

Samarra Excavations in Ottoman Bureaucracy

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Introduction

The transfer of the caliphate center from Damascus to Baghdad in the Abbasid period, a time span in which the history of Islam changed dramatically, paved a way not only for political history but also for the history of art and culture. In Damascus, the late Hellenistic-Byzantine art had influenced the making of the Islamic art, whereas earlier impacts in Baghdad came into being through the influence of Sasanian art. On their way to power, the Abbasids were assisted by their imperial army. The army consisted of Turks from Khorasan, which were first to introduce Turkish culture into the Islamic lands. According to some historians this act resulted in the transfer of some Far Eastern elements into Islamic art. The architectural compositions and ornamental motifs of the Abbasid art took shape with the adaptation of these diverse features. In addition, the introduction of new materials and techniques also contributed to the making of the characteristic style of the Islamic art.

It was a traditional act of the Abbasid caliphs to found cities as a symbol of power, and at that Samarra held priority with its preferred location. For instance, even the first Abbasid caliph as-Saffah wanted to establish a city in Samarra, however, he later founded the city of al-Anbar. Similarly, Abu Ja'far al-Mansur and Harun al-Rashid who ruled before al-Mu'tasim were also two caliphs to express a desire to found a city in Samarra. Caliph Harun al-Rashid founded a palace near Samarra next to the monumental works constructed by the Sasanians.¹ The true founder of the city of Samarra is, yet, caliph al-Mu'tasim whose mother was a Turk² and whose father was the famous Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid.

Caliph al-Mu'tasim's undertaking to create a grandiose capital city out of Samarra was based on many different motivations. His passion for establishing a city that would eternalize his name, exactly so as his ancestors had done, was surely one impetus. On the other hand, he probably also wanted to live close to the imperial army of Turkish troops that he trusted so much. As a result of these motivations, the city of Samarra was founded in the year 836 by the Turkish commander Ashnas on the left bank of Tigris north of Baghdad. The city of Samarra that remained the capital of the Abbasid caliphs until the seat was shifted again to Baghdad and it developed into an urban attraction with its numerous works to reflect the grandeur of Abbasid architecture, art and culture. This found its reflection on the caliph's coins with the writing "those who see it become joyful and happy".³

Thanks to Herzfeld's excavations in the once flourishing Abbasid city of Samarra, architectural and decorative elements of Islamic art and culture of the 9th century have been unearthed. At the same time, the archaeological remains provided a dating basis of the Abbasid art of the 9th century.

1 K k 2003, 27–28.

2 According to the historians al-Tabari and al-Mas'udi, the caliph's mother was Maride Hatun daughter of  ebib of Turkish origin whose ancestors settled down in Samarkand and who himself lived in Kufa. For more detailed information on Maride Hatun see: Kitapçı 1995, 65–71; K k, *ibid.*, 7.

3 Viollet. Henri, "Samerria", *İsl m Ansiklopedisi X*, MEB Yayınları, İstanbul 1976, 144.

The present study deals with the Samarra excavation as reflected in the Ottoman state bureaucracy. Recent research on the Ottoman archival material has brought significant results, including detailed information on the various stages of the excavations which lasted about 17 months. The documents revealed that the Ottoman authorities approached the Samarra excavations with special attention. I hereby present a section of my ongoing research on the Samarra excavations seen from the Ottoman perspective. My principal aim is to add new information to the scholarly field on one side and to announce my book which is about to be completed on the other.⁴

The Ottoman Documents

The earliest document in our archives concerning Friedrich Sarre and Ernst Herzfeld's common survey in the region is related to their study trip from Aleppo to Urfa, Deir ez-Zor, Mosul and Baghdad in October 1907. Sarre and Herzfeld, who were planning to examine the archaeological remains and take photographs in the mentioned area, needed to obtain a guarantee from the Ottoman authorities in order to accomplish their academic work. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Berlin mobilized the German Embassy in Constantinople to take initiative for bureaucratic issues.⁵ Upon the application of the Embassy, a decree was released by Sultan Abdülhamid II on the 2nd of October 1907, ensuring the security of the scholars on their trip and the assistance of the local authorities during the course of the studies (Fig. 1).⁶

