

How to get ahead in collecting: the diplomatic advantage

Unofficial Diplomats: East Mediterranean Archaeologists and Britain's Imperial Project
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When it comes to the creation of our National Collections, traditional narratives tell the story of intrepid, adventurous explorers who, at their own expense, collected and donated antiquities to the British Museum without intervention from the state. This workshop also poses the basis of the conversation on that understanding, but I hope, by the end of my talk, to have reversed that impression, at least for the people I am going to be talking about: the consuls and diplomats.

Thus this talk will provide an excursus on how individual characters determined and influenced the history of collecting for the British Museum and how in turn their collecting determined the course of their careers.

It will be a journey from the late eighteenth century to the second half of the nineteenth, and the role played by British Consul and subsequently the first keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities Charles Thomas Newton. I finish my analysis with Newton partly because he achieves and represents the climax of this collecting spree, but also because after the second half of the nineteenth century legislation came into place within the Ottoman Empire, that changed the way things could be done.

It was after the more careful application of Ottoman legislation on behalf of the provincial authorities, that attention shifted outside Europe and towards Africa where colonial collecting took advantage of military aggression that continues to pose huge ethical dilemmas especially when talking about restitution.

If we examine the history of collecting in Iraq, but equally in Egypt and Greece in the first half of the nineteenth century, we see that the main actors were, in all circumstances, diplomats and it was thanks to the state apparatus that their archaeological achievements became possible.

- How did these diplomats obtain their permission to export the pieces?
- What were the circumstances and who provided the money?
- How did they transport these huge monuments back to England?

All of these questions have a common factor, one aspect of which is the constant lack of adequate funding, and, at some point the substitution of funding with personal recognition.

In Europe, the story begins with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt which showed how a well organised government machine could work to procure pieces of art and antiquities. When he sailed from France to conquer Egypt in 1798, he brought an army not just of 38,000 officers and 16,000 sailors but also some 180 assorted artists and natural philosophers who had the aim to look for, record and take antiquities for the Louvre.

His defeat at the hands of the British in 1801 costed him the surrender of the monuments acquired in those lands. This was the origin of the first significant collection of antiquities which arrived at the British Museum in 1802 comprising the Rosetta Stone, sarcophagi, sculptures and inscriptions. It marked the beginning of an unprecedented political race for antiquities.

To understand how this race was run it is worth taking a short step back in time to 1764 when William Hamilton was appointed as British Attaché to the court of Naples. Hamilton can be seen as the first British ambassador-collector; he built a collection of vases and antiquities which he sold to the British Museum in 1772.

This acquisition by the Museum was transformative, not only for the understanding of the classical world, but also for the formation of taste in Britain.

Hamilton's example inspired Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, who, when appointed ambassador at the Sublime Porte, consulted with his architect, Thomas Harrison, on the benefits of taking sculptures of ancient Greece.

Building a French style entourage of artist and antiquaries and appointing thirteen vice-consuls and agents in various commercial outposts and islands of the Aegean Sea, Elgin's arrival was well timed to coincide with Britain's military role as the saviour of Egypt.

The firman authorising the removal of the sculptures from the Athenian Acropolis reached Elgin only weeks after the capitulation of the French forces in Egypt. And whilst in Europe the French found themselves having to restitute marbles to Italy as a result of Napoleon's defeat, in England the British government started to discuss the acquisition of the Elgin marbles for the nation.

In an extract from the Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Earl of Elgin's Collections of Sculptured Marbles in 1816 we find the ideological justification for such acquisitions in the belief that they were saving monuments for

humanity, so that, 'secure from injury and degradation', antiquities might 'serve as models and examples to those who, by knowing how to revere and appreciate them, may learn first to imitate, and ultimately to rival them.'

Elgin relied on private funds, yet it was his official position that enabled him to obtain the firman, creating a grey area where monuments and archaeological pieces of high cultural value could be taken in an official capacity but sold privately. He failed to profit financially, ending up almost bankrupt as the government imposed its own acquisition price.

