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**BETWEEN EAST AND WEST
MODERNITY, IDENTITY, AND THE TURKISH BATH**

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Illustration on cover: Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, The Turkish Bath, 1863, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Source: Public Domain

Trondheim Studies on Eastern European Cultures & Societies

**Between East and West:
Modernity, Identity, and the Turkish Bath**

by

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In 1867, the World Fair took place in Paris, welcoming 15 million visitors.¹ Like all states who wanted to join in the display of Civilization (with a capital C) and their cultural and technological contributions to it, the Ottoman Empire presented itself with an assembly of pavilions that included a small mosque, a residential building, a fountain on a plaza, and a bathhouse.² These buildings as well as the activities and displays that they housed were to convey Ottoman social life and culture to the European visitors. The Ottoman exhibition committee had commissioned the pavilions from Léon Parvillée, a self-trained French architect, who previously had documented and restored the Ottoman monuments of Bursa on request of the Ottoman government.³ The hamam he designed was a rectangular building block with three rooms — (A) the dressing room, (B) the warm room, and (C) the hot room, all of which were quite faithful to those of original functional hamams — and two domes as the superstructure (Fig. 1a, 1b). Visitors could enter the building through a high portal and proceed to the hot room, where benches along the walls invited them to sit down and contemplate the exotic, “Oriental” atmosphere. It is noteworthy that a hamam pavilion was

Note: This article is based on a portion of my doctoral dissertation, for which I received support from the William W. Stout Fellowship and the Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, both at the University of Minnesota. It was presented at the workshop “Imagining the West” at the University of Trondheim in December 2009. I am grateful to Prof. György Péteri for his invitation to the workshop and his encouragement to submit the article, as well as to the anonymous reviewer for the many helpful comments.

¹ <http://expomuseum.com/1867/>

² Zeynep Çelik, Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 60.

³ See Beatrice St. Laurent, “Léon Parvillée: His Role as Restorer of Bursa’s Monuments and His Contribution to the Exposition Universelle of 1867,” in H. Batu and J.-L. Bacqué-Grammont, eds., L’Empire Ottomane, le République de Turquie, et la France (Istanbul: Isis, 1986), pp. 247-82; Miyuki Aoki, “Leon Parvillée: Osmanlı Modernleşmesinin Eşiğinde bir Fransız Sanatçı,” doctoral dissertation, Istanbul Technical University, 2001.

also included in the 1873 World Fair in Vienna, where it once again represented the Ottoman Empire, together with a coffeehouse, the sultan's treasury, and four more buildings.⁴

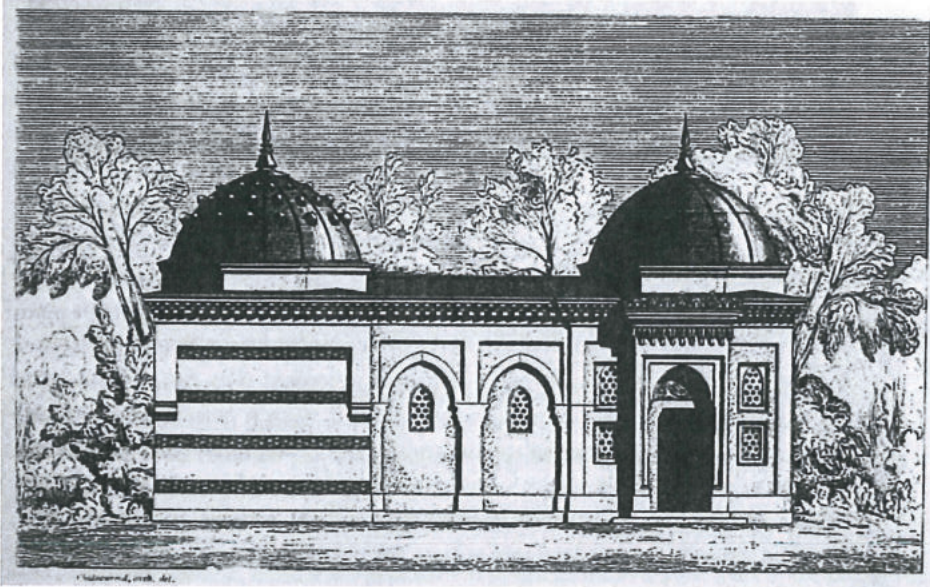


Fig. 1a: Leon Parvillée, drawing of the façade of the bath for the 1867 World Fair in Paris. Source: *Gazette des Architectes et du Bâtiment*, special issue, 1867.

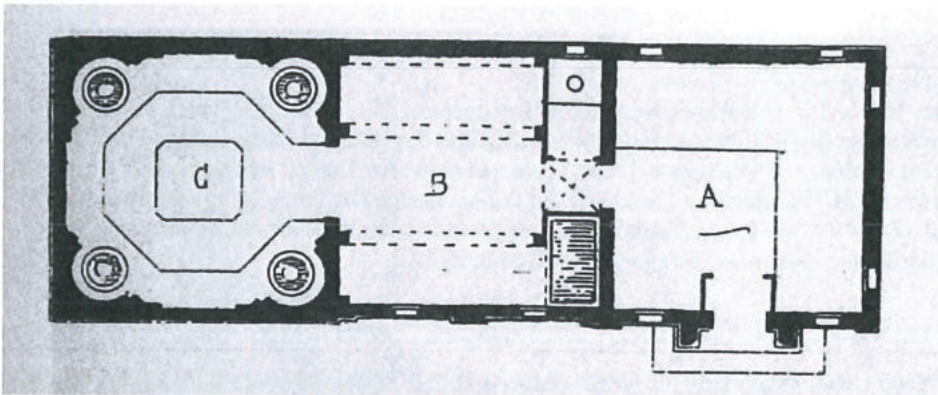


Fig. 1b: Leon Parvillée, ground plan of the bath for the 1867 World Fair in Paris. Source: *Gazette des Architectes et du Bâtiment*, special issue, 1867.

