



ESSAYS: OSMAN HAMDI BEY

NEW DISCOVERIES: THE PAINTINGS AT THE PENN MUSEUM

THE EXCAVATIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM AT NIPPUR, MESOPOTAMIA

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Osman Hamdi Bey painted his view of the Nippur excavation in 1903, just after the final season of exploration at the site. The Hilprecht family owned the work until 1930, when it came to the Penn Museum on loan from Elise Robinson Paumgarten, the granddaughter of Hermann Hilprecht's second wife, Sallie Crozer Robinson. In 1948, the Hilprecht family donated the painting and it was accessioned into the Penn Museum's collection. Since then, it has been kept in the museum's archives and was conserved in 2000-2001. Until the current exhibition, these brief facts summed up everything that was known about the work. Although documentation of the painting remains scarce, it is now possible to reconstruct the circumstances of the painting's creation and its subsequent travels from Osman Hamdi's studio to Hermann Hilprecht's home in Jena and finally to the Penn Museum.

The painting represents the site of Nippur as it appeared during the third season of excavation, which lasted from 1893 until 1896. To create this work, Osman Hamdi, who had never visited Nippur, relied on a photograph taken by John Henry Haynes (cat. no 64), reproducing the photograph's appearance in almost every detail. The photograph was later included as the frontispiece to Hilprecht's book, *Explorations in Bible Lands during the*

Nineteenth-Century, published in 1903 (cat. no. 119), and Hilprecht's account of the excavation, as well as his comments on Haynes's photograph itself, allow for a more precise identification of the painting's subject matter. Hilprecht reports that during the Nippur expedition's third season, workers focused on an area northwest of the ziggurat, known as the "temple mound." The exploration yielded remarkable finds, including over 20,000 cuneiform tablets, roughly 500 fragments of vases, several sections of the temple court, and the remains of pre-Sargonic structures surrounding it.¹ It is the southeast portion of the temple court that Osman Hamdi chose to portray in the Nippur painting, omitting any representation of the pre-Sargonic ruins visible in the foreground of Haynes's photograph.

Despite its achievements, the Nippur excavation came under sharp criticism from Hilprecht, who supervised its progress from afar while attending to academic duties in Philadelphia, Germany, and Constantinople. Hilprecht's chief complaint was that Haynes, who had no formal training as an archaeologist, had not proceeded methodically, recording each layer of the site in order to produce a coherent view of Nippur's development over time. Instead, Haynes had dug vertically, simply removing without documentation whatever debris lay atop the objects of interest to him. Moreover, Haynes dumped this detritus on other mounds adjacent to the site, which themselves contained valuable antiquities that were thus rendered even more difficult to uncover. In one comment, Hilprecht relates these criticisms to Haynes's photograph:

Whatever seemed important enough at the different altitudes, he left standing, supporting the uncovered remains of the past by solid pillars of earth, or by artificial arches cut out of the rubbish below them. In consequence of this unique method of operation, the southeast section of the temple court, as seen in the frontispiece, looks as picturesque and attractive as possible, while in reality it presents a picture of utter confusion and devastation to the archaeologist.²

In light of Hilprecht's remarks, it is likely that some of the structures in Osman Hamdi's

¹ Hilprecht 1903, 295-296, 360.

² *Ibid.* 375.

painting, such as the central tower, the two cylindrical mounds of earth, and the stairs in the foreground, represent Haynes's constructions, while the hills surrounding the Nippur site may be piles of excavated debris, rather than natural features of the landscape.

The landscape portrayed by the Nippur painting is thus an artificial one, created by modern archaeologists; nevertheless, the work still gives the viewer the impression that he or she is witnessing the re-emergence of a lost civilization after thousands of years underground. The drama of this subject certainly would have appealed to the taste for panoramic landscapes and fascination with architectural ruins developed by the artistic trends of the Romantic period. By the beginning of the twentieth century, ruins had long been considered objects of aesthetic interest, a fact that Hilprecht acknowledges in the quotation above by noting the "picturesque and attractive" character of the Nippur site. Moreover, ruins also captivated those with an interest in the sublime, since these remains of the past inspired awe at their ability to endure the passage of time, even as their partially decayed state suggested the frighteningly ephemeral nature of human creations.³

