Making Sargon Great Again: Reuse and Reappropriation of Ancient Mesopotamian Imagery in Fan-Art of the Online Right

Abstract

This chapter explores questions of fandom, authority, and renegotiations of meaning through a study of one Mesopotamian artefact: the 23rd century BCE Copper Head of an Old Akkadian ruler, which has found a new career in the fan art of the online right. This phenomenon originates with the artefact's use as an avatar of prominent right wing YouTuber Carl Benjamin, who posts under the username 'Sargon of Akkad', after the most famous Old Akkadian king. The association between Benjamin, 'Sargon', and the Copper Head is now reflected in fan-generated imagery and in Google search algorithms. Miller considers this association in light of ongoing debates in academia about how to confront 'misuses' of historical imagery. Considering the historical references in 'Sargon' fan art as indicative of the digital canon of Mesopotamian art, it becomes clear that visual storytelling and modern reimaginings are influential components of public perception of the past.

Keywords: Fandom, authority, ancient Mesopotamia, reception, online right

7486 words

This chapter investigates how an artefact excavated by British archaeologists in Iraq in the early 20th century, a striking Copper Head of an Old Akkadian ruler (Fig. 1), has come to be reimagined in fan art disseminated online among communities built around mutual antipathies towards feminism, the 'Social Justice left', and 'political correctness'. To explain its place in this volume, it needs to trace the relevance of this topic to archaeology and public engagement, and to the study of 'comics' as an art form and a social category. Bearing these competing requirements in mind, I will begin by sticking close to the central artefact, the Copper Head, and its new role in online fan art as an avatar of online right wing culture. I then consider how this very specific reuse has implications for broader questions of authority, fandom, and community. Finally, I discuss its relevance to ongoing debates about how academics can or should engage with 'misappropriations' of imagery and ideas from our fields, and the role of visual reimaginings in conceptualising the past in the digital age.

The initial association between the Old Akkadian Copper Head and a specific right wing online fandom is due to one, rather tangential connection: the use of the artefact as an avatar by a

popular YouTuber (almost one million subscribers to his primary channel) and latterly United Kingdom Independence Party (Ukip) candidate for the European Parliament, Carl Benjamin, who posts under the username 'Sargon of Akkad'—referencing the third millennium ruler with whom the Copper Head was initially (and now it is agreed, incorrectly) identified. Benjamin does not hide his face or his real name, but in fandom he is more often identified as 'Sargon'. As we will see, the Copper Head is recognised in certain online subcultural contexts as 'his' image. In describing the political alignment of Benjamin's fandom and the cultural sphere his fan art emerges from, I favour a neutral catch-all term 'online right'. Benjamin, who describes himself as a 'Classical Liberal', first rose to prominence online in 2014 during the (notoriously difficult to succinctly summarise) Gamergate movement which can be seen as the origin point of various reactionary trends both in online subcultural spaces and in mainstream Western politics. Benjamin's fans share a dislike of feminism, 'political correctness' and 'social justice warrior' culture. As a Ukip candidate in the May 2019 European elections and in his online content, Benjamin has advocated with particular fervour against immigration to the UK from majority Islamic countries, like Iraq, home of the Copper Head and of the original 'Sargon of Akkad'. Benjamin's online presence became a source of mainstream media controversy during that election, particularly his past targeting of Labour MP Jess Phillips on Twitter; comments he had made online even triggered a police investigation, as well as widespread condemnation from many political corners, including by other members and former members of Ukip itself.

Still none of the above adequately explains the nature of his fanbase, whose members span countries and likely vary quite widely in their positions on the political spectrum, though undoubtedly extending to individuals on the extreme fringes in their views on race, gender, and immigration.[1] It is not, in the main, my aim here to assess the politics of Benjamin's fans who

generated the fan images I will look at here. I want to take these images as documents illuminating the state of publicly available knowledge of ancient Mesopotamian history and art, and ongoing renegotiations of the meaning of Mesopotamian imagery. That said, it seems important to acknowledge the nature of the fandom that produced these images, where its political sympathies lie, and why academics who study the ancient Near East might be especially anxious about imagery like the Copper Head becoming visually involved with this fandom.

I am interested here primarily in fan art and fandom, and not therefore in 'comics' as a medium. Because it is not the purpose of this article to put forward a theory of the relationship between fan art and comics in general, I will be relatively brief on this aspect and ask the reader to accept the basic proposition that comics and fan art are indeed related, conceptually and practically, at both a technical and social level—and that fan art is therefore relevant to the interests of this volume. Comics art, especially for covers and splash pages, forms the basis of styles and conventions that are often adopted by fan artists, to convey narrative meaning through vivid imagery. The fan art considered here borrows from various styles of 'comics' iconography and techniques, as well as from digital imagery associated with video games. Perhaps more significantly, looking at fan-led image production online allows us to consider how modern imagery communicates certain conceptions of antiquity—with implications for comics production as a means of public engagement and archaeological communication.

