

## Chapter XVIII

### The Meanings of Sinan's Architecture\*

Among the glories of the Ottoman Golden Age are the many buildings built by or attributed to the architect Sinan. The majority of them are in Istanbul and they are still today the visual landmarks of the city. Their construction preceded and then overlapped the rebuilding of Rome under the leadership of the popes and through the genius of Bramante, Michelangelo, Sangallo, and eventually Bernini. Thus two of the three largest metropolises of the Mediterranean (and, at that time, of the world) were drastically modified in roughly the same period, the two which were the direct heirs of the first and of the second Rome. For comparative studies, this parallelism is of considerable interest and deserves some intelligent attention.

Some 470 buildings are attributed to Sinan, including eighty-four large mosques, fifty-four small ones, fifty-seven *madrastas*, thirty-five palaces and forty-eight baths, to name but a few of the functions which have been recorded. A large proportion, nearly two-thirds, of these monuments has been preserved and more or less adequate publications exist about most of them. Two biographies of Sinan have been preserved which still need philological investigation. The Ottoman archives have yielded their usual rich information and the *waqfiyah* of the Süleymaniye mosque has already created a significant literature on its content. Finally, a few interpretative articles have begun to raise aesthetic issues around Sinan's buildings.<sup>1</sup> All of this suggests that to talk about Sinan is to interpret available buildings during an unusually rich period of time and with a large array of documents. Even a non-Ottomanist like myself who has never worked in centuries as late as the sixteenth could have something to say which would not be a trite generality. It is in fact almost an intellectual obligation to develop and

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<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about Sinan and the Ottoman sixteenth century. I have profited primarily from the following: Aptulla Kuran, *Sinan* (Washington and Istanbul, 1987); Dogan Kuban, "Sinan," *Encyclopedia of Architecture*; Dogan Kuban, "The Style of Sinan's Domed Structures," *Muqarnas*, 4 (1987); Gulru Necipoğlu-Kafadar, "The Süleymaniye Complex in Istanbul: An Interpretation," *Muqarnas*, 3 (1985). All further bibliographical items will be found in these works.

publicize impressions and hypotheses so as to elicit reactions from those who are more continuously involved with the art and life of Sinan. [276]

Having said that, however, difficulties begin at several different levels. One is a question of perception which can best be illustrated by an anecdote. Some months ago, as I was visiting the Suleyman exhibition in New York, a group of visitors passed by the large air photograph of the complex of Suleyman the Magnificent. Someone asked: why did they put a picture of Hagia Sophia in an exhibition on Suleyman? These fairly well-educated visitors all associated a certain shape – a single-dome-dominated building with a set of supporting segments of domes – with one monument and one monument only, Hagia Sophia, built in the thirties of the sixth century AD, which was then, as it is now, a unique building. The existence of several hundreds of dome-centered Ottoman buildings from Algiers or Cairo to Baghdad and Yugoslavia (not to speak of the Turkish cities in Anatolia and Thrace) has not entered art-historical memory as an original creation but as an offshoot of Hagia Sophia.

A second difficulty of dealing with Sinan (as opposed to Michelangelo or Bramante) is that there has occurred an almost total break between scholarship and evaluation. Most of the new scholarship, done primarily in Turkey, is precise and factual, even in its occasional formalism, and, with a few significant exceptions, avoids the poetic expression which is often required of works of great art. Evaluation, still too often without a full immersion in the context of the time, tends to be superficial and reduces the Ottoman experience to an example of a stepchild of Roman architecture. It fits snugly, however, within a Western experience of architecture. The problem here is how to discover and develop a discourse of analysis and explanation which would at the same time acknowledge the originality of the Ottoman experience of the sixteenth century and relate it to a technological and formal history which is Mediterranean, if not universal.

And the third difficulty is that Sinan built for the most part buildings whose functions were clearly circumscribed by an almost millenary Islamic tradition. They were mosques, *madrasas*, baths, caravanserais, palaces, mausoleums, all part of a known and well-established tradition with dozens of local variants extending from India to Morocco. How well does his work fit with this tradition? Or did the very special circumstances of the Ottoman empire – its ethnic and religious variety, its unique manner of choosing its ruling elites, its close contacts with Europe and especially with Renaissance and Baroque Italy – alter the nature of the Islamic presence within the world of Sinan? Put in the jargon of contemporary intellectual practices, what was the collective memory of Sinan's world, the world of his patrons and of his surroundings? Was it the memory of ancient Turkish things in Central Asia? Of Harun al-Rashid and the glories of classical Islam? Of Rome and Constantinople, Caesar and Justinian, the Pantheon and St Irene, the world of Rum? Of Timur, the semi-legendary [277] conqueror who had inflicted

on the Ottomans a most costly defeat but whose name had remained among them as well as among the Mughals in India as a cultural ancestor? Each one of these historical explanations is possible and some have even been argued, but the difficulties are that each one has a different set of implications and that, therefore, different approaches are needed to investigate any one of them.

