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Interventions to Istanbul Studies II, Introduction Restoring the Fabric: Giving Voice to Istanbul's Rum Community

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Sir Steven Runciman, the eminent English Byzantinist who taught at Istanbul University between 1942 and 1945, observed that Turkish authorities discouraged members of minority communities—Greeks, Armenians, and Jews—from attending his Byzantine history classes. Interestingly, however, Runciman noted that these authorities had no objections to these "minority races" participating in his classes on Byzantine art and archaeology.[1] Runciman's observation offers a compelling glimpse of the regime of knowledge that excluded Istanbul's Greek-speaking community, the Rum, from studying Byzantine history. Moreover, our current academic ignorance of the exclusionary practice he describes speaks volumes about the "narrative frameworks and cognitive paradigms"[2] that shape us, conditioning us to overlook the experiences of individuals and communities marginalized outside Turkey's dominant groups. As part of the *YILLIK* dossier series *Interventions to Istanbul Studies*, which addresses "the legacies of various exclusionary and discriminatory practices/approaches"[3] in Istanbul studies, the six essays collected in this dossier deal with the theme of erasure surrounding the Greek-speaking community of Istanbul over the past two centuries. They uncover silenced voices within Ottoman registers from the nineteenth century, the memoirs of an early twentieth-century businessman, and the archives of the organizing committee of the Tenth International Congress of Byzantine Studies, held in Istanbul in 1955. Their research also examines the records of the Greek Literary Society of Istanbul during the foundation of the Republic and the personal recollections of intellectuals from the 1950s.

These essays analyze the lived experiences of the Rum people as individuals and as a community, and their integration into Ottoman and republican society. Their stories not only highlight the vibrancy of the Rum community in Istanbul but also enrich our understanding of the broader context of Ottoman and Turkish economy and culture. These essays also underscore how Muslim and Turkish hegemony, exclusionary ideologies, and destructive practices led to the disappearance—rapidly in some cases, gradually in others—of Rum culture from Istanbul. The reactions of both Rum and Turks to this disappearance, the survival strategies adopted by the former, and the mechanisms of domination and representation employed by the latter, also form a crucial part of the present dossier. The essays focus on significant dates marked by transition or destruction, such as 1453, 1923, and September 6–7, 1955, as well as key spaces such as the Byzantine churches and fortifications of Istanbul, Büyük Valide Han, the Theological School of Chalke, and the streets and buildings of Fatih and Pera, highlighting patterns of erasure and survival through pivotal moments and locations.

Christine Philliou, in her essay "Invisible Ink: Erasures and Revelations of Valide Han," explores the layered history of Büyük Valide Han, located in the heart of Istanbul. Despite ongoing efforts by Turkish scholars to document the han's architectural and social history, the significant presence of non-Muslims in the han in its earlier years has been largely overlooked. By examining individual names and professions documented in the 1821 registers,

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1 Steven Runciman, *A Traveller's Alphabet: Partial Memoirs Runciman* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 59.
2 For the use of these terms, see Christine Philliou's contribution in this dossier.
3 Koray Durak, Cemal Kafadar, and Christine Philliou, "Introduction: Interventions to Istanbul Studies," *YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies* 3 (2021): 169.

Philliou challenges the narrative of the han as an exclusively Muslim space. She reveals how the Greek War of Independence and retaliatory violence led to the displacement of the 383 non-Muslim residents (mostly Rum and Armenians) who occupied 126 rooms in the han in 1821. Reconstructing the han's erased histories, she underscores the need to recognize the roles of non-Muslims in core areas of Ottoman economic life.

Where the first essay examined the Rum community through names and occupations in historical registers, the second, Paul Magdalino's "The Istanbul Experience of Ilias Makridis, 1901–1912," does so through the detailed personal story of Ilias Makridis, a Greek businessman from Pontos. Makridis's memoirs offer rich insight into the lives of Istanbul's Greek-speaking community across the city, from homes to inns and music shops to schools. His recollections highlight the delicate balance the Rum community struck with Ottoman authorities under Sultan Abdülhamid II and reveal broader cultural and social dynamics in the late Ottoman Empire. Makridis's story captures the complexities of being a Greek Orthodox Christian in a Muslim-majority empire undergoing rapid modernization and political upheaval.

