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## Ohio university grapples with case of missing mosaic

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*Bowling Green University knows it has parts of a stolen Turkish mosaic. Turkey knows too. So why are they still in Ohio?*

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by [Jennifer Pinkowski](#) - [@jpinkowski](#)

GAZIANTEP, Turkey — About 1,800 years ago, a rich resident of Zeugma, a Roman city in what is today southern Turkey, decided to install a mosaic in the dining room of his villa. Along with the Greek god of wine, the mosaic would feature a maenad, a follower of Dionysus known for ripping people limb from limb during drunken frenzies.

Tessera by tessera, artists constructed the ornate floor. They gave the maenad piercing brown eyes and seductive windblown hair. They surrounded her face with distinctive patterns of birds, flowers and geometric motifs.

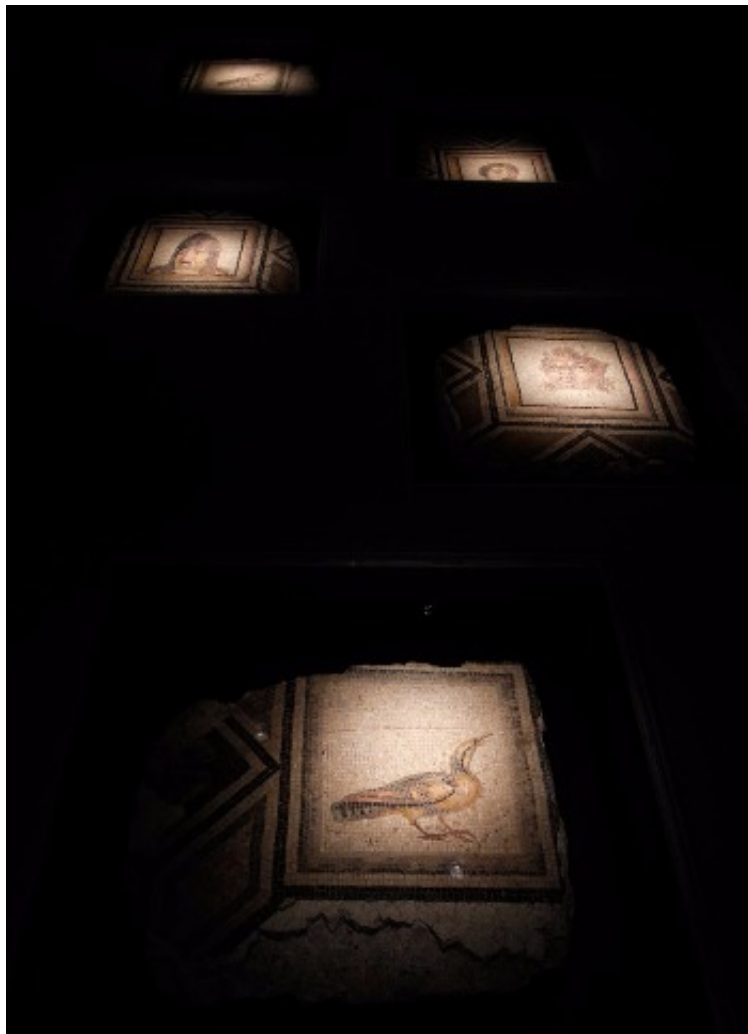
About 50 years ago, looters crudely broke parts of this mosaic into slabs suitable for illicit shipping, and these pieces disappeared into the black market.

But the looters did not steal the section that included the maenad. She lay buried until 1998, when a team of archaeologists unearthed her. Today she hangs on a wall in a dark room in the [Zeugma Mosaic Museum](#) in Gaziantep, a city on the Turkish-Syrian border. The main

halls are filled with extraordinarily gorgeous mosaics, though hers stands out for the abuse it has clearly suffered. With big gaps where sections once were, it looks like an old puzzle missing most of its pieces.

We know where those stolen pieces are. So does the Turkish government and the FBI. They're in Ohio.

Specifically, they're in the foyer of the Eva Marie Saint Theater in the [Wolfe Center for the Arts](#) at Bowling Green State University. BGSU knows they're stolen; university officials [made an announcement](#) in February 2012 after one of its scholars discovered their true origin.



Ancient mosaics at the Wolfe Center at Bowling Green State University, February 7, 2012. Andy Morrison / The Blade

Turkey has asked for them back. But they're still in Ohio. Why?

### Art Historians on the Case

On Jan. 11, 2012, Stephanie Langin-Hooper began poring over a thick file of archival documents related to the mosaics. A newly minted Ph.D.,

Langin-Hooper was just beginning her second semester as a tenure-track assistant professor of ancient art history at Bowling Green, and she had been asked by the head of her department to organize an academic symposium that March around the mosaics.

The university wanted to shine a spotlight on them. After years in storage, they had been restored and placed on display in the award-winning Wolfe Center, which had opened just a month before.



