The Emperor's Treasure Hunters

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German Archaeologists and the Plundering of the Orient

Jürgen Gottschlich and Dilek Zaptcioglu-Gottschlich

Translated by

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Foreword

To this day, the pioneers of archaeology are regarded as heroes of scholarship. The excavators of the nineteenth century, the men—they were almost exclusively men—who brought millennia-old cultures back to light along the Nile in Egypt, in the deserts of Mesopotamia, or in the wilderness around the Aegean, are widely regarded as daring pioneers who, often risking their lives, uncovered and deciphered dead languages, bringing them back to life.

Almost all of them boasted of having unearthed irreplaceable artifacts for science and for humanity's understanding of its own history, and thereby of having saved them from local savages. For the people who lived in the nineteenth century in the regions of the ancient civilizations, that is, in Egypt, Greece, and modern-day Turkey, were assumed to be ignorant and uneducated, and to be interested solely in the material value of the ancient past.

But this black-and-white narrative must be examined in its historical context and turned on its head. In fact the giants of archaeology accomplished great deeds, often at the risk of life and limb. But their efforts were never simply a matter of scientific discoveries; these were more of a byproduct of their actual goal, which was the acquisition of ancient treasures. The art and cultural artifacts of the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, and early Greeks were embodiments and symbols of prestige and power for the major European powers, a group that was joined by the Americans at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. From Napoleon's campaign in Egypt in 1798 through the end of World War I, the pursuit, and subsequent display of the most impressive ancient artifacts, first in their own domain and later in specially created imperial or royal museums, served to enhance the glory of the respective dynasties and the European nations competing for power and influence.

The Louvre in Paris and the British Museum, and later also Museum Island in Berlin, were and remain treasure chambers where the symbolic power and wealth of Europe's former great powers were displayed and which today demonstrate the former greatness of those nations. With very few exceptions, the pioneers of archaeology were always agents of their countries and treasure hunters working for the glory of their rulers.

The man who in 1801 had the famous marble sculptures from the frieze of the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens chiseled off—the so-called Elgin Marbles, which remain the most famous pieces in the British Museum to this day—was the British ambassador to Constantinople at the time, Lord Thomas

Bruce, Seventh Earl of Elgin and Eleventh Earl of Kincardine. Lord Elgin was an art thief par excellence. He not only destroyed large sections of the Parthenon, he also had other antiquities removed from Athens and brought to his castle in Scotland. Later, he justified the art theft with an argument that would be used time and again, almost stereotypically, by European treasure hunters in the Orient: he had merely wanted to "save" the art treasures, as they were being threatened with "destruction" during the Greco-Turkish War of Liberation.

Historians have searched in vain through the Ottoman archives in Istanbul for the Sultan's firman, the decree said to have authorized him in 1801 "to investigate ancient stones with inscriptions." There was, in any case, never any mention of removing the objects (see chapter 12). Nevertheless, the British Museum persists in refusing to return the Parthenon sculptures to the Acropolis Museum in Athens. They had, after all, legally acquired the sculptures from Lord Elgin in 1814 for a substantial sum.

This tradition, established by Lord Elgin, continued in Mesopotamia during the nineteenth century. The two most famous excavators along the Euphrates and Tigris, the Frenchman Paul-Émil Botta, who discovered the Assyrian metropolis of Nimrud in 1840, and the Englishman Austin Henry Layard, who had Nineveh excavated shortly thereafter, were either in diplomatic service to their country (Botta) or used their archaeological successes to later pursue a meteoric career in the foreign service (Layard). Both were—despite their differences—primarily "looters," as C. W. Ceram wrote in his classic book *Gods, Graves, and Scholars*: one for the Louvre, the other for the British Museum. Although they also contributed to the scientific study of the Assyrian Empire around 2000 BCE, this was more an afterthought, when they published their excavation experiences and needed the historical framework to do so (see chapter 7).

They did not give much thought to obtaining excavation permits from the Ottoman government in Constantinople. If problems arose due to their unauthorized activity, their envoys at the court of the Sultan, who was already at that time economically and militarily dependent on the European great powers, were able, through political pressure, to procure the desired commissions from the governor of the site.

