

THE NEW CRUSADERS AND THE TENDENCIES OF POST MODERN ORIENTALISM IN BRAZIL

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Abstract: This article is concerned with the institution of academic Orientalism in Brazil, specifically at the University of São Paulo. It is an attempt to trace methods trends and theories of Orientalism in the Western Hemisphere, and the socio-political context for the production of oriental ancestral constructs.

- "To such spirits it will not be irksome to dwell among the memories of the past; to them the recovery of the unfolding life of man will not be a toilsome task, but rather a joyful quest, the modern quest for the Holy Grail, from which arduous journeys and weary exile in distant lands will not deter us. For in this crusade of modern scientific effort in the ancient Orient, we know what the first crusaders could not yet discern, that we are returning to ancestral shores" (Breasted 1928).

- "The monuments of the ancient East are calling for a New Crusade, and the task of saving them for science is the greatest responsibility confronting the historian anywhere in the whole range of historical research" (Breasted 1928).

Introduction:

How could one attempt to explain the Brazilian tendencies and concerns in the study of Orientalism? It might seem that the development of departments dedicated to Oriental studies, in such distant shores might not carry local or foreign political influences such as the colonialist, nationalist and imperialist burdens. The goal of this article is to trace the core socio-political ideas, theoretical trends, thoughts, and methods behind the crystallisation of academic Orientalism at the University of São Paulo. It was the first Brazilian university—founded in the 1934—the pioneer in Oriental studies in the country. The study and investigation related to the Ancient Near-Eastern history, languages and archaeology elsewhere offered previous models for the formation of adjacent departments and sub departments to deal with the magnitude of this field of research. The dimensions of Orientalism are here given special attention since it was brought into the twentieth century as a bundle of knowledge that had been constituted under heavy ideological conditioning, and remained almost unchallenged and unquestioned, considering all of its socio-political facets involving academic and extra-academic intentions.

As the Near East staged the Western economic exploitation since the nineteenth century, its past was "discovered and appropriated" by some of the leading European powers of the time (Larsen 1996: 36). The monumentality of the archaeological remains bewildered Europeans who began to regard the past that they brought to surface (and later taken to European Museums) not only as the Cradle of Civilisation, but the Cradle of Western Civilisation. From this point on, the Near Eastern landscape began to be regarded as a "stream of civilisations". The Oriental inheritance was then explained as a transition of civilisation flowing from the East to the West through the Greek and Roman Ancient expansions. By the end of the nineteenth century, this body of ideas concerning cultural and civilisational transmission gained an increased eloquence and "scientific" framework through diffusionist explanations.

Diffusionism became a far-reaching phenomenon, and in a political sense, it became particularly useful to distant growing political powers aspiring to claim a particular heritage. Yet, in the case of the Near Eastern past, what exactly was being diffused? The nineteenth century Orientalists saw the Near Eastern past as

their own, the idea that justified the abduction of archaeological evidence. Nevertheless, the living population, traditions and specifically Islam was regarded by them as barbaric, backwards, alien to them, and therefore set aside from, and considered unrelated to the past that they were investigating. As a result of the European semi-colonial intervention which exploited local human and natural resources, interfered in political conflicts, decisions and affairs, created and named geographical entities, and explored and interpreted the past—and in this historical context—strict boundaries were drawn between the East and the West. The cultural rift, concerning the present population, as imagined by the West was abysmal. The outcome of this partition between present and past had two major consequences. Firstly, the past civilisations were detached from the present/living populations, who were downplayed, generalised and lumped together as a single cultural entity, not entitled to a past, ethnic differences or nuances, it was merely denominated as an Arab-Islamic present. Secondly, the trenchant division of what was to be the "Eastern and Western Oriental heritage" imposed by the Europeans, was based on the underlying concept of the *Orient Chrétien* (see Contenau 1927 and 1949, Dussaud 1931 and 1933, and even non Europeans, Breasted 1928, 1935, 1938, 1947). The scenario of the *Orient Chrétien* had nothing to do with the Christians living in the "Orient", it was rather an abstraction of imagined affinities between a Christian Europe, and the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Crusader pasts, and associations with the colonialist attempts of the nineteenth century. This partition, according to the archaeologists, started with the Hellenistic and Roman conquests. These stratigraphies represented the allotments of what was the European heritage and in a way, past conquests, anything previous to these periods was European heritage, and anything later, with the exception of the Crusades, had to do with the living populations.

