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Introduction

The Lands, Their Rulers, and Their Aggressors

Early on March 8, 1801, fifty British soldiers sat huddled with their muskets between their knees in each of fifty-eight flat-bottomed boats off the Egyptian Mediterranean coast at Abukir. Each wore a belt containing three days' rations of food and water and sixty rounds of ball cartridge. They were the first wave of an assault on the shore from the offshore fleet, made up of five thousand soldiers in all. As their boats approached the beach, they came under shell attack from the French artillery on top of the sandhills. This was followed by a hailstorm of grape shots to which they had no means of responding. Three boats were sunk; some soldiers drowned wearing their heavy belts. On landing, many more were immediately dispatched by French bayonets, but replacements continued to arrive. The men on the right clambered up a steep sandhill, panicking the French artillerymen into retreat. On the left, the resisting enemy was soon outnumbered. The traveller Edward Clarke, who arrived soon afterwards, was told by survivors that "a spectacle more horrible than the landing of the troops was never seen." They "had been taught to expect no quarter, and therefore none was given. . . . [A]ll was blood, and death, and victory."¹ Within twenty minutes, the British army found itself in secure possession of a small pocket of land—the first step in the first British occupation of Egypt, and the first modern British military encounter with what we now know as the Middle East.²

The soldiers' mission was to reconquer Egypt from the twenty-five thousand French troops who had occupied it ever since Napoleon's invasion in 1798. This took five months, during which at least 1,600 British soldiers died, and probably as many more were permanently maimed, including 160 blinded

1. Otter, *Edward Daniel Clarke*, 2:102–3; E. Clarke, *Travels in Various Countries*, 1:279.

2. For the landing, see T. Walsh, *Journal of the Late Campaign*, 74–78; Mackesy, *British Victory in Egypt*, 71–75.

by ophthalmia. They had to live in their clothes day and night, exposed to searing heat, thirst, flies, fleas, sand lice, and sirocco-whipped sandstorms.³ Once the two main bodies of French troops in Cairo and Alexandria surrendered, the British army found itself in possession of Egypt. But then what? It had had persistent angry arguments with its allies, the Ottoman military commanders, who thought that the British were there to help them to liberate their own country. The British army had made commitments to the Mamluk leaders who had governed Egypt for many years before 1798, and who bitterly distrusted the Ottomans. It relied for provisions on local Arab chiefs who disliked both groups. Its continuing presence was an affront to Napoleon, who held the upper hand in the European war, and who planned to renegotiate the future of Egypt in a peace settlement. It was also an irritant to Russia, Britain's only significant ally, which could see that a long-term British occupation might alter the global balance of power. These factors all helped to force the British army to evacuate Egypt in 1803. However, it reinvaded the country in 1807, determined to keep France out.

Why did Egypt matter so much to the British, and to Napoleon? Egypt was an obvious route to India, and India was the cornerstone of Britain's new empire. It seemed essential in view of the humiliating loss of the thirteen American colonies in 1783. Britain had recently begun to expand the amount of Indian territory that it governed directly, and remained alarmed at possible internal and external challenges there. Napoleon threatened a global war against Britain. He originally hoped to ally with Indian princes to subvert British authority; moreover, the occupation of Egypt would weaken the British navy by forcing it to spread itself thinly across the world. Napoleon's challenge to British power was never forgotten. Every prime minister until 1868 and most of the wider political elite spent their formative or adult years living through his war. Nor was Egypt the only route that Napoleon could take. In 1799, it was widely assumed that he would move up through Syria, east to the Tigris, and then down past Baghdad to the Persian Gulf, as Alexander the Great had done on his march to the East. After 1810, the French threat to India disappeared, but within twenty years the Russians had begun to threaten it instead. When they penetrated Kurdistan in 1828, the Russians showed how they might be able to send an invasion force down the Mesopotamian rivers. In planning against French or Russian aggression, Britain's strategy involved thinking geopolitically—about how to define, defend, and develop these two crucial routes from Europe to India, through Egypt and the Red Sea, or through Syria, Mesopotamia, and the Gulf.

The main purpose of this book is to discuss how Britain went about securing these lands and waterways from its rivals. The book argues that to all intents and purposes it had done this by the time of the Crimean War in 1854,

3. See Daniel Nicol's diary in Macbride, *With Napoleon at Waterloo*, 52–56.

when the account ends. So this can be seen as an important imperial story. Yet there has been astonishingly little interest from historians in considering this region as a British problem and British opportunity in the first half of the nineteenth century. There is no large-scale analysis of British policy to it, and in the general histories of the British Empire it hardly features.⁴ One reason is because the region is almost never seen as a unit. I have used the term “Middle East,” which is of course anachronistic, simply as the best shorthand description for the territory with which the book is concerned, the Asian and Egyptian lands of the Ottoman Empire south of the Anatolian plateau.⁵

These were lands of many diverse cultures, and it will become clear that the British response to them appreciated at least some of that diversity. Nonetheless, there are four reasons for treating them as a coherent region, from a British perspective. First, these territories were essential in keeping the European powers from British India. Second, Britain had to think seriously about how to manage and cultivate their inhabitants, which meant mainly the Arabs. Third, they were lands of enormous historical and religious importance—the bases of three great religions, and formerly provinces and empires of immense fertility. The contrast between their present state and their past glory was obvious to anyone who knew their Bible and classical literature, yet this very contrast raised the question of what the region might become if it were wisely governed. Finally, and most problematically, they were all owned by another ruler—the sultan of the Ottoman Empire.⁶

4. Robert Harrison’s *Britain in the Middle East* is a valiant recent exception, though it naturally focuses on later periods. Edward Ingram’s articles and books contain stimulating insight: see, for instance, some of the essays in his compilation *In Defence of British India*. Some valuable material can still be found in Temperley’s *England and the Near East*.

5. As this book’s subject is the parts of the nineteenth-century “Middle East” that were recognised to be Ottoman, it excludes Persia and, for most purposes, the Gulf. The term “Middle East” became fairly widely used between 1896 and 1903. “Near East” and “Far East” already existed; “Near East” continued for some time to be applied to discussion of the Balkan and Levantine Ottoman lands from a European perspective. The “Middle Eastern problem” was defined as the defence of India from the west, so most uses of the term in the early twentieth century prioritised the regional importance of Persia and even Afghanistan. But Huseyin Yilmaz has shown that Goethe used “Middle East” in 1819, again primarily with reference to Persia and its neighbourhood, and that others followed his usage. So it seems reasonable to use the term “Ottoman Middle East” in a book that argues that the British thought seriously about the region from the beginning of the nineteenth century, in relation to Indian defence. See Koppes, “Captain Mahan,” and Yilmaz, “Eastern Question,” 24.

