

The Süleymaniye Complex as the centre of the world

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Abstract

The awareness of a multiplicity of cultural connections is shown in several of Sinan's works, including features belonging to Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Byzantine as well as European/Western architecture. Nowhere is this more richly exposed than in the Süleymaniye complex. This essay interprets the architectural relationships creatively handled in various components of the Süleymaniye, reaching from the obvious typological connections with the Hagia Sophia to links such as with Mughal Indian and Italian architecture. These more or less explicit intercultural references belong to individual elements as well as to features of structure and composition.

By featuring a selection of such connections, this interpretation explores the position of Sinan within a cultural sphere that may be termed Renaissance. If this concept is expanded from its conventional application as a basically Italian movement towards regarding similar interests in cultural and political heritage as well as intercultural reception going on in other parts of the world, it may be argued that the Ottoman claims represented a position at its forefront. In architecture these tendencies became nowhere more explicitly revealed than in the works by Sinan, and among them most richly in the Süleymaniye.

The analysis reveals no unexplored primary sources related to the Süleymaniye, but adds a number of contextual references to the rich body of existing studies. Through this perspective Sinan and the Ottoman court culture that he represented are connected, at least by implication, to rivalling cultural centres of power such as Rome and Venice, but also for instance Isfahan and Delhi.

Keywords

Süleymaniye Complex, Ottoman architecture, Architect Sinan, Cultural connections.

The concept of centrality has its place in all religious architecture, and not least in the firmly monotheistic culture of Islam. At the same time, in the architecture of mosques it is interestingly ambivalent, since the central point manifested is always the distant Mecca. This ambivalence could be seen as one of the architecturally creative forces not least in the Ottoman mosque complexes. In the strongly unified, but at the same time widely diversified, architecture of the Süleymaniye külliye it may be considered a vital component. On the one hand the mosque itself forms the central item in a group of buildings and courtyards, as well as being itself centred on its major dome. On the other hand the variety of elements forming the complex, each one themselves being shaped around aspects of centrality and balance, seem to countervail any mono-centricity. The Süleymaniye complex, even if dominated by the mosque and its central dome, through its polycentric structure forms a piece of urban armature seemingly merging with the multiplicity of the city itself.¹ And while built on the one hand to serve the local *mahalle*, the commercial and residential neighbourhood, through its connection to the sultan and in being the place of most advanced theological and scientific learning, it was also designed to be the centre of the empire, or of the world.

The aspect of centrality within multiplicity is emphasized by the overall relationship in the urban landscape to other buildings, most of all the earlier Sultan's mosque complexes. The capital city of Istanbul, claimed to possess world dominance, was architecturally a strikingly polycentric structure, where the visual effect of world power was achieved by the addition and balancing of multiple domed structures rather than by a single focus. This is contrary to the cathedral cities, but also to early Islamic capitals like Damascus or Baghdad. And in the 16th century, the age of Sinan, Istanbul was developing quite differently from the mono-centricity of western Rome, with its slowly rising dome of Saint Peter's.

While the long process of design and construction kept going on in Rome,

the Süleymaniye would rise to completion within a few years of the 1550's, with the addition of the major *türbe* in the following decade. It may seem to have merely added another sultanic mosque complex to those five already existing in the city, including the Hagia Sophia as the most ancient and the Şehzade as the most recent one. The connection of the Süleymaniye mosque and complex to these ancestors might seem to have been emphasized by the reuse of features of type and composition or location from all these predecessors. Another feature, the set of four minarets placed around the courtyard, also formed the connection to the earlier mosque of Murat II in Edirne. In this way Sinan's solution for the Süleymaniye was forming a kind of synthesis of all these former mosques. If Sinan was also emulating these predecessors it was by accumulating their experiences rather than by surpassing them in dimensions.

But the inclusion of lessons from the past could be seen to have reached also far beyond these predecessors. The modular system of the archetypal hypostyle mosque is present more directly in the earlier Şehzade than in the Süleymaniye, but some echoes from this heritage may still be sensed. More explicit, however, is the reference to the Hagia Sophia, repeating its basic composition of the major dome and semi-domes, as had been the case also half a century earlier in the Bayezid mosque. While this strengthened the relation to local context, the typological reference to Hagia Sophia also established a relationship with ancient and Roman heritage, not only of the city itself but also in more general terms.

