

A MASTER OF THE TOPOGRAPHICAL:

Briony Llewellyn DAVID ROBERTS AT BAALBEK

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All I can say of the magnificent remains of Baalbec is that they are matchless - little, little indeed has been hitherto known of this glorious temple - the noblest specimen of this most noble people and the mightiest Dynasty that ever held sway in this Globe. Long may it yet be spared to stand thru' wondering succeeding ages'¹.

David Roberts, writing in his Journal, was evidently deeply impressed by the imposing ruins at Baalbek, when he visited them in May 1839 towards the end of his long tour of the Near East. The excitement that he felt there is reflected in the many images that he made of the temples. On his return from the Near East he selected seven views of the site to include among the lithographs published in *The Holy Land*, one of these being given a special place as the frontispiece to Volume II of the bound publication². Over a period of 21 years between 1840 and 1861 Roberts painted more than a dozen oils with Baalbek as their subject, several of which commanded prices above the average for his work. Notable among these were £420 for *Ruins of Baalbec - Lebanon in the Distance*, in 1841; £500 for *Surprise of the Caravan - Scene in Syria*, in 1851; and £700 for *Temple of the Sun, Baalbek*, in 1861³.

Baalbek was an important subject for Roberts throughout the second half of his career. He chose a close-up view of the massive gateway to the Temple of Bacchus, with its dramatically suspended keystone, as his Diploma Work for the Royal Academy after his election to membership in 1841 (fig.1). Painted in 1842, this was exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition the following year, receiving favourable notices from the critics. Broader views of the ruins were represented in some important commissions, including a very large painting for the Garrick Club in 1847, an earlier incarnation of the *Surprise of the Caravan* composition⁴ (cf. fig. 2). Even in 1861, over twenty years after his visit, Roberts returned to the scene, rearranging elements from the site already used in previous images, for an imposing composition that was to be his last major orientalist painting (fig. 6). As he wrote to his son-in-law, Henry Bicknell: 'Baalbec - will be a grand finale - and take me back to The Lebanon, and Syria'⁵.

His memories of the ruins thus remained strong to the end of his life, even though he had spent only a few days sketching them, and was worn out and ill after his strenuous journey through Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Lebanon. He had endured dangerous and difficult terrain, extremes of weather, hostile tribesmen and the threat of plague but,

1 *Eastern Journal*, 7th May 1839.

This and following quotations are from David Roberts's *Eastern Journal*, 1838-39: up to 7th May 1839 from the transcription made by his daughter, Christine Bicknell, now in the National Library of Scotland, Department of Manuscripts (I am grateful to the NLS for permission to quote); from 7th May onwards from the original fragment, still in the possession of Roberts's descendants.

2 *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt & Nubia*, 6 vols, London, F. G. Moon, 1842-49. For publication details see Barbican Art Gallery London, *David Roberts*, compiled by Helen Guiterman and Briony Llewellyn, 1986, cat.nº. 211.

