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The “Discoverer” and the “Informant”

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The first object that was accessioned by the Department of Oriental Antiquities at the Louvre Museum was a statue of the ruler Gudea (c. 2120 BC) from Tello (ancient Girsu) in southern Iraq (Fig. 1). When one looks at the hands of this statue closely, signs of damage and restoration can easily be discerned. In fact, the earliest photographs published in the excavation reports show this statue without its hands (Fig. 2). This absence was interpreted by the Louvre curator André Parrot as an ancient act of iconoclasm carried out in the late third millennium BC, after the time of Gudea: “By breaking the hands, the vandal believed to annihilate more completely the effectiveness of the statue erected in the Eninnu [temple of Ningirsu]” (Parrot 1948: 162).



Fig. 1. Statue of Gudea, ruler of Lagash, c. 2120 BC; from Tello, Iraq. Musée du Louvre, AO 1. Photos: Musée du Louvre.

Yet, if we combine the few existing sources in western languages with a variety of local sources from that period, including the documentation in the Ottoman Imperial Archives on the construction and maintenance of telegraph lines between Baghdad and Basra, it becomes clear that a French telegraph inspector named Juilletti was led to this statue by an unidentified local person in early 1876. Juilletti then broke the statue’s hands, took them with him to Baghdad, and sold them to a local antiquities dealer (most likely Michel Marini), who then resold them to the British Museum curator George Smith that same year. The hands of this statue were kept at the British Museum until 27 May 1958, when they were brought to the Louvre to be reunited with the rest of the statue in a ceremony

celebrating the friendship between the two nations. However, the related publication (Rey 2019) did not make any mention of how these hands got to the British Museum in the first place. This, then, was not an act of ancient iconoclasm, and the ancient “vandal” was a modern French telegraph inspector. In fact, I do not believe that the statues of Gudea were subjected to iconoclasm in the late third millennium BC at all – a topic upon which I elaborated elsewhere (see Tamur 2022).



Fig. 2. Statue of Gudea, ruler of Lagash, c. 2120 BC; from Tello, Iraq. Musée du Louvre, AO 1. From Sarzec and Heuzey 1884–1912, Pl. 9.

I decided to begin with this example because it seems permissible today to publish comprehensive books on Mesopotamian archaeology or on the history of excavations without citing a single source in local languages. This neglect concerns not only the Ottoman Imperial Archives or 19th-century local accounts but also modern scholarship that has been produced in the region. For instance, half a century after the bylaw of 1869 was discussed by Ahmet Mumcu (1969), and later published in full by Halit Çal (1997), there are still prominent western scholars who argue that the earliest Ottoman regulations on the protection, excavation and export of antiquities date to 1874 (e.g., Bernhardsson 2005: 39; Dalley 2021: 31). The issue here is not only a matter of leaving out five critical years, during which these two starkly different laws helped shape the convoluted path of the institutionalization of the Ottoman Imperial Museum, but it also has to do with the politics of citation¹ and is the symptom of a deeper theoretical and methodological flaw. The systematic neglect of sources in local languages, coupled with established citation practices, serves to sustain asymmetrical power relationships in academia.

Rafi and Yannis (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 64) very eloquently speak of that sense of exceptionalism felt by the local scholar working in the crypto-colonies, who sometimes derides the foreigner who does not speak the local languages. Although I understand that sentiment, I do believe in the necessity of scholars and students learning not only the ancient but also the modern languages of the region. It is important to push universities, research institutions and museums to make modern language instruction an integral part of their professional training, as well as an employment prerequisite. As I noted, it is first and foremost a matter of correcting major empirical fallacies upon which ancient and modern historical narratives are founded. However, I do agree that the situation

1 Magnus Bernhardsson’s source for this information is Wendy Shaw (2003). Stephanie Dalley cites Matthew Ismail (2011: 87), who, in turn, provides a single reference, namely the aforementioned book by Shaw.

at hand requires much more than correcting empirical fallacies. Let me bring in another, recent example, this time from a museum context.

The British Museum recently organized a touring exhibition titled “Ancient Iraq: New Discoveries,” one of the stops of which was the Great North Museum in Newcastle upon Tyne (7 March–2 August 2020). A virtual tour of the galleries has been made available online.² One of the highlights of the show is a partially preserved standing statue of Gudea which was taken by the British geologist William Kennett Loftus in 1850 from a site called Tell Hammam in southern Iraq. After mentioning that the statue was “discovered” in 1850, the label, titled “A Battered Survivor,” continues as follows:

“Made of dolerite and showing a life-size worshipper with clasped hands, it lost its head and limbs a long time ago. In recent times it was hacked at by local tribesmen who believed it concealed gold – which it didn’t – and was also used in target practice by local warriors! It was the first Sumerian sculpture to reach Europe [...] The archaeologist who found the statue was William Kennett Loftus, who was educated at the Royal Grammar School in Newcastle.”

