Mario Liverani
Imagining Babylon

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The Modern Story of an Ancient City

Translated from the Italian by Ailsa Campbell

DE GRUYTER

For Robert McCormick Adams

Preface to the Italian Edition

> If a city rises to the sky like a mountain, that city will be reduced to a heap of ruins.
> Babylonian prophecy (*Šumma ālu,* I 16)

> The civilization of the past will become a heap of ruins and in the end a heap of ashes, but ghosts will hover over the ashes.
> *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (1977, p. 22)

The reconstruction of the cultural story of our Western world in the last two hundred years could ideally be portrayed as so many tesserae – one for each possible subject – which build, or should build, a mosaic which shows a picture rich in meaning. One tessera missing until now is the one showing how the city of the Ancient Near-Eastern civilizations (Mesopotamia and surroundings) has been imagined and visualized, studied and reconstructed over two centuries of archaeological excavations and scholarly research. I imagine that the normal reader's immediate reaction is one of irritation: this tessera is so small and abstruse as to be irrelevant, and anyway, the complete picture would be clearly visible and full of meaning even if our tessera were to remain for ever an empty hole. I believe, on the contrary, and not only because of my official position, that no tessera is useless, because all are interconnected and throw light on each other. If anything, I think that our tessera is endowed with a certain appeal and also a diagnostic value as regards relationships between West and East, between modernity and tradition, between colonialism and neo-colonialism, between the humanistic, social, natural-physical and information sciences. Besides, it is one of the very few tesserae that I can attempt to fill from my own personal knowledge.

To tell the truth, whoever wanted to write a book on the subject with due competence and consciousness should know much not only of historical and proto-historical archaeology and many of the philologies of the Ancient Near East (Assyriology, Sumerology and Hittitology, Egyptology, Semitic studies, Persian studies, and several others), but also of the history of town planning and architecture, of the history of art and drawing, of urban sociology, of social anthropology, of macro-economic theories from the nineteenth century onwards, of evolutionism and neo-evolutionism, of neo-Marxism and neo-liberalism, of village communities and agrarian landscapes, of despotism and theocracy, of political events between Europe and the Ottoman Empire, of colonialism and decolonization, of globalization and localization, of neo-geographic approaches and the theory of systems, of computerized graphics and remote sensing, and who knows what else besides. I do not believe that a single person answering this identikit exists in the world, but in any case it is certain that I am not it.

However, having passed so many years of my life dwelling on the question, having written different articles and entire books on particular points, and having finally decided to embark on this undertaking, I set myself to read (in many cases reread) a quantity of books and articles, inside but largely outside my own field of professional competence, over three years of frenetic and uninterrupted frequenting of very varied libraries. From this I have drawn not only ideas and information, confirmations and confutations, corrections and rejections, but also strong intellectual enjoyment. So if then the outcome of my labours should be unsatisfactory, I can always console myself with the famous words of Borges: 'Others boast of the pages they have written; I am proud of those that I have read'. I must, however, confess that the temptation to widen my horizons has arrived too late to allow me to think (and live) in a way a little more complete, because I also feel like Poe's castaway, who towards the end of *Manuscript found in a bottle* says: 'I have been all my life a dealer in antiquities, and have imbibed the shadows of fallen columns at Balbec, and Tadmor, and Persepolis until my very soul has become a ruin.'

At a certain point I had to put an end to the frenzied activity of reading (in every article read others are discovered to read, and so the further one advances, the further away one is from the ideal destination), giving up the search for books and articles whose titles were enticing and at the same time relevant. Fortunately I found great support in the suggestions and comments of numerous colleagues and friends, whom I must here thank. I wish at least to mention my debt to Silvia Alaura, Marcello Barbanera, Isabella Chiari, Francesco Paolo Fiore, Maria Gabriella Micale, Davide Nadali, Vanda Perretta, Maria Grazia Picozzi, Alessandro Vanzetti, Mercedes Viale, Claudio Zambianchi. I then found in Mario Torelli a friend willing to read everything before its final development, receiving from him (apart from the ritual compliments) valuable criticism of both a general and a specific nature.

The title of the book and the Babylonian prophecy cited in the epigraph allude to the biblical myth of the Tower of Babel, of which the prophecy itself is largely an inspiration and model. Whether divine nemesis or historical process, whether moral teaching or systemic outcome, it is certain that the ancient cities were all reduced to heaps of rubble: the Babylonians said *tillu*, from which comes the Arabic *tell*, which indicates the low stratified hills of the remains of the ancient settlements. If the boast of the Assyrian king, Esarhaddon, in describing the deadly advance of his army, was 'Before me cities, behind me heaps of ruins (*tillu*)', the boast of modern Near-Eastern archaeologists could be the reverse: 'Before us *tell*, behind (or after) us cities'. The archaeological and epigraphic rediscovery of the ancient cities of the Near East constitutes a chapter not at all marginal in our recent cultural history, a contribution rich in

consequences, and well able to fit into the fabric of cultural trends and even of historical events of the last two centuries. The maturity of a discipline is also recognizable by being more than the urgency of publication of the unpublished, and of the spatio-temporal framing of data, in order to face a sort of self-analysis or self-historicization of work completed and in progress, and of further perspectives. It is, besides, striking how and to what extent the old myths, the echoing of biblical and classical readings, remain profoundly rooted in our culture, and how, on the contrary, more recent discoveries, as exciting as they are, have great difficulty in penetrating it. And the recent trends towards turning everything into a show and 'mass' sharing of cultural communication draw easier and more attractive nourishment from the old myths than from the boring details and contextualization of the professional historians.

A couple of technical clarifications. On the spatial level, this book has a strong 'nucleus' in the so-called Greater Mesopotamia of the period between 3500 and 500 BC; but it also has a gradually shaded outer extent in time (from the proto-historic premises to classical, late antique and Islamic development) and in space (from Egypt and the Aegean to Iran, to Southern Arabia, to the valley of the Indus, and to Central Asia). Finally, everyone will understand that this book does not pretend to provide a systematic treatment, in a textbook fashion, of the subject, but rather to outline its developments in their important traits. The book has already assumed a size much greater than that initially imagined – and I am grateful to the publisher for having accepted it, although so expanded, and with all the illustrative and bibliographical apparatus. I thank in particular Maria Gabriella Micale and Lucia Mori for having helped me in the iconographical research.

The dedication of this book to Robert McCormick Adams is inevitable and due: it is a question of the only person in the world who to a large measure approaches close to the identikit of the ideal author outlined above, and it is to him that we owe many of the decisive suggestions in carrying our way of handling the subject from the positions of the late nineteenth century to the present level. It is then for me a true pleasure to be able to express to the great Maestro my recognition for everything that I have learnt from him, even without ever having been a pupil, unless a virtual one.

<div align="right">Mario Liverani</div>

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Abbreviations

Journals

AfO	Archiv für Orientforschung
AJA	American Journal of Archaeology
AmAnt	American Antiquity
AmAnthr	American Anthropologist
An	Antiquity
AnnESC	Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations
AoF	Altorientalische Forschungen
ARA	Annual Review of Anthropology
ArOr	Archív Orientální
BaM	Baghdader Mitteilungen
BASOR	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
BCSMS	Bulletin of the Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies
BO	Bibliotheca Orientalis
CA	Current Anthropology
CHM	Cahiers d'Histoire Mondiale
DaM	Damaszener Mitteilungen
IEJ	Israel Exploration Journal
JA	Journal Asiatique
JANES	Journal of the Ancient Near-Eastern Society of Columbia University
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JARCE	Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt
JCS	Journal of Cuneiform Studies
JEA	Journal of Egyptian Archaeology
JESHO	Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient
JNES	Journal of Near-Eastern Studies
MDOG	Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft
OA	Oriens Antiquus
OLZ	Orientalistische Literaturzeitung
Or	Orientalia
PdP	La Parola del Passato
P&P	Past & Present
PO	Paléorient
RA	Revue d'Assyriologie
RANL	Rendiconti dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei
SA	Scienze dell'Antichità
SAAB	State Archives of Assyria, Bulletin
SMEA	Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici
SS	Studi Storici
UF	Ugarit-Forschungen
VO	Vicino Oriente
WA	World Archaeology
ZA	Zeitschrift für Assyriologie

ZAS	Zeitschrift für die Aegyptische Sprache
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
ZDPV	Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins

Series

AASOR	Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research, *New Haven*
ADOG	Abhandlungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, *Berlin*
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament, *Kevelaer (1969 sgg.), Münster (1997 sgg.)*
BaF	Baghdader Forschungen, *Berlin*
BAH	Bibliothèque Archéologique et Historique, *Paris*
BAR Int	British Archaeological Reports, International Series, *Oxford*
BBVO	Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient, *Berlin*
CDOG	Colloquien der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, *Berlin*
CMAO	Contributi e Materiali di Archeologia Orientale, *Rome*
MARI	Mari. Annales de Recherches Interdisciplinaires, *Paris*
OBO	*Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis*, *Freiburg–Göttingen*
OIC	Oriental Institute Communications, *Chicago*
OIP	Oriental Institute Publications, *Chicago*
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, *Leuven*
OWA	One World Archaeology, *London*
PIHANS	Publications de l'Institut historique-archéologique néerlandais de Stamboul, *Leiden*
RAI	Rencontres Assyriologiques Internationales. Comptes-rendus. I–X
RIA	Reallexikon der Assyriologie, *Berlin*
SAOC	Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilizations, *Chicago*
SDOG	Sendschriften der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, *Berlin*
TAVO Bh.	Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, Beihefte, *Wiesbaden*
WVDOG	Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, *Berlin*

1 Rediscovery and perplexity

1.1 The ruins and the biblical curse

There is a Jewish legend which describes the fate of the 'Tower of Babel', the building symbolic of human presumption and divine punishment, destroyed by God, before it was completed, to stop man from reaching the sky, not under divine benediction but in an act of arrogant insubordination. The story goes: 'One part was plunged into the earth, another was consumed by fire, and only a third remained standing. The place where it rose retains to this day one peculiarity: whoever passes it forgets everything he knows'.[1] So no one, even if he had been there, could ever 'remember' and say where it was. There is a somewhat similar Arab-Islamic story, transmitted to us by the great Ibn Khaldun (whose intention was to destroy its historicity), but certainly much older, of the mythical city of 'Iram – a story inspired by the visible ruins of the ancient south Arabian cities: 'When Shaddad [a mythical king] heard a description of Paradise, he said, "I shall build something like it". And he built the city of 'Iram in the desert of Aden over a period of three hundred years. He himself lived nine hundred years. It is said to have been a great city, with castles of gold and silver and columns of emerald and hyacinth, containing all kinds of trees and freely flowing rivers'.[2] But then when the king and his followers went there to live, God destroyed them all, and of the city we know only that it is still there, but no one has ever seen it again.

