

# Minding one's own Heritage?

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The "Western appropriation", as Liverani puts it, of ancient western Asia and Egypt is a phenomenon whose consequences have been becoming clear over the last two decades. Perhaps this is an appropriate time to discuss the subject; in the new spirit of eagerness (amongst individual archaeologists and institutions) to open more doors to scholars from the affluent nations, Indian archaeology—the Harappan past in particular—may face a fate similar to that of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Early Egypt and early Mesopotamia (Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria), occupy a special place in world history. There were two streams of thinking which gave early Mesopotamia special importance in the Western academia. One stream was the Babylonian-Assyrian background to Old Testament narratives. After all, Abraham was instructed by God to leave Ur of the Chaldees and to migrate, with his family and flock, towards the land of Canaan. The story of the great Flood, the story of the infant Moses, the erotic Song of Songs, the names of demons of the night, and other cultural elements in the Old Testament have parallels in Sumerian/Akkadian literature. The Book of Kings and other sections of the Old Testament refer to Assyrian military assaults on Israel and Judah, and to Babylonian oppression after the attack by Nabuchadrezzar on Jerusalem. Here was an evil land, where the Tower of Babel had stood, a land that God had cursed, and Israelite prophets had doomed to destruction and desolation. So it is understandable that this land had a fascination for people who knew the Bible.

The early German cuneiform scholar, Friedrich Delitzsch, claimed in the late nineteenth century that Europeans must "toil and trouble in distant, inhospitable, and danger-ridden lands . . . to dig the rubbish heaps of forgotten centuries", because it was these lands, especially Mesopotamia, that would provide the historical and

cultural background to the study of the Old Testament. While it appeared problematic to some people in Europe that the stories of the Bible were in fact the old tradition of other peoples in other lands, there were some other Europeans who saw the parallels as giving an authenticity to the Hebrew text. Also, in borrowing Mesopotamian material, the Judaic religion was simultaneously transforming it. For Delitzsch, Israel and Judah were part of the civilization of greater Mesopotamia, which the Twelve Tribes had carried into the land of Canaan (Larsen 1987).

There is also a second stream, an academic one, which views the Bronze and early Iron Ages of the two fertile river valleys as the ultimate fountain head of European civilization. These river valley civilizations had seen, since 3000 BC, the precocious development of monarchies, writing, city life, and technologies of crafting various stones and metals. Here had flowered literatures and institutions such as legal codes and libraries. The entrance to the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago has a carving executed under the direction of James Henry Breasted (1865–1935), that shows an Egyptian handing over to a half-dressed Westerner, the gift of writing (ibid.: Fig. 14.1). Around the Egyptian scribe are figures such as Assyrian and Persian kings, around the Westerner, Herodotus, Caesar, a crusader, and an archaeologist holding a vase. Breasted wrote in 1933, ". . . the civilizations of the Near Orient are like the keystone of the arch, with prehistoric man on one side and civilized Europe on the other." (ibid.: 231).

This idea had been further developed by V. Gordon Childe. In his much-read *What Happened in History*, a magisterial account of the growth of the ancient world, he stated the following in the context of the trend for cultures to merge into one another,

If our own culture can claim to be in the mainstream, it is only

because our cultural tradition has captured and made tributary a larger volume of once parallel traditions. While in historical times the main stream flows from Mesopotamia and Egypt through Greece and Rome, Byzantium and Islam, to Atlantic Europe and America, it has been repeatedly swollen by the diversion into it of currents from Indian, Chinese, Mexican, and Peruvian civilizations, and from countless barbarisms and savageries. (p. 29)

Clearly, one of Childe's interests was the origins of Western civilization—just as for Marx and for Max Weber, the central issue was the growth of capitalism in the West. Childe perceived that the elite-centred and import-dependent economies of the early river valley civilizations were inherently limited (ibid.: 147-8), and it was their links with the Minoan and Mycenaean civilization which gave the connection with classical Greece. But Greece, with its sense of individual liberty and democratic polities posed a contrast to what was conceived as the stagnant and superstitious totalitarian monarchies of bronze age Mesopotamia and Egypt. Until late in his career, Childe interpreted the origins of civilization in Europe as the product of cultural influences from western Asia.

