

M. K I E L

A NOTE ON THE EXACT DATE OF CONSTRUCTION OF THE WHITE
TOWER OF THESSALONIKI

To establish the definite date of construction and the identity of the founders—architects—of the famous White Tower of Thessaloniki, the Lefkos Pyrgos, is the aim of this short note. The huge tower, one of the most characteristic and popular architectural dominants of the city of St. Demetrius has been the subject of considerable misinterpretation as to the year in which it was built and by whom this was done. The various theories range between the early 13th century under the Latin Empire of Thessaloniki and the years of the Venetian occupation in the first half of the 15th century. Then we have also the little used statement of the 17th century Turkish author Evliya Çelebi who described the tower as an Ottoman Turkish work of the time of sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566). In his still authoritative study on the topography of Thessaloniki the Rumanian scholar Tafrali¹ wrote that the Ottomans constructed two big towers very probably in the first years after their conquest of the city² (1430) and added that according to the local tradition the work was done by Venetian master builders³. The Venetian origin of the tower was more or less generally accepted⁴ and still figures as such in a publication of 1970⁵ and in a number of popular travel guides and tourist folders. Some decades after Tafrali the German expert of military architecture Bodo Ebhardt⁶

1. O. Tafrali, *Topographie de Thessalonique*, Paris 1913.

2. «Ces deux bâtisses datent vraisemblablement des premier temps de la conquête» (Tafrali, p. 51).

3. Tafrali, p. 50.

4. As a exception more or less might be cited Hans Höggi, *Türkenburgen an Bosphorus und Hellespont, Ein Bild frühosmanischen Wherbaus bis zum Ausgang des 15. Jahrhunderts*. Dresden 1932. On page 42 of this work he writes that the North Eastern corner tower of the wall of Thessaloniki (the Zircirli Kule) is most probably a Venetian work but did know that the White Tower was from the time of Süleyman the Magnificent (p. 44). He was certainly one of the few who used the work of Babinger about this matter (Babinger cited further on) which appeared two years before that of Högg. Unfortunately Högg does not mention his source and his work did not receive the attention it deserves.

5. By Michael Vickers in his «Byzantine Sea Walls of Thessaloniki», in *Balkan Studies* No 11. 2, Thessaloniki 1970, p. 261. However, in a letter of April '72 to the author of the present article Vickers expressed his uneasiness as to this point and asked for more information. This ultimately resulted in the study given here.

6. Bodo Ebhardt, *Der Wehrbau Europas im Mittelalter*, III, p. 696-697. This work was written in and before 1940 but appeared in 1958 in Oldenburg.

launched a much different theory. He connected the tower, and a number of other towers of much the same kind, with the Donjon of Aigues Mortes, the Crusaders port in the south of France, built in 1246. He therefore suggested an early date and attributed the tower to the short-lived Latin empire of Thessaloniki. However, the Venetian version remained the more popular.

It must be said to the credit of Franz Babinger¹ that he first recognised the true date and origine of the White Tower, but he did not further deepen his research in this question. He pronounced his views in a footnote in a solid study on Albania in the 17th century which was published in 1930 but escaped unnoticed by those working on the monuments of Thessaloniki. In fact the problem of the date of the tower needed not to become a problem at all if the proper sources were used. Already in the 17th century the Ottoman geographer-traveller Evliya Çelebi², namely, had noted the presence of an inscription above the gate of the tower. He gives a reading of the inscription, which mentions sultan Süleyman as founder and gives the date of construction as Hijra 942 = 1535/36. The inscription mentioned by Evliya is not longer extant. It disappeared in or after 1912 when the Ottomans were driven out of their Selanik. Babinger accepted the story of Evliya unreservedly as well as the note that the famous Ottoman architect Sinan was the builder of the tower and stated: Meine Bemerkungen über «Bauten Sinâns auf Griechische» Boden in *Praktica tis Akadimias Athinon*, IV. Bd. (Athen 1929), s. 15 ff. «möchte ich jedenfalls nunmehr auch auf den Weissen Turm ausdehnen»³. In his History of Thessaloniki, Apostolos Vacalopoulos⁴ also used vol. VIII of Evliya's Travelbook (*Seyâhatnâme*) and stated on the basis of data given there that the tower was built by sultan Süleyman between 1520 and 1566.

