Chronos- Revue d'Histoire de l'Université de Balamand, is a bi-annual Journal published in three languages (Arabic, English and French). It deals particularly with the History of the ethnic and religious groups of the Arab world.

**Journal Name:** Chronos

**ISSN:** 1608-7526

**Title:** A look into the evolution of the Hünkar Mâhfil, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries

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**To cite this document:**


**Permanent link to this document:** DOI: https://doi.org/10.31377/chr.v26i0.417

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A LOOK INTO THE EVOLUTION OF THE HÜNKAR MÂHFIL, FROM THE FIFTEENTH TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURIES

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When the Ottoman sultan attended service at the imperial mosque, he had his own private quarter — the hünkar mâhfîl (the sultan's loge) — where he would relax and pray in seclusion. In general, an imperial mosque involved a set of signs that reinforced its imperial identity and that of its patron, one of which was the sultan's mâhfîl (box or loge). (Necipoglu 2005: 20) Moreover, the style of mosques varied according to patron, location, function, decade and architect and being an integral part of the mosque, the sultan's mâhfîl echoed these variations. The hünkar mâhfîl witnessed a subtle but marked transformation whether in architectural terms or the symbolic meaning it stood for. It began with the sultan's mâhfîl at the back of the prayer hall facing the mihrab (niche) at the Yeşil Cami. By the sixteenth century, the evolution in architecture necessitated its shift to the southeastern corner of the qibla wall however it remained simple and accessible from a private portal on the outside. It is in the seventeenth century that the Sultan Ahmet Cami marked a shift in the concept and magnitude of the hünkar mâhfîl with a large ramp leading to a gallery (later pavilion) and then the sultan's mâhfîl at the back of the mosque. By the nineteenth century, the sultan required greater ceremonial pomp and thus the pavilion was moved to the front of the mosque and became incorporated with the portico. The contrast is very impressive between the hünkar mâhfîls of earlier mosques and those of mosques from the later nineteenth century. This evolution, visible in the plans, architectural configuration and decorative schemes, was inspired by more than just a need to experiment with space and form. It came as a call for more display of the wealth and splendor of the sultan and the empire, which — from the seventeenth century onwards — was

1 SOAS, London.
definitely not splendid nor wealthy. The once expanding empire began in the eighteenth century to enter a phase of stagnation and then in the nineteenth into decline before its final demise following First World War. This article attempts to shed light on this transition in style and analyzes the transformation in architecture and meaning the hünkâr mâhfil underwent starting with the Yeşil Cami in Bursa down to the imperial mosques of the nineteenth century.

At first the evolution of the hünkâr mâhfil may appear as a complicated process, which must be studied within the context of power, patronage, time, location and the relevant politics. However, and upon careful inspection of the sultan’s mâhfil and its role in earlier mosques, it becomes evident that it evolved in response to economic and political plight and as a dire need for pomp and ceremony as whitewash for a failing empire. In observing the cult of mosque patronage adopted by the royals of the Ottoman Empire, no doubt that architecture was an expression of the patron’s — in this case, the sultan’s — piety on one hand and power and grandeur on the other. In 1593-94, the court historian Talikizade attributed twenty imperial qualities to the House of Osman, which would distinguish the Ottoman Empire and rationalize its legitimacy and superiority over all other Muslim rules. One of these qualities was that the Ottomans maintain a full treasury for architectural patronage, which thus demonstrates the significance of architectural representation as an expression of the empire’s glory. (Necipoglu 2005: 20) Architectural patronage was indeed a cult, a main part of which were mosques where the sultan would erect one after the other mainly to immortalize himself through the mosque — which would usually hold the sultan’s name — and to commemorate a certain victory or territory won. This was to prevail towards the seventeenth century where most imperial mosques where not only built in an ostentatious fashion for the purposes above but also for an assertion of Ottoman might and power.

For this reason, imperial monuments are generally analyzed as a creative corpus representing an autonomous evolution of different models, types, contexts and visions all circulating around domed spaces that rise to the sky with a ‘political’ statement. These mosques were the sultan’s way of asserting his supremacy as the protector of Islam and Muslims. This concept of power was further bolstered by a religiously sanctioned notion of the sultan being God’s representative on earth and the protector of the laws of Islam or the Shari’a. The title of caliphate was being used “for rhetorical effect without making any specific claim to divine right or supreme sovereignty over the entire Muslim community” by the Ottoman sultans from as early as 1421. (Imber 1997: 103) In an inscription above the Topkapı Saray gate, Mehmet Fatih is referred to as
the “shadow of God” on earth, which demonstrates the special ranking Fatih gave himself as subsequent Ottoman sultans would later come to do. (Freely 1999: 3) Another example is an inscription on a mosque in Manisa built by one of Mehmet’s officials: “The builder of this blessed mosque is the founder of pious establishments, Sinan Bey son of Abdullah, the freed slave of Sultan Mehmed son of Murad Khan, in the time of his caliphate, the middle of the month of Rejeb in the year 879 [1474].” (Peirce 1993: 161-162)