If we look at how Loftus himself described the “discovery” of this statue, we read that it was only after his “new guide Mahmud [...] mentioned the existence of a large statue at a ruin named Hammam” that Loftus decided to visit and explore that site (Loftus 1857: 113). Once there, Mahmud told Loftus that the statue was recently used for target practice by “the Arabs” and also attacked by the Sabaeans who work in iron. However, Loftus found this unlikely as “it is not their [Sabaeans’] custom to travel with large implements of their trade” and that “the fractures bore evidence of having been effected at an earlier period than my informant [Mahmud] admitted” (Loftus 1857: 115).

Whether or not the statue actually suffered in the hands of local populations is impossible to ascertain – it might well have. My point here is how that possibility, one that Loftus himself doubted, is given in a museum label today as an unquestioned “fact.” Additionally, although this is one of those rare occasions that the local person who guided the western archaeologist to the monument was named in the original source, the “discovery” is again entirely attributed to Loftus himself. It is astonishing how the temporal-logical contradiction this attribution leads to goes unnoticed in such narratives. How can a statue that is documented to have been known by local populations prior to the arrival of Loftus be regarded as “discovered” by him in 1850? The putative singularity of the moment of “discovery” is negated even within the same label. Finally, one expects to see one sentence or a separate wall text concerning the socio-political settings that made this statue “the first Sumerian sculpture to reach Europe.” Instead, the narrative that is offered in this label in 2020 is akin to the tired glorification of how Europeans “saved” antiquities from oriental ignorance and superstition. I would argue that the disappearance of Mahmud and the “pre-discovery” histories from this museum narrative is another form of what Rafi and Yannis (Greenberg and Hamilakis: 75–108) called purification – the adherence to a single, linear, academic narrative of “discovery” at the expense of one that is complex, multitemporal, and open to non-academic forms of knowledge.

Further, the generic designations that have been used to describe local populations are part and parcel of that process of purification. Loftus, as we saw in the aforementioned quotation, used the word “informant” when referring to Mahmud. Others, such as the British Museum curator Wallis Budge, asserted that the French diplomat Ernest de Sarzec who led the excavations at Tello “questioned the *natives* in the district as to the possibility of finding an untouched site” (Budge 1925: 197, my emphasis). Although this statement implies that local populations were more than just a passive backdrop or a cause of disturbance, the use of the collectivizing term “natives” effectively denamed and defaced them. Similarly, Sarzec’s excavation photographs further perpetuated this tendency by categorizing local collaborators as his “escort” (Sarzec and Heuzey 1884–1912: Pl. 63; see Fig. 3). Such rhetoric is still perpetuated today. A case in point is Paul Collins’s otherwise brilliant recent book, where the same people are referred to, without any serious engagement, as “local informants” (Collins 2021: 43).

On the other hand, a closer analysis of a diverse set of local sources makes it clear that Wallis Budge knew by name all of those people whom he called “natives” in his book. He had met many of them in person and bought various types of ancient objects from them. Elsewhere (see Tamur 2022), I visualized the intricate relationship between such individuals and institutions in a social network graph, which demonstrates the existence of a world of local and international relationships that remained concealed behind the narratives of “discovery” glorifying the

2 See <https://greatnorthmuseum.org.uk/visit-us/virtual-tours-ancient-iraq>. Last viewed 28.9.2023.

individual, European excavator. Then the use of the collectivizing terms “informants,” “natives,” and “escorts,” as well as the nature of the power relationship implied by the act of “questioning” (see the aforementioned quote by Budge) do not derive from ignorance; they are intentional elements of a broader narrative informed by a distinct colonial logic that regards these lands as *terra incognita*. Rafi and Yannis note similar processes taking place in Greece and Israel as well.



Fig. 3. “Ernest de Sarzec and his escort.” From Sarzec and Heuzey 1884–1912, Pl. 63.