In both the Jewish tradition, of Old Testament origin, and the Islamic (which also owes much to the biblical tradition), the ancient world's cities in ruins are the outcome and mark of a divine curse against civilizations and kingdoms that had rendered themselves culpable: in Islamic tradition because they predate the true faith, going back to the period of ignorance (*jahilīya*), and in the biblical tradition because they were opponents of Israel. In the Qur'an (XI 117) the principle of 'presumption of guilt', even in the absence of definite information, is stated unequivocally, inasmuch as, 'Your Lord would not destroy any town without cause if its people were acting righteously',[3] a promise placed after a long series of images (with clear biblical echoes) of the great flood and pre-Islamic cities and civilizations in ruins, the legendary 'Ad, Thamud and Madyan.

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1 Ginzberg 1995, p. 171 (from Sanhedrin 109a), and pp. 382–385 on other legends relevant to the Tower. Schmid 1995, pp. 5–7, citing the Judaic sources on the Tower, gives only the first half of this passage!

2 Rosenthal 1958, I, p. 26.

3 Abdel Hameed's translation, 2010, p. 235.

In the biblical tradition, while the lesson told by the myth of the Tower of Babel concerned all humanity, the fate of genuinely historical peoples and cities – as described by the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah on the destruction of Babylon (*Is*. 13, 21, 47; *Jer*. 25:8–13; 50; 51:34–58) or in Nahum's rejoicing at the destruction of Nineveh[4] – concerned the tragic history of the 'chosen people'. Assyria was guilty of the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel (with the consequent scattering of the 'ten lost tribes') and of the attempted siege of Jerusalem at the time of Sennacherib. Babylonia was guilty of the destruction of Jerusalem and her 'first temple' at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar II, and of the consequent exile of the Jews in Babylonia itself. Just as an incomplete ruin had to remain of the Tower of Babel, because the divine prohibition brought to bear during the 'confusion of tongues'[5] had stopped it thus, just so must these capital cities of the 'empires of evil', which had been Nineveh and Babylon, find themselves in a state of complete ruin, which would confirm and realize the outcome of the divine curse. Had they been able to excuse themselves, Assyria and Babylon could surely have said that they were simply carrying out a divine order, from that same Yahweh who was God of Israel and who had used them to punish his people. But it is so much more comfortable to be the order-givers than the executors: the giver of orders can change his mind and forgive (giving proof of his magnanimity), while the executor of the order remains 'enmeshed', more cursed than the victim himself. And besides, Assyria and Babylonia had been so over-zealous and had so much relished their punitive missions that their curse was more than justified.[6]

Biblical memories of the ancient kingdoms of Assyria and Babylonia were therefore deeply marked by moral and theological implications, which made them rather more than snippets of information or occasional curiosities, and which identified allusive, and even fundamental, symbols and principles of shared values. And yet commitment to the faith – be it Judaic, Islamic or Christian – implied that these ruins should remain as such, or, even better, be so obliterated as to be no longer known, not even the places where they had stood. The desire to know and find the ruins of antiquity, therefore, and to reconstruct the images and values of these remote worlds (leaving out the theological worth of their story) belongs rather to the slow and gradual formation of a historicist, and largely secular, vision in the European world.

The western world's interest in antiquity, including that of the Ancient Near East, had developed slowly over the centuries, and then underwent sig-

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4 On Babylonia in the Old Testament: Kratz 1999.

5 Uehlinger 1990

6 Silberman 1991.

nificant acceleration with the Enlightenment of the second half of the eighteenth century, within the context of the great cultural and historiographical changes that heralded the start of 'modernity'; these changes had their roots in the great geographical explorations of the sixteenth century, which had widened our knowledge of our planet, and in the beginnings of modern astronomy, which had widened the dimensions of the universe, and which was then followed by the beginnings of geology, to widen the dimensions of time. As is well known, this enormous spatio-temporal expansion met with censure and resistance from the Church, since it contradicted the biblical text, but it nevertheless sparked off growing awareness of the fact that there exist – in time and in space – worlds different from our own, and that their recognition (be it rediscovery or reconstruction) serves also to enrich our vision of the world, and possibly strengthen our control over it.

As an initial formulation, the antiquity that men wanted to know and revisit in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was obviously the classical world of Greece and Rome. Of this world there remained not only abundant historical and literary sources but also remarkable monuments and entire cities that, in the form of ruins, occupied the European/Mediterranean world, not to mention movable objects of art, which served to enrich the growing collections of private and princely individuals (or cardinals). The 'antiquarian' reconstruction of the world will break out in the movement of Neo-Classicism, with its ideals that were not purely aesthetic but also ethical (the ancient heroes as models of virtue), and finally political (on opposite sides: the Greek city-state and the Roman Empire).[7] The start of the Bourbon excavations at Herculaneum and Pompeii may signal, more symbolically than definitely, this vision,[8] which young members of the European nobility and growing middle classes acquired in their 'Grand Tour' of the antiquities of Rome, Sicily and Greece. Besides, as well as the 'public' excavations of the two Neapolitan sites, there were numerous 'private' initiatives undertaken by the grand families of the Roman nobility, each on their own land in the city and outside, in order to supply their collections of antiquities.[9]

The rediscovery of the Ancient Near East, on the other hand, although parallel in time was a very different event, both in the availability of written mate-

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7 The best introductions (although not recent) to Neo-Classicism: Honour 1968; Assunto 1973. On the eighteenth-century study of antiquity: Pucci 1993.

8 The excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii appear in every history of archaeology: cf. Schnapp 1993, pp. 215–240; Barbanera 1998, pp. 9–10, 19–34.

9 On the Grand Tour, excavations and building of collections, see the studies of Pinelli 2010. On the Colonna collection, Picozzi (ed.) 2010 is definitive.

rial and in the values that people sought to attribute to this world. On the documentary front, while direct knowledge of the classical world (literary and material) had always been maintained, nothing remained of the Ancient Near East, though considered the 'cradle' of our civilization, beyond, to use Johann Gottfried Herder's words at the end of the eighteenth century, 'stories about stories, fragments of history, a dream of the world before us (*ein Traum der Vorwelt*)'.[10] And on the ethical front, while the classical world was perceived as 'our' western world, as a privileged place in which to set inspirational value models, ours by sharing (however discontinuously), eastern civilizations were perceived, even before being rediscovered, as models of the anti-values that were personified above all by the Ottoman Empire: and so, culturally interesting, but also ethically-politically by antithesis. And, as we know, antithesis is a primary instrument of self-identification.

To come to the actual question of the city, we can begin with a fact that is obvious, but pregnant with consequences. While great monumental complexes and indeed entire cities of the classical world (particularly of the time of the Roman Empire) were clearly visible in the Mediterranean and Near-Eastern landscape (enough here to think of Ba'albek and Palmyra, of Leptis Magna and Sabratha), the monuments and cities of the pre-classical Near East remained hidden under stratified mounds, actual artificial hills, known by the name of *tell* in Arabic (and as *hüyük* in Turkish, *tepe* in Kurdish and Persian).[11] And I open here a brief parenthesis to note that the Arabic word *tell* comes from the Assyro-Babylonian *tillu*, which means precisely 'a heap of ruins', and also to recall the passage (already cited in the Preface) in which the Assyrian king Esarhaddon takes up the story, with Tacitean brevity, of the advance of his conquering and destroying army, boasting (he speaks of himself in the third person), 'before him (is) a city, after him a heap of ruins', precisely, a *tell*.[12] Modern archaeologists of the Near East could boast of the contrary, of transforming a *tell* into a city returned to life. Now, stone ruins are legible remains that allow us to add to and mentally reconstruct the building or the city as it must have been; but collapsed unfired brick presents an unformed mass, a non-ruin apparently unimportant and illegible.[13] By applying the distinction

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10 Herder 1784–91, p. 329; notes by Larsen 1987, pp. 96–98, repeated by Moorey 1991, p. 1.

11 On the morphology of *tell*: Naumann 1957, pp. 197–205; Lloyd 1963, pp. 13–28; Wright 1974; Lapp 1975; Butzer 1982, pp. 87–93; Rosen 1986; London 1992; Schirmer 1999; Steadman 2000 and 2005.

12 Frahm 2006, p. 93; the passage is now in Leichty 2011, p. 184 (rev. 13).

13 Building in unfired brick: Sauvage 1998; Glassner 2003, pp. 158–175; Anastasio 2011, pp. 35–44.

dear to Marc Augé,[14] we can say that true and real 'ruins' remain of the classical world, while of the Eastern only 'rubble'. Already in Strabo (16.1.5) the definition 'the great city is (by now) a great desert'[15] fitted Babylon even better than Arcadian Megalopolis, and Lucan's lament (*Bellum Civile* 9.969) comes to mind, *etiam periere ruinae*, 'even the ruins have perished', which, however, refers to Troy and Pergamum.[16]

Alongside, therefore, theological considerations, technical factors took substance (the different resistance of unfired brick compared to stone) to explain how it came about that the Near East, although strewn with Graeco-Roman monuments, had preserved no visible remains of the 'accursed' Assyrian and Babylonian empires. Over and above Mesopotamia, the landscape of Palestine, a land of Old Testament and Gospel *par excellence*, was also scattered with remains and *tell*, which had given rise since antiquity to moral explanations (or 'aetiologies'): from Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed for their sins (*Genesis* 19) to Jericho and 'Ay destroyed, accursed, reduced to heaps of ruins 'even unto this day' for having been opposed to the Israelite conquest of the Promised Land (*Joshua* 6 and 8).[17] If the Mediterranean classical world had valuable and wonderful 'ruins' that gave rise to positive aetiologies,[18] the world of Mesopotamia and the Levant had only 'rubble', which could only provide aetiologies of guilt and eternal punishment.

The more acute European travellers in the Near East remained struck and perplexed at seeing the plains strewn with *tell*, and at first had difficulty in understanding their origin – even although their nature as a mine of ancient objects was well known to the local population, who had long been accustomed to bore into them in search of something to sell. The majority of travellers were driven by religious motives and remained content with the theological explanation (human guilt and divine punishment) but those inspired by a secular spirit sought human, political or socio-economic explanations. A writer of the Enlightenment such as Volney, who crossed Syria in 1785, was struck by the numerous *tell* in the area south of Aleppo, and drew from them a historical and political lesson. These remains of ancient settlements, so frequent in a region now desolate but once clearly fertile and populated, demonstrated to Volney

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14 Augé 2003.

15 Cf. also Pausanias 8.33: 'Of Babylon the sanctuary of Bel remains, but of Babylon itself, than which the sun saw no greater city, nothing now survives except the walls'.

16 Papini 2009.

17 Topographical aetiologies of the Old Testament: Long 1968; but Alt 1936 remains the fundamental text. The name, 'Ay, means 'ruin'.

