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# The Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Camii: “An Auspicious Building On An Auspicious Site”

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## Abstract

The Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Mosque was inaugurated in 1871 by the mother of Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861-1876). It was the last example of the long Ottoman tradition of royal mosque complexes, but neither twentieth-century urban developers nor historians of Ottoman art have had much regard for this monument, likely because the decoration and tectonic structure of the mosque reflect a vast span of Ottoman, Moorish, Gothic and Renaissance styles. The amalgamation of these styles was often condemned in the old paradigm of Ottoman architectural history as a garish hodgepodge lacking the grandeur of classical Ottoman architecture. This paper will examine why and how such preferences emerged and establish what Michael Baxandall has called the “period eye.”

Furthermore, I will investigate a point that Ottoman art historians who have explained the choice of style have omitted: nowhere do they mention the importance of the site for the *valide sultan* and the imperial family. My paper will thus contextualize the complex within the larger nineteenth-century urban fabric and the socio-political circumstances to elucidate better its function and significance.

Overall I argue that the rich hybridity of the building together with the choice of its location was intended to testify to the powerful dynastic presence during particularly tumultuous years of the empire, while also projecting the aspirations of a strong female figure of the Ottoman dynasty.

## Keywords:

Women patronage  
Women and art  
Women in imperial sovereignty  
Women and power  
Auspicious site

## Introduction

In this conference, which focuses on “Art and Identity” I intend to introduce a nineteenth century Ottoman mosque and argue that the building proposes a powerful dynastic presence in its new image, sponsored by a strong female figure.

The Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Camii was inaugurated in 1871, following two years of construction<sup>i</sup> (Fig. 1). It was built by the mother of Sultan Abdülaziz (r.1861-1876) during her son’s reign in the Aksaray district of the Historical Peninsula of Istanbul (Fig.2). Historians describe Pertevniyal Valide Sultan (?-1883)<sup>ii</sup> as having a strong influence on her son. The mosque was meant to be a complex comprising a mausoleum, a small fountain (*sebil*), a clock room (*muvakkithane*) and a school (*mektepe*)<sup>iii</sup>. It is the last example of the long Ottoman tradition of royal mosque complexes.

Today the mosque complex does not reflect its original glory since it became the victim of successive urban modernization projects of the Turkish Republican era (Fig.3). In order to permit the widening of boulevards, the mausoleum was moved twice, leading to its demolition in 1958. In the end it was reconstructed with the remaining construction materials inside the courtyard of the complex.<sup>iv</sup> The fountain experienced a similar fate and was inserted in the enclosure wall of the complex after the original partition had been partially demolished. Nowadays we can barely notice the mosque behind the clover-leaf intersection of boulevard and tramline (Fig.4).

Neither twentieth-century urban developers nor Ottoman art historians highly regarded the mosque. The decoration and tectonic structures of the mosque reflect a vast span of styles, which was often condemned in the old paradigm of Ottoman architectural history as a garish hodgepodge lacking the aesthetic beauty and fluidity of classical Ottoman architecture. Doğan Kuban considers the Valide Mosque as an alien building in its own neighborhood, borrowing many foreign elements not fitting into the Ottoman archeological idiom and fabric. To quote him: “The

Kulliye of Hırka-ı Şerif at Fatih and the Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Mosque at Aksaray (1871) were alien buildings in these ancient traditional quarters.”<sup>v</sup> Godfrey Goodwin criticizes the interior of the mosque rather than the exterior. “The prayer hall is a domed square painted all over with that love of massed rich color which disfigures Sinan Pasha Camii at Beşiktaş. At Beylerbeyi, the salons are as brilliant with reds, blues and greens as a gypsy caravan. It is a success here for bargee art may be fit for a palace but it is not necessarily ideal for a mosque.”<sup>vi</sup> Despite being condemned as decadent and characterless in the old paradigm of Ottoman architectural history, the Valide Sultan Mosque was eulogized by Sultan Abdülaziz as one of two seminal buildings of his era (the other being the Çırağan Palace) in the book called *Usul-i Mi'mari-i Osmani* (Fundamentals of Ottoman Architecture). The book was published by the Ottoman government during the reign of Abdülaziz, on the occasion of the 1873 world exposition in Vienna, in order to define the Ottoman dynastic building tradition according to contemporaneous European standards of art-historical scholarship.

