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Callaghan Todhunter

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EXHIBITING POWER: PROTO-MUSEOLOGICAL ORIGINS IN THE EMPIRES OF ANTIQUITY

by

Callaghan Todhunter

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Ancient Civilization

Robert Cargill
Thesis Mentor

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All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
Ancient Civilization have been completed.

Robert Ketterer
Ancient Civilization Honors Advisor

**Exhibiting Power: Proto-Museological Themes
in the Empires of Antiquity**

Callaghan Todhunter

**Undergraduate Honors Thesis
University of Iowa Department of Classics
Robert R. Cargill, Supervisor
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ABSTRACT:

While scholars date the earliest museums to the 15th and 16th centuries CE, there is evidence that institutions of collection, preservation, and the public display of artifacts existed beginning as far back as the 12th century BCE. From the war-spoils brought to Susa by the Elamite monarch Shutruk-Nahkunte I in 1158 BCE to the peristyle gardens of Imperial Roman villas, the origins of museum culture can be traced through the major empires of antiquity. This thesis examines specific Near Eastern, Greek, and Roman sites for evidence that could qualify them as early proto-museums, as well as overall cultures of collection and display within empires. This thesis also addresses proto-museological themes in antiquity by examining material and literary evidence in an attempt to refute the idea that the museum is a modern colonialist construction.

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INTRODUCTION

The International Association of Museums defines the modern museum as “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”¹ Museum history is largely understudied, and is often whitewashed due to the popularization of museums during periods that experienced the rise of colonial European powers. While modern scholarship places the earliest museums in the 15th–16th centuries CE, there exists evidence that institutions, including non-Western ones, engaged in the collection, preservation, and public display of artifacts beginning as far back as the 12th century BCE. This evidence spans both classical and Near Eastern cultures, and demonstrates that while the Romans refined museological themes and practiced a more overt culture of collection, the modern concept of the museum had its origins in the Near East, with the Elamite and Babylonian empires.

The idea of a “collection” in the sense of preservation of objects of cultural heritage is particularly relevant to this thesis because it stands in opposition to museological malpractices such as the gathering of trophies and reliquaries, which plague modern museums and contribute to their misuse. Because museums have their origins in problematic and institutionally racist organizations and practices, an understanding of what comprises “good” museum practices is vital when studying any museological or pseudo-museological developments.

¹ International Council of Museums, “‘Museum Definition’ as adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, Austria, on 24 August, 2007,” *ICOM.museum*. <http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/.9>.

In researching the ancient origins of museums, it is necessary to understand the consequences of colonialism and white supremacy that accompany museum culture and collection practices. Traditionally, museums have been fed with artifacts and curiosities collected by “explorers” representing white colonial powers. This point is useful in understanding ancient museums because it negates the central argument against museological origins in the ancient world: namely, that because objects which were displayed in empires of antiquity were largely stolen during conquests of other peoples, they cannot be considered museum artifacts, but rather the spoils of war or trophies.

Disqualifying collections of war booty and trophies from classification as a museum seems like a valid argument until one considers the fact that many of the artifacts on display in modern museums are the result of conquest, looting, theft, and controversial sales. These practices are often illegal, and definitely morally objectionable, but are nonetheless an ongoing dilemma for modern museums. And yet, we consider these modern collections and the buildings that house them to be museums.

Even outside of museums, illegal antiquities collections and the illicit trade of ancient objects are flourishing, often as a direct result of numerous conflicts in the Middle East.² The objects appropriated from these conflicts often find their way into western museums. The Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C has been embroiled in a number of legal actions centering around their questionable acquisition of a number of ancient objects. The museum’s Founder and Chairman of the Board, Steve Green, who made millions of dollars as the founder

² Chris Boyette, “Hobby Lobby to pay \$3 Million fine, Forfeit Ancient Artifacts,” *CNN.com*, July 6, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/07/05/us/hobby-lobby-ancient-artifacts-trnd/index.html>.

and owner of the Hobby Lobby chain of craft stores, was charged with smuggling culturally important cuneiform tablets from war torn areas into the country with the express purpose of entering them into the museum's collection.³ The museum was also beset by a host of criticism by scholars complaining that a number of their Dead Sea Scroll fragments were acquired from black market dealers and were forgeries.⁴ The Museum of the Bible later issued a press release in October 2018 confirming that some of the Dead Sea Scroll fragments that had been on display in their museum were indeed forgeries.⁵

Setting aside the obvious problems of theft and smuggling, the Hobby Lobby/Museum of the Bible controversy presents two major issues that plague museums today. The first is the commercialization of museums and the potential forfeiture of scholarship. If corporations can

³ Roberta Mazza, "Biblical History at What Cost?" *Bible History Daily*, July 24, 2017.

<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/artifacts-and-the-bible/hobby-lobby-museum-of-the-bible/>. See also Julie Zauzmer, and Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Hobby Lobby's \$3 Million Smuggling Case Casts a Cloud Over the Museum of the Bible," *Washington Post*, July 6, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/07/06/hobby-lobbys-3-million-smuggling-case-casts-a-cloud-over-the-museum-of-the-bible>.

