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TWO OTTOMAN DOCUMENTS ON ARCHITECTS IN EGYPT

The significance of two archival documents in Istanbul concerning architects who worked in Egypt in the late sixteenth century lies in three areas. First, both documents mention the name of Sinan, the greatest architect of the Ottomans, and add to our information about the office of head architect, or ser mi'mar-i hāssa, which was then occupied by him. Second, both deal with provincial architecture and thus add to our information about the relationship between Istanbul and peripheral areas. Third, the documents help clarify the role of the architect, a very elusive component in Ottoman architecture. We tend to ignore the creative role architects played when we discuss Ottoman buildings, except perhaps when we deal with those built by Sinan and his few students. This neglect is largely due to the meagerness of information in the sources concerning artists and architects. Biographical references to architects and critical descriptions of their buildings are very rare in Ottoman historiography. If the documents described here are representative of others yet to be revealed, then archival material may still yield more of the kind of information we need. At the very least, we might discover how architects were hired, what their education was, and how they were organized.

A thorough understanding and interpretation of Ottoman architecture requires a careful investigation of the interrelationship between the architectural endeavors undertaken in the various provinces, such as Egypt, and those undertaken in Istanbul and its environs. Clearly the study of the architecture of a province should do more than to document stylistic, structural, or typological peculiarities that set it apart from the architecture of the capital and other regions of the empire. Such a major tradition as Ottoman architecture is can only be defined in terms of its variations, permutations, and the extent of its influence over a large area and a span of time. As with Roman architecture, Ottoman architecture has to be seen in conjunction with the imperial system from which it takes its name and whose fortunes it reflects. Egypt, quite clearly, is a case in point.

The diversity of styles that appeared in Egypt in the years between 1520 and 1620 reflects the complexity of the factors that affected building activities in a region that had a rich architectural past but had subsequently been reduced to provincial status. This complexity included the effects of the radical administrative and economic changes Egypt underwent after it was conquered by the Ottomans in 1517. Given the centralized administrative system of the Ottoman empire, we might expect the architectural models of the capital simply to be replicated in the provinces, but this was not always the case. Although between 1520 and 1580 the Ottoman governors of Egypt had mosques built in Cairo that would have been appropriate for any neighborhood of Istanbul, they also commissioned structures that emulated Mamluk architecture so closely that they could have been undertaken by a Mamluk amir.

Generally, we might assume that the presence and continuity of a local, as opposed to a central imperial, architectural tradition largely depended on the prominence and strength of regional power and authority. In Egypt, many of the Mamluk institutions were continued under Ottoman rule, thus signaling this province's special administrative status and its higher degree of independence within its boundaries. The Ottoman governor (he was called beylerbeysi until the early seventeenth century; later vali became the more common term) in Cairo presided over a court or council (divan) that paralleled the one in Istanbul, although of course subjugated to it. The governor usually remained in the Cairo post for a brief period, two years being the normal stay. The post was a highly prestigious position: the governor held the rank of vezir with four plumes, and more often than not his governorship would be followed by an appointment to the council of the imperial city.
On the other hand, if the tenure of the governor was short and if he was largely unsuccessful in forming alliances with the local elite, few grandiose architectural undertakings could be expected from him. As a province, Egypt was not as fully integrated into the imperial system as the Syrian provinces were. The land of Egypt was not granted in fiefs, but was farmed out, usually to the mamluk amirs who as tax farmers (mutazim) eventually became landlords.7

Many of the patrons of architecture in Egypt seem to have felt a less than total commitment to the promotion and continuity of imperial Ottoman symbols. In 1535 Husrev Pasha, then governor of Egypt, had built a sabîl-kuttâb in Cairo that was modeled after the Mamluk type. But later, as governor of Aleppo province, he commissioned Sinan or one of his immediate underlings to build his mosque, madrasa, and other dependencies, and they are unmistakably Ottoman.8 The variance in style between two foundations by the same patron can be attributed in large degree to the different administrative policies in effect in the provinces in which they were built.

The availability of well-established local architectural forms to serve as models for new structures undoubtedly accounts for much of the diversity in styles in Ottoman Cairo. Cairo in the early sixteenth century boasted many more imperial monuments than did Istanbul. The sheer number of buildings from the Islamic period in Cairo might well have overwhelmed the Ottoman patrons. Influences from Istanbul and local traditions vied with each other, as patrons selected one style or another for their buildings. The popularity of architectural styles in Ottoman Cairo fluctuated with the taste and political ambitions of the patrons.

Whether or not continuity in local traditions of architecture is maintained in the face of political changes depends a great deal on who the architects were. Were the architects and master craftsmen local people, or were they foreigners who were partly trained and worked in Egypt? How were they organized and what were their links to the associations of architects and craftsmen in Istanbul? In the centralized state characteristic of the Ottoman empire, particularly in the classical age, from about 1450 to 1600,9 the choice, training, appointment, and organization of architects was closely controlled from the office of imperial chief architect (ser mi‘mâr-i hâssa) at the court in Istanbul. The chief architect had under his immediate command the second architect-in-chief (mi‘mâr-i sâmi), the supervisor of waterworks, the agha of Istanbul, chief of lime products (kireçibâşı), the director of the magazines, the head secretary of the magazines, and finally the head of repair work (ta‘mîrât). The chief architect was also the head of the organization of imperial architects (cema‘at-i mi‘mârân-i hâssa). This organization consisted of court architects, the steward (katkhudâ), the scribe (kâtib), the minaret builder (minâreci), the marble carver (mermerci), mason (traşçî), plasterer (sccaci), and finally the painter/decorator (nakkâs).10 The organization occupied a workshop (kâr-khâna) situated in the Vefa quarter of Istanbul.11 The counterpart of the chief architect in the supervision of building activities was the prefect of the city (sehr-emini), who was responsible for the financial aspects of construction.12

Our knowledge of the organization of architects, as well as of individual architects, is limited. Sinan, whose life spanned almost a century, was the most prolific and famous of Ottoman architects, and the Ottoman historians are comparatively informative about him. Yet our knowledge even of his career and life does not extend beyond a sketchy biography.13 Sinan’s involvement in major imperial undertakings such as the Suleymaniye is well documented,14 but the extent of his contribution to the buildings sponsored by lower-ranking patrons is not known.15 It is documented that architects used to prepare drawings and models of their projected buildings for their patrons, but very few of these have come to light.16 We also have no critical writings on architecture by Ottoman historians or travelers.17 If our familiarity with the chief architect of the imperial court is so meager, it would appear that there is little hope to learn much about the architects of Ottoman Cairo, a provincial capital.18

In the absence of biographical references or critical observations by Ottoman historians about Cairo’s architects, I turned to the Register Books of the Imperial Court (Divân-i Humâyûn Muhimme Defterleri), partly preserved in the Prime Minister’s Archives (Başbakanlık Arşivi) in Istanbul. I expected to find decrees (hukm-i şerif) issued from the court of the Ottoman sultans to their representatives in Egypt concerning building activities under their jurisdiction. I was fortunate. There are indeed a large number of such documents in the Istanbul archives. Many of them pertain to structures in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, the care and maintenance of which were entrusted to the Ottoman governor of Egypt and his court.19

Two of these decrees directly concern the activities of architects in Egypt, and give some sense of what might