Some single features of the Süleymaniye may point specifically to the Roman heritage, especially the twin gates forming the eastern entrance. They appear, more than anything else, like Ottoman transformations of Roman triumphal arches (Figure 1). The awareness of this type and its importance was spreading around the mid sixteenth century, where one important source was the 3rd book on architecture by Sebastiano Serlio, published in Venice in 1540. Comparing the two eastern entrance arches of the Süleymaniye to

¹ "Urban armature" was developed as a concept describing the role of monumental public structures in ancient Roman cities by William L. MacDonald (1986).

the triumphal arch at Verona, presented by Serlio, may show how a basic architectural type could be innovatively transformed by Sinan into a genuinely Ottoman grammar and vocabulary. For instance both structures may be described by mentioning the framing of the central opening by an arch using the circular geometry, crowned by a horizontal and the obtuse angle carried by framing columns (Figure 2).

Worth noting also in this context is the architecture of the Sultan's tomb. While following the scale and octagonal plan of earlier sultanic türbes it also contains some unique features. Most conspicuously it has an exterior colonnade, which seems to create a ty-

pological relationship to the centrally shaped temple (Figure 3). This classical type of structure had been revived in Rome half a century earlier, notably by Bramante in his Tempietto, where also a domed core rises above the encircling colonnade (Figure 4). The awareness of this building could likewise have reached the Ottoman architectural high quarters through the publication by Serlio² (Figure 5). However, a more direct architectural relationship with the Süleymaniye türbe can be seen in the late Roman tomb of the emperor Diocletian at Split in Dalmatia, where an octagon with a domed, colonnaded interior space is seen rising above a surrounding exterior colonnade (Figure 6). This key Roman monument in the Balkans, by the Adriatic coast, points to a region that was in several ways an important source of Ottoman identity. And as a Roman emperor Diocletian had been the predecessor of Constantine, whose tomb was at the Holy Apostles church in Istanbul. The link to this church and tomb had been established by Mehmet II, whose mosque and türbe occupied its site, crowning the fourth hill of Istanbul.³

The multifunctional Süleymaniye complex, while crowning the third hill, in its general layout developed several features of Mehmet II's külliye of some ninety years earlier. They both comprise a series of *madrastas* along with other institutions grouped around a



Figure 1. Entrance to the garden of Süleymaniye Mosque.

² Serlio (1540), although dealing with antiquity (including the triumphal arches) also presents Bramante's Tempietto in four drawings, two of which are plans, one elevation and one section.

³ Kuban (1997), 32, 205, notes the typological connection to Diocletian's tomb and raises the issue of Sinan's possible visit to the site.

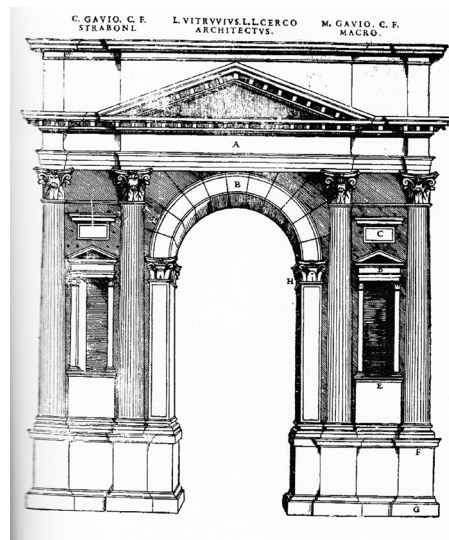


Figure 2. Triumphal arch (Serlio, 1540).



Figure 3. Tomb of Süleyman.



Figure 4. Tempietto, Rome.

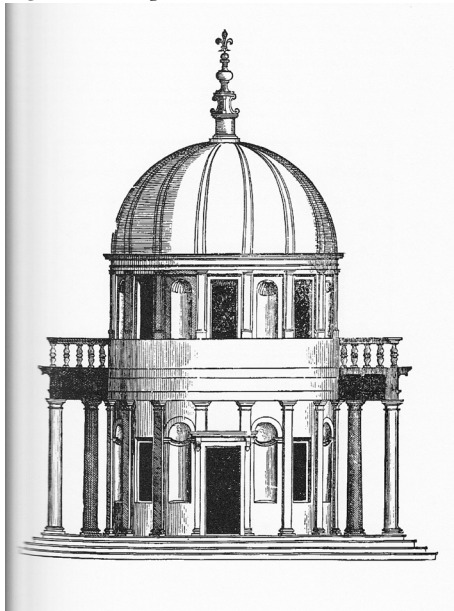


Figure 5. Tempietto (Serlio, 1540).