This was (in very general terms) the kind of scholarly thinking behind such titles as *History Begins at Sumer* (S.N. Kramer, 1958). A.L. Oppenheim however broke the tradition and gave the subtitle, *Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, to his path-breaking book (1964); while he did not deny the Old Testament connection with this fountainhead of Western civilization, he also referred to inputs from Greece and Ionia, and to contributions in the Old Testament tradition from "genuinely Palestinian" as well as "general Near Eastern" elements (ibid.: 5). Even so, a title, *Ancestor of the West: Writing, Reasoning, and Religion in Mesopotamia* (ed J. Bottero et al.), appeared as late as 2000.

This academic tradition was, thus, not broken in spite of the publication of Renfrew's *Before Civilization* in 1976. Renfrew had studied the implications of the improved mode of dating by taking radiocarbon samples from stratified archaeological deposits, and found that Europe did not really lag behind the "Near East" or derive its technologies or cultures and craft traditions only from western Asia and Egypt.

The point of my short piece, however, is to ask what the insistence on the glory of Mesopotamia as the fountainhead of the West implied for archaeological studies.

The archaeology of Mesopotamia began in the early nineteenth century and the imperatives of imperialism were never completely dissociated from the archaeology. The agent of the East India Company, Claudius James

Rich, stationed in Baghdad, engaged in one of the earliest excavations at the city of Babylon. Later in the century, Austen Henry Layard, an adventurer who travelled amongst the tribes of the eastern Ottoman empire, excavated at Nineveh and Nimrud. He had been preceded at Nineveh by the Frenchman, Paul-Emile Botta. Layard's interest was in digging until he found an art object or large artifact (pushing the earth to one side in the process), and in finding as many art objects as he could with the minimum expenditure and in the shortest possible time. (He was assisted by Hormuzd Rassam, an Iraqi from Mosul and a scholar in his own right.) Some of the Assyrian palace reliefs that today stand in the British Museum come from Layard's "excavations."<sup>1</sup> Significantly, reliefs were discovered by Layard depicting the Assyrian siege of the Hebrew town of Lachish, an event narrated in the Bible: these finds raised excitement as "proof" of the existence of some actors in the narratives of the Old Testament.

Cultural appropriation in the later nineteenth century was moored in British interests in the oil potential of the region (oil had been discovered in south-west Iran in the 1880s) and the need to make secure the land route to India. The British agents T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell became active in the early twentieth century, securing potential allies for the British against Ottoman rule. Gertrude Bell, born to a rich family, was the first woman to read history at Oxford. In her travels in the eastern Ottoman realm she picked up Persian, Arabic, and Turkish. She was remembered as a chain smoker who rode camels and dined with sheikhs in their tents. Digging was a vicer for her active intelligence work. Bell worked to get the sons of the Sharif of Mecca placed on the thrones of Transjordan and Iraq, and Faisal I became "constitutional monarch" of Iraq in 1921. As this person had no past connection with Iraq, it is almost inevitable that fierce uprisings followed.

As adviser to Faisal, Gertrude Bell set up the Iraqi Antiquities Service, and was its first Director. Her institutional legacy includes, besides, the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. Until about 1940, little archaeology was practised by Iraqis themselves, and to regulate and monitor the digging of several foreign teams, Bell set up, in 1924, a sound antiquities law, among other things requiring of each team a professional photographer and a qualified architect, and an epigraphist. Each find was to be numbered and registered as belonging to the government of Iraq (to which some Europeans objected). When artifacts turned up in pairs, however, the active country was allowed to keep one of the two. It is said that the system worked well because of the integrity of the archaeologists of those times. Gertrude Bell died

young, in 1926, and is buried in Baghdad.

Bell's one-room museum in the king's palace was re-located and re-built by the Baathist government of Iraq (the "kings" had been deposed by a military revolt), and was a delightful place to visit, spacious, airy, and well lit. By the 1970s, emphasis began to be laid by the Iraqi authorities on the restoration of buildings that were being excavated at the important sites. Sites such as Babylon were given large-scale restorations. Even though Iraqi archaeologists were active in the field after 1940, scores of European teams continued to dig various sites. The Department's journal, *Sumer*, had an Arabic and an English section. The BSAI brought out *Iraq*, an annual, from London.

It appears that there remained a strong impetus to relate archaeological discoveries to the Old Testament. For instance, Leonard Woolley's discovery at Ur of a "royal cemetery" with an unbelievable wealth of artifacts crafted in gold, silver, electrum, shell, and semi-precious stones did not obscure the discovery of a water-laid deposit at that site, interpreted by Woolley as evidence of Noah's Flood!

