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Byzantium in the Objectiff: Nikodim Kondakov, Jean Xavier Raoult and Their Photographic Expedition to Sinai

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Abstract: Nikodim Kondakov (1844-1925), arguably the greatest art historian of the Russian empire, provided a new impetus to the study of Byzantine art. During decades of rigorous travels, he documented and introduced into scholarship previously unknown Byzantine monuments by embracing the power and promise of archaeological photography. The academic impact of Kondakov's publications was greatly enhanced by the participation of a brilliant French photographer, Jean Xavier Raoult (ca. 1835-ca. 1890). This article analyses their most challenging venture, the expedition to Sinai in 1881. This journey contributed to advancing a more objective conception of Byzantine art via the collaboration between archaeology and photography. As a key example of how the Kondakov-Raoult partnership advanced the state of the art of academic knowledge, this article also analyses the historiographic importance of the earliest extant photograph of the Transfiguration mosaic.

Keywords: Nikodim Kondakov, Jean Xavier Raoult, Byzantine art, history of photography, archaeological photography, Sinai monastery, Transfiguration mosaic, Odessa

In the 1870s-1880s, when the history of Byzantine art was just coming into its own as an academic discipline, much of the field's key terrain was still *terra incognita*. While western European scholars could deride whole periods of Byzantine artistic production as decadent or even "degenerate", a different academic vision of Byzantium was emerging in the east. Nikodim Kondakov (1844-1925), arguably the greatest art historian of the Russian empire, provided a new impetus to the study of

Byzantine art.[1] He accorded Byzantium both creative agency as well as independent development outside the selective, constrictive western canon of medieval art. During decades of rigorous travels, he documented and introduced into scholarship previously unknown Byzantine monuments by embracing the power and promise of archaeological photography. The expeditions launched him on the road to international fame and stature, which would culminate in his appearance at the First Congress of Byzantine Studies in Bucharest in 1924, the momentous event which is celebrated in this volume. Kondakov's attendance at the Congress, according to Henri Grégoire, caused great emotion and palpable enthusiasm among its participants.[2] The Congress closely aligned with Kondakov's eightieth birthday and would become his "swan song" upon the academic stage.[3] The steering committee for the newly inaugurated journal *Byzantion*, which met in Bucharest at the Congress, even decided to dedicate the first volume of the journal to Kondakov.[4]

Though largely forgotten today, the academic impact of Kondakov's publications was greatly enhanced by the participation of a brilliant French photographer, Jean Xavier Raoult (ca. 1835-ca. 1890). The two men collaborated on the publication of the Chora mosaics, the Sinai treasures, and the arts of the Caucasus. Theirs was a special business relationship, a successful partnership, and, for a time, something of a

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[1] I would like to thank Andrei Timotin and Petre Guran for their invitation to participate in a stimulating conference, for their wonderful hospitality in Bucharest, and for organizing an excellent excursion to Romanian monasteries.
The enormous contributions of Nikodim Kondakov to the shaping of Byzantine art history were greatly downplayed during the Soviet period. Irina L. Kyzlasova and Svetlana O. Vialova revitalized interest in his legacy, correspondence, and impact on Russian-language scholarship. See I. L. Kyzlasova, *Akademik N. P. Kondakov: poiski i svershenіia*, St Petersburg, 2018; *Mir Kondakova: publikatsii, stat'i, katalog vystavki*, Moscow, 2004; S. O. Vialova published ground-breaking works on the Sinai album and the correspondence of Kondakov preserved in the St Petersburg library. For bibliography, see S. O. Vialova, "Fotograficheskoe nasledie XIX veka: N. P. Kondakov i ego 'al'bom vidov i drevnostei sinaiskikh'", *Fotografiia. Izobrazhenie. Dokument* 1, 2010, p. 15-21. For a useful introduction to Byzantine art history in imperial Russia and Kondakov's contributions, see M. Lidova, "The Rise of Byzantine Art and Archaeology in Late Imperial Russia", in J. Elsner (ed.), *Empires of Faith in Late Antiquity: Histories of Art and Religion from India to Ireland*, Cambridge, 2020, p. 128-160. For a brief contribution in a Romanian venue, see A. Adashinskaya, "An 'Ancient Argonaut' in the Service of the Empire: The Research Expeditions of Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov", https://arthist.ro/2020/11/an-ancient-argonaut-in-the-service-of-the-empire-the-research-expeditions-of-nikodim-pavlovich-kondakov.

[2] According to H. Grégoire, "…son apparition au milieu des congressistes, dont la plupart se proclament ses élèves, provoqua un frémissement d'émotion et un vértable mouvement d'enthousiasme". H. Grégoire, "Un Congrès d'études byzantines à Bucarest (fin avr. 1924)", *Échos d'Orient* 137, 1925, p. 58.

[3] For a recent study of Kondakov's last years, see E. P. Serapionova, "Poslednii prazhskii period zhizni Nikodima Pavlovicha Kondakova (1922-1925)", *Slavistica* 29.1, 2025, p. 74-85. The article does not, however, highlight the Bucharest Congress.

[4] P. Graindor and H. Grégoire, "Avant-propos", *Byzantion* 1, 1924, p. vi.

friendship. This article analyses their most challenging venture, the expedition to Sinai in 1881.[5] This journey became a launching point for Kondakov's academic career, even though it was far from an immediate success. It also contributed to advancing a more objective conception of Byzantine art via the collaboration between archaeology and photography. As a key example of how the Kondakov-Raoult partnership advanced the state of the art of academic knowledge, this article also analyses the historiographic importance of the earliest extant photograph of the Transfiguration mosaic.

The publications of the results of the Sinai expedition were momentous for the careers of both Raoult and Kondakov.[6] The first publication consisted of two texts under one cover authored by Kondakov – his travelogue and description of the Byzantine treasures of the Sinai monastery, including the Transfiguration mosaic and various Byzantine and Slavonic manuscripts. *Puteshestvie na Sinai v 1881 godu. Iz putevykh vpechatlenii. Drevnosti Sinaiskago monastyria* (*The Journey to Sinai in the Year 1881. From Travel Impressions. Antiquities of the Sinai Monastery*) was a hasty publication, written in Russian, and widely circulated as a separate offprint of the annual journal of Kondakov's own Novorossiya University.[7] The travelogue stands out in the body of Kondakov's otherwise scientific, and rather dry prose, for featuring strong personal political opinions (he detested the British), visceral comments on the hardships of the journey (waves of cockroaches that terrorized them on a small boat), as well as extensive descriptions of people (the Bedouins) and places (the European refashioning of Cairo). He also chose to write the travelogue in the first-person plural, thus making Raoult and himself into a joint narrative entity, perhaps to position it as a grand scientific expedition. Only occasionally does he break away from that narrative mode and switch to first-person singular. His publication was a defining milestone for the study of the Orthodox East, it was in dialogue with the international interests of the Russian imperial government, and it was revelatory because for the first time any of the Sinai treasures (architecture, icons, and manuscripts) were captured as photographs rather than drawings.[8] In Kondakov's own words the greatest scholarly result of the

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[5] J. Ebersolt noted: "Avec l'année 1881 s'ouvre la période des grandes missions scientifiques en Orient". J. Ebersolt, "M. Nicodime Pavlovitch Kondakov", *Byzantion* 1, 1924, p. 3.

[6] S. O. Vialova, "Fotograficheskoe nasledie...", p. 17-18. Vialova was the dedicated scholar who introduced the photographic volume into scholarship. She has published brief, but highly informative articles on the subject, and introduced many new archival materials into scholarship. In addition to the aforementioned article, see especially ead., "Sinaiskii al'bom N. P. Kondakova", *Rossiia i Khristianskii Vostok* 1, 1997, p. 207-225.

[7] From volume 33 of *Zapiski Imperatorskago Novorossiiskago universiteta*, 1882.

[8] N. Kondakov published as an appendix the full list of the photographs taken on the trip. In both of his reviews of this publication, H. Omont engaged only with the list of the manuscripts. See H. Omont's reviews of Kondakov's *Voyage au Sinaï en l'année 1881. Impressions de voyage. Les antiquités du monastère du Sinaï*, published in *Bibliothèque de l'École des chartes* 43, 1882, p. 667-678, and in *Le Cabinet historique* 28, 1882, p. 604-606.

voyage "consists of the photographs…".[9] And yet despite the great importance of these images, Kondakov and Raoult struggled mightily to disseminate knowledge of these treasures.

