



Smuggling Cuneiform Tablets in Aniseed Bags: Profile of a Sale Made by Elias Gejou to the British Museum in 1896

RESEARCH PAPER:
EUROPE/MIDDLE
EAST

NADIA AIT SAID-GHANEM 

]u[ubiquity press

ABSTRACT

The British Museum archive preserves hundreds of letters sent by antiquities dealers based in Baghdad who regularly wrote to sell archaeological artefacts to the department of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities (the former name of today's Middle East collection) in the late 19th century. These documents, largely understudied for the information they contain about the antiquities trade in this period, are invaluable not only because they preserve the stories of the men and women who were involved in this trade, but also because they record the details of their smuggling operations. In their letters to curators, antiquities dealers openly discussed the methods they used to circumvent the Ottoman authorities' exportation ban of archaeological artefacts adopted in 1884. Although dealers did not shy away from writing about their operations, they did however refrain from disclosing how they passed their collections through customs undetected. Despite this absence, such stories (while rare) do survive. One of the most explicit is preserved in documents related to the British Museum's purchase of 186 cuneiform tablets from a Baghdad-based broker named Elias Gejou in 1896, who hid the artefacts he sent in bags of aniseed. To present this rare example of a ploy to deceive, this article retraces the events and relationships that enabled Elias Gejou's smuggling. The aim of this case study is to illustrate how investigating antiquities dealers' letters in the British Museum archive can enrich our understanding of the manner in which Iraq's tangible cultural heritage was dispersed across the globe.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem

SOAS, GB

ng31@soas.ac.uk

KEYWORDS:

Smugglers; Iraq; Archaeology;
Antiquities Dealers; Museum
Studies; Steamships; Cuneiform

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ait Said-Ghanem, Nadia. 2022. Smuggling Cuneiform Tablets in Aniseed Bags: Profile of a Sale Made by Elias Gejou to the British Museum in 1896. *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 32(1): 2, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bha-667>

In June 1896, E.A. Wallis Budge, Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities at the British Museum, received a letter from an antiquities dealer based in Baghdad named Elias Gejou, with whom he had not previously exchanged correspondence. Gejou was writing to advise he had just sent a collection of cuneiform tablets (ancient texts inscribed on clay in a script called cuneiform, which emerged in the south of Iraq c. 3,200 BCE to write Sumerian and later Akkadian) that he wished to sell.¹ Although the exportation of archaeological artefacts outside of the Ottoman Empire, of which Iraq was then a part, was strictly forbidden since 1884 by the Ottoman Antiquities Law, Elias Gejou had managed to successfully smuggle his collection by passing it through customs hidden in bags of aniseed. For Wallis Budge, receiving an offer to buy artefacts smuggled out of Iraq was far from surprising. When first sent to Iraq by the British Museum in 1888, four years after the ban, Wallis Budge had himself smuggled cuneiform tablets to London, and had made it known among the antiquities dealers' community in Baghdad that the museum would purchase such collections sent directly to its door.² As a result, during his keepership from 1894 to 1924 Wallis Budge 'tripled the size of the collection under his care through limited excavations and the network of agents he maintained in Iraq and in Egypt.'³ He also corresponded in writing monthly for twenty years with antiquities dealers who wrote to sell smuggled collections, primarily cuneiform tablets. The objects accumulated by the British Museum in the 19th and 20th centuries from purchases, and also from excavations conducted in Iraq and the region, would eventually make its collection 'one of the largest and most-studied collections of Iraqi antiquities in the world', known among specialists as the largest outside of Iraq.⁴ Although the Middle East collection is famous today, the archive of the British Museum which preserves the documents related to these acquisitions and finds is a lot less known. In particular, the hundreds of letters that antiquities dealers from or based in Iraq sent to Wallis Budge and other curators, kept today in the correspondence volumes of the Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities department (the former name of the Middle East department), can be said to be largely understudied. Although used to investigate the provenance history of objects in the collection, the information these letters contain about the identity and activities of dealers-turned-smugglers and their personal stories has attracted little attention in scholarship.⁵ Yet, investigating these letters holds much potential. It would also help to conserve these documents, which to this day have not been indexed, photographed, or digitized by the museum for lack of funds. Among the many subjects such investigations could enrich is the retracing of long forgotten networks that enabled the dispersal of Iraq's tangible cultural heritage, a subject on which the case study below will focus. To assess the content of Iraqi antiquities dealers' correspondence with the British Museum, I collected the letters of fourteen antiquities dealers from the correspondence volumes of the department of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities (1887 to 1940), during three research visits in 2021 and 2022, as well as a sample of letters sent by several British citizens living in Baghdad who were introduced to Wallis Budge during his three missions in Iraq (the first in 1888, then in 1899 to 1890, and lastly 1891), and who remained close friends and correspondents of his, regularly keeping him abreast of archaeological discoveries in Iraq.⁶ This research quickly led me to Elias Gejou, the father of the

1 Cuneiform was also used to write a dozen other languages in the region. See Irving Finkel and Jonathan Taylor, *Cuneiform* (London: The British Museum Press, 2015), 10–22; Brigitte Lion and Cécile Michel, "Les principaux sites ayant livré des tablettes cunéiformes," in *Atlas Historique du Proche-Orient Ancien*, ed. Martin Sauvage (Les Belles Lettres, 2021), 2, which provides a map of sites where cuneiform tablets were found in Southwestern Asia.

2 Wallis Budge himself records several instances of his own smuggling in *By Nile and Tigris* (London: Murray, 1920), 223–241; also Matthew Ismail, *Wallis Budge. Magic and Mummies in London and Cairo* (Dost Publishing, 2021), 128–130.

3 Ismail, *Wallis Budge*, 275.

4 Michael Seymour, "Ancient Mesopotamia and Modern Iraq in the British Press, 1980–2003." *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 3, June 2004, 352.