Actually, the story of the Flood has great relevance to the beginnings of archaeology in Iraq. The Old Testament is a collection of narratives (myth, legend, folk-tale, saga). It was put into writing at various times between 1,200 and 200 BC, in Hebrew. In its extant form it has seen the hands of at least four redactors. Much of the narrative derives, however, from a vast body of oral literature that was current in the Mesopotamian world. Oral narratives about Gilgamesh in the Aramaic language—Aramaic had succeeded Akkadian as the most commonly spoken language of western Asia in the first millennium BC—were probably the immediate source of the Biblical tale of the flood. In the late nineteenth century, a young assistant called George Smith, engaged by the British Museum to piece together clay tablets that were being dug up in Nineveh and Nimrud, identified a tablet fragment as narrating the story of a dove being set free from a boat (ark). Obviously, this was from an Assyrian version of the story of Noah's flood. *The Telegraph* gave Smith a grant to travel to Iraq to search for the entire narrative tablet. He did so, and succeeded! So the "flood stratum" at Ur was only part of this propensity to relate discoveries to the text of the Bible.

Much later in the day, sustained French excavations at the town of Mari produced tablets that named individuals and pastoral groups in ways distinctly similar to some ethnonyms and personal names found in the Old Testament. But the name *Habiru* for second-millennium pastoral nomads living in tents does not "prove" that "the Hebrews" of the Bible had important links with Mari!

Similar literalist interpretations (fanned by the Western media including the BBC) of material that was unearthed at Ebla in northern Syria in the 1970s, were later read in a more sober academic light.

For a graphic illustration of early approaches in the West, Larsen refers us to the carved relief above the entrance to the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago, mentioned above. It was conceived by James Henry Breasted, pioneer of Egyptology in America. The Egyptian with a reed and papyrus is accompanied, among others, by figures of Mesopotamians and Persians. On the side of the Western man are Caesar, a crusader (!), and an archaeologist. Quite different and to my mind truly ill-mannered, however, was the conception of the façade of that stupendous museum, the Cairo Museum, built in 1902 by the French, in the French style—a Museum that sees absolutely thousands of visitors every day and requires of the student at least a week to take in all its displays. The Egyptian Antiquities Service, incidentally, was directed by Frenchmen for a good 94 years, says Donald Reid. Almost inevitably, the façade of this building has an inscription in Latin, and female figures in wet-look drapery flank the inscription. Neither in the Pharaonic period nor in the eighteenth century had Egyptian women dressed in such garments! The Khedive of the time is named on the facade. And the date of the building is inscribed, *Anno Hegirae MCCCXVIII*.<sup>2</sup>

There is another ironic aspect to all this. The Assyrians and Babylonians appear in poor light in the Old Testament, as aggressive and cruel, deporting defeated populations and settling them elsewhere to labour on state projects. Their reliefs depict prisoners of war (children and women included) walking in columns behind Assyrian soldiers. Royal inscriptions too describe the aftermath of successful battles. And there was also the Orientalist perceptions of the European administrators and scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ascribing an essentially retrograde character to Arab and Persian society: the despotism of the rulers, the tradition and superstition, and social stagnation. So how was the "background to the Bible" to be reconciled with such societies? How could such societies, despised by the Europeans, be descendants of the "cradle of civilization"?

Zainab Bahrani, the feisty scholar of Iraqi descent at Columbia University, puts her finger on the dilemma: the West appropriated the ancient Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, denying them any contribution to, or historic link with, Islamic Iraq. It was Europe that was the heir to this wonderful past of antiquity, in Western thought. So much so, says Bahrani, that an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum (in 1992)

about 'The Royal City of Susa', made *no* mention, in the maps or signage, of the countries of Iraq and Iran.

It has often been said that the coming of Western archaeology to western Asia was a boon, because in Islamic countries there is no interest in the pagan cultures of the pre-Islamic past. I wonder if this assumption will stand up to sustained scrutiny. Was there not Hormuzd Rassam in Mosul? Or do we shrug him off as a Chaldean Christian? Donald M. Reid mentions at least four Egyptians who in the nineteenth century were engrossed in what we call "Egyptology."<sup>3</sup> Significantly, says Reid, when one of them, Ali Mubarak, founded a school in the early nineteenth century for training local people in Egyptology, it was the French archaeologist Mariette who, feeling threatened, had the school closed down—by the simple expedient of refusing to hire its graduates!

