The New Palace of Mehmed Fatih and its Byzantine Legacy

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Soon after Sultan Mehmed made his ceremonial entry into Constantinople in 1453 he began the construction of a palace, situated at the modern site of the University of Istanbul.[1] Soon after its completion in 1458, Mehmed decided to build yet another palace. This became a much larger and more diverse building, called the *Yeni Saray* (New Palace), a name used until the early 19th century, when it was replaced by *Topkapı Sarayı*.[2] But why did the Sultan build a new palace so soon after the first one?

The new palace was also a new *kind* of palace, probably related to a change in Mehmed's self-image. As he established himself in Constantinople and united most of Anatolia and the Balkans under his rule, he came to view himself as the heir to the Roman Empire, and among the titles he used was *Kayser-i-Rum* (Emperor of Rome). His plans to conquer Italy and unite Constantinople and Rome under one rule was only cut short by his death.[3]



Fig: 1: Sultan Mehmed Fatih (Wikimedia Commons)

The old palace did probably not correspond to the sultan's demands of magnificence. The location of the new palace was chosen with care, and perched at the ancient Acropolis of the city, it dominated the skyline. It was also situated close to the ancient monuments of Hagia Sophia and the Hippodrome, which developed into important sites for Ottoman display. The Church of the Apostles and its imperial tombs were supplanted by Mehmed's new mosque complex and mausoleum. These acts symbolically replaced the founder of the Christian city with the founder of the Muslim city.[4]

As Mehmed developed ideas of world dominion, the symbols and ideology surrounding the sultan also changed dramatically. Our knowledge about early Ottoman court ceremony is patchy, but there is every indication that the sultans often appeared in public and were surrounded by a minimum of rituals. This tradition continued under Mehmed, until it was abruptly changed in 1477 with the promulgation of the law code *Kanunname*, which,

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[1] Doukas (ed. H. J. Magoulias), *Decline and fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks by Doukas* (Detroit, 1975) 243-44; Michael Kritovoulos (ed. & trans. C. Riggs), *History of Mehmed the Conqueror by Kritovoulos* (Princeton 1954) 93-95, 104.

[2] Gülru Necipoğlu, *Architecture, ceremonial, and power. The Topkapı Palace in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries* (Cambridge, Mass.,1991), 3-4 (hereafter Necipoğlu)

[3] H. İnalcik, 'The policy of Mehmet II toward the Greek population of Istanbul and the Byzantine buildings of the city', *DOP* 23-24 (1969-70), 231-49; E. Werner, *Sultan Mehmed der Eroberer und die Epochenwende im 15. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1982), 5-10; Necipoğlu, 10-22, 249; D. Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922* (Cambridge 2005), 178.

[4] Necipoğlu 249.

among other things, regulated the administrative and religious hierarchy of the state, and the court ceremonies. It turned the Ottoman state in a highly centralised and authoritative regime, and the sultan into a semi-divine and secluded ruler. From this time on the sultan only appeared in public during accessions, the two annual *Bayram* festivals, at a few council meetings and in times of crisis. This body of ceremonies lacked Ottoman and Muslim predecessors, and was most probably inspired by Byzantine books of ceremonies.[5]

