



## The Construction of the Other: British Travelers' View of Ottoman Levantines in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century


Ufuk Özmesmer 

**Abstract:** The Levantines arose as a culturally hybrid community that straddled the boundaries between East and West. Seen by neither Ottoman society nor Europeans as belonging to a distinct group in a strict sense, they constructed an identity that was continually negotiated within the contexts of politics, economics, and culture. While the emergence of Levantine communities has been historically contested, the Levantine identity became more distinct, especially in the nineteenth century, and was described by Western travelers as “neither European nor Ottoman. This article examines the identity construction of Levantines living residing in the port cities of the Ottoman Empire, particularly in Izmir and Istanbul, in during the nineteenth century, and how they were positioned perceived as the “other” by British travelers. It emphasizes that Levantines in the Ottoman Empire were caught between their Western and Eastern identities, leading to their marginalization in both worlds. Seeking to redefine Levantine communities through the lens of British travelers and to reveal how Western perceptions shaped these communities, this study discusses how and in what ways Levantines were marginalized in the eyes of Westerners and how they were considered estranged from their Western identity.

**Keywords:** Levantines, Late modern, Minorities, The other, Ottoman Empire, Travel writing

### 1. Introduction

The Levant is a geographical term referring to the Eastern Mediterranean coastline of Western Asia and its hinterland. The term entered English from French in the fifteenth century, having originally been borrowed into French from Italian. In Italian, *Levante* meant “rising,” referring to the sun’s rising in the east. For Western Europeans, *le Levant* (French) and *il Levante* (Italian) became synonymous with the land of the rising sun. Geographically, the Levant refers to the Eastern Mediterranean coast, which came under Ottoman rule from the sixteenth century onwards (Mansel, 2001, p. 1). The Levant, a region where Mediterranean trade has been highly active and East and West converge, has historically been a meeting ground for Christians and Muslims, East and West, the civilized and the barbarian. For this reason, difference, diversity, and integration have been the defining characteristics of Levantine cities throughout history. Philip Mansel (2001) highlights this fluidity and network of multicultural relations

<sup>1</sup>Middle East Technical University, Institute of Social Sciences, Ankara, Türkiye, [ufukozesmer@gmail.com](mailto:ufukozesmer@gmail.com) 

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when he describes the Levant not only as a region but also as a dialogue and a quest. For this reason, he emphasizes that in an environment of diversity, Levantines prioritized compromise over ideals, agreement over conflict.

The ambiguity in the definition of the word Levant is similarly reflected in the meaning of the term *Levantine*. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the word *Levantine* generally referred to a “person who lives in the East” or someone “associated with the East.” Etymologically, the term derives from the French verb *lever*, meaning “to rise.” According to Şerife Yorulmaz (1994), *Levantine* first entered the French language in 1575 with the meaning “born in Eastern countries” or “Easterner.” However, the concept of *Levantine* has been subject to various interpretations in different contexts over time. In Prince Alexandre Handjéri’s 1841 French-Arabic-Persian-Turkish dictionary, the term is translated as “Eastern nations” in all four languages. Handjéri’s (1841, p. 393) definition relies solely on the word’s geographical and etymological origins, without attributing any specific identity or imposing an exclusionary or inclusive meaning. On the other hand, Livio Missir, in *Turchia Preottomana e Ottomana*, states that the concept of Levantine is closely intertwined with the notions of *Latin* and *Eastern Latinity* in European languages. According to Missir, the term *Eastern Latinity* or *Frenk* represents Roman Catholicism. In the Ottoman geography known as the Levant, this identity encompassed those baptized according to the Latin rite, descendants of Roman Catholic families, and Latinized individuals who had settled in the East (Yorulmaz, 1994).

Despite these different definitions, towards the second half of the nineteenth century, a significant narrowing of the meaning of the word Levantine is observed. This change can be observed, especially in the first edition of Redhouse’s dictionary (Elhem, 2006, p. 14). While Redhouse defines the term Levant as “Ottoman country” (*Memâlik-i Osmaniyye*), it defines a Levantine as “a Frankish born in an Ottoman country” (Elhem, 2006). Frankish, on the other hand, is defined in the dictionary as “a person belonging to a European nation.” Therefore, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, while the word Levant retained its broad geographical meaning, encompassing Ottoman territories, the term Levantine had narrowed to refer specifically to “European people living in Ottoman lands.” This shift illustrates the evolution of the term from its original broad meaning, denoting geographical and ethnic diversity—to a more specific definition that emphasized a European identity and reflected a Western perspective.

