A|Z

German traces in Ottoman Istanbul: The Kaiser Wilhelm Fountain

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Abstract

In 1901 German Kaiser Wilhelm II commissioned a fountain in İstanbul as a gift for Sultan Abdülhamid II and his subjects. The fountain was not only a symbol of the amity between these rulers and their two nations, but also stood as an architectural embodiment of its creator. Wilhelm II was personally involved in the design phase; he chose the plan and the style, also supervised the entire creation process. By the time it was completed, it had already become a monument to himself.

German in construction and design, the fountain was representative of the revivalist style of its time. It belonged in the Ottoman capital with its Neo-Byzantine style. Besides being born out of Wilhelm II's personal preferences, the choice of style conveyed fragments of İstanbul's past as well. Thus, history of the site became one of the factors contributing to the fountain's design.

German Fountain, also known as Kaiser Wilhelm Fountain represented a middle ground between the Ottoman and German cultures of the time. Furthermore, it was to become a souvenir from an era which left profound vestiges in both of these empires and their subsequent future.

1. Introduction

In Sultanahmet Square, one of the most significant and historical sites of İstanbul, stands a fountain easily distinguishable from the monuments around it by its style and workmanship.

It is a small baldachin structure with a central octagonal plan and consists of an elevated platform, eight columns and a semi-circular dome. Its front façade is on the southern side and is demarcated by a gate and stairs. The rest of its façades have cast bronze faucets and marble basins to distribute water. Except for its columns, which are of green granite, the fountain is predominantly made out of white marble. The ripped dome is covered with copper and has a cast bronze gutter. The column capitals and bases are also cast in bronze and have floral engravings. These columns situated on the platform carry the dome by circular arches (Figure 1).

At first glance, the domed form of the structure reminds visitors of Ottoman architectural works. As it distributes water through faucets, it functions like an Ottoman fountain rather than a European one. However, when the architectural elements of the building, such as the ripped copper dome, the cube capitals and composition of its mosaics, are examined more closely, it becomes obvious that this tiny building has more references to different architectural styles than most of the large buildings around it.

2. The history of the Fountain

The fountain, originally named 'Kaiser Wilhelm Brunnen' or 'Kaiserbrunnen', is known to the Turkish public as the 'German Fountain'. It was a gift from the German Kaiser Wilhelm II following his ambitious second visit to the Ottoman Empire in 1898. During this trip Wilhelm II did not only visit İstanbul and the Sultan, but also the Holy Land and Damascus (Figure 2). While consolidating his political and economic relationship with the Ottoman Empire, he also intended to strengthen his influence in this part of the world[1] and on the Christian, especially Catholic community back in Europe[2]. The Kaiser himself was a devout Protestant and religion had an important role in his political strategies.

Impressed by the meticulous preparations the Ottoman State undertook for this trip and the enthusiastic welcome the public gave him, he decided to commission a fountain as a sign of his gratitude to the Sultan and the inhabitants of İstanbul (Figure 3). Reports concerning this decision appeared in German newspapers as early as 24 October 1898 while the Kaiser was on his way to Jerusalem (Deutsche Tageszeitung, 1898.10.26). The state correspondence regarding its construction, on the other hand, started in 1899 after the Kaiser's return to the German Empire.

[1] The rapid growth of industry in the German Empire in 1880s created a demand for natural resources like metals and minerals. Adding to that the need for food resources for the growing population, The German State found itself in need of a fertile "Hinterland". In the time of Wilhelm II, prestigious projects such as the Baghdad Railways were put in action. Building a railway to ensure easy access to Anatolian and Middle Eastern natural resources was an ambitious European dream. British Empire was the first to start the constructions. After the fallout between British and Ottoman Empires following the annexation of Cyprus in 1878 and invasion of Ottoman Egypt in 1882, French took over these constructions, but the Franco-Russian defence treaty put an end to that in 1894. German Empire,

Figure 1. The German Fountain (Photo: Ceren Göğüş, 2013).