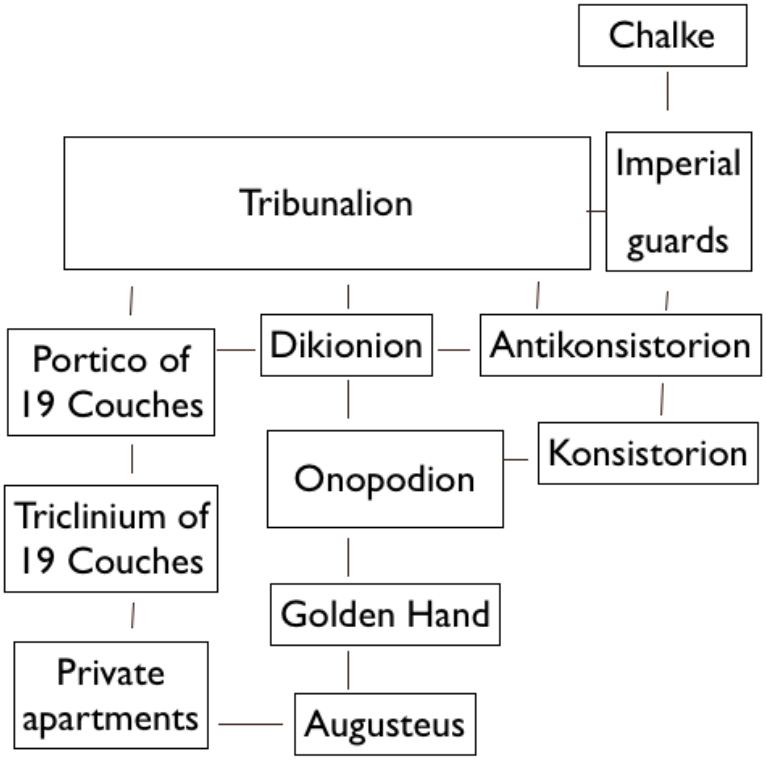


Fig. 2: Schematic model of the Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors (by the author)

Comparing the Palaces

With this situation in mind, it could be fruitful to compare the Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors with the new Topkapı Palace. The idea is to dwell on some of the remarkable similarities the two palaces displayed, and attempt to illuminate some of the reasons behind these resemblances. I will only give a brief comparative outline of the two palaces, and will therefore not generally discuss style, specific architectural elements or the problems of topographical location and identification, but will rather dwell on general structural and functional aspects of the palaces. Rather than trying to cover the whole palaces, I will concentrate on a few highly charged locations:

1. the outer gate
2. the central courtyard with its major halls and inner gate
3. the inner courtyard with its audience hall

[5] Necipoğlu, 16-30, 249-52; K. Dilger, *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des osmanischen Hofzeremoniells im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1967); A. Bryer & H. Lowry (eds.), *Continuity and change in late Byzantine and early Ottoman society* (Birmingham 1986).

In the Byzantine palace, these locations can be found in the Upper Palace, and in Topkapı among the central cluster of buildings. I have also imposed chronological limitations to the comparison: for the Byzantine palace I will mainly deal with the earliest Byzantine phase, until the inauguration of the *Chrysotriklinos* in 581, and in Topkapı until the major rebuilding of the 1520s.

Of course, the study of these palaces are vast scholarly subjects, and I have benefited from the erudite studies of the Byzantine palace undertaken by an impressive list of scholars.[6] This is also a subject I have dealt with to some extent myself, for instance in my doctoral dissertation on imperial banqueting.[7] Concerning my study of the Topkapı Palace I am admittedly completely relying on secondary sources, but my attempts to remedy this shortcoming has been much facilitated by two fundamental works: the architectural history of the palace by Sedad Hakkı Eldem and Feridun Akozan, and the magisterial work by Gülru Necipoğlu, which really covers all aspects of the early palace.[8]