Notably, the word Levantine does not appear in Turkish dictionaries until the first half of the twentieth century. Eldem attributes this to the existence of a well-established local idiom already used to describe Levantines: *Tatlı Su Frenki* (Freshwater Frankish). This idiom defined “the Eastern Christians who imitate

Western customs” (Sami, 1900, p. 858). In support of that, in his *Kamus-ul-Alam*, Şemseddin Sami explains the word Frankish, corresponding to the word Levantine in its current meaning: “Frankish: It is the name given to the peoples of Europe in Eastern languages and is derived from the word Frank. In fact, Frankish includes Catholic and Protestant Europeans, but Orthodox nations such as Russians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Serbs, and so on were not called Frankish (Sami, 1896, p. 3397).” In this manner, by the end of the nineteenth century, even though the word Levantine had not been used yet, its obscure definition manifested itself with the widespread use of *Tatlı Su Frenki* and the definition of the word Frank in Ottoman society. Thusly, the usage of Levantine, a Eurocentric definition, in the Turkish language was postponed until the middle of the twentieth century (Elhem, 2006, p. 17). The community known as Levantines, or *Tatlı Su Frenki*, could not avoid being one of the symbols of the “other” both by the Ottoman people and by Europe. As a result, the word Levantine was used by the Europeans, and the word *Tatlı Su Frenki* by the Ottomans to describe a cultural identity. Although definitions are very different, Levantines were legally permanent residents of the Ottoman Empire and were often viewed by Westerners as culturally assimilated Europeans. For Levantines, however, defining their identity has often been a highly complex process. Maria Rita Epik provided one of the hundreds of definitions of what it means to be a Levantine when she said, “At Christmas, they make pilaf in Turkish style” (Epik, 2006, p. 55). With this definition, Epik points to cultural transitivity and emphasizes that Levantine culture is the result of the interaction between East and West.

The increase in the Levantine population within the Ottoman Empire, particularly in key port cities during the nineteenth century, marks a period in which Levantine identity was redefined by Europeans, Ottomans, and Levantines themselves. Simultaneously, this period saw a rise in European travelers visiting Ottoman lands, facilitated by advancements in transportation and technology. Throughout the nineteenth century, numerous French, British, and German travelers journeyed to the Ottoman Empire for political, archaeological, and anthropological studies, commercial endeavors, religious missions, or as part of their Grand Tour. These travelers documented their experiences in works of travel literature. Notably, nineteenth-century British travelers frequently included Levantine communities in their travelogues, portraying them as a hybrid and ambiguous *other*, neither fully Ottoman nor entirely European.

This study argues that the term *Levantine* has carried connotations of *otherness* since its emergence in European literature. It traces the notion that Levantines were neither purely Eastern, like the majority of Ottoman subjects, nor entirely Western, like their European ancestors, through the travelogues of nineteenth-century British travelers in Izmir and Istanbul. By examining British travelers’ observations and assessments of Levantines in terms of identity, culture, and morality, this study seeks to uncover the

construction of *otherness* in the Mediterranean port cities of the nineteenth century.

## 2. Emergence of the Levant and the Levantine

The origins of commercial relations between the Turks and Westerners can be traced back to the trade networks established between the pioneering Turkish communities that settled in Anatolia and the Europeans who turned their focus to the Levant during the Crusades. Additionally, the privileges granted by the Ottoman Principality to Venice and Genoa in the fourteenth century further reinforced these economic ties (Fleet et al., 2006, p. 116). However, these early contacts are too distant to mark the beginning of the Levantine concept in its modern sense. Although there is no clear consensus on when the modern use of the term *Levantine* emerged, Philip Mansel (2001) argues that the concept began to crystallize in the nineteenth century, with its roots tracing back to the alliance between the Ottoman Empire and France in the sixteenth century. From 1525 onwards, the two states signed a commercial treaty in 1535 and a more comprehensive alliance treaty in 1536. These treaties are regarded as the beginning of the capitulations, which laid the foundation for the legal presence of European merchants in the Eastern Mediterranean ports. With the development of this alliance, the Eastern Mediterranean ports became hubs where French sailors expanded their commercial activities. Over the following centuries, these ports grew commercially and culturally rich, as the capitulations not only granted commercial privileges but also provided legal and cultural freedoms (Pamir, 2002). As a result of this cooperation, the ports of the Eastern Mediterranean became centers of commercial activity, particularly for French sailors. Over time, these port cities diversified economically and culturally, as the capitulations not only granted commercial privileges but also included legal and religious freedoms. The main privileges granted to the Franks under the capitulations included: the right to move and trade freely within Ottoman territory; the freedom to practice their religion; exemption from most taxes, though they were still required to pay customs duties; and the inviolability of their homes, which could not be disturbed by Ottoman authorities (Angell, 1901). Their ambassadors and consuls had jurisdiction over their citizens. When a French citizen committed a crime, Ottoman authorities could only intervene in the presence of the French consul or diplomatic representative. The Franks had the right to make wills, and if they died intestate in the Ottoman Empire, their assets were identified by their consuls and transferred to their heirs (Angell, 1901). In essence, the Franks and other European merchants gradually became a dominant community in the Empire. This led them to become an *imperium in imperio*. Following the 1535 treaty, England in 1583, the Netherlands in 1609, and Austria in 1615 began to benefit from capitulations (Angell, 1901, p. 256). In 1673, France assumed the role of protector of Catholics in Ottoman lands and gained broader privileges. As a result,