Following these surveys, Sarre applied for a two-year excavation permit that would start in March 1910, sending a letter written in French to Osman Hamdi Bey, the then director of the Imperial Museum (*cf.* the article by Kröger). The areas Sarre wished to excavate are listed in the application, written on the 2nd of July 1909.⁷ On the 12th of July 1909, a translation of this letter was sent to the Ministry of Education. It had the same content, yet it was written in Ottoman Turkish and signed in the name of Sarre (Fig. 2).⁸ The letter included a map, outlining the future areas to be surveyed and excavated (Fig. 3).⁹ According to that, the area stretched from the outlet of the ancient canal named Nahr ar-Rasas at the Shatt to the spot called al-Qadisyyah in the South. The canal Nahr ar-Rasas on the left bank of the Shatt would eventually mark the eastern boundary of the excavation field. The islands on the river, as well as the terrain between al-Huwaisilat and Kaaf al-Kalb on the right bank of the river are also shown as excavation areas.¹⁰ The map further includes the phrase "those who see it become joyful and happy" and the record "this sketch has been drawn by Ernst Herzfeld in 1905". Herzfeld produced this map during his visit to Samarra in 1905, long before he went to the mentioned region with Sarre in 1907. We know that Herzfeld intensified his studies on

4 I would like to express my gratitude to Havva Koç from the Istanbul Archaeological Museums who kindly provided me access to the archival documents and to Firat Boztaş, research assistant at our department, who photographed the documents with utmost care.

5 Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA) [Prime Ministry Ottoman Archive], İ-HR., no. 409/ 1325/Ş-20, leff 1.

6 BOA., İ-HR., no. 409/ 1325/Ş-20, leff [document] 4.

7 İstanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri Arşivi (İAMA) [Istanbul Archaeological Museums Archive], no. 3270/68.

8 İAMA, no. 2080/36.

9 İAMA, no. 2080/36, leff 3.

10 İAMA, no. 2080/36.

Islamic culture especially after he had visited the ancient city of Samarra in Iraq during this first study trip.

The permission that Sarre applied for was granted to him by the Ottoman authorities almost one year later. It was granted in a period which marks the initial stage of the constitution of a new administrative system in Ottoman state bureaucracy. As a matter of fact, the Second Constitutional Monarchy was declared, and on 27 April 1909, Sultan Mehmed Reşad replaced Abdülhamid II who lost his legitimacy to the throne. It was a time of constitutional instability. Within the same year, Osman Hamdi passed away, and Halil Ethem was appointed to take up his post as director of the Imperial Museum.

A letter by Enver Bey, soon to carry the title “Paşa”, sent from London to the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 1910 refers to the fact that the French started an excavation in Samarra by the time when Sarre had applied to the Ottoman authorities for the same undertaking. Enver Paşa, who at this time worked at the Berlin Embassy as a military attaché, recommended Sarre, whom he personally knew very well, for the concession grant, referring to him as a very distinguished academic.¹¹ Viollet had unearthed wall sectors and made eight boxes of small finds. However, according to the instructions sent by the Imperial Museum, the excavations were interrupted and the boxes handed over to the local government.¹² These boxes were later given to Herzfeld for examination.

At the end of the application process, on the 27th of July 1910, the permit for archaeological excavations in and around the city of Samarra for two years was granted to Sarre by the Sultan (Fig. 4).¹³ The permission was issued after Sarre had paid the concession fee of 20 Ottoman Liras.¹⁴

Once the excavation permit had been granted, a commissar was appointed, as it was customary practice of the Ottoman bureaucracy. He had to supervise the excavation work and to keep records of the finds uncovered. Selahaddin Bey was the first commissar charged by the Imperial Museum with the control of the Samarra excavations. He was promoted with a monthly salary of 10 Liras during the course of his mission and with additional 10 Liras for his transportation costs there and back. The monthly salary and the transportation costs set by the Ottoman Law of Ancient Monuments were to be paid by the excavator. An instruction including ten articles listing his missions as a commissar at the Samarra excavations was also sent to Selahaddin Bey at the initial phase of his work.¹⁵

