

ESSAYS: OSMAN HAMDİ BEY **NEW INTERPRETATIONS**

DEFINING EMPIRE'S PATRIMONY: OTTOMAN PERCEPTION OF ANTIQUITIES

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A painting in the permanent galleries of the Pera Museum, titled *Yeni Cami and the Port of Istanbul*, tells another story beyond depicting yet again the famous view of the historic peninsula. It shows in the foreground antiquities lying on an embankment, ready to be shipped to France. A rowboat, being loaded by native workers under the supervision of a European man, carries the fragments to a large boat, anchored at a distance. The painting is by Jean-Baptiste Hilaire, dates from 1789, and has a subtitle: *Embarkation of Antique Fragments Sent to France*. Hilaire was closely associated with Comte Choisseul-Gouffier, the French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1784 to 1792. During his tenure in Istanbul, Choisseul-Gouffier convinced Sultan Abdülhamid I to issue him a *firman* to remove some fragments from the Acropolis in what seems to have been a common practice that accompanied diplomatic service at the time. The French consul to Athens acquired quite an impressive collection of antiquities on behalf of the ambassador and sent them to Istanbul to be catalogued on their way to France. Hilaire's painting documents the departure of this collection.

A century later, the situation had changed and such a transparent operation would not have been possible. Antiquities laws had been passed, with each new law attempting to address the loopholes in the previous one. Under these new regulations, the work of European archaeologists was subjected to control, archaeological research was undertaken by Ottoman teams, and an imperial museum was founded and housed in a new building, designed by Alexandre Vallaury. The museum's collection flaunted the sarcophagi from Sidon, "decorated exquisitely with bas-reliefs and embroideries (nakış), and deserving to be exhibited in the best museums of the world," according to an Ottoman report. The new museum was publicized with so much pride that many European and American scholars came to Istanbul to see it.

The reception of the museum from the other side was at best ambivalent—and often sceptical. Writing at the end of the century, the French historian Charles Diehl explained the rationale for its foundation in the following words:

No doubt trying to appear European and civilized, Turkey wanted to give itself the luxury of collecting antiquities; and, as it possesses at this time more than half of the ancient Greek world, it did not have to go through much trouble to satisfy this ambition.

As arrogant as this statement may sound, Diehl was not entirely off. Defining an identity for the empire was very much on the Ottoman agenda. Parallel to and in dialogue with similar searches in other empires, the Ottoman ruling elite and intellectuals were engaged in a struggle to find an appropriate image that balanced modernity with heritage. They were hence beginning to embrace the multiple layers of the land's history and regional traditions in unprecedented ways.

The Ottoman appropriation of antiquities was, to a great degree, a response to European interest in (and, of course, smuggling of) these objects, as well as to the European metaphor that equated the ruinous state of antique monuments with the decline of the empire. I concur with Ussama Makdisi's proposal that the Ottoman claim to antiquities turned this association around.

It also expanded and complicated the imperial image of the Ottomans and linked the empire to an architectural heritage shared with Europe, thereby emphasizing the empire's modernity. In 1889, an article in *Servet-i Fünun*, a periodical to which I will return, put it clearly (as quoted and translated by Wendy M. K. Shaw in *Possessors and Possessed*, 2003):

Europeans can now see how the Ottoman state has entered a period of progress. They write about the service of archaeology to the spirit of arts and progress in their press. They admit that for the examination of history and fine arts, just as London, Paris, and Rome have each been a center of the treasures of antiquities, Istanbul has also become the same way.

The valorization of antiquities in the Ottoman Empire is epitomized by the photography albums of Abdülhamid II. This vast collection of photographs documented all aspects of the empire—its landscapes, its wealth of historic architecture, and its modernity, shown by its railroads, government buildings, hospitals, and schools. It also dedicated a considerable section to antiquities (*asar-ı atika*), which covered all periods and regions, from Jerusalem to Baalbek, Jerash, Petra, Sidon, Ephesus, Palmyra, and Mesopotamia. The photographs depicted the sites on different scales to convey comprehensive views of entire settlements, individual buildings, and details. Furthermore, the archaeological work carried out on the sites was presented systematically as visual reports about the nature and the progress of the operations. A number of photographs documented the use of modern technology to carefully remove especially valuable artefacts, with the underlying message that these objects were on their way to the new museum in the capital (fig. 1). They gave intriguing views of the sites, complete with the actors, including the Ottoman figures in charge and the local workers.

