

Curating a Nation: The Interplay of Museums and Muslim Nationalism in Modern Turkey*

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Abstract. Over the past two decades, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has held power in Turkey through five different governments, with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the helm throughout. This AKP has brought about significant changes for both the Turkish State and society, including the emergence of a new national ideology that Jenny White epitomized Muslim Nationalism. Muslim Nationalism in its Turkish specificity brought forth a new Turkey and “new Turks”, with state-sponsored institutions playing a key role, largely driven by top-down efforts to build a cohesive national identity. Museums have played a significant role in the process of nation-building with many new institutions featuring stories of sultans, Islamic scientists, and Ottoman warriors while neglecting other equally important symbols and heritages of Turkey, such as the Greek, Roman, and Byzantine heritages. These museums are important state-sponsored rituals that promote the vision of the “new Turkey” envisioned by the ruling class. This study focuses on four museums: the Istanbul Museum of the History of Science and Technology in Islam, the Panorama Museum 1453, the Kabatepe Simulation Centre and Museum, and the newly renovated Topkapı Museum. By examining the connections between these museums, we can gain a better understanding of how this ideology is exhibited and perpetuated through cultural institutions, and what image of Turkey and Turks emerges from them.

Keywords: memory, museums, nationalism.

Riassunto. Negli ultimi due decenni, il Partito per la Giustizia e lo Sviluppo (AKP) ha detenuto il potere in Turchia attraverso cinque diversi governi, con Recep Tayyip Erdoğan al timone per tutto il tempo. L'AKP ha apportato cambiamenti significativi sia allo Stato che alla società turca, tra cui l'emergere di una nuova ideologia nazionale che Jenny White ha qualificato come nazionalismo musulmano. Il nazionalismo musulmano, nella sua specificità turca, ha dato vita a una nuova Turchia e a “nuovi turchi”, con istituzioni sponsorizzate dallo Stato che dall'alto verso il basso svolgono un ruolo chiave per costruire un'identità nazionale coesa. I musei hanno svolto un ruolo significativo nel processo di costruzione della nazione, con molte nuove istituzioni che presentano storie di sultani, scienziati islamici e guerrieri ottomani, trascurando altri simboli e patrimoni ugualmente importanti, come il patrimonio greco, romano e bizantino. Questi musei sono importanti rituali sponsorizzati dallo Stato che promuovono la visione della “nuova Turchia” immaginata dalla classe dirigente. Questo studio si concentra su quattro musei: il Museo di Istanbul della Storia della Scienza e della Tecnologia nell'Islam, il Museo Panorama 1453, il Centro di Simulazione e Museo Kabatepe e il Museo Topkapı, recentemente ristrutturato. Esaminando le connessioni tra questi musei, possiamo comprendere meglio come questa ideologia sia esposta e perpetuata attraverso le istituzioni culturali e quale immagine della Turchia e dei turchi emerga da esse.

Parole chiave: memoria, musei, nazionalismo

Introduction

«Museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political» (Benedict Anderson, 1991, p. 182). The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002 and since then has ruled Turkey uninterruptedly. The long government rule of the AKP led to critical changes both in domestic and foreign policy (Keyman, 2014). In 2016, Jean-François Pérouse and Nicolas Cheviron

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(2016) wrote that the advent of Erdoğan could be compared to the advent of Atatürk, the first President of Turkey and founder of the Turkish Republic. Today, we can call this a certainty, as Erdoğan largely surpassed Atatürk in terms of years at the head of the Turkish Republic (this is Erdoğan's 21st year at the head of Turkey), which granted him the time to re-shape the country. While initially AKP's Turkey was seen by scholars worldwide as progressive in economy and conservative in domestic policy, it turned increasingly authoritarian after the general elections of June 2018.¹ As Taspınar (2018) wrote, after 2018 Turkey took a big step toward nationalist fascism. Besides the growing authoritarian grasp of the AKP's leader, Islam entered the Turkish political arena with laws that increased the role and visibility of religion within the Turkish society. To materialize the religious and authoritarian stance of Turkey's president, Erdoğan, both scholars and journalists have used the epithet "New Sultan" (Cagaptay, 2017).

