

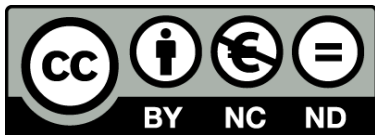
Can We Put West Asia in the Center? An Introduction

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Can We Put West Asia in the Center? An Introduction

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Why this Question Matters

It has almost been ten years since the publication of the article *Against Reactionary Populism* by Alfredo González-Ruibal, Pablo Alonso González, and Felipe Criado-Boado (2018), but the text has not lost its relevance. With the agenda of Project 2025, the Trump administration has already begun to implement authoritarian, fascistoid ideas centered around Christianity and whiteness into the social and political structures of the United States. In Italy, Poland, and Hungary, populist, right-wing and authoritarian forces are in charge, in France and parts of Germany they are knocking on the gates of power, while an authoritarian quasi-fascist regime in the Russian Federation is waging war on their western borders. All perceive themselves under threat from inside, from the LGBTQ+ communities, migrants and refugees, and those with ‘wrong’ beliefs (including disbelievers). In addition, voices that question the states’ colonial pasts and presents are also under attack (McGuire and González-Ruibal 2025; Niklasson 2023). At the global level, there are a number of geo-political confrontations emerging, and the conflicts related to the distribution of natural resources and energy sources, as well as the struggle for symbolic and political interpretative authority, are just beginning.

In light of the numerous current crises and wars, one may question whether it would even be useful to discuss the history of archaeology, particularly that of the colonial past and present of West Asia. As editors of this theme issue, we believe it is, since it continues to have a significant effect on the contemporary world. The macro-region of West Asia remains at the center of global and regional politics, which can be traced to historical developments that occurred at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Our conviction is that a greater understanding and critique of the history of our discipline and the inherent colonial practices will foster a more comprehensive understanding of the current state of the massive conflicts shaping regional politics on West Asia.

To begin, we would like to discuss the concept of decolonisation. It is largely characterised in Frantz Fanon's 1961 publication, *Les damnés de la terre*, which frames decolonisation not merely as political independence but as a fundamental restructuring of social, economic, and epistemic systems imposed by colonial rule. In the words of the Kenyan writer and cultural scientist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the publication gave the people of the African continent a language to deal with the monstrosities of colonialism, to resist the atrocities of past and present, and to struggle for a different future. We, the editors of this collection of essays, in turn, have taken up the title of one of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's central analytical texts, entitled *Decolonising the Mind*, in which he traces the role of the dominance of European language in the literature of the African continent.

The term 'decolonisation' has been used in so many different ways in recent years that in 2012 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang felt compelled to publish the article *Decolonisation is Not a Metaphor*. They argue that decolonisation is a form of rebellion, it is an explicitly political act based on a historical analysis of colonialism using the same critical frameworks applied to white supremacy and racism. In order to position ourselves, we need to understand how our research questions and approaches are intertwined with geo- and socio-political discourses. Additionally, it allows us to draw conclusions from these analyses about how to break inequalities, injustices, and inconsistencies, and, hopefully, to leave them behind. Decolonial arguments should not fall prey to simplistic schemes of 'good' vs. 'evil' in this particular context. In his short essay from 2020, Thomas L. Gertzen outlines such points with regard to Egyptology; he emphasises the complexity of disciplinary histories and the discourses and processes that take place over time (Gertzen 2020: 192).

As a first step, we need to address the issue of whether decolonisation can happen from outside or needs to take place from the position of those who are experiencing and suffering from the effects of colonialism. Hence, it is necessary to examine how colonial systems and structures are ingrained in institutions, policies, and everyday practices. We can only begin to dismantle inequalities by addressing such internalised structures. With reference to Fanon, Tuck and Yang describe decolonisation as the outcome of reflection on and resistance to colonial structures and practices. As these authors note, it is imperative that we do not allow decolonisation to degenerate into a metaphor under which 'whiteness' returns to dominate, as well as utilise tropes that they describe, following Janet Lee Mawhinney, as "moves to innocence" to secure one's own future (Tuck and Yang 2012: 3). In this light, it may be justified to question whether decolonisation can come from the Global North.

Where We Come From

For us, the project grew out of a sense of unease that crept in when we thought about certain discursive fields associated with ancient West Asian cultural studies, such as archaeology, philology, and history. The publication emerged from the workshop "West Asia in the Centre: decolonising orientalist narratives of the past and present," which we jointly organised at ICAANE 13 in Copenhagen in May 2023. We see this workshop as a first step in a longer process, which we hope to initiate and partake in.

