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### CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Géza Dávid</td>
<td>In Memoriam: Győző Gerő (1924–2011)</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heba Mostafa</td>
<td>The Early Mosque Revisited: Introduction of the Minbar and Maṣūra</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana Isaac Bakhoum</td>
<td>The Foundation of a Tabrizi Workshop in Cairo: A Case Study of Its Influence on the Mosque of Emir Altunbugha al-Maridani</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra Aube</td>
<td>The Uzun Hasan Mosque in Tabriz: New Perspectives on a Tabrizi Ceramic Tile Workshop</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eloïse Brac de la Perrière</td>
<td>Manuscripts in Bihari Calligraphy: Preliminary Remarks on a Little-Known Corpus</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keelan Overton</td>
<td>Book Culture, Royal Libraries, and Persianate Painting in Bijapur, circa 1580–1630</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Melville</td>
<td>New Light on Shah ‘Abbas and the Construction of Isfahan</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farshid Emami</td>
<td>Coffeehouses, Urban Spaces, and the Formation of a Public Sphere in Safavid Isfahan</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conrad Thake</td>
<td>Envisioning the Orient: The New Muslim Cemetery in Malta</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### NOTES AND SOURCES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ünver Rüstem</td>
<td>The Spectacle of Legitimacy: The Dome-Closing Ceremony of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mounia Chekhab-Abudaya, Amélie Couvrat Desvergnes, and David J. Roxburgh</td>
<td>Sayyid Yusuf’s 1433 Pilgrimage Scroll (Ziyāratnāma) in the Collection of the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hans Barnard, Sneha Shah, Gregory E. Areshian, and Kym F. Faull</td>
<td>Chemical Insights into the Function of Four Sphero-Conical Vessels from Medieval Dvin, Armenia</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THE SPECTACLE OF LEGITIMACY: THE DOME-CLOSING CEREMONY OF THE SULTAN AHMED MOSQUE

Today one of the most popular and iconic monuments of Istanbul, the Sultan Ahmed Mosque had a famously unpromising start. Its young founder, the Ottoman sultan Ahmed I (r. 1603–17), embarked on the building in the face of considerable opposition from the empire’s religious authorities, for he had won no major victories in war with which to fund or justify the project. Not only did Ahmed choose to ignore his critics, but he pulled no punches in visually asserting his right to build: implanted into the very heart of the Ottoman capital, the mosque, with its six minarets and cascading tiers of domes, was designed as a transformative landmark, and continues to define modern impressions of the city (fig. 1). Though art historians have tended to view the result as overblown, this unbridled aesthetic magnificence must have played a large and deliberate role in quelling the controversy that surrounded the mosque, whose splendor allowed it to emerge from its inauspicious beginnings as a fitting monument to both Islam and the empire.

But it was not only through physical grandeur that Ahmed sought to win over his subjects. As soon as construction began in 1609, the mosque became the focus of an unusually high level of ceremonial activity, hosting numerous events—some singular, some recurring—that propelled the building into the public consciousness and cemented its status as a fruitful addition to Istanbul’s fabric. Among the most remarkable in this festive roster was a lavish ceremony to celebrate the closing of the central dome in June 1617, only two months before the building would be inaugurated. Marked by a grand procession from the Topkapı Palace and the raising of stately tents in the mosque’s courtyard, this ceremony appears to have been a unique experiment in Ottoman history, specifically intended to boost the profile of Ahmed’s endeavor and reassert its legitimacy in preparation for the official opening.

Basic details of the dome-closing ceremony have long been known from contemporary chronicles, but a far fuller and rarer source of information has hitherto escaped notice: an anonymous manuscript of nearly fifty folios written shortly after the event and devoted to its description. As unusual as the occasion itself, this text—the inspiration for the present article—sheds valuable new light on the ceremonial as well as discursive means by which the sultan and his backers strove to vindicate the new mosque. Of particular note is the account’s portrayal of the festivities as a triumph over the infidel, a characterization that suggests that the ceremony itself—with its prominent inclusion of an encampment—was aimed at glossing over Ahmed’s military deficiencies and presenting him in the guise of a victorious holy warrior. Staged against the symbolically charged act of closing the building’s dome, both the ceremony and its textual commemoration were telling responses to the challenge that the sultan had set himself, encapsulating the concerns that underlay his ultimately successful campaign to preserve his memory in stone.

DEFIANCE AND MAGNIFICENCE: THE CREATION OF AHMED’S MOSQUE

When Sultan Ahmed, still in his teens, resolved to build a new imperial mosque, he must have anticipated the resistance his plans would meet. It had been many years since a sultan had erected such a monument in the capital: the last had been that of Ahmed’s great-great-grandfather,
the mighty Süleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520–66), whose prominent hilltop mosque complex was built by the architect Sinan (d. 1588) between 1550 and 1557 (fig. 2). This, the Süleymaniye Mosque, had been preceded by a number of other grand sultanic foundations, but the second half of the sixteenth century witnessed a lull in imperial construction that reflected growing anxieties about the decorousness of such lavish architecture. In a book of advice written in 1581 for Murad III (r. 1574–95), the historian Mustafa ʿĀli (d. 1600) asserts that sultans should refrain from building even charitable or religious institutions if they “have not enriched themselves with the spoils of Holy War and have not become owners of lands through gains of campaigns of the Faith.” The reason for this objection, ʿĀli explains, is that “the Divine Laws do not permit the building of charitable establishments with the means of the public treasury, neither do they allow the foundations of mosques and medreses that are not needed.” Voiced at a time when the Ottoman Empire was not expanding at the rate it had under earlier sultans, such views were further fueled by the effects of a global inflation. Süleyman had more than fulfilled the conditions set forth by Mustafa ʿĀli, but his less impressive successors duly chose not to follow in his architectural footsteps, with the exception of his son, Selim II (r. 1566–74), who used booty gained from his conquest of Cyprus in 1571 to finance the construction of the Selimiye Mosque, designed by Sinan and completed in 1574. Yet although widely regarded as Sinan’s masterpiece, the Selimiye still stopped short of challenging Süleyman’s legacy: it was built in Edirne, the empire’s second city, rather than the capital, in part because Selim, unlike his father, had not personally led his army.

Such restraint evidently held little sway with Ahmed, who was keen to buck the trend by boldly presenting...
himself in Süleyman's image. The comparison was not well deserved, however: far from expanding the empire, Ahmed lost important territories to the Safavids in 1604–5, and was forced in 1606 to concede parity with the Habsburg emperor, who no longer had to pay the annual tribute that had been instituted in Süleyman's time. Nevertheless—and apparently driven by his well-known piety—the sultan made known his plans to found a mosque worthy of the empire's heyday. His advisers, perhaps seeking a middle way, initially recommended that he complete the sizeable mosque that his grandmother Safye Sultan (d. 1618) had started to build in 1598 on the shore of Eminönü, one of the capital's busiest districts. But Ahmed, who disliked his grandmother intensely, had personally put a stop to her project upon his accession and had no desire to resume it, especially since its enviably conspicuous site was considered by many as having been illegally expropriated. (It would take many years and another queen mother, Turhan Hâdice Sultan [d. 1683], to finish Safye's mosque, which was finally opened in 1665 and is now known as the Yeni Cami.)

Preferring to start afresh rather than associate himself with his grandmother's failed enterprise, the sultan managed to acquire a site that was as prominent as it was licit, buying and demolishing two large sixteenth-century palaces that occupied a choice area of land next to the Hippodrome and opposite the Hagia Sophia. The legality of the site did not, however, settle the questions raised by the construction itself. The grand mufti pointed out that the mosque would be needless in its intended setting, which lacked a large congregation, and the more serious issue of the sultan's military shortcomings still loomed. In a report dated 1612, Simone Contarini (d. 1633), who had just completed his tenure as Venetian bailo to Istanbul, noted that the mosque was deeply unpopular among those who would have preferred Ahmed to pour his resources into conquering Christian lands. How this controversy played out is described in an account written later in the seventeenth century by the French traveler Guillaume-Joseph Grelot (d. after 1680):

[...] though the Mufti, the Mulla’s, the Cheiks, and other Doctors of the Law, laid before [Ahmed] the sin of undertaking
to erect such a costly fabric, since he had never been in any other Combat, than those which are daily to be seen for the exercise of the pages, and divertisement of the Prince, nevertheless he gave little heed to their admonitions, but carried on the work with a vigour answerable to his resolution; and when he had finish’d the Pile, because he had slighted his Chaplains exhortations, call’d it Imansız Gianişi [İmânız Câmi’si], or the Temple of the Incredulous.16

A more complicated picture is painted by the English ambassador Sir Thomas Glover (d. 1625), who, in a dispatch sent in early 1610, links the mosque to a curious circumstantiality he describes are hardly those of other observers, though even his version of the circumstance he describes are hardly those of other observers, though even his version of the incident is the onlie cause of the building of the mosque’s foundations were laid, but the conflict, which would end in the Safavids’ favor, was still ongoing when he died.18 The sultan’s clerics, meanwhile, urged him to invade Crete so that he might triumph over a Christian enemy, and while he seemed willing, he never undertook the task.19 One might wonder whether Ahmed’s desire to build was motivated in part because of, and not despite, his lack of military promise;20 perhaps he felt a great mosque gracing the capital would prove a meritorious enough legacy by which to compensate for his failure to win new territories.

Sure enough, the mosque was to emerge from its problematic gestation unscathed. If accounts such as Grelo’s reveal that Ahmed’s obstinacy was not forgotten, the monument itself was soon accepted as an integral and apparently uncontroversial fixture of the city: its usual name in the decades following its completion was Yeñi Câmi, “New Mosque,” a neutral label that makes no reference to its founder’s transgression.21 Several factors contributed to the ultimately warm reception with which the finished building was greeted. Notwithstanding the project’s many detractors, the sultan was supported in his actions by various sympathetic voices that helped to balance the discourse in his favor. These individuals included two men who would play instrumental roles in the dome-closing ceremony. One was the highly revered Sufi shaykh Mahmud Hüdayi (d. 1628), who, acting as a spiritual adviser to the sultan, pushed for the Cretan campaign without questioning Ahmed’s overall right to build.22 The second of these important backers was the chief harem eunuch Hacı Mustafa Agha (d. 1624), whom Ahmed appointed as superintendent (nâzîr) over the mosque’s construction,23 and who countered the grand mufti’s objections to the site by proposing that new houses be built to boost the population surrounding the mosque.24

Hacı Mustafa’s suggestion is recorded in a chronicle penned by the royal imam Mustafa Saﬁ (d. 1616), another ally to Ahmed.25 Describing the circumstances in which the mosque was conceived, Saﬁ recasts events to

With its claim that Ahmed was being spurred on rather than discouraged, Glover’s account seems to contradict those of other observers, though even his version of events bespeaks an uneasy genesis for the mosque. The circumstances he describes are hardly flattering to the sultan, who acts not from a position of strength, but out of mortal fear in response to the admonishments of his clerics. Moreover, Glover goes on to say that those advising Ahmed, besides promising an end to his illness, also affirmed that construction of the mosque would bring “greate and incredible victories, againste all the Gran Sig;”9 enemies, wheresoever he shall please to wage any warre.” In spite of its otherwise idiosyncratic content, then, the dispatch still ties the mosque to the hawkish rhetoric of conquest, and Glover is in broad agreement with other sources that tell us that the project was encouraged only inasmuch as it would oblige Ahmed to pursue a commensurate martial victory.

Attempts to retroactively legitimate the mosque indeed followed, though they came to nothing. Ahmed declared war against the Safavids in 1609, shortly after the mosque’s foundations were laid, but the conflict, which would end in the Safavids’ favor, was still ongoing when he died.18 The sultan’s clerics, meanwhile, urged him to invade Crete so that he might triumph over a Christian enemy, and while he seemed willing, he never undertook the task.19 One might wonder whether Ahmed’s desire to build was motivated in part because of, and not despite, his lack of military promise;20 perhaps he felt a great mosque gracing the capital would prove a meritorious enough legacy by which to compensate for his failure to win new territories.

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present Ahmed’s 1606 treaty with the Habsburgs, which was largely a stalemate, as an unqualified Ottoman victory, and he also lauds the sultan’s suppression in 1608 of the Celalis, rebels in Anatolia who were often viewed as subscribing to a Qizilbash—that is Shi‘i—ideology.26 Safi thus lays a religio-legal groundwork for the mosque, and some, at least, seem to have shared his view, as we learn from another of Glover’s dispatches, this time written as the monument’s foundations were being dug in late 1609:

[T]he Gran Sig[27] in respecte of his victorie againste the [Celali] Rebels in Asia, or in that he hath, contrarie to all mens expectations, soe suddainlie subdued and whollie rooted them out, hath commaund to pull downe many goodlie and sumptuous pallaces, belonginge to some of his vizereis, or vizereis sonnes (payinge them well for it) and instead thereof to be builde a verie sumptuous church or Meskite, which shall be bigger then any as yet in Constant: and to be named by his name, Sultan Achomat.