6. The reason for focusing on the *Ottoman* Middle East in this book is partly to aid clarity in discussing British policy and attitudes, and partly because I see this region as neglected in historical accounts of this period, compared with Persia and the Gulf. However, the issues of Persia and the Gulf were often very relevant to the politics of Baghdad and Basra, so I discuss both at certain points. For the Gulf, I have relied mostly on the classic account by J. B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf*. This is now updated by the

These four aspects mean that this is a geopolitical story, about routes and strategy, but it is also a cultural story, about histories, religions, and races, and thirdly it is a diplomatic story, about European great power tactics. One issue immediately arises: whether this third element can help to explain British policy to the extent that the old accounts of the “Eastern question” suggested.

The sparse coverage of British policy to the Middle East in the first half of the nineteenth century is mostly due to diplomatic historians viewing British concern with Ottoman lands through the lens of an “Eastern question” that was managed by European governments. For a long time, diplomatic narratives, concentrating on the dispatches of aristocratic ministers and their conversations in European drawing rooms, reduced Britain’s objectives to a fixed policy or “system”: the maintenance of the Ottoman imperial state and its territorial integrity.⁷ Yet this perspective does not get us very far in understanding British actions, for three reasons. First, the other European powers also, in general, attached importance to the principle of Ottoman territorial sovereignty. Second, Britain was as willing as other powers to compromise it in practice. Third, British officials always needed to consider the range of regional issues—geopolitical, economic, religious—that this book explores. In fact, recent scholarship on the Eastern question has started to recognise that all the European powers had diverse and shifting priorities and visions, and that diplomacy was not a static system involving fixed rules and principles, but a dynamic and interactive process, in which the Ottoman Empire also participated actively. This is a very helpful shift of perspective, which this book hopes to take further.⁸ It is part of the wider recent realisation that international relations were not just a matter of diplomatic negotiation; they involved clashing conceptions and assumptions.⁹

The status of the Ottoman Empire was a fundamental problem of European diplomacy. In 1683, its army reached as far west as the gates of Vienna.

important work of Guillemette Crouzet: *Inventing the Middle East*. For British strategy regarding Persia, see Yapp’s *Strategies of British India* and Ingram’s *Britain’s Persian Connection*.

7. The best classic account is Schroeder’s *Transformation*. M. Anderson’s *Eastern Question* is a good example of the old thematic treatments. An incisive general survey of British foreign policy that nonetheless adopts this very Eurocentric approach is Paul Hayes’s *Nineteenth Century*, chap. 9. John Clarke’s *British Diplomacy*, another very intelligent overview, almost entirely omits the Middle East, though it discusses the Americas, India, and the Far East as well as Europe.

8. See Šedivý, *Metternich, the Great Powers*; Fray and Kozelsky, *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands*; Ozavci, *Dangerous Gifts*.

9. Three stimulating recent reinterpretations of nineteenth-century international history from an ideological and geographical perspective have been Lauren Benton’s *Search for Sovereignty*, Mark Mazower’s *Governing the World*, and Barry Buzan and George Lawson’s *Global Transformation*.

Since then, it had been in retreat, but a sultan who was the caliph of Sunni Islam still ruled most of the Christian populations of the Balkans. To most Europeans, Ottoman governing practice appeared offensively barbarous and its military and economic power in terminal decline. It was generally assumed throughout this period that the empire could not survive. Only the Crimean War of 1854–56 made the powers guarantee its independence. The extent of Ottoman territory in Europe, in Asia, and along the North African seaboard naturally led many Europeans to dream of capitalising on its demise. In the sixty years after 1798, Napoleonic France and then Russia seemed to pose major threats to it.

Moreover, French and Russian interest in Constantinople had massive historical ramifications. Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome, had founded his new capital—a second Rome—on the straits between Europe and Asia in 330 CE, and called it after himself. This decision reflected the enormous size of the Roman Empire, its natural division into Latin and Greek realms, and the pressing need to combat challenges from Persians and others in central Asia. Within 150 years, the Roman Empire had collapsed in the Latin West, but it was revived as the Holy Roman Empire when the pope crowned the Frankish king Charlemagne in 800. The Byzantine Empire continued in the East, but lost most of western Asia to Arab invaders in the seventh century. These two empires promoted rival styles of Christianity, which each claimed to be the only true religion. In 1054, a formal split occurred between Roman Christianity and the Eastern Orthodox Church. From 1095, the Catholic powers in the West began Crusades against the Muslim rulers of their claimed Holy Land. In 1204, however, the Fourth Crusade diverted to attack Constantinople instead, and all but destroyed Byzantine power. By 1400, the Byzantines were struggling to hold off the Ottomans, the latest anti-Christian invaders from Asia, who overran Constantinople in 1453. In the eighteenth century, France and Austria continued to vie for the leadership of European Catholicism, while Russia emerged as the new standard-bearer for Orthodoxy. In the nineteenth century, finally, the whole of Europe assumed that the Islamic empire to its east was dying. Was it the destiny of the Christian powers to take over its lands, and regenerate Christianity in its very birthplace? If so, could France and Russia, and the Churches that they represented, cooperate in this project any more easily than in the past, or would they end up fighting for it?