Since the very beginning, the AKP advertised its coming with a motto, *Yeni Türkiye Yolunda* (Towards a new Turkey), which aimed to set a divide between the pre-AKP and post-AKP era. After more than twenty years, one could agree that the AKP has definitely been a trigger of important changes shaping a "new Turkey". This is certainly true regarding skyrocketing inflation. In fact, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute, the average annual inflation rate in Turkey from 2002 to 2021 was around 9.5%, while the highest annual inflation rate during this period was a massive 25.24% in 2018. Inflation aside, in the eyes of the AKP, to be new meant to be different from the other parties, especially from the Kemalists, which had ruled Turkey for decades pushing for secularism, nationalism, populism, and statism. The new Turkey of Erdoğan built, since the beginning, on a new national ideology, which leveraging on White (2009) we call Turkish Muslim nationalism. Turkish Muslim nationalism builds much on the Ottoman, Turkic, and Islamic heritage of Turkey and less on other likewise important heritages of Turkey, such as the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Armenian, and Kurdish. a new form of nationalism in Turkey that is distinct from previous secular nationalist ideologies. This new nationalism is based on a shared Muslim identity and a rejection of the West and its values, which are seen as a threat to Turkish culture and traditions. This new nationalism, White (2009) argues, has been used to consolidate the AKP's power and suppress dissent, particularly among Turkey's Kurdish minority.

Turkish Muslim Nationalism found its way through state sponsored institutions, which Pierre Bourdieu equated to a factory of national emotions (Bourdieu, 2014): public shows (like the annual celebration of the conquest of Constantinople), decorated with speeches of state officials, covered by the media, and exhibited in new technological museums. The public is captured and filled with nostalgia for a golden – and yet imagined – Turkish past made of Sultans, Ottoman heroes, and Islamic scientists.

Among the many public institutions that stage a new past for a new Turkey are museums. The building of a number of new museums has sparked the interest of the most renowned daily media, in Turkey and beyond: *The Economist* (2016), *Der Spiegel* (Steinvorth, 2009), *Al-Monitor* (Akyol 2014), reporting about new museums in Turkey as the mirror of the political changes. Also scholarly studies picked on the subject and carried out a number of studies on it (Posocco, 2022; Bozoğlu, 2019). The hypothesis, for most, is that by functioning as performative cabinets exhibiting the national ideology of the ruling party, new state-sponsored museums mirrored the new Turkish nation

¹ For an account of Turkish authoritarianism under the AKP read: Öktem K. and Akkoyunlu K. (2016) *Exit from democracy: illiberal governance in Turkey and beyond*. In *Journal Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* Volume 16, 2016 - Issue 4. Pages 469-480; Öktem K. and Akkoyunlu K. (2016) *Existential insecurity and the making of a weak authoritarian regime in Turkey*. *Journal Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*. Volume 16, 2016 - Issue 4. Pages 505-527; Başer B. and Erdi Öztürk A. (2017) *Authoritarian Politics in Turkey: Elections, Resistance and the AKP*. I.B. Tauris. London and New York City. Alkan A. (2015) *New Metropolitan Regime of Turkey: Authoritarian Urbanization via (Local) Governmental Restructuring*. In *Lex Localis - Journal of Local Self-Government*. Vol. 13. No. 3. pp. 849 – 877. July 2015; Eraydin A. and Taşan-Kok T. (2014) *State Response to Contemporary Urban Movements in Turkey: A Critical Overview of State Entrepreneurialism and Authoritarian Interventions*. In *Antipode* Volume 46. Issue 1. January 2014. Pages 110–129; Yesil B. (2016) *Media in new Turkey: The origins of an authoritarian neoliberal state*. University of Illinois Press.

incarnating a new national identity as engineered by the ruling class. Despite the abundance of literature on nationalism, there are few studies, aside from Posocco's (2022, 2020, 2018, 2019) works, that undertake a comparative analysis to make sense of this assumption. In an effort to address this gap, this article compares four museums and proposes the ideal types of Turkish identities that are promoted by them. The central research question is: who is the Turk portrayed by the new museums built in the age of Erdogan? In 2009, Jenny White (2009) gained prominence in Turkish studies with her idea that 'the identity of the new Turks is that of a pious Muslim Turk whose subjectivity and vision of the future is shaped by an imperial Ottoman past overlaid onto a republican framework, but divorced from the Kemalist state project. In other words, everything from lifestyle to public and foreign policy are up for reinterpretation, not necessarily according to Islamic principles (although Islamic ethics and imagery may play a role), much less Islamic law (in which few Turks have any expertise), but according to a distinctively Turkish post imperial sensibility' (White, 2009, p. 9). Is the new Turk the pious Muslim Turk described by White, or are there other identities being promoted by these museums? If so, what are they?