Figure 2. Kaiser in the Encampment Site (Yıldız Albümleri, 779-76--0018, İ.Ü. Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi).

with its lack of imperial tradition and geographic remoteness, replaced these countries as "protector against the Russian threat" and took over the railway project. The advantages of this collaboration for Ottoman Empire were not only restricted to this protection, but also the railways would provide the Empire with a swift way to deploy troops to troubled areas like eastern Anatolian (McMeekin, 2011).

[2] It was speculated widely that the Kaiser aimed to become the new protector of the Christians in the Jerusalem, Protestans and Catholics alike. This was one of the reasons Wilhelm II's trip had caused unease in Europe and Russia, among German Empire's enemies and allies alike. In October 1898 'Berliner Blatt' wrote that French and Vatican were worried that German Empire was trying to take the protection of the catholic community in Jerusalem from the French. Russians feared that it wanted to get a part of the Ottoman land and the British was anxious about the talks between the Kaiser and the Sultan about Syria which they considered a part of Egypt (Berliner Blatt, 1898.10.26).

Figure 3. *The Reception Ceremony for the Kaiser in İstanbul on 18th October 1898 (Yıldız Albümleri, 90548---0014, İ. Ü. Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi).*

The German Fountain's existence was outlined by two main aspects. Primarily, it was a functional fountain built to be used by the public. Secondly, it was a monument symbolizing a sovereign's presence. The latter was established by the name given by the German government: "*Kaiser Wilhelm Brunnen*" or "*Kaiserbrunnen*". Taking the absence of monuments in Ottoman cultural life into consideration, one could even conclude that it was built primarily as a monument, but was cloaked as a fountain in order to ensure public approval. Building monuments under the disguise of functional structures such as fountains or clock towers was also the way Abdülhamid II preferred to build "monuments" under his name for the 25th anniversary of his reign (Erkmen, 2010).

A massive monument movement, or rather a 'Monument-epidemic' as some contemporary critics called it, was seen in Germany during this time period (Dolgner, 1993). It started after the unification in 1871 and grew with the death of its heroes Wilhelm I and Bismarck (Bruchhausen, 1999). Dolgner explains this as the 'war fervor' of unification wars, procreating 'mystically blazoned person cults' and bringing the Emperors and Chancellors to an elevation of God-like idolization, almost like the deification of the Roman Emperors (Dolgner, 1993).

Similar to the aforementioned monuments built for the ruling elite and monarchy as a whole (Nipperdey, 1968), the German Fountain in its essence was meant to be a symbol of Wilhelm II's presence in a land where he had hoped to provoke trust, loyalty and even fidelity if the circumstances called for it.

3. Placement of the Fountain

The location of a monument is almost as important as its design. This was also the case for the German Fountain.

In correspondences with the Ottoman officials, German officials emphasize the fact that the fountain was a gift for the inhabitants of İstanbul and that it had to be situated accordingly. Additionally, its location had to coincide with the design without requiring any changes. It was designed to be situated on open space, such as a square (BOA. Y.PRK. EŞA. 35/39).

The German government preferred the Nişantaşı neighborhood for construction, but the Ottoman officials suggested Sultanahmet Square as there was not enough water in the Nişantaşı district (BOA. Y.A.HUS. 394/119). Sultanahmet Square, the ancient Hippodrome of the Roman era, had been serving as an important gathering place throughout the city's history. It had functioned as a venue bringing the rulers and public together through hippodrome attractions or festivals. It had also been the place where public gathered to let their voices be heard by their rulers. Notable riots in the history of Constantinople had taken place on this square adjacent to the imperial palace and the imperial church. Consequently, it remained public open space during the Ottoman era and was the stage for practice of equestrian sports, demonstrations, meetings and religious festivals sponsored by the rulers (Grélois, 2010). The square was also designated as the site of "Sergi-i Umumî-i Osmanî", the first World Exhibition organized in the Ottoman Empire in 1863 (Yazıcı, 2010).

This square is the only place in İstanbul with a historical continuity in public memory and its monumentality. Like a chronological catalogue of monuments, the square demonstrates the history of İstanbul with obelisks from Egypt, columns from Ancient Greek and Roman times, Byzantine churches and the Ottoman era mosques.

