

ПЕРСОНАЛИЯ

PERSONALIA

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Christ the Judge with Saints. Icon, detail. Burgas Art Gallery. Ioan of Ahtopol, icon painter, 1811. Photo I. Vanev

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A New Perspective on Bulgarian-Turkish Architectural Interactions: Understanding Fichev's Work Within The Context of Late Ottoman Baroque

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Abstract: After his stay in Edirne and Istanbul (1837–1841), Nikola Fichev returns to the Bulgarian lands with a rich and mature architectural vocabulary. This essay aims setting a new perspective on Fichev's work investigating its multilayered relations with present-day Turkey's architectural culture of 18th and early 19th centuries. This perspective, which is primarily based on architectural analysis and comparison, tries to reveal some aspects of the late Ottoman Istanbul's dynamics of exchange as well as the personal impact of Fichev within the panorama of 19th century Bulgarian architecture.

Key words: Ottoman Westernization, Late Ottoman architecture, Bulgaria and Istanbul, Nikola Fichev, Bulgarian Revival

Within the panorama of the 19th-century Bulgarian architecture, Nikola Fichev (also known as "usta" Kolyu Ficheto, 1800–1881) stood out for his extraordinary creative capacity, putting together the local elements with those who circulated outside of his region. We have poor information about his biography, yet several authors spoke about his stay in Constantinople (Tsarigrad for Bulgarians, present-day Istanbul)

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and Edirne (Odrin) in the early stage of his professional life². This stay seems to have greatly shaped his future work as an architect or master builder. In the early 1840s, once he was permanently back in Bulgaria, Fichev's work changed radically, assuming a self-confident and mature approach to architectural problems and displaying a novel and vast ornamental vocabulary which skillfully merged local, Ottoman Baroque and Western European features. This essay will interrogate which buildings Fichev may have seen during this stay and how these works may have influenced his architectural and artistic vocabulary once he was back to the Bulgarian lands.

Tchavdar Marinov convincingly argued how the 19th-century Bulgarian architecture, entitled as the Bulgarian Revival (*Възрожденска архитектура*) and presented by the ethno-nationalist 20th-century scholars as a rejection of the Ottoman cultural hegemony, was in fact in total continuity with what was being built in the capital and in other major urban centers of the empire³. Furthermore, he criticizes the state-sponsored scholarship throughout the communist regime which portrayed Fichev as a national "awakener" and retroactively provided him a revolutionary biography, though there were no sources to support this⁴. Considering that at the final phase of his career he worked mostly on governmental buildings under the patronage of the local governor Midhat Paşa, these depictions of Fichev as an anti-Ottoman master builder who gave forms to his nation's independence claims appear even odder. Thus, making new considerations on his work is essential and a comparative lecture with Istanbul can offer important keys for a deep comprehension of his skills. With the purpose of reaching a greater level of detail in the analysis, this brief essay will focus exclusively on the religious architecture of Fichev in relation to the sultanic buildings of Istanbul.

Nikolay Tuleshkov suggests that Fichev's stay in Edirne and Istanbul may have initiated in 1837 and lasted intermittently till 1840 or 1841. The same author asserts that, like in the case of many Bulgarian master builders, his stay was limited to spring and summer times – which permitted the constructions to progress- and during the winters, he was back in Tarnovo working in carving and joinery in partnership

² Stoykov 1976: 86, Tuleshkov 2001: 34.

³ Marinov 2017: 543-572.

⁴ Marinov 2017: 569.

with Stanyu Marangozina⁵. At the end of this stay he got his first seal as *ustabashiya* (устабашия, from Turkish *ustabaşı*) – i.e. master builder, presumably in the capital⁶. Fichev's journey to Istanbul was not an extraordinary event for this period, nor his stay was particularly challenging since he spoke fluent Turkish and understood Greek quite enough⁷ (the two predominant languages in the daily life and the construction entourages of the city). Moreover, from the early 18th century, important migration waves started to shape flourishing Bulgarian communities in Edirne and Istanbul⁸. Already in 1800s Bulgarians became one of the most consistent ethnic groups in the capital⁹. Since most of the Bulgarians were initially seasonal workers, even when they started becoming a settled community, they often kept close relationships with their homelands. An important number of them were gardeners, master builders and craftsmen and certainly this might have eased Fichev's integration within the professional milieu of Istanbul.