This article attempts to provide some answers by drawing on an original theoretical framework based on theories of nationalism. It then proceeds analysing four case studies of museums through this lens, with the goal of contributing to the study of the Turkish museum in a comparative perspective.

1. Theoretical Framework

There is a solid body of studies that emphasize state-centric theories of nation-making. This includes Breuilly (1982), Mann (1995), Brubaker (1992), Hobsbawm (1983), Gellner (1983), and Anderson (1991). These studies have one common principle: States plays a major role in the construction of nations. In particular, modern nations seem to be organically tied to the development of and the changes within modern bureaucratic States which seek 'to unite the people subjected to its rule by means of homogenisation, creating a common culture, symbols, values, reviving traditions and myths of origin, and sometimes inventing them' (Guibernau, 2003, p. 4). As rituals of the State (Duncan, 1995), museums have functioned as tools that contribute to the making of these national symbols and values, and as devices that revive traditions and myths of origin, and sometimes invent them. Anderson phrased the State-museum relationship as follows, the issue as follows 'museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political' (Anderson, 1991, p. 182).

Also the literature on museums as state-sponsored institutions that contribute to nation-making is large and relevant to this article. This includes studies on identity negotiation and construction in heritage, and museums as institutions created to celebrate the nation (Mclean, 2006; Newmann & Mclean, 2006; Macdonald, 2003; Fyfe, 2011). These studies root back to Tony Bennett and his *Birth of the Museum* (1995), Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture* (1992), and to Macdonald (2003), whose article on *Museums, national, post-national and transcultural identities* is still a point of reference for museum scholars.

Museums represent one of many factors that, like national anthems, national flags, national schools, national orchestras, national Olympics, etc., contribute to what Bourdieu called the factory of national emotions (Bourdieu, 2014). The birth of the museum was a moment for "culturing" the public and for bringing "culture", which Macdonald provokingly called "high culture", to the masses (Macdonald, 2003, p. 2). In this view, national museums were born mainly as institutions *for* the people, certainly not *of* the people in the sense of exhibiting popular culture (Bennett, 1995).

Within the macro category of museum, national museums display national history and contribute to infuse national values into what Maurice Halbwachs called "collective memory" (1950). All museums, as social institutions, deal with collective memory, including national museums. The same is true for Turkish museums.

There is a small but solid body of studies on the Turkish museum. Among them, Wendy Shaw's article on *National Museums in the Republic of Turkey* (2011) summarizes best the situation in

Turkey. For Shaw, until the 1980s, museums have been subject to a centralized system at the head of which is the Turkish state. This vision is extended to the present day, as pointed out by Bonini-Baraldi *et al.* (2014) in their study of the Turkish museum, who argue that the policy of decentralization implemented in the 2000s by the AKP has interested only marginal areas of the heritage field. Centralization remains the core element. This is supported by Shaw (2011), who showed that since Atatürk, politics in Turkey has played an important role in the making of national narratives in museums.

Under Atatürk and his legacy, museums in the 1920s-1960s had a specific focus on ethnicity, and emphasized the Turkic origins of the nation avoiding the emphasis on the Ottoman and Islamic past. In the 1950s, Turkey opened to the multi-party system but Kemalism kept a strong hold on national museums. The 1960s are seen as an era of regional proliferation of the national model of the museum, whereas more important changes occurred in the 1980s, 1990s, and especially in the recent two decades. The 1980s and 1990s mark, according to Shaw (2011, p. 935), an era of privatization of national ideology in Turkey, and an era of liberalization and democratization that led to the opening of a number of private museums built by wealthy Turkish families. An even more important change occurred though in the 2000s, with the rise of pro-Islamic governments all under the flag of the Justice and Development Party. During this period, state initiatives have focused largely on strengthening exhibitions that emphasize Islamic heritage, including Ottoman heritage (Shaw, 2011, p. 937). The works of Kılıçkaya (2010), Göktürk (2010), Bozkuş (2014), Türel (2006), Öncü (2007), Aronsson (2011), and Shaw (2007) prove this hypothesis true. This does not mean that with the coming to power of the AKP all museums in Turkey were subject to change. The museum institution in Turkey mirrors a complex scenario with museums constructed in the Kemalist period, small institutions, and private museums built in the 1980s and 1990s that 'reinforce various narratives of state ideology, heritage, and identity construction as these narratives have changed over the course of time' (Shaw, 2011, p. 942). Nonetheless, it is key to underline the current trend, in particular the emphasis that the Turkish state puts on the combination of Islamic, Ottoman, and Turkic heritage in combination with strong nationalist stances, thus a political position that prioritizes the interests, culture, and values of the Turkish nation above those of other nations