citizens of Catholic states that did not have the right to capitulations began to enjoy these rights under French protection. England, in 1675, and Austria, in 1718, were granted similar privileges. Thus, the smaller states of Europe gained the right to trade in Ottoman lands under the patronage of the great powers (Angell, 1901, pp. 256-257). All these developments paved the way for the expansion of trade in the Mediterranean and led to an increase in the presence of European merchants in Ottoman port cities. This process facilitated the formation and gradual strengthening of Levantine communities in the Ottoman Empire.

Fernand Braudel (2002, p. 468) observed that trade centers in the Eastern Mediterranean have undergone continuous evolution over time, influenced by changing political and economic priorities. These fluctuations led to transformations in the location of trade centers. Braudel emphasized that Bursa was the most important trade center in Anatolia in the fifteenth century, but by the sixteenth century, economic activities began to shift to Aleppo and Alexandria. With the rise of Izmir as a trade center from the seventeenth century onwards, he stated that trade, which had previously been kept away from Istanbul in the eighteenth century, began to be concentrated in Istanbul again. Thus, Istanbul and Izmir became the main trade centers of the Ottoman Empire and the Eastern Mediterranean (Braudel, 2002, p. 469). These repositionings also shaped the boundaries of the Levant, and Istanbul gained an important place in this geographical context. One of the reasons for these shifts, as Braudel points out, was the economic mobility created by the capitulations. The influence of Europeans in these ports increased over time, thus forming merchant communities. However, the question of at what stage these Europeans adopted a non-European identity and when they started to be called Levantines remains a rather complex issue.

The distinction between Franks and Levantines is quite pronounced. Filomena Viviana Taliaferro (2016, p. 88), in her study titled 'The 'Levantinization' of the Catholic Community of Smyrna in the Process of Becoming Levantines (1683-1724)', explains this difference as follows: "While Franks were known for their European origin, Levantines represented a new cultural identity derived from the fusion of Franks with Ottoman culture. Although Levantines exhibit characteristics of both cultures, they are neither entirely European nor entirely Ottoman." At this point, it becomes difficult to draw a clear boundary between whether a person was a Levantine or a Frank, as both were European citizens. It is therefore unclear when a European lost his or her cultural identity or when differentiation occurred.

In this article, Franks who settled permanently in the Ottoman Empire, owned property there, integrated into the trade networks within the empire's borders, became part of economic and social life, and continued their ancestry in Ottoman lands, will be evaluated within the framework of Levantine identity. In this

context, Europeans who were only in Ottoman lands for short-term commercial or diplomatic activities will continue to be referred to as Franks, while individuals who lived in Ottoman cities for generations and developed a hybrid identity through cultural interaction with local communities will be considered Levantines. Therefore, although the distinction between Franks and Levantines is difficult to define with absolute boundaries, this study will consider long-term settlement, integration with local economic and social structures, and a generational presence in Ottoman lands as the key elements of Levantine identity.

### **3. Construction of the Other: Identity, Culture, Morality**

The Levantine communities of Istanbul and Izmir were unique communities that emerged, perfectly combining the cultural, social, and commercial influences of East and West. These communities constructed an identity that was 'neither Eastern nor Western,' shaped by the interaction of these two contrasting cultures. However, in the historical development of these communities, there was a distinct tendency to adopt a Western identity. Julia Pardoe's observations in her 1836 travelogue shed light on the complex nature of Levantine identity formation. Despite being geographically located on a bridge between East and West, Levantines gravitated towards Western values, lifestyles, and desires. Pardoe (1838, p. 54) expresses this situation as follows: "In my rapid definition of European society, I must not omit to mention that the Perotes, or natives of Pera, consider themselves as much Franks as though they had been born and nurtured on the banks of the Thames or the Seine; and your expression of amusement at this very original notion would inevitably give great offence." Although the Levantines may have lost some traces of Western culture and ideals, they maintained a strong desire to preserve their ties with the West. As Julia Pardoe observes, rather than accepting a non-Western identity, the Levantines reacted strongly to any views that diminished their European connection. This reaction reveals their conscious effort to adopt and maintain Western characteristics. Levantines recognized their Western identity as an important part of themselves and were particularly sensitive about emphasizing it.

