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Introduction

An Archaeology of Violence

War is organized violence. As such, war might be viewed in the same way as some other institutions and rituals of civilized people. War was first defined as a form of controlled, organized, and even ritualized violence some time ago, in the first part of the twentieth century, in the works of authors such as Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, and slightly earlier, in the psychoanalytic writings of Sigmund Freud. Carl von Clausewitz's 1832 treatise *On War*, which describes war as an act of rational violence and a political instrument of the nation, is widely regarded as the first modern philosophical work that considers the "true nature" or, in Platonic terms, originary essence of war. For Clausewitz, this essence is certainly organized and civilized aggression. It is "violence that arms itself with the inventions of art and science."[1] The ancient Mesopotamians, whose forms and representations of violence are the focus of this book, seem to have been already aware of such a philosophical definition of war. In the Sumerian myth "Enki and the World Order," the Mesopotamians counted the art of war among the MEs of civilization. The ME is a category in the Sumerian taxonomy of the world that Assyriologists usually translate as "the arts of civilization."[2] This category is comprised

of a long list of the achievements of this early complex society, from kingship and rule to metallurgy and writing.

For the Mesopotamians, the arts of war, plunder, and taking booty were all aspects of civilized behavior. These are the forms of behavior of people who have become urbanized, that is, settled into urban communities interacting within urban social structures. Scholars of Antiquity have sometimes been baffled by the idea that such unpleasant forms of behavior might be considered MEs, or arts. The inclusion of sexuality and its various manifestations, including prostitution, and war and its practices in the grouping of "arts of civilization," along with such commendable occupations as music and craftwork, has been something of a mystery to modern readers. Ancient Mesopotamian culture is described in the grand narratives of world history as the ancestor to the Western tradition yet it remains, in this traditional view, rather unlike the later West in such civilized areas as ethics and aesthetics.

Perhaps the word *art* as a translation of ME is slightly off the mark. No word in contemporary sociological, anthropological, or archaeological theories is the equivalent of Sumerian ME. War, as organized violence, is indeed a form of civilized behavior, as abhorrent as that thought may be. The Mesopotamians recognized this behavior as a ritualized organization, distinctive of complex societies; they linked it directly to the existence of the city and later, as it came into its own, the state. In the list of the MEs, they seem to have attempted to draw a taxonomic difference between the behavior of civilized people and animals or the barbaric nonurbanized nomads. The categorization of the MEs reveals an early contemplation of the place of human behaviors and the order of things in the world.[3]

According to Bataille, war exists because the taboo on violence in daily life relegates violence to areas of existence confined

in space and time and that follow their own rules.[4] Today, a number of such rules exist, many of which have recently become issues of concern and subjects of contemporary debates and analyses. For example, the international laws that regulate war and occupation such as the Geneva Conventions and the Hague Convention, the accepted treatment of prisoners of war, the concept of war crimes, the legality of torture and its relationship to a specific national terrain, and the legitimacy of the nation-state are issues that are being redefined by politicians and contested by military commanders. The latter discussions indicate that even within war some forms of violence are acceptable (what is called conventional warfare), some are questionable or vaguely defined (such as the torture of prisoners of war and "collateral damage"), and some are categorized as criminal (rape and deliberate attacks on civilians during war and occupation). These divisions of violence fall into the Western philosophical categories of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, the two areas of just war. The first is just cause to go to war; and the second, just behavior in war (as in the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war). In the Middle Eastern tradition, the term *jihad* (although it is currently used to mean terrorist or suicidal war) is more or less similar to the idea of *jus ad bellum*, in that it defines in which cases going to war is justified. Ibn Khaldûn (AD 1332–1406), a Muslim jurist and historian, discussed the definitions of just and unjust wars in his *Muqqadimah*; centuries later, Michael Walzer, an American scholar of government and philosopher of war, analyzed wars, and behavior within them, in his 1980 book *Just and Unjust Wars*.[5] Discussions and treatises from China and the Indian subcontinent about correct behavior in war and reasons to go to war are also well known. Sunzi's *Art of War*, from the fifth century BC, and the *Arthasastra*, a late fourth-century-BC Sanskrit treatise on diplomacy and war attributed to Kautilya, are two early texts

concerned with the realm described in the Western tradition as just war.