This also prepared the ground for the German treasure hunts in the Ottoman Empire. Even Heinrich Schliemann, the first German "hero of the spade" to dig there in search of fame and glory, caused a major uproar. However, Schliemann did not yet enjoy diplomatic protection at the time. He arrived as a self-made-man, empowered solely by Homer, to search for the fabled city of Troy on Hisarlik Hill near the Dardanelles. Schliemann, though born in Mecklenburg and loyal to his homeland until the end of his life, traveled as an American citizen, and if he made contact with any embassy in Paris, Athens, or Constantinople at all, it was the American one.

In 1868, Schliemann set foot for the first time in the historical landscape around Troy. With a copy of the *Iliad* in hand, he went in search of the hill

beneath which the ruins of homeric Troy were said to be buried. It took three years before Schliemann began the excavating on a large scale on Hisarlik hill, overlooking the Dardanelles. His worldwide fame is due to a chance discovery in 1873, when he uncovered what he called the gold treasure of Priam at the foot of a massive defensive wall and immediately smuggled it out of the country.

The resulting scandal was serious. At the behest of the Ottoman government, a Greek court in Athens, where Schliemann had transported the finds, ordered him to pay a fine. Schliemann paid five times the amount, thereby securing a legally valid right of ownership under international law for his Priam's treasure. The fact that the affair did not bring an end to further excavations in Troy, and on the contrary Troy remained an exclusively "German excavation" until 2010, was thanks to another German amateur archaeologist, Carl Humann, a civil engineer, who had excellent connections in Constantinople and advocated for Schliemann.

With Carl Humann, the true German archaeological activity in the Ottoman Empire began in the 1870s. Although the German antiquarian Richard Lepsius had already traveled to the Nile in 1842/1843 on behalf of the Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm for an archaeological expedition for the German fatherland, Egypt was no longer de facto part of the Ottoman Empire at that time. When Carl Humann, on behalf of the Berlin museums, began his excavation on the citadel of Pergamon in 1879 and ultimately brought the famous altar of Zeus to Berlin in its entirety, he laid the foundation for German treasure hunting in the Orient. He brought the German Empire, founded only a few years earlier in 1871, not only an ancient jewel that gave rise to hopes in Berlin that one day they could be on a par with the Louvre or the British Museum, but also paved the way for extremely successful years in the Ottoman Empire for the Berlin museums and later for the German Archaeological Institute and the German Oriental Society.

Until the end of the First World War, German archaeologists played a leading, if not the leading, role in the search for treasure in the Ottoman Empire. On behalf of their emperor, they were always one step ahead of the English, French, Russian, Austrian, and Italian competition at the most spectacular excavation sites in Troy, Pergamon, Miletus and the Hittite capital of Boghazköy. Even in Mesopotamia, the traditional domain of British and French archaeologists, the Germans were able to gain a foothold and conduct important excavations in Babylon and Assur.

The greatest treasures of Berlin's Museum Island originate from these excavations in the Ottoman Empire between 1871 and 1914. The Pergamon Altar, housed in the museum named for it and built specifically for it, the Market Gate of Miletus, and the Processional Way of Babylon, the highlights of ancient art in Germany's museum landscape, all come from the Ottoman Empire. The only exception is the bust of the beautiful Nefertiti from Egypt.

When one reads the explanations of the Berlin museums, then all these treasures have nothing to do with colonial art theft, but rather they are morally irreproachable and brought totally legally out of their homelands and to Berlin. In fact, the Ottoman Empire was not a German colony, however Sultan Abdülhamid II, who ruled at that time, was not called the "sick man of the Bosporus" for nothing. It was not because of his physical weakness, but because the 500 year old Ottoman Empire had been so weak economically since the middle of the nineteenth century, that it could only exist with the help of credit from the European great powers. The Sultan became the plaything of Europeans, and he had to play along under threat of his ruin. In this political context excavations by foreign treasure hunters took place (see chapter 3).