It was 1815, at the Congress of Vienna the European ambassadors, redesigning the boundaries of Europe, allocated to Great Britain the protectorate of the Ionian Islands. With it, came the duty to look after the Ionians throughout the territory of the Ottoman Empire.

How did the consuls and diplomats come to be involved in collecting?

Until 1825 the Consular service in the East had been run by the trading companies. In the Ottoman Empire, the Levant Company, a body of merchant houses independent of the state, had provided its merchant consuls with a comfortable and rich establishment.

The passage of the British consular service into the hands of the Foreign Office in 1825 necessitated however, a number of fundamental changes.

If diplomatic life-style in the near East under the trading companies had been of a very high standard, with consuls allowed to trade, reside in specially selected accommodation with a retinue of servants and clerks all paid for by the company, (and in locations where goods were shipped directly from Britain), by contrast the Foreign Office officials were underpaid, understaffed and unable to speak the language.

Consulates were established in remote locations where these officials were sent without any support. It is at this stage that the impact of the consular service on the collection of antiquities for the British Museum becomes significant.

Henry Salt, the Levant company consul at Alexandria arrived in Egypt with a semi official request by Sir Joseph Banks to procure antiquities for the British Museum. He found valid help in the strongman Belzoni to amass multiple collections which he proposed, at various stages, to the British Museum.

In an error of judgment, however, he had attached prices to the monuments he had collected, sending a sort of shopping list to the trustees. This had offended the very

people who were supposed to acquire them, who had first refused to deal with him, and eventually grossly underpaid for some of his pieces.

It was for this reason that Salt sold the Seti sarcophagus to the architect and collector Sir John Soane, and later mostly to the French.

Amongst the Foreign Office papers for 1827, one concernedly explains that Mr Salt does not seem aware of the great interest 'felt in this country for Egyptian antiquities' and as a consequence many have been lost to the French, urging the ambassador to exert his influence with this unruly consul and others in the region to acquire objects 'that are in our power to obtain' for the national museum.

'I am sorry to say in connection with this subject that Mr S.[alt] employed the power entrusted to him by Government entirely for his own advantage and to the exclusion of other parties, engaging in a kind of trading monopoly in conjunction with Sig. Drovetti in a manner not very creditable to either the individuals or their Governments.'

Salt was unable to profit substantially from the sale of the antiquities, nor to receive any personal benefit .

However, it is with Austin Henry Layard that a way forward started to become clear. He was only a young traveller unconnected with diplomacy when he arrived in Mosul. His passion for antiquities in Iraq had been inspired by the surveys and collection of Claudius Rich, East India Company Resident in Bagdad. Rich's publications had been convinced the French to appoint Paul-Émile Botta as consul in Mosul.

Layard met Botta in 1842, their friendship was based on their common interest for the excavations. With an initial grant of £100 from Sir Stratford Canning and a minor embassy appointment to officialise his position Layard started his excavations which turned out to be an immediate success, uncovering two palaces on the very first day.

Layard's own account of the excavations: *Nineveh and Its Remains* promoted the idea that the Victorians were unearthing the very archaeological remains that confirmed the stories of the Bible and captured popular imagination on a grand scale. The success of the book was instrumental in convincing the British Museum to conduct further excavations. An entry in the Parliamentary Papers for 1 May 1849 records the Chancellor of the Exchequer saying that on receiving an application from the trustees of the British Museum for the sum of £3,000 to conduct excavations at Nineveh, he had agreed to set aside the sum of £2,000 to cover the expenses incurred during two years by Mr. Layard.

Out of this money, Layard was expected to fund a two year campaign and pay for all the necessary expenses, including men, excavations and transportation. *It is not clear*

if the salary of the artist selected by the British Museum to record the excavations: a certain F.C.Cooper was also to be covered in the same way.