I use the term fandom to describe a community held together by mutual appreciation for a YouTube video creator turned politician because it seems the most appropriate characterisation of this online subculture. Henry Jenkins' notion of fandom as 'participatory culture', a foundational one for fan studies, works here just as it does for fandoms of more 'traditional' media.[2] We can recognise the 'Sargon' fan artists as part of a subculture that exists through

practices of production, sharing, and mutual communication among participants, held together by common appreciation and interests. In characterising this community by its activities, rather than its political ideology, the fan art that I look at here can be seen in the tradition of other fannish activities, its dynamics more familiar than they might otherwise appear when the online right is treated as unprecedented and alien. As I will argue below, this approach also implicates these fan-made images in broader discussions of authorship and authority, a central concern of fandom studies,[3] that overlap with academic concerns about popular dissemination and scholarly authority over the meaning of the ancient past.

<FIG. 1 ABOUT HERE: Copper Head of a ruler of the Old Akkadian Dynasty, c. 23rd century BCE; excavated Nineveh, Iraq, 1931, photographed 1936. Copyright British Institute for the Study of Iraq, published by Cambridge University Press.>

The Copper Head of an Old Akkadian Ruler

Establishing the 'identity' of the artefact that I refer to as the 'Copper Head of an Old Akkadian Ruler' (for brevity, 'the Copper Head') is not a simple task. When it was discovered at the northern Iraqi site of Nineveh through archaeological excavation in 1931, excavation leader Max Mallowan speculated that it was likely a portrait of Akkadian ruler Sargon of Akkad ('the Great'). Reflecting then-common highly racialised interpretations of ancient art, Mallowan identified the features as Semitic (as expected for 'Akkadians') rather than Sumerian; the 'type' he suggested called to mind 'any tribesman living in the Iraq desert to-day'.[4]

Sargon of Akkad, forerunner as Mallowan would have it of modern Semites, was a real historical figure attested in primary sources, although his mythologising as a paradigmatic 'great ruler' in later Mesopotamian traditions means that we know somewhat more about how later rulers and scribes in the region thought about him.[5] Likely ruling from about 2340–2284 BCE,

Sargon of Akkad is often credited as founder of the 'world's first empire'. Today, the precise nature of the state he oversaw and his role as its ruler is much disputed,[6] but this simplistic characterisation is easily found online and in introductory histories, especially those from the 1990s and earlier (which are more likely to have found their way into citations in free online sources). It is this popular understanding of 'Sargon of Akkad' that influenced Benjamin's choice of the moniker. In a 2014 video about the history of his namesake, he explains: 'Sargon was a very interesting man because he performed a lot of firsts and was easily the biggest badass ever to have walked the earth up to that point. Sargon's claim to fame was to be the first ruler to create a political entity that can legitimately be called an empire by almost any definition of that slippery word'.[7]

Leaving aside the best characterisation of Sargon and his 'empire', in the years since its discovery, the identification of the Copper Head with Sargon has been abandoned. It is now considered most likely that the head dates to the later Akkadian period, to the reign of Sargon of Akkad's son Manishtushu (r. 2270–2255), or grandson, Naram-Sin (r. 2190–2154).[8] The Copper Head stands as one of the most striking witnesses to dramatic developments that took place in Mesopotamian elite art during the Old Akkadian period. As Marian Feldman characterises it, the political realignments of the Akkadian state and associated developments in royal and imperial ideology coincided with changes 'most evident in an exquisite expression of materiality linked to a heroic, but human, ideal'.[9] Scholarly assessments of these artistic developments are usually unable to avoid aesthetic judgment about the striking power and beauty of Old Akkadian art. The Metropolitan Museum's online summary of the period's material culture is a representative example:

> When fully developed, it came to be characterized by a profound new creativity
> that marks some of the peaks of artistic achievement in the history of the ancient

world. A new emphasis on naturalism, expressed by sensitive modeling, is manifested in masterpieces of monumental stone relief sculpture.[10]

This perceived naturalism and careful attention to human anatomy in Old Akkadian art has found favour with Western aesthetic preferences—as Feldman has argued, a reason for the special status that works like the Copper Head occupy in modern viewers' imaginations.[11]