However, the title of Caliph was formally adopted by Selim I following the conquest of Egypt, Syria, Palestine and the Arabian Peninsula and with the Ottomans becoming guardians of the three main holy sites of Islam – Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. (Toprak 1981: 43) The problem was that according to traditional Sunni theory there was a requirement for the Caliph to be a descendent of the Prophet’s tribe of Quraish, which the Ottomans did not satisfy. However, this predicament was resolved in a treatise written by a former Grand Vizier and son-in-law of Sultan Süleyman I, which demonstrated that lineage from the Quraish tribe was not necessary for the office of Caliphate. This was endorsed by Ebu’s-su‘ud (1490 – 1574), the leading jurisconsult of the Ottoman Empire, who bestowed upon Sultan Süleyman the title of “Caliph of God Most High on His Earth” in one of his works. (Imber 1997: 104) However, the title seemed to have been abandoned until later in the eighteenth century as evidenced by an absence of the title of Caliph from an appendix attached to a diplomatic correspondence of 1575, which records sixteen titles for the address of the Ottoman Sultan. (Toprak 1981: 43) In 1774, Sultan Abdülhamid I signed the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, whereby the Ottomans acknowledged the detachment and political autonomy of the Crimea in return for an official recognition from the Crimeans of the Sultan’s authority as Caliph. This was also restated in the Aynahkavak Agreement of 1779 between the Russians and the Ottomans. (Buzpinar 2005: 17-18) This seems to have coincided with the decline of the Ottoman Empire and it came at a fateful time for several reasons. Firstly, it was an attempt to elevate the status of Ottoman sultans through a legitimization of their right to the Caliphate. Secondly, it was a license to use the caliphal title as a political implement. Thirdly, it helped the Ottomans project an image of sovereignty and power during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which on the contrary was a very difficult period for the Ottomans. This was a somewhat sophisticated political attempt to cover up their territorial failures. All this political and territorial demise was somewhat obscured – or so hoped the Ottomans - behind a very rich material culture as some of the largest and richest palaces were built during this period, notably the Dolmabahçe.
In articulating this total power, the sultan, being head of the empire and God’s representative on earth, was accorded much veneration amongst his subjects. An inclination towards isolation and seclusion from regular Ottoman subjects was developed. With the exception of religious holidays and big events, the sultans did not appear to their subjects, thus emphasizing the royal and divine status of the sultan who is untouchable, venerated and high. Thus, the sultans differentiated themselves by not only adopting the title but by also creating a grandiose and impenetrable persona for themselves. This trend of the sultan isolating himself from his subjects was initiated by Mehmet Fatih who issued a set of protocols for the conduct of the sultan and the hierarchy among his officials; not only did the sultan become increasingly less visible to his subjects but also when he would meet with his courtiers and officials four times a week, the sultan was to be concealed behind a curtain. (Finkel 2005: 55) This tradition of isolation and seclusion was suspended during the short but spectacular Tulip Age during Ahmet III’s reign in the eighteenth century when Ahmet III encouraged more social gatherings and public festivities as well as more royal appearances and less reservation before his subjects. (Finkel 2005: 344, 364) By that time, however, the hünkâr mahfîl had remarkably evolved and came to realize a more ostentatious and flamboyant appearance both architecturally and symbolically. The more we progress in time, the more we notice a trend in the growing size and importance of the hünkâr mahfîl, all of which coincides with an empire on its way to decline.

This paper begins with a look at the hünkâr mahfîl at the Yeşil Cami, which was commissioned by Mehmet I (Çelebi Mehmet) in 1412 as part of a large complex in Bursa and was only completed around four years after his death in 1421. It is considered very advanced for its time owing to its rich tilings, mostly green, in the cuerda seca technique; hence, the name Yeşil Cami or Green Mosque. In this mosque, there seems to be a separate dialogue between the secular and religious spaces. It is in the secular space where the sultan has his own hünkâr mahfîl on the northern wall and facing the qibla wall. The hünkâr mahfîl is located on the upper level and is reached through stairs from the halls located on either side of the lobby at ground level. Each of these stairways leads up to an anteroom, between which is located the hünkâr mahfîl in two sections; a domed chamber to the farthest north and a barrel-vaulted eyvan overlooking the inside of the mosque. (Freely 2011: 45-46) The eyvan is very impressive and completely paneled with tiles, its ceiling overlaid with gold and its beautiful ceramic-tiled balustrade etched with traditional geometric figures, polygons, and stars of five, six and eight points. (Goodwin 1971: 60, 62, 66) Like the balustrade,
the ceiling is completely covered with interlocking stars and geometric figures, only to emanate into more stars. These heavenly constellations lend the hünkär mähfil a spirit of otherworldly magnificence and sublime beauty. Thus, this interplay between star and heaven may be understood as a representation of the sultan’s closeness to and integration with God. This is an occurrence that is quite prevalent in Islamic decorations where there is constant allusion, albeit abstract and nonfigurative, through the use of patterns and geometric figures, to the skies, heavens and paradise. (Blair and Bloom 1991: 34-35)

