Max von Oppenheim was born in Cologne on July 15, 1860, the second-oldest son of the banker, Albert von Oppenheim, and his wife Paula, née Engels, the daughter of a patrician family in that city. His father wanted him to take over the reins at the banking house Salomon Oppenheim jr. & Cie., and on graduating from high school in 1878 Max initially obliged him by enrolling to study law. This he did first in Strasbourg and later in Berlin and Göttingen, becoming an articled clerk in 1883 and a Dr. jur. later that same year.
But Oppenheim’s real interests ever since his school days had lain in the fields of botany and geography. According to his memoirs, it was the tales of A Thousand and One Nights that first aroused his enthusiasm for the Arab world and inspired the dream that he would never abandon, of becoming an explorer in the Islamic lands of the Near East. Thus he seized the opportunity of undertaking two lengthy trips to Constantinople and North Africa even while still a student. The oriental world that he encountered there enthralled him instantly. In 1892 he finally settled in Cairo, where he rented a house and dedicated himself to perfecting his command of Arabic and studying Islam as well as Arab customs and traditions. In 1893 he embarked on his first three-month trip to Damascus. This journey, financed by his father, took him through the Syrian Desert to Mosul, Baghdad, and the Persian Gulf.

Max von Oppenheim (1860–1946) in his tent, Tell Halaf 1929. (© Max Freiherr von Oppenheim Foundation, Cologne)

Oppenheim had by now set his heart on a career in the German Foreign Service that would enable him to combine his private interests with professional obligations. The German Foreign Office was deeply anti-Semitic, however, so that Oppenheim with his Jewish background had to wait until 1896 before being offered a posting as attaché to the Imperial Consulate General in Cairo.

It was from that base in Cairo that in 1899 he set off on a seven-month-long expedition through Syria, Upper Mesopotamia, and Eastern Turkey. In the headwaters of the River Khabur in north-eastern Syria he discovered an ancient mound called Tell Halaf, where in 1911–1913 and 1929 he carried out privately financed excavations.
Among his most sensational finds were several monumental stone sculptures and relief slabs dating from the early first millennium BCE. They originated from the period when Tell Halaf was the site of Guzana, the capital of a Late Hittite-Aramaean kingdom. The first settlers arrived at Tell Halaf in the Late Neolithic (8000 years ago). When the Assyrians invaded the region in the 9th century BCE they turned Guzana into a provincial capital. The Bible describes how the inhabitants of Samaria were deported to the upper reaches of the Khabur following the conquest of the city by Sargon II (721–705 BCE). The place retained its importance even in the Neo-Babylonian period following the fall of the Assyrian Empire. New excavations by Syrian and German archaeologists in 2006–2010 unearthed proof that Guzana had been a place of some standing even in the Achaemenid Period (6th–4th century BCE) and then the Hellenistic Period. It was abandoned permanently only in the 2nd century BCE.

The stone sculptures made of basalt and limestone along with painted ceramics from the time of the first settlement there in the 6th millennium BCE have made Tell Halaf one of the most important ancient sites for research into the cultural history and development of Upper Mesopotamia.
Scorpion gate (10th/9th century BC) at the citadel 1912. (© Max Freiherr von Oppenheim Foundation, Cologne)

Grave sculptures (10th/9th century BC) in a mudbrick massif at the citadel 1913. (© Max Freiherr von Oppenheim Foundation, Cologne)
In 1921 Oppenheim founded an Oriental Research Institute with which to safeguard his work and evaluate his finds; eight years later this was succeeded by the foundation that bears his name, the Max Freiherr von Oppenheim-Stiftung. In 1930 he opened his own private Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin-Charlottenburg, in which the finds allotted to him by the Beirut-based Syrian-French Directorate of Antiquities could be exhibited to the general public.