18 Ruins and memories in the classical world: Boardman 2002; Alcock 2002; Papini 2011.

the weight of human factors and, above all, the role of political structures: the desolation was the fruit of the fiscal banditry of Ottoman greed and misgovernment, hand in hand with the plunder and brigandry of the Bedu and the uncaring indolence of the peasantry.[19] But Volney likewise, when he wished to ponder more deeply the rise and fall ('the revolution') of civilizations and empires, saw himself standing in front of the majestic ruins of Palmyra,[20] and certainly not in front of some insignificant *tell*. Edward Gibbon, a good twenty years earlier, had thought no differently: he also was intent upon pondering in front of majestic ruins (in his case the Forum at Rome), and on meditating upon the fall of empires: 'The provinces of the East present the contrast of Roman magnificence with Turkish barbarism. The ruins of antiquity, scattered over uncultivated fields, and ascribed by ignorance to the power of magic, scarcely afford a shelter to the oppressed peasant or wandering Arab'.[21] And again, in the mid-nineteenth century, Layard, who certainly knew the nature and potential of the *tell*, having excavated a couple of large ones and visited hundreds more,[22] contrasted the monumental ruins of Anatolia and the Levant with the shapeless *tell* to be encountered east of the Euphrates.[23] Even half a century after the discovery of the Assyrian capital Lord Byron contrasted the formless ruins of Nineveh and Babylon with the significant ruins of the Parthenon.[24]

The fact is that a heap of broken bricks does not keep (at least not before being correctly excavated) either the form or style of the monumental remains stratified inside it, as stone ruins do, since the latter remain more or less 'intact' and allow the visitor to reconstruct mentally their form and function. In a wider Eastern pre-classical context, not only the Syrian-Mesopotamian one, there were two striking exceptions: Pharaonic Egypt and the site of Persepolis (to which I will return in the next chapter). But apart from these concrete exceptions, there was also, and above all, one special case, imaginary and symbolic, to be postulated, and indeed was postulated, on the basis of the biblical text (*Genesis* 11:1–9): the Tower of Babel, so high as to touch the sky, massive and majestic, part of which should have remained visible in Babylon, even if reduced to the state of an incomplete ruin, to which it had been condemned,

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19 Volney 1787, II, pp. 59–60.

20 Volney 1791. Volney had never visited Palmyra, but saw Wood's 1753 account (Volney 1787, vol. 2, pp. 259–263; and Barbanera 2009, pp. 45–46). Carena 1981 has interesting points of discussion on the theme of ruins.

21 Gibbon Vol. 1, p. 55, Oxford World's Classics 1903.

22 Layard 1849, I, p. 315 on the hundred *tell* at the foot of Jebel Sinjar.

23 Cf. Layard 1849, II, pp. 249–279; 1853, pp. 527–531 on the illegibility of brick architecture.

24 Byron 1821 (in 1901 edn., pp. 547–548).

not by normal deterioration in the course of time, but by the divine curse meant to break and punish man's insane ambition. So these few travellers who, not content with a Levant more easily accessible, confined by the triangle of Istanbul, Cairo and Jerusalem, pushed the 'voyage to the East' as far as Mesopotamia, did so in order to look for the Tower of Babel – the search for the Earthly Paradise (the biblical Eden) appearing less easily practicable.[25]

However, even the Tower remained difficult to identify. At the beginning of the nineteenth century only the still towering remains of the stepped temples (the *ziqqurat* as the ancient Babylonians called them) of 'Aqar Quf (the ancient Dur-Kurigalzu) and of Birs Nimrud (the ancient Borsippa) presented themselves as reasonable candidates for identification as the Tower of Babel[26] until, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the excavation of Babylon by Robert Koldewey brought to the light the actual remains of the *ziqqurat* of Babylon itself.[27] But well before being rediscovered on the ground, the Tower of Babel, besides providing a subject for written and pictorial reconstructions based on pure imagination (we shall see them in § 1.2), was above all a symbol indicative of the relation between the Ancient Near East and the modern western world. We know how and how widely the custom of reading the Bible became diffused (especially in the Protestant world), and how deeply rooted biblical knowledge became in western Christian culture. The events in the Bible were part of the fundamental culture not only of the ecclesiastical and intellectual elite, who had direct knowledge of them from the biblical text (whether or not in translation), but also of the whole population, who were given a sense of these events by pictorial representation, by Sunday sermons, and by use of the liturgy. The Tower of Babel had then an altogether unique

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25 Ancient localizations of Eden: Alexandre 1988; Bockmuehl 2010; mediaeval: Cardini 2004: Assyriological: Delitzsch 1881; Albright 1922; Deimel 1925; and now comprehensively, Scafi 2007. Lemaire's 1981 suggestion (Eden = Bit-Adini, an Aramaic kingdom) is not convincing. On the 'journey to the East' cf. Berchet 1985; Brilli 2009; and the critical approach of Said 1978 (pp. 166–197 of the 1979 paperback edn.); for a more technical approach Larsen 1992; Liverani 1994; Invernizzi 2002; 2005; 2008; Di Paolo 2006; 2008. Sixteenth-century presuppositions, in a commercial context: Ooghe 2007 (with rich bibliography).

26 The candidature of Birs Nimrud (once 'Aqar Quf, too distant, was rejected) was eliminated in 1854 by Rawlinson, who showed that the ruins were of Borsippa (but Peters 1897, p. 124, still has, 'Birs Nimrud, the Tower of Babel'). On the *ziqqurat* of Borsippa cf. now Allinger and Csollich 2004. The history of the voyages and archaeological discoveries has been told many times: already in Budge 1925, pp. 58–73; Pallis 1956, pp. 19–93 (travellers) and 266–384 (archaeological discoveries); and then in Uehlinger 1990, pp. 181–200 (travellers) and 201–230 (archaeological discoveries); Mazower 2002; Fagan 2007 (popular account); Reade 2008a; Prato 2010; Fenollòs (ed.) 2010; 2011; Brusasco 2012.

27 § 2.1; Lenzen 1941 on the *ziqqurat* of Uruk and Nippur.

power of imagery, linked both to the question of 'confusion of tongues', which had great influence on the beginnings of linguistic classification in a proto-modern age,[28] and to the ethical and theological value of the story.

Of these Ancient Near-Eastern cities, however unknowable materially, there was yet thought to be information of a character both economic/political and related to town planning. A negative stereotype and an urbanization model resulted in the meeting of the biblical and classical threads, which began with Herodotus and Ctesias to spread by means of writers such as Diodorus Siculus up to the *Bibliotheca* of Photius. The biblical texts provided the theological framework and 'logical' explanation of the curse, while the classical texts on the other hand gave measurements and descriptions of the Near-Eastern megalopoleis and, above all, literary embellishments and narrative stories of the political (despotism) and moral (luxury, cruelty and such like) aspects. The classical stories of Ninus, Semiramis and Sardanapalus became well known among the educated public in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance age, without indeed ever reaching the diffusion of the Bible, but lending themselves more easily than the Bible to all the charm of visual and literary elaboration.

In our eyes, however, it is the aspects of actual urbanization known in these currents, both biblical and classical, that are of primary interest. The biblical book of Jonah gives a picture of Nineveh as a huge metropolis, which takes three days to cross (Kafka's 'Messenger of the Emperor' would have found himself at his ease there). Singularly analogous is Aristotle's 'fact' (*Politics* 3.1276a,28–30) that when Babylon was conquered by the Persians, part of the city had still not heard even a rumour of this after three days. In even greater detail the first book of Herodotus (1.178–187) describes Babylon as a square city, enormous, on a Hippodamean grid, with houses of three or four storeys, imposing perimeter walls, and at the centre the citadel, half palace and half temple. The surrounding agricultural land had also been ordered systematically with a complex network of canals, the work of the queens Semiramis and Nitocris. The other detailed description of Babylon is derived by Diodorus from Ctesias, eager to differentiate himself from Herodotus. For Ctesias (Diodorus 2.1.4–28) Babylon is an enormous rectangular city.[29] The sources present numerous variants (as we shall see in detail in § 1.6), but they agree (and indeed vie with each other) in giving an image of enormous cities, evidently populated by innumerable human hordes, but at the same time well

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28 There is Borst's huge work (1957–63) on the diversification of languages and peoples from antiquity to the present age. The writings of Olender 1989 and Eco 1993 are more manageable.
29 Classical descriptions of Babylonia: Prontera 1994, 2000.

organized because of far-sighted royal sagacity.[30] Besides, the enormous dimensions did not impede a lightning speed of building: in Josephus (*Ant. Iud.* 10.224–5) Babylon's three-fold wall was built in fifteen days, and in Strabo (1.5.9) Sardanapalus boasts of having built the Cilician cities of Tarsus and Anchiale in a single day.

This picture of urban building clearly served to provide a material setting for eastern despotism. Not by chance it was once again Herodotus, with all the weight of his authority, who was most responsible for establishing the influential stereotype of antithesis between East and West. The theory, arising from Herodotus' description in his *Histories* of the Persian Wars (and already at work in Aeschylus' *Persians*), is well known: given the quantitative disproportion of human and material resources between the widespread Persian Empire and the Greek *poleis*, there must have been a qualitative factor that enabled the small to prevail against the large, and that factor was liberty. Free citizens had the virtue and motivation that the slaves of the emperor lacked. The Persian Wars as described by Herodotus unleashed an entire sequence of struggles between 'fighters for freedom' and 'the empire of evil', which in the nineteenth century was obviously identified with the Ottoman Empire, with the preceding empires of Assyria, Babylonia and Persia seen at its shoulders. The Greek War of Independence (1825–30) against the Ottoman Empire came to be fought not only by the Greeks (who, to tell the truth, were more Levantine than European) but also by European intellectuals, from Lord Byron to the Italian Santorre di Santarosa, rushing to help brandishing a musket in one hand and the *Histories* of Herodotus in the other.

If the idea that Near-Eastern cities were vast megalopoleis harmonized well with the fact that they were the seats of 'oriental despots' and their anti-values (the caprice of the despot, the general subjugation), in the course of the classical writing on the Near East (whether Persian or Assyro-Babylonian) over and above Herodotus there came to prevail a thread going back to Ctesias which made the Near East the seat of thoroughly negative values and behaviour: luxury, licentiousness, sexual depravity, cruelty, which, added to an atmosphere of magic and intrigue produced a mixture only too well suited to supply inspired ideas and plots for works of entertainment. Hellenistic and late-antique short stories and poems, with Semiramis and Sardanapalus as protagonists (to name the best known characters), committed to immortal memory the stereotypes of a dissolute and despotic Near East, set in palaces (more than in cities) with plenty of harems, eunuchs and viziers, in all of which eighteenth and

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30 Historical Babylon was a 'megalopolis' by the standards of the time (Margueron 2000); but that is another argument.

nineteenth-century readers recognized a Near East more unchangeable than ancient, perfectly embodied in the Ottoman 'Seraglio' with its intrigues and scandalous affairs. Moral condemnation of the great Assyro-Babylonian capitals runs through the entire history of western culture, from early Christianity to Romanticism, but to repeat it here would be out of place.[31]

1.2 Imagining unknown cities

If you had asked a Renaissance scholar how, specifically, an ancient city was built, you would have found him perhaps a little perplexed, but not unprepared. To begin with he might have cited the best of ancient and modern treatises (from Vitruvius to Leon Battista Alberti)[32] on the external shape of the city and its civic organization. But, continuing, he would have finished by admitting that he imagined it as similar to the cities of his own time. And if the inquisitive (but luckily imaginary) questioner had asked how a city of the Ancient Near East was built, before the time of Alexander the Great, let us say at the time of Semiramis and Sardanapalus, then the scholar would have become more deeply perplexed. Faced with a problem that had never been put, and with his thoughts oscillating between the Tower of Babel and Herodotus' description of Babylon, he would have been unable to envisage anything (a city, a whole world) that was unknown and foreign to him.

