

WRITING THE IMAGINARY ORIENT: MAURICE BARRÈS'

Heghnar Watenpaugh JOURNEY TO THE LEVANT

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Maurice Barrès (1862-1923) numbers among the few French travellers to the Eastern Mediterranean who has exerted a considerable influence over the manner in which this region was imagined by French and francophone readers. These included François-René de Chateaubriand and Alphonse de Lamartine, the great romantic authors of the 19th century, as well as the more scholarly Ernest Renan, whose travel accounts were made accessible to a wide readership through their travelogues and studies. Barrès, the author and politician, had a fascination with all things "Oriental" from an early age. In 1914, when he travelled to the Eastern Mediterranean shortly before the outbreak of the World War I, he saw himself as being in a lineage of French travellers to the Levant, whose accounts he knew well. Like them, he was imbued with an imaginary geography of the Orient, derived in equal parts from the Bible, legends of the Crusades, and *The Thousand and One Nights*. He wrote down his own impressions in a novel and a travelogue; moreover, his travels had a great impact on his political activism as a deputy in Paris. On his journey, he became convinced of the importance of what he saw as France's "historical mission" in the Levant, and later became a proponent of France's Mandate over Syria and Lebanon following the end of

World War I.

At the time of Barrès' visit to the eastern Mediterranean, however, the area which today comprises Lebanon, Syria and Turkey was part of the Ottoman empire. Barrès was already a noted personality when he arrived. His two trilogies of novels, *Le Culte du Moi* (1888-91) and *Le Roman de l'Énergie nationale* (1897-1902), had made his literary reputation, and eventually earned him election to the French Academy in 1906. During his long career in politics as deputy he grew famous for his staunch nationalism. His visit to the East was no small event, but rather an eagerly awaited official occasion. Its ostensible purpose was to inspect the educational institutions of the various catholic missions in the Levant; privately he was determined to clarify France's possible role in the Levant. His diaries, published posthumously as *Les Cahiers*, reveal his careful research into the history and the present of the region, including reading the works of the French experts of the day, such as Renan's work on religious issues, and Guillaume Rey's books on Crusader history and architecture; he also sought the advice of his scholarly friends, such as René Dussaud, the Curator of Oriental Antiquities at the Louvre. In addition, contemporary accounts of French diplomats, preserved today at the French Ministry of

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Foreign Affairs, at the Center of Diplomatic Archives in Nantes, reveal a carefully planned visit. His itinerary began in Alexandria, then took him to Beirut by boat. He went on to Damascus, Aleppo, Antioch and Konya, ending his journey in Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman state. His hectic schedule included visits to schools and universities administered by catholic orders. Barrès was remembered by local diplomats and school officials for his courtesy and his inspiring speeches that praised the work of French teachers overseas, and encouraged students to absorb, along with their French grammar lessons, French ideals and Republicanism.

In addition to his visit to catholic educational institutions, Barrès made pilgrimages to historic sites that have held a particular fascination for many westerners, and especially French visitors, such as Baalbeck, Byblos, Afqa, and Deir al-Qamar. Barrès admired the Phoenician past of the region, but he was particularly interested in Crusader-period castles, namely the citadel of Marqab. Long fascinated by the Medieval history of Ismailis, Barrès went out of his way to visit a number of Ismaili castles in the Anti-Lebanon mountains like Masyaf, Qadmus, and the remote Qal'at al-Kahf. Barrès saw these sites as being heavily layered with historical and literary meaning to the extent that he described himself as the last of "*les pèlerins du mystère*", the pilgrims to the mysterious lands - he understood these pilgrims as being French. On his way north, he spent time in Antioch, and in Konya, studied the Whirling Dervishes (the Mawlawi sufi order) which had long fascinated him.

His diaries reveal his determination to publish an account of his travels, along with at least two projects for novels set in the Levant. These projects simmered, however, due to the first world war, during which Barrès was involved in intense political activity. Many aspects of Barrès' illiberal, right-wing politics have been criticized, most intensely in his own time. For example in 1921,

the Dadaists staged a mock trial of Barrès in Paris. Among other things, they objected to his neo-catholic conservatism and commitment to France's imperialist policies. Barrès' visit to the Levant had strengthened his commitment to imperialism, and provided him with the authority to speak as someone who had been "there." For years, Barrès maintained the importance of the Levant to *La plus grande France*. In this vision, the opinions and wishes of any local population were subordinate to the dictates and requirements of France.

