

Patrons, Politicians, Agents and Archaeologists

The Networks Framing “Lost Cities” in Western Asia

6-8 May 2026


Organized by

Miriam Kühn (Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin),
& Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

Held at the Archäologisches Zentrum of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin



 AARHUS
UNIVERSITY

 Museum für
Islamische Kunst
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Gefördert durch
 Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft

CARLSBERG FOUNDATION
GERDA HENKEL STIFTUNG

 FREUNDE
MUSEUM
ISLAMISCHE
KUNST

Table of Contents



Display of antiquities at Carl Jacobsen's private museum at Valby. From Nielsen and Raja 2019, *The Road to Palmyra*.

Front cover

Oscar Reuther: Ctesiphon, Taq-i Kisra, view from South-West, Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst, inv. no. Pl. Kt 111, Public Domain Mark 1.0

Outline	4
Programme	6

Abstracts

Rubina Raja: Competing to Collect “Lost Cities” in late 19th and early 20th Centuries Asia Minor and the Near East: Denmark’s Role on the International Scene	10
Hana Navratilova & Thomas Gertzen: Agents, Networks and Entanglements: The Imperial Contexts of Near Eastern Archaeology in Britain and Germany before World War One	11
Olaf Matthes: Babylonian Networks.....	12
Vanessa Rose: Inventing Islamic Archaeology: Scholarly Networks and Political Stakes in Samarra at the Turn of the Twentieth Century	13
Šárka Velhartická: A Reassessment of the Archaeological Excavation Methods of Bedřich Hrozný in Syria and Türkiye in the 1920s	14
Sebastian Willert: Thefts at Tell Halaf. Local Agency, Imperial Rivalries, and the Impact on Archaeological Fieldwork	15
Eva-Maria Troelenberg: “Arab Notions of Archaeology”: Bedouin Agency and the Archaeology of Bilad al-Sham.....	16
Zoya Masoud: Haunting Specters: Local Agencies in German Excavation Sites in Ottoman Samarra 17	
Miriam Kühn & Rubina Raja: Send More Money: Financing of Large-Scale Excavations in the Late Ottoman and early Mandate Period	18
Alexandra Solovyev: Intersecting Institutional and Commercial Networks in the Excavations of Ephesus (1863–1874)	19
Anne-Lise Guigues: The Role of French Christian Missionaries in the Dispersal of Archaeological Objects from Asia Minor in the Early Mandatory Period	20

Venues	22
Organizers.....	23
Conference Webpage.....	23

Outline

The numerous recent, much needed and important narratives coming out of research on the exploitation of urban sites and their cultural heritage in 19th and early 20th century Asia Minor and the Middle East, have increasingly focused on the role of the individual in the driving of (legal and illegal) export of cultural heritage. This has also included the role which these individuals played through their positions, connections or roles in a variety of institutions and organisations and as single actors. Despite the importance of such studies, this focus has led to fragmented narratives which have focussed either on a single site or a single individual's central role or impact, often not allowing for an overarching analytical insight into the potential patterns or lack thereof in such frameworks and their developments over time.

With this conference, however, we aim to investigate the period and region in question from the perspective of the larger and complex networks (the weak- or strong-ties networks) that framed and enabled the exploration, excavation and exploitation of urban sites in Asia Minor and the Middle East from the late 19th to the early 20th century (the Late Ottoman period and early Mandate period). We invite papers, which focus on the understanding of the larger and overarching frameworks in an analytical perspective, taking as the point of departure the contemporary shaping of societal and political structures and networks in the first place and the role of the individual agents on all levels in the second place.

In particular we are interested in contributions from researchers, who are willing to rethink approaches to archival material and legacy data; "data", which often is incomplete and often has been produced by a single person or a single institution or excavation, but which in fact is an expression of much wider and potentially overlooked patterns that still remain underexplored. Such an "inverted" approach might in turn contribute to a broader and more refined understanding of networks in the broader sense of societal networks - taking studies from the micro to the macro level.