The splendor that is the sultan’s box belongs to the craftsman with the name Mehmet the Eccentric owing to an inscription in Persian. (Aslanapa 1971: 199) The inscription is probably a sufist term and falls within a mystic context as with the whole spirit of the hünkär mähfil. Another inscription above the royal box mentions Ali bin Ilyas Ali, known as Nakkaş Ali (Ali the Designer) who must have been the director in charge of the decoration in tiles, wood, plaster and paint. (Goodwin 1971: 63) The significance of the hünkär mähfil’s position is that it rests on an elevation at a higher level than the main mihrab, thus communicating a very powerful message with political and religious undertones. Just like the sultan is the ultimate sovereign in his empire, he also is head of his own mosque where from his royal box he presides over the prayer hall, the people and the imam, whose mähfil is set on a lower level than that of the sultan. The Yeşil Cami is one of the fewer mosques where the royal box is located in the center of the northern wall and looking into the inside of the mosque. This would soon change and the royal box would move to the southeastern corner of the qibla wall, where it would assume its standard location in most imperial mosques as shall be demonstrated below.

One of the earliest mosques home to this novel change in location of the hünkär mähfil is the Sultan Selim I Cami, which was built in 1522 and stands on a hill overlooking the golden horn. It is assumed from an inscription in Arabic over the entrance portal that this mosque may be posthumous. The belief is that Selim did not live to complete his mosque but rather his successor and son, Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, completed it two or three years after his death. (Freely 2001: 190) In this mosque, and unlike the Yeşil Cami, the hünkär mähfil takes its position in the southeastern corner. It rests on rich marble columns of several kinds including jasper and is reached only through a stairway set in the thickness of the wall. (Goodwin 1971: 185) The tradition of positioning the hünkär mähfil in the southeastern corner of the qibla wall and usually accessible by means of stairs set in the thickness of the wall would continue for the next century.
In 1520, Sultan Süleyman rose to the throne as the most powerful ruler in the Islamic world and during the next thirty years of his reign, the Ottoman Empire expanded in territory as the largest and most striking force of all time. Sultan Süleyman was aware of his military might and political authority and, thus, adopted the title of ‘world conqueror’, which his father Sultan Selim I had used to refer to himself following the conquest of Syria and Egypt in 1516. The reign of Sultan Süleyman is considered to be the most successful with the greatest territorial expansion and internal and social order – and he came to be known as the Magnificent to the Europeans and as the Legislator (qanuni) to the Ottomans. (Finkel 2005: 116-117) Towards the late sixteenth century (between 1550 and 1557), Sultan Süleyman sponsored the building of his own imperial mosque, known as the Süleymaniye, a mosque imbued with grandeur and which, for many centuries later, would come to be regarded with the greatest honor. (Necipoglu 2005: 208) The sultan’s mâhfil is located on the southeastern corner as per tradition and is elevated above ground level on slim columns. This royal room, inaccessible from inside the prayer hall, is reached from the outside through the south door from a flight of steps set into the thickness of the exterior of the east wall. (Kuran 1990-1991: 281) Every week Sultan Süleyman along with his retinue would attend the Friday sermon at the Süleymaniye. He would travel from the palace to the mosque in a spectacular demonstration and an organized procession. André Thevet, a French traveler described the sultan’s procession to Hagia Sophia Mosque since the Süleymaniye Cami was still under construction during his visit:

First the Janissaries who must be seven thousand in number march on foot in front of him...They walk in a wonderful silence while their old captain marches behind them. Various officers follow them on horseback...and beyond all of them comes the grand mufti...After them march a grand number of handsome pages decorated and adorned in a manner beyond description. Next come the four pashas who govern the grand lord [i.e., the sultan] peacefully and whose countenances demonstrate a very seigneurial majesty. Then comes the aforementioned grand lord, about fifteen paces after them...mounted on a handsome horse caparisoned in velvet – the said caparison being decorated all over with fine oriental pearls. The said Süleyman carries a scimitar entirely covered and decorated with emeralds, rubies, diamonds, and other exquisite materials...He goes to the aforementioned mosque in such beautiful order and silence that, except for the sound of the horses' hooves, one would think there
was not a soul in the streets, although an almost infinite multitude from diverse nations are watching him pass. Then all the people salute him, bowing their heads low; their lord returns the same salute to his people with a great sweetness and gentleness, inclining his head, now here and now there, with a very becoming gravity. (Necipoglu 1985: 98)

There is no reason not to believe that the same manner of extraordinary display of grandness and power continued on the sultan’s Friday visit to the Süleymaniyye when it was completed. Upon his arrival, the sultan entered the mosque from the south door mentioned above while his retinue entered through the other side entrances. (Necipoglu 1985: 98) The sultan’s māḥfil is enhanced by its very fine stone lattice balustrades, which as Goodwin suggests are grander than those of the corresponding loges on the southwest. Inside the sultan’s māḥfil, there is a muqarnas-hooded mihrab, which is consistent in character and decoration with the main mihrab. (Goodwin 1971: 228, 235) There is an emphasis on symbolic meanings with the excessive use of Quranic inscriptions in the mosque and especially in and around the royal lodge. An inscription, recommending that believers dress in fine clothes in the house of God, adorns the lunette next to the royal box. A Quranic inscription (3:39) containing the word ‘mihrab’ is carved into the mihrab. The lunettes of both windows on each side of the mihrab cite the hadith, which declares that those who act with justice are raised above minbars of light in the eyes of God. (Necipoglu 2005: 219) This is nothing but a tribute for the great Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent, the Qanuni, the most just, honorable and righteous man who is the protector of justice on earth. This is corresponding with the inscription over the portal of the mosque, which confirms the sultan to be caliph and the protector of Islam as revealed in the Quran:

[Sultan Süleyman] has drawn near to [God], the Lord of Majesty and Omnipotence, / the Creator of the World of Dominion and Sovereignty, / [Sultan Süleyman] who is His slave, made mighty with Divine Power, / the Caliph, resplendent with Divine Glory, / Who performs the Command of the Hidden Book / and executes its Decress in [all] regions of the inhabited quarter: / Conqueror of the Lands of the Orient and the Occident / with the Help of Almighty God and His Victorious Army, / Possessor of the Kingdoms of the World, Shadow of God over all Peoples, Sultan of the Sultans of the Arabs and the Persians, / Promulgtor of Sultanic Qanuns, / Tenth of the Ottoman Khaqans, / Sultan son of the Sultan,
Sultan Süleyman Khan/ ... / May the line of his Sultanate endure until the End of the Line of the Ages!/ ... (Imber 1997: 75)

The Selimiye at Edirne, Sinan’s masterpiece and in most regards rivaling the Süleymaniye in splendor, was built for Sultan Selim II between 1569 and 1575. (Goodwin 1971: 261) The sultan’s mâhfil continues to be elevated in the conventional southeastern corner of the qibla wall and here it is notably protruding from the gallery to encompass the first windows on the south wall. (Goodwin 1971: 265) The sultan’s mâhfil is yet again reached via a staircase situated within the thickness of the wall. An interesting feature here is the anteroom where the sultan may have lounged, which is to the east of the sultan’s mâhfil with an arcade separating both rooms from one another. A door on the qibla wall of this anteroom, leads to a dark rectangular cell, which may have been used in seclusion by the sultan who himself was a follower of the Halveti order. (Necipoglu 2005: 245, 255) This anteroom may be considered a direct forerunner to the loggias attached to the sultan’s mâhfil as seen in later mosques of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both the anteroom in this mosque and the loggias of later mosques, served the same purpose: space for the sultan to relax, whether alone or with his entourage (note that a private room for the sultan’s entourage was later added in the mosques of the nineteenth century). The balustrade of the hünkâr mâhfil, which supports a seventeenth century lattice added by Ibrahim I, extends from that of the east gallery. (Goodwin 1971: 265)

The hünkâr mâhfil itself emulates the Selimiye Cami, which is very far from humble, in its rich decorations that pronounce its imperial character. Very fine iznik tiles with floral motifs and hefty calligraphy richly decorate the royal box and the spandrels of the four arches on which it rests, the ceiling is lavishly painted, and the arched window lunettes are of stained glass. (Necipoglu 2005: 252) Similar to the sultan’s mâhfil at the Süleymeniye, the inscriptions in the hünkâr mâhfil at the Selimiye are dedicated to the sultan. The gilded lunette above the sultan’s private muqarnas-hooded mihrab bears the Quranic verse from Surat Ash-Shu’ara, which asks forgiveness on the Day of Judgment for ‘him who bringeth unto Allah a whole [pure] heart (qalb salîm)’ (26:89). This might have been intended as a pun (qalb salîm and the sultan is Selim) and certainly it is the sultan who bears the pure heart. Two horizontal iznik tiles above the lunette on the sultan’s mihrab, display the following verses: ‘My Lord! Vouchsafe me wisdom and unite me to the righteous’ (26:83); ‘And place me amongst the inheritors of the Garden of Delight’ (26:85). (Necipoglu 2005:
The Garden of Delight stands for *Jannah* or paradise as conceptualized in the Quran: a privilege only given to those who lead a virtuous life. (Blair and Bloom 1991, 16-17) With its rich foliate and floral Iznik panel decorations, the beautiful Quranic inscriptions and the mystical meanings they stand for, the whole of the sultan’s mâhfil resembles the ‘Garden of Delight’ or paradise.

When Murat III decided to build his imperial mosque, Istanbul and Edirne were crammed with mosques. So he built his mosque in the city of Manisa on a meadow bellow a hillside. (Goodwin 1971: 317) Moreover, Murat, who had an inclination to mysticism and wrote mystical poetry under the name *Muradi*, most probably chose Manisa for his mosque owing to its tolerable position for Sufism. (Necipoglu 2005: 257) Sinan, who must have only laid the design of the mosque in 1583, assigned one of his best apprentices, Mahmut, to be the architect responsible for the construction. However, Mahmut died and was substituted by Mehmet Aga, the future architect of the Sultan Ahmet Cami. The mosque was completed in 1586, however the complex must have been completed as late as 1592. (Goodwin 1971: 317) The sultan’s mâhfil is again elevated on the southeastern corner and reached from its own gate on the east wall. (Necipoglu 2005: 263) However, the sultan’s mâhfil and the main mihrab are hidden from each other: the sultan’s mâhfil is obscured from the main mihrab because the main mihrab is recessed into the depth of the wall. The sultan’s mâhfil, which rises on three high ogee arches adjusted on two marble columns and the south and east walls, is more modest compared to its contemporary sultan mâhfiils. The wooden ceiling under the sultan’s mâhfil preserves its original painted decorations, gilded and in red and black, covered with twelve-pointed star motifs, on which Goodwin admiringly notes that only the dome of the Kafes at the Topkapisaray competes with its splendid decoration. (Goodwin 1971: 320)