Given the continuing calls for Ahmed to invade Crete, relatively few can have accepted the defeat of the Celalis as a valid pretext to build (and as we have seen, Glover himself would offer a quite different reason for the undertaking in a dispatch written only a few months later). But Safi’s extended defense of the mosque preempts further opposition by noting that the grand mufti, while objecting to certain aspects of the project, could cite nothing in religious law to forbid it.28 As well as defending Ahmed’s military record, Safi commends the mosque as evidence of the sultan’s atypical piety and fondness for good works,29 and he also reaffirms the suitability of the building’s location, declaring the Hippodrome to be “a magnet for the people of the world” that would draw enough worshippers to fill “many mosques like Ayasofya.”30

Safi’s praise for the chosen site is echoed by the author Çafer Efendi in his Rısaile-i mi’marîyye, an architectural treatise centered on the life and career of the chief imperial architect Sedefkar Mehmed Agha (d. 1617), who designed the Sultan Ahmed.31 Completed in 1614 as the mosque was being built, the Rısaile, which devotes a whole chapter to the monument, presents it as a regenerative blessing to “one of the finest locations of the city,” for it replaced “aged palaces . . . filled with the nests of owls.”32 Çafer Efendi goes on to describe the numerous exemplary elements making up the edifice, claiming that “no other such high and solid building has been erected” before it.33

Hyperbolic as this statement may seem, Çafer Efendi is hardly exaggerating the mosque’s sheer visual impact. The advocacy of Ahmed’s backers, together with the written records of their support, would have amounted to little had the architecture itself been any less persuasive than it is. Writing at the same time as Çafer Efendi, Contarini reports that the “superbissima” mosque would resemble and compete with the Süleymaniye,34 and he is right on both counts. The mosque, which comprises a domed prayer hall and porticoed courtyard, stands imposingly in an expansive walled precinct, around which are scattered numerous dependencies that make up the remainder of the complex (figs. 3 and 4).35 Modern connoisseurs and art historians have frequently denigrated the building as a pretentious rehashing of Sinan’s style, but, as Emine Fetiçci has shown, the Sultan Ahmed Mosque’s dramatic design was carefully tailored to, and highly appreciated in, its own seventeenth-century context.36 A student of Sinan, the architect Mehmed Agha judiciously adapted the prestigious mode of his master with the aim of rivaling it. The plan of the prayer hall is thus an aggrandized reworking of that of Sinan’s first major work, the Şehzade Mosque (1543–48), which Süleyman the Magnificent had built to commemorate his favorite son, the deceased Mehmed (d. 1543).37 In this so-called quatrefoil plan, the main dome rests on four piers and is braced by four semi-domes, with cupolas filling the remaining corners (figs. 5 and 6). At the Sultan Ahmed, the scheme is on a much larger scale and further elaborated with the addition of exedrae flowing down from three of the semi-domes (figs. 1, 4, 7, and 8).38 By reviving the Şehzade’s plan, which Sinan himself had not returned to, the Sultan Ahmed Mosque posits its founder as a scion of Süleyman and preserver of his legacy. It is notable in this regard that Safiye Sultan’s abortive foundation at Eminönü had preceded the Sultan Ahmed in being designed on the Şehzade’s model,39 her grandson’s halting of that project and cooption of the quatrefoil plan for himself thus stressed his privileged status as Süleyman’s rightful heir.

Mehmed Agha’s decision not to adopt the vaulting arrangement of the Süleymaniye—which, like the Hagia
Sophia, has only two semi-domes flanking its dome—might be construed as a decorous concession, but it also allowed the patron to distinguish his own monument from his ancestor’s. Comparison between the two buildings is rendered inevitable by their stylistic resemblance and the similarity of their dimensions, and the later mosque’s doubling of semi-domes and emphasis on pyramidal verticality arguably make for a more impressive effect. The same principle is at work in the use of minarets: the Sultan Ahmed replicates the Süleymaniye in placing four minarets of uneven height at the corners of its porticoed courtyard, but it also adds a further two to the qibla side of the prayer hall. The resultant total of six minarets was unprecedented in Ottoman mosque architecture and never to be repeated. Consciously avoiding a direct correspondence with any one model, then, Mehməd Ağa opted for an augmented combination of Süleymanic references drawn from both the Şehzade and the Süleymaniye, creating a distinctive synthesis that stands in its own right even as it evokes the past.

This shrewd design also equips the Sultan Ahmed Mosque against its more immediate rival, the Hagia Sophia, which faces it directly across a large open square (fig. 9). The use of four semi-domes serves again—and still more clearly—to differentiate the newer structure, whose rhythmic cascade of domes presents a marked contrast to the rather ungainly exterior of the converted sixth-century church. The earlier Şehzade Mosque had already been credited in one of Sinan’s (auto)biographies with eclipsing the Hagia Sophia’s style, which “did not possess elegance.” Building on this trope, the Sultan Ahmed’s emphatically beautiful exterior is able to challenge the Hagia Sophia despite being smaller in size. Its unyielding visual appeal is once more bolstered by its six minarets, which on the one hand mirror the Hagia Sophia’s placement of four towers at the corners of the prayer hall, but on the other surpass their earlier counterparts in number as well as aesthetic coherence—the minarets of the Hagia Sophia are mismatched accretions of different periods. The overall effect of the Sultan Ahmed’s gracefully deployed mina-
Fig. 4. Plan of the surviving elements of the Sultan Ahmed Complex and the neighboring Hippodrome: 1) Mosque; 2) Madrasa; 3) Mausoleum; 4) Primary school; 5) Royal pavilion; 6) Hippodrome; 7) Garden platform; 8) Marketplace (arasta). (Drawing: Arben N. Arapi. Courtesy of Gülru Necipoğlu)

Fig. 5. Şehzade Mosque, from the southwest. (Photo: Reha Günay)

Fig. 6. Plan of the Şehzade Mosque. (Drawing: Arben N. Arapi. Courtesy of Gülru Necipoğlu)
rets is to conflate the arrangements of both the Hagia Sophia and the Süleymaniye, underscoring the new mosque’s competitive dialogue with these two venerable models.

Inside, too, the Sultan Ahmed sets itself apart from its prototypes. The four piers supporting the dome take the form of gigantic fluted cylinders that art historians have criticized as excessively bulky, though their heft can only have been an intentional departure from the leaner proportions employed in other monuments, as if to bear out Ca’fer Efendi’s assertion that no earlier building was as solid (figs. 10–12). The walls likewise strive for a fresh approach, eschewing the decorative reserve of Istanbul’s existing sultanic mosques in favor of a comprehensive coating of floral Iznik tiles, whose rich hue is the reason the building is popularly known as the Blue Mosque (fig. 13).

Observers in the seventeenth century were duly impressed with what they saw. Grelot writes that the mosque “may be said to be the most beautiful in Constantinople, if not in all the East,” a sentiment shared by his Ottoman contemporary, the famous traveler Evliya Çelebi (d. 1682), who calls it “the most beautiful of all sultanic mosques in Istanbul.” Having ignored the dictates of tradition and pushed ahead with his plans, Ahmed had produced an architectural fait accompli, so striking and magnificent that any lingering objections to it were swiftly obviated. The success of this audacious artistic feat was not, however, due to its design alone: the sultan may have raised a splendid new edifice, but

Fig. 7. Sultan Ahmed Mosque, entrance façade from the inner courtyard, showing the cascading domes of the prayer hall. (Photo: Güven Erten)
Fig. 8. Sultan Ahmed Mosque, interior view of the domical superstructure. (Photo: iStock.com/wrangel)
only by enlivening it with activity could he prove that it was more than a needless extravagance.

CEREMONIAL AND SOCIABILITY: THE SULTAN AHMED MOSQUE IN THE PUBLIC EYE

Among the more novel elements of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque is an L-shaped structure that is attached to its southern corner and entered by a ramp (figs. 1, 9, 14, and 15). Dwarfed by the adjacent prayer hall and easily missed by modern visitors, this building would not have escaped attention in Ottoman times, when it served as a pavilion to host the sultans during their ceremonial visits to the mosque. The upper story of the structure contained decorated and furnished rooms for the sovereign’s respite, while a corridor on the same floor gave direct access to the royal prayer loge that occupies the neighboring corner of the prayer hall. True to its function, and in order not to detract from the mosque proper, the pavilion follows the stylistic norms of residential building: its walls are of alternating courses of brick and stone, unlike the pure stone of the prayer hall, and its roof is externally hipped rather than domed. This palatial annex was the first structure of its kind in Ottoman mosque architecture, introducing a feature that would become canonical and increasingly prominent in later imperial mosques. The advent and subsequent development of this type of pavilion coincided with a larger shift whereby the sultans—no longer absent on distant campaigns—were becoming ever more visible on home turf. It was already routine for a sultan to ride in dazzling procession to one of the capital’s mosques.
Fig. 10. Sultan Ahmed Mosque, interior toward the west, showing the domical superstructure. (Photo: Ünver Rüstem)
Fig. 11. Sultan Ahmed Mosque, interior toward the qibla (southeast) wall. (Photo: Ünver Rüstem)

Fig. 12. Süleymaniye Mosque, interior toward the qibla (southeast) wall. (Photo: Reha Günay)
THE DOME-CLOSING CEREMONY OF THE SULTAN AHMED MOSQUE

Fig. 13. Sultan Ahmed Mosque, Iznik tilework in the upper gallery. (Photo: Ünver Rüstem)

Fig. 14. Sultan Ahmed Complex, royal pavilion viewed from the northwest toward its entrance side, with the attached mosque on the right. (Photo: Güven Erten)

Fig. 15. Sultan Ahmed Complex, royal pavilion viewed from the southeast, with the mosque on the left. (Photo: Güven Erten)
in order to perform the Friday prayer there (fig. 16); the placement of a pavilion at the culmination of this parade would only enhance the ceremony’s splendor and prominence, concretizing the royal visit even after its end.

That this move towards amplified spectacle began with the Sultan Ahmed should not surprise us. Both during and after its construction, the mosque witnessed a level of ceremonial activity that amounted to a relentless public-relations exercise, intended to reiterate the sultan’s devotion to the project while also exciting his subjects’ interest in it. The staging of festivities to mark the establishment of a new imperial mosque was, to be sure, a well-established practice, and two occasions in particular—the foundation-laying and the inauguration—were typically celebrated on a grand scale with processions, prayers, animal sacrifices, and the distribution of gifts. Even so, the ceremonies associated with the Sultan Ahmed Mosque stand out as extraordinary, not only in their elaboration, but also in their number. Ahmed’s supporters had promised a building that would buzz with new life, and it seems the sultan was anxious to deliver on their assurances with a series of events jointly implicating himself and his subjects in the mosque’s formation.

The tone was set from the very beginning. Indeed, the pavilion attached to the prayer hall is the adapted version of a structure that had been erected even before work on the mosque commenced. The purpose of this “exalted pavilion” was, according to Mustafa Safi, for the sultan to “view and observe the construction and investigate the conditions of the poor and weak,” a description that links Ahmed’s care for the mosque with his care for his people, who could in turn look to the structure as a constant symbol of their ruler’s beneficence. It was from this pavilion, Safi states, that Ahmed watched the groundbreaking ceremony, which was held at an auspicious hour on October 7, 1609, and entailed a packed gathering of courtiers, clerics, and officials. Led by the grand mufti and by Mahmud Hüdayi, whom Evliya Çelebi dubs the “shaykh of the foundations” (temel şeyhi), members of the assembly started to dig the ground. They then stopped and cleared the way for the sultan, who descended from the pavilion and himself began to dig using a silver-decorated mattock with a velvet-lined handle.

In a dispatch sent a few weeks later, the English ambassador Glover, whose knowledge of the event may have been secondhand, gives a different order to the day’s proceedings while adding interesting details not found in Safi’s description:

[The Gran Sigiz himselfe in persone, with the Muftie, and all his vizeyres, and other ministers and officers, went to the [site of the mosque], and there first offered sacrifice (as they doe call it Curban) of 500. sheepe, and 140. oxen, this beinge devided amongste the people, they ioyntlie went to prayers wherin continued fower howers by the clocke, which alsoe beinge ended, the Gran Sigiz tooke the mat-hooce or pickaxe, and soe himselfe for halfe a quarter of an hower, digged the grounde for to laye the foundation of...]

