

GOING NATIVE THROUGH ARCHAEOLOGY: THE IMPACT OF BRITISH EXPLORERS AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Numerous archaeological expeditions were carried out by British scholars in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. The practice field archaeology offered a unique experience of contact and interaction between the British excavators and the officials and subjects of the Ottoman Empire. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the dialogic nature of this interaction between the British explorers and the Ottoman subjects stemming from the actual practice of archaeology in the Near East.

RESUMEN

En el siglo XIX se llevaron a cabo en el Imperio Otomano numerosas expediciones arqueológicas a cargo de investigadores británicos. La práctica de la arqueología de campo ofrecía una experiencia única de contacto e interacción entre los excavadores británicos y los oficiales y súbditos del Imperio Otomano. La intención de este artículo es ilustrar la naturaleza de diálogo de esta interacción entre los exploradores británicos y los súbditos otomanos partiendo de la arqueología real en el Próximo Oriente.

KEYWORDS

Ottoman Empire, British explorers, History of archaeology, Symbolic Interaction, Hormuzd Rassam, Austen Henry Layard, Hilmi Pasha, Mosul, The British Museum

PALABRAS CLAVE

Imperio Otomano, exploradores británicos, historia de la arqueología, interacción simbólica, Hormuzd Rassam, Austen Henry Layard, Hilmi Pasha, Mosul, Museo Británico

The ultimate goal of most European archaeological explorations and excavations conducted in the lands under the control of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century was to collect monumental art and glorious artifacts to be displayed in the European museums. In this age of colonial expansion, the acquirement of colossal sculptures, rare and striking objects, and artefacts from long-gone empires was a show of stately power and imperial prestige. For instance, the acquirement of the sculptural decorations of the Parthenon in Athens, which were brought to England by Lord Elgin, in 1816, was one of the most important and famed purchases of the British Museum.¹ A few decades later, Sir Charles Fellows took on the excavation and transportation of a large group of sculptured sarcophagi and parts of a monumental tomb from Lycia in southwestern Turkish coast to

¹ For a detailed story of the purchase and display of Elgin Marbles in the British Museum, see Hunt and Smith, 1916; St.Clair, 1967. Lord Elgin was appointed as an ambassador in Constantinople in 1799. He personally conducted and funded the excavation and transportation of the Parthenon sculptures (Wilson, 2002: 71-77).

London.² This sculptural group nicknamed “the Lycian Marbles” became one of the most treasured collections displayed in the British Museum.³ Likewise, the arrival of the colossal winged-bull statues from the Assyrian palaces, which were excavated by Austen Henry Layard from Mosul, in the British Museum, was a spectacular public event, which was illustrated vividly in the newspapers of the day.⁴

In order to reach the goal of acquiring monumental art for the European museums, explorers needed to be sent to the field, travel thousands of kilometers, observe topography, locate ancient sites, get the required permits from local authorities, organize the necessary manpower to conduct fieldwork, arrange for the packing and transport of these items to the museums. In each of these steps, the field archaeologist was required to deal with native people and with local authorities. In certain aspects, these early archaeologists had to act like social anthropologists conducting ethnography. They had to observe local customs, follow local ways of life and native rules of conduct, learn the required languages of the area fluently, and, ideally, had to understand the political and social conflicts taking place around them to make a successful assessment of the situation so that they could obtain these highly prestigious objects for their own empires. This being the case, an intense, and perhaps at times intimate, interaction between the excavator and the natives ensued.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the dialogic nature of this interaction between the British explorers and the Ottoman subjects stemming from the actual practice of archaeology in the Near East. Did this contact have any effect in the emergence of a native archaeological tradition in the Ottoman Empire? And, how did the events of this encounter between the individual actors affect both parties?

