

Promoting Muslim Nationalism in Turkish Museums: A study of visitors' responses to the *Panorama Museum 1453**

Claudia Gina Hassan **, Lorenzo Posocco ***

Abstract. In recent years, studies have shown that the institutional representation of Turkey's national history and identity has undergone a shift closely linked to the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Since the AKP came to power, the government supported the building of new state-sponsored museums reflecting the party's national ideology, which recent literature dubbed "Turkish Muslim Nationalism." These museums prioritize the Ottoman Empire's past and its Islamic heritage as the grand narrative of Turkey's national history, putting other equally important narratives in the background, e.g. the Roman, Byzantine, Greek, and the more recent Kemalist past of the country. One such museum is the *Panorama Museum 1453*, which has become a popular tourist attraction in Istanbul. This article examines how the visitors respond to the national identity promoted by the *Panorama*. It draws on fifty video-based interviews as well as visual elements of the museum. The data collected in this study has been analysed using a theoretical framework based on theories of nationalism. This research findings provide material supporting the thesis that the museum is successful in promoting a distinct version of Turkish Muslim Nationalism. It effectively conveys a national identity that emphasizes the characteristics of a Muslim Turk whose identity can be (and is) still influenced by the Ottoman Empire's historical legacy. This legacy drives Turkish identity as an identity inextricably linked to Islam as the religion of the state, connected with other characteristics such as military power and technological progress. The museum's presentation of this identity in the *Panorama* is compelling and immersive, which helps to solidify visitors' understanding and acceptance.

Keywords: Nationalism; Museum; Turkey; National Identity; Neo-Ottomanism; Cultural heritage

Abstract. Negli ultimi anni, alcuni studi hanno dimostrato che la rappresentazione istituzionale della storia e dell'identità nazionale turca ha subito un cambiamento strettamente legato all'ascesa del Partito della Giustizia e dello Sviluppo (AKP), guidato dal presidente Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Da quando l'AKP è salito al potere, il governo ha sostenuto la costruzione di nuovi musei sponsorizzati dallo Stato che riflettono l'ideologia nazionale del partito, che la letteratura recente ha ribattezzato "nazionalismo musulmano turco". Questi musei danno la priorità al passato dell'Impero Ottomano e alla sua eredità islamica come grande narrazione della storia nazionale della Turchia, mettendo in secondo piano altre narrazioni altrettanto importanti, come quella romana, bizantina, greca e il più recente passato kemalista del Paese. Uno di questi musei è il *Panorama Museum 1453*, che è diventato una popolare attrazione turistica di Istanbul. Questo articolo esamina come i visitatori rispondono all'identità nazionale promossa dal *Panorama*. Si basa su cinquanta interviste basate su video e su elementi visivi del museo. I dati raccolti in questo studio sono stati analizzati utilizzando un quadro teorico basato sulle teorie del nazionalismo. I risultati della ricerca forniscono materiale a sostegno della tesi secondo cui il museo riesce a promuovere una versione distinta del nazionalismo musulmano turco. Trasmette efficacemente un'identità nazionale che enfatizza le caratteristiche di un turco musulmano la cui identità può essere (ed è) ancora influenzata dall'eredità storica dell'Impero Ottomano. Questa eredità guida l'identità turca come un'identità inestricabilmente legata all'Islam come religione dello Stato, collegata ad altre caratteristiche come la potenza militare e il progresso tecnologico. La presentazione di questa identità da parte del museo nel *Panorama* è avvincente e coinvolgente e contribuisce a consolidare la comprensione e l'accettazione da parte dei visitatori.

Parole chiave: nazionalismo, museo, Turchi, identità nazionale, neo-ottomanesimo, eredità culturale.

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** Associate Professor of Sociology, *University of Rome Tor Vergata*, Italy. Correspondence: Via L. Manara 15, 00153 Rome, Italy, e-mail <hassan@lettere.uniroma2.it>.

*** Lecturer at University College of Dublin; *University of Rome Tor Vergata*, Via Columbia 1, 00133 Rome, Italy, e-mail <lorenzo.posocco@ucd.ie>.

Politics and public museums under the AKP

The last twenty years of Turkish history are marked by a radical shift in domestic and foreign policy, both linked to the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. One of the initial aims of the AKP was the accession to the EU (Martin and Icoz 2016). This goal motivated a series of important reforms aimed to narrow the distance between EU countries and Turkey. These included reforms towards democratization, internationalization, new education policy, the normalization of the relations with the Greeks in Cyprus, and the resolution of the Kurdish issue. Undertaking this ambitious plan of reforms, provided Turkey with admiration from both Turkish and worldwide media that elected Erdoğan and the AKP as the champions of Turkish democracy (The Economist 2004). For many, a bright future awaited Turkey as the first Muslim country to enter the EU. It is worth noting that Kemalism, the national ideology of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, has historically enjoyed support from the Western world. However, the recurrence of violence and coup d'états during its implementation was a clear indication of a flawed democracy. In contrast, President Erdoğan's promises of a "New Turkey" that is democratic, inclusive, and economically progressive has been a welcome change for many Turks. This shift in direction is positive news for the EU and its investors in Turkey, a country also known as the land of the crescent moon.

