Political Archaeology. Deconstructing the Political Exploitation of Myths in Iraq (1958–2003)

━━━ Goodarz Haddadi Nasab, Mehdi Mortazavi*, Fariba Mosapour Negari

The Middle East is widely recognised as one of the most influential regions in the world, primarily due to its rich cultural diversity encompassing linguistic, ethnic and religious variations. However, despite the potential significance of myths in shaping national identity and political developments, limited research has been conducted in this area. This study aimed to explore the role of myths in the political governance of Iraq during the period from 1958 to 2003, a challenging era within the Middle East. Considering Iraq's ancient history, this research sought to elucidate the ideological perspectives of the rulers during the republican era, as well as the factors influencing their selection of specific myths for political purposes. It is worth noting that this study can contribute to enhancing awareness in future investigations on the role of myths in political governance across other regions within the Middle East.

KEYWORDS: Republic of Iraq, 1958 to 2003, ideology, political myth, the goddess Ishtar, the god Marduk

Bližnji vzhod velja za eno najvplivnejših regij na svetu, predvsem zaradi bogate kulturne raznolikosti, ki vključuje jezikovne, etnične in verske razlike. Kljub potencialnemu pomenu mitov pri oblikovanju nacionalne identitete in političnega razvoja pa je bilo na tem področju opravljenih le malo raziskav. Namen te študije je bil raziskati vlogo mitov pri političnem upravljanju Iraka v obdobju med letoma 1958 in 2003, ki je bilo na Bližnjem vzhodu zahtevno obdobje. Ob upoštevanju starodavne zgodovine Iraka je ta raziskava skušala pojasniti ideološke perspektive vladarjev v republikanski dobi ter dejavnike, ki so vplivali na njihov izbor določenih mitov v politične namene. Poudariti velja, da lahko ta študija prispeva k večji ozaveščenosti pri prihodnjih raziskavah o vlogi mitov pri političnem upravljanju v drugih regijah na Bližnjem vzhodu.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: Republika Irak, 1958–2003, ideologija, politični mit, boginja Ištar, bog Marduk

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to examine the role of myths in decision-making and political governance during the Republic of Iraq era. This perspective will be employed to explore the

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* Corresponding Author.

background of existing studies on this issue with a view to gaining further insight. Analysing the role of myths in shaping political strategies and leadership within the historical context of the Iraqi Republic reveals a new way of interpreting that era. Additionally, the relationship between political ideology in Iraq and the exploitation of myths will be analysed in a section entitled "Ideologies of the Iraqi Republic". The dominant ideologies of the era, Pan-Arabism and Iraqi nationalism, were heavily influenced by the social and political landscape of Iraq at that time. Studying these social and political factors provides a critical foundation for understanding how these ideologies emerged. Therefore, this research will also encompass an examination of these influential conditions. A brief overview of historical events and significant political developments during the Republic of Iraq era will aid in understanding why rulers exploited myths for political advantage. This research investigates the link between political ideology and the use of myths in Iraq. We cannot fully grasp how myths were used in specific historical events without a strong foundation in the events themselves. Furthermore, given Mesopotamia's rich cultural heritage and the rulers' need to foster unity among the diverse perspectives within Iraq, particular focus will be placed on the period following the monarchy (during the First Republic and Baath Party rule). Due to Mesopotamia's long and diverse history, this period becomes even more significant for study in this context. Mesopotamia's unique cultural heritage and the need for national unity make the Republic of Iraq era a compelling case for examining the use of myths in governance. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how myths influenced governance and political decisions throughout Iraq's republican era. The theoretical foundations underlying this topic will be briefly presented in a separate section to emphasise its overall importance. Consequently, this article will explore how ancient myths can contribute to national solidarity within a country.

With this context in mind, our main inquiry revolves around examining how myths influenced Iraq's national identity and shaped political governance strategies and decisions during the Republic of Iraq era. To address this question, a descriptive-historical and qualitative approach will be employed, utilising various library resources to analyse the role of myths in decision-making and political governance during the Republic of Iraq era. The findings revealed that during the Iraqi Republic period, particularly in its early stages, there was a prevalent politically motivated utilisation of mythological figures such as Ishtar (symbolising love, war, blessings, social relations and social interaction) and Shamash (the sun god). In addition, considering the prominent role and position of the goddess Ishtar in ancient Mesopotamian society, it can be inferred that there was a shift in the perception of women's roles during the First Republic of Iraq. Furthermore, the presence of the god Marduk was utilised to legitimise the rulers of ancient Mesopotamia and justify their actions in times of war. This was evidenced by the strengthening of legitimacy during the Iraq-Iran conflict and confrontations with Israel. It is also possible that the personality of the Iraqi president at that time played a significant role in the decision to attack Kuwait. Ultimately, it appears that during the period of the Iraqi Republic, emphasis was often placed on the goddess Ishtar due to political and social conditions. Conversely, under Baath Party rule, the focus shifted towards the god Marduk.

