Figure 1: Spiridon Ventouras: *Portrait of Ali Pasha*, 1818. Oil on canvas, 71 × 58 cm. Private collection, Athens.

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Portrait of Ali Pasha: Cultural Mobility on the Periphery of Empire

Abstract This study examines an early nineteenth-century portrait of the Ottoman provincial governor Ali Pasha, who ruled a border region that is now northern Greece and southern Albania for almost forty years. The governor commissioned this oil-on-canvas painting from the Christian artist Spiridon Ventouras, a Greek-speaking Christian hailing from the Ionian Islands, which lay just beyond the borders of the empire. While Western European-style portraits are known to have been produced for several Ottoman sultans throughout the centuries, until that point such a painting initiated by a Muslim notable beyond the sphere of the imperial court in Istanbul appears to have been unheard of. Ali Pasha's portrait stands as a unique expression of self-presentation on the periphery of empire, not only in the act of commissioning the work itself but also in the depiction of the governor decked out in an array of finery that serve to evidence his political and economic status. Furthermore, this painting participates in a wider pan-Adriatic aesthetic that transcends both imperial and confessional boundaries, calling into question a paradigm of mobility that assumes an encounter or exchange between two fixed cultures.

Keywords Ottoman Empire, Greece, Ali Pasha, Portraiture, Cultural Mobility, Periphery

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In 1818, the Ottoman governor Tepedelenli Ali Pasha summoned the painter Spiridon Ventouras to his court in Preveza, a port city on the Ionian Sea today located in Greece. At the time, Ventouras was residing on the island of Lefkada, whose main town directly faces Preveza across a small bay. After making his way to the vizier's waterfront palace, the artist was granted an audience with Ali Pasha and allowed to make preparatory sketches (Themeli-Katifori 1960, 206). Four months later, the encounter between painter and pasha resulted in an oil-on-canvas portrait that is approximately life-size. Surrounded by an intricate gilded frame, which could quite plausibly be original, the governor confronts the viewer with a commanding gaze, his lips drawn taut and eyebrow half-cocked. Shown as a seated half-figure, Ali Pasha poses against a dark ground, his luxurious fur mantle and velvet cap almost dissolving into the black behind him. Ventouras has managed to capture the governor's characteristic swagger, which I argue played no small role in Ali Pasha's attaining a prominent socio-political position within the empire and even a level of international celebrity. Weighed down with an impressive collection of finery and precious objects, the man depicted here sits calm and confident in the spotlight.

There are many examples of Western-style canvas portraits ordered by the Ottoman sultans, from the famous fifteenth-century depiction of Mehmed II attributed to Gentile Bellini to several paintings produced for Mahmud II only a decade or two after Ali Pasha's portrait was completed (Kangal and Işın 2000). These portraits, however, seem to have remained the singular prerogative of the imperial ruler, and do not reflect a wider trend of images commissioned by Ottoman elites. Although there has been much recent work done on the exchanges between European and Ottoman artists at the Sublime Porte, the fact that Ali Pasha—a provincial governor who came to power outside of the more traditional circles of the imperial court—invited Ventouras to his domain and ordered such a painting appears to be a rather extraordinary case within the field of Ottoman visual culture.

Taking the portrait of Ali Pasha as its point of departure, this essay investigates questions of circulation (▸**Circulation**) and mobility—the movement of both persons and objects from one geographic location to another—in early modern art. I aim to put pressure on assumptions frequently underlying discussions of cross-cultural exchange, particularly the overwhelming focus on royal court production and the view of cultures as distinct and separate entities. Towards this goal, I take up Stephen Greenblatt's call to resist what he describes as the "compartmentalization of mobility," that is, a tunnel vision in which significant moments of mobility are strictly limited to particular times and places, while, "in all other contexts, [scholars] remain focused on fixity" (2010, 3). In order to locate these new contexts for mobility, I propose to focus on cultural zones found on the periphery (▸**Periphery**) of empire, where one might find trajectories, triangulations, and entangled histories (▸**Entangled Histories**) that suggest a mode of analysis

moving beyond a "clash of cultures." More to the point, when scholars discuss mobility and transcultural exchange in the context of Ottoman art and architecture, they often speak about the movement of foreign artists and objects at the highest level of Ottoman society, i.e. the imperial court in Istanbul. In contrast, this portrait of a provincial governor is the product of what could be considered "micro-movements" across imperial boundaries, which indicate the existence of a common regional taste, rather than the interface between two fixed cultures.

