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The urban and architectural environment of Galata and Pera through the descriptions of some Italian travelers between the 19th and 20th centuries

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to present the urban and architectural environment in the cosmopolitan Istanbul's districts of Galata and Pera throughout the impressions left by some Italian travelers who spent some period in the Ottoman capital throughout the 19th and the early years of the 20th century. This historical period has been chosen and analyzed in order to show the changes and development of Istanbul in those years through several Italian 'eyes' and 'voices' who witnessed at that time some important transformations in the Ottoman culture, highlighting the coexistence of different world, such as the Turkish Muslim society and the 'Levantine world', a mixture of several cultures and religions, including Jewish and Christians. Through their detailed and accurate descriptions, many travelers witnessed the daily life of the 'Levantines', the urban environment in which they lived and the architecture they built, as well as their traditions and customs among the Muslim Turks. Following a chronological order, this paper will focus on travelers who described spaces and architecture in some areas of Istanbul such as Galata and Pera, defining and encompassing the culture of those Levantine communities.

Keywords: Galata and Pera, Levantine World, Ottoman Culture, Italian travelers, Architecture

1 Introduction

The focus of this article is to present some memoirs and comments on the urban and architectural environment in the cosmopolitan Istanbul's districts of Galata and Pera - which are today incorporated into the Municipality of Beyoğlu - made by some Italian travelers, in a period amid the 19th and the beginnings of the 20th century. Those descriptions were left by travelers who spent, for several and different reasons, a period of permanence in Istanbul. Within this purpose, the aim is to show how Italian 'eyes' and 'voices' have testified in that period differences, contradictions but also points of contact and similarities between the West and the fascinating 'Orient', through the magnifying glass represented by the local Italian community and their world in the Levant, giving new points of view to understand the complexities and the

thin equilibrium of the local foreign communities, seen as a micro cosmos within the immense Sultan's empire [1]¹.

Written impressions in form of diaries, illustrated books or travelogues, left by Italian travelers, ambassadors and diplomats, as well as journalists, artists and writers, who visited the city of Istanbul in the above mentioned time, have left to us a fundamental source to understand the social and political transformations in the Ottoman Empire, especially affected by the important *tanzimat* reforms after 1839. Through their detailed and accurate descriptions, many travelers witnessed, discovered and gave different interpretation on the 'Franks' or the so called 'Levantine' world: the urban Western-like environment in which they lived, the architecture they built, the several languages they spoke and so on, showing often a sense of curiosity and sometimes admiration for their habits and their daily life, as well as their religion, traditions, integration and customs among the Muslim Turks.

Starting mostly from the second half of the 19th century, and following the *Voyage dans le Levant*'s fashion inaugurated by famous French writers and poets such as François-René de Chateaubriand, Gérard de Nerval, Théophile Gautier, Alphonse de Lamartine, Gustave Flaubert and Pierre Loti, several Italians began the journey towards East, in order to write and describe it, sometimes looking just for an 'exotic' experience, but in many cases to clear the mind of the Italian readers about Turkey, the Turks and the incredible melting pot of cultures and religions which coexist in those lands.

Among all the 'Franks' and foreigners living at that time in the Ottoman Empire, the Italian community had always represented a strong presence in that geography since very long time. For many reasons, but mostly pushed on by trade and commerce, the Italians were among the first foreigners who first established durable relations in the Orient. Even before the rise of the Muslim rulers – in the medieval period – the presence of Italian communities within the borders of the Byzantine Empire and in other eastern lands was not an exception but the rule. The Genoese, the Venetians, the Pisans and the Florentines as well as the Catholic Church with friars, monks, nuns and priests – just to mention some of the most active Italian communities abroad – carried on for centuries trades, diplomatic and religious relations with the Byzantines, at least from the beginnings of the 13th century, following the so-called Fourth Crusade. It is not surprising that those tight relations between East and West have been continued as special agreements, or *Capitolazioni*, even later, under the Turkish Muslim rules who occupied those lands starting from the 15th Century [2].

Through several travel accounts, the contextual framework of this paper is structured to highlight the narrative and the images of the city left by these travelers over a period of about one hundred years. In this sense, different 'voices' have been selected to narrate through their own words or their personal memoirs what happened in the capital of the Ottoman Empire during the arduous phases and processes of

¹ This paper is part of a work in progress developed by the author in the last years, mostly investigating the travel literature in the Levant related to the Italian-Levantine community, its culture and its urban and architectural built environment. Some results were presented in the First Levantine Heritage Foundation Conference held at the British Consulate in Istanbul in 2014, but unfortunately the proceedings were never adequately published, while a few years earlier other results had already been presented in a collective publication relating to the Italian community in Levant.

westernization – when Istanbul was transformed into a modern city. It was a period shaken by strong social and political issue: first the *tanzimat* reforms (1839-1876), characterized by the modernization process, then the fall of the empire due to the consequences of the Balkan Wars and World War First and finally the birth of a new nation.

