Appropriations of the Past: Mesopotamia as Definer of Identities

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Introduction

Within the scope of the study of Antiquity, it becomes increasingly relevant to understand its reception over time. The present study addresses how Mesopotamia was used in various discourses, particularly through visual sources.

To this end, the methodology used was bibliographical research together with the analysis of visual records where Mesopotamian motifs and elements are recovered. The main objective is to understand how its historical rescue affected and helped to formulate national and imperial identities.

In this sense, the article starts from a very succinct contextualization of Mesopotamia, focusing on the main characterizing aspects of this civilization.

It then explores the 19th century, where European and North American powers excavated ancient Mesopotamian cities. Here I intend to underline the way in which archaeological finds were appropriated and used to establish a reality opposite to that which was experienced in Europe and America, in order for these powers to reaffirm their own identity. In a first approach, I will analyse some examples that propagated a constructed image of the Ancient Near East associated with a place of violence and transgression.

Finally, in the 20th century, the emergence of new states in the Near East, particularly Iraq, is addressed. In order to consolidate and legitimize its historical identity, this state claim a pre-Islamic past, going back to the beginnings of Mesopotamia. This is especially important, as I will have the opportunity to explain, since this construction of a national identity is also denied.

Archaeology in Iraq was used as a tool to promote national unity, building, step by step, an ideological narrative to portray the state as a continuous review of its past. It is in this context that the self-proclaimed Islamic State emerges as a reactionary movement against nationalist definitions.

This group seeks to re-establish the caliphate as a political institution that would rule according to Islamic law, where Allah has total sovereignty over the universe. The Islamic State presents itself as the heir of the Rashidun caliphs[1], arguing that all power structures that distance themselves or interfere with the practice of Islam should be removed.

Islamic thought views images and allegiance to any institution that claims a separate authority from Allah as idolatry (*shirk*)[2]. Bearing in mind that Iraq, as a secular state, demonstrates obedience to the law, the Islamic State identifies it as loyal to a doctrine other

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[1] Jones 2018, 52.
[2] Jones 2018, 31.

than divine. In addition, the recovery of artefacts and archaeological sites is considered a form of idolatry, which ultimately justifies its destruction.

According to this formulation, archaeological sites, museums, and their pieces must be decimated because, when they are restored, safeguarded and/or displayed, they are sacralised. The destruction of the heritage of the Ancient Near East by the Islamic State is closely related to the recovery of these remains to promote a national cultural identity, which is absolutely denied by this group.

Therefore, to understand the reuse of the past, in this specific case of Mesopotamia, as a definer of identities, it becomes necessary to reflect on the concept of "identity". Precisely because it is an embracing term, it becomes relevant to the study in question. By encompassing multiple meanings, it allows approaching various types of identity construction and discussing them, as I hope to make clear at the end of this article.

By using the notion "identity" I am referring not only to a product, to an identifiable condition of a symbolic nature, but also to the process that allows self-identification and identification. This process is always relational and situational[3], in the sense that for there to be a definition of the "self" it is necessary to establish differences with alterity.

One of the consequences of territorial and colonial expansions is the crisis of the "self" before other forms of life, realities, and organizational systems. Therefore, the marking of difference is not made from neutral binary oppositions. In other words, there is always a power relationship between the two opposite poles, where normally the dominant pole is the one that includes the other within its operational field[4].

This category of identity will be particularly visible in the approach of the 19th century when the cities of Mesopotamia were rediscovered. Through examples of works of art, whose themes are related to the culture uncovered by archaeological excavations, I intend to demonstrate that they are social representations.

This type of representations are not copies of reality or the ideal, on the contrary, they correspond to the process by which the relationship between the world and things is established. This means that they reflect the attribution of the position that people occupy in society[5].

In the European and North American context, it was important to make a difference to the "Oriental world" because it symbolically led to the eradication of attitudes considered uncivilized. Paradoxically, this differentiation was also the reason for attraction to this culture, precisely because it was something strange, new.

In a second moment, regarding the independence of Iraq, the concept of identity will be addressed in a broader perspective that includes self-understanding, emotionally charged with national ideas.

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[3] Reguillo 2002, 63; Brubaker 2019; Cooper 2019, 287.
[4] Hall 2010, 420.
[5] Sêga 2000, 129.

Here, social representations are also present. However, they aim to explain relevant aspects of reality, define the group's identity, guide social practices, and justify the actions of individuals[6].

In the Iraqi context, in the 20th century, personalities such as 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim and Saddam Hussein, built an identity. In political terms, they persuaded the population to believe that they were a unit. They gave them a sense of belonging to a delimited and distinct group, alienating them from a pan-Arab policy[7] led by Egypt. By demonstrating that internal differences did not matter for the purpose at hand – an Iraqi nationality – the rulers appropriated a symbolic force.

The constitution of responses to this Iraqi identity, like the formation of the Islamic State, is also the creation of an identity. In this case, it must be understood as a social identity, which results from complex interactions between social representations and individual representations[8].

Although in a different way, the claimed and reinforced identities, both in Europe/North America and in Iraq, mirror the power of the ruling class. This class by itself does not create identities. It creates them because it has the material and symbolic resources to impose these categories[9]. The common element to all these identity narratives is the role, importance, and impact of the "other" in the definition of the "self".

Mesopotamia in context

"Mesopotamia," the Greek expression meaning "between the rivers"[10], alluded to the geographical description of the civilization that developed around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. In spatial terms, the territories adjacent to these rivers constituted the entire Mesopotamian region. Today it would roughly correspond to Iraq and include parts of Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

Taking into account the territorial extension, Mesopotamia had areas with different geocultural characteristics. To the south there was steppe and desert. To the north and east were mountain ranges. The south-center contained an alluvial region, highly fertile, which became an attractive focus for communities to settle since the Neolithic period.

