

SCRAMBLE FOR THE PAST: A STORY OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE, 1750–1914

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1753–1914
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SALT Galata

One of the opening exhibitions at SALT Galata, *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914* presents the rich and intricate story of archaeology in the Near East in a chronological narrative around selected archaeological sites. Exploring archaeological activities in social, cultural and political contexts across a wide geographical area that spans from Greece to Egypt, the exhibition examines local and foreign archaeological initiatives undertaken in the land of the Ottoman Empire over a period of nearly two centuries. Taking the inauguration of the British Museum, the first museum in the modern sense of the word, as a starting point and following the development of the Museum of Islamic Pious Foundations in the Ottoman Empire (today's Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts), the exhibition explores transformations in the historical narrative of the Ottoman Empire in parallel to studies focusing on Western interest in "the cultural heritage of the classical era."

Principal materials in the exhibition include reports by Western and Ottoman explorers, books that share their experiences travelling across this region with plans and maps, and selected documents and photographs expressing the involvement of the Imperial Museum in the Ottoman Empire (today's İstanbul Archaeology Museums) and the race to attain artifacts immediately after the museum's establishment. These materials are corroborated by objects excavated and transported from major archaeological excavation sites in Greece, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt to İstanbul at the time.

The main theme of the exhibition however, is the story of how an interest in the past transformed into a field of "struggle" over artifacts – a process that began in the mid-18th century. The basis of this transformation sees a shift in the motivation for archaeological activity; an act that had originally served as an argument for pursuing the origins of European civilization by the 19th century became eclipsed by the desires of an imperialistic project. The Ottoman investment in the archaeological scene was based on the rise of historical consciousness, which emerged in parallel to these imperialistic arguments. In the exhibition, the changing perspective on the practice of archaeology is addressed by emphasizing the interaction among European and Ottoman actors.

Scramble for the Past was conceptualized and prepared by Zainab Bahrani, Zeynep Çelik and Edhem Eldem. A commissioned installation by Celine Condorelli functions as a support structure for the exhibition, with graphic design by Ash Altay. In addition, two specially composed installations by artists Mark Dion and Michael Rakowitz further address some of the issues raised by the conceptual framework of the exhibition and touch on our everyday understanding of and relationship to the field of archaeology.

Gathering together texts by 15 authors from diverse fields and edited by Bahrani, Çelik and Eldem, a book under the same title as the exhibition will be published in both Turkish and English. Prepared as a comprehensive reader, the content introduces a variety of perspectives from different countries that relate to and expand upon topics raised within the exhibition.

Thanked for their contributions:

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