2. Methodology

This article brings evidence from a qualitative research methodology. It uses direct observation of the museums' exhibits, analysis of transcripts in Italian and English, audiovisual materials, and historical analysis. Historical analysis involves the examination of how museums narrate historical events, people, and contexts, as well as how these narratives are linked to the AKP's national ideology. The goal was to understand the museum's overall narrative and its interpretation of historical events, and the idea of Turkish nation emerging from the museum's historical interpretations and representations. By conducting a historical analysis, we gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of the Turkish museums during a time of political transition.

This methodology allows the combination of different data sources for the purpose of investigating each museum's narrative and comparing similarities and differences between the selected museums.

The main reasons for choosing these museums are the following. First of all, they are among the most visited museums in Turkey. High visitor numbers suggest that these museums are of great interest to the public and likely have a significant impact on shaping cultural narratives and understandings. Additionally, popular museums may have a larger influence on the construction of national or cultural identity, making them particularly important sites for investigation. In addition, these museums have been the subject of previous studies, although never in a comparative perspective, which allowed this research to leverage on previous knowledge and complement it with new analyses. That said, this methodology was chosen because addressed gaps in knowledge by examining the museums from different perspectives.

3. Four Museums

This section examines four prominent museums in Turkey, namely the Istanbul Museum of the History of Science and Technology in Islam (IMSTI), the Panorama Museum 1453, the Kabatepe Simulation Center and Museum, and the Topkapı Palace Museum. Each of these museums is analyzed in a comparative perspective using theories of nationalism.

1) The Istanbul Museum of the History of Science and Technology in Islam (IMSTI) was the subject of a study by Posocco (2018), which explored the political context and controversies surrounding the museum. The study highlighted the influence of the AKP's approach to museums in Turkey, which heavily influenced the construction and exhibit of the IMSTI. The author argued that the museum reflects the AKP's ideological agenda and desire to promote a narrow, sectarian view of Islam, while celebrating the scientific and technological achievements of the Islamic world and Turkey.

While the details of the IMSTI's historical narrative and design process are beyond the scope of this article (previous literature already focused on these aspects), analyzing them through the lens of nationalism theories can provide insight into the museum's role in revisiting and promoting a distinctive history of Turkey. It can also shed light on how the museum serves the interests of the AKP's ruling class by reinforcing a national identity that aligns with their agenda.

The official aim of the IMSTI is to alter the prevailing perception of Muslim scholars throughout history, with a specific emphasis on highlighting their contributions to the Renaissance and the scientific and cultural revolution that began in Europe during the late Middle Ages and reached its peak in the sixteenth century (See Figure 1 below). In order to achieve this objective, the museum exhibition is centered around showcasing in a celebratory setting the accomplishments of Muslim scientists between the ninth and sixteenth centuries.

This is in line with Smith's idea that cultural traditions and historical narratives have always played an important role in the construction of national identity (Smith, 1997). Nation-building is a process that involves the creation of a shared cultural heritage that can bind members of the nation together. This theory is extremely relevant to the analysis of this and the other museums because it suggests that the construction of a historical narrative that emphasizes the contributions of Muslim scholars is a deliberate attempt to construct a particular form of national identity. By highlighting the achievements of Muslim scientists and their role in the Renaissance and the scientific and cultural revolution in Europe, the museum gives birth to a sense of shared cultural heritage, both among Turks and other nations previously under rule of the Ottomans, constructed around religion. This shared cultural heritage can, and does, serve as a basis for a distinct form of national identity that is exclusive, as other religions and ethnic groups of the Turkish past (and present), e.g. Christians and Christianity, are not acknowledged nor represented.