These discussions fall under the ethics of war. The concept of just and unjust war means that war is not generally thought of as an impetuous activity. It involves a choice made at a particular moment, when violence is sanctioned as an accepted, correct, even valorized form of behavior. War, then, is the collective organization of aggressive urges. It is the controlled practice of group violence on a large scale, and as such it has to adhere to certain forms: its own rules and regulations. Clausewitz was certainly not the first to contemplate the notion of war. War and its causes have been analyzed from the earliest historical records. In recent scholarship, scholars of government and historians of war are not alone in studying the forms of war and their justifications. Sociologists and anthropologists have also attempted to frame the act of war within human behavior and within theories of war. War, state violence, and the law are now the focus of some of the most incisive contemporary philosophical writing. And "war studies" has now become an independent academic field at a number of universities.[6]

The art of war — the forms and images of violence that both support and justify wars, enabling as well as representing them — has received far less attention. A number of studies of images of violence and war have recently emerged from the fields of art history and visual cultural studies, but the uses and functions of such images in Antiquity remains largely untheorized.[7] What was the place of images of war and violence in Antiquity? Did such images aim to be objective historical records? Were they coercive or propagandistic? How was the notion of just war formulated in the images of war? How were works of art, historical monuments, and artifacts treated in war? And how did the monument of war (that much-revered type of monument) come to be invented in Mesopotamian Antiquity?

A history or an archaeology of forms and monuments of violence can consider how such conventions of war, its representations, and its underlying activating rituals were practiced in Antiquity.[8] Art, visual displays, representations, and war have a long, interrelated history. War, one can argue, is already a narrative as it is acted out on the battlefield. Assyrian and Babylonian accounts of battle make war's narrative aspect clear. Furthermore, war, victory, and royal or imperial power do not appear as narratives only in the visual arts. Central to the aims of the economy of violence (in Bataille's broadest sense of economy as the circulation of energies) and of power and geopolitics is the technology of war, a militaristic complex that is sometimes described as the war machine.[9] This war machine depends on technologies of violence in every sense of the word *technology*. Aspects of war such as the supernatural, rituals of divination, and performative representations are all integral parts of the war machine. But the war machine is not reducible to the military. It is a complex appropriated by state violence but by definition outside the normative day-to-day affairs of the city and the internal laws of the state.[10]

War is a strictly organized activity that at the same time allows for forms of behavior that are non-normative and taboo. Like the festival and some religious rituals, war occupies a place outside; it is a phenomenon that stirs and interrupts.[11] In Bataille's words, "the unleashed desire to kill that we call war goes far beyond the realm of religious activity. It is a suspension of the taboo surrounding death and killing."[12] The contemplation of war in this way, as organized and sanctioned violence, appropriated or channeled by the urbanized city-state, limited in time and place, was a source of anxiety for the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia. Not unlike today's state records and dominant representations, Mesopotamian records and rituals of war and images of violence sought to rationalize war as a just aggression in each case. There is no

extant Sumerian or Akkadian treatise on just war. However, the large corpus of textual and visual representations of violence and war allows an analysis of the subject of violence in Mesopotamian Antiquity. This book, therefore, investigates aspects of war that might not today be considered within the realm of military logistics and strategies but that the ancients clearly understood as crucial and logical aspects of war and sovereignty.

The Mesopotamian discussion of war, its justifications, and its rituals spans the period between the third and the first millennia BC. As such, it predates all other discussions of war and traditions of justified wars. The Assyrians of northern Mesopotamia are perhaps thought of in relation to war and violence more often than most other ancient cultures, especially in the first millennium BC, when the Assyrian kings expanded their empire into the surrounding territories. These kings conquered lands, moved populations, plundered cities, cut down and burned forests, and destroyed monuments. The expansion of power of the Assyrian kings of the first millennium BC constitutes what can be firmly defined as an imperial mission. The Assyrian kings were remarkable perhaps not so much because they were aggressive imperialists, since other periods of imperial expansion and force have existed in history, as because they chose to record the events of war, torture, and conquest in detail, sparing us from no gruesome act of violence in their glorification of war and empire — either in their written annals or in the visual images of empire.

War, imperialism, and power in Mesopotamia have been discussed from the point of view of political history in numerous publications. In fact, the political-historical approach is now standard in the field of Mesopotamian studies, especially in works on the Akkadian and Neo-Assyrian periods. Materialist economic reasons, and geopolitical reasons of power and control, spurred the Mesopotamians into the act of war for imperial expansion at

various times, but these territorial wars relied on rituals and representations of power and rituals of battle. These were the ideological methods that enabled the processes to work.

This book, therefore, is not a chronological survey of specific historical wars and technologies of weaponry or vehicles of war in Mesopotamia; a number of useful, concise studies already exist on that subject.[13] Instead, this study considers what underlies war and violence. It examines philosophical beliefs about war and ideologies of war in Mesopotamian tradition; conceptions of violence and power that were inseparable from conceptions of the body and its control; and the processes and rituals of war that these formulations of the body and power made possible. These developments of ideas of power, rule, dominion, and authority cannot be separated from visual images or representation broadly defined. These formulations and representations, technologies in the rituals of war and in displays of violence and power, are an inevitable part of every imperial process. The present study thus considers facets of war and domination that fall under the categories of representation and display, the ritualistic, the ideological, and the supernatural. These might be described as the magical technologies of war, and as such they are not usually discussed in the standard political narratives of Mesopotamian history books.

