

# WHO OWNS THE OCTAGONAL PRISM OF SENNACHERIB, BM 103000? A DEALER'S DISPUTE IN FRANCE'S LAW COURTS IN 1910

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The octagonal prism of Sennacherib BM 103000, today in the Middle East collection of the British Museum, is well-documented as a purchase made from the antiquities dealer Ibrahim Elias Gejou. However, the circumstances that brought this object to London from Iraq, as well as the trial this acquisition triggered in France have not been explored in scholarship. Yet, several documents survive and preserve this history. The letters that Ibrahim Elias Gejou sent about the prism to E.A. Wallis Budge, Keeper of Assyrian and Egyptian antiquities at the time, still exist today in the archive of the British Museum. While in France, records of the court case brought against Gejou by Benjamin Minassian who accused Gejou of having sold the prism without his knowledge, are to be found in the Archives de Paris. Read together, these documents narrate a chronology of events that begins with the appearance of the prism on the antiquities market and go much beyond a French court of law. To reconstruct this long-forgotten part of BM 103000's biography, this case study examines a dispute over the ownership of an artefact illegally removed from Iraq specifically to be sold to the British Museum, and how it impacted the parties who sold it.

## Introduction

The Middle East collection of the British Museum in London, which is made up of “around 300,000 objects”<sup>1</sup>, is well-known to hold many unique archaeological artefacts from Iraq. Among those described by the museum as “highlights”<sup>2</sup> of the collection is the so-called Library of Ashurbanipal,<sup>3</sup> a collection of around “30,000 tablets and fragments inscribed in cuneiform” (Taylor 2018), discovered in the remains of the ancient city of Nineveh. Although many of these tablets and fragments are now in the Middle East collection as a result of finds made by teams of archaeologists who excavated for the British Museum, a substantial number were also bought on the antiquities market from dealers and private collectors. From the Ashurbanipal collection alone the British Museum online database lists 589<sup>4</sup> such purchases. Some were purchased as early as 1825 when the collection of Claudius James Rich (1787–1821) was bought from his widow Mary.<sup>5</sup> The latest purchases date from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example BM 113203,<sup>6</sup> a cylinder inscribed with the annals of Sennacherib bought in 1915 from the antiquities dealer Ibrahim Elias Gejou (1868–1942).<sup>7</sup> Finding that artefacts from the Library of Ashurbanipal are linked to Ibrahim Elias Gejou is unsurprising. Over the course of his forty-five-year business relationship with the British Museum, which stretched from 1895 to 1940, Gejou sold at least “17,121”<sup>8</sup> archaeological artefacts to the department of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities, the former name

<sup>1</sup> The British Museum Online's description of the Department of the Middle East states: “There are about 300,000 objects in the department's collection.” (see British Museum Online, Our Work, Departments, Middle East, last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>2</sup> The British Museum Online's description of the Department of the Middle East: “Highlights of the collection include Assyrian reliefs, treasures from the Royal Cemetery of Ur, the Oxus Treasure, Phoenician ivories and Ashurbanipal's library of cuneiform tablets from Nineveh.” (last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>3</sup> See Fincke 2004: 114–115.

<sup>4</sup> Data obtained from the British Museum Online Collection, searching “Library of Ashurbanipal” and “Purchased” (last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>5</sup> The British Museum Online Collection lists ten artefacts from the Rich collection part of the Library of Ashurbanipal.

<sup>6</sup> BM 113203 is edited in Grayson & Novotny 2012: 29–40. Photographs of the object are on British Museum Online (search Museum Number 113203, last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>7</sup> For a brief profile of Gejou and his activities see Ait Said-Ghanem 2023 and Ait Said-Ghanem 2021c; also Dessagnes 2017 for a study dedicated to Gejou's activities in relation to mathematical tablets.

<sup>8</sup> A search of the British Museum Online Collection under Person/Organisation “I.E.Gejou” shows that “17,121” objects are listed as purchased from this dealer, but this only represents the sales that Gejou made in his own name. Gejou sold several hundreds more artefacts to the British Museum, the payment of which was issued to the transport companies who delivered the objects sent, such as Frank Strick & Co, see Ait Said-Ghanem 2020 for an example.

of the Middle East collection.<sup>9</sup> From the smallest and most easily moveable objects, like cylinder seals and cuneiform tablets, to the largest, such as statues and bas-reliefs, the artefacts Gejou sold were smuggled from Iraq to Europe. Gejou operated when the Ottoman Antiquities Law of 1884, and its subsequent iteration in 1906, explicitly forbade the exportation of archaeological artefacts outside of the Ottoman empire, of which Iraq was then a part.<sup>10</sup> As an antiquities dealer born in Baghdad and raised there, Gejou was well-aware of these laws, and so were the institutions which bought objects from him.<sup>11</sup>

Among the many artefacts inscribed with the annals of Sennacherib bought by the British Museum from Ibrahim Elias Gejou, there is a remarkable piece: BM 103000, an octagonal prism (eight-sided clay text) inscribed with Sennacherib's first five campaigns and accounts of building work, known as the 'King Prism' in scholarship (edited in Grayson and Novotny 2012: 126–146).<sup>12</sup> This prism is today one of only 4,500 objects on permanent display in the Middle East wing of the British Museum, out of 300,000 held in the collection.<sup>13</sup> When BM 103000 was purchased from Gejou in 1909, it was the only octagonal prism of Sennacherib to have been found complete.<sup>14</sup> It was also "the longest preserved text of Sennacherib (ca. 740 lines)",<sup>15</sup> making it an invaluable historical document, both for its content and aesthetic quality. The only other whole octagonal prism of Sennacherib would come to light much later during excavations conducted by Iraqi archaeologists in 1952 (IM 56578, Heidel 1953: 177–188, a better-preserved copy of the text on BM 103000).

Although BM 103000 is well documented as an artefact bought by the museum from Gejou (see Grayson and Novotny 2012: 126–127 for a summary of discussions on provenance and provenience), the history of this acquisition has not been explored in depth (Tamur 2022: 109 does briefly mention this affair), yet it is far from lost. The letters that Ibrahim Elias Gejou sent about the prism to E. A. Wallis Budge (1857–1934), Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities between 1894 and 1924, still exist. They are today in the central archive of the British Museum, filed in large leather-bound volumes known as the correspondence volumes of the Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities department. During three research visits to this archive in the year 2021 and 2022, I collected the 593 documents held in these volumes sent by Gejou to the department between 8 October 1895 (the earliest document) and 1 March 1940 (the last, written two years before Gejou's death in 1942). Most are letters, but there are also numerous lists of artefacts sent for sale with their descriptions, price lists, invoices, drawings and photographs of objects.

Gejou's many letters to the museum naturally contain a wealth of information about the artefacts he sent for sale which can be used to research the provenance history of objects in the collection. In this respect, the letters Gejou sent to Wallis Budge about BM 103000 stand out. Between July 1908 and December 1910, Gejou not only referenced BM 103000 almost continually, but he also discussed the ownership dispute which followed the sale of the prism, making it one of the most detailed quarrels Gejou ever recorded in his correspondence. The substance of the conflict was as follows: immediately after Gejou sold BM 103000 to the museum in March 1909, two antiquities dealers and brothers, named Benjamin and Kirkor Minassian contacted Wallis Budge claiming that at the time of the sale Benjamin was the co-owner of the prism, and as such he should have received a

<sup>9</sup> See Wilson 2002: 93–125 for an organigram of the British Museum's department structures from 1807 until 2000. The Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities department, created in 1886, changed name in 1955 to the Western Asiatic Antiquities. Then it was renamed the Ancient Near East collection until 2000. The title 'Middle East' for the department was adopted in 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Shaw 2003: 108–130 discusses the Ottoman antiquities laws of 1869, 1874, 1884, and 1906.

<sup>11</sup> Dealers from Baghdad who sold artefacts to the British Museum openly acknowledged they broke the law, and talked about how they smuggled collections out of Iraq in their letters to Wallis Budge. Ferida Antone Shamas herself used the term 'smuggling' (see excerpt of her letter dated 10 April 1900 in Ait Said-Ghanem 2021a). Gejou was more guarded. He referred to the illegal aspect of his exportations

but in euphemistic terms, talking about 'difficulties' in getting artefacts 'out' of Iraq.

<sup>12</sup> Photographs of BM 103000 are available on the British Museum Online Collection (search Museum Number 103000, last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>13</sup> The British Museum Online Collection's description of the Department of the Middle East writes: "A representative selection, including the most important pieces, is on display and totals some 4,500 objects." (last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>14</sup> The cylinder is complete but the text bears some damage on column IV and V. Reade 1975: 189–195 lists known octagonal prisms and fragments in the British Museum. See Grayson & Novotny 2012: 87–160 for a list of "Octagonal Prisms" with editions.

