

## **Britain's Search of Historical Artifacts and Their Smuggling in Nineveh and Babylon**

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### **Abstract**

*The British Empire found out the historical importance of Nineveh and Babilonia in Iraq. It took an action to bring under control these cities virtually. After this, its second aim was to remove the historical artifacts discovered from these cities. It charged its agents so that they could research in these areas. As a result of these agents' researches, they uncovered some valuable artifacts existing there. They continued to do research throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Following the searches they succeeded to remove the historical and valuable artifacts from Iraq to the Homeland.*

### **Preface**

Nineveh and Babylon, which are two ancient cities situated on a strategic area in the Middle East, are located around Mosul in Iraq. These historical and strategic settlements have preserved their importance throughout history. Due to this importance, both of them have been named "the cradle of civilization". Additionally, they have also served as battlegrounds and areas of influence for different nations. The first nation to settle in Nineveh and Babylon was Sumerians, followed by Acadians, Babylonians, Hittites, Persians, Parthia, Sasanians, Macedonians, and Romans. Following the Muslim Conquest, the cities were controlled by the Umayyad Dynasty, Abbasids, Hamdanid Dynasty, Seljukians, the Ilkhanate State, the Kara Koyunlu Federation, the Ak Koyunlu Federation, the Safavid Dynasty and by the Ottoman State, respectively. The area was brought under control by The Ottoman State after the Çaldıran Victory, led by the Sultan Selim I in 1516-1517. However, complete control of the area did not arrive until the Baghdad Military Expedition, led by Suleiman the Magnificent in 1534. With this expedition, the control of the Ottoman State became definite over Mosul and thus on Nineveh and Babylon.

After the invasion, the Ottoman State ensured the stability in the area and started to control these cities through local governors or sheiks. However, the political and financial turbulence of the State led to corruption in management. The corruption was deeply felt in the area beginning from early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This situation continued through the decline in the Ottoman rule until the British mandate in World War I. The main purpose of this study is to shed light on the archeological excavations and the antique artworks obtained through these excavations which were organized by The British agents in Nineveh and Babylon throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Undoubtedly, there may be some limitations of this study in terms of providing an exhaustive account of the excavations and the artworks; however, we believe that these limitations can be eliminated by further studies to be conducted on the same subject matter. By virtue of their growing influence in Iraq, British agents organized some research and excavations to find historical artifacts and treasures in Babylon and Nineveh and send them to their homeland<sup>1</sup>. Following the excavations, they opened a museum and exhibited the artifacts in these cities for a short time and then transferred them to their homeland by the aid of Sir Henry Layard, who was then the consul of the British Empire in Baghdad. Among the most important pieces were two obelisks written in hieroglyph, cuneiform tablets, and lion statues<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>Foreign Office, 78/907, No: 5, s. 38

<sup>2</sup>Justin Perkins, Journal of a Tour from Oroomiah to Mosul, Through the Kurdish Mountains and a Visit to the Ruins of Nineveh, s. 117-Nejat Göyünç, "Dicle ve Fırat Nehirlerinde Nakliyat", Belleten, C. LXV, S. 243, BOA, MVL 236/34, 4. Mühimme 253, 22.R. 1267-BOA, İ.HR. 72/3480, 07.S.1267

Sir Henry Layard is also known for his navigation activities on the Euphrates and the Tigris, both of which flow from the southeastern part of Anatolia to Basrah, and for his clandestine agreements with tribes against the authority<sup>3</sup> despite facing strong opposition from the Ottoman State. The State was aware of this situation but could do nothing to prevent it because of the political conditions of the period\*. British agent Harford Jones's residence became a guest house for British treasure hunters, missionaries, agents and travelling consuls during Kucuk Suleiman Pasha's rule as the governor of Baghdad (1807-1810). Jones's strong position gained him an enmity of Kucuk Suleiman Pasha and Davut Pasha (successor of Kucuk Suleiman Pasha), who was one of the most influential governors of the Ottoman Empire. The British Indian Government, which was very influential in Baghdad, intervened and resolved this conflict. Nevertheless, Suleiman Pasha's enmity against the British influence on Iraq was highly favorable for the Ottoman State, but Sultan Mahmud II was strictly opposing the existence of influential governors in the provinces and cities away from Istanbul. On the other hand, the Pasha did not hesitate to receive support from the British authorities. Whenever he needed support, he made agreements with the British agents or those from other western countries.

