

Salonica and Beirut: The Reshaping of Two Ottoman Cities of the Eastern Mediterranean

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Salonica and Beirut have parallel histories. Both were small provincial towns in the middle of the nineteenth century. Both experienced a rapid growth under the reigns of the last Sultans. At the beginning of the 20th century, both presented a complex profile. They had a mixed population, forming a most diversified social cocktail. They were engaged in modern economic activities, remaining nevertheless faithful to traditional occupations. Their urban pattern reflected this diversity. Both had been partially remodelled by the Ottoman administration. But both also had popular sections which escaped the attention of town planners.

The aim of this paper is to examine the evolution of the two cities after the collapse of Ottoman rule in the Balkans and the Arab world. Just after the First World War, both were submitted to the intervention of French architects and planners. Both were in the process of building up a new urban identity. Both had had to reshape their past and become part of a modern nation-state. However, having been incorporated in an Orthodox Christian state, and thus having rediscovered its Byzantine heritage, Salonica could not have the same approach to its Islamic past as the multi-religious Beirut. Here the two approaches will be compared, stressing both the similarities and the differences.

Salonica and Beirut at the end of the nineteenth century

Although belonging to two different cultural areas, Salonica and Beirut displayed at the end of the nineteenth century a large number of similarities. Beirut had grown faster than Salonica. But around 1900 both cities were approximately the same size, with an estimated population of 120,000 people.¹ Both derived their wealth from a rich agricultural hinterland where cereal growing, fruit trees and vegetable gardens dominated. Both could count also on a sizable industrial potential, based on mining. Salonica and Beirut were also producers of cotton, silk and wool and other profitable products such as skins, dyestuffs and oil-producing

¹ Population figures relating to cities or any other kind of agglomeration in the Ottoman Empire are always debatable. For Beirut, the work of Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), is trustworthy (for population growth, see chs. 4 and 5, 28-60); some additional information is to be found in May Davie, *Beyrouth et ses faubourgs (1840-1940), une intégration inachevée* (Beirut: CERMOC, 1996), 141. Concerning Salonica, data on demographic trends can be found in Meropi Anastassiadou, *Salonique, 1830-1912. Une ville ottomane à l'âge des Réformes* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), ch. 5, 94-117; see also Régis Darques, *Salonique au XXe siècle. De la cité ottomane à la métropole grecque* (Paris: CNRS éditions, 2000), 19-24.

plants.² Finally, both played a role of maritime frontage for cities of the hinterland. Beirut was linked to Aleppo and Damascus; Salonica served Skopje and Sofia.

Similarly, the factors which contributed to the development of the two cities are very much alike. In both cities, demographic growth was due, among other reasons, to significant improvement of sanitary conditions. In Beirut, a quarantine lazaretto constituted a first step in the process of sanitization already in the 1830s.³ Likewise, Salonica was one of the first Ottoman cities, in 1837, to be equipped with a lazaretto, temporarily set up in a coffeehouse.⁴ The Ottoman administration endowed Beirut with a hospital in 1846.⁵ Salonica had to wait only a few years more; its *gureba* hospital was built in 1850.⁶ In the following decades, both cities were to be outfitted with many more health facilities, including several hospitals, medical schools and a sizable number of physicians. Part of this sanitary equipment and personnel, like, the military hospital established in Beirut at the beginning of the 1860s,⁷ was designated to meet the needs of the Ottoman army.

Naturally, demographic growth was also an outcome of economic prosperity. Beginning in the 1820s, Beirut was to become one of the most active centres of Syria and Mount Lebanon. It owed most of its prosperity to silk production and growing commercial activities, partly thanks to its harbour. During the same years, silk production was also a triggering factor in Salonica, together with tobacco plantations. Here too, the port and commercial ties with the hinterland were major assets.

Among the factors which played a role in the growth of both cities, also significant were the means of communication. The 110-kilometre-long Beirut-Damascus road built between 1857 and 1863 constituted for the capital of Lebanon a major tool of expansion.⁸ Constructed at the end of the 1880s, the Beirut-Damascus railway contributed even more efficiently to the prosperity of

² Concerning the economic background of Beirut, the pioneering work of Dominique Chevalier, *La société du Mont Liban à l'époque de la révolution industrielle* (Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1971), remains a basic reference book. For Salonica and its hinterland, P. Risal, *La ville convoitée: Salonique* (Paris: Perrin & Cie, 1914), is still useful; the works of Anastassiadou (*Salonique*) and Darques (*Salonique au XXe siècle*) include extensive bibliographies on this topic.

³ Jens Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut: The Making of an Ottoman Provincial Capital* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 118; see also Daniel Panzac, *La peste dans l'Empire ottoman 1700-1850* (Leuven: Peeters, 1985), 469.

⁴ Panzac, *La peste*, 485; Anastassiadou, *Salonique*, 83.

⁵ Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants*, 34.

⁶ Meropi Anastassiadou, 'Mourir seul à l'hôpital : démunis et étrangers dans la Salonique du XIX^e siècle', in Jean-Paul Pascual, *Pauvreté et richesse dans le monde musulman méditerranéen. Poverty and Wealth in the Muslim Mediterranean World* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2003), 291-292.

⁷ Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 241-242.

⁸ R. Tresse, 'Histoire de la route de Beyrouth à Damas (1857-1892)', *La Géographie* 64 (1936): 227-229; Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants*, 67-70.

the city.⁹ In the same way, the railway network set up in the area of Salonica¹⁰ from the beginning of the 1870s onwards, resulted not only in the strengthening of ties between the Macedonian port and Istanbul and European capitals, but also in increasing relations with urban centres of the agricultural hinterland.