Napoleon and the Russian empress Catherine (who died in 1796) both seemed very tempted by Ottoman partition. Yet it was never clear throughout this period whether either France or Russia really wanted to dismantle the empire. Though partition continued to have its advocates, the dominant view was usually that war over such a large territory would be devastating; besides, for any power there was huge risk that rivals would gain relatively more from the regime's collapse. An alternative strategy was to exploit Ottoman weakness

and dependency, and to offer the sultan protection. France, Russia, and Austria had a history of seeking influence at his court—against the others. France’s economic and naval power in the Mediterranean had given it a favoured position at the Ottoman capital since the sixteenth century. In the eighteenth century, Russia used its military weight, its extensive common border with the empire, the threat of war, and occasional real conflict to bully the sultan into recognising its growing power. Sometimes the Ottomans accepted this; sometimes they turned to Austria or France to protect them from it. Napoleon’s occupation of the semi-independent Ottoman province of Egypt in 1798 could be seen as a new way of putting French pressure on Constantinople—as the European powers called it. The use of such a historic Christian name reflected the fact that though the sultan and his ministers might not be a formal part of the European diplomatic network, the pursuit of ascendancy at their court was an integral aspect of the struggle for power across the whole of eastern Europe. This remained the case after 1815. The continental powers knew that a new war over the Ottoman Empire, after twenty-two years of European fighting, would be catastrophic. They were all deeply conservative in their attitude to European politics, and worried that further conflict would unleash liberal, nationalist, and even revolutionary sentiments across the continent, destroying the propertied order. Moreover, conscious of the importance of legitimacy and legal rights in national and international affairs, they appreciated the dangers of undermining Ottoman sovereignty claims, and remained very reluctant to do so.

This existing French and Russian influence at Constantinople posed a much greater problem for Britain than the old diplomatic histories recognised. Britain’s fundamental aim was to stop French or Russian aggression in Middle Eastern territory, and so naturally it had to claim to defend Ottoman sovereignty against invasion. Yet France and Russia both seemed adept at promoting their interests at the heart of Ottoman government—at the ministerial offices of the Sublime Porte. This book shows time after time that Britain could never trust the Porte to pursue British interests in a coherent and sustained way, rather than French or Russian ones. In 1798, Britain had no tradition of asserting itself at Constantinople, and few obvious means of browbeating the ministers there. This sense of Ottoman vulnerability to French, and later to Russian, pressure created an inherent suspicion between Britain and the Ottoman regime. Britain had to pursue its own aims in the Middle East irrespective of the desires of that regime, even while it was upholding Ottoman sovereignty. A major theme of this book is that the British ambassador at Constantinople, who was usually struggling against the odds to maintain good relations with the Porte, had a different perspective from the British agents and officers in the main cities of the Middle East.

Britain had to neutralise the danger that the Ottoman Empire would act as a pawn of France or Russia, if either of them sought to attack British

India.¹⁰ There were two potential ways of doing this. One was the geopolitical approach already mentioned, which focused on securing practical influence over the lands and waterways of the Middle East without bothering much about the fact that the Ottomans nominally ruled them. This was the main policy before 1840, and the most successful. The second, more ambitious, goal was to challenge other powers at Constantinople itself, and to ally with Ottoman ministers who might promote British perspectives.

The powers' general preference for propping up the Ottoman Empire did not translate into agreement about its future needs. There were differences of opinion about the conditions on which it should be allowed to survive, and about the governance of its territories.¹¹ Diplomats spent much effort in trying to find common approaches. In the years after 1815, Russia, Austria, and Prussia worked together to prioritise the interests of conservative Christianity in Europe, in what the tsar called the "Holy Alliance." Yet they had more difficulty deciding how to manage the problem of Greece, once it became clear, in the 1820s, that its current position within the Ottoman Empire was unsustainable. The process by which these powers, Britain, and France worked out a future for an independent Greece was tortuous and hesitant.

British governments were always in two minds about this post-1815 Concert of Europe. It was a valuable security mechanism for the maintenance of European peace, but it did not look very congenial to a parliamentary, Protestant, global naval empire. In the 1820s, the conservative European powers tried to resist representative liberalism and to promote Catholic and Orthodox religion. By the 1840s, moreover, it was clear that continental peoples, as well as governments, tended to view the Ottoman lands through the prism of supporting Christian interests there. If the Ottoman Empire really was collapsing, and Islam was attacked by Catholic and Orthodox power, was this progress? Was it better to try to reshape the empire? Or was that not feasible? There was never a united British position on that thorny question.

Strategies and Visions

This book explores the strategies and visions adopted by British officials and commentators towards the Ottoman Middle East—towards the lands themselves, and towards the empire that had ultimate authority over them. There were diverse perspectives on most key issues. This diversity was partly ideological and partly geographical: the view was usually different from London,

10. Edward Ingram is one of very few historians to stress the need to write about British policy to Baghdad and Persia from this perspective. See particularly *Beginning of the Great Game* and *Britain's Persian Connection*.

11. On Russia particularly, see Edward Ingram's essays in *British Empire as a World Power*, pt. 1. Caquet's *Orient* and Ozavci's *Dangerous Gifts* both shed significant light on the perspectives of all the powers.

Bombay, and Constantinople. More importantly still, British officials in Egypt, Syria, and Baghdad all had different outlooks and agendas from those of the Constantinople embassy with which they had to communicate. So at many points this is a story of competing opinions about national interests and the best ways of promoting them. There may be parts of the nineteenth-century world for which simple, uniform generalisations about British “imperialism” are sustainable, but the Middle East was not one of them. The policy of the Foreign Office emerged out of a dialogue between centre and locality—a dialogue in which the Indian government’s voice also featured inconsistently. The foreign secretary was most comfortable in imposing policy on British ambassadors and consuls when that policy was not simply “British,” but had been agreed with representatives of some of the continental powers. When this was not the case, local men were usually given more latitude. Often they took it whether they were given it or not.

Some of these visions involved the application of coherent principles. On the other hand, one sub-theme of the book is that individuals frequently talked up British objectives in one or other remote part of the Middle East in order to secure a posting, and a career, for themselves. The risk of French invasion or Russian aggression may at times have been real, but there was also great scope for British representatives to exaggerate the threat in order to demonstrate their own utility. The national interest was also often a personal interest. As a result, this is a story of individuals much more than it is of abstract economic forces—which came to matter seriously in Middle Eastern policy only after 1860.

The first disagreement, in 1798, was about how much Egypt mattered in a war for control of Europe. Britain’s international position in 1798 was not attractive. The government was preoccupied with finding European allies against Napoleon. This Eurocentric strategy meant downplaying British interests in the Middle East. But Britain lost all its European allies anyway—not an unusual occurrence—and in 1800 the cabinet realised that it was essential to get France out of Egypt. This was done by a strategically unprecedented two-pronged attack, from the Mediterranean, but also from India into the Red Sea. For the next thirty years, the defence of the Middle East, Ottoman and beyond, was left mainly to Indian officials, and in particular to the presidency of Bombay. The Bombay government’s navy, the Bombay Marine, was used to protecting Indian commerce in the Gulf and around Arabia, so it was a natural extension of its function to safeguard these waters against potential European threats. After Britain took Mauritius from France in 1810, these threats greatly diminished anyway. So all the fundamental assumptions about how to defend the Middle East from Britain’s rivals were developed in India, or by the civil servants of the East India Company in London. Until the 1830s, the Foreign Office had not thought much about the Middle East, or indeed India, because it continued to be preoccupied with Europe and with other regions where European powers might challenge British might.

