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Sultan Süleyman, Architect Sinan and Süleymaniye

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Last year Turkey commemorated a great architect, 400 years after his death. For half a century this architect, Sinan Ibn Abdülmennan, designed all major buildings in İstanbul, and was responsible for numerous projects throughout the Empire. The activities, exhibitions and events organised in celebration of Sinan coincided with the opening of a great travelling exhibition of Süleyman the Magnificent, his patron. It is a curious coincidence that Sinan and Süleyman shared the artistic-cultural scene again in 1988 as they did in the 16th century.

The 16th century and Süleyman's rule marked the peak of the Ottoman Empire, both in terms of power and arts. The rapid political growth was followed by the equally rapid development of a new monumentality in architecture, a particularly appropriate medium in which the Ottomans could express their newly found imperial identity. Though the first sultans initiated a search for architec-

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tural forms embodying their aspirations, originality in construction or introduction of structurally daring projects were not witnessed until much later, namely after the conquest of İstanbul in 1453, and its subsequent establishment as the capital of the Empire.

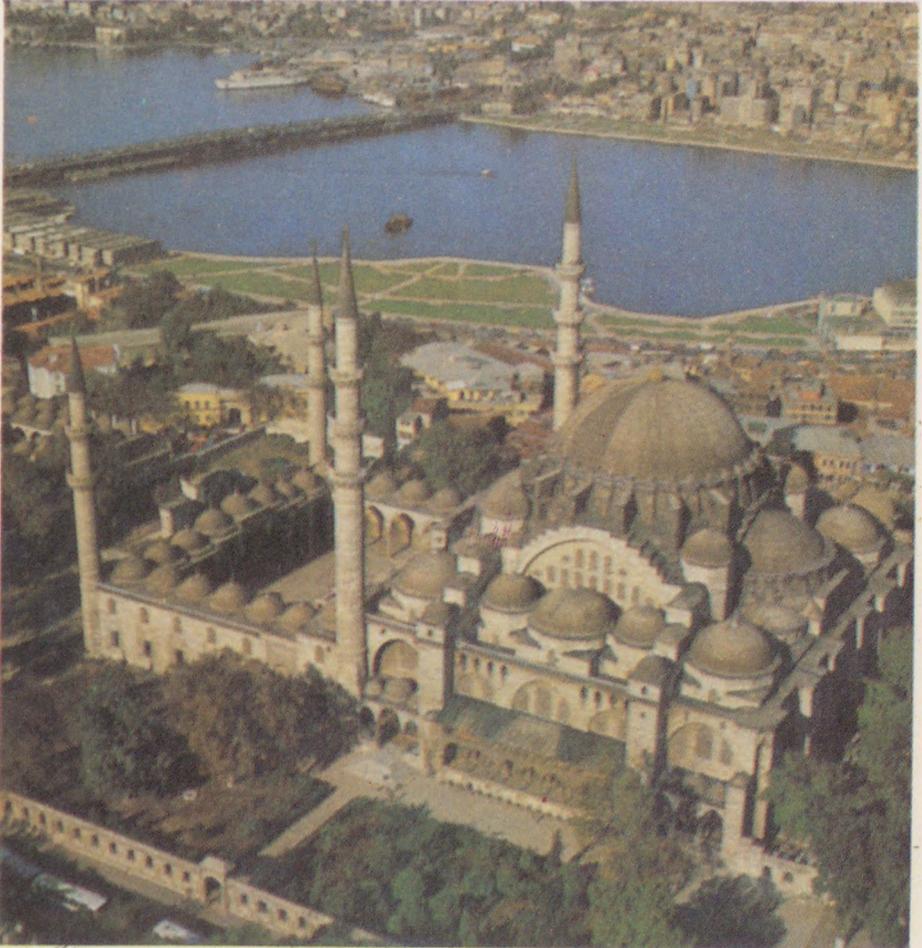
Early Ottoman architecture expresses the merging of two different cultural spheres, Eastern Islamic and Mediterranean. As the architectural language developed, a style which incorporated the Mediterranean spirit with classical rationalism and traces of the Medieval attitude of Islamic architecture started to evolve. Stylistically Byzantine architecture had its influence in earlier works. Later the influence was also felt in the structural clarity of domed space, which was composed of a main dome, its supports, buttressing, and other minor elements. The interiors were simple and functional, with decoration subordinate to the structure.

