



A Review of “Kiliseye Çevrilen Türk Eserleri: The Turkish Monuments Converted into Churches” by Mehmet Emin Yılmaz

Mehmet Emin Yılmaz. *Kiliseye Çevrilen Türk Eserleri: The Turkish Monuments Converted into Churches* (İstanbul: İstanbul Fetih Cemiyeti, 2020, ISBN: 978-95-7618-70-6. XXVIII, 569 P, bibliography, index)*

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*Yılmaz published an extended bilingual (Turkish-English) 2nd edition of the book during the publication process of this article: Mehmet Emin Yılmaz, *Kiliseye Çevrilen Eserler 1-2-3 = The Turkish Monuments Converted into Churches 1-2-3*, Ankara: YTB Yayınları, 2023.

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Submitted/Başvuru: 08.05.2024

Accepted/Kabul: 03.07.2024

Citation/Atıf:

Koç, Haşim. "Review of *Kiliseye Çevrilen Türk Eserleri: The Turkish Monuments Converted into Churches*." *Tarih Dergisi - Turkish Journal of History*, 83 (2024): 193-199.
<https://doi.org/10.26650/iutd.20241480810>

ABSTRACT

Covering vast areas, the Ottoman Empire left important imprints on the territories that had been ruling for centuries. These imprints may be best followed through the architectural pieces that have served for centuries for religious, social, cultural, or educational purposes. Some of those monuments are still surviving, but the majority of them were destroyed after the Ottoman rule ended and new authorities emerged. Also, some of this bulk has been converted into buildings that are more compatible with the needs of the newly ruling society. The master architect Yılmaz authored a very interesting and comprehensive book on Turkish architectural pieces that have been converted into churches in 19 countries: Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Algeria, Armenia, Southern Cyprus, Georgia, Croatia, Montenegro, Crimea, Kosovo, Hungary, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Greece. Apart from listing the re-shaped monuments, Yılmaz accomplished to visit them all and took photos to contribute to detailed literature and archival research. He also conducted a deep analysis of changes, transformations, and repair operations to shed light on the perceptions of restoration by country. He also compared these perceptions according to the principles of architectural restoration.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, cultural heritage, conversation, forgetting strategy, architectural history



Yılmaz' work might be easily considered a continuation and completion of Ekrem Hakkı Ayverdi's monumental four-volume masterpiece of *Ottoman Monuments in Europe (Avrupa'da Osmanlı Mimari Eserleri)*, the last of which was published in 1982. The late Prof. Semavi Eyice, an expert on art history, to whom the author dedicated his work had written a very promoting presentation in which he also mentioned the complementation function of Yılmaz' work to Ayverdi's. Nevertheless, Eyice died in May 2018 and was not able to see the publication of the book due to the long-term effort invested by the author on his serious work to publish a detailed and refined work in a relatively "less-touched" field of the history of architecture. The author mentions this in acknowledgement part "we studied most of the artefacts mentioned in the book and which are still standing during visits. I was able to complete my work, which I started in 2010 writing about Kara Mosque, a work by Mimar (Architect) Sinan in Sofia that has been transformed into a church." (p. xviii) This statement clearly indicates that the author spent 10 years working on the conversion and function shifts of Ottoman monuments until the publication of his piece in 2020.

The book has the following parts: abbreviations, Place Names list (to compare the names of places during the Turkish period and today), Semavi Eyice's presentation, acknowledgement, introduction, plans of mosque and church, place names in a typical Orthodox church and mosque, the catalogue containing monuments according to the country, unknown monuments, and an evaluation, which has an appendix comprising the dates of all the monuments' conversion into churches in the book. Also, the author prepared tables in which he classified Turkish monuments that were converted into churches according to country and building type. Thus, he found 334 monuments, i.e., mosques, fountains, baths, kitchens, khans, towers, madrasas, minarets, prayer places, watch towers, dervish lodges, and tombs that had been transformed or destroyed after the end of Ottoman rule in the corresponding countries. The book goes on with tables of the churches which were constructed upon the walls or ruins of mosques; of the mosques transformed into Catholic churches by the Austrians whose cupolas were reshaped or hidden under the roof of churches; of the monuments which apses were added to; of the monuments where altars were kept; of the minarets converted into bell towers; of the bell towers built upon the minarets' bases; and of the samples which possesses minarets and bell towers together, respectively. In addition to these mentioned tables, Yılmaz also classified converted churches into the following categories in different tables: samples of which architectural attributes have been converted entirely making them unidentifiable; samples of which unfunctional fake lanterns were contributed to change the view of cupola; and those which have converted or baptised bell towers with crosses upon them. A conclusion, a bibliography, a list of photos used from the internet, and an index followed the tables.

