Recasting Imperial Pasts and Palimpsest in Balat, Istanbul

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This paper aims to trace the afterlives of a neighbourhood of Istanbul that sprawls along the western side of the Golden Horn. Today, Balat has become the name of an area that comprises the neighbourhoods of Fener, Balat and Ayvansaray, because it is perceived as having the most recognizable 'period features' in which the Byzantine and Ottoman traces are conflated. This paper explores its representation in Byzantine, Ottoman and Republican times and tries to parse the layers of history. In my reading of this metonymic neighbourhood I will take recourse to the concepts of palimpsest, chronotope (macera) and heterotopia, bearing in mind that all three are concepts derived from Greek, a local language.

- Palimpsest: palin (again) psestos (rubbed smooth)
- Chronotope: chronos (time) topos (space)
- Heterotopia: hetero (different) topos (space)
- Balat: Palation (Greek), from Latin Palatium

A Greek and Jewish neighbourhood during Ottoman times, Balat has become a neighbourhood of untenanted buildings after the demise of the multicultural Ottoman Empire, due to complicated inheritance/confiscation issues, which then led to illegal occupancy, paving the way for its status as artist and hipster hangout today. These buildings, half deconstructed and half reconstructed, Byzantine walls and palace terraces providing (See Hanife Oz) building material and ersatz walls for the new buildings, call to mind, in all their palimpsestic qualities, the concept of heterotopia: places composed of different places, space that have accumulated different usages through time. Foucault has written extensively on the idea of the heterotopia and related it to heterochronism. Bakthin is equally interested in this accumulation and condensation of time in *writing*, however, we can carry it back to the *topos* itself as harbouring time.

> Heterotopias are linked for the most part to bits and pieces of time, i.e., they open up through what we might define as a pure symmetry of heterochronisms. The heterotopia enters fully into function when men find themselves in a sort of total breach of their traditional time. In the first place there are the heterotopias of time which *accumulate* ad infinitum, such as museums and libraries. These are heterotopias in which time does not cease to accumulate, perching, so to speak, on its own summit.[1] (Foucault)

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, *thickens*, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history (Bakhtin)

[1] There also exist, and this is probably true for all cultures and all civilizations, real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged, and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable. In contrast to the utopias, these places which are absolutely other with respect to all the arrangements that they reflect and of which they speak might be described as heterotopias. (Foucault)

This ability of space to hold time and to reflect its density to the onlooker, the flaneur, has been described by Tanpınar, whose oevre seems to be a contemplation on the ways the Turkish republic has tried to regulate time and our relationship with it. He is particularly aware of the relationship between time and space in certain districts of Istanbul. His 1943 newspaper piece, 'A Stroll in the Slums/Side Streets' in that sense, seems a manifesto of the Istanbul chronotope, and the scenes he describes meets the physical characteristics of Balat. He formulates his own concept of the palimpsest, and time 'thickening' and 'accumulating'. He uses words like 'terkip' and 'macera' to indicate complexes of time and space. 'There can be very few things that can be as educational as a stroll in the dingy neighbourhoods of Istanbul' he says and points to the Istanbul palimpsest 'For in all their state of neglect and ruin they give you the whole of history, layer by layer. ('A Stroll in the Slums/Side Streets', 1943)

Tanpınar says that in the old neighbourhoods names given to streets, fountains and mosques make hundreds of figures appear all at once: he does not name a neighbourhood in his piece; still this is a function of naming we witness in Balat. The name of the neighbourhood itself, Kuyu Sokak, Cibali populate these streets with Byzantine royalty and saints, and gallant Ottoman soldiers who broke through the walls.[2] Tanpınar calls this *thickening* and *accumulation* of history and names, which we can tentatively call the 'affect of heterotopia and heterochronism' *magic*, he says we walk in these haunted places 'as if we are in a spell' (235) In the following he outlines the chronotope of Istanbul. The weight of history leaves its burden on the face of the city as visible and legible wrinkles of old age:

> I saw the trajectory of these neighbourhoods as a symbol. How much time, how many incidents, accidents of history were needed to give this face to a single neighbourhood of a city! How many conquests, how many defeats, how many migrations had caused these people to congregate here, after what destructions and reconstructions had these neighbourhoods gained this aspect? How many deaths, how many farewells with no return, how many souls missing home did it have to experience in order for the face of a neighbourhood to ripen like that a fruit, or a human being? (236)[3]

In that sense, Tanpınar's questions guide the meanderings of this paper, looking at conquests, fires and exoduses that gave Balat its present face. I will try to read its fortunes as a function of its relationship with the ruling dynasty, and the state's organization of the city during the Byzantine, Ottoman and Republican periods.

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The name of the neighbourhood gives us the first palimpsest in this paper. Palatium, a Latin word Hellenized, or vulgarized in Constantinopolis, the capitol of the Eastern Roman Empire, where Latin was more likely to be spoken by the hated, invading Latins than the local population, into Palation, from whence it was Turkified to

[2] 'Fetih şehitlerinin mezarları İstanbul'un tapu senetleridir' (Tanpınar, 153)
[3] Mahalle, with its madrasa whose ruinous state strikes the eye like an impossible Rome (237) and then goes on about the noises of the mahalle. Rome is always and remains a yardstick

Balat.[4] This palace, a suburban retreat from the one on the first hill, is now in the neighbourhood called Ayvansaray right next to Balat, but as I have pointed out, Balat has come to stand also for neighbouring Ayvansaray and Fener. Ayvansaray refers to the palace complex, some of which still stands further up the hill. Ayvansaray, a Turkish word of Persian origin, 'Veranda Palace' making a reference to the topography of the area, as sloping down to the Golden Horn, a topography which makes the Theodisian Walls running right next to it more pregnable. This palace that gives the contemporary neighbourhood its name twice over, provided, in Byzantine times, both an escape from the increasingly ungovernable[5] city, and also marked the space of least resistance when it came to the fortifications.

Blachernae seems to have been a place that the Byzantines used to dazzle foreign visitors and dignitaries. It gets a mention in the report of Benjamin of Tudela writing in 1165 (Freely 138) and he is rather impressed with it, particularly when compared to the squalor of the rest of the city. Blachernae seems also to have played its part in the endless succession intrigues and dramas of the Byzantine court (Freely 142). 5 Romanos III is murdered in his Blachernae bath on Empress Zoe's orders. It was where Kings were made and unmade and different nations claimed sovereignty of the city. A place of transformations, if you will. When the Crusaders came in 1261 and occupied the city, this is where they set up headquarters for the short period that they ruled the town. The palace had a church and a celebrated icon of Mary in it, which Constantinopolitans believed kept the city safe. The well still survives within the grounds of a much newer church- and it has left its trace on the city's map: the street it is on is called Kuyu Sokak.

In his 17th century account of Istanbul Evliya Çelebi does not treat Balat[6] as a separate neighbourhood to list the many madrasas, hammams, churches and synagogues as he does elsewhere in the Empire, but considers it as part of the many gates along the Golden Horn. When it is referred to, it is almost always referred to as Balatkapı; it follows in a list of Unkapanı, Cibalikapısı, Ayakapısı and Fenerkapısı, reminding us that Balat is seen as port of this network of gates/doors. It gets a not so honourable mention under the title '(1/420) 'The accursed, sinister, condemned guild of the ale houses'.[7] Balat also gets mentioned as he lists the several professions in Istanbul- such as string instrument players and fishmongers.[8] He says it is the neighbourhood where the gypsies from the Kanije in the Balkans were settled; and this Balkan connection echoes the trajectory of the Ohrid Jews that had set up the Ahrida and Yanbol Synagogues in the neighbourhood, in Byzantine times.