The Levantines asserted that they were not socially, culturally, ethnically, or religiously less European than Westerners, claiming a direct connection to Europe. However, in their daily lives—through language, customs, business practices, and family structures—many traces of the Orient remained. This complexity prevented them from fully aligning with either Eastern or Western identity, creating a strong contradiction when attempting to define their identity. In his 1828 travelogue, Charles MacFarlane (1828, pp. 12-13) critically described this complex identity structure, offering one of the most comprehensive interpretations of the ambivalent nature of the Levantines. MacFarlane emphasizes that Levantines, particularly those



of Western European origin (British, French, Italian, etc.) or with parents born in these countries, are neither fully European nor Eastern but rather exhibit a 'hybrid' identity. This 'hybrid' structure carries negative connotations in the eyes of the author. According to MacFarlane (1828, pp. 14), although the Levantines appeared to have inherited the idleness, inertia, and apathy of Muslim Ottoman society, they lacked the 'striking' and 'visually impressive' characteristics of the Eastern populations. In other words, the Levantines appeared stagnant and inert like the Orientals, but lacked the exotic charm that MacFarlane attributed to them. Similarly, he draws comparisons between the Levantines and Greek society. While he saw in the Levantines the same frivolity and flamboyance he associated with the Greeks, he portrayed them as lacking the vitality and natural flair that defined the Greek character.

According to MacFarlane, the Levantines adopted and internalized the most negative characteristics of the societies they interacted with. He emphasizes that the Levantines assimilated the negative aspects of the nations they encountered, while excluding their positive traits. MacFarlane observes that the Levantines not only failed to embrace a European identity but also struggled to develop an Eastern identity. Rather than being caught between the two, they existed somewhere in the middle. This liminal position shaped their distinctive cultural identity, blending elements from both cultures. MacFarlane argues that the Levantines exhibited the laziness and arrogance of the Muslims, and the weak character of the Greeks, but lacked the vitality, talent, and positive qualities that these groups possessed. This perception led British travelers to view the Levantines as the "other"—without a clear identity and in a negative light. Many travelers, like Adolpus Slade, described the Levantines in a manner similar to MacFarlane's critique. For instance, Slade (1833, p. 89) saw a Levantine he hosted in his home during his travels in Istanbul as a representative of his own society, referring to him in similarly disparaging terms. The Levantines depicted by Slade appeared to embody a fusion of Turkish, Greek, and Frankish cultures. This cultural blending went beyond physical features, extending to clothing, hairstyles, and speech patterns. The Levantines were said to have adopted mustaches from the Turks, long hair from the Greeks, and European-style clothing. This hybridity illustrates how the Levantines synthesized various cultural identities to create a distinctive, unique one. Their adoption of multiple cultural traits served as a strategic form of adaptation, allowing them to navigate and survive within their environment. In this sense, the Levantines represented a cultural structure too complex to fit into simple categories. However, in Slade's narrative, this hybrid identity is portrayed negatively. It is emphasized that the Levantines' identity was fragmented and contradictory, lacking a clear origin, and they were neither fully European nor Eastern (Slade, 1833, p. 89). This portrayal fosters the impression that Levantines are rootless, inconsistent, and possess negative characteristics. Consequently, Levantines were viewed as the "other" by European travelers, and this "otherness" carried a negative

connotation. Slade's perspective suggests that the contradictions and ambiguities in Levantine identity led to their marginalization and portrayal as a negative group within society.

On the other hand, many travelers also noted the significance of linguistic transformation in the Levant. From the early nineteenth century onward, French emerged as the local language of commerce and diplomacy. As the influence of French merchants grew in the region, French gradually replaced Italian and Greek, which had previously dominated as languages of business. French became not only a linguistic shift but also a symbol of broader changes in the Levant's cultural, economic, and political landscape. Despite their diverse national origins, Levantines began to use French as a hybrid means of communication. McFarlane (1828, pp. 85-86) summarized this linguistic evolution, noting that while French was the dominant language of Levantine society, it was, in fact, more a symbol of social status than a 'natural' language. He argued that most Levantines could neither read nor write in French, and what was spoken was far from pure, often influenced by local dialects and occasionally mingled with Romani. McFarlane also observed that men of British origin spoke English with an accent, often in a multilingual manner, while women rarely spoke it at all. He considered the manner in which Levantines of British descent spoke English to be a negative aspect of their identity.

As MacFarlane notes, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Levantines—particularly men—were often able to understand and speak several languages, but they did so with noticeable accents and frequent errors. This linguistic confusion was frequently remarked upon and criticized by travelers. However, it was also seen as a reflection of the Levantines' unique position at a cultural crossroads, where they adopted elements from both Europe and the Eastern world. MacFarlane underscores the blending of languages and the accompanying identity crisis within Levantine society. This linguistic inconsistency suggests that Levantines were unable to fully integrate into any single language or culture, which contributed to a weakening of their cultural identity and essence. British travelers often described this 'intermediate state' as a source of uncertainty and incompleteness in the Levantines' cultural identity. Moreover, when the Levantines spoke their own language with a foreign accent, MacFarlane perceived them as having lost their connection to their true origins, neither fully English nor authentically Levantine. This was seen as one of the clearest signs that Levantines were part of a mixed culture, embodying elements from multiple societies.

