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# Under the shadow of occupation: cultural, archaeological, and military activities at Topkapı Palace during the armistice period, 1918–1923

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## Abstract

This article looks at Topkapı Palace as a showcase reflecting the changing cultural heritage policies of the Allies, as well as of the İstanbul and Ankara governments, during the occupation of İstanbul from 1918 to 1923. It analyzes the military, archaeological, and cultural facets of the occupation, focusing first on the military takeover of the Topkapı gardens, then on the French archaeological mission at the Seraglio, and finally on conflicts over the possession of the imperial treasures and sacred relics. Drawing on primary sources from Ottoman, Turkish, French, and British archives, memoirs, letters, newspapers, and visual material, this article explores the versatility of cultural heritage policies during the occupation and the entangled relations among various power groups, institutions, and actors. The military, strategic, cultural, and historical significance of the royal complex, together with its invaluable imperial collections, made the historic palace a place of rivalry and contestation, as well as deception and cooperation, among various agents and actors, including the Ottoman military and bureaucratic officials, local and foreign archaeologists, the dynastic family, the Interallied government, the occupation forces, and the Turkish resistance forces, ultimately reflecting the military and political empowerment of Ankara.

**Keywords:** Topkapı Palace; Seraglio; Allied occupation of İstanbul; cultural heritage; archaeology

## Introduction

An encrypted memorandum written by an Ottoman official in January 1923 informed the Ankara government about certain archaeological activities that the French occupation forces were conducting “within the precincts of Topkapı Palace” (Ottoman Presidential Archives: Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA), HR.İM.235.80, 22.1.1923):

It became clear that French troops had been carrying out excavations at Topkapı Palace since last year, and the director of the [Ottoman Imperial]

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Museum, Halil Bey, immediately intervened in the situation. At the request of the French colonel, Halil Bey agreed to the excavations on the condition that a representative from the Museum would be present for the archaeological work and that all the findings would be handed over to us.

Seven months later, the Directorate of Culture in Ankara sent a letter to the İstanbul Archaeological Museums warning them that recent news in the Ottoman press claimed that trafficking of artefacts was taking place (BOA, MÜZ.ARK.100.202, 29.8.1923):

There have been reports about French attempts to transport artefacts discovered during the excavations to France. Monsieur “Perdno,” a member of the School of Rome, had promised to undertake efforts to get those artefacts delivered to your museum. You should also implement the necessary measures to ensure that those antiquities are not taken abroad and that they are delivered to your museum.

These archival documents offer insights into the complexity of heritage policies during the armistice and shed light on the entangled relations between the Allied forces and the İstanbul and Ankara governments, as well as particular institutions and actors. Through an examination of the armistice period (1918–1923), this article scrutinizes the military presence and cultural and archaeological activities of the occupation forces, focusing particularly on Topkapı Palace.<sup>1</sup> The old Ottoman Imperial Palace provides fertile ground for tracing the military motivations and cultural policies of the Allied powers and the responses of the İstanbul and Ankara governments, revealing the strategic and bureaucratic maneuvers carried out with the aim of maintaining control over cultural and religious heritage. During the occupation of İstanbul, the grounds of Topkapı Palace attracted the Allies due to its military, historical, and logistical prominence, as well as its invaluable collections.

The question of heritage during times of conflict and occupation has been widely discussed, especially in the context of World War II (Karlsgodt 2011; Lowenthal 1998). Even though the plunder and spoliation of the treasures of the defeated had been the norm for pre-modern societies, the unprecedented scale and methodology of Napoleonic and later Nazi plundering triggered social and legal discussions on the legitimacy of the confiscation of cultural artifacts (Sandholtz 2007, 127). The post-war

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<sup>1</sup> The old imperial palace of Topkapı, built soon after the conquest of İstanbul in 1453 by Sultan Mehmed II (r. 1444–1446, 1451–1481), is located at a strategic point where the Bosphorus Strait, the Golden Horn, and the Sea of Marmara converge. The imperial complex was enclosed by the Byzantine sea walls and sultanian land walls and was composed of multiple courtyards serving different functions, all surrounded by vast outer gardens. By the mid-nineteenth century, the palace had been abandoned by the imperial family, but it continued to maintain its historical and political significance in Ottoman court decorum until the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Numerous strategic facilities, such as barracks, ammunition depots, and hospitals, as well as the Imperial Museum, the Military Museum, the Ottoman Imperial Treasury, and the Chamber of Sacred Relics, remained within the palace grounds. Positioned strategically to control entry into the city, Topkapı Palace had direct access to the Seraglio port and the Sirkeci railway station, which served as the terminus for the renowned Orient Express connecting İstanbul to Europe.

ownership of antiquities brought from countries' former territories and their repatriation is another debated issue (Cuno 2008). While international laws had been promulgated for the protection of cultural heritage by the late nineteenth century, launching archaeological excavations in occupied or colonized territories became a common practice (Abi 2024). The engagement of Germany, Italy, France, Russia, and Britain in various archaeological activities in the Ottoman Empire during and after World War I reveals how they appropriated heritage (Abi 2019; Coşkun 2023).

Following World War I, the Allies occupied large territories of the Empire, including the imperial capital, İstanbul. The fact that no other capital cities or imperial palaces belonging to the Central Powers were occupied by the Allies makes the “selective occupation” of Topkapı all the more intriguing. While the palace proper, the imperial collections therein, and the Imperial Museum were not officially confiscated, the French army seized the surrounding gardens and the military facilities within. Struggling to legitimize and secure their presence in the Ottoman capital and to increase their public visibility, the occupation forces developed certain strategies to justify their bold presence in the city. In this respect, control over the palace grounds, particularly the historically significant Seraglio, was crucial for all the actors competing to render their authority in the occupied city. The palace grounds and its hereditary collections not only set the stage for struggle and tensions between the Ottomans and the occupiers, but they also revealed the rivalry between the İstanbul and Ankara governments (Figure 1).

The occupation period is well documented thanks to the variety of materials available in the British, French, Greek, Italian, and Ottoman archives, as well as the journals, publications, and first-person narratives penned by authors of various nationalities (MacArthur-Seal and Tongo 2022a). However, earlier scholarship did little to shed light on the occupation's cross-national and cross-cultural dimensions. Turkish studies have mainly focused on the military and political activities of the Interallied administration or, from a nationalist perspective, the “heroic” resistance of the Turkish forces. Still, in recent years, an increasing number of studies have revealed the cultural and social dimensions of the occupation (Çekiç 2022; Criss 2000, 2020; Ekmekçioğlu 2022; MacArthur-Seal 2017; MacArthur-Seal and Tongo 2022b; Abi 2023; Tongo and Schick 2024; Yerasimos 2015). Recent works, such as those by Ceren Abi (2019, 2022, 2024), Ayşe Ercan Kydonakis (2022), and Yahya Coşkun (2023) on archaeological activities during the occupation shed light on the confrontations and alliances that arose among the various parties involved over the exploration and possession of historical heritage. Nonetheless, there is still ample room for studies on cultural activities and heritage policies during the fall of the Empire and the birth of the Turkish Republic. The relocation, possession, and repatriation of antiquities during and after the war in Ottoman lands deserve further scrutiny.<sup>2</sup>

This article takes up three cases, each analyzing a different – yet interrelated – facet of the occupation. The first examines the French military presence in the outer gardens of Topkapı Palace and the aspirations of French forces to expand their symbolic, spatial, and political hegemony. The second section focuses on the French

<sup>2</sup> The spatial and architectural impacts of the occupation on the urban landscape of İstanbul are also under-researched. Amy Mills (2017), Safiye Kıranlar (2015), and Bilge Ar (2006, 2019) are among the few scholars who have examined the occupation from an urban studies perspective.