<sup>15</sup> Grayson & Novotny 2012: 126.

share of the proceeds, which were never paid by Gejou. As for him, Gejou insisted that his brother Isaac had been the sole owner of the prism when he sold it to the museum. Gejou's letters show that Minassian's accusations had not been mere complaints. Minassian initiated court proceedings in Paris against Gejou to recover his alleged share. With the trial fast approaching, Gejou spoke about Minassian's claim at length with Wallis Budge, and a hint that a trial finally took place appears in a letter dated March 1910, one year after the official sale of BM 103000. In this letter, Gejou informed Wallis Budge that he now urgently needed to go to Baghdad to bring back the documents he needed to win his appeal. Though Gejou avoided saying the words, the message was clear. He had lost the trial but was preparing to fight a sentence he did not name.

In his next letter, written in June and sent from Baghdad, Gejou wrote he had found the documents he needed, and then his letters stop referencing the matter altogether. It would resurface six months later in December 1910, when Gejou wrote to announce he had won his appeal. The events recorded in these letters of course raise many questions. How had the prism changed hands from Benjamin Minassian to Ibrahim Gejou? And what had occurred during the trial, and the appeal? No letters from Gejou or from the Minassian brothers (whose letters to Wallis Budge are also in the archive) answer these questions. Given that Gejou was writing from Paris where he had settled since at least his first marriage in 1890,<sup>16</sup> and that Kirkor Minassian was also living in Paris, the trial was likely to have been held in this city's courts. In an attempt to fill this absence of information, my research soon led me to the Archives Nationales de Paris, a public archive where records of court cases heard in both civil and criminal courts from 1871 are kept (known as the "Fonds Judiciaires"). It is there that two documents related to the Minassian v. Gejou trial and appeal are preserved. In the record books for March 1910, a five-page document titled 'annex to the audience sheet' ("annexe à la feuille d'audience") recounts the evidence presented by Kirkor Minassian, and by Gejou during his defence, heard on 12 March 1910 in Paris' Tribunal de Première Instance. Kirkor was acting on behalf of his brother Benjamin who was in Baghdad. The records for the appeal held on 12 December 1910 are unfortunately much briefer, but they summarise the dismissal of all charges against Gejou after he had submitted documents left undescribed.<sup>17</sup> Read together, these records reveal versions of events and names never disclosed in Gejou's or Minassian's letters. It is the story of this dispute over the ownership of BM 103000 that the present article will recount, one which erupted between four antiquities dealers, Ibrahim Gejou and his brother Isaac on the one hand, and Benjamin and Kirkor Minassian on the other, with a museum professional, Wallis Budge, and a mysterious 'intermediary' named Mr de Sarzec, caught in the middle.

To investigate this dispute, this study will reconstruct the events which led Ibrahim Elias Gejou and Kirkor and Benjamin Minassian to fight over the prism through a close reading of the letters these parties sent to Wallis Budge. I will then turn to the court records in the Archives de Paris, also using information found in press articles published in France at the time, to examine evidence uncovered during the trial. This reconstruction will be presented in chronological order, with a summary timeline given in the appendix, and with the full transcription of selected letters also given in an online appendix (documents 1 to 26).<sup>18</sup> This investigation will begin from the moment Wallis Budge was first offered the prism for sale in March 1908 (Part 1), and will follow the ownership dispute the sale triggered from March 1909 (Part 2), until the case against Ibrahim Elias Gejou was heard in court in March 1910 (Part 3), resulting in all charges being dropped during Gejou's appeal in December 1910 (Part 4). At the time of writing this article, the letters of Wallis Budge kept in his 'Letter Book' in the British Museum archive could not be consulted because of their state of preservation.<sup>19</sup> But as will be seen below, the documents gathered here provide a background informative and rich enough to reassemble a coherent timeline of events. By

<sup>16</sup> See Ait Said-Ghanem 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Archival reference for the trial of 12 March 1910 is D1U6 1065. Archival reference for the appeal of 12 December 1910 is D3U9 273.

<sup>18</sup> My transcriptions of the letters in the British Museum archive are made courtesy of the British Museum Trustees.

The online appendix can be found at <https://oracc.org/iraq/iraq85/aitsaidghanem/>.

<sup>19</sup> The British Museum archive advised me that Wallis Budge's Letter Book is in too poor a state of preservation to be consulted, on 21 February 2022 and 15 August 2022 (email communication).

reconstructing this long forgotten chapter in BM 103000's biography, this case study aims to examine a dispute over the ownership of an artefact illegally removed from Iraq specifically to be sold to the British Museum, and how (if at all) it impacted the parties who sold it.

*Part I. From March 1908 to February 1909 - BM 103000 appears on the antiquities market in Baghdad, and is sold in London to the British Museum*

*A. Context: Sennacherib cylinders and prisms in the British Museum*

To understand the Minassian v. Gejou affair and its impact on the latter's career and personal life, Gejou's and Minassian's letters as well as the aforementioned court records are crucial, but so is the importance of BM 103000 for scholarship at the time of its appearance on the antiquities market. When Gejou brought the octagonal clay prism of Sennacherib, which would become BM 103000, to Wallis Budge in February 1909, specialists had known for some time that Assyrian scholars had kept a record of the military campaigns and the building work of king Sennacherib (705 BCE–681 BCE) on a variety of clay supports like cylinders (barrel-shaped clay documents) and prisms (polygonal clay texts typically with six or eight angles, described as hexagonal and octagonal prisms). Several such artefacts had been in the British Museum for over fifty years at this point. As discussed by Grayson & Novotny (2012: 6–7), objects inscribed with the annals of Sennacherib had entered museum collections even before cuneiform was deciphered and foreign-led excavations in Iraq had begun in the 1840s. The Bellino Cylinder (BM 22502) for example was purchased by the British Museum in 1825 from Mary Rich, the widow of Claudius James Rich.<sup>20</sup> This cylinder, said to have been discovered at Nebi Yunus, records Sennacherib's first and second campaigns.<sup>21</sup>

The discovery of a Sennacherib prism soon followed when the archaeologist Hormuzd Rassam discovered BM 91026 in 1854 in Nineveh's North Palace. This hexagonal prism, which became known as the Rassam Cylinder, is inscribed with three campaigns of Sennacherib.<sup>22</sup> Barely a year after this discovery, in 1855, the Taylor Prism (BM 91032) was purchased by the British Museum from Sir Henry Rawlinson. Rawlinson had himself bought it from Mrs Taylor, the widow of Colonel R. Taylor, Rich's successor as Political Resident in Baghdad from 1821 to 1843.<sup>23</sup> Also said to have been found at Nebi Yunus, the inscription records Sennacherib's eight campaigns.<sup>24</sup> Aside from these early and spectacular pieces, broken cylinders and prisms inscribed with the annals of Sennacherib were also acquired by the British Museum from excavations led by the teams of archaeologists it sent to Iraq (see Reade 1975: 189–195, with previous literature on Sennacherib prisms, whole and fragmentary, in the British Museum). An example is the discovery of BM 99046 made during the British Museum's excavations of Kuyunjik mound in 1904, led by Leonard W. King.<sup>25</sup> This fragment would later be identified as a duplicate text of the above-mentioned BM 113203, bought from Gejou in 1915, known as the "First Campaign Cylinder" (Grayson and Novotny 2012: 29).

Based on the decipherment of the texts inscribed on these artefacts, and on many others besides, a scholarly reconstruction of the reign of Sennacherib would eventually be possible. The *History of Sennacherib*, "the first book dedicated entirely to Sennacherib's inscriptions" (Grayson & Novotny 2012:7), published in 1878, was George Smith's work. He had almost finished this study before he died, and it was completed by A. H. Sayce. This book alone was based on "a total of twenty-three texts" (Grayson & Novotny 2012:7). Soon other philological and historical studies dedicated to Sennacherib would follow (see Grayson & Novotny 2012:6-9 for an overview of previous literature). Hence, when BM 103000 appeared on the antiquities market, its historical importance

<sup>20</sup> See Reade 2010: 90–92.

<sup>21</sup> The Bellino Cylinder (BM 22502) is edited in Grayson & Novotny 2012: 48–54. Photographs of the cylinder are available on the British Museum Online (search Museum Number 22502, last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>22</sup> The Rassam Cylinder (BM 91026) is edited in Grayson & Novotny 2012: 55–68. Photographs of the cylinder are available on the British Museum Online

(search Museum Number 91026, last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Wright 2019 provides a biography of Colonel Taylor; see also Julian Reade 2010: 93–4.

<sup>24</sup> See Grayson & Novotny 2012: 167–185 for an edition of The Taylor Prism (BM 91032) with discussion of its provenance.

<sup>25</sup> BM 99046 is a fragment from the inscription found on BM 113203. It is edited in Grayson & Novotny 2012: 29–40.

was immediately recognised. As mentioned above, the length of this text was remarkable, and in 1909 BM 103000 was also the only complete octagonal prism to have been discovered. The Bellino cylinder is barrel-shaped, while the Rassam and Taylor prisms are hexagonal prisms. The acquisition of BM 103000 therefore not only had the potential of enriching scholarly knowledge, it also represented an opportunity to possess a unique and aesthetically impressive object, which would continue to strengthen the national and international reputation of the British Museum as a place where rare archaeological artefacts from Iraq could be seen and studied.