We welcome interdisciplinary approaches that bring together sources and perspectives from archaeology, history, art history, museum studies, cultural heritage policy and political science. By shedding light on the overarching networks in which these actors were drivers or participants, agents or nodes, often in overlapping and sometimes conflicting network, we hope that this conference might be part of a push to reframe and nuance the history of early urban archaeological research in an important part of Western Asia.

Wednesday 6 May

Public Keynote Lecture (in cooperation with the Freundeskreis des Museums für Islamische Kunst), followed by a reception

Please note that **registration is required by 4 May 2026** at isl@smb.museum for the conference and evening lecture, as seating is limited.

18:00 *Competing to Collect "Lost Cities" in late 19th and early 20th Centuries
Asia Minor and the Near East: Denmark's Role on the International
Scene*
Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)

Thursday 7 May

8:30–09:00 Registration/ Coffee & Tea

9:00–9:30 Welcome

Panel 1: Archaeology, Empire, and Transnational Networks

Chair: Rubina Raja

9:30–10:20 *Agents, Networks and Entanglements: The Imperial Contexts of Near
Eastern Archaeology in Britain and Germany before World War One*
Hana Navratilova & Thomas Gertzen

10:20–11:10 *Babylonian Networks*
Olaf Matthes

11:10–12:00 *Inventing Islamic Archaeology: Scholarly Networks and Political Stakes
in Samarra at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*
Vanessa Rose

12:00–12:50 *A Reassessment of the Archaeological Excavation Methods of Bedřich
Hrozný in Syria and Türkiye in the 1920s*
Šárka Velhartická

12:50–14:00 Lunch for speakers

Panel 2: Local Agency and Ottoman Contexts

Chair: Dagmar Schäfer

14:00–14:50 *Thefts at Tell Halaf: Local Agency, Imperial Rivalries, and the Impact on
Archaeological Fieldwork*
Sebastian Willert

14:50–15:40 *"Arab Notions of Archaeology": Bedouin Agency and the Archaeology
of Bilad al-Sham*
Eva-Maria Troelenberg

15:40–16:30 *Haunting Specters: Local Agencies in German Excavation Sites in
Ottoman Samarra*
Zoya Masoud

16:30–17:00 Coffee & Tea

Panel 3: Funding Archaeology: Philanthropy, Politics, and Power

Chair: Sebastian Willert

17:00–17:50 *Send More Money: Financing of Large-Scale Excavations in the Late
Ottoman and early Mandate Period*
Miriam Kühn & Rubina Raja

18:30 Speakers' Dinner (self-pay basis)

Friday 8 May

Panel 4: Circulating Antiquities: Missionaries, Markets, and Material Economies

Chair: Miriam Kühn

- 9:30–10:20 *Intersecting Institutional and Commercial Networks in the Excavations of Ephesus (1863–1874)*
Alexandra Solovyev
- 10:20–11:10 *The Role of French Christian Missionaries in the Dispersal of Archaeological Objects from Asia Minor in the Early Mandatory Period*
Anne-Lise Guigues
- 11:10–11:40 Coffee & Tea
- 11:40–12:15 Closing discussion & publication process
- 12:15–13:00 Lunch
- 13:00–15:00 Site Visit to the Museum für Islamische Kunst with group discussion (for speakers)



Ernst Herzfeld: Samarra, excavations in the Dar al-Khalifa, 1913, Samarra archive, Museum für Islamische Kunst, Pl. Sam 960, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst / Public Domain Mark 1.0

Competing to collect “lost cities” in late 19th and early 20th centuries Asia Minor and the Near East: Denmark’s role on the international scene

Rubina Raja

Aarhus University

From the 19th century onwards there was an explosion in interest from European states, institutions and individuals in traveling in Asia Minor and the Near East as well as collecting objects from famous sites recently “rediscovered” by Europeans. This interest turned into a “collecting competition” between various nation states, who were building up national and state museums and individuals representing these states - not necessarily as officials - but simply as patriots with strong national sentiments and funds. Building up collections to show other Europeans just how fabulous one’s own public or private collections were became a trope across European countries. This is not a new insight. However, often smaller nation states and the ways in which their elites acted are overlooked in this larger picture. This lecture takes its point of departure in the Danish situation(s) and focuses on individuals who collected and those who collected for them (and for others - also other countries) by proxy and asks why and how they collected and also importantly brings to the forefront collecting as a pan-European competition, which was to the detriment of the local people, countries and sites from which the objects were taken - often illegally and despite legislation in place to exactly counteract such export of material culture from these regions.

