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Selling Heritage in the Post-Ottoman Balkans: in, but not of Europe

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Abstract

Normalising subjectivities of ‘Europeanness’ and ‘Westernness’ have effects on the interpretation and consumption of cultural heritage sites in non-Western contexts. Here we examine the liminal space of the ‘post-Ottoman’ West Balkans, a European region with a significant built heritage and contemporary social legacy reflecting the c.500 year rule of the Muslim Ottoman dynasty where large numbers of people converted voluntarily to Islam but in which a syncretic system for the legal toleration and recognition of Christianity and Judaism was also implemented. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH), Republic of Macedonia (Macedonia) and Albania are selected for contextual study in the West Balkans given that their social complexion is perhaps most obviously a representation of that syncretic legacy and because of their concentration of extant Ottoman heritage sites presented to the market. We note first that these countries’ heritage and tourism sectors anticipate and to some extent modify their interpretation to accommodate ‘Western’ consumers affectation of ‘surprise’ and ‘delight’ at the region’s religious diversity, constructing it in binary terms as a ‘remarkable’ crossroads between ‘West/East’ or ‘Christendom/Islam’. We then note occasional counter-discursive interventions by heritage practitioners to offer consumers an interpretive framework in which the syncretic legacy of the Ottoman period is an unremarkable consequence of contingent regional history. To understand why Ottoman heritage is often understood to be in but not of Europe, our analysis brings together and develops recent ‘Post-Saidian’ scholarship which interrogates ‘Europe’s’ discursive erasure of its Ottoman-Islamic-Oriental ‘self’ as well as recent work on the particularities of the syncretic Ottoman mode of social organisation in Europe and its legacy.

Keywords: Heritage; Europe; Islam; Ottoman
Introduction

Recent decades have seen unprecedented critical interest in researching the re-appropriation, commercialisation and consumption of cultural heritage and museums as social institutions and repositories of favoured versions of history. According to (Goulding and Domić, 2009), interest in heritage and the past is located in moral, social and identity crises experienced in recent decades by consumer subjects. Meanwhile, attention has begun to be focused on the construction of Western consumer subjects in relation to the consumption of the heritage of Turkey and the wider post-Ottoman world the implications of this for the very notion of ‘Europeanness’ (Bryce 2007; 2011).

The cultural boundaries of ‘Europe’ are notoriously difficult to define (Janoshka 2010 262), yet discourses of European civilisation that posit fixed cultural frontiers are often unproblematically and ahistorically deployed. Jeffrey (2008: 428) makes the telling point that ‘with the recent expansion of the EU into Central and Eastern Europe, scholars have conducted sustained deliberation over who, what, or where counts as “European”. Jeffrey (ibid) notes the reinforcing effect the notion of the Balkans as lands of ‘ancient ethnic hatreds [and] primordial evil’ has for Western-centric notions of European normative rationality. In doing so, he deploys the analytical frame of ‘Balkanism’ (Todorova 2009) as an analogous phenomenon to Said’s (1978) notion of Orientalism, in which a liminal ‘Balkans as Europe’s internal other’ is posited as somewhat distinct from the ‘external’ Orient, understood to principally denote Anatolia and the Arabic and Persian speaking lands (Said 1978).
Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* has taken on a certain presence as the default theoretical source to ‘account’ for the constitution of the ‘West’ in relation to an exteriorised ‘Eastern’, Islamic ‘other’. However, we find the study to be of limited utility in the historico-spatial context of post-Ottoman Europe. Scholars such as Maxime Rodinson (1988 130-131) remind readers that Said’s study was contextually focused on the discursive consequences of Anglo-French, and subsequently US, imperial involvement in the largely Arabic speaking, Islamic, Middle East. Indeed, Said (1978 41,74) himself was careful to make that very qualification. Instead, we align with Bryce’s (2013 118) positing of a ‘pre-Orientalist’ discourse within Europe and the ‘West’ in which ‘the anxiety-producing proximity of the Ottoman legacy makes repeated efforts towards its exteriorization both impossible yet perennially “urgent”’.

