

# Byzantine/Ottoman Cross Currents

## *Study Day - Background Notes*

Jane Angelini – 11 May 2016



Virgin and Child between Constantine and Justinian,  
SW Vestibule, Hagia Sophia, Istanbul. 10<sup>th</sup> Century



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## **City of the World's Desire: Constantinople to Istanbul**

Throughout the medieval centuries the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, towered over other European cities as a symbol of cultural refinement and monumental grandeur. In 1453, the great metropolis fell to the armies of the Ottoman Turks and became the capital of another mighty empire. The Ottoman Turks arose from an entirely different culture with an artistic heritage belonging to the Persian-Iranian tradition. Once established in the great city a symbiosis of cultures occurred between embryonic Ottoman and the extraordinary splendours belonging to Byzantine Constantinople with its Graeco-Roman roots.

The day will be devoted to the *World of Ottoman Art*, with reference to this symbiotic relationship with Byzantium.

First Talk: **From Nomads to Sultans** - discusses the historical and cultural background to the Ottoman Turks and looks in detail at their earliest capital cities Bursa and Edirne, both on the shores of the Western Mediterranean. It is here that the Persian-Iranian traditions start clearly to merge with those of the Romano-Byzantine legacy.

Second Talk: **City of the Heart's Desire** - concentrates on the architecture of the Ottoman capital including both religious and secular monuments. Secular architecture includes the delightful Topkapi complex, whilst religious monuments include the great mosque complexes, with their centrally planned domed prayer halls, greatly influenced both in concept and design by the Byzantine precedents.

Third Talk: **Istanbul and the Ottoman Paradise** - Ottoman art appeals directly to the senses, creating a complete world, rather similar to the original meaning of the word paradise: an enclosed garden, consciously devised for relaxation and contemplation, where time itself seems suspended. We will look at what makes up this paradise: rugs, ceramics, miniatures, calligraphy and rich silks. Colourful, often vibrant, and hugely appealing to the senses this presents a different world to the more formal and figurative art of Byzantium.

## THE OTTOMANS : BURSA, IZNIK and EDIRNE

The Ottoman sultans descended from Osman, a war-like tribal leader of thirteenth century Anatolia. In the fourteenth century the Osmanli tribe had swept westwards, (urged on not only by hopes of conquest but by the need to escape Mongol oppression in the East), far into the Byzantine Empire whose cities crumbled so rapidly that Constantinople was rumoured to be falling a century or so before the Ottomans finally took it. Among the first cities to fall was Bursa, in 1326. That city, a great trading centre, especially for the silks produced there, became the capital of the new Empire under Osman's son, Orkhan, and a few years later a traveller remarked admiringly on its fine bazaars and wide streets. On the crowning height of the citadel Orkhan buried his father in a tomb, which was called 'silver' because of its dome of gleaming lead. On the citadel too was his own palace, of wood, and unfortunately destroyed by fire at the start of the eighteenth century. In the centre of town Orkhan built a mosque, The Orkhan Gazi Mosque, more than once rebuilt and restored but still inscribed as ordained by him, 'The Sultan of the Warriors and Champions of the Holy War'; and round it grouped a soup kitchen for the indigent, two public baths and an inn. Such buildings are typical of later sultans and represent enlightened public carrying out of a central tenet of Islam: the helping of the poor and unfortunate. The Koran enjoins: ' Show kindness to the orphans and to the needy, to your near and distant neighbours, to your fellow travellers, to the wayfarers, and to the slaves whom you own'.

Long after Bursa ceased to be capital of the Empire (it was transferred first to Edirne and then to Istanbul), the city remained a thriving trading centre and retained its particular semi-sacred status. Trade had made it prosperous and cosmopolitan, the buildings commissioned by the sultans gave it character. Orkhan had created a tradition by burying his father there and by building his own mosque. He himself was buried close to his father's tomb. Other sultans selected other sites, though always within the environs of Bursa and each built at least one mosque there up until the time of the taking of Constantinople (1453). The most famous of these are the Green Mosque and Green Tomb, otherwise known as the Yesil Camii and the Yesil Turbe and the Muradiye Complex (1421-1451). The Green Mosque and the Green Tomb are regarded as high water marks in the development of early Ottoman art and architecture, proclaiming a new exquisiteness of taste and a new elaboration of decorative richness and above all a triumph of architectural harmony. The mosque, in its disposition of space is intimate rather than grandiose and very much related to human scale. There is no sense of immensity or of eternity dwarfing mankind, the mosque seems designed to accommodate people, positively inviting one to occupy the dark tiled

carpeted recesses on each side of the entrance. The coloured tiles inside (not yet Iznik) create an exuberance of vivid colour, like gardens in bloom and the external turquoise tiles (from which the mosque takes its name) are the only example of an Ottoman building with external facing. Many of the craftsmen and certainly most of the decorative techniques used in these two buildings are derived directly from Samarkand .