The Hellenistic and Roman pasts were considered the transit course between the East and the West, and as a result, archaic geographical terms learned from classical texts were then revived and used by nineteenth century Orientalists. The term Mesopotamia, for instance, was the name of a satrapy built by Alexander the Great, and later; during the Roman empire, it was the name of a province to the southeast of modern Turkey (Matthews 2003: 5). The revival of the classical terminology indicates the Orientalist's imagined cultural and political affinities with ancient Greece and Rome. Such Eurocentric anachronism mirrored the nineteenth century colonialist environment and political intentions (see Bahrani 1998: 172). At this point, one might ask who could reconcile the Near Eastern past with the living populations? And, even more challenging, who could persuade the West to believe that Islam had also influenced Europe?

It was James Henry Breasted, the first American Orientalist to hold a PhD in Egyptology, archaeologist, historian and ex-seminarist who first reconciled the Near Eastern past with the living populations. He expanded this two-way passage, in a number of ways. On a geographical scale, he enlarged this "narrow passage" into far broader panorama; a locus of civilisation, "The Fertile Crescent", and a Circum-Mediterranean network of conquests, trade, and cultural exchange. His concept of the "development and diffusion of civilisation" was multicultural and covered a time span from prehistory until the spread of Islam. The inclusion of Islam in the civilisational panorama allowed Breasted to enter the local political scene led by those who were unsatisfied with what was being instituted by both French and British mandates. As one could presume, on the political level, Breasted's discourse became the favourite discourse to the Arab nationalist political parties in the Near East. Also not surprisingly, his discourse became a guideline to those from the "New World" justifying the scholarships in Orientalism. In his words: "In that earliest civilized world lay the roots of the civilization which our ancestors transplanted to the Western Hemisphere" (Breasted 1928). As this idea of inheritance stimulated the Oriental Studies in the United States, it also influenced

the institution of academic Orientalism in Brazil. One can notice from Breasted's description that the study of civilisations was a continuation of the natural sciences, tracing human evolution, and regarded it as a pointer, guiding the way to socio-economic progress. The study of the development of civilisations was in a sense reckoned as a key element to the capitalist advancements. As one can notice from Breasted's speech for his annual address as president of the American Historical Association, delivered at Indianapolis, December 28, 1928:

"We historians thus take our places side by side with the natural scientists, and while not claiming for our field the precision of method or result obtainable in a natural science, we are nevertheless taking up the process of evolution where the natural scientists leave it, and in following the upward course of the developing life of man we are tracing later stages of that same development which natural science has disclosed. And what more inspiring task than to follow that tremendous transformation by which the primitive forest of the stone-age savage has at last given way to the modern forest of factory chimneys"(Breasted 1928).

This discourse was equally appealing to the Brazilian Orientalists, and specifically to Prof. Eurípides Simões de Paula, the dean of the *Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras* of the University of São Paulo, considering the socio-political and economic context that Orientalism was to be instituted.

The University of São Paulo was founded in 1934. It came to existence after a long history of academic neglect, considering that Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, both had their own both Law and Medical Schools since the early nineteenth century. São Paulo had always been regarded as provincial, as periphery, until it became a rich coffee-producing province starting in the 1850s. The coffee elite hopes and power in the federal political affairs came to a halt after the crisis of 1929. Both states, São Paulo and Minas Gerais had for long monopolised the presidential post of the executive power. On October 9, 1930, Júlio Prestes, who was also from São Paulo won the elections over Getúlio Vargas. Despite the fact that he had been officially elected, he was prevented to take office on the 3rd of November of the same year. The *coup d'état*, achieved by a military group, or the *junta militar*, assumed the functions of the executive power on the 24th of October. Under such turbulent political background, Vargas claimed to start a "revolution", and marched towards Rio de Janeiro, the national capital at the time. As he arrived, the *junta militar* handed the executive power to Vargas, where he remained as the head of a Provisional Government.