**The Study Context: the ‘post-Ottoman’ West Balkans**

What unites both Balkan and ‘Oriental’ contexts in historico-geographical and heritage terms is their former incorporation within the Ottoman Empire. We look at a countervailing site of European experience that normative Western models occlude. Therefore, our starting conceptual position is to take Todorova’s (1996 46) rejoinder to think not of an Ottoman legacy *in* the Balkans but *of* the Balkans *as* the Ottoman legacy and add to it Delanty’s (2003 15) notion of the ‘Ottoman-Islamic constellation’ as being intrinsically European. Our selection of the West-Balkan states of Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth BH), Albania and the Republic of Macedonia as fieldwork contexts, with four trips undertaken between 2011 and 2014, is explained by their history as former Ottoman *eyalets* (provinces) (e.g. Anscombe 2006; Sugar 1977) where the socio-cultural legacy of imperial rule as management and maintenance of
difference (Barkay 2008) is particularly pronounced. Our empirical focus is the supply-side ideological conceptualisation and representation of cultural heritage sites dating from the period of Ottoman rule (15th-early 20th centuries). We approach these heritage sites not simply through their individual religious-ethnic provenance as Muslim, Jewish, Orthodox, Catholic or alternatively Bosniak, Sephardic, Serb, Croat, Albanian, Turkish or Macedonian but as ‘Ottoman’ in terms of the historical period they date from and, vitally, the form of imperial social and legal organisation within which they emerged in associational terms.

Ottoman Expansion and Social Organisation in Europe

The *Osmanlı* (Ottoman) dynastic state emerged in northwest Anatolia in the 14th century in the vacuum left by the decline of two great regional Muslim and Christian powers, the Seljuq Sultanate of Rum and the Byzantine Empire (Norwich 1998; Findley 2005; İnalçık 1994; 2006; Almond 2009). This was part of a wider geopolitical restructuring within a Euro-Mediterranean ‘greater Western world’ and attracted both Muslims and Orthodox Christians to the Ottoman cause (Goffman 2002 7-9). Ottoman expansion in Europe was rapid; incorporating, or reducing to tributary status, Macedonia, Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Serbia, BH, Moldova and Wallachia (modern Romania) by the late 15th century (İnalçık 1994; Lopasic 1994; Goody 2004; Wheatcroft 2004).

Goffman (2002:6) notes that ‘the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans is often imagined as a suspension of that region’s history, the immobilization of a society imprisoned for several centuries in the “yoke” of an exogenous and ungodly conqueror’. Toner (2013) and Bryce (2013) argue that Western Europeans from the Renaissance
onwards, appropriated the classical Greek and ancient Roman past, excluded its ‘Oriental’ component and thereafter conceived of the Ottomans as an Asiatic ‘other’, regardless of both the duration of their possessions in SE Europe and the fact that Europeans made up much of its ruling elite.

Ottoman social organisation involved the formal interrelationship of religion, social class and state employment (Bieber 2000). Islam was supreme, with subordinate, legitimate status reserved for Christianity and Judaism, crosscut with socioeconomic status. Finally, society was divided between those occupying positions in the state administration, including those acting as official representatives of the three recognised religions (Askerî) and the subject population at large (Reya) (ibid). From the late 15th to late 17th centuries, therefore, the Ottoman state successfully developed a policy of toleration towards its non-Muslim population, integrating and expanding the role of the Orthodox clergy as a component of the state and making less formal, but no less stable, accommodation with the Jewish and Catholic populations (Vickers 1999; Faroqhi 2010; Bieber 2000; Barkay 2008; Čaušević 2005). So, what emerged, first in the European provinces and later throughout the empire more generally, was a situation where Islam constituted ‘the primary marker of [political] inclusion’ and whose legal tenets towards Muslims, Jews and Christians formed a framework of relations best described as ‘separate, unequal and protected’ (Barkay, 2008:120).

Ottoman ‘Tolerance’ at odds with Western/European Binary Narratives

This Ottoman social legacy is problematic for ‘mainstream’ European discursive constructions of the 1990s conflict in Yugoslavia, let alone for binary conceptions of European history in relation to its Ottoman past. The former posits that ‘timeless’
hatred was unleashed in the early 1990s as the Yugoslav state unravelled, causing brutal inter-communal war (see for instance Malcolm 1994; Simms, 2001 on this critique). However, as Kovač (2006) argues, the non-existence of ethnically based politics for most of the preceding Ottoman period created a heterogenic social texture, constituting a ‘normality’ of social experience.