RESEARCH HISTORY

The influence of national mythmaking in shaping and advancing the debate over Iraqi nationalism has been the subject of numerous studies. In the context of Iraq, Harkhu (2005) examines the ideological parallels and divergences between Saddam Hussein and the ancient Mesopotamian kings, acknowledging both historical echoes and the unique context of Saddam's rule. The role of the state and politics in antiquarianism and collective identity in Iraq (during the Baathist era) is discussed in an article by Eric Davis entitled "The Museum and the Politics of Social Control in Modern Iraq" (Davis 1994). This article acknowledges the large growth in government spending in this area. In his book entitled *The Development of Archaeology in Mesopotamia: From the Ottoman Empire to the Rise of the Iraqi State*, Bernhardsson discusses the evolution of archaeology in Mesopotamia from the time of the Ottoman Empire to the British occupation and the early years of the formation of the Kingdom of Iraq as a sovereign state. He emphasises the connection between archaeology and modern Iraqi nationalism (Bernhardsson 2005). Several researchers have also conducted in-depth research on the ancient gods and myths of Mesopotamia (Matsushima 2014; Cortés 2019; Oshima 2011). Additionally, numerous studies have been published on the political exploitation of ancient Mesopotamian mythical symbols during the Republic of Iraq's existence (al-Khalil 1991; Baram 1983; Abdi 2008).

It is important to note that during the Iraqi Republic, symbols of the goddess Ishtar were used to foster national unity among Iraqis (Dawisha 2016). R. Nicholas Christoff eferences to the god Marduk in political decisions during that time have also been found (Dalley 1995; De Bruyn 2013). Although the use of ancient myths during the Iraqi Republic has already been discussed, this article differs from earlier ones in that it is unclear from an archaeological perspective how and why the governments in question selected the specific deity or goddess to achieve their political objectives.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The primary objective of this research is to explore the ideological perspectives of rulers in the political manipulation of ancient myths, and to elucidate their role in justifying and influencing the political decisions made during the period of the Iraqi Republic (1958–2003). Given the historical significance and diverse pantheon of ancient gods in Iraq, this study specifically focuses on understanding the position and influence of the goddess Ishtar and the god Marduk in shaping political governance. It also examines how their societal nature impacted the decision-making process of Iraqi rulers. In essence, this research seeks to investigate how myths have contributed to strengthening Iraq's national identity amidst various challenges.

Hence, the primary focus of this research will be to examine the development of Pan-Arabism and Iraqi nationalist ideologies. Additionally, it will explore the political advantages associated with the worship of the goddess Ishtar and the god Marduk, as well as their impact on governmental decision-making during the Iraqi Republic era. To

achieve this objective, a descriptive-historical and qualitative research approach has been adopted, with a strong emphasis on utilising library resources.

Moreover, this research employed a qualitative approach, centred on a textual analysis of political speeches delivered by prominent Iraqi leaders. Speeches were collected from different academic resources relevant to Iraqi politics. Thematic analysis was the primary method used, with a coding scheme designed to identify keywords, historical references and recurring themes related to national identity and the deployment of myths and symbols. By closely examining the way historical events and figures are presented within these speeches, we aimed to elucidate the methods by which Iraqi leaders have leveraged political mythology to both construct and reconstruct national identity, ultimately serving their political agendas.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF MYTH AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

The role of myths in culture and national identity is one of the topics that have been studied in sociology. Social identity theory emphasises that individual identity is dependent on the identity of the group in which one resides. In other words, groups can be defined in terms of national, cultural and religious communities, and myths play a role in the formation of the identity of different groups. Therefore, the theory of social identity is a crucial foundation for investigating the relationship between myth and identity (Brown 2019). Our understanding of identity is crucial to this research. Social construction theory tells us that identity is not fixed, but constantly evolving based on our social interactions and group memberships. Political identity, a specific type of social identity, revolves around shared political beliefs. Furthermore, identity construction is a dynamic process, shaped by social and political contexts. These concepts allow us to analyse how Iraqi leaders have used myths and symbols to construct and reconstruct national identity, ultimately influencing political decisions and governance.

The following section presents examples related to this theory in the Middle East. For example, the founder of the Republic of Turkey (Atatürk) used cultural myths in political discourse to transform the traditional Muslim society into a secular, modern and democratic nation-state (Morin 2010: 485–486). Alternatively, in Persian culture, the mythical king Jamshid plays an important role in the formation of group identity and is known as a symbol of purity, authenticity, courage and justice. It seems that myths are widely recognised in the formation of group identity in many cultures, functioning as symbols of accepted and influential values in society. They play an important role in the formation of group identity and national identity. It also seems that each member of society assumes a variety of roles that collectively contribute to forming that person's identity and the collective identity within which they live. In this regard, it is important to consider individual needs. In order to achieve individual satisfaction, it is necessary to address three key areas: the need for development, the need for social connection, and the need for security and belonging. Myths are considered to be one of the factors that play a role in fulfilling these individual needs. It is necessary to acknowledge that

social realities are created through social processes and no reality exists in isolation. Myths are also examined as one of the social processes that play a role in the structure of social realities. Furthermore, social facts are not inherently right or wrong; rather they are created through perceptions, meanings and social interactions. In this regard, myths are examined as one of the social processes that play a role in the structure of social realities. For example, national myths can play a role in the construction of national identity, and as one of the factors that facilitate integration and unity within a society, they assist in the better recognition and understanding of social processes. Therefore, it can be assumed that cultural heritage myths are important as one of the key instruments in legitimising nationalism and fostering a sense of national belonging to promote political ideology (Berger 2009: 492). For instance, this type of benefit can be observed in the Middle East, where Hafez Assad (President of Syria at the time) employed cultural heritage to strengthen his government (Wedeen 1999). Similar mechanisms can be seen in the case of the family of Muhammad Ali Pasha in Egypt (Reid 2002) and in the example of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) who sought to identify the roots of Turkish civilisation in the Sumerians and Hittites. Similarly, the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1919–1980), also identified himself with the Achaemenid generation (Sciolino 1991: 40, Mortazavi 2009: 125–126).