Ottoman yearbooks, known as *salnames*, open another window into the Ottoman perception of antiquities. These key sources for the history of the late Ottoman Empire were prepared for all provinces. They conveyed detailed information about infrastructure projects, urban affairs, major new buildings, and historic buildings, as well as peoples and customs. They

employed a uniform format that included lists of events, administrative units, committee members, and buildings, in addition to selective descriptive entries, sometimes with illustrations. The *salnames* testify to the late-nineteenth-century penchant for orderly documentation and classification to facilitate the gathering and storage of knowledge on all aspects of the empire (fig. 2). Compiled at intervals of several years, they recorded developments and served as measures for progress.

To craft a new and dynamic imperial image that embraced cultural wealth and diversity, *salnames* highlighted the antiquities of all periods with great pride. The vocabulary that describes them is telling, albeit repetitive, reductive, and not particularly “scientific.” Baalbek, whose “fame and importance” was acknowledged by the entire world, stood out for the “vast monumentality” (*cezamet*) of its buildings, its “architectural ingenuity” (*maharet-i mimari*), and the “unequaled” “artistic qualities of its architectural style” (*tarz-ı mimarisindeki sanat*). The sculptures found on the site displayed extraordinary “delicacy” (*letafet*); they were “exquisite works” (*eser-i nefaset*) and “wonders of innovation” (*bedaat harikası*). In short, everything here was worth the entire world (*beda-i cihan*) and impressed visitors so that they wanted to come back. The entire site in Pergamon “blew the mind away”; its view from a distance caused viewers to “marvel” (*dehşet*) and “wonder” (*hayret*). The “unique” (*yegane*) sarcophagi found during an excavation carried out by Osman Hamdi Bey in Sidon, especially the one known as the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great, were “extremely valuable”: they were already described and discussed world-wide in all scholarly periodicals (or rather, “there was no periodical left in the world that did not write about them”). In Şirkat (Bar Sharrukin), the buildings were “regular and solid” (*muntazam ve metin*) and the ornamentation was “perfect” (*tezyinatın derece-i mükemmeliyesi*).

Salnames boasted of foreigners' admiration for the heritage of the empire, but they also employed a cautious tone when discussing these foreigners' dubious activities. One reported that the old city of Sidon had been particularly hurt by "brokers of antiquities" (asar-ı atika simsarları). It was regrettable that the sarcophagus of "Eshmunzar" (the king of Sidon, 489-475BC), found in 1855, was transported to the "Paris Musuem." And it was not the only one. Baalbek, a site that drew thousands of visitors, a large number of which were "men of science" (erbab-ı fen ve hendese), had also been ravaged and some of its "glorious" (azam) statues stolen. Finally, in order to protect it from further damage, an officer was appointed and an entrance fee established, turning the site into an open-air museum, the first of its kind in the empire.

To emphasize how things had changed, the *salnames* made sure to mention Ottoman authorities' control of foreign explorers when describing archaeological excavations (fig. 3). According to the Aydın *salname* of 1901, Germans were working in Pergamon with the permission of the government. The Mosul *salname* of 1910 reports that Germans had also been excavating in Şirkat with the authorization of the Ottoman state since 1904 and had discovered a "glorious and regular city." The artifacts from the site were taken, not to Germany this time, but to the Imperial Museum in Istanbul by special envoys assigned to the task. In an uncharacteristically amusing tone, the text noted that the only fragments still on the site were "the head of a statue" and "a statue without a head" (bir heykel başı ile başsız bir heykel)—not part of the same unit, but both "truly amazing."

It should be clear even from my spotty references that all historic periods were covered in *salnames*. Often, the sequence of civilizations would be listed and discussed in chronological order. For example, the province of Syria had been home to Canaan, Egyptian, Hittite, Jewish, Assyrian, Greek, Roman, and Arab civilizations. Other archaeological sites stood out for the

prominence of a specific period. Nineveh, Nimrud, Khorsabad, and Erbil were supreme Assyrian examples. Khorasan, with its “solid and perfect” temple, represented the Sasanian period (100-650). Among the “Arab” centuries, the early eras were singled out for the significance of their monuments, such as the fortifications of Baghdad, the walls and the so-called “twisted” (mülevvayi) minaret of the great mosque, and the great mosque in Ebu Dilaf—all dating from the Abbasid era. The *salnames* may not have systematically capitalized upon this cultural wealth to conceptualize the empire’s history, but their proud display of it proposed a new orientation in thinking about the past and owning up to it.