Though revisions to identification of the likely ruler would come later, it was immediately apparent to its excavators that the ancient head, likely once part of a larger, full-body statue of the ruler in question, also had a long and varied career in antiquity. It was discovered in a 7th century BCE context, in Nineveh's Ishtar Temple. How it came to be there is not clear; it may have been originally dedicated in Nineveh, in a late third millennium temple to the goddess and preserved in subsequent iterations of the institution, or it may have been brought to Nineveh from elsewhere long after the Old Akkadian period.[12] The head as it was discovered had clearly been deliberately damaged in antiquity, with gouging to the eye-sockets (likely once inlaid with precious stones) and bridge of the nose, damage consistent with the sorts of punishments carried out upon human captives in the ancient Near East.[13] It is highly likely that the head was damaged during the sack of Nineveh by a Median-Babylonian coalition in 612, the turning point in the fall of the unprecedentedly powerful Neo-Assyrian Empire which had dominated much of the Middle East from the 9th to 7th centuries. In this reading, the head was destroyed not because of ill will towards Naram-Sin, Manishtushu, or Sargon, but in its capacity as a symbol of first millennium Assyrian power brought low.

Scholars still struggle to communicate effectively a proposition that now governs academic approaches to knowledge: that objects and historical figures might have more complex identities than 'portrait of Sargon' or 'world's first emperor'.[14] The meaning of this head since its excavation has been renegotiated by scholars as interpretations and emphases change; its

meaning was also in flux in antiquity when it went from a late third millennium expression of kingship to a mid-first millennium marker of a venerable past kept in a Neo-Assyrian temple, to a casualty of conquest and seemingly a target of punishment for that same latter-day political association.[15] Its reappearance in online memes and fan art is then only the latest stage in its career. Yet even as more recent academic work emphasises the contingent nature of any artefact's meaning, the technologies of sharing knowledge online arguably hamper this project. The one-sentence 'answer' to the query 'Sargon of Akkad' at the top of a Google search result rewards short and definitive identifications, while tags on an image on Wikimedia Commons or elsewhere online must provide uncomplicated answers geared towards search algorithms.

An Old Akkadian artefact in new company

A visual association between Carl Benjamin, the YouTube 'Sargon of Akkad', and the Copper Head has been actively courted by Benjamin himself who uses the head and other ancient Mesopotamian imagery as part of a visual 'brand' for his content. This branding has been embraced by his fans, finding expression in fan art. Let us look at how this reuse manifests in a single image.[16] This digital drawing was posted to Reddit's r/The_Donald subreddit, the influential Trump fan community (now banned after repeated clashes with Reddit moderators) on May 11, 2017 by a user who did not specify if they were its creator (though it reasonable to assume that they were).[17] Soon afterwards it started appearing elsewhere on the internet; it can currently be found in various iterations and edits across meme-sharing websites and social media. The original Reddit post (now inaccessible) had received approximately 3.8k votes (95% upvotes) and 105 (mostly approving) comments.[18]

The image is digitally hand drawn and features four individuals in a blue car—as various

Reddit commenters (approvingly) identified, apparently a Kübelwagen, a vehicle produced by

Volkswagen for Nazi-era military usage. Two figures sit in the car's backseat: then Ukip leader

Nigel Farage, who has since left that party and founded the Brexit Party,[19] and now largely

forgotten but briefly notorious British journalist Milo Yiannopoulos who was then an editor for

far right American website Breitbart News and a self-styled media provocateur. The car's driver

is a green-skinned, bug-eyed, smirking Pepe the Frog. This character originated in American

cartoonist Matt Furie's comics series *Boy's Club* in 2006, but has since become a ubiquitous

meme figure, ultimately winding up in memes specifically popular with the online far right,

which has led to his controversial designation as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation

League,[20] to the sorrow of his creator.[21]

Finally, sitting shotgun, is a golden-skinned robot-like individual whose smiling face is,

unmistakably, that of the Akkadian Copper Head: this is 'Sargon of Akkad'. An observer

familiar only with the Mesopotamian context of the head might wonder why this work of ancient

art is in such dubious company; the answer of course, as we can already guess, is that it

represents here not any Old Akkadian ruler (whether Sargon, Manishtushu, or Naram-Sin), but

the figure which even Google now more closely identifies with the name 'Sargon of Akkad', the

YouTuber Benjamin.[22]

'Sargon's' hand is extended, offering a red pill to the viewer, a reference to the

widespread use of the term 'red-pilling' (deriving from the 1999 film *The Matrix*). Popularised in

the 'manosphere' to describe the realisation that Western society is fundamentally 'gynocentric'

and unfair to men, it is used more generically in right wing online spaces to refer to any

radicalising away from liberal or 'social justice' values and perspectives on reality, or more

broadly to 'waking up' to the real structure of society.[23] A caption on the image reads: 'Get in normie, we're about to save civilization'.[24] In the background, apparently tying in with the driver's presence, is the characteristic monumental structure of Mesopotamia, a ziggurat (shorthand perhaps for 'civilization', about to be saved).

