Special Subject: The British and the Ottoman Middle East, 1798-c.1850

In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt. This was intended to be a blow against the fast-expanding British Empire in India and a major extension into Asia of the war for global dominance between the British and French. Napoleon’s move highlighted to the British the importance of the region between the Mediterranean and India and particularly the large part of it ruled by the Ottoman Empire. In the next fifty years the British became preoccupied with strengthening their position in these lands by using their sea power in the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to frustrate their French and also increasingly their Russian rivals. This Special Subject tells the story of British activities in, attitudes to, and experiences of the Ottoman Middle East in this period, particularly in relation to Egypt, Syria, Arabia and Baghdad. The British could not seize these territories because their international strategy depended on trying to keep the Ottoman Empire alive, but most observers believed that it would shortly collapse and that it was essential to ensure political, economic and moral influence in advance of that point. The course’s ultimate objective is to trace the connections between political, cultural and religious activities in these territories: territories which were not just of strategic, diplomatic and naval significance but also of enormous interest to travellers seeking an understanding of classical and biblical history – and indeed adventure and exotic ‘Oriental’ experiences.

No prior understanding of Middle Eastern history, or of nineteenth-century British politics or foreign policy, is required. The course is taught in sixteen sessions in Michaelmas and Lent terms, plus three or four revision sessions in Easter. The first sixteen sessions each have designated source reading, indicated below, and the sources are available on Moodle. Early sessions will primarily involve lectures, plus some class discussion of specific sources. After a few weeks the weekly classes will focus on 20-25 minute presentations by individual class members, plus source discussion; each class member will give one presentation. Though we may do a certain amount of informal gobbet practice along the way, the main formal gobbet practice will take place during the Easter Term revision sessions.

The Michaelmas Term sessions focus on British political activities and attitudes. They start with the conundrum of how to get the French out of Egypt after 1798, especially given the differing objectives of the Ottomans and Russians with whom the British had to ally. Sidney Smith became a national hero for driving Bonaparte out of Syria in 1799 but then made an agreement with the French which was vilified at home. The British had to mount a two-pronged campaign from the Mediterranean and Red Sea in 1801 in order to expel the French; this created a sense of British responsibility for Egypt, and new British objectives in the Red Sea. We need to understand why it was that in 1807 the British felt the need to go to war with the Ottomans and to occupy Egypt again, though this created fresh problems. In order to tackle the naval threats from France but also from Arab pirates, and thus to protect trade, the British spent much effort strengthening their naval position around the Arabian coast and especially in the Persian Gulf, establishing naval primacy there in 1820 which also boosted British influence in Baghdad. We explore the aims and limits of this primacy and British attitudes to the pirates’ Wah’habi allies. Britain’s war on the pirates was assisted by the rise of Mehmet Ali as governor of Egypt, and soon the strongest regional figure, semi-independent of the Ottoman Sultan. For thirty years after 1811 he was the dominant figure in British calculations: essential in guaranteeing order for British travellers and traders; much admired by utilitarian liberals for his technological improvements; the only man who might revive the Islamic caliphate and create an Araban empire; either the Sultan’s greatest strength or the agent of his destruction; a potential ally of Britain but also of Britain’s enemies against her. The remaining weeks of Michaelmas are spent considering how best to deal with his power, and the striking British initiatives that – after considerable debate - resulted: a great discussion about British political and economic interests, leading among other things to the 1838 Anglo-Ottoman trade treaty (week 5); the invasion of Syria and Palestine in 1840-1 by British troops and agents, resulting in the protection of designated religious minorities,
in particular the Jews and Druses (week 6); the introduction of armed British steamers on the Mesopotamian rivers (week 7); steam navigation of the Red Sea, the seizure of Aden, and expensive missions to Abyssinia (week 8). By the 1840s British influence in all these territories was unmistakeable - which brought major new problems with it, not least the question of securing the transit through Egypt, and of reconciling British interests with the maintenance of Ottoman rule not only in Egypt but also in southern Arabia and in Mesopotamia. We might ask how far British power – assumed by most historians to be a late 19th and early 20th century phenomenon – could already be seen throughout the key parts of the Middle East by 1850.