As Vargas took the post, he immediately abolished the Constitution of 1891, dissolved all federal and state legislatures, and introduced the direct government of the states, until the appointment of new governors. Angered by this overthrow, the population of São Paulo started a movement that culminated into an armed conflict. São Paulo was defeated, yet it gained the university that was created soon after the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1932.

By the time that the university was constituted, the city of São Paulo was at the height of its economic crisis, urbanisation and industrialisation. The population of São Paulo, the *Paulistas*, after the revolution of 1932 were found in an urge for socio-political identity. Academia and specifically the law students had already played a great role in the revolution and shaping the identity of the *Paulistas*. After all, the city was being given a European urban *façade*, an industrial input, and a new educational institution. It was as if São Paulo was entering a new Era of progress. The attempt to reconstruct history through the study of civilisations, including the Classical and Oriental pasts, and include it as our own, would boost the morale of the *Paulistas*, and serve as a momentum to the suffering elite and

middle class. Breasted's discourse concerning the department that he had formed, conveys a message of hope:

"For the disclosures which the researches of the Oriental Institute should bring to the world will contribute to make more clear to all modern men that imposing vista of the human past which saw the emergence of the highest human values, and transformed our father Man from savagery in some remote cavern, where at most he could count five by the aid of his fingers, into a godlike creature who reached out to the stars on those Babylonian plains and made the first computations which have at length enabled us to plumb the vast deeps of the universe" (Breasted 1928).

The idea of progress was intrinsic to the history of civilisations, and gained new grounds and significant social meaning to countries and regions with a late developing industry and economy. It seems that as a consequence of such aggressive capitalist environments, the history of civilisation was viewed as the means to the economic ends of the society, if not to the society as a whole, to a particular elite.

James Henry Breasted and his conquest of civilisation: selling the drama:

"[...] the historians of America were more than a generation behind in recognizing "Kulturgeschichte", the history of civilization, as the very life-blood of history" (Breasted 1928).

The history of civilisations, or how to become a great (capitalist) civilisation? As one looks into the way Breasted treated the study of civilisations, the answer to this question becomes clearer. His quest as an Orientalist included both tasks. He followed the footsteps of the first European archaeologists, and heavily invested in the fieldwork, and purchasing archaeological evidence in the antiquities market (Breasted 1933). In the political arena, this could be considered the first step towards making some room in the post World War I order for the American imperialist expansionism. As it has already been made quite clear by Hassan (2003:19): "[...] The premise is that imperial powers aim to legitimate their rule by cannibalizing other civilizations in order to assume the supreme position in the order of the world". Objects were then to be "digested" and interpreted:

" It has been from the beginning a twofold task, requiring first the salvaging of the available evidence, and second its laborious interpretation and incorporation into the body of recognized knowledge. It is a remarkable fact, and I think also a regrettable fact, that the historians have left the salvaging of this evidence entirely to the archaeologists" (Breasted 1928).

The second point to be made concerning his views of the construction of the historical narrative of the past is that it was defined by Breasted as a record of human experience, which resulted in the conquest of civilisation (Breasted 1928). After his personal survey of the facts concerning the history of civilisation, he was left with no doubt *"that civilization was born at the southeast corner of the Mediterranean"* (Breasted 1928). While constructing his allegory of past and descent he excluded both the Native American past and the Afro-American population. This is clear from his famous publication *the Ancient Times*, describing the peoples that participated in the process of civilisation, he claimed that only the "Great White Race" had participated in this "rise of civilisation" (Breasted 1916, 130-131).

