

Media Release

British prehistorian forged documents throughout his life

An examination of James Mellaart's estate reveals that the British prehistorian ran a veritable forger's workshop throughout his life.

London / Zurich, 1 March 2018 – For half a century one of the great pioneers of Anatolian archaeology, the British prehistorian James Mellaart (1925-2012), fabricated documents to reinforce his theories. This became clear during an examination of Mellaart's estate in his former study in North London. Mellaart had made a name for himself with the discovery and excavation of important Neolithic and Early Bronze Age sites in Turkey, including Beycesultan, Hacilar and Çatalhöyük. Still in his thirties, he was even considered the most famous archaeologist in the world. From 1958 onwards he was repeatedly involved in scandals. In several cases, colleagues accused him of falsifying evidence, but were unable to substantiate these allegations. The documents in Mellaart's estate leave no doubt that the critics were entirely right.

The biggest scandal occurred in 1962 when the Turkish press condemned Mellaart's publication of the so-called Dorak treasure in a large-scale media campaign. It was followed by scathing criticism of the alleged discovery of murals in Çatalhöyük: Many years later Mellaart claimed to have found very extensive and detailed wall paintings in rooms that in the original excavation reports were said to have contained no murals. Mellaart published drawings of these murals – but no photos.

From 24 to 27 February 2018, James Mellaart's son Alan and Swiss geoarchaeologist Eberhard Zangger examined the estate in Mellaart's former apartment near London's Finsbury Park. In June 2017, Eberhard Zangger accepted material from the estate which the prehistorian had identified as particularly important. Together with the Dutch linguist Fred Woudhuizen, Zangger published a series of Luwian hieroglyphic inscriptions in December 2017. This publication evoked indignant accusations from experts around the world who believed the documents to be forgeries – probably fabricated by Mellaart himself, even though he had claimed he could not even read Luwian hieroglyphics.

“These allegations of forgery are undoubtedly justified,” says Zangger. “We did not find any ‘prototypes’ for the Luwian hieroglyphic inscriptions, but we did find notebooks from Mellaart which prove that already as a student he had worked intensively on Luwian hieroglyphs and that this active interest continued for at least forty years.”

Whether Mellaart has completely fabricated the Luwian hieroglyphic inscriptions that were recently published by Zangger and Woudhuizen is still uncertain. From the examination of his estate, however, it is clear that much of the “evidence” that Mellaart used to reinforce the authenticity of the inscriptions was made by himself.

In 1995 James Mellaart had written long letters to Eberhard Zangger informing him about other sensational documents that allegedly recorded the history of Western Asia Minor from about 2500 to 700 BC. Mellaart's study in London contained a thick dossier showing how the prehistorian had constructed this one hundred-page-plus history of Western Asia Minor.

Zangger: "Mellaart seems to have used the same approach throughout his life. He first acquired a tremendously broad and deep knowledge. Then he tried to use this knowledge to develop a coherent historic panorama. This is perfectly legitimate and consistent with scientific methodology. Instead of formulating theories, however, Mellaart fabricated drawings of artifacts and translations of alleged documents to reinforce his theories."

There is no indication that Mellaart also faked artefacts. His creative work was limited to drawings and texts.

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