Chapter 8

Conjuring Mesopotamia

Imaginative geography and a world past

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Our familiarity, not merely with the languages of the peoples of the East but with their customs, their feelings, their traditions, their history and religion, our capacity to understand what may be called the genius of the East, is the sole basis upon which we are likely to be able to maintain in the future the position we have won, and no step that can be taken to strengthen that position can be considered undeserving of the attention of His majesty's Government or of a debate in the House of Lords.

<div align="right">Lord Curzon, address to House of Lords, September 27, 1909</div>

Introduction

By 1909 the importance of the production of knowledge for the British colonial enterprise in the East was neither implicit in political rhetoric nor subtly expressed. In Lord Curzon's words it was "an imperial obligation...part of the necessary furniture of Empire" (Said 1978:214). The need for this knowledge was stressed as an integral part of the process of colonisation, and

one that would facilitate the continuation of European authority over the East. It is my contention that the development of the discipline of Mesopotamian archaeology and its discursive practices during this time cannot be isolated from this colonialist enterprise. Nor can it be divorced from the general Western historical narrative of the progress of civilisation which was necessary for the aims of a civilising imperial mission. I argue here that this narrative of civilisation was heavily dependent upon a discourse of Otherness which posited a "Mesopotamia" as the past of mankind, and furthermore that the presencing of Mesopotamia through this imperialist discourse constitutes the ground whence today archaeologists continue to unearth what counts as "historical fact," and to decide upon its acceptable mode of comprehension. First, in order to locate Mesopotamia's position in the Euro-American historical tradition I consider the historical dimensions of time and space as structuring horizons for the framework of "Mesopotamia." Second, I argue that this framework, which in Heidegger's words "serves as a criterion for separating the regions of Being" cannot be divorced from the cultural abstraction most commonly used to identify Mesopotamia: despotism.

Postcolonial critiques have pointed to how the process of imperialism was not limited to the overt economic and political activities of Western governments in colonised lands. An entire system of classification through the arts and sciences was necessary for the success of the imperial enterprise in the East and Africa.[1] Mesopotamian archaeological practices must be considered within this system, not only because this field concerns a region that was of geopolitical interest to the West, but because of its crucial place within the metanarrative of human culture. Archaeology, like other human sciences such as anthropology and history, allowed a European mapping of the subjugated terrain of the Other. While ethnography portrayed the colonised native as a savage requiring Western education and whose culture needed modernisation, archaeology and its practices provided a way of charting the past of colonised lands.

Mesopotamian archaeology is a discipline concerned with defining a particular past, and a particular culture within this past, and like in other archaeological or historical enterprises two of the basic constituents structuring the discursive practices of this discipline are space and time. These ontologically "obvious" measures are not neutral in archaeological practices. In fact, if we apply Heideggerian terms, it is within this structure of space and time that "Mesopotamia" was revealed as a Being-in-the-world. As an ontic phenomenon therefore, Mesopotamia is prefigured by the temporal structure of European metahistorical narrative. In other words, as I aim to show here, "Mesopotamia," as archaeologists generally think of this culture today, is a discursive formation.

The relationship of power to praxis in archaeological research has received some attention in recent years (Hodder *et al.* 1995; Shanks and Tilley 1987).

Issues such as the promotion of one historical interpretation over another, or the focus on one sector of society at the expense of all others, have been confronted and discussed at great lengths by a number of scholars. In this chapter, it is not my intention to liberate a "true" Mesopotamian past from the power of Western representation. Rather, by analysing Mesopotamia as a phenomenon within Western archaeological discourse I hope to show how a particular Mesopotamian identity was required for the narrative of the progress of civilisation as an organic universal event. My intention then is to question the ontological or, rather, ontic concept of Mesopotamia as it has been determined by Western archaeological discourse, and to consider the ideological components of this phenomenon. In other words, I would like to open up the field of politicising inquiry in archaeology to consider Mesopotamia not as a factual historical and geographical entity waiting to be studied, excavated and interpreted according to one set of conventions or another, but as a product of the poetics of a Western historical narrative.

