

## Introduction: Between Local and External— Searching for Salonica’s Local Cultures

Guest Editor’s Note  
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Sometime around the middle of the eighteenth century, a Sufi—and former resident of the Anatolian town of Kayseri, known later to his followers as Zühuri Şeyh Ahmed Efendi—settled in Salonica and became a follower of the Ümmi Sinaniya branch of the Halvetiyye order. At some stage he left the Sufi lodge to lead a rather more secluded life in a tent that he pitched in the Seray-ı ‘Atik neighborhood, situated in the center of the Muslim area of Salonica. For seven years he lived in this tent, gaining the admiration of many Salonican Muslims. Later he founded his own *tekke* (Sufi lodge) in the same place. His piety and charisma enticed some well-off residents of the city to endow assets and cash in favor of the newly founded *tekke*. The popularity of the place only increased following the death of Zühuri Şeyh Ahmed Efendi sometime after 1751 (the date of the registration of his second endowment deed). His tomb (*türbe*) was now an additional site that confirmed the sanctity of the complex and marked it as a focal point for Islamic religious activity, patronage relations, and charitable donations.<sup>1</sup>

Though a native of Kayseri, Zühuri Şeyh Ahmed Efendi founded a Sufi order that was unique to Salonica. While his order disappeared several decades after his death, the existing documents registered in the local Muslim court enable us today to discuss it as one case of a cultural enterprise that was founded and thrived in Salonica. Because these documents provide some information about the activity that took place in the *tekke*, we possess substantial evidence regarding the charitable, social, and economic relations that developed between the Sufi order and some local Muslim Salonicans. Therefore, we can offer a discussion on a Salonican sacred site that, while it originated elsewhere, was very much a product of local initiatives and needs.

In the last two decades a growing body of academic literature has dealt with Salonica as a place that harbored multiethnic and multireligious populations and was part of a Muslim empire for more than 400 years, serving as a home for large numbers of Jews, Greeks, Muslims, and other small non-Muslim communities. This literature is often motivated by the diversity that made Salonica a place of different cultural encounters, exchanges, and conflicts. With the establishment of European consulates in the city at the end of the seventeenth century, Salonica was gradually exposed to trends and fashions arriving from Western Europe. This process enticed some Salonicans, especially during the second half of the nineteenth century, to “embrace Europe,” as Mark Mazower phrases it in his seminal book on Salonica.<sup>2</sup> This encounter between East and West further instigates research on the city and its varied populations.

Cultural diversity and multiethnicity were not, of course, unique to Ottoman Salonica. Anthony Molho rightly observes that “other Mediterranean ports have shared some of the social, cultural, and economic characteristics that defined Salonica’s history.”<sup>3</sup> Different port cities in the Mediterranean basin and beyond shared similar features. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Izmir, Alexandria, or Beirut are some of the well-researched case studies that shape our understanding of the Levantine world and its hybrid cultures.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Salonica is often discussed in the comparative, cross-ethnic, and cross-religious studies that explore related topics such as the cultural significance of port cities, the development of transregional and transstate networks of communication and exchanges, the shaping of Ottoman bourgeoisie and its distinct “Frankish” culture, different processes of modernization and acculturation, and the shift from empires to nation-states that put an abrupt end to the cosmopolitan character of these cities.<sup>5</sup>

This focus on the transregional and transnational aspects of Salonica often downplays local cultural manifestations. Furthermore, these studies often focus on what could be understood as the elites’ cultures, thus marginalizing other cultural manifestations that often remain far from our attention. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century figures such as Zühuri Şeyh Ahmed Efendi are often obliterated in the studies focusing on Salonica’s relations and cultural exchanges with the West, which were established directly via maritime and, later, railway routes or through the mediation of Istanbul and its Ottoman officials.