Agents, Networks and Entanglements: The Imperial Contexts of Near Eastern Archaeology in Britain and Germany before World War One

Hana Navratilova

University of Oxford

Thomas Gertzen

Freie Universität Berlin

Notwithstanding the transnational character of empires and ‘the Great Game’ unfolding in the Middle East, culminating in World War One, the entanglements of archaeology with imperial(ist) politics have been primarily analysed in national frameworks, even mirroring former military allegiances (i.e., the Entente and Central Powers). Furthermore, archaeologists have been perceived as either passive and ‘impacted’ by politics or as inappropriately engaged – thereby neglecting/‘betraying’ their profession.

This paper aims for a more integrated perspective transcending national (archival) boundaries and suggests not to consider archaeology as a means of imperialist agendas but to interpret the conduct of archaeologists as part of a wider political sphere, in which they were not ‘pawns’ but stakeholders, who aimed to shape the agendas at least as much as these agendas shaped them.

As two case studies we will analyse and compare the personal networks and institutional frameworks behind the British excavation at Carchemish, including D.G. Hogarth and T.E. Lawrence later reunited at the ‘Arab Bureau’ in Cairo during WWI, as well as the involvement of German archaeologists R. Koldewey and W. Andrae excavating the ancient sites of Assur and Babylonia for the German Oriental Society and their embeddedness in Germany’s bid for ‘indirect rule’ within the Ottoman Empire. Andrae served as staff officer of Field Marshall C. von der Goltz, while Koldewey continued to safeguard the Babylon excavation until 1917. Against the backdrop of disciplinary history of Near Eastern Studies in German-speaking and Anglophone lands, sociological analysis and Milieu Studies shall highlight both similarities and differences of the dynamics and motives of the archaeologist-agents in their respective imperial setting.

Babylonian Networks

Olaf Matthes

Museum für Hamburgische Geschichte

The first comprehensive German excavation in Babylon, located in the Near East, began in 1899 and concluded in 1917. Unlike previous excavations, this one was carried out throughout the year as a large-scale research project according to the scientific standards of the time. Simply keeping this 'excavation machine' running required precise organisation and communication on site in Hilla, throughout the region in Baghdad, and far beyond in Constantinople/Istanbul, Smyrna/Izmir and Berlin.

This article will focus on selected individuals in the Ottoman and German empires and their networks, who contributed significantly to research being conducted at this highly symbolic location for such a long time. However, the actions of these individuals must also be considered within the specific political and cultural context of this period of high imperialism.

Inventing Islamic Archaeology: Scholarly Networks and Political Stakes in Samarra at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Vanessa Rose

Independent Researcher, Paris

This paper re-examines the emergence of Islamic archaeology through the emblematic case of Samarra, capital of the Abbasid Caliphate between 836 and 892. Excavations carried out in the early twentieth century, during the final decades of the Ottoman Empire, generated substantial documentation and material collections. These were shaped by transnational actors engaged in the exploration, study, and musealisation of Islamic heritage within competitive imperial contexts.

Focusing on the intersecting archives of German and French expeditions prior of the First World War—particularly those of Ernst Herzfeld, Friedrich Sarre, and Henry Viollet—this study explores how networks of scholars, institutions, diplomats, and politics shaped the intellectual and political foundations of Islamic archaeology as a discipline. It draws attention to fragmented and dispersed archival sources, often overlooked or difficult to access, considering them not as isolated remnants but as evidence of a broader history of transnational entanglements.

The paper reconstructs the overlapping scholarly, political, and institutional dynamics that underpinned the production of archaeological knowledge at Samarra, examining the circulation of people, objects, and ideas across colonial empires (France, Germany, Britain, and the Ottoman Empire). It also sheds light on the rationales behind the formation of museum collections. By moving beyond monographic approaches, it contributes to a macro level understanding of the social, scientific, and political networks framing early excavation of Islamic urban sites in the Middle East. Furthermore, it reflects on how archival materials can be mobilised to contribute to a critical genealogy of the knowledge, practices and power dynamics at the heart of early Islamic archaeology.