The Sultan was uneasy about his predecessors' problems with the local governors and overlords in different parts of the State. Kucuk Suleiman Pasha had been controlling Iraq for a long time and was against the British rule as well. His growing influence pushed Sultan Mahmud II to take measures against him. Halet Effendi, who was the head clerk of the period, and his attendants were secretly sent to Baghdad. In a meeting, Halet Effendi counselled Kucuk Suleiman Pasha to submit himself to the Sultan and to pay his tax regularly and completely. However, the pasha preferred to avoid Halet Effendi until he returned to Istanbul. Halet Effendi had no intention to stay longer in Baghdad owing to the military expedition to Russia and the Alemdar Pasha revolt in Istanbul<sup>4</sup>. Suleiman Pasha was accused of dissidence and of avoiding tax and thus removed from office in Jan. 5, 1810. He was killed by the Shammar Tribe in the same year. The secret affairs performed by the British Empire in Istanbul played an important role in the removal and murder of the Pasha<sup>5</sup>. What is more, the Anglo-Turkish relations were extremely warm during the Abdullah Pasha's term of office in Baghdad<sup>6</sup>. As for Davut Pasha, he had good relations with British officers, but he did not refrain from waging cold war against them. He disputed not only with Harford Jones but also with the other British officers and merchants. He purposefully behaved in this manner because he was an unopposed leader in Baghdad and was trying to break free from the British influence in Iraq. His prime fight was with Rich, who was known as the second key figure in Baghdad. Davut Pasha put him into prison but the British agents in Istanbul were powerful and they supported their agent. Thanks to this support, he was freed in a short time. Rich regained his power in Baghdad in a short period of time, and Davut Pasha could not react against him<sup>7</sup>. Meanwhile, an earthquake and flood occurred in Baghdad soon after this event. Baghdad and Basra were heavily affected from these disasters. The Pasha was arrested and taken to Istanbul by the Ottoman army led by Ali Rıza Pasha, on allegations that he failed to manage the disasters as the governor. Undoubtedly, the British agents were personally involved in Pasha's deposition and arrest. Subsequently, they did their best to prevent his execution, and finally the Ottoman State administration abolished his death penalty taking into account his successful and long-life services for the State. It is believed that the reason of his forgiveness was not only his success but the British policies implemented in Istanbul<sup>8</sup>. The British consuls were serving in numerous posts in Iraq and were important examples of British political agents. Rasam, who was originally from Mosul and served as the governor of Mosul for a long time, was a prominent example of those governors<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>3</sup>Gavin Young, *Return to the Marshes*, Futura Publications Limited, Great Britain, 1978, s. 56

\*For more information about Britain's finding golden lion statues in their excavations in Iraq: Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive, A.MKT.UM, 120/58

<sup>4</sup> Abdurrahman Şeref Efendi, *Tarih Musahabeleri*, (Sadeleştiren: Enver Koray), Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, 1985, s. 26

<sup>5</sup>Zaki Saleh, *Britain and Iraq*, El-Maaref Press, Baghdad Iraq, 1966, s. 83

<sup>6</sup> Meir Litvak, *Shi'i Scholars of Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, s. 122-Saleh, *Britain and Iraq*, s.84

<sup>7</sup>Saleh, *Britain and Iraq*, s. 88-89-Sinan Marufoğlu, *Osmanlı Döneminde Kuzey Irak*, Eren Yay., İstanbul, 1998, s. 176-177-Eraslan, *Türk-İngiliz Rekabeti*, s. 229-230

<sup>8</sup> BOA, HAT 389/20702- Ahmed Lûtfî Efendi, *Vak'anüvîs Ahmed Lûtfî Efendi Tarihi*, 2-3, Yapı Kredi Yay., İstanbul 1999, s. 625-Mustafa Nuri Paşa, *Netayicül Vukuat, Kurumları ve Örgütleriyle Osmanlı Tarihi*, C. III-IV, (Sadeleştiren: Neşet Çagaatay), Üçüncü Baskı, TTK Bas., Ankara, 1992, s. 261