Finally, one should take into account the crucial role played by social unrest. Indeed, both Salonica and Beirut greatly benefited from the atmosphere of anarchy which was developing in the regions to which they belonged. Strife between Druze and Maronites in 1840, unrest in Aleppo in 1850, civil war in 1860 – from the beginning of the 1840s onwards, there were many reasons for which the flow of immigrants to Beirut was ceaseless until the end of the nineteenth century. Likewise, Salonica largely benefited from insecurity and ethnic conflicts which devastated the Macedonian countryside. The 'Eastern Crisis' of 1876-1878 that provoked massive emigration of Muslims in the Balkans was only one of the many episodes from which Salonica drew its population growth.

In both cities, one striking consequence of demographic increase was that the ethnic cocktail forming the urban population proved quite unstable. Thus, in Beirut, the proportion of Muslims significantly diminished between the 1830s and the 1890s, dropping from 45 percent of the total population to 30 percent, while the proportion of Christians rose during the same period from 45 percent to 66 percent, owing mainly to an influx of Maronites.¹¹ As for Salonica, it is traditionally depicted as a Jewish centre. However, it well seems that the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed in the city a constant growth in the share of Muslims, Orthodox Greeks, Albanians and Vlachs.¹²

Fin de siècle Salonica and Beirut were not only characterized by similar geographic locations, demographic profiles and economic accomplishments. Like a number of other port cities of the eastern Mediterranean, they also played the role of shop windows of Ottoman modernization. Although Beirut displayed distinctive 'Oriental' features and Salonica belonged without a doubt to the southern Balkans, both cities carried around 1900 the stamp of Ottoman administrative methods and views about urban reorganization. Under the governorship of Sabri Pasha, at the very end of the 1860s, Salonica had lost part of its corset of city walls and had stepped into modernity by making plans for the building of new quays,

⁹ Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants*, 70; Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 92-96; Shereen Khairallah, *Railways in the Middle East, 1856-1948* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1991).

¹⁰ Anastassiadou, *Salonique*, 171-178.

¹¹ Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants*, 46-60; Carla Eddé, 'Beyrouth, le Mont-Liban et ses environs au XIXe siècle: pratiques de l'espace. Le cas de la communauté maronite', in Jean-Luc Arnaud, ed., *Beyrouth, Grand-Beyrouth* (Beirut: CERMOC, 1997), 35-49.

¹² The population figures concerning Salonica and its hinterland differ considerably from one author to the other. For an almost complete list of available data, see Darques, *Salonique au XXe siècle*, 76-79. The official Ottoman statistics constitute an acceptable compromise between the various fanciful data available. See K. Karpat, *Ottoman Population 1830-1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

new streets and a full set of administrative buildings, military barracks, schools, hospitals, fashionable hotels and restaurants, public gardens, and means of urban transportation. By the end of the nineteenth century, most of what had been planned was accomplished. From 1867 onwards, several main roads had pulled to pieces the fabric of the traditional city. In 1889, the Hamidiyeh Boulevard linking the White Tower to the Municipal Hospital had put the finishing touches to the grid of wide streets that the Ottoman urban planners had laid out, taking advantage of the fires that devastated the city from time to time. New quays were built, adorned with a succession of stately hotels, coffeehouses and various social establishments. In 1893, Hamdi Bey, a local businessman who happened also to be head of the city council, had managed to create a tramway network. The population was overflowing the city walls, migrating to fashionable suburbs where wealthy families competed with each other to build jewel villas, decorated with eccentric embellishments. The Ottoman administration had commissioned Italian architects to erect imposing administrative and military buildings. One of them was the new Konak, built in 1891 after the plans of Vitaliano Poselli, an over-productive man of the trade who sprinkled the city with countless official constructions, banks, schools, villas, factories, mosques, churches and synagogues, combining fancy 'Oriental' ornamentation with features borrowed from classical architecture.¹³

In Beirut, the chronology and pattern of urban transformation was very similar to that of Salonica. Here too, the Ottoman administration played a triggering role by launching the ambitious project of modernizing the port. A crucial step was taken during the governorship of Midhat Pasha, in 1878, when the municipal officers of Beirut, duly briefed by the forceful governor-general of Syria, started to negotiate with European capitalists. However, here again in the vein of what could be witnessed in Salonica, the local bourgeoisie was not long in establishing itself as a major actor of local development. It is thanks to Joseph Mutran, a Christian notable from Baalbeck, and his associates that the port concession of Beirut did not remain on paper.¹⁴ Other Lebanese entrepreneurs such as Salim Efendi Ra'ad, the Malhama family, the Bayhums or the Sabbaghs, just to mention a few of the most conspicuous names, also contributed significantly to the making of modern Beirut. As early as 1873, the city had a water distribution company. In 1887, it was equipped with gas lighting. In the first years of the twentieth century,

¹³ On urban change in Salonica from the 1860s onwards, see Anastassiadou, *Salonique*, 89-202; on late-nineteenth-century buildings and spatial planning, *Neotera Mmimieia tis Thessalonikis* (Thessaloniki: Ipourgeo Vorias Elladas, 1985-1986), constitutes a very useful general survey; see also Vassilis Colonas, 'Vitaliano Poselli: An Italian Architect in Thessaloniki', *Environmental Design: Journal of the Islamic Environmental Design Research Centre*, Rome (1990): 162-171; idem, 'Vitaliano Poselli (1838-1918) et Pierro Arrigoni (1856-1940), deux architectes italiens à Thessalonique à la fin du 19^{ème} siècle', in *Architectura e architetti italiani ad Istanbul tra il XIX e il XX secolo* (Istanbul: Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Istanbul, 1995), 71-78.

