

# Continuity and change in the British diplomatic service in the Levant

The 'Levantine' question and the lure of antiquities

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*In this article, we examine the organization of the British diplomatic service in the Ottoman Empire and analyse its transition from a prestigious, privately financed, highly individualized public office to a state-funded, but fragmented and poorly paid body. We survey the idiosyncratic character of the diplomatic apparatus set up by the Levant Company to serve its business pursuits, infiltrate local society and obtain political favours. In 1825 the Foreign Office replaced the Levant Company officers with public servants who had no ties or affinities with Levantine society. However, to obtain antiquities for the British Museum, the Foreign Office had to turn once again to British Levantines. Based on our earlier published work,<sup>1</sup> as well as recent unpublished archival research, this paper explains how the collecting of antiquities in the Ottoman Empire relied entirely on the British diplomatic service and its Levantine connection.*

## The Levant Company's diplomatic apparatus

In 1575 the English merchants Edward Osborne and Richard Staper sent agents to Constantinople to explore the possibility of establishing commercial relations with the Ottoman Empire. Their representatives obtained permission to reside, as well as the commitment of the Ottoman authorities to allow and protect English trade within their dominion.<sup>2</sup> Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established through the 'capitulations' – an agreement signed by Queen Elizabeth I and Sultan Murad III. This document outlined the privileges, rights and obligations of the English operating within the Ottoman Empire:<sup>3</sup> it defined the jurisdiction and responsibilities of an English diplomatic mission comprising an ambassador, resident in Constantinople and consuls established in major cities and ports. Within a year, the Company of English Merchants trading in the Levant Sea, otherwise the Levant Company, was founded.<sup>4</sup> The company's corporate form was finalized in 1661,<sup>5</sup> with a centralized management structure: at the top, a governor, a deputy and eighteen assistants elected

at an annual general assembly of company members held in London, formed the administration; the general assembly had executive, legislative and judicial authority. The company established offices, known as 'factories', in strategic trading outposts in the Ottoman Empire: Constantinople, Aleppo, Tripoli, Alexandria and Cairo, and later also in Smyrna, Larnaca and Salonica. Factories were established also on the coast of the Ionian Sea – the centre of the trade in currants.<sup>6</sup> As a chartered trading company, the Levant Company was responsible for appointing diplomatic representatives to ensure the implementation of the capitulations, promote commercial enterprise and safeguard resident English subjects. In 1581 its foundation was seen as the only way to organize, finance and coordinate a new commercial enterprise in a vast and little-known territory and to set up a system of diplomatic representatives.<sup>7</sup> The ambassador, consuls, treasurers and chancellors (holders of the latter two roles were elected locally) implemented the company's policy, inspected the activity of its members or 'freemen', and their agents or 'factors', and sent reports back to the London headquarters. Appointed by the Crown to represent England at the Ottoman Porte, the ambassador's

salary and expenses were paid by the company. The ambassador oversaw the application of the capitulations, guaranteed the safety of English expatriates in Ottoman territory, administered the company membership oath to English subjects abroad, granted trading licences and patents and offered protection to foreigners. From the nineteenth century, Britain's involvement in political and military activities in the south-eastern Mediterranean turned its ambassador to the Porte into a key negotiator, entrusted with crucial diplomatic duties, who had little time for commercial affairs. Consequently, from 1806 a consul general was also appointed by the company at Constantinople, with the specific task of overseeing the company's commercial affairs and of corresponding with the consuls, leaving the ambassador in complete control over British foreign affairs. From the middle of the seventeenth century, vice-consuls, proconsuls and agents, were also appointed to minor ports and islands of the Aegean Sea.<sup>8</sup>

As the head of the British diplomatic mission, the ambassador symbolized British sovereignty on Ottoman soil. However, the backbone of the Levant Company's organization in the Ottoman Empire was a diplomatic mechanism built precisely to serve its own commercial interests, promote business and protect its members. This mechanism comprised appointed officers, employees and intermediaries recruited from among its members or local society. British merchants, as members of the company, were hired as consuls, treasurers and chancellors to attend to the needs of the factories and to represent the Levant Company administration to the Ottoman authorities. At the same time, Ottoman subjects and protégés of various nationalities were assigned the offices of vice-consul, proconsul and agent to assist the company and its members in entering local markets; these personnel worked with the Ottoman administration to ensure the smooth and efficient operation of the factories. Finally, Ottoman subjects were also appointed to auxiliary staff positions at the British embassy and major consulates. The members of this *sui generis* diplomatic structure, comprising British and Ottoman as well as other foreign members, constituted an idiosyncratic group entrusted with the company's diplomatic representation. British protection, collaboration and partnership enhanced relations of trust among them and led them to other important contractual and non-contractual forms of association through private

business pursuits, credit, sociability, friendship and marriage.

