

DESTRUCTION: TOPRAKKALE

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Toprakkale is the site that constitutes the starting point for the archaeology of Urartu, but the history of the largely destructive early excavations of the site is shrouded in darkness. The presence of items on the antiquities market said to come from the Van region attracted the interest of Austen Henry Layard, which led to brief excavations at the site of Toprakkale by the British Museum under Hormuzd Rassam in 1877, followed by further also brief investigations by K. Kamsarakan as well as continued illegal excavations. It is commonly held that Carl Friedrich Lehmann-Haupt and Waldemar Belck excavated here between 1898–1899, but research performed in the Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister's Office reveals their claim to have excavated there to be fraudulent and empty. This article uses primary source material from Ottoman archives to investigate the excavation history of one of the most iconic sites for the beginnings of Urartian Studies, and compels us to re-evaluate what we think we know about Toprakkale and the provenance of the objects associated with it.

Toprakkale/Rusahinili Qilbanikai is located roughly 5 km east of the Van Citadel (*Tušpa*), the Urartian capital. The limestone natural hill on which the citadel stands is connected to Mount Zimzim behind it (Fig. 1). The citadel is 400 metres long on the north-south axis and 60–70 metres wide. The Urartian name of Toprakkale (*Rusahinili Qilbanikai*) is accepted to have derived from a tablet dating to the reign of Rusa (II?), son of Argišti (Lehmann-Haupt 1906: 105, Fig. 77a-b); however, there is an ongoing debate on whether the citadel was built by Rusa son of Argišti, or Rusa son of Erimena.¹

Toprakkale is a significant site as it is the location of the first archaeological excavations concerning Urartu. Within a century, it is supposed to have been excavated by Dr. Reynolds, Captain Emilius Clayton, Hormuzd Rassam, Carl Ferdinand Friedrich Lehmann-Haupt and Waldemar Belck, Iosif Abgarovich Orbeli and lastly by Afif Erzen. What attracted so many researchers to this site? What is the true relationship between the artefacts that were believed to originate from Toprakkale – and thereby attracted excavators – and the site itself? In this article, by using various documents from the Ottoman Archives, I will explore the Toprakkale excavations from the 1870s onwards, via a re-assessment of the early researchers who worked there and the various excavation periods, and through discussion of the confusion caused by artefacts reported to have originated in Toprakkale² (Tables 1–2).

Toprakkale's Rise to Prominence: the Finds and First Excavations

Austen Henry Layard and Hormuzd Rassam. In a book published in 1874 Garegin V. Srvandztyants mentions finds discovered above Toprakkale, in an area he calls the Zimzim cave, including stones, large pithoi, small pottery, copper (bronze?) chair fragments and a bronze figurine depicting a man sitting on a ram. Srvandztyants states that this bronze statue was taken to Constantinople (Istanbul) by the bishop of Edessa (Srvandztyants 1874: 132–133).³ Furthermore, in 1877 various bronze artefacts and objects said to have come from Toprakkale began to be sold on the international market. It is widely thought that these artefacts stimulated the interest of Austen Henry Layard, who was employed at the British Embassy in Istanbul at the time (Barnett

¹ Salvini dates the citadel to Rusa, son of Argišti based on written documents found in Toprakkale (Salvini 2006: 117), while Seidl dates it to Rusa, son of Erimena (Seidl 2012: 178). For discussions on Rusa, son of Erimena, see Fuchs 2012: 135–161; Kroll 2012: 183–186; Roaf 2012: 187–216; Hellwag 2012: 227–241; Salvini 2012: 128–133.

² I would like to thank Dr. Vural Genç for the transcription of these documents.

³ I would like to thank Dr. Yervand Grekyan, who kindly shared relevant information in Srvandztyants' book and translated it from the Armenian language.