The image is legible to anyone who understands the various connotations of the iconography it deploys, and rewards subcultural knowledge.[25] The drawing is not exactly famous, but was sufficiently well-known in certain crowds that it was brought up by podcast host Joe Rogan in a June 26, 2017 interview with Benjamin, which now has nearly 3.2 million views on YouTube. 'If anyone takes that seriously they're a fucking idiot', Rogan declared.[26] His own amusement as he describes it makes it clear how it should be taken instead: affectionately, as deliberately and successfully ridiculous. Its grandiosity and use of 'superhero team' tropes are clearly intended to be, as many 4chan commenters discussing the image diagnosed, 'cringe'.[27] Yet behind the irony is real approbation: this image was made by and for individuals who admire and largely agree with the figures in the image and who really do believe that they are part of a cultural wave that has 'red-pilled' individuals: the mostly young men who frequented The_Donald subreddit, or their normie friends whose eyes are being opened.

Fan art of 'Sargon of Akkad', the YouTuber

On websites like DeviantArt, Imgur, and Reddit, this is not the only image in which the Old Akkadian Copper Head stands in for YouTuber-turned-Ukip candidate Benjamin. Indeed, there are over 200 such images in existence at the time of writing. Although the image described above was created of the artist's own initiative, the existence of so many works of art featuring the 'Sargon' head is mostly due to solicitation directly by Benjamin himself, through a

competition intended to secure images for use as backgrounds for his videos.[28] In his initial video announcing the contest on April 16th, 2016, Benjamin referred to the images he wanted as 'fan art', and specified the kinds of material he was after: 'Something that captures the grandeur and the beauty of ancient Mesopotamia'. He suggested images showing 'Sargon sat on a throne or something, deep in thought'.[29]

Fans responded mostly in kind, drawing inspiration largely from actual ancient visual referents, reimaginings of the same, or sometimes from generalised ideas of 'ancient' or 'oriental' settings. Entries adopted a range of artistic styles, and ran in tone from aggrandising to trollishly mocking. Of greatest interest to me is the overwhelming tendency among fan artists to represent the YouTube 'Sargon' through the Copper Head, very often in the style of the 'Get in normies' image, as a golden-skinned robotic statue-made-living. Although these artists imagine a body for the head, they generally retain and even emphasise the damaged state of the artefact. A scarred eye becomes part of its iconography. In other images 'Sargon' has been actualised as a 'realist' interpretation of the type of man that the ancient head might be interpreted to represent; a handsome, fit, bearded dark-haired individual whose elaborate hairstyle and beard accord to the design of the Copper Head.

Again, Benjamin does not hide his real face or name, but imagining YouTube 'Sargon of Akkad' via the head was significantly more popular than depicting the YouTuber's real face. A few images play on the idea of the Copper Head, and the 'Sargon persona', as a superhero alter-ego to the real Benjamin: one image drawing from the tropes of comics art shows the Sargon persona looming behind the 'real' Benjamin (a motif also found in other fan works);[30] in others the head is a mask partially revealing his face. Superhero tropes are also deployed in a handful of entries with include crudely cartoonish 'villains'; mostly online feminist commentators like

Anita Sarkeesian, who 'Sargon' is depicted choking in one image, or other favourite Gamergate targets seen to exemplify 'angry SJW' stereotypes.[31]

Benjamin's request for images that capture not just himself ('Sargon') as a powerful figure, but also the 'beauty and grandeur' of Mesopotamia inspired the use of Mesopotamian visual references from different times and places. Mostly in evidence are the most recognised and digitally well-distributed Mesopotamian artefacts, often with design motifs reassigned or reimagined in scale or placement. By far the most frequent association with 'ancient Mesopotamia' in most contexts, including through googling this phrase, are 9th–7th century Neo-Assyrian motifs which have a long history of modern revival, dating back to their excavation starting in the 1840s, the beginning of modern Near Eastern archaeology. With a similar level of 'brand recognition', Babylon's 6th century Ishtar Gate appears in many entries. The Royal Standard of Ur (BM 121201), dating to the mid 24th century (before the Old Akkadian period) is transformed into a wall relief in one entry, and is praised by Benjamin in a video showcasing his favourites as 'eminently Sumerian'.[32] Although these works of fan art mash up imagery from very different times and places, often together with much later 'oriental' or Graeco-Roman-inspired imagery, the research involved in finding references is, I suspect, a point of pride for fan artists who made the effort.[33]

