

Masaa Al-moukdad

Dr. Ben Garceau

Humanities Core

29 May 2018

Ruins of Bosra

Situated in the southernmost region of Syria, Bosra Al-Sham's plentiful ruins attest to its long history of various empires. Nabataean, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic ruins are found side by side in the old town of Bosra. In the 19th century, specifically the Victorian era, there was a surge of Western orientalist travelers to the Levant (Said). They commonly visited and explored more known historical sites, like the holy city of Jerusalem and the oldest continuously inhabited city of Damascus. However Hauran, the ancient southern region of Syria in which Bosra is located, was hardly visited and scarcely known to the West. Josias Leslie Porter, an Irish presbyterian minister, missionary, and traveler, set out to explore and record his findings of ruins in the region in 1855. Generally, travelers to the Hauran were fascinated with "the extensive deserted towns and villages with ancient standing houses" and compared the mysterious region to the famous cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii (Greenhalgh 102). J.L. Porter was no exception to the collective fascination with the region. In the second volume of his first book, *Five Years in Damascus*, Porter included a record of his journey, thoughts, and observations of the Hauran. As one of the most impressive cities in the entirety of the region, Bosra received particular attention by Porter. The demonization and disregard of the role of Islam and Muslims, including their history and architectural monuments in Porter's account of Bosra and its ruins, reveals his orientalist, western, and Christian biases. The focus on the ruins and the disregard of Bosra's local inhabitants results in the dehumanization and othering of Islam and Muslims.

Edward Said defined Orientalism as “ a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient [the East]” (Said 3). It is the way the West deals with the Orient by “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it” (Said 3). Josias Leslie Porter’s Christian missionary background reveals an Orientalist hatred for Islam and Muslims; it is reflected in his account of the history of Bosra, in addition to his observations of the Muslims and ruins present within the city. Under his account for Bosra, he dedicates a section labeled “History of Bosra.” In this section, he includes a detailed history in connection of Bosra to the Bible where multiple biblical cities and events are explained. At the end of the section he continues to mention Bosra’s history as “a Christian city...of importance in the political point of view...acknowledged as the metropolitan city of a very extensive ecclesiastical district...” and concluded that under Christianity, “it attained...its greatest pitch of prosperity” (Porter 167). After the “invasion” of Muslims, Porter does not include any detailed history of Bosra. The only history he mentions of Bosra under Muslim rule is that of destruction and desolation, “The temples and monumental statues were either overthrown or concealed behind the miserable structures of the Saracens” and that “the prosperity and glory of Bostra were gone and the city gradually and steadily declined under the withering influence of Islam until it has become utterly desolate” (Porter 168). Porter clearly exhibits a bias for Christianity. The section he incorporates pertaining to the history of Bosra is mostly made in connection with the Bible and emphasizes the history of Christianity, while neglecting Bosra under Islam. It is almost as if Bosra’s history came under a standstill with the influence of Islam. In his Orientalist attempt to reconstruct the history of Bosra, Porter manages to demonize Islam as a destructive force. There is no mention of the prosperity and significance Bosra retained because of Islam, only that of devastation. He slanders the Islamic monuments as

“miserable” while complaining of their supposed overshadowing of Roman/Byzantine monuments, which further demeans Islam and highlights his bias for Christianity. Porter directly blames Islam for the utter desolation of Bosra, but ironically continues to add on that he “enjoyed comparative peace and solitude.” He also adds, “It was with mingled feelings of awe and thankfulness I read in my Bible the things written in former days of Bozrah, and of Bashan and Moab. The terrible fulfilment of many prophecies was now visible around me, and awe filled my heart as I gazed on the predicted desolations; but it was with deep thankfulness I remembered that the very judgments of God here tend to confirm and strengthen the Christian's faith” (Porter 168). Porter angrily blames Islam for Bosra’s desolation, then again had no problem enjoying the “peace” and “solitude” that came with it. In this passage, he indicates that the prophecies in his Christian Bible are fulfilled, which shows that Porter believes there is a greater force at play with Bosra’s abandonment. Yet unsurprisingly, he does not direct any hate or blame for the contents in the Bible and places all blame on Islam. His entire view of Bosra centers around his interpretations of the Bible and Christianity; these interpretations imply that “the very judgements of God” are a punishment to these Muslim lands, a punishment that “confirms and strengthens” his “Christian faith” and further highlights his Orientalist nature of painting Christianity as a dominant force over Islam.

