

ORIENT & OCCIDENT

EAST MEETS WEST IN ISTANBUL

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SYMPOSIUM ABSTRACT

East and West, are, of course, expressions used to stress the contrast between different worlds and ways of thinking, living or making works of art. They also represent a certain stance in looking upon “the Other”. All of these concepts have become clichés. But they have had a widely accepted role and a long history as terms of comparison. Especially in Istanbul, city known for ages as a gate to the East and meeting point of people and cultures.

This conference is not the first and won't be the last to deal with the dichotomy. But it has a definite and special point of departure: the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey as a place where the two worlds meet. Our aim is to follow some of the stages of the encounter of both throughout history and in different fields. An eminent international group of scholars, from the Czech Republic, France, Greece, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Switzerland will meet prestigious Turkish intellectuals in this conference, that will focus on Medieval history and literature, Renaissance and Modern Travel writing, as well as present-day Turkish culture. The symposium is organised by NIT, Universiteit Utrecht, l'Université de la Picardie Amiens and Ankara Üniversitesi.

An important role is performed by the medieval period, when the West first faced Byzantine culture and then the Ottomans. This has left a broad range of testimonials both in historiography and in literature. Key word is, of course ‘Crusade’, a concept still (and justly) seen in the Muslim world as a huge campaign of aggression of the Western Christian powers against Islamic religion and culture. But not much different was the Byzantine reaction against the Venetian-French war that, masked as a Crusade, overthrew their Empire.

In Early Modern times, the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul was maybe the most important event of the 15th century. Once the Turkish presence in the former Byzantine capital was an accomplished fact, diplomats, travellers and merchants went there and reported on its fascinating culture, many elements of which would make their way into Western life (e.g.

rugs, coffee, tiles, sorbet ice and musical instruments). In the period of Enlightenment, when the Ottomans were no menace any more, the myth of the evil Turk was displaced by that of the tolerant pasha or bon vivant. To many writers in the 18th till 20th centuries, the so-called Near East provided an ideal background: exotic, ma non troppo.

By now, however, the Ottomans had begun to look more towards Western civilization. The tanzimat period only institutionalized an outlook already present. After the Army, the economics, transports, applied science and technology of the Empire tried to follow Western models. "Westernizing" became a keyword that until today has lost nothing of its actuality in Turkish culture. The great leader Atatürk embraced it and implemented a strict and consequent program revolutionizing Turkish society into a Western one. In the process, the nation's own history rather receded to the background, since the elif be was changed into the Latin alphabet and the language cleansed from Arabic and Persian elements in favour of French or English words. Politics, laws, education, dress and arts followed one after the other and laid the base for a modern country and the emancipation of women.

Now, some 85 years after the foundation of the Republic and 70 years from its Founder's and Father's death, the Turks themselves have become increasingly curious about their own background and history. Ottoman culture is fashionable once again, even Operas are being written and numerous books published on this subject. That still some difficult points remain, and remain to be cleared, is no secret. For Western observers, the country is, as it has always been, both intriguing and welcoming. It is no exaggeration to say that many of our age's contradictions and problems are lived and have to be faced right here.