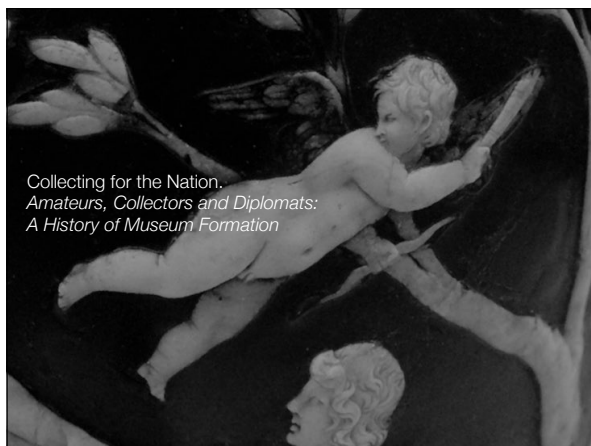




Good afternoon, my name is Lucia Patrizio Gunning and I am a teaching fellow in the History Department of UCL.



My PhD research into the British Consular Service in the Aegean and my subsequent book published in 2009, revealed the extensive connections between diplomacy and the collection of antiquities for Britain's national museum.



Over the past few years I have taught students about the history of collecting from cabinets of curiosity to the development of encyclopaedic museums in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The course touched on the ethics of collecting and the repercussions of historic collecting practices on today's art market and legislation relating the protection of antiquities. It is my personal view that Museums need to understand the broad principles and policies that guided their collecting policies, both to counteract criticism from some quarters and to actively engage in conversation regarding the



This year a UCL HEIF Knowledge Exchange and Innovation Grant allowed me to carry out a six month pilot project with the British Museum Archives.

This was focussed on researching documents relating to diplomatic involvement in the collection of antiquities in the whole of the Ottoman territory from the foundation of the British Museum in 1753 until 1912.



As well as the Central Archives, my research focused on the departmental archives of Greek and Roman Antiquities, Egypt and Sudan, and the Middle East.

Today I will use examples from the pilot project to illustrate the development of the connection between diplomats and the Museum across this period.



Whilst Lord Elgin used his own funds to acquire the Parthenon friezes, he was only able to do so because he was the Ambassador of Great Britain at Constantinople, (and able to benefit from the weakened political position of the Sultan when he applied for permission). The excitement of his diplomatic success is communicated in a letter from his wife sent to her parents in July 1801:

"I am happy to tell you Pisani has succeeded a merraveille in his Firman from the Porte... It allows our artists to go into the Citadel and to copy and model everything in it... to dig and discover all the ancient foundations and to bring away any marbles that may be deemed curious by their having inscriptions on them. I am in the greatest glee for it would have been a great pity to have failed in the principal point after having been at such an expense."

Mary Nisbet, Lady Elgin, letter to her parents, 1801.

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"One thing however would upset you very much as it would anyone who has the slightest understanding of these things: the last deplorable (to the point of tears) stripping of the temple of Athina on the Acropolis... like a noble and opulent lady who has lost all her diamonds and jewellery"

Ioannis Venizelos, letter to Elgin's private secretary

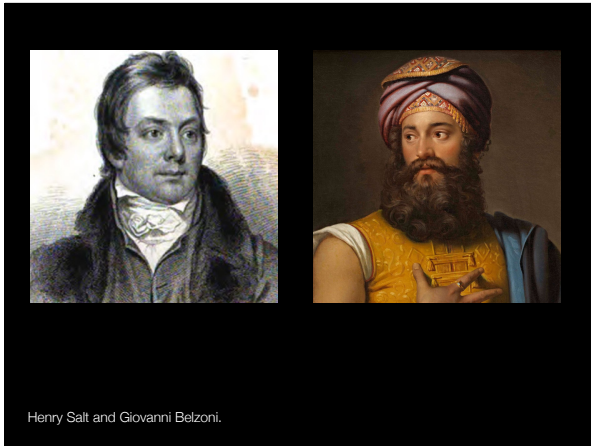
Any pretence that Elgin was unaware that taking the friezes would spoil the monument of its most beautiful attributes can be dispelled by the letter his private secretary received from Ioannis Venizelos, a school master in Athens who wrote:

"One thing however would upset you very much as it would anyone who has the slightest understanding of these things: the last deplorable (to the point of tears) stripping of the temple of Athina on the Acropolis... like a noble and opulent lady who has lost all her diamonds and jewellery"