Language is here a crucial element. The museum's focus on the achievements of Muslim scientists and its use of the label "Islamic science", which has a dual goal: 1) it is a way to assert the importance of Muslim culture and knowledge, and 2) it challenges the dominant Western narrative of intellectual and cultural superiority. Joshua Fishman (1972) was among the firsts to argue that language is a crucial component of national identity and that linguistic differences can serve, as it does in this case study, as markers of cultural identity. Michael Billig's theory of Banal Nationalism (1995) and its legacy (Skey, 2009; Fox, 2018; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008) reinforces this hypothesis. According to Billig, nationalism is not only expressed through overt displays of patriotism, but it is also present in more subtle and mundane forms in everyday life. He argues that these banal expressions of nationalism, such as flags, national symbols, and linguistic expressions such as "us" and "them", or in this case "Christian science" and "Islamic science" serve to reinforce national identity and contribute to a sense of national belonging.

By emphasizing the contributions of Muslim scientists and their unique cultural identity, the museum is seeking to reinforce a sense of national belonging among members of the Muslim community. The use of the label "Islamic science" asserts the importance of Muslim culture and

knowledge and challenges the West. Billig's theory also suggests that these banal expressions of nationalism can become so normalized that they are often overlooked or taken for granted. The use of the label "Islamic science" may not be seen as a deliberate expression used by the museum, but rather as an accepted and natural way of expressing the cultural identity of those who designed it.

Yet, the term "Islamic science" raises questions about the relationship between science and religion, and may be seen as a way to fracture science into two separate fields - Western science associated with Christianity, and Islamic science associated with Muslim culture. This can be a potentially problematic notion, as it can create artificial boundaries and reinforce cultural and religious divisions in the field of science.



Figure 1: IMSTI in Gulhane (Courtesy of Waymarking.com:

www.waymarking.com/gallery/image.aspx?f=1&guid=cd1e3b28-df95-4d29-8756-2f09b251c664)

3.1. The Panorama Museum 1453 was the subject of studies. Among others, Bozkuş's study investigated the Panorama to show how modern representation techniques contribute to the formation of a new class of citizens who have a different relationship to Turkish-Ottoman national identity. He explored how these techniques help shape the way citizens understand and relate to their national identity in the present day. A similar study is Gönül Bozoğlu's work, which looked at the Panorama to understand the politics of the representation of the past, looking closely at the displays and incorporating findings from staff interviews. This is part of neo-Ottomanism, a strategic use of the Ottoman past to propose a global and national Turkish identity in the present. Also Posocco (2022, 2019), focused on the Panorama to highlight the material connections between Erdogan's party, the AKP, and this museum.

The reason for such attention is that the Panorama is a celebrated museum in Istanbul, and one of the most visited (although bigger museums such as Topkapı make bigger numbers). It is best known as the museum of the conquest because, as it displays the siege of Constantinople by the Ottoman armies of Sultan Mehmed II, the Conqueror (Fatih Mehmed) in 1453. The conquest of Constantinople is one of the grand narratives in Turkey, and in the Middle East in general, that's one of the reasons why it also appeals to many other countries in the region, including the Arabs. It marks the victory of the Ottomans over the Byzantines (symbolically the victory of the East over the West), the growing expansion of the Islamic religion in the Middle East and the Balkans, and the beginning of the strong hold of the Ottomans in the Middle East.

While the IMSTI celebrates the mission and accomplishments of Muslim scientists, the Panorama

celebrates the Ottoman-Turkish warriors. Nationalism studies suggest that representing historical narratives in a celebratory setting is an important aspect of promoting and reinforcing national identity and pride. These include the theory of "heroic nationalism," (Smith, 1986; Agulhon, 1979) which centers on the idea of celebrating national heroes and the country's historical achievements and victories as fundamental factors reinforcing national identity and pride. By glorifying and portraying the conquest of Constantinople as heroic and significant, the Panorama addresses the Turkish population (and beyond), with the goal to develop a shared sense of pride and connection to Turkey and the Ottoman past. Also Anderson's concept of "imagined communities," (1991) helps to make sense of the Panorama's emphasis on the Ottoman victory as a shared cultural element around which constructing the nation.