Most Western European states are organised under generally stable national or supra-national identities (Anderson 2006). Smith (2008), however, questions naive ‘modernist’ notions of the formation of nations, bound up as they are with (Western) Eurocentric teleologies whose general applicability is merely presumptive. Building ‘nation’ states along such lines has been a difficult exercise in much of southeast Europe, because of differing, longstanding historical experiences of ethno-religious coexistence where ‘neither the Byzantine nor the Ottoman Empires were ethnically-based polities’ (Mazower 2000 51).

These assumptions that the Western model of nation-state building is an extra-historical ‘norm’ against which all other modes of social organisation may be measured (Turner 1994; Delanty 1995; Lewis and Wigen 1997) is part of the subjective constitution of ‘Western/Modern’ positioned consumers, located in the West itself and in those states and classes associated with its rubrics (Shohat and Stam 1994; Yeğenoğlu 1998; Atasoy 2005; Çınar 2005; Eldem 2007; Sandikci and Ger 2010). This subjective apparatus therefore, may help to form the lens through which ‘other’ cultures, religions and histories are presented, received and consumed.
Analysis: commercialisation and narrativisation of Europe’s Ottoman heritage

The commercialisation of ‘contested heritage’ sites through tourism has become an important area of study (Ashworth 2004; Goulding and Domić 2009; Čušević and Lynch, 2011). We, however, deal not so much with the contestation of heritage sites as with the occlusion of certain of what we call ‘narrative-associational’ links amongst them. As we have shown, an Ottoman socio-legal framework providing the discursive ‘condition of possibility’ (Foucault 1970) within which Muslim, Orthodox, Jewish and Catholic sites emerged historically in relation to certain formal and informal relationships. We undertook an ‘in-depth qualitative data capture’ (Crouch, 2005; 75) over multiple visits between 2011 and 2014 to the cities of Sarajevo, Mostar, and Počitelj (BH), Tirana and Berat, (Albania), and Skopje and Tetovo, (Macedonia). We undertook a sequence of participant observations of guided tours and museum and heritage site visits in all the aforementioned cities, observing both general city and contextually thematic tours and sites, with the analysis below drawn from selected conversations with participants (see Appendix 1).

In Mostar, S1 acknowledged that a reductive ‘East/West’ binary is easily received, in particular by Western European and North American visitors. Complex historical legacies are, therefore, truncated for commercial and operational reasons that also depend upon particular civilizational assumptions consumers carry with them. S1 emphasised that visitor interest tended to focus on the recent legacy of the 1990s’ conflict. However, a general sense that Islam in BH is simply the effect of a brutal conquest from the ‘East’ was identified, with many visitors linking what they
understand as an ‘Islamic’ conquest with ‘terrorism and 9/11’. The principal heritage attraction in Mostar is the famous Ottoman era bridge, destroyed during the 1990s’ war and subsequently reconstructed. It was on this point that S1 expressed a desire to explain a shared local heritage to visitors, telling them that although of Ottoman provenance, it is not a ‘Muslim bridge … it does not belong to Muslims in the city, but to all the citizens of Mostar’. Therefore, presenting the bridge principally through the lens of the recent conflict but also situating it in relation to that earlier provenance does point visitors, implicitly, towards a shared cultural legacy.

In Sarajevo, S2 observed that, “…because many of the tourists I speak to, they do not know anything about Ottoman Empire, when I say Ottoman Empire, they do not know what I am talking about, therefore, in order to simplify the matter, I use the term Turkish”, indicating modification and simplification of the actual historical situation to correspond with consumer expectation. This acknowledges the existence of an external perspective where the Ottoman past in the Balkans is more easily received as a simple ‘Turkish’ imperial occupation. The active participation of Turkic, Slavic, Albanian, Greek, Hungarian and Romanian populations - Muslims, Jews and Christians - as both rulers and ruled (Barkey, 2008) cannot be reconciled with a will to typify the Ottoman past in Europe as a ‘Turkish’ empire. It appears that presenting it as simply ‘Ottoman’ does not ‘fit’ with a Western understanding of how empires ‘work’ that depends upon an absolute distinction between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ (Spanos, 2009). This was mirrored in Tirana by S16 who commented upon the importance of Skanderbeg, an Albanian noble in Ottoman service, as a national hero who went on to resist the Ottoman conquest yet noted little contemporary bitterness at the fact of occupation. This, he reflected, may be due to wholesale voluntary
conversion of over half the Albanian population to Islam as well as an overarching, pre-Ottoman, sense of Albanian identity superseding religion.