The second publication of the journey was a photographic album of over 100 images, *Vues et antiquités du Sinaï par M. le Professeur N. Kandakoff et Phot. J. Raoult*, a bibliophile rarity already at the time. This was an album of ca. 100 glued-in-by-hand photographs, which had been taken by Raoult on the journey. The volume was self-financed and jointly owned by the two men, with enough photographs created in order to have produced ca. 15 copies of the album.[10] The volume was simultaneously an economic fiasco and an academic marvel. As I discuss below, it was displayed in 1884 at the exhibition of the Sixth Archaeological Congress in Odessa and caused a sensation.[11] Both men would receive delayed recognition for their labours. Raoult would eventually be awarded the order of Stanislav of the third degree and concomitant ennoblement, while Kondakov received the coveted Lomonosov award in 1883.[12]

There is one complete album in the Russian National Library, St Petersburg, and it features 107 photographs.[13] Raoult had travelled to France in order to sell subscriptions to the volume in Paris. He reported success in selling three albums to institutions and private individuals there, but the locations of those original albums are not presently known.[14] However, this author has learned of the existence of a simulacrum – a copy of the album created at the behest of Gabriel Millet containing 102 photographs, as well as copies of photographs on glass plates.[15] Among these images we encounter the first photograph of the Transfiguration mosaic which will be analysed below.

As I have previously demonstrated, Kondakov was keenly aware of the seminal importance of photography for the expansion of knowledge.[16] He argued already

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[9] Kondakov's letter to V. V. Iagich dated 6 June 1881, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski N. P. Kondakova s A. F. Bychkovym i V. V. Stasovym", *Vspomogatel'nye istoricheskie distsipliny* 27, 2000, p. 218.

[10] S. O. Vialova, "Fotograficheskoe nasledie...", p. 18-19.

[11] *Ibid*., p. 17.

[12] *Ibid*., p. 18.

[13] The National Library of Russia 15.31.1.86.

[14] Kondakov's letter to V. V. Stasov dated 1 May 1883, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski...", p. 213.

[15] I wish to thank Ioanna Rapti (EPHE) for sharing with me her knowledge of the *Photothèque Gabriel Millet, Collection chrétienne et byzantine* (EPHE), and for showing me this volume preserved in the EPHE collection. I am also grateful to Mathilde Lorilliard, archivist of the Humathèque, for facilitating access to the glass plates of the photographs.

[16] E. N. Boeck, "Mosaics and Mavericks: Nikodim Kondakov's Pioneering Studies of the Chora (1880-1886)", in B. Pitarakis (ed.), *From Istanbul to Byzantium: The Path to Rediscovery, 1800-1960*,

in 1881 that photography could have resolved many questions and controversies regarding various monuments of St Catherine's. It would take the famous photographic expeditions of Kurt Weitzmann to Sinai in the 1950s (following in the footsteps of the Soterious team in the 1940s) to firmly institutionalize access to the Sinai treasures. Had Kondakov succeeded in securing funding for the planned publication and wider dissemination of Raoult's photographs, more attention would have been devoted to the Sinai treasures even earlier.

Jean Xavier Raoult as a historiographic ghost

Jean Xavier Raoult (ca.1835-ca. 1890) was a French adventurer and talented photographer, who spent two decades working in the Russian empire and was based in Odessa (1860s-1880s). He garnered considerable contemporary recognition in Russia and France for his ethnographic photographic album *Collection de types de peuples de Russie, Roumanie et Bulgarie*. His photographs were hailed as "marvellous", and celebrated for their technical perfection and ingenious compositions.[17] The bicultural life that propelled him to the threshold of fame also contributed to the complication of his legacy, including his very name: the spelling variants of his first and last names in Russian are different from French (Zh. Raul', I. Raul'), and his first name is frequently Russified (Jean becomes Ivan or Ivan Petrovich).[18] The remarkable photographer became something of a historiographic ghost, lost between different cultural narratives and disciplinary traditions.[19]

We do not have a clear picture of either his background or training. Rumoured to have originated from Marseille, he set up a photographic studio in the 1860s on the most fashionable street of Odessa, a new city on the northern edge of the Black Sea which was an emerging centre of Russia's hugely profitable grain trade.[20] He operated the studio until 1884 and traded on his fashionable French identity, advertising his craft as "French photography". Raoult had also traversed the vastness of the Russian empire

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Istanbul, 2021, p. 474-85; ead., "First Encounters of a Chora Kind: Nikodim Kondakov and the Emancipation of Byzantine Art", in ead. (ed.), *Afterlives of Byzantine Monuments in Post-Byzantine Times* (= *Études byzantines et post-byzantines*, new series, 3), Heidelberg, 2021, p. 201-218.

[17] V. V. Stasov, *Fotograficheskiia i fototipicheskiia kollektsii imperatorskoi publichnoi biblioteki*, St Petersburg, 1885, p. 38-39.

[18] For an introduction, see A. P. Popov, "Raul', Zhan", in id., *Rossiiskie fotografy (1839-1930): slovar'-spravochnik*, vol. 2, Kolomna, 2013, p. 237-239.

[19] He merited a brief and rather incomplete entry in the *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*. See A. Loginov, "Raoult, Jean (Ivan Petrovich)", in J. Hannavy (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, London, 2007, p. 1183-1184.

[20] For an excellent introduction, see P. Herlihy, *Odessa: A History, 1794-1914*, Cambridge, MA, 1986. Of all the many works devoted to Odessa I highlight this particular volume for its path-breaking role in western scholarship and in gratitude to the late Professor Herlihy for some stimulating conversations in 2007.

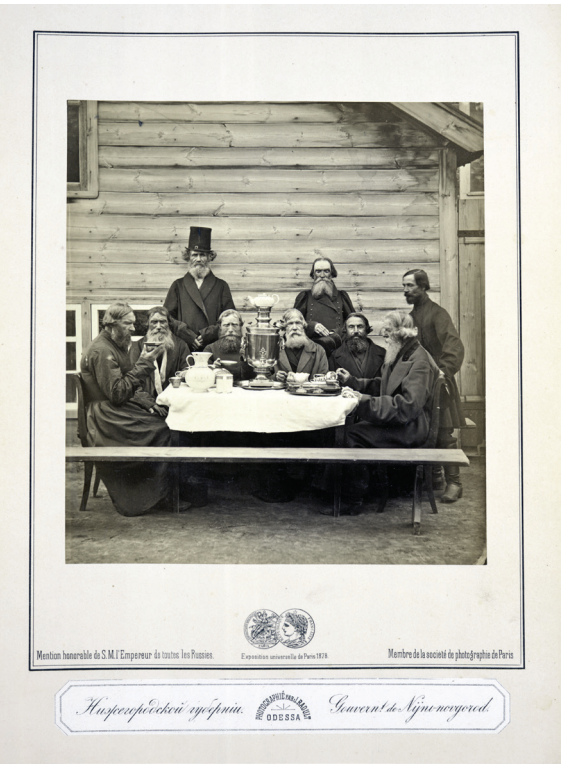

Fig. 1. Peasants of the Nizhegorodskaia guberniia, from the album *Collection de types des peuples de Russie, Roumanie et Bulgarie* (*Neskol'ko narodnykh tipov Rossii*).
Photographer Jean Xavier Raoult.
The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Photography Collection, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections.
Accessed 26 October 2025.
https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/fc64e180-c6ba-012f-942b-58d385a7bc34

and photographed its diverse peoples to great acclaim, while he also documented the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878. Raoult is believed to have departed Russia around 1884, shortly after his final trip with Kondakov to Constantinople. He was rumoured to have returned to southern France, possibly Marseille, where he is presumed to have died around 1890.

Jean Xavier Raoult as photographer

Raoult's work came to the notice of an important, astute, and discerning contemporary observer, the celebrated Russian critic Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906). In order to understand Raoult's personality, philosophy, and accomplishments as a creative photographer, it is useful to examine Stasov's assessment of Raoult's first celebrated *baustein* – a large album of picturesque nationalities of the Russian empire, unassumingly titled as *Collection de types des peuples de Russie, Roumanie et Bulgarie* (*Neskol'ko narodnykh tipov Rossii*) (fig. 1). He assembled them into a vast collection over the course of several years of traversing the empire:

> … the album consisting of 224 photographs, taken on site [*s natury*] in the course of the 1870s and 1880s by the Odessa photographer Raul' (J. X. Raoult), who has now left his craft [*svoe delo*] and who forever returned to France, in 1883 [*sic*, it

> was actually in or after 1884]. This album can be considered a true chef-d'œuvre of technical production [*proizvodstva*] and represents at the same time a remarkable wealth of artistic [*khudozhestvennago*] and scientific material: the choice of types and poses, picturesque [*zhivopisnoe*] posing and grouping of the figures captured by the lens [*vziatykh ob"ektivom figury*], and in some instances also the picturesqueness of the landscape, which serves as the backdrop to the paintings [*kartin*], and finally, the richness of the national [*natsional'nykh*] or tribal [*plemennykh*] facial types [*fizionomii*] and outfits [*kostiumov*], reproduced [*vosproizvedennykh*] in the photographs of Raoult, make his album an extraordinarily outstanding phenomenon [*iavleniem neobyknovenno vydaiushchimsia*]. That is why Raoult was granted his just reward [*spravedlivost'*], when he was awarded the highest honorary awards at the Paris geographical exhibition of 1875 (for the then still incomplete album) and at the world international exhibition [meaning Paris] of 1878. On account of the enormity of the money spent [*zatrachennykh sredstv*], Raoult could not produce too great a quantity of the albums, and those few complete specimens, which were created by him, constitute now the property of royal personages or large scientific institutions. Our specimen was the last of those prepared by Raoult and initially intended as an offering [*podnesenie*] to the Danish king Christian IX ... .[21]

