

# Microhistories of movement and olfactory heritage

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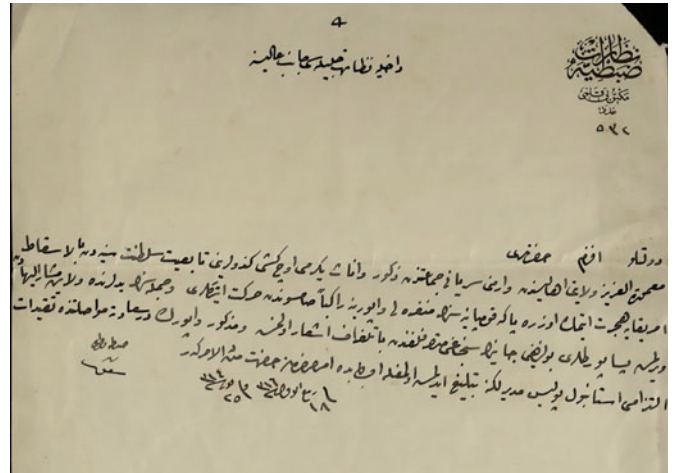
The lens of movement has been a thread running through both my completed work and my ongoing research here at the BIAA, from my project on the episodes of exile and disenfranchisement endured by the privileged Tingiryans, a Catholic Armenian family hailing from Ankara, to my further analysis of the peripatetic existence of Rupen and Sebuhan Manas, in what turned out to be a quite valuable overhaul of the material that I had previously collected for my dissertation project, to the lecture I delivered on 25 October 2022 at the BIAA on the transnational life and agency of Aroussiag Torkyan Iskian. This last project was a microhistorical analysis of Aroussiag, an unknown and unstudied Armenian woman from Marsovan [Merzifon], in the global context of 19th-century mobility, transnationalism and coloniality. I sought to restore her voice and rewrite her into history by venturing beyond the narrow confines of area studies and exploring her within the different spaces of Marsovan, Ankara, Istanbul and New York.

This year, I am building on the same framework in assessing the socio-political implications of human movement, while diversifying by delving into the movement experiences and journeys of Syriac Christian individuals from the Ottoman Empire to North America. While mobility and forced displacement have always been relevant, I believe it is an especially timely and relevant lens today, when the number of forcibly displaced people is at a record high and one in every 78 people has been displaced due to war, persecution, violence and various human rights abuses, according to UN reports.

My proposed projects this year revolve predominantly around the Syriac Christians, a community that has so far received only meagre scholarly attention for the Ottoman period, and one which I have been very passionate about



Class of 1894 (among them, Aroussiag Torkyan Iskian) and teachers, Anatolia Girls' School.



Ottoman archival document regarding 23 Syriac Christians from the Harput Vilayet who wish to relinquish their Ottoman citizenship to emigrate to North America.

introducing back into my research since the completion of my M.St in Syriac Studies in 2014. Adding this element, or rather the various Syriac Christian elements, to my research programme not only contributes to the body of scholarship that exists in this rich and understudied domain and to calling attention to further research, but also acts as a foil for my study of the Armenian community, to which the Syriac Christian community was administratively linked in the Ottoman system. Mainly emigrating from the Harput Vilayet, some were naturalised as American citizens, while others retained their original citizenship. Certain members of both groups of Syriac Christians attempted to return to their homes in the Ottoman Empire. They increasingly made use of the sophisticated smuggling networks that had been established in certain provinces by wealthy and well-connected individuals, frequently aided and abetted by local officers and other local and foreign actors within the Empire.

The aim of my projects is to assess Syriac Christian mobility in light of complicated and ever-variable domestic and international passport and movement regimes, and the increasing clampdown by the Ottoman government on specific groups – first and foremost Armenians. The broader colonial environment and technological developments that resulted in faster and more convenient travel also helped to shape these dynamics and the ways in which migrants and the state interacted. While it gets more attention in the scholarship, though from the perspective of the impact of immigration in general on American domestic politics, I am also reflecting on how American attitudes shifted, becoming more exclusionary during the early 1900s. Particularly after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, for various reasons, some

of these naturalised American citizens from the Ottoman Empire were effectively stripped of their American citizenship and deported, thus being rendered effectively stateless.

Many aspects of Syriac Christian experiences from this time are yet to be unearthed, despite some rare and exceptional pieces of research. I am currently writing two articles related to this topic, which build on the scholarship that exists: first, a more general article that comprises a historical review and helps fill the lacuna in the study of the Syriac Christian community; and second, a microhistorical analysis that zooms in on individuals to reflect on their personal journeys.

This year, I am also developing a workshop about the multisensory dimensionality of Ottoman experiences, with a special focus on the olfactory sensation, or smellscape. The consequence of the olfactory experience to current and historical encounter has lately been receiving more academic interest, resulting in fascinating studies, as well as exhibitions, in the Ottoman and modern Turkish context. More generally, the idea of the centrality of smell to experience has gained more traction in the public imagination. As part of this trend, some companies have already divulged their plans for the introduction of smell and bio-aromatics into virtual reality platforms like 'Metaverse', as an essential component that is currently missing.

I think it is important to highlight the real-world implications of humanities research and to emphasise the cross-disciplinary value of research which enables cross-specialty communication. For projects interested in the virtual reproduction of the olfactory environment of historical spaces, the study of historical smellscape has the potential to contribute to current understandings of how smell can add to the construction of an environment, as well as to provide much needed insights into how historical spaces smelled. For the workshop, I will be presenting a paper on *Papier d'Arménie*, which is a blotting paper soaked in benzoin resin, created by Auguste Ponsot at the end of the 19th century. Still available today, it mimics the smell of historical Ottoman Armenian households that used styrax as a fragrance and disinfectant. This paper reflects on how *Papier d'Arménie* serves as a piece of history that captures an olfactory experience and an intangible sensory heritage. It opens a window into the past reimagined through smell in a move away from ocularcentrism, while also looking into issues of appropriation and colonisation. I take an anthro-historical approach to the olfactory and build on sensory anthropology, smellscape studies and intangible heritage studies in assessing sensory perception, practice and culture.



Papier d'Arménie over the years.