⁴ Çelik, *Displaying the Orient*, p. 213, n. 16.

In 1868, one year after the Paris World Fair, Ottoman urban planners demolished one of the oldest, largest and most important bathhouses of Istanbul, the Çemberlitaş Hamamı, by cutting off a corner of the women's dressing room at a 45-degree angle (Fig. 2, 3). The Çemberlitaş Hamamı had been built in 1583 under the patronage of Nurbanu Sultan, the mother to the then incumbent Sultan Murat III, by the famous master architect Sinan. Its location — opposite one of the oldest monuments of the city, the Constantine's Column dating to 330; bordering on the Divan Yolu which formed the main traffic artery of the city and frequently was the scene of Ottoman imperial processions; and situated right in the middle of a lively commercial area — as well as its function — as an institution of hygiene as well as social gathering — made the Çemberlitaş Hamamı one of most crowded and also most profitable hamams of Istanbul. Nevertheless, the Commission of Road Improvement, which had been established in 1866 after a devastating fire, did not hesitate to sacrifice part of a 285-year-old monument (along with a number of other Ottoman monuments located in the area) to a wide, straight boulevard from the Covered Bazaar to the Hagia Sophia.

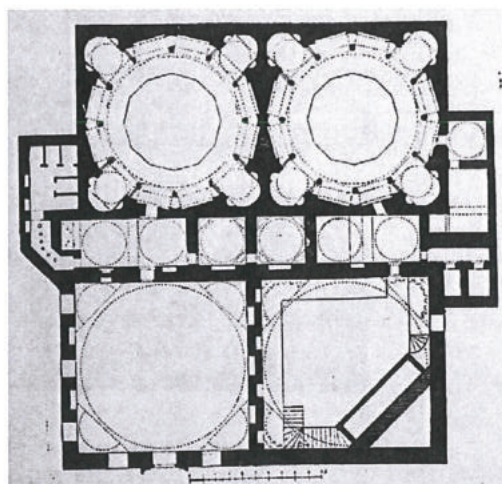


Fig. 2: Ground Plan of the Çemberlitaş Hamamı.

Source: Heinrich Glück, Probleme des Wölbungsbaues: Die Bäder Konstantinopels (Vienna: Halm & Goldmann, 1921).



Fig. 3: Exterior of the Çemberlitaş Hamam.
Source: Author's photograph.

What is the significance of and the relationship between these two vignettes — one about exhibition, the other about demolition — about two rather contradictory ways in which the Ottomans perceived and treated the hamam, one of their oldest cultural institutions? In the following, I hope to disentangle and explain the reasons behind these contradictory positions, which in fact were entirely determined by how the Ottomans imagined and hoped to fashion themselves as part of the West. In fact, it was not only hamams that were viewed from such contradictory perspectives, but also antiquities and Ottoman artifacts,⁵ vernacular residential architecture,⁶ the preservation of built heritage in general,⁷ and many objects and practices of

⁵ Wendy Shaw, *Possessor and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁶ Carel Bertram, *Imagining the Turkish House: Collective Visions of Home* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

daily life and culture. My primary focus here is on the bathhouse in the nineteenth century; however, the latter part of the essay will also take into account how the attitudes towards the hamam as they emerged in this earlier period have continued to shape attitudes in the Early Republican Period, and even today.⁸

Attempts at reform and modernization can be observed in the Ottoman Empire beginning with the eighteenth century, but it was the nineteenth century that saw the most effective measures to transform the empire into a Europeanized state.⁹ In 1839, Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839-1861) issued the *Hatt-ı Şerif* of Gülhane, the Imperial Rescript of the Rose Pavilion, which redefined the relationship between state and subjects as well as between subjects. In spite of the reiteration of these points in another charter in 1856 (*Hatt-ı Hümayun Islahat Fermanı*), the reforms that came to be labeled as *Tanzimat* did not lead to the expected outcomes. Instead of creating equal access to education and employment, universal military conscription and a centralized state apparatus, the reforms resulted in an ever-widening gap between a Europeanized elite and a majority living according to long-established values. They also resulted in an almost dogmatic belief in Europe's superiority and the rather naïve notion that

⁷ Nur Altınyıldız, "The Architectural Heritage of Istanbul and the Ideology of Preservation," *Muqarnas* 24 (2007), pp. 281-305.

⁸ An example of another work that points to these continuities is: Sibel Bozdoğan, Modernism and Nation-Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).

⁹ The terms "modernization," "modernizing," and "Europeanization" or "Westernization" are problematic, because they imply a binary dichotomy between "backward" and "modern," between West and East. However, in the later Ottoman Empire "modernization" was one of the rallying points in public discourse, and the Ottoman elites widely used the term. Therefore, I will continue to use the term as well. Fatma Müge Göçek, Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demise of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Kemal Karpat, "The Transformation of the Ottoman State, 1789-1908," International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 3 (1972), pp. 243-81; Şerif Mardin, "Super Westernization in Urban Life in the Ottoman Empire in the Last Quarter of the Nineteenth Century," in Peter Benedict, ed., Turkey: Geographical and Social Perspectives (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

eliminating old institutions and substituting them wholesale with imported European ones would solve all of the empire's problems.¹⁰

