Written of the mid-eighteenth-century Nuruosmaniye Mosque by authors contemporary with its construction, these statements may surprise the modern observer (fig. 1). So conditioned are we to locate the heyday of Ottoman architecture in the sixteenth century—and above all in the works of Sinan (d. 1588)—that it is difficult to credit that a later building could have excited such praise. If the first statement might be dismissed as mere hyperbole on the part of an Ottoman official involved in the mosque’s construction, the second—penned by a Frenchman with no connection to the project—cannot be so easily disregarded.

Indeed, the widespread acclaim that greeted the Nuruosmaniye bespeaks a momentous shift in the history of Ottoman architecture, one embedded in, and itself constitutive of, far-reaching sociopolitical developments. The modern focus on the period before 1600—what has come to be known as the Ottoman classical age—has obscured the decisive role of the eighteenth century in (re)shaping the Ottoman Empire’s image, especially as embodied in its capital, Istanbul. Abandoned by the court

It is fair and accurate to say that this beautiful building and gladdening house of worship—all of solid marble and so charming—has no like or counterpart not only in the capital [Istanbul], but indeed in [all] the lands of Islam.

—AHMED EFENDI, CONSTRUCTION ACCOUNTANT OF THE NURUOSMANIYE MOSQUE

The mosque that Sultan Mahamout had built is, without doubt, the most beautiful that one can see in the Empire, after one has seen St. Sophia.

—JEAN-CLAUDE FLACHAT, FRENCH MERCHANT AND RESIDENT OF ISTANBUL

Fig. 1. Nuruosmaniye Mosque, Istanbul, 1748–55.
during the preceding decades in favor of the empire’s second city, Edirne, Istanbul was restored as the seat of government in 1703, after which it became the site of lavish architectural patronage intended to reinscribe the sultans’ presence. This campaign culminated in two distinct but related outcomes that were both loudly announced with the erection of the Nuruosmaniye between 1748 and 1755. Not only did the building reestablish the dormant tradition of the sultanic (imperial) mosque complex, with other examples soon to come, but it was also the first truly monumental example of a brand-new architectural style heavily informed by European models: the so-called Turkish or Ottoman Baroque. Denigrated by later commentators as decadent and foreign, the style was in its own time a remarkable success, dominating the architectural output of Istanbul between the 1740s and early 1800s and earning the appreciation of locals and foreigners alike.

This twofold process—the revival of the sultanic mosque and the rise of a widely admired new building manner—is the central concern of the present study, which examines the resultant architecture in terms that confront long-held unease about the late Ottoman Empire’s artistic and political standing, particularly in relation to Western Europe. Bernard Lewis summed up a common attitude when he said of the Nuruosmaniye, “When a foreign influence appears in something as central to a culture as an imperial foundation and a cathedral-mosque, there is clearly some faltering of cultural self-confidence.” While rejecting the charge of degeneracy, newer interpretations have in their own way continued to discuss the Ottoman Baroque as a predominantly decorative approach lacking the gravitas and import of the earlier classical manner. I wish to turn Lewis’s assumption on its head and propose that it is precisely because the new style was employed—and, moreover, applauded—in the most esteemed contexts that it cannot be understood as an index of insecurity, nor as a loosening of architectural decorum. Any failure to ascribe purpose to the style is, in short, irreconcilable with its essential role in the imperial mosques, buildings that demand to be taken seriously as expressions of state ideology.

The potential of these monuments for rethinking the Ottoman Baroque and its wider implications has remained strangely unexplored. Though scholars have long acknowledged that the new style coincided with a resurgence of imperial religious foundations, few have considered the two phenomena in tandem, and the more recent revisionist literature in particular has largely overlooked the mosques in its discussion of the period’s architectural changes. Such neglect is curious given the Ottomans’ own privileging of the sultanic mosque as the building category par excellence, and all the more so in light of the type’s conspicuous eighteenth-century comeback. The Nuruosmaniye was followed in swift succession by the mosques of Ayazma (1758–61), Laleli (1760–64), Beylerbeyi (1777–78), and Selimiye (1801–5), not to mention reconstructed versions of the mosques of Fatih (1767–71) and Eyüp Sultan (1798–1800). These buildings had a profound and transformative effect on the landscape of Istanbul, spreading the new style along the city’s thoroughfares and waterways (fig. 2). Their importance lies not only in their status and number, but also in their value as uniquely revealing case studies. To talk of an imperial mosque really means to talk of a whole complex that includes such additional elements as a school, library, public kitchen, royal pavilion,
Fig. 2. Map showing the principal mosques built and reconstructed in Istanbul ca. 1740–1800, with other significant sites and locations labeled: (1) Nuruosmaniye Mosque, 1748–55; (2) Ayazma Mosque, 1758–61; (3) Laleli Mosque, 1760–64; (4) Fatih Mosque, 1767–71; (5) Beylerbeyi Mosque, 1777–78; (6) Eyüp Sultan Mosque, 1798–1800; (7) Selimiye Mosque, 1801–5. Adapted from Antoine Ignace Melling, *Voyage pittoresque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore* (Paris, Strasbourg, and London: Treuttel et Würtz, 1819). Engraving on paper.
tomb, and fountain. By bringing together these various kinds of buildings ranging from the utilitarian to the palatial, royal mosque complexes functioned as microcosms of what was happening more generally in the architecture of the capital. They therefore provide us with some of the richest and fullest information available about the visual culture to which they belong, and it is in treating the mosques as emblematic of the Ottoman Baroque at large that I hope to give a more convincing account of the style’s impetus and consequences.

