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# Ottoman Decorative Arts in Cyprus

Netice Yıldız\*

Cyprus first came into contact with Turkish culture in 1570/71 after the conquest of the island by the Ottomans during the reign of Selim II. Following the conquest some 1000 janissaries and a force of 2779 cannoneers and various unmarried volunteers garrisoned the island's five castles. Married men were encouraged to bring their families to the island, while the region of Canik was ordered to provide Muslim Turkish brides for unmarried Ottoman soldiers.<sup>1</sup> An imperial order encouraged people from the provinces of Konya, Larende, Kayseriye and Niğde to settle on the island. These settlers would be exempted from taxes for the period of three years, while those liable to join the army would be given *gedik*.<sup>2</sup> Forced population transfers from various parts of the Ottoman Empire followed this voluntary settlement. Imperial firmans were sent to Anatolian provinces such as Karaman, Rum and Zulkadiriye ordering one out of every ten households from all towns and villages in these provinces to be deported to Cyprus. Families who owned unfertile, rocky land would be given priority. Brigands and other evildoers had to be exiled to the island, while men not listed in the last provincial census together with their sons, immigrants from other areas and subjects who did not own farms, were also to be included in the list. In addition craftsmen and artisans such as *pabuççu* (shoemakers), *başmakcı* (makers of coarse shoes), *derzi* (tailors), *takyeci* (hatmakers), *kemhacı* (weavers), *mutaf* (spinners of goat hair), *hallaç* (wool-carders), *kazzaz* (silk manufacturers), *aşçı* (cooks), *başcı* (cooks of sheep's head), *mumcu* (candlemakers), *semerci* (packsaddle makers), *demirci* (blacksmith's), *dülger* (carpenters), *taşcı* (stonemasons), *kuyumcu* (goldsmiths or silversmiths), *kazancı* (copper-smiths) etc. were recruited.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald C. Jennings. *Christians and Muslims in Ottoman Cyprus and the Mediterranean World, (1571-1640)*, New York 1993, 214-215.

<sup>2</sup> Başbakanlık Arşivleri, Osmanlı Arşivi, Mühimme Defteri 10, no. 378, 246 Tarih: 5 Ra 979.

<sup>3</sup> Jennings, *op. cit.*, 219.

Ottoman restructuring activities in Cyprus started from the first day of the conquest. The largest cathedral in Nicosia was converted into a mosque by providing it with the necessary *mihrab*, *minber* and *kürsü* and the first Friday prayer was performed on September 15, 1570. Lala Mustafa Paşa, the commander in chief made the building a pious foundation and donated a sword and a Koran as symbols of the conquest. The following year, on August 17, 1571, Lala Mustafa Paşa also converted the largest cathedral of Famagusta into a mosque.

In general there are only few sources available providing information about religious buildings and their decoration. It is not known whether there were any special workshops producing art objects for religious buildings. However, travelogues and existing examples do provide us with some information about domestic architecture and their decoration. From these sources it becomes clear that there were artisans who produced decorated wooden ceilings in various techniques. Although there is little specific information about these craftsmen and the decorations they made, the interior decoration of some religious buildings and houses (mainly 19<sup>th</sup> century) as well as some objects now in the Museums of Cyprus point to the existence of craftsmen skilled in wood decoration, calligraphy and painting in the *kalem işi* technique. A fragment of a Kütahya tile in a private bath in a Venetian-Ottoman house in Famagusta and some tiles in museums in North Cyprus as well as in the Armenian Monastery in Nicosia indicate that tiles were used mainly in domestic architecture. As for woodwork, the most important examples are two pairs of doors exhibited in the Lapidary Museum and the ceiling of the so-called Lusignan House, both in Nicosia. Decorative stonework mainly in religious buildings (particularly the pulpits of mosques) and stucco window traceries that replaced the Gothic stain glasses in Latin buildings, are also fine examples of Ottoman decorative arts in Cyprus. Calligraphic decorations on religious buildings, fountains and tombstones bear the signatures of Cypriote calligraphers such as Durri, Mehmed Şemsi and Feyzi Dede, who were also responsible for the *tuğras* of Sultan Mahmud on several Ottoman buildings as well as the *besmele* designed in the shape of a *tuğra* on the southern portal of the Selimiye Mosque.

Although the Ottoman cultural heritage in Cyprus suffered because of natural disasters like earthquakes, and because of neglect, in particular during the British period when the definition of "monuments" did not include Ottoman works of art, there is still enough material available to give a good impression of Ottoman-Turkish culture in Cyprus. In this paper I will concentrate on the following two subjects: architectural decoration in religious architecture and domestic architecture.