A Reassessment of the Archaeological Excavation Methods of Bedřich Hrozný in Syria and Türkiye in the 1920s

Šárka Velhartická

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici

In recent years, the legacy of Czech Assyriologist and Hittitologist Bedřich Hrozný, who deciphered the Hittite language in 1915 and undertook archaeological expeditions to Syria and Anatolia in the 1920s, has been thoroughly researched. Hrozný's estate contained a large number of records of archaeological research conducted at Sheikh Sa'ad and Tell Rifa'at in Syria and Kültepe in Türkiye, including drawings, plans, and measurement records, which have significantly altered our understanding of Hrozný's excavation methods. Contrary to earlier beliefs that Hrozný worked unsystematically, it now appears that he meticulously documented the entire excavation process. Not only did he carefully measure and record all the objects he found, but he also created rough sketches, photographed almost every object, and recorded details about the locations and dates of the finds. These important documents are now gradually being published.

In addition to these documents, Hrozný's diary entries and newspaper articles provide a more detailed account of his stay, documenting his meetings with leading political figures, French officers, and foreigners based in Syria. The contemporary political situation (particularly the Great Syrian Revolt in 1925) also influenced his stay, and his notes mention many related events. In the newly formed Turkey, Hrozný met personally with the president and many officials in Kayseri, and his records of these meetings help fill in many historically significant details. His accounts of the excavations and his descriptions of the workers' lives provide further valuable information.

Thefts at Tell Halaf. Local Agency, Imperial Rivalries, and the Impact on Archaeological Fieldwork

Sebastian Willert

Leibniz-Institut für jüdische Geschichte und Kultur – Simon Dubnow

On the dawn of April 17, 1912, workers from Max von Oppenheim's (1860–1946) excavation team at Tell Halaf in Ottoman Bilad al-Sham discovered two orthostates along the shores of the Khabur River. The inexperienced and self-trained archaeologist suspected that locals were attempting to steal valuable artefacts from the ancient site. Between 1911 and 1913/14, Oppenheim excavated at Tell Halaf with a team of Ottoman workers and German scholars. Before his campaign began, Halil Edhem (1861–1938), director of the Müze-i Hümayun (Imperial Museum), verbally and in writing prohibited Oppenheim from exporting any antiquities from the Ottoman Empire. Until 1912, the excavator adhered to Ottoman regulations. Eventually, in response to pressure from German patrons, politicians, and scholars, the excavator built a clandestine network and adopted methods to illicitly export finds unearthed at Tell Halaf and objects from local antiquity markets.

The Ottoman authorities suspected illicit activities surrounding the excavation, but could not substantiate these claims. While illicit exports were being secretly prepared and executed, Oppenheim consistently reported thefts of archaeological objects from his excavation site. What do these thefts reveal about the Tell Halaf excavation? Why did the thefts take place specifically during the period when exports began? Were workers or local residents reacting to the loss of excavated items? Was the Ottoman government involved? What was the impact of the disappearance?

In the context of the exodus of archaeological objects from Tell Halaf, this paper examines potential local or Ottoman involvement in the disappearance of objects from the excavation site. It explores the interplay of patrons, politicians, and archaeologists in shaping the archaeological fieldwork and contextualises the excavation site within the broader political and diplomatic relations between Istanbul and Berlin. The study situates its investigation within the geographical and operational framework of the 'lost city' of Tell Halaf and sheds light on the German archaeologist's framing of the incidents and their repercussions for archaeological campaigns in the Ottoman realm.

“Arab notions of archaeology”: Bedouin agency and the archaeology of Bilad-al-Sham

Eva-Maria Troelenberg

Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf

This contribution will look at the role of local guides and forms of knowledge transfer for the so-called “exploration” of archaeological sites in Islamic Syria in the second half of the 19th century. Departing exemplarily from the narrative writings of Henry Baker Tristram, I will look at how local agency is situated within a Western “Grand Narrative” of archaeology, but also how travel accounts and other sources of the period can be read against the grain for a more differentiated view.

