

# THE POWER OF THE PAST

*The British Academy and the British School of Archaeology in Iraq co-sponsored a conference on 'Steady States: Institutional Stability in the Face of Political Change', the proceedings of which have now been published. Dr Harriet Crawford explains how for thousands of years government practices and personnel managed to survive violent regime change in the Near East — until recent events.*

THE ROOTS of the present often lie deep in the past. By understanding the past we can achieve a better understanding of the present and even perhaps, in some instances, of the likely outcome of events in the present. The past often determines national boundaries, the composition of populations, national ideologies and national iconographies. Consider the power of two of the great religious traditions today, of the neo-Conservative ideology in the USA and of radical Islam throughout the world. Their roots lie more than a millennium away, but the tenets and the iconography of the crescent and the cross are, arguably, as powerful today as they have ever been and have driven much of the history of the recent world.

With hindsight, it is sometimes possible to trace the influences which played a major part in forming past states and to draw lessons from them. In the case of successful conquests we can for example, study which traits survived the change of regime and which did not, giving us some understanding of their relative importance in the maintenance of the status quo. A conference on this theme, sponsored by the British Academy and the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, was held at the British Academy in September 2004 and what follows is based on the papers given there. The conference looked at continuity and change in two specific areas, royal iconography and administrative practices in a single large area, the ancient Near East (loosely defined as the Levant, Mesopotamia and Iran) and Egypt.

Case studies demonstrated that the iconography of the Egyptian pharaohs is extraordinarily persistent over the millennia. It consisted of a formulaic set of titles and a well defined set of royal regalia. Even Hatshepsut, one of the few queens regnant in the history of Egypt, was depicted on official monuments wearing the royal beard which formed one element of this regalia, though Cleopatra escaped this indignity. (Figure 1) The titles and the crowns survived political upheavals and many incursions from outside the Nile valley. The first half of the first millennium in Egyptian history was a confused and fragmented time when warriors from the south and west, from Kush and Libya, took control in turn. The Kushite kings introduced some modifications to the royal regalia and the way in which the pharaoh was depicted, but all the Libyan pharaohs who succeeded them were depicted in a purely traditional Egyptian manner.

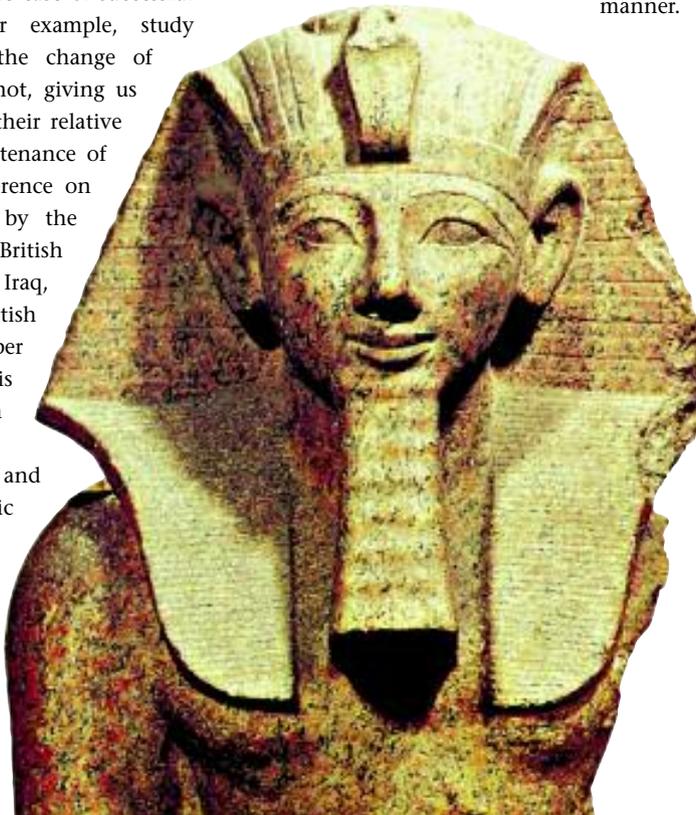


Fig. 1: Hatshepsut in a beard

It is possible to suggest a number of reasons for this continuity; it often seems to be the result of deliberate political choice, sometimes perhaps a matter of necessity. Both iconography and titulary were designed to instil fear and wonder in the beholder and to underline the divinity of the office-holder. The use of the iconography of the previous ruler projected an illusion of legitimacy by the invader and by showing him as a son of Horus, whatever his physical parentage might have been, established his credentials to the throne and made him appear invincible. This veneer of legitimacy was of course especially important to the usurpers who needed to gain acceptance from those they had conquered. Being portrayed in the official iconography as the choice of the gods, or indeed, as a god, was a device used by conquerors the world over to defuse the opposition. Opposition to the ruler then became apostasy as well.