1. EARLY EXPLORERS

In the beginning of the 19th century, Near Eastern archaeology was at its infancy. Very little was known of ancient Mesopotamian art, with the exception of Achaemenid rock reliefs and monumental architectural sculptures. While excavations were conducted by English gentlemen such as Lord Elgin and Sir Charles Fellows on Ottoman soil for acquiring classical antiquities for the collections of the British Museum,⁵ the ancient material culture of the Near East was largely unexplored.

William Hamilton was one of the explorers sent to Asia Minor, modern Turkey, to map the area by the Royal Geographical Society in the 1830s.⁶ In 1837, he became one of the very first Europeans to visit the ruins of the capital of Hittite Empire in Boğazköy (Hattusha), which he thought to be the ancient site of Tavium.⁷ His comments upon his visit to the nearby early Hittite site of Alacahöyük is significant in terms of illustrating how aesthetically unimpressed he was by their sight:⁸

² Sir Charles Fellows published accounts of his travels and his excavations in three travel journals (Fellows, 1838; 1840; 1852). See also Slatter, 1994 for a study on Fellows’s life and excursions in Lycia.

³ The Nereid Monument, a funerary monument in the shape of a small ionic temple, was among the group of sculptural pieces brought to London by Sir Charles Fellows. The monument was almost complete in its architecture and decorations. An additional wing was added to the British Museum to house this monument and other classical sculptures (Wilson, 2002: 103).

⁴ The *Illustrated London News* of 28th February 1852, for instance, included an illustration showing a colossal winged-bull statue on the steppes of the British Museum as being carried into the building.

⁵ Hunt and Smith, 1916; Fellows, 1838, 1840, 1852.

⁶ Hamilton, 1837a, 1837b, 1838.

⁷ Hamilton, 1837b.

⁸ Hamilton, 1837: 52.

“The two large blocks of stone which form the gateway are of gigantic proportions, ten or twelve feet high. On the outside of each is sculpted a huge monstrous figure, too grotesque to be human, and too human to be called anything else”.

William Hamilton’s explorations were primarily aimed at investigating the geography of the region. Excavating and transporting antiquities were not among his priorities. However, these vivid accounts published by explorers like Hamilton probably inspired curiosity and interest in antiquities of Anatolia and the Near East. These geographical accounts also played a functional role by providing detailed spatial information for future investigators.⁹

2. EXCAVATING THE ORIENT

The earliest European excavations in the Neo-Assyrian palaces were conducted under the direction of Paolo Emilio Botta in sites around Mosul.¹⁰ With the discovery, transport, and display of monumental Assyrian sculptures found in the royal palaces of Khorsabad in the Louvre in 1847, the glorious ancient remains of the Near East were brought to the attention of the world. Following Botta’s discoveries, with the help and guidance of Sir Stratford Canning, the British ambassador at Constantinople, young Austen Henry Layard was sent to Mosul to investigate and excavate some ruins in the vicinity.¹¹ It was through the enthusiasm and colorful narrative of Layard that the British public was introduced to the antiquity of Ancient Mesopotamia.

Layard’s job was not easy. He had to operate in a social environment in which the dealings with the bureaucracy were uneasy, the local religious, linguistic, and ethnic divisions were tricky. Mosul was a multi-lingual, multi-religious, multi-ethnic place, which made things all the more complicated for an outsider to conduct field-work. In many respects, the early period of British exploration around Mosul benefited greatly from Layard’s powers of observation and his diplomatic ability.¹²

Any explorer and excavator in the Near East in the 19th century had to be very careful in their dealings with the local Ottoman authorities. Even before the passing of the first antiquities legislation of 1876, the Ottoman Empire’s control over the antiquities under its soil was quite strong.¹³ Excavators were required to apply for a *firman*, a permit given under their name, authorized by the Ottoman sultan, to excavate anywhere in Ottoman territory.¹⁴ These *firman*s needed to state explicitly that the excavator had the

⁹ Hamilton’s accurate accounts received praise from the Royal Geographical Society, and his efforts in identifying and mapping ancient sites were acknowledged (Hamilton, 1843). Hamilton was not the only traveler to have studied the lands under the control of the Ottoman Empire. A large number of explorers and travelers visited the Ottoman Empire beginning with the 16th century. For a summary account of the British explorers from the 16th to the 18th centuries, see Maclean, 2005. Explorers like Ramsay and Rawlinson continued this tradition in the 19th century (Ramsay, 1882, Harper and Henry, 1898).