1.1 Research methodology

The research method is mostly based on qualitative sources, while the quantitative method of research cannot be applicable to this work due to the fact that the settlements of Galata and Pera were severely affected by fires and urban transformations, that completely reshaped the entire areas of which today we have minor to no evidence at all.

The way to present this architectural environment and cultural milieu is through gathering and analyzing the data existing in old maps, gravures, paintings and pictures that are depicting the area in which we can see the existence of this rich built environment and all its specifics and characteristics that are presented further on in this paper. The travelers' selection tries to show in a chronological matter a heterogeneous framework in which the individuality and the quality of each single author can be recognizable. In this context, the paper presents some Italian authors who directly have described the districts of Galata and Pera in Istanbul, and by doing that indirectly all the transformations within whole Ottoman Empire.

The narrative experiences herewith considered are exclusively related to the Italian-Levantine community in Istanbul, concerning the 'modern' district of Galata and Pera and the chosen written texts confirmed a variety of cases in which the sense of 'Italian-ness' inside that culture was perceived by the authors themselves with pride and gratification, making them more close and friendly to the Turks and the Ottoman world as well. Of course, there are many other descriptions and written texts left by other Italians on the Italo-Levantine community that are not taken into consideration [3, 4, 5], but the purpose of this work is to show how the reflections of this Levantine world - in the our case limited to the Italian community of Galata and Pera - were represented and felt by Italians from Italy.

2 The Italian contribution to the urban and architectural built environment of Galata and Pera

Through the works of some architects this chapter aim to present the Italian contribution to the Ottoman architectural culture, which served to consolidate a strong link already existed between *La Sublime Porta* and Italy.

In that period of great reforms after 1839, many foreigners contributed to the urban and architectural development of modern Istanbul, implementing from time to time the styles in the changing Ottoman-Turkish world. In particular, many of these architects highlighted through their masterpieces the main trends visible in the

contemporary Italian or French scene, emphasizing the fashions or styles of the moment, from Neoclassical to Eclecticism, from Historicism to Art Nouveau, from Ottoman Revival to Neo-Gothic, to Decò and Modernism. Historically Galata and Pera were the districts in which mostly of the population was not Muslim and throughout the centuries the establishment of such cosmopolitan milieu became possible thanks to many factors that contributed to the modern urban development and to a consequent architectural transformation process [6].

Finding a fertile ground in the Ottoman Empire, where solid cultural and commercial relations had always been established with all the European powers and having common consolidated roots, well represented by the Latin community already existing since the period of the Genoese colonies, several entrepreneurs, architects, engineers, sculptors and decorators from Italy and Levantine from Italian origins were commissioned or moved to the court of the last Sultans or in the first period of Kemalist Turkey, to propose their own projects and visions for the ‘City of Desire’: Constantinople. As pointed out by Boriani, in relation with the urgent need of skilled experts to reform many sectors of the Ottoman society:

To achieve this [modernization], the contribution of Europeans would be indispensable: engineers, architects, physicians, technicians and workers with expertise in these new sectors, as well as craftsmen and artists, were offered great opportunities for employment. They were taken up not only by the community of the European - a great many of them Italian – settled in Galata (the Levantines), but also by a new wave of immigrants, lured by the revival of the economy and the demand for new skills. [7]

Therefore, throughout the 19th century many architects, engineers and contractors from different countries were involved in the ‘modernization’ process of the cities’ layout, and in the specific case of Galata and Pera, a major role was played by the Italian ones, who were able to interact with the local hybrid Levantine environment and to include in their projects typical features of the Ottoman - Muslim architectural background, entwined with the most contemporary European stylistic tendencies as well as with the spaces related to the Armenian, Greek and Jewish communities. In fact, considering the architecture of several public and private buildings, and its stylistic features, Girardelli states that:

[...] In between these two extremes, the Levantine production of minor protagonist like Barborini or Semprini, as well as the highly redefined synthesis of D’Aronco, stood as significant contribution of an Ottoman architectural modernity, not yet inscribed into clear-cut national scheme. [8]

In some cases, catastrophic disasters like big fires - as it happened in 1831 and in 1870 - were an opportunity to redefine new modern urban plans all over Galata and Pera, but in other circumstances top-down interventions and the formation of new public entities like the new municipality system, decided the rules for the entire city and in the case of Beyoğlu those transformations were intensely implemented (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Detailed map of Galata and Pera in the 19th century, from: *Plan general de Galata, Pera et Pancaldi. 6mo cercle de Constantinople. G. D'Ostoya, Ingenieur du Conseil Municipal. 1858-1860.* (source: IBB Atatürk Library - Istanbul).