Which atmosphere Fichev could have witnessed in Istanbul and where we can place these three or four years within his artistic career? Starting from 1720s, Constantinople became the central motor to a turbulent movement of architectural renewal which by time involved other Ottoman territories¹⁰. With the construction of the well-known Nuruosmaniye Complex (1748–1755) (**Fig. 1**), the so-called Ottoman Baroque affirmed its potentials and the novelty of its architectural and ornamental codes¹¹. The architecture of this period was heavily influenced by the Baroque vocabulary originating from Italy, France and Austria. A new and more mature phase has initiated under the sultanate of Selim III (1789–1807) and his successor, Mahmud II (1808–1839), has taken the Europeanization of the empire to an unprecedented degree and used architecture as a solid instrument for displaying his power. Thus, during Fichev's stay, the Ottoman architecture was profoundly novel and Westernized, the traditional ornamental vocabulary was

5 Tuleshkov 2001: 34, Stoykov 1976: 88.

6 Tuleshkov 2001: 34.

7 Stoykov 1976: 87.

8 Kostandov 2011: 31-40.

9 For detailed statistics, see Shaw 1979: 268-275.

10 For the situation in the Balkans in general and Bulgaria in particular, see Hartmuth 2006: 137-156.

11 In Turkish, see Arel 1975: 59-62 and Kuban 2007: 526-536. The most exhaustive analysis of this complex in English is Rüstem 2013: 159-226. For the significance of the complex within the panorama of the Ottoman architectural history, see Hartmuth 2006: 44-47.



Fig. 1. Istanbul, Nuruosmaniye Mosque (1748–1755) by Simeon Kalfa. Detail of the Eastern façade with windows and portico arches with S and C profiles and elaborate curvy cornice. Photo A. Metin

abandoned almost a century ago and non-Muslim architects and artists, who were particularly familiar with European forms, were increasingly dominant in the sultan-ic constructions (local Greeks and Armenians, alongside with *Frenk*, i.e. Italian and French architects and builders).

The continuous links between Istanbul and the present-day Bulgarian lands thanks to the seasonal, itinerant and settled master builders, created a remarkable architectural permeability between these two contexts, allowing several Bulgarian churches built between late 18th and early 19th centuries

to share common features with the buildings of the capital. Unlike the mosques, the churches were not commissioned by actors who were in direct contact with Istanbul (like pashas or the sultan-ic family members), so the shared forms that they display with the capital are more meaningful for understanding the extent of these connections. The catholicon of the Batoshevski Monastery (1836–1838) is a clear example of the late Ottoman Baroque forms appearing in Bulgarian lands¹², like the rounded corners of the eastern façade and the overflowing central part of the entrance portico clearly resembling to the Complex of Mihrişah Valide Sultan (1792–1796)¹³.

12 G. Stoykov gives a panorama of the 19th-century constructions and renovations of the Bulgarian monasteries in *Stoykov* 1961: 360-379.

13 *Arel* 1975: 87-88.