The truth is that interest in the archaeological discovery of ancient cities is but the apex, the point of final maturity, of a cultural process of extraordinarily wide compass and sustained effort, namely, to imagine and visualize the ancient world according to its own shapes and forms, stepping beyond the facile anachronism – which held sway for centuries – of dressing ancient heroes in mediaeval and then Renaissance garb, and of placing their adventures in cities and landscapes copied (so to speak) from those familiar to the artists of the age. The historicizing of the ancient (in architecture and city planning as in the visual arts) went hand in hand not only with the growth of an interest in antiquities and then with the early stages of archaeology, but also with the beginnings of a historiography that was not just bare chronicles, or moral warnings or biblical curses. It has often been observed that the beginnings of

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31 Summaries in McCall 1998, pp. 185–189. Babylonia in literary tradition: Haas 1999; Glassner 2003, pp. 64–94 and 199–228 (without notes and bibliography); also Brusasco 2012, pp. 209–273.

32 Alberti's works (published posthumously, 1485) are studded with quotations from the classics, including on Babylonia.

interest in archaeology (which implies a 'layered' vision of the earth), and in a history and chronology based upon the timeless years of prehistory, owe much to the great formative period of geology and physical anthropology at a scientific level. The fundamental works of Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin partly preceded but also partly followed the beginning of the Assyrian excavations of the decade 1845–55: Lyell's *Principles of Geology* appeared in 1843, and his *Geological Evidence of the Antiquity of Man* in 1863, while Darwin's *Origin of Species* came out in 1859 and *The Descent of Man* in 1871. So although the 'dilettantes' Botta and Layard, who excavated the Assyrian capitals in the mid-nineteenth century (as we shall see in § 1.3), were not right in the vanguard, they were, all things considered, firmly part of the cultural and scientific climate of the time.

Coming then to the question of how to visualize the ancient city in a non-anachronistic way, before the eighteenth century the problem did not really arise; it was perfectly natural for Piero della Francesca to set the meeting of Solomon with the Queen of Sheba, or the recovery of the true cross, in a Jerusalem perched like a fifteenth-century village on top of a Tuscan hill, or for Benozzo Gozzoli in Pisa's Camposanto to picture in a similar way the Babylonians intent on building their Tower, or for a fifteenth-century French miniaturist to imagine the temple of Solomon as a 'decorated' Gothic cathedral. And when eighteenth-century Neo-classicism wanted to visualize, in a philologically appropriate way, the ancient cities of Greece and Rome, there was no problem to be faced. Classical ancient monuments had always occupied a noticeable place in the European and Mediterranean landscapes – mostly as ruins, but also as conspicuous monuments, while the eighteenth-century study of antiquity had added the final touches to a rich repertoire of ancient habits and iconography, and Vitruvius provided detailed technical information.[33] The case of the pre-classical Near East was very different: with the ancient Mesopotamian cities buried under the enigmatic *tell* of which we spoke before, only Egypt, and the isolated case of Persepolis, provided visible and conspicuous remains.

Egyptian antiquities had always drifted around the Western world, in the form of obelisks, sarcophagi, sphinxes, canopic jars and other decorated objects, much appreciated by the *Wunderkammer* antiquarianism (not to mention the Masonic symbolism);[34] but ancient Egypt also became a field of topographical and architectural study following the Napoleonic expedition of 1793–99 and then the Prussian expedition of 1842–45, which, in their sumptuous publica-

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[33] Antiquarianism and the beginnings of archaeology: Pucci 1993; Schnapp 1993, pp. 109–157.

[34] Egypt-mania: Baltrušaitis 1967; Humbert 1989; relation to Masonry: Pucci 1993, pp. 34–38.

tions, brought back images of temples and entire cities emerging from the sand. The architectural and decorative style of ancient Egypt was therefore readily available in the minds of those who wanted to picture buildings and cities foreign to classical culture and placed in the East. As for Persepolis, frequently visited and described from the time of the memorable but tragic Danish expedition of 1761–67,[35] the pictures in Niebuhr's account, like those of Ker Porter (1821–22), Buckingham (1827) and still others, gave the impression of a kind of 'plantation' of columns, more than a real city.

Even in Egypt, there were no complete cities, no inherently urban structures; there were, however, temple complexes so extensive and comprehensive (think of the Karnak-Luxor complex) as to allow the reconstruction of the image of a city, at least in its central and ceremonial aspects. To take just one example, David Roberts' 1829 painting entitled *Departure of the Israelites* (completed a year after the publication of the last volume of the *Description de l'Égypte*) depicts an Egyptian city which in its excessive monumentalism (with four levels of colonnades, and pyramids springing up all over) shows a basis of specific 'philological' knowledge which would have been unthinkable (at that period) for the other parts of the Ancient Near East.

But the problem of visualizing the Ancient Near-Eastern cities in a non-anachronistic way, quite apart from being difficult to solve from lack of relevant documentary material, was also of little, or at least only selective, interest. Prior to their discovery, that is, between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, did anyone need to envisage how Nineveh or Babylon had been built?[36] Really only painters and landscape artists, above all the painter of biblical and classical themes, who, however, had a preference for internal settings, and thus wanted to envisage costumes and furniture but not entire cities. The one subject that led more directly to architectural and urban visualization was the building of the Tower of Babel. Examples are plentiful, and tell different stories of the building: they appear from the thirteenth century and then become more and more frequent towards the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[37] The pre-Renaissance pictures are based only on the biblical text and concentrate on the Tower alone, without an urban setting. They are clearly not intended as 'historical' representations of the architec-

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35 History of the exploration of Persepolis: Pallis 1956, pp. 55–64.

36 Babylonia in European culture: Allard 2008a.

37 Iconographic collections in Parrot 1949, pp. 169–176 (also 1953b, pp. 39–42; 1970, pp. 98–101); Klengel and Brandt 1982; Minkowski 1983; Vicari 1985; 2000, pp. 98–114; Neumann 1997; Albrecht 1999; André-Salvini (ed.) 2008, pp. 436–497; Seymour 2008d; Marzahn and Schauerte (eds.), *passim*.
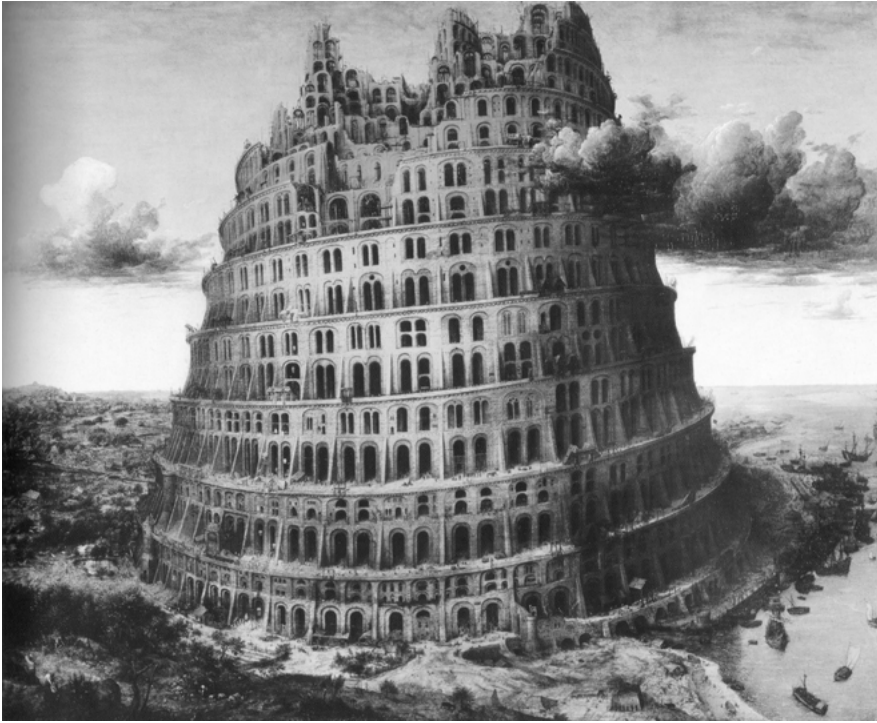
Fig. 1: Pieter Brueghel, *The Tower of Babel* (1565). Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

ture and habits, but only to show skilful stone-masons at work on their scaffolding, of dimensions better suited to a human scale than to a tower meant to reach the sky.

From the sixteenth century, however, the Tower becomes depicted within the urban setting of Babylonia – I believe as a result of the spread of the texts of Herodotus (Lorenzo Valla's Latin translation came out in 1474) and of Diodorus. In this way the various details that could be extracted from the classical descriptions found themselves faithfully portrayed as the surroundings of the biblical Tower: the square plan of the city, the right-angled urban grid, the high city walls, the innumerable towers, the city gates, the bridge over the river that cuts the city in two. These elements are exemplified in famous paintings, such as those of Pieter Brueghel (1563, 1564/68) [fig. 1], which created a school of followers in the Low Countries, for example with the paintings of Maerten van Valckenborch (1595), Lucas van Valckenborch, Brueghel the Younger and others. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were

Prospectus Turris Babylonicæ ex Præscripto R. Adm. Patris Athanasÿ Kircheri Soc. Jesu.

TURRIS BABEL.
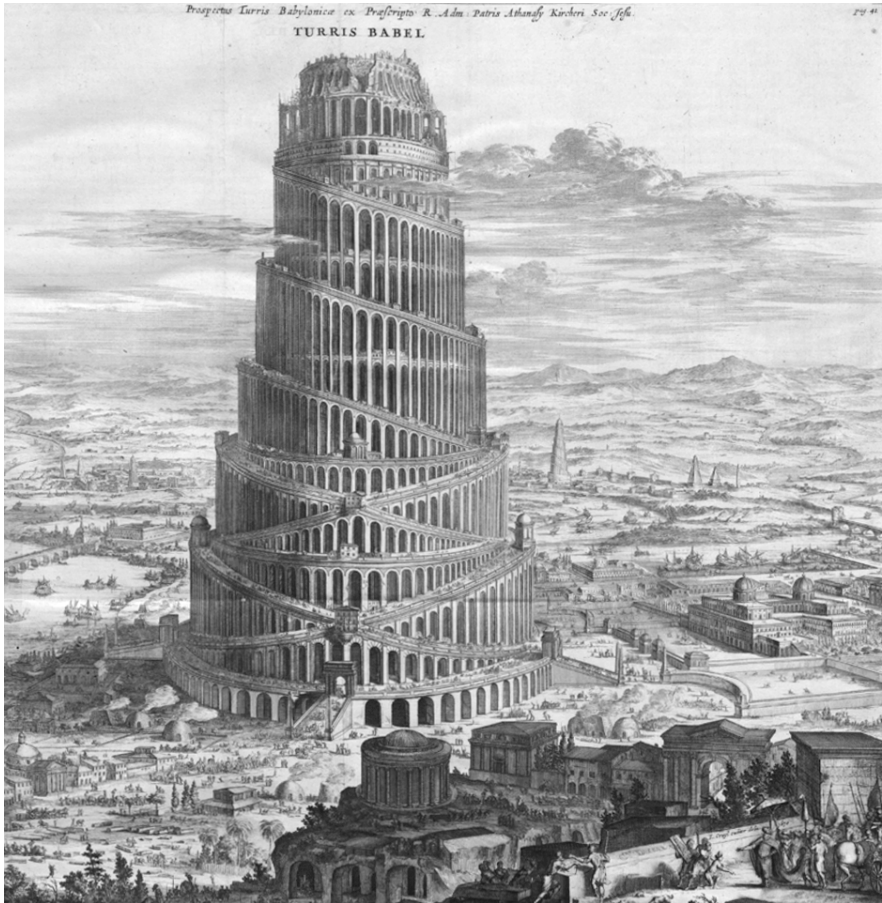
Fig. 2: Athanasius Kircher, *The Tower of Babel* (1679).

above all huge numbers of engravings, for the most part somewhat repetitive and of poor quality, but with some of considerable value – only think of the famous engravings by Athanasius Kircher (1679) [fig. 2], which portray both the single Tower and the whole city, or of the *Spectacula Babylonica* of Johann Fischer von Erlach (1721–23) [fig. 3].[38] The Tower is the centre of attention, but also provides an excuse to portray the whole city, with the help of descriptions and measurements from classical authors, such as the two cited above, in order to draw up genuine urban design 'projections'. Moreover, the bird's eye view

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38 On Kircher: Fletcher 2011.