3 See 'List of Pictures' in J. Ballantine, *The Life of David Roberts, R.A.*, Edinburgh, 1866, pp. 249-53.

4 Illustrated in Barbican Art Gallery, *David Roberts*, 1986, *op.cit.*, p. 76.

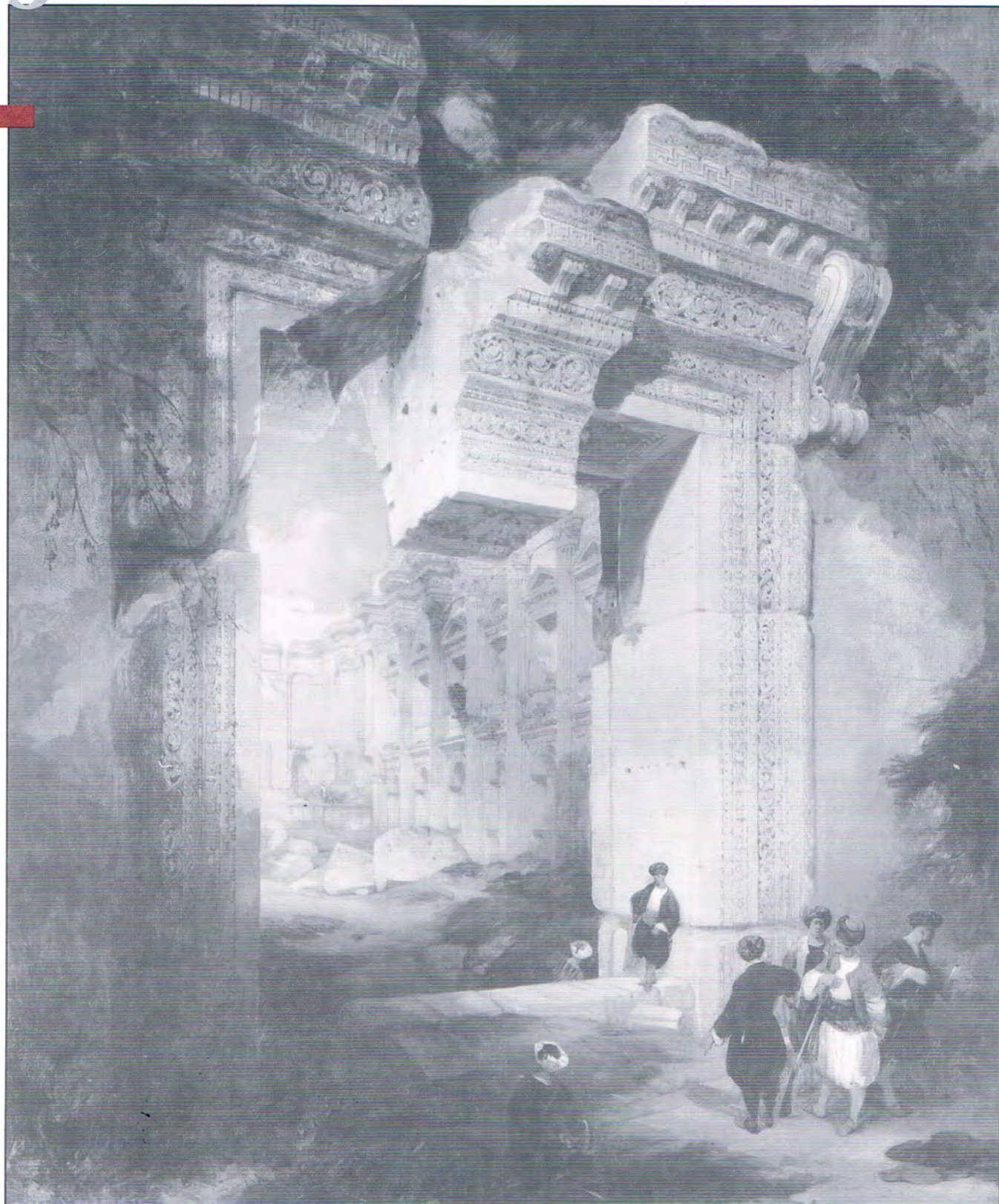
5 Letter dated 26th March 1861. See Christie's London, *Ottomans and Orientalists*, 18th June 1998, lot 42.

6 David Roberts, Record Book, 1829-64, 2 vols, p.108, now at the Yale Center for British Art, Department of Rare Books and Archives.

1 David Roberts, *Gateway of the Temple of Baalbek*, 1842, oil on canvas, 74.9 x 62.2 cm. Royal Academy of Arts, London.

after all that he had seen and done, he remained as enthusiastic as ever. Roberts's extensive tour was the result of a desire 'from earliest boyhood,

to visit the remote East' ⁶. Landing at Alexandria in September 1838, he went to Cairo, and from there sailed up the Nile as far as Abu Simbel, stopping on the return journey to draw temples and tombs at sites such as Philae, Karnac, Luxor and



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Dendara. Reaching Cairo in December 1838, he spent over a month drawing streets and mosques, before leaving for Syria and Palestine in February 1839. He crossed Sinai to Petra, and from there travelled north, via Hebron and Jaffa, to Jerusalem, where quarantine had just been lifted after an outbreak of

plague. From there he made an excursion to the Jordan and the Dead Sea, returning via Bethlehem. After a further week in Jerusalem, he continued his tour of places associated with the Bible, visiting Nazareth and Galilee.