For Mesopotamian archaeology, scholarly considerations of the relationship between politics and archaeology has meant two things only: (a) interpreting the material and textual remains from ancient Iraq primarily as manifestations of political propaganda of Babylonian and Assyrian kings and, more recently, (b) pointing to the Iraqi Baathist regime's use of the pre-Islamic past for propagandist purposes. We, as Mesopotamian archaeologists, do not question the nature of our discipline, its parameters, and its interpretive strategies. I do not use the word "we" because I am a Middle Eastern scholar educated in the West. Eastern archaeologists work within the same parameters and according to the same interpretive models as Western archaeologists (see Özdogan, Chapter 5), due to the fact that archaeology is a Western discipline that only became instituted in Middle Eastern countries while they were under European rule. As a "high cultural" activity and a humanist discipline we do not question its institutional character or presence. Mesopotamian scholarship assumes that the colonial context of its creation is irrelevant except as a distant, indirectly related, historical event. This attitude is not limited to archaeologists of Western origins. Therefore, Mesopotamian archaeologists, regardless of nationality, have been slow to reflect on the circumstances under which the constitution of the field of Mesopotamian archaeology occurred, and how its textual practices have formed ancient "Mesopotamia" as an area of modern knowledge.

On the level of the overtly political and ideological, ancient history and archaeology have certainly been areas of contestation as in, for example, Palestine/Israel (Silberman, Chapter 9) and Cyprus (Knapp and Antoniadou, Chapter 1). However, it is not only such geographical areas and histories that can be contested. In this chapter I would like to define and contest another terrain: the conceptual territory which functions in the production of Western culture as narration.

Space and despotic time

During the second half of the nineteenth century the myth of Mesopotamia as the origin of Western civilisation became institutionalised into the Western humanist tradition. This modern humanist field of knowledge is a "metatemporal" teleological discourse based upon the concept of culture as an organic natural whole; one that encompassed the entirety of the world. Time, in this cultural narrative, is visualised according to this organic structure and its potential evolution. The past was seen as a necessary part of the present Western identity and, its place in the serial development to the present, of paramount importance.

Michel de Certeau has defined the act of historical writing as a perpetual separation and suturing of the past and present (de Certeau 1975). In the case of Mesopotamia, the cut and suture are not limited to the separation and adhesion of past and present time as abstract phenomenological concepts. This reconstructive historical act has severed "Mesopotamia" from any geographical terrain in order to weave it into the Western historical narrative. In the standardised orthodox text book accounts of Middle Eastern history, Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian cultures can have absolutely no connection to the culture of Iraq after the seventh century AD. Instead, this past is grafted onto the tree of the progress of civilisation, a progress that by definition must exclude the East, as its very intelligibility is established by comparison with an Other. The Otherness of the Oriental past, however, plays a double role here. It is at once the earliest phase of a universal history of mankind in which man makes the giant step from savagery to civilisation, and it is an example of the unchanging nature of Oriental cultures.

In historical scripture, then, the Mesopotamian past is the place of world culture's first infantile steps: first writing, laws, architecture and all the other firsts that are quoted in every student handbook and in all the popular accounts of Mesopotamia. These "firsts" of culture are then described as being "passed" as a "torch of civilisation" to the Graeco-Roman world. If Mesopotamia is the cradle of civilisation, and civilisation is to be understood as an organic universal whole, then this Mesopotamia represents human culture's infancy. Already by the 1830s, even before the start of scientific excavations in the Near East, Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history defined this area as the site of the infancy of human civilisation (Hegel 1956:105). European historical writing had provided an interpretive framework in which the development of history was likened to the growth of the human organism, and in which the cradle of that organism was the East. When Mesopotamian material remains actually came to be unearthed in the decades following Hegel's lectures this evolutionary model was firmly in place. Therefore, Mesopotamian archaeological finds were interpreted according to a pre-established model. Conversely, architectural structures, visual and textual representations, as well as every other aspect of culture, were used to confirm a

model of progress that had been established before these same cultural remains had been unearthed.

