

ONE

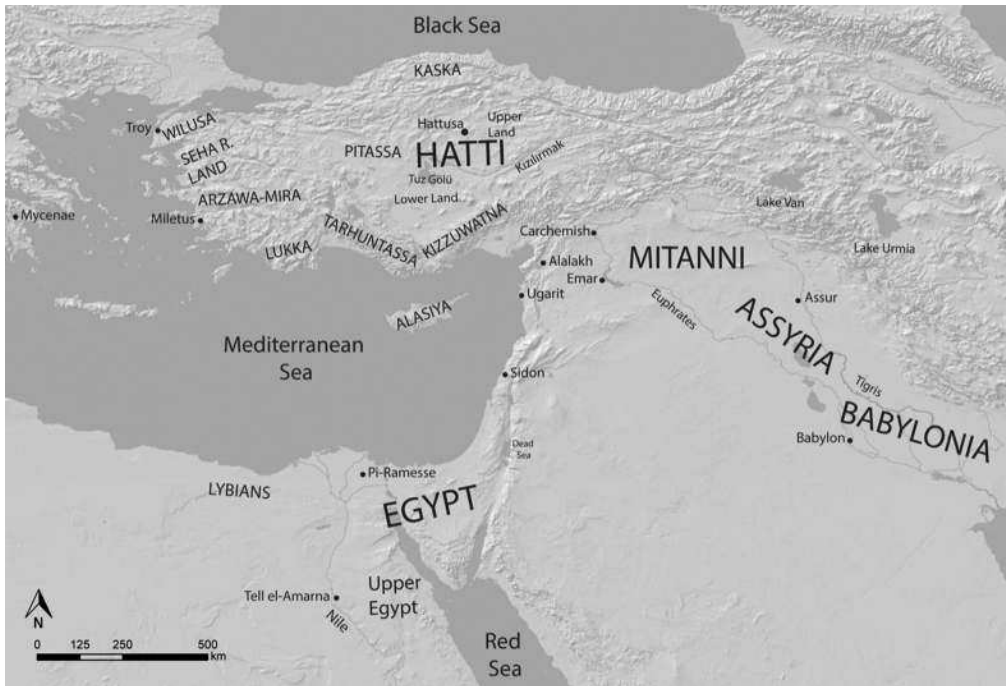
EMPIRE IS ALWAYS IN THE MAKING

To endeavour to think the state is to take the risk of taking over (or being taken over by) a thought of the state.
Pierre Bourdieu (1994, 1)

We have to study power outside the model of Leviathan, outside the field delineated by juridical sovereignty and the institution of the State. We have to analyze it by beginning with the techniques and tactics of domination.
Michael Foucault (2003, 34)

Power is constitutive of the story In history, power begins at the source.
Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995, 28)

This book is about the making of empire, in a historical sense and, more significantly, in its focus on the practices, places and things, and their evolving interconnections with people, that together produce, challenge, and, above all, continuously transform imperial networks and their constituent communities. In the chapters that follow, I will sketch – through detailed analyses of material and textual sources – a critical anthropological perspective on the Hittite imperial network of Late Bronze Age Anatolia (c. 1650–1180 BCE, Figure 1), one of the earliest archaeologically well-attested expansive polities of the ancient Near East. To do so, I will track the relationships and practices through which Hittite elites and administrators hoped to bind together disparate communities and achieve a measure of sovereignty, the ambiguities inherent in these practices, their messy results, un- and under-achievements. I will



1 The imperial networks of the Late Bronze Age Near East and East Mediterranean (base map: ESRI Topographic Data (Creative Commons); World Shaded Relief, World Linear Water)

also chart the unexpected consequences of particular practices aimed to produce specific forms of power; the ways in which they became arrested by physical and mental geographies; and how they were resisted, or more subtly negotiated, by a variety of not-so-willing subjects.