He and his companions arrived at Tyre and Sidon at the end of April, and then headed for Baalbek. During an arduous crossing over the mountains,



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7 Roberts, *Eastern Journal*, *op.cit.*, 1 May 1839.

8 *Ibid.*, 4 May 1839.

9 *Ibid.*, 5 May 1839.

10 *Ibid.* Other views of Baalbek by Roberts are illustrated and recorded in The British Lebanese Association, *Romantic Lebanon. The European View 1700-1900*, London, 1986.

11 *Ibid.*, 10th May 1839 (original fragment).

12 *Ibid.*, 29 January 1839.

13 *Literary Gazette*, and *Journal of the Belles Lettres*, 26 February 1841, p.146.

14 *Manchester Courier*, 30 July 1842.

15 J. R. Abbey, *Travel in Aquatint and Lithography 1770-1860*, London 1956-67, n°385.

2 David Roberts, *Ruins of Baalbek*, 1857, oil on canvas, 45 x 69.8 cm. Signed and dated lower left, *David Roberts R.A. 1857*. Private Collection. In this romantic interpretation of the ruins, Roberts focuses on the six remaining columns of the Temple of Jupiter, which stand out against the sky and create an imposing backdrop to the turmoil of men and camels in the foreground. The composition is similar to earlier paintings entitled *Surprise of the Caravan*, of 1847 and 1851.

their pack-animals were attacked by hyenas, but they found refuge in the town of Zahleh, 'one of the prettiest I have ever seen' ⁷. The weather was atrocious however and the night they arrived in Baalbek

their tent blew down and they were soaked to the skin. With such hardships and after so long and exacting a journey, it is hardly surprising that Roberts succumbed to a high fever, though, before taking to his bed he was 'so struck with the magnificence of this splendid ruin that I could not resist visiting & examining every part of it' ⁸. Such was his iron constitution that within a day or two he was up and about exploring the temples and sketching them from several different angles, both close-up views of the Temple of Bacchus, such as the doorway and the western portico - 'I made several sketches of this glorious temple' ⁹ - and more general views of the entire complex of ruins, set against the backdrop of the Lebanon mountains (fig. 4). He also walked up the valley to the remains of a fountain, where he sketched the scene represented in *Baalbek, from the Fountain* (fig. 5), the mood of which reflects his nostalgic musings in his Journal: 'It is the very spot that imagination would select for the Naiads. Here is the bubbling fountain around which the grass still seems smoother and greener than anywhere else; the mountains of Lebanon tower above, covered with eternal snow rivalling in whiteness the clouds in which they are enveloped ...' ¹⁰. Baalbek struck a particular chord in Roberts, perhaps because the mountain scenery and classical forms of the provincial Roman architecture were more assimilable to his western understanding than the ancient temples of Egypt or even the rock-cut tombs of Petra.

Roberts left Baalbek on 8 May, and again endured the bad mountain roads, before arriving at Beirut two days later: 'the prettiest town in all Syria, the most delightful in situation, in climate, in prosperity, and the wealth of its inhabitants....' ¹¹. From here he sailed to Alexandria, and several days later on to Malta where he was quarantined; he finally arrived home in July 1839.

