

**TWENTY TWO MIDDLE EASTERN PARAGRAPHS****Text and photos by João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira**Senior Professor of the Tércio Pacitti Institut  
of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*Israel is the only democracy in the  
Middle East.*

Jack Schawartz

1 Built during the Dynasty XI (c. 2150 BC-c. 1991 BC), hence in the Middle Kingdom, Luxor is known as the “world’s greatest open-air museum”, because the remains of the Egyptian temple complexes at Karnak and Luxor stand right within the modern city.



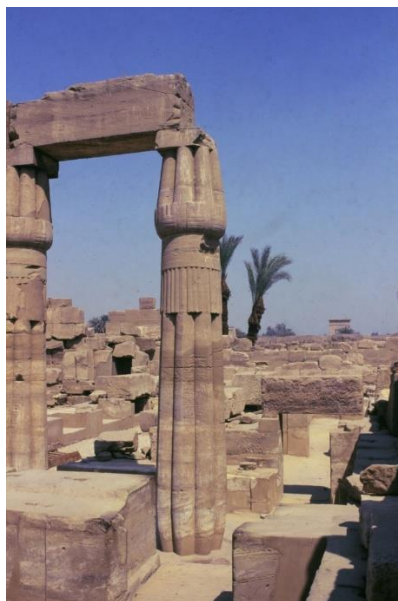
Luxor

2 *Luxor* is a name derived from قصر (*qaṣr*), an Arabic word that means “castle” or “palace”, in its plural form: *al-quṣūr* = “the palaces”. Ancient Egypt had its formidable desert as geographical protection. This is the reason why Egypt, this “gift of the Nile” (so nicknamed by the Greeks, namely Hecateus and Herodotus), was much less subjected to foreign invasions than its neighbour Mesopotamia (which is even a bit older than Egypt as great early civilization). Due to that, “Egyptian culture presents, as one of its salient characteristics, a long, virtually unbroken continuity.”, as William Stevenson Smith (1907-1969) puts in his indispensable book named *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*.



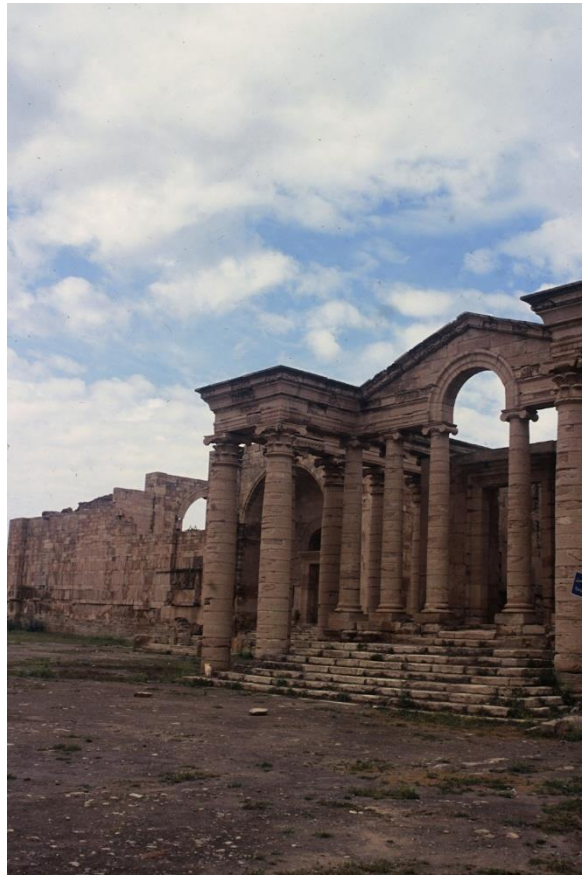
Luxor

3 As that same distinguished Egyptologist states in that same distinguished book of his, “In an almost rainless country the regular rise of the Nile every year provided the striking example of a renewal of life with each annual flood and gave the Egyptian a cheerful assurance of the permanence of established things, suggesting the acceptance that life would somehow continue after death in the same way.”.



Luxor

4 Together with Erbil, the capital of the state of Adiabene under the Parthians and Sasanids, Hatra, once a rich and fortified caravan city in the Parthian Empire (247 BC to 224 AD), form the duo of old Persian cities in northern Irak.



Hatra

5 The ruins of Hatra are the location we see in the opening scenes of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, one of the most famous horror films of all times, released in 1973.



Hatra

6 Founded in the late 120s BC, Ctesiphon is only a short distance (35 km southeast) from modern Baghdad, in Iraq, located at the banks of the river Tigris. In its “seven years of fat cows”, notably between the 3rd and 6th centuries AD, Ctesiphon covered circa 30 square kilometres, which meant more than twice the area of fourth-century imperial Rome. For over eight centuries, Ctesiphon was the capital of the Iranian empires that rose and fell between the twilight of the Seleucid Empire (which existed from 312 BC to 63 BC), namely the Parthian and the Sassanian, and the Muslim conquest of Persia, occurred in 651 AD.