In the 1830s, Indian interests continued to dominate thinking about the Middle East, but perceptions were changed by the introduction of steam power in the Indian Ocean and on the rivers of Mesopotamia. In the latter case, one explicit aim was to pre-empt the threat that Russia might take that route towards India. The other reason for investing in steam in Mesopotamia was the search for a new route for the transport of people, mail, and goods between Britain and India, because of the great practical difficulty of the Red Sea route. In the late 1830s, however, more advanced steam technology made possible the conquest of the Red Sea. Around 1850, plans for a railway across Egypt made the Red Sea route yet more attractive. By the 1850s, reliable and swift communication had brought nineteenth-century material culture to the narrow corridor that the British used for the transit across Egypt. In addition, the ships of the Bombay Marine (renamed the Indian Navy in 1830) secured dominance in the Gulf and maintained a presence on the Mesopotamian rivers.

Steam power extended British visions of the region in several ways, which were imported from India in the hope that they could work among the Arabs. Improved communication networks made it easier to move troops and guns about, and thus to use technology to flaunt Britain's military and economic superiority over feudal Russia or the Ottoman sultan. Steam also promised to help Britain in assisting local authorities to secure order and the rule of law, including the protection of property. As a result, the process of strengthening British authority on the waterways of the Middle East can be compared to the "rage for order" described by Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford for other parts of the early Victorian empire.¹² Some commentators also hoped to persuade the inhabitants to settle by riverbanks and to grasp the mutual benefits of commerce with the passing steamers.

An important group of British politicians, led by William Huskisson and Lord Palmerston, developed a more ambitious link between steam power and commercial development. They were enthusiasts for the idea of freeing British trade from monopolies, prohibitions, and extortionate tariffs, and wanted to apply this to Ottoman lands. In 1825, this had led to the abolition of the Levant Company, the venerable body that had monopolised Anglo-Ottoman trade and had employed local consuls. The hope was that free enterprise and capital investment could revive old land trade routes like the one between Syria and the Gulf. Egypt seemed less promising, because of the bargain that the monopolist pasha Mehmet Ali had made with the remnants of the Levant Company to build up a protectionist economic system. As it happened, Mehmet Ali was himself a great enthusiast for British steam power, and it further entrenched his rule in Egypt. By the 1840s, many British people regarded Egypt as a model for the future economic development of the region. The British now tried to enhance their commercial presence in Baghdad as well.

12. Benton and Ford, *Rage for Order*.

The same tensions emerged, between those who favoured cooperation with powerful local vested interests and those who hoped for transformative capital investment from outside. In Baghdad, unlike in Egypt, both groups were disappointed.

Thus there was never only one economic policy aim for the Middle East. In the same way, there had been a division of opinion during the Napoleonic Wars, between those who believed that the best way to enhance local respect for Britain was by destructive bombardments of uncooperative Arab trading settlements, and those who hoped instead to build friendship and respect through mutually beneficial commerce. Both were tried in the Red Sea in 1799–1802, but the first was quickly abandoned. The Indian government faced a similar issue in relation to the Gulf, where “pirate” shaykhdoms were shelled in the desperate wartime conditions of 1809, but also in the much less desperate ones of 1819.¹³

The ancient equivalent of steam had been irrigation, which had turned deserts into gardens, until human neglect turned them back again. Most British residents and travellers thought about the future of these lands through the prism of their past. Those who had had a classical education remembered particularly the way in which the Greeks and Romans had united Europe and western Asia into prosperous civilisations under the rule of law, and the accounts they had left of the history and geography of these lands. The modern world was the result of the fusion of those classical empires with the Christian religion. The British could not avoid thinking about the Middle East through the same historical lens as the French and Russians. They dreamed of the return of civilisation as they defined it. They regarded Britain as the natural successor and best interpreter of those ancient civilisations. Nearly all were Protestants, and saw the Catholic and Orthodox versions of Christianity as intolerant perversions.

In Britain, one body had a particularly religious perspective on the history of the Middle East: the Church of England. The Church regarded itself as the purest exponent of historical Christianity and the body best suited to reunite other Christian communities, around Anglican Protestantism. In the 1830s and 1840s, leading bishops pressed for Church missions to the “primitive” Churches of the East, which had spent centuries courageously defending their independence from Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim aggressions. Well-funded evangelical societies also eyed the region because they believed that Islam was about to fall, allowing the word of God to be spread freely. They looked to history to suggest alliances with small groups that could spearhead this

13. Crouzet, in *Inventing the Middle East*, provides the first major discussion of the debates in India about how best to secure British interests in the Gulf in the first half of the nineteenth century. I consider the bombardment of 1819–20 briefly below in chapter 3, as part of my discussion of Britain’s policy to Baghdad.

evangelism. One of the “primitive” Churches, the Nestorians of Kurdistan, had successfully evangelised across Asia in the past; perhaps they could reprise this role? Alternatively, one approach to reading the Bible suggested that the resettlement and conversion of Jews in their Old Testament lands would usher in the Second Coming of Christ. This book argues that these explicitly Christian domestic visions had little purchase among British officials in the Middle East itself, where there was usually much more tolerance towards Muslim culture. Nonetheless, their power in Britain gave them a brief political impact.

Finally, there were divisions in domestic politics. Until 1830, Britain was governed by a succession of Tory governments. They were concerned to avoid revolution in Europe and to keep down defence spending. So they saw the value of cooperation between the conservative European regimes to maintain the peace. They had no particular plans for the Ottoman Empire, but they hoped that the powers’ aversion to a European war over it would provide adequate security for the defence of India. Tories who had a Eurocentric outlook usually sympathised with the explicit institutional Christianity of continental conservatives, including the Russians. When the Church of England became actively involved in the region around 1840, it, likewise, tentatively sought common ground with the Orthodox Churches, against Roman Catholicism. In the 1830s, a series of Liberal governments had very different attitudes to domestic politics and to Russia, which they treated as an ideological as well as a geopolitical foe. They used steam and trade to assert British technological modernity in Asia as a way of warning Russia not to advance towards India. This meant a more active approach in the Middle East, as noted above.