That said, if the IMSTI supported the idea of a superior Muslim science (thus also Turkish and Ottoman science), the Panorama encourages visitors to acknowledge the idea of the Ottoman and Turkish military. These are two important institutions for most nation-states. In both cases, they reinforce a sense of national identity by emphasizing the achievements of the Ottoman ancestor with whom they identify (Taştan, 2022) and by stressing the superiority of 1) the Turkish and/or Ottoman culture over the West, and 2) Islam over Christianity.

In addition, this museum's narrative addresses also other countries and populations in the Middle East, as the Ottoman territory included vast stretches of the Middle East, the Balkans, and northern Africa. The celebration of this power must also be seen as a way to assert and promote a sense of cultural influence and military leadership among Turkish people, and to establish Turkey as a regional power. At the same time, it stresses a shared cultural and religious identity among Muslims in the Middle-East, and a sense of past political unity among Muslims in the Middle Eastern region. This is particularly important vis-à-vis Turkish geopolitical goals, as Turkey attempts to be a hegemonic power in the Middle East (Özel, 2023).



Figure 2: Exterior of the museum. Notice the circular building and the dome surrounding it (Source: İlhami DİNÇ; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Panorama_1453_History_Museum.JPG), "Panorama 1453 History Museum", marked as public domain, more details on Wikimedia Commons: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-user>)



Figure 3: Interior of the Museum. Point of view of the visitor (Source and copyright: Vivaystn; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Panorama_1453_History_Museum_4.JPG, marked as public domain, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>)



Figure 4: Inside the museum (Source and copyright: Vivaystn; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Panorama_1453_History_Museum_6.JPG, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>)

3.2. The Kabatepe Simulation Centre and Museum (KSCM) focuses on the Gallipoli Campaign during WW1, in which the Ottomans and the Allies clashed. The KSCM is a museum that opened in 2012 and is today part of the rich presence of memorials, statues, and cemeteries, which have slowly accumulated over time shaping the territory (Posocco, 2020). Also this museum, like the Panorama, makes an extensive use of machinery borrowed by the entertainment industry. This includes the use of three-dimensional glasses, spatial sound, reconstruction of war fields and trenches, a pre-established path, special effects, and narrator's voice.

It exhibits the story of the battle for Gallipoli, which is considered one of the Ottoman Empire's greatest victories and is seen as a foundation myth of modern Turkey (Posocco, 2022). Despite the Ottoman Empire's defeat in World War I, the battle for Gallipoli stands out as a key moment in which the Ottomans defeated the Allies, a matter of pride and glory for both the Ottomans and the Turks. Notably, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the first President of Turkey, fought in the Gallipoli campaign as an Ottoman soldier, an element that serves the attempt of the AKP to take possession of the memory of the foremost icon of Turkish secularism. While being often portrayed as a victory, the Gallipoli battle is also represented as a moment of sacrifice for the Ottoman military, the population, and the Ottoman state, as its territory was being invaded by foreign forces. As previous studies put it (Posocco, 2018, 2022), sacrifice is ever present in the narrative of the museum, and it is accompanied by the element of injustice. The museum presents WW1 as the moment in history when the Western powers allegedly took the chance to invade with the goal of dividing the Ottoman Empire. The battle is portrayed as a kind of David versus Goliath where the West is the all-powerful but presumptuous power, and the Ottomans are smaller in numbers and weaker in terms of technology (Posocco, 2022). Sacrifice is brought to a whole new level in the 10th room, where soldier-martyrs who died for the Ottoman Empire are praised in letters dated from WWI. These letters of the fathers and mothers of martyrs are read through in an emotional setting which involves music, videos, and special effects.

Theories of nationalism help to make sense of these elements as symbols and myths (Anderson, 1991; Smith, 1986) 'focused on language, biology, history, golden ages and heroes' (Breuille, 1988, p. 416) that raise a national consciousness by leveraging on multiple elements, be them scientific achievements (IMSTI), bravery and power (Panorama) or sacrifice and national resilience (KSCM). The KSCM, in particular, leverages more on death, historical injustice and victimization than on victories and heroism than the other elements. John A. Hall's and Siniša Malešević's work is exemplary in making of the role played by war and its tragic experiences in creating shared collective meanings that bind diverse populations together into a single nation (Hall & Malešević, 2013). War memorials and museums such as the KSCM, in particular, serve as potent collective symbols in modern, secular contexts, defining nations as moral communities. 'The monuments, cenotaphs and war memorials dedicated to the "glorious dead" lionize the war heroism of past soldiers in order to set the boundaries of normative obligation to present and future generations.' (Hall & Malešević, 2013, p. 5). One might provocatively argue that the way nations and states remember events such as the Gallipoli campaign is more important than the events themselves. The same is true of the nation and nationalism. It doesn't matter what they are but what people believe they are and signify.



