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Performing politics

Beginning around 3500 BC, cities, writing, and monumental architecture emerged almost simultaneously in Mesopotamia – a watershed in the development of social complexity that has attracted scholarly attention for nearly a century. The primacy of Mesopotamia – its cities are the earliest known in the world, its scribes developed writing centuries before it emerged elsewhere – has led historians and archaeologists worldwide to use it as the paradigmatic case of state formation.¹ Until the 1980s, Near Eastern archaeologists interested in the rise of political complexity investigated the growth of cities and changing settlement systems in the third and fourth millennia BC in the irrigated river valleys of southern Iraq and Iran, recognizing, as the title of a popular account has it, that *History Begins at Sumer* (Kramer 1981).² Over the last thirty years, the focus of research has shifted north and west as archaeologists have analyzed how Sumer's neighbors formed their own polities in response to this “urban revolution” (Weiss 1986; Ur et al. 2007; Ur 2010a; Porter 2012). The time frame under consideration has also broadened, with some scholars now focusing on later second-millennium polities as well (Yoffee 2005; Schwartz and Nichols 2006; Laneri et al. 2012). Researchers have analyzed social complexity – usually defined as economic and political differentiation and stratification (Renfrew and Bahn 2005) – by examining changes in site size, settlement patterns, long-distance trade, household organization, craft production, and the establishment of administrative hierarchies. But for the most part, the literature has glossed over the cultural and ideological changes that accompanied the rise of Mesopotamian polities.³ As a broad array of anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and political scientists have recognized, however,

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“state formation is itself a cultural revolution” (Corrigan and Sayer 1985: 3; Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005; Joseph and Nugent 1994).

I will argue that the inhabitants of Mesopotamian polities – including villages, city-states, kingdoms, and empires – created a sense of political belonging through ritual and daily practice. Most historians and anthropologists agree with Benedict Anderson that “all communities . . . are imagined,” since most of their members will never meet face-to-face, but nonetheless share a strong sense of belonging (Anderson 2006: 1). But there has been little attention to the processes that gave rise to this imagining in ancient contexts in general and in the Near East in particular. How did the inhabitants of different Near Eastern village and urban communities with distinctive identities, histories, and expectations come to share a new idea of the polity and their places within it? How did these polities operate and how, after the death of their first charismatic founders, did they survive?

In the ancient Near East, ritual performance was not set apart from the real practice of politics; it *was* politics. Ritual provided a space and means for sovereignty to be both created and debated. Priests, kings, and ordinary citizens used festivals to negotiate, establish, and contest political power. Indeed, ritual was one of the main techniques that individuals used to create political communities and establish a framework for belonging. The performance of rituals allowed both elites and nonelites to negotiate the long-standing tensions that allowed for and simultaneously threatened early polities. Daily practices – walking through the city, making pottery, composing administrative texts – cemented the political and social realities of these societies.

I consider the performance of politics – the intersection of ritual and practice – through three specific case studies from different periods and places: northern Mesopotamia in the mid-third millennium BC, the middle Euphrates in the early second millennium BC, and Seleucid Babylonia in the late-first millennium BC. Each case study analyzes how specific rituals engaged with concepts – movement, memory, and tradition – that were essential to the construction of authority and grounded multiple political approaches. These analyses are not wholly distinct; each considers Mesopotamian polities during a period of crisis and transformation. As a result, an investigation of the (re)constitution of political authority – during the emergence of the first states, as part of resettlement following a period of collapse, and as a response to conquest and the loss

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of cultural autonomy – lies at the heart of each chapter. Similarly, each study draws upon landscape archaeology and excavated remains, including cuneiform texts, to trace these processes.

Politics and ritual in the past and present

We do not often reflect on how political life is performed. Ritual tends to be dismissed as arcane and exotic, at best a colorful mask for the real process of politics. Most political analysis ignores the symbolic and the ritual as something entirely apart from the more respectable analytical spheres of economy and society. Nonetheless, even in contemporary politics, rituals – political conventions, protest marches, stump speeches, and the pledge of allegiance – create a powerful political reality, a process that a growing number of political scientists and cultural sociologists now investigate (Kertzer 1988; Alexander 2011; Alexander et al. 2006; Wedeen 1999, 2008). Expressed through a variety of symbols, performance helps to communicate specific values that can both create and affirm a community. Rituals can function as a mechanism to resolve conflict and/or reaffirm communality in contrast to the competition inherent in social life. By employing the creative power of liminality, these events can integrate opposing cultural or social systems, and can facilitate transitions between separate social orders.⁴ At the same time, rituals may provide a vocabulary for dissent and even revolt (Kertzer 1988; Ozouf 1976). In short, performance is an essential aspect of both ancient and modern politics. As Ronald Reagan once replied when asked how an actor could become president, “how can a president not be an actor?”⁵ Analyzing how politicians stage political acts – paying attention to the choice of setting, costume, and props – can provide insight into how political decisions are made.