While Makridis's experience illustrates the insular nature of many provincial Greek networks, the Greek Literary Society of Istanbul (*Syllogos*), founded in 1861, emerged as an extensive hub for the Greek-speaking community and intellectual networks. It provided a library, a meeting space, and public lectures at its headquarters in Pera. In "The Loss of the Greek Literary Society of Istanbul, the *Syllogos*, and Mapping as a Counter-Act," Firuzan Melike Sümertaş examines how the *Syllogos* represented the cosmopolitan intellectual vitality of the Greek Orthodox community in late Ottoman Istanbul. Sümertaş explores the destruction of the *Syllogos* as part of the broader erasure of Istanbul's non-Muslim presence, driven by the nationalist policies of the Turkish Republic. Following the Greco-Turkish War and the founding of the Turkish Republic, the *Syllogos* was closed in 1923, its property confiscated, and its archives and library dispersed, with remnants now housed in institutions such as the Turkish Historical Society in Ankara. The essay also discusses how digital mapping can serve as a countermeasure to preserve and reconstruct the institution's legacy.

The early republican years brought further traumatic events for the Rum community. The Istanbul Riots of September 6–7, 1955 marked a turning point, triggering an exodus of the Rum community by the 1960s. Additionally, the closure of the Theological School of the Chalke in Heybeliada in 1971 and the political discrimination that followed curtailed the academic development of the Rum community within Turkey. In his essay, Koray Durak examines the engagement of Istanbul's Rum community with Byzantine studies during this period, focusing on the Tenth International Congress of Byzantine Studies, held in Istanbul in 1955. Durak identifies ten Rum scholars who, through networks built around the patriarchate and the Chalke, contributed to the field. Although some of these scholars were invited to attend the 1955 congress, they withdrew at the last minute following the pogrom that occurred just a week prior to the event. Their contributions to Byzantine studies from the 1930s to the 1970s remain underrecognized, recoverable only through painstaking archival research and interviews with those who knew them.

Çiğdem Kafescioglu's "Diyelim Fethedildin [Let's say you've been conquered]" offers a distinctive perspective on the commemoration of the conquest of Istanbul (1453) by modern Turks, examining its socio-cultural and political implications from both historical and contemporary viewpoints. The essay questions the duality of the terms *fatih* (conqueror) and *meftuh* (conquered), presenting conquest not as a one-sided event but as a process of mutual transformation. Kafescioğlu uses the Kanlı Kilise (Theotokos Mouchliotissa) in Fener-Balat as a metaphor for the layered history of Istanbul, highlighting the complexities of Ottoman policies toward minority religious structures and the city's Byzantine heritage. She also explores the evolution of conquest commemorations from the late Ottoman period to the present, critiquing the spectacle-driven, exclusionary narratives that often marginalize the historical suffering of the conquered populations. Kafescioğlu proposes alternatives to traditional conquest celebrations, advocating for a focus on shared histories, cultural intersections, and the city's multifaceted identity.

The dossier concludes with Stefanos Yerasimos's brief yet poignant piece, "Orhan Pamuk'un İstanbul'una Nazire: Bir Rum Çocuğunun Beyoğlu Haritası [A counterpoint to Orhan Pamuk's Istanbul, or A Rum child's map of Beyoğlu]," first published in the 1999 issue of the journal *Istanbul*. Yerasimos recounts how a scholarly excursion around Pera in 1986 suddenly brought back memories of the limited yet rich physical and social world of his childhood Pera in the 1950s. The hills, street corners, and avenues that defined this world not only created a mental map but also acted as invisible barriers imposed on his existence as a Rum child. Yerasimos admits that, as an adult, he did not consciously question the map but gradually came to discover the world beyond its confines. He writes, "I sought to break down the invisible yet insurmountable barriers that Istanbul had placed before me by navigating through its historical geography. I tried to claim the history of a city whose geography I did not possess." In this sense, history emerges as a tool that helped an individual reclaim his past and dismantle the insurmountable barriers imposed by external forces.

This dossier engages in a similar act of remembering and recovering the legacy of Istanbul's Rum community, as well as the interaction between the majority Muslim and Turkish society and this community. Erasures create rents in the fabric of societal memory. Some of these rents are hastily stitched together to preserve a sense of continuity, while others are patched with pieces that fail to fit seamlessly. The texture of the past, held together by forgetting, silencing, and substitution, results in disrupted patterns and mistakes in the weave. Each essay in this volume serves as an intervention to undo the hasty and careless repair work, striving to restore the original fabric of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Istanbul and to reclaim the Rum community's place within it.