**IZNIK** (ancient Niceae), wrapped within its Roman walls, fell to the troops of Orkhan in 1331 and the city's absorption into the rising new Empire was achieved smoothly. The church, which had sheltered the Council of Niceaea, was converted into a mosque. New mosques, (the Haci Ozbek mosque and the Green Mosque), baths, a public soup kitchen and some tombs were built there during the fourteenth century and the city became, next to Bursa, the most important in the expanding kingdom. Its buildings often contain distinct echoes of Seljuk style, especially through the use of tiled minarets. Two of Orkhan's sons had work done there, one of them setting up the soup-kitchen foundation in memory of his mother. The Nilufer Hatan building has a deep impressive portico and a bubbling silhouette of several domes, pointing the way already across the centuries to complexes like the Blue Mosque at Istanbul. As well as providing shelter for the poor the Nilufer Hatan foundation was in origin a lodging house, connected with a special sect and it is in every sense as grand as a mosque – in fact far grander than any mosque at Iznik.

Iznik was eventually left behind. No later groups of monuments joined its nucleus of early ones, some now ruined. In the sixteenth century it became famous for the superb tiles its workshops then produced but its reputation did not increase its importance or size.

## **EDIRNE**

Sultan Murad I (1362 – 89) more or less devoted his energies to expanding the borders of the Ottoman Empire – both east and west. Daringly he carried warmongering into Europe and conquering Adrianople (modern Edirne) and invaded the Balkans. Within his newly conquered territories Murad felt the need for a new European capital and he settled on Edirne, although his tomb is in Bursa. Unlike Bursa and Iznik, Edirne did not lose its importance after the rise of Istanbul, it remained an alternative, summer capital and it was there in the sixteenth century that Sinan's greatest masterpiece the Imperial Mosque of the Sultan Selim II, was built. Neither cradle nor grave of the dynasty, Edirne actually possesses greater continuity than either Bursa or Istanbul, although much less visited.

At Edirne, Murad built much more ambitiously than at Bursa and under him the city benefited by being treated as the centre of his court, a court recognized by foreigners and natives as highly cultured. Religious architecture alone survives to convey the splendour of the culture, but the dramatic bulk of Murad's huge 'Three balconied Mosque' with its four

thrillingly tall minarets, is another of the great early Ottoman monuments and a quite unprecedented architectural achievement. It is in particular this mosque, with its bold bravado, together with Sinans's masterpiece the Selimiye, that thoroughly reward any visit to Edirne.

## **OTTOMAN ISTANBUL and its Byzantine Background**

In the spring of 1452 Mehmed II, otherwise known as the Conqueror, massed his armies along the Bosphorous straits, using the Rumeli Hisar Castle as his base. His aim was Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine Empire since 330 AD. The real surprise is that the city lasted as long as it did. The Byzantine Empire was brought into being by Constantine the Great on 12 May 330, it ended on 29 May 1453, a little over 1,123 years later. During its heyday, it had extended from the Pillars of Hercules in the West to Mesopotamia in the East; but over the previous 400 years it had steadily shrunk, until by the beginning of the fifteenth century it extended no further than the walls of Constantinople. The city was the empire; the empire was the city.

Its decline was due to two shattering blows, from neither of which it never recovered. The first occurred in 1071, when the initial wave of Turks, the Seljuks, swept over its eastern frontier and at Manzikert -the modern Malazgirt - defeated a Byzantine army led by the Emperor Romanus IV in person. Tens of thousands of Turkmen tribesmen swarmed across Asia Minor, and within a decade the empire had lost most of its grain and more than half its manpower. But even this was nothing to the tragedy that occurred some 130 years later in 1204, when a huge crusading army - that, at least, is what it called itself - turned its full force against Christian Constantinople, pillaged it and sacked it, overthrew its Greek emperor and substituted a succession of Frankish thugs on the Byzantine throne. This Latin empire lasted little more than half a century, but the gutted city into which the triumphant Michael Palaeologus led his returning army in 1261 was but a poor, pale shadow of what it had been before the crusaders had done their worst. This last eastern outpost of Christendom, had it retained its strength, might have successfully defended all Europe from the inexorable advance of the Turks. Instead, it was on its knees and, ultimately, doomed.