This testimony is highly revealing. We encounter an ambitious, self-assured, and adventurous risk-taker, who is able to implement a long-term plan. In order to execute this project, Raoult would have had to have been fluent enough in Russian in order to communicate with his models. From Kondakov we learn that he also spoke some basic Turkish.[22] Since the photographic volume was an expensive, multi-year, prestige project, we can imagine a crafty strategist, who balanced income-generating projects (the studio in Odessa) with a high-stakes artistic gambit. We learn that Raoult's investment paid off, but only to an extent. Though he garnered international prestige, he was not able to realize full profits (either financial or in terms of patronage) from the venture. Thus, the emerging psychological portrait is that of a self-made man willing to stake major sums in his quest for international recognition, while earning a respectable living in the provinces.

What do we learn about Raoult as an artist? Stasov's gushing assessment of the album as an "extraordinarily outstanding phenomenon" is superlative as a stand-alone statement. It is also an exceptional statement of praise. In the eyes of the important critic, Raoult had clearly become a star. He was celebrated for all aspects of photographic production: first, as a technical virtuoso; second, for his mastery of creatively assembling the picturesque subjects and settings; and, finally, for effectively capturing them. His departure from the Russian scene was both noticed and noted.

In collaboration with Kondakov, Raoult excelled in the documentary precision of unmediated exactitude. Raoult's ability to adjust to a scholar's needs and archaeological

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[21] V. V. Stasov, *Fotograficheskiia i fototipicheskiia kollektsii*..., p. 38-39.

[22] N. P. Kondakov, *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 14.

way of seeing was impressive. What is even more impressive, especially when working in the gruelling conditions of field photography, was his technical virtuosity. Kondakov in private correspondence declared Raoult's photographs from the Sinai expedition to be its greatest result: "Now I am working with the [collected] materials, but I most definitively do not know what I will do with them, since the main result [material] consists of the photographs with colours".[23]

The photographer, in turn, ranked his collaboration with the Novorossiya University among his signal accomplishments. Raoult's sensitivity to acclaim and accolades was even featured on his photographs. The Sinai expedition photographs bear a substantive itemized list:

> Phie par J. X. Raoult, Chevalier de plusieurs ordres, Membre collaborateur de l'Université Impériale d'Odessa, Mention honorable de S. M. l'Empereur de toutes les Russies, Médaille à l'Exposition Universelle de Paris 1878, Membre de la Société de Photographie de Paris (Odessa).

The obverse of his Paris medals was carefully represented in outline, and centred below the photographic image. All but one of the photographer's claims were true. It is most improbable that Raoult was a "chevalier de plusieurs ordres", because it was Kondakov who finally made that dream come true with a Russian order of merit, as a long-fought-for reward for the Sinai expedition.

Odessa as chance and choice

Neither charismatic nor well connected, Kondakov was a diligent workaholic. A college friend steered him towards the new field of art history, by prophetically arguing that he would be able to find an academic position after graduation rather than be reduced to begging for a job.[24] Following the completion of his bachelor's degree in Moscow in 1865, a university job seemed like an impossible dream for several years. He struggled through eighteen-hour work days, exhausted and dispirited as a school teacher and a private tutor.[25] Then fortune smiled upon him in 1870, when he received an offer to teach at the very new Novorossiya University in Odessa (established in 1865).[26] Though Kondakov was not the first choice for the position, in hindsight he was clearly the best choice.[27]

Though his relationship with Odessa was a marriage of convenience, the city became a most fortuitous place for propelling his career development and subsequent rise to prominence. He would remember it as a convenient point for efficient travel

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[23] Letter to V. V. Iagich of 6 June 1881, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski...", p. 218.

[24] N. P. Kondakov, *Vospominaniia i dumy*, ed. I. L. Kyzlasova, Moscow, 2002, p. 65-66.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 108, 122, 125-126.

[26] *Ibid*., p. 131.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 133.

abroad,[28] and a place situated between East and West.[29] His extensive travels were instrumental to his eventual rise to the top of the art historical field. Moreover, he studiously participated in the university's excavation projects along the northern Black Sea coast for several years.[30]

In the nineteenth century, Odessa came to epitomize modernity, ambition, and cosmopolitanism in the Russian empire. It was a new city and a strategic port, founded in 1794 at the order of Catherine II, as part of the grand vision for transforming the Black Sea from the Ottoman lake into Russia's entry point into international maritime trade.[31] In addition, Odessa was a major starting point for the pilgrimage to the East for Christian and Muslim pilgrims of the Russian empire.[32]

Kondakov arrived in the city in 1871, when its fortunes were still on the upswing as the grain trade boomed, propelled by steam and rail technologies. While Russia's defeat in the Crimean War stifled its naval ambitions, the government poured money into Odessa, establishing it as a major international grain trading centre and a key node in passenger transportation. The headquarters of the Russian Steam Navigation and Trade Company were relocated to Odessa from St Petersburg in 1861.[33] Concomitantly, Odessa was connected with Moscow by railway in 1872.[34] The embrace of the steam engine revolution meant that science and technology were particularly dynamic in the city: "Odessa became the centre of technological innovation in maritime transport in the region".[35] This also meant the rise of more affordable, international mass

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[28] A. V. Shamanaev, "N. P. Kondakov i VI arkheologicheskii s''ezd v Odesse (1884)", *Nauchnye Vedomosti. Seriia Istoriia. Politologiia. Ekonomika. Informatika* 1.96, 2011, p. 71.

[29] N. P. Kondakov, *Vospominaniia*..., p. 136.

[30] P. A. Alipov, "Voprosy mezhtsivilizatsionnogo vzaimodeistviia v Rossiiskoi nauke rubezha XIX-XX vekov: Trudy N. P. Kondakova v otsenkakh G. V. Vernadskogo i D. V. Ainalova", *Novyi istoricheskii vestnik* 4.78, 2023, p. 27.

[31] E. Sifneos, *Imperial Odessa: People, Spaces, Identities*, Leiden, 2018; P. Herlihy (ed.), *Odessa Recollected: The Port and the People*, Boston, 2018.

[32] N. A. Chrissidis, "The Athonization of Pious Travel: Shielded Shrines, Shady Deals and Pilgrimage Logistics in Late Nineteenth-Century Odessa" (special section on pilgrimage ed. C. Chulos with commentary by C. Worobec), *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 28-29, 2012-2013, p. 169-191. For background, see E. M. Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca*, Ithaca, 2015; L. A. Gerd, *Russian Policy in the Orthodox East: The Patriarchate of Constantinople (1878-1914)*, Berlin, 2014; L. Gerd, "A Russian Island in the Orthodox East: Mount Athos in the 19th-early 20th Centuries", *Vestnik Rossiiskogo fonda fundamental'nykh issledovanii. Gumanitarnye i obshchestvennye nauki* 3, 2018, p. 27-36.

[33] A. Sydorenko, "The Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Company: The Transition from Sail to Steam in the Russian Black Sea (1856-1914)", in A. Delis (ed.), *Mediterranean Seafarers in Transition: Maritime Labour, Communities, Shipping and the Challenge of Industrialization, 1850s-1920s*, Leiden, 2023, p. 490.

[34] P. Herlihy (ed.), *Odessa*..., p. 216. The line was inefficiently laid out, and the decision-making was hampered by the factionalism of court politics.

[35] A. Sydorenko, "The Russian Steam Navigation...", p. 480.

travel on steam ships via the recently established routes to places such as Istanbul and Alexandria.[36] The policies of the imperial government had a notable impact on Kondakov, who recollected that he owed his academic career to frequent trips abroad in order to study monuments both in the West and the Greek East. He also noted that these trips became affordable in his time.[37] Incidentally, he and Raoult hurried desperately across the desert at the end of their visit to the Sinai monastery in order arrive in time for the departure of a Russian steam ship from Alexandria.