Finally, I would like to return to the issue of “discovery.” If it is not Loftus, then who is the “discoverer” of this statue? Is it Mahmud? Someone else? What happens if we go further back in time, say to the 10th century AD, when an Iraqi judge and collector of stories named Al-Muḥassin ibn ‘Alī al-Tanūkhī (939–994) noted the existence of:

“[...] a statue of a man made of smooth black stone, of vast size, known to the people of that region as Abu [Father] Ishaq [...] The inhabitants state that they have heard their elders calling it by that name from time immemorial [...] On its chest, back, and shoulders there was ancient writing inscribed, in an unknown character.” (Margoliouth 1930: 368)

Al-Tanūkhī continues with another story of a “square stone of great size” that bore “images and engraving” at a place called Tell Hawār, which was known as “an ancient site, containing relics of antiquity” (Margoliouth 1930: 368). Already in 1931, Tell Hawār (or Tell Ḥawwāra) was proposed as the Medieval name of Tello by Ya‘qūb Sarkīs, one of the most prominent local historians of Iraq (see Sarkīs 1948: 293–301, 1949). However, his

arguments on the etymology of Tello as well as his works in general have never been taken into consideration in western scholarship.³ By drawing on classical and modern Arabic sources on the history and historical geography of lower Mesopotamia as well as recent archaeological surveys and excavations, I was able to further identify several other key geographical markers mentioned in Medieval texts and trace both of Al-Tanūkhī's stories to the vicinity of Tello. In other words, it is highly likely that the sculptures mentioned by Al-Tanūkhī were statues of Gudea. Finally, Al-Tanūkhī added that several people tried to move the statue named Abū Ishāq, but the local people "came crying" and requested the statue back. Stressing that their village "was its [the statue's] home," they stated: "We come to it for company at night, and the wild beasts keep off us when we are near it, as they approach nothing which resorts to it for protection" (Margoliouth 1930: 368).

Such accounts refute one of the major arguments against restitution and repatriation as espoused by James Cuno and others, namely that local populations had no relationship whatsoever with these ancient monuments prior to the arrival of the European "discoverer" (e.g., Cuno 2007: 11–12, 2008: 146). Yet I believe that the aim should not be to reverse that narrative by replacing the name of one "discoverer" with that of another, but to dispense with that kind of logic altogether. The fundamental problem with narratives of "discovery" is how they strip the object or concept in question of its surrounding context and deny it any existence prior to and independent of the moment of "discovery." In other words, its "history" begins with its modern "discovery."

While countering these narratives by expanding the range of sources is imperative, a critical engagement quickly reveals that many of the sources resist any inherent classification into the fixed categories of "indigenous" or "European." Further, the prevailing discourse of "discovery" often pervades the literature of the time regardless of such categorizations. For example, the Assistant Director of the Ottoman Imperial Museum, Halil Edhem Bey (1897: 106) claimed that the site of Zincirli in southern Turkey was "discovered" by the Director of the same institution, Osman Hamdi Bey, although Osman Hamdi Bey himself noted that members of the local Kurdish population had already unearthed the sculptures of Zincirli prior to his arrival at the site (see Eldem 2010: 51). Similarly, Ferruh Gerçek, a modern, Turkish historian who wrote a comprehensive book on the history of museology in Turkey could write that "Nineveh was discovered by Carsten Niebuhr [1733–1815]" (Gerçek 1999: 28), while the tenth century geographer Ibn Ḥawqal had already noted how the ruins of Nineveh [Nīnawā] were easily discernable from the city of Mosul (see Johnson 2017: 264).

Instead, the emphasis should be on the entanglement of the past with the present and on the temporal plurality of artworks and landscapes. Yannis, in particular, has been stressing this point for many years now, and this emphasis is also reflected in the discipline of art history with the recent shift from the negatively connotated "anachronism" to the productive capacity of the "anachronic." In that sense, as with the issue of sources and the politics of citation, I find the critique of the notion of "discovery" to be an integral part of a decolonial project. Only then, perhaps, would modern histories of Mesopotamian "discovery" no longer begin with the account of Benjamin of Tudela from the twelfth century, and local sources from across the centuries, which have generally been relegated to myth or tradition, would be critically read and integrated into our narratives.

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3 Instead, the name of Tello has generally been explained as meaning the "mound of the tablets" in Arabic – "tell" (تل) meaning "mound," and "lawḥ" (لوحة) referring to a writing board. This explanation goes back to the French orientalist Charles Henri-Auguste Schefer (1820–1898) as noted in Sarzec and Heuzey, 1884–1912: 1: 8, n. 1.

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