As its designation indicated, the rivers and their main tributaries were a source of life. They allowed the irrigation of the land and consequently the fertility of the soil, provided native fauna and flora, resulting in a prominent role for agriculture and livestock. The navigability of the rivers also made possible contact and trade both internal (between north and south) and external.

Northern and southern Mesopotamia had their own distinct conditions. The northern territories depended mainly on rainfall for crops and had mounds for grazing. In turn, the

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6 Wachelke 2007; Camargo 2007, 380.
7 To learn more about Pan-Arabism see Mohsen [https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arab-integration]; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica [https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Arabism].
8 Wachelke 2007; Camargo 2007, 387.
9 Brubaker 2019; Cooper 2019, 289.
10 Reade 2011, 6.

regions further south were characterized by some coastal swamps and intense canals and irrigation systems to supply the plantations[11].

On the one hand, the geographical characteristics of Mesopotamia led to the development of communities. In the fourth millennium BC the first cities were erected, utensils which were fundamental in agriculture such as the wheel and the plow were invented, and there was the emergence of writing[12].

On the other hand, this stability was interrupted by several moments of tension. Not only external conflicts, with the east (Elam) and the west (Syria); as well as internal disputes between cities in the north and south of Mesopotamia[13].

Although to a large extent it was dependent on agriculture, Mesopotamia had access routes to acquire deficit materials in its territory, namely precious metals, stone, and wood. In the same way that Mesopotamia established contacts and trade routes with the outside, the permeability of its natural borders[14] facilitated the threat of external forces.

The Mesopotamian city-states were self-sufficient, so they rivalled each other. These disagreements were based on the distribution of water, maintenance of canals, disrespecting borders, among other aspects. Attempts to control irrigation systems and agricultural land favoured a supra-urban logic.

In this sense, there was recognition of the power of a superior authority that varied according to the level of resources it possessed. These authorities led more or less extensive regional instances in a unified manner[15]. However, in pursuit of this sovereignty, rival cities upset this balance. For this reason, the political history of Mesopotamia was marked by constant wars and small moments of unification[16].

While there have been several territorial unifications[17], the most significant in terms of durability and greater territorial extension only occurred in the first millennium BC. First with the so-called Neo-Assyrian Empire and later with the hegemony of the city of Babylon. It was precisely these two great political powers, Assyria, and Babylon, that were the target of nationalist appropriation in the modern world, as I will have the opportunity to demonstrate.

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[11] Reade 2011, 10.

[12] Mesopotamia would come to be portrayed as the cradle of civilization due to its technological advances. It would even be understood as a source of ideas that were at the base of the biblical world and classical Greece. On the topic of the emergence of writing see Reade 2011, 35-37.

[13] For example, conflicts between Sumer (to the south) and Akkad (to the north) in the third millennium BC and in the second and first millennia BC conflicts between Babylonia (to the south) and Assyria (to the north), see Sanmartín; Serrano 1998, 12.

[14] The Euphrates provided access to Syria, the Mediterranean Levant, and western Anatolia, while the Tigris provided passage to the rest of Anatolia, the Caucasus region, and the Iranian plateau. Sanmartín; Serrano 1998, 12; Reade 2011, 6.

[15] Sanmartín; Serrano 1998, 137-138.

[16] See Oppenheim 1977, 31-73; Sanmartín; Serrano 1998, 9-178 for a more developed framework on the history of Mesopotamia.

[17] I am referring particularly to the Akkadian Period (c. 2340-2150 BC), where Sargon starred in the first Mesopotamian unification and the subsequent Period of Ur III (c. 2150-2000 BC), with the hegemony headed by the city of Ur. Nevertheless, there had already been moments characterized by the pretence of territorial unification, for example with Lugalzagesi, around 2400 BC.

In temporal terms, the history of Mesopotamia had a very vast chronology, from the fourth millennium BC until 539 BC. This year marked the end of Mesopotamia's political independence with Persian rule[18]. For some time, this civilization was "lost" in history because the language was no longer understood and spoken and because the material used for ceramics, architecture and as a support for writing was highly perishable, which made this civilization inaccessible directly.

Nonetheless, Mesopotamia was never completely forgotten since there were indirect sources of contact. From the outset, the biblical account, since when the monotheistic religion began to take its first steps, in the sixth century BC, there was a strong Assyrian and, later, Babylonian dominance. This means that there was always contact between the Biblical World and Mesopotamia. There were Greek texts, as well as Persian documents that addressed contacts and conflicts that occurred in the first millennium BC. There were also chronicles of travellers, Arab sources and Latin, Byzantine, and Syrian writers[19]. Some travellers produced travel diaries, given that during the Middle Ages, the Modern Age, and the Contemporary Age, many of them passed through this territory. The latter sources wrote mainly about the last periods of the Ancient Near East.

Rediscovering Mesopotamia in the 19th century

Until the 19th century, the knowledge that remained of the populations of the Ancient Near East was based on the traditional image of Assyrian as a barbaric and violent people, thirsty for conquest and domination by all peoples. The biblical narratives provided a theological interpretation of Assyria's fall, interpreting its almost sudden collapse as a divine reprisal[20] for the way in which they conquered and treated the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Likewise, in classical texts, although they conveyed a more ambiguous image, which maintained a certain admiration for political and architectural conquests, the Assyrians were equated with the bellicose of Persians, a people that throughout history terrorized the Greeks, reinforcing the brutality and decadence of their rulers[21].

