

Archaeology and Soft Power: Cultural Diplomacy Between Türkiye and the UK

This is the summary of the online and in-person public event, which was held on 18 October 2022.

You can access the [podcast here](#) and the [video here](#).



On the 18th of October 2022, Contemporary Turkish Studies and the European Institute hosted an online and in-person public event exploring linkages between archaeology, soft power, and international relations. The event was entitled: “Archaeology and Soft Power: Cultural Diplomacy Between Türkiye and the UK.”

The speakers were **Prof Stephen Mitchell**, Emeritus Professor of Classics and Ancient History, University of Exeter; **Sir David Logan**, British Ambassador to Turkey 1997-2001; and **Prof Tuna Şare Aġtürk**, Marie Curie Research Fellow, Faculty of Classics, University of Oxford and Professor of Classical Art and Archaeology, Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University.

Prof Yaprak Gürsoy, Chair of Contemporary Turkish Studies at LSE, chaired the event. In her introduction, Prof Yaprak Gürsoy welcomed the participants and speakers and introduced them to the audience.

The role of the BIRIs and the BIAA

As the first speaker, **Prof Stephen Mitchell** summarised the British institute at Ankara's history and gave information about some of its current work in Türkiye. Prof Mitchell emphasised that the BIAA, almost 75 years old, was one of eight British International Research Institutes (BIRI) supported by the British Academy. Their core funding came from the British Treasury, and was allocated to the Institutes by the British Academy, but the scale was small. The total budget of the 8 BIRIs from public funds is less than five million pounds a year. Their work concentrates on the Middle East, the Mediterranean, East Africa, and North Africa. There were long established research centres in Athens, and Rome, Amman (with a branch in Jerusalem), Ankara, and Nairobi. The British Institute in East Africa had been concerned with research in Kenya and across several East African countries. Because of currently unfavourable political contexts, The Institute in Teheran was currently hardly active in Iran and there were no in-country bases in Libya and Iraq. All the BIRIs, including the BIAA, were private charitable organisations ran by a board of trustees.

Since its foundation in 1948 the BIAA, like the other BIRIs had conducted most of its research in archaeology or subjects related to archaeology, but this now included Cultural Heritage Management as a major part of its work. In the Turkish context, the BIAA's approach to archaeology had been distinctive. While most Turkish archaeologists, responding to the requirements of the Ministry of Culture, focused on excavations, the BIAA had concentrated not on large excavations, but on surveys.

Apart from the excavation of Çatal Hüyük near Konya, the BIAA had not been involved in eye-catching projects. The first excavations at Çatal Hüyük directed by James Mellaart excavation had produced spectacular results in the 1960s but ended abruptly with a personal scandal. The project began again in 1993 with different objectives under Professor Ian Hodder and set new standards for scientific archaeology. One of the achievements of the BIAA was to give opportunities for young scholars based in the UK to start careers which subsequently treated Türkiye as a focal point of their academic work. It had created a significant reservoir of Türkiye specialists. The BIAA also facilitated UK visits by Turkish scholars, which benefitted bilateral relations and established lasting connections between academics in Türkiye and the UK. Prof Mitchell underlined the important contribution of Sir David Logan, former chairman of the BIAA council, who had introduced new dimensions to BIAA activities, and excellent relations with the British Embassy in Ankara, which had created important opportunities for partnerships in modern disciplines, including international relations, political science and recent Turkish history, for instance the five-year programme “From Enemies to Allies” which tracked British Turkish relations from 1914 to the 1960s.

Prof Mitchell highlighted that in collaboration with Koç University, Turkish Museums, and other agencies, the BIAA had introduced a large programme, SARAT, funded with over a million pounds on protecting heritage monuments in threatened areas in Türkiye, and a follow-up programme, SARAA, which involved partners in Lebanon and Jordan as well as British-Turkish collaborators.

Research into natural environment, climate change and resource management were also an important current theme for the BIAA. Prof Mitchell concluded by mentioning two current initiatives on water management and climate change, respectively in metropolitan Istanbul and rural parts of Konya province, which engaged engineers, archaeologists, and water management experts to examine and improve and examine water use management. Both projects had been warmly welcomed by local authorities in Türkiye and were likely to have an impact on policy decisions and regional practice. Like the work on Cultural Heritage, lessons could also be applied in other countries. Prof Mitchell ended his remarks optimistically that the BIAA was today more firmly engaged with modern Türkiye than it ever was. It had created new opportunities for scholars, researchers, and participants in both countries.

Soft-Power and Anglo-Turkish Relations

Sir David Logan pointed out that the history of “soft power” started with the adoption of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. The cultural and media section, known as Basket 3 of the Act, played an essential role in the downfall of the Soviet Union as it enabled citizens to contrast their political and social situation with that of their Western European neighbours. Nowadays, the term soft power is applied to individual states. The concept is supported by a “soft power industry” which rates states based on assets as recondite and various as French cuisine or British football. The UK was usually in the top five of these rankings.