The Sultan and the ruling class, in the Ottoman Empire, were great patrons of architecture and the arts. It is also true that many of the monumental works commissioned were primarily for public use. Among them were the great urban complexes, "külliye" containing a mosque, commercial buildings, schools, theological colleges, inns and hospitals. Such külliyes provided the citizens, irrespective of their social class, physical means for satisfying all sorts of religious and social needs.

Sultan Süleyman reigned from 1520 to 1556. Known as "Süleyman the Magnificent" in the West and as Kanuni (the Lawgiver) by the Turks, he was a great ruler whose primary flair lay in organisation and administration, an ability to recognise talent, and to make the best use of it. His patronage in the field of architecture considerably surpassed that of his forefathers. Politically, the second and third quarter of the 16th century bear the seal of Sultan Süleyman, but artistically they carry the trademark of Sinan. The patron and the artist are closely linked, the best example of their relationship being the Süleymaniye mosque and complex, which was commissioned by Süleyman, and designed and built by Sinan. Süleyman was 54 when this monument which bears his name was started. As a ruler, he had reached the zenith, though his reign was to last for another 16 years. It took seven years to build the Süleymaniye complex; work was completed in 1557. Sinan's contemporary, Michelangelo, must have been disappointed with the slow progress of the work at St. Peter's cathedral site and perhaps secretly envied Sinan for the rich resources and support that poured down from the resolute ruler of a vast and prosperous empire. It is estimated that apart

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from unskilled labourers, about 3500 skilled workers were employed on the site at any given time.



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The controversy arises from the fact that very little documentation survives today. The main source of information covering the period resides in chronicles of his life and work written by Mustafa Sait Çelebi, and other authors whose identities are lost in the mists of time. However, some of these documents contain factual inaccuracies, suggesting that they may have actually been written quite some time after Sinan's death.

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Sinan's biographers do, however, agree that he was conscripted as a *devshirme* (*) in 1512 by Selim I, the Grim, while in his early twenties. The normal procedure would have been for him to spend between three and eight years training in provincial state service, and then be transferred to the Janissaires (**) for a seven to eight year period of military training. It is during this time that he must have acquired his skills as a carpenter as part of his military service, since training in provincial state service, and then be transferred to the Janissaries (-) for a Belgrade campaign only nine years after his conscription, which means that he must have spent an unusually short period of apprenticeship. After serving also in later campaigns he was finally appointed Grand Architect of the Court in 1538, replacing Acem Ali. Such rapid promotion must have been in recognition of his administrative and technical skills, combined with demonstration of his abilities in bridge-building during the wars. His responsibilities as Grand Architect extended beyond designing and supervising new works and royal buildings to include the supervision of public works, and heading of the Architects' Guild. Despite these other commitments, which must have been time consuming, Sinan is credited with many buildings in Istanbul and other provinces. Considering the strict supervisory work required, and the considerable distance of some from Istanbul, it is quite likely that a number were perhaps only initiated by Sinan or supervised by him in absentia.

Sinan, in a personal comment on his career, divides his works into three categories. In this self-appraising view, the Shehzade Mosque commissioned by S.Süleyman to commemorate the death of his son, Mehmet, the Crown Prince, belongs to Sinan's "apprenticeship" years, while the gemstone of his career as a "Kalfa" (journeyman) is the Süleymaniye. At the zenith of his career as a "master", he built the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne. To entrust Sinan with such a commission only two years after the completion of the Shehzade Mosque, his "apprentice work", his patron Sultan Süleyman must have had full faith in his talent. Sinan may have regarded the Süleymaniye as the work of a mere journeyman, but it is undoubtedly the largest, most comprehensive and most ambitious complex built in the Ottoman Empire. The cluster makes up a sizeable külliye (complex) consisting of the mosque in the centre surrounded by a group of medrese (seminaries), a hospital, hospice, soup-kitchen, caravanserai, bath house, school and shopping arcade, as well as the tombs of Süleyman and his wife, Haseki Hürrem Sultan (Roxelana).

Work began on the külliye in 1550 with the foundation of the mosque. The site chosen for the design was the third hill along the Golden Horn, the most



Beautiful inscriptions high in the dome of Süleymaniye

dominant area of the city. Seen from the opposite shores of the Golden Horn, about 400 domes seem to cascade from the pinnacle of the mosque, almost down to the edge of the waterline, yet the eighteen buildings housing hundreds of rooms are organised securely around the mosque, whilst being contained by the city at the perimeters.