The study of empire and imperialism is not only a pastime for archaeological and historical scholarship. It is also a thoroughly political act, and one fundamental to recognising the making of our own imperial presents and futures. For it is comparative histories, fashioned from critical readings of textual and archaeological information, and the conceptual disentanglement of empire from civilisational origin myths that furnish us with the cognisance and vocabulary to identify, critique, and counteract current imperialist and nationalist narratives, their simple stories, and the exclusionary behaviours they normalise and provoke.

This book is, therefore, also about responsibility and relevance in a present that is at the same time neo-imperial, and, in light of the failing of globalisation as a project and ideology, also neo-nationalist in character. Both discourses appropriate ancient empires and associated concepts of civilisation, and selectively distil their materialities and complicated histories into simplified, binary stories about belonging and difference. At the same time, imperialism and imperial practices of rule and exploitation continue to take on a multitude of

subtle and technologically new, but also unsettlingly familiar, forms that can be recognised, resisted, and prevented only through the cognition and narration of their relational and historical complexity and precarity.

PRESENTS OF IMPERIAL PASTS

After urban civilisation, empire soon dawned in the plains of southern Mesopotamia, or rather a discourse of imperial desire.¹ Over the next 5000 years, empire developed as the most common model of large-scale socio-political organisation, shaping the lives and deaths of hundreds of millions of people.² And although European colonial powers may be things of the past, a more diffuse empire now emanates from the ambiguous but no less imperialist practices of the United States, those of its competitors, and collectives with at least partially analogous aspirations.³ The repertoire of this new imperialism is diverse and includes aggressive foreign and economic policies, varying strategies of cultural hegemony, surveillance, and data gathering, and what has been called ‘offensive humanitarianism’.⁴ (Re-)emergent from these practices has been an undeclared, or even vehemently denied, empire that appears at first glance incompatible and distinct from those of eras past, but which is in reality steeped deeply in long-term imperial tradition.⁵ Aspects of these new, and more dissipated, forms of empire include, for instance, China’s commercialist expansionism,⁶ while the European Union’s eastward expansion, its responses to economic and currency crises, and the falling out of love with the European project of civilisation have also brought into sharper focus the Union’s imperial tendencies.⁷ More recently still, digital forms of imperialism have emerged through the cyber-based control of (mis-)information flows,

¹ To adapt Seth Richardson’s (2012, 4) very apt term.

² The British empire alone held sway over 458 million people, about one fifth of the world’s population then, and a quarter of the earth’s surface (Maddison 2001, 98, 242; Osterhammel 2010, 25; see also discussion in Dietler 2005, 50). Although, as James Scott (2017) recently pointed out, until the very recent past, many more people also lived at the margins, or altogether beyond the political, administrative, or ideological grasp of state and imperial institutions.

³ E.g. Hardt and Negri (2000). ⁴ Thomas (2007); Porter (2016).

⁵ Stoler (2006, 126–127), but see Hobsbawm (2003, 1), who has vehemently declined the usefulness of comparing current imperialist tactics with earlier forms of empire. As Lori Katchadourian (2016, xix–xxi) observed, there is also a noticeable increase in imperial terminology in the reporting of current affairs, including the use of ancient imperial terms to describe relationships of political dependency in the present. Zielonka (2007), for instance, recently characterised the EU as a neo-medieval empire organised around a polycentric system of government with overlapping jurisdictions, ambiguous borders, and divided sovereignties that encompass, and hope to harness, a bewildering cultural and economic heterogeneity. Others have described it as a ‘cosmopolitan empire’ built on an ideology of cooperation (Beck and Grande 2007, 61–67).

⁶ Okeowo (2014); Beattie (2014).