Nişantaşı, on the other hand, was a neighborhood with residences and

Figure 4. The German Fountain and the Sultanahmet Square (Photo: Ceren Göğüş, 2013).

palaces of İstanbul's bourgeoisie of the time. It was not completely urbanized yet and still had a rural atmosphere. Considering the importance of nature in German life and identity, this ambiance might have influenced the German government's predilection. The green landscape and the relative high altitude of the Nişantaşı district, combined with its elite inhabitants, might have made it seem like an ideal place for a German monument.

At the end, it was decided that the fountain would be built in Sultanahmet Square (Figure 4). Although it was not their first choice, the placement was welcomed by the German papers and government alike. Muenzer, while explaining the idea of a monument, puts emphasis on its placement by saying that the monument 'as an instrument of social organization and control' had to be placed at a location where everyone could visit it with pleasure and a good part of citizens would assemble every day (Muenzer, 2001). With this placement the German Fountain definitely fulfilled this pre-condition. It was on a place, where, as Berliner Lokal Anzeiger wrote "a lot of Muslims gather around [it] every day and voice their appreciation about the beautiful gift of the German Kaiser" (Berliner Lokal Anzeiger, 1900). The German government, on the other hand, was planning to take advantage of this momentum to create an opportunity for archaeological research. German Kanzler Bernhard von Bülow writes in a letter to the Kaiser, that they could arrange an excavation along the spina during the construction of the fountain. Not only would such an excavation produce results of great magnitude and add value to Kaiser's endeavors, but would also

silence the critics in Germany who were against constructing something modern on the Hippodrome (von Bülow, 31 October 1900). Theodor Wiegand, Director of the Department of the Antiquities at the Museums of Berlin, is mentioned in the letter advising von Bülow on how to proceed. They were planning to see if such a dig would be fruitful with a preliminary research leg during construction; they must have deemed it meritless since a formal excavation had never taken place. We know that Wiegand supervised an excavation in greater scale in Sultanahmet Square later, between 1918 and 1932, during which he established the exact dimensions of the Hippodrome (Bardill, 2010).

The inauguration of the fountain had initially been scheduled to take place on 1 September 1900, the 25th Anniversary of Abdulhamid II's accession to the throne, but due to construction delays it had to be postponed to 27 January 1901, the birthday of the Kaiser. Although the structural work could be finished by the end of September, the work on the decorations of the fountain would continue until the end of the year (Berliner Lokal Anzeiger, 14 August 1900).

Even though the German papers had reported that the Sultan would attend the inauguration, neither he nor the Kaiser were present at the ceremony (Berliner Blatt, 19 December 1900). (Figure 5) After the death of his grandmother, Queen Victoria, on January

Figure 5. The Inauguration Ceremony on 27th January 1901 (Yıldız Albümleri, 90548---0014, İ.Ü. Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi).

22 the Kaiser had travelled to England and his absence from the ceremony must have influenced Sultan's decision not to attend. Even so, in its essence German Ambassador Adolf Marschall von Bieberstein's speech at the inauguration ceremony focused on the friendship between the two sovereigns, which was to endure like the fountain's marble and to stay pure like its water (Königlich Preussischer Staats-Anzeiger, 28 January 1901).

4. The design and construction of the Fountain

The fountain was designed by Max Spitta in accordance with the Kaiser's own preliminary sketches. Spitta, who held an important position as the Geheimer Baurath (Building Councillor) in the German court, interestingly never came to İstanbul during the whole design and construction process of the monument. (Figure 6) He appointed Conrad Scheele to supervise the construction (35. Spitta, 14 April 1900). All the parts of the fountain, including the Ottoman inscriptions, were prepared in Germany and brought to İstanbul in May, 1900 to be assembled by German and Italian workers like a prefabricated building (Berliner Lokal Anzeiger, 14 August 1900; 71. von Wangenheim, 24 August 1900).