A pioneering collaboration: Archaeology and photographic reproduction

Theirs was a pioneering partnership, an important collaboration between a scholar who travelled and an adventurer-photographer who liked to explore. They were united by a passion for collecting – while for Kondakov this translated into images of Byzantine monuments, Raoult "collected" curious ethnographic types and picturesque views. Their professional collaboration was also a cordial relationship, since Kondakov travelled "in the company of Raoult" for months at a time.[38]

In February of 1881, just after getting approval for academic leave in order to undertake the expedition, Kondakov was optimistically planning a grand tour, which was to include Constantinople, İznik (Nicaea), Thessaloniki, Patmos, and Sinai (as well as other places in Greece and Asia Minor). For Constantinople he had highlighted one particular goal – "photographing of the mosque church in [*sic*] Kahrie Dzamisi [i.e., Chora]".[39]

Because Kondakov had failed to secure subventions for travel from the ministry of education,[40] his plan had to be drastically curtailed. He was so bitter about it that he opened the published travelogue of the Sinai journey with a line that appraised the reader of his predicament: "the journey to Sinai, undertaken by me as a private venture [*chastnym obrazom*] in the company of photographer Raoult".[41] His bitterness resurfaced again when he discussed the absence of means for the publication of the photographs within the context of making the monuments a shared scientific heritage:

> Not having access to the funds for the production of ... images [*izgotovleniia takikh snimkov*], except for those few monuments, which constituted the most important

[36] *Ibid*., p. 499.

[37] N. P. Kondakov, *Vospominaniia*..., p. 71.

[38] V. V. Stasov, review of N. P. Kondakov's *Puteshestvie na Sinai*…, in *Zhurnal ministerstva narodnago prosveshcheniia* 226, 1883, p. 326.

[39] Kondakov's letter to A. F. Bychkov, 6 February 1881, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski...", p. 212.

[40] S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiiskii al'bom...", p. 207.

[41] N. P. Kondakov, *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. i.

> part of my journey, I consider, still necessary to briefly describe all the monuments of antiquity, which are preserved in the Sinai monastery ... .[42]

This unfortunate situation meant that the fundamental publication which he had envisioned as the result of the journey, would not and could not materialize, even after his return. Stasov would attempt to remedy the blow suffered by Kondakov by publishing a glowing, extensive, and high-profile review of the *Journey to Sinai*, which he opened with the statement that Kondakov had heretofore not received the recognition which he deserved for his impressive scholarship.[43]

Kondakov's correspondence regarding the Sinai venture reveals the extent to which the business partnership between Kondakov and Raoult was built on mutual trust, and the degree to which that trip strained their relationship. It also provides a better understanding of the economics of knowledge production. It is most likely that Raoult advanced most of the necessary funds in order to salvage the journey, and, by virtue of bringing his own photographic equipment, exposed himself to an even greater financial risk. The expedition (the journey and the photographic equipment and supplies) cost the staggering sum of 3,000 rubles,[44] equivalent to roughly $73,000 in today's currency.[45] Despite the vast expenditure, the travellers suffered enormous hardship and had to cut costs on even the barest of necessities. In assessing the total financial outlay, we must also take into account that Raoult produced 1500 individual photographs. The resulting album (fifteen copies of hand-glued images) was intended to sell for 100 rubles (roughly equivalent to $2,500 today), which meant that the venture was almost certain to incur a loss.[46]

The trip was both bold and ambitious. Though steam ships and rail networks made movement in the Mediterranean easier, it was still an age when travel in the eastern Mediterranean could be dangerous. Greece, for instance, was still deemed unsafe in the 1870s by the British government.[47] A private venture without a single,

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[42] *Ibid*., p. 69.

[43] According to Stasov: "It is surprising that Mr. Kondakov to this day has not received just recognition for his impressive work [the first book], and the book has not received in the academic world that honourable place, which it deserves". V. V. Stasov, review of N. P. Kondakov's *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 325.

[44] Kondakov's letter to A. F. Bychkov, dated 17 November 1881, published in S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiskii al'bom...", p. 223.

[45] The exchange rate then was $1 = 1,3 rubles, which converts to $2,308. The current sum was arrived at using inflation calculator, https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1881?amount=2308 (last consulted, 26 October 2025).

[46] The sum was calculated using inflation calculator, https://www.in2013dollars.com/us/inflation/1881?amount=77 (last consulted, 26 October 2025).

[47] The hostage crisis of 1870, when a group of prominent British visitors were kidnapped at Marathon was still fresh in memory, especially since some hostages were murdered after the failed negotiations. D. Harlan, "Travel, Pictures, and a Victorian Gentleman in Greece", *Hesperia: The Journal of the*

dedicated, multi-lingual guide through Ottoman territories was certainly audacious. Kondakov and Raoult navigated the travel logistics by relying on an early travel guide book, *Itinéraire de l'Orient* by Adolphe Joanne and Émile Isambert (first issued in 1861).[48] During the journey they lost patience with each other, suffered from sunburns, and fell off of camels. The adventurous gambit precipitated a financial crisis which lasted for nearly three years, putting a great strain on their relationship.

It is reasonable to infer that Kondakov was fundraising until the last minute, and therefore the travellers had to delay the journey until late in the sailing season. As a result, they faced inclement weather and rough seas. The very difficult roundtrip lasted 51 days (the passage to Sinai alone was 23 days).[49] It included such perils as a ferocious storm in a prodigiously leaking boat on the crossing of the Red Sea and swarms of roaches which so loudly attacked their food supply that they were awaken at night.[50] Traveling without a servant or a guide, the journey was painfully onerous: "With limited means our luggage was truly a burden [*otiagoshchenie*]".[51] The bulk of the luggage consisted of Raoult's photographic equipment, but this turned out to be a blessing. It insured a welcome reception at Sinai: "At the monastery we were treated very courteously [*liubezno*], which is understandable, on account of the photographic camera".[52] Shortly after returning from Sinai, Kondakov declared to various correspondents: "The journey was extremely long and so difficult, that if I had known how it would be, I would have never undertaken it".[53] He also quipped that "In Odessa we were presumed dead and it was an unpleasant surprise [in Odessa] when I returned".[54]

And yet, their pioneering spirit is on full display in the two volumes produced in the aftermath of their fateful journey. Kondakov's textual narrative of the Sinai adventure mirrors the visual structure of the *Vues*. Both begin with the journey (the Bedouins, the desert, the mountains, the Bedouins in the desert and among the mountains), then transition to the architecture of the Sinai monastery, and conclude with the Byzantine and Glagolitic manuscripts.

American School of Classical Studies at Athens 78.3, 2009, p. 423.

[48] N. P. Kondakov, *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 1.

[49] V. V. Stasov, review of N. P. Kondakov's *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 327.

[50] N. P. Kondakov, *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 15-18, roaches at p. 15.

[51] Kondakov's letter to V. V. Stasov dated 17 June 1881, published in S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiskii al'bom...", p. 217.

[52] *Ibid*.

[53] Letter to V. V. Iagich of 6 June 1881, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski...", p. 218. The same sentiments are in the letter to Stasov, 17 June 1881, published in S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiskii al'bom...", p. 217.

[54] Letter to V. V. Iagich of 6 June 1881, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski...", p. 218.

The two volumes also reveal the promise of photography for scholarship. The possibilities of documentary field photography, as opposed to staged and romanticized images of new discoveries, were not yet clearly realized.[55] While the German state-sponsored excavations at Olympia, which were begun in the late 1870s, but published in the 1890s,[56] included numerous, carefully staged photographs of new finds, archaeologists were only beginning to harness the power of the medium for documentary purposes or for landscape archaeology.[57] As late as 1898, in the age of hand-cameras (rather than the earlier heavy and bulky stand cameras), photography enthusiasts had to exhort archaeologists to appreciate the possibilities of photography to capture the vanishing monuments:

> Archaeology now claims our attention, and this furnishes plenty of scope for the photographer, inasmuch as examples everywhere abound. There are numerous relics of a bygone age still existing; ruined castles, ruined abbeys, ruined monasteries, and ruined churches; all of these could be secured photographically ere they pass for ever away. In our own day improvements are always being made; old houses and ancient landmarks disappear, leaving nothing, unless, happily, a photograph behind. […] In connexion with archaeology, one can but regret that Dr. Schliemann and Mr. Gladstone, that marvellous man who seemed to have time for everything, and to whom nothing came amiss, could not have had the assistance of photography in their researches on the buried cities of Troy.[58]

Kondakov and Raoult established a collaboration between archaeology and photography over two decades prior to this exhortation, and well before the advent of the more convenient hand-cameras. In his review, Stasov emphasized the scientific importance of this kind of collaboration:

> From Sinai professor Kondakov brought back very substantive artistic-historical material. One half of it consists of the text of his book, the other – the photographic album of images, which were made under his observation and leadership [*nabliudeniem i rukovodstvom*] by the photographer Raoult. This "Sinai Album" [i.e., *Vues*] holds particular importance precisely because, all previous travellers either did not include

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[55] F. N. Bohrer, "Edges of Art: Photographic Albums, Archaeology, and Representation", *Studies in the History of Art* 77, 2011, p. 225.