IRAQI IDEOLOGIES AND THE EXPLOITATION OF PAST HERITAGE: TRACING THE FORMATION OF MODERN IRAQ

The modern state of Iraq can be traced back to the second decade of the 19th century. Following the conclusion of the First World War, the British amalgamated three southern provinces of the Ottoman Empire – Mosul, Baghdad and Basra – to form a new country known as Iraq (Ramesh 2003: 123). In 1921, under the rule of Prince Faisal bin Hussein from the Hashemite dynasty, the Kingdom of Iraq was established. This section aims to examine the social and political conditions that prevailed during this period and their influence on shaping Pan-Arabism and nationalist ideologies. It will explore how these ideologies evolved from the monarchy era until the downfall of power held by the Baath Party in Iraq (2003).

PAN-ARABISM IDEOLOGY

Abu Khaldoun Sati al-Hosri is recognised as one of the key figures in the development of Pan-Arabism (Dawisha 2016: 49). His ideas also played a significant role in shaping the formation of the Republic and the Baath Party (Simon 1986: 75–84). Al-Hosri's perspective emphasises language and history as shared principles that define a nation. He posits that the Arabic language has its roots in ancient times on the Arabian Peninsula and that the extensive history of the Arab people extends back to pre-Islamic times. These cultural aspects serve as protective measures against foreign influences (Cleveland 1971: 123–126).

Dervish Moqdadi, a Palestinian graduate from the American University of Beirut, also emphasised Pan-Arabism and advocated for the establishment of an Arab homeland by recognising the environmental potential of the Fertility Crescent idea (Dawn 1971). The formation of Pan-Arabism ideology during the founding period of the Kingdom of Iraq (1921) can be attributed to several factors. Despite being an Arab from the Sunni Hejaz religion, King Faisal, who became Iraq's first king after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, was revered by Shiites as a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and a leader in their rebellion against Ottoman rule. King Faisal and his supporters believed that the Arab lands could unite around a central core, similar to the Italian or German model, forming an Arab country with Iraq as its capital. It is worth noting that Pan-Arabism reached its peak in Iraq during both the monarchical era (1921–1958) and the early republican period (1958–1968).

Although Iraq gained independence from British colonial rule in 1932, the treaties signed between Britain and Iraq in 1924 and 1930, which allowed Britain to maintain military bases and interests in Iraq, had a significant impact on the development of Pan-Arabism. These agreements were only reluctantly approved by the Iraqi parliament, highlighting the influence of external powers on Iraqi affairs. Furthermore, the presence of ethnic rivalries and successive coups between 1936 and 1941 further emphasised the importance of Arab unity and solidarity, with a focus on a shared language and ancient history (Dann 1969: 362). While it can be argued that the First Iraqi Republic (1958–1968) marked a transition from Pan-Arabism to Iraqi nationalism, it is evident that Iraqi nationalist thought had not yet fully emerged during the period between 1921 and 1968. This period stretched from the monarchy era until the end of the First Republic, characterised by political and social instability. Therefore, it can be posited that the Iraqi nationalist ideology had not yet reached a state of consolidation during this period.

THE IDEOLOGY OF IRAQI NATIONALISM

The 1958 coup led by General Abdul Karim Qasim transformed Iraq from a monarchy to a republic. This shift was influenced by various factors, including the rise of Nasserism in Egypt and Iraq's desire to compete with Egypt for influence in the Arab world. Additionally, Iraq's withdrawal from the Arab League, its claim of sovereignty over Kuwait and the Arvand River, strained relations with neighbouring countries, and the Kurdish rebellion in the 1960 and 1970s played a role in forming a new ideology among Iraqi leaders (Abdi 2008: 9). The Baath Party emerged as a significant force during this period, promoting strong nationalist sentiments and emphasizing Iraqi nationalism. The party's ideology of Pan-Arabism aimed to consolidate political unity by drawing on Iraq's ancient history and glorious past. It is worth noting that other intellectuals such as Miqdadi also influenced the foundation of Iraqi nationalism and Baathism (Simon 1997). The Baath Party was established in the 1930s by two Syrians, Michel Aflaq and Salahuddin Bitar, while studying at the Sorbonne University. They drew inspiration from nationalist debates in Europe and the Arab world, including ideas put forth by al-Hosri and Miqdadi (Torrey 1969). Considering the limited understanding of ruling ideologies during the

Kingdom of Iraq era and beyond, it is important to examine how national mythmaking influenced political governance during the republican period.

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL MYTHMAKING IN THE
REPUBLIC OF IRAQ'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The position of national mythmaking in the political thinking of the Republic of Iraq can be observed through the dominance of the Baath Party in the government from 1968 onwards. Benefiting from the ancient potential of Mesopotamia, the Baath Party emphasised the distinction of Iraq from other places and promoted Iraqi nationalism as the dominant ideology. As a result, ancient symbols of Mesopotamia became prevalent in public and political gatherings. An example of this national mythmaking is the renaming of the province of Hillah to Babylon in 1970. In Baghdad, a hotel was named Babel with an entrance designed to resemble the gate of the goddess Ishtar. Furthermore, Udi Hussein, son of Saddam Hussein, established a newspaper called Babil (Coughlin 2002: 49). These instances demonstrate how modern Arabic names were replaced by ancient Mesopotamian names.