¹⁴ Fawaz, *Merchants and Migrants*, 71-73; Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 87-92; Christine Babikian, 'Developpement du port de Beyrouth et hinterland', in Arnaud, *Beyrouth, Grand-Beyrouth*, 25-34.

the installation of tramway tracks was to lead to the same result as in Salonica: the expansion of the city and the emergence of vigorous suburban settlements.

Meanwhile, in central parts of the city, the Ottoman administration and municipality were doing their best to implement the principles of European, and more specifically French, hygienists. Like other urban centres of the eastern Mediterranean, *fin de siècle* Beirut was an intricate combination of old and new. Traditional quarters survived as best they could. But they had to put up with harsh urban readjustment. The city walls had gone through a process of erosion followed by destruction. Some streets were reshaped regardless of the traditional urban fabric. Old city gates were pulled down or seriously damaged. New public spaces competed with the private gardens of the historical centre. Specializing in the commerce of luxury items and imported products, modern *suqs* markets were created in the north-eastern outskirts of former commercial areas, not far from the port through which European goods were imported into Lebanon.¹⁵

In both cities, the symbols of Ottoman modernity were the same. In Beirut, the Grand Sérail, built in 1853 and remodelled several times during the following decades, was one of the most conspicuous signs of imperial presence. Located on the Qantari hilltop, this massive military barrack commanded the whole Beirut landscape. With its severe and imposing rows of windows, it remained a major landmark of the city when it was converted into the official residence of the governor, and even later, when it served as a prison or was used to house medical units. A typical construction of the period of Abdülhamid II, the Petit Sérail was also meant to make visible the Ottoman grandeur. Built by the Armenian architect Bechara efendi, chief engineer of the *vilayet*, this edifice was situated on the northern fringe of the Burj. At the end of the nineteenth century, it served as the seat of local government. Its monumental architecture expressed both neo-Baroque stylishness and majesty.¹⁶ During the same period, Beirut was endowed with several other emblems of Hamidian dominance and modernity: the train station built in 1895, the clock tower erected three years later,¹⁷ a Hamidiye fountain, and, above all, an impressive vocational school installed in 1905 at the centre of a huge complex comprising a hospital, a public garden and several other buildings that existed at least on paper.¹⁸

¹⁵ On all these changes, Davie, *Beyrouth et ses faubourgs*; see also Helmut Ruppert, *Beyrouth, une ville d'Orient marquée par l'Occident* (Beirut: CERMOC, 1999 [trans. from the German first edition, 1969]); Samir Khalaf, *Heart of Beirut: Reclaiming the Bourj* (London: Saqi, 2006).

¹⁶ On these two major relics of Hamidian architecture in Beirut, see Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 141-143; idem, "'Your Beirut is on my Desk': Ottomanizing Beirut under Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876-1909)", in H. Sarkis and P. Rowe, eds., *Projecting Beirut: Episodes of the Construction and Reconstruction of a Modern City* (Munich: Prestel, 1998), 60; Khalaf, *Heart of Beirut*, 63-64.

¹⁷ On this typical emblem of Hamidian urbanism, see Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 243-247.

¹⁸ Here also, Bechara efendi had designed the project. As stressed by Hanssen, *ibid.*, 250, the Sanaya complex was the largest urban-development scheme in Lebanon during the reign of Abdülhamid II; see also Khalaf, *Heart of Beirut*, 73-75.

In Salonica, the topography was also favourable to demonstration of imperial magnificence. Quite resembling the Petit Sérail of Beirut, the Konak erected here by Vitaliano Poselli crowned a prominence that had been for centuries the location of successive administrative headquarters.¹⁹ From the 1880s onwards, the city had also been equipped with a set of other commanding structures, all of them expressing authority, state concern for social and economic progress and aspiration to Western modernity. Like Beirut, Salonica was endowed with a belt of barracks, a Hamidiye high school, several monumental clocks including a couple of clock towers erected in front of an elegant 'new mosque' designed by Poselli, an ornamental fountain topped by an obelisk in the French style, a most impressive Hamidiye hospital and, last but not least, a military palace intended for the administration of the Third Army.²⁰

However, neither in Salonica nor in Beirut was the Ottoman state the only actor of urban transformation. In both places, several other bodies and social groups played a crucial role in designing and financing the construction of the various elements needed to convert traditional urban centres into modern bourgeois cities. In Beirut, the municipality was particularly active in launching new projects. Several of the landmarks of the city, including the Petit Sérail, were the outcome of its incessant creativeness in matters of urban embellishment. The municipal council of Salonica was also reasonably efficient. It is thanks to the *belediye* that the Macedonian capital could display by the beginning of the twentieth century most of the emblems of modern prosperity: a gas company, a water supply system, a tramway network, municipal schools, properly paved streets, various sanitary structures and so on.