In all these calculations, there was rarely much emphasis on upholding the status of the Ottoman Empire. Only the Constantinople embassy was consistently concerned with that. The army and the Indian Navy were much more interested in the practicalities of winning local influence, sometimes in challenging conditions, by gaining the confidence of contending factions and trying to mediate between them. So they were concerned to secure a balance between Ottoman state interests and those of local groups, primarily for political reasons, and sometimes also for moral ones.¹⁴

No British government in this period ever guaranteed the Ottoman Empire unilaterally, and before 1840 none attempted a special relationship with it. They assumed that common European action was the only way of securing the empire, while they doubted its capacity for independence in the face of Russia’s use of pressure to win influence at the Porte. The European diplomatic

14. Hutchinson, the British army commander in Egypt in 1801, had very negative views about the morals of his Ottoman counterparts, which might be described as “Orientalist” or alternatively as “humanitarian.” Both terms have been used so indiscriminately as to become problematical, and I have tried to avoid them. My policy throughout the book has been to quote British comments at some length rather than to seek to pigeonhole them. Readers can judge them for themselves.

crisis of 1839–40 over the future of the Ottoman Empire improved its security, and therefore its prospects, but did not resolve the issue of whether it could be saved from dominant Russian influence.

The Tory government of 1841–46 still preferred to pursue stability in the East by getting the five European powers to agree to any adjustments in Ottoman ruling arrangements. This meant working with Russia and Austria to a much greater degree than Liberal governments wanted to do. It also aimed at cooperation with France, on a joint policy to press the Porte to keep its word to look after all oppressed religious minorities. One aim of this policy was to restore good relations with France after the 1839–40 crisis. The other aim was to position both countries behind a group of ministers at Constantinople who had recently unveiled their own vision of law-based government founded on the principle of security for all interests and religions, usually known as the Tanzimat. This was also how the British thought they governed India.

When the Liberals returned to power in 1846 they dramatically increased the stakes, arguing that the Ottomans should remove the bias in their legal system that favoured Muslims over others. They hoped that this would remove most grievances of Orthodox Christians, and undercut the Russian strategy of exploiting those grievances in order to maintain primacy at the Porte. Therefore, a strategy emerged that tried to unite Britain, France, and Tanzimat-minded Ottoman ministers behind the principle of legal equality among religions. In advocating it, Palmerston and Lord John Russell had wider ambitions: to reshape the European Concert around Anglo-French liberal values. That would help to pen in Russia across Eurasia. The aftermath of the 1848 revolutions made this approach doubly attractive. The Ottoman Empire now became a liberal project, and we can begin to talk of a liberal approach to empire. There were two difficulties with this strategy. One was that France was still tempted by its old policy of prioritising the interests of the Catholic Church at times of crisis; Napoleon III's international aspirations increased French assertiveness. The other was that Russia seemed determined still to support the grievances of the Ottomans' Orthodox subjects. The Crimean War emerged from this situation. It was only the war's outcome that allowed the the British liberal project to develop, for the next few years at least.

The Claims of Chronology

This is a British story—a story about the pursuit of British political objectives. The book approaches political history in the way I have always tried to write it, by taking into account the mentalities of those who sought to shape policy. I wanted to understand how they conceived of Britain's role in the Middle East, what they did there, and how far particular ideas—about geography, history, trade, and religion—may have affected them. This volume is based almost entirely on British sources, and confines itself to British viewpoints,

aspirations, and prejudices. It is a history of how the British saw the Middle East, not of the Middle East itself, though I hope that students of that subject will find some interest in the evidence presented here about British views of Ottomans and Arabs. There are many fine works on particular parts and aspects of the Middle East from which I have benefited, but many others that I have not been able to consult. There are many non-English archives that seem not yet to have been fully used by anyone. I have made no attempt to explore the effects of British activities on local societies. My instinct is that usually they were not very significant, but it would take a lot more specialised knowledge than I possess to reach convincing conclusions about that. Generalisation about the impact of European interventions on existing complex trading relationships is problematical, as Sarah Shields has shown so persuasively.¹⁵ I see this book as complementing the important recent work on the Ottoman regime's role in, and response to, these European interventions, from which I have learned a good deal.¹⁶ Several of these works have emphasised Ottoman agency in these relationships, and have usefully qualified entrenched assumptions about the role of European powers in modernising or subjugating the empire, which Edward Said's *Orientalism* did so much to establish.¹⁷

Said's writings have had a crucial impact on the investigation of British attitudes to the Middle East over the last forty years. A rich body of secondary literature has examined an array of British works and value judgments on eastern themes—on attitudes to gender and sexuality, and to travel, archaeology, architecture, literature, and the other arts.¹⁸ This literature has introduced essential theoretical sophistication, while emphasising how many of the

15. Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*, 8–12. She warned specifically against making sweeping judgments on the impact of the 1838 commercial treaty. R. T. Harrison, on the other hand, confidently attributes Egypt's ills after 1841 to the treaty and its mastermind Palmerston. Ignoring the constraints imposed by Egyptian economic patterns and interests, the Ottomans, and the other powers, he blames Palmerston's free-trade imperialism for checking tendencies to independence, turning Egypt into a “glorified vegetable garden,” and destroying the ambitions of industrialisers and young intellectuals alike: *Britain in the Middle East*, chap. 7. As Aaron Jakes has recently pointed out, Mehmet Ali himself bears most responsibility for focusing the Egyptian economy on cotton exports and on the lucrative intercontinental transit trade: “World the Suez Canal Made.”

16. Aksan, *Ottoman Wars*; Anscombe, *State, Faith, and Nation*; Ateş, *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*; Aydin, *Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia*; Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*; Douwes, *Ottomans in Syria*; Ozavci, *Dangerous Gifts*; Philipp, *Acre*; Toledano, *Ottoman Slave Trade*; Yaycioglu, *Partners of the Empire*; Yurdusev, *Ottoman Diplomacy*.

17. For recent work on the Ottoman Empire and modernity in this period, see Ze'evi: “Back to Napoleon?”; Bouquet, “Ottoman Modernisation”; McDougall, “Sovereignty, Governance”; Zanou, *Transnational Patriotism*.