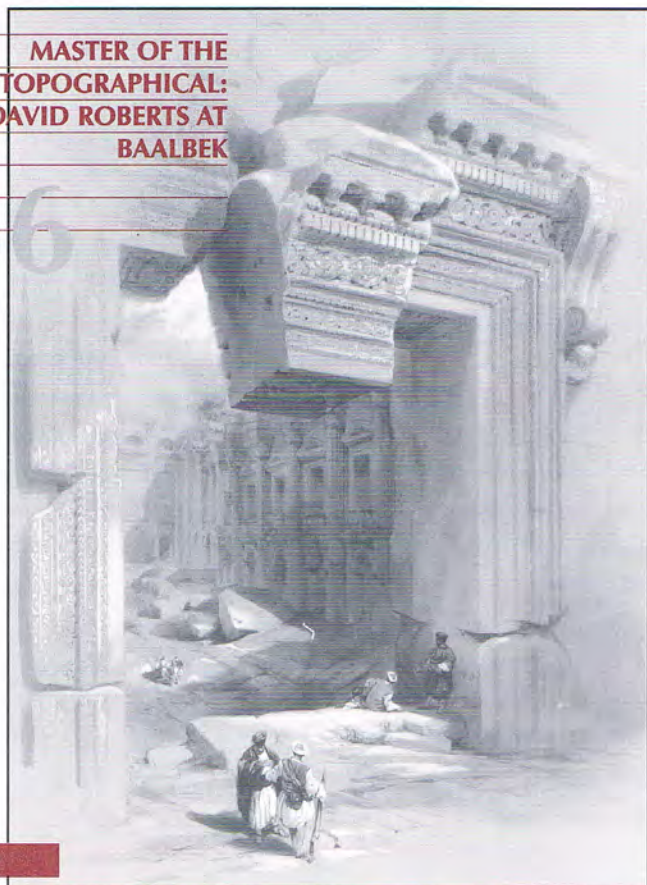
As the first independent, professional British artist to travel so extensively in Egypt and the Holy Land, Roberts knew that he was returning with 'one of the richest folios that ever left the East' ¹². He was well aware that his Victorian public would find irresistible the combination of famous ancient monuments, elaborate Islamic mosques and the landscapes of the Holy Land, redolent of the scenes and events of the Bible, and so it proved, for when the 247 coloured lithographs made from his drawings were published in a series of monthly parts, between 1842 and 1849, they were a resounding success. Collectively titled *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt & Nubia*, when they appeared in bound volumes, the publication was a hugely ambitious venture: nothing before had presented so comprehensive a series of views of the people and places of the Near East. The reviews were lavish in their acclaim, one critic declaring: 'Not a spot but is embalmed in sacred history, or immortalised in connexion with succeeding changes, which impart the deepest historical interest to objects of striking pictorial grandeur or beauty. And who so competent to represent them as our admirable countryman, whose patient and difficult pilgrimage in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, proved the true fervour from which alone great works can spring' ¹³? Another asserted that: 'It is a work that will long survive those that have been engaged upon it, and will live as long as genuine art holds a place in the regards of Englishmen' ¹⁴. More recently the publication has been called 'one of the most important and elaborate ventures of nineteenth-century publishing, and ...the apotheosis of the tinted lithograph' ¹⁵, and to this day regard for it has not diminished, as is reflected in the high prices still paid for the volumes in the salerooms.

By 1842, with the first part of *The Holy Land* already published, and well received, and several oil paintings with Near Eastern subjects successfully exhibited, Roberts could, with some justification, perceive himself both as an influential traveller and a prestigious artist. Painting his Diploma Work to commemorate his election as a Royal Academician, he may well have regarded it as a kind of manifesto, celebrating the successful con-

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clusion of his travels and encapsulating the artistic skills on which his current reputation was based. Not only does he establish his credentials as a painter of exotic architectural subjects, but he also makes a bid for supremacy in this genre of art. He depicts with care the elaborate architectural decoration - dentils, scrolls, acanthus leaves and vine wreaths - complete with appropriate picturesque decay. While he does not exaggerate the position of the keystone - successive earthquakes really had

caused it to drop thus far - his low, angled view-point certainly exploits its dramatic impact; it also appears to increase the height of the lintel. Though similar to the view represented in the lithograph¹⁶ (fig. 3), slight variations, such as greater contrasts of light and shadow and the softening effect of discreet framing foliage, focus attention with greater intensity on the imposing features of the doorway. It is probably no coincidence that the image of the doorway would have already been familiar to the public through two engravings, published shortly before Roberts left for the Near East: one in Finden's *Landscape Illustrations of the Bible*, after a drawing by Roberts's friend, Clarkson Stanfield, based on a sketch by an earlier traveller, Charles Barry¹⁷; the other in Fisher's *Syria, the Holy Land, Asia Minor &c.*, after a drawing by another topographical artist, William Bartlett, who had visited the Lebanon in 1834¹⁸. Since neither presents the subject with anything like the force of his own image, Roberts may have deliberately intended to display his superiority.