In general, British travelers from diverse cultural backgrounds saw Levantine societies as a fusion of Eastern and Western cultures. They observed that this cultural amalgamation had a significant influence on the character and behavior of the Levantine communities. Naturally, the travelers' own cultural



backgrounds and prejudices shaped these observations, leading to the formation of stereotypes rooted in their own norms. These stereotypes were often used as tools for travelers to convey their experiences and classify Levantine society. Over time, such generalizations became widespread, ultimately solidifying into prototypical descriptions. Moreover, these prejudices found in the writings of travelers were reinforced by subsequent generations encountering similar impressions. In this context, Francis Hervé (1837a, pp. 389-390) provided a particular definition of Levantines in his travelogue. According to Hervé's observations, anyone who spent a few years living in Izmir would eventually acquire a Levantine character. Regardless of their origins, individuals would inevitably adapt to the region's cultural dynamics. The author emphasizes that the language skills of an ordinary Levantine are poor, especially the poor quality of Greek in Smyrna. He also notes that the Levantines were always looking out for their own interests and were very astute in bargaining, seizing opportunities, and taking advantage of the day-to-day changes in the value of money. However, compared to European merchants, they were lazy and preferred to spend rather than save, a factor that made it difficult for foreign merchants in the region to acquire wealth. Hervé's definition of the Levantine provides a strikingly critical perspective. The author highlights how Westerners, upon living in the Levant, quickly came to embody the typical "Levantine" identity, and what this transformation signified. Hervé identifies a series of negative traits associated with the Levantine identity, many of which were attributed to both locals and foreigners who adapted to the region's culture. According to Hervé, Levantines were characterized by a mixture of poor language skills, often speaking multiple languages badly, an inclination to avoid direct answers, and a prioritization of commercial interests above all else.

Hervé (1837a, pp. 390-391) emphasizes that these traits were not intrinsic to the Levantines but were rather shaped by the unique influences of the society and environment in which they lived. Specifically, he argues that the Levantines of Izmir were lazy, wasteful, uneducated, and manipulative qualities that Hervé believed were typical of the East. This negative portrayal reflects the broader view of the Levantines as a community that embodied the less desirable aspects of Eastern society, as viewed through the lens of European travelers. This approach reveals the Levantines' transitional identity between the West and the East and underscores the negative aspects of this liminal position. Hervé portrays them as a community that has deviated from their Western roots and instead embraced Eastern habits and values. His account provides significant insight into the cultural perception of Levantines as seen through a European lens.

In his narrative, Hervé adopts a distinct Orientalist perspective, emphasizing that Europeans who resided in Izmir adopted the negative characteristics of Eastern societies. He argues that the Europeans in Smyrna gradually transformed into "ordinary Levantines," marked by foul language, commercial opportunism, and laziness. This shift, in Hervé's view, signaled the loss of their Western identity and

their assimilation into a supposedly inferior Eastern culture. By highlighting these supposed flaws, Hervé reinforces Orientalist notions of Western superiority and Eastern degeneracy. Furthermore, by including the Levantines within this Orientalist framework, he strengthens the distinction between Europeans and Levantines, framing them through the concepts of “self” and “other.”

In the broader depictions of Levantine society by British travelers, negative perceptions are often central. These observations are shaped by a common sentiment: a widespread belief that Levantine society was largely preoccupied with commercial interests and financial gain. Many travelers noted that the Levantines lacked formal education and had a narrow worldview, one that revolved solely around their immediate concerns, without broader intellectual or cultural engagement. This perception is frequently coupled with a sense of pride and arrogance regarding their isolated lifestyle. Hervé, for instance, stresses that the Levantines in Smyrna were solely focused on trade, particularly cotton, wool, and figs, and were neither interested in nor willing to engage with any subject beyond these commercial pursuits (Hervé 1837b, p. 32). He states that not only the Levantines born in Smyrna, but also the Europeans who settled in Smyrna for work, had adopted this narrow-mindedness. Hervé (1837b, pp. 32-33) argues that every behavior of the Levantines - be it a ball game, a card game, or neighborly relations - reflected a business-oriented mentality. During his travels, he observed: “If two *Izmiris* meet on the street, after greeting each other, they will certainly ask the following question: *Comment va le commerce?*”

Hervé's observations in Istanbul mirror many of the same themes he addressed in his account of Izmir, continuing his critique of Levantine society. He points out that, in the Levantine world, being well-educated was actually viewed as a negative trait, and respectability was instead measured by wealth. His example of the German family he encountered highlights this attitude: “The family with whom I boarded was German; very worthy people, but with them were associated two mighty sins in the eyes of the inhabitants of Pera, they were poor and well-educated. The latter crime might have been pardoned, but, united with the former, it was too enormous to be forgiven. This anecdote not only emphasizes the low regard Levantines had for education but also underlines their emphasis on commercial success and social standing as the ultimate markers of respectability. In this sense, wealth and business acumen were considered far more valuable than intellectual or cultural achievements.