What his stay in Istanbul could have changed in the architecture of Fichev? For answering this question, we should first have a look at his preceding works, which are the Transfiguration Monastery, Veliko Tarnovo region (started in 1834 with Dimitar Sofianlyata), St. Nicholas Church in Tarnovo (1834–1835 in collaboration with Ivan Davdata, completed in 1836) and Solak Mosque in Kazanlak (ca 1837)¹⁴. If we exclude the latter, of which we have almost no precise documentation, we might say that the two churches preceding his stay in the Ottoman capital were in collaboration with local master builders whose vocabulary was deeply rooted in the longstanding Medieval Bulgarian tradition. In St. Nicholas (**Fig. 2**), the upper gallery is the freshest element we could individuate from this early stage, and it is most likely designed by Fichev himself after the completion of the rest of the building, perhaps when his stay in Istanbul has already initiated. Indeed, starting with his work, a new link appeared between the Bulgarian churches and Istanbul mosques which underscores the role of Fichev in the definition of what has been till now referred to as the Bulgarian Revival Architecture. It consists in the use of dynamic undulations in walls surfaces and in the plans of the upper galleries (*емнория, етпорија* in Bulgarian). Undulated walls were already in use from the 1740s in Istanbul thanks to Baroque influences, and these compositions reached their maximum expression with the Küçük Efendi Complex¹⁵ (ca 1818). Fichev used undulated compositions at the eastern elevations of the St. Spas (Ascension) Church in Tarnovo¹⁶ (**Fig. 3**) and Holy Trinity

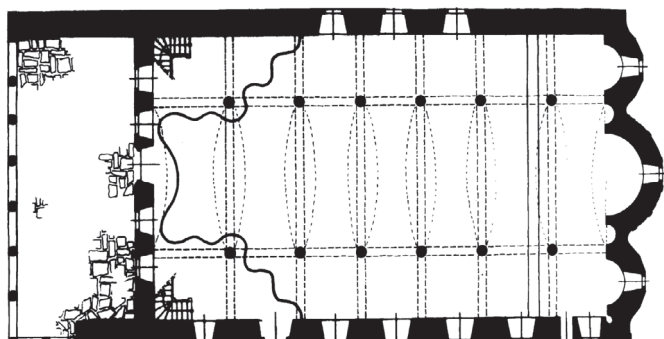


Fig. 2. Plan of St. Nicholas Church in Veliko Tarnovo (completed in 1851) by Nikola Fichev, with undulated upper galleries. Plan after Stefan Mateev and Emil Momirov

¹⁴ For these three early buildings, see *Tuleshkov* 2001: 29-35. Moreover, further information on the Transfiguration Monastery can be found in *Stoykov* 1976: 91-97.

¹⁵ *Kuran* 1963.

¹⁶ *Kirova* 2010. I would like to thank Dr. Radosveta Kirova for the image and for helping me about my research on Bulgarian architecture.



Fig. 3. Veliko Tarnovo, view of the ruins of St. Spas Church (1858–1859) by Nikola Fichev, with remnants of the apsidal wall. Photo R. Kirova

in Svishtov¹⁷. Upper galleries (*mahfil* in Turkish) with curvy plans appear some decades later, one of the earliest examples being the Hamid-i Evvel Mosque in Beylerbeyi¹⁸ (Fig. 4). Here, the *hüinkâr mahfil* (sultan's lodge) – built in 1811 – is projected towards the prayer hall with a dynamic convex curve. In fact, this feature appears very often at sultan's lodges added to pre-existing mosques by Mahmud II, exactly in the years Nikola Fichev was in the city, like those in Mahmud Paşa¹⁹ and Atik Valide Mosques (dating respectively to 1828–1829 and 1835)²⁰. In Bulgaria, Holy Trinity Church in Bansko (1833–1835)²¹ has a curvy outlined upper gallery whose plan resembles the S and C profiled arches which were used in that period. However, it is this early work by Fichev, St. Nicholas in Tarnovo, which takes this composition to an unprecedented complexity. Here, each part of the gallery displays

17 For a brief history of the construction process see *Panteleva 2001*.

18 For more information on this building, see *Arel 1975: 77-78, Kuban 2007: 629-632 and Rüstem 2013: 329-369*.

19 *Kuban 2007: 189-190*.

20 The interest for public and urban visibility of the sultan reached an unprecedented degree during the reign of Mahmud II (1808–1839). For an exhaustive list see *Özgülven 2009: 31-44*.

21 *Bichev 1954: 93-96*.