It is my belief that the Ottoman Baroque—far from being a lightweight ornamental mode born of cultural atrophy or artistic whim—was a sophisticated and conscious strategy to reaffirm the Ottoman state’s position in an age when older aesthetic idioms had lost their relevance. Centered on the capital, the message was designed to speak both to the empire’s own subjects and to the surrounding world, and it is this comprehensiveness of aim that explains the architecture’s characteristic incorporation of Westernizing elements. If older scholarship has grossly exaggerated the Ottoman Baroque’s relationship to European models, recent revisionist arguments have misleadingly underplayed it, ignoring what is plain to see with the eye. The style’s patent adaptation of Western forms has become something of an elephant in the room, when it should be regarded as one of the clearest reasons for the Ottoman Baroque’s success and appeal. Always creatively recast according to local concerns, such borrowings allowed patrons and artists to refashion Istanbul as a modern city boasting a globally resonant yet recognizably Ottoman mode of architecture. The project was a cornerstone of a much larger rebranding effort whereby the Ottomans—responding to new political realities at a time of heightened East-West contact—sought both to consolidate their power on the world stage and to put themselves on a more diplomatic footing with their European neighbors. This international perspective will be key to the argument that I shall here develop.

OTTOMAN BAROQUE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Until relatively recently, scholars and connoisseurs have been none too favorable in their view of eighteenth-century Ottoman art and architecture. The tone of the discourse was established as early as 1873 by the Uṣūl-i Mi‘ārī-i ‘Osmānī (Fundamentals of Ottoman Architecture) or L’architecture ottomane, an illustrated treatise with texts in Turkish, French, and German prepared by the Ottoman government for the Vienna World Exposition. Both a history and a defense of Ottoman architecture, the Uṣūl tells a by-now familiar tale in which the tradition reached its peak during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, particularly under Sinan, whose manner was perpetuated, though not bettered, in the decades that followed his death. With the mid-seventeenth century came stagnation, and then, during the reign of Ahmed III (r. 1703–30), a short-lived reflowering. Notwithstanding this positive start, the eighteenth century soon took an unhappy turn, for “engineers and hydraulic architects, having been called from France for various works, brought in their wake other artists, sculptors, painters, and decorators who soon altered the stylistic purity of Ottoman architecture to the point of complete debasement, as we see most strikingly from the examples of the Nuruosmaniye and Laleli Mosques.” This bastardized and alien style, the text continues, was to last...
into the 1860s, when a revival of the “classical” manner began under Abdülaziz (r. 1861–76), the sultan during whose reign the Uṣūl was written. Ironically, the main author of the treatise, Victor Marie de Launay, was himself a French expatriate working for the Ottoman government, and the buildings he hails as exemplars of the incipient “renaissance” are eclectic works that have little to do with traditional models.6

Despite its contradictions, the Uṣūl proved highly influential among those who would found the field of Ottoman art history. The prolific Celâl Esad Arseven (d. 1971), son to a grand vizier and a politician in his own right, closely paraphrased the Uṣūl’s description of the eighteenth century in his first book, an architectural history of Istanbul published in French in 1909. Here—perhaps for the first time—the malign foreign influence is explicitly labeled “Baroque.”7 Another proponent of the rise-and-fall view, and likewise a grand vizier’s son and politician, was Halil Ethem Eldem (d. 1938), an important figure in early Turkish museums who wrote on various art-related topics. Eldem, whose father, İbrahim Edhem Pasha (d. 1893), had supervised the preparation of the Uṣūl, helped to carry the treatise’s characterizations into the nationalistic literature of the young Turkish Republic, declaring, “Our style of architecture took on a defective form and fell into the hands of foreigners.”8

Such a stance is representative of a broader and still popular narrative of Ottoman decline, which holds that the empire entered into a long and ultimately fatal degeneration after its sixteenth-century zenith.9 This well-worn account—widespread in both Western and Turkish historiography—needs little recapitulation, but it bears remembering that the eighteenth century, give or take a few decades, serves as the tale’s extended turning point.10 Events may be summarized as follows. After the failed second siege of Vienna in 1683, the Ottomans suffered a spate of territorial losses at the hands of a Habsburg-led coalition, eventually admitting defeat with the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699. The ensuing century was marked by a series of attempts at reviving the empire’s fortunes through European-inspired military reforms, but a combination of ineptitude, reactionary opposition, and Russian expansionism stopped these efforts from bearing fruit. In 1807, the progressive Selim III (r. 1789–1807, d. 1808) was toppled, signaling the end of the Ottoman eighteenth century. Although Selim’s successors would follow his reformist example, the Ottomans’ fate was already sealed, and the Sick Man of Europe, as the empire came to be dubbed, would die in 1922. The artistic dimension of this process was as pitiable as the rest: in their visual culture just as in their military and politics, the Ottomans succumbed to European hegemony and tried, with poor results, to ape the ways of the West.

Over the course of the twentieth century, several art-historical approaches arose to challenge this dominant interpretation. The first was simply to treat the material as worthy of study to begin with. Arseven, who continued to publish (mainly in Turkish) until his death in 1971, came to look less dismissively on the eighteenth century in his later writings.11 While he always considered the buildings of this period to be frivolously ornamental when compared with classical Ottoman works, he stopped viewing them merely as copies of Western models and recognized their distinctively local quality, such that by the 1950s, he was arguing for their acceptance as part of “our national history of Turkish art.”12 This change in thinking came about in the volatile political...
climate of the young Turkish Republic, whose explicitly Westernizing policies in many ways undermined the traditionalist basis of the previously leveled criticisms.  

