



ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE

## THE CONQUEST OF ISTANBUL AND THE MANIPULATION OF ARCHITECTURE

*The Islamist-nationalist Rhetoric  
of Conquest and Melancholy*

BERİN F. GÜR



### MELANCHOLY AS POLITICAL RHETORIC: REIMAGINING THE CONQUEST OF ISTANBUL THROUGH ARCHITECTURE

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Reanimating the past with a political agenda has long been used by those in power, but it has become more prevalent as the world turns away from shared values and pluralism towards nationalism, religiosity, and authoritarianism. Examples include political events, such as Columbus Day in the United States and the Great Patriotic War (WWII) in Russia, as well as figures like Charlemagne and Emperor Ashoka of India. Each mobilises the past, which, as David Lowenthal (2015) suggests, is “partly a product of the present”, to legitimise contemporary political agendas. Perhaps May 29, 1453, the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, is more alive than ever after the 2020 re-conversion of Istanbul’s Hagia Sophia into a mosque. In the immediate aftermath, the decision sparked not only public but also scholarly debate, described as “Hagia-Sophia-mania”, an obsession with the

symbolism behind the monument and its re-conversion.

Among the plethora of scholarly work, Berin F. Gür’s monograph *The Conquest of Istanbul and the Manipulation of Architecture: The Islamist-nationalist Rhetoric of Conquest and Melancholy* successfully revisits the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453 and its contemporary memory through a comparative lens, placing Türkiye in dialogue with Greece. It examines how the conquest is memorialised at present, mainly through architecture, together with spatial practices, commemorative rituals, discourse, and in rare cases iconography.

The central argument of Gür’s monograph is that the fall/conquest of Constantinople/Istanbul is framed through the theoretical lens of melancholy, which is defined as “a project that obsessively produces an ‘imaginary loss’ or a ‘loss without a lost’

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NATIONALIST RHETORIC OF  
CONQUEST AND MELANCHOLY

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object' for its desires" (2026, 33). What makes Gür's argument powerful is her comparative perspective, which reveals that two seemingly opposite groups – the religio-nationalist conservatives aligned with Türkiye's ruling party and the displaced Rum community and nationalist groups in Greece – frame the conquest through a melancholic perspective. The rearticulation of melancholy is a future-oriented phenomenon related to the past, used as a political, ideological, and identity-related tool to manipulate the present, albeit with different motives.

In the introduction, Gür manages a difficult task by framing the conquest of Istanbul and history of its celebrations, which is a complex and politically charged subject, within its historical and contemporary contexts. She not only deals with the political aspects of memory but also affective aspects, feelings of different groups associating themselves with the conquest/fall. The section further highlights the dominant politics in Türkiye, seen as a significant departure from the secularist ideology of the early Republican period, commonly referred to as neo-Ottomanism (Yavuz 2020, Tokdoğan 2024). It also traces the current political shift, reflected in the conquest celebrations after opposition party's victory in local elections, which reshaped the celebrations to reconcile the Ottoman imperial past with Türkiye's foundational ideology. While the "Turkish side" is clearly presented, if at times overwhelmingly dense, the "Greek side" would benefit from greater contextualisation, particularly for an international audience. The last part of the introduction concentrates on the narratives of old and dilapidated Istanbul, which prepares the reader for the book's explorations of melancholy within memorialisation processes through architecture and commemorative practices.

Gür develops a theoretical framework of melancholy in her first chapter, in which she argues that melancholy is a concept that is future-oriented, often spatial, and exploited for political manipulation. She further elaborates on the implications of melancholic attachment, which is not tied to a loss of a concrete object, but rather, both the concept of loss and the object itself remain uncertain. In this regard, she refers to Agamben's (1993) powerful article "The Lost Object", in

which melancholy is attached to an imagined and idealised absence. Gür convincingly argues that melancholy, in this very nature, operates spatially, which attaches itself to objects or places deemed lost and to the memory of that loss, and is therefore inherently political.

When experienced collectively, melancholy becomes a useful rhetoric that can be linked to political paranoia, manifested in the tension between former possession and current loss of an object, and mobilized in the present for political purposes. Through Gür's fresh perspective, the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople emerges as a "melancholy project" of religio-nationalist conservatives in Türkiye, who recreated Istanbul and Hagia Sophia as lost objects against the secularists of the early Republican period and reappropriated them as new symbols of neo-Ottomanism through architectural interventions and ritual practices.