The Levantines' disinterest in education and the arts also caught the attention of other travelers, such as Charles MacFarlane, who wrote critically about the cultural climate in Smyrna. MacFarlane emphasized the Levantines' lack of engagement with art and literature, observing that women, in particular, lacked musical sensitivity and did not partake in reading. He noted, “The ladies do not even possess the

accomplishment of music, which one would think inherent to the clime of Ionia. I never heard a piece of music, or even a song, that was supportable, during my long stay at Smyrna. I never saw but one lady with a book in her hand, nor did the men seem much more given to reading.” This portrayal highlights the perceived cultural barrenness of Levantine society in the eyes of British travelers, who saw the Levantines’ lack of interest in intellectual pursuits as a sign of their cultural stagnation and moral decline.

Both Hervé and MacFarlane’s accounts paint a picture of Levantine society that is indifferent, even hostile, to education and the arts. For these travelers, the Levantines’ preoccupation with wealth, commercial success, and practical matters of everyday life was seen as a reflection of their cultural shortcomings. In the Orientalist mindset, this lack of engagement with intellectual and artistic pursuits further marked the Levantines as culturally inferior and confirmed the travelers’ biases toward Western superiority. These observations show that the examination of Levantine society from a Western perspective is interpreted in a way that reinforces the superiority of the West and the backwardness of the East.

In another section of his travelogue, Hervé highlights that bankruptcies and sudden wealth were commonplace among the Levantines of Izmir. In Levantine society, the focus was placed not on how individuals acquired their wealth, but on the extent of their riches. In this context, Hervé (1837b, p. 137) recounts the case of a wealthy man he encountered: “One of the most prominent figures in the Levantine society of Izmir, who was widely known to have accumulated his fortune by usurping the property of his deceased patron.” According to the author’s observations, a poor clerk, who a few years ago no one paid attention to, suddenly had a great fortune and was interested in trade. He became one of the richest men in Izmir and was recognized as an important figure in society. The author (Hervé, 1837b, pp. 137-138) states that some of the merchants had very bad and negative opinions about how this person acquired his fortune, but despite this, they showed him great respect. These merchants accepted his invitations with great joy, celebrated his health, and used flattering expressions praising his virtues.

On the other hand, Charles Fellows, in his observations of Levantine society, noted that one of the primary challenges faced by Europeans in Smyrna was that the mercantile caution and reserved approach typical in England were displayed here, but without being supported by corresponding social advantages. Like Hervé, Charles Fellows argues that the Levantines remained indifferent to the developments occurring around them and failed to establish a sense of belonging to their environment. According to him, (Fellows, 1839, pp. 4-6) the Frankish community in Izmir lacked both emotional and political ties to the land they inhabited, and they had no influence within the local administrative structure. Therefore, all of their thoughts and daily lives are shaped around trade. Fellows (1839, pp. 4-6) emphasizes that even the

properties owned by the Levantines were of a temporary nature, that they avoided building permanent and valuable dwellings due to natural disasters such as earthquakes, and that they were organized in such a way that they could quickly load their possessions onto ships and leave the region in the event of a threat, such as a plague outbreak or tension with the Turks. Another noteworthy aspect of Fellows' account is that the Levantines made no effort to leave a physical or social trace of the city they lived in. What is essential for them is the continuity of their commercial connections and the preservation of their earning opportunities. In this respect, Fellows makes it clear that the main motivations of the Levantines were trade and material gain.

Another point about Levantine society that British travelers consistently emphasize is the sensitivity surrounding social status. Within this narrow and insular community, the reputation of individuals and families was considered of utmost importance. However, a view frequently expressed in the travelogues is that the Levantines' sense of prestige was relative. According to the travelers, the social status that Levantines held at the local level would not be the same in major European cities, where they would often be regarded as mediocre or of low social standing. Hervé also observed this phenomenon and noted in his travelogue that the prestige the Levantines enjoyed in local society would be modest by European standards. According to the author's observations, it was true that these Europeans felt like "little village lords" in Pera, yet in large cities like London, Dublin, or Edinburgh, they would be considered nobody. The author refers to a French proverb: "He who has one eye becomes a prince among the blind," highlighting the idea that, while many Europeans in Pera were highly regarded, in other places, they would only stand out for their mediocrity (Hervé 1837b, p. 146). This is an observation that suggests that even though they are perceived as very important and remarkable figures in their position in Pera, elsewhere they will remain such ordinary and obscure beings.

