

## The Ancient Past that Oil Built

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Something about America slouches toward apocalypse. Could it be the vast geographic expanse and the coastal drama of land dropping into crashing waves? Or is it that the place was settled by apocalypticists who disciplined themselves and their neighbours through fiery refigurations of the end? Perhaps investment in annihilation stems from the particular combination of New World Christianity and free market economy—after all, the fantasy of capitalists chastised by God or the otherworldly redemption of workers plays right into the belief that Americans can pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Confidence that it will all end soon anyway may even justify continued exploitation of labour and resources. Without foreclosing such speculation, Erin Runions proves that an obsession with the primordial/eschatological location of Babylon runs through multiple sites of American culture. But what does it matter how Americans envision the end of the world; don't we all need to contend in one way or the other with the impending fact of our own death and the more recent realization of cataclysmic climate change? Runions' *The Babylon Complex* convinces that how we see the end matters quite a bit when it comes to declaring war, deciding economic policy, and regulating familial structures. The book further shows that these three dimensions of power constitute part of the same exercise of transforming its subjects from bearers of rights to financial assets whose controlled (and underpaid) labour benefits the small group we have come to know as the 1%.

Like Runions, I am a Bible scholar interested in the political deployment of its discourse. Inspired anew by her analysis of the links between the biblical Babylon and U.S. wars in Iraq, I continue to write about Israeli interpretations of conquest in the book of Joshua. At one point, I thought that biblical interpretation or religion more broadly might constitute a major cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war that consumes my research. So I conducted ethnographic studies in Jordan, Palestine, and Israel concerning the use of biblical imagery, particularly around the map of Israel-Palestine and its signifying border, the Jordan River. I found that although everyone speaks of the twice-claimed homeland as “the Holy Land,” “biblical Israel” or the Islamic “land of the Prophets,” its iconic shape was actually drawn by British imperial cartographers. Setting off a chain of tragic consequences, both Palestinian and Jewish nationalists claimed the imperial map as their sacred, historical land. It did not matter that the map conformed to no historical, religious configuration. While researching how the borders in question came about through Franco-British power struggles, raiding Bedouin who made mapping impossible for Western survey groups, and continuity with British interests in Egypt, I stumbled upon documents relating to colonial plans for an oil pipeline stretching from the petroleum rich Ottoman vilayet of Mosul to the Haifa Bay. Such a pipeline was built exactly as the British Colonial and Foreign Offices created Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine. This discovery motivated me to look underground for clues to the awful unfolding of history above.

In the chapter “Revenge on Babylon: Literalist Allegory, Scripture, Torture,” Runions addresses the American revenge fantasy during the Gulf War of punishing

contemporary Iraqis for sins of general Muslim terrorism, as well as for exiling ancient Judeans to the rivers of Babylon where they wept, as described in Psalm 137. She presses the point to show how biblical injunctions factored in the justification of torture. Imagining Iraqis as total, transhistorical enemies allowed for both their dehumanization and an exercise in militarized American nationalism that imagined itself triumphant over the ancient Babylonian Empire.

In April of 2003, the ancient site of Babylon, modernized and rebuilt to some degree by Saddam Hussein, was occupied by Coalition Forces. In September of 2003, it became Camp Alpha, where Polish troops were stationed until December of 2004 (Runions 2014, 27).

In passing, we might note parallels with the much-derided destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan by the Taliban and of Assyrian monuments in Iraq, as well as the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, by ISIS. In each case, an invading army exhibits its control through the destruction and damage of ancient material culture as if objects created long before the onset of capitalism represent the greatest threat to contemporary military rule. Although she does not draw this connection, Runions does propose an apocalyptic frame on the part of US troops in which the good and godly Americans fight “the forces of evil associated with ancient and future (rebuilt) Babylon” (Runions 2014, 27).

A distinction thus emerges between earlier iterations of nationalism that relied on archaeological finds to support claims that Western empires continued and fulfilled the aspirations of ancient societies and more contemporary transnational conquest that revels in smashing relics of the past. Here too the “literalist allegory” which Runions describes is just a step away—“Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site” (Deuteronomy 12:3). And yet, amidst these changes in relationship to ancient material culture, continuities of extraction, violence, and nationalism persist. As I hope to add to the Babylon conversation, the transnational empire of global capital has a more than one-hundred-year old footing by the rivers of Babylon.

