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**Genesis and Epicenter of Renaissance:
Florence versus Istanbul**

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Genesis and Epicenter of Renaissance: Florence versus Istanbul

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Abstract

The genesis of the Renaissance is primarily credited to the rediscovery of both the writings and the art and architecture of the ancient Greeks, which the Romans emulated wholeheartedly. Most scholars posit Florence as its epicenter and the completion of the Brunelleschi's dome of the *Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore* in 1436 as its genesis. This paper first inquires what made Florence the center of the Renaissance instead of Istanbul, where Sinan built the *Süleymaniye Mosque*, considered to be one of his masterpieces, the main depository of Greek civilization. This comparative inquiry is contextualized on the Golden Ages of the two cities in the early years of Renaissance, first in Florence and subsequently in Istanbul.

As *millecinquecento* dawned, the *zeitgeist* of Medieval Europe was experiencing a pivotal shift, changing its focus from the heavens and the divinity to nature and mortals. The paradigm shifts, the new worldview initiated and nurtured in all spheres of life eventually ushered in the Renaissance. Driven by humanism, individualism, and secularism, peoples' ambitions in life changed from a struggle to secure a place in heaven in afterlife to advancing their position on earth. These "isms" brought forth a desire for a better way of life, which in turn, and above all else, sparked creativity and invention. But what actually caused this extraordinary epiphany? Was there a similar shifting in peoples' perspective in Istanbul?

The Renaissance began around the mid-15th century and its initial evolution lasted well into the 1600s. One is tempted to ask and the paper attempts to answer, if it is a mere coincidence that the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks took place within this time period and if this was a critical event in explaining why the Renaissance was initiated in the lands of the Catholic Church where Florence was an eminent city.

During the Renaissance, artists, philosophers, and architects were highly influenced by Classical Greek and Roman predecessors. This was due largely in part by the influx of Classical Greek and Roman literature, a lot of which came from Constantinople after its demise to the Muslim Turks. Constantinople, being the cultural center that it was, contained a plethora of these writings, and in an attempt to protect them from the Turks, people migrating west from Constantinople brought with them many of the documents that had been kept there. However, there is little evidence that the Ottoman scholars were aware of these resources except the immovable pieces, neither is there any evidence of sharing of the ideas that emerged out of these. Thus it is an enigma to witness the similarities between the cultures of the east and the west in general and in the architecture of Florentian Brunelleschi and Mimar Sinan of Istanbul. The paper identifies these similarities and speculates the factors that may have yielded them.

Keywords: Renaissance, Brunelleschi, Sinan, Florence, Istanbul.

The Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence and the great mosque Suleymaniye in Istanbul are comparable as examples of *zeitgeist* and the embodiments of ideals that permeated into the 15th and the 16th centuries in the West and the East of the world. The two monuments can be considered as the genesis of the heightened cultural and scientific growth of their times. If there is a link between two distinct cultures one ought to find certain similarities in their outcomes, and there are in the Il Duomo and the Suleymaniye. However, the two architectural examples here cannot be perceived as singular forces. The causes must be viewed as the expressive acts that embodied them in the two cities golden ages. A golden age is not the conglomeration of affluence, intellect, and talent only – but their compounding into a collective ideology propelling that society into a passionate prosperity. These examples do not have the capacity to holistically explain *how* a golden age has come to be; yet, they do compel a sufficient answer as to *why* it existed. Through a juxtaposition of Il Duomo and Suleymaniye the distinguishing characteristics of their architecture illuminate the commonalities inherent in, and by the expression through these two built masterpieces, attest to their respective golden ages.

The *renascimento* of Florence and throughout Italy shaped its regions and influenced far beyond its borders by the multifaceted masters of the time. “The Renaissance blend of realism and nobility was soon exported from Florence to other parts of Italy.”¹

These physical accomplishments were parts to a whole that shifted the worldview of this area. An oversimplification perhaps, but it was this shift in conceptions driven by actions that proves the Florentine “golden age”. And these accomplishments were soon recognized, celebrated, and memorialized in writing -records unlike that of any other Italians before.² The Florentines rediscovered classical civilization and naturalism but the ideals manifested, or were necessarily rewritten, to embrace the humanist ideal -conceived as “the human body as autonomous, powered by a self-generated mobility.”³ The Basilica of Florence is a vivid example of the rapid translation of the rediscovery of the classical and its extrapolation into the new century. It is an expression of the collective unity empowered by the recognized accomplishments of the individuals responsible -not constricted to the merit of the patron.

In relatively the same period of time the separation between the ecclesiastical and the secular were occurring in the Islamic empire of the Ottomans. With the defeat of the Christian Byzantine Empire, Turkish Islam become “an image of a world conquering empire, establishing the dominion of Islam over all peoples and fulfilling the Islamic 'providence' or 'manifest destiny' to rule the world.”⁴ The ideals enlightened by the Ottoman golden age are not emblematic of Florence and Italy. Yet it is again a blend of intellect and

¹Hall, 70

²Ibid.