18. Bar-Yosef, *Holy Land in English Culture*; Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*; Crinson, *Empire Building*; Laisram, *Viewing the Islamic Orient*; Lockman, *Contending Visions*; Melman, *Women's Orients*; Moser, *Wondrous Curiosities*; Ziter, *Orient on the Victorian Stage*.

British arguments about Ottoman and Arab governance and culture were stereotypical, negative, and self-interested. My aim here is not to challenge any of those works, except occasionally at the margins. However, my perspective differs in one sense, because a fundamental concern of a political historian must be to make distinctions across time, whereas many of these works, from Said onwards, have sought to underplay those distinctions in a search for general explanatory models.

This book operates on the principle that context and chronology are essential tools in explaining the purchase of particular strategies and ideas, since the political process is always in flux. I argue, for example, that British moves to protect the Jews in Palestine had different meanings in 1838, in 1841, and in 1849, and that bold explanations like the influence of Christian Zionism are greatly overdrawn.¹⁹ I suggest that British attitudes to Islam were determined not by abstract reactions to its theology, but by reasoned assessments of the likely impact of specific instances of Islamic fervour. I criticise the very common assumption that British policy to Mehmet Ali between 1807 and 1840 can be reduced to a simple choice as to whether to support or oppose him. In fact, he was almost irrelevant to the decision to invade Egypt in 1807; in 1839–40, Britain demonised his ambitions for its own purposes; between those years, he seemed an irremovable presence, usually for the better.

The art of political history—perhaps the art of all history—is to know when to make connections and when to make distinctions. Historians have lacked a coherent overview of British activity in Ottoman lands in different decades, which would provide a framework for those who seek to contextualise individual events or texts. As a result, for instance, David Katz's recent book, *The Shaping of Turkey in the British Imagination, 1776–1923*, can claim that a handful of famous writers (Gibbon, Byron, and Disraeli) “set the horizon of expectations about Turkey” for British readers.²⁰ The shortage of general overviews has meant that I have had to supply my structure myself. My hope is to show that our understanding of the Middle East from a British perspective is helped enormously when local stories that historians have treated separately—when they have treated them at all—are connected up. This book is written from primary sources: from contemporary memoirs, but primarily from the Foreign Office and India Office archives in London—particularly the thousand or so volumes in FO 78 alone of original correspondence with British representatives in the Ottoman Empire in this period, and the more fragmented but still vast India Office collections.

19. My argument supports, and extends, Abigail Green's contention that in practice British support for the Jews in the Middle East should be seen in terms not of Christian Zionism but of what she calls an “imperialism of human rights” that applied to other faiths as well: “British Empire and the Jews.”

20. Katz, *Shaping of Turkey*, 7.

I have focused on the period before 1854, because Britain's activities in the Middle East then are much less well covered by historians than they are for later decades. Writing about comparatively uncharted episodes brings rich opportunities as well as challenges. One of my claims is that a large proportion of the things the British ever thought about the Middle East had already been thought by 1854. T. E. Lawrence was obviously a figure of political significance and charisma, but there was little new in his fascination with the elemental spiritual significance of the desert and the deeply venerable qualities and defects of its spartan, virile Arab tribes. Jonathan Duncan tried to organise an Arab revolt against the French in 1801. However, some of the perspectives of imperial historians of a later period cannot be applied here so easily.²¹ Subjugating the Arabs themselves was just not practical. I underline the uncertainty and pragmatism that affected Palmerston's policy for the Ottoman Empire between 1833 and 1850, as it went through at least four phases. Political strategies are not always imposed with imperial arrogance; they are often pursued hesitantly, against the odds, and fail. Ideas on what the region needed mattered. It is curious that, despite all the writing on the 1839–40 diplomatic crisis, there has been no attempt to uncover the British government's ideas of what Syria should look like after the Egyptian evacuation that it enforced. In the light of Iraq since 2003, this is not an uninteresting question to ask.

The limits to Britain's power in the region were always important. Its freedom of manoeuvre can easily be exaggerated if one ignores the role of local political forces with which British officials had to interact. The Ottoman Empire was a much more durable and significant presence than the Saidian model recognised. An assumption is often made that Britain aimed to impose constitutionalism on it.²² Here, I side with those who have always insisted that, until the 1840s, British policy was merely to make the Ottoman army and taxation system function better.²³ The central principles of the Tanzimat programme of 1839 were designed by Ottoman bureaucrats, not British liberals, and Britain's policy for Syria in 1840 was Reshid's as much as it was the British embassy's. Likewise, the 1838 Commercial Convention was primarily a simplification of existing trading principles, of greater political than economic significance; there is no evidence that it was a British capitalist plot to

21. Shawn Malley imaginatively asserts that Layard's vision of Arab agricultural settlement by the Mesopotamian rivers resembled a "concentration camp replete with gun towers": *From Archaeology to Spectacle*, 40.

22. Caquet argues that Britain made a fixed decision to support the Ottomans against Mehmet Ali from 1832–33, and that it did so on condition that the Turks embraced "adaptive constitutionalism": *Orient*, 19–22, 111–13, 243–45. See also Figes, *Crimea*, 53–56, and Charmley, "Britain and the Ottoman Empire," 73. Caquet asserts, oddly, that the future of Islam in the East "preoccupied . . . almost no one" in 1839–41: *Orient*, 249.

23. Temperley, "British Policy"; Bailey, *British Policy*, 153–54.

destroy Egyptian industry.²⁴ Major political forces within the empire—Reshid, Bashir, Mehmet Ali—exploited Britain’s presence for their own gain.²⁵ The Porte was a great beneficiary of the military assistance that Britain gave it in Egypt in 1801 and Syria in 1840, which increased Ottoman prospects of dominating local elites. It was these military alliances, and the destruction that they caused, that generated an impulse in British official circles to accept more responsibility for the future of the territory concerned. Nowadays we are instinctively wary of any Western impulse to intervene in foreign lands, but the historian should also recognise the political potency of that concept of responsibility. British embarrassment at the killing of Mamluk leaders in 1801, or at the Lebanese civil war of 1841, created a consensus in favour of further intervention, just as domestic guilt at Britain’s role in the Crimean War prompted the popular agitation twenty years later demanding that Ottomans should no longer be allowed to misgovern the Balkans. They were two sides of the same coin.