Both above-mentioned authors, who were doubtless on the right track, left out of question the many problems concerning the Travelbook of Evliya as a source for topography or history. After half a century on Evliya's research⁵ we know something more about this very remarkable author and the way he

1. Franz Babinger, «Ewlijâ Tschelebi's Reisewege in Albanien», published in *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen*, XXXIII, Berlin 1930. Easier to consult in Babinger, *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen zur Geschichte Südosteuropas und der Levant II*, München 1966, p. 73, note 4.

2. Evliyâ Çelebi, *Seyâhatnâmesi*, vol. VIII, Istanbul 1928, p. 150.

3. Babinger, *op. cit.*, p. 73, note 4.

4. Apostolos Vacalopoulos, *A History of Thessaloniki*, Thessaloniki 1963, p. 88. Unfortunately we could only use the English popular edition of this work. In the much larger and fully documented Greek version of this work are probably more details on this subject.

5. Reviewed in the article «Ewliyâ Çelebi» in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New Edition, by J. H. Mordtmann-H. W. Duda, pp. 717-720, Vol II, Leiden 1965, and Cavid Baysun, article Evliyâ Çelebi in *İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, Vol IV, Istanbul 1945, p 400 vv.

worked. It is generally known that Evliya needs to be checked whenever possible. In the case of the description of the sea walls of Thessaloniki this was done by Michael Vickers¹ who concluded that the information of Evliya was correct. We ourselves had the opportunity to compare some of the Ottoman inscriptions in Thessaloniki² (those of the Hamza Bey Mosque and the Kasimiye Cami) with the texts of these inscriptions as given by Evliya. Disregarding a few minor differences they are given in a remarkably correct manner, a fact which might also be noticed by a number of other inscriptions in various places on the Balkan peninsula 'published' by Evliya³. On the other hand there are also a large number of inscriptions which are given in a careless or even wrong manner with many mistakes⁴. Seen from this angle Evliya Çelebi can never be an absolute proof on certain questions without supplementary, independent evidence.

Encouraged and helped by Mr. Vickers of Oxford and Mr. Spieser from Athens we are now able to give the absolute proof on the problem of the date and the founder of the White Tower. This is an old photograph⁵ taken before 1912 and showing the gate of the tower with the now missing inscription immediately above it. The photograph was most probably made by Adolf Struck⁶ who carried out detailed geographical research in Macedonia in the last decades of the Turkish rule. The inscription is excellently readable but unfortun-

1. Michael Vickers, «The Byzantine Sea Walls of Thessaloniki», *Balkan Studies* 11. 2, Thessaloniki 1970, pp. 261-280.

2. For these inscriptions see: M. Kiel, «Notes on the History of some Turkish Monuments in Thessaloniki and their founders», in *Balkan Studies* 11. 1, Thessaloniki 1970, pp. 123-156.

3. So for example in Serres where he gives a correct reading of the inscription of the Mosque of Mehmed Bey and a good but shortened (the verses 1 and 3 while omitting verse 2) of the Mustafa Pasha Mosque (*Seyâhatnâme*, VIII, p. 131). For these inscriptions see: Robert Anhegger, «Beiträge zur Osmanische Baugeschichte III, Moscheen in Saloniki und Serres», in *Istanbul Mitteilungen* 17, 1967, pp. 312-324, and M. Kiel, «Observations on the History of Northern Greece during the Turkish Rule, Monuments of Komotini and Serres», *Balkan Studies* 12. 2, 1971, pp. 415-462.