**Figure 1.** Topkapı Palace and its sections during the armistice.

Source: Manipulation by the author of the 1918 aerial photograph of the Seraglio (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, D-DAI-IST-3929, 1918).

archaeological mission along the Marmara shores of the Seraglio. It scrutinizes French, Ottoman, and Turkish claims over archaeological findings, revealing the conflicts and collaborations that arose between various agents and actors. The last section examines the Ottoman dynastic and religious heritage, unveiling controversies related to the possession of sacred relics as a sign of political legitimacy. These separate yet interconnected cases revolving around the Ottoman imperial palace lay bare the entangled political, cultural, and military relations of opposing groups in response to the swiftly changing balance of power during this turbulent era.

### The Seraglio besieged: an Allied garrison on palace grounds

One of the outcomes of the devastating World War I was the *de facto* occupation of İstanbul on November 13, 1918 by the Allies. British, French, Italian, and Greek naval



**Figure 2.** Allied navy vessels anchored at Bosphorus, between Topkapı and Dolmabahçe palaces.

Source: Manipulation by the author of the 1918 aerial photograph (Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF), Album de photographies d'un militaire français, 4-VH-210, ark:/12148/btv1b8432325c/5).

forces dropped anchor in the Bosphorus as an imperialist sign of their victory and gradually took control of harbors, docks, railroads, and postal services, as well as the military and governmental institutions of the city, until the *de jure* occupation, which began on March 16, 1920. During this tumultuous period of political and social ambiguity and instability, the occupation forces engaged in numerous military acts and symbolic gestures to establish and assert their authority over the capital's social, physical, and urban networks. They divided the city into various zones of control overseen by British, French, and Italian forces, competing with each other as well as with the Ottomans and the burgeoning resistance forces in Anatolia (Criss 2000, 2020). The Allied forces controlled the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn, particularly the area south of an imaginary line between the two imperial palaces, Dolmabahçe and Topkapı (Ar 2006). Allied battleships were anchored in Dolmabahçe harbor and at Seraglio Point, thereby asserting their military presence and power *vis-à-vis* the new and old Ottoman palaces (Figure 2).

Control of the Seraglio entailed, however, a number of rather nuanced and delicate tasks. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the imperial functions and dynastic significance of Topkapı gradually transformed as the palace lost its role as the imperial residence and seat of the Empire. Nevertheless, the imperial complex continued to hold political and emblematic significance in Ottoman court decorum, and it was positioned as a spatial symbol of dynastic continuity, religious legitimacy, and imperial patrimony. Moreover, Topkapı Palace had already begun functioning as a venue for courtly and touristic visits and became a heritage site housing various imperial, dynastic, and religious collections and museums (Özlu 2018, 2022).





**Figure 3.** French soldiers posing in front of Demirkapı Barracks, renamed the Caserne Gouraud during the occupation, 1918.

Source: Getty Research Institute, Pierre de Gigord collection, 96.R.14, French Occupation of Constantinople, [http://hdl.handle.net/10020/96r14\\_ref9199\\_ftm](http://hdl.handle.net/10020/96r14_ref9199_ftm)

Due to their logistic and military significance, French troops occupied the outer gardens of Topkapı Palace, which housed ammunition depots, military barracks, drill fields, and transportation hubs, including the railway and the harbor. Days after the de facto occupation, French occupation forces seized the Demirkapı military barracks, which were on the palace grounds, to house their military staff. Built during the time of Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839–1861) to house the modernized Ottoman army, the barracks were strategically positioned, bolstering control over Eminönü harbor, Seraglio Point, Sirkeci Train Station, and the gardens of the palace. After the occupation, the barracks were renamed the Gouraud Barracks of the Eastern Corps Command (*Commandement de l'Orient Corps d'Armée Caserne Gouraud*) (Figure 3) (Düzalan 2011, 19). General Henri Joseph Eugène Gouraud (1867–1946), who was a veteran of World War I and regarded as a war hero, had commanded the French forces in the Battle of Dardanelles at Gallipoli, where he was seriously wounded and had to have his right arm amputated.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the name of the barracks was deliberately chosen in reference to that significant battle, which was considered a major victory by the

<sup>3</sup> Following the war, General Henri Joseph Eugène Gouraud was appointed High Commander of the Levant and led the creation of the French Mandates in Syria and Lebanon between 1919 and 1923. During the armistice, he served as commander in the Battle of Maraş against the Turkish resistance forces in 1920.

Ottomans. As such, renaming the barracks, which lay on the grounds of Topkapı Palace and had imperial and historical significance for the Ottomans, was a clear sign of French defiance against the Ottoman forces.

As the French seized the military and logistic quarters of Topkapı, they also took control of the land and sea entrances to the inner palace and had direct access to Gülhane Park and the surrounding facilities (Figure 1). The former imperial gardens of Topkapı Palace had already been converted into a public park before World War I by the progressive mayor of İstanbul, Dr Cemil [Topuzlu] Paşa. During those times of war and occupation, Gülhane Park was used as a venue for public events, film screenings, kermesses, and charity events for war veterans and orphans that promoted the nationalist sentiments of the Muslim population (Karaca 2023; *Servet-i Fünun*, 14.8.1919). The park and the palace grounds were also used as film sets for silent movies such as *Mürebbiye*, *Binnaz*, and *Alemdar Mustafa*, some of which were produced for the Society of Aid for the Disabled Veterans Film Factory (*Malulîn-i Guzzata Muavenet Heyeti Sinema Film Fabrikası*) (Aydın 2011; Çeliktemel-Thomen 2010, 2013).

In this way, Seraglio Point became a site of French–Ottoman encounters, and Gülhane Park created an ideal setting for the French to assert their public visibility, expand their cultural presence, and demonstrate their power to the other Allied governments. For instance, during the first year of the occupation, the French organized spectacular events, including buffets, concerts, comedy shows, and a performance by the Janissary orchestra in the gardens of Topkapı Palace. Advertised as “*Le grand Festival du Vieux-Sérail*” in the local newspaper *Stamboul*, one such event included free boat rides between Galata and Seraglio Point (*Stamboul*, 2.7.1919). The same newspaper announced that the Casino of the Old Palace had opened in the park (*Stamboul*, 12.7.1919). Celebrations for French festivities such as Bastille Day were also held in the palace gardens, and the entire French community in İstanbul was invited to Gülhane to see *théâtre de verdure* (open-air theatre) performances (*Stamboul*, 14.7.1923). An Ottoman palace official’s diaries convey his annoyance with the Bastille Day celebrations held at public venues (Atatürk Library Collection, Bel\_Mtf\_048079, 14.7.1919). Apart from being a venue for festivities, Topkapı Palace retained its ceremonial roles and was frequented by members of the Ottoman dynasty, particularly for the annual Sacred Relics visits. As he passed through the palace gardens during his visits, the Sultan was saluted by the French troops as a public demonstration of their military and political presence in the Ottoman capital (*Stamboul*, 4.7.1920).