The temporal organisation of this evolution of human civilisation puts Mesopotamia into the distant primeval past of mankind, a time that is both "ours" (i.e. the West's) and that of a barbaric, not yet civilised, civilisation. Thus, the temporal placement of "Mesopotamia" also determines the spatial organisation required for this system to function. In terms of geographical land, Mesopotamia is not to be associated with Iraq as it can only inhabit a temporal, not a terrestrial, space. Thus, in this case, the will to power which is often turned to the production of history, has established as historical fact the development of culture as one Olympic relay with its starting point in a place that needs to remain in the realm of the West, although its savagery can never be totally overcome.

However, the Western historical narrative is not a coherent discourse which merely uses the East as the origins of civilisation for its own political ends, in the sense of appropriation of land, history, or the declaration of cultural and moral superiority; nor does the ancient Orient simply appear within this narrative as a representation of Otherness. The exercise of power may often work on the level of the consciously political. But at the same time, academic discourse as an apparatus of power, with its metaphoricity and rhetoric, is a matrix in which unconscious desire also manifests itself symptomatically. The representation of the ancient Near East within the Western historical narrative then is not limited to overt racial comparison and hierarchisation through linear time; it is also a form of control and fixing of that uncanny, terrifying and unaccountable time: at once "ours" and Other.[2]

In the simplest terms, if the earliest 'signs of civilisation' were unearthed in an Ottoman province inhabited primarily by Arabs and Kurds, how was this to be reconciled with the European notion of the progress of civilisation as one organic whole? Civilisation had to have been passed from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt to Greece. Therefore, the contemporary inhabitants of this area had to be dissociated from this past, and this unruly ancient time was brought within the linear development of civilisation. However, as a sort of primeval European past it was also construed at the same time as an era of despotism and decadence and, paradoxically, Orientalist notions of nineteenth-century Eastern culture, systems of government and economy were projected backwards in time and applied also to Babylonia and Assyria. From within this matrix of control, the unruly despotic past continues to resurface in descriptive language and interpretive methods.

The structuring of historical time is not only a teleological device. It is my contention here that this temporal framework is necessary for the operations of taxonomy which were so crucial for the colonialist project. It has often been stated that in the evolutionary process of civilisation the telos is equivalent to the West. Countless texts from the Western historical tradition describe how

civilisation was passed from the Near East through Greece and Rome to the modern West and this is hardly a point of contention any longer. However, it is my belief that this unilinear time also acts as an organising device for a taxonomy of political systems which are then aligned racially to particular past cultures that are, in turn, seen as the developmental steps of the human cultural organism.

According to Montesquieu, the so-called founder of political science, there are three species of government: the republic, the monarchy and despotism. The republic was the ideal government of Classical antiquity and monarchy that of the West. Despotism, according to Montesquieu, is the government of most Asian countries and, as Louis Althusser has pointed out, the first feature of despotism in Montesquieu's definition is the fact that it is a political regime which has no structure, no laws and lacks any social space. Montesquieu represents despotism as "the abdication of politics itself" hence its paradoxical character as a political regime which does not exist, as such, but is the constant temptation and peril of other regimes (Althusser 1972:82). According to Althusser's description of Montesquieu's characterisation, despotism is "space without places, time without duration" (ibid.: 78).

Despotism's timeless quality then explains how latter day Middle Eastern despots can be converged with a primeval past world.[3] Mesopotamia therefore exists within despotic time as the mythical time of despotism or civilisation's unruly malformed past. I have discussed this abstraction in my previous work (Bahrani 1995) and will address it further below. However, first I would like to focus upon how the process of *naming* the historical region in question was so indispensable for its placement within the Western cultural narrative—because, as we have learned from the ancient Mesopotamians, a thing does not exist until it is named.