4. So the inscription of the Yeni Cami of Bitola (Monastir) built in H. 959 by Kadi Mahmut Efendi but for which Evliya gives the date as H. 973. See: Hazim Sabanović, *Evljia Celebija Putopis odlomci o Jugoslovenskim Zemljama* II, Sarajevo 1957, pp. 57-58. On the Ottoman inscriptions of Edirne F.Th. Dijkema has a special work in preparation in which considerable attention will be devoted to the problem we are dealing with.

5. The photograph is preserved in the archives of the German Archeological Institute in Athens where it was recognised as possibly belonging to the White Tower of Thessaloniki by J. M. Spieser of the Ecole Française d'Athènes who was so kind to bring this to our knowledge. A copy of it was placed at our disposal by the German Institute. Both Mr. Spieser and the Institute should accept our warmest thanks for this fruitful cooperation.

6. A meaning expressed by J. M. Spieser in a letter to the present author of March '73.

ately the fifth line, containing the date was considerably damaged. However, just enough remains of the letters to control the version of Evliya on this critical point. The date is given by Evliya as «tokuz yüz iki», nine hundred forty-two. «Kirk», forty, is largely readable on the photograph, the upper parts of the first letters of «iki» also. Only «tokuz yüz», nine hundred, is hardly if at all recognisable. Some evidence for the correctness of Evliya's reading of the date is, that the words suit the metre. If we further compare the text of Evliya with the photograph of the inscription we may notice the close similarities between both. Evliya really copied the text and only made some minor mistakes. The greatest of these possibly is that he did not note the diacritical dots in the second word of the first line and hence writes Merdan instead of Maydân and writes Ejder instead of Ejde (Dragon) while adding a *r* where it is not¹. These details are of no importance as to our conclusion that Evliya literally copied the inscription. The mistakes may also go back to the editor and printers of the work as we could not check the original text which is in Istanbul. There are no grounds for looking for another date than the year nine hundred (tokuz yüz) which is spoiled on the inscription. Süleyman the Magnificent was really the «Salomon of his time»—Süleymân-i zamân—, his far predecessor Emir Süleyman (1402-1411) did not possess Thessaloniki and Süleyman II (1687-1691) reigned after Evliya Çelebi wrote. Therefor *Nine hundred* forty-two is the only possibility.

Here we shall give both the text and the transcription of this so important inscription² and add the photograph as evidence.

احرى ايله يابلوب بورج [٤] اسد اولدى تام.	شير مېردان حضرت سلطان سليمان زمان
ياره شور بو قلميه بورج [٥] اسد ديلنه نام	شېر پيكر اژدها طوبلر كه اطرافنده در
٩٤٢ ٩٥ هـ	هجرت بيغبر آخر زمان [٦]
	اولدى تاريخى طقوز يوز قرق ايكي بو قله نك

*Text of Evliyâ Çelebi Seyâhatnâme, Printed edition, Istanbul 1928,
Vol. 8, p. 150.*

1. In the printed edition of the *Seyâhatnâme*, VIII, p. 151, the words «ves-salâm» at the end of the last verse of the inscription are omitted but in note 6 of the same page is stated that these words do appear in three other manuscripts of the same work. According to the latest research of Richard Kreutel the manuscript Bağdat Köşkü 304 should be recognised as the original autography of Evliya and used as such. See R. F. Kreutel, «Neues zur Evliyâ Çelebi-Forschung», *Der Islam* 48, 1971/72, pp. 268-279.

2. The reading, the transcription, the translation and the following remarks are by Mr. F. Th. Dijkema, Leiden. The text is in Turkish verse, metre: *remel*. The illegible parts are supplied from Evliyâ Çelebi and put between square brackets. In the second hemistich read *burc*, in the last one *peygamber*. Evliyâ's record concludes with *sene 942* («year 942»). It is not likely that this addition has figured in the parts of the inscription that are now damaged.