Rather than criticizing the aesthetic and formal choices of the mosque, in my presentation I examine why and how such preferences were made, by establishing as much as possible what Michael Baxandall calls the ‘period eye.’<sup>vii</sup> I will first contextualize the complex within a larger nineteenth-century urban fabric to elucidate better its function and significance within its milieu, and then discuss its formal choices. Overall, I argue that the rich hybridity of the building together with the choice of its location was intended to testify to the powerful dynastic presence in the tumultuous years of the mid-nineteenth century.

## The Choice of the Location of the Pertevniyal Mosque

Ottoman historians explain the choices of formal styles for the mosque, but nowhere do they mention the importance of the site for the *valide sultan* and the imperial family.

Since the establishment of Constantinople, Aksaray was an important district. It is on the Byzantine historical thoroughfare (*mese*). Here the *mese* is divided into two branches. Aksaray occupies the site of an ancient Roman forum, the *Forum Bovis*. Due to its proximity to the important Roman harbor, *Eleueterios* (in Yenikapı), it retained its importance as a vital commercial center. Additionally, its relative high altitude also provided a dominant sea view (Fig.5)

During the Ottoman period Aksaray continued to be a favored neighborhood. The *mese* kept its vitality as the Divanyolu. This region, all the way to the city walls, had a vast green area full of gardens, orchards and fields. Aksaray was the connecting point between the green area and the main thoroughfare of the city.

By the nineteenth century, most of the 40,000 Janissaries were living in the Aksaray area, in the military barracks at Etmeydani (the Meat Square) and the bachelor rooms nearby.<sup>viii</sup> The Janissaries, originally an elite corps, under the direct command of the sultan, gradually became a source of substantial trouble. With the decline of their military discipline they became involved in commerce and prostitution, therefore ruining the reputation of Aksaray. When Sultan Mahmud II (r.1808-1839), Pertevniyal’s husband, formed a new European-style army, the Janissaries mutinied and started plundering the streets of the capital, advancing towards the sultan’s palace. The event started and ended in Aksaray, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Janissaries.<sup>ix</sup> On June 15, 1826, the sultan abolished the Janissary corps, an event that was called *Vaka-i Hayriye* (the Auspicious Event) by Ottoman chroniclers.

The Auspicious Event did not take place overnight; it took Sultan Mahmud II sixteen years to get rid of the Janissaries and establish his new army. The event was a turning point in Ottoman military history as well as in the wider history of Ottoman reforms. The Janissaries served as important power-brokers within the Ottoman political system. They were inclined to align with the *ulema* (religious authority) against the court and the bureaucracy. Their abolishment facilitated the implementation of reforms.<sup>x</sup> Therefore, the “Auspicious Event” and the location were meaningful for the Ottoman dynasty in many aspects.

Another factor in shaping the neighborhood were major devastating fires that periodically swept Istanbul. The 1856 Aksaray fire and the 1865 Hocapaşa fire were especially crucial in reshaping the Historical Peninsula.<sup>xi</sup> Following the Aksaray fire the government appointed an Italian engineer, Luigi Storari, to reorganize and modernize Aksaray. Storari applied European urban planning principles which were highly respected by Ottoman elites. He constructed straight and wide streets on a grid plan together with large public squares. He also created a main crossroads, corresponding to the intersection of the north-south road from the Golden Horn to the Sea of Marmara (today’s Atatürk Bulvarı), and the east-west road of Aksaray Caddesi, a continuation of the Divanyolu (today’s Millet Caddesi). The new intersection was a new concept for Istanbul. In order to emphasize the importance of this public square, Storari repeated the grid pattern three more times along the thoroughfare (Fig.6). The new public place was described in the *Journal de Constantinople* as a “belle place.”<sup>xii</sup> Storari’s plan no doubt re-established Aksaray as the prestigious and desirable neighborhood it once was. Given the fact that Pertevniyal’s *kethüda* (butler), Hüseyin Hasib Bey, was the mayor of Istanbul, the *valide sultan* may have directly decided on the rejuvenation of Aksaray. For her it

must have been important to revitalize the neighborhood to erase the negative traces of the Janissaries' mutiny and turn it into a site that celebrated the "Auspicious Event."

