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ORIENTALIA LOVANIENSIA  
ANALECTA  
————— 254 —————

## CONTACTS AND INTERACTION

*Proceedings of the 27<sup>th</sup> Congress  
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edited by

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and ILKKA LINDSTEDT



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A PASSAGE TO ITALY:  
CONTACTS AND INTERACTIONS BETWEEN  
ORIENT AND OCCIDENT IN THE 19th CENTURY

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In the present article I intend to consider some travel journals written by Arab intellectuals who, starting from the second half of the 19th century, headed for Europe,<sup>1</sup> stopping off in Italy. The accounts of their experiences in Italy – although marginal in many ways compared to the rest of their journey – offer, with a few exceptions, points of considerable interest given the fact that Italy was their first port of call in Europe. It is in Italy, in fact, that the travellers have their first encounter with the Other and where they register analogies and differences between the East and the West. When they find themselves in touch with new ethnic social groups and different cultures, the travellers feel obliged to examine their own social mores and cultural norms, thereby setting in motion a transformation of themselves and their civilization.

Starting off from the idea that it is the journey that forms experiences and, in some way, satisfies the need for change, I feel that it is particularly interesting to look at some of these travel writings which stimulate two kinds of consideration. The first concerns typology; the authors in question are Egyptian, Tunisian and Syrian-Lebanese and their writings can be collocated within travel literature in general and, as such, while offering universal elements they are also typical of the genre, in other words, the *adab al-rihla*. The second type of analysis, intimately bound up with the first, harks back to the concept of identity and relations with the Other,

<sup>1</sup> D. NEWMAN, Myths and Realities in Muslim Alterist Discourse: Arab Travellers in Europe in the Age of the Nahda (19th C.), *Chronos* 6 (2002), pp. 8–76; N. SĀBĀYĀRD, *al-Raḥḥālūna al-‘Arab wa ḥaḍārat al-gharb fī al-nahḍa al-‘arabiyya al-ḥadītha*, Bayrūt, 1992 (2nd edition); I. ABU LUGHOD, *Arab Rediscovery of Europe: A Study in Cultural Encounters*, Princeton, 1963; H. PÉRÈS, Voyageurs musulmans en Europe aux XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles : notes bibliographiques, in *Melange Maspero III: Orient Islamique*, Le Caire, 1935–40, pp. 185–195; L. ZOLONDEK, Nineteenth-Century Arab Travellers to Europe: Some Observations on Their Writings, *Muslim World* 61 (1971): 28–34; A. G. CHEJNE, Travel Books in Modern Arabic Literature, *Muslim World* 52 (1962), pp. 207–215.



since the traveller, although armed with his own expectations and cultural baggage which condition his concrete experiences, by means of the journey itself he has the opportunity to reflect on his perception of himself vis-à-vis the Other.<sup>2</sup> From this point of view, the writings here examined are paradigmatic not only of the evolution of Arab thought which saw its renaissance between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century and inaugurated the epoch of *Nahḍa*, but also of its numerous contradictions. In a convulsive thrust towards modernity (in the sense of scientific and technological progress) the Arab élite was overcome by the West/modernity paradigm that set off a process of acculturation which even today seems to be on-going.

### Italy as the Goal of Arab Travellers

The 19th century with its scientific discoveries made travel and communications easier and faster compared to preceding centuries, even though in the 17th and 18th century, too, there was no lack of journeys to the West, both of a diplomatic and a private nature.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in the course of the 19th century the Ottoman Empire began a period of reform inspired, precisely, by the West. As a result, Europe became one of the most sought-after destinations for young Arabs who had earlier gone to study in Constantinople to ensure for themselves positions of respect in the Imperial administration but who were now being sent to European military colleges and universities. The first to set such a project in motion was Muḥammad 'Alī, governor of Egypt, who in 1809 sent first 'Uthmān Nūr al-Dīn, to Switzerland, Germany and Italy where he spent several years studying engineering and military strategy, and then in 1815 Niqūlā Massābikī who spent four years in Milan to learn the art of printing.<sup>4</sup> In 1816 another delegation was sent to Milan, Leghorn, Florence and Rome to study naval engineering and military strategy.<sup>5</sup> These are not isolated cases: Muḥammad 'Alī, in fact, also included in his program the formation