German Emperor Wilhelm II was extremely interested in acquiring ancient Greek art. Even his father, the seriously ill and short-reigning Emperor Friedrich II, with whom Wilhelm II was otherwise rather at odds, had cultivated this philhellenic enthusiasm for Berlin as "Athens-on-the-Spree" and viewed the German Empire as the successor to the Greek heroes of antiquity. Wilhelm II not only spent considerable sums from his private coffers on excavations in the Orient, he also took part as an amateur archaeologist on Corfu himself, and maintained close contact with the directors of the Berlin museums and the Oriental Society. Theodor Wiegand, excavator, archaeologist, treasure hunter and representative of the Berlin museums at the German embassy in Constantinople since 1895, maintained direct contact with the Emperor and was personally patronized by him.

Wiegand was the successor to Carl Humann, who, in recognition of his efforts in acquiring the Pergamon Altar, was permitted to establish a funded branch of the Berlin museums in Smyrna—now Izmir—on the Aegean coast. From then on, coordination of all German excavations in the Ottoman Empire went through Wiegand (see chapter 5).

It eventually became increasingly difficult to bring the treasures out of the country. For some time an interest in antiquity had been developing within the Ottoman Empire as well, reaching back far beyond the Islamic period. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, similar to Berlin, there were initial efforts to secure and collect ancient artifacts. What began as a collection of finds in the former church of Hagia Irini led to the founding of the Imperial Archaeological Museum in the gardens of the Topkapi Palace in the 1880s. The museum's founding father and a central figure in archaeology and art on the Ottoman side was Osman Hamdi Bey, the son of an aristocratic family who had studied in Paris and had made the preservation of ancient remains for the Ottoman empire his life's work. As early as 1884, Osman Hamdi Bey persuaded the Sultan to issue a general ban on the export of antiquities, replacing earlier, less clear regulations. Wiegand's task as a diplomat was thereafter to find ways to circumvent the export ban (see chapter 4).

Already in 1878, it was clear to Carl Humann and his Berlin mentor Alexander Conze, then head of the Berlin museums' collection of antiquities, that in 1878, even before the start of excavations on the acropolis hill of Pergamon, that it would not be so easy to remove the altar from the country. Both invested almost as much time, energy, and money in the export of the altar slabs as in the excavation itself. "Legal" is, therefore, a flexible term when it comes to the export of the altar slabs, even if it was not as obvious a case of art theft as with Priam's gold or the Parthenon friezes (see chapter 2). The transport of the other ancient treasures from the Ottoman Empire to Berlin is also a story in itself, which is told in this book from both the German and Ottoman perspectives.

Unlike the collections of non-European art for the Humboldt Forum, the restitution debate facing many European museums has not yet truly reached Museum Island. However, Turkey, like Egypt and Greece, is increasingly pressing for the return of illegally/legally exported antiquities. So far, this primarily affects the private art market and auction houses. But, as with the Acropolis Museum in Athens or the new Egyptian Museum in Cairo, more and more museums are also emerging in Turkey that no longer need to hide in the shadow of the great European museums. The latest example is the Trojan Museum, opened in 2018, located directly at the excavation site on the Dardanelles. Even the last major German excavator of Troy, Manfred Korfmann, believed that the Trojan art treasures should be displayed, at least temporarily, at the place of their origin.

The question of who owns Priam's gold treasure, the bust of Nefertiti, or the Pergamon Altar of Zeus is not so important. Much more important is where and how as many people as possible can best see and admire these unique pieces of world cultural heritage. After all, this is a heritage of humanity that should be valued more highly than the national property of individual states.

Certainly, the bust of Nefertiti belongs more to the Nile than to the Spree, and the sculptures of the Parthenon are more impactful in the new Acropolis Museum in sight of its historic location than in the halls of the British Museum in London. The altar of Zeus, too, would be more comprehensible in terms of its significance and impact on the acropolis hill in Pergamon than in its reconstructed setting in Berlin. This is why no archaeologist today would even think of removing historical artifacts from their place of discovery. But the situation in the nineteenth century was simply different.

That is why we should discuss today how best to deal with the legacy of this era, which lasted less than one hundred years, during which the major European powers pursued the looting of art in the Orient as official policy. The goal imust be to make ancient treasures and an understanding of humanity's early history accessible to as many people today as possible.

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