Name and being

The earliest European interest in the remains of the ancient cities of Babylon and Assyria stemmed from the desire for the validation of the Bible as an historically accurate document. As early as the twelfth century AD, Western travellers such as Benjamin of Tudela and Petahiah of Ratisbon attempted to identify remains of cities around the area of the city of Mosul in northern Iraq mentioned in the Old Testament. However, it was not until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that a number of European travellers began to record their attempts at the identification of ancient sites, sometimes with illustrations of those sites accompanying the written descriptions. The first organised archaeological expeditions or missions in Mesopotamia began in the mid-nineteenth century. This is also the time that a number of terms came to be applied to this geographical locale: Mesopotamia, the Near East, and the Middle

East. While the latter two names were interchangeable originally, and encompassed a larger geographical terrain, Mesopotamia became instituted as the name of the pre-Islamic civilisation of the region that under Ottoman rule was known as Iraq. This name, Iraq, had already-long been in use by the local inhabitants of the region by the time of the writings of the geographer Yakut al Rumi (born 1179 AD/575 AH [Anno Hijra]) and the early tenth century AD (4th century AH) descriptions of the region by Ibn Hawkal.[4]

The terms "Middle East" and "Near East" came into use in Europe and North America in order to identify more clearly the vast geographical terrain that had previously been referred to simply as the Orient, an area that encompassed basically the whole of Asia and northern Africa. In order to distinguish what was nearer to Europe, in a time when European interest in this vast area was intensified, a closer definition of what Europe was dealing with became necessary. The term "Near East," which was first applied at the end of the nineteenth century, soon fell out of general usage. Nevertheless, it has survived until today primarily as a designation for the same geographical locus in the pre-Islamic period, for the place named the Middle East. This is especially true in academic literature produced in the United States. The name "Middle East" was coined in 1902 by the American naval historian, Alfred Thayer Mahan, for whom the center of this region for military strategic purposes was the Persian Gulf (Lewis 1994:3). In this way a distinction came to be made between the region before and after the advent of Islam that implied the death of one civilisation and its replacement and eradication by another. Within this disciplinary organisation the term that came to be the acceptable name for Iraq in the Pre-Islamic period was "Mesopotamia." This revival of a name applied to the region in the European Classical tradition came to underscore the Babylonian/Assyrian position within the Western historical narrative of civilisation as the remoter, malformed, or partially formed, roots of European culture which has its telos in the flowering of Western culture and, ultimately, the autonomous modern Western man. Thus the term Mesopotamia refers to an atemporal rather than a geographical entity, which is, in the words of the renowned Mesopotamian scholar, A.Leo Oppenheim (1964), a "Dead Civilisation." This civilisation had to be entirely dissociated, by name, from the local inhabitants and contemporary culture in order to facilitate the portrayal of the history of human civilisation as a single evolutionary process with its natural and ideal outcome in the modern West.

The distinguished American scholar of Middle Eastern history, Bernard Lewis, tells us that only "two of the peoples active in the ancient Middle East had survived with a continuing identity and memory and with a large impact on the world. The Greeks and Jews were still Greeks and Jews and still knew Greek and Hebrew; in these ancient yet living languages, they had preserved the immortal works of religion and literature, which passed into the common

inheritance of mankind" (Lewis 1994:10). Therefore, according to this still commonly held view, the "torch of civilisation" was passed from Mesopotamia to Europe via the two "Eastern ethnicities" that are acceptable to the West: Greeks and Jews. Paradoxically, in the two main sources of the Western cultural narrative, Classical texts and the Bible, the Assyrians and Babylonians and their successors, the Persians, are the hostile Other, presenting a constant threat to the political freedom of democracy and the worship of the true God. The earliest archaeological expeditions to Mesopotamia then were unambiguous in defining the purposes of their mission. Since human civilisation was thought to originate in Mesopotamia, and this civilisation was transferred from the East to the West, the two justifications for the archaeological expeditions were repeatedly stated as being the search for the "roots" of Western culture and to locate the places referred to in the Old Testament.[5]