Osman Hamdi designed the Nippur painting so as to enhance exactly this aesthetic and romantic appeal; a comparison between the painting and the photograph on which it is based makes this apparent. In addition to raising the lower border of the scene, Osman Hamdi extended the upper border, adding a patch of water in the distance, and offering a view of the landscape receding towards the horizon. He also added several solitary figures in the foreground that are not present in Haynes's photograph. The resulting scene is less centered on the documentation of the excavation's progress, and more suited to an academic painter's concern with creating a well-balanced composition with elements that guide the viewer's gaze from the foreground to the background. None of the additional figures, in fact, are actively engaged in archaeological work;

³ Borys 2005; Roth, Lyon, and Merewether, 1997.

they neither dig or carry away debris. Instead, the figure in the left corner of the painting, who simply sits and contemplates the ruins, models the behavior of the viewer, while the central figure in the foreground faces the viewer, acknowledging his presence and including him in the scene. These details encourage the viewer to envision himself at the site, and may have aimed at helping armchair archaeologists in Philadelphia to imagine themselves in a true encounter with the past.

Aspects of the Nippur painting's composition appear in other works by Osman Hamdi, even though its subject matter is unique within his oeuvre. A few landscapes executed early in Osman Hamdi's career provide the Nippur painting's closest analogues. *Sitt Zubeyda Mausoleum in Baghdad*] and *View from Baghdad* from 1884 and 1870, respectively, are comparable views of buildings placed in a barren landscape. In both, just as in the Nippur painting, Osman Hamdi places a strongly vertical architectural element in the very center of the composition, against a flat horizon. Other shared characteristics between these two landscapes and the Nippur painting are their muted color palette and the motif of the isolated viewer in the foreground, which occurs in *View from Baghdad* and recalls that in the left corner of the Nippur scene. A similar figure appears in another early landscape, *Istanbul View*, although in this case, the figure is much closer to the picture plane, and the architecture further off in the distance. Finally, the looser, impressionistic brushwork of these early landscapes matches the style of the Nippur painting, providing a marked contrast to the photo-realist style typical of Osman Hamdi's Orientalist works.

Almost nothing is known about the circumstances of the Nippur painting's creation. Certain clues, however, suggest that Hilprecht had a role in its production, and that Osman Hamdi may have tailored the work to his recommendations. First, Hilprecht himself is included in the painting, standing off to the right side of the excavation site. He is, in fact, the only

identifiable figure in the entire scene. Second, as previously mentioned, the painting copies the same photograph that Hilprecht chose as the frontispiece to his publication of the Nippur finds, which appeared in the same year as the painting's execution. Osman Hamdi probably received Haynes's photograph from Hilprecht, to whom Haynes sent his photographs throughout the course of the excavation.⁴ As the main liaison between Turkish officials and Penn, Hilprecht regularly corresponded with Osman Hamdi and visited him in Constantinople, providing Hilprecht with plenty of opportunities to share these photographs with him.

The only known document pertaining to the Nippur painting confirms Hilprecht's involvement with it. In a letter written in January of 1905 by Hilprecht to Halil Bey, Osman Hamdi's brother and assistant director of the Imperial Museum, Hilprecht mentions the Nippur painting in relation to a power struggle erupting between him and the administration of the Penn Museum. He relates how Sara Yorke Stevenson, a wealthy Philadelphian who was curator of the Egyptian section, staged a "coup d'etat" to become president of the museum early in 1904. Following the death of Edward White Clark, one of the main financial backers of the Nippur expedition and chairman of the Babylonian Committee from May 1903,⁵ those on the side of the museum tried to halt the election of another chairperson, and thus wrest control of any future work at Nippur from the university. Hilprecht tells Halil that the new museum administration has "gone so far" that "they have refused to acknowledge the decision made under Mr. Clark to ask you for the exhibition of his [Hamdi's] oil painting of Nippur, the execution of which I was officially entrusted with." Hilprecht then states that following this refusal, "my wife gave me the painting as a gift and I am proud, it hangs in a place of honor in Jena."⁶

⁴ Hilprecht's catalogue of Haynes's photographs is box #21 of the Nippur Expedition Records, Penn Museum, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁵ Edward White Clark, personal diary, May 18, 1903.

