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All for a Silver Vase? Osman Hamdi Bey's Indignant Resignation Letter from the Ottoman Imperial Museum

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Context

In c. 2400 BCE, a ruler in southern Mesopotamia named En-metena ordered that a vase be fashioned and dedicated to Ningirsu, the god of war and agriculture. Mounted on a copper stand, the gleaming body of the vase was masterfully hammered from a single sheet of silver. It was decorated in two registers with fine, linear incisions of couchant calves arranged above a series of heraldic compositions featuring the lion-headed Imdugud bird, Ningirsu's symbol. As evidenced by the ekphrastic inscription in Sumerian wrapping around its mouth and referring to its "refined" silver, it was appreciated in its own time as an exquisite work.¹

About 4300 years later, an employee of the Ottoman Imperial Museum named Bedri Bey telegraphed his superiors from Nāşiriyya that a vase had been unearthed in archaeological excavations led by the French diplomat Ernest de Sarzec in Tello.² As the 1884 bylaw on antiquities established state ownership of all excavated material in principle,³ the vase arrived in Istanbul and was displayed in the Ottoman Imperial Museum. This marked the start of a new episode in this object's millennia-long adventures, which were soon to become entangled with inter- and intra-governmental controversies, the expansion of universal museums, and the use of antiquities as bargaining chips.

Right after the excavation of the vase, Sarzec called it his "best object," and when the time came for the customary division of finds, the French team leveraged the vase to secure the delivery of other important sculptures. Hence, the vase was not among the objects that were handed over to the French Embassy in April 1890. Still, Léon Heuzey, curator at the Louvre Museum, negotiated its temporary loan for restoration

¹ For the inscription, see Douglas Frayne, *Presargonic Period, 2700-2350 BC* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 208–9.

² BOA, MÜZ. ARK. 10/78 (17 Nisan 1304/29 April 1888).

³ For the full text of the 1884 bylaw, see "Âşâr-ı 'Atika Nizāmnāmesi," *Düstur*, 1. Tertib, 4. Zeyl (Dersaadet: Matba'a-yı 'Osmāniye, 1302/1886), 89–97 (in Ottoman Turkish); Hamit Zübeyr Koşay, M.E. Zarfı Orgun, Sadi Bayram, and Erdoğan Tan, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu ve Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Çağlarında Türk Kazı Tarihi*, vol. 1/2 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2013), 794–99 (in modern Turkish) and Nicole Chevalier, *La recherche archéologique française au moyen-orient: 1842-1947* (Paris: Editions recherche sur les civilisations, 2002), 497–500 (in French).

purposes and highlighted its art historical significance in publications. It became clear that the Vase of En-metena was a unique find—the earliest surviving silver cult vessel from ancient Mesopotamia.

Meanwhile in Istanbul, the director of the Ottoman Imperial Museum, Osman Hamdi Bey, was working toward the institutionalisation and expansion of the Museum and the School of Fine Arts. It was within this context that Vincent Scheil, an Assyriologist affiliated with the Imperial Museum informed Heuzey that the Ottoman side was open to trading antiquities from Tello—including “even the Vase of Entemena”—in exchange for books.⁴ Indeed, there was an ongoing conversation between Heuzey and Hamdi Bey about the vase, the fate of which, according to the former, was “in the hands of” the latter.⁵

About a year later, Scheil’s remark came close to fruition when Hamdi Bey informed the Ottoman Ministry of Education that he had received a proposal from the Louvre with regards to the vase. He added that he would support relinquishing this object because the Ottoman School of Fine Arts was in “extreme need” of copies of European paintings and architectural models to be used as a study collection, and “this vase, in terms of its quality, is not one of those antiquities considered to be of great rarity, nor, for that reason, extremely necessary to the Imperial Museum, one can see no inconvenience in accepting the proposal that was made.”⁶

⁴ Nicole Chevalier, “De Tello au Louvre: les aventures du vase d’Entéména,” in *Collectanea orientalia: histoire, arts de l’espace et industrie de la terre: études offertes en hommage à Agnès Spycket*, ed. Hermann Gasche and Bartel Hrouda (Neuchâtel and Paris: Recherches et publications, 1996), 78. The Louvre had already donated sixty-five volumes, alongside plaster casts of some statues in its collection, to the School of Fine Arts (see BOA, MÜZ.ARK. 10/83 (23 Eylül 1305/5 October 1889)). Hamdi Bey was circulating similar inquiries among other foreign teams as well. See, for example, Matthew Ismail, *Wallis Budge: Magic and Mummies in London and Cairo* (Kilkerran: Hardinge Simpole, 2011), 139.