Even if historians are willing to concede the importance of ritual and religion, most archaeologists ignore them due to a pervasive belief that these processes have no material signature and hence are not susceptible to archaeological investigation. But ritual and politics are realized through the physical world, making an analysis of material culture necessary to understanding their operation. As Clifford Geertz notes, “ideas are not, and have not been for some time, unobservable mental stuff,” rather they are “envehicled meanings” that may include “melodies, formulas, maps, pictures . . . rituals, palaces, technologies and social formations” (Geertz

1980: 135). Social and political life is constituted by the daily decisions and actions of people, and these actions take place within a world of things.⁶ People build houses, pave streets, sew clothes, and fashion saucepans. But once created, these objects both allow for and limit later activities. Society is not produced only through our interactions with other people, but within and through “mutually created relationships between humans and things” (Pauketat and Alt 2005: 214). This is obviously true of relationships characterized by persistent inequality. If these were only established through social skills – through conversation, negotiation, and persuasion – they would be very transient. Indeed, the sheer physicality of our world is precisely what lends social interactions their “steely” quality (Latour 2005: 67). It is this materiality, the connections between people and things, which Ian Hodder terms “entanglement,” that is fundamental to social and cultural transformation (Hodder 2012).

But it can be difficult to understand how we might engage in an archaeology of performance by talking about it in the abstract. Before turning to Mesopotamia, let us consider five vignettes about the performance of politics in other times and places. These stories illustrate different ways that ritual performance can either establish or destabilize specific political orders, and how rituals intersect with the practice of daily life. The stories illuminate how the three concepts that I will consider later – movement, memory, and tradition – have been important in the negotiation of political identity. Although only two of these narratives are archaeological *sensu stricto*, they all indicate the importance of materiality. They illustrate that despite their seeming evanescence, political performances are only effective when expressed through things. These tales will set the stage, so to speak, for a more in-depth exploration of performance and politics in Mesopotamia.

THE 2,500-YEAR CELEBRATION AT PERSEPOLIS

The imposing ruins of Persepolis, once the capital of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, have been a contested space in modern Iran for more than forty years. This complex of palaces and tombs was the setting of “the greatest show the world had ever seen”: Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi’s celebration of 2,500 years of Persian civilization in October 1971 (Mohammed Reza Shah quoted in Grigor 2005: 23). Every head of state was invited to the ceremony, which was celebrated at the archaeological sites of Pasargadae and Persepolis near Shiraz. In preparation for the event,

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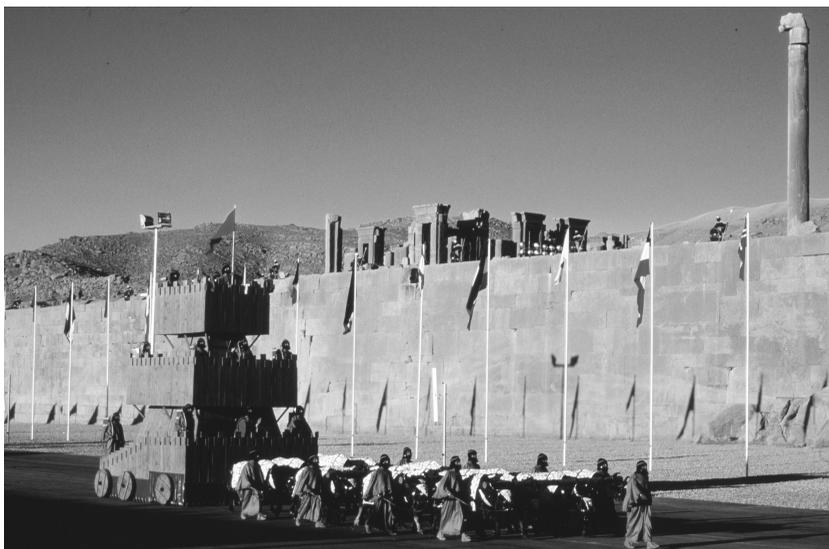
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engineers worked overtime to renovate the Shiraz airport and pave the road to Persepolis, while the Hessarek Institute launched a campaign to kill all the snakes and scorpions found within 30 km of the ruins so that the eminent guests would be in no danger. The visitors stayed in a sumptuous “tent city,” actually prefabricated luxury apartments covered in canvas and designed by a noted Parisian interior decorator.⁷ The festival opened at dawn on October 12, 1971, when Mohammed Reza Shah went to the tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae to address the first Persian king, using terminology adapted from inscriptions found in excavation:

To you Cyrus, Great King, King of Kings, from Myself, Shahanshah of Iran, and from my people, Hail! We are here at the moment when Iran renews its pledge to History to bear witness to immense gratitude of an entire people to you, immortal Hero of History, founder of world’s [sic] oldest empire, great liberator of all time, worthy son of mankind. Cyrus [,] . . . Sleep in peace forever, for we are awake and we remain to watch over your glorious heritage.” (quoted in Abdi 2001: 69)

Events over the next three days portrayed Iran as a progressive, modern nation with an illustrious past. A performance of Iannis Xenakis’ electronic music piece “Persepolis” with a special sound and light show demonstrated the Shah’s appreciation of the avant-garde. On successive nights, guests enjoyed both the finest French cuisine (Maxim’s of Paris catered the event and prepared such dishes as foie gras–stuffed peacocks and quail eggs with caviar) and an Oriental feast served on low cushions and divans. But the central importance of the pre-Islamic past was never forgotten. In addition to the setting amidst the ruins, actors recreated the rituals of the Achaemenid court for the edification of foreign dignitaries. On the final day of the celebrations, more than 6,000 people took part in a grand parade of Persian history, with soldiers dressed to resemble their historical counterparts (Fig. 1; Grigor 2005: 26–7). Like much of the celebration, the parade was televised and broadcast to the world.

The festivities officially celebrated the antiquity of the Persian monarchy, the shah’s enlightened reign, and Iranian modernity before audience. Many Iranians, however, contested the shah’s portrayal of both Iran’s past and present. Clerics, revolutionaries, and many ordinary citizens viewed the spectacle at Persepolis – and indeed the shah’s interest in the premodern past – as a sign of his corruption, obsession



1 Actors portraying Achaemenid soldiers with a wheeled tower in the Persepolis parade, October 1971 (Photograph courtesy of Bob Dyson)

with the West, and distance from both the poverty of most of the nation and its Islamic values. The Ayatollah Khomeini issued a statement from exile decriing the ceremony for its excesses and absurdity, asking, “[A]re the people of Iran to have a festival for those whose behavior has been a scandal throughout history and who are a cause of crime and oppression, of abomination and corruption, in the present age?” (quoted in Abdi 2001: 69). Indeed, the celebrations became a potent symbol for the opposition, leading the ayatollah to assert later that “to participate [in the festival] is to participate in the murder of the oppressed people in Iran” (quoted in Holliday 2011: 68). Clearly Khomeini interpreted history rather differently than the shah. This did not mean that he eschewed the past categorically; rather, he rejected Iran’s pre-Islamic, monarchical past and chose instead to ground his vision of politics in an understanding of the history of Islam in Iran (Hoveyda 2003: 29). Within this alternative political vision, an Islamic past provided an ideal setting for rituals of resistance. Khomeini and other clerics equated modern revolutionaries’ struggle against the shah with the battle of Karbala, one of the foundational events of Shi’a Islam, commemorated each year on Ashura (Holliday 2011: 67). During the revolution, various parties recalled the excesses of the Persepolis celebrations as signs of the shah’s decadence, while in the early 1980s, state television occasionally broadcast reruns of the festivities

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“to remind the people of the despotism they had overthrown” (Abdi 2001: 69). In the early 2000s, these ruins again became a contested space when Marjane Satrapi published the first volume of her autobiography, aptly titled *Persepolis* (Satrapi 2003). Satrapi’s graphic novel is critical of both the shah and the revolution, adding yet another twist to modern Iranian appropriations of an Achaemenid past.