In the early seventeenth century, the less pretentious entrance to the sultan’s mâhfil, albeit rich in decoration, witnessed a striking change in architectural terms with the Sultan Ahmet Cami. The sultan’s mâhfil remained in its conventional place in the southeastern corner of the mosque, however it was more prominent in size and occupied the whole area underneath the smaller dome in the southeast. (Goodwin 1971: 346) However, and for the first time in Ottoman mosques, the striking change involved the annexing of a ramp from the outside of the mosque, which allowed the sultan to reach the lodge on horseback. This was the sultan’s chance for a more pompous presence in his imperial mosque. Although Ahmet was very excited about his mosque, attending the building process regularly and even physically helping
with the work, one cannot speculate to what extent Ahmet had a say about this new addition. Ahmet held an opening ceremony for the mosque, which was completed in 1617, but he barely enjoyed his mosque and his lodge, as he died a year after its completion. (Freely 1999: 109, 115) Commenting on the mosque, Goodwin derogatorily refers to it as a ‘marriage of other men’s ideas in most but not all particulars’ since Mehmet Aga studied all the important monuments of the empire before he began any work on the Sultan Ahmet Cami. (Goodwin 1971: 344, 349) The sultan’s mahfil, which is raised on ten columns of precious marble, is directly accessed from the loggia, which was built on the outside of the mosque in the southeastern corner. (Kuran 1990-1991: 281) Therefore, instead of the hidden entrance and the narrow staircase that led to the sultan’s mahfil, now the sultan’s reception was grander and may never go unnoticed. To reach the royal box, the sultan had to go through a large gateway, and then a ramp up to a loggia with two small retiring rooms where the sultan could relax on one side and from the other side gain access to the sultan’s mahfil inside the mosque. (Goodwin 1971: 346) Despite some of the unwelcoming criticism this mosque may have received, it marked a shift in Ottoman mosques, in terms of plan, decoration, its graceful exterior, its six minarets (four triple-balconied and two double-balconied) and certainly the addition of the ramp leading to the sultan’s mahfil.

The Yeni Valide Cami at Eminonu in Istanbul is another example of the sultan’s pompous entrance but on an even grander scale. It was built by Safiye Sultan, mother of Mehmet III; however, the building process was discontinued when Mehmet died in 1603 and Safiye was sent away to live in the Old Saray until her death fifteen years later. (Freely 1999: 103, 106) When Ahmet I ordered the discontinuation of the mosque, the walls were built up to the level of the lower windows. (Goodwin 1971: 340) It was Hadice Turhan Sultan, mother of Mehmet IV, who completed the abandoned mosque in 1663, which was then called the Yeni Valide Cami or New Mother Mosque. (Freely 1999: 163) Here, the royal lodge takes the form of a pavilion, which overlooks the Golden Horn, and is more spacious and commanding when compared with its precursor at the Sultan Ahmet. The first thing the architect, Mustafa Aga, did was build this apartment and the ramp for Hadice Turhan Sultan as she wanted to be present and overlook the construction of the mosque. Unlike the open ramp at Sultan Ahmet, the ramp here is covered and much larger, and extends across the south end of the mosque to admit to the sultana’s apartment in the southeastern corner. (Goodwin 1971: 357) The ramp includes three levels: the ground floor, which has seven shops, the middle floor has rooms for the sultana’s ladies-in-
waiting and then the apartment on the third floor. (Kuran 1990-1991: 282) The apartment, called the Sedan Chair Road, consists of two rooms separated by a water closet and enveloped by an L-shaped hall. This hall leads into a triangular lobby, from which access is gained to the sultan’s mahfil in the southeastern corner of the mosque. The apartment is enhanced by a painted ceiling, large stained-glass windows, and fifty-nine panels of tiles from Iznik, containing floral motifs in many blues, covering the walls from floor to ceiling. (Kuran 1990-1991: 282; Goodwin 1971: 357) The sultan’s mahfil has two gilded muqarnas-hooded mihrabs and a gilded muqarnas cornice and horizontal tiles with Quranic inscriptions flow uninterrupted on all sides of its walls.

At the NuruOsmaniye Cami, the concept continued to be the same but with a few alterations. Sultan Mahmut I began the building of the NuruOsmaniye complex in 1748, however, upon his death, the construction of the mosque was taken over and completed in 1755 by his brother Sultan Osman III, after whom the mosque retained the name NuruOsmaniye or Light of Osman. (Finkel 2005: 365; Goodwin 1971: 382) Here, an impressive gateway in the south permits entry to the large and covered ramp, which contains seven piers forming round arches that are closed on the outer side but open on the mosque side. This ramp considered the grandest of ramps built in imperial mosques as it allowed the sultan to ride his horse from ground level up to his residence area without having to dismount his horse. (Goodwin 1971: 384) Unlike the Sultan Ahmet Cami and the Yeni Valide Cami, the pavilion is replaced by a long and grand gallery carried over three arches. (Kuran 1990-1991: 282) From the interior, the sultan’s mahfil, which is still in the southeastern corner looks like a ‘grand tier box at the opera’. The same is observed at the Laleli Cami (Tulip Mosque) but this time the hünkâr mahfil takes its position in the northeastern corner. The Laleli Cami was built by Mustafa III in 1759-1763 and is considered to have been partly designed on the example of the NuruOsmaniye. The sultan enters the mosque through a gate at the southeastern corner which gives way to the large and long ramp parallel to the east wall leading to a short gallery and from there to the sultan’s loge in the northeastern corner. (Goodwin 1971: 386, 388-389)