The excavations in Samarra were entirely carried out by Herzfeld who acted as Sarre’s representative. Sarre, who traveled twice to Samarra from Germany did not take part in the field work but studied the small finds. The first excavation season in Samarra started on the 9th January 1911 and was completed on the 30th March in the same year.¹⁶ Its results and its finds with all their characteristic features were listed in a special excavation book. Sample pages of this book signed by Selahaddin Bey and Herzfeld are given in the appendix (Figs.

11 Telegraph sent by Enver Bey military attaché at the Berlin Embassy dated 14th February 1325: BOA, BEO, no. 3868/290076, leff 3. During the course of the research on the same topic that I made later, I came across documents supporting Enver Paşa’s notice. Indeed, the French architect and art historian Henri Viollet held around the same time excavations in Samarra at the sites of al-Ashiq and Dar al-Khilafah with a special permit that he received from the governor of Baghdad.

12 İAMA., no. 2918/40.

13 İAMA., no. 68. Here, the permit of 18th August 1910 is given.

14 BOA., DH.MUİ, no. 119/21.; BOA., BEO., no. 3787/284015.

15 İAMA., no. 3270/68.

16 İAMA., no. 294, leff 2.

5/ a-b).¹⁷ This first book also includes illustrations of every single find. The excavation report presented by Selahaddin Bey to the Imperial Museum informs us that the Great Mosque of Samarra built by the Abbasid caliph al-Mustansir Billah was chosen as the first site to be investigated. Here, the excavations were started at the major outer gate with 150 workers. From the mosque nothing remains but four enclosure walls and the spiral shaped minaret of 70 m height. Selahaddin Bey states that Herzfeld's principal aim was to uncover the stones of the major gate in order to conceive its original architectural style. The site of the ablution fountain at the center of the mosque was excavated too. Afterwards, the excavation at the base of the minaret called Malwiya brought to light the quadrangular form of this structure. Hereafter, the excavations were transferred on 3rd March 1911 to a site known as Guraybiyya in the South of Samarra, on the bank of Euphrates. On this site, dwellings of the same style, a great number of *pithoi* and ink bottles were uncovered. The walls of the houses were made of mud brick; the interiors were covered with decorated plaster.¹⁸

In the next excavation period of the first campaign, lasting from 22 September to 13 October 1911, Samarra received a new commissar who would keep his post until the end of the excavations: Abdürrezzak Bey who just spent two years as former vice commissar of the Babylon excavations.¹⁹ Both his reports and the regular charts which he had to produce every 15 days, were much better organized and much more academic than those of his predecessor. The dates were written on top of these charts, and the archaeological finds unearthed on the excavation field were numbered one by one. Also, the reference number of the object and its amount were given in the journal. Under the title "name of the item", the type of the find was defined, such as piece, pipe or brick etc., whereas the title "kind of the item" referred to the material the find was made of, such as marble, iron, terra-cotta, glass, timber or lead etc. The date of the discovery of the find was registered under the title "days". The workers had Friday off since this was holiday for the Ottomans. The column with the heading "date" was meant for the exact day, month and year of the discovery of the find. The section "explanation" included accurate descriptions such as "potsherd with human depiction", "ornamented pieces of the ceiling" or "parts of the ceiling decorated with inlaid ebony pieces". At the end of the Samarra excavations, 1004 archaeological finds were registered in these charts.

The reports presented by Abdürrezzak Bey to the Imperial Museum direction until the end of the Samarra excavations contain much more extensive data on the particular sites of the excavations and the details of the work. They also include information on the number of the workers at the different sites, the detailed study of the remains, the way of casting of the uncovered pieces and the overall activities of Herzfeld or Sarre in the excavation region. Likewise, they mention the activities by Lieutenant Ludloff who had especially traveled from Germany to prepare detailed drawings of the excavation field by fixing the distances of the archaeological remains from one to another, and the activities of Beger, an engineer, who supervised the casts which were produced of the stucco (*Cf.* the article by Kröger).

