



# Receptions of the Ancient Near East in Popular Culture and Beyond

edited by  
Lorenzo Verderame  
Agnès Garcia-Ventura

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## FOREWORD

# RECEPTIONS OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST IN POPULAR CULTURE AND BEYOND

PAUL COLLINS

This book is an enthusiastic celebration of the ways in which popular culture has consumed aspects of the ancient Near East to construct new realities. The editors are distinguished experts in the literature and cultures of ancient Mesopotamia and its historiography and they have brought together an equally impressive line-up of colleagues—archaeologists, philologists, historians, and art historians—to reflect on how objects, ideas, and interpretations of the ancient Near East, many of which are the focus of their individual scholarship, have been remembered, constructed, reimagined, mythologized, or indeed forgotten within our shared cultural memories. The exploration of cultural memories has revealed how they inform the values and structures and daily life of societies over time (Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1992). This is therefore not a collection of essays about the deep past but rather about the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

There are a number of ancient societies that have a greater presence in the public consciousness than those of the ancient Near East, and they have attracted much interest in academic explorations of popular culture and issues of representation (de Groot 2016). Greece and Rome, for example, have come to embody in the West (problematic as this term is) notions of perfection and order, especially in aesthetics and politics (Kallendorf 2007; Hardwick and Stray 2008). Equally, ancient Egypt occupies a seemingly very familiar place in our lives; through the “mysteries” of hieroglyphs, pyramids, and mummies, it presents a heady mix of otherness and imagined accessibility (Riggs 2017). In the essays offered here, however, we discover just how significant the ancient Near East has been in influencing popular culture.

If, as David Lowenthal (2015) suggests, the past is a foreign country, for the nonspecialist the ancient Near East can appear as very foreign indeed: a mysterious “Orient,” encompassing as it does an enormous geographical area containing an apparently impenetrable mosaic of diverse peoples, languages, and cultures. In popular



understanding this can sometimes take the shape of a threatening and distant alien world but it also “charms *because* it is little known” (Lowenthal 2015, 13). Ideas about Mesopotamia (Babylonian and Assyrian “civilizations”) were already embedded in cultural memory, filtered through descriptions in biblical and classical writings, long before the mid-nineteenth century when Western explorers began to uncover its ancient physical remains. Mesopotamia was understood as the cradle of civilization—or human culture’s infancy (Bahrani, Çelik, and Eldem 2011, 56). The first real excavations started at a time when colonial adventurers were planting flags of occupation and ownership in foreign lands, and the “discoveries” in the Near East allowed the region’s past to be simultaneously claimed and incorporated into the West’s myths of origins. Mesopotamia became Orientalized for Western consumption (Bahrani, Çelik, and Eldem 2011, 62). Yet access to this ancient past was immensely challenging and only slowly revealed through the heroic decipherment of the lost cuneiform script and the languages it recorded. Popular reception was shaped by the historical reconstructions of these pioneers, which inevitably reflected the concepts and forms of argument of their own times (Couldry and Hepp 2017).

Although many of the scholarly approaches to construct Mesopotamia’s past over the last century and a half are no longer considered as legitimate fields of inquiry, conclusions derived from them still echo within our cultural memories. This becomes apparent, for example, in popular understandings of the Sumerians. From the 1870s a bitter controversy developed about whether or not the Sumerian language, as had recently been identified in cuneiform texts, belonged to a distinct ethnic group. Racial science underpinned these debates and eventually would come to contrast the Sumerians (identified as “Aryans”) with “Semites” (Akkadians) (Cooper 1993). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the academic reconstruction of Mesopotamia remained essentially a story of racial conflict with the Sumerians viewed as the founders of civilization, ultimately crushed by Semitic conquerors— notions that have never entirely gone away, existing at their most extreme in the diatribe of white supremacists. As Sumerian literary texts were discovered and translated, myth, legend, and history were often conflated so that by the 1950s the Sumerians were viewed as lying at the root of the modern world, having invented not only writing, urbanism, and the wheel, but having even experimented with democracy (Kramer 1963). The themes or, perhaps better, the myths of the origin of civilization have proved highly resilient in popular imagination despite recent arguments that the Sumerians as a people are in some sense the invention of modern Assyriologists (Cooper 2010, 331). So, for example, ancient Sumer is one of the options available for teachers to explore the achievements of the world’s earliest civilizations in the UK national history curriculum for primary school children (Department for Education 2013).

