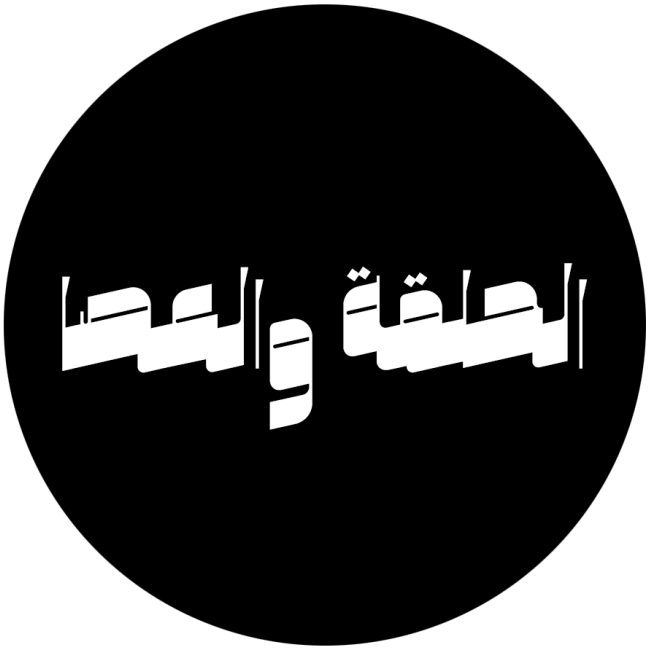

The Rod and The Ring:
Remember the Future and What It Could Bring

By Hala Alsalman

A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design (IAMD).
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ABSTRACT

This thesis project aims to radically imagine a possible future for Iraq that's unshackled from dystopian geopolitical narratives and Western notions of technological progress. I ground my research in the idea that history moves in cycles by referring to ancient Mesopotamia, a civilizational region that encompassed Iraq and parts of Turkey, Syria and Iran (7000BC – 350BC). Replete with literary and artistic artifacts set in clay and stone, the vast archeological record reveals a more dialectical worldview than our own. My thesis question asks: What seed of ancient wisdom, buried in deep time, could re-emerge in Iraq's distant future?

My visual research of Mesopotamian art and aesthetics lead me to the recurring motif of the mysterious rod and ring. As potent signifiers for *relationality*, an overarching theme of investigation is that of gender relations in Mesopotamian society, and how it became increasingly patriarchal over the course of millennia - shaping the world we live in today. I also explore Mesopotamian oneiric epistemology, echoed in later regional traditions, to reframe our understanding of time and present dreaming as a speculative vehicle for time travel.

I approach my research through the theoretical lens of Luce Irigaray's "sexual difference", Riane Eisler's social systems theory of "partnership" vs. "dominator" models, and historians Zainab Bahrani and Gerda Lerner's critical reading of ancient Near-Eastern scholarship. My research-creation work is also informed by psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung's multicultural study of the language of symbols in dreams.

This research-creation process is demonstrated in the multidisciplinary exhibit ***Remember the Future: Oneiric Artifacts from Mesopotamia*** - presented at OCAD University's Graduate Gallery in June of 2024 – which combines cinema and ceramics. My goals are to contribute to growing feminist scholarship in the arts that incorporates what Irigaray calls "female subjectivity" into male-dominated discourses, and to inspire Arab youth to dream defiantly.

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

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Last but not least my parents, Nahla and Falah, for always blessing me with their love and support. We have come full circle: As newlyweds some 45 years ago, they were both pursuing their master's degrees in England while my mother was pregnant with me.

Dedicated to

The children of Gaza

and

my mother
Nahla Abduljabbar

Who taught me:

"عالم الأحلام هو ملتقى الأرواح"
(The realm of dreams is the meeting place of souls)

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2006, I stood in the rubble of Beirut's suburb of Dahieh with a video camera in hand, documenting the devastation of Israeli airstrikes that had all but flattened the neighborhood. I was filming people frantically sifting through the wreckage looking for their loved ones in the sweltering heat. At one point, I panned my camera to a severely damaged apartment building next to them; it looked like a mythical giant had bitten a huge chunk out of the top corner. Out of the gaping hole poured clothes, curtains and broken furniture. People had either been killed in there or fallen to their deaths, struck in the middle of the night.

It was my first time in a war zone. I was preparing a video news package for Reuters news agency, as I did every day across Lebanon for a month. But it was this specific moment in Dahieh that shifted something in me; the image of a broken building previously filled with human life, transformed into a totem of manmade death and destruction within seconds. As I interviewed survivors and got the b-roll I needed, compressing horrific moments of personal histories that would be consumed and forgotten, it dawned on me that a much more urgent issue needed to be addressed: What kind of world do we live in that develops aircraft technology to not only connect people around the globe, but also to drop bombs from the sky to annihilate them?

Although I continued working in news and documentary filmmaking for some 15 years, I grew increasingly disillusioned with the industry. My international experience revealed to me its relationship to Empire and maintaining the status quo, by normalizing images and narratives of conflict. As a psychic outlet, I intermittently made subversive political art and wrote short stories about alternative futures. This MFA has afforded me the time, space and resources to produce a definitive futurist project that attempts to defy preconceived notions about Iraq and the Middle East region at large.

Being Iraqi means the personal is not only political, but also geopolitical. Like the Lebanese, Palestinians, Yemenis, Libyans and Syrians, we too fall into the contemporary category of **the bombable ones**, with possible futures brutally disrupted by the militant imperialism of the US, UK and Israel[1]. Of course, state violence and its rationalization are not unique to the West and will likely continue, just as it has since the dawn of conquest and patriarchal systems in ancient Mesopotamia - humanity's first, urbanized civilization. If this hostile way of managing populations and projecting power had a beginning, then surely it can have an end.[2]

It is this hypothetical ending, and the sociocultural trajectory that led to it, that interests me. In order to worldbuild and glimpse a radically different tomorrow, I went back to Iraq's rich ancient Mesopotamian past to look for clues. I took an expansive approach to my research through the concept of historical cycles: A theory of historical time that identifies cyclical social patterns of varying breadths and themes, with much scholarship across cultures[3].

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[1] In another timeline where my grandfather wasn't exiled due to foreign political meddling, I would have been born in Iraq, had a life there and would likely be writing a thesis like this in Arabic.

[2] The thesis of Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986).

[3] For example, Islamic scholar and philosopher Ibn Khaldun's explores it from the vantage point of political dynasties in his treatise *Muqaddimah* (1377) and Italian historian and philosopher Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (1725) examines it from a cultural point of view.

In this thesis, I reference social systems through scientist Riane Eisler's book *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987), in which she explores the cultural evolution of gender relations. Through a macro historical view, Eisler identifies cycles that sway between "partnership" (more peaceful) and "dominator" (more violent) models in society. As a woman living in a *man's world* – or rather, **a socio-political reality structured from a male-dominated perspective** - it is important for me to examine the historical dynamics between the two largest human subsets to inform a vision of the future.

The aim of my thesis research is to find answers to the following questions: How can I imagine a future that's unshackled from the current geopolitical context? Does it have something to do with the male-dominated social systems of our world? How can this be countered? Would it require a great reset of sorts, like the biblical flood that is sourced from ancient Mesopotamian mythology? If history moves in cycles, what seeds of ancient wisdom, buried by the sands of time, could grow in the distant future?

My research framework is primarily historical and references Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) and Zainab Bahrani's *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity* (2014), among other specialized scholarly texts. Both address Mesopotamia critically through the lens of women's history and decolonial art history respectively. In Part One: Mesopotamian Memories, I will give an overview of the chronological patriarchization of Mesopotamian society over the course of four major eras – Sumer, Akkad, Babylon and Assyria – which paved the way for Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). These patriarchal religions theologically and politically cemented the demotion of women's place in society and the divine order, shaping the world as we know it today. To this I apply social systems scientist Riane Eisler's cyclical theory of "dominator" vs. "partnership" relations in history.

My visual research of ancient artifacts lead me to the conjoined rod and ring, a recurring symbolic object yielded by deities in artifacts that span approximately 2000 years[4]. Scholars are still debating its meaning, which for me, added to its allure. I found the rod and ring to be a potent metaphorical signifier for union, separation and relationality within the context of the theoretical thinkers I reference in this essay: French linguist Luce Irigaray's work posits that male and female subjectivities are rooted in sexual difference, and Egyptian feminist author Nawal El Saadawi relates it to the culture of gender segregation engendered by Abrahamic theology. Both Irigaray and El Saadawi, as well as Lerner and Eisler[5], see the fundamental lack of "female subjectivity" as the root cause of all injustices in the world. I address this in Part Two: Rod and Ring, Man and Woman.

In Part Three: On Dreams and Nonlinear Time, I will also explore aspects of Mesopotamian archeology and oneiric epistemology, which point to a complex relationship with time. I will also explore their connection to the symbolic language of dreams through Islamic dream tradition and the work of psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung.

This research process resulted in the creation of my multidisciplinary exhibit ***Remember the Future: Oneiric Artifacts from Mesopotamia*** which proposes dreaming as a methodology for excavating possible futures. The exhibit features two mediums: Speculative clay artifacts from a time to come, and a short film - shot in Iraq - that depicts a dream expedition which contextualizes them. I

[4] Slanski, "The Mesopotamian 'Rod and Ring'" 38.
[5] Contemporaries (1980s) who were working on the same issue through different angles from different parts of the world.

describe these and my creative methodology in Part Four: Remember the Future: Oneiric Artifacts from Mesopotamia.

A note on intention and self-awareness: I am a child of the Iraqi diaspora who only knows my country as a visitor (so far). Although my cultural upbringing was strong, having been surrounded by the Iraqi community all my life, I do not intend to impose a vision of Iraq with this endeavor, which by nature is admittedly subjective. I acknowledge that I am an outsider, although I was never made to feel that way during my travels there. My approach is neither utopian, nor is it all-encompassing. It is simply a symbolic vision inspired by Iraqi women, past and present. Ultimately, this project is testament to my love and deep respect for my heritage, my motherland and its people who have suffered unfathomable injustices in recent decades[6].

Finally, this research-creation project is a form of resistance to male-dominated perspectives about how the world works, in order to engage in unrestrained futurist imaginings. With this thesis, I hope to make a modest contribution to the relatively new phenomenon (in the grand scheme of recorded history) of female voices in many areas of scholarship. The thinkers I reference in this thesis not only critique patriarchal narratives, but they also present unique ideas from their own lived experience as women that can benefit humanity as a whole. There is still much work to do in that regard, **but a shift is underway**. In the words of systems scientist Ilya Prigogine who made the ground-breaking discovery of the self-organizing principle: *"*When a system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence have the capacity to shift the entire system."[7]

[6] Brutal dictatorship under Saddam Hussein, 1990-2003 sanctions, 1991 Gulf War and 2003 US invasion and occupation.
[7] N.J. Hagens, "Economics for the Future – Beyond the Superorganism" in *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 169 (March 2020).

MESOPOTAMIA MAP AND TIMELINE[8]

Figure 1: Map of Mesopotamia (Image: Goran tek-en)[9]

Ubaid	7000BC	Prehistoric pottery and female figurines. Social stratification begins with the development of agriculture. Eridu is founded around 5400BC.
Sumer	3200BC	Sumerian cuneiform (written) language appears and with it, many inventions. Sophisticated sovereign city-temple states rise with marine trade that reaches the Indus Valley.
Akkadian	2400BC	Sargon of Akkad unifies Mesopotamia by conquest to form the first empire. His daughter priestess Enheduanna signs her cuneiform tablets, making her the world's earliest known author.
Babylonian	1800BC	Flourishing of art and the first set of laws (Code of Hammurabi). Female gods begin to be replaced by male gods.
Assyrian	1115BC	Military expansion outwards to Egypt and Judah.
	597-538 BC	Babylonian exile of the Judeans.
	350BC	Mesopotamian civilization declines and the first copy of the Torah is written.