4.1. The structure

The fact that the fountain had to serve as two things, a monument and a functional fountain, determined its form. Its design had to accommodate

Figure 6. *The construction of the Fountain (Yıldız Albümleri, 90548---0009, İ.Ü. Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi).*

the monumentality expected from the gift of a European sovereign whose name it carried, without impairing its functionality.

The German Fountain is, in its core, a simple octagonal baldachin structure. Although its style and details change throughout Spitta's design process from Neo-Romanesque features with 12-meter diameter to Neo-Byzantine elements with 7.70-meter diameter, its general form remains constant.

Baldachin structures have been used in designs of religious buildings throughout history, such as baptisteries and tombs, thus carried a certain spiritual meaning. This made them a suitable choice for monument designs. In this particular case though, this preference must have been largely due to the importance Wilhelm II ascribed to baldachin structures. In the book The Origin and the Use of the Baldachin (Ursprung und die Anwendung des Baldachins) transcribed from a presentation he gave in the "Doorner Arbeitsgemeinschaft" in 1938, he tracks down the use of the baldachin structure throughout the history. He believes that the baldachin structure was not an example of a profane object gaining sanctity over time, but had rather always been a symbol of the sky connecting the human soul to the supernatural and to the divine (Wilhelm II, 1939). Derived from temporary covers, like mantles or parasols with sky patterns used by holy personalities, it was a symbol of divine sovereignty. As permanent structures like ciborium altars or covering sarcophagi, baldachin structures in churches carry out this tradition by protecting what is seen as sacred (Wilhelm II, 1939, 17/19).

Since the building was supposed to represent him, Wilhelm II must have chosen a plan type he had associated with sovereignty.

After the aspect of monumentality was accomplished through its plan, the integration of faucets on the façades added the aspect of functionality as it was also a fountain. This dual situation is apparent in its form: as a fountain, it was supposed to be used from outside, but as a baldachin structure the design also had an inner space.

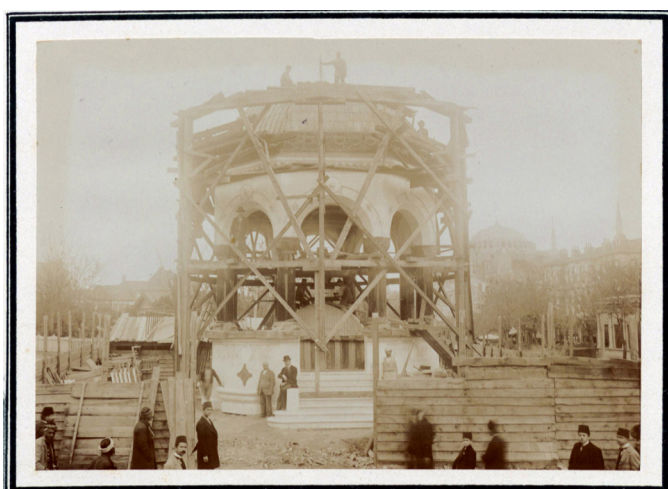In the initial designs this inner space

was intended to be used for ritual cleansing. There were supposed to be faucets in the middle and benches along the column row, but Kaiser Wilhelm vetoed the idea. He did not want the fountain to be used for ritual cleansing, but only for distributing drinkable water (21., Spitta, 18 July 1899). During the construction phase, there had been other suggestions like placing the reservoir outside and replacing it with a sprinkler or a vase, but these were also rejected assuming that the Turks would not like the idea of a sprinkler using clean water (57, Spitta, 20 June 1900). Once these ideas had been eliminated, the existence of the seating banks became superfluous. From the correspondence of the German state officials we learn that they were perceived as resting places. Von Wangenheim from the German Consulate in İstanbul writes about his visit to the construction site at a time when the benches were being installed and states his wish that in a few weeks "the countless Muslim spectators, who watch the construction under the sun would change their places on rubble masses with these comfortable benches" (von Wangenheim, 71, 1900.08.24).