<sup>2</sup> See E. J. LEED, *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism*, New York, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> See H. KILPATRICK, Between Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and al-Ṭaḥṭāwī: Arabic Travel Accounts of the Early Ottoman Period, *Middle Eastern Literatures* 11 (2008), pp. 233–248; idem, Visions of Distant Cities. Travellers as Poets in the Early Ottoman Period, *Quaderni di Studi Arabi* 3 (2008), pp. 67–82; N. MATAR, *In the Land of the Christians: Arabic Travel Writing in the Seventeenth Century*, London, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> J. ZAYDĀN, *Ta'rikh ādāb al-luḡha al-'arabiyya* IV, [al-Qāhira], 1957, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> ZAYDĀN, *Ta'rikh ādāb* IV, p. 20; see also: A. LOUCA, *Voyageurs et écrivains égyptiens en France aux XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1970, pp. 33–74; NEWMAN, *Myths and Realities*, p. 9.

abroad of young Egyptians, first in the Military Academy of Turin (thanks to the influence of the Egyptian governor's personal councilor B. Drovetti, native of Turin), which was soon outclassed, however, by the Military Academy of Paris, as a result of the intervention of E.-F. Jomard, another of the governor of Egypt's councilors.<sup>6</sup> Certainly France – or in other words Paris – became a highly sought-after goal although even other countries, such as England, Italy and Spain, welcomed students: between 1813 and 1849, 311 young men were studying abroad.<sup>7</sup>

Europe also became the goal for non-official visits on the part of Arab and Turkish intellectuals. Some of them chose to go to Italy although the latter represented, for the most part, merely a stage in their European itinerary and Paris was almost always the ultimate goal. Italy as a country of choice was certainly the most favored by the Tunisians, for the most part reformists who had been forced into exile.<sup>8</sup> Among the factors that contributed to such a choice, geographical accessibility was a decisive one as well as the fact that Italy, as part of Europe, was considered a modern and developed country and as such an ideal land for exile and political maneuvers not only for the Tunisians but also for the Egyptians (Naples had been hosting the *khedivé* since 1879). Thus Italy became an important centre for the Arab exodus thanks to such figures as general Ḥusayn, who settled in Leghorn from where he set up a tight network of international contacts. Guests of the general were, in fact, the Tunisians Muḥammad Bayram al-Khāmis (1840–1889) and Muḥammad al-Sanūsī (1851–1900), both authors of weighty travelogues who provided ample coverage of Italy.<sup>9</sup> Other travel journals were written by the two Syrian-Lebanese writers, Salīm Bustrus (1839–1883)<sup>10</sup> and Dīmītrī b. Nī'mat Allāh al-Khallāṭ (d. 1932),<sup>11</sup> as well as the Egyptians Maḥmūd 'Umar al-Bājūrī, (n. 1855),<sup>12</sup> Muḥammad Amīn Fikrī (1856–1900)<sup>13</sup> and Muḥammad Zakī (1867–

<sup>6</sup> P. BRET, *L'Égypte de Jomard : la construction d'un mythe orientaliste*, de Bonaparte à Méhémet-Ali, *Romantisme* 120 (2003), pp. 5–14; A. SILVERA, The First Egyptian Student Mission to France under Muhammad Ali, *Middle Eastern Studies* 16 (1980), pp. 1–22.

<sup>7</sup> NEWMAN, *Myths and Realities*, pp. 13–14.

<sup>8</sup> A. M. MEDICI, *Città italiane sulla via della Mecca : storie di viaggiatori tunisini dell'Ottocento*, Torino, 2001, pp. 46–47.

<sup>9</sup> M. BAYRAM AL-KHĀMIS, *Ṣafwat al-i'tibār bi-mustawḍa' al-amṣār wa-l-aqtār*, Miṣr, 1885 (vols. I–IV) & 1894, (vol. V); the edition consulted: Bayrūt, 1981; M. AL-SANŪSĪ, *al-Riḥla al-ḥijāziyya*, Tūnis, 1851; the edition consulted: Tūnis, 1976.