### *B. Change of hands in 1908 - from Benjamin Minassian to Ibrahim Elias Gejou*

The story of the acquisition of BM 103000 begins in March 1908, but not in Gejou's documents. It is in the letters of the antiquities dealer Benjamin Minassian that the prism is first mentioned. On 2 March 1908, Minassian had written to Wallis Budge to advise he was in possession of "a rare piece of antiquity" which he describes as "an old cylinder of very hard backed mud of 36 centimes [sic] long with a hole in the middle; it is octogon (eight angular) the width of each angle is 9 centimes [sic] with 95 lines of Assyrian Kuniform [sic] writing in each side."<sup>26</sup> As will be seen throughout this discussion, in this period antiquities dealers did not use the term 'prism'. In their correspondence, they speak of 'cylinders' both to refer to barrel-shaped objects and to prisms. In the latter case they would simply note the shape and number of angles of the 'cylinder', for example here "octogon", and "eight angular". With his letter, Benjamin had sent a photograph of the prism (still in the archive), which must have helped Wallis Budge determine the prism's state of preservation, as well as the nature and historical value of the text.

Like Gejou's letters, Minassian's own are still in the archive together with the letters of his brother Kirkor, who, as will be seen below, became one of the main characters in this dispute. Benjamin Minassian was not unknown to Wallis Budge in 1908, but it had been some time since Benjamin had been in touch, something to which he alludes in the opening of his letter. He had last written in 1900 to offer a bronze statue for sale, possibly dated to the Achaemenid period, which had been purchased by the department (BM 94347<sup>27</sup>). The British Museum Online records that this is the only object acquired from Benjamin Minassian, but "326" artefacts were bought from his brother Kirkor.<sup>28</sup> Several letters from Kirkor Minassian (1874–1944) survive in the archive and show that his correspondence goes back to 1894, when he began to offer cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals for sale. The letterheads of these early letters are striking. Written in Armenian and English they describe Kirkor Minassian as an 'antiquarian and numismatist' trading from Constantinople. By 1896, his letterheads had changed. No longer written in Armenian, they place Kirkor at 12 University Street in West London, close to the British Museum. Then, post-1896 Kirkor fades from the archive. The only subsequent letter of Kirkor I have been able to collect dates to 1909, when he had written to support his brother Benjamin against the Gejou brothers. The letterhead of this letter is also noteworthy: Kirkor was now established in Paris, at 18 rue Choron, and he had expanded his activities as a trader in "Objets de Collection, Arts Oriental & Persan, Faïences, Bronzes, Etoffes, Tapis, etc."

As noted in the introduction, I was unable to consult Wallis Budge's letters, but Minassian's next letter dated 18 June 1908 acknowledges receipt of Budge's reply, dated 4 April 1908. Wallis Budge was of course interested in the prism and had asked Minassian to name the price he wanted, something he asked all dealers who got in touch.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> I am very grateful to Gareth Brereton who provided me with a copy of Minassian's letters for the year 1908. This letter is transcribed in full in the online appendix, see [Document 1](#).

<sup>27</sup> Photographs of the object are available on the British Museum Online (search Museum Number 94347, last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>28</sup> This number also includes those Kirkor Minassian formerly owned but which were sold to the museum by his daughter after he passed away.

<sup>29</sup> I say 'of course' based on my assessment of Budge's dealings with sellers. In total, I collected the letters of 49

antiquities dealers, based in Baghdad, Basrah, Cairo, London, and Paris. As far as I can see, Budge ignored none of them. He seems to have been interested in buying everything sent his way, with two exceptions: forgeries and severely damaged artefacts though he would recommend the purchase of collections containing both if they were mixed with valuable objects (see Ait Said-Ghanem 2021c for examples). The result was that, in the words of Ismail 2021: 275 during his twenty-year keepership Wallis Budge "tripled the size of the collection under his care through limited excavations and the network of agents he maintained in Iraq and in Egypt."

Minassian's reply dated 18 June 1908 shows he was unwilling to set a price.<sup>30</sup> He wanted Wallis Budge to be the first to name a sum. This approach is typical of many Baghdad-based antiquities dealers who sent objects expecting Wallis Budge to open negotiations. In this letter, Minassian also announced he would bring the prism in person to London. It is at this point that Gejou's letters about the prism begin.

In the chronology of Gejou's correspondence with Wallis Budge, the mention of the prism of Sennacherib first appears in his letter of 10 July 1908.<sup>31</sup> Gejou not only writes that he expected to soon receive 'the Assyrian cylinder', he also promises that Wallis Budge would be the first to see it. Gejou had not mentioned this artefact before, and for this seemingly sudden mention to be understood, his activities need to be placed into context. Gejou worked as an agent for sellers throughout his career, and as such he regularly took over negotiations started by other dealers either at their request (as in the case of the Thoma brothers in 1898 who had fallen out with Budge by that year<sup>32</sup>), or at Wallis Budge's request when the latter no longer got along with a dealer (like the antiquities dealer Ferida Antone Shamas, who complained to Wallis Budge she had been approached by Gejou in 1899, and in 1900<sup>33</sup>). Gejou's unprompted phrase that 'he will be delighted to present the cylinder first to Wallis Budge' also reads like a response. It is my belief that Wallis Budge or Minassian had asked Gejou to deal with the matter, but this hypothesis can only be checked when Wallis Budge's letters are made available.

Gejou had not mentioned Minassian in relation to this transaction (he rarely gave the name of his clients) but he did speak about Minassian in his next letter dated 14 September 1908,<sup>34</sup> explicitly naming him as the individual who had sent the photograph of the prism. In this letter, Gejou also shared a curious piece of information: his brother Isaac was going to travel with the prism to bring it to London from Iraq. Why was Isaac involved in this transaction? The answer would come from Benjamin Minassian's next letter dated 2 November 1908, discussed below, in which he presents Isaac as his partner in this sale. As will be discovered later from the trial records, Isaac was the co-owner of the prism. Isaac Gejou was a well-established antiquities dealer in Baghdad and he held no minor role in Ibrahim's business. Until Isaac passed away in 1930, it is he who supplied Ibrahim with collections and informed him of new discoveries.<sup>35</sup> When Ibrahim had left Baghdad to settle in France (possibly circa 1887<sup>36</sup>), his family had remained there. Ibrahim's mother and father, Ferida Kroumy and Elias Gejou, as well as his two brothers, Isaac and Henri, and his sisters Lulu and Sarah continued to live in Iraq.<sup>37</sup> Given his role, Isaac is mentioned in Ibrahim's letters on a regular basis, however none of the documents sent by Gejou to the British museum, nor any of those I collected from other museum archives,<sup>38</sup> mentions Isaac accompanying artefacts from Iraq to Europe. This transfer seems unusual. It may of course be the case that Isaac regularly travelled with shipments to supervise the smuggling, safe crossing, and arrival of the collections the brothers sent to France and the UK, but this was an occasion so significant that Gejou disclosed it in writing.

After Gejou's letter of 14 September 1908, only one more appears in the correspondence volume of that year, but in it, Gejou does not speak about the prism. Dated 15 October,<sup>39</sup> it confirms the British

<sup>30</sup> See appendix, [Document 2](#).

<sup>31</sup> See appendix, [Document 3](#).

<sup>32</sup> Gejou's involvement in the Thoma brothers' business is recounted in his letters to Wallis Budge between 7 December 1898 and October 1899.

<sup>33</sup> For a profile of Mrs Antone Shamas, see Ait Said-Ghanem [2022a](#).

<sup>34</sup> See appendix, [Document 4](#).

<sup>35</sup> For details about Isaac, see Ait Said-Ghanem [2023](#).

<sup>36</sup> Although no references are given for this, Dessagnes [2017](#): 88 states: "A partir de 1887, il vit majoritairement en France".

<sup>37</sup> Ibrahim's second sister Sarah married the antiquities dealer Alexander Messayah. By the mid-1910s, the couple had settled in New York to trade artefacts but I do not know if they had already left Iraq in 1909.

<sup>38</sup> With the generous assistance of the curators and archivists of the following institutions, I was able to collect letters sent by Gejou to: the Royal Museums of Art and History (Belgium), the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek (Denmark), the Louvre Museum (France), the Archives de Paris, Archives Nationales, and Archives Diplomatiques du ministère des Affaires étrangères (France), the Vorderasiatisches Museum (Germany), the Böhl Collection and the University of Leiden Special Collection (Netherlands), the Rijksmuseum (Netherlands), the Gulbenkian Foundation (Portugal), the Bibliothèque de Genève (Boissier Dossier, Switzerland), the British Museum (UK), the British Library (UK), Cambridge University (UK), the Yale Babylonian Collection (USA), the Metropolitan Museum (USA), Harvard University (USA).

<sup>39</sup> See appendix, [Document 5](#).

Museum's payment of £20 for a lot of objects undescribed. In Gejou's correspondence, mention of the prism would re-emerge from 16 January 1909.

As mentioned above, Benjamin Minassian's next letter dates to 2 November 1908.<sup>40</sup> He had not written since June perhaps because he had let his agent, Ibrahim, deal with the negotiations. But his veiled complaint that he had not heard from Budge since his last letter is curious, and may indicate that both Ibrahim Gejou and Wallis Budge were preparing to go over his head in the acquisition of the prism. It is from this letter that Isaac's role is disclosed. Benjamin could not himself come to London, and he explains that his business partner Isaac would be bringing the prism instead. Isaac, he explained, had left a fortnight ago.

