

Ayşe Irmak Çelik

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Architects of 19th Century Ottoman Empire: the Balyan Family

People from various nationalities have contributed to the Ottoman Empire for many years. One Ottoman-Armenian family, in particular, was responsible for many imperial Ottoman works and buildings. You may recognize the Balyan Family through some of their well-known works; Dolmabahçe Palace (1848–56), Çırağan Palace (1863–1871), and the Row Houses of Akaretler (1874-75). This paper aims to investigate the Balyan Family throughout the years by taking the historical, artistic, and social context of the geography into consideration; the works that they have contributed to the heritage of Imperial Ottoman Architecture, and the Parisian impact on the designs of the family through education in the later years.

1. The historical, artistic, and social context:

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was dubbed "the Sick Man of Europe" (Temperley, 272). This era is a time of resistance to capitalism, oceanic expansion, printing press, Renaissance, and Reformation (Kafadar, 614). A revisionist perspective of the century for a top-down reformist zeal has followed. The influence of westernization on reforms and the shift in Ottoman architectural language due to the image-making of the Tanzimat period is visible, and it is evident to state the identity of Armenians has shaped in this period (Faroqhi, 179). The loans taken from the foreign by the Empire emphasized the equality of all Ottoman subjects at

the table and the employment of non-Muslims (Uneno, 93-109). Because the Ottomans became left behind in efforts to develop the sciences, research, and study. The total neglect of madreses, they became reliant upon employing foreign experts in architecture and construction (Mustafa Nuri Paşa, 147). Multiplicity in architecture, applied to new building types and traditional structures, is visible. We observe the eclectic approach to the Ottoman, Islamic, and then Turkish styles mainly in the later years of this era (Çelik, 126), in some cases showing the first implementations of an anti-Orientalist structures (Bozdoğan, 23).

The Balyan Family

Since the conquest, Armenian families have held "enviable positions" in the Ottoman government (1453). This group included the Balyans ('Les architects attirés du Sultan') (Macler, 47). From 1848, the Building Council appointed Kalfas, primarily non-Muslims, contractors to essential roles. One of them was Krikor Balyan, who started to win most construction auctions in his later years. It is argued that Krikor Kalfa was the son of Merametçi (repairman) named Bali Kalfa from Maraş (introduced to an Armenian imperial architect close to Sultan Mehmed III), then married his daughter and became Imperial Architect (De Caston, 395-421). The family started to serve as imperial architects from father to son for over a century and a half started, from the reign of Ahmet III to Mahmud II. They became the first non-Muslim family to have the title *mimarbaşı*.

Krikor Balyan:

He was given the title of architect in 1777 by Abdülhamid I (Teotik, 257). After his promotion as a royal architect (1809), he was granted status privileges and exemptions from taxes levied against non-Muslims (Wharton, 57). He is also known for his close relationship with sultans. He was an advisor to Selim III and contributed to the reform such as Nizam-I; Selim III even would communicate with foreign ambassadors through Krikor. In the later years, Krikor was subjected to plotting and got exiled to Kayseri, but Mahmud II still favored him. When he returned from Kayseri, his status ascended even higher with his Nişan-ı İftikhar (Order of Glory) decoration (Wharton, 57).

He was engaged in work related to imperial apartments (the 1810s) and involved in preparing the salaries for building the imperial apartment in Paşakapı (1811). He had a part in repairing important past mosques such as Çinili Valide Sultan Mosque in Üsküdar (1815). He was responsible for repairing Mahmud Paşa Mosque (1821), parts of the Hidayet Mosque in Eminönü (1826), building a mosque in Arnavudköy (1831), building institutions for the reformed state, constructing Üsküdar barracks for the new troops (1825), rebuilding walls to the Mengenehane-I Amira (pressing house), rebuilding the Osmaniye and other imperial mausoleums that the fire had destroyed. (Wharton, 59). There are indications that Krikor had greater control over the new bureaucratic entities, and he was paid more than Akif Efendi (Cezar, 112).

Karapet Balyan:

The sultans also awarded Karapet Balyan a high-status position, as had his father. On April 1844, Karapet and his assistant architect Ohannes Serveryan had the privilege of wearing a

tuğra nişanı (decoration in the imperial monogram) on their fez. Armenian newspapers frequently report honors given to Kaparet, such as Masis (1859, issue 398) states that the Sultan gave the Mecidiye Decoration to Karapet -the 'Royal Architect- and his sons Serkis and Agop (Wharton, 62). He also had personal relations with the sultans, such as visits for accompanying the Sultan on a visit to the factory in Izmit and a spa in Bursa and receiving jewelry gifts from the sultans (Pamukciyan, 519).