The Municipality of the 6th District in Beyoğlu (*VI. Daire-i Belediye*), established in 1858, represents one of the institutions that was modeled on Western examples and contributed to the modernization process of the entire district [9]. The building to locate all the administrative functions was built by the Italian architect Giovanni Battista Barborini between 1880 and 1893 in the core of Beyoğlu, nearby the so called Tünel station, the new underground cable railway linking Galata to the heights of Pera.

Among all the projects done by Italians between the second half of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century, some of the most relevant architects who contributed to the formation of such rich architectural cityscape has been chosen within this purpose. Even today, wandering through the narrow streets of Galata and Karaköy or along the main İstiklal Avenue in Pera (as *Grand Rue de Péra* was renamed in republican times) many of their names are still engraved on the façades of important banks, palaces, hotels, churches, department stores, inns and apartment buildings that were part of such cosmopolitan environment.

The Italian-Swiss architect Gaspare Fossati, together with his younger brother Giuseppe, was among the first of those invited to work in the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the reforms of 1839. Among his main works in Galata and Pera districts, there are some projects for the international diplomacy such as the Embassy of Russia (1838-45), that of Holland (1854) and the restoration for the Palazzo Venezia, at that time occupied by the Austrian legation (1853), and after World War I used as the residence of the Ambassador of Italy in Turkey. Between 1841 and 1843 they built the Dominican Church of San Pietro in Galata and all around Beyoğlu they also built

three theaters, the most important of which, the Naum Theater, was built near Galatasaray in 1846 and was active until a fire completely destroyed it in 1870 [10].

Italian Levantine architect Alessandro Vallauri, who later became a French citizen known as Alexandre Vallauri, was an extremely prolific architect and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts (*Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi*) in the cosmopolitan Istanbul, regularly chosen by the Ottoman high officials and French business circles elites.

As ‘City Architect’ (*Mimar-ı Şehir*), Vallauri was responsible for several public and administrative buildings such as banks, schools and other important Ottoman and foreign institutions. Among his numerous works in Beyoğlu we can briefly remember: the Décugis House in Şişhane, today Galata Antique Hotel (1881), the Cercle d’Orient in Pera for the cosmopolitan Istanbulian bourgeoisie (1884), the Pera Palas in Tepebaşı, built as an ‘exotic’ welcome facility for the Orient Express’s travelers and dated 1892, the monumental and eclectic Imperial Ottoman Bank in Galata-Karaköy dated 1890-92 and some commercial buildings such as the Hezaran Han and the Ömer Abed Han, both of them built in Karaköy in 1902 [11]; Giulio Mongeri, another Professor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, was an Italian-Levantine architect who contributed by teaching the training of new Turkish architects and who designed - in the very early years of the 20th century - works in a historicistic and eclectic style such as the Neo-Byzantine Karaköy Palas in Galata-Karaköy area (1920) or the Neo-Gothic Church of St. Anthony built in the busy İstiklal Avenue (1907-12). The latter was built, like many other buildings, together with Edoardo De Nari, another productive architect who arrived in Istanbul at the very end of the 19th century and soon became a leading figure in the Italian community, not only as an architect and decorator, but also as a politician and entrepreneur [12, 13].

Art Nouveau thus becomes part of the architectural language of cosmopolitan Istanbul as an expression of the local bourgeoisie and thanks to the work of the Friulian architect Raimondo Tommaso D’Aronco, who lived in Ottoman lands from 1893 to 1909, a new and successful architectural season was soon inaugurated. D’Aronco left in Galata and Pera several masterpieces, such as the atelier-residence of the court tailor, Jean Botter. The building dated from 1900 is an excellent example of Art Nouveau, which was the current fashion in vogue in all European cities, while other buildings from the same years are carrying his signature as architect such as a small fountain in a crossroad in Galata and the Kara Mustafa Pasha mosque in Karaköy, unfortunately demolished in the late 1950s to enlarge the square [14].

