

Traveler's Descriptions of Vernacular Architecture in Istanbul, Turkey. (15th – 19th Century)

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the impressions left by some travelers who visited the capital of the Ottoman Empire between 15th and late 19th Century in order to understand the urban space and the vernacular architecture during this period. Relations between urban practices, the traditional architecture and urban imagery in the Western discourses will be discussed through case studies.

The paper employs memories and accounts such as drawings, journals, travelogues and descriptions left by the travelers to delineate the architectural and urban changes that took place in Istanbul, underlining their effect on the Western visitors. The transformations and use of urban spaces in the new Ottoman capital as well as the architecture, both public and civic, help understand the morphology and the topography of the urban environment. Having considered the contribution of travelers within the frameworks of visual and literary studies, the paper produces an image of the city as has been perceived and recorded throughout the centuries. It offers a gaze into the Ottoman Istanbul that seem so far from our contemporary world.

Keywords: Vernacular architecture, travel literature, cityscape, Ottoman capital.

Introduction

While studying Istanbul and its vernacular neighborhoods in the Ottoman times, we see how the imagery of the city itself was changing throughout the centuries, due to different social, economic and political factors. The collected chronicles and reports have been selected and investigated, using the narrative or the visual representation of the city and presented as a case-study. The result of this process is a reconstruction of a 'described cityscape' that can represent the point of view of the travelers, according to their own perspective and cultural filters. Although those descriptions cannot be seen as an absolute and definitive representation of the reality at that time, the travel literature can be helpful to reconstruct specific periods of life and the growth of the city. It is not always that there is a true correspondence between the perceptions of the city; the one represented by the Western travelers and the 'real' city that was in front of their eyes. Sometimes, many details and features were omitted, ignored or completely missing and sometimes other details were too much emphasized or exaggerated, according to the perspective or the prejudices of the travelers, or maybe according to the interests of what the readers abroad expected from these 'exotic' descriptions and commentaries. As Ezel Kural Shaw states:¹

¹ Kural Shaw, E. – Heywood, C. J. (1972) *English and Continental Views of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800*, Paper read at a Clark Library Seminar, January 24, 1970, with an introduction by G. E. von Grunebaum, Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, p. 3.

The examination, analysis and evaluation of foreigners' accounts of the Ottoman Empire require the removal of two obstacles, or veils, first by a realization of the assets and limitations of the observer, imposed by his cultural and linguistic background as well as by his personality, and second by an understanding of the complexity of the Ottoman society, which not only presented difficulties to those casual observers who have tried to dissect it over the centuries, but which continues to baffle the serious researcher even today, particularly in view of the thousands of contemporary Ottoman Turkish documents that remain to be sifted in the archives.

(Shaw et.al,1972:3)

In any case, through sketches, memories and impressions related to the travelers who visited the Ottoman capital in different centuries, it is possible to show how cultural differences and manners were compared to the European life style and how the physical urban environment was compared too. Many different kinds of visitors, such as writers and journalists, pilgrims and spies, ambassadors and slaves, traders and navigators, historians and architects—with their own cultural background and their own prejudices—gave their personal contributions in creating such kind of imagery for the city that better represents the center of the power of the infidel enemies. All these descriptions left us an incredible material that can be used to reconstruct a sort of cultural map, made of stratified layers of the city, very useful for the purpose to investigate the 'lost past' of Istanbul. Real or sometimes re-invented by the narrations, that information extrapolated from books and drawings can be also used for what it concerns the vernacular and civic architecture, so often neglected or forgotten.

In many cases, important and remarkable buildings from the Ottoman time survived until our days, especially stone architecture like mosques, complexes, baths or caravanserais, but for what it concerns the civic architecture, the traditional Ottoman timber houses—unfortunately—very little survived to our days, eventually lost forever, due to big fires, natural causes or rapid and uncontrolled urban transformations and growth. In this sense, using in an appropriate way, the travel literature offers us today a tool to reconsider the complexity and the richness of the Ottoman urban environment and the importance of its vernacular architecture throughout the centuries.