⁴ Candida R. Moss, and Joel S. Baden, *Bible Nation: The United States of Hobby Lobby* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2017).

⁵ Press Release: "Museum of the Bible Releases Research Findings on Fragments in Its Dead Sea Scrolls Collection," *MuseumoftheBible.org*, Oct. 22, 2018.

<https://www.museumofthebible.org/press/press-releases/museum-of-the-bible-releases-research-findings-on-fragments-in-its-dead-sea-scrolls-collection>.

sponsor and illicitly assist museums, they may also be able to influence the content and messages of the exhibits. In this instance, Hobby Lobby smuggled clay tablets that had been looted from Iraqi museums following the U.S. involvement in armed conflicts there and purchased Dead Sea Scrolls from black market dealers for the purpose of owning and displaying objects believed to be of biblical importance in order to promote their own message of evangelical Christianity with little thought to the tablets' cultural significance outside of the biblical themes imposed on them by the Museum of the Bible.

The second major issue that arises from the Museum of the Bible case is that of war profiteering. Art and artifact thefts commonly occur at a much higher rate during times of war and turmoil.⁶ Following ISIS's seizure of portions of northern Iraq, antiquities were being looted from very important sites and museums. Profiteers like Steve Green can be said to utilize this kind of violence as a means by which to obtain stolen artifacts through smuggling and purchase through looters. As unfortunate as it is, artifact theft is certainly not a new phenomenon, and in fact has its roots in the creation of some of the largest and most eminent museums in the world.

The fundamental question of ownership of cultural heritage is one that has plagued archaeologists and museums for years. It is not simply a question of location, but one of politics, heritage, nationalism, and greed. Major museums such as the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, the Neues Museum in Berlin, and the Vatican Museums in Vatican City are full of objects which were "discovered" by white European archaeologists digging in colonized countries. Because of this, any argument claiming that an institution cannot be classified as a

⁶ For examples, see: James Cuno, *Who Owns Antiquity?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 53, 62-64, 98-99, 113.

museum simply because it obtained objects in an imperialist manner or through military conquest must be rejected as these constitute the origin stories of most European museums. The problematic associations of museums with the results of the acquisition benefits of colonization or outright theft cannot therefore be ignored in any museological study. Rather, they are particularly relevant when examining the origins of museums and collection cultures.

A HISTORY OF MODERN MUSEUM PRACTICES

Modern scholarship often attributes the beginnings of museum development to the Renaissance practice of keeping *Wunderkammer*, or “cabinets of curiosity.” These collections, which were undefined in terms of their boundaries and scope, were often nothing more than rooms filled with objects of interest to the owner. One of the most famous *Wunderkammer* belonged to 17th century Danish physician Ole Worm.⁷ It was catalogued, and held objects as varied as taxidermized animals, mummies, automata, and Native American crafts. Some of these objects had academic value—Worm’s collection helped to prove that what had once been thought of as a unicorn horn was in fact that of a narwhal—but the majority were simply objects of visual or anecdotal interest, gathered by prominent European collectors and amassed for the first time in one space. Worm intended the collection to foster study and discovery, but the collection itself functioned as a demonstration of his own abilities.⁸ Collectors of the time

⁷ Jole Shackelford, “Documenting the Factual and the Artifactual: Ole Worm and Public Knowledge,” *Endeavour* 23/2 (1999): 66.

⁸ For further information on Worm’s collection, see his Latin text detailing the collection and his research: Ole Worm, *Museum Wormianum; seu, Historia rerum rariorum, tam naturalium, quam*

believed that they were doing virtuous work, gathering physical objects that reflected God's power and encouraged the pursuit of knowledge. In many regards, Ole Worm's collection was nothing more than an extension of a millennia's worth of collection culture. His goals, to simultaneously please God, impress his contemporaries, and further an understanding of the world, were essentially the same as those of the emperors and elites of antiquity.

Further research into early European museum practice, however, reveals that these intentions were often overshadowed by less altruistic ones. Early European museums were often misused and founded on stolen artifacts and poor archaeological practices that contributed to the collection and display of trophies and relics, rather than objects of academic significance. Theft and treasure hunting undermine genuine efforts to preserve cultural heritage and lend themselves to destructive museological practices. These bad practices are also the reason that so many important archaeological finds from areas of the Levant and Near East, for example, are housed in European museums. During the so-called "golden age of archaeology" in the 19th century, European explorers "discovered" hundreds of sites and brought artifacts back to museums in their own countries.⁹ Many of these artifacts remain in European museums today, and there is generally little research or acknowledgment given to their provenance.

artificialium, tam domesticarum, quam exoticarum, quae Hafniae Danorum in aedibus auctoris servantur (Lugduni Batavorum, ex officina Elseviriorum, 1655).

⁹ For more on 19th century archaeology and colonialism, see Margarita Díaz-Andreu, *A World History of Nineteenth-Century Archaeology: Nationalism, Colonialism and the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Often, the artifacts most sought by European archaeologists took the form of relics—religious objects that were gathered not for their cultural importance, but simply because owning them meant owning a piece of religious lore. The search for relics began in earnest with Helena Augusta, the mother of Constantine, in the 4th century CE, and has continued into the present day. The story of Helena’s discovery of the True Cross, and of the transformation of her home into a kind of church-museum, was a well-known myth in the Middle Ages, and was the model on which modern relic-seekers have based their own missions.