In the sphere of urban policy-making, the introduction of European-style administrative bodies, building types and architectural styles paralleled the socio-political aims of the *Tanzimat* charters. Beyond the adoption of theaters, apartment buildings, banks, hotels, ministries and similar new structures, Ottoman reformers imported design principles on a larger scale, as well as laws and regulations about urban planning. An influential person in this matter was Mustafa Reşid Paşa, one of the authors of the Imperial Rescript of the Rose Pavilion. He had seen and greatly admired Paris, Vienna and London on his diplomatic missions and wished for Istanbul to meet European standards.¹¹ The earliest concrete plans to regularize Istanbul's urban fabric date to between 1835 and 1839, when a number of European experts were hired to implement schemes that would disentangle the street network. These schemes did not come to fruition, and neither did most of the large-scale plans in the following two decades, although several regulations somewhat improved transportation, communications, and the condition of the streets.¹² In order to achieve a city with straight and uniformly wide streets, flanked by rectangular blocks of masonry or brick buildings, as the *Tanzimat* planners were dreaming of it, it would have been necessary to eliminate the existing

¹⁰ On the last point, see Zeynep Çelik, *The Remaking of Istanbul* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 32. For more detailed accounts of the *Tanzimat* period, see Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Suraiya Faroqhi (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Vol. 3: The Later Ottoman Empire, 1603-1839* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Çelik, *Remaking of Istanbul*, p. 49.

¹² These regulations included the *Ebniye Nizamnamesi* (Buildings Regulation) of 1848, the *Sokaklara Dair Nizamnamesi* (Regulation Concerning Streets) of 1858, and the *Turuk ve Ebniye Nizamnamesi* (Streets and Buildings Regulation) of 1863. For more detailed information on these and other regulations, see Çelik, *Remaking of Istanbul*.

urban fabric. But a willful wholesale destruction of a large urban area was too radical even for the most zealous reformers.

What the urban reformers could not bring themselves to destroy, the Hocapaşa Fire of 1865 did within a matter of 32 hours. The devastated area included many important mosques, commercial buildings and major thoroughfares, and the Çemberlitaş Hamamı was right at its center. In the wake of the fire, the *Islahat-ı Turuk Komisyonu* (Commission for Road Improvement) was established on 10 May 1866. Comprised of nine government officials educated in the best *Tanzimat* manner, the commission completed an astonishing amount of work within a short period of time, building sewers and streets and repairing sidewalks until its dissolution in 1869.¹³

A significant portion of the commission's work focused on the Divanyolu which was widened from an average of 3.8 to 19 meters.¹⁴ In order to ensure its appearance as a straight, neat boulevard, the commission interfered with many historic monuments. It demolished the religious school (*medrese*) of the Atik Ali Paşa mosque complex and the Elçi Han, which had housed ambassadors to the Sublime Porte until the eighteenth century; and it removed the wooden huts accumulated around Constantine's column. Furthermore, the commission dismantled, moved and reassembled the mausoleum of Köprülü Mehmed Paşa (erected 1659), so that it now neatly lined the street.

In 1868, the Çemberlitaş Hamamı itself was partially demolished to accommodate the street's new width: The commission cut off the southwest corner of the women's dressing room at a 45-degree angle, including the dome (Fig. 2). The resulting opening was then filled

¹³ In the first year of its existence, the commission built 3,500 *arşın* of sewers and 100,000 *arşın* of streets and repaired 60,000 *arşın* of sidewalks (1 *arşın* equals 68 cm). Mustafa Cezar, *Osmanlı Başkenti İstanbul* (Istanbul: Erol Kerim Aksoy Kültür, Eğitim, Spor ve Sağlık Vakfı, 2002), p. 321.

¹⁴ Çelik, *Remaking of Istanbul*, p. 57.

with a brick wall, and the blind arches and star-shaped windows show that the commission still wanted to preserve a certain ornamental quality to the building. The demolition, which reduced the square women's dressing room to an irregular shape, led to the women's section being closed down in the long run. In a photograph taken in 1890 (Fig. 4), an awning in front of the former women's dressing room indicates that the space had been converted into a shop or other type of commercial establishment. When the art historian Heinrich Glück surveyed the hamam in 1916 or 1917, the women's section had not welcomed bathers for a long time,¹⁵ and only after a major renovation in 1988 did the hamam again open its doors to female customers.¹⁶



Fig. 4: Photograph of the Divanyolu with the sliced Çemberlitaş Hamam, 1890.
Source: *Servet-i Fünun*, no. 13, 6 June 1890.

¹⁵ Heinrich Glück, *Probleme des Wölbungsbaues: Die Bäder Konstantinopels* (Vienna: Halm & Goldmann, 1921), p. 136.

¹⁶ Mehmet N. Haskan, *İstanbul Hamamları* (Istanbul: TTOK, 1995), p. 101.

The act of demolition reflects a shift in the urban planners' administration and perception of the Ottoman built heritage. From now on, hamams acquired a new layer of meaning — in addition to their religious, social, economic, political and medical significance — in that they became a symbol for a traditional Ottoman life-style. As such, hamams were viewed either negatively or positively, depending on the Ottoman beholder's attitude towards modernization and the West.

The concrete result of the reformers' negative attitude towards the Çemberlitaş Hamamı was its demolition. The Commission of Road Improvement strove to create an urban space conforming to the planning principles of Baron Haussman's design for Paris: tree-lined boulevards with sidewalks cutting through the urban fabric and leading the gaze towards grand historic monuments standing in splendid isolation. In Istanbul, the decision as to which historic monuments were worthy of the gaze and deserved preservation and presentation in the grand manner privileged the Classical and Byzantine periods over the Ottoman.