The conflict over the Persepolis celebration, however, did not just play out in public rituals of political speeches and broadcast commentary, nor even in the space of resistance and criticism that art opens up. People debated the meaning of the past in several areas of life, perhaps most fiercely in education. At the height of Mohammed Reza Shah’s reign, the history curriculum emphasized the same nationalist narrative encapsulated in the Persepolis festival, tracing the nation of Iran back to Aryan migrations at the turn of the first millennium BC. Textbooks dated the origins of the Persian monarchy to the Median period (678–550 BC), but represented Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire, as its true ancestor. They described how Iran took “gigantic steps in the way of culture and civilization, attaining towering levels of progress” under the Achaemenid kings in the sixth century BC (Ta’rikh-e Lebas 1974, quoted in Ram 2000: 72). This narrative of the nation continued to frame the history of the Islamic period, which stressed the unique contributions that Iranians had made to Islam. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the republican government quickly commissioned new books so that schools could transform children into model citizens of the Islamic republic.

Unsurprisingly, in light of Khomeini’s own vision of the past, schools at first simply ignored ancient history. In the early 1980s, textbooks were purged of references to Iran’s dynastic antiquity and the new, state-mandated curriculum portrayed the centuries before Mohammed’s birth as a time of darkness and barbarism (Ram 2000). Hostility to Iran’s pre-Islamic past was also responsible for the closure of the Department of Archaeology at Tehran University from 1979 to 1982 and the cessation of the Institute of Archaeology’s activities at the same university until 1990. Although the archaeological service remained active, no scholarly field research was undertaken during the 1980s. Many in the government viewed archaeology as “nothing more than a pseudoscience,” one that the royal court had used “to glorify despotism and justify royal oppression of the masses,” and were consequently loath to support it (Abdi 2001: 70).

Despite such beliefs, during the last twenty years, the Achaemenids have crept back into Iranian national life. They once again occupy a prominent place in schoolbooks, children's imaginations, and the activities of the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organization (ICHO), responsible for archaeology in Iran since 1988. A recent study of middle school history education in Iran found that not only were both the Aryan migration and the Achaemenid empire included in the curriculum, but most pupils saw the latter period as "the pinnacle of Iranian history" (Soltan Zadeh 2012: 147). Similarly, from 1999 to 2005, there were excavations at twenty-six Iron Age and Achaemenid period sites (Azarnoush and Helwing 2005: 215–31).

The various interpretations of history in Iran, and the ways that the state has mobilized these narratives, are complicated. The return of the Achaemenids to classrooms and archaeological research agenda has been part of a transformation of Iranian political and national identity that developed in the Islamic Republic subsequent to the rejection of these themes in the 1980s. How individuals understand and manipulate history is never monolithic, and it is possible to infuse ancient history with a number of separate and incompatible meanings, as the case of contemporary Iran demonstrates.

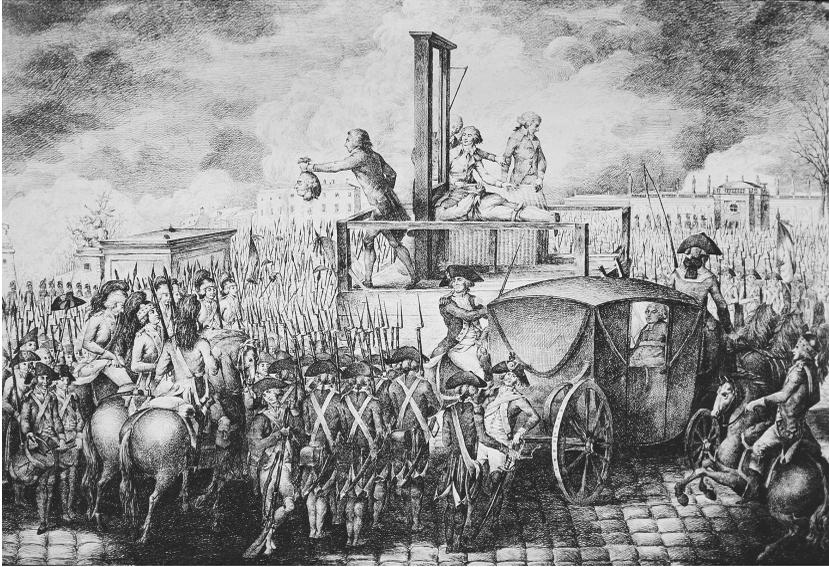
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Like Khomeini's followers in the early 1980s, revolutionaries in France sought to remake the world according to a new logic through the invention of symbols, myths, and rituals. Insisting on a complete break with the past, they rejected the centuries of political and religious symbolism that underlay the *ancien régime*. For many, a new French nation required the creation of a new citizen with appropriate loyalties, beliefs, and customs (Hunt 1984: 56). In the initial absence of political parties, slogans, or even a coherent movement, competing factions established innovative rituals (and anti-rituals) and changed even the most routine experiences of daily life.