This obsessive desire to disassociate the past of the region from its present and to present it instead as a primitive stage in the evolution of mankind facilitated the concept of "Mesopotamia" as the rightful domain of the West, both in a historical and a geopolitical sense. A separation and division of (Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian) cultures and an exclusion of the later history of the region was successfully articulated through the act of naming.

The acquisition of monuments and works of art that were shipped to London, Paris and Berlin in the mid-nineteenth century was thus not seen solely, or even primarily, as the appropriation of historical artefacts of Iraq but as the remains of a mythical pre-European past. Mesopotamian cultural remains unearthed in the first days of archaeological exploration then served to illustrate how the modern West had evolved from this stage of the evolution, and that Biblical accounts were true, thus that the Judeo-Christian God was the true God. Yet these were certainly not the only needs that dictated the archaeological endeavour in Mesopotamia. And, more importantly, the European concepts that formed "Mesopotamia" are not limited to the earliest days of archaeological work in the region. It is even more important to realise that the construction of a "Mesopotamia" within the discourse of nineteenth-century colonialism is not a thing of the past. The structure of this colonialist discipline continues virtually unchanged today, and remains all but unquestioned.

The most recent and comprehensive engagement of Mesopotamian scholarship with the issues of imperialism and Orientalism, with the "construction" of the field of Mesopotamian archaeology during the height of Western imperialism, was the 1990 conference "The Construction of the Ancient Near East" (Gunter 1992). The participants, however, confined themselves to the workings of the field of Ancient Near Eastern studies— whether publications, excavations, funding—to pre-World War II Europe and North America, and maintained that the field today is untainted by any political power interests. Mathew Stolper seems to be the exception when he says, "The

European literary and intellectual history that shaped the study of the ancient Near East is not to be separated from political history" (Stolper 1992:20). More significantly, however, although the contributors refer to the "construction" of the discipline during the period of Western imperialism, the major consensus seems to be that Near Eastern archaeology is the "stepchild of imperialism," thus having only an indirect relation to it, and that it was never used as a tool of imperial power (Cooper 1992:133). A reading of the papers presented at this conference indicates that the silence in Mesopotamian studies regarding the colonial context of the field is not an oversight. The issue has indeed been brought up, but only so that it may be dismissed.

While conferences, such as the one organised at the Smithsonian, and articles written by a handful of scholars attempt to engage with issues of Orientalism and colonialism these endeavours, especially in the area of Mesopotamian archaeology, have been limited to positivist historical documentation of the origins of the discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There has been no engagement with issues such as representation, cultural translation, or prevalent paradigms of discourse, which have been major areas of focus in related academic disciplines. Although there has been some concern with the recording of the events that occurred in the earliest days of Mesopotamian archaeology, there has been a decided lack of questioning of the (internalised) structure of the field and its practices. The rhetoric of objectivity and realism is today still operative in Mesopotamian archaeology. However, what I find equally disturbing is that now this objectivity is at times presented in the guise of politically correct "post-colonial" approaches that are alternatives to the hegemonic mainstream of the discourse.