[8] These periods are approximate and they overlapped.
[9] "N-Mesopotamia and Syria english." Wikimedia Commons (28 January 2014). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:N-Mesopotamia_and_Syria_english.svg

PART ONE:
MESOPOTAMIAN MEMORIES

Figure 2: Hala Alsalman. ***Collage Process Work 1***, 11 x 14 in. 2023

In this chapter, I will briefly review archeology as a memory practice in Mesopotamia. Then I will summarize the historiographic thesis of historian Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of Patriarchy* to illustrate a chronological pendulum swing of gender relations in ancient Mesopotamia that led to the theological institution of patriarchal systems through Judaism. To this I will then apply systems scientist Riane Eisler's cyclical theory of cultural evolution that's proposed in her book *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future*.

1.1 Archeology in Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia is the Greek term for "the land between two rivers" of the Euphrates and the Tigris[10]. It is also referred to as "the cradle of civilization" thanks to the sophisticated Sumerians in Southern Iraq, who introduced paradigm-shifting practices like writing, astronomy, mathematics and irrigation; systems of knowledge that spread across the world and time.[11] The Mesopotamian archeological record is bursting with written documentation across millennia on a wide range of topics, from beer recipes to dream compendiums, law codes and their own ancient histories.[12] These memories were imprinted on hundreds of thousands of clay tablets that survived thanks to the resilience of clay,[13] with more still being discovered today.

Archeology in this sense is not new. Even ancient Mesopotamians engaged in it as a memory practice when ruins were discovered accidentally during the construction of temples and palaces.[14] In *The Infinite Image*, Iraqi Assyriologist and art historian Zainab states that these discoveries were seen as the past intervening with the present and that complex rituals and restoration efforts were made to connect with and honor that past - including reburying objects inscribed with messages for future discoverers (Bahrani 2014, 221-222). Moreover, "temple renovation and the restoration of sculptures and monuments were seen as pious acts that bring about a propitious destiny" (Bahrani, 105).

Modern archeology is markedly different in that it is a deliberate endeavor. Excavations in Iraq by Europeans and Americans began in the 19th century with discoveries that captivated imperial Western powers and confirmed biblical accounts of history that Christian Europe was founded on.[15] In a time of colonization and competing national museums, the science of archeology for Europeans was driven by a need to classify and **possess** the past: Objects were found, inspected, cleaned up and displaced to the centers of Empire to be presented in completely unrelated social context so that "a person did not only belong to history; history belonged to him or her."[16]

But has written **his**tory ever really belonged to **her**?

Archeology is part of history-making, which requires the medium of writing. Although writing has been the domain of men of status until relatively recently, humanity's earliest known author is Enheduanna, the daughter of the ruler Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2334 – 2279 BC), a priestess-poet who

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[10] Dietz O. Edzard et al. "History of Mesopotamia" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Accessed July 21, 2024 https://www.britannica.com/place/Mesopotamia-historical-region-Asia

[11] Even our sexagesimal numeral system for time – based on the unit 60 – came from them.

[12] Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*, 14.

[13] See *The Digital Hammurabi Project* by John Hopkins Institute.

[14] Bahrani, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity*, 104.

[15] Berhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq*, 27.

[16] Berhardsson, 21.

signed her clay tablets.[17] This is not necessarily evidence of women having more agency and power in the early days of Mesopotamian civilization, but rather an indication of the privilege of class (Lerner 1986, 66). Being a gifted poet devoted to the primary Sumerian goddess Inanna, Enheduanna's father placed her in the temple city complex of Uruk once he captured it. At this point in time, the temple elite and the military-ruler complex became intertwined, legitimizing each other socially and managing citizens by controlling the economy. I will explore this in the next section, but before I do – I would like to share my own personal encounter with this significant moment of ancient time.

In October 2022, I traveled to New York to see an exhibit about Enheduanna and the women of Mesopotamia at The Morgan Library Museum. Organized by museum curators and scholars like Zainab Bahrani, the dimly-lit exhibition space was filled with objects from various eras. I was impressed with the diversity of artifacts, gathered from several museums and collectors, from colorful cylinder seals to alabaster sculptures and fine royal jewelry. But it was three small cuneiform clay tablets (Fig. 3) attributed to Enheduanna, inscribed with a temple hymn about a male intruder, that stopped me in my tracks:

> That man has defiled the rites decreed by holy heaven,
> He has robbed An of his very temple!
> He honors not the greatest god of all,
> The abode that An himself could not exhaust its charms, its beauty infinite,
> He has turned that temple into a house of ill repute,
> Forcing his way in as if he were an equal, he dared approach me in his lust![18]

Figure 3: "The Exaltation of Inanna", Old Babylonian copy (1750 BC),
Clay, 9.7 x 5.9 x 3.1 cm each.
(Photo: Yale Babylonian Collection / Klaus Wagensonner)[19]

[17] Babcock and Erhan, *She Who Wrote: Enhedduanna and the Women of Mesopotamia*, 19.
[18] Sydney Babcock, "Tablets Inscribed with Exaltation of Inanna" The Morgan Library & Museum (2022). https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/she-who-wrote/three-tablets
[19] Ibid.

This treasure of an artifact is essentially humanity's first, first-person account of sexual harassment, according to the museum's longtime curator and Mesopotamian expert Sidney Babcock. As I marveled at the fine, meticulous writing, I imagined the Akkadian princess furiously pressing wedges into soft clay with her reed stylus. Or did she have a scribe? I read the label and learned that the exhibited tablets were actually copies from the Old Babylonian period, centuries after Enheduanna's lifetime.[20] As an Iraqi woman standing before the intimate testimony of a female ancestor thousands of years later, I felt time collapse because I could relate to her – as most of the women in my life would. Her desperate plea to Inanna also struck me as an ominous message about the trajectory humanity would take in terms of gender and power.[21]

1.2 The Institution of Patriarchy: A Brief History

In this section, I will overview the chronological patriarchization of Mesopotamia society through the lens of historian Gerda Lerner's magnum opus *The Creation of Patriarchy*, in which she traces the genesis of institutionalized male dominance "as a slow and wavering process of transition in the status of women and the definition of gender, which took almost 2500 years" (Lerner 1986, 66). I will also weave in systems scientist Riane Eisler's cyclical theory of cultural evolution, in an effort to inform my vision of a possible distant future in Iraq.

Lerner lays out a detailed comparative and cross-cultural analysis of established scholarship in archeology, anthropology and psychology to explore her hypothesis: That the institution of patriarchy is a complex **historical** phenomenon that originates with - and may have been enabled by – the development of cuneiform writing in Sumer. I should mention that Lerner is not proposing a single-cause theory here. It would be impossible to summarize this thoroughly in this essay, but I will highlight the most compelling aspects of her thesis in relation to my research.

Lerner prefaces her analysis of Mesopotamian history by discussing the archeological evidence of more egalitarian prehistoric societies that preceded it, like that of Çatalhöyük in Anatolia (present-day Turkey): "[This] offers us hard evidence of the existence of some sort of **alternate model** to that of patriarchy. Adding this to other evidence we have cited [e.g. matrifocal Iroquois society before colonization], we can assert that female subordination is not universal, even though we have no proof for the existence of a matriarchal society" (Lerner, 35).

In *The Chalice and The Blade*, Riane Eisler names this alternate model to patriarchy as the "Partnership Model" – social periods that prioritize cooperation and egalitarianism. The other model that patriarchy falls into, she calls "The Dominator Model" – social periods in which hierarchy and organized violence are emphasized. These are part of Eisler's thought-provoking theoretical framework through which we can understand cultural evolution from a cyclical point of view. Like Lerner, Eisler posits that male-dominated systems that characterize "dominator" relations are not destiny or biologically predetermined, rather they are symptoms of value system changes that result from various internal and external forces, like invaders and environmental shifts (Eisler 1987, 43-47). Eisler describes

[20] Mesopotamians diligently practiced archiving and reproduction of their literature.

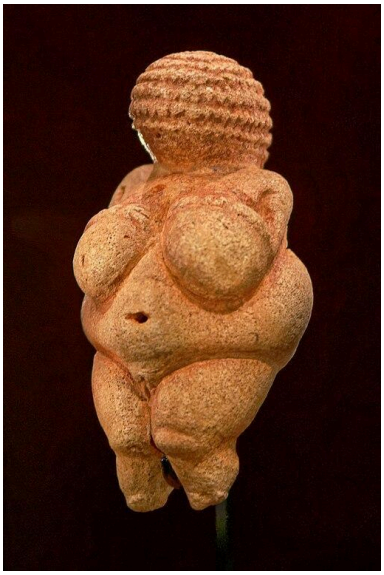
[21] An anecdote: When I stepped out of the exhibit, a well-dressed young woman approached me asking if I knew about "Our Father in Heaven". I obliged and asked if this had to do with Jesus and she replied "Yes. But do you know about our *Mother* in Heaven? She has arrived." She then proceeded to try to recruit me into a neo-Christian cult led by a female messiah in South Korea. I politely declined but took it as an amusing, fortuitous sign.

the process of transition away from the "partnership"relations as a shift from near equilibrium to a disrupted, chaotic state which brings forth "dominator" attitudes (Eisler, 47).

Figure 4: Neolithic Female Figures

Seated Woman of Çatalhöyük
(Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Sefer Azeri)[22]

Seated Female, Halaf
(Photo: The Met Museum)[23]



Venus of Willendorf
(Photo:Wikimedia Commons/Jacob Halun)[24]

Some of the evidence of egalitarianism that Lerner discusses are the faceless (sometimes headless), fleshy female baked-clay statues found at Çatalhöyük and prehistoric Mesopotamia that look very similar to what Western scholars call "Venus Figurines" found in neolithic art from around the world (Fig. 4) – but they are not evidence of female domination over males or even Goddess-worship (Lerner 1986, 125, 147). Lerner sees some feminist scholarship as problematic in this regard, when it promotes 'compensatory myths' – like matriarchy as a **reversal** of patriarchy – because it is rooted in contemporary socio-political concerns. She is quite careful in making any definitive conclusions about the past herself, since archeological artifacts are fragmentary to begin with and can only be understood within the context of the time. In the same way, we have to read history books with an awareness of the subjectivity of the writer and the time they wrote in. (I will discuss Lerner's historiographic approach later.)

Cross-referencing existing historical scholarship and contextualizing it within a wider cultural wave of male supremacy that reached later ancient Greece and Egypt, Lerner astutely argues that women became incrementally subordinated in Mesopotamia over the course of millennia as societies went from kinship to kingship relations, with the formation of private property and class (Lerner, 55). Women were viewed as more vulnerable (to rape and exploitation) and valuable than men as war captives and slaves, due to their ability to carry life (Lerner, 77, 87). The earliest (Akkadian) cuneiform sign for slave in the

[22] "Çatalhöyük oturan ilahə fiqurunun öndən görünüşü" Wikimedia Commons (3 June 2023). https://rb.gy/t1shbb
[23] "Seated Female" The Met Museum, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/327066
[24] "Venus of Willendorf" Wikimedia Commons (30 July 2021).
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Venus_of_Willendorf,_20210730_1214_1255.jpg

archeological record is gendered as female, which linguistically indicates the commodification of women before men (Lerner, 86).[25]

From early on in the 3rd millennium BC, Sumerians were already engaged in sophisticated religious systems presided by gods and goddesses. The southern region of Iraq was made up of warring independent city-states like Ur, Nippur and Uruk that were ruled by the temple class. The prevailing attitude on female sexuality was positive and temple prostitution by women was viewed as honorable, sacred and distinct from commercial prostitution. Once the Akkadian king Sargon,[26] Enheduanna's father, conquered and united city-states under his rule in what is known to be the first nationalistic empire, the enslavement and sexual abuse of captive women became institutionalized (Lerner, 133) and women's sexual autonomy became increasingly regulated, in marriage and in prostitution (Lerner, 140). As a result, they became excluded from certain types of specialized work that developed over time. Lerner adds: "After the invention of writing [3500 BC] and the establishment of formal learning, women are excluded from access to such education" (Lerner, 54).

