

## **Scramble for the Past: A Study of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire 1753-1914**

---

By Zainab Bahrami, Zeynep Çelik, Edhem Eldem

İstanbul: SALT Garanti Kültür, 2011, 520 pages, ISBN 9789944730270.

---

## **American-Turkish Encounters: Politics and Culture 1830-1989**

---

By Nur Bilge Criss, Selçuk Esenbel, Tony Greenwood, Louis Mazzari

Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, 410 pages, ISBN 1443832057.

---

## **Istanbul: A Cultural History**

---

By Peter Clark

Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2012, 266 pages, ISBN 9781566568456.

---

ALTHOUGH very different in terms of subject matter, all three books reviewed here offer fascinating insights into the ways writers over time have employed a variety of strategies in an attempt to emphasize the superiority of the western way of life over others.

The edited collection *Scramble for the Past* offers several prime examples. Ussama Makdisi's piece on "The 'Rediscovery' of Baalbek" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century discusses the ways in which the ancient site, situated in modern-day Lebanon, was colonized by European traders and missionaries as well as archeologists. It became "a fixture of the eastern tour" for anyone seeking to broaden their cultural education. Writing in 1860, the travel writer David Urquhart observed: "It is something

else they [western travelers] look for when they see it; [...] it is a point of departure [...] from which to survey men as they have been" (p. 267). Although foreigners and Ottomans were charged the same price for admission, only the Ottomans were exhorted not to steal anything, while Europeans had *carte blanche* to purloin whatever they wished in the interests of archeological "research."

Edhem Eldem's essay on "Ottoman Perceptions of Antiquities 1799-1869" offers a fascinating insight into the ways in which educated Ottomans willingly subjected themselves to western colonizers' interests in order to maintain good diplomatic relations. As a result they adopted a position of "blissful ignorance" when the British aggressively appropriated the Elgin Marbles. When they entered an ancient city during military campaigns, the Ottomans' principal concern was not to preserve the ruins, but rather to placate their allies; hence they had no objection to any passing archeologist who wanted to take something out of the country back to Europe. It was only during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that Ottoman attitudes changed as they decided to set up their own museums (p. 320).

The Ottomans' generosity would have been much appreciated by British archeologists such as Austen Henry Layard (1817-94), who made his reputation by conducting large-scale excavations in Mesopotamia. Shawn Malley's essay looks at the ways in which he chronicled his exploits in works such as *Nineveh and its Ruins* (1849). While claiming to be a factual account, Layard offers a convincing defense of British interests in Iraq; while excavating the site, he brought "civilization" to the local people, while "protecting" it from further destruction. His account is written in the first person, representing himself as the western hero, uncovering hitherto well-concealed

ancient secrets. Malley argues that these attitudes still dominate western policies in Iraq: the United States justified its 2003 invasion on the grounds that the country needed to be “protected” from Saddam Hussein, while the self-style “hero” of the campaign – at least in its early days – was President George W. Bush. Malley comments: “the Department of Defense’s attempts to clean up [Iraq] [...] actually reaffirms the mission objectives that began a hundred and fifty years ago” (p. 118).

*Scramble for the Past* lays bare the often unspoken assumptions underlying most archaeological initiatives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hubert Szmethy’s “Archeology and Cultural Politics” looks at how digs in Athens, Smyrna (İzmir) and İstanbul were generously funded by the Austrian state in a deliberate attempt to help that country “compete on equal terms in the peaceful rivalry with other countries, many of which already had institutes of their own” (p. 361). The word “peaceful” is problematic here; while such initiatives did not lead to war, the intention behind them was undoubtedly aggressive – to colonize Ottoman territory in the interests of archeological research. Profusely illustrated with high-quality photographs and diagrams, *Scramble for the Past* is an ideal book to dip into, not only for archeologists, but for anyone interested in the historical antecedents of contemporary east-west politics.