The superficial incorporation of the vocabulary of dissent from the margins into the hegemonic discourse of the center without any reassessment or awareness of the epistemological boundaries of the discipline only serves to neutralise and deflect, thereby allowing the central system of practice to remain dominant and effective. In Gramsci's sense of the word, hegemony is not ideology and manipulation. Hegemony constitutes the limits of common sense for people, and even forms a sense of reality (Gramsci 1987; Williams 1973). Thus, the vague references to Orientalism and imperialism in the contemporary discourse of Mesopotamian archaeology have only served to further validate the status quo and preserve the conventional epistemological limits of the field. It seems that a principle of silent exclusion is in operation, barring any real oppositional views through the adoption of their vocabulary into the central dominant discourse.[6] Therefore, this mimicry and subsequent neutralisation of counter-hegemonic terms within the parameters of hegemony are decoys of sorts that lure the possible danger to the integrity of the discipline by deflecting any oppositional realities.[7]

Time of the Despots

Once identified and placed within a Western matrix of knowledge, "Mesopotamia" as the cradle of civilisation began to be reduced to characteristics that were identifiable by and recognisable to (scientifically) trained archaeological research. A number of powerful abstractions, not unlike those upon which ethnographers depended in order to get to the "heart" of a culture more rapidly, graphed a diagram for Mesopotamian archaeological practices. Components of this framework were a priori summaries of the East that discerning scholars could access through objective inquiry into every realm of culture. However, if we analyse this "value-neutral" research on the level of the mimetic description of the data we can see that the creative distortion inherent in all mimesis, as Aristotle describes it, forms a dominant mode of discourse. And, furthermore, this discursive mode is heavily dependent upon the prefiguration of the master tropes of metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche for its prosaic mimetic image of antiquity.[8] In metaphor, which is literally "transfer," a figure of speech is used in which a name or descriptive word is transferred to an object or action through analogy or simile. Metonymy, "name change," works through displacement. The part of a thing may be substituted for the whole, cause for effect or agent for act, whereas synecdoche (regarded by some as a form of metonymy) uses a part to symbolise a quality presumed to inhere to the whole (White 1973).

The main recurring tropical or hologramic abstraction in the textual practices of Mesopotamian archaeology is that of despotic rule. Working within the rhetorical boundaries and signifying processes of essentialising metonymy and synecdoche, scholarship has further identified a despotic Mesopotamia as a historical fact, and it is this abstraction of despotism that has allowed Mesopotamia to assume its position as a non-place. The abstract immediacy of Mesopotamia as a despotic entity is found in all manner of archaeological interpretation regarding this culture, from agricultural production to religion, and recurs repeatedly in descriptions of the arts and architecture (see Hodder, Chapter 6). Decay, violence, inertia and excess, all characteristics of despotic lands in Montesquieu's classification, are abstractions through which Mesopotamian culture is represented. Here, I focus on how despotism resurfaces in the form of metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche in the descriptions of aesthetic traditions and artistic genres of Mesopotamian culture. An early example can be seen in the writings of James Fergusson, the architect who worked with Austen Henry Layard in reconstructing the Assyrian palaces:

> Khorsabad formed a period of decay in Assyrian art…but this is even more striking when we again pass over eight centuries of time and reach Persepolis, which is as much inferior to Khorsabad as that is to Nimrud. In Persepolis,

the artists do not seem to have been equal to attempting portrayal of an action, and scarcely even of a group. There are nothing but long processions of formal bass reliefs of kingly state.

(Fergusson 1850:363–4)

In this passage decay and repetitive inertia are characteristics of an architecture that is metaphorically defined for us, in Montesquieu's terms, as despotic. Such a viewpoint published in London in 1850, during the period of British colonial expansion in the East, should come as no surprise. However, abstractions of decay, repetition, inertia and despotism appear more often than not in descriptions of Mesopotamian material culture today. In a whole series of articles and books, Assyrian art—wall reliefs, free standing monuments and entire buildings—has been interpreted as despotic (e.g. Pittman 1996; Winter 1981). For instance, in a recent study of Sennacherib's palace, an entire building is interpreted as an oppressive propagandistic building (Russell 1991:267). The architectural structure of the palace is described metaphorically as possessing the awesome magnificence of all oriental despots and the power to reduce troublemakers to submission, both in Assyria proper and in distant lands. Synecdochally here, consciously political propaganda is the part of Mesopotamian cultural practices taken to stand for the whole, integrating the entirety. The ideology of despots has clearly become a handy ethnographic abstraction through which archaeologists can get to "the heart" of Mesopotamian culture and describe its aesthetic practices more easily and quickly than if they were to accept the possibility of a certain amount of variation of purpose or means in the cultural production of this despotic non-place.