German monuments, especially the ones in the city squares or parks, had an important part in day-to-day life as places where citizens would spend time. So installing benches inside of the fountain was also a way to ensure that the fountain would have an active role in the lives of the citizens of İstanbul. Also, as the lavish dome mosaic was the pinnacle of the fountain's design, it became necessary in order to create some kind of arrangement that would bring visitors inside the structure. These benches gave visitors the chance to experience the mosaics from under the dome. In fact, this kind of use of a public monument was not common in the Ottoman culture and after all the changes the design had gone through, the space between the benches and the reservoir became too small to be a comfortable way. (Figure 7) Furthermore, the inner space of the fountain was closed to public a few years after its opening as people had been vandalizing the mosaics. Therefore, the fountain could no longer be

experienced from the inside and this inner space brought upon by the choice of the baldachin plan turned into a design handicap (Rienaecker, 29.10.1901; Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger, 1906.07.30; 148; Scheele, 05.06.1912).

4.2. The Fountain's style

Wilhelm II played yet again a leading role in choosing the fountain's architectural style. The fountain was built at the height of the revivalist era and displayed the characteristics of Neo-Byzantine architecture. Neo-Byzantine was an essential component of the German architectural style, "Rundbogenstyl", a mash of architectural elements from different eras, like Byzantine, Romanesque or Renaissance, making use of the circular arch as a dominant structural component.

Rundbogenstyl was used commonly in monumental designs as a Neo-Romanesque form. The Romanesque style and the time associated with it was regarded as an era when the German Empire was in its prime, hence monuments, particularly national monuments, employed this association.

Nevertheless, although the Ottonian and Carolingian dynasties had cultural and political relations with the Byzantine Empire, Neo-Byzantine style did

Figure 7. The benches and the corridor as constructed (Photo: Ceren Göğüş, 2013).

not have such a strong visual presence in the German cultural identity. They mostly used Neo-Byzantine elements in decorations, often in churches or on monuments.

The Erlöserkirche in Bad Homburg, designed by Max Spitta, but finished after his death by Franz Schwechten, is a good example of this decoration principle. The architecture of the church is Neo-Romanesque, but the inner space is decorated with Byzantine elements, like marble wall coverings and golden mosaics. As the main nave is designed wider than a regular basilica's, it creates the atmosphere of a domed Byzantine church's inner space (Krüger, 2008). There were other examples where a building would be designed entirely in Byzantine style, like the unbuilt palace projects of Ludwig II, but this was rather rare (Petzet, Neumeister, 2005).

In his book Byzantium Rediscovered J.B. Bullen attributes the revival of Byzantine style in 19th century to two contradictory driving forces.

"[Because it] came somewhere between the Orient and the West; because it had affinities with both Christian and Muslim cultures and thought to have maintained something of the values of its Greek origins, yet participated in the Western traditions, it presented an exotic, un-European image to the world" (Bullen, 2003, 13).

Therefore, contrary to other revivalist styles, Byzantine architecture's connection to Ancient Greek and Roman architectural traditions and other Eastern influences gave this style a more exotic and distant feel. It was also seen as a spiritual style, belonging to a period and geography with strong Christian faith. Although the Byzantine Empire had obvious ties to the Roman Empire, its culture had gone through drastic changes after the acceptance of Christianity. As Rosenthal writes, it had tried to express the spirit of Christianity (Rosenthal, 1992). If Gothic architecture was seen as completely Christian, Byzantine architecture embodied the primitive and pure Christianity (Bullen, 2003).

The Prussian royal family Hohenzoller's use of medieval images and styles was correlated to their reign (Kroll, 2002). For Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV (1795-1861), who tried to establish a kingdom modeled after the early Christian states and to rebuild the Christian-German Empire by bringing "the crown and the altar" together, reviving the early Christian architectures like the Byzantine was a political choice (Bullen, 2003; Dolgner, 1993). Friedrich Wilhelm IV used Neo-Byzantine style because it symbolized a strongly religious land shaped by Christianity and ruled by a monarch with divine privileges and sacral qualities (Kroll, 2002). Wilhelm II followed in his footsteps, but according to Frank-Lothar Kroll during William II's time reminiscences of Middle Ages had become some kind of a 'playful staffage', 'a fantasyland, which has atmospheric pictures suitable to almost all situations' (Kroll, 2002, 79-83).

