Lucienne Thys-Senocak

Ottoman Women Builders: The Architectural Patronage of Hadice Turhan Sultan


Hadice Turhan Sultan was captured by slave raiders on the Russian steppes in 1640, when she was about twelve years old. Taken to Istanbul, she was given as a gift to the Ottoman queen mother, or valide sultan, the most powerful woman in the vast Ottoman Empire. Within a few short years, the young slave girl converted to Islam and received a Muslim name, underwent training in religion, language, and courtly arts in the Topkapi Palace, and was presented by the valide sultan to her son, Sultan Ibrahim, as a possible concubine. Although not the sultan’s favorite concubine, she was the first to conceive a son. The boy was only six years old when his father died and he became Sultan Mehmed IV. A power struggle ensued between his mother and grandmother over the position of valide sultan, culminating in the murder of the older woman in 1651. At the approximate age of twenty-one, Turhan Sultan became the de facto ruler of the Ottoman Empire. She ruled with distinction even after her son came of age, since he disliked both the task of ruling and his capital city, Istanbul.

In Ottoman Women Builders, Lucienne Thys-Senocak documents the architectural patronage of this fascinating woman. Shortly after becoming valide sultan, Turhan Sultan faced a military threat from the Venetians, who were making incursions into the Dardanelles, the narrow strait connecting the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara. Thys-Senocak has unearthed fascinating archival documents showing that Turhan Sultan responded by beefing up the Ottoman navy and constructing two castles at the Aegean entrance to the Dardanelles, one on the European side and one on the Asian side. Her next major project was a large religious complex called Yeni Valide in the heart of Istanbul, consisting of a mosque, a royal pavilion, a dynastic mausoleum, a covered market, a fountain, and a Quran school. Other constructions elsewhere in the empire included a palace near Edirne and the conversion of several churches into mosques after the Ottoman conquest of Crete. Turhan Sultan was clearly a significant figure as both a ruler and a patron, and Thys-Senocak has illuminated a fascinating case study from a period that has often been erroneously dismissed as an era of Ottoman decline.

The book forms part of the series Women and Gender in the Early Modern World and is the first to venture slightly outside Europe; most of Turhan Sultan’s constructions are located within Europe, while her Dardanelles fortifications straddle the continents of Europe and Asia in the most dramatic way possible. Although it is lavishly illustrated in black and white, the book would have benefited from at least one color illustration of the Iznik tiles inside the royal pavilion at the Yeni Valide complex.

The book is divided into six chapters: the first introduces the parameters and aims of the study, which include documenting the Dardanelles castles for the first time, challenging the paradigm of Ottoman decline in the seventeenth century, and comparing Turhan Sultan with several European patrons to show how this particular queen mother used architecture for self-representation as well as political and religious legitimation. The second chapter documents the early life of Turhan Sultan, and the third contrasts her with Elizabeth I, Catherine de Medici, and Maria de Medici, emphasizing how the Ottoman woman was restricted in her means of self-representation by customs, related to her gender and imperial status, that prevented her from being seen by anyone outside of her immediate entourage. Turhan Sultan used her architectural patronage as a way of making herself visible to her subjects, and she had the financial means to do so because Ottoman laws allowed women to own property and control their finances in ways that European laws of the time did not. She was also free to choose the type of building she wished to construct, whereas there were typological restrictions for her Western European counterparts (namely, fortresses were at this time constructed only by men). The fourth chapter surveys the castles of Seddülbahir and Kumkale, and is based on the results of a project led by Thys-Senocak and published in this volume for the first time. The fifth chapter discusses the construction of the Yeni Valide complex, which entailed expropriating property from Jewish inhabitants of the commercial district of Eminönü and was consequently presented as a local expansion and triumph of Islam. Thys-Senocak argues that the layout of the Yeni Valide complex, which was previously dismissed by architectural historians as disorganized, derivative, and emblematic of decline, was actually shaped by the gender of its patron, who wished to view as much of her complex as possible from the royal pavilion. The final chapter surveys the evidence for Turhan Sultan’s other constructions, arguing that she would have been able to communicate extensively with the chief architect of the Ottoman court and thereby shape the design of her projects.