Lerner then identifies a pivotal moment for women's history in Babylonian times, when King Hammurabi (ca. 1792 – 1750 BC) codified law for the first time in an oblong, phallic stele depicting the ruler standing before the sun god Shamash (Fig. 5):

> The code of Hammurabi marks the beginning of the institutionalization of the patriarchal family as an aspect of state power (…) The patriarchal head of the family at the time of Hammurabi was still somewhat restrained in his power over his wife by kinship obligations to the male head of the wife's family. By the time of the Middle Assyrian laws, he is restrained mostly by the power of the state. Fathers, empowered to treat the virginity of their daughters as a family property asset, represent an authority as absolute as the King. (…) The king's power was secured by men as absolutely dependent on and subservient to him as their families were dependent on and subservient to them. The archaic state was shaped and developed in the form of patriarchy (Lerner, 140).

The Babylonian empire ushered in the final stage of the Assyrian era, in which veiling was legally codified "to distinguish clearly and permanently between respectable and non-respectable women [prostitutes]" (Lerner, 134). At the same time we see the masculinization of female deities. A distinctive example is that of Nisaba, the Sumerian goddess of accounting and writing who was dethroned by her male counterpart Nabu by the time the Assyrian period rolled around.[27] Even lower-ranking female guardian deities called 'Lamma' and 'Apsasu' become overshadowed, especially in the public sphere, by the hypermasculine, anthropomorphic Lamassu.[28] Towering winged bulls with muscular legs, broad shoulders and bearded faces that helmed the entrances of temples and palaces. Although queens and primary goddesses like Ishtar remained, they were tools to increasing male political power (Lerner, 156). The feminine – so to speak – was less and less visible in the public sphere.

This era also manifested the height of militarized, imperialist power; Assyrian kings like Ashurbanipal (ca. 668 – 627 BC) are written about as brutal and almighty in the Bible and beyond.[29] The

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[25] However, Lerner emphasizes early on that women were not systematically oppressed victims. They actively participated and adapted to a changing culture that became increasingly concerned with urban administration as populations grew.
[26] Who some biblical scholars identify with the Old Testament's Moses as they have very similar origin stories.
[27] Asher-Greve and Westenholz, *Goddesses in Context,* 19.
[28] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 51, 115.
[29] Donald John Wiseman, "Ashurbanipal: Personality and Significance" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed July 21, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ashurbanipal/Personality-and-significance,

terrifying splendor of this era's monumental, propagandistic art mirrors the social reverence of masculine virility and state violence - as Zainab Bahrani states: "Decapitation, flaying, impaling, and other forms of physical torture appear in the battle scenes of Assyria. In the Neo-Assyrian era, these images of slow violence to the enemy's body became so common in scenes of victory that torture itself can be read as a narrative means of signaling the conquest of the other."[30]

Figure 5: Code of Hammurabi Stele inscribed with 282 laws, basalt, 225 x 79 x 47 cm (photo: Franck Raux)[31]

[30] Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 18-19.
[31] "Code de Hammurabi" Photo #1, Musée du Louvre (2009). https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010174436

This veneration of violence and subjugation as a symptom of decline is an observable phenomenon globally, according to Eisler. Within her "dominator" vs. "partnership" models, she identifies predictors of times of warfare when "gylanic linking value systems" are suppressed by "androcratic ranking value systems" (Eisler 1987, 147). These have to do with prioritizing relationships and affiliation vs. aggressive power, respectively. They are value systems and not sexual characteristics per se, as Eisler emphasizes that both sexes can only exist in relation to each other and thus, dialectically. However, in these "dominator" periods of history, typically "feminine" value systems of care and prioritizing relationships still exist because women don't just disappear. This begins **to shift the system** because "the movement towards higher levels of cultural evolution could, under the prevailing male-dominant system, only go so far and no further" (Eisler, 146).

This is exactly what happened with the neo-Assyrian Empire: Soon after Ashurbanipal's ruthless reign reached a pinnacle of art and culture, the empire fell - and with it, the grand story of the Mesopotamian civilization. If we were to look at our current globalized era through Eisler's theory, the threat of nuclear world war is increasingly becoming real because our geopolitical system is stuck in the "dominator" model of relations – but it could be reaching its peak.

1.3 The Male Supremacy of The Word

Lerner points to a profound transformation in human communication during Sumerian times, which I think is important to discuss: The naming of deities and abstract ideas. We have to imagine a time in which this is a relatively new practice that must have altered the perception of their relation to time and space, just as the internet and social media has altered ours. To write someone's name down must have felt like a magical act of immortalization. As Lerner puts it, "Naming has profound significance in the Old Mesopotamian belief system. The name reveals the essence of the bearer; it also carries magic power" (Lerner 1986, 151). This concept is emphasized in the first lines of *Enuma Elish,* the Babylonian creation myth from the late 2nd millennium BC:

> When on high the heaven **had not been named**,
> Firm ground below had not been **called by name,**
> Naught but primordial Apsu, the begetter,
> (and) Mumu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
> Their waters commingling as one sing body
> When no gods whatever had been brought into being
> **Uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined**
> Then it was that the gods were formed from within them[32]

These lines are echoed in the opening verses of the Book of Genesis, in which the dawn of creation is reduced to a single, masculinized god and His divine word. Thanks to the wealth of translated ancient texts that have to do with evolving creation myths in the Near East, Lerner is not only able to explore the eventual masculinization of goddesses within the Mesopotamian pantheon – but also to describe the shift in perception that led to Abrahamic monotheism through the act of naming:

> (…) the symbolification of the capacity to create, as in the concept of naming, simplifies the move away from the Mother-Goddess as the sole principle of creativity. It is, so to speak, a higher level of thinking to move away from the common sense observable facts of female fertility and conceptualize a

[32] Lerner, 151.

> symbolic creativity, which can be expressed in "the name" or "the concept". It is not a very big step from that to "the creative spirit" of the universe. Yet precisely that step forwarding the ability to make abstractions and create symbols that can stand for abstract concepts is an essential precondition to the move towards monotheism. Until people could imagine an abstract, unseen, un-knowable power which embodied such a "creative spirit," they could not reduce their numerous, anthropomorphic, contentious gods and goddesses into one god (Lerner, 151-152).

At some point in deep time, before procreation was understood, women must have been seen as powerful portals to new human beings – as Camille Paglia puts it: "Woman was an idol of belly-magic. She seemed to swell and give birth by her own law.*"*[33] Mesopotamian creation myths that soon came after bear traces of this: As mentioned earlier, in the *Enuma Elish*, the primordial entity that bore the universe and the gods was female. In the early Akkadian *Atra-Hasis* myth (1700 BC), the Mother goddess Mami is assigned the job of fashioning the first human being out of clay and the blood of a slain god.[34] This metamorphoses into the monotheist creation story of Adam in the Hebrew Genesis,[35] which does away with feminine participation in creation altogether, ideologically severing women's direct connection to the divine.

Early on in her thesis, Lerner states that although women have always participated in history, the recording and interpretation of that history, up until very recently, has been the domain of **men of a certain class –** and this was the case with the trajectory of women and education in Mesopotamia. It makes for a distorted view of the past despite the fact that history is widely regarded as a form of "truth". She elaborates: "Men and women have suffered exclusion and discrimination because of their class. No man has ever been excluded from the historical record because of his sex, yet all women were" (Lerner, 5). As the first and last known Mesopotamian female author, Enhedduanna is an exception in ancient times, although scholars are still debating whether she was even a real person[36]– which is telling of how outstanding women in history are still scrutinized.

With her research, Lerner's goal is to transform historical scholarship by encouraging women to critique androcentric discourses and engage in history-making from their own point of view. It is a matter that is beyond just "adding women" to an existing paradigm (Lerner, 220). Picking up where she left off, through the prism of systems science, Riane Eisler states: "It is only now, when the missing female half of history is starting to be seriously considered, that we can begin to develop a new theory of history, and of cultural evolution, that takes into account the totality of human society" (Eisler 1987, 147).

Similarly, linguist and theorist Luce Irigaray takes the conceptualization of a new historical paradigm and casts a wider net with it in her works. She calls for the injection of female subjectivity into all fields of knowledge to transform the world and views gender equality as a dangerous false promise that implies a leveling up to a standard designed and set by men (Irigaray 1993, 11-12). The acknowledgement and respect for sexual difference, in her view, is the foundational gateway to eradicating all other forms of 'othering' like race, religion, age and even our exploitative relationship with the Earth (Irigaray 2001, 7-8, 141).

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[33] Paglia, *Free Men, Free Women*, 14.
[34] George and Al-Rawi, "Tablets from the Sippar Library VI. Atrahasis" 162.
[35] Abulhab, *Adam and the Early Mesopotamian Creation Mythology*, 13.
[36] See Sophus Helle, "Enhedduanna and the Invention of Authorship" in *Authorship*, vol. 8, issue 1, 2019.

Drawing on her expertise in psychology and linguistics, Irigaray confirms Lerner's thesis about the male supremacy of the written word – which has had all kinds of implications in our social relations, the way we perceive reality and thus, the direction our can future can take:

> Man seems to have wanted, directly or indirectly, to give the universe his own gender as he has wanted to give his own name to his children, his wife, his possessions. (…) he gives his own gender to God, to the sun, and also, in the guise of the neuter, to the laws of the cosmos and of the social or individual order. He doesn't even question the genealogy of this attribution. **How could discourse not be sexed when language is**? (Irigaray 1993, 31-32)

As we have seen, the invention of writing some 5000 years ago not only profoundly transformed the way human beings perceived reality, it also helped cement and project domination systems through the politicization of Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) that subjugated women - half of the population - for millennia. Despite growing geopolitical tensions, we also have an infusion of female subjectivity in various fields of knowledge over the last century from around the world and theoretically, we could be at the brink of a pendulum swing away from a long-lasting reality that has values "ranking" over "linking". As Eisler and Lerner posit in their work, male-dominated societies are not eternal. They are but a chapter in the human story.

My task is to envision the apex of this change; a world in which women and men build a world together. And so, if history moves in cycles that spiral at different levels, what else could return in the distant future for Iraq and beyond?

PART TWO:
Rod and Ring, Man and Woman

Figure 6: Hala Alsalman. ***Collage Process Work 2***, 11 x 14 in. 2023

In this chapter, I will discuss the scholarship around the rod and ring, a mysterious motif that permeates Mesopotamian art across millennia. I will then contextualize this within the realm of Mesopotamian aesthetics as explored by Zainab Bahrani, in order to glimpse their ancient worldview. Following that, I will explore the rod and ring further as a signifier for the feminist theoretical frameworks I reference in this thesis.

2.1: A Mysterious Emblem

As stated earlier, in order to conceive of a radical future in Iraq, I refer to Mesopotamian history in search of lost wisdom that could resurface tomorrow. For months I conducted visual research of Mesopotamian art, not sure what I was looking for, but trusting that the process was leading me somewhere. I was mostly drawn to narrative sculpture in monuments and wall reliefs and the meticulous, expressive depiction of hands.[37] This drew my attention to a recurring, peculiar object held by the Anunnaki, the central deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon:[38] The conjoined rod and ring (Fig. 8). It appears in reliefs, cylinder seals, steles and clay plaques across various eras of Mesopotamian history. If a deity yields the conjoined rod and ring in the presence of a mortal ruler, the latter is never touching it. However, sometimes we do see kings holding the rod alone and goddesses bearing singular rings.