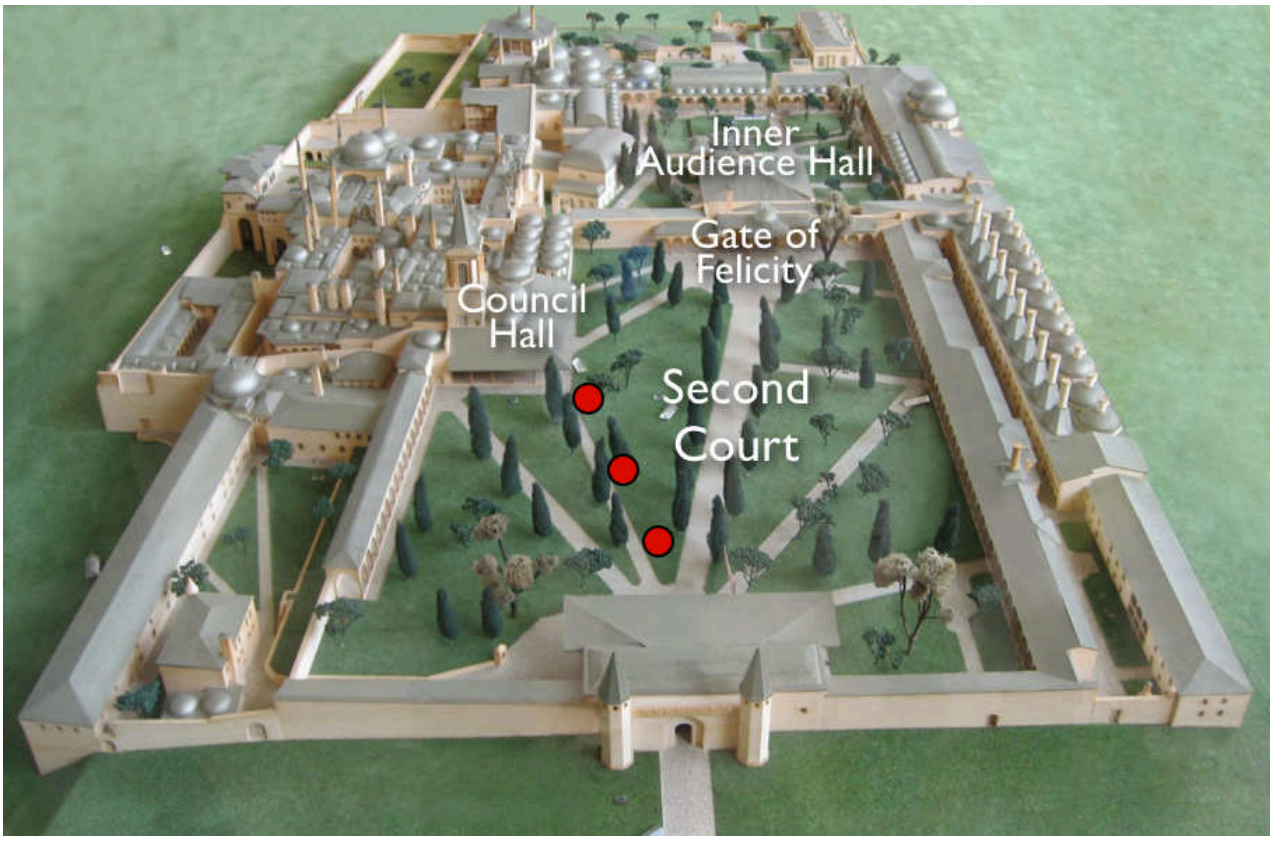


Fig. 3: Topkapı Palace model (Wikimedia Commons, modified by the author)

[6] To name but the most prolific scholars on the subject in recent years: Bardill, Bauer, Berger, Bolognesi, Featherstone, Jobst, Kostenec, Kresten, Magdalino, Mango.

[7] S. Malmberg, *Dazzling dining: banquets as an expression of imperial legitimacy* (Uppsala, 2003).

[8] S. H. Eldem & F. Akozan, *Topkapı Sarayı: bir mimari araştirma* (Istanbul, 1982), hereafter Eldem-Akozan; Necipoğlu.

Outer Gate

Starting with the *Chalke* Gate of the Byzantine palace, it is probably its single most famous building, and became a shorthand for the imperial palace as a whole, as in Procopius's famous description: 'We know the lion, as they say, by his claw, and so those who read this will know the impressiveness of the Palace from the entrance building.'[9]

The gate was lavishly decked out with statuary and imperial symbols. Its massive and guarded bronze doors gave, together with the internal mosaics showing imperial triumphs, a message of imperial might and victory. This was also furthered by the architecture itself, in the form of a domed vestibule, with its implied symbolism of heavenly associations and world rule.[10] At least the Anastasian Chalke also boasted an epigram displayed over the entrance, declaring imperial victory and comparing the edifice with the wonders of the ancient world.[11] This message was in time supplemented by two others: first that of Christianity. The image of Christ was famously displayed over the entrance, and was later accompanied by a chapel erected next to, or on top of, the gate. The second was that of justice, in the form of the Noumera state prison that flanked the gate.[12] In many ways, the palace gate was a physical boundary and a symbolic space that mediated between emperor and people. It was a liminal zone, where different rules applied, which is probably one of the motives why the emperor was the only one allowed to pass the gate on horseback.[13]



Fig. 4: The outer gate of the Topkapı Palace (by the author)

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[9] Procop., *Aed.* 1.10.11. C. Mango, *The brazen house: a study of the vestibule of the imperial palace of Constantinople* (Copenhagen, 1959); A. Berger, 'Die Altstadt von Byzanz in der vorjustinianischer Zeit', in *Varia* 2 (Bonn, 1987), 7-30; A. Berger, *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos* (Bonn, 1988), 243, 270.
[10] The gate and its decoration is described by Procop., *Aed.* 1.10.12-20.
[11] *Anth.Grec.* 9.656.
[12] The image of Christ, the chapel and the Noumera prison are developments in the Middle Byzantine period.
[13] Mango, *Brazen House* 85.