During the 19th century, much of the Near East belonged to the Ottoman Turkish Empire (c.1299-1922), which at its peak gained exclusive access to the Black Sea and incorporated territories from Anatolia and the Caucasus to North Africa, Syria, Arabia and Iraq[22]. Nevertheless, merchants, diplomats and adventurers occasionally travelled to these territories.

The growing curiosity about the Near East stemmed from the expansion of political interests in the region by the empires of Great Britain and France. This was already visible in the brief occupation of Napoleon in Egypt (c. 1798-1801), which resulted in the publication of the twenty-four volumes of the *Déscription de l'Égypte* (1809-29)[23]. Work

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[18] Oppenheim 1977, 65.
[19] Sanmartín 1998; Serrano 1998, 37.
[20] Bohrer 1998, 337.
[21] Frahm 2006, 74-77.
[22] Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art,
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rdas/hd_rdas.htm].
[23] Daniel 2006, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/treg/hd_treg.htm].

where the conquered land, the people and their history were documented, and local topography and architecture were illustrated. Main interests in the Near East included resource extraction and access to routes to the Holy Land and India, comprising the land route through ancient Mesopotamia and the sea route through the Suez Canal[24].

With the success of the Napoleonic campaign, there was a growing concern on the part of Great Britain to maintain and control the land and river routes to India[25]. In this sense, the 19th century was characterized by the French and British dispute over the territories of the Near East, that sought not only to control this strategic area and to exert diplomatic and commercial influence, but also to explore the region archaeologically.

The first excavations were not motivated by the archaeological artefacts themselves, but by the location, mapping and confirmation of sites mentioned in the Bible. From 1842, Paul-Émile Botta began archaeological excavations in Khorsabad and, between 1845 and 1851, Austen Henry Layard excavated Nimrud[26] - two important Assyrian capitals, currently located in Iraq, discovered by a French and a British team respectively.

The deciphering of cuneiform writing also occurred in the middle of the 19th century when a series of scholars, from comparisons between Persian documents, were able to read what was recorded in ancient Persian on the *Behistun Rock*[27]. A trilingual document with the same inscription in Babylonian, Elamite, and ancient Persian. This deciphering attributed to Henry Rawlinson allowed direct access to Mesopotamia, not depending on links and connections with the Bible for the first time.

Slowly, the deciphering of texts recovered from archives of cuneiform tablets provoked a contradictory feeling. Some corroborated the historicity of kings of Judah like Hezekiah; however, others questioned the reliability of the biblical account of history[28]. As was the case of tablet XI of the *Epic of Gilgameš*[29] where was described a story of the flood, providing a parallel with Noah's Ark.

[24] Emberling 2010, 15.

[25] Bohrer 1998, 341.

[26] Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art,
[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rdas/hd_rdas.htm].

[27] Within the scope of the *Behistun Rock* see Olmstead 1938, 392-416; Thompson [s.d], 467-476; Malbran-Labat 1994; Khlopin 1974, 15–20.

[28] Frahm 2006, 78-82.

[29] The *Epic of Gilgameš* is a literary text that narrates the adventures in search of immortality lived by the mythical king of Uruk, Gilgameš. This is the main character who names the modern title of this narrative. In antiquity, this text would have other names, depending on the narrative version. Most of the time, the title would be the words that open the epic. The tablets found by Layard in 1849, in what became known as the Ashurbanipal Library, correspond to the normative version of the epic. That is, the version without significant changes where Gilgameš's deeds are gathered in a single narrative, dating from the 18th century BC. The *Epic of Gilgameš* is one of the most important texts as it becomes a reference and model of identity for southern Mesopotamia. In addition, these stories endure in time and cross borders, for example, we find a Hittite version adapted to its context. Gilgameš becomes the preferred protagonist of literature, also appearing in hymns. The Epic's longevity seems to be associated with the fact that it can be read as a gradual development path for Humanity. It has its foundation in independent tales from the third millennium BC and a strong oral tradition. On tablet XI, the meeting between Gilgameš and Ut-napištin, a man who achieved immortality after surviving the flood, is described. Bearing in mind that the Bible was the historical source, par excellence, of the European world and one of the driving motives for archaeological

In fact, the first archaeological discoveries seemed to confirm the reputation of Assyrian insensitivity. The textual and visual sources demonstrated that the military dimension was one of the essential pillars of governance. The military theme included the destruction of lands, plundering and exploitation of populations and the humiliation of other leaders in different registers.

The excavations headed by Botta resulted in the first exhibition of Assyrian pieces in France, at the Louvre Museum, in 1847, which was attended by King Louis-Philippe, and the publication in five volumes - *Monument de Ninive* - of the archaeological finds[30]. This publication was accessible to a very limited audience.

On the contrary, in Great Britain, Assyrian discoveries were disseminated in several publications that reach audiences of various social classes - from the high sphere of society with *Athenaeum Magazine* to the popular *Penny Magazine*[31]. This difference partly reflected the different supports of both: Botta obtained government contributions, establishing close political ties, while Layard had little direct support from the British Museum or any other sponsor providing the widest dissemination of his findings.