Much has been written about Mesopotamian history, but the scholarship about the rod and ring is sparse. The few related texts that are available provide unimaginative answers: One source speculates that it is an emblem of kinship between temple and palace,[39] others, that they depict measuring tools of divine justice.[40] Nevertheless, one scholar states: "The 'rod and ring' was a significant motif. It was employed for almost 2000 years, in both Babylonian and Assyrian royal monuments and in non-royal works. As such, it must have resonated strongly with kings and their subjects across dynastic, ethnic and political boundaries."[41]

A 2011 study by Brigham Young University scholar Mary Abram titled "A New look at the Mesopotamian Rod and Ring" proposes a unique interpretation that also integrates previous ones. In Abram's view, the conjoined rod and ring could represent the dual nature of time that only deities have dominion over: The rod symbolizing the temporary (mortality) and the ring, the eternal.

Abram defines the rod and ring as follows: "The Mesopotamian rod and ring consist of two separate emblems held as one conjoined unit. The rod is usually slender, straight and blunted at each end with no embellishments. The ring is usually a thin, continuous circle gripped with the rod" (Abram 2011, 19). As such, it is never touched by mortals.

However, Abram points out that "the rod and ring are separate objects with unique characteristics that complement each other when combined" (Abram, 35) since the singular ring is depicted on its own with goddesses in the neo-Assyrian period and the singular rod – by the male storm god Adad in a few

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[37] Perhaps this was subconscious since I was working with my hands in the ceramics studio, but artistic depiction of this particular body part entranced me: Gesturing expressively, carrying bags, plants, bowls and palm cones, always telling the viewer something, either directly or indirectly. This resulted in a week of spontaneously making the paper collages that appear as chapter heads in this thesis.
[38] See "Annuna" in "Gods, Demons and Symbols of Mesopotamia" 34.
[39] Slanski, "The Mesopotamian 'Rod and Ring'" 38.
[40] Black and Green, *God, Demons and Symbols of Mesopotamia*, 156.
[41] Slanski, 38.

exceptional cases[42] (Abram, 18). Moreover, since Mesopotamian rulers often legitimized themselves as divine representatives, Abram states that this explains their bearing of the singular rod (or scepter) in royal art (Abram, 36).

Throughout her essay, Abram juxtaposes her theory of the dual nature of time with existing scholarship on the matter as she makes a comparative analysis of multiple artifacts, including the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi Stele that I mentioned in the previous chapter - as it depicts the Babylonian king standing before the seated sun god Shamash, holding the conjoined rod and ring (Fig. 7).[43]

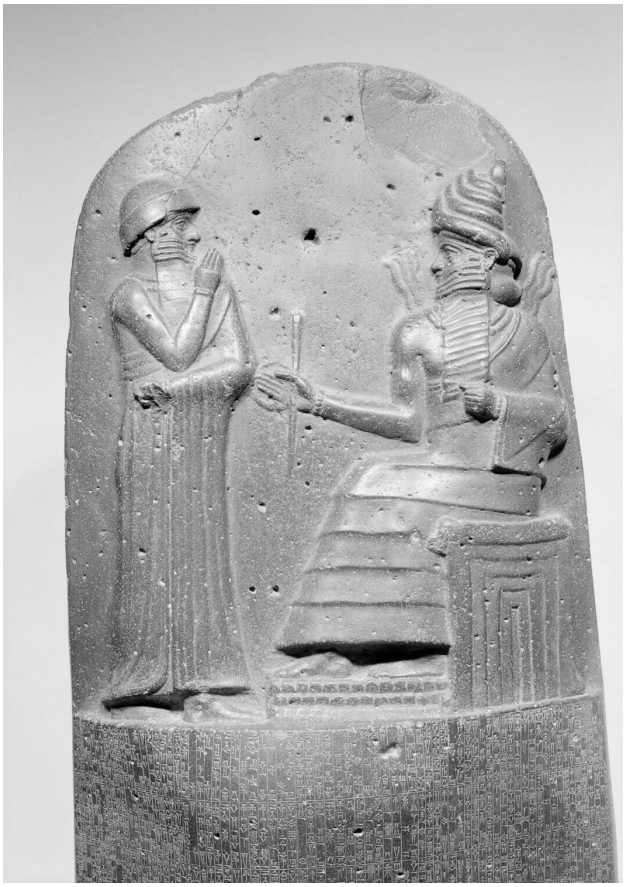

Figure 7: Detail of the Code of Hammurabi Stele
(photo: Maurice et Pierre Chuzeville)[44]

While her theory is analogous to others in that the rod and ring are divine emblems that allude to measurement – she deduces: "Unlike other definitions, the rod and ring motif as explained in this article has remained consistent throughout the presentation of a variety of artifacts (…) The rod represents the temporal measurement of life that begins and ends. The ring represents the eternal aspect of life, a

[42] Concurrent with her time theory, she proposes that the rod in this instance represents the temporality of rain and thunder.
[43] Hammurabi is legendary in Iraqi culture and this particular image is iconic in Baghdad: When I went there to shoot my thesis film earlier this year, I noticed it was embedded in Baghdad airport's interior design, as well as the 25,000 Iraqi dinar bank note. Curiously though, the ring is missing, whereas the rest of the image is a meticulous copy of the original depiction.
[44] "Code de Hammurabi" Photo #96, Musée du Louvre (2009). https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010174436

concept familiar to Mesopotamians as indicated by the story of eternal life bestowed by deity upon the mortal Utnapishtim[45]" (Abram, 23).

With this metaphorical approach, Abram is treading the realm of hermeneutics – that is, the interpretation of symbols through wisdom texts. I will discuss the language of symbols from this philosophical point of view in the last section, but before exploring the rod and ring further, I want to discuss aspects of the Mesopotamian worldview that we can glean from their approach to making art – which they documented on clay tablets thousands of years ago.

[45] The Noah-like character in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

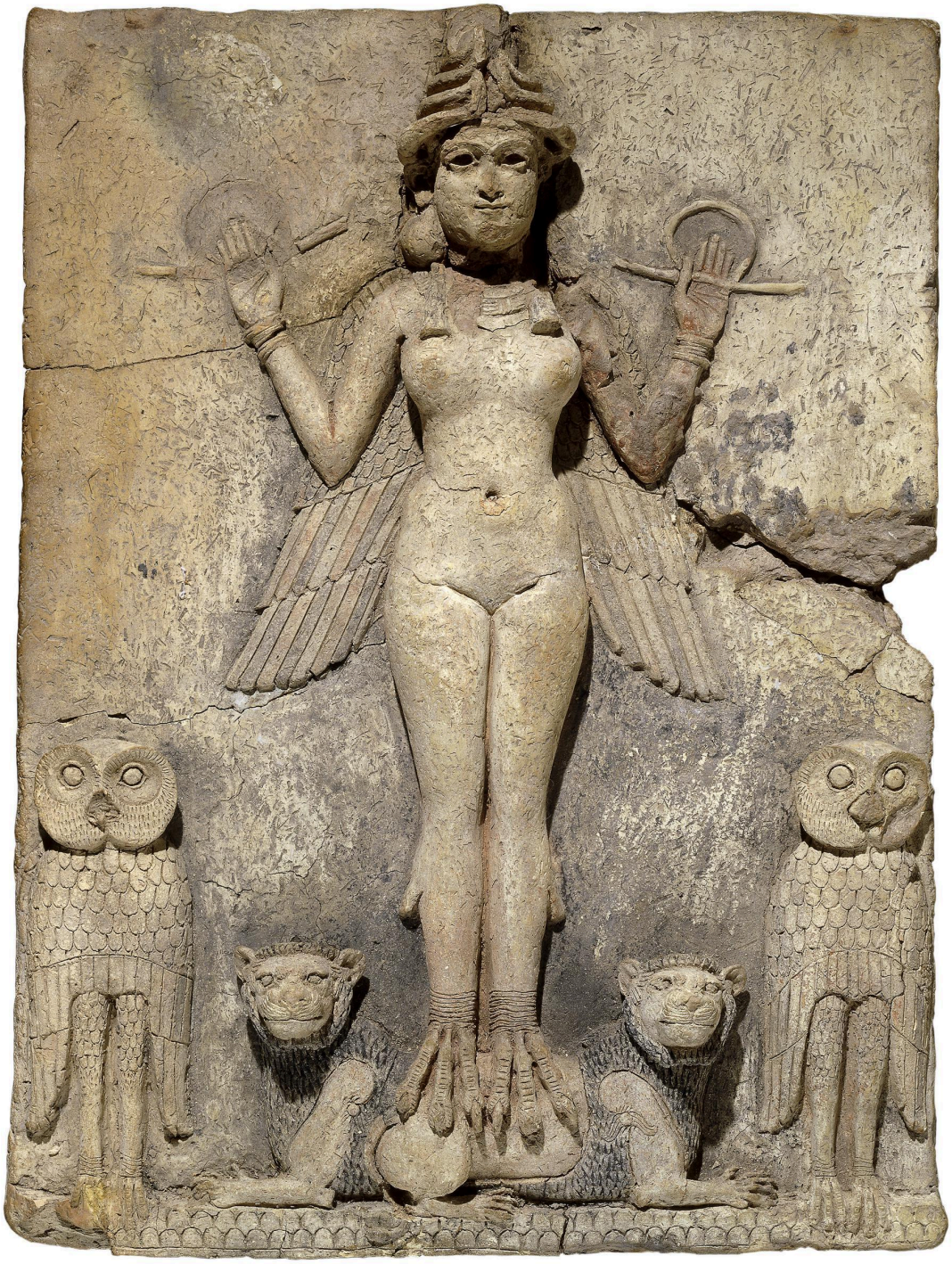

Figure 8: Ishtar Plaque (also known as Queen of the Night) with goddess holding conjoined rod and ring, fired clay, 49.5 x 4.8 x 37 cm
(Photo: Trustees of the British Museum)

2.2 The Mesopotamian Mentality

Zainab Bahrani's work as an Assyriologist and art historian decodes ancient Near Eastern art of Mesopotamia and Egypt. In *The Infinite Image* she explores aspects of Mesopotamian aesthetics as it pertains to their relationship with time and reality, thanks to the abundance of ancient scholarship on the matter: "The Mesopotamians wrote incessantly. And a large number of their texts shed light on their own conceptions of the image and forms of representation as well as aspects of response to the visual realm" (Bahrani 2014, 62).

According to Bahrani, Mesopotamians saw representation as something that was much more complex than just mimesis and affect. An artistic image was real in that it could affect reality through emanation in its own right (Bahrani, 43). She adds:

> I would argue, images were not a means of copying or referencing a separate ontological reality. They are better understood as ways of **breaking the real**, as forms of interruption in the material world of the everyday. This is why the great winged, human headed bulls and lions that guarded the portals of the Assyrian palaces bore an incantation that was to keep them from walking away from their position (Bahrani, 67).