Unfortunately, no document I have recovered so far explains how Isaac had got involved in the purchase of the prism in the first place. As will be seen in Part 3, Isaac is named throughout the court proceedings as the co-owner of the prism, which make it seem as though he and Minassian had purchased the object together initially. Many letters sent from Baghdad by antiquities dealers to Wallis Budge show that partnerships between dealers were the default. The main reason for this was the price of artefacts on the antiquities market. Given the high demand driven by foreign archaeologists, scholars, and museum professionals who came to Iraq to buy artefacts for the collections of their respective institutions, and for their own,<sup>41</sup> artefacts became so expensive that dealers acting alone found themselves outbought, a situation to which the occasional antiquities dealer Joseph Svoboda refers in his letter to Wallis Budge dated 26 June 1895: "If you only give out that you require no more of these tablets, I am sure the price will go down here for they are all looking out to your demand for such articles".<sup>42</sup>

Letters sent to Wallis Budge by Ferida Antone Shamas between 1894 and 1904, also in the central archive, are particularly informative on partnerships, as she headed a group of five dealers who traded with the British Museum under her leadership. Mrs Shamas knew Isaac and Ibrahim Gejou well, and it is clear she found them pushy and irritating competitors. In early 1900, she had located a valuable statue on the antiquities market, which she wanted to sell to the British Museum. But before she invested her money in this purchase, she wanted an assurance from Wallis Budge that the museum would buy it. In 1900, Mrs Shamas and Wallis Budge's relationship had very much soured, especially because of the way she felt Wallis Budge had treated her adopted daughter Djemilah Hanna Sayegh (see Ait Said-Ghanem 2021a for details). In February 1900, she recalls that Ibrahim Gejou had written to her to ask her to send the statue to him, promising he would sell it at a good price, thereby cutting her out of the negotiations she had first initiated with the museum. Mrs Shamas was very annoyed by this, and she writes that it was Isaac who must have told Ibrahim 'about everything'.<sup>43</sup> This affair, and several others similar to it, are examples of what may have happened with Benjamin Minassian originally. He might have located the prism and begun negotiations for its purchase with the previous owner when Isaac appeared and pushed to be made part of the deal. Minassian would not have hesitated much: Isaac had ready money, and the agent best placed to sell to the British Museum from Paris at his disposal: his brother.

### *C. The Year 1909: Arrival of the prism in London; Purchase by the British Museum*

Ibrahim Gejou resumed his discussion of the prism on 16 January 1909:<sup>44</sup> Isaac had arrived in London with the prism, which had been placed in a safe. No information can be gleaned from Gejou's letters about how the prism exited Iraq. Gejou only mentions that the prism had not gone to France but had been sent directly to London. People and merchandise leaving Iraq usually did so from Basra where steamships bound for Europe awaited in the Persian gulf, and based on the many letters Baghdad-based antiquities dealers sent to Wallis Budge, it is clear that Basra was the preferred and speediest route. But there was one obstacle: Basra's Customs House. To smuggle

<sup>40</sup> See appendix, Document 6.

<sup>41</sup> For example, see Russell 1997.

<sup>42</sup> For a profile of Joseph Svoboda in Ait Said-Ghanem 2021b.

<sup>43</sup> Ferida Shamas' letter to Wallis Budge dated 23 February 1900: "je viens de recevoir une missive de Mr Géjou de Paris

par laquelle il me prie de lui envoyer cette statue en me promettant de la vendre à la valeur qu'elle mérite à l'occasion de l'exposition. Ce Monsieur a connu cet objet par le moyen de son frère de notre ville qui l'a mis au courant de tout".

<sup>44</sup> See appendix, Document 7.

their collections, many dealers speak about bribing customs' officials (see Ait Said-Ghanem 2021a for an example), while others simply hid the objects in other types of merchandise (Isaac and Ibrahim's father Elias Gejou himself hid 186 cuneiform tablets in bags of aniseed<sup>45</sup>). Gejou's letter of 16 January also contains a crucial piece of information: he was in the process of buying out the share of the 'various parties' who owned the prism to be able to sell it as he wished. As would soon be revealed, this did not mean Ibrahim was buying out his brother Isaac, he was speaking about his brother's partner, Benjamin Minassian. It is also in this month that Gejou would sell a prism fragment for £6, which would later be found to be inscribed with the same text inscribed on BM 103000 (BM 102996, see Grayson & Novotny 2017: 126).<sup>46</sup>

A month later, Gejou declared himself free of all partners. His letter of 12 February 1909 announces they had accepted to sell the prism to him, now described as 'the cylinder of Sennacherib'.<sup>47</sup> Gejou writes that buying out his former associates had not been easy. The difficulty had been that they already had a price in mind, which was based on an offer made by the French assyriologist Father Jean Vincent Scheil (1858–1940),<sup>48</sup> who had valued the prism at 30,000 francs (£1,200). Gejou did not share whether Father Scheil had heard about the prism from word of mouth, or if he had been directly contacted to make an offer but this brief mention can be tied to Minassian's earlier letter of 18 June 1908 which states that "many have applied to me both here and from France and are ready to pay me any amount." Scheil had a very good relationship with antiquities dealers in Baghdad – he often appears in their letters as a scholar who would give them historical information about the objects they collected as well as price evaluations.

Two days later, in a letter dated 14 February 1909,<sup>49</sup> a Sunday, Gejou announced he would be arriving at the end of the week to bring the prism in person at the British Museum. None of Gejou's letters mention the exact day on which he and Wallis Budge met. An approximate date is however preserved in the trial records (Part 3) which state that Gejou had brought the prism to Wallis Budge on 17 or 18 February 1909. The date of Gejou's return to France is also known from these records: he had returned by 25 February as he had met Kirkor Minassian at his home in Paris on that day, having invited him in a letter sent "from London" on 24 February.

By 26 February, the date of Gejou's next letter, Wallis Budge and Ibrahim had obviously begun price negotiations. Gejou writes he had hoped for at least £1,700, but Budge had offered £1,550, and Gejou now asked for £1,625.<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that Gejou mentions he had come to London twice. He had first come to meet Isaac upon his arrival with the prism (presumably in January 1909 when he wrote to inform Wallis Budge the prism was in a safe), and then once more to bring the prism to Wallis Budge in person, and he wanted the purchase price to reflect these expenses.

Negotiations did not last long. Gejou and Budge agreed on a price on 28 February 1908: the prism was sold for £1,600 (equivalent to £225,082 today).<sup>51</sup> Gejou sent his invoice on that day, and would confirm receipt of the payment in two letters dated 14 and 16 March 1909.<sup>52</sup> This sale was a milestone in Ibrahim Elias Gejou's career. Since 1895, Gejou had regularly sold archaeological artefacts to the British Museum for sums varying between £5 (for a "Babylonian cylinder" sold in 1895 for example)<sup>53</sup> and £475 (for a collection of Egyptian scarabs sold in 1904).<sup>54</sup> But so far, he had never received a lump sum close to £1,600 from the British Museum, especially not for one artefact alone. How much profit had the Gejou brothers just made from this transaction? Assuming they had bought out their former

<sup>45</sup> A plot recounted in Ait Said-Ghanem 2022b.

<sup>46</sup> Gejou mentions this sale much later in the year, in a letter dated 27 December 1909.

<sup>47</sup> Full transcription in the appendix, Document 8.

<sup>48</sup> See Charpin 2022: 165–169, and extended biographical references in fn 43.

<sup>49</sup> Full transcription in the appendix, Document 9.

<sup>50</sup> See appendix, Document 10.

<sup>51</sup> See appendix, Document 11. The currency equivalence was calculated from the UK Inflation Online Calculator of the Official Data Foundation, see <https://www.officialdata.org/> (last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>52</sup> See appendix, Document 13 and Document 14.

<sup>53</sup> Gejou's letter of 8 October 1895: "Dear Sir, I have had the pleasure through my correspondent Mr C. W. Robinson, 12 Leadenhall Street, to sell you for account of the 'British Museum' a Babylonian Cylinder for £5. Five pounds."

<sup>54</sup> Gejou's letter of 27 February 1904: "Cher Docteur, je vous suis infiniment reconnaissant pour votre honorée lettre no. 4475 du 26 courant acceptant de payer la somme de £475 pour la collection des scarabées, et sous ce pli je vous en remets facture en duplicata".



partners for £1,200<sup>55</sup> (the price based on Scheil's evaluation or offer), this sum did not represent the total price paid to Minassian as Ibrahim had not bought Isaac's share, who was equal partner and co-owner. At most, the Gejou brothers paid Minassian £600. Hence they must have cleared at least £1,000 (£400 – ie. £1,600 minus £1,200 –, plus £600, the possible worth of Isaac's share). Not all of this was profit as the price paid by Isaac to the original owner of the prism would have to be subtracted (unfortunately, no document references the price at which Minassian and Gejou had bought the prism), but their gain was substantial. Given their experience, Ibrahim and Isaac Gejou had probably foreseen the remarkable sum they were likely to make from the prism, but they could not have calculated that the buying out of Benjamin Minassian would lead Ibrahim Elias Gejou to face criminal charges.