In 2004, President Erdoğan proclaimed that "taking part in the EU will bring harmony of civilizations - it is the project of the century." He went on to state that "during the last days of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey was called the sick man of Europe, never the sick man of Asia. We were Europeans even at our worst" (The Independent, 2004). These statements indicate that Erdoğan initially presented Turkey as a European country during the early years of his rule. However, recent newspaper reports suggest a different stance from Erdoğan, who has become a harsh critic of the EU, frequently bashing Germany and other EU countries and referring to them as "Nazi remnants" (Reuters, 2017). This shift in stance is widely believed to have been triggered by the stalling of negotiations for Turkey's accession to the EU.

The current debate surrounding Turkey's failure to join the EU can be summarized by three key points. Firstly, the slowdown of Turkey's economic growth; secondly, the inability to resolve long-standing domestic and international issues, such as the Kurdish issue and Cyprus, which became increasingly apparent after 2014; and thirdly, inadequate education policies that do not meet the EU's criteria (Martin 2015; Kaya 2015). The consequences of these challenges led to Turkey withdrawing into itself. The government, led by President Erdoğan, shifted its messaging, promoting Turkey as a Middle Eastern country with a unique blend of Turkish, Ottoman, and Islamic characteristics. There were no longer friendly and conciliatory words for Europe. As Öktem and Akkoyunlu noted, "a revolution from above" began (Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2018). Since 2009, Turkey has increasingly looked East, and during his 2014 presidential campaign, Erdoğan famously declared *Osmanlı Torunlarıyız!* (We are the Ottomans' grandchildren!)... we don't need the European Union" (Stockholm Center for Freedom 2017).

The promotion of Turkey as a Middle Eastern country involved the creation of a new national ideology that has been dubbed "Turkish Muslim Nationalism" by White (2009). According to White, the identity of the new Turk was 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

is up for reinterpretation...according to a distinctively Turkish post-imperial sensibility" (White 2009: 9). There has been an inconclusive debate about whether this identity had social or political roots. Some scholars, such as Rosati and Stoeckl in *Multiple Modernities and Postsecular Societies* (2012), argue that it is the expression of a unique Turkish modernity and is therefore a social outcome resulting from Turkey's grappling with its Ottoman and Islamic past. However, others argue that the Turkish government has actively used cultural and political tools such as national education, media, charities, and TV to shape the identity of the Turkish people (Lüküslü 2016; Öztürk 2018; Eligür, 2010; Kaya 2015; Al-Ghazzi 2013). These tools have been wielded to mold the identity of the Turkey according to the AKP's desired outcome, much like shaping clay.

Slowly but resolutely, more public shows, speeches from state officials, TV programmes, and also new museums, advertised a new Turkey that built upon the Ottoman past, Turkic ethnic elements, and Islam (Posocco 2022). Museums especially—usually a footnote in newspapers—became the centre of a heated debate on the influence of politics over culture. Writing about the building of more than thirty new museums in 2014, Akyol (2014) reported on the zeal of the Justice and Development Party on revisiting Turkey's Ottoman heritage. Ottomanism goes hand in hand with religious conservatives who claim the Ottoman time as their glorious heritage (Akyol 2014). Similar statements were written on *Der Spiegel* (2009) in Germany and *The Economist* (2016) in the UK, which reported on a disillusioned Turkey with Europe and its use of the museum to advertise a Turkish nation anchored to its Ottoman and Islamic past.

Besides magazines and online newspapers, a number of scholarly works have explored the construction of new museums as tools to restore or reclaim Ottoman narratives for both local and foreign visitors who continue to be drawn to Turkey (Posocco, 2022; Posocco, 2020; Posocco, 2018; Bozoglu, 2019; Bozkus, 2014). However, there is a gap in the existing literature regarding whether these new museums are successful in convincing visitors of their narrative. This article aims to fill this gap by examining the *Panorama Museum 1453* and the visitors' responses to its exhibits. Drawing on interviews with museum visitors and insights from the literature on museum and nationalism studies, this study seeks to shed light on the extent of political influence over the museum and the effectiveness of its messaging in shaping visitors' understanding and acceptance of a particular version of Turkish national identity. In addition, by providing insight into visitors' perceptions and motivations, this study contributes to the wider discourse on museum politics in Turkey and beyond.

The *Panorama Museum* provides a good example of how museums in Turkey have been used to commemorate the Ottoman and Islamic heritage of the country. The museum was inaugurated on 31 January 2009 by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Mayor of Istanbul, Kadir Topbaş. The timing of its construction is significant, coinciding with Turkey's shift towards the Middle East. The *Panorama Museum* is also known as the Museum of Conquest, as it features the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmed II, the Conqueror (Fatih Mehmed), in 1453. The conquest is significant because it marks the victory of the Ottomans over the Byzantines, symbolizing the victory of the East over the West, and the growing expansion of Islam in the Middle East and the Balkans. This narrative of conquest is perfectly suited to study the political changes occurring in Turkey and their reflection in cultural institutions. An external view of the *Panorama Museum 1453* is in Figure 2 on page 23 of the article by Hassan & Posocco (2023) in the previous issue of *Trauma and Memory*, while two paintings inside of the Museum are in Figures 3 and 4 of page 24.