Parallel to his views on the contemporary destiny of the Levant, Barrès ceaselessly cultivated an imaginary oriental world, in which he staged his last novel, *Un Jardin sur l'Oronte* (1922). This novel dramatizes the doomed love story of a young Crusader, Sire Guillaume, and the beautiful "Oriental" woman, Oriante. The religious themes of this novel are also found, in a different form, in *Une Enquête aux pays du Levant*, published a month before the author's death in 1923. The *Enquête* is a travelogue interspersed with long discussions of religious groups in the Levant, including the sufis of Konya, and the famous passage on Ismailis entitled, "The Old Man of the Mountain."

Long banished from the canon of modern French literature because of his proto-fascist politics, Barrès lately has enjoyed something of a revival, due to his talent as a writer, and the importance of his influence in French literature in the twentieth century. A contemporary of Proust and Céline, his influence has been traced in the work of such disparate figures as Aragon, Malraux, and Mauriac. Importantly, his mode of imagining the Levant also remained influential. Distilled in three genres -- political speeches, a novel, and a travelogue, having enjoyed a wide readership, his vision of the Levant helped determine the manner in which this region is imagined still.

ISTANBUL ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

SIDON, 5th century BC.



SIDON, 4th century BC.



SIDON, 5th century BC.



BEIRUT, 5th-4th century BC.



SIDON, 4th century BC.



BYBLOS, Roman period.



SIDON, mid-4th century BC.



BAALBEK, Roman period.



BRITISH MUSEUM

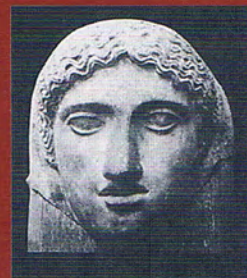
JEZZINE, turn of the 3rd millennium BC.



BEIRUT, 1800-1792 BC.



SIDON, 4th century BC.



BAALBEK, Roman period.



BERLIN MUSEUM

AIN IN LEJOUJ , Roman period.



AIN IN LEJOUJ, Roman period.



SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTE

BEIRUT, Roman period.



NY-CARLSBERG GLYPTOTHÈQUE

SIDON, Roman period.



MUSÉE CALVET, AVIGNON

Baalbek , Roman period.



During the 19th century and the early twenties artefacts left Lebanon in quantities. The activities of travellers and traders helped the export of Antiquities. Other factors were also very important, namely Lebanon having been a French colony but also part of the Ottoman Empire. A number of archaeological objects from Lebanon are housed today in the museum's of the world, primarily the Louvre in Paris, the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul and to a lesser extent at the British Museum, London, the Berlin Museum, the Musée Calvet, Avignon, the Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C. and the Ny- Carlsberg Glyptothèque in Copenhagen. These pages aim to give a quick synopsis of some of the major artefacts.

THE LOUVRE

SIDON, 6th century BC.



Sidon, end of the 4th century AD.



Sidon, end of the 4th century AD.



SIDON region, 5th-4th century BC.



Sidon, end of the 4th century AD.



Sidon, end of the 4th century AD.



Sidon, end of the 4th century AD.



Sidon, end of the 4th century AD.



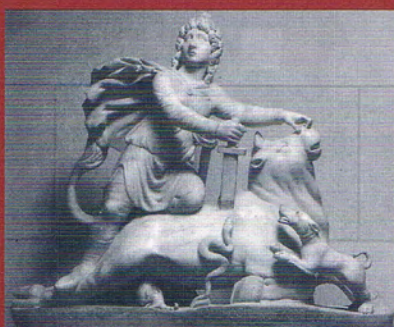
SIDON, Roman period.



Sidon, end of the 4th century AD.



Sidon, end of the 4th century AD.



Baalbek, Roman period.



Baalbek, Roman period.



Niha, Roman period.



Byblos, 5th-4th century BC.



Baalbek, Roman period.



Byblos, middle Bronze Age.



Umm el Amed, 5th-4th century BC.



Baalbek, Roman period.



Byblos, 924-889 BC.



Tyre, 7th-6th century BC.



Niha, Roman period.



Byblos, 6th century BC.



Lebanon, late Iron Age.



Byblos, 5th-4th century BC.