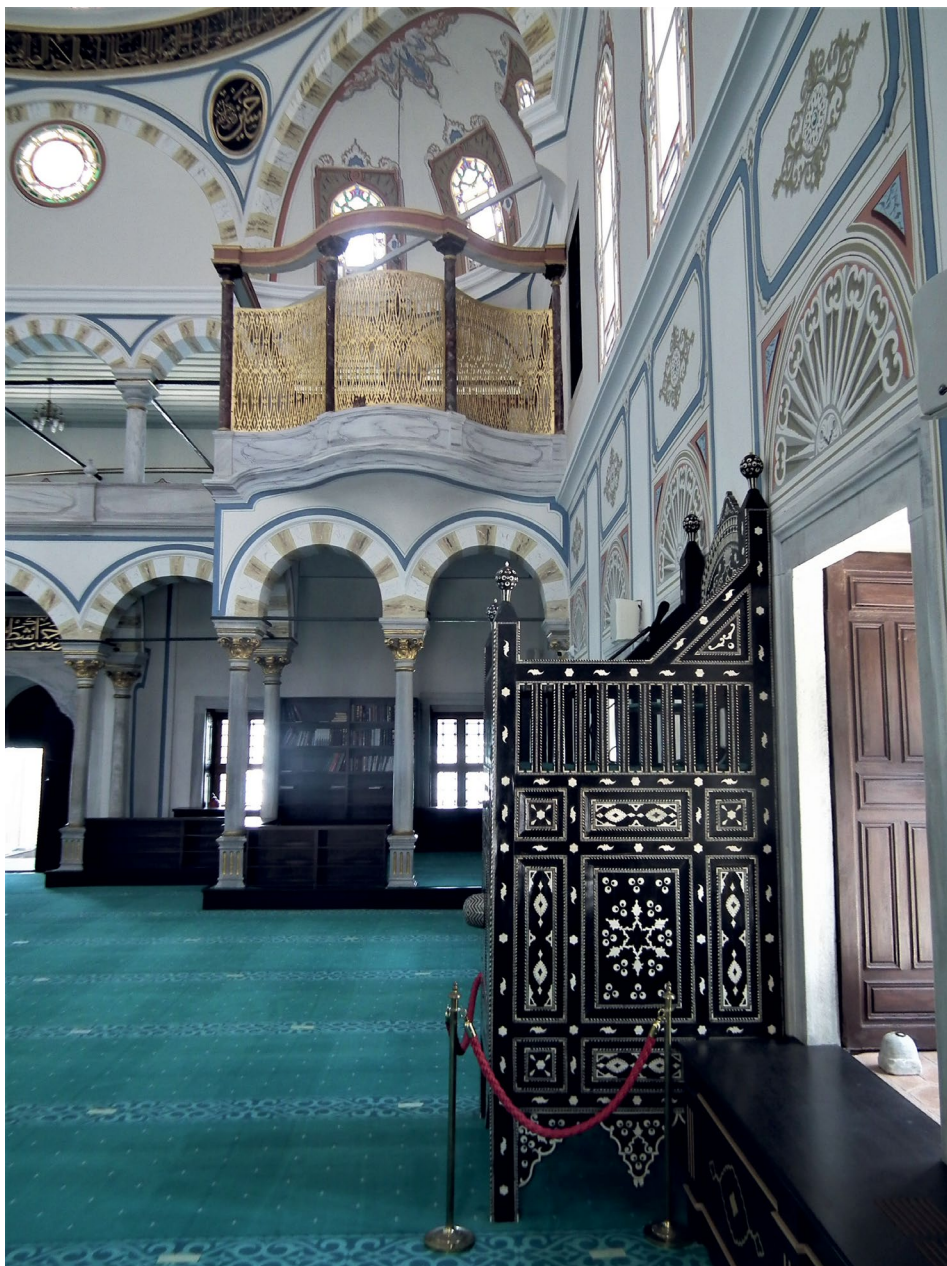


Fig. 4. Istanbul, Hamid-i Evvel Mosque in Beylerbeyi district (1788–1811). Sultan's lodge built in 1811 at the upper gallery. Photo A. Metin



Fig. 5. Istanbul, Laleli Mosque (1759–1763), attributed to Mehmet Tahir Ağa. Detail of the Southwestern façade with arcatures, curvy transition profiles and portico. Photo A. Metin

a set of repeated profound undulations with a brand-new dynamism. Subsequently, these galleries had great impact and became a frequent *leitmotiv* of the 19th-century Bulgarian architecture thanks to the recognition that Fichev's work gained since the very beginning.