ŧir-i maydān hażret-i sultān süleymān-ı zamān
 emriyle yapılup burc-ı esed oldi tamām
 ŧir-i peyker ejdehā toplar ki eṭrāfındadır
 yaraşur bu kulleye burc-ı esed olursa nām
 [oldı tārihi tokuż yüz kırk iki bu kulleniñ
 h[icre] t-i peygamber-i āhir-i zamāndan ves-selām.

In English translation this is:

At the order of the Lion of the (Battle-?) field, his Presence the Sultan, the Salomo (Süleyman) of his age, the Tower of the Lion was made and completed.

The lion-faced dragon-guns that are on all its sides render «Lion Tower» a suitable name for this tower.

The date of this tower was nine hundred forty-two (= 12 July 1535 - 19 June 1536) since the Hijra of the messenger of the End of Time (Mohammed,) peace be (on Him).

The inscription is a characteristic example of an Ottoman 'Bauinschrift' and leaves no doubt that the tower was built from the foundations. Tafrali¹ remarked that at this place there must have been a large tower which is mentioned by Eustathe of Thessalonique in the 12th century. The White Tower as it appears today might be regarded as an Ottoman re-building and strengthening of an older work. We should not think too much of the tradition of the Venetian workmen. The tower is a prominent example of a group of defensive works characteristic for the Ottoman military architecture precisely. The type emerged in the 15th century and was continued till about the middle of the 16th century when the improvement of the heavy siege gun induced the military architects to adapt their works to a new situation. In a detailed work on the walls of Thessaloniki, now in preparation², we hope to come back on the place of the White Tower in Ottoman military architecture and discuss the various related buildings both in Asia and the Balkans. As to the question of the architect we might believe, with Babinger, that Sinan was the builder.

In the year the tower was built Sinan was not yet nominated Chief Imperial Architect³ but still commanded the Royal Guard. Sufficient is known on his

1. Tafrali, *Topographie*, p. 94.

2. By J. M. Spieser - Athens, with a collaboration of the present authors. Photographs, plans and sections of the various parts will be given together with a comparative study of the related structure elsewhere.

3. For a short survey of his life and work see *Encyclopedia of Islam*, old edition, article

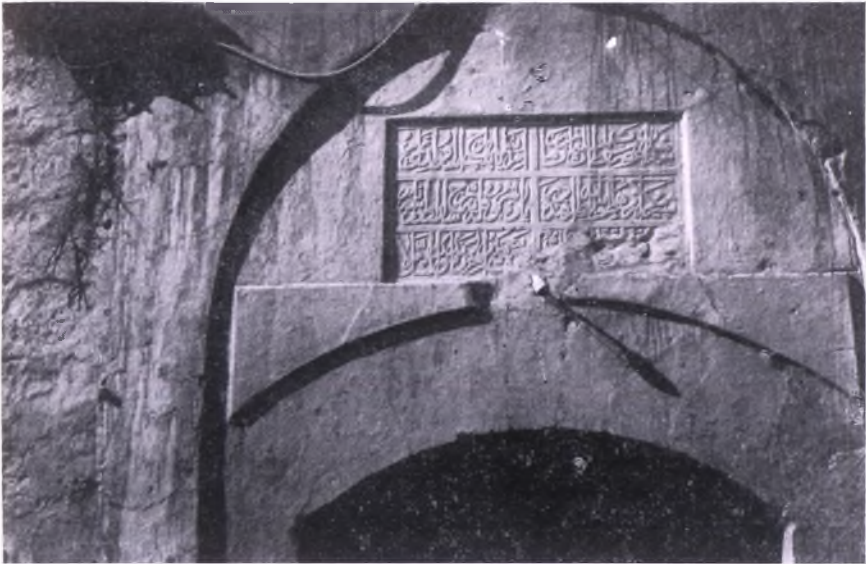


Plate I. White Tower, Thessaloniki, old photograph of the inscription.



Plate II. White Tower, Thessaloniki. The