

# A Point of View - An Eye for Detail

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(Originally written for the BBC)

Once again a listener has set me off on a productive train of thought. A small correction has prompted me to reflect on the way that we historians, in the very act of reaching out to recover the forgotten connections between ourselves and our forebears, run the risk of overlooking what is right under our noses.

But I begin with a little known story retrieved from the archives, that sheds some intriguing light on a piece of long-buried Elizabethan history. In the Beyazit Devlet Library in Istanbul is a document in Turkish, which contains an account of an exchange of gifts between the rulers of England and the Ottoman Empire in the 1590s:

'During the sultanate of Murad [it runs], the ruler of [England] was, it is said, a woman, Queen of a sizeable kingdom. This person, in order to approach the Abode of Majesty and the shadow of its protection, sent [sultan Murad] as a gift a masterpiece of craftsmanship, a clock.'

The so-called 'clock' was in fact a highly ornate clockwork organ, 'a work of art, studded with jewels', on which, according to the manuscript, the skilled technicians who accompanied the gift 'laboured for many years, toiling to complete and perfect it'. And although Queen Elizabeth I intended it for Murad III, by the time the organ had completed the long sea voyage from London in 1599, it was his son Mehmed III who received it enthusiastically, and had it assembled and tuned in the seraglio, for the entertainment of his harem. Captivated by the musical performance and the organ's whirling automata, Mehmed responded with lavish ceremonial gifts in the Turkish style.

Queen Elizabeth's and Mehmed's glamorous gifts to one another were part of a deliberate policy of cementing cordial relations between their countries. England and the Ottoman Empire had signed an agreement in 1581, granting English merchants preferential trading rights in the region, superior to any currently in existence with other European nations. Now, it was hoped that an Anglo-Turkish alliance might play a key role in creating an effective East-West force, to divide the military focus of the dominant and aggressively expansionist European power, Catholic Spain.

A generation later, however, the more austere Islamic sultan Ahmed I had the clockwork organ destroyed. Nothing remains to tell us of its existence, except the documents in Turkish, Italian and English filed away in archives in London and Istanbul.

While this story is remarkable as a cordial sixteenth-century exchange between the Protestant West and Islamic East, it has a yet more unexpected sequel.

The musical mechanical marvel was not the only gift delivered to the court of Mehmed III. There was also a fine ceremonial coach, which was presented, with an accompanying personal letter from Queen Elizabeth herself, to the Sultan's mother, the Albanian-born Walide Safiye, who had enormous influence over the Sultan.

The Sultana was delighted. She wrote an effusive thank-you letter to Elizabeth in Turkish, in which she promised to use her best endeavours to ensure that her son stood by the treaty of cooperation he had signed with England: 'May you, too, always be firm in friendship! God willing, it will never fail.' Accompanying the letter was her own gift -- a robe, a girdle, a sleeve, two gold-embroidered handkerchiefs, three towels, and a crown studded with pearls and rubies.

These were the formal communication and gifts, to go through official channels. But delightfully, Walide Safiye sent a second, less formal letter, written in Italian on her behalf by her entrepreneurial 'Kira' or intermediary between the harem and the outside world, Esperanza Malchi, an Italian Jew -- one of the English delegation described her as 'a short, fat trubkin'. 'On account of Your Majesty's being a woman', she wrote, the Sultana could without embarrassment ask a personal favour. Would the English Queen send her some English cosmetics, the renown of which had reached Istanbul:

'There are to be found in your kingdom rare distilled waters of every kind for the face and odiferous oils for the hands, Your Majesty would favour me by sending some of them by my hand for this most serene Queen; by my hand as, being articles for ladies, she does not wish them to pass through other hands.'

This long-distance relationship between an English Queen and a Turkish Sultana was short-lived. In 1600 there was a coup in Istanbul in the course of which Esperanza Malchi was murdered. Three years later England was ruled by a Scotsman, King James I. Nevertheless, this extraordinary sequence of documents -- all of them to be found in the original and in contemporary Italian translations in the British Library in London -- is evidence of contact and understanding between Eastern Islam and Western Protestantism long before most people would expect.

Archival jewels like these Turkish letters have lain undiscovered for centuries in national and local libraries across Britain. No wonder the National Council on Archives -- an organisation in Britain which exists to campaign for 'archives awareness' -- maintains that the nation's collections of historical documents ultimately contain everything we could possibly want to know about ourselves.

In themselves, however, documents are effectively 'lost', unless they are reawakened by the attention and skill of an historian. It was only in the 1960s that the distinguished Ottomanist scholar Susan Skilliter brought the Turkish letters in the British library to more general historical attention. And being one of those who can recover glimpses of the past from the glorious relics among the records carries with it responsibilities.

It was while I was working on this story that a courteous email arrived from Dr Rozina Visram, pointing out a piece of misremembering on my part in my last *A Point of View*. It made me rush off to the library of the Warburg Institute in London, to check that I had remembered the Ottoman Kira, Esperanza Malchi's letter correctly, and to retranscribe its detail.

Other alert listeners to last week's *A Point of View* will already have noticed the slip I made, in the course of telling the story of the Indian mathematician Ramanujan. I remarked in an aside that Ramanujan was the first Indian national to have been made a Fellow of the Royal Society. And I wrote that sentence while sitting at my desk within the Royal Society's Library, with the entire resources of its almost 350 years of archives and records at my disposal.

Had I thought to check what I had, I believe, always been told, I would have found in a matter of minutes that Ramanujan was not the first but the second Indian national to become a Royal Society Fellow. The Parsi engineer Ardaseer Cursetjee from Bombay had been elected to a Fellowship almost eighty years earlier, on 27 May 1841. His nomination paper (lodged in the Royal Society archive) describes him as a 'Gentleman well versed in the theory and practice of Naval Architecture and devoted to scientific pursuits', and it credits him with having 'built a [sea-going] Vessel of sixty Tons to which he adapted a Steam Engine', introducing gas street lighting in Bombay, and 'having otherwise promoted Science and the useful arts in his own country'. He frequented the highest scientific circles on his visits to London, and on one of them he was presented to Queen Victoria.

The incident reminded me of the fragility of the jigsaw of human history we reassemble from its scattered documentary pieces. The sixteenth-century Ottoman Sultan's presents and letters belong to distant times and places. Recovering them requires all of our endeavours. Yet while we historians extend our efforts to try to give the past the depth and global reach needed to explain Britain's rich diversity today, our history closer to home may get forgotten.

Dr Visram assured me in her email that my error was 'not of much consequence, and does not in any way detract from what you were saying'. Perhaps so. But it is a timely reminder to those of us toiling in the archives that while we labour to recover the overlooked from the disparagement of history, we must also always take care not to be forgetful ourselves.

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