In the introductory part, Yılmaz tries to explain methodology he followed in compiling his book. In addition, he discussed the existing literature he consulted during his study. As

he emphasises in introduction, he has been able to visit the converted buildings that are still standing. He supported his own research on-site with Ayverdi's *magnum opus* and Evliya Çelebi's famous *Book of Travels (Seyahatnâme)*, essentially, along with other publications in Turkish and other languages. To determine the original conditions of the monuments, old photographs, post cards, and maps were accessed, if available. Thus, the master architect could identify the "changes and repairs done on the buildings", which he indicates in red shading, and he also makes recommendations for the reconstruction of buildings in different drawings. (p. xxi)

Yılmaz is discussing the existing literature on a country basis, scrutinising publications in Turkish and local languages. Bulgarian, old-Yugoslavian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, and Crimean and Greek monuments are analysed in the literature and Ottoman archival documents, including the foundation charters, foundation ledgers, accounting records, and official correspondence relevant to each work. Thus, the author tries to suggest a method for further studies.

When we come to the part of the catalogue of monuments, we find an alphabetical order by country name and an identity card invented by the author that welcomes the reader in the first instance. It consists of categories such as location, built by, building date, conversion date, modern name, and archive record, if available. After that, a short text is readable, followed by the reference information. Either a modern photo or an old photo, in many cases both with relief, plans, and restitution of monuments can be found for each building. The author also puts enormous effort into the inclusion of archival materials, and in some parts, we see also the pictures of original archival documents on the monument. Thus, the author tries to bring old knowledge together with current knowledge and merge them to find out which alterations monuments have undertaken during their transformation or destruction processes. In this format, we can track of historical and architectural knowledge relevant to all buildings before and after conversion. Thus, each entry in the book can be considered not only as a symbol of change, but also with its features that are kept to protect, symbolising the continuity of new elements with old patterns.

While telling the story of each monument, the author also outlines all the main turning points. In some cases, monuments were used as churches for a certain period, and after that, they were re-converted into their original functions. The book also highlights their stories. And in rare cases, if the author has been able to identify, the remains of a mosque that was converted into a church and after using it for some period as a church, which was deconstructed, also have a place in the book, which was identified from historical sources and whose remains can be visited in Bosnian city, Gabela today.

The historical and archival sources and current situation of some monuments in the book allows the author to leave more spaces with divergent types of texts or visual materials. For

instance, for the Akyazılı Sultan Dervish Lodge in Balchik, Bulgaria, which is currently used as St. Atanas; the author used his own photos from his on-site visit in 2019; the foundation charter's photo, the restitution attempt, and the plan and profile of the lodge. (pp. 13-17)

Scrolling through the pages of the book enables us to discover monuments that are not existing today. A good example is Sultan's Factory Mosque in Sliven, Bulgaria; built next to the fabric factory in 1844-45, which was set up in order to produce fabric for the Ottoman army. (p. 28) Currently, the factory is being used as a museum.

We can multiply the samples and numbers for each country, but as a general remark, the author's fine contribution to the literature might be emphasised as his insistence on listing even the non-existent monuments that were built originally by the Turks, converted and used for a certain period of time as Christian temples, and then destroyed for any reason. Second, his references to Ayverdi for the good deeds of the Hungarian government and conservation staff for certain pieces from the Ottoman Empire, stating that "even there are no more Muslims living in the area, the attitude of Hungarian authorities to transform these monuments into the original ones has to be respected" (p. 203) are carrying traces from the author's intention to ask authorities in other countries: "Was there not any other possibility to keep the Ottoman monuments close to their original format?" Also, the remaining number of 1.000 architectural pieces in the whole Balkans out of approximately estimated 16.000 monuments makes this questioning right and legitimate if we think from the perspective of global cultural and civilizational heritage aspects.

As the author mentions in the evaluation section of the book, the total number of converted churches from different types of Turkish architectural pieces comprises 334. He lists 277 mosques and masjids, 36 dervish lodges and tombs, 6 watch towers, 6 minarets, 2 madrasas, 2 prayer areas, 1 public kitchen, 1 tower, 1 bath, 1 inn, and 1 fountain. (p. 523) At the same place, the author says that with more detailed field research in the villages of Bulgaria and Greece, the number of converted monuments will definitely increase. The monuments are accordingly classified as follows:

- the ones still used as church
- those that were used as church for a certain period in the past but are currently used under different functions
- the ones that are used today in their original function but have been converted into the Church for a certain period in the past
- those that were converted into church in the past but not existing today
- the ones converted into church in the past but nowadays are in ruins.

- the churches built on the remaining walls of a ruined mosque
- churches built on the remains of mosques and tombs after their total destruction
- Minarets and watch towers converted into bell towers (p. 523).

The oldest monument analysed in this book is the mosque in Sudak castle in Crimea, which was built by Seljukids in 1222 and converted into church in 1373 by the Genoese. Lastly, Hıdır Baba Dervish Lodge in Taşlık's village in Komitini, Greece, was converted into a church in 2008.