¹⁰ Larsen, 1994: 14-33.

¹¹ Larsen, 1994: 61-69.

¹² Özveren, 2000: 72-77.

¹³ For the emergence and transformation of first antiquities legislations in the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century, see Shaw, 2003:108-130; Cezar, 1995: 328-335.

¹⁴ See for instance, Mr. Hunt’s recommendation that a *firman* should be administered for Lord Elgin in 1801 for conducting work in the Acropolis in Athens. The *firman* would allow him to “(1) To enter freely within the walls of the Citadel, and to draw and model with plaster the Ancient Temples there; (2) to erect scaffolding, and to dig where they may wish to discover the ancient foundations; (3) liberty to take away any sculptures or inscriptions which do not interfere with the works or walls of the Citadel.” (Hunt and Smith, 1916:190). The fact that a written permission from the imperial center was required in order to freely enter, draw, make plaster molds and erect scaffolding, let alone carry away antiquities, implies the presence of a fairly strong control mechanism in and around ancient sites.

right to remove the stones, once they were uncovered, should they wished to transport them to their native country. Guided by the aid of Stratford Canning in Constantinople, Layard was lucky in that he received his *firman*s with ease, and his relations with the central authority were mostly without a problem.

Nevertheless, Layard was operating in a context which diverged significantly from the world-view he was accustomed to. During his 1849 campaign, he ran into a situation in which his discoveries aroused unexpected sentimental religious emotions, which had constraining consequences. Upon the first emergence of a monumental bull sculpture in the ground, the workmen were apparently shocked and excited. Layard gave a detailed account this event in his travel-journal:¹⁵

“He had scarcely checked his speed before reaching the bridge. Entering breathless into the bazars, he announced to every one he met that Nimrod had appeared. The news soon got to the ears of the Cadi, who, anxious for a fresh opportunity to annoy me, called the Mufti and the Ulema together, to consult upon this unexpected occurrence. Their deliberations ended in a procession to the Governor, and a formal protest, on the part of the Mussulmans of the town, against proceedings so directly contrary to the laws of the Koran. The Cadi had no distinct idea whether the bones of the mighty hunter had been uncovered, or only his image; nor did Ismail Pasha very clearly remember whether Nimrod was a true-believing prophet, or an Infidel. I consequently received a somewhat unintelligible message from his Excellency, to the effect that the remains should be treated with respect, and be by no means further disturbed; that he wished the excavations to be stopped at once, and desired to confer with me on the subject”.

This narrative illustrates that Layard’s discoveries not only caused a mutual distress between the British explorer and the local religious and bureaucratic authorities, but also provided a ground for symbolic interaction in which both parties were effected by the contact around this diagnostic event. For Layard, the reaction of the native workmen, and the authorities was senseless, and irrational. Nevertheless, it presented a situation in which he had to observe and evaluate the native sentiments. For the locals, this presented a new development in their daily lives, they had to discuss, understand, and negotiate this unprecedented incident. For the sultan, this probably presented a delicate situation, in which the interest in preserving the local peace through preventing further disturbance of the ground prevailed over the interest of the excavator.