The fact that the Assyrian pieces were brought to Europe confirmed nationalist beliefs and attitudes, this was particularly visible in the correspondence exchanged between those responsible for the archaeological excavations. For example, in a letter from Rawlinson to Layard one could read: "It pains me grievously to see the French monopolize the field, for the fruits of Botta's labors, already achieved and still in progress, are not things to pass away in a day but will constitute a nation's glory in future ages.[32]" At the same time, the acquisition of these pieces interfered with the aesthetic doctrine established until then. Despite divergent opinions and multiple criticisms regarding the validity of Assyrian remains as art, these were exhibited in specific rooms and received with great admiration. It is worth highlighting the interest in the royal figures and in the winged geniuses whose abundant beards resembled the spectators of the time[33]. When integrating Assyrian artifacts into museums, the newspaper *L'Illustration* in France associated Louis-Philippe's reign with Assyrian royalty[34]. In the same way, in Great Britain, these works were exhibited in conformity with the Victorian idea of empire where the order reigned, and its acquisition revealed British superiority[35].

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excavations in the territories that formed Mesopotamia, it becomes evident that the decipherment of this tablet caused a great impact. In 1872, with George Smith's decipherment, for the first time, the biblical account is called into question.

[30] Bohrer 1998, 344.

[31] Bohrer 1998, p.345.

[32] To learn more about this issue, see Bohrer 1998.

[33] This characteristic of Assyrian iconography proved to be relevant in European art of the 19th century, becoming known as the "Assyrian profile". Gustave Courbet was one of the artists who used this attribute, for example in his painting *L'Atelier du peintre* (1854-55) his self-portrait has a prominent beard that Courbet himself claims to be his head in an Assyrian profile. This does not mean that there was a deep interest in Assyrian art. This only reveals the artist's self-education and demonstrates a way to popularize Assyria. Regarding the points of contact between Assyrian sculpture and Courbet's work, read Alexander 1965, 447-452.

[34] Bohrer 1998, 344.

[35] Brereton 2018, 286-313.

In addition to the appropriation of Assyrian monumental art reflecting the imperial ambitions that France and Great Britain had in this period, in artistic terms[36], Assyria's European reception was part of a process of identification through opposition. In parallel with studies on the Near East[37], a romantic interpretation of this region in literature, art and thought coexisted.

The "Orientalism"[38] constructed cultural, visual, and spatial mythologies and stereotypes that were linked to the geopolitical ideologies of governments and institutions. Thus, most 19th century orientalist paintings functioned as propaganda for imperialism and, at the same time, portrayed the Near East as an uncivilized world, delayed and reigned by barbarism[39].

A relatively recurring theme in European art was the fall of the Assyrian Empire. This event was portrayed in the play *Sardanapalus, a Tragedy* by Lord Byron, which will have been inspired by the Greek description of Diodorus Siculus. According to the latter, Sardanapalus[40] was an Assyrian king oblivious to royal responsibilities, characterized as narcissistic, vain, and effeminate. It was said to have exceeded its predecessors in laziness and luxury[41].

A prophecy said that his city would be safe as long as the Euphrates did not turn against it. One day, however, because of heavy rains the river flooded its territory. Sardanapalus, foreseeing the imminent fall of his city and the looting of all his goods, closed himself in a room in his palace where he gathered his belongings, including his eunuchs and concubines, and settled everything on fire, being himself consumed by the flames.

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[36] It is important to mention that the image of Assyria and, by extension, of the Ancient Near East is being adapted and re-adapted according to the archaeological discoveries. In Europe, cultural appropriation trends included a consumerist "taste" of products originating in these territories (fabrics, carpets, robes, etc.) and, simultaneously, pieces of "Assyrian style" (porcelain with *lamassus*, jewellery with various themes of palace reliefs are developed such as the lion hunt and the consequent libation, among others). As the flow of new monumental finds diminished, so did public interest, ultimately this fashion did not last much longer than a generation. Read Brereton 2018, 304-311.

[37] See the development of scientific knowledge about the Near East in Karttunen 2004.

[38] I allude to Said's definition of Orientalism, where European political ideologies generalized and distorted the realities lived in North Africa, the Near/Middle East and Asia. According to Said, this concept was created with the aim of subjugating and controlling these regions. Please read Said 1979. It is important to emphasize that the notion of "Orient" no longer refers to a geographic space, synonymous with East. This term came to report to various regions and, of course, different cultures considered inferior.

[39] Demerdash, [https://smarthistory.org/orientalism/]; Meagher, [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd_euor.htm].

[40] Sardanapalus was not a real character. His name is believed to derive from a distortion of Ashurbanipal, an Assyrian king (c. 668-631 BC), however, Sardanapalus appears to have resulted from an amalgamation of three kings. It is important to note that a king involved in orgies and cruelties would be an abomination in Assyria, since royalty was a sacred institution. The king was chosen by the gods, to act on their behalf, making him their representative on the earth plane and having as main function to follow the divine designs and wills. To learn more about the Assyrian ideology, see Parpola 1999 and Frankfort 1978.

[41] Nochlin 1989, 42; Bohrer 1998, 338.

Fig. 1. Eugène Delacroix, *La Mort de Sardanapale* (1827). Oil on canvas, 392cm x 496cm.
Currently in the Musée du Louvre – R.F.2346. Source: Wikimedia Commons[42]. Public Domain.

This was the story that underlies the painting by Eugène Delacroix *La Mort de Sardanapale* (fig.1), where the king calmly observed the murder of his concubines. Reclining on a bed, Sardanapalus was both judge and executioner, actor, and spectator. His palace was invaded by destruction and anarchy, a profusion of bodies, objects and animals translated the disorder, at the same time that there was a strong tension and eroticism transmitted by the treatment of colour.

Linda Nochlin described Delacroix's work as a space of fantasy in which the artist's own erotic and sadistic desires were projected, not only through the European man's power over the Arab man, but also through the masculine dominance over the women's bodies[43]. Clearly, with the exception of the title, nothing referred to Assyria, only to a broad and general idea of the Near East.