This tradition of the ramp and gallery being positioned behind the qibla wall of the mosque on the outside is broken here with the Ayazma Cami at Uskudar (1757-1760). (Goodwin 1971: 387) Here, like the NuruOsmaniye, the concept of ramp and gallery persist, but with a new and very significant change in positioning. Instead of running behind the mosque on the south, the ramp and U-shaped gallery were moved to the eastern wall on the north by the
façade. The sultan’s māḥfil no longer occupied the southeastern corner of the qibla wall but rather the eastern section of the gallery. (Kuran 1990-1991: 282)

The Fatih Cami, which was built in 1463-1470 by Mehmet the Conqueror, is mentioned along with the mosques of the eighteenth century because it suffered from both the 1509 and 1767 earthquakes. Although the courtyard and the portico of the mosque survived the 1767 earthquake, the rest of the structure was completely damaged. (Goodwin 1971: 121-122, 129) What we know of the original mosque is limited to sketches and plans done by visitors and travelers such as M. Lorichs. The wooden hünkâr māḥfil was built by Beyazit when the mosque was being restored after the 1509 earthquake. (Crane 1999: 11) Following the 1766 earthquake, the Fatih Cami was reconstructed in 1767 by order of Mustafa III. It is believed that the reconstruction originated in the old foundations, however there is enough reason to doubt that the new mosque was true to the original one. The original plan seems to have been lost, as the new plan was based on the Şehzade Cami, and a good deal of the details in the mosques such as its cornices and plant paintings were redone in the new style, most probably the Baroque style seen in the NuruOsmaniye. The hünkâr māḥfil, which is typically located in the south, is reached by means of a ramp characteristic of the eighteenth century, which leads into a spacious gallery and then the sultan’s māḥfil in the south. (Goodwin 1971: 394)

From the Sultan Ahmet Cami to the Ayazma Cami, a set of noticeable changes can be identified. First, the sultan’s māḥfil ceased to be humble and isolated in the southeastern corner of the qibla wall like at the Selimiye, where the sultan’s māḥfil appears isolated and on its own. (Goodwin 1993: 82) Second, a royal pavilion or gallery was added to the southeastern corner of the mosque on the outside. This pavilion, which contained a set of rooms for the sultan to relax, was the direct connection to the sultan’s māḥfil. Third, a ramp, extending on the outside of the mosque from the south, was attached to lead up to the pavilion. At the NuruOsmaniye, the sultan could go up the ramp without having to get off his horse. At the Ayazma, the location of the ramp changed from southeast behind the mosque to the eastern side of the façade. However, the sultan’s pavilion, which was accorded extreme importance in the seventeenth and eighteenth century mosques mentioned above, achieved more notoriety in the mosques of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century discussed below, where in many instances it came to dominate the mosque, in both area and positioning.

The Beylerbeyi Cami was built by Abdulhamit in 1778 and completed in 1781 and it was in memory of his mother Rabi‘a Sultâne. (Bosworth 2007: 216)
This mosque introduced a set of new changes in terms of architectural style and purpose. This is the first Baroque mosque to be built on the waterfront and the main reason was the sultan’s comfort for when he was residing at one of the many palaces along the Bosphorous. (Goodwin 1971: 397) The second feature was the sultan’s pavilion, which for the first time since the imperial mosques at Bursa was incorporated with the portico at the northern façade of the mosque. It consists of two floors, where the upper floor contains a spacious gallery and the royal room. While the public accessed the mosque from the main door on the north wall, the sultan took the stairs from the east wing of the portico pavilion into the upper floor to a hall containing the sultan’s sitting room and a toilet to its north. On the west wall of the hall, a door led to the sultan’s private prayer balcony. (Kuran 1990-1991: 282) Likewise, the Selimiye Cami, Sultan Selim III’s imperial mosque built in 1804 at Haydarpaşa, contains a royal two-storey pavilion attached to the northern façade where it meets the west lateral arcade. (Goodwin 1971: 413) The sultan’s mahfil, which like the NuruOsmaniye assumed the form of a loge, tops the end of the mosque’s west gallery on the inside. (Kuran 1990-1991: 282)

In 1822, Mahmut II commissioned the architect Kirkor Balian to build an imperial mosque as part of a larger complex and this was to be Balian’s first major project. The mosque was completed in 1826 and it rose at Tophane in the district of Beyoğlu on the site of a small wooden mescit. (Goodwin 1971: 417) It was called Nusretiye or Divine Victory in commemoration of Mahmut II’s victory in subduing the Janissaries, an endeavor which had begun under his uncle Sultan Salim III. Kirkor Balian, an Armenian Ottoman and the founding father of the family of architects that would dominate the building of most imperial mosques and palaces in Istanbul. Kirkor had studied in Paris, which is why in addition to the Baroque style his mosque reveals motifs from the Empire style of building that was popular in France. (Freely 2000: 274)