In addition to such occasional disputes with the local authorities, it was also an important challenge for Layard to create a balanced and effective workforce in this area. As Layard reported in his accounts the native populations of mid-19th century Mosul consisted of Arabs, Kurds, Turcomans, Nestorian Christians and Yezidis.¹⁶ Eyüp Özveren investigated Layard’s field-strategies in organizing his work-force and suggested that his successful business-like organization played a significant role in the outcome of his efforts.¹⁷ Özveren also illustrated Layard’s exceptional ability to use different ethnic and religious groups by assigning them different tasks in the field; and carefully placing the ones that might potentially cause disputes away from each other in the site. He suggests that through that efficient division of labor, Layard was able to conduct such a notable amount of work in the field. One visual documentation of Özveren’s observations can be found among the illustrations included in Layard’s *Nineveh and its Remains: with an account of a visit to the Chaldean Christians of Kurdistan, and the Yezidis, or Devil-*

¹⁵ Layard, 1849, vol. I: 67-8; quoted in Larsen, 1994: 93.

¹⁶ Layard, 1853.

¹⁷ Özveren, 2000: 74-77.

worshippers; and an *Enquiry into the Manners and Arts of the Ancient Assyrians* (1849).¹⁸ This line-drawing shows the transportation of a winged-bull statue in front of the Mound of Nimrod. The massive statue is placed on top of a wooden-cart and is dragged by a large group of men holding ropes. Kurdish musicians lead the way in front of the crew, the Arab workers pull the ropes; and Nestorians drag the cart. By employing workmen from various groups in the area, Layard was able to keep the local populations pleased.

In order to successfully analyze local conditions, one needed to depend on an efficient and accurate collection of native knowledge. This process also required a considerable level of observation and imitation of the local customs. As reported in the *Quarterly Review* of 1849, Layard was indeed very successful at “going native”.¹⁹

We found in Mr. Layard not merely an industrious and persevering discoverer in this new field of antiquities, but an Eastern traveler, distinguished we may say, beyond almost all others, by the freshness, vigor and simplicity of his narrative; by an extraordinary familiarity with the habits and manners of these wild tribes, which might seem almost intuitive, but is, we soon perceive, the result of long and intimate acquaintance, and perfect command of the language. No one has shown in an equal degree the power of adapting himself—at once and completely, without surrendering the acknowledged superiority of the Frank—to the ordinary life of the Asiatic.

In the collection of this local knowledge, Layard was aided by his beloved local assistant Hormuzd Rassam.²⁰ Hormuzd Rassam was a Nestorian-Christian native of Mosul. He was perhaps one of the most interesting figures of the early days of Near Eastern archaeology. In his obituary, his efforts in Layard’s campaigns were acknowledged in the following manner:²¹

“One of the first requisites of such an expedition is an active, intelligent, and trustworthy native to train the local workmen to Western methods and precautions, and to initiate the European explorer, no less, into the habits and traditions of the East. This was young Rassam’s opportunity. He was hardly more than a boy, but he had obviously intellect and character above the average; and he developed rapidly that almost instinctive skill in locating ancient remains, and as it were, seeing into the heart of an unexcavated site, which is found now and then among the Orientals of all ranks and races, and is the envy and despair of European Diggers”.

The interaction between Layard and Rassam resulted in a different fashion of “going native”; this time from an Ottoman subject, to a British gentleman. With Layard’s recommendation, Rassam was sent to Oxford to receive a proper English education. His studies were cut short when Layard requested him to go back to Mosul in 1852 to conduct further excavations on behalf of the British Museum. By then, Hormuzd Rassam already considered himself as an “English gentleman” to a certain degree. And his appointment by the British Museum in his “native” land was indeed an important task for him. As stated in the *Illustrated London News* of 24th of May 1856, “If success attended the new expedition, the result would have been received as a natural consequence; but if unsuccessful, no amount of energy, perseverance, or labor would have shielded the conductor of the

¹⁸ Layard, 1849.

¹⁹ As quoted in Layard’s obituary, Goldsmid, 1894: 373.

²⁰ For more information on Hormuzd Rassam, see Larsen, 1994: 306-332.