The contribution made by the UK’s academic institutions was important. This mattered to the British government since it gave heft to pursuit of its objectives. However, the nature of soft power disqualified the government from using it to secure concrete and immediate policy objectives. This contrasted with, for example, the Chinese Confucius Centres, supposedly established for the promulgation of the Chinese language and culture, but in practise clearly intended to promote Chinese overseas interests. Sir David argued that in contrast to these Centres, British higher education and research capacity was held in high regard thanks to its independence.

Yet, the UK’s recent rankings were affected by the resources devoted to its soft power assets. Consistent and sustained funding for academic research and higher education was needed to keep the UK’s position as a top-ranking soft power. Sir David also noted that soft power indices lagged considerably behind the position they purported to be reflecting. So, the UK’s high ranking would be affected by Brexit, and its loss of access to primary European research funding sources would also impact its ranking.

Sir David mentioned that the BIAA and other BIRIs were important contributors to the esteem in which British academic excellence was held abroad. They were regionally based and the BIAA for example offered direct access to British higher education excellence and expertise for Turkish specialists in the fields in which it operated. He pointed out that the focus of the current discussion was mainly archaeology, but the BIAA had specialists in various fields, including historical and contemporary political questions.

He underlined that the BIRIs had an enormous reservoir of local expertise and a vast network of contacts. From the government's point of view, they significantly contributed to the UK's profile and standing in unstable regions where important British interests were at stake. He added that if there was one lesson from the post-Cold war era, it was the fact that hard power would not bring stability to these regions.

Sir David concluded by saying that in Turkey the BIAA was wrongly regarded as an organ of the British government. It was not. British academia needed government funding. But its high reputation depended precisely on the fact that this was not tied to government policy objectives but enabled independent thinking and research.

History of Archaeology in Türkiye

Prof Tuna Şare Ağtürk presented a brief overview of the history of archaeology in Türkiye to provide a Turkish perspective on the topic. In her talk, she explained the situation of British archaeologists and foreign archaeological institutions in Türkiye. She pointed out the evolution of Turkish state policies regarding archaeologist researchers and how these policies had affected Turkish and foreign scholars' works.

Prof Şare Ağtürk explained that archaeology had been intertwined with politics since the late 18th century. The artefacts' contexts had become much more important than the artefact itself. Archaeology cooperated with other disciplines such as chemistry, botanic, sociology, computational technologies, and restoration heritage. She highlighted that true modern archaeological research required the cooperation of several disciplines, scientists, and nations.

In the 1830s, European archaeological explorations aimed to collect monumental art from the Ottoman lands to be displayed in European museums. She added that Ottoman bureaucrats knew that some of these explorers had been looking for profits while others had been working for the military and political intelligence services under the cover of archaeology. A new imperial museum (Müze-i Hümâyun) opened in İstanbul in 1869, but archaeology during the late Ottoman Empire had not had an ideological component. A handful of elites, such as Osman Hamdi Bey, tried to protect the antiquities that could attract Westerners and prevent their constant transfer to foreign countries.

Prof Şare Ağtürk stated that after the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Türkiye, had a personal interest in archaeology and during his era, archaeology became part of national politics. The British Archaeology Institute opened in Ankara in 1947. In the decades that followed, archaeology in the West went through fundamental changes. A generation of Turkish scholars who had trained with foreign professors both in Türkiye and abroad had sustained collegial friendships and, thus, collaborative projects. She pointed out that as the number of excavations increased, the antiquities department in Ankara introduced many new regulations for permits to foreign excavation teams. The antiquities department still had a pivotal role in securing these essential permits.

Prof Şare Ağtürk highlighted that the early 2000s saw a sudden and unpredicted increase in archaeology in the number of universities in Türkiye. Archaeology became a popular subject. She emphasised that several excavation permits had shifted from foreign teams to local universities. However, simultaneously, new populist policies started to put tourism above academic concerns. Almost every excavation had expected to carry heavy restoration so that they could attract tourists. She pointed out that according to some new regulations, foreign scientific teams of archaeology in Türkiye should have a Turkish co-director, and the research team should consist of 51% Turkish citizens and 49% foreigners. These regulations had good intentions, like training and employing Turkish students about the heritage of their land. Yet, because of some of the strict rules, foreign researchers were losing their interest in Anatolian archaeology. She highlighted that a “New Turkish Institute of Archaeology” had opened in 2018 with funding from the European Union and predominantly with the support and engagement of Turkish scholars.

Prof Şare Ağtürk ended her remarks by emphasising that Turkish archaeology had strong roots. The image of astonishing marbled relief recently discovered from excavations she led in İzmit symbolised the collegiality of the embracing co-emperors, Diocletian and Maximian. Inspired by this embrace, she underlined that Turkish and British archaeologists’ cooperation could work for the benefit of both sides, for science and cultural heritage itself.