The relationship Wilhelm II had with Byzantine culture was also routed in his admiration for Emperor Constantine.

For a sovereign like Wilhelm, who wanted to use religion to affirm his rule, Constantine was the perfect role model. Under his rule, in the 4th century A.D., Christianity had evolved from a persecuted community faith into a religion accepted and guarded by the empire. While this change affected the way of life in the Roman Empire, churches became its monuments in the cities (Miles, 1993). Like Constantine's church constructions, which had led to the reformation of Roman life, Wilhelm II started to build churches to reform German city life, where religion had lost its influence through rapid changes in economic and social conditions brought on by industrialization. He aimed to strengthen piety to bring the masses together and to deter ideologies like communism or socialism threatening his rule. To accomplish this, he even established the "Protestant-Church Help-Union" (Evangelisch-Kirchlichen Hilfsverein) in 1888 for entire Germany and "Protestant Church Construction Union for Berlin" (Evangelische Kirchenbauverein für Berlin) in 1890 specifically for this region (Krüger, 1995).

We can follow Spitta's design process for the fountain through his correspondence with the state officials and

his drawings. The first drawings display obvious Neo-Romanesque influences. Wilhelm himself steered it to its final state in Neo-Byzantine style (21., Spitta, 18.07.1899). It looks like there were two motives behind this choice: Firstly, Wilhelm II's admiration for Byzantine history and art and secondly, Byzantine Empire's place in the history of İstanbul. After all, Byzantine culture is an inseparable part of İstanbul and Byzantine architecture and monuments like Hagia Sophia had an undeniable influence on Ottoman architecture after the conquest of the city. Rudolph Wiegmann wrote about the revival of Byzantine architecture in Germany during the debate on a nationalistic style, 'Those who seek to revive the Byzantine style on the grounds that it was a native style should bear in mind that it originated in foreign lands and flourished there as much as it did with us' (Wiegmann, 1992, 108-109). What he saw as negative must have been seen as an advantage by the designers of the German Fountain and neo-Byzantine architecture must have appeared like the perfect middle ground to bring the Empires together.

Like in the German Neo-Byzantine examples, the strongest Byzantine influences on the fountain are in the details of its decorations, namely the mosaics and the adornments of its column capitals or bases.

Some sources explain that mosaics

Figure 8. *The Dome Mosaics (Photo: Ceren Göğüş, 2013).*

were chosen for the adornment of the fountain out of respect for the Islamic tradition of non-figurative drawings, but it is more likely a complementary choice in a building of Byzantine style, as it was the preferred adornment of monumental buildings of the Byzantine era (Fındıkgil-Doğuoğlu, 2001).

The mosaics of the fountain are situated on the inside of the dome and the row of stars on the arches. They consist of a central circular motive on a golden background and Abdülhamid II's tughra and Wilhelm II's initials around it. (Figure 8) This mosaic pattern is an example of sky representations used frequently in dome or vault decorations. The origin of this composition is derived from similar examples of pre-Christian times and are seen as representations of temporary structures covered with fabrics with sky-themed patterns (Lehmann, 1945). Looking back at Wilhelm's examination of the baldachin structure, we see a close correlation between the mosaics and the structural system of the fountain.

In these kinds of compositions we generally see heavenly objects and creatures covering a part or the whole of the dome. In time, these compositions became more and more centralized and the motive with concentric circles in the dome of the fountain emerged (Lehmann, 1945). This form was a direct representation of the "canopy of heaven", basically a tent. It either represents the center of the tent from where the fabric falls down or an oculus with fabric hanging loosely around it (Lehmann, 1945).