The question concerning travel literature becomes so a fundamental investigative tool for the comprehension of the Europeans and their relations with the rest of the world outside the borders of the 'Old Continent'. Starting from the 15th Century, as Mary L. Pratt underlines: "The predominant theme is how travel books by Europeans about non - European parts of the world went (and go) about creating the 'domestic subject' of Euro-imperialism".² Analyzing the impact of the travels' narrations, it seems that many travelers—maybe not intentionally or perhaps without any hidden agenda—considered unquestionably predominant the rule of the Western countries above the others, especially when they were traveling to the Levant or to the Eastern Mediterranean and visiting cities like Istanbul, Thessaloniki, Alexandria or Damascus. Their visions of the 'oriental' cities and their approach to the local cultures were often susceptible to clichés and stereotypes, as it has been remarked by Edward Said on the 'Orientalism' phenomena,³ or as it seems clearly defined by the scholar Michèle Longino: "Travelers made their way to the Levant armed to varying degrees with their ancestors' crusader memories, booking knowledge of the Levant, a sense of cultural superiority, and clear expectations of self-enrichment as a consequence of their adventuring"⁴.

In this sense, it seems noteworthy to underline that until the end of the 19th Century, many travelers and visitors, like the French Pierre Loti, Théophile Gautier or the Italian Edmondo De Amicis persisted to use the former Christian name of the city, Constantinople,

² Pratt, M. L., (1992) *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 4.

³ Said, E. W., (1995) *Orientalism*, New York: Pantheon Books.

⁴ Longino M., (2000) *Imaging the Turk in Seventeenth-century France: Grelot's Version*. See: <http://www.duke.edu/~michelel/projects/visions/1.html>, last retrieve, February 2018.

instead of the consolidated one, The name 'Istanbul', was already in use by the time of the Conquest and even before, both by the local population and by the new rulers. In this panorama, an exception is given by Joseph Grelot, who visited the capital of the Ottoman Empire in the 17th Century. It seems at least that this traveler, aware of the discussion on the toponym and in its relation, mentioned that Constantinople as a term was still in use among the Latins and the other local Christian communities, while the Turks and the other eastern populations of Africa, Asia and Europe preferred to call the city 'Stambol'⁵.

But even though this introduction shows mostly the negative approach of the Western travelers in the Orient, we must also underline that many times those prejudices changed during their permanence in the Ottoman capital. It was a real kaleidoscopic, cosmopolitan and multicultural city, within all its inner contradictions and juxtapositions, that effected and fascinated the travelers, making possible for us to elaborate their data in a more objective way, in order to understand the architecture, the topography, the urban development and somehow the urban history and the urban processes of the city.

Travelers and descriptions

In this section, a selection of travelers who stayed in Istanbul and in a period between the 15th and the late 19th century, will be presented in order to see how the city was presenting for long time the same characteristics. Several descriptions from memoirs, reports, notes, letters and some images, like sketches and drawings, are presented in a chronological order from the oldest memories until the late 19th century representations. The intention is to put in evidence the aspects related to descriptions of local traditional architecture as well as urban spaces of Istanbul, trying to avoid the descriptions of the most celebrated monuments and architectural masterpiece, like churches, mosques, ancient monuments, Sultan's palaces and so on. Where it was possible, the focus is on the houses and the narrow streets descriptions, the core of the Ottoman town, related mostly to the nowadays Historical Peninsula and Galata district, around the Golden Horn shores and the bazaar's area.

The first two images that are briefly commented are related to the 15th Century and they represent a map of the city of Constantinople edited in 1420 circa. They are contained in the *Liber Insularum Archipelagi*, a book of cartography and coast measurements made by Cristoforo Buondelmonti⁶. He described in an accurate manner and through sketches, cartographies and plans, the coasts of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Seas, including the Greek islands and the Turkish coast and the city of Constantinople and its antiquities. He was a pioneer in promoting the Western world the knowledge of those countries, giving geographical information and sailing routes to the Westerns readers.⁷

In the images, all those spaces of the city are well depicted and recognizable as part of the ancient Roman Empire and other Christian monuments that belonged to the Byzantine Empire. The city was already divided in three major parts, Constantinople, Galata and Üsküdar, divided by the Bosphorus strait and by the Golden Horn estuary and shows us also all the defensive structures of the city like towers and walls. Even though the original one was lost in time, this image was reproduced and circulated in Europe in many different versions for centuries. Nevertheless, nothing was changed in the representation of the city, showing always the antiquities and the glorious past, even if, following its capture in 1453, many parts of the city were changed due to the necessary urban transformations that occurred and made Istanbul, the former capital of Eastern Rome, as the capital of a Muslim empire. We know that at the apogee of the Ottoman Empire, in the era of Suleiman the Magnificent, an Ottoman polymath, Matrakçı Nasuh, in the book dedicated to his Sultan, *Süleymannâme* (Book of Suleiman), depicted the city of Istanbul and its quarters in a meticulous way, showing how the cityscape

⁵: See: Grelot J., (1683) *A Late Voyage to Constantinople*, London.