One incident related to the use of the palace gardens by the occupation forces reveals the tensions between the various parties, governing bodies, and actors, epitomizing the complexity of the relations between the Alliance forces and the various departments of the Ottoman government. A dispatch sent in April 1921 by the *Corps d’Occupation de Constantinople* expressed the intentions of the French army to establish a *manège* (riding school) in the Seraglio gardens so they could exercise their horses there (BOA, DH.UMVM.97.42/01, 4.4.1921). Lieutenant Colonel Karcher added that the envisaged project would contribute to the elegance of the palace park, and he attached a plan for the proposed transformation to the document (Figure 4). Such an attitude was not uncommon among the occupation forces. Reproducing their colonialist practices, the French justified their urban interventions in İstanbul under a discourse of “beautifying” the city (Shaw 2003, 216). Moreover, they sought to

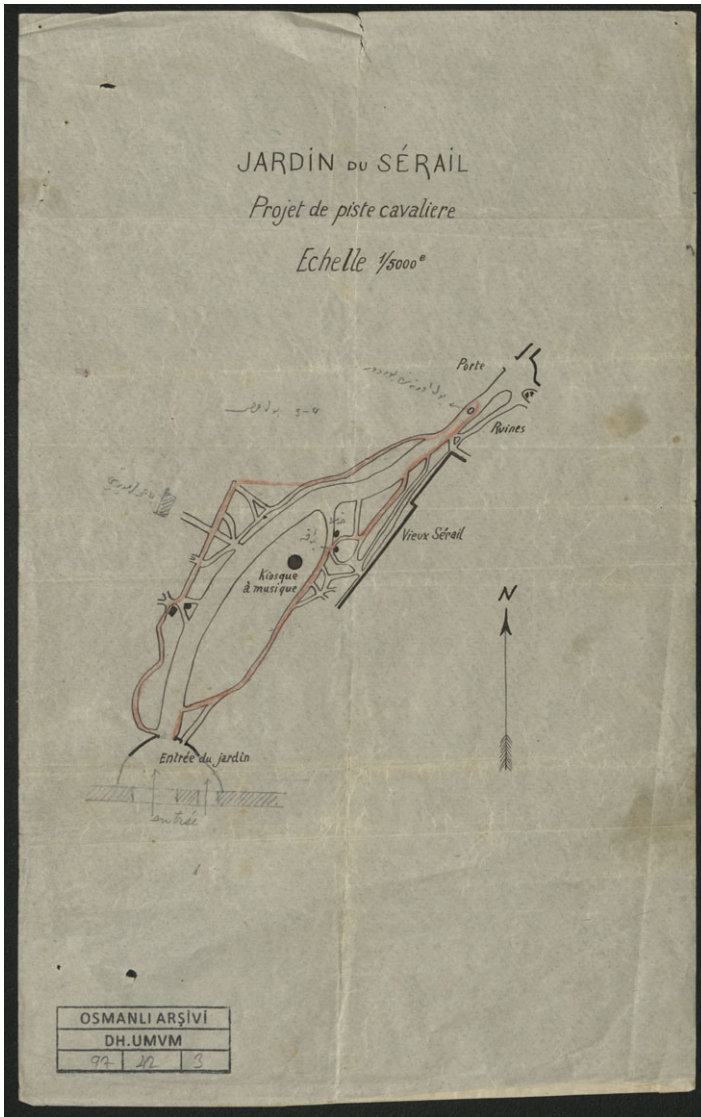


Figure 4. The proposal for the transformation of “Jardin du Sérail” (Gülhane Park) into a manège.  
Source: BOA, DH.UMVM.97.42/03 (1921).

legitimize their groundless existence in the Ottoman capital and expand their territorial and political control.

The Ottomans’ inconsistent responses to the French proposal to transform the palace gardens into a manège reflected the changing priorities of various institutions and the heterogeneity of the Ottoman bureaucratic system. Firstly, the Ministry of War acknowledged the proposition put forward by the French forces, probably thinking that their request would not have any direct military consequences (BOA,



DH.UMVM.97.42/04, 9.4.1921). However, the municipality diplomatically rejected the project, stating that the park had been designated as a place where the people of İstanbul could get some fresh air and that driving automobiles and riding horses or bicycles in the park was forbidden except on the main arteries. They also added that the proposed manège would ruin the park's beauty and that the dust kicked up by horses would threaten the health of the citizenry (BOA, DH.UMVM.97.42/06, 27.4.1921). Eventually, the Ministry of the Interior sent a firm rejection letter to the French forces, stating that approval of the project was out of the question (*bu proje gayr-ı kabil-i tecviz olduđu izahtan müstağnidir*) and that the Veli Efendi manège was suitable for practicing horsemanship (BOA, DH.UMVM.97.42/14, 19.5.1921).

On the same day, May 19, 1921, the French forces sent a firm response to the Ottoman authorities which had an explicitly arrogant tone. The document insisted on the plan to convert Gülhane Park into a manège and stated that the first letter had been written as a mere courtesy to inform the Ottoman authorities about the ongoing developments. The ultimatum also asserted that they would only accept a positive response from the Ottomans (BOA, DH.UMVM.97.42/15, 19.5.1921). In the end, the necessary adjustments were made in the park so the French cavalry could carry out their exercises. The French forces kept their horses in Gülhane Park, ruining the landscaping of the gardens, and they did not leave until Turkish resistance forces took control of the city in October 1923 (BOA, BEO.4684.351260, 5.6.1921; Topuzlu 2010, 219–220).

In 1923, Halil Edhem Bey, the director of the Ottoman Imperial Museum, wrote a petition which portrays the severity of the situation and the escalating capacity of the French forces to intimidate the Ottomans. Halil Bey complained about the dust that blew into the Museum when the French cavalry carried out their exercises in the palace gardens. He also noted that his request to General Charpy to stop the exercises was rejected and that French tanks had started doing drills right below the museum, aggravating the situation (BOA, HR.İM.46.47, 31.7.1923; Coşkun 2023). This case reveals the French forces' ambition to establish their hegemony on the grounds of Topkapı Palace as a means of fostering their military presence by infiltrating public spaces and intimidating the Ottomans.

### The Seraglio excavated: the French archaeological mission

According to the December 3, 1921 issue of the newspaper *Akşam*, the Commander of the French Corps of the Occupation in Constantinople, General Charpy, paid a visit to the Ottoman Imperial Museum together with 100 French officers (Figure 5). Accompanied by Vahid Bey, a professor at the *Darülfünun* (University) and the son-in-law of Osman Hamdi, the group remained at the museum for two hours. General Charpy listened attentively to Vahid Bey's detailed lecture on the history of the museum and its collections (*Akşam*, 3.12.1921). In fact, French military interest in archaeology and cultural heritage was not unusual and could even be considered a tradition for French troops on foreign missions, and the occupation of the Ottoman Empire was no exception.

Along with military interventions, French occupation forces also engaged in numerous archaeological activities in various parts of the Empire, including Adana, Gallipoli, and Bakırköy, in addition to the outer gardens of Topkapı Palace (Abi 2019,



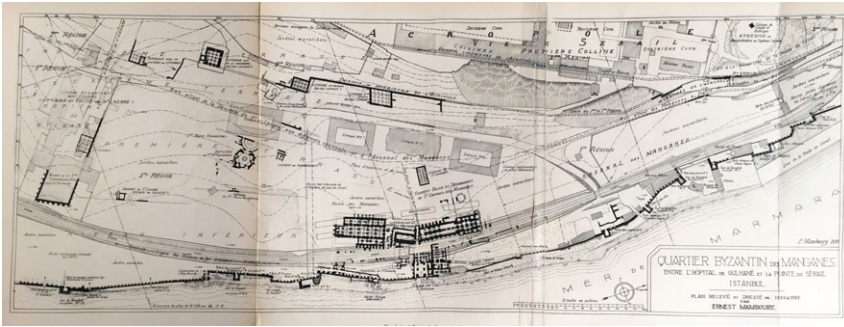
**Figure 5.** French occupation forces in the courtyard of the Ottoman Imperial Museum, 1919.

Source: Getty Research Institute, Pierre de Gigord collection, 96.R.14, Constantinople, [http://hdl.handle.net/10020/96r14\\_ref9204\\_x1q](http://hdl.handle.net/10020/96r14_ref9204_x1q)

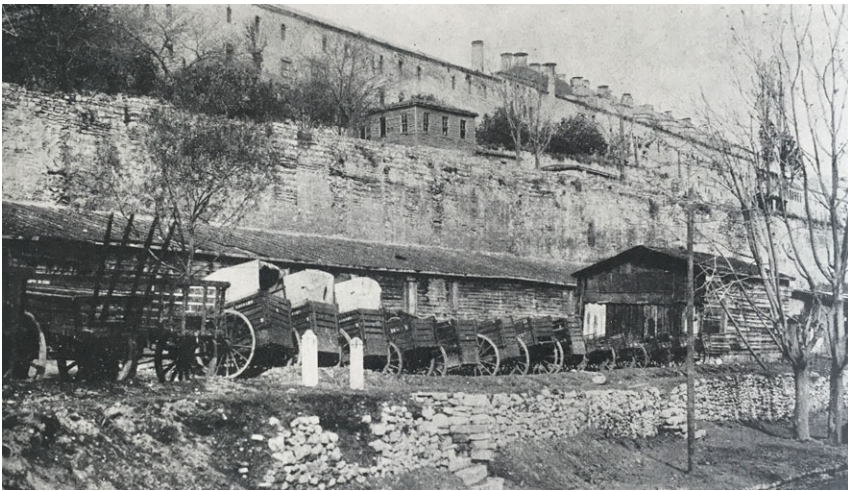
2022; Ercan Kydonakis 2022). According to French claims, excavations on the palace grounds were initiated after an “accidental discovery” was made by French soldiers while they were searching for a cool place to store wine around the Marmara coastline of the palace (Demangel and Mamboury 1939, 5).