If we compare the Chalke to the outer gate of the Topkapı Palace, we may find some striking similarities. This gate was known as the Gate of Salutation (*Babü's-selam*), a word that could also mean Gate of Peace, the name of the gate to Paradise in the Koran, where God's angels salute those who enter. The message gets even less ambivalent by the placing of a Koranic inscription above the archway, which compares the building to the gates opening onto the Gardens of Eden. The religious symbolism was underlined by the inclusion of a small mosque (*mescid*), located on top of the gate building, and the large dome, painted in blue and gold, in the ceiling of the gate's vestibule.[14]

The outer gate had the form of a double-towered gate, known as *iki frengi burgaz* (two towers in European mode), which existed already in the 15th century.[15] Together with the gilt iron doors they gave a fortified appearance, probably intended as a message of military might. This message was further emphasised by the display, inside the gate's vestibule, of gilded weapons. As at the Chalke, the liminality of the space was shown by the rule that only the sultan could pass through the gate on horseback.[16] The theme of justice was also invoked by a state prison flanking the gate.

In short, the two gates show similar attention placed on the symbolic and liminal aspects of the buildings, with focus on the themes of military power, victory, divine favour and justice. In this way, the visitor was prepared for the main functions of the central courtyard.

Central courtyard

In the Byzantine palace, after passing through the Chalke and halls of the imperial guard, one reached the central courtyard of the early palace, the *Tribunalion*. This was a huge, open court, with its two most important halls probably situated on the southern side: the *Triclinium* of the Nineteen Couches and the *Consistorium*, preceded by a colonnade and a ceremonial podium.[17] However, the focus of the courtyard probably fell on a monumental archway, known as *Dikionion* (presumably flanked by two large columns), or Great Middle Gate of the Tribunalion, which was probably located between the Triclinium and the Consistorium and along the same axis as the podium.[18]

The courtyard itself was used for large gatherings in the palace, where members of the imperial family was acclaimed by the army, factions and courtiers, when appearing either on the podium or in front of the Dikionion. The Dikionion seems often to have been the preferred location, where the emperor was framed by columns and curtains in an archway that communicated between the public and private parts of the palace.

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[14] Necipoğlu 50-52.
[15] Eldem-Akozan 69-70; Necipoğlu 51.
[16] Necipoğlu 20, 50.
[17] R. Guilland, 'A propos du livre des cérémonies de Constantin VII Porhyrogénète: le Delphax', *AIPHOS* 10 (1950), 293-306; R. Guilland, 'Études sur le grand palais de Constantinople: les XIX lits', *JÖBG* 11-12 (1962-63), 85-113; Berger, *Altstadt* 10, 14; F. A. Bauer, *Stadt, Platz und Denkmal in der Spätantike. Untersuchungen zur Ausstattung des öffentlichen Raums in den spätantiken Städten Rom, Konstantinopel und Ephesos* (Mainz, 1996), 154; A. Berger, 'Regionen und Straßen im früher Konstantinopel', *IstMitt* 47 (1997), 349-414, at 353, 357-60.
[18] *De Cer.* 1, esp. ch. 9, 40, 46, 92; Guilland, *XIX Lits* 85; Malmberg, *Dazzling* 55.