Friedrich Sarre stopped the excavation for a certain time. A document which was sent by Sarre to the governor of Baghdad on the 6th January 1912 informs us that he had closed the excavations temporarily due to approaching winter time until July of the next year and, since he did not find sufficient time to prepare the casts of the wall decorations.²⁰ The archaeologi-

17 İAMA., no. 294, leff 3.

18 İAMA., no. 294, leff 1.

19 İAMA., no. 1085.

20 İAMA., no. 1686/68, leff 4.

cal finds that had been uncovered up to this date were kept inside boxes in the Samarra town hall and it was determined that the excavation site should be watched by a guard during the day and by gendarmes during the night.²¹

However, by the time the next excavations would start again, the two years excavation permit would have been expired. For this reason, Sarre sent a letter to Halil Ethem Bey on 23rd February 1912, applying for an extension for one year.²² Sultan Mehmed Reşad's approval for the extension of Friedrich Sarre's excavations from 18 August 1912 onwards for one year was issued on 7 March 1912.²³ On 6th May 1912, a second permission document for the extension of the Samarra excavations for one year was prepared (Fig. 6).²⁴ However, the second campaign started somewhat later on 2nd December 1912.

The excavations within the period of this extension were once again to be supervised by Abdürrezzak Bey who again prepared the reports and the charts of the finds. As a remarkable act of this period, Herzfeld suggested that some samples of the various uncovered marbles, painted plasters and potsherds should be sent to Berlin for a scientific examination since this could not be done on site. The Ottoman authorities accepted his wish, stressing that "the ancient finds to be sent would definitely not get lost since Prof. Sarre and Dr. Herzfeld are highly respected and trustworthy persons".²⁵ Then, an official report was prepared to catalogue the type and number of the samples selected by Herzfeld and Abdürrezzak Bey to be sent to Berlin. 134 different archaeological finds were photographed and placed into five chests carrying the marks S and A, and delivered by the commissar to the ship named Markomanya of the German Company. The ship was to sail from Basra to Istanbul where the finds would be received by the Imperial Museum. The museum direction had the task then to send the finds from there to Berlin (28 May 1914).²⁶

Samarra's archaeological excavations which had started in January 1911 were brought to an end on Wednesday, the 18th of June 1913. The casts of the uncovered finds were sent inside boxes part by part to Germany. Herzfeld returned back to Germany by way of Iran on the 8th of July 1913. The ancient pieces that had been uncovered during the entire course of the excavations were all wrapped in cotton, dry grass and straw, and placed into chests for protection. 115 chests and 120 timbers containing cast decorations were kept in a room in an underground space provided in the town hall. The door of the room was sealed by Abdürrezzak Bey whereas the entrance to the underground space was walled up with lime and brick. Two pieces of marble roller stones which were too heavy to transport into the reserved spaces were passed to the local government of Samarra.²⁷ Abdürrezzak Bey set out for Baghdad on Wednesday the 9th of July after having accomplished all these tasks.²⁸ A decision was taken to employ two guards who would work in the name of the museum, since the local gendarme forces were thought to be insufficient for the full protection of the excavated sites, building foundations and walls.²⁹

21 İAMA., no. 1361.

22 İAMA., no. 4619/68.

23 BOA., BEO., no. 4017/301204.

24 İAMA., no. 68.

25 İAMA., no. 5549-5550/68, leff 1.

26 İAMA., no. 5549-5550/68, leff 3.

27 İAMA., no. 5704/68, leff 1.

28 İAMA., no. 5704/68, leff 4.

29 İAMA., no. 5704/68, leff 2.

In this article I tried to display the results of the research that I have made to clarify the bureaucratic side of the excavations in Samarra taking the Ottoman documents as a base. This study will doubtlessly comprise much more details after being published as an entity. A different consideration of the Samarra excavations through the Ottoman archives will then be exposed with the publication of the lists that include detailed information on the excavations in search of Abbasid-Islamic art and culture, and the features of the unearthed archaeological remains.

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