Not only does Porter reveal a sense of superiority over Bosra and Islam through his preference of Roman relics and slander of Islamic ones, he also shows a disdain for Muslims. The few times Porter mentions the inhabitants of Bosra is to complain about their unwelcoming nature because “no attention” was given, despite the fact that he was provided a room in the sheikh’s house (Porter 147). Another time Porter discusses Bosra’s inhabitants is to connect them to the city’s downfall, in which he states “...are not the abundance of its waters, and the richness

of its soil, and the wide extent of its plain, sufficient guarantees against decay and ruin? But a greater than human agency has been here at work. The curse of an angry God for the sin of a rebellious people has fearfully descended upon this land” (Porter 176). Through his blame of Muslims for their own decline of population and prosperity, he indirectly reveals that he is unsatisfied with the fact that Bosra is not under Christian or Western rule. Porter implies that there is no way a city with rich water and soil would be this desolate, unless its people are “rebellious.” Bosra’s inhabitants are ordinary people who happen to be Muslim, but Porter dehumanizes them by claiming they are rebellious to God. It is an accusation that suggests they do not approve of God and vice versa, further resulting in the othering of Muslims. Felix Konrad argues that the “Orientalist discourses of the 19th century...were informed by a European sense of superiority and...defined Europe and Islam as two antithetical civilizations” (Konrad). Porter continues to exhibit his belief that Islam and Muslims are antithetical to European Christian civilizations in a book other than *Five Years in Damascus*. He mentions that the abandoned homes and especially the old churches, are “awaiting the influx of a new Christian population” (Porter, *Giant Cities of Bashan* 16). Although he is referring to the historic Hauran region as a whole, Bosra is a significant part of the region, and the desire to make the region Christian again extends to the city. Porter doesn’t simply desire for Bosra to repopulate and be prosperous, he envisions the Christians as the source of repopulation and prosperity. Irrationally blaming and demonizing Islam and Muslims is a convenient way for him to continue the Orientalist othering of Muslims and justify his rationale to Christianize the region.

J.L. Porter’s demonization of Islam manifests in his accusation of the religion as the sole reason for decline and depopulation of Bosra. His dishonesty and disregard for Islamic contribution leads to the dehumanization of Muslims in Bosra. Porter likens Bosra’s desolation

to that of Palmyra, stating, "...never before had I seen such a picture of utter desolation except when looking down upon Palmyra." Unlike Bosra, Porter says that Palmyra "would naturally decline and fall" at the "discovery of another channel of communication" (Porter 156). Porter blames the fall of Palmyra on economic factors, but doesn't extend that logic to Bosra. Instead, he paints Islam as the sole reason for its fall and assumes it is so, when history shows that it is not true. Just like Palmyra, Bosra was prosperous beginning with the Nabataeans, continuing with the Romans and Byzantines, and lastly was prosperous under Islam because of its strategic position (Aalund). In fact, it was because of Islam's veneration for the annual Hajj pilgrimage, that Bosra remained as a significant stopping point for the Hajj pilgrimage route (Othman). In Islamic tradition, Bosra is also known to be the place where Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) once stopped by and his prophethood was foretold, which resulted in people flocking to it (Aalund). In this case, Islam was not a reason for its decline but a reason for its once prosperous state. Additionally, just like Palmyra, Bosra's decline was partly due to the change in routes. The Hajj pilgrimage route changed and Bosra was no longer a stopping point (Othman). Porter himself mentions the shift in the route, "the great pilgrim caravan, which, until a little over a century ago, journeyed from Damascus to this place" but does not note it as a factor for Bosra's decline (Porter 178). Instead, he purposely chooses to wrongfully blame and demonize Islam as the sole reason for Bosra's depopulation and ruins.

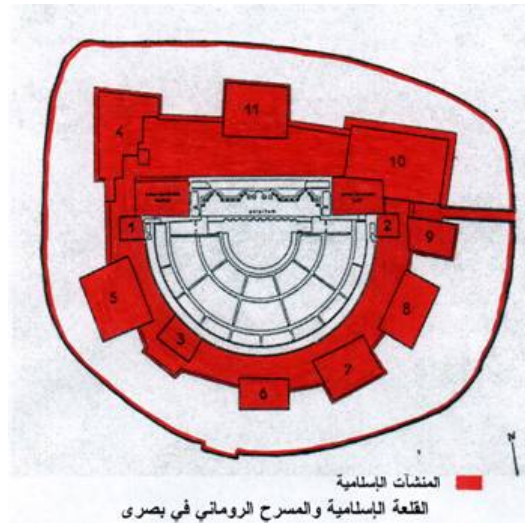


Fig 1. A diagram of Bosra's theatre in white and its citadel in red (Othman).