Here, like its contemporaries, the sultan’s pavilion is not only incorporated in the northern façade but also entirely dominates it. The sultan’s pavilion is divided by a high triple-domed portico, and, on each side of which, an arcade projects in one-third its width to support an upper suite that rises slightly higher than the portico. The sultan’s pavilion, sitting on arcades, continues its movement all the way around the corners where the two minarets stand and protrudes on the northeast and northwest walls respectively. The bay on the eastern wall, which is carried on an arcade, is for the sultan’s entourage. Belonging to the sultan, the one on the west is grander and stands on an arcade of three grilled arches. It is accessed from a private Baroque portal in the
arcade on the southwest, which leads into a hall and the prayer loge in the southwestern corner. (Kuran 1990-1991: 282)

In his journals, Auguste de La Garde describes in detail the procession of Sultan Mahmut II to the mosque, which he witnessed during his visit to Pera (known today as Beyoğlu) in Istanbul. In many ways, it is very similar to that described by André Thevet of Sultan Süleyman. However, there are some striking differences and here we learn that:

The sultan never goes to the same mosque more than once during the same year, neither does he return to the seraglio by the same way he came out of it. Frequently he rides to the mosque, and returns by water, or vice versa; and if, owing to the situation of the mosque fixed upon, it is necessary both to go and return by water, there are always two state barges in the procession, each used in its turn to carry this demigod of Mahometan adoration. On the occasion on which I witnessed the procession it took place by land. All the streets through which the sultan had to pass had been carefully swept, and were lined by crowds of janissaries, who stood there as a matter of form to greet their sovereign, and by others attracted merely by curiosity. The sultan as mounted on a most magnificent white horse, whose trappings glittered with gold, silver and precious stones. Twenty-four attendants were walking on each side of him, wearing on their heads a helmet, the thick and ample plumage of which formed a kind of white forest, which almost concealed the person of the sultan from public view. (De La Garde 1831: 186)

Sultan Mahmut II did not seem to be as approachable as Sultan Süleyman and was almost completely disconnected from his subjects, with whom most contact would be through mediating officials. Whilst Sultan Süleyman returned the salute to his people, Mahmut II did not as described in the text below:

All the spectators made a low bow on the approach of the sultan, and then held their heads inclined towards the left shoulder until he had gone by. This extraordinary mode of salutation implied that their heads were at the sovereign’s command...I observed that the sultan did not return the salute of his devoted subjects and seemed quite unconcerned with what was going on around him in the street. I was informed that he is the first sovereign of Turkey who had ventured to set aside the form of courtesy observed towards the people on public occasions. (De La Garde 1831: 188)
Another final modification was initiated with the Bezmialem Cami, the Buyuk Mecidiye Cami, and the Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Cami. Here, instead of the sultan’s pavilion being an independent feature of the façade, it became integrated and united with the façade. In addition, now the sultan’s entourage was undoubtedly accorded its own private section in the sultan’s pavilion. At the Bezmialem Cami (1852-1853), the portico disappeared to be replaced by the main entrance hall and upper gallery, whose façade consists of two levels of five large arched windows. The central hall is flanked by the rooms for the sultan and his entourage on the west and east respectively. (Kuran 1990-1991: 283) On the south are the porticoed entrances to both wings, which include, on each floor, a hall with a big room on one side of it and across from it two smaller rooms and service areas. Similarly, the sultan’s pavilion preceding the prayer hall continues at the Büyük Mecidiye in Ortaköy (1854-1855) and the Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Cami in Aksaray (1871-1872). At the Buyuk Mecidiye Cami, the two floors on both the east and west wings contain a staircase and a sitting room, which flank the central hall. The west wing, which overlooks the Bosphorus, continues to be for the sultan, who from there has direct access to his prayer balcony. The same pattern continues with the Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Cami (1871-1872) but with a much bigger front section in comparison with the prayer hall. (Kuran 1990-1991: 283)

