'Bridging Europe and Asia: Crossing the Bosphorus'

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Abstract

Istanbul is the only city in the world which straddles two continents. Europe and Asia are separated by the narrow Bosphorus Strait, a waterway of immense historic and strategic importance, which is steeped in mythology. When the first Bosphorus Bridge opened in October 1973, it represented the first permanent crossing between Europe and Asia. It was hailed as the realisation of a dream dating back to 512 BC, when Darius, King of Persia, spanned the straits with a chain of boats for his army to cross. Today, three bridges and a tunnel cross the Bosphorus.

During the 1960s and 1970s, crossing the Bosphorus, by ferry, then bridge, was a significant transition point for tourists on the overland route between Europe and India, and beyond, as they left the West and their Western selves behind and journeyed towards the East. The 1973 bridge formed an important link in the 'Asian Highway', the road network connecting Europe and the 'Far East' — a modern incarnation of the Silk Road.

This paper examines representations of Bosphorus crossings from a range of perspectives, including tourists, locals and authorities, within changing historic and cultural contexts. Representations of the new bridges invoked national heritage and mythologies, yet, conservationists opposed the bridges' impact on Istanbul's historical and environmental heritage. The first bridge's opening commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Turkish Republic, while imagery from Turkey's imperial past accompanied construction of the second and third bridges. For some, the bridges themselves are symbolic of Turkey's own identity, suspended between Europe and Asia. The paper raises questions about: the relationship between physical and metaphorical crossings; where Europe and Asia begin and end; the extent to which bridges, and other crossings, unite or divide East and West; and how crossing the Bosphorus figures in constructions of both national and personal identity.