

Max von Oppenheim

Cairo

In 1883 Max von Oppenheim, banker's son from Cologne (1860-1946), travelled for the first time to the Near East. His early enthusiasm for the Arab world would influence his whole life: he gave up a career in his father's bank (founded in 1789 by Salomon Oppenheim) in favour of joining the diplomatic service. His first assignment led him to the general consulate in Cairo in 1896. From there he set out on several journeys to explore the region. On one of his expeditions in 1899 he discovered Tell Halaf close to the town of Ras el Ain in northern Syria and immediately carried out test excavations at the site. The stone sculptures he unearthed were so promising that von Oppenheim changed his travel plans and went to Constantinople in order to apply for a digging license thus reserving Tell Halaf for future investigations.

Expedition house

Ten years after the discovery of the tell the Ottoman authorities urged von Oppenheim to start exploring the site as French and British parties were now signaling their interest as well. Consequently in November of 1910 Max von Oppenheim handed in his letter of resignation to the Foreign Office in order to prepare the task that was ahead of him. His expedition was supposed to rival Robert Koldewey's work and the methods he had developed during his years in Babylon. That meant hiring competent architects, experienced in that line of work, transporting all the supplies and every piece of equipment to Tell Halaf and staying on site for a long extent of time.

Expedition of 1929

For the main campaign lasting from 1911 until 1913 von Oppenheim brought in Felix Langenegger and Karl Müller, two students of Robert Koldewey. His staff consisted also in professional photographers and secretaries. A specialist for molding from the Royal Museums of Berlin began in 1913 to take plaster casts from most of the sculptures, as a change in the Ottoman antiquities laws did not allow the sharing of the finds anymore. The onset of the First World War prevented the progression of work planned for 1914. It was not before 1927 that von Oppenheim could return to Tell Halaf intending to negotiate the sharing of finds with the newly established French-Syrian mandate administration. While Max von Oppenheim himself set up a little Museum in Aleppo for the Syrian share of finds it was still unclear where and how his own share of objects designated for the 'Berliner Museen' would be put on display.

Tell Halaf-Museum

The privately funded expedition had cost the equivalent to 7-8 million Euro. The financial burden forced von Oppenheim to require for the intended donation of his collection to the Royal Museums of Berlin a certain monetary compensation, which the Museums could not afford. When negotiations had come to a halt he inaugurated his very own Tell Halaf-Museum in the vicinity of the former 'Freund'sche Maschinenfabrik' in Berlin-Charlottenburg. In July of 1930 his spectacular finds and the monumental reconstruction of the Western Palace's façade were presented to the public for the first time. The very modern concept of the

exhibition made it a contemporary peer to the Near Eastern department of the Pergamon Museum.

National Museum Aleppo

The two biggest Tell Halaf collections these days are in Aleppo and Berlin: the National Museum of Aleppo features a reconstruction of the palace facade as well as a Tell Halaf exhibition-hall. One of the standing entrance sculptures, the goddess, is displayed there next to the so-called 'younger scorpion-man', the smaller seated tomb sculpture and an assortment of big and small orthostats and plaster replicas. The great bird statue from the front court of the Western Palace, 50 small relief slabs of basalt and limestone along with a collection of Chalcolithic and Iron Age small finds are housed in the Museum of Ancient Near Eastern Art in Berlin. Additional small orthostats from Oppenheim's excavations grace the exhibitions of the British Museum, the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Walters Art Museum.

Further reading:

Faszination Orient. Max Freiherr von Oppenheim. Forscher • Sammler • Diplomat, hrsg. v. G. Teichmann und G. Völger im Auftrag der Max Freiherr von Oppenheim-Stiftung, Köln 2003

N. Cholidis – T. Stern, *I would enjoy immensely* Der Ausgräber Max Freiherr von Oppenheim vor der Filmkamera, UF 34 (2002) 25-38