

A WOODEN-COLUMNED MOSQUE FROM ANATOLIA. BEYŞEHİR EŞREFOĞLU MOSQUE

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Abstract: *Wooden-columned mosques constitute a major structural group in Turkish mosque architecture. Inspired by the abundance of forestation in the region in which they were built, the mosques that made use of wood boasted of rich architectural ornamentation. It is the aim of this study to offer a presentation of Beyşehir Eşrefoğlu Mosque, one of the wooden-columned mosques that were widely constructed in the Anatolian Selçuk Era, taking their place in Anatolian Turko-Islamic architecture. A product of the local master builders of its time, the structure was included in UNESCO's List of Provisional World Heritage Sites. In this context, the paper will describe the characteristics and elements of the layout of the Beyşehir Eşrefoğlu Mosque, its structural system, roof structure, and the distinctive features of the materials and adornments used.*

Key words: *Wooden-Columned Mosques, Wooden Architectural Decorations, Beyşehir Eşrefoğlu Mosque, Anatolia.*

1. Introduction

The group of mosques unique to Anatolia among those built in the time of the Anatolian Seljuks is referred to as the “wooden-columned Anatolian Seljuk mosques.” Reflecting an age-old Turkish architectural tradition, these structures have cut stone or pitch-faced stone on their outer walls; they have been constructed in the masonry system and have main portals made of abundantly decorated cut stone [3]. These types of mosques are built on a hypostyle-plan and have a maksure (mihrab anterior) dome. The wooden-columned mosques that

appeared with the settling of the Anatolian Seljuks continued to be implemented during the Period of the Principalities and the Ottoman Era.

The renowned art historian K.A.C. Creswell asserts that the first example of wooden-columned mosque was Mescit-i Nebevi, located in Medina and credited as being the first mosque in Islamic architecture. The scholar writes that palm trunks were used as columns in the prayer hall of this mosque, which was set out inside a courtyard [7]. Creswell says that this might have been the original precursor of the wooden-columned

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mosques that were to appear in the course of history.

It is known that wooden columns were employed in some structures belonging to the pre-Mughal period of Central Asia. Plaster was used on wooden column capitals [9]. The oldest of this type of column was found in Obburdon, Tajikistan and is displayed today at the Tashkent Museum. Another carved column from the 10th or 11th century is located in Kurut, while still another dated to the 11th or 12th century is in the Hiyve Cuma Mesjid [8].

The origins of the tradition of wooden-columned mosques in the history of Turkish architecture goes back to the era of the Karahanids (840-1042). The Karahanids built wooden-columned and wooden-ceilinged mosques in cities of Turkistan such as Samarkand, Buhara, and Hive [54]. The museums of Samarkand and Tashkent contain richly decorated wooden capitals retrieved from mosques that were built in the tenth and eleventh centuries [6]. The same tradition continued to be implemented in the era of the Ghaznevids (962-1186). The Ghaznevid Sultan Mahmut (998-1030) had a mosque built in the eleventh century – Arus ül Felek Mosque – that featured wooden columns [3]. Sultan Mahmut had the mosque erected in Gazne with columns made of wood brought in from India as a monument of victory upon his return from his campaign to India. This mosque, with its flat roof carried by wooden columns, has a rich ornamental repertoire in which gold gilding and lapis lazuli have been applied to the columns [5].

The first scientific studies of wooden-columned Anatolian Selçuk mosques were conducted by the well-known German art historian Kathrina Otto-Dorn. Otto-Dorn made a detailed study of this group of

mosques in her 1959 article [10], *Seldschukische Holzsäulen-Moscheen in Kleinasien*. Otto-Dorn states that this type of mosque made its entrance into Anatolia by way of Central Asia [10].

This tradition that was thus brought in from Central Asia was carried on in Anatolia. During the periods of the Anatolian Seljuks (1077-1308) and the Principalities, many wooden-columned and wooden-ceilinged mosques were built in numerous regions of Anatolia, particularly in Ankara, Konya, Beyşehir, Kastamonu, Niğde, and Afyon [14].

The earliest example of this group of structures is the Sahip Ata Mosque in Konya, dated to 1258. The mosque complex or kulliye consists of a hanikah (medrassah), a tomb, and a hammam. The wooden-columned mosque itself is in ruins at present and only its mosaic-tiled mihrab has been preserved. The plan of the structure, which carries the signature of the famous architect of the Seljuk Period, Kölük bin Abdullah, has a mihrab anterior maksure dome with seven areas lying perpendicular to the kiblah wall and twelve wooden columns [11].