### The merchant consuls of the Levant Company

The Levant Company consuls were 'freemen', or members appointed directly by the company's administration.<sup>9</sup> In each of the major factories, a treasurer and a chancellor were appointed by factory vote. The consuls represented the rights and interests of the company to local authorities, furthered bilateral relations, collected revenues and duties, and presided over the assemblies of factory members in all the Ottoman trading outposts, while at the same time carrying out their own business.<sup>10</sup> They also supervised the behaviour and activity of factory members to ensure compliance with company rules. The consuls in the major factories were authorized, in consultation with the company in London, to swear in new members of the company on the spot and grant trading licences. They were also responsible for distributing English protection certificates which were purchased by Ottoman and foreign subjects through the *berat* system. Appointments to the position of consul, chancellor and treasurer of the factory required the payment of financial guarantees to the company; often these financial guarantees were paid by their 'friends' – that is, other company members who supported their candidacy. Consuls, treasurers and chancellors received an annual salary. Despite the fact that they systematically communicated with the company's headquarters and received guidance on how to manage their responsibilities and duties, geographical distance and mail delays allowed them to administer the factories freely, following their instincts, and sometimes overstepping their duties or the company's rules.<sup>11</sup> Official duties, personal strategies and professional targets combined to make these officials both intuitive businessmen and conscientious, experienced public officers and diplomats. The image of the consul as a free rider<sup>12</sup> – a merchant divided between his aspirations as a businessman and his career as a public officer – did not apply merely to the English (later British) merchant consuls of the Levant Company but was typical of the early modern perception of consular representation in the Ottoman Empire. The systems adopted by other European countries to organize and finance their diplomatic missions in the Levant, which

in theory differed considerably from one country to another, in reality had overarching similarities.<sup>13</sup> Wealthy members of the upper middle class were appointed as consuls: Venetian diplomats belonged to distinguished families, the French were rich entrepreneurs who ran the consulates for speculative purposes, the English and Dutch were rich and prominent merchants. All were vehicles of national sovereignty inside a foreign country, conveying the policies of their respective governments to the Ottoman authorities, and all were delegated to supervise and protect their citizens and to collect taxes and duties on trade and navigation. Studies comparing these missions in the Ottoman Empire have emphasized how, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, they developed into semi-autonomous institutions, albeit under the control of public and private organizations in their countries of origin.<sup>14</sup> Working on a plurality of levels, they simultaneously served national, state, corporate and personal interests.

The Levant Company's diplomatic correspondence encapsulates the semi-autonomous character of the British diplomatic establishment. It also demonstrates how the merchant consuls, their associates and families, forged close ties with members of local society through business interaction, which required integration into local markets and constant transactions with locals and foreigners. Upon their arrival in the Levant, British merchants were introduced into the local British communities. Their business, social and family life unfolded inside the local factories, and they developed ties with members of the international merchant community and the local Ottoman society. Office-holding was the outcome of a precise and focused process which necessitated the use of legitimate and illegitimate methods, yet repaid the merchants with power, prestige and material benefits by introducing them into a system of power relations, affinities and strategic alliances with the members of all other business communities. Being a British consul in the Ottoman Empire transformed a merchant from an independent businessman to a public figure with a political mandate. He negotiated with Ottoman officials, combining the qualities of dealer and diplomat. Responsible for protecting English merchants against Ottoman commercial and fiscal policies and illegitimate initiatives, consuls were necessarily implicated in Ottoman politics and bureaucratic procedures. National goals and business interests triggered antagonism between

members of the European missions, but also solidarity when collaboration became necessary. When needing to put pressure upon central and local authorities, joint action was more effective and gave the opportunity to promote personal interests directly, while expanding the network of local friends and collaborators. Business, social and family relations developed inside the international markets of the Ottoman Empire and contributed to the creation of an ad hoc society within the Ottoman one, where established dichotomies (foreigners versus locals, Europeans versus other Europeans and non-Europeans, Christians versus Muslims and versus Jews) existed but were often surpassed by the superior purpose of achieving profit and benefits, and protection from the Ottoman authorities. Atypical solidarities, affinities and connections developed inside a society geared towards profit. Being merchants themselves and connected with other merchants and merchant families, the consuls felt at ease with these rules. Trust and friendship growing out of business collaboration, partnership, economic dependency, social and professional solidarity and sociability formed a multinational environment within which family bonds and marriage alliances could be forged. Association with prominent members of the local business community sometimes led to the marriage of British subjects with other Europeans or Ottomans. Such marriages defied conventions of religious identity and social origin, and contributed to the development of a social fabric connecting Levant Company merchants, agents and officials with members of local society through love, intimacy, dependence, interest and daily habits. At the same time, they provided the company with a legacy of second- and third-generation protégés – British, Ottoman or other nationals – who could support the interests of the company as members, officials or employees. As the number of company members established in the empire increased, so did the number of their family members and relatives who depended on the Levant Company or served it as officials and employees.