As early as 1928, when he published the first edition of his famous survey of Turkish art, Arseven laid down what was to become the standard art-historical periodization of the eighteenth century. He followed the Ḫūṣūl in distinguishing the reign of Ahmed III from what came after it, though he was now able to give the period a name: the “Tulip Era” (Lâle Devri), a term whose significance I discuss in chapter 1. This was a time when, according to Arseven, Ottoman architects rejuvenated their art by looking to Seljuk and Persian sources before finally turning to European models. Following the “Tulip Era,” and as a logical outgrowth of it, came the Turkish Baroque (Türk Baroku), which was to last until the beginning of the nineteenth century, and which saw the proliferation of forms derived from Western Baroque models. As Arseven writes, “this Baroque did not exactly resemble its European counterpart. Turkish artists included details specific to a Turkish taste, and a Turkish Baroque took shape.”

Though foundational, Arseven’s ideas on the so-called Turkish Baroque would not become better known until they were synthesized and given monographic treatment by the architectural historian Doğan Kuban, whose short 1954 book, Türk Barok Mimarisi Hakkında bir Deneme (A Study on Turkish Baroque Architecture), first popularized this subfield. Kurban’s book is essentially a survey of buildings produced in Istanbul between about 1725 and 1825, and its stated philosophy, elaborating Arseven’s, is that “most of [these works] must be given an honorable place in our art history.” For Kuban, the decline of the empire is an accepted fact, but while he sees the Turkish Baroque as part of a change in attitude that was forced on the Ottomans by their weakened position vis-à-vis Europe, he is largely positive in his judgment of the result:

Despite the continuing decline of the empire’s political and economic situation, and the lack of favorable conditions for the emergence of great artists, eighteenth-century Turkish artists were able to absorb outside influences and recast them in a completely original mold. They produced attractive works using the possibilities they were given, conforming to the spirit of the time.

Kuban thus explains the Turkish Baroque as a tradition that was hampered by rather than symptomatic of the empire’s deterioration, and he further vindicates it with reference to parallel phenomena in the West, arguing that “if eighteenth-century Turkish architecture did not bring about works to be compared with those of earlier periods, . . . it can be said of Europe that after the Renaissance, no works equal to those of the Renaissance were produced.”

Kuban’s spirited, if apologetic, defense of the Ottoman Baroque marked an important shift in the scholarship, and notwithstanding its patriotic overtones, his study is among the first to emphasize the extensive role played by Greek and Armenian artists in this variety of “Turkish” architecture. While doing much to redeem the material, however, Kuban also solidified the notion—often perpetuated by later scholars—that the Ottoman Baroque was really a Rococo style, involving surface decoration rather than any substantive architectural innovations:
Leaving aside the resemblance of motifs, this decoration . . . differs from the [Western] Baroque in the weakness of its plasticity. In the Baroque, decorative motifs merge with the architecture to form a whole. But in our case, the decorative motifs, even at their most plastic, are additions to the architecture . . . . We do, on the other hand, possess the same kind of surface decoration that is essential to the Rococo.19

Elements of this characterization may well be true, but, as I shall later demonstrate, the tendency to view the Ottoman Baroque as something that remained on the buildings’ surface has led to an analogously superficial understanding of how the style, ornamental or not, might have been read by those who observed it.

Whatever its shortcomings, Kuban’s monograph secured the legitimacy of eighteenth-century Ottoman architecture as a field of inquiry and was followed by a number of studies—some more sympathetic to the material than others—covering the subject, particularly from the 1970s onward.20 It was in this decade that the topic first gained prominence in English-language scholarship, as exemplified by Godfrey Goodwin’s classic History of Ottoman Architecture, where, in a chapter devoted to the Baroque, he defends the Nuruosmaniye as “a work of considerable interest . . . by an architect with inventive and assimilative powers.”21 Goodwin stops short, however, of really challenging the established art-historical schema, and he makes little attempt to hide his preference for the earlier monuments. Typical for its time, such ambivalence continues to reverberate today in the more traditionally framed literature.22

Perhaps the only old-school scholar to have developed an entirely comfortable relationship with the material is Kuban himself, whose monumental survey of Ottoman architecture—published in Turkish in 2007 and in English in 2010—returns to the issues raised in his much earlier study.23 The author’s once qualified appreciation for the later buildings has here turned into all-out praise for what he now deems a “great legacy” whose monuments are examples of an “imported, eclectic architecture” even as they are “in fact truly indigenous.” According to this assessment, late Ottoman architecture becomes a thriving sign of (Westernizing) modernity, one that “arose in line with the desire for innovation manifested by the ruling classes” and proceeded “quite independently of the political background, even in the most difficult and unfavourable conditions.”24 Already anticipated by his 1954 study, this argument sees the architecture emerge triumphant while leaving the broader decline paradigm firmly in place, and Kuban is forced to artificially sever the buildings from their political context in order to maintain his position. Moreover, the Ottoman Baroque remains a largely superficial and self-referential entity, speaking of the resilience of artistic expression but having no real import beyond its aesthetic merit.

Only in the work of a newer generation of scholars has serious headway been made in advancing other, more persuasive ways of situating later Ottoman architecture. Paralleling the endeavors of political and social historians,25 art and cultural historians have discarded the old decline paradigm and reassessed the late Ottoman Empire as a still robust and adaptable entity, one whose visual culture, while different from its classical counterpart, was no less creative or significant. The resultant perspectives go well beyond the rehabilitative efforts of the earlier scholarship, which sought
to improve the material's reputation without proposing alternative conceptual frameworks divested of assumptions of Ottoman decay and Westernization. With this change in thinking, the term “Ottoman Baroque” has increasingly fallen out of favor.