In June 1921, just after the de jure occupation began, French forces started excavating the Seraglio, benefiting from the unique opportunity that the occupation provided for the discovery, study, and possession of antiquities. Topkapı Palace, which was established over the old Byzantine acropolis, was home to numerous antiquities, particularly from the Roman and Byzantine eras (Necipoğlu 1991; Tezcan 1989). Excavations took place on the Marmara shores of the palace between the retaining walls of the inner palace and the Byzantine sea walls. The area between Gülhane Hospital and Seraglio Point, known as “*le quartier des Manges,*” was excavated in three phases from 1921 to 1923. The first phase only lasted a few months, from June to August 1921, and, probably after an initial survey of the area, the French government decided to pursue the archaeological mission and inaugurated the second phase in February 1922 without informing the Ottoman authorities (Abi 2022). The rich findings made during the second phase called for a more serious and systematic study, so a third phase was launched in December 1922; this phase lasted until September 25, 1923, when the occupation came to an end (Demangel and Mamboury 1939).

During the course of the archaeological mission, comprehensive work was carried out, and the key efforts focused on clearing an area that included the Palace and the



**Figure 6.** Map of the Byzantine remains discovered by the French forces in the gardens of Topkapı Palace. Source: Demangel and Mamboury (1939).



**Figure 7.** Archaeological work in the palace gardens, just below the Imperial Kitchens of Topkapı Palace. Source: Demangel and Mamboury (1939).

Convent of Manges, as well as the foundations of three other Byzantine churches (Figures 6 and 7) (Tezcan 1989, 78). According to French sources, the excavations were conducted under difficult conditions, as the edifices were completely covered by earth and rubble, and the mission “required the work of several hundred workers for several months” (Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), 71-IV).

The archaeological missions carried out in various parts of the Empire must have been quite fruitful, as several weeks after General Charpy’s visit to the Imperial Museum in January 1922, the French government took steps to establish a French School of Archaeology and History in İstanbul. The proposed school, similar to those in Rome and Athens, would conduct research on archaeology, history, and the history of art, and it would cover classical, Byzantine, and Turkish eras; moreover, Turkish experts and students were to be included in its body (BOA, HR.SYS.2694.3, 6.1.1922). In

the meantime, the High Commissary of Syria, General Gouraud, established *l'Institut français d'archéologie et d'art musulmans* in Damascus (Avez 1993). Even though correspondences between the French, Ottoman, and later Turkish governments continued well until 1923, the project was never realized (BOA, BEO.4707.352993, 15.03.1922; BOA, HR.İM.45.7, 23.12.1922; BOA, ML.EEM.1361.36, 20.6.1922).<sup>4</sup>

Since no archaeological institutions existed at the time, the first two phases of the Gülhane excavations were directed by Ernest Mamboury (1878–1953), a self-made Swiss archaeologist who previously took part in Theodor Wiegand's research on the Byzantine Great Palace (Mamboury and Wiegand 1934) and taught French and technical drawing at Galatasaray High School. At the end of the second phase, Mamboury gave a “long scholarly lecture” on the quartier des Manganes to the intellectual and military community of Pera at the *Union française (Stamboul, 13.4.1923)*. However, the third phase of the project was handed over to an expert, renowned Hellenist and archaeologist Robert Demangel (1891–1952). He was invited to İstanbul to direct the excavations in Bakırköy, Gülhane, and Gallipoli. Mamboury continued to assist and guide the French team, documenting archaeological findings and producing technical drawings under the direction of Demangel (Demangel 1922).<sup>5</sup> According to General Charpy, Demangel put his “experience, scholarship, and activities, which were particularly fruitful, into the service of the occupation forces,” noting that “thanks to his enlightened direction, the works-in-progress moved forward without delay and new sites of great interest were opened” (CADN 71/IV, 1420/2P, 21.9.1923).

Numerous archaeological artefacts, ranging from pithoi to architectural pieces and from coins to reliefs, were unearthed during the French digs. The question of whether to keep these “fruitful” findings in İstanbul under French control, send them back home, or submit them to the Ottoman authorities posed a dilemma for the French forces, especially considering the slippery basis of their legal status in İstanbul. Moreover, the Ottoman Imperial Museum, located in close proximity to the excavation site, disputed French claims to scientific research and protections (Abi 2021). Nevertheless, the modification of the Ottoman Antiquities Law in 1921, made under the pressure of Allied powers, also opened a legal path for the transfer of antiquities to Europe (Abi 2019, 101–103; Karaduman 2008, 31). These excavations – especially those on the grounds of the imperial palace – created unrest within Ottoman circles, particularly for the director of the Museum, Halil Edhem Bey. Given the challenging conditions of the occupation, the Imperial Museum could not exercise full control over the excavations, but the museum administration remained in contact with the French forces and sometimes chose to collaborate with them.

In 1921, during the first phase of the excavations, the Sublime Porte expressed its concerns about the ongoing work and urged the French to terminate the excavations and submit their findings to the Imperial Museum, requests which initially went unheeded (Demangel and Mamboury 1939, 2). Shifts in the balance of power between

<sup>4</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewer for calling these sources to my attention.

<sup>5</sup> Both Mamboury and Demangel remained active in the French archaeological mission until the end of the occupation. After the withdrawal of the Allied forces, Demangel left the country and was appointed the director of the *École française* in Athens. In contrast, Mamboury stayed in the newly founded Republic and established a fruitful career publishing numerous guidebooks on İstanbul, Ankara, the Princes' Islands, and Bursa, as well as essays on Turkey's archaeological and cultural heritage.



the Allies, fluctuating Ottoman governments, and the advancing Turkish resistance forces directly influenced the progress of the work and altered French policies on archaeology. Illustratively, following the Treaty of Ankara signed between France and the Grand National Assembly in Ankara on October 20, 1921, the attitudes of the French changed, becoming more cooperative and even conciliatory. Especially after the Ankara government took control of İstanbul in November 1922, French forces searched for means of cooperation. For instance, a letter that General Charpy sent to the director of the Imperial Museum, Halil Bey, on December 12, 1922 stated that the occupation forces not only “made an effort to contribute to the beautification of your admirable city ... but also used the means which it had at its disposal for excavations, for a supplementation of the patrimony of art, which constitutes the fame of your capital” (quoted in Shaw 2003, 216). The letter, while trying to convince the Ottomans of a certain agenda, was also reminiscent of the French colonialist discourse of “bringing civilization” to the occupied territories (Çelik 2008; Ercan Kydonakis 2022). A newspaper article penned by Demangel explicitly situated the archaeological mission in İstanbul within the context of the “scientific tradition” that the French occupying corps had followed “since the time of the Egyptian expedition” (*Stamboul*, 2.7.1922). Moreover, a memorandum dated March 5, 1923 that General Charpy sent to the French High Commissioner of the Orient noted that the archaeological missions in Gallipoli, Bakırköy, and Gülhane complied with a “French tradition in the East that will make it possible to make a new contribution to the history of a region rich in *souvenirs*”<sup>6</sup> (CADN 71-IV, 990, 5.3.1923).

