

Cultural Imperialism versus Protectionism? The role of Antiquities as a matter of conflict between the German and Ottoman art policy between 1890 and 1918

– Sebastian Willert –

The Ottoman and German Empire signed a secret treaty concerning the partage of artefacts excavated within the territory of the Porte in the year 1899. While Ottoman scientists regarded this treaty only valid for the German led excavation of the ancient Greek city Milet, the German representatives understood it in tradition of the hitherto practised German Cultural Imperialism in the Orient as generally admitted. With Sultan Abdülhamid II's intervention the conflict between the scientists obtained a shattering effect which determined henceforth the German-ottoman diplomatic relations.

The ottoman protection of cultural heritage is a result of a growing sentiment of a need for measures and resistance against the western exploitation and translocation of antiquities since the 1850s. Berlin tried simultaneously to intensify its political, economic and social penetration on the Porte. This resulted especially in an increased activity of German archaeologists in the Near East.¹

Despite the political approach between both countries – soon to form an alliance at the dawn of the outbreak of the First World War – the German and Ottoman Empire developed to be more and more antagonists regarding the question of how to deal with the cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire. Since the Crimean War the Porte was commonly satirised as the “Sick Man of Europe”. Even Berlin defined the Ottoman Empire as inferior and in colonial dependency to Europe and tried to strengthen the exploitation of the cultural heritage.

The focus of this project is the analysis of the conflict around the different interpretations of the secret treaty of 1899 and to examine the dimensions of the scholarly efforts, the interactions of German and Ottoman scientists and the outcome concerning the German and Ottoman arts and cultural policy. Furthermore the politicization and instrumentalization of cultural heritage through two nations. The analysis essentially bases in this connection on the discourses, groups of players and last but not least the bilateral tensions generating cultural objects and excavations. In addition to the study of the differing agendas and intentions of collection the project focuses on investigating to what extent the Porte tried to exploit its cultural heritage in the sense of *nation building* in order to establish an “Ottoman Identity” within its citizen of different ethnos and religions.

¹ Vgl. Çakır Philip, Filiz: Ernst Herzfeld and the Excavations at Samarra. In: Bahrani, Zainab/Çelik, Zeynep/Eldem, Edhem (Hrsg.): Scramble for the Past. A story of Archeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753–1914, S. 383–397, hier S. 382 u. Mietke, Auf der Suche nach neuen Ausgrabungsstätten, S. 116.