Other important mosques in this typology are Afyon Great Mosque, built in 1272, the Sivrihisar Great Mosque, Ankara Aslanhane Mosque, Ayaş Great Mosque, and Beyşehir Eşrefoğlu Mosque. The striking features of these mosques, besides their monumental portals and wooden minbars, are their wooden column capitals adorned with muqarnas and spolia along with capitals and ceilings adorned with colorful “kalem işi” ornamentation. The covering system of the mosques consists of a flat roof with wooden beams.

The aim of this article is to describe the plan, the plan elements, the structural system, materials and adornment features

used in the Beyşehir Eşrefoğlu Mosque which occupies an important place in the group of Anatolian wooden-columned mosques and as such, was included in UNESCO's List of Provisional World Heritage Sites in 2012. The article hopes to fulfill the purpose of transferring to future generations the cultural asset that is the largest of the wooden-columned mosques built in Anatolia, one that has been signaled as one of the most beautiful examples of Seljuk architecture.

2. Methods

This study aims to offer a presentation of Beyşehir Eşrefoğlu Mosque, one of the wooden-columned mosques that were widely constructed in the Anatolian Selçuk Era, taking their place in Anatolian Turk-Islamic architecture. For this purpose, the characteristics and elements of the mosque layout, its structural system, roof structure, as well as the features of the materials and adornments used will be rendered by means of a descriptive method.

3. Characteristics of the Plan

The construction of the Eşrefoğlu Mosque, located in Beyşehir, which was the center of the Eşrefoğlu Principality in Konya, was commissioned by the founder of the Eşrefoğlu Principality, Süleyman Bey, over the period 1296-1299 (Figure 1). Süleyman Bey's tomb lies adjacent to the east body wall of Eşrefoğlu Mosque. On the entrance facade of the structure is the high main portal with a sebil (fountain) on the left. Besides the entrance facade of the mosque, there are also entrances to the east and west of the building (Figure 2). The entire structure consists of a

massive kulliye with a programmed plan of a mosque, tomb, khan (caravansarai), a hammam and sebil (fountain).



Fig. 1. *Beyşehir Eşrefoğlu Mosque* (Author)



Fig. 2. *Beyşehir Eşrefoğlu Mosque*
Congregational Area Interior Portal
(Mustafa Cambaz)

The structure, situated on a north-south axis, appears to stand on a diagonal base due to the beveling that meets the main road running from its northeastern corner (Figures 1 and 2). This has given the structure a five-facade appearance. This corner forms the main facade of the building. The facade and the large tomb (*kümbet*) are of stone while the other walls are made of pitch-faced stone. Built in the masonry construction system, the mosque's minaret consists of a body of bricks that rise on top of a base of cut stone.

With its exterior dimensions of 31.77x46.55 m, this is the largest of the wooden-columned mosques of Anatolia. The walls of the mosque which stands in the form of a lengthwise rectangle are covered with mosaic tiles and in front is a closed congregational space. This is accessed through the main portal. The prayer hall of the mosque is accessed through a pointed-arched interior portal that is covered with mosaic tiles (Figure 2). The inscription above the arch of this interior portal reads: *This holy mesjid, the sword of religion and state, was built by the noble ameer Eşrefoğlu Süleyman in the hijri year 699* [5].

The prayer-hall (*harim*) is divided into seven galleries that are situated at a perpendicular position to the mihrab (Figure 3). In other words, the prayer hall has been divided into 7 areas supported by 42 wooden columns standing on 6 rows of stone bases. The middle gallery of the structure, which is set upon a maksure dome plan, is wider and higher than the others. The mihrab anterior dome of a diameter of 4.20 m is situated on pointed arches of brick that tie together two wall piers of cut stone on either side of the mihrab and another two freestanding octagonal columns of cut stone. The arches connecting the columns form an arched four-sided baldachin in front of the mihrab (Figure 4).

The mihrab anterior dome is of brick and in the form of a pendentive; the tile-decorated bricks have been adorned with Turkish triangles (Figure 5). The interior of the brick dome is decorated with glazed bricks and in the center, an intricate inscription citing Allah and the names of Muhammad, Ebu Bekir, Omar, Osman, and Ali appear in kufic script [15]. The silhouette of the top of the mihrab

anterior dome produces a strong effect as a result of its conical and pyramidal covering (Figure 1). This appearance thus does not spoil the Seljuk double-shelled dome tradition.

