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AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY « YALI » ON THE SHORES OF  
THE BOSPHORUS

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*Emel Esin (Istanbul)*

A «yali» is an amphibious construction, built directly on the edge of the water and sustained by walls erected in the sea. In the Ottoman period, until the end of the nineteenth century, on the shores of the Golden Horn and of the Bosphorus, the façades of rows of yali's mirrored themselves on the waters. Slender boats called «kayık» manned by several rowers in livery, glided over the waterways of Istanbul. Thus, the maritime Ottoman capital had some affinities with Venice.

The yali which is the subject of this paper, stands on the edge of the water, within a park with centenarian trees, at Çengelköy, on the Asian shores of the Bosphorus. Although the date of its construction is unknown, from the research made and published by Mr. Haluk Şehsuvaroğlu and the reports of the descendents of the yali's earliest known owners, the present building seems to have been in existence in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The Çengelköy yalı was then one of the several edifices, within a large park, extending from the sea to the hills and belonging to Selim III's grand vizier Koca Yusuf Paşa. The Paşa made a present of the yalı to his daughter, on the occasion of her marriage. Hamdi Paşa, the son born of this union, gave in the yalı and its park sumptuous parties with torch illuminations that lit up the nocturnal sky of the Bosphorus. Ruined by these expenses, Hamdi Paşa sold the present yalı, and it was acquired about a century ago by Sadullah Paşa, Ottoman Ambassador to Berlin and to Vienna and author of distinction. The Çengelköy yalı remained in the possession of Sadullah Paşa's family and has borne his name to the present time.

The extant building consists only of the « harem » part, or living quarters of the yalı, the one-storied « selamlık » or men's reception rooms having fallen into ruins and been torn down some forty years ago. In 1947 the yalı was repaired and restored to its original shape, through the removal of later additions that disfigured it. At the time of these repairs, under the floor of the north-western sea-side room of the ground floor, at a level about fifty cms lower, a flagging of Malta stone and some red-painted beams were discovered: the remains of an older house on the site of which the present yalı was built.

The architecture and the inner décor of the Çengelköy yalı seem to confirm Mr. Şehsuvaroğlu's research and indicate that it must have been built perhaps in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. One reaches to this conclusion by considering the Çengelköy yalı within the general line of development of Istanbul yalıs.

A specimen of the seventeenth century single storied yalı with a central hall, surmounted by a circular dome, is provided by the remaining portion of the Amcazade or Köprülü yalı at Kanlıca. The Çengelköy yalı is two-storied, although its ground-floor has a very low ceiling. Its central dome is no more circular, but ellipsoid in shape. This places it later than the Amcazade yalı, but earlier than another yalı, at Beylerbeyi, named after Hasib Paşa and attributed to the early nineteenth century. The Hasib Paşa yalı also has an oval central hall, but in expanded proportions. Moreover, the Hasib Paşa yalı's ground-floor is a complete storey, with high ceilings. All these grander proportions detract from the intimacy of seventeenth and eighteenth century dwellings like some of Topkapı pavillons or the Aynalı Kavak Kiosk, and announce the palatial architecture of nineteenth century Istanbul.

The yalı's interior decoration also provides clue for its period. One notices that the lacquer red wood-work usual in Turkish interior decoration until the seventeenth century, for instance in the Amcazade yalı or in the old houses around the citadel of Ankara, has given way at the Çengelköy yalı to wooden parts and polychrome wood carvings in pastel shades. The paintings in the niches or on the walls showing views of Istanbul, are in the soft palette observed in the eighteenth century painter Levnî.

One also notes that the Çengelköy yalı was built at a time when European influences trickled into the conservative Inner-Asian culture of the Ottoman Empire. It was about this time that the visionary poet Şeyh Gâlib dreamt in his Mevlevi cell at Istanbul of the remote expanses of the Turks' original land of Central Asia and of a castle reminiscent of the « Imagery » of the Çigil. But rumours of the splendours of Versailles came also to the Ottoman court. One feels this duality in the yalı. There are motifs related to the ancestral tradition of Inner-Asia, such as the balustrade knobs in the shape of Bektashi crown-bonnets. No doubt, in the oval-shaped hall, so similar to the « meydan » of its contemporary dervish convents, sacred cosmic dances were performed, by the light of candles, lit in the eight niches. In the balcony reserved for musicians, overlooking the hall, the long, solemn notes of monophonic religious music were certainly played on age-old Asian instruments. Yet, here and there, a European rococo garland reminds one that in this eighteenth century, Dede Efendi occasionally composed lighter strains, inspired by European music.

It must however not be forgotten that the yalı architecture does not seem to be a form of construction that the Turks found in the Near East, but rather one that they brought with them from Inner Asia. Already the Istanbul yalıs' wooden bodies, generally painted in lacquer red in the same way as Uighur Koço's wooden houses, seem incongruous on the Marmora sea where marble is abundant. The yalı is evocative of the water-kiosks built from China to India and Iran by those Turco-Mongol invaders for whom the conjunction of the earth and water elements, the « yer-su » was a symbol of happy abundance. Finally the yalı's central domed space is conceived in the tradition of the Turco-Mongol royal tent.

In Turco-Mongol nomadic tradition, the royal tent was a microcosm, in the centre of which, under a heaven-shaped canopy, sat the sun-like Kaan. Four projections in felt, towards the cardinal directions, formed four main gates through which, in ceremonial receptions, visitors from the Earth's four directions were introduced.

How much the Istanbul yalıs' domed central halls resemble the « Orda », the royal Turco-Mongol cupola tent is apparent at

the Çengelköy yalı, where in the centre of the ellipsoid cupola, blazes, in gilded splendour, a wooden carving representing the sun. From this central motif, twisted cords in painted wood, like a tent's ropes, radiate down to a fringe of wooden lambrequin hangings, evoking the folds of a tent's textile draperies.

On the ends of the two axes of the oval hall, there are four projections, towards the four cardinal points. In these, bay windows provide wide views of the sea on three sides and of the wooded hills on the fourth. The sun and the moon are seen rising from the eastern panes and, completing their course, they set at the opposite western rows of windows. From the south comes the warm zephyr and from the north the cool breeze.

This way of living, in a light construction that forms no obstruction to the intimate enjoyment of nature, is also an inheritance of the free nomad, who, wherever he pitches his tent, visually dominates the entire horizon.

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