⁶ Cristoforo Buondelmonti (circa 1385-1430), was an Italian traveler and geographer born in Florence.

⁷ An accurate description of the work of Cristoforo Buondelmonti is possible to be find in: P.D.A. Harvey, *Local and Regional Cartography in Medieval Europe*, Chicago 1992.

looked-like in 1536. In this image, the traces of the previous Empire almost faded away, replaced by the great imperial architecture of the new rulers.⁸

The first book presented here is '*Viaje de Turquia*' (A Travel in Turkey), an anonymous text edited in the second half of the 16th century, accessible in two different manuscript copies in the National Library of Madrid.⁹ According to the text, presented in the form of a dialogue between three Spanish gentlemen, the main character, Pedro de Urdemalas, who was the author and probably hid himself under this pseudonym—in a sort of an auto biography—tell the story of part of his life. On his way to Naples in 1552, Turkish corsairs captured him and then deported as a captive in Constantinople. After a period in prison, he became the personal doctor of Sinan Pasha and after three years at his service, he fled back to Spain. In a passage of his text, there are some interesting descriptions of buildings like mosques and baths, that represent the different architectural typologies to a Western eye and in another one, the splendour of the whole city is described:¹⁰

Constantinople is all full of mosques and baths, that seen from outside they look like royal palaces, and they have round domes in the shape of half orange, covered by lead. Inside everything is made of rich marble, jasper and porphyry. The smallest on these baths has six domes and inside it can guest eighty people. [...] At least, watching all the qualities that a good city must have, I tell you that comparing Constantinople to Rome, Venice, Milan, Neapolis, Paris and Leòn, not only we cannot do any kind of comparison, but suppose it as possible and putting together all these cities to make a single one, still Constantinople would be the best.

The Frenchman Pierre Gilles or Petrus Gyllius (1490-1555) was a scholar in humanistic studies. He left the Kingdom of France under Francis the 1st, to visit together with some ambassadors the court of Suleiman the Magnificent and his interests were directed in the studies of the antiquity and in the ruins of the glorious past of the city, Byzantium or Constantinople.¹¹ In his work, *The antiquities of Constantinople*, there are many descriptions of ancient buildings, ruins and monuments, but sometimes he described also Istanbul in the present time, with the signs of the new Turkish rules. In the following extrapolated, for example, we can find an accurate description of the Galata district, at that time already 'Ottomanized' with the typical urban environment made of narrow alleys and small wooden houses:¹²

The town of Galata therefore stands on a triple descent, one of which winds from north to south, another falls easterly, and another west. The slope that crosses its width stretches from north to south and is so steep that in many places you are forced to climb it by steps so that you ascend the first floor of the houses, which stand on one level, by ladders. The eastern and western sides of Galata have a double slope; one from north to south, the other east and west, so that not only the

⁸ For many consideration about the image and the representation of the city of Istanbul see the important work done by Kafescioğlu, C. (2009) *Constantinopolis/Istanbul Cultural Encounter, Imperial Vision, and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital*, The Pennsylvania State University press.

⁹ There are different opinions about the author of this book of travel. According to the major fonts there are three persons that could have written this book, and according to the first editor Manuel Serrano, the author of this chronicle could be Cristobal de Villalón. He was a humanist born at the beginning of the century in Salamanca and author of a book on the local language '*Gramatica Castellana*'. Another attribution refers to Andrés Laguna, a doctor at the service of the court of Charles the 5th, who wrote an essay about the discord; but recently it seems that the author could be a Knight of Malta, Juan de Ulloa Pereira. See also another Italian version of the book: Laguna, A., (1983) *Avventure di uno schiavo dei turchi*, Firenze.

¹⁰ De Villalon C., *Dal Viaggio in Turchia*, Bari 1961, p. 117.

