

Anatolian Travels, 19th Century: A Review

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Portrait of Léon de Laborde in his travel costume, by Antoine-Alphonse Montfort, published in 1838, Bibliothèque municipale du Blanc

Exhibited between September 7-December 18, 2016 at the Arkas Art Center, Izmir. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Mr. Jean-Luc Maeso for guiding me through the exhibition and providing his valuable support—AK.

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Once you climb the marble stairs in the entrance hall of the Arkas Art Center, an early 20th century building, and walk down the corridor to enter the first room of the exhibition, you are soon greeted by an armed man, dressed in an Ottoman costume, with embroidered red trousers and a *sarik* on his head. He looks at you with determination from a softly lit frame, inviting you to prepare for a journey in time. He is depicted standing in an outdoor setting. Just behind him, another man seems busy preparing a horse for travel. Whereas the horse has its head turned to the viewer, this man is facing backwards, claiming none of your attention, absorbed by his work. He might be a servant, or a local guide. Two date palms behind an old stonewall, some cactus plants and, at the far back, a couple of scattered small structures evoking Muslim tombs, disperse any remaining doubts as to where we are. This is the Ottoman “Orient”, and this company is preparing to resume travel after a break.

The drawing, a work of Antoine-Alphonse Montfort (1802-1884),¹ was created in the 1820s and depicts no other than Léon de Laborde, a Frenchman, who travelled together with his father in the Ottoman lands in 1825. Yet it is not the Ottoman period and its culture that Laborde invites us to explore. He is there because he is performing his very own travel-in-time, searching for ancient remains, and seeking to match his encountered landscape with the one in his literary imagination:

The source of the Scamander is here, Ilion is before you. You have Homer in your hand, you read, and the site corresponds to the description, just as the description vividly evokes a faithful image of the site.²

This double journey in time, the transfer from the year 2016 to the 19th century Anatolia and from there, with the help of French travellers, to the region’s ancient past, is the challenge taken up by “Anatolian Travels: 19th Century”, the latest exhibition of the Arkas Art Center. Through hundreds of visual documents presented to the Izmirian public —many for the first time— the exhibition manages to successfully convey the complex nature of Western travel in the region. Realistic views are entangled with imagined landscapes, orientalist strokes with extremely accurate archaeological and anthropological accounts, and all demonstrate the variety of interpretations, perceptions, and dispositions of the Western traveller. Sometimes epic poetry leads to archaeological surveys of extraordinary accuracy—while in other occasions, like in the case of the Temple of Halicarnassus, historical account and *in situ* observation lead to imaginary reconstruction drawings, endowing us today with multiple versions of the temple façade. In the breath-taking drawings, sketches, watercolours and even early photographs, science and imagination feed each other, while present and past get reconstructed.

The exhibition presents the rich visual production of over 30 French travellers to Anatolia throughout the 19th century, including among others Louis-François Cassas, Jules Laurens, Charles Texier, Antoine-Marie Chenavard, Léon de Laborde and his father Alexandre de Laborde, Antoine Ignace Melling, Jules Gervais-Courtellemont, and Félix Sartiaux. These Frenchmen travelled in the Ottoman lands sometimes on their own initiative, while on other occasions with the support or by commission of the French state. They assumed multiple roles. For example, the Labordes can be seen at the same time as archaeologists, geographers and anthropologists, and produced a wide range of drawings and records, while comparing their discoveries with ancient accounts or recent publications. The collective travels and works of travellers turned the Orient from a fantasy to a real experience, available to them and the ones to follow.

As the curator Jean-Luc Maeso mentions in the exhibition catalogue, it is difficult to record “typical” routes that the travellers followed.³ This probably owes to the vast number of archaeo-

1 It is a lithograph, published in 1838. The exhibit belongs to the collection of *Bibliothèque municipale du Blanc*.

2 Léon de Laborde, *Voyage de l’Asie mineure, par MM. Alexandre de Laborde, Becker, Hall et Léon de Laborde* (Paris: Firmin-Didot Frères, 1856), 26, quoted in Jean-Luc Maeso, ed., *Anatolian Travels, 19th Century*, exhibition catalogue (Izmir: Arkas Sanat Merkezi 2016), 35.