Figure 1: The 569th Anniversary of Istanbul's Ottoman conquest
 (this is an image of a video that is in YouTube at the address <https://youtu.be/apnxCB1Wha0>)



Figure 2: Information Panels inside the museum.
 On the left, the model of the *Panorama Museum 1453*, with the dome surrounding the visitor
 (Source and copyright: Website of the *Panorama Museum 1453*, available at
<http://panoramikmuze.com/media/1341/panmuez16a.jpg>)

Theoretical Framework

State-centric theories of the Nation-State have a long tradition in nationalism studies. Breuilly (1982), Mann (1995), Brubaker (1992), Tilly (1994), Gellner (1983), and Bourdieu (2014) are some of the most celebrated scholars that identified States as the main forces behind nation-building. They all agree on the fact that the State seeks '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: 4). Other scholars of nationalism like Benedict Anderson (1991), Anthony D. Smith (2010; 1999; 1998), and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) have focused more the cultural aspects of nationalism. In particular, Anderson saw public museums as institutions that contribute to make and spread national symbols and values, which

together with traditions and myths of origin are presented to museum visitors. As he put it: ‘museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political’ (Anderson 1991: 182).

While state-centric theories of nation-building contribute to theorize the influence of national museums over national identity, cultural nationalism can explain how shared national culture and symbols help to form and maintain the nation as a collective through the celebration of shared practices, values, and symbols. Cultural nationalism stresses the importance of sharing culture as the very core of national identity, as opposed to other factors such as race, language, or religion. This leads to the idea that nations are not static or fixed entities, but are continuously constructed and re-constructed through the active participation of individuals in the cultural practices and symbols associated with the nation (Smith, 1979). The work of “designing the nation” is often the work of cultural elites, a factor also emphasized by Pierre Bourdieu (1993), who discussed the concept of the “cultural capital”, which he defined as the cultural knowledge and skills that are valued and rewarded in society.

Anthony D. Smith (2010) argued that museums accompanied the rise of and give continuity to nations, and that they have evolved from private collections but are thereafter under the auspices of the State. For Smith, the criteria guiding museum exhibitions are largely national: ‘the objects and artefacts displayed are arranged to tell the story of the nation and its great predecessors, whether in terms of distinct civilisations or of national schools of painting, sculpture and architecture’ (Smith 2010: 84).

Besides the theories of nationalism and nation-building, the available literature on museum and nationalism adds relevant theoretical guidelines to this study. There is a large body of studies on identity negotiation and construction in heritage, and museums as rituals of the nation (Elgeneius 2015; Mclean 2006; Newmann and Mclean 2006; Macdonald 2003; Fyfe 2011; Fladmark 2000; Gillis 1996). More published work investigating national identity includes Cooke and McLean (2002a; 2002b); Crooke (2000; 2001); Holo (1999); Macdonald (2003); McLean and Cooke (2000, 2003a, 2003b); and Mason (2004). These studies root back to Tony Bennett’s *Birth of the Museum* (1995), Eilean Hooper-Greenhill’s *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (1992), and Flora Kaplan’s seminal book on the *Role of Objects in National Identity* (1994).

Pierre Bourdieu, whose visionary work *The Love of Art: European Art Museums and Their Public* (1966) paved the way for sociological investigation of the museum and wrote that museums are part of a greater factory of national emotions, which includes national anthems, national flags, national schools, orchestras, sports, etc. (Bourdieu 2014). The birth of the museum was a moment for “culturing” the public, but also for making a public (Macdonald 2003: 2). Especially national museums were for people to watch artefacts, read information panels, and learn about the story of their nation. However, nationalism became so grounded and entrenched in the institutions of nation-states that national symbols and language soon colonised also other typologies of museums (Posocco, 2022). To visit a museum means always being consciously or unconsciously subject to other ever-present national symbols, like flags, national mottos, and national language in information panels. The visitor doesn’t always acknowledge their presence, but psychologists have proved that “unconscious learning” is the best way to teach notions indirectly (Jiménez et al. 1996).

In one of the seminal books on the birth of the museum, Bennett (1995) wrote that national museums were born “for” the people, but they weren’t “of” the people. This trend continues in the present. Most museums are sponsored by governments and built by cultural elites that play a primary role in shaping the collective memory of nations (Halbwachs 1950). Inclusive museums, to use the words of Simon (2010), are recent developments that have a hard time in changing the status quo. Turkey reflects the same pattern.

From the time of Kemal Atatürk, the first President of the Turkish Republic after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in WWI, governmental changes have led to changes in the way collective memory was constructed in museums (Shaw 2011). The chronological investigation of museum developments in Turkey shows the influence of politics over exhibitions. National history changed in Turkey

according to the governmental body. From 1920 to the 1960s, museums focused on ethnic elements. They emphasized the history of Turkic tribes that came from central Asia, and avoided references to the Ottoman and Islamic past. This model lasted, almost unchanged, until the 1980s, the time of liberalization in Turkey. In the 1980s and 1990s, wealthy Turkish families started to fund private museums. It's the time of democratization in Turkey, when both religious and secular narratives found a place in museums. The political opening of the 1980s also affected public museums, especially in the 1990s when the first government led by an Islamic leader, Necmettin Erbakan, was established. Erbakan's government lasted around a year, and was outlawed by the Kemalist army loyal to Turkish secularism, but it represented change. In the 2000s, pro-Islamic governments led mainly by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) ruled the country. President Erdoğan, leader of this party, called for a greater democratization that led to the growth of exhibitions on Islamic and Ottoman heritage (Shaw 2011; Kılıçkaya 2010; Göktürk 2010; Bozkuş 2014; Türeli 2006; Öncü 2007; Aronsson 2011; Shaw 2007).