### **Levantines in the British diplomatic service**

The diplomatic representation of the Levant Company in the Ottoman Empire comprised Ottoman subjects

in positions of responsibility, or as auxiliary staff and minor employees. The creation of networks of loyal and trustworthy Ottoman subjects, acting as British vice-consuls, agents and employees promoting the company's interests, was an effective system devised by the company to infiltrate Ottoman markets, evade Ottoman bureaucratic procedures and access local power lobbies. The Ottoman subjects appointed as vice-consuls and employees allowed the company officials and members of the British factories access to Levantine society: they offered the British valuable information, acquainted them with the political, social and economic realities, introduced them to local culture, customs and traditions and sometimes even became their trusted friends and partners. For instance, Ottoman subjects employed as dragomans at the British embassy in Constantinople were not merely official interpreters to the British diplomatic missions. Their knowledge, experience and acquaintances made them valuable and trusted advisers to the British ambassadors on issues that surpassed their official duties, such as policy design, public relations and negotiation. This was the case of the well-known Pisani family, whose members were appointed as dragomans at the British embassy and through the years became closely related with the British delegation. Bartholomew Pisani's career represents a telling example of how the network of local Ottoman subjects employed by the company functioned. Bartholomew was initially appointed as chancellor at the Constantinople factory and later as dragoman by Lord Elgin. He remained in the office for many years and, as appears from the company's correspondence, he was entrusted with many important duties and responsibilities: he received briefings from Consul General Isaac Morier, which he forwarded to the ambassador, conveyed requests to British embassy officials from Ottoman authorities and individuals, and participated in negotiations between British and Ottoman officials. Pisani openly expressed his opinion on various issues to his superiors and forwarded reports to the British factory.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the dragomans, the Levant Company recruited vice-consuls, proconsuls and agents from within Ottoman society. A letter sent by Morier to the company in London in May 1812 listed the British holders of these positions who had been appointed in various islands and ports of the Archipelago by the king's ambassadors between

1794 and 1812. He stated that these officers were all Ottoman subjects and acted under no other authority but the ambassadors' patents bestowed on them.<sup>16</sup> Morier's list contained twenty-nine Ottoman subjects mostly of Greek origin. They were members of the local societies delegated to assist British merchants, shipmasters, and royal convoys, provide valuable information and other services to Levant Company officials and freemen, and represent British subjects before local authorities. They did not receive salaries but were usually granted annuities as a gift upon leaving office and on special occasions a percentage bonus over the *consulages* (the charges or dues) collected, which ended up being very low. Their appointment offered them security vis-à-vis the Ottoman administration and filled them with pride; on many occasions they proved willing to risk their lives and reputations to serve their British superiors. The vice-consuls appointed to the Aegean islands corresponded directly with the office of the consul, Francis Werry, in Smyrna, and for this reason Werry employed a clerk to transcribe Greek and correspond with these agents. The letters they sent to the company's headquarters were dispatched to London via Smyrna.

British protection, collaboration and partnership enhanced relations between the members of this unconventional diplomatic apparatus and led to other important contractual forms of association. Credit, partnership, marriage alliances, kin and friendship, ethnicity, religion and sociability, trust and doubt constructed an interdependence between them. These relationships allowed them to develop a deep sense of belonging that formed the basis of the so-called Levantine identity. In Britain, however, this identity was seen as highly problematic, as it was believed that immersion in the Levantine way of life and affinity with local society interfered with diplomatic duties.

### **The winding up of the Levant Company and the creation of a state consular service**

The ten years between 1815 and 1825 saw a gradual erosion of the Levant Company's rights, as public opinion in England sided against the privileges granted to it.<sup>17</sup> For a significant part of British society,

which included liberal intellectuals and politicians, the company was an imperfect construct of the dominant mercantilist ideology, a monopoly established to serve the interests of an economic elite of socially distinguished London merchants, closely linked to the political establishment of the time. By 1825, with its scope 'no longer connected with the protection of public interest', the company was invited to surrender its royal charter, which was now seen as damaging to free trade in the Levant.<sup>18</sup> On 29 January 1825, following the creation of the Foreign Office, all officers were transferred into His Majesty's Service, and the *consulages* abolished.<sup>19</sup> On 11 February the company 'humbly petitioned' the king by letter to accept the surrender of its charters which it 'could not have any desire to hold any longer'.<sup>20</sup> In May of the same year, the Levant Company dismissed its consuls, communicating to them that it had transferred its authority to the Crown, surrendered the charter and suspended the consulates, and that the company's offices were to be administered by the Crown. 'You will therefore, on receipt of this letter, consider yourself released from your engagement with us and follow only the instructions which as his Majesty's Consul general, you will receive from the Foreign Department.'<sup>21</sup> Districts were reorganized with new and different priorities, and the Foreign Office communicated the decision to absorb the diplomatic and consular services under one branch and to reform its personnel entirely. Consuls would dedicate themselves uniquely to diplomatic duties and would be allowed to trade only in exceptional circumstances. Although letters of recommendation for each official were sent to the Foreign Office, there was no guarantee that they would be retained with the same role and location. New, British-born personnel, without friendship or family ties, were intended to be substituted for Levant Company officers and personnel, in a move that sought to clean up the service and make it more efficient. Families whose members had worked for generations as diplomatic representatives for the Levant Company, the Wilkinson, Biliotti and Werry dynasties among others, had assured the Levant Company continuity of service throughout its tenure. However, it was precisely on this type of personnel that the Foreign Office, the press and parliamentary inquiries chose to focus their attention in subsequent years. The elimination of *consulages* deeply affected the income and consequently the quality of life of the consuls, and since the

Foreign Office had peculiarly little understanding of local customs, or of the financial costs and practical necessities of life in the Ottoman Empire, economic priorities soon clashed with the requirements of the service. The Levant Company had provided offices, servants and an administrative entourage that had allowed the job to be conducted to the high standards expected in this part of the world. Under the Foreign Office, trade continued to be carried out in the same places, yet the relocated consuls, deprived of such support, became increasingly isolated.