Ctesiphon

7 Feared (and possibly hated) by millions, the Iraqi Saddam Hussein (1937-2006) installed a dictatorship in Iraq that was considered genocidal even by Islamic standards. At the time I was in Iraq (2002), money was worth so little that, on some occasions, it was calculated by the weight of the bills, not by the value written on them. Anyway, “Dictatorship is a state in which everyone fears someone and that someone fears everyone.”, as the Italian writer Alberto Moravia (1907-1990) once said.



Mosul, in Northern Iraq, a few months before Saddam’s fall

8 “Money, it’s a crime / Share it fairly, but don’t take a slice of my pie / Money, so they say / Is the root of all evil today” (Roger Waters). The Islamic leader’s need to be ubiquitous doesn’t even spare banknotes, no matter how little they’re worth.



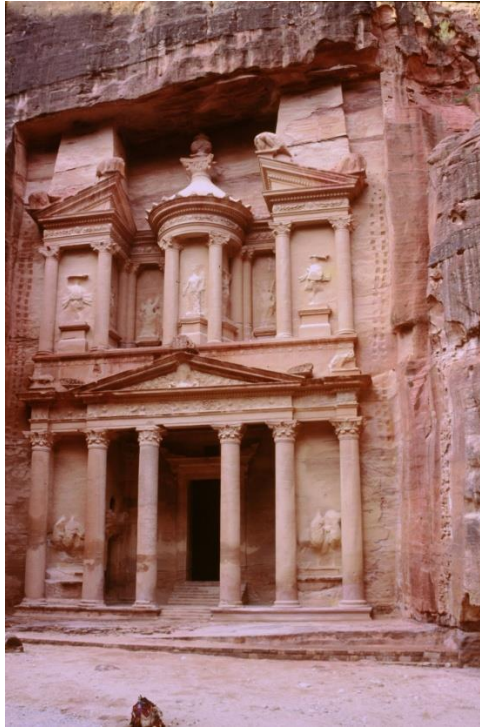
Iraqi money in Saddam’s times: difficult comes, easy goes

9 Karbala is the second largest city in central Iraq, after Baghdad. During the Abbasid era (750-1258), many important events happened there. In 1258, for instance, Karbala came to be controlled by the Mongols. Asia was experiencing the *pax mongolica*, which was what allowed the Venetian Marco Polo (1254-1324) to travel from Venice to Kublai Khan’s (1215-1294) Khanbaliq, which was located within what is now Beijing, staying in China for seventeen years.



A friendly Iraqi I met in Karbala

**10** According to the Lonely Planet travel guide for the Middle East, if you can visit just one archaeological site while traveling through that region, it should be Petra. Who am I to say otherwise?



Petra, in Jordan

**11** The first inhabitants of Petra appear to have arrived there about nine thousand years ago. During the Iron Age (1200-600 BC), the region served as residence for the Edomites, a Semitic people descendant of Esau, Jacob's twin and Isaac's oldest son (cf. Gen 36). During the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Arab tribe of the Nabataeans settled in the region. Carved directly into soft sandstone rocks by Nabatean artists in Hellenistic style, Petra's palaces, tombs, temples and theatre are visited by circa a million people every year. I was one of these visitors in 1998.



Petra, in Jordan

**12** UNESCO sees Petra as “one of the most precious cultural properties of man's cultural heritage”. Who am I to say otherwise?



Petra, in Jordan

**13** Human beings seem to have reached the region of Jerash (nowadays in northern Jordan) around 7500 BC. Known as *Gerasa*, the city of Jerash thrived during the Greek, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine eras. Having been one of the Hellenistic cities of the Decapolis (i.e., the ten Hellenistic cities built on the eastern part of the Greek Roman Southern Levant during the first centuries BC and AD), *Gerasa* is historically linked with the demon-possessed man (or maybe men) healed by Jesus (cf. Matthew 8,28-34, Mark 5,1-20, and Luke 8,26-39).



What remains of Gerasa

**14** Erected just some decades after the First Latin Crusade (1096-1099), more precisely between c. 1140 and c. 1170, by the Catholic military order of the Hospitallers in what is now Syria (an ex-Eastern Orthodox Christian country and now a Muslim dictatorship [sorry for the pleonasm]), the *Krak des Chevaliers* happens to be one of the most significant and well preserved medieval castles on earth.



The *Krak des Chevaliers*, seen from beneath

**15** “My country of Lebanon was much like America and the West are today. It was an island of freedom in the middle of an Islamic sea of tyranny and oppression.”, warns Brigitte Gabriel (1964) in her must read *Because they Hate. A Survivor of Islamic Terror Warns America*.



Beirut, Lebanon: reminds of the Lebanon Civil War (1975-1990)



**16** “Now, Jericho had shut and barricaded its gates (against the Israelites): no one came out and no one went in. Yahweh then said to Joshua: ‘Look, I am putting Jericho, its picked troops and its king, at your mercy. All you warriors must march round the city (go right round the city once, doing the same on six successive days. Seven priests must carry seven ram’s-horn trumpets in front of the ark. On the seventh day, you will go seven times round the city and the priests will blow their trumpets). When the ram’s horn sounds (when you hear the sound of the trumpet), the entire people must utter a mighty war cry and the city wall will collapse then and there; the people will then go into the assault, each man straight ahead.” (Joshua 6,1-5). Inhabited since c. 9000 BC, Jericho is considered one of the oldest cities in the world.