Turkish museums represent the above complexity. There are museums constructed 'in the Kemalist period, small institutions, private museums built in 1980s and 1990s, and recently built museums that reflect the AKP's vision of the Turkish past, present, and future' (Posocco 2018). This variety of museums 'reinforce various narratives of state ideology, heritage, and identity construction as these narratives have changed over the course of time' (Shaw 2011: 942).

Methodology

This study of the *Panorama Museum 1453* employed one-to-one interviews with visitors of the museum and direct observation. The sample includes fifty Turkish visitors of the *Panorama Museum 1453*, without distinction on the grounds of age, race, and political, philosophical or religious creed. Interviews were carried out in front of the museum and filmed, with a camera, by prior consent.

The use of video-based interviews proved to be particularly beneficial in the data analysis phase, as the visual elements provided by the recordings allowed for a deeper examination of the data and facilitated the collection of important information that might have been missed or overlooked during the initial interviews. By watching the clips of the interviews, the research team was able to identify details that might have otherwise been overlooked or temporarily forgotten. However, due to the time-intensive nature of video-based interviews, the research team opted to use short semi-structured interviews with a limited number of questions. Specifically, a total of four questions were used in the interviews. Despite the limitations imposed by the abbreviated interview format, the data collected provided valuable insight into visitors' perceptions of the museum and its exhibits, and allowed for a deeper understanding of the ways in which the museum promotes and shapes a particular version of Turkish national history and identity.

To gather information about visitors' responses to the museum, interviews were conducted with museum visitors who had been approached by a gatekeeper and invited to participate in the study. Once the interviewees had agreed to participate, the interviews were conducted with the following questions:

Where did you hear about this museum?

Why did you decide to visit it?

What did you learn from your visit?

What was your overall impression of the museum?

These questions were designed to gather information about visitors' responses to the museum (questions 3 and 4), particularly the complexity of beliefs and expectations of visitors when approaching the museum (question 2). In addition, questions 1 and 2 provided potential insight into how the museum was advertised. While it was clear from direct observation that the municipality of

Istanbul had invested heavily in advertising the museum, including posters throughout the city and coverage in Turkish media, there were likely other channels—both political and non-political such as word of mouth—that contributed to making the *Panorama Museum 1453* one of the most visited museums in Turkey. The interviews provided a valuable opportunity to explore the various factors that influenced visitors' decisions to visit the museum and their perceptions of its exhibits.

The method of data analysis employed in this study is influenced by, but did not apply rigorously, discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1993). The focus was on coding and text analysis of the discourses from transcribed interviews, and the analysis of pictures and video of the museum display. This approach helped to make sense of the ways in which visitors experienced the museum and whether their words reflected a socio-political stance, their national identity, their sense of national belonging, and their broader views on the Turkish nation. The goal was to identify the dominant discourses and narratives that emerged from the data and to analyse, through theories of nationalism, the ways in which they reflected and reinforced the particular version of Turkish national identity promoted by the museum. By analysing both the verbal and visual elements of the data, the research team was able to gain a more nuanced understanding of visitors' perceptions of the museum and the ways in which it shaped their understanding of Turkish national identity.

In this study, the recording of audio and video data were transcribed and transformed into written data for analysis, whereby analysis we refer to the extrapolation and interpretation of interview extracts. Interview transcripts and informants' texts and field notes were inserted into Nvivo (software of data analysis) to be analysed. The analysis of the interviews targeted descriptive responses from which I extracted portions of transcripts strictly relevant to this study on national identity and museums. Given the limited space, information that does not focus on this aspect haven't been included.

The narrative of the conquest. Interviews with visitors

The *Panorama Museum 1453* serves as a platform for the dissemination of national symbols in the form of historical events, myths, traditions, and heroes through national narratives. Specifically, the museum showcases a particular national narrative centred around the conquest of Istanbul and Ottoman history, which portrays the Ottomans as ancestors of modern-day Turks. This implicit teaching constitutes the foundation of the museum. The belief that Ottomans are the heirs of the Turks is here a doxa: a generally unquestioned reality (Eagleton and Bourdieu 1992). To learn about Ottoman history is, for Turkish visitors, to learn about the roots of the Turkish nation. The following extracts represent examples of such a belief, reproduced by the *Panorama Museum 1453*:

Interview no. 9

Question: Why is Ottoman history important?

Answer: This question has a simple answer: Ottomans mean us, we mean Ottomans. That's why I think it is necessary to learn about Ottoman history. Ottomans are of course important for us. He [the interviewee points to his seven-year-old child] has an interest in this subject. At home there are Ottoman flags and the posters of Fatih, Kanuni (Suleiman the Magnificent) and Yavuz (Sultan Selim I). He is so willing to know more. This museum has been our main reason for coming to Istanbul.