### *Decoration in religious buildings*

Architectural decoration in Ottoman religious buildings in Cyprus is quite rare. The only decoration - usually on the minarets and the main portal – consists of muqarnas or colored stonework. Calligraphic panels and elements such as the *mihrab*, *minber*, *kürsü* and *mahfil* are the only elements in the interiors that have a decorative character. Religious buildings therefore give an impression of simplicity and humbleness.

The largest cathedral in Cyprus was built in the early years of the Lusignan rule and was later converted into a mosque. The Selimiye Mosque is still the most important mosque in Cyprus. It retains its Gothic figurative decorations on the western façade of the building while the interior does not contain any of these Gothic decorative elements any more. The rib bosses and the capitals of the columns also did not keep their grotesque decorations such as masks, dragons or mouflons.

The most important decorative elements can be found on the *mihrabs*, *minber*, *mahfil*, and *kürsü*. The central *mihrab* (**Figure 1**) of the Selimiye Mosque is decorated in the *kalem işi* painting technique. The decorative style used for the recently restored *mihrab* is rococo. The well-proportioned *mihrab* is in the middle of an especially for this purpose constructed wall in front of one of the round circular staircase towers of the building. It is the largest *mihrab* ever built in Cyprus during Ottoman rule. The *mihrab* has muqarnas decoration, the stalactites of which are brightly painted in red, black, cream and gold. A gilded ball hangs over this muqarnas. The muqarnas decoration, which forms a triangular shaped niche, has an outside border which forms a rectangle. The triangles on each side are decorated with foliage, rosettes and other flowers on a golden background. At the two sides of the niche are large bands that have two boards attached on each side and a rounded knob decorated with relief work in *rumi* style forming a star in the middle, painted in blue and gold. At the top of this is a large rectangular dark blue cartouche with a verse from the Quranic chapter *Āl Imrān*, which is commonly used for *mihrabs*. The inscription is gilded. At the sides of the niche, there are two large bands running from top to bottom, again painted in bright blue with the same flower motif. The motif of each band is foliage with flowers rising from a double handled vase. The vase is painted in brown with the volute decorations outlined in darker brown. The foliage has large leaves, which forms a continuous "S" motif. The leaves are outlined and shadowed with darker green. Among the flowers are roses, carnations and white lilies (*zambak*). The same design is painted on the opposite band in mirror style. The niche has two columns decorated with interlacing relief bands and also *rumi* decorations at the top. The crown (*tepelik*) of the *mihrab* has gilded *rumi* decorations in relief. There is no date. Comparing the column

decorations and the crowning decoration in *rumi* style with the Rococo painting on the side bands and on the *muqarnas* of the niche, it may be suggested that the decoration shows two different stages.

There are two other niches that are also used as *mihhrabs* in the mosque. Both of them have a similar style of decoration but their execution is crude. The eastern *mihhrab* is on the left side of the main *mihhrab* and the western *mihhrab* is on the right side of the *minber*. The inscription carved on the marble slab is dated H. 1004/1595 and bears the signature of a person named Mahmud. From this inscription we can conclude that the western *mihhrab* (Figure 2) is the oldest *mihhrab* in the mosque. The *mihhrab* is crowned with *rumi* decoration; its flower decoration is rather primitive. The Quranic inscription is decorated with tiny birds and tulips.<sup>4</sup>

The *minber* (Figure 3) of the mosque is made of marble with elegant but simple decorations. The lower parts have niche decoration and triangles below the balustrade emphasize the shape of the *minber*. The kiosk at the top of the *minber* is made of wood and it is decorated with painted flower motifs.

The geometrical decoration in *ajour* (openwork) on the marble *kürsü* (Figure 4) of the Selimiye Mosque dates most probably from the early period of the mosque. The marble *kürsü* has arch decorations with palmettes made of different colored marble. There is also a wooden *dikka* in the mosque. Its ceiling is decorated with diamond-shaped wooden trellises, each of which has a gilded star.

One important Ottoman alteration made to this original Gothic building is the removal of the Gothic stain glass from the windows and their replacement with stucco traceries. Each of these has a different geometrical pattern. The main motif is composed of interlacing circular, hexagonal or octagonal shapes with star and crescent motifs filling the spaces between these interlacing circles. (Figure 5) The same decoration was used for the Ottoman Arab Ahmed Mosque.