Fig. 16. Zacharias Wehme, The Friday Procession of Sultan Selim II to the Süleymaniye Mosque. Detail of a scroll painted after a lost Habsburg album, 1581–82. Dresden, Die Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Mscr.Dresd.J.2.a. (Photo: SLUB/Deutsche Fotothek, Brigitta Paetzold)
the churche, and soe the Muftie, and all the vizereys followed him, whose continuied in digginge, for space of two good howers, and soe delivered their instrumentes unto the labourers.⁶⁰

Ahmed’s participation in the digging—a highly unusual step—harked back to certain fifteenth-century foundation ceremonies in which the sultan personally laid the first stone of his mosque as a vow before setting off on campaign.⁶¹ Besides demonstrating his pious humility, Ahmed’s comparable act many years later may thus have been intended as a pledge of his own ostensible commitment to a future (though never realized) holy war. The handing out of sacrificial animal meat, which is also mentioned by Safi,⁶² served to involve the wider public in the ceremony’s votive symbolism. On the days that followed, several groups tied to the state, from the janissaries to vizierial officers, took it in turns to continue digging, in each case being rewarded for their efforts with a feast.⁶³ The care that went into organizing this activity is recounted in Glover’s next dispatch, written a month into construction:

The seise do verie earnestlie followe, w.th all forces, and cerelitie they can, the buildinge of the Meskit…and all the vizereis of the Bench are comandad, every day by turne, one of them to attend, and to oversee, all the day longe, the buildinge therof, and soe they doe. And because the Gienis-saries, of their owne voluntarie will, for the Gran Sig.⁶⁵ sake (as allsoe supposinge to be a charitable deed to further the same) have offered themselves inpersone, for the space of the wholl weeke, to worke in digginge of the foundations therof, (as they have done) the Gran Sig.⁶⁵ hath bestowed on them, five lode of mony for theire paynes, which is five thousand Crownes.⁶⁴

Already more embellished and prolonged than other recorded groundbreakings,⁶⁵ the initiation of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque was further heralded with a second foundation ceremony that took place on January 3, 1610, when another great assembly gathered to ritually lay the first stones of the qibla wall. The grand mufti and Mahmud Hüdayi again led the proceedings, which Ahmed once more watched from his pavilion before descending to lower a number of stones into the base of the mihrab using a sling specially made of silver rings and silken cord. Mustafa Safi’s lengthy description of the event tells us that some 150 individuals received robes of honor that day.⁶⁶

As work on the building progressed, the sultan continued to make himself present and visible at the site, which he could survey—and be seen surveying—from his pavilion. Glover, reporting in January 1610, notes that the mosque was “daylie verie diligentlie solicited, by the vizereis, and often visited (at lease once a weeweke) by the Gran Sig.’ himselfe.”⁶⁷ A letter written seven months later by the French ambassador Jean de Gontaut-Biron (d. 1636) stresses Ahmed’s “marvelous diligence” in connection with the project, whose progress he personally urged on by “staying at the scene for seven or eight days”—presumably in the pavilion.⁶⁸ Gontaut-Biron adds that many in Istanbul questioned whether the sultan would succeed in his ambitious enterprise, and it was surely in part to counteract these doubts and inspire confidence in the building that Ahmed made such a show of his dedication to it. Another kind of royal appearance during the mosque’s construction is recorded by Evliya Çelebi, who tells us that the sultan one day “pitched his tent on . . . the courtyard of the mosque . . . and gave a feast to all the Vezirs and great men of the capital, which surpassed even that which was given at the feast of [his] circumcision.”⁶⁹ After most of the assembly dispersed, Ahmed remained in his tent with a select group of men that included Mahmud Hüdayi, who exhorted the sultan to fulfil his plan to invade Crete. The gathered company then prayed, probably aware that the mosque would be completed whether or not the sultan ever delivered a victory against the infidel.⁷⁰ Holding this supererogatory ceremonial feast in a tent—a structure as much associated with warfare as with festivities—may well have been an intentionally bold conceit, emblematically lending Ahmed the very martial credibility he lacked in life. A similar banquet, on this occasion hosted by Lala Mustafa Pasha (d. 1580) at an army camp outside Iznik, is depicted in the 1584 copy of Mustafa ‘Alî’s Nüşretname, which commemorates the Ottomans’ successful campaign against the Safavids in the Caucasus (fig. 17). The semiotic potential that such military references offered the mosque would, as we shall see, be more overtly realized with the dome-closing ceremony.

Beyond drawing attention to the project’s scale and development, the sultan was keen also to earn his mosque a rightful place in a city already teeming with religious foundations. The proximity of the Hagia
Sophia—the empire’s principal mosque and the most frequent destination for the sultans’ Friday parades—made it especially important to demonstrate that the new monument would not be superfluous. Ahmed’s waqfiyya (foundation deed), which was written in 1613, addressed this concern by providing for the annual festive recitation of the Mevlûd poem, chanted in honor of the Prophet’s nativity (every 12 Rabi’ 1). This was not the first time that the Mevlûd would take place at an imperial mosque, for Ahmed’s father, Mehmed III (r. 1595–1603), had already introduced the ritual at the Hagia Sophia. In 1599, however, the grand mufti put an end to this “ugly innovation,” which was criticized for, among other things, its exclusionary nature: those administering the ceremony distributed candies and sherbets to the grandees but not to the poor. By reviving the Mevlûd, Ahmed aimed to distinguish his mosque as the ritual’s new permanent venue, where his subjects might experience something that no other site offered. He learned from the mistakes of the ceremony’s failed past by stipulating a more lavish and inclusive affair at which the entire congregation, rich and poor alike, would be served food and drink, even coffee. A preliminary Mevlûd had already been held at the Sultan Ahmed’s building site in late 1610, not on the Prophet’s birthday, but to bring good luck to the fledgling project. Cushioned sofas and other temporary furnishings were installed for the ritual, which was attended by all the notable men of state and religion, including Mahmud Hüdayi, who delivered a sermon. The mosque was still being built when, in 1614, it hosted its first endowed Mevlûd, for which oil lamps were hung from the scaffolding. A contemporary account by the janissary scribe ‘Abdülkadir Efendi (d. 1644 [?]) describes a busy gathering of dignitaries and clerics engaged in “sociable conversation” (sobhah), evidence of Ahmed’s success in establishing a new and lively tradition even before the mosque was finished. The last Mevlûd to be celebrated during construction was in March 1617, when the monument was nearing its final form. Shaykh Mahmud Hüdayi was again prominent among the assembly, which, according to ‘Abdülkadir Efendi, was so large on this occasion that the mosque could not contain it. Incense burners wafted the scent of ambergris while the poem was recited, and the overflowing crowds “helped themselves to endless sherbets and candies.” The royal account books confirm that these refreshments were plentiful enough to satisfy all, “high and low.” Such vibrant scenes offered important proof that the mosque, once opened, would not struggle to attract and engage the public, and they also made a virtue of the mosque’s uncrowded setting: the open spaces bordering it rendered the building ideally suited for large-scale festivities that might overspill its walls.

So remarkable was Ahmed’s achievement in giving his mosque a unique ritual and social identity that the
practice of celebrating the Mevlûd would continue there under his successors until the empire’s final years, surviving even into our own time (fig. 18).\textsuperscript{82} John Murray’s much-used nineteenth-century travel guide to Istanbul gives a vivid account of the mosque’s enduring—and indeed expanded—ceremonial function:

In consequence of the beautiful site of the Atmeidan, and its open and free communication on every side, the mosque of Sultan Ahmed is the theatre of the great ceremonies of religion and court processions. Aja Sofia may be termed, from its vicinity to the palace, the Court church, the Ahmedje, the State church, or cathedral of Constantinople; for it is hither that the Sultan generally repairs, accompanied by his

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\textsuperscript{82} For use by the Author only | © 2016 Koninklijke Brill NV
whole suite, on the two great festivals of the Bairam [Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha].

It is during the “Mevlūd,” the book adds, that “the Sultan appears in his greatest splendour” at the mosque, “surrounded by all the functionaries of the court and state, to assist in the praises of the prophet, which are sung by the most melodious voices.”

But if the Mevlūd is the longest lived of the Sultan Ahmed’s festive innovations, the most striking is surely the dome-closing ceremony, which was held less than three months after the nativity ritual of 1617 and would, by contrast, remain a one-off extravaganza. No earlier or later mosque is known to have been the object of such an event, and the closest recorded parallels—other celebrations tied to constructional milestones—were less grand affairs. The completion of the Süleymaniye’s tympanum arches in 1555, for example, was marked with the distribution of sherbet and gifts of money to the workforce. Ottoman sources note the closing of its dome the following year without making reference to any accompanying festivities, though a much later Venetian dispatch, to be discussed below, states that for three days the dome’s exterior was draped with fabrics that were then presented as gifts to the workforce and superintendents. Whether the dome was bedecked upon its closing or for the later inauguration is not specified by the dispatch, whose description is in any case uncorroborated. But even if, as seems plausible, the completion of the Süleymaniye’s dome was proclaimed in this colorful manner, we still have nothing to rival the far showier production that attended the same moment at the Sultan Ahmed. The 1617 dome-closing ceremony stands, then, as a singular event not only in the life of the mosque, but also in Ottoman history. Already apparent from the known sources, the unusualness of the festival is substantiated by the equally exceptional monograph that is its written outcome, and to which my discussion now turns.

CAPPING IT ALL OFF: THE DOME-CLOSING CEREMONY AND ITS TEXTUAL RECORD

The manuscript describing the Sultan Ahmed Mosque’s dome-closing ceremony appears to be unknown in the scholarship, and I discovered it quite by chance among the digitized holdings of the Süleymaniye Library, where it is listed with the title Tarih-i Bına-yi Cami-i Sultan Ahmed-i Evvel (History of the Construction of the Mosque of Sultan Ahmed I) and the classmark Fotokopi No. 294. As this classmark indicates, the library houses only a black-and-white photocopy of the book, whose actual location, as recorded by a modern Arabic slip photocopied together with one of the endpapers, is (or was) the Iraqi Academy of Sciences in Baghdad. This slip gives the simpler title Sultan Ahmed cāmi’[i] tārīḥi (History of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque) in the Arabic/Ottoman script, which suggests that the endpaper beneath it bears the same heading written in late Ottoman times; the longer and more typically Ottoman-sounding title found in the Süleymaniye’s records may well be a modern cataloguer’s coinage. In the absence of a more definitive alternative, I shall refer to the work as the Tarih, an abbreviation of both available titles. There is no mark of ownership on the manuscript, at least as revealed by the photocopy; the Arabic slip, which may be obscuring relevant information on the endpaper itself, gives the book’s provenance only as the National Center for the Preservation of Documents, part of the Ministry of Information in Baghdad.

The book comprises forty-nine folios and, according to the Arabic slip, measures 22 by 18 centimeters. The text, which runs from fol. ob to fol. 43b, is written in an elegant and large naskh that is extensively vocalized, punctuated by rosettes and occasional rubrics, and framed by ruled borders (see the reproduction of the manuscript on pp. 300–324). It is apparent even from the photocopy that the borders, rosettes, and rubrics are gilt. There are seven lines of text to the page except for a few easily explained exceptions, including the illuminated opening page, whose five lines start beneath a colored and gilt headpiece that is filled with arabesques and crowned by a lobed arch. Distinguished above all by its beautifully inscribed and liberally voweled large-scale text, this fine format is reminiscent of fair-copy imperial waqfiyyas—indeed, the Sultan Ahmed Mosque’s own waqfiyya manuscript is almost identical in arrangement (figs. 19 and 20)—and it therefore seems that we are dealing with a presentation copy made for an elite

reader with close personal interest or involvement in the mosque. A likely candidate is the building superintendent, Hacı Mustafa Agha, whom the text singles out for lavish praise.\footnote{That he was exiled to Cairo in 1620 before being recalled to the capital in 1623 may account for why the book left Istanbul and ended up in the Arab world. Even if catering to the agha, however, the text would also have been intended for wider circulation at the court, and, more specifically, to gratify the sultan himself, who is, as we might expect, its overall hero. Whether further copies were ever made or have survived remains to be investigated, but the work must in any case be reckoned an extremely rare product, a point to which I shall return.}

Written in a florid courtly register of Ottoman Turkish, the \textit{Tarih} is made up of a prose account of the ceremony followed by two related qasidas, the first composed for the sultan and the second for Mustafa Agha (see the appendix for a full transliteration and translation of the manuscript). The prose section, which constitutes about three-quarters of the total work, is itself peppered with poetic couplets, some of them drawn from the second qasida. At the end of the manuscript are two additional borderless folios inscribed in a different (and far more workaday) hand with an unrelated tract whose conclusion the photocopy omits.\footnote{As for our text, there is no indication of an author for any of its components, all three of which are probably the work of the same man. Neither does the book give any details of its scribe or the circumstances of its copying, though it was very likely produced (and must certainly have been drafted) between August 18, 1617, which is the last date mentioned, and November 22, 1617, the death date of the sultan, who is nowhere referred to as deceased.}