Another manifestation of national mythmaking is evident in the naming of an atomic reactor after one of the ancient myths, Tammuz (Baram 1983: 451). This reflects how ancient Mesopotamian culture and mythology even influenced scientific endeavours. The government also supported festivals inspired by Mesopotamia. Moreover, architectural and artistic styles derived from Sumer, Babylon and Assyria gained popularity during this period (al-Khalil 1991). This cultural revival led to an increase in budget allocations for the Ministry of Antiquities between 1968 and 1972 by more than 80% (al-Khalil 1991). Collectively, these examples demonstrate how national mythmaking significantly influenced political thinking and cultural expressions within Iraq during this period.

To emphasise the significance of the matter and to back up the assertion, we present Saddam Hussein's message to archaeologists:

> The responsibility of managing and protecting the ancient monuments, which are valuable relics for Iraqis, rests with you and especially the experts; to show the world that previous civilizations originated from our country and that they made a significant contribution to humanity (cited in Shantaf 1979: 11).

In light of these statements, it appears that attaining superiority in the Arab world's economic and military domains, as well as in the Iran-Iraq war (1988–1980), was critical for the Baath party in strengthening Iraq's nationalist emotions (Abdi 2008: 7). In this sense, Saddam Hussein abandoned the idea of Pan-Arabism as a means of uniting Arabs under a single banner. Nevertheless, he emphasised Iraq's cultural and political supremacy over other Arab countries, as well as its right to lead them. Promoting historical-cultural bigotry, such as the power of old myths and their impact on individual and social unconscious beliefs, could potentially play a role in this direction. These ancient tales

include those about Sumerian gods and goddesses including An Enlil, Enki, Ninhursag, Nanna-Sin, Utu and Inanna (Cortés 2019: 63). In particular, Ishtar (also known as Inanna or Ishtar in Akkadian) and the god Marduk played an important role in forming political ideas within the Iraqi Republic.

THE ROLE OF THE GODDESS ISHTAR DURING
THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ'S EXISTENCE

The first Iraqi Republic (1958–1968) already showed signs of the resurgence of pre-Islamic history. The national flag and emblem were designed by General Abdul Karim Qasim using the star of the goddess Ishtar and the god Shamash's solar symbol (Baram 1983: 427). The investigation into the potential for capitalising politically on the god Shamash and the goddess Ishtar during this period enhances the significance of the work. General Abdul Karim Qasim's perspective was rejected during the Baath Party's reign. In other words, it appears that the characteristics of the myth in question, along with the prevailing political and social conditions, determine how myths are used politically. The remainder of this essay will explore this subject in greater depth.

As previously mentioned, the two types of identitarianism that could be pursued in Iraq were Pan-Arabism and exclusive nationalism. Pan-Arabism regarded Arab culture, history and a shared language as prerequisites for the identity and unity of the Arab people, while exclusive nationalism believed that Iraq's cultural and natural potential was exclusively Iraqi and not Arab. However, the Iraqi Republic era may be seen as the period when Pan-Arabism gave way to Pan-Iraqism. This is because Pan-Arabism was not as much emphasized during this time as Iraqi nationalism (Bashkin 2011: 294). From this perspective, it appears that General Abdul Karim Qasim promoted the people using the term "Arab people of Iraq", in order to emphasise the trans-ethnic identity of the nation of Iraq in light of the political and social circumstances of the time. This included the rise of pan-Arab Nasserism in Egypt and the opposing Baathism in Iraq. The incorporation of the eight-pointed star of the goddess Ishtar on the national flag and the god of Shamash on the national emblem (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) could potentially facilitate the integration of other ethnic groups in Iraq, including the Kurds, with the central government. However, General Abdul Karim Qasim's nationalism may have hindered Iraq's alignment with the goals of the Arab League (Dawisha 2016: 287–288).

Figure 1: The symbol of the god Shamash on the national emblem during the period of General Abdul Karim Qasim (1963–1958). (Dann 1969: Cover page)

Figure 2: The eight-pointed star symbolising the goddess Ishtar on the national flag of Iraq during the period of General Abdul Karim Qasim (1963–1958). (Dann 1969: Cover page)