¹¹ Well-versed in Classical Greek and Latin, Pierre Gilles wrote in Latin his books about the ancient architecture of the city, *The antiquities of Constantinople*. During his permanence in Istanbul, because he lost all his money, Pierre Gilles decided to join the powerful Ottoman army under Suleiman and with the Sultan he went to war in Persia and after many adventures, with the help of the French Ambassador at La Porta, he spent some time again in Istanbul in 1550, before to come back to Italy, where he started to write all his observations about the old Constantinople.

¹² See: *A Description of Galata*, book IV in Gilles, P. (1988), *The Antiquities of Constantinople*, Based on the translation by Ball, J., New York: Italica Press.

parts of it that lie in a straight line, but also those streets that are winding or lie crossways have their descents. The eastern side of the town is more on a slope than the western side. To be brief: Galata is of such steepness that if all the houses were of equal height, the upper rooms would have a full view of the sea and of all the ships sailing up and down in it.

(Gilles, 1988:page no)

The main architectural aspect of Istanbul and its topography can be easily seen in visual representations realized during the apogee of the Ottoman Empire under the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent (1522-1566) in the middle of the 16th Century. In that period, an accurate panorama of the city was sketched by the Danish artist Melchior Lorichs (circa 1527-1583) in 1559.¹³ From the Melchior Lorichs's panorama,¹⁴ who came to Istanbul following the Austrian ambassador Busbecq, the central part of the composition is selected (Figure 1), in which it is clearly visible that the Forth Hill of the Historical Peninsula with the mosque of Mehmet the Conqueror is in the middle. It is interesting that for the first time in a Western observation on the city, not only the glorious past of the Roman and Byzantine civilizations is depicted, but also the urban texture of the city. It shows the intricate maze of dead end streets, sloped pathways, clusters of wooden houses, inner gardens and small squares with tall trees as they were in that historical period.

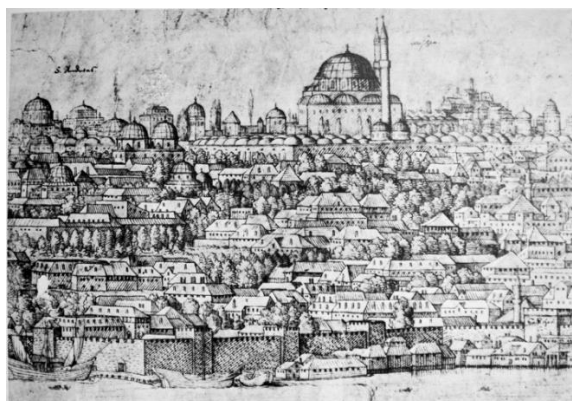


Fig. 1: The Forth Hill of Istanbul and its urban surroundings

Source: Yerasimos, S.; Mango, C. eds. (1999) Melchior Lorichs' Panorama of Istanbul.

The other image selected belongs to the 17th Century and is taken from a book titled *Memorie Turche*. It represents, in the form of drawing narration with some explication notes, the manners in the Ottoman court, the daily life of the Turkish people, the fleet in the waters of Constantinople as well as architecture and urban settlements in Istanbul. This collection, with more than one hundred tables, included also the misadventures of the Bailo of Venice, and Giovanni Soranzo, in Constantinople in 1649. During the war between the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Venice for the conquest of Candia the Bailo of Venice and his entourage, such as diplomats and translators were put in prison in the Castle of the Seven Towers (*Yedi Kule*), and some of them were brutally killed. The others were then deported in Edirne where they spent some more time charged, before their return to Italy as free persons. One of the personnel

¹³ The title of the Melchior Lorichs's Istanbul panorama is: *Konstantinopel unter Sultan Suleiman dem Grossen aufgenommen im Jahre 1559 durch Melchior Lorichs aus Flensburg*. Here it has been used the reproduction presented in: Yerasimos S. – Mango C., eds., (1999) *Melchior Lorichs' Panorama of Istanbul*, Istanbul.