The Rise of Civilisation, a casting and the scenario:

Breasted divided the "Great White Race" into three groups occupying different geographical regions. The "Nordic type" was tall, long-headed, blue-eyed, and blond; the "Alpine type" was round-headed; and the "Mediterranean type" was short, long-headed, dark-eyed, dark-haired, and included the Semites. While the "Mediterranean type" was claimed by Breasted as being the direct ancestor of the "creators of civilisations", the "Negroid" and the "Mongoloid" races were considered not to have played a part in the "rise of civilisation" (Breasted 1933, 130-131). In Breasted's racist discourse, he not only claimed that "civilisation" developed in only a few places on the globe, but also that only few peoples were part of the category of "Great White Race". Breasted called this limited area in the Near East the "Fertile Crescent".

If Breasted had created and chosen his own cast, he also created a proper scenario. The "Fertile Crescent" was the product of his bountiful mind, and it was used to designate to a stretch of land meant to be borders to past civilisations. The term was first used in *Ancient Times*, to designate the geographical area involved in the processes of cultural diffusion in the Near East. He believed that the artificial boundaries that he had imagined constituted a 'corridor of past civilisations'. Breasted followed Frederick Ratzel who had developed the theory of Diffusionism in the 1880s. Followers of this theory did not believe in the independent development of cultural groups, or that human beings were particularly inventive. They conceived that inventions were few and made once in human history; ideas were promoted and diffused by interaction and contact between different groups, diffusion, however, was traceable to one initial source (Trigger 1995, 151). The "Fertile Crescent", according to Breasted, had the primary sources necessary in the process of cultural diffusion which ultimately spread to Europe. Civilisation, as believed by Breasted, had stages of evolution that could be identified within this geographical space. Such optimistic assumptions were not only made concerning the past, as stated by Breasted, the present times represented the climax of civilisation:

"In any case, in so far as our knowledge of the universe carries us, the advent of civilization for the first time on our globe represents the highest ascent of the life processes to which evolution had anywhere attained" (Breasted 1928).

These ideas revolutionised the way in which "Orientalism" had been regarded and taught in the United States. This construct was the founding stone to the Oriental Institute, founded by Breasted in 1919, at the University of Chicago, was the first step leading to implementing this ideas developed in *Ancient Times*, specifically the "Fertile Crescent" hypothesis as a point of departure for his research in the Near East. For the first time, due to all the technology used by the military during World War I, archaeologists could rely on materials such as aerial photographs to plot sites. As it can be noticed, Breasted's vocabulary while designating to his institute also shares military traits, characteristics and strategies.

The Oriental Institute: the expansion into the Near East:

"The central organization here in America, like the unified command in the World War, must be able to keep these expeditions systematically operating in correlation with each other along the whole scientific frontier, which stretches in the Near East from the Black Sea on the north around the eastern end of the Mediterranean to the Upper Nile in the south—a front some 2000 miles long, which bends eastward in its centre to include Assyria and Babylonia, together with Persia and its neighbors" (Breasted 1928).

Starting in 1920 the Oriental Institute was divided into two major units consisting of a home unit and what he called the "Near Eastern Headquarters" (see [fig. 1](#)). The home unit housed a staff of scholars and specialists in all areas that concerned the Near East, while the local "Headquarters" consisted of laboratories and lodgings for visiting scholars. The newly created Institute was described by him as "a research laboratory for the investigation of the early human career" (Breasted 1933, 3). The Institute had a threefold objective for its expeditions in the Near East: firstly, the "establishment of a field expedition in every important cultural region of the ancient Near East"; secondly, the "maintenance by these strategically placed expeditions of racial, cultural and anthropo-geographical researches"; thirdly, "the correlation of the resulting observations and discoveries as the lines of evidence converged on the centralized headquarters in America and furnished the basis for a comprehensive historical reconstruction of the course of early human development" (Breasted 1933, 81). Breasted's strategy while investigating the Near East, attracted private investors. What had started as an academic assumption of a pattern of diffusion, became the basis of Breasted's plan of research, based on an academic expansion. The idea of the purchase of antiquities and excavations were appealing to the North American elite. John D. Rockefeller Jr., himself, who had already collaborated with the Institute in 1902, offered an annual maintenance budget of 10,000 US dollars for five years (Breasted 1933, 33). Soon after delivering his speech in 1919, Breasted also received checks from other members of the Board of Trustees and friends. A few months after, Breasted left to the Near East, in order to contact the Departments of Antiquities of the mandated territories, and for a preliminary survey of the areas he held interest in excavating.