Political theorist Timothy Mitchell’s account of *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* moves us toward an understanding of the dynamic. Mitchell shows the correlation between sources of energy and political systems—the production of coal, for example, conferred a degree of influence on workers because they could easily halt its extraction, processing and, most importantly, transport. The domestic nature of coal production also created proximity between producers and consumers. In coal-driven England, workers used strikes to hold coal back from sites of consumption—a power that allowed them to influence law and send representatives into government. In response, the petroleum system followed a different logic. Nothing expresses the shift more clearly than a pair of actions undertaken by Winston Churchill as Minister of Defence—sending the army to fight striking coal workers and shifting the British naval fleet from coal to oil.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The link between the two events becomes all the more clear through the biographical detail that before becoming Minister of Defence, Churchill sat on the board of the Iraq Petroleum Company, the company that built the pipeline. From its first use in Western markets, Middle Eastern oil was cheap, deterritorialized, and disassociated from the workers and residents at its points of extraction. Rejecting the more biblical notion of the oil curse, Mitchell signals that the end of oil or the shift to either more extreme or renewable energy sources will similarly transform political structures.

In Mitchell's timeline, this moment represents the onset of *Carbon Democracy* in which a liquefied substance fuelled uneven global development with the political reflexes of increasing influence of corporations in systems of representative democracy and non-democratic authoritarian rule in oil-rich countries. My research on the extraction and export of oil reveals that residence above or around oil wells almost always constituted cause for alienation from profit or decision making about crude oil. The system required the deterritorialisation of oil and its re-placement through the circuitous routes of pipelines and tankers. Such reconfiguration of geography became possible through the legal apparatus of the concession, which separated the entire subterranean realm of the Middle Eastern nation states created after World War I from the exercise of sovereignty above. Colonial governments gave concessions to companies that granted them ownership of all the oil, minerals, or water beneath a colony. For example, the Iraq Petroleum Company—the forerunner of BP—was slated to own all of the oil beneath Iraq for a seventy-five-year period (1925-2000). Although Saddam Hussein nationalized oil in 1972, by 2007 the Second Gulf War restored many of its original oil fields to BP.

The Iraq Petroleum Company pipeline from Kirkuk to Haifa began operation in 1935. The faster oil moved out of Iraq, the more constrained its citizens became. At the onset, the Iraq Petroleum Company (an enterprise that included no Iraqis) insisted that the British colonial air force create flight paths and bases along the route of the pipeline to insure that local residents did nothing to thwart the export of oil. This apparatus of aerial surveillance included the new category of “extremist,” used for any individual who slowed the pace of oil's exit from its place of origin. Although all profit belonged to the company, colonial governments paid for securing oil and deducted the expenses from moneys due the Iraqi government as a kind of rent. The cost of Britain's surveillance proved so high that Iraq saw no financial benefit from its oil that was not its own.

However, exactly as oil became privatized, the nationalisms at points of extraction and consumption became more passionate. Fierce nationalism and its underlying schisms proved helpful to the Iraq Petroleum Company's agenda of thwarting the labour movement. Having learned from coal strikes not to allow labour to make national claims, the British company dealt with organizing and striking by pitting workers against one another on ethnic or sectarian grounds. In Iraq, concerted campaigns pitted Arab workers against Jewish organizers, stressed the difference of the Christian minority by employing educated Christians in managerial roles, and played up Sunni-Shia and Arab-Kurdish tension by conferring benefits along ethnic or sectarian lines. Such practices suggest a necessary revision of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's distinction between the more benign imperialism of the nation-state and the more rapacious imperialism of global capitalism. In fact, the nation-states created out of the Ottoman Empire after World War I were fashioned to ease the outward flow of resources and simultaneous constraint of newly minted citizens. When the citizens posed a threat to corporate extraction without remuneration, they were systematically reminded of their sub and supranational affiliations. If they persisted, they were labelled “extremists” and

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opened to attack.<sup>2</sup> It was in the Iraq Petroleum Company's—portrayed as England's national—interest to do so.