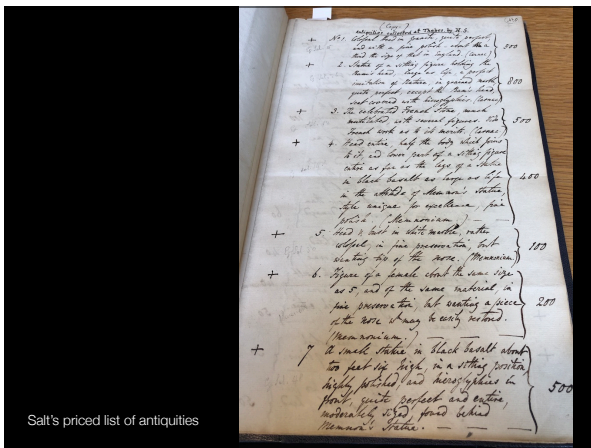
Although Elgin's collection had not been commissioned by the museum, its eventual acquisition changed the perception of how antiquities could be obtained.

In correspondence in the Egypt and Sudan departmental archive relating to acquisitions from British Consul Henry Salt and Giovanni Belzoni we find the seeds of the idea of institutional collecting.



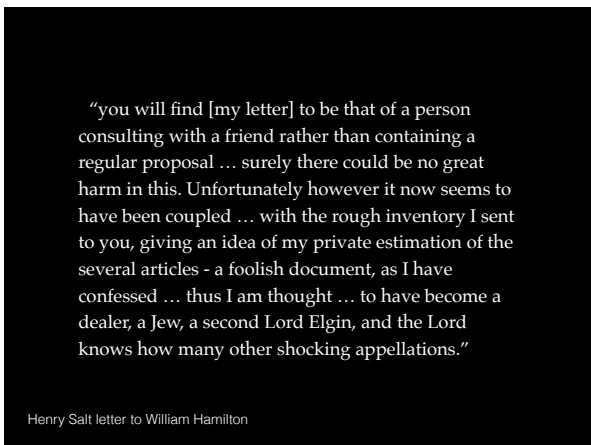
Henry Salt and Giovanni Belzoni.

The relationship between Salt, Belzoni and the Museum was fraught with complexity and misunderstandings. When Salt arrived in Egypt in 1815 he contacted Belzoni to collect antiquities for the British Museum failing to mention that there was no direct arrangement between himself and the Trustees, but just an amicable request from Sir Joseph Banks.



Salt's priced list of antiquities

It appears that Salt intended Belzoni to be at his own service to collect items for sale to the Museum. However Salt made a major misjudgement in sending a list of antiquities and prices to William Hamilton, (Permanent Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs), which was then passed to the Museum. It is evident that this letter painted a picture of Salt as an opportunist and the archives contain a series of letters where he tries to set the record straight.



“you will find [my letter] to be that of a person consulting with a friend rather than containing a regular proposal ... surely there could be no great harm in this. Unfortunately however it now seems to have been coupled ... with the rough inventory I sent to you, giving an idea of my private estimation of the several articles - a foolish document, as I have confessed ... thus I am thought ... to have become a dealer, a Jew, a second Lord Elgin, and the Lord knows how many other shocking appellations.”

Henry Salt letter to William Hamilton

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...the most economical system, they would amount to the sum of one thousand five hundred Pounds per annum, including the necessary presents to the Beys, Hasheffs, and Kaiwrakans of the Country, leaving it to the Trustees of the British Museum to employ myself in excavating and collecting antiquity in Egypt... I should feel myself highly honoured in engaging with the said Trustees for the period of two years, promising that I would endeavour to the best of my knowledge to employ the above time in the most minute researches."

I take the liberty to beg you will acquaint Sir Joseph Banks with my proposal by...

Giovanni Belzoni letter to the Trustees.

Further confusing matters, Belzoni had understood he could get directly employed by the Trustees of the Museum and wrote them a candid letter setting out his costs.

"I understand that it is the wish of Sir Joseph Banks that I should enter into an arrangement with the Trustees of the British Museum to employ myself in excavating and collecting antiquity in Egypt... I should feel myself highly honoured in engaging with the said Trustees for the period of two years, promising that I would endeavour to the best of my knowledge to employ the above time in the

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Giovanni Belzoni letter to the Trustees.