<sup>10</sup> S. BUSTRUS, *al-Nuzha al-shahiyya fī al-riḥla al-salīmiyya 1855*, Bayrūt, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> D. AL-KHALLĀT, *Kitāb sifr al-safar ilā ma'raq al-ḥaḍar*, Miṣr, 1891.

<sup>12</sup> M. 'U. AL-BĀJŪRĪ, *al-Durar al-bahiyya fī al-riḥla al-ūrūbāwiyya*, Miṣr, 1891.

<sup>13</sup> M. A. FIKRĪ, *Irshād al-alibbā' ilā mahāsīn Ūrūbbā*, Miṣr, 1892.

1934).<sup>14</sup> The work of these writers allows us to see their journeys in a wider perspective by comparing the travelogues of Christian writers, as in the case of Bustrus and al-Khallāt, with those of the Tunisian and Egyptian Muslim writers especially as regards their attitude to the West and their contribution to the development of the *Nahḍa*.

The oldest work is that of Salīm Bustrus who belonged to one of the leading Greek-Orthodox families of Lebanese traders. Why he can be singled out lies in the fact that his is the account of a mere boy. Bustrus, in fact, was only sixteen when in 1855 he set sail with his paternal uncle from Beirut, headed for Europe and touching on Haifa, Alexandria, Cairo, then Malta and Messina. Their other Italian stops were Naples, Leghorn, Pisa, Florence, Genoa and Trieste. The other Syrian-Lebanese writer al-Khallāt belonged to a family of Christian merchants.<sup>15</sup> He set sail from Alexandria in June 1889 and arrived in Brindisi on 5th June; from here he continued his journey in Italy where he stayed for two weeks. This indefatigable tourist visited Naples, Pompey, Caserta, Rome, Florence and Milan where he doubtlessly gave precedence to visiting the churches, considered the main Italian attraction,<sup>16</sup> but also numerous important buildings, museums and monuments.

The two Tunisian authors, on the other hand, were Bayram V who was an important exponent of the reformist movement and Muḥammad al-Sanūsī, also a reformist but of less noble origins than his master Bayram, with whom he shared a passion for journalism. Al-Sanūsī wrote, in fact, for the newspaper *Rāʾid* directed by Bayram V (1874).<sup>17</sup> They both headed off for Europe, the knowledge of whose civil and administrative organization they wanted to investigate as well as, above all, its scientific and technological progress. Bayram visited Italy on three occasions and knew it from top to bottom, so much so that he was able to make comparisons between the North and South from the East to the West coast of the peninsula. He was often a guest of general Ḥusayn. Besides the usual stops (Brindisi, Naples, Pompey, Caserta, Rome, Pisa, Turin, Bologna, Milan), Bayram also visited the Spa of Montecatini. Another enthusiastic visitor of Tuscany (Leghorn, Pisa, Montecatini as well as Monsummano and Pistoia) is al-Sanūsī, who also visited Naples (Pompey) and Rome.

<sup>14</sup> A. ZAKĪ, *al-Safar ilā al-muʿtamar*, Būlāq, 1893.

<sup>15</sup> F. ZACHS, *The Making of a Syrian Identity: Intellectuals and Merchants in Nineteenth Century Beirut*, Leiden, 2005, pp. 227–228.

<sup>16</sup> AL-KHALLĀT, *Kitāb sifr al-safar*, p. 72.

<sup>17</sup> M. CHEBBI, *L'image de l'Occident chez les intellectuels tunisiens dans la seconde moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Tunis, 2010, p. 59.

The Egyptians al-Bājūrī and Fikrī belonged to the delegation that was sent to the VIII Congress of Oriental Scholars held in Stockholm in 1889 and hence their stopovers in Italy were the usual ones: Brindisi, Trieste, Venice, Milan. When Zakī was the delegate to the IX Congress of Oriental Scholars held in London in 1892,<sup>18</sup> he took the opportunity of visiting Italy, stopping off in Brindisi, Naples, Rome, Florence, Pisa, Genoa and Turin.