Of the new breed of scholars, Tülay Artan has played a pioneering role in shifting the terms of the debate. Her writings are especially significant for demonstrating how the eighteenth-century Ottoman court was able to reassert its presence in Istanbul by erecting a string of new palaces along the city’s waterways. This endeavor, Artan asserts, turned the Bosphorus into a new ceremonial axis for the sultans and their circle to display themselves before the populace, who emulated the elite by likewise building in and retreating to the shoreline suburbs. The growing participation of nonroyals in the cultural and architectural life of the city only encouraged the sultans in their patronage, which aimed “to remind the people of the enduring nature and rich magnificence of the Ottoman dynasty.” Artan thus explains the architectural changes of the eighteenth century with reference mainly to the empire's internal dynamics, and she also widens the scope of inquiry to consider the role of nonelite Ottomans in this altered climate.

These same ideas have been taken up by perhaps the most influential proponent of the revisionist approach, Shirine Hamadeh, whose key work, published in 2008, is tellingly titled The City's Pleasures. Hamadeh holds that the eighteenth century ushered in a new attitude of what she terms décloisonnement, “opening-up,” in the architectural culture of the Ottoman capital. First, the concept describes an opening up of patronage, whereby the court’s earlier predominance in this regard came under increasing challenge as a broader spectrum of society acquired the means to commission buildings and determine tastes. Second, décloisonnement denotes an opening up in the realm of style, with Ottoman architects and patrons becoming increasingly receptive to forms drawn from outside sources, including, but not limited to, the European Baroque. This openness to new motifs was due, Hamadeh argues, to a growing emphasis on artistic novelty and visual spectacle, which marked a shift away from the more sober and imperially led stylistic norms that had characterized earlier classical tastes. Bridging these two types of décloisonnement was a new aesthetic sensibility that came to redefine Istanbul, rendering the built environment “a perpetual source of sensory pleasures.” Under these changed conditions, the city became a locus of exteriorized activity, with a proliferation of public spaces in which growing numbers of middle-class Ottomans could be seen out and about picnicking and promenading, all against the backdrop of a new and diversified architecture.

In short, Hamadeh’s eighteenth-century Istanbul emerges as a vibrant, revitalized locale whose architecture, far from being in decline, bespeaks the continuing ability of the Ottoman Empire to reformulate its visual culture on its own terms. Central to Hamadeh’s argument is her insistence that the Ottomans were not beholden to European influence, and that the new kind of architecture was more eclectic than it was Westernizing. She points to the fact that while Ottoman commentaries, together with inscriptions on the buildings themselves, often refer to the architecture’s stylistic novelty, they do so without mentioning Western models. Moreover, the contemporary fashions in Europe for chinoiserie and turquerie show that the West was not immune from making its own cross-cultural borrowings.
Hamadeh’s seminal work has greatly advanced our understanding of later Ottoman visual culture, countering many long-held prejudices and offering rewarding alternative viewpoints. But even in this new framework, the architecture risks being seen as a lighthearted departure from tradition—pleasurable, less hierarchical, and without the semiotic charge of earlier classical buildings. The criterion of Westernization, meanwhile, is rightly questioned without being adequately accounted for, as the blanket ascription of eclecticism to the whole period ignores the dramatic stylistic realignment of the 1740s. A significant step in addressing some of these issues would be to turn to the very buildings that have been least touched upon by corrective efforts: the imperial mosques.

OTTOMAN BAROQUE RECLAIMED

While deeply indebted to recent scholarly analyses, my own reconsideration of eighteenth-century Ottoman architecture will argue for a new interpretative approach that problematizes certain revisionist trends. The admirable campaign to debunk old misconceptions has taken on a defensive and sometimes obscurantist cast, with “decline” becoming what Cemal Kafadar has dubbed “‘the d-word,’ shunned simply because it seems the incorrect thing to say rather than as a well thought-out critical perspective.” The same is true of the terms “Westernization” and “Europeanization,” which are likewise bugbears inherited from earlier assessments. It is obvious enough that the decline paradigm is an untenable way of discussing an empire whose size and importance remained considerable into the twentieth century, and I have already indicated my aim to treat the mosques as the products of a still-vital culture rather than of listlessly received influence. Nevertheless, we should not shy away from accepting that the period after the late seventeenth century witnessed various Ottoman attempts to rejuvenate the empire, and that many of these were modeled on institutions and concepts originating in Western Europe. The contemporaneous adoption of European artistic motifs cannot be unrelated to this shift, notwithstanding scholarly discomfort with the notion.

How, then, might we address these issues without sidestepping them or returning to older perspectives? The first task is to dissociate Western-inspired borrowings from the baggage carried by the idea of “Westernization”: that is, such borrowings need not have been—and indeed were not—motivated by a pursuit of Westernization per se. In the case of political and military reforms, the Ottomans looked to Europe with a pragmatic and resourceful eye, importing models only insofar as they served, and could be modified to suit, the empire’s own traditions and needs. Nor should an openness to foreign ideas be understood as an admission of impotence and hence a diagnostic of degeneracy. To be sure, Ottoman commentators had spoken of the empire’s being in decline since as early as the last decades of the sixteenth century, but this anxiety, as Kafadar has discussed, was to some extent a conventional discourse. That the Ottomans continued to develop policies to bolster the state shows that they were far from truly believing that their days were numbered. Not all of these measures bore fruit in the long term, and it is largely because of the nineteenth-century image of the empire
as Europe’s “Sick Man” that the Ottomans’ receptiveness to foreign expertise has come
to be viewed so much more negatively than that of the Russians, whose own parallel
attempts at reform produced more favorable military results.34 What is important,
however, is that the teleological understanding of Ottoman “Westernization” as a
marker of defeatist self-doubt ignores the deliberate, adaptive, and versatile nature of
the process as it actually unfolded.