The Ottomans admired the originally Gothic Selimiye Mosque and always tried to preserve its architectural integrity whenever changes and/or additions were made. The only decoration added to the building is found at the eastern entrance of the building. (Figure 6) The Gothic decorative elements on the tympanum have been carefully removed and an inscription recording the date of the restoration was added. The inscription is placed in a large central trefoil niche. At the very top, is a *besmele* in the shape of a *tuğra*. There are two trefoil niches on both sides of the central niche, each of which has three cypress trees painted in a naturalistic manner.

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed description see Fahrettin Kırzioğlu, "Fotoğraflarla Kıbrıs Türk İslam Kitabeleri", *Arkaik dönemden Bugüne Kıbrıs'ta Türk Kültürü ve Turizm Politikası*, 30-31 Ekim 1989, Lefkoşa, 1989, 61.

Minarets replace the church towers in the Selimiye Mosque. This is also the case in the Lala Mustafa Paşa Mosque, which has one minaret. Muqarnas decorations are the main ornamentation of the Selimiye minarets while the balcony of the minaret of the Lala Mustafa Paşa Mosque has a Gothic three-lobed flower motif. The fountain of the Selimiye Mosque (**Figure 7**) is another example of architectural decoration that may be mentioned here. The circular fountain has a geometrically designed iron cage and an iron baldachin in octagonal shape, which date back to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The decoration of other Ottoman buildings in Cyprus is also very simple and modest. The 17<sup>th</sup> century mosque built by Arab Ahmed Paşa is a classical style Ottoman mosque. The interior of the mosque is white washed and the only decorative elements in the mosque are the *mihrab*, the *minber*, and the window traceries with geometrical motifs. (**Figure 8**) The *mihrab* (**Figure 9**) of the mosque is rather simple and moderate in size. The decorative elements are the muqarnas in the niche and an inscription on the top. The *tepelik* (crown) of the *mihrab* is beautifully designed. The *minber* of the mosque (**Figure 10**) is rather elegant with its classical ornamentation on the balustrade. The interlacing eight-angled stars form a six-sided star in the middle. It is carved out in the *ajour* technique. The *mahfil*, reserved for women, is located on the left side of the entrance. It is a wooden kiosk with wooden balustrades on the left side of the entrance. The slim marble pillars that support the wooden ceiling have beautifully decorated capitals. A French pendulum clock painted in *Edirnekari* technique is another decorative element.

The Turunçlu Mosque in Nicosia is a 19<sup>th</sup> century mosque in Ottoman style, which has a beautifully carved marble *mihrab*, a *minber*, a marble *kürsü* and a wooden *mahfil*. The inscription at the entrance indicates that this mosque was built by Seyyid Mehmed Ağa, Ottoman governor of Cyprus in 1825. There is a clear parallel with the dominant decorative style in other parts of the Ottoman Empire in that period because its decoration is baroque in style. The *mihrab* (**Figure 11**) and the *minber* (**Figure 12**) have gilded relief and are decorated with curving foliage motifs in baroque style.

### *Decoration in Domestic Architecture*

It is possible to follow the evolution of Ottoman domestic architecture from the beginning to the end of the Ottoman period. Descriptions of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries indicate that the Ottomans re-used existing buildings rather than pulling them down and building new ones.

The common type of ceiling construction in these houses during Ottoman rule consisted of timber beams supporting a roof plastered with mud and mattresses. In the houses of the wealthy more elaborately

decorated wooden ceilings were constructed in the main rooms of the houses. A study carried out by an MA student<sup>5</sup> has brought to light nearly 30 such decorated ceilings in Ottoman houses in Nicosia. These ceilings usually have geometrical decorations (in wood); some are painted in brushwork (*kalem işi*). These ceilings were usually designed according to a 1/4-3/4 ratio in order to emphasize the entrance (*pabuçluk*) and the *divan* (sitting) area. A number of ceilings have a centerpiece usually with relief in intricate geometrical patterns.