As with all Roberts's subjects, whether of Baalbek, an Egyptian temple, a European church interior or a Scottish castle, colourful groups of natives act as foils to the monumental architecture. One figure, leaning against the right-hand door frame, draws the eye towards the names, inscribed in the stone, of previous well-known western visitors to Baalbek. These are Irby and Mangles, who, in 1818, took detailed measurements of the temples,

16 Roberts, *The Holy Land*, *op.cit.*, 1843, vol.II, pl.81.

17 *Gate at Baalbek*, in W. and E. Finden, *Landscape Illustrations of the Bible*, London, 1836, vol.I, pl. 62.

18 *Interior of the Great Temple at Balbec*, in J. Carne, *Syria, The Holy Land, Asia Minor, &c.*, London, 1836-38, part 3.

19 Captains Charles Irby and James Mangles, naval officers, visited Baalbek with William Bankes, and published *Travels in Egypt and Nubia, Syria and Asia Minor during the years 1817 and 1818*, London, 1823. Richard Wood and James Dawkins, accompanied by an Italian artist, Giovanni Battista Borra, visited Baalbek in April 1751: the ensuing publication, *The Ruins of Balbec*, London, 1757, exerted huge influence on the architectural taste of the time. Sheik Ibrim was the name adopted by John Lewis Burckhardt, a Swiss explorer, who, disguised as a Muslim, travelled through Egypt and the Levant, 1810-17; his scholarship and enterprise inspired many British travellers. Prince Pueckler-Muskau is less well known, but it is possible that Roberts met him when he was in England in 1828-29.

20 *The Art-Union*, June 1843, p.163.

21 John Murray, *A Hand-book for Travellers in Syria and Palestine*, Part II, London, 1858. pp. 558-67. Other guidebooks do not mention inscriptions on the doorway.



Wood and Dawkins, who in 1751 were the first to make a thorough investigation and detailed drawings of the ruins, 'Sheik Ibrim', the pseudonym adopted by J. L. Burckhardt, a pioneering explorer, who examined the ruins in September 1810, and Pueckler-Muskau, a wealthy German landowner, who had visited Baalbek in 1837¹⁹. Attention is also drawn to the initials 'S.P.Q.R.' on the lit section of the stone threshold between the two white turbans of the seated figures. The Latin reference to the Roman state (Senate and People of

Rome) and its use as a stamp on colonial outposts would have been familiar to Roberts's educated contemporaries: the *Art-Union's* review of his painting notes the initials and comments, 'a legend of freedom in Rome, but rivets of bondage abroad'²⁰. It seems that none of these inscriptions were actually where Roberts has placed them, though Murray's *Handbook* records graffiti and 'Latin inscriptions' elsewhere in the temple²¹. Roberts often moved, added or omitted elements of architecture and landscape to suit his artistic purposes,

3 David Roberts, *Baalbec*, 1839, pencil, watercolour and bodycolour, 52.1 x 36.8 cm. Signed lower right *David Roberts. R.A.*; inscribed and dated lower left as title and May 7th 1839. Private Collection. The lithograph taken from this image was in Volume II of *The Holy Land* (plate 81).

4 David Roberts, *Ruins of Baalbec*, 1839, pencil, watercolour and bodycolour, 29.8 x 48.2 cm. Signed lower right *David Roberts. R.A.*; inscribed and dated lower left as title and May 5th 1839. Private Collection. This general view of the ruins appears as a lithograph in Volume II of *The Holy Land*, plate 77.

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and does so here to underline the western rediscovery of the Roman ruins, in which he himself has played a part.

Several layers of history are thus represented: the great provincial Roman edifice of the second century AD, decayed by time and the forces of nature; the present-day Arab inhabitants, representing Muslim domination of the region since the seventh century; western travellers of the 18th and early 19th century whose visits had resulted in influential publications, and now, by implication, Roberts himself, whose own ambitious publication, *The Holy Land*, began its appearance in the same year that this picture was painted.