Alongside understandings (or misunderstandings) of the ancient Near East generated from the publications of specialists, museums have probably played the most significant role in shaping the Western public’s reception of the region’s past (Evans 2012,

77–78). During the nineteenth century, European national museums began amassing collections as a result of control over their colonies or through political and economic influence in neighboring regions (e.g., Duthie 2011). As imperial institutions, the museums came with authority and popular reach, and the decisions on the selection of the objects that entered their collections, their display practices, and the dissemination of information about those choices beyond their doors have had a significant impact. Through their ethnographic representations, the museum displays contributed to the domestication of not only the contemporary colonized non-Western world but also its past. Thus, as described above, the ancient Near East came to serve as a starting point for describing the rise of Western civilization (a familiar trope even today). The cultures of Mesopotamia dominated these narratives, partly because sites like Ur, Nineveh, and Babylon could be mined for objects to fill museums (often with spectacular results), but also because many of these same sites and their inhabitants were already deeply embedded in cultural memory (Seymour 2014; Millerman 2015; Petit and Morandi 2017). Museum displays thus presented an “Orient” that seemed both familiar and exotic. Neighboring regions, such as Turkey or Arabia, however, were often viewed as peripheral to this central story, being perceived as underdeveloped or uncivilized. Modern attempts to unpack or even “decolonize” such displays can be disquieting to a public familiar with, and thereby reassured by, these versions of ancient and recent pasts (Chambers et al. 2014).

European and American museums with large ancient Near Eastern collections continue to attract enormous numbers of visitors, and many such collections are destinations on tourist itineraries. Their galleries of objects, however, can no longer be viewed as passive displays that simply transmit knowledge. Rather, it has become apparent that they actually construct meaning and define cultures through their arrangement and presentation; the displays actually create knowledge, shaping our understanding of science, culture, and history (Alpers 1991; Kaplan 1995; Moser 2006, 2010). Through museum displays ancient objects take on new lives as modern artworks (Azara and Marin 2018), and the stories they tell reveal as much about contemporary interests and concerns as they do about the objects themselves, reshaping further our understanding of their ancient roles and meanings.

Perhaps the most surprising way in which understanding of the ancient Near Eastern past has come to influence popular culture is through its reconstruction by the ancients themselves. They consciously chose either to remember or to forget parts of it. This is evidenced most famously by the Sumerian King List, a document constructed as a succession of cities and their rulers, starting at the beginning of time “before the Flood” (that theme of origins again), that had achieved the political unity of southern Mesopotamia. Yet the deletion of a number of regional states from the list by its compilers and the creation of the myth of a single dynasty in control of territory at any one time demonstrates that this is a contrived view of reality but one, nevertheless, that continues to support popular notions of deep antiquity, including the pres-

ence of aliens (e.g., Kraychir 2017). Other Mesopotamian inscriptions, especially those associated with glorious rulers of the past, were used from the second millennium BCE onwards as models in the production of contemporary works and stories; the origins and successes of kings that these describe have been understood by both scholars and the public as historical fact (Foster 2016, especially chapter 12).

The modern Near East has been much in the news over recent decades because of invasions, occupations, wars, and terrorism, which have had a devastating impact on the lives of its inhabitants. The Western press, however, has reacted with particular horror at the destruction, often targeted, of the region's rich cultural heritage, especially its archaeological sites, religious buildings, museums, and archives (Emberling and Hanson 2008). This response is strengthened by the notion of a shared global heritage—a sense of ownership in a postcolonial context—and ultimately derived from the popular understandings that the ancient Near East lies at the root of today's Western urban, literate societies (Meskell 2015). Public interest has turned to the ancient history of the Near East to try and understand the importance of this ongoing loss of heritage, and it should perhaps not come as a surprise that dominant constructs within popular culture have contributed to explanations of its significance—such as in 2016 when the then Iraqi transport minister described the ziggurat at Ur as an airport to launch spacecraft from five thousand years ago (Forster 2016).

Ultimately, there is no definitive ancient Near East, because the surviving physical remains are always interpreted through the concerns of the present day and filtered through cultural memories. Academia and popular culture have created their own versions of the past with many points of contact. Among these constructions are simulacra that, in the concept developed by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1994), are copies of things that never existed but feel as though they should have. Popular culture has inherited these along with stereotypes about the Near East to construct memories out of the remnants of the past. Investigating these cultural memories is surely as important as probing the ancient records as they challenge our ideas and our ways of looking at the past. As such, the enlightening essays in this volume they will prove of enormous interest not only to specialists of the ancient world, but to all those concerned with society's attitude to its own history and culture.

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