Developments in architecture confirm the point, for though facilitated by the
same conditions of cross-cultural dialogue as the reforms, these had their own pace
and purpose. Before the nineteenth century, European-derived forms were far more
prevalent in the architectural sphere than in the political, or indeed than in numerous
other categories of visual and material culture. Changes to costume, for example,
would not be introduced until the 1820s, long after the Ottoman Baroque had already
reconstituted the cityscape.35 Such differences of timing and implementation should
cautions us against equating these shifts with a totalizing foreign-oriented overhaul, as
too should their outcomes. The dress reform may have put Ottoman gentlemen in
European-style trousers and frockcoats, but it also introduced the fez, a headdress as
distinctly Ottoman as the turban had been. As we shall see, the Ottoman Baroque dem-
onstrated the same independent approach to its foreign models, proving that Western-
ization as an ethos was neither the intention nor the association of the buildings, which
were readily accepted by their native observers.

If Westernization is an ill-suited label for the phenomenon at hand, the concepts
of transculturation and hybridity might suggest themselves as more appropriate ways
to think about the Ottomans’ embrace of the Baroque.36 Finbarr Barry Flood, in his
groundbreaking work on premodern Hindu-Muslim artistic interactions, has em-
ployed both terms, together with the analogy of translation, to describe the visual
edceticism typical of medieval contact zones, where “intrusive forms and styles often functioned as ‘powerful symbolizations’ conferring cultural and political capital on
those associated with them.”37 Yet, as Flood’s use of the word “intrusive” indicates,
hybridity and transculturation can imply conditions of encounter that are not so ap-
plicable to the centuries-old relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the West.
Moreover, both concepts are heavily associated with postcolonial discourses that,
while revisionist in aim, often assume an unequal balance of power in which the
seemingly weaker (non-Western) party finds ways to reassert itself against the seem-
ingly stronger. Flood himself can resist this characterization, but in the context of the
later Middle East, the nomenclature of postcolonialism is bound to evoke Edward
Said’s theory of Orientalism, which identifies the discursive strategies used by the
West to subjugate the Muslim Other.38 True, hybridity and transculturation compli-
cate Said’s binarism, but they do so by accepting its basic underpinnings. Whatever
their more general merits, such theories are at odds with the material under consid-
eration here, particularly when we remember that the Ottoman Empire was itself a
colonizing power until its fall.

Rather than view East and West as two separate entities—a model in which one
half is apt to influence, imitate, or react against the other—I shall argue that the archi-
tectural transformation of eighteenth-century Istanbul came about precisely because
the Ottomans saw themselves, and were in turn seen, as part of a broadly shared Euro-
pean landscape (fig. 3). Westernization thus becomes a moot (or at least mitigated) criterion, and though I employ the terms “Westernizing” and “Europeanizing,” I do so sparingly and in a strictly formal (as opposed to ideological) sense. It would, of course, be absurd to pretend that Western Christendom and the Ottoman Empire had no sense of the very real differences between their respective domains. Belief in the existence of a (Christian) West and a (Muslim) East was shared by both sides, fueled by angry words as well as bouts of warfare, and the scholarship—my own included—has largely re-
tained this terminological distinction. But when we scratch beneath the surface of the expected and often hackneyed condemnations that abound in the sources, we find a wealth of shared practices and concerns—rooted in a common pan-European experience—that allowed for a high degree of dialogue, mutual intelligibility, and even sympathy across the supposed East-West divide. And if we consider that Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire were each in themselves highly variegated political and cultural spheres—spheres that even overlapped in the form of Christian-ruled Ottoman vassal states—the notion of two abutting monoliths becomes still less tena-
ble. The continuities that bound East and West together were especially manifest at the time of the Ottoman Baroque, when the traditional rhetoric of Muslim-Christian en-
mity gave way to more complicated modes of engagement that emphasized the Otto-
mans’ belonging to Europe. Even Said recognizes the eighteenth century as a fluid milieu not yet mired in the hegemonic reductionism of subsequent years.

This takes us from the limiting context of East-West alterity to the more fruitful realm of global modernity. Quite when the so-called modern period began, and how it should be conceptualized and subdivided, remain matters of scholarly dispute. Equally problematic is the notion of the “global,” a designation now so widely invoked across academic disciplines that it has taken on the quality of a trite catchword, whether used to describe phenomena themselves or our framing of them. The term is especially open to criticism when employed as a temporal qualifier, for was there ever a time in which, to quote Flood, “people knew their place”? But if transregional movements and inter-
actions are as old as recorded history itself, there can be little doubt that the post-
medieval world saw a notable increase in their range and scope. (Early) modernity was both an outcome of and a catalyst for the multiplied and diversified modes of travel, trade, and even conflict that brought the world’s geographies into unprecedented con-
tact with one another. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam discusses, this augmented contact allowed different Asian and European societies to develop shared cultural forms that, while locally suited, were meaningful across vast spaces. Subrahmanyam’s concept of “connected histories” explores the mechanisms that made such “unifying features” possible, and does so without falling into the trap of postulating an amorphous zeit-
geist. Though his interest lies mainly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Subrahmanyam’s approach is no less pertinent to the eighteenth, a period in which existing global ties were consolidated by burgeoning cultures of consumerism and diplo-
macy. Attending to these connected histories results in a very different picture of eighteenth-century modernity from that traditionally construed in terms of Eurocen-
tric Enlightenment. It is through this lens that I shall consider the Ottoman Empire as...
Fig. 3. Ottoman map of Europe from the start of the nineteenth century, with the Ottoman Empire’s European territories shown in green toward the bottom right. From Cedid atlas tercümesi (Istanbul: Tab' hane-i Hümayun, 1218/1803–4), translated by Resmi Mustafa Agha from an edition of William Faden’s General Atlas; the model for this map was originally published in London, 1791. Colored engraving on paper.
an integral player, rather than a passive bystander, in the changed and changing world of the eighteenth century.46