By contrast the French consul Paul-Émile Botta had been given separate funds to cover each and every expense. An artist had been appointed and paid a separate annual salary, the excavations had been published into a volume for an estimated amount of £13,000, and royalties had been offered to both Botta and Flandin. He had also been given an annual pension and the promise of a consular appointment wherever he deemed fit, plus the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour. It has been estimated that the Botta excavations and benefits package cost the French state a grand total of £50,000. When compared with the £2,000 offered to Layard for his 'all included' package, one can see why reward needed to come in a different nature.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica describes Layard's later career in government and diplomacy. Layard served in Parliament (1852–57 and 1860–69), became under secretary of foreign affairs (1861–66), and was appointed chief commissioner of works and privy councillor (1868) and ambassador at Istanbul (1877–80). In 1866 he was appointed a trustee of the British Museum. He was knighted in 1878. When he retired in Venice, he was a famous and wealthy man.

As far as his diplomatic appointment is concerned we can read in the Parliamentary Papers that it was not without controversy: "Several Ministers had been appointed who had never been in the Diplomatic Profession. Sir Henry Bulwer—afterwards Lord Dalling—for instance ... and then there was the case of Mr. Layard, who had only been nominally an Attaché to the Embassy at Constantinople, for the purpose of enabling him to better conduct certain excavations."

Layard became the inspiration for Charles Thomas Newton, who had worked as an assistant in the Department of Antiquities at the British Museum for ten years. By this time Newton had become familiar with the pattern of collecting that the government was willing to finance. He was under no illusion of wealth, but aimed at his personal promotion when he applied for an appointment as British vice consul on the Island of Lesbos.

Aided by political friends and his ever increasing friendship with Antonio Panizzi, the newly appointed Keeper of Books and soon Principal Librarian, Newton found, excavated and sent to the British Museum vast quantities of archaeological material.

I have not focussed on the nature and details of his excavations, which have been covered by numerous publications, but instead on the way in which his discoveries were made possible by his position as British vice-consul in the Aegean.

Newton had observed the way in which antiquities had arrived to the British Museum in the preceding years, and he understood how a consular appointment in the Aegean might best be used to increase the collections. He was conscious that, provided he did not ask for financial reward, he could look forward to gaining a higher position at the Museum. His private correspondence reflects this. His leaving note to the Museum reads:

In the new career on which I am about to enter, I shall probably have many opportunities of rendering service to the British Museum, not only by collecting antiquities and works of art in the island in which I am destined to reside, but by examining and reporting on collections and discoveries in the neighbourhood, whenever I may have the opportunity.

His appointment as vice consul was ideal, it had none of the responsibility for political and commercial reports, or burden of day to day administration, whilst on the other hand, giving him the authority and local prestige to be taken seriously, and although modest, it provided him a salary. Newton had liaised with Layard and received approval and encouragement.

Between 1852 and 1859 Newton made discoveries at Bodroum, Kalymnos, Cnidus, Branchidae. He identified a number of local consuls with Biliotti in charge of excavations, and negotiated on his behalf with the British Museum. He advised against the appointment of agents and in this sense he wrote a letter to Panizzi for the trustees:

No ostensible agent of the British Government should be sent to the Levant to purchase antiquities ... By employing consuls as agents ... a much more effectual agency is set on foot. No one can compete with a consul in the market except another consul. His dragoman is in much the same position as a solicitor of a small county town in England. He knows everybody's secrets, debts and crimes. Here money will not purchase antiquities in the Levant, but money and consular influence together will do much ...)

I have travelled much, for six years ... all the real prizes were sold not to the agent of the British Museum but to the Vice Consul of Mytilene and the acting consul of Rhodes...

all that he could possibly do for the Museum could be a great deal better done by the present Vice Consul at Rhodes, Mr Biliotti who has a most extensive connection in the islands and whom I find very well disposed to help me because he is an unpaid Vice Consul and lives in hopes of getting something from the Government.

