

ACADÉMIE BULGARE DES SCIENCES
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TWO GRAFFITI DRAWINGS FROM THE OTTOMAN PERIOD OF AYASOFYA

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Abstract: The paper deals with two graffiti drawing in the south gallery in the former Christian church Hagia Sophia converted after 1453 into mosque Ayasofya. In view of the posture, clothing and headgear of the figure, most likely the author of the first drawing intended to present a whirling dervish. The attempt to date non-epigraphic graffiti with any degree of accuracy is often extremely difficult, but a terminus post quem of this graffito drawing can be the 15th century suggested on the basis of the established clothing standard for all members of the Mevlevi Order. The second drawing presents three weapons defined as “saber” and most likely they correspond to the well-known types of sabers in the Near East Zulfikar, kilij and Shamshir. The hypothetical time span for creating the drawing with the three sabers is between the 17th and the end of the 18th century.

Keywords: Ayasofya, Ottoman graffiti, sabers, dervish, Zulfikar

Looking back, it is surprising to find that in the great mosque of Ayasofya in Constantinople (or Istanbul after 1453), formerly the Christian church of the Divine Wisdom (or Hagia Sophia), we can still come across new discoveries. Although the graffiti inscriptions or drawings provide a first-hand source, they are the least studied¹. Many of them are still visible on the marble surface, but not a few have been deleted during the cleaning and restoration activities of the building. The most numerous are the graffiti in the galleries on the second floor, which varies of content, ranging from autographs, prayer formulas to figurative images or symbols of the cult². Usually, the expectations

¹ Today the examined graffiti by Thomas Thomov are as follow: Cyrillic graffiti inscriptions are 100 (95 published), the Greek ones are about 400, the Latin ones – 150, two in Armenian and four in Ottoman Turkish, as well as about 100 fragments of inscriptions – separate letters and signs.

² In 2106 Th. Thomov published an epigraphic corpus with 85 inscriptions in Cyrillic and one in Glagolitic from the temple's galleries: Т. Томов, *Непознатият храм „Св. София“*.

The straight hilt with a short and slightly curved pommel cap from our drawing shows a certain resemblance to a similar Iranian shamshir dating from the second half of the 17th century¹¹⁷, and that from the museum Topkapı Saray Museum, Istanbul (T.S.M. Inv. № 1/292, 17th century, Safavid period)¹¹⁸ to which can be added examples from the collection of Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (the Kunstkamera), St. Petersburg. (№ 4475 – 1, 18th century, saber-shamshir of the last Crimean khan Şahin Giray presented as a gift to Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia)¹¹⁹, The Moscow Kremlin Museum, the Armoury Chamber (№ OP – 4443/ 1–3, before 1645, Iran)¹²⁰, The Lviv Historical Museum (ca.1685 – 1692, Ottoman empire)¹²¹ and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (№ 36.25.1333 a, b, European blade, end of the 17th century, Ottoman empire)¹²². Therefore, the dating of the handle is within the second half – end of the 17th century, and that of the blade lies between the 17th and 18th century. From all the above-mentioned, it can be concluded that the hypothetical chronological framework for creating the graffiti drawing with the three sabers is between the 17th and the end of the 18th century.

As always with graffiti, the problem seems to be how far one can trust them. However, if we try to sum up the above findings, the following conclusion may be drawn: we can only conclude that for the anonymous person who created the second drawing it was necessary to emphasize the Zulfikar saber. As for the reason that led the author to scratch such a drawing, it may be more than one – for a talisman with apotropaic properties, for a victory, or as a sign to demonstrate the owner's status and prestige. The absence of any signature on a drawing denotes the importance of the sign represented and not the creator. There is also a good reason to believe that the sign, regardless of its form – verbal or figurative, left in a holy place like Ayasofya, performs the function of

¹¹⁷ Хайдаков, *Шамширы*, с. 129.

¹¹⁸ Aydın, *The Arms of the Sultans*, p. 51.

¹¹⁹ Тоїчкін, Галенко, *Козацький шамшир*, с. 149, Photo 13; Тоїчкін, *Клинок зброя*, с. 380, Fig. 54.

¹²⁰ <https://collectiononline.kreml.ru/entity/OBJECT/1016?page=5&fund=2766593&index=228> – 23.04.2021.

¹²¹ Rivkin, Isaac, *A Study*, p. 215, Fig. 115.