Haunting Specters: Local Agencies in German Excavation Sites in Ottoman Samarra

Zoya Masoud

Forum Transregionale Studien

In early 1910, the German Consul in Baghdad communicated with Theodor Wiegand’s general administration via telegram, stating, “Civil authorities in Samarra and Baghdad have spoken favourably of the excavation project. An assessment from the military authorities is still pending.” This correspondence underscores the necessity for foreign archaeologists in the Ottoman realm of obtaining permissions from both civil and military authorities, which were essential for Ernst Herzfeld and Friedrich Sarre to conduct their excavations at the site between 1911 and 1913. The telegram reveals various layers of local Ottoman agencies in Samarra. The excavation of the objects from Samarra, now exhibited in museums worldwide, was primarily carried out by labors from Ottoman Iraq. Their contributions are often poorly documented, appearing only in ghostly presence as unnamed or vaguely identified figures in archival reports and silent bodies (men, women and kids) captured in photographs. Some reports from German men in Iraq narrated that the local communities were stealing breaks of the ancient sites. These specters prompt critical inquiries: Who were the Ottoman-Iraqi subjects and excavators? What were their recruitment processes? How did they assist the German archaeologists?

While existing scholarship has predominantly focused on European archaeologists and institutions, this paper seeks to shed the light on the role of local agencies in Ottoman Samarra and beyond. By engaging with these marginalised voices, the work offers a counter-narrative to the official “heroic male” narrative of Samarra’s excavation. The scarcity of archival materials evokes a haunting through spectral presence of those marginalised voices.

Send More Money: Financing of Large-Scale Excavations in the Late Ottoman and early Mandate Period

Miriam Kühn

Museum für Islamische Kunst

Rubina Raja

Aarhus University

Between the middle of the 19th century until the outbreak of the Second World War large-scale urban excavations of increasingly organised character took place across the Middle Eastern region. This period was one in which the global geopolitical landscape changed profoundly. Empires were dissolved, new borders were drawn, alliances forged and enemies and friends alike were made - also across disciplines, societal realms, political and military interests. Archaeology and the appropriation of ancient sites in the region, often urban sites, were inherent parts of the political landscape of the time. This presentation focusses on the funding structures behind some of the large-scale urban excavations, which were expensive undertakings. We take our point of departure in the period 1893-1934 and the sites of Palmyra, Samarra, Ctesiphon, Tabgha and Gerasa and examine the mechanisms which made these projects possible, tracking funding and funders, from small scale to large scale investments in archaeological projects, which were never purely just about archaeology.

Intersecting Institutional and Commercial Networks in the Excavations of Ephesus (1863-1874)

Alexandra Solovyev

University of London

Between 1863 and 1874, the British architect J. T. Wood excavated the ancient Greco-Roman site of Ephesus in southwestern Anatolia. If one were to take the narrative that Wood put forth in his 1877 memoir, *Discoveries at Ephesus*, at face value, then he would conclude that it was Wood's personal resilience in the face of environmental challenges, indolent natives, and Ottoman bureaucrats that led him to export thousands of objects from the site to the British Museum.

In fact, the excavations of Ephesus were facilitated by a set of intersecting institutional and commercial networks that provided the diplomatic and transportation infrastructure for antiquities to be excavated and removed from the site at scale. Among institutional networks, Wood was reliant on the Royal Navy for ships and personnel to transport objects from Ephesus to London; on the British Museum to provide firmans for his excavations; and on the British Foreign Office and Consular Service in Izmir and Istanbul to support his firman applications and to intervene on his behalf in the aftermath of the announcement of the 1869 Ottoman antiquities legislation. Among commercial networks, Wood also relied on his professional connections to the Ottoman Railway Company, his former employer, to facilitate the storage and transportation of antiquities from Ephesus to Izmir via the newly-constructed railway line.

My paper will argue that these intersecting networks of British state and imperial power are crucial to understanding not only the exploitation of Ephesus, but also to other ancient sites in the eastern Mediterranean.