<sup>9</sup> FO 78/1115

He was of British origin and acted against the Turkish authority during his post as the vice-consul and consul of Mosul. He was such an influential and powerful figure in secret policy that the British politicians preferred him over the other important candidates from Iraq. He was regarded as a suspected and strong person initially by the authorities in Mosul and then by all the authorities in Iraq. Later, due to the strong British support, he became a rival for the authorities and also for tribal and religious leaders<sup>10</sup>. He protected Kurdish rebellions and turned his consulate into a patrol or court. Rasam was later assigned to the organization and recruitment of workers in the excavations to be performed in Nineveh and Babylon by the British Museum. This post is also mentioned in a study by Austen H. Layard, who was then a member of parliament; "... the vice-consul Rasam was drafted to the position of organizing and recruiting the workers in the excavations to be performed in Nineveh and Babylon by the British Museum..."<sup>11</sup>.

Rasa was not the only influential figure who organized the excavations and the transfer of antique artifacts but a British agent called Asmit was also in charge of doing the same things as Rasam did. Asmit received permission from the Ottoman State in 1874 for searching antique artifacts and treasures. At that time, The Ottoman State had serious problems with nationalist movements such as Bulgarian Revolt, Serbian Revolt and persistent fiscal problems. Stated differently, the State was forced to allow Asmit to do harmful activities<sup>12</sup>. A decree of Turkish Foreign Ministry enacted in 1867 holds that "transferring the artifacts, inscriptions, antiques and other artworks from Iraq to The British Empire or to somewhere else in the world would not be proper either for our nation or for our country. Such an act to be perpetrated by the British Empire will be considered harmful and improper"<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, this dissatisfaction was not enough to stop the British Empire. As a matter of fact, the British agents continued doing their work relentlessly. Moreover, they expanded their activities in the areas mentioned above.

The British Empire was planning to build railways reaching from Anatolia to different parts of Iraq but failed. The Empire built highways and repaired the old ones. What is more, they became the best nautical navigators on the Euphrates and the Tigris. Their main goal was to carry the antiques and valuable goods obtained in Iraq to their homeland. They were also planning to control Iraq closely and deploy their military, diplomatic materials and soldiers to the Iraqi territory. As understood from the information given above, the Ottoman State was most critical of the British Empire for the archeological activities they were doing around Babylon and Nineveh. The British Empire was doing whatever they wanted but The Ottoman State could do nothing to prevent them, because they did not want to lose the British support in the diplomatic circles in Europe and the Middle East (especially against Russia and France). Therefore, they remained silent against the British policy on Iraq and thus allowed the British agents to be free so that they could do whatever they were ordered. As a result of these activities, a large number of valuable and historical artifacts were moved from different parts of Iraq to Britain and then became some of the most magnificent and precious artifacts exhibited in the British museums<sup>14</sup>. People visiting the British Museum in London can see numerous magnificent artifacts, including Iraqi treasures, artifacts, cuneiforms and other artworks, all of which were taken from various parts of the World<sup>15</sup>; only a limited number of art works are of British origin.

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<sup>10</sup> FO 78/1115, No: 9-Pall Mall Gazette, "Bitumen", 23.01.1868-Pall Mall Gazette, "Railway", 24.07.1868

<sup>11</sup> Austen H. Layard, Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon, London, 1853, s. 67- Perkins, Journal of a Tour from Oroomiah to Mosul, Through the Kurdish Mountains and a Visit to the Ruins of Nineveh, s. 117-118- H. Lobdell, "Letter from H. Lobdell, M. D., Missionary at Mosul, Respecting Some Recent Discoveries at Koyunjik", Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 4 (1854), pp. 472-480, Published by the American Oriental Society-BOA, MF. MKT., 55/104- BOA, MF. MKT., 57/61

<sup>12</sup> BOA, İ. HR., 258/15445

<sup>13</sup> BOA, İ. HR., 72/3480

<sup>14</sup> FO, 78/907, No: 5, 01.03.1852, s. 38

<sup>15</sup> To see Iraqi treasures, historical artifacts, statues and cuneiform exhibited in London, look at [www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)

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