³Hall 73

⁴Lapidus, 16

practical reasoning separated from the pure dominion of Islamic clergy. “The state was not a direct expression of Islam but a secular institution whose duty it was to uphold Islam.¹” To understand this, a shift can be seen in the typology of the mosque complex. Zawiya-mosques were conceived by colonizer sheikhs, state officials, and sultans, which accommodated social, religious, and educational services. Hostels were incorporated into these early Ottoman complexes signifying the importance of the spiritual and social role of the sheikh. However, with the gradual centralization of the Ottoman state this mosque typology was abandoned along with the social function of Sufi sheikhs.² The power of the orthodox Islamic state is expressed in the great mosque Suleymaniye by detaching the hostel. Served by the surrounding, yet separated, madrasas, Sufism is subordinated and the unity of the state is clearly realized by the geometric centralization of the mosque plan.³ Educational services are allocated to the madrasas and so intellectual thought can be seen as provided and controlled by the state. The function of the mosque also becomes a function of the political nature of the Suleymaniye complex: “Suleymaniye fulfilled the function of an imperial mosque where Suleyman the Magnificent and his impressive entourage prayed each Friday.”⁴ “As a pious and charitable foundation carrying the sultan's name, the Suleymaniye symbolized the power and charity of the patrimonial Ottoman state” - not simply of piety but of the sultan's glory.⁵

Understanding the expressions brought forth by these two grand monuments of history clearly delineates the progression of two entirely different societies throughout their golden ages. The histories of both lands give an intriguing narrative to the prosperity of two societies interlocked in history. With the fall of Constantinople in 1453 halted the flow of prosperity to the Byzantine capital and away from Italy.

With Rome struggling to regain prowess, other regions of Italy flourished with renewed trade and wealth contained within the country. The Ottoman Empire now occupied the gateway between Europe and Asia and became a united whole. The circumstances respective to either are quite similar. Their propagation merely differs, understandably, by the stark differences in cultural and religious histories.

However, by examining such differences with historical continuity is a sharp contrast that highlights the sociopolitical, ideological, and architectonic influences of architecture. Illustrated by the church and the mosque is not surprising although the implications of either case is a shift in society away from the ecclesiastical -a governance of man to elevate those respective religious services. These comparable relationships do not define the causality of “golden ages” but glimpses at the effects these parts of the world are presently embodied through history and culture.

¹Ibid.

²Necipoglu-Kafadar, 96.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid. 98.

⁵Ibid. 99.

Suleymaniye in plan is standard and intermingles political and religious functions. The simple geometry of the rectangular plan containing the inner courtyard with fountain, mosque, and mausoleums are separated from the madrasas by a surrounding exterior garden encompassed by a low stone wall. The separation of the madrasas from the religious spaces was a clear separation of church and state. Yet, the Ottoman Empire is still an Islamic empire -that the government supports the religious function, but is not controlled by it. This is made evident by the strategic location of the complex itself – the physical and visual domination of the city from the imperial third hill.¹ “From the outer courtyard the mosque's congregation can watch the world.”² This refers to the open East side of the complex giving an expansive view of the Golden Horn and its activities below. This is synonymous with the power of a Christian city which civic function often centers around the looming facade of its grandest church. Religious patronage was paramount for much of these achievements in architecture and the visual arts. The cupola exemplifies the humanist shift and the glory of the individual and not the church (a parallel to the glory of the sultan and not to piety). The church itself cannot be neglected for importance but only alluded to when speaking of the Renaissance. The technical domination of the cupola can be seen metaphorically for the logic and reason of science surmounting religion.

“Perhaps [for a golden age to come about] it needs rapid accumulation of wealth, and a resultant breakdown of traditional values, to produce an explosion of creative power and a fundamental reexamination of the position of the individuals in society.”³ Florence was fiercely led not by the aristocracy or the clergy but by the individuals: craftsmen, artists, writers, poets, inventors blended into the great polymaths that ruled by example.

Brunelleschi was the sole proponent of constructing the great dome without a supporting armature. The claim was controversial and came with much resistance but it was the most economic and efficient solution put forth. “The motive was severely practical; it saved timber, which was in extremely short supply.”⁴ The scientific masterpiece was a physical testament to the glory of the Florentine genius – not to crown the church for the glory of god. Thrust above the red terracotta roofs of the city the people of Florence were confronted with the new age. Its stature dictated to the entire urban fabric. This was for the prosperity of the city and the people – not the church. Religion was integral but the progress of the city functioned in a different light. Although this progression was not new that in the 13th century religion still shaped the culture but the Church was no longer the main patron.⁵

Although the arts of Florence did not culminate around architecture, its role expresses a society and culture more succinctly. Albeit a masterpiece attributed to one man's execution may be so but its energy and symbol of a city

¹Necipoglu-Kafadar, 106.

²Ibid. 107.

³Hall, 71.

⁴Ibid. 77.

⁵Ibid. 72.

goes beyond, ironically, an autonomous ideal. The fuel of the Florentines cannot be summed up by one entity; but the nature of architecture as habitat, art, science, symbol, or concept can perhaps sum up the ideals for the artists (visual, musical, and literary), the people, culture, and society of a city. The same should be said for the mosque of Sinan. Of how time and place weave together to sprout the ingredients of what is heralded as a golden age is a chaotic formula. Yet, the concocted effects are orderly. The expression of which enlightens and brings new thought towards its surroundings. This unplanned event should not be imitated but analyzed and expanded upon to reap the benefits of the exemplary of humankind -and look for the next golden age.

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