In a good indication of the qualities Benjamin's fans admire and how they understand their fandom, many entries imagine their Sargon as a 'philosopher king'. To this end, in place of Mesopotamian references, more familiar Western iconography and signalling is deployed: one entry shows 'Sargon' as a realist version of the Copper Head alone in a desert at sunset in the pose of Rodin's *The Thinker* while another uses the same pose from a different angle seating the figure on a throne decorated with a motif drawn from a famous Old Akkadian cylinder seal (BM

89115).[34] Another casts him as the 'golden robot' interpretation of the head surrounded by disciples in a digital painting that copies motifs both from Jacques-Louis David's 1787 painting *The Death of Socrates* and Caravaggio's 1601 *Supper at Emmaus* (Benjamin noted only the Socrates connection when he praised it).[35] In another, a realist version of the Copper Head in a generically 'oriental' palace setting sits on a throne in which the word 'REASON' glows in blue letters above him.[36] All of these examples were showcased by Benjamin in his competition results video.[37]

This imagery links Benjamin's avatar, the Copper Head, with various concepts Benjamin defines himself as championing: free speech traditions, 'Classical Liberalism', philosophical 'reason'. Leaving aside any assessment of the justice of these associations, this network of meanings is currently much more likely to be understood by the online right as linked to ancient Greece and Rome (as discussed in greater detail below) than to Mesopotamia. Thus, in order to evoke these concepts, the Copper Head has to be integrated with imagery drawn from Renaissance, Baroque and broadly Neo-Classical art that evokes a 'Western Classical' tradition. We will come back to the concept of such a tradition in a moment.

Fandom and fan art

Fan art and fanfiction is often analysed in the context of subversion of authorship and authority.[38] Fans are able to create their own readings of characters, themes, and stories, and to rewrite narrative dynamics and subvert narrative tropes, allowing marginalised or under-represented groups to express desire and to claim and celebrate themes that go ignored or under-represented in the media that inspired them. Yet fan communities are also social spaces and fan art emerges from social practices of sharing and engagement,[39] including engagement with the object of the

fan's sentiments; in this case Benjamin himself, who solicited and judged submissions. Participating is also a means of constructing a subcultural group identity: artists define a shared political and ideological positioning through the creation of fan images. Through the approbation of Benjamin, and of fellow viewers, fan artists can gain subcultural capital, as fully-fledged members of a community who understand private jokes and references. Subversion is not the intent, except within the 'shitposting' terms that are acceptable to the community.

In the case of the 'Sargon' fan art solicited by Benjamin through his competition, it should also not escape attention that star power is used to obtain work for free. The three winners were rewarded monetarily, though at relatively low rates (in his initial video floating the competition, Benjamin was vague about exactly how much but suggested about £200 for the first-place winner), and Benjamin reserved the right to use any of the images submitted in his videos and branding. Artists have created what are, in many cases, very high-quality graphics that have now become part of Benjamin's 'official' visual package, a means of building a distinctive visual identity online which claims a generic 'ancient Mesopotamian' grandeur as his own purview. This represents a real service for his business (YouTube is his full-time job) which is taken out of the realm of the marketplace by being framed as an act of competitive fandom and subcultural community participation.

Although we might regard this sort of relationship as a hallmark of a social media age, this blurring of boundaries will be familiar even from traditional media fandoms.[40] The practices of this corner of the online right is most fruitfully understood as only one specific iteration of dynamics that have always existed in fan communities, as Jenkins argues in his recent work on the role of 'Web 2.0' technologies in participatory cultures. YouTube, he suggests, is an 'epicenter' but not an 'origin point for any of the cultural practices people associate with it'.[41]

Although the relationship between YouTube creator and fan is in many ways unusual, traditional media formats and older fandoms have also facilitated direct creator-fan engagement—think letter pages in old comics, fan conventions at which professional artists take commissions for personalised drawings—and sometimes made the divide between author and receiver porous— think major comics franchises now produced, almost by definition, by former fans. The dynamics of 'participatory cultures' are similar whether the culture is held together by interest in comics or in right wing political commentary. Right wing memes might be opaque, but the dynamics that animate these communities are familiar.