Dr. Stephanie Langin-Hooper, assistant professor of ancient art history at Southern Methodist University, kneels near an ancient mosaic at Bowling Green State

According to the antiquities dealer who sold the mosaics to BGSU in 1965, the artifacts were from Antioch, a city now known as Antakya in what is today southern Turkey. They were allegedly from the 2nd or 3rd century, though the only documentation attesting to their provenance was an untitled, anonymous academic paper comparing the style of the dealer's mosaics to others found at Antioch. BGSU agreed to pay \$35,000 in three installments for the works, and they were shipped from New York to Ohio a few months later.

The thin documentation wasn't unusual for the 1960s, but Langin-Hooper sensed something was amiss.

Langin-Hooper first began to question the mosaics when she saw the original letters of sale. "In my field, you always

have to be suspicious of anything that is purchased from an antiquities dealer,”

she said. Additionally, Antioch was an influential provincial Roman capital and important center of early Christianity, and it had been thoroughly excavated and documented in the 1930s by a team of Princeton University archaeologists. That artifacts excavated from Antioch would suddenly turn up on the antiquities market struck Langin-Hooper as suspect.

Meanwhile, another scholar was also looking into Princeton’s records about its Antioch excavations: Rebecca Molholt, a specialist in Roman mosaics at Brown University, who had been asked to present the keynote speech at Langin-Hooper’s symposium.

A week after beginning research, Molholt sent Langin-Hooper a worried email. “I haven’t yet found the Bowling Green mosaics in any of the Antioch publications,” she wrote. “My understanding is that if the pavements aren’t in the books, then they don’t come from those 1930s excavations of Antioch.”

She began to look other sites of origin. A day later, she called Langin-Hooper. “I think I know where they’re from,” Molholt told her. “Zeugma.”

## The Drowning of Zeugma

[Zeugma was a Greco-Roman city](#) located some 125 miles northeast of Antioch that by the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. was a bustling, prosperous metropolis of enormous military and economic importance on the eastern border of the Roman Empire. But a Persian invasion in the 3rd century A.D. and an earthquake soon after wreaked havoc on the city, and in subsequent centuries it dwindled to a minor settlement. By the 11th century, Zeugma was largely abandoned — and forgotten.

In the early 19th century and again in the 1960s, Zeugma was heavily plundered. Archaeological excavations began in the late 1980s, and looters were not far behind. In 2000, Turkish archaeologists in

collaboration with international colleagues removed as much of Zeugma as they could before the government flooded the ancient city to make way for the Birecik dam and hydroelectric plant. What they were able to remove is on display in the Gaziantep Museum, which opened in 2011. Today much of Zeugma is underwater, but archaeologists continue to excavate on dry land.

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**“ To find a mosaic that has exactly the same details of shape, color, birds, flowers — there really is no realistic way that these don’t come from that particular floor. ”**

— **Stephanie Langin-Hooper**  
Art history professor at Southern Methodist

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Molholt carefully compared the mosaics at BGSU with those from the dining room of the Maenad Villa in Zeugma. The mosaics featured Dionysian figures such as Pan, the satyr Silenos and the maenad; rows of black and white; birds and flowers; and a geometric motif. Eleven of the mosaics at BGSU were perfect matches.

“To find a mosaic that has exactly the same details of shape, color, birds, flowers — there really is no realistic way that these don’t come from that particular floor,” Langin-Hooper says. “The match is just too perfect.”

In all, it took Langin-Hooper and Molholt less than two weeks to pinpoint Zeugma as the true home of the fragments.

BGSU reacted nearly as quickly. Langin-Hooper alerted the university administration in late January, and on Feb. 7, 2012, BGSU [issued](#)

a [statement](#) admitting it owned stolen mosaics. “We take the care and preservation of the mosaics seriously,” university president Mary Ellen Mazey said in the statement. “They have been housed at the university for nearly half of our history — of course we will do the right thing.”

The university cancelled the symposium and [initiated talks](#) with the Turkish government, which contacted the FBI. But according to an internal Turkish governmental report, the agency told Turkish representatives that the mosaics’ ownership was a private dispute.

In November 2012, archaeologists from Turkey’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism visited BGSU to examine the mosaics and confirmed the findings. Kultamis Gorkay, director of Zeugma excavations, even created a composite image of the BGSU mosaics and the maenad mosaics. They matched perfectly.

### Negotiations come to a halt

After this visit, Turkey formally requested the mosaics be returned. Although things moved quickly at first, in the three years since the discovery, negotiations between BGSU and the Turkish government have become dead in the water, as the parties haven’t been able to agree to a deal. Neither side is willing to comment on the matter.

According to a [letter](#) BGSU general counsel Sean FitzGerald sent to the Turkish Consulate in 2014, the university, citing “fiduciary obligations,” wants proof that Turkey can claim legal ownership of the mosaics.