The most famous monument in Bosra is the second century Roman theatre. It is among the largest and best preserved Roman theatres in the world. The stage is 45 meters in length and eight meters in depth, and includes beautiful columns with a gallery on top. What makes the free standing theatre even more unique than most, is the Islamic citadel that encircles it. Although the theatre's facade is now shown to the public, most of it used to be hidden by several Islamic buildings that were erected inside the theatre (Aalund). Excavations to unveil the theatre began in the 1940s, which ultimately removed the inner Islamic buildings to reveal the magnificent theatre. When J.L. Porter visited Bosra in his travels to Hauran, he was greatly impressed with what little was shown of the theatre, along with the large castle or citadel surrounding it. He mostly focused on the remains of the Roman and/or Byzantine empires, and disregarded the Islamic buildings. He generalizes the Islamic relics as the "miserable structure of Saracens" as he raves on about Roman ruins, notably the theatre (Porter 168). Because the only parts of the theatre shown were the seats at the most top, where the roof of the topmost Islamic building is erected, Porter assumes that the placement of the theatre is "splendid monument of the luxury and magnificence of former days was so constructed that the spectators had, as a background to

the scenic representations of the stage, the buildings of the great city, and the plain beyond” (Porter 146). He goes on to describe the “massive piers and groined arches, like the crypt of a cathedral” that the theatre is assumedly erected upon (Porter 146). After the detailed account of the citadel and the theatre, which highlights his appreciation for both, Porter wrongfully comes to the conclusion that both the castle and the theatre situated within are Roman (only the theatre is). Porter proceeds his wrongful conclusion by adding on that when “the Arabs” or the Muslims first seized the city, the theatre and the citadel were present. He then went on to imply that the citadel was built and “required” because it “must have been in all ages exposed to sudden attacks of Arab tribes” (Porter 147).

J.L. Porter exhibits a racist orientalist sense of superiority over Islam and its Arab followers, which manifests in his dismissal of Islamic monuments along with his stereotypical portrayal of Arabs as warmongers. The irony in praising the theatre and the citadel while defaming Muslims for their “miserable” structures is that the citadel itself was erected by Muslims. Thanks to the citadel and the Islamic buildings within the theatre, Muslims were able to largely preserve the Roman theatre, which is an aspect that it is now commonly known for (Aalund). Two of the towers were built by the Seljuk Muslims, and the rest of the towers and complete citadel are credited to the Ayyubid Muslims (Aalund). Porter failed to identify the citadel as Islamic, even though the outside of it bears a bright white Arabic script in contrast with the black basalt of the structure (Othman). It is difficult not to notice such inscriptions, especially for one who pays meticulous attention to such, which is evident by the numerous notes of inscriptions in his book. The missed details can be attributed to his dismissive attitude of Muslims, which led to many erroneous conclusions. A following noteworthy incorrect conclusion, also inspired by his disdain and dismissal of Muslims, is his elaborate insistence that

the citadel was not built after the Roman theatre. Even though Porter admits himself that the outer walls of the citadel are clearly “of a date subsequent to the Roman age,” he ignores hardcore evidence in favor of assumptions. A date later than that of the Roman age is strongly in favor of Muslims, hence his insistence on denying such evidence. He argues that if indeed it was built later than the Romans then, “the benches would all have been torn up for building-stones, and the massive curved wall would doubtless have been removed to make way for structures more important in the interior of a great fortress” (Porter 147). Porter implies that it is the Muslims’ habit to destroy ruins and make use of the structure for their own good, which is in fact the complete opposite case for the theatre. Porter’s racism continues to manifest itself in his claim that the citadel was erected to ward off the constant threat of Arab tribes. In actuality, the fortress was built in anticipation of the Crusaders. The Ayyubids heavily used the castle to fight off the Crusader invasion of Bosra, which is a Western Christian force and not an Arab one. The Ayyubids succeeded in thwarting them off, which Porter bitterly admits to. The fact that the Ayyubids recognized Bosra as a “strategic site of intersection between the Levant, Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Arab peninsula,” and built a citadel to fight off a western force that threatened the region’s safety, commerce, and agriculture, which ensured its prosperity, and in turn is denied by Porter, shows that Porter’s dismissal of Islamic relics stems from an orientalist sense of superiority and hatred of Muslims (Othman). As Felix Konrad argues, it is easier to use the “Orient as a surface on which to project everything negative, and it was easy to hold Islam responsible for the negative features of the Orient” (Konrad). Porter lazily holds Islam responsible for the disastrous state of Bosra, because it is convenient to do so.