Far right appropriation of ancient imagery

As discussed elsewhere in this volume,[42] archaeologists often find themselves confronting questions of how to engage (or not) with 'pseudoarchaeological' fringe theories. In a related dilemma, recently many scholars, mostly in Classics, have found themselves alarmed by the use of the ancient past for more transparently political ends by far right political movements and internet communities. The appropriation of Classical imagery and ongoing controversies about the nature of the Classical past are not new, playing on centuries of political use of Classical symbols by individuals at many positions along many political spectra. Indeed, engagement with the legacy of the Greek and Roman pasts is so much a part of political discourse in North America and Europe that it would be fruitless to attempt to isolate specific instances of Classical appropriation separate from an entire history of political symbology in which the idea of a 'Western Classical' tradition has been a part of political movements with diverse aims and ideologies.

Nonetheless, it is clear to most interested observers that the concept of this 'Classical tradition' has become especially prevalent in far right movements and online right wing subcultures in recent years. Classical aesthetics and iconography are consciously adopted as symbols of white racial purity, Western supremacy, and gendered hierarchies;[43] they are not merely the meaningful but incidental expressions of a long identification between 'Western' whiteness and classical antiquity, but a conscious 'branding' choice. Perhaps the best example is the white supremacist Identity Evropa movement, which covered American college campuses with posters bearing images of ancient Greek and Renaissance statues (the conflation of the two suits a narrative in which the connection is direct and heritable).[44]

In response to this tendency, there has been a wave of work by academics to confront the ways that the academic disciplines and institutions they are involved with have often perpetuated, or at least not discouraged, this sort of identification (work that has a long history and counter-history in Classics but has now moved more than ever to engage an online, non-expert public). A project to document 'misuse' of Classics by the far right initiated by Curtis Dozier, *Pharos: Doing Justice to the Classics*, launched in 2017 and held a roundtable at the 2020 Society for Classical Studies Annual Meeting, with calls for a panel on Greco-Roman Antiquity and White Supremacy at the 2021 conference. The website Eidolon has also become a platform for scholarly engagement with the topic.[45] Medievalists have also been encouraging a similar reflectivity in their own discipline, where the idea of a white Christian Europe is a staple of racist and white supremacist discourse, as most trenchantly outlined by Dorothy Kim.[46]

In contrast, scholars of the ancient Mesopotamian past are less used to confronting far right Western appropriation of iconography from the field, even as there is a long-standing engagement by scholars with the very consequential political appropriation of Mesopotamian

imagery in Iraq, Iran, and elsewhere in the Middle East. Yet, unlike the ancient Graeco-Roman world, 'Mesopotamia' is not a ubiquitous part of modern European and American nation-building and is not widely familiar to non-expert publics in the West. As has been perceptively critiqued by scholars within the field, Mesopotamia primarily appears in the Western political imagination as 'our heritage' only in the context of protectionist narratives which serve as justifications for Western military intervention in the Middle East.[47] Zainab Bahrani has argued that terminology like 'Mesopotamia' and 'Near East' serves to divorce the ancient, pre-Islamic history of Iraq and its neighbours from the modern day Middle East.[48] As a result perhaps, many members of the public may simply quite literally not be aware of *where* 'Mesopotamia' is—or never have thought about it. This dynamic makes it possible for ancient Mesopotamia to exist as a 'no-place', its historical figures like the real Sargon of Akkad and prominent artefacts treated like science fiction, superheroes, or cartoon characters by online communities whose politics are explicitly Western-centric and xenophobic.

Conclusion: Negotiating meaning between academics, fans, and online media

As movements to critique 'misuse' of the ancient past grows, we might ask ourselves whether scholars will ultimately find themselves engaged in a Sisyphean task: trying to assert authority over the meaning of artefacts, imagery, and names. No one who has studied the material past could contest the flexibility of objects, images, and icons—as the biography of the Copper Head itself attests. This object has never had a fixed meaning that scholars can simply restore. Looking back at the earliest entry of the head into archaeological space, Max Mallowan's racial commentary on its Semitic, rather than Sumerian, facial features should also remind academics and archaeologists of our own inevitable entanglement in the politics of our time. Both our facts

themselves and the wider interpretations and meanings we derive from them are reflections of personal beliefs and subject positions, as well as of larger ideological and political currents. Perhaps our most valuable contribution to public discourse can be to reiterate that knowledge is never neutral and academic interpretation always political and always subject to revision and reframing—admittedly, a difficult point to get across.

It should not surprise academics, then, if attempts to communicate a nuanced message about the uncertainty of historical interpretation and the flexible meanings of objects over time are less successful than simple narratives. It should also not surprise us to find that many people will simply not care whether there is something perverse in using an artefact from ancient Iraq to represent a Ukip candidate who has argued for stopping immigration to the United Kingdom from Iraq. And indeed, there would be a justice to this: descriptivism, and not prescriptivism (to borrow terms from linguistics), is the only intellectually viable approach to iconography— something Google's mysterious algorithm exemplifies in its rewriting of the meaning of 'Sargon of Akkad' and of the search term 'Sargon art' to bring up, primarily, fan art created for Benjamin's competition.[49]

This is not to say that academics should give up on public engagement. Indeed, much the opposite: if images are flexible, academics can be one of the forces that flexes on them, as the Pharos and Eidolon websites are attempting to do in Classics. Still, attempts to intervene in public uses from a position of academic authority are unlikely to stand up to fan practices and the dynamics of online image-sharing—not because of public ignorance, but because of the very nature of how imagery travels through the world (digital or otherwise). With this in mind, the preceding analysis can tell us something valuable about Mesopotamian art in the age of digital visual culture. The many works of 'Sargon of Akkad' fan art discussed here serve as a good

snapshot of the state of Mesopotamian imagery in the popular consciousness of a fandom *not* held together by an interest in history, archaeology, or the ancient Middle East–a dis/uninterested public (at least in our subject for its own sake). The visual references that appear across examples provide a sense of the 'canon' of Mesopotamian artefacts as translated through Google image search: mostly mid-first millennium Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian imagery, with an occasional Royal Standard of Ur or Old Akkadian cylinder seal. These are the images most likely to appear through a search engine when an artist searches for Mesopotamian image references; the repetition of the same few visual references in many fan works shows us the small and ahistorically presented array of prominent images.[50]

Yet perhaps even more interesting, fan works also reference modern visual interpretations: many are clearly informed by depictions of ancient Mesopotamian antiquity and its rulers that have appeared in video games (notably, in iterations of Sid Meier's historical nation-building *Civilization* strategy games), while others repeat motifs from historical illustrations prominent in Google's image search for keywords related to Mesopotamia. This phenomenon (fan artists copying professional historical illustrations and digital recreations) is strikingly indicative of the extent to which recreations and reimaginings will shape public awareness of the ancient past at least as much as photographs of real sites or artefacts. If nothing else, we can take this as a reassuring indication that relaying archaeological findings and historical ideas through visual media like comics is likely to be an effective means of shaping public perception. As online fandoms of right wing culture warriors and the arcane inner workings of search engine algorithms push the meaning of Mesopotamian objects and images in one direction, academic engagement and knowledge sharing through visual storytelling has strong potential to push back.

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[1] During Benjamin's run for the European Parliament, a private Discord 'election chat' channel for his subscribers included violent White Nationalist rhetoric (Di Stefano and Wickham 2019). A recent study provides some empirical support for an oft-iterated idea that Benjamin is among a class of YouTube figures who serve as 'gateways' to more extreme ideologies, with analysis showing 'that users consistently migrate from milder to more extreme content' (Ribeiro et al 2019: 1).

[2] Jenkins 1992.

[3] See for example, Jenkins 1992: 9–49; Brooker 2013; Hellekson and Busse 2014; Lamerichs 2018: 11–34; Scott 2015.

[4] Mallowan 1936: 106.

[5] See Foster 2015: 245-286; Westenholz 1997, 2007; Michalowski 1993.

[6] McMahon 2012.

[7] Sargon of Akkad 2014.

[8] Bahrani 2017: 117–120.

[9] Feldman 2009: 42.

[10] Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art 2004.

[11] Feldman 2009: 50–52

[12] Nylander 1980: n. 3; Westenholz 2004.

[13] Nylander 1980: 329–332.

[14] See Robson 2017.

[15] In its career as a museum object it has also been involved in larger geopolitical events. Its welfare was in doubt after the 2003 looting of the Iraq Museum; fortunately, it was safely in storage throughout.

[16] r/The_Donald – 'Get In, Normie' n.d. Since this subreddit was banned in June 2020, this link no longer works and the image is now difficult to find in its original form. Currently it can be viewed at https://external-preview.redd.it/WaSbuxEjL16Be4hOKqTudm6pLi385mHushHy6u13VNs.jpg?auto=webp&s=7261a4f4c19e1087218eca7ac7d22878dc02a298

[17] Research suggests that this subreddit, along with 4chan's /pol/, drives an extremely disproportionate level of meme creation and dispersal (Zannettou et al 2018: 1).