5 See especially the work of Julian Reade, for example "Hormuzd Rassam and his discoveries," *Iraq*, Vol. 55, 1993, 39–62; "Rassam's Babylonian Collection: The excavations and the Archives," in *Catalogue of the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, vol. VI, ed. E. Leichty (London: British Museum Publications, 1986), xiii–xxxvi; "Early Monuments in Gulf stone at the British Museum," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie*, 92, 2002, 258–295. Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem, "When Things Go Wrong: Smuggling Artefacts from Baghdad to London in the late 19th Century," *SOAS History Blog*, April 4, 2022.

6 The names of the antiquities dealers are: Jemileh Hanna Benny, Elias Gejou, Ibrahim Elias Gejou, Asher Salem and Toma Hindi, Susan and Fadlallah Toma Hindi, Eliza Kebaba, Djemilah Hanna Sayegh, Antone Samhiry, Ferida Antone Shamas, Joseph Antone Shamas, Joseph Svoboda, Henry Svoboda, Daud Toma, and Abdulkarim Toma. British citizens in Baghdad are: Frank Bottomley, Captain Holland, Captain Cowley, and Tom Blockey.

antiquities dealer Ibrahim Elias Gejou (1868–1942, a well-known figure in cuneiform studies),⁷ whose sale particularly stands out because documents related to it preserve the story of how this dealer managed to take his collection through customs undetected. Accounts of how customs were deceived are rare in antiquities dealers' letters. Although they openly spoke about their smuggling activities,⁸ they did remain silent about how they avoided the scrutiny of officers at Basra's Customs House (Figure 1). In the 19th century, it was standard for merchandise on its way out of Iraq to be sent to Basra's port,⁹ where the Customs House would issue a pass to allow their passage.¹⁰ Once through, goods would then be loaded on international steamships waiting in the Persian Gulf to journey to Europe. This absence of information is easily explained: dealers were well-aware that the authorities regularly read the mail and telegrams to intercept information about smugglers.¹¹ Elias Gejou was no exception. He did not reveal his method in either of the two letters he sent in May and September 1896. The story is instead found in a letter that his colleague, Frank Bottomley, sent to Wallis Budge to make light of it. To illustrate the value of a study focused on antiquities dealers' letters in the British Museum archive, this article presents a rare example of a deceit at customs. The aim of this investigation is to examine the connections that enabled Elias Gejou's sale (part 1 and 2), and the manner in which he evaded the scrutiny of the authorities twice, first by hiding the tablets at home (part 3), and secondly by hiding them in bags of aniseed (part 4).



Figure 1 Photograph of the “Basra Customs House” in Wallis Budge, Nile and Tigris, 182.¹²

⁷ For a profile of Ibrahim Elias Gejou, see Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem, “Ibrahim Elias Gejou and Old Babylonian Omens,” *SOAS History Blog*, 6 May 2021; and Magali Dessagnes, *La circulation des tablettes cunéiformes mathématiques* (La Sorbonne, 2017), 76–119, for a profile and study of this dealer's activities in relation to mathematical tablets.

⁸ For examples of dealers who speak about their smuggling operations in their letters, see the case studies in Ait Said-Ghanem, *When Things Go Wrong*.

⁹ Stephanie Jones, “British India Steamers and the Trade of the Persian Gulf, 1862–1914,” in *The Great Circle*, Vol.7, No. 1, 1985, 35.

¹⁰ Jones, *Steamers*, 27.

¹¹ The antiquities dealer Henri Svoboda writes in his letter to Wallis Budge dated 31 January 1895 that: “The Turkish post in Baghdad are seizing all the letters that come from London and retain them to see if there is nothing mentioning in them about antiquities and for this reason I am asking you to post my letters via Bombay to Basreh”.

¹² Copyright: Creative Commons, see https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/ce/By_Nile_and_Tigris_-_a_narrative_of_Journeys_in_Egypt_and_Mesopotamia_on_behalf_of_the_British_Museum_between_the_years_1886_and_1913_%281920%29_%2814757346146%29.jpg.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The ancient Middle East collection of the British Museum contains a variety of objects from Iraq, some large, such as monumental statues of winged-bull with a human face, wall panels, and bas-reliefs, others that fit in the palm of a hand such as amulets and cylinder seals, many of them inscribed in cuneiform. A third of the collection is also made up of cuneiform tablets found in numerous sites in Iraq, and in Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Egypt, which were sold to the British Museum or found during excavations conducted by teams who worked for, or with, the museum.¹³ The Middle East collection itself is founded on purchases. Its story began in 1825 when the collection of Claudius James Rich, former British Resident in Baghdad, was bought from his widow Mary, and was found to contain objects inscribed in cuneiform.¹⁴ In 1825, cuneiform was undeciphered but the sites where this script could be found had become a focus of interest since European travellers who had written about their journeys had been shown by local residents the ruins of the ancient cities of Babylon and Nineveh, cities known in the West then only from classical literature and the Bible.¹⁵ Foreign diplomats posted in Istanbul, Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra soon found themselves especially well placed to request permits from the Ottoman authorities to excavate and to send their finds to the museums of their respective nations (as well as to their own homes to build private collections).¹⁶ The artefacts found in Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin) in the north of Iraq by Paul Emile Botta, France's Consul in Mosul, from 1842 led to the creation of a new wing in the Louvre named the 'Assyrian Museum,' inaugurated on 1 May 1847.¹⁷ Meanwhile, those discovered by Henry Layard in Nimrud (ancient Kalhu) from 1845 would be displayed at the British Museum from June 1847.¹⁸ During these excavations, tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets emerged. With time, the decipherment of cuneiform from 1857 would revolutionize 19th century knowledge of human history.¹⁹ The translation of cuneiform texts would eventually provide historical evidence that ancient civilizations, such as Assyria, Babylonia, and Sumer for example, had been writing and thriving between the early third to the late first millennium BCE,²⁰ and that the intellectual production of these ancient societies had impacted modern science (such the sexagesimal system of Babylonian mathematics for example).²¹ These discoveries would also influence popular culture.²² As excavations increased in number and scope, the Ottoman authorities quickly found they had to regulate the mass extraction of archaeological artefacts by foreign nations. The Ottoman Antiquities Laws of 1869 and 1874 had initially attempted to implement a law of partage (the division of archaeological finds between the Ottoman government and foreign excavation missions), but faced with constant abuses, a full ban to export artefacts