## The Choice of Style

The prestigious site also required a prestigious style. A distinct, new and creative Ottoman architectural repertoire was to embellish the Valide Sultan Mosque complex. During the reign of Abdülaziz, the Ottomans participated in several international exhibitions, which were highly fashionable in the nineteenth century. The structures displayed at these exhibitions outline how the Ottomans intended to define themselves both to themselves and to the outside world. The idea was to show Ottoman architecture combining both old and new in a creative syncretistic style. This was the modern neo-Ottomanism. For the Ottoman General Exposition of 1863 in Istanbul the government wanted the building in the "new manner" (*tarz-i cedid*). The government therefore commissioned two French architects: Marie-Augustin-Antoine Bourgeois and Léon Parvillée, who had designed the Ministry of Defense headquarters in Beyazit. Arches with red and white voussoirs (Umayyad Syrian or Spanish), crowned with a crenellated roofline (Cairene) framed an Ottoman dome. The middle section of the building was higher than the rest of the building and projected,<sup>xiii</sup> as in the case of the Pertevniyal Mosque. The new manner was broadly neo-Islamic in style (Fig.7).

At the Paris exposition in 1867 an ensemble of buildings, designed by Parvillée and the Italian architect Giovanni Battista Barborini, represented the Ottoman Empire: a mosque, a residence, a bath and a fountain. The mosque at the exhibition is another seminal example of the new manner. Its façade had a finely carved monumental entrance portal surmounted by large-scale muqarnas decorations under a dome (Fig.7). The interior is much more richly decorated than the exterior, as in the case of the Pertevniyal Mosque. The intricate fresco decoration in the dome, the tall carved prayer niche and pulpit are elements of the new Islamic taste, and they reflect a strong resemblance with the interior decoration of the Pertevniyal Mosque (Fig.8).

The architects of the era were striving to create a new syncretistic idiom for Ottoman architecture by combining the decorative richness of Early Ottoman architecture (especially the fifteenth-century monuments of Bursa) with contemporaneous European features.

The neo-Ottoman style of the Valide Mosque combined a vast span of styles: Ottoman, Moorish, Gothic and Renaissance. Its square ground plan capped by a dome and slender minarets refer to Ottoman architecture. The protruding center section, on three sides of the façade, is crowned by a neo-classical pediment reminiscent of Greek temple facades. However, it is not a simple imitation of that form since its edges are bent, disallowing the formation of an exact triangle. Also the intricate Islamic decoration on the pediment shows a newly interpreted eclectic style. The high portals embellished with pediment-like structures existed in the architectural idiom of previous imperial mosques such as the Sultan Ahmed Mosque (1616) and the New Valide Sultan Mosque (*Yeni Camii*, 1665) in Istanbul (Fig.9). The Pertevniyal Mosque borrowed these earlier Ottoman features and reinterpreted them based on contemporary architectural concepts. Instead of using these forms as entrances, the mosque employed them on its three facades. Triangle forms protruded and repeated twice on each façade accentuate the monumentality of the building and distinguish it from earlier Ottoman mosque facades, which emphasize windows with semi-circle arches.<sup>xiv</sup> The dome surmounted on a sixteen-sided high drum remains behind triangular crowns of the façade. In lieu of domes, semi-domes and circles, triangular forms dominate the exterior of the Pertevniyal Mosque. The columns, which carry the main dome are turned into small towers, capped by onion-shaped domes in the corners, inspired by Indian Islamic architecture. Their finely carved stone embellishments have neo-Classical elements, such as post-lintel-post niches decorated with shell figures, in their lower parts, and neo-Gothic features, such as elongated niches, in their upper parts. Muqarnas and arabesque decorations help the transition from the rectangular lower parts, to the octagonal upper parts (Fig.10). The elongated windows of the Pertevniyal Mosque quote the neo-Gothic style, whereas their exquisitely carved ornamentations with multi-lobed stone arches denote the Moorish style. The Moorish effect is created by employing one whole, two halves rose windows. Forms and styles often permeate each other on the monument (Fig.11). In the interior the intricate arabesque design in dominant blue with some reds and yellows echoes contemporary Orientalist Moorish architecture in Europe. According to Afife Batur, the rich wall and ceiling paintings, *kalem işi*, express the traditional Ottoman architecture in their patterns and layouts.<sup>xv</sup> As at the exterior, the muqarnas decoration surrounds the inside walls above the first tier of windows (Fig.12 a & b).