According to Tuleshkov, within the cosmopolitan panorama of the 19th-century Istanbul, Fichev had the possibility of a first-hand encounter with the Western forms and know-hows, since he was in contact with Italian master builders and artisans working in Istanbul²². This connection with Italians has been frequently interpreted as the source of the Lombardian-type medieval arcatures that Fichev used extensively starting from 1840s (St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki at Kilifarevo

²² Tuleshkov 2001: 34.



Fig. 6. Istanbul Topkapı Palace, the portico built behind the Salutation Gate (Babüsselam) in 1758–1759. Photo C. M. Ferrier, early 1850s

Monastery, Nativity of Virgin Mary in Tarnovo, St. Prophet Elijah, St. Nicholas in Dryanovo). In fact, similar elements dating back to the medieval period can be found in some parts of the Bulgarian lands, like in Nessebar (Church of St. Stephen, known as New Metropolis, and Christ Pantocrator)²³. Notwithstanding, arcatures were certainly a *leitmotiv* of the 18th-century Ottoman architecture presumably thanks to the same Italian master builders working in the city. Examples can be found at the pedestal of the minarets of Nuruosmaniye Mosque (1748–1755) and the lateral façades of Laleli Mosque (1759–1763) (Fig. 5). Moreover, if during his stay Fichev visited also Bursa, as the similarities between the Covered Bridge of Lovech (1874–1875) and

²³ I would like to thank Prof. Emmanuel Moutafov for this indication.

the 15th-century Irgandı Bridge suggest²⁴, he may have also observed the arcatures surrounding the Hüdavendigâr Mosque (1365–1385)²⁵, where a foreign craftsmanship is very likely.

Even before Fichev's activity, the complex cornice profiles and the arches enriched with S and C curves of the Ottoman Baroque appeared quite often in Bulgaria. These arches were formulated in Istanbul during the so-called Tulip Era around 1720s, as a completely novel type initially used for decorating fountains, mihrabs, windows and portals. In few decades, they had an extensive diffusion around the empire (see Kurşun Çeşme built in Shumen in 1774 or the *phiale* of the Hilandar Monastery at Mount Athos dating to 1784). The earliest example of such arch profiles in Fichev's work is the entrance portal of St. Prophet Elijah Church built at Plakovo Monastery completed around 1845, which can be put in relation to many buildings in Istanbul. Later in the 18th century, these arches started being used also as structural arches covering major spans like in the portico added to the Babüselâm Gate of Topkapı Palace (1758–1759) (Fig. 6). The curvy multifoil arch of the entrance portal of St. Spas Church in Tarnovo (Fig. 7) is visibly similar to this latter example, as well as to the portal of the *hiınkar kapısı* (sultan's gate) to Nusretiye Mosque (1823–1826).



Fig. 7. Detail of the entrance portal of St. Spas Church in Veliko Tarnovo (1858–1859) by Nikola Fichev. Photo M. Ahsmann, Wikimedia Commons

Another element which is relevant for our analysis are the window profiles. The catholicon of Rila Monastery built by Master Pavel (1834–1837) and the Virgin Mary Cathedral of Pazardjik built by masters from Bratisgovo region (1836–1837) display clear acquaintanceship with the *oeil-de-boeuf* and *quatrefoil* windows

24 For a detailed comparison see *Tuleshkov* 2019: 100–112.

25 *Kuban* 2007: 86–88.