²¹ JLM, 1911: 100-101.

expedition from undeserved blame, more freely bestowed, too, perhaps, because he was a foreigner in an Englishman's position."²²

In his appointed job, Rassam successfully applied the knowledge he gained through working with Layard in the field. He was able to excavate and arrange the transport of sculptured slabs from Nineveh. His labors were praised by the British press in the following way:²³

“They consist of about seventy slabs, chiefly selected from the north place at Koyunjik, discovered in 1854 by Mr. Hormuzd Rassam, the companion and friend of Mr. Layard. It must be not a little gratifying to that pioneer Assyrian research to find, through his example, an Oriental—generally indifferent to all works of art—so thoroughly interested in the undertakings and impregnated with English energy to carry his individual labors to a successful conclusion”.

What is most interesting in this praise is the fact that, despite his persistent efforts, Rassam was still considered as an Oriental—albeit a bright, and talented one.

Hormuzd Rassam's account of his excavations around Mosul was published in 1897, shortly before his death. In this book, *Asshur and the Land of Nimrod Being an account of the Discoveries Made in the Ancient Ruins of Nineveh, Asshur, Sepharvaim, Calah, Babylon, Borsippa, Cuthah, and Van. Including A Narrative of Different Journeys in Mesopotamia, Assyria, Asia Minor, and Koordistan*, he adopted a prose very much akin to Layard's travel journals. Rassam's travel accounts include a variety of episodes from his own travels and excavations in the Near East. Like Austen Henry Layard's publications, he too presents detailed descriptions of local peoples, customs, traditions, and ways. What is most interesting however, is his emulation of the colonial gaze, this time directed to his own kinsmen. He states, for instance:²⁴

“In describing fully my travels and the conduct of my archaeological work I had one aim in view, and that is to show how easy it is to get on with all the inhabitants of Biblical lands, especially the Arabs, provided that they are not treated with unbecoming hater and conceit. I ever found Arabs, Koords, and Turcomans (all of whom are, of course, Mohammedans), most tractable people to deal with, and I always found them true, loyal, and most hospitable”.

Nowhere in his travel-journal Rassam acknowledges the fact that he was a Nestorian Arab himself, and a native of Mosul. The successful mimicry of the author completely conceals the past-identity of the narrator. The published account also includes a photo of Rassam, which shows him seated in front of a map of northern Mesopotamia, holding a photo of a fragment from the bronze relief-strips from the Balawat Gates.²⁵ In this photo, he is dressed in a dark suit, white shirt, and wears a bow-tie. Although no date is given for image, Rassam's white hair and beard suggest that it must have been taken by the end of his life. His attire and pose illustrate that he was indeed very successful in imitating the ways of the English gentlemen.

One very interesting episode from Hormuzd Rassam's travel journal is his reports of the excavations conducted by Hilmi Pasha, the Ottoman governor of Mosul, in Nebi Yunus, a site in the close vicinity of Nineveh.²⁶ We only know of Hilmi Pasha's exploits

²² As quoted in Rassam, 1897: 40-41.

²³ From an issue of *Illustrated London News* published in 1856, as quoted in Rassam, 1897: 40-41.

²⁴ Rassam, 1897: ix.

²⁵ Rassam, 1897: i.

²⁶ Rassam, 1897: 4-7.

from the reports of Rassam and H. Lobdell, an American missionary positioned in Mosul.²⁷ It is clear from these accounts that Hilmi Pasha conducted excavations at the site in 1854, which lasted for about 8 or 9 months. His work, conducted decades before the first proper Ottoman archaeological expedition led by Osman Hamdi Bey in Nemrut Dağ, marks an interesting juncture in the history of archaeological research in the Near East.²⁸ Evidently, Hilmi Pasha was trying to imitate the European excavators, with similar aspirations of obtaining valuable antiquities for the imperial collection being established in Constantinople. Even though Rassam was clearly very upset that he (and other European excavators in the area) were not allowed to excavate at the site, he nevertheless could not resist the temptation of visiting Hilmi Pasha's excavations:²⁹