[56] E. Curtis and F. Adler (eds.), *Olympia: Die Ergebnisse der von dem deutschen Reich veranstalteten Ausgrabung*, Berlin, 1890-1897.

[57] For a broad overview of the subject, see F. N. Bohrer, *Edges of Art: Photography and Archaeology*, London, 2011; C. L. Lyons, J. K. Papadopoulos, L. S. Stewart et al. (eds.), *Antiquity and Photography: Early Views of Ancient Mediterranean Sites*, Los Angeles, 2005. For the Ottoman empire, see R. G. Ousterhout, *John Henry Haynes: A Photographer and Archaeologist in the Ottoman Empire, 1881-1900*, Istanbul, 2011. See also B. Anderson, *Palmyra 1885: The Wolfe Expedition and the Photographs of John Henry Haynes*, Hawick, 2016.

[58] J. H. Baldock, "Photography in Relation to Science", *British Journal of Photography*, 17 June 1898, p. 394.

> any drawings with their descriptions of Sinai, or included hand-drawn images [*ot ruki*], which were most inaccurate and unsatisfactory. The "Sinai Album", quite the opposite, consists of all the scientific proofs of reliability [*vse nauchnye ruchatel'stva dostovernosti*] and the most impeccable scientific accuracy [*samoi bezukoriznennoi nauchnoi tochnosti*].[59]

The modes of beholding and staging for the camera differed significantly between the genres of travel and archaeological photography. While scientific exploration demanded positivist precision, travel photography was rooted in the aesthetics of the picturesque with a heavy dose of artistic licence and infused with Orientalist expectations. The Sinai album embodies this collaborative understanding. While Raoult produced the images needed for Kondakov's scholarly purposes, Kondakov understood that Raoult would also need to create picturesque panoramas and ethnographic images. This had important ramifications and drew "a distinction between what might be called the engraving's interpretive anatomy and photography's descriptive physiognomy".[60] It is worth noting that Raoult would retain ownership of the picturesque views, while Kondakov claimed ownership of images of an academic nature.

The partners clearly understood the parameters of visual economies of their respective professions. Raoult ably calibrated images for the different sectors of the photography market, and was recognized for these efforts by an astute critic in St Petersburg. In 1885, Stasov published the inaugural catalogue dedicated to the particularly noteworthy holdings of photographic materials in the imperial library of St Petersburg.[61] Though he proclaimed the photographic album of the Sinai trip as "marvellous" [*velikolepnyi*],[62] Stasov discussed it not as a single entity, but chose to describe the photographs in three discreet sections: "views", "architecture", and "painting".[63] The observant interlocutor understood that the scholar and the photographer had complimentary, but not identical, goals on this journey:

> The main goal of the trip for N. P. Kondakov was the study of architectural and painted monuments of Byzantine art in the Sinai monastery, and therefore the majority of folios of this album will be enumerated below, in the categories "architecture" and "painting". In the first category [here meaning "views"] of the current survey belong only the outstanding photographic views of Sinai and its environs, which are also presented in this album and belonging to the number of the rarest photographs among

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[59] V. V. Stasov, review of N. P. Kondakov's *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 334.

[60] F. N. Bohrer, "Edges of Art...", p. 226.

[61] V. V. Stasov, *Fotograficheskiia i fototipicheskiia kollektsii*... . His selection principle was to discuss "the rarest" and "the most comprehensive" publications, with a more detailed treatment reserved of the publications which are of particular importance to "Russian history, ethnography, and art". *Ibid*., p. 1.

[62] *Ibid*., p. 9.

[63] *Ibid*., p. 9-10.

Fig. 2. "Sinaï, groupe de Bédouins des environs d'el-Tor", from the album *Vues et antiquités du Sinaï par M. le Professeur N. Kandakoff et Phot. J. Raoult*. Photographer Jean Xavier Raoult. Photothèque Gabriel Millet, Collection chrétienne et byzantine, EPHE B.00103

> the photographic views by European travellers. These views, all of which turned out superbly, and are remarkably picturesque ... .[64]

The first image listed by Stasov was "the environs of El-Tor (the desert), with a group of the Bedouin in the foreground".[65] Let us briefly examine this image, which is preserved in the Photothèque Gabriel Millet (Paris) (fig. 2).

We behold twenty men comfortably reclining in the foreground. Many of their faces are relaxed, and their body language is open. It is clear that Raoult, the extravert of the traveling duo, succeeded in creating a comfortable group dynamic for the photograph. At the same time, the composition is artful: the single standing man does not project above the distant tree line, while the composition is effectively asymmetrical on account of the pitched tent of the middle ground and a small building of the background. The group includes the Bedouin guides who were hired by Kondakov and Raoult to conduct them to the Sinai monastery from El-Tor (ancient Rhaithou, the settlement on the coast of the Red Sea and the travellers' entry-point for traversing the desert en route to the Sinai monastery) and return them to Suez. The travellers bonded with their guides, referred to them by name in the travelogue, described their

[64] *Ibid*.

[65] *Ibid*., p. 10.

Fig. 3. "Sinaï, Bédouins des environs du monastère de Sainte-Catherine", from the album *Vues et antiquités du Sinaï par M. le Professeur N. Kandakoff et Phot. J. Raoult*. Photographer Jean Xavier Raoult. Photothèque Gabriel Millet, Collection chrétienne et byzantine, EPHE B.00126

upbeat character,[66] admired their resilience,[67] and expressed gratitude for the success of the extremely arduous passage. Thanks to Kondakov's narrative we can identify the central, seated figure of the photograph, as the leader of the Bedouins in charge of the travellers because of the prominent sabre in his hand. Kondakov called him "the sheikh". He described his headgear as a hat interwoven with yellow ribbons,[68] and his weapon as "instead of a knife, a long, excellent sabre".[69] Though occasionally succumbing to orientalist digressions, Kondakov ardently admired the Bedouins in their own environment and understood that European ideals of beauty were not universal:

> I was long confused [*smuchali*] by the legs of our young sheikh, whom I liked very much: they did not at all resemble the proportions of Apollo of Belvedere, but when I had to walk on sand and pull my feet [out], which sunk to ankle deep, I understood how unattractive Apollo would have been here; the Bedouin was walking with a light step, consistent and graceful, barely leaving a trace with his sandal.[70]

[66] N. P. Kondakov, *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 29.

[67] *Ibid*., p. 29.

[68] *Ibid*., p. 30.

[69] *Ibid*.

[70] *Ibid*., p. 29.

In a unique instance of the convergence between text and image, we can even trace directly how each partner influenced the other's mode of beholding subjects and objects. For instance, Kondakov recollected in *The Journey to Sinai* with some amusement how three Bedouin women were eventually convinced to pose for a photograph:

> It was easy [to photograph] the monastic Bedouins, but it took enormous efforts with three Bedouin women, who came to the monastery following their husbands; several hours of coaxing, offers of money, orders of the monastic leadership finally broke the untameable nature and conservatism of Arab ladies. And then one had to see how they sat in front of the [photographic] camera, every minute jumping from their seats, covered with their tattered blue coverings [*pokryvala*] so thoroughly that one could only see coals of their eyes, and bronze circles which adorned their *buru*; a kind of cylinder on the bridge of the nose, through which was inserted a woven veil, which covers the forehead above and the chin below, and in general the lower part of the face and the chest.[71]

The precision of this recollection is quite remarkable, and is uncannily in dialogue with Raoult's photograph of the three women (fig. 3). Considering the impatience of the subjects for the exposure and the photographic process, one can forgive a tiny blurring in the faces of the two women on the left side of the image. The viewer is also struck by the intense, documentary immediacy of the image as opposed to the orientalist engravings of similar ethnographic subjects. It is also notable that this digression into the photographic process was narrated in the first-person plural, without mentioning Raoult by name.

In general, Kondakov's comments on Raoult's craft, and on the art of photographing human subjects in particular, appear very rarely in the volume: he provided two extended comments about photographing the interior of the church, and a single comment on photographing the human subjects. This is somewhat surprising, considering that a substantive number of picturesque photographs were taken along the way, and would have required time and preparation for staging the equipment and the human subjects. In one instance, Raoult posed standing Bedouins against Mount Horeb. In order to make the mountain peak visible, he would have had to walk or ride a great distance with the camera, in order to capture the monumental landscape and have the human figures appear almost as the size of small dots. While he was staging the sacred in dialogue with the picturesque expectations of travel photography, he also provides the viewer with an ability to imagine the scale of the monumental sacred landscape by means of this cluster of tiny human figures (fig. 4).