This discussion may seem to have strayed from biblical concerns, but the background, I hope, helps to illuminate the longer history of western nationalisms strengthened by things dug up from the Iraqi ground. Simply put, discovery of the treasures of archaeology and energy are inextricably linked. Antiquities, like oil, rarely figured as the patrimony of the people who lived above or alongside them, and bases of excavation, which doubled as proto-military bases, marked some of the first colonial outposts. By the mid-nineteenth century, the race was on among England, France, Germany, and the United States to exhume, survey, and map the Ottoman Middle East.<sup>3</sup> The search for antiquities was bound up with the military and commerce in a way perfectly evinced by the 1855 sponsorship of “Captain Felix Jones, commander of the *Nitocris*, the Indian Navy vessel that maintained British communications between Baghdad and Basra by the East India Company to make a proper plan of Babylon in the name of ‘elucidation of Oriental Antiquities’” (Reade 2008, 37). Colonial agencies secured lines of transit, communication, and exchange for companies who justified their exploitation by producing antiquities heralded as vital to Western nationalisms.

Securing permission to scrutinize the surface and subsurface from Ottoman authorities was no small matter. Angling on the part of Britain, France, and the United States always took the form of permit requests for archaeologists and explorers in search of the biblical past. However, the Germans gained the widest open access through the alliance with the Sublime Port born out of their construction of the Baghdad-Berlin Railway.<sup>4</sup> Such license to excavate marked the coveted prize because the collective, unspoken desire was for what lay underground and the search for one type of treasure could easily translate into exploration for the other. The people living above were easily ignored, discounted, or disparaged for failing to bring value to the surface. Archaeological expeditions doubled as surveys of potential oil wells and military reconnaissance; surveyors and cartographers doubled as amateur archaeologists. Babylon needed to be simultaneously dug up and conquered.

Analysing the politics of archaeology in modern Iraq, Magnus T. Bernhardsson cites “enlightenment universalist apocalyptic teleology” as driving the search for the remnants of Babylon (Bernhardsson 2007, 193). Such remnants were viewed as

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Percy Cox, June 21· 1920, Public Records Office FO 371/5227.

<sup>3</sup> Claudius James Rich, discoverer of Mesopotamian baked clay tablets sent to the British Museum, was the British East India Company's first resident in Baghdad. Paul-Émile Botta, the French “discoverer” of Nineveh offered “a form of government/imperial service designed to serve its ideological interests...In part through the growing attention to the region fostered by Rich's many publications, around 1841 a French consulate was opened in Mesopotamia...Henry Creswick Rawlinson encouraged the Assyrian excavations of the British Austin Henry Layard in order to prevent the French from “monopoliz(ing) the field...The German attempt to rival the great British and French collections of Mesopotamian antiquities demanded competition on their terms, through excavation” (Bohrer 2003, 70, 103, 279).

<sup>4</sup> “Not least among the members of the DOG (the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft/The German Orient Society) were those with direct business ties to the Middle East, notably the German banking and railroad interests headquartered in Constantinople, whose project for a ‘Baghdad-Bahn’ loomed throughout the period” (Bohrer 2003, 279).

essential evidence of human evolution that inherently belonged to countries at its alleged apex. Insofar as they depicted the achievements of ancient empires, “Oriental Antiquities” attested to the natural, timelessness of empire and supported the politically evolutionary idea that the power of empire followed a chain of transmission culminating in Western Europe. To discover and display them in the metropole was further a means of staking claim to a colony. As Mario Liverani puts it, “the archaeological and epigraphic rediscovery of ancient Near Eastern civilizations started in the period of colonial appropriation of the Ottoman Empire and was a constituent part of that process” (Liverani, 2005, 223). Excavators in the field meant eyes probing underground and co-nationalists who could moonlight in the search for mineral stores. The motivations of German, French, and British industrialists aligned with those of the governments to know and to claim what lay below the ground.