3 Italian travelers and their descriptions about Galata and Pera

The first of the authors chosen as a companion in the description of the Levantine world is Cav. Antonio Baratta (1802-1866). As a diplomat born in Genoa and employed at the Sardinian legation in the Levant, he cannot be considered as a genuine traveler, but he was an important ‘observer’ of the Ottoman society, whose works were published as a collection of his personal travels and experiences². Even if

² Other works on ‘Costantinopoli’ by Baratta are herewith listed: *Costantinopoli effigiata e descritta con una notizia su le celebri Sette Chiese dell’Asia Minore ed altri siti osservabili del*

he lived in the Ottoman Empire for few years he witnessed the beginning of the major reforms and his careful descriptions of how the 'Eastern Question' was also a keen interest in Italy helped a lot to shape a new vision of those lands and its inhabitants. In "*Costantinopoli nel 1831*", Baratta showed a strong critical sense in describing the 'other', compared to previous travelers or writers who tried to define the Levant with arrogance and maleficence; on the other hand, he always wanted to bring out and explain for a Western audience what was the real capital of a great empire as Istanbul surely was, regarded instead by many with prejudice and preconceptions. His criticisms against the intolerance and his enthusiastic approach towards the Turkish world are well perceptible in describing the Ottoman Empire and Turks as well as the Levantines and their quarters, as suggested by the following lines, chosen to underline Baratta's interest to unveil this strange, fascinating and kaleidoscopic world:

Almost all the Franks of Costantinopoli live in Pera and Galata. And therefore, it is an error to suppose that some public ban prohibiting them to settle on other sites: the Turks would not be able to imagine it. The Franks in Turkey are mainly engaged in trading, and there are some families who often collected huge fortunes. However, many also are dedicated to the liberal arts and crafts of all kinds, as there is no restriction to establish their industry, and their genius. [15]

Almost forty years after Baratta, a fellow who needs no introduction gives the most interesting and fresh description of the city and its customs: Edmondo De Amicis (1846-1908). In 1874, as a young correspondent for the Italian magazine *L'Illustrazione* he arrived into the Ottoman capital to capture, for the pleasure of the Italian readers, a colorful *fresco*, made up of architectural descriptions, landscapes, costumes, and people met by him.

As states and confirmed by many scholars today, "*Constantinopoli*" was a huge publishing success at the time, printed and translated in many languages several times. In this astonishing De Amicis' publication it is possible to find and select some passages and engravings related to Galata / Pera and the Levantine world (Fig. 2); not those in which the author indulges too much in the stereotyped Orientalist fascination, but mostly the ones in which the author was able to capture the spirit the changes of the modern city, instead of describing only the customs of the Turks. A different attitude toward modernity, as in the descriptions of hats and clothes, which really represented, in a small scale, the large changes in Ottoman society just introduced by the reforms of those years and the contributions made by the Levantine communities in those years:

It was from Galata that our excursion started. Galata is built upon a hill that forms a promontory between the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus, and upon the site of the great cemetery of ancient Byzantium. The streets are almost all narrow and tortuous, bordered by taverns, pastry-cook shops, butchers' and barbers' shops, Greek and Armenian cafes, merchants' offices, workshops, and barracks; the whole dark, damp,

Levante. 2 volumes, Torino: Alessandro Fontana, (1840), and *Bellezze del Bosforo. Panorama del meraviglioso canale di Costantinopoli, dello stretto dei Dardanelli e del Mar di Marmara*. Torino: Alessandro Fontana, (1841).

muddy and sticky as in the lowest district of London. A dense and busy crowd throngs the streets, constantly opening before carriages, porters, donkeys, and omnibuses. Almost all the trade of Constantinople passes through Galata. Here are the Exchange, the Custom House, the officers of the Austrian Lloyds, those of the French Messageries; churches, convents, hospitals and warehouses. An underground railway unites Galata to Pera. If it were not for the turbans and fezes in the street, it is not at all Oriental in its character. [16]