The eight Lent term classes consider the engagement of British travellers with the region, primarily through the accounts of it that they wrote. They deal with the business of travel in general, for men and women; with perceptions of Eastern gender relations; with the particular cultural, religious and political attractions of Egypt, the Holy Land and Mesopotamia/Assyria; and with attitudes to Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

In the eighteenth century, a few adventurous gentlemen travellers had extended their Grand Tour to include inspection of classical and biblical sites in Egypt, Palestine and Asia Minor, and after the return of peace in 1815 the number grew enormously. This process was helped by the increasing regularity of transport links with India, and then by the arrival of steam power in the 1830s, as well as by the encouragement given by Mehmet Ali to British travellers. To start with, the main interest lay in the region’s classical and Christian inheritance, though as time went on there was more engagement also with ancient Egypt and, in the 1840s, with ancient Assyria. How far was this interest driven by a shift in antiquarian taste and how far by a selfish search for valuable antiquities or for fame? And while a majority of travellers were much more interested in the ancient past than in the modern reality of the countries through which they journeyed, others took the trouble to engage with local cultures, including some pioneering women travellers. The period saw a significant flowering of interest at home in Eastern history and literature – such as the Thousand and One Nights – and in the harem, polygamy and female slavery. When considering British attitudes to Eastern gender relations and culture, we are necessarily led into the multi-faceted debate among historians about the nature of early Victorian perceptions of the Orient, which has become progressively stronger and more nuanced ever since the publication of Edward Said’s Orientalism in 1978.

Many Britons believed that the Middle East would be the epicentre of a dramatic struggle for religious truth that would determine the future of the world, in ways that also affected their views on its political development. Many eagerly sought literal evidence of the truth of the bible from the sites described in the Old and New Testaments. Some aimed instead at a more imaginative appreciation of the spirit of Christianity by visiting the region. Others pioneered the study of comparative religions and ethnography by seeking to explore points of comparison and contrast between Christianity, Judaism, Islam and ancient Egyptian beliefs.

Meanwhile, among the major threats to the stability of the region were the vigour of Wah’habi Islam and of tribal revolts against Ottoman occupation, and British officials had to develop a workable relationship with Moslems and Arabs. At the same time public opinion at home expected the defence of Christian interests. Moreover diplomats and interest groups often became mixed up in quarrels between different Christian sects, particularly since the promotion of Catholic interests was a key element in the assertion of French power in the region. The British tried to defend Chaldean Christians in Kurdistan against both Catholic and Moslem (Kurdish) aggression, and worked with the Prussians to establish a Protestant bishopric at Jerusalem, despite hostility from Moslems, Catholics and Russian Orthodox groups. Finally, some influential British figures sought to defend Jewish interests and encourage Jewish settlement, particularly in Palestine.

Though these different themes are treated separately, by the end of the course connections between them should be apparent, thus helping us to gain a fuller and richer understanding of British engagement with the Middle East than currently appears in any single secondary book. An introductory list of 30 secondary works is given here, but a full bibliography of secondary reading will be produced for Long Essays.
PRIMARY SOURCES

Michaelmas

Week 1: Introduction: Napoleon, Egypt and India 1798-1800


*Historical Manuscripts Commission: The manuscripts of J.B. Fortescue preserved at Dropmore* (10 vols, 1892-) V, 475-84

Francis B. Spilsbury, *Picturesque scenery in the Holy Land and Syria, delineated during the campaigns of 1799 and 1800* (1803), pp. 7-13, 66-70

John Philip Morier, *Memoir of a campaign with the Ottoman army in Egypt* (1801), pp.17-33

Week 2: The struggle to preserve Egypt from the French, 1800-1807


Arthur Aspinall, *The later correspondence of George III* (5 vols, 1962-70), III, 423-4*


William Hamilton, *Remarks on several parts of Turkey: part I: Aegyptica, or some account of the antient and modern state of Egypt, as obtained in the years 1801, 1802* (1809), pp. 1-10, 185-7