Being among the world's earliest imperial forces, the Mesopotamians developed a system of expansion that relied on the machinations of war and the sophisticated development of weaponry and technology. But military technology included a number of aspects that today would be regarded as unscientific: the reading of omens, the movement of prisoners, the display of acts of torture. These practices and the beliefs behind them were the parameters of war for the Assyrians. They defined the reasons for war; they justified war, even if war was primarily a process of imperial expansion and the resulting control of natural resources,

land, and wealth. Magical technologies and rituals can be described as a semiotics of war that delineates the parameters for correct and incorrect behavior in war. They define certain acts as appropriate and other acts as enabling, empowering, or, in fact, actually leading to victory.

For the Assyrian imperial war machine, for example, the processes of war were clearly linked to the supernatural, but amid the detailed Assyrian accounts of the need for imperial expansion, an incredible anxiety about the outcome of war, about life, death, and memory, can be glimpsed. In fact, these accounts display the extraordinary historical consciousness that is characteristic of early Mesopotamian Antiquity. It is here that images and monuments, in my assessment, have a social role beyond the depiction of historical events.

Formulations of the body and power are made, defined, and become reified through monuments, representations of war, and images of violence. Underlying the discussions of these rituals and representations of war is the premise that the body is a principal factor in the political economy of power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that the art of punishing must rest on a whole technology of representation.[14] This kind of reliance on technologies of representation in the broadest semiotic sense, in relation to violence and control, can be seen clearly in the ancient Mesopotamian record. This study, therefore, is focused on the interrelationship of power, the body, and violence in Assyro-Babylonian society and its representations, a semiotics of war that was an integral part of the mechanics of warfare. In other words, it combines three lines of inquiry that are not generally seen or studied together: war, the body, and representation.

Chapter One, "The King's Head," opens with a study of a particular sculpted relief from Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh (c. 650 BC). This is a wall panel usually referred to as the Battle of

Til-Tuba relief and now found in the collection of the British Museum in London. Focusing on this work of art, the chapter follows the movement of the defeated Elamite king's severed head on the relief and in the parallel and contemporaneous historical annals of this battle, to assess the significance of the head's repeated and cryptic appearance in the composition. A close reading of the image in its relationship to the historical annals of the same campaign demonstrates that the narrative of war is woven around the main subject, which is the decapitation of the Elamite king as an act in itself, an act that is contingent but described as a supernatural event decreed by the gods, and that is in some sense pivotal in that theatre of war.

Chapter Two discusses Babylonian semiotics and the relationship of representation to reality in Mesopotamian speculative thought, a relationship that is essential to an understanding of the function of images such as the Battle of Til-Tuba relief. The Mesopotamian scholarly tradition conceived of the division between artifice and reality in rather different terms from the later classical Greek concept of mimesis. Instead of imitating the natural world, representation (writing, visual images, and other forms) was thought to participate in the world and to produce effects in the world in magical or supernatural ways. The world was saturated with signs, and Babylonian scholars were the first to develop a rigorous system of reading visual signs according to a method that would now be described as semiotic. Taking up Carlo Ginzburg's suggestion that the origins of semiotics are to be found in Babylonian divination, the chapter delineates the links between these methods of divination and Mesopotamian concepts of representation and the real.[15] Building on earlier work on this subject, especially my book *The Graven Image*, the chapter considers the relationship of ideology to the concept of images in Assyro-Babylonian culture.

In Chapter Three, what I have described as the "mantic body"

is discussed in some detail as a distinctive Mesopotamian conception. In Mesopotamia, the body and body parts signified omens in ways that were considered very real and serious. This was no marginal superstition. The semiotic code of the body and body parts was a crucial part of the Mesopotamian cultural understanding of the world and its movements and was therefore central to notions of history and time.

The Assyro-Babylonian practice of divination by means of reading parts of the body is analyzed in some detail in Chapter Three, since divination through extispicy (reading a sacrificial animal's entrails) and hepatoscopy (inspection of the liver) were fundamental to the strategies of war. The Babylonian and Assyrian practice of reading omens from the liver of a sacrificial animal is well known, but this type of manticism ought to be seen within the broader context of the Mesopotamian conception of the mantic body. While recent research in theories of the body has often focused on the organic body as a locus of existential identity, for the Mesopotamians the body, especially the human body, was by definition a semiotic entity. Body parts were believed to signify; they contained universally relevant signs that made reference to aspects of the world, history, and lived experience well beyond personal identity. They could also portend future events in messages that could be deciphered through divination, a system that worked as an exegetical reading of the parts of the body according to preestablished codes, recorded in treatises that span from the third through the first millennium BC. Finally, the argument for the semiosis of the organic body leads to a reconsideration of the boundaries between the organic body and its representations in Mesopotamian thought.