Fig. 3: Johann Fischer von Erlach, *The city of Babylon* (1721). London, the British Library.

of Babylon adds itself to the tradition of the 'portrait of a city' which portrays real cities and which runs through the history of European art from around 1470 to around 1770 (then to be cast aside in the division between topographical plans, of scientific accuracy, and pictorial 'panoramas').[39] Also the 'portraits of cities' on one side seek to be technically accurate, and therefore realistic, but on the other involve an ideological twisting of the evidence towards a model of the 'ideal city', and therefore 'imaginary' cities are not far distant from this thread.

There was, however, one significant, and familiar, exception to the imaginary representations of Babylonia:[40] in 1616 Pietro della Valle betook himself to the spot and not only correctly identified Babylon with Tel Babil near Hilla, and even had a quick sounding carried out, but, what is of interest here, he had drawings made of the *tell* as a realistic portrayal of what remained of the Tower of Babel. The drawings remained unpublished until Athanasius Kircher brought them out in 1679, to make a clear contrast with the reconstructions full of imagery which were then current.

39 de Seta 2011.
40 Invernizzi 2000.

En molem ædificant animisque, opibusque parati, Vertice quæ nubes, et vertice tangeret astra.

Fig. 4: Maarten van Heemskerck, *The Tower of Babel* (1569). Paris, Bibliothéque nationale de France.

It was not just the city that remained open to different interpretations, but, to an even greater extent the Tower, which had been far less described by classical authors. Few artists portrayed it as square (as Herodotus clearly says at 1.181), and it is only by chance (I would say) that Maarten van Heemskerck's lithograph (1569) [fig. 4] so extraordinarily hits the mark in being not too removed from the appearance of a real *ziqqurat,* as the archaeologists will later establish [fig. 5]. The prevalent cylindrical form derives instead from the Islamic world, with the tower of the mosque of Samarra or the minaret of the Cairo mosque of Ibn Tulun as possible models. As for the context, the Renaissance images do not yet set themselves the problem of 'archaeological' accuracy and place the Tower in the landscape of their own times: either empty (but more rural than desert), or urban, with a Babylon which, among Flemish painters, tends to resemble a busy river port. When, with the eighteenth century, a sense of antiquity is sought, painters obviously turned to the classical world's decorative and constructive elements, but, wanting to add at least some 'eastern' touches, their only option was to turn to Egypt (putting obelisks here and there, and some pyramids) or to the Ottoman world (adding cupolas and minarets).
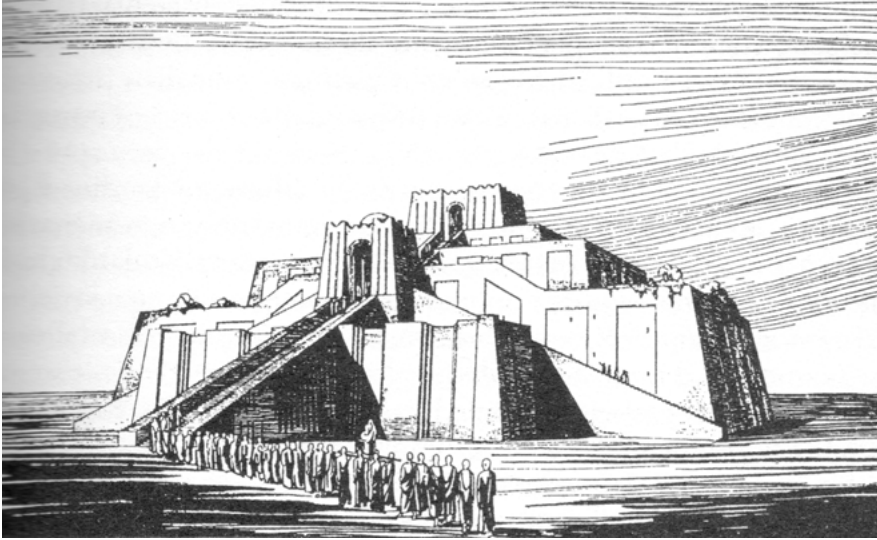
Fig. 5: The *ziqqurat* of Ur.

At this point perhaps we can be allowed to take a leap ahead. When the real 'Tower' is excavated at Babylon by Robert Koldewey's expedition in 1913 (as we shall see in § 2.1), and shows without any possibility of doubt that it was square, many artists (not Assyriologists) continue undaunted to portray it as circular. Moreover, Koldewey himself,[41] archaeologist and architect, reconstructs it as very perpendicular, as a parallelepiped, as a real 'tower', rather than in pyramid form as a *ziqqurat* (the upper part is entirely a reconstruction). It has to be said: behold the power of the name![42] And, again, he reconstructs the whole city of Babylon, taking into account the information gained so far (thanks to his own excavations) but also allowing himself to be influenced by the classical descriptions (Herodotus and Diodorus), and so reconstructing a right-angled plan much more regular than emerges from the excavation. From Athanasius Kircher's Babylon to Robert Koldewey's, there was more continuity than rupture, and the tradition seems to have greater weight than the new specific discovery.

The Tower apart, other biblical or classical episodes (such as the death of Sardanapalus or the story of Judith and Holofernes) that were the subjects of

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[41] Koldewey 1913 (fig. 121b in the 1981 edition); 1918b, with figs, 8 and 10.
[42] Cf. Schmid 1995, pp. 9–24; Micale 2008c; Unger 1931, figs 30 and 35 take account of the previous portrayal. A different reconstruction in Wiseman 1985, pp. 68–75.

Fig. 6: John Martin: *The fall of Nineveh*. London, British Museum.

pictorial elaboration were for the most part (as we pointed out earlier) set in-doors, which required the artist to envisage furniture and habits, but not the urban complex. Real urban images are therefore rather rare, although certainly not absent. I want to exemplify this by reference to three paintings by John Martin in the first half of the nineteenth century.[43] The first in chronological order is the *Fall of Babylon* (1819), the second is the *Seventh Plague of Egypt* (1823), and the third the *Fall of Nineveh* (1829) [fig. 6].[44] The second anticipates in certain aspects (with colonnades on more than one level and pyramids springing up here and there) Robert's 1829 *Departure of the Israelites*, which we discussed earlier, but it also, and more markedly, anticipates the *Fall of Nineveh* not only by its leaden sky and violent storm clouds, but also by the slanting flight of the colonnades. It is obvious that Martin, by moving the sub-ject of his painting from the Egyptian to the Assyrian city, needed to drop the most obvious 'Egyptianisms' (such as, above all, the pyramids) but kept nearly

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43 On Martin: DNB ed. 2.

44 Assyriological notes in McCall 1998, pp. 189–191; Bahrani 2001b; Bohrer 2006, pp. 228–229 with fig. 20; Seymour 2008e with figs. 167–168; Allard in André-Salvini (ed.) 2008, pp. 494–495. The *Fall of Babylon* is reproduced and commented on by Woodward 2001, pp. 162–164 with fig. 15; also cf. Wullen and Schauerte (eds.) 2008, p. 122.

unchanged almost all the rest, in absence of an alternative. By so doing, he had to pass from a reconstruction within certain 'philological' limits (the Egyptian) to one totally arbitrary (the Assyro-Babylonian). Martin himself recognized this honestly, explaining, 'the style of architecture, particularly of the Egyptian on the one hand, and of ancient Indian on the other, has been invented as the most appropriate for a city situated between the two countries, and necessarily in frequent intercourse with them,' all the more since Nebuchadnezzar, conqueror (according to the classical tradition) of both Egypt and India, must have imported architects and other craftsmen (as was the custom at the time), who would have worked together with the Babylonian ones.[45] But it has to be said that the British Empire of the time also placed Mesopotamia (which it did not yet control) halfway between its two well-known bulwarks of Egypt and India.

The same localization used by Martin is found in the work of Thomas Cole. His cycle 'The Course of Empire'[46] includes a painting of the destruction of Rome (1836)[47] which is clearly inspired by Martin's destructions of Nineveh and Babylon. Viewed obliquely, with a foreground which here is meant to be the side of the Palatine looking towards the Circus Maximus, there are again levels of colonnades, tempestuous skies, slaughter and desperation. Four years later (1840) when Cole conceived *The Architect's Dream*, with a mixture of styles which he would have liked to be 'universal', once the dark Gothic of the left corner is removed, what remains is the same oblique view of Egyptian and classical colonnades, giving onto a river studded with boats. Even after the archaeological discovery of Nineveh this design will remain in force: as an example we have the painting of 'Nineveh' (really Nimrud) commissioned by Layard from Thomas Mann Baynes (and published in 1849) with the view of the city on the river [fig. 7], which fits well into the preceding tradition. And again, in Gustave Doré's portrayals of eastern cities (1866) the scenes set at Susa reappear at Persepolis (inserting, however, Assyrian bulls in a city gate which clearly belongs to Khorsabad); but the scenes set at Babylon and Nineveh are a good deal fuller of fantasies (on Thomas Cole's model) with colonnades on several levels, improbable columns, and in no way consistent with what the excavations had meanwhile documented.[48]

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45 Cited by McCall 1998, p. 191.

46 Woodward 2001, pp. 178–180.

47 Illustrated on the cover of Ward Perkins 2010.

48 Pedde 2000.

Fig. 7: Thomas Mann Baynes, *Nineveh* (1853), (actually Nimrud).

It is also noticeable that in the first half of the nineteenth century both Martin and Cole favour destruction (of Nineveh, of Babylon, of Rome) as if the most important fact about these centres of ancient civilizations is that they fell, were destroyed, no longer exist. And conversely, in Degas' picture (c.1860) portraying Semiramis building Babylon – a theme of classical, not biblical, literary origin – the main element is the character of Semiramis, not the city of Babylon, which we see only indistinctly in the distance.[49] Only after the discovery of the Assyrian capital, in contrast, will the same city design, with slanting colonnades along the river, be applied (exactly as in Baynes' work) to the living and thriving city and not to its ruinous destruction.