The amalgamation of all these styles in the building was to create an Ottoman Renaissance in architecture, by combining a classical Ottoman style and the prevailing European model of eclecticism, which encompassed a variety of repertoires from the neo-Classic, over the Orientalist to the neo-Gothic.

This neo-Ottomanism was also a response to the historical developments and ideological discourses of the period. The process of modernization that the Ottoman Empire underwent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,<sup>xvi</sup> the continuous loss of territories, and the emergence of nation-states compelled the Ottomans to search for a new identity. The New Ottomans' Movement (*Yeni Osmanlılar Hareketi*) was one of liberal thinking, formed around 1865. As

Afife Batur writes, “New Ottomans were the first ones to bring the question of culture and identity into the agenda of the Ottoman intelligentsia...According to them, the Tanzimat (Reform) was not based on a background of basic philosophy or moral values; in order to fill this gap some proposed to make use of Islamic philosophy while others proposed the positivist concept.”<sup>xvii</sup> The eclectic style combining elements of both east and west in architecture was like a synthesis of all these conflicting approaches of the period. In lieu of underlining the dichotomy between the old and the new, neo-Ottomanism intended to dissolve it into a more compromising aesthetic synthesis

The central point is that the Ottoman elite saw architectural innovation, as part of the reforms of the period, as a way of conserving the empire, reflecting a modern, more confident self-image. The amalgamation of styles would reflect also a more cosmopolitan aspect of the “Ottoman nation” of the time. In the process of the empire’s dissolution vis-à-vis nationalist tendencies, the neo-Ottoman style would exhibit Islamic, Classical and Gothic elements as a kind of special glue holding its multi-ethnic population together.

The aesthetic style of the Pertevniyal Mosque was closely repeated at the Hamidiye Mosque, at the Yıldız Palace, built fifteen years after the Valide Mosque, and also to a lesser extent at the Mausoleum of Mehmet Reşat V, built in 1918. Both monuments have impressive portals crowned with pediments, protruding and embellished with elongated windows to emphasize the verticality, reminiscent of the façade of the Valide Mosque. Additionally, the Yıldız Mosque imitates the Valide Mosque’s high-raised central dome, the minarets and the minarets’ onion-shaped domes (Fig.13). These examples are the confirmation of a new architectural idiom as it was proposed by the Valide Mosque. Despite condemnation by art historians, the Valide Mosque reflects an example of a creative synthesis, deemed successful by the Ottoman elites.

## Conclusion

With Abdülaziz’s reign, a “national art” based on a “Renaissance” of Ottoman architecture emerged. The goal was to retrieve the legacy of Ottoman architecture and revive it in contemporary practice. The Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Mosque, rather than being a motley of styles, expresses the eclectic mode of its period in order to convey a novel and artistic expression of Ottoman architecture. It was successful since it was imitated in later Ottoman buildings.