But doom was postponed, the Seljuks having been crushed in 1243 by the invading Mongols from the East. Though various minor Turkic emirates continued to whittle away the remaining Byzantine territories in Anatolia, they had no overall unity and constituted no serious threat. It was only with the coming of the fourteenth century that the situation suddenly changed. One of these emirates, commanded by a certain Osman, surged westward to the Sea of Marmara until it was within sight of Constantinople. There the Ottomans established themselves (see above Bursa & Iznik), and grew

steadily in their military strength. In 1354 they crossed the Hellespont and established their first European colony at Edirne. Half a century later virtually the entire Balkan Peninsula was in their hands. Constantinople was effectively surrounded.

Somehow, the pathetic rump of the Byzantine Empire kept going. But then, in February 1451, the Ottoman Sultan Murad II died of apoplexy in his capital at Edirne and was succeeded by his nineteen-year-old son Mehmed. The boy was a considerable scholar – fluent we are told, in six languages – but he was also consumed with ambition. In April 1452 he began to build a fortress on the Bosphorus a few miles up from Constantinople, where the great channel was at its narrowest. Known as Rumeli Hisar, it still stands essentially unchanged since it was completed - just twenty weeks later - at the end of August. The Sultan now had complete control of the strait.

By January 1453 he was ready to move. A huge fleet cast anchor immediately below the city, while the army gathered in Thrace - in all some 80,000 regular troops and up to 20,000 bashi-bazouks, or irregulars. He also possessed a secret weapon: bronze cannon balls which, according to their German manufacturer, could blast the walls of Babylon itself. On 5th April he pitched his tent before the western walls of the city, and the following morning the siege began. Compared to the Turks, the Byzantines had nothing. Constantinople had never recovered from the fourth Crusade. Of the once-great empire, the city was all that was left, now so depleted "that there were acres of green fields within the walls". The previous century, moreover, had seen no less than ten separate visitations of the Black Death. Just before the attack began, a census of all able-bodied men in the city, including monks and clerics, amounted to just 4,983 Greeks and rather less than 2,000 foreigners. To defend fourteen miles of wall against Mehmed's army of 100,000, Emperor Constantine XI could muster fewer than 7,000 men.

It was one of the epic sieges of history, lasting 55 days. The final onslaught began at 1.30am on 29 May. By dawn the Turks were pouring into the city. The emperor, seeing that his empire was lost, plunged into the fray. He was never seen alive again. In the late afternoon young Mehmed, just 21, rode slowly through the streets to St Sophia, where he dismounted and bowed his turbaned head to the ground in thanksgiving. At that moment the Cross gave way to Crescent. The great church became a mosque; the Byzantine Empire became the Ottoman Empire; Constantinople became Istanbul.

The conquest was followed by the usual bloodshed as the victorious soldiers charged through the city. By tradition they were allowed three days of rape and pillage, but the Sultan stopped it after 24 hours. He was to prove surprisingly merciful. The surviving Greeks comprised a self-governing community under their Patriarch, and were guaranteed freedom of Christian worship. Now, over 500 years later, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the whole Greek

Church continues to be based in Istanbul. It is not an ideal residence for his pastoral duties, but its symbolic value is immense. It was in that city that the Orthodox Church was born; its heart is still there today.

Western Europe had not lifted a finger to help Byzantium in its hour of greatest need, nor was it, profoundly changed by its fall. The Empire had fought with heroism. Internationally however, by the fifteenth century it had ceased to matter. In any account of a siege, one's sympathies inevitably lie with the besieged. But nothing lasts forever, and Byzantium was dead on its feet. Once the conquest was over, there can be no doubt that the Turks breathed new life into the moribund city. They gave it a new, Islamic dimension; they contributed their own superb buildings, religious and secular, which in turn have provided Istanbul with perhaps the most famous skyline in the world.