Despite the changes in the consular service, the Biliotti family had managed to navigate the world of antiquities, trade and excavation. Alfred Biliotti was already excavating in the Aegean with Auguste Salzman, and Newton bought pieces from

him, recommending others for the museum. Career advancement could be offered instead of payment: 'he is our unpaid British Vice Consul at Rhodes and wants advancement in the service.'

Biliotti's subsequent career at the Foreign Office has to be read in conjunction with this letter and his findings for the Greek and Roman Antiquities Department at the British Museum,.

The career of Charles Merlin, also a Levantine employed in the Aegean, is equally directly attributable to Newton's intercession. Yannis Galanakis writes that Merlin's special interest in antiquities was supported by the realisation that for a consul paid an ordinary salary, antiquities 'provided an opportunity for making small profits'.

Newton provided the consuls, the Trustees and the government with advice on how to institutionalise the collection of antiquities for the British Museum. Indeed, following his experience in Lesvos, and under his guidance, the Foreign Office prepared in 1863 a list of instructions for British consuls in the Aegean. These included, amongst their new official duties, the search of antiquities for the British Museum.

His return to the Museum was discussed in Parliament on the 22 of July 1861, it was Layard himself to announce that:

The -new- keeper of the classical antiquities is a gentleman known probably to every hon. Member of this House for his energy and enterprise in excavating at Budrum the ruins of what was once one of the seven wonders of the world—the ancient Halicarnassus.

A few after thoughts:

While the West has tended to treat these early archaeological explorers as romantic figures in noble pursuit of 'truth' and the preservation of the past, this has masked the use of these excavations as pretexts for expanding political influence.

The archeological achievements of the early 19th century were facilitated by the technological advancements of the western powers. But they were ultimately made possible by their political domination of the areas that were the source of archaeological remains.

Political and economic domination came hand in hand with the expansion of the consular service, a symbol of the reach and breadth and of the economic and political power of a country.

Three main aspects needed to be in place for the excavation, collection and arrival of antiquities to European museums: technological, economic and political power. The

first two were insufficient without political power, which was necessary to obtain the permissions to excavate and export the pieces. History teaches us that these were given almost exclusively for political reasons and only to diplomats, and it is for this reason that it is impossible to disentangle the collection of antiquities from national governments and politics.

Indeed empires used antiquities to justify their own narratives and form their own imperial culture. Antiquities helped to categorise and rewrite the history of the world, to show that the highest stage of social development was represented by the rapid industrialisation of Western societies. Scholars analysed the remnants of these ancient worlds to find links and to 'trace the ultimate sources' of their own societies incorporating them into a narrative whose logical conclusion was the Western industrial empire.

Mesopotamia represented the cradle of civilisation, the place described in the Bible, the beginning of the story of humanity, and of the development of Western Christian religion. The narrative constructed around monumental pieces coming from this land was the same that gave the justification for keeping them up to the present. Who should be more entitled to hold onto these testimonies to civilisation if not the highest examples of civilised society?

This is also not to say that archaeologists were unwitting accomplices to these policies. In reality, there was a spectrum of self-interest and web of negotiation that motivated many excavations.

I hope I have demonstrated that it took years in England to find a sort of balance between the taking and the reward. Yet, I must stress that the nineteenth century accounts are written by and for Europeans. The 'natives', as the Illustrated London News dismissively called them, are seen to be passive, incapable of understanding the importance of their own heritage or simply ignorant. In contrast, the documentation show the locals reacting to the unforgiving attitude of the Europeans and to their excavations and consequent removal of the monuments. These archaeological campaigns were seen by these populations as aggressive acts that deprived them of part of their own identity. This is demonstrated by the implementation of laws prohibiting exports, in Greece as early as 1827, in Egypt in 1835 and in the rest of the Ottoman Empire in 1874. This is the reason why cultural heritage in the 19th and 20th century has become an 'ideologically and politically contested arena'.