THE KADIRGA PALACE:
AN ARCHITECTURAL RECONSTRUCTION

This contribution is part of a larger work which will present evidence for two discoveries. The first is that the Ottoman palace at Kadirga Limani in Istanbul, long referred to as “Esma Sultan’s palace” and loosely attributed to one or the other of two eighteenth-century princesses of that name, in fact dates back to the sixteenth century. It was built for a much earlier Esmahan (Ismihan) Sultan (1545–85), the daughter of Selim II by Nurbanu Sultan (née Cecilia Venier-Baffo), granddaughter of Süleyman the Magnificent, and wife of Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Paşa. The second discovery is that the architect for this monumental palace was none other than Sinan. This makes Kadirga the first of Sinan’s numerous palaces for which we have an actual layout.

I have presented evidence for both Esmahan’s patronage and Sinan’s design elsewhere. Here I shall limit myself to the task of architectural reconstruction. A description of what the palace must have been like is in any case necessary before any definitive identification can be made. Since no part of this palace has survived, its reconstruction must be based entirely on other evidence, something that has hitherto never been attempted for an Ottoman palace for which there are no remains. This reconstruction will form the foundation for the second part of my argument, for the results suggest, not a non-classical palace, but, on the contrary, a very traditional and imperial form. The Kadirga Palace, like the Topkapı and other Ottoman royal palaces, originally consisted of an inner core made up of three successive courtyards corresponding to the hierarchical system of a royal household, which was organized in terms of an outer sphere (birun) that housed service and administrative functions and an inner sphere (enderun) for domestic and recreational activities, terminating in the totally private walled garden. The contrast between outside and inside found expression at Kadirga Limani in the horizontal layout of three consecutive terraces on which separate but often connected buildings formed subsidiary courts. This procession of walled-in enclosures is also manifested in the only surviving palace from the eighteenth century, the Ishak Paşa palace in northeastern Anatolia. Other, non-imperial antecedents of comparable size in Istanbul are two palaces belonging to sixteenth-century grand viziers, Ibrahim Paşa and Sokollu Mehmed Paşa. But, although Esma Sultan’s palace was organized along hierarchical lines that reflected the organization of the Ottoman regime, its buildings could have been remodeled indefinitely to accommodate changes in fashion. Its structural skeleton would in all probability have remained relatively unchanged, however, which is important to bear in mind in tackling its reconstruction and tracing and dating its origins.

The extensive palace at Kadirga Limani (the Harbor of the Galleys; so-called because it had been a harbor and arsenal complex in Byzantine times and the harbor for the Ottoman fleet from the conquest until 1515) was the only Ottoman royal palace in Istanbul built to look out over the Marmara Sea; the others faced the Bosporus. The palace has been known for some time from two plans in the Topkapı Palace archives (figs. 1–2). One of them is for a complex with three courtyards arranged hierarchically in the usual progression from public through semi-public to private buildings and has usually been associated with Esma Sultan the Elder (1726–88), a daughter of Sultan Ahmed III, because the few early Ottoman archival and historical sources that refer to the palace at Kadirga Limani as “the palace of Esma Sultan” all date from the time when it was first allocated to her. The second, smaller, plan shows a single building with a large audience hall and other rooms, clearly the men’s quarters for the same palace where a pasha, in this case the princess’s husband, held court.

Since only a limited number of Ottoman architectural plans have been preserved through the ages and precious few of these are residential, these two plans are important enough in themselves — whatever the further secrets they hold the key to — all the more because among the handful of residential examples that do remain, none that dates from before the nineteenth century displays such grandeur and is identified with the name of a royal woman. In addition, the two plans are
Fig. 1. Site plan of "Esma Sultan's Palace" at Kadirga Liman, probably drawn up for the repairs of 1803. Topkapı Palace Archives, D. 947-2.