Alongside municipal bodies, local entrepreneurs, European companies involved in commercial and banking activities, Christian missionary organizations and various institutions set up in the framework of the Ottoman *millet* system were also heavily instrumental in the making of *fin de siècle* Beirut and Salonica. In both cities, the multiform Ottoman bourgeoisie found many ways to express its political ascension and economic prosperity. It sprinkled the urban grid with banks, department stores and modern *suqs*. It financed the construction of stately schools, eye-catching religious buildings, massive hospitals and elegant social clubs. Wealth and luxury also colonized the newly created suburbs. In Salonica, the Avenue des Campagnes was lined with beautiful villas designed by some of the most talented architects of the time. A similar taste for exhibiting economic success could be observed in some bourgeois garden-banlieues of Beirut, especially those close to the centre of the city (Minet el Hosn, Zokak al Blat, Qîrât, Rmayl).

¹⁹ V. Colonas, 'Vitaliano Poselli (1838-1918) et Pierro Arrigoni (1856-1940)', 72.

²⁰ An impressive photograph of this monument is published by Colonas, *ibid.*

Although Salonica and Beirut had much in common, it should be stressed that a certain number of local specificities had already led, by the end of the nineteenth century, to easily perceptible dissimilarities in the evolution of the two cities. In Beirut, owing to the overwhelming presence of a largely Christian population, the new urban fabric strongly carried the mark of European patterns. On the whole, Salonica appeared less Westernized. Around 1900, observed from the sea, the capital city of Rumelia still looked like a typical Turkish town, with its landscape dotted with white minarets. In the foreground, the new port and quays formed a kind of façade that did not manage to hide the traditional town climbing up the hills. In the same way, the impact of European colonial expansion was much more visible in Beirut than in Salonica. Missionary schools, buildings accommodating the activities of foreign companies, churches of all creeds, European banks and department stores were most conspicuous components of the Beirut urban landscape. As for Salonica, it also had its Ottoman Bank, its Orosdi-Back stores, its Catholic schools and churches, its foreign companies and their undertakings, but here everything was more modest, less eye-catching. The fact is that, globally speaking, the Macedonian context was very different from the Lebanese one. Around 1900, Salonica and the three Ottoman *vilayets* of Rumelia could still be considered core components of the Ottoman Empire. European interests certainly had their say in these Western fringes of The Ottoman Empire but could not easily impose their views in the presence of a local administration doing its best to check foreign intervention. In Lebanon, on the contrary, the game was already partly over. After the civil war of 1860, the region had become a semiautonomous *mutasarrifiya*, opening its gates not only to French missionaries and entrepreneurs but also to British merchants and, to a lesser extent, to Americans and other Westerners. Indeed, Lebanon was still part of the Ottoman Empire and its elites continued to view themselves as part of the Ottoman family; but Beirut had been exposed to the song of European sirens much more than many of the other Mediterranean port cities.

Forgetting about the Ottoman Empire

Salonica ceased to be an Ottoman city in November 1912. Beirut had to wait a few more years. Officially, the Ottoman province of Beirut ceased to exist on 29 August 1920. Two days later, with the support of the League of Nations, the French High Commissioner Henri Gouraud proclaimed the formation of a new territorial entity, the Grand-Liban, established under French mandate. In both cases, the new administration considered that the centuries of belonging to the Ottoman state should be wiped out as speedily as possible. However, given the particulars of the local context, the task of building up a novel urban identity could not be carried out with the same guidelines in Salonica and Beirut. The capital city of Macedonia had been annexed by the Kingdom of Greece at a time when most of its population was non-Greek. Here, then, the main assignment was to obliterate the

Ottoman heritage and to reinvent the Greek antecedents of the city. In Lebanon, the mission of the French Mandate administration was somewhat different: the Ottoman past was of course to be presented as a mere parenthesis in the long history of Lebanon; but local culture, like in all the other colonial possessions, had to retain an exotic flavour. Indeed, the cultural discrepancy between East and West was one of the main justifications of all colonial endeavours. This discrepancy had to be cultivated and approached with a mixture of fascination and disdain. Conversely, one of the missions of Mandatory power could not but be to 'civilize' the lands submitted to its management. Consequently, localism and swift Europeanization of the urban landscape had to go hand in hand.

In Salonica, various events facilitated the task of the Greek administration. One major factor of urban reorganization was the big fire of August 1917 which destroyed 9,500 buildings, or approximately two thirds of the city. When the reconstruction process came to an end in the 1930s, nothing much remained of the urban pattern as it had been shaped during the last decades of Ottoman presence. Many Jews had lost their property in downtown Salonica and had been forced to move to suburban quarters. The historical heritage of the Jewish community, including ancient synagogues, was reduced to ashes. By the same token, a large number of mosques were desecrated, their minarets being pulled down. Soon after the fire had done its work, a French architect, Ernest Hébrard, had been asked to design a new master plan for the city. Although only a small part of this grandiose project was realized, Salonica displayed henceforth a new identity. The central quarters were organized in accordance with the norms of international architecture, borrowing extensively from the vocabulary of German, French, British and American urban planning. When one looks at photos of the 1930s, one easily remarks that the city had lost, by then, its Oriental character. No minarets in view. No intricate streets. A rigid grid of avenues and lanes arranged following a chequered pattern had replaced the playful Ottoman city.²¹

While the reconstruction process was going on, efforts were also made to resuscitate the Greek and Christian heritage of Salonica. The Hébrard plan foresaw highlighting of the main monuments of the city through a strategy of destruction of environing constructions and isolation of edifices of historical interest.²² Thus, small Byzantine churches, which had survived thanks to their invisibility, were transformed into major landmarks. In parallel, public squares were populated with

²¹ We owe to Alexandra Yerolimpos a detailed account and analysis of this catastrophe: *I anoikodomisi tis Thessalonikis meta tin Pyrkagia tou 1917* (The Reconstruction of Thessaloniki after the Fire of 1917) (Thessaloniki: Ekdosi Dimos Thessalonikis, 1986); idem, *Urban Transformation in the Balkans (1820-1920): Aspects of Balkan Town Planning and the Remaking of Thessaloniki* (Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 1996); see also Darques, *Salonique au XXe siècle*, 148-151; Rena Molho, *Les Juifs de Salonique, 1856-1919: une communauté hors norme*, doctoral thesis, 3 vols., Strasbourg, Université des Sciences Humaines, 1996, vol. 1, 235-259.

