Mimar Sinan, Suleyman the Magnificent & the Suleymaniye

ARCHITECT SINAN'S CAREER BEGAN AS A Janissary engineer building bridges and other military structures for the Ottoman Empire, and by the 1540s his fame had reached the ear of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent. Suleyman's reign marks the zenith of the Ottoman Empire not only in the political arena, but also in scholarship and the arts.

Between 1520 and 1566 numerous mosques, bridges, khans, hammams, madrasas and other structures were built all over the empire. Sinan, from the village of Aghirmas in Kayseri, Anatolia, was recruited into the Janissaries and arrived in Istanbul early in the century. This tall, heavily built man with a bushy beard and kindly face became known as Koca Sinan or Big Sinan.

Suleyman appointed Sinan to design and build a mosque in memory of his favourite son, Shehzade Mehmed. The superb building, which was completed in 1548, so impressed Suleyman that he decided to appoint Sinan to build a mosque in his own name which would symbolise the greatness of the Ottoman state. For Sinan it was a chance to fulfill a life-long desire to create a building which would surpass the glory of the Byzantine Aya Sophia. An edict was issued for the project to go ahead, and Sinan was invited to the palace to show Suleyman his design, and during that audience Sinan was appointed to the post of Mimar Pasha (chief imperial architect).

Jelalzade Mustafa Chelebi, in his early 17th century work Tabaqat al-Mamalik wa Turuqat al-Masalik describes the site selected for the Suleymaniye mosque. It is an airy and spacious hilltop site inside the grounds of the Old Imperial Palace, overlooking the Marmara Sea and the Bosphorus, open to the north winds.

Mimar Sinan drew up the plans for the mosque so as to take best advantage of its site. To prepare the grounds, three thousand galley slaves from the naval arsenal worked for three years, and construction finally began in June 1550 according to the inscription over the courtyard gate. The day that construction of the foundation began, Sultan Suleyman arrived at the site on horseback, accompanied by leading statesmen, scholars and clergies of the time. He distributed alms to the poor,
presided over sacrificial offerings and the laying of the foundation stone by Shaykh ul-Islam Abul-Saud Efendi. After reading several verses from the Quran, he ended with the Fatihah and then work began.

During the three years spent digging the foundations, Sinan busied himself collecting stone for the edifice from the four corners of the Ottoman Empire: white marble from Marmara Island, and other types of stone from Dawutpasha, Haznedar, Izmir and Karacabey. One of the four great pillars was brought from Alexandria in Egypt, one from Baalbek in Lebanon, one from the former Byzantine Great Palace, and the fourth from Kiztashi in Fatih.

When the foundations were built, construction was halted to give them time to settle. Meanwhile, however, Mimar Sinan’s rivals spread many malicious rumours about the project – that the task was beyond his capabilities, the Sultan was displeased with the work, or even that the project had bankrupted the treasure. These rumours came to the ear of Shah Tahmasb Khan of Persia, who sent an envoy to Suleyman with a chest of large rubies and emeralds and a message that they should be sold as his contribution to the construction of the mosque. Sultan Suleyman was offended – as his contemporary had no doubt intended – and had Sinan summoned to the palace. Suleyman ordered Sinan to take the jewels and incorporate them in the mosque as the shah had requested. Sinan understood the sultan’s meaning, and before everyone’s eyes he poured the gems into a great stone mortar at the construction site, crushed them to powder and stirred them into the building mortar.

Years passed but the mosque was still not finished, and Sultan Suleyman grew impatient. Sinan was simultaneously engaged in other projects, and his enemies complained to the Sultan that he was not supervising the project properly. It was an angry Suleyman who, having grown tired of waiting, dropped in unexpectedly for a surprise inspection. He found Sinan seated in the centre of the unfinished building smoking a water pipe. The Sultan was enraged at this display of idleness and at the sacrilege of smoking in that holy place. Sinan hastened to explain that he was testing the ventilation system by which the currents of air inside the building were drawn through a vent over the main entrance into a small chamber.

The object of this clever piece of ventilation engineering was twofold. First, it prevented the smoke from the hundreds of oil lamps from soiling the interior decoration. Secondly, the vent was used to collect lampblack for use in the production of ink (lampblack was the principal ingredient of the ink used by Turkish calligraphers). Somewhat mollified, Suleyman nonetheless demanded to know exactly when the building would be completed. To the astonishment of everyone present, Sinan calmly replied that it would be ready in two months. Sure enough, exactly two months later the edifice was ready. The building inscription
The 26 m wide dome is carried on semi-domes and exedras, thus rivalling that of Aya Sophia.

Side windows, known as lunettes, allow the glittering sunlight to reveal the beauty of the wall calligraphy.
Detail showing how the load distribution is subtly handled through semi-domes and exedras.
tells us that it was completed around the middle of October 1557, and the Flemish painter Melchior Lorichs, who was in Istanbul at this time, gives the exact date as 4 October 1557.

Thousands of people swelled the grounds of the new mosque for the inauguration ceremony where Sinan handed the golden keys of the Suleymaniye to its owner. The Sultan took the keys, but then returned them to Sinan saying: "It is fit that you rather than I should open this house of God which you have built, with joy and prayers of thanksgiving." Sinan took the keys and opened the door. The completed interior was revealed, filled with light that streamed in through the 138 windows in the dome.