The execution of Louis XVI, a grand and unrepeatable act that was central to expressions of French politics and identity for at least a century, is perhaps the starkest example of this (Fig. 2). In January 1793, King Louis XVI was paraded through the streets of Paris, alongside drummers, soldiers, and prison guards. As he reached the guillotine in the Place de la Révolution, he protested his innocence and forgave his executioners, consciously echoing the actions of Christ at Calvary (Kertzer 1988: 159).

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2 The execution of Louis XVI, January 21, 1793 (Courtesy of the British Library)

Before a silent crowd of perhaps 100,000, he was decapitated; his severed head was displayed to the populace and his body was summarily removed. The only state funeral held that day was not for Louis, but for Louis-Michel Le Peletier, a national deputy, who had cast the deciding vote for the king's execution. Le Peletier had been assassinated the night before by a former member of the king's *Garde du Corps*.

The public nature of this beheading, its formal setting, and especially its massive audience made it a very particular type of ceremony, one that was foundational for the new republic (Dunn 1994: 2). Louis XVI was not the only victim that January day. Rather, the architects of the ceremony aimed to destroy the institution of kingship, to revoke the dynastic principle. The beheading of the king was an anti-ritual, one that attempted to undo publicly and definitively the coronation. By putting Louis XVI to death in front of vast numbers of Parisians, his executioners sought to sever his "two bodies," and slay both the man and the king (Connerton 1989: 8–9; Kantorowicz 1957; Walzer 1992: 18). The first anniversary of this event witnessed spontaneous acts of commemoration, and two years later it became a public holiday (Ozouf 1975). The execution reverberated beyond Paris and was revisited continuously during the nineteenth century by people from across the political spectrum (Dunn 1994: 67). Moreover, the conditions for this sort of event became routine; in 1793 and 1794,

2,639 heads rolled in Paris and perhaps 40,000 people died throughout France. Clearly, the very public and ritualized nature of the executions had a different effect than executions in the privacy of a jail cell. Beheadings became a way for the Jacobins to define their enemies and themselves (Kertzer 1988: 159).

Public execution was not the only new ritual developed as part of this effort to remake the world in a new political image. The state sponsored a variety of different festivities, and competing political groups staged public rites in towns and villages throughout France that sought to establish new loyalties and understandings of the body politic. Events such as the first anniversary of Bastille Day, the federation festival of 1790, the liberty festival of 1792, and the festival of Simmonneau of 1792 were not meaningless celebrations; they employed potent symbols that helped to constitute a new class of political citizen and create different, competing ideas of what the republic should be (Ozouf 1975, 1976).

These rituals existed alongside a series of wide-reaching interventions in state institutions, the organization of time, and the presentation of self. The critical changes in a variety of legal institutions are well known, but changes in the understanding of time and personal appearance were just as consequential.⁸ In October 1793, a new calendar was adopted with a retroactive start date of September 1792 to commemorate the founding of the first republic (Shaw 2011). Twelve months were divided into three ten-day weeks, called decades; the tenth day, *décadi*, replaced Sunday as a new day of rest and celebration. The months and days received new names and were associated with animals, tools, plants, and minerals, rather than with saints and Christian holidays. Five extra days were added to the end of the year as national holidays – celebrations of virtue, talent, labor, convictions, and honor, and during leap years, revolution. Each day was divided into ten hours, and each hour into 100 decimal minutes, which were in turn divided into decimal seconds. Although decimal time proved to be the element of the calendar system that was suspended earliest, officially ending by April 1795, this was a fundamental shift that affected the ordering of every part of daily life in order to reinforce the ideology of the revolution (Hunt 2008).

Changes in self-presentation were also critical to the instantiation of the new society following the French Revolution. Certain costumes came to represent political positions, and “a color, the wearing of a certain length of trousers, certain shoe styles, or the wrong hat might touch