During the ongoing Syrian conflict, Bosra was liberated by opposition forces away from Syrian regime control. One of the Syrian regime’s main propaganda points is that its supposed

secular values are threatened by fanatical jihadists who seek out to destroy or threaten Syria's cultural heritage sites. When the opposition forces based in Bosra took over the city, Bosra was no exception to the propaganda. Al-Masdar news, a famous pro-Syrian regime outlet, claimed that the "terrorists" in Bosra systematically destroyed many of its archaeological sites (Milhem). They painted the opposition forces, many of whom are locals from the city itself, as "Islamist" terrorists who purposely seek to destroy archaeological monuments, implying their Islamic nature is partly to blame for the destruction. In actuality, the Syrian regime's barrel bombs caused most of the damage. Bosra's Department of Antiquities reported that barrel bombs dropped by the Syrian regime "caused massive damage to the western section of the Ayyubid Citadel and Roman Theater in central Bosra" (Danti). The UNESCO report on the damage to the ruins in Bosra, also reported of the same destruction with satellite images that further supports the Department's report (Cunliffe). Although the Syrian regime was proven to be the cause of damage by eyewitness accounts and by the city's official department of antiquities, in a separate article regarding the damage to Bosra's ruins, the UN failed to condemn the perpetrators ("UN condemns archaeological destruction"). Within the same article, however, they bring up the extremist ISIS terrorists' deliberate destruction of monuments in Palmyra, which is completely unrelated to Bosra. They also include a quote of a UN speaker who outright names and shames ISIS, but cannot do the same for the Syrian regime. A clueless reader might interpret the statement regarding extremists destroying monuments as applicable to Bosra, further eating in to the Syrian regime's propaganda strategy. In western media's discourse pertaining to Syria's monuments destroyed by ISIS, Romy Voren argues that "Western media reacts with placing ISIS heritage destructions in a long line of iconoclasm and Islam's fight against idolatry. Words as 'medieval' and 'barbaric' can often be found in such mediated reactions." The West and its

UNESCO representative continuously reacts with horror when destruction of ruins is inspired by “Islamic” extremists; however, when self-declared secularist state like the Syrian regime cause massive damage to Syria’s historical sites, they are not named and are largely ignored by Western media. In some ways, a similar manifestation of J.L. Porters bias against Islam and his favor of Western ideology pertaining to Bosra’s ruins, is present in the contemporary discourse of Bosra’s ruins.

Work Cited

- Aalund, Flemming. *Vernacular Tradition and the Islamic Architecture of Bosra: Ph. D. Dissertation*. Diss. Royal Academy of Fine Arts, School of Architecture, 1991.
- Cunliffe, Emma, et al. "Satellite-based Damage Assessment to Cultural Heritage Sites in Syria." (2014).
- Danti, Michael D., et al. "ASOR Cultural Heritage Initiatives (CHI): Planning for Safeguarding Heritage Sites in Syria and Iraq1." *Weekly Report 24* (2015).
- Greenhalgh, Michael. *Syria's Monuments: Their Survival and Destruction*. Brill, 2016.
- Konrad, Felix. "From the "Turkish Menace" to Exoticism and Orientalism: Islam as Antithesis of Europe (1453–1914)." *European History Online* (2011).
- Milhem, R. "20 Archeological Sites Systematically Sabotaged by Terrorists in Bosra Al-Sham." AMN - Al-Masdar News | المصدر نيوز, 1 Mar. 2015, www.almasdarnews.com/article/20-archeological-sites-systematically-sabotaged-terrorists-bosra-al-sham/.
- Othman, Najwa. "Islamic Citadel in Busra (Basra)." *Islamic Arts and Architecture*, 22 Mar. 2011, islamic-arts.org/2011/islamic-citadel-in-busra-basra/.
- Porter, Josias Leslie. *Five years in Damascus, including an account of the history, topography and antiquities of that city: with travels and researches in Palmyra, Lebanon and the Hauran*. John Murray, 1855.
- Porter, Josias Leslie. *The giant cities of Bashan; and Syria's holy places*. T. Nelson, 1870.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. Print.
- "Syria: UN Condemns Archaeological Destruction at Major World Heritage Site of Bosra | UN News." United Nations, 24 Dec. 2015, news.un.org/en/story/2015/12/518992-syria-un-condemns-archaeological-destruction-major-world-heritage-site-bosra.

Van Voren, R. J. M. *In what way does the West respond to heritage destructions in Syria and Iraq by ISIS and how does this relate to the concepts of Postcolonialism and the Authorized Heritage Discourse?*. MS thesis. 2017.