¹³ The British Museum's Middle East collection holds approximately 130,000 cuneiform tablets, see The British Museum Online which lists "128,152 clay tablets" https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?object=tablet&material=clay&view=grid&sort=object_name__asc&page=1. I am not aware of any statistics on the number of purchased cuneiform tablets versus the number of those found during excavations, and those donated.

¹⁴ For a history of the Middle East collection, see David M. Wilson, *The British Museum – A History* (British Museum Press, 2002), 93–125, with an organigram of departmental structures from 1807 until 1988, page 379; also Finkel, I. and Fletcher, A., "Gallery 55 at the British Museum," in *Museums and the Ancient Middle East*, eds. G. Emberling and P. Petit (Routledge, 2019), 62–72; and Marjorie Caygill, *The Story of the British Museum* (British Museum Publications, 1981), 23–31.

¹⁵ See André Parrot, *Archéologie mésopotamienne* (Albin Michel, 1946), 13–35. For a brief overview of the development of interest in cuneiform artefacts from Iraq between 1621 and 1892, see R.F. Harper, "The Discovery and Decipherment of the Cuneiform Inscriptions. I," *The Old and New Testament*, Vol.14, no.1 (Jan. 1892), pp.14–19.

¹⁶ For a critical discussion of foreign interests in pursuing excavations in Iraq, see Michael Greenhalgh, *Plundered Empire* (Brill, 2019), 65–85, and especially Zainab Bahrani, "Archaeology and Empire," in *Scramble for the Past – A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753–1914*, eds. Zainab Bahrani, Zeynep Çelik, Edhem Eldem (SALT, 2011), 13–43.

¹⁷ Nicole Chevalier, "Early Excavations (Pre-1914)" in *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, ed. D.T. Potts (Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 48–69.

¹⁸ John Malcom Russell, *From Nineveh to New York* (Yale University Press, 1997), 35–37.

¹⁹ Kevin J. Cathart, "The Earliest Contributions to the Decipherment of Sumerian and Akkadian," *Cuneiform Digital Library Journal*, vol 1, 2011 (3 March 2011 version).

²⁰ Marc Van de Mieroop, *Cuneiform Texts and the Writing of History* (Routledge, 1999), 9–38.

²¹ Eleanor Robson, *Mathematics in Ancient Iraq* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 263–290.

²² See *Receptions of the Ancient Near East in Popular Culture and Beyond*, eds. Lorenzo Verderame and Agnes Garcia-Ventura (Lockwood Press, 2020).

was adopted in 1884 (art.8).²³ Foreign parties, however, soon realised that objects could still be taken away with the help of local antiquities dealers who were still permitted to trade and were willing to smuggle collections abroad.²⁴ Examining the reasons why dealers decided to go against the Antiquities Laws is beyond the scope of this article, but their letters in the British Museum archive, including those of Elias Gejou below, offers a glimpse into one main drive: personal connections.

2. A PURCHASE MADE BY WALLIS BUDGE, FROM ELIAS GEJOU, RECOMMENDED BY FRANK BOTTOMLEY

The story of Elias Gejou's sale to the British Museum begins with his first letter to Wallis Budge, dated 21 May 1896.²⁵ Brief and straightforward, it opens with all the information that the department needed to receive delivery of the artefacts, such as the type of objects sent (cuneiform tablets), their number (186), the number of cases in which they were packed (four), and the shipment's route (Baghdad to Basra, Basra to Bombay, and Bombay to the UK). Gejou, who corresponded in French, writes: '*J'ai l'honneur de former la présente pour vous aviser que d'après le conseil de Mr Bottomley l'Agent de Messrs Lynch & Co à Bagdad, je vous ai expédié 4 caisses d'antiquités contenant 186 pièces par l'entremise de mon correspondant de Bombay.*' The format of this opening is worth examining: although he had not previously sold artefacts to the department, Elias Gejou did not inquire about the department's interest in purchasing collections, nor about the budget available. The reason for this directness was the department's well-known readiness to buy cuneiform tablets, mentioned above.²⁶ In simply announcing that his collection was on its way, Elias Gejou was following – knowingly or unknowingly – the manner in which the majority of Iraq-based dealers communicated with Wallis Budge.²⁷ It was also common for dealers who had not yet traded with the British Museum to mention the person who had recommended they sold artefacts to the department. Here also, Elias Gejou followed the established approach by mentioning that Mr Bottomley, an agent of Messrs Lynch & Co in Baghdad, had advised he should get in touch. The mention of Lynch & Co is of great interest: below his signature and on his business card,²⁸ Elias Gejou notes that he worked as a broker for Lynch & Co, hence both men were colleagues. Frank Bottomley and Wallis Budge were also connected through work. The correspondence I have collected does not refer to their first meeting, but many letters they exchanged attest that from 1893, the two men were on very friendly terms.²⁹ They could not have met during Wallis Budge's first mission in Iraq. Upon his arrival there in January 1888,³⁰ Wallis Budge had been introduced to many British citizens living in Baghdad, including members of Lynch & Co who helped him to meet antiquities dealers, and to purchase cuneiform tablets from them.³¹ However, Wallis Budge would have

23 For a discussion of the Ottoman Antiquities Law of 1869, 1874, 1884, and later 1906, see Wendy Shaw, *Possessors and Possessed* (University of California Press, 2003), 108–130. See also Morag M. Kersel, "The Changing Legal Landscape for Middle Eastern Archaeology in the Colonial Era, 1800–1930," in *Pioneers to the Past: American archaeologists in the Middle East 1919–1920*, eds. G. Emberling (The Oriental Institute Museum Publications, 2010), 85–90.