Similarly, care is required in applying generalisations about “West” and “East.” A number of area studies have done important work in uncovering local political and economic realities, and in contrasting those realities with the limited understanding shown by British and French observers. Rubenson’s superb study of Ethiopia is a model of the genre, in revealing the activity of both sets of officials in a superficial and sometimes ridiculous light.²⁶ The West can easily be seen as a unitary interfering force, incompetently imposing itself on the East. This tendency has been noticeable especially in discussing British and French attempts to protect local religious sects; both powers are often blamed for promoting a damaging sectarianism. Certainly their interventions could sharpen local factional disputes, and be exploited by actors in them.²⁷ What is more doubtful is whether support for particular sects was Britain’s intention: nearly all the examples used by Makdisi for Lebanon, or Shields for Mosul, are in fact of French activity.²⁸ In chapter 7, I argue that British policy in both places took a sectarian form only briefly and tentatively, and for particular reasons. Britain deprecated the extent to which the French

24. For assertions to the contrary, see R. Harrison, *Britain in the Middle East*, chap. 7; Marsot, *Egypt*, 239, 259–60.

25. Ozavci, *Dangerous Gifts*, epilogue, esp. 360–62.

26. Rubenson, *Survival of Ethiopian Independence*.

27. It is clear, for example, from Rose’s consular reports from Syria throughout 1842 and 1843, that Ottoman and Maronite leaders, the Russian consul, and Druze rivals, all of whom disliked the high profile of the Jumblatts in Lebanon, spread rumours about the latter’s supposed connection with Britain in order to damage them. It was the allegation of British bias, rather than the reality, that became politically important.

28. Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism*; Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*. It should be noted that Makdisi’s study is impressively sophisticated in its handling of political contingency and change over time.

pursued sectarianism, not least because it exploited the local power of the Catholic Church, a body that most Britons feared on several grounds, but with which they knew they could not compete.

In this period, most of the time, the British saw their function in the Middle East as being to defend it from other European rivals. They were inherently suspicious of French and Russian Christian imperialism. Many local representatives also criticised Turkish imperialism over the Arabs, and aimed to gain credit with them by protecting them from its consequences. On the whole, the British imagined that they would manage western Asia more sensitively than the Russians or the Ottomans, who, for most of this period, seemed the only alternatives. Of course, there was a lot of self-deception in these arguments; if readers wish to see this account as a straightforward British imperial story, they are free to do so. One repeated theme is how swiftly Britain moved to pre-empt threats that were almost invariably exaggerated. There is much truth in Gladstone's remark of 1859: "the English piously believe themselves to be a peaceful people; nobody else is of the same belief."²⁹ Nonetheless, as long as the region was threatened by rivals, including France, it is not appropriate to think of a united "West" as against an "East."

To my knowledge, the first Briton to use "Western" in relation to the future of the Ottomans was David Urquhart in 1838, who employed it to denote sinister French and now Russian religious and commercial imperialist pressures on the East. These, he argued, could be defeated by an Islamic patriotic reform movement founded on decentralising, low-tax principles that British liberals should admire and encourage.³⁰ In the 1830s and 1840s, many people talked of "West" and "East," but they defined both in a suggestive variety of ways. Some writers envisaged a "civilising" project towards the "East," but this did not mean that they agreed on the nature of that "civilisation."³¹ Some offered a historical perspective, imagining the re-establishment of law and order across the lands of the Roman Empire, or the recreation of an interactive Mediterranean culture.³² When Layard wrote about the social failings of "eastern nations," he implied that Russia was one of them. When the French philosopher Auguste Comte envisaged a "West," founded on the principles of humanity, ruling Eurasia, this was to expunge the baleful influence of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. He wanted to build a future republican basis for the Ottoman Empire, to

29. Quoted in Parry, *Politics of Patriotism*, 238.

30. Urquhart, *Spirit of the East*, 1:xxxii. He blamed Colbert's protection system for originating this commercial rivalry in the 1660s (1:358).

31. The shallowness of one of the most famous "civilising" visions—that of Alphonse de Lamartine—was already noted at the time: C. Miller, "Orientalism, Colonialism," 701–2.

32. Hegel insisted in *The Philosophy of History* that the Mediterranean was the centre of world history, the origin of its main civilisations and religions, the sea that gave the Old World its unity—cited in Yapp, "Europe in the Turkish Mirror," 135. On visions of the Mediterranean, see Isabella and Zanou's *Mediterranean Diasporas*, 9–10.

rescue it from war and Russian imperialism. In fact, he hoped to extend this to India, defeating British imperialism there.³³ Some British commentators were similarly tempted to include India in a future vision of this Eurasian region, though others were frightened off by traditional concerns about its corrupting effects on British politics. Whether India was added or not, it seemed clear that Egypt was an essential first step. In 1847, John Stoddart, the consul in Alexandria, set out a plan for Britain to secure Egypt and make it happy and wealthy, in order to realise the plans of both Alexander and the Caesars for a dominion spanning Europe and Asia. In his view, Alexandria was destined to be the capital of a great transcontinental empire “full of hope and of progress,” combining vast commercial prospects with protection of the Muslim religion and its Holy Cities.³⁴ I hope to convince future scholars to explore more fully the richness and diversity of these various visions.³⁵

On the level of practical diplomacy, Britain’s strategy after 1846 was to bend France to its purposes. This was an extension of Britain’s European policy after 1830, which, as Paul Schroeder has shown, was an attempt to keep France in line as a junior partner in a cautiously liberal coalition to counterbalance Russia and Austria.³⁶ There was always a risk that an alternative France might emerge: an aggressive France, a Catholic France—particularly under Napoleon III in the 1850s, who had his own ambitions in Italy and the East—seeking especially to work with Russia towards a mutually acceptable revision of the European settlement. A very large amount of British international policy in the nineteenth century ultimately turned on the question of which was the real France: the France of the rational Enlightenment or the France of restless expansionism. British cooperation with France always aimed to encourage the former and to restrain the latter.