The role of French Christian missionaries in the dispersal of archaeological objects from Asia Minor in the early Mandatory period

Anne-Lise Guigues

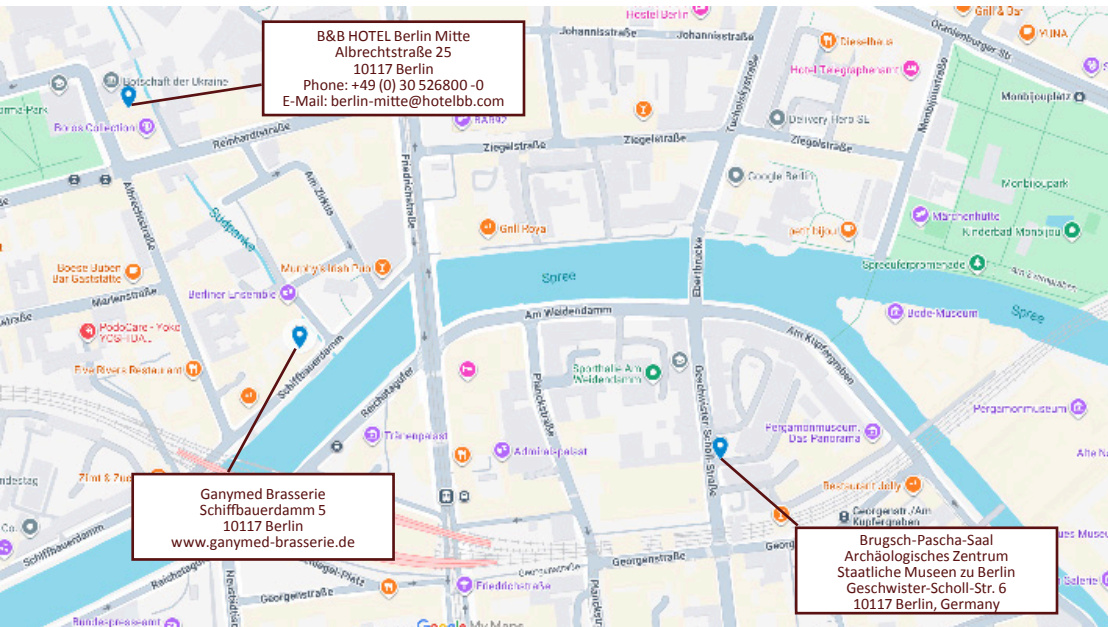
Musée du Louvre

From the late 1910s, French missionaries such as Lazarist Charles-François Jean (1874-1955) and Abbé Henri de Genouillac (1881-1940) took advantage of their trips to the Near East to visit Istanbul's Grand Bazaar and enrich their collections with archaeological objects, including the "idols" from the Kültepe site. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the role of French missionaries in the Near East was strengthened. Close to dealers and often archaeologists themselves, they contributed to the arrival on the French art market of objects from sites that had not yet been scientifically excavated. Archives documenting their purchases at the Grand-Bazar in Istanbul, as well as in Beirut and Jerusalem – kept in particular at the Louvre Museum -, allow us to map the flows and routes favored by the mandatory systems, and raise the question of the various antiquities legislations difficult to put in place in the early 1920s. This presentation looks at the place and role of French missionaries in the circulation of archaeological objects from Asia Minor, their contacts with dealers and the creation of networks and routes for the circulation of antiquities between the Near East and France, in the context of the establishment of the French Mandate in Syria and Lebanon.



South-east of Camp Hill, Room 1 looking south-east with workers posing behind the wall (17 April 1931). Photos courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery.

Venues



Organizers

Miriam Kühn
Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin
m.kuehn@smb.spk-berlin.de

Rubina Raja
Aarhus University
rubina.raja@cas.au.dk

<https://projects.au.dk/lost-cities-rediscovered>





Start of excavations on the Ishtar Gate in Babylon by the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, 1902.
<https://www.orient-gesellschaft.de/forschungen/projekt.php?a=50>

Book of abstracts

Patrons, Politicians, Agents and Archaeologists: The Networks Framing “Lost Cities” in Western Asia

Organizers:

Miriam Kühn (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) & Rubina Raja (Aarhus University)