24 For an analysis of foreigners' reaction to the Ottoman Antiquities law of 1884, see Zeynep Çelik, *About Antiquities Politics of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire* (University of Texas Press, 2016), 43–48; and Shaw, *Possessors and Possessed*, 110–125.

25 The transcription of this letter is given in full in the Appendix, document A. In this article, transcriptions of letters in the British Museum archive are made by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

26 Ismail, *Wallis Budge*, 105–6.

27 Ferida Antone Shamas' first letter dated 1 November 1894 for example reads "Sir, when you were in Baghdad you were kind enough to say to me when you were at our house that if I had any antiquities if I sent them to you, you would see what you could do for me [...] Enclosed you will find a letter from Mr. Daud Toma introducing me to you."

28 See Appendix, document B.

29 I collected 22 documents (letters, invoices, bills of lading) exchanged between Budge and Bottomley between 11 December 1893 and 20 December 1894.

30 Budge arrived in Iraq on Monday 15 January 1888, see Ismail, *Wallis Budge*, 119. He had boarded the steamship of Lynch & Co called the *Medjidiah* (on which the occasional antiquities dealer Joseph Svoboda worked) and met Captain E. Cowley, see Ismail, *Wallis Budge*, 120. For a brief profile of Joseph Svoboda's activities as an antiquities dealer, see Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem, "Joseph Svoboda Svoboda – Selling Clay Tablets in 19th Century Baghdad," *SOAS History Blog*, 2 July 2021.

31 Recounted in Ismail, *Wallis Budge*, 125.

missed meeting Frank Bottomley by a few weeks during this trip. He had returned to London in March 1888, while Frank Bottomley was seen to take his post as a clerk for Lynch & Co in April.³²

Evidently, the common denominator between Elias Gejou, Frank Bottomley, and Wallis Budge is Lynch & Co, a company that played a key role in the circulation of merchandise in the region in the 19th century, by transporting goods and people on their steamships which ran between Baghdad and Basra twice weekly.³³ Ultimately, these steamships were also crucial to the transportation of smuggled artefacts. Lynch & Co was created by three brothers of Anglo-Irish origin: Stephen, Thomas, and Lieutenant Henry Blossie Lynch.³⁴ It was Henry who had first come to Iraq, when he had been posted there for the East India Company, to participate in the Chesney expedition, to assist Colonel Chesney's exploration of the Euphrates in the spring of 1836.³⁵ Although the expedition had failed, Lieutenant Lynch had been ordered to stay in Iraq and was put in charge of the *Euphrates* steamer. There, he continued his extensive survey work of the Euphrates and Tigris between 1837 and 1839.³⁶ Convinced that the rivers could open lucrative commercial navigation opportunities between Baghdad and Basra, Henry and his brothers Thomas and Stephen established a commercial house in Baghdad in 1841,³⁷ and started 'importing goods on convoys of teak rafts, dragged by trackers up the Tigris from the Persian Gulf'.³⁸ By 1842, Lieutenant Lynch had 'had to admit that the Euphrates was not navigable',³⁹ but he had nonetheless learnt from the Chesney expedition that the Tigris river 'offered the better prospects'⁴⁰, an idea that the British government, who were looking to further British commercial and political interests in the region, fully supported.⁴¹ The opportunity to acquire steamships came when the East India Company decided to withdraw their 'Mesopotamian flotilla'.⁴² The brothers took over two of the four steamships the Company owned and in 1861 created *The Euphrates and Tigris Steam Navigation Company*, incorporated on 25 April of that year, again with the support of the British government.⁴³ To operate their steamships, Lynch & Co needed the permission of the Ottoman authorities. As a British company, they had initially functioned under the permit that the British government had been granted for the Chesney expedition in December 1834. Through diplomatic channels, a permission for British merchants to operate a navigation service 'under the British flag' on both the Euphrates and the Tigris was confirmed in a letter of instruction in January 1861, however two conditions were named.⁴⁴ The first was that only two steamers were allowed to run. The second was Lynch & Co had to maintain a central station in Baghdad.⁴⁵ With a permit and steamships at their disposal, Lynch & Co began to transport merchandise and people between Baghdad and Basra, stopping at many ports in between, with offices in both cities (see [Figure 2](#) for Lynch & Co's offices in Basra).

³² In his *Diary* 31, 118, Joseph Svoboda writes that on Thursday 5 April 1888: "We have altogether 260 passengers [...] and Mr F. Bottomley a new clerk for the office of S. Lynch & Co".

³³ Jones, "British India Steamers", 35.

³⁴ Zaki Saleh, *Mesopotamia and Britain: A Study in British Foreign Affairs* (Middle East Book Review, 2006), 137.

³⁵ J.P. Parry, "Steam Power and British Influence in Baghdad, 1820-1860," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 56, No.1, 2013, 156.

³⁶ Saleh, *Mesopotamia*, 112.

³⁷ Jones, *British India Steamers*, 27; and Saleh, *Mesopotamia*, 114.

³⁸ John S. Guest, *The Euphrates Expedition* (Routledge, 1992), 155.

³⁹ Parry, *Steam Power*, 163.

⁴⁰ Parry, *Steam Power*, 59.

⁴¹ Parry, *Steam Power*, 145-173.