Interviewer no. 11

“The museum made us comprehend one more time what we achieved in history. To be more precise, we are already aware of that, but we wanted to keep our memory alive”.

Interviewer no. 2

“We came here to see our ancestors, to see what they have achieved”.

These answers repeat very consistently through the fifty interviews. The museum does not create the idea of the Ottomans as the ancestors but strengthens an already existing perception of that. This makes the role of the museum partly redundant, and yet fundamental: it allows the visitors to consolidate what they have been taught, read in history books, watched on television, or simply learned indirectly from others. This is in line with Michael Billig’s theory of Banal Nationalism (Billig, 1995), supporting the idea that nationalism is stronger because its symbols are constantly repeated, and almost subliminal in nature. Banal nationalism pervades our everyday language, as illustrated by the use of common expressions such as "us and them" or "our country versus their country", as confirmed by interviews number 9 and 11. This type of nationalism is also embodied in the use of national flags and symbols, as exemplified in Figure 3 (above page 5) and in museum complexes, as this article suggests. The *Panorama Museum 1453* serves as a physical manifestation of this banal nationalism by providing visitors with a sensory experience that reinforces their pre-existing nationalistic beliefs and perceptions.

When asked what the *Panorama* is about and what they learned, visitors answered:

Interview no. 8: The museum made us comprehend once more what we achieved in history. To be more precise, we are already aware of that, but we wanted to keep our memory alive. We visited the museum and lived through that moment. Let’s say that we felt it.

Interview no. 9: It is about the biggest war in history. This is the most important war. It tells us how important Turkishness is and how powerful a Turk can be. It is very beautiful.

Interview no. 10: The power of the Turks and the Ottomans, six hundred years of Ottoman history and the power of Fatih Sultan Mehmet.

Interview no. 11: I learned how and with such difficulty this territory we are living in was captured. We saw this closely here.

Interview no. 13: It tells me about history, courage, strife. That’s my opinion.

Interview no. 14: Our past, Istanbul; Istanbul, how it was and how it became later.

Interview no. 22: The sufferings of the people. They, our ancestors, our martyrs have experienced boiled oil poured upon them to capture the city. It transmits this. That’s it.

Also the above extracts represent a sample of the answers which repeated themselves more than others and are therefore worth analysing. In interview no. 8 the visitor identifies with the ancestors: “The museum made us comprehend one more time what we achieved in history”. Also in this extract, the factor of national identity is preponderant, but it is attached here to a feeling of pride, which supports Bourdieu’s thesis of museums as factories of national emotions (Bourdieu, 2014). Interestingly, the visitor, which is of Turkish nationality, sees the Ottomans as the ancestor, and project what was achieved by them to all Turks in the present time. This is in line with what Halbwachs (1950) (and later Anderson [1991]) wrote about collective memory as the shared pool of memories and interpretations that individuals in a society or group hold in common, also retrospectively with regard to the past. This interview supports Halbwach’s idea that memories are not simply individual recollections of the past, but are rather shaped and constructed by the social and cultural contexts and institutions, as in the case of the *Panorama*, in which individuals exist.

The second extract, from interview no. 9, repeats a similar pattern. The visitor identifies with the ancestor, but there is a further element that is also present in several other interviews: power (e.g. in “how important Turkishness is and how powerful a Turk can be”). This extract is important insofar as it suggests what visitors might perceive when witnessing the 1453 war with Byzantium in the *Panorama Museum*, a historical museum that makes important use of immersive technology. Everything appears magnified at the eyes of the visitor, so much so that the war becomes “the biggest

war in history” and “the most important war [...]”. As visitors identify with the Ottoman ancestor, the glory and the power of the Ottomans become, in the eyes of the Turks, the glory and the power of the Turks.

Interview no. 10 introduces the topic of Sultan Fatih Mehmet, which is the figure around which the conquest revolves. All Turks know who Fatih Mehmet is. Many come to see his face allegedly visible among the painted clouds on top of the *Panorama*'s dome. The role of Fatih is important because he was the commander of the Ottoman troops, and incarnates the symbol of the religious soldier to which Erdoğan himself referred to as a point of reference in numerous occasions. Even recently, in April 2022, he has launched the reopening and operation of *Ayasofya Mosque's Fatih Madrassa* — Istanbul's first religious school under the Ottoman Empire, which is named after Fatih Sultan. The school was reopened nearby the ex museum of Ayasofya, recently reconverted into Mosque. Also Istanbul's third Bosphorus bridge was inaugurated by Erdoğan and was named “Bridge Fatih Sultan Mehmet”. Erdoğan's decision to begin construction of the urban mega-project on May 29, 2013, turned the inauguration into a celebration of the 560th anniversary of the Ottoman Conquest of Istanbul by Fatih Sultan Mehmet.

The *Panorama Museum 1453* is to be seen as yet another tribute to Fatih Sultan by Erdoğan, a symbol that incarnates and materializes Islam. Below, an extracts from an interview that helps make sense of this argument.