The Levantines' perception of themselves as influential figures in Pera is a noteworthy phenomenon, especially considering the limited social structure and small-scale dynamics of the region. The relatively small European population around them may have played a crucial role in shaping this perception. Qualifications or individual achievements that would be overlooked in larger European cities might have become more apparent in a smaller social circle like Pera's, elevating individuals' status beyond what they might have otherwise attained. The metaphor of the "one-eyed man as king among the blind" reflects the widespread belief that Europeans in Pera were seen as more cultured or intellectual than the native elements of Ottoman society. However, in the travelers' narratives, Levantines were often excluded from this positive impression. On the contrary, they were frequently depicted as poorly educated, ordinary, and obscure compared to their European counterparts.

Nevertheless, the observations of Levantine society are marked by a consistent judgment that this group was introverted, primarily focused on individual interests. While the travelers' accounts suggest that Levantine society did not exhibit an absolute closedness in terms of ethnic and religious boundaries—wealthy Greeks and Jews, for example, could be integrated into the community to some extent—what is frequently emphasized is the remarkable solidarity within the group. Outsiders were often met with a distant, even indifferent, attitude. In this context, the accounts of MacFarlane, who was in Izmir during the Greek Revolt, highlight the Levantines' indifference toward the political developments in their surroundings. MacFarlane (1828, p. 43), while describing the Levantines' response to the Greek revolt, finds their indifference particularly striking: “During the Greek massacres at Smyrna, the most thorough heartlessness was generally testified by all classes, Franks and Rayahs, wearers of hats and calpacs. The Franks were not attacked, and when their alarm for themselves subsided, they gave soirées and balls, while unfortunate Christians were murdered in the streets.”

The indifferent attitude of the Levantine community towards the Greek Revolt suggests that there were various structural reasons for their lack of support for this movement. The professional and social status of the Levantines differed significantly from that of the Greek communities, which were predominantly involved in the revolt. Living in the same geographical region or sharing certain economic activities did not foster a strong sense of belonging that would unite them in a common political cause. This implies that, regardless of their wealth or status, the Greeks were not considered essential members of the Levantine community. Since Levantine identity was primarily shaped by trade and relations of interest, rather than by specific ethnic or national loyalties, a movement with a national character, such as the Greek Revolt, likely failed to resonate within their worldview.

However, the Levantines' indifference to the social and political events unfolding around them may also reflect a deeper cultural attitude that extends beyond narrow self-interest. In fact, some travelers perceived this indifference as an inherent aspect of the Levantine way of life, rather than simply a concern for individual interests. For instance, Pardoe (1838, p. 65) characterized Levantine society as one that remained aloof from any issue that did not directly affect them, remaining largely indifferent to the political and social transformations happening around them. While Pardoe suggests that a lack of education may be at the root of this indifference, she also observes that Europeans who have lived in the East for many years develop a similarly superficial understanding of life in the region. According to the author, it is striking that Europeans residing in Anatolia often behave as if they have never left their home country. Despite living there for many years, sometimes fifteen or twenty, they remain largely ignorant of the political economy, the governance system, and the moral values of the country they inhabit. When prompted to discuss these

matters, they tend to limit themselves to surface-level and superficial details about external influences, and they find it difficult to engage in deeper discussions or develop a more profound understanding. Pardoe further notes that discussions on Eastern policies within European embassies are rarely undertaken in depth, except within a small circle.

According to Pardoe (1838, p. 66), the Levantine community was notably indifferent not only to the socio-political conditions of the Ottoman lands but also to the political processes of the European states to which they were connected. This indifference aligns with the widespread perception of Levantines as apolitical and introverted, a characterization frequently encountered in the travel narratives of the time. Another striking theme that travelers emphasized was the difference in behavior and attitude between Levantines in Pera and Izmir. As often noted in these narratives, the Levantines in Pera were distant, cold, and frequently rude, especially toward strangers and foreigners. In contrast, the Levantines in Izmir were described as warm, hospitable, and tolerant. This disparity can likely be attributed to the fact that the Levantines of Istanbul were more closely connected to the Ottoman bureaucracy and exposed to the relatively tense atmosphere of official and political relations. In contrast, the Levantines in Izmir were primarily engaged in trade and lived in a more relaxed social environment. In fact, Charles MacFarlane found the Levantines of Smyrna to be exceptionally polite, friendly, and hospitable, and he made sure to highlight this observation in his travelogue:

Smyrna boasts the title of “Le Petit Paris du Levant,” and... the free, familiar intercourse among all classes, never fails to strike the stranger, who, if he chooses, may become an immediate partaker in it. At Smyrna, you are presented at a house-you meet there a certain number of Levantines, and make their acquaintance in a brief time -they talk at once with you, particularly the ladies, who are of course the most interesting, as if they had known you for years; they tell you stories about Greeks and Turks, and the splendid balls at their casino, and ask questions about London and Paris, of which places their eastern imaginations have formed the most extravagant ideas. There is little instruction or wit to be met with, but naïveté and natural liveliness are general and do very well for an idle hour (Pardoe, 1838, p. 82-83).