Moreover, a certain paradox characterizes much of Salonica’s history: thanks to its geographical setting and its fertile hinterland, the city prospered because of its role as a major harbor, administrative center, and a major road junction. This

was certainly true during the periods discussed in this volume—the long period of Ottoman rule (1430–1912) and the modern Greek period (beginning in 1912). Salonica’s administrative and economic significance developed largely owing to its favorable location on the protected shores of the Thermaic Gulf and on the crossroads between the Balkans. The city became a commercial hub for the Balkans, attracting merchants from the whole peninsula and beyond. In addition Salonica was also a magnet for refugees and immigrants, who arrived in this port city in search of shelter or work. Yet, despite its economic and administrative significance during Ottoman rule and under Greek sovereignty, Salonica had to settle with the position of being only “the second city,” often remaining far behind the capital city—be it Byzantine Constantinople, Ottoman Istanbul, or modern Athens. This fact had major ramifications on the center’s investment in Salonica’s economic, social, and cultural infrastructures. Much was left to local actors. Thus, for example, during the Ottoman period the city was devoid of any religious or imperial prestige and thus lacked the huge building projects financed by the sultans and members of their households. Instead, local governors, prominent religious scholars, and merchants were those who initiated, financed, and supported the construction and maintenance (through the founding of pious endowments) of many of its mosques, *medreses*, Sufi lodges, soup kitchens, public baths, markets, and so on.<sup>6</sup> The incorporation of Salonica into the Greek state did not much change this situation, as most of the state’s investment targeted Athens and its harbor, Piraeus, rather than Salonica, which was now devoid of its agricultural hinterland.<sup>7</sup>

There were, of course, some major exceptions: the second Ottoman conquest of the city, in 1430, prompted the transformation of churches and monasteries into mosques, thus creating a vital Islamic infrastructure that served the growing Muslim population. This was clearly a step implemented by the Ottoman sultans.<sup>8</sup> The city’s inclusion in the Greek national state (1912), combined with the Great Fire of 1917, presented another major case of the state’s (in this case the Greek state’s) investment in the city’s reconstruction according to a clear plan and agenda, one that this time served the Greek national outlook and vision.<sup>9</sup> Salonica’s nomination as “the European City of Culture” of 1997 served as another example of the state’s investment, with the assistance of European and international organizations, to promote Salonica as a major cultural and tourist center.<sup>10</sup> Among its other contributions, this nomination helped bring the city’s non-Greek legacies back to the attention of the broader public—the opening of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki in 2001 was a clear outcome of that hallmark event.<sup>11</sup> Still, as claimed by Alex Deffner and Lois Labrianidis, “the history

and contribution of non-Greek nationalities was largely ignored” at many of the events.<sup>12</sup> These short periods of imperial and state investment and contribution to Salonica’s development aside, during most of its premodern and modern history, the city had to rely on local actors and entrepreneurs and their initiatives, perceptions, and agendas.

While taking into account the significance of cultural trends arriving from the outside (whether from Western Europe, Istanbul, Athens, or elsewhere), this issue of the *Journal of Levantine Studies* mainly looks at Salonica through the prism of local culture, its agents, and their interpretation of external cultural trends. Can we discern particular aspects of local cultural ingredients that developed owing to Salonica’s diversified populations and legacies? Which aspects were due to the local specific Salonican cultural traditions, and which stemmed from more general conditions?

This issue is the outcome of a workshop that took place at the Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East and the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute in May 2017. We asked the participants to discuss the significance of Salonica as a place in which different communities, defined by class, religion, or ethnicity, negotiated their culture through processes of exchange, inclusion, and exclusion. While not neglecting the relations between local and external trends and fashions, we especially searched for the particular ingredients that shaped local cultures from below, away from the state’s attention and involvement. We put the emphasis, therefore, on local contexts and actors. Indeed, many of the authors chose to examine different aspects of local cultures that developed in Ottoman and Greek Salonica and their relations to external cultural influences. It is evident that local cultural manifestations often crossed communal boundaries, thus enabling us to question real and imagined national boundaries.