²² Darques, *Salonique au XXe siècle*, 150.

statues of Greek national heroes and the façades of the buildings all around were covered with typically 'Greek' ornamental motifs, although remaining faithful to Hamidian neoclassicism.²³ After the departure of the Turks, the new image of Salonica drew mainly on the Christian and neo-Hellenic past of the city. But, like in other places in Greece, antiquity was also considered a major component of the city's memory. Although not much was done to revive ancient Salonica, subsequent to pioneering archaeological research by the French 'Armée d'Orient' between 1916 and 1919,²⁴ some attention was nevertheless given to prominent late-Roman monuments such as the Rotunda, the Palace and Arch of Galerius, and the Agora.

The final stroke was to come during the German occupation of the city in World War II. By that time, the city had already lost much of its Jewish character but was still hosting a sizable Jewish population. In spite of the destructions perpetrated during the preceding decades, it also preserved some of its Jewish heritage, especially significant portions of the Jewish cemetery. Physical extermination of the community was not the only consequence of the occupation. With the connivance of Greek authorities, what remained of the cemetery was totally erased from the map in 1942-1943, together with other Jewish landmarks.²⁵ Muslim graveyards having already met a similar fate soon after the collapse of the Ottoman administration, the city was henceforth "liberated" from its most embarrassing ghosts: the hundred thousands of corpses that populated the kingdom of the dead.

By the middle of the twentieth century, there could be no doubt anymore that Salonica was a Greek town, endowed with a cultural heritage composed of small churches, early-Byzantine monuments, ancient city walls and statues of national heroes. What had considerably facilitated the Greekification of the city was the dramatic transformation of its demographic profile. Muslims had begun to leave Salonica immediately after its incorporation into Greece. Subsequent to the peace settlement of Lausanne, in 1923, those who remained also had to depart. The treaty of population exchange signed between Greece and Turkey also resulted in the influx of a large number of Greek refugees expelled from Anatolia.²⁶ The annihilation of the Jewish community during World War II added to the same process of ethnic and religious homogenization. Around 1950, it was not only the urban fabric which bound Salonica to a Greek past, but also the individual

²³ Striking examples of this mixture of 'Greek' and late 'Ottoman' ornamentation can be seen on the façades of several buildings of the Plateia Aristotelou, at the center of the new urban grid designed by Hébrard.

²⁴ On archaeological research conducted by the French army, see the files preserved by the library of the Institut de France, ms. 3494-3496, 'Service archéologique de l'Armée d'Orient, 1916-1919'.

²⁵ On the history of the Jewish cemetery of Salonica, see Michael Molho, ed., *In Memoriam. Hommage aux victimes juives des Nazis en Grèce* (Thessalonique: Communauté israéliite de Thessalonique, 1973), 375-466.

²⁶ Details in Darques, *Salonique au XXe siècle*, 68-137.

memories of its inhabitants. The few thousand non-Greeks who still dwelled in the city had become invisible.

During the same decades, Beirut was also submitted to reorganization and search for a new urban identity. The French Mandate administration was not helped by fire or any other calamity of the kind. But its presence in Lebanon was the result of military conquest; it therefore had the capacity to impose its views. Besides, it could count on the support of Westernized Lebanese entrepreneurs, businessmen, architects and engineers who had everything to gain from any kind of massive programme of public works.

The French were there to bring civilization to their Near Eastern protégés. Civilization they brought. In spite of harsh resistance of shopkeepers, small traders and artisans, in spite also of the opposition of heads of religious *awqafs* and some urban notable families such as the Sursock, the Bustros, the Khayyat or the Tueni who saw French undertakings as threatening their own interests, a substantial section of the traditional centre was destined for demolition. After some hesitation mainly because of local hostility and polemics, a grandiloquent scheme was adopted in 1927 under the name of *Beyrouth en cinq ans*.²⁷ The main outcome of this plan was the creation, on expropriated land, of a truncated Place de l'Étoile. This modest replica of its counterpart in Paris was intended as a symbol of modernity and also, with its five avenues radiating from the clock tower marking the centre of the 'Place', as a hymn to French colonial power. Indeed, each of them carried the name of some French general, in conformity with the pattern set by the Haussmannian twelve-branched 'Étoile' of the French capital.

The expropriated city dwellers and shopkeepers of the *souqs* were not the only opponents of the new Beirut imagined by French engineers and military officers. The Mandate administration also had to cope with various political activists who advocated nationalist or Arabist positions. Supporters of Syrian nationalism or backers of Prince Feisal expressed strong hostility to French urban planning, charging it with the intention of deliberately erasing the historical memory of Beirut.