The commission's activities around the Divan Yolu clearly illustrate this preference. The wooden huts around Constantine's column were removed in order to create a triangular plaza that was centered on the ancient monument. From there, the Divan Yolu led directly to the former entrance area of the Byzantine Hippodrome (today's Atmeydanı), passing the Byzantine Empire's zero-mile-marker (*million*), and to the newly created square in front of the Hagia Sophia. If the aim of creating long, straight streets connecting ancient monuments had been less urgent, an angled version of the Divan Yolu could have preserved the Çemberlitaş Hamamı, the Atik Ali Paşa mosque complex and the Köprülü Mehmet Paşa complex as a harmonious ensemble of Ottoman monuments, in its entirety and original location. However, the commission envisioned straight and uniformly wide boulevards as the road to progress. And the Ottoman monuments — including the Çemberlitaş Hamamı, which now symbolized a non-Classical, Islamic heritage — would in the long run stand in its way.

This emphasis on ancient monuments had important ideological underpinnings.¹⁷ The *Tanzimat* reforms attempted to fashion a modern state out of an empire and to bring the Ottomans closer to Western civilization. This approximation also necessitated an appropriate historical narrative that proved that the Ottoman Empire did indeed share the same roots with European civilization. In Europe, historical narratives in the service of emerging nation-states depended on an interpretation of history as a linear cultural development from Ancient Greece to the present day. This supposedly universal interpretation not only appeared in scholarly books, but also in the display and exhibition strategies of European museums. In the great museums of Paris, London, Vienna, and Berlin, visitors could retrace the development from pre-historic to Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and contemporary civilization, as they walked from art object to art object and from gallery to gallery. In this scheme, civilizations outside the West only figured as background against which Europeans could project the image of an inferior Other, for the purpose of self-identification.¹⁸ Moreover, European imperialist domination over these territories and peoples was justified by demonstrating that they fell outside the purportedly universal, humanist narrative that centered on Ancient Greece's heritage.

Ottoman reformers were fully aware of this narrative; if the empire should be part of the West, it also needed to share in the history and cultural heritage that had led Europe to the point where it now was. Thus, in an anachronistic twist the existence of Ancient Greek and Roman as well as Byzantine antiquities on Ottoman soil could demonstrate that the Ottoman Empire was indeed an integral part of modern European culture, bypassing Islamic history. In Wendy Shaw's words,

¹⁷ Many of the arguments about the Ottoman reaction to and partial appropriation of the European historical narrative have been made in: Shaw, Possessor and Possessed.

¹⁸ Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Random House, 1979).

members of the Ottoman elite hoped to become acknowledged as a seminal site for European culture rather than be excluded from the narratives of its supremacy. Moreover, an association with ancient Greece would link the empire with modern science and distance it from the narrative of irrationalism associated with religion, particularly Islam, which had not entered a secular phase, in contemporary European discourse.¹⁹

In the light of the Ottoman elite's aspirations, it is not surprising that Ancient Greek and Byzantine monuments and art objects gained positive symbolic value. Placed in opposition to the Ancient Greek and Byzantine heritage were contemporary Ottoman and Islamic monuments — they were assigned negative value. The Çemberlitaş Hamamı fell victim to this categorization, accounting for its partial demolition, while at the same time Byzantine monuments were incorporated into and glorified within the urban planning schemes.

Yet, the tampering with and deliberate destruction of Ottoman monuments along the Divan Yolu did not go unchallenged, particularly where religious buildings were concerned. The necessary demolitions along the new Divan Yolu were not warmly embraced by the local populace. An anecdote recorded by Osman Nuri Ergin in the proceedings of the Commission for Road Improvement relates one interesting expression of public opinion about the construction work.²⁰ While the commission member Keçecizade Fuad Paşa supervised the demolition of the Köprülü cemetery across from the Çemberlitaş Hamamı, an elderly man addressed him: "Paşa, you are demolishing these mosques, medreses and tombs, but

¹⁹ Shaw, *Possessor and Possessed*, p. 68.

²⁰ Osman Nuri Ergin, *Mecelle-i Umur-ı Belediye* (Istanbul: Büyükşehir Belediyesi Kültür İşleri Daire Başkanlığı Yayınları, 1995).

tomorrow the people will shit onto your grave.” Fuad Paşa retorted: “If the people shit on my grave, their children will come and clean it, collect it, and throw it into the sea.”²¹

Of course, even within the ranks of the Ottoman elite the attitude towards Islamic monuments was neither static nor unisonous, but exhibited changing and divergent views as early as in the nineteenth century. While urban planners demolished hamams in the Ottoman capital, the Ottoman Empire at the same time presented itself at the 1867 World Fair in Paris and the 1873 World Fair in Vienna with pavilions that included baths, as I have mentioned above. The pavilions represented an Ottoman cultural identity in an essentialized summary form and stood for the past cultural heritage that the empire needed to possess, in addition to the Classical heritage, if it wanted to be on par with contemporary Europe. If the appearance of this heritage conformed to the perceptions and expectations of European viewers, it was all the better.

Adopting the tropes of colonialist representation (or, in other words, European stereotypes about them), the Ottomans engaged in what Mary Louise Pratt has called “auto-ethnography.”²² Ottomans depicted their own past and traditions as an ethnographic Other. They did so in order to show that they had re-evaluated and re-defined their own identity according to Western views; that they had adopted European conventions; and that Ottoman civilization had reached the same stage as European civilization. While proving that the Ottoman Empire was part of Europe, the exhibition displays at the same time asserted the empire’s regional difference and uniqueness in the face of a universalizing modernity that

²¹ Ergin, *Mecelle*, vol. 2, p. 955.

²² Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

emanated from Europe and the USA.²³ It is interesting to note here that the Ottoman Empire was the only Islamic country to include a hamam in its exhibits. Maybe this was because the Western popular imagination had already known these building types as “Turkish baths” for several centuries and thus considered hamams an essential and distinctive characteristic of the Ottoman life-style.²⁴ In this sense, the hamam as an emblem of a long-standing Ottoman tradition, respected by locals and foreigners alike, acquired a positive meaning, also for those reformers who looked towards Europe — at least as long as the emblem was dead and under control and could be presented like a taxidermied animal in a museum.

In the reformers’ minds, hamams and their symbolic value must have been a vexing issue: On one hand, hamams represented Ottoman “backwardness,” since the norm among the Europeanized elite was to have a bathroom in one’s residence. Such a view not only disregarded the fact that not everybody could afford to have such a bathroom, but also that European norms of body hygiene were actually much less stringent. On the other hand, hamams were the kind of cultural heritage that was crucial for a nation’s cultural identity and

²³ See Çelik, *Displaying the Orient*, p. 136.

²⁴ Although I have used the term “Turkish Bath” here repeatedly, it is in fact a misnomer. Islamic bathhouses (hamams) can trace their genealogy back to their Romano-Byzantine predecessors. See Nina Cichocki [Ergin], “The Life Story of the Çemberlitaş Hamam: From Bath to Tourist Attraction,” doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2005, pp. 35-61. The synonymous, but erroneous usage of the name Turkish Bath for hamams is to be attributed to foreign travel writers dating back to the sixteenth century, who collapsed ethnic and religious categories (to turn Turk meant to convert to Islam) and popularized the hamam in Europe as something essentially Turkish. Ottomans themselves would not have described the Çemberlitaş Hamamı in such ethnic terms, particularly because the word “Turk” was considered derogatory — meaning provincial, uncivilized, ignorant — until the rise of Turkish nationalism in the nineteenth century. The term Turkish Bath, therefore, is problematic: if used in the travel writers’ sense, it is Orientalist; if used in an ethnic or nationalist sense, it projects a nineteenth-century concept back onto previous centuries. See Nina Ergin, “The Life Story of a Turkish Bathhouse: The Çemberlitaş Hamamı, Istanbul,” unpublished book manuscript, in progress. Because of the context in which this paper was presented, in the framework of the workshop “Imagining the West: Perceptions of the Western Other in Modern and Contemporary Eastern Europe and Turkey” (11 December 2009, Trondheim University), the term still is appropriate here.

gave it a certain cohesiveness and legitimacy. It was a traditional institution — and traditional institutions and ceremonies were of such utmost significance that fledgling European nation-states often had to invent them.²⁵ What complicated the matter further was that bathhouses continued to have great use-value as providers of hygiene and centers of social life. The hamams' new identity as an emblem of Ottoman heritage in the nineteenth century was thus a most conflicted and contradictory one.

The establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 heralded a new age for the inhabitants of the former empire, in spite of the many continuities in everyday life. The Republican reformers — who sometimes behaved like rebellious teenagers towards their parents in declaring all things Ottoman as hopelessly outdated and backward — would often have liked for the hamam to die out and be showcased only in a museum context. Indeed, by 1943 only 86 of the originally 150 hamams of Istanbul were still operating.²⁶ Here, I will briefly examine how the self-image of the Early Turkish Republic as a Western nation-state shaped attitudes towards bathhouses.

Whether Western or not, a nation-state needs a shared cultural heritage to build upon; however, deciding on the content and nature of this heritage often generates much dispute and ambiguous sentiments. A community's relationship to its past, including its material heritage, usually shifts with the establishment of a nation-state, since nation-states generally emerge in opposition to whatever has come before — for instance, an empire, or a colony. The Turkish

²⁵ One example of such an invented tradition meant to give cohesiveness to group identity is the distinct Highland Culture of Scotland, including the tartan-patterned kilt and the bagpipe. The Scottish Highlanders did not form a distinct group before the late seventeenth century, although since the nineteenth century they have claimed that their regional culture was of greater antiquity. Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland," *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 15-41.

²⁶ Ahmet Süheyl Ünver, "Türk Hamamı," *Türk Tarih Kurumu Belleteni* 37 (1973), p. 92.

Republic is no exception, and its relationship to the Ottoman-Islamic past remains laden with tension and ambiguity. In the Early Republican period, those periods in Turkey's past which were safely dead and unthreatening to the new order (that is, the Prehistoric, Classical and Byzantine civilizations) constituted the heritage most useful for the nation's aggrandizement.²⁷ Not surprisingly, Istanbul's Islamic-Ottoman heritage was downplayed, even though it was undeniably seen as an expression of national artistic genius. For example, in the period between 1923 and 1938, a time when the new Republican government was still consolidating itself, the term "Ottoman" rarely appeared in the press when referring to Turkey's architectural heritage. Instead, it was replaced by more neutral phrases, such as "the legacy of our forefathers" and "our ancient monuments."²⁸

The meaning of architectural heritage also shifted due to the power of capitalism which is intimately related to the invention of the nation-state. While some buildings acquired a national, symbolic value, others that fell outside this class of buildings were reduced to their monetary value and became a commodity for sale. As Kopytoff has argued,

in every society there are things that are publicly precluded from being commoditized. [...] This applies to much of what one thinks of as the symbolic inventory of a society: public lands, monuments, state art collections, the paraphernalia of political power, royal residences, chiefly insignia, ritual objects and so on. Power often asserts itself

²⁷ A case in point is the Hagia Sophia, which was closed as a mosque on 8 December 1934 and re-opened as a museum on 1 February 1935. Because it needed national monuments to legitimize Turkey's claim to the status of a modern nation-state, the government chose to emphasize Hagia Sophia's more distant past as ancient church in a museum context, rather than acknowledging its uncomfortably recent past as the largest sultanic mosque of Istanbul.