The unusual or perhaps even transgressive act of Ali Pasha sitting for his portrait executed in a style that some Ottoman viewers might have described as *alafranga* (or "in the European fashion") can best be explained by the border context from which this painting emerged. Ali Pasha and his sons served as provincial governors and controlled the region of Epirus—what is now northwest Greece and southern Albania—for almost forty years, from 1784 until Ali Pasha's death in 1822, when he was ultimately accused of treason and assassinated by order of Sultan Mahmud II. In the early nineteenth century, Ali Pasha's *de facto* capital city of Ioannina (Ott. Yanya) came into its own as a cosmopolitan hub situated on the western frontier of the Ottoman Empire. Under the governor's rule, this town hosted a vibrant multi-confessional elite of merchants, intellectuals, scribes, military officials, and religious leaders. Many of these individuals, especially the Christian traders and academics, had been educated abroad in other nearby urban centers—primarily Venice and Vienna—and continued to maintain connections that transcended imperial boundaries.

Ali Pasha's portrait invites an investigation of how these trans-imperial connections contributed to the formation of taste in the Ottoman borderlands. In the painting, the governor is attired in a rich costume, with a vest and black velvet cap embellished with dense gold embroidery, a specialty of the craftsmen in Epirus that was exported to western and central Europe. On his right hand, Ali Pasha also wears a ring, its dark color suggesting either an emerald or sapphire, or perhaps a seal that he would use to officiate documents. This hand rests on a pistol, an object that was often imported from France or Britain and then subsequently embellished by local craftsmen with an outer casing of rich gold or silver filigree work.

Evidence for Ali Pasha's material wealth in the form of textiles, jewelry, and fine weapons can also be found in an abundance of archival documents in both Athens and Istanbul. When the governor died in 1822, a number of inventories were drawn up in Ottoman Turkish to account for all of the movable property found in the multiple palaces that Ali Pasha owned in Ioannina—a comprehensive view of a pre-eminent household's material culture. Two registers in particular (BOA D.BŞM.MHF.d. 13344 and 13346) reveal a taste for European import items such as gilded table clocks, jeweled pocket watches, guns, mirrors, and cut-glassware. The registers also list objects flowing from eastern trade connections, such as sable furs from Russia, shawls from Lahore, and large ceramic vessels from Myanmar. These Ottoman property registers thus establish the image of Ioannina as

a place with a robust mercantile economy. In the same way, the portrait of Ali Pasha also serves as a kind of inventory, documenting objects of mobility that were evidently considered markers of status.

Rather than turning to Istanbul for cues in fashion, Ali Pasha did not have to look much further than his own court, as well as his neighbors on the Ionian Islands. If Ali Pasha's territory was located on the north-western frontier of the Ottoman mainland, then directly on the other side of that political border were the Ionian Islands—including Lefkada, the home of the painter Ventouras. When Ali Pasha first came to power, the Ionian Islands had long been held by the Venetians, but after Napoleon's invasion in 1798 this area became a revolving door of occupying French, Russian, and British forces. This jockeying for a foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean was at least in part motivated by what European diplomats characterized as the "Eastern Question," i.e. the anticipated disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. The vizier thus entered a fraught geopolitical arena, with international powers bitterly squabbling over territory quite literally on his doorstep, and immediately sought how to turn the situation to his own advantage.

Taking into consideration this highly charged political dynamic, we now turn to what is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this portrait: the large medal pinned to Ali Pasha's vest, boasting an enormous cut diamond in its center, surrounded by fifteen smaller diamonds set into a black enamel casing. This same medal is described by the British traveler Thomas Smart Hughes, who was granted an audience with Ali Pasha in Ioannina in 1814. Hughes remarked that "The dress of the vizir [...] appeared costly but never gaudy; [...] he has bought a diamond from the ex-King of Sweden at the price of 13,000 l., which, with a number of others, he has had formed into a star, in imitation of one which he saw upon the coat of Sir Frederick Adam: this he now wears upon his breast, and calls it 'his order'" (1820, Volume II, 58). Sir Frederick Adam was a military officer who would eventually be appointed as British High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands, and from Hughes' account it can be understood that he had at least one meeting with the governor. At such a high-stakes encounter—the British had great interest in Ali Pasha and his ability to curb the French in the region—there is no doubt that Adam would have come in full regalia, including medals awarded by the British crown. Thus, within this painting there is represented on the very person of the vizier the exchange of both objects and fashions across a razor-thin imperial border.