[18] In this article, I refer to a number of works of fan art posted online which unfortunately cannot be included here, for legal reasons. Establishing the artists of these works and ensuring right to publish has not been possible for the images I discuss. As a result, I provide URL links to the images but am not able to incorporate them into this publication. I hope that readers will not find it too burdensome to follow the links provided as they read the text.

[19] Although the artist has imagined Farage and 'Sargon' as buddies, Farage has since, in real life, publicly distanced himself from Benjamin and other controversial Ukip members postdating his tenure as leader (Good Morning Britain 2019: at 7:00).

[20] Pepe the Frog n.d.

[21] Furie and Furie n.d.

[22] Based on searches carried out in incognito/private browsing modes to avoid past searches swaying results. Such searches have produced different results at different times between 2019 and 2022. 'Carl Benjamin' has usually appeared in Google's sidebar. Sometimes the Wikipedia page for Benjamin has preceded that for the Old Akkadian ruler; at other times the reverse has been true, with the 'real' Sargon's Wikipedia page as top result and Benjamin's second.

[23] Zuckerberg 2018: 1–2, 12–13.

[24] On the term 'normie', ubiquitous on 4chan and within 'chan culture', as well as to some extent within internet culture more generally, see Nagle 2017: 101–116.

[25] See Nagle 2017: 106–107 for a discussion of 'subcultural capital' as a means of negotiating hierarchies in online communities. See Sandvoss 2014: 66–67 on the role of pre-existing knowledge in reading meaning.

[26] PowerfulJRE 2017: at 1:23:15 and following.

[27] /pol/ - Politically Incorrect » Thread #125869689 n.d.

[28] All the entries were collected together by Benjamin and posted at https://imgur.com/a/JaBdB. Individual artists are not credited in this collection; names and/or screennames are provided onscreen for the entries that were featured in the competitions results video (Sargon of Akkad 2016b).

[29] Sargon of Akkad 2016a: at 4:12 and following.

[30] https://i.imgur.com/yzGfeZH.png

[31] Credited in competition results video (Sargon of Akkad 2016b) to Lil Derp. Source: https://i.imgur.com/nqnGITs.png

[32] Credited in competition results video (Sargon of Akkad 2016b) to Hurderpus Maximus. Source: https://i.imgur.com/vHafxO1.jpeg

[33] Benjamin himself clearly has, beyond just his co-opting of the name Sargon, a special passion for the history and literature of ancient Mesopotamia that dates back to a period when he frequently recorded his own readings of ancient texts in translation. As recently as November 2019 he uploaded a video analysing the Gilgamesh mythos through his own political lens; Sargon of Akkad 2019.

[34] Credited in competition results video (Sargon of Akkad 2016b) to Reina Vianei. Source: https://i.imgur.com/NMEOUWx.png; see also https://i.imgur.com/iWl9lng.png

[35] Credited in competition results video (Sargon of Akkad 2016b) to Schi Raz. Source: https://i.imgur.com/A4XJqzk.png

[36] Credited in competition results video (Sargon of Akkad 2016b) to Justin Tougas. Source: https://i.imgur.com/QGCYSJk.png

[37] Sargon of Akkad 2016b.

[38] Scott 2015; Busse 2017: 99–120.

[39] Lamerichs 2018: 15–19; Cook 2013.

[40] See Brooker 2013; Lamerichs 2018: 28–29.

[41] Jenkins 2009; see also Jenkins et al 2013: 1–46.

[42] CITE

[43] Two relevant recent books are Adler 2016 and Zuckerberg 2018; for blog posts and articles by academics engaging with the issue see Bond 2017; McCoskey 2018; Zuckerberg 2017.

[44] Morse 2018.

[45] Eidolon n.d.; Pharos n.d.

[46] Kim 2017, 2018. See also Albin et al. 2019; Dockray-Miller 2017; Hsy and Orlemanski 2017. Panels on whiteness, racism, and the academy have been run by the Medievalists of Color organisation at the 2018 International Congress on Medieval Studies, and on 'Decolonizing Medieval Studies' at the 2019 American Historical Society Annual Meeting.

[47] Robson 2015; see also Kamash 2017; Press 2020.

[48] Bahrani 1998: 165, 170.

[49] A search for the term 'Sargon art' in google images, carried out in incognito mode on March 2, 2020, led to results in which nine out of twelve of the top results are fan art for the YouTuber. On February 24, 2022 results were a less swayed in this direction; five out of twelve were fan art for the YouTuber; 3 were other forms of fan art and illustration; four were related to the ancient Mesopotamian ruler.

[50] Feldman 2016.