¹⁴ The overall length of the panorama is 12 meters in length and 45 centimeters in height and it includes the view of the Golden Horn from Seraglio to the holy district of Eyüp, observed from the Galata hill.

of the Bailo Soranzo, probably Marco Tarsia, collected in the form of drawings all the information about this misadventure.¹⁵

Among many drawings, one in particular seems significant to our purposes related to the traditional urban settlement: *Forma delli antichi acquedotti, che passando per parte della città di Cost.li danno il comodo all'erectione di fonti, a'bagni, che abbondano in varie parti* (Structure of the ancient aqueducts, crossing different areas of the city of Constantinople, that conveys the waters permitting the construction of fountains and baths in everyplace) (Figure 2). This drawing shows the Valens' aqueduct between the Third and the Fourth Hill of the historical center and the dense settlements built all around the huge pillars of the structure. There are many houses and some small mosques, and in the middle a big pine-tree, representing very well the typical structure of the Turkish *mahalle*. The aqueduct is depicted in good conditions, with all the arches and the stones on the top well squared and all the houses, presumably in timber, present the typical pitched tiled roof.

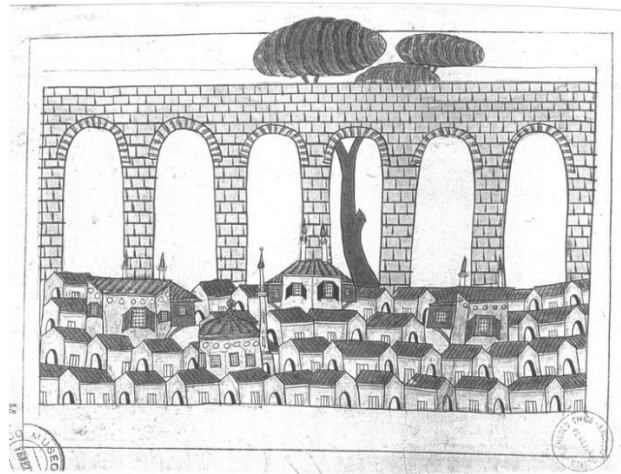


Fig. 2: Ottoman settlement under the aqueduct

Source: *Yüzyıllar Boyunca Venedik ve İstanbul Görünümleri – Vedute di Venezia ed Istanbul attraverso i secoli*, (1995) Exhibition Catalogue, Istanbul.

The Italian Pietro della Valle, (1586-1652), *il Pellegrino*, as he used to define himself, visited Istanbul in 1614, during a long voyage from Rome to the Holy Land, Egypt, Syria, Persia and India between 1614 and 1626. In this stay in the capital of the Ottoman Empire, he could study Turkish, the local traditions and he met notable persons of the political life, like vizier, militaries and ambassadors, learned persons and merchants. There are many places of Constantinople described by Della Valle, showing us the interest for the architecture of the city. Even if he was influenced by the Byzantine and Christian architecture in general, there is the intention to catch the Ottoman architecture of the city:¹⁶

And more, they make in front of [the mosque] big courtyards, surrounded by porticos, full above of leaded domes, and inside the courtyards there are fountains and pools filled with water, so that you can purified yourself entering in the temple, according to their belief. In front of – and also in the back – they build many bell towers – some mosques have two, other four or even six – and at the top of them, in place of the cross, they have a gilded crescent; and those bell towers they don't look like the ours, but they are round and slimy, in shape of candlestick, from

¹⁵ For further information see: *Yüzyıllar Boyunca Venedik ve İstanbul Görünümleri – Vedute di Venezia ed Istanbul attraverso i secoli*, Exhibition Catalogue, Istituto Italiano di Cultura, Istanbul 1995, pp. 229-230.

¹⁶ Cardini, C. (2001) *La Porta d'Oriente. Lettere di Pietro della Valle. Istanbul 1614*, Roma: Città Nuova ed., p.75.

which the shape gives them their names, and on the top of these towers they light some lights during some festivals.

Cardini,2001:75)

Jan Potocki (1761-1815) was born from a rich and noble family in the vast lands of the Polish Empire. He was a man of literature, learned, curious, observer and interested in the oriental manners and customs. He was an eccentric person and he spent many years travelling through the Ottoman Empire, Egypt and Morocco. After those travels, he joined the army at the service of the Russian court and travelled upto the border of the Chinese Empire. He wrote some novels, like the well know “Manuscript found in Saragoza”, before committing suicide in 1815. In his travels through the Ottoman Empire and during his stay in Istanbul, with all the curiosity of an intellectual approach, Potocki preferred to enter inside the real life of the city. He was without any western prejudices about the Turkish and he was free to analyse and to live intensely the experiences without any cultural filter, as it is possible to understand from the following passage:¹⁷