Helena’s quest to find objects associated with Christ could in many ways be understood through a museological lens: she was seeking out objects of historical significance for the purpose of bringing them together and displaying them. But in truth, her relic hunting behaviors constitute bad museum practices and are a poor example of museological goals. Upon her discovery of the so-called nails of the crucifixion, for example, Helena purportedly had them melted down and sent to his son Constantine for use in his helmet and the bridle of his horse.¹⁰ This is clearly the antithesis of proper museum practice: she cared not about the objects themselves, but about their religious significance as talismans. Rather than preserving and displaying the nails for public appreciation, she destroyed them in an attempt to empower her son. This is the quintessential problem with relic collectors—their purpose is not to further an understanding of the world, but simply to be able to say that they hold a piece of religious history for themselves. Helena has been referred to as the “mother of archaeology,” and in a sense this is

¹⁰ Jan Willem Drijvers, “Helena Augusta, the Cross and the Myth: Some New Reflections,”

Millenium 8 (2011): 152.

true, if we consider that archaeology has traditionally gone hand-in-hand with colonial theft and the misuse of museums.

One example of exploitative and deceptive colonialist archaeology in modern times is the story of John Lewis Burckhardt, a Swiss traveler and artist who is credited—erroneously—with the discovery of the Nabataean city of Petra in Jordan (despite the fact that Petra had never been undiscovered territory to those living in the area). Burckhardt entered “Arabia,” which he locates in the same area as modern-day Saudi Arabia, in 1814. Because the city of Petra was off-limits to Europeans, Burckhardt spent two years learning Arabic, growing out his beard, and living in disguise as a Muslim man, so that he could deceive a Bedouin guide into leading him to the rumored city of Petra under the pretense of sacrificing a goat to Aaron. Once he had achieved his destination, he made a series of detailed drawings of the site, which he took back to Europe and showed to other archaeologists and treasure hunters. “Whether or not I have discovered the remains of the capital of Arabia Petræa,” he said, “I leave to the decision of Greek scholars...”¹¹ Never mind that the local Bedouin people to whom the site was sacred knew perfectly well what it was, or that it had never been hidden in the first place. The Scottish painter David Roberts followed soon after and returned with paintings and sketches of the site.¹² Once Europeans had

¹¹ John Lewis Burckhardt, *Travels in Arabia, Comprehending an Account of Those Territories in Hedjaz which the Mohammedans Regard as Sacred* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1968), 431.

¹² See “View of the ruins of Petra, Jordan, by David Roberts, 1839, watercolor painting,” in *Bridgeman Images: DeAgostini Library*, (ed. Bridgeman Images; New York: Bridgeman, 2014).

been to the site, the gates were opened to travel and archaeology, but also to looting and theft. Works of art from Petra are now housed in museums as far away as the Metropolitan Museum in New York City.

Today, the site of Petra is considered a UNESCO World Heritage site and is renowned for its beautiful buildings and the continuous new discoveries coming from the licensed archaeological excavations being conducted there.¹³ But the credit for many of the “discoveries” of these sites largely goes to European and American archaeologists. Likewise, the art and artifacts discovered at these sites are often not displayed in the near eastern and north African national museums of the countries in which they were discovered—a trend that only became commonplace in the second half of the 20th century—but are instead too often housed in European museums, having been delivered by European archaeologists and explorers, often displayed lacking appropriate contextual information about their provenance or cultural value.

There are examples of this from across the world: the case of the Elgin/Parthenon marbles is perhaps the most famous. The colonial bias inherent in museums is never more evident than in instances such as this: that European colonialists are credited with the invention of the museum, despite the fact that the objects their museums contain are no better than war

https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/bridgemandeag/view_of_the_ruins_of_petra_jordan_by_david_roberts_1839_watercolor_painting/.

¹³ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “Petra,” *WHC.UNESCO.org*. Accessed May 03, 2019.

<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/326>.

spoils or treasure.¹⁴ What, then, constitutes a museum? If colonial loot can be considered a museum artifact, does the dedication and display of war spoils in Roman temples constitute an exhibit? Does the Library of Alexandria, with its collections of literature and biological specimens, make up a museum collection? The idea that museums are colonialist institutions can only be refuted by a historical survey of the origins of similar collections in the ancient world. Areas of the ancient world as diverse as Rome, Assyria, Persia, and Egypt offer various institutions which are clearly the early ancestors of the modern museum, hundreds of years before Ole Worm began his collection.

