

2016

The Architects of Ottoman Constantinople: the Balyan Family and the History of Ottoman Architecture

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Recommended Citation

Sibel Zandi-Sayek, « Alyson Wharton. The Architects of Ottoman Constantinople: the Balyan Family and the History of Ottoman Architecture », *ABE Journal* [En ligne], 9-10 | 2016, mis en ligne le 28 décembre 2016, consulté le 02 mai 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/abe/3064>

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ABE Journal

Architecture beyond Europe

9-10 | 2016 :
Dynamic Vernacular
Recensions

Alyson Wharton. *The Architects of Ottoman Constantinople: the Balyan Family and the History of Ottoman Architecture*

New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015

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Référence(s) :

Alyson Wharton. *The Architects of Ottoman Constantinople: the Balyan Family and the History of Ottoman Architecture*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015

Entrées d'index

Index de mots-clés : architecture ottomane, architectes arméniens

Index by keyword : Ottoman architecture, Armenian architects

Indice de palabras clave : arquitectura otomana, arquitectos armenios

Schlagwortindex : Osmanische Architektur, Armenische Architekten

Parole chiave : architettura ottomana, architetti armeni

Index chronologique : XIXe siècle

Texte intégral

- ¹ *The Architects of Ottoman Constantinople* by Alyson Wharton is a timely and much needed contribution not only to the rather scant literature on mid-nineteenth century Ottoman architecture but more generally to the growing critical literature on the historiography of Ottoman non-Muslim constituencies. In a thoroughly researched

monograph, Wharton offers a methodical reassessment of the Ottoman-Armenian Balyan family of architects and builders, credited with some of Istanbul's most coveted imperial buildings, including the Dolmabahçe and Çırağan palaces and the Nusretiye and Ortaköy mosques.

- 2 As the author makes it clear from the outset, the historiography of the Balyan family suffers from a double distortion. Whereas mainstream Turkish narratives have drastically diminished their contribution, if not discredited their work for corrupting Ottoman architecture, Armenian accounts, for their part, have exalted the Balyans as geniuses, overstating their role at the expense of a much wider constellation of builders and architects. Straddling this politically charged, historiographical bifurcation, Wharton weaves a carefully balanced and richly detailed portrait of the Balyans and their operations against the background of a century of intense transformations in Ottoman building trade. Spanning the practice of three generations of Balyans—Kirkor Amira (1764-1831), his son Karapet Amira (1800-1866), and his sons Nigoğos Bey (1826-1858), Serkis Bey (1831-1899), and Agop Bey (1837-1875)—with a focus on the reign of the two *Tanzimat* sultans, Abdülmecid (1839-1862) and Abdülaziz (1862-1876), the book fills a scholarly lacuna in its temporal focus alone. Despite receiving a great deal of attention as an era of intense and energetic bureaucratic reforms, the *Tanzimat* decades have not yet had their share of critical scrutiny with respect to transformations in architecture and building practices, at least, compared to the later Hamidian (or post *Tanzimat*) architectural developments.
- 3 What most significantly distinguishes Wharton's investigation, however, is her ability to draw on an exceptionally wide array of sources that have not previously been considered together. Proficient in Ottoman Turkish and Armenian as well as relevant European languages, she marshals a vastly varied body of evidence to support her analyses—Ottoman salary records and registers of construction estimates, Armenian histories and periodicals, French educational registers, and literary sources in various languages alongside formal and stylistic evidence gleaned from extant buildings.
- 4 The main thrust of the book is to foreground the thoroughly composite nature of the Balyan family's *modus operandi* and identity. Wharton notes that the Balyans did not serve as chief architects (*mimarbaşı*) or hold a stable office in the Imperial Architect's Office (*hassa mimarları ocağı*) within the established palace hierarchy. Nevertheless, they forged a comparably powerful position for themselves. Relying on their own networks, mobility and efficient methods, the Balyans made themselves attractive to the Sultans of the *Tanzimat*, carving out a hybrid practice that maintained certain aspects of traditional imperial architecture, but was otherwise akin to modern private practices just emerging at the time. Wharton also warns that this was a precarious status, without formal institutional support, thus vulnerable to attacks and accusations. It brought both the family's rise to fame and its falling out of grace. The Balyans, she moreover contends, identified themselves as Ottomans on many levels, but also expressed their difference as Armenians and were well-aware of their position as non-Muslim subjects under a Muslim "master culture." Their compounded identity, evinced in both their communal and imperial work, upheld Ottomanism and rendered it tangible, even before its formulation as an official ideology.
- 5 The book lays these points out in six chapters. Each of these addresses an aspect of the Balyans' life and practice—namely, its status within the imperial hierarchy, its position within the Armenian community, its Parisian education, its creative role in defining an official style, and its working environment, culminating in a short chapter on Serkis Balyan's demise. An introduction that establishes the historiographical framework and a conclusion that draws attention to the challenges of interpretation in the face of ever-growing new evidence serve as book ends to these six chapters.
- 6 Following the introduction (chapter 1), chapter 2 establishes the status of the Balyans in the face of contradictory and confusing evidence that runs across different sources. Eschewing the historiographical schism that overstates the Balyans' creative agency as architects or reduces them to mere *kalfas* (site managers) in charge of practical