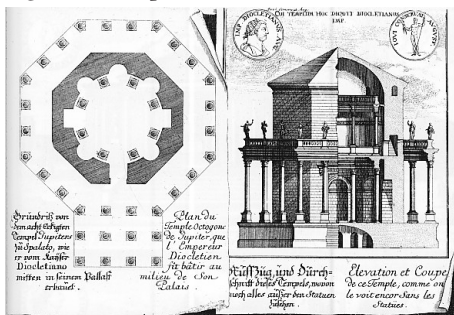


Figure 6. Tomb of Diocletian in Split (Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, 1721).

large forum, and containing as a centrepiece the mosque with its court and graveyard featuring the türbe of the sultan. Both complexes may be understood as forming a city within the city,

and in this sense distantly echoing the Dalmatian palace city, also containing a temple, of Constantine's predecessor Diocletian.

In comparison with Mehmet's establishment, the Süleymaniye complex is not only less formally rigid, but also contains by far a richer variety of what can be described as urban elements. The concept of the city gate can be interpreted not only in the two triumphal arches at the eastern side, but also in the two gates along the central axis on the western side. The domed outer one is smaller in scale than the two eastern gates, the inner one leading to the courtyard of the mosque however much taller and larger. This building is one of the most unique elements of the complex, neither preceded nor repeated in other works (Figure 7). It is a three storey building, and although the inner spaces are small, at least as much as being a gate it appears like a palace. In Ottoman mosque architecture from this point of view it shows some affinity with the 1360s mosque of Murat I in Bursa, but its composition and proportions seem to point to another source, again in the Adriatic region. It has some similarities, which can hardly be overlooked, to the standard type of late gothic Venetian palaces, if translated into Ottoman architectural language. It shares the typical three-storey composition with a basically open middle section, framed by walled sections with pairs of windows. (Figure 8) Even the placing of these windows at some distance apart, approaching the corners, is repeated in Sinan's artistic transformation. The gothic verticality sensed in the exterior is made even more literate in the interior, by the use of ribbed groin vaulting, not seen previously in Ottoman architecture.⁴ (Figure 9) And considering the contacts and rivalry between the Ottoman and Venetian centres of Mediterranean power, impressions affecting architecture would be likely to travel not only (as has lately been shown) from Istanbul to Venice, but also in the other direction (Howard, 2003).⁵

If Rome and Venice were cities to be emulated by Suleyman's architectural manifestation, the same would be expected also for other cities around

⁴ I owe this information to Prof. Dr. Ilknur Aktug Kolay.

⁵ It is known that the Venetian artistic culture having explicitly contributed to Ottoman court identity during the early reign of Süleyman was played down around 1550, so it may have been found appropriate to transfer this relationship into an architectural interpretation using Ottoman vocabulary. See Necipoğlu (1989).



Figure 7. Entrance to the courtyard of Süleymaniye Mosque.



Figure 8. Venice Palazzo Pisani Moretta, late 15th century. The standard typology for the Venetian palace fronts was followed until late 16th century.



Figure 9. Ribbed cross vault in the building framing the north entrance of the courtyard of Süleymaniye Mosque.



Figure 10. Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem.

the Mediterranean, not least considering the recent expansion of the empire towards the east and southeast. This might take us back to the *türbe*, where in spite of the Roman affiliations the connection also with the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem should be considered. Especially the interior, as has been noted, appears to be directly inspired, but also the octagonal circumambulatory around a taller domed central space basically repeats the general structure of this highly ranked monument (Necipoğlu, 1985, 100). (Figure 10) Also a constructional feature like the double shell dome may be a sign of a deliberate inheritance.

The symbolic importance of this building, of course, lies not only in its direct connection to the prophet and to early history of Islam, but also to the traditional identification of the building with the predecessor on its site, the Solomonic temple. The temple had been considered a prototype for generations of churches, including not least the Hagia Sophia, but also obviously held a natural position in the identity of Suleyman I, as the namesake and follower of Solomon himself (Necipoğlu, 2005, 216 ff).

While the architecture of the Dome of the Rock thus seems to be echoed in Suleyman's *türbe*, reduced in scale and transformed according to the established type of sultanic tomb, also its larger urban context appears to be reflected in the layout of the complex. The rectangular terrace with its mosque and domed octagon framed by inner and outer courtyards can be seen in relation to the entire Haram al-Sharif area of Jerusalem. Thus the mosque of Süleymaniye reflects the al-Aqsa mosque, situated on axis with the Dome of the Rock, both framed

within the large plateau. In making this connection with the early Islamic place of worship, the Süleymaniye may have repeated, again, a feature already associated with the mosque complex of Fatih Mehmet.⁶ If so, an important difference is the fact that Jerusalem was now since one generation incorporated within the empire, and its buildings now undergoing renovations. The symbolic and religious importance of conquering Jerusalem in 1516 was reportedly expressed by the sultan Selim I upon entering the city and the al-Aqsa mosque, considered as “the first qibla” (St. Laurent, 1999, 391).

