

## Prof. Dr. Mehmet Celal Özdoğan\*

### The Responsibility to Preserve and Transmit Anatolia's Cultural Heritage



*\*He was born in Istanbul on May 30, 1943. He completed his secondary education at the English Boys' High School and then at Robert College in 1963, and began his higher education at the Department of Prehistory in the Faculty of Letters at Istanbul University. In 1970, he began working as an "honorary assistant" at Istanbul University and spent his entire academic career there. Özdoğan was promoted to professor in 1994, assumed the chairmanship of the Department of Prehistory in 2000, and retired in 2010. Özdoğan is a full member of the Turkish Academy of Sciences (TÜBA) (2002 - 2011), a member of the Academy of Sciences (2011), a foreign full member of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) of the United States (2005), and a member of the American Institute of Archaeology (AIA) and the German Archaeological Institute (DAI).*

“What has been entrusted to us? These are the intrinsic values rooted in this land that must be passed down from the past to the future, as they have shaped our present. They could be a major archaeological site, such as Ephesus, or a shrine in any region. They could also be traces of past events in the region. At the very least, they must be documented and passed on to future generations. However, we must not impose our current perspective or problems onto the past. We must not politicise the past. Science is not the monopoly of any single person. Recognise that the past belongs to no one, and that concentrating knowledge in one person is wrong. We must view it as humanity’s shared knowledge and establish collaborations based on knowledge itself, not on ‘you and me.’”

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**This interview was conducted with Prof. Dr. Mehmet Celal Özdoğan by Dr. Hande Günözü, a member of the BRIQ Editorial Board.**

*What do we mean by ‘cultural heritage’? What is the meaning and importance of cultural heritage to us?*

**Prof. Dr. Mehmet Celal Özdoğan:** Well, this is a very broad question. Whose cultural heritage are we referring to when we say ‘cultural heritage’? We should think of heritage as a value we must pass on to future generations, or as something entrusted to us to do so. Cultural heritage can include things related to me, as well as the environment and surroundings in which I live. It can be more general. I believe everything that has enabled us to reach the present, everything left to us by the past that shapes the present, is part of culture. This could be a local monument, Hagia Sophia, the Sultanahmet Mosque, or even the street I live on. But it could also be the accumulated history of my street, dating back to my childhood. It could be my family’s history. I view these as values that the next generation should understand, learn, and pass on - values that

will also enrich them.

The geographical boundaries of our country have only recently been delineated. Consequently, it is imperative to refrain from projecting contemporary political perspectives and comprehension onto bygone eras. Upon posing the question of the provenance of the past in question, it is evident that it pertains to the history of these specific lands. These are the elements entrusted to us on this land. The objects or concepts to which responsibility is entrusted must be determined. These values are deeply rooted in this land’s historical landscape, and they must be carried from the past into the present to shape our future. These could be a major archaeological site such as Ephesus, a shrine in any region, or even traces of a past event in that area. These must be documented and disseminated to future generations. However, it is imperative to refrain from imposing contemporary perspectives or contemporary challenges on bygone eras. It is imperative to refrain from politicising history.

### Key Considerations in Documentation Processes

*As a conservationist, the subsequent question concerns the domain of movable cultural assets. The presence of readily visible immovable cultural assets facilitates comprehensive documentation efforts. In light of contemporary best practice, what is your opinion on the adequacy of current inventory, registration systems, and documentation efforts for movable cultural assets?*

**Prof. Dr. Mehmet Celal Özdoğan:** It is evident that these phenomena have evolved. A marked distinction emerges when comparing the documentation approach of the preceding generation, my own experience as a student, and the contemporary context. The manner and scope of documentation have also evolved. At the time of this concept's initial emergence, the approach was confined to the documentation of large, monumental structures, that is, structures that were visually striking in both beauty and appeal. Other factors were not taken into consideration. In that era, a rudimentary sketch sufficed as documentation, obviating the need for photographic evidence. As time progressed, a variety of documentation forms emerged, including geographic coordinates. In the contemporary era, a plethora of documentation methods exists. The determination of the correctness or incorrectness of these statements is not a straightforward task. This is due to the perpetual evolution of both the methods and the tools utilised.