It is beyond the scope of these notes to elaborate in any detail on either the course of the empire's history, or the many great buildings erected in Istanbul over the centuries succeeding the conquest. In brief:

In the second half of the 15th century, following the conquest, Mehmed continued to use Edirne as the capital city and seat of government. However, he patronized a number of buildings in Istanbul, two mosque complexes, as well as two palaces and the Bazaar. The Fatih Mosque complex, comprising soup-kitchens, baths and an inn as well as prayer hall, was built on the prominent hill site where the Byzantine Church of the Holy Apostles had stood. Materials from the ruined building where the Byzantine emperors had been buried, were incorporated into the building. Although the original had to be rebuilt after an earthquake in the 18th century, early engravings confirm its massive shape, bulking high along the city's skyline, very much as the later building does today. It was the first major piece of Ottoman architecture in Istanbul and something of an assertive complement to Santa Sophia at the other end of the city. Nothing as vast as the Fatih complex had been attempted before in Bursa, Iznik or Edirne and vastness remains its overall effect.

The Conqueror also instigated the building of two palaces. The first was built on ground now occupied by the University of Istanbul and no trace survives. The second was built on the Seraglio Point (Topkapi) where all that survives of the period is the charming Tiled Pavilion built in 1472. It is the earliest existing building of its royal secular kind. Enchanting, elegant, with a sensuous decoration of patterned tiles in alternating blue tones inside and out. It is strongly suggestive of the central Asian Timurid taste (also seen in the Green Mosque and Tomb at Bursa). Mehmed's plans for the development of the Seraglio Point Palace continued over the centuries, taking an enormous leap forward in the next century under the sultan Suleyman the Magnificent who moves the harem and the seat of government to Topkapi.

It was in the 16th century that the Ottomans achieved their greatest successes, in every sense. The empire basked in the glory of apparently endless victorious military campaigns, conquering the world as if the sun would never set. The middle years of the sixteenth century belong historically to Suleyman the Magnificent, probably the greatest of all sultans, but artistically they belong to Sinan, the greatest of all Ottoman architects. As artist and patron the two men deserve to be linked at least as much as, say, Bernini with Pope Urban VIII. Sinan spent fifty years of his life creating the definitive masterpieces of Ottoman architecture: mosques, tombs, fountains, bridges, baths, hospitals, markets and inns. His mosques and tombs are in themselves monuments to moments of history and to personalities, commemorating such an event as the premature death of Suleyman's much loved son, the Crown Prince Mehmed, or keeping alive the names of great statesmen of the period, (Rustem Pasha the financial genius with a Glastonian attitude to public expenditure who married the Sultan's daughter, Mihrimah, herself commemorated by two of Sinan's mosques; Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, a Grand Vizier of Bosnian Royal Blood; the reformed pirate and brilliant admiral, Barbarossa). Suleyman himself is almost literally enshrined in the vast, forever dominant bulk of the Suleymaniye Mosque, with his own tomb and that of his wife Roxelana so close to each other near by.

In the autobiographical fragments Sinan dictated in his old age he identified his three major buildings with the major stages of his career: the Sehzade Mehmed Mosque (Istanbul) representing his apprenticeship, the Suleymaniye his maturity and the Selimye at Edirne his masterpiece. The trio of buildings shows his range as well as his greatness, and his own evaluation of each can hardly be disputed.

Sinan was also the architect of that Abode of Felicity, the Topkapi Saray, which was considerably expanded in the 16th century. The complex has been added to and rebuilt many times and little that Sinan built there can now be quite as he designed it.

The 17th century is marked by political uncertainty. Although war was waged splendidly, military successes alternated with defeats and for each efficient grand vizier and sultan another was deposed or murdered. The empire was in decline. A policy of blood and circus characterised methods of government. War was the chief solution to discontented Janissaries, poverty and threats of anarchy, public festivals and processions and displays of splendour dazzled the people and made it hard to believe that there was any diminution in power. It was an age of great miniaturist painting and solid artistic achievements, large-scale like the Blue Mosque and the Yeni Valide Mosque, or small like the Baghdad Kiosk in Topkapi, both closely connected to political events.