⁷ For a collection of critical essays, see e.g. Behr and Stivachtis (2016).

and the influencing of foreign elections.⁸ Corporate agro-colonialism is bank-rolled, alongside other forms of resource imperialism, by, for instance, European and US development aid in Africa, and in other regions of the so-called Global South.⁹

In 2014 erupted an imperial project that was not part of the new, comparatively subtle, and often deliberately veiled imperialist tactics of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries CE. In contrast to these more or less disguised examples of neo-imperialism, the Islamic State's (ISIS) or Daesh's purported caliphate, while technologically savvy and the product of hypermodernity, resonates strikingly in its discourse and practice with imperial pasts more often the prerogative of archaeology and ancient history than current affairs and political science. This included the visceral immediacy of its biopolitics of terror, the self-publicised and expertly choreographed cruelty against people, things, and their pasts,¹⁰ and the unabashed honesty of its imperial intent. Daesh's imperial realm, however, also manifested the patchy spatial structure of early imperial networks, their mostly unwilling publics, and with them the volatility of its ancient Near Eastern precursors. The example illustrates, as starkly as no other today, the acute relevance of studying empires and imperialisms in increasingly unequal and polarised, as well as environmentally and politically precarious, local and global presents.

Forged in the cauldron of the West's more openly aggressive military assaults on Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of counterterrorism and totalitarian regime change,¹¹ and in Syria's civil war, Daesh's swift advance across the region, and the paradox of its chilling brutality and bureaucratic pedantry, made it seem to western onlookers as 'one of the strangest states ever created'.¹² To the student of imperial networks, however, it is less strange than disturbingly familiar: an empire *in the making*.

I do not seek here to ascribe Daesh's purported caliphate to a distant, barbaric past that exists outside our modern and allegedly civilised world, even if the group's own hypermodernist propaganda machine hails it as the return to

⁸ Uffelman (2014). ⁹ Cotula (2013); GRAIN and RIAO-RDC (2015).

¹⁰ Archaeological commentaries, thus far, have centred on the extremist group's strategies of cultural heritage destruction as effectively mediatised, material spectacles of power (Harmanşah 2015a, 201–202; Katchadourian 2016; Shahab and Isakhan 2018), on its political and ideological roots and motivations (De Cesari 2015; Jones 2018), and on the politics of post-conflict reconstruction (Isakhan and Meskell 2019).

¹¹ The discourse of terrorism is, of course, itself deeply enmeshed in imperial dynamics of power and knowledge (Said 1993, 209–310; Hardt and Negri 2000, 37). While 'terror' during the French Revolution held connotations of justice against a government that ruled by intimidation and violence, it also soon acquired its negative meaning that became dominant in the course of the nineteenth century. Terrorists in this context were individuals or groups resisting empire, be that the British or later the United States, and that could be used to further imperial interests through scapegoating and political victimage (Blain 2015, 161–163).

¹² Cockburn (2016, 385).

a seventh century CE golden age of Islamic unity and near-global dominance. Quite the contrary, Daesh is the product of the West's more recent colonial and post-colonial meddling in the Middle East and Asia,¹³ while the group's intent on empire-making presents, much like others in the past, an almost accidental afterthought that followed in the wake of its astonishingly rapid conquest of large parts of Iraq and Syria in the spring of 2014.¹⁴ And yet, Daesh's violent and rapid rise to, as well as subsequent fall from, power, the incipient materiality and practice of its government, its ideology, and the punctuated cartography of its domination strikingly resonate with those of much earlier imperial networks, including the Hittite empire that forms the focus of this book.

Academic abstraction may seem at first glance to draw a veil over the horrors of genocide, the concerted attack on the bodies and dignity of Iraqi and Syrian girls and women, and the re-institution of slavery that the group perpetrated along with the highly mediated destruction of the region's ancient and Islamic cultural heritage. I would submit, however, that a comparative approach allows us to engage with both the ancient and the hypermodern more profoundly.