### *Part 2 – The storm before the trial*

Three days after sending his invoice, Gejou sent a letter of a different tone on 3 March 1909,<sup>56</sup> warning Wallis Budge to 'stay discreet' about the acquisition of the prism. Merchants he described as 'jealous' had heard of the British Museum's purchase of BM 103000, and they wanted to find out the exact figure at which it had been bought and on which date the sale had been made.

Wallis Budge undoubtedly knew who the dealers were, but if he had not guessed, he was about to hear from them. In a letter dated 28 May 1909,<sup>57</sup> Kirkor Minassian wrote to ask confirmation that the British Museum had purchased the prism.

Separately from Kirkor, Benjamin Minassian also wrote to Wallis Budge. In a letter dated 21 June 1909,<sup>58</sup> he reiterated that Isaac Gejou was his partner and that since Isaac had left Iraq with the prism, he had shared no information about its sale. Benjamin Minassian's relayed account that the cylinder was discovered during excavations conducted by the British Museum, and that it "had been stolen from the articles excavated by the British Museum" is worth noting as one of the many stories that must have been circulating about the prism's provenance. It also adds to the brief account that Budge (1920: 22–23) published twelve years after the purchase of BM 103000: "rumours reached London that further excavations had been carried on at Nineveh. A little later, further rumours stated that some important 'finds' had been made, and some of these having made their way to England were acquired by the British Museum in 1909–14. Among these were the fine cylinder of Sennacherib (No.103,000)."

I do not know if Wallis Budge ever wrote back to the Minassian brothers, but in July, Gejou's increasing worry about the Minassian brothers' claim can be seen in his letters. On 6 July, Gejou sent a postcard asking Wallis Budge for a copy of the British Museum's letter of 13 March 1909 in which the purchase had formally been agreed.<sup>59</sup> An explanation about why Gejou needed this was sent two days later.

In his letter of 8 July, Gejou explained that the courts were now involved.<sup>60</sup> Gejou states that 'people', unnamed and in the plural, described as 'dishonest' were blackmailing him, giving him two options. Either he should give them money, or they would take him to court, and Gejou was now preparing for a court hearing initiated by these parties but which he seemed to welcome as an opportunity to settle the matter. It is in this letter that Gejou finally names one of his accusers: "K. Minassian". The reason Gejou was being confronted by Kirkor was that Benjamin could do little from Baghdad, and so Kirkor was to represent his interests in Paris. Gejou explains that Kirkor Minassian claimed Gejou had sold the prism to the British Museum in December 1908, and had received payment in January 1909. For Gejou, this was his claim's weakness: it was inaccurate. Gejou knew the sale had been agreed in February and the prism paid for in March. For Gejou, Kirkor's position was also untenable because he did not have any official documents that allowed him to act on Benjamin's behalf. Gejou also stated his own position to Wallis Budge.

<sup>55</sup> The equivalent today is £56,270, calculated from the UK Inflation Online Calculator of the Official Data Foundation (last accessed on 18 April 2023).

<sup>56</sup> See appendix, Documents 12.

<sup>57</sup> See appendix, Document 15.

<sup>58</sup> See appendix, Document 16.

<sup>59</sup> See appendix, Document 17.

<sup>60</sup> See appendix, Document 18a.

In this letter as in all the others to follow, Gejou insists he considered his brother Isaac as the sole owner of the prism. He also adds he had a letter signed by Minassian authorising ‘the sale’ at the price ‘previously mentioned’ to Wallis Budge (presumably the £1200 he referenced in his letter of 12 February 1909 about buying out his partners).

This letter of 8 July was also followed by another written later on the same day, brief and headed ‘Private’.<sup>61</sup> Barely five sentences long, it gives instructions to Wallis Budge about what to answer the courts if they asked if the prism had been sold in January 1909, in itself an extraordinary way of speaking to Wallis Budge for Gejou, who always remained highly deferential. Gejou’s directives were that if the courts asked ‘did you buy the prism in January’, Wallis Budge should simply answer ‘no’. He was also to refrain from giving any information about the price paid. Gejou had of course misunderstood the legal process. As will be seen in Part 3, the courts would not be asking yes-or-no questions. Wallis Budge would even be made to submit a statement about the exact circumstances of the purchase of BM 103000.

Two days later, on 10 July, Gejou sent another letter marked ‘Confidentielle’, which repeated his position in the face of Minassian’s claim.<sup>62</sup> It is interesting here that Gejou refers to his solicitor. He also seems to have been emboldened in thinking that Minassian’s inaccuracies would be an advantage by Wallis Budge’s statement, reported in this letter, that ‘no one could force the British Museum to reveal the details of its affairs.’ Both would soon see that on the contrary, the courts could do this exactly.

By July 1909, the dispute had now been part of Gejou’s correspondence with Wallis Budge for five months, but after his letter of 10 July Gejou suddenly stopped referring to it. This is not to say that he and Wallis Budge stopped corresponding. They continued to do business together happily. Between 10 July and 27 December 1909, Gejou sent fourteen letters to Wallis Budge in which he proposed many artefacts for sale, including an Egyptian sarcophagus.<sup>63</sup> The pair seemed to have been so unphased by a looming trial that in July, Wallis Budge was even preparing to purchase another octagonal prism of Sennacherib from Gejou, all be it a fragmentary one. In a short letter dated 10 July (separate from the abovementioned letter marked ‘Confidentielle’), Gejou had written to Wallis Budge to say he had ‘found the fourth cylinder’ that Wallis Budge had told him about.<sup>64</sup> This cylinder was made of several fragments, some owned by a client Gejou did not name, and others that he had asked Isaac to locate and purchase (Gejou’s letter of 17 December 1909). Here again, Gejou was acting as agent. In December 1909, he would confirm that his brother had found one of the fragments (bought for £5, which he now sold for £6). The other fragments owned by his client would be bought by the museum in the summer of 1910 for £50 (Gejou’s letter of 13 June 1910). Once reassembled, they would come to form the fragmentary octagonal prism BM 103214 (Grayson & Novotny 2017: 106–107).<sup>65</sup>

Gejou would not mention the Minassian case again until 16 March 1910, but the one clue that something had definitely happened is this letter. Gejou states that he had to ‘urgently leave for Baghdad to gather the documents he needed for his appeal.’ What had happened, and when? As will be seen below, the audience sheet records that the trial had been held on 12 March 1910. However, the date on which Minassian had first been heard is preserved in an article published in the French press. A journalist for the French newspaper *Le Radical* had been present at the audience of Saturday 5 February 1910, and the next day, on Sunday 6 February, he had published the story in an article titled “Les Tribunaux – Le cylindre de Sennacherib”.<sup>66</sup> No record of this hearing remains in the Fonds Judiciaires of the Archives de

<sup>61</sup> See appendix, [Document 18b](#).

<sup>62</sup> See appendix, [Document 19b](#).

<sup>63</sup> Gejou offered Wallis Budge numerous artefacts for sale between July 1909 and January 1910: a “cone” of Sennacherib, two statues undescribed, 100 bullae from Tello (Girsu), a sarcophagus from Egypt, three cylinder seals, an amulet inscribed in Hittite, 124 cuneiform tablets found north of Sippar (Abu Haba), a large cylinder from Borsippa (Birs Nimrod), the exportation of which was encountering ‘a few difficulties’ at customs, an Egyptian statue in the

shape of a cat wearing an amulet of Horus, and an advance warning that he now had contacts with dealers who were trading artefacts from Susa.

<sup>64</sup> See appendix, [Document 19a](#).

<sup>65</sup> A photograph of the broken prism BM 103214 is available on the British Museum Online Collection where the group of fragments is referenced as G14306.

<sup>66</sup> I thank Professor Francois Billacois and Jihane Billacois for having shared with me the articles in *Le Radical* and in *L’action Francaise*. The latter can be found open access

Paris, but this press report summarises the dispute thus: two merchants described as ‘Ottoman’ had hired an agent named “Elias Gezou” to sell the ‘cylinder of Sennacherib’, an artefact found in Mossoul. “Gezou” had then sold the object to the British Museum for 40,000 francs, but he had kept the proceeds. This article is especially interesting because it also reports Gejou’s initial stance, an account that would be found to be an embarrassing fabrication: Gejou claimed that he did not know who had sold the cylinder to the British Museum.<sup>67</sup> If the trial records had not preserved this story, one would have thought the journalist had invented it, but as will be seen below, this was one of two versions of the story Gejou presented to the courts. The article then closed announcing that Gejou’s defence would be heard at the end of the month, on 26 February. However, it would be heard a little later, on 12 March 1910.

*Part 3. March 1910: The Trial - Minassian v. Gejou in the Tribunal de la Seine, Paris*

As mentioned above, the trial records are most helpful in reconstructing the evidence presented by both parties. Written over five pages, they recall the arguments presented by Minassian and Gejou, and revisit them in chronological order.<sup>68</sup> To present each party’s version, I will follow this chronological arrangement. The case was a serious one. Contrary to what Gejou had hoped, Kirkor had been accepted as the representative of his brother, and Gejou was now being tried before a criminal court (“tribunal correctionnel”), in the 11<sup>th</sup> chamber of the Seine Tribunal, on a charge of breach of trust (“abus de confiance”).