Figure 5: The KSCM, 2nd room. Turkish politicians on the reproduction of the Nusrat, Turkish minelayer ship (Image from the website of the AK Party: www.akparti.org.tr/site/foto/27119/Çanakkale-destani-tanitim-merkezi-acilisi; last accessed 11/03/2018, and archived by the author)

3.3. The Topkapı Palace Museum. The Topkapı Palace is a historic palace in Istanbul. It was the primary residence of Ottoman sultans for almost four centuries, and now is now a museum housing an extensive collection of Ottoman and Islamic artifacts, as well as exhibits on the history of the Ottoman Empire. The palace was built in the 15th century and served as the administrative, educational, and cultural center of the Ottoman Empire. It was also the site of the royal harem and many other important imperial functions. According to official statistics of the Turkish state, Topkapı Palace is among the most visited museums.

The importance of Topkapı Palace Museum, both in terms of historical heritage and number of visitors, made of this museum one of the most studied. However, only a few focused on the renovation and several transformations that the museum has undergone since the 2000s, which turned it into a national museum and later a national palace museum. One of these studies is “Displaying the Ottoman past in an ‘old’ museum of a ‘new’ Turkey: The Topkapı Palace Museum” (Kınıkoğlu, 2021). Kınıkoğlu focused on the institutional position, administrative structure, and displays of the conflicted past during this time of transition and highlighted the contested and bureaucratically challenging process of re-organizing permanent collections, renovating buildings, and creating temporary thematic exhibits, commemorative events, and performance shows. Kınıkoğlu argued that the palace was re-invented through a metanarrative on the Ottoman past that draws on the pan-Islamic legacy of the Empire, as well as the primordial roots in pre-Islamic Central Asian Turks. It is this change, highlighted by Kınıkoğlu’s work, which make of this museum a good match for this study. In fact, alongside the other museums investigated here, the recently renovated Topkapı Palace and the political changes at its roots make of it yet another example of AKP’s Ottomania (Daniel, 2016); another potential subject analysable from the perspective of the theories of nationalism.

The fact that Kemalist historiography associated Ottoman sultans with corruption and religiosity (Kınıkoğlu, 2022), while under the AKP, and in this museum, these historical figures turned out being mostly positive examples of statist might be seen, following Anthony D. Smith (2010, 2000), as the re-emergence of pre-existing ties that the Kemalists sought to decrease in terms of importance, if not erase. As Smith put it, nations are not created *ex nihilo* but rather emerge (or re-emerge as in the case of Turkey) from pre-existing cultural and historical ties (Smith, 2000) that end up serving many different ends. What the events around the Topkapı Palace Museum seem to suggest is that the growing interest in the lives of Ottoman sultans and the prominence place given to them by AKP's governments register yet another element of what has been identified as a cultural turn, the re-emergence of symbols that had lost their importance under the Kemalists, and are gaining it back under the AKP.

One of the examples bringing strength to this theory was brought by Kınıkoğlu (2022) and regards a temporary exhibit on Sultan Beyazıt II held in 2020 that aimed to present him as an important figure in Ottoman history. Overlooked in favor of his well-known predecessors and successors, Beyazıt II's importance as a positive symbol was carefully researched and exhibited through a meticulous work of historical revisionism and reinterpretation. That said, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the above mentioned symbols reappeared on their own. Rather, it took the effort of numerous professionals and a clear political will, materialized in many forms, among which funding, to make this happen. This is inline with 1) state-centric theories of nationalism such as Gellner's (1983), Bourdieu's (2014) and Guibernau's (2014) highlighting the role of the state in constructing nations, and 2) theories that emphasize the role of cultural elites such as Hobsbawm's (1983) and Anderson's (1991).