Then there's the "cloud." They're uploading everything to the cloud, "up there." Data in the cloud can always be easily deleted or politically erased simply because it doesn't suit someone's interests. That's why it needs to be permanently

documented. It must be documented in a format that future generations can understand, explaining "why it was important, why we preserved it, why we called it Cultural Heritage," not just because it's beautiful or because someone crafted it with great skill, but by highlighting the meaning it carries.

In excavations, we used to draw; sketches were made alongside photographs. We did this in the field. When you do that, you draw by observing the structure of a wall and the connections between its corners, in other words, by thinking it through. Your accumulated knowledge also comes into play. Nowadays, photographers take photos or scans. It looks very sleek and beautiful, but it doesn't convey the information of the drawing made in the field through observation and thought.

But when you look at it from another perspective, we've started to see the past as more vibrant than we ever imagined. While my student years were defined by a past built on selected objects, a different picture is now emerging, one that includes the unselected as well. We need to recognize the value of that, too. For example, look at it through the eyes of a sociologist: you'll be documenting the city you live in today. Your documentation depends on the questions you have in mind. You can't document everything. In other words, whatever you ask, that's what you get. Research into the past is the same; we receive the answer to the question we ask of the past. The questions we ask are also connected to our perspective at that time. So you can't say, "I've documented everything; I know everything." That's not possible.

There's another factor as well: bureaucracy. There's an international framework. There are rules in your region of your country. All of these have their own distinct approaches.

### Those Who Monopolize Knowledge for Financial Gain

*What consequences have the theft and removal of artifacts, which can be described as the tangible carriers of civilizations across generations, from their original locations led to?*

**Prof. Dr. Mehmet Celal Özdoğan:** We need to distinguish between two different situations. One involves actions taken to gain financial benefit. Let's set that aside. In the traditional perspective, one believes without seeking proof. In other words, you have a past based on legends; you believe in it and do not seek evidence for it. When you begin to seek evidence, a different approach is required - one that asks, "Is it true?" or "Is it really like that?" There are 13 or 14 countries in the world today that are living through the Age of Enlightenment, an era that

prioritizes asking questions over a fixed, established past. The answers to the questions they asked have shaped the field of archaeology as we know it today. If you examine the history of archaeology, you'll see that the arrival of an Assyrian artifact from Mesopotamia in the West for the first time sparked astonishment and excitement because it came from a place where it was never expected. And no one else in the world possessed it. If the Westerners hadn't done so, we wouldn't even know about those cultures today. They might have even vanished. The same applies to Egyptian civilization. From the first Napoleonic campaigns in Egypt or the discoveries in America - things emerging from places no one anticipated... At that time, they took what they found back to their own countries to prove their discoveries and generate excitement. They weren't just collecting archaeological artifacts. They took the fossils, the various animals, and the plants they found with them.



The Sphinx Gate at Alacahöyük, one of the oldest settlements in Central Anatolia, is located in the province of Çorum, Türkiye (Photo: Turkish Museums, 2026).

It's not accurate to call this "theft"; these are the architectural records and stones of the past. In recent years, a process has been underway to return a significant portion of these artifacts to their countries of origin. However, alongside this, there are instances of theft -whether driven by the desire to plunder the world for purely material gain or by the greed of collectors. In other words, some do not contribute to science but instead hoard knowledge for their own benefit or destroy it. We must distinguish between the two.

As scientists, we must study the past. To study the past, we need concrete data. For example, the A burial site in State A, America, is an archaeological site. Are the Native Americans living there today? Or were those Native Americans somewhere else 15,000 years ago? Does it belong to them? That skeleton does not currently belong to the people living there. It is now the common heritage of humanity.

Let's take the example of Türkiye. Atatürk famously argued that the cultural heritage of all civilisations that inhabited these lands belongs to their contemporary inheritors, regardless of ethnic or religious identity. He introduced a culture rooted in the land. Whether in Africa, East Asia, our region, or Europe, the history of the lands we inhabit is humanity's shared cultural heritage.

During my student years in the 1960s, scholars from England to China possessed knowledge and perspectives on every subject, from the Paleolithic era to the Middle Ages. They could view the world's past and its broad outlines on a global scale. Today, archaeology exists in over 200 countries. Everyone focuses on a specific part or detail of their own country. You look at Country A. The leading scholar there is studying only the A period in the northeastern corner of their own country. They have no idea about the rest. Now this situation is also diverting us from the original purpose. Because while we should be looking at the past as a whole, fragmented, disconnected pasts are beginning to emerge.