*American-Turkish Encounters* is a truly fascinating text. Based on a conference held in İstanbul in June 2006, it comprises a series of essays from Turkish and non-Turkish scholars on the often turbulent relationship between the Ottoman Empire, the Republic of Turkey and the United States, from the mid-19th century to the end of the Cold War. The principal aim consists of revealing how that

relationship has been sustained “through patient diplomacy, compromise, and mutual forbearance” (p. 73). Both countries have understood how cultural, social, and religious differences can be a source of strength rather than conflict. Ted Widmer’s essay on Cyrus Hamlin, a missionary who built Robert College (now Boğaziçi University) offers a case in point. Through continual contact with locals, he learned to moderate his Christian zeal and thereby established “a school that could truly serve the diverse peoples of Constantinople.” For their part the Ottoman government “relaxed their traditional structures to allow the college to come into existence, because they knew that a first-rate Western institution was in Turkey’s interest” (p. 73). Nur Bilge Criss invokes a similar image of mutual understanding while writing about the Cold War. Once the Republic of Turkey had joined NATO in 1952, NATO had the chance to exert “a moderating effect on each set of coup makers” – the leaders of the three military coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980. Criss concludes: “The case of Turkey’s encounter with the American presence [through NATO] reflects not only on the nature of international partnerships, but also on the social-political management of military alliances” (pp. 293-5).

What renders *American-Turkish Encounters* truly fascinating is the way in which it draws on the kind of rhetorical strategies reminiscent of Austin Henry Layard’s writing, suggesting that the relationship between the two countries is as unequal today as it was a century and a half ago. Mine Pınar-Gözen describes how jazz legends such as Dizzy Gillespie and Dave Brubeck regularly toured Eastern Europe as well as Turkey during the Cold War era in an attempt to present an inclusive image of the American nation that could successfully “protect” itself and its allies against the communist “threat.” While

Gözen insists that Gillespie's reason for touring Europe was "more democratic than the State Department's" (he wanted to prove that African-Americans could become cultural ambassadors as well as members of other races), she also suggests that Gillespie's main role was to provide "the necessary training and professionalism" for local musicians (p. 338). The implication is clear: in spite of his ethnic origins, Gillespie willingly participated in a mission to "civilize" the people of Eastern and Central Europe.

Hakan Yılmaz's piece on American-Turkish diplomatic relations between 1940 and 1960 suggests that American policy was geared towards the "economic and democratic development" of the Republic, designed to satisfy "both the civilian demand for consumer goods and the basic needs of the military." In truth however, what the Eisenhower government really wanted was to "protect" the Republic from possible invasion – both intellectual as well as military – by the Soviets: "A democratic Turkey [...] would more easily identify with the US and western Europe. A dictatorial regime, on the other hand, would make Turkey much more vulnerable to Soviet influence" (p. 252). Like the archeologist Layard, the State Department justified its colonizing policy on the grounds of maintaining "security."

The book also portrays pioneering Americans in Turkey (for example Cyrus Hamlin or Admiral Mark Bristol, whose reports in the 1930s helped create a more positive image of the Republic in Washington), as heroes – the kind of people who worked tirelessly to sustain long-lasting diplomatic ties and creating "greater possibilities for American business men in an emerging market" (p. 131). To "civilize" a country inevitably meant opening it up to western capitalist interests.

What we do not hear in *American-Turkish Encounters* are the voices of ordinary citizens – whether American or Turkish. Most contributors confine themselves to historical narratives recounted from the diplomats' or the politicians' point of view. Louis Mazzari's piece on the American Embassy in İstanbul offers a case in point: while he engagingly recreates a world of "florid mythology, rococo anguish, and dewy-gladed love" unfolding in the halls of diplomacy, the ordinary İstanbullu is consigned to the background – the willing (or more likely) unwilling participant in "school project [sic] about 'Amerika'" (pp. 119-20). Kerem Ozan Kalkan and Eric M. Uslaner have researched Gallup polls conducted in the immediate post-1945 era that surveyed American public support for the Republic of Turkey. At that time most people perceived little difference between the Republic and Greece, nor were they particularly interested in the American government providing financial assistance to both countries through the Marshall Plan (p. 233). However such antipathy was not exclusively reserved for the Republic: most Americans resisted any form of foreign aid, especially to those territories (for example, Germany) that had so recently been defeated.

*American-Turkish Encounters* would have benefited from a more pluralist approach, encompassing oral histories and/or herstories of people from different walks of life who participated in bilateral exchanges – for example, learners of American Culture and Literature courses in Turkish universities; scholars from both countries who obtained research scholarships; poets and other creative artists involved in cross-cultural exchanges; or business people trying to open up new trading opportunities. Arzu Öztürkmen's interview with Howard A. Reed, who was born in İzmir in 1920 and spent most of his professional life

trying to build American-Turkish relationships at a personal as well as an institutional level (pp. 381-404), offers a fascinating insight into the ways in which politics impacted personal lives, particularly for those raised in a bi-cultural environment. However the book needs a lot more of this kind of work.

As it stands, *American-Turkish Encounters* represents something of a missed opportunity. Rather than expanding our understanding of the relationship between the two countries, the book reinforces familiar constructions, with America conceived as the dominant partner bringing culture, democracy and military knowhow to the Republic in an attempt to maintain stability in the region. Although the book boasts no less than four editors, there are numerous spelling and grammatical errors that should have been eliminated at the proofreading stage.

Peter Clark's *İstanbul: A Cultural History* at least has the courage of its convictions. In a highly entertaining preface the author declares himself an outsider who has never lived in the city, even though he has lived for over two decades in the Arab territories that once formed part of the Ottoman Empire (p. xii). While the book rehearses familiar orientalist tropes – for example, İstanbul as a hotbed of romance and intrigue, or Beyoğlu/Pera as a magnet for people of different cultures and faiths – Clark makes a brave attempt to show how the city has changed over time, and how we should refrain from looking at it through a western prism. He recalls how an İstanbul Armenian chided him for using the term “minorities,” on the grounds that the term delegitimizes the community. İstanbul has for centuries comprised different communities, the size of which has changed over time, but nevertheless they have upheld the tradition of “mutual acceptance and often mutual

support.” It was the westerner – the foreign writer, the political, or the diplomat – who colonized the city and “imposed exclusive choices of identity on people,” who were now told they had to belong to the “majority” or the “minority” (p. xxiv).

The book traces the growth of the city from pre-Christian times to the present day. The story is a familiar one, but Clark spices it up with a series of guided walks through different regions. A stroll through Beyoğlu will help visitors understand what the area might have looked like in its 19th century heyday. Walking around the British Consulate and the Galatasaray Lisesi can serve to create something of that “florid mythology [and] rococo anguish” that Mazzari describes in his piece on the American Embassy in *American-Turkish Encounters*. Moving towards the Bosphorus, Clark traces the growth of the villages along the shore, but rather surprisingly does not suggest any walks – for example, from Etiler to Sarıyer. In his sketch of the history of the Princes Islands he mentions that Trotsky found refuge here in the 1920s, but omits the Anatolian Club (*Anadolu Kulübü*), a magnificent building on Büyükdada built in the style of an English gentleman's club.

However these are minor quibbles in a book that provides a comprehensive guide to the city's past and present. It ends with a chapter on the ways in which İstanbul has changed over the last two decades, with the growth of capitalist enterprise and the parallel emergence of the so-called “Anatolian Tigers”, the conservative business community who have kept the AKP in power over the past decade. While invoking hackneyed constructions such as Huntington's clash of civilizations metaphor (which tells us more about American anxieties rather than Middle Eastern political realities), Clark recognizes the efforts of

the city to maintain an atmosphere of cultural pluralism, in which “chic restaurants, shopping malls and an IKEA store are neighbors to conservative Islamist quarters [and...] the coffee house” (p. 237).

The book ends with a postscript describing İstanbul as “a melting pot” – another tired metaphor that doesn’t really sum up the ways in which communities interact (p. 247). İstanbul has always accommodated citizens

of different ethnicities and/or nationalities. While tensions have sometimes been brought to the surface, there exists a tolerance that has nothing to do with melting pots, and more to do with the city’s capacity to “integrate outsiders with ease” while recognizing the importance of difference (p. 246). If westerners understood the significance of this, then perhaps they might refrain from imposing their own cultural formulations (based on binary oppositions) on the city and its people.