⁵ Letter from Heuzey to Hamdi Bey, 25 January 1894, quoted in Henri Metzger, *La correspondance passive d’Osman Hamdi Bey* (Paris: Diffusion de Boccard, 1990), 94. Cf. Edhem Eldem, “An Ottoman Archaeologist Caught Between Two Worlds: Osman Hamdi Bey (1842–1910),” in *Archaeology, Anthropology and Heritage in the Balkans and Anatolia: The Life and Times of F.W. Hasluck, 1878–1920*, ed. David Shankland (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), 145–46 and his important correction to Metzger’s transcription on p. 146, n. 1. See also Edhem Eldem, *Osman Hamdi Bey Sözlüğü* (Ankara: Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2010), 272.

⁶ Chevalier, “De Tello au Louvre,” 78 (my translation).

This led to nothing short of an intra-governmental scandal. Hearing about the Louvre's proposal and Hamdi Bey's position on this matter, a royal decree was issued, ordering the formation of a special committee to decide on such proposals—a measure that would essentially undermine Hamdi Bey's authority.⁷ The decree also ordered the delivery of the vase to the Imperial Palace for examination by the sultan himself.

The letter published here is Hamdi Bey's response to this request, which concludes with his resignation attempt.⁸ His resignation apparently came as a surprise. The Minister of Education, Zühdü Pasha, tried hard and long “to appease his [Hamdi Bey's] broken heart,”⁹ and after much convincing, Hamdi Bey agreed to continue in his post. Stressing that the value of his contributions could easily be established by comparing the state of the Imperial Museum before and after he took office, Hamdi Bey concluded that the individuals who circulated those serious accusations were “immoral” and acted with “malice.”¹⁰ While this episode makes it clear that the fate of the vase was, in fact, not “in the hands of” Hamdi Bey, he did take steps to re-enforce his authority. Several months after this incident, he urged the Ministry of Education to inquire with the Palace to see when the vase was going to be sent back to its “dedicated space” in the museum galleries. The response to this inquiry was terse: the vase was to stay with the sultan.¹¹

This impasse was resolved rather abruptly on 8 February 1896. The French ambassador Paul Cambon was invited by Abdülhamid II to a long reception—an “infernal din,” as Cambon later described it—which did have one silver lining: “I asked the Sultan on behalf of the Louvre for the famous silver vase from Tello, of which Mr. Heuzey dreams night and day, and His Majesty gave it to me.”¹² It was as simple as that. A few weeks later, the vase was received in Paris by Heuzey himself, who

⁷ BOA, İ.HUS. 33/66 (3 Kânûn-i Şânî 1310/15 January 1895).

⁸ BOA, MF.MKT. 247/1.3 ([n.d.] Kânûn-i Şânî 1310/[n.d.] January 1895. This letter must have been written between 16–21 Kânûn-i Şânî 1310 / 28 January–2 February 1895.

⁹ BOA, A.MKT.MHM. 534/13.2 (23 Kânûn-i Şânî 1310/4 February 1895).

¹⁰ BOA, MF. MKT. 247/1.8 (8 Şubat 1310/20 February 1895).

¹¹ BOA, MF.MKT. 247/1.9 (27 Mart 1311/8 April 1895); BOA, BEO. 601/45029.2 (30 Mart 1311/11 April 1895); BOA, MF.MKT. 247/1.11 (3 Nisan 1311/15 April 1895).

¹² Paul Cambon, *Correspondance. 1870-1924* (Paris: Grasset, 1940), 1:401. See also Cambon's thank-you note dated 13 February 1896 (BOA, Y.PRK.TŞF. 4/55).

worriedly wondered if it “has had to suffer too much for eighteen months at the hands of the Messieurs du S rail.”¹³ It was then placed prominently in “Le Salle de Sarzec” at the Louvre in a dedicated glass case, and remains one of the most celebrated pieces in the Mesopotamian galleries.

By violating the regulations that he himself sanctioned, Abd lhamid II not only did *not* return the vase to the Ottoman Imperial Museum, but he went so far as to “re-turn” it to a *different* museum, and not even in exchange for books or architectural models. Such special arrangements, initiated by the sultan or at times by Osman Hamdi Bey himself, were part and parcel of the politics of archaeology and museology in the late Ottoman Empire.¹⁴ In this case, the sultan’s gesture, showcasing his incontestable authority to his own subjects—Hamdi Bey included—as well as foreign dignitaries, rendered the protracted intra-governmental controversy and Hamdi Bey’s resignation nothing but a footnote.