Fig: 5: Fourth-century missorium of Theodosius I. The emperor is framed by columns and tympanum, possibly in the same manner as at the Dikionion. (Wikimedia Commons)

Of the two flanking halls, the Triclinium seems to have been mainly devoted to imperial banquets,[19] while the Consistorium had more diverse functions. The Consistorium was created as an advisory council to the emperor, but it also promulgated laws and functioned as the high court of the empire. It gradually took on a more ceremonial role, and became associated with the reception of foreign embassies. The emperor entered from the palace's inner courtyard and presided over meetings seated on a throne, covered by a domed *ciborium*. The ambassadors approached from the Tribunalion, and was met by the full court, drawn up in strict hierarchical order, and sitting on benches along the walls. At these occasions, valuable hangings and carpets were brought out to decorate the hall. Silence reigned during meetings, which were known as *silentia*. Visitors then had to prostrate themselves at porphyry circles inlaid in the floor. They were not directly addressed by the statuesque emperor, who normally communicated through a herald.[20]

At Topkapı Palace, as one entered the central courtyard, known as the Second Court, the visitor beheld a huge rectangular open space, completely surrounded by walls and colonnades.[21] The centrepiece was the inner gate on the opposite side, known as the Gate of Felicity (*Babü's-Saade*), since it led to the inner palace, the Abode of Felicity, a name with

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[19] Guilland, *XIX Lits*; R. Krautheimer, 'Die Decanneacubita in Konstantinopel. Ein kleiner Beitrag zur Frage Rom und Byzanz', in *Tortulae* (Vienna, 1966), 195-99; N. Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IXe et Xe siècles* (Paris 1972); Malmberg, *Dazzling*, 58-60, 91-100

[20] Cor. *In Laude* 3.191-263; Lyd. *De Mag.* 148.14-16; *De Cer.* 1, esp. ch. 39, 46, 88, 89, 91, 92, 93; R. Guilland, 'Le Consistoire. Le makrôn des candidats. L'église du seigneur', *Dêmosieumata tês hetaireias Makedonikôn spoudôn* 14 (1955), 106-22; O. Kresten, *"Staatsempfänge" im Kaiserpalast von Konstantinopel im die Mitte des 10. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna, 2000); Malmberg, *Dazzling* 56-58.

[21] Eldem-Akozan 69-73; Necipoğlu 53-69.



Fig. 6: Gate of Felicity at the Topkapı Palace, audience by Sultan Selim III (Wikimedia Commons)

heavenly implications. The gate was fronted by a domed canopy supported by large marble columns. At this spot Mehmed used to present himself to the court during communal banquets, or for acclamations by the soldiers and courtiers. But following the promulgation of the Kanunname, sultans ceased to appear here, except at the their accession, on the two Bayram holidays, and in times of crisis. In Necipoğlu's words 'the second court was like a magnificent theatre with an impressively large cast, but the principal actor very rarely appeared on stage'.[22] Instead the sultan's symbolic presence was implied by the prominence of the Gate of Felicity.

In the courtyard a special ceremony was held to impress ambassadors, called the Council of Victory (*Galebe Divanı*). At this ceremony all courtiers were present, lined up in strict hierarchical order, while the courtyard was decorated with precious curtains and carpets especially brought from the Treasury. Sometimes the councils were scheduled to coincide with the days on which the Janissaries received their wages.[23] At set places the ambassadors had to stop and salute certain groups of courtiers, indicated by porphyry markers called salutation stones (*selam taşı*). The ambassador was then received inside the Council Hall by the grand vizier.[24]

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[22] Necipoğlu 56, see also 88-90.
[23] C.f. Liudprand, *Antapodosis* 6.10.
[24] Necipoğlu 61.

The inner gate was flanked by two important halls, the Treasury and the Council Hall. The Topkapı seems to have dispensed with a dedicated banquet hall. Instead, ceremonial dining took place either in the Council Hall, or, for less exalted visitors, in the colonnades of the courtyard. The location off-centre of these buildings expressed their subordinate position vis-à-vi the sultan and the Gate of Felicity.

The Council Hall, known in the Kanunname as the Imperial Council (*Divan-i Humayun*), was a simple, unassuming hall, with a wooden portico and pitched roof. In the 1520s it was replaced by a more monumental construction, with a marble portico and a domed roof. Here the council of viziers met regularly, sometimes also, until the reign of Suleyman, with the sultan attending meetings. At these rare occasions, the whole court was present, sitting according to rank on benches along the walls. The hall itself was especially decked out in valuable hangings and carpets. The sultan and his entourage arrived last, and he took his seat on a throne placed on a podium right beneath one of the hall's domes. The Divan also functioned as the high court of the empire, where the judges met four times a week to dispense justice. As we have seen, it could also be used for formal banquets.[25]