The symbol of the goddess Ishtar (Fig. 2) was selected to figure on the national flag during the leadership of General Abdul Karim Qasim. However, the reasons why and how remain a mystery. It is important to note that the equal rights of all Iraqi citizens were enshrined in the country's constitution during his tenure, regardless of their race, ethnicity, language or religion. Furthermore, the goddess Ishtar was renowned for her commitment to justice (Pryke 2017: 162–163; Jacobsen 1970: 209). She was considered to possess (Fig. 3) the authority to pursue justice and establish order in the world. Therefore, although the concept of justice in the ancient Mesopotamian world, rooted in divine origins, differed from that in modern Iraq, based on universal and modern law, utilising the symbol of the goddess Ishtar on the Iraqi national flag to promote justice within the context of political and social conditions was feasible. For instance, political prisoners, including Kurds, were released under the First Republic. However, they continued to express their discontent. Therefore, it seems that during the republican era, the utilisation of Ishtar's symbols was primarily focused on fostering social connections and interactions. As previously mentioned, the goddess Ishtar sought to enhance her power through engagement. This can be seen in the context of Jamal Abdel Nasser's claim to be the Arab leader in the Middle East during that time. Furthermore, under the First Republic (Abdi 2008: 12), the activities of the Communist Party, which had been limited during the Kingdom of Iraq, were completely halted in 1962. This is significant because General Abdul Karim Qasim's political beliefs did not align with the Marxist viewpoint. His decision to lift the ban on the Communist Party's activities reflects traits similar to those attributed to the goddess Ishtar. In addition to being the personification of love, war and blessings, this mythical goddess also emphasised interacting with other deities to gain more power (Abdi 2008: 12).

Figure 3: The Goddess Ishtar. (Pryke 2017: 161)

The social standing of women in the first Iraqi Republic is a distinct issue from the ones mentioned above. It can be said that the anthropomorphism of ancient Mesopotamian myths, the attributes of the goddess, and the beauty attributed to the goddess Ishtar/Inanna and ancient Mesopotamia in Sumer (Matsushima 2014: 1), along with the social status of women in both ancient Mesopotamia and modern Iraq, are interconnected. The ancient era preceding the Hammurabi dynasty appears to have had a more tolerant attitude towards women's social status

Figure 4: The symbol of the god Shamash, the eight-pointed star of the goddess Ishtar on the flag of Iraq and the importance of the role of women in the middle of the picture. (Dann 1969: 176)

because gods replaced mythical goddesses during the time of the Hammurabi. However, it is possible that the secular perspective and changing attitudes towards the role of women during the First Republic of Iraq were influenced by a self-awareness stemming from the goddess Ishtar's personality. Consequently, women's roles in society became more prominent during this period (for further details, see Dann 1969). For instance, in Figure 4, the presence of the goddess Ishtar's symbol on the flag and the god Shamash's symbol of two torches, along with a woman depicted within the picture, suggests that the nature of Ishtar's personality may have reflected and represented the position and role of women in Iraqi society at that time.

It is important to note that during the initial decade of General Abdul Karim Qasim's commitment to purely nationalist ideology, his ideas were not widely accepted (Baram 1983: 427). However, during the war with Iran, the Baath Party apparently prioritised Iraqi nationalism (aiming for unity between diverse ethnicities and religions) over Pan-Arabism, which will be further explored in subsequent sections. It is important to note that the Ishtar Gate was excavated by German archaeologists in the early 20th century. The remains of the gate were subsequently sent to Berlin. However, in the 1970s, the Baath regime failed to restore the gate, so a new design inspired by the Ishtar Gate was constructed. In order to emulate the architectural style of ancient times, bricks were placed between the original bricks of the Ishtar Gate (Fig. 5). These additional bricks bore inscriptions indicating that this structure was rebuilt during Saddam Hussein's era (Coughlin 2002: 227). Furthermore, replicas of the gate of the goddess Ishtar, accompanied by an image of Saddam Hussein, were distributed throughout the country (Fig. 6).

Figure 5: An example of Saddam Hussein's approach to reconstructing the Ishtar Gate in Babylon. (Abdi 2008: 20)

Figure 6: The replica of the gate of the goddess Ishtar and the president of Iraq at the time, Saddam Hussein. (Al-Khalil 1991: 53)

THE POSITION OF THE GOD MARDUK DURING
THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ PERIOD

The role of the god Marduk during the Republic of Iraq period can be seen through the utilisation of ancient myths and Babylonian civilisation to help solidify the national identity of the Iraqi people under the rule of the Baath Party from 1968 to 2003. One may cite an example from 1982, when the party employed ancient myths as a means to achieve their political objectives, such as the unveiling of the statue of the god Marduk in Baghdad. Babylon was a popular destination for archaeologists and tourists, and particularly for foreign dignitaries who were invited by the Iraqis to witness the magnificence of the ancient Mesopotamian ruins. It is worth noting that on the anniversary of the Baath Party coup in 1969, during General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr's leadership, Iranian diplomats were among the first foreigners invited to visit this site. This coincided with the Iranian Shah's preparations to celebrate his monarchy's 2500th anniversary (Abdi 2008: 19). It is likely that the Baathists intended to remind these imperial diplomats that ancient Iranians drew inspiration from Babylon's supreme deity, Marduk (Fig. 7), at Persepolis.

In 1987, President Saddam Hussein issued an order to rebuild the Tower of Babel. The significance of Babylon in the Baath Party's ideology can be attributed to its manifestation as a symbol of resistance and stability in the Mesopotamian civilisation, particularly after the overthrow of multiple kings. Additionally, Babylon's strategic location between Sunni areas surrounding Baghdad and Shiite regions in the south further underscores its importance (Baram 1991: 45–47). Therefore, the construction of the tower facilitated the social cohesion desired by the Baath party, particularly during the period from 1980 to 1988, which coincided with the war against Iran. Consequently, the Baathists sought to assert their dominance by invoking the myths contained in the Shahnameh. The interplay between political events and the use of national myths is a critical aspect of understanding national identity in Iraq. The devastating and prolonged Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) significantly influenced Iraqi society, fostering a surge in Iraqi nationalism and a sense of national unity as the country faced a common enemy. It is likely that this evolving social context influenced how Iraqi leaders employed national mythology. They may have emphasised myths that highlight Iraqi courage, resilience and historical importance to bolster national pride during this turbulent period. Analysing how political

Figure 7: The god Marduk. (Prete 2011: Cover page)

Figure 8: Medal of the 1987 Babylon International Festival with the face of Saddam Hussein and the ancient king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar. (De Cesari 2015: 25)

events, such as the Iran-Iraq War, have shaped the use of political mythology in Iraq is essential for comprehending the complex relationship between national identity, political leadership and the exploitation of symbolic narratives.