The unease is also caused by the inequalities and power imbalances remaining between researchers based in the Global North and those from the Global South. ICAANE itself is a good example of this. In 1998, ICAANE was founded by researchers predominantly from Europe. A foreword in the first volume of its proceedings by Paolo Matthiae describes the beginning of archaeology in West Asia in December 1842, when Paul-Émile Botta began excavations in Khorsabad, without referring to the questionable methods employed, which resemble those used in the extraction of mineral resources rather than that of scientific research. Matthiae's narrative portrays the success story of researchers from the Global North working in West Asian countries.

Likewise, it seems odd that ICAANE, a conference that describes itself as 'international' and focuses on a particular region of the world, has only been held in Europe so far. It is noteworthy that this has taken place despite the many voices that have called for events to be held outside of Europe and in a West Asian country in particular. This conference is also a political space where numerous actors meet, often outside of the lecture halls, in order to connect, socialise, and plan joint projects. This raises the question of who has access to the ICAANE, who is able to attend in person, and who can establish and maintain contact with the relevant key players and decision-makers.

It seems to us a case of ‘the rich who get richer,’ where if you have the funds and contacts, you can maintain and foster them.

The fact that archaeology and politics cannot be separated from each other is also shown by a very recent circumstance: until a few days before the ICAANE 13, archaeologists from the Ariel University, which is located in illegally occupied territory (considered so by many states, the UN, and under international law on the basis of a ruling by the International Court of Justice), wanted to give a presentation at ICAANE on their excavations at the site of 'Aujah el Foqah in those very areas. It was after protests from some informed colleagues and the Palestinian Antiquities Authority that the lecturers were disinvited.

We are aware that we as editors and authors of this volume are also part of the Global North and recognise our own responsibilities. Our original intention was to organise a digital event outside of ICAANE where colleagues from West Asia could participate and discuss this topic. In spite of our best efforts, and due to a combination of lack of funding, communication issues, and participation barriers, we chose to hold the workshop at ICAANE, despite knowing that many colleagues from Western Asia would be thereby excluded. This is an issue that has preoccupied us greatly and whose full implications we are still grappling with. It was decided to carry on in the hope that the outcomes of the workshop would be made public.

In light of the fact that it will be impossible to resolve the past and present political entanglements of the topic we are discussing, it might be better to focus on the journey rather than on the destination. There will be no formal launch of the series, but instead we invite those who are passionate about their subject and appreciate its complexity to participate in the dialogue. Our thanks go to the editors of *Forum Kritische Archäologie* for agreeing to publish the articles that emerged from the workshop at ICAANE 13 in the form of a theme issue and as an open access publication.

Content of the Theme Issue

Since its beginnings in the 19th century, European archaeological and philological research on ancient West Asia has been inescapably linked to the politics of the great powers in the region at that time, and so the history of archaeology in West Asia is intertwined with European imperialism. Its gaze was always one of categorisation, assessment and evaluation, revealing a blatant asymmetry in the balance of power regarding the practice itself: the activities of geographers who surveyed, classified and drew the land, anthropologists who surveyed, classified and drew the people, archaeologists who did the same with the monuments deemed relevant, colonial officials and military officers who monitored compliance with laws and punished their violation, often dressed up under a ‘*mission civilisatrice*’ and closely linked to notions of white superiority.

Following the end of the First World War and the implementation of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, European archaeologists were able to conduct large-scale excavations in the areas formerly belonging to the Ottoman Empire, more extensive than ever before (Bussemaker 2021: 9–11). This went hand-in-hand with major infrastructure measures, carried out by European architects and engineers on the foil of European urbanism and use of space; oil pipelines, road and rail networks were also built in order to ensure that information, personnel, goods, and weapons could be transported efficiently and quickly between different places.

Against this disciplinary backdrop, we again raise the question of whether scholars from the Global North can and should decolonise the concept of decolonisation, and if so, how. In an article for FKA, Maresi Starzmann reached a positive conclusion: According to her, two steps contribute to the deconstruction of the reference frameworks of epistemological categories: we must question discursive categories, as well as trace the common threads in discursive networks and interconnections that connect the past to the present and, in her words, are remnants of colonial projects in the present (Starzmann 2018). The following articles have been gathered in this spirit:

Rune Rattenborg critically examines the historical geography and discourses associated with the term ‘Mesopotamia’. The author argues that the current use of the word, which describes the land between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and is often criticised from a postcolonial perspective as an appropriation of Iraqi heritage,

is in fact an unintended byproduct of British military nomenclature during World War I. Despite its older Greek and Roman origins, the term acquired its modern, far-reaching meaning relatively late, primarily through archaeological and historical scholarship, which stressed its supposed neutrality on both an ethnic and political level. As Rattenborg points out, this acceptance and continued use of ‘Mesopotamia’ has unintended negative consequences, such as obscuring the origin of illegally traded antiquities. The article calls for a reassessment and a more transparent use of vocabulary in order to acknowledge the complicated history of cultural space in the Middle East.