*A. Minassian’s version:*

The audience opened with Kirkor Minassian’s version of events. Everything had begun when Benjamin Minassian and Isaac Gejou became the co-owners of the prism, described by the courts as ‘a cylinder in baked clay, octagonal in shape, covered in inscriptions, which had come from the excavations of Nineveh.’ Toward the end of the year 1908, both partners had wanted to sell this object and by common agreement they had hired Ibrahim Gejou as a commission agent. Ibrahim had agreed to find a buyer.

On 24 February 1909, writing from London, Ibrahim invited Kirkor Minassian, who was looking after Benjamin’s interests in this affair, and a friend of Kirkor called Mr Garakian (whose profession is not specified but who may have been a dealer of pearls and diamonds based in Paris<sup>69</sup>), to come to his home in Paris the next day, on 25 February, to discuss an offer he had received for the prism.

Kirkor Minassian claimed that during their meeting, Gejou informed him that the British Museum had offered to purchase the prism for £1,000 (a tremendous fib, as the reader knows by now). Kirkor also presented proof that after this meeting, he had sent a telegram to both his brother Benjamin and Isaac Gejou to inform them of the museum’s offer.

Kirkor had then received a telegraphic reply on 2 March 1909 signed by both Benjamin and Isaac to say that unless there was a better offer, they agreed to the proposed sale, worded as “sauf mieux vendez”. On that evening, Kirkor then relayed the message to Ibrahim Gejou, also by telegram, adding that he should not sell without consulting him.

Following this, Kirkor had sent a letter to Ibrahim by recorded mail on 3 March to explain that what he had meant was that Ibrahim should try to find a higher offer before agreeing to sell to the British Museum. After this however, Minassian had not heard again from Ibrahim.

Ibrahim only replied on 27 March, after Kirkor had accused him of selling the prism to the British Museum without consulting him. Gejou had written to say he had agreed to sell the prism on 25 February for £1,000, before having received Kirkor’s relayed instructions. Kirkor also wrote to Gejou on 10 July 1909, to accuse him of having directly contacted Wallis Budge to sell the prism, without consulting the owners.

on Gallica <https://gallica.bnf.fr/>, document number bpt6k7568048.

<sup>67</sup> Full transcription of the article in the appendix, Document 20.

<sup>68</sup> Full transcription of the audience sheets in the appendix, Document 21.

<sup>69</sup> The name Garakian is difficult to read on the transcripts, which are handwritten. It could be Gavakian instead. The correspondence volumes preserve several letters sent by a dealer named N. Garakian who describes himself as a dealer of diamonds and pearls. He was based in Paris, at 8 rue Rochechouart.

At this point, the courts were understanding of Gejou's position: for the judge, Minassian's very own evidence was proof that Gejou had been appointed as agent and that decisions to sell were part of his mandate. Hence, in selling he had done no wrong. However, this same evidence also gave ground to Minassian's claim that Isaac Gejou was not the sole owner of the prism at the time of the sale. Isaac had submitted a statement on 13 January 1910 that he was the sole owner, but this remained an allegation that was supported by no formal document. What seems to have set the courts against Gejou was not the lack of written proof of Isaac's sole ownership, but that Gejou had repeatedly made contradictory statements during the proceedings, which showed bad faith, worded as: "sa mauvaise foi résulte de son attitude même et des explications contradictoires qu'il a fournies." Even more damningly, Ibrahim was also caught in a blatant lie.

### *B. Gejou's First Version*

Gejou initially recounted in a written statement that before having received the directives of Kirkor Minassian, he had agreed to sell the prism on 2 March 1909 for 25,000 francs (£1000) – the offer to which he referred when he wrote a telegram to Kirkor on 25 February. But in this first statement to the courts, Gejou stated he had sold the prism, not to the British Museum, but to a man named Mr de Sarzec, and he did not know whether de Sarzec had next sold it to the British Museum. Leaving Gejou's obvious cheek aside, one must ask: who was Mr de Sarzec? The transcripts do not mention his first name but state that he was a man ("sieur"). De Sarzec is a well-known name in the field of cuneiform studies and in the history of archaeology in Iraq: Ernest de Sarzec (1832–1901) was the French archaeologist who led the excavations of Tello (ancient Girsu) between 1877 and 1901 when he was appointed France's Consul in Basra.<sup>70</sup>

De Sarzec had been born Ernest (Gustave Charles) Chocquin, but he had added 'de Sarzec' to his patronym after he had bought the Château de Sarzec, a castle in the region of Montamisé in France in 1880. Ernest de Sarzec died in 1901, therefore he could not have been involved in this acquisition and trial. But given this patronym, the individual mentioned by the records was very likely a relative. Ernest and his wife Charlotte (Guillet d'Escravayat de la Barrière) had one child, a son named Charles-Marie Henri, born on 27 June 1881. Both Charlotte and Henri had always accompanied Ernest during his excavations of Tello, until the latter's health had made him return to France for a break where he passed away in 1901. I am unaware of Henri's profession in adulthood, but his marriage certificate in 1905 records him as a "propriétaire".<sup>71</sup> In 1905, Henri was living in Paris, the city where Gejou resided.<sup>72</sup> As an adult, it is possible that Henri had remained close not only to matters related to archaeology in Iraq, but also to the people he had met there as a child. Between 1881 and 1887, when Gejou was 13 to 17 years old, he worked as a translator for France's Chancellery in Iraq.<sup>73</sup> Years later, Gejou would recount that it was thanks to Ernest de Sarzec's support that he had been employed there.<sup>74</sup> At the time, Gejou very likely encountered Henri who would have been between one and six years of age. After Gejou had himself left Iraq and settled in France by 1889, it is possible that he would have kept in touch or renewed contact with both Ernest and Henri.

### *C. Gejou's Second Version*

Once in court in person, Gejou 'had been forced to recognize' (in the court's words, "l'inculpé est obligé de reconnaître") that his first version was lacking. It was obvious that it was he who had

<sup>70</sup> For a profile of de Sarzec's campaigns see Charpin 2022: 92–94, and for his career see Pillet 1958: 52–66. An account of the circumstances that brought de Sarzec to excavate at Tello is in Parrot 1946: 127–168.

<sup>71</sup> After his father and mother's death in 1901, Henri married Marie Hibon on 10 November 1905 in Paris, 9<sup>ème</sup> arrondissement. Their marriage certificate is in the Archives de Paris, Act no. 1230, under 'Chocquin de Sarzec et Hibon'.

<sup>72</sup> The address given in his marriage certificate is 4 rue de Berlin, Paris, with the previous address referenced

as formerly "Montamisé", the location of the de Sarzec castle.

<sup>73</sup> Gejou gives this information in the application he submitted to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 6 January 1926 to support his award of the Chevalier de la légion d'honneur.

<sup>74</sup> Parrot 1948: 16 quotes Gejou saying "c'est en 1880 que j'ai fait connaissance avec M. de Sarzec et suis entré au Consulat de France de Bagdad comme commis de chancellerie."

negotiated the sale of the prism with the British Museum. And so Gejou had come up with a second version. He had maintained to the courts that he had sold the prism to Mr de Sarzec on 2 March 1909 (for 25,000 francs, £1,000), but that he had sold the prism for de Sarzec to the British Museum, which had bought it on 13 March for 40,000 francs (£1,600).

#### *D. Mr de Sarzec's Version*

Evidently, the judge was dissatisfied with both versions especially because the courts had required bank statements which had not only confirmed that Gejou had received 40,000 francs (£1,600) from the British Museum, but also revealed that de Sarzec had been paid 5,000 francs (£200) by Gejou on 2 March. Why was de Sarzec paid this sum when, as the courts had calculated, if he had bought the prism for 25,000 (£1,000) on 2 March, and that it had been resold to the British Museum for 40,000 (£1,600) on 13 March, there was a profit of 15,000 francs (£600) which was nowhere to be found in his account (“le deux mars qu’il n’a touché que cinq mille francs alors que l’excédent du prix de revente au British Museum sur son prétendu prix d’acquisition est de quinze mille francs”).

De Sarzec had initially supported Gejou’s second version in a written statement but once in court himself, he too ‘had been forced to recognise’ (“il a du reconnaître”) another version. He explained he had been paid 5,000 francs to act as an intermediary and ‘name-lender’ (“prête-nom”) to help Gejou in his negotiations with the British Museum – a curious statement given Gejou needed no help –, and he had agreed that should the sale to the British Museum fall through, he would buy the prism from Gejou for 25,000 francs (£1,000). Unfortunately the court records do not mention when Gejou had contacted de Sarzec.

#### *E. Wallis Budge's Evidence*

Once revised, Gejou’s and de Sarzec’s versions still made no sense to the courts, especially in view of Wallis Budge’s statement. He too had been called to submit a written account, to give the details of the acquisition, and he had stated that he had only ever dealt with Ibrahim Elias Gejou.