In the second chapter, Gür introduces Hagia Sophia as the "lost object" of the Ottoman conquest following its conversion into a museum in 1934. She argues that religio-nationalist conservatives interpreted this transformation as a violation of the conquest, and the conquest would only be deemed complete with the monument's reconversion into a mosque. Thus, over time, neo-Ottomanist politics manipulated the melancholic attachment to Hagia Sophia as a functioning mosque, which resulted in its re-conversion into a mosque in 2020 in an attempt to link the current regime to its imperial and Islamic past.

The chapter begins with the ceremonial opening of Hagia Sophia as a mosque on 24 July 2020, attended by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the then-president of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Ali Erbaş. The main theme of the Friday prayer was Hagia Sophia's "reversion to origin (*aslina ruci*)" and the use of a sword by Erbaş signified the political and religious authority of the ruling party, reminding attendees that Constantinople was taken by war. Following her demonstration of the rhetoric and symbolism behind Hagia Sophia as a "lost object", Gür situates the roots of contemporary melancholy surrounding Hagia Sophia by outlining the Ottoman accounts of

Hagia Sophia after the conquest, which is considered the “origin” of the “lost monument” by religio-nationalist conservatives in Türkiye.

Gür, then, offers an overview of Hagia Sophia’s transformations from the conquest to the present day, largely through previously published sources and newspaper articles. This reliance on secondary material makes the analysis more descriptive than analytical; it succeeds in placing the monument within a broader international context. What Gür does particularly well is to highlight the historical periods that triggered paranoia about Hagia Sophia’s loss as a mosque: its emergence in the 19th century as a historic monument and object of “seyr-ü temasă” (observation and contemplation); the Allied occupation of Istanbul between 1918 and 1923, alongside the Kingdom of Greece’s ambitious *Megali Idea* (Great Idea), which triggered a paranoia over its reopening as a church; its museumification in 1934 under the secular Kemalist ideology; and the Cyprus conflict of the 1960s. Gür’s integration of Osman Yüksel Serdengeçti, an outspoken opponent of Hagia Sophia’s conversion into a museum, his writings, and the lawsuit filed against him, together with Necip Fazıl Kısakürek and Peyami Safa as other prominent opponents, provides clear insights into the so-called “Hagia Sophia cause”, which frames the Ottoman and Islamic identity of the monument as a “lost object”.

The book’s main theme of melancholy is more prominent in Chapter 3, dedicated to the Panorama 1453 History Museum, which was opened in 2009 as the first panorama museum in Türkiye. Drawing on the history of panoramas and panorama architecture, Gür argues that the choice of the panoramic way of reenacting the conquest was not coincidental since panoramas were historically used as political tools of imperial and nationalistic propaganda in the 19th century. She adds that panoramas, as modes of representation, strictly regulate visitors’ movement and modes of engagement with the narrative by creating the illusion of a unified space and time, resulting in a highly controlled emotional and affective experience.

The strongest aspect of the chapter is Gür’s architectural reading of the museum, which emphasizes this highly controlled character of the visitor experience, positioning visitors within the intended narrative. This is complemented by her analysis of the panorama’s visual rhetoric, particularly the way Constantinople and Mehmed II are depicted during the conquest. In her visual discourse analysis of the 1453 conquest panorama, Gür highlights that the city of Constantinople is depicted solely through its land walls, which are in a dilapidated condition. According to her, this state of disrepair not only emphasises the diminishing Byzantine legacy but also alienates visitors from Constantinople prior to the Ottoman conquest, positioning them as outsiders. In this way, visitors feel as though they are part of the Ottomans conquering the Byzantine city. This impression is reinforced by the portrayal of Sultan Mehmed II on a white horse, which, according to Gür, is a fictitious scene invented in the 19th century to transform him into a heroic saviour figure of Istanbul. Another significant argument Gür makes successfully is that the dilapidated condition of Constantinople serves two purposes: it not only triggers melancholy for Istanbul as a lost, decaying city, but also as an object of mourning, which is significant for the religio-nationalist conservatives, even though the city has been under the rule of the Ottoman Empire and later the Turkish Republic as its heir, but rather to emphasise the narrative of loss over the secularist foundational ideology, central to contemporary politics in Türkiye.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Gür’s monograph lies in its comparative nature. In Chapter 4, the focus shifts to mainland Greece, where the author examines how the fall of Constantinople is commemorated. Similar to the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a museum in 1934, the fall of Constantinople, according to Gür, is a “national trauma” for the Greek state and marks the beginning of Ottoman domination for centuries and the first wave of migration outside Constantinople, followed by the 1923 bilateral Greek-Turkish population exchange. Gür assesses the discourse, representations, and commemorations of the fall of Constantinople by referring to Smelser’s (2004) concept of

"intergenerational trauma" and Hirsch's (2012) concept of "postmemory." These two concepts help us understand how communities deal with collective traumatic events and how such events are kept alive for the members who do not have direct experience of traumatic events. The main motive behind this, for Greece and particularly the Rum community, lies in the underlying aim of reinforcing their rights to Istanbul's cultural heritage, as Gür notes.