The location of the mosque, Aksaray, was in the Ottoman period a favored neighborhood, except for a short period of time, mainly due to the Janissaries’ barracks and housing at the site. The powerful *valide sultan* must have intended to mark Aksaray as the site of the “Auspicious Event” in honor of her deceased husband. Moreover, the area recently had been transformed based on a prestigious European-style urban design, and the complex was planned at the well-admired main intersection of the neighborhood. With the complex the *valide sultan* intended to immortalize herself, and to testify to a powerful dynasty through its new imperial image at a time when the empire was crumbling.

## Author’s bio-note

Following 26 years as a career business woman in Istanbul, –half of it as an entrepreneur in the textile and tourism sectors- I changed direction and delved into a second career in art history and received my MA at UNC – Chapel Hill in May 2012. During my graduate studies I was offered a teaching assistantship. Since Fall 2013 I have been pursuing my PhD in art history at the Koc University as well as continuing on my teaching assistantship.

My research interest is on gender issues and cross-cultural exchanges. My aim is to expand historical perspectives and understanding among societies and to promote women’s position in making history. My master thesis explores the phenomenon of turquerie in nineteenth-century America, that is the fascination with and appropriation of elements of Turkish culture, particularly in interior designs and baths.

The paper that I submit for the conference, “The Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Camii: “An Auspicious Building On An Auspicious Site” is part of my doctoral thesis where I explore women, patronage and power in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire.

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## List of Figures



Figure 1: The Pertevniyal Mosque



Figure 2: Location of the Mosque

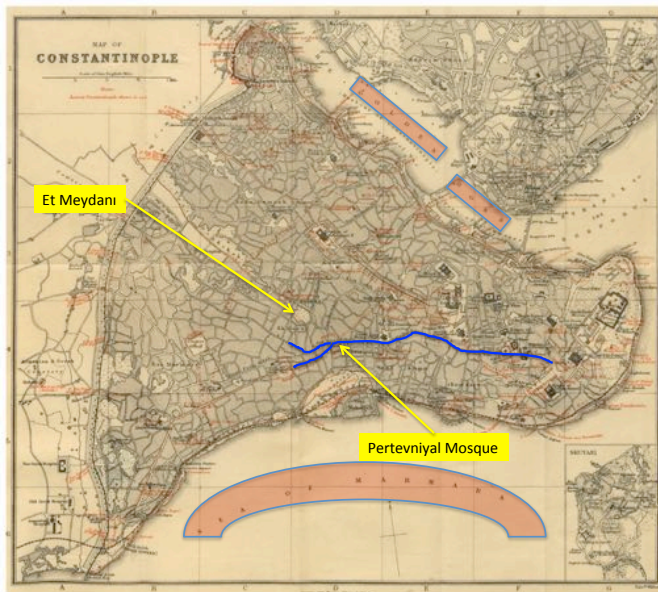




Figure 3: Urban Modernization and the Mosque



Figure 4: Urban Modernization and the Mosque



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/britishlibrary/11220014974/>

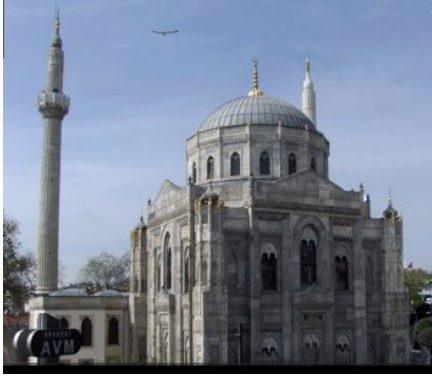
Figure 5: Historical Location of the Mosque