#### *F. The Court's Verdict on 12 March 1910*

For the court, Gejou’s alleged sale to de Sarzec on 2 March for £1,000 was ‘not serious’ (“qu’en conséquence la prétendue vente du deux mars à de Sarzec pour mille livres n’a aucun caractère sérieux”). In Gejou’s postcard and telegram to Benjamin Minassian dated 24 February, it is the British Museum who was meant as the buyer, not de Sarzec (“c’est évidemment le British Museum et non de Sarzec, que visaient les cartes postales de Géjou du vingt quatre février et le télégramme adressé à Benjamin Minassian le vingt cinq février”). All evidence showed that from the moment Ibrahim had been entrusted with the sale of the prism by his brother Isaac and by Benjamin Minassian, he had proceeded to sell it to the British Museum, and had successfully done so on 13 March for the sum of 40,000 francs (£1,600).

Given that Isaac had submitted no proof he was the sole owner of the prism at the time of the sale, and taking into account the discrepancies of Gejou’s multiple stories, the court declared that Ibrahim Elias Gejou had prejudiced Benjamin Minassian by misappropriating his share of the proceeds. Gejou was found guilty, and was sentenced to the restitution of Minassian’s share, evaluated at eighteen thousand francs, as well as to the payment of five thousand francs in fines and to one thousand francs in damages and interests. But worst of all, he also faced six months imprisonment. Although the judgement was squarely against Gejou, the judge had nonetheless recognised that as the co-owner of the cylinder Isaac had a right to a share equal to Benjamin Minassian’s, and that Gejou who had been proven to be the agent had a right to his commission.

This heavy sentence was reported in France in the press on 13 March 1910, in a tone entirely different to the one found in *Le Radical*. Published in the violently anti-Semitic newspaper *L’Action française*, it uses and distorts the dispute to portray French nationals originally from the Middle East in racist stereotypes so prevalent at the time, fabricating their religion to suit a rant

against the Jewish community (Gejou's family was Christian, which did not suit the paper's editorial line so he becomes Jewish in this article).<sup>75</sup>

#### *Part 4 – Appeal and Personal Profits*

##### *A. The Appeal*

Four days after the trial, Gejou sent his letter dated 16 March 1910, discussed above.<sup>76</sup> He was now on his way to Iraq to recover documents for his appeal. Once in Baghdad, Gejou seems to have soon found these documents, whose nature is unfortunately left unspecified. In his letter of 13 June 1910, he also advised Wallis Budge he would be in London by 25 July.<sup>77</sup> After this letter, Gejou again stopped mentioning the case. But as before, he and Wallis Budge continued to organise for the purchase of hundreds of artefacts to enrich the British Museum's collection (between 13 June and 12 December 1910, Gejou sent nine letters to Wallis Budge).

The appeal, initially thought by Gejou to be scheduled for October or November, took place on 12 December 1910.<sup>78</sup> The record of this hearing, written on two pages, does not give the type of details that the trial's audience sheet preserves. Instead, it only states that now, Benjamin Minassian's co-ownership 'could not be properly established' ("La Cour considérant que la preuve de la copropriété de Benjamin Minassian n'est pas suffisamment établie par les motifs"). As a result, all charges against Gejou were dropped. The courts also condemned Minassian to pay for all of Gejou's court expenses, and to also reimburse the courts' own costs. Two days after this decision (14 December 1910), Gejou would write to Wallis Budge to inform him he had finally won his case against Minassian and that his 'enemies were for their shame'.<sup>79</sup> Based on Gejou's letter of 19 December, it seems Wallis Budge congratulated him by return mail.

##### *B. Unresolved questions and Personal Profits*

A close reading of Gejou's and Minassian's letters and of the court records raises many questions. An investigation of them is beyond the scope of this article but I shall mention three that are particularly glaring. The first is: what was de Sarzec's role? Gejou did not need anyone 'to facilitate' negotiations with the British Museum. By 1909, he had been selling artefacts to the museum through Wallis Budge for 14 years. But the need for a 'name lender' is intriguing. Had Gejou simply paid de Sarzec 5,000 francs (£200) on 2 March 1909, days after having formally sold the prism to Wallis Budge, so that he could fool Kirkor and Benjamin Minassian by attaching a different buyer's name to the prism, thereby blurring its ownership history? Another question is: what kind of documents did Gejou submit at his appeal? In his letters of 16 January and 12 February 1909, Gejou told Wallis Budge he had a letter from Minassian 'agreeing to the sale', but which sale did he mean? Was he referring to a letter which confirmed Gejou's purchase of Minassian's share, or to one in which Benjamin Minassian had agreed to sell the prism to a third party, whom Gejou later produced as de Sarzec? The third and most noticeable issue from a modern standpoint is to do with the prism's removal from Iraq. Based on the court records, it seems that no one asked about the legality of the cylinder's export.

The sale of BM 103000 and its repercussions affected Gejou for almost two years, but despite it, this affair had a positive and lasting impact for Gejou. After having received payment for the prism in March 1909, Gejou bought a plot of land in a French village named Cosne-sur-Loire on 28 June 1909 for six thousand francs (£240).<sup>80</sup> Gejou knew the place well: his second wife Ernestine was born there, and from 1909, Gejou would write to his clients every summer from Cosne, where he was holidaying. This would kickstart Gejou's beloved project: his summer villa. Between 1927 and 1930 and with great care, Gejou would organise for the building of the summer home he would come to name his

<sup>75</sup> I do not know Minassian's religion, but he is also presented as Jewish in this article. See full transcription of the article in the appendix, [Document 22](#).

<sup>76</sup> See appendix, [Document 23](#).

<sup>77</sup> See appendix, [Document 24](#).

<sup>78</sup> Full transcript of the appeal in the appendix, [Document 25](#).

<sup>79</sup> See appendix, [Document 26](#).

<sup>80</sup> This information is preserved in the "Extrait de vente" of the villa Gudea, held in Cosne's archives. I am very grateful to Professor Francois Billacois for having shared this document with me.

“Villa Goudéa”. The house still exists today but is no longer owned by Gejou’s family. An investigation of Gejou’s letters may one day reveal which spectacular sale enabled the building of this house. In the 1920s, Gejou sold several Gudea statues for large sums to a number of different museums in Europe and America (see Johansen 1978: 14–32 for a list), including one to the Ny Glyptotek in 1925 for £12,000.<sup>81</sup>

### *Concluding remarks*

The octagonal prism of Sennacherib BM 103000 was one of its kind when it was purchased for £1,600 by the British Museum from the antiquities dealer Ibrahim Elias Gejou in March 1909, on the recommendation of Wallis Budge. To this day, the historical importance and state of preservation of this text make it an invaluable artefact from ancient Iraq. When Ibrahim Elias Gejou sold it, he may have expected the anger of his brother’s former partner Benjamin Minassian but he probably did not imagine that Benjamin, through his brother Kirkor, would take him to court in Paris. By documenting this dispute in his letters, Gejou enabled a detailed reconstruction of part of the provenance history of BM 103000, an investigation which extends to documents in other archives whose content would remain without context if studied alone. The letters of Ibrahim Elias Gejou in the British Museum archive, together with those of his colleagues and contemporaries are vastly understudied, but as illustrated in this case study they are key to understanding the configuration of the relationships that made this trade possible, from dealer to museum professional, from friendships to rivalries.

The history of this particular dispute shows that in Europe the trial had little impact on Ibrahim Elias Gejou’s business in real terms, especially given that the issue of the illegal exportation of BM 103000 from Iraq to the UK was not raised. As Tamur (2022: 145) describes, the court case had some repercussions in Iraq for the Gejou brothers. When the Ottoman authorities heard reports of the affair, they searched the Gejou’s home in Baghdad and seized “3,500 tablets” there, which they sent to Istanbul<sup>82</sup>. But both Isaac and Ibrahim were able to continue to illegally export archaeological artefacts for two more decades. As for Minassian, it appears that all he lost was money, and perhaps also sleep, but he had made a profit on his investment when Gejou purchased the prism from him. The impact on Kirkor is unclear but he continued to thrive. In the 1920s, long after this affair, Kirkor had expanded to selling and exhibiting his collections in the USA<sup>83</sup>. As for Gejou, he substantially benefited privately and professionally from this sale. On the one hand, the profit he made from selling BM 103000 funded the start of his beloved project: his “villa Goudéa”. The house became renowned in Cosne during Gejou’s lifetime, and still is today.

Professionally, Gejou also saw his relationship with Wallis Budge strengthen. After the sale of BM 103000, Wallis Budge and Gejou seem to have launched into a search for other cylinders and prisms, especially those said to have been found in Nineveh. In a letter sent on 26 October 1921, Gejou explicitly referred to a request Wallis Budge had made, which was for Gejou to find four cylinders that the late Leonard W. King ‘had mentioned’. Gejou had gone to Baghdad for this, and replied that out of the four, one was now in Paris, a second had just been sold to James Henry Breasted (1965–1935<sup>84</sup>) for £2,000, a third was being negotiated by Gejou in competition with Breasted, and the fourth was in pieces in Mosul.<sup>85</sup> The appearance of antiquities dealers in law courts in Europe over archaeological artefacts from Iraq is not as damaging, nor as rare, as one might imagine. Gejou would find himself before a judge more than once. In 1916, Gejou took a furniture

<sup>81</sup> In a letter addressed to Professor Andrea (Vorderasiatisches Museum) dated 22 August 1937, Gejou lists the prices paid by five institutions for the Gudea statues he sold, including the price paid by the Glyptotek.