The deliberate ambivalence of the various framed spaces as courtyards and urban space is emphasized by the new position introduced for the place of ablutions, in the outer courtyard instead of as expected in the inner yard. Here the loggias introduced as a type by Sinan in the Şehzade mosque were used as backdrops for the ablution fountains. One reason for this must have been that the majority of visitors were likely to enter from the bazaar quarters in the east, so not naturally through the inner courtyard. Through this innovation the function as a *şadırvan* of the central fountain in the interior courtyard became obsolete. Its role became mainly decorative or symbolic, containing water for drinking but not for ablutions. It was also given a unique, rectangular shape.

In fact in earlier as well as later architecture by Sinan, fountains are demonstrating some unexpected references. In the madrasa courtyard of Şehzade we find the *şadırvan* appearing, more than anything else, like a Seldjuk türbe such as the Döner Kumbet in Kayseri. (Figure 11 and 12) The rectangular fountain in the courtyard of the Süleymaniye may thus also be expected to bring an appropriate reference, especially so since the position of the courtyard is emphasized through being framed by the four minarets. Only in the Üç Şerefeli mosque in Edirne had this arrangement been used before. And while some contemporary general references were made to paradise, on the more specific level the rectangular fountain may be seen to represent the Ka’ba, the building

framing the meteoric stone said to have fallen from heavenly paradise. Thus we seem to find the site of the holy Mecca itself being reflected in the courtyard framed by arches and minarets. (Figure 13) And the fact that like the classical Islamic site of Jerusalem, Mecca had been incorporated into the empire during the reign of Selim I was of course no less important from the point of view of world dominance. The reference to Mecca in the Süleymaniye may reflect the position of the sultan as caliph, and the position of Istanbul as the legitimate heir of not only the Roman and Byzantine empires, but also not least of the central power of Islamic religion. Images of the Haram mosque in Mecca are the only pictorial elements recurring in mosques, and finding it more or less full scale in the Süleymaniye would seem appropriate in this context. And in fact some literary sources make reference to the mosque itself as representing the Ka’ba (Necipoğlu, 2005, 220). However, on the instrumental, architectonic level concerned in Sinan’s design this connection seems more relevantly belonging to the uniquely shaped courtyard and its fountain. In this way the role of the interior courtyard as not primarily a part of everyday functions of the mosque, with ablutions, is emphasized. Rather the courtyard would serve as the expansion area for prayer during religious feasts when large crowds would enter the mosque, in this way having some resemblance to the Haram mosque of Mecca also by its function. And logically, then, in the 1570’s Sinan would direct the reconstruction of the Haram mosque courtyard to be framed by domed arcades, following the Ottoman typology. Besides that it may be remembered that the presence of the Ka’ba through fragments inserted in Ottoman mosques had been a fact at least since the Eski camii in Edirne, and that one such fragment was included in Süleyman’s türbe.

Thus the variety of types and forms in the Süleymaniye complex may find its explanation in some highly esteemed models from west and east, artistically transformed by Sinan. In the interior space of the mosque, this diversity of geographical origin is rep-

⁶ This connection is noted in Goodwin (1971), 122.



Figure 11. The fountain in the courtyard of Şehzade Madrasa.



Figure 12. Kayseri Doner Kumbet (monumental tomb).

resented by the four central columns, whose shafts were brought from Baalbek and Alexandria plus from two sites in Istanbul itself.⁷

If the Roman, Venetian and Near Eastern references should be understood as a deliberate connection to cultural, religious and political centres east and west, also sources from further east are to be expected. For instance, in the turbe of Şehzade Mehmet, the major element of the Şehzade mosque, the decorative treatment along with the fluted dome on its cylindrical drum may refer to the renowned mausoleum

⁷ For the complex story of these columns as well as other facts on the widespread sources of stones brought to the Süleymaniye see Kolay and Çelik (2006).



Figure 13. Courtyard of Süleymaniye Mosque.

of Timur in Samarkand. The source in this case would be neither a personal experience by the architect nor any pictorial representation, but most probably some elementary verbal description or ekphrasis.