To deal with Sinan's architecture is, then, to deal not only with a set of buildings and their evolution but with an astounding spectrum of issues ranging from contemporary national and scholarly concerns all the way to transcultural relations or to many different moments of time or places in Western Asia or the Mediterranean. Therein lies the first meaning of Sinan's architecture. By the very nature of its circumstances, context and quality, it appears on two tracks: as a set of buildings which become sequences of objects to explain and understand and as a set of issues which extend meanings beyond an object.

Such a double track is a characteristic of any great artist's work and it is what makes his creation fascinating. In the scope of one paper, however, it is possible neither to discuss 470 individual buildings nor to deal with all the issues raised. I shall pick only two themes which will allow me to deal with three or four buildings. The themes are, first, how it was that Sinan created an appropriate setting for Muslim life, and, second, the unavoidable problem of Sinan's domes. I shall leave aside completely many of the problems which have occupied a great deal of recent scholarship: the evolution and evaluation of Sinan's treatment of forms, his growth as an architect, his use of decoration, and the relationship of his work to the Baroque age about to flourish, although I will come back to a special aspect of the last.

The vast majority of Sinan's buildings are destined for the by then well-honed and well-developed purposes of an Islamic society in which the proper act of the rich and powerful (and especially the latter) was to donate part of their fortune for the eternal upkeep of a set of functions restricted in their use to the Muslim community. Prayer is the best known of these functions, illustrated by the mosque. But all sorts of schools, from elementary to specialized training places for the legal and religious elites, were part of the system, as were hospitals, libraries, welfare kitchens, mausoleums and so forth. It was a complex system of functions, each of which has its own history and development. None of the functions, except perhaps public kitchens (*imaret*), were Ottoman inventions and few among them had clear forms or blueprints attached to them. Such broad functional requirements as existed (unified space for prayer, hot rooms in bath houses) could be met in any number of technical ways. Sinan, therefore, did not come to the Muslim function without an experience of older models and [278] memories. In Bursa and especially in Edirne the young Ottoman system had developed mosques based on a single dome or on sequences of domes. Mausoleums abounded, as did schools, but the challenge of Constantinople had not as

yet been met, a challenge which was of a unique urban space, of a unique building (Hagia Sophia), and of a unique history.

Let me show you what Sinan did with two examples. The first one is the group of buildings completed in 1571–2 and known as the Mosque of Sokollu Mehmet Pasha. This celebrated statesman and his wife, Esmahan Sultan, sponsored a typical ensemble consisting of a mosque, of a *madrasa*, and of a *tekke*, a cloister for holy men at times with mystical interests, often merely a form of welfare for the old and the transient. Sinan, whether directly or through his atelier, separated the *tekke* from the mosque and the *madrasa* and combined the last two by providing them with a single courtyard. All the terms involved – a large dome on a hexagon supported by six piers engaged in walls, four supporting half-domes, courtyard, portico, interior colonnade, domical cells, monumental entrance – have been common or at least current in Islamic Anatolian architecture for several centuries, and some of these terms go back to the obscure origins of Mediterranean architecture which so fascinate historians of art. Sinan's genius appears in the way in which he has ordered these elements in the very difficult setting of a sharp slope. He has made access to the mosque almost invisible from the outside, but dramatic once one finds the entrance and climbs toward the court; he has used admirably a large fountain to serve as a transitional visual stopover from the trabeated entrance of steps and the curves of the upper parts of the complex. And then, as one penetrates into the dome chamber, the spatial unity of the composition is fractured, like a crystal or a diamond, into a myriad of facets, some architectonic, other flat applications on walls or stained glass. Ottoman monuments have not been studied enough to know whether many iconographic meanings can or should be attributed to this mass of visual signs, at least in this particular instance. But, in opposition to current opinion which sees the Sokollu interior exclusively in terms of spatial daring, I prefer to see it as in a state of tension between a unified and logical upward movement and a broken-up downward cascade.

To my initial question of Sinan's response to the challenge of traditional Islamic piety as applied to the rich and powerful, the answer here is that Sinan used a difficult lot to close Mehmet Sokollu's mosque unto itself, to create a rich interior space which could hardly be guessed from the outside, as the section makes the dome, whose domination of the interior space is evident, more forceful from the outside than it really is. Sokollu's ensemble, an interiorized monument, meets wonderfully one Muslim tendency: withdrawal from the immediacy [279] of the city in order to meditate, dream and pray, but not withdrawal from the urban setting. In early references to the mosque, its relationship to the seashore was recalled, and Sinan knew how to manipulate known elements in order to create a rare contrast between a hidden and mysterious exterior (whose minaret is the weakest Sinan ever conceived) and a rich and clear interior. This contrast is *one* possible Muslim message.