One of the most characteristic features of the modernity of this period was a pronounced concern for self-display, itself related to and spurred by greater social mobility.47 The Ottoman dimensions of this trait have been commendably analyzed by scholars like Artan and Hamadeh, but insufficient attention has been paid to the importance of the imperial mosques in this regard. The recent tendency to concentrate on smaller-scale and secular structures such as fountains and pavilions has created a misleadingly democratized impression of eighteenth-century Ottoman patronage, contributing to a more general narrative of Ottoman decentralization and reduced sultanic authority in this period. But just as the central state responded to the growing autonomy of provincial notables in ways that largely maintained their loyalty, traditional hierarchies in the visual realm were renegotiated rather than overturned.47 Even if they faced greater competition from lesser patrons—and perhaps in part because they did—the sultans assiduously defended their position as the empire’s chief builders and arbiters of taste. The revival of the imperial mosques is strong evidence to this effect, compelling us to consider how these buildings secured their patrons’ place in the increasingly open field of architectural activity. This in turn means approaching the period’s new style as a purposeful and carefully crafted idiom whose audiences—foreign as well as local—understood it in rather more semantically loaded terms than much of the scholarship has considered.

By focusing here on the mosques, I realize that I am to some extent perpetuating the long-standing bias in the study of Ottoman art toward imperially sponsored works located in the capital. My chief justification for doing so is that alternative avenues of inquiry can tell us only so much while the more obvious material has yet to be sufficiently dealt with. This is all the more so given that the refashioning of Istanbul into a modern imperial capital was one of the most eagerly and comprehensively pursued endeavors of the eighteenth-century Ottoman state, even in times of war. Indeed, the sultans themselves were deeply invested in the project, encouraged by their princely education to take an active interest in the arts. Writing in the reign of Selim III, the famous Ottoman-Armenian author and diplomat Ignatius Mouradgea d’Ohsson (d. 1807) noted that each of the eighteenth-century sultans excelled at a particular art, from calligraphy and goldsmithery to carpentry and muslin-painting.48 There is, then, good reason to attribute a significant role to these rulers in determining architectural change. At the same time, it must be noted that by referring to any particular sultan, I am referring also to those members of his circle—his mother, consorts, courtiers, and viziers—who with him formed the sultanate as an institution. The propensity of the sources to describe what must have been collectively shaped projects as the personal achievements of the sovereign has forced me to retain this shorthand in my own discussion of the monuments.

This brings me to the question of the available sources. One of the reasons that the field has become such a hermeneutic free-for-all is that the Ottomans themselves have left us with no clear account of how and why they came to adopt a new style of building. Such lack of written explanation is consistent with a more general scarcity in
the Ottoman tradition of aesthetic and architectural texts, quite in contrast to the abundance of European treatises of this kind. Nonetheless, there is no shortage of relevant Ottoman documents about the mosques, touching on everything from their physical construction to the ceremonies by which they were inaugurated. These sources—which include foundation deeds (waqfiyyas), payrolls, official and unofficial chronicles, and protocol registers—in many cases discuss and vaunt the mosques’ architectural qualities, as too do inscriptions on the monuments themselves. Though their references to the architecture are often couched in highly conventional terms, a close and comparative reading of these texts can bring out the more specific aesthetic commentaries they offer, providing us with an appreciable, if sometimes opaque, sense of how the buildings and their novel style were received and discussed.

Alongside these more obvious sources, we are fortunate to possess a number of rûznâmes, journals kept at both the courtly and noncourtly levels that document notable occurrences in the day-to-day life of Istanbul, including the sultans’ movements through the city. The significance of these journals to the study of architecture has yet to be fully recognized, even though they contain invaluable information regarding the various events—groundbreaking ceremonies, sultanic visits, inaugurations—that surrounded the buildings. As I shall demonstrate, such events should be considered on a par with the architecture itself in any discussion of the monuments, especially given the increasing emphasis in this period on sultanic visibility and spectacle. That the ruzname as a genre came into its own in the eighteenth century is proof enough of the amplified importance of the sultans’ public appearances.49

In addition to the Ottoman documents, I shall make unapologetic use of contemporaneous Western sources, despite the recent trend to disparage such material as unreliable and prejudiced in its discussion of the empire.50 European authors were no less obliged than their Ottoman counterparts to conform to certain literary norms, often parroting well-worn criticisms of the “Turks” and their culture, but these same sources also offer a good deal of information and insight, much of it complemented by the Ottoman documents. They show, moreover, that foreign observers were interested in and impressed by the city’s eighteenth-century transformation, with the mosques receiving much attention in their accounts. Particularly useful is the more direct way in which these authors address the issue of architectural style, perhaps echoing the Ottomans’ own unwritten discourses. While travelogues constitute the bulk of the relevant European writings, I also utilize diplomatic records such as journals and ambassadorial dispatches, which art historians have largely neglected. Written by well-informed outsiders, these documents greatly enrich our understanding of how Istanbul’s sizable foreign community was implicated in the Ottoman court’s practices of display.

Bridging the Eastern and Western sources are the works of European-educated Ottoman Armenians, who offer the fascinating perspective of cultural insiders usually writing for a foreign readership. Their descriptions of eighteenth-century Istanbul occupy a prominent place in this book. Another kind of document with strong cross-cultural resonances are the numerous European architectural books, manuals, and prints that were collected by the Ottoman elite in the eighteenth century and are still to be found in the Topkapı Palace Museum Library.15 These materials, many of which
bear Turkish annotations, are among the most significant sources we have on the architectural climate of eighteenth-century Istanbul, providing a tangible record of the Ottomans’ deep investment in understanding the visual traditions of the world beyond their empire.