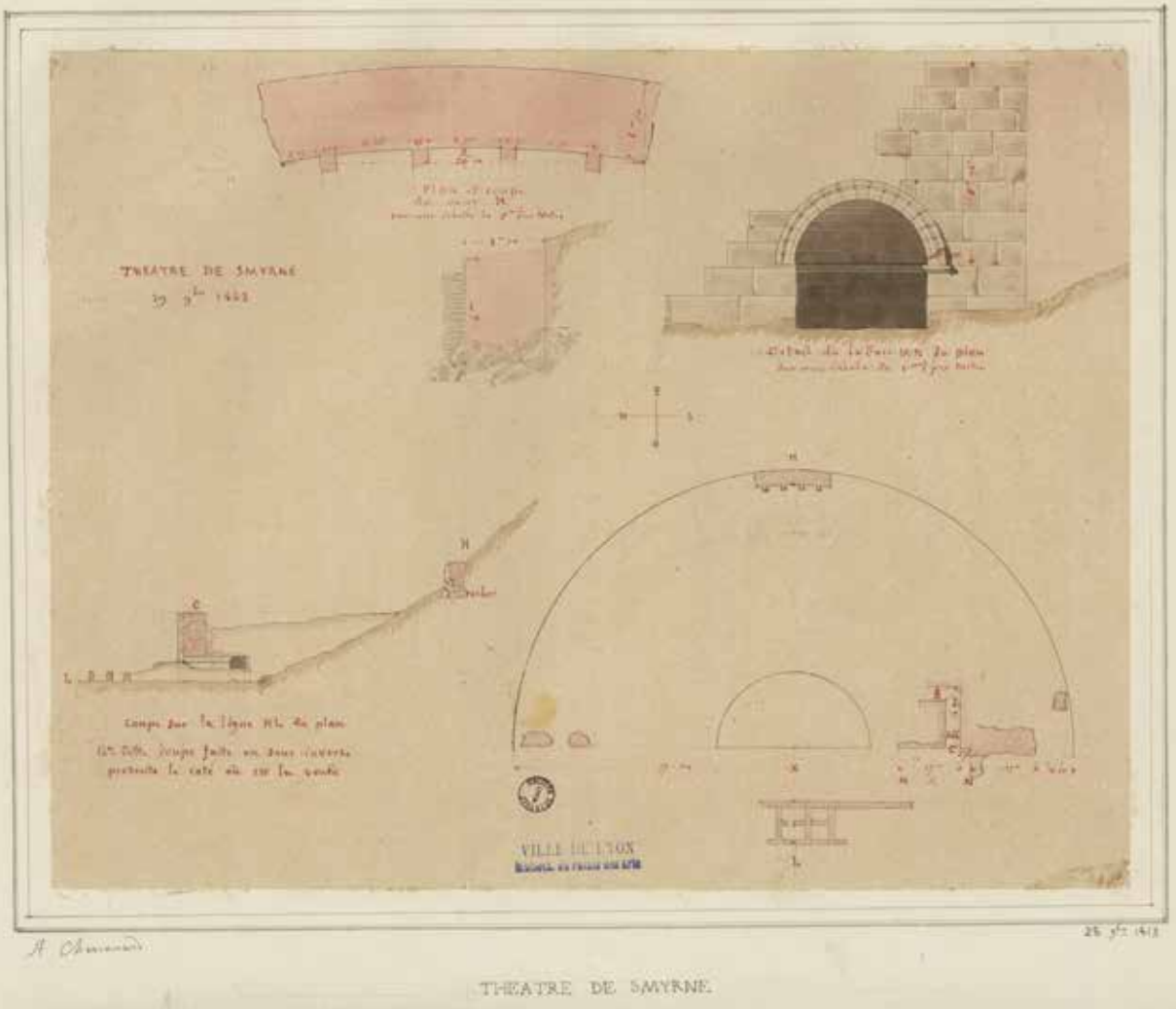
3 Maeso, *Anatolian Travels, 19th Century*, 25.