Week 3: Baghdad and attempts to control the Persian Gulf, 1798-1821

Sir Harford Jones Brydges, *An account of the transactions of His Majesty's mission to the court of Persia, in the years 1807-11, to which is appended, a brief history of the Wahauby* (2 vols, 1834), II, 177-8


J.R. Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia* (2 vols, 1838), I, 54-9, 247-54

J.R. Wellsted, *Travels to the city of the caliphs, along the shores of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean* (2 vols, 1840), I, 34-42, 99-107
L.G. Johnson, General T. Perronet Thompson 1783-1869: his military, literary and political campaigns (1957), pp. 95-111

Week 4: the debate about Ottoman decline and the Russian threat

Robert Walpole (ed), Memoirs relating to European and Asiatic Turkey; edited from manuscript journals (1817), pp.1-31*

[David Urquhart,] Turkey and its resources (1833), pp.v-viii

[John McNeill,] Progress and present position of Russia in the East (1836), pp.110-17, 121-3

‘A Manchester manufacturer’ [Richard Cobden], Russia (1836), pp. 1-8, 28-32

Anon., ‘Trade with Russia, and Trade with Turkey’, British and Foreign Review (1837), 490-3, 498-501

[Hugh Cameron,] ‘The City of the Sultan’, British and Foreign Review (1838), 92-4, 104-6, 116-19*

John Reid, Turkey and the Turks (1840), pp. 55-7, 62-80*

Charles Macfarlane, Kismet; or, the doom of Turkey (1853), 1-12

Week 5: Mehmet Ali’s economic regime, his conquest of Syria, and free trade


James Augustus St John, Egypt, and Mohammed Ali; or, travels in the valley of the Nile (2 vols., 1834), II, 394-407 [398 and 402 are missing]

‘Letter from Mr Farren’, in Lord Lindsay, Letters on Egypt, Edom and the Holy Land (2 vols., 1838), II, 274-5, 292-3, 315-29*

[Lord Ashley, later 7th Earl of Shaftesbury,] ‘Lord Lindsay’s travels – state and prospects of the Jews’, Quarterly Review (1839), 170-1

Thomas Waghorn, Egypt as it is in 1837 (1837), pp.13-29

Autobiographical recollections of Sir John Bowring, ed. L.B. Bowring (1877), pp.174-81


Eliot Warburton, The crescent and the cross (1844), I, 354-60

Charles White, Three years in Constantinople (3 vols., 1845), II, 312-13

Henry Lytton Bulwer, The life of Henry John Temple, Viscount Palmerston (2 vols., 1871), I, 257-88*

Week 6: Britain, Syria and Palestine 1840-1


F.A. Neale, *Islamism; its rise and its progress* (2 vols., 1854), II, 252-9*


**Week 7: the Euphrates expedition, the Church in Kurdistan, and the Baghdad steamers**

‘Report from the Select Committee on Steam Navigation to India’, *Parliamentary Papers* (1834) XIV, 1-12, 106-10, 132-5


W.F. Ainsworth, *The claims of the Christian aborigines of the Turkish or Osmanli Empire upon civilized nations* (1843). pp. 3-7, 12-16, 31-40, 43-53*


**Week 8: Aden, the Red Sea and the steam transit**

George, Viscount Valentia, *Voyages and travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia, and Egypt, in the years 1802, 1803, 1804, 1805, and 1806* (4 vols, 1809), II, 212-15

James Augustus St John, *Egypt, and Mohammed Ali; or, travels in the valley of the Nile* (2 vols, 1834), II, 139-40

J.G. Wilkinson, *Topography of Thebes* (1835), pp.588-95

‘Report from the Select Committee on steam communication with India’, *Parliamentary Papers* (1837) VI, 14-22, 63-5, 91-4, 96-8, 119-24

J.R. Wellsted, *Travels in Arabia* (2 vols, 1838), II, 292-6

J.R. Wellsted, *Travels to the city of the caliphs, along the shores of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean* (2 vols, 1840), II, 112, 156-60, 163-6, 269-71