Like the name of the neighbourhood, many of the buildings in Balat are palimpsests in their own right, and one of these is Gül Mosque, which gets a lot of attention in

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[4] The palace in question was called Blachernea, and yes, the sound does not trick you, it is thought to be derived from the word Vlach, the name of a Vlach from Dobruja who settled in the outer reaches of Dobruja- there shall be more Balkan links later.

[5] In the first place there are the heterotopias of time which accumulate ad infinitum, such as museums and libraries. These are heterotopias in which time does not cease to accumulate, perching, so to speak, on its own summit. http://www.vizkult.org/propositions/alineinnature/pdfs/Foucault-OfOtherSpaces1967.pdf

[6] (1/168) Describes the Ferruh Kethüda Mosque built by Mimar and also a curious map that in the outside sofa, qiblah side 'From Jerusalem to Egypt, from Egypt to Madina and Mecca, and all rivers, hills and dangerous passages on the stations'.

[7] .(there is also a mention of Balat –turned to Polat- in the Mediterranean, Milas)

[8] Bridge from 'Balatkapı' to Tersane (1/18).

Evliya Çelebi's account. Evliya Çelebi speaks of Gül Mosque firstly as the compiler of the Empire and Istanbul's inventory. As with almost all the Istanbul mosques that he talks about, Evliya manages to link the mosque both to the Prophet and the conquest of Istanbul. Without ever mentioning that it had been a church, Hagia Theodosia[9] (hence the name of the gate closest to the mosque, Ayakapı), Evliya says that the mosque is called Gül Mosque because the dirt of the unbelievers was cleansed off with rose water (1/32, 38) and that Cübbe Ali, Cibali, a warrior saint, one of the opener of the gates (hence the gate and neighbourhood name Cibali within greater Balat) is buried in Gül Mosque: one of those cast of characters that populate the streets once their names are chanced upon on a street sign. In Evliya's narrative Balat is one of these districts that still carry the whiff of unholy rites, alcohol and fish, and needs to be cleansed and reclaimed over and over by generations of Istanbulites, according to the ruling ideology of the time.

Elsewhere in his account of Istanbul Evliya references Gül Mosque again and says that it was an old mosque during the time of Fatih Sultan Mehmet, that after an earthquake during the time of Sultan Murat it was rebuilt. He says that it is called Gül because the restorers added small domes to support the central dome, and thus made it look like a rose, and that it was washed with 100 churns of rose water (1/117). So here we have a palimpsest of not just names, but also meanings attributed to those names. Evliya says that the locals sometimes set off for rain prayer from this mosque because it is an (quote) 'old house of worship', drawing perilously close to admitting that it used to be a church.[10]

In this picture of the mosque requisitioned from a church, we see the Jewish trace of David's star- by no means the only Magen David in the neighbourhood. The famous multiculturalism theorist Will Kymlicka calls the Ottoman Empire a federation of theocracies, and in Balat, it is easy to see why: every other building seems to be a church, a mosque, or a synagogue. Despite the prominence of the Bulgarian Church by the water and the fact that the neighborhood is home to the Greek patriarchate, Balat has long been known as Istanbul's Jewish neighborhood. Today, a couple synagogues are tucked in the alleys towards the hill and there is a Jewish hospital by the water, but most of the Jewish inhabitants have moved — first to northern parts of town, and then further on to Israel. Ahrida synagogue dates back to 1427, built just before the conquest. Similarly Yanbol synagogue dates back to Byzantine times, built by Jews coming from the Bulgarian city of Yanbol. Both the Ottoman and the Byzantine Empires, ruling the same area successively, shuffled populations around. (Guidebook p 91). After the establishment of the Turkish Republic there were two exoduses of Jewish people from the neighbourhood: one in 1948, enhanced by the effect of Wealth Tax, and one in 1955, after the 6-7 September pogroms. The latter was primarily directed at Greeks who, after their properties were destroyed and looted- the famous Agora alehouse in Balat was burnt- left Istanbul in large numbers.