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[71] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Fig. 4. "Sinaï, vue du sommet, partie nord du mont Horeb (Ras Safsaf)", from the album *Vues et antiquités du Sinaï par M. le Professeur N. Kandakoff et Phot. J. Raoult*. Photographer Jean Xavier Raoult. Photothèque Gabriel Millet, Collection chrétienne et byzantine, EPHE B.00112

The key photograph of the Transfiguration mosaic

It appears that the earliest extant (and most likely the earliest ever) photographic image of the Transfiguration mosaic was captured by Raoult. A copy of this previously forgotten image is preserved in the Millet photographic archive.[72] In order to understand, appreciate, and contextualize the image, we will consider the circumstances under which Raoult had to execute photographs inside the church. Raoult's view of the interior, looking east towards the apse, reveals just how challenging it was to photograph within the cluttered religious space and to engage the building and its elements as an archaeologist, rather than as a worshipper (fig. 5). We behold numerous light fixtures suspended quite low from the ceiling, wooden furnishings with excellent mother-of-pearl decorations, beautiful inlaid marble floors, two icons of the iconostasis, and contours of a very large crucifix towering over the iconostasis. The image captures the illuminated and reflective surfaces – marble, metal, mother of pearl, gold background, and parts of the ceiling. We also behold blinding light emanating from one of the windows above the altar, which appears as a disc of light by the crucifix. The apse mosaics are completely invisible.

[72] Photothèque Gabriel Millet, Collection chrétienne et byzantine, EPHE, B.03173.

Fig. 5. "Sinaï, monastère Sainte-Catherine, basilique de Justinien (église de la Transfiguration), VI^e siècle, vue intérieure", from the album *Vues et antiquités du Sinaï par M. le Professeur N. Kandakoff et Phot. J. Raoult*. Photographer Jean Xavier Raoult. Photothèque Gabriel Millet, Collection chrétienne et byzantine, EPHE B.00127

The lighting of the church presented a particular, and in the end, insurmountable challenge. Our travellers did not have access to artificial means for illuminating the interior (like flash powder) as an aid in photography. Kondakov narrated their struggle of photographing inside the church and documented their ingenious solutions to overcome the obstacles. He also noted that the monks tried to lend a hand:

> The monks with great enthusiasm helped us in our photographic works and are very keenly interested in their success. While we were photographing the dark doors and the mosaics immersed in darkness, we were already despairing to reach any positive result, when it occurred to us that it would be possible to illuminate them with the reflection of rays of sunlight though the mirror, which were streaming into the window, but at once we had another thought: where would there be found mirrors among the monks? But the mirrors were found and brought to us ... .[73]

This was a laudable effort and a clever solution, which worked effectively for the three photographs of the basilica's doors.

For the mosaics, however, the result did not live up to his initial expectations (fig. 6). The lack of success, however, is most instructive for understanding the

[73] N. P. Kondakov, *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 53. The Bedouins did not want to pose for their portraits, but were persuaded (p. 54).

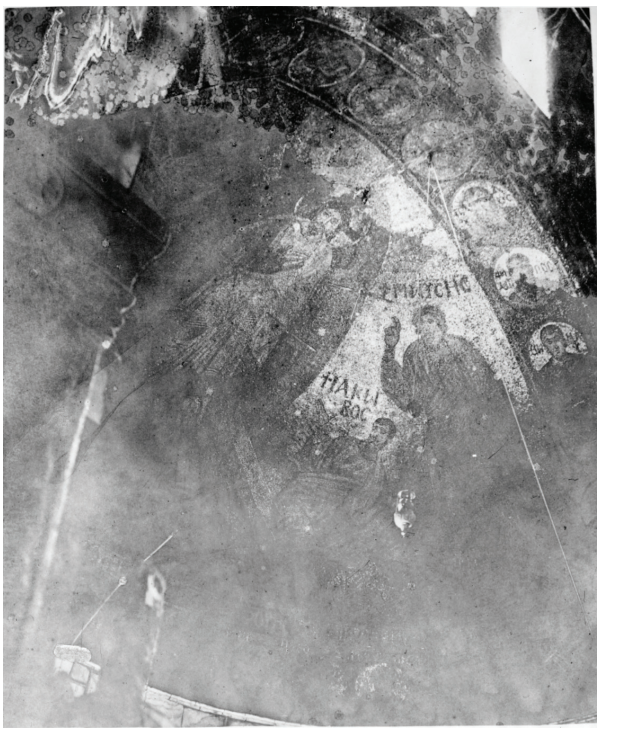

Fig. 6. "Sinaï, monastère Sainte-Catherine, basilique de Justinien (église de la Transfiguration), VI^{e} siècle, mosaïque absidiale, Transfiguration, détail", from the album *Vues et antiquités du Sinaï par M. le Professeur N. Kandakoff et Phot. J. Raoult*. Photographer Jean Xavier Raoult. Photothèque Gabriel Millet, Collection chrétienne et byzantine, EPHE B.03172

conditions under which the work was undertaken. Even though the photograph of the Transfiguration mosaic did not turn out, Kondakov included it within the published list of the images taken by Raoult. Stasov, who appears to have closely examined Raoult's photographs before publishing his extensive review of *The Journey to Sinai*, offered a conciliatory statement: "Alas, the local conditions of the mosaic's position within the church, did not provide professor Kondakov with an opportunity to take a satisfactory photograph [*fotografiiu vpolne udovletvoritel'nuiu*]".[74]

Raoult made a valiant attempt to stage the photograph and to make the image legible.[75] We can behold some of the obstacles and insurmountable challenges that he faced. The photograph is not centred, instead it captures the central figure of Christ and the right side of the mosaic (from the viewer's perspective). The image is simultaneously overexposed (the upper part) and underexposed (the lower part). Raoult had attempted to minimize the blinding light from the apse window, which is partially visible in the upper right corner of the image. This light was the leading cause of over-exposure and, in part, for the very sharp angle that the photograph was taken at. Raoult attempted to maximize the legibility of the composition in a very cramped space: the left side of the mosaic is blocked by a steeply projecting cornice,

[74] V. V. Stasov, review of N. P. Kondakov's *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 338.

[75] Photothèque Gabriel Millet, Collection chrétienne et byzantine, EPHE, B.03172, B.03173, B.00128.

and part of the wooden armature of the iconostasis is visible in the lower left part of the image. The photograph had to be taken at a very steep angle, close up, on account of the iconostasis, which otherwise blocked the view of the mosaic. Despite these difficulties, one can distinguish the figures of Jesus (with the mandorla of light and some emanating rays of light) and Moses quite clearly, and partially the figure of the kneeling Jacob. One can also distinguish seven roundels with busts of saints, which frame the mosaic and the architectural space of the apse.

Had the photograph turned out successfully, it would have been the biggest prize of the entire journey for both the scholar and the photographer. We can definitively make this conclusion based on the fact that Kondakov included a twenty-four page description of the apse mosaic, as well as several other comments about the photographic process. We can also judge the stakes for Kondakov and the pressure he put on Raoult from the two descriptions of the attempts to photograph the mosaic. This portion of the text is again presented in the first-person plural. He first informs the reader in the travelogue portion of the publication:

> But above all other treasures of eastern art towers the ancient mosaic of the Transfiguration, which covers the half-dome [*polu kupol*] of the altar, and which is framed by medallions and ornamentation, the work of the VII-VIII centuries. Due to its [physical] distance [implied – from civilization], a work of ancient pictorial art as if disappeared in the midst of the desert, it has troubled the peace of archaeologists, who have keenly been guessing about the time of its creation.[76]

The next time the struggle to photograph the mosaic enters the text as a long footnote within the extensive, academic description of the mosaic. Kondakov's frustration here is palpable:

> The altar is illuminated by two windows (of new workmanship) above the arch and one window within the arch, below: the light shines directly into the camera [*apparat*] and impedes [the taking of] the image: we had to make use of the help of mirrors, so that we could illuminate the sides [of the mosaics] with these reflections; this [attempt] also worked poorly; finally, the photograph is not possible from afar, on account of the iconostasis. The monument [i.e., the mosaic] deserves to be executed in full size [i.e., traced] with *calques* [*kal'ki*], as it is done by the French mosaic workshops for the Ravenna mosaics; but for this scaffolding is necessary. Even for a precise description it is necessary to have scaffolding [*podmostki*], since due to the beaming light it is difficult to see the upper parts [of the mosaic], especially the scenes under the ceiling... .[77]

The very long verbal description of the mosaic was therefore Kondakov's plan B. Here we again can intertextually glimpse the stakes which were involved in the failure to produce a quality photographic image. One cannot fathom in the

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[76] N. P. Kondakov, *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 40.

[77] *Ibid*., p. 77, n. 1.

present moment either the level of frustration or the stakes for his career. He was passionate about collecting and publishing ancient monuments, yet he failed to secure a high-quality photograph of the "most important monument"[78] of the Sinai monastery and "one of the most remarkable works of art of Christian antiquity in the East and of the Byzantine art in its most ancient period".[79] For a scholar who was passionate about Byzantine art, this must have been exasperating. For a traveller, who had suffered enormous frustrations and hardships, this was all the more bitter. On a grander scale, it must have seemed a substantive setback to the study of authentic Byzantine art in general and to the rehabilitation of the status of this mosaic within the corpus of Byzantine art history more broadly.