⁴² Parry, *Steam Power*, 163, writes that there is confusion about the year in which the India Company's steamers were transferred to the Lynch Brothers: for Saleh, *Mesopotamia*, 114, the steamers were transferred to Lynch for commerce in 1842, while Guest, *The Euphrates*, 155, states that the year was 1861.

⁴³ Saleh, *Mesopotamia*, 115.

⁴⁴ Jerome A. Saldanha, "Précis of Turkish Arabia affairs, 1801-1905," in the *Persian Gulf Précis*, Vol. 6 (Archive Editions, 1986), 187.

⁴⁵ Saldanha, *Précis*, 116-117.



Figure 2 Photograph of “The British Consulate and Messrs Lynch’s offices Basra; Showing 4000 tons of merchandise awaiting shipment to Bagdad”, 1906 Photographer: Wilfried Malleson.⁴⁶

They were also in charge of a crucial item on board: the mail on which communication between India and England rested.⁴⁷ To provide this postal service, Lynch & Co were given a £2,400 subsidy by the British government in 1862 ‘to run a six-weekly or monthly steamer, as might be required, on the Tigris between Baghdad and Basra in connection with the British India Steam Navigation Company’s Ocean line to Bombay’.⁴⁸ Lynch & Co began to operate their shipping services using the *City of London* steamer (commissioned in 1862, and on which the antiquities dealer Henri Svoboda worked),⁴⁹ and the *Dejla* steamship (commissioned in 1865, and on which the antiquities dealer Joseph Svoboda worked).⁵⁰ The opening of Lynch & Co’s Baghdad-Basra route also coincided with the opening of another in 1862: that of a shipping route between Basra, Bombay and Karachi, established by the British India Steam Navigation Company, which connected Basra to crucial ports in the Persian Gulf.⁵¹ This and the opening of the Suez canal in 1869 vastly increased trade in Iraq,⁵² and the Lynch brothers’ steamships quickly became essential to transport within the country.⁵³ From early 1890s, probably because people knew Wallis Budge would not return to Iraq, many employees of Lynch & Co began to send artefacts for sale to the department, including the aforementioned brothers Henri⁵⁴ and Joseph Svoboda,⁵⁵ their Captains Henry Cowley and Alfred Holland, as well as Frank Bottomley, and Elias Gejou, to name but a few of Lynch & Co’s employees turned occasional antiquities dealers. Elias Gejou had worked as a broker for Lynch & Co since at least 1865, trading merchandise such as wool and wheat (and aniseed, as will be seen below). Given his profession, he was well-acquainted with the manner in which imported and exported merchandise transited through customs. Having contacts in this industry must also have helped him in organising the passage of his

⁴⁶ Copyright: Qatar Digital Library. Source: ‘Mosque and Minaret of coloured tiles at Basra’. Photographer: Wilfrid Malleson [25r] (1/2), British Library: India Office Records and Private Papers. Reference: IOR/L/PS/20/C260, f 25 1, in Qatar Digital Library https://www.qdl.qa/archive/81055/vdc_100117294308.0x000032.

⁴⁷ As Saldanha, *Précis*, 197–200 writes, the British Postal Service was ensured by British Consuls in Iraq. Post offices to collect British Mail were opened at Baghdad and Basrah on 1st January 1868 and were controlled by the Financial Department of the Government of India.

⁴⁸ Saldanha, *Précis*, 199.

⁴⁹ In his *Diary* 4, 11, Joseph Svoboda records he met his brother on the *City of London* on 19 July 1865: “At 6.45 the “*City of London*” came from Baghdad and landed astern of us alongside the bank she had left on the morning of the 17th has wheat and other cargo, on board saw Mr Carter and my brother Henry”. The *City of London* was replaced in 1875 by a larger ship called the *Blosse Lynch* (Saldanha, *Précis*, 186). This was later replaced in 1883 by the *Mejdieh*. The digitized version of the diaries of Joseph Svoboda (no. 3 to 62, 1865 to 1908) are freely accessible on the University of Washington <https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/iraqdiaries/search> (last accessed on 31 August 2022).

⁵⁰ Saleh, *Mesopotamia*, 137–138. Joseph Svoboda records his first journey on the *Dijleh* steamship in his *Diary* 4, 9, on 11 July 1865: “*Baghdad to Basrah per ‘Dijleh’ First Trip Down*”. Joseph would work on the *Dijleh*, and then on the *Medjedieh*, as confirmed in his letter to the BM dated 25 February 1889. Like the *City of London* (described above), the *Dejleh* was eventually replaced in 1875 by a larger steamer called the *Khalifah*.

⁵¹ Jones, *Steamers*, 23; and Parry, *Steam Power*, 165.

⁵² John Robertson, *Iraq* (One World, 2020), 243.

⁵³ See Camille Lyans Cole, “*Precarious Empires: A Social and Environmental History of Steam Navigation on the Tigris*,” *Journal of Social History* vol. 50 no.1 (2016): 74–101.

⁵⁴ Henri Svoboda wrote to Wallis Budge between 7 September 1894 and 29 August 1895.

⁵⁵ Joseph Svoboda wrote to Wallis Budge between 25 February 1889 and 22 March 1897.

collection of 186 cuneiform tablets through customs undetected. Aside from his specialist knowledge, Elias Gejou was also well aware of how the trade of antiquities functioned because his two sons, Ibrahim and Isaac, had been trading cuneiform tablets since 1894.⁵⁶ Ibrahim, who had moved to Paris permanently since at least 1889, had himself begun to sell collections to the British Museum in 1895. He would continue to do so until 1940.⁵⁷ Although no portraits of Elias Gejou are known to me at this stage, I was able to locate photographs of his son Ibrahim which survive in the private documents of his great grandchildren. I reproduce a portrait of Ibrahim Elias Gejou here (Figure 3) with their kind permission, to give a face to the stories and voices of father and son.⁵⁸



Figure 3 Black & White Photograph of Ibrahim Elias Gejou as a young man, undated. Reproduced with the kind permission of his great grandchildren.

