



44<sup>th</sup> Levantine Heritage Foundation Zoom lecture with guest speaker Dr Semih Sefer  
16 June 2026, 6.00 pm (UK time)

## Levantine Enterprise in Transition: The Foscolo Family in 19th-Century Istanbul

This presentation explores the economic transformation of nineteenth-century Istanbul through the lens of the Levantine Foscolo family, with particular emphasis on the Pera district as a focal point of commercial and social change. Originating from the Venetian aristocracy and later dispersing across various regions of the Ottoman Empire, the Foscolo family emerges as a representative case for understanding the integration of Levantine elites into Ottoman urban and economic structures.

The talk will examine how members of the Foscolo family engaged in diverse professional spheres—including trade, craftsmanship, and finance—and how these activities facilitated their incorporation into Istanbul's evolving economic landscape. Special attention will be given to their entrepreneurial ventures, notably in shipping and coal industries, which positioned them as influential actors within the broader Levantine business milieu.

Furthermore, the presentation situates the Foscolo family within the wider context of nineteenth-century transformations, addressing the roles of industrialization, the emergence of modern corporate law, and the increasing presence of foreign capital. By tracing the family's migration patterns, occupational strategies, and commercial enterprises, this study offers new insights into the making of Istanbul as a cosmopolitan hub where economic and cultural interactions between East and West were continuously negotiated and redefined.

In preparing this study, a diverse and complementary body of sources has been employed to ensure both empirical depth and analytical rigor. Foremost among these are materials drawn from the Ottoman Archives, which provide rich documentation on commercial activities, legal arrangements, and administrative practices related to Levantine actors in nineteenth-century Istanbul. These archival records allow for a granular reconstruction of the Foscolo family's economic engagements and their interactions with Ottoman institutions.

In addition, the study makes extensive use of the *Annuaire Oriental* series, a key contemporary commercial directory that offers detailed information on firms, professions, and business networks operating in Istanbul and the broader Ottoman geography. This source proves particularly valuable for tracing the Foscolo family's entrepreneurial ventures and situating them within the wider Levantine business environment.

These primary materials are complemented by a wide range of secondary sources, including scholarly works on Ottoman economic history, Levantine communities, and the legal and institutional transformations of the nineteenth century. Together, these sources enable a multi-layered analysis that bridges micro-historical inquiry with broader structural developments, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Istanbul's transformation into a cosmopolitan economic centre.

Booking essential: <https://semih-sefer-presentation.eventbrite.co.uk>

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Mateo Foscolo & Marc Foscolo



Research Assistant Dr. Semih SEFER graduated from the Department of History at Istanbul University in 2014. In the 2014–2015 academic year, he commenced his master's degree studies in the Department of Modern History at the Institute of Social Sciences, Istanbul University. He graduated in 2017 with a thesis entitled *The Lorando and Tubini Families: Bankers Operating in the Ottoman Empire*. He commenced his doctoral studies in the same department during the 2017–2018 academic year. At the beginning of 2019, he was appointed as a research assistant in the Department of History at the Faculty of Letters, Istanbul University. Between 2021 and 2022 he spent twelve months as a visiting researcher at L'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in France. In 2024, he successfully defended his thesis entitled *The Consolidation of Ottoman External Debts: Tevhid-i Düyun (1901–1903)* and was awarded a PhD. His research interests include modern economic history, Ottoman external debts, Ottoman modernisation, and the economic and social history of Istanbul.