The tughra of the Sultan and the initials of the Kaiser surround this central motive on a transcendental golden background. The fountain symbolized the friendship between these sovereigns, this was even more strongly pronounced by their initials on the golden sky background. The backdrops of these symbols honor the sovereigns in their individual circumstances. The tughra is on a green background, which symbolizes the prophet and the initials are on a Prussian blue background (Batur, 1993). The line of stars on the arches can also be seen as a continuation of this sky representation.
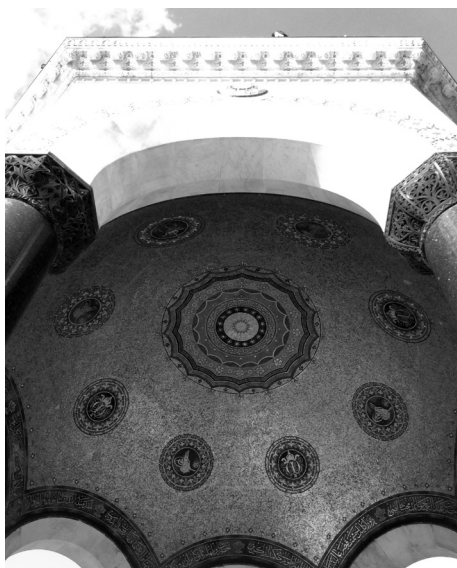
5. Conclusion

Max Spitta's first designs for the fountain were Neo-Romanesque, a style he was familiar with. He was an architect specializing in church designs and Gothic and Romanesque were the popular choices for churches in the 19th century Germany. With Wilhelm II's insistence these first designs evolved into a Neo-Byzantine project. At this time, Wilhelm II himself had been in İstanbul twice and had visited many Byzantine architectural works in İstanbul and in the Middle East. Undoubtedly they used his experience, but while designing the details of the fountain, anthologies of Byzantine architecture must have been consulted as well. Especially the book by Wilhelm Salzenberg with the impressive architectural drawings of Hagia Sophia is known as an important source for German architects and sovereigns when they wanted to cite Byzantine Architecture.

The Alman Çeşmesi reveals the typical multi-layered character of architecture we see in İstanbul by the end of the Ottoman Era. The fusion of Ottoman and Byzantine forms, functions and decoration details, merged with German monumental architectural notions brought about a monument that symbolized a long lasting political cooperation. Even though it is never explicitly described, the Kaiser Wilhelm Fountain, along the lines of other historical monuments of the Hippodrome's spina, sets a historical point of reference as being part of the historical development of this most important public space of the city. Even though the locals quickly forgot the name "Kaiser Wilhelm" and only called it the "German Fountain", the spot of the fountain became so important for the Germans in İstanbul that some 15 years later the place of the German-Turkish House of Friendship was chosen at a nearby location.

Abbrevations

BOA. *Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivleri* [Prime Ministerial Ottoman Archives]

Y. A. HUS. *Yıldız Hususi Maruzat*

Y.PRK.EŞA. *Yıldız Perakende Evrakı Elçilik ve Şehbenderlik Maruzatı*

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Kayzer Wilhelm Çeşmesi, Osmanlı İstanbul'unda Alman izleri

İstanbul'da Sultanahmet Meydanında yer alan Alman Çeşmesi dönemin Alman Kaiser'i II. Wilhelm'in Osmanlı Padişah'ı II. Abdülhamid'e hediyesidir. Kaiser başarılı geçen ve sadece İstanbul değil Yakın Doğu'yu da kapsayan 1898 Doğu Gezisi sonrası Osmanlı topraklarında gördüğü misafirperverliğe teşekkür etmek istemiştir.

Çeşmenin, İstanbul tarihinde iz bırakan olayların sahnesi olmuş, şehrin önemli anıtlarına ev sahipliği yapan Sultanahmet Meydanına yapılması ve II. Wilhelm'in doğum gününde halka açılması planlanmıştır. Çeşmenin kentin merkezinde, tarih içinde önemli yer tutmuş bir alanda yapılıyor olması ve açılışının Kaiser Wilhelm'in doğum günü için bir kutlamaya dönüşmesi hem çeşmenin iki ülke için de önemini gösterirken, hem de anıtsallığını kanıtlamaktadır.