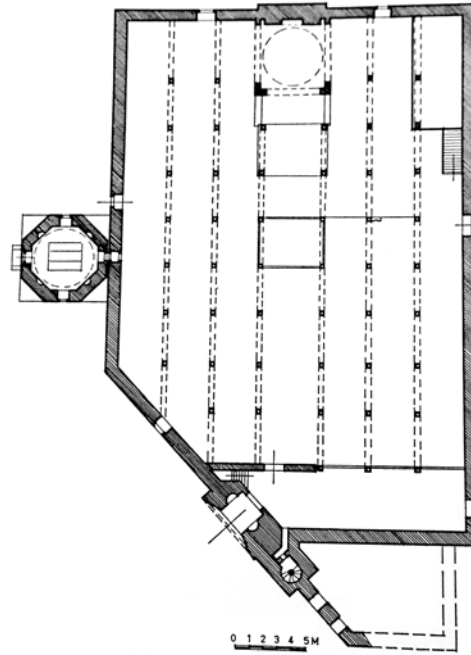


Fig. 3. *Beyşehir Eşrefoğlu Mosque Plan* (Aslanapa 1993, 132)

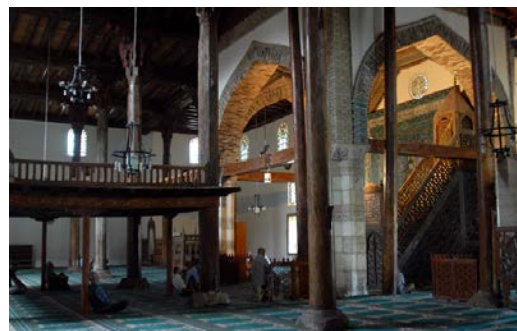


Fig. 4. *The arched baldachin in front of the mihrab* (Mustafa Cambaz)

Immediately in front of the mihrab anterior dome, in the central area, the muezzin's platform (*mahfil*) can be seen, rising up on wooden columns, decorated

with geometric designs and a balustrade (Figures 6 and 7). The muezzin mahfil is painted with ochre dye and embellished with a concentration of hand-drawn *kalem işi* carvings.

The mosaic tiled mihrab of the mosque stands more than 6 meters high and its tiles are of the colors of turquoise, dark blue, and purple. The mihrab, adorned in the colors of blue, white, and turquoise, has a ten-point star composition that opens out like the sun inside the muqarnas recessed mihrab niche [5].

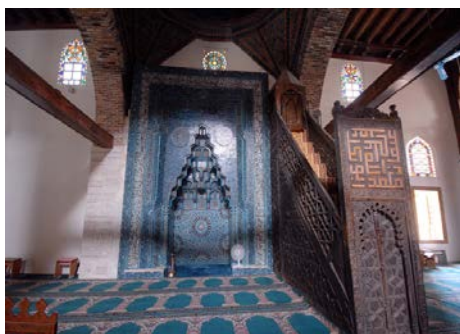
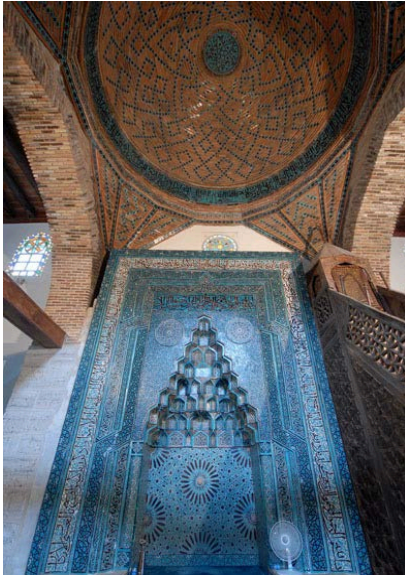


Fig. 5. *Turkish triangles and the arched baldachin in front of the mihrab (Mustafa Cambaz)*



Fig. 6. *The muezzin mahfil (platform) in front of the mihrab anterior dome (Mustafa Cambaz)*

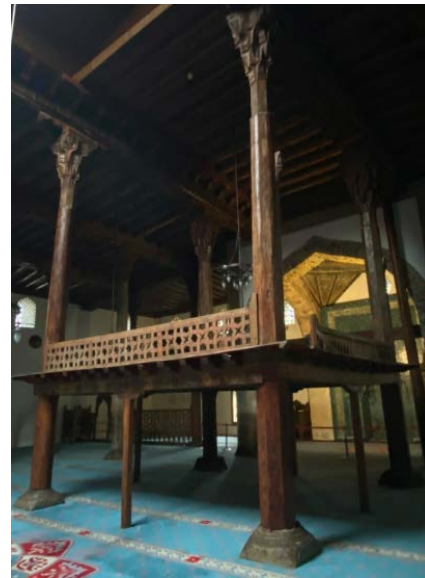


Fig. 7. *The muezzin mahfil (Author)*

The minbar, made of walnut wood and decorated in the kundekari technique, has inscriptions and is known to be the work of Master İsa [5] (Figures 5 and 8). On the sides of the minbar, among four-, five-, eight-, and 10-point star formations, wooden studs (*kabara*) can be found that represent a motif symbolizing the universe and the cosmos dating back to the original Turks of Central Asia. On the front facade of the minbar is a *kufic* inscription affixed above the double-winged kundekari door.