By the end of the long nineteenth century, archaeology remained a “litmus test” reflecting the region’s power dynamics and the rivalries between nations (Bahrani et al. 2011). In order to demonstrate their larger-than-life scientific achievements, in 1923 General Charpy organized a series of three visits to the excavation site and invited high-ranking military officers and Interallied ministers to show them the outcomes of this ambitious archaeological mission (*Stamboul*, 17.4.1923). Archaeological missions were also a matter of prestige and competition between the Allies, legitimizing their existence and interventions in the occupied territories (Abi 2021).

Tensions, as well as moments of conciliation between the occupiers and the occupied, also persisted. For instance, days before the initiation of the second phase of the mission, on January 26, 1922 a letter was sent to Halil Bey demanding his consent for the archaeological works in the Gülhane Gardens and in Makriköy (Bakırköy). Halil Bey’s response was positive, but he demanded that two experts from the Imperial Museum, Theodor Macridy Bey (1871–1940) and Aziz [Ogan] Bey (1888–1956), attend the excavations on behalf of the Ottoman government.<sup>7</sup> According to this agreement, the library of the Imperial Museum would be placed at the disposal of the archaeological team (Demangel and Mamboury 1939, 3–4). Ottoman sources indicate

<sup>6</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>7</sup> These two actors would later play essential roles in the world of archaeology. After founding the İzmir Archaeological Museum, Aziz Ogan was appointed director of the Archaeological Museums in 1931 (Kurt 2015). Theodor Makridy, who was of Ottoman Greek origins, was appointed vice-director of the Archaeological Museums in 1923 and, after his retirement in 1930, he was invited to take part in the founding of the Benaki Museum in Athens (Eldem 2017).



that the French authorities agreed to submit any archaeological artefacts discovered in Bakırköy and Gülhane to the Imperial Museum (BOA, HR.İM.235.80, 22.1.1923; İstanbul Archaeological Museum Archives (IAMA), 100/9109, 27.3.1923). This case reveals the significance of informal collaborations and negotiations between various actors and agencies. Even before the effectuation of any written agreements, Halil Bey used his personal connections to convince the French to submit archaeological findings to the Museum. However, his authority was limited in terms of enforcing full control over the French authorities, who were unwilling to turn over all their findings.

In that regard, the Armistice of Mudanya, signed in October 1922, and the abolition of the sultanate by Ankara in November 1922 changed the rules of the game. Having proved itself both on the battlefield and in the political arena, the Ankara government could finally put pressure on the occupation forces. For instance, an “*Aide-Mémoire*” sent from the vice president of the Great National Assembly of Turkey, Adnan [Adivar] Bey, to the French High Commissariat reminded the French side that General Charpy and Halil Bey had come to an agreement according to which the excavations “would be carried out under the supervision of an official of the Museum and that all the findings would be handed over in full to the Museum of Antiquities.” Despite this, the French forces were reluctant to turn over all their archaeological discoveries. Notwithstanding the persistent demands of the Turkish authorities, the findings were kept in a small makeshift museum at the excavation site rather than being sent to the Imperial Museum (CADN 71-IV, 46/3, 25.5.1923) (Figure 8):

To date, the Museum has received only two capitals from these excavations. Upon the Museum’s recent request to send the rest of the findings, General Charpy announced in his letter of May 8 that he intended to ship objects of lesser importance shortly. Upon the legitimate request that the Director of the Museum made to him verbally, he categorically refused to send the marble relief of the Virgin, the main object of his discoveries, on the pretext that it would be customary to keep the findings onsite until the end of the works in order to be able to complete them if necessary. This measure, applied to excavations far from the center, cannot have any value in the case that concerns us, given the proximity of the Museum.

The relief of the Virgin became a topic of controversy between Ankara and the French High Commissariat (Ercan Kydonakis 2022). The piece, known as the *Vierge Orante*, was discovered at the Monastery of St George in the quartier des Manganes in June 1921, and the relief, measuring 201 by 99 centimeters, attracted much scholarly attention. According to a newspaper article, “the most beautiful discovery [of the mission] is undoubtedly a bas-relief depicting the Virgin Mary represented as praying” (Demangel 1922). In their book, Demangel and Mamboury (1939, 155–161) dedicated a full appendix to the piece, placing it in a broader art-historical context (Figure 9a). According to French archaeological reports, “attempts to find new fragments of the low relief of the *Vierge Orante* had been unsuccessful” (CADN 71-IV). However, its preservation and ownership became an issue of dispute.

During the Lausanne peace negotiations, the possession of antiquities found on Turkish soil as a sign of national independence and territorial recognition was a



Fig. 197. — Les jarres byzantines dans le petit musée provisoire de Gülhané.

**Figure 8.** Makeshift museum established in the Gülhane Gardens by the French forces.  
Source: Demangel and Mamboury (1939, 147).

pressing issue. Adnan [Adivar] brought this issue to the table and sent an encrypted telegram to İsmet Paşa in Lausanne. He complained that General Charpy was not submitting the relief of the Virgin to the Museum and “after appropriating our things on earth, the French were now confiscating what they dig up from the ground” (BOA, HR.İM.19.218, 9.7.1923; Coşkun 2023, 90). Following the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne on July 24, 1923, the Turkish authorities intensified their pressure on the Allies. An official letter, marked “urgent” and addressed to the French High Commission, raised concerns that archaeological findings were “placed in boxes to be transported to France in two days.” The Turkish side also stressed that the Turkish state “rightfully possesses all archaeological objects discovered in its territories” and argued that the attitude of “the French authorities is not only contrary to the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne but also runs counter to the general principles of international law” (CADN 71-IV, 3543-153, 22.8.1923). Responding to this ultimatum, the French side firmly rejected the accusations of antiquity trafficking and stated that “orders have long been issued that all the objects coming from the excavations be placed at the disposal of the Museum.” They also demanded that the “Turkish press in Constantinople” stop publishing inaccurate information on this topic (CADN 71-IV, 147/2, 26.8.1923), such as the one published by *Hilal Gazetesi* accusing French forces of sending gold bullions and antiquities home (BOA, MÜZ.ARK.100.201, 29.7.1923).

Demangel and Mamboury (1939, 5) wrote that the *Vierge Orante* remained in the aforementioned “French Military Museum” until the final retreat of the French forces in late September 1923. In fact, General Charpy hoped to keep the original piece and leave a cast copy for the Ottoman Imperial Museum (Ercan Kydonakis 2022, 324). Eventually, the relief of the Virgin and other archaeological findings were submitted to the Archaeological Museum in İstanbul. The following year in 1924, as a courtesy



**Figure 9.** (a) Low relief of the Virgin (*Vierge Orante*) found in the Gülhane Excavations. (b) The cast copy of the Virgin in the Louvre Museum collection.

Source: (a) Demangel and Mamboury (1939); (b) *Vierge orante dite des Manges (Vierge de Gülhane)*, Moulage exécuté entre 1921 et 1924, donated by Halil [Edhem] Bey, © 2023 Musée du Louvre/Hervé Lewandowski, <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010094145>

the young Republic sent a cast copy of the *Vierge Orante* to the Louvre Museum through the “kind offer of Halil Bey, the director of the Turkish National Museum” (CADN 71-IV, No. 1, 9.7.1924) (Figure 9b).

Once an object of opposition and oppression, the relief became a symbol of scientific and cultural collaboration between the Republic and France. The rivals thus became allies in the context of post-war Europe. Moreover, in 1933 Demangel and Mamboury resumed their mission, unearthing the site in the Topkapı Gardens “with the support of museum director Aziz Ogan” and published their findings in a book titled *Le quartier des Manges et la première région de Constantinople* in 1939 (Demangel and Mamboury 1939, 5; Eyice 1953; Tezcan 1989, 26). The collaboration between Aziz Ogan and Robert Demangel continued in the following years and turned into a lifelong friendship (Archives of École française d’Athènes, AS1 1904–1938; Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Arşiv ve Dokümantasyon Merkezi, Aziz Ogan Koleksiyonu, OGNIST0200103; OGNIST0301902; OGNIST0200204). Today, the *Vierge Orante* is still

on display at the İstanbul Archaeological Museums as a reminder of the armistice period and of the archaeological investigations carried out during those times of war, occupation, resistance, rivalry, and cooperation.