Alman İmparatorluğu 19. yüzyılın ikinci yarısında kurulduğunda Avrupa ülkelerinde büyük ekonomik ve politik değişimler nedeniyle halkın devlet içindeki yerini sorgulayan bir değişim yaşanıyordu. Bu ortamda muhafazakar yönetimini sürdürmek isteyen İmparatorluğun korunabilmesi için halkın gözündeki meşruiyetini güçlendirmek gerekiyordu. Bu amaca yönelik özellikle II. Wilhelm'in 1888'de tahta çıkışı ile beraber saltanatın ülkenin her yerinde fiziksel olarak var olabilmesi için daha önce görülmemiş bir anıt inşaatına girişildi.

Bu anıt inşaatları incelendiğinde Alman Çeşmesi ile benzerlikler gösterdikleri görülür. Çeşme Alman hükümeti tarafından Kaiserbrunnen (Kaiser Çeşmesi) olarak adlandırılmıştır. Yer seçimi sırasında Osmanlı ve Alman tarafı arasındaki çatışma iki tarafın da bu kararı hafife almadığını, Osmanlı tarafının Sultanahmet Meydanı konusundaki ısrarı ise çeşmeyi olabilecek en merkezi yerlerden birinde görmek istediğini gösterir. Açılış günü de gecikmeler olmasına rağmen adını taşıdığı hükümdarın doğum gününe denk getirilmiş ve resmi tören ile gerçekleşmiştir. Tasarımının detayları seçilen plan tipi ve üslup da çeşmeye yüklenmeye çalışılan kavramların, bir hükümdar sembolü oluşunun izlerini taşır.

II. Wilhelm tasarım sürecinde aktif olarak rol oynamıştır. Tasarımın onun eskizlerinden uyarlandığı dönemin gazetelerinde yer almaktadır. Bundan sonra da çeşmenin mimarı olarak geçen Max Spitta'nın yazışmalarından Kayser'in tasarımın gelişimi içinde yer aldığı ve üslup seçimi gibi birinci dereceden öneme sahip konularda karar verdiği görülmektedir.

Yapının tasarımı strüktür kararlarına yakından bağlıdır. Sekizgen planlı bir baldaken strüktürü olan yapı bu yönüyle II. Wilhelm'in bu strüktüre verdiği ve 1938 yılında yayınlanan "Baldakenin Kökeni ve Kullanımı" konuşmasında da görülen kavramsal önemin izlerini taşır. II. Wilhelm baldaken strüktürünün tarih boyunca kullanımını araştırdığı konuşmasında bu strüktürün ilk kullanımından itibaren göğü sembolizmiyle kutsallık ve hükümdarlığı ifade ettiğini iddia etmiştir.

Çeşmenin Neo-Bizans üslubunda olması onun kararıdır. Max Spitta'nın ilk tasarımlarında gene Rundbogenstyl (Alman topraklarında 19. yüzyılda kullanılan dairesel kemer üslubu) sınırları içinde olsalar da Neo-Romanesk üslubun ağırlığı hissedilir. Tasarımı son haline getiren II. Wilhelm'in Bizans üslubuna duyduğu ilgi olmuştur. Wilhelm'in Bizans kültürüne, dinin Bizans hayatındaki ve yönetimindeki önemine ve özellikle Bizans hükümdarlarının mutlak hakimiyetlerine duyduğu ilgi biliniyor. Kendisini temsil eden bir yapı için bu üslubu seçmesinin arkasında bu gerekçe olmalıdır. Yine de tarihinde Bizans kültürü önemli bir yer tutan bir şehir içinde inşa edilecek bir yapıda bu üslubun kullanılması sadece buna bağlı olamaz. Yapının bir parçası olacağı şehrin ve alanın tarihsel mirası ile uyum içinde olması da bu üslup seçimi ile sağlanmıştır.

Sonuçta, ortaya çıkan yapı 19. yüzyıl sonu Osmanlı ve Alman kültürlerinin kesişme noktasından doğan ve bu etkileşim alanının ürünü olan bir yapıdır. Sadece bu iki devlet ve hükümdarları arasındaki dostluğun değil, iki devletin de geleceğini belirleyecek olan bir dönemin İstanbul'da bıraktığı bir izdir.

German traces in Ottoman Istanbul: The Kaiser Wilhelm Fountain