The neighbourhood was then, in the 1960s, resettled by communities from Anatolia and I take the 60's as the end of Istanbul's imperial multiculturalism. Republican

[9] Between 1573 and 1578, during his sojourn in Istanbul, the German preacher Stephan Gerlach visited the mosque, identifying it with the church of Hagia Theodosia.

[10] Another layered house of worship is that of Surp Hreshdagabet (Belge, 152) which used to be an Orthodox church (as understood from the ayazma)- a church given over to the Armenians because another, Armenian Church had been requisitioned to be a mosque (Kefeli)

Istanbul remains a multicultural society of another kind, with communities from eastern Anatolia including the Kurds, and needless to say the thousands (hundreds of thousands?) of Syrians who provide part of the multicultural fabric now, settling in the very neighbourhoods abandoned by the Christians and the Jews. Balat remains a topography of migrations.

Once populated by Armenians, Greeks and Jews by imperial will, in the 60s, Balat was being populated by Turks and Kurds, through republican manoeuvres of cheap labour. The dilapidated houses and streets inhabited by large thriving families is neatly captured in the photographs of Ara Güler, whose work as a chronicler of Istanbul came to be recognized as essential in later decades. He seems to be inspiration for Orhan Pamuk's wonderings in this neighbourhood of an imperial past, strategically forgotten in a republican Istanbul. In a life achievement ceremony held for Güler earlier in the year İlber Ortaylı confessed that when he was younger, the neighbourhoods that Güler photographed was out of the mind-map of (quote unquote) 'modern' Istanbulites, and only through Güler persistent work did an awareness of the heritage of these old Byzantine and Ottoman quarters was rekindled. It is Güler's maxim that it is the people and their livelihoods that make photography worthwhile and accordingly, his photographs focus, not so much on the Greek and Jewish ruins, but the lives of the new occupants of the Balat quarter.[11] As much as the life of the 'mahalle' which is invariably emblemized in children playing unattended on the streets[12] and clothes lines drawn between tall Jewish apartments, Güler, in his photography concentrates on the importance of the Haliç, the sea, as part of the livelihood of the people living in Balat.

The life led by these Anatolian communities is reflected in the 1967 film 'Arif of Balat'. 13 (Tanpınar's wrinkle quote) We follow the story of Arif, a medical student who lives in a ramshackle building in Balat. We are given to understand that he is part of a community that has moved to Balat from Anatolia recently, the patterns of the village *mahalle* repeating itself in the 'big city', with women queuing up at the fountain for water, and the men playing card games at the coffee house. Arif is shown to be the beloved hope of all the neighbourhood. The aspiring medical student in a poor neighbourhood seems to be trope directly lifted from Tanpınar. After another passage about the accumulation of history on Istanbul streets he says:

> And on top of everything white, dewy, indifferent to human time, spring light, sublime, laughing victoriously, and some dance music that seems stricter because it comes through it, and that still invites the medical student preparing for his exam by the window 14

[11] … Kasımpaşa'nın dar ve yoksul sokaklarını, Balat'ın ilk gidişlerimde bana yapay bir tiyatro dekoru gibi gözüken eski evlerini, yeni göçler ve yoksullukla tuhaf bir doku edinmiş eski Rum ve Yahudi mahallelerini, Üsküdar'ın ta 1980'lere kadar ahşap evlerle kaynaşan son derece Müslüman ve aydınlık arka sokaklarını, Kocamustafapaşa'nın hızla beton apartmanlarla bozulan ve bana kötü niyetli, gözüken eski ve korkutucu sokaklarını, Fatih Cami'nin bana hep çok çarpıcı gelen harika avlusunu, Balıklı ve civarını, Kurtuluş ve Feriköy'ün yoksullaştıkça eskiyen ve insana bu orta sınıfların devlet baskısıyla din, ırk ve dil değiştire değiştire binyıllardır hep buralarda oturduğunu düşündürten ve yokuş aşağı indikçe daha yoksullaşan mahallerini amaçsızca böyle gezdim… (Pamuk, 2004: 321–322)
Melling also liked the neighbourhoods for the people not Roman/Greek ruins (Tanpınar, 200)