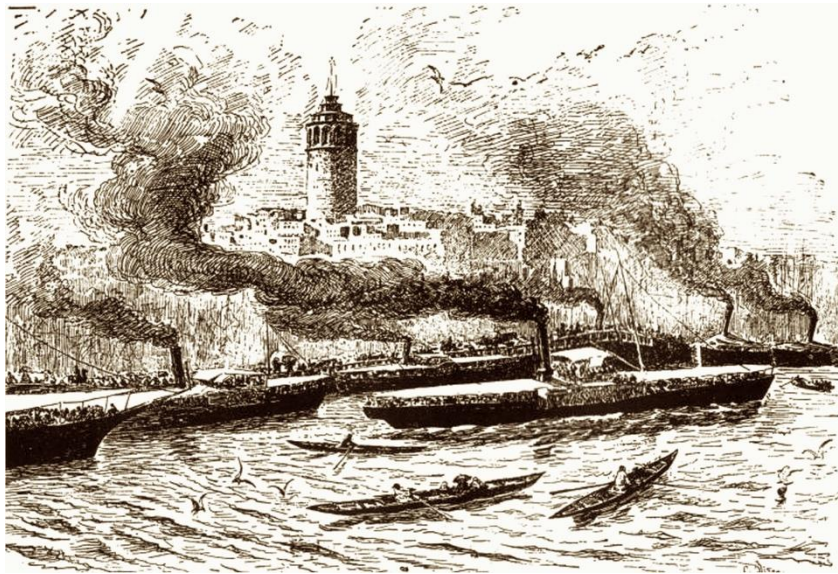


Fig. 2. Galata Bridge and the Golden Horn, from: E. De Amicis, *Costantinopoli*, 1877-78. (source: RDL private collection).

The writer-traveler Gaspare Invrea (1850 -1917), better known as Remigio Zena,³ in 1887, encouraged by the scientific expedition to ‘Costantinopoli’ recently made on a boat trip by his friend Captain Enrico D’Albertis [17], decided to go along with four friends in Istanbul by sea, sailing the yacht ‘Sphinx’. From this experience he published “*In Yacht da Genova a Costantinopoli (Giornale di bordo)*”, in which he took notes and commented the entire trip, describing the nature, the coasts and so on, but the habits of the local populations and the cities encountered as well. Sometimes, the author seems to miss certain objectivity, describing characters and situations faced, having strong prejudices against the Turks and their habits, but in rare cases, he

³ He was born in Turin but ‘adopted’ by the city of Genoa, where he spent his life and where he died at the age of 67 years. Son of a Ligurian noble family, Zena had a very conservative and religious education, which led him to enlist in the papal army during the Third Italian War of Independence (1866). He remained in Rome until 1870, the year of the breach of Porta Pia and later, he graduated in law and made a career in the military judiciary, not forgetting, however, his passion for letters and for travelling.

documented the beauty of some buildings belonging to the Italian community or the pleasure to spend time with Levantine families and Italian friars and nuns. In the following lines there is a beautiful description related to the Italian hospital in Tophane, built by the brothers Giorgio Domenico and Ercole Stampa around 1860s (Fig. 3), and visited by Remigio Zena after a good lunch with the Dominican friars, in the dining hall next to the Catholic church of San Pietro in Galata, a building renovated by the Fossati brothers in 1840s, which is still a tangible presence of the Italian community in Istanbul dating back to the Genoese time:

We had coffee and smoked a couple of cigarettes, the late hour already forced us to leave by those good fathers sooner than we would have liked to reach the lawyer Scaniglia, waiting for us to go together to see the Italian hospital. It is located in a side street of Pera on Top-Kane, is an elegant building, not huge, but large enough to meet the needs of the colony, and now maintained by our government, it was built on a bequest of Count Camondo, an exceptional work of charity, for which there will never be too excessive praise or admiration. Famous work really, when you consider how much difficulty you had to overcome in origin, and as time proceeds orderly and its performance, flawless, perfect, a sign that many Italians, and sometimes even the Turks, ask to be received, for a fee fixed in this hospital, rather than free in theirs. Nothing saves us from the kitchen to the attic, we did the honors director, a member of the Institute of Ivrea in Piedmont, a nun of the "Immaculate Conception" order and we were amazed: marble staircases, spacious corridors, spacious dormitories, neat, airy, with the windows open on the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn, which let in streams of light, allow the sick to be able to enjoy from their bed the most beautiful view in the world. [18]



Fig. 3. The Italian Hospital at Tophane-Cihangir built by Giorgio Domenico Stampa and Ercole Stampa in the 1860s. (source: photo@Luca Orlandi, 2021).