The dome spans 26 meters in diameter and is 48 meters high. Like its counterpart, the Aya Sophia, it rests on four huge piers and its weight is elevated by semidomes and exedras. But it is there that the resemblance ends. Sinan concealed the heavy solidity of the massive dome with sweeping arcades that create a sense of vast space.

Also unlike the Aya Sophia, which means heavenly dome on earth, Sinan outlines the borders of each and every varying transitional element - be it in the form of the pendentive corner niches, stalactites or any other form. It is as though he was attempting to accentuate the difference between the earthly realm and the heavenly one. Likewise, calligraphy plays a vital role in Sinan's interior to link the structure with the dome, avoiding the sense of dematerialisation in the Aya Sophia.

The delicate inscriptions inside the mosque were begun by celebrated calligrapher Ahmet Karahisari. After his death, on 16 August 1556, his pupil Hassan Chelebi completed the work. Out of respect for his master, Hassan Chelebi signed the decoration "inscribed by Hassan, son of Ahmet Karahisari."

The mihrab wall is remarkable for its intricate marble carving, Iznik tiling panels and stained glass windows. The minbar is surmounted by a gilded conical finial, a feature common to Ottoman architecture of this period. The Dikket al-Muballigh (the muezzin's gallery) in many travellers' accounts has been referred to as "like a gallery from paradise" due to its lace-like marble carvings and inlay work.

The rectangular forecourt that introduces the worshipper to the mosque is encircled by colonnades along its four sides. A minaret is set at each corner of this courtyard and those that adjoin the mosque have three balconies while the others have only two. The ten balconies symbolise the fact that Suleyman the Magnificent was the tenth Ottoman sultan. In the centre of the courtyard is a marble ablution fountain. The Suleymaniye mosque and its courtyard are set in an outer courtyard measuring 144 by 216 meters that was described in one 17th century chronicle as being "large enough to gallop a horse in."

Over the centuries, foreign artists such as Melchior Lorichs, Cornelius Loos and Thomas Allom have all visited Istanbul and been impressed by the Suleymaniye. Many left paintings, engravings and etchings, which remain as valuable records of the development of this great edifice. Writers, such as Pierre Gilles, Philippe du Fresne Canaye, have done likewise. Pietro della Valle, Julia Pardoe, Edmondo di Amici and the famous Pierre Loti all left descriptions of the Suleymaniye from the 16th to the 19th centuries.
In addition, the Suleymaniye has inspired poetic verse like the 20th century Turkish poet Yahya Kemal Beyatli's poem "Bayram Morning at Suleymaniye":

That it might look out on infinity unsurpassed
It chose this sacred hill on Istanbul’s skyline
Its thousands of labourers and architects who
defeated the stone
For my free and broad homeland by night and day
A spiritual door opens here unto the heavens
Through which the spiritual armies can pass
Foremost amongst them, the architect of this
victorious mosque.

Photography by Aly Hatem Gabr

المعمار ستان ومسجد السليمانية
على حاتم جبر

شهدت الإمبراطورية العثمانية في الفترة من سنة 1566 إلى سنة 1570 م بناء العديد من المساجد الهامة مثل المساجد الكبيرة والعتاد والمدارس ومراكز التنظيم الأخرى. كما شهدت هذه الفترة التاريخية أيضا نشأة المعمار العماني ستان الذي قام بتصميمه وبناء عدد كبير من المساجد والمراكز العظمى التي تعد اليوم من روائع ونموذج في العمارة الإسلامية.

وفي سنة 1540 م كلف السلطان التركي سليم
المعمار ستان بناء مسجد كبير يحتوي على أبا صوفيا في عظمته وروعته المعمارية ويزم إلى
عظمة الإمبراطورية العثمانية في ذلك الوقت. لقد
كان الموقع الذي نصب المعمار الكبير بهدف
بداخل أرض القصر السليماني على هيئة الجبل
المئذنة ذات النقوشات الثلاث هي إحدى
المجسمات الفريدة لمسجد السليمانية

أحد التصميمات الفريدة
لزجاج الطوب في خانات
المحراب.

وتعد المئذنة ذات النقوشات الثلاث هي إحدى
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وقد بدأ المعمار ستان في إنشاء مسجد السليمانية
عام 1566 م. وطعا الموحة البناية المعلقة فوق
بوابتي فناءه الرئيسي، جلب احترامه إلى ما كان
مختلفا عن الإمبراطورية العثمانية من جزيرة
مرمرة ومكة، باستعداده باسلاجنة ومن استمرار
الكاذبة (من داخل تركيه) ومن الاستمرار
ويبقى (من خارجها)، وتعد مجارفية المعمار
ستان في تصميمه المبدع واصحابه من عمل
التخطيطات الاستثنائية الدقيقة من القبة
الرئيسية الهائلة بقطر 37 مترا وارتفاع 85 مترا و
وهي القباب الأخرى ونماذج القباب، وفي وضع
العناصر المعمارية بالمسجد، كما تخلص أيضا في
عمل نظام التهوية الطبيعية في القرن السابع
وفي التصميم المبدع للفناء الرئيسي بارتفاع
144 مترا و12 مترا، والورقة المحيطة به، كما تظهر
عيقريتيا أيضا في التصميم الداخلي للمسجد
وعناصره المعمارية وزخرفته الداخليه التي
تتجلى في تصميم المحراب الرئيسي، وفي زخرفة
المحراب.