To shed further light on the dissemination of history with particular references to archaeology, I turn to a book, titled *Tarih-i Umumi* (General History), published in 1285 (1868-69) by the Imperial Military School (the name of the author is not indicated). The volume covers the history of the Egyptians, Phoenicians, Jews, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Europeans, Africans, Sassanians, Indians, and Chinese—some only in a few pages, others in some depth. The illustrations seem to be randomly collated; the section on Egypt is visually represented by generic pyramids and the name of Cleopatra in hieroglyphs, Phoenicia by an “Eastern caravan,” and Jewish civilization (Ibraniler) by the “high rabi in his official costume.” The discussion of Assyrians is accompanied by an “emperor,” a scene of “hunting and chase,” and a “nisrok” (nisroch), an eagle-headed god (fig. 4).

Assyrians and Babylonians occupy ample space in the book. Interestingly, archaeological discoveries are mentioned only in relation to these civilizations (and to a lesser degree, Egypt), with specific references to the on-going work there. About Nineveh it is reported that the city’s location and size were now well established. The digs in Nimrud had revealed evidence of a palace, suggesting the remains of an imperial capital, possibly from the earliest period of

Assyrian state. The richness of the region was evident from the presence of many hills and the rumours that farmers often came across old works as they ploughed. Descriptions of buildings were possible only because of the archaeological work. Hence, for example, it was known that the large rooms of Assyrian palaces were marked with images (suret) of two wings carved in stone and wall decorations in bright colors.

On a popular level, the growing interest in antiquities is evident in the end-of-the-century periodicals published in Istanbul. There were several illustrated journals modelled after the French *L'Illustration*. They reported on archaeological activities both within the empire and elsewhere. Articles appeared every now and then, but more frequently, photographs and drawings were scattered randomly throughout the pages—such as an image from *Şehbal*, which shows Spartan mothers during a festival, and also glorifies classical Greek architecture (fig. 5).

Servet-i Fünun, begun in 1891, was the most important, the most widely circulated, and the most enduring of these journals. In unique cases, it presented antique sites as backgrounds to politically significant events, such as Kaiser Wilhelm II's tour of the empire and the placement of a memorial to mark his visit in Baalbek (fig. 6). More commonly, photographs showed a historic site, monument, or sculpture. The captions did not necessarily evoke a learned tone; one of them stated simply: “an old statue recently discovered and excavated near Baghdad” (Bağdad civarında ahiren keşf ve ihraç olunan bir heykel-i atik).

The historic specificities of the “Arab” era were covered by *Servet-i Fünun* at a prominent moment during the restoration of the Great Mosque of Damascus. While it was routine to conduct systematic repairs to fragmented damages in all major monuments, the restoration of the Great Mosque of Damascus, burned in 1893, took on another dimension, according to correspondence and reports in the Prime Minister's Archives in Istanbul. The initial

restoration project by Evkaf-ı Hümayun (office of imperial waqfs) reconceived the interior and exterior design of the Mosque “entirely on the new style architecture.” Osman Hamdi, using his authority as the director of the museum, challenged this position, and proposed a historically-grounded approach to the restoration of the monument. His thinking was no doubt influenced by European debates on restoration and preservation at the time, especially by Viollet-le-Duc’s advocacy to remain faithful to original structures, but it also pointed to an informed reading of early Islamic architecture.

The Office of Imperial Waqfs had decided to clear out all historic elements of the mosque, including the marble decorations and columns that lined the large courtyard, and replace them with new pieces fabricated according to patterns taken from the surviving parts of the building. Osman Hamdi argued that the extraordinary importance of the mosque mandated a restoration that would return it to its original architectural and artistic state. To this end, it was essential to repair the damaged columns (originally Roman) and all other fragments.

Eight years later, *Servet-i Fünun* published a series of photographs in two subsequent issues that coalesced into a comprehensive documentation of the restoration, which by then, was almost complete. They depicted general views of the interior and the courtyard, as well as details—among them the *mihrab*, *minbar*, doors, columns, and mosaics—all meticulously restored to its original state. Two photographs emphasized the complicated process of transporting the columns, which had been repaired elsewhere, through the city streets with a carriage designed specifically for the function (fig. 7). Collectively, the photographs conveyed the magnificence of one of the earliest mosques. The investment in the restoration and the attention paid to details, strikingly different from those of Istanbul mosques, emphasized the cultural and aesthetic value of the monument. Its furnishings, which included four-hundred

square meters of new rugs woven in factories in Hereke (east of Istanbul) and transported to Damascus, reiterated the impressive scale of the operation. The restoration was a well-publicized imperial endeavor that punctuated the incorporation of the “Arab” past into present-day Ottoman identity.