Finally, the act of commissioning a portrait itself serves as a notable example of Ali Pasha's engagement with regional taste, which could be thought of as a shared Italianate-Adriatic zone of visual culture. Despite the numerous portraits of Ali Pasha that circulated in European books in the first decades of the nineteenth century, this painting remains the only known instance of the governor himself initiating such a likeness. Because Ventouras was from the Ionian Islands, this painter who was brought in to create Ali Pasha's portrait could also be considered part of a community in

the Venetian "borderlands." The majority of the population on the Ionian Islands were Orthodox Christians, but the longstanding Venetian influence in this region meant that its inhabitants participated in a wider Adriatic cultural zone, many being fully bilingual in Italian and Greek as well as traveling to Venice (which had the first major Greek printing press) for both intellectual and mercantile opportunities. Like many young men on the Ionian Islands, Ventouras was sent to Venice for his education, where he studied painting for ten years before he returned home in 1795 (Themeli-Katifori 1960, 203).

Once back in Lefkada, Ventouras not only became well known as an accomplished painter of icons for local Orthodox churches, but also gained a reputation as a portrait artist, capturing the likenesses of local officials and clergymen alike. Ventouras' renown evidently extended across the narrow strait that divided Lefkada from the Ottoman Empire, to Ali Pasha's court in Ioannina. In 1818, the governor asked the Ottoman consul in Lefkada, Marinos Lazaris, to make arrangements for Ventouras to cross the strait and come to the port of Preveza. After this meeting, the finished painting was finally transported in the summer of 1818 to be presented to the governor at one of his palaces in Ioannina.

The fact that Ioannina was a flourishing cultural center in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is no secret to Greek historians who have devoted particular energy to situating Ioannina within the broader context of what is commonly referred to as the "Greek Enlightenment." This line of scholarship, however, tends to focus exclusively on the Christian communities in Ioannina, and explains the consumption of luxury goods and the patronage of artists as a phenomenon occurring in spite of the Ottoman "occupation" of the region. Yet, I would like to suggest a revised view of the Ottoman period, acknowledging the agency of the governor as a partner of the Christian elites (‣**Agency**), facilitating and encouraging these trans-imperial connections by opening the cities of Vlora and Preveza as free ports as well as rebuilding the main road networks that connect these towns with the provincial seat in Ioannina.

Objects such as Ali Pasha's canvas portrait or the piles of imported luxury items described in Ottoman registers cannot be fully explained by an East/West (‣**East/West**) discourse of mobility, which paradigmatically considers cross-cultural transfers only at the highest political levels, the various courts of imperial rulers. While the Ottoman capital in Istanbul stands as an important center for trans-regional cultural exchange, the patterns of cultural fashioning and consumption in Ioannina during the time of Ali Pasha are perhaps better understood as a shared regional tradition that existed on both sides of imperial borders straddling the Adriatic. Ali Pasha summoning Ventouras from Lefkada to Preveza, even though technically a trans-imperial exchange, in reality only required a 45-minute journey by rowboat. There is no question that these geopolitical borders were well known and observed by the various actors on the ground—and, if one looks through diplomatic archives, these boundaries were often

vehemently contested and fought over. Nevertheless, what I have aimed to demonstrate is that scholars should be wary of relying too heavily on the monolithic designations these boundaries suggest when discussing moments of cultural production in areas on the periphery. In the case of Ali Pasha, the governor was not necessarily interested in having a portrait done in the "Western" or "*alafranga*" style, but rather the regional style, the style in which every important figure in the immediate area, whether a colonial officer on the Ionian Islands or a local archbishop, participated. This border zone accommodated a diversity of individuals of multiple confessions, language backgrounds, and ethnicities. In a similar manner, the portrait of Ali Pasha serves as a visual capsule, recording not only the likeness of the governor but also the confluence of both objects and moments of encounter at his court—a portrait of a pasha, but also of the periphery itself.

Figure

Fig. 1: Private collection, Athens.

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