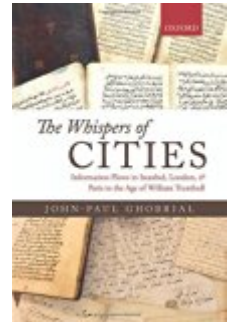


**John-Paul A. Ghobrial.** *The Whispers of Cities: Information Flows in Istanbul, London, and Paris in the Age of William Trumbull.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xvi + 192 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-967241-7.



**Reviewed by** Hailey Stewart

**Published on** H-War (April, 2015)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

John-Paul Ghobrial's *The Whispers of Cities* emphasizes how people communicated and the flow of that communication between Europe and the Ottoman Empire during the seventeenth century. More specifically, he focuses on the urban centers of Istanbul, London, and Paris as hubs of communication. Ghobrial acknowledges that the actual process of transmitting information between places largely concerned the circulation of print such as letters, newspapers, or gazettes. While Ghobrial includes elements of the printed material as an assessment of information, his interest accentuates "everyday communication, that is to say, the sort of informal, often oral, streams of communication produced within exchanges that took place between individuals in daily life" (p. 14). Ghobrial chose the diplomat William Trumbull as a lens through which to demonstrate the intricacies of the exchange of information between Europe and the Ottoman Empire.

Trumbull kept extensive records of his life in Istanbul, and through these, Ghobrial recreates a larger world of communication in Istanbul out-

side of printed materials. Despite using Trumbull as the central account, Ghobrial does not remain tied to Trumbull's activities but expands beyond the narrative to assess other possible sources for communication and information. William Trumbull represented the typical seventeenth-century diplomat and upon being informed of his new appointment to Istanbul, he began collecting information regarding his new appointment. Ghobrial traces Trumbull's steps in order to establish how a diplomat might acquire the necessary information to successfully do their job in a foreign land. Trumbull consulted the essential published works that detailed Ottoman politics such as *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1668) by Paul Rycaut, secretary to the Earl of Winchilsea. Furthermore, a diplomat in Trumbull's position could go to the Royal Exchange to seek information from merchants who traveled the Ottoman world; correspond with persons familiar with it; or consult the previous diplomat or the archives. When Trumbull departed for Istanbul in April 1687, he had been gathering information about the Ot-

toman Empire for eight months. Ghobrial's detailed assessment of the process in which Trumbull acquired the information for his appointment demonstrates the access diplomats and others interested in the East had to a variety of sources, both oral and written.

Ghobrial portrays the diplomat or European in Istanbul as abiding by and belonging to a system of "European-Ottoman sociability." European-Ottoman sociability exhibits "how the business of diplomacy and trade created a regular rhythm of interactions between Europeans and Ottomans in everyday life. It is also a reminder of the potential for friendship that existed within the world of elite sociability in the Ottoman capital" (p. 66). The creation of this type of sociability had basis in the exchange of gifts between European and Ottoman officials such as wine, medicines, and books. Ghobrial highlights how the exchange of gifts served a significant ceremonial purpose in the public exchanges between European and Ottoman officials, but the informal meetings hold more significance for Ghobrial because they allowed officials to orally communicate on more private matters, confirming or negating information they had obtained through other avenues. He further attests, through the works of Trumbull, the importance of the English embassy as an element of sociability, as it provided a location where people such as merchants, scholars, and officials could interact. An integral component of information flows in Istanbul between European and Ottomans, for Ghobrial, were those individuals who connected the officials where language barriers proved damaging to communication. He includes dragomans, servants, doctors, and scribes in this category, but he mostly focuses on the role of the dragoman with regard to European-Ottoman sociability and its role in everyday communication.

Ghobrial's use of Trumbull's papers provides a glimpse into the vast oral and scribal networks of information flows between European and Ot-

toman officials in Istanbul, although he contends that the inability to trace oral communications limits the accuracy of any interpretation. Despite the limitations of available sources, Ghobrial has used Trumbull's papers well and constructed an intelligible and coherent understanding of how Europeans and Ottomans accessed and spread information in spite of distance.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Hailey Stewart. Review of Ghobrial, John-Paul A. *The Whispers of Cities: Information Flows in Istanbul, London, and Paris in the Age of William Trumbull*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2015.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43035>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.