During the conflict with Iran, Saddam Hussein sought to bolster his nationalist leadership by portraying Nebuchadnezzar, an ancient Iraqi Figure, as someone who had fought against the Iranians and the Jews (Karsh and Rautsi 1991: 152). This was evident in the depiction of Nebuchadnezzar and Saddam Hussein on the medal of the 1987 Babylon International Festival (Fig. 8). However, this essay will not delve into this historical narrative. Instead, it will focus on exploring the significance of the mythological god Marduk in both ancient and contemporary Iraq during the Baath Party era.

The revival of Babylon can be attributed to Saddam Hussein's fascination with Nebuchadnezzar, one of the most famous kings of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. In early 1981, one year into the Iraq-Iran war, Babil was chosen as the centre of celebrations with the slogan "Yesterday's Nebuchadnezzar, Today's Saddam Hussein." These celebrations became an annual event during the Iran-Iraq war. On the one hand, these festivities portrayed Iran as a staunch enemy of Iraq. On the other hand, they conveyed a hidden message and a threat to Israel (Karsh & Rautsi 1991: 152). This is because Nebuchadnezzar, the king of New Babylon, plundered Jerusalem in 587 BC with the support of the mythical god Marduk. The conflict between Israel's ancient God, Elohim, and Marduk, the chief god of the city of Babylon, resulted in Marduk's victory (De Bruyn 2013: 631–632). It is plausible that Saddam Hussein attempted to exploit the mythical legacy and war power associated with Nebuchadnezzar from ancient times for political gain against his rivals and enemies. A notable example is a billboard from 1990 that links ancient monuments with contemporary ideology. The billboard depicts Jerusalem being captured by Nebuchadnezzar's warriors in 587 BC, alongside a celebration of unity by fighters with diverse beliefs. The image also includes Saddam Hussein, then President of Iraq, standing next to Saladin who defeated the Crusaders, and Nebuchadnezzar (the conqueror of Jerusalem), all under the Iraqi flag (Fig. 9).

Figure 9: Picture of the President of Iraq with Saladin, the commander of the Arabs in the Crusade, and Nebuchadnezzar, the conqueror of Jerusalem in ancient times. (De Cesari 2015: 25)

The most formidable divisions of the Iraqi Army were the Hammurabi Armoured Division (an elite formation of the Iraqi Republican Guard) and the Nebuchadnezzar Infantry Division (Harkhu 2005: 60). The significance of this lies in the belief held by the ancient rulers of Iraq that mythical gods played a crucial role in their creation, birth and upbringing (Nemet-Nejat 1998: 218). During the Old Babylonian period, for instance, royal scribes glorified acts of warfare against enemies and the defeat of rivals by the rulers (Bottero 1995: 294). Such ancient mythical beliefs could serve to justify and legitimise the warlike behaviour exhibited by the Baath Party in the minds of the masses. This is further supported by a speech given by Vice President Taha Muhie-eldin Marouf (1924–2009), who stated: "O masses of our great nation, the victorious children of Iraq, the grandchildren of Nebuchadnezzar… Salutations to the battle of Qadisiyah [referring to Saddam Hussein's war with Iran]. With yesterday's Nebuchadnezzar as its slogan and today's Saddam Hussein as its embodiment, it establishes a link between this country and its historical past. Under the leadership of a fearless and inspired figure [Saddam Hussein], we shall celebrate victory" (Baram 1991: 48). It is important to note that the Iraqi Baath Party consistently employed ancient myths to justify its actions.

However, relying solely on ancient myths is insufficient to explain the political decisions of the Iraqi Republic in the aforementioned cases. This notion can also be observed in Iraq's military invasion of Kuwait. To begin with, it is important to examine the historical narrative surrounding this event. Saddam Hussein claimed that he initiated the war against Kuwait after receiving a divine vision of the Prophet of Islam in a dream. Despite his secular beliefs, he even incorporated the phrase "Allah Akbar" in the national flag in 1991. Additionally, during the course of the war, photographs depicting his acts

of worship within sacred structures were disseminated as a means of legitimising his military actions (Simpson 2003: 251).