My key document, however, is the architecture itself, and my approach throughout this book is to contemplate the buildings as logical and legible works from which we might infer motives, decisions, and outlooks that may never have made it to the written page. This close “reading” of the monuments has convinced me that the appropriate framework for discussing them remains, in spite of everything, the Baroque, though qualified as Ottoman rather than Turkish. While I am not the only scholar who continues to see utility in the concept of the Ottoman Baroque, it must be admitted that I am going against the revisionist grain by maintaining the term, which many have eschewed as being Eurocentric and unrelated to Ottoman discourses.52 Nasser Rabbat, distilling a widely shared concern, has adduced the Ottoman Baroque as an egregious instance of a much bigger methodological problem of “categorising Islamic architecture after the Western stylistic sequence,” which “has subjected the development of Islamic architecture to the rhythm of another architectural tradition.” The result, Nasser argues, is “that some attributes of Islamic architecture have been glossed over when they were named after formally, or conceptually, comparable characteristics of Western architecture, of which Baroque Ottoman is the most conspicuous, even though the similarity was mostly skin deep and historically unsubstantiated.”53 Even earlier scholars who used the term willingly did so in an almost tongue-in-cheek fashion to describe a style that they believed had merely the veneer of being Baroque. Repeating some of the sentiments of Arseven and Kuban, Aptullah Kuran thus asserts that

eighteenth century Ottoman architecture is basically a continuation of the well-established sixteenth-century classical architecture with overtones of mannerism on the one hand and Europe-inspired features on the other. The baroque in Europe emerged as a result of scientific discoveries. That it took root especially in the Catholic [sic] shows a relationship with the Counter Reformation. . . . Not being a part of these developments, the Ottoman world simply borrowed the forms of the baroque or the rococo without appreciating the philosophy behind those forms.54

Goodwin puts it more succinctly with his statement that “the uncompromisingly anti-baroque square form of the mosque which was dictated by the ordinances of religion could never be resolved.”55 Such assessments cast the architecture as doubly inauthentic, no longer purely Ottoman, but neither capable of becoming truly Baroque.

Quite apart from its problematization in the Ottoman context, the notion of the Baroque has come under attack also in its original home of Western art history.56 Helen Hills, in her introduction to a 2011 volume of essays interrogating this very issue, characterizes the Baroque as “the grit in the oyster of art history,” castigated in recent years “because it had no contemporary usage in the period to which it was subsequently applied.”57 And yet in the absence of any better alternative, art historians—Hills among them—continue to employ the Baroque as a helpful, if imperfect, way of addressing a
series of connected visual traditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This more circumspect usage not only rejects the negative connotations of decadence and bizarreness that the rubric once carried, but also moves beyond limiting criteria that define the Baroque in relation to any specific philosophy (the Counter-Reformation, for example) or geometrical precept (elongated forms over regular ones). After all, where would such a definition leave a monument like St. Paul’s Cathedral (1675–1711) in London, an Anglican church whose domes are uniformly circular in plan?

A more convincing and demonstrable commonality between the architectural products of the Baroque is their utilization of related repertoires of forms adapted from the all’antica vocabulary of the Renaissance. These repertoires might encompass anything from stately Corinthian colonnades to busy Rococo interiors; what they share is a bolder, more dramatic, and less canonical approach than we find in either the Classicism of the Renaissance or the more strictly codified Neoclassicism of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (Throughout this book, “Classical” and its derivatives will be capitalized when referring to the legacy of Greco-Roman antiquity, whereas lowercase “classical” will be used when referring to the traditions associated with the Ottoman Empire’s own fifteenth- and sixteenth-century “golden age.”) There is, to be sure, nothing new about defining the Baroque as a flexible yet coherent stylistic category that enlivened its Classical source material. It was in 1915 that Heinrich Wölfflin (d. 1945), developing ideas he had propounded decades earlier, famously contrasted the ordered “clearness” of the Renaissance with the open-ended “unclearness” of the Baroque, which he regarded not as a debasement of Classicism, but as an inevitable desire to break free of its restrictions. But while Wölfflin’s portrayal of the Baroque—one of the earliest not to condemn the style—contains many astute observations, it is rooted in his belief that aesthetic change is an end unto itself, the manifestation of a recurrent and unending impulse whereby all classicisms must produce their own baroques. Leaving aside the more general issues one might take with this cyclical view of art history, the Baroque of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries cannot be divorced from the circumstances in which it operated. This was no spontaneous scratching of a human itch—an antidote to the boredom with Classicism—but a multiglossic stylistic language of cognate expressions, a language that took shape at a particular moment in time and gained currency because it both fulfilled and furthered the goals of those who used it. It flourished, above all, because it was meaningful in its (early) modern context, providing a manifold apparatus by which to connote magnificence and power at a time when the increased movement of people, objects, and ideas gave new impetus to competitive and cosmopolitan shows of visual splendor.

Such an understanding of the Baroque also takes into account one of its most characteristic qualities, and that is its unprecedented worldwide extent. From Latin America to East Asia, the Baroque found favor in a multitude of regions where it took on a range of idiosyncratic but connected guises, becoming what has been described as “an international system of communication.” Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, who has done much to draw our attention to non-Western varieties of the Baroque, sees the global perspective as a way of redeeming a term that he admits makes him uncomfortable:
While in some sense the use of the term “baroque” in such cases may seem anachronistic, even ahistorical, its application may nevertheless still have merit, because it helps us to treat the monuments in which such forms appear not as derivative or provincial works, but as a parallel, comparable phenomena [sic] to other works so designated in Europe.