A statue of a king was not just a monument to power. It had a presence in its own right and was seen as the embodiment of the person. For example, Bahrani recounts a story about the Assyrian ruler Ashurnasirpal II's statue: After it was sculpted and carved, priests performed a ceremonial ritual to imbue it with his essence. No longer an image – the statue became a valid presence of the king, immortalized in stone (Bahrani, 75-76). This is why statues and monumental sculptures were also always inscribed with curses towards anyone who would try to deface or destroy them; there was a belief that if a statue were to be damaged, it would actually bring harm to the depicted (Bahrani, 75).[46]

Furthermore, Bahrani explains that according to the extensive Babylonian scholarship on divination, they organized their perception of reality through a phenomenological matrix in which "all manner of visible phenomena in the world were literally read like cuneiform signs embedded into the real" (Bahrani, 73). The movement of stars, the change in weather, even the state of invisible organs like sheep liver (extispicy)[47], which were extracted and subject to omen interpretation. To the ancients, it seems that life was a layered, sensorial experience filled with messages to send and receive: "The Mesopotamians believed that the gods wrote into the universe, and that this is why the world could be read hermeneutically by those who were wise enough to do so" (Bahrani, 74).

A reality of this complexity can seem illogical and superstitious to us – especially in a time that is governed by rational thought and empirical science. But according to Bahrani, the Mesopotamian approach to image-making was not irrational: "Rather, it **plays** with logic in a very sophisticated way that becomes clear if one reads Babylonian hermeneutics or wisdom texts with this question of the image in mind" (Bahrabi, 63). I would add that many other ancient cultures also perceived the world

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[46] This reminds me of an iconic image from the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 that was broadcast live on television: The toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in central Baghdad by US forces. It was roped at the neck, face covered with the American flag and then pulled down. The invaders did this deliberately, knowing full well its symbolic power and the effect the image would have on the world. If we were to look at that event with the ancient ontological understanding Bahrani talks about, we see that the defacing of this "embodiment" of the Iraqi president was doubled and intensified by the TV image, broadcast on screens across the globe. In a strange way, this visual history-making moment may have sealed the dictator's fate, as he was captured later that year and executed by hanging.

[47] For more see *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World* by Amar Annus (2010).

through epistemologies that combined matter and metaphor. For example, the sciences of astrology and astronomy were one in ancient Greece, Mesoamerica, India and beyond.

This relational ontology interests me as a way to conceive of a distant future; a world in which people are aware and respectful of their participatory relationship with the cosmos. Additionally, if we are to take Abram's theory of time and Bahrani's supposition that Mesopotamian art was meant to "break the real", in many ways this applies to the mysterious rod and ring that has time travelled to us - emerging from the earth through archeology in just the last century. (I will discuss this as it pertains to my thesis exhibition in Part Four.)

2.3 Rod and Ring: A Metaphor for Relationality

Working with this ancient mindset and Mary Abram's compelling dualistic interpretation, I present the rod and the ring as a potent visual metaphor for multifaceted modalities, perhaps the most obvious one being that of male (rod) and female (ring). In this section, I will use the rod and ring as a signifier to expand on the theoretical frameworks that informed this research-creation project.

As I laid out previously, Mesopotamian societies increasingly relegated women to second class status from the time of Sumer to the Assyrian empire. Concurrent to this, the conjoined rod and ring is often held by gods and goddesses (Fig. 8) alike earlier in Mesopotamian history, but by the later Assyrian period, we tend to see the ring in a separated state. For example, the Maltai rock reliefs in northern Iraq (7th century BC) depict a procession of gods and goddesses,[48] with the males carrying the conjoined rod and ring and females carrying the ring only (sometimes called a chaplet).[49] The latter are still deities, but the emblem they hold is incomplete. The rod is only ever depicted on its own in the context of a male, mortal ruler and the male God Adad throughout Mesopotamian art (Abram 2011, 18-19).

This gendered view of the rod and the ring and its states of separation and union also illustrate Luce Irigaray's ideas on relationality. As objects that signify distinct meanings on their own, they are also important in their difference. The title of her popular book *Je, Tu, Nous* ("I, You, We") reflects the three states of **singular rod**, **singular ring** and **conjoined rod and ring**. Irigaray's overarching idea is that female subjectivity is real and only exists as female because there exists a male one, and that only if there is respect for one another's difference can there be true union; the third and complete way. Man and woman have to define each other together, not separately.

The relationality of the rod and the ring is simple but quite profound as a visual metaphor for what Lerner and Irigaray write about in this regard. In *Democracy Begins Between Two*, Irigaray suggests a radical reimagining of citizen rights based on sexual difference: "Perhaps a sexually-marked civil code is the minimal guarantee needed to protect the singularity of man, that of woman, and the relation between them" (Irigaray 2001, 9).

Separation itself could be a fourth modality, in that distance matters in sexual difference and gender relations. Abrahamic religion placed man high up in the spirit realm with God, and woman down low in the animalistic body. The first woman, a secondary creation from the first man's mere rib, was the

[48] See "Maltai Rock Relief" in *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Mesopotamia*, 40.
[49] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Mesopotamia*, 156.

source of all temptation and the original sin of sex. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Egyptian author and activist Nawal El Saadawi expands on this notion of separation as an affliction for men and women:

> These religious concepts and thoughts lead inevitably to the separation of human beings from their bodies and from real life. Thus arose the phenomenon which was to be called the 'alienated experience of reality' as an expression indicating the splitting of human life into two. Henceforward two fundamentally contradictory notions of life were to be locked in struggle all through the ages up to the present day. The first was the ancient or primitive humanistic notion which believes in the essential goodness of the human body and its functions, and which derives its roots from the religions of Ancient Egypt [and Iraq] that gave great emphasis to the vitality, generosity and richness embodied in the physical qualities of both men and women.
>
> A second notion which spread its influence widely after Judaism and Christianity, and which leads to the alienation of the body from reality, encourages an escapist attitude towards the objective material world. Here the alienation is in relation to the material world, whether subjective or objective, where the term 'material' is used in its philosophical sense and not in the mundane sense usually attached to it. Human beings escape into the world of spirits, souls, ideas and illusions divorced from reality, and base their conception of the world and themselves on an 'idealist' approach. 'Idealism' – again in a philosophical sense – has very often been willfully confused with 'ideals' or 'noble motives' whereas in fact there is no necessary relation between the two (El Saadawi 2015, 198).

El Saadawi tried to heal this split in her own life: Although searingly critical of patriarchy and the religious establishment in her novels, as a fearless lifelong activist she always worked with men because she saw them as victims of patriarchal systems too. She says young men made up 40% of her activist group because they understood the link between women's oppression and class oppression.[50] Like Luce Irigaray, El Saadawi understood that women's rights were at the root of all social injustices, including colonialism.

This notion of separation echoes Riane Eisler's social theory of "linking vs ranking value systems", which she states are **stereotypically** seen as feminine and masculine respectively. In her view, these are gendered in society because "the configuration of values [that Eisler calls gylanic] are in male-dominated systems generally confined to a separate world subordinate or ancillary to 'man's' world or the 'real' world – the world of women" (Eisler 1987, 146). In other words, male-dominated societies prioritize power as control of *the other*, consequently **disconnecting men** from values of caring and affiliation because they are associated with women and childbearing when really, **these values are human**. This relates to Irigaray's call for respectful and mutual recognition between the sexes.

In summary, here I have explored the rod and ring historically as a symbolic object and metaphorically as it relates to theoretical frameworks I employed to imagine a future society that's unshackled from current structures. In the next chapter, I will look at the rod and ring through the symbolic language of dreams to contextualize my artistic proposal of using dreaming as a vehicle for time travel.

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[50] El Saadawi, Nawal. "Nawal El Saadawi on Feminism, Fiction and the Illusion of Democracy" *Channel 4 News* (2018). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=djMfFU7DIB8

PART THREE:
On Dreams and Nonlinear Time

Figure 9: Hala Alsalman. ***Collage Process Work 3****,* 11 x 14 in. 2023

Dream – a door cannot hold it back, nor can a doorpost
To the liar it speaks lies; to the truthful the truth
It can make one happy or make one lament;
It is **a closed archive basket** of the gods…

- From the Sumerian myth "Lugalbanda in the Mountain Cave"[51]

In this chapter, I will briefly review the language of symbols in dreams as it pertains to interdisciplinary psychologist Carl G. Jung's work. Following this, I will explore aspects of Mesopotamian and Islamic and oneiric ontologies to reframe our understanding of time. Finally, I will circle back to the opening subject of archeology and discuss its connection with dreaming.

3.1 The Symbolic Language of Dreams and the Sacred

As we have seen, the rod and ring as symbolic objects have been subject to multiple interpretations in Assyriology – with no definitive answer. As such, Mary Abram is the only scholar to date who has taken the rod and ring beyond the literal and into the realm of metaphysics and metaphor. This is akin to Swiss psychoanalyst Carl G. Jung's study of the language of symbols, especially through the logic-defying realm of dreams. In his final work *Man and His Symbols*,[52] he states: "As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason" (Jung 1964, 21).

Jung devoted his life to understanding the language of symbols in dreams, ancient art and mythology as a way to discover – or recover - one's connection to the sacred and achieve psychological balance (Jung, 50). In this regard, he speaks of a higher level of symbols as forms and as archetypes[53] - the **numinous** – which are imbued with "psychic energy" that transcends fixed meaning but elicits a response from individuals and societies across time (Jung, 96). In other words, the Sublime.

Jung identifies two categories of symbols in this regard: The natural – which are direct, simple and have roots in prehistory – and the cultural, which he states "are those that have been used to express "eternal truths" and that are still used in many religions. They have gone through many transformations and even a long process of more or less conscious development, and have thus become collective images accepted by civilized society" (Jung, 93).

In this sense of transformative divine cultural symbols, I see the Mesopotamian rod and ring as related to the ancient Egyptian ankh - also a symbolic object related to deities and the afterlife[54] - which was later overshadowed by Christian cross. These emerged consecutively in the ancient Near Eastern region (Fig. 10) and illustrate what Jung means by cultural symbols transforming in shape and meaning over time.

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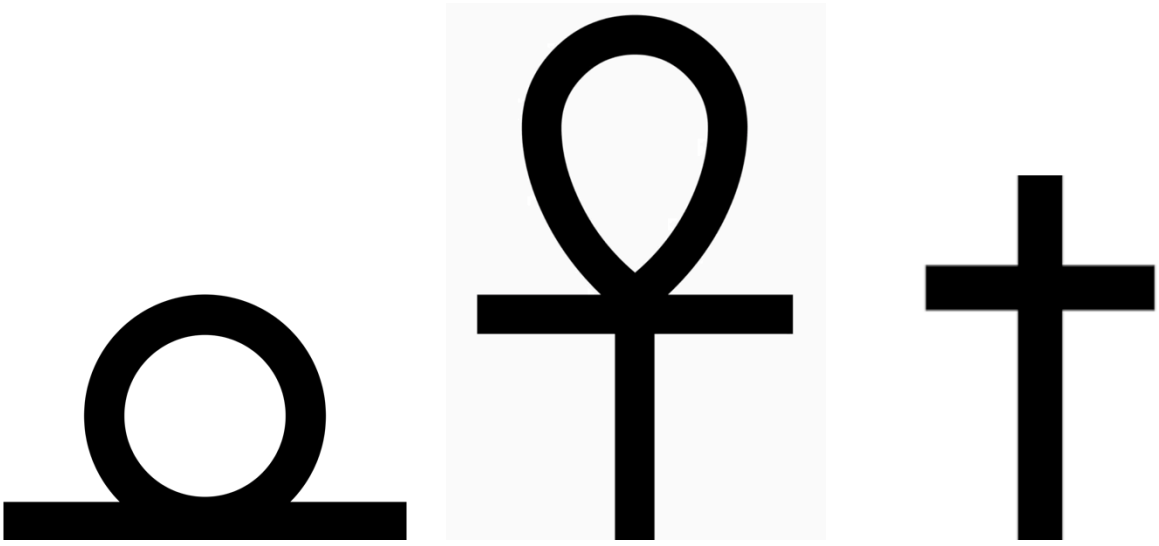
[51] Noegel, "Dreams and Dream Interpreters in Mesopotamia and in the Hebrew Bible" 47.
[52] This work was initiated by a dream Carl Jung had, which is described in the introduction.
[53] See Jung pp. 67-82 for more on archetypes.
[54] Hill, "Window Between Worlds" 243.

