
From the sixteenth century onward, the commercial expansion of France toward the Levant and its diplomatic contacts with the Ottoman Empire resulted in the import of new ideas, products, and goods as well as art, literature, food, furniture, and clothes. These developments did not only change the culture of the elites at the court but also that of the less well-off social groups. Orientalism in Early Modern France explores the way in which these oriental commodities were imported into France, how they were accommodated to the taste of new consumers, and how the consumption of some of these goods, like coffee, eventually became a national habit. For her study, Baghdiantz McCabe has chosen to focus on those Eastern countries which were once part of the Ottoman Empire. The period analyzed in the book is delimited, on the one hand, by the appointment in 1538 of Guillaume Postel to a chair of Langues orientales (except Hebrew) at the newly founded Collège du Roi (known today as the Collège de France) and, on the other hand, by Napoléon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, which had been ordered by the French Directory. Although the French were eventually defeated by the British, this Egyptian expedition nevertheless marked the beginning of the scientific exploration of the Middle East. Napoléon asked savants to join the Armée d’Orient in order to prepare a survey of the country, which became the multivolume Description de l’Égypte published from 1803 to 1828. However, the Egyptian expedition proper does not fall within the scope of this book which deals with Oriental studies before their institutionalisation at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part, “One Nation, One World under French Rule,” sketches the governmental and intellectual background against which France developed new political and commercial interests first in the Levant and afterward in India and the Far East. The first French embassy to the Ottoman Empire, sent by Francis I in 1526, marked the inception of this orientation toward the East. The notion of “Gallia Orientalis” which developed at the French court in the middle of the seventeenth century, framed the overall discourse within which the French king dreamed of extending a Christian kingdom all over the world, including Siam. However, the king’s ideal merely remained a dream as political and commercial interests required investments into bonds of
friendship, at least with the Ottomans. The French did not succeed in establishing a colonial empire before the nineteenth century. Dupleix’s military failure in India, in the first half of the eighteenth century, provides a good example of the weaknesses of France with regard to its overseas political enterprises.

But Louis XIV’s reign nevertheless marked the beginning of a flourishing of Oriental knowledge in France. The Academy of Inscriptions and Belles Lettres and the Academy of Sciences, established in 1663 and 1666 respectively, became two of the most prominent institutions where manuscripts and information from the Far East were collected and where Oriental issues were debated. Although the Faculty of Medicine in Montpellier had long been famous for its herbal garden, the Jardin du Roi (today the Jardin des plantes) in Paris established itself under the rule of Louis XIV as the country’s most important center for botanical studies. The increasing need for interpreters for the Levant, who were called dragomans (which comes from the Turkish word *tarjuman*, i.e. translator), prompted the opening of a new school at the Lycée Saint-Louis. This establishment was called the Ecole des Jeunes de Langues, or Ecole des Arméniens, as many of the boys who were sent to this school belonged to Armenian families who settled in the Levant. Yet, the Collège du Roi still remained the most important academic institute for the study of oriental languages. Although one chair had already been devoted to Arabic—for which Galland was appointed professor in 1709—a second chair became available for Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, and there was also a separate chair for Syrian. Lacking a connection with the field of biblical studies, which was under the strict control of the Faculty of Theology at the Sorbonne, the study of oriental knowledge flourished in French rather than in Latin which was still the language of the university and the church.

The second part of the book, “Consuming the Exotic,” analyzes how exotic goods were indigenized and were transformed into national products. Baghdiantz McCabe uses the consumption of coffee as a case study and she indeed tells a fascinating story. The habit of drinking coffee was borrowed from the Turks and the Persians who in their turn had learned about it from the Arabs. Although coffee has its origins in Africa, its name is a translation of the Arabic word *qahwa*. In those days the French viewed coffee as a typical Oriental import product, thus concealing its link with the slave trade, an issue on which French society was silent for a long time. The history regarding the import of the plant itself reveals the process in