Though his description of the mosaic is long, dry, and technical, he presents several explicit and implicit big picture claims and methodological points for the study of Byzantine art history, which are simultaneously offensive and defensive. The key elements, which we can infer from the text include the construction of a comprehensive corpus of precise images, pushing the boundaries of knowledge beyond the comfort of one's own sphere, and not being satisfied with images already in circulation. The twin problems of the academic ignorance of works of art and the circulation of works of art in a distorted form as imprecise drawings and lithographs in his view formed a huge obstacle in the formation of a precise body of knowledge: "But the absence of knowledge of this monument, depends on the fact, that up until now not one specialist in archaeology has seen it personally, and in the absence of any satisfactory images [*snimki*] has been the cause that this work of art has remained fruitless [*besplodno*] for science".[80] He again emphasizes the importance of photographs for the advancement of knowledge:

> [...] the very questions about [the monuments of antiquity in the Sinai monastery] could be easily resolved, if the efforts of scholars, travelling to look at the monuments, were joined by satisfactory photographs, which so much enable the dissipation [*razseianiiu*] of various misconceptions [*zabluzhdenii*], as they make the monuments subject of shared scientific heritage [*obshchago nauchnago dostoianiia*].[81]

Kondakov engages with hidden and named interlocutors in his description of the monastic treasures. He begins with the state of the question:

> The monuments of monumental art and Christian antiquity, which are preserved in the Sinai monastery, have been the subject of learned curiosity [*liuboznatel'nost'*] of many scholars and educated travellers, but their brief notes and generic musings [*obshchiia soobrazheniia*], which lack [*lishennyia*] scientific archaeological criticism, have not heretofore provided the [kind of] material, which could be of value to historical science.

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[78] *Ibid*., p. 75.

[79] *Ibid*.

[80] *Ibid*.

[81] *Ibid*., p. 69.

Fig. 7. "Grande mosaïque de l'église du couvent de Sainte-Catherine (Mont Sinaï)", from L. de Laborde, *Voyage de l'Arabie Pétrée*, Paris, 1830. General Research Division, The New York Public Library. The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed 26 October 2025. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/76b10900-c6e5-012f-3628-58d385a7bc34

> These notes only indicated the existence of monuments, and musings of generic nature had the purpose to present their historical importance and antiquity of origins.[82]

He thus positions himself as the very first scholar to properly introduce the Transfiguration mosaic into scholarly discourse, by correcting previous errors and emending the imperfections of prior accounts. His empiricism and the influence of the natural sciences (first-hand observation) are fully on display in this properly scientific debut of the mosaic.

He harshly and rather unfairly criticizes the first western European publication of the mosaic, that of Léon de Laborde, in the *Voyage de l'Arabie Pétrée* of 1830 (fig. 7). He sarcastically misrepresents de Laborde's engagement with the mosaic:

[82] *Ibid*., p. 67.

"the mosaic of Transfiguration, as if discovered [*kak by naidennoi*] for the first time by [de] Laborde and attributed [to the period] of Constantine the Great".[83] Most likely Kondakov was responding to de Laborde's statement that the mosaics were never previously drawn by travellers and that very few travellers had even mentioned them.[84] He is also dismissive of de Laborde's publication of the outline of the mosaic composition: "[...] [he] brought with him careless description [*nebrezhnyi ocherk*] of some obscure painting [*tumannoi kartiny*]".[85] Kondakov does not mention, however, that de Laborde in his publication was repeatedly cautious about the limitations of his publication, being acutely aware that the limited illumination of the interior space and the physical condition of the mosaics introduced errors into the figural composition and the transcription of the inscriptions:

> Je l'ai soumise, telle que j'ai pu la copier, au savant M. Hase, et c'est à ses conseils que je dois de pouvoir faire remarquer quelques erreurs probables de dessin qui tiennent sans doute a l'obscurité du lieu, et des fautes dans les noms qui y ont été introduites par le graveur.[86]

We can in part surmise that Kondakov's frustration stemmed from the fact that de Laborde's image became foundational in several subsequent publications in French, Italian, and Russian as late as 1880.[87] He was frustrated by the publication of the mosaic composition as an outline:

> The drawing of de Laborde did not provide anything, other than contours, which allow one to guess the iconography [*siuzhet*], and therefore it is understandable that it left considerable expanse for various kinds of guesses regarding the style, the date and the signification of the monument... .[88]

Kondakov was not impartial in his assessment of de Laborde's effort. As Kondakov later himself acknowledged, the mosaic was cleaned/renewed in 1847, therefore what de Laborde had seen was at best a very hazy outline in comparison to what our Russian scholar was able to behold: "we know that [de] Laborde saw [the mosaic] in such a smoked through [*zakopchennom*], and, likely destroyed [*razrushennom*] state, that he considered it impossible to make a clear drawing of it [*sdelat' s neia iasnyi risunok*]".[89]

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[83] *Ibid*.

[84] De Laborde declared: "Elle n'a jamais été dessinée, et même peu de voyageurs l'ont remarquée". L. de Laborde, *Voyage de l'Arabie Pétrée*, Paris, 1830, p. 67.

[85] N. P. Kondakov, *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 75.

[86] L. de Laborde, *Voyage*..., p. 67.

[87] He enumerates those in an extensive footnote. N. P. Kondakov, *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 75.

[88] *Ibid*., p. 76.

[89] *Ibid*., p. 98.

Though de Laborde's drawing of the Moses scenes in the upper register of the mosaic is approximate at best, he correctly recognized both compositions of the Burning Bush and the Ten Commandments, as well as noted that Moses is represented bearded, unlike the many representations of a youthful Moses ("avec des traits jeunes, sans barbe") in eastern Christian art.[90] De Laborde's image of the Transfiguration mosaic overall adequately conveys its major compositional elements, the inscriptions, as well as the roundels with the saints. De Laborde, however, introduced a major error into the identification of two large mosaic medallions, which appear on the eastern wall below the flying angels and above the Transfiguration mosaic. He claimed that the two mosaic medallions represented Justinian and Theodora: "Dans les deux médaillions placés au haut de la voûte sont représentés les fondateurs du couvent, *l'empereur Justinien* et *Théodora*, sa femme".[91] Though he again hedged the verity of his observations, he did claim that Justinian is represented as beardless, despite the fact that one of the two imperially-identified heads is sporting a notable beard.[92] The two medallions, which do not include identifying inscriptions, also puzzled Kondakov. He agreed with a recently proposed identification of the figures as John the Baptist and the Mother of God, but considered them to be of "rather late provenance" [*ves'ma pozdniago proiskhozhdeniia*].[93]

Kondakov also speculated about the iconography and dating of the mosaics. He considered the iconography of the flying angels to be too modern and too similar to the mosaics of Ravenna:

> But restoration, or more precisely, modernization of the ancient mosaics seeped in further, and more precisely into the ornamental group of the two flying angels, which is placed above the very arch. [...] the figures of both angels are notable by such elongation of proportions, which is neither feasible to surmise as being possible in the most ancient period of the Byzantine art (before the iconoclasts) nor to explain away as, for example, inability of a provincial artist or mosaicist... .[94]

He noted that the Sinai mosaics were restored in 1847 by a Russian monk Samuel.[95] Without going into much detail, he also used an argument by analogy – the aggressive restoration practices for the Italian mosaics.

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[90] L. de Laborde, *Voyage*..., p. 67.

[91] *Ibid*.

[92] *Ibid*.

[93] N. P. Kondakov, *Puteshestvie na Sinai*..., p. 81.

[94] *Ibid*., p. 79.

[95] *Ibid*., p. 98.

Kondakov's triumph and Raoult's recognition

Kondakov faced serious financial repercussions as a result of the Sinai expedition and remained in Raoult's financial and emotional debt for years. The scholar's tone and intentions shifted considerably from idealistic in 1881 to pecuniary in 1883: while in 1881 Kondakov had hoped to "transfer the entire album with all negatives to some institution [*uchrezhdenie*]",[96] by 1883 he was actively trying to sell a single copy of the album to the imperial library in St Petersburg, leveraging the fact that Raoult was able to sell three copies in Paris.[97] In order to raise some money, Raoult even broke the rules of etiquette. When Stasov decided in 1883 to purchase the *Peuples* album for the imperial library, Raoult, lacking another copy, demanded that the Danish embassy turn over the gift intended for their king to the imperial library in St Petersburg.[98]

It is within this context that we gain insights into their business arrangement. Kondakov and Raoult shared intellectual and economic ownership of the Sinai photographic album.[99] The album, which bears shared credit to the scholar and the photographer, with Raoult's name significantly more prominent and Kondakov's misspelled, was a laborious and costly undertaking, with each photograph glued by hand.[100] Kondakov privately complained about the constraints of technology which hampered production: "I confess to you, that from the very beginning I refused to sell copies [of the album] – we do not have a workshop and we pay for everything threefold, since they [albums] do not bring to me and Raoult big revenues [*bol'shikh dokhodov*]".[101] The partners may have produced fifteen copies, but were able to sell four. The negatives were the personal property of the photographer, who retained rights to the images.[102] When contacted about replacements for some pages of "ruined" images, Kondakov did not have access to the good photographs, and had to wait patiently for Raoult to supply them, while the photographer did not treat the scholar's

[96] Kondakov's letter to A. F. Bychkov, dated 23 October 1881, published in S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiiskii al'bom...", p. 221.