On the one hand, and most glaringly, this crass and all too recent example reminds us of what has been largely neglected in recent scholarship of colonial and imperial networks and tacitly accepted as the unsavoury underbelly of civilisation, and the identities of those who claim descent from one such formation or another. Daesh's unspeakable acts of violence and degradation have shocked a global audience to the core, but they are not so different from the terror and loss experienced by other colonial and imperial subjects, as Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* makes abundantly clear.¹⁵ Ancient imperial regimes did not share in the religious fervour of Daesh's purported caliphate, but Hittite royal annals, as we shall see in Chapter 2, gleefully recount how annual military campaigns razed dozens of cities and deported hundreds of captives. Later Assyrian propaganda revelled in the specifics of bodily suffering inflicted upon Assyria's enemies. As Ashurbanipal II (c. 668–627 BCE), for instance, recounts:

I erected a pile in front of his gate; I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me (and) draped their skins over the pile; some I spread out within the pile, some I erected on stakes upon the pile, (and) some I placed on stakes around the pile. I flayed many right through my land (and) draped

¹³ McDonald (2014).

¹⁴ In March 2014, Daesh's sophisticated Twitter-based media machinery crowd-tested the idea of proclaiming a caliphate by calling for it; an official declaration only followed on 29 June (Stern and Berger 2015, 157).

¹⁵ Fanon (2001 [1961]).

their skins over the walls. I slashed the flesh of the eunuchs (and) of the royal eunuchs who were guilty. I brought Ahi-iababa to Nineveh, flayed him, (and) draped his skin over the wall of Nineveh.¹⁶

Assyrian palace relief carvings similarly depict the torture and killing of captured enemies, while the otherwise idyllic garden banquet scene from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh shows the severed head of Teumman, king of Elam, hanging from a tree.¹⁷

Assyria's imperial cruelty and propaganda, as those of other historical empires, continue to be celebrated today and not only by terror groups; most recently and strikingly, for instance, this occurred in a British Museum exhibition called 'I am Ashurbanipal, King of the world, King of Assyria'.¹⁸ The exhibition, which dramatically displayed objects and wall reliefs from Assyria's capital cities located in modern-day Iraq, in 2018 and 2019 coincided with Britain's ongoing identity crisis and concomitant nostalgia for its own, and long-lost, imperial grandeur at a time when the country struggled to reach a consensus on its place and role in Europe. Fittingly, Ashurbanipal's exhibition was sponsored by British Petroleum,¹⁹ both a type fossil of Britain's colonial past in Iraq, and a posterchild of today's corporate imperial manifestations.

On the other hand, the analysis of Daesh's practices of domination and political production, their material means and outcomes challenges empirically the extremist group's discourse of supreme power that its brutal propaganda projects. Beyond the spreading of terror and the primeval responses it aimed to elicit, Daesh developed over time a rhetoric of universal control rooted in the origin myth of seventh century CE Muslim domination of a region stretching from Spain to India. Both origin myth and the group's own discourse, however, outstretched by far their capabilities to manifest such a realm, to implement lasting government, and to persuade brutalised subjects of their legitimacy. This too was the case for ancient imperial phenomena.

There is ample evidence for the ways in which Daesh sought to aggressively socialise a compliant citizenry. Most publicised among them were the stringent behavioural rules, dress codes, and educational measures, as well as the disproportionate punishments for their transgression. Out of the rubble of the major cities wrestled from the terrorist group's grip also have begun to emerge the materialities of its imperial project, and its temporary workings.

The swaths of administrative documents left in the wake of its demise in Mosul, for instance, reveal an incipient state apparatus that 'collected taxes and

¹⁶ Translation by Grayson (1976, 199). ¹⁷ Barnett (1976; pl. LXV).

¹⁸ www.britishmuseum.org/about_us/past_exhibitions/2019/ashurbanipal.aspx; Brereton (2018).