Both courtyards, the Tribunalion and the Second Court, were the hearts of the ceremonial cores of the palaces. This is where a majority of processions passed through, the most impressive gatherings were orchestrated, and towards which the palaces' most important reception halls faced. The courts were completely enclosed and were uncluttered by freestanding buildings. This lack of architectural distractions compelled the visitor to concentrate on the ceremonial activities, in which the courts and their adjoining reception halls were used to overwhelm a visitor with the grandeur and resources of the empire, as the unimposing and uncoordinated mass of buildings became unified and impressive through court ceremonial. Apart from the ubiquitous message of might, victory and consensus to imperial rule, there is also great importance attached to generosity (through banquets), and justice (through law courts).

Inner court and audience hall

At the Byzantine palace, through the archway of the Dikionion, you reached the inner court of the palace, the *Onopodion*. Facing the courtyard was the inner audience hall, the *Augusteus*. From 582 it was especially associated with the empress's court, and was used for weddings, female coronations and presumably female banquets. It may originally have been intended for male use, until the inauguration of the Chrysotriklinos, as it was occasionally also in later times, and could have functioned as an inner audience hall.[26]

The Augusteus was the innermost part of the public palace, and communicated with the private apartments, known as the Court of Daphne and the *Koiton*.[27] In this respect as well, the Augusteus had a similar position as the later Chrysotriklinos, placed at the transition from public to private parts of the palace. In the Chrysotriklinos, the separation between male and

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[25] Eldem-Akozan 70; Necipoğlu 76-84.

[26] *De Cer.* 1, ch. 1, 9, 10, 29, 46, 88; R. Guilland, 'Autour du livre des cérémonies. L'Augusteus, la main d'or e l'Onopodion', *REB* 6 (1948), 167-80; Malmberg, *Dazzling* 60-61, 100-102.

[27] *De Cer.* 1, ch. 1, 10, 23, 41, 46, 52, 91, 92; 2, ch. 15, 29; Guilland, *Augusteus*; M. Featherstone, 'Olga's visit to Constantinople', *HUkSt* 14 (1990), 293-312; J. Bardill, 'The great palace of the Byzantine emperors and the Walker Trust excavations', *JRA* 12 (1999), 216-30, at 227; E. Bolognesi & M. Featherstone, 'The boundaries of the palace: *de Cerimoniis* II.13', *TM* 14 (2002), 37-46; Malmberg, *Dazzling* 61-72.

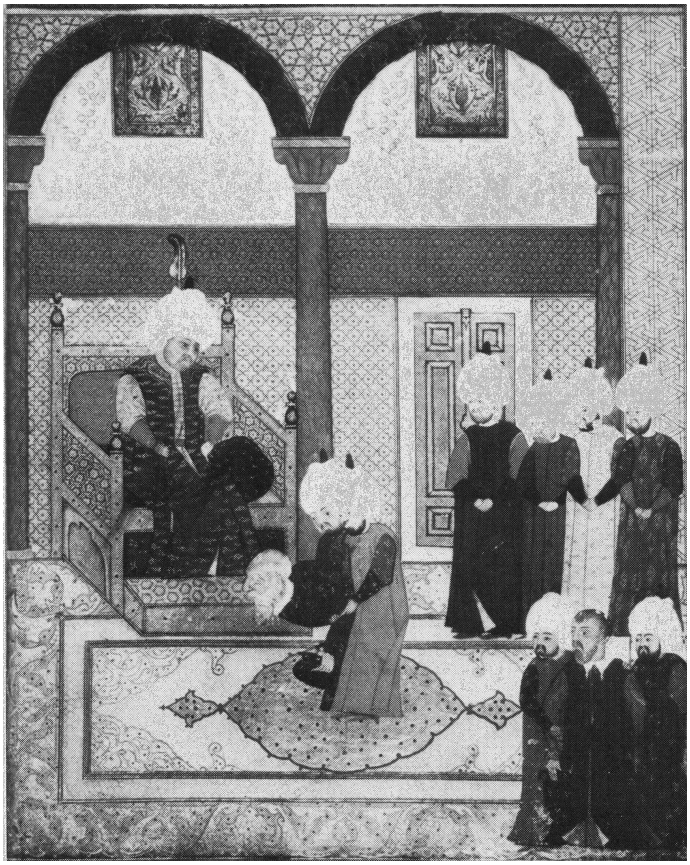


Fig. 7: Audience in the Inner Audience Hall in the Topkapı Palace (Wikimedia Commons)

female apartments had been taken further, and separate doors were provided to each of them.[28]