Figure 10: Near Eastern Divine Symbols



ROD + RING ANKH CROSS

Jung defines the **collective unconscious** as "the part of the psyche that retains and transmits the common psychological inheritance of mankind" (Jung, 107). As such, numinous symbols time travel and emerge from the collective unconscious, in Jung's view, which can manifest in waking life (Jung, 55). Jung attributes this especially to artists, writers and scientists in terms of genius (Jung, 38). With this, there is an implication of a logic-defying non-space, accessed through dreaming and the unconscious, that human beings can tap into. In other words, the greater mysterious system all human beings are part of. In religious terms, Abrahamic monotheism sees dreaming as a mode of communication with God. (This has parallels with Abram's interpretation of the Mesopotamian ring if we were to look at conscious waking life as the rod.)

As an avid traveler, Jung incorporated Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist and indigenous American philosophies into his psychoanalysis work. This gave him a holistic perspective on the human condition in the age of rationalism (Jung, 94). Much like Nawal El Saadawi's thoughts on the divisive effect of organized religion on the human psyche, Jung thinks of modernity as an alienating condition, divorced from the original dialectical relationship we had with nature and meaning-making (Jung, 95). This is why he paid so much attention to dream analysis in his work and writings. Jung believes this loss is redressed through dreaming and its analysis*:* "The general function of dreams is to try to restore our psychological balance by producing dream material that re-establishes, in a subtle way, the total psychic equilibrium" (Jung, 50).

3.2 Dreaming as Time Travel

It isn't uncommon for scientists to solve problems in their dream states. In 1862, German chemist August Kekulé famously discovered the molecular "ring" structure for benzene in a dream, when he saw the timeless image of a serpent eating its tail – the ouroboros (Jung, 38). It is also said that physicist Niels Bohr, the father of quantum mechanics, only came up with the structural model for the

atom after dreaming of sitting on the sun, observing planets orbit around him with elliptical cords.[55] There are many stories like these, where dreams provide a visionary stroke of genius. Could dreams be seen as a time travel methodology into a future where problems can be solved? Or more broadly – to inform research? Jung states: "The discovery that the unconscious is no mere depository of the past, but is also full of germs of future psychic situations and ideas, led me to my own approach to psychology (…) In addition to memories from a long-distant conscious past, completely new thoughts and creative ideas can also present themselves from the unconscious" (Jung, 38).

To make use of dreams in the way Jung speaks of it, interpretation is required. Oneiromancy – the interpretation of dreams for future visioning - is thousands of years old, originating in the Babylonian Dream Book (Noegel 2001, 51), which is part of Mesopotamia's diverse divination epistemology. Dreaming and its interpretation were a very serious matter in antiquity, to the point of becoming a matter of legal record (Noegel, 51). Moreover, "Mesopotamian dream accounts appear in a variety of textual genres including ritual, oracular, epistolary, historical, dedicatory, and literary texts" (Noegel, 46).

American Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim studied these texts and created typologies and categories that I won't detail here[56] - but they do involve prophetic dreams. However, in broader terms that we can relate to today, I see two overarching ways that dreaming can be activated: Spontaneously or via "incubation". Dream incubation is the deliberate act of **creating an intention** to dream about someone or something specific before sleeping. In Neo-Assyrian times, this was a method by which one could communicate directly with gods which involved prescribed rituals, ordained on specific astronomical events or days (Noegel, 53). Some of these rituals aim to provoke good dreams while "others aim to provoke dreams that disclose and manipulate the future" (Noegel, 53).

Dream rituals like this endure in many cultures today, and I sometimes practice one that my mother taught me when I was young: In Islam, there is a common practice in prayer called **Salat El Istikhara** - "to seek that which is good / right".[57] It involves the usual prescribed rituals of ablution, as well as a specific prayer designed to provoke a dream that can provide guidance or in essence, a glimpse of the future to know what direction to take.

Dream incubation as such is related to lucid dreaming, in that it can also involve setting an intention before sleep, but it requires training and practice if one wants to go further than experiencing it spontaneously. Lucid dreaming is a conscious state wherein the dreamer is aware that they are in a dream and can therefore exert some control.[58] Although it is a relatively new field of study in science, it is an age old, cross-cultural practice tied to spirituality.[59] If we take into account what I've discussed as a long tradition of glimpsing the future through prophetic dreams – then theoretically, lucid dreaming could provide a more intensified, active exploration of possible futures.

With this in mind, how can we reframe our understanding of time and reality?

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[55] Helge Kragh, *Niels Bohr and the Quantum Atom: The Bohr Model of Atomic Structure 1913-1925,* Oxford University Press (2012) 228.
[56] For more see A. Leo Oppenheim's "The Interpretation of Dreams in the Ancient Near East" (1956).
[57] From Islamic hadiths (sayings of the prophet Muhammad): Sahih Bukhari, Book 19, Chapter 25, Hadith 1162.
[58] Lite, "How Can You Control Your Dreams?" https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-to-control-dreams/
[59] Antonio Raffone et al., *The Dream of God: How do Religion and Science See Lucid Dreaming and Other Conscious States During Sleep?*, Sapienza University of Rome (2020).

Islamic researcher Nur Sobers-Khan proposes a radical reframing of our understanding of reality and time through dreaming. In her essay "Dreaming: An Exploration of Oneiric Logic and Radical Ontology Creation*"* she draws from Islam's rich scholarship[60] on dream interpretation from centuries ago to explore ways to unshackle Muslims from rigid, modern schools of thought. For me her ideas can apply to any rigid way of thinking, especially within the context of patriarchal ontologies and political memory:

> The point (of old dream interpretation texts) is not about truth and origins, but about narrative and interpretation. The beauty of these systems of oneiric logic lies in their unselfconscious defiance of rationalization. A symbol carries a range of meanings, and can be interpreted differently according to context, time of day, gender of the person who had the dream (etc). Symbols and their meaning range from the mundane to the surreal, are **interpreted relationally**, and often in the arc of a single sentence can be narrativized creatively to mean anything. However, the narrative leaps and the meaning they create are not without substance, as **true dreams are linked with prophecy**. The dream world has an ontology of its own creation, bearing its own ever-shifting meaning (Sobers-Khan 2018, 131).

She continues*:* "The dream narrative as historical narrative that evades anti-colonial longing for a past of pre-colonial wholeness, happiness, and agency that never existed; a language to explore the tragedy and incomprehension of the present without resorting to modernist utopia-building, for there are no utopias in dreams, just the illogical semiotic mazes of life that offer infinite modes of interpretation" (Sobers-Khan, 136).

3.3 Women as Translators of the Oneiric

In relation to Jung's reading of numinous symbols as beyond the rational, the realm of dreams is often a logic-defying, non-tactile, unconscious location experienced by people around the world and across time, which requires interpretation.

In Mesopotamian antiquity, symbolic dreams are accounted for more than direct divine message dreams (Noegel 2001, 49), which means that they required interpretation. Dream accounts in Mesopotamian literature all feature females as wise interpreters. For example, in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, King Gilgamesh experiences two symbolic dreams that are deciphered by his mother, the goddess Ninsun (Noegel, 50). Was this a reflection of reality? Or a deliberate choice with socio-political motivations? It's impossible to know… But this speaks to Irigaray's ideas about an aspect of difference (in terms of tendencies) between women and men: "Women, in fact, privilege intersubjectivity, relationship with the other gender, the relationship of being-two, the physical and, particularly natural environment, the present and future tenses. Men, in contrast, prefer the subject-object relation […]"[61]

In social psychology, it is said that women tend to be interested in people whereas men tend to be more interested in things.[62] Irigaray echoes this in her writing by emphasizing that society is severely lacking in "the relational", which is why she believes in sexual difference and the need for feminism to be liberated from "trying to be like men". If women have a greater propensity for the relational, perhaps their ability to decipher dreams lies in this ability to connect dots more intuitively.

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[60] For example Ibn Sirin (7th century Iraq), Ibn Arabi (12th century Andalusia) and Abdul Ghani al Nabulsi (17th century Syria).
[61] Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, 15.
[62] Su, Rounds and Armstrong, "Men and Things, Women and People" 859-884.

3.4 The Archeology of Dreams

I will now circle back to the beginning of this essay, to illustrate the metaphorical connection between dreaming and archeology.

As discussed previously, at various stages of their history, Mesopotamians would often stumble upon traces of their own ancient past. In *The Infinite Image*, Bahrani recounts a later story of a local Babylonian ruler Adad-nadin-ahhe in the 2nd century BC (under the Seleucid King), whose workers came across walls, statues and gates buried in the earth as they were preparing for foundation work (Bahrani 2014, 217). Thanks to the inscriptions found on these ruins, they discovered that they belonged to the Sumerian Gudea of Lagash[63] who ruled the area some 2000 years before. Adad-nadin-ahhe dutifully restored what was found and had the inscriptions translated, copied and integrated into his own palace construction - in line with traditional Mesopotamian practices (Bahrani, 218). Bahrani adds:"In my own readings of these practices, I see both the consciousness of history and a looking forth into the future as something seen to take place in and through things in time, in images and texts, interred deliberately or found in chance encounters, as if they were mantic signs from the past written into the earth of Mesopotamia" (Bahrani, 221).

Archeology, in antiquity and modernity, is essentially a memory practice that involves encountering or **digging up** artifacts from the past to restore and preserve. Then they are **interpreted** by studying their connection to other artifacts in order to understand collective histories that were hidden in the sands of time. The oneiric is analogous: Dream recall and interpretation are only possible because an essential aspect of this is **remembering.** Encountering the memory once we wake up, sometimes fragments of it, we **dig deeper** to try to **interpret** the symbolic language and connect it to our individual experiences so we can restore what is hidden. The collective unconscious is the metaphysical earth that unites us all: It is the hidden location where what has been lost to time can be recovered.

And so, dream recall and archeology share many parallels: Both are memory practices that require speculation, interpretation and *re-membering* disconnected elements to form a coherent narrative. Both also require negotiation, sometimes even confrontation, with our perception of time. With this in mind, my thesis exhibit proposes a speculative form of archeology that uses dreaming as a methodology to excavate possible futures.

[63] Gudea famously built a palace based on a plan revealed to him in a dream (Bahrani, *The Infinite Image*, 101-102).