Having made a calculation of the expenses necessary for such an undertaking ... I find that, on the most economical system, they would amount to the sum of one thousand five hundred Pounds per annum, excluding the necessary presents to the Beys, Hasheffs, and Kaiwrakans of the Country."

"the Greeks were evidently the pupils of the Egyptians ... he could trace from the works I showed him to the Athenian works of Phidias."

Lord Mountnorris letter to Joseph Banks.

Although Egyptian art was at the time largely believed to be the work of barbarians and of interest primarily as curiosities, correspondence reveals a growing appreciation of its importance.

One of the Trustees, Lord Mountnorris, writing in support of Salt to Joseph Banks noted the Royal Academician Francis Chantrey's opinion on seeing some of Salt's statues and bas-reliefs that "the Greeks were evidently the pupils of the Egyptians ... he could trace from the works I showed him to the Athenian works of Phidias"



The Trustees did eventually agree to help with the transport of the antiquities believing that these would then be destined for the Museum, however when the pieces finally arrived in England there was confusion as to whom they belonged and a misunderstanding with Belzoni about the sale of the precious sarcophagus of Seti I which I believe was the reason for it eventually ending up in the John Soane Museum.

“Having received the satisfactory intelligence that the whole of my Egyptian collection, as per catalogue transmitted, which I was pressed by my friend and patron the late Sir Joseph Banks to place at your disposition, has arrived in safety, I take the liberty of repeating my unconditional offer of it to the British Museum with the exception ... of the elaborate sarcophagus, which according to agreement with Mr Belzoni, I have to beg may be estimated at a fair valuation.”

Henry Salt letter to the Trustees.

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“At the same time I feel it necessary for my interests to state that this collection has been made by me at great expense upwards of three thousand pounds, at the imminent risk of the funds employed, out of private property left to me by my father, to which alone... my family has to look for support. I have therefore to throw myself entirely in your liberality and shall be perfectly satisfied with whatever you may determine in my favour.”

Henry Salt letter to the Trustees.

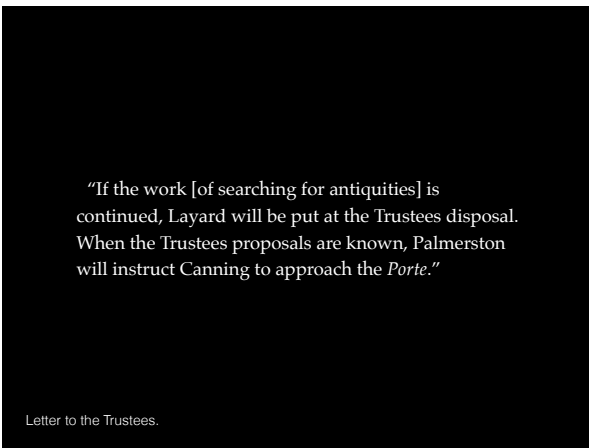
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Salt’s opportunism in thinking he could exploit his diplomatic position to procure a



Henry Austin Layard

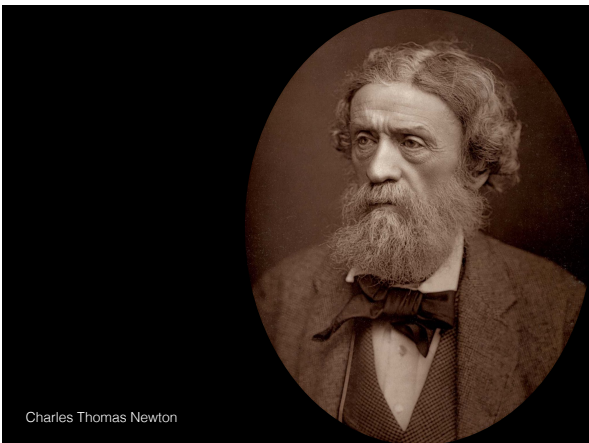
A further fundamental step in the development of a mutual system involving the diplomatic service in the procurement of antiquities for the Museum was the appointment of Henry Austin Layard. A letter in the Department of the Middle East which he wrote in 1849 explains his willingness to undertake work but laments that the sums were so inadequate that the result was doubtful. He noted that there was no prospect of personal advantage either in diplomacy or reputation. If he was to continue he would want an undertaking from the Government that his service to the Trustees should count as seniority in diplomatic professions.