To save money, the Foreign Office did not reappoint dragomans and other Levant Company personnel, all of whom were excluded from a system to which they had dedicated their entire working lives.<sup>22</sup> Left without work and accommodation, many became unable to support their families. This affected their behaviour and loyalty and damaged the reputation of the British in the area.<sup>23</sup> At Francis Werry's consulate in Smyrna, the Foreign Office reorganization created chaos. At the age of 83, Werry was left with an enormous burden of work and only one member of staff. Three clerks and an under-clerk had previously been constantly occupied to keep the consulate running, their salaries being paid out of the fees charged on trade. As fees and personnel had been reduced, Werry had no means of undertaking the work: 'though Economy is the order of the day, Mr. Canning would I am sure wish appearances to be maintained in the proper manner, neither extravagantly, but certainly not shabbily'.<sup>24</sup>

### Parliamentary inquiries and the quest for change

Throughout the nineteenth century, the British press and parliamentarians were critical of the employment of 'Levantine', including in this category both 'men of English descent domiciled, sometimes over several generations, in the Levant',<sup>25</sup> as well as consuls sent from England but employed in the Levant for a number of years. Critics of the concession of a state monopoly to a private company that employed its personnel in the diplomatic conduct of state affairs disapproved of the entire Levant Company diplomatic system, including everyone who had served the company's purposes for centuries: consuls, vice-consuls, agents, protégés and personnel, alternating in

different offices and living inside or close to the embassy, the consulates and the factories. Their employment had been a natural solution under the Levant Company as Levantines, both British and Ottoman subjects, understood local traditions and customs, were fluent in the language and had an Ottoman and international business entourage and a precise understanding of what was expected from a foreign diplomat in the Ottoman Empire. However, this posed difficulties under the administration of the Foreign Office, according to whose practice appointments were at the 'private patronage' of the secretary of state. People were chosen through personal connections or by recommendation 'from some aristocrat or politician whose own name carried weight at the Foreign Office'.<sup>26</sup> These later candidates received no training and did not speak the language, were expected to top up their salary with private income and were granted no accommodation or allowances. Appointments at this stage met the objective of maintaining party loyalty through the distribution of offices<sup>27</sup> rather than responding to a set of needs relevant to the service.

In 1858 a parliamentary select committee inquired into the nature and quality of personnel employed in the Levant. While, in the absence of a set of specific instructions, the consul had to 'rely on his own common sense and on public opinion in the community in which he resided',<sup>28</sup> the committee, swayed by articles in *The Times*, was more preoccupied with the nature of personnel inherited from the Levant Company than with the definition of their duties or their working conditions. Of three hundred salaried appointments, one third were filled, at this stage, by officers who had been previously employed in one duty or another.<sup>29</sup> *The Times* attacked the 'frequent and most obnoxious way' of recruiting British consuls in the Levant, where these 'half-English, half Levantine families' were said to have acquired a right to consulships: an 'infusion of fresh English blood and English ideas' was required.<sup>30</sup>

The committee wondered if 'the result of the peculiar mode of conducting our commercial establishments in the Levant [has] been that the consulates have a good deal fallen into the hands of families established in those countries and familiar with the customs and usages of those countries?'<sup>31</sup> Compared with their French counterparts, who were always appointed directly from France and were less 'orientalised', Levantines, interacting with the natives, could not possibly command the respect expected from

the representatives of a country with the standing of Great Britain.<sup>32</sup>

*The Times* questioned the honesty of consuls, paid like clerks but expected to behave according to 'the English standard of commercial and political morality'.<sup>33</sup> In 1870 a second inquiry revealed that salaries were never enough and that consuls were expected to invest their own private funds in settling into their post. Taking one month's leave to go back to England cost a consul half of his salary during his absence. This made it financially impossible to return home, which resulted in a loss of contact with the 'English ways', and meant that the officials became 'more and more like the people amongst whom they lived'.<sup>34</sup> In 1871 George Jackson Eldridge from Syria testified that the government failed to pay staff 'enough to enable them to live decently. Men could hardly be expected to expatriate themselves out of pure patriotism.' Consul Robert William Cumberbatch at Smyrna and vice consul Alfred Biliotti at Rhodes both pointed out that no travel home had been possible because the salary deduction and the shortness of the leave made it not worthwhile. A cumulative leave every three years without deduction of salary would allow consuls to return home and re-acustom themselves to British habits.<sup>35</sup> While *The Times* and the committee insisted on the necessity of moving people regularly,<sup>36</sup> it was realized that knowledge of local customs could emerge only as a result of long residence. 'A consul who had been many years at a post acquired local knowledge and was therefore of immense value and service to the British government.'<sup>37</sup> Levantines understood precisely local politics, customs and the way of life, and had helped to run the service smoothly and efficiently.<sup>38</sup> So, while at the beginning of the nineteenth century a desire to reform and 'clean up' the service focused on the propriety of the appointment of officials, there were specific motivations that kept them within the service. Indeed, for practical reasons, the personnel employed in the Levant service continued to include people who had lived or served all through their working lives in the Ottoman Empire. One of the motivations for their retention was the search and acquisition of antiquities to enrich the collections of the British Museum.