At the Topkapı, as you passed through the archway of the Gate of Felicity, you reached the third court. However, the view from the second towards the third court was obstructed by the imposing building known as the Inner Audience Hall (*Divanhane-i Enderuni*), built in the 1520s and located exactly at the intersection of the public and private parts of the palace. Earlier, the sultan had received ambassadors at this location in a simple loggia building. The exterior of the hall was covered with porphyry slabs – the sultan's colour – and the interior by carpets, precious wall tiles and a blue dome covered with golden stars. The sultan received ambassadors seated on a throne, motionless and mute.[29] Via the third court one reached the living quarters of the sultan and his family. There existed a strict separation between male and female quarters, until the second half of the 16th century, when the sultan moved his residence to the harem.[30]

In both the Byzantine and Ottoman cases, the visitor moves into smaller, more intimate parts, marking the gradual transition from public to private parts of the palaces. Beyond the Augusteus and the Divanhane only the inner members of the court could move. This

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[28] M. Featherstone, 'The Chrysotriklinos as seen through *De Cerimoniis*', in L. Hoffmann (ed.), *Zwischen Polis und Peripherie. Beiträge zur byzantinischen Kulturgeschichte* (Wiesbaden, 2005), 845-52; M. Featherstone, 'The Great Palace as reflected in the *De Cerimoniis*', in F. A. Bauer (ed.), *Visualisierungen von Herrschaft. Frühmittelalterliche Residenzen - Gestalt und Funktion* (Istanbul 2006), 47-62.

[29] Necipoğlu 96-110. An audience chamber at this location was originally constructed under Mehmed: Necipoğlu 19.

[30] Necipoğlu 91-93.

underlined the secluded nature of audiences in these halls, which may also be the reason why Augusteus in time turned into a more female space in the palace.

Conclusions

Of course, there are obvious differences between the two palaces. But the similarities are also striking, and their occurrence interesting. However, although Mehmed clearly was inspired by Byzantine ideology and ceremonial, it seems far-fetched that he had knowledge about the early Byzantine layout and functions at the Great Palace, and yet the two palaces are clearly related. How to explain this? We probably find the answer in similarities in the fundamental structures of national government and ideologies of governance as seen by Norbert Elias, as well as the relation between architecture and its societal context as developed by Spiro Kostof, to explain resemblances in architectural form and ritual function through similarities in societal and hierarchical structures.[31]

Both the Roman and the Ottoman states had traditionally been dominated by a land-holding aristocracy based on family ties. The creation of an imperial court, loyal directly towards the ruler, gradually shifted the balance of power, and led to the establishment of a non-hereditary bureaucracy. This allowed the creation of a highly centralised state, with a large degree of power and decision-making concentrated into the hands of one man. The late-antique law codes and the Kanunname became very important instruments in this concentration of power, through their regulations of the system of promotions and spheres of responsibility in government.

Rituals of kingship are about making ordinary persons into extraordinary rulers, and the strict ceremonial, social distance and seclusion observed at these centralised courts underlined the dignity, semi-divinity and dynastic continuity of the ruling house. The message conveyed by the layout and ceremonies at the palaces were directed towards two audiences, one internal and one external. To the inner audience – the court – the ceremonies meant that ambiguity in the socio-political order was to a large degree eliminated. The status system was made visible and the power of the sultan was manifested by clearly showing the dependency of the governing classes on the benevolence of the ruler. The members of the artificially created non-hereditary court society had their position in society confirmed by the office received. The use of family names, rather than office titles, to mark membership of the governing class, showed the decline of central authority in the later days of the two empires. To the external audience, ceremony was impressive and persuasive, and promoted a vision of the state as timeless, just and stable. In conclusion, I hope that this essay at a comparison has given some new perspectives to our understanding of both Byzantine and Ottoman palaces and societies.

[31] N. Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie* (Berlin 1969); S. Kostof, *A history of architecture: settings and rituals* (Oxford 1985)