Conversion processes take place mostly after wars, conquests, and migration. A good example is the Sultan Ahmet Mosque in Pylos, Greece. (pp. 478-482) Built by the Ottomans at the beginning of the 17th century, it was converted into a Catholic church during the Venetian period of 1686-1715. Reconverted into a mosque after Turks took Pylos back from the Venetians in 1715, and finally, in 1770, Russians invaded the city and converted it into a Russian Orthodox church. When the Russians left the city to the Greeks, it became a Greek Orthodox church. (pp. 523-524) Similar back and forth processes occurred in Beograd and its environment within 18th century. The places conquered by the Austrians from the Ottomans faced enormous transformation of the monuments: a large majority of the monuments were destroyed, and those that remained were essentially transformed so that they did not possess any traces from the Ottoman times. This is mostly valid for the territories of Hungary, Croatia, and Serbia.

Russian invasions in the 19th century caused the conversion of mosques into churches in conquered territories. In the regions where there is no Moslem population left, monuments continued to be used as Churches, but where Moslem populations continued to live, some converted monuments were given back to Moslems so that they transformed them into their original forms and functions. There are some examples of this in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, in Greece, many standing monuments were converted into Churches, a phenomenon that we see more often after the population exchange in 1923 due to the Lausanne Treaty. The Turkish-Moslem population left Greece, and the Greek-Orthodox population settled in their villages from Anatolia. The mosques in those villages were converted into Churches after the settlement of Greek populations. An interesting issue in which the author argues that the conversion of dervish lodges into churches should be thoroughly analysed in a separate study, according to Yılmaz. (p. 525)

In the conversions, the new authorities primarily sought to delete the most visible symbols, minarets. In some cases, they were transformed into church bell towers. In rare cases, minarets and bell towers were seen together. The conversion process was carried out not only to load a new function into the existing buildings but also to delete the traces of

symbols of old functions from the buildings and allow them to gain new symbols in harmony with the new functions. The removal of inscriptions and epigraphs from the original building and the addition of new inscriptions indicating the date of conversion are good examples of this symbolic change.

The author proposes important thoughts about the changes and transformations in architectural pieces due to the change of power and authority. First, any historical buildings in Balkan regions that are used either religiously or mundanely are automatically considered a symbol of religion. There are many samples like fountains or conference halls that carry one element of religious symbolism. Second, the Ottomans converted the biggest church of the city into a mosque after the conquest and undertook the first conquest prayer in the largest temple. To use a church as a mosque, some elements were added; however, the basic features of the monuments were not touched or manipulated. Thus, the converted churches were able to maintain their main and original features in a well-cared and stable condition. In order to test this, we can check the famous churches in Istanbul, such as Hagia Sophia, which is still surviving due to the maintenance invested by the Ottomans on the building.

This respectful and tolerated attitude of Ottomans towards the architecture and the beliefs in the churches that were to be converted into mosques can be seen in Buda's St. Mathias Church, or in Wind tower of Athens. Another good example is the Kasımiye mosque in Thessaloniki, where before conversion it was St. The Demetrios Church had frescos from the Byzantine times that were well kept by the Ottomans, who covered them with drapery. This fact was also uttered by Italian architect Hermes Balducci, who studied Turkish monuments on the island of Rhodes during the Italian invasion of the island approximately 1931-32. He also analysed the converted Latin churches that were used as mosques by the Ottomans: "Generally, Turks did not carry out a comprehensive alteration in the converted churches. They sufficed by adding a minaret, building to the necessary direction an Islamic altar (*mihrab*), and covering the paintings on the walls with thick plaster. A typical example of such a change is the Santa Maria del Castello Church." (p. 547, my translation from Turkish into English). This church was converted into a mosque in 1523. This mosque's minaret was destroyed during the Italian period in 1940-41 and used now as a museum. (p. 548)

Apart from the necessary additions, the Turks change nothing with the existing monuments. In particular, if there is a solid building, Turks never dared to destroy a church to build a mosque on its place; rather, they chose to convert it into a mosque. Nevertheless, the opposite approach was observed in the territories after the Ottoman retreat. Of the 83 mosques in Sofia, only three are still there. One is converted into a museum, and the other is converted into a church. Only one mosque is open to Muslims to pray in. In Belgrade, there used to be 217 mosques and masjids, but only one still survives. From the 72 mosques in Buda, two windows and a part of the *mihrab* now survive. No trace remains of the 46 mosques

and masjids in Osijek, Croatia. For all these reasons, it is comforting that the monuments analysed in this book have been converted into churches and are still standing today, when we consider the conscious extermination of Turkish works in the Ottoman geography.

Yılmaz ends up his piece by wishing that those monuments that are still standing should be considered by global society not only as Turkish pieces but also as the common heritage of humanity. Therefore, they should be kept alive in harmony with their original shapes and transmitted to the next generations as pearls of human civilisation and of common humanitarian heritage.