Even with archaeological discoveries, Assyria's conception in art always reflected a binary relationship between Europe and the Near East, reinforcing the ancient civilization as a picturesque, violent, sensual and, perhaps more significant, condemned place[44].

For example, the painting *Dream of Sardanapalus* by Ford Madox Brown (fig.2), represented the same theme as Delacroix although it did not correspond to the same episode. Here, several Assyrian elements were visible, from the very beginning the background recalled the interior of a royal palace as it featured a frieze with figures derived from Assyrian reliefs, namely the winged genius with the head of a bird and a *lamassu* flanking the door.

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[42]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Death_of_Sardanapalus#/media/File:Ferdinand-Victor-Eug%C3%A8ne_Delacroix,_French_-_The_Death_of_Sardanapalus_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg
[43] Nochlin 1989, 41-44.
[44] Bohrer 1998, 340.

King Sardanapalus presented the "Assyrian profile" and reclined on a couch represented in a similar way to the relief "Banquet Scene" by Ashurbanipal. The earring, necklace and bracelet of Sardanapalus were also characteristically Assyrian, just as the crown covering his armour was a Mesopotamian element exclusively reserved for the king.

Fig. 2. Ford Madox Brown, *The Dream of Sardanapalus* (1871). Watercolor and gouache on paper, 47cm x 55,9cm. Currently in the Delaware Art Museum – 1935-38. Source: Wikimedia Commons[45]. Public Domain.

Brown portrayed a specific moment in Byron's narrative, according to which Sardanapalus came back wounded from a battle - a detail observable in the painting by the king's left forearm being bandaged - and was comforted by his Greek slave Myrhha while he had a dream that prophesies the end of the Assyrian Empire[46].

Even then with the inclusion of markedly Assyrian visual elements, the representation continued to value human *pathos*, functioning as a distant and distorted mirror in which France and Great Britain affirmed their own identities.

Another relevant painting was the *Babylonian Marriage Market* by Edwin Long, whose theme derived from a description by Herodotus[47]. This artwork presented motifs that lead us back to the Ancient Near East, such as parietal decorations, the relief of the auctioneer's podium, robes, accessories, and the beard of some figures.

This painting depicted women from ancient Babylon who, because they did not have a dowry, were auctioned off as wives. The most beautiful woman was presented first, she was on the podium, while the rest were seated waiting for their turn and organized according to the degree of beauty. The purpose of these tenders was, according to Herodotus, that the

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[45] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dream_of_Sardanapalus_1871_Ford_Madox_Brown.jpg
[46] Bohrer 1998, 351.
[47] Bohrer 1998, 351-352.

most beautiful woman could raise enough money to form a dowry for the ugliest woman, represented in the lower right corner and, in this way, everyone could marry.

The *Babylonian Marriage Market* has been interpreted as a stimulus for the discussion of women's rights in Victorian society from the 1800s. Considering that women from the middle and lower classes did not have access to studies, they could not work or support themselves, so they had no choice, the marriage had to happen. In this sense, they continued to be part of a wedding market as in Antiquity[48].

On the one hand, these paintings depicted an "exotic", racialized and often sexualized culture from a distant land. On the other hand, they presented themselves as an authentic testimony of a specific place and its inhabitants, claiming themselves as a pseudo-ethnographic work[49]. In this essay, I do not intend to distinguish the "authentic" representations of Assyrian culture and artifacts, but rather to understand the process of affirming European identity through the antagonism and binarism expressed in French and British art.

That said, it is important to emphasize that in both works we were confronted with issues of the contemporary world that in reality were never approached within a European context. There was a generalization and misrepresentation of the territories of North Africa, the Near East and Asia in order to project an image of the "other" as uncivilized.

Hence the critical definition of Orientalism by Edward Said as a way of defining and identifying a supposed cultural inferiority. The "Orient" instead of referring to a geographic location, alluded to a cultural and moral connotation, determined by colonialism as a control mechanism, designed to justify and perpetuate European domination[50].

Iraqi Identity

Iraq's wealth of natural resources exposed it to a number of politic domains, the last of which were the Ottoman and the British[51]. After World War I, the Society of Nations negotiated – between France and Britain – a tutelary government for the regions of the Near East that were part of the then disintegrated Ottoman Turkish Empire. Iraq was placed under the British protectorate and its borders were demarcated.

However, until its independence in 1932, Iraq was conducted by several Arab nationalisms that were engaged in the struggle against the colonialism that dominated them. With regard to Iraq, nationalist currents were generally understood to reflect one of the following forms of identity: pan-Arabism, which declared Arab culture, history and language as markers of national identity, fighting for political unity formed by all Arab states; and the so-called territorial patriotic nationalism, which considered the geography, archaeology and history of Iraq (and not of the Arab world) the main characteristics of the national identity.

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[48] Royal Holloway University of London, [https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/].
[49] Demerdash, [https://smarthistory.org/orientalism/].
[50] Said 1979, 31-49.
[51] Bashkin 2011, 299.