The prose account that forms the heart of the text opens with fulsome praise for God, for the Prophet and his family and companions, and for the sultan, who is termed the “protector of Muslims and Monotheists and slayer of pagans and heretics.”\footnote{While eulogistic prefaces are typical of many categories of Ottoman literature, the introduction again exhibits notable similarities to Ahmed’s \textit{waqffîya}, particularly in the manuscripts’ shared use of gilding to highlight the first mention of the sultan’s name and titles (fig. 20 and the reproduction of fol. 7a on p. 303). Such typological overlaps, which build on the broader artistic resemblance between the \textit{Tarih} and the \textit{waqffîya}, are partly a reflection of the former’s experimental character—it does not belong to an established genre of its own—but they also confirm the \textit{Tarih} as part of the officially sanctioned discourse surrounding the mosque. This evocation of the \textit{waqffîya} format would, moreover, have been readily appreciated by Mustafa Agha, whose role as chief harem eunuch also entailed overseeing the endowments—and hence endowment deeds—of several major religious sites, including the sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina.}

His Excellency the aforesaid superintendent—long may he live—was ordered to set up a place for the sultan of the seven climes in the mosque’s honorable courtyard \textit{[harem-i muhtereminde]}, whereupon the faithful superintendent, in accordance with the imperial command, pitched that heavenly tent—whose azure cupola reached the heavens and whose golden finial shone upon the word—in that graceful and noble location, as befitting Ottoman law and imperial custom; and he had curtains of cloth of gold and silver hung all around it, completing the imperial tent as well as one could wish.\footnote{Whether the location of the tent was the mosque’s porticoed forecourt (the inner courtyard) or its surrounding precinct (the outer courtyard) is unclear from the account’s terminology, and the question is not settled by the shorter descriptions of the event found in other seventeenth-century sources, which include the chronicle of Abdülkadir Efendi and the \textit{Fezleke} of Katib Çelebi (d. 1657), whose entry on the ceremony is reproduced almost verbatim in the later official history of Mustafa Na’ıma (d. 1716). These alternative sources do, however, note the presence of additional tents that are not mentioned in the \textit{Tarih}, and though it would have been possible for several large tents to fit inside the mosque’s spacious inner courtyard (fig. 21), such an assemblage may have been better accommodated—not to mention more publicly visible—in the outer court (fig. 22), which...}
Fig. 21. Sultan Ahmed Mosque, porticoed inner courtyard and domed ablution fountain. (Photo: Güven Erten)

Fig. 22. Sultan Ahmed Mosque, outer courtyard from the northwest, with the mosque on the right and the royal pavilion in the distance. (Photo: Güven Erten)
bordered the vast open space of the Hippodrome. Either way, these histories make no reference to Mustafa Agha’s role in setting up the encampment, nor indeed in organizing any part of the ceremony. The Tarih in this regard is both a more complete and a more biased record.

Our text continues with the day of the ceremony itself, when the agha spent the morning furnishing “both sides of the sultanic road [from the Topkapı Palace to the mosque]…with variegated cloths of gold and silver and tricolor silk,” held in place by several hundred doorkkeepers as the expectant crowds gathered. Such use of precious textiles to form decorative roadside barriers was customary for sultanic processions, and the practice is vividly attested—albeit with the spectators themselves shown holding the lengths of fabric—in a double-page manuscript illustration that depicts the victory parade of Sultan Ahmed’s father, Mehmed III, following his conquest of Eger in 1596 (fig. 23).

Having thus prepared the route, Mustafa Agha returned to the palace with a gorgeously caparisoned horse for the sultan, who, meanwhile, sent the grand vizier, Halil Pasha (d. 1629), to the royal tent. There, accompanied by his retinue, the vizier “awaited a propitious hour to invite that cheer-spreading sultan and world-nourishing emperor,” and when the time came, he went back to
the palace to inform the sultan, receiving robes of honor in reward. The sultan then mounted the bejeweled steed prepared for him by Mustafa Agha, whereupon the grand vizier and other court dignitaries (who, Katib Çelebi tells us, were likewise invested with robes) set out from the palace on horseback in solemn procession, with Ahmed and two of his sons—“the apples of his imperial eye and the fruits of his prosperous lineage”—following on as the parade’s climax (figs. 24 and 25). As the cortege made the relatively short passage to the mosque, those lining the route “viewed [the sultan] avidly while praying for the continuance of His Majesty’s rule.” It is at this point that the text introduces us to the “ruthless”—that is foreign—ambassadors who are among the...
throng of spectators,106 and whose presence on the day is, as we shall see, pivotal to explaining the event.

The parade almost certainly entered the precinct through one of the gates opening onto the Hippodrome, where thousands of onlookers would have been standing. Some sense of the scene is offered by a late eighteenth-century French watercolor of another procession to the mosque, though here, in an example of artistic license, the public is omitted from view and the Hippodrome widened in order to accommodate the sultan and his entourage, who snake their way to the mosque’s pavilion through the gate at the northern corner of the precinct (fig. 26). In the case of the dome-closing ceremony, the cortege very likely proceeded in a more straightforward line and, since it was not heading for the pavilion, may well have entered through the more central northwestern gate, which had the advantage of aligning with the mosque’s principal axis (fig. 27).

Upon reaching the royal tent, the sultan dismounted and was escorted by Mustafa Agha to “a splendid bejeweled throne—variegated with diverse gemstones—that had been placed inside the portico of the tent.”107 Katib Çelebi’s account adds that the two princes stood to their father’s right.108 Ottoman paintings again allow us to visualize the scene with some confidence: a depiction from fifty years earlier of the enthronement of Selim II at Belgrade, for example, shows the newly ascended sultan seated in an encrusted gold throne that is flanked by standing figures and set under a canopy before the open entrance to a grand tent (fig. 28).109 Cutting the same sort of figure as his ancestor, Ahmed called into his presence Shaykh Mahmud Hûdayî, who was to reprise the privileged role he had played at earlier occasions related to the mosque. The sultan presented Mahmud and a number of other clerics with robes before commanding “that the said saint, together with all the viziers, distinguished ulema, and the building superintendent, should climb and close [bağla—, lit. “tie”] the lofty dome with prayer and eulogy.”110

Exactly how this part of the ceremony was enacted is not explained, and we have to turn to other sources that are more informative in this regard. Abdûlkadîr Efendi tells us, somewhat ambiguously, that “the marble in [the dome’s] center received a nail,”111 and he also suggests
Fig. 26. Jean-Jacques-François Le Barbier, *Procession of the Sultan through the Hippodrome to the Sultan Ahmed Mosque*. Unused watercolor design for d’Ohsson’s *Tableau général de l’empire othoman*, 1770s. (Photo: © Christie’s Images/Bridgeman Images)

Fig. 27. Sultan Ahmed Mosque and its precinct wall, from the Hippodrome toward the main entrance axis. (Photo: Guillaume Berggren [1835–1920], 1880. Courtesy of the Ljungström Foundation)
that the dome was already leaded and decorated. A more evocative account is offered by the Venetian bailo Almoró Nani (d. 1633), who, as I shall discuss below, viewed the ceremony firsthand and wrote an extremely valuable description of it in a dispatch dated June 13. Nani reports that after preliminary sacrifices, which are not mentioned in the other sources, “they placed the last stone of the cupola in position, and set a large gilt moon upon it.” This powerful image makes clear that the focus was on the summit of the dome, where a number of workmen must have secured some sort of stone before installing over it the giant crescent that crowns the mosque (fig. 29). Neither ‘Abdülkadir Efendi nor Nani mentions the party of supplicants whom Ahmed sent up the building, and whether all of them made it as high as the dome is doubtful—Shaykh Mahmud was seventy-six at the time. In theory, at least, these men could have climbed through passages and staircases to reach either the catwalk along the dome’s interior base or, for a more eye-catching effect, the dome’s exterior, where some scaffolding must have remained to enable the completion of work. It is likely that the men were spread across various levels and galleries of the mosque, with most perhaps standing on the interior catwalk and a few venturing onto the scaffolding outside the dome. Given that the dome was built of brick and, like the rest of the mosque, essentially complete by this point, the act of closing it as staged for the ceremony was evident-

It still likelier that Ahmed had spent the preceding part of the ceremony in his prayer loge, which, as discussed, directly communicated with the neighboring royal pavilion. From this second throne, the sultan oversaw the granting of more robes of honor, this time to certain officials involved in building and staffing the mosque, including the chief imperial architect, Mehmed Agha, and the building supervisor (emin), İdris Agha. This is the only reference the text makes to Mehmed Agha, whose role as the building’s designer seems not to have been marked with any special distinction on the day.

The ceremony drew to an end with the sultan’s return to his tent, where he ordered his courtiers and ulema to kiss his hand. He and his retinue then processed back to the Topkapı Palace as they had come, and once there, Ahmed showered still more robes and other gifts on Mustafa Agha and his staff.

With the narrative description of the day over, the text turns to elaborating on the sultan’s munificence, which was such that “the people of the world sweated with embarrassment at the selfless favor that the mighty emperor had shown them.” (Katib Çelebi notes this...
generosity in more prosaic terms, telling us that Ahmed conferred a thousand robes in all.\textsuperscript{121}) Likewise lauded is the uncommon diligence of Mustafa Agha, whose service fully merited the rewards heaped on him.\textsuperscript{122} This excursus on the sultan’s largesse also includes an extraordinary subsection about the effect of the ceremony on the foreign ambassadors and other non-Muslim spectators, as further discussed below.

The \textit{Tarih} ends its prose account with a brief epilogue concerning the mosque’s inauguration a few months later, on August 18, 1617 (16 Sha’ban 1026), when the building was formally opened with the performance of the Friday congregational prayer. Mahmud Hüdayi again had the job of preaching, and the sultan once more distributed gifts and honorific robes.\textsuperscript{123}

This conclusion is followed by the two qasidas, which are not known from other sources but are nonetheless fairly typical examples of their genre.\textsuperscript{124} Dedicated to the sultan, the first poem extols his virtues and admiringly enumerates the various parts of the mosque, whose “like or counterpart cannot be found,” and whose crowning dome is “unique, engulfed by mother-of-pearl.”\textsuperscript{125} The sentence introducing the qasida informs us that it was “composed for the completion of the noble mosque”
before being presented to Ahmed,\textsuperscript{126} and the poem itself describes the monument as if it were in its final state. This portrayal is in part imaginary, however, for it extends to ancillaries of the mosque that were a long way off from being finished.\textsuperscript{127} It is possible, then, that the qasida was given to the sultan as early as the day of the dome-closing ceremony, when work was far enough advanced that the finalized complex could be convincingly evoked. As with many such compositions, the poem’s final line is a chronogram, which is a feature often accompanied by a reference to the identity of the author, though none is provided here.

The second qasida, which lacks a chronogram, was prepared for Mustafa Agha and, we are told, given to him “upon the completion of the sultan’s mosque.”\textsuperscript{128} Because the poem in this case refers back to the events of the dome-closing ceremony, it cannot have been written until after that occasion. Several of its couplets are embedded into the \textit{Tarih}’s prose narrative, whose arrangement and content are in turn mirrored by the poem. The latter, however, places even more emphasis on the agha’s excellent service, which now constitutes the main subject: “In truth,” one couplet asserts, “no one has trod this gentleman’s path, / He sacrificed his all with heart and soul.”\textsuperscript{129} As well as singing Mustafa’s praises, the qasida loudly applauds the sultan, and its final acclamations—spoken by the adulatory crowd—might well be directed at either man. These enthusiastic compliments bring the overall text of the \textit{Tarih} to a fitting, if predictable, close.\textsuperscript{130}

**CLOSING THE DOME, WINNING THE DAY:**
**THE SYMBOLISM OF THE CEREMONY**

The importance of the \textit{Tarih} as a descriptive document of an unusual event is obvious enough, but the text’s most distinctive value lies in what it reveals about the motivations behind the ceremony, which are in turn bound up with the conceptualization of the mosque at large. The very existence of the manuscript confirms the exceptional nature of the ceremony and bespeaks the discursive excitement it must have generated. While the Ottomans produced numerous \textit{sərnəməs} (festival books) to commemorate royal births, circumcisions, and marriages,\textsuperscript{131} and although the state’s protocol registers included brief accounts of a range of official ceremonies,\textsuperscript{132} the \textit{Tarih} appears to be the only example thus far uncovered of an Ottoman monograph that describes a ceremony centered on architecture. It belongs, furthermore, to a select handful of Ottoman texts devoted to particular buildings, among them a late fifteenth-century history of the Hagia Sophia and a mid-eighteenth-century account of the Nuruosmaniye Mosque (built 1748–55).\textsuperscript{133} These works are too few and dissimilar to constitute a cohesive category, but all of them concern high-ranking religious monuments that excited particular attention from their observers. Indeed, the Sultan Ahmed had, as noted, already helped to inspire another kind of rare architectural text, the \textit{Risāle} of Cafer Efendi, whose chapter on the mosque was written even as it was being built, when construction had reached the level of the dome.\textsuperscript{134} Picking up where the \textit{Risāle} left off, then, the \textit{Tarih} amplifies Cafer Efendi’s verbal celebration of the monument against the background of a ceremony that was itself designed to glorify the building.