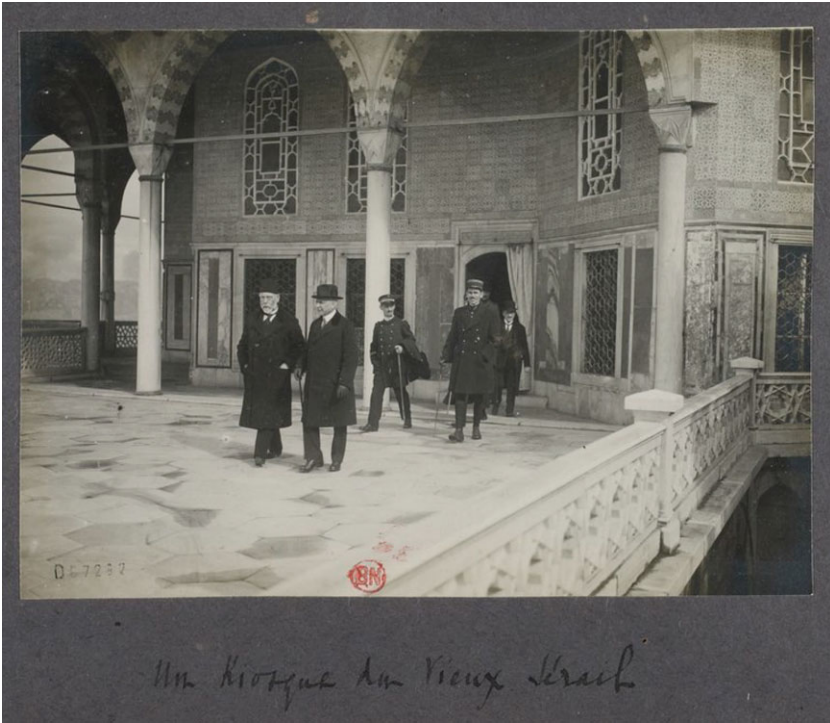
### The Seraglio visited: possessing the imperial collections

While the outer gardens of Topkapı Palace abounded with numerous military and archaeological activities, the inner palace was left virtually intact under Ottoman control. The palace, which had gradually been turned into a museum quarter in the nineteenth century through the display of its various collections, was positioned as a cultural center and a historical monument by the early twentieth century (Özlu 2022). Apart from the inner palace, the Imperial Museum (*Müze-i Hümayun*) and the Military Museum (*Müze-i Askeri-i Osmani*), both located on the palace grounds, remained open during the occupation and maintained their institutional autonomy. Comprehensive guidebooks for both institutions were published in Ottoman Turkish for the first time during this period (Alus 1336 [1920]; Vahit 1337 [1921]).

The well-known author Sermet Muhtar Alus, the son of the director of the Military Museum, Ahmet Muhtar Paşa, prepared a three-volume guidebook to introduce visitors to the history of the Military Museum and its collections (Alus 1920). In a similar vein, the Imperial Museum Guide provided a detailed description of the artefacts displayed in each museum hall. A lexicon for foreign and technical vocabulary was attached to the guidebook, confirming the institution's role as a space for education and civilization (Duncan 1995). These guidebooks reflected the Ottomans' inclusive cultural policies in the sense that both the Military Museum and the Imperial Museum sought to attract Ottoman visitors rather than catering exclusively to the occupation forces or foreign visitors. The guidebooks can also be interpreted as an attempt by the Ottomans to justify and confirm their possession of the military and archaeological collections by systematically studying and classifying them and publishing their findings for the wider population.

Apart from these two museums, the Inner Palace and its royal collections remained a major attraction. Topkapı Palace and the Imperial Treasury had already become a chief destination for foreign visitors by the time of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), and, by the Second Constitutional era, local visitors were also allowed to see the royal collections (Özlu 2018). During the armistice, selected halls, the royal gardens, the kiosks of the palace, and certain imperial collections remained open for touristic visits. During palatial tours, the Military Museum (St Irene), the Imperial Council Hall (*Divan*) and the Gate of Felicity (*Bab-üs Saade*), the Audience Hall (*Arz Odası*), the Library of Ahmed III, and the porcelain and ceramics (*çini*) collections displayed in the Seferli wards were open to visitors. The Sultanic pavilions, such as the Baghdad Kiosk, Sofa Kiosk, and Mecidiye Kiosk, were also kept open for touristic visits. Moreover, some parts of the Harem, which had previously been closed to the foreign gaze, became accessible. As might be expected, Topkapı Palace and its royal collections became one of the major attractions for occupation officers and their families (Figure 10).

Similar to the pre-war era, an official permit issued by the Ottoman authorities was required to gain access to the inner palace (BOA, TSMA.E.1112.8). The photographs



**Figure 10.** French officers visiting Baghdad Kiosk in Topkapı Palace, 1918.

Source: BnF, Album de photographies d'un militaire français, 4-VH-210, ark:/12148/btv1b8432325c/44.

taken by the Photographic and Cinematic Services of the French Army (*Le Service photographique et cinématographique de l'armée française*) demonstrate that certain rituals of hospitality mimicking old palace customs such as serving coffee on the terrace of the Mecidiye Kiosk continued during the armistice (Öktem 1996) (Figure 11). However, gaining access to the Imperial Treasury was apparently more complex than during previous eras when visits to the treasury had been a part of “choreographed palatial tours” (Özlü 2022). During the armistice, the treasure chambers were closed to most visitors, but could still be accessed exclusively by others (BOA, TSMA.E.1411.18, 14.6.1922; Diehl 1922, 121–123; Mamboury 1925, 471; Şentürk 2020).

The treasury collection as well as sacred relics were sent to Konya during the first years of the war, but they were brought back to Topkapı Palace in 1916 (Karaduman 2016; Şentürk 2020, 246–249). As such, sacred relics remained in the palace in the possession of the Sultan–Caliph during the armistice. The Chamber of the Holy Mantle, which housed Islamic relics of major religious and political significance, was closed to all foreign visitors, including Allied officers. However, annual sultanic visits to Topkapı Palace to venerate the Sacred Relics continued. During the Sultan’s visit in 1919, the first to take place in the occupied capital, the passengers on the imperial boat leaving Dolmabahçe “disembarked at the Hunkiar-Iskélessi at the tip of the





**Figure 11.** Occupation officers sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes on the terrace of the Mecidiye Kiosk. Source: Öktem (1996).

Sérail, where, apart from Ottoman troops, a detachment of the French saluted him” (*Stamboul*, 25.6.1919). The following year, the Sultan was received by the highest-ranking Ottoman military and palace officials at Seraglio Point, but, this time, French troops saluted him at Gülhane Park on his way back to Yıldız (*Stamboul*, 4.6.1920). In 1922, the Allied fleet escorted the imperial boat in a grand spectacle, and Ottoman and foreign soldiers, notably French occupation troops, as well as young scouts lined up in the park to welcome the Sultan at Topkapı Palace (*Stamboul*, 15.5.1922). While announcing these royal visits, Ottoman newspapers refrained from mentioning the Allied presence (*Alemdar*, 25.6.1919; *Tasvir-i Efkar*, 25.6.1919).