Secondly, alongside paintings, there were the stage sets for tragedies and lyrical works very often set in classical antiquity or the Middle Ages (to take only the many tragedies of Corneille, Racine and Shakespeare), and many more, with biblical subjects, rooted in the Ancient Near East. The question of 'archaeological' accuracy gained authority in stage sets more slowly than in painting: it began in the mid-eighteenth century[50] but dragged on for more than a century, if even at the end of the nineteenth century Oscar Wilde upheld

49 Bohrer 1998, p. 347; 2003; 2006, pp. 255–256; Bahrani 2001a, pp. 176–177; Asher-Greve 2006, pp. 349–354. On Semiramis Asher-Greve 2006; Bernbeck 2008.
50 Above all in the writings of Pietro Gonzaga, cf. Biggi 2006. My thanks to Mercedes Viale for drawing my attention to this.

its non-obligatory nature, 'archaeological accuracy is merely a condition of illusionist stage effect; it is not its quality'[51] – but modern archaeologists do not take umbrage, it does not concern them.

Stage sets conceived as Egyptian also enjoyed a solid documentary foundation, which Mesopotamia on the other hand lacked. Thus Karl Friedrich Schinkel's Egyptian stage sets for Mozart's *Magic Flute* at the Berlin Opera House in 1816,[52] while the interpretation is obviously arbitrary (with the pyramid on the backcloth), are based upon direct knowledge. The situation for the authors of stage scenery in an Assyro-Babylonian context is very different; they needed first of all to imagine what the Assyrian cities could be like and then (after the middle of the nineteenth century) to take account of the information which arose from their discovery. This is a question that has only recently attracted scholars' attention and which would be worth the trouble of analysing systematically. The most propitious case is given by Rossini's *Semiramis*, which, written in 1823, stretches throughout the whole period, before, during and after the discovery – but I do not want here to enter into a discussion which emerges in the course of analysis on the part of other scholars, in particular of Julia Asher-Greve.[53] All the same, the delay in taking note of the reality revealed by Assyrian excavations, or, to put it differently, the persistence of previous stereotypes, means that even the sequence of nineteenth-century stage sets for Verdi's *Nabucco* (which came out in 1842, coinciding with the discovery, if not yet of Babylon, at least of Nineveh) lends itself to similar considerations.[54] I shall limit myself to just one example, the stage set which my (possible) ancestor Romolo Liverani prepared for the performance of *Nabucco* at Genoa in 1846 [fig. 8].[55] There is still nothing Assyro-Babylonian but plenty from Egypt (the capitals, the pyramids), something from India (the elephants), something Islamic (the tower of Samarra), and the usual slanting view of colonnades above, as in the pictorial works of Martin or Cole.

In practice, the solution adopted to visualize cities which were in fact unknown was a mixture of classical (Greek) and Egyptian elements, with long colonnades, even built on more than one level – which will then prove totally foreign to the unfired brick architecture of Mesopotamian cities – and with plenty of obelisks and the odd sphinx. To this mixture is added, often and

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51 Wilde 1930, p. 120.

52 Reproduced in the catalogue *The Age of Neo-Classicism*, London 1972, pl. 100(a).

53 Asher-Greve 2006.

54 Babylonia in theatre scenery: Crespi Morbio 2004; Allard 2008b. On *Nabucco* now Nadali 2010–11.

55 On Liverani cf. Vitali 1990.
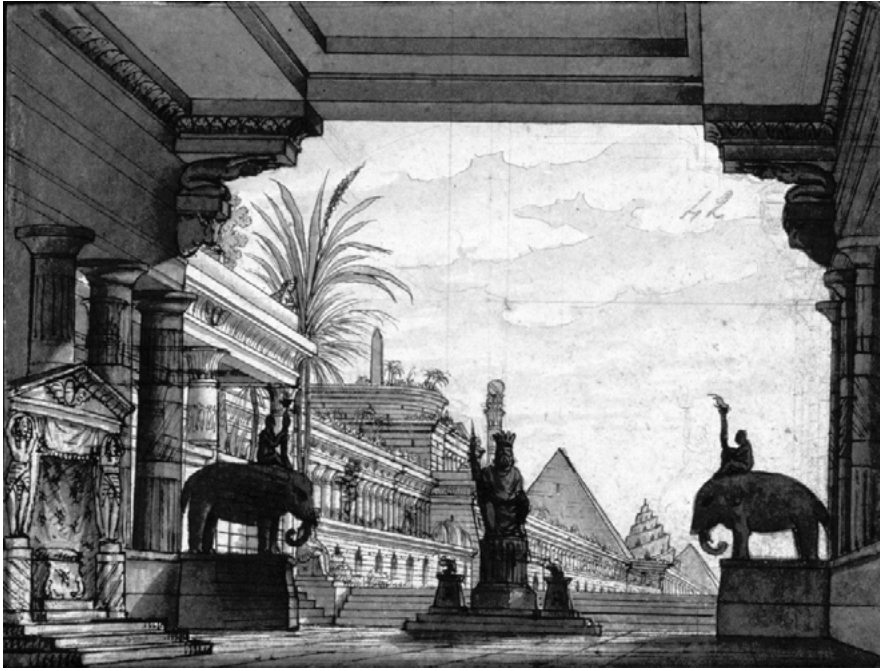
Fig. 8: Romolo Liverani, stage-set for *Nabucco*.

willingly, something of Ottoman architecture, showing cupolas and minarets, clearly useful in picturing an unchangeable Near East which therefore needed to retain elements of remote antiquity in a modern age. As for taking account of the concrete reality revealed by the excavations in Assyria and Babylonia, this was a weak and slow process, as if the biblical and classical facts, deeply rooted in western culture, were only with difficulty to be menaced by the new acquisitions. Even in 1867, when Assyrian architecture and habits were well known (the Assyrian section of the Louvre had by then been open to the public for twenty years) the poster for a *Sardanapale* at the *Théâtre Lyrique Impérial* in Paris was all Egyptian and not at all Assyrian.[56] And even in 1920–22, at the *Festspielhaus* in Salzburg, Hans Poelzig's scenery for an opera was inspired by the Tower of Babel, but by the Tower of the medieval iconographical tradition, not the Tower by then known from the excavation.[57]

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56 Bohrer 1989, p. 14 with figs. 2–3.
57 Biraghi 2008, I, p. 234.

1.3 The rediscovery of the Assyrian capitals

In 1829 Barthold Niebuhr (Roman historian, son of Carsten, the discoverer of Persepolis) in his *Römische Geschichte* 'ventured a prophecy that Nineveh would arise as the Pompeii of Western Asia'.[58] The prediction was realized twenty years later, with the startling discoveries made by Paul-Émile Botta and Layard, the story of which has been told so many times as not to need repeating here.[59] It is, however, useful to go over once again, at least with a few hints, the question of the localization of Nineveh, a question which is at the same time taken for granted, but problematic.

Towards 1170 the rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, who was travelling throughout the Near East passing from one Hebrew community to another, having arrived at Mosul (which he called 'Assur the Great') had a clear idea (thanks to information given to him by his local colleagues) that across the Tigris was the famous Nineveh, in ruins but covered with villages and farms, and he added: 'the extent of the city may be determined by the walls, which extend forty parasangs to the city of Irbil'.[60] The rabbi mixed the visible information (the 'real' walls were easily seen) with the myth of the tradition (an enormous city with a circumference of 200 km). Ten years later another rabbi, Petachia of Ratisbon, also arriving at Mosul (which he called 'New Nineveh') and crossing the river, visited 'Old Nineveh', which he described as desolate and 'overthrown like Sodom' with the land black like pitch, without a blade of grass.[61] The power of tradition, or rather of the divine curse, which makes men see not what there is (what had happened to the cultivated land and farms seen by his colleague a few years earlier?), but what ought necessarily to be there.

Myths apart, the localization of Nineveh remained a matter of common knowledge and beyond argument; various western travellers (such as Jean Baptiste Tavernier in 1644, and then Bourguignon d'Anville in 1779) confirmed it, and some small soundings followed.[62] Anyway, the tomb of the prophet Jonah (Nebi Yunus), which obviously (on the basis of the biblical book) had to be found at Nineveh, dominated (and still dominates) the very centre of the ruins, facing onto the Tigris beside the older acropolis of Kuyunjik. As for the extent of the city, if the 'cadastral' plan prepared by the elder Niebuhr (in 1766)

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58 Breasted 1933, p. 9.

59 Larsen 1996; on Layard cf. Waterfield 1963, and Brackman's 1980 ('journalistic') biography.

60 Adler 1930, p. 42.

61 *Ibid.* p. 67.

62 Pallis 1956, pp. 42–43 (identification); 19–93 (other undertakings to the mid-nineteenth century).

is found too schematic to resemble the reality, by the middle of the nineteenth century there were very exact topographical plans, in particular that of Claudius Rich, who was the English 'Resident' in Baghdad in the years 1812–21.[63]

The parallel question however, of identifying the ancient Babylon,[64] remained for a long time much less decided, tied as it inevitably was to the question of the Tower (and therefore dragged from 'Aqar Quf to Birs Nimrud); but the location of Babylon too, in the area of Hilla, was already correctly identified by the more careful travellers of the seventeenth[65] and eighteenth[66] centuries, and was then mapped and described by this same Rich, who in the ten years 1810–1820 brought about a true turning point.[67] Rich visited the site several times over and although initially dismayed by the range of the ruins and their state of preservation, which did not allow the visualization of monuments, he made both an accurate description and a very satisfactory topographical plan. Rich became sufficiently well known to be mentioned in 1820 by Byron in *Don Juan*, with reference indeed to the identification of Babylon: 'Should there be […] some infidels who don't / Because they can't, find out the very spot / of that same Babel, or because they won't / (though Claudius Rich, Esquire, some bricks has got / and written lately two memoires upon't)'.[68] But, literary irony apart, Rich's personality was truly notable, and his work completely accurate and meritorious; he not only drew the attention of the whole cultured world (at least the British) to the importance of these ancient sites and gave assistance to passing scholars (such as Buckingham in 1816, Ker Porter in 1818),[69] but then opened the way in practical terms to the first excavators of the site of Nineveh, through his topographical survey and also by help given to them *in loco*.

The merits of Rich and other nineteenth-century scholars should not be belittled, but the memory of what Babylon had been and where it was located is also found much earlier in the Arab-Islamic world, if then emerging with

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63 Rich 1836 (posthumous); on the character see Lloyd 1947, pp. 5–75. Jones' plan followed in 1855 (from excavation carried out from 1852); cf. Pallis 1956, pp. 47–53.

64 André-Salvini (ed.) 2008 has chapters on Babylon in the biblical (Recio), talmudic (Geller), classical (Rollinger), late-antique (Teixidor), mediaeval (Gousset) and Arab (Vernay-Nouri) sources, and on the travellers and story of the excavations; similar contributions in Marzahn and Schauerte (eds.) 2008.