As is well known, after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iraq Museum was broken into and thousands of antiquities have disappeared or have been destroyed. The looting of the Iraq Museum continued for about five days until the Director of the British Museum made a call to Blair in London, and an American military contingent then arrived to guard the building. The ancient sites too were targeted by pilferers. The top two or three metres of several mounds have been stripped away, we are told. The American troops created a military station complete with helipad actually on the site of Babylon, in all ignorance of what that site was. This remained a military station for about two years. In February 2010, the Chilcot Inquiry into the British invasion of Iraq devoted time to the failure to protect the cultural property of that land. Evidence was presented by the British Institute for the Study of Iraq (formerly the British School of Archaeology in Iraq), among others.

But were the failures to protect the Iraqi heritage part of a larger underlying problem? I think we need to give adequate weightage to the fact that Iraqi archaeology began and remained under the umbrella of an assumed superiority—not to mention dominance—of Western countries. Roger Matthews condemns those Western archaeologists who go and dig in Iraq without making any attempt to explain to local residents what they are doing and who do not read Arabic—so that they are not completely abreast with the research being done by Iraqis. And if this land is really accepted as the fountainhead of world civilization, why is ancient Mesopotamia not taught in a more serious fashion in the schools and to the public at large, asks Matthews.

I am reminded of a bitter experience in 1991. I had written to several Mesopotamian archaeologists about protesting the destruction of Iraq in the First Gulf War. Of the two responses I received, one was a copy of a letter

sent to *The Independent* newspaper which was signed by the who's who of British archaeology in Mesopotamia. This letter requested the British armed forces and their allies to create a *cordon sanitaire* around the Iraq Museum, so that none of its precious content would be damaged by bombs. In the letter there was not even a token expression of regret at the loss of Iraqi lives.

None of this is totally irrelevant to us in South Asia. We would not object if someone from a distant land claimed that the Harappan past, or the peninsular megalithic culture, is the heritage of the whole world and not just of India/Pakistan. Neither would it be in the least objectionable if archaeologists from other countries came to India to excavate particular sites, provided they show adequate expertise and respect for the rules of the ASI. It is also perfectly acceptable for any world body to fund and direct the conservation and restoration of a site or building of historic value, provided it is done in consultation with experts and local people.<sup>4</sup> Let us note that American and European archaeologists have, for political reasons, practically lost their ability to conduct field work in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Their rescue excavations may have passed their peak after the spurt of small dam constructions in northern Syria and northeastern Turkey. India may thus become a new hunting ground for them.

Should we welcome this? The question needs to be debated in our universities. So far, the signs are not good. A foreign institution has been making annual pay-outs to individual archaeologists or departments to dig or explore particular Harappan sites: is archaeology a suitable domain for outsourcing? A European university given permission to *explore* around the Harappan site of Lothal has taken the liberty not just to excavate large trenches, but, as far as I can make out, to dump the earth from those trenches on the mound itself. We also need to debate the kind of policy we should adopt in relation to individuals or bodies who wish to put a foot into the portals of one or other archaeology department in order to set up a "world class" institute for Indus heritage. Will this necessarily be good for the subject other than pave the way for up-to-date technological resources?

If we refer back to the archaeology of Mesopotamia, we could suggest that this field of study has not been a simple gainer from colonial and neo-colonial intervention. It remains antiquarianist in many respects, e.g., research papers until recently being devoted to tablet collections in this museum or the cylinder seals of that private collection—what coherence do such collections have? what meaning, divorced as they are from their contexts in the archaeological record? Such archaeology, besides, has little wider relevance. Students taught the

unique character of the library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh are rarely referred to later times, to the imperial library of the Sassanians, or to the Translation Movement and *Beit al-Hikma* of Mansur and his successors, Caliphs of the newly-constructed Baghdad of the ninth century.

Perhaps it is now time for national archaeological bodies to wake up; to not only take cognizance of the potential of their sites in both their immediate and wider contexts, but also to be clearly aware of the ramifications of any international collaborative venture that may be contemplated. It is time to mind one's heritage, national and global, in the interest of unbiased knowledge.

#### NOTES

1. A few Assyrian reliefs on display in the Chhatrapati Shivaji Vastu Sangrahalaya in Mumbai are pieces that were diverted off the Basra-London sea route, and also remind us that early archaeology was in part a looting of the antiquities of diverse countries.
2. Personal communication from Donald E. Reid.
3. Donald M. Reid, in a lecture delivered in Washington. Personal communication with the author.
4. UNESCO's "conservation" of Mohenjo-daro did nothing to lower the water table and keep the bricks water-proof. Its limestone spur along the Indus banks, ostensibly to protect the site against a major flood, has itself damaged Harappan-period sites. And the local residents of Mohenjo-daro told me in 1998 that there has been no major flood in living memory that has threatened the site.

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