Fig. 8. *The minbar (Author)*

Another element in the area lying along the central axis is a space that is broader and higher than the *harim* (prayer hall)—the snow pit that has been placed in the center of the middle gallery (Figures 9 and 10).



Fig. 9. *The snow pit in the center of the middle gallery of the harim (prayer hall) (Mustafa Cambaz)*

This area, known as “karlık,” is a well in which snow is collected; above it is an unlined rectangular aperture (light well) that lets light in (Figures 11 and 12).



Fig. 10. *The snow pit in the center of the middle gallery (Author)*

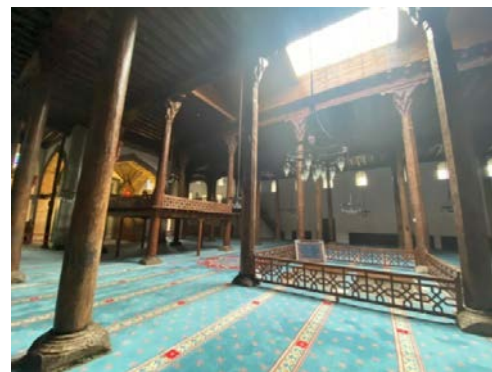


Fig. 11. *The snow pit (karlık) (Author)*

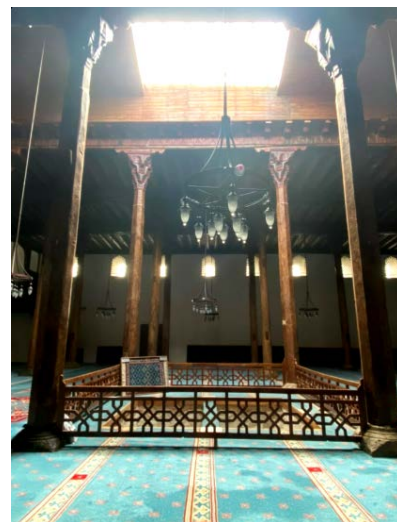


Fig. 12. *The snow pit (karlık) (Author)*

According to some Turkish art historians, the snow pit underneath the light well is symbolic and reminiscent of the interior courtyards of Central Asia [13]. The snow pit provides a distinct feature of interior space; it is encircled by interlaced geometric railings (Figure 13). A fountain provides coolness to the interior space in the summertime. The moisture from the snow pit (*karlık*) prevents the wooden columns from drying up and cracking.



Fig. 13. *The snow pit and its geometrical balustrades (Author)*

At the southwest corner of the harim is a sultan's gallery (Bey mahfil) of wood that is 2 meters high (Figure 14). The mahfil is accessed by wooden stairs on the side. The mahfil, made of walnut wood, has geometrically decorated wooden balustrades and the wood sits on stone bases that are carried by two columns with muqarnas capitals. The arches of the mahfil are in the style of Bursa arches. The mahfil ceiling has been raised 1.80 m higher than the mosque ceiling and is flat and covered with wooden beams [12]. Below the Bey (Sultan's) mahfil is another mahfil that again has a geometrically designed balustrade (Figure 15).



Fig. 14. *Sultan's mahfil (Mustafa Cambaz)*



Fig. 15. *Wooden balustrades of Sultan's mahfil (Author)*

The columns resting on the stone bases in the prayer hall are 7.50 m high and are of a one-piece structure. Some of the columns display a circular cross-section while some are of octagonal cut; they are made of cedar, called "iladin" in the region. Cedar is the preferred material because of its pleasant aroma and durability. The cedar trees used in the structure were brought in from the Amanos Mountains. After being cut down,

the cedar wood is soaked in the Beyşehir Lake for between five to six months and then laid out in manure for a period as a form of baking procedure. This increases the durability of the columns. The large carved muqarnas capitals are made of ebony. They usually contain vivid kalem işi decorations of the colors of red, blue, and cream. The wooden columns in the structure are tied together with wooden beams.

Its upper windows, pointed-arched in the *revzen* style, contain stained glass (Figure 8). There are no windows at the ground level. This arrangement is interpreted by some researchers as an effort to provide the sanctuary with an atmosphere conducive to the peaceful, noise-free performance of religious rites.