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The Roman Empire was a civilization which placed great value on objects from the past, especially those objects which had special provenance or cultural significance. After all, according to Simon Price, “Roman myths were essentially myths of place.”¹⁵ The landscape of Rome was intertwined with its myths, and it therefore makes sense that the Romans were so focused on history and the preservation of ancient places. This fascination with history was cleverly employed by Augustus during his reign from the late 1st century BCE to the early 1st century CE. In an effort to convince the people that Rome’s greatness had not lapsed with the fall of the Republic, and to distance himself from the radical nature of his adopted father, Augustus

¹⁴ For many excellent examples of problematic archaeology and its direct effects on museums, see Cuno’s excellent book on antiquity and ownership in the 21st century: *Who Owns Antiquity?*

¹⁵ David E. Karmon, *The Ruin of the Eternal City: Antiquity and Preservation in Renaissance Rome* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

restored the institutions and buildings that were central to the traditional Roman self-image. He rebuilt crumbling temples and began rededicating the spolia and artwork kept within them. Many of the rededicated objects had little or no practical value beyond serving as political propaganda that promoted Rome by promoting Rome's historical might and cultural significance. For instance, the flintstones used during sacrifices by the *fetiales*, a college of priests dedicated to Jupiter, were dedicated at the temple of Jupiter Feretrius, along with other artifacts which served either no purpose or a very limited one.¹⁶ He added Greek and Roman artistic pieces to public spaces, and built frames to support them, not unlike those used to support large installations today.

In fact, under Augustus the entire city of Rome functioned as a kind of museum. It was a space filled with carefully repaired artifacts of the past, preserved and displayed as a reminder of Rome's once and future greatness. That is, Rome's cultural heritage—its art and architecture—was restored, preserved, and put on display for the purpose of promoting Rome itself. Temples and public buildings, while still in use, were themselves objects in a massive collection. Many of the important buildings repaired in the Augustan era were religious ones, and often served a dual purpose. They were preserved as historic buildings, but they also functioned as quasi-museums—spaces within which art was stored, displayed, and understood. Augustus appointed certain religious officials, a college of priests known as the *Aediles*, as a kind of curatorial staff tasked with maintaining public buildings and organizing temporary art exhibits for festivals, often with various objects from local collections alongside those taken from far-off conquered

¹⁶ Lawrence A. Springer, "The Cult and Temple of Jupiter Feretrius," *The Classical Journal* 50/1 (1954): 30.

places.¹⁷ This suggests an interest in objects of aesthetic value and a motion toward curated, themed art collections. That these restorations were often a political action does not necessarily take away from their museological value. Modern buildings like the Old Capitol Museum in Iowa City, Iowa, for example, which once served as the capital building of the State of Iowa, are preserved as proud displays of political history, despite the fact that they no longer serve any political function, because they function as museum spaces.

A notable example of such a political-historical restoration in ancient Rome is the Casa Romuli, or Hut of Romulus, on the Palatine Hill. The Hut is known to have been preserved and is mentioned in many travelers' accounts of Rome's important landmarks. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, for example, mentions that the hut, which stands on the southwestern slope of the Palatine, "... is preserved holy by those who have charge of these matters; they add nothing to it to render it more stately, but if any part of it is injured, either by storms or by the lapse of time, they repair the damage and restore the hut as nearly as possible to its former condition."¹⁸ The people described by Dionysius as "those who have charge of these matters" are most likely the *Aediles*, Augustus's appointed protectors of ancient buildings. This description fits nearly exactly with a modern understanding of the historic house-type museum.

¹⁷ Maia Wellington Gahtan, and Donatella Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes and Collecting: An Overview of the Public, Private, and Virtual Collections of the Ancient World," in *Museum Archetypes and Collecting in the Ancient World* (ed. Maia Wellington Gahtan and Donatella Pegazzano; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 5.

¹⁸ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.79.11.

Modern archaeologists have confirmed the presence of post holes at the supposed site of the hut. It is unlikely that the actual Casa Romuli, which would have been over 700 years old, was actually still standing in the 1st century CE. This makes the supposed hut described in the Augustan era even more interesting, because it must have been a complete reconstruction. In a city full of temples, theaters, and palaces, the hut must have seemed small and irrelevant. If it was rebuilt in the original archaic style, it was nothing but posts and a thatched roof. Yet it was rebuilt, repaired, and protected by an imperially-governed staff. Its significance extended beyond the tangible, and the hut served as a reminder of the glory of Rome's past. The "preserved physical integrity of this unchanged artifact spoke directly to profound concerns associated with the ongoing transformation of imperial Rome."¹⁹ It seems likely that the Casa Romuli therefore served much the same function as a modern museum: it preserved the past; was viewable by the public, as evidenced by Dionysius of Halicarnassus; was permanent; and served as a kind of history lesson and political warning for the people of Rome. This kind of visual caution was especially powerful for the Roman people, for whom art and history were an essential part of life. Even lower-class Romans who owned no art of their own were constantly surrounded with public architecture and statuary, and elite Romans often had artistic displays within their own homes.

In addition to governmentally-mandated museums, the Roman Empire was home to a plethora of private collections which also served as public art displays. As far back as the 2nd century BCE, generals and politicians had begun to create buildings in which to house their war spoils and personal collections. Often accessible to the public, these buildings were arranged in

¹⁹ Karmon, *The Ruin of the Eternal City*, 5.

aesthetically pleasing or significant ways. Visible displays of wealth and victory enhanced a general's standing with the people and solidified the memory of their successes. An excellent example of a publicly-displayed private collection is that of Gaius Assinius Pollio. Pollio, a renowned general, was given permission to rebuild the Atrium Libertatis after his victory in Illyria in 39 BCE. The building dated to the 2nd century BCE and was housed in the northwestern corner of the Forum of Caesar.²⁰ After the reconstruction, the Atrium housed a public library—possibly the first in Rome—and large viewing spaces for collections of art. This art included objects taken as spolia during Pollio's military campaigns as well as local art, some of which was specifically commissioned for the installation.²¹ The fact that some of the art was created for the sole purpose of being exhibited within this collection is remarkable because it indicates a movement away from display as a political act and toward simple visitor enjoyment. The Atrium Libertatis was constructed, of course, largely as self-promotion, but there seems to be genuine attention paid to the curation of pieces and their display in a historic and newly refurbished space which could have enhanced an appreciation of the art.