Political rhetoric and propaganda were certainly important components of Assyrian and Babylonian cultural production. In fact, I argue that no representation, regardless of its country of manufacture, can be entirely separated from politics and ideology. But all manifestations of Mesopotamian culture have been reduced through essentialising metaphors, synecdochally and metonymically, into one identity. While sculpture and architecture created under royal patronage were no doubt infused with some form of propaganda, many other factors went into their creation besides the consciously political. Reading all Mesopotamian cultural remains as nothing more nor less than the propagandist utterances of the king reduces this Mesopotamian identity to the epiphenomenon of articulate ideology and thus serves the rhetorical strategy of "Oriental despotism." In this way, current scholarship repeats and diffuses the prototypes of imperialism. Through the power of writing, abstractions that are colonial in principle are left intact.

This kind of essentialising metonymic and synecdochal representation does not take place solely in text. Since the mid-nineteenth century objects collected from Mesopotamian archaeological sites by Western travellers,

adventurers or archaeologists have been displayed in Western museums as a metonymic visual presence of that culture. The categorisation of these objects, and their display in Berlin, Paris and London, in museums that were built or enlarged specifically for that purpose, was unquestionably part and parcel of the Western imperial project in the East in the nineteenth century. At the British Museum, the original installation of the Assyrian finds was advertised to the general public as both an antiquarian object of study and a national prize or trophy (Bohrer 1994; Jenkins 1992). Today, a metonymic method of display continues to be utilised in museums for Mesopotamian (and other Near Eastern) antiquities. A group of Mesopotamian royal monuments, including the famous Stele of Naramsin, formed the main focus of an exhibition entitled "The Royal City of Susa" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1992. These monuments had been mutilated and carried to Iran by the Elamites in the twelfth century BC. According to the established tradition in scholarship, the didactic material and the catalogue entries expressed horror at this act of theft and destruction. Oriental violence and cruelty was seen as a valid explanation for these actions (Bahrani 1995). "Stolen" works of art from Babylonia were placed directly in the central space of the galleries, as the main focus of the exhibition and as a prime example of, in this case, Elamite cultural practices.

Further, what is interesting for my purposes here is that neither the didactic material in the exhibit, nor the wall maps, made mention of the words Iraq or Iran. The reasoning behind this was, no doubt, that only the ancient names should be represented in a "high cultural" institution. However, I shall venture to say here that this is not common practice with exhibits representing ancient Western cultures within the same institution, nor others like it in this country. The museum and its representation of alien cultures is clearly not a value-neutral domain since this is the arena in which information and representations of other cultures are disseminated to the general public. The deliberate omission of the names Iran and Iraq from these maps and descriptions have only added to the general conception of this area as a non-place, and further strengthened the disassociation of the past and present of a particular geographical region (one which, whether relevantly or irrelevantly happened to be at the moment either at war, or without diplomatic relations to the United States), while paradoxically presenting these cultures as typically "Oriental."

My insistence on the political ramifications of this exhibition through its omission of names from the map may seem unwarranted or at best misguided; however, references to it in the popular press and leading newspapers in the United States indicate that its message was successfully deployed and understood. The following is an excerpt from an article published in *The Houston Chronicle,* after a US air attack on Iraq:

> Before initiating his pre-inaugural raids on Iraq (Clinton) should have visited the exhibition at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art called 'The Royal City of Susa.' Had he attended the exhibit, he would have seen that, like Saddam Hussein, the kings and queens of ancient Mesopotamia lived in mortal fear of losing face before their enemies.
>
> (Makiya 1993)

The writer clearly associated an oppressive antique despotism with the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, although confusing Iranian for Mesopotamian artefacts in his comparison. This is hardly surprising considering the exclusion of the names from the exhibition maps and descriptive texts. The omission of the names and the confluence of Iran and Iraq as one despotic entity is traceable to an established Western concept of the East which is still intact from the days of Montesquieu—namely, that everything East of the Mediterranean is one vast oppressive country. Because of the omission of the names and the nature of the display, the writer, Kanan Makiya, came away from this exhibition with a general vague notion of violence and oppression which he was able to apply generically and racially to Middle Eastern dictatorship—the contemporary oriental despotism.

