On Becoming a Passenger

I was of opinion, that hee who would behold these times in their greatest glory, could not find a better Scene then Turky.

Blount, Voyage, p. 4

Henry Blount’s strenuous self-representations in the opening pages of his Voyage to the Levant (1636) outline his preparations before starting on a journey from Christian Europe into the Ottoman Empire. Known for his precocious wit, Blount portrays himself as a well-educated man of his times, a learned and yet sceptical observer seeking to contribute to knowledge currently unavailable from the records.

Casting himself from the start as a man of the new Baconian scientific method, Blount proposes a comparative and rationalist inquiry into the Islamic world, offering evidence that Christian supernaturalism may not have dominated discourse about the East before the French Enlightenment as Edward Said has suggested. Blount insists that his desire to travel to Ottoman lands was both sceptical and rational; he sought to test tradition and authority and find out if the ‘Turkish way appeare absolutely barbarous, as we are given to understand, or rather another kind of civility, different from ours, but no lesse pretending’ (p. 5). For Blount, civilizations and cultures were evidently distinct but also relative, to be valued on their own terms and not those of an opposing perspective. Perhaps the Turks would prove to be not as terrible as they had often been made out to be.

Istanbul: Blount in haste

The times grow verie variable in Turkie, all things have latelie changed farre, the Gran Signior is grown most bloodie, laying hold of slight
ocations to shedd it, and his insatiableness therein is such, as manie times he doth it with how owne hands, but daylie it is done in his sighte.

Sir Peter Wyche to Secretary of State Sir Edward Coke, 28 December 1633

Blount reached Istanbul in the summer of 1634, yet ‘stayed here but five dayes’ (p. 24). It had taken him, he records, 52 days travelling overland from Spalatro (Split), so he must have arrived in July, two months after leaving Venice. Although frustrated that he ‘had not leasure for much observation’ while in the imperial Ottoman capital, he notes that he was ‘in this hast’ without further explanation. Yet we can easily adduce several reasons, not least of which was his desire to take the earliest passage for Egypt. While he was there, Istanbul was certainly not at its best. From November 1631 until May 1632, regular rioting between Janissaries and Sipahis had made the city streets the scene of widespread violence. In May 1632, however, Sultan Murad IV began to emerge from his minority by forcefully asserting a bloody command over the imperial government. On the 18th, Murad ordered the Grand Vizier, Topal Recep Pasha, to be strangled. He then swiftly ended revolts in Anatolia, led by Abaza Mehmed Pasha, and set about internal reforms of the army, ‘executing 20,000 men in the process’. A nineteenth-century historian imagined the scene as follows:

Every morning the Bosphorus threw up on its shores the corpses of those who had been executed during the previous night; and in them the anxious spectators recognised Janissaries and Spahis, whom they had lately seen parading the streets in all the haughtiness of military licence.

Except for those partial to morbid fancies, these early years of Murad’s personal rule would not have been a good time for sightseeing in Istanbul.

To make Istanbul even less attractive, a great fire in late August 1633 had destroyed extensive sections of the old city, including the Janissary barracks and state archives, in addition to which, Blount noted, ‘they report seventie thousand houses to have perished’ (p. 25). The contemporary Ottoman historian Kâtip Çelebi put the number lower, at 20,000. During those few summer days that Blount spent in the city, Murad himself was in Scutari, planning his campaign to recapture Erivan and Tabriz from the Persian Savaids. Once he had taken command, Murad expended his energies on political reforms and border wars, leaving him little time or inclination for improving his capital or engaging in ceremonial displays. Moreover, for several months, Europeans living in Istanbul had been subjected to an unusual degree of harassment. Since 1629, regular hostilities between English, French and Venetian merchant communities