¹⁹ This led to protests outside the British Museum, which pointed out the multiple layers and cynical colonial nature of the exhibition and its sponsors (Shukla 2019).

picked up the garbage. It ran a marriage office that oversaw medical examinations to ensure that couples could have children. It issued birth certificates . . . to babies born under the caliphate's black flag. It even ran its own D.M.V.²⁰ Unlike the US invasion in 2003 and much like earlier imperial regimes, Daesh did not replace existing bureaucrats, but forced their collaboration to both keep local public services running, and apparently in some cases improve them, as well as to keep track of fines and punishments. These bureaucrats were also responsible for the extraction of tax revenue, the most significant amounts of which stemmed from local agricultural dues and the taxing of daily commerce, rather than, as had been internationally assumed, from sales in oil.

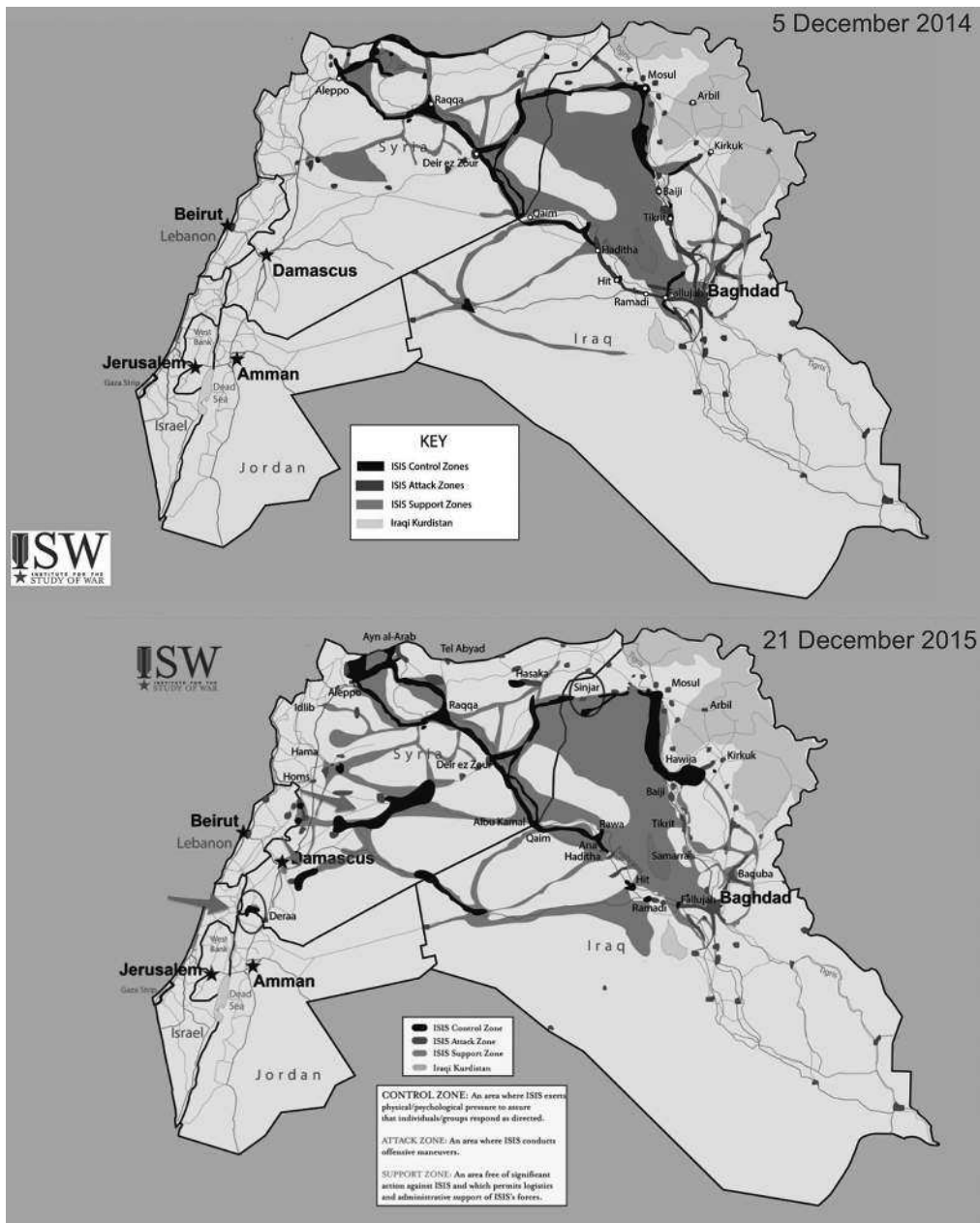
The iconic emblem of its state of terror, the black flag, flew not only over its tanks and marked the sites of its atrocities, but was also transfigured into a technology of bureaucratic authority: an iconic symbol, not unlike those reproduced by the seals of ancient great kings and their administrators, that was printed on a fledgling empire's stationery, the multitude of forms and leaflets with which it sought to reproduce itself as legitimately sovereign.