²⁸ Can Binan, "The Treatment of the Ottoman Architectural Legacy in the Early Republican Press," in Nur Akın, Afife Batur and Selçuk Batur, ed., Seven Centuries of Ottoman Architecture: A Supra-National Heritage (Istanbul: YEM Yayınları, n.d. [2001]), p. 380.

symbolically precisely by insisting on its right to singularize an object, or a set or class of objects.²⁹

The Turkish Republican government, on one hand, reserved the right to own major monuments deemed to express the national artistic genius; on the other hand, it asserted its political power and superiority over the preceding empire. It did so by allowing and sometimes even encouraging the commoditization and/or destruction of monuments that were *not* part of the national symbolic inventory. By turning Ottoman imperial hamams — which once had been singularized monuments and part of the empire’s symbolic inventory — and the land that they stood upon into commodities, the Republican government demonstrated a “thorough” break with the past.

In order to contextualize the notion of a national symbolic inventory in the transformation of the Ottoman Empire into the Turkish Republic, it is necessary to refer to the endowment (*vakıf*) system which in the Ottoman period had provided the administrative framework for the operation of most bathhouses. Hamams had often been built as one of the revenue-generating components of large endowments; the rent income from these and other endowed properties then benefited the empire’s mosque complexes — which in some cases consisted of the mosque, the founder’s mausoleum, schools, theological seminaries, libraries, hospitals, soup kitchens, and the like. The money went towards the salaries of the different employees (from the imams over the hospital’s doctors to the janitors), the students’ stipends, the food distributed from the soup kitchen, the medicine dispensed from the hospital, building repairs, and so on. The ideal form of this *modus operandi*, however, found an end latest in the eighteenth century, when the empire experienced fiscal problems and Sultan Abdülhamid I (r. 1774-89) began to centralize the imperial administration, including the endowment system.

²⁹ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in Arjun Appadurai, ed., The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 73.

The practice of double-rent (*icareteyn*), which had already served as a legal loophole in the sixteenth century with the aim to rent out endowed property for the longer term rather than the customary one-year periods, now became more and more common, because the endowments were short of cash and needed to attract renters through favorable conditions. Double-rent meant that the renter paid a high initial lump sum, or immediate rent (*icare-i mu'accele*), upon taking over the property and then continued to pay a nominal sum, or postponed rent (*icare-i mü'eccele*), once a year year. The rent period increased to 200 or 300 years, meaning that tenancy could be bequeathed on the initial renter's heirs, as long as they continued to pay the nominal rent. This arrangement paved the way for private ownership of formerly endowed property, since with a 1936 law ending the practice of double rent a number of imperial monuments became the private property of the descendants of the long-term renters, rather than reverting to the state.³⁰

As much as by the loss of their administrative framework, hamams were hit particularly hard by the Early Republican nationalist attitude toward Ottoman monuments and the urban policies of the 1950s and 1960s. Already in the 1930s, hamams were destroyed at a rate of three to four per year.³¹ This was due to three different factors: First, as symbols of traditional Muslim life in imperial Istanbul, bathhouses were deemed unsuitable for modern city life. The new Republican discourse of modern science claimed that communal bathhouses were not hygienic — an attitude also widely held today.³² Secondly, as relatively

³⁰ For more detail and sources regarding the transformation of the endowment system and its consequences for the Çemberlitaş Hamamı, see Cichocki [Ergin], "Life Story of the Çemberlitaş Hamam," pp. 209-213.

³¹ Ahmet Süheyl Ünver, "İstanbul Hamamların İstikbalı," *Yeni Türk Mecmuası* 84 (1939), p. 537.

³² About half of the Turkish interviewees whom I questioned during my dissertation research between October 2001 and February 2003 had never visited a hamam; they held this paradoxical attitude and gave it as a reason why they would not want to visit. As follow-up question I asked whether they would swim in a swimming pool, and the answer was always

inconspicuous buildings even in the case of imperial foundations, bathhouses could never attain the same status as the more magnificent mosques codified as national heritage; therefore, they were rarely considered worth preserving. Even with preservation laws in effect, owners and government officials managed to find pretenses under which they could demolish hamams without legal consequences. For example, a bathhouse could be claimed to block the planned route of a new street which from the standpoint of infrastructure was more crucial than an old, “useless” monument. In one case, the Cerrahpaşa Hamamı was destroyed in 1933, under the pretense that the owner owed a tax debt of 500 lira.³³ Or, government officials could declare an already damaged hamam unsalvageable, whether rightfully so or not. Lastly, economic difficulties meant that even for the preservation of major monuments there was little money to spare, let alone for bathhouses.

Republican views on bathhouses were disseminated in a number of Turkish newspapers and magazines. Many articles continued to employ the auto-ethnographic mode already mentioned in the context of the nineteenth-century World Fairs. Displaying their own heritage as exotic, Oriental and a thing of the past according to European ethnographic tropes and methods helped to present the Ottoman Empire as an integral part of European civilization. The empire was dead, and the new nation-state had to demonstrate that it indeed was so. In a most blatant example of auto-ethnographic attitude towards hamams, the historian Ahmet Refik Altınay (1880-1937) wrote an article entitled “Istanbul in the Era of the Latticed Balconies and the Veil: The Hamams of Istanbul,” meant for a popular readership (Fig. 5).³⁴ Altınay presents an odd collection of historical details: the Ottoman travel writer

positive, even though communal soaking in chlorinated water can hardly be more hygienic than washing with running water in a hamam.

