

↳ NATURA ADMIRANDA IN MINIMIS

SEMİH ÇELİK

Architecture¹² as² Measure⁷
Ölçü⁴ Olarak⁶ Mimarlık⁸



Photo: Abdullah Bey, "Formation calcaire devonien du Bosphore," 1870. Naturhistorisches Museum Wien (Natural History Museum Vienna) Collection.

Karl Eduard Hammerschmidt, a palaeontologist and geologist of Hungarian origin from Vienna, took refuge in the Ottoman Empire after fleeing the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the 1848 Revolution and carried out his scientific studies there as a Muslim convert, under the name of "Abdullah Bey." Coincidentally, the same year Abdullah Bey found asylum in the Ottoman Empire, the Galatasaray Imperial College of Medicine, which was founded in Istanbul 10 years prior and hosted the empire's first natural history museum, was burned to ashes. The museum, which has withered away along with its collection that contained samples from Anatolia and many different regions of the world, was considered among the most prominent natural history museums of the time despite its short life.¹ Following this tragic incident, Abdullah Bey continued to work on creating a new natural history museum in Istanbul. His efforts and collection of the geological and entomological samples were met with acclaim in scientific circles beyond the borders of the empire.

This drawing, which constitutes merely a single work of his, describes in layers the fossils Abdullah Bey collected between 1862 and 1867 in the Kanlıca coast of the Bosphorus, and chronologically depicts the initial phases of marine fauna and fish formation during the Devonian Period, ●1 ●2 ●3 ●4 ●5 ●6 ●7 ●8 which took place between 350 to 400 million years ago. To be more precise, the drawing points out the pieces of this evolutionary chain that bred even more complex forms of creatures in every stage, along with the intertwinement of these stages throughout the evolutionary process. Additionally, according to the French Academy of Sciences, where Abdullah Bey sent the fossil drawings to, these

1 Semih Çelik, "İstanbul'un ilk Doğa Tarihi Müzesi: Galatasaray Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-i Adliyesi Numunehanesi (1839-1850)", *Toplumsal Tarih* 311 (November 2019), 34-41.

fossils “prove that despite the long distances that separate them, there is no difference with regard to organic life between the northern, western, and eastern parts of the old continent.”² Even though they are depicted as individual layers⁹, these fossils, which are also an indication of terrestrial animals being of marine origin,³ point to the fluid and intertwined nature of both the geological space and the political geography divided by imperial borders.

This curiosity towards collecting, classifying, preserving, and exhibiting natural history specimens within the Ottoman world around the mid-19th century, of which Abdullah Bey was an important part, mostly faded in the 20th century. The rocks Abdullah Bey had worked on have been destroyed to a large extent as a consequence of the effects of the Anthropocene—i.e., bulkheads on the Bosphorus, construction activities on the shores, emissions of chemical, biological waste, etc. Today, as the ecological destruction of the Bosphorus is coming more and more to light, one can appreciate the value of even the smallest element of nature, and consequently the value of natural history collections and museums, through a sentence that Abdullah Bey wrote down in another work⁴ of his: *Natura admiranda in minimis* / Nature’s beauty [lies] in small things.

2 Naturhistorisches Museum Wien archives, Abdullah Bey, “Pétrifications du Bosphore dans les couches paléozoïques du terrain dévonien par Dr. Abdullah Bey,” 1867.

3 Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture* (Wiley, 2018), 29

4 Naturhistorisches Museum Wien archives, Abdullah Bey, “Préparations Phytotomiques 1ère Série: Organes Sexuelles des Plantes,” [No Date], 3.

About the author

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