PART FOUR:
Remember the Future: Oneiric Artifacts from Mesopotamia

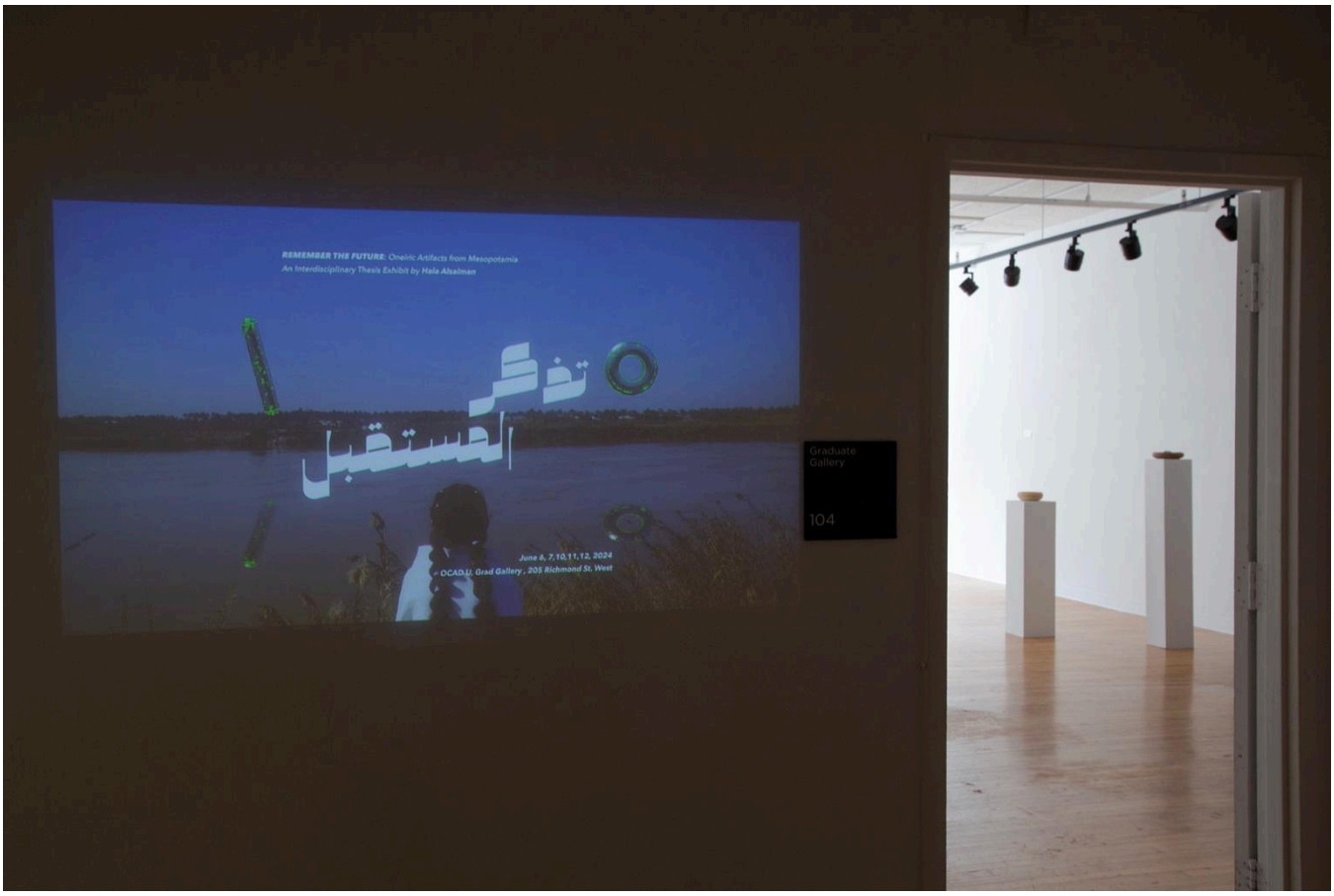

Figure 11: Hala Alsalman. Entrance to the Exhibit. 2024 (Documentation by Natalie Logan)

4.1 Methodology:

There is an invisible story behind this body of work. It came from the perspective of a fictitious experimental archeologist who began to form in my mind as I poured over images of Mesopotamian art and archeological texts during the first year of this Masters' journey. I named her **Nisaba**, after the Sumerian scribe goddess mentioned earlier who was later replaced by the male deity **Nabu**, and I embodied her as I wrote the script for the film. I imagined Nisaba to be a controversial figure in the sciences, employing lucid dreaming as a vehicle for time travel and her artistic skills to recreate the oneiric objects she encounters as a form of dream interpretation.

The exhibit consists of two mediums: Cinema and ceramics - the latter being artifacts from the distant future that are contextualized in the film ***The Rod and The Ring*** (Fig. 19-20)

4.2 The Artifact Room: Ceramic Artworks

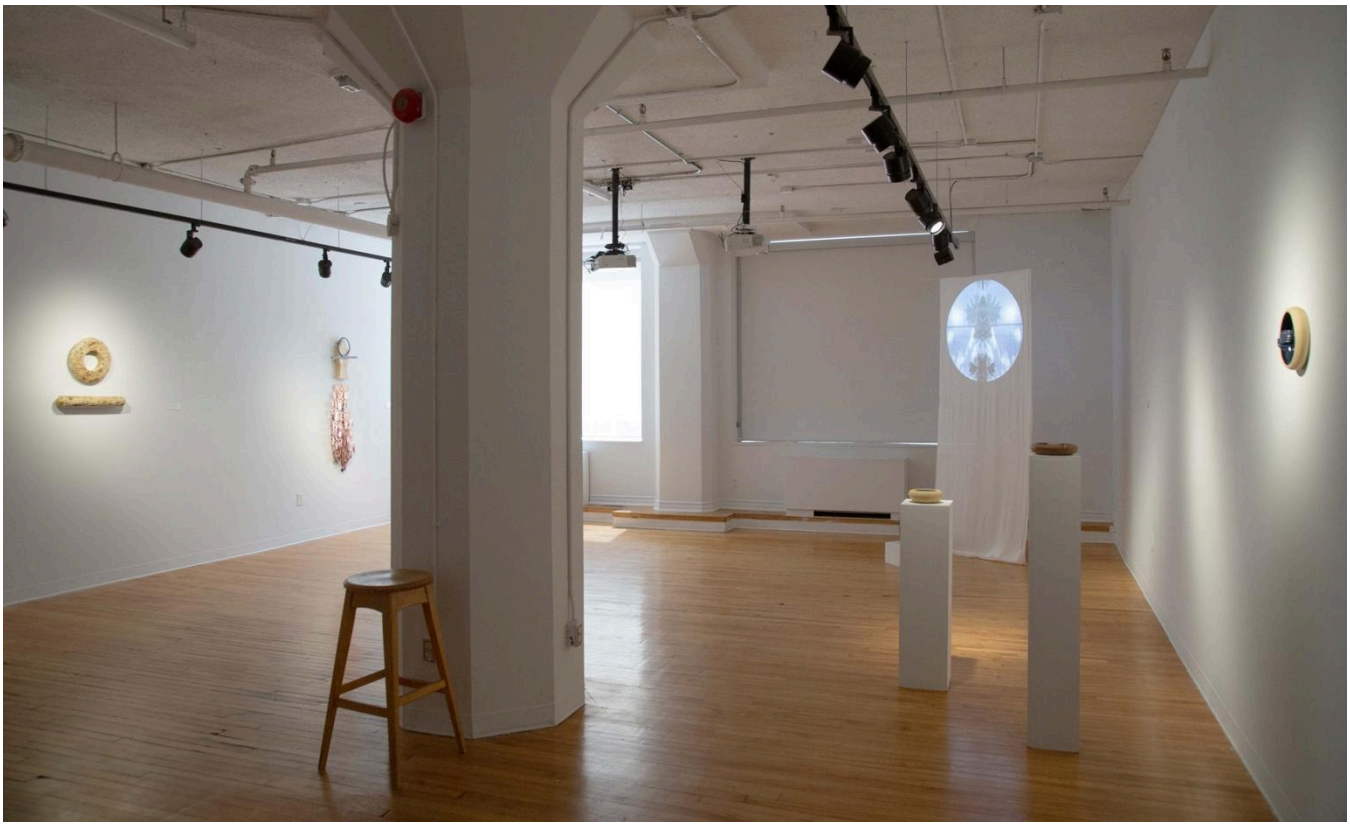

Figure 12: Hala Alsalman. The Artifact Room. 2024

The Graduate Gallery is a large exhibition space with high ceilings and large windows that make the space well-lit in the afternoon (Fig. 12). I used the spotlights to illuminate each art work, but began experimenting with dimness and natural light throughout the exhibition days.

There are seven items in this room. Some are hung on the walls, others placed on plinths. These ceramic works are physical artifacts that appear, or are suggested in my film ***The Rod and The Ring***. It was important for me to work with the ancient material of clay as a time-travelling medium that has made it possible for us to interface with the past. The objects I created are ambassadors of the future, representing familiar, but undefined purposes. The three bowl-like vessels are vessels (Fig. 13), but the iconic Mesopotamian clasped hands emerge from their centers. Does this make them decorative pieces? Or domestic items for food? Or perhaps ceremonial wares? I kept things open for interpretation with vague label descriptions, reminiscent of museum language (Fig. 17).

One of the artworks, ***Dream Recall*** (Fig. 14), features a hollow glazed ceramic object with a circular hole at the top, the only figurative feature being the clasped hands at the center. It is placed on a small plinth on the floor, in front of a draping silk cloth that hangs from the ceiling. On that silk cloth is a round video projection of moving images from my shoot in Iraq that did not make the final edit of the film.

Figure 13: Hala Alsalman. ***Vessel 1*** (of 3), stoneware clay, glaze, 6.7 x 6.7 in. 2024

Figure 14: Hala Alsalman. ***Dream Recall,*** stoneware clay, glaze, iron chips, silk, video projection. 2024

Figure 15: Hala Alsalman. ***Rod and Ring***, stoneware clay, glaze, iron chips, 23 x 3 in and 14 x 14 in. 2024

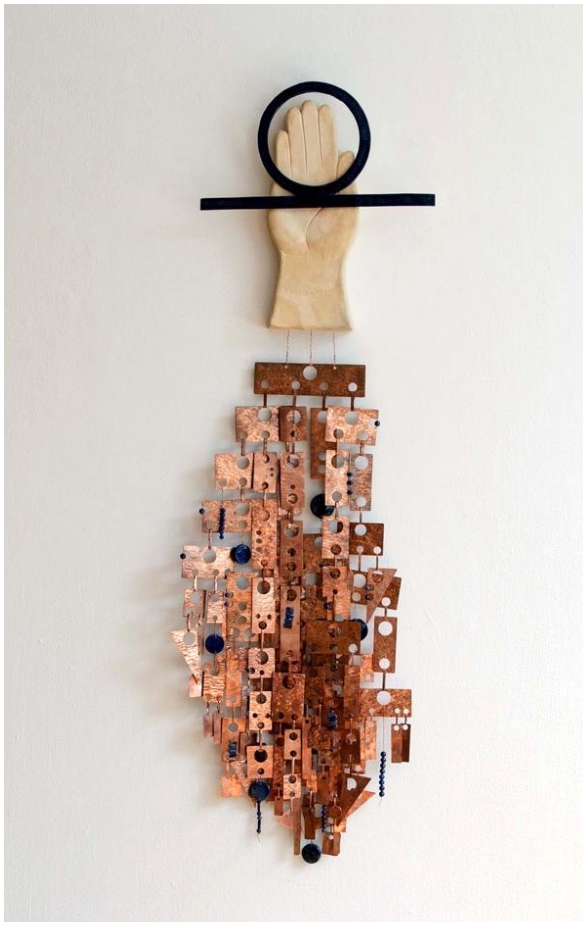

Figure 16: Hala Alsalman. ***Family Roots***, stoneware clay, glaze, copper, lapis lazuli, 51 x 17 in. 2024

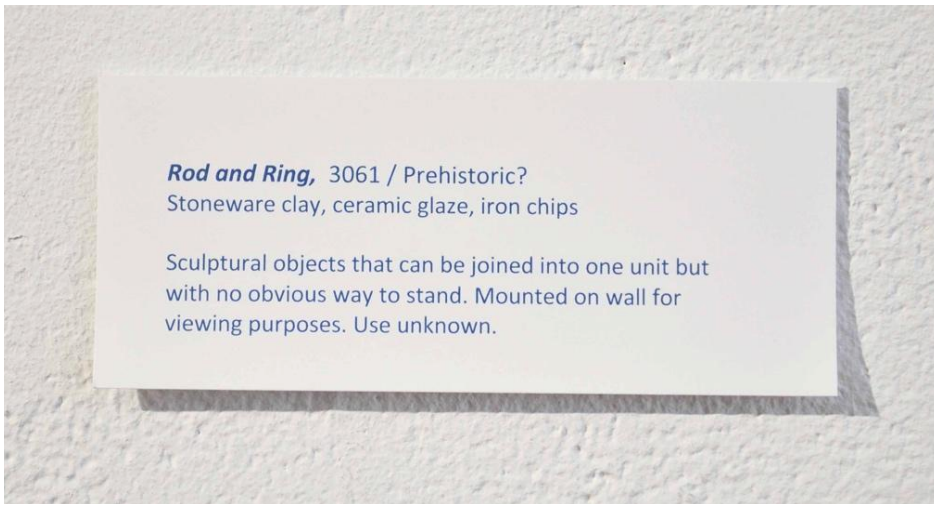

Figure 17: Hala Alsalman. Label for ***Rod and Ring***. 2024

The ***Family Roots*** sculpture (Fig. 16) features the conjoined rod and ring and is a subversion of the foundational document of patriarchy: The patrilineal family tree. The doing away of female genealogy in history-making and epistemologies is fundamental to male-dominated systems. As Gerda Lerner puts it: "Women's lack of knowledge of our own history of struggle and achievement has been one of the major means of keeping us subordinate" (Lerner 226). Each copper tablet represents a mother and her children, which links to other copper tablets indicating matrilineal descendants. I did this using circles for females, and lines to represent fathers and males. The lapis beads represent babies and children that died suddenly, while the blue glazed ceramic discs represent mothers who died at birth.