One of the most striking aspects of Levantine society that nineteenth-century travelers found most remarkable was the extraordinary tolerance that this group developed towards the increasingly sharpened identity elements such as religion, nationality, and race in Europe of the period. This tolerance of the Levantines was seen as exceptional by travelers, especially at a time when European nation-states were



constructing their identities with strict boundaries. Charles MacFarlane (1828, p. 43) tries to identify three main sources of this tolerance. First, he points to the civilizing and unifying effect of trade relations. In contrast to the rigid boundaries of identity often found in Central and Northern Europe, in Levantine society, individuals' success in economic activities and commercial cooperation was more important than their ethnic or religious affiliation. This trade-oriented approach, which developed within the multicultural characteristic of port cities, led Levantines to adopt a more pragmatic and tolerant attitude towards different identity groups.

Secondly, MacFarlane (1828, pp. 86-87) argues that the sectarian distinctions in Levantine society blurred over time, and that kinship relations developed between different Catholic and Protestant families, and that these marriage ties reinforced tolerance by creating a common system of values. This allowed the Levantines to remain relatively free from tensions similar to the sectarian conflicts in Western Europe and to develop a more flexible relationship between different faith groups. The third element is the practice of coexistence necessitated by daily life in a multi-ethnic city like Izmir. According to MacFarlane, the Levantines of Izmir lived intertwined with Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and Muslims, establishing neighborly, commercial, and service relationships with these communities. Levantine families sometimes hired young Greek women for domestic work, sourced agricultural produce from Muslims, and purchased it through Armenians and marketed their goods through Jews. Such daily contacts enabled Levantines to establish closer relations with different ethnic and religious groups and thus internalize a tolerant way of life.

MacFarlane also associates this tolerance of the Levantines with their apparent "emotional tranquility." According to MacFarlane, Levantines neither indulged in strong passions nor divided into sharp ideological camps. The absence of grand ideals and intense emotional conflicts created an atmosphere of calm, moderation, and therefore compromise in Levantine society. MacFarlane (1828, pp. 87-88) summarizes this situation with the following sentence: "The Levantines are not given to strong passions, nor do they lack great virtues, but this restraint protects them from great excesses."

## **4. Conclusion**

Throughout history, the Levantines have symbolized and constituted the transitory space and boundary between East and West, Europe and the Ottoman Empire. As a hybrid community, they resisted being defined by a single identity at a time when national identities were becoming increasingly important, and they could neither be fully European nor fully Ottoman. For these reasons, Levantine communities occupied the status of the "foreigner," the "other" in both worlds. The construction of the Levantines as

the “other” was not a passive identification, but rather an active process shaped by political, economic, and cultural dynamics. Travelers’ narratives often constructed a negative stereotype, depicting Levantines as rootless, opportunistic, and lacking a clear cultural identity. Meanwhile, their multilingualism, adaptability, and commercial acumen—qualities that facilitated their survival in Ottoman port cities—were frequently dismissed as hypocrisy or superficiality.

The travelers, who evaluated the Levantines’ economic pragmatism, multicultural structure, customs, and lifestyles from an Orientalist perspective, accepted them as neither fully Eastern nor fully Western. This hybrid status was further complicated by the Levantines’ own perceptions of themselves. On the one hand, they saw themselves as part of the European world; on the other, they struggled to adapt to the lifestyles of Ottoman cities, finding it difficult to maintain European customs, language, and traditions. Their claims to a Western identity were often rejected by European observers, who viewed their cultural hybridity as a sign of degeneration rather than enrichment. This rejection contributed to their marginalization both within the Ottoman Empire and in the eyes of Europe.

As a result, the Levantines became one of the most notable examples of the permeability of identity boundaries in a world where cultural borders were shifting more rapidly than geographical ones. As a community that managed to be both self and the other, both insider and outsider, and to navigate the borders of being European and Eastern, the Levantines also illuminated the complexity of identity formation in multicultural societies. The debates surrounding the construction of the Levantines as the “other,” cultural purity, hybridity, and the permeability of social and political borders were central to the nineteenth century, but they remain highly relevant in today’s discussions of migration, diaspora, and transnational identity.

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