Anon., ‘Occupation of Aden’, *Blackwood’s Magazine* 53 (Apr. 1843), 484-95

Arthur Anderson, *Communications with India, China etc; observations on the practicability and utility of opening a communication between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean* (1843), pp. 18, 22-9, 39-43

W. Cornwallis Harris, *The Highlands of Aethiopia* (3 vols., 1844) I, 27-9
**Lent**

**Week 9: Travellers: masculinity and femininity**

J.G. Wilkinson, *Topography of Thebes* (1835), pp.559-68

J.R. Wellsted, *Travels to the city of the caliphs, along the shores of the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean* (2 vols, 1840), I, 146-54, 319-22


Michael Angelo Titmarsh [W.M. Thackeray], *Notes of a journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846), pp. 72-81, 99-100*


**Week 10: The harem, polygamy, slavery: the lifestyles of eastern women**

Frederick Henniker, *Notes, during a visit to Egypt, Nubia, the oasis, Mount Sinai and Jerusalem* (1823), pp.149-50, 175-8

Edward Lane, *An account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians* (1836), 403-14*

Julia Pardoe, *The city of the sultan, and domestic manners of the Turks in 1836* (1837; 1854 edn), pp.37-43


Sophia Lane-Poole, *The Englishwoman in Egypt* (3 vols., 1844), II, 74-7, 94-9, 171-5, III, 5-25*

Eliot Warburton, *The crescentwoman in Egypt* (1844), I, 85-93

Charles White, *Three years in Constantinople* (3 vols., 1845), II, 286-94, 299-300, 304-6, 309-11*


*History of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East* (1847), pp. 97-103, 123-4*

Though not formally sources for examination purposes, we will also discuss pictures in:


**Week 11: The changing appeal of Egypt**

William Hamilton, *Remarks on several parts of Turkey: part I: Aegyptica, or some account of the antient and modern state of Egypt, as obtained in the years 1801, 1802* (1809), pp. 225-6, 402-3

G. Belzoni, *Narrative of the operations and recent discoveries within the pyramids, temples, tombs and excavations of Egypt and Nubia* (2 vols, 1822), pp. v-ix


L. Loewe (ed), *Diaries of Sir Moses and Lady Montefiore* (2 vols., 1890), I, 39


Michael Angelo Titmarsh [W.M. Thackeray], *Notes of a journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846), pp.183-91, 212-19*

*A hand-book to Mr. Albert Smith’s entertainment, entitled the ‘Overland Mail’* (1850), pp. 16-21, 26-8*

Anthony Trollope, *The Bertrams* (1859), 466-7, 474-5*

**Week 12: The Holy Land**

E.D. Clarke, *Travels in various countries of Europe, Asia and Africa Part II section 1* (1817 edn), pp. 284-5, 288-90, 292, 303-4, 315-20

William Turner, *Journal of a tour in the Levant* (3 vols, 1820), II, 164-6, 170, 198-204


Edward Napier, *Reminiscences of Syria* (2 vols, 1843), II, 145-51*

A.W. Kinglake, *Eothen* (1845), pp. 146-61*

Michael Angelo Titmarsh [W.M. Thackeray], *Notes of a journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846), pp.147-63


Robert Curzon, *Visits to the monasteries in the Levant* (1850), pp.154-61, 166, 186-7, 210-13*


Though not formally sources for examination purposes, we will also discuss pictures in the following books:

Week 13: Britain and the protection of the Jews

[Lord Ashley, later 7th Earl of Shaftesbury,] ‘Lord Lindsay’s travels – state and prospects of the Jews’, Quarterly Review (1839), 176-92


Edwin Hodder, The life and work of the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury (3 vols, 1887), I, 313-19, 364-82*


Harriet Martineau, Eastern life: present and past (3 vols., 1848), III, 111-15, 265-6


George Gawler, Syria and its near prospects (1853), pp.35-49

Week 14: Islam and the Wah’habi

George, Viscount Valentia, Voyages and travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia, and Egypt, in the years 1802, 1803, 1804, 1805, and 1806 (4 vols, 1809), II, 354-7, 384-93