³³ Ünver, “İstanbul Hamamların İstikbalı,” p. 538.

³⁴ Ahmet Refik Altınay, “İstanbul Hamamları,” *Akşam Gazetesi* (29 July 1936). Ahmet Refik Altınay in 1919 became professor of history at the Darülfünun, the forerunner of Istanbul

Evliya Çelebi's account of Istanbul's hamams, the inscription of the Çemberlitaş Hamamı, a poem, the transcription of an Ottoman document on the construction of a bath, and so forth. He illustrates the article not with an Ottoman painting, but with a nineteenth-century engraving by the British painter Thomas Allom. The reclining figures in an unidentified bath's dressing room, smoking and enjoying refreshments, remind the viewer of the Orientalist stereotype of the lazy Muslim inclined toward sensual delights. While the title implies that hamams are a thing of the past, of the era when gender segregation still determined the life of Istanbul's women, the pastiche of textual excerpts evokes a travelogue intended to whet the reader's appetite to visit such an exotic place. Altınay does not refer to any functioning hamams in the city; he points towards them as if they were an already dead part of Istanbul's Oriental past, a past conceptualized as an exotic Other.



Fig. 5: Ahmet Refik Altınay's article "İstanbul Hamamları."
Source: Ahmet Refik Altınay, "İstanbul Hamamları," *Akşam Gazetesi* (29 July 1936).

University. He wrote both for a scholarly and popular audience. After the end of World War I and before the proclamation of the Republic, he was one of the leading members of the liberal *Hürriyet ve İtilaf* party (Freedom and Reconciliation Party).

Although authors writing in the auto-ethnographic mode tried to convince their readers that hamams were a thing of the past, at the same time they held great pride in the achievements of “Turkish” civilization and, hence, the Turkish nation. Moreover, hamams could be useful in the context of a new phenomenon emerging with the new affluence of the West after World War II: tourism. Thus, the historian Reşat Ekrem Koçu in a 1954 article addressed Turkish tourism professionals in their association’s bulletin.³⁵ The brief article draws attention to the careless treatment of many valuable architectural masterpieces that had been turned into workshops or warehouses and ends with the plea to enact a law against the demolition and closing down of hamams.

Today in Turkey there still exist somewhat contradictory positions towards hamams, which can be traced back to the nineteenth-century and Early Republican attitudes I have outlined above, even though they slowly seem to change with a more positive re-evaluation of the Ottoman past since the 1980s. Elsewhere I have defined five different types of attitudes towards hamams among Turkish visitors;³⁶ the two types most relevant in this context are the non-visitors who claim that bathhouses are unhygienic (and by implication backward) and “for tourists,” and those visitors who go to the bathhouse with the express aim to connect to an “authentic” Ottoman past. The latter may be called “internal tourists,” as the hamam visit is not a routine activity of daily life for them, but a consciously undertaken excursion into the past “as a foreign country.”³⁷ The destination of such an excursion can be either a historic hamam, such as the Çemberlitaş Hamamı, or a “Disneyfied” version, such as the many hotel

³⁵ Reşat Ekrem Koçu, “Çarşı Hamamlarımız,” *TTOK Bellekten* 155 (1954), p. 12.

³⁶ Nina Cichocki [Ergin], “Continuity and Change in Turkish Bathing Culture in Istanbul: The Life Story of the Çemberlitaş Hamam,” *Turkish Studies* 6 (2005), p. 108.

³⁷ Cf. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

and spa hamams that have been constructed in Istanbul and other major tourist destination cities over the last two or so decades.

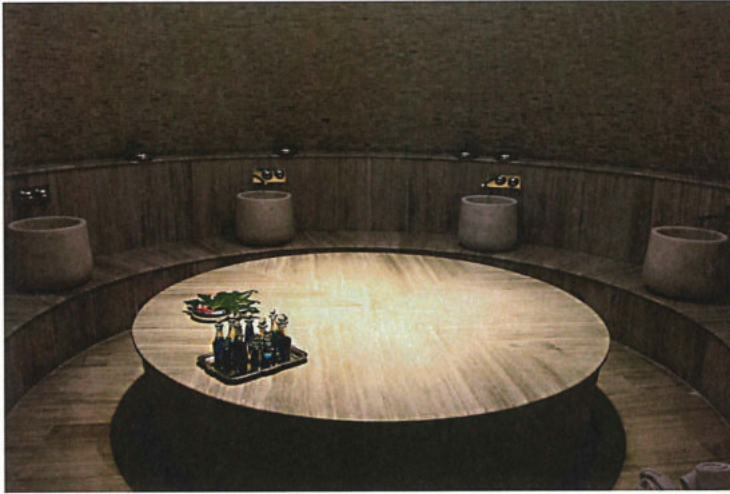


Fig. 6: Interior of the hamam at the Sanda Day Spa.
Source: Courtesy of Sanda Day Spa.