Iconography and the motifs of which it is composed were, of course, modified in appearance through time and, more subtly, in meaning. This is something which it may be difficult to determine from the archaeological record alone, but by using texts as well it is possible to do so. One of the oldest figurative motifs known in ancient Mesopotamia is that of a human figure despatching lions (Figure 2). This figure is often interpreted as a ruler and though his killing of lions may be no more than pest control in a region where lions posed a real threat to animals and humans, it seems to have come to symbolise the ruler's mastery of nature itself. Some of the most spectacular depictions of these ritualistic lion hunts can be seen in the British Museum where the Assyrian king can be seen spearing lions in

---

Dr Harriet Crawford is an honorary visiting professor at the Institute of Archaeology University College London and a research fellow at the McDonald Institute Cambridge.

---



Figure 2 above: *Lion hunt, drawing*



Figure 3 above right: *Assyrian lion hunt*  
© The Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 4: *Sasanid hunt Sasanian period, Reign of Shapur II (309–379 CE), 4th century, silver and gilt. By courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, Purchase F1934.23*

an almost balletic performance (Figure 3). The hunts of the Sasanid kings also showed them in struggles with a wide variety of wild animals on rock reliefs and vessels of precious metals (Figure 4). The great hunts of the Persian kings of the 14th and 15th centuries shown in manuscripts also depict carefully choreographed hunting scenes in the same visual tradition, but here the message is somewhat different and it is the refinement and riches of the king, who is shown as an individual rather than a symbol, that we are invited to admire, as well, perhaps, as his prowess. The tradition was revived in the late 18th/early 19th century when the Qajar king Fath 'Ali Shah was portrayed in the same way. A very similar hunting scene was recently included in the great Velazquez exhibition at the National Gallery showing the Spanish court indulging in a hunt probably modelled on that of the Persian court but the original meaning of the scene had been completely lost (Figure 5, overleaf).

On the other hand, the reasons for the longevity of the bureaucratic procedures which survived conquest or civil war are



severely practical. Whoever was in power the taxes needed to be collected and law and order enforced. A wise conqueror will preserve as much as he safely can of the structure of government of the state he has defeated. Successful invaders often saw little

reason, at least initially, to interfere with the internal workings of their new domains as long as the population remained properly cowed. Senior officials might be removed to make way for loyal followers of the conqueror, thus providing 'jobs for the boys',



Figure 5. Diego Velázquez, Philip IV hunting wild boar (*La Tela Real*), photograph © The National Gallery

but the middle ranking civil servants were left to continue their essential tasks. This was the case after the Persian conquest of Babylonia, for example, and after the Islamic conquest of Egypt. Change when it came was often introduced after a generation or so, but some traditions still continue today. Recently the British School of Archaeology in Iraq issued a letter of invitation to a young Iraqi to visit this country on a short fellowship. A polite message was received by email from him asking for a new invitation bearing an official seal so that he might get his new passport. (The British Academy was kind enough to loan the BSAI its seal for this purpose). The sealing of documents in order to authenticate them is a bureaucratic device which has a history of five thousand years or more in Mesopotamia. (Figure 6)

The resilience of both motifs, especially those associated with the ruling classes or with religion, and bureaucratic practices over centuries in spite of radical changes in

population and in the composition of the ruling elite is extraordinary. Some of the reasons for this and some of the methods of transmission have been briefly discussed above, but there are many others. In spheres other than the public ones discussed other mechanisms may have come into play. For example, ideas and stories may have been preserved by scholars; technical information may have survived by being passed from father to son or mother to daughter in a sort of apprenticeship system, while women, who were often enslaved by a conqueror rather than killed like the men, were in a position to pass on their values and their stories of the past to their offspring.

If the past does to some extent inform the present, a study of the past may be of real practical value to the politicians of today. Had the Allies been more aware of the history of Iraq before the 2003 invasion they would have been better able to avoid some of their more calamitous mistakes. They would have known that the modern state was an entirely artificial construct invented in the aftermath of the First World War and made up of different fractious ethnic, linguistic, tribal and religious groups each looking for opportunities to take control of the wealth of the country. Civil war was always a real possibility, while porous borders which on the west follow an arbitrary straight line

with a ruler by some British official were always going to be impossible to police, rendering it easy for supplies and men to infiltrate into Iraq from outside.

They would also have been aware that Mesopotamia, almost co-terminous with the modern state of Iraq, is one of the oldest bureaucracies in the world so that abolishing the existing state structures and putting even middle ranking civil servants out of work would doom the country to chaos. These people were the keepers of statecraft and of the levers of power with traditions reaching back into the third millennium BCE and beyond. Rulers may come and go, but the civil service goes on for ever!



Figure 6: The Academy's seal with drawing of an early 4th millennium BCE seal supplied by the author

The papers from the 'Steady states' conference were published in March 2007 in *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East and Egypt: from Sargon of Agade to Saddam Hussein*, edited by Harriet Crawford (Proceedings of the British Academy, volume 136). Details can be found on the Academy's web site at [www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/pubs/)

