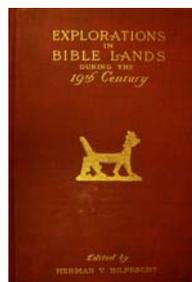


Tracing the Travels of Osman Hamdi Bey's Painting of Nippur

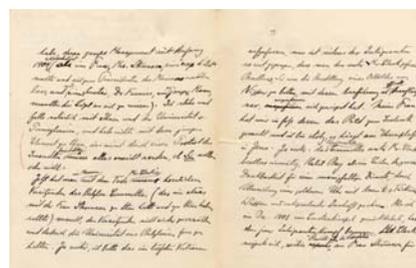
Archaeologists and Travelers in Ottoman Lands will mark the first exhibition and publication of Osman Hamdi Bey's painting, *The Excavations of the University Museum at Nippur, Mesopotamia*. This scene of an excavation site is unlike any other subject in Osman Hamdi's oeuvre, and owes much to its proposed commissioner, the Penn Assyriologist Hermann V. Hilprecht. His ambitions and the scandal his work provoked directly shaped the life of this painting, from its origins in Osman Hamdi's studio, to its interim stay in Hilprecht's house in Germany and eventual exhibition at Penn.

A Celebratory Gesture

Osman Hamdi painted the scene of Nippur in 1903, when Philadelphians were praising Hilprecht as the man responsible for the excavation's success. Clues within the painting suggest that Osman Hamdi created it according to Hilprecht's recommendations, which ensured that it would highlight Hilprecht's role in the Nippur expedition. For example, Osman Hamdi depicted Hilprecht standing near a collection of pottery at the right edge of the scene, making him the only identifiable figure in the entire work. He also based the painting on a photograph of the Nippur site taken by John Henry Haynes between 1893 and 1896. The photograph appeared as the frontispiece to Hilprecht's book, *Explorations in Bible Lands* (fig. 1), in 1903, and was probably given to Osman Hamdi by Hilprecht during a visit to Constantinople. Correspondence between the two men in 1905 (fig. 2) indicates that the Nippur painting originally belonged to the University Museum and that Hilprecht was arranging its exhibition. By displaying the work, he likely hoped that it would publicly commemorate his achievements.



1. Cover (left) and frontispiece (right), Hermann V. Hilprecht, *Explorations in Bible Lands During the 19th Century*, Philadelphia: A.J. Holman and CO., 1903.



2. Letter from Hermann Hilprecht to Halli Bey referring to the Nippur painting, January 18, 1905.

Hilprecht's Changing Fortunes

Hilprecht's success, however, was short-lived, and when his reputation plummeted, Osman Hamdi's painting fell into obscurity. As the scholarly community condemned Hilprecht for taking credit for tablets he did not excavate and for falsifying data from the Nippur finds, the Penn administration halted plans to exhibit the painting. In the face of this rejection, Hilprecht took the painting to his home in Jena, Germany, where it remained until it entered the University Museum's collection in 1948. Thus in an ironic twist, the painting meant to celebrate Hilprecht's work ultimately memorialized the episode of his undoing.