At the southeast corner of the harim, there is a flap on the floor that permits ingress into the basement level, where there are two small rooms known as cilehanes, or suffering chambers [2]. The women's gallery in the mosque is located above the congregational hall at the entrance [15].

4. Roof Structure and Decorative Features

The entire *harim* (praying hall) is covered with a flat ceiling with wooden beams on the interior. No nails have been used in the ceiling, which is made up of wooden beams that rest on wooden columns. The roof construction consists of secondary beams laid parallel to the mihrab and lying between the principal beams perpendicular to the mihrab (Figure 16). The cross-section of the secondary beams is circular. There are gaps about the width of 1.5 beams in-between the secondary beams. The main beams parallel to the mihrab rest on

wooden columns. Imposts are situated on top of the muqarnas capitals of the wooden columns. These are loadbearing and are tied to the main beams (Figure 16). The beams are exposed since they have not been covered, and thus the entire roof structure can be read from within. While the roof covering used to be of earth, in the repairs carried out in 1941 the structure was converted into a hipped roof, which was later covered with copper plating in 1956 [15].

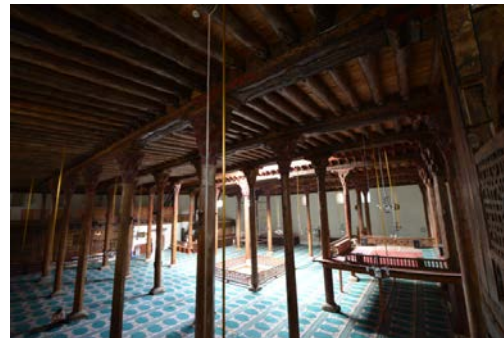


Fig. 16. *The flat ceiling with wooden beams over the harim (Mustafa Cambaz)*

All of the ceiling beams, the small wooden consoles supporting the beams, the muqarnas column capitals, and the impostes on the muqarnas capitals have been decorated with intricate kalem işi carvings dyed red with madder, adding a plastic effect to the structural elements (Figures 17 and 18) [12].

The decorations on the ceiling of the middle gallery are particularly intense (Figure 19). The seven six-point stars joined together here and the Turkish triangles between them are the most eye-catching of the adornments (Figure 20). These stars exhibit a three-dimensional effect. The concentration of the decorative elements in the broadest and highest middle gallery are also a point of

emphasis in the ceiling. The motifs in the decorative program of the structure derive from both indigenous and Islamic roots. The motifs include multi-point variations of stars and palmette-rumi patterns, with palmettes more concentrated inside the arches (Figures 18 - 20) [1].



Fig. 17. Above: *Wooden columns with muqarnas capitals and the wooden ceiling (Mustafa Cambaz)*. Below: *Wooden columns with muqarnas capitals (Author)*



Fig. 18. *Wooden ceiling beams and muqarnas capitals with kalemishi decorations (Mustafa Cambaz)*

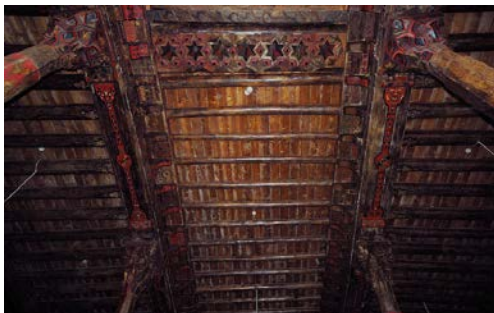


Fig. 19. *Six-point star muqarnas formations on the ceiling of the middle gallery (Mustafa Cambaz)*



Fig. 20. *Six-pointed stars on the ceiling of the middle gallery and the baklava-shaped Turkish triangles (Mustafa Cambaz)*

5. Conclusion

Beyşehir Eşrefoğlu Mosque, its 700-year history dating back to the thirteenth century, is a structure that reflects the richest wood carving workmanship to be found in Anatolia with its extraordinarily ornamented ceiling and its wooden columns boasting of kalem işi decorations. Besides the high quality of wood craftsmanship, the structure is the richest example of Seljuk artistic style with its tile mihrab, its minber rendered in the kundekari technique and its main portals. Built with walls of masonry and a maksur dome of brick, the structure exhibits great spatial integration and harmony with its wooden ceiling, wooden galleries, wood-balustraded snow pit, and wooden columns.

A reflection of the strong creative power and experimental prowess of the Seljuks in their mosque architecture in Anatolia, the inner area of the mosque, with its wooden columns with muqarnas capitals and colorful *kalem işi* decorations, presents a virtual forest of art captured in an aura of serenity. This legacy of culture deserves to be preserved and it is of vital importance that it be transferred to future generations.

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