Fig. 8. Dryanovo, St. Nicholas Church (1851) by Nikola Fichev. Photo S. Traykov, Wikimedia Commons

which were used very often in 18th and 19th centuries Istanbul²⁶. We know that Fichev was cooperating with Bratsigovo masters during his stay in Istanbul and once back in Bulgaria, he used these window profiles extensively, like in Nativity of Mary Church in Tarnovo (1844) and St. Nicholas in Dryanovo (1851) (**Fig. 8**).

In St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki Church at the Kilifarevo Monastery (1840–1842)²⁷ (**Fig. 9**), and Nativity of Mary in Tarnovo (1844), both built shortly after his journey, Fichev successfully shows his great familiarity with the undulated corniches and entablatures of Istanbul's key Ottoman Baroque constructions. The canopies sheltering the lateral entrances of the Tarnovo church and the cornice highlighting the center of the façade of St. Demetrius can be easily put in relation with the

26 The first example of an oeil-de-boeuf window in Istanbul is the Mosque of Hacı Beşir Ağa Complex (1744–1745).

27 Angelov 2001, see in particular p. 135 where the author defines the cornice and the *kobilitsa* of the church as "very characteristic of the manner of Usta Kolyu Fichev" without further indications on the origins of these elements.

tomb of the Nuruosmaniye Complex (1748–1755)²⁸. This latter being considered as the masterpiece of the Ottoman Baroque since its completion, we cannot imagine that Fichev, a greatly attentive observer, has not visited it. Few years later, St. Nicholas Church that he built in his native Dryanovo (completed in 1851) goes one step further where the portico presents a concatenation of five arches with different spans (Fig. 8). These arches which may seem irregular and aleatory at first sight, are on contrary wisely combined considering what stays behind and they are visually unified by the undulated cornice surmounting the whole element. Indeed, at the arrival of Fichev, the newest sultanic complex in Istanbul was that of Nusretiye Mosque (1823–1826)²⁹ which is distinguished by its extensive use of continuous undulations. The twin pavilions of this complex (*sebil* and *muvakkithane*) as well as numerous elements of the interiors are enlivened by these concatenations of concave and convex lines giving the impression of a fluid continuity (Fig. 10). The curved eaves of *kobilitsa* (кобилица) type tympanums which characterized the main façades of Bulgarian churches from the late 18th century, met with Fichev’s work a smaller scale, like we can observe in many buildings of Istanbul³⁰. Furthermore, these twin pavilions are surmounted by roofs with unprecedented complex geometries resembling tents or inverted flowers,



28 Hartmuth 2006: 43-47. The author compares the undulated profiles of these corniches with similar Viennese examples. Comparisons with Vienna are the main core of Bichev’s explanation on the origins of the ‘Bulgarian Baroque’, where the mediation of Istanbul seems to be intentionally lessened. Bichev 1954: 127-151.

29 Kuban 2007: 631-633.

30 I discussed the links between the Ottoman Baroque and the *kobilitsa* tympanum at the international conference “Encager le ciel: approches artistiques, historiques et anthropologiques des volières” at Académie de France à Rome in 2020. Also, the essay of T. Marinov mentions some parallelisms between Istanbul and Plovdiv while discussing the *kobilitsa*. See Marinov 2017: 545-546.



Fig. 9. St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki Church at the Kilifarevo Monastery (1840–1842) by Nikola Fichev. All façades are enriched with arcatures and pilasters and the entrance is emphasized by the curvy cornice. Photo B. Krustev, Wikimedia Commons

like those used by Fichev for covering most of his bell towers (see for instance, Plakovo and Transfiguration Monasteries' bell towers, respectively from 1856 and 1861). Towards the end of his career, Fichev merges wisely all these elements we analyzed in Holy Trinity Church in Svishtov (1865–1867)³¹ which becomes a condensed representative of his religious architecture. Here, even though the final product preserves a distinctive local and personal aspect, the use of curves, window and roof profiles and the rich vocabulary of the decorations are strictly related to the late-Ottoman Baroque forms of Istanbul.

³¹ A detailed architectural analysis of the building can be found in *Stoykov* 1976: 112-120.