Plans of Aksaray circa 1850 and circa 1870



Figure 6: Nineteenth-century modernization of Aksaray

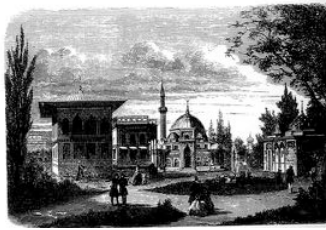
The Pertevniyal Camii



Façade of the Main Hall, Ottoman General Exposition, Istanbul, 1863



The Turkish Quarter at the Universal Exposition, Paris, 1867



**Figure 7: The Mosque and the Ottoman structures at the nineteenth-century international exhibitions - exteriors**



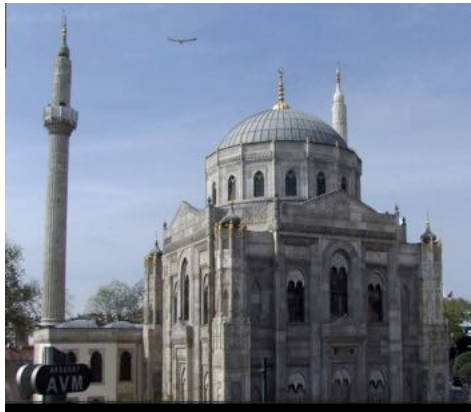
Mosque at the Paris Exposition in 1867



Pertevniyal Mosque, 1871 (Author's photo)

**Figure 8: The Mosque and the Ottoman structures at the Nineteenth-century international exhibitions - interiors**

Sultan Ahmed Mosque, 1616



Pertevniyal Mosque



Yeni Valide Mosque, 1665

Figure 9: The facade of the Pertevniyal Mosque and the portals of earlier Ottoman mosques