65 Pietro della Valle, in 1616, cf. Invernizzi 2000.

66 Already Niebuhr (1765), then D'Anville (1779); cf. Pallis 1956, pp. 44–55; Reade 1999; 2008a, b, c.

67 Rich 1813; 1818; then 1839 (posthumously).

68 Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto V, 62; cited by Lloyd 1945, and by Moorey 1991, p. 7.

69 Cf. Hilprecht 1903, pp. 26–54 (on Rich, Buckingham, Ker Porter, Mignan); also Fagan 2007, pp. 45–68.

very different results.[70] The eleventh-century historians and geographers (such as Ibn Hawqal, al-Istakhri, Mas'udi) knew correctly that facing Hilla was the village of Babil, perched atop the ruins of the ancient magnificent city ('Bābil was the city of the "Nimruds" and *fir'awns*, the seat of their reign, and the center of their magnificence, while nowadays it is a small village [...] In Bābil are the remnants of a construction of which is reported that it was in the days of old a large capital';[71] 'When someone watches this village, impressive vestiges of debris, destruction and buildings which have become like hills come to his eyes'[72]), and also made use of the information of Greek authors on its dimensions;[73] however, they considered the ancient city as by then unknown and characterized it negatively as the city of wine and witchcraft, based on the ancient anti-models of oppressive royalty like Nimrud and Dahhak,[74] huge mythical metropoleis composed of seven cities, each one characterized to the world by a unique peculiarity. For example, 'In the seventh city there was a copper tree, huge, with many branches, that did not cast a shadow on its trunk. Yet if someone sat underneath it, it would shade him, up to a thousand persons ("souls"); but if the number of people exceeded thousand, even by one, they all ended up standing in the sun.'[75]

Turning to Assyria, I am a little amazed, thinking of the certainties established, that once they went on to the excavation of the Assyrian capitals, various uncertainties remained. Botta, the first excavator of Nineveh, was quickly disappointed by the site of Kuyunjik and moved almost immediately (March 1843) to the site of Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin) where he easily brought to light (in the absence of heavy superimposed layers) the palace complex of the new capital that Sargon II had caused to be built and which was abandoned immediately after his inauspicious death. The monumental edition of Botta's discoveries was published by him as *Monument de Ninive*,[76] and yet is unmistakably about Khorsabad. In a somewhat similar fashion, Layard also initially worked above all at Nimrud (the Kalkhu of Assurnasirpal II) and then at Kuyunjik, but his successful publications – both those properly scientific[77]

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70 Documentation collected and analysed by Janssen 1995; also briefly by Haase 2008; Vernay-Nouri 2008; Brusasco 2012, pp. 275–289.

71 Janssen 1995, p. 33 (Ibn Hawqal 244); also p. 30 (al-Istakhri 86).

72 *Ibid.* p. 49 (Mas'udi 538–540).

73 *Ibid.* pp. 62–63 (al-Himyari 13th–15th centuries).

74 *Ibid.* pp. 91–111 (localization), 136–145 (ruins), 157–180 (Nimrud and Dahhak).

75 *Ibid.* pp. 73 (Yaqut 14th century), 83–84 (al-Qazwini) and 87 (al-Dimashqi).

76 Botta and Flandin 1849–50.

77 Layard 1849–53; 1851.

and the popular works[78] – emphasized the name of Nineveh without giving a hint of that of Nimrud. There was undoubtedly an opportunistic motive in terms of publication (which, although it may have been valid for the popular works, should not have applied to the scientific ones), in that the biblical and classical fame of Nineveh took hold of a wide public, to whom the names of Khorsabad and Nimrud meant little or nothing. But there was also the idea of a 'great Nineveh' extending over a wide area (I shall discuss this in § 1.6), which in some way made this improper use of its name legitimate.

The first cities of the Ancient Near East to be revealed by archaeology were then the Assyrian capitals, with the excavations of Botta and Layard taking place in the decade 1843–53.[79] Why precisely then? On the level of factual history we note that this decade was an interlude of respite and relative stability for the Near East, between the end of the war between Muhammad Ali and the Sublime Porte (1838–41) and the beginning of the Crimean War (1853–56), which was followed immediately by the Indian Mutiny (1857–58) and the Second Opium War (1856–60), events which prevented the western powers from engaging in investments and activities that were not military.[80] The decade in question saw the influence of the western powers (above all Britain and France) take root in the Ottoman Empire, in political and diplomatic, financial and commercial fields, at a level without precedent, thanks to the credit they gained (and were to continue to gain) through their support for the 'sick man of Europe' against his enemies, first Egypt, and then Russia.[81] The economic influence had been formalized since 1838 (Treaty of Balta Liman), then to become altogether invasive following the Ottoman and Egyptian bankruptcy of 1876.[82]

But in the longer timescale of cultural history, the rediscovery of Assyria fits into that more general interest in the archaeological discovery of ancient civilizations of which I have already spoken (at § 1.1). While the archaeology of the Greek world developed in a climate of a shared culture, and of the claims

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78 Layard 1849; 1852; 1853.

79 Botta excavated in 1843–1846; Layard in 1845–1851 (then Rawlinson and Loftus 1852–55). On the whole story Larsen 1996; in brief Fagan 2007, pp. 97–155.

80 On the Indian Mutiny, Panikkar 1953, pp. 102–103; Wolpert 1985, pp. 216–220; on the Opium Wars, Panikkar 1953, pp. 127–138; Sabattini and Santangelo 1989, pp. 596–599, 606–610. On the interruption to the excavations as a result of the Crimean War and their later resumption cf. now Crossen 2011 (who seems to me to overvalue Loftus).

81 Ottoman decline, Ternon 2005. An attempt to set the Assyrian discoveries in the frame of the events of the period has been made by Glassner 2003, pp. 95–135 (with little interest paid, however, to the archaeological aspects).

82 Cf. Gelvin 2008, pp. 119–122, 180–182, 187–188 (text of the Treaty of Balta Liman).

of continuity between ancient and modern Greeks (even although the latter were in good measure Levantines), the archaeology of the Mesopotamian world took shape with an attitude of 'otherness' and of a rupture between the ancient and modern inhabitants of the region. The West that had supported the independence of Greece, which had been the seat of European civilization, the origin of democracy, of arts and sciences, against the despotism of the Ottoman Empire, behaved very differently in the whole of the Islamic part of that same Empire – from Egypt to the Levant and as far as Mesopotamia – notwithstanding the Near-Eastern origin of the Christian faith. On the cultural level, Western interest in eastern antiquities characterized itself through an attitude which we can define as proto-colonial; an attitude, at any rate, of appropriation.

On this topic two cultural traditions, opposing but converging towards the same outcome, met. On one side the Islamic world expressed a total lack of interest (and even contempt) for the pre-Islamic cultural heritage, dating to the period of the *jahilīya*, that is to say of 'ignorance' not yet illuminated by Islam. I have already cited (in my book on the history of the Ancient Near East) a passage from the letter which the *qadi* of Kuyunjik wrote to Layard when the latter, beginning his work at Nineveh, sought to inform himself on the economy and technology of the region as a help for understanding the antiquities. It is worth repeating the quotation here: 'My illustrious Friend and Joy of my Liver! The thing you ask of me is both difficult and useless. Although I have passed all my days in this place, I have neither counted the houses, nor have I inquired into the number of the inhabitants; and as to what one person loads on his mules and the other stows away in the bottom of his ship, that is no business of mine. But, above all, as to the previous history of this city, God only knows the amount of dirt and confusion that the infidels may have eaten before the coming of the sword of Islam. It were unprofitable for us to inquire into it'.[83] A few decades ago we were able to perceive a similar lack of interest and contempt (also shown by the consequent instances of destruction and dispersion), before mass tourism showed the Arab countryman what antiquity could do, even for him.

On the other side, this cultural heritage, in which the inhabitants of the Near East were not interested, was claimed by the 'moral heirs' who came from Europe.[84] This vindication was more obvious and went further back as far as the Bible was concerned: at the outset the expansion and migration of a good part of Christianity and Judaism towards the West, and then their further dislocation with the advent of Islam, made it clear that the heirs of the biblical

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83 Layard 1853 (edn. 1982, p. 401); cf. Braidwood 1973b, p. 38; Liverani 2014, p. xxi.
84 Larsen 1994.

world were largely the Europeans. This claim then attached itself to the archaeological remains of the Near East, either because they were also enhanced by the biblical connections, or because they were the result of the lengthy Greek, Roman and Byzantine presence in the Levant. Today we are informed enough to understand that the myth of the 'empty land' and 'unused resources' is a typical expedient of modern colonialism (as it already was of ancient imperialism): if there are spaces, resources, heritage which the 'indigenous' inhabitants are not using, through lack of interest or ignorance or technical backwardness, then we are authorized to 'discover' and use these otherwise useless riches. This counts, first, for material, but also for cultural resources. And in this way the process of colonial appropriation of the Near East, which culminates in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and government by mandate, had been prepared in parallel, by appropriation both mercantile and financial and, equally, both cultural and, in particular, archaeological.[85]

To sum up, while the Islamic world made the strong break with pre-Islamic antiquity prevail, the European world, while accepting moral judgement from the Judaic-Christian tradition, valued the unchanging continuity between the ancient eastern civilizations, the classical world and the later development of western and world civilization. And so in the nineteenth century models (classical in origin) were conceived which could be labelled as *Ex Oriente lux* and *Translatio imperii*, those keystones of a universal history which had arisen in the east, later to move and grow in the Mediterranean and then in Europe. There come to mind here the representations spread through the 'orientalist' painters of the early nineteenth century, in which the imposing and wondrous classical or Egyptian ruins, which emerge from the sands of time, are populated by tiny (in comparison) and picturesque, but somewhat miserable, 'native' characters, little shepherds and farmers, little old men and women, that by the very fact of being there appear to be the 'material heirs', but that clearly cannot be – I do not say, the direct creators of these colossal and sublime monuments, but not even their direct descendants. By way of contrast the western traveller/painter, who works among the dull and lazy indifference of the natives, belongs to the 'spiritual heirs'.[86]

The appropriation of Assyrian antiquities took on in the field a very businesslike manner, linked to the emergence in Europe of the middle class and

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85 Liverani 2005a.