Fig. 1. Breasted's "Promising Fertile Crescent", and research headquarters. Source: Breasted, J. H. *The Oriental Institute*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), Appendix.

In reality, Breasted was only putting to practice what he thought were the "scientific responsibilities of America in the Near East" (Breasted 1933, 33). As North America had an escalating political interest in the Near East, Breasted's discourse gained power since it matched the needs of the American imperialist aims. The presidential address made before the American Oriental Society in 1919, exposed what he considered to be the role of the Orientalist, the role of the "Fertile Crescent" in the "rise of civilisation" and the European "conquest of civilisation". While his publication entitled *The Oriental Institute*, published in 1933, he narrated his political connections with local 'rebels', authorities, and even private meetings

with British military authorities on his way back to his homeland. Breasted had truly become the New Age Crusader as he had once claimed on his speech in 1928.

If one is to read between the headlines of Breasted's speeches and academic publications, it is a simple task to isolate the characteristics of what he believed to catalyse the process of civilisation both in the past and in the present. The ingredients to the rise of civilisation were the interaction of the elements that Breasted isolated: "White Race", Christian, Imperialist, European descent and heritage (i.e. appropriated from the Near East and developed/improved in Europe), Capitalist, Industrial and Urban. In this case, it is true that Brazil belonged in the Western Hemisphere and that Breasted's discourse influenced Orientalism world wide, but did it bring along the same political baggage to us?

Orientalism in Brazil, the *mise en scène*:

"This slowness of the New World to discern that the very substance of human development lies in those processes which only the history of civilization can set forth, is the more remarkable in view of the fact that the conquest of the New World, consisting as it did so largely in that tremendous drama of the subjugation of the wilderness, was itself a chapter of human experience which could be successfully depicted only by the methods and the inclusiveness of the history of civilization, as Parkman had so powerfully shown. We of America are especially fitted to visualize and to understand the marvellous transformation of a wilderness into a land of splendid cities. But it is obvious that our fathers, whose efforts have planted these great and prosperous cities along the once lonely trails of our own broad land, received all the fundamentals of civilization as a heritage from their European ancestors" (Breasted 1928).

There should be no doubt that the institution of academic Orientalism at the University of São Paulo carried a political baggage. Yet, as the institution of such models such as Breasted's Oriental Institute were implemented in other countries and regions, some of the underlying political meanings and ambitions lost room to other local intentions. As academic archaeology was being instituted in Brazil after World War II, the crystallisation of institutes and departments should be regarded as indicators of the intellectual, nevertheless political beliefs concerning the national or local identity and heritage. Paulo Duarte, one of the founding fathers of the University of São Paulo, introduced academic archaeology after World War II. As an outstanding intellectual, he introduced the possibility to the study of prehistoric archaeology, which at first, generated a commission for the study of prehistory, that later became an institute, the *Instituto de Pré-História* (Funari 2000). The creation of such an institute dedicated to the study of prehistory—that had been excluded and neglected, was a major breakthrough to the reminiscence of colonialist ideas that only valued the 'white, Christian, European descent and heritage' to the Brazilian population. There was a strong tendency for such ideas to be perpetuated by an intellectual—at the same time—social elite, who regarded itself as 'white, Christian, European descent and heritage', and due to the fact that this same elite was expecting progress and economic growth.