Main room of the Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin-Charlottenburg 1930. (© Max Freiherr von Oppenheim Foundation, Cologne)

But during the first Allied bombing raid on Berlin in November 1943 the Tell Halaf Museum was hit by a phosphorus bomb and burned to the ground. Many objects made of combustible materials like limestone and plaster were destroyed, as was much of the excavation documentation, including the glass negatives of photos. Heated to over 900°C, the basalt monuments shattered into thousands of pieces.
Having already been bombed out of his Berlin home, Oppenheim himself was in Dresden when the Tell Halaf Museum was hit. On learning of the destruction of his life’s work, he wrote to Walter Andrae, then the Director of the Vorderasiatische Abteilung, in December 1943 with the request that at least what remained of the stone sculptures be salvaged from the debris. Between then and August 1944, nine tractor-loads of basalt fragments were deposited in the basement of the Pergamon Museum.

That the stone sculptures might ever be reconstructed was considered highly unlikely and in a 1954 statement of war losses from art collections in Central and Eastern Germany, the Tell Halaf Museum was written off as a total loss. The only person who right up to his death in Landshut on November 15, 1946 never once lost faith in the eventual reconstruction of the works was Max von Oppenheim himself.

It was not until October 2001 that the staff of the Vorderasiatische Museum was able to put the 27,000 fragments onto 300 pallets and, after spread out over an area of 600 square meters, to begin systematically sorting them and piecing the first objects back together again.
After just nine years of intensive work, all the basalt sculptures had been reconstructed, allowing them to be exhibited in a major new special show called “Die geretteten Götter aus dem Palast vom Tell Halaf/The Tell Halaf Adventure” that opened at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin in 2011. Max von Oppenheim’s dearest wish was thus fulfilled after all, sixty-four years after his death. There are now plans to incorporate the monuments into the permanent exhibition of the Vorderasiatische Museum once the full-scale renovation of the Pergamon Museum has been completed. This, too, will fulfill a wish that Oppenheim himself expressed as early as 1910, before work on the excavations at Tell Halaf had even commenced.
Restoration of the eastern lion sculpture 2005. (© Tell Halaf-Restaurierungsprojekt, photographer N. Cholidis)

Main Hall of the special exhibition “Die geretteten Götter aus dem Palast vom Tell Halaf/The Tell Halaf Adventure” 2011. (© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Vorderasiatisches Museum, photographer O. M. Teßmer)
The Tell Halaf Restoration Project, which was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and the Salomon-Oppenheim-Stiftung, fostered close collaboration with the Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées in Damascus, and hence can be regarded as a shining example of successful international cooperation on the preservation of our shared cultural heritage. Among the basalt rubble from the Tell Halaf Museum were fragments belonging to monuments that following the partition of the finds had remained in Aleppo. Those fragments were given to Syria by agreement with the Max Freiherr von Oppenheim-Stiftung as owner of the Tell Halaf collections in Germany. Their restoration was undertaken by a German conservator at the National Museum in Aleppo. The fragments of a severely damaged bull sculpture at the museum in Aleppo, by contrast, were brought to Germany in 2003 and reassembled there by conservators as part of the Tell Halaf Restoration Project in Berlin. In the summer of 2004, the restored bull sculpture was taken back to Aleppo and has stood in the garden of the National Museum ever since.

On a visit to the Tell Halaf Restoration Project in Berlin in 2005, a delegation from the Syrian Antiquity service proposed that a joint Syrian-German expedition resume excavations at Tell Halaf. Digging thus began again on August 5, 2006, seventy-seven years after Max von Oppenheim’s last excavation campaign, but unfortunately had to be suspended owing to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.
That conflict has resulted not only in unspeakable human suffering, but also in the destruction of many of Syria’s cultural treasures and the cessation of collaboration with the Direction Générale des Antiquités et des Musées in Damascus. Many of our Syrian colleagues are now living abroad so that even should a peace agreement be signed, it will be difficult to rebuild institutions dedicated to the preservation and study of Syria’s cultural heritage. It remains to be hoped that the contacts that have been on hold since 2011 can be revived once the hostilities have ended.

The Max Freiherr von Oppenheim-Stiftung, which celebrated its 90th anniversary in November 2019, now sees its most urgent mission alongside the preservation of its founder’s legacy as the promotion of “peaceful, intercultural, and professional dialogue” between different cultures.

*Lutz Martin recently retired as the deputy director of the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin.*