The Süleymaniye, as an institution and in its design, exemplifies the relationship between the building and the Islamic faith. The mosque is unlike other religious buildings in that it has no internal liturgical focal point, with the exception of the mihrab, which the faithful should face in prayer. The mosque itself is, however, the focal point of the community, acting not only as a religious centre, but also as an assembly hall, office, hostel, and even school. Apart from the mimber (pulpit) it has no furniture, so that the entire desire to artistically

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express the love and adoration of God is channelled into its basic shape, internal decoration (ceramics, mosaics, and relief carvings), and some of its minor fittings such as lamps (in glass and metal), the Koran book stands, rugs and carpets. The stained glass in the Süleymaniye, the only ones surviving today being on the kible wall, are the work of a craftsman who signs himself "Ibrahim the Drunkard". The mihrab is a simple marble panel framed with magnificent tiles fashioned by Iznik craftsmen. Figurative decoration was not employed either in the interior or exterior of mosques, its place being taken by elaborate calligraphic quotations from the Kōran and naturalistic and geometric designs in an infinite pattern, such as the traditional mukarnas (cornices) at the entrance niches. The beautiful inscriptions adorning the interiors are by Hasan Çelebi, the most distinguished calligrapher of his time. The extent of Sinan's involvement in the selection of these decorative elements will probably never be known, but the careful planning of their use, as well as the skilful variation in the effects, does suggest a strong coordinating hand. His is the most likely. Indeed the Islamic concept of the infinite pattern and the universal equality of value placed on every element, which established a unity of style, have been faithfully expressed in every Islamic country at all times.

Within the building itself, the transcendental nature of matter is suggested by the ever changing space created by the domes, arches and aisles, giving a sense of space within and without. It could be expressed equally well in a garden, like the Pleasure Gardens of Kashmir. The buildings themselves define space around them, suggesting its infinite nature. Islamic architecture is a philosophical expression of the religion, and yet in itself is not only totally religious. The mosques are perhaps the best embodiment of this idea. It is probably this sense of infinity confined that several visitors have described as tension or superhuman loftiness. It is understandable that encountering so much covered-in space could be disorientating. To the non-follower of Islam the dramatic transformation of the interior when dark sets in may be daunting. Thousands of lamps, hung from the domes by chains, change the immense hall into a mysterious world, its boundaries felt, but not exactly seen. Within the conventional boundaries of a mosque, Sinan manages to create this feeling of tension, mysticism, through the use of physical forms. The effect is experienced equally in the court, inside the great hall, and in the environs of the mosque.

The Süleymaniye is also a typical example of the social welfare system that was instrumental in the establishment of these külliyes, namely the vakif system.

Vakıfs were ultimately founded on religious concepts of obligation towards one's fellow men, whilst at the same time, conveniently for the rulers, symbolising the authority and munificence of the State. In Istanbul, during the second half of the 18th Century, it is estimated that around 30,000 people were served two meals a day by the Vakıf foundations, a clear indication of their charitable nature.

The Süleymaniye külliye forms a compact group of buildings spreading over the prominent hill. The complex was built on and around a vast plaza, created by means of an elaborate system of foundations and retaining walls, covering an area of more than 70,000 m², the mosque alone being 3,358.4 m². The mosque stands in the centre of the site, and emphasises the main axis of the külliye. Entering the külliye from the town, one sees the mosque from its east side, and is most immediately aware of its axial design; axial designs being traditionally employed as an expression of solidity and endurance. Its form becomes apparent only when one walks along the west side of the street. In fact, it is arguable that even then the relationship of one outlying group of buildings to another can best be appreciated on plan. However, there can be no mistaking the relationship of each



Another view of the Süleymaniye Mosque

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group to the tremendous, ubiquitous presence of the mosque itself, never lost sight of down an alley, or rising sheer over the regular lines of the shallow lesser domes of the medreses. The concept of the mosque as the focal point of any külliye was traditional, but at Süleymaniye it becomes inescapable; the eye is brought continuously back to that soaring central mass with four tapering minarets marking the extent of its courtyard.

Yet even while the mosque dominates surrounding buildings (annexes), they retain an existence in their own right, and are perhaps even more immediately assimilable. The clear-cut geometry of the symmetrical medreses facing the mosque would in itself suggest the design of a master architect. The use of the extra spaces resulting from the sloping site for shops and cafes adds to the human touch. The original soup kitchen (imarethane), now the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art, is one of enchanting intimacy, and is very well preserved. Its arcaded courtyard, with trees and fountains, has the air of a garden, despite its apparently solemn looking design, achieved through a skilful arrangement of domes and colonnades. The kitchen, like the medreses, borders the piazza-style precinct of the mosque, which is vast compared to the mass felt earlier, and is a prelude to the spaciousness of the courtyard and interior. The cliff-like walls of ashlar, the almost chill grandeur of the austere, and the almost thrillingly tall main doorways increase the sense of awe as one draws nearer to the mosque itself.