Interview no. 23

“These pictures are almost the same pictures we see in the books we read or in the movies we watch, but if one reads the information panels one sees, for example, the letter of Fatih to the Bosnian priests (Christians). I mean, the museum communicates to me the justice of Fatih Sultan Mehmet in the first place and I think this is the most important aspect. Another aspect is that Fatih and his soldiers accomplished the Hadith [saying] of our Prophet”.

Interviewer: Could you please repeat this Hadith for those who don't know it?

Interviewee: “The commander who conquers Istanbul is a blessed commander, his soldiers are blessed soldiers” stated our master (the Prophet Muhammad). Many tried to conquer this city, but it was destined to Fatih Sultan Mehmet and his soldiers, that's why, if we speak Turkish in Istanbul today, is thanks to Fatih. In a way we are their (the Ottomans') grandchildren. I hope we can be worthy of them. Let me put it this way. May this be our advice to today's students.

These extracts reflect how certain stories can be seen (and are used) as tools to construct and reinforce a sense of national identity and pride in Islam among Turkish visitors. The interviewee in the extract emphasizes that the museum communicates the justice of Fatih Sultan Mehmet and that he and his soldiers accomplished a Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, which predicted the conquest of Constantinople. The interviewee's interpretation of the Hadith suggests that the conquest of Istanbul was a sacred and divine event and that Fatih Sultan Mehmet and his soldiers were heroic and blessed individuals. The visitor further emphasizes the importance of the conquest of Istanbul in shaping the Turkish identity and language, stating that if they speak Turkish in Istanbul today, it is thanks to Fatih Sultan Mehmet. This statement connects the conquest of Istanbul to the creation of a Turkish national identity and suggests that the Turkish language and Islam are interrelated and essential components of that identity. The visitor's final statement, “May this be our advice to today's students,” suggests that the museum serves as a pedagogical tool to transmit nationalistic values and ideals to younger generations.

In sum, also this extract illustrates how the *Panorama Museum 1453* reinforces the construction of Turkish national identity and pride through the glorification of the conquest of Istanbul and the portrayal of Fatih Sultan Mehmet and his soldiers as heroic and divine figures. The visitor's

interpretation of the museum's displays and his reflection on the significance of the conquest of Istanbul suggest a sense of nationalistic pride and a desire to pass on these values to future generations.



Figure 3: Inside of the *Panorama Museum 1453*

(this is an image of a video that is in YouTube at the address https://youtu.be/Fze_B2b1o8M)

Interview no. 14

Interviewee: Something unbelievable. Unfortunately, I cannot express that emotion. I have been through something unbelievable

Interviewer: How?

Interviewee: To such an extent that it was dazzling.

Interviewer: Have you learned something new here?

Interviewee: We knew many things from the books we have read of course, but it is something different to get inside the museum and experience it as if were real!

This interview highlights the emotional impact that the museum had on the visitor. The visitor's description of the experience as "unbelievable," "dazzling," and a "great emotion" suggests a deep emotional connection to the exhibits and the historical events they depict. It supports the museum as a spectacle-space which according to Foster 'can swallow any art, let alone any viewer, whole' (Foster 2002: 37). This emotional connection can be seen as a key component in constructing a sense of national identity and pride. The museum creates an immersive experience that allows visitors to connect with the historical events in a personal and emotional way, which reinforces the significance of those events for the construction of a Turkish national identity.

The visitor's statement that they "knew many things from the books we have read" suggests that prior knowledge of the historical events depicted in the museum may have contributed to the emotional impact of the exhibits. This idea aligns with Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities," (1991) which argues that nations are constructed through shared cultural experiences, including the consumption of literature and other media that reinforce national identity.

Interview no. 6

“Visualisation, that atmosphere, I mean, the soldiers climbing the city walls, the sound of cannon balls and horses. If you are proud of being Turkish, as a Turk you feel happy for that conquest. I saw that scene inside. It was animated in my mind. I felt happy and peaceful as a Turk [...] You feel happy in the name of your ancestors and then you become peaceful. I felt a warmth in me”.

This extracts from interview no. 6 adds to the previous one. Also in this case, it highlights how the museum constructs and reinforces a sense of Turkish national identity and pride through the use of visual and sensory elements creating an immersive experience. The visitor’s comments on the soldiers climbing the city walls, the sound of cannon balls and horses, and the animated scenes in their mind links to the museum as an environment creating such experience, which in turn helps the visitor to connect with the historical events and reinforce his sense of national identity. This element is present in most interviews. Like interview no. 14, the visitor’s statement that "If you are proud of being Turkish, as a Turk you feel happy for that conquest" suggests a sense of pride, tied this time to the idea of Turkish historical exceptionalism, where the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans is seen as a defining moment in Turkish history that sets them apart from other nations. Like other visitors before him, the visitor’s comments on feeling happy and peaceful in the name of their ancestors and feeling a warmth in themselves suggests that the museum creates an emotional connection with the past that reinforces a sense of continuity and identity between present-day Turks and their ancestors who accomplished the conquest.



Figure 4: A painting inside of the *Panorama Museum 1453*

(Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Panorama_1453_History_Museum_3.JPG)

Interview no. 12

Interviewee: I understood that everything was too difficult. Nothing was earned easily.

Interviewer: Have you learned anything you haven't known before from this museum?