¹²² <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/24323?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=Hilt+and+scabbard%2c+Turkish%3b+Blade%2c+Iranian&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=14> – 12.05.2021.

an everlasting prayer addressed to the Almighty for protection and success in battle¹²³. Moreover, the prayers give the saber its target and range, they even make it honorable¹²⁴. This does not exclude of course the possibility that the drawing is also a perfect way of preserving someone's memory of somebody by repeatedly reminding of him through these simple signs. The written word or picture ensures a more intimate and direct way of communicating with God, despite the lack of an immediate answer. The place of writing or drawing strengthens the action through faith in its miraculous characteristics, but the most important part is for the author's sign to "remain" at the holy site¹²⁵. The attribution of this drawing to the period between the 17th and the end of the 18th century is based on the specific shape of the handle and blade.

We have not been able to determine the exact reason, or the motives that guided the author for the drawing with the whirling dervish. On the one hand, he has attempted to portray the reality surrounding him, and on the other, to use it as an expression of his faith in seeking union with the Divine. This does not exclude, of course, the possibility that the drawing might be accepted as his own self-portrait with more of a mystical than a physical action. If we follow the words of Z. Yürekli, the authors of the two graffiti can be defined as illiterate visitors who witnessed their visit to a cult building through images of "... bowls of dervishes (in our case the dervish himself), ... the sword of Zulfikar..."¹²⁶. It may be recalled that the attempt to date non-epigraphic graffiti with any degree of accuracy is often extremely difficult, but as stated above, a *terminus post quem* can be the 15th century, suggested on the basis of the established clothing standard for all members of the Mevlevi Order. We shall also not be too far from the truth if our choice is the year of 1453 as a *terminus post quem*. Usually, we can simply offer a year or century as plausible suggestions, although some are more convincing than others. What our suggestion does make clear is that the preference must be given to the first date and some support for this comes from other pieces of evidence. It is useful to remember that during the last decade of the 14th century a Turkish quarter

¹²³ It had always been a tradition in Islam to wear one's sword by praying and intending to win in the name of Allah. For this, see Aydın, *The Arms of the Sultans*, p. 37.

¹²⁴ Aydın, *The Arms of the Sultans*, p. 78 argued that "swords had always been important for Turks, in terms of both their lives and religious beliefs".

¹²⁵ P. Maraval, *The Earliest Phase of Christian Pilgrimage in the Near East (before VIIth century)*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 2002, N 56, p. 71.

¹²⁶ Yürekli, *Architecture and Hagiography*, p. 148.

that contained a mosque had been established within Constantinople and in order to settle their commercial disputes a Muslim judge (kadi) was installed inside the city at the request of Bayezid I¹²⁷. Following Bayezid I's defeat at the battle of Ankara (1402) Byzantine authorities grasped the opportunity to do away with the Turkish quarter, mosque, and kadi of Constantinople, but approximately three decades later circumstances changed again and enabled the re-entry of Ottoman traders into the Byzantine capital, thus opening the way for greater interaction and communication between Byzantines and Ottomans¹²⁸. Thus, a reasonable hypothesis would be that the anonymous author would have to be sought among these Ottoman newcomers to the city. It seems to us that such a connection can be made and we have a *terminus post quem* within the 15th century.

Finally, these two graffiti-drawings are physical evidence of people with anxieties and beliefs, passions and fears. They serve as a visual link between the present and the past; between the modern visitor and the man who wrote on the walls so many years ago. Unfortunately, many graffiti-drawings which have remained in their original places have been exposed to humidity and neglect, as well as vandalism, without respect for the people of whom this may be the only memorial or legacy left behind.

¹²⁷ N. Necipoğlu, *Byzantium Between the Ottomans and the Latins: Politics and Society in the Late Empire*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 138 and 201.

¹²⁸ Necipoğlu, *Byzantium*, p. 207 and 209.



Fig. 1.

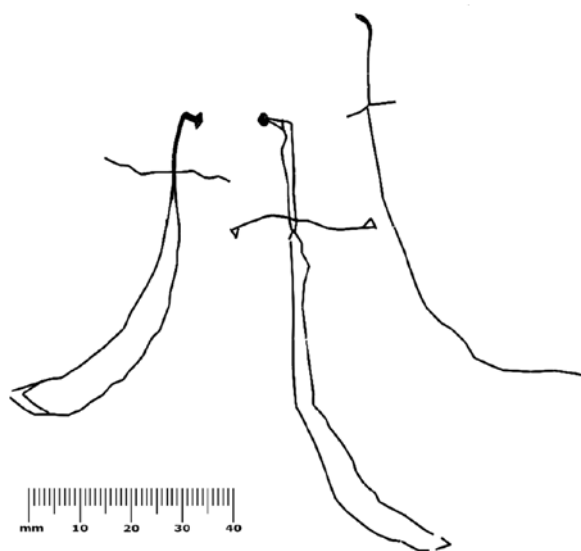


Fig. 2.