The ***Rod and Ring*** sculptures (Fig. 15), mounted on the wall, are the main feature in the film. They consist of two separate objects that can be fitted together to conjoin as one.

4.3 The Dream Room: ***The Rod and The Ring*** film

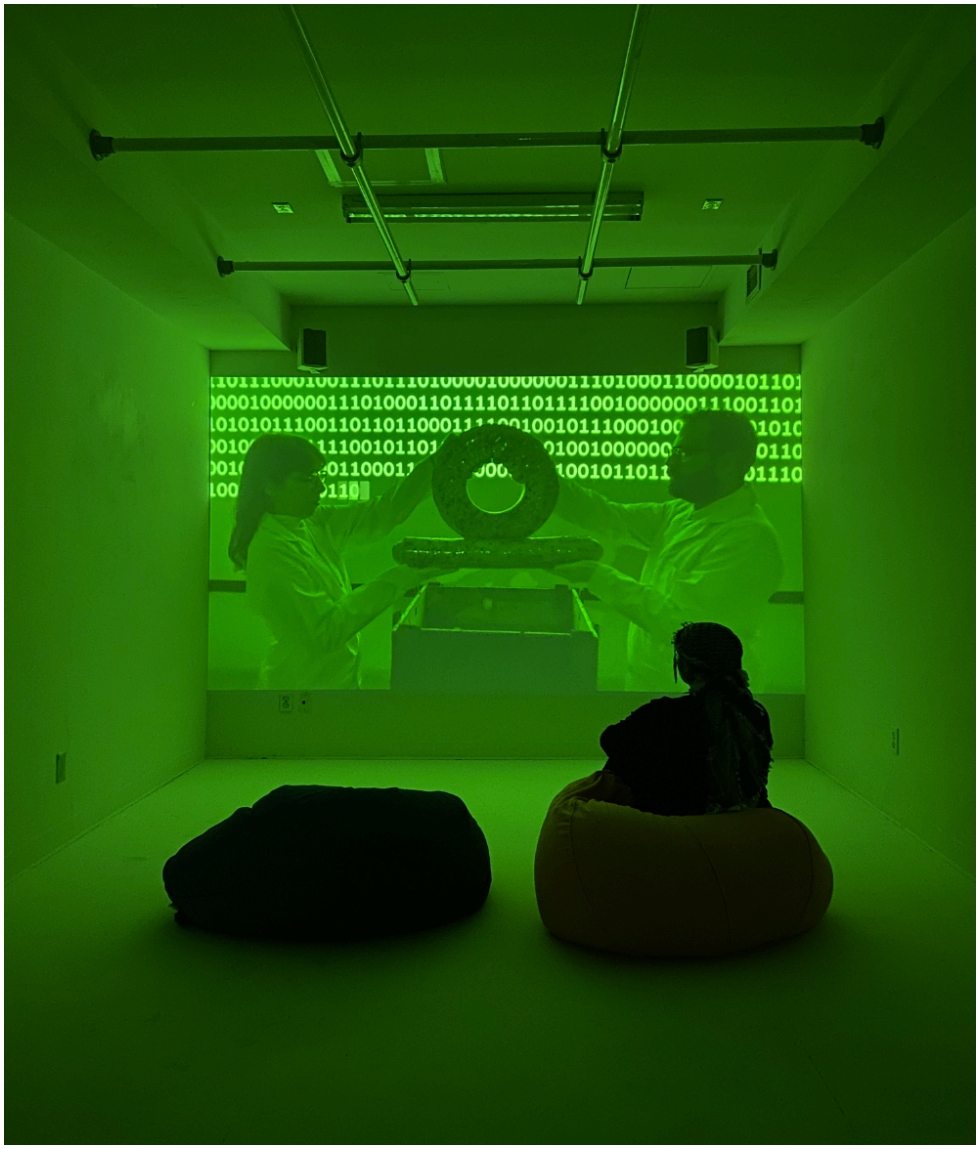

Figure 18: Hala Alsalman. Screening room for ***The Rod and The Ring***. 2024 (Photo: Hala Alsalman)

Screened in the intimate Experimental Media Space next door (Fig. 18), ***The Rod and The Ring*** is a 9-minute music film that was edited to loop continuously, with no obvious beginning or ending. It presents scenes from different eras: Past, present and a possible future that is devoid of electronic technology. Thus, the film is meant to defy time and the narrative logic of fiction in a form of **magical futurism**.

Most of the film was shot in Iraq in January 2024 across three governorates. Additional interior scenes were filmed in Toronto later. I wanted to capture the architecture in Iraq from extremely different eras: Namely the 8th century Abu Dulaf Mosque[64] in Salaheddin, which dates back to the Abbasid era of the Islamic Empire, and the 1970s futurist Monument to the Unknown Soldier in Baghdad, designed by Iraqi sculptor Khaled al-Rahal. I created the electronic score a year before the shoot, having been inspired by the sounds of the Sumerian Lyre recreated by Canadian musician Peter Pringle.[65]

The film features woman at three stages of life: As child, as mother and as wise elder. Other scenes feature man and woman as couples. They all interact with the rod and ring – which separate and unite in different contexts and timelines. In one era, they are archeological artifacts, and in others, they are 'activated' in that they move and change texture. They could be conscious beings that interact with this future civilization. This element of surrealism is inspired by Bahrani's suggestion that Mesopotamian art was meant to "break the real" – which in many ways dreams do as well.

Regarding the elder woman on the مشحوف (*mesh-hoof*), the ancient canoe that is still used by the marsh people in Southern Iraq to traverse canals and rivers (Fig. 19): I had the privilege of working with Zaera Fatima, an marsh woman who lives alone by the canals of the Tigris, tending to her oxen and farm animals. It was important for me to depict this character, and for it to be played by a real marsh person, because she is part of the indigenous Iraqi community who have been living the same way for thousands of years. As such, she is the guardian or companion of the rod and ring across time in the film.

[64] A smaller replica of the larger, more well-known Great Mosque of Samarra that is nearby.
[65] Peter Pringle, "Lament of Gilgamesh, The Gold Lyre of Ur" *YouTube* (2022) Accessed October 15, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDRD3c-WAec

Figure 19: Hala Alsalman. Still from ***The Rod and The Ring***. 2024

Figure 20: Hala Alsalman. Still from ***The Rod and The Ring***. 2024

CONCLUSION:
It Doesn't Have to Be This Way

I opened this thesis with a war time memory that marked a major shift in my awareness as a journalist and as a human being in the world. Confronted with the brutality of modern weaponry, I realized there was no way to explain the complexities of what had just happened in a 4-minute video package. News media is a field where perspective is frustratingly narrow and oversimplified. As such, it can distort our reality in damaging ways. My intention with this MFA was to broaden the context by exploring a multidimensional, multidisciplinary approach to storytelling: The space-time-defying realm of dreams through cinema and the historical resonance of clay through artifacts. In this sense, my chosen mediums themselves represent different dimensions of time, with the moving image being temporal and clay being a regenerative material that contains traces of ancestors buried in the ground since time immemorial.

There is much more to say about the written word and how history is written by the victors. As we have seen, these accounts come from a mass-male point of view of domination and control – a way of life that was established thousands of years ago. There is a ruthlessness to this way of viewing the past because it limits our capacity to envision a radically different future. My research-creation project is a form of resistance to this phenomenon; a call to not only inject the feminine voice, but to also transform *the way* we look at history and the unfolding of time. It's not only my perspective as a woman, but also as a human being who values the past, present and future as *ours*, regardless of biological sex or era. By proposing the unorthodox method of dreaming for the practice of archeology as expansive time travel, I am also defying the status quo of empirical science and man-made ontologies. This is a feminist work in the sense that it challenges the explicit, direct and outward nature of the masculine by pulling the viewer into the mysterious, symbolic realm of oneiric images and feminine ontologies.

I've always had a practice of making political art that addresses issues and events I was covering as a journalist and this project was made in that same spirit of activism, albeit in a broader and philosophical way. Informed by my study of Mesopotamian history, my thesis exhibit hints at a grand cycle of return in a time ahead that could manifest lost ancient wisdom: First and foremost, I found that the Mesopotamian rod and ring and its potent symbolism reflects a relational reality that escapes us now. Secondly, with the cinematic language of ***The Rod and The Ring***, I explore this through oneiric moving images of women in a future where they are re-elevated within the context of their own lived experience. Thirdly, I tie this together through the forgotten language of symbols as a non-verbal mode of communication that unites us in waking life and dreams.

Following scholar Mary Abram's interpretation of the ancient Mesopotamian ring as a timeless, eternal state, we can all access it by engaging in dreaming as practice and praxis. Wouldn't it be paradigm-shifting to teach dreaming and journaling in education systems as a way to build society and participate in the world? Reframing our rigid understanding of time could change our reality in positive ways. The feminist theorists and writers I have referenced in this thesis say that establishing reciprocal respect between men and women can undo all forms of 'othering' that ultimately lead to injustice and violence. Likewise, if we respect and honor **time as a continuum that we are all connected to – ancestors and descendants alike** – we could break free from divisiveness and polarizing subjectivities. Furthermore, the active dynamic between dream and dreamer can teach us much about recognizing and acknowledging intersubjectivity between all others. There is a reason why dreams contain symbolic

language that's been shared across cultures and generations: Jung calls it the "collective unconscious" and my mother, "the meeting place of souls".

As a body of work, ***Remember the Future: Oneiric Artifacts from Mesopotamia*** can be situated in the world of many Iraqi artists, past and present, who draw from ancient Mesopotamian history: Hanaa Malallah (b.1958) and Michael Rakowitz (b.1973) are interdisciplinary artists who explore Iraq's antiquities through the critical lens of contemporary war and Empire. Baghdad-based surrealist painter Muayad Muhsin's (b.1964) large-scale works draw from the oneiric and reimagine Iraq's ancient artifacts in the current political context. Then there's Khaled Al Rahal (b.1926), sculptor and founding member of Iraq's modern art scene who designed the futuristic Monument to the Unknown Soldier that appears in my film.

Finally, my creative process was informed by visual research into ancient Mesopotamian art and aesthetics and I was wholly inspired by the exquisite works of unknown artists who sculpted and wrote on clay thousands of years ago. I thought of them often as I worked late nights in the ceramics studio and wondered: Did they ever glimpse me in their dreams?

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