We already arrived in the harbor of Constantinople. Here I quit to write more, because the view offered by the city itself is more than any other description of it. If you try to image something like this, if you ask someone, any traveler you can meet, you will remain always under the real truth [...]. Perhaps, you will be astonished to learn how real all the descriptions and the perceptions of the city are made by most of the travelers. Just a bunch of them have in fact a precise idea about what they can see around. But this is the reality! The most of the travelers are just curious about the ancient Greek monuments and they consider the Turks just as the destroyers of their religion. They arrive in the city with this idea, they lodge in the Franks districts and with big troubles they decide to cross the harbor, maybe for one single time, just to go to visit the mosque of Saint Sofia and return immediately back.

(Potocki,1980:21)

Cav. Antonio Baratta (1802-1866) was a Genoese diplomat in the Sardinian legation sent to the Levant; he was not a genuine traveler, but he should be only seen as an important Italian ‘observer’, who worked for the ‘House of Savoy’ and published books based on his personal travels and experiences. In his book “*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 the Italian 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 prejudice and his enthusiastic approach towards the Turkish world are well perceptible in describing the Ottoman Empire and Turks as well as their architecture, quarters and urban scene, as suggested by the following lines, chosen to underline his interest to unveil this extraordinary, fascinating and variegated world:¹⁸

With the exception of a few districts in the center of the city, some others at the shore of the sea near the port, one in Pera, and two or three in Galata, the other districts are so narrow that in many of them the overhangs of the roofs they touch each other and seem united. This circumstance, due in large part to the narrowness of the site facing, combined with the dark color that predominates in the facades of the houses, makes the streets, mostly, sad and gloomy. [...] The windows of the houses, all hermetically sealed by the jealousy, wooden grilles that guard them, make them, too, the interior of the city, silent, and silent, removing one of the most

¹⁷ Potocki J. (1980), *Viaggio in Turchia, in Egitto ed in Marocco*, Roma: e/o, p. 21.

¹⁸ Baratta, A. (1831) *Costantinopoli nel 1831*, Genova: Pellas, pp. 20-21

abundant sources of ornament that make cheerful European cities. To this is added the frequency of the tombs, which meet, almost at every step, along the streets, and the infinite quantity of cemeteries, wide and tree-lined, which halve and interrupt the houses.

Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), French writer and journalist,¹⁹ traveled for long time in Europe and in the Near East during his lifetime, collecting experiences and observations about populations and manners on the visited places. From his well know book on the Ottoman capital, *Constantinople en 1852*, the selected passage refers to the area of Balat, the district in which majority of the population was represented by the Jewish community, in which the author is describing the quality of the architecture, different from other wooden districts of the city:²⁰

The stone houses have a fine architectural look. Several of them have balconies supported by brackets carved in the shape of steps or volutes; some of the older recall the narrow facades of the small mansions of the Middle Ages, half fortresses, half dwellings. The walls are thick enough to stand a siege, the iron shutters are ball-proof, enormous gratings protect the windows, which are as narrow as those of barbicans; the cornices are often cut into the shape of battlements, and project like look-outs, a needless defensive display useful only against fire, for the powerless flames in vain seek to sweep through this stone quarter.

(Gautier, 1980:169)

An interesting and complete description of the city is offered by another Italian author, Edmondo de Amicis (1846-1908), at that time young journalist for a magazine, *L'Illustrazione Italiana*.²¹ In 1874, he was sent to Istanbul to write an article about the city that later became a book, *Constantinople*, and his observations on the city are like sketches made by a good painter, quick but extremely precise. He caught the real atmosphere of the city, with all the contrasts of East and West, focusing his attentions in the manners of the people as well as in the architecture. In the following passage, the author perceives the traditional Ottoman houses, strolling in the narrow streets and alleys (Figure 3):²²

Here everything is Eastern in its strictest sense. After walking for fifteen minutes the last sounds have died away, the crowds entirely disappeared; you are surrounded on every side by little wooden, brightly-painted houses, whose second stories extend out over the ground floor, and the third again over those; in front of the windows are balconies enclosed with glass and close wooden gratings, which look like little houses thrown out from the main dwelling, and lend to the city an indescribable air of secrecy and melancholy. In some places the streets are so narrow that the overhanging parts of opposite houses nearly touch, and you walk for long distance to the shadow of these human bird-cages and literally beneath the feet of the Turkish women who pass the greater part of the day in them, seeing nothing but a narrow strip of sky. All the doors are tightly shut, and the windows on the ground floor protected by gratings.

