I applied to the Queen Mary University of London Expeditions Fund so that I could gain insight into Turkey’s history and culture. The country greatly aligns with my dissertation research topic, so I was hopeful I would learn about three areas in particular: Islam, Turkey’s multi-cultural history, and art across time. This report will aim to share some of my experiences and new-found knowledge while on this trip.

My trip was relatively short. I travelled to both Antalya, on the Mediterranean southwestern coast and to Istanbul, on the north-western coast of Turkey. I spent a total of five nights in Turkey and stayed in accommodation close to the main historical sites and museums so that I could get the most out of the trip.

Antalya is a town shaped by many cultures, religions, and languages. Initially founded by the Roman Empire in 150BC, its ties to Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman rule are still very visible today. For instance, Hadrian’s Gate is a reminder of the city’s Roman founders, who built the gate in 130AC.

Another physical memory of its long history can be seen in many graveyards. During the Ottoman civilisation, graveyards were not removed from daily life but instead installed in public areas. Remnants of such graveyards can still be admired today. Personal information about the person’s identity was given through symbols. For instance, flower decorations identified the person as a woman, while an anchor or an arrow indicated the person’s profession.
Antalya’s multicultural history can be further seen in its traditional musical instruments. The cultural accumulations brought by the Turks from Central Asia were reshaped in Antalya and gave life to various music genres. The typical folk instruments included the finger cura, zurna, shepherd's pipe and many others. Its ceramics are also worthy of admiration. Turkey has a long history of producing ceramics – from the Iznik ceramics of the 14th century to the Çanakkale ceramics of the 17th century, it is possible to find beautiful pieces decorated with human and animal figures, religious themes or abstract patterns. The Çanakkale ceramics were perhaps the most eye-catching because of their distinct forms resembling human or animal figures.

In Istanbul, the historical complexity of the town was perhaps more subtle in some ways. The Hagia Sophia, for instance, now decorated with stunning Muslim decorations and Arab calligraphy, hides many secrets. The paintings of feathered angels on the ceiling are a clear remnant of its Christian history. The combination of Islam and Christian religions is what makes the mosque so special. In some ways, it is a reflection of Turkey’s complex religious history and cultural foundations.

The Hagia Sophia. Traditional Islamic decorations can be seen on the walls and ceiling.

The white banners at the very front of the mosque cover a mosaic of the Virgin Mary, another Catholic remnant.
Topkapi Palace is also a mirror of the past in Istanbul. Built by the powerful sultans of the Ottoman Empire to be used as their main residence and administrative centre, the now-turned museum tells a story of Ottoman wealth and grandeur. Paintings, decorative pieces, and Arab calligraphy show the best of both Western and Eastern art.

Overall, the trip was incredibly informative and enlightening. Besides learning about Islam and Turkish history and art by visiting museums and historical sites, I was also immersed in a completely different culture, and many times learnt a lot more about Turkish culture by talking to locals. I have no doubt that my experience in Turkey will positively impact my future research in the field.

I am very grateful to Queen Mary University of London for awarding me the Expedition Fund, without which I would not have been able to carry out this trip.