But what specific functions was this ceremony intended to perform that the official opening could not? After all, there was much that both events shared, including a grand parade from the palace and the distribution of sultanic gifts, and the two were sufficiently close in date that one might well overshadow the other. Sure enough, the seventeenth-century chronicles record only the dome-closing ceremony without mentioning the later inauguration, an omission that has led modern scholars invariably to misdate the mosque’s opening.\textsuperscript{135} That the dome-closing ceremony took place on a Thursday shows that it was never meant to be conflated with the actual inauguration, which coincided, as tradition required, with the Friday prayer. Nevertheless, the shared elements of the two events, together with their chronological proximity, would have made comparison between them unavoidable, with the earlier ceremony emerging as the more memorable of the two. The \textit{Tarih} reveals as much in its cursory treatment of the opening, which is discussed almost as a muted replay of what had occurred two months previously.\textsuperscript{136} What set the precursor event apart—and explains why it was devised in the first place—was that it allowed Ahmed to announce the completion of his mosque in a far more original manner than was possible with the more codified form of an official inauguration. This is not to say that real
inaugurations were lacking in their own flourishes: at the opening of the Suleymaniye, for example, the sultan handed the mosque’s golden key to Sinan, an unusual gesture that reflected the architect’s unparalleled status (Mehmed Agha, as we have seen, would not receive the same honor). But such festive embellishments were eclipsed by the altogether inventive celebration created for the Sultan Ahmed Mosque. Much like the building itself, the dome-closing ceremony was an exercise in circumventing custom, and the sultan took full advantage of the opportunity to trumpet his project with a level of spectacle that would inevitably (and deliberately) outdo the subsequent opening. The desired effect was not mere fanfare, however, nor was the end result to the inauguration’s detriment. On the contrary, the ceremony amounted to a ritual absolution that, by proclaiming the unimpeachable character of the mosque, paved the way for as auspicious an opening as possible. The extravagant theatricality of the event was, in other words, crucial to its efficacy as a legitimizing rite of passage for the monument.

Of the features that distinguished the ceremony, one of the most striking was its ostensible raison d’être: the very act of closing the dome. The choice of this moment for the ceremony’s backdrop brought with it obvious dramatic impact, giving spectators “live” visual access to the capping of Istanbul’s newest public and imperial landmark. As well as emphasizing the scale and beauty of Ahmed’s architectural achievement, the closing of the dome carried multiple layers of symbolism. There was, of course, the age-old trope of the dome as heavenly sphere, and although a commonplace, the idea would have taken on real charge when framed by a ceremony in which a group of supplicants scaled the building to bless the vault as it was being closed. The Tarih gives literary expression to the conceit with a couplet in its immediate pendant, the imperial tent. “When devotions were performed in the mosque of the heavens, / The [celestial] lotus tree opened the hand of supplication in prayer.”

But the dome’s symbolic message went much further than a generalized reference to paradise; it also argued for the mosque’s impeccable merit by once again evoking flattering parallels with the great dome of the Hagia Sophia opposite. As admired and influential as it was, the vaulting scheme of the converted church proved famously unstable: the central dome, which was originally built too shallow, had to be reconstructed after collapsing in 558, and its shape was manifestly uneven by the time the Ottomans inherited it. Several Ottoman architects undertook the monument’s repair, including Sinan, one of whose (auto)biographies frankly records that the first “flat” dome had caved in. Other Ottoman texts recast the facts as a fanciful legend about the east semi-dome, which, they claim, fell down on the night of the Prophet’s birth and could not be successfully repaired until the Byzantines sent an embassy to the adult Muhammad many years later. Against this real and mythologized awareness of the Hagia Sophia’s troubled structural history, Ahmed’s new mosque—synecdochically represented by its dome—would appear perfect from the outset, its completion, to quote the Tarih, “facilitated and ensured by the aid of the Lord God Almighty.” Ahmed, who had renovated the Hagia Sophia and reeased its dome almost ten years earlier, was now unveiling its faultless counterpart in a carefully directed ceremony that underscored the mosque’s freedom both from structural defect and from the taint of a Christian past.

Such triumphalism also extended to the dome’s more immediate pendant, the imperial tent. It is this temporary structure rather than the mosque’s actual dome that the Tarih most insistently describes in celestial terms, calling it a “heavenly tent...whose azure cupola reached the heavens and whose golden finial shone upon the word.” Here, as elsewhere in the text, the Ottoman word for tent, otak (also otaj), is punningly rendered as tāḳ, “vault,” intentionally blurring the distinction between the sultan’s ceremonial stage and the architecture of his mosque. The comparison is not entirely rhetorical: though we lack a detailed verbal description of it, the tent, in keeping with other examples that have survived or are known from paintings, must have been a truly substantial structure, with high walls and a steeply pitched vault-like roof, all made of richly colored and patterned fabric (figs. 32 and 33). As with the neighboring mosque, more was at play than a paradisiacal metaphor. The inclusion of this tent, along with the others that we know surrounded it, arguably constituted the ceremony’s most outstanding feature. To be sure, the use of tents for ceremonial or festive occasions was not especially rare in Ottoman contexts (fig. 34), and,
Fig. 32. Ottoman military tent with a protruding canopy, seventeenth century. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Rüstkammer, inv. no. Y 364. (Photo: Elke Estel/Hans-Peter Klut. Courtesy of Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden)

Fig. 33. Interior of an Ottoman military tent, seventeenth century. Krakow, Wawel Royal Castle, inv. no. 896. (Photo: Stanislaw Michta. Courtesy of Wawel Royal Castle)
as noted above, Ahmed had already pitched a tent on his mosque’s construction site some years earlier when giving a feast. The adjacent Hippodrome hosted tents on numerous occasions throughout the Ottoman period (fig. 35), including the marriage celebrations in 1524 of the grand vizier İbrahim Pasha (d. 1536), whose palace stood opposite where the Sultan Ahmed would be built. Even in view of this broader tradition, however, the setting up of multiple tents in the courtyard of an essentially complete mosque would have been remarkably novel, unlike anything seen during an inauguration proper. While no doubt augmenting the festive mood of the day, this encampment cannot have been divorced from the tent’s longstanding association with warfare, especially in light of the mosque’s own uneasy relationship with the theme. Earlier events had already embraced the martial link—the tents erected for İbrahim Pasha boasted examples captured from the Aq Qoyunlu, Mamluks, and Safavids—and Ahmed and his advisers must have planned the dome-closing ceremony with such precedents in mind. What may appear as a risky and potentially counterproductive evocation—one that might remind the public of the sultan’s meagre military record—makes far more sense if understood as a defiant statement by which Ahmed could address his critics head on. Not only did the mosque’s encampment keep alive the promise of a future Cretan campaign, but it also—and more importantly—cast the

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sultan as a victor already entitled to memorialize his name.

This seemingly farfetched assertion rested on several related ideas that must have been circulating in the courtly and public spheres and that are articulated in the Tarih. Ahmed’s main claim to legitimacy was his well-known piety, a trait that the manuscript hails from the start and reiterates throughout. Conventional as such praise was in the Ottoman panegyric tradition, the portrayal of Ahmed as an unrivaled paragon of religiosity capitalized on specific acts that distinguished him from other sultans. He funded a number of important renovations to the pilgrimage sites of Mecca and Medina, sending the architect Mehmed Agha to oversee the repairs. The Ka’ba in particular was in urgent need of attention when Ahmed restored it in 1611, and it was also during his reign—specifically in 1609, when work commenced on the Sultan Ahmed—that the Ka’ba’s annually renewed fabric covering, the kiswa, began to be produced on special occasions in Istanbul instead of its usual place of manufacture, Cairo. These achievements are cited in the Tarih’s first qasida, which likens Ahmed’s legacy to that of the Prophet himself:

Because, O Large-Hearted Sultan, you have modeled yourself on [Muhammad],
You have truly executed the rule of holy law in the world.

[...]

Fig. 35. Sultan Ahmed Complex and the Hippodrome, historical view with tents in the Hippodrome. (Photo: Sébah & Joaillier, ca. 1870. Courtesy of Middle East Photograph Archive, University of Chicago Collections)
Above all, the Flourishing House [Ka’ba] and the city of God’s Prophet [Medina]

Have been reanimated in your time, given honor and new life.\[155\]

The poem goes on to call the new mosque an “Exalted Ka’ba” for the poor who could not perform the pilgrimage,\[156\] and though this same concept was applied to other mosques over the centuries (among them the Hagia Sophia),\[157\] Ahmed’s patronage of Mecca rendered more convincing the idea of his own foundation as an alternative shrine. Its hosting of the Mevlâd ritual must have enhanced the Sultan Ahmed’s cultic significance and strengthened its relationship to the Two Holy Places, and Ahmed cemented these ties by sending hundreds of gifts and honorific robes to the notables of Mecca and Medina upon the mosque’s completion.\[158\] In the late eighteenth century, kiswa\[s\] were actually being embroidered at the Sultan Ahmed,\[159\] and by the mid-nineteenth, the mosque was the starting point of the annual pilgrimage caravan to Mecca, with the previous year’s kiswa being returned to the building and hung on one of its walls.\[160\]

Ahmed’s mosque could thus be vindicated with reference to his exemplary and generous piety, which served the religion of Islam as much as any great conquest. Already invoked at the start of the project as a complement to other—more aspirational—motives, the sultan’s charitable purpose was now in itself an unassailable justification for the monument. Indeed, the impact of such righteous beneficence was not limited to the Muslim community; even the faithless could be moved by it, as explained in what is the most arresting and arguably most revealing section of the Tarih:

Furthermore, the sultan was watched that day by the ruthless [foreign] ambassadors who were present at the assembly, and when they—despite having not a trace of faith in their hardened hearts, wherein the devil and rebellion resided—saw the selfless favor that the magnanimous sultan conferred on the people of the world, together with the good works and pious deeds done in the path of God and the effort and labor exerted in the course of the religion of Muhammad, countless infidels could not help but come to Islam, wherewith they were honored with the glory of Islam and decked in royal favor. And even the remaining wicked infidels could not help but say countless prayers for the life and state of the mighty and exalted sultan, that he should remain secure and stable on his throne of glory; and so they confirmed as was right the glory and power pertaining to the religion of Muhammad and to the emperor of Islam, while seeing for certain the ignominy and vengefulness of their [own] false rites; and whether the ambassador of the reprobate Qizilbash or whether Venetian, Fleming, or Frank—they are one scourge alike—all of them were frustrated and confounded, their heads hung in vexation and sadness, and each of them was plunged into utter disgrace.\[161\]

Like other passages of the manuscript, the narrative here is tantalizingly incomplete in its details, but the implication is that foreign ambassadors were in some way officially present at the ceremony. This impression is confirmed by the above-mentioned dispatch of Almorò Nani, who considered the event important enough to send a long description of it to the Venetian Senate a few days after it took place. Although long ago published in an abridged English translation, the document seems to have gone unnoticed by subsequent scholars. It is, however, a source of unusual significance, and a rich supplement to the Tarih. The relevant passages are here quoted in full:

Last Tuesday, the 6th inst. [June], the Pasha [Halil, the grand vizier] sent a chiasus [capus, messenger] to all the houses of the ambassadors as well as to mine asking us to send our chief dragoman, as he wished to speak to them. He told them that His Majesty was going on the following Thursday to perform the first sacrifices in the new mosque, and he invited the ambassadors and the bailo of Venice to attend the festivities, when a suitable place would be assigned to them to view His Majesty and the concourse of people, which would be great. The dragomans accepted the invitation, adding that we had received a singular honor, and on the dragomans’ return the ambassadors of France, England, and Flanders, and I discussed what we should do, as by the Turkish custom when a building is finished all the neighbors send presents, as a gesture of goodwill and of gladness, and we ought to do something. In the time of Sultan Suliman, the last of the Ottoman Emperors to have built a mosque in Constantinople, the French ambassador and the Venetian bailo at that time made gifts to the mosque, and all the viziers and grandees of the Ottoman Porte also did the same, in competition with one another. And in truth, for three days in succession, the dome of this mosque was seen to be draped on the outside with a great quantity of cloths of various kinds, which were removed each evening and replaced by new ones. Afterwards these
were all distributed by order of the Chılaragasi [kızlar ağası, the chief harem eunuch] among the head of the mosque and various other superintendents and workmen, who are infinite [in number]. We therefore decided to send to the [current] Chılaragasi [Mustafa Agha] twelve cloths each. These were immediately sent by him to the mosque and placed around its dome along with many others, which made a fine show. The Imperial [Habsburg] ambassador was last to be invited, because of which he thought he might be excluded from this ceremony, and he too sent twelve cloths, all of silk. This expense was necessary and could not be avoided . . . . The Grand Signor’s mosque is built on one side of the square of the Hippodrome, where they usually hold public spectacles for the marriage of the sultan and the circumcision of the princes. Opposite this mosque stood a large covered corridor for the four ambassadors and myself, divided into compartments by flags, leaving a place for each. I laughingly remarked to the ambassador of Flanders that as our rulers were joined in friendly relations it was not proper that we should be separated, and I ordered the cloth to be removed. Soon afterwards England did the same, and then France and the Emperor’s ambassador, so that the five compartments were made one, with all assembling nearer to the Imperial ambassador’s section, which was the one that more directly faced the gate where the sultan entered the mosque’s courtyard. Here they sacrificed a number of sheep in honor of the Prophet. Then, at a certain hour determined by them to be auspicious, they undertook the ceremony to place the last stone in the summit of the mosque’s main cupola, and, in accordance with their custom, set a large gilt moon upon it. After, as it was reported, one of their principal holy men [Mahmud Hūdayi] preached a long sermon, praising the sultan’s goodness and then reproving the general injustice and rapacity of [his] enemies. His Majesty then came out of the mosque into its courtyard and placed himself under a small tent, where not only the viziers, muftis, and cadıleschiers [kadi’askers, military judges], but countless other officials went to kiss his hand, wishing him happiness; and most of them were invested with a robe, but the Grand Vizier received three, two of them sable, and he wore all three despite the season, without feeling any discomfort. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the sultan came out on a horse of singular beauty entirely adorned with gems—valuing, they say, 50 thousand zecchini—which had been donated that day by the Chılaragasi. Then proceeded on horseback the two princes, all the viziers, and other grandees of the Porte, and also the janissary guards and spahıs [sipahıs, cavalry], who, though small in number, were sufficient for the great concourse of people who had stopped on the square to see [the sultan] and loudly greet him as he passed.

While we were waiting for the crush of people to stop, the Imperial ambassador . . . said it was high time that the war [between Venice and the Habsburgs] ceased, because in the end we are all Christians, and there is nothing these Turks enjoy more than to see us bloody our hands among ourselves.

We all subsequently left together, on horseback . . . . As soon as I had reached home the Pasha sent me a most noble golden raiment as a present, and he did the same to all the other ambassadors; in fact, his chief preoccupation is to find some means of showing honor to the ministers of the powers, just as the late Caimecam [kaymakam, the grand vizier’s deputy] was never so happy as when he could insult them, but, praise God, everything has turned out to the greater glory of the princes whom we represent.162

Fleshing out the sketchy picture provided by the Tarih, this fascinating report reveals the deliberateness with which foreign representatives were made a feature of the ceremony. The bailo and his fellow ambassadors could hardly refuse the grand vizier’s invitation, and their presence on the day itself was closely stage-managed by their hosts. Foreign participation in Ottoman state festivities was, in itself, nothing new, and Nani’s description of a viewing “corridor” erected opposite the mosque recalls the wooden loggia that had accommodated European spectators at the circumcision festival of the future Mehmed III in 1582 (fig. 36).163 Known from pictorial and written sources, this earlier loggia anticipated even the location of its later counterpart: it stood opposite the Sultan Ahmed’s eventual site on the Hippodrome next to the Palace of İbrahim Pasha, probably on or near the spot where Nani’s “corridor” would be erected. But whereas the structure of 1582 had been integrated into a series of galleries filled mainly with Ottoman viewers, that of 1617 seems to have stood alone, at a suitable distance from the sacred precinct where the Muslim elite were gathered.

This was not the only way in which the ambassadorial presence at the dome-closing ceremony was distinctive. For while foreign representatives could be found in numerous Ottoman festive contexts, there is very little evidence that the Christians among them attended religious ceremonies centered on mosques. Many Westerners, including diplomats, would have witnessed such events at a remove along with the general crowds,164 but this is a different matter from being officially invited participants. The case of the Süleymaniye, which Nani’s
there was in the festivities surrounding the Süleymaniye thus appears to have been limited and unorchestrated, quite in contrast to the obligatory arrangement under which all the principal foreign representatives attended the dome-closing ceremony of 1617.

The coordinated gifting of textiles by the ambassadors was a judicious move that capitalized on a shared appreciation among Ottomans and Westerners for luxury fabrics. In a ceremony already richly articulated with textiles, this collection of cloths must have made a powerful impression, particularly if exhibited, as Nani tells us, with a multitude of others around the dome. It is curious that the Ottoman sources do not refer to this festive bedecking, and Nani’s description leaves some
ambiguity as to whether the cloths were draped over the dome’s surface or otherwise hung from its exterior (or even interior) base. Either way, such adornment of the dome would only have emphasized its visual and conceptual relationship to the sultanic tent. The very real meaning with which fabrics were imbued on such occasions is also apparent from the ambassadors’ decision to remove the cloths that divided their viewing compartments. Yet messages were not always understood as intended. Nani’s claim that all turned out to the glory of the European states perhaps belies a certain intimidation felt by the vastly outnumbered Westerners, a reaction that would explain why they were so anxious to present a united front at the ceremony. While the Ottomans may have been suitably impressed with what they were given and returned the favor by sending textile gifts of their own, they surely viewed the ambassadors’ far grander offering as a form of collective tribute. Such an interpretation—unsurprisingly sidestepped by Nani’s account—is very much consistent with the tone of the Tarih, which, though no less subjective than the bailo’s dispatch, is a better indicator of what the ceremony’s organizers intended by inviting the Christian representatives.

There is, however, one particular in which the Tarih certainly misrepresents the ambassadors’ experience, and that is its suggestion that some of them renounced their faith in favor of Islam. No conversion of the sort took place, nor is it likely that the text is referring to members of the ambassadors’ retinues.166 If the claim has any truth to it, the Tarih appears to be conflating the foreign diplomats with Istanbul’s own communities of non-Muslims, who must have been among the general crowds gathered around the mosque precinct, and whose numbers may have included some on-the-spot converts.167 A still more interesting conflation in the text is that between the Western representatives and the ambassador of the Qizilbash, by which is meant the Shi’i Safavids, treated as infidels on a par with the Christians.168 The Safavid ambassador finds no mention in Nani’s dispatch and must have attended the ceremony separately from his Christian peers.169 For all the Ottomans’ anti-Shi’i bluster, he may even have been allowed to join the other Muslim dignitaries inside the complex, as happened on previous occasions when Safavid ambassadors visited Ottoman mosques.170 But such ecumenism has no place in the textual record of the Tarih, whose ideological rigor sees the Safavids and Europeans treated with equal disdain. This blanket stigmatization conveniently bolsters Ahmed’s flimsy claims to a ghazi status: his greatest military success had been against the Celali rebels, who were, as noted above, tarred with the brush of Shi’ism, and he was at war with the Safavids at the time of the mosque’s opening.

What makes the Tarih’s triumphal conceit so effective, however, is that it does not ultimately rely on any martial corroboration for its force. The very realization of the mosque is itself presented as an overwhelming blow to the empire’s non-Sunni enemies, who, in spite of themselves, are inwardly won over by the feat. Victory in warfare may yet follow, but whether or not it does, Ahmed has, according to the manuscript, already conquered multitudes of nonbelievers through his pious act of patronage. Far from being a mere literary fancy, this audacious redemption of the sultan is the textual imprint of the ceremony’s own potent imagery, which, as Nani indicates, received its verbal affirmation in Shaykh Mahmud’s sermon. The faithful masses who witnessed the mosque’s spectacular consecration were surely convinced that God was on their sovereign’s side, and the limited contingent of foreign ambassadors must have appeared humbled and subjugated by what was happening around them, particularly if any non-Muslims were indeed inspired to convert. The Westerners themselves evidently picked up on the martial mood: it is no coincidence that Nani and the Habsburg ambassador turned to talk of war and Turkish hostility even as the crowds were dispersing. The ceremony’s charged inclusion of these elite “infidel” spectators again helps to explain why it was staged in the first place: as we have seen, a true inauguration would probably not have afforded the leeway to accommodate non-Muslims in such a prominent and formalized manner. Their presence at the event completed its dramatis personae and fulfilled the symbolism of Ahmed’s splendid encampment, positing him as a Muslim conqueror within his own capital.

But it was not only over the unbelievers that Ahmed triumphed that day. The emblematic battle that played out in the mosque’s courtyard was a defeat also for those
Sunni Ottomans who had questioned the sultan’s right to build. By metaphorically enacting the conquest that his critics had long called for him to attain, the sultan was signaling once and for all the lawfulness of his enterprise. The accompanying rhetoric presumably tackled the related issue of how the mosque was financed, for the *Tarih* reassures the reader that “[not] a penny from the imperial treasury” was spent on the project other than what Mustafa Agha had legally earmarked in his capacity as superintendent. That the very clerics who had disapproved of the mosque were now obliged to celebrate its completion implicated them as reformed supporters of a blameless endeavor. Ahmed, for his part, wished to underline his rapprochement with his detractors of a merciful vanquisher, just as the dome’s opening—termed *feth*, which also means conquest—mentions only the ulama as receiving royal gifts. Such benevolence showed the sultan to be a merciful vanquisher, just as the dome’s ceremonial capping proved that the mosque had won the hearts even of its detractors, whether skeptical clerics or foreign infidels.

The later history of the mosque would reiterate how thoroughly its reputation had been consolidated. In June 1826, when the reformist Mahmud II (r. 1808–39) launched his own battle in Istanbul by resolving to extinguish the unruly janissary corps, it was to the Sultan Ahmed Mosque that his supporters were called. They gathered there under the Prophet’s Sacred Standard, which had been temporarily brought from the Topkapi Palace and raised inside the prayer hall on the minbar. In a practical replaying of the dome-closing ceremony, tents were pitched in the mosque’s outer court, as well as on the Hippodrome, and from this encampment the sultan’s loyal officers and subjects mounted their fatal attack against the janissaries, who were branded heretics and crypto-Christians. Though in part determined by the building’s advantageous location and open surroundings, the use of the mosque as a loyalist headquarters also reflected the extent to which it had come to embody religio-imperial authority. Those who set up the 1826 encampment are unlikely to have done so with any knowledge of its festive precedent, but their militarization of the site nonetheless instantiated, and thereby endorsed, what the dome-closing ceremony had so impressively visualized over two centuries earlier.

CONCLUSION

Ahmed died of typhus at the age of twenty-seven on November 22, 1617, barely three months after his mosque was inaugurated. It is tempting to wonder if fears for his health were an additional reason why the monument was unveiled with such pomp before its actual opening. Indeed, most of the mosque’s ancillaries—including the madrasa, public kitchen, and marketplace—were as yet unfinished upon the sultan’s death, and the complex as a whole would not be completed until 1620. The last element to be built was Ahmed’s own tomb, a substantial single-domed structure with a porticoed entrance (figs. 3, 4, and 37). Unlike its counterparts at other sultanic foundations, this tomb is located not in the garden behind the mosque’s qibla wall, but in a more visible spot outside the precinct at the northernmost end of the complex, from where it faces—and competes with—the dynastic mausolea of the Hagia Sophia (fig. 9). It is adjacent, moreover, to the Sultan Ahmed’s madrasa, identifying the patron in perpetuity as a friend to the ulema. The tomb thus acts as a satellite of the mosque to which it pertains, redoubling in miniaturized form the architectural glorification and legitimation of its founder. In this it recalls another vaulted dependency that had been erected on the grounds of the mosque for much the same purpose: the tent of the dome-closing ceremony. The relationship between the two structures is all the more palpable given that sultanic mausolea were often preceded by tents that served as temporary grave coverings. Although this custom seems not to have been followed in Ahmed’s case, his tomb already had its formal and symbolic forerunner in the tent of the 1617 festival.

This event was, as I have demonstrated, among the most extraordinary ever held in the Ottoman Empire, and the highpoint of a ceremonial campaign already unparalleled in richness and extent. Ahmed’s readiness to lavish such attention on his mosque was an astute and effective strategy by which to stir wider enthusiasm for the building and secure its place in the public eye. No moment in the mosque’s festive history could have been more compelling in this regard than when the sultan processed to an encampment in its precinct and sent his clerics to close its dome with their prayers. Against
the odds, and making full use of the power of ceremony, Ahmed succeeded that day in staking his claim to the monument that he was never entitled to build.

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NOTES

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4. Typical in this regard is Godfrey Goodwin (History of Ottoman Architecture, 344), who writes, “The mosque is a marriage of other men’s ideas in most but not all particulars, and where it is not inspired by previous masterpieces it is often ungainly or monotonous since the dominant ideas were size and splendour.”