An additional point of departure was that Salonica is much more than a place in history. It evokes different, sometimes contradictory, experiences, perceptions, and memories, often compiled and remembered today in the different languages that were spoken in this major port city. As stated above, while some of these experiences and perceptions developed through processes of exchange and selective adoption of external ideas and fashions, others were the outcome of local developments and traditions. Whereas those cultural manifestations often reflected the diversified cultural backgrounds of the Salonicans, they were nevertheless often understood as the unique legacies of particular groups that were part of the Salonican mosaic. For the Greeks, Thessaloniki is the birthplace of the Macedonians and the second city

of the Byzantine Empire. Looking at more recent history, the city represents the struggle to incorporate Macedonia back into the young Greek kingdom. For the Turks, Selânik was the birthplace of the 1908 Young Turk Revolution and a pioneer in modernizing the Ottoman state. It also serves as an important *lieu de memoire* (or memory space as defined by Pierre Nora) commemorating the childhood of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey.<sup>13</sup> For Jews, Saloniki (in its Hebrew form) or Saloniko (the name used by the thriving Ladino press) represents the memory of the “Jerusalem of the Balkans,” the center and zenith of Sephardi culture, and achievements under Ottoman rule that came to an abrupt and horrible end during the Holocaust, which destroyed most of the community. We can add Levantine Salonique and its distinguished image as a place of commerce and encounter between West and East, as remembered in France and elsewhere in Western Europe, or Solun as a major center of the Bulgarian press and political and economic activities prior to the Balkan Wars. And there is, of course, Salonica of the Armenians, Albanians, Roma, Vlachs, and other ethnic groups that made Salonica their home. Each of these ethnic and religious groups contributed to the shaping of Salonica’s distinct cultures—often based on distinct cultural aspects mixed with cultural exchanges and borrowing to construct unique cultural products. This issue endeavors to deconstruct the different cultural products that were shaped in Salonica and to discuss them comparatively. The idea was to gather scholars from different disciplines, who would present their insights and studies on Salonica and its later diasporas through the prisms of history, literature, linguistics, geography, architecture, poetry, religion, folklore, and other fields. A selected number of papers that discuss the cultural diversity of Salonica through local contexts appear in this issue of *JLS*, while papers that focus on local actors and entrepreneurs and on their contributions to the shaping of Salonica are being published in a special issue of the journal *Études Balkaniques*.

In his paper, **Yannis Sygkelos** explores the development of imperial Ottoman identity at the end of the Ottoman period and its impact on the different groups residing in the city. Indeed, Ottomanism, though often ignored or even despised by later national historiographies, was a major example of an ideology that transcended national and religious boundaries, and thus it could serve as an illustrative case study of an imperial ideology as understood, used, and materialized in the local context by different agents. Sygkelos’s article analyzes the different representations of Ottomanism in the Salonican arena, as well as these representations’ ability to suggest multiple venues for spreading and promoting the idea of a shared imperial

civic identity. The printed media, education, ceremonies, and public celebrations that surpassed communal boundaries were channels through which both the shared imperial and local identities could develop. One of the local outcomes of the Ottomanist press was the imagining of Salonica as harboring a local community in which the different ethnic groups cohabited and shared similar interests and agendas.

Similarly, the development of a common Salonican urban identity during the late Ottoman period and this identity's different manifestations stand at the center of **Rena Molho's** article. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Salonica offered various venues, new meeting places, and institutions that permitted members of different religious and ethnic groups to meet and to develop a kind of shared civic identity. Gender, education, class, and other social frameworks, Molho observes, had a significant impact on the nature of such cross-communal encounters and their expressions. Such encounters were present in most cases, thus strengthening the city's multicultural character, which persisted until its incorporation into the Greek national state and, in some cases, until World War II.

The "Ma'aminim" (also known by the derogatory term *Dönme*) were probably the only religious group that created what could be described as a new religion, centered around Salonica, reflecting the city's diversified cultures. As such, this group's liturgy can serve as both an illustrative case of interreligious exchange and a display of relations between center and province. In her article, **Hadar Feldman Samet** analyzes some sacred mystical songs that the Ma'aminim chanted in Salonica during ritual religious gatherings in the nineteenth century. A clear manifestation of their messianic faith, the songs used both kabbalistic terminology and different artistic aspects of Ottoman poetry. Feldman Samet argues that these songs should be studied in the context of the broader cultural tendencies prevailing in the Ottoman Empire and their local manifestations among Muslims and Jews in Salonica. She also demonstrates how this group that is often identified with the process of modernization and Westernization during the late nineteenth century continued to use traditional Ottoman popular culture in their religious gatherings. Feldman Samet was also one of the initiators and organizers of the workshop in Jerusalem, for which I am very grateful.