Woodwork formed the most important form of decoration in these houses. The Lapidary Museum in Nicosia, opened in 1925 to exhibit the architectural and sculptural remains from the Government Palace, originally a Gothic building, which was adapted and re-used by various Ottoman governors, has two pairs of wooden doors. Although there is no record to show the provenance of these doors, it is assumed that they were the doors of the Palace. One of these is a door in eclectic style, the middle of which shows a beautiful geometrical design in early Turkish style. (**Figure 13**) The other one is beautifully carved with foliage and flower motifs. Sir Harry Luke published a photograph showing a similar door beautifully carved with interlacing foliage and flower motifs from the house of Kamil Paşa.<sup>6</sup>

Three houses, two in Nicosia, the other one in Famagusta, show that the Turks re-used existing Latin buildings by altering the interior design according to the needs of their inhabitants. Sometimes they rebuilt them maintaining only the outside walls of the building. A rather beautiful house from this early period is in the Kirlizade Street in Nicosia. It still has the pre-Ottoman Lusignan coat of arms on its façade, while the windows and the *cumba* at the west side of the house, where the main entrance is located, show the Turkish adaptations of the house. The following text by Archduke Louis Salvator of Austria supposedly describes this so-called Lusignan House and its decoration:

"There are very few houses worth seeing at Levkosia. However, an old stone house in the Yen Cami Street, called Kaloiro al Effendi Konak, is worth mentioning, which is inhabited now by two Turkish families. It has Gothic arched gate, the outer cornice of which is crowned by finials and a shield of arms over them; there are also arms at both sides. Some traces of Byzantine windows and gargoyles at the corners of the cornice are still visible. The Turkish inhabitants have erected a wooden pavilion in front. The interior of the edifice was once richly decorated in Oriental fashion; now, we are sorry to say, the whole of it is sadly neglected and half in ruins. The balcony shows elegantly shaped stone ornaments, different

<sup>5</sup> Zehra Öngül, *Ornamentation in the Interior Spaces. Case Study: Old Houses in Nicosia*, MA Thesis, Eastern Mediterranean University, Gazimagusa, June 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Harry Luke, *Cyprus, A Portrait and an Appreciation*, London 1957/1965, plate opposite page 160.

grotesque figures, and tiny carved windows. Entering the house itself we find in the first place a large divan-room, with soft, inviting seats all round; the fine ceiling, elaborate shutters on the latticed windows, and a neat inlaid cupboard by the side of the door, remind us of best Moorish works; there are also little hanging stairs or shelves, on which the thousand little nothings of a hare, are neatly arranged. On one side we enter a smaller room with a wooden ceiling, divided into squares, and a low balustrade in front of the latticed windows. Some steps lead up to a higher platform with divans, separated by another balustrade from the rest of the room. Neat shelves are visible everywhere. The doors are partly of square design with Turkish fretwork, partly carved in the elaborate style of the Renaissance, or else arched. There are rooms with groined arched ceilings, others simply covered with flat beams, which are supported by small consoles. On the second floor there is a exceedingly fine room, the ceiling of which is composed of Turkish woodwork. Over the doorposts is a small latticed balcony, which rests on the slender columns of the balustrade separating the upper divan from the rest of the room. Ornamental shelves with turrets in the middle give the room a lively aspect, which seems to have been opened in olden times for the family feasts and dances.<sup>7</sup>

This house has recently been restored. The fine, beautifully painted and gilded ceiling in one of the fine rooms mentioned by Louis Salvator is also restored. Unfortunately, the fireplace, lattice windows, inlaid cupboards, shelves and turrets do not exist any more. The ceilings of the other rooms are the only parts that remain in good condition today.

A second example is the house of Menteş Efendi, the *kadı* of Cyprus in the early years of Ottoman rule. This house, which had once been the palace of the Latin Archbishop, was later restored and re-used by Küçük Mehmed Ağa who was governor of Cyprus in 1816-1821.<sup>8</sup> The Gothic hood moulds that have been filled in later times, the Turkish style windows, the coats of arms of the Frankish families carved on the southern façade of the building and the projecting loggia (*cumba*) in the middle of the building show the eclectic character of the house. The upper main room has a wooden ceiling with geometrical decorations with a square-shaped central part with other geometrical decorations. (Figure 14) The eastern wall has wooden niches (Figure 15) One of the rooms on the upper floor has also Turkish style niches on the side of the cupboards.

A house referred to as the Venetian House or Chimney House is one of the most elegant houses in Famagusta. Although the exterior walls are Venetian, the plan and interior design of the rooms reflect a Turkish style of living. The most attractive part of the house is the Turkish bath in the

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<sup>7</sup> Louis Salvator (Archduke of Austria), *Levkosia, The Capital of Cyprus, with 15 engravings by the author, Reprinted from his original account of a visit to the island in 1873*, London 1983, 24, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Haşmet M. Gürkan, *Kıbrıs Tarihinden Sayfalar*, Lefkoşa 1982, 106-107.



courtyard. This bath has beautifully shaped niches and traces of tiles that once covered the whole interior. Only one blue-and-white tile, most probably made in Kütahya and in a rather bad condition, remained on the right hand side of the entrance of the hot area of the bath until the restoration some years ago. Unfortunately careless workmen broke this tile.