The goal of Orientalism in Brazil was to promote civilisation, craving for a remote identity while rejecting the local identities. Brazilian prehistory, the indigenous populations and four hundred years of the history of slavery and remarkable slave resistance were, at the best of situations, pushed aside to make room to what was imagined as, and believed to be a more civilised past. The appropriation of a civilised past was believed to trigger the present development of the economy, a process starting with the colonial "conquest of the New World", the transformation of the wilderness into cities brought by the "European ancestors", better

understood as the white colonisers. The Brazilian elite had been flirting for a long time with the Classical past urging for a European identity, as stated by Funari:

"Roman archaeology played a role in fostering an image of Brazilian upper class identification of idealised Romans with the Brazilian elites, at different moments with different features, since the nineteenth century. (Funari 2003:1)"

But, identity constructs were yet to receive an academic treatment that would somehow legitimize it scientifically.

Prof. Eurípides Simões de Paula, the director of the Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras of the University of São Paulo, as stated above, was responsible for the institution of both Classical archaeology and Oriental Studies. Through his academic dissertations one can trace his pattern of ideas. He chose rather eccentric topics for his researches such as the commercial relations of the principality of Kiev, for his doctoral degree, presented in 1942. In his post-doctoral research presented in 1946, he investigated the relationships between Marrocco and the Iberian Peninsula during antiquity. These topic choices were not incidental, they rather reflected his beliefs in East and West exchange and inheritance. As the dean of the faculty, Prof. Simões de Paula inaugurated the periodical of the history department, and expanded the faculties and gave special attention to the Oriental languages. He considerably enlarged the bibliography on the history of European civilisation by translating a number of titles into Portuguese. The collections he translated were rather a civilisation sequence of Europe, as it was imagined in the 1940s and 1950s. One can still find the stamps of the library, the *Biblioteca da Civilização*, named after what became more than a trend or a method, it rather took the shape of a science of its own. As a scholar, he supervised fifty-two theses, starting in 1945 until 1977 (when he died in an accident), covering a wide range of topics and regions.

In a certain way, the concern and the construction of an Oriental-*Paulista* inheritance had to do with the massive amount of immigrants, and immigrant descendants that lived in São Paulo. Immigrations had been promoted since the mid-nineteenth century to substitute African slaves in the agriculture, in the case of São Paulo in the coffee plantations. The encouragement of immigration also had the underlying intention of 'whitening the population' (largely composed of slaves), and where 'white' population was believed to gear modernity, industrialisation, and progress. The Oriental-*Paulista* construct, would find its way through the study of languages (such as Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Armenian, Chinese, Japanese, Russian and others) and 'civilisations' regarded as contributors from the East. This idea became particularly interesting to the immigrant communities of São Paulo, it worked rather as a mirror effect of the contributions that immigrant communities had made to the development of the economy of São Paulo. Such communities were part of the identity and pride of the state, giving it a cosmopolitan glamour not to be found in any other state, not even in Rio de Janeiro, the national capital. On the academic level, the University of São Paulo (was and still is) unrivaled as a study centre in such areas and topics. The researches supervised by Prof. Eurípides were mainly bookish and bureaucratic, rather than *in situ*.

In this case, there was no aggressive appropriation of material culture, but the acceptance of the Oriental past as part of the European civilisation, and later North American, South American, and *Paulista*. After the institution of Classical and Oriental studies and specifically archaeology, the University of São Paulo, acquired a Mesopotamian and Egyptian collection, that we owe to Prof. Mariano Carneiro da Cunha. He also shared the same ideas of the Oriental inheritance. Different from Europe and the United States, São Paulo could not have massive Oriental

archaeological monuments, such as obelisks, stelaes, temples brought to museums or central squares. Yet it could improvise! As copy-cats of the civilisational discourse, the city of São Paulo and the *Paulistas* received an Obelisk to the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1932. Within this line of thought, the institution of Orientalism at the University of São Paulo should be regarded more as a temporary dialogue. A dialogue between the economic needs of the state, its political insularity, and the elite, craving for a 'civilised and European-like' past with no imperialist intentions but with a significant colonialist echo.

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