86 Orientalism in art: MacKenzie 1995, pp. 43–70 (painting), 71–104 (architecture), 105–137 (drawing), 138–175 (music), 176–207 (theatre), 53 on the disparaging effect of the picturesque with regard to the imposing monuments; also Liverani 2008a; on the 'lazy native' Bahrani 2001b, pp. 24–26.

national state, and realized in the development of metropolitan museums and historical and archaeological publishing.[87] Just as a start, the excavation itself was explicitly intended for the recovery of valuable objects and their export towards the metropolitan museums. The phenomenon went back some time: for centuries the local people of the Levant and Egypt had been accustomed to dig up and sell (for very little) ancient objects to the antiquities traders of Levantine business, with their final destination in Europe. Besides, from ancient times popular imagination had told fables of treasure both hidden (e.g. in the tomb of Sardanapalus) and recoverable by digging underground tunnels. Eastern objects, above all Egyptian, had always been collected (alongside the prevalence of Etruscan, Greek and Roman objects), but for private or aristocratic collections, as oddities worthy of inclusion in a *Wunderkammer* alongside natural oddities. With the excavations of the mid-nineteenth century, however, we pass to direct exploitation by the European middle class in which the 'firmans' granted (or rather sold) by the Sublime Porte were permits for export rather than simply for excavation – excavation without export being inconceivable.[88] In other words, given that the operation took place in Ottoman territory, the intervention of state diplomacy was necessary, in the context of the British and French government influence (in competition with each other) on the Ottoman Empire. In this sense, the fact that Botta and Layard were diplomatic agents and not archaeologists has its own logic: as well as 'dilettanti', they really were the 'specialists' in the case. The very mass of objects found (the great sculptured stone slabs of the Assyrian palaces) required the organization of laborious transport, on rafts for going down the Tigris, and then by ship, even passing by way of India (there was as yet no Suez canal), and the transportation did not always go well: dozens of sculptured stone slabs lie somewhere at the bottom of the Tigris basin, and all that remains of them are the quick drawings made early in the expedition.[89]

The metropolitan museums, set up by the state, had really arisen in order to receive these great complexes of Ottoman or Egyptian origin which could have been neither recovered nor imported by private individuals. The British Museum was founded in 1759, the Louvre in 1791, and alongside the masterpieces of classical art – the story of the 'Elgin Marbles' unfolds between 1801 (their removal) and 1816 (their acquisition by the museum)[90] – Assyrian sculptures

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87 Display and popular publishing of the Assyrian discoveries: Bohrer 1989. Eurocentric and imperialist attitude of the first discoverers: Larsen 1992; 1994.

88 The excavation of Botta and Layard began without authorization from the Sublime Porte and were to all effects clandestine, conducted with the same procedures: cf. § 1.4.

89 On the shipwreck of the reliefs: Pillet 1962.

90 Pavan 1977, pp. 159–210; Rothenberg 1977; Greenfield 1989, pp. 47–105; recently King 2006.

coming from Khorsabad, Nineveh and Nimrud made an enormous impression. The Assyrian section of the Louvre was opened to the public in 1847, and that of the British Museum in 1853. To illustrate this phenomenon more widely, the first ethnographical collections, botanic gardens, and 'state' zoological gardens, also all arise during this proto-colonial phase, as a clear consequence of the imperialist ideology: that is, to gather at the centre of the world all the variety of strange and beautiful things from every part of the periphery, as a demonstration of the empire's capacity for universal domination, and for the sake of public admiration. As a parenthesis, the Assyrian kings had already done the same, 2500 years before, and indeed had already said they did it 'for the admiration of the public'.

The stream of visitors into the metropolitan museums (which were followed by the museums of Cairo in 1857 and Istanbul in 1882, in clear imitation of the European model) coincided with the spread of popular books, partly derived from the topic of the adventures of travel, but now enriched by first hand accounts of the startling archaeological discoveries. While the 'official' reports of the excavations of both Botta and Layard were enormous and expensive volumes (in the style of the Napoleonic *Description de l'Egypte* and of Lepsius' *Denkmäler*), impossible to open unless supported on a suitably large lectern,[91] the popular works by Layard (Botta did not write any) were small volumes, easily accessible and readable, yet without sacrificing an informative accuracy, to the extent that modern scholars consult and cite those volumes more often than the large official reports.

The different publication strategies of Botta and Layard have a number of contributory causes. The different organization of their respective missions carried the greatest weight: the French was clearly supported by the state, well financed by public money; the English was of a private collector nature, with resources that were always inadequate. The subsequent careers of the two excavators also weighed: Botta was transferred to other diplomatic duties, far from France, and ended as consul in Jerusalem and then in Syrian Tripoli. Layard on the other hand remained in London, became a Member of Parliament and gained considerable fame from his popular publications. His works were reprinted and reprinted on what was for the period a considerable scale: every British family of standing had a copy in their library at home, seeing that *Nineveh and its Remains* sold 20,000 copies in four years (12,000 in the first year).[92] Its success was not only due to the fascination of exotic adventures,

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91 Cf. Chevalier 2002, p. 483, for Mohl's criticisms of the inaccessibility of the sumptuous publications, more costly than the excavation!
92 Bohrer 1992.

and not only to the archaeological information, but also to the biblical back-cloth which the authors took care to highlight, and did this not out of opportunistic calculation but from deep cultural roots. In Protestant Britain there was a huge public already with marked biblical interests, whereas in France this aspect was less developed.[93]

I will close this section with two quotations on Layard's fame. Karl Marx, who found himself in London at the time (1853) and followed the parliamentary debates in which Layard took an active part describes him as 'the celebrated restorer of ancient Nineveh' and refers to one of his speeches as 'proving the illustrious scholar to be as intimately acquainted with Nicholas [the Tsar] as with Sardanapalus, and with the actual intrigues in the Near East as well as with the mysterious traditions of its past.'[94] So far as it appears, Marx approved of Layard for his political positions, but had probably not read any of his books, and at any rate had not gained much from them, but continued to pick up traditional stereotypes. Jakob Burckhardt (in 1870) on the other hand had certainly read Layard, but regarded him with dislike, in that he cites him as a prototype of the scholar who becomes famous and respected not for the value of his ideas but for the luck of his discoveries: 'A disproportionate glory is attributed to the first to make important discoveries in distant lands (for example, a Layard at Nineveh), though everyone knows that the greatness is found in the object and not in the man.'[95] Even today many 'philological' scholars think the same of their 'archaeological' colleagues.

1.4 The techniques of excavation and the problems of visibility

In the more general historical cultural view which I have sought to deal with in the preceding section, is included the problem which is at the centre of our book: the discovery of the ancient Assyrian capitals, then to be followed by the discovery of even more ancient cities, finally made it possible to visualize and interpret the cities of the Ancient Near East, not as just a trick of the imagination, nor as a new reading of the later texts (biblical or classical), but on the evidence itself of the actual archaeological material. Anyone who visits the archaeological excavation of an ancient city today has a more or less organic

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93 Bohrer 2001 notes the difference, but not the 'biblical' causes.

94 Articles in the *New York Daily Tribune* No. 3826 22nd July 1853, and No. 3862 2nd September 1853.

95 1870 Lectures at Basle, then published (1905) as *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*.

vision of it (of course, depending on the site, its history, its organization), which allows the visitor to understand its ground plan and appreciate its buildings, even leaving aside the possible help available on the spot, such as posters, guides, audiovisual aids. Unfortunately, a similar visualization was impossible for the Assyrian capitals in the mid-nineteenth century, above all because of the aims and methods of the excavation.

It is always necessary to bear in mind that those responsible for the excavation were not archaeologists, for the simple reason that such a profession did not yet exist: archaeology was only just in its birth throes. In the history of archaeology we read that the Dane, Jens Worsaae, 'became the first professional prehistoric archaeologist, and was the first person to be trained in the discipline, albeit informally',[96] and his book on Danish antiquities[97] came out at the same time as Botta's first discoveries. The other founder of prehistoric stratigraphy was Jacques Boucher de Perthes, whose volume on Celtic antiquities came out a few years later, but whose thesis on 'antediluvian man' did not appear until 1860.[98] Obviously the two pioneers of Mesopotamian archaeology, Botta and Layard, had not been professionally trained, and their excavation was far removed from the standard 'stratigraphy' of the nascent study of European prehistory. Besides, the comparison with British or Scandinavian pre- or protohistoric archaeology would be unjust, given the very different dimensions of the great earthworks on the palaces of the historic age compared to the minute stratigraphy of prehistoric funerary tumuli. Professionally speaking, Botta was French consul at Mosul, and Layard was *attaché* at the British embassy in Istanbul. They were both men of considerable intellectual talent and great organizational ability, and undoubtedly did their best – I would say they performed 'miracles', considering the difficult conditions in which they had to operate and the methods of excavations then current. All in all their work was not so very different from what was being done in the same years in Italy or Greece, where the great 'professional' excavations, carried out by those belonging to the academic world of antiquity, began only with the next generation, in the 1870s: the excavations of Alexander Conze at Samothrace in 1873–76, those of Ernst Curtius at Olympia in 1875–86, those of Conze again and Carl Humann at Pergamum in 1878–86, and other important operations (at Aegina, at Delos, at Athens itself) all took place about that

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96 Daniel 1967, p. 85; Trigger 1989, p. 80; Schnapp and Kristiansen 1999.

97 Worsae 1843.

98 Boucher de Perthes 1847–49; 1860. On the origins of archaeology Daniel 1967; Guidi 1988, pp. 12–25; Trigger 1989, pp. 80–102.

time[99] – so thirty odd years after the excavations of the Assyrian capitals. The same goes for the pre-classical Aegean world, the startling discoveries of Schliemann at Troy began in 1870, those of Mycenae in 1875, to say nothing of those of Arthur Evans at Knossos, which only began in 1894.

In fact, Botta and Layard could not do otherwise than apply the methods of excavation already in use by those burrowing on the spot, by the 'clandestines', as we say. They followed the methods for two reasons: first because the aims were the same (recovery of objects of value, intended for the museums), so that we could say the excavations of the Assyrian capitals were clandestine (in their method) even if made official (with government permits, which applied besides to work already well in progress). The aims of profit were explicitly stated by Layard himself: 'to obtain the largest possible number of well preserved objects of art [*sic*] at the least possible outlay of time and money', and Loftus, excavating at Warka some years later, also used similar words.[100]

The second reason is that the excavation was in practice carried out by the workmen, with general directions and intermittent supervision by the director, and the workmen would not have been able to know how to proceed other than apply, for the benefit of whoever had engaged them, the same work practices which they were accustomed to carry out by themselves.[101] Obviously in 'stratified' sites, like the Mesopotamian *tell*, and with architecture in unfired brick in which every reconstruction implied the emptying of the old foundations, the practice of digging (or simply rummaging) under one's own house, even during the life of the city, without expecting that it would become a ruin, is ancient: in the Babylonian tablets we already meet predictions dealing with this activity of 'household archaeology': 'if a man, in pulling down his own house, finds in the ancient foundations gold / silver / bronze / lead / stone' generally with negative results.[102] The tradition of seeking for ancient 'treasure' by thieves but also by local country people is found throughout European literature from Herodotus (2.150), who tells of tunnelling to find the treasure of Sardanapalus, at least as far as Goethe (in the second act of *Faust*).

But let us return to the first excavators of the Assyrian cities. Two of Botta's letters[103] are revealing on the inability to understand the ground plan of the

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99 Daniel 1950, pp. 166–167; Marchand 1996, pp. 77–103. On Curtius and Conze: Schiering 1969; Barbanera 1998, pp. 53–55.

100 Daniel 1950, p. 152.

101 Pallis 1956, pp. 293–303 (organization), 304–313 (excavation methods).

102 Freedman 1998, pp. 84–85.

103 Published by their recipient, Jules Mohl, secretary of the *Société Asiatique*, in the *Journal Asiatique* of 1843, 1844, 1845, and then in his book (Mohl 1845).