Halicarnassus, the Mausoleum as restituted by Bernier, Musée d'Orsay

logical sites, which offered them a wide range of possible routes, but also to the travel conditions of the time. Generally, they were interested in antiquity and early Christianity. But many recorded the Ottoman reality as well, whether motivated by curiosity, realism or orientalism. Varied interests and individuality played their role. These men did not just follow old or recent accounts, reproducing the same perceptions, but expanded the knowledge on the Orient, and when back home, they published their own works, such as in the cases of Charles Texier (*Description de l'Asie Mineure*, 1837) and Leon de Laborde (*Voyage de l'Asie Mineure*, 1856).

Nevertheless, one cannot but recognize that most of these travellers expressed themselves in the same visual language—their points of interest might not always have coincided, but the



Smyrna Theatre, by Antoine-Marie Chenevard, 1843, Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon

viewpoints, techniques and themes were similar (compare for example Laborde and Texier's drawings of the theatre at Hierapolis). Their works expanded the understanding of the Orient, but did not challenge the fundamental worldviews that fuelled these explorations. Perhaps they were led by personal curiosity, or a desire to find one's own identity and fulfil it, to rise to one's role as a member of the Western elite. But at the same time, they contributed to an understanding of knowledge as power, and to a worldview that connected the acquired knowledge and subsequent inspiration to the right of ownership over ancient civilisations. In relation to the this, Anatolian travels gain further interest when considered as precursors or contributors to the foundation of local archaeological institutes by powerful states (such as the French School of Athens or the Russian Archaeological Institute in Istanbul, RAIK).

On the other hand, the contribution of western travellers and archaeologists to the development of local archaeological practice and of the study of the past is undeniable and has been

extensively researched. Whether because of the strive to modernisation, or as a response the increasing interrelation of archaeology and politics with regards to the “Eastern Question,” a strong local interest for the ancient past developed among the Ottomans (and some decades earlier, among the Greeks). This also meant that gradually Ottoman controls over foreign travels and excavations increased, and the Ottoman Empire too entered the game of archaeology, claiming its share over the past remains unearthed in its lands.⁴

Practical difficulties faced by the travellers and resulting from the above or other issues are not neglected in the exhibition. Often one assumes that these travellers roamed without control or difficulty in the Ottoman lands. Among the exhibits one has the opportunity to encounter a few textual documents that reveal the difficulties encountered—whether those meant finding a good local guide or being granted permission from the Ottoman state to visit a site.

Many of the documents raise as many questions than they answer: if we return to Laborde’s striking portrait, one wonders, why did the Labordes chose to dress in local costume? Is it a matter of practicality, or is this a personal preference? Is it possible to diagnose specific ideological standpoints in the various drawings, or would such an endeavour speak more of us than about them? What meaning did the travellers assign to the cityscape of Afyonkarahisar, or the photographs of village women? Where did they find their guides, and how did they navigate?

The exhibition, which filled the two floors of the Arkas Art Center, is the second part of a diptych dedicated to the itineraries of travellers in the Orient. The first part, presented in 2013, had focused on Izmir under the title “Smyrna in the 18th and 19th centuries: A Western Perspective.” Away from generalizations and reductionisms, both these exhibitions grasped the vast complexity of the —literal— return to antiquity in the 19th century. Both were accompanied by well-prepared catalogues that deserve careful study, and open a discussion that will hopefully be continued.

“Anatolian Travels” is the fruit of a laborious search that involved many libraries and museums in France, such as the *Bibliothèque municipale du Blanc*, *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, and Cinémathèque Robert-Lynen, and the museums of Bordeaux, Lyon, Marseille and Montpellier, among others. The presentation of this material at the very building of the old French Consulate is especially appropriate.

Almost two hundred years after the Anatolian travels started flourishing, their study and importance remains very relevant. It is worth mentioning that during the period of the exhibition, an exhibition on a related topic was organized in Athens, by the Benaki Museum of Islamic Art in Athens, titled “Thomas Hope: Drawings of Ottoman Istanbul.” As East-West dilemmas and borders have begun to resurface in our region, the reconsideration of historic encounters, antagonisms, and exchanges between Europe and its “Near East” is more than fruitful—it is necessary.

Bibliography

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⁴ For more on this topic see Zainab Bahrani, Zeynep Çelik, and Edhem Eldem, eds., *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914* (İstanbul: SALT, 2011).