The British and French had begun the enterprise by excavating for Assyria, which left the Germans eager to prove their colonial prowess by digging for Babylon. German archaeologist Robert Koldewey discovered the submerged city of Babylon with the substantive funds that industrialists provided to the German Oriental Society. Even the Kaiser offered financial support in order to “rival discoveries made by England and France” (Reade 2008, 42). At this same point in time, members of excavations and exploration teams acquired maps and geologic studies of potential oil wells. As they wondered who might pump the oil, national elites found political and cultural justification when archaeological treasures made their way to the capital as in the case of ancient Babylon’s Ishtar Gate discovered by Koldewey, which arrived in Berlin as “a major archaeological coup for Germany in the production of German nationalism” (Runions 2014, 20). Industrialist elites could be satisfied by the fact that the Ishtar Gate was part and parcel of concessions awarded by the Ottoman Empire for the Baghdad-Berlin Railway, essentially “a pipeline on wheels.”<sup>5</sup> Well aware of the double boon, the British Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force promptly expelled Koldewey and his archaeological team upon reaching Babylon in 1917, just two years before Deutsche Bank lost its concessionary claim to Mesopotamia oil.

Following their Assyrian finds, the British maintained archaeological teams in the Middle East. Just before the outbreak of World War I, for example, archaeologists T.E. Lawrence and Leonard Woolley were ostensibly employed by the Palestinian Exploration Fund to dig for antiquities in Syria and southern Palestine. Although they did not prospect for oil, Lawrence and Woolley were part of a “covert operation being run by the British military” to determine who might constitute an opponent and who an ally in a war to oust the Ottomans (Andersen 2013, 12). Lawrence assumed his famous identity as Lawrence of Arabia through his role in the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. His earlier notes from the field, along with those of other archaeologists, enabled Britain’s Indian

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<sup>5</sup> “Abdul Hamid had quietly agreed to give German prospectors working for the railway company generous exploration rights inside his domains, including copper and coal-mining grants and broad excavation rights within twenty kilometres of the Baghdad line on either side. A secret imperial *Irādē* (decree) dated 15 November 1899—just five weeks before the Baghdad concession was granted—gave the Berlin Museum further rights to keep artefacts German miners or archaeologists might discover while excavating on Ottoman territory. The results, as anyone who has visited the Museum Island in Berlin knows, were dramatic” (McMeekin 2012, 43).

Expeditionary Force (IEF) to easily seize the oil fields of southern Iraq in 1915. Capture of the northern fields was delayed by the Ottoman defeat of British troops at Kut, but by 1917 the British Arab Bureau began to fashion the modern state of Iraq. Several archaeologists numbered in the eclectic, but influential group including Lawrence, his mentor David Hogarth, Lord Kitchener, and Gilbert Clayton.<sup>6</sup> Post-war conferences held by the victors finalized the archaeologists' version of Iraq under British influence. Lawrence was often in attendance to support the crowning of the Hashemite prince Faisal, his comrade in arms, as the ostensible sovereign.

The competition among archaeological teams in the Ottoman field presaged the clash of troops in the trenches of World War I; both endeavours, I suggest, were intimately tied up with acquisition of drilling rights. As much as the story of archaeology and oil in the Middle East shows the continuities between pre- and post-World War I practices, the war brought tectonic changes. To summarize a long, excruciating war: with their substantial concessions in hand, the Germans fought alongside the Ottomans and lost. The British, French, and ultimately the Americans allied, won, and reconfigured the Middle East as nation states. These nation states might better be recognized as carbon nation states in which borders secured dedicated British, French, and American pipelines and the entire subterranean level belonged to their pseudo-national oil companies.<sup>7</sup> As the concession governed the subterranean realm, the system of mandates defined territory. Mandates—ostensibly a form of European handholding on the way to national independence—were intended as strategies of political management to protect European and American ownership of resources while keeping the price of local labour low. Obsessed with costs, officials at home stressed a policy of “no annexation.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, hand-picked local rulers should persuade the populace to comply with the mandate.<sup>9</sup> These rulers had no say over resource management, no ability to confer labour benefits, and no means of persuading the oil companies to drill.