“If the work [of searching for antiquities] is continued, Layard will be put at the Trustees disposal. When the Trustees proposals are known, Palmerston will instruct Canning to approach the *Porte*.”

Letter to the Trustees.

Five weeks later a letter informed the Trustees that Layard had been appointed paid attaché at Constantinople on a salary of £250 a year. “If the work [of searching for antiquities] is continued, Layard will be put at the Trustees disposal. When the Trustees proposals are known, Palmerston will instruct Canning to approach the *Porte*.” Layard’s diplomatic appointment was specifically created to allow him to collect for the Museum.



Charles Thomas Newton

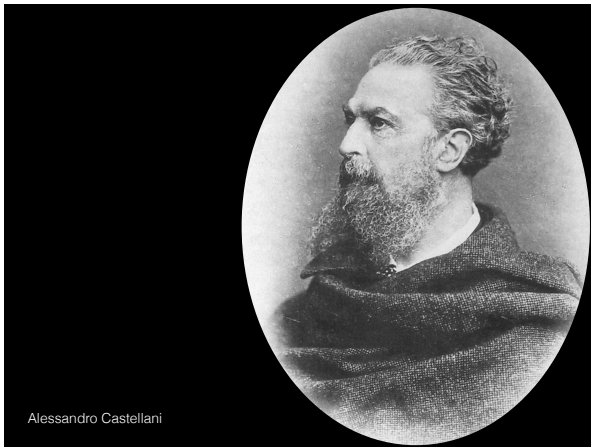
But the person who was responsible for connecting the Foreign Office and the British Museum into an effective agency for the collection of antiquities was Charles Thomas Newton who obtained a diplomatic posting in the Aegean in 1852. Whilst there, Newton met, advised and organised the local consuls to become agents for the collection of antiquities for the museum. After a brief posting as consul in Rome, on his return to Britain in 1861 he secured the keepership of a newly formed Department of Greek and Roman antiquities and in 1863 he wrote draft instructions to consuls for the Foreign Office, institutionalising the search and retrieval of antiquities as one of the official duties of British consuls in the Ottoman



The Satala Aphrodite

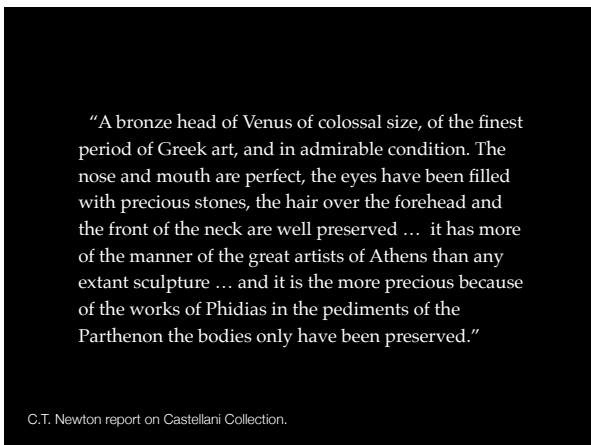
By this time, the golden age of collecting was in full swing, and while the Ottoman authorities started to extend access to excavations to other powers they had become aware of the value of findings for their own museum. In the newly unified Italy the antiquities market had begun to freeze up as the new government had legislated to prevent the export of archaeological finds which were instead destined for regional museums.

This delicate set of coincidences sets the background for my final example which combines acquisition, consuls, and intense diplomatic activity to convince the trustees to spend money for a collection in order to obtain one very special piece:



Alessandro Castellani

Alessandro Castellani, the descendant of a family of famous Italian jewellers, had been negotiating to sell his collection of gold and gems to the Museum since August 1865 but the government had repeatedly failed to commit the money. The situation changed following his purchase of a rare Greek Bronze which seems to have attracted Newton's particular interest and which he became determined to secure for the Museum.



C.T. Newton report on Castellani Collection.

Whilst Castellani's gold objects had been deposited at the Museum in 1871, the bronze head with other antiquities was still in Rome and Newton travelled there in 1872 to inspect it.

"A bronze head of Venus of colossal size, of the finest period of Greek art, and in admirable condition. The nose and mouth are perfect, the eyes have been filled with precious stones, the hair over the forehead and the front of the neck are well preserved ... it has more of the manner of the great artists of Athens than any extant sculpture ... and it is the more precious because of the works of Phidias in the pediments of the Parthenon the bodies only have been preserved"

"This precious relic of the heroic age has been secured by Mr Castellani and it is now offered with the remainder of his collection to the British Museum. I have reported very fully on his offer to the Trustees and recommended it in the strongest manner... because it contains a bronze head of Venus of heroic size which is to my mind the finest example of Greek work in metal I have ever seen, indeed, I may say, the work which in beauty of conception and mastery of execution has most claim to rank next to the marbles of the Parthenon. I trust that the liberality of the Government will enable us to secure this matchless head."