The extraterrestrial Orient

The creation of a historical narrative in which space and time became transcendental horizons for the Being—Mesopotamia, was part of the larger discursive project through which Europe attempted its mastery of the colonised. The narrative of the progress of civilisation was an invention of European imperialism, a way of constructing history in its own image and claiming precedence for Western culture. But this narrative of world civilisation is a representation and one which necessarily requires what is described by Adorno and Horkheimer, as "the organised control of mimesis" (1944:180). The economy of rhetorical structures in this mimetic organisation certainly depended upon prefigurative tropological languages. However, it also involved a metaphysical cartography that provided a conceptual terrain necessary for the narration. And the charting of an extraterrestrial Mesopotamia was essential for the success of this representational enterprise. Edward Said points out that "in the history of colonial invasion, maps are always first drawn by the victors, since maps are instruments of conquest. Geography is therefore the art of war" (Said 1996:28). Historical cartography is also drawn according to the requirements of the victorious, and archaeology is instrumental in the mapping of that terrain.

Likewise, representation in archaeological writing is not a duplication of reality: it is a mimetic activity that cannot be neatly separated from questions of

politics and ideology. The ancient Greeks were well aware that mimesis always involves distortion but by some transposition we have come to think of mimesis as an exact realistic copy.[9] In the *Poetics,* Aristotle defines representation as differing in three ways: in object, manner, and means of representation. The first is the thing or action which is represented, the second is the way in which it can be represented, and the last is the medium of representation. While the choices involved in the first and last aspect of representation are addressed in Mesopotamian archaeological theory, the second remains mostly disregarded, any mention of it construed as a radical subversive act. The image of Mesopotamia, upon which we still depend, was necessary for a march of progress from East to West, a concept of world cultural development that is explicitly Eurocentric and imperialist. Perhaps the time has come that we, Middle Eastern scholars and scholars of the ancient Middle East both, dissociate ourselves from this imperial triumphal procession and look toward a redefinition of the land in between.

Notes

1 The bibliography on this subject is vast but see Said (1993).

2 For the application of the Freudian concept of the uncanny to historiographic analysis see especially M. de Certeau (1975); H.K.Bhabha (1994).

3 As an example of this type of scholarship see Lewis (1996).

4 Encyclopaedia of Islam (1938), vol. 2, part 1 (H-J), Leiden: E.J.Brill, 515–19.

5 In 1898, for example, the Deutsche Orient Gessellschaft stated that these were the reasons for the newly established journal, *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung,* vol. 1 (2), 36, 1898.

6 See Raymond Williams (1973:3–16) for the concept of the deflection of oppositional "emergent" cultures by the hegemonic center. See also Edward Said, "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community" in *The Politics of Interpretation,* W.J.T.Mitchell (ed.), pp. 7–32.

7 Similar critiques have been made regarding the assimilation of postcolonial theory into what Stephen Slemon calls "an object of desire for critical practice: as a shimmering talisman that in itself has the power to confer political legitimacy onto specific forms of institutionalized labor" (Slemon 1994).

8 These are three of four master tropes defined and analysed by Hayden White in his *Metahistory* (1973). See also Paul Ricoeur (1984) for the function of mimesis in historical writing.

9 The current usage of the term in the English language according to *The Oxford English Dictionary* refers to very close, accurate, resemblance.

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