After the British installed Faisal, the Iraq Petroleum Company secured its seventy-five-year mineral concession. Overseeing the “rigged plebiscite” to attain Iraqi consent to a state in which Britain owned the subterranean realm and kept control from the air above befell the archaeological aficionado, Gertrude Bell (Khalidi 2005, 99). For her efforts, Bell received the office of British Oriental Secretary in Baghdad with control over antiquities (Bernhardson 2008, 194). Interestingly, and perhaps for gendered reasons, Iraqis secured partial nationalization of their antiquities well before their oil. In 1934, Iraqi nationalist and

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<sup>6</sup> Hogarth had previously dreamed of “European colonists return(ing)...to take up this portion of their more legitimate heritage” (McMeekin 2012, 35).

<sup>7</sup> The states of Iraq, Jordan, and Israel developed within parameters set by the various British bureaus and the states of Syria and Lebanon developed within French colonial systems. The concession granted Iraqi oil to the Iraq Petroleum Company comprised of 23.75% holdings by the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (BP forerunner); Shell, Compagnie Francais de Petrol (Total forerunner), and Standard Oil/Near Eastern Development Company (ExxonMobil forerunner) and 5% held by Calouste Gulbenkian, the Armenian former Ottoman subject who had first obtained the relevant geological charts.

<sup>8</sup> From Secretary of State to Civil Commissioner, Baghdad 28<sup>th</sup> November 1918, PRO FO 371/5227.

<sup>9</sup> “The mandate, it is added, will contain provisions to facilitate the development of Mesopotamia as a self-governing state until it is able to stand by itself when the mandate will end.” Foreign Office press statement, Bagdad June 22, 1920. PRO FO 371/5227.

Bell nemesis, Sati al-Husri gained appointment as director of antiquities and mobilized archaeology to support Iraqi national sentiment. Just as the IPC pipeline completed its first year of moving oil in 1936, al-Husri passed legislation keeping “all unique objects” inside Iraq at the Iraq Museum.

American archaeologists, oil companies, and later soldiers figure in the story as well. Before and during World War I, Standard Oil dispatched William Yale with a small team to pose as gentleman explorers in search of biblical artefacts to support the scientific veracity of Christianity. Despite the fact that Yale searched in vain for mineral deposits in southern Palestine, by 1924 Standard Oil had secured about a third of Iraqi oil. Between its quarter share of Iraqi Oil and dominance in Saudi Arabia, the precursor of ExxonMobil had the power to limit French and British price gouging while not needing to shoulder the burden of policing the Iraqi people.

Among his philanthropic projects, Standard Oil’s co-founder, John D. Rockefeller Jr. funded archaeologist James Henry Breasted’s 1920 trip to a Mesopotamia, which was in the process of becoming Iraq. The year before, Rockefeller established the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago in order to house the archaeological finds from Breasted’s trip. The year of Breasted’s Mesopotamian expedition was in no way incidental; it concurred with the redistribution of Iraqi oil shares in light of the German Deutsche Bank’s exclusion. The shares went to Standard Oil. To support nascent British rule and American interests, Breasted consulted with British officials on his impressions of the Iraqis he encountered in the field. Unlike his British counterparts, however, Breasted took the treasures and left Iraq.<sup>10</sup> Such a pattern seems to have appealed to the American military close to a century later, but proved exceedingly more difficult.

Archaeology also went the way of oil during processes of Middle Eastern nationalization. Saddam Hussein, for example, nationalized Iraqi oil in 1972, eventually driving out most western oil interests. Amidst this process, archaeology constituted part of the evidence of an unbroken national heritage that needed to be safeguarded and defended by Iraqi patriots. Consequently, Saddam Hussein’s Baathist government vowed to reconstruct ancient Babylon, which had been pilfered and reduced by western archaeologists. “The ‘Archaeological Restoration of Babylon Project’ commenced on 14 February 1978, under the direction of the State Organization of Antiquities and Heritage, and continued all through the Iraq-Iran War, which started in September 1980...The restoration of Babylon, or at least the first phase of it, was mostly finished in time for the first Babylon International Festival in September 1987, held while fighting in the war against Iran was still raging” (Curtis 2008, 213). The coincidence of excavation/archaeological reconstruction and war reveals another long-standing effect of carbon democracy because, more than a repetition of modes of domination, the imperial legacy remains evident in Middle Eastern nationalisms.<sup>11</sup> When Middle Eastern states

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<sup>10</sup> Adding a contemporary layer to the story, the 2010 exhibit about Breasted’s expeditions at the Oriental Institute, “Pioneers to the Past: American Archaeologists in the Middle East, 1919-1920,” was sponsored by the Exelon Corporation, a nuclear and fossil fuel energy company. In parallel, we might see BP sponsorship of the British Museum, which houses Assyrian and Babylonian artefacts, as pointing to long-standing partnerships and debts.