The notion of the intrinsic place of Islam in a European context is the problematic component underwriting the very need to construct the Balkans in binary terms, both internally and externally. This emerges in a will to externalise Muslim identity with the appellation ‘Turk’ and as we strongly emphasise, a will to conceive of the Ottoman legacy as strictly Islamic and not as organisational convergence across faiths. The inevitability of such externalising, indeed dehistoricising, discursive manoeuvres is cast into doubt when, for example, Bosniaks or Albanians themselves, whether practicing Muslims or those with ancestral cultural links to the faith, are asked to reflect on the issue.

A custodian and Islamic scholar (S11) at Sarajevo’s Gazi Husrev-begova Džamija (“Bey’s Mosque”) began by commenting on visitors’ naive understanding of Islam and a general conflation of the faith with its more radical adherents. This allowed us to reflect on S2’s previous comment that, “when I say to American tourists that my name is Muhamed, they think that I am joking. They expect an Arab with a long beard. This is Muslim for them ... ”. S3 negatively contrasted Sarajevo’s recently built Saudi funded King Fahd mosque’s inconsistency with local Islamic aesthetics, stating that ‘Ottoman mosques are small ... built beautifully ... so romantic, and they fit so well in the city's landscape’. Similar tensions in the interpretation of Islam were apparent when interviewing at the Arabati Baba Tekke, a lodge of the Bektashi Sufi order, in Tetovo, Macedonia. S20, a member and representative of the ‘mainstream’ Sunni community in Macedonia which now has control over most of the site, acted as
a gatekeeper, offering an approved narrative to visitors in which the founding Bektashi dervishes were denounced as ‘in error’ and ‘heretical’ in their beliefs. This contrasted with the interpretation provided by one of the few remaining dervishes at the site (S21), occupying only a small part of the complex, who emphasised contingency and local specificity. He related how the Bektashis, a mystical, syncretic order, actually preceded the Ottoman army in the Balkans, bringing the new Muslim faith, but absorbing elements of existing Christian and folk beliefs (Goodwin 1994). Similarly, S16 was at pains to point out that Islam in Albania is very liberal in its articulation and not associated as an exclusive marker of imperial rule.

These encounters raised two important, related issues on the question of religion and the symbolic potency of heritage in the region. First, that a type of ‘East/West’ binary within heritage practitioners’ sense of ‘legitimate’ Islam, bound up with externally driven discourses on ‘radical Islam’ and the ‘War on Terror’ may be at play. Second, that the local provenance of long-established Islamic practice, an extensive built environment that reflects it and its roots within an Ottoman social framework that accommodated and normalised ‘tolerance’ could be deployed as both ‘refuge’ for local people themselves and as counterpoint to be presented to international consumers holding, perhaps, an undifferentiated, often negative, view of Islam.

We joined S3 on a tour of the Annexes of the Sarajevo Museums: Despica House (Christian Orthodox House), Svrzo’s House (Muslim House) and the Jewish Museum and Synagogue, to examine the community life during the Ottoman period. Reflecting on the frequent use and external derivation of an East/West dyad in BH, S3 observed that, ‘we take it for granted, and we think that we are special because we built the
bridge between the East and the West ... but that was always there, East and West were always here, and we do not think about that ... we were here before East and West was invented!