Archaeological site of Jericho, in nowadays Israel

**17** In Arab and Islamic countries in general, “domestic violence is not yet considered a major concern despite its increasing frequency and serious consequences. Surveys in Egypt, Palestine, Israel and Tunisia show that at least one out of three women is beaten by her husband. The indifference to this type of violence stems from attitudes that domestic violence is a private matter and, usually, a justifiable response to misbehaviour on the part of the wife.” (R. Ghachem et alii. “Violence against women in Arab and Islamic countries”, in <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12920614/>).



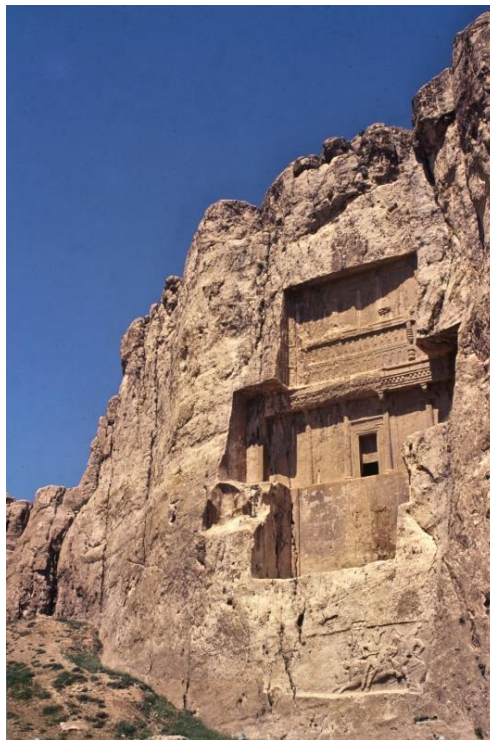
Two Cappadocian ladies from Goreme, in Asian Turkey

**18** Over three thousand years old, Bosra was a Nabataean city before becoming Roman and later Byzantine. For the last 14 centuries, it has been in the hands of Islam.



Byzantine ruins of Bosra

**19** Established by Darius the Great (c. 522-486 BC), the Behistun Inscription is a trilingual (Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian) inscription on a cliff at Mount Behistun, in western Iran. After more than a millennium of indifference on the part of the Islamic masters of Iran, western surveyors (namely Carsten Niebuhr, Georg Friedrich Grotefend, Sir Henry Rawlinson) managed to climb the cliff and decipher the cuneiform writing between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.



Behistun, in Iran

**20** Majoritarians before the aggression perpetrated by Arab Muslims in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian Zoroastrians are estimated to be between 15,000 and 25,000 in nowadays Iran (= 0.0336% of the total population, 99.3789% of which “accepted” Islamism as their creed): “Until the Arab invasion and subsequent Muslim conquest, in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century, Persia (modern-day Iran) was a politically independent state, spanning from Mesopotamia to the Hindu Kush and dominated by a Zoroastrian majority. (...) After the Muslim conquest of Persia, Zoroastrians were given *dhimmi* status and subjected to persecutions; discrimination and harassment began in the form of regular physical violence. Those paying *jizya* were subjected to insults and humiliation by the tax collectors. Zoroastrians who were captured as slaves in wars were given their freedom if they converted to Islam.” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution\\_of\\_Zoroastrians](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution_of_Zoroastrians)).



Atashgah, one of the few surviving Zoroastrian Fire Temples in present-day Iran

**21** Partially destroyed by an earthquake in 2003, which caused around 34,000 fatalities and 200,000 injuries, Bam is an Iranian city whose history dates back to Parthian times (248 BC-224 AD); nonetheless, most of its buildings were built during the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736). Before 2003, it was the largest adobe building in the whole world: “In terms of human loss, the quake of 2003 was the worst to occur in Iranian history. The BBC reported that a large number of victims were crushed while sleeping. At least 10,000 students and 1,200 teachers were among the dead. This caused a significant problem for the local education system. At least 5,054 children were orphaned and 400 people were left disabled in the aftermath of the earthquake.” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003\\_Bam\\_earthquake](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003_Bam_earthquake)). As for me, I was lucky to having visited Iran in 2002.



Bam, before the earthquake

**22** In 1976, Bam served as the setting for the Italian film *Il deserto dei Tartari* (*The Desert of the Tartars*), directed by Valerio Zurlini (1926-1982) and based on Dino Buzzati’s (1906-1972) book of the same name. As if all this wasn’t enough in terms of quality, the film’s striking scenery, lighting, and cinematography were based in the metaphysical picture invented by the Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), and the soundtrack was composed by Ennio Morricone (1929-2020).



Bam, before the earthquake