PTOLEMAIC EGYPT

The concept of collection curation was not exclusive to Rome. As early as the 6th century BCE in Greece, there is evidence for paleontology and specimen collection. Art from the time shows depictions of animal fossils that would have been extinct long before the creation of these works. This is especially true in cases of vase painting like that on the Monster of Troy vase,

²⁰ Gahtan and Pegazzano, "Museum Archetypes," 6.

²¹ Ibid.

which contains an image of a fossilized Miocene giraffe.²² Likewise, extremely early peoples from the Mediterranean dedicated fossilized bones and teeth at temples and buried them in graves. Thus, one could argue that early Greek scholars were interested in collecting objects, especially preserving the remains of animals and plants, for further study.

However, the best example of Greek collection and preservation of culturally significant objects is demonstrated by Ptolemy in the 4th century BCE and his legendary Library and Museum. In fact, the first formally recognized use of the word “museum” to describe a collection was in 1793 in revolutionary-era France, when the National Convention declared that the objects held in the Cabinet du Roi and Cabinet d’Histoire Naturelle no longer belonged to the king, but to the entire nation of France. They chose the specific term “museum” to describe the newly published collections.²³ The use of this term, rather than other, more widely used French terms like “*institut*” or “*galerie*” directly references the famous Musaeum of Alexandria, which was named for the Greek muses, the goddesses who oversaw poetry, music, and the arts. The term “Musaeum” is the Latin translation, and was widely used to describe the building at Alexandria because the fire which ultimately destroyed it occurred in the Roman era and therefore occurs often in Latin literature. Whether the French used the term to draw connections between the prestigious Musaeum and their own collection or to simply differentiate themselves by name from other galleries, the term certainly came weighted with authority, and began to be used more

²² Adrienne Mayor, *The First Fossil Hunters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 160.

²³ Paula Young Lee, “The Musaeum of Alexandria and the Formation of the Museum in Eighteenth-Century France,” *The Art Bulletin* 79/3 (1997): 385.

widely to refer to academic, serious collections which could be studied and appreciated by the public.

The Musaeum of Alexandria, which was destroyed in the 4th century CE, is best known for its famous Library, but was also home to meeting halls, residences, gardens, and many other spaces which served the scholars who traveled to Alexandria and took up residence within the Musaeum. Strabo described the Musaeum as having “a public walk, an *exedra* with seats, and a large house containing the common mess-hall of the men of learning who share the museum. This group of men not only hold property in common, but also have a priest in charge of the museum, who formerly was appointed by the kings.”²⁴ It had rooms for scholars of each specific discipline, lecture halls, a garden of rare flowers and a zoological collection of rare and exotic animals, human cadavers for use by physicians, painting spaces and galleries for artists, astronomy towers, and even pneumatic research rooms.²⁵ The Museum was essentially a very early university museum. Scholars came from other institutions throughout the Hellenistic world to live in Alexandria and study its collections, which were carefully preserved and displayed for just such a purpose. Books from the library could not be checked out and returned: rather, the library and Musaeum fostered discussion and analysis within their walls. Knowledge was understood through the collection itself, rather than small pieces.

²⁴ Strabo, *Geography* 17.1.8 (793–94).

²⁵ Giovanni Di Pasquale, “The Museum of Alexandria: Myth and Model,” in *From Private to Public: Natural Collections and Museums* (ed. Marco Beretta; Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2005), 4.

The Library and Musaeum at Alexandria are generally thought to have been built by Ptolemy Philadelphus, though there is little physical evidence to support this. A helpful account of the library's founding comes from the *Letter of Aristeas*. This document was written at an uncertain time and is most likely fictitious, but still contains what was most likely the common knowledge of the time. Based on citations and paraphrases by other authors, the text can be dated to around 150–100 BCE.²⁶ The letter itself is largely a praise of Jewish law and the origin story of the Septuagint, but its background is rooted in the Musaeum of Alexandria, and is therefore extremely helpful in piecing together the otherwise unknown intentions of Ptolemy in creating his library. In the *Letter*, so-called Aristeas, an official in Ptolemy's court, describes Ptolemy's desire to amass all of the world's best literature. It also mentions a specific curatorial staff, including a librarian named Demetrius of Phalerum, who was knowledgeable about literature including the Jewish scripture. Demetrius describes the Hebrew Scriptures as being worthy of the library because they are "full of wisdom and free from all blemish."²⁷ Even though the religion recorded within the Hebrew Scriptures did not align with Ptolemy's own, the *Letter* argues it was worthy of being placed in what must have been an exclusive collection of works. This language suggests that Ptolemy's intentions in creating the Musaeum and Library were to collect the best literature and knowledge from every culture and to display them together in one location. The information gleaned from this variety of texts could then be preserved, taught, and understood by the scholars who studied them. A collection of artifacts which do not align with a particular

²⁶ Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2002), 15.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

culture's beliefs, but which are gathered by a member of that culture for the purpose of study is extremely museum-oriented. It suggests an understanding of preservation and of knowledge on a universal platform which is generally considered to have developed much later in history.