4. Quoted and translated ibid., 60. The origins and development of this viewpoint, which seems not to have been codified until the late sixteenth century, are the subject of promising new research by Samet Budak, a PhD candidate at the University of Michigan. I am grateful to him for sharing his findings with me.

5. See Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 510.

6. Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 256–57, 511. Kuban (Ottoman Architecture, 361) disregards Ottoman codes of decorum and opines that “Murad III and Mehmed III had undoubtedly failed to honour an old state tradition” by not constructing large complexes.

7. See Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 238–56.

8. Ibid., 65–66.


13. The palaces had been built by Sinan for two princess-vizier couples—Mihriban Sultan (d. 1578) and Rüstem Pasha (d. 1561), and Ismihan Sultan (d. 1585) and Sokollu Mehmed Pasha (d. 1579)—and were bought from their descendants. For the purchase of this and other land for the complex, see Bilge, “Sultan Ahmed Cami ve Külliyesi,” 529–41; Fetcavi, “Music, Light and Flowers,” 233–34; and Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 514.


17. Dispatch dated January 27, 1610 (1609 old style), The National Archives, UK (henceforth TNA), SP 97/6, fol. 150a–50b, copied also on fols. 153a–53b.

18. See Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 514; and Shaw, History of the Ottoman Empire, 11:88–89. A qasida written in praise of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque no later than 1614 calls on God to render “the Shah of the [Safavids] Heretics...powerless before” Ahmed, and to let the sultan “be triumphant and victorious, and a vanquisher and a taker of spoils”: see Ca’fer Efendi, Risâle-i Mi’ârîyye: An Early-Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Treatise on Architecture, trans. and ed. Howard Crane (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), 75–76.

19. See Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 514, 516.

20. I am grateful to Fariba Zarinebaf for discussing this idea with me.


22. Mahmut Hidayat’s involvement with the Sultan Ahmed Mosque will be discussed below. For an overview of his life and career, see Hasan Kâmil Yılmaz, “Aziz Mahmûd Hûdâyî,” in Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1988–2013).


25. For a critical edition of his chronicle, see Muştafa Şahi, Zübdet’tü’l-Tevârîh.

26. See Muştafa Şahi, Zübdet’tü’l-Tevârîh, 1:48; and Shaw, History of the Ottoman Empire, 1:88. Avcuoğlu (“Ahmed I and the Allegories of Tyranny,” 219) writes that Ahmed used his victory over the Celalis “as an excuse to build a new royal mosque bearing his name.”

27. Dispatch dated October 22, 1609, TNA, SP 97/6, fol. 139a.


See Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 516.

57. 


60. Dispatch dated October 22, 1609, TNA, SP 97/6, fol. 139a. Glover adds that the mosque, “(for all thereit extraordynaiy dilligence therein) cannot be ended, by all mens judgment, not in twelve yeeres, of such greates, importance and worth, this Meskit shall be.”

61. See Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 60. Cafer Efendi’s gasida in praise of the mosque (Risâle, 75–76) lends itself to this votive intimation by calling on God’s help in Ahmed’s conflict with the Safavids.


63. Ibid., 132–53.

64. Dispatch dated November 10, 1609, TNA, SP 97/6, fol. 141a–41b.

65. Take, for example, the foundation ceremony of the Süleymaniye: though undoubtedly a magnificent and charged affair—the cornerstone was laid by the revered grand mufti Ebussu’ud Efendi (d. 1574) as the sultan watched—the ceremony is surely outdone in scale and nature by the multiple events held to celebrate the initiation of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque. See Bates, “Patronage of Suleyman,” 67; and Cantay, Süleymaniye Camii, 18.


67. Dispatch dated January 27, 1610 (1609 old style), TNA, SP 97/6, fol. 150a.


69. Evliya Celebi, Narrative of Travels, vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 84. The translation is Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall’s; for the original Ottoman, see the following note.

70. See Evliya Celebi, Seyahatnâme, 2:84–85, paraphrased into English in Narrative of Travels, vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 84–85. The feast is conflated with the earlier foundation ceremony in Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 516.

71. As Necipoğlu (Age of Sinan, 3) notes, “[t]he closeness of Hagia Sophia must surely have made the ‘New Mosque’ appear superfluous to its critics.”

72. İstanbul, Topkapı Palace Museum Library, E. H. 3036, fols. 67b–68a, as discussed in Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 516. The mosque hosted another recitation of the poem each year with the dome-closing ceremony. See Bilge, Sultanahmet Camii ve Külliyesi, 525.

73. See Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 516, from where the translated quotation is taken.


75. See Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 516, where the inclusion of coffee at the ritual is linked to “the expansion of the public sphere during the seventeenth century, an epoch of urban ‘mass’ culture.” It is notable in this regard—and further proof of the drive to turn the mosque into a locus of sociability—that the complex originally included a coffeehouse: see Nayar, Sultan Ahmet Külliyesi, 46.

76. See Muştafa Şâfi, Zübdeüt’-Tevârîh, 1,xxxii, 104–9.

77. See ‘Abdül-Kâdir Efendi, Topçular Kâtibi Tarihi, 629; and Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 516, from where the translated quotation is taken.

78. ‘Abdül-Kâdir Efendi, Topçular Kâtibi Tarihi, 63. See also Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 516. Owing to the somewhat unclear timeline in ‘Abdülkadir Efendi’s account, Necipoğlu mistakenly states that this Mevlîd coincided with the dome-closing ceremony.


80. See Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 516, from where the translated quotation is taken.
handbook for travellers, 177. the edition cited here (see n. 48 above for the full reference) was published in 1840; later versions of the book, published until the end of the nineteenth century, give the same information. the two eids were being celebrated at the sultan ahmed mosque already by the late eighteenth century: see d'ohsson, Tableau général, 2:358 and 451, rendered into english in d'ohsson, Oriental Antiquities, 478, 530.


85. See n. 78 above.

86. See Barkan, Suleymaniye Cami ve İmaretı, 161–62, where additional celebrations marking other stages of the mosque’s construction are also discussed. a much later example of such an event is the ceremony held at the nusretiye mosque in 1825 to signal the start of the raising of its dome, the supporting piers of which were festively decked with rich textile hangings: see Es’ad Efendi, Vak’at-i nüvüs Es’ad Efendî’nin Zeyt ve İlaveleriyile, 1237–1238/1821–1826, ed. ziya yilmazer (istanbul: osmanlı araçtırmaları vakfı, 2000), 460–61. Es’ad describes the event as following “ancient exalted royal custom [‘âdet-i dirin-i saltanat-i seriyye],” though I have not found any comparable instances other than the festivities related to the Suleymaniye. regardless of its pedigree, the ceremony was nowhere near as elaborate as what took place at the sultan Ahmed: for one thing, it was presided over by the grand vizier rather than the mosque’s founder, the great reformist sultan mahmud ii. mahmud was nevertheless deeply invested in the nusretiye and wished, like Ahmed before him, to create a monument redolent of triumph and suitable as a venue for royal ceremonial: see Rüstem, “victory in the making,” 92–15.

87. with ottoman diacritics, this title would be written Tarihi-i bina-yi camî-i sultan Ahmed-i evvel, though, as I shall presently discuss, it is far from certain that this name was historically valid for the book. i am extremely grateful to samet budak for checking the Suleymaniye Library’s catalogue to confirm the details of its entry for the work. he also inquired into how and when the photocopy of the manuscript was acquired; neither the library’s staff nor its paper records could offer any answers.

88. the omission of the Turkish possessive suffix from the word âmi’ suggests that the title was copied by a speaker of Arabic unfamiliar with Turkish grammar.

89. the first folio is not numbered and so is here reckoned as 0. the foliation for the rest of the manuscript often appears extremely indistinct in the photocopy, though there seem to be two folios counted as 28, the second of which I have called 28.1 (see n. 55 of the appendix). the book must have been rebound at some point, as the folios now numbered 2–4 have erroneously been moved out of sequence, exchanging their place with for what are now fols. 5–7. the other exceptions are the final folio, which has only three lines, and fol. 39a, which has an additional line to correct a scribal oversight (see n. 73 of the appendix).

90. as suggested to me by tim stanley, it is also possible that Mustafa Agha himself commissioned the work for presentation to the sultan. the text’s unabated flattery of the agha is, however, more appropriate to the recipient of such a gift rather than its originator.

91. see Şüreyya, Sicill-i Osmanî, 4136; and uluçay, Harem, 122.

92. see n. 82 of the appendix.

93. the three parts of the text are closely related: the second qasida is liberally quoted in the prose narrative, while the latter shares with the first qasida an apparent indebtedness to the work of the sixteenth-century soldier and poet Taşçıah Yahya (d. ca. 1582): see nn. 14 and 65 of the appendix. the Suleymaniye Library’s catalogue misleadingly identifies Mustafa Agha as the Tarihi’s author.

94. Tarihi, fols. 0b–1b, 5a–7b, 2a. All references to the manuscript refer to the images reproduced on pp. 300–324 and to my transliteration and translation in the appendix. see also n. 89 above.

95. Tarihi, fols. 2a–3b.

96. Ibid., fol. 3a.

97. Ibid., fol. 4a.

98. Ibid., fols. 4b, 8a–8b.

99. Abdü’l-Kâdir Efendi, Topçular Kâtipi Tarihi, 651–52; Kâtip Çelebi, Fezleke, 1383; and Na’imâ, Tarihi, 2:337. like the Tarihi, the first source uses the term harem, while the second and third use sâha. both terms are ambiguous and could denote either the mosque’s porticoed forecourt or its outer precinct.

100. Tarihi, fols. 8b–9b.


102. Tarihi, fols. 10a–12b.


104. Ibid., fols. 13a–14b.

105. Ibid., fol. 14a.

106. Ibid., fols. 16a–17a.


108. See Emine Fetcâ, Picturing History at the Ottoman Court (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press,
296 ÜNVER RÜSTEM


134. Çafer Efendi, Risale, 64–76, esp. 65.
135. Most scholars give the date of the mosque’s inauguration as (or close to) June 8, 1617, and several treat the dome-closing ceremony itself as the official opening; see, for example, Bilge, “Sultanahmed Cami ve Külliyesi,” 542; Nayar, Sultan Ahmet Külliyesi, 46; and Öz, “Sultan Ahmed Camii,” 26. Other than the Tarih, the only source, historical or otherwise, that I have encountered with the correct month for the mosque’s opening (no day is specified) is a description of Istanbul written by the Ottoman-Armenian historian and teacher Sargis Hovhannisean (d. 1805), who was a native of the city: see Sargis Hovhannisean [Sarkis Sarraf Hovhannesyan], Payitaht İstanbula’n Tarihçesi, trans. Elmon Hanger (Istanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 1996), 3. A similar confusion once pertained to the Süleymaniye, for the chronicler Celalzade Mustafa Çelebi (d. 1567), in his description of the mosque, gives the date on which its dome was closed—August 16, 1556—but not that of its inauguration, which took place over a year later in October 1557. Until the chronology was settled by Barkan, many historians mistook the date provided by Celalzade as referring to the mosque’s completion or opening. Celalzade’s celebratory reference to the closing of the Süleymaniye’s dome shows that the Sultan Ahmed was not the first mosque to have this milestone recognized. As discussed above in the main text, however, there is no definitive evidence that the Süleymaniye’s dome-closing occasioned any festivities, and certainly nothing on the scale of the 1617 ceremony. See Celalzade Muşafa Çelebi, Geschichete Sultan Süleyman Kânînîns von 1520 bis 1557, oder, Tabakât il-Memâlîk ve Derecat il-Mesâlîk, ed. Petra Kappert (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1981), fols. 52a of the facsimile, rendered into modern Turkish in Celalzade [Celâloğlu Mustafa], Tabakâtî Memâlîk ve Derecatî Mesâlîk: Osmanlı İmparatorluğunun Yükselme Devrinde Türk Ordusunun Savasları ve Devletin Kurumu, Iç ve Dış Şaysarlar, trans. Sadettin Tokdemir (Istanbul: Askeri Matbaa, 1937), 254; and Barkan, Süleymaniye Cami ve İmaretleri, 1546–54.