3. ELIAS GEJOU'S DECEPTION NO. 1 – HIDING CUNEIFORM TABLETS AT HOME

Elias Gejou's plan to profit from the sale of cuneiform tablets can be traced back to several months before he sent them to London. In his letter of 21 May 1896, he writes that he had purchased the tablets a year before, presumably in early 1895, and that he had then hidden them at home. The reason he gives for this was that he feared they might be confiscated by the authorities. Although Elias Gejou repeated this in his second letter of 24 September 1896, he did not share the reasons why they would have been taken from him.⁵⁹ One therefore wonders why these tablets were liable to confiscation? Antiquities dealers openly bought and sold

⁵⁶ Joseph Svoboda, who was also a friend of the Gejou family, writes that he had seen Isaac Gejou buy antiquities in the south of Iraq on 30 October 1894, see *Diary* 40, 150, entry of 30 October 1894: "At 10.45 am arrived at Coot landed 61 passengers (Isak son of Elias Jejo coming to buy Antique Tablets of Tello)".

⁵⁷ The earliest letter Ibrahim Elias Gejou sent to Wallis Budge is dated 8 October 1895. It confirms the sale he negotiated for a buyer named Mr Robinson.

⁵⁸ Hundreds of letters sent by Ibrahim Elias Gejou (Elias' son) survive in the British Museum archive, as well as in the archives of several other European and American museums, but none holds photographs of this antiquities dealer. However, during the course of my research on Ibrahim Elias Gejou, I was contacted by his great grandchildren who generously allowed me in May 2022 to consult and study their private archive, which contains five photographs of Ibrahim. I am very grateful to them for their generosity and for allowing their publication.

⁵⁹ Elias Gejou's letter of 24 September 1896 is reproduced in full in the Appendix, document C.

archaeological artefacts in Baghdad at the time, but the Ottoman Antiquities Law of 1884 had reiterated that the only excavations recognised as legal were those declared to the authorities who would then grant a permit (art. 7), and that artefacts found during undeclared excavations would be confiscated (art. 13). In his letters, Elias Gejou does not disclose where the tablets he possessed had been found, but in his first letter he does mention he also had tablets from Tello, the modern name of the ancient city of Girsu in the south of Iraq. The mention of this location is a helpful clue to retracing Gejou's activities in this period. In mid-1894, Iraqi archaeologists and excavators had conducted undeclared excavations in Tello and had discovered thousands of cuneiform tablets there, which had soon appeared on the antiquities market. The details of this discovery were known to Wallis Budge since December 1894. He had himself heard it from a contact named Charles Pinches, an employee of the London branch of the Persian Gulf Trading Company, who also regularly acted as an agent for antiquities dealers in Baghdad who wished to sell artefacts to the British Museum. In a letter dated 1 December 1894, Pinches had written to advise that his client Mr Muir had sent him an account of the Tello discovery. I reproduce parts of the letter relevant to Elias Gejou's case:

“Copy

Information on Antiquities discovered at Telloo

Baghdad, 2 October 1894

*Four months ago Mr De Sarzec on behalf of the French Government was digging for Antiques in a place called Telloo, but after he left the place, the Arabs around that spot chanced to discover a large cellar (about 10 feet in height & 10 in length) full of bricks of different forms & sizes. It is said that this was a library of the government of that time perhaps from the days of Nimroud for his name was read on one of the large bricks *by the French Consul here) writing a letter to his minister to prepare for a war.*

[...]

Great difficulty is experienced in obtaining them especially lately, on account of the Turkish Government as the Antique dealers has to sink their money and bear the insults and fines of the Government.”

Given the date of this discovery (the summer of 1894) and the likely date of Elias Gejou's purchase (early 1895), it is possible that the tablets from Tello that Elias Gejou had in his possession had come from this excavation.⁶⁰

4. DECEPTION NO. 2 – HIDING CUNEIFORM TABLETS IN BAGS OF ANISEED

While Elias Gejou was negotiating the price of his cuneiform tablets with Wallis Budge between May and September 1896, he probably did not realise that Frank Bottomley had disclosed how the tablets had gone through customs. Bottomley had written from Baghdad on 16 May 1896 to vouch for Elias Gejou, and to remind Wallis Budge that he had previously met this broker. He writes: ‘My dear Budge, Our ‘honest’ Broker Elias Gejou, whom you doubtless remember has been bothering me to write to you for the past few days and as I have a spare moment I avail myself of it to do so’. Bottomley's joking manner is typical of his exchanges with Wallis Budge. The two often swapped stories and jokes,⁶¹ and it is obviously while in full comedic flow that he was inspired to recount the trick played by Elias Gejou: ‘He has shipped them via Bombay and I hear from him he passed them through the Customs and down river packed in bags of aniseed.’ Given that the tablets arrived in London by the summer of 1896, Elias Gejou's ploy had been successful, but the tablets did not arrive in aniseed bags at the British Museum. Someone had separated the two, and it is possible that ‘the contact in Bombay’ that Elias Gejou mentions in his first letter had been asked to prepare the collection for the final part of their journey to the UK. Despite this successful operation, Elias Gejou was to meet with disappointment. He

⁶⁰ An index of the tablets in *Catalogue of the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, Vol. II, eds. M. Sigrist, C.B.F. Walker, H.H. Figulla (British Museum Press), 254–260 lists that out of 184 tablets 20 are from the Ur III period.