### The lure of antiquities

The question of finding and buying antiquities for the British Museum put the issue of British diplomatic representation on a new footing. As Charles

Thomas Newton, an agent of the British Museum authorized to acquire antiquities by excavation and purchase, was to demonstrate, the success of this project would require the appointment, in Ottoman outposts, of experienced and well-connected individuals who could get information, come to terms with the locals and negotiate. Although the search for antiquities was not included among official consular duties until 1863, when consuls were charged with handling the less publicized duty of procuring artefacts for the British Museum,<sup>39</sup> it eventually justified the decision of the Foreign Office to turn to well-known British Levantines able to undertake this task.

Throughout the preceding centuries, along with members of the European aristocracy and the upper classes, high-ranking officers and distinguished merchant members of the Levant Company had appreciated antiquities in their own private collections and as decorative elements in their lavish mansions.<sup>40</sup> Sir Thomas Roe, appointed ambassador to Constantinople in 1621, is known to have overseen the first introduction to England of classical sculptures from Asia Minor. William Ray, the company's consul in Smyrna, collected 600 Greek coins which he presented to the Bodleian Library. And company records provide evidence that the merchant Alexander Drummond, consul at Aleppo, shipped home an inscribed stone found near Palmyra as a gift to the Duke of Argyll in the 1740s. At the beginning of the nineteenth century British demand for antiquities was stimulated by the echo of the interest aroused by the Parthenon marbles. British merchant houses in Malta traded in antique relics coming from the East. In 1814 in Joseph Woodhead's shop in Malta one could spot 'a great assortment of mosaics and ancient stones', while the British firms Chabot, Routh & Co., John C. Ross and William Mawson imported antiquities from the Ottoman Empire to Malta and forwarded them to Britain. The British merchant Nathaniel Harley was also known for dealing in ancient statuary.<sup>41</sup>

The precise mechanisms through which British officials and merchants were able to find, buy and forward to England Levantine and Mediterranean antiquities remain largely unknown. What is certain, however, is that they needed to get the consent of Ottoman authorities: a permit in the form of a *firman* and a trading licence. The crucial role played in this procedure by efficient and well-connected intermediaries of the British with the Ottoman administration is

described in a seventeenth-century account ascribed to John Milton:

The measures to get these [statues] are these, there must be a passe or safe conduct from the Great Turk procured by the Ambassador at Constantinople authorizing and securing the man employed . . . to search, dig up, and transport these things only for curiosity, for the Turkes must not know that they are of any value, he that is employed must always wear poor apparel, for by that means the Turkes will imagine the things he seeks for to be of no great estimation, he must have letters of recommendation to the English consuls and merchants factors at every place he goeth, with bills of exchange and letters of credit, for the digging, carryeing, or buyeing, of the things aforesaid.<sup>42</sup>

The Levant Company diplomatic apparatus, its agents and protégés assisted and facilitated this kind of pursuit.

The first ambassador-collector was William Hamilton, appointed to the court of Naples in 1764; he built a collection of vases and antiquities which he sold to the British Museum in 1772. This acquisition was transformative, not only in the understanding of the classical world, but also for the formation of taste in Britain.<sup>43</sup> Hamilton's example inspired Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin,<sup>44</sup> who, when appointed ambassador at the Sublime Porte, consulted with his architect, Thomas Harrison, on 'the benefits that might possibly be derived to the arts in this country, in case an opportunity could be found for studying minutely the architecture and sculpture of ancient Greece'.<sup>45</sup>

A glance at Consul General Morier's list of vice-consuls and agents of 1812 allows us to arrive at some immediate conclusions. During his mission at the British embassy in Constantinople (1799–1803), Lord Elgin appointed thirteen vice-consuls and agents in various commercial outposts and islands of the Aegean Sea; by contrast, among his predecessors, Robert Liston had appointed two, John Spencer Smith five, Charles Arbuthnot one, Robert Adair three and Stratford Canning four. All of Elgin's appointments were Ottoman subjects, mostly of Greek origin, probably recruited during his six-month trip to the Greek mainland and the Archipelago, when he left his secretary Alexander Stratton as his replacement in Constantinople. During this journey, Elgin visited Athens and many Aegean islands and got hold of many trophies. On his return to Constantinople, he secured letters from the Ottoman government confirming that everything that had been undertaken in

Athens was approved by them. It would seem logical to conclude that Elgin's personal desire to find antiquities and get the permission of local authorities to excavate, remove them and send them back to England was assisted by Levant Company officers and personnel, who were, at the time, found under his orders. In fact, Spyridon Logothetis, appointed by Elgin as British vice-consul in Athens, played a key role in the process of obtaining permissions for carrying out excavations under the Parthenon, while he also offered his house in the Plaka quarter to the British mission to store the marbles that had been dismantled until they were transferred to the ships that would take them to England. Mary Nisbet, Lady Elgin, writing to her parents explained how Elgin's Levantine dragoman, Pisani, had been instrumental in obtaining the *firman* for the Parthenon marbles:

I am happy to tell you Pisani has succeeded a merraveille in his Firman from the Porte, Hunt is in raptures for the firman is perfection and P [Pisani] says he will answer with his whiskers that it is exact. It allows all our artists to go into the Citadel and to copy and model everything in it, to erect scaffolds all round the temples, 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. And that they are not to be disturbed by the soldiers, under any pretences whatsoever. Don't you think this will do?<sup>46</sup>

Many years later, in 1859, Charles Newton praised the valuable contribution of these Levantine vice-consuls, proconsuls and agents who assisted in the fulfilment of the most delicate and difficult missions on behalf of the British government. Newton, who had arrived in Greece to find and buy antiquities that would enrich the British Museum's collection long after the Foreign Office had taken over the diplomatic representation of Britain in the Ottoman Empire, wrote in a letter to his friend, the museum's principal librarian, Antonio Panizzi. In his letter, he recommended that instead of appointing an agent, the museum would be better served by the unpaid vice consul at Rhodes, Alfred Biliotti.<sup>47</sup>

Biliotti's low expectations of receiving a reward for his services, as described by Newton, were echoed in a remark made by consul Francis Werry when referring to the motives of those who took up these positions. In a letter to the company's secretary, George Liddell, in 1817, Werry admitted that these 'poor fellows' accepted the positions expecting, perhaps, to receive something as a reward, and 'were it not for the power

the Company had delegated to them to remunerate them . . . no person of character would serve us'.<sup>48</sup>

### The benefit of the Levantines in collecting

Technological, economic and political power were all needed to obtain antiquities,<sup>49</sup> but imperial collecting was enabled by political influence in the areas that were the source of archaeological remains.<sup>50</sup> This political and economic domination came hand in hand with the expansion of the consular service. In the European race to establish museums in the capitals of Europe, diplomats in the Ottoman Empire acquired an unparalleled position to source antiquities. Elgin had paved the way for a wave of British diplomats who built their career around archaeological findings. He set the basis for an unprecedented collection of cultural heritage that would bring the British Museum to a position of equality with the Louvre. These events need to be understood in the context of the archaeological rivalry that developed in Europe at a time of the formation of state museums. Diplomats from different countries competed on the ground for the same antiquities. When Elgin arrived in Athens, he found the French artist Fauvel working for the ambassador Choiseul-Gouffier at the Acropolis; Fauvel even managed to take away a pair of slabs.<sup>51</sup> The belief that if one country did not take them, they might be taken by another worked as an effective self-justification. Documentation in the archives of the British Museum, cross-referenced with the Foreign Office papers at the National Archives in Kew, reveals the details of these activities.<sup>52</sup> Ottoman permission to excavate and export pieces abroad was given by the sultan for political reasons, and only to diplomats; it is this that makes it impossible to disentangle the collection of antiquities from the actions of national governments and international politics.<sup>53</sup>

Elgin relied on private funds, yet it was his official position that enabled him to obtain the *firman*, creating a grey area where monuments and archaeological pieces of high cultural value could be taken in an official capacity but sold privately. In fact, he failed to profit financially, as the government eventually barely paid what he had spent to acquire the marbles.<sup>54</sup>

In a parallel example, Henry Salt managed to obtain appointment by the secretary of state as consul general at Alexandria when the post became vacant in



1815, through recommendations from Lord Valencia and Sir Joseph Banks.<sup>55</sup> An informal request by Banks to find antiquities for the British Museum<sup>56</sup> made Salt believe that direct sales to the museum would be forthcoming, which would help him to create a pension. An unexpectedly low salary influenced his decision to collect for profit.<sup>57</sup> Salt employed Giovanni Battista Belzoni, an Italian engineer with an unusual ability to locate tombs, and over three years they built up a substantial collection. However, it proved difficult to sell. Salt made the tactical error of sending a priced description of antiquities to William Hamilton at the British Museum, causing offence<sup>58</sup> and alienating Banks and other trustees who had backed his adventure.<sup>59</sup> Correspondence in the Egyptian archives at the British Museum reveals that matters were further exacerbated by a dispute with Belzoni, who believed that he was working officially for the trustees rather than for Salt in a private capacity.<sup>60</sup> This first collection was eventually acquired by the French, while the unique alabaster sarcophagus of Seti I ended up in Sir John Soane's museum. Like Elgin, Salt was unsuccessful in attempting to profit, though he demonstrated how even a consular position could be used for the procurement of monumental antiquities and to build collections destined for foreign institutions.<sup>61</sup>