Interviewee: No, I generally knew it. There is nothing much about knowing. You could learn by reading downstairs, but there is nothing much to learn when you look at the dome. You just see the landscape, how crowded and difficult it was.

Interview no. 12 brings new elements highlighting the difference between knowledge and emotional connection. The interviewee suggests that there is nothing new to be learned from the museum, but the experience of seeing the landscape and understanding how crowded and difficult it was can still create an emotional connection with the past. The visitor's statement that "nothing was earned easily" suggests that the museum reinforces the idea that Turkish national identity is tied to the struggle and sacrifice of past generations, and that present-day Turks should also be willing to work hard and make sacrifices to continue this legacy. This is a regular trope also in Erdoğan's other AKP officials' speeches. The reader might remember that in 2018 Erdoğan was heavily criticised after staging a weeping child in military uniform and telling her that she would be honoured if killed while fighting. "If she's martyred, they'll lay a flag on her," Erdoğan told the sobbing girl at a televised congress of his AK Party. His supporters cheered "Chief! Take us to Afrin!", in reference to Turkey's operations against Kurdish fighters in Syria's northern Afrin region. The speech has been described as "child abuse" and a glorification of death. As interview no. 12 suggests, the *Panorama Museum 1453* walks the same path, highlighting the importance of sacrificing one's life for the nation.

Overall, this interview demonstrates how the *Panorama Museum 1453* creates different forms of engagement with the past, depending also (but not only) on individual experiences and perspectives. The museum's visual and sensory elements can create a sense of pride and accomplishment among visitors, reinforcing their national identity, while the recognition of the difficulties and sacrifices of the past can create a sense of continuity and responsibility for present and future generations.

Interview no. 16

Interviewer: How did it make you feel?

Interviewee: I felt like the Ottoman Empire was a very powerful society and it also felt that we are a very powerful society. It removed from us the myth of the European countries. We have understood, by seeing and by living, that we are the strong ones, not them

Interviewer: How do you relate this to the conquest?

Interviewee: The Turkish nation can be easily re-claimed. With this museum we understood that we get united if necessary

Interview no. 16 confirms that the museum has led them to believe that the power of the Ottoman Empire still resonates with the modern Turkish nation. Furthermore, the visitor seems to view the museum as a way of dispelling the idea of European superiority and instead emphasizes the strength of Turkish society. This also can be seen as a form of cultural nationalism (Smith, 1998), where the visitor is emphasizing the unique culture and history of Turkey as superior to that of other nations. In fact, this extract is in line with Smith's work (1998) that emphasizes the importance of cultural markers, such as language, history, religion, and mythology, in creating a sense of shared identity among a group of people.

The comment that "the Turkish nation can be easily re-claimed" suggests that the visitor sees the museum as a means of promoting national unity and a shared sense of said identity among Turks. This view aligns also with theories of civic nationalism (Anderson, 1991), which emphasize the importance of shared values and civic participation in creating a national identity. Benedict Anderson (1991), who wrote extensively on civic nationalism, distinguishes between "horizontal" solidarities (between individuals of the same social class) and "vertical" solidarities (between individuals of

different classes who share a sense of national identity). This interview seems highlight horizontal nationalism more.

In addition, in this interview, the feeling of being a “powerful society” is not an end in itself but it is promptly directed against Europe. The idea of Europe as a power is, in the mind of the visitor, a spell to exorcise. This is what the museum performs: the duality Ottoman/Byzantine corresponds to the duality Turkey/Europe. The logic behind the visitor’s words is the following: (We) Turks are Ottomans; we defeated the Byzantines in the past; we were strong in the past; we are strong in the present; (they) Europeans are Byzantines; they were weak in the past; they are weak in the present; they have been defeated in the past; they can be defeated in the present. In this way, the nationalist narrative of the *Panorama* also serves a myriad of revanchist feelings, although when questioned about the link between today’s Europe and the conquest the visitor provided a vague answer such as “we get united if necessary”. There is much tacit and unsaid in his answer which is clear only in view of the present socio-political situation in Turkey, the clashes with the Kurdish community, and other ethnonationalist issues faced by this country.

The following extract will help to deepen this subject.

Interview no. 25

“It is very important to visit this place. Why is the situation so messy in Turkey? They are trying to mess it up. Byzantium’s flag is pulled down, they want to raise it up again. They feel ripped off. Of course! Why do they want to have it here? Divide and rule! They can’t accept to lose. Turkey is dragged into the games of America and Israel in some way. Turks, Kurds, Laz, Circassians, we must be careful. Our ancestors conquered these places with great difficulty. We must protect them. We will protect what we have! The only thing we will protect is our country, our unity. Besides, this museum is very well done. God bless the hands of those who made it”.

This extract from interview no. 25 reflects a mix of cultural and territorial nationalism (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Smith, 1998; Anderson, 1991). The visitor expresses a concern for the unity and protection of their country, which suggests territorial nationalism. The reference to "our ancestors" and the conquest of the place with "great difficulty" suggest a connection to a shared history and culture, which points to cultural nationalism. The visitor’s fear of being "dragged into the games of America and Israel" can also be seen as a reflection of a desire to preserve their country’s independence and sovereignty, another key aspect of territorial nationalism. The reference to protecting "what we have" also reflects a desire to maintain the status quo and defend against threats such as the Kurdish separatist threat. Overall, also this visitor’s comments suggest a strong sense of national identity and a desire to protect and preserve their country and its cultural heritage.