Two papers in this issue discuss the rise of Zionism and the Jewish immigration to Palestine versus the integration into the Greek national state and culture in the context of Jewish Salonica. Both papers explore the attempts of Salonican Jews to negotiate their responses to policies and strategies, such as assimilation and

integration versus exclusion, marginalization, and emigration. **Paris Papamichos Chronakis** analyzes the way in which Zionist organizations shaped a symbiotic relationship with the dominant Greek national ideology by claiming the Jews' equal participation in the Hellenic public space, thus promoting a renewed Jewishness in modern Greece. The outcome of their efforts was the articulation of a new double spatial experience supporting both Jewish identity based on the Zionist project in Palestine/Eretz Yisrael and Greek Jewish identity revolving around Salonica and Macedonia. Practices and discourses of locality created what Chronakis describes as "Zionist youth with topographies of Hellenism."

**Oded Erez's** article shifts the discussion from Salonica to one of its main diasporas: the Salonican Jews who came to Mandatory Palestine and, later, to Israel during the early 1950s. Music has served as a powerful lens for scholars who wished to focus on local cultures, identity politics, and representation.<sup>14</sup> Its significance for the study of diaspora and immigration is likewise evident, as the production and consumption of music can teach us about diasporic identities, authenticity, nostalgia, and power.<sup>15</sup> In Erez's paper the real and imagined popular music cultures of the Salonican Jews in interwar Salonica and in post-statehood Israel represent a case study of cultural negotiation between local and external musical cultures. While the article explores two different political and ethno-class contexts and arenas (interwar Greece and postindependence Israel), Erez shows that the similarities between the projects of the Greek and Jewish national states and the marginal position of the Salonican Jewish popular musical culture in both of them led to some continuities in the persistence and development of musical taste cultures. In both cases music served as a powerful social tool of nostalgia, class-oriented resistance, and negotiation of identities.

The search for "lost" Levantine cities and their populations stands at the center of **Maria Eliades's** dock-ument piece, "Istanbul Is a Moveable Feast." The attempts to reconcile the multiethnic and multireligious past of Salonica and Istanbul and their present as Greek and Turkish cities, respectively, enable her to discuss the complex issues of identity and memory against the background of homogenization that took place in many of the countries that inherited the Ottoman Empire, as well as the development of diasporas. **Nathalie Alyon** offers a brief discussion of this essay and its significance to our understanding of the Levant as a meaningful historical category.

This issue includes three papers that are not related to Salonica. **Mostafa Hussein** discusses the significance of Jewish engagement with classical Arabic literature in

Palestine/Israel for the shaping of Modern Hebrew literature. The translation of classical masterpieces also offered a sense of fascination, belonging, and attachment to the Oriental cultural world. **Gallia Lindenstrauss**'s article focuses on the reception of about 3.5 million Syrian refugees in contemporary Turkey and its handling by the Turkish republic. At the center of her paper stands the 2016 Turkey-EU refugee deal and its possible positive ramifications on the absorption of Syrian refugees in Turkey. **Myriam Feinberg** debates the current European dilemma regarding immigration and the often-assumed threat of spreading terror attacks. She chiefly investigates security agendas, migration policies, and their efficiency in terms of promoting the security of different European states.

Finally, in appreciation of this truly collaborative work, it gives me great pleasure to thank several colleagues and friends who were pivotal in the organization of the 2017 workshop in Jerusalem and in producing this volume. Yaron Ben-Naeh, Hadar Feldman Samet, Jeanine Horowitz, Abigail Jacobson, Tamir Karkason, Tsameret Levy-Daphny, Edo Litmanovitch, Judith Loebenstein-Witztum, Yoel Marciano, and Sarit Noy were all my partners in organizing the Jerusalem workshop and in shaping its questions and content. JLS's outgoing editor Abigail Jacobson and former associate editor Edo Litmanovitch contributed much time and effort to the first steps of producing this issue. Tal Kohavi and Duygu Atlas later replaced them. Their contribution was fundamental in the preparation of this issue for publication. Deborah Schwartz immaculately edited the different articles. Finally, I would like to thank all of the participants in this issue for their contributions that, I am sure, will enhance the discussion on Salonica and its different legacies.