The difference could not be more striking with the Süleymaniye, the grandiose ensemble built between 1550 and 1557 and still now dominating the city day and night. Yet, from my point of view of traditional Islamic functions, it is a very traditional ensemble with four *madrastas* instead of one and with a usually rare medical school. In Istanbul itself Mehmet the Conqueror had already provided the precedent of a group of eight monumentalized functions of three sides of a mosque–imperial cemetery axis. And it is easy to see the Süleymaniye simply as an expression of power and domination, as Sinan carves out of the highest hill of the city a monument which embodies Suleyman's rule. Many scholars have commented on the contrast between the symmetry of the central complex and the asymmetry of the surrounding areas, on the elevation of domes and cupolas cascading down from the central cupola or snugly set next to each other with their little chimneys like obedient children in a classroom. Nowhere in the history of architecture does the astounding versatility of the dome appear with such brilliance and testify to the imagination of Sinan's designs, nor is there any ensemble with so many axes, so many directions, and so many points of view. A recent study has also unraveled the several operational levels at which this ensemble functioned and shown in particular that the building was full of verbal or visual references to the great sanctuaries of Islam, to Hagia Sophia, and to paradise, in the peculiarly Muslim way in which paradise is both here and yet not quite present.

Thus, a first contrast with Sokollu is that of the multiplicity of meanings available in the Süleymaniye. In part this was no doubt due to the difference between a public and a private enterprise, and it is theoretically not excluded that a deeper knowledge of the Sokollu family may yield interesting results in the interpretation of the mosque. The earlier Turkish world of Anatolia was full of private references of this sort, but I simply do not know whether they are appropriate in an Ottoman context. For, in contradistinction to the West, with its fascination with mimetic representations and with the spirit of self-analysis issued from the practice of the confession, the Muslim world usually preferred not to expose the individual peculiarities of each believer and to subsume pain and fear under a decorous façade. At the public level, visual references to a paradise or to politics are better known and their presence at the Süleymaniye [280] is derived from obvious qur'anic quotations in doorways and from the parallelism between the tomb of Suleyman and the Dome of the Rock, probably because of a common relationship to Solomon. These public and official synchronic meanings were then read into the building by Ottoman historians and only withered away when the setting of these meanings disappeared in the nineteenth century and especially after the Kemalist revolution. The Süleymaniye is part of the setting of an empire and becomes the partner of the Topkapı Serayi. In the latter, the Palace school trained the future soldiers and administrators of the empire; out of the former came its intellectual and religious leaders. And what Sinan

succeeded in doing is in making visible the preeminence of the religious order as the foundation of the empire, as its rationale and its justification. It is the domination of Istanbul by the Süleymaniye which led dozens of similar buildings all over the empire to become signs of Ottoman presence. The architecture of the mosque, because of its simplicity and visibility, became *the* imperial statement, and it is Sinan who codified the form taken by the mosque in classical Ottoman times.

Sinan achieved this in part by his artful treatment of the hill, which has already been mentioned. He did it also with the plan of the mosque which consciously recalled Hagia Sophia with its central dome on huge articulated piers supported by two half-domes on the main axis of a square space. In other words, there is a movement toward an end in the building, toward the *qiblah*, the focus of prayer. There is an antespace to it, the court with four minarets as a separate composition; and then the platform has asymmetrical entrances, so that one walks around the building as through a spiral to get to its doorway. Several geometries of movements form patterns around the building. What we see in all of this is a manipulation of space and of movement in such a way that a competition takes place between the eyes and the feet. Clear and obvious from afar, the Süleymaniye is reached through several tortuous passages and appears or disappears as one moves toward it. What Sinan has done is once again to use admirably the setting of the city in creating a drama of accessibility toward a composition which then broadcasts a complex series of multi-leveled messages about the pious foundations of a universal Muslim empire.

In all of this we see again the striking use of domes as modules and as centers of composition. And thus I have an entry into the second of my major issues, Sinan's domes. Let me summarize, first, what the problems are. No one questions any more that, for reasons which need not concern us here, the Ottomans, more than any other Turkic principality after the thirteenth century, adopted the dome as their primary planning module. They used it in sequences of two or four or more units arrayed for instance in a T, or compacted into a single rectangle, or eventually as a single large dome dominating the rest of the building. In [281] Edirne's Uc Serefeli mosque (built between 1438 and 1447), that single dome was set over a hexagon, thus liberating side walls for eventual expansion of the interior space in four different directions.