“The governor of Mossul (Hilmi Pasha) was good enough to allow me to take copies of all inscriptions found, for the purpose of sending them to Colonel Rawlinson to decipher. He asked me at the same time to send one of my experienced diggers to work with his men, and show them how the excavations were to be conducted; this answered my purpose admirably, as my man brought me daily reports of what was going on. Notwithstanding all their anxiety to discover hidden treasures, the workmen of the Ottoman authorities, being inexperienced, and hampered with heavy chains as convicts, had some difficulty in making any progress with their work; and the first time I went down into their trenches I could not help laughing at the result of their labors. There was no idea of system; therefore the diggings were most irregular, and the tunnels they tried to burrow looked more like the work of those who merely wanted to search for treasure than to uncover an ancient building. The amount of work done by them in one day with four gangs of men I could excavate in a quarter of the time”.

Even though Rassam's tone is harsh, and most unflattering, certain interesting points arise from his account. First, it is clear that, only a few years after Layard's encounter with the inhabitants of Mosul in the episode of the events following the discovery of the first colossal winged-bull statue, the local authorities had embraced the practice of uncovering such sculptures from the ground themselves. This point becomes even more important when one considers that Nebi Yunus was considered to be a holy site by the locals as it was the supposed burial place of Jonas. Second, Hilmi Pasha clearly wanted to have a better training in the field, for himself and his workforce, that he asked for a trained man from Rassam. The fact that he allowed Rassam to make copies of all inscriptions to be sent to England indicates his understanding of the scientific value of his discoveries. And third, although Rassam mocked and laughed at his excavation techniques, from his description, Hilmi Pasha's techniques do not seem all that different from what Layard and Rassam had been doing in their own excavations. In this early age of archaeology, an understanding of stratigraphy had not yet developed. The descriptive accounts included both in Layard's and Rassam's travel journals indicate that one common method of excavating ancient remains was to open a few soundings from the top of the mound, and look for stone slabs that delineated the walls (fig. 1). Once a sounding hit such a slab, the excavators would then dig trenches following these stone slabs. By this way, the walls of palatial structures were exposed, and the relief sculptures decorating these walls could easily be removed for transportation. Apparently, Hilmi Pasha employed the very same technique of excavation, albeit with more crooked trenches following the relief sculptures.

²⁷ Lobdell, 1854.

²⁸ For a summary of Osman Hamdi Bey's early archaeological exploits, see Cezar, 1995: 311-325.

²⁹ Rassam, 1897: 6-7.

Consequently, it seems that the presence of British explorers in the Near East, like Layard, had an effect in the emergence of a native effort for conducting archaeological excavations in the area. The presence of native-born people, who learned the trade first-hand from the European travelers either by observing or participating in excavations, may have provided an important step in the establishment of a native archaeological tradition. Moreover, the contact and dialogue established through the field practice of archaeology provided a sphere that allowed a symbolic interaction between the two parties—which consequently ended up affecting them both.



Fig. 1. An illustration showing a trench from Layard's excavations in Koyunjik. The excavator opened a sounding from the top of the mound, and dug tunnels following the walls lined with relief sculptures. The lithograph included in the publication was based on a pencil-sketch done on the site by Rev. S.C. Mallan. From: Layard, 1853:105

On the one hand, we have a British explorer, Austen Henry Layard, who was so keen in observing the local rules of conduct successfully that he went native in his understanding of the social and cultural context in which he was operating. On the other, we have an Ottoman-born, Arab Christian, Hormuzd Rassam, who, by the end of his life had embraced Britishness to such a degree that he was almost indistinguishable in his poise and prose from an English gentleman. Somewhere between these two, we have an example like Hilmi Pasha, who tried to imitate the practice of archaeology, in order to serve his own empire, by collecting antiquities for the newly established imperial museum in Constantinople. As can be seen from these examples, the practice of field archaeology by the British in the Ottoman domain in the 19th century resulted in an interesting range of symbolic interactions among various parties involved. From this inter-imperial encounter, different forms and levels of mimicry and imitation ensued, which further contributed to the perpetual process of renegotiation of multi-layered and complex imperial identities.

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