⁶¹ As an example, see this exchange sent by Bottomley, in a letter dated 27 December 1893: “We were around there the other night story telling, yours of the ‘duck’ came out prominently and was well received, but to my mind no one can tell that story but E A Wallis Budge.”

had confidently written that he wanted £250 for the tablets (equivalent today to £36,966)⁶² arguing that the purchase price should reflect ‘the stress he had endured’ and ‘the troubles he had taken to send the artefacts to London’. However, he was offered only £30, a much lower but not negligible sum (equivalent today to c. £4,436).⁶³ Not wanting to delay the sale with arguments over the price which he knew would be lengthy and futile,⁶⁴ Elias Gejou accepted this rate, asking only for a few more pounds. As the British Museum’s Trustees Report shows, this concession was granted: the tablets were purchased for £32 in May 1897.⁶⁵ It is probably on account of this low purchase price that Elias Gejou, like several new sellers in this period, did not attempt to sell another collection to the British Museum.⁶⁶ No other letters from him are to be found in the British Museum archive, and this appears to be his only sale to the department.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The British Museum archive holds hundreds of letters sent by antiquities dealers based in Iraq who wrote to the keepers of the department of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities in the 19th and early 20th century to offer archaeological artefacts from Iraq for sale, while openly sharing they had smuggled the collections offered. These documents, unexplored for the information they contain about the trade of antiquities conducted after the Ottoman authorities adopted an exportation ban of all archaeological artefacts in 1884, can vastly enrich our knowledge of the manner in which Iraq’s tangible cultural heritage was dispersed across the globe. As illustrated by the case study of Elias Gejou’s sale of 186 tablets inscribed in cuneiform to the British Museum in 1896, dealers’ letters not only provide evidence of how customs could be deceived (Elias Gejou had hidden the artefacts he sent to London in bags of aniseed), they also unearth under-studied relationships which enabled the smuggling of artefacts in this period.⁶⁷ Elias Gejou and Frank Bottomley were two work colleagues who had met Wallis Budge through their employer, Lynch & Co, a company who was key in transporting people and merchandise in and out of Iraq. Reconstructing the ties that existed in this period between smugglers, museum professionals, scholars, and transportation companies, could provide data to support current research into modern scholarly practices and the normalization of the study of artefacts looted from Iraq.⁶⁸ Investigations of this correspondence could also help to understand the smuggling networks that would later be established. Dealers’ letters not only reveal family connections, they also show that men introduced their sons to the trade, while women did the same with their daughters, encouraging their female friends to trade too.⁶⁹ By making their children sell independently from them, parents were training the next generation to build an international network that would have far-reaching consequences. Far from lost, their stories are still preserved in the British Museum archive.

ADDITIONAL FILE

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendices.** Appendix document A–E. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bha-667.s1>

⁶² This equivalence was calculated using an online Consumer Index Price Calculator (CPI) for the UK, see <https://www.in2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1896?amount=250>.

⁶³ This equivalence was calculated using an online Consumer Index Price Calculator (CPI) for the UK, see <https://www.in2013dollars.com/uk/inflation/1897?amount=30>.

⁶⁴ For examples of sales that took from two to three years to be resolved, see Ait Said-Ghanem, *When Things Go Wrong*.

⁶⁵ Reproduced in the Appendix, document D. Note that the number of the tablets is given as ‘188’, while Elias Gejou mentions ‘186’, and Sigrist, *Catalogue*, 254–260, lists 184 tablets.

⁶⁶ For other disappointed first-time sellers, see Ait Said-Ghanem, *When Things Go Wrong*.

⁶⁷ In the words of Greenhalgh, *Plundered*, 28: “An even hotter PhD, even less likely to be written, would feast on archives to detail the symbiotic relationship between museums, looting and archaeology”.

⁶⁸ See issues raised by Neil Brodie, “Cuneiform Exceptionalism? Justifying the Study and Publication of Unprovenanced Cuneiform Tablets from Iraq,” in *Crime and Art: Sociological and Criminological Perspectives of Crimes in the Art World*, eds. Naomi Oosterman, Donna Yates, SAHLM, volume 1 (Springer, 2021), 103–117.

⁶⁹ See Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem, *Women Antiquities Dealers in 19th Century Baghdad*, ANE Today, 2022, forthcoming.

This research could not have been conducted without the kind assistance of the British Museum archivists, especially Francesca Hillier, who helped me gather documents even during the many confinements of 2020 and 2021. I am also very grateful to Jonathan Taylor for his support in studying antiquities dealers who traded with the British Museum, and to Gareth Brereton for many fruitful exchanges. This study was funded by the British Academy.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem  orcid.org/0000-0001-8365-4541
SOAS, GB