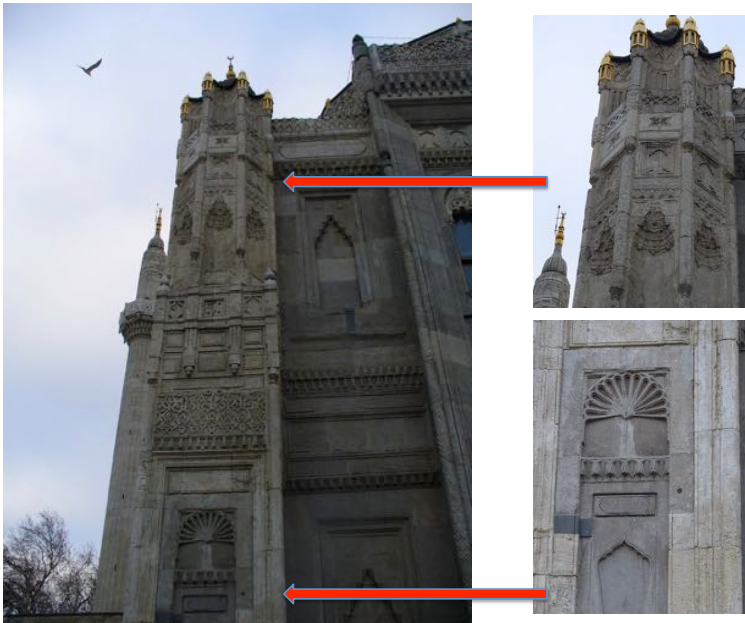


Figure 10: Corner Towers of the Mosque





Figure 11: Windows of the Mosque

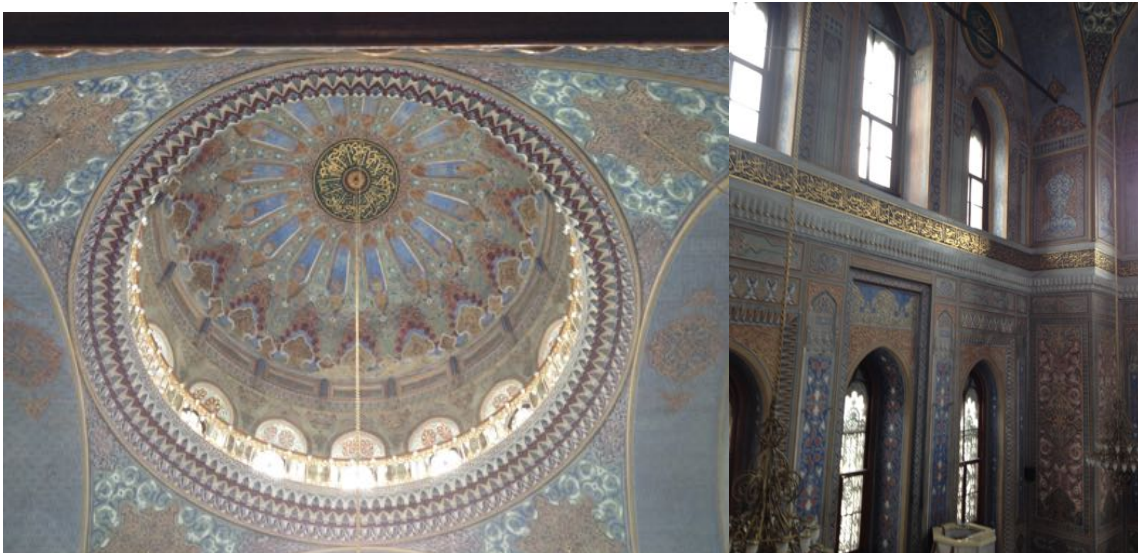


Figure 12: Interior of the Mosque



Hamidiye Mosque, Yıldız Palace,  
1886



Mausoleum of Mehmet Reşat V,  
1918

**Figure 13: Ottoman buildings imitating the style of the Mosque**

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Afife Batur, "Valide Camii," *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 1993), 360. Batur indicates three years of construction, but the construction started in November 1869 and finished in 1871. Only the school building was finished in 1872.
- <sup>ii</sup> Necdet Sakaoğlu, "Pertevniyal Valide Sultan," *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 1993), 245.
- <sup>iii</sup> Afife Batur, "Valide Camii," indicates it as mektep. M. Çağatay Uluçay, "Padişahların Kadınları ve Kızları" (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1980), 125 uses the same terminology. Ayhan Doğan, "Pertevniyal Lisesi," *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 1993), 244 reveals that the high school was originally the elementary school built by Pertevniyal Valide Sultan in 1872. The school was burned during the Aksaray fire of 1911 and rebuilt in 1930 as high school with the revenues of the Valide Sultan Endowment (*Valide Sultan Vakfı*).
- <sup>iv</sup> Tarkan Okçuoğlu, "Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Türbesi," *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 1993), 246.
- <sup>v</sup> Doğan Kuban, *İstanbul, an Urban History: Byzantion, Constantinopolis, Istanbul* (İstanbul: The Economic and Social History Foundation of Turkey, 1996), 406.
- <sup>vi</sup> Godfrey Goodwin, *A History of Ottoman Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971), 425.
- <sup>vii</sup> Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972. In the book Baxandall developed the influential concept of the 'period eye.' He argued that everyone processes visual information differently since it is culturally determined. Art historians should view artists and their works within their original social, economic and cultural context and without shedding their own contemporary values.
- <sup>viii</sup> Doğan Kuban, "Aksaray," *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 1993), 163.
- <sup>ix</sup> M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 58–59.
- <sup>x</sup> Ibid., 59. Also see the *Osmanlı Mimarisi: Usul-i Mi'mari-i Osmani = L'architecture Ottomane = die Ottomanische Baukunst* (İstanbul: Çamlıca, 2010), 7. Even in this catalogue, which was prepared by the Ottoman government for the Universal Exhibition of Vienna, there is a reference to the Janissaries. They are presented as forces impeding the construction of substantial and beautiful monuments during the Ottoman period especially after the reign of Sultan Murad IV, due to their frequent mutinies.
- <sup>xi</sup> Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs*, Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 12 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 53.
- <sup>xii</sup> Zeynep Çelik, *Remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 54.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Çelik, *Displaying the Orient*, 140–141.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Batur, "Valide Camii," 361.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Modernization started in the eighteenth century and was institutionalized with the declaration of the Imperial Rescript of the Rose Chamber in 1839. The period between 1839 and 1876, which marks the adoption of the short-lived Ottoman constitution, is called as the Tanzimat period.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Afife Batur, "Style in Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ottoman Architecture," in *Art Turc, Turkish Art, 10th International Congress of Turkish Art*, Geneva, Fondation Max Van Berchem (1999): 145–146.