organization, Wharton offers evidence for the multiplicity of titles held by different family members. To drive her point home, she draws attention to the instability of the term *kalfa*, which lends itself to different interpretations, including non-Muslim contractor, architect, master builder or master architect. The next chapter turns to Karapet Balyan, benefactor, builder, and influential member of the Armenian *Amira* elite, and focuses on the churches he rebuilt in the years leading to the *Tanzimat* (1830s-40s) as a gift for his community. As Wharton demonstrates, these churches showcased the *Amiras'* influence and social capital within their communities. They reinforced local identity and hierarchies, and promoted a modern Armenian identity under the Ottoman millet system. They also served as the strongholds for the Orthodox Church in countering the encroachment of foreign missionaries and Mechitarists on Ottoman-Armenian communities. Through a formal comparison of these with Armenian medieval architecture and Karapet's imperial commissions, Wharton further maintains that mid-nineteenth churches embodied a distinctively Armenian-Ottoman identity.

7 The fourth chapter delves into the Parisian training and international connections of Karapet's three sons. Contrary to common assumptions that cast the Balyans as mere conduits of westernization, Wharton highlights their role as stimulators of Ottoman development in the face of European intrusion. She pays particular attention to how they localized their Parisian education through adherence to traditional typologies of Ottoman interiors and the use of motifs symbolic of *Tanzimat* ideology, such as the imperial insignia or *tuğra*. A close analysis of Serkis Balyan's varied work—his industrial, residential, imperial projects as well as his proposal for a school of art and industry—further exposes the interpretive leaps he made in each case, fusing his modern training with conventional Ottoman practices and historic Armenian elements. Building on these arguments, the fifth chapter shows how the Balyans developed a deliberately hybrid, yet distinctively official style for each *Tanzimat* sultan that displayed a refashioned Ottoman sovereignty. Through a careful examination of formal evidence (recurring materials, techniques, motifs and structural elements) Wharton seeks to extract a larger story of continuities across different realms and counter the notion that an Ottoman Renaissance began only in the 1870s. While recognizing the stylistic differences between works executed in the 1840-50s and those built in the 1860-70s, she argues that both exemplified an Ottoman Renaissance that blended a revival of local traditions with new, European-influenced stimuli.

8 Chapter 6 is devoted to the bureaucratic, social, and industrial networks behind the Balyans' works, detailing their strategies for achieving efficiency and specialization. Painstakingly parsing through construction estimate registers, suppliers' lists, and purchased goods, Wharton detects changes between the networks in the 1840-50s and those in the 1850-60s that she reads as an ebbing of the support network away from the Balyans. In a short final chapter, she digs deeper into the shifting economic and political climate that precipitated the downfall of Serkis Balyan following allegations of embezzlement. Here, Wharton hints at the decentralization and resultant confusion in the building sector as important factors in bringing about Serkis' demise.

9 Commendably, Wharton's narrative takes a comparative stance, attending to contemporary developments that informed the Balyans' architectural practice and output. Notable here is the professionalization of the field, evidenced not only in the training of the Ottoman elite in Parisian institutions— *collège Sainte-Barbe*, *École Centrale des arts et manufactures*, and *École des beaux-arts*—but also in the rapid changes in the building trade—from craftsmen and reliance on local systems to proto-companies and wider networks of foreign contractors and furnishers. Also valuable are the processes and mechanisms through which the dominant architectural discourses of the time (such as romantic nationalism, or ideas of expressive ornament) circulated and permeated the Ottoman context.

10 For all its strengths, the book is not without its weaknesses. Based on the author's doctoral thesis, it exhibits an imbalance between datum and interpretation, a likely

holdover from the original dissertation mode. It also suffers from being repetitious and analytical in a way that interrupts and obscures the flow. Although the author writes in a lucid style, some readers may find progress through the text to be further impeded by the numerous headings and subheadings. The book boasts 30 lavish plates in addition to 20 black and white photographs. Still, it falls short of providing the visual evidence necessary for a fuller grounding of her arguments. The lack of drawings, sketches, and plans is especially unfortunate—even if the author cannot be blamed for the notorious difficulty of accessing and reproducing visual material held in dispersed private collections, rather than public archives.

- 11 These cavils notwithstanding, this book stands as a major research effort and advances our understanding in several important ways. The diffused architectural production that Wharton begins to unearth upsets the neat, clear-cut narrative of Ottoman-Turkish architectural history based on a smooth progression from the eclectic architecture of the *kalfas* to the first national style. It also sheds light on the intense but overlooked networks that made up the building sector, and on the position of non-Muslim elites within the Ottoman society before the nation. Without a doubt, the book demonstrates intellectual courage, if only for its engagement with hopelessly compartmentalized narratives. It will be of significant value to art and architectural historians, Ottoman historians, scholars of Armenian studies, and historians of professionalization.

Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

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