Sacred relics were of great political significance, and the Allies purposefully promoted the Sultan’s role as their inheritor and protector to control the Muslim population and moderate resistance against the occupation. A certain high-ranking Ottoman officer and a member of the Commission for Sacred Relics at Topkapı Palace noted that he had regular meetings with Allied officers, especially the British, in his diaries (Atatürk Library Collection, Bel\_Mtf\_048080 1918; Bel\_Mtf\_048078, 1921). In fact, during this turbulent era, holy relics became a matter of conflict, as their possessor was regarded as the Caliph of all Muslims and believed to hold political and religious authority over the Islamic world. The caliphate, as an institution, was promoted as having political agency and it was utilized during World War I to mobilize Muslims. Therefore, the control and possession of Islamic relics were strategically crucial not only for the İstanbul and Ankara governments but also for the Allies.



**Figure 12.** Transfer of sacred relics from Medina to İstanbul.

Source: Medine'de Mescid-i Nebevi'nin Babü's-Selami'ndan Alay sancaklarının çıkışı, 1916–1918, IRCICA Archive, FFP012389.

The transfer of sacred relics from Medina to İstanbul during World War I had already sparked an international political crisis (Beyoğlu 2019). In 1917, the commander of the Fourth Army and Minister of the Ottoman Navy, Cemal Paşa, instructed Fahreddin Paşa, the commander of the Hejaz Expeditionary Force, to evacuate Medina, adding that it was “his responsibility to take the holy relics of the Prophet and bring them [to İstanbul]” (Atatürk Library Collection, Bel\_ Mtf\_023746, 4.3.1917). In turn, Fahreddin Paşa seized the relics and treasures kept at the Tomb of the Prophet Mohammad (Al-Masjid an-Nabawi) and sent those artifacts and manuscripts, which were of great religious and financial value, first to Damascus and then to İstanbul in the spring of 1917 (Ağca 2013, 208; Aydın 2011, 260; Kandemir



**Figure 13.** Photographs of the relics sent from Masjid an-Nabawi in Medina to Topkapı Palace in İstanbul by Fahreddin Paşa.

Source: Topkapı Palace Museum Library Collection, TSMK.YY.827.

1974; Şentürk 2020, 150) (Figure 12). Cemal Paşa praised his sacrifices and heroism, writing, “You are not only the commander of Hejaz but the guardian of Medina” (Atatürk Library Collection, Bel\_Mtf\_023774, 16.3.1917). In December 1918, a commission of high ranking Ottoman officials was established to study, classify, and repair the relics sent to Topkapı Palace (BOA, İ.DUİT.100.28, 14.12.1918; Topkapı Palace Museum Library Collection, TSMK.YY.827, 1917).

While official Turkish historiography positions Fahreddin Paşa as a legendary hero who was the “savior of the holy relics” and “defender of Medina,” calling him “the lion of the desert” (Kandemir 1974), Arab and British sources accused him of “plundering,” “spoliation,” “looting” (The National Archives, FO686/59, 1919-1924), and even “theft” (Landon 1923). As might be expected, the transfer of sacred relics and treasures from Medina to the Ottoman capital created political unrest and international controversy among the British, Hashemite, Ottoman, and later Turkish governing bodies (Figure 13). For instance, in a letter dated 1918, King Hussein “beg[s] His Illustrious Britannic Majesty and his advisers to demand from Turkey the return of what she plundered from the tomb of our Prophet.” The letter emphasizes the moral and historical worth of the items, apart from their material value, and demanded justice from Great Britain and all of the Allies in the name of all Muslims (The National Archives, FO 7903/1, 8.11.1918).<sup>8</sup> Even though the issue was brought up during the Paris Peace Conference, it remained unresolved during the armistice.

<sup>8</sup> The British carried out excavations during the armistice, particularly in Mesopotamia, but they were cautious about excavating in İstanbul and refrained from exporting objects to Britain (Abi 2024).

The question of the relics was raised again during discussions over the Treaty of Lausanne. A memo sent by Lord Curzon to İsmet Paşa urged the Turkish government “to settle this question by spontaneously returning the treasures [to Medina] on the conclusion of the peace” (The National Archives, FO 7903, 2.2.1923). The Turkish delegate in Lausanne stated that “the custody of these treasures belonged to the Caliph ... and the matter was a purely religious concern to be determined in accordance with principles of religious law,” concluding that “the Turkish Delegation was unable to discuss the matter” (The National Archives, E 1151/46/91, 25.1.1923). The attitude of the Ankara government was harshly criticized, and that criticism was echoed in the British press; an article in the *Daily Telegraph* claimed that “[t]his shameless theft by the Turks will stiffen the growing Mohammedan resistance to Angora” (Landon 1923).

Indeed, aware of their political power over the Islamic world, the Ankara government was earnestly engaged in acquiring and protecting Islamic relics and treasures. During the occupation, the security of the sacred relics in Topkapı Palace and the Islamic art collection in the Museum of Pious Foundations (*Evkaf Müzesi*) became a serious concern for the Turkish Grand National Assembly. The deputies for Konya and Kayseri raised concerns about the protection and preservation of the antiquities, the throne of Shah Ismail, and the sacred relics at Topkapı (Presidential Archives of the Turkish Republic (BCA), 30.10.0.0/5.29.7, 14.1.1922; Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi (TBMM) Archives, 1.26.175, 383, 17.1.1339). On August 2, 1922, Mustafa Kemal sent a letter to the Council of Ministers in Ankara, stating that a request should be delivered to the İstanbul government demanding that all the valuables and treasures kept at the Grand Museum of Topkapı Palace and the Museum of Pious Foundations be sent to Anatolia. He warned that “one of the motivating factors for the Greek forces to invade İstanbul was to capture this treasury of great value” and added that if that scenario were to occur, the İstanbul government would bear tremendous financial and emotional responsibility (BCA, 30.18.1.1.13.13.20/149-14(51), 2.8.1922, cited in Karaduman 2016, 219, 321). The next day, the Great National Assembly drafted a declaration that repeated Mustafa Kemal’s concerns and demanded the transfer of the sacred relics kept in the treasuries of Topkapı Palace to Anatolia, together with the servants of these valuables. It stressed that if the İstanbul government failed to accept the proposition, in the case of a Greek occupation all responsibility would be on their shoulders (BCA, 30.18.1.1.13.13.20/149-14(54), 3.8.1922, cited in Karaduman 2016, 220, 322).

Security concerns aside, the Ankara government was trying to take possession of the imperial collection to legitimize its emerging political and religious authority. The İstanbul government did not respond to Ankara’s bold and daring propositions, and the sacred relics remained at Topkapı Palace in the possession of the sultanate for a while longer. Before the Lausanne Peace Conference, on November 1, 1922 the Grand National Assembly enacted legislation separating the caliphate and the sultanate, ultimately abolishing the latter. Immediately afterwards, Mustafa Kemal assigned the Turkish military the task of protecting the Sacred Relics and the Imperial Treasury as a precaution to ensure they would not be smuggled abroad either by the deposed Sultan or the British (Karaduman 2016, 62). Consequently, the Ankara government reinforced its political legitimacy in the national and international arenas by establishing de facto ownership and control of the dynastic collections.