The first and second floors of Despica House present life during the long Ottoman and brief Austro-Hungarian (1878-1918) period of rule. The site custodian, S4, recalled many visitors’ surprise that the first floor of the house is designed in an ‘eastern’ style, which they seemed to associate exclusively with ‘Turks’ and Islam. S4 speculated that it might be difficult for tourists to reconcile the house’s ownership by a wealthy Christian family with its design in an Ottoman vernacular. A colleague, S5, recalled being asked by visitors if they had reached ‘the right place’, and ‘is this a Muslim house? It is all done in a Turkish way!’ S4 interjected, ‘we explain that we wanted to present it as it was. This was fashionable at that time, and comfortable too. So, wealthy people would be able to afford it’. This is congruent with Sugar’s (1977 225) explanation that ‘because the Muslims had both old and new rich among them, this group automatically enjoyed the highest prestige and gave the tone to "high society". This is proven by the fact that the richer a non-Muslim became, the more his home and clothing resembled those of the Muslims’. S15, a volunteer guide leading ‘interfaith’ tours of Sarajevo commented on this syncretic normality. In both the city’s Old Orthodox Church and Franciscan Monastery, she related how the practise of both faiths was subtly shaped during Ottoman times because of community overlap between the Muslim and Christian population, commenting, ‘this is, or was, quite normal for us in a day to day sense but seems surprising to outsiders ... we try to explain this normality to them’. Meanwhile, S17, a guide at Berat Citadel in Albania,
stated that intermarriage was and is common, and Islam was practiced alongside Orthodoxy mainly peacefully during the Ottoman period.

Sarajevo’s Jewish Museum and Synagogue represents, on its lower floors, community life during the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Yugoslav periods until 1941. The museum’s custodian (S6), a Bosnian of mixed Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish background, noted that visitor response to the site seemed to be filtered through more historically recent assumptions of irreconcilability between Judaism and Islam. A frequent theme in visitors’ questions about life during the Ottoman period was ‘whether it was difficult for Jews to live with Muslims’. S6 considered this to be a result of exposure to media coverage of conflict in Israel/Palestine, embedding assumptions of antipathy quite at odds with the actuality of the position of Jews in the Ottoman mode of social organisation (Barkey 2008 137-140). The arrival of a specific component of the Jewish population was as a result of deliberate Ottoman policy to offer refuge in the empire to Sephardim after their persecution and expulsion from Catholic Spain from the mid 1500s (Lehman 2005). S6 perceived a responsibility to highlight that, ‘this museum shows the life of the Jewish community in Sarajevo and also how well integrated the community was’. This comment was underpinned by the recognition that new Jewish arrivals to Sarajevo, and the empire generally, brought skills that the Ottoman authorities perceived to be economically beneficial (Lehman 2005).

At Svrzo’s House, the former home of a wealthy Muslim family during the Ottoman period, the custodian (S7) observed that many tourists come with certain exaggerated preconceptions regarding Muslim family life, focusing on gender relations and
polygamy. For instance, S7 recalled how ‘a group from Slovenia asked me whether I have four wives. Imagine that! We lived in the same country, have they forgotten that?’ For S7, the problem did not solely lie in unfamiliarity with the modern reality of Muslim family life in BH, but with how a shared history of Yugoslav, if not Ottoman (the modern territory of Slovenia was not part of the empire) experience could be subsumed under such an undifferentiated rubric of the ‘alien’ nature of Islam in Europe.

Such assumptions are a powerful manifestation of discursive understandings of Islam as an absolute ‘other’, excluded from any intrinsic place within European cultural heritage (Quinn, 2008). The Balkans is, thus, often presented as a crossroads between East and West in a well-understood deployment of normative European teleology, where Ottoman heritage is interpreted as an alien, if picturesque, imposition from the East that arrived and receded violently, never embedding itself in the complexity of ‘Europeanness’.

Tourists like what they hear; it is quite exciting for them to be in the ‘place where East and West meet’, usually perceived and presented in oppositional terms, temporally and spatially. This is a trigger which gives value to Baudrillard’s (1998) notion of purchased ‘free time’ - it is both sensational yet reinforces modernist understandings of borders and civilisations. However, when invited to reflect on this point, S2 commented that ‘...people come here with a lot of prejudices, so you have to explain something what we find here normal’ but that this can be inhibited by commercial pressures to meet expectations.
Even the most overtly ‘nationalistic’ of our interviewees, S18, an official city tour guide in Skopje reflected a sense of the Ottoman period as not being necessarily benign but, in places, a source of shared history and achievement. S18 clearly favoured the legitimacy of his own Slavic-Macedonian community over what he perceived to be the uncomfortably large and ‘wild’ Albanian-Macedonian and unproblematically smaller and, by comparison, ‘cultured and educated’ Turkish-Macedonian communities. His attitude when taking us across the Ottoman era ‘Stone Bridge’ into the ‘Čaršija’, or old Ottoman city, was ambivalent. He presented Ottoman rule as a barrier to realisation of Macedonian nationhood yet expressed pride that the classically Ottoman designed Stone Bridge was the product of ‘a shared endeavour by all the people’ and placing the various religious sites in the ‘Čaršija’, including the Orthodox Church of Holy Salvation, the Ishak Bey Mosque and the various secular buildings from the period in relational, not oppositional terms, reflecting, in this instance, close congruence with the historical record (Čurčić 2010: 758).