C.T. Newton letter to Gladstone.

Newton reported that this bronze had recently been sold to Castellani by Potiades Bey, the former Turkish minister at Florence where Newton's ex-assistant Domnic Colnaghi, of the family of auctioneers, was Consul-General.

Newton was determined to secure this piece for the Museum, writing to Gladstone that the collection contained:

"a bronze head of Venus of heroic size which is to my mind the finest example of Greek work in metal I have ever seen, indeed, I may say, the work which in beauty



Consul Alfred Biliotti photo courtesy of the Greek and Roman Antiquities Department of the British Museum

Newton appears to have been quite obsessed with the bronze head and he set out to find the story behind it and where it had been found so that he could try to locate the entire statue.

In a museum committee meeting on the 28 of March 1874 Newton submitted two letters from Alfred Biliotti, British consul at Rhodes which stated that he had received information that the large bronze head in the Castellani collection recently acquired by the Museum had been found, together with a hand in bronze, at or near Satala in Armenia, and suggested that interesting discoveries might be made where these objects were found.

"Some months ago you sent Biliotti to Satala in search of the statue. He made excavations but failed to find it .. now the very man... who severed the head from the trunk of the statue was in my room here two days ago. He was brought to me by Alishan who has been entrusted with the secret which is known to only 2 or 3 other persons. They are afraid of Biliotti and the Turks..."

Hughes to Newton

Newton had evidently tasked as many people as possible to enquire about the head. Since it had originally been sent to Constantinople he had asked the Secretary General of the British Embassy to investigate and his report alluded to further pieces.

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“Not only is the statue (of which you have the head) in existence, but a companion statue quite uninjured can be had. The Ambassador must ask leave to purchase and bring away the statue as a special favour from the Sultan. In the present temper of the Turks, as regards antiquities it can be done in no other way.”

Hughes to Newton

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Head from a bronze cult statue of *Anahita*, a local goddess shown here in the guise of Aphrodite

200-100 BC
Found at Satala in NE Asia Minor
(Armenia Minor)

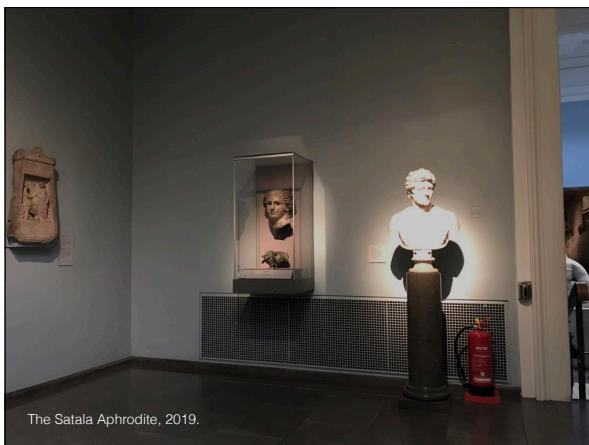
A left hand holding drapery was found with the head, showing that it belongs to a full-length figure.

GR 1873 0220.1 (Bronze 266)(head)
GR 1875 1201.1 (hand)

Labelling of the Satala Aphrodite in the British Museum.

The extensive correspondence relating to the Satala head shows how Newton and the Museum made full use of the machinery of the British diplomatic service, directing consuls on the ground and gathering intelligence relating to antiquities and how they might be procured.

The current display of the piece in the Museum makes no mention of its complex journey, of the extensive efforts made to secure its purchase, to seek out its origins or to discover the rest of the statue that it may have been part of.



The Satala Aphrodite, 2019.

One of the aims of the pilot project has been to show how material in the British Museum illuminates the attitudes, behaviour and policies behind acquisitions and how they shaped both the way the museum developed and the collections it acquired.

These documents tell the story of the determination to build a museum with the best pieces but with the least expense, involving governmental efforts at a variety of different levels to obtain permissions, get the manpower to excavate, transport and bring the monuments to the museum. It is a story of an initially casual but later