Regardless of the fact that one purpose of the *Letter* is to promote the Hebrew Scriptures and cultural heritage as noble worthy of study, the fact that the *Letter* employed the Musaeum as part of its story, and understood the nature of it as a place where even foreign cultural achievements that were deemed "worthy" were to be collected, demonstrates that the Musaeum at Alexandria was understood to be similar to what we would consider a modern museum to be.

The information being gathered at Alexandria was on a hitherto-unknown scale, the likes of which are not seen elsewhere in the archaeological record until much later. It is claimed that Alexandria held up to 70,000 papyrus manuscripts, on which every branch of knowledge, translated into Greek, was stored in one place. The idea of this collection as a "wholeness"—an entity complete only when each object is stored with the rest—is critical to museum studies and to the idea of the museum as an institution, rather than a simple amassing of unrelated objects.²⁸ This was not a library in the sense that books could be checked out, studied, and returned: the texts and objects within Ptolemy's collections remained in their buildings, and it would therefore have been impossible to appreciate one without understanding it in the context of the collection.

PERSIA AND ASSYRIA

The Near East is an archaeologically rich and culturally significant region which is largely overlooked for its contributions to early knowledge-gathering and museological

²⁸ Di Pasquale, "The Museum of Alexandria," 2.

practices. Sites in Persia and Assyria boast a wealth of objects that were collected for the purposes of display and study, and yet are almost never researched for this purpose. This fact almost certainly has its roots in the aforementioned problems of colonial archaeology and European centrism: sites in the Near East could not possibly reflect early museum culture because many the discoveries made there were made by white European archaeologists in the 19th century. It is demonstrably incorrect, however, that the Near East provides no evidence of early museological practices, and this can be proven by a brief survey of two major sites in Persia and Assyria.

An excellent example of a very early proto-museum comes from the Elamite city of Susa. A commonly known site, but one which has not been appreciated for its significance as a very early proto-museum, Susa is located in modern day Iran, roughly 500 km outside of Baghdad. The site is famed for the wealth of significant objects from the 2nd millennium BCE, which were retrieved during digs in the 19th and early 20th centuries. These objects were immediately sent to the Louvre, where they are still housed today. Major finds from the site include the famous stele with the law code of Hammurabi, along with many other objects of various provenance. They are all thought to have been found within the same structure at Susa, though the archaeological records from the excavations are spotty and somewhat undetailed.²⁹ While these objects have been extensively studied for their individual artistic and historical value, little has been made of their presence in Susa. As a whole, the works of art from Susa are largely from the regions of Sippar and Akkad, both of which were located on the Western bank of the Euphrates. They were

²⁹ Joan Aruz, Prudence Oliver Harper, and Françoise Tallon, *The Royal City of Susa: Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), 22.

amassed in Susa by the Elamite king Shutruk-Nakhunte and his son Kutir-Nakhunte in the late 2nd millennium BCE, and remained there for almost 3,000 years.

Shutruk-Nakhunte ruled the Elamite empire from 1185–1155 BCE, at the height of its power. His military prowess allowed him to invade and conquer large swaths of Babylon, conquering various regions and constructing temples at important sites. During these campaigns, he captured and carried home works of “significant religious and dynastic monuments from cities within Elam as well, from Anshan and Choga Zanbil,”³⁰ which he amassed at the city of Susa. It is likely that the repository for these objects was a temple, probably to the god Inshushinak. This is evidenced by both the Elamite-era inscriptions on the monuments and a similar, though less significant, collection at Sippar within the walls of a temple to Shamash. The monuments retrieved by Shutruk-Nakhunte are significant not only for their visual and artistic value, but also because they represent significant moments in history. Many of the objects uncovered at Susa are still valued today for their cultural importance.



1 Seated Statue of A Mesopotamian Prince, Louvre

The Seated Statue of a Mesopotamian Prince, which now resides in the Louvre Museum, was created ca. 2000 BCE. It depicts a Mesopotamian ruler once thought to be Hammurabi, though details such as the carving of the beard suggest that the monarch probably ruled the city of Eshnunna at the very end of the third millennium BCE. The statue was stolen by Shutruk-

³⁰ Ibid, 161.