This is a useful perspective if we are to understand the ambiguity of Anglo-French relations in the Middle East. France was never wholly trusted, but, after 1815, it was trusted more than it was distrusted.³⁷ Holger Hoock has argued that British and French cultural rivalry over antiquities was a major and neglected theme of the period, manifest particularly in the excavations of Henry Layard and Paul-Émile Botta near Mosul.³⁸ This has been a valuable insight, but I argue here that our perspective on Mosul affairs benefits from

33. For Layard, see chapter 9 below. Varouxakis, “Godfather of ‘Occidentality.’”

34. Stoddart to Palmerston, Feb. 9, 1847, FO 78/710.

35. See Arsan’s “France, Mount Lebanon” for some interesting French visions.

36. Schroeder, *Transformation*.

37. David Todd’s account of French informal imperialism in the Middle East in the 1850s and 1860s is strong on this collaboration: *Velvet Empire*.

38. Hoock, *Empires of the Imagination*, 243–51. The same is true of Maya Jasanoff, who sees Britain and France competing in Egypt for cultural ascendancy after 1815 because the peace debarred them from conquering it: *Edge of Empire*, 216.

“putting the politics back in.” His main actors on both sides were intensely political figures with a political agenda, while their archaeological inquiries were driven at least as much by the spirit of shared Enlightenment enthusiasm for knowledge as by national rivalry. The same combination—superficial competition, limited by an underlying cooperation in pursuit of a liberal project—was the driver of their political behaviour in Kurdistan as well. The problem of interpreting French behaviour also explains the ambiguity of the Crimean War. On the one hand, it was a traditional struggle for dominance at Constantinople between a Catholic and an Orthodox power, exploiting a row over the Holy Places of Jerusalem. On the other, it was a liberal war fought by France and Britain to force Russia to respect the territorial integrity of a reformed Ottoman Empire—if that empire could be dragged into ruling its own peoples by law and principles of civil equality.

A Tale of Two Obelisks

What had the British achieved by 1854? In terms of reforming Ottoman governance, not a great deal. In terms of practical influence in the Middle East, it was almost inconceivable that France or Russia could challenge Britain's presence in Egypt, in Aden and its hinterland, in the Gulf shaykhdoms, or on the Mesopotamian waterways. In the decade before 1854, the troublesome regime that the British worked hardest to subdue throughout this region, again successfully, was the Ottoman Empire itself. By 1854, Britain had staked a strong claim—under the carapace of Ottoman sovereignty—to nearly all the parts of the Middle East that it governed after 1918. As this was the case, Britain had no interest in actually governing them, which would be diplomatically explosive, extremely expensive, and bound to incite awkward local tensions. But that did not reflect a lack of ambition or influence. Between 1815 and the 1870s, there was (outside India) little interest in expensive territorial acquisition anywhere. This was the period of the Pax Britannica, when British dominance rested on commercial, naval, and technological pre-eminence, globally, and specifically in the waters around Arabia.

So this Middle Eastern story can be seen as a typical one of the period after 1815: of stealthy rather than overt imperialism, of quietly growing world dominance rather than bombastic celebration. These priorities also explain the disappearance of the British campaign in Egypt from the historical memory. Edward Clarke, who arrived there in April 1801, was confident that “the laurels acquired by our army in Egypt can never fade.”³⁹ The officers and men expected a permanent memorial to their achievement. Lying in the sand at Alexandria was a seventy-foot-long Egyptian obelisk that seemed perfect

39. E. Clarke, *Travels in Various Countries*, 1:271.

for the task. The troops christened it “Cleopatra’s Needle,” though in fact it predated Cleopatra by at least fourteen hundred years. In 1802, Lord Cavan, the commander of the British army in Egypt, set up a subscription to transport it to London for permanent public display. Robert Wilson, one of the officers, hoped that it would “animate with pride and emulation” the rising generation.⁴⁰ The army itself subscribed £7,000, but politics intervened; the price of peace with France at Amiens in 1802 was Britain’s evacuation from Egypt the next year, which meant that such glorification suddenly seemed inappropriate.⁴¹

The obelisk remained in the sand. In 1819, Mehmet Ali gave it to Britain as a symbol of his friendship. The British were happy to accept his friendship, but they were less happy with the expense of transporting home such an unwieldy object in the post-war economic depression, so it stayed where it was. In the 1830s, more obelisks were identified and Mehmet Ali, still looking for friends, offered them to Britain and France. In 1836, the French erected theirs with great fanfare in the middle of the Place de la Concorde, where it continues to stand, projecting to generations of passers-by the impression of a unique French cultural affinity with, or power over, Egypt.⁴² The British, now even more concerned with cutting government costs, did nothing. In 1851, the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park celebrated the stages of human civilisation with lavish mock-ups in a great glass greenhouse known as the Crystal Palace, and a commercial company was formed to re-erect the “palace” as a permanent display in south London. Some directors planned to pay to bring over the British Needle as one of the main attractions, but they were overruled by those who argued that a cleaner and cheaper reproduction of antiquity would attract more customers. Besides, the Crystal Palace had been built as a hymn to international cooperation, so military memorials seemed out of place: the building implied that British global domination and peace went hand in hand. The Crimean War was fought in alliance with France, and Anglo-French cooperation became even more desirable after that.

The British never doubted that they owned the Needle and, more importantly, that they had supreme reserve power in Egypt, because they had the only military force capable of removing the regime. Finally, in 1877–78, at the dawn of a new era of imperial competition, Erasmus Wilson, a rich and philanthropic dermatologist, decided to redress this long-standing neglect after the abandoned obelisk was brought to his attention by a veteran army officer with Eastern interests, Sir James Alexander. Wilson’s navy surgeon father had taught him to worship Nelson and Abercromby for combatting Napoleon in Egypt; more recently, he had developed interests in oriental skincare and

40. R. Wilson, *History of the British Expedition*, xiii.

41. The money was returned: Head, *Eastern and Egyptian Scenery*, 54–55.

42. For this episode, see Porterfield, *Allure of Empire*, 13–41.

Egyptology. He paid the £10,000 needed to bring the Needle to London—a hazardous project, on which six sailors died in a Biscay storm. In September 1878, it was erected in its current position on the Thames Embankment, carrying appropriate memorials to the men of 1801 and to Nelson.⁴³ Less than four years later, British troops invaded Egypt. This time, they did not leave for seventy-four years.

43. See E. Wilson, *Cleopatra's Needle*, 182–83, 190, 205; J. Alexander, *Cleopatra's Needle*. For the prehistory, see the dedicated volume of correspondence in FO 78/2116, and below, chapter 11, p. 339, n.19.

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