<http://platformlondon.org/2015/09/18/british-museum-art-not-oil-azerbaijan/>

<sup>11</sup> British imperialism enabled Arab and Jewish nationalisms as it co-opted them for its own needs. In a 1918 memorandum on “the value of the Sherifial Arab Movement for British Policy,” for

nationalized, they absorbed militarized space configured to expedite the transit of oil out of the region. Surveillance, attack on local populations, and exacerbation of ethnic and sectarian tensions developed in tandem with the states themselves. Nationalization did not annul these structures, but simply transferred them from imperial to authoritarian national governments. In the mix, antiquities have either stoked militarized nationalistic passions or led to counter-claims by would-be national groups like the Kurds or Palestinians.<sup>12</sup> Of late, they have been summarily destroyed by invading armies like the U.S. led coalition in Iraq or ISIS. The nature of the countries configured to provide the west with a steady stream of oil and ancient splendour ensures ongoing war.

Runions shows us how such a scenario is part of a complex. Applying her ideas to the energy industry reveals both the “orientalist framing...used to shore up U.S. subjectivity and nationalism”—not to mention unfettered oil extraction—and the oil companies’ resistance to federal regulation while publicizing it “as complicit with harm” (28, 31). The corporate claim that oil conglomerates represent Western values while at the same time standing outside its legal frameworks as eternal exceptions have contributed to the ongoing “crisis of national sovereignty” in the Middle East. These same corporations have accelerated a similar crisis in North America in the form of domestic energy extraction. As U.S. markets turn away from Iraqi oil in order to avoid confronting a steady succession of “extremists” and instead rely on extreme energy in the form of Canadian Oil Sands or American Fracked Gas, 21<sup>st</sup> Century North American towns begin to resemble those of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Iraq. A migratory labour force has little guarantee of stable employment or workplace safety; local owners lack jurisdiction over the minerals and water beneath their property; and the beneficiaries of energy extraction dictate their terms to government rather than the reverse. How long might it take until internecine violence, systemic surveillance, and militarization ensue? One response, both pseudo-populist and dominant among right-wing elites, decries the absent authority of God and certainty that restoring Christian hierarchy (in the form of outlawing gay marriage and abortion) could again set everything right. The same platform, of course, seeks to hasten the spread of the market, annul existing regulation, and threaten the job security and benefits of its base. Another response, in line with the archaeology-energy connection, bewails the destruction of “our” heritage as ISIS destroys antiquities as if they were sworn enemies. As an integral part of our culture, the antiquities themselves belong in our museums at the same time that Islamists are the anti-us and must be opposed in the name of survival. As we continue to claim the subterranean treasures of the Middle East and define ourselves in opposition to those living above, we lose our grip on domestic resources and labour rights, anxiously awaiting and experiencing the Babelian diffusion of political coherence into a welter of metrics and data.

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example, General Clayton explains, “the rise of the Arab Movement has been a fortunate development for the British Empire at a very crucial period of its history. Hussein (Sharif Hussein, Emir of Mecca) agreed to give us the oil from Mesopotamia for an annuity from out of the Mesopotamia revenues. On the other hand, he is bound to draw a veil over this relationship with us in order to justify himself in the eyes of the Moslem world.” PRO FO 371/3385.

<sup>12</sup> “The modern Lebanese, especially the Christian Maronites, engaged in Levantine trade pretend to be direct heirs of the Phoenicians, while the desperate Kurds claim to be descendants of the ‘mighty Medes’ and celebrate Nowruz as an anniversary of the Medes’ destruction of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E.” (Liverani 2005, 224).

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