If a Persian or Central Asian component is to be found in the Süleymaniye it may be related to elements like the tiles on the qibla wall rather than to architectural composition. One strikingly Persian element could be said to be the canopy covering the upper part of the staircase leading from the bazaar street at the northern foot of the terrace up into the northwest corner of the outer courtyard. (Figure 14) Here the Persian type of profile, based on the four-centred arch, is seen, quite uniquely among Ottoman domes. But significant also is the fact that the dome was not covered by lead, but using the same material as the structure itself. In Persian models this of course would be tiled brick, rather than stone. But not only the stone material but also the type of miniature dome itself, resting on columns rather than walls, may seem to point more specifically to another origin, even further to the east.

This is the type of structure known as *chattri*, and seen as a signature element in Mughal architecture, where it combines a Persian geometry with a native Indian heritage. This element, historically deriving from Hindu temples, is seen in a number of prominent



Figure 14. Baldachin over passage from Süleymaniye Mosque garden to the lower street.

Mughal and other Indian Islamic sites built before the mid 16th century. The chattris, with domes resting on four or more columns, are normally placed in elevated positions, crowning gates or roof corners. And this is the case also with the Süleymaniye canopy when viewed from the street below. In this respect it adds to the multiplicity of the complex, as designed to be approached and experienced by widely different views from different directions, but yet with a central unity.

The area below the terrace was also obviously conceived by Sinan as an important, visually strategic position in the complex. Here is the point where the complex unites the westward view of the new (Topkapı) palace, the importance of which was increased during Suleyman's reign, with the eastward view of the Fatih Mehmet complex to which the Süleymaniye as a centre of learning was the direct successor.

This is significantly also the position for which Sinan designed his own tomb and its adjoining water dispenser, neighbouring also his own residence. And in this marble domed structure on a modest scale the reference to the Indian chattri seems to be carried even one step further, to include the marble eaves often seen in Mughal structures. (Figure 15) The two miniature domes, above and below, form an interacting pair, strengthening through their related languages the connection between the mosque complex and the street corner with Sinan's tomb. This interplay may be of importance also in view of an Indian tradition telling about the *sthapati*, the Hindu temple architects that they used to be buried at the foot of the temple itself (Volwahren,



Figure 15. Sebil and tomb of architect Sinan.



Figure 16. Türbedar room at Süleymaniye Complex.

1969, 45). Possibly this legend was also known to Sinan.

In any case it may be significant that the building signalling Sinan's tomb, like the chattri can be viewed as symbolising the art of architecture itself. With its elementary composition of a single miniature dome on supports it points to the very basics of structure and space, yet with delicate refinements.

This holds true also for another archetypal structure, however very different in language, forming another distinct element of the Süleymaniye complex. This is the building known as the Darülkurra or Türbedar odası, where the plain domed cube creates a composition of fundamental clarity, placed on the central axis (Figure 16). Its cubic shape could, again, be referring to the Ka'ba, but the structure rather reminds of the standard unit in Ottoman public architecture, such as the single domed mosques, the signature building type of Ottoman civilisation spreading east and west in the age of Sinan.

It is logical that the almost encyclopaedic richness of types and references synthesized by Sinan's innovative spirit in the Süleymaniye should com-

prise also the most uniquely Ottoman contribution to global architectural culture of its day, the crystal clear masonry structure with its exquisite combination of the most basic geometric shapes, the cube and the sphere.

The widely outlooking approach, embracing architectural cultures and monuments from far and near, had one predecessor in the garden pavilions established by Mehmet II for the Topkapı palace, where one would represent Turkish tradition and the other two Greek or Byzantine and Persian ways of building (Necipoğlu, 1991, 210ff). In the Süleymaniye we may find a development of the same approach, used with greater richness but much less explicit, to be absorbed by the architectural and contextual unity of the complex. Calling Sinan's approach eclectic would be to diminish the inventive spirit of these transformations. Like the Italian Renaissance architects he was open to finding sources and connections from distant periods and locations, but he was less dogmatic both in selection and reworking his models.

The idea of Süleymaniye being at the centre of the world could reflect the fact that material resources were brought from many distant places. It could be expressed, on the other hand, in verbal references to the Ka'ba or to paradise, or to implications of Ezekiel's vision of the City of God. Such literary dimensions may certainly have been vital in Sinan's creativity, where his friendship with the poet Sai Mustafa Çelebi was probably one fact of importance. In the architectural language, however, this had to be expressed by inclusion and by sophisticated absorbing of all the most highly ranked experiences of the building culture, local and distant, known to date.

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