestizo* urban guerillas when they moved to Chiapas in the 1980s. Sympathetic to Marxism-Leninism and hoping to launch a proletarian movement in Chiapas, the guerillas soon realised their ideology was incompatible with the political realities of local Maya communities. *Neo-Zapatismo* was the product of a prolonged confrontation and dialogue between 'western' revolutionary discourse and indigenous Maya political traditions (Mignolo 2002). There is thus a perception that the novelty and radicality of *neo-Zapatismo* derives from its 'indigenous' element. In the decades since the Zapatistas' initial uprising, there have been numerous attempts to identify the indigenous Maya beliefs and practices giving rise to *neo-Zapatismo*, with these beliefs and practices often described by the Zapatistas themselves as having 'ancient' roots (e.g. Mentinis 2006; Fitzwater 2019).

The Zapatistas' own understandings of time and history do not follow a linear and chronological vision (Mignolo 2002; Horvat 2019: 132–140), therefore they are not necessarily referencing the Precolumbian past, which the term 'ancient' conventionally denotes in Mesoamerican culture-history, when they say their practices are grounded in 'ancient' Maya traditions. There have nevertheless been attempts by external observers to identify historical precedents for *neo-Zapatismo* in the beliefs, practices, and symbolism of pre-conquest Maya societies. Given that, insofar as the Zapatistas themselves have ever explicitly referenced specific periods of history as shaping the movement, it has always been in relation to the centuries following European colonisation, such speculations of continuity from the Precolumbian past deserve further scrutiny. This article will focus specifically on interrogating such interpretations made by archaeologists and anthropologists. It is argued that, while some of these interpretations are extremely compelling, and regardless of whether these are true to the Zapatistas' own engagement with the past, such assertions of continuity with the Precolumbian Maya past often rest on the unconscious assumption that pre-conquest societies represent a more 'authentic' form of indigeneity, which has become integral in proving the 'authenticity' of the Zapatista movement. The article concludes with a broader consideration of limitations faced by revolutionary struggles in the age of identity politics.

Cultural Continuity between the Precolumbian Maya and the Zapatistas?

The most explicit scholarly attempt to understand the Zapatista movement through the lens of Precolumbian Maya societies comes from Gary Gossen (1996). In an article in *American Anthropologist*, Gossen identifies three central ideas within Maya epistemology, which he argues have been in existence since the Precolumbian period and can explain the structure and practices adopted by the Zapatista movement. Firstly, Gossen argues that Maya epistemology is concerned with the opaque and incomplete nature of human access to reality, and the ways in which perceived reality is always affected by external, uncontrollable forces, above all that of time. History is thus a programmed, divinely ordained process, to be revealed and understood with the help of leaders with less opaque vision, but for which no leader would wish to assume sole or principal responsibility. Gossen attributes the Zapatistas' collective, diffused structure for leadership to this. Secondly, Gossen argues that the idea of the co-essence is fundamental to Maya understandings of personhood, wherein the individual self is always linked to extrasomatic forces beyond one's direct control. This encourages individuals to always act in a way that accounts for their wider community, as to only act in one's own self-interest would in fact be detrimental to one's destiny. This, too, Gossen argues, explains the acephalous structure of the Zapatista movement, which places limitations on opportunities for self-aggrandisement and self-gain. Finally, Gossen argues that, throughout Mesoamerican history, political legitimacy has always derived from the use of foreign symbolic and ideological forms. The choice of Subcomandante Marcos, a middle-class, *mestizo*, urban intellectual, as spokesperson for the Zapatistas is imbued with meaning: because he is not himself indigenous Maya, Marcos' power derives from the fact he embodies the external, uncontrollable forces that dictate Maya destiny.

Arguably none of the Maya beliefs that Gossen has identified, however, are distinctly 'Maya.' For example, most people, Maya or not, would acknowledge that it is not possible to have a complete understanding of the world around them (even if the dominant institutions they live under may claim to); many of our own philosophical frameworks similarly see history as somewhat predetermined by forces outside of our control; and ‘stranger-kings’ seem to be the norm, rather than the anomaly, in a remarkable number of societies across space and time (Sahlins 2008). This is not to question whether the Maya beliefs identified by Gossen were ‘real’ to the Precolumbian Maya, but it highlights how Gossen’s argument, that the Zapatistas adopted specific structures and practices because of a unique, millennia-long ‘Maya’ tradition of understanding and experiencing reality, betrays a patronising attitude. The Zapatistas made a deliberate, political decision to organise in particular ways, taking into consideration their concerns and goals as they arise in relation to contemporary social, political, and economic developments, and through sustained dialogue with each other and the rest of the world. It is not because, as a movement composed mainly of indigenous Maya people, the Zapatistas have inherited from the Precolumbian Maya a specific way of interpreting reality, which they carry as ‘cognitive baggage’ (Gossen 1996: 534) that dictates their actions and behaviour (see also Forbis 2016: 374 for a description of an account published by two anthropologists, which invokes the *Popol Vuh* to describe a meeting with the Zapatistas).

Furthermore, the beliefs identified by Gossen derive from theories of statecraft and narratives about kingship in pre-conquest Maya societies; his argument relies partly on interpretations of iconography and inscriptions from the Classic period in the Maya area (c. AD 250–900/1000), which was defined by the prevalence of divine kingship and dynastic rule. Counterintuitively, Gossen appears to be seeking to explain the Zapatistas’ principles of egalitarianism and autonomy by drawing upon the literary and artistic traditions used to justify and uphold autocratic rule. Indeed, if *neo-Zapatismo* really was inspired by any aspect of the Precolumbian Maya past, it would most likely be the disintegration of Classic Maya polities and the subsequent Postclassic period (c. AD 900/1000–1519/1697). While there are a range of interpretations concerning the transition between the Classic and Postclassic periods – conventionally referred to as the Maya ‘collapse’ – scholars generally agree that the most fundamental change that occurred was the dissolution of the institution of divine kingship (Kratimenos 2025: 272). A plausible interpretation of the reasons behind the Classic-Postclassic transition is that subject populations in the Classic period, dissatisfied with the inability of divine kings to respond adequately to environmental and socio-political issues, abandoned the domains of their rulers and established new communities elsewhere, which in turn resulted in the disintegration of divine kingship, the rise of a new mercantile elite, and the emergence of ruling councils and assemblies in the Postclassic (Aimers 2007; Sabloff 2007). One could argue that, not unlike the Zapatistas, populations living in the Maya area during the Classic-Postclassic transition perhaps conceptualised political resistance as inherent in the reinvention of ways of living in and structuring society, rather than manifesting in direct confrontation and uprisings (Fitzwater 2019: 11). It is also conceivable that the councils and assemblies of the Postclassic period, attested to by both ethnohistoric and archaeological evidence, adopted processes of collective deliberation and consensus decision-making similar to that documented within Zapatista communities in Chiapas.

The Postclassic period has historically not received much attention within Maya scholarship, precisely because it does not feature evidence of kingship or monarchy, often regarded as the key markers of ‘civilisation,’ and has therefore traditionally been deemed the insignificant period following ‘collapse’ (Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 376–378; Wong 2023; Kratimenos 2025). With the growing challenge within archaeology against teleological narratives that frame states and empires as the pinnacle of ‘progress,’ however, the ‘collapse’ is increasingly being reframed as a process of political decentralisation. The Postclassic has also emerged as a crucial period of study, featuring societies marked by relative egalitarianism and autonomy, which were flourishing at the time of the Spanish conquest. David Graeber has noted the parallels between these aspects of Precolumbian Maya history and the Zapatista movement. In *There Never Was A West* (2007: 361–368), Graeber states that the Zapatistas claim their systems of consensus decision-making to be a more radical form of ‘the way that Maya-speaking communities have governed themselves for thousands of years,’ arguing that it seems ‘rather unlikely’ Maya communities had not already adopted some kind of consensus system during the Precolumbian periods. He also describes how a Zapatista drew parallels between their revolution against the Mexican government and the overthrow of Classic Maya divine kings. Subsequently, in *The Dawn of Everything* (2021: 376), with David Wengrow, they argue that the Zapatista movement could be said to represent a continuation, albeit in different form, of an ‘anti-authoritarian streak’ and ‘spirit of rebellion’ among the Maya, which has been evident since the disintegration of the Classic Maya political system, persisting through Maya uprisings against Spanish colonisers between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and the Caste War of Yucatán in the nineteenth century.

In these publications, the link between the Precolumbian Maya and the Zapatistas is proposed speculatively, forming part of a much wider argument, rather than any sort of serious interpretation of the movement in itself. The suggestion that the Zapatistas drew inspiration from the strategies of resistance and political organisation employed by the Precolumbian Maya is nevertheless an extremely compelling and attractive one. The issue with this interpretation, however, as with all other attempts to identify continuities between the Precolumbian Maya and the Zapatistas, is that insofar as the Zapatistas themselves have ever directly referenced the past as a source of inspiration for their struggle, it has always only been in relation to the history of resistance against domination and oppression that emerged following European colonisation (EZLN 1994). Certainly, just because there is no official record of the Zapatistas ever explicitly referring to Precolumbian history does not mean that they do not engage with it. As Horvat (2019: 132–140) argues, the Zapatistas deliberately resist capitalist presentism by adopting a *kairological* understanding of time, where past, present, and future struggles are one and the same, and the potentials of the past can be fulfilled by shaping the present, which can in turn create the conditions of the future. History is not understood by the Zapatistas as a linear and chronological succession of events – the movement may well be engaging with what is commonly referred to as the Precolumbian past in their own ways. But the more pertinent question is why, given the deliberate decision by the Zapatistas to not make any public statements that address Precolumbian Maya history, external observers would even think to draw links between pre-conquest Maya societies, as constructed within 'western' historiography, and the movement to begin with. Where does the appeal to such a narrative derive from, and what sorts of pitfalls may it introduce to discourse surrounding the movement?

Indigenous Identity in the Construction of Revolutionary 'Authenticity'

Regardless of whether it concerns the Classic Maya 'civilisational heyday' or political decentralisation in the Postclassic, it is worth questioning the extent to which the Zapatistas themselves would really engage with scholarly insights and debates on Precolumbian Maya history. After all, much of what is known about the Precolumbian periods in Mexico has been the combined product of antiquarian activities carried out by European colonisers, government-funded research during the *Porfiriato*[1], and attempts by the state to mobilise Precolumbian heritage for nation-building following the Mexican Revolution. In other words, knowledge of the Precolumbian past has, in large part, resulted from activities carried out by political actors that the movement is fighting against. Indeed, the very idea that Precolumbian history is especially deserving of study, at the expense of the colonial period, emerged following the Revolution, as part of the effort by the Mexican state to promote a cult of *mestizaje*. National consolidation in post-revolutionary Mexico centred on fostering a sense of unity and citizenship on the basis of *mestizo* identity, 'forged' from 'the races of iron and bronze' (Gamio 1916) and transcending all other 'races' due to its combined European, indigenous American, and African ancestry (Vasconcelos 1925). The discourse of *mestizaje* required the hypervisibility of the indigenous – but as part of a teleological narrative, which frames *mestizaje* as historical destiny, and the mainstream into which indigenous cultures, though romanticised and idealised, had to be assimilated. Indigeneity was valorised as representing the ancestral foundation to the Mexican nation, but it also symbolised the incompletion of national consolidation and absence of modernity, and therefore something to be relegated firmly to the past (Knight 1990; Hyland 1992: 98–99; Nash 2001: 66l; Saldaña-Portillo 2019: 36). Precolumbian history and heritage were crucial to this program of *indigenismo*, with the art and architecture of many Precolumbian cultures, including the Maya, facilitating the glorification of the indigenous past, and becoming national symbols that were treated as common patrimony of all Mexicans (Bonfil Batalla 1996: 128; Jung 2008: 83–97). Far from being an assertion of indigenous identity, research into and celebration of the Precolumbian past in Mexico for the past century has gone hand in hand with continued contempt for the indigenous present, where contemporary indigenous communities are viewed as the degenerate remains of great civilisations shattered (Bonfil Batalla 1996).

Indeed, one only has to consider the resistance of the Zapatistas in recent years to the *Tren Maya* project, to recognise the reasons behind the movement's reluctance to engage with the Precolumbian Maya past. The *Tren Maya*, proposed in 2018 by the Mexican administration and coming into operation at the end of 2023, is an intercity railway connecting major cities and tourist spots across the Yucatán Peninsula; the aim of the project was to promote

1 The dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911).

tourism to historically poor and marginalised regions, such as Chiapas (Camargo and Vázquez-Maguirre 2021: 379). As its name suggests, the main touristic appeal of the *Tren Maya* derives from the Maya archaeological sites along its route. The Zapatistas have vehemently opposed this project, largely on the grounds of the large-scale ecological destruction and disruption to local populations that the construction of the *Tren Maya* and subsequent increase in tourism will bring. The Zapatistas have also pointed out, however, that the *Tren Maya* feeds into a longstanding perception of contemporary indigenous people as 'museum pieces,' where indigenous communities living in the areas along the *Tren Maya* become incorporated into a wider landscape of ruins, to fulfil tourist fantasies about the 'mysterious' and 'timeless' Maya (Pyburn 1998; Hackbarth and Mooers 2019; Munro 2021). This remark reflects a critical awareness among the Zapatistas of how the mobilisation of Precolumbian Maya history has historically been implicated in attempts to erode the political and cultural autonomy of living indigenous Maya communities, with infrastructure projects mobilising heritage in the interests of 'capitalism qua development' (Wainwright 2008) representing the latest iteration of this.

More importantly, the Zapatistas' comments about the *Tren Maya* also highlight an essentialist misunderstanding that underlies some interpretations of cultural continuity: the assumption that contemporary indigenous Maya people necessarily feel any connection to the Precolumbian Maya to begin with. Different Maya groups across Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala differ in the extent to which they feel a link to the precolonial Maya past, with these differences often dependent on specific local circumstances and national contexts, and there are certainly Maya communities, most notably in Guatemala, who identify strongly with the Precolumbian Maya (Gabbert 2001; Normark 2004). But the notion of cultural continuity has generally been overemphasised for the Maya within both academic and popular discourse (Hervik 1992, 1998), where it is often assumed that the precolonial past serves as a shared, underlying 'base' uniting different indigenous Maya groups today (Vogt 1976; Tedlock 1982; Freidel et al. 1993; Fischer 1999: 474; Montejo 2005). While Graeber and Wengrow (Graeber 2007: 364; Graeber and Wengrow 2021: 376–378) are careful to emphasise the mediating influence of the five hundred years since the end of the Precolumbian period in shaping the Zapatista movement, Gossen's (1996) argument perpetuates a misconception that the Precolumbian past represents an 'authentic' form of indigeneity that can serve as an empowering strategy of decolonisation. Like most parts of the colonised world, indigenous Maya did not self-identify as 'indigenous' or 'Maya' at the time of the Spanish conquest. There is no unspecified, fundamental quality of being 'Maya' that transcends historical circumstances (Castañeda 1996: 13; Fischer 2001: 243–246; Restall 2004). Similarly, indigeneity, often mistakenly thought of as representing 'a longue durée of cultural continuity' (Préaud 2015: 13–14), is also not a fundamental, unadulterated attribute of specific groups, but a particular status and consciousness that is constructed, maintained, and negotiated in the context of ongoing colonialism. To conflate indigeneity with the pre-colonial is a perpetuation of coloniality through denying coevalness to an exotic 'other' (Fabian 1983).

Even disregarding whether and how the precolonial past has factored into the Zapatistas' understandings of 'indigenous Maya-ness,' there is the broader issue of the Zapatistas' relationship to indigeneity itself. There is no doubt that the Zapatista movement would not exist, as it does today, without its indigenous Maya base. The EZLN began as a branch of the *Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Forces, FLN), an armed group that attempted but failed to overthrow the government and establish socialism in Mexico throughout the 1970s. It was only once the movement began to integrate with indigenous communities in the 1980s that the EZLN achieved the national and global impact it did post-1994 (Le Bot and Subcomandante Marcos 1997; Cedillo 2012). Indigenous Maya practices, beliefs, and customs form a crucial part of everyday life in Zapatista communities (Comandanta Esther 2001, as cited in Pacheco Ladrón de Guevara 2019; Forbis 2016: 375–376), and indigenous autonomy has consistently been a demand of the Zapatistas. Many Zapatistas, especially indigenous Maya elders who compose the General Command, assert that they are an indigenous movement (Correa and Morales 1996: 4, as cited in Pacheco Ladrón de Guevara 2019). However, I would raise the further question of what the Zapatistas mean in self-describing as an 'indigenous' movement, and whether they truly view the 'indigenous' element as the defining feature of their struggle. Forbis (2016), drawing on long-term community work and ethnographic research conducted among the Zapatistas, has argued that the movement understands indigeneity as a form of political subjectivity, rather than linked to ideas of race, culture, language, and origin (Forbis 2016: 371). This aligns with the Zapatistas' insistence that their struggle cannot be reduced to an ethnic and local movement for indigenous rights, but a broader, transnational one opposing neoliberal reform and advocating the reinvention of democracy (Saldaña-Portillo 2019: 51). The Zapatistas are an indigenous movement but they are not an 'indigenous' movement in the conventional, essentialist sense of the word.

I would further argue that the Zapatistas and their supporters have seized upon this ambiguity over whether the Zapatistas are ‘really’ an indigenous movement, to advance their goals of radical democratic transformation and revolutionary politics. Having emerged amidst the so-called ‘postmodern’ cultural mood of the early 1990s, which witnessed the dismissal of class-based analysis and the consolidation of identity politics, indigenous identity has become the condition allowing the Zapatistas to participate in global political dialogue (Jung 2003; Graeber 2004: 103–105, 2007). *Neo-Zapatismo*’s enormous global appeal can be attributed partly to the fact that it is described as being rooted in ‘indigenous Maya’ tradition – while many supporters around the world perceive *neo-Zapatismo* as a radical departure from ‘western’ revolutionary ideologies on the basis of its actual content, part of the novelty of the Zapatistas also stems from an exoticisation of the movement. The Zapatistas position themselves as an indigenous movement (ambiguously defined) not just because they are objectively a movement composed predominantly of indigenous Maya people, but because foregrounding this aspect of the movement is necessary within a global context concerned only with identity politics and hostile to open discussion concerning alternative economic or political possibilities (Graeber 2009; see also Forbis 2016: 376, which details how a former EZLN insurgent wore *traje* to a meeting with an NGO in order to look ‘real’). In trying to further a vision of political liberation that is not fixated on issues of ‘identity,’ the Zapatistas have paradoxically had to emphasise their indigeneity. The ‘invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) linking the Precolumbian Maya to the Zapatistas perhaps constitutes an attempt by external observers, sympathetic to the movement, to ‘prove’ the indigenousness of the Zapatistas, which has itself become integral to constructing a sense of revolutionary ‘authenticity’ and garnering support for the movement.

Conclusion

I have argued that the Zapatista movement is, at its core, an emancipatory struggle against the state and against global capital. While the Zapatistas would not exist without its indigenous Maya majority, any emphasis that the Zapatistas themselves place on the fact that they are an indigenous movement is arguably rooted in an understanding of indigeneity as a specific form of political subjectivity, which transcends culture, language, ethnicity, or originarity. Nevertheless, the public perception of the Zapatistas as an ‘indigenous’ movement has been crucial in allowing them to appeal for transnational solidarity, in a world where discourse surrounding ‘identity’ is, in a sense, the only real political discourse that is acknowledged.

The identification of parallels or continuities between the Precolumbian Maya past and the Zapatistas constitute attempts to ‘authenticate’ the ‘indigenousness’ of the Zapatistas. The notion that Precolumbian indigenous cultures represent a ‘purer’ form of indigeneity is a flawed but widespread misconception, one that accords further credibility to the ‘indigenousness’ of the Zapatistas, and by extension their political struggle, in the public sphere. But as the Zapatistas’ own reluctance to engage with Precolumbian history demonstrates, such comparisons run the risk of perpetuating a conflation between the indigenous and the pre-colonial and pre-modern. The past is not always affirming to identities in the present, and the rhetoric of ‘identity’ is not even necessarily something the Zapatistas want to engage with in the first place. These are things to bear in mind as archaeology and other historical disciplines increasingly emphasise the study of societies traditionally neglected in ‘civilisational narratives,’ to construct an alternative history rich in structures and practices promoting egalitarianism, autonomy, and collectivity, which may result in further attempts to construct or overemphasise historical precedents from the ‘deep past’ for revolutionary movements in the present.

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Theme Issue

West Asia in the Center

Edited by Sebastian Hageneuer, Aris Politopoulous, Bärbel Morstadt and Aydin Abar

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Can We Put West Asia in the Center? An Introduction

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Why this Question Matters

It has almost been ten years since the publication of the article *Against Reactionary Populism* by Alfredo González-Ruibal, Pablo Alonso González, and Felipe Criado-Boado (2018), but the text has not lost its relevance. With the agenda of Project 2025, the Trump administration has already begun to implement authoritarian, fascistoid ideas centered around Christianity and whiteness into the social and political structures of the United States. In Italy, Poland, and Hungary, populist, right-wing and authoritarian forces are in charge, in France and parts of Germany they are knocking on the gates of power, while an authoritarian quasi-fascist regime in the Russian Federation is waging war on their western borders. All perceive themselves under threat from inside, from the LGBTQ+ communities, migrants and refugees, and those with 'wrong' beliefs (including disbelievers). In addition, voices that question the states' colonial pasts and presents are also under attack (McGuire and González-Ruibal 2025; Niklasson 2023). At the global level, there are a number of geo-political confrontations emerging, and the conflicts related to the distribution of natural resources and energy sources, as well as the struggle for symbolic and political interpretative authority, are just beginning.

In light of the numerous current crises and wars, one may question whether it would even be useful to discuss the history of archaeology, particularly that of the colonial past and present of West Asia. As editors of this theme issue, we believe it is, since it continues to have a significant effect on the contemporary world. The macro-region of West Asia remains at the center of global and regional politics, which can be traced to historical developments that occurred at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Our conviction is that a greater understanding and critique of the history of our discipline and the inherent colonial practices will foster a more comprehensive understanding of the current state of the massive conflicts shaping regional politics on West Asia.

To begin, we would like to discuss the concept of decolonisation. It is largely characterised in Frantz Fanon's 1961 publication, *Les damnés de la terre*, which frames decolonisation not merely as political independence but as a fundamental restructuring of social, economic, and epistemic systems imposed by colonial rule. In the words of the Kenyan writer and cultural scientist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the publication gave the people of the African continent a language to deal with the monstrosities of colonialism, to resist the atrocities of past and present, and to struggle for a different future. We, the editors of this collection of essays, in turn, have taken up the title of one of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's central analytical texts, entitled *Decolonising the Mind*, in which he traces the role of the dominance of European language in the literature of the African continent.

The term 'decolonisation' has been used in so many different ways in recent years that in 2012 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang felt compelled to publish the article *Decolonisation is Not a Metaphor*. They argue that decolonisation is a form of rebellion, it is an explicitly political act based on a historical analysis of colonialism using the same critical frameworks applied to white supremacy and racism. In order to position ourselves, we need to understand how our research questions and approaches are intertwined with geo- and socio-political discourses. Additionally, it allows us to draw conclusions from these analyses about how to break inequalities, injustices, and inconsistencies, and, hopefully, to leave them behind. Decolonial arguments should not fall prey to simplistic schemes of 'good' vs. 'evil' in this particular context. In his short essay from 2020, Thomas L. Gertzen outlines such points with regard to Egyptology; he emphasises the complexity of disciplinary histories and the discourses and processes that take place over time (Gertzen 2020: 192).

As a first step, we need to address the issue of whether decolonisation can happen from outside or needs to take place from the position of those who are experiencing and suffering from the effects of colonialism. Hence, it is necessary to examine how colonial systems and structures are ingrained in institutions, policies, and everyday practices. We can only begin to dismantle inequalities by addressing such internalised structures. With reference to Fanon, Tuck and Yang describe decolonisation as the outcome of reflection on and resistance to colonial structures and practices. As these authors note, it is imperative that we do not allow decolonisation to degenerate into a metaphor under which 'whiteness' returns to dominate, as well as utilise tropes that they describe, following Janet Lee Mawhinney, as "moves to innocence" to secure one's own future (Tuck and Yang 2012: 3). In this light, it may be justified to question whether decolonisation can come from the Global North.

Where We Come From

For us, the project grew out of a sense of unease that crept in when we thought about certain discursive fields associated with ancient West Asian cultural studies, such as archaeology, philology, and history. The publication emerged from the workshop "West Asia in the Centre: decolonising orientalist narratives of the past and present," which we jointly organised at ICAANE 13 in Copenhagen in May 2023. We see this workshop as a first step in a longer process, which we hope to initiate and partake in.

The unease is also caused by the inequalities and power imbalances remaining between researchers based in the Global North and those from the Global South. ICAANE itself is a good example of this. In 1998, ICAANE was founded by researchers predominantly from Europe. A foreword in the first volume of its proceedings by Paolo Matthiae describes the beginning of archaeology in West Asia in December 1842, when Paul-Émile Botta began excavations in Khorsabad, without referring to the questionable methods employed, which resemble those used in the extraction of mineral resources rather than that of scientific research. Matthiae's narrative portrays the success story of researchers from the Global North working in West Asian countries.

Likewise, it seems odd that ICAANE, a conference that describes itself as 'international' and focuses on a particular region of the world, has only been held in Europe so far. It is noteworthy that this has taken place despite the many voices that have called for events to be held outside of Europe and in a West Asian country in particular. This conference is also a political space where numerous actors meet, often outside of the lecture halls, in order to connect, socialise, and plan joint projects. This raises the question of who has access to the ICAANE, who is able to attend in person, and who can establish and maintain contact with the relevant key players and decision-makers.

It seems to us a case of 'the rich who get richer,' where if you have the funds and contacts, you can maintain and foster them.

The fact that archaeology and politics cannot be separated from each other is also shown by a very recent circumstance: until a few days before the ICAANE 13, archaeologists from the Ariel University, which is located in illegally occupied territory (considered so by many states, the UN, and under international law on the basis of a ruling by the International Court of Justice), wanted to give a presentation at ICAANE on their excavations at the site of 'Aujah el Foqah in those very areas. It was after protests from some informed colleagues and the Palestinian Antiquities Authority that the lecturers were disinvited.

We are aware that we as editors and authors of this volume are also part of the Global North and recognise our own responsibilities. Our original intention was to organise a digital event outside of ICAANE where colleagues from West Asia could participate and discuss this topic. In spite of our best efforts, and due to a combination of lack of funding, communication issues, and participation barriers, we chose to hold the workshop at ICAANE, despite knowing that many colleagues from Western Asia would be thereby excluded. This is an issue that has preoccupied us greatly and whose full implications we are still grappling with. It was decided to carry on in the hope that the outcomes of the workshop would be made public.

In light of the fact that it will be impossible to resolve the past and present political entanglements of the topic we are discussing, it might be better to focus on the journey rather than on the destination. There will be no formal launch of the series, but instead we invite those who are passionate about their subject and appreciate its complexity to participate in the dialogue. Our thanks go to the editors of *Forum Kritische Archäologie* for agreeing to publish the articles that emerged from the workshop at ICAANE 13 in the form of a theme issue and as an open access publication.

Content of the Theme Issue

Since its beginnings in the 19th century, European archaeological and philological research on ancient West Asia has been inescapably linked to the politics of the great powers in the region at that time, and so the history of archaeology in West Asia is intertwined with European imperialism. Its gaze was always one of categorisation, assessment and evaluation, revealing a blatant asymmetry in the balance of power regarding the practice itself: the activities of geographers who surveyed, classified and drew the land, anthropologists who surveyed, classified and drew the people, archaeologists who did the same with the monuments deemed relevant, colonial officials and military officers who monitored compliance with laws and punished their violation, often dressed up under a '*mission civilisatrice*' and closely linked to notions of white superiority.

Following the end of the First World War and the implementation of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, European archaeologists were able to conduct large-scale excavations in the areas formerly belonging to the Ottoman Empire, more extensive than ever before (Bussemaker 2021: 9–11). This went hand-in-hand with major infrastructure measures, carried out by European architects and engineers on the foil of European urbanism and use of space; oil pipelines, road and rail networks were also built in order to ensure that information, personnel, goods, and weapons could be transported efficiently and quickly between different places.

Against this disciplinary backdrop, we again raise the question of whether scholars from the Global North can and should decolonise the concept of decolonisation, and if so, how. In an article for FKA, Maresi Starzmann reached a positive conclusion: According to her, two steps contribute to the deconstruction of the reference frameworks of epistemological categories: we must question discursive categories, as well as trace the common threads in discursive networks and interconnections that connect the past to the present and, in her words, are remnants of colonial projects in the present (Starzmann 2018). The following articles have been gathered in this spirit:

Rune Rattenborg critically examines the historical geography and discourses associated with the term 'Mesopotamia'. The author argues that the current use of the word, which describes the land between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and is often criticised from a postcolonial perspective as an appropriation of Iraqi heritage, is in fact an unintended byproduct of British military nomenclature during World War I. Despite its older Greek and Roman origins, the term acquired its modern, far-reaching meaning relatively late, primarily through archaeological and historical scholarship, which stressed its supposed neutrality on both an ethnic and political level. As Rattenborg points out, this acceptance and continued use of 'Mesopotamia' has unintended negative consequences, such as obscuring the origin of illegally traded antiquities. The article calls for a reassessment and a more transparent use of vocabulary in order to acknowledge the complicated history of cultural space in the Middle East.

Jessie DeGrado explores the origins and influences of the famous illustrations in Austen Henry Layard's 1849 bestseller *Nineveh and Its Remains*. The author argues that Layard's popular depictions of a winged bull being transported from Nimrud, which many incorrectly view as coincidental parallels to ancient Assyrian reliefs, were actively influenced by Assyrian compositional elements. The article explores in detail how these modern images were revised and adapted by Layard, particularly after he and Hormuzd Rassam later discovered ancient reliefs from Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh depicting similar transportation scenes. As a result, the text shows that this mutual influence impacted both the British public's conception of a timeless Orient as well as the modern understanding of Assyrian transport techniques.

Eric Jarrard examines a Neo-Assyrian relief slab from the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, known as the "Captive Being Flayed" (or "Wellesley eunuch"). Using Dan Hicks' concept of 'necrography,' which builds upon Achille Mbembé's concept of 'necropolitics,' the paper recontextualises looted museum objects as legacy objects of colonialism. It focuses on the provenance of the object, particularly its authenticity and the probable chain of transfer from the excavation site in Nineveh through American missionaries to the donor Gorham D. Abbott and then to the college. According to Jarrard, curators and academics are responsible for reconstructing this history in order to at least partly compense for the plunder of their forefathers, agents of colonial powers.

Luise Loges examines the portrayal of looting and illegal trade in archaeological artifacts from West Asia in the German media between 2003 and 2021, focusing on the emergence of what she terms a 'moral panic.' In her analysis, she demonstrates how media coverage, including the sensational linking of the illegal antiquities trade with terrorist financing by the 'Islamic State' between 2014 and 2015, led to an exaggerated public concern. In the context of 'moral panic theory,' Loges argues that such 'media exaggerations' led to the passage of stricter laws in Germany, as well as unsubstantiated statements about the value of the illegal market and the stigmatisation of legal dealers in antiquities. This work emphasises that the Eurocentric view neglects the voices of the local populations affected and results in antique dealers using the exaggerated figures in order to undermine any research on or regulation of the market. According to the study, the long-term effects of the moral panic were social rather than institutional, resulting in the reinforcement of Orientalist stereotypes.

Aydin Abar examines the complex interrelationships between archaeology, nationalism, and crypto-colonialism by investigating an Iranian example, whereby archaeology has been regarded as a political activity since its inception among scholars who deal with the history of ideas. As a result of relying on an idealised pre-Islamic, 'Aryan' past, archaeological knowledge has been instrumentalised to create national identities, thereby marginalising cultural plurality. The author describes Iran's paradoxical power relations through the concept of 'crypto-colonialism,' where formal independence is accompanied by de facto dependence on Western powers. Due to this dynamic, archaeological narratives were used to support state power strategies and are still used today to promote racist and homogenising notions of 'Iranianness.'

Bärbel Morstadt analyses the Phoenician merchant Épidemaïs and other figures, such as the Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes, in the comic series *Asterix the Gaul* in terms of their historical accuracy versus their stereotypical representations. The study argues that although the comics were intended for entertainment, they are often perceived as historically authentic, yet reflect deeply rooted colonialist and orientalist stereotypes of the time of their creation (20th century). It discusses how these stereotypes, such as that of the enterprising Phoenician merchant or the irrational, constantly warring West Asians, appeal to readers from the educated Western bourgeoisie and serve to reinforce their self-image. Morstadt concludes that the comics should be viewed as historical documents of the time of their creation rather than as representations of antiquity.

Sebastian Hageneuer examines the representation of West Asian history and archaeology in the video game *Civilization VI: Babylon Pack*. He argues that the game perpetuates colonial and Orientalist narratives from the 19th century that were established by early Western excavations, such as those conducted by Austen Henry Layard. He analyses in detail how the visual design, the character of Hammurabi, and game mechanics such as 'Colonialism' and 'Natural History' reproduce these ideological legacies. The text highlights that the global reach and immersive nature of video games transfer these stereotypes into players' historical consciousness, especially because many players lack critical prior knowledge. Finally, the analysis emphasizes the need for archaeologists and humanities scholars to become aware of these popular cultural representations in order to use them critically in education.

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Past Colonialisms: ‘Land Between Rivers’ and Archaeological Discourses of Empire

Rune Rattenborg

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Past Colonialisms: 'Land Between Rivers' and Archaeological Discourses of Empire

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Abstract

Vocabularies of space define the world. Yet, despite their apparent conceptual authority (Harley 1989), the lineages of cartographic entities are often blurred, accidental, and produced from etymologies only imperfectly understood by their users. Drawing on a recent study on past and present meanings of the term 'Mesopotamia' (Rattenborg 2018), this paper reviews the inadvertent, if now firmly embedded separation of past and present spaces of the state of Iraq in Western – and global – discourse. Though widely conceived of as a textbook example of colonialist discursive dispossession of a nation's heritage (Bahrani 1998), the argument advanced here is that 'Mesopotamia' – in the sense that we understand it today – is an unintended by-product of British military nomenclature defined during the First World War. Its widespread application as a cultural-historical shorthand, utilized with great enthusiasm by generations of archaeologists, epigraphers, and historians, came about comparatively late, fusing the trappings of an age-old signifier with the versatility of a physical space shaped by very modern events. As such, 'Mesopotamia' is itself a freak accident of history, the vestige of a haphazard etymology far removed from the simple biographies attributed to it by contemporary commentators. This rather ironic state of affairs is reviewed through a discussion of its continued reaffirmation and widespread use in spatial discourses of archaeological and historical scholarship, arts trade and antiquities trafficking, and in popular media worldwide.

Keywords

Mesopotamia, Orientalism, Antiquities Trade, Historical Geography, First World War

Zusammenfassung

Vokabulare des Raums definieren die Welt. Trotz ihrer offensichtlichen konzeptionellen Autorität (Harley 1989) sind die Abstammungslinien kartografischer Einheiten oft verschwommen, zufällig und beruhen auf Etymologien, die von ihren Benutzer*innen nur unzureichend verstanden werden. Aufbauend auf einer aktuellen Studie zu den vergangenen und gegenwärtigen Bedeutungen des Begriffs ‚Mesopotamien' (Rattenborg 2018) untersucht dieser Artikel die unbeabsichtigte, wenn auch mittlerweile fest verankerte Trennung vergangener und gegenwärtiger Räume des Staates Irak im westlichen – und globalen – Diskurs. Obwohl ‚Mesopotamien' weithin als Paradebeispiel für die kolonialistische diskursive Enteignung des nationalen Erbes gilt (Bahrani 1998), wird hier argumentiert, dass ‚Mesopotamien' – in unserem heutigen Verständnis – ein unbeabsichtigtes Nebenprodukt der im Ersten Weltkrieg definierten britischen Militärnomenklatur ist. Seine weitverbreitete Verwendung als kulturhistorische Abkürzung, die von Generationen von Archäolog*innen, Epigraphiker*innen und Historiker*innen mit großer Begeisterung genutzt wurde, erfolgte vergleichsweise spät und verband die Merkmale eines uralten Signifikanten mit der Vielseitigkeit eines von modernen Ereignissen geprägten physischen Raums. So ist ‚Mesopotamien' selbst ein Zufall der Geschichte, das Überbleibsel einer zufälligen Etymologie, weit entfernt von den einfachen Biografien, die ihm zeitgenössische Kommentator*innen zuschreiben. Dieser eher ironische Umstand wird anhand einer Diskussion seiner anhaltenden Bestätigung und weitverbreiteten Verwendung in räumlichen Diskursen der archäologischen und historischen Forschung, des Kunst- und Antiquitätenhandels sowie in den populären Medien weltweit untersucht.

Schlagwörter

Mesopotamien, Orientalismus, Antiquitätenhandel, Historische Geographie, Erster Weltkrieg

> "Perhaps the time has come that we […]
> dissociate ourselves from this imperial triumphal procession
> and look toward a redefinition of the land in between."
> Bahrani 1998: 172

Introduction

Critical reappraisals of the politics of archaeological research in West Asia have been a long time coming. Against the backdrop of a volatile geopolitical landscape, marred by social upheaval and war, disciplinary introspection over the last two decades has matured into an innovative and illuminating strand of scholarly debate, working to inform a more transparent, ethical, and activist attitude to the study of the past on behalf of the present (Meskell 1998; Pollock and Bernbeck 2004; Porter 2010; Bernbeck 2012; Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022). As a disciplinary domain thoroughly entangled with the geopolitical and cultural fault lines of several centuries of recent history, archaeology in West Asia must necessarily engage with the vestiges of a troubled past also today.

Histories of the Past, Histories of the Present

Inherent to such endeavors, however, is the deceptive ease with which one may apply in the dissection of past actions the morals informed by present insights. Such is particularly evident when tracing the circumstantial origins of conceptual artifacts that may, to later generations, seem anything but circumstantial, especially when inserted into a recent history so inherently complex, debated, and politically charged as that of West Asia (Said 1978). The study of history is bereft with simplifications, many of which serve us well in organizing and making sense of the past. Heuristics have histories of their own, however. A critical attitude to the lens applied is contingent upon an admission of concepts as dynamic entities, of epistemology as a history every bit as complex as the untangling of events of ages past. In West Asia, this is most expressly evident in cartographic discourse; the naming, ordering, and interpretation of space as a basis for scholarly inquiry in a region where space has always been heavily politicized (Keddie 1973; Capdepuy 2008a, 2008b).

The politics of the present much too often lead us to call upon the past not to peruse, illuminate, or inform current debates, but to affirm and sanctify positions to which this past is not a party. Such is relevant, no doubt, to the solving of contemporary problems, but also liable to mold history into shapes more amenable to our arguments than representative of their origins. In discussing past spatial taxonomies, I find it equally important, then, to critically evaluate how postcolonial readings may conjure the impression of collectively orchestrated strategies of past oppressors, devised to appropriate, remove, and rob the heritage of the oppressed. And in so doing argue that present politics is just as able to shape our reading of past histories as those histories are at shaping politics of the present.

Focusing on one specific entity, namely the word 'Mesopotamia',[1] and its present role as an emblem of past colonialist discourse and cultural appropriation (Bahrani 1998), I wish to trace how modern commentators, in reinforcing a static, unchanging notion of this term in archaeological and historical research and communications, are contributing to an etymological ossification that obscures the complex formative history of its meaning and use. And how, in so doing, they are coincidentally also shifting responsibility for its murkier qualities on to a Western imperial past, even when its continued use is surely not due to the dicta of 19th century strongmen.

My argument, in essence, is that current understandings of 'Mesopotamia' in their accentuation of postcolonial narratives of imperial oppression, works to conflate a rich and highly informative set of etymologies. From this position springs a tendency to ignore the manifold motivations for its use and an unintended disregard for the more concrete negative consequences of its continued application in scholarly literature. In the following, I revisit and discuss three semantic dimensions of 'Mesopotamia' and how their internal relationship has worked to muddle current understandings of the word. First is the historical region of Mesopotamia, a now largely forgotten designation for a part of the rolling plains east of the Syrian Euphrates common to Greek and Roman geographies from around the beginning of the Common Era and beyond. Second, the Mesopotamia that we all assume to know, the land between the rivers, the Mesopotamia of Western imperialism, and the predecessor of the modern state of Iraq. And third, the Mesopotamia of relatively recent and present research on the archaeology and history of West Asia, a space of the past defined by very modern events.

Lands Between Rivers

To set the scene, let me sum up some concluding remarks given in an article that I published years back, retracing the etymology and application of the name 'Mesopotamia' as a regional concept in Western scholarship (Rattenborg 2018). As it so often happens, the wider implications of conclusions reached in any isolated study will only crystallize over time. Accordingly, I should like to thank the editors of this special issue for the opportunity to review and expand upon this subject, in the hope that it will offer some small contribution to a more nuanced discussion of how the early history and archaeology of West Asia has been, and continues to be, marred by the iniquities of a history of imperialism, colonialism, and cultural appropriation.

The principal argument raised in said article was that 'Mesopotamia,' far from being the stable remnant of Greek or Roman geographies nowadays presented in specialist and general literature (Nissen and Oelsner 1996; Röllig 1997; Edzard et al. 2014), is a regional signifier with a long and shifting history of application. While seemingly convincing in its didactic simplicity, a straightforward reading of its constituent components will obscure, rather than clarify, its etymology. Derived from a Greek compound noun built from *mesos* ('middle, in between') and *potamos* ('river'), 'Mesopotamia' is usually translated as the 'land between the rivers', taken as a self-evident reference to the land between the Euphrates and the Tigris.

Such a reading is, however, not consistent with the contexts in which the term has historically appeared. Abiding by scholarly tradition, the term 'Mesopotamia' is first attested in the 1st century CE writings of Arrian, drawing on sources dated to the 4th century BCE campaigns of Alexander I of Macedon (Anabasis VII 7; for precursors in Akkadian, Aramaic and Persian sources, see Finkelstein 1962). Here, it signifies the lands along the left bank of the Euphrates, the rolling plains that extend across present-day eastern Syria towards the Assyrian heartland around the Tigris, and bordering Babylonia to the south. This is maintained in a wide variety of later European sources, including maps, encyclopedias, and travelers accounts, extending from the 7th to the 19th century CE (Rattenborg 2018: 151–153).

The gradual introduction of Arabic geographic nomenclature into Western cartographies saw a semantic alignment of 'Mesopotamia' with Arabic al-Jazīrah (الجزيرة) or 'island', the latter being the Arabic name commonly applied to the rolling plains between the Tigris and the Euphrates, extending from the Taurus in the north to Baghdad in the south, from around the 10th century CE onwards. This regional taxonomy, including 'Babylonia' as

1 Throughout this article, I refer to the term, or signifier, as 'Mesopotamia', and to the territory that it designates as Mesopotamia.

another term for the alluvial plain between Baghdad and Basra, Arabic al-‘Irāq (العراق), was incorporated also into general atlases, a source of geographical information that became extremely popular in Europe and the Americas during the 19th century. By the beginning of the 20th century, this understanding of ‘Mesopotamia’ was still so widely accepted that it was included in the 1911 version of the Encyclopedia Britannica (Hogg 1911).

The World of Empire

The grossly simplified version of this story is, of course, the one rehearsed in just about any standard textbook or introductory reader today, namely that ‘Mesopotamia’ refers to the lands between the Euphrates and the Tigris, all the way from the mountains of Anatolia to the shores of the Persian Gulf (for the most explicit examples, see Hrouda 1997: 7; Pollock 1999: 1; Matthews 2003: 5–6; Foster and Foster 2009: 6; Frahm 2013: 19). In this narrative, the continued usage of the term reflects merely the continued relevance and utility of an ordering of space coined by Greek and Roman authors, a lineage endowing it with the illustrious authority brought on by its endurance through more than two millennia of Western intellectual history.

There are, to be sure, many examples of such readings of ‘Mesopotamia’ appearing in the accounts of European travelers to West Asia already during the 17th and 18th centuries CE (Rattenborg 2018: 152–153), examples entirely compatible with present-day understandings of the word, if allowing for a rather vague definition of the physical space that it connotates. In this sense, ‘Mesopotamia’ is rarely used with any great consistency, nor is it typically firmly delineated. An early and very telling definition was penned by a typical representative of the British Empire, namely Major Francis Rawdon Chesney, commander of the British Euphrates Expedition of 1835–1837. In quoting a curious paragraph preceding his definition of ‘Mesopotamia’ as encompassing all the lands between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, I should like to draw attention to the emphasis on a strict reading of the word as a basis for defining the geographical area that it is intended to signify:

> “Contrary to the description given by some of the ancient geographers, as well as the strict meaning of the expressive term *Aram-naharaim*, Mesopotamia has been supposed to have its southern extremity at the Median Wall, instead of approaching the shores of the Persian Gulf.” (Chesney 1850: 103)

In making this observation, Chesney stressed the evident agreement between the semantics of a signifier and a cartographic reality. The resulting notion of ‘Mesopotamia’ as a much more extensive, and most importantly, modern, spatial entity, remained a stable, if occasional, element of British political and military parlance throughout the remainder of the 19th century CE, yet official nomenclature mostly continued to respect Ottoman administrative divisions in the region until 1914, referring to the area chiefly as ‘Turkish Arabia’ (Lorimer 1908: 759–761). It was only with the outbreak of the First World War, the landing of a British expeditionary force at Basra, and the eventual expansion of military operations to encompass virtually all the Tigris-Euphrates drainage, that ‘Mesopotamia’ was to become firmly and lastingly associated with the area that we think of today.

Following the signing of the armistice at Mudros in October 1918, the former Ottoman *vilayets* of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, now occupied by British troops continued to be referred to as ‘Mesopotamia’. This also was to be the name for a prospective mandate awarded to the United Kingdom by the League of Nations (Foreign Office 1921). Within a couple of years, however, it disappeared altogether from the world of contemporary politics, following changes in British colonial politics and the Iraqi revolt of 1920 (Wilson 1931: 22). The state that came to take its place, following the conclusion of the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1922, was named Iraq. The complex chain of events that drew up the borders of this new national territory, far from being merely a formal manifestation of the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, excellently illustrates a formative history that may be judged predictable when viewed through a critical post-colonialist lens, but which proves itself much too complex and muddled when examined in its immediate historical context (Yapp 1987: 331–336).

Entangled Etymologies

While hardly ignorant of the politics of their day, it is interesting to note that the writings of a host of rather esteemed authorities display altogether different attitudes to the location of 'Mesopotamia' than what is often assumed in retrospect. Such is evident from many general accounts of the ancient history of the region published in the years leading up to the beginning of the First World War. In *Das alte Westasien* (1900), published in English as *The History of Babylonia and Assyria*, Hugo Winckler (1863–1913), lecturer at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin, consistently used 'Mesopotamia' in reference to the plains west of Assyria and north of Babylonia (1907: 172). Leonard William King (1869–1919), Assistant Keeper of Egyptian and Near Eastern Antiquities at the British Museum, employed the same regional ordering in *A History of Sumer and Akkad* (King 1910: 7) and in *A History of Babylon* (King 1919: v & 1–13), even though the preface to the latter made it clear that he was also keenly aware of where exactly modern Mesopotamia was to be found (Rattenborg 2018: 156). Such curiosities are not restricted to the years prior to 1914, one might add. Bruno Meissner (1868–1947), author of *Babylonien und Assyrien* (1920: 1), one of the most acclaimed general histories of the cuneiform world published during the last century, conceived of Mesopotamia in the same way, as did his French contemporary, professor at the Institut Catholique de Paris Louis Joseph Delaporte (1874–1944), in his *La Mésopotamie* (1923: 11–12).

One is forgiven if sensing some degree of conceptual confusion at play during these years. Delaporte evidently employed 'Mesopotamia' in two different senses, one the rolling plains north of Baghdad, the other a general designation for the lands between the Tigris and the Euphrates. John Punnett Peters (1852–1921), director of the excavations at Nippur and a contributing author to Baedekers *Palestine and Syria*, apparently altered the geographical outline of Mesopotamia in order to reflect contemporary developments (compare Baedeker 1906: 391–392 to 1912: 413). What should be perfectly clear, however, is that 'Mesopotamia', in academic writings, at least, remained a term associated with other semantic qualities than what contemporary politics might suggest.

Instead, the rise of 'Mesopotamia' as a means of designating a past historical space commensurate with the geographical extent of much more recent political events seems to have come about during the interwar years. While the examples quoted above indicate a gradual transition from one conceptual meaning to another taking place already from the beginning of the 1920s, 'Mesopotamia' apparently remained something of a novelty to scholars for some time. In 1934, French archaeologist André Parrot published an article wherein he, following a review of the evident similarities of 3rd millennium BCE material culture horizons at Tall Hariri on the Middle Euphrates and archaeological sites throughout southern Iraq, labelled this cultural-historical entity a 'Mesopotamian' civilization. In choosing this label, he made some telling remarks on his reasons for doing so:

> "Raison de plus, pour ne pas définir ici la civilisation par des termes ethniques, mais pour la préciser seulement sous l'angle géographique." (Parrot 1934: 185)

The purely geographical character of 'Mesopotamia', as opposed to the 'Sumerian civilisation' of Henri Frankfort to which Parrot was alluding, was evidently considered a positive trait. It offered an ethnically neutral signifier for a material culture horizon that extended across the modern territories of Syria and Iraq. In other words, the 'Mesopotamia' of Greek geographers was fused with the geographical space marked out by British military might during the First World War, providing an extremely versatile vehicle for the historical study and spatial placement of the deep history of the region. The same notion of supposed objectivity is taken up in A. Leo Oppenheims seminal *Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (1964 [1955]). Here, 'Mesopotamia' becomes a vaguer, apolitical realm within which other, and more culturally or ethnically charged regional entities may be subsumed:

> "It is customary to designate the two principal local formulations through which Mesopotamian civilization speaks to us by the political terms Babylonia and Assyria." (Oppenheim 1964 [1955]: 37)

Collateral Colonialisms

It should not be necessary to further harp on the widespread acceptance in more recent scholarship of this notion of 'Mesopotamia' as a somehow neutral concept, applicable without much consequence to material culture horizons and past civilizations that naturally fail to recognize modern borders. As I have pointed out above, this alluring spatial objectivity is hardly new. What is new, however, is its proliferation, in scholarly literature and in the popular mind, which is on much clearer display in our post-colonial present than it ever was during the days of empire. Rather than being somehow imposed on scholarship, it has been actively accepted and advanced for its surmised neutrality, further compounded by the authority bestowed on it by old age. Yet, if anything, 'Mesopotamia' remained an elusive and entirely fuzzy regional concept throughout the 19th century CE, a concept whose agreement with our modern understanding of the term should be considered coincidental at best. Seeing 'Mesopotamia' simply as a colonial means of appropriating and thereby disowning historical space, is empirically flawed. The appeal of such a line of argument is not, so I would suggest, due to its mustering of historical facts, but rather its persuasive alignment with a timely, critical, and wholly necessary engagement with the dark history of colonialism.

In considering the more general consequences of such an attitude, the scholarly entertainment and tacit promotion of such concepts should not be viewed as somehow trivial or insignificant to contemporary society. The espousal of fuzzy historical spaces as a means to circumvent modern national boundaries holds unintended consequences. Next to its role as a convenient cultural-historical label, 'Mesopotamia' also serves other and more questionable purposes. In his studies of the global antiquities trade, Neil Brodie has pointed to the ease with which cultural historical labels serve to deflect and divert pressing questions as to the provenance of looted cultural heritage (Brodie 2009: 67–71; also Topçuoğlu and Vorderstrasse 2019). Objects that may be securely identified as stemming from archaeological deposits in the state of Iraq are presented as coming from Mesopotamia, an ethereal origin to which no legal instruments or contemporary moral sentiments apply. This widespread practice of obscuring archaeological provenance feeds on vocabularies that continue to be espoused by scholarship, and scholars who should be more aware of the broader consequences of their choice of words.

A preoccupation with Mesopotamia as the vestige of a distant imperialist discourse, rather than a working concept for archaeological and historical classification, elegantly sidesteps its more dubious qualities as a means by which scholars can comfortably ignore the more problematic aspects of their engagement with objects produced by looting, strife, and war. The conjuring of a past space in which to conduct one's business, unfettered by modern borders, is certainly of use not only to empire builders, but also to the devoted scholar, the passioned collector, or the eloquent museum guide. As countless popular retellings of the story about the land between the rivers as the cradle of civilization have demonstrated, this immediate didactic appeal is certainly not without merit. But it also points to a certain lack of creativity, especially when considering the openly problematic nature of the term in contemporary cross-cultural debate. While epistemological introspection may deliver compelling insights, the practical application of such findings often falls well short of their logical consequences.

Conclusion

In a review of how the borders of the modern state of Iraq came into being, Sara Pursley has convincingly called into question the habit of post-colonial critiques of presenting the modern commentator as a somehow static observer to the dynamics of ages past (Pursley 2015a, 2015b). In presenting 'Mesopotamia' as a relic of a racist, imperialist history somehow foreshadowing more recent events of war, unrest, and injustice in West Asia, the anti-colonialist argument is obviously strengthened by presenting the elements of a past, oppressive discourse as somehow still with us, impervious to change and impossible to remove. It is certainly not without irony that the admonishment of British imperialist discourse and its use of 'Mesopotamia' are often motivated by its continued use in a world which should, for all practical purposes, be released from any allegiance to these imperial forces. More broadly, my argument is not that we should ignore the problems generated by a troubled vocabulary but rather stop visiting such iniquities on our forebears. Archaeological discourse must, by necessity, not only recognize the occasionally troubled past of its vocabulary but also utilize this recognition for the benefit of a more informed and transparent dialogue of the present.

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A Load of Bull: Assyrian Inspiration for Layard's Colossus-Moving Scenes

Jessie DeGrado

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Abstract

Both volumes of Austen Henry Layard's *Nineveh and Its Remains* (1849a) include a frontispiece dramatizing the removal and transport of a winged bull from Nimrud. The illustrations inspired a series of sequels propagated in Layard's subsequent publications, popular news media, and cloth prints. These drawings have received significant attention because of their striking resemblance to reliefs found in Court VI of Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh (seventh century BCE). The similarities are generally assumed to be a coincidence. Based on an analysis of archival material, I will argue that Layard was inspired by Assyrian reliefs in crafting the illustrations. In fact, most illustrations showing the modern transit of colossi were produced *after* Layard and Hormuzd Rassam had excavated Court VI of the Southwest Palace at Nineveh, with its reliefs depicting the ancient transport of a winged bull. I show that many of the striking parallels between the ancient reliefs and modern images are manufactured by twin interpretive processes: (1) the reading of Layard's techniques back into Sennacherib's reliefs and (2) the active appropriation of Assyrian compositional elements into updated versions of Layard's frontispieces.

Keywords

Nimrud, Austen Henry Layard, Nineteenth-century Archaeology, Assyria, Ottoman Iraq

Zusammenfassung

Beide Bände von Austen Henry Layards *Nineveh and Its Remains* (1849a) enthalten ein Frontispiz, welches die Bergung und den Transport eines geflügelten Stieres aus Nimrud dramatisiert. Die Illustrationen inspirierten eine Reihe von Nachfolgedarstellungen, die in Layards späteren Publikationen, in populären Medien und auf Stoffdrucken verbreitet wurden. Diese Zeichnungen haben erhebliche Aufmerksamkeit erhalten, da sie eine auffällige Ähnlichkeit zu den Reliefs im Hof VI des Südwestpalastes Sanheribs in Ninive (7. Jahrhundert v. u. Z.) aufweisen. Die Ähnlichkeiten werden gemeinhin als Zufall angesehen. Auf Grundlage einer Analyse von Archivmaterial werde ich jedoch argumentieren, dass Layard bei der Gestaltung der Illustrationen von assyrischen Reliefs inspiriert wurde. Tatsächlich wurden die meisten Darstellungen des modernen Transports von Kolossen erst *nach* den Ausgrabungen Layards und Hormuzd Rassams im Hof VI des Südwestpalastes in Ninive angefertigt, wo Reliefs den antiken Transport eines geflügelten Stieres zeigen. Ich zeige, dass viele der auffälligen Parallelen zwischen den antiken Reliefs und den modernen Bildern durch zwei miteinander verflochtene Deutungsprozesse erzeugt wurden: (1) die rückwirkende Projektion von Layards Techniken in die Reliefs Sanheribs und (2) die aktive Aneignung assyrischer Kompositionselemente in überarbeitete Fassungen von Layards Frontispizen.

Schlagwörter

Nimrud, Austen Henry Layard, Archäologie des 19. Jahrhunderts, Assyrien, Ottomanischer Irak

In 1849, Austen Henry Layard published his best-selling *Nineveh and Its Remains*. Each volume in the two-volume set is accompanied by a frontispiece depicting Layard as he supervises the removal of a winged bull and lion from Nimrud and its transport to the Tigris River. The images inspired a series of sequels that were propagated in Layard's subsequent publications, popular news media, and cloth prints.[1] The follow-up images both revised the earlier ones and staged later events on the journey of Assyrian sculptures to the British Museum, including the bull's embarkation at the port of Basra (published July 1850) and the lion's arrival at the British Museum (published February 1852).[2]

The illustrations have received significant attention as sources for the reception of Assyrian antiquities in the British popular imagination (Bohrer 1992, 2003: 142–148; Bahrani 2001, 2011; Stauffer 2005; Malley 2012: 45–76; Çelik 2016: 137–142). They also feature as objects of curiosity in discussions of Sennacherib's artistic program in Room XLIV and Court VI in his Southwest Palace at Nineveh. There, Layard uncovered a series of ancient reliefs depicting a strikingly similar scene: the quarry of stone for a winged bull and the sculpture's transit beside the Tigris River toward its eventual destination in the royal palace. Within the generally accepted chronology, the similarity of the images is a remarkable coincidence: the modern ones are generally assumed to have been produced before Layard uncovered the ancient parallels. John Russell (Russell 1991: 108), for example, uses an image from the 1951 popular abridgment of *Nineveh and Its Remains* to illustrate how Sennacherib and Layard used similar techniques to haul colossi without the aid of heavy machinery. This comparison is problematic since, as several scholars have shown, the illustrations accompanying Layard's volumes are dramatizations, not reliable records of his procedure (Bohrer 2003: 143–145; Malley 2012: 54–59; Çelik 2016: 141–142). There is, however, an additional complicating factor: the majority of the images allegedly documenting Layard's removal of the bull were, in fact, produced *after* Layard and Hormuzd Rassam had excavated Court VI of the Southwest Palace, which included the full set of reliefs depicting the ancient quarrying and transit of the colossus.

I argue that many of the striking parallels between the ancient reliefs and modern images are largely manufactured by twin interpretive processes: (1) the reading of Layard's techniques back into Sennacherib's reliefs and (2) the active appropriation of Assyrian compositional elements into updated versions of Layard's frontispieces. As a result, contemporary understanding of Assyrian transport processes is based in part on Layard's actual technique, while our understanding of Layard's technique, at least as mediated through images, is based in part on the Assyrian reliefs. Disentangling this complex web of interpretation has two implications. First, it allows us to reconstruct more accurately the distinct techniques used by Assyrian and Ottoman-era workers to transport colossi. Second, understanding the precise sequence of image production and dissemination sheds light on the active processes required to construct a timeless Orient.

Austen Henry Layard in Ottoman Iraq

Austen Henry Layard's journey in 1839 coincided with the outbreak of the second Ottoman-Egyptian war, an unsuccessful bid by the Sublime Porte to end Muhammed Ali's control of Syria. The war prompted intense diplomatic interest from Britain, France, and Russia. Each aspired to increase their political, military, and economic influence in the region. The Palmerston government believed that continued stability of the Ottoman Empire was in Britain's best interest. Should the Ottoman Empire fall too soon, Britain feared that Russia would gain the greatest share when the three Eurasian powers sat down to carve their Turkey.

British informal imperialism in this era provides the context and motivation for Layard's work, both archaeological and diplomatic. Palmerston's policies relied on a diverse network with strategic, commercial, and religious interests in the region – sometimes a mix of all three. British ambassadors to the Porte, including Stratford Canning, strongly supported the Tanzimat reforms, intended to centralize Ottoman governance and remake its

1 A series of these images, consisting of the frontispieces to *Nineveh and Its Remains* and two subsequent images published in the *Illustrated London News*, are analyzed in Malley 2012: 45–76. On the subsequent production of cloth prints inspired by Scharf's originals, see McCall and Seymour 2020.

2 Bull's embarkation: *Illustrated London News* (27 July 1850), 71. Lion's arrival: *Illustrated London News* (28 February 1852), 184.

military structure along the lines of European models (Gürpinar 2012; Parry 2022: 176–177). Among other things, they hoped this would increase British access to trade and decrease Russian influence in the Ottoman lands. British officials stationed in the Ottoman Empire also hoped to cultivate overland routes between the Gulf and Syria, connecting commerce in colonized India with the European continent (Parry 2022: 144–145, 175–176).

Missionary interest in the region added another dimension to British informal imperialism. In Kurdistan, Anglican missionaries were especially drawn to the Church of the East (often called 'Nestorians' in nineteenth-century sources). In the Anglican imagination, these Aramaic-speaking Christians fed a vision of archaic Protestantism, creating a pedigree more ancient than the Catholics for their reformist movement (Parry 2022: 240–241). Developing ties with Christians in Kurdistan and the Eyalet of Mosul also had a more pragmatic goal, allowing the British to compete with the French in developing allegiance along religious lines.[3]

An incident in 1836 provides a useful introduction to several figures whom Layard would soon come to know and illustrates their interests. Under the direction of Royal Artillery officer Francis Rawdon Chesney, a group of officers, engineers, and naturalists attempted to run the length of the Euphrates River in two steamships, named the *Tigris* and *Euphrates*.[4] The goal was to secure an overland route to British India and develop potential markets along the way. Christian Rassam, the elder brother of Hormuzd Rassam, was retained as translator. As an Anglican convert born to a Moslawi Chaldean merchant family, C. Rassam stood to benefit from the expedition if Mosul could become an entrepot on this new route (Parry 2022: 242–243). Indian Naval Officer Henry Lynch also participated as Chesney's second-in-command. The project ended in failure after, among other mishaps, a tropical storm sank the *Tigris* and killed its entire crew. Despite this setback, both C. Rassam and Henry Lynch benefitted from the enterprise: Christian was named the British vice-consul to the Porte, and Henry went on to found a shipping company with his brothers which would eventually carry Layard's winged bull and lion to Great Britain.[5]

For Layard, like many middle-class British citizens, the imperial apparatus offered an opportunity for economic and social advancement (Adkins 2004: 7–9).[6] Layard initially set out in 1839 to join his uncle Charles as a solicitor in the British colony of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), but he had never had interest in the law.[7] After two years of adventuring, Layard would eventually abandon his plan to reach Ceylon and instead seek employment in the British foreign service. In 1840, while couch-surfing (as it were) in Khuzestan,[8] Layard had already begun to take notes on Bakhtiari tribal movements, which he submitted to the British Foreign Office and the Royal Geographic Society.[9] During his stays in Baghdad, Layard also developed ties with local merchants, including the Lynch brothers and Robert Taylor, the British Resident in Baghdad. In early 1842, Layard convinced Taylor to revive the spirit of the Euphrates Expedition by running a steamship up the Karun River, hoping to develop trade contacts in Khuzestan.[10] Layard also seems to have run some errands for Taylor in this period. His first appointment with Stratford Canning, who hired Layard as his personal agent, came after Layard brought a message from Taylor in Baghdad to Constantinople (Layard 1887: II.366).

3 The French and Austrians had cultivated ties with Maronite Christians in Lebanon, which caused British anxiety over French influence in the region (Parry 2022: 251–252). Missionary outreach to Christians in Ottoman Iraq and Kurdistan exacerbated local rivalries and led to rifts within the diplomatic corps. Ambassador Stratford Canning, for example, strongly opposed British outreach along religious/sectarian divides, which brought him into conflict with his vice-consul Christian Rassam (Parry 2022: 249–250).

4 On the Euphrates Expedition, see Malley 2012: 27–28; Parry 2013: 254–255, 2022: 125–126; Fleetwood 2023.

5 A brief overview of C. Rassam's vice-consulship during the Tanzimat era can be found in Parry 2022: 264–277. On the Lynch brothers' shipping company, see Cole 2016.

6 As Adkins notes, even less wealthy members of the landed gentry, such as Henry Rawlinson, sometimes opted to join the ranks of the East India Company rather than purchase a commission in the British Army.

7 Further discussion in Kertai 2021: 375–376.

8 Layard (1887: II.212) reports that he depended entirely on the hospitality of others while travelling in Khuzestan.

9 The report, which is referenced in Layard 1887: II.339, was eventually published in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* (Layard 1846). For further discussion, see Malley 2012: 28.

10 Layard (1887: II.342–365) narrates the run up the Karun in significant detail. For further discussion of the political context and aims, see Parry 2013: 159–160.

This broader political context significantly shaped Layard's excavations at Nimrud and then Nineveh. The excavations themselves were conceived as an attempt to counter French claims on the region's antiquities, following Paul-Émile Botta's dig at Khorsabad. They also offered Canning a chance to usurp the cultural status of his predecessor, Thomas Bruce Elgin, who had arranged the removal of the Parthenon Marbles to the British Museum, approximately fifty years prior. And for Layard, the excavations offered a chance for notoriety that would eventually propel him into a political career and, finally, a formal diplomatic posting.[11]

Discussions of British and French excavations in this period tend to excuse their destructiveness on the grounds that archaeology, as a discipline, did not yet exist (e.g., Larsen 1996, xiii; Liverani 2016: 37). This is partially true. However, by the time Layard left England in 1839, Danish scholars had already begun to develop the stratigraphic method, analyzing successive layers of deposition preserved in local bogs (Rowley-Conwy 2007: 15–17). The method was further refined through the early 1840s (Rowley-Conwy 2007: 56–60), and early Danish pioneers discussed their work with British Museum staff in 1843 and again in 1846. German translations of their work were also available at this time (Rowley-Conwy 2007: 87). One could, of course, reasonably point out that Layard was unlikely to apply cutting-edge methods in archaeology at the outer edges of Ottoman rule when locked in an antiquities race with the French. Yet this is precisely the point: the parameters of Layard's excavations were set by British imperial interests. These are apparent not only in the methods of excavation but in how Layard packaged and sold his endeavor to the British public. In the following sections, we will trace one aspect of this, through the figure of the winged bull.

Excavation and Publication Timeline: The Nimrud Bulls and Sennacherib's Court VI

The convoluted publication history and subsequent updating of Layard's bull-moving illustrations has made it nearly impossible to trace the various vectors of influence from Assyrian art to British representation. My own analysis will begin with the dramatized procession scenes published in Layard's *Nineveh and Its Remains* (*N&R*) in 1849 because this is the version of the scene most familiar to scholars today. I will then move back in time in the subsequent section to explore possible Assyrian influences for the 1849 lithographs. In the final section, I then move forward to see how the full excavation of Court VI in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace spawned multiple adaptations to bring Layard's image closer into line with that of Sennacherib himself.

Here, for ease of reference, I include a basic chronology from the initial removal of the bulls to the last publications covered in this paper. Documentation, including primary and secondary sources for each event listed below, is included as events are discussed in subsequent sections.

- 1843–1845: Layard reviews Botta's excavation notes.
- October 1845: Layard begins to dig at Nimrud.
- April 1847: Layard oversees the removal of two winged bulls intended for transport to the British Museum. They were shipped to Basra and remained there until 1849, after the publication of Layard's *N&R*.
- May–June 1847: Layard spends time in Mosul and visits excavations at Kuyunjik before returning to London. His drawings show that part of Court VI has been excavated. Before leaving, Layard likely sees the quarrying scene (slabs 66–68).
- Summer 1848: Illustrator George Scharf II illustrates the removal and procession of the bull from Nimrud for publication in *N&R*.
- January 1849: *N&R* is published in two volumes with frontispieces featuring the illustrations "Lowering of the Bull" and "Procession of the Bull."

11 For a discussion of the British–French competition and Canning's interest in antiquities, see Bohrer 2003: 102–103; Malley 2012: 32–37; Kertai 2021: 387–388. On Layard's view of excavation as a path to a formal government job, see Parry 2020: 157.

- October–December 1849: Layard has returned to Mosul where the full bull transport scene in Court VI is excavated.
- 1851: An abridged version of *N&R* is published with an updated version of the illustrated "Procession of the Bull."
- 1852: Layard and Scharf begin lecturing at the Working Men's Educational Union using painted cotton screens, including another updating of "Procession of the Bull."
- 1853: The reliefs from Court VI are finally published in *A Second Series of the Monuments of Nineveh*.

Dramatizing the Procession: Text and Image in *Nineveh and Its Remains* (1847–1849)

In April 1847, Layard oversaw the removal of two colossi from Ashurnasirpal's Northwest Palace at Nimrud: a winged bull (BM 118872) and lion (BM 118873). The two colossi originally stood guarding entries from the Central Courtyard (Y) into adjacent rooms S and G. Layard (1849a: II.74) selected the specimens for their preservation and smaller size, and he had workers remove stone from the unsculpted side to facilitate their transport. If the Louvre had already beaten the British Museum in obtaining an Assyrian winged bull for its collections, Layard was determined that he would be the first to transport intact colossi to Europe. He undertook this mission without funding for the sculptures' transport, nor did he wait to contract a ship that could carry the artifacts from the port at Basra to London.

When *N&R* hit the shelves in the first weeks of 1849, the bull and lion remained in storage at the port of Basra. A major goal of the work, outlined in the preface, was to apply pressure on the British government to cough up funds for their shipment to England. "Surely," Layard (1849a: I.xi–xii) opined, "British ingenuity and resources cannot, as is pretended, be unable to remove objects which have already, with very inadequate means, been transported nearly a thousand miles." The frontispieces accompanying the volumes dramatize key moments of this ingenuity as does Layard's lengthy prose description of the obstacles he encountered in moving the bull and lion colossi (Layard 1849a: II.79–90). Shawn Malley (2012: 57–59) has documented the effect of the book on Trustees of the British Museum and the parliament. Just three months after the publication of *N&R*, the latter had contracted the Lynch brothers' shipping business to retrieve the stranded colossi.

As multiple scholars have argued, the images produced for Layard's volume have a broader function: they concretize aspirations for colonial domination of Ottoman lands (Bahrani 2001: 15–28, 2011: 142–143; Bohrer 2003: 143–145; Malley 2012: 54–59; Çelik 2016: 141–142). The illustrations project Layard's ability to command local labor, thereby establishing British dominance over Ottoman subjects. The two-volume work also highlights Layard's power and ingenuity by fusing ancient Assyria and contemporary Iraq. In the treatment of the bull and lion's removal, Layard's authority was articulated through a division of labor between text and illustration. The prose sets a chaotic scene that is tamed in the visual medium through the establishment of spatial hierarchy and ordered lines of workers.

In his narration of lowering the bull, for example, Layard (1849a: II.79–80) emphasizes the paltry tools at his disposal: small ropes shipped from Aleppo, a palm-fiber cable obtained from Baghdad, and two jack screws left over from the Euphrates Expedition of 1836, discussed above. A chaotic scene unfolds as one group of workers attempts to lower the bull with ropes and another supports the colossus' descent onto rollers using hewn beams propped at an angle. Layard's description is tense with excitement and saturated with exoticism:

> "It was a moment of great anxiety. The drums and shrill pipes of the Kurdish musicians increased the din and confusion caused by the war-cry of the Arabs, who were half frantic with excitement. They had thrown off nearly all their garments; their long hair floated in the wind; and they indulged in the wildest postures and gesticulations as they clung to the ropes. The women had congregated on the sides of the trenches, and by their incessant screams, and by the ear-piercing tahlehl, added to the enthusiasm of the men."

Amid this din, Layard reports that the ropes snapped, and the bull came crashing down. To everyone's great relief, it landed unscathed on the rollers.

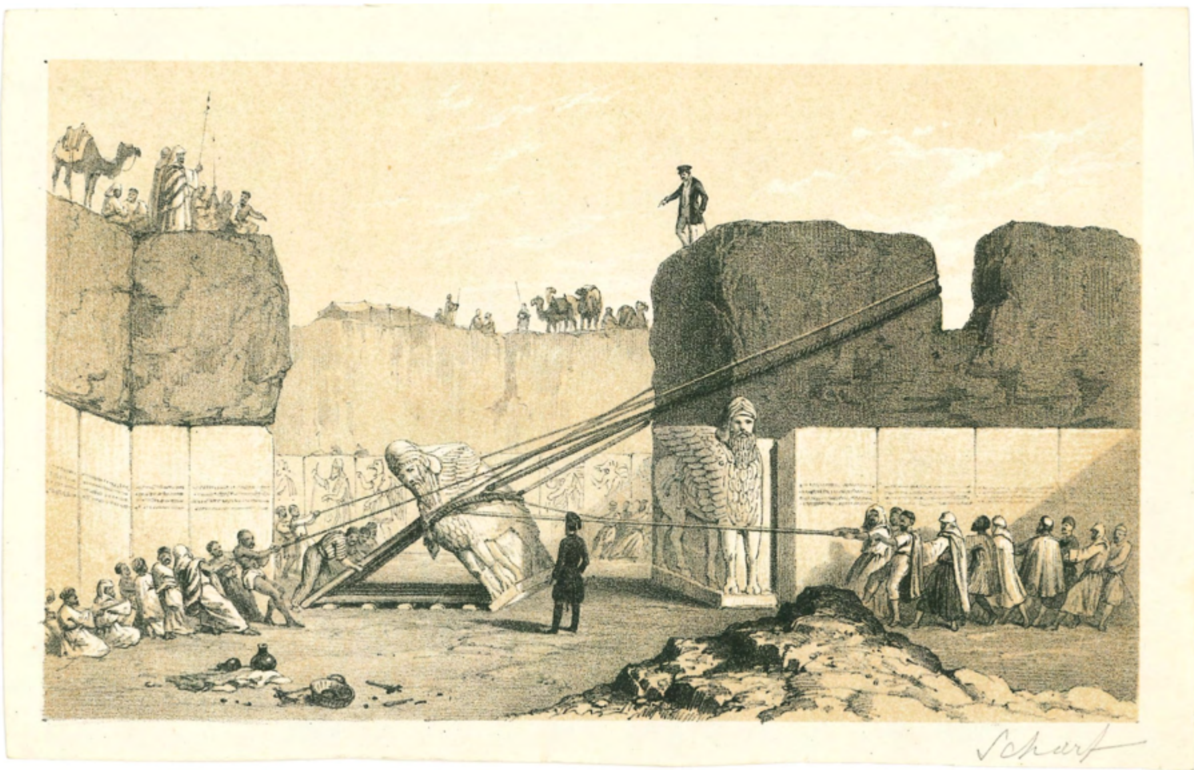

Fig. 1. “Lowering the Bull.” George Scharf’s drawing for the lithographed frontispiece to *Nineveh and Its Remains* (volume 1). JMA Acc.13236/27 (unfoliated file). Reproduced with the kind permission of the National Library of Scotland.

The visual representation of this scene, produced by George Scharf II as a frontispiece for *N&R*, presents a significantly more orderly affair. If the prose narration tells a story of limited means and unruly natives, “Lowering the Bull” depicts Layard’s ingenuity and control (Fig. 1). Bohrer (2003: 144) has observed that the image departs significantly from Layard’s narration in a key detail: precisely when Layard reports that the ropes began to fail, the illustration shows them holding firm. No workers frantically pour water on the unravelling cords. Instead, a scattering of men and camels perch atop the trenches, adding local color with their costume. There are, however, no Kurdish musicians piping or women whooping. Three static figures punctuate the image. Beside the bull is Layard’s assistant H. Rassam, dressed as for a military parade in a frock and high boots. The figure of Layard’s acquaintance Abd-ur-rahman is recognizable at top left in a striped garment.[12] Layard himself oversees the entire operation. Beneath his gaze, workmen array themselves in two orderly lines, not gesticulating wildly but pulling as a unified body. Aside from the man heading the line at left, the workers are fully clad, their hair mostly restrained in caps and turbans.

A similar taming of the populace is evident in the frontispiece to the second volume, “Procession of the Bull beneath the Mound” (Fig. 2). The plate illustrates the arduous process of hauling the colossus from Nimrud to the Tigris River. A row of figures in conical hats are yoked to the wagon, which is dragged by a large workforce. Per Layard’s (1849a: II.87) narration, the team of water buffalo initially tasked with the burden refused to move. They were replaced under the yoke by rotating teams of eight men from the Tiyari tribe, a modern Assyrian group

12 The spear-wielding figure is identified as Abd-ur-rahman already in Bohrer 2003: 143. I have not seen Abd-ur-rahman identified by name in the correspondence between the illustrator, George Scharf, and Layard (John Murray Archive Ms.42344 folios 15–24), but a man in a striped cloak with a spear appears in nearly all illustrations of scenes that include Abd-ur-rahman in Layard’s narration.

Fig. 2. “Procession of the Bull.” George Scharf’s drawing for the lithographed frontispiece to *Nineveh and Its Remains* (volume 2). JMA Acc.13236/27 (unfoliated file). Reproduced with the kind permission of the National Library of Scotland.

from what is now the Hakkâri province of Turkey.[13] These men, Layard (1849a: II.88) explains, were assisted by “Arabs” and “the people of Naifa and Nimroud” in dragging the cart. Layard conscripted a diverse group of laborers to haul away local heritage and memorialized the moment as a tribute to British superiority.

According to Layard’s account, a veritable parade followed the cart, with musicians “drumming and fifing with might and main” and women shouting their encouragement from the rear (Layard 1849a: II.88). All the while, Layard’s acquaintance Abd-ur-rahman and his entourage “performed divers feats round the group, dashing backwards and forwards, and charging with their spears” (Layard 1849a: II.88). Amid this excitement, the cart sank into a hidden storage pit, and its front wheels became lodged. Unable to extract it, the party was obliged to halt for the night before resuming in the morning. The cart was ultimately hauled up thick planks wedged beneath its wheels, a process that had to be repeated in the sandy soil as the party approached the riverbank (Layard 1849a: II.89–90).

Although the scene is recognizable in the frontispiece, the chaos has once again been transformed to emphasize Layard’s mastery. A row of five Tiyari men are yoked to the cart as Layard supervises from horseback. Malley (2012: 55) observes that, as in the previous image, Layard’s arm “mirrors the tension line of the ropes, reigning over, and reining in, his workers.” Here, too, H. Rassam appears in drag as a British soldier overseeing the operations on foot – though he is passed over in the prose narration. Abd-ur-rahman and his entourage of spear-wielding horsemen have in turn been reduced to spectators, their mounts nowhere to be found. They stand stoically watching the great colossus as it passes them by.

13 A brief overview of the distribution of modern Assyrian populations in the second half of the nineteenth century can be found in Donabed 2015: 58–62. I use the term Assyrian deliberately, in accordance with the self-designation of the contemporary community and with recognition that *all* social groups are formed through fluid and dynamic processes. An overview of the spread of the specific term Assyrian (and Syriac ܐܬܘܪܝܐ) to designate modern Aramaic-speaking Christian populations can be found in Butts 2017.

Five extant letters to Layard, written by the head illustrator at John Murray's, Scharf, testify to the process of transforming word to image (JMA MS.42344, folios 15–24). The letters, mostly composed in Summer 1848,[14] reveal several significant details about how the two worked. Even before the proof stage, Layard was heavily involved in the process, receiving updates from Scharf and requesting specific changes to the figures, with particular attention to the figure of Abd-ur-rahman. Layard posed the man in numerous scenes, not only in the lowering and procession of the bull, but at other key moments, including the very first discovery of a colossus (Layard 1849a: I.72). Abd-ur-rahman also features in the folio of illustrations, *Monuments of Nineveh*, where he poses beside a winged lion colossus (Layard 1849b: pl. 3). Throughout *N&R*, the character of Abd-ur-rahman is made to voice the proper response of a native: fear, wonder, and astonishment at Layard's genius. He becomes the phantasmagoric native, standing for the idealized resident of Ottoman Iraq, simple-minded and fiercely loyal. This transformation is underscored by Scharf's references to Abd-ur-rahman exclusively as "the Arab."[15]

In the letters, Scharf discusses illustrations of ancient remains, modern inhabitants, and a combination of the two, generally without clarifying whether the people he has drawn are characters in Assyrian reliefs or nineteenth-century inhabitants of Ottoman Iraq. He and Layard had already established a list of illustrations, corresponding roughly to the captions given to the lithographed plates and in-page woodcut illustrations. Even with this general correlation, the rapid alternation between ancient and modern scenes creates a chronological slippage that is difficult to track in the archival record, even for someone intimately familiar with the works. In his painstaking analysis of the volumes' production, for example, Frederick Bohrer (1992: 96) classifies three of the letters as pertaining exclusively to the production of the frontispieces. This is not entirely correct: one of the letters quoted by Bohrer also discusses the illustration of "a block with the women + ox cart," which must refer to a figure taken from an ancient relief (Bohrer 1992: 96 n. 16).[16]

Like Bohrer, I initially wondered whether that letter might refer to the illustration of the frontispiece for volume 2, "Procession of the Bull" (see Fig. 2 above). This would conform, at least partially, to Layard's description of the scene, in which the bull was loaded onto a cart, followed by musicians and a group of women. However, Scharf's reference to engraving the remainder of the wood block makes this interpretation impossible: the frontispieces to the original edition of *Nineveh and Its Remains* are lithographs. The woodcut that Scharf references must be the illustration of a detail from an Assyrian relief at Nimrud (Kalhu), illustrated with the caption, "Captive Women in a Cart drawn by Oxen" (Layard 1849a: II.396).[17] Adding to the general confusion is the fact that Scharf refers occasionally to illustrations that appear only in *Monuments of Nineveh*. Thus, the "figure of the Arab" that Bohrer took as a reference to Abd-ur-rahman in one of the frontispieces is more likely the same individual featured beside the lion colossus in *Monuments*.[18]

Throughout the correspondence, Scharf never mentions reproducing ancient reliefs but contextualizes each image based only on the figures represented. Layard (1849a: I.x) himself specifies in the preface to *Nineveh and Its Remains* that the Christian inhabitants of Mosul and Kurdistan are artifacts like the sculptures: "they are, indeed, as much the remains of Nineveh, and Assyria, as are the rude heaps and ruined palaces. A comparison between the dwellers in the land as they now are, and as the monuments of their ancestors lead us to believe they once were, will not perhaps be without useful results." Layard's statement here requires some unpacking because Christians in Mosul and Kurdistan, including H. Rassam, did identify the Assyrian remains they unearthed as their own cultural

14 One letter is dated to June 27 (MS.42344, folio 15–16). In another undated letter (JMA MS.42344, folio 23), Scharf refers to drawings he executed in June and July. Since Layard did not contract with John Murray for the volume until after his publication project was rebuffed by the British Museum in March 1848, and since the volume itself was in production by December 1848, the general dating of the dossier to this period is assured.

15 "Holl sent me a proof which I touched upon in the figure of the Arab" (JMA MS.42344 folio 23). He elaborates in a further update, perhaps written the same day (both are dated only "Saturday"), "Holl will retouch my Arab to the great lion" (JMA MS.42344 folio 22).

16 The letter is JMA MS.42344 folio 23o. Bohrer's task was made more difficult because the manuscript seems not to have been foliated yet when he worked with the letters, with the result that Bohrer transcribes a quote running across two pages that, it is now clear, belong to two different missives.

17 The full slab is illustrated in Layard 1849a: II.58. It is today held in the British Museum (BM 118882).

18 This is apparent only from the reference to the "Arab to [*sic*] the great lion" (see n. 30 above), which does not correspond to any of the images published in *Nineveh and Its Remains* but provides an apt description of pl. 3 in *Monuments* (Layard 1849b).

heritage. The British public was, however, primed by previous missionary reports and travel writings to see this Christian population not as heirs to an ancient tradition but as a primitive *fossil* of the past.[19] When Layard (1849a: I.241) refers to these populations as a distinct race and dubs them the “Protestants of Asia” (Layard 1849a: I.268), he taps into an emergent British discourse that is subtly but significantly distinct from the understanding that H. Rassam would later articulate of his own heritage.

For his part, H. Rassam (1897: 175) did adopt the European conceit of race in describing the indigenous populations of Ottoman Iraq and Kurdistan, but he also acknowledged that multiple groups may have been able to claim lineage from ancient Assyria. H. Rassam emphasized that the Chaldeans’ active embrace of this heritage distinguished them as modern Assyrians. This view is significantly more nuanced than what we might expect the British reading public to get from Layard’s illustrated writings, which displayed a variety of modern figures, Arab and Christian alike, alongside excavated remains to provide a romantic vista. As I will argue below, subsequent modifications to the illustrations would further encourage viewers to conflate the past and present in a single image.

Assyrian Inspiration for the Frontispieces (1845–1849)

Given the growing awareness among scholars that Layard’s images of nineteenth-century Ottoman Iraq are designed to convey a static and unchanging Orient, it is striking that no published work considers whether frontispieces produced for *Nineveh and Its Remains* were directly inspired by Assyrian art. There are likely a few reasons for this. First, an entire series of images based on the frontispieces to *N&R* were published before any drawings of the sculptures in Court VI of Sennacherib’s palace had been published, which creates the illusion of independent processes (first illustrating a modern scene, then discovering an ancient one). Second, even scholars aware that Scharf and Layard were producing imaginative works find it difficult to resist collapsing image and event. Andrew Stauffer (2005: 372–373), for example, attributes Scharf’s production of “Lowering” and “Procession” to 1847, which is in fact the year that the removal of the bull occurred – not the year the images were produced. Scharf, who illustrated for John Murray, did not begin his work with Layard until 1848, after Layard had returned to England with sketches and notebooks full of Assyrian reliefs (Bohrer 1992: 91–97). As noted above, Russell (1991: 108) uses an updated version of “Procession of the Bull,” not published until 1851, to illustrate the techniques used by Layard. Both scholars reconstruct a straightforward process, in which the modern illustrations are uninflected by the Assyrian representations.

It is true that Layard did not see the full set of Sennacherib’s bull transport reliefs until the fall of 1849, about a year after Scharf produced the illustrations for the first edition of *N&R*. The relevant narrative sequence occupied the northern and northeastern walls of Court VI (Chamber 1 in *N&R* and Layard’s notebook), where a series of at least five scenes showed the production and movement of a winged-bull colossus from its quarrying (slabs 66–67) in a mountainous region through several stages of transport in a sledge, first over hilly terrain near the quarry (63–64) and then along a river valley (43–47 and 53–56). Most of these were either uncovered during excavations supervised by H. Rassam in Summer 1849 or emerged shortly after Layard’s return to the site in October of the same year, as will be discussed in more detail below.

Layard had, however, quite possibly seen the stone quarrying reliefs on slabs 66–67 (Fig. 3), which initiated the narrative sequence, during his initial dig at Nineveh in 1847. Layard’s excavators first cleared door *a* in the eastern wall that connects the courtyard to Room V (formerly Chamber C) in the throneroom suite. The passage was initially designated *b* in Layard’s notebook[20] and in the publication of *N&R* (Layard 1849a, II facing page 124). I have updated the image with the contemporary designations in italics as Fig. 4 here. Although Layard’s notebook only mentions reliefs discovered to the south of door *a*,[21] his plan depicts an excavated portion of wall running 40–50 feet north of the door, along which later plans show that reliefs 66–68 stood. Slabs 66–67 show

19 See further the discussion in Parry 2022: 239–242.

20 Or.Dr.IV.83, reproduced with scale and north arrow added in Turner 2021: 48–49, fig. 1.2. During the initial phase of excavations, spaces and passageways were assigned letters in the order of their discovery, and subsequently renumbered.

21 Transcribed in Turner 2021: 11.

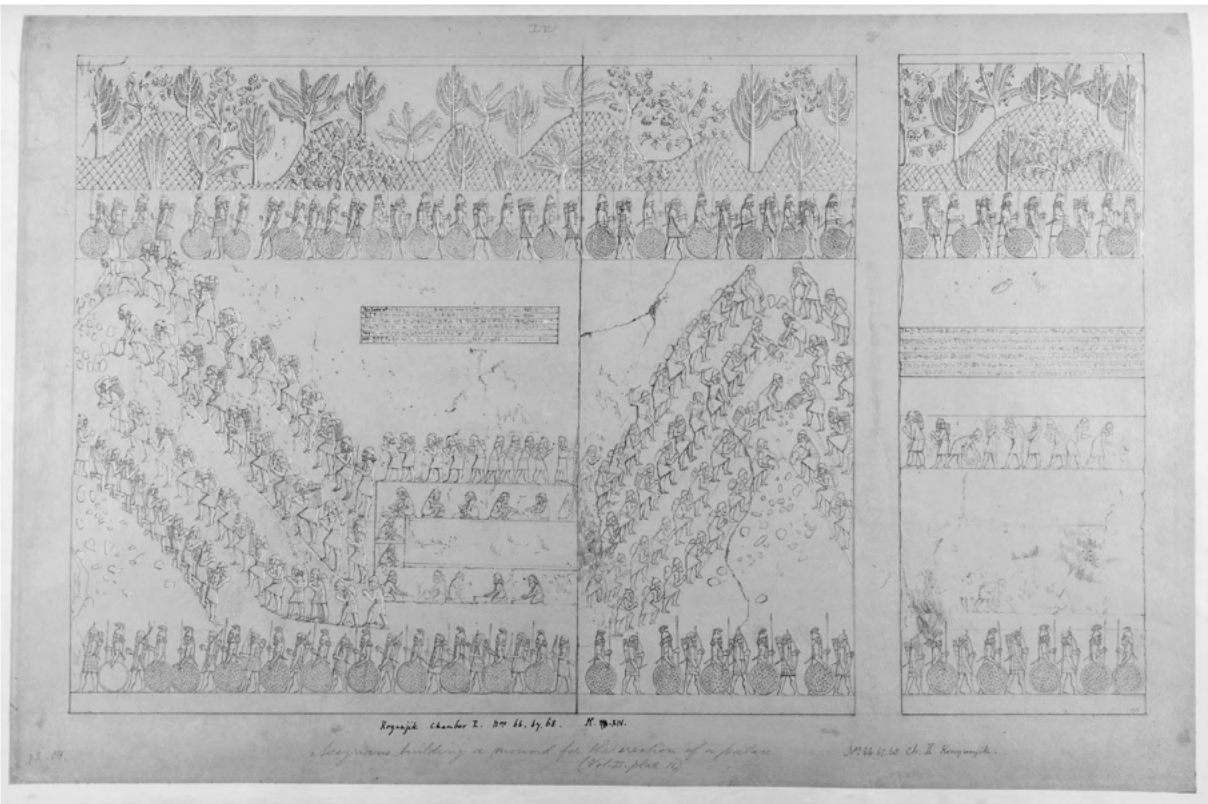

Fig. 3. Court VI, slabs 66–68 (right to left) depicting the quarrying of stone. Southwest Palace, Kuyunjik. Or.Dr.I.56 (British Museum 2007,6024.58). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

conscripted laborers hauling quarried stone in lines, which were likely intended for use in the construction of Sennacherib's palace. At center, a group of men chisel a rectangular block that will, in subsequent scenes, become a bull colossus. Two lines of soldiers frame the scene at top and bottom, highlighting the power of the Assyrian state to impose this labor.

Beyond the plan showing a section of excavated wall, no details of the scene are given in extant documentation from the 1847 excavations, including in *Nineveh and its Remains*. However, the likelihood that Layard had seen slabs 66–68 is lent further support by a report to the Trustees of the British Museum, dated December 10, 1849, in which Layard states that a tunnel circumnavigating the Court VI had finally been completed and all surfaces uncovered: "I have now united the new with the old excavations, so that we shall have a complete plan."[22] Since Layard did not re-excavate door *a* until over a year later in 1850, the trench cut by the 1847 excavations must have extended to the area of reliefs 66–68 for Layard to recognize that he had completed his circuit of the room. Consequently, it is quite likely that by the time he commissioned the frontispieces for the volume, Layard had already seen the quarrying scene in Court VI. The lines of conscripted workers, overseen by Assyrian soldiers, provides a precedent for the visual and thematic motifs employed in "Lowering" and "Procession of the Bull."

These are not the only reliefs that may have inspired the frontispieces in *N&R*. During his first stint of excavation, Layard (1849a: II.315–318) had already determined that the stone employed for Assyrian monuments was not quarried locally, and he was interested in how vast quantities of stone had been moved and sculpted. As Layard (1849a: II.315–318) reports directly, his imagination had already been spurred by the reliefs uncovered at Khorsabad between 1843 and 1845. Paul-Émile Botta, who oversaw the French dig at Khorsabad, sent letters and drawings by Eugene Flandin to Layard, then stationed in Constantinople. Layard reviewed the correspondence before forwarding the documents to Jules Mohl in Paris.[23] Layard was also given permission to publish preliminary

22 Original Papers XLIII, qtd. Turner 2021: 110.

23 Layard describes his correspondence with Botta in Layard 1849a: II.13–15. Botta's letters were published in Mohl 1845,

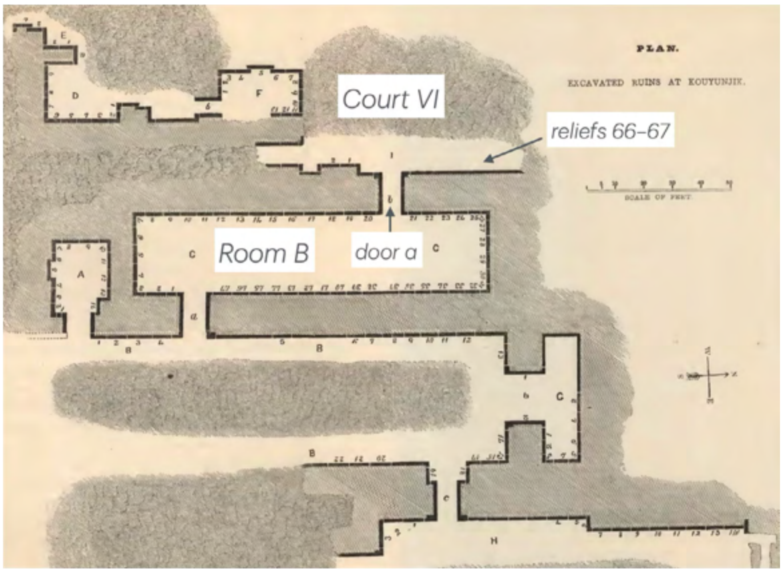

Fig. 4. Layard's drawing of the throneroom (Room B) complex in the Southwest Palace, Kuyunjik, based on excavations undertaken 1845–1847. Modifications in grey on white background. Layard 1849a, II facing page 124.

reports on Botta's finds in the *Malta Times* (Layard 1849a: II.15), at least one of which was later republished in the British periodical *The Athenaeum*.[24]

One of Flandin's drawings (or perhaps several drawings, conflated) struck Layard (1849a: II.317) as significant for the Assyrian transport of stone: "Amongst the sculptures at Khorsabad was, I believe, a bas-relief representing the moving of a block of stone, placed on a cart drawn by men." In the accompanying footnote, Layard observes that a drawing of this scene had not yet been published but that he has "some recollection of having seen a drawing of it in M. Flandin's portfolio." When Layard was preparing the manuscript of *N&R* in 1848, Botta and Flandin's *Monument de Nineve* had not yet been published, so Layard did not have much to consult. The scene Layard describes did not, however, turn out to be among those published in Botta and Flandin's work, nor is it among the few sketches by Botta only recently published (Guralnick 2002).

Although Layard's memory is likely faulty, it does not seem to have been entirely baseless. Visual parallels for Layard's recollection do exist, but only if the details were drawn from several different reliefs and conflated. One possibility is that Layard's memory of "a block of stone, placed on a cart" was inspired by slab 1 in Room 13 of Sargon's palace, which shows two flat objects stacked on a cart (Fig. 5).[25] No men can be seen pulling the cart on the extant portion of the poorly preserved slab, but other reliefs supply this visual imagery. They were part of the now-famous lumber-hauling scene,[26] which occupied part of façade n in the throneroom courtyard (Court VIII).[27]

and the drawings were used to make lithographs, published by Botta and Flandin 1849. The original drawings have subsequently been published in Albenda 1986. Additional discussion of Layard's relationship with Botta in this period can be found in Waterfield 1963: 113–115; Larsen 1996: 24–25.

24 *The Athenaeum* no. 901 (February 1, 1845), 120.

25 Albenda (1986: 149) suggests that the flat objects may be door leaves. The slab is part of a larger narrative series that shows the despoliation of Haldi's temple in Muṣaṣir during Sargon's eighth campaign, but Layard would not have had access to this information. The campaign itself is narrated in the famous "Letter to Aššur" (Sargon II 65). A summary of recent research on the campaign with extensive bibliography can be found in Frame 2021, 271–274. The text omitted in the print edition (between pages 272 and 273) can be found on the RINAP project page: https://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/rinap/rinap2/rinap2textintroductions/ashur6372/index.html#rinap2no065 (16.05.2025).

26 Based on the ship's protomes and the costume of the workers, scholars have alternately identified the setting as the Mediterranean (so Barnett 1958: 226–228, followed by Albenda 1983: 8–17, and DeGrado 2019: 114) or river transport of logs felled elsewhere in boats operated by Phoenician workers (so Linder 1986).

27 Botta and Flandin 1849: I.pl. 29. In contrast to contemporary practice, Botta and Flandin refer to walls according to the direction they *face* – i.e., following the cardinal direction of a line extending into the courtyard perpendicular from the wall. Albenda (Albenda 1986: pl. 19) maintains this system of reference. The wall itself is located in the southwest corner of the

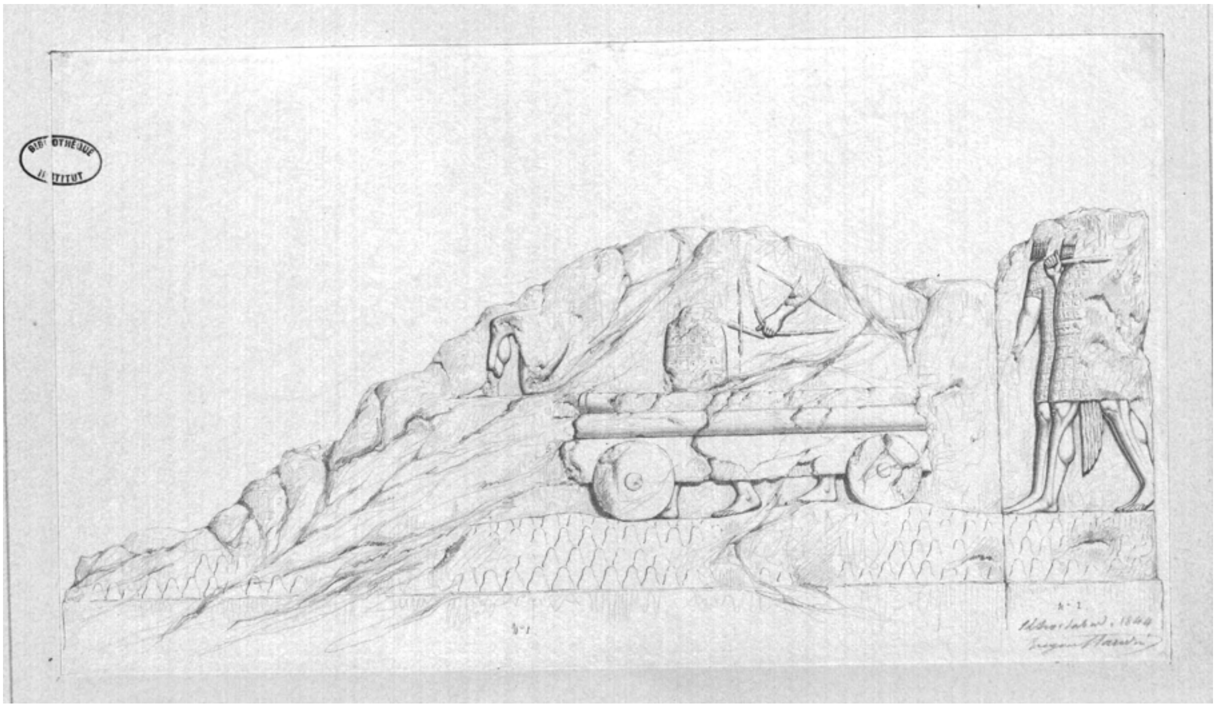

Fig. 5. Eugène Flandin's drawing of Slabs 1–2 of Room 13 at Khorsabad. From the original drawings for *Monuments de Ninive*. Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, Ms. 2735 f. 86. © Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France.

The scene extended across slabs 0–5,[28] and two of the slabs showed lines of men in double file, straining to haul logs attached to long ropes. Slab 0 (Fig. 6) was quite broken, and without further context, it is unclear what the men are hauling. The scene on neighboring slabs 4 and 3 (Fig. 7) supplies this context, depicting lines of workers as they strain to unload massive timbers from shallow bottomed ships. Layard may well have conflated the lines of workers in these scenes with the image of a cart in Room 13. This could result in a memory of Assyrian workers pulling stone blocks.

The timber-hauling scene from Sargon's palace incorporates another element found in the frontispieces of *N&R*: the workers are furnished with authenticating details of local costume. The workmen on slab 3 sport turbans and the short, pointy beards characteristic of Assyrian depictions of westerners.[29] Based on his investigation of Flandin's drawings, Layard (Layard 1849a: II.397–398) had already surmised that such closely fit caps and turbans were intended to designate foreign populations, an observation he combines with racist attempts at physiognomic classification that I do not reproduce here. *N&R* also includes small woodcut illustrations of the diverse dress in the reliefs at Nimrud and Kuyunjik (Layard 1849a: II.336–337). Layard concludes, "It is probable that these various costumes indicate people of different countries, auxiliaries in the Assyrian armies."

Layard's attention to detail in the Assyrian representation of foreign conscripts may, consciously or not, have inspired some aspects of "Lowering the Bull" that differ from Layard's prose description. The illustration shows workers in diverse dress and varying headgear when, according to Layard, most had stripped down for the work. Here, certain details in the clothing do not correspond to Layard's description of the specific moment. Rather, they draw on his description of costume elsewhere in the book. For example, Layard (1849a: II.111) describes how he

courtyard.

28 The numbering within Botta and Flandin (1849) is inconsistent. In Botta and Flandin's (1849: I.pl. 29) schematic drawing of wall A-B, a blank un-numbered slab is shown at right of slab 1. The unnumbered slab is later drawn fully on pl. 31, where it is now given the designation slab 1. As a result, what was slab 1 in the schematic drawing becomes slab 2 in the detailed drawing on pl. 32. Albenda (1986: pls. 20–23) uses the numbering system from the schematics, with the alternate set of numbers presented in parentheses. To simplify matters, I designate the initial slab as 0 and employ the schematic numbering system throughout.

29 For further discussion of foreign costumes in these reliefs, see DeGrado 2019: 114–115.

Fig. 6. Eugène Flandin’s drawing of Slab 0 of façade n, Court VI at Khorsabad. From the original drawings for *Monuments de Ninive*. Bibliothèque de l’Institut de France, Ms. 2735 f. 12. © Bibliothèque de l’Institut de France.

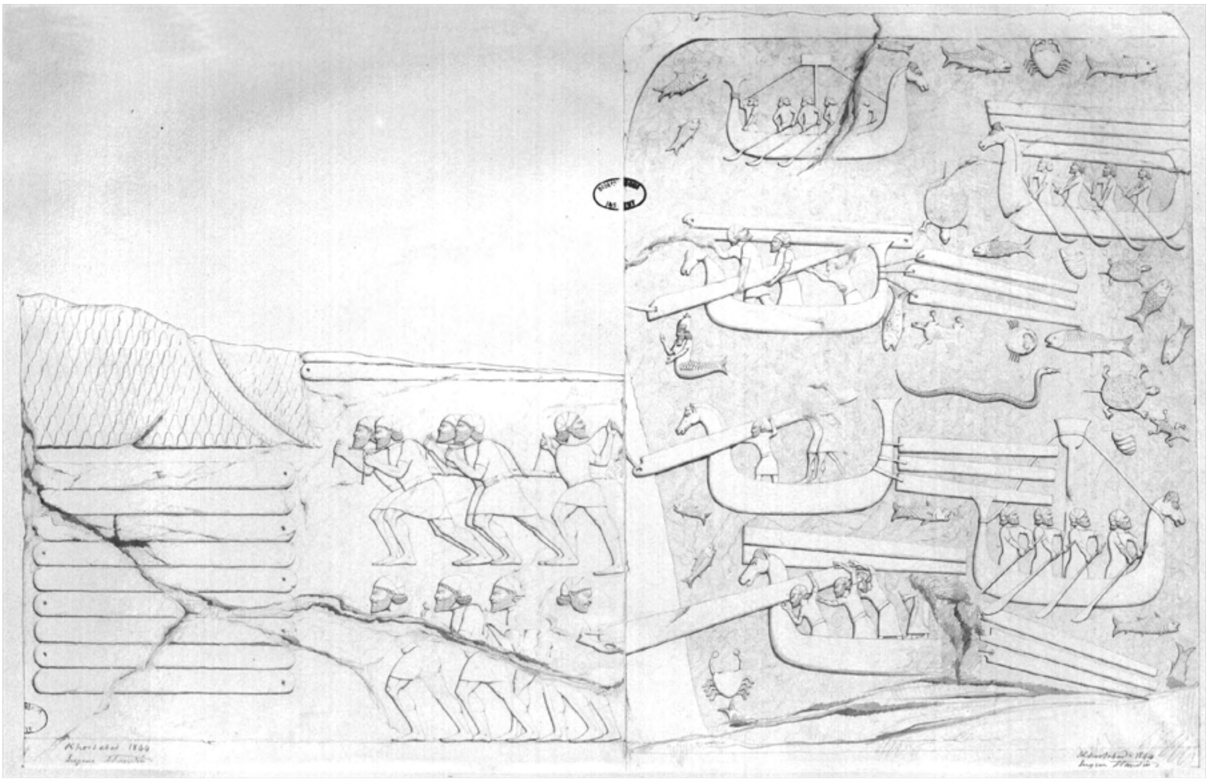

Fig. 7. Eugène Flandin's drawing of Slabs 4–5 (right to left) of façade n, Court VI at Khorsabad. From the original drawings for *Monuments de Ninive*. Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, Ms. 2735 f. 15. © Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France.

set a group of Tiyari workers to check the bull's descent with long poles. The vertical stripes on workers' coveralls in "Lowering" correspond to Layard's description of the Tiyari's "striped dresses and curious conical caps" elsewhere in the volume. The same vertical stripes appear on the clothing of the Tiyari men yoked to the cart in "Procession," where they do wear distinctive caps. When these marked aspects of clothing are imported into the illustrations (in contravention to the prose itself), fashion becomes a means to create racialized distinctions.[30] In this respect, Assyrian practices of categorizing and representing sartorial difference could provide fodder for imperial practices of race-making in Britain.[31]

Layard was captivated by the military scenes he excavated, and this may have inspired several details in the representation of himself and H. Rassam in the frontispieces. The relative positioning of Layard supervising from above and H. Rassam in his military-inspired dress finds visual echoes in many scenes from Sennacherib's palace. Layard (1849a: II.373) observes that in the Southwest Palace the king is at times depicted "superintending the operations" in battle. This is especially common in Sennacherib's reliefs as compared to those of Ashurnasirpal and Sargon who are frequently depicted participating in battle. Omar N'Shea (2018) has recently argued that Sennacherib's artists depicted him at spatial remove from battle, surveilling rather than participating in the melee.[32] This change resulted in part from a real-life constraint: after the unexpected death of Sargon in battle, Assyrian

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30 Numerous studies show how race-making does not only (or even primarily) rely on phenotypical distinctions. For the role of sartorial representation in race-making already in sixteenth-century European travelogues, see Kaplan and Katz 2023. For a discussion of the role of clothing in making and sustaining racialized distinctions in contemporary American contexts, see Puar 2007: esp. 166–202.

31 Miller (2021) offers a nuanced discussion of Assyrian modes of categorizing human difference and how they compare to post-Enlightenment Euro-American processes of race-making. A full discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that although Assyrians instrumentalized human difference (see also DeGrado 2019), they did not tie this to phenotypic or linguistic categorization.

32 A similar observation is made in passing already by Micale and Nadali 2004: 166.

kings no longer directly participated in combat. It is not hard to imagine the appeal of surveillance and superintendence as a visual motif for Layard, who did not, after all, participate in the manual labor he oversaw. Scharf's positioning of Layard at the top of the trenches creates a strong visual hierarchy that compensates for Layard's stationary posture. Below, H. Rassam supervises the lines of workers like an Assyrian officer overseeing conscripts or prisoners as they carry off heavy loot for the empire.

Since Scharf was already working to prepare lithographs of Layard's drawings for the publication of *Monuments of Nineveh*, which appeared less than a year after *N&R*, Layard would not necessarily have needed to provide Scharf with explicit instruction on each of the thematic elements noted above. Strong lines, visual hierarchy, military supervision, and the conscription of a diverse populace are all well represented in the drawings selected for publication in *Monuments*. Scharf also had access to the text of *N&R*, and, as we have seen above, Layard was actively involved in the process. Consequently, there are multiple avenues by which Assyrian motifs may have entered Scharf's work.

To be sure, many features in Scharf's illustrations, including the representation of local costume, are not indebted only to Assyria.[33] Victorian representations of the so-called Orient relied on exoticism to manufacture authenticity and constitute authority, a practice that John Murray III exploited to its fullest extent in the production of travel works.[34] This does not, however, preclude the likelihood of Assyrian influence on Layard, Scharf, and other illustrators working on the project. Rather, preexisting Victorian interest in exotic details likely made the Assyrian reliefs more legible to Layard and his publishing team and hence more desirable for appropriation. The perception of diverse Ottoman populations as primitive would also have facilitated this process. The past was to be found not only in the remains underground. It inhered in the residents of Ottoman Iraq, in their architecture, clothing, customs, and very flesh. Conversely, ancient subterranean ruins furnished the British a new vista to conquer – what Jeffrey Auerbach (2024) has termed a spectacle of "underground empire." The gravitational pull of the empire warped both space and time so that the past surrounded the viewer, and the present lay under their feet. This blending would continue with the discovery of the transport reliefs in Court VI, just months after the first edition of *Nineveh and Its Remains* had rolled off the press.

The Present in the Past: Discovery and Representation of Court VI (1848–1853)

After Layard left Mosul in June of 1847, excavations continued under the supervision of a British merchant named Henry Ross and then, beginning in July 1848, under that of C. Rassam. If any reliefs on the northern wall of Court VI were excavated during Ross's tenure, information about their contents could theoretically have been conveyed to Layard prior to the production of the two frontispieces for *N&R* (1849a), but this seems unlikely. Turner's (2021: 84–85; 560–562) analysis of the ten extant letters from Ross indicates that his excavators worked primarily in the northwest corner of the throneroom courtyard (then Forecourt H) and in the Southwest portion of the mound. Shortly after C. Rassam took over supervising the dig, excavators did reach an area with relevant reliefs. On August 21, 1848, Matilda Rassam, Christian's wife, wrote to report discoveries in a new trench that joined rooms XLIX to XLVIII, including "a large marble slab that has partly come out in good preservation."[35] Just beyond the threshold of room XLIX, five slabs (2–7) show the transport of a colossal object, obscured by its support structure, in the shallows of a river.

M. Rassam does not describe the scene in her extant letters, and by the time she penned the missive in August 1848, Scharf had already created drafts of both frontispieces.[36] Thus, while it is possible that some details of the scene reached Layard before the frontispieces went to press in late 1848, it is unlikely that this scene could have been a major source of inspiration for the lithographs in the 1849 edition of *N&R*. There was, however, ample time to update Scharf's "Procession of the Bull" for the 1851 abridgement of the work. The updated modern scene would

33 Noted already by Çelik 2016: 142–143.

34 For further discussion of Murray's use of illustration as paratext, including in Layard's volumes, see Keighren et al. 2015: 133–174.

35 The letter (Add.MS.38.978 folio 158r) is summarized and partially transcribed in Turner 2021: 89.

36 Scharf mentions both in his letter of June 27, 1848 (JMA MS.42344, folio 15o).

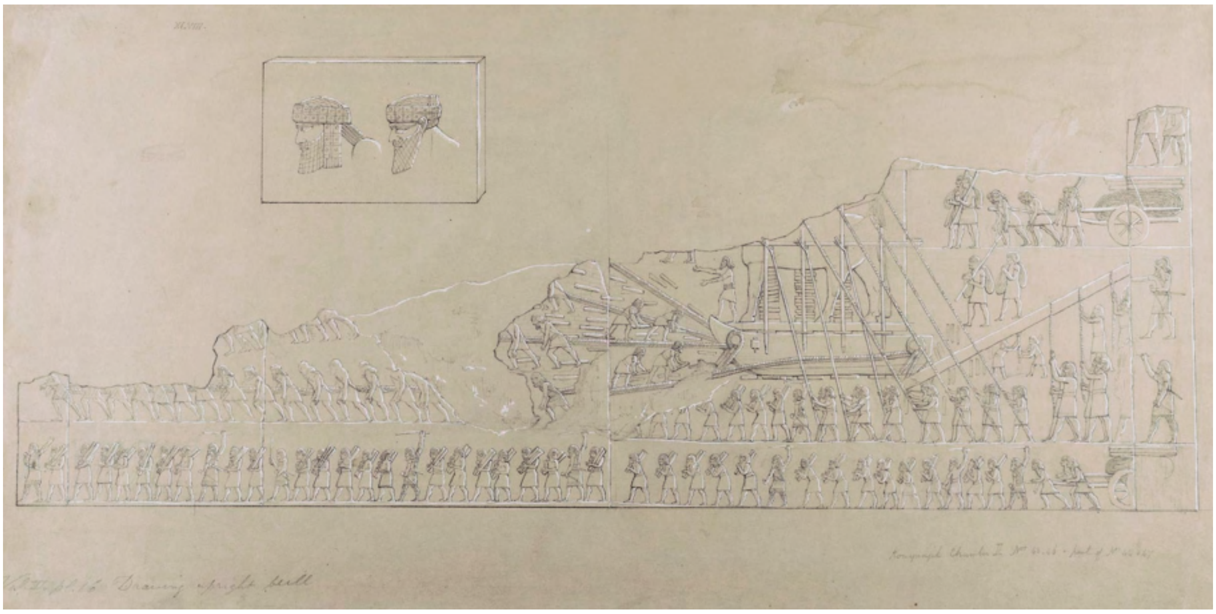

Fig. 8. Frederick Cooper's drawing of slabs 44–46, with the edges of 43 and 47, from Court VI of the Southwest Palace, Kuyunjik. The procession of workers is continued on the remainder of slab 44 and slab 43. Or.Dr.IV.48 (British Museum 2007,6024.393). Photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

bring details of the past into the present, a process discussed in the next section. First, however, I will describe the other half of this dialectic – the staging of Layard's discoveries in Court VI – to see how he read details of his own work back into the past.

By the time Layard returned to Nineveh on September 30, 1849, his foreman Toma[37] had extended the tunnel in Court VI along the north wall, where the main series of transport reliefs were located. The contents of slabs 43–46 (Fig. 8) are the first discovery recorded in Layard's diary, and the full sequence emerged over the next few weeks.[38] It would be a remarkable coincidence if Layard arrived on the spot just as reliefs paralleling his own frontispieces emerged from the ground. Although this is not impossible, another possibility presents itself. Turner (2021: 91) has already documented at least one instance when H. Rassam and Toma backfilled trenches that were subsequently re-excavated with Layard present. A similar process may have been obtained here, in which case even the discovery of Sennacherib's bull transport scene was staged for Layard's benefit.

Layard's diary entries and notes preserve a peculiar detail of interpretation, previously overlooked in studies of his excavations. Through multiple entries in 1849, Layard records discovering slabs that show the *removal* of a bull colossus. Although the semantics of "removal" in Victorian British English were broader than they are in contemporary American English, the word generally referred to movement *from* one location *to* another, including the transfer of property from a former residence to a new estate.[39] As such, it is not a word likely to designate the transport or installation of a new sculpture.

Based on Turner's (2021: 118) transcription, the following relevant entries can be adduced:

37 I have been unable to locate a reference to Toma's family name or any other formal appellation. He is referred to by the moniker Toma Shishman, "Fat Toma," or by other more derogatory epithets in the primary documentation. If Toma needs to be disambiguated from another individual of the same name, confusion can easily be avoided by referring to him as Foreman Toma.

38 Relevant entries from Layard's diary (Add.MS. 39.096) are transcribed in Turner 2021: 118.

39 *Oxford English Dictionary* s.v. "removal" (especially subheading 3b) and "remove."

- October 4, 1849: "bas relief representing the removal of a bull discovered"
- November 5, 1849: "Bas relief representing the removal of a winged Bull thro' a country wooded with pines discovered"
- December 7, 1849: "Two slabs with King superintending removal of Bull in the Great Hall at Kouyunjik"
- December 8, 1849: "Two slabs with king removing the Bull, uncovered"
- December 14, 1849: "Slabs representing the building of the mounds – following the King superintending the Removal of the Bull"
- September 13, 1850: "move part of bas relief representing removal of bull"

The final of the entries, dated nearly a full year after Layard first saw the reliefs, records his own removal of slabs for shipment to the British Museum. This suggests that in September of 1850 he still understood the reliefs to show an Assyrian king removing a sculpture from another location, not installing a new sculpture. He kept to this interpretation through the summer of 1851, in fact, when he wrote up a summary of his excavations based on his field notebooks.[40]

Layard's interpretation of the scene was likely occasioned in part by the order of its excavation, which proceeded in reverse from the narrative logic. In Summer 1851, he had not yet connected the quarrying reliefs (Court VI, 66–68) to the procession of the bull. Instead, he understood the quarrying scene to represent the "building of the mounds [of Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus],"[41] and he took the scenes showing stages in the bull's procession to instead represent the moving of multiple bulls. But where did he think they originated and why would they have been moved?

Answering this question requires a closer look at what Layard believed he had uncovered at Nimrud in the context of broader historiographic trends in Victorian Britain. In his first stint in the field, Layard (1849a: II.200–201) correctly surmised that the multiple palaces he excavated at Nimrud had been constructed successively, and he observed that the Southwest Palace at Nimrud reused slabs from the Northwest Palace and at least one other location. Subsequent scholarship confirmed that Esarhaddon (reigned 681–669) did indeed reuse slabs from both the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859) and the palace of Tiglath-pileser III (r. 744–727) in the Southwest Palace at Nimrud.[42] But Layard worked without knowledge of cuneiform, and Rawlinson's incorrect reading of names and scrambled chronology did not help matters.[43] At Nimrud, then, Layard worked primarily based on the principle of reuse: a building that repurposed slabs had to have been constructed later than its source. At Khorsabad and Nineveh, meanwhile, Layard was able to recognize common elements in the genealogy of Sargonid kings, presented as part of their titulary, and so he could confirm that the Southwest Palace at Nineveh postdated the palace at Khorsabad.

Layard was particularly attentive to two types of historical change: dynastic overthrow and racial conflict.[44] This required that Layard stretch his timeline significantly because he did not consider it feasible that an ancient king would reuse monuments from the palace of a respected predecessor (Layard 1849a: II. 201). At Nimrud, Layard (Layard 1849a: 202–203) concluded that a new dynasty with a new religion must have repurposed older slabs from the Northwest Palace, which he believed occurred only after it had fallen into ruins. Stylistic changes evident in the sculptures at Khorsabad and Nineveh were also evidence of either a new dynasty or "a new race" (Layard 1849a: 202–203) taking over the population. Both borrowing and innovation could be subsumed under the succession of dynasties and races.

40 The copy, Add.MS. 39.077, folios 75r–79o, is transcribed in full in Turner 2021: 15–20 as LN 3.

41 Transcribed in Turner 2021: 15.

42 For an overview of subsequent excavations and the sparse remains of the Southwest Palace at Nimrud, see Oates and Oates 2001: 74–77.

43 See Larsen 1996: 120–124, 171–172, 208–210 on Rawlinson's many mis-readings of cuneiform in this period.

44 On race and civilization as drivers of history in the Victorian imagination, see Makdisi 2014; Satia 2020.

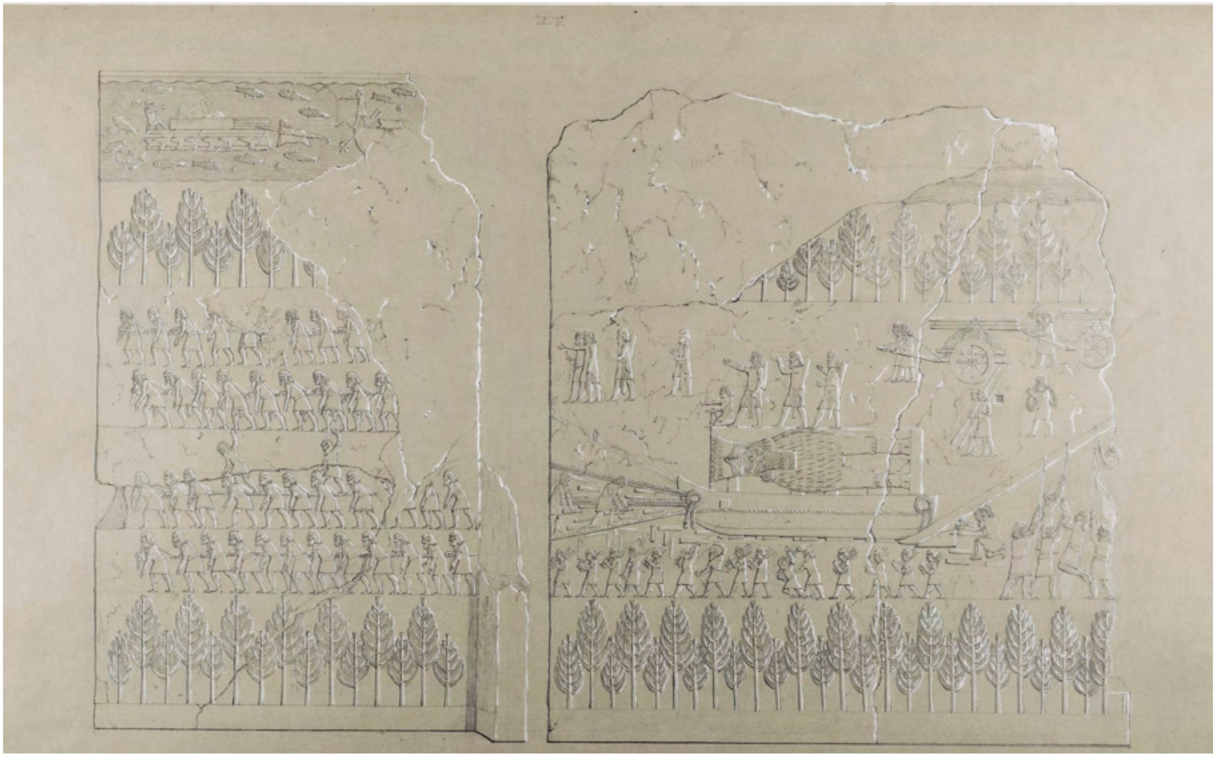

Fig. 9. Frederick Cooper's drawing of slabs 54–56 (right to left) from Court VI of the Southwest Palace, Kuyunjik. Or.Dr. IV.55 (British Museum 2007,6024.57). Photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

When Layard first saw Sennacherib's sculptures in Court VI, he understood the series of reliefs through his own experience. Layard himself, a representative of the ascendent British empire, had recently arranged for the transit of several bulls away from Nimrud. Layard's notebook entries, reviewed above, suggest that he analyzed the new reliefs in Court VI under the same rubric. The Assyrian king, too, was *removing* ancient bulls from another Assyrian site for installation in his new palace.

By the time Layard published *N&B* in 1853, he had sorted out the narrative sequencing of the Court VI reliefs and presented the movement of a single bull from quarry to palace.[45] There was, however, at least one other detail he imported into his analysis of the reliefs from his own experience: the idea of rollers. At Nimrud, Layard had used rollers to transport the massive colossi through the tell before placing each one on the cart. In describing the scene on slabs 54–56 (Fig. 9) of Court VI, Layard (1853b: 89) attributes a similar process to the Assyrian workers: "The sculpture moves over rollers, which, as soon as left behind by the advancing sledge, are brought again to the front by parties of men, who are also under the control of overseers armed with staves." Layard's reconstruction has been reiterated in subsequent treatments of the reliefs (e.g., Turner 2021: 135) and influenced Russell's (1991: 108) reconstruction of the quarrying and transportation practices used to construct Assyrian palaces.

The persistence of this hypothesis is striking because it matches neither the visual evidence nor current reconstructions of ancient building practices. Layard's method required first laying beams longitudinally to construct a track. As Davison (1961: 12) observed over half a century ago, no similar placement of a track is evident on the Assyrian reliefs. Without the benefit of a fully levelled ground and track, it is nearly impossible to keep rollers parallel, and they eventually jam. Over longer distances, this renders rollers impractical and inefficient, at best, as decades of experimental archaeology have shown (Harris 2018: 275). At distances greater than 100 meters (about double the distance Layard covered), it becomes more efficient to lay out timber sleepers, which keep the sledge

45 The earlier understanding resurfaces, however, in the preface to Layard's (1853a: v) *Second Series of the Monuments of Nineveh*: "The series representing the removal of the winged Bulls, and the raising of the mounds on which the Palaces were built, forms a valuable addition to our knowledge of the manners and arts of the ancient Assyrians." It is possible that Layard had already referred to the series in his public lectures, discussed in more detail below.

Fig. 10 (top). A fragment of Slab 58 (BM 124822) from Court VI, Southwest Palace at Kuyunjik. Photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license. Fig. 10.1 (bottom left). A close-up of the logs used as sleepers from figure 10, showing the irregular nubs on each branch. Fig. 10.2 (bottom right). Assyrian workers pulling the bull colossus. The white arrows indicate the cords attached to the rope and looped around the workers' chests.

from biting into the earth, without requiring workers to level the ground, construct a track, hew equally sized timbers, etc. (Harris 2018: 275). In fact, Layard's workers had to resort to a similar technique even when using a wheeled cart. Storage pits and sandy soil caused the cart to bottom out or lose traction, and motion forward could only be resumed when workers wedged planks under the wheels.

The logs in Sennacherib's reliefs that Layard took for rollers are certainly sleepers used for a similar purpose – to keep the sledge from becoming mired in the soil. On a fragment of slab 58 (Fig. 10), now in the British Museum, the logs placed before the sledge are roughly hewn with the nubs of pruned branches still visible (Fig. 10.1).[46] They also vary in width and orientation, with the majority placed parallel to the direction of motion, which would render them entirely useless as rollers. Simply put, neither the details of the relief nor the exigencies of the project should have triggered their identification as such. Layard's confidence and the easy acceptance of his proposal in the secondary literature since might plausibly be explained by two possibilities: lack of experience moving a large object over uneven terrain, or an unshakable commitment to a specific model of technological progress.

Layard certainly had more experience moving heavy objects than, at least, this author does. Although Layard likely overstated his own role in solving problems throughout the endeavor, he was present and described in detail the physical difficulties the workers encountered. The ox-drawn cart seems to have been his idea, inspired by Botta's progress at Khorsabad, and it clearly did not work as planned. Layard was bound to a model of British technological process that likely influenced his decisions and interpretation of Assyrian sculptures. His commitment to the superiority of rollers appears, for example, in his discussion of the famous tomb painting of the 12th-dynasty governor Djehuitehotep at Deir el-Bersha, Egypt. The image provides a parallel to the Assyrian reliefs, with a large colossus mounted on a sledge pulled by rows of workers. Layard (1853b: 97) was puzzled by the lack of rollers or levers shown in the Egyptian scene since, he explained, "the Egyptians must have been well acquainted with the use of both, and no doubt employed them for moving heavy weights." Layard's logic here clearly hews to the evolutionary trajectory that Harris (2018: 268–271) has identified, in which the development of rollers precedes that of the wheel.[47]

Since Layard presented Ottoman Iraq – though not the empire as a whole[48] – as a relic of the ancient past, his own use of rollers at Nimrud must have provided a powerful impetus for making the same identification in Sennacherib's reliefs. By identifying the two methods of transport, Layard could imagine himself master of ancient technology. The undeniable differences that could not be leveled, such as the use of a wheeled oxcart, could then be slotted into the rubric of progress, a process that had already begun with the publication of *N&R*. Here, Layard (1849a: II.75) describes the "wonder" of all Mosul when they saw the massive cart of mulberry wood he had constructed for the undertaking. Malley (2012: 56) argues that the cart functions here as a "marker of cultural maturity that infantilizes the workers and separates them from understanding the meaning of their labor." The same marker also set Layard's method of transport apart from what he would soon find in Sennacherib's, an indication of the technological superiority of modern Europe.

The problem with Layard's self-presentation is, of course, that both ancient Assyrians and contemporary Moslawis could and did use wheeled carts for many tasks. Both iron and hardwood were available to Sennacherib, and the bulls that he moved were considerably heavier than the debulked specimens that Layard had transported. Without access to a well-maintained road, it seems likely that a wooden-wheeled cart was not the best tool for the job. Perhaps, then, Layard did accurately record the reaction of Moslawi society before his cart, just not the cause. Crowds may have gathered to watch the massive cart as it was hauled over a rotten bridge toward the mound at Nimrud, amazed at this bizarre and inefficient construction and curious what disaster would ensue. That the many workers ultimately managed to transport the sculptures on a device so poorly suited to the terrain is surely a testament to *their* ingenuity.

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46 Noted already by Davison 1961: 12; Harris 2018: 273.

47 Harris's (2018: 271–273) suggestion of a link between Layard's roller hypothesis and Robert Weaver's attribution of their innovation to ancient Israel seems more strained. Both Layard and Weaver were clearly operating with a model of scientific progress, but Layard's interest in biblical texts appears to be chiefly as a means to engage the public and boost book sales. This is evident, for example, in Layard's letter to John Murray in March of 1850, promising additional discussion of biblical material in the upcoming abridged version of *N&R* (JMA MS.40677 folio 46r).

48 Layard, like his boss Canning, advanced a pro-Ottoman and anti-Russian policy. In Layard's letter to John Murray of 17 January 1850, Layard complains of the anti-Ottoman stance of Charles Macfarlane, whose work *Turkey and Its Destiny* Murray had recently published. Layard considered the Tanzimat reforms to have successfully modernized much of the empire (JMA MS.40677 folios 42–44).

The Past in the Present: Updating "Procession"(1849–1852)

Sennacherib's bull-transport reliefs were copied by Frederick Cooper, the artist assigned to Layard's second campaign in November and December of 1849. The sketches were likely among the 21 drawings included in the report that Layard sent to the Trustees of the British Museum on December 10, 1849.[49] None of these drawings would, however, be published until 1853 when Layard's *Nineveh and Babylon* (N&B) and *A Second Series of the Monuments of Nineveh* appeared. In the intervening three years, representations of the bull and lion's journey from Nimrud to the British Museum proliferated in the British press.

Since popular interest in Layard's *N&R* was, at least in part, responsible for the outlay to retrieve the sculptures from Basra, it is not surprising that their transit and installation attracted attention. Layard had already cultivated a substantial press-following during the years of his first excavations,[50] and the publication of an abridged version of *N&R* in 1851, after Layard's return to Britain, fed the fires of Assyromania as Layard worked on *N&B* and *Second Series*. The abridgment itself contained updated illustrations, adapted from lithography to the cheaper medium of woodcut, with significant modification to both frontispieces.

The first visual sequel to "Lowering" and "Procession," appeared in the *Illustrated London News* in July 1850 (Fig. 11). The illustration shows workers loading the bull colossus onto the *Apprentice*, a merchant ship owned by the Lynch brothers. The woodcut, the article boasts, was based on a drawing "brought over by one of the Messrs. Lynch, of Bagdad."[51] It is likely that the sketch was done by Thomas Lynch, who had shown several drawings of the Euphrates to Cooper during a previous visit to Mosul in January of 1850. At this time, he also made his own sketches based on some of Cooper's drawings.[52] It is hard to imagine that Lynch did *not* see the newly excavated reliefs of Court VI and Room XLIX while at Kuyunjik in late 1849 and early 1850. Consequently, the *ILN* illustration showing the bull loaded onto the *Apprentice* may have been inspired, at least partially, by the Assyrian reliefs depicting the bull's transport over water.

The influence of the Court VI sculptures on Layard's self-presentation is clearest in the updated version of "Procession of the Bull" that appeared in *A Popular Account of Nineveh and Its Remains*. First published in late 1851, this abridgment of *N&R* was sold at less than a fifteenth the original price.[53] To keep costs down, Murray had a staff engraver, Josiah Wood Whymper, convert the lithographed plates in *N&R* to woodcuts. Whymper modified both frontispieces in the process. The changes to "Lowering the Bull," which remained the frontispiece for the *Popular Account*, were fairly minor and have already been analyzed by Malley (2012: 56–57). In the updated version of "Procession," the workers strain at the ropes, and Layard exhorts them from above, now with his arm raised in excitement. The woodcut adaptation of "Procession" (Fig. 12) is, however, substantially modified.

Of the changes introduced, only two bring the image closer into line with Layard's textual description, which is reproduced mostly unabridged in *Popular Account* (Layard 1851: 289–298). The new woodcut image (facing page 297) shows the felt mats that were wrapped around the colossus to protect it according to Layard's narration. They had been omitted in the original lithograph, presumably to make the details of the sculpture visible. In the updated woodcut, Abd-ur-Rahman and his entourage have been restored to their mounts, which not only conforms to Layard's slightly abbreviated description of the procession (1851: 296) but also is in keeping with Whymper's preference for action.

Every additional modification made to "Procession of the Bull" introduces some element from slabs 54–56 in Court VI of the Southwest Palace (see Fig. 9 above). The direction of movement in the updated "Procession" has been fully reversed to match that of the Assyrian relief. The yoke has also been removed from the cart, as if it had

49 Although the report does not identify which drawings are included, Turner (2021: 118) was able to correlate the slabs excavated before December 10, 1849 with the drawings in the British Museum collections.

50 In addition to the classic study of Bohrer 2003, which focuses on coverage in the *Illustrated London News*, see Kertai 2021.

51 *Illustrated London News* July 17, 1850, 71.

52 These are recorded in Cooper's diary entries for the first days of 1850, transcribed in Turner 2021: 205.

53 On the success and pricing of the *Popular Account*, see Bohrer 1992: 98–100.

Fig. 11. A dramatization of the bull colossus being hoisted aboard *Apprentice*. *Illustrated London News* (July 27, 1850, p. 72).

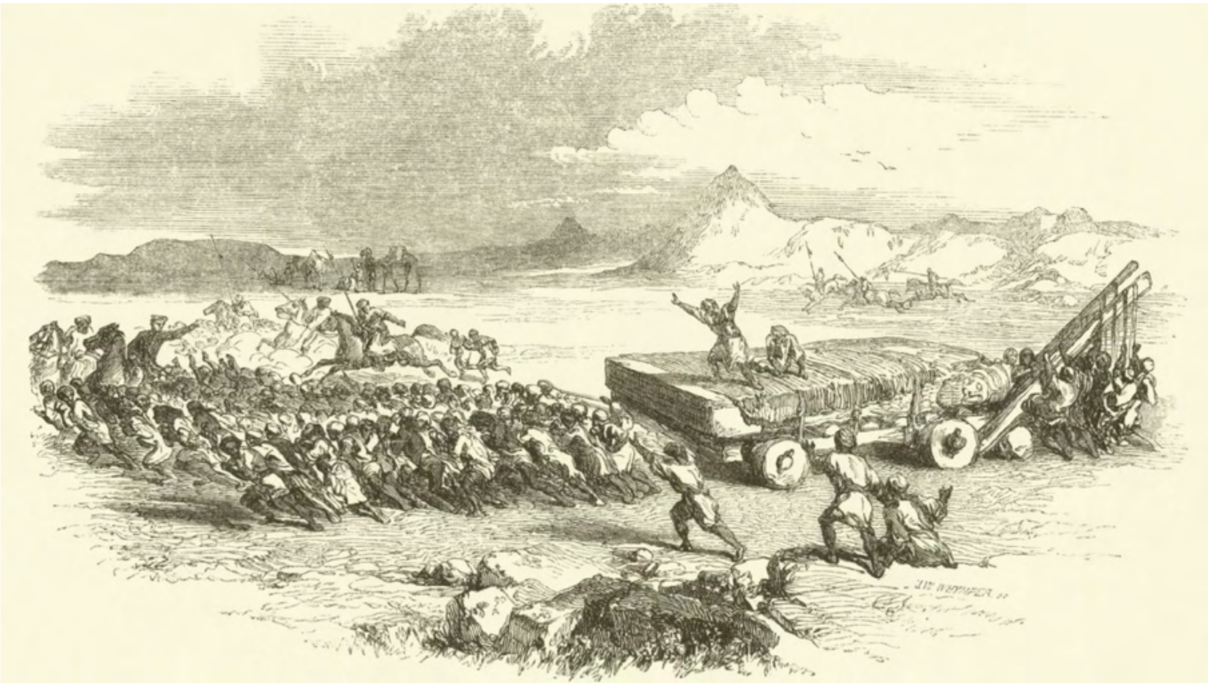

Fig. 12. Josiah Wood Whymper's updated woodcut version of "Procession of the Bull." Layard 1851, facing p. 297.

been designed to be drawn by humans alone like Sennacherib's sledges. Although the text retains the reference to the recalcitrant oxen, replaced by Tiyari workers, they (and their "curious conical caps") have vanished from the woodcut. The ruins of a more modern village at the base of Nimrud were likewise erased,[54] replaced by galloping riders and some more of the requisite camels.

54 The text does retain Layard's (Layard 1851: 296) mention of the village and his explanation that the inhabitants had moved closer to the river after it had shifted its course westward, leaving them an inconvenient distance from water.

The posture of the workers has also changed significantly. In the original lithograph prepared by Scharf, many of the men have their feet set toward the bull so that they can use their bodyweight, leaning backward as they haul on the ropes. This contrasts with the uniform posture of Sennacherib's workers who all lean into the work. In the Assyrian relief, cords are strung into the thick rope at regular intervals. On the extant portion of slab 58 in the British Museum (see Fig. 10.2 above), the Assyrian artists clearly show the workers with these cords looped around the broadest part of their chests. Cooper's drawing of slab 56, however, gives the impression that on this slab the cords were looped around the workers' right shoulders. Much of this is taken up in Whymper's woodcut. All workers now face forward and are shown mid stride. Where the men's hands are visible, they are clasped above their right shoulders.

In the updated "Procession," two figures have also appeared on top of the bull itself. This striking feature – two men perched on a ten-ton stone bull as it is dragged over rough terrain – must be a later innovation to the scene. Nothing of the sort appears in Layard's prose narration, either in the 1849 original or the in 1851 abridgment the woodcut illustrates, nor do the two figures appear in Scharf's lithographed frontispiece. The men do, however, have clear parallels in the scene on slab 56 (see Fig. 9 above), where four men perch atop the bull as it is pulled on the sledge. One of the men kneels and another raises both arms in postures that likely inspired the new detail in Whymper's woodcut.

The strangest of all the changes, at least from a mechanical perspective, is the addition of a forked lever at the back of the cart. Not only is this detail absent from previous textual and visual iterations of the scene, but it would likely have hindered the progress of the cart. The lever in the woodcut is placed at the left side of the cart, with one of the forked ends inexplicably placed in front of the cart itself, rendering it useless. Underneath the lever is either the end of a roller or a large boulder, nearly as large as the wheels and taller than the cart could clear.[55] Under either interpretation, the large object would impede the motion of the cart. A large boulder should have been removed from the cart's path, and a roller is clearly unnecessary. Furthermore, using a lever at the back left corner would most likely increase the pressure on the front right wheel, increasing the risk of lodging the cart in the sand.

These new details can again be explained by recourse to the Assyrian reliefs. Slab 56 shows the sledge's progress aided by a lever and two triangular fulcrum blocks. The workers in the rear pull ropes to work the lever, relieving pressure from the back of the sledge as the larger body of workers pulls forward. Beneath the lever, the larger triangular block may have helped keep the sledge from backsliding, while the smaller block on top could be manipulated to change the location of the fulcrum point.[56] In updating "Procession", Whymper appears to have imported the Assyrian use of levers, designed to propel an unwheeled sledge, to enhance the drama of the procession. Since Layard's wheeled cart could not be converted to a sledge – the wheels being a marker of technological progress – basic mechanics had to be sacrificed.

Layard himself was heavily involved in all aspects of producing *Popular Account*. He began the process of abridging the text in the spring of 1850,[57] but the bulk of the work, including the modification of illustrations, was undertaken after Layard had returned to England in Summer 1851. Frequent references in Layard's correspondence to meetings between Layard, Murray, and a team of illustrators indicate that much of the work was carried out in person, and Layard's catalogued letters to Murray do not include explicit comment on the updating of "Procession."[58] Layard does, however, explicitly request that Cooper update the illustration "Shammar Lady on a Camel" for the abridgment due to inaccuracies in the original saddle.[59] In the same letter, Layard requests that a specific drawing

55 In the cotton print produced in 1854 to illustrate Layard's lectures (British Museum EPH-ME.211), the object under the cart is clearly a roller and not a boulder, but this could be a later clarification of the illustration. The print is discussed in more detail below.

56 This is the conclusion Layard (1853b: 95) also eventually reached concerning the function of the two triangular blocks beneath the lever, but he was clearly not bothered by the incoherent mashup in Whymper's illustration, which he also references on the same page as an illustration of his own methods (discussed in more detail below).

57 In a letter from Mosul dated March 10, 1850 (JMA MS.40677, folios 46o–47r), Layard outlines his plans for the abridgment.

58 For documentation of illustrations for the abridgment of N&R, I reviewed Layard's letters to Murray for the years 1850 and 1851 (JMA MS. 40677, folios 42–67 and MS.42341, folios 23–43), Scharf's letters to Murray in the same period (JMA MS. 41065, unfoliated [8 letters]).

59 Letter from Layard to Murray dated August 11, 1851 (JMA MS.42341, folios 29o–30o).

Fig. 13. Cloth print of "Procession of the Bull" produced by the Working Men's Educational Union (British Museum EPH-ME.211). 74.5 x 108.5 cm. Photograph © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

by Milan be included as a new illustration in the abridgment and inquires whether the winged lion and bull, which were included as lithographed plates in *N&R*, will need to be reduced in size for inclusion in *Popular Account*.

For Layard and his illustrators, accuracy was not only a matter of the faithful representation of details. Layard and Scharf, who illustrated both 1853 volumes (*N&B* and *Second Series*), deemed the spirit of a scene particularly important. In an 1851 letter to John Murray, Scharf offers a candid reflection on artistic practice, which he felt should be guided but not constrained by the use of models.[60] Layard himself fretted over the engravings for his abridged *Popular Account*, concerned that the head printer for the woodcuts, Wilhelm H. L. Gruner, had not taken enough care with the work. After reviewing an initial set of proofs, Layard wrote in September 1851 to complain that none were suitable: "the lines are *ragged + careless*," and "the spirit of the original is not entered into."[61] Beyond accuracy, Layard's works cultivated an experience for the reader, mediated in part through visual art.

The modifications that Whymper made to "Procession" apparently pleased Layard. Beginning in 1852, Layard and Scharf offered occasional lectures on the excavations at Nimrud and Kuyunjik, sponsored by the Working Men's Educational Union and copiously illustrated with painted cotton screens.[62] One surviving screen, now held in the British Museum (Fig. 13), shows a version of "Procession" based on Whymper's version, not the original lithograph engraved by Scharf.[63] One further detail has been added that brings the scene even closer to

60 Letter from Scharf to Murray dated January 23, 1851 (JMA MS.41065, unfoliated).

61 Letter from Layard to Murray dated September 17, 1851 (JMA MS.40677, folios 58o–59r). Quote at 58r.

62 McCall and Seymour 2020.

63 Seymour (2020: 24) has identified this screen as belonging to a second set of illustrations produced in 1854–1855 to replace the original set, which had worn out by then. The original set, produced in 1852, also included a version of the procession of the bull. This is evident from a portrait of George Scharf II giving a lecture in 1852, sketched by his father (George Scharf I). Behind George Scharf II's head a note reads: "Picture of removing of the Bull from the mound." The portrait is held in

Sennacherib's reliefs. Now a river has appeared in the background, between the procession and the mound of Nimrud. This matches the river shown in the upper register of slabs 54–56 of Sennacherib's Court VI. The interpolation of the river in this latest update to "Procession" is in no way accurate: it contradicts Layard's description of the river's shift away from the mound and muddles the purpose of the procession, which was to bring the bull and lion colossi to the bank of the Tigris, not ford it and continue overland.

Conclusion: The Wheels of Progress

By the time the reliefs from Court VI were published in 1853, the British public had been inundated with representations of the colossi on their recent journey to the British Museum as David Kertai (2021) has shown. The uncanny recognition that scholars feel, even today, seeing these ancient images had taken quite a lot of work to produce, and Layard did not want anyone to miss the effect. Layard's (1853b: 95) description of the Assyrian scenes explicitly recalls the modern images for his readers. He explains, "From these bas-reliefs we find that the Assyrians were well acquainted with the lever and the roller. […] When moving the winged bulls and lions now in the British Museum from the ruins to the banks of the Tigris, I used almost the same means." An accompanying footnote sends the reader neither to Layard's prose description in *N&R* nor even to Scharf's creative dramatization of the moment. Instead, Layard refers the reader to Whymper's reinterpretation of the scene in *Popular Account*, with its unacknowledged reliance on Sennacherib's reliefs. Layard comments that the woodcut "may be compared with the Assyrian bas-reliefs, to show the difference between the ancient and modern treatment of a subject almost identic."

The assertion of different ancient and modern techniques is remarkable, given that so much of Layard's work has blurred those boundaries, attributing aspects of his own process to Sennacherib and liberally borrowing from Assyrian reliefs. The illusion is sustained by the belief in a rupture between the ancient and modern, even as Layard is constructed as a privileged figure who can dance between domains. Only the cart's wheels are left to testify to the technological superiority of the modern European man. Layard (1853b: 95) draws our attention to this one distinction, surmising that the Assyrians were "unable to construct a wheeled cart of sufficient strength to carry so great a weight." Layard's hypothesis omits an important piece of information: Sennacherib's workers transported colossi four to five times heavier than the ones Layard had loaded onto his own wheeled cart.[64] Consequently, it is unlikely that Layard's modern cart could have handled Sennacherib's load, either. But this seems not to have troubled a public who had already accepted the completely non-functional contraption dramatized by Whymper.

At issue here is not whether more durable carts and wheels existed in the mid-nineteenth century CE than were available two and a half millennia earlier. Without access to a greater source of funding, Layard could not procure better equipment, and it is unclear how much they would have benefited him without the construction of a road. More interesting is the symbolic weight Layard's wheels bore as a marker of civilization. The illustrations created the illusion that Layard mastered all the techniques employed by Assyrian builders in just a few years and on a shoestring budget. His trophies were won for England fair and square, not with imported technology but with his superior understanding of wheeled transit and construction skills.

This vision of Layard's enterprise had both personal benefit for the aspiring statesman and broader appeal for an imperial public. They bolstered Layard's image as a "man of the people" who earned his seat in the House of Commons, which he entered in 1852, through his hard work, intelligence, and merit.[65] The illustrations also served the purpose of informal imperialism, projecting British power over the residents of ancient and Ottoman Iraq. They present the acquisition of these artifacts as a process parallel to, or perhaps the completion of, the Assyrian construction process – as if the bulls were always destined for display in European (and now American) museums.

the British Museum (1862,0614.178) and is discussed in more detail in McCall and Seymour 2020.

64 At Nineveh, Russell (1987: 520) estimates the weight of the colossi in Court VI at 40–50 tons. According to an article in the *Illustrated London News* (28 February 1892, p. 184) announcing the arrival of the colossi at the British Museum, the lion colossus weighed "upwards of ten tons."

65 On the role of Layard's archaeological endeavors in launching his political career more generally, see Parry 2020.

Understanding how Layard appropriated not just Assyrian monuments but also their compositional elements can enrich our knowledge of history, both ancient and modern. The narrative of technological progress, for example, has obscured Assyrian quarrying and transportation practices. But the harm done by this narrative of progress, and the archaeological despoliation it naturalized, is not confined to the 19th or even 20th centuries. The narrative of Western Civilization, and of Euro-American stewardship of antiquities, was never retired. As Shawn Malley (2012) has shown, it proved instrumental in justifying the 2003 Anglo-American occupation of Iraq. Today, Iraqi scholars face challenges accessing artifacts held abroad as well as the international scholarly community that has formed around them. Understanding Layard's publication process does not redress these harms. It can, though, reveal how much work it took to make the presence of Iraq's heritage in European and American collections seem natural.

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The Wellesley Assyrian Relief: A Necrography

Eric X. Jarrard

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The Wellesley Assyrian Relief: A Necrography

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Abstract

Over the last decade, Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe has developed the concept of necropolitics as a biting critique of the Eurocentricism of Foucault's biopolitical discourse. Building on Mbembe, the art historian Dan Hicks has advanced the concept of necrography as a productive paradigm by which the looted objects in museum collections might be analyzed as legacies of colonial despoliation. He suggests that a necrography of looted objects provides the desperately needed context that has been stripped away from them in the service of Western European and American colonial efforts.

Using Hicks's work as a blueprint, this paper provides a preliminary necrography for the "Captive Being Flayed," or the so-called Wellesley Eunuch [Wellesley Davis Museum; 1883.1]. In so doing, I attempt to answer the fundamental questions: *What is our responsibility to the objects in our care?* And, more importantly: *How the curation of these objects extends the orientalist impulses out of which they were procured, allowing them to metastasize into new* lieux de memoire *as satellites of decaying empires?*

Keywords

Neo-Assyria, museum, cultural heritage, reliefs, art history

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten zehn Jahren hat der kamerunische Philosoph Achille Mbembe das Konzept der Nekropolitik als scharfe Kritik am Eurozentrismus von Foucaults biopolitischen Diskurs entwickelt. Aufbauend auf Mbembe hat der Kunsthistoriker Dan Hicks das Konzept der Nekrografie als produktives Paradigma entwickelt, mit dem die geraubten Objekte in Museumssammlungen als Vermächtnis kolonialer Plünderungen analysiert werden können. Er schlägt vor, dass eine Nekrografie geraubter Objekte den dringend benötigten Kontext liefert, der ihnen im Dienste der kolonialen Bestrebungen Westeuropas und Amerikas genommen wurde.

Auf der Grundlage von Hicks' Arbeit liefert dieser Artikel eine vorläufige Nekrografie für das Werk „Captive Being Flayed" (Gefangener wird gehäutet) oder den sogenannten Wellesley-Eunuchen [Wellesley Davis Museum; 1883.1]. Dabei versuche ich, die grundlegende Fragen zu beantworten: Welche Verantwortung tragen wir für die Objekte in unserer Obhut? Und, was noch wichtiger ist: Inwiefern verlängert die Kuratierung dieser Objekte die orientalistischen Impulse, aus denen sie beschafft wurden, und ermöglicht ihnen so, sich als Satelliten zerfallender Imperien zu neuen *lieux de memoire* zu entwickeln?

Schlagwörter

Neuassyrien , Museum, Kulturerbe, Reliefs, Kunstgeschichte

Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American museums, missionaries, and colleges joined the European – primarily English and French – despoliation of the Middle East in a fervent clamor to accumulate collections of Neo-Assyrian objects to imitate the emerging collections being amassed in the British Museum and Louvre. The assemblage of these objects of cultural heritage and their curation into prestigious institutions created museums that were and remain “a product of colonialism” (Collins 2020: 233). The establishment of these institutional spaces required the systematic removal of the cultural, material, and natural resources from sites and peoples throughout the world and subsequently transferred their possession for the benefit and enrichment of the plundering party; the modus operandi of colonial powers.

Nearly two centuries after the initial excavations of the objects, these institutions often struggle to cultivate significant public interest or excitement in Neo-Assyrian culture. For example, despite a highly publicized and marketed 2018 exhibition *I am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria*, the British museum reported that while visits to the museum from overseas tourists and Londoners were consistent with similar exhibitions on Scythians and Egypt, the exhibition failed to resonate with visitors from elsewhere in the UK. Moreover, the exhibition recorded an extremely low rate of first-time visitors to the museum (4%), and a high rate of specialist visitors (16%). In other words, the Assyrian exhibition did little to cultivate new interest in the collection and likely attracted visitors for whom the Assyrian collection was already known, or who regularly visited the museum (McIntyre 2019). The visitor data for the 2018 showcase represents a general inability of museums to cultivate sustained interest in the Assyrian artifacts. Presumably as a consequence of this indifference, some of these objects have been left to languish in storage rooms throughout the world, rarely if ever on display.

When I arrived at Wellesley College in the Fall of 2020, this was certainly the case concerning The Wellesley College Davis Museum’s object 1883.1 (“Captive being Flayed”).

Figs. 1–2. 11 December 2016: Photographs of Wellesley Davis Museum 1883.1, front and reverse.

The Davis listed only this description (Davis Museum 2023):

Title: Captive Being Flayed
MAKER: Assyrian
DATE: ca. 645–640 B.C.E.
MEDIUM: Gypsum
DIMENSIONS: overall: 12 in. x 12 in. x 1.5 in. (30.5 cm x 30.5 cm x 3.8 cm)
CLASSIFICATION: Sculpture
CREDIT LINE: Gift of the Estate of Rev. Gorham D. Abbot
OBJECT NUMBER: 1883.1
STATUS: Not on view

Fig. 3. Artistic rendering of 1883.1, Jordyn de Veer.

As the catalog description and image indicate, the 1.5-inch-thick gypsum (alabaster) slab is triangular in shape with two twelve-inch sides. Using the Pythagorean theorem, the third side would measure roughly 16.97 inches. The museum maintained two sets of photographs of the object. The metadata for the first set of photos (Figs. 1–2) indicate a creation date of 11 December 2016. The second set of photographs, whose metadata show a creation date of 23 November 2009 indicated that the relief had been repaired (Fig. 4).

Figs. 4–5. 23 November 2009 Photographs of Wellesley Davis Museum 1883.1 and artistic rendering.

I was unable to locate any records of the circumstances surrounding the repair, including the origin of the damage, or when or why the repair took place. The repair filled the most substantial crack across the throat and through the left pectoral muscle of the subject, but also several less prominent cracks to the background of the relief above the subject's head. The dark gray discoloration over the right hand of the subject (upper-right hand corner of the relief) and the brown residue on the background below the subject's left rib cage (lower left of the relief) were present in both sets of images.

Perhaps the most interesting detail of the description concerned the dating of 1883.1. I initially assumed that this relief was of a kind with the sizeable collections of Neo-Assyrian reliefs decorating the walls of other prestigious American colleges in the northeastern United States such as Dartmouth, Amherst, and Bowdoin. Those originated almost exclusively from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II, who reigned from 883–859 BCE from the ancient city of Kalhu (Nimrud). The date in the file, however, would make this provenance an impossibility and would place the relief instead at the North Palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh. This would distinguish the Wellesley relief from the other American reliefs quite substantially, making it exceedingly rare. So, out of sheer curiosity – and necessity if I wished to use the object in my teaching, which I did – I began to investigate the provenance of the object and to assemble what Dan Hicks has called a necrography – or inverse history – for object 1883.1.

What Is a Necrography?

In *The Brutish Museums*, Hicks, the curator of World Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum and Professor of Contemporary Archaeology at Oxford University, coined necrography as a productive paradigm by which the looted Benin Objects in the collection of the British Museum might be analyzed as a legacy of colonial war (Hicks 2020: 25–36). His project had an ambitious multi-temporal gaze, looking backward to the history of the objects in these collections, but also forward to demand restitution and repatriation:

> "This necrography of Benin 1897 is a forensic excavation not an anthrohistorical exercise, seeking not just to call out the crimes, to count up the dead, to think ourselves back into the past like the historian – but to take action in the present." (Hicks 2020: 36)

His project went on to interrogate the despoliation of the Benin Kingdom by the British Empire and the subsequent curation of their efforts through the collection and display of the Benin Bronzes in primarily Western European and American museums.

Hicks intentionally differentiated his work from more conventional cultural biographies of objects. As he described it, necrographies are distinctive from work in cultural or object biographies in that the cultural biographies of objects "stifle any discussion of enduring colonial violence over time" (Hicks 2020: 26). The goal is to remove such provenance research out of the "tacit pact between museums and the public […] by aiming a spotlight at the inaccuracies and gaps in museums' self-serving historical accounts" (Marlowe 2021: 576). Or, put another way: the explicit goal of a necrography is research in service of the object and the culture and group from whom it originated, not the museum's rights to retain it – often at the (non-financial) expense of the very groups who generated the object.

Thus, Hicks advanced the concept of a necrography as an extension of the work by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe. In an article (Mbembe 2003) and book (Mbembe 2019) by the same title, Mbembe developed the concept of necropolitics as a trenchant critique of the Eurocentricism evident in Michel Foucault's biopolitical discourse. In Foucault's seminal work on power (Foucault 1978), he proposed that whereas once monarchs exercised and demonstrated sovereign power through executions and war, the monarchic system was systematically transformed over time into new forms of political rationality, first through disciplinary institutions (*institution disciplinaire*) and then biopower (*biopouvoir*) – wherein the state asserted its power through the preservation and particularly the restriction of life. So, Foucault proposed that rather than simply exercising power through killing constituents, thus leaving individual rulers and empires susceptible to acts of retaliation and revolt, rulers began to exert their power by controlling human bodies, transforming their authority to appear benevolent. The transformational mutation in power marked a shift wherein the state was concerned with the minutiae of life, health, and death of individuals as an aggregate or abstraction: the *how* but not the *who* of existence.

Understandably, Mbembe observed certain biases in Foucault's theory. He pointed out that the ostensible benevolence described by Foucault was not equally accessible to all the constituent members of any ruler's domain. To account for this theoretical gap, Mbembe proposed necropolitics as a term to describe how power is systematically deployed using tactics and strategies to eliminate certain contingents of a population with minimal resistance or interference – often along lines of race. He further proposed that a state or authority, for usually racist or ethnocentric reasons, exerts its power through its determination that certain bodies are less valuable than others. Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 1998) described a similar phenomenon in his work on ‘bare life,’ where the biological existence of certain groups is prioritized over the quality or reality of that life’s circumstance. Or, put another way, human beings are functionally reduced to their physical bodies, and thus meaningless and expendable; they are tools and not fully realized persons.

Building on Mbembe’s concepts, Hicks suggested that redressing the necropower exercised by England on the Benin Kingdom would require starting with the Benin Bronzes – objects of cultural heritage from the Benin Kingdom. In theory, this would begin the reactualization of personhood backwards, restoring cultural value to the labor of the Benin peoples, and by extension, to the Benin people themselves. A necropolitical analysis of the Benin Bronzes and objects allows us to see how collections, like those held by the British Museum, serve as a functional prosthesis for the literal murder of Benin peoples and the metaphorical murder of their cultural heritage.

In what follows, I demonstrate what it means to take the charge proposed by Hicks quite literally. Hicks endeavored to investigate the Benin Bronze collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum, “to dig into what we know, to use our specialist and sometimes esoteric technical knowledge to excavate new pasts and presents, perhaps even to seek to carve out better futures too” (Hicks 2020: xii). In this article, I outline the research I have conducted to provide a necrography of a small triangular piece of a Neo-Assyrian relief, or object 1883.1 of the Wellesley Davis Museum collection. I will construct this necrography in several parts: (1) I will establish the details concerning what was known about the relief from the records the museum had maintained about its origin; (2) I will provide some basic background on the initial excavations at Nineveh; (3) I will detail what I was able to recover or hypothesize about the provenance of the Wellesley relief, including how it was sent to America by an American missionary; and (4) how it may have come into possession of the donor responsible for gifting the relief to Wellesley College; and finally (5) how and when that donation may have taken place. In so doing, I hope to model a necrography as one possible path toward reevaluating our personal and professional responsibility to objects like 1883.1, and more generally, to interrogate how American museums and academics remain complicit in – and can help redress the harms of – the despoliation of the Middle East through the acquisition and maintenance of Assyrian reliefs.

The Record of 1883.1

The museum’s records concerning the relief provided very little clarification concerning its provenance. The object’s folder contained only a single letter from 1997, written by Julian Reade, who at the time was the Assistant Keeper for the British Museum’s collection of Western Asiatic Antiquities (now the Department of the Middle East). The letter, it seems, confirmed the authenticity of the relief contra an article written by Pauline Albenda, to which the letter made reference. Reade’s letter stated:

> “Thank you for the fine print of the ‘captive being flayed’, and the details of the height of the relief carving. I expect the stone is gypsum. Although I myself have never inspected the piece directly, I do not share the doubts expressed by Pauline Albenda and Oscar White Muscarella. On the contrary, I have never seen any reason to question its authenticity. If its accession number refers to the year 1883, I suppose the clergyman who bequeathed it may have acquired it at Mosul himself or from a friend among the missionaries there. I ascribe it to the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, with a date about 645–640 BC.” (Reade 1997: 1)

Reade went on to clarify some of the stylistic elements of the scene depicted, and he referenced photos from similar reliefs in the British Museum’s collection that were no longer available in the file for 1883.1.

Authenticity

In two articles published on 1883.1, there were two proposed dates offered for its acquisition. Albenda’s paper which appeared in a 1970 issue of the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* began: “In 1951 Wellesley College acquired a fragmentary Assyrian relief from the estate of the Reverend Gorham D. Abbot" (Albenda 1970: 145). She concluded in her article, without ever seeing the relief, that based on some stylistic features it was a forgery. Those findings were subsequently mentioned (and accepted) by Oscar White Muscarella (2000: 180).[1]

Reade's letter, and an article he would later write on the relief in 2001, referred to the correlation between accession number and the date of 1883. If Albenda is correct and Wellesley did acquire the relief in 1951, there is a higher probability – though not at all inevitable – that the relief might be a forgery. If, however, Reade's letter and the Davis listing is correct and Wellesley acquired the relief in or before 1883, it would be more probable that the relief was authentic. As Reade hypothesized:

> "That the fragment was acquired by Wellesley in 1883 is a strong argument in its favour, since no plausible nineteenth-century forgeries of Assyrian sculpture have yet come to light, and this one is far too small to have been worth faking at the time. Missionaries resident in Mosul during the 1850s sent many Assyrian panels and fragments to institutions and friends in the United States, as described by Stearns, and it seems likely that this is how one came into the possession of the Rev. Abbot." (Reade 2001: 68)[2]

Because of the Wellesley relief's fragmentary nature and the unremarkable subject matter, it would have had little perceived value. Moreover, in 1883, the skills and knowledge to produce such a replica were more limited. Accordingly, the incentive and ability to create the Wellesley Eunuch in 1883 or earlier would have been lacking.

Origination

Much of the disagreement concerning its authenticity hinges upon the palace whence the relief might have originated. Albenda and Muscarella attributed the piece to the Lachish reliefs of Sennacherib's palace on the basis of its depiction of a flayed prisoner but found the Wellesley relief to be stylistically incompatible with the Lachish reliefs and thus a forgery. Emily and Cornelius C. Vermeule (Vermeule and Vermeule 1972: 278) report this possibility in their review of antiquities at Wellesley College, but also refer to a proposal by Richard D. Barnett that the relief actually originated from Room M in the North Palace of Ashurbanipal.[3] In support of the view that the Wellesley relief originated in Room M of the North Palace, Reade (2001: 70–73) provided a detailed analysis comparing the Wellesley relief to other similar figures from the North Palace, including fragments held by the Louvre such as AO 19912 (Fig. 6).

Reade concluded that the Wellesley relief was from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh and depicts a Mannean eunuch being flayed. The curved instrument under the left armpit is a flaying knife, typical of scenes found elsewhere in reliefs. The shackled wrists further support this conclusion. The exposed ligament, musculature, and ribs likely indicate the skin has already been removed from the victim. Neo-Assyrian reliefs rarely show emaciated forms as it bolstered their self-perception to show conquests over strong armies. The figure's lack of facial hair and short hair may indicate that the person is a eunuch. As further evidence, Reade (2001: 69) also stated that the person's chest was slightly more prominent than what would be typical of other male figures depicted in Assyrian art.

I am ambivalent about this one minor point in Reade's conclusion concerning the figure's chest, but Reade only ever saw the relief in a low-resolution, black-and-white photo. A closer visual inspection of the relief reveals muscular striations in the figure's left pectoralis major; the original state of the right pectoralis major is unknown due to the repair to the relief noted above. The examples of prisoners being flayed in other reliefs are from other palaces or are not eunuchs (e.g., BM 124909 from the Lachish reliefs in which the genitals are unmutilated and the

1 Muscarella and Albenda are often conservative in their assessment of relief fragments, typically assuming they are forgeries when the provenance cannot be traced linearly and directly back to the archaeological dig.

2 See also Stearns 1961.

3 Barnett was the Keeper of Western Asiatic Antiquities of the British Museum from 1955–1974. Presumably Emily and Cornelius Vermeule received this opinion directly from Barnett, as they cite no published work asserting the Room M connection and Barnett's 1976 *Sculptures from the North Palace* mentions the Wellesley Relief only as a "possible fragment" of a flayed person.

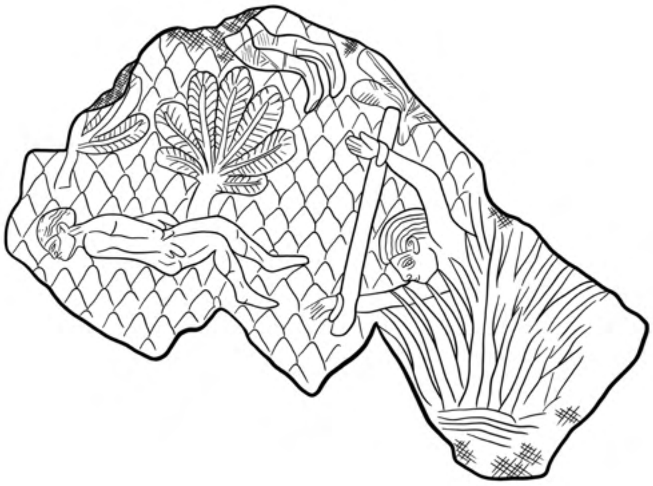


Fig. 6. Artistic rendering of Louvre AO 19921, Jordyn de Veer.

skin on the chest remains intact given the presence of a nipple; or BM 124808 depicting a bearded prisoner at the Battle of Til-Tuba whose skin has been removed to his armpits). A consequence of the dearth of representation is that we have little to which we can compare the prisoner being flayed in 1883.1. However, if the relief was indeed attempting to depict the chest of eunuch, one would expect the pectoral striations to have been obscured with a profusion of fatty breast tissue as a result of the eunuch's gynecomastia (the swelling of breast tissue resulting from hormone imbalances). Thus, given the exposed bones and musculature, we ought to understand the figure's chest as the exposed pectoral muscles after the skin has been removed.

Where Reade's contribution is most useful is his discussion of the origin of the slab, predicated on the figure it depicts. He proposed that the Mannean depicted is a prisoner being tortured after the destruction of the city of Birti-Adad-remanni. This location was associated with Mannea, whose officials are often depicted wearing caps. The figure's short hairstyle, which had been badly damaged in 1883.1, further supports this as the subject. Reade therefore concluded that the relief originated in panel 2–3 of Room M in the North Palace of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh.[4]

Reade's assessment remains the most comprehensive and convincing published analysis of the relief. The evidence of fire damage to the upper right-hand quadrant of the relief adds further credence to Reade's analysis. Its origin in Room M is made all the more likely by the fact that Room M was burned during the destruction of the palace (Reade 2022: 56–57). In subsequent conversations and a review of a high-resolution photo of the relief, Reade confirmed that the fire damage was likely and that this further supported his published findings. Consequently, I remain persuaded by Reade that the relief is authentic, that it was from the North Palace, and that it depicts a

Mannean captive being flayed. These conclusions, however, are substantially more probable if the museum had not received the relief in 1951, as Albenda suggested.[5]

4 In the seventh century BCE, Nineveh was the imperial capital of the Assyrian empire, which made it a central hub of a vast trading network extending from western Europe to central Africa, enveloping nearly the entire Middle East and southern Arabia, and into Asia. It had an elaborate system of canals that provided irrigation and transport, and it was surrounded by massive walls, close to 7.5 miles punctuated by a series of eighteen gates. Within those city walls were several royal palaces, a 2000-year-old temple complex, and a military base. For a detailed discussion of the North Palace reliefs, see Reade 2022.

5 In our discussions, Reade observed that he had somehow overlooked Albenda's acquisition date of 1951, and he conceded that if she was right, it might very well be a forgery.

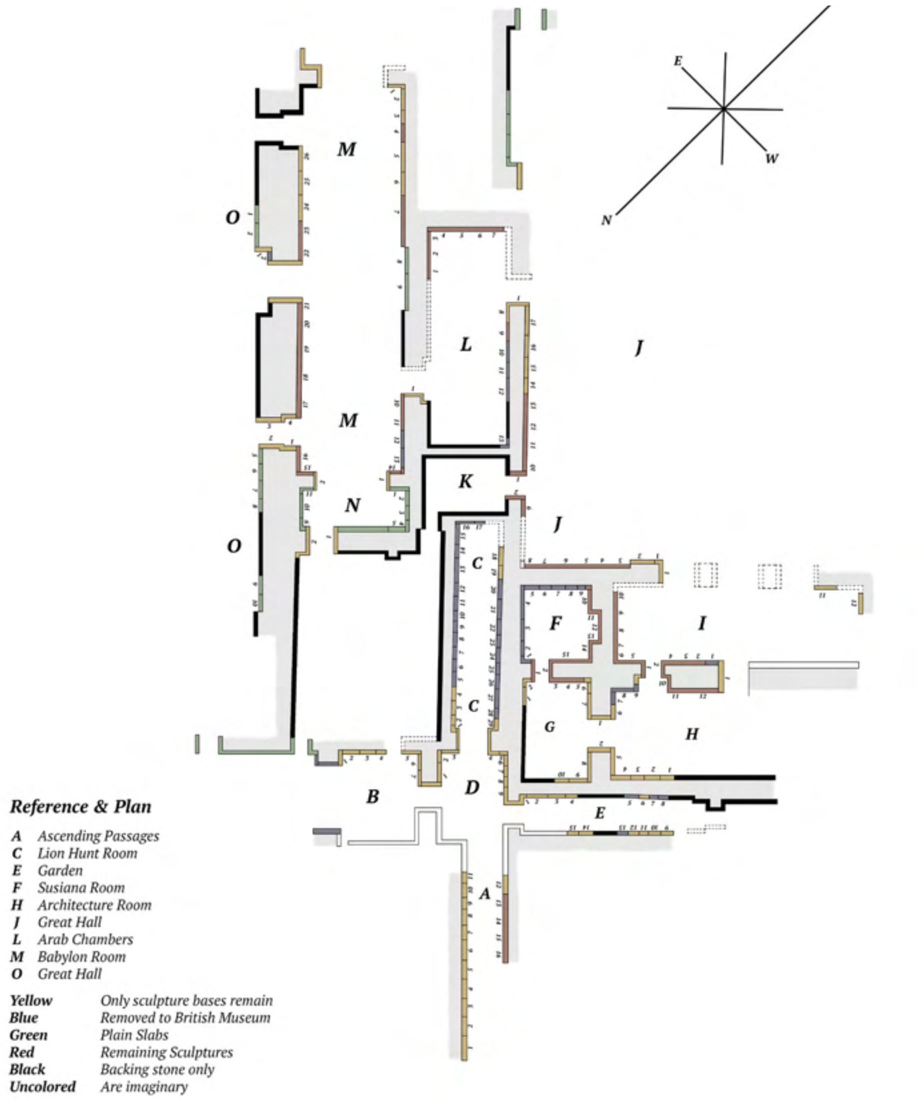
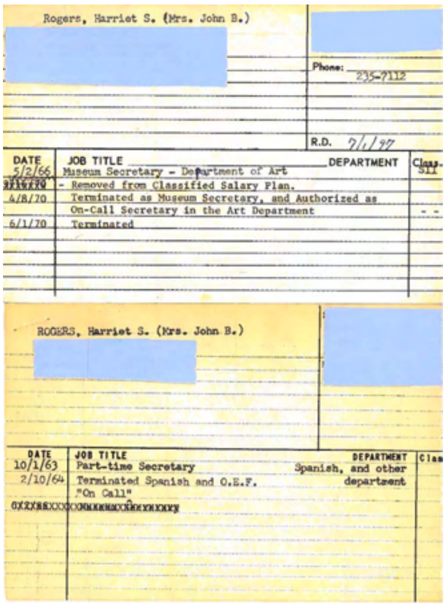


Fig. 7. Artistic rendering of Bouchard's first North Palace map, Jordyn de Veer.

Acquisition Date

No one in Abbott's immediate family was alive in 1883 or 1951 to donate the relief to Wellesley College. Nevertheless, the donation certainly had a *terminus a quo* of the Wellesley charter and a *terminus ad quem* of the date suggested by Albenda. That is to say, it had to be donated by Gorham D. Abbott sometime between 1870 and 1951.

Albenda's 1951 dating – the *terminus ad quem* of the donation of the relief – was unsubstantiated by the Wellesley archive, whether in contemporary records of its acquisition or correspondences between Albenda and the museum staff. In her article, Albenda acknowledges two Wellesley employees: Margaret Robinson, the acting director of the Wellesley Museum at the time of Albenda's article, and Harriet Rogers. Wellesley Human Resources did verify that Harriett Rogers worked for the museum between 1966 and 1970 as the museum's secretary.



Rogers, Harriet S. (Mrs. John B.)

Phone: 235-7112

R.D. 7/1/97

DATE	JOB TITLE	DEPARTMENT	Class.
5/2/66	Museum Secretary - Department of Art		SII
[illegible]	- Removed from Classified Salary Plan.		
4/8/70	Terminated as Museum Secretary, and Authorized as On-Call Secretary in the Art Department		- -
6/1/70	Terminated		

ROGERS, Harriet S. (Mrs. John B.)

DATE	JOB TITLE	DEPARTMENT	Clas
10/1/63	Part-time Secretary	Spanish, and other	
2/10/64	Terminated Spanish and O.E.F. "On Call"	department	

Fig. 8. Wellesley human resources records for Harriet S. Rogers.

Having been unable to verify her date in the Wellesley archive, I corresponded with Albenda to ask where she would have gotten the acquisition date of 1951. She replied:

> "As I may recall, the information was given to me by [Margaret Robinson or Harriett Rogers]. At that time, we were viewing the bas-relief currently on exhibit. To my knowledge, my 'date' was not questioned till now, although my conclusion regarding the bas-relief has been questioned." (Albenda 2022)

So, I am still unable to account for Dr. Albenda's 1951 date or what would have brought about the disparity.[6]

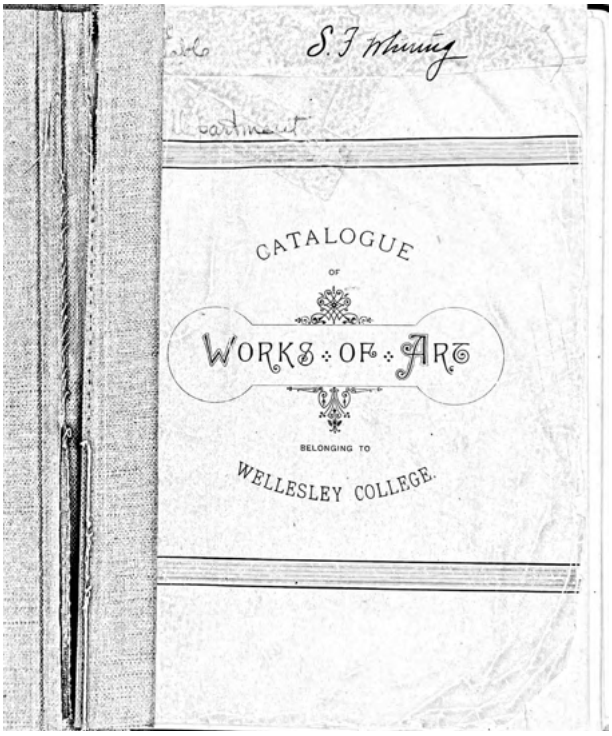
However, the Wellesley archive did preserve an 1883 catalogue (Figs. 9–10) of the Wellesley Museum (Denio 1883: 34) that included this description:

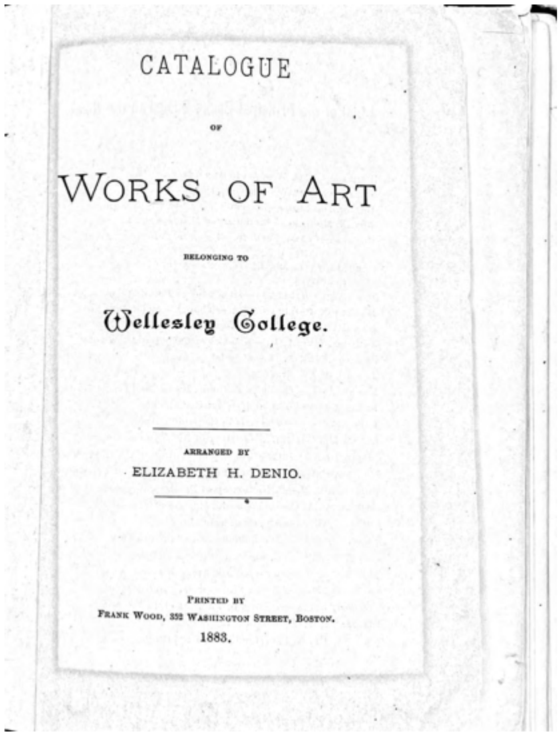
> No. 175. FROM SENNACHERIB'S PALACE, Nineveh, B.C. 713. A captive (Jew) pinioned to the earth, and flayed (presented to the College from a collection of antiquities belonging to the late Rev. Gorham D. Abbott, Springler [sic] Institute, N.Y.)

The parenthetical mention of a "Jew" being tortured stood out to me immediately. The 1883 record demonstrated an effort to substantiate an account of Sennacherib's confrontation of Jerusalem reported in the Hebrew Bible in 2 Kings 18–19. It is even possible that whoever secured the relief for Abbott had conflated it with the Lachish reliefs that do depict Sennacherib's confrontation of a town near Jerusalem and were displayed in the Southwest Palace also at Nineveh, which, not coincidentally, was also the mistake made by Albenda and Muscarella in their attribution of the scene to the Lachish reliefs. This type of superimposition of the biblical text onto an unrelated relief underscores how the despoliation of the Middle East in the nineteenth century was motivated by biblical interest.

Although the catalogue lists the item as No. 175, the 1883 date of this catalogue coincides with the accession number: 1883.1. The date of the catalogue places its publication between the founding of the College in 1875 and the dedication of the Farnsworth Art Building on October 23, 1889, understood as the genesis of what is now the Davis Museum. As these two pages from the catalogue demonstrate (Fig. 11), the collection during these intervening years was primarily constituted by efforts to acquire objects – paintings, prints, and classical sculptures – in support of the Wellesley curriculum by the College's founder, Henry Fowle Durant (d. 1881). Although there are

6 The possibility of a numerical transposition or confusion is possible though unlikely. If the mistake is in the century (i.e., 1851 and not 1951), that would put the date of acquisition before Henry Lobdell's arrival in Nineveh, which is not at all likely. The mistake is also unlikely to have been in the decade or year as a date in the twentieth century is improbable given the chain of custody research described below.





CATALOGUE

OF

WORKS OF ART

BELONGING TO

Wellesley College.

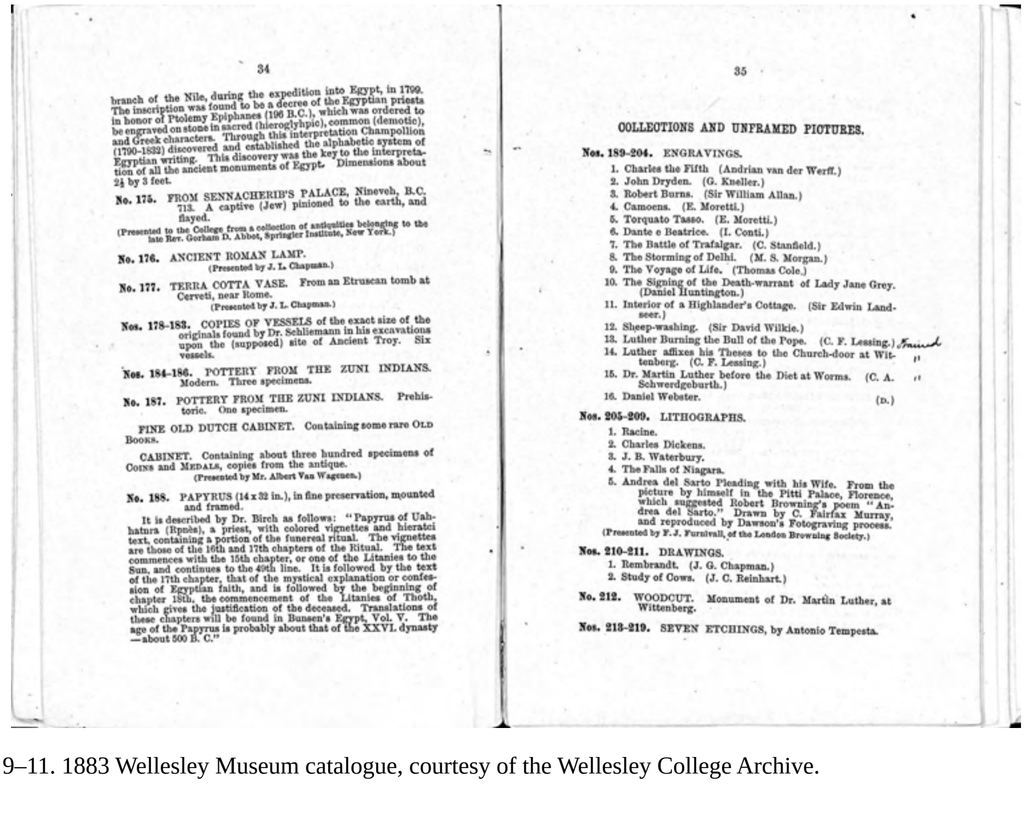
ARRANGED BY

ELIZABETH H. DENIO.

PRINTED BY

FRANK WOOD, 352 WASHINGTON STREET, BOSTON.

1883.



34

branch of the Nile, during the expedition into Egypt, in 1799. The inscription was found to be a decree of the Egyptian priests in honor of Ptolemy Epiphanes (196 B.C.), which was ordered to be engraved on stone in sacred (hieroglyhpic), common (demotic), and Greek characters. Through this interpretation Champollion (1790–1832) discovered and established the alphabetic system of Egyptian writing. This discovery was the key to the interpretation of all the ancient monuments of Egypt. Dimensions about 2½ by 3 feet.

No. 175. FROM SENNACHERIB'S PALACE, Nineveh, B.C. 713. A captive (Jew) pinioned to the earth, and flayed.
(Presented to the College from a collection of antiquities belonging to the late Rev. Gorham D. Abbot, Springler Institute, New York.)

No. 176. ANCIENT ROMAN LAMP.
(Presented by J. L. Chapman.)

No. 177. TERRA COTTA VASE. From an Etruscan tomb at Cerveti, near Rome.
(Presented by J. L. Chapman.)

Nos. 178-183. COPIES OF VESSELS of the exact size of the originals found by Dr. Schliemann in his excavations upon the (supposed) site of Ancient Troy. Six vessels.

Nos. 184-186. POTTERY FROM THE ZUNI INDIANS. Modern. Three specimens.

No. 187. POTTERY FROM THE ZUNI INDIANS. Prehistoric. One specimen.

FINE OLD DUTCH CABINET. Containing some rare OLD BOOKS.

CABINET. Containing about three hundred specimens of COINS and MEDALS, copies from the antique.
(Presented by Mr. Albert Van Wagenen.)

No. 188. PAPYRUS (14 x 32 in.), in fine preservation, mounted and framed.

It is described by Dr. Birch as follows: "Papyrus of Uahhatura (Rpnès), a priest, with colored vignettes and hieratci text, containing a portion of the funereal ritual. The vignettes are those of the 16th and 17th chapters of the Ritual. The text commences with the 15th chapter, or one of the Litanies to the Sun, and continues to the 49th line. It is followed by the text of the 17th chapter, that of the mystical explanation or confession of Egyptian faith, and is followed by the beginning of chapter 18th, the commencement of the Litanies of Thoth, which gives the justification of the deceased. Translations of these chapters will be found in Bunsen's Egypt, Vol. V. The age of the Papyrus is probably about that of the XXVI. dynasty —about 500 B. C."

35

COLLECTIONS AND UNFRAMED PICTURES.

Nos. 189-204. ENGRAVINGS.
1. Charles the Fifth (Andrian van der Werff.)
2. John Dryden. (G. Kneller.)
3. Robert Burns. (Sir William Allan.)
4. Camoens. (E. Moretti.)
5. Torquato Tasso. (E. Moretti.)
6. Dante e Beatrice. (I. Conti.)
7. The Battle of Trafalgar. (C. Stanfield.)
8. The Storming of Delhi. (M. S. Morgan.)
9. The Voyage of Life. (Thomas Cole.)
10. The Signing of the Death-warrant of Lady Jane Grey. (Daniel Huntington.)
11. Interior of a Highlander's Cottage. (Sir Edwin Landseer.)
12. Sheep-washing. (Sir David Wilkie.)
13. Luther Burning the Bull of the Pope. (C. F. Lessing.) Framed
14. Luther affixes his Theses to the Church-door at Wittenberg. (C. F. Lessing.) "
15. Dr. Martin Luther before the Diet at Worms. (C. A. Schwerdgeburth.) "
16. Daniel Webster. (D.)

Nos. 205-209. LITHOGRAPHS.
1. Racine.
2. Charles Dickens.
3. J. B. Waterbury.
4. The Falls of Niagara.
5. Andrea del Sarto Pleading with his Wife. From the picture by himself in the Pitti Palace, Florence, which suggested Robert Browning's poem "Andrea del Sarto." Drawn by C. Fairfax Murray, and reproduced by Dawson's Fotograving process.
(Presented by F. J. Furnivall, of the London Browning Society.)

Nos. 210-211. DRAWINGS.
1. Rembrandt. (J. G. Chapman.)
2. Study of Cows. (J. C. Reinhart.)

No. 212. WOODCUT. Monument of Dr. Martin Luther, at Wittenberg.

Nos. 213-219. SEVEN ETCHINGS, by Antonio Tempesta.

Figs. 9–11. 1883 Wellesley Museum catalogue, courtesy of the Wellesley College Archive.

records of acquisitions and rudimentary inventories from as early as 1875, the relief is not listed among these until the 1883 catalogue. I have found no other formal documentation of how acquisition numbers were determined or assigned in these early years (1875–1889) of the institution's growing collection. So, although the catalogue's issue date (1883) has no bearing on the date of acquisition, it does indicate that the relief made it into the collection sometime *before* the 1883 publication of this catalogue. It also, of course, substantiates the Wellesley Davis Museum's attribution line claiming that the relief was a gift of Gorham D. Abbott.

In the end, though, the file failed to further clarify anything regarding the object's provenance, not least of which was why Gorham D. Abbott[7] had decided to leave the relief to Wellesley College only a few short years after its charter in 1875. Reconstructing the journey of 1883.1 from Nineveh to Wellesley requires further explication of the history of the object, beginning with its initial excavation.

The Excavations of the North Palace at Nineveh

In December 1853, Hormuzd Rassam, acting as the agent of Henry Rawlinson, unearthed the mudbrick walls of what eventually was determined to be the North Palace of Ashurbanipal (Reade 1993: 48; Turner 2020: 670). It was the final building found during the British Museum excavations at Nineveh between 1846 and 1855 (Larsen 1996: 322–330).

The excavations at Nineveh were of a kind with other Assyriological investigations of the nineteenth century. Nineveh was a locus of biblical curiosity, as demonstrated by the contemporaneous work of Joseph Bonomi, who published images detailing the relationship between the Assyrian discoveries and the Bible (Bonomi 1857; Larsen 1996: 5–7). Archaeologists and site visitors seem to have known of Nineveh from texts like Genesis 10, 2 Kings 18–19, the book of Jonah, and prophetic texts like Isaiah 37, Nahum, and Zephaniah, and then set out to substantiate the historicity of the biblical narrative.

A speech for the dedication of the Nineveh Gallery in 1857 by Amherst's then President Edward Hitchcock reflects the impetus for their collection. He remarked:

> "Nineveh was founded 2200 years before Christ, 1770 years after the Creation […]. Every new discovery of these lost cities is a new testimony to the truth of Scripture […]. Blessed be God that he opened this new source of Biblical history just at the period when infidelity supposed the history was proven to be false." (Hitchcock 1857: 2)

Hitchcock's speech lays bare the fact that at no point during the nineteenth century excavation or curation of these objects were the variously implicated parties interested in the study of the objects' *creators*. Within the context of their curation in American museums and galleries, we can see a remarkable divergence from the way these objects were communicated to a nineteenth century European public. In American contexts, we find the remarkable – if expected – comingling of the obvious aims of American missionaries to "prove" the veracity of the biblical text. By contrast, in Europe many of the nascent Assyrian collections tended to be presented not only in relation to their biblical context, but also contiguous with other noteworthy civilizations of the ancient past like Greece, Rome, and Egypt, often relying on chronological sequence as an organizational scheme for their growing collection (Collins 2020).[8] Disentangling these various motivations, and especially the mediation of American missionaries in the acquiring of West Asian objects for American collections underlines the need for reexamination of all such material.

From Nineveh to Lobdell

While the choicest and best-preserved reliefs were shipped to the British Museum, smaller, less desirable fragments and duplicates from Nineveh were sent as gifts and souvenirs or sold into private collections throughout the world. Nearly every relief sent to America was facilitated by Protestant missionaries. In order to reduce their weight, reliefs were frequently trimmed by removing their heavy backs and carving around the edges. For the

7 The name Abbott is spelled alternatively as Abbot in several historical records.

8 For a fascinating demonstration of this impulse in British Society outside of the British Museum, one need only observe the Frieze of Parnassus on the podium of the Albert Memorial wherein John Birnie Philip carved the un-named 'Assyrian' and 'Egyptian' engineers who are placed 'chronologically' alongside persons reported in the Bible and Herodotus: Hiram (the Phoenician King of Tyre depicted in 1 Kings 5), Bezaleel (the craftsman responsible for the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 31–37), Sennacherib (r. 705–681 and depicted as the antagonist of Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18–19), Nitocris (the otherwise undocumented Egyptian Pharaoh depicted in Herodotus), Cheops (r. 2589–2566, the name given to Pharaoh Khufu in Herodotus), and Rhoecus (a Samian sculptor reported in Herodotus).

smaller fragments, the process effectively created portable and superficially self-sufficient units such as detached heads or groups of figures while also disassociating them from the groups and scenes to which they originally belonged.

The best preserved and most prominently displayed Assyrian reliefs in America originate from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II found at Nimrud. These are the reliefs that dominate the prestigious American collections in the MET, MFA, and the collegiate collections at Amherst and Bowdoin. Their transport was arranged by a handful of American Congregationalist missionaries beginning with Dwight Marsh from 1851 until around 1860. Their prominence in American collections was the source of my initial confusion about the Wellesley Eunuch.

A public address by Selah Merrill to the American Oriental Society in 1875 mentioned at least six other clergymen who took part in the lucrative sales of these artifacts. In total, Merrill provided an accounting of the distribution of forty-two large and thirteen smaller slabs that had made their way to America by 1875. He estimated the total spent to be between $8,000 and $10,000, but closer to the latter – roughly $350,000 today, adjusted for inflation (Merrill 1875: 41). That means the American investment in the Neo-Assyrian excavations for just these fifty-five objects was equivalent to or possibly exceeded that of the British. If we were to divide that investment over linear feet of reliefs acquired by the British Museum and American collections, the American investment is exponentially higher.

But what we also know from his report, only ten to twenty-five years after the reliefs' arrival on American soil, is that the full network of their distribution had already been lost. In his accounting of their locations, Merrill knew of reliefs in at least fourteen locations including Amherst, Williams, Yale, Dartmouth, and Bowdoin, but it is probable that this list is incomplete, not least because the Wellesley relief does not seem to be included there.

The larger, more well-known reliefs were not the only objects from Nineveh and Nimrud sent to America. In that same report, Merrill also observed, "These slabs all belong to the reign of Assur-nazir-pal, who reigned from B.C. 883 to B.C. 859" (Merrill 1875: 326). Merrill noted one exception, however, a small relief in the collection at Hartford Seminary (Fig. 12) – an image of which is preserved in Barnett (Barnett 1976: pl. LXII[b]) – and described its difference:[9]

> "In a glass case at Hartford is a small slab without inscription, but interesting from the sculptures upon it. It has five figures all facing the right; the two foremost appear to be female captives; they have long hair, full and very fair faces, and each has something in the left hand. Behind them are three warriors with bows and quivers. There is no other sculpture like this in the country." (Merrill 1875: 333)

Merrill was correct that the slab is different in kind from the others. Unlike its larger counterparts, it is not from the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II. It is from a totally different site: the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh. It is similar to pieces, of which Merrill was unaware, now in the Fogg collection at Harvard (Fig. 13; cf. BM 135204) and the Boston MFA (Fig. 14).[10]

9 This relief has been lost. After corresponding with Hartford International Seminary (formerly Hartford Seminary), it was last accounted for in an exhibit arranged by Joe Seger for the Art and Archaeology Festival at the Omaha Jewish Community Center. He noted he returned the relief to Hartford Seminary in 1978. Hartford sold their cuneiform tablet collection to Andrews University, but the relief was not among the items sold, per the Andrews University Museum.

10 Another North Palace relief missing from Merrill's list is a fragment related to BM 124916 of two sheep gripped by a (Eunuch) handler. Originally part of the Barnum Museum of Natural History at Tufts College (now Tufts University), it was acquired by the Arizona State University Museum in 1959 (ASM A-13104; Accession AP-988). ASM received the relief as a gift from Ernest E. Leavitt, Jr., who had been gifted the relief from Tufts College as part of the conversion of the Barnum Museum collection around 1952. The relief may have been given by the Smithsonian to Tufts in 1888, facilitated by Phineas Taylor Barnum himself. The relief was likely unearthed by Rassam in late 1853 or early 1854, as described by Lobdell in a letter from 5 January 1855, and given to Lobdell by William Loftus around the same time. See Romano et al. 2024.

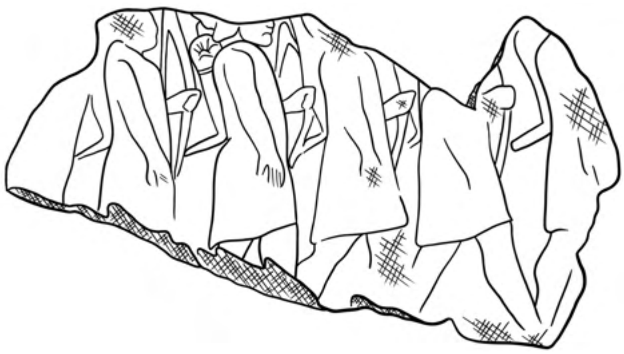


Fig. 12. Lost relief fragment formerly in the collection of the Hartford Seminary.

Fig. 13. Relief fragment in the Harvard Fogg Museum 1953.13.

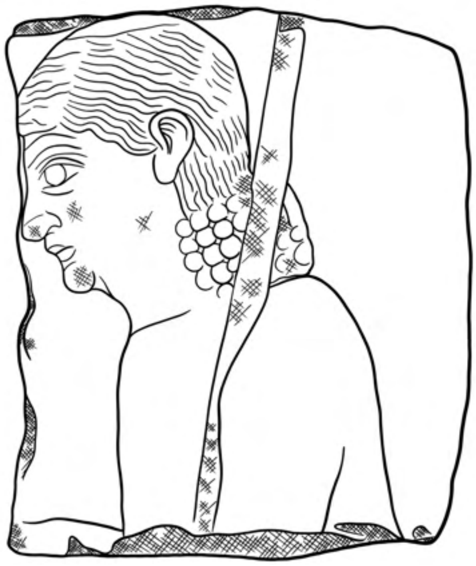


Fig. 14. Relief fragment in the Boston MFA, 33.685.

One can forgive Merrill for the mistake. Pieces from the North Palace at Nineveh were and remain rare. In fact, in Barnett's catalog of the North Palace (Barnett 1976), only seven total fragments from the North Palace were found in America: in Baltimore (Fig. 15), Boston, Detroit, Hartford, Toledo (Fig. 16), Winnetka, and New Haven (Fig. 17).

Although there was a pronounced missionary presence amidst the excavations at Nimrud and Nineveh (Franck 1980: 40–47; Russell 1997: 193; Reade 2022: 62; Romano et al. 2024: 96–102), by far the most productive broker procuring these fragments for American collectors was Henry Lobdell. A graduate from Amherst College and Yale School of Medicine, Lobdell was in Mosul functioning as a medical doctor and missionary. While there, he played a significant role in procuring large slabs for college collections and also seems to have sent smaller pieces for institutions and private collectors. This was the case, according to Merrill's 1875 summary, with a piece he apparently sawed with his own hands and gifted to his mother, who then gave it to a collector, Rev. Daniel A. Goodsell.

Fig. 15. Relief fragment in the Walters Art Gallery 21.6.

Fig. 16. Relief fragment in the Toledo Museum of Art 1921.84.

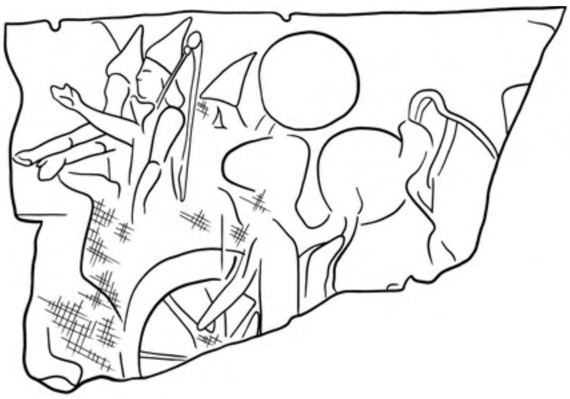


Fig. 17. Relief fragment in the Yale Babylonian Collection 2355.

By September 10, 1852, Lobdell was in Nineveh being led on a tour through the site by Rassam (Tyler 1859: 194) at the time of its excavation. He purportedly

> "examined with his own eyes the remains of Assyrian antiquities, which were at that time being brought to light; compared notes with Capt. Loftus, Mr. Rassam, the English Vice Consul, and Mr. Holder, to whose skill in drawing Col. Rawlinson has been so much indebted; and was preparing to form an independent judgment, if possible, of the history and the significance of those wonderful monuments." (Tyler 1859: 177)

A lengthy letter published in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* in 1854 further attests to his presence at the excavations of the North Palace.

On March 1, 1855, Lobdell wrote his last letter while convalescing in Baghdad. In it, he described supervising the re-sawing and re-packing of several slabs, including six smaller ones, for transport to the United States:

> "I am engaged in superintending the sawing, packing, marking, and forwarding of forty-seven boxes of sculptures – not forty-seven slabs, but twelve, besides a dozen bricks. Six of the slabs are for Dr. Wright, of Oroomiah. The other six are the property of us missionaries at Mosul – two each. Those of Dr. Wright will go to Dartmouth College and the University of Virginia, I expect, and the others will be kept at Mosul, till we get orders for them from America." (Lobdell 1854: 361)

The crates Lobdell had packed left Mosul in the summer of 1855 (Merrill 1875: 324).

The enclosed reliefs were bound for Dartmouth, Amherst, and the Missionary Rooms at Boston – or what would later be called the Boston Missionary Museum. When the Boston Missionary Museum closed in 1895, the Middle

Eastern objects thought to be related to the Bible were donated to Hartford Seminary. To this we might also add the relief in the collection of E. Starr, which was subsequently gifted to the Harvard Fogg Museum, because we know both reliefs to be from Room S[1] from the North Palace at Nineveh, not Nimrud, as they are of a kind with twelve other fragments depicting Persian auxiliary bowmen (Barnett 1976: pl. 62) distributed in collections throughout the world, including the Glasgow Burrell Collection (28 38, 28 61), Venice Deposito Correr (41, 43), the Louvre (AO 22.200), the British Museum (124923–4), Rome Baracco (9), Istanbul (6398–9), Brussels (O.1923), and the London Royal Geographical Society (7). It is possible, then, that these two badly broken, smaller slabs from the North Palace – one at the Boston Missionary Museum that would be transferred to Hartford Seminary and another in the Fogg Collection that would be transferred to Harvard – form part of the collection of the six discussed by Lobdell. Nevertheless, even were we to speculate, given its Northern Palace origins, that the Wellesley relief was among Lobdell's last packed slabs, what remains unanswered about the Wellesley relief is how it first made it out of Nineveh through the efforts of Lobdell into the hands of Gorham D. Abbott, and then finally into the collection at Wellesley College.

From Lobdell to Abbott

Although it makes no explicit mention of the relief – much less a transfer either from Lobdell or to Wellesley College – Abbott's biography helps fill in some of the gaps concerning how he might have acquired the relief from Lobdell. The biography was compiled by the Abbott Memorial Committee "under obligations to Rev. Edward Abbott, D.D.," who we know was Gorham Abbott's nephew (Abbott 1876: preface). Some chapters are anonymous; at least one is a contribution by a former student; another is written by his nephew.

Born in Maine, Abbott was educated at Bowdoin and Andover Theological Seminary. He dedicated much of his subsequent career to the education of women. In 1843, with his brothers Jacob and Charles, he opened the Abbott's Institution New Seminary for Young Ladies at 45 Lafayette Place (now street) on the prestigious Colonnade Row in Lower Manhattan, across from the location for the future Astor Library (est. 1849).. His goal was "calling attention to a higher order of education for daughters in our country, and of elevating its general character" (Barnard 1866: 600). By 1848, the institute had grown significantly, and Gorham Abbott sought to move the institution to progressively more ornate facilities.[11] He invested as much as $250,000 – or the equivalent of nearly $9 million today – for the purchase, renovation, and furnishing of the Spingler Building off Union Square Park, which he then renamed The Spingler Institute.

By 1860, the Institute had moved to the Townsend mansion at 5th Avenue and 34th Street. The August 21, 1860, issue of *The New York Herald* described the house in great detail:

> "The edifice is entirely of brown stone four stories in height; and surrounded by open and handsomely laid out gardens. A large double stoop and portico, supported by fluted Corinthian columns forms the entrance. On passing inward we are at once struck by the great size of the entrance hall, which extends from the first floor to the roof, with an arched ceiling, beautifully ornamented in blue and gold. The hall is surrounded on each story with corridors supported by columns, and presents an imposing appearance. [...] To the right of the entrance is the library, and adjoining a small but unique apartment called the "Pompeii Room," which is a facsimile in size and frescoes, of a room in the exhumed City of Pompeii. Beyond this is the gallery of paintings, filled with some of the choicest works of art to be found in this city." (anon. 1860: 1)

It appears Abbott deliberately spared no expense. He said of the institute's collections:

> "It is believed there is not in the world at this day, an Institution for the education of daughters with a library of ten thousand volumes, a telescope worth five thousand dollars, and corresponding appointments in apparatus, cabinets, and works of art, that would be deemed indispensable in a college for sons. This enterprise was undertaken and has been prosecuted with the full conviction that the establishment and endowment in our great metropolis, of an Institution worthy of such an object, would be followed by similar movements in every city and State of the Union, and that ultimately a great change would be effected in the public estimate of the provisions which should be made for the education of daughters." (The Abbot Memorial Committee 1902: 46)

11 The name of the institution, much like the address, varied over time. It is also recorded as Abbott's Collegiate Institution for Young Ladies, the Abbott Collegiate Institute, and later the Spingler Institute.

Fig. 18. Spingler Institute on Union Park, New York Public Library.

From Abbott's own words and the *Tribune* description, he sought to assemble renowned collections for the women learning at the Spingler Institute to rival those held by men's institutions. Or, as Edward Abbott reflected in his eulogy to his uncle: "It was the one sacred ambition of my uncle's life to establish a college for the daughters, that should be the peer of Harvard or of Yale" (The Abbot Memorial Committee 1902: 19).

His approach to their actual education seems to have been similar, conscripting Roswell D. Hitchcock of Union Theological Seminary to give courses of identical content and length to those he offered at Union. *The New York Observer* recounted the following in its list of "Fall Lectures at the Spingler Institute" taking place in October 1853:

> "By Prof. Roswell D. Hitchcock, D.D., of the Union Theological Seminary on Tuesdays and Thursdays at one o'clock, commencing October 26, on The General History of the World before Christ, paving the way for Christianity, embracing: […] 5. The Hebrew Nation in the several distinct Stadia of their History. 6. The Grand Historic Civilizations and Empires, such as the Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek and Roman which conditioned the Hebrew development and prepared the way for Christ." (The Abbot Memorial Committee 1902: 43).

The lectures offered by the professors at Union Theological Seminary were renowned and appear to have been attended by many noted intellectuals of the time. In a striking parallel, in Lobdell's own biography he wrote to a friend and colleague:

> "I heard all the professors lecture at the Union Theological Seminary, and am well satisfied that the Junior and Senior years must be good there. How much pleasure it would have given me to spend another year in theological study; but I have work to do elsewhere." (Tyler 1859: 87)

The Spingler Institute continued to operate at 5th and 34th for only a few years when it moved to the corner of Park Avenue and 38th Street under financial pressure from the Civil War. A significant portion of the student body came from Southern aristocracy, and after the onset of the war, those women returned to their families. The school was eventually closed in the fall of 1866 (Barnard 1866: 600). Abbott's memorial is deliberately opaque on the details and describes its closing thus:

> "Had not National calamity combined with private misfortune, to prevent the consummation of his hope as it approached fruition. The apparent surrender of the enterprise was due to circumstances which no human forethought could have anticipated. When the great teacher could no longer place his College on a firm foundation, his plans were deeded to Mr. Matthew Vassar [the founder of Vassar College]." (The Abbot Memorial Committee 1902: 49)

The precise 'plans' or resources that were deeded to Vassar are unclear. Abbott's biography simply notes that the institution "merged" with Vassar College (The Abbot Memorial Committee 1902: 50).

Although I have found a number of plausible connections between Lobdell and Abbott, none is more convincing than their mutual affinity for the lecturers on Assyriology at Union Theological Seminary, who would surely have taken a keen interest in Lobdell's endeavors in the Middle East. Gorham Abbott seems likely to have acquired an Assyrian relief either directly from Lobdell or from a mutual connection at Union Theological Seminary sometime between Lobdell's arrival in Nineveh in 1852 and the shipment of the last crates of reliefs sent on behalf of Lobdell in the summer of 1855 following his death. The transfer was possibly facilitated by Roswell Hitchcock, the lecturer at both institutions, who corresponded with and was a distant cousin to Edward Hitchcock, the President of Amherst College, cited above.[12]

Given this hypothetical – though I contend highly plausible – reconstruction, it appears likely that the Wellesley relief would have been used to furnish the collection of another women's college – the Spingler Institute for Young Ladies – until its closing sometime around 1866. After the Spingler closed, Abbott seems to have retained some of the Spingler's collection, perhaps including the relief, for himself, as evidenced by a set of steel engravings donated to Vassar College, which Abbott helped establish along with Matthew Vassar, a personal friend, in 1861. After the Spingler's closure, Gorham was in financial ruins and simply could no longer afford to acquire the relief using personal means.

The Abbotts moved to Natick, Massachusetts, in 1870, where Gorham D. Abbott died on August 3, 1874. Abbott and his wife, Rebecca, had only one child: a girl, Carry F. Abbott, who died in a "distressing incident" in childhood – presumably the impetus for his devotion to the education of women. Rebecca Abbott died not long after her husband, on March 29, 1876.[13]

From Abbott to Wellesley

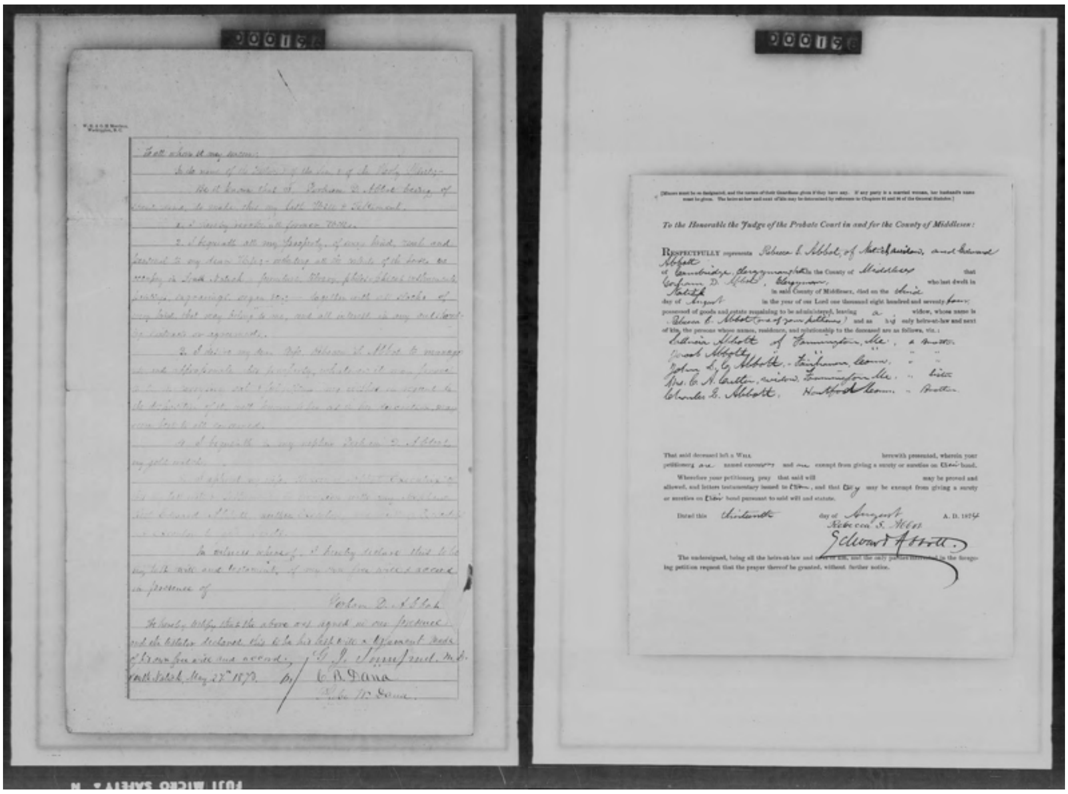
The dates of the deaths of Gorham (1874) and Rebecca Abbott (1876) are difficult to square with the accession number and presumable date of acquisition of the relief. The Abbott estate records (Middlesex County, Packet 12–19) support this conclusion. The digitized estate records of the State of Massachusetts indicate that Gorham, unsurprisingly, left his full estate to his widow (Figs. 19–20).

Rebecca, on her death, made her nephew by marriage, Edward M. Abbott, the executor of her estate. In her will, she left various jewelry and possessions to named family members. A full list and appraisal of all her possessions in their modest Natick home lacked any mention of antiquities, a relief, or Wellesley College (Figs. 21–22).

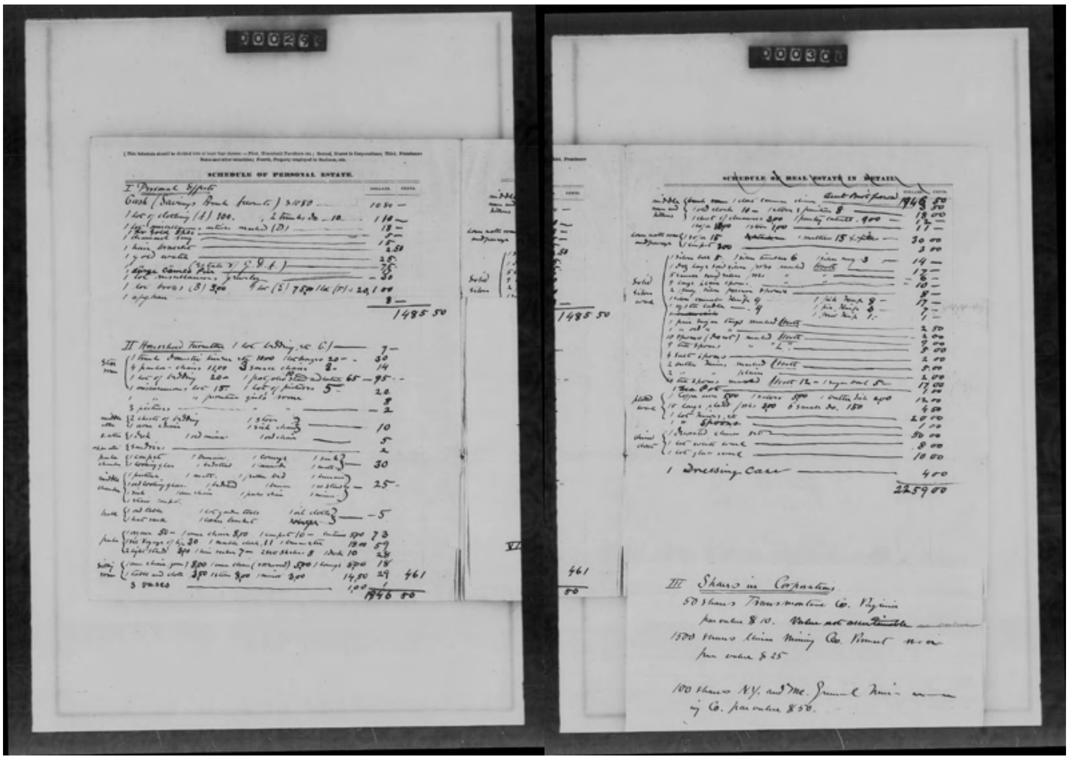
The fact that the relief went unmentioned in Gorham Abbott's estate is unremarkable, save for the fact that he did not bequeath it to Wellesley College, since his estate was not itemized and he left all of his property – including a potential relief – to his wife. However, its absence in the estate records of Rebecca Abbott suggests that the relief was no longer in her possession at the time of her death in 1876. Therefore, the transfer from the Abbott estate to Wellesley College is most likely to have happened sometime after the Abbotts move to Natick in 1870, but more likely between the death of Gorham in 1874 and the death of Rebecca in 1876, because the relief is not in the inventory of her possessions written by her nephew in 1876 after her death, nor is the relief bequeathed to the museum in her will.

12 The familial relations were documented in the genealogy kept by Mary L. Hitchcock (and published by the same Dwight Marsh, mentioned above), the two Hitchcock men would have been third cousins, twice removed; Hitchcock 1894. Roswell and Edward knew each other and corresponded to arrange an appearance by Edward at the Congregational Church in Exeter, NH, prior to Roswell leaving for an academic post at Bowdoin and then at Union Theological Seminary; Hitchcock 1945.

13 One of the eulogies offered by Lyman Abbott and transcribed in Gorham's memoir even holds an oblique reference to Wellesley College, comparing Gorham's vision for the Spingler Institute to that of Vassar and Wellesley: "He saw in a vision, what Mr. Vassar in our own State, and Mr. Durant [the founder of Wellesley College] in Massachusetts, have made real, and without wealth, and at the outset with no other influence than such as an earnest and unselfish purpose always confers, he labored for its realization." (The Abbot Memorial Committee 1902).



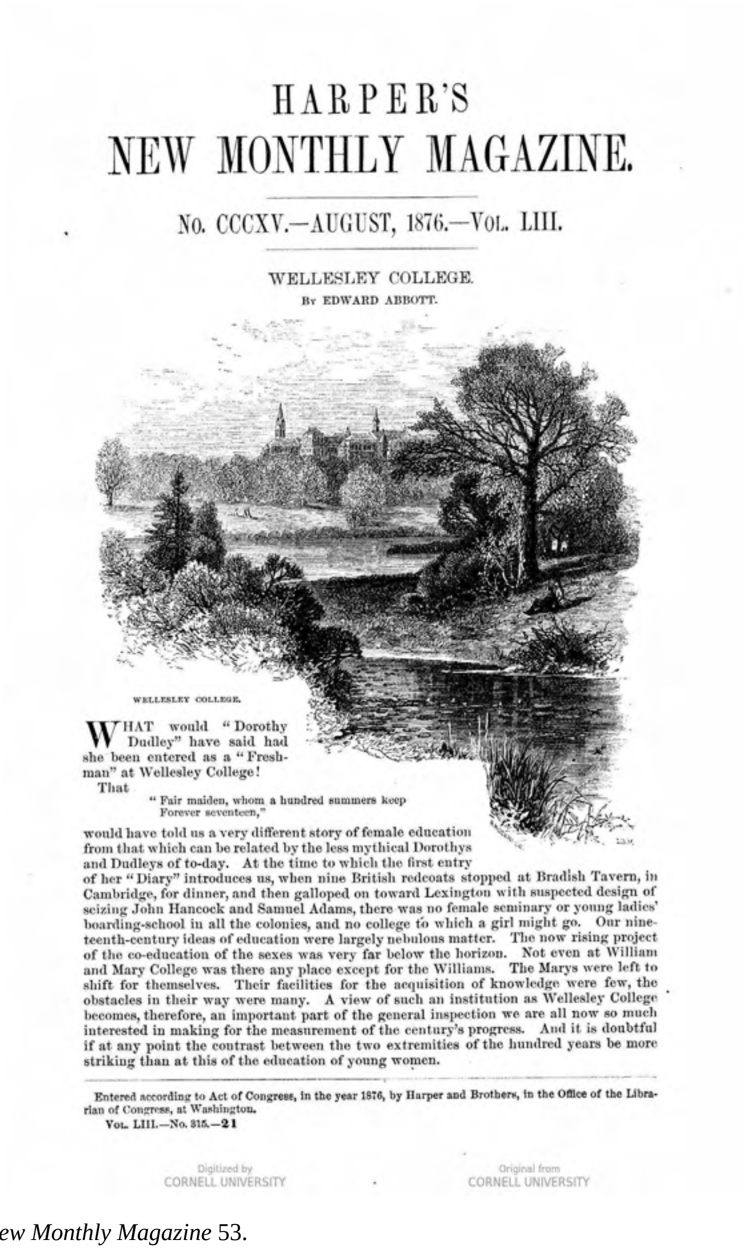
Figs. 19–20. Middlesex County, Massachusetts Probate Papers, Packet 12.



Figs. 21–22. Middlesex County Probate Papers, Packet 19.

Thus, the relief likely stayed in the possession of Gorham and then Rebecca until it was donated by his estate to Wellesley College in honor of his longstanding investment in the education of women and his belief in the necessity of such objects for their education, as evidenced by the documented collection at the Spingler.

This proposed chain of custody is further substantiated by a fascinating 1876 essay by Edward Abbott about Wellesley College in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, which functioned, at least in part, as a recruitment tool for potential students and their parents (Fig. 23).


HARPER'S
NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

No. CCCXV.—AUGUST, 1876.—Vol. LIII.

WELLESLEY COLLEGE.
By EDWARD ABBOTT.

WELLESLEY COLLEGE.

WHAT would "Dorothy Dudley" have said had she been entered as a "Freshman" at Wellesley College!

That

"Fair maiden, whom a hundred summers keep
Forever seventeen,"

would have told us a very different story of female education from that which can be related by the less mythical Dorothys and Dudleys of to-day. At the time to which the first entry of her "Diary" introduces us, when nine British redcoats stopped at Bradish Tavern, in Cambridge, for dinner, and then galloped on toward Lexington with suspected design of seizing John Hancock and Samuel Adams, there was no female seminary or young ladies' boarding-school in all the colonies, and no college to which a girl might go. Our nineteenth-century ideas of education were largely nebulous matter. The now rising project of the co-education of the sexes was very far below the horizon. Not even at William and Mary College was there any place except for the Williams. The Marys were left to shift for themselves. Their facilities for the acquisition of knowledge were few, the obstacles in their way were many. A view of such an institution as Wellesley College becomes, therefore, an important part of the general inspection we are all now so much interested in making for the measurement of the century's progress. And it is doubtful if at any point the contrast between the two extremities of the hundred years be more striking than at this of the education of young women.

Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1876, by Harper and Brothers, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, at Washington.

Vol. LIII.—No. 315.—21

Fig. 23. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 53.

It touted, for instance, the lush and remote campus, and the ample campus facilities, including a sizable collection of roughly one thousand commentaries and resources for biblical studies in the Gertrude Library, which had been donated by a Mr. A. A. Sweet in the name of his late daughter. It specified aspects of the curriculum and the goals of the college to:

> "graduate from Wellesley students who shall be fully on a par with the graduates of Harvard and Yale. The curriculum of study will, of course, differ somewhat from that of these and other colleges for men, but the very highest standard of culture is to be maintained." (Abbott 1876: 328)

Prospective families were reassured that core to the college's mission was the study of the Bible:

> "The place which Biblical study receives in the curriculum indicates the importance which is attached to it here. Christianity is accepted as a great fact to be studied. And more, it is esteemed as an experience which is to be individualized." (Abbott 1876: 331)

In addition to recruitment, the essay seems also to have been intended as a plea for additional funding and resources. The cost of room and board was fixed at $250 per year, or roughly $7,000 adjusted for inflation, and that commitment required investment.

> "But at [the board and tuition cost of $250 a year] it can hardly be expected that the college will pay its own current expenses. The benevolent here see a grand foundation already laid to their hand, and, by the creation of an endowment, may communicate an immediate and immense impulse to the usefulness of the institution. The many vacant shelves of the library likewise invite contributions. One hundred thousand dollars could be at once most profitably expended in supplying them with those costly works which are such a boon to both student and teacher." (Abbott 1876: 332)

The *Harper's* article demonstrates that biblical studies was a foundational element of the Wellesley curriculum in 1876, and that the institution had launched a concerted fundraising campaign to advance those efforts in the form of both monetary and resource donations. The donation of something like the Assyrian relief – which by 1883 had been incorrectly determined to corroborate 2 Kings – would certainly be well within this call.

Yet, as fascinating as the essay is, its author – Edward Abbott – remains most relevant to a necrography of 1883.1. In tandem with the general appeal for donations at the end of the *Harper's* article, we can propose the author, Edward Abbott, the nephew of Gorham D. Abbott and the executor of Rebecca Abbott's estate, as a potential respondent to his own call. The *Harper's* article amplifies the possibility that sometime between the deaths of Gorham D. Abbott in 1874 and Rebecca D. Abbott in 1876, their nephew Edward Abbott, after considerable contact with the college while researching his article for Harper's, found cause to donate the relief to the Wellesley collection, likely sometime in early 1876 – prior to Rebecca Abbott's death in March and in the midst of Edward Abbott's writing and publication of the *Harper's* article.[14]

Conclusion

Constructing a necrography of 1883.1 has been something of a Pandora's box for me with far more questions than answers. The more I have chipped away at the contours of this relief, the more I am compelled to confront bigger and more significant questions about the other North Palace reliefs in America. By my count, there are as many as twenty reliefs from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal in various public and private collections throughout the United States. Some of these, like the Hartford Relief, I already know to be missing from their last-known collections.

As a biblicist, I continue to benefit from the public interest in the Bible. This project has revealed the more maleficent side of that same interest. Over the last century and a half, Americans and Europeans have been complicit in the despoliation of the Middle East through the acquisition of Assyrian reliefs. What strikes me as egregious about this pursuit is less the fact that they were removed from their country of origin – this was a widely accepted practice contemporaneous with the colonial context of their excavation – but rather that their collection was never out of any real interest in their creators, and was instead motivated by their ability to substantiate (or not) the Bible as 'true' – by which I mean a factual and accurate accounting of the past.

What I have started with this project is an initial attempt at reconciliation and accountability by gradually assembling a necrography of the North Palace fragments in America starting with the Wellesley relief, to which I had the most access and clearest responsibility. As a proxy custodian of both 1883.1 and the biblical text that impelled its collection, this is the beginning of a longer project that functions, as Hicks proposed, to begin the process of not only excavating the past to redress harms, but also to imagine a different future. I have begun demanding of myself

14 Edward Abbott was named a member of the board of visitors of Wellesley College in 1884; he died in 1908, well after the relief was in the possession of the College.

here, as I think we must all be compelled to do, to delve into troubling questions: What is our responsibility to the objects in our care and, by extension, upon whom does the onus lie to restore and document their history? There are several potential answers to these questions, none of them mutually exclusive.

There is certainly a practical component to necrographic work being conducted and documented by collections affiliated with higher education: faculty may have both the expertise and bandwidth to undertake this type of research. Beyond my work here, not only do models for how to best answer these questions already exist (Romano et al. 2024), but their answers have substantial implications for university and college museum collections. In fact, collections affiliated with educational institutions may continue to play an outsized role in this type of provenance research in multiple ways. First, university and college museums likely already find themselves custodians of cultural heritage objects resulting from alumni donations prior to the 2008 guidelines issued by the Association of Art Museum Directors and the American Alliance of Museums. Although the guidelines sought to curb collector demand for objects and thus reduce instances of looting and theft, it did little to resolve the complexities of the unresolved futures of antiquities already in the possession of collectors. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Elizabeth Marlowe has persuasively argued that university and colleges committed to provenance research and repatriation would be preeminent stewards of such objects through potential donation agreements with private collectors. Collectors, in turn, would be assured safety and preservation of their collections (Marlowe 2022).

Beyond the more practical concerns of research and preservation, necrographic work, at least as Hicks originally intended it, acts to decenter curatorial authority (Hicks 2020: 36). In my case, I benefited from active and enthusiastic support of the curators and administration at the Davis Museum. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that this type of necrographic work could expose problematic and dubious provenances that would potentially be at odds with the traditional goals of a museum (i.e., to retain their collections). In these cases, necrographies function to catalyze dialogue about why an institution might seek to collect (then) and to retain (now) these objects. In the case of the Wellesley Assyrian Relief (1883.1), this has involved teaching and institutional conversations about what authority was and continues to be gained by locating the College in proximity to the ancient world as the bedrock and foundation of 'western' civilizations.

Finally, out of this research also necessarily arises a second function: its ability to deconstruct (post-)colonial orientalization of identity. Gerd Baumann, interweaving the existing social theories of Edward Said (1978), Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1940), and Louis Dumont (1980), explained:

> "Orientalism is not a simple binary opposition of 'us = good' and 'them = bad', but a very shrewd mirrored reversal of: what is good in us is [still] bad in them, but what got twisted in us [still] remains straight in them." (Baumann 2006: 20)

As Giovanni Tarantino and Paola von Wyss-Giacosa went on to explain, Baumann's grammar of alterity clarified how orientalization primarily

> "constitutes 'self' and 'other' by negative mirror imaging: 'what is good in us is lacking in them.' At the same time, and most significantly, it also entails 'a sense of loss' and adds a subordinate reversal: 'what is lacking in us is (still) present in them'." (Tarantino and von Wyss-Giacosa 2021: 2)

The presence of subordinate reversal is plainly evident in Lobdell's memoir. In recounting his estimation of the Neo-Assyrian reliefs he was exporting *en masse* to American collections, his biographer, William Seymour Tyler noted:

> "[Lobdell] looked on them also with the eye of a Christian philosopher and a student of the Bible. He beheld them, not with the idolatrous veneration of the ancient Assyrians, nor yet with the iconoclastic fanaticism of the modern Mohammedeans, but with the religious awe, mingled with compassion, which an enlightened and candid mind can scarcely refrain from feeling in the presence of objects that have once stirred the deepest and most sacred emotions of the human heart, even though it be a heart that has lost the knowledge of the true God." (Tyler 1859: 364)

Tyler's dual framing of Lobdell/Assyrian and Christian/Muslim intentionally fits within a perfectly arranged enlightened/unenlightened paradigm. Such a disposition indicates that collectors of these reliefs apparently relished the delusion that the Bible was "in" but not "of" the ancient Middle East: "the Bible […] has never in any instance borrowed the errors or imbibed the spirit of the idolatrous nations of antiquity" (Tyler 1859: 366).

One should rightfully find such a presentation brutish and distasteful, but dismissing it as a relic of the past would be a mistake. In fact, the British Museum's exhibition of *I Am Ashurbanipal* – discussed in the introduction to this article – was unironically reviewed with the headline: "Some of the most appalling images ever created." In his unwitting replication of the sentiments of the initial custodians of the reliefs, Jonathan Jones reflected:

> "You have to hand it to the ancient Assyrians – they were honest. Their artistic propaganda relishes every detail of torture, massacre, battlefield executions and human displacement that made Assyria the dominant power of the Middle East from about 900 to 612BC. Assyrian art contains some of the most appalling images ever created." (Jones 2018)

From Jones's appraisal, we can readily appreciate how the excavation, collection, and exhibition of the Assyrian reliefs has been – from the moment they were unearthed – used as a spurious partition between Orient and Occident, to use the language of Said.

This false construction is also precisely the type of alterity we, as custodians, are obligated to interrupt. A necrography seeks to provide such an interruption. The historical contextualization – both original and colonial – supplied through necrographic research strives to combat the imminent potential for orientalization and other insidious forms of identity construction. Instead, following the lead of Tarantino and von Wyss-Giacosa (2021: 3), a necrography is a self-critical exercise in that it seeks as much to reconstruct an object's history as it does to deconstruct representations of 'the other' contemporaneous to the object's collection until the modern period. Which is to say, this necrography of 1883.1 serves as much to indicate the history of the object and its creators as it does to indict its collectors concerning how and why they chose to remove, transfer, and acquire the North Palace fragment throughout its history.

Acknowledgements

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Framing Looted Heritage

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Framing Looted Heritage

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Abstract

Looting and trafficking of archaeological objects is a worldwide problem, which often becomes more severe during armed conflicts – two examples being the looting of Iraqi museums and archaeological sites after 2003, and the plunder of Syrian heritage during the civil war. Shocking images of archaeological destruction have attracted significant media attention in so-called 'Western' countries. In some situations, the reporting of European news media on the obliteration of what is perceived as 'world heritage' can even inspire public outrage. Between 2014 and 2015, the shock value of cultural destruction wrought by the terror group IS was used to draw attention to conflict-related antiquities trafficking, portraying the illicit antiquities market as a main income source for the terrorists. This sensationalist reporting has roused public concern and arguably even led to a moral panic. The antiquities market has reacted defensively to this portrayal, and used the overblown figures and tenuous allegations of terror financing seen in the media to discredit research into and regulation of the antiquities trade. In this paper, I discuss the consequences of this discourse and the continuing lack of voices from Western Asia therein.

Keywords

Antiquities trafficking, antiquities market, Germany, Iraq, Syria, moral panic, news framing analysis

Zusammenfassung

Raubgrabungen und der illegale Handel mit archäologischen Funden ist ein andauerndes weltweites Problem, das sich in bewaffneten Konflikten verstärkt – zwei Beispiele dafür sind die Plünderung irakischer Museen und Ausgrabungsstätten nach 2003 und der Raubbau an syrischen Kulturgütern im Bürgerkrieg. Schockierende Bilder von der Zerstörung archäologischen Kulturerbes erregen mitunter große Medienaufmerksamkeit in sogenannten ‚westlichen' Ländern. Bisweilen können Berichte europäischer Medien über die Vernichtung von als ‚Weltkulturerbe' verstandenen Altertümern sogar öffentliche Empörung auslösen. Zwischen 2014 und 2015 wurde der Schockwert der Kulturzerstörung durch die Terrorgruppe IS genutzt, um Aufmerksamkeit für das Problem von Raubgrabungen im Rahmen bewaffneter Konflikte zu erregen, indem der Antikenhandel als eine der Haupteinnahmequellen der Terrorgruppe dargestellt wurde. Dieser reißerische Journalismus hat öffentliche Besorgnis erregt und mag sogar eine *moral panic* verursacht haben. Der Antikenhandel selbst hat defensiv auf diese Darstellung reagiert und die übertriebenen Zahlen und schwer zu beweisenden Anschuldigungen der Terrorfinanzierung genutzt, um Erforschung und Regulierung des Marktes zu diskreditieren. In diesem Artikel beschreibe ich die Konsequenzen dieses Diskurses, und das Fehlen von Stimmen aus den betroffenen Ländern darin.

Schlagwörter

Antikenschmuggel, Antikenhandel, Deutschland, Irak, Syrien, Moral Panic, News-Framing-Analyse

Introduction

The looting of archaeological sites for the international antiquities market is a global problem, which often becomes more severe during armed conflicts. Two well-known examples of conflict-related looting crises from Western Asia are the looting of Iraqi museums and sites after the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the plunder of Syrian heritage during the civil war after 2011. The way conflict-related archaeological looting and antiquities trafficking have been portrayed in the news media of so-called 'Western' countries between 2003 and 2016 has served to inspire public outrage among its audiences. It has, as I will argue below, even led to a phenomenon that sociologists call a moral panic, when, in 2014, the topic of antiquities looting and trafficking became conflated with activities of the so-called 'Islamic State' in northern Iraq and Syria. In this paper, I use the example of newspaper journalism in Germany to explore how this moral panic has changed the ways in which media in 'Western' countries talk about illicit antiquities and the antiquities trade in general, and what the social ramifications of this change were.

The term 'Western' is used in quotes here, as it is both geographically incorrect and culturally less than cohesive. However, the term is widely used in public-facing media worldwide to denote both formerly colonising European countries, as well as culturally Europeanised countries, such as, most prominently, the USA, but also including Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The term still partly carries an orientalist connotation of a dichotomy between a supposedly 'civilised West' and a 'barbaric East' (Said 2003), but can also be used disparagingly, evoking the history of colonialism. Since it is so loaded, I try to avoid using the term 'Western' except when quoting. My research is focused on the discourse about antiquities trafficking as it happened between 2003 and 2021 in Germany and other German-speaking regions in Europe (that is, Austria and parts of Switzerland).

Germany is used as a case study here, since it is an important destination market for Western Asian antiquities and to limit the sample size of analysed newspaper articles. Moral panic theory is a helpful concept to analyse this discourse, since it serves to illuminate the pitfalls of using well-known tropes to draw attention to a pressing issue, as will be shown below.

A social discourse can be called a moral panic when it meets a number of criteria. The term was made popular by British sociologist Stanley Cohen in 1972, who described an escalating reaction to an issue perceived as an imminent threat to society (Cohen 2002). Cohen identifies several escalating stages of moral panic: First, a group or behaviour is identified as a threat and cause for concern. Then, mass media pick up on this concern and bring the problem to a wider audience, amplifying, exaggerating and often distorting the original issue. Influential figures, such as politicians or church officials, rally behind the cause and call for a solution. In the last phase, authorities react to these calls for action, social changes ensue, and the moral panic dissipates (Cohen 2002). American sociologists Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda built on this concept by adding five elements of moral panic: concern, consensus, disproportion, hostility, and volatility (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2010, 2011). The themes of both concepts are similar, but Cohen's model is more focused on a process, while Goode and Ben-Yehuda identify necessary qualities. Therefore, these two models have also been called the 'processual', and the 'attributional' model of moral panic analysis (Critcher 2008, 2017). Using both of these models in combination to analyse the public discourse about antiquities trafficking in Germany between 2003 and 2021 allowed me to witness the unfolding of a moral panic over time, as more and more of the qualities were present.

As I lay out below, the discourse about antiquities trafficking quite suddenly spun out of control and into a moral panic when an established point of concern among a certain audience – the looting of archaeological sites and museums in Iraq and Syria for the international antiquities market – became linked with a more widespread fear: The fear of terrorism. An important aspect of any moral panic is the need for a villain, or "folk devil", as Cohen calls it, usually not represented by an individual, but rather a group of people thought to be responsible for the perceived problem (Cohen 2002). In Goode and Ben-Yehuda's interpretation, this group is the target of the collective hostility (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2011). "Folk devils" are usually members of marginalised groups, such as ethnic or sexual minorities, who do not have equal access to mainstream media power (Cohen 2002; Garland 2008). However, it has been argued that they can also use their own media platforms to spin the narrative to their advantage, at least for their own audiences (McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Garland 2008; Walsh 2017).

In this specific case, the folk devils were not only Islamist terrorists, although they have been identified as the targets of moral panics at the beginning of the 21st century (Rothe and Muzzati 2004) and may be argued to have become a recurring folk devil since. But additionally, the dealers and collectors of Western Asian antiquities also became folk devils. In this paper, I also discuss how the antiquities market in Germany reacted to this portrayal.

Phase One: Looting in the News

In the course of my doctoral research, I have analysed the media and public discourse about looting and trafficking of Western Asian antiquities in Germany between 1991 and 2021, to assess the impact of conflict-related looting in Iraq and Syria, and the public perception of it, on the market in antiquities from these countries. I chose Germany as an example, but this discourse may be comparable to what happened in the media of other so-called 'Western' countries in the studied period of time. In the structure of the international antiquities market, Germany is today both a so-called transit and a so-called market country, with cultural objects from Western Asia and beyond being bought and sold both domestically and to collectors in other countries (Hilgert and Hemeier, 2020). It was at least for a time also the fourth-largest seller of antiquities over the platform eBay, only surpassed by the USA, the UK, and Thailand (Altaweel 2019).

For this research, the first step to was to examine articles published in German-language newspapers between 1991 and 2021 with a method called 'news framing analysis'. News framing is the term given for the ways in which journalists use language and images to present topics to their audiences (Entman 2004; Entman et al. 2009; D'Angelo 2017). Essentially this means that by highlighting some aspects of a topic through their choice of words to describe and images to illustrate it, journalists and communicators put the issue at hand into a frame in order for it to be understood by their audience (Entman et al. 2009; Van Gorp 2009). In the course of analysing a moral panic, framing analysis is useful, as it helps to understand what is seen by journalists and their editors as a threat to society (the identification of a societal threat being a necessary condition for a moral panic following Cohen). It can, moreover, show how many of the elements of moral panic, following Goode and Ben-Yehuda, are present in the writing.

It has to be pointed out here that, while not necessarily intentionally manipulative, frames are 'culturally embedded' with both the author and their audience (Van Gorp 2009). That means that some frames, such as specific lexical choices, might evoke well-known metaphors, archetypes and tropes in the minds of readers who share a cultural background with the writer. As such, frames can also reproduce preconceived notions that are already present in the audience. In former colonising countries such as Germany, this can include orientalist narratives, as I will show in this paper.

The articles analysed for this study were selected by a targeted search on the international newspaper archive Nexis, using the German search terms 'Raubgrabung' (looting), as well as 'Antikenschmuggel' and 'Antikenhehlerei' (two common terms for antiquities trafficking), in a time period between 1991 (the year of the Gulf War in Iraq) and 2021 (the time of the search, and, neatly, 30 years later). This yielded a number of articles from national and local German newspapers, as well as some from larger Swiss and Austrian newspapers. This sample is not exhaustive, but the selection is deemed representative for the more general media trends in the researched time period. Each article was analysed individually for its framing of the problem. After the framing analysis, the articles were sorted into a timeline, to better assess how the discourse developed over time and when the most striking changes occurred.

The first notable result from the search was that the looting and trafficking of Western Asian antiquities was apparently not really a topic in German newspapers before 2003. The occasional news story about archaeological looting would usually relate to domestic cases, such as the Nebra sky disc, a Bronze Age artefact unearthed by looters in Germany in the 1990s. Only after the American-led invasion of Iraq did newspapers start reporting on the loss of Iraqi cultural heritage, be it stolen from museums or obtained through illegal digging (Waser 2003; Zekri 2005). This sudden media attention to the looting of Iraqi cultural heritage might have given readers the impression that it was a new phenomenon then. However, the looting of Iraqi archaeological sites had already been a severe problem for years following the sanctions of 1991, and was only exacerbated by the collapse of public order and the loss of income of many citizens during the war (Stone 2008; Brodie 2011). Most of the articles dealing with this topic are found in the 'Arts and Culture' pages, with few examples from 'Third Page' or 'Opinion' sections. Thus, the target audience can be assumed to be already culturally interested people to whom the destruction of cultural heritage would be a reason for concern. However, while concern is an element of moral panic, the presence of concern alone does not constitute the beginning of one.

Soon after the topic of antiquities looting and trafficking was first discussed in German media during the Iraq war, newspapers made the connection to the international antiquities trade and the antiquities trade in Germany (Doering 2005; Kapff 2005; Zekri 2005). In these articles, concern about the sale of potentially looted artefacts on the German antiquities market was expressed, and experts interviewed in the news media called for a better legislation to prevent trade in artefacts looted from conflict zones, criticising Germany as a trade hub for illicit antiquities. There is also some hostility (another one of the elements of moral panic following Goode and Ben-Yehuda) visible, with one interviewed expert calling Germany a "country of fences" – 'fence' here meaning a person who sells stolen goods (Zekri 2005). Another element of moral panic that is found early on is disproportion: The allegation that antiquities constitute the third-largest illicit market after drugs and guns, and that it is worth at least several millions (e.g., Kapff 2005). Both of these allegations are hard, if not impossible to substantiate, because the illicit antiquities market is hardly quantifiable in financial figures (Yates and Brodie 2023; European Commission et al. 2019; Mackenzie et al. 2019). The inclusion of these claims in the reporting speaks for an attempt to generate concern in an illicit market by putting a monetary value on the crime.

With calls for better legislation to prevent the sale of looted cultural artefacts in Germany coming from experts and the media, the German government ratified the 1970 UNESCO convention in 2007, and adopted a law to enact it in the following year. The topic of archaeological looting in Iraq then became less prominent as the war itself stopped dominating the news. However, the topic of illicit Western Asian antiquities within Germany still came up occasionally in the following years, often related to restitution cases and then mostly in local newspapers (Gaul 2009; Platen 2009; Müller-Karpe 2011). Still, these articles show that antiquities trafficking, specifically the trafficking of antiquities from Iraq to Germany, had been established as a topic of some public interest.

With the beginning of the civil war in Syria, the Arts and Culture sections of the newspapers once again flared up with concern for cultural heritage – mentioning antiquities trafficking as a potential danger to the country's archaeological sites (Baykal 2012; Metzger 2012). These concerns were later validated when satellite imagery and other sources confirmed extensive looting of Syrian archaeological sites, from 2012 onwards (Casana and Panahipour 2014; Casana 2015; Casana and Laugier 2017; Brodie 2022; Sabrine et al. 2022). The reporting of that time mirrored the concern for world heritage shown in the newspapers during the Iraq war, and even surpassed it. But the height of moral panic was yet to come.

Phase Two: Moral Panic

It can be seen from the Figure 1 that the reporting on antiquities trafficking in Germany reached a marked peak between the second half of 2014 until early 2015, which coincided with the conquest of large parts of northern Iraq and Syria by the terror group known as Islamic State (IS) or Da'esh. The group's campaign was most prominently one of conquest and destruction, including the destruction of cultural heritage. They also used social media to publicise their atrocities and make themselves known. This strategy was at the time so effective that it was even identified as a new form of terrorism, called "socially-mediated terrorism" by some commentators (Smith et al. 2015). As such, they arguably acted as self-aware folk devils in a moral panic (Walsh 2017).

At that time, it had become an accepted fact in the academic discourse that some or all factions of the Syrian civil war used archaeological looting to help fund their war efforts (Casana and Panahipour 2014; Brodie 2015; Casana 2015). This was also reported on in more public-facing media, if mainly in the 'Arts and Culture' sections of newspapers, until 2013 (Baykal 2012; Hanimann 2013). However, amid growing concerns about the terror group's territorial advances, the reporting on cultural looting and trafficking in the reporting suddenly became completely focused on IS alone in mid-2014 (Doering 2014; Frey 2014; Timm 2014), after several months of relative silence on the topic (see Fig. 1). In combination with the massively exaggerated market figures for the illicit antiquities trade, and the terror group's own propaganda videos, which showcased their contempt for Syria's and Iraq's cultural heritage, the narrowed view on IS as perpetrators paved the way for the narrative which would soon dominate the relevant reporting: That the terrorists obtained a significant part of their income, possibly in the millions or even billions of dollars, through the trafficking of looted antiquities for the 'Western' market (Waser 2015).