REFERENCES

- Ait Said-Ghanem, Nadia.** “Women Antiquities Dealer in 19th century Baghdad,” *ANE Today (blog)*, 2022, forthcoming.
- Ait Said-Ghanem, Nadia.** “When things go wrong: smuggling artefacts in the 19th century,” *SOAS History Blog*, February 4, 2022. <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/soashistoryblog/2022/02/04/when-things-go-wrong-smuggling-artefacts-from-baghdad-to-london-in-the-late-19th-century/>.
- Ait Said-Ghanem, Nadia.** “Joseph Svoboda – Selling Clay Tablets in 19th Century Baghdad,” *SOAS History Blog*, July 2, 2021. <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/soashistoryblog/2021/07/02/joseph-svoboda-selling-clay-tablets-in-nineteenth-century-baghdad/>.
- Ait Said-Ghanem, Nadia.** “Ibrahim Elias Gejou and Old Babylonian Omens,” *SOAS History Blog*, May 6 2021, <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/soashistoryblog/2021/05/06/ibrahim-elias-gejou-and-old-babylonian-omens/>.
- Bahrani, Zainab.** “Archaeology and Empire,” in *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753–1914*, edited by Zainab Bahrani, Zeynep Çelik, Edhem Eldem, 13–43. Istanbul: SALT, 2011.
- Brodie, Neil.** “Cuneiform Exceptionalism? Justifying the Study and Publication of Unprovenanced Cuneiform Tablets from Iraq,” in *Crime and Art: Sociological and Criminological Perspectives of Crimes in the Art World*, edited by Naomi Oosterman and Donna Yates, 103–117. SAHLM, volume 1, Springer, 2021. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84856-9_7
- Budge, Wallis.** *By Nile and Tigris, a Narrative Journey in Egypt and Mesopotamia on Behalf of the British Museum between the Years 1886 and 1913*, Vol. I. London: John Murray, 1920.
- Cathart, Kevin J.** “The Earliest Contributions to the Decipherment of Sumerian and Akkadian,” *Cuneiform Digital Library Journal* 1, 2011, 3 March 2011 version, https://cdli.ucla.edu/file/publications/cdlj2011_001.pdf.
- Caygill, Marjorie.** *The Story of the British Museum*. London: British Museum Publications, 1981.
- Çelik, Zeynep.** *About Antiquities. Politics of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire*. University of Texas Press, 2016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7560/310199>
- Chevalier, Nicole.** “Early Excavations (Pre-1914),” in *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, edited by D.T. Potts, 48–69. Chichester: Blackwell Publishing, 2012. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444360790.ch3>
- Cole, Camille Lyans.** “Precarious Empires: A Social and Environmental History of Steam Navigation on the Tigris,” *Journal of Social History* vol. 50 no.1 (2016): 74–101. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shw011>
- Dessagnes, Magali.** “La circulation des tablettes cunéiformes mathématiques et la constitution des collections de la fin du XIXe siècle à la première moitié du XXe siècle.” PhD diss., Université Sorbonne Paris Cité, 2017. <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01515604>.
- Finkel, Irving, and Taylor, Jonathan.** *Cuneiform*. London: British Museum Press, 2015.
- Finkel, Irving, and Fletcher, Alexandra.** “Gallery 55 at the British Museum,” in *Museums and the Ancient Middle East. Curatorial Practices and Audiences*, edited by Geoff Emberling and Lucas P. Petit, 62–72. London: Routledge, 2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351164160-5>
- Greenhalgh, Michael.** *Plundered Empire: Acquiring Antiquities from Ottoman Lands*. Leiden: Brill, 2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004405479>
- Guest, John S.** *The Euphrates Expedition*. New York: Routledge, 2015. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315788555>
- Harper, R. F.** “The Discovery and Decipherment of the Cuneiform Inscriptions. I,” *Harper*, 14, no.1 (January 1892): 14–19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/470904>
- Ismail, Matthew.** *Wallis Budge: Magic and Mummies in London and Cairo*. Dost Publishing, 2021.
- Jones, Stephanie.** “British India Steamers and the Trade of the Persian Gulf, 1862–1914,” *The Great Circle* 7, no. 1 (April 1985): 23–44.

- Kersel, M. Morag.** "The Changing Legal Landscape for Middle Eastern Archaeology in the Colonial Era, 1800–1930," in *Pioneers to the Past: American Archaeologists in the Middle East 1919–1920*, edited by Geoff Emberling, 85–90. Chicago: The Oriental Institute Museum Publications, 2010.
- Lion, Brigitte, and Michel, Cécile.** "Les principaux sites ayant livré des tablettes cuneiforms," in *Atlas Historique du Proche-Orient Ancien*, edited by Martin Sauvage, 1–2. Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2021.
- Parrot, André.** *Archéologie mésopotamienne*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1946.
- Parry, J. P.** "Steam Power and British Influence in Baghdad, 1820–1860." *The Historical Journal*, 56 no.1 (2013): 145–173. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X12000568>
- Reade, Julian.** "Hormuzd Rassam and his Discoveries," *Iraq* 55 (1993): 39–62. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/4200366>
- Reade, Julian.** "Rassam's Babylonian Collection: The Excavations and the Archives," in *Catalogue of the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, vol. VI, edited by Earle Leitchy (London: British Museum Publications, 1986): xiii–xxxvi.
- Reade, Julian.** "Early Monuments in Gulf stone at the British Museum," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 92 (2002): 258–295. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/zava.2002.92.2.258>
- Robertson, John.** *Iraq: A History*. London: Oneworld, 2020.
- Robson, Eleanor.** *Mathematics in Ancient Iraq: A Social History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691201405>
- Russell, John Malcom.** *From Nineveh to New York*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Saldanha, Jerome A.** "Précis of Turkish Arabia affairs, 1801–1905," in the *Persian Gulf Précis*, Vol. 6 (Gerrards Cross: Archive Editions), 1986 (originally published in 1906).
- Saleh, Zaki.** *Mesopotamia and Britain: A Study in British Foreign Affairs*. Middle East Book Review, 2006.
- Seymour, Michael.** "Ancient Mesopotamia and Modern Iraq in the British Press, 1980–2003," *Current Anthropology* 45, no 3 (June 2004): 351–368. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/383004>
- Shaw, Wendy.** *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520928565>
- Sigrist, M., Hugo, H. Figulla, and Walker, Christopher B. F.** *Catalogue of the Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum*, Vol. II. London: British Museum Press, 1996.
- Van de Mierop, Marc.** *Cuneiform Texts and the Writing of History*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Verderame, Lorenzo, and Garcia-Ventura, Agnes** (eds.) *Receptions of the Ancient Near East in Popular Culture and Beyond*. Lockwood Press, 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5913/2020242>
- Wilson, David M.** *The British Museum: A History*. London: British Museum Press, 2002.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ait Said-Ghanem, Nadia. 2022. Smuggling Cuneiform Tablets in Aniseed Bags: Profile of a Sale Made by Elias Gejou to the British Museum in 1896. *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology*, 32(1): 2, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bha-667>

Submitted: 01 June 2022

Accepted: 06 September 2022

Published: 10 October 2022

COPYRIGHT:

© 2022 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Bulletin of the History of Archaeology is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.