Transcription

M ze-i H m y n

numro

Ma ‘ rif ne  ret-i cel lesine

Devletl  efendim    retleri

M ze-i h m y na gelen    r-ı ‘at kani  birer bah ne ile Avrupa m zelerine g nderilmekde oldu  ve ez-c mle bir bu uk sene mu addem // bulunmu  olan bir s m destini  ba ‘ zı antika modelleriyle m b delesini mute avver bulundu  istihb r k lnmi  oldu ndan //    r olunan destini  man  r-ı ‘ l  buyurulmak   re tak d mi ve bir  omisy n te  kiliyle ba ‘d-ez- n o  omisy n n ma ba ası // olmadık a bu mi ill  mu ‘ mel t n icr ’ olunmaması  eref- ud r buyurulan ir de-i seniyye-i    ret-i   l fet-

¹³ Letter from Heuzey to the French Ministry of Education, 23 February 1896. This letter is quoted in full in Chevalier, “De Tello au Louvre,” 80 and partially in Maurice Pillet, “Hamdi-Bey et la Mission de Sarzec   Tello,” *Revue Arch ologique* 46 (July–December 1955), 7.

¹⁴ Zeynep  elik, *About Antiquities: Politics of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016). Other famous examples of Abd lhamid II’s gifts include the sculptures of Ephesus presented to Franz Joseph I of Austria and a section of the Mschatta gate given to Kaiser Wilhelm I of Prussia.

penāhī muḳteẓā-yı celīlesinden // bulundığı mābeyn-i hümāyūn-ı mülūkāne baş kitābet-i celīlesinden bā-teẓkire-i ḥuṣūṣīye vāḳi‘ olan tebliğ üzerine bā-teẓkire-i sāmīye // iş‘ār buyurılıb meẓkūr komisyon derdest teşkīl bulunduğundan mebhūsün-‘anh destiniñ sür‘at-ı tesyārı // şeref-vārid olan seksen toḳuz numarolu ve 16 kânūn-i ṣānī sene [1]310 tārīḥli teẓkire-i ‘ālīye-i cenāb-ı neẓāret-penāhīlerine emr ü beyān // buyurulmuş ve zikr olunan desti müze-i hümāyūn mu‘āvinī sa‘ādetlü Ḥalīl Bege tevdī‘en irsāl ü tāḳdīm kılınmış // olduğunu ve müze-i hümāyūna gelen āṣār-ı ‘atīḳanıñ birer bahāne ile Avrupa müzelerine gönderilmekde olduğına // dā‘ir ‘ācizlerine vāḳi‘ olan isnādı hīç bir vāḳt ḳabūl idemeyeceğimden bu günden i‘tibāren müze-i hümāyūna // devām itmekte ma‘zūr bulunduğımı ‘arz iderim ol-bābda emr ü fermān ḥazret-i men-lehū’l-emriñdir

fī Şa‘bān sene [1]312 ve fī Kānūn-i Ṣānī sene [1]310

bende

Ḥamdī

Translation

Imperial Museum

number

To the Exalted Ministry of Education

Dear illustrious sir,

It was communicated by the exalted Chief Secretary of the Imperial Private Apartments of His Majesty to the Grand Vizieriate that because it has been said that antiquities arriving at the Imperial Museum are being sent to European museums under various pretenses, and that a silver vessel which was found one and a half years ago may be exchanged for some models and copies,¹⁵ an imperial decree of His Majesty the Caliph ordered the presentation of the aforementioned vessel for the observation of His Majesty, as well as the formation of a commission, without the mandate of which these sorts of dealings are no longer to be carried out.

¹⁵ lit. “antique models,” most likely referring to copies of paintings, architectural models, and casts.

As this commission has been formed, the speedy delivery of the aforementioned vessel was ordered in the ministerial note dated 16 Kānūn-i Sānī [1]310 [28 February 1895] and numbered 89. Accordingly, the said vessel was dispatched and presented by the Assistant Director of the Imperial Museum, Halil Bey.¹⁶

Since I could never accept the accusation of sending antiquities that arrived at the Imperial Museum to European museums under any pretense, I respectfully submit that I must excuse myself from continuing at the Imperial Museum from this day forth. In that regard, the command belongs to him who commands all.

January/February 1895

Your servant,

Hamdi

¹⁶ Halil (Edhem) Bey was the younger brother of Osman Hamdi Bey and succeeded him as the director of the Ottoman Imperial Museum in 1910.

Illustration



Vase of En-metena, c. 2400 BCE; silver (vase) and copper alloy (stand); H. 30.4 cm; diam. 10 cm (neck); 18 cm (body); excavated at Tello, Iraq. Musée du Louvre, AO 2674.
[Photo](#): Musée du Louvre, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

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