(De Amicis, 1878:61)

¹⁹ Example of romantic author, ironic and sentimental at the same time, Théophile Gautier wrote several novels, like *Capitan Fracassa* in 1866, and he was interested in theatre, poetry and dance as well.

²⁰ Gautier, T. (1990) *Constantinople – Istanbul en 1852*, Istanbul, p. 169.

²¹ On the Italian travelers in the Ottoman Capital see: Luca Orlandi, *Alcune note, impressioni e memorie di viaggiatori italiani nella "Costantinopoli" del XIX e XX secolo*, in Attilio De Gasperi – Roberta Ferrazza (eds.), (2007) *Gli Italiani di Istanbul. Figure, comunità e istituzioni dalle riforme alla repubblica 1839-1923*, Torino: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, pp. 239-253.

²² De Amicis, E. (1878) *Constantinople*, New York: Merrill and Barer, Voll. I-II, pp. 61.



Fig. 3: Vernacular architecture in De Amicis' Constantinople
Source: author's private collection

Julien Viaud, better known worldwide as Pierre Loti (1850-1923), was a French navy officer, who travelled throughout all the countries, especially in the Middle and in the Far East Orient. He was a novelist and a traveller at the same time, and he often mixed his personal experiences with fiction and not-real events, creating very suggestive, but sometimes also excessive images of the Orient.²³ In the selected text, he shows his surprise reaching a big monumental complex as the Süleymaniye and the strong contrast between the narrow streets and crumbling wooden dwellings of the districts (*mahalle*) in the surrounding and the greatness of the imperial mosque built by master architect Sinan:²⁴

The dark narrow street I took suddenly end up in the huge Seraskierat Square, full of light, crowds, music, costumes. But I cross the square to penetrate more deeply into the heart of the city, into the exquisite, as yet unprofaned quarters of Süleymaniye and Sultan Selim. Now the darkness of mournful little streets, now lights and crowd. [...] A very narrow street, very dark: above the high, barred houses, in a bit of the starry sky, one can see the minarets of Süleymaniye rising, gigantic black points – you would think they were diaphanous – bearing two or three dying fiery wreaths on over the other.

(Loti,1980:27)

Conclusions

This paper analyzed, starting from the earliest representations of the city in the 15th Century, like the Buondelmonti's cartography, and then the 16th Century's visual representations, like the Lorichs' panorama passing through the description of the many travelers in the Ottoman Empire until the notes and sketches left towards the end of the 19th Century. The visual and written traces left by all the visitors provide a caricature of the urban changes that occurred in the past of Istanbul. They show in some detail, the civic architecture, beside the imperial and monumental stone architecture.

²³ Pierre Loti was interested in the Ottoman world, where he felt the sense of decadence of the Empire and the survivals of the Turkish background. He located in Istanbul, several books like *Aziyadé* (1879), or *Les deschantées* (1905) and chronicles and reportages about the city. He travelled many years in these countries, before the return to Rochefort, in France, where he spent the last time of his life, dressed as an oriental Pasha and surrounded by all the memories and souvenirs of all these trips.

²⁴ Loti, P., (2002) Constantinople en 1890, Istanbul, pp. 27.

The paper shows that travel literature which recorded the changes the eyes of the visitors merely as observations can be used today for other purposes, not just related to the city, but to a vast field where intersections between architecture and urban practice, combined with social and economic studies need to be improved and encouraged. In this sense, we can try to figure out a sort of ideal 're-construction' of the 'cityscape' of Istanbul, looking for the lost parts of the city itself and trying to fill the missing parts with cultural operations and not only with buildings. A cityscape that not necessary is completely real, as stated at the beginning showing all the limits in the past of the Western gaze on 'the other', but that could be used in rethinking the meaning of the past and its value today.

As a conclusion, it is significant to remark that those representations of Istanbul are extremely important as additional information for all those parts of the city that went lost, or disappeared by negligence, by accidental reasons or due to the quick modernization process that interested many historical areas of the city. Perhaps those descriptions and drawings we should contribute today to maintain an awareness of what was this very peculiar urban system that characterized the city of the Levant.

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