An example of the latter is the hamam in the Sanda Day Spa in the up-scale İstinye Park shopping mall, which opened in February of 2008 (Fig. 6). The facilities there include a small domed bathing chamber with a raised marble slab in the center, marble basins along the walls and a smaller, secondary room offering more privacy. While the hamam is reserved for women on Fridays and for men on Sundays, during the remainder of the week both men and women bathe at the same time. The spa's customers may choose from the among the following services: the traditional treatment, the so-called "Sanda Pasha," the "Sanda Delight," or "Design your own Ritual," ranging in price from 70 to 135 TL. For groups, there is the "Hamam Escape" (530 TL for eight persons for one hour of private use), and for brides and their friends and family the "Runaway Bride" (2,700 TL for twelve persons for three hours of private use). After washing, the hamam visitor can stay in the resting area offering couches and a jacuzzi; this part of the spa serves approximately the same function as the

traditional hamam's *soğukluk*. Clearly, hotel and spa hamams such as this are closely linked to the wellness phenomenon that has emerged in the West. This phenomenon has found an enthusiastic response among upper-class Turks who consider themselves Western, who do not want to bathe in historical hamams for various reasons, and who can afford to frequent these types of establishments.³⁸

In this essay, I hope to have shown that not only texts, but also architectural heritage and even such mundane everyday practices as washing in a hamam could and did play a significant role in the discursive formation of identity. In this case, the Ottomans responded to the West by *not* allowing themselves to become entirely passive objects of observation and analysis, by *not* merely receiving and accepting imposed Western images and formulas. Rather, through their participation in the world's fairs, their urban planning schemes, and their sometimes positive, sometimes negative attitude towards the hamam, depending on the context, the Ottomans (and later citizens of the Turkish Republic) actively shaped the interaction. They did so by looking at themselves in an auto-ethnographic manner and then inscribing themselves into their image of the West.

Paradoxically, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Western norms of body hygiene were much less stringent than in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, because of the Islamic requirements of canonical purification before prayer. Thus, the hamams guaranteed a standard of hygiene not equaled in the West. This observation had already been made by the sixteenth-century travel writer Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq.³⁹ In a 1938 newspaper article, Dr.

³⁸ The prices cited here date to October 2009. At that time, Turkey's official minimum wage was 496,53 TL after taxes.

³⁹ "They hate uncleanness of the body as though it were a crime, and regard it as worse than impurity of the soul; hence their frequent ablutions." Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, Turkish Letters, transl. Edward Forster (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), pp. 119-120.

E. Şerif Egeli recalled how much the German doctors who helped establish the Gülhane hospital in Istanbul thirty years earlier had been impressed with the cleanliness of the poor Istanbulites they treated there, in comparison to the German standards of the time.⁴⁰ Between the 1930s and 1950s, Ahmet Süheyl Ünver — a medical doctor, amateur historian and prolific writer — repeatedly lamented the decline of hygiene standards in the Early Republican period due to the closing down of hamams, although he does not point to a direct relationship between Westernization and the disappearance of bathhouses.⁴¹



Fig. 7: Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, The Turkish Bath, 1863, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Source: Public Domain.

⁴⁰ Anonymous, “Hamamlarımız en sıhhi yıkanma vasıtasıdır,” Kurum Gazetesi (10 February 1938).

⁴¹ See, for example, Ahmet Süheyl Ünver, “İstanbul Hamamlarının İstikbali,” Yeni Türk Mecmuası 84 (1939), pp. 537-538; “İstanbul Hamamları, Hali ve İstikbali,” Yeni İstanbul (29 July 1972), p. 2.

Neither did the West come away untouched and unimpressed from the interaction with the Ottomans in terms of hamams. The hamam has often been the subject of a Western eroticized Orientalist fantasy, from the sixteenth-century travel writer Nicholas de Nicholay's report of homosexual relations between female bathers, to Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's many versions of bathing nudes (Fig. 7).⁴² However, beginning in the nineteenth century, enterprising individuals such as David Urquhart and Christopher Oscanyan built Turkish baths in London, Paris, New York and several other Western cities, with the utilitarian and philanthropic aim to offer adequate washing facilities especially to the working class. Especially Urquhart had a radical political agenda in introducing the hamam to Britain, in that he hoped to rectify the social rift between classes in Victorian society in terms of body hygiene (and by implication also morals). The story of the hamam in the West has been told elsewhere in great detail;⁴³ moreover, it falls outside the scope of this study. But so much should be said here: The Western appropriation of this Ottoman institution can be seen as a display of imperial prowess and competition between different cities as to which was the most cosmopolitan one. Similarly, today well-equipped wellness centers in Europe and the US like to boast Turkish baths. Thus, the story of the hamam between East and West rejects a straightforward Orientalist interpretation. Although the groundwork for much of this

⁴² "... sometimes they do go 10 or 12 of them together, & sometimes more in a company aswell Turks as Grecians, & do familiarly wash one another, wherby it cometh to passé that amongst the women of Leuan, ther is very great amity proceeding only through the frequentation & resort to bathes: yea & sometimes become to fervently in loue the one of the other as if it were with men, in such sort that perceiuing some maiden or woman of excellent beauty they will not cease vntil they haue found means to bath with them, & to handle & gope them euery where at their pleasures, so ful they are of luxuriousness & feminine wantonness; euen as in times past wer the Tribades, of the number wherof was Sapho the Lesbian which transferred the loue wherewith she pursued a 100 women or maidens vpon her only friend Phaon." Nicholas Nicholay, *The Nauigations, Peregrinations and Voyages, Made into Turkie ...* (Amsterdam, London: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, Da Capo Press, 1968), p. 60a.

⁴³ For a comprehensive discussion of the history of the hamam in the West, see Nebahat Avcioğlu, "The Turkish Bath in the West," in Nina Ergin, ed., *Bathing Culture of Anatolian Civilizations: Architecture, History and Imagination* (Louvain: Peeters, forthcoming).

interaction was laid in the nineteenth century (and could be traced back even further), in terms of the hamam, East and West have continued to re-imagine themselves and each other.

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