To these accusations, the men of the trade working for the French authorities responded by sprinkling the city with neo-Oriental architectural motifs. Thus, the local parliament erected on the edge of the Place de l'Étoile was endowed with a monumental gate 'in Mamluk style'. Its architect, Mardiros Altounian, had done his best to combine modern features with neo-Oriental ornamentation.²⁸ Virtually all other public buildings constructed during the same years displayed an exotic-looking façade. Such was the case, in particular, with the new Municipality,

²⁷ M. Davie, *Beyrouth, 1825-1975: un siècle et demi d'urbanisme* (Beirut: Ordre des ingénieurs et architectes de Beirut, 2001); idem, 'Beirut and the Étoile Area', in J. Nasr, M. Volait and F. Zewdou, eds., *Urbanism: Imported or Exported* (London: Wiley, 2003), 206-229; Khalaf, *Heart of Beirut*, 75-84.

²⁸ Khalaf, *Heart of Beirut*, 78, 90-93.

commissioned by the French to another leading Lebanese architect, Youssef Aftimos. In fact, neo-Oriental or neo-Ottoman themes competed with various other styles, including European 'Baroque', 'art nouveau' and 'art deco' trends, in most of the buildings put up in colonial Beirut.

This generous display of Oriental decoration was supposed to express the distinctiveness of local culture. However, the French were careful to favour all-purpose designs and, conversely, to suppress, or alter, genuine manifestations of local spirit. The old *sugs*, the intricate lanes leading to dead ends, the traditional mansions with their private gardens gave an image of the Lebanese way of life too messy to be kept as it was; it was replaced by a reinvented Orient, in harmony with the vision the Mandate administration had of its *mission civilisatrice*. Even most stylish architectural works of the past were remodelled. While carrying on the construction of a new urban identity, the French were also busy with shading off the excess of Ottoman flavour that some monuments still displayed. One of the victims of this policy was the Résidence des Pins, built in the last years of Ottoman rule and which had served during World War I as a casino. One of the first moves of the Mandate authorities was to convert this elegant building into the official residence of the High Commissioner, not without having put it in conformity with the canons of neo-Oriental architecture and carefully eliminated its pre-war adornment.²⁹

In Beirut, however, imposing a new cultural identity on the city proved to be a thornier endeavour than in Salonica. One of the factors that heavily weighed against French undertakings was the complexity of the city's demographic profile. In Salonica, the Greek authorities dealt with a population which was undergoing a process of ethnic homogenization. The Jewish community indeed constituted a rebellious element, but given the general climate of the interwar period, the Greek administration felt free to act towards this component of the local population with a large amount of brutality and scorn.³⁰ Moreover, the new authorities held at least one good card: their presence in the city could be easily styled as historically legitimate. In Beirut, the ethnic and social context was totally different. Here, the French authorities had inherited the Ottoman *millet* system and it was in their own interest to keep it as effective as possible. Lebanese communalism seemed to be the best antidote to nationalism, be it Syrian or, more extensively, Arab. In such a framework, trying to confer a new identity on colonial Beirut was a hopeless challenge. The French could of course count on the support of their traditional clients, especially the Maronites and the Armenians.³¹ But interwar Beirut, with its constant flow of refugees and migrants, was such a complex place, it hosted

²⁹ Denise Ammoun and Pierre Fourmie, *La Résidence des Pins* (Paris: ACR éditions, 1999).

³⁰ R. Molho has dealt extensively with the topic. See her collected articles in *Salonica and Istanbul: Social, Political and Cultural Aspects of Jewish Life* (Istanbul: Isis, 2005).

³¹ Davie, *Beyrouth et ses faubourgs*, 92.

such untamed social tensions, that any kind of cultural levelling out could not but meet with hostility or, at best, an inhibiting lack of concern.

Re-appropriation of local memory

Yet, interwar Beirut did not have the capacity to resist efficiently the *mission civilisatrice* of France. By the will of urban planners, architects and enterprising businessmen, the city was transformed into a Near Eastern little Paris, with a touch of Oriental flavour underlining its colonial status. During the same years, Salonica was enjoined to forget its Jewish and Ottoman past, while the city's ties with Byzantium and neo-Hellenic history were exalted. In both cases, a new identity had been imposed on local society and reshaping of the urban profile had been implemented through swift destruction of the existing urban grid. Another common trait is that urban reorganization went together, in both cities, with demographic turmoil and political violence. In Salonica, the process of imposed change eventually culminated in almost complete extermination of the Jewish element.

Cities, however, sometimes show an astonishing aptitude for recovering memory. During the last decades, the metropolis of Greek Macedonia shared with the capital of Lebanon the distinctive feature of being the scene of substantial revivalist trends. After World War II, neither Salonica nor Beirut had experienced gratifying urban development. Both cities were confronted with a rapid growth of their population. They had to adapt themselves to the development of unrestrained suburbs. Local building contractors had no better prospect to offer than multiplying ad infinitum insipid housing, characterized by lack of imagination, poor quality of construction and conformity to international canons of utilitarian architecture. The remodelled central quarters had not aged well and were lost in a sea of anonymous blocks.

In Salonica, the first signs of reaction against loss of urban memory and levelling-out of local culture emerged soon after the establishment, in Athens, of the dictatorial regime of the colonels in 1967. Suppression of civil liberties, dissolution of political parties and censorship triggered a paradoxical reaction: nostalgia for older times, those times when life was sweet, when city dwellers had some possibility to act upon their own fate and when the diverse elements of the population lived together in harmony.