It is along similar lines that I should like to reclaim the notion of an Ottoman Baroque. If the Baroque still has validity as a term for the multiple and dispersed traditions that currently fall under its purview, I believe it is apt also for the architecture of eighteenth-century Istanbul, a city physically and culturally part of the European continent. One of the reasons I am drawn to the Baroque as a concept is precisely its troubled history. Even in its “pure” Western form, the style continued long after Wölfflin’s recuperation of it to be regarded as a degenerate offshoot of the Renaissance that withered in the face of Neoclassicism. The Rococo in particular was long seen as the apotheosis of Baroque decadence—ornamental and meaningless. The very different evaluation that is now generally made of the European material is instructive for how the Ottoman case might also be rehabilitated. So too are recent interventions that have called for closer scrutiny of ornament itself, shining light on the ability of decoration—Baroque, Rococo, or otherwise—to express meanings, collective memories, values, and socio-political hierarchies.

But bringing the architecture of eighteenth-century Istanbul under the Baroque umbrella is not simply a matter of terminological or methodological convenience, much less an expedient by which to signal a loose resemblance between otherwise unrelated traditions. Although scholars of all stripes have taken it for granted that the Ottomans’ engagement with the Baroque remained at the level of formal borrowing, the buildings themselves, together with the responses they generated among contemporary observers, reveal that we are dealing with far more than the free-floating transposition of motifs. The new style would never have been introduced, and would certainly not have taken hold, in the absence of conceptual as well as aesthetic commensurability between Ottoman visual culture and its European counterparts. The artists and patrons who set about changing the fabric of Istanbul were, in other words, knowing and informed participants in the wider artistic discourse that would come to be labeled “Baroque.” That the Ottoman version of the style looks so distinctive when compared to Western varieties (themselves far from unified) should not be taken to mean that its connection to them was feeble, confused, or incidental. On the contrary, its characteristic effect—at once locally rooted and internationally appealing—testifies to how fully the Ottomans considered Baroque forms to be applicable, and therefore adaptable, to their needs. My own use of the Baroque as a way of discussing this architecture is, then, not only a means to articulate my interpretation, but an important acknowledgment of what the Ottomans themselves were aiming for with their new manner of building, especially as showcased by the imperial mosques.

In pursuing my argument, I have taken an approach that is both chronological and thematic, dividing my five chapters according to the sultans’ reigns and using each period to address a different aspect of the overall topic. While this diachronic arrangement may at first seem overly traditional, it comes directly out of the material itself,
for one of my chief contentions is that the Ottoman Baroque’s advent and unfolding were historically contingent processes that must be evaluated as such if their intents and effects are to be understood.

Chapter 1, which focuses on the reign of Ahmed III, takes as its starting point the return of the court to Istanbul in 1703 after prolonged periods of absence in Edirne. The nearly three decades during which Ahmed ruled initiated a concerted campaign to re-model the city and promote royal self-display, entailing new artistic trends and significant changes in the architectural profession. These developments coincided with, and were inflected by, intensified diplomatic and commercial activity with Europe. Although this period—traditionally discussed under the heading “Tulip Era”—predates the phenomena that are my main topic, it nevertheless introduced many of the concerns and conditions that would shape the rest of the eighteenth century.

It was under Mahmud I (r. 1730–54), whose reign is addressed in chapter 2, that the city’s architectural transformation was set on a more novel and enduring course. In the wake of important military victories that ushered in an unprecedented period of peace on the empire’s Western front, Mahmud and his elite oversaw the formation of a triumphal new Baroque style during the 1740s. Crucial to this process were the increasingly prominent communities of Ottoman Greek and Armenian artists, who used their European—and especially Italian—connections to create an altogether original mode of architecture that readily lent itself to symbolizing state vigor.

The earliest products of this new style were generally of smaller scale or limited application, but the innovative repertoire they established was soon channeled into what was to be the Ottoman Baroque’s monumental public debut: the Nuruosmaniye Mosque, the subject of chapter 3. Begun by Mahmud I and completed by his brother and successor, Osman III (r. 1754–57), the Nuruosmaniye struck a remarkable balance between reviving and revolutionizing the imperial mosque as a building type. The result spoke simultaneously to native and outside audiences, concretizing the sultan’s ceremonial dominance over Istanbul and tying the Ottomans’ visual culture to the globally prestigious Baroque mode.

Covering the reign of Mustafa III (r. 1757–74), by which time the Ottoman Baroque had achieved canonicity, chapter 4 considers his three major mosques—the Ayazma, Laleli, and Fatih—as buildings that show a sophisticated awareness of the style’s morphology, syntax, and historical and cultural contexts. Especially notable is the architecture’s inclusion of numerous references to the Byzantine past, whereby the Ottomans could stake their own claim to the same antique heritage on which the European Baroque was founded. Such demonstrations of stylistic consciousness provide telling evidence of the Ottomans’ largely unwritten architectural theories and discourses.

Chapter 5 focuses on the use of religious architecture by Abdülhamid I (r. 1774–89) and Selim III to establish a new paradigm of engagement that brought them into heightened visual and conceptual proximity with their subjects, reasserting sultanic power in the face of renewed international warfare. Their endeavors yielded a number of regenerative modifications to Istanbul’s streetscapes and suburbs, including two new mosques—the Beylerbeyi and Selimiye—that combined earlier innovations with
an original kind of palatial façade. Accompanying a surge in royal patronage along the shores, the introduction of this palatial feature boosted the efficacy of the mosques in monumentalizing the ruler's presence and spreading his image—by now fully recognizable in the Baroque style—across the city.

So effective did this model prove that it became exemplary for the future, with several new pavilion-fronted mosques erected throughout the nineteenth century. These I discuss in my conclusion, where I also consider the afterlife of the Ottoman Baroque itself. Like the imperial mosques for which it was utilized, the style had ramifications well beyond its own time, setting the ambitiously cosmopolitan tone that would continue to define Istanbul's remaking until the end of the empire.67