Interview no. 4

“These places were conquered through great difficulty. Especially when Byzantium’s flag is pulled down by Ulubathı Hasan¹ with many arrows on his back and despite this he does not die there. This proves that there is a divine force involved there. Here, you feel that divine force. You say to yourself that it is impossible to lift up those cannonballs. Plus, these city walls are still present. How come they are still present? Any work carried out with strife and respect becomes very beautiful and successful. We must listen to the words of our elders. Mehmet the Conqueror is indeed an unprecedented sovereign. Fortunately, we are his grandchildren. May God let us know the value of

¹Ulubathı Hasan was a Turkish soldier who fought in the Ottoman army during the siege of Constantinople in 1453. According to a popular legend, he was the first Ottoman soldier to plant the Ottoman flag on the walls of the city. He is also known for his bravery in battle and is said to have fought with many arrows in his body before falling in battle. The character is present in the *Panorama Museum 1454*.

this. May God protect our country from enemies and evil eyes. It is very very beautiful. I can't find a word to say. I get excited".

The interviewee was a woman in her 60s, traditional in her outlook, and religious by her own statement. This extract suggests yet a new factor: a strong sense of spiritual and divine elements related to the conquest of Constantinople scattering from the *Panorama*. The visitor's belief in a divine force that aided in the conquest and protected the city walls even after centuries, suggest the influence of religious and mystical beliefs in the formation of nationalism. The idea of "divine right" or "chosen people" has been present in many nationalist movements throughout history (Smith, 1999), and it seems to be the case for this visitor as well. Moreover, the visitor's emphasis on the difficulty of the conquest and the respect for the ancestors and their achievements are also characteristic of nationalist sentiment. Also the belief in the superiority of the nation and the importance of honouring the past is a common feature of many nationalist movements (Smith, 1999). Overall, this extract highlights the role of religion, spirituality, and respect for the past in the formation of nationalist sentiment. It also reveals the importance of heroic figures, such as Ulubatlı Hasan, in creating a sense of national identity and pride.



Figure 5: Ulubatli Hasan's extract from the colossal Turkish movie *Fetih 1453*, directed by Faruk Aksoy and released in 2012

(this is an image of a video that is in YouTube at the address <https://youtu.be/eRHQY4tPGNI>)

Conclusions

This article investigates visitors' responses to the *Panorama Museum 1453* and places the construction of this museum within the wave of national museums built after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Turkey. These museums emphasize and sponsor a specific national identity for modern Turkey, one that roots the country's past in the Ottoman and Islamic heritage while other equally important heritages of Turkey, such as the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and also the more recent Kemalist heritage remain in the background.

The museum was built in 2009, at a time when Turkey's relations with the EU were worsening, and it became evident that Turkey's accession to the EU would be more protracted than expected. In reaction to what seemed like a dismissal, the Turkish government advocated for a more robust identity of Turkey as a Middle Eastern nation, rooted in its Ottoman heritage rather than a European one. The

Panorama Museum 1453 can be viewed as a tangible manifestation of this political transformation and the emergence of a new type of nationalism that gained prominence in state cultural institutions.

This article focuses on the analysis of the visitors' responses. Visitors were interviewed outside the museum and asked a series of questions to qualitatively investigate the impact of the museum narrative on the visitor. Answers came in the form of visual references and psychological states, revealing visitors' excitement, admiration, reverence, honour, pride, pain, and unity concerning the present political and social disorders. Particular attention was paid to responses that relate to collective memory, particularly national memory, which constitutes one of the founding elements of national identity. While exhibiting on Ottoman history, the museum provides visitors with an answer (or a suggestion) to the question of what it means to be a Turk, promoting a distinctive Turkish Muslim identity that echoes the one promoted by AKP's governments. The idea of the Ottoman as the ancestor of the Turk has been revisited and presented in a new guise that emphasizes technology and modernity. This identity, which fuses nationalist, ethnic, and religious elements, fosters a sense of unity and inclusiveness among the visitors. However, it also excludes a significant part of Turkey's past and present.

Overall, this article attempted to contribute to an existing body of literature on the museum suggesting that museums might (and do) function as a resource and host of national discourses, national identity, and national history manufactured by and within the ruling class to be sold to the masses. In fact, all museums can be influenced by national(ist) narratives and symbols, regardless their specific typology, e.g. art museums, history museums, science museums, natural history museums, etc (Posocco, 2022). The *Panorama Museum 1453* is a history museum, and yet, much of it has to do with the nationalism and the Turkish national identity. Far from being a distinctive Turkish specificity, museums exhibiting ever-positive representations of the nation are, everywhere, the norm rather than the exception (Denton 2014; Forest and Johnson 2002; Kelly 2000 Duncan and Wallach 2012; Light 2000). Vis-à-vis this evidence, it seems fair to suggest the necessity of more comparative analyses that focus on museums and dynamics of nation-building in diverse national contexts. This would help not to fall in the always present trap of orientalism (Said 1978) and/or ethnocentrism (Geertz 1973).

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