Collecting the Past: The Legacy of 19th Century Antiquarianism in Cyprus

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Introduction
Looking specifically at the British Museum, the Cyprus Museum, and the Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum, this project focuses on the ways in which antiquarian motivations shaped 19th century archaeological activity in Cyprus, how this is reflected in Western museum collections, and to what extent this legacy continues to impact current archaeological research on the island.

Early Archaeology and Collecting in Cyprus
“The work (in Cyprus) is interesting alone to the serious student of the remote annals of the Mediterranean. To him the antiquities of the island are a precious connecting-link between Egypt, Assyria, and early Greece and the less attractive they are to the artist the more valuable are they to his comparative vision.”
Stuart Poole, 1878

British Museum
The British Museum was founded in 1753 as the world’s first national public museum, and its extensive collection of Cypriot antiquities is one of the largest outside of Cyprus. Today the collection is housed primarily in the A.G. Leventis Gallery.

Cyprus Museum
The Cyprus Museum was founded until 1883 during the British occupation of Cyprus. The early museum was funded entirely by private subscription, and excavations on behalf of the museum were conducted throughout the period of British occupation, most notably by Ohnefalsch-Richter.

Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum
The Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum was established in 1882, and is one of the oldest university collections of archaeological material in the United States. Though the museum was originally in McCoy Hall on the old campus downtown, today nearly all of the collection resides in Gilman Hall in the newly renovated Archaeological Museum.

Cyprus Under British Rule
In 1878 the British government took control over from Cyprus from the Ottoman Empire. The inheritance of Ottoman antiquities law meant that a large amount of archaeological material could be exported from the island without much issue. British control in Cyprus also meant that British officials on the island had practically free reign over all archaeological activity, a fact which many exploited to acquire their own personal collections.

Despite the apparent lack of aesthetic appeal of Cypriot antiquities, excavation and collection of this material was rampant in British controlled Cyprus. These excavations primarily focused on tomb and sanctuary sites, where the most valuable artifacts could be found. Collecting preferences in this period were largely shaped by interest in the Bible and in Classical literature. Through the end of the 19th century, the British Museum’s Greek and Roman Department sponsored several excavations in Cyprus, a large number of which were led by German archaeologist Max Ohnefalsch-Richter.

Conclusions: Legacy of Antiquarianism and the Future of Cypriot Archaeology
Excavation techniques and collecting habits from the late 19th century continue to influence our understanding of the ancient past of Cyprus through modern display in Western museums. Since Cyprus’s independence from Britain in 1960, archaeological practice has undergone significant change, which may be seen as a response to pre-independence antiquarianism and museum collecting. The Cyprus American Archaeological Research Institute, an organization that attempts to bring together archaeologists with a variety of backgrounds to collaborate on their work in Cyprus, is one example of such change. The establishment of regional archaeological museums ensures not only that all objects found in modern excavations remain on the island, but also in the region whence they came.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank the Woodrow Wilson Undergraduate Research Fellowship for the opportunity to pursue this project, and Ami Cox for all of her help throughout this process. I would also like to thank my mentor, Dr. Emily Anderson, for her constant support and guidance over the past four years.

Selected Bibliography
- British Museum
- Cyprus Museum
- Johns Hopkins Archaeological Museum

Image courtesy of the Cyprus American Archaeological Research Institute.

Map of Cyprus indicating significant archaeological sites. Image courtesy of Harvard Semitic Museum.

Image courtesy of AAP.