The Ottoman discourse on archaeology at the end of the century thus comes across as unsystematic, fragmented, and lacking a coherent vocabulary. Nevertheless, it was very much there, textually and visually, staging a new consciousness about the past and raising questions about current practices.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1: Sidon, excavations (Istanbul University Central Library, Rare Works Collection)

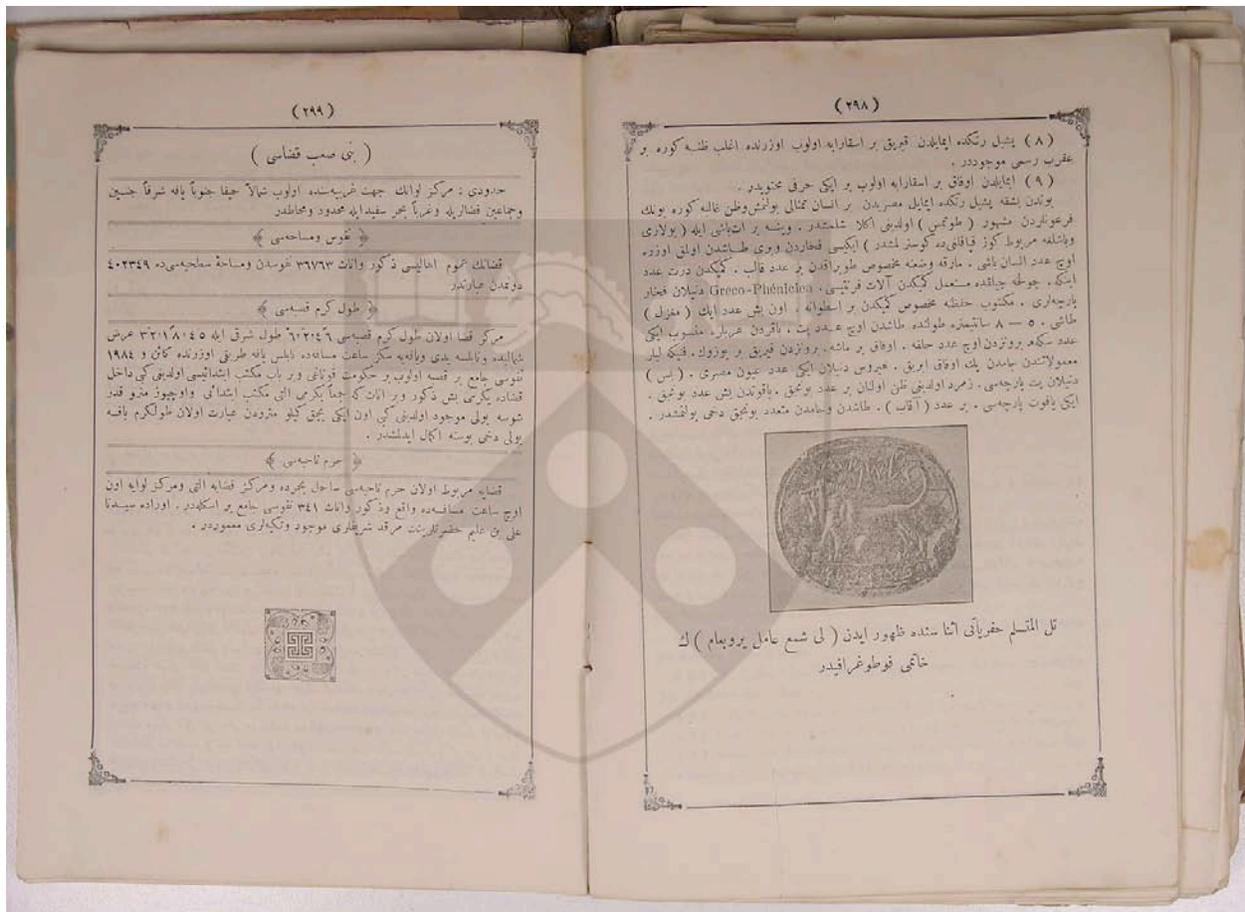
Figure 2: pages from *Suriye Vilayeti Salnamesi* (1900)



Figure 3: Richard Bohm in Pergamon
(Istanbul University Central Library, Rare Works Collection)

آئوریلر و بابلیلر (۲۵۹)