Nakhunte during one of his 12th century military campaigns, and was brought to Susa to be displayed. Interestingly, the statue bears an Elamite inscription which reads:

“I am Shutruk-Nakhunte, son of Halludush-Inshushinak, king of Anshan and Susa, who enlarged the kingdom, master, ruler of the land of Elam. Inshushinak my god having granted me this, I destroyed Eshnunna; I took away the statue and brought it to the land of Elam. I offered it to Inshushinak, my God.”³¹

This inscription is vital to an understanding of Shutruk-Nakhunte’s motivations in his collection of important artworks. It certainly emphasizes his devotion to his god Inshushinak, to whom the large collection of art is most likely dedicated, but it also suggests that he understood the statue as important enough to be retrieved and then inscribed. If this were simply a random piece of war booty, it would almost certainly not have been inscribed. Most works of art from the Elamite empire have inscriptions detailing the might of the king and the destruction of enemies. While the Mesopotamian Prince’s inscription does contain these details, it seems to be focused far more on the statue itself and its removal to Susa. This is especially interesting when combined with the inscription on another important work found at Susa, the Victory Stele of Naram-Sin.



2 Victory Stele of Naram-Sin, Louvre

³¹ Françoise Demange, “Seated Statue of a Mesopotamian Prince,” *Louvre.fr*. Accessed May 2, 2019. <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/seated-statue-mesopotamian-prince>.

The Victory Stele of Naram-Sin was carved in expensive pink limestone to commemorate the victory of the Akkadian king over the people of the Zagros mountains. Naram-Sin was an influential king who ruled at the height of the Akkadian empire from 2254 to 2218 BCE according to the Sumerian King List. In the stele, the Akkadian army is shown climbing the mountains, mercilessly trampling defeated enemies underfoot. Naram-Sin himself, shown in larger relief, ascends to the watchful sun disk of the god above him, and wears the conical horned helmet typically associated with divinity. It clearly depicts a ruler who views himself as equal to the gods, and in fact, in the original inscription his name is “preceded with a divine determinative.”³² The stele carries enormous religious, cultural, and artistic significance and was discovered in the same area of Susa as the Mesopotamian Prince. It also displays a similar message inscribed in Elamite by Shutruk-Nakhunte, which boasts that the monarch “protected it...and brought it to Elam.”³³ This particular inscription suggests that the stele was not merely collected as a war spoil or to dishearten the enemy, but because Shutruk-Nakhunte believed it to be important and worth preserving. It also means that he believed he could do a better job of “protecting” it than the Akkadians. Collection for the sake of protection is fundamentally a museological concept, and one which is rarely seen in a provable way in the ancient world.

A third crucial work found at Susa is the famous Law Stele of Hammurabi. The Law Stele was erected in the 18th century BCE by the Babylonian king Hammurabi, and was carved in basalt. It remains significant today due to its status as the most complete ancient legal

³² Patrick Pouysségu, “Victory Stele of Naram-Sin,” *Louvre.fr*. Accessed May 02, 2019.

<https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/victory-stele-naram-sin>.

³³ *Ibid.*

compendium, dating back to centuries earlier than the biblical law codes.³⁴ Shutruk-Nahkunte captured it in the 12th century BCE, nearly 600 years after its completion.

What is noteworthy for our purposes is that Hammurabi's Law Stele has no Elamite inscription. The stele does boast a smoothed blank area on the back, where several columns of Hammurabi's text were erased apparently in preparation for a new inscription to be made by Shutruk-Nakhunte. However, the fact that this inscription was never actually begun may lend credence to the suggestion that the objects from Susa were collected for their own intrinsic significance, rather than simply as war booty: while text that may have been considered offensive or that did not promote the Elamite kingdom was removed, Shutruk-Nakhunte did not take the opportunity to overwrite Hammurabi's stele with his own inscription. While this is admittedly speculative, it may signal that Hammurabi's stele was preserved for its cultural value and not as a propagandistic tool.



3 Law Stele of Hammurabi, Louvre

Additional evidence supporting my central thesis comes from the fact that all three of the works found at Susa show evidence of ancient repair. The defacement limited to the top of the rear of the original inscription on Hammurabi's stele is not present on the rest of the collected pieces. There seems to have been attention and care given to these objects, over the hundreds of

³⁴ Claire Iselin, "Law Code of Hammurabi, King of Babylon," *Louvre.fr*. Accessed May 02, 2019. <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/law-code-hammurabi-king-babylon>.

years that they remained at Susa, which far surpasses the expected levels of commitment for simple war spoils. Not unlike the spolia displayed by Gaius Assinius Pollio in his Atrium Libertatis, these objects may have been taken as the result of a military campaign, but took on another role as pieces in a collection. As in a museum, they were preserved, repaired, and protected.

Elsewhere in the Near East, similar collection practices were being enacted by the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. Ashurbanipal was the king of the Neo-Assyrian empire from 668 to ca. 627 BCE. His reign was marked by his military prowess, including the defeat of Egypt, and by his contributions to art and science. He often expressed a desire to know everything there was to know, and was one of the few kings who could read cuneiform script in both Akkadian and Sumerian.³⁵ Guided by this knowledge, he defined the course of the empire and asserted his claim as “King of the World.”³⁶ His best-known accomplishment was his establishment of the Library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh.