From 2014 to 2017, Daesh exerted varying degrees of domination over an area roughly the size of Britain and a population of around 12 million people, nested within and bridging the national sovereignties of Iraq and Syria. It also at some stage nominally held sway over small parts of Libya, Nigeria, and the Philippines, as well as over colonies (*wilayat*) in 13 other countries.²¹ Daesh never modelled itself as a traditional nation state, but it is because of western observers' reluctance to ascribe to it a state-like status in the Westphalian sense,²² and the international aura of legitimacy that such a recognition would have carried, that we can track from detailed diachronic maps the emergent and ever-morphing spatiality of its attempt of empire-making (Figure 2). This spatiality resembles closely what archaeologists have for some time envisioned early state and imperial territorialities to manifest themselves as,²³ but generally lack the chronological resolution and material indicators to map accurately. In Daesh's changing cartographies of power, we see islets or nodes of good-enough control enforced by violence or its very real threat, connected to each other by temporary corridors of movement and communication. Large swaths of territory and people remain outside of the reach, or interest, of central institutions – though not necessarily beyond their ideological sway or that of occasional violent forays.

Daesh's caliphate crumbled nearly as quickly as it had risen under the onslaught of a concerted military effort by Kurdish forces, the Iraqi army, and international airstrikes. The group's territory was reduced to about 3 percent of its maximum extent by autumn 2018, followed by declarations of its

²⁰ Callimachi (2018). ²¹ Stern and Berger (2015, 147–175); Callimachi (2018).

²² Gilsinan (2014). ²³ E.g. Sinopoli (1994); A. T. Smith (2003, 78–79); Smith (2005).



2 Map showing extent of Daesh's control in Iraq and Syria in December 2014 and 2015 (courtesy of the Institute for the Study of War)

final defeat in March 2019.²⁴ Those freed from its yoke, and willing to speak to the media, seemed consistent in their relief and lack of allegiance.²⁵

²⁴ McKernan (2019); although isolated cells continue to remain active at the time of writing.

²⁵ Cockburn (2016, 385–388).

Thus, despite the group's efforts to appropriate and transform the region's political landscapes, to attempt to institute bureaucratic institutions, and to perform public services, its extreme ideologies and spectacles of brutality against people and the things and places meaningful to them had succeeded in enforcing temporary public submission and the extracting of resources, but not in the creation of the type of supportive and cohesive public that is essential to long-term political survival.