Concluding Discussion: Balkanism or occluded Ottomanism?

The consequence of these formal and informal relationships was the development across the West Balkans of an intertwined social milieu. The richness of this heritage in the West Balkans is that it is simultaneously Muslim, Christian, Jewish and European, yet the socio-organisational framework underwriting it is, of course, Ottoman. In this article, we focused on supplier responses to external consumer subjectivities shaped by Western Eurocentric, binary discourses that find this interpretation of Ottoman Heritage in the West Balkans ‘remarkable’.
Ottoman heritage in SE Europe is subsumed under exclusionary ethno-nationalisms internally and externally by binary constructs that simplify its position in civilisational terms. The latter dimension seems to drive commodification and reception of the country’s heritage by ‘Western’ constituted consumer subjects and may be refined into two further binaries: between East and West (Islam and Europe), denoting an ‘external’ other, and between Europe and an internal European ‘Balkan’ other. The latter component, as we will discuss, denotes the anxiety provoked by the ‘intrusion’ of the ‘East’ into interdictory European space.

In the first set of binaries Europe or the greater ‘West’ is presented as Christianity and the ‘East’ as Islam. Containing a significant Muslim community or heritage legacy in Europe, whose religious conversion was largely voluntary, much of the Balkans does not ‘make sense’ and must, therefore, be constructed as a de-historicised anomaly in order to suit the Western-identified consumer subject. Normative assumptions about the perennial exteriority of Islam, couched in the ‘serious’ talk of politics or policy or in the ‘banal’ promotion of pleasurable heritage tourism consumption, occlude the constitutive place of Ottoman experience in Europe. In the ostensibly benign context under discussion here, the designation of Ottoman heritage as religiously and civilisationally remote from Europe produces a de-historicised identity for both Balkan hosts and the subject positions of ‘Western’ consumers. If, as Žižek (1996 para. 1/19) claims, ‘the object of our perception is constituted through the subject’s attitude towards it’, the Balkan construct delivers a reification of valorised forms of ‘Europeanness’ in order to present the ‘superior’ West and ‘backward’ East, or ‘the other within Europe’ (Todorova 2009). Considering Žižek’s (2008a) conception of Balkan as backward and primitive European ‘self’ rather than an alien ‘other’, we must ask under which historical conditions such a construction was and continues to
be ‘necessary’.

The post-Ottoman Balkans does not readily correspond to certain internalised notions of that which is conventionally of Europe; it needs to be constructed as ‘exceptional’, where that which is perennially external meets Europe. The discursive relationship at hand is therefore more proximate, indeed intimate, than that between ‘Europe’ and the Arab-Islamic ‘other’ at stake in Said’s critique of Orientalism. Rather, it is the anxiety inducing, and therefore occluded, proximity of the Ottoman-Islamic European self that is at stake (Bryce, 2009; 2013).

We agree with Jeffrey (2008 431) that the ‘Balkanism’ referred to earlier is not a simple intra-European ‘variant’ of Orientalism, yet, feel that the point of differentiation he arrives at (that the Balkans, unlike the Middle East, was not colonised by Western powers) does not go far enough. There is a nameable, concrete historical situation and legacy that can be stated: a shared, longstanding socio-cultural experience mandated by the Ottoman Empire as a European state. Talk of Balkan ‘liminality’ and ‘meandering’ between Occident and Orient, East and West, signify nothing more than a European disinclination to either integrate its Ottoman-Islamic self or be integrated with the ‘Orient’ that it so diligently exteriorises. The manner in which the Balkans is presented to, largely Western, international consumers in the discussion above is, therefore, not so much a representation of its cultural heritage as it is of an unresolved European anxiety about its own Ottoman past.
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