The 18th century brought a marked delight in exotic modes and exotic artistic styles, both in Europe and in Turkey. The turquerie became – especially in France – a popular category of picture. Turkish costumes and even Turkish- style buildings were fashionable. Meanwhile the Ottoman court grew increasingly fascinated by European styles of art and culture. European influenced pavilions were built and the Nurosmaniye Mosque is a westernised building. Both cultures were sophisticated and both anxious to perfect, in its own way, a climate of *douceur de vivre*, where pursuit of agreeable sensations, rather than glory, might be thought a reasonable, laudable ambition. A style fostered in France (the main source of artistic influence in the 18th century) in the early century - rococo - chimed remarkably well with Ottoman ideals of this period, sometimes known as the Tulip Age. The greatest patron of the century was the enlightened , peace-loving sultan Ahmed III. His fruit chamber in the Topkapi harem, the Ahmed III library in the palace and his fountain outside are the most virtuoso examples of the delicate, slightly cosmopolitan rococo style that marks the 18th century.

The 19th century dominated by wars with Russia and various attempts to modernise the state, sees the sustained attempt to put Ottoman traditions behind and emulate the great palaces of the West. The Sultans abandon Topkapi and move to palaces along the Bosphorous – palaces built in an extraordinary eclectic style. At this point the West had nothing much to offer the Ottomans in artistic terms. The courts of Queen Victoria, Franz Josef and Napoleon III were perhaps cosy or luxurious but they were not power houses of original taste and lacked distinctive character. Bric a brac, hunting trophies and photographs were their ideas of furnishing a room, and similar gimcrack objects look singularly out of place in the harem quarters of the Dolmabahce palace! Ottoman painting had once had its own proud tradition, equally unsuited to the vast reception rooms and banquet halls in the new palaces. It is in the wooden waterfront houses, or *yalis*, built along the Bosphorous for viziers and ambassadors that the finest examples of the Ottoman tradition can still be seen. Interestingly, in most of them the interior lay out is much the same as the earliest Ottoman building in Istanbul, the Tiled Pavilion .

## READING LIST

### Ottoman Istanbul

\***Freely, J.**, *Istanbul the Imperial City*, Penguin, 1998. Excellent and devoted to the city rather than Ottoman history in general.

**Kinross, P.**, *Ataturk: The Rebirth of a Nation*, W&N, 2001. A classic history much admired by Turks and English alike. Probably the best biography of Kemal Ataturk.

**Levy, M.**, *The World of the Ottomans*, 1975. A really excellent introduction to Ottoman Art in general but probably only available through Amazon as out of print.

\***Mansel, P.**, *Constantinople, The City of the World's Desire.*, new ed., John Murray, 2006. He is a good writer and this is most readable.

**Stone, N.**, *Turkey: A Short History*, Thames and Hudson, 2011. Best read for a concise history.

\***Sumner-Boyd, H. & Freely, J.**, *Strolling Through Istanbul: The Classic Guide to the City*, rev. ed., Tauris Parke, 2012. Excellent guide.

### Fiction

**De Bernieres, L.**, *Birds Without Wings*, new ed., Vintage, 2005. Wonderful novel set in Izmir around the time of the Greek uprising and Armenian massacres.

**Pamuk, O.**, *My Name is Red*, Faber & Faber, 2011. The author won the Nobel prize for literature for this novel which is set in the late 16th century when the Sultan secretly commissions a great book: a celebration of his life and the Ottoman Empire, to be illuminated by the best artists of the day in the European manner. It is a great account of the art of miniature painting and a sophisticated novel.

**Pamuk, O.,** *Istanbul: A Biography of the City*, Faber & Faber, 2006. A shimmering evocation of one of the world's great cities. Some people find Pamuk (a tormented but very gentle writer) a little depressing but I feel he gets right under the skin of Istanbul.

**Shafak, A.,** *Honour*, Penguin, 2015. A good insight into the problems of integration and adaptation faced by modern Turks.

**Shafak, A.,** *The Architect's Apprentice*, Penguin, 2015. A novel based around an apprentice of Sinan in the period of Suleyman.

**Turney, S.J.A.,** *The Ottoman Cycle: Volume 1 The Thief's Tale, Volume 2 The Priest's Tale, Volume 3 The Assassin's Tale*, CreateSpace, 2013-2014. I have been recommended this series and look forward to reading them. The setting is Istanbul in the very early years of Ottoman history (late 15th century) whilst Byzantium lives on.

**Unsworth, B.,** *The Rage of the Vulture*, Penguin, 2001. Set in Istanbul in the early years of the 20th century, Armenian massacres, paranoid Sultan, collapsing empire. I really enjoyed the book.



Blue Mosque Interior, 17<sup>th</sup> c.

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