In conclusion, the hünkâr mahfîl underwent several changes from its beginning with the Yeşil Cami at Bursa. The sultan’s mahfîl, a small royal box, was situated in the centre above the domed court at the Yeşil Cami. With the exception of the Sultan Beyazıt Cami in Istanbul where the sultan’s mahfîl was at the southwestern corner, the sultan’s mahfîl reappeared elevated in the southeastern corner with its own private mihrab facing the main mihrab on the qibla wall. Exemplified by the Süleymeniye in Istanbul, Selimiye in Edirne and Muradiye in Manisa, this tradition went on for almost a decade until the late sixteenth century. With the seventeenth century, a very striking change took place: the need for a more prominent inclusion of the sultan in the mosque yielded new architectural measures. At the Sultan Ahmet Cami a large pavilion was attached to the mosque and reached by means of a long ramp running all the way on the south side and an even wider grander ramp was added at the NuruOsmaniye Cami. By the late eighteenth century a new variation took place: the sultan’s pavilion was shifted to the front of the mosque, where the sultan’s prayer hall no longer occupied the south-eastern corner of the qibla wall but now took up position in the front. The sultan’s pavilion grew in prominence and
in size that it forced the disposition of the courtyard, a prevalent feature of most
fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century Ottoman mosques. Kuran gives percentages relating to the overall plan evolution of the sultan’s mahfil: the sultan’s mahfil at the Sultan Ahmet Cami took up 4.7% floor area of the mosque’s entire floor area, but it grew to 83% at the Beylerbey Cami and 109% at the Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Cami. (Kuran 1990-1991: 283) The evolution of the sultan’s mahfil did not happen as an answer to architectural needs as much as a call to social factors. The sultan’s importance and what he stood for necessitated this change. Definitely, the eighteenth century Lale Devri or Tulip Age brought with it flamboyant and ceremonial pomp, which was enjoyed by the royals and elites of the Ottoman court and neither the sultans nor their mothers, the valide sultanas, were content with just a little hidden box in the mosque. They wanted more: a chance to shine and reflect the prominence of the empire represented by the sultan, the almighty demigod without whom the empire would cease to be. This was furthermore reinforced towards the eighteenth and nineteenth century when the empire was beginning to decline and architectural patronage and material culture were the only avenues left to convey a strong and powerful image.

December 2011
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Fig. 1: Yeşil Cami. View from inside of the royal box facing the mihrab below. (From Goodwin, G., *A History of Ottoman Art and Architecture*. London, Thames & Hudson Limited, 1971)
Fig. 2: Yeşil Cami. Royal box seen from the outside facing the northern wall. (From Doris Behrens-Abouseif)

Fig. 3: Yeşil Cami. Detail of royal box from the outside. (From Doris Behrens-Abouseif)
Fig. 4: Selimiye Cami. Hünkar Mâhfil in the southeastern corner. (From Alyson Wharton)

Fig. 5: Selimiye Cami. The tiled entrance of the royal lodge. (From Necipoglu, G., *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*. London, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2005)

Fig. 7: Muradiye Mosque. Ceiling under the royal lodge. (From Goodwin, G., *A History of Ottoman Art and Architecture*. London, Thames & Hudson Limited, 1971)
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Fig. 8: Sultan Ahmet Cami. Plan of mosque showing the annexe ramp. (From Necipoglu, G., *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*. London, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2005)
Fig. 9: Sultan Ahmet Cami. The royal box in the southeastern corner. (From Walter B. Denny, Agha Khan Visual Archives, MIT)

Fig. 10: Yeni Valide Cami. Plan of mosque showing the annexed ramp. (From Necipoglu, G., *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*. London, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2005)
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Fig. 12: Yeni Valide Cami. Mihrab in Hünkar Mâhfîl. Alyson Wharton
Fig. 13: NuruOsmaniye Cami. Sultan’s pavilion on the side of the mosque. Alyson Wharton

Fig. 14: NuruOsmaniye Cami. The Hünkar Mâhfil projecting into the prayer hall raised on columns in the southeastern corner. (From Walter B. Denny, Agha Khan Visual Archives, MIT)
Fig. 15: Laleli Cami. The ramp leading into the royal lodge. (From Walter B. Denny, Agha Khan Visual Archives, MIT)

Fig. 16: Laleli Cami. Interior view looking at the sultan’s lodge in the northeastern corner. (From Walter B. Denny, Agha Khan Visual Archives, MIT)
Fig. 17: Ayazma Cami. Exterior View with sultan’s pavilion. (From Kuran, A., 1990-1991, “The Evolution of the Sultan’s Pavilion in Ottoman Imperial Mosques,” *Islamic Art* 4, New York, pp. 281-300)

Fig. 18: Beylerbey Cami. View from the Bosphorus. (From Kuran, A., 1990-1991, “The Evolution of the Sultan’s Pavilion in Ottoman Imperial Mosques,” *Islamic Art* 4, New York, pp. 281-300)

Fig. 20: Nusretiye Cami. Exterior View from the north-east showing the sultan's pavilion incorporated into the portico. (From Goodwin, G., *A History of Ottoman Art and Architecture*. London, Thames & Hudson Limited, 1971)
Fig. 21: Nusretiye Cami. Exterior view from the west, showing the sultan's lodge running along the front and side of the mosque above arcades. (From Walter B. Denny, Agha Khan Visual Archives, MIT)

Fig. 22: Nusretiye Cami. View of portal leading into the royal lodge located next to the side arcade on the southwest façade. (From Walter B. Denny, Agha Khan Visual Archives, MIT)

Fig. 24: Bezmialem Cami. Interior view showing sultan’s balcony. (From Kuran, A., 1990-1991, “The Evolution of the Sultan’s Pavilion in Ottoman Imperial Mosques,” *Islamic Art* 4, New York, pp. 281-300)
Fig. 25: Sketch plan of Imperial Ottoman Mosques (drawn in heavier lines) and their Sultan's Pavilions (drawn in lighter lines)
1. Süleymaniye;
2. Sultanahmet;
3. Yeni Cami;
4. Nuruosmaniye;
5. Beylerbey;
6. Buyuk Mecidiye