In addition to their compositional function it has been suggested that the group of figures are intended by Roberts to represent the heathen and worthless Arabs, now inhabiting the ancient city, ignorant of its magnificence and unconcerned at its decay²². Certainly it is true that Roberts shared his contemporaries' contempt for the Muslim religion, considering that it had brought indigence and oppression to a once prosperous region. 'Where is the wealth & plenty that once belonged to the proud city?', he asked in his Journal. 'Ask the followers of the great Prophet, the founder and projector of a creed that could bring the most fruitful & civilised portion of the globe into worse than

barbarism again accompanied with sufferings & crime that could render life even in this paradise a misery'²³. He contrasted the industry and courtesy of the Christian inhabitants of Lebanon with 'the wretched and downcast looks of the miserable fellows of Egypt or even the half starved Arabs'²⁴. Despite this, there is no evidence that he intended the figures in his Eastern paintings to add anything other than a picturesque local dimension, creating colour, animation and sometimes drama in his compositions. They are clean and well-dressed, often engaged in an activity, and rather than being the miserable specimens of humanity that he wrote about elsewhere, they are more of the type that he encountered when he was received by the Muslim governor of Baalbek and his men: 'Two Bedouin chiefs particularly struck me as being the finest specimens of men I had ever met with'²⁵. He wished that his friend, David Wilkie, renowned for his skill in depicting scenes of contemporary life, had been with him.

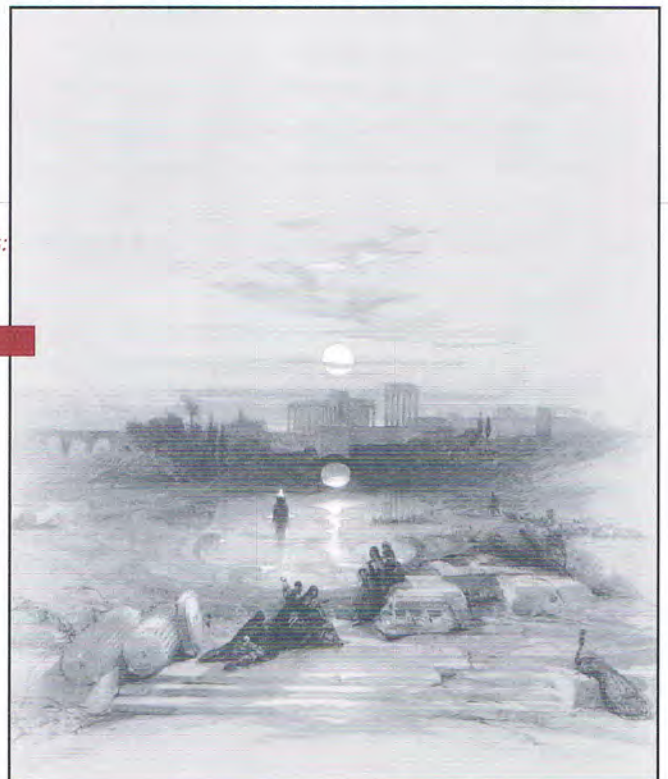
Whatever beliefs he may have held, Roberts chose, in his images of Baalbek, only to convey the grandeur and magnificence, tinged with nostalgia, of the ruins he represented. Innocent of modern-day concerns with political correctness, his was a romantic vision of the remnants of an important

22 See Royal Academy of Arts, 'London, *The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse*, ed. MA. Stevens, 1984, p. 224.

23 Roberts, *Eastern Journal*, *op.cit.*, 5 May 1839.

24 *Ibid.*, 30 April 1839.

25 *Ibid.*, 5 May 1839.



outpost of a once powerful empire; a vision which he employed his considerable skills as a topographical artist

to realise. His views of Baalbek display no great originality and are sometimes repetitive, but they are consummate examples of a genre in which he excelled.



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5 David Roberts, *Baalbek from the Fountain*, 1839, pencil, watercolour and bodycolour, 32.4 x 27.6 cm. Signed lower left *David Roberts. R.A.*; inscribed and dated lower right as title and *May 7th 1839*. Private Collection. The title vignette for Volume II of *The Holy Land*.

6 David Roberts, *The Temple of the Sun at Baalbek, Syria*, oil on canvas, 150 x 240 cm. Signed and dated lower right *David Roberts R.A. 1861*. Private Collection. This late painting incorporates elements from earlier images - the western portico of the Temple of Bacchus, part of three of the columns of the Temple of Jupiter, scattered architectural fragments and a throng of men and camels - into a coherent but imaginative composition.

Briony Llewellyn, and co-author Krystyna Matyjasziewicz, are seeking funding for a major publication on David Roberts, comprising catalogue raisonné, journals, letters and other original source material.