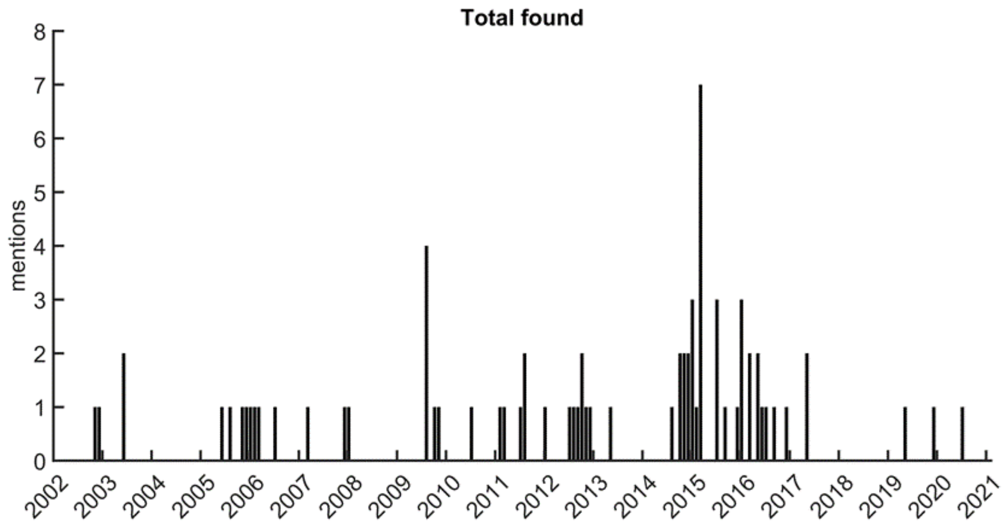

Fig. 1. Timeline of News. The graphic shows the sample of analysed German-language news articles in the studied time frame with the y-axis indicating the number of mentions of the three search terms ('Raubgrabung,' 'Antikenhehlerei,' 'Antikenschmuggel') found on the database Nexis, and the x-axis showing the years from 2002 to 2020. While there are two articles touching on the topic in 2002, the topic of Western Asian antiquities trafficking only becomes a discussion point during the 2003-2007 Iraq war. An early peak in 2009 reflects a restitution case mainly discussed locally. Note that a marked peak occurs between 2014 and 2015, after a period of relative silence.

For the media and subsequently the public discourse, this meant by implication that antiquities collectors in market countries were financing the terror group with their purchases. The focus here lay on 'Western' market countries, such as the former colonising countries of Europe and North America. It can, of course, be argued that collectors in these countries in particular have historically shown an interest in obtaining Western Asian cultural objects by any means necessary (McGeough 2015; Bahrani 2018;). The German newspapers also put special attention on the market in Germany. From a journalistic perspective, this makes sense as the focus brings the topic closer to the newspaper audiences. However, it has to be noted that this framing also narrows the picture. Other potential destinations or way stations for looted Syrian and Iraqi antiquities are mentioned only in passing. From about August 2014 onwards, the trafficking of antiquities was portrayed as a main source of income for IS, and thereby, end consumers in 'the West', including Germany, as complicit in their actions (Frey 2014; Anon. 2015a).

This narrative has several problems: For one, the figures brought up for the illicit antiquities market are unsubstantiable (European Commission et al. 2019). Secondly, by nature of the illicit antiquities market, the revenue gained from looting and selling artefacts at source is low, compared to the eventual price paid for an antiquity in a consumer country (Mackenzie et al. 2019). In other words, even if the illicit antiquities market was worth as much overall as has been claimed, repeatedly, over the last decades, these billions of dollars would be found nowhere in the actual source region of the antiquities. Moreover, it has by now been established that IS was less involved in the antiquities trade than previously assumed, and in fact, the looting activities in IS-controlled areas were apparently even less extensive than under some other factions of the civil war, such as the so-called Free Syrian Army (Sabrine et al. 2022). But even before these new studies, some, including in the media, speculated that the role of IS in the trafficking of Syrian antiquities was seriously overstated (Zimmermann 2014). Voices that criticised this increasingly rumour-based reporting stayed in the minority, however. There was a certain consensus in the writing across newspapers. Consensus, as an element of moral panic, following Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2010), was now present alongside concern (for cultural heritage), disproportion (on the value of the illicit antiquities market), and hostility (against terrorists and their supposed financiers).

Over time, several embellishments to the basic narrative of terror financing through antiquities became a regular part of the reporting. One of them is that IS used a hypocritical ‘double strategy’ of destroying cultural heritage for their propaganda videos, while secretly squirreling away a significant part of it to sell on the market (e.g., Gehlen 2015). This narrative seems to satisfy a certain craving for moral superiority, by putting emphasis on the idea that the leaders of the terror group would even betray their own followers and belief system for profit.

It is notable that the destruction of Syrian and Iraqi cultural heritage, particularly that of archaeological heritage sites and artefacts, was portrayed from a very narrow, Eurocentric point of view: If not as a form of income generation through trafficking to ‘Western’ countries, the destruction is usually framed as a form of rejection of pre-Islamic cultures, as a message directly to the former colonial powers. This framing also suggests that people in former colonising countries care more about the destroyed pre-Islamic heritage than the local population do. This view seems strikingly parallel to a narrative dating back to the early days of archaeological exploration in Western Asia by the colonial powers: That the local, often Muslim, population had no interest in or understanding of the ancient artefacts unearthed there, which would therefore be better taken care of elsewhere, i.e., the countries of the colonisers (McGeough 2015; Bahrani 2018).

Contrastingly, it has also been argued that the archaeological destructions may tie in with the more general devastation the Islamic State terrorists wrought on the lands they conquered, including the burning of crops and destruction of infrastructure, in a campaign which could be called a ‘scorched earth strategy’ (Harmanşah 2015). In addition to pre-Islamic archaeological heritage, many other forms of heritage were targeted and, despite the media focus on ancient artefacts in European and American media, the most victimised monuments were those of other Muslim denominations (Stein 2022). Such actions might then be interpreted as a form of cultural genocide, severing the ties of populations to their local heritage. With archaeological artefacts, this can only be an effective strategy if the local population do indeed care about their ancient heritage. This view, however, did not feature prominently in the reporting by German-language newspapers.

Media exaggeration, amplification and even distortion is one integral part of any moral panic. Another is the rallying of ‘right-thinking people’ (Cohen 2002), that is, influential figures of society such as lawmakers and representatives of law enforcement, behind the cause. In this case, some of the narratives pushed by the media have been repeated by official bodies, including UNESCO, in an effort to encourage countries to take measures against antiquities trafficking. The most striking example here is the disproportion with which the illicit antiquities market is described: For one, the money to be made from illicit antiquities is massively overstated, with some claiming the market is worth up to 36 billion dollars (Anon. 2015b). It is called the third-largest illicit market after guns and drugs. It is also called one of the ‘main income sources’ of terror groups and organised crime, even in official statements by researchers (Hilgert 2015). Activists and academics have also supported similar statements. However, neither of these three claims is true, or at least not verifiable. The myth of the third-largest illicit market has been identified as a ‘factoid’, that is, a claim that assumes the sheen of reality simply by being repeated over and over (Yates and Brodie 2023).

Despite this, the idea that IS was making a fortune off looted antiquities clearly stuck even with policy makers, not only in Germany. In 2016, a U.S. Homeland Security Committee Majority Staff Report judged the sale of antiquities looted either by the terror group themselves or locals who were taxed and supervised by them, to be one of their major income sources. Using Syria’s pre-war cultural heritage industry as a benchmark, the report estimates that “even if ISIS captured only a fraction of the market, it could have seen a windfall well into the tens of millions” (Homeland Security Committee 2016). Aside from the fact that the heritage sector in pre-war Syria did not generate its main income through the sale of antiquities, it is striking that the report’s sources in the section about antiquities are almost exclusively newspaper articles (Homeland Security Committee 2016: 27–28 fn. 45–58). Over time, after the peak in reporting in early 2015, the moral panic’s endorsement by official bodies and experts led to bolder statements in the public discourse and to calls for action directed at the authorities: The moral panic reached its peak.

In 2016, Germany amended its cultural property law, which had only been adopted in 2007, after Germany’s ratification of the 1970 UNESCO convention that same year. This legislation, aimed to curb the illicit trade with foreign antiquities in Germany, was greeted widely as a reaction to the calls for better legislation resulting from recent events. In reality, an amendment of the old legislation, which had proven altogether ineffective, had been planned since 2013, and was based on a critical evaluation of the 2007 legislation started in 2009 (Neumann 2013). After the adoption of the 2016 legislation, the German media interest in the topic of antiquities trafficking suddenly dissipated, despite vocal criticism both from the antiquities market (which felt the law was too strict) and archaeological experts (who felt the opposite). It is notable here that, despite their apparent fall from grace, and protestations of being unjustly criminalised, spokespersons for several market interest groups were present as expert witnesses in the lawmaking process of the 2016 law, more than from the fields of archaeology, law, or law enforcement.

Phase Three: Aftermath

A moral panic needs a villain, a person or group responsible for the societal problem, whom Cohen (2002) calls the 'folk devils'. These groups are portrayed as an imminent threat to society, which, in the case of IS, was relatively easily understood by the audiences. After all, the fear of Islamic terrorism had been a recurring moral panic since the 9/11 attacks (Rothe and Muzzati 2004), and massacres had been carried out by IS members in 2015, not only in Syria and Iraq, but also in Europe, and thus much closer to home for the newspaper readers. For the terrorists, media attention was the goal of their actions, as their whole campaign was designed to shock and terrify the international public to maximum effect (Smith et al. 2015; Walsh 2017; Stein 2022).

But the folk devils in this specific moral panic were not only terrorists, but also the antiquities dealers who allegedly funded the terrorists out of greed. This connection needed some more explanation by the writers, but ultimately did come across, perhaps in an effort to shine a light on the more general problem of antiquities trafficking. However, the focus was still on a supposed IS-antiquities market pipeline, without much regard for the complex structure of the illicit antiquities chain or the realities on the ground. This happened despite the fact that academics have been pointing out that all factions in the civil war, as well as unaffiliated locals, took part in the unsanctioned digging for antiquities (Casana 2015; Sabrine et al. 2022). A tone of hostility in the reporting, which is a key element of moral panic, is clearly visible towards the antiquities dealers suspected of funding "the knives of IS" (Frey 2014). It is not surprising, then, that voices from the antiquities market have reacted defensively to this portrayal, and in no less hostile tones. Associations of antiquities dealers and collectors, as well as market-friendly magazines have decried the reporting as 'bogus' (Fitz Gibbon 2019; IADAA 2023). Moreover, despite the fact that an amendment of Germany's cultural property legislation had been planned since at least 2013, the sensationalist reporting gave the market an opportunity to portray itself as unjustly persecuted by laws built on bad information (IADAA 2019; Kunsthandel 2019a).

In the wake of Germany's 2016 amendment to its cultural property legislation, the Cultural Property Protection Act (*Kuturgutschutzgesetz*: KGSG 2016), new umbrella organisations for market associations formed to protest the legislation (Kunsthandel 2019b), and market actors were seen working in a more concerted way when asked to comment on new regulations, such as the 2022 EU action plan against trafficking in cultural goods (European Commission – Have Your Say 2022). Community building by the supposed 'folk devils' in reaction to a moral panic has been noted before, for example, in roleplaying gamers targeted by religious activists in the 1980s (Waldron 2005). It is yet to be seen, which effects these new, more cohesive interest groups will have on the market, and on potential future lawmaking efforts. As of now, despite the concerns of being forced out of business by new due diligence rules, it can be said that Western Asian antiquities are still being sold by private dealers and auction houses in Germany (Hilgert and Hemeier 2020).

Thus, both the disproportional figures given for the market and the media focus on IS and terror financing, possibly meant to attract more attention to a serious problem, can be said to have backfired. The fact that these narratives were largely unproven at the time, and by now have been at least partially debunked (Sabrine et al. 2022; Yates and Brodie 2023), have been used to cast doubt on all reporting on illicit antiquities, and to portray journalists, academics and even lawmakers as biased "anti-trade activists" (Fitz Gibbon 2019).

Conclusions: What Has the Moral Panic (Really) Changed?

The sudden prominence of the topic of antiquities trafficking, in conjunction with terror financing, the heated debate sparked by it, and its equally sudden disappearance when calls for action were seemingly answered by authorities, are consistent with the stages of moral panic, defined by British sociologist Cohen in 1972 (Cohen 2002). While one of the elements of moral panic, defined by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2010, 2011) is volatility, a moral panic always has some sort of legacy (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994) – and indeed some social changes can be observed here.

On the one hand, the reporting on the transnational antiquities trafficking chain may reflect a new awareness on the responsibility of the end consumer in market countries for archaeological looting taking place in the origin countries of antiquities. But on the other, the overreporting on terror financing and the overblown market figures reported have arguably backfired, as, these easily-debunked myths have been used by the market to portray archaeologists, antiquities crime researchers, and even lawmakers as biased and unscientific. Meanwhile, market interest groups have formed, making increased efforts to speak with one voice towards policy makers, at least on a German national and EU level. Market actors continue to portray themselves as unjustly criminalised by overly strict due diligence regulations, despite being regularly involved in lawmaking processes. As the antiquities market is notoriously hard to quantify, it is hard to say whether the moral panic of 2014–2015 had any real effect on the trade as such, but it has led to some changes in the behaviour of market actors, such as increased efforts to 'speak with one voice' against new regulations, which can be seen as community building in the sense of David Waldron (2005).

On a broader social scale, it can be stated that the moral panic has led to a greater awareness of antiquities trafficking – albeit a somewhat distorted image of the problem. Next to some changes, for example, speaking of antiquities as the cultural heritage of nations rather than treasure to be claimed, there are also some tropes that have proven quite stable in the news framing. As such there is still a certain element of orientalism noticeable in the German discourse on Western Asian antiquities even after the moral panic. For one, the focus on terrorism, which reflects an older legend of 'constant war in the Middle East', as well as the more general moral panic relating to Islamic terrorism. The conflation of illicit antiquities trafficking with terror financing and specifically IS has therefore not only hurt the objective of curbing the trade in looted antiquities, but is also reproducing orientalist stereotypes. In addition, the myopic view on antiquities trafficking for the 'Western' market excludes the experiences and stakes of those people most affected by the looting of archaeological sites, that is, the local population.

In the long run, the legacy of this moral panic was social rather than institutional, and as such, relatively subtle. What can be said is that, while the complex and global issue of antiquities trafficking was arguably quite misrepresented, it did generate some attention, for better or worse, at least for some time. However, the more profound changes in the discourse took place over about two decades, not in the short period of media frenzy between August 2014 and February 2015.

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A Formidably National Archaeology? The Impact of Crypto-colonialism on Archaeological Research in Iran

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A Formidably National Archaeology? The Impact of Crypto-colonialism on Archaeological Research in Iran

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Abstract

The article examines the links between archaeology, nationalism, and (crypto-)colonialism using the example of Iran. The starting point is that archaeology has not only been a scientific enterprise but also a deeply political endeavour since its emergence. The central question is how archaeological knowledge has been instrumentalised in colonial and post-colonial contexts to construct national identities – often marginalising or ignoring cultural plurality. Particular attention is paid to the concept of crypto-colonialism, which describes the paradoxical power relations in formally independent but de facto partially subjugated states such as Iran. In the area of conflict between adaptation to Western standards and self-assertion through recourse to an idealised pre-Islamic past, an archaeological practice developed that actively supported state power. Case studies are used to analyse the role of archaeology as an instrument of knowledge and power. The aim is to show the entanglements of researchers and to provide impulses for a critical-reflexive, decolonising archaeology.

Keywords

crypto-colonialism, aggressive nationalism, racism, Iran, Iron Age

Zusammenfassung

Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht die Verflechtungen zwischen Archäologie, Nationalismus und (Crypto-) Kolonialismus am Beispiel Irans. Ausgangspunkt ist die These, dass Archäologie seit ihrer disziplinären Entstehung nicht nur ein wissenschaftliches, sondern auch ein zutiefst politisches Unterfangen ist. Im Zentrum steht die Frage, wie archäologisches Wissen in kolonialen und postkolonialen Kontexten zur Konstruktion nationaler Identitäten instrumentalisiert wurde – oftmals unter Marginalisierung oder Ausblendung kultureller Pluralität. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit gilt dem Konzept des Crypto-Kolonialismus, das die paradoxen Machtverhältnisse in formal unabhängigen, aber faktisch hegemonial geprägten Staaten wie Iran beschreibt. Im Spannungsfeld zwischen Anpassung an westliche Standards und Selbstbehauptung durch Rückgriff auf eine idealisierte vorislamische Vergangenheit entwickelte sich eine archäologische Praxis, die staatliche Machtstrategien aktiv stützte. Anhand von Fallbeispielen wird die Rolle der Archäologie als Wissens- und Machtinstrument analysiert. Ziel ist es, die Verstrickungen der Forscher*innen aufzuzeigen und Impulse für eine kritisch-reflexive, dekolonisierende Archäologie zu geben.

Schlagwörter

Crypto-Kolonialismus, aggressiver Nationalismus, Rassismus, Iran, Eisenzeit

Introduction

Since its beginnings, archaeology has been far more than just the scientific reconstruction of past cultures. It is a political project that is often used to legitimise rule, construct identity, and reproduce hegemonic order. As early as the 19th century, the discipline developed in close relation to the imperialist undertakings of European powers, which not only found historical depth in antiquity, but also an ideological canvas to justify their colonial '*mission civilisatrice*'. The ambiguous role of archaeology – as a science and as a tool of cultural dominance – runs as a common thread through the history of archaeological disciplines.

This article examines the complex interrelationships between archaeology, nationalism, and colonial or crypto-colonial power politics with a special focus on Iran. The picture is complemented by a comparison with the socio-political situation in Thailand. The starting point is the observation that national identities in the 19th and 20th centuries increasingly drew on a deep past that was as 'pure' as possible, which was made visible archaeologically and symbolically charged. In many states, the construction of such genealogical continuities not only served to culturally reassure themselves against colonial powers, but also to homogenise and exclude people marked as 'foreign' within the state.

A central theoretical instrument of this analysis is the concept of crypto-colonialism, which Michael Herzfeld introduced to describe those states that remained formally independent but were de facto deeply integrated into Western hegemonies, and which was recently introduced to archaeology by Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis in their analysis of archaeology in Greece and Israel (Herzfeld 2002; Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022; see also Plantzos 2023). As I show with the example of Iran, crypto-colonialism led to a paradoxical constellation: on the one hand, the political elite with an interest in international relations sought recognition on the world stage by aligning itself with Western knowledge and symbol systems; on the other hand, an aggressive nationalism was cultivated within the country, which used archaeological narratives to assert its own cultural superiority – often marginalising or even ignoring minorities. This marginalisation has its roots in the Qajar period and before, but became particularly pronounced in the context of nation-building during the early Pahlavid era and continues to this day. It affects different minorities in Iran in many ways, but is certainly most pronounced in the context of the structural and institutional exclusion, disenfranchisement, and, as a result, financial, physical, and sexual exploitation of Afghan refugees, of which wage slavery, similar to the situation of workers from the Indian subcontinent in the Arab Gulf states, is only one form (DeSouza 2020; Verdi 2024; Farahani et al. 2025). The article traces the genesis of these political instrumentalisations of archaeology from the Qajar period through the Pahlavi era to the present day. It shows how Western concepts from the 19th and early 20th century – such as the search for 'ancestral homelands,' 'Aryan origins,' or the idea of homogenous cultural groups – were received, adapted, and placed locally in the service of nation-state agendas and continue to have a negative impact on research today. Archaeology in Iran was not only used for research, but also as a stage for nation-building from the very beginning.

The analysis of archaeological practice exemplifies how closely scientific interpretations are tied to political objectives – and how necessary a critical-reflexive archaeology is that questions its own epistemic foundations. The aim of the article is therefore not only to make the historical lines of these entanglements visible, but also to contribute to the debate on a decolonised, plural archaeology.

> "There is little discussion of the West's use of the past, nor is there much interest in how the position of a Western archaeologist approaching an alien culture may or may not relate to the object of study" (Bahrani 2003: 63).

Research Question

In the following, I address a number of questions that I believe are all interwoven. To what extent is the concept of crypto-colonialism useful in historicising archaeology in Iran, and does it help to unearth and explain blind spots? Is the absence of certain topics in the archaeology of Iran the result of an aggressive nationalism, and if so, might the absence be directly conditioned by crypto-colonial structurations that have shaped much of Iranian history in the late 19th and the 20th centuries? How are they connected to a focus on ethnic attributions in the context of Late Bronze Age (1450−1250 BCE)[1], Early Iron Age (1250−550 BCE) and well into the Late Iron Age (which comprises the historic periods from the Teispid-Achaemenid period into the Early Arsacid Period, that is from 550−150 BCE)? Which problems result from the abandonment of archaeological periodisation with the beginning of the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire? Is there an absence of alterities in the Iranian highlands?

Racism, Archaeology & Crypto-colonialism in Iran

The non-Persian-language literature corpus on the subject of nationalism in Iran has grown steadily in recent decades. The topic is considered and discussed from all sides, and it seems that interest in this topic, especially among Iranians in Iran and the diaspora, but also among subsequent generations of young Iranians, is unbroken, with sometimes very different positions and approaches being advocated (see Zia-Ebrahimi 2016; Merhavy 2019). Approaches to explaining national identity in Iran often move between the poles of primordial ideas and discourses of modern construction, as Reza Asadian recently discussed in his synthetic article (Asadian 2023).

In this context, the important role of classical and oriental studies as well as archaeology and their proponents is also repeatedly emphasised (Borumand 2016: 78). From the very beginning, Greek and later Roman sources played a fundamental role in the exploration of the empires of Western Asia, which led to the adoption of stereotypical images and narratives, particularly in the first half of the 20th century. Both Iranian and non-Iranian players are inextricably linked to the history of nationalism in Iran. Less research has been done on the disciplines from which the researchers from the Global North came, and the specific role of fields such as Iranian studies, archaeology, linguistics, and history. This point is complicated by the fact that many disciplinary and socio-political discourses and strands of discourse, such as the debates on research into Indo-European roots, are closely interwoven, and there is a thicket of assumptions, hypotheses, and models, oftentimes leading to circular arguments that can no longer be properly untangled. Elke Kaiser observed a similar phenomenon in the context of research history on the emergence of the Proto-Indo-European language in the Eurasian steppe (Kaiser 2017: 194−217).

With regard to the subject of archaeology in Iran, it is repeatedly emphasised from various sides that many disciplines, including archaeology, must be regarded as a foreign import in Iran (Niknami 2000; Abdi 2001; Vahdati Nasab et al. 1391/2011; Dezhamkhooy et al. 2016). The authors also agree that there have been no independent developments in the field of research methods and underlying theories in Iran, although they differ concerning the reasons given. For Maryam Dezhamkhooy and her colleagues, the findings are relatively clear, and the recent state of archaeology in Iran is largely due to decades of outdated curricula and encrusted structures within relevant institutions. According to the authors, this condition is a result of the close connection of academic archaeology to state structures, which were ultimately instrumentalised from the beginning in order to serve the state, a circumstance that has continued from the Qajar through the Pahlavid rulers and up to the current regime of Mullah theocracy.

In my view the metaphor of ‘import’ does not adequately describe the context: As in other fields, the adoption of antiquarian and archaeological concepts involved a process of local appropriation of approaches and techniques and the integration of research results into an overall societal discourse. This can also be observed in other fields such as painting (Roxburgh 2017) or architecture (Grigor 2009).

Politics and Archaeology

In her 2010 article, Susan Pollock pointed out that hardly anyone can question whether there are direct links between archaeology and politics (Pollock 2010: 196). These links have existed since the beginnings of professionalisation of archaeological disciplines, as traced by Margarita Díaz-Andreu García (2018). The development

1 Here I refer to the redefinition according to Michael Danti, who criticised the traditional typo-chronological subdivision according to which the time span from 1500 to 1250 BCE was lumped into the Iron Age based on cultural-historical premises (see Danti 2013).

of archaeological disciplines based at universities is in many cases directly linked to the emergence of nation states and the political ambitions of their elites as well as the imperialist aspirations of European states and those strongly influenced by Europe (e.g., Iran, USA, Thailand, Turkey).

The emergence of archaeological practice in a Western sense can be studied in the context of nationalist currents in many parts of the world. Díaz-Andreu García emphasises that the role of archaeology grew particularly with the rise of the idea of ethnically motivated nationalism as a shared history: language and customs form the fundamental premise for the assertion of a nation as a community (Díaz-Andreu García 2018: 5). On this basis, together with the notion that a nation must be able to dominate others, it was the discourses and narratives of superiority that fostered a pronounced white racism and supremacism in North American and European societies, which also served as a rationale for colonialist practices. Ruthless attacks on others were often cynically dressed up as a form of humanitarian mission, such as the French '*mission civilisatrice*', which was similarly propagated by other Western states (Burrows 1986).

In many cases, colonial endeavours are about the manifestation of power relations and their massive shift in favour of the colonialists. This happens in various areas and in various ways, which Patricia Hill Collins has labelled as 'vectors of oppression', and which primarily draw on concepts of race. They are to be found on different levels that she describes as 'dimensions of power' and that also encompass the past of colonised people (Hill Collins 2000 [1990]). The reason for the subjugation can be found in Frantz Fanon's description of appropriation of a colonised people's past and by that the establishment of interpretative authority over it (Fanon 2024: 43). It was these practices that ultimately formed the basis for biologistic-scientific racisms in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries and – in some cases – are still today. In the Southern hemisphere, too, racism played a central role (particularly in the context of settler colonialism, but not only there).

This means that the practice of European archaeologists was often both directly and indirectly linked to the colonial practices of European states and settlers' interests in various ways (Bohrer 2001). As a hard power, together with other disciplines, such as geography, anthropology, and biology, it was a way of studying, measuring, and documenting other groups of people, their customs, and their environment. Just as these were used to objectify human communities, ancient studies also offered the possibility of measuring, documenting, interpreting, and exercising epistemic power over people's (supposed) past and sometimes also to argue why the archaeological finds did not represent the past of the groups living nearby (Pollock 2023: 381). The appropriation of things perceived as exotic served the purpose of self-representation through musealisation in Europe and North America (Malley 2008: 635). This went hand-in-hand with what Edward Said calls the essentialisation of the Orient by Western scholars, with which colonialists looked at colonised subjects (Said 2014 [1979]). As Barbara Bender (1999) has shown, this is often associated with a gaze in which people and landscapes are perceived and conceptualised, in tropes such as 'penetration,' 'conquest,' and 'domination'. The explorers often had other employments; they were cartographers and surveyors, but also diplomats and military officers, often more than one at the same time. Good examples are two diplomats with an interest in antiquarianism, the French Paul Émile Botta and the British Austen Henry Layard, whose activities in Iraq I am reluctant to call archaeological excavations, but rather underground works which, with their shafts and underground galleries driven along palatial orthostats, were more akin to mining of mineral resources.[2] From the time of Naser al-Din Shah *talā-šuyi* – 'panning for gold' – was a term used to find ancient treasures (Abdi 2001: 53). It is also fitting that Jacques de Morgan, who dug up artefacts from all over West Asia to Egypt, was a trained mining engineer (Amiet 2015). Layard also wrote dossiers on the geography and movements of nomadic groups in the border region of the Ottoman and Qajar territory, which were read by British diplomats and the Foreign Office (Malley 2008: 630–631) and certainly influenced political and military decisions.

From the very beginning, research in and on West Asia was conducted primarily in the context of European history, which was understood as a clearly structured sequence in the cultural-historical tradition of European antiquarianism. This is beautifully illustrated by the tympanon 'the torch of civilization' above the entrance to the Chicago University Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures.[3]

2 I don't seem to be alone in this impression. In this context, Shawn Malley also says that Layard "had struck a virtual mother lode" (Malley 2008: 634).

3 Previously 'The Oriental Institute', renamed in 2023.

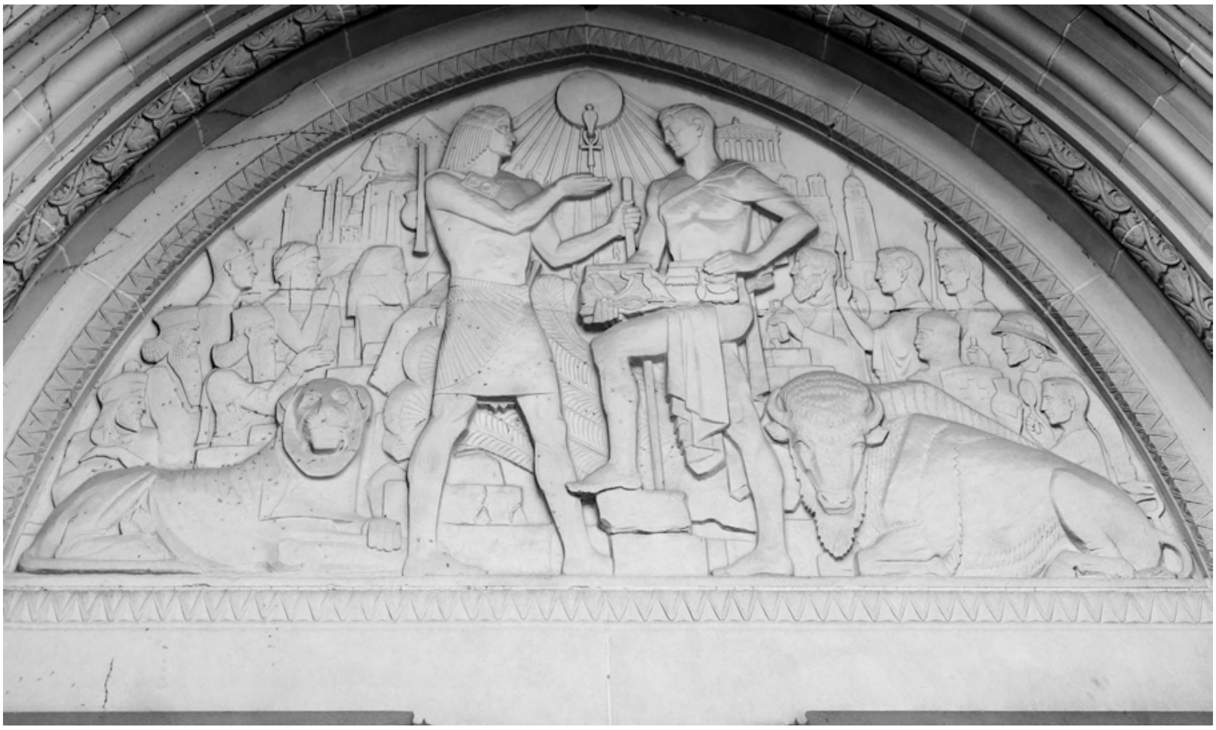

Fig. 1: Tympanon above the entrance to the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, designed by James Henry Breasted, sculpted by Ulric Henry Ellerhusen (modified on the basis of a photo by User: Daderot; public domain; source Wikimedia).

The relief was designed by James Henry Breasted, founder of the Oriental Institute (Larsen 1989: 232). The central motif in the foreground shows an Egyptian-style male figure on the left and a male figure on the right that is partly Roman and partly modern Western in appearance, placing his left foot on the remains of a wall. The two figures are arranged antithetically: while the figure on the left extends his right hand in a kind of presentation gesture towards the figure on the right, the latter holds an architectural fragment decorated with hieroglyphs in his hands. The overall composition is characterised by symmetry and harmony, and it would certainly not be wrong to interpret this as an allegory of the peaceful transfer of knowledge and culture from "East" to "West," despite the depiction of a crusader in the right-hand centre. It is obvious that the Western proponents of archaeology, history, and linguistics must be viewed in the context of oftentimes veiled "cultural imperialist power politics", as Franziska Torma has put it (Torma 2017: 223). In that sense, scholars were all acting in the context of Western knowledge regimes, which could, however, take very different concrete forms.

Crypto-colonialism & Archaeology

In the context of colonialist practices, it must be noted that oftentimes we are not dealing directly with colonialism, but in many cases initially with coloniality[4] (Appiah and Yeboah Mireku 2021: 32), from which different forms of colonialism subsequently developed. Especially in the case of Iran, which was never a direct colony, other parameters must be applied in order to better understand the developments in detail. In my opinion, the concept of crypto-colonialism is suitable for this purpose. Michael Herzfeld developed the concept in the context of his analyses of Greek conditions and also applied it to the socio-political situation in Thailand (Herzfeld 2002: 900–902). The term refers to developments in a state that is formally independent, but in other central points all the more dependent on hegemonic states that use the territory of the crypto-colony as a buffer space towards an enemy state or an uncontrollable hinterland. Crypto-colonialism arises where the elites of a state endeavour to appear

4 Coloniality refers to a plethora of underlying ideas, opinions, and narratives particularly in European countries that were fundamental to legitimising (colonial) hierarchies and exploitative relationships and, according to Juliana Safowaa Appiah and Roland Yeboah Mireku, might even manifest in "a system of 'colonialism without colonies'" (2021: 32).

equal to hegemonic states both internally and externally (Herzfeld 2012: 217). In addition, aggressive forms of nationalism develop in crypto-colonised states, which are primarily intended to lend credibility and authority to the nation-state and state institutions through an imagined temporal depth that often stands in contrast to their political role as perceived by other state actors in the international arena. However, nationalism also plays an important role externally, namely where it attempts to confront foreign hegemonic forces with a self-proclaimed aura of cultural superiority in order to demand respect from foreign countries that cannot be gained in any other way (Herzfeld 2002: 905). One symptom is therefore a paradoxical relationship between self-representation and external perception.

Many elements of nationalism are based on concepts originating from hegemonic European states. Border demarcation and the characterisation of territoriality often play an important role. Another central element is homogenisation efforts in the areas of language and culture, but also pre-/history, which serves as a projection surface for a 'pure' past to which archaeologists and philologists are considered to deliver significant contributions. There is often a dissonance between the political and social reality and the central projections into a self-aggrandising, glorious past, which at the core characterise the main state myths and have their impact on people's everyday lives. Internally, this means that nationalism is used by the institutions of the state to impose a uniform identity on all inhabitants of a state territory in one or more of the areas of religion, politics, and culture, as can be observed in the example of Thailand (Herzfeld 2002: 906–917). Such highly centralised states run the risk of institutionalising racist topoi, which can express themselves as internal colonialism (Casanova 1965). Minorities are often denied the right to self-determination in the practice of their own culture, with frequent fatal consequences for local communities. These range from the suppression of individual groups' cultural customs to that of religious beliefs, but also the systematic, intentional underprovisioning of infrastructure, which leads to differences in income and even life expectancy (Sawhney and Azad 2020; Khezri 2021; Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2022; Matin-Asgari 2024).

Iran's political structures of the last 150 years developed in the context of autocratic rule (Katouzian 2006: 2). While the Safavids met Western colonial powers politically and militarily on an equal footing until the 18th century, the Qajar state (1779–1925) increasingly came under the influence of European powers (Katouzian 2006: 25). Russia and Great Britain in particular threatened Iran's territorial integrity and used the region as a geopolitical buffer (Amanat 1997). The Iranian state tried to ensure its survival through changing alliances, but was faced with massive military, economic, and political problems (Amanat 1997: 218; Kashani-Sabet 1997: 209).

In order to push ahead with reforms, the Qajar rulers brought European experts into the country (Cronin 2008) and founded the first polytechnic school modelled on European examples, Dār al-Fonūn, in 1851 (Azizi 2021: 399). In order to solve financial problems, concessions were granted to foreign investors, including Julius de Reuter in the mining sector, the telegraph network to Siemens & Halske, and railway lines to other European companies (Amanat 1997: 424–425; Shahvar 2014 [2008]). The fiscal sector also came under European influence (Issawi 1991: 602). There were repeated revolts in society, the most well-known being an outcome of Naser al-Din Shah granting the Englishman Major G. F. Talbot the infamous tobacco concession of 1889. The protests started among a group of influential tobacco growers and merchants who successfully won over the Shiite clergy, leading to massive nationwide protests against the political and economic intrusion of foreigners in internal affairs (Amanat 1997: 411−421). In 1895, the French diplomat René de Balloy secured the monopoly for archaeological excavations in Iran on behalf of the French Government for 50,000 francs for 95 years, driven in particular by the desire to prevent British interventions on Qajar soil. A similar agreement had previously been offered to the Ottoman High Porte for the territory of Iraq, but was rejected by the Ottoman ruler (Malley 2008: 634). The above-mentioned developments led to crypto-colonial entanglements that gave Western powers considerable influence over Iran (Scarce 2007). By the end of the 19th century, Qajar Iran had become a mere buffer state dependent on Europe, a playing field for Western states and investors.

At this point, a look at the history of another country can provide some helpful insights. The archaeologist Rasmi Shoocongdej describes precisely such developments when she talks about the development of archaeology in Thailand. Around 1833, the then Kingdom of Siam began to practise Western-oriented archaeology, which, largely detached from religious aspects, dealt with the question of the origins of the population (Shoocongdej 2017). In 1874, it was the ruler Rama V who had a museum with archaeological exhibits set up in his palace, with the focus on illustrating the age and long history of Siam to Western emissaries. This can be directly linked to the state endeavours described above. Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul describes how, in 1899, the French archaeologist Henri Parmentier founded the *Mission archéologique de l'Indochine* in Hanoi, covering the vast area between Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos that had been included in the French colonial empire. In 1901, this mission was incorporated into the *École française d'Extrême Orient* as part of the colonial administration, an institution that also had a direct influence on archaeological research in Siam. The court elites played a central role in the historiography of the country. Winichakul describes how European cultural markers, especially in the areas of politics and social norms, but also very specifically in clothing, were adopted by 'enlightened' elites, especially by Rama IV (1804−1868), as part of complex appropriation processes (Winichakul 2000: 529). The intentional development of an aggressive nationalist consciousness in Thailand was expanded by the elites in resistance to the influence and pressure of the Western colonial states, to the grief of local minorities (Shoocongdej 2007: 380). It consisted of a refiguration of already existing religious and cultural values, but also of concepts adopted from Western tradition, leading to the attempt to establish cultural homogeneity. Its legitimisation was sought in the prehistory of the country by archaeological means (Shoocongdej 2007: 381). This aspect was greatly promoted by the fact that, at the beginning of the 20th century, all public institutions and elite societies were closely linked to the ruling court (Shoocongdej 2017: 99–100).

Of Wandering Peoples

The study of pre-Islamic antiquities in Iran was fuelled by two convergent, but not necessarily always interrelated currents. Both were characterised by a teleological understanding of history, which was based on research into European-Anglo-American culture's origins. While one line originated from the context of biblical exegesis, the other was inspired by the study of Indo-Europeans and Aryans as a counter-concept involving a notion of ancestry freed from religion and the Bible's primacy.

Older archaeological research in West Asia focused primarily on biblical sites between the Levant and Babylon (Masry 1981; Bahrani 2003: 59; Larsen 2009; Hoeks 2018). The British geologist William Kennett Loftus' activities must also be placed in this context. He had come to the region in 1850 as an employee of the Ottoman-Qajar-Russian-English border commission (Curtis 1993) and during this time carried out the first 'archaeological' excavations in Susa. These largely met rejection from the local population. Both his own quite rude behaviour and tensions between the Iranian-speaking governors and Arab sheikhs may have contributed to this (Loftus 1857: 288–289, 329–330).

The discourses of the second approach were primarily concerned with a detachment from biblical traditions, especially with regard to the origin of Indo-European languages (Poliakov 1993; Arvidsson 2006). The first traces of the hunt for origins can already be found in Abraham Anquetil-Duperron's work on the translations of the Zarathustrian holy book of the Avesta (Anquetil-Duperron 1771) and William Jones' findings on the linguistic relationship between European languages, Sanskrit, and Old Persian (Jones 2013 [1786/88]). However, the search for evidence of concepts such as *Urvolk*, *Urheimat*, and *Ursprache* played an even more pronounced role in the emerging German Empire, which was struggling to find its own identity (Poliakov 1993; Motadel 2014). The discourses that predominated at the centres of learning, such as academies and universities, were always about the migration routes of the supposed Indo-European groups (Adams et al. 1978).

Indo-European studies (Marchand 2009) developed in the wake of these discourses, soon leading to a conflation of language with those of culture. In a further step, the notion of an Aryan/Indo-Germanic group of people was developed from the Aryan/Indo-Germanic language, and Iran was initially brought into play as a possible original homeland (Wiwjorra 2002). In the 19th century, anthropologists increasingly linked the aforementioned linguistic and cultural concepts to biological characteristics such as skull form, skin and eye colour, and charged them with prejudices about mental abilities, which were said to have given people with 'Aryan ancestors' superiority over other supposed 'races'. It was no coincidence that these concepts were based on the supposedly unique characteristics of European and American researchers and served to morally underpin racist and supremacist fantasies. Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau, in particular, who was for a while a French diplomat at the Qajar court, disseminated such racist ideas in his writings, which he and other people in his circle of influence, such as Houston Stewart

Chamberlain, combined with scientific concepts of racial hygiene and maniac ideas of supposed purity (Priester 2003: 197–212).

German philologist and archaeologist Gustaf Kossinna played an important role by formulating his iconic premise-turned-synthesis: “Scharf umgrenzte archäologische Kulturprovinzen decken sich zu allen Zeiten mit ganz bestimmten Völkern oder Völkerstämmen” (Kossinna 1911: 3). In his publication *Die deutsche Vorgeschichte. Eine hervorragend nationale Wissenschaft,* Kossinna sought to prove that archaeology could make a meaningful contribution to the localisation of ethnic groups and thus be a valuable tool in the process of nation-building (Kossinna 1936 [1912]). He was also inspired by the idea of showing that the Germanic peoples were not uncivilised barbarians, contrary to what the Roman sources suggested, but rather a superior race who had inhabited the area of Central and Northern Europe since time beginning, thus speaking in favour of the model of *ex septentrione lux* (Eggers 1974 [1959]: 229−254; Wiwjorra 2002). From there, the Aryans would have spread across the Eurasian continent (Kossinna 1902). In his *siedlungsarchäologische Methode*, he moved from the later periods step by step into the past by combining historiographical Roman sources with antiquarian-archaeological data. Where this was no longer possible due to a lack of sources, he used linguistic hypotheses and models in order to draw an unbroken line of human tradition from the Stone Age to Late Antiquity. The German prehistorian Hans Jürgen Eggers already pointed out that this combination of different information from different disciplines was scientifically very prone to error and therefore should be dismissed (Eggers 1974 [1959]: 250–252).

Increasingly, a rift between two camps became apparent: while linguists saw origins in the East, anthropologists postulated a Nordic homeland of the Aryans – a thesis that enjoyed increasing popularity, particularly in the German Reich (Wiwjorra 2002). A fierce dispute erupted between the two camps, in which many scientists felt compelled to take a stand (Wiwjorra 2002), and which repeatedly centred on questions of migration and the displacement of peoples by other peoples (Adams et al. 1978).

Turning to the Past in Iran

Developments in Iran were strongly influenced by the aforementioned discourses, which awakened a broader interest in the pre-Islamic past among the elites. At the same time, the numerous concessions, such as the French monopoly on excavations, were criticised as a sell-out of the country. Mirzā Moḥammad Ḥāj Sayyāḥ commented harshly that European states dealt differently with the past and the monuments of the past than his fellow countrymen in Qajar Persia (Abdi 2001: 53). Mirza Fathali Akhundzadeh (1812–1878) and Mirza Agha Khan Kermani (1854–1896/97) had a particularly strong influence; their texts and pamphlets significantly shaped the debates of the time by framing the existence of the weak Qajar state and the miserable state of the country as a late consequence of the Arab-Islamic conquest of the Sasanian Empire (Kashani-Sabet 2011). They painted a glorious past of Iran before Islamisation and espoused anti-clerical but also openly racist views, blaming ‘the Arabs’ for the supposed decline. Their writings took up themes and ideas from the French Enlightenment, especially Ernest Renan (Kashani-Sabet 2011: 165), but also include topics such as the purity of blood and the eternal conflict between the Aryan and the Semitic. In this case, the *ex Oriente* models of Aryan expansion served as their basis.

Their objectives can be outlined as follows: 1) to create a common primordial history of all Iranian-speaking groups (a form of Pan-Iranianism), 2) to marginalise certain groups, particularly Arabic-speaking ones, and 3) to emphasise Iran as an ancient cultural nation superior to all others. These ideas were particularly popular with young men who had been sent to Europe to study; even though these discourses did not play a central role in the constitutional revolution of 1906, they were certainly accepted in elite circles. One such group was the first masonic lodge in Iran, founded in 1907 under the name Lož-e bīdārī-e Īrān (Lodge of the Awakening of Iran), whose members believed that a national identity should be established based on concepts of Aryanism and a pure Iranianness (Grigor 2010: 58).

Following the defeat of the democratic forces, the suppression of the constitutional revolution, and the eventual seizure of power by Reza Pahlavi, the members of the lodge began to seek other ways of exerting influence in the arena of cultural policy. All were highly respected politicians and academics, and a number of them came together in 1922 to found the *Anjoman-e Athar-e Melli* (Society for the National Heritage of Iran, SNH) (Khademzadeh et al. 2020). Their aim was a *mission civilisatrice* based, among other things, on historical politics, by using the famous poet Abu Qasem-e Ferdowsi (940–1019/1025 CE) as a link to the past. His Shahnameh was highly valued and popular in all parts of society and therefore provided the opportunity to establish connections to the Sasanian and Teispid-Achaemenid empires (Esmaili 2025: 140−142). At the same time, however, the racisms of Mirza Fathali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Agha Khan Kermani were also incorporated, in order to reinforce Iranian identity through the antagonism between Iranianness and the supposedly intrusive Islamic-Arabic cultural elements. This involved adopting the aforementioned Aryan concepts in order to strengthen internal homogeneity in Iran. The institution of *Farhangestān*, which was modelled on the *Académie Française* and was meant to cleanse Farsi from Arabo-Semitic intrusions, should also be understood in this context (Kashani-Sabet 2011: 176). Both the *Farhangestān* and the SNH were concerned with restoring an imagined ‘original state’ before the destruction of the Sasanian Empire. Ultimately, in the words of Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, the aim was to “restore Iran [... as a] highly cohesive and primordial nation, contained as it was from its racially distinct neighbours” (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016: 164).

During this period, archaeological research was also intensified to emphasise Iran’s pre-Islamic past. Historians such as Mohammad-Ali Foroughi and Hasan Pirnia wrote about the pre-Islamic period (Abdi 2001: 56) and, as members of SNH and *Farhangestān* (Abdi 2001: 57; Grigor 2004: 21; Algar 2012), were in close contact with German archaeologist and philologist Ernst Herzfeld, who travelled to Iran several times at the invitation of the AAM. E. Herzfeld and the SNH collaborated on the drafting of a law on antiquities and thus played an important role in the context of abolition of the French monopoly in 1927.

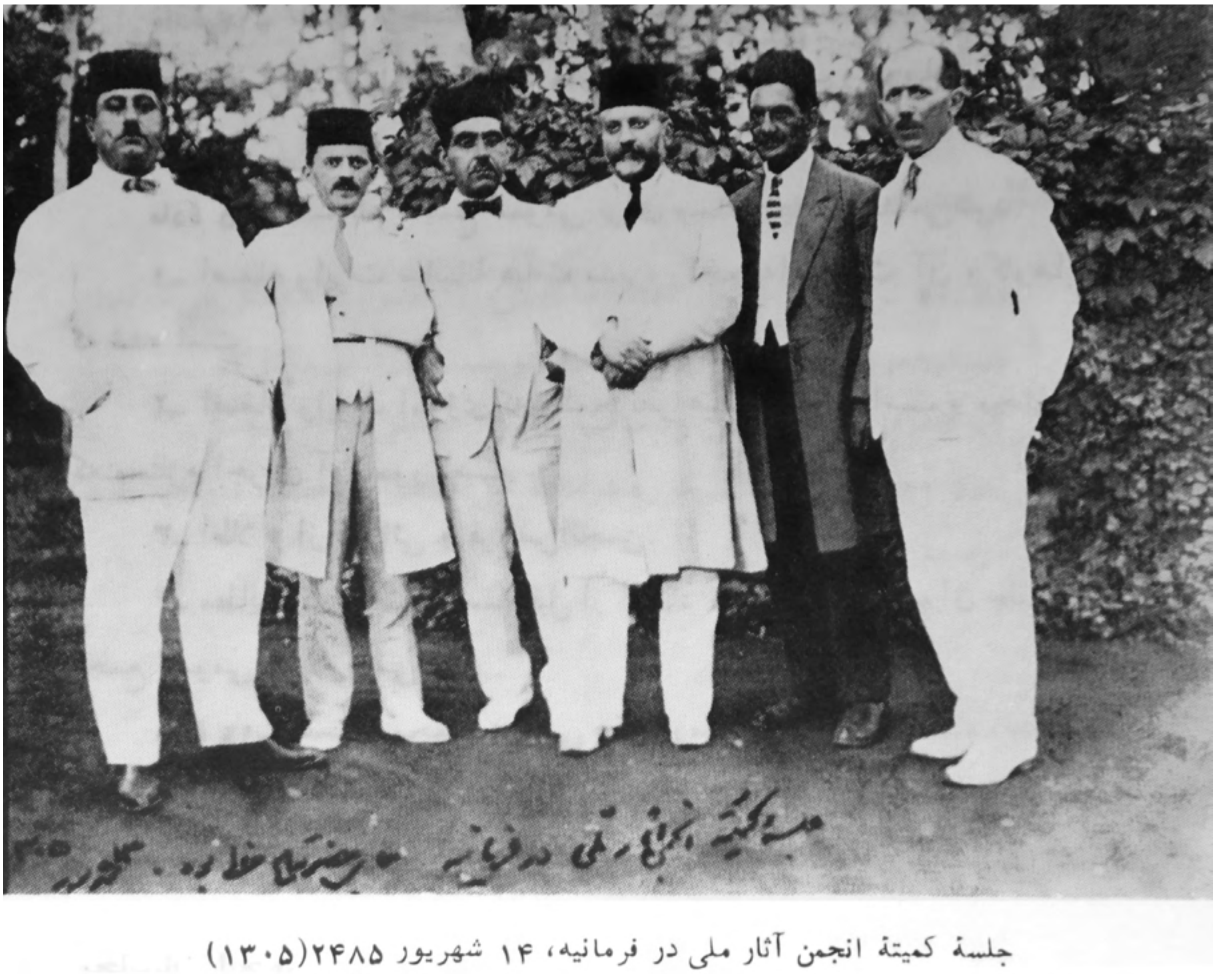

Fig. 2: Photo taken during the AAM committee meeting on 6 September 1926; from left to right: Ali Asghar Hekmat, Hossein Ala, Firuz Mirza Nosrat-ed-Dowleh, Mirza Hassan Khan Esfandiari Sadegh al-Molk, Ebrahim Hakimi Hakim-al-Molk, Ernst Herzfeld (My gratitude goes to Talinn Grigor for providing a photograph first published in al-Ulumi 1976: 19).