(نيسروق) نام معبودك اشبو صورت اولسي

مظنوندر تور اتده حرقيال

قصه سنده حيوانات مختلفه

اعضاسندن برر ايکيشر

اعضاسنك ديكريله اتحاد

ايتدير اديكي حالده حاصل

اولان اشكال مختلفه سي

اکثر محلايه بيان اولمشدر

آئوريلرک اشبو اشکاله نصل

معنا ويردکري ني فهم ايتمک

ممکن دکل ايسه ده اشبو

صورتلر اعلا درجه ده

محترم طوتيلان معبودلردن

اولدقلى محتمل اوليوب

انسان ايله کولش ايلدکرنده هر وقت انسانک غالب

اولديغي کورينور آئوريلر عنندنده حکمدارلرک مقدس

طوتلديغندن درجه اعلايه بولنان معبودلردن بشقه

سائر معبودلره حکمدارلرينک پرستيش ايتدکلى

کورلما مشدر



نيسروق

Figure 4: page with “nisroch” from *Tarih-i Umumi*



Figure 5: “Spartan Mothers” (*Sehbal*, 1908)



Figure 6: Kaiser Wilhelm II in Baalbek (*Servet-i Fünun*, 1898)

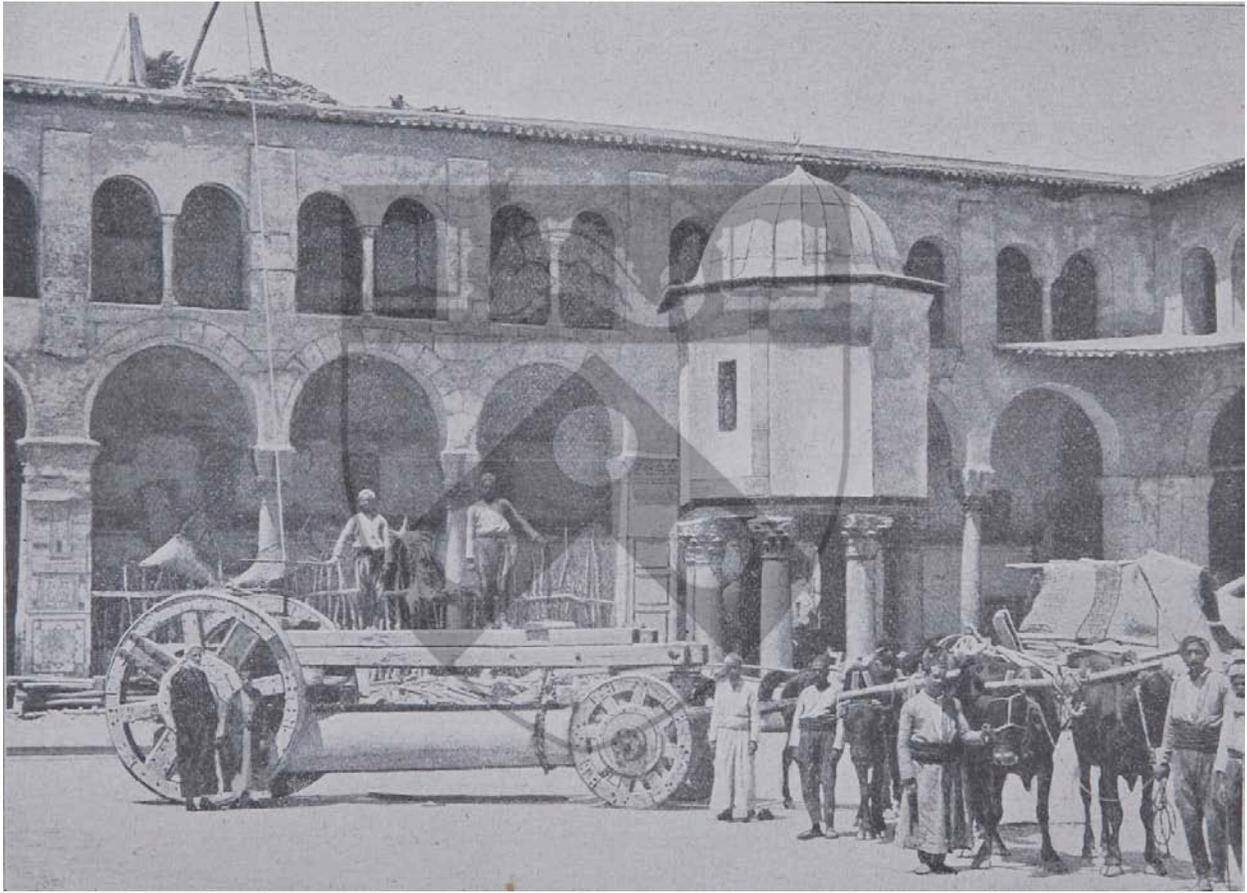


Figure 7: Great Mosque of Damascus, transportation of columns (*Servet-i Fünun*, 1902)