But proof of ownership is impossible to provide, says a Turkish Ministry of Culture staffer who spoke off the record. Looters, black market dealers and buyers of stolen artifacts don’t leave paper trails, he says. Several Turkish sources also claim that BGSU asked for compensation for the return of the mosaics. According to an internal Turkish government report shown to Al Jazeera, in February 2013 the university asked that Turkey create a scholarship fund for 20 students to attend BGSU. The request was refused. Six months later, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement urging BGSU to behave “ethically.” BGSU responded with the demand for proof of ownership.

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“ [Bowling Green] has a problem on their hands. No question about it.”

— Peter Herdrich

Founding partner of Antiquities Coalition

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Bowling Green has a “problem on their hands. No question about it,” says Peter Herdrich, a founding partner of the [Antiquities Coalition](#), an alliance of experts who fight the looting and trafficking of antiquities by organized criminals and terrorist organizations. “The way to go about solving it is to enter a negotiation with the Turkish government in good faith. That’s what it seems like they started to do. Why it’s dragging on, I don’t know.”

Herdrich’s colleague Tess Davis, executive director of the Antiquities Coalition and an affiliate researcher with the Glasgow-based [Trafficking Culture](#), is less surprised. She says that most negotiations take place behind closed doors, that compensation is common, and that the process of repatriation often takes years.

### Turkey's options

Since 2007, the [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#) has returned more than [7,800 artifacts](#) to at least 30 countries. When negotiations fail, however, lawsuits are another recourse.

Turkey could sue in U.S. court. It has before, [and won](#). In 1989 a Massachusetts court ruled that William Koch, brother of petroleum giants Charles and David Koch, had to return some 1,700 coins that his company OKS Partners had purchased for \$3.2 million from Elmali in southwest Turkey. It took 10 years for the Elmali Hoard to return to

Turkey.

In 1993, the Metropolitan Museum of Art agreed to return 363 coins from the [Lydian Hoard](#) — but only after a six-year legal battle in Manhattan federal court.

Filing a civil suit would be a “huge burden” for Turkey, says Davis. “It’s often a very lengthy process. We’re talking years or decades.”

Laws also vary between countries and, in the U.S., between states. There is no bilateral repatriation agreement between Turkey and the U.S., and the merit of a claim — say, good evidence that an object was looted — is rarely the deciding factor in a case, says Davis. Many museums and galleries retain disputed objects by winning on procedural defenses.

## Coming Home

In recent years the Erdogan government has denied excavation permits to archaeologists from countries Turkey is in dispute with over artifacts. Scientists from France, Germany and the United States have all had their dig permits in Turkey revoked — sometimes at sites they’d excavated for decades — with the promise that they’d be returned once their countries repatriated certain artifacts.

The tactic has angered both foreign and Turkish archaeologists, especially since the Erdogan government has reburied, flooded, or otherwise damaged many archaeological sites across the country in pursuit of real estate development.

But [it’s also worked](#). In 2011, the Pergamon Museum in Berlin returned a 3,300-year-old Hittite sphinx back to Hattusa, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts sent “[Weary Herakles](#)” to Antalya to be reunited with his lower half. Through a variety of measures, more than 4,000 artifacts were returned to Turkey between 2002 and 2012.

In its drive to reclaim its cultural heritage — one many Armenians, Greeks and Kurds argue is at least partially theirs — Turkey has





Fragments of a mosaic from Antioch in the Wolfe Center for the Arts of Bowling Green State University. Jetta Fraser / The Blade

pressed not only for the return of looted antiquities but for artifacts legally exported under agreements with Ottoman rulers. Many objects in the Istanbul Archaeology Museums came from such Ottoman-era excavations, including the famous [Alexander Sarcophagus](#), which was taken from Sidon, Lebanon, in 1887.

But Turkey may have little leverage with Bowling Green, because the university has no digs on the

ground in Anatolia. It just has the mosaics in Ohio.

What happens next is anyone's guess. Considering its request for proof of ownership, BGSU is unlikely to return the mosaics on its own, as a private museum in Houston [did in 2000](#) after a scholar realized the Menil Collection had two mosaics from Zeugma. Meanwhile, Turkey doesn't seem to have made any additional formal requests — or even hired lawyers.

In an attempt to galvanize public support, last August a leading Turkish archaeology magazine launched a [online campaign](#) to agitate for the mosaics' return. So far, the petition has garnered more than 41,000 signatures.

Meanwhile, archaeological work at Zeugma continues. Just last year Gorkay and his team [unearthed three new mosaics](#).

No matter the fractured condition of her mosaic or the nearly 6,000 miles separating her pieces, the maenad is still the face of the ancient city. At the Gaziantep Mosaic Museum, her visage adorns many trinkets in the gift shop — buttons and magnets, T-shirts and bookmarks, commemorative plates.

Inside the museum, not far from the mosaic, is a digital puzzle featuring the maenad's face. It's missing pixelated tesserae. The viewer's job is to put her back together. To play, you press your finger against a loose tessera and slide it back where it belongs — fill in a shaded cheekbone, complete a pale patch of skin, smooth a lock of brown hair. Piece by piece, the maenad becomes whole again.



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