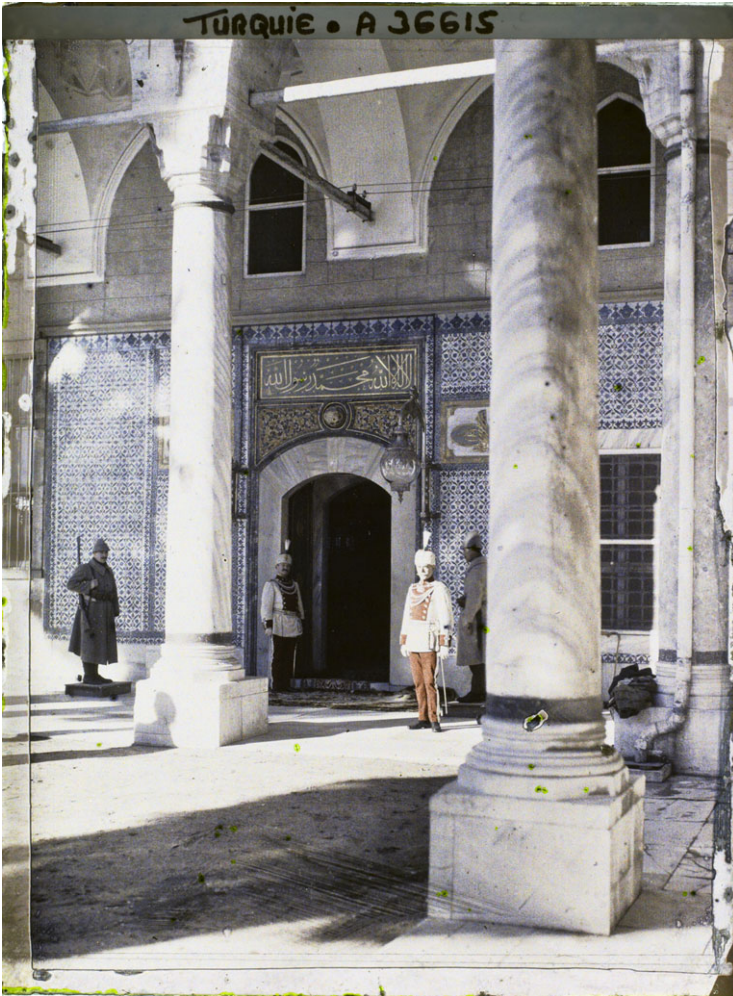


Following Mehmed VI Vahideddin's flight from İstanbul, Prince Abdülmecid Efendi (1868–1944) was declared as Caliph of all Muslims by the Grand National Assembly in Ankara on November 18, 1922. Soon after, an exceptional *biat* (oath of allegiance) ceremony was held at Topkapı Palace, a harbinger of the burgeoning power of the Turkish state under the shadow of the occupation. A committee of selected deputies went to İstanbul to hand the holy relics over to the new Caliph and endorse his legitimacy (BCA, 30.10.0.0/202.380.11, 9.5.1923; TBMM Archives, 1.25.141.15, 20.11.1338; 1.25.155 13.12.1338). In the Chamber of Holy Relics, Abdülmecid Efendi expressed his gratitude and swore allegiance to the Turkish Grand National Assembly in the presence of the delegates (Figure 14). Following tradition, the ceremony continued in the palace's second court in front of the Gate of Felicity. Apart from Turkish officials and deputies, French religious and diplomatic delegates and foreign journalists were also present, filming and photographing the unprecedented ceremony (Danişmend 1972, 469; Küçük 2016; Musée départemental Albert-Kahn, AI90579, December 1922; *Stamboul*, 24.11.1922) (Figure 15). The last *biat* ceremony at Topkapı Palace, although held under extreme political and military conditions, mimicked the traditional rituals of accession, and the last Caliph, Abdülmecid Efendi, made reference to dynastic customs, asserting his role in the making of a new power structure in the region. As it was announced in the local newspapers, the new Caliph, by taking stewardship of the sacred relics, said he would “dedicate all his life to the protection of these relics and the prosperity of this country” (*Akşam*, 24.11.1924) (Figure 16).

The Ankara government hoped the cooperation of Abdülmecid Efendi would reinforce its political authority and religious legitimacy. However, after a period of time, a struggle for power arose between the two parties. The plan to transfer treasures and antiquities from Topkapı Palace to Anatolia epitomized that tension. After taking absolute control of the political scene, on January 4, 1923 the Grand National Assembly ordered the transfer of valuable items kept at the [Imperial] Museum, the Imperial Treasury, and the Chamber of Sacred Relics to Anatolia before the occupation officially ended. A total of 372 chests of valuables from the Chamber of Sacred Relics, the Imperial Treasury, and the Museum of Pious Foundations were shipped from İstanbul to Ankara by train (BCA, 30.18.1.1.13.13.20/149-14(17), 4.1.1923, cited in Karaduman 2016, 223, 325).

The museum director, Halil Bey, rejected calls for the transfer of archaeological collections, claiming that their relocation would damage the items and that moving sarcophagi from the Imperial Museum was not feasible (Karaduman 2016, 69–70). Caliph Abdülmecid approved the transfer of the royal collections from Topkapı Palace to Ankara but requested that some significant pieces, including the Holy Mantle of the Prophet (*Hurka-i Saadet*) and the Holy Flag (*Sancak-ı Şerif*), be left in his possession (BCA, 30.18.1.1.13.13.20/149-14(19), 4.1.1923, cited in Karaduman 2016, 225, 327). He claimed possession of relics that had the greatest political significance in an attempt to ensure his legitimacy. Nevertheless, Abdülmecid had to leave those relics in the possession of the Ankara government, and the last Caliph was expelled from the country with other members of the dynastic family following the abolition of the caliphate on March 3, 1924. Topkapı Palace, along with its collections, was declared an official museum on April 24, 1924 several months after the withdrawal of the occupation forces from İstanbul (BCA, 30.18.1.1/9.20.17, 24.4.1924).





**Figure 14.** Palace servants and Turkish soldiers guarding the portal of the Chamber of Sacred Relics in Topkapı Palace for Caliph Abdülmecid's swearing of allegiance, November 24, 1922.  
*Source:* *Porte de la salle du Hirka-i-Saadft ("Manteau du Prophète") à Topkapı Sarayı, Frédéric Gadmer, Musée départemental Albert-Kahn, A36615S (24.11.1922).*

While the inner palace was under Ottoman control, at least on paper, during the armistice, both the Allies and the Ankara government strove to control the royal collections, particularly the Sacred Relics. The French attempted to legitimize their military presence during the Sultan's annual visits to the Chamber of the Holy Mantle by saluting and escorting the imperial cortège. Nevertheless, the Ankara government managed to control and, eventually, take possession of the relics through various political, military, and diplomatic maneuvers. The transfer of relics to Ankara, which continued into the 1960s, and the proclamation of Topkapı Palace as a museum ultimately resulted in the nascent Turkish state becoming the possessor and inheritor of the Ottoman imperial heritage.



**Figure 15.** Ceremonial throne at Topkapı Palace for Abdülmecid's swearing of allegiance, November 24, 1922.

Source: *Topkapı Sarayı - Bayram Tahti ("Trône de cérémonie") et deux gardes*, Frédéric Gadmer, Musée départemental Albert-Kahn, A36605 (24.11.1922).

## Conclusion

The Allied occupation of İstanbul was unprecedented for both the occupiers and the occupied. The Allied forces, aside from trying to legitimize their occupation, which lacked legal grounds, sought to assert their authority and power in the Ottoman capital, while also hoping to govern İstanbul's subterranean and terrestrial cultural riches. In response, the Ottomans used various tactics to maintain control, maneuvering between resistance, diversion, negotiation, and cooperation. The changing balance of power in the region, together with the military advancement and political recognition of the Turkish resistance forces, led to a shift in Allied policies on



**Figure 16.** Caliph Abdülmecid's allegiance ceremony with the participation of a committee appointed by the Ankara government, November 24, 1922.

Source: Courtesy of Cengiz Kahraman.

cultural heritage. Starting from a position of condescending superiority, the Allied forces began adopting a more cooperative and conciliatory stance and negotiated with Ottoman and Turkish agents when necessary.

As I have shown in this article, Topkapı Palace was positioned as a showcase reflecting the changing power dynamics during this turbulent period. The military, strategic, logistic, and historical significance of the royal complex, together with its invaluable imperial collections, made the historic palace a site of rivalry and contestation, as well as deception and cooperation, among various power groups that included, but were not limited to, Ottoman military and bureaucratic officials, the dynastic family, the Interallied government, and the occupation armies, in addition to the Turkish resistance forces. The case of Topkapı also demonstrates that relations between the Allied forces and the İstanbul and Ankara governments were not unidirectional – as one might imagine relations between oppressor and oppressed or occupier and occupied to be – but far more complex and multilayered.

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