Austin Henry Layard was a young traveller unconnected with the diplomatic service when he arrived in Mosul, but his engagement with antiquities was to determine a subsequent career as diplomat and politician. In 1842 he met the French consul Paul Émile Botta, who had started excavations in Mosul, having studied the surveys and collection of Claudius Rich, the powerful Baghdad resident of the East India Company. Layard shared Botta's passion for uncovering the places described in the stories of the Bible. A small grant of £100 for exploratory work from Sir Stratford Canning, British ambassador at Constantinople, gave him the means to start excavations. He discovered two palaces on the first day. Layard's book *Nineveh and its Remains* (1849) promoted the idea that he was unearthing remains that confirmed the stories of the Bible. It became an instant bestseller<sup>62</sup> and convinced the trustees of the British Museum to conduct further excavations. A letter to Edward Hawkins, keeper of the Department of Antiquities, reveals that Layard believed the sums offered for excavations to be hugely inadequate: there was no prospect of personal advantage, either in diplomacy or reputation. He asked for

an understanding from government that his service to the trustees would count as seniority in the diplomatic profession.<sup>63</sup> An entry in the Parliamentary Papers from 1849 records the chancellor of the exchequer announcing that, on receiving an application from the trustees of the British Museum for the sum of £3,000 to conduct further excavations at Nineveh, he had agreed to set aside £2,000 to cover expenses incurred by Layard during the next two years.<sup>64</sup> Out of this sum, Layard was expected to fund a two-year campaign and pay for all the expenses, including men, excavations and transportation. It is not clear if the salary of the artist F. C. Cooper, selected by the British Museum to record the excavations, was to be covered out of this grant or not.

By contrast, the French had given Consul Botta separate funds to cover every single expense: an artist had been appointed and paid an annual salary, the excavations had been published in a volume at an estimated cost of £13,000, and royalties on the publication had been offered to both Botta and the artist Flandin. Botta had been given an annual pension and the promise of a consular appointment wherever he deemed fit, plus the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honour. Larsen estimates that the Botta excavations and benefits package cost the French state a total of £50,000.<sup>65</sup> When compared with the £2,000 offered to Layard for his 'all-inclusive' package, one can see why reward needed to come in a different form. This marked difference in treatment between the British and French consuls characterized the history of collecting in the nineteenth century. Where the French state started with Napoleon to invest in archaeology on a grand scale, from the British side, interest in the procurement of antiquities from the Mediterranean hardly occurred before the 1850s and 1860s. Until then, the government and the British Museum acted only in response to the sheer determination of a handful of individuals (some mentioned in this article), to push back the archaeological frontier. An entry in the British Museum letter books reveals that Layard was, as a result of his excavations, appointed paid attaché at Constantinople in 1849 on a salary of £250 a year and put at the service of the trustees. The entry states: 'when the Trustees proposals are known, Palmerston will instruct Canning to approach the Porte',<sup>66</sup> highlighting the direct link between Layard's diplomatic appointment and his task to collect antiquities.<sup>67</sup> Layard's career demonstrates that an acceptable

compromise could be reached in career promotion rather than direct financial payment: he served in parliament (1852–7 and 1860–69) and as under-secretary for foreign affairs (1861–6), and was appointed chief commissioner of works and a privy councillor in 1868, then ambassador at Constantinople in 1877, where he remained until 1880. In 1866 he became a trustee of the British Museum, and he was knighted in 1878. He retired to Venice a famous and wealthy man.

Layard was a source of inspiration for Charles Thomas Newton, who, after ten years as assistant in the Department of Antiquities at the British Museum, requested a posting in the Aegean. Appointed vice-consul in Mytilene in 1852, Newton wrote in a letter to his friend the Revd Philip Bliss, registrar of the University of Oxford, that his decision, facilitated by General Charles Fox and supported by Lord Granville, was dictated by archaeological interest.<sup>68</sup> In his resignation letter to the museum he wrote that, in his new career, he would have great opportunity to collect antiquities and to examine and report on collections and discoveries.<sup>69</sup> Layard gave his approval and encouragement. Between 1852 and 1859, when he left the Aegean for Rome, Newton made discoveries at Bodrum, Kalymnos, Cnidus and Branchidae.<sup>70</sup> During his years in the Aegean he found the Levantine consuls, vice-consuls and consular agents to be valid collaborators in his search for antiquities. When, in 1859, the British Museum suggested appointing an agent to excavate in Rhodes, Newton recommended Alfred Biliotti, the Levantine vice-consul there.

No ostensible agent of the British Government should be sent to the Levant to purchase antiquities . . . By employing consuls as agents . . . a much more effectual agency is set on foot. No one can compete with a consul in the market except another consul. His dragoman is in much the same position as a solicitor of a small county town in England. He knows everybody's secrets, debts and crimes. Here money will not purchase antiquities in the Levant, but money and consular influence together will do much . . . I have travelled much, for six years . . . all the real prizes were sold not to the agent of the British Museum but to the Vice Consul of Mytilene and the acting consul of Rhodes . . . all that he could possibly do for the Museum could be a great deal better done by the present Vice Consul at Rhodes, Mr Biliotti who has a most extensive connection in the islands and whom I find very well disposed to help me because he is an unpaid Vice Consul and lives in hopes of getting something from the Government.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the changes in the consular service, the Biliotti family had managed to navigate the world

of antiquities, trade and excavation which became important from the mid-nineteenth century. Alfred Biliotti was already excavating in the Aegean with Auguste Salzman,<sup>72</sup> and Newton bought some pieces, recommending others for the museum. Career advancement could be offered instead of payment: 'he is our unpaid British Vice Consul at Rhodes and wants advancement in the service', Newton wrote.<sup>73</sup> Biliotti's subsequent career at the Foreign Office has to be read in conjunction with this letter and his findings for the Greek and Roman Department of Antiquities.<sup>74</sup>