Chapter Four, "Death and the Ruler," takes up the notion of violence and the body in public art as an expression of sovereign power and the power over life and death. In focusing on the rela-

tionship between death and the ruler, the chapter explores explicit and public violence in historical images of war as political technologies of the body. The new formulation of the king's power over life and death is drawn up through new visual images of sovereignty, as well as relying on the more standard rituals and political rhetoric. These changes come to be crystallized in the famous victory stele of the Akkadian ruler Naramsin (2254–2218 BC).

Chapter Five, "Image of My Valor," continues the investigation begun in Chapter Four into the formulation of sovereign power in public monuments, shifting the focus to the historical development of and changes in images of heroism, victory, and explicit physical violence. It begins with a close analysis of the iconography and text of an Old Babylonian public monument that dates to the beginning of the second millennium BC, and is described in the text written on the monument as "Image of My Valor." It considers earlier Sumerian and Akkadian images and later Neo-Assyrian depictions of victories in battle. The latter are particularly well known as images that are brutally direct in their portrayal of violence.

The Assyrians depicted and recorded their rise to political power, their defeat and subjugation of enemy lands, and their control of the entire Middle East in the first millennium BC via the bodies of the defeated. Such depictions did not simply record the events of battle but also narrated the identity of the empire. Images of forced exile and mass deportation, war prisoners' pleas for mercy, and enemy rulers' homage to the Assyrian king all celebrated Assyria's victory through the body of the vanquished enemy. Torture, as opposed to execution and immediate death, became a common subject in scenes of war. Decapitation, flaying, impaling, and other forms of physical torture appear in the battle scenes of Assyria. In the Neo-Assyrian era, these images of slow violence to the enemy's body became so common in scenes of

victory that torture itself can be read as a narrative means of signaling the conquest of the other.

Chapter Six, "The Art of War," considers the place of art in war and the art of war as military strategies. Rituals of making images, wars fought over cult statues and public monuments, the abduction of images, the use of images as human substitutes, and the human substitute as a form of image are aspects of the place of art in war. The uses of images in war, the treatment of images during battles, and battles fought specifically over images — in sum, the treatment of images in war — communicate more about the representation of war itself as image. A discussion of the practices of deportation and exile of populations follows. Both of these practices had to do with the reconfiguration of space in the vision of the imperial power and were (as they continue to be today) strategies of warfare.

Chapter Seven, "Omens of Terror," is a study of the relationship between religious rituals and war — specifically, the place of divination and manticism in wars and images of war, using texts and the archaeological record. This chapter brings together my earlier argument regarding the power of images, relating it to the function of image making and image magic in Babylonian and Assyrian traditions, as evidenced by textual records.

The Mesopotamians were the first to develop medical semiotics or symptomology. They used protasis and apodosis in all scientific formulations and in logic. The Codex Hammurabi, for example, uses the same scientifically inextricable link between symptom and cause. The same was true for the reading of omens. The signs of war could then be read logically, in a similar way to the signs of justice or somatic signs. They were embedded naturally into the world. This system of signification and how it functioned enabled the semiotics of the body and violence to be part of the mechanism of war.

The concluding chapter explores the relentless nature of the war machine and its relationship to the arts. Art glorifies war and terrorizes through the explicit images of violence. But an ancient Babylonian poet wrote a passionate epic account of the relentless horrors of the war machine.

We may believe that Mesopotamian practices of violence and rituals of war are far removed from our own civilized time, yet even today, rituals of war, the parameters of accepted levels of torture and violence, and the treatment of prisoners of war and enemy combatants are redefined through visual displays in the media and through the rhetoric of justice and enlightenment. In the end, this ought to be a reminder that the usual statements of abhorrence of the Assyrian displays of violence fit neatly into Tzvetan Todorov's observation that a description of the uncivilized sign (that of others) is an uncivilized description of the symbol (our own).[16] For the ancients, religion was not separate from the ideology of sovereignty. Instead, the supernatural served to facilitate the ground rules of war. Expansion and empire and physical violence against the bodies of the enemy were just activities approved by the gods, although never directly ordered by them. The ideological belief that one's own was the correct system of rule justified war, violence, the torture of enemy bodies. It justified imperialism, and a tyrannical reign, but ancient authors also worried about the excesses of power and hubris and left numerous warnings and laments about the sorrows and horrors of war.

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