In the same years, Francesco D'Elia (1841-1916) describes a brief journey of only fourteen days in a report entitled "*Impressioni di un viaggio a Costantinopoli nel 1889*". It was first published as a pamphlet in 1913, but later was inserted in the religious magazine "The Order". It is a very interesting point of view, considering that the author - native from Gallipoli in Apuleia - was a priest, a clergyman in the capital of the 'infidels', perhaps driven solely by curiosity to travel in the Levant, but certainly supporting the idea of a quick return of the Ottoman capital in Christian hands. D'Elia gave very detailed descriptions about the religious services, the processions and some Catholic churches, like San Pietro in Galata (mentioned above as a work by the Fossati brothers) or Santa Maria Draperis in the heights of Pera, built in 1903 by Guglielmo Semprini, another important architect and contractor related to the Italian-Levantine community. D'Elia pleased to see how Italians could easily be seen as an integral part of the Ottoman cosmopolitan world; he was also impressed by the religious tolerance in which he found even himself in that brief stay, and by hearing everywhere Italian language, as described in this passage from his book:

In the shops, in the cafes, in the agencies, at the exchange, in steamboats, in the tram, in the Catholic cemetery, everywhere, it is easy to find those who want to speak Italian, as it was to me a real surprise. [19]

Giuseppe Antonio Borgese (1882-1952) was a writer and in his early years he founded several literary reviews, beside working for important Italian newspapers such as *Corriere della Sera*, *La Stampa* and *Il Mattino*. His nostalgic and melancholy book on "Costantinopoli" can be interpreted as a farewell to the Ottoman capital and its cosmopolitan world, for when he visited the city in 1928, it was no longer the center of the world as it had been in previous centuries.

Those who really want to see the East with their senses should listen to the Costantinopoli of today, which we have now looked at. In Pera, the horns roar with more noise and less need than in Milan itself. In Pera, and in Stamboul, on both sides of the Golden Horn for all hours of the morning, 1000 street vendors offer their own goods, carpets or oily fish from the Bosphorus, socks or cauliflower. With guttural cadences, which at times strangely recall the voices of the Palermo street. This kind of steady song is not very different from the lament we heard in the mosque, or from the long appeal to prayer, which the muezzin in a cyclist's cap repeats to the four winds from the balcony of the Minaret and no one pays attention to him. [...] Then, when he will have shaken the softness of these last filters, the traveler will understand that the prismatic and dull Orient - in what is today the East - no longer lives with the eyes, at least in Costantinopoli. [20]

4 Conclusion

Between the second half of the 19th until the first decades of the 20th century, the system Galata-Pera became an important center of cultural and political interactions where most of the population was living like in any other European capital city, until the fall of the Ottoman Empire, in the twenties of the 20th century. Present-day Galata and Pera architectural layout and cityscape are basically the result of 19th and 20th century transformations and despite all the inevitable and rapid changes that occurred in the last 150 years due to natural causes like fires and earthquakes and human interventions, like demolitions, abandonments or wrong reconstructions, a sort of *genius loci* is still perceivable. Considering all the upheavals over the centuries that have altered its appearance, making the neighborhood almost unrecognizable in today's urban layout and chaos, the district of Beyoğlu still shows - through some of its architectural remains - the multi-layered and cosmopolitan character of the old town.

As it can be understood from the selected descriptions made by some Italian travelers during their sojourn in Istanbul/Costantinopoli, there is not a clear and systematic definition of what the 'Levantine world' really was and what they were expecting to find from it; undoubtedly, it can assert that all the descriptions here presented have some common points that link them to each other: the 'voices' chosen to describe and comment the Italian-Levantine community and their built environment, often seemed to find a pleasuring and unexpected wonder when they found similarities in the Levant with their homeland.

If we have to summarize what travelers have witnessed of their stay in Galata and Pera, two adjectives very well represent a common feeling perceptible in all their descriptions: modern and cosmopolitan. Baratta, De Amicis, Zena, D'Elia and Borgese were constantly challenged and mesmerized by the frenetic life and by the modernity of the city visible in all the aspects of Beyoğlu's daily life. Those feelings of excitement and surprise can be almost seen everywhere through their pages as well as many comparisons with other European cities are incessant in their books; the streets of Pera quickly become those of Paris or Milan; fashion is the same as in Italy or in France; men wear suits and straw hats and women *a la page* dresses; the blind alleys of Galata and Karaköy are equal to the stench and confusion within the docks of London or Genoa or Naples; dialects chase between the screams of the people in the narrow streets climbing the slope of Galata and the Genoese, the Venetian and the Italian language itself are spoken or heard anywhere by the travelers.

All these narratives – combined with the tangible even though neglected architectural heritage of Beyoğlu – present a world that still need to be completely decipher, in order to give back, through the memory, the important role played by those communities who built their own identity, culture, architecture in a city that is still able, in the 21st century, to amuse and seduce the visitors and the contemporary travelers.

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