## Notes

- 1 I discuss Zühuri Şeyh Ahmed Efendi's activities and significance in my article "The Shaping of a Sacred Space: The *Tekke* of Zühuri Şeyh Ahmed Efendi in Eighteenth-Century Salonica," *Medieval History Journal* 9, no. 2 (2006): 271–296.
- 2 Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430-1950* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), 224.
- 3 Anthony Molho, "Introduction," *Jewish History* 28, no. 3-4 (2014): 252.
- 4 On the idea of the Levant as a cultural construction, see Jacqueline Kahanoff, "What about Levantinization?" *Journal of Levantine Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 13–22 [originally published in French in 1972].



- 5 See, for example, Gilles Veinstein, ed., *Salonique, 1850-1918: La 'ville des Juifs' et le réveil des Balkans* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1992); Mark Levene, "Port Jewry of Salonika: Between Neo-colonialism and Nation-state," in *Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550-1950*, ed. David Cesarani (London: Frank Cass, 2002), 125–154; Meropi Anastassiadou, *Une ville ottoman à l'âge des Réformes* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Minna Rozen, *Facing the Sea: The Jews of Salonika in the Ottoman Era (1430-1912)*, accessed November 8, 2018, <http://minnarozen.co.il/documents/facing%20the%20sea%202.pdf>. See also the general discussion offered in Edhem Eldem, "A Quest for the Bourgeoisie of Istanbul: Identities, Roles and Conflicts," in *Urban Governance under the Ottomans: Between Cosmopolitanism and Conflict*, ed. Ulrike Freitag and Nora Lafi (London: Routledge, 2014), 159–186.
- 6 On the role of the guild of the merchants trading with Egypt and its impact on the development of the harbor area, see Eyal Ginio, "When Coffee Brought about Wealth and Prestige: The Impact of Egyptian Trade on Salonika," *Oriente Moderno*, n.s., 25 (86), no.1 (2006): 93–107.
- 7 On Salonika's relative economic decline following its incorporation into the Greek state, see George Mavrogordatos, *Stillborn Republic: Social Coalitions and Party Strategies in Greece, 1922–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Shai Srugo, *Ha-po'alim ha-Yehudim bi-nemal Saloniki: Beyn ha-olam ha-Othmani le-olama shel medinat ha-le'om ha-Yevanit (1869–1936)* [The Jewish laborers in the port of Thessaloniki: Between the Ottoman world and the Greek nation-state (1869-1936)] (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2014), 70–77.
- 8 Machiel Kiel, "Notes on the History of Some Turkish Monuments in Thessaloniki and Their Founders," *Balkan Studies* 11 (1970): 123–148.
- 9 Alexandra Yerolympos, *Urban Transformations in the Balkans (1820-1920)* (Thessaloniki: University Studio Press, 1996), 87–128; Vilma Hastaoglou-Martinidis, "A Mediterranean City in Transition: Thessaloniki between the Two World Wars," *Facta Universitatis* (Niš) 1, no. 4 (1997): 493–507; Régis Darques, *Saloniques au xxe siècle: De la cité ottomane à la métropole greque* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000); Minna Rozen, "Money, Power, and the Salonika Great Fire of 1917," *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 2 (2017): 74–115.
- 10 Alex M. Deffner and Lois Labrianidis, "Planning Culture and Time in a Mega-event: Thessaloniki as the European City of Culture in 1997," *International Planning Studies* 10, no. 3-4 (2005): 241–264.
- 11 Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, "History of the Museum," accessed November 8, 2018, [www.jmth.gr/article-06032014-history-of-the-museum](http://www.jmth.gr/article-06032014-history-of-the-museum).
- 12 Deffner and Labrianidis, "Planning Culture," 249.
- 13 For Nora's definition of memory space, see Pierre Nora, *The Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

- 14 See, for example, Ian Biddle, "Introduction," in *Music and Identity Politics*, ed. Ian Biddle (London: Routledge, 2012), xi–xxiv.
- 15 See, for example, the different articles in Florian Schending and Erik Levy, eds., *Music and Displacement: Diasporas, Mobilities, and Dislocations in Europe and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010).