[97] Kondakov's letter to V. V. Stasov, dated 1 May 1883, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski...", p. 214.

[98] Kondakov's letter to V. V. Stasov, dated 19 September 1883, published in S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiskii al'bom...", p. 218.

[99] Kondakov's letter to V. V. Stasov, dated 1 May 1883, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski...", p. 214.

[100] S. O. Vialova, "Fotograficheskoe nasledie...", p. 17.

[101] Kondakov's letter to V. V. Stasov, dated 1 May 1883, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski...", p. 214.

[102] Kondakov's letter to A. F. Bychkov, dated 17 November 1881, published in S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiskii al'bom...", p. 223.

request as a priority.[103] In 1883, Raoult had even declared his intention to leave Russia for good, but delayed implementing the decision.

Kondakov resorted to rebuilding the relationship with Raoult through a different system of values – honour and status. For more than two years he doggedly leveraged his high-placed connections in order to secure for Raoult an imperial order of merit. He tried, in vain, for two years to obtain it directly through the official channels by performing an expected step – gifting photographic albums to different institutions. The award, in turn, would be the state's acknowledgement of the gift. This seems to explain why two copies of the Sinai album were gifted to institutions in St Petersburg, the gratis copy for the imperial library Kondakov requested to be registered as coming from "me [Kondakov] or Mr. Raoult, if it were possible to petition [*khodataistvovat'*] about awarding him some kind of Russian order of merit for his labours".[104] That initiative did not bear fruit. The scholar, then, involved his network of connections and benefactors. In May of 1883 he pleaded with Stasov: "If you could find it possible to support my onerous strivings in awarding Raoult with at least [the order of] Stanislav of the lowest decree, then we could consider ourselves rewarded better than with money."[105] Two weeks later he approached a prominent St Petersburg intellectual, Afanasii F. Bychkov (1818-1899): "Please allow me to approach you with a big request – how to go about regarding the question of petitioning [*khodataistvo*] about awarding Mr. Raoult (my photographer) with some Russian order".[106] In the same letter, Kondakov confessed that Raoult's satisfaction was essential to his own academic plans: "You are aware that the fate of my future [academic] endeavours depends on the satisfaction of the request of Mr. Raoult".[107] Almost a year later (in March of 1884), after Raoult had finally received the order of St Stanislav, we witness Kondakov's palpable relief being shared with another correspondent, Ivan V. Pomialovskii (1845-1906), professor at St Petersburg University:

> I don't know how to thank You for the gracious notice [*liubeznoe izveshchenie*] regarding the award of the order [to Raoult] and the gracious [*liubeznoe*] letter from Count Tolstoi himself. [...] The award of the order to Raoult lifted a heavy mountain off my shoulders, because I fruitlessly sought how I could thank him for his labours.[108]

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[103] Kondakov's letter to V. V. Stasov, dated 29 January 1884, published in S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiskii al'bom...", p. 219.

[104] Kondakov's letter to V. V. Stasov, dated 14 May 1883, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski...", p. 215.

[105] Kondakov's letter to V. V. Stasov, dated 1 May 1883, published in S. O. Vialova, "Iz perepiski...", p. 214.

[106] Kondakov's letter to A. F. Bychkov, dated 14 May 1883, published in S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiskii al'bom...", p. 223.

[107] *Ibid*.

[108] Kondakov's letter to I. V. Pomialovskii, dated 26 March 1884, published in S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiskii al'bom...", p. 225.

Though the order of St Stanislas of the third decree was the lowest in the hierarchy of Russian orders, it was still a major honour, which granted hereditary nobility.

Thus, the relationship of Kondakov and Raoult was temporarily mended and led to a new success. A month later, in April of 1884, Raoult travelled with Kondakov to Constantinople and fulfilled the scholar's long-standing desire of photographing the Chora Monastery. This was the final, fruitful result of their collaboration.[109]

Conclusion

Kondakov's path to international recognition at the First Congress of Byzantine Studies in Bucharest can be linked to an earlier congress, namely the Sixth Russian Archaeological Congress, held in Odessa in 1884. Kondakov served as one of its principal organizers, and it was there that the Sinai album and the Constantinople photographs were triumphantly displayed. Because written records shape recollection and memory, an excerpt from a review of the congress by N. Pokrovskii is useful for our wider assessment of Kondakov's rising fortune:

> A rich Sinai album [*bogatyi sinaiskii al'bom*] of the photographs, taken by Mr. Raoult, who accompanied prof. Kondakov on a journey to Sinai in the year 1880 [*sic*], occupied a notable place at the exhibition. The album includes photographs of the monastery proper, its environs, the main church of the Transfiguration with the famous mosaic, parts of which are datable to the sixth century, and especially many photographs from ancient Greek manuscripts, decorated with initials, headpieces, and miniatures and remarkable likewise for their palaeography. […] An artistic appraisal of the most important of these monuments was made by prof. Kondakov in his work "The Journey to Sinai", but the monuments themselves remain unpublished.[110]

Pokrovskii was an influential figure in the cultural and intellectual life of St Petersburg, and the founder of the Church-Archaeological Museum established there in 1879.[111] By this time, Kondakov had already attracted the attention of the capital's movers and shakers.

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[109] In a letter dated 19 June 1884, Kondakov declared: "We returned from Constantinople with a more clear understanding of its ancient topography, with piles of notes and descriptions, but most importantly, with plans of churches, photographs and watercolours. We have 60 photographs, of large size in folio [...]. The entire mosque Kahrie with its mosaics and frescoes was photographed by us. All of it will be displayed at the Congress [...]". S. O. Vialova, "Sinaiiskii al'bom...", p. 220-221.

[110] N. Pokrovskii, "Shestoi arkheologicheskii s''ezd v Odesse", *Khristianskoe chtenie* 1-2, 1885, p. 200-201.

[111] N. V. Pivovarova, "N. V. Pokrovskii i kollektsionirovanie khristianskikh drevnostei v Sankt-Peterburge. Tri modeli razvitiia tserkovno-arkheologicheskogo muzeiia: 1850-e-1917 g.", *Khristianskoe Chtenie. Nauchnyi zhurnal Sankt-Peterburgskoi Dukhovnoi Akademii Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi* 1, 2022, p. 320-328.

Following his triumph at the Odessa congress both as a scholar and as an organizer, Nikodim Kondakov soon left the city on the Black Sea for the imperial capital on the Baltic. In 1888, he accepted two prestigious appointments in St Petersburg: as Professor in the Department of Art History of St Petersburg University and as the Head of the Department of Medieval and Renaissance Art at the Hermitage. From then on, he enjoyed the standing of a recognized imperial authority and a professor of international renown. These accolades would ensure a relatively smooth transition for him when the age of revolution engulfed Russia in 1917.[112] The honoured reception accorded to him in Bucharest in 1924 thus served as a fitting coda to his long and remarkable career.

[112] In western European scholarship, Ivan Foletti has in recent years contributed to a revival of interest in Kondakov. He rediscovered the third volume of Kondakov's *Iconography of the Mother of God* and has published extensively on Kondakov's legacy. See I. Foletti, *From Byzantium to Holy Russia: Nikodim Kondakov (1844-1925) and the Invention of the Icon*, tr. S. Melker, Rome, 2017; I. Foletti and A. Palladino, *Byzantium or Democracy? Kondakov's Legacy in Emigration: The Institutum Kondakovianum and André Grabar, 1925-1952*, Brno, 2020. For critical appraisals of Foletti's work, see L. G. Khrushkova, "'Rab, pridvornyi istorik i emigrant': obraz Nikodima Pavlovicha Kondakova v sochineniiakh Ivana Foletti", in *Vizantiiskoe "sodruzhestvo": traditsii i smena paradigm*, Ekaterinburg, 2019, p. 163-165; E. Boeck, review of I. Foletti and A. Palladino, *Byzantium or Democracy?...*, in *Byzantinoslavica* 79.1-2, 2021, p. 295-297.