In ancient Mesopotamia, battles and victories were seen as the will of the gods. For example, the god Marduk played a key role in the wars of King Hammurabi, and the defeat of his enemies was seen as the victory of justice (Dalley 1995: 416). The gods were also believed to speak to ancient kings in their dreams (Lewis 1993: 184). This belief in divine guidance has been used for political purposes throughout Iraqi history. For example, during the Persian Gulf War, Saddam Hussein claimed that he had been commanded by God to invade Kuwait. He said, "God is witness that He [God] wanted the war to happen and we took this decision from God… Our role in this decision was minimal" (Abd-al-Jabar 1994: 104). By legitimising his war actions with religious language, Saddam Hussein sought to portray the conflict as a battle between good and evil. The Baath Party, which ruled Iraq at the time, also believed that Kuwait was historically part of Iraq. They cited the myth of Marduk, who was said to have returned the lost land of Dilmun to Iraq (Seri 2006). This belief provided the Baath party with a justification for invading Kuwait, despite the fact that it violated international law (Kelsay 1993: 16). The use of religious and mythological language to justify war is a common tactic used by political leaders. By linking their actions to the will of the gods, they can try to gain the support of their people and portray their enemies as evil. This was certainly the case with Saddam Hussein, who used religious language to great effect during the Persian Gulf War.

Finally, it is necessary to state that the duality inherent in Iraqi mythology, particularly in the case of deities such as Ishtar and Marduk, is an undeniable phenomenon. This duality, manifested in various aspects such as power and mercy, war and peace, and life and death, reflects the complexities of human society and its conflicting needs. However, Saddam Hussein, the former dictator of Iraq, masterfully exploited this duality to advance his political agenda. By manipulating mythological narratives and emphasising specific aspects of the deities' personas, he projected an image of himself as a powerful, ruthless yet benevolent and saviour-like leader of the Iraqi people. For instance, Saddam saw himself as an embodiment of Marduk, the god of war and power, employing symbols and imagery associated with him in propaganda and state ceremonies. He also utilised tales of Ishtar, the goddess symbolising feminine power and beauty, to legitimise his rule and garner support from Iraqi women. Through the distortion and misuse of Iraqi mythology, Saddam successfully established an image of himself as an unparalleled, powerful leader in the minds of the Iraqi people. This significantly aided his consolidation of power and suppression of dissent. While the inherent duality of myths can reflect the complexities of human society, their exploitation for political purposes, as exemplified by Saddam Hussein, can have detrimental consequences.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that ancient myths play an important role in the formation of collective and national identities. They have been used as a tool to promote political ideology and legitimise nationalism in the Middle East. The idea of Pan-Arabism was formed during the founding period of the Kingdom of Iraq. This ideology is based on the common belief, language and history of a nation. It was used to protect the Arab national identity against foreign influences prevalent at the time. During the Iraqi Republic period, nationalist sentiments and Iraqi nationalism were strengthened by relying on Iraq's ancient and glorious past. The goddess Ishtar and the god Shamash were used as symbols to promote these sentiments. This helped to reduce the challenges posed by other Iraqi ethnic groups to the central government and led the country towards greater unity.

The cancellation of the ban on the Communist Party's activities was indicative of General Abdul Karim Qasim's willingness to interact with various political currents. Qasim was a secular leader who was not aligned with any particular ideology. He believed that the best way to unite Iraq was to allow a diversity of political views. The goddess Ishtar was a powerful symbol in ancient Mesopotamia. She was the goddess of love, war and fertility. She was also the patron goddess of social relations. In the First Republic of Iraq, Ishtar was used as a symbol to promote national unity and social harmony. The role of women in Iraq changed significantly during this period. The ban on the Communist Party was lifted, allowing more women to participate in politics. Additionally, the government promoted the goddess Ishtar as a symbol of female power and authority. This helped to change attitudes towards the role of women in society. The Baath Party also used ancient myths to promote its political goals. It turned to the ancient myths (especially the god Marduk) and the civilisation of Babylon to crystallise the national sentiment of the Iraqi people. The deposed president of Iraq used the ancient myths of Babylon and Mesopotamia to justify his war actions. In fact, ancient myths have sometimes been used as a tool to justify political decisions and provide legitimacy for war actions.

In conclusion, this research has explored the multifaceted relationship between political leadership, national identity and the manipulation of myths in Iraq. We have examined how Iraqi leaders have utilised specific myths to construct, reconstruct and legitimise their agendas throughout history. The analysis has highlighted the case of Saddam Hussein and his exploitation of deities such as Marduk and Ishtar to consolidate his power. It is important to acknowledge that scholars such as Harkhu (2005) have previously explored the connection between Iraqi ideology and Mesopotamian myths, particularly focusing on how these myths bridge archaeological representations and political identities. While this article shares common ground with Harkhu's work, it has offered a distinct perspective by focusing on the post-Iran-Iraq War period and analysing how leaders used myths to navigate the social and political transformations of that era. This approach has allowed for a deeper understanding of the dynamic interplay between political context, national identity and the strategic deployment of mythology in Iraq. Further research can delve into the contemporary landscape, exploring how the manipulation of myths continues to shape Iraqi identity and political discourse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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POLITICAL ARCHAEOLOGY. DECONSTRUCTING THE POLITICAL EXPLOITATION OF MYTHS IN IRAQ (1958–2003)

GOODARZ HADDADI NASAB, MEHDI MORTAZAVI*, FARIBA MOSAPOUR NEGARI

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This article delves into the fascinating phenomenon of how myths were strategically employed for political gain in Iraq during the Republican era (1958–2003). The author argues that Mesopotamia's rich cultural heritage, which includes some of the earliest civilisations and a vast array of myths and legends, constituted a powerful resource for rulers seeking to forge a unified national identity. The research meticulously examines how the ideological perspectives of these leaders, particularly the shift from Pan-Arabism – emphasising a shared Arab language and history – to a more inward-looking Iraqi nationalism, influenced their selection of specific myths. Employing a descriptive-historical and qualitative approach, the analysis incorporates speeches delivered by Iraqi leaders alongside scholarly works on mythology and Iraqi history. Social identity theory is introduced as a valuable framework to illuminate how myths contribute to a strong national identity and foster a sense of group cohesion. This sense of shared history and cultural heritage, nurtured through the retelling of myths, can be a powerful tool for uniting a diverse population.