J.A. Saldanha, ed., The Persian Gulf Precis; volume I (1908; 1986 edn), 349-52

Sir Harford Jones Brydges, An account of the transactions of His Majesty’s mission to the court of Persia, in the years 1807-11, to which is appended, a brief history of the Wahauby (2 vols, 1834), II, 18-19, 22-26, 107-14, 201-3

[David Urquhart,] ‘Character of the Turkish populations and religions’, British and Foreign Review (1836), 18-23*

David Urquhart, The spirit of the East (2 vols, 1838), I, xxv-xxviii, II, 376-7

Thomas Carlyle, ‘The hero as prophet; Muhammad’, in On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History (1840), pp.39-45, 50-2, 57-71

Harriet Martineau, Eastern life: present and past (1848) III, 293-8, 332-5

Charles Kingsley, Alexandria and her schools (1854), pp.144-58*

Richard Burton, Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah (1855), I, 107-10, II, 247-9, 260-4*
Week 15: the protection of Christianity

Stanley Lane-Poole, *The life of Stratford Canning* (2 vols, 1888), II, 54-5, 61-5, 76-9, 89-114, 135*

[Henry Layard], 'The Levant Mail', *Morning Chronicle*, 5 Sept. 1843, 1p.

*Times*, 26 April 1844, leading article, 1p.

Charles White, *Three years in Constantinople* (3 vols., 1845), II, 110-15


Foreign Office, *Memorandum respecting the persecution of the Nestorian Christians* (1876), FO/78/2702, National Archives, pp. 1-22*


Edward Robinson, *Later biblical researches in Palestine* (1856), pp.23-5*

Week 16: Henry Layard and the cult of Assyria


‘Reception of Nineveh sculptures at the British Museum’, *Illustrated London News*, 28 February 1852, p.184

Excerpts from newspaper cuttings of Layard’s speeches in Britain, 1851-3, 1pp.

A.H. Layard, *Discoveries in the ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (2 vols, 1853), I, 3-4, 40-1, 83-4

Charles Kean, ad., *Sardanapalus, King of Assyria: a tragedy in five acts* by Lord Byron (1853), Preface 1-2

A.H. Layard, *The Nineveh Court at the Crystal Palace* (1854), 30-4, 52-4*
30 key secondary books


Gange, David, *Dialogues with the dead: Egyptology in British culture and religion 1822-1922* (2013)

Ghorbal, Shafik, *The beginnings of the Egyptian question and the rise of Mehemet Ali* (1928)

Gleason, J.H., *The genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain* (1950)


Hoskins, Halford Lancaster, *British routes to India* (1928)

Ingram, Edward, *The beginning of the great game in Asia 1828-1834* (1979)


Mayes, Stanley, *The Great Belzoni* (1959)


Thompson, Jason, *Sir Gardner Wilkinson and his circle* (1992)


Winder, R. Bayly, *Saudi Arabia in the nineteenth century* (1965)

SAMPLE LONG ESSAY PAPER

Write an essay of not less than 6,000 words and not more than 7,000 words on one of the following questions.

1. ‘British political and public support for the Ottoman Empire was always grudging, and highly conditional on Ottoman acceptance of British political interests.’ Discuss.

2. How far was British policy to local Arab tribes during this period consistent?

3. How far was British policy driven by ideas for the improvement of the region?

4. What impact did steam power have on British confidence in dealing with middle eastern peoples?

5. Do the published accounts of British travellers and explorers reveal more about the British abroad or about the routes to celebrity at home?

6. How far did British observers adhere to an ‘Orientalist’ view of the relations between men and women in the middle east?

7. Is Orientalism a useful concept for the cultural historian of this period? Discuss with reference to either painting or the display of antiquities.

8. ‘Though Palestine was very unlike the Holy Land of the British imagination, visiting it seems to have done little damage to the faith of the voyagers.’ Discuss.

9. How far did the British develop a specific policy towards the Jews of the Ottoman Empire?

10. What determined whether British observers saw Islam as a ‘tolerant’ or ‘fanatical’ religion?