Fig. 10. Istanbul, the twin pavilions of the Nusretiye Complex (1823–1826) by Krikor Balyan. Photo Robertson & Beato, 1852/53

As we analyzed, the architecture of Fichev witnesses a profound familiarity with the Ottoman forms which derived from the capital. Since he did not leave treatises about his architectural theory nor any written document on his *modus operandi*, the only way to approach Fichev's work is by analyzing and contextualizing his buildings as first-hand testimonies of his knowledges. The ethnocentric Bulgarian scholarship of the last century carefully avoided comparisons with present-day Turkey while understanding the 19th-century Bulgarian architecture and

this approach also conditioned the comprehension of Fichev's work³². Even in studies where the role of Istanbul was questioned, like in M. Bichev, the general proclivity was to lessen the importance of the Ottoman models in order to underscore that of Central and Western Europe. Certainly, this attitude has to be understood within the socio-political climate of the country, however, it neglects a very important aspect of the socio-cultural dynamics of the 19th-century Bulgaria which are the cross-regional interactions with other Ottoman territories. Bulgaria was indeed a scene for the so-called Ottoman Baroque from the very beginning thanks to buildings of sultanic or local patronship in Shumen (Tombul Mosque built between 1740 and 1744³³ and Kurşun Fountain in 1774) and later on in Samokov (Bayraklı Mosque dating to 1845³⁴). Thus, 19th-century Bulgarian architects and artists had concrete models both in their own land and in the capital, to emulate, combine and interpret. This double-layered relation with the Ottoman Baroque was for sure quite determining for the Bulgarian art of the 18th and 19th centuries and the dynamics of exchange were crucial for 'actors' like Nikola Fichev. Biographers of Fichev, such as G. Stoykov and N. Tuleshkov, cited his stay in Edirne and Istanbul only in an anecdotal way, without further questioning of his following work within this perspective of the relations with the Ottoman Baroque. However, as I attempted with this brief essay, a more detailed analysis of Fichev's work in comparison with the 18th- and 19th-century architecture of Istanbul could reveal important aspects of his architectural and artistic background. Only thanks to a complete comprehension of references, we could appreciate the distinctive features his repertory as well as his personal role within the history of Bulgarian architecture. In the 19th-century panorama, Nikola Fichev, an architect and builder who shaped the architectural culture of his country like any other, obtains a special place in both Balkan and late Ottoman architectural histories, thanks to the extent of his vocabulary which resulted from his rich personal and professional path.

32 For sure, a more temperate attitude is the case of Mihaila Staynova (also latinized as Michaila Stainova) who greatly contributed to the studies on the Ottoman architecture in the Balkan peninsula (see *Staynova* 1979 and especially 1995). However, her studies focused on the Ottoman art with the most conventional meaning of the term, i.e. within the Islamic and imperial contexts. Thus, her work can contribute only partially to the understanding of the architecture of non-Muslim actors, including Fichev.

33 *Kuban* 2007: 592-593 and *Staynova* 1979: 595-596.

34 *Staynova* 1979: 596-601.

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Нова перспектива към българо-турските архитектурни взаимодействия: работата на Фичев в контекста на късния османски барок

Алпер Метин



Българската архитектурна историография от ХХ в. приписва множество антиосмански характеристики на архитектурния стил на Фичев. Въпреки това неговата работа показва сериозни познания и забележителна приемственост с построеното в османската столица Истанбул. Статията изтъква приноса, който престоят на Фичев в Истанбул и Одрин (1837–1841) има за архитектурния му опит, чрез подробен анализ на религиозните сгради, построени от архитекта от 40-те години на ХІХ в. насам. Аналогии с архитектурните и орнаментални особености на т.нар. османски барокови султански сгради от ХVІІІ и ХІХ в. разкриват значимостта на този престой за професионалната подготовка на Фичев като архитект новатор и майстор и се дискутират подробно в настоящото изследване. В същото време тази контекстуализация позволява по-доброто разбиране на ролята му на архитект, оказал силно влияние върху българската архитектура от неговия период.

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