The article meticulously traces the trajectory of Iraqi ideology during the Republican era. In the early years, Pan-Arabism held sway, emphasising the shared identity of all Arab nations. However, a gradual shift towards Iraqi nationalism emerged, focusing on the unique heritage and history of Mesopotamia. The dominance of the Baath Party, a political movement advocating for Arab unity, is then analysed in the context of this ideological shift. The party's strategic use of national mythmaking, manifested through the adoption of ancient symbols and narratives associated with Mesopotamia, stands out as a key strategy to promote Iraqi nationalism. The author provides specific examples to illustrate this point,

including the renaming of cities with names evoking Mesopotamian history (e.g., Saddam City replacing Al-Awja) and the implementation of large-scale archaeological projects aimed at rediscovering and celebrating the glories of past Mesopotamian civilisations.

The article delves further into the specific ways the goddess Ishtar and the god Marduk were used to shape political ideology:

- The findings revealed that during the Iraqi Republic period (particularly in its early stages), the politically motivated utilisation of mythological figures such as Ishtar (symbolising love, war, blessings, social relations and social interaction) was prevalent. The emphasis on Ishtar, associated with justice, social interaction and empowerment, aligns with the early Republic's focus on social unity and potentially even the advancement of women's rights during that period. Her image resonated with the aspirations for a more equitable and just society. This is particularly evident in the use of the country's flag and national symbols by leaders such as General Abdul Karim Qasim, who was the Prime Minister during that era (1958–1963). The sun god Shamash, often associated with justice and social order, may have also played a role in this early ideology, but the emphasis seems to have been placed more on Ishtar.

- In contrast, the god Marduk, symbolising strength, legitimacy and resistance, was extensively employed by Saddam Hussein and the Baath Party to legitimise their rule and justify their actions during wartime, including the Iran-Iraq War, which Iraq initiated in 1980, and challenges with Israel. It is also possible that Saddam's desire to be seen as a powerful leader influenced his decision to attack Kuwait. Ultimately, it appears that during the period of the first Iraqi Republic led by Abdul Karim Qasim, emphasis was often placed on the goddess Ishtar due to political and social conditions. Conversely, during the rule of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party, the focus shifted towards the god Marduk.

Furthermore, the inherent duality within Iraqi mythology, particularly evident in deities such as Ishtar and Marduk, is undeniable. This duality, manifested in various aspects such as power and mercy, war and peace, and life and death, reflects the complexities of human society and its conflicting needs. However, Saddam Hussein, the former dictator of Iraq, exploited this duality to a chilling effect in order to advance his political agenda. By manipulating mythological narratives and emphasising specific aspects of the deities' personas, he projected an image of himself as a powerful, ruthless yet benevolent, and saviour-like leader of the Iraqi people. For instance, Saddam saw himself as an embodiment of Marduk, the god of war and power, employing symbols and imagery associated with him in propaganda and state ceremonies. He frequently used golden swords in official portraits, reminiscent of Marduk's weapons. He also utilised tales of Ishtar, the goddess symbolising feminine power and beauty, to legitimise his rule and garner support from Iraqi women. Through the distortion and misuse of Iraqi mythology, Saddam successfully established an image of himself as an unparalleled, powerful leader in the minds of the Iraqi people. This significantly aided his consolidation

of power and suppression of dissent. While the inherent duality of myths can reflect the complexities of human society, their exploitation for political purposes, as exemplified by Saddam Hussein, can have detrimental consequences. It can sow discord, silence dissent, and ultimately weaken the very national identity it purports to strengthen.

In conclusion, the article underscores the critical importance of understanding how political events shape the use of myths in constructing national identity. This emphasises the intricate relationship between political leadership, national identity and the strategic manipulation of symbolic narratives. The case of Iraq serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the potential dangers of distorting and exploiting powerful cultural symbols for personal gain.

Goodarz Haddadi Nasab, PhD Candidate in Archaeology, University of Sistan and Baluchestan, Department of Archaeology, Zahedan, Iran, Postcode: 98167-45845, soleymanhaddadi@pgs.usb.ac.ir
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4044-9431

Mehdi Mortazavi (Corresponding Author), Associate Professor, University of Sistan and Baluchestan, Archaeology Department, Archaeological Sciences Research Center & Iranian Journal of Archaeological Studies (IJAS), Zahedan, Iran, Postcode: 98167-45845, mehdi.mortazavi@lihu.usb.ac.ir
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6753-5347

Fariba Mosapour Negari, Assistant Professor, University of Sistan and Baluchestan, Archaeology Department, Archaeological Sciences Research Center & Iranian Journal of Archaeological Studies (IJAS), Zahedan, Iran, Postcode: 98167-45845, fmosapour@lihu.usb.ac.ir
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5897-812X