The literary production of Yorgos Ioannou (1927-1984) constitutes one of the most remarkable expressions of this new trend. In a few of his short stories and novels, this master of modern Greek literature explored the past of a multicultural city, endowed with a composite heritage based on the encounter of a variety of nations and creeds. Ioannou conjured up with special emotion the Jewish population of Salonica, stressing the role played by this element of the

urban society in the construction of the city's identity.³²

Following the steps of Ioannou, several other members of the local literary elite started to dig up the graveyard of a concealed past, uncovering the contributions of Jews, Turks, Bulgarians, Albanians, Serbians, Vlachs and Gypsies to Salonician culture.³³ A few of these explorers of the past were Jews who had survived the Holocaust or were born after World War II. Alberto Nar was particularly prolific; from the 1970s until his death in 2005, he published numerous articles and books with the aim of reconstructing, at least on paper, the Jewish heritage of Salonica.³⁴

In parallel, postcard collectors started to publish what they had in hand. One of the first books of this kind was an album of ancient photographs prepared by a renowned Greek folklorist, Elias Petroupoulos, and printed in 1980. Entitled *La présence ottomane à Salonique*, this pioneering compilation of photographic evidence made visible to the public the city of Salonica as it was in 1900.³⁵ Several other albums of the same sort were to follow.³⁶ Thanks to these works, those who had the opportunity to flip through them were able to check what they already knew, not always admitting it, namely that their city was, in not so far-off days, a provincial Ottoman town, looking much more Muslim and Jewish than Christian.

Although Greek historiography, during this period of reappraisal, was not yet ready to question its nationalist credos, some historians, Greek and non-Greek, also contributed to the revivalist trend through their scholarly work. Thanks to a set of masterly studies, many blurred aspects of the recent history of Salonica were brought to light. Alexandra Yerolimpos, in particular, took the risk to meticulously describe the strategy pursued by Greek authorities after the fire of 1917 to deprive the Jewish house owners of their property and transfer much of the urban core into new hands.³⁷ Regardless of criticism coming from her own community, Rena Molho, for her part, devoted most of her production to the

³² Peter Mackridge, 'De la ville réelle à la cité imaginaire: l'image littéraire de Salonique chez Yorgos Ioannou et Vassilis Vassilikos', *Mésogeios* 27 (2005): 82-91; Corinne Alexandre-Garner, 'Une pierre pour Thessalonique', *Confluences Méditerranée* 38 (été 2001): 107-110. Several compilations of short stories by Y. Ioannou are available in English translation. In French, stories concerning Salonica are assembled in *Le seul héritage* (Paris: La différence, 2007).

³³ A general survey of literary, artistic and scholarly production related to Salonica is to be found in *Afieroma sti Thessaloniki, Nea Estia* (Athens) 118 (1985); see also Stéphane Sawas, 'La représentation de Salonique dans le cinéma grec des années 50 à nos jours: d'une ville hellénique à une ville balkanique?', *Confluences Méditerranée* 38 (été 2001): 141-151.

³⁴ Among others, *Oi synagoges tis Thessalonikis and Ta tragoudia mas* (Thessaloniki: Israelitikis Koinotitas Thessalonikis, 1985), with an introduction by Yorgos Ioannou.

³⁵ This book comprises mainly ancient photographs and an introduction by Clément Lépidis; see also Elias Petroupoulos, *Salonique. L'incendie de 1917* (Thessaloniki: Barbounakis, 1980) (with a text by Jacques Lacarrière).

³⁶ For instance, Nikos K. Moutsopoulos, *Thessaloniki 1900-1917* (Thessaloniki: Ekdoseis M. Molho, 1980); Yannis Megas, *Souvenir: Images of the Jewish Community, Salonika 1897-1917* (Athens: Editions Kapon, 1997); Iannis Constantinidis, *Thessaloniki 1913-1919* (Thessaloniki: Diagonos, 1989).

³⁷ See *supra*, n. 21.

political history of Jews during the interwar period.³⁸ One should also mention here the publications of Ottomanists such as Vassilis Demetriades³⁹ and Meropi Anastassiadou⁴⁰ who used local Ottoman archives to offer vivid reconstructions of nineteenth-century Salonica.

The most tangible result of this concern for things past has been the launching of a number of restoration projects. Although the city hosts today a sizable Muslim population of immigrants, no one among local decision-makers in Salonica would dare to propose the rebuilding of a mosque or the renovation of some Ottoman monument with the aim of using it for religious purposes. But several mosques have been restored and are presently being utilized for cultural activities. Likewise, other remains of the Ottoman period, not very numerous, have been repaired and put into service. Thus, the *bedesten*, a few *hammams*, the provincial *konak* and various late-Ottoman buildings are henceforth treated as important landmarks, after having endured decades of neglect and oblivion. The most important restoration undertaking is that of 'Ano Poli', the old Turkish quarters covering the hilltops of the city. In the mid-1980s, most of the traditional houses edging the intricate lanes climbing up the hills were still in a state of advanced decay. A few years later, thanks to the support of an official agency established by the Greek state and the municipality of Salonica, a large number of these were fit to live in, although much concrete had been used for their renovation.

Similar revivalist trends can be observed in Lebanon. Here, however, the new urban model imposed by the Mandate authorities had met with antagonism from the start. Already in the 1920s, Lebanese newspapers were full of criticism against projects as unconnected to local culture as the *Beyrouth en cinq ans* programme. The two main planning schemes presented by French urban designers in the 1930s and 1940s (a master plan for Beirut by the Danger brothers in 1932 and the Ecochard plan of 1943) encountered similar reactions.⁴¹ However, the French had no reason to pay much attention to local dissatisfaction. For one thing, a sizable portion of the local elites backed them without reservation. Moreover, they were the masters, with the approval of the League of Nations. Finally, they had already 'protected' Lebanon for such a long time that their claims to 'historical interests' in the region sounded legitimate.