Sinan became a master in the treatment of these domes. The plans of his buildings show every possible permutation from a dome on a square all the way to a dome on an octagonal space. Furthermore, he developed to its fullest logic the principle of the half-domes supporting the central dome. At least he created that particular visual impression, for, in a recent essay, a Turkish scholar argued that Sinan's dome was not really a means to cover space, but an independent baldaquin, that is to say a self-contained and independent unit with four, six, or eight supports. This independence of the

domed area explains the movement of supports away from the wall, their own independence, and the streamlining of the passages from square to dome. It also allowed for a greater flexibility of the sides which could then be adapted to various sizes, types and shapes. It allowed, finally, for the concentration of thrusts in a small number of points and, as a result, the opening up of walls through windows.

The modulation by which these changes and experiments took place is a problem for specialists and I do not dare enter into the hallowed grounds of chronology in the work of Sinan. What is certain is that the evolution of the dome and of the dome-based composition culminated in Sinan's masterpiece, the Selimiye in Edirne, built between 1564 and 1575. Not particularly original in its general plan (a court and a sanctuary), the Selimiye stands out, first of all, in elevation. Massive and elegant at the same time, it is framed by the four minarets which seem almost to protect it. It is as though the mosque has become a shrine, but not so much to a faith as to the art of building domes. It is an art which began with the Pantheon, acquired its longitudinal expansion with Hagia Sophia, and then a series of spatial variants in the early Ottoman period, while Alberti, Bramante and their European Baroque followers, like their Iranian and Indian counterparts, created a high dome on a drum which ordered space around it. Not so in the Ottoman dome, which is strictly and powerfully related to the building in which it is found, and which sends its tentacles into the whole building. This was Sinan's contribution: as opposed to Hagia Sophia which is a cover *toward* which one builds one's attention, the Selimiye dome is the first feature one perceives and, in a brilliantly calculated way, its membranes extend into the rest of the building. One of the expressions of this transmission is the two-colored (so-called *ablaq*) masonry of the arches which, like concrete slabs of today, emphasize this loadbearing quality. This intelligence of the supports probably reflects Sinan's early years as a military engineer; the result of the intelligence is the opening up of walls and the introduction of light on a grandiose [282] scale, so that the tile decoration appears less as a wall covering than as the reflection of a colorful outside world. The clarity of a light only partly filtered through glass gives volume to two-dimensional designs and flattens some traditional three-dimensional forms like the *muqarnas* in the pendentive.

In the Selimiye dome, Sinan finally meets the challenge of the Hagia Sophia. He does it first of all by creating a higher and wider cupola, as Sinan freely acknowledges in his autobiography. But this is a purely dimensional vanity. What Sinan has really done is to take ideas of the dome-baldaquin and of the dome-membrane to their most extreme point of growth. It is not merely that later mosques did not reach the level of sophistication and originality of the Selimiye, even if the dimensions of Sultan Ahmet or the outer lines of the Nurosmaniye are not without interest. It is rather that there was no way for them to go beyond Sinan's achievement. The sequence which began with Justinian's engineers, perhaps even with Hadrian's in the



Pantheon, finds here its logical end. Pared to its minimal support system within a technology of stone and concrete, the domed volume has found its purest expression in Sinan's buildings which, therefore, become a prototypical example, of which many more exist in the twentieth century, of an architectural formula which would have run its course. Although ultimately destined for the same fate, the Baroque church issued from the same Albertian decades in the West took longer to become repetitive, because it played constantly the dome against the façade (Invalides, St Paul). Sinan clearly relegated façades and doorways to another realm, even though his details are often exquisite. The reason, I submit, is that, to him as to his imperial masters, power of presence overshadowed the call for specific behavior.

The first meaning of Sinan's architecture was that it raised an unusual number of issues about architectural meanings. What, then, are some of these issues? One is technological and, on that level, I propose to see the meaning of Sinan's work, not in his structural achievements, but in the fact that he brought a certain domical tradition to its logical purity, somewhat in the way in which Cézanne and the Cubists brought to a logical end centuries of mimetic representation.

A second issue is that of power and domination. Here again the specific signs and codes are peculiar to the sixteenth century and would have been unlikely in the fifteenth. The relative absence of inscriptions in the Selimiye shows that the signs and codes were well understood by everyone who needed to do so. The meaning of this point is the creation of a contrast between an outer shell visible to all and an inner space restricted to some. This double life of the building could be seen as an example of the classical Islamic contrast between *batin* and *zahir*, between outward and inner meanings, visible and invisible. [283]

But perhaps it is more appropriate to see yet another meaning in these forms. Instead of imagining esoteric contrasts, we should perhaps see Sinan's achievement as the creation of works of art, perhaps as the creation of a work of art, the perfect dome. At this level Sinan's work lies somewhere in the celebrated trajectory which led from tents to Boulée's fantasies or to Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes.