CHAPTER 18

The Tofre Begadim Synagogue and the Non-Muslim Policy of the Late Ottoman Empire

*Meltem Özkan Altınoz*

Transforming the old Byzantine capital, Constantinople, into a new Ottoman center was a crucial step leading to the emergence of separate Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the city by the end of the fifteenth century. After the conquest Ottoman Muslims largely settled in the Historic Peninsula, while the non-Muslim population lived by the sea in Pera, surrounding Galata, and Üsküdar.1 However, this division did not insulate Ottoman society and court culture from ‘Westernizing’ influences and the historical and political winds of change, which led to the introduction of new institutions and lifestyles from the end of the seventeenth century. These changes also impacted the spatial arrangement of the city, with the non-Muslim residential areas continuing to rise in importance to become the seat of government in the nineteenth century.

The cosmopolitan social structure of Galata saw the co-existence of Greeks, Turks, Italians, Armenians, Arabs, and distinct Jewish ethnicities. A Jewish community had resided in Constantinople since Roman times and first appear in the records during the fourth century CE. In the twelfth century, Benjamín de Tudela, a Jewish traveler to Constantinople reported that 2,555 Romanoit Jews were living in Pera. This congregation was the oldest Jewish congregation in the region. Another congregation, Italian Jews, were mostly traders from Genoa. One of the oldest Jewish communities was the Ashkenazim whose name signified ‘Germany’ in Hebrew and who shared the Yiddish language, a dialect of German. Ashkenazim mostly settled in Eastern and Central Europe following unrest in Germany. While their history in Anatolia goes back to the Byzantine period, records of Ashkenazim finding favorable conditions in areas under Turkic control go back to the thirteenth century. From the seventeenth through to the twentieth centuries a spate of pogroms in Europe forced many more Ashkenazim to seek refuge in the Ottoman Empire, with many immigrants choosing to settle in Galata. The end of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century saw large waves of immigrants to Istanbul from the Sephardic congregations of the Iberian Peninsula after the so-called Spanish reconquest movement reached its apex. The reconquest policy aimed to establish Catholic monarchic superiority over the Peninsula, resulting in firstly the Jews being exiled from the Peninsula. These Sephardic congregations spoke the Ladino language, a dialect of Spanish. The Sephardic name also derived from the word for ‘Spain’ in Ladino. Over time these congregations would assimilate the other Jewish societies in Ottoman territories and become the dominant Jewish culture.2

---


2 Erdal Frayman, “Aşkenazlarnın Kökenleri” (Origins of Ashkenazim) Yüksekka’dan Yüz Yıllık Bir Sinagog; Aşkenazlarnı (A Hundred Years Old Synagogue in Yüksekka’d Street: The Ashkenazim), ed. Erdal Frayman, Moše Grosman, Robert Schild (Istanbul: Galata
Until now, most studies of Jewish History in the Ottoman Empire have been based on etymological and historical research. Only a few of them have focused their interest on architectural questions: Architect Mine Tanaç Kiray considered Sephardic communities and their cultural transformation of the architecture of İzmir; art historian İnci Türküoğlu concentrated on the plan formations of synagogues in Turkey; another prominent researcher of Jewish studies, Naim Gülezyüz, contributed to the social, historical, and architectural debates on Turkish Jewry. Yet none of these studies evaluate Jewish architecture within the context of late period Ottoman architectural history. However, this paper asserts that our understanding of the late Ottoman period cannot be formulated without including the relationship of non-Muslim ethnicities to the multi cultural policies seen in the nineteenth century. In this regard, this paper deciphers non-Muslim architecture in an Ottoman context, while stressing an Ottoman identity whose early beginnings were based on Turkish and Muslim origin but by the effect of state policy obtained multiethnic-religious features that were promoted until the end of the nineteenth century.

The study investigates the changing social and political aspects of the Ottoman Empire, which led to the emergence of the non-Muslim policies in the nineteenth century. It explores Ottoman identity and draws a general picture of the architectural language of the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. It offers a better understanding of the importance of Galata and the contribution of its ethnic diversities to the cosmopolitan nature of Ottoman architectural history. The Tofre Begadim Synagogue’s plans, drawings, and photographs assist in revealing the architectural language of the synagogue and its parallels with the broader agenda of late period Ottoman architecture, which studies of nineteenth-century Jewish life seem to have largely overlooked. This paper therefore seeks to address a gap in the study of architectural history and brings a new methodological approach to the field, so as to meaningfully include non-Muslim architecture within the context of late period Ottoman architectural history.


1 Westernizing Influences on the Empire and the Non-Muslim Policy

The nineteenth century brought a trend toward improvement in all walks of life in the seat of the Ottoman Empire. During this period, Europe was the most well-organized and dynamic continent in the world, and exerted much influence over its adjacent territories, particularly the Ottomans, who were less technologically advanced. With its strong image undermined by eighteenth-century military defeats, the Ottomans sought to create