Historical figures such as Kurush II. and Zarathushtra gained importance in science, literature, and art (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016: 177–187), accompanied by the idea of a strong leader. These certainly fit into the political programme of Reza Pahlavi (1878−1944), initially Minister of War from 1921 to 1923 and then Prime Minister from 1923 to 1925. In 1925, backed by the British and the Shi'a clergy, the Iranian parliament elected him as the new autocratic monarch. His political strategy consisted of strengthening the central government in Tehran and forcing the sometimes highly autonomous parts of the population within the country to cooperate and submit through a combination of carrots and sticks. In this context, he frequently referred to the Teispid-Achaemenid and, in particular, the Sasanian rulers.

Iran's Department of Antiquities was founded in 1918 (Dezhamkhooy and Papoli Yazdi 2018: 5), followed by the first university institute of archaeology at the University of Tehran in 1937 (Abdi 2001: 62). The discipline served political purposes from the very beginning: while the question of Aryan migrations played an important role for Western researchers coming to Iran, Iran's elites saw the research and the models on which it was based as a way of differentiating themselves from their immediate neighbours and postulating a relationship with Europe. Iran was thereby culturally the primogenitor and therefore the senior country from their point of view. It is also fitting that in 1935, under the influence of some members of the AAM, Reza Pahlavi decreed that the country should in future be referred to as "Iran" by foreign states.

Data published by Kamal ad-Din Niknami shows that the number of excavations during this period was limited due to the world economic crisis and the Second World War (Niknami 2000: Appendix). However, the majority of the excavations that took place in Iran were ultimately connected with Aryan research, be it that of Erich Schmidt in Tappe Hesar (Schmidt 1937), Frederick R. Wulsin's excavations at Torang Tappe (Wulsin 1932), or Ture Algot Johnsson Arne's work at Shah Tappe (Arne 1945). The research of Georges Contenau and Roman Ghirshman during this period should also be categorised accordingly (Larsen 1989: 237). Fundamental models of 'Iranianness' were thereby created, which were also widely disseminated through the school system and thus found their way into conceptions of Iranian nationalism, which limited the perspective, especially for certain periods of time, to an idealised and romanticised pre-Islamic past.

After the British-U.S. coup of 1953, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became the ruler of Iran. In the 1950s, he reformed the higher education system along U.S. lines, which led to a close partnership between U.S. and Iranian universities. At the same time, the number of foreign, particularly U.S., projects in Iran increased, and many Iranian students went to study in the U.S.A. (Leslie and Kargon 2006: 123).

Iran's state ideology increasingly referred to Achaemenid heritage, especially to Kurush II. This link between the cult of the Pahlavid and Teispid rulers, Iranian identity and an allegedly 'pure' Aryan heritage manifested itself in various forms of violence, including the destruction of an Islamic shrine that was considered the tomb of the mother of Solomon in the Fars region (Abar 2020: 108–109), but also the appropriation of the cylinder of Kurush, which was stylised as the 'first testimony of human rights' by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and torn from its actual historical context. In 1965, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi adopted the freshly invented title of 'Āryāmehr' (Light of the Aryans) in order to link Iran more closely to the West and distance himself from Islamic concepts of rule, but at the same time excluded all non-Iranian groups in Iran.

From the mid-1960s, numerous archaeological excavations began in northwest Iran, focusing on the Late Bronze and Iron Ages and the alleged migrations of Iranian groups, following Robert H. Dyson's initial works at Tapeh Hasanlu (Dyson 1965). These include T. Cuyler Young's excavations at Godin Tapeh which began in 1965 (Young 1969: 2), Claire Goff Meade's excavations at Bābā Jān Tapeh initiated in 1966 (Goff Meade 1968: 105), David Stronach who started his excavations at Nuš-e Jān Tapeh in 1967 (Stronach 1969: 2; Roaf and Stronach 1973), Charles Burney's excavations at Haftavān Tape in 1968 (Burney 1970: 157). These research projects followed existing Western notions of the spread of Aryan/Iranian groups from the northern steppe regions and, at the same time, coincided with nationalist Iranian narratives. Most of them emphasised the role of the Medes, who were attributed a precursor role in the emergence of the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire. Dyson labelled this period 'protohistoric', which his doctoral student Young had previously elaborated upon in his dissertation (Young 1963; Dyson 1965). In his work, Young linked archaeological finds with historical sources using a 'pots equal people' approach and attempted to derive social developments from ceramic typologies.

This is not the place to question fundamental work on ceramic typology and chrono-typological approaches, but what definitely must be detached is the ethnic interpretation. The combination of both elements is not surprising in the context of cultural-historical approaches, but it cannot be maintained in this form today, even though it has played a central role in the context of nation-building and propaganda since the early beginning of the archaeological disciplines (Jones 1997).

The close connection between archaeology and the state apparatus was particularly evident during the so-called '2500th anniversary celebrations' in 1971 in honour of Kurush II. European archaeologists such as Stronach and Giuseppe Tucci were involved in the preparations and benefited massively from exclusive invitations to celebrations, meetings with political dignitaries, and state funding for major conferences around the year of the celebrations. One example is the 'Congress of Iranology', held in 1971 under the title *The Continuity of Iranian Civilisation and Culture*, which focused on the Iron Age and the subsequent 'Achaemenid period' (Steele 2018: 156). This is particularly unsettling, as critical Iranian archaeologists were silenced, placed under house arrest, or imprisoned at the same time (Dezhamkhooy and Papoli-Yazdi 2018: 89). Western scholars who took part in the celebrations must have been aware of this and also of the fact that they were being instrumentalised for political propaganda.

All Iranians, or What?

There is still the old hypothesis that Iranian-speaking groups migrated to the highlands during the 2nd millennium BCE. The beginning of the Iron Age was also therewith defined as a period of fundamental cultural change (for further information, see Genito 2005; Danti 2013: 48–49).

Although repeatedly criticised and insufficiently evidenced by today's standards, this image is still partly regarded as the basis for studies of ancient history in Western Asia (see Waters 2014: 19). Linguistic evidence for such migrations may exist (Witzel 2013: 425), but in context of archaeology, the sometimes very simplistic migration models of Iranian-speaking groups from the 19th and 20th centuries must be strongly called into question (Adams et al. 1978: 487; Gori and Abar 2023). The references based on the spread of 'gray pottery' as an indicator of migration based on a detailed evaluation of Hasanlu's material (Danti 2013: 323–329) are, for example, no longer tenable. On the contrary, clear lines of tradition between local Bronze Age and Iron Age traditions can be observed all over from western to eastern Iran (see also Piller 2008: 12; Fahimi 2013: 160–162). Numerous authors rightly criticise the oftentimes ill-conceived conflation of linguistic and archaeological evidence (for further information, see Witzel 2013: 425; Rossi 2017), which in many cases leads to convoluted, circular conclusions. In his article published in 2017, Adriano V. Rossi presents the many loose threads that we would need to ignore if we wanted to construct the still persistent image of Iranian groups in general and the Medes as an ethnically and linguistically homogeneous group and precursor empire of the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire in particular. These include many inconsistencies that are often simply sidelined in attempts to create a homogeneous narrative.

In order to better understand the situation, it may help to look at archaeological research in other regions where questions of migration and ethnic identity also play a central role. Sebastian Brather deals extensively with the question of migration-models of supposed ethnic groups in Central Europe and convincingly shows for the period from the Late Iron Age to Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages that the well-known problems in interpretations arose from the merging of historiographical, historical, linguistic and archaeological concepts with political constructs of the 19th century (Brather 2004: 240–276). He pointed out that many statements from older research have, on closer examination, little substance, emphasising that all these attributions lead teleologically to concepts of 19th-century nationalism and notions of nation-state that are closely interlinked with notions of homogeneity and purity of supposed peoples (Brather 2004: 319). Brather does not want to halt all discussions on ethnicity, but he points out that we must exercise great caution in order not to unnecessarily simplify and homogenise past realities (Brather 2004: 518). I would add to this argument that by such oversimplifications, we do injustice to past social complexities and thus past individuals.

The criticism put forward by Brather must also be applied to the archaeology of Iran in the 1st millennium BCE. The key point here is that the fundamental hypotheses about the nature, extent, and timing of a possible immigration of Iranian-speaking groups to the Iranian highlands are ultimately based primarily on linguistic analyses.

Archaeologically, attempts have been made to identify an immigration by the staggered appearance of grey-ware pottery. Bruno Genito has already pointed out that the various ceramic traditions of grey-ware are far too heterogeneous for such a link between linguistics and archaeology to be really tenable in this form (Genito 2005: 317–320). Migration can have very different forms and reasons that cannot be summarised in one model (Gori and Abar 2023: 30–31). Moreover, even if we assume that Iranian-speaking immigrants came to the Iranian highlands, we must take into account that these groups did not fill a vacuum, but that the highlands were already populated: linguistic data is key, as it indicates that particularities in Iranian languages can be interpreted/explained as remnants of non-Iranian languages, which had been spoken in the highlands (Witzel 2013: 433). This, in turn, raises questions of interaction and acculturation that need to be answered, but which we can only pursue if we discard the old homogeneity paradigm.

In my opinion, however, the difficulties continue: as already mentioned above, the migration hypotheses play a central role for many researchers, above all because their research is intended to provide explanations about the origin of Iranian groups such as the Medes and Persians. The latter initially played a more important role, as it was long assumed that they must have populated and ruled large parts of West Asia as a precursor empire to the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire. The aim has always been to find something typically Median, a search that has so far proved unsuccessful, to the extent that an increasing number of researchers are openly questioning the existence of such a predecessor empire (Lanfranchi et al. 2003). I will not elaborate on the fact that this clearly contradicts Herodotus' texts in particular and will merely refer to the numerous publications of Robert Rollinger, who has repeatedly elaborated on this point in great detail in recent decades (Lanfranchi et al. 2003; Rollinger 2003a, 2003b, 2020; Degen and Rollinger 2019).

We may assume that the Assyrian sources from the first half of the 1st millennium BCE would be more informative on this subject, a hope that many archaeologists, philologists, and historians dealing with the Iranian highlands shared. According to the first generation of scholars, especially Dyson, Young and Stronach, the textual evidence allowed the precise location of Medes and Persians during the 1st half of the 1st millennium BCE. But in fact Assyrian and Babylonian textual sources cast doubt on the hypothesis of linguistically and culturally homogeneous Iranian groups that can be identified on the basis of a simple link of language equals ethnos: past realities must have been more complicated, as the example of Ḫanaṣiruka shows: Assyrian sources mention Ḫanaṣiruka as an influential ruler of Sagbita, which is commonly equated with Hangmatana/Ecbatana, a nodal city in what is believed to have been the core region of ancient Media, interestingly his name does not fall into the group of the Indo-European language family (Radner 2003a: 41; Hipp 2016: 776). The complexity of the situation is further emphasised by a votive object found near modern Hamadan, which most likely depicts a local ruler of a 'Median' settlement of the 9th/8th century BCE with the name Šilisruḫ (Radner 2003b: 121–127): while the dedicatory inscription is written in Babylonian, the ruler's headdress and clothing are reminiscent of Assyrian traditions (Muscarella 1987: 239), and the name cannot be assigned to any language currently known to us. In addition, the Assyrian sources clearly show how many very different, politically quite independent territories existed in the area in the immediate vicinity of the Assyrian empire alone (Radner 2003a).

If even the Assyrian written sources cannot clarify this question (Radner 2003a: 63–64), how should archaeology solve the problem? In my opinion, it is impossible to make claims on the basis of the archaeological sources to explain 1) who was a Mede at what time and who was not, 2) when the biological ancestors of the people described as Medes in the Assyrian sources migrated to the regions east of the Assyrian empire, and (3) whether they migrated at all on a large scale or whether local 'secondary state formation' (Brown 1986) in conjunction with acculturation processes could have led to some sort of ethnogenesis. Archaeologically, it is not possible to clearly define what exactly 'Median' means: is the term an ethnonym, and if so, did it mean the same thing in the 8th century BCE as it did around 500 BCE? Attempts to clarify such questions using terms such as 'Median art' must be labelled a failure (Muscarella 1987). Attempts to grasp something typically Median via architecture (Naseri et al. 2016) were also met with fundamental criticism (Boucharlat 2020). All these approaches have the same flaw as Mohammad Rahim Sarraf's interpretation of his findings in Hamedan as Median (Sarraf 2003): they always start from the premise that there must have been a homogeneous Median tribe and that such a tribe must have inhabited a clearly defined cultural area – the spirit of Kossinna sends his regards.

In my opinion, the univocality between European/North American and Iranian researchers only superficially stems from the same points of view. While Western researchers, especially historians of antiquity, are concerned with the credibility of Herodotus as the founder of the historical sciences and therefore defend him tooth and nail, in Iranian archaeology, he plays more of a role in the backward projection of a homogeneous Iranian empire in the context of nationalist narratives. Concepts of an Iranian homogeneity that marginalises non-Iranian groups − both in the past and in the present − inflict violence on these groups (Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2022).

The problems resulting from the very rigid concepts of homogeneity continue into the later historical periods. With the end of the Iron Age III, a historical-dynastic chronological conception, starting with the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire, is often adopted, combined with the idea that 'Iran' entered a historical epoch before the West (e.g., Naseri et al. 2016: 104), which in turn is linked to the idea that the ceramic ensemble must also have changed considerably. However, this concept obscures the fact that 1) we have no written sources for many regions in this period, and 2) in many regions, Iron Age pottery traditions have durations well into the Arsacid period (Abar 2012). However, if certain ceramic shapes, typical carinated bowls and dishes, and red surface coatings do not occur, findings are labelled as Iron Age. This applies in particular to old excavations, where stratigraphic units are often dated purely typochronologically and without 14C confirmation. In my opinion, these questions require more precise analyses, which must go far beyond a purely stylistic-typological approach: rather, further analyses of production techniques are needed to track down the specific techniques and clay formulas on the basis of which changes and thus chronological differences could possibly be indicated.

In addition, the absence of certain 'Achaemenid' pottery types in archaeological sites could raise a series of questions:

- Is the absence of 'Achaemenid pottery' truly a chronological marker?
- In which kinds of assemblages and contexts does such pottery appear, and in which not?
- What can presence or absence tell us about practices associated with this kind of pottery?

Another point is that research on periods such as the Seleucid has so far been much less extensive than that of the Achaemenid and Sasanian periods; there have been and still are only a few projects that have dealt with the Hellenistic phase in depth. This problem continues from the Seleucid period into the Arsacid period. For some, the Arsacid period is too Hellenised and no longer 'Iranian/Oriental' enough, while for others, such as classical archaeologists, the period is too 'Oriental' and not 'Hellenistic' enough; certainly the stereotypes and prejudices found in ancient sources also play a role (Isaac 2004: 371−380; De Jong 2008: 18). Over everything lies the haze of decadence and decay, underpinned by Sasanian propaganda about the Arsacid dynasty as basically descendants of foreign barbarians originating from the north-east.[5] One effect is that we hardly know anything about acculturation processes in various areas of life, such as the emergence of syncretisms on the Iranian highlands, which in some publications leads to ideas of a pure 'Iranian' religiosity under the primacy of Zoroastrian written testimonies. An example of this is the search for Iranian sanctuaries for the *yazata Mithra* (Alibaigi et al. 2017) and an attribution of places as sanctuaries, building on premises that must in themselves be questioned.

The previous discussion was intended to show the emergence of nationalism in Iran in terms of its links with the history of ideas in Europe and North America, but also to trace the way in which it was adopted as a state doctrine, especially in the Pahlavid period, and used as a targeted tool. Similarly, the ideological legitimisation by scholars of antiquity was partly directly controlled by Iranian elites in various ways and partly skilfully steered by financing and flattery with clear self-interests. In my opinion, one of the central characteristics of the crypto-colonised states identified by M. Herzfeld can be seen very clearly in these developments, namely that they proclaim their superiority through particularly aggressive forms of backwards projection. This in turn is almost always diametrically opposed to their real political significance (Herzfeld 2002: 902), a circumstance that serves to defend them externally, but internally demands, among other things, the political and social subjugation of all inhabitants (Rostam-Kolayi 2003). However, there are also certain differences: while M. Herzfeld shows that in modern Greece there was a rather vague idea of the category of the "barbarian" (Herzfeld 2002: 902), in Iran, from the end of the 19th century to the present day, the image of the barbarian is primarily projected onto 'Arabs.' I agree with Reza Zia-Ebrahimi in his observation that the ideas of the founding fathers of dislocative Iranian nationalism were not anti-colonial in their core (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016: 177–178). In order to realise their vision of a strong centralised

5 Similar tendencies can also be observed in modern Greek historiography, in which the Byzantine Empire, in contrast to the Hellenistic period, has been devalued by various authors (see Ricks and Madgalino 1998; Kostantaras 2015).

state and a homogeneous Iranian nation, it was necessary to largely strip the many different minorities of their political independence (and, in the case of nomadic groups, their rights of mobility), their traditions and customs, which were expressed in cultural practices such as their own language, poetry, and music. The architects of modern Iran thereby consciously or unconsciously laid the foundations for an internal colonialism as previously described by Pablo G. Casanova (1965).

Archaeological research into the Iron Age in particular is hampered by the associated ethnic interpretations, as the analysis of the findings is based on old convictions that were carried over from the times of the Pahlavids into the theocratic regime of today. Concepts of an Iranian homogeneity that marginalises non-Iranian groups both in the past and in the present (Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2022) and thus inflicts violence still predominate, although Assyrian sources in particular, but also later sources from the environment of the Achaemenid administration, give us an idea that the situation must have been much more complex (e.g., Henkelman and Stolper 2009).

Conclusion

The intertwining of archaeology and politics is not a sideshow, but a central structural feature of the discipline's development – both in its European genesis and in its worldwide spread. As has been shown in the previous discussion, archaeology has always been not only an academic project, but also a political instrument – a vehicle for the construction, justification, and stabilisation of power. Research on the past has always been ambiguous: on the one hand, it has been used for scientific knowledge, on the other hand, it served for the normative legitimisation of claims in the here and now – be it in the form of colonial dominance or the self-assurance in the context of nation-states.

The case of Iran in particular illustrates how national identity constructions were interwoven with imperialist and local interests. The selective appropriation of a pre-Islamic past, as had been practised since the Qajar period and played an important political role from the era of Reza Pahlavi onwards, was intended both to assert cultural independence from the West and to create a unified national identity within the country – a strategy that functioned above all through recourse to the supposedly 'Aryan' heritage. These memory policy manoeuvres served the purpose of cultural self-assurance, but at the same time led to the marginalisation and delegitimisation of non-Iranian and, in particular, Arabic-speaking groups in southwest Iranian Khuzestan.

The concept of crypto-colonialism, as developed by M. Herzfeld, proves to be fruitful in the analysis. It allows the ambivalent position of Iran – formally independent, but de facto deeply integrated into hegemonic power relations – to be analysed. Paradoxically, cultural self-assertion did not lead to decolonisation, but to the reproduction of Eurocentric forms of knowledge, now under the sign of 'Iranianness.' Archaeology was not only a mirror of these processes, but an active player. The selection of excavation sites, the interpretation of finds, the periodisation, and even the choice of terms such as 'Medes,' 'Aryans,' or 'Iranians' are not neutral. They still contain elements of nationalistic assumptions about ethnicity, culture, and history. The attempt to equate material culture with ethnic groups – such as grey pottery with 'Iranians' – is methodologically problematic and conceptually regressive. It is based on paradigms that have been out of date even in German-speaking academia since the late 1990s/early 2000s.

In addition, the fixation on concepts such as '*Urvolk*,' '*Urheimat*,' and '*Ursprache*' refers to a teleological view of history that understands the past as a linear path to the present – a path that ideally leads to today's nation. This ignores the historically demonstrable plurality and hybridity of cultural identities. Migration, acculturation, and secondary state formation are either ignored or distorted in such narratives. As Brather has shown for Europe, such models not only lead to an impoverishment of historical, archaeological, and anthropological analysis but also to a dangerous politicisation of the past. The legacy of this politicised archaeology continues to this day. Apart from political instrumentalisation, archaeological periodisation is still strongly influenced by nationalist assumptions. Models that emphasise homogeneity and cultural coherence over plurality and difference still dominate. Certain periods – such as the Seleucid and Arsacid period – are still marginalised because they do not fit into the narrative grid of an idealised past, as are non-Iranian-speaking groups, which must have inhabited the Iranian highlands, too.

The challenge lies, therefore, above all in reflecting on the epistemic foundations of the discipline. We archaeologists must realise that archaeology is a historically contingent practice that is always charged with political implications. A decolonising archaeology must reveal these implications in the wake of inequalities and power imbalances and actively work to create space for ambiguities, contingencies, and alternative narratives.

This does not mean that every form of national identity formation should be condemned. But it does mean that archaeology must not be allowed to function as a sidekick to essentialist national myths. Instead, it should see itself as a critical cultural science that visualises the complexities of past societies in all their contradictions, and thus at the same time makes a contribution to the pluralistic shaping of the present and future.

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Historising Épidemaïs – West Asian Characters in the Comic Series 'Asterix the Gaul' Against the Background of Historical Sources, the 20th-Century-Zeitgeist and the Current Discourse on Orientalism

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Abstract

In this article, Épidemaïs, the Phoenician merchant in the comic series *Asterix the Gaul*, and other characters representative of ancient West Asian cultures, namely the Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians and Medes, are analysed with regard to their historically accurate or stereotyped representation. Even if it has already been made clear several times that the characters and their narratives in the comic series should not be understood as historically accurate, such accuracy is repeatedly attributed to them. First, it will be demonstrated on the basis of some well-known case studies why this is the case. In a subsequent step the results will be applied to an analysis of the West Asian characters. It will be discussed whether the historical reference dominates or whether they rather represent stereotypical characteristics that associate them with the time of their creation in the 20th century, and how to deal with these results.

Keywords

Astérix the Gaul, Épidemaïs, Phoenicians, West Asian characters, stereotypes, orientalism

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel werden Épidemaïs, der phönizische Händler aus der Comic-Reihe „Asterix der Gallier", und andere Figuren, die für alte westasiatische Kulturen stehen, nämlich die Sumerer, Akkader, Hethiter, Assyrer und Meder, hinsichtlich ihrer historisch korrekten oder stereotypen Darstellung analysiert. Auch wenn bereits mehrfach klargestellt wurde, dass die Figuren und ihre Erzählungen in der Comic-Reihe nicht als historisch korrekt zu verstehen sind, wird ihnen diese Korrektheit immer wieder zugeschrieben. Zunächst wird anhand einiger bekannter Fallstudien aufgezeigt, warum dies der Fall ist. In einem weiteren Schritt werden die Ergebnisse auf eine Analyse der westasiatischen Figuren angewendet. Es wird diskutiert, ob der historische Bezug überwiegt oder ob sie eher stereotype Merkmale aufweisen, die sie mit der Zeit ihrer Entstehung im 20. Jahrhundert in Verbindung bringen, und wie mit diesen Ergebnissen umzugehen ist.

Schlagwörter

Asterix der Gallier, Épidemaïs, Phönizier, westasiatische Figuren, Stereotype, Orientalismus

Aims and Limits

Asterix the Gaul is one of the most popular comic series. Many children and adults have been captivated by the stories of a fictional French hero and his companions, set some 2000 years ago in ancient Gaul, facing the expansion of the Roman Empire. Although it was not the authors' intention to portray the characters and the stories in a historically accurate way, they are often understood and celebrated as such by their enthusiastic readership. While academicians and readers alike frequently emphasise the ingenious mix of historical references and ahistorical elements that comprise the narratives, despite this, it seems that they are often tempted to ignore, to overlook, and to push it to the background due to their fascination with the narrative and images.

The first step is therefore to identify and understand this area of tension in order to explain how, why, by what means and for whom the stories and images were designed and to whom they were intended to appeal. This will be demonstrated by a few case studies that are widely known and repeatedly cited in this context.

In a further step, some West Asian figures, namely Épidemaïs, the Phoenician merchant, as well as some unnamed Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians and Medes, will be analysed to make a further contribution, an addition to the already known case studies. The result of this analysis will neither be a completely new nor revised reading and interpretation. However, it will add a valuable piece to the bigger picture and prevents them from disappearing behind the veil of uncritical and blind perception. The aim is to work out to what extent historical authenticity dominates in these cases or to what extent they are shaped by the colonialist and orientalist gaze of past decades at the time of their creation in the 1960s, 1980s and 2019. This then leads to the discussion of what contemporary and future approach can be applied to the appreciation of this popular comic series.

The methodological approach is history-based, not that of media studies. Promising aspects of such a study would be the development of the characters within a narrative or across different narratives, the relationship between text and image. Unfortunately, this cannot be accomplished here, because it would go beyond what can be achieved here in terms of scope, time and number of pages. In order to pursue the aim of this study, it is limited to a few meaningful aspects that are relevant to the investigation. It would be rather a reasonable wish to have them studied in the light of their specific mediality. Yet the present study may help to pave the way for this.

Introduction to the Comic Series *Astérix the Gaul*

Astérix le Gaulois (*Asterix the Gaul*)[1] is one of the most successful comic series in the world in terms of sales figures and translations into other languages as well, and it is therefore presumably also one of the best known.[2] In 40 volumes (status 2023), the writer René Goscinny and the illustrator Albert Uderzo, the authors Jean-Yves Ferri (2013–2021) and Fabcaro (since 2023), respectively, as well as the illustrator Didier Conrad (since 2013) depict the manifold adventures of Astérix and his friends. Based in a small village in Gaul otherwise conquered by the Roman Empire, Astérix and his friend Obélix, accompanied by his dog Idéfix (Dogmatix), experience various adventures in the ancient Mediterranean world of the time around 50 BCE. During this time, they meet various characters, fictitious and historical individuals, totalling around 350.[3] Among the most famous historical characters are the Roman dictator Julius Gaius Caesar and the Ptolemaic Queen of Egypt Cleopatra VII Philopator. As examples of fictitious individuals, one could cite the pirate captain Barbe Rouge (Redbeard) and the pirate Triple Patte (Pegleg) as well as the Numidian pirate Baba (Lookout) with his Creole accent, usually sitting in the crow's nest, the Phoenician merchant and seafarer Épidemaïs (Ekonomikrisis), the Egyptian architect Numérobis (Edifis), and various characters who are not presented as individuals and do not have personal names.

1 The characters are named according to their original name in the French editions, their names in English editions are put in parantheses – except Astérix and Obélix.

2 Key figures for the Asterix series 2019: https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/986539/umfrage/erfolgreichste-comic-reihen-nach-absatz-weltweit/ (07.08.2023). This applies in particular to the frequency of translations into other languages and dialects: https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1106185/umfrage/kennzahlen-zu-asterix/; https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/977469/umfrage/ausgewaehlte-comics-nach-uebersetzung-in-andere-sprachen-weltweit/ (07.08.2023).

3 https://asterix.com/de/die-charaktere/ (07.08.2023).

These include a bunch of pirates, Romans, Egyptians, and Sumerians. Some occur more often, such as the Romans, others rarely (the Egyptians), or only once as in the case for the Sumerians.[4]

The first story appeared in 1959 in the youth magazine *Pilote* (Berner 1999; Uderzo 1986, 2009; Feige 2001: 42–46)[5] and since then, it has enjoyed impressive success: numerous paperback volumes followed, and it continues today. The stories were translated into at least 110 languages, including Latin as well as multiple regional dialects, such as Hessian. The stories were filmed as comics and with real actors.[6] The characters in the comic series are loved by children and adults of many generations, and the depictions are celebrated for their historical accuracy to the extent that teachers, for example, use the volumes in Latin and history classes – the incorporation of comics in school lessons, in general, is considered useful (Gundermann 2007).

The high appreciation of the Astérix series is commonly attributed to the following factors:[7]

- the artistic design of the pictures and the characters, with an intense attention to detail,
- the rich historical knowledge (sic!),
- the dense wordplay as well as myriad allusions, puns, and persiflage,
- because the Gauls, Romans, and other ethnic groups reflect the idiosyncrasies of their recent descendants, in which the reader can recognise himself or herself (sic!),
- the embeddedness of celebrities such as Sean Connery and Arnold Schwarzenegger (to name only a few) or even the authors themselves as characters or references,
- running gags such as the sinking of the hapless pirates, the argument about the freshness of certain goods such as fish that always ends in fisticuffs, or the emphatic ban of the bard Troubadix (Cacofonix) at the final celebration,
- a consistently high level of quality of all foreign-language editions through personal control by the authors.

The integration of the comic series into modern Latin lessons is recommended because of the multilingual availability of the comics, the profitable linking of classical and modern languages, and due to the real-life material and the excellent source situation, coupled with entertainment through anachronistic allusions, which contribute to unbroken students' interest.[8] Numerous studies have emphasised the motivational effects of this comic series on learning Latin (Lüthje 1979). In the following, however, the focus is not on the motivational aid, but on the aspect of the supposedly historical accuracy and the potential self-recognition of ethnic groups which always resonates and is even sometimes explicitly expressed as seen above.

Recognition of the Astérix Cosmos

The creators of the Astérix cosmos, Goscinny and Uderzo, always emphasised that their comics were primarily intended to entertain and amuse readers. They did not depict historical events correctly, nor did they want to express political views:

4 A private project has compiled lexicon-like information on, among other things, the genesis and all characters: https://comedix.de/lexikon/index.php (07.08.2023).

5 https://www.comedix.de/lexikon/special/geschichte_von_asterix/pilote.php (15.05.2024).

6 https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1106185/umfrage/kennzahlen-zu-asterix/; https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/977469/umfrage/ausgewaehlte-comics-nach-uebersetzung-in-andere-sprachen-weltweit/ (07.08.2023). A good compilation of the issues, the editions in different languages and dialects, films and audio plays, websites, special volumes, and learning aids, etc, can be found on the website of a private project: https://comedix.de/medien/index.php (07.08.2023).

7 http://www.werhatxerfunden.com/wer-hat-asterix-und-obelix-erfunden/ (11.05.2023).

8 https://www.lehrer-online.de/unterricht/sekundarstufen/fremdsprachen/latein/unterrichtseinheit/ue/asterix-multilingual/ (11.05.2023).

> "We have only one goal: to have fun ourselves and to make others have fun. This is our modest contribution during our short stay on this planet" (Uderzo 1986: 128);
>
> "Sometimes it was a passage from a historical work that had some relation to the present, or an object or a journey. The main thing was that we liked the occasion and enjoyed it" (Uderzo 1986: 177);
>
> "We therefore needed a minimum amount of documentation in order not to exceed the limits we had set ourselves" (Uderzo 1986: 182);
>
> "Sometimes the readers are better informed or smarter than the illustrator and share their observations with him" (Uderzo 1986: 194);
>
> "We are comedians who have only one desire, one vocation: To amuse children and all those who have remained children." (Uderzo 2009: 204)

Apparently, there were efforts on the part of the readership and fan community to provide real evidence of fictional places, which Uderzo explicitly rejected (Uderzo 2009: 272–276). Therefore, one should not expect Astérix to teach Roman history. Actually, it contains many – in part also presumably deliberate – historical mistakes, as various publications with a scientific archaeological and historical background point out (Wiechers 1999: 31; Müller 1999a; in general: Westfälisches Römermuseum Haltern 1999; Brodersen 2001; van Royen and van der Vegt 2001). Despite manifold authentic elements such as the Roman army and armoury, they do not form a coherent and authentic historical setting.

Yet, why are these comics now and then considered to present historical authenticity? According to Christine Gundermann, who has been intensively researching the connection between comics and history – and also history teaching and education – for many years, this works via the simulation of education (Gundermann 2009).[9] It includes the recognition of occasional historically accurate elements, of real and fake Latin quotations, of historical ruptures and mistakes, stereotypes, persiflage, anachronisms, analogies, and manifold allusions on different levels both in images and text, as well as in their interaction (Penndorf 2001). This tests the reader's education and gives the pleasure of discerning both truth and falsehood, ruptures and allusions. It allows him or her to speculate about details and jokes, which results in the aura of historical authenticity. In this way, the reader experiences self-affirmation and self-assurance of his or her already existing education, an affirmation of belonging to the educated middle class, to which she or he can playfully add.

Apart from the above-mentioned scientific publications with an archaeological and/or historical background, fans have made it their goal to record and list the various aspects on Wikipedia and private websites, e.g., a compilation of allusions to works of art, caricatures of famous personalities and allusions to other comic series, historical and literary allusions and quotes in the margins of the main plot, of running gags,[10] of ethnic stereotypes,[11] a list of references to existing and fictional persons as well as of historical references and references to contemporary society,[12] of Latin quotations.[13]

In the following, a few examples are given to illustrate what this mixture is made of:

- Volume 6, *Astérix et Cléopâtre* (*Asterix and Cleopatra*): In Egypt, Astérix and Obélix meet the faithful scribe of the Egyptian architect Misenplis (Exlibris). He speaks the Gauls' language as well as all other languages that are still in use (sic!), such as Latin, Greek, and Celtic. In his appearance and crouching position, he recalls the famous Egyptian sculpture of the so-called sitting/squatting scribe of the 4th/5th dynasty, 2600 to 2350 BCE, on display in the Musée du Louvre, Paris.[14] Here, a work was the inspiration for the portrayal of a character, one that has

9 https://zeithistorische-forschungen.de/1-2009/4506#pgfId-1038554 (22.05.2024).

10 https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asterix (07.08.2023).

11 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asterix: Ethnic stereotypes (07.08.2023).

12 https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asterix (07.08.2023).

13 https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_der_lateinischen_Zitate_in_den_Asterix-Comics (07.08.2023).

14 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010006582 (22.05.2024).

long been in the possession of probably the most prestigious museum in France, is on public display, and that can be considered a very famous exhibition piece.

- Volume 6, *Astérix et Cléopâtre* (*Asterix and Cleopatra*): On the other hand, with the exception of a handful of specified characters, the mass of Egyptians is represented as doing what Egyptians are famous for: they build huge monuments, pyramids, and temples. Some of them even seem modelled on real examples, such as the Philae temple complex in Aswan. However, on the whole, they are quite generic. Here, we recognise the creation of a stereotype (see more on this below) for the ancient Egyptians.
- Volume 26, *L'Odyssée d'Astérix* (*Asterix and the Black Gold*): In the course of the visit to Egypt, it is explained – in a false, but humorous way – why the nose of the Sphinx of Giza is broken off: because Obélix climbed up it and his weight damaged the nose. It is erroneously rumoured that Napoleon Bonaparte's soldiers destroyed the nose during artillery exercises. However, it was already damaged by the time Napoleon arrived. This is demonstrated by a copperplate engraving from 1738, made by the Danish artist Frederick Ludewick Norden (Norden 1795: pl. 45–47). Here, one of the most famous objects in Egypt is used to symbolise a significant military campaign and scientific enterprise in French history. It was executed by one of the most celebrated and controversial characters.
- Volume 6, *Astérix et Cléopâtre* (*Asterix and Cleopatra*): The image of Cléopâtre (Cleopatra) in the comic series is based on Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra in the 1962 film version – disregarding the existing historically authentic evidence of Cleopatra's portraits and depictions such as a famous marble portrait in Berlin[15] or representations on numerous ancient coins[16] and also ignoring her many receptions throughout European history (Farsen 2013; Gentili 2014). It features make-up that was generally considered 'Egyptian' in the 1960s but with the pastel-coloured lips of popular '60s fashion. Her appearance altered over time and was adapted to the Zeitgeist of each era – somewhat thinner and daintier in the 1960s, somewhat more rounded and feminine in the 1980s (Müller 1999b: 47). Her portrait in the comic series was adorned by a particularly pointed nose. This became one of the running gags of the series and a special characteristic of the figure. Here, the purpose was not to approximate a historically valid representation. Instead, it was to use a famous film's recognition and engage with it.
- Volume 26, *L'Odyssée d'Astérix* (*Asterix and the Black Gold*): The character of the Jew Saül Péhyé (Saul ben Ephishul) – the assistant to the merchant Samson Pludechorus (Samson Alius) in Jerusalem – has been modelled on Goscinny's portrait. He is depicted as a friendly and helpful character, to whom Asterix expresses his gratitude on leaving. Here, no historical connection has been made. However, an appropriate character has been created and used to represent a real-life person as a memorial to him. Goscinny was already deceased at the time, and Uderzo dedicated this volume in his honour (Uderzo 2009: 250). The connection between Saül Péhyé and Goscinny lies in their Jewish ancestry. This biographical background and the physiognomic resemblance are only apparent to dedicated fans of the comic series.

In summary, the aim of the comic was to entertain, and this entertainment is perceived by the readers as a challenge and self-affirmation of his or her education, recognising the complex Astérix cosmos. Various means were used unsystematically, such as actual historical personalities, phenomena, objects, their appearance, and their deliberate alienation. These means represent a combination of the potentially recognisable. It can have a personal connection, be closely linked to history in general or to France's history in particular, to be internationally known. And above all, it lives from stereotypes.

It is obvious and often criticised that the Astérix cosmos is populated by a multitude of stereotypes, namely regarding gender, nationality, and ethnicity, including anti-Semitic and racist stereotypes: corrupt Egyptians, a large, nameless mass of Egyptian construction workers, bad food among the British, the hot water with milk the British drink every day at five o'clock in the afternoon, that the British mow their lawns by hand and always have bad weather, nepotism among the Greeks. It can be observed that the use of stereotypes is not strictly and coherently one-sided, and also contains contradictions and ruptures, sometimes even in difference between the text and pictorial narrative (Riegel n.d.). Very often stereotypes are presented as ambiguous and leave room for interpretations. Notably, anti-fascist, anti-imperial, and anti-colonial elements can be found in the textual and figurative

15 https://smb.museum-digital.de/object/8429 (23.05.2024).

16 E.g., https://smb.museum-digital.de/object/156416?navlang=de (23.05.2024).

narrative as well. Yet in doing so, the Astérix characters – individually or in groups – are coated in astonishingly modern national stereotypes (Schleicher 2011, 2023). Some readers may therefore believe that they reflect the idiosyncrasies of their recent descendants (see above), but who are they? Who do they recognise? To whom does this apply?

To answer these questions, we need to take a look at what stereotypes actually are. They are based on the creation and formation of categories around groups of people. Certain characteristics or behaviours, such as appearance, gender, clothing, or eating habits, are chosen and attributed to them in a highly simplified manner. They are not subject to rules or objective observation. Instead, they arise from the perception and evaluation of a detail used in an uncritical or overgeneralising way. They do not always contain valid social information but can be incorrectly generalised and emotionally related. Group-related aspects are transferred to an individual as its representative, where this does not necessarily have a negative or positive connotation per se and due to the reduction of complexity could also create opportunities for identification. It acts as a reference structure for expected and anticipated behaviour by the nominator. The key aspect here is the repetition or repeatability of this statement, which is why stereotypes become fixed and inescapable. Therefore, it is also a demonstration of the power of the nominator as the stereotype-giving group over the stereotyped persons or groups. Stereotypes legitimize social power relations and enable the legibility of images and texts. Even more than in textual media, stereotypes conveyed through images control perception, as they prescribe a relationship of similarity to the depicted object (based on Hall 2019; see also Hahn 1995; Hahn and Mannová 2006).

Therefore, the stereotypes used often tell us more about the stereotype-givers and users than about the stereotyped groups themselves. In the case of the Astérix cosmos, it is the second-half-of-the-20th century French-educated bourgeoisie of the Global West or those who self-identify with that group. These are the readers who understand the stereotypes (and all allusions), and they recognise themselves and others in them. The creation of stereotypes are under their control and power, although they may subsequently acquire a dynamic of their own or be modified and further developed by others. And knowing them and being amused by them enables participation in this group, it is the key to being an insider. It is well known that Uderzo and Goscinny were asked by the editors of the *Pilote* to find a French answer to American comics' dominance (Feige 2001: 42; Berner 1999: 9). Their method of achieving this goal was to create an image of self-identification, the incentive of belonging to this in-group, and the associated exercise of power over outsiders, and it was very successfully applied.

The use of this method is evident not least in light of the difficulty of translation, as well as the language with its specific turns of phrase in general and the names of the characters in particular (Embleton 1991; Kaindl 2008). The examination of the Arabic translation of three comics *(Astérix le Goulois* [*Asterix the Gaul*], *Astérix et Cléopâtre* [*Asterix and Cleopatra*], and *Astérix chez Rahàzade* [*Asterix and the Magic Carpet*]) by Regina Hartmann (1982), for example, revealed that the translators had transformed and reduced the text quite subjectively for two reasons: 1) hardly any knowledge of the history of Western Europe could be assumed by the target group, 2) some aspects could have offended the religious or national sensibilities of the target group. While the author of the study had no data at hand to analyse the effect of the Arabic version on Arab readers, she has the impression that the result of this work is uninformative, less allusive, and less humorous than the French equivalent. This is the reason why the original French names and terms are listed here with their English versions in addition.

With these prerequisites in mind, we will now turn our attention to characters that have not yet been examined in depth but should be now: Épidemaïs, the Phoenician, as well as the unnamed Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes.

Épidemaïs, the Stranger

Épidemaïs (Ekonomikrisis) is a Phoenician merchant. He appears in three stories, *Astérix gladiateur* (*Asterix the Gladiator*), *L'Odyssée d'Astérix* (*Asterix and the Black Gold*), and *La Fille de Vercingétorix* (*Asterix and the Chieftain's Daughter*), published as the fourth, the 26th, and the 38th volumes respectively in the original French in 1964, 1981, and 2019.

In *Astérix gladiateur* (*Asterix the Gladiator*), the bard Assurancetourix (Cacofonix) was captured by the Romans and should be taken to Rome. Astérix and Obélix therefore board a ship with Épidemaïs, the Phoenician merchant, who agrees to take them to Rome. After a pirate attack on his ship, which the two Gauls thwart, he admits that he had the intention to sell them as slaves in the next harbour – an allusion to the corresponding episode in Homer's Odyssey (14, 287–300). In gratitude for saving them from the pirates, however, Épidemaïs takes them to Rome as promised and even collects them on the return journey. Subsequently, positive contact seems to have been established between the Phoenician and the Gauls, for Épidemaïs later appears again as a supplier of goods to the Gallic village. However, he has forgotten the stone oil that Panoramix (Getafix) asked him for. So Astérix and Obélix set off with Épidemaïs on the 'Odyssey' to get the stone oil.

As helpful as Épidemaïs seems to be here, he is also responsible for the arduous journey due to his unreliability. Nevertheless, the readers' sympathy goes out to him: he is a distinct character, he is well-travelled, experienced in everything, and independent of anything and anyone, he is intent on profit, he is always friendly, and above all, he cleverly designs his own rules within the legal space of the Roman Empire – and would presumably do so today as well. The rowers of his merchant galley, for example, are allegedly not slaves, as on Roman ships; rather, they are shareholders in the company under a duly drawn up contract, whose fine print they have not read, however. Épidemaïs himself is general manager-president and chairman of the supervisory board, and the voyages are declared to be holiday club cruises. The titles, however, lose their wit in the translations: the rowers are called in French '*gentil membre*' and '*gentil organisateur*' referring to the tourism company Club Méditerranée. And as pleasant and unconcerned as Épidemaïs seems, he is mainly interested in his goods and money. Of course, the comic is a cover-up of classical slavery with profit as the primary goal, but who would condemn the congenial Épidemaïs for his sophistication? In *La Fille de Vercingétorix* (*Asterix and the Chieftain's Daughter*) from 2019 he is no longer portrayed in such a dazzling way: he just offers Astérix and Obélix a passage and cares for his goods.

Épidemaïs, literally 'corn on the cob', enjoys widespread popularity among readers as an entrepreneurial role model. He is pot-bellied, hook-nosed, dressed in a white and green apron with a golden necklace and a bold red headscarf. He comes from the prominent Phoenician trading city of Tyre. In contrast to the above-mentioned characters with individual names – the Egyptian scribe Misenplis (Exlibris), the Egyptian queen Cléopâtre (Cleopatra), the Jew Saül Péhyé (Saul ben Epishul) (see above) – the notorious Épidemaïs has no concrete role model, neither a person of ancient or contemporary history, nor an ancient or contemporary picture, and no references to ancient depictions or quotations of ancient realia are made. He is rather the pure embodiment of a stereotype in the textual and visual narrative: the Phoenician as an ambiguous, roving, mischievous, rather clever than physically remarkable male trader. He is not a muscular fighter, and the fullness of his body, and his clothing and jewellery give him a rather effeminate appearance. He travels as a merchant in the Mediterranean and offers all kinds of goods at his mobile stall. However, the reader is unclear whether he sells valuable gold objects or gold-coloured trinkets – nor are they told. Nor does the reader learn about his social, political, social, and family background. Épidemaïs, the Phoenician, does not belong to the cultures of ancient West Asia, which fight each other only out of tradition (see below) but is a Mediterranean traveller with the closest ties to Europe.

He therefore fulfils two typical Phoenician roles: the (male) merchant and the affiliation with the (European) Mediterranean. It was precisely the aspect of traders and travellers that was first taken up in research on the Phoenicians. This aspect is still considered the most prominent for them today. One could start by citing the *Geographia Sacra* of the French Reformed theologian Samuel Bochart (1599–1667). The *Geographia Sacra* (Bochart 1681) was the standard study of the Phoenicians for the following period. Bochart belonged to intellectual circles. In addition to theology, he was also well versed in geography, natural science, and philology. This made him a typical representative of the century labelled the 'scientific revolution'. In the *Geographia Sacra*, he constructed ancient geography and etymology based on the Old Testament, starting with the table of peoples in Genesis 10, continuing with the Flood, and ending with the first descendants of Noah. For Bochart, the Phoenicians represented the link between biblical and secular chronology and geography as well as the key to ancient migratory movements. Due to this methodical approach, his work *Geographia Sacra* was sensational and highly controversial at the time of its creation and publication. Bochart dealt extensively with Phoenicia's history and geography, Phoenician navigation, expansion, colonisation and language. The Phoenician language allegedly was spread by the Phoenicians through their expansion, driven by search for metals, and they even reached the British Isles. It represents the primal language on which all others depend. This is obviously wrong, as Phoenician belongs to the Semitic language family and has nothing to do with Indo-European languages – this has been falsely claimed again and again, however. The Phoenicians were therefore to be regarded as the ancestors of the peoples in their area of expansion (including the British Isles) – a theory that had already been formulated, even more radically, before Bochart. It persisted in European research for a long time, also concerning French and German ancestry. England, however, identified with the ancient Phoenician maritime and trading power. The attribution of Western civilisation to the Phoenicians (‘Pan-Phoenicianism’) is evident in several publications of this and the following period. It was then particularly strongly developed as the Phoenicianism of national ancestry at the beginning of the 20th century in the formation of modern nation-states in the Levantine region and it was even instrumentalised in the Lebanese Civil War of 1975–1990 between the Arab nationalists and the pro-Western Maronites as a vehicle for the latter to express their affiliation to Europe and dissociation from the Islamic world (Shalev 2012; Morstadt 2015: 25–28). And yet it still confronts us in its misused form as a stereotype in Astérix the Gaul.

One could continue and mention what is probably the most comprehensive and influential work of the 19th century about the Phoenicians, the four volumes written by the theologian and orientalist Franz Karl Movers (Movers 1841–1856). Based on written sources, he described the Phoenicians’ state, religion and deities, trade and commerce, as well as the state of their colonies. He attached particular importance to the Phoenicians’ long-distance trade, through which many elements from the Orient flowed into the Aegean region. One could add the publication *Die Phönizier: Handelsherren zwischen Orient und Okzident* (sic!) by the ancient historian Michael Sommer (2005), in which a general overview of the Phoenicians is given, mainly based on historical, but also including archaeological sources. One could also refer to the public interest, satisfied by scientists and non-scientists, that we can capture on social media such as YouTube, where the Phoenicians are depicted as stereotypically embodied in the character Épidemaïs.[17]

As we have seen, this stereotype can be traced back to the earliest studies of the Phoenicians and even beyond, to antiquity itself, as elaborated by the ancient historian Josephine Quinn (2018). It has already been pointed out that ‘the Phoenicians’ never actually existed, that it is an externally created image, that there was no Phoenician ethnicity or nationhood. Instead, the people named ‘Phoenicians’ rather identified themselves as citizens of Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, etc. However, this stereotype is not even a modern one, but an ancient one: Quinn traces how the idea of ‘being Phoenician’ first emerged in support of Carthage and Rome’s imperial ambitions, and only crystallised as a component of modern national identities in contexts as far-flung as Ireland and Lebanon. The Phoenicians were already stereotypes related to trade. As a result of believing in this historical mirage, we have been blinded to the compelling identities and communities. Faced with this stereotype of Phoenicians as seafarers and traders, one is always inclined to forget the daily life and social structures in Phoenician communities, including members of administration and scribes, craftsmen of all sorts such as builders, potters, basketmakers, dressmakers, and blacksmiths, likewise farmers, gardeners, livestock and stable owners. One may add unspecified workers, grocery salesmen in local markets, etc., as well as their familial, social, religious, and domestic political organisation. Furthermore, seafarers and merchants are usually conceived as male, in ancient and modern times, and also in their modern appropriation. This was pointed out a few years ago by Ana Delgado (2016: 48). The state of knowledge and research on Phoenician women, for example, is marginal (Morstadt 2017–2019).

Generally speaking, based on ancient, mostly written sources and through research history, the term ‘Phoenician’ became a synonym for commerce and utilitarianism, dominance, and progress – concepts associated with masculinity in the modern world. Beyond that, it is connected with Europe and the Mediterranean Sea rather than with West Asia. Yet he is the classic stranger in Europe and the Mediterranean Sea, as described by the sociologist George Simmel (Simmel 1908: 509–512): He comes and stays, he brings new qualities into the spatial environment that do not originate from him, he brings something from outside into the economic circle, he has an outside perspective and his own agenda, but he is there, and no one knows how loyal he is.

17 E.g., https://www.bing.com/videos/riverview/relatedvideo?q=die%20ph%C3%B6nizier%20handelsherren&mid=49A81FA8FBC1BC8585E249A81FA8FBC1BC8585E2&ajaxhist=0 (20.04.2024).

The Irrational West Asians in Astérix' Odyssée

In *L'Odyssée d'Astérix* (*Asterix and the Black Gold*), Astérix and his companions meet people of ancient West Asian cultures – namely Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes – on their way to Babylon, presented on panels 32B–34B. Three encounters are staged in the same order, one after the other: the Gauls are ambushed and shot at with arrows. They then take cover. They are asked who they are. When they reply that they are Gauls, the attackers enter the scene and apologise, justifying themselves by saying that they were mistaken for members of an opposing group – the Sumerians, the Akkadians, the Hittites, and the Assyrians respectively. The Medes have lost their way and ask for the way out, whereupon Obelix sends them in the direction of the previous attackers ("It's easy! Just follow the arrows!", panel 34B). So, as Egyptians do what Egyptians are supposed to do (see above: they build pyramids), the West Asian people are perpetually at war with each other and attack strangers because they confuse them with their enemies, but they later apologise when they realise that the strangers are not their enemies. This is likely meant as a criticism of the constant conflicts among the Middle Eastern peoples by the author, captured and illustrated here in the comic series in a stereotype. Only the Medes have the possibility of finding a way out: they would be lost, but it is actually the Gaul Obelix who sends them back to their opponents. The fact that these groups are representative of cultures that would not have met in this way and thus pursued each other in an anachronistic, futile manner does not contradict the narrative but rather gives it additional humour.

Here, certain Realia are set in the scene and can be recognised, such as the golden helmet of Meskalamdug, worn by one of the Sumerian soldiers. Meskalamdug probably was an early Sumerian ruler of the 1st Dynasty of Ur (26th century BCE), in today's southern Iraq. His helmet is a spectacular masterpiece, found in a tomb within the Royal Cemetery of Ur that was equipped with rich gifts, among them two golden vessels and a lamp, inscribed with his name. The helmet is housed in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, but with reproductions in several international museums such as the British Museum[18] in London and the Penn Museum in Philadelphia. It measures 22.7 cm high, 27 cm long, and 21 cm wide and is made of one piece of hammered gold in the shape of a wig with ears on the sides. Fine engravings imitate a wavy hairstyle, plaited hair and a ribbon are laid around the head and knotted into a bun at the back of the head. Underneath are several rows of curling locks. The rim of the helmet has a series of small holes to which a lining was probably attached. Similarly designed but simplified helmets are represented on the Sumerian stelae of Eannatum, also known as the Stele of the Vultures, dating to the 1st Dynasty of Lagash, 25th century BCE, today kept in the Musée du Louvre[19] (Parrot 1960: 134–139); the type of hairstyle can also be rediscovered on the so-called mask of Sargon, ruler of the Akkadian empire, 24th to 23rd century BCE found in Niniveh/Kouyunjik, and on a small inscribed stone statuette found in Mari/Tell Hariri in Syria, representing Ishqi-Mari, king of Mari (c. 2300 BCE) (Parrot 1960: 114–120). The mask of Sargon even adorns the cover of a well-known publication by André Parrot on Sumer from 1960. Parrot (1901–1980) was a French Near Eastern archaeologist, who led several excavations in ancient Mesopotamia and held the position of the director of the Louvre from 1968 to 1972. He is the author of several publications that have also attracted attention outside the specialist world. One may even speculate if it were not only the objects exhibited in the Louvre but explicitly this publication that inspired Goscinny for the design of this figure. The statue was discovered by Parrot in 1934 and is kept today in the Aleppo National Museum. The unclothed upper body and the woolly skirts of these Sumerian bunch in the Astérix cosmos are reminiscent of small Sumerian figurines such as the one of Ishqi-Mari and others. The helmets of the other Sumerian warriors, a small round cap with neck shield, also have their role models in the above-mentioned stelae of Eannatum. Among the armour, a sceptre crowned with an animal (bull?) figure stands out, which could have a real-life model in a rein ring from Ur, today in the British Museum in London, crowned with an onager (Orthmann 1975: 169 fig. 37a). The further costume and general armament are so general that they do not correspond to ancient evidence. So, the appearance of these characters is based among other things on some objects that can be admired in the Musée du Louvre and that were published in well-known publications.

The Akkadians are depicted as taller and leaner than the small and chubby Sumerians. The leader's headgear evokes the Assyrian royal tiara of the 1st mill. BCE as it appears so often in the Assyrian reliefs, e.g., from the palace of Sargon II in Khorsabad/Dur-Sharrukin,[20] while the headgear of the others are reproductions of Neo-

18 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_C-278?selectedImageId=842849001 (06.10.2025).

19 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010121794 (06.10.2025).

20 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010122698 (06.10.2025).

Assyrian helmets, e.g., from the palace of Tiglath-Pileser III in Kalhu/Nimrud[21]. Many of these reliefs are exhibited in the Musée du Louvre, others in the British Museum, and they are among the best-known pieces. The representation of the Hittite leader recalls the Hittite representation of the god Teshub, e.g., on stelae from Tel Barsip, today in the Musée du Louvre:[22] this applies to the horned helmet and the short and fringed apron. Otherwise, this group is physically mixed, unlike the Assyrians, who are depicted as almost identical. In this way, they reproduce the aesthetics and costume of Assyrian reliefs, with the sequence of soldiers, whereas the helmets can be compared with the Assyrian ones with cheek-pads as shown in the Assyrian reliefs from Niniveh/Kouyunjik, stored in the Musée du Louvre.[23] The leader's headgear refers to the Assyrian royal tiara (see above). The depiction of the Medes, however, is based on the famous and often displayed reliefs in Persepolis (e.g., Schmidt 1953: pl. 19–117), some of which are in the Musée du Louvre.[24] The West Asian characters in total are not depicted as muscular heroes. Some are gaunt, others plump and feminised. In their appearance, they are a colourful group that looks more like highwaymen than warriors to be taken seriously.

This requires the reader to recognise both these concrete facts as well as general appearances, allusions, and general knowledge of the succession of cultures in ancient West Asia from Sumerians to Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes. Moreover, it is the recognition of the temporal breaks and the anachronistic element, in which centuries are reduced to a few minutes in which Astérix and Obélix encounter these groups in close succession that could never have happened, since these cultures no longer existed in Roman times. And even more: the narrative only works with all of them in a supposedly shared cosmos. The entire sequence is a reference to the later 20th century conflicts in the Middle East and it is the stereotyping of West Asian people as engaged in endless military conflicts. They are involved in conflicts that only they understand and for which no reason is given. It seems to be more of a tradition than a true cause, a habit shared by almost identical parties, barely distinguishable by details such as their headgear. They hardly recognise their opponents themselves, since they initially confused them with Astérix and Obelix. And no information is given beyond that, no further characterisation, nor any women or other members of society or other activities. Instead, only those of the handful of barely distinguishable highwaymen. And, overall, it appears highly irrational. The story and the depictions make the West Asian protagonist appear irrational, in stark contrast to the Gauls. And, incidentally, Astérix and Obélix's journey could have continued without these encounters. This is because they do not influence 'our heroes' and their mission. Thus, the basic idea of self-identification of certain ethnic groups with their ancestors (see above) in West Asian cultures is reduced to absurdity. Only the Medes – usually understood as the ancestors of modern-day Iranians – would have had a chance to escape. And it was actually a Frenchman who sent them back into the conflict. This could certainly be understood as (self-)criticism of the events surrounding the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the interference of the French and perhaps even global Western politics.

It is precisely this irrationality, that is – among others – attributed to the 'Orientals' by the 'Occident'/the Global West as a commonality according to Edward Said. His publication *Orientalism* (1978) is a founding document for postcolonial studies as a field of research. In it, he coined the term 'Orientalism' as a concept created by the Occident/the Global West as an instrument of imperialism and colonialism in the 18th century. The creation of this concept was based on the idea of superiority, made to achieve colonial dominance over West Asia. According to this concept, the 'Orientals' are the opposite of the occidental, Global Western cultures. They can be either effeminate or cruel, luxurious or meagre, rich or poor – as long as the contrast with the Global West attributed in the respective context works. These ascriptions usually had a negative connotation but sometimes also a positive one. They may differ from each other in detail, but are indistinguishable when viewed from the outside. In any case, these 'Orientals' are depicted in the Global West as the irrational others. Said's publication has not gone unchallenged, with the main criticism being that Said himself was caught up in the dichotomy between Orient and Occident and reinforces this with his work (Schnepel et al. 2011).

'Irrationality' is one of the manifold facets of this concept on which the 'othering' of the 'Orient' is based. And it is the process of othering 'Orientals' that is so consistently implemented in the comic series. This is even marginalised in the end: The 'others' are so different that you don't even need to concern yourself with their

21 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010123104 (06.10.2025).

22 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010123072 (06.10.2025).

23 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010123114 (06.10.2025).

24 https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010138755 (06.10.2025).

'otherness' because you won't understand it anyway. Their behaviour could only be described as irrational, it is absurd and will never change. And, therefore, in the Astérix cosmos, these 'Orientals' are portrayed as such. This characterisation is so strong and recognisable that it even manages without the use of term 'Orient'.

Interestingly, other episodes also deal with the 'Orient' or are set in the 'Orient', according to common understanding, such as 'Astérix chez Rahàzade' (*Asterix and the Magic Carpet*). The title is an allusion to the Persian tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* in the original with Shéhérazade as the main character. The English translation of the title also alludes to these fairy tales with the flying carpet. In contrast, the German title (*Asterix im Morgenland*) refers to the 'Orient' after all. And thus, the fundamental methodological problem in dealing with the term 'Orient' arises: the 'Orient' is an imaginary spatial construction. It never existed as a state, an empire, a homogenous culture. What was understood by it has changed repeatedly over time and even from language to language. While the entire Asian world, i.e. the Arab countries, Iran, India, and China, used to be regarded as 'the Orient', later only the countries of the Near East with Egypt and most Islamic cultures were included. Today's usage tends to refer to the Middle East and the Arab-Islamic world – such as Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan and North Africa, but excluding the Islamic states of South and Southeast Asia. This means that the 'Orient' as the object of investigation cannot be defined here and extend far beyond the Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes. Given the diversity and complexity of the Astérix cosmos and its interpretation, and given the irregularity of stereotypic allusions and creations, this even defies a comprehensive interpretation. We will therefore stick to the case studies discussed here because they show us how deeply rooted the stereotype of the male, ambiguous Phoenician seafarer with his affiliation to the Mediterranean is, who has nothing to do with the constantly warring irrational 'Orientals'. It is surprising how simply this can be casually integrated into the narrative and understood by readers. It is certainly a good thing to pay attention to the language and avoid problematic terms such as 'Orient', but it is not enough if the concepts behind it continue to exist.

Entertainment Without Stereotypes?

The stories and the figures in the Astérix comics do not illustrate the ancient Gallic and Roman world but what was known and thought of during their creation in the second half of the 20th century, due to the state of research and inextricably linked to the Zeitgeist. Astérix and his creators are not to blame for these stereotypes, they merely reflect existing ones for the scope of entertaining a specific readership. Yet, the extent to which these stereotypes appeal to the French-educated bourgeoisie of the Global West and its self-affirmation is alarming. And it is an excellent example of the self-fulfilling prophecy that society creates through its history. As far as I can see, the volumes with Épidemaïs, the Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes appear not to have been translated into Arabic. How would it have turned out, this gang of highwaymen in colourful costumes at constant war with each other in only one short episode, one may ask?

I firmly believe that entertainment is possible without stereotypes. But they are the very foundation of the Asterix comics and their absence would fundamentally distort the stories. Therefore, opinions were already expressed to put an end to the Astérix cosmos and its stereotypes, for example by the publicist Richard Herzinger in the newspaper *Welt* in 2009 on the occasion of the 50th birthday of the comic heroes,[25] saying that their message would playfully evoke old longings that seemed to be buried in the deepest layers of the European collective consciousness. The author Florian Werner even describes it in a podcast from 2021 within the frame of colonialism as fossilised in a world long gone.[26] And, of course, there is immediate opposition and resistance with a strong desire to hold on to[27] – to hold on to what, one should ask. To tradition and status? Couldn't we simply understand the Astérix cosmos for what it is: a historical document based on recent history, not on antiquity. In this way, it could even provide next-level entertainment to include in our simulation of education. At least that's how it was for the author of this paper. And certainly, many allusions were even overlooked by her.

25 https://www.welt.de/kultur/article5037128/Schluss-mit-dem-Kult-um-die-Asterix-Comics.html (16.11.2019).

26 https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/asterix-neu-gelesen-zwanghafte-pruegeleien-und-ein-bisschen-100.html (08.08.2024).

27 https://exxpress.at/ueberkorrekte-moralisten-wollen-uns-jetzt-asterix-und-obelix-verbieten/ (08.08.2024).

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Playing Archaeology, Playing Colonialism

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Playing Archaeology, Playing Colonialism

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Abstract

This paper explores how *Civilization VI: Babylon Pack* perpetuates colonial and Orientalist narratives originally rooted in nineteenth-century Western archaeology of West Asia. It argues that early excavations, such as those conducted by Austen Henry Layard at Nineveh, produced archaeological finds as well as visual and textual frameworks of hierarchy and 'civilising' missions. These frameworks continue to shape popular representations of ancient West Asia.

Through a detailed examination of *Civilization VI* and its *Babylon expansion*, the paper illustrates how the game's visual design, its portrayal of Hammurabi, and its core mechanics, such as 'colonialism' and 'natural history', perpetuate these ideological legacies. The immersive and interactive nature of video games intensifies their cultural impact, embedding inherited stereotypes in contemporary perceptions of the past. However, their popularity also provides opportunities for critical engagement. By recognising the colonial genealogies of archaeological imagery, scholars can gain a better understanding of, and challenge, how digital media continues to 'play' with the power structures of the past.

Keywords

Archaeogaming, Orientalism, Civilization VI, Postcolonial Archaeology, Austen Henry Layard

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag untersucht, wie das Videospiel *Civilization VI: Babylon Pack* koloniale und orientalistische Narrative fortsetzt, die im 19. Jahrhundert durch die westliche Archäologie Westasiens etabliert wurden. Ausgangspunkt ist die Beobachtung, dass frühe Ausgrabungen – wie jene von Austen Henry Layard in Niniveh – neben materiellen Überresten auch ideologische Bilder produzierten, in denen Hierarchie und „Zivilisierung“ zentrale Motive waren. Diese Bildsprache prägt bis heute populäre Darstellungen Altwestasiens.

Anhand einer exemplarischen Analyse des *Babylon-Erweiterungspakets* von *Civilization VI* wird gezeigt, wie visuelle und narrative Elemente des Spiels – von der Figur Hammurabis bis zu Spielmechaniken wie „Colonialism“ oder „Natural History“ – an koloniale Denkfiguren anschließen. Der Artikel argumentiert, dass die Kombination aus globaler Reichweite und immersivem Erleben die Wirkung solcher Darstellungen verstärkt und damit unbewusst tradierte Stereotype verfestigt. Zugleich wird betont, dass gerade diese Popularität eine Chance bietet: die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den kolonialen Wurzeln archäologischen Wissens und dessen digitalem Fortleben.

Schlagwörter

Archaeogaming, Orientalismus, Civilization VI, Postkoloniale Archäologie, Austen Henry Layard

Introduction

From its beginnings in the nineteenth century, archaeology in West Asia has been inextricably linked with political power, ideology and visual representation. Excavations have been embedded in colonial enterprises that have sought to recover antiquities and construct a particular vision of the past, affirming Western authority and knowledge. The images and narratives produced by early excavators such as Austen Henry Layard shaped how the region and its people were imagined: as exotic, distant and waiting to be discovered. These frameworks did not disappear with the end of colonial rule. Instead, they have been repeatedly adapted and circulated through new media, such as illustrated books, museum displays, television documentaries and, more recently, digital games. By tracing the continuities between nineteenth-century archaeological imagery and the visual and narrative design of modern video games, this study highlights how modern media continues to 'play' archaeology – and, in doing so, reproduce long-standing hierarchies between observer and observed, past and present. This paper examines how *Civilization VI: Babylon Pack* (2020) perpetuates and transforms colonial and Orientalist narratives originating from nineteenth-century West Asian archaeology. By examining the visual, textual and mechanical layers of the game, the paper explores how ideas of hierarchy, progress and cultural otherness are encoded in its representation of Babylon and Hammurabi. It also considers how these depictions reflect broader continuities between archaeological discourse and popular media. However, to understand how such narratives continue to shape popular media, it is useful to recall their origins.

At the beginning, West Asian archaeology formed part of the colonial endeavours of European governments. The first excavators arrived with political and military backing, acting as agents of their respective countries. For example, Paul Émile Botta and Victor Place were French consuls in Mosul, acting on behalf of the *Société Asiatique* in Paris. Sir Austen Henry Layard worked as an assistant to the British ambassador, Sir Stratford Canning, in Constantinople, and later for the British Museum in London. Robert Koldewey and Walter Andrae were funded by the German Kaiser and the Orient-Gesellschaft. As representatives of colonial power in these countries, they appropriated not only physical artefacts for their respective institutions and states, but also political power and social hierarchy. West Asian archaeology has therefore been categorised as colonialist archaeology, as identified by Bruce Trigger.[1]

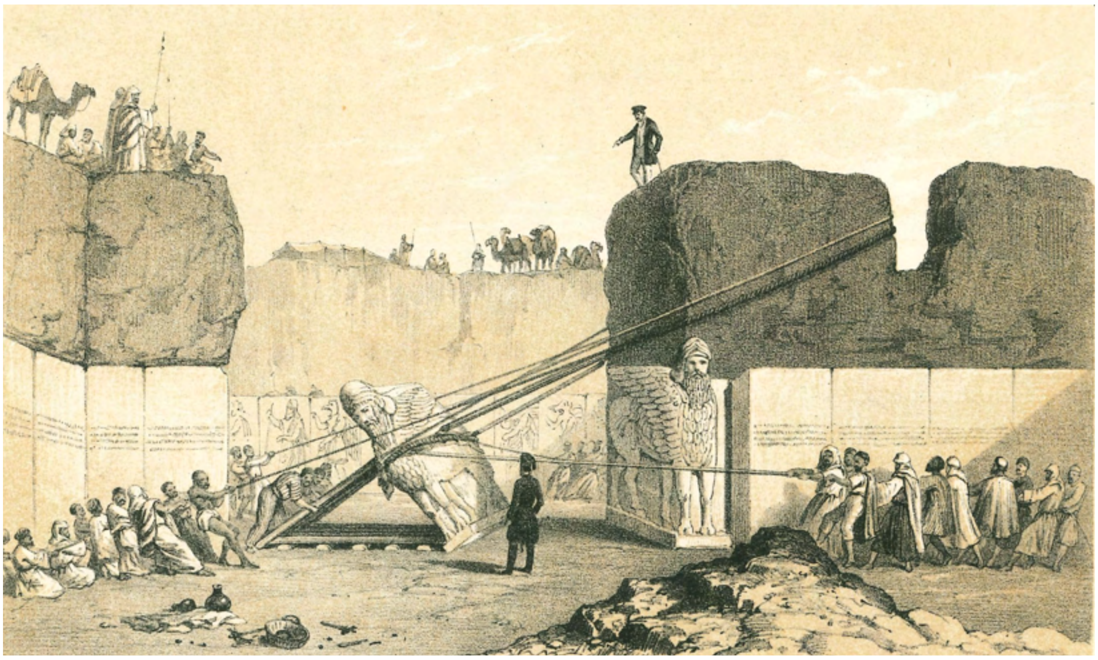

Fig. 1. Lowering the great winged bull. 1848. From: Layard 1849a, 1: Frontispiece.

1 I agree with Trigger's definition of 'colonialist archaeology', "which developed either in countries whose native population was wholly replaced or overwhelmed by European settlement or in ones where Europeans remained politically and economically dominant for a considerable period of time" (Trigger 1984: 360).

These hierarchies and power structures are evident in a variety of ways. They can easily be found in excavation reports and travel accounts. For instance, the frontispiece of Layard's *Niniveh and its Remains* (1849a) offers a glimpse of the excavations and the preparation for the removal of a winged bull to the British Museum (Fig. 1). Of more interest here are the social hierarchies, which show the workers half-naked and under strain while Layard and his assistant, Hormuzd Rassam, stand by, organising the workers and holding what look like sticks. Simon Lindner described Layard's attitude as imperial, and argued that the depiction was similar to the iconography of Babylonian[2] rulers. Lindner also refers to another depiction of the winged bull being transported on a wooden cart (Layard 1849b: frontispiece). Here, Layard is shown leading the workers on horseback, clearly depicting ruler iconography (Lindner 2018). Comparing this depiction with reliefs found in the south-west palace of Sennacherib in Nineveh (Layard 1853: pl. 10–13, 15–16; Russell 1995: 77–78) reveals clear iconographic parallels (see also DeGrado in this Theme Issue).

These kinds of relations can also be seen in textual descriptions by the excavators. For example, in Layard's account of discovering the head of a winged bull, he also describes the local sheikh's astonishment at the find:

> "It was some time before the Sheikh could be prevailed upon to descend into the pit, and convince himself that the image he saw was of stone. 'This is not the work of men's hands', exclaimed he, 'but of those infidel giants of whom the Prophet, peace be with him! has said, that they were higher than the tallest date tree; this is one of the idols which Noah, peace be with him! Cursed before the flood.' In his opinion, the result of a careful examination, all the bystanders concurred." (Layard 1849a: 66–67)

By describing the sheikh's reaction as naïve, Layard is not only degrading the ability of the people of West Asia to comprehend, he is also putting himself hierarchically on a higher level. In doing so, he is practising colonialist archaeology par excellence (Trigger 1984: 363). Although explicitly citing Layard's publications here, these visual and textual statements can be found in the work of every early excavator (Hageneuer 2022: 67–131). In this context, therefore, Layard is merely representative of a broader group of excavators from Britain, France, Germany and, later, the United States. These textual and visual examples are relatively easy to spot. Other works are more subtle, with colonial power relations not being as easily visible. One such medium is archaeological reconstructions as seen in drawings, sketches, and paintings, some of which were created by the excavators themselves (Hageneuer 2016, 2022). Produced during the era of industrialisation and colonialism, it is clear that these representations of the past are integral to political views and power relations. Although we can easily dismiss the visual and textual examples as products of their time, archaeological reconstructions influence us more than we initially realise. Examples of media that still rely on images and texts from the time of early excavations include exhibitions, special-interest magazines, TV shows and movies (Bahrani 2001: 15; McGeough 2006; Micale 2008: 191; Hageneuer 2020, 2022: 144–163).

These representations, from early travelogues to televised documentaries, illustrate a continuous fascination with archaeology as a spectacle. Video games are the latest medium to inherit this legacy:

> "Clearly, the general public is interested in the past: They just want to choose the delivery format that suits them the best. For millions around the world, that format is video games." (Rassalle 2021: 8)

Although plenty of studies have examined the use of stereotypes (e.g., Breger 2008; Hageneuer 2021) and the depiction of colonialist or orientalist views (e.g., Mol and Politopoulos 2021; Politopoulos 2021) in video games, this paper aims to examine the depiction of West Asian cultures in this medium more closely. There are two distinct reasons for focusing this research on video games: influence and immersion.

Influence

The influence of video games on society is widely underestimated. In the United States, 190.6 million people play video games, of whom 24% are under 18 and 47% are aged 18–50. 61% of the U.S. population reports playing video games for more than an hour a week (ESA [Entertainment Software Association] 2024: 6–7). Younger players are more likely to prefer playing video games to watching movies, and 63% agree that video games offer better

2 Sic! What he meant was 'Assyrian'.

value for money than any other form of media (ESA 2024: 12, 26). In the EU, half of the population (237 million players aged 6–64) play regularly. Of these, 80% are aged 11–14 (Ecorys, KEA 2023: 7–8). Sales in the video game industry have skyrocketed in recent years. While sales in the U.S. balanced around 10 billion dollars per year 20 years ago, they increased to 57.2 billion dollars in 2023 (ESA 2024: 28). In the EU, the video game market generated €23.5 billion in revenue in 2022 and is expected to grow to €34.3 billion by 2027 (Ecorys, KEA 2023: 7). Globally, revenues increased immensely from €145.3 billion in 2017 to €367.8 billion in 2023 (an increase of over 153% in six years), and are expected to reach an estimated €471.5 billion by 2027 (Ecorys, KEA 2023: 35). With hundreds of millions of active players worldwide and annual revenues exceeding 350 billion euros, video games have become one of the most dominant forms of global entertainment. Their cultural presence rivals that of cinema and television. However, large audiences do not automatically translate into social or cognitive influence. To understand the cultural power of games, it is necessary to look beyond economic indicators and examine how they construct and mediate experiences of the past.

The influence of the media is rarely a matter of sheer exposure. Television and film often make greater claims to factual accuracy and authority. In contrast, games are often dismissed as ‘not serious’ and operate through participation rather than instruction. Their impact lies less in what they tell players than in what they allow them to do – the actions, choices and systems they model. It is this participatory dimension that explains why games can shape perceptions of the past differently from other media. They do not merely depict history; they enable players to inhabit it. This fosters a sense of agency and immersion, leading to what Daniel Giere (2019) calls ‘transfer effects,’ whereby players internalise the historical logic of a game world as part of their own understanding. Therefore, although video games may not have the same explicit authority as museums or documentaries, their interactive realism and emotional engagement make them powerful tools for recreating – and potentially reimagining – long-standing cultural narratives about the past.

Immersion

In addition to their huge media influence, video games offer unparalleled immersion. This is achieved not only through realistic depictions, as with photographs, or by telling a good story, as with novels or films, but also by offering players a certain degree of freedom to choose what they want to do. Sometimes these decisions have an immediate effect on the story or the player, making video gamers feel as though they are participating in the narrative. Unlike other media, they become part of the story.

Recently, Giere examined the representation and reception of history in video games, as well as the extent to which digital games can be used to impart knowledge in the classroom (Giere 2019). In his empirical study, Giere examined the interactions between historicising, historicist, pseudo-historicist, and historical game worlds and players. He views these as connected by a structural coupling (2019: 105–150). Drawing on Adam Chapman’s structural analysis model (2016), among others, he arrives at revealing results concerning players’ individual historical awareness. Firstly, he found that the more visually realistic the digital game world was perceived by video gamers, the more the historical representations within it were accepted as true (Giere 2019: 344–347). He also found that the more historical knowledge video gamers have, the more critically they judge the content presented within the game worlds. Conversely, Giere was therefore able to demonstrate the following: The less prior knowledge the test subjects have of the depicted history, the more vividly these depictions are absorbed into their historical consciousness as transfer effects within the game under investigation (Giere 2019: 347–350; but also Winter 2021: 16–18). According to Giere, these transfer effects can only be interrupted by elements perceived as anachronistic (2019: 345–346). This is of particular interest given that video games are a popular medium largely played by gamers with no prior knowledge of archaeology, history or colonial history. Without the necessary prior knowledge, many elements in these games cannot be perceived as foreign, thus interrupting the transfer effect.

If video gamers act as archaeologists in a video game and carry out unethical actions or perceive the past in a stereotypical way, these actions and stereotypes may not be perceived as unethical by the gamers, meaning that transfer effects can occur. Unlike acts glorifying violence, where the difference between fact and fiction is clear to a healthy mind, the ethical dividing line in archaeological acts – i.e. the working methods of today’s archaeologists –

is much less well known (see the work of Holtorf 2007; Kircher 2012; Moshenska 2017). Therefore, it is important to recognise what is fact and what is fiction in order to identify and interrupt the transfer of unethical actions or stereotypical depictions in the context of archaeology. However, as I argue that this transfer effect usually occurs, it is necessary to understand why the depicted world is perceived as authentic, thereby preventing the interruption of the transfer effect. Here, *authenticity* does not refer to the accuracy of the depiction of the profession or the past, but to the feeling of being immersed in it (Zimmermann 2021: 22–24). In his introduction to the anthology *History in Games*, Felix Zimmermann describes how players perceive reality in video games, summarising Chapman's work:

> "As Adam Chapman has argued, digital games can also be understood as affording heritage experiences. What all of these practices offer or claim to be offering are authentic experiences of the past." (Zimmermann 2020: 14)

According to Zimmermann (2020: 12), the world of computer games generally provides an escape into another reality. Historically, games already suggest a certain 'authenticity' through their connection to the past, which the producers always emphasise and advertise. They offer a more tangible reality than films or novels, for example, and therefore provide an even more unapproachable refuge.

> "Insofern stellen digitale Spielwelten keine historisch akkurate Verarbeitung dar, sondern vermitteln ein Gefühl davon, was als realistisch wahrgenommen werden kann. Sie lassen den Rezipienten dabei in eine aktive Rolle schlüpfen, der die Konstruktion von Geschichte mit beeinflusst. Man kann davon ausgehen, dass so auch eine stärkere Bindung der Nutzer an die historischen Verarbeitungen erzeugt wird." (Giere 2019: 83)[3]

In my opinion, perceived authenticity (Zimmermann) plays an important role in transfer effects (Giere), i.e. the transfer of facts depicted in game worlds. If the player is immersed in the game world through perceived authenticity, they will be 'abducted' by it. This is not created by historical or archaeological facts, but by what gamers expect to see. The more realistic the video game, the greater the chance of a transfer effect in the player's mind. If players cannot recognise any clear markers to interrupt these transfer effects, the image conveyed by the video games consolidates as a habitus in their perceptual horizon (see Winter 2021: 16–18).

Methods

In order to evaluate the depictions of the West Asian past in video games, this paper will focus on one game as an example. It examines *Civilization VI* (2016), with a particular focus on one of its expansions, the *Babylon Pack* (2020). This paper builds on my dissertation, in which I analysed several video games depicting the West Asian past and the profession of archaeology itself in detail (Hageneuer 2022: 176–217). I played and documented all of the video games analysed in the dissertation. Alongside my own observations, I have included the work of other researchers who have analysed the same video games. I distinguish between games with a cultural focus (games depicting a culture in general) and games with a subject focus (games depicting a person as the main character). The game introduced here is a culture-focussed game. In these kinds of video games, cultures are generally portrayed in a normative way. Representations of architecture and historical figures, for example, can be examined more closely. This is interesting because it demonstrates how certain visual media stereotypes from archaeology have been transferred to modern pop culture. It also becomes clear where Eurocentric ways of thinking play a role, and how they are portrayed and transferred to certain cultures.

In this paper, I will build on my dissertation analysis and take a closer look. The Civilization games fall under the 4X genre, where the four Xs stand for Explore, Expand, Exploit and Exterminate. In these games, you act as the ruler of a nation and try to defeat others through strategic actions that can be reduced to exploration, expansion, exploitation and destruction. The focus is not on an individual ruler, although we will examine one, but rather on cultures and their achievements. One of the most famous examples of the 4X genre is the Civilization series, which has been produced since 1991. *Civilization VI* features civilisations such as the Phoenicians, Sumerians and Persians. Older parts of the series showcase Assyrians, Babylonians and Hittites. The Civilization games are very

3 Translated: 'In that sense, digital game worlds do not offer historically accurate interpretations, but instead convey what is perceived as realistic. They enable the audience to play an active role in constructing history itself. It can be assumed that this creates stronger emotional engagement with these historical representations.'

popular, as Angus A. A. Mol and Aris Politopoulos explain (2021: 44). They always follow the same structure: after selecting a nation to play, the game begins with a few playing pieces on a largely unexplored map. By founding settlements, expanding cities and roads, building up the military and establishing diplomatic relations – which can degenerate into war – you try to become the strongest nation and achieve one of several goals. The game embodies fundamental imperialist values, as exploration and conquest form part of the mechanics and are rewarded, representing the most common way to win. The research mechanics, ranging from the invention of the wheel to the colonisation of space, also testify to a basic social Darwinist conviction, whereby more highly developed civilisations have a clear advantage over others (Kubetzky 2012: 89–92; Martino 2021: 34; Mol and Politopoulos 2021: 46–47).

Focusing on the *Babylon Pack*, I will take a closer look at how Babylonian culture and its in-game ruler, Hammurabi, are depicted. To gain a better understanding of the game's perceived authenticity, I will analyse different layers: the ruler, special abilities/features, civics and wonders. The results section of this paper will present each layer and its findings, and the discussion section at the end will cover the wider implications. The game offers different modes of play. As I am focusing on certain historical depictions, I will only utilise the single-player mode. I played the game on a Windows PC, having purchased it through the Steam gaming platform.

Results

In this section, I will present my analysis of the game *Civilization VI*, focusing on rulers, special abilities, civics and wonders.

The Ruler

When playing as the Babylonian Empire, the representative ruler is Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE, middle chronology). Before the game begins, the ruler is introduced via a text:

> "Great Hammurabi, your word is your law. You live and lead by your code, and will make sure that your empire does too. You see the world as a complex web of alliances, possibilities, and risks. Weigh the odds carefully, as you build your empire to unite Mesopotamia" (see also Fig. 2).

The text clearly references the Code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian legal text attributed to the ruler himself. Written in Akkadian, the text was inscribed on a diorite stela found in Susa, Iran, in 1901/02 and now housed in the Louvre Museum. It features 282 laws relating to offences concerning property, commerce or marriage. It is one of the most famous and widely discussed texts in West Asian archaeology (Novák and Elsen-Novák 2006: 132). In the inscription, Hammurabi refers to an image called 'šar mīšarim', meaning 'king of justice'. There is some debate as to whether this refers to the depiction on top of the stela itself or something else, but what is clear is that Hammurabi saw himself as a king of justice (Veenhof 2001: 127; Novák and Elsen-Novák 2006: 142–46). However, the introductory text of the game does not depict Hammurabi as a just king, but rather as a king bound by law, which is not the same.

The depiction of Hammurabi in the game does not resemble any well-known images of the Old Babylonian ruler, such as those on the *Code of Hammurabi*. While the headdress resembles that of the Neo-Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (669–631 BCE)[4], the clothing – a short-sleeved dress with a frayed scarf hanging over it – is more reminiscent of the Neo-Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE)[5], two kings who lived around 1,000 years later. The colours of the clothing are based on the famous blue and yellow glazes of the Ishtar Gate, which dates from the reign of the Neo-Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BCE). In the analysed video game, *Civilization VI: Babylon Pack*, Hammurabi is depicted as a combination of various generic Mesopotamian rulers and styles.

4 See for example BM 124920. URL: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1856-0909-53 (02.10.2024).

5 See for example BM 118871. URL: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1851-0902-507 (02.10.2024).

Fig. 2: Screenshot from the loading screen of *Civilization VI*, when selecting the Babylonian Empire. © 2K.

As Shannon Martino has demonstrated, preconceived notions of game developers are already embedded in the development of such games. For instance, the rulers of different nations are depicted differently in *Civilization VI*. Alexander the Great is shown rather nonchalantly, whereas Shaka, the Zulu leader, is shown in an aggressive pose similar to those of modern-day footballers during interviews (Martino 2021: 36). Hammurabi clearly shows an aggressive gaze towards the player, signalling his hostility. Artistically, Hammurabi is depicted as an aggressive ruler, which contrasts with the aforementioned portrayal of him as a king bound by law. Martino also clarifies that the developer studio prioritised representing nations with a strong player demographic over those with a low impact on the game's sales figures (Martino 2021: 36–37). This means that nations with a smaller gamer demographic have less control over how their historical figures are depicted in the game.

Special Abilities

As can also be observed by the introductory text playing the Babylonian Empire (Fig. 2), this nation has special abilities that set the Babylonians apart from the other nations in the game. These include two unique abilities, one special unit and one special building. The first unique ability is called *Ninu Ilu Sirum* and derives from the opening words of the prologue to Hammurabi's Code: *(N)i-nu ilum ᵇṣi-ru-um*. This translates as 'the supreme god Anu' and was also used as a title for a collection of copies of the code made during the first millennium BCE (Johns 1903: 173). The special ability is described as follows:

> "When each speciality district is constructed for the first time receive the lowest Production cost building that can currently be constructed in that district. Receive an Envoy when any other district is constructed for the first time." (see also Fig. 2)

This special rule, based on the game mechanics of *Civilization VI*, provides bonuses when building larger, more complex cities. In the game, districts provide cities with specialisations such as military, science and culture, and the Babylonians are rewarded for building these districts with lower production costs. Envoys, on the other hand, are used to build diplomatic relations with city-states. The more envoys a player has, the better their relations with and bonuses from these city-states will be. In summary, this special ability enables Hammurabi to build more complex cities faster and establish stronger diplomatic ties with other city-states.

Hammurabi's second unique ability is known as *Enuma Anu Enlil*. This term refers to a collection of divinatory texts from Nineveh and Babylon. This ability enables us to accelerate scientific research in the game:

> "Eurekas provide all of the Science for technologies. -50% Science per turn." (see also Fig. 2)

Although Babylonians incur a penalty on scientific research, Eurekas[6] provide a special way of making faster progress. When certain tasks are completed for the first time, such as mining a resource or building an iron mine, other nations receive a 40% bonus on their scientific research for that particular technology. However, Babylonians receive a 100% bonus, completing the research in no time. This means that, especially in the early phase of the game when Eurekas happen more frequently, scientific progress is much faster for Babylonians than for any other nation. Later in the game, though, it is slowed down by 50%.

As a special unit, the Babylonians can control the *Ṣābum kibittum*. In the Assyrian Dictionary, the term is translated as 'heavily armed troops' (Oppenheim 1995: 92). The word '*ṣābu*' generally denotes a group of people or a troop of soldiers (Oppenheim 2004: 46–55), while '*kibittu*' denotes 'full force' or 'full strength' (Oppenheim 2008: 330–331). An Old Babylonian text from Mari[7] mentions Hammurabi as the sender of these troops. This therefore provides a very detailed reconstruction of the Babylonian past. However, the in-game Civilopedia describes the unit as follows:

> "After Hammurabi's time, Babylon was occupied by the Assyrians, who reshaped Mesopotamian warfare. The Assyrian king Tiglath Pileser III took up what was originally a collection of conscripted farmers and made from them an integrated army, with different units taking up different tasks […]. The Assyrian sabum kibittum – shock troops – would have been terrifying […]."

Here, the *Ṣābum kibittum* are assigned to the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Tiglath-Pileser III (745–726 BCE), even though they are also available in the game to Hammurabi and the Old Babylonian Empire.

Finally, the Babylonians had access to a special building known as the *palgum*. '*Palgu*' is the Akkadian word for 'canal' or 'irrigation ditch' (Oppenheim 2005: 62–64). The Civilopedia describes the *palgum* as follows: "channeling the flow through palgum – small-scale canals – to feed elaborate gardens". In the game, constructing a *palgum* increases a city's production, housing capacity, and food availability, but it can only be built in cities adjacent to a river. The connection between the *palgum* and Hammurabi may stem from the name of his 33rd regnal year, which refers to the "creation of a canal that offered water in abundance" to the cities of Nippur, Eridu, Ur, Larsa, Uruk and Isin (Nissen 1999: 71–72), in which Hammurabi praises himself for constructing these channels to irrigate his lands.

In summary, the special abilities of the Babylonian Empire in *Civilization VI* focus on building cities quickly (*Ninu Ilu Sirum*) and conducting fast research (*Enuma Anu Enlil*) at the start of the game. The *Ṣābum kibittum* unit increases military power at the start of the game, while the *palgum* generally enhances the success of Babylonian cities. The ability to send envoys early reflects the time that Hammurabi lived in. During his reign, diplomatic activities were in full swing:

> "Mit Karawanen oder gesondert und von einer bewaffneten Eskorte begleitet waren Boten und königliche Gesandte, Briefe und Geschenke im Gebiet zwischen Susa im Osten und Aleppo und Hazor im Westen unterwegs, wo sie von Hof zu Hof zogen. Die ‚großen Könige' hatten in den Städten ihrer Vasallen offizielle ‚Vertreter' […] und sie entsandten Botschafter an die Höfe ihrer Verbündeten." (Veenhof 2001: 125)[8]

6 In *Civilization VI*, 'Eurekas' are bonuses that accelerate research by completing actions thematically tied to specific technologies, simulating the role of practical discovery in technological progress.

7 ARM 2,22, CDLI Number P272934. URL: https://cdli.ucla.edu/P272934 (02.10.2024).

8 Translated: 'Messengers and royal envoys, as well as letters and gifts, travelled either with caravans or separately, accompanied by an armed escort, throughout the region between Susa in the east and Aleppo and Hazor in the west, moving from court to court. The "Great Kings" maintained official "representatives" in the cities of their vassals [...] and sent ambassadors to the courts of their allies.'

Technologies and Civics

Technologies and Civics are special game mechanics in *Civilization VI* that represent a player's scientific and cultural progress. Earlier versions of Civilization only featured a technology tree, favouring players who focused on technological improvements[9] and leaving those who focused on cultural development behind. In *Civilization VI*, however, players can research scientific advances (tech tree) and cultural ones (civic tree) simultaneously. Examples of possible civics to research include Craftsmanship, Mysticism, Political Philosophy, and Recorded History.

When the Industrial Era is reached, the civic *Natural History* becomes available, enabling the player to build archaeological museums and recruit a unit called an *Archaeologist*. However, as Martino pointed out, in order to research *Natural History* and be able to recruit archaeologists, one first has to research *Colonialism*. This establishes a direct connection between colonialism and archaeology, which is reinforced for progression within the game (Martino 2021: 40–41).

In addition, once an archaeologist has explored an excavation site and found an artefact, it automatically goes to an archaeological museum to promote tourism. This highlights the colonialist connotations of archaeology's claim to ownership of ancient artefacts. This is even more apparent given that it is possible to trade artefacts with other nations. England also has the special ability to place more objects in its museums and employ two archaeologists instead of one (Martino 2021: 41).

Finally, archaeologists can cross national borders regardless of whether the player has diplomatic relations with that country. This means that when there are no more artefacts available within one's own borders, archaeologists can go to other countries, excavate and bring the artefacts to their local museum. They have the option of leaving the artefacts with the foreign culture, in which case they will not receive any bonuses. This game mechanic perfectly illustrates the early days of archaeology during the Industrial Age.

Wonders

Another mechanic in the game involves building a wonder of a certain type to receive cultural, religious or other bonuses. These wonders are based on extraordinary real-life projects, such as the Forbidden City, Stonehenge and the Taj Mahal. Sometimes, world wonders are given their original names (e.g., 'Huey Teocalli' for the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan). An increase in online searches for these indigenous names after the game's release shows that players are conducting their own research on the wonders while or after playing the game (Martino 2021: 40), suggesting that their interest extends beyond what is required for gameplay. In *Civilization VI*, there are four wonders from ancient West Asia: the Apadana, the Etemenanki, the Hanging Gardens, and Petra (Fig. 3).

While Petra is clearly a replica of the Al-Khazneh Treasury Building, which still stands today, the other three wonders are reconstructions. The depiction of the Apadana in the game is most likely a combination of various existing reconstructions and cannot be identified more precisely. However, clear parallels can be drawn between the Etemenanki reconstruction and a reconstruction of Babylon that was exhibited at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada, as part of the Mesopotamia exhibition (22 June 2013 – 5 January 2014). Blue glazed bricks can be found on the temple, gateways, and battlements of the steps in this reconstruction, a combination not found in other reconstructions. Additionally, the game's depiction was adorned with decorative elements inspired by the Ishtar Gate. In my opinion, the depiction of the Hanging Gardens is a combination of elements from the Ishtar Gate and common depictions of the Hanging Gardens. Clearly, the reconstruction of these iconic monuments was based solely on widely available depictions on the internet. This was also made clear during an interview with the designers of the *Brave New World expansion* (2013) for the game *Civilization V* (2010), in which they discussed their research process (Pitts 2013; also Martino 2021: 33):

9 For more on technology trees in video games, see Ghys 2012.

“The designers scour the internet looking for clues. They consult historical texts as well as Osprey books, renowned among historical wargamers for their attention to detail. Occasionally, as a last resort, they also turn to cosplayers.” (Pitts 2013)

Fig 3. The four West Asian wonders in *Civilization VI*: The Apadana, Etemenanki, the Hanging Gardens, and Petra. © 2K.

Discussion

In the previous sections, I stated that West Asian archaeology was, at least in its beginnings, a colonial practice. Early archaeologists conveyed these practices through imagery and texts in their publications, creating an Orientalist perspective on the West Asian past. Whether this Orientalist perspective was intentional or merely a by-product of the time is not the focus here. I also stated that modern media, led by video games, still utilises variations of these Orientalist views in the form of stereotypes or tropes, displaying the past and the profession of archaeology in a certain way. For example, I demonstrated how these views are incorporated into the visuals, narrative and integral game mechanics of video games. Given the huge influence and immersion that video games possess, I also remarked that, as archaeologists, we should be aware of the Orientalist views portrayed within these games.

The example of *Civilization VI* shows that its depictions of the past are stereotypical, and that research into this ancient West Asian culture has only been conducted selectively. As mentioned at the outset, media representations of the past are optimised for the viewing experience, focusing on creating a sense of authenticity rather than authenticity itself. By adding facts such as the *Ṣābum kibittum* or Hammurabi’s relationship with law, the developers present three levels of information. While many players have probably heard of Hammurabi (1), fewer people might be aware of his connection to law (2). Only a select few (most likely archaeologists or assyriologists) would recognise the connection to the *Ṣābum kibittum* (3). However, as mentioned previously, players research terms like this,[10] and then seem to have further proof of the game’s authenticity when they find specialised articles about the Code of Law or Hammurabi’s special military units. Other topics discussed in this paper are more problematic, such as the aggressive stance of the Babylonian ruler, in contrast to other rulers in the game, and the fact that the game mechanics favour the Babylonians initially but penalise them later, hindering their success on the world stage after their head start. In a different study, Mol and Politopoulos took a closer look at the representation of the

10 A quick Google Trends search for the term ‘Sabum Kibittum’ (as used within the game) reveals that it was searched for unusually often between January and February 2021, shortly after the release of the Babylon Pack in November 2020.

Persian Empire throughout the game series. They concluded that the depiction of the Persian Empire largely aligns with Western perceptions and thus meets Western expectations (Mol and Politopoulos 2021: 48–51). Sadly, this may also be true of the stereotypical portrayal of the Babylonians in the game, reflecting how Western media has imagined (and still imagines) ancient West Asian cultures, and what Western consumers expect them to be like. This further increases the player's feeling of authenticity.

Both studies show us how stereotypical ideas influence the design of video games and de-historicise them in the same way. By portraying an Orientalist view in these games, it seems that the representation of ancient West Asian cultures has not improved since their archaeological discovery in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is particularly problematic given the large number of video game players, especially younger ones. At first glance, this seems to be more of a problem for the video game industry than for archaeologists because we are not the ones making these games. However, more and more scholars are using video games for teaching purposes, either by creating games in the classroom or using games to educate people about the past (e.g., Boom et al. 2020; Hiriart 2020; Remmy 2020; Houghton 2021, 2022; Hageneuer 2025). Dom Ford has already drawn attention to the problems of these 4X games in relation to postcolonialism, criticising the imperialist narratives of the games and their use in the classroom (Ford 2016). Thomas Kubetzky argues similarly in his study of *Civilization III* (2001) and highlights the problems associated with the use of the game for teaching (Kubetzky 2012). While I generally support the use of video games in the classroom, it is important to understand these games and how immersion and knowledge transfer work in order to teach effectively. Contrary to the points discussed above, *Civilization VI* also shows the true connection between early archaeology and colonialism, which, as I mentioned at the beginning, is close to reality (see also Hageneuer 2024). However, it does not demonstrate how to decolonise archaeology in later stages or offer alternative approaches to dealing with cultural heritage.

The way video games, especially those depicting the past, are created involves a complex interplay of authenticity, expectations, profitability and the simple pleasure of playing. As scholars of the humanities, I believe we should continue to analyse video games and do what we do best: highlight cultural, intellectual, media, social, sociological, historical, political and/or religious phenomena, and demonstrate how they relate to our society and its expectations today.

Ludography

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