The career of Charles Merlin, also a Levantine employed in the Aegean, is equally directly attributable to Newton's intercession. Yannis Galanakis writes that Merlin's special interest in antiquities was supported by the realization that for a consul paid an ordinary salary, antiquities 'provided an opportunity for making small profits'.<sup>75</sup>

Newton was responsible for institutionalizing the collection of antiquities for the British Museum. He advised the consuls, the museum's trustees and the government, and prepared a list of instructions for British consuls in the Aegean which became part of the Foreign Office instructions to consuls in 1863.<sup>76</sup> He oversaw the appointment of Levantines in as many strategic locations as possible. After nine years in the consular service, Newton returned to the British Museum as keeper of classical antiquities. His appointment was discussed in parliament in July 1861, with Layard present, when it was noted that the new keeper was a gentleman known for his energy and enterprise in excavating at Bodrum the ruins of ancient Halicarnassus.<sup>77</sup> As with Layard before him, the announcement in parliament of Newton's promotion was linked with his services to the museum. Others already employed at the museum, such as Edmund Oldfield, were highly worthy of the position,<sup>78</sup> but Newton's services to archaeological discovery allowed him to request and obtain the keepership of the newly established Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities on his return from the field.<sup>79</sup> Spencer Walpole, the MP for Cambridge University, felt 'that a better appointment could not have been made'.<sup>80</sup>

## Epilogue

The system of diplomatic representation established by the Levant Company in the Ottoman Empire from

the sixteenth century matched the company's character and carried out its objectives effectively. Consuls were chosen from among the company's high-profile merchant members and performed their duties as diplomats, while at the same time pursuing their business careers. Ottoman subjects were also hired as vice-consuls, dragomans and other auxiliary staff. Being under the control of the chartered trade company, they retained a considerable degree of autonomy and were free to capitalize on the privileges, status, high-ranking contacts and sociability they gained through their public office. Their everyday interactions within Ottoman markets allowed them to integrate into the multicultural Levantine society, adopt a Levantine way of life, and build local family and business networks.

When, in 1825, the Foreign Office assumed authority over the British diplomatic representation in the Levant, forcing the winding up of the Levant Company, the type of personnel appointed to operate the consulates and vice-consulates in the Ottoman Empire changed radically. The British political establishment, the press and public opinion demanded that diplomatic representation of the country should pass from the hands of canny, profit-orientated, wealthy merchants and their Ottoman assistants, advisers and employees to reliable and dignified public servants. The Foreign Office employees sent to the Levant were expected to accomplish specific sets of duties efficiently, operate under the firm control of the government and keep at a safe distance from the locals. However, these modestly paid diplomats, who entered a foreign environment without previous knowledge of the language, customs and way of life, and with no contacts or incentive to integrate into local society, proved to be much less capable of handling diplomatic relations than their predecessors. From 1863, a process of searching for antiquities in Ottoman lands, negotiating and on occasion carrying out their purchase and sending them back to Britain was coordinated by consuls and vice-consuls for the specific benefit of the British Museum. The trade in antiquities became firmly associated with the British diplomatic representatives,<sup>81</sup> and Foreign Office consuls needed to become shrewd mediators and dealers in Levantine markets and society. To carry out their assignments some of these diplomats adopted strategies and developed skills similar to those of their Levant Company forerunners.

At the same time, it became clear that Levantines – members of British and Ottoman families established in the Ottoman Empire for decades – remained essential for the continuation of the service: their insight into local politics being far superior to that of their British counterparts. Thus, two parallel processes can be observed in the period. Highly focused consuls were able to link their career progression to the acquisition of antiquities for the national museum, at the same time as Levantines were rediscovered as vital to the service. As the 1870 parliamentary inquiry noted in a question-and-answer session:

Do you think that the commercial interests of this country have suffered from the inferiority of our consuls in the East? – I did not admit that there was inferiority in our consuls in the East. We have some extremely able men; and we have naturally some people who are not such as we should like to have; but, generally speaking, they are efficient men, and some of the very best are what is generally called Levantines.<sup>82</sup>

Ironically, the very characteristics that had made the government question the use of the Levantines when the Foreign Office was first set up were precisely those required to run the service effectively, and were certainly needed in order to procure antiquities for the British Museum. The collection of antiquities in the eastern Mediterranean was inextricably linked with the diplomatic and consular service and with the employment of Levantines. All involved needed to make a living, supplement their salaries or improve their career prospects. Indeed, the history of collecting in this part of the world must be read as an inseparable combination of political events, imperial organizational evolution, the particular characteristics of Levantine society and the concomitant development of European museums.

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- 79 Patrizio Gunning, op. cit. (note 1), p. 171, and *passim*.
- 80 ‘Supply – Civil Service Estimates – British Museum’, op. cit. (note 77), entry 1326.
- 81 T. Kiely, ‘Robert Hamilton Lang and the archaeology of Cyprus’, *Cahiers du Centre d’Études Chypriotes* 50 (2020), pp. 483–523.
- 82 *Report of the Select Committee on Diplomatic and Consular Services*, pp. 1870 (382), VII.