Karapet is known for his interest in Armenian architectural history. The reason behind his passion is from his years of education in the village of Lisonk, Bayburt, and his visits to the ruins of Ani. Although his education was without formal training, as well as the majority of Armenian architects working in the nineteenth century, he built world-renowned structures such as Çırağan Palace and Abdülaziz's mother's mosques) (Teotik, Teotik Amenum Daretsuytsi, p. 259), then he received education from private master's. He was decorated with the Nişan-ı İftihad and was responsible for the works of the (Old) Çırağan Palace and the Dolmabahçe Palace. He was awarded the same tax and status privileges as his father, Krikor (De Caston, 269). He paid close attention to rebuilding the churches and expressing the Armenian identity in these centers for communal activities.

Nigoğos Balyan

Masis (1858 issue 319) states that Nigoğos learned 'the architectural art' as a teen in Paris, where he studied with 'Baron Labrouste,' the head of 'the imperial school of fine arts.' In 1845, Nigoğos returned to Constantinople and worked as a royal architect under his father's supervision. The article says that "the buildings he constructed – the palaces, mosques, and other well-known buildings, notably Dolmabahçe Palace – were marveled at by European architects

and the sultan." It characterizes his structures as being created with 'great skilfulness' and a 'refined taste.' Buildings attributed to Nigoğos include the Audience Hall and entrance gates of the Dolmabahçe Palace, Ortaköy Mosque, Ihlamur Pavillion, and Tophane Clock Tower; responsible for the plan of Çırağan Palace. The projects that he was involved in show the traces of a follower of the revivalist and neo-renaissance architectural language. Although he was pretty active in the construction and architectural design of imperial works, it is suggested that he was not very involved in the bureaucratic side of his building career compared to his father. He passed away in 1858.

Agop Balyan

According to Armenian newspapers and chronicles, many imperial privileges were granted to Agop Balyan by the Sultan. Masis (1859 issue 398) mentions that he, like his predecessors, earned the Mecidiye Decoration. After studying at the Saint-Barbe in Paris, Agop traveled to Venice and then worked alongside Karapet upon his return and later with Serkis (Wharton 67). His works indicated a neo-Renaissance style due to his education abroad, such as in Kağıthane Mosque. He is also known for his work on kisoks of Kağıthane, Topkapı, Izmit, Beylerbeyi and Çırağan (De Caston, 296). Ottoman sources on Agop are, similarly to those on Nigoğos, far fewer than those on Karapet and Serkis. This may reflect the view of the Armenian sources that Agop and Nigoğos were the creative minds behind architectural projects, whereas Karapet and Serkis were involved in the management, financing, and presentation of the works of the Sultan (Wharton, 67). He moved to Paris after the death of his wife in 1873, and he died in 1875.

Serkis Balyan

The impression of Serkis by the press was that he was a formally trained architect and engineer since he stayed in Europe and received an education at the Sainte-Barbe, École des Beaux-Arts and École Centrale (Boğosyan, 178). He was known as a successful royal architect whose fame was internationally growing. He was more of a practical team member rather than having a creative role like Agop.

He constructed the Yıldız Kiosk, a marvel of architecture due to its decorations and rapid and low-cost management. He implemented his knowledge of the latest innovations in human engineering, technology, and the metallurgic industry in his works (De Caston: 502-3). In an interview reviewed by Caston in 1861, Serkis revealed that he was primarily a surveyor on the project; Sultan Abdülaziz produced the designs, selected the marbles and stones, specified the ornaments and the arrangement of interior areas, and indicated the appropriate furnishings. After receiving the Bey title, Serkis's prestige continued to rise in the 1870s, and he was acknowledged not only by the Sultan but also by foreign nations. He received the Mecidiye from Abdülaziz in 1874. He continued to gain more titles and decorations for his architectural service and possessed skills in the science of architecture and geometry. His work was not only about regulating payments and the business part of the construction; his job was interconnected with the coordination of different groups of people, including state departments, with the local and foreign artisans.

Up to this point, I have emphasized the views and approaches toward the Balyan family, a bloodline of architects who served the Ottoman Empire for over a hundred years. In conclusion, it could be said that each of these architects has contributed to the architectural

identity of the Ottoman geography with their architectural language. It is visible that each of them has their own approach to building the state due to their difference in terms of era, experiences abroad, and architectural education. The Parisian impact is worth mentioning since it has evoked the revivalistic traces on the buildings supervised by the majority of Balyans.

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