[12] Tanpınar's observation of children's games and songs

Ayşe Şasa, the scriptwriter for the film, follows the traditional narrative of pitting one neighbourhood of Istanbul against another. Arif, the honourable Turkish boy gets mixed up with a girl – naturally reading humanities- who lives in Nişantaşı. Balat-Nişantaşı, a contrast readily to be found also in Pamuk's work, harking back to Peyami Safa's *Fatih Harbiye*, a contrast that is not just the subject but the actual title of Safa's book. 15 Balat, with its now Anatolian population, represents Turkishness pitted against the jazz records that play in Arif's new girlfriend's house. Arif is shown to be torn, a-la-Elif Shafak, between the two cultures, and is in fact being unfaithful to his fiancé. It is interesting to note that the intimacy he experiences with either girl happens in Istanbulite heterotopia. First we see him cavort with Gülşen, his intended, in what they call the *hurdalık*, a hulk of a ship in the dockyards of Balat, and later we see him lying side by side with Çiğdem in the hulk of a newly built apartment- the future of Istanbul, possibly in Levent, north of the limits of the old city. 16, 17, 18

The scenes in Balat do not disclose any Greek or Jewish traces. It is firmly the milieu of hardworking, salt of the earth Turkish folk, whose livelihoods are being threatened, not so much by jazz music, but by the new motorcars that are driving business away from the horse transport business. If one looks hard for the repressed, it only comes out when Arif's university friends tease him for working too hard 'We are tired of your *papazlık*/priestry'. It is a turn of phrase hardly ever used today- *hafızlamak* is more common. By the time the film was shot the bearded orthodox priests were already replaced by the bearded mullahs.

The image of unkempt roads and houses evidenced in Ara Güler's photography and Ayşe Şasa's script is one that has persisted well into the 90s when, possibly with the rise of leisure of time and popularity of 'multiculturalism', the artists, particularly photographers, started to return to Balat. 2010s have proven that historical commodification will find means to integrate the neighbourhood into the vision of a consumable city. Already in 2010 Radikal newspaper was measuring Balat against Karaköy as an instance of a more gentle, organic regeneration, or gentrification, with an emphasis on how expats were making homes there. The gentrification has also been enhanced by the new metro stop on the new bridge, connecting Nişantaşı and Balat, making it a place to visit for the inevitable instagram photos of houses at strange and alluring angles.

> Balat is a place you can get away from the city's crowds and get lost in its streets. One of the best things about exploring Balat is to take in the history while experiencing the present. You'll see places you only read about in school, and houses where old movies were filmed. Houses with bay windows, sloped streets with stairways, narrow cobbled streets, and laundry drying out in the open air on lines hung between buildings. Balat has it all.

The description is on point, except maybe for the 'places we read about in school', as I certainly don't remember being taught about anything about the place. It has instead served as the attic of the republic, a topos of unwanted memories of a multicultural past, republican poverty and exploitation. The 21st century version of romanticism of the ruins now sees the inhabitants of the 'new Istanbul' return to these places to feel a connection with the city in its original conception. Due to its palimpsests it acts as the repository of both Anatolian and Ottoman values, both of which are now sanctioned, claimed and encouraged by the ruling government. It encapsulates the mahalle with

its mosques, coffee houses, hamams and children. Resident as well as visiting Istanbulites, architects, artists, laymen and women, try to *parse* the palimpsest of Balat in their own ways, and along with Ottoman traces they necessarily come across Byzantine ones. When the reclamation of the Ottoman way of life with its spatial organization and multiculturalism is done, Balat seems set for the reclamation of a Byzantine past, ready to be a gateway to a rediscovery of the Byzantine heritage.