Jessie DeGrado explores the origins and influences of the famous illustrations in Austen Henry Layard’s 1849 bestseller *Nineveh and Its Remains*. The author argues that Layard’s popular depictions of a winged bull being transported from Nimrud, which many incorrectly view as coincidental parallels to ancient Assyrian reliefs, were actively influenced by Assyrian compositional elements. The article explores in detail how these modern images were revised and adapted by Layard, particularly after he and Hormuzd Rassam later discovered ancient reliefs from Sennacherib’s palace in Nineveh depicting similar transportation scenes. As a result, the text shows that this mutual influence impacted both the British public’s conception of a timeless Orient as well as the modern understanding of Assyrian transport techniques.

Eric Jarrard examines a Neo-Assyrian relief slab from the Davis Museum at Wellesley College, known as the “Captive Being Flayed” (or “Wellesley eunuch”). Using Dan Hicks’ concept of ‘necrography,’ which builds upon Achille Mbembé’s concept of ‘necropolitics,’ the paper recontextualises looted museum objects as legacy objects of colonialism. It focuses on the provenance of the object, particularly its authenticity and the probable chain of transfer from the excavation site in Nineveh through American missionaries to the donor Gorham D. Abbott and then to the college. According to Jarrard, curators and academics are responsible for reconstructing this history in order to at least partly compensate for the plunder of their forefathers, agents of colonial powers.

Luise Loges examines the portrayal of looting and illegal trade in archaeological artifacts from West Asia in the German media between 2003 and 2021, focusing on the emergence of what she terms a ‘moral panic.’ In her analysis, she demonstrates how media coverage, including the sensational linking of the illegal antiquities trade with terrorist financing by the ‘Islamic State’ between 2014 and 2015, led to an exaggerated public concern. In the context of ‘moral panic theory,’ Loges argues that such ‘media exaggerations’ led to the passage of stricter laws in Germany, as well as unsubstantiated statements about the value of the illegal market and the stigmatisation of legal dealers in antiquities. This work emphasises that the Eurocentric view neglects the voices of the local populations affected and results in antique dealers using the exaggerated figures in order to undermine any research on or regulation of the market. According to the study, the long-term effects of the moral panic were social rather than institutional, resulting in the reinforcement of Orientalist stereotypes.

Aydin Abar examines the complex interrelationships between archaeology, nationalism, and crypto-colonialism by investigating an Iranian example, whereby archaeology has been regarded as a political activity since its inception among scholars who deal with the history of ideas. As a result of relying on an idealised pre-Islamic, ‘Aryan’ past, archaeological knowledge has been instrumentalised to create national identities, thereby marginalising cultural plurality. The author describes Iran’s paradoxical power relations through the concept of ‘crypto-colonialism,’ where formal independence is accompanied by de facto dependence on Western powers. Due to this dynamic, archaeological narratives were used to support state power strategies and are still used today to promote racist and homogenising notions of ‘Iranianness.’

Bärbel Morstadt analyses the Phoenician merchant Épidemaïs and other figures, such as the Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Medes, in the comic series *Asterix the Gaul* in terms of their historical accuracy versus their stereotypical representations. The study argues that although the comics were intended for entertainment, they are often perceived as historically authentic, yet reflect deeply rooted colonialist and orientalist stereotypes of the time of their creation (20th century). It discusses how these stereotypes, such as that of the enterprising Phoenician merchant or the irrational, constantly warring West Asians, appeal to readers from the educated Western bourgeoisie and serve to reinforce their self-image. Morstadt concludes that the comics should be viewed as historical documents of the time of their creation rather than as representations of antiquity.

Sebastian Hageneuer examines the representation of West Asian history and archaeology in the video game *Civilization VI: Babylon Pack*. He argues that the game perpetuates colonial and Orientalist narratives from the 19th

century that were established by early Western excavations, such as those conducted by Austen Henry Layard. He analyses in detail how the visual design, the character of Hammurabi, and game mechanics such as ‘Colonialism’ and ‘Natural History’ reproduce these ideological legacies. The text highlights that the global reach and immersive nature of video games transfer these stereotypes into players’ historical consciousness, especially because many players lack critical prior knowledge. Finally, the analysis emphasizes the need for archaeologists and humanities scholars to become aware of these popular cultural representations in order to use them critically in education.

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