Under the AKP, the Turkish government mobilised cultural elites to reinterpret the memory of Ottoman Sultans that sustain the imagination (Anderson, 1991) of the new "AKP nation". As in the other museums, these figures are supposed to become a source of pride and glory for the Turks, reinforcing the idea that the Ottoman past is an essential part of Turkish national identity.

Also Michael Billig and his theory of Banal Nationalism (1995) can help us to make sense of the new exhibits in the Topkapı Palace Museum. In particular it helps us to see it as the material and concrete embodiment of Turkish Muslim Nationalism in everyday life as promoted by the AKP. The patchwork nature of the narratives of the Ottoman past in the Topkapı Palace Museum (and the other museums investigate here) can be seen as a set of practices that reinforce the idea that the Ottoman past is an essential and natural part of Turkishness. This is done by selectively compartmentalizing the Ottoman past and constructing a narrative that links it to modern Turkish identity. The work is intense and difficult. It involves selection, interpretation, and representation of the past (Smith, 2000). The Topkapı Palace Museum could be seen as an important example where the Turkish past is newly selected, interpreted, and represented with the goal of contributing to the construction of a new shared collective memory (Halbwach, 1950).

Conclusion

Under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party, new and old museums in Turkey have come to function as performative cabinets that exhibit a new national ideology—Turkish Muslim Nationalism—backed by the ruling party. This article focuses on historical museums, which are viewed as repositories of national symbolism, myths, and traditions in nationalism studies, to investigate the representations of Turkish identity that emerge from them.

Backed by the fact that the number of visitors in Turkish museums has been skyrocketing in recent years (with the exception of 2020, when the COVID19 Pandemic hit), this article asked the following research question: who is the Turk portrayed by the new or renovated museums built in the age of Erdogan? The study began by examining Jenny White's description of the identity of the "New Turk." It then analyzed three new museums and one museum recently renovated under AKP's rule using a qualitative methodology to see if they are consistent with this identity. A second subset of questions it attempted to answer leveraging on White's definition the new Turk a pious Muslim Turk whose subjectivity and vision of the future is shaped by an imperial Ottoman past overlaid onto a republican framework? Is this new framework divorced from the Kemalist state project? Do Islamic ethics and imagery play a role in the making of this new Turkey and new Turks? Is a distinct Turkish post imperial sensibility projected in the new museums and their visitors? Are there other identities being promoted by these museums? If so, what are they?

By using a qualitative methodology, this article investigated four museums exhibiting on different historical periods of the Turkish-Ottoman past, suggesting that the identity of the new Turks emerging from these museums is shaped by an Ottoman idealtype, as White (2009) already suggested. The museums leverage consistently on stories and symbols recalling this past. Islamic ethics and imagery play an important role in these museums. In the Istanbul Museum of Islamic Science and Technology, the mission and accomplishments of Muslim scientists is celebrated while the museum officially attempt to promote and reinforce a religious identity by instilling pride in the visitors. The same identity is reinforced through the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, as seen in the Panorama Museum 1453, where the goal is to emphasize the bravery, courage, and intelligence of the Ottoman-Turkish warriors who conquered the former capital of the Roman Empire, and cradle of Christianity. The religious setting is also present in the Kabatepe Simulation Centre and Museum, where religious martyrdom is entangled with the ethnic mission of perpetrating the nation.

At the same time, the article suggests that there is an attempt to silence previous criticism towards the Ottoman Empire and its symbols, as the case of the Topkapı Museum suggests. The stories of Sultans that, like Sultan Beyazıt II, were previously overlooked return to life in the new restored setting of Topkapı. A careful work of historical revisionism brought a new, more positive, image of this and other Sultans.

In summary, these new museums and renovated ones reinforce and promote an idealized representation of the Ottoman-Islamic past as a model for 21st century Turks and Turkey. However, it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of this top-down approach, as there is a lack of studies that examine the impact of these museums on visitors and assess their success in promoting this new identity. Additionally, there is a need to investigate whether forms of resistance exist that challenge this narrative. For instance, it is unclear whether and to what extent other significant cultural heritages of Turkey, such as the Greek, Roman, and Kurdish, are given a lower visibility.

Future studies could address these gaps by carrying out both large-scale comparative and qualitative analyses. It would be desirable to broaden the scope of research to explore other directions and fill the existing gap in understanding the impact of these museums on Turkish identity formation.

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