The plan of Süleymaniye is said by some scholars to follow that of the mosque of Beyazıt II, but it is also identical to that of the Hagia Sophia (532-537), the very building that Sinan had set out to surpass. The differentiation between them is seen in the third dimension. In the Süleymaniye the structural aspect is emphasised- there are constant changes between spherical and level areas as well as between half-domes and arcaded walls. The spherical forms of Hagia Sophia merge softly into one another, whereas Sinan intentionally stresses the differences, and emphasises the material. The apses of the Hagia Sophia are not included in the Süleymaniye, the result being a strict square which serves to remind us of the original cubes from which the shell seems to have been hewn. In many ways the Süleymaniye marks the end of Sinan's association with Byzantine architecture, which is probably why he classifies it as the work of his journeymanship.

On closer inspection of the interior spaces created, it is interesting to note that a specific proportioning system seems to have been followed. All the domes have been formed with a height-to-width ratio of 3:5 or 5:8, these ratios alter-

nating in the arcades to break the monotony. Windows show more variation, and can be 5:8, 4:7, or 6:11. Such a system allows for subtle change within a comprehensive elevation. The façade is 110.58 meters long, while the dome is 27.44 meters wide (less than that of the Hagia Sophia), and 47.42 meters above the ground. The interval between the three şerefes (balconies) of the minaret adjoining the mosque decreases with increasing height, while the diameter decreases by 10 cm. at each level, starting from a 4-meter diameter at its base. Small flying buttresses encircle the base of the dome and, together with the polygonal turrets placed over the exterior piers, relieve its thrust. The turrets are integrated into the silhouette of the mosque, and stepped buttresses rise from the ground to meet the dome forming a complete composition. It is impossible to divine how much Sinan knew of the Italian Renaissance and its ideals, but the Süleymaniye has assimilated so many aspects of Renaissance architecture that there appears to be more than a parallel independent development. The elegant courtyard of the imaret must be meaningful to anyone brought up in the traditions of 15th Century Florence. Less obvious is the relationship of the great mosque to the ideas of Alberti, whose ideal church would be raised above the distractions of daily life, with windows through which only the sky could be seen. God is seen as the centre of the circle - the symbol of the universe - thus the cosmic conception embodied in the dome. Alberti used the number three as the basis for the proportions of the dome, whilst Sinan used two. Alberti and Sinan shared a purist's approach to decoration. In Sinan's case this may have been a reflection of Süleyman's growing dislike of opulence: His increasing religious scruples even led him to destroy his gold and jewelled musical instruments. The two architects are also in a sense matched by contrasts in that monuments of the Italian Renaissance are the sum of their parts, whereas with Sinan the parts are subordinate to the whole because the movement is always upwards to the central dome. Major differences are seen in Sinan's concern with space rather than form, the simplicity of his surfaces, compared with the enrichment provided in the West by paintings and sculptures, and the exposure of material Sinan favored in contrast to the search for effect found in Western examples.

Sinan may not have been one of those revolutionary architects who changed the course of architecture. But his works mark the zenith in the evolution of Ottoman architecture and especially in the construction of mosques, Sinan made an undisputed contribution to the conceptual development of spatial structures. His works are a study in dome construction, the organisation of the space below, and the relationship between the space of the dome and its enveloping parts. His

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designs were the blueprint for others throughout the history of Ottoman architecture.

Today, the Turkish General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums is implementing an extensive preservation and renovation scheme, from which the Süleymaniye has especially benefitted. The old wooden houses surrounding the precinct have been restored to their original beauty, while work has begun on the actual külliye itself. At the end of the day there is always a question that remains in one's mind; how were these mosques designed? Given the speed with which they were erected, the structural precision they demanded, and the perfect symmetry of each part, the design must have been worked out in great detail before it was begun. Yet no drawings, models, templates, or preparatory studies of any kind remain. One wonders how he did it.

(*) **Devshirme**: Christian child levied to fill, and when necessary trained for, posts in the palace, the administration, or military corps.

(x x) **Janissary**: Member of the Ottoman crack infantry troops, recruited from the devshirme and paid from the treasury, rather than from military fiefs.