All of this finds parallels in early imperial networks, including the Hittite, whose practices of landscape transformation, I will argue in Chapters 2 and 3, created spatially dispersed nodes of imperial authority, which had to be woven together by ritual, military, resource, and other forms of movement, and which, as a result, displayed a fragile, network-like spatiality. These practices reproduced – more permanently in some places and intermittently elsewhere – Hittite sovereignty and succeeded in extracting resources from local communities and institutions. In Chapter 7, I will show that Hittite imperial administrators enlisted the help of bureaucratic technologies, which were visually emblematic and distinct in their materiality from other, similar systems of record keeping and access control. Their success, however, in enchanting subjects into sanctioned behaviours was limited by their own physical and metaphysical affordances, and subject to local subversion and appropriation. In the end, as we shall see in Chapter 9, the Hittite combination of perennial performances of violence, elaborate ritualised political spectacles, and bureaucratic measures, though outlasting Daesh's purported caliphate by several centuries in some places, also led to a radical rejection of imperial memory and materiality by the majority of the people whom it had brought under its yoke.

SIMPLE STORIES

State institutions, both modern and ancient, aim to render simpler, more observable, and manageable, sometimes with disastrous outcomes, what is complex in nature and culture.²⁶ Political ideologies too must be simple, generalised, and decontextualised in their messages of collective belonging, privilege, and alterity in order to be widely understood, and incorporated into common consciousness and discourse.²⁷ What makes fundamentalist groups such as Daesh so appealing to those it aims to recruit is also 'the simplification of life and thought'.²⁸ In both its own rhetoric and in the western responses

²⁶ Scott (1999); though colonial and imperial powers also thrive on the ambiguities and messiness of their political and other dominance relationships – see discussion below.

²⁷ van Dijk (1998, 243–253). ²⁸ Stern and Berger (2015, 242).

that it has elicited, ‘good and evil are brought out in stark relief’ and opposed to what is a complex and difficult present.²⁹

This ideological and institutional strive for simplicity intersects in concrete terms with disciplines concerned with the study of the human past. Constructed from selected historical anecdotes and iconic material symbols,³⁰ simple stories about idealised origins, utopian points of return, or, alternatively, primitive pasts to be left behind for brighter, more modern, futures, inevitably connect archaeological and historical knowledge and practice with the murky arenas of identity politics. Once unfettered from archaeological and historical context, such stories and their material emblems become symbols of community that can be put to work to elicit, as required, emotions of belonging, or fervour against those perceived as external or non-compliant. Often they appear to be top-down state or institutional phenomena, but such narratives and material symbols are also constructed from the bottom up, including the alternative identities of non-state or subaltern groupings that are nested within, or in opposition to, state authority.³¹

Empire in both abstract and specific historical form has been the subject of top-down as well as bottom-up political and cultural manipulations for a long time, as different symbolisms, meanings, and moral lessons become ascribed to it.³² Empire and imperialism have largely negative connotations in western political and public discourse today, resulting in a vehement disavowal by some of its continued tradition; though its practice, as discussed above, is very much alive. Nineteenth and early twentieth century colonialism and post-colonial nation-building, by contrast, had no qualms in weaving historical empires, including those of the distant past, into their founding myths and everyday ideological practice. The expatriation and appropriation of artefacts from Iraq and other regions of the Middle East, many derived from early imperial capitals, served in the construction of an origin for Europe’s notions of civilisation and progress. At the same time, the region’s contemporary residents provided a convenient, and supposedly less advanced other against which Europe could favourably differentiate itself.³³ Saddam Hussein’s vigorous restoration of Mesopotamia’s ancient ruins in the second half of the twentieth century sought to harness the symbolism of Babylon’s former cultural prowess and imperial might for his own dictatorial purposes.³⁴ Today, Bronze and Iron Age episodes of Mesopotamian imperial encroachment on the Zagros

²⁹ Stern and Berger (2015, 242).

³⁰ Brown and Hamilakis (2003); for case studies of mainly nationalist intersections with archaeology, see, for instance, papers in Meskell (1998a); Boytner, Swartz Dodd, and Parker (2010); MacMillan (2008, 53–77).

³¹ Hamilakis (2010, 223). ³² E.g. Lieven (2003, 3–27).

³³ Bahrani (1998); McGeough (2015).

³⁴ Bahrani (1998, 2003); Bernhardsson (2010); Seymour (2014, 243–244).