On a visit to a museum in Athens, I remember seeing a proskynetarion, an icon of sorts, that mapped the Holy Land and its various important Biblical events. Proskynetaria fall somewhere between souvenirs and religious objects that were produced as late as the early twentieth century and bought by Christian pilgrims who came to Jerusalem and wanted to take a representation of the Holy Land back to their home countries. Proskynetaria often had a note on the back certifying that an individual had undertaken such a pilgrimage. This particular proskynetarion was painted in 1839, the same year that photography was invented.

While Palestine, with all its religious connotations, had always had a significant history of pilgrimage, the nineteenth century was a transformative period. Enabled by modern advancement, from transport technologies – such as ships and trains – to the advent of photography and print-media industries that broadcast images of the Holy Land far and wide, the nineteenth century saw the birth of the modern tourism industry as we know it today.

The traditional religious pilgrimages to see the holy sites had obvious historical importance, but with the beginning of the Ottoman Empire’s Tanzimat Reforms in 1839, Palestine’s landscape shifted dramatically. Among other things, the reforms enabled foreign ownership of land. This reality, coupled with a growing appetite for modern tourism, precipitated the emergence of many institutions during the second half of the nineteenth century, accommodating the desires of the modern tourist.

From nationally run religious institutions that facilitated pilgrimage, such as the Russian Compound, Notre Dame de France, and the Austrian Hospice, to antiquities and souvenir stores such as the Boulos Meo Store and the American
Colony’s Vester and Co., both at Jaffa Gate, cities like Jerusalem changed rapidly during the second half of the century. Added to this were travel agencies and tour groups run by foreigners and locals alike, such as Thomas Cook and the Awad Travel Agency. These institutions and many others showed both local and foreign interest in Palestine, but perhaps most importantly, and often overlooked, is the series of cultural materials produced either as artworks or souvenirs that met the Western appetite for the Holy Land.

Indeed, as early as the 1850s, Louis Félicien Caignart de Saulcy, a French gentleman and amateur archaeologist, would discuss the natural majesty of the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley, positioning its authenticity against the modernity of Jerusalem and the many tourists who constantly flocked to visit its holy sites.

Alongside the significant industry that facilitated Western visitation was another that catered to visitors once they had arrived. When we consider the size of the Palestinian tourist industry, we can begin to understand the number of goods that were produced as souvenirs to address the demands of the market, quietly distributing Palestinian cultural materials across the globe in ways that often go unnoticed.

The market for Holy Land souvenirs included a diversity of industries from icon painting, both religious and commercial, to ancient industries, such as mother-of-pearl and olive wood carving that were reinvigorated, to items drawn from the physicality of the landscape itself, such as rocks painted with crosses or pressed flowers glued to pages of booklets. With the advent of photography, new images of the Holy Land were added, especially postcards, as local photographic studios came to be established through Armenian networks from the 1860s onwards.

Such materials, both secular and religious, form a corpus that hints at how Palestinians marketed Palestine to tourists as well as offer insight into the ways that visitors perceived Palestine in the nineteenth century.

To gain a sense of the materials that were sold, we might look to Lars Lind, a member of the American Colony. Later in life he wrote in his memoirs of the Russian pilgrims who travelled to Palestine in the late Ottoman period, before the Russian revolution of 1917 disrupted what had been one of the largest tourist demographics. He described their experience of the city:

[...]

This description gives us an insight into the world of objects produced in Palestine, but also a sense of just one of the many global distribution points. To consider souvenir culture in Palestine, we must think about an intricate set of networks that range from the artisans who made them to the merchants who sold them and the tourists who would buy them, taking them to their countries of origin. When we think of the spread of such objects, their reach was global.
One of the most prolific industries was mother-of-pearl carving. Indeed, during the course of the nineteenth century, Bethlehem-carved mother-of-pearl was so popular that Palestinian trading posts were set up in Manchester, Paris, Kiev, Manila, Singapore, and Port-au-Prince. These trading outposts sold carvings made in Palestine and also sourced raw materials for new production. This led to much innovation with the addition of new pearl-shell colors. Looking at changing styles of carving, we also see evidence that artisans addressed different markets in different ways. This image shows an Italian rendering of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* in the material so strongly associated with the Palestinian industry.

These enterprising merchants and artisans were well aware of the cachet held by goods produced in Palestine. They actively marketed their production in the Holy Land as part of the allure of ornately carved mother-of-pearl both locally and abroad. Indeed, the Boulos Meo Store’s receipt book made explicit reference to the sale of carved mother-of-pearl and olive wood.

Similarly, the painted rocks, pressed flowers, and vials of Jordan River water were valued precisely because they were fruits of the landscape itself. While often religious in nature, when we examine the visual culture of souvenirs, it becomes apparent that there was an interesting meeting of Palestinian souvenir makers and merchants with their Western clientele in which the land was made fundamental.

Perhaps one of the most enduring legacies of the nineteenth-century souvenir market was the image of Palestine itself. The market for Biblical and Orientalist images spurred an entire photographic genre that supported a significant ecosystem of photographic studios. Such photos of course built on the earlier painting and printing traditions of such artists as David Roberts, but the new photographic industry also made photography accessible to Palestinian communities themselves.

This produced a paradox. Typical Biblical images, on the one hand, may have problematically enabled the imagining of an empty and ancient land or one filled with Biblical characters. On the other, for local communities, photographers also documented Palestine’s modern social life. In many ways, the rift between marketing an ancient land and the modern technologies that enabled such marketing, as well as tourism itself, shows just how modern the conception of Palestine’s ancientness is.

Along with photography, a more reliable global postage system produced the postcard. For those who could not visit Palestine, photography, and postcards in particular, enabled viewers at least a version of a Palestine visit. Some of the earliest postcards in Palestine were produced by Boulos Meo and sold through his store, a Jerusalem landmark at Jaffa Gate.

Speaking to Rami Meo, the great-grandson of Boulos Meo, who ran the store in the 1980s and 1990s, gives us some insight into how strongly the nineteenth-century image of Palestine was ingrained in the touristic imagination. Meo...
recalls going on buying trips to London to purchase British-authored books and images of Palestine, particularly those of David Roberts, which he would then sell to tourists visiting from abroad at the shop in Jerusalem.

The desire of more recent tourists to find a souvenir that reflects their expectations of the romanticized Biblical Holy Land of the nineteenth century persists to this day. In such instances, “authentic” souvenirs become a mirror that not only presents tourists with what they expected, but that also shows the ongoing ingenuity of contemporary merchants and the reciprocal interaction between trader and tourist that the tourism industry continues to offer.

Only when we begin to map the various souvenirs and cultural goods produced for the tourism market can we understand the important reach of the industry in the nineteenth century as it marketed Palestine abroad. More importantly, it also speaks to how the marketing of nineteenth-century merchants and artisans has, for better or worse, created an enduring legacy in how the Holy Land is still imagined today.

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The author would like to thank Rami Paul Anton Boulos Meo for taking the time to discuss the Boulos Meo Store and its history.