In this second form, the figure of 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim (1914-1963) stood out, a ruler who came to power through a military coup on July 14, 1958[52], ending the Hashemite monarchy. Qāsim promoted a particular form of Iraqi nationalism moving away from pan-Arab policies that sought to assimilate Iraq into the United Arab Republic headed by Egypt[53]. Qāsim's policy was based on three important vectors. At first it celebrated the July revolution as the materialization of the possibility of Iraqi independence and freedom. Then, at a second moment, it highlighted the importance of the people[54] as a group of persons whose ethnic and linguistic identity was configured within the same homeland. Finally, it rescued Iraq's pre-Islamic past as a source of national pride, which marked the region as a unique entity, culturally and historically distinct from the rest of the Arab world. In addition to supporting archaeological excavations in various locations, including in Babylon, the vision of the state was widely disseminated in museums, public monuments, national holidays, and various media. Consequently, objects and specific motifs of Antiquity acquired national meanings. For example, a new national emblem (fig.4) with the symbol of Utu/Šamaš was introduced, one of the most important deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon. Utu/Šamaš was the sun god, so he was represented with rays coming from his shoulders (fig.3). The rays were recovered for the emblem appearing alternately with the points of a star.

Fig. 3. Details of the emblem of the solar deity on the "Victory Stele of Naram-Sîn (c. 2250 BC). Limestone, 200cm x 150cm. Found in the city of Susa, currently in the Musée du Louvre – AS 6065 © Beatriz C. Freitas

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[52] The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica [https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abd-al-Karim-Qasim]; Bashkin 2011, 294-295.
[53] Jones 2018, 33.
[54] See the relevance of this aspect in overcoming political differences in Bashkin 2011, 298.

The cosmic function of this deity was related to justice probably because the sun travelled across the sky daily, which meant that the sun saw and knew everything[55]. For this reason, Utu/Šamaš was considered a god of truth, justice, and law.

Inside the star, there were two Arab inscriptions, the upper one corresponded to the identification of the Republic of Iraq and the lower one was the date of the July 1958 revolution that allowed Qāsim to come to power.

Between the two inscriptions there was the mirrored representation of a scythe which, in addition to being an agricultural attribute associated with prosperity, also symbolized the cycle of crops that were renewed[56], alluding to the finitude of the previous regime and, consequently, to the hope of a new one, that is, a rebirth that could result in freedom. In turn, the central element of this emblem was a spike, which evoked growth and fertility at the same time that it coincided with the unfolding of all possibilities of being[57].

Fig. 4. Iraqi National Emblem, used between 1959 and 1965. Source: Wikimedia Commons[58]. Public domain.

It is also important to emphasize that the predominant shape of this emblem was the circle, where the presence of the cogwheel, leads us to an idea of cycle, restart, and renewal. While the sickle and wheat represented agriculture, the cogwheel referred to industry, the two economic pillars of the country. It was a symbol of the military state that was linked to the destructive power personified by the end of the Hashemite era, concomitant with a moment of establishing peace and justice. The nationalist ideology advocated and defended continuity; however, it was originated in a moment of decisive and unspeakably profound rupture in history[59].

Qāsim also introduced a new national flag (fig.5). It kept the colours of the Arab world (black, white, and green)[60] but added an eight-pointed star in the center, reporting to the Mesopotamian deity Inanna/Ištar. The symbol of this goddess was the star, since her astral

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[55] Black 1992; Green 1992, 182-184.
[56] Chevalier; Gheerbrant; Rodriguez; Guerra (trad.) 2010, 333-334.
[57] Chevalier; Gheerbrant; Rodriguez; Guerra (trad.) 2010, 302-303.
[58] This image was released by the author (AnonMoos) to Public Domain.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Emblem_of_Iraq_(1959-1965).svg
[59] Ernest Gellner cited by Cuno 2008, 130.
[60] These three colours are closely related to Muhammad, according to tradition the Prophet wore a white turban, the colour of his banner was black and his favourite colour was green. For a more detailed analysis of the evolution of the Iraqi flag over time, read Midura 1978, 4-9.

element was Venus, the morning star, and the evening star[61]. Inanna/Ištar was a very important and complex deity, closely linked to governance as one that legitimized the king's power. In this way, an element of legitimation of the authority of Qāsim to govern was instituted.
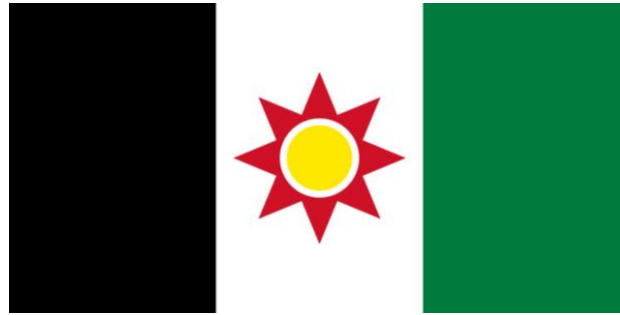

Fig. 5. Iraqi National Flag, used between 1959 and 1963. Source: Wikimedia Commons[62]. Public Domain.

After Qāsim was overthrown in 1963, the next regime followed a pan-Arab course, giving little importance and political attention to the pre-Islamic past. This situation only changed after 1968 when the Ba'ath Party came to power and realized that the most effective way to get around certain political issues (such as the Sunni-Shiite division), was to present modern Iraq as a continuation of its ancient past.

Consequently, interest in archaeology in Iraq was renewed and several museums were built together with the foundation of *Iraqi House of Fashions*, which promoted clothing, poetry, sculpture, dance, and theatre productions inspired by Mesopotamia. Two very expressive examples were the garments presented in 1970. In the first, the model wore a conical hat that evoked the Mesopotamian royal crown. Her skirt displayed a representation of a typically Assyrian head and featured an element that attached to the wrists reminiscent of wings. This was a clear recovery of the mythical and colossal Assyrian figures that adorned the royal palaces (fig.6). The *lamassu* and *apkallu* had an apotropaic function, that is, they were protective elements and for that reason were located on the facades and at the entrance of some rooms of the palace. They coincided with the pieces that were most appreciated in Europe after the first archaeological excavations.