See Tarih, fols. 32b–34b.
136. See Tarih, fols. 23b–25b.
137. See Sâi, Sinan’s Autobiographies, 7, 126.
138. Tarih, fols. 18b–19a. For the celestial lotus tree, see n. 104 of the appendix.
140. Sâi, Sinan’s Autobiographies, 65–66.
142. Tarih, fol. 4a.
143. For Ahmed’s extensive renovation, which took place between 1607 and 1609, see Necipoğlu, “Life of an Imperial Monument,” 211–219. It seems that some of the figural

2013), 118. For the use of thrones and canopies in conjunction with sultanic tents, see Nurhan Atasoy, Otaq-i Hümâyun: Ottoman Imperial Tent Complex, trans. Joyce Matthews (Istanbul: Ayyaz, 2000), 95, 135–38, and figs. 7, 44–47.
110. Tarih, fols. 17a–19b.
112. Ibid., 653.
113. See n. 162 below.
114. Tarih, fol. 18b.
115. Ibid., fols. 19b–21a.
116. Ibid., fols. 21a–22b.
117. Ibid., fols. 22b–23b. Idris Agha was the third project head; his predecessors were Kalender Agha (later Kalender Pasha), who died in 1616, and Hüseyin Agha. See ‘Abdü’l-Kâdîr Efendi, Topçular Kâtibi Tarihi, 647–48; and Bilge, “Sultanahmed Cami ve Külliyesi,” 541–42.
118. Tarih, fols. 23b–25b.
119. Ibid., fols. 25b–27a.
120. Ibid., fols. 27b, 29a–30r.
121. Kâtib Çelebi, Fezleke, 1383, repeated in Naima, Tarih, 2378.
122. Tarih, fols. 28a–29a.
123. Ibid., fols. 32b–34b.
124. Indeed, the first qasida seems to have been composed with reference to Taşkâlî Yahya’s sixteenth-century encomium on the Hagia Sophia: see n. 65 of the appendix. It is interesting to note that this qasida has far less in common with its counterpart by Çafer Efendi, for which see n. 127 below.
125. Tarih, fols. 36a and 37a.
126. Ibid., fols. 34b.
127. Similarly, a qasida written by Çafer Efendi no later than 1614 describes the mosque as if it were complete. The author in this case had seen the architect’s designs, which no doubt proved helpful in envisaging the final work. See Çafer Efendi, Risale, 65, 73–76.
128. Tarih, fol. 40a.
129. Ibid., fols. 41a.
130. Ibid., fols. 43a–45b.
133. The first of these, the Tarih-i binâ-i Aya Şofya, was composed during the reign of Mehmed the Conqueror (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) on the basis of earlier Byzantine accounts; the second, Tarih-i cami-i şerîf-i Nâr-i Osmâni, was written between 1756 and 1757 by the mosque’s building secretary, Ahmed Efendi. See Stefanos Yerasimos, La fondation de Constantinople et de Sainte-Sophie dans les traditions turques: Légendes d’empire (Istanbul: Institut français
mosaics that had been left unobscured until the seventeenth century, including the image of Christ Pantokrator in the dome, were painted over during this campaign.

144. Fetvaci (“Music, Light and Flowers,” 235) also argues that the Hagia Sophia’s Christian past may have acted as a foil to the Sultan Ahmed Mosque. It is interesting to note that the Sultan Ahmed Mosque’s other great forerunner—the Suleymaniye—had been the subject of malicious rumors questioning the stability of its dome during construction. Sinan would, of course, prove the skeptics wrong, but the history of his dome nevertheless adds to the context in which to understand the proud showcasing of its later counterpart at the Sultan Ahmed. See Sä’d, Sinan’s Autobiographies, 124; and Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 143.

145. Tarih, fols. 4b, 8a.

146. For illustrations and descriptions of such tents, see Atasoy, Otaq-ı Hümayun.

147. For other instances, see Atasoy, Otaq-ı Hümayun, esp. 60–63, 67–75; Nurhan Atasoy, “Ottoman Garden Pavilions and Tents,” Muqarnas 21 (2004): 15–19; and Atl, “Story of an Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Festival,” esp. 184, 185, 190, and figs. 4–6, 8, 13. For the use of tents to further the increasingly visible image of the sultans in the late Ottoman period, see Ashley Dimmig, “Fabricating a New Image: Imperial Tents in the Late Ottoman Period,” International Journal of Islamic Architecture 3, no. 2 (2014): 34–72.


149. For Ottoman tents in martial contexts, see Atasoy, Otaq-ı Hümayun, esp. 64–67. It is an interesting coincidence that the corps of imperial tentmakers had its headquarters close to the Sultan Ahmed Mosque in the sixteenth-century Palace of Ibrahim Pasha: ibid., 23–30.


152. See Muştafa Şafi, Zübdetü‘-Tevârih, 12xxii–12xxiii, 109–24; and Hammer-Purgstall, Geschichte, 4:444.


154. The sultan is recorded as having worn a representation of the Prophet’s footprint on the aigrette of his turban: see Bilge, “Sultanahmet Cami ve Külliyesi,” 525, 526.

155. Tarih, fols. 35a–35b. Cafer Efendi (Risâle, 75), in his gasida on the mosque, likewise praises the sultan’s patronage of the Ka‘ba.

156. Tarih, fol. 36a. Similarly, Cafer Efendi (Risâle, 73) writes, “The world set out on a pilgrimage to it as they do to the Ka‘ba / The pilgrims strove to circumambulate it.” See also Fetvaci, “Music, Light and Flowers,” 224–26.

157. See n. 68 of the appendix, and Necipoğlu, “Life of an Imperial Monument,” 201. Eighteenth-century sources compare several imperial mosques of the period—including the Nuruosmaniye, Ayazma (1757–60), and Laleli (1760–63)—to the Ka‘ba or its heavenly prototype, though they do not explicitly discuss these mosques as substitute pilgrimage sites: see Rüstem, “Architecture for a New Age,” 226, 259, 278.


159. See Ahmed Efendi, III. Selim’in Sürkâbîti Ahmed Efendi Tarafından Tutulan Rüzâname, ed. V. Sema Arıkan (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basmevi, 1993), 294; and Başlangıçdan Günümüze Kadar Büyük Türk Klâskâleri: Tarih, Antoloji, Ansiklopedi, vol. 6 (İstanbul: Ötüken; Ankara: Söğüt, 1987), 145, where the location specified is the mosque’s portico (revâk).
che ne anco si può schiﬀare di presentare questi nuovi mini-
stri, et massime a tempi presenti, ne quali ricerca il servizio 
pubblico, che non si habbia a restringer la mano; mi duole 
in estremo queste frequenti mutationi de Bassà et altri del 
governo di questa Porta, conoscendo l’interesse, che da ciò 
ne riceve la Serenità vostra per rispetto della spesa. Ma dove 
vi concorre la necessità il dispiacere non serve di rimedio. La 
moschea del Gran Signore è fabbricata da un lato della piazza 
dell’ipodromo, nella quale si sogliono fare li spettacoli pubblici 
in tempo di noce [sic, nozze] del Sultan de retaglia de Principi. 
In questa all’incontro di detta moschea fu un largo coridore 
coperto alli, 4, Ambasciatori, et a me, assignato un luoco a 
ciascun di loro in forma di stanza con le ale de padiglioni, 
ondie io dissi all’Ambasciatore di Fiandra sorridendo, che non 
così le avesse pur bene, che essendo noi uniti insieme con li 
nostri Principi di animo, et di volontà, questi ci volessero dividere, 
però comandassimo, che fusse levata la tela, che ci separava, 
et il medesimo poco appresso fece Inghilterra, et di mano in 
mano Franco, et l’Ambasciatore dell’Imperator di modo che di 
cinque stances [sic, stanze] ne fu fatta una sola, riducendosi 
tutti verso il [213a] luogo dell’Ambasciatore Cesareo, come 
quello, che era più a fronte della Porta per dove entrava il 
Rè nel cortile della moschea. In questa sacrificarono diversi 
castri in honor del Profeta, poi ad una certa hora osservata 
dal loro in quel giorno per felice, fecero la cirimonia di metter 
all’ultima pietra nella sumità della pupola maggiore di detta 
moschea, sopra la qual conforme al loro uso vi piantano una 
sistem-
tur aus osmanischer Zeit, exh. cat., 2 vols. (Recklinghausen: A. Bongers, 1985), 1:233, no. 1/55. The inauguration of the mid-eighteenth-century Nuruosmaniye Mosque was also recorded in writing by a Western observer: see Rüstem, “Architecture for a New Age,” 159, 178–79.

165. Shah Tahmasp’s sending of gifts and letters is well attested, but a sixteenth-century Ottoman chronicle now in Vienna (cited below) indicates that these were presented in June 1557, some months before the Süleymaniye was opened. Whether the Safavid envoy stayed on for the inauguration is unclear; he is not mentioned in the known accounts of the event. See Matraḵi Naṣiḥ (?), formerly misattributed to Rüstem Pasha, Tārīḫ-i ʿāl-i ʿOsmān, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Mxtr. 339, fol. 282a (available at http://data.onb.ac.at/rec/AL00465234), summarized in Ludwig Forrer, trans., Die osmanische Chronik des Rüstem Pascha (Leipzig: Mayer & Müller, 1923), 89–90; Feridun Beg,Memâni’-a- münse’âtü’s-selâtûn, 2 vols. (İstanbul, 1264–65 [1848–49]), 1:524–29, summarized and partially translated in Hammer-Purgstall, Geschichte, 3345–48; Bates, “Patronage of Süleyman,” 70; Eyice, “Avrupa’lı bir Ressamın Gözü ile Kanuni Sultan Süleyman,” 159–67; and M. Tâyyib Göktüllî, “Süleyman I, in İslâm Ansiklopedisi (İstanbul, 1940–88), 139. I am grateful to Sinem Basale for sharing references with me on this topic.

166. To be sure, certain members of the Safavid delegation present at the 1582 circumcision festival are recorded as having converted to Sunnism, but this was only after the ambassador was expelled or imprisoned when news reached Istanbul that the Safavids had broken their truce with the Ottomans: see Terzioğlu, “Imperial Circumcision Festival,” 86. Such political defections are very unlikely to have occurred at the far shorter dome-closing ceremony, which did not coincide with any major diplomatic developments or crises. As I shall discuss presently in the main text, the conversions mentioned by the Tarîh probably pertain to the sultan’s own non-Muslim (or non-Sunni) subjects.

167. It was not unusual for non-Muslims to convert to Islam during princely circumcision festivals, including the famous celebrations of 1582. The English chaplain Dr. John Covel (d. 1722) witnessed such an event in Edirne in 1675, noting in his travel account that at least two hundred non-Muslims, “many of riper yeares,” spontaneously indicated their desire to convert during the thirteen-day festivities and were led away to a tent to be circumcised. The magnificence of the ceremony itself must have played an important role in wooing people to the faith; as Covel observes, “the Turkes would be so farre from hindering your seeing, as they would make way for you.” Outside such festive contexts, other would-be converts announced their intentions at the imperial council, where they were richly rewarded in a ceremony that became increasingly codified in the seventeenth century: the first recorded instance of new Muslims being gifted clothes occurred in 1609, the year that work began on the Sultan Ahmed Mosque. See Terzioğlu, “Imperial Circumcision Festival,” 85; J. Theodore Bent, ed., Early Voyages and Travels in the Levant (London: Hakluyt Society, 1893), 209–10; Finkel, Osman’s Dream, 276–77; Marc David Baer, Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 179–203, 293n39; and Tijana Krstić, “Illuminated by the Light of Islam and the Glory of the Ottoman Sultanate: Self-Narratives of Conversion to Islam in the Age of Confessionalization,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 51, no. 1 (January 2009): 35–63, esp. 58. For the staging of the 1675 festival, see Atasoy, Otaq-i Hümâyûn, 68–69.

168. Such denigration of the Safavids was not new. At the circumcision festival of 1582, the Habsburg ambassador is supposed to have complained at having to be seated with his Safavid counterpart, whom he considered inferior. He cited as proof the grand mufti’s fatwa that it was better to kill one Qizilbash than seventy infidels (i.e., Christians). Regardless of the truth of this story, the Western diplomats were indeed provided with their own tribune. The Safavids, though seated with other foreign Muslim dignitaries, were taunted throughout the festival, and more bitingly than the Christians. See Terzioğlu, “Imperial Circumcision Festival,” 85–87.

169. The Safavid ambassador was separately accommodated at other festivals also: see the preceding note.


171. Tarîh, fol. 28a.

172. Ibid., fols. 34a–34b.


174. Tellingly, perhaps, a dispatch from the English ambassador reporting the sultan’s death states that “it had been falsely rumored he was dead 40. dais before.” Dispatch dated November 28, 1617, TNA, SP 97/7, fol. 174a.

175. See Kuban, Ottoman Architecture, 369; and Nayır, Sultan Ahmet Külliyesi, 46.


177. See Necipoğlu, Age of Sinan, 517.


179. See Yazar, “Osmanlı Defin Merasimlerinde Otaq Kurma Gelenekleri,” 115. A report from the English ambassador states that the sultan’s coffin was “laid in his tombe, nott yett fullie finished in his new Mosccka” (dispatch dated November 28, 1617, TNA, SP 97/7, fol. 174b), which strongly suggests that the building was far enough along not to require a tent.