An interesting description of a 19th-century Ottoman house is given in the memories of Mrs. Esmée Scott-Stevenson. Mrs. Scott-Stevenson lived in Cyprus with her husband, Captain Andrew Scott who was the Civil Commissioner of Kyrenia, and also worked as the assistant commissioner of Sir Garnet Wolsey. They lived in Kyrenia in a modest Turkish house near the harbour. The description of this house is interesting since no such house exists any more in Cyprus:

"Our house in Kyrenia was the quaintest little dwelling imaginable. It was only one storey high, and built in the shape of a hollow square. In the centre was a court filled with orange, lemon, quince, and mulberry trees. The roof was flat and covered with mud, and became in the springtime, a perfect garden, full of iris and anemones, grown from the seeds sown by the birds and the wind. The back of our house faced the sea, and our drawing room was built on piles right over it, so that on looking out of the windows I could see the fish swimming. We had a Turkish bath attached to the house but this was never used, as none of our servants know how to manage it. By the side of the building was a stone tank, always kept filled with water. Our dining room was a long chamber, having six windows looking on to the sea, with low divans round the walls. These served as the most comfortable couches, and were very convenient for all the tray newspapers. Above the divans in Cypriot houses there is always a wooden shelf, on which the inmates arranged their china plates and bowls, whether for use or ornaments I could never decide. Instead of plates, we placed a row of gourds, for gourds grow to perfection here, and my husband got some very fine specimens, even better ones than some he brought home from Ashantee. Our sitting room was painted in true Turkish style: stars and crescents in every colour round the top of the walls, below this, verses from the Koran and different proverbs. Some of these translated to me as follows:

"Let God keep away from the man who has the face of a friend, but the heart of an enemy".

"Wine and women turn a wise men into a tyrant"

"He who knows how to keep his tongue silent saved his head"

"At Constantinople fire devours your goods, plague takes your wife, and women your wit"

At the end of the room was a gaudily painted recess, to hold a basin and ewer for washing the hands. We filled this with flowers, thinking a lavatory unnecessary in an English drawing room. The ceiling was the

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quintets part of all. It was divided by a raised trellis of plasters all over the surface and in each almond-shaped space was a separate daub of colour, all in graduating shades: canary, amber, gold, orange, brown, and the same with the blues, reds and greens. Strange to say it is not hideous, and is some odd way seemed to harmonise the room. The floor was covered with cool Turkish matting, while a few pieces of English furniture gave quite a comfortable appearance to the little apartment. Opposite the entrance of our dwelling stood the mosque, a square building with a graceful minaret."<sup>9</sup>

It was not only Ottoman upper class or rich people who used these typical Turkish houses. Dragomans representing non-Muslims, other rich non-Muslims and European consuls lived in large, luxurious, Turkish-style houses. Dr. Clarke gives us a clear description of a dragoman's house:

"We went to the house of Mr. Sekis (the English Dragoman) as he is vulgarly called, a rich Armenian merchant, who enjoys the English protection for transacting whatsoever business their nation may have with the Governor. His house was in all respects a palace, possessing the highest degree of Oriental magnificence. The apartments were not only spacious, but they were adorned with studied elegance; the floors being furnished with the finest mats brought from Grand Cairo, and the divans covered with satin, set round with embroidered cushions. The windows of the rooms, as in all Oriental houses, were near the roof, and small, although numerous, and placed close to each other. They had double casements, one being of painted glass, surrounded by carved work, as in the old Gothic palaces of England. These perhaps derived their original form from the East, during the crusades. So many instances occur to strengthen the opinion, that I may be liable to unnecessary repetition, when allusion is made to this style of building. The custom of having the floor raised in the upper part of the chamber, where the superiors sit, as in our old halls, is strictly Oriental; it is the same in the tents of the Tartars. We were permitted to view the Harem. This always consists of a summer and a winter apartment. The first was a large square room, surrounded by divans; the last an oblong chamber, where the divans were placed parallel to each other, one on either side, lengthways; and at the upper extremity was the fire-place, resembling our ancient English hearths. Soon after he proposed that we should accompany him to the Governor's. As we descended, he showed us his beautiful garden, filled with standard apricot trees laden with ripe fruit, and our wine, as he said, our dinner, already cooling in marble fountains, beneath the shade of orange, citron, lemon, fig, vine, and pomegranate trees."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Scott-Stevenson, *Our Home in Cyprus*, London 1880, 94-97.