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[61] To explore the main facets of this divinity succinctly see Black 1992; Green 1992, 108-109; for a more complete and developed reading see Almeida, 2015;
AAVV [http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/].
[62] This image was released to Public Domain.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Flag_of_Iraq_(1959%E2%80%931963).svg

Fig. 6. *Lamassu* (c. 865-860 BC). Gypsum, 309cm x 315cm. Northwest Palace of Nimrud, Room B, currently in the British Museum – BM 118872 © Beatriz C. Freitas

In turn, the other model had a horned crown, a symbol of divinity in Mesopotamia. A set of rays emanated from her back, with a connection to the Mesopotamian sun god, which was reinforced by the particular garments that reproduced the so-called *Hammurabi Code*[63].

In this, the Babylonian king Hammurabi built a discourse of royal legitimation, evident not only in the support, - diorite, a stone considered precious because it did not exist in Mesopotamian territory - in the dimension and textual register that reflected the good exercise of royalty, but also in the iconography itself. The god Utu/Šamaš handed over the symbols of governance - the rod and the measuring line - to the king who showed himself in a prayerful attitude.

This emblematic piece of Mesopotamian civilization was recovered again in the last quarter of the 20th century by Saddam Hussein (1937-2006) who was represented in a painting in Babylon looking at this ancient city alongside Nebuchadnezzar. Saddam Hussein personified one of the leading dictatorial leaders in the Arab world and was one of the most prominent members of the Ba'ath Party.

Their political propaganda was based on the recovery of the Mesopotamian past. To this end, Saddam created a vast program for the construction of archaeological museums and required the repatriation of antiques previously transferred to European museums[64]. In addition, the dissemination of Assyrian iconography in Iraqi daily life, from the banknotes

[63] The designation "Hammurabi Code" is limiting, but it was given according to the state of the art at the time the monument was found. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was no knowledge of any other stele with this typology, which made the monument the first legal code. In reality, it is not the first code and, perhaps more relevant than that, the purpose was to legitimize the king. This text was not intended to be consulted by the justice officials, so much so that it was in the center of the city of Sippar as a territorial landmark. We are facing an oedipus of governance where the appropriation of justice occurs as one of the main real functions.

[64] Cuno 2008, 59. To learn more and understand the problems associated with returning artefacts to the territories where they were excavated, see Rodrigues 2012.

that now included the *Hammurabi Code* or *lamassus*, to images that reproduced the Assyrian iconography, for example, in one poster at the entrance of the ancient city of Nineveh Saddam Hussein replaced the king in a lion hunt, a very common theme in the reliefs of the royal palaces of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

Hussein had his palace built near the ancient city of Babylon so that his guests could look directly at these ruins and understand the millennial legacy of the ruler. The ancient ruins were repositories of memory, so they helped in the construction of narratives where the greatness of the past had been lost in the modern world and needed to be rescued[65]. In addition, Hussein ordered the reconstruction of the city walls and, like the kings of the Ancient Near East, etched his name on the bricks[66].

These symbolic resources that were used as a means to legitimize their power and authority were also expressed in Saddam's speeches. An example of which were the celebrations of the first anniversary of the Iraqi invasion in Iran, where a cult of personality was instituted. The slogan was: "Yesterday Nebuchadnezzar, today Saddam Hussein" [67].

This meant that a genealogical link[68] was established that confirmed the relevance of Hussein's power. It was his right to rule and, at the same time, he attested that modern Iraq was the result of a previous civilization that contributed and allowed the development of humanity.

More than a marker of sovereignty, the past had become an ideological justification for the existence of Iraq and archaeological finds were transformed into a tool of state power. It is interesting to note that the preamble to the 2005 Iraq Constitution begins with the words: "(...) *We, the people of Mesopotamia*, the homeland of the apostles and prophets, resting place of the virtuous imams, *cradle of civilization*, crafters of writing, and home of numeration.[69]"

That said, I realize that nations resulted from the political ambitions of a group of people who wanted to take control over a certain territory and population[70]. A nation was not a natural thing, but a construction. Hence the concept of "imaginary communities" formulated by Benedict Anderson, which explained the fact that the nation corresponds to an idea of community and unity created in the mind of each individual, since its members would never know the majority of their peers[71].

National identity provided a powerful means of defining individuals in the world based on a common personality and a distinct culture[72]. If Iraq was a state whose borders were

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[65] Cooper, [https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180419-saddam-disney-for-a-despot-how-dictators-exploit-ruins].

[66] On this topic see Amin [https://www.ancient.eu/image/9875/].

[67] See the speech itself at the 1981 celebrations in Cuno 2008, 59-60.

[68] In order to understand the implications of this type of manipulation of the past, read Fowler 1987, 239-241.

[69] Excerpt from the Preamble to the Iraqi Constitution 2005, highlighted by the author; Jones 2018, 36.

[70] Cuno 2008, 17.

[71] Anderson 2006, 6.

[72] Anthony Smith cited by Cuno 2008, 132-133.

determined by European colonialists, then in order to personify the resistance to colonialism, 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim and Saddam Hussein had to present modern Iraq as a continuation of the heritage of past civilizations, so the restoration of collective dignity was achieved through the call for a "golden age".

Final considerations

In a broad sense, archaeology as a provider of various interpretations of the past has been ceaselessly used for imperialist, colonialist and nationalist purposes. In the specific case of Mesopotamian rediscovery, the past was used to symbolize and legitimize a particular ideology.

Nineteenth century Europe, characterized by imperialism, colonialism and mass consumption, conceived an image of the Near East as a place of backwardness, illegality and barbarism in order to define itself. More than delimiting a "us" and "the others", it was intended to justify and validate the subjugation and control over these territories and their populations.

