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Sultan Mehmet II Construction of Muslim and Ottoman Prestige

When the Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, many European elites felt threatened. The Pope, Nicholas V, called for a crusade against the Ottomans and many saw the Turks as barbaric and lawless. However, the Ottoman Turks saw themselves as the true heirs to the Roman Empire. Emerging from the Byzantine Empire, the Ottomans were desperate to define themselves as a culture separate from and superior to the Byzantines. Aware of the developments, most notably within the city-states of the Italian Peninsula, termed the Renaissance, Sultan Mehmed II invited many European scholars to his court to help elevate the Ottoman Empire.

The Byzantines previously had seen themselves as the heirs to the Roman Empire. However, the Ottomans sought to adopt the scientific and artistic advancements of the Ancient Romans instead of Catholicism. The Ottomans were distinctively Muslim and desired to associate their religious advancements with cultural ones. In order to do this, Mehmed II had to first assert Islam's superiority over the Christian past. He began by transforming the Byzantine churches into mosques, most notably the Hagia Sophia commissioned by Justinian and completed in 537. Mehmed also expanded the Ottoman territory to include Serbia (1458), Athens and the Peloponnese (1460), and Bosnia (1466).

In a more symbolic sense, Mehmed II employed Janissaries (Turkish *yeniçeri*, *yeni* new and *çeri* militia) as his leading military force. The Janissaries were Christian slaves, taken from their villages between the ages of seven and ten, and raised to be loyal property and soldiers of the emperor. Their loyalty was gained both through their strict training and the prospect of rewards for good service. The Janissaries were trained bowmen whose lack of political connections within the Empire made them invaluable to the stronger sultans. Some two thirds of the Grand Viziers of the Ottoman Empire up at least until the sixteenth century had been Janissaries, as were many other officials of the empire. The ability to take Christian slaves and convert them into Muslim fighters shows the power of the Empire over Christians and importance to enforce their Muslim and Ottoman power.

Outside of the political conquests, Mehmed II was also trying to construct a rich new culture for Istanbul. When beginning upon new building projects, Mehmed II drew on European architects. He employed Greek architect, Christodoulos (known in Turkish as Atik Sinan), to build the Fatih Camii. An Italian follower of Leon Battista Alberti, Filarete was invited and may have contributed to the work of the Topkapi Sarayi. Nonetheless, Mehmed II certainly employed many other architects who had been trained and worked in Europe to work on his palace Topkapi Sarayi.

The most exceptional relationship that Sultan Mehmed II had with Renaissance artists was with the Venetian Gentile Bellini. Venice had a long history of trade relations with the Byzantines. Decades of war followed the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and Venice found itself in a clash of civilizations between the Islamic world and Christian Europe. However, both parties eventually recognized the need for peace and the trade relations were normalized with the Ottomans. Goods were certainly traded- the Ottomans provided grain and colored ash for glass-making- but Venetians seemed to also export its top artists.

During the summer of 1479, Mehmed II wrote to Doge Giovanni Mocenigo requesting that the Venetians send him 'a good painter'. In this time, exporting artists meant helping to placate diplomatic relationships between polities. Mehmed II had an inflated idea of his own Empire, but nonetheless the Venetians needed to accommodate him. Gentile Bellini arrived in Istanbul in the autumn of 1479 as a part of a 1479 peace agreement and remained until the beginning of 1481. Bellini produced many portraits of Mehmed II, scribes, janissaries, and other members of the social elite. The masterwork of this period is the portrait of the Sultan from 1480 currently located in the National Gallery of London.

This portrait encapsulates the Sultan's idea of himself as a '*Victor Orbis*'- utilizing the Ancient Roman past and European Renaissance advancements to catapult the Islamic East onto a global stage. Here, he is presented in a three-quarter view; a composition adopted from Ancient Roman techniques. The barrel vaulted arch is clearly an allusion to one of the most famous Ancient Roman architectural achievements, although the arch and pilasters are enhanced with motifs from the Venetian *quattrocento* repertory. The embroidered cloth encrusted with jewels and a crown reflects the taste for rich textiles, heavily developed in both Venice and the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, a deep red caftan, brown fur mantle, and the turban wrapped over a red *taj* indicates his rank as well as his identity as a Muslim. The two groups of three crowns declare the actual political power that the Sultan did waver, symbolizing the extent of Ottoman power over Greece, Asia and Trebisonda. Ultimately, as patron and subject of the artwork, Mehmed II has the power to manipulate other cultures to benefit and elevate his own.