### **Göbeklitepe: A Shared Heritage of Humanity**

*We can't skip Göbeklitepe, professor. It's very popular. And it's important, too... Actually, the region as a whole is very important, but Göbeklitepe has become quite popular lately.*

**Prof. Dr. Mehmet Celal Özdoğan:** There's something extraordinary there, in that culture. They're exceptionally well-preserved. Why are they so well-preserved? They're better preserved than we've ever seen anywhere or in any period. First, they were buried during that period. Second, all of these are on land unsuitable for agriculture. They're all on a limestone plateau. Places suitable for hunting. As soon as they transitioned to agriculture, they abandoned them and moved on. Since no one settled there again, they've been preserved as fossils, just as they were between 8,000 and 7,500 years ago.

How did Göbeklitepe become famous? The first surface survey at Göbeklitepe began in 1963. Then came Klaus Schmidt in the 1990s... At first, no one was interested. But everything was there in the first season, T-shaped stones and statues alike. The first traces of that culture were also found in the 1964 Çayönü excavation. It didn't capture anyone's attention as much as it does today. When did it start attracting attention? After National Geographic featured it on the cover... People in Ankara, our people, and the villagers living there all got excited. And the Göbeklitepe phenomenon exploded. If it weren't for National Geographic's popularization, no one would have provided the funds to excavate Göbeklitepe, nor would anyone in Europe have been interested. No effort was being made to protect it. The bureaucracy in Ankara didn't care at all. In fact, some were even wondering, "How can we stop this?" It was only through the extraordinary efforts

of a museum director like Adnan Mısır (then director of the Şanlıurfa Museum) that the excavation permit was secured.

The preservation of this site is Türkiye's responsibility. But it is the common heritage of all humanity. It represents a pivotal event in which the foundations of everything from the transition to agriculture to village life to urbanization to the rise of empires and states were laid, beginning with the laws of inheritance. For this reason, we must view it as the true cornerstone of modern civilization. I'm not just talking about Göbeklitepe, but the entire cultural region.

There are two responsibilities here: preserving it and uncovering that knowledge, as well as contributing to science and humanity. This is happening at the international level. The number of participating countries is steadily increasing. And experts from various scientific disciplines are also joining in. The current project is structured correctly. At present, it is limited to the Taştepe sites, that is, those around Urfa, but in reality, that cultural sphere encompasses the entire Euphrates-Tigris Basin. It needs to evolve into an academy where interdisciplinary experts come together to share knowledge, discuss, and develop new methods collaboratively.

### Information Should Be Shared Internationally

***How can developed nations collaborate to preserve cultural heritage?***

**Prof. Dr. Mehmet Celal Özdoğan:** The best example is something like what's happening in Şanlıurfa. Science is not the monopoly of any single person. You must realize that the past belongs to no one, and that concentrating knowledge in a single hand is wrong. Knowledge belongs to science. There is so

much work to be done, international, interdisciplinary, that scientists can share ... There's no need for anyone to be jealous. There's also this tendency, common among archaeologists. They don't show anyone what they've unearthed until they've published it. Yet, I cannot claim exclusive ownership of what emerges from my excavation. My interpretation is my own. I won't hide from anyone what a craftsman made 8,000 years ago. Hagia Sophia stands there—can't you look at it and write a new book? You can. If someone can interpret it better than I can, let them write. I have shared everything that came out of my excavation with everyone. Considering it humanity's shared knowledge, collaborations built on that foundation, not "you versus me," but knowledge-focused collaborations, should be established. Right now, many tools and developers around the world are developing new methods. Methods I couldn't even imagine are emerging.

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Some things are going very well right now. Take the Shanghai Archeology Forum, for example. From what I can see, it's one of the best forums where the most sound ideas in the world are developed. It used to be held every two years. I'm involved in it: every year, about 150 participants from roughly 40 countries. At one point, the European Association of Archaeologists used to organize it. Then it became a bit more politicized. We need to participate in these forums and share knowledge. Knowledge does not belong to us. Knowledge is an inheritance from the past. It must be shared and utilized. 🌸