At the archaeological site of Nineveh, significant collections of tablets were found in four locations: the South-West Palace, the North Palace, and the temples of Ishtar and Nabu. The majority of the texts that make up the actual Library



4 Library of Ashurbanipal, Iraq

³⁵ George Smith, *History of Assurbanipal: Translated from the Cuneiform Inscriptions* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1873), 6.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

were located in the South-West palace.³⁷ In total, more than 26,000 tablets and fragments in cuneiform languages were recovered at the library sites, though the records are again poor. British archaeologist Austen Henry Layard is credited with the library's discovery in the 1850's. He sent the majority of the fragments and tablets back to England, and many are housed in the British Museum. The records taken during the excavation are vague, and list only the general locations of objects in respect to the two palaces and temples, rather than exact site-specific locations.

It is clear, however, that the tablets were gathered in a specific place with the intention that they be studied and understood as parts of the whole collection. Ashurbanipal himself recorded this intention in several letters to his agents and governors. A letter to his agents in Borsippa is particularly telling: he asks them to enter the houses of the locals and “collect all the tablets as many as are in their houses and stored in the temple Ezida.”³⁸ The “temple Ezida” is the Borsippan temple of Nabu, a specific location within which to store scholarship and wisdom. Ironically, when the stolen tablets were later brought back to Nineveh, some of them were replaced in another temple of Nabu, this time in the library complex.

What makes the Library so important to museum scholarship is that it contains a partially intact object catalogue.



5 Cuneiform Tablet, British Museum

The Library Records of 647 BCE, while incomplete, list the approximately 2,000 tablets and 300

³⁷ Jeanette C. Fincke, “The British Museum’s Ashurbanipal Library Project,” *Iraq* 66 (2004): 55.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 57.

writing boards housed within the collection. These seem to be largely comprised of “professional literature of experts in Mesopotamian scientific and religious lore, divination texts, medical texts, lamentations,” and so on, with the corpus on divination being by far the largest.³⁹ Interestingly, there are also seventeen independent compositions that exist only once in the records, which suggests that they were either gathered because of their unique nature or were created specifically for the Library. While nearly 75% of the contents of the library’s full collection are unknown, those that are recorded are extremely telling of Ashurbanipal’s desire to have not only the most knowledge stored in one location, but also the best and most interesting. In his letters to agents, the king requests tablets of rituals and incantations important to his rule, but also “rare tablets...that are not in Assyria.”⁴⁰ Presumably, this includes things like the seventeen independent compositions, which are unique in the records and all gathered in the library.

Ashurbanipal also specifically requested that his agents take the original tablets, rather than copies. While many texts did end up copied onto wooden boards, whether by confused agents of Ashurbanipal or local scholars attempting to keep the original texts in their own collections, the intent to obtain only the original, tangible tablets is crucial to an understanding of Ashurbanipal’s collection as not only an early library, but an early museum as well. Combined with the object catalogue, it suggests an understanding of the tablets as parts of a larger collection. It also indicates, as did the objects from Susa, the early stages of preservation and cataloguing which are essential parts of the museum process.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 57.

CONCLUSIONS

Modern museums may have popularized the exhibited collection in the 15th–16th centuries, but the foundational concept is much older. As nations and empires expanded, there were many reasons to collect objects. Often, this took the form of war booty or reliquaries, but there were genuine examples of good museum practice as far back as the 12th century BCE, with ancient leaders attempting to preserve cultural heritage for the sake of wisdom. In Rome, Augustus's restoration efforts on the Palatine Hill led to the preservation of the Casa Romuli for hundreds of years, and wealthy elites like Gaius Assinius Pollio displayed their own private collections to the public. These public displays fostered a culture of collection and display that ranged from monumental temples and palaces to the peristyle gardens within private homes. In Egypt, early Greeks collected and studied the remains of animals, but Ptolemy I ushered in a new age of learning and research with his Musaeum and Library in Alexandria. The permanent collections housed within the university-like institution were studied by scholars from across the Hellenistic world, and were understood as one cohesive unit of knowledge. Similarly, the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurbanipal collected cuneiform tablets of literary or academic importance from across the Near East and stored them in his library at Nineveh. Shutruk-Nakhunte preserved and displayed at Susa objects of cultural significance from across his empire, which may have been collected as war trophies but developed into a carefully curated museum exhibit.

Thus, even in areas of the ancient world that do not present such obvious museum sites, there is evidence of early collection practices and quasi-museological theory. The impulse for collection and display is a fundamentally human trait, and one which is displayed long before the 19th century. In the Mediterranean and Near East, it is also easy to trace the evolution from basic collecting and hoarding to the proto-museological sites which have been mentioned thus far.

While scholars have long claimed that the museum was a modern European invention, the sites described within this thesis demonstrate that this is simply not the case. Claims of the European origins of the museum are the result of imperialist scholarship that fails to recognize the contributions made by pre-colonial empires to the east of Europe. The colonialist bias of European museums is evident and problematic, and should not be the model on which to base museum practices. Modern museum scholarship should endeavor to survey more accurately the history of museums and strive to understand their own institutions and practices within this larger context. It is not enough simply to appreciate Ole Worm's collection of curiosities or Burckhardt's problematic approach to archaeology. The museum is a product of human reflection upon its own history and culture, which has a long and storied genealogy that extends well prior to colonial Europe. Our understanding of the origins of the museum should likewise acknowledge and appreciate the contributions of ancient Near Eastern and early Mediterranean museological practices.

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