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EMPIRE BUILDER

From humble foot soldier to chief imperial architect to the Ottoman court, Sinan's lengthy and extraordinary career left behind a bounty of spectacular mosques and other public buildings, many still standing as iconic structural features of the modern-day city of Istanbul



No single city can match Istanbul. To those who have never been there, I try to explain it as an urban cocktail formed from the history of Rome and the drama of New York. If that gets a curious look, I compound it by suggesting Paris draped over one of the pillars of Hercules at the entrance to the Mediterranean, or London packed with half the cathedrals and cloisters of England.

Those who have the good fortune to approach Istanbul by boat at dusk will have no need of such analogies. The drama of a blood-gold sky pierced by the silhouettes of medieval domes, minarets, and towers, all set beside the rushing waters of the Bosphorus, will be etched in their memory. In the foreground will be the terrier-like activity of dozens of white ferryboats crisscrossing the straits, while in the background hums the thronging evidence of a rapidly expanding contemporary metropolis: suspension bridges, congested highways, hundreds of merchant ships anchored offshore, incoming aircraft, and the gleam of the distant sharp towers of the financial district and über-chic hotels.

Those who have landed in Istanbul, even for a half-day or a long weekend, will be caught in a web of rich, confusing experiences. Typically the garbled recollections will include tales about getting lost in the labyrinth of the covered bazaar and the treasure galleries of the Topkapı Palace, all set against the experience

of the vastness of the prayer hall of the Blue Mosque, the throne room of the Dolmabahçe Palace, and the melancholic dignity of the interior of Hagia Sophia.

Only a tiny minority of travelers to Istanbul – those with energy, time, an inquiring eye, and a fascination with shape and form – will respond to the word “Sinan.” It takes a degree of commitment to crisscross the city tracking down works by the greatest Ottoman architect of all time. Sinan (which means “spear”) is said to have been born in 1490 in an Anatolian hamlet populated by Greek and Armenian peasants. As a man of 20, he was recruited to join the slave army of the sultan, Selim the Grim. On one level, these enslaved Christian youths of the infamous “blood tribute” were mere cannon fodder for the sultan’s wars, but on another, selection into the household of the sultan meant the possibility of rising through the ranks to become a leading figure in the government of the empire – a pasha or even a grand vizier.

For the next 30 or so years, following his basic training which included conversion to Islam, Sinan served as a janissary soldier, rising through the ranks as he mastered the tasks of building pontoons, laying out an army encampment, commanding cavalry, building ships, and directing the bombardment of fortress walls. He rose to be a janissary colonel with two pious wives

and a nest of children and adopted nephews, all safely housed in central Istanbul. His career, which spanned service in Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Persia, as well as in his Anatolian homeland, gave him hands-on experience of different architectural traditions. It also allowed him to create a unique synthesis when he was appointed the head builder-architect to the imperial court in 1538.

Over the next 30 years, key members of the imperial family, particularly the greatest of Ottoman sultans, Süleyman the Magnificent, employed court architect Sinan to build gifts to God for them. It is revealing of the essentially devout nature of Ottoman society that none of the summer kiosks, riverside palaces, or townhouses that Sinan built for his august patrons survives. These secular structures were ephemeral affairs of wood, brick, and plaster, while for their pious and charitable religious foundations, the Ottoman elite lavished vast fortunes to build with precision, order, and stone.

This is the first characteristic of the era of Sinan – an almost Romanesque sense of order and permanence, enforced by a pleasing harmony of materials. His solid confident exteriors of dressed limestone masonry lead up through an ascending scale of arches and vaults to support a cascade of lead-sheathed domes. Indeed, Sinan’s three grand imperial mosques – the cathedrals,

as it were, of the Ottoman Empire – were studies of power in stone. The ripple of domes over a porch processes to a higher series ringing the outer courtyard of a mosque, all of which are but the base notes for the growing ascendancy of quarter and half domes that buttress the final, over-arching central dome. The imagery is insistent, from both a spiritual and a secular perception. As the great mosques are commanded by one dome, so is the empire ruled by one sultan, his authority buttressed by a descending authority of viziers, pashas, beylerbeys, and aghas. Together, they shelter the believer.

Internally, there is no need for any other symbolism than that all numbers ultimately lead to one – the square prayer hall and the single dome. This is unlike the architecture of Christendom, where the subdivision of internal space into porches, nave, chapel-encrusted side aisles, and chancel expressed the hierarchy between priests and congregation. Instead, Sinan poured all his energy into creating one imposing prayer hall that dwarfs the worshipper, for all believers are equal (and insignificant) under the one God. All internal decoration – wall tiles, stained glass, and carving – affirm the direction for Muslim prayer, facing toward Mecca. Even the famous floral motifs of the fabulous Iznik tiles that were created in this period (a chromatic

Above: the Süleymaniye was the mosque built by Sinan for his master, Sultan Süleyman, between 1550 and 1557. It is the grandest, most magnificent instance of Ottoman architecture in all of Istanbul – serene, harmonious, and awesome. It stands at the center of a vast complex of walled tombs and 8 distinct charitable complexes, whose courtyards were dedicated to feeding the poor, caring for the insane, teaching the true path of Islam to university students, as well as perfecting the 7 different accents in which the Koran can be recited

Previous pages: Şehzade Camii – the Mosque of the Prince – was the first of the great imperial mosque complexes to be built by Sinan. Work started in 1543 on the orders of Sultan Süleyman, transfixed with grief at the loss of his adored eldest son, Prince Mehmed, who died of smallpox aged 21. Behind the prayer hall of the mosque, Sinan designed a garden, where the beautiful octagonal tomb of the prince can be found. Above: Sinan built the Mihrimah Sultan Camii for the favorite daughter of Sultan Süleyman, between 1562 and 1565. It stands on the summit of the Sixth Hill of old Istanbul, just inside the line of ancient Byzantine walls



swirl of four colors and flowers, typically peonies, tulips, carnations, and windblown reeds) are implicitly reinforcing Islamic faith. They are a reminder of the great garden beyond the walls of the mosque, the heavenly garden created by God. Similarly the geometric designs carved into plaster or decorating the marble floors remind the believer that there is one fixed point at the center of the swirling distractions of the world. The Arabic calligraphy drawn in triumphant, exuberant scale on the dome, or hung in medallions beside the supporting drum, unite architecture with sound: the sound of Arabic prayer and the recitation of the Koran.

Sinan identified the Şehzade imperial mosque (built for the son of Süleyman, who predeceased him) as his apprentice piece; the Süleymaniye, for the sultan himself, his work of qualification; and the Selimiye, built for Sultan Süleyman's surviving son and heir, Sultan Selim II, as his masterwork. These three edifices were all built on time and on budget, yet they were only a

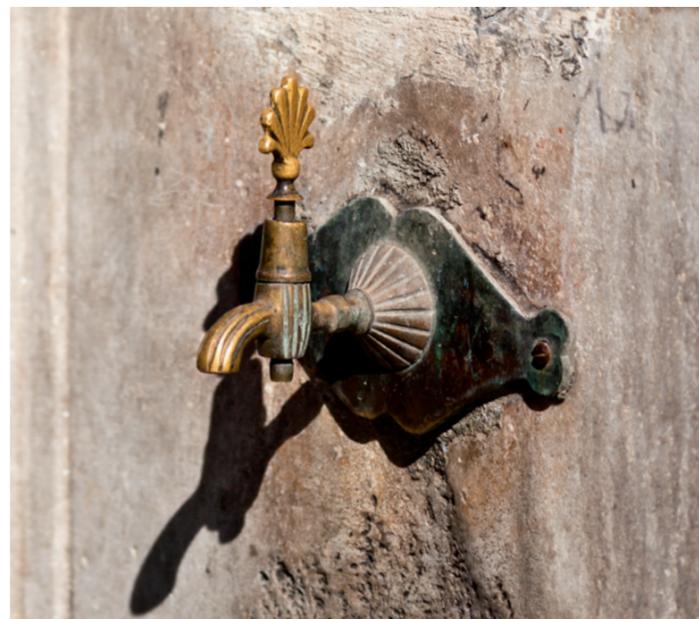
fraction of his oeuvre. Over his career, until his death in 1588, he is thought to have supervised and designed as many as 476 buildings, of which 196 survive. These include charitable hospices, hospitals, tombs, schools, fountains, university colleges, dervish monasteries, and public bath houses, often built as part of the complex of a memorial mosque for one of the great figures at the court of Sultan Süleyman.

There were also more routine imperial duties to be undertaken. Sinan repaired ancient mosques, and built bridges (one of which inspired Ivo Andrić's Nobel Prize-winning novel, *The Bridge on the Drina*) and aqueducts worthy of the Romans to bring fresh water into Istanbul, not to mention rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

The most revered of the works of Sinan are the mosques he built for the imperial family. Not all are masterpieces, though one suspects this was as much to do with an interfering patron, or being employed to complete a half-finished project, as with any lack of

Left and below: the Selimiye mosque, Sinan's acknowledged masterpiece, was completed when the royal architect was 80 years old. It was built for the only surviving son of Süleyman the Magnificent, Sultan Selim II, in the city of Edirne (Adrianople), at the time one of the centers of the Ottoman Empire and now perched on the western edge of Turkey





personal talent. For his command of detail is always impeccable, whether in the fitted wall cupboards in a student dormitory, a series of chimneys that draw perfectly, gutters that drain, or buttresses half-hidden in the depth of a wall. He never constructed unnecessary ornaments, but instead used evolving embellishment to strengthen the true function and purpose of a building. And he commissioned many of the most talented craftspeople of the time – Ibrahim the Drunkard, the mercurial genius of Ottoman stained glass, the hereditary guild of Tabrizi potters, as well as the court calligrapher (who in the Ottoman tradition stood at the apex of all the applied arts).

At times, Sinan seems to have so understood his brief that he succeeded in translating some aspect of the character of his patron into stone. By adding a row of goldsmiths' booths to the Süleymaniye complex, he made reference to the sultan's own training in that craft. The four minarets are customarily read as a reference to Süleyman as the fourth sultan to rule in Istanbul, while the ten balconies for the muezzin to call the hours of prayer refer to the sultan's position as tenth in line from the founder of the dynasty.

Even more impressive was Sinan's brilliant evocation of Rüstem Pasha – the Uriah Heap of Ottoman politics. This tightfisted, mean-mouthed miser was notorious

for his bad language and his youthful occupation as a Croatian swineherd, yet he was also an efficient and loyal minister to Sultan Süleyman. Sinan commemorated Rüstem Pasha with a supremely elegant mosque built above a vaulted basement, whose spaces are rented out as shops and storehouses. The smells and babble of noise from the bazaar waft up into the exquisite prayer hall, decorated with a magpie's nest of Iznik tiles from the pasha's collection.

Sinan's first, and arguably most loyal and influential, patron was Princess Mihrimah Sultan, the daughter of Sultan Süleyman, who is commemorated by the Mihrimah Sultan mosque, a bafflingly high and delicate hall of light. Hundreds of years before its time, it has survived intact beside the old walls of the city and a busy highway to become the cherished inspiration for half of the modern mosques being built today in the Turkish countryside.

Finally, in the mosque he built for Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, one of the most enlightened and principled of all the brilliant viziers who served the sultans, one can see the perfect union of patron and master-craftsman. It is strong, enduring, classical, clever, inventive, forever enchanting, of its time but also made, not for eternity but, as Sinan once assured his master, "to stand until the Day of Judgment." ♦

Above and right: Sokollu Mehmed Pasha Camii was built between 1571 and 1572 to honor the Ottoman Princess Esmahan, the royal wife of the brilliant grand vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha. Like Sinan, Sokollu Mehmed Pasha was a "slave of the gate," a janissary soldier, recruited from a Christian village in Bosnia, who rose to the very highest position of state