### Typology: Travelogues Revisited

The authors under discussion, with their more or less illustrious origins, are not travellers in the ordinary sense but rather representatives of the new professional figures (journalists, teachers, lawyers, etc.) who were coming to the fore in Arab society. There can be no doubt, however, that their works can be collocated within *adab al-riḥla*, a consolidated genre in Arab literature. Notwithstanding the fact that they do not constitute a uniform corpus, they do, however, have several points in common both from the standpoint of content and of formal structure precisely because they are travelogues (*riḥla*). It should be noted, however, that these works revisit the traditional genre according to modern expectations and needs. Now, unlike in the past, the goal of the journey and the primary object of interest was no longer *dār al-Islām* but Europe, which was attractive because of its scientific progress and technological innovations. Hence it transpired that the *riḥla*, although it moved to the West, retained its fundamental propelling force which was the *ṭalab al-‘ilm* (quest for knowledge). The journey to Europe, therefore, was not simply a past-time but a fundamental stage in the formation of self and the authors discussed here seem to respond to the same imperative: to make Europe and the secrets of its progress known to their fellow countrymen.

Certainly in the case of the Tunisians Bayram V and al-Sanūsī, as also in that of the Syrian-Lebanese writers Bustrus and al-Khallāt, the journey to Italy was dictated by free choice and unfolded according to an itinerary that was not predetermined, while for the Egyptians it was a matter of official duty, sponsored by the government and organized by the famous Cook's agency. But the spirit animating the written texts appears to be the same, namely to make known to their countries of origin what they have seen in the places visited with the objective, as Fikrī points out,

<sup>18</sup> LOUCA, *Voyageurs et écrivains*, pp. 197–199, 206–210.

to draw to their attention what these countries have produced and to the spirit of commitment and abnegation they have employed to achieve progress, well-being and a comfortable life.<sup>19</sup>

Each author outlines his account with the aim of providing a kind of treatise on the country visited, with dissertations on European civilization, including architecture and art (Bustrus and al-Khallāt), but also on social conditions. In short, the intention seems to have been that of producing a useful travel guide, exactly as al-Ṭaḥṭāwī had set out to do in *Takhlīṣ al-ibrīz fī talkhīṣ Bārīz* (1834). The subjects dealt with are also analogous and became literary topoi: women and how they behaved and dressed, food, political and administrative organization, business concerns but also means of transport, theatres and entertainment, architecture and art. The description of places and objects belonging to the Other and the Elsewhere follow both the traditional minute precision in providing numerical specifications such as the calculation of distances and dimensions of cities, squares and buildings and also the imaginative taste typical of the medieval ‘*ajā’ib*. The realities of progress and technology are filtered by the Arab authors through a fantastic and imaginative spectrum. The term ‘*ajā’ib* crops up frequently. While Bustrus uses it to describe a natural spectacle such as that of Vesuvius which nightly gave a display of its tongues of fire and cinders<sup>20</sup> – in much the same way as Fikrī does in his account of his visit to the Castle of Miramare on the coastline of Trieste<sup>21</sup> – there are also numerous occasions in which the term ‘*ajīb* is used to point to the prodigious advances of technology such as the tunnels gouged out of the Italian mountains which enabled trains to run through them (Zakī, Fikrī), or other man made products such as works of art – frescoes, paintings and tapestries – or municipal and religious buildings, churches and monasteries.

Bustrus, who was a refined traveller, did not limit himself to visiting the important centres such as Naples (where, among other things, he appreciates the elegance and fascination of the Veiled Christ),<sup>22</sup> but he also visited minor localities such as Caserta and Pompey.<sup>23</sup> Al-Khallāt, too, went

<sup>19</sup> FIKRĪ, *Irshād al-alibbā’*, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> BUSTRUS, *al-Nuzha al-shahiyya*, p. 48–49.

<sup>21</sup> FIKRĪ, *Irshād al-alibbā’*, p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> BUSTRUS, *al-Nuzha al-shahiyya*, p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> See A. HAVEMANN, A View of the ‘Other’: Berlin in 1855 through the Eyes of Salīm Bustrus, in B. HEYBERGER & C. M. WALBINER (eds.), *Les Européens vus par le Libanais à l’époque ottomane*, Beirut, 2002, pp. 111–119.

from Naples on a trip to Pompey where he studied with particular attention the archeological (and human) remains preserved intact in the solidified lava;<sup>24</sup> when in Rome he also went to the outskirts to visit the catacombs of San Calisto.<sup>25</sup>

As we can see, these 19th-century works often have recourse to classical stylistic models not only as regards themes but also in their attention to details and measurements. There is, however, the difference that in these texts – unlike what happened in the traditional *rihla* – these details acquire the value of useful information for a modern traveller: they give distances and the time needed to cover them as well as the price of train tickets, carriages and taxis. Furthermore, they provide information about museums, theatres and also hotels (all-inclusive service and the exorbitant cost of extras etc.).<sup>26</sup> These writings, while duly taking into account their differences, follow a structural line that is largely similar. The authors explain in the introduction the reasons for their journey. In the case of the Muslims, they justify their sojourn outside the *dār al-Islām*, concentrating on practical recommendations such as water for ablutions, *qibla*, butchered meat etc. and they then go on to describe the places visited: the physical geography of a region, the place names of cities, important historical events, the populace (social condition, temperament, food and fashions in dress) as well as the principal monuments and, in the case of Italy the numerous churches and archeological specimens.

Bustrus who during his week-long stay in Rome did not limit himself to visiting famous monuments, confesses that on the basis of his “Oriental taste” he found the church of San Paolo the most beautiful while Westerners attributed greater beauty to St Peter’s.<sup>27</sup> When in Naples he was surprised by the fact that the populace – for the most part poor – did not beg for alms but asked for a glass of wine. Al-Sanūsī, on the other hand, while he appreciates the natural beauty of Naples, deplores the fact that its people are innately malicious and make the city a centre of petty thievery and corruption.<sup>28</sup> Bayram also advises travellers not to go about with a lot of money but to deposit money with other valuables and jewels in the banks since theft in Naples was common both on the streets and

<sup>24</sup> AL-KHALLĀT, *Kitāb sifr al-safar*, pp. 22–30.

<sup>25</sup> AL-KHALLĀT, *Kitāb sifr al-safar*, pp. 46–48.

<sup>26</sup> BAYRAM AL-KHĀMIS, *Ṣafwat al-ʿtibār* III, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> BUSTRUS, *al-Nuzha al-shahiyya*, p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> AL-SANŪSĪ, *al-Rihla al-ḥijāziyya*, pp. 84–85.

in the hotels.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, the beauties of Naples outweighed its negative aspects. Zakī, for example, was fascinated by the city and expressed his appreciation of its position, which he compared to that of Constantinople, and more than anything else, he enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere that one could breathe there.<sup>30</sup> In this connection, al-Khallāṭ remarks that there is not a restaurant in Naples where one does not eat to the accompaniment of music and song.<sup>31</sup>

The journey is of fundamental importance in Islamic culture; it is enough to think of emigration (*hijra*), pilgrimages or the formation of a scholar – a grammarian, a judge or a Sufi – who undertook long journeys within the *dār al-Islām* to meet a *shaykh* or find a manuscript.<sup>32</sup> Direct ocular testimony is, therefore, considered indispensable in the quest for knowledge. *Ra'aytu, zurtu*, I saw, I visited, is repeated time and again by the 19th-century author-travellers in their works which are intended to transmit their knowledge of what they have seen in Europe. Undoubtedly each of them follows his own interests and inclinations, but the objective is always, to a greater or lesser extent, the desire to embrace all knowledge and put it down in encyclopedic *rihla*. These works, while they can be inserted into the tradition and so follow a line of continuity with the past, also trace out a trajectory for the future.

In particular, Fikrī's work not only describes, translates and transmits a reality but it also suggests itineraries and introduces subjects that will be at the base of the *Nahḍa*, i.e. the role of the individual within society, the call for a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone to instruct himself and better his condition not only for his own sake but for the sake of the nation. Fikrī devotes ample space to the biographies of famous personages such as Thomas Cook<sup>33</sup> of the acclaimed travel agency or Monsieur Boucicaut, the owner of the *Bon Marché*,<sup>34</sup> chain of stores. In both cases he emphasizes the fact that these men were of humble origins. The exhortation to assume individual responsibility towards one's own country and also Zakī's explicit criticism of his fellow Egyptians for the scant care they take of their monuments touch on a subject about which al-Ṭaḥṭawī

<sup>29</sup> BAYRAM AL-KHĀMIS, *Ṣafwat al-i'tibār*, III, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> ZAKĪ, *al-Safar*, pp. 13–15.

<sup>31</sup> AL-KHALLĀṬ, *Kitāb sifr al-safar*, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> H. TOUATI, *Islam et voyage au Moyen Âge*, Paris, 2000, pp. 57–94.

<sup>33</sup> FIKRĪ, *Irshād al-alibbā'*, pp. 21–26.

<sup>34</sup> FIKRĪ, *Irshād al-alibbā'*, pp. 293–298.

had expressed himself in harsh terms. The latter underlines the symbolic force of statues which not only make manifest to the population the deeds of a personage who has fought, sometimes at the cost of his life, for his country, but also represent a model, an example to follow.<sup>35</sup> In the same way, the texts of both the Syrian-Lebanese writers underline the importance of knowledge as an instrument of progress and civilization, transmitted through multiple sources that are more specifically historical-cultural than social.

### We and They ...

Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī observes Paris and what he writes in his account says more about the Egyptians than the French in that a definition of the Other presupposes a definition of oneself. If, however, for al-Ṭaḥṭāwī the differences between East and West, between ‘we and they’, are not translated into the supremacy of relationships, in later accounts things inevitably change. European power reaches its apex not only in the military field but Europeans celebrated their achievements in the Universal Exhibitions which became showpieces to parade before the whole world, their creations, products and new technology thereby assigning to themselves the uncontested role of the homeland of progress. Progress, however, did not involve only science and technology but embraced art, architecture and literature as becomes clear from the accounts of the Arab men of letters-travellers. European efficiency was evident in every aspect of daily life: wide streets, means of transport, street lighting, central heating and elegant buildings tastefully decked out inside with furniture, ornaments, paintings, frescoes and statues. In Italy, as Zakī points out, the inhabitants of the city are so much surrounded by monuments and beautiful artworks of all kinds that they cannot help becoming artists, painters and musicians.<sup>36</sup> The elegance of Rome – still according to Zakī – is reflected in its shops where even a butcher displays his cuts of meat as tastefully as a florist does his flowers.<sup>37</sup> It is, of course, not only the externals that influence the conduct of modern citizens. In this connection, Zakī seems to want to debunk an old saying according to which Arab laziness was to be attributed to the effect of the heat: he relates, in fact, that he has visited

<sup>35</sup> ZAKĪ, *al-Safar*, pp. 23–25.

<sup>36</sup> ZAKĪ, *al-Safar*, p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> ZAKĪ, *al-Safar*, p. 21.



Italian cities where the heat was comparable to that of Alexandria and Aswan although he admits that this is unusual in Italy.<sup>38</sup>

Bayram V, too, remarks on the high temperatures in many cities, especially in the South of Italy. In fact, it is in the North of the country that the conditions of the populace are decidedly better, even from a cultural point of view. (Bayram notes a more extensive presence of the public in the Turin library as compared to that of Naples).<sup>39</sup> A consideration of Italy and its state of progress is measured according to a dual standard: apart from the obvious one with their country of origin, the Arab writers also make a comparison with France. Italians (sometimes referred to as *naṣārā*, Christians, infidels and also *ifranj*) and Italy rarely appear in all their specificity (apart from descriptions of the landscape, references to ancient and modern history and comments on domestic administration and certain dialects). Bayram V and al-Sanūsī, who spent a longer period of time in Italy compared to the others, are struck by certain characteristics that they consider “typically Italian” but that are, in fact, stereotypes: Naples, lascivious and corrupt, Turin, serious and efficient, Milan “the most beautiful of the Italian cities”, according to Bayram who paid a visit there during his second journey in 1881 on the occasion of the National industrial and artistic Exhibition.<sup>40</sup> What emerges here more than elsewhere is how the Arab travellers wholly embraced the image that the Italians themselves wanted to give of Milan, a city that could certainly not compete for beauty with Venice, Florence, Rome or Naples but which, precisely in that period, was asserting itself as the economic capital of the country.