Unlike in Türkiye, where commemorations are largely organised by municipal or state authorities at present, in Greece they are dominated by Rum associations, giving the events a more civic character. Gür evaluates these Rum associations as "cultural creators" of trauma by referring to Alexander and Breese (2011), as they actively reenact and transfer the collective memory of the trauma to ensure it is not forgotten. According to Gür, the commemorations on the "Greek side" heavily use Constantinople and Hagia Sophia as "conveyors of trauma", and symbols of past glory as Hagia Sophia represents Orthodox Christianity and the city as the lost homeland. Another significant figure, paralleling Sultan Mehmet II on the "Turkish side", is Constantine XI Palaiologos, remembered as the last Byzantine emperor who is celebrated by some as having heroically defended the city against the Ottomans.

Gür discusses the venues of these commemorations, notably the liturgical service held at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Athens to honour Constantine XI Palaiologos, where a statue of the last Byzantine emperor is also located. The commemorative marches begin with a wreath-laying ceremony at the statue and proceed to the Monument of the Unknown Soldier in Syntagma Square. There is another statue of the emperor in Palaio Faliro district, which is mostly inhabited by the Rum community.

Gür also analyses the visual rhetoric adopted in the exhibitions organised by the Rum associations to commemorate the fall of Constantinople, together with the logos of these associations and the newspapers they publish. These representations heavily utilise the image of the last emperor, Hagia Sophia (occasionally depicted without its

Ottoman minarets), and the land walls representing Constantinople, which, as Gür argues, reenact and transfer the collective trauma of the Rum community as a means of reminding their rightful claims to the city. Thus, when Hagia Sophia was re-converted into a mosque in 2020, it triggered a widespread emotional and public reaction, since the monument is not only the symbol of Orthodox Christianity, but also the main church of Greece's "spiritual capital", Constantinople. Another significant argument addresses the monument's UNESCO World Heritage Site status, a point also emphasised by opposing groups in Türkiye. However, while UNESCO's prioritisation of nation-states in the World Heritage process is widely recognised by heritage scholars, this issue remains largely unexamined in Gür's analysis (De Cesari 2020, Meskell and Liuzza 2022).

Gür states her standpoint towards the end of the monograph, grounded in a pluralistic understanding of the past and heritage. This standpoint is introduced relatively late, as in the introduction she specifically mentions she will try to be as objective as possible, even if such objectivity is impossible for such an inherently subjective topic. From this standpoint, she critiques the conquest celebrations on the "Turkish side", which she argues reenact a sense of superiority, acknowledging also that the commemorations on the "Greek side" carry their own nationalistic overtones. Gür's comparative perspective reveals how both sides politically exploit the melancholy surrounding the commemorations of the 1453 conquest or fall of Constantinople as an imagined or ongoing loss in an attempt to link the past to the present for shaping future aspirations.

Gür's monograph makes a significant contribution to the recent discussions on neo-Ottomanism and its spatial implications in Türkiye, exemplified by the 1453 Panorama Museum and the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, accompanied by the revival of conquest commemorations. Her use of melancholy as a theoretical lens for critical reading of spatial, discursive, and visual rhetoric offers a fresh and convincing argument that interprets these practices as reenactments of the loss of an ideal, mobilised by the dominant ideology in Türkiye. Her

comparative perspective compellingly reveals how Istanbul and Hagia Sophia function as idealised or lost symbols of religious and national aspirations. Despite her inclusion of perspectives from both sides, Gür's analysis tends to rely primarily on the grand narratives of state actors and on certain opposing dualities, such as secularists vs. conservatives, Turks vs. Greeks, Turks vs. Greeks, treating these as largely homogenised groups. The voices and struggles of politically under-represented groups, opposing specialists, and actors of civil society therefore remain relatively silent. Despite the occasional integration of visitors' perspectives through field observations or already published sources, how these reenactments were received and experienced rather remains limited in scope. In her concluding remarks, Berin F. Gür genuinely expresses her desire to see Hagia Sophia being liberated from its polarised meanings and appreciated for its architectural and cultural significance. Even though her idealistic and heartfelt desire contrasts with contemporary understandings of heritage, it can be interpreted as a call for pluralistic approaches to heritage conservation.

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