With the end of the French Mandate in 1943 and the proclamation of an independent Lebanon, one would have expected to see the supporters of a new

³⁸ See *supra*, n. 21, n. 31.

³⁹ Vassilis Demetriades, *Topografia tis Thessalonikis kata tin epochi tis tourkokratias. 1430-1912* (Thessaloniki: Heteria Makedonikon Spoudon, 1983).

⁴⁰ Besides *Salonique*, M. Anastassiadou has published a substantial number of meticulous studies based on local Ottoman archival material.

⁴¹ For further details, see Assem Salam; 'Lebanon's Experience with Urban Planning', in S. Khalah and P. Khoury, eds., *Recovering Beirut: Urban Design and Post-War Reconstruction* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993), 194-201; Davie, 'Beirut and the Étoile Area'; R. Saliba, *Beirut City Center Recovery: The Foch-Allenby and Etoile Conservation Area* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2004).

deal in urban matters move from success to success. But the political and social conjuncture was not in favour of the young Lebanese state. The never-ending influx of Palestinian refugees, regional tensions and wars, internal strife, and, finally, the civil war of 1975-1990 and the subsequent deployment of Syrian troops in the country for fifteen more years, resulted, for the city of Beirut, in unrestrained spatial development, disorderly answers to urgent questions concerning urban management and infrastructural needs, costly destruction of existing housing and business facilities, anarchic implementation of reconstruction projects and incapacity in finalizing ambitious schemes.

Constant chaos and frequent paralysis of decisional centres, however, inevitably fuelled a longing for happier days. Modern Lebanese literature expresses this trend with eloquence. Most of the novels published after 1975 are explicable obsessed with the calamities of war. But they are also filled with tales of a peaceful past and nostalgia for the way of life of former generations. Such is the climate of Dominique Eddé's *Posthumous Letter* (1989). Such is likewise the leading motif of *The House without Roots*, the novel that Andrée Chedid published in 1985. Political violence, war and nostalgia are also the key themes of several of Elias Khoury's novels. This author is known for the part he played, through his weekly *Al-Mulhaq*, in the denunciation of controversial aspects of the post-civil-war reconstruction of Beirut. He belonged to the layer of Lebanese intellectuals who fiercely contested the destruction of surviving elements of the city's architectural heritage in the Burj area and the old Jewish quarter of Beirut.⁴²

The civil war and its effects on the urban memory of the Lebanese capital also constitute the subject matter of Selim Nassib's *Fou de Beyrouth*. Published in 1992, not long after the end of the war, this novel explains much better than any sociological or historical study how difficult it is to recover life and stability for a population that has experienced decades of strife, destruction and anarchy. A similar atmosphere is to be found in *West Beirut*, the first feature-film of the Lebanese moviemaker Ziad Zoueri. Released in 1998, this film is about youngsters who encounter the absurdity and cruelty of war, while yet finding ways to survive. As in many other Lebanese works of art, the older generation is given an important role to play here. The father and mother of the central character, a lively teenager, do not only provide their untamed son with parental love and an artificial sense of security; they also constitute for him a most valuable link with the sweetness of bygone days. While political and religious strife is reducing Beirut to ashes, the father is still able to find a source of comfort in his *oud*, which brings him the consolation of old tunes.

⁴² Julia Schmidt, 'La guerre du Liban dans la littérature francophone', *La République des lettres*, 1 May 1994 (internet edition); see also Ramy Zein, *Dictionnaire de la littérature libanaise de langue française* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1999).

Finally, one should stress that a certain amount of nostalgia is also easily perceptible in a number of works that historians and social scientists have devoted from the 1990s onwards to the analysis of urban change in Beirut. May Davie's *Beyrouth et ses Faubourgs* or Samir Khalaf's *Heart of Beirut*⁴³ are successful examples of this trend. Both works stir up memories of ancient Beirut and question, not without a pinch of acrimony, the numerous urban schemes the city had to put up with in less than a single century. Strangely enough, although it has inherited some of the concerns of the Mandate-period urban planners, the French Observatoire Urbain of Beirut⁴⁴ has also produced a mass of studies in tune with this nostalgic mood.

Naturally, in cities such as Beirut or Salonica, which have undergone so many episodes of destruction of the existing urban pattern, there is not much which can be done to give satisfaction to those who would like to see the city recover some of its intrinsic flavour. Both Salonica and Beirut boast landmarks dating from the Ottoman period. In both cities, members of the intellectual elite have already made huge efforts to save from destruction existing photographic evidence, archival material or tiny remnants of ancient monuments. Going beyond such literary or scholarly reconstruction does not seem feasible.

More generally, it is obvious that local civilization is not well equipped to resist cultural globalization. It may well be that only intangible cultural heritage – music, literature, culinary tastes, religion, historical memory and the like – can effectively challenge the levelling-out of collective and individual identities.

⁴³ For bibliographical information, see *supra*, n. 1, n. 14.

⁴⁴ Created in 1993 by Jean-Luc Arnaud, the Observatoire urbain de Beyrouth has changed its name to Observatoire urbain du Proche-Orient and is presently a permanent research programme of the Institut français du Proche-Orient (Amman, Beirut and Damascus).

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