

Commentary III: Early Expeditions in the Ottoman Empire

When we consider the activities of Giovanni Belzoni and Lord Elgin in the early nineteenth century, we have to look closely at the leverage that European technical expertise gave them in dealings with the Ottoman authorities. This technical expertise came in two forms: general scientific knowledge such as hydraulics or electricity (Belzoni) or the sort of technical knowledge that led to more powerful firearms and militaries (Elgin). This was the leverage that Elgin and Belzoni had over the Ottomans—and which every Western archaeologist had over pretty much every non-Western person he encountered until the 1920s. What it did was allow them to have something of great value that was highly desired by non-Western elites. In exchange for this desirable commodity, the non-Westerners were eager to “trade” something that they perceived as being of lesser value for something they perceived to be of far greater value. We can call these commodities various forms of “capital”: economic capital (wages for unskilled laborers in the field), diplomatic capital (favors in international negotiations), political capital (knowledge that enables modernization), and social capital (being able to brag about having met or befriended a global scientific celebrity. What we see here is diplomatic capital (Elgin) and political capital (Belzoni). That is, Elgin was able to trade expensive diplomatic favors—the return of Egypt, an Ottoman province, from the French—for what the Ottomans perceived as virtually worthless Greek marbles (worthless for them because it did not resonate with their own cultural traditions). That’s a pretty good deal. The key is that Elgin is the British ambassador—and thus the physical embodiment of England’s commitment to returning Egypt to the Ottomans. So Elgin can ask for pretty much anything he wants, especially if the Ottomans don’t place a high value on what he’s asking for. There are several ways to support this argument by reference to the primary sources. Note, for instance, the repeated deference in Elgin’s *firman* to his long and illustrious titles, which are even more elaborate than those of the sultan himself. Then think of the passage in which the Ottomans say that granting him this *firman* is “what is due to friendship, sincerity, alliance, and good will subsisting ab antiquo between the Sublime and ever durable Ottoman Court and that of England.” That’s a great quote showing the nature of diplomatic capital. (Another wonderful example unrelated to Lord Elgin is Cleopatra’s Needles: a series of three ancient obelisks that were gifted to France, England, and the United States at different times in the 19th century as thanks for various diplomatic favors—i.e., trading something perceived by the Ottomans as being of low value for something perceived as high value.) With Belzoni, the form of leverage is what I’d call political capital: the knowledge necessary to undertake modernization. Here, this knowledge takes the form of Belzoni’s expertise in hydraulics, which he learned and refined in the circus in Britain. In contrast to Lord Elgin, Belzoni doesn’t have a grand diplomatic title and he can’t offer any major concessions in diplomatic negotiations. But his expertise in hydraulics—and the prospect of helping the *pasha* increase his agricultural tax base—is what gains him the attention and favor of Muhammad Ali, even after the water machine he is trying to sell doesn’t end up working. But Belzoni’s political capital gets him a foot in the door to make friends and impress important and powerful people—the sort of people who can issue a *firman* to excavate and allow Belzoni to get the help necessary to complete his expedition. Recall the part in Belzoni’s account where he notes that “the Bashaw seems to be well aware of the benefits that may be derived from his encouraging the arts of Europe in his country.” That is, Muhammad Ali is desirous of obtaining the modernization knowledge that someone like Belzoni represents, and Belzoni can leverage this desire to get things he wants out of Muhammad Ali—especially if Muhammad Ali doesn’t place a high value on what Belzoni wants. Now how do we know what value the *pasha* places on the Memnon Head? The best quote to illustrate this is when Belzoni writes that another European “had often

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endeavored to persuade the Bashaw to send it as a present to the Prince Regent; but as it must have appeared to a Turk too trifling an article to send to so great a personage, no steps were taken for this purpose.” And there we have it: the “compensations of plunder” framework, which is really “the compensations of cooperation”—because neither side perceived it as “plunder” at the time it was going on. That is a later valuation that we foist retroactively upon these historical actors based on a value system that was alien to them. The compensations of plunder/cooperation framework helps us to understand why everyone seems to be doing all these things voluntarily, without a whole lot of coercion involved: because everyone had an incentive to act in their own self-interests, and these self-interests were based on a value system that we do not share today—and that is why we tend to assume that coercion, deceit, and corruption must have been involved, because we can’t grasp their original value system. But going back to the original historical sources shows us that value system quite clearly.