<sup>82</sup> Tamur 2022: 145–146 recounts this episode based on documents from the “Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Prime Minister’s Archives)”.

<sup>83</sup> See Jenkins-Madina 2000: 72.

<sup>84</sup> Breasted was the chair of Egyptology and Oriental History at the University of Chicago. He founded the Oriental Institute in 1919.

<sup>85</sup> Ibrahim Elias Gejou’s letter to Wallis Budge dated 26 October 1921: “I already traced the four large clay cylindres [sic] mentioned by the regreted [sic] King: one of them is in Paris at the Credit Lyonnais, in Chakmadjian hands and already the important text of which published before the war by Scheil, the second sold last year to Breasted for £2000 (20 000 Rupees) I am negotiating the third which is perfect state with the owner who is planning on Breasted’s price and if I succeed I should be pleased to address you same at once, the fourth is in pieces at Mossoul.”

merchant to court named Mr Toulousy in a case which involved Father Scheil again, and in which the curator of another museum appeared as witness, this time Edmond Pottier, curator of the *département des antiquités orientales* at the Louvre Museum. Even Isaac Gejou faced the courts on occasion in Iraq. In 1928, Ibrahim recounts that Isaac had been fined for false declaration by the Iraqi authorities, after he had tried to illegally transfer the ownership of a Sumerian archaic statue to Ibrahim. The statue had been seized in April 1928.

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### *Appendix: Summary Timeline of events*

Abbreviations: BM (British Museum); IEG (Ibrahim Elias Gejou); IG (Isaac Gejou); BMn (Benjamin Minassian); KMn (Kirkor Minassian); WB (Wallis Budge)

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Source</i>
	Year 1908	
2 Mar 1908	BMn in the possession of a rare octagonal cylinder he wishes to sell to the BM	Letter (with photograph of prism): BMn to WB
4 Apr 1908	WB acknowledges offer, asks for price	Letter: WB to BMn
18 Jun 1908	BMn says he bring the prism to London	Letter: BMn to WB
10 July 1908	IEG promises the BM will be first to see the prism	Letter : IEG to BW
14 Sep 1908	IEG advises prism is on its way & will be brought to London by his brother Isaac	Letter: IEG to WB
15 Oct 1908	IEG sends £20 invoice for artefacts undescribed	Letter: IEG to WB
2 Nov 1908	BMn says he cannot come to London, but his partner Isaac Gejou will bring it instead	Letter: BMn to WB
	Year 1909	
16 Jan 1909	IEG announces prism is in London in a safe. Advises he is attempting to buy out his partners	Letter: IEG to WB
12 Feb 1909	IEG is now free of partners	Letter: IEG to WB
14 Feb 1909	IEG says he will be in London at end of the week	Letter: IEG to WB
17 or 18 Feb 1909	IEG brings the prism in person to WB	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
24 Feb 1909	IEG writes to KMn (postcard) from London to invite him to come to his home in Paris to discuss the sale	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
25 Feb 1909	IEG meets KMn, tells him that BM offers £1000 for prism	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
25 Feb 1909	KMn sends telegram to BMn & IG to inform them of £1000 offer	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
26 Feb 1909	BW offered £1550, IEG asks for £1625 payable on 15 March 1909	Letter: IEG to WB
28 Feb 1909	IEG agrees to sell for £1600, sends invoice.	Letter: IEG to WB
2 Mar 1909	I.E.Gejou pays 5,000 frs to de Sarzec	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
2 Mar 1909	KMn receives telegram from BMn & IG re BM offer: "sauf mieux vendez"	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
2 Mar 1909	KMn sends telegram to IEG to relay answer of BMn and IG	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
3 Mar 1909	K sends IEG letter by recorded mail to say find a better offer & do not sell without consulting him	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
3 Mar 1909	IEG writes to warn WB to stay discreet about details of the sale	Letter: IEG to WB

*Continued*



(Continued)

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Events</i>	<i>Source</i>
13 Mar 1909	BM confirms purchase at £1600	Letter: BM to IEG
13 Mar 1909	IEG says sold prism to BM on behalf of de Sarzec for 40,000 francs	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
14 Mar 1909	IEG thanks WB for assurance payment will be send on 15 March.	Letter : IEG to WB
16 Mar 1909	IEG confirms receipt of £1600	Letter: IEG to WB
27 Mar 1909	IEG tells KMn he sold prism to BM for £1,000, agreement made on 25 Feb	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
28 May 1909	KMn writes to WB to ask if BM has bought prism	Letter: KMn to WB
21 Jun 1909	BMn writes to WB to ask if BM has been bought. Reiterates Isaac is his partner.	Letter: BMn to WB
28 Jun 1909	IEG buys land in Cosne-sur-Loire to build his summer villa.	“Extrait de vente” of the Villa Gudea
6 Jul 1909	IEG asks WB for a copy of BM letter of 13 March 1909	Letter: IEG to WB
8 Jul 1909	IEG tells WB he is being threatened by K. Minassian.	Letter 1: IEG to WB
8 Jul 1909	IEG tells WB what to say if courts ask questions	Letter 2: IEG to WB (Private)
10 Jul 1909	IEG says found ‘4 <sup>th</sup> cylinder’	Letter 1: IEG to WB
10 Jul 1909	IEG says he has a letter from BMn proving his right to sell.	Letter 2: IEG to WB (Confidentielle)
10 Jul and 27 Dec 1909	<i>14 letters from IEG to WB re purchases of other artefacts</i>	
	Year 1910	
5 Feb 1910	Court audience: KMn’s claim is heard (tribunal correctionnel de la Seine, 11th Chamber)	Press articles – Le Radical and L’action française
6 Feb 1910	Press Reports Minassian v. Gejou	Le Radical, “Les Tribunaux – Le cylindre de Sennacherib”
12 Mar 1910	Court audience: IEG defence is heard (tribunal correctionnel de la Seine, 11th Chamber)	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
	De Sarzec says he was paid 5,000 francs as ‘name lender’ by IEG on 2 March, to help with sale to the BM.	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
	IEG claims if prism not sold, de Sarzec will keep it and pay 25,000 francs	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
	IEG found guilty of breach of trust.	Audience Sheet - 12 March 1910
13 Mar 1910	Press report of sentence against Gejou	L’action française - “Juifs d’antiquailles”
15 Mar 1910	Gejou lodges an appeal.	Appeal Record - 12 December 1910
16 Mar 1910	IEG goes to Baghdad to get documents for his appeal	Letter: IEG to WB
13 Jun 1910	IEG is in Baghdad, he has found the documents.	Letter: IEG to WB
12 Dec 1910	All charges against IEG are dismissed. New evidence shows BMn co-ownership can no longer be ascertained.	Transcripts of the Appeal
14 Dec 1910	Informs Budge he won his appeal	Letter: IEG to WB

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من يملك المنشور المثلث لسنحاريب رقم **BM 103000**؟ نزاع التجار في المحاكم الفرنسية عام 1910.  
بقلم: ناديا آية سعيد غانم ، باحثة مستقلة ، باريس.

إن المنشور الزجاجي الثماني الأضلاع لسنحاريب **BM 103000** اليوم في مجموعة الشرق الأوسط للمتحف البريطاني موثق جيداً باعتباره نتيجة عملية شراء من تاجر الآثار إبراهيم الياس جيجو. ومع ذلك ، فإن الظروف التي جلبت هذه التحفة الأثرية إلى لندن من العراق ، وكذلك قضية المحكمة التي أثارها هذا الشراء في فرنسا لم تتم الإشارة إليها في دراسة هذه التحفة الأثرية. ومع ذلك ، بقيت العديد من الوثائق التي تسجل هذا التاريخ. مثلاً، الرسائل التي أرسلها إبراهيم الياس جيجو حول المنشور إلى ني أي واليس بدج ، المسؤول عن المحافظة عن الآثار الآشورية والمصرية في ذلك الوقت، موجودة حتى اليوم في أرشيف المتحف البريطاني. بينما في فرنسا ، يمكن العثور في أرشيفات باريس على نصوص القضية المرفوعة ضد جيجو من قبل بنيامين ميناسيان الذي اتهم الأول ببيع المنشور دون علمه. تروي هذه الوثائق ، عند قراءتها مغاً ، تسلسلاً زمنياً للأحداث يبدأ بخروج المنشور الزجاجي في يد إسحاق ، شقيق إبراهيم ، الذي جاء من بغداد ليودع المنشور في خزانة في لندن ، وينتهي في ديسمبر 1910 عندما احتفل إبراهيم بالفوز باستئنافه للقضية. لإعادة استعراض هذا الجزء المنسي منذ زمن طويل من سيرة **BM 103000** تعرض دراسة الحالة هذه كيف أدى البيع والنزاع إلى طرح السؤال الوحيد الذي يخشاه الجميع: من يملك التحفة الأثرية **103000**؟