With few exceptions the Arab descriptions concern the urban reality; glimpses of the countryside are rare. Fikrī visited the French countryside and Bayram admired the orderly landscape of northern Italy but the strength of a nation seems to be measured by its industries and commerce. Italy, the taillight of Europe, was the sixth power after France, Great Britain, etc. and, as Bayram points out, although its industries were not yet so numerous, “the Italians are making every effort to bring themselves to the level of the most advanced countries”.<sup>41</sup> Italy, from this point of view, might well have seemed to the Arabs a more fitting model for to follow than other European countries but, essentially, the only feature in

<sup>38</sup> ZAKĪ, *al-Safar*, p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> BAYRAM AL-KHĀMIS, *Ṣafwat al-i'tibār* III, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> BAYRAM AL-KHĀMIS, *Ṣafwat al-i'tibār* III, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> BAYRAM AL-KHĀMIS, *Ṣafwat al-i'tibār* III, p. 54.

common that they find is the heat. For them, Italy remains an integral part of a vaster reality and comparisons often break away from Italian specificity to include Europeans in general. The counterpoint is between ‘we and they’ where ‘they’ stands for Europeans or Christians or even, unbelievers (Bayram V, al-Sanūsī). The distinction, however, does not, perforce, exclude the Other. When al-Sanūsī was in Naples, he heard the church bells ring out on Sundays and invoked Allāh to protect his faith,<sup>42</sup> but when in Rome, he went to visit the Vatican.

Alongside considerations of ways of dress and the banking system, the question of women, particularly as regarded the use of the veil, was a relevant theme in the dispute between ‘we and they’ in particular for the Muslim authors. On the train for Milan, while travelling in the company of his father and other delegates, Fikrī struck up a conversation with two young Italian intellectuals; when talk turned to Muslim women, he rebutted the opinion of the Italians who criticized the exclusion from social life of women by explaining that in Islam women could take part in all activities although, of course, they could not conduct themselves according to promiscuous Western norms.<sup>43</sup> The Arabs were quick to point out that Islam was not the cause of backwardness but rather it was laziness and lack of initiative that laid to the impasse. The image of themselves that the Arabs project does not seem very far from that of Oriental scholars. In the same way, the dominant image in these 19th-century accounts of a progressive Europe represented almost exclusively by modern urban centres is exactly the image that the mainland European bourgeoisie wished to transmit of itself precisely by harking back to the image of an exotic East (as perfectly embodied by the Oriental pavilions of the Universal Expositions).<sup>44</sup>

In conclusion, these Arab travelogues make evident that ‘East’ and ‘West’ are not fixed and immutable categories but, as Roxanne Euben rightly points out, “they emerge, transform and recede in the course of the journey itself”.<sup>45</sup> But there is more: although diametrically opposed in

<sup>42</sup> AL-SANŪSĪ, *al-Rihla al-hijāziyya*, p. 82.

<sup>43</sup> FIKRĪ, *Irshād al-alibbāʾ*, pp. 66–67.

<sup>44</sup> C. BALDAZZI, The Arabs in the Mirror: Stories and Travel Diaries Relating to the Universal Expositions in Paris (1867; 1889, 1900), in G. ABBATTISTA (ed.), *Moving Bodies, Displaying Nations, National Cultures, Race and Gender in World Expositions Nineteenth to Twenty-first Century*, Trieste, 2014, pp. 213–240; Z. ÇELİK, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World’s Fairs*, Berkeley, 1992.

<sup>45</sup> R. L. EUBEN, *Journeys to the Other Shores: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*, Princeton, 2006, p. 10.

their comparison (or perhaps precisely on account of the confrontation), these categories, the 'we' and the 'they', seem, in fact, to be profoundly interrelated in the sense that a dialectic exchange is established between them. The work of mediation and translation of another culture was never so complex for the Arabs as in the period under discussion around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In this historical moment Europe had, in fact, taken on the semblance of a Janus: even if Europe embodied progress, technology and statesmanship and was, consequently, a model to emulate, it also acted as a colonizing power that had already demonstrated its imperialistic designs in *dār al-Islām* itself, first in Algeria and then in Tunisia and, as such, it was a force to be resisted. In short, this was the fundamental contradiction that the Arab travellers here discussed were faced with and it is a contradiction that would become of central importance to the intellectuals of the *Nahḍa* in their attempt to construct a modern form of society.