This book represents a major contribution to the study of imperial female patronage and to architectural history as a whole. Turhan Sultan provides a fascinating case study, and Thys-Senocak achieves the aims she outlines in chapter one with exhaustive research and convincing argumentation. The documentation of the Dardanelles fortresses alone is a significant achievement that adds considerably to our knowledge of an often-neglected aspect of Ottoman architecture. As Kumkale, the castle on the Asian side of the Dardanelles, is still occupied by the Turkish military, gaining...
access could not have been easy, and the difficulties of carrying out the survey are hinted at in a footnote thanking the fort’s commander for his help with the team’s Dardanelles crossings in a small fishing boat in inclement weather. This survey combined with Thys-Senocak’s archival research and her insightful arguments about the Yeni Valide complex amounts to an impressive volume, despite several lacunae.

While the Dardanelles fortresses and the Eminonü complex are covered thoroughly, the other constructions of Turhan Sultan are not. The mosques in Crete and the palace near Edirne are not illustrated or described in detail, and the reader is left unsure as to whether this is due to their current condition or to the selective focus of this project. Additional constructions in the Balkans and along the route to Mecca are mentioned in chapter one but are not referred to again, whereas other buildings along the Black Sea possibly attributable to Turhan Sultan are not mentioned in the beginning of the book but are alluded to in the conclusion. A clearer exposition of the evidence for the entire corpus of Turhan Sultan’s patronage is needed.

Another gap is the lack of any contextualization of the case of Turhan Sultan in the Islamic world beyond the Ottoman Empire. Thys-Senocak claims this is due to a lack of research on female patronage of the Ottoman contemporaries, the Safavids and Mughals, whereas I would argue that a comparison with the imperial women of earlier dynasties would definitely enhance our understanding of Turhan Sultan and other Ottoman female imperial patrons. Several features of Turhan Sultan’s patronage stand out in comparison with her European contemporaries: her ability to build castles, her independent wealth, and her use of her imperial son rather than her deceased imperial husband or her own lineage as a means of legitimization. But by comparing the Ottoman women to their Seljuk, Ayubid, and Timurid predecessors, we would have seen that the patronage of architecture by a queen mother, with paramount importance placed on her link to the living, ruling son rather than the dead husband, was a long-standing practice in the Islamic world. The earlier women did, however, often emphasize their own exalted lineages as well in their foundation inscriptions; this is characteristic especially of those who engaged in architectural patronage while their husbands were still alive, but it is also seen in the constructions of queen mothers. All of these women were wives rather than concubines, and this difference between Ottoman royal practice and that of earlier dynasties accounts for the sole Ottoman focus on the son: Turhan Sultan and the other royal Ottoman concubines were removed from their own non-Muslim families at a young age and would scarcely wish to emphasize their origin as slaves. Even those exceptional women who were made legal wives, such as Hürrem Sultan, the consort of Suleyman the Magnificent, started out as concubines (although the difference between Ottoman concubines and wives was not well-elicited by Thys-Senocak and could be an interesting avenue for future research). The ability of Ottoman women to hold independent wealth, although distinct from contemporary Western European practice, was also a long-standing custom enjoyed by their Islamic predecessors. However, the construction of castles was really unusual: earlier imperial women constructed a wide range of buildings but not actual military fortifications. Hence putting these typological distinctions into a historical Islamic context would serve to emphasize that Turhan Sultan was a truly outstanding patron.

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Note

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The Bank of England, and specifically Sir John Soane’s design (which began in the 1790s and continued into the late 1820s), is a mainstay in the history of architecture. Images of Soane’s abstracted classicism can be found in almost every survey book and any architectural history of the nineteenth century. Discussion of the antecedents of modern architecture would be unthinkable without its inclusion. However, the existing building is very different, since it was largely reconstructed in the years between the two world wars. Nikolaus Pevsner’s thunderous condemnation of the reconstruction has colored our views, for as he wrote in the London volume of the Buildings of England: “The virtual rebuilding of the Bank of England in 1921–37 is—in spite of the Second World War—the worst individual loss suffered by London architecture in the first half of the C20.” The London Blitz