<sup>10</sup> C. D. Cobham (ed.), *Excerpta Cypria, Materials for a History of Cyprus*, London, 1986, 386-387.

### *Conclusion*

Ottoman religious architecture in Cyprus in general has a modest and humble character. Most mosques have no elaborate decoration; only elements added to these buildings like the *mihrab*, *minber*, *mahfil*, cupboards and doors are decorated. There is no mosque with tiles or painted domes/ceilings. In Ottoman domestic architecture more decorative elements are found, mainly wooden ceilings and doors. Unfortunately, much has been lost. Descriptions, however, reveal the full scale of Ottoman decorative arts in Cyprus.

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Figure 1: Central *mihrab* of the Selimiye Mosque, Nicosia.



Figure 2: Western *mihrab* of the Selimiye Mosque, Nicosia.

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Figure 3: *Minber* of the Selimiye Mosque, Nicosia.



Figure 4: Marble *kürsü* of the Selimiye Mosque, Nicosia

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Figure 5: Window traceries of the Selimiye Mosque, Nicosia.





Figure 6: Eastern Portal: Inscription of the Selimiye Mosque, Nicosia

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Figure 7: Fountain of the Selimiye Mosque, Nicosia

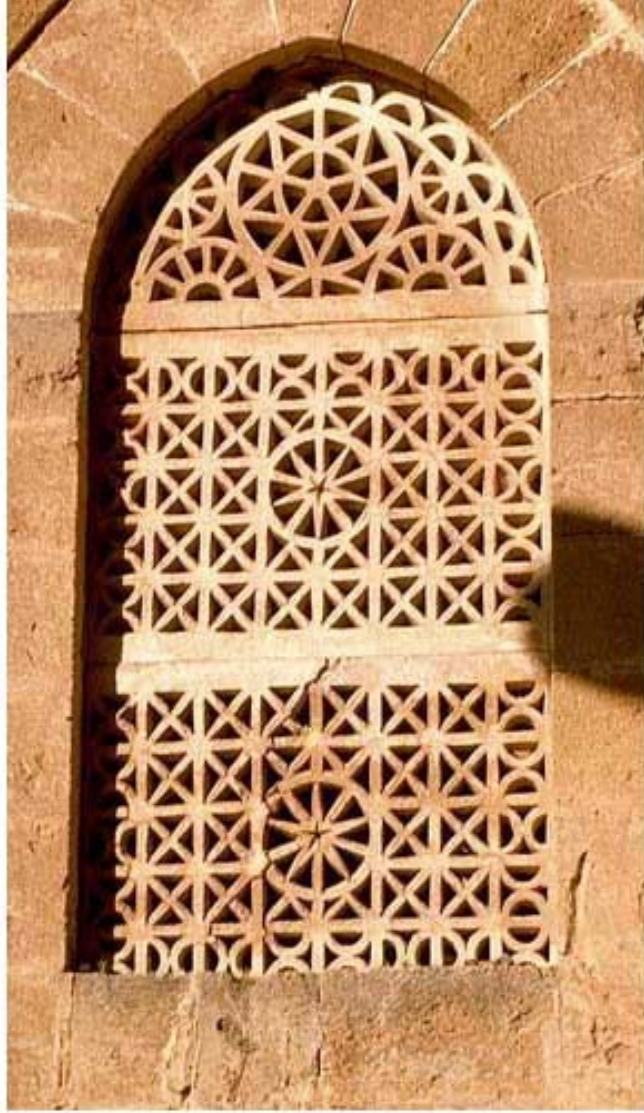


Figure 8: Window tracery of the Arab Ahmed Paşa Mosque, Nicosia



Figure 9: *Mihrab* of the Arab Ahmed Paşa Mosque, Nicosia



Figure 10: *Minber* of the Arab Ahmed Paşa Mosque, Nicosia

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Figure 11: *Mihrab* of the Turunçlu Mosque, Nicosia.



Figure 12: *Minber* of the Turunçlu Mosque, Nicosia.



Figure 13: Centerpiece of one of the doors in the Lapidary Museum, Nicosia.





Figure 14: Ceiling of the Menteş Efendi House, Nicosia.

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Figure 15: Niches in the walls of the Menteş Efendi House, Nicosia.