

**CALL FOR PAPERS: Archaeology, Antiquity, and
the Making of the Modern Middle East: Global
Histories 1800–1939
25–26 May, 2023, University of Warwick, Global
History and Culture Centre**



This conference will explore the role played by discoveries and debates about the ancient past in the development of ideas about the Middle East in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. What competing imperial, national, and transnational narratives about the present and future of this geopolitically crucial region were fed by archaeology, philology, and history? How were these emergent disciplines themselves forged through Middle Eastern contexts they purported to study? How were temporalities of modernity and progress constructed in relation to the ruptures, continuities and heuristic challenges suggested by the excavation and exegesis of traces of ancient civilisations? Were there overlaps between how this region was simultaneously transformed by the construction of new transportation networks, the unearthing of oil in commercial quantities, transforming its present and future, and archaeological projects which dug up new dimensions to its past? How did the return of the remains of the past assist Western and Eastern empires, and new Middle Eastern countries in understanding their own national destinies?

Recent studies in intellectual history around imperial temporalities and teleologies provide a set of reference points informing this conference's research aims. As Priya Satia has recently remarked in relation to the place in the British imperial imaginary of the Middle East in the decades around 1900, travel to the region 'was conceived as a journey into a past that was not merely further back on the secular time scale of history but on a different scale altogether, outside secular time'. This was at once a 'biblical region' but also a 'mythological landscape', in some ways 'outside the space of history' and yet also one which would 'matter deeply to the historical fulfilment of empire', not least as a space offering 'the chance to resurrect the cradle of civilization' (Satia, *Time's Monster: History, Conscience and Britain's Empire*, 2020: 156–7, 174). Yet examination of the region's ancient past could equally inspire a sense of the uncomfortable resemblances bridging empires ancient and 'modern', and attendant anxieties about the sustainability of contemporary empires.

If outsiders came to the Middle East to find their own origins (and perhaps their futures), various Middle Easterners themselves sought pasts that they could claim as their own: whether to consolidate new national identities, or to build over-arching and wide-ranging connections across the region. As Timothy Mitchell has written in regard to modern Egypt, a characteristic of the modern nation state was that 'for a state to prove that it was modern, it helped if it could also prove that it was ancient' (Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, 2002: 179).

We are interested in the concept of the ancient past as a means of constructing modern identities: of 'the Middle East' as a region, of diverse new nations within it, and of Western nations whose colonial projects and political interests in the region became part of their own modern identities. While much valuable work has been done on archaeology, imperialism, and nation-building in the Middle East, it is rare for scholars to have a chance to consider different imperial, national, and regional contexts together, as part of a broader reshaping of historical consciousness about this region, one forged through competing visions and agendas. This conference will bring together scholars with a range of interests to examine this question at a variety of scales. We are interested in studies that examine uses of the past in specific national/imperial/regional contexts, and also in contributions that take a broad view of how the 'Middle East' became a region with a certain kind of past (original, imperial,

monumental, liminal?). Bringing this range of papers together will allow us to discover habits of thought that were common across times and places, and those that were unique or unusual as empires, nations, and people within them sought to create their own distinctive identities through references to the past and its remains.

We invite contributions on how either/both ‘outsiders’ and ‘natives’ in the region came to identify themselves and their political projects with the pasts they discovered there. Relevant are ‘official’ projects of nation-building and imperial enterprise, and also projects by special interest groups, non-state actors, and individuals. Through taking this broad approach, we hope to find new connections and illuminate broader tendencies in the reception, interpretation, and reuse of ancient pasts in the making of the modern Middle East.

Papers might approach the conference’s themes might from a variety of different angles. Contributions might focus, for example, on one or more of the following:

- (i) Specific objects, artefacts and sites, both ancient and modern: this might involve, for example retracing how ancient materials became valorised and commodified in the modern period by excavators, collectors and museums.
- (ii) Forms of institutional and official sponsorship (government or otherwise) for given scholarly ventures (re)collecting the ancient world, and for the fabrication of ancient histories.
- (iii) Appropriations and reinventions of ancient cultures, for example through speculative reconstructions, in textual, pictorial or architectural form, of ancient sites or styles.
- (iv) Imaginary geographies, environmental theories and political economies of nation and empire, around teleologies of *translatio imperii* and the modern state.
- (v) The development of ‘the Middle East’ as a unique place of origin, and as a political, historical, or geographical region with a distinct identity.
- (vi) The ongoing legacy of archaeological, collecting, and display practices of 1800–1939 in the contemporary world.

CONFERENCE PARTICULARS

The two-day conference will be held at the University of Warwick **25–26 May 2023**. Keynotes will be given by Professor Lynn Meskell (University of Pennsylvania) and Professor Zeynep Çelik (Columbia University, New Jersey Institute of Technology). Participants will submit papers of 6000-8000 words one month in advance of the meeting for pre-circulation, and will present a 15-minute condensed version of the paper at the workshop. This format will ensure productive discussions among participants and speed the process of publishing all papers from the conference in an edited volume, a process we will begin soon after the conference takes place.

Proposals for papers should include author name and affiliation, 300–400 word abstract, and a short CV. We invite proposals from scholars at all levels from early career onwards. Papers will be selected on the quality of the proposal and with the aim of ensuring a broad spread of topics for the conference. These should be sent to GHCCconference2023@gmail.com by the deadline of **Monday, 20 June, 2022**. Stipends for travel of up to £500 for scholars based in countries in the Middle East and North Africa will be available. To apply for these stipends, simply indicate in your email to the organisers that you wish to be considered and state the country you will be travelling from.

Looking forward to receiving your proposals,

Dr Guillemette Crouzet (Marie Curie Skłodowska Research Fellow, History, University of Warwick)

Dr Eva Miller (British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow, History, UCL)