⁶ Hilprecht to Halil Bey, January 18, 1905: "Jetzt hat man ins Museum seit dem Tode Mr. Clark's, unsere herrlichen Vorstizenden des Babylon. Committeees (das nie etwas mit der Frau Stevenson zu thun hatte und zu thun haben

Hilprecht's letter suggests that Osman Hamdi did not originally intend for the painting to end up in Hilprecht's hands, since if this had been the case, Hilprecht would have had no need to inform him of the painting's new location in his home at Jena. Further, in Hilprecht's account, it is the Babylonian Committee (different from the (Babylonian Exploration Fund ?) and the museum administration who decide whether or not to exhibit the painting, so it seems that they were the owners of the work before Hilprecht's wife made off with it. Considering that Hilprecht is depicted in the work, and that he provided Osman Hamdi with the photograph from which the scene was painted, it is likely that Osman Hamdi executed the painting at his request, with the University Museum as its target audience.

Such a commission would have served the interests of all those involved. For Hilprecht, who had claimed the discoveries of the excavation as his own and inflated the importance of the finds, the painting provided him with yet another way to promote his achievements. That the Babylonian Committee under Clark encouraged Hilprecht's efforts to exhibit the work is not surprising, since much of the motivation for the expedition to Nippur had been to raise Penn's status within both American and European academic circles, and Hilprecht, with his German academic pedigree, was most equipped to accomplish this goal. In the eyes of the Committee, Hilprecht had ensured that their investment in the expedition had paid off excellently, and upon his return to Philadelphia in 1900, they showered him with honors, including an endowed professorship and a medal of honor. Their plans to exhibit the Nippur painting should be understood in this context of public accolade.

In addition, the Nippur painting's display of archaeological treasures unearthed in Ottoman

wollte) versucht, den Vorsitzenden nicht wieder zu erwähnen und dadurch die Universität aus Babylonien fern zu halten. Ja weiter, ich bitte das im tiefsten Vertrauen aufzufassen, man ist seitens der Intriganten [sic] so weit gegangen, dass man den unter Mr. Clark gefassten Beschluss, Sie um die Ausstellung seines Ölbildes von Nippur zu bitten, mit dessen Ausführung ich offiziell beauftragt war, anzuerkennen sich geweigert hat. Meine Frau hat mir in folge dessen das Bild zum Geschenk gemacht und ich bin stolz, es hängt am Ehrenplatz in Jena."

territory surely would have resonated with Osman Hamdi, who, in addition to being a painter, was also the director the Ottoman Imperial Museum. Although one of his key achievements in this role was to establish more stringent restrictions on the export of antiquities, he regularly made exceptions to these regulations for prominent members of the archaeological community in order to promote the Ottoman Empire as their cultural partner and equal.⁷ Osman Hamdi's relationship with Hilprecht was probably part of this strategy; more than anyone else associated with the Penn excavations, Hilprecht's prominence as a European scholar represented the status to which Osman Hamdi aspired. Thus, while executing the Nippur painting gave Osman Hamdi the opportunity to exhibit his artwork to an international audience, it also let him to create a lasting link between himself and the elite scholarly community of which Hilprecht was a part.

Just as Hilprecht's ambitions directly shaped the life of the Nippur painting, so too did the scandal his work provoked. The museum's refusal to exhibit the painting occurred only a few weeks before John Punnett Peters launched public accusations against Hilprecht, which revolved around three issues: that Hilprecht had misleadingly published tablets that were not actually excavated at Nippur, that he kept some of the finds for himself, and that he took credit for tablets he did not discover.⁸ Particularly given this last accusation, it is no wonder that the museum did not want the excavation represented by the Nippur painting, which fictitiously places Hilprecht as the sole archaeologist at the site at a time when he had not been there at all. As Hilprecht's reputation plummeted, the Nippur painting fell into obscurity, remaining in the Hilprecht family's possession and the Penn Museum's storerooms and finally emerging in a new "place of honor" as a showpiece of this exhibition. The changing fortunes of this one object neatly encapsulate the irony of the Nippur episode as a whole, both a professional disaster for some of those involved and a lasting scholarly contribution to the field of Near Eastern archaeology.

⁷ Eldem 2004, 129-30.

⁸ Kuklick 1996, 127-33.

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