It was precisely this European intention together with the possibility of Iraq being integrated into a political unit headed by Egypt that, as the first states in the Near East appear, demanded a need to formulate a historical identity. Thus, the rulers that constituted the so-called patriotic territorial nationalism reiterated that the history of the Arab nation in Iraq, instead of having its beginning with the advent of Islam, had it in the oldest civilizations that emerged in that territory.

Thereby, Antiquity was recovered as a whole, without differentiating between Mesopotamia, Assyria or Babylon and what at first might seem paradoxical, the recovery of symbols of Mesopotamian deities in an Islamic reality was, in fact, a rehabilitation without religious connotations, that merely looked for the most common and widespread motifs in "primordial" art. The pre-Islamic past was taken up as part of Iraqi history in order to support the claim to national greatness.

In turn, the Islamic State sought to restore political Islam as the ultimate authority[73]. Because Islam is a practice and not just a belief[74], obedience to the laws is an acknowledgment of the state's sovereignty and, therefore, a form of idolatry that must be punished.

Often, the destruction of the archaeological heritage by the Islamic State has been interpreted as a merely iconoclastic attitude, however, this group produces images through the dissemination of videos and photographs of that obliteration.

The definition of iconoclasm is the prohibition of making any type of images that represent deities or the human being, based on the belief that they inevitably take on a "life of their own"[75]. For this reason, iconoclastic acts rarely involve the complete destruction of images, usually limited to the mutilation of elements of vividness (such as the head or the eyes)[76].

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[73] In this sense, if we wanted to include the Islamic State ideology in some aspect it would correspond to a "pan-Islamism" since they evoke the unity of all Islamic states.
[74] Jones 2018, 43.
[75] Mitchell 2005, 16.
[76] Harmanşah 2015, 176.

Although the Islamic State produces its own images, pre-Islamic archaeological artefacts must not be completely erased, but remain in a state of decay. The disfigurement and vandalization of an image can be as or more potent as its real destruction, since it leaves a mark on the idolater's mind of the serious consequences that attend to idolatry[77]. In other words, that is a "creative destruction", in the sense that a secondary image of annihilation is created from the moment the target image is attacked.

Obviously, the group would deny their videos and photographs as the creation of images, however, there is a selective and, in a way, contradictory understanding of the representation that must be interpreted as a discourse of power[78]. The group's propagandists likened the destruction of ancient artefacts to the destruction of cult statues by Muhammad after the capture of Mecca around 629[79].

It is not correct to reduce these acts to simple performing activities whose main objective was to eliminate the historical memory and the feeling of belonging of the local communities to which the heritage belongs. It is true that the videos are carefully edited in order to convey a previously thought-out message, however, this interpretation often leads to the assumption that they are aimed at a European audience as a provocation.

Undoubtedly, positions like those of Hugh Eakin - who defends the extension of the doctrine of "responsibility to protect"[80] to cultural heritage - are used as arguments by the Islamic State. Indeed, if UNESCO applied this measure, the group would use it to underline that the global concern was for heritage, and not for people. Therefore, the reaction to the destruction of ancient *idols* validates their annihilation.

It must be taken into consideration that the narrators of these videos always speak in Arabic, directing their comments explicitly to Muslims. Furthermore, videos posted on the internet on sites such as Facebook or YouTube are quickly removed, which leads us to believe that the target audience are supporters of Islamic State[81].

Another dimension to consider is the monetary and historical value attributed to these archaeological artefacts, which leads to their plunder and sale. The Islamic State considers buried antiquities as a natural resource, like oil, to be used and extracted for the benefit of the people[82]. Having said that it makes sense that several archaeologists from Mosul have claimed that part of the members of the Islamic State know where to find the artefacts, that is, in addition to an ideological vandalization, we are also facing a sophisticated entity for the sale of valuable antiques[83].

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[77] See the subchapter that correlates the attack on the twin towers with the concept of creative destruction in Mitchell 2005, 11-27.
[78] Harmanşah 2015, 173.
[79] Jones 2015a
[https://hyperallergic.com/188455/what-isis-destroys-why-and-why-we-must-document-it/].
[80] This measure is used to justify military intervention in a country to prevent genocide and mass slaughter. See the implications of such an association with heritage in Jones 2015 [https://hyperallergic.com/200005/in-battle-against-isis-saving-lives-or-ancient-artifacts/].
[81] Jones 2018, 52.
[82] Jones 2018, 52.
[83] Westcott 2020, 3-6.

By erasing all evidence from the pre-Islamic past and alternative interpretations of Islam, the Islamic State aims at a world where knowledge of any belief system, with the exception of its own interpretation of Islam, is overlooked[84].

The destruction of property by the Islamic State must be understood in the context of the growing importance given to archaeology in Iraq, which was based on European colonialism and, later, post-colonial Arab nationalism[85].

I conclude that the control and manipulation of the past or its complete denial are essential to the ideology and purposes of States[86]. Under these circumstances, regardless of whether it is a French, British, Iraqi or Islamic State reality, the regeneration of Antiquity aims to convince its citizens and, ultimately, the world, of its dominion over other territories, of its right to rule, or present their cause as "just".

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[84] Jones 2015a
[https://hyperallergic.com/188455/what-isis-destroys-why-and-why-we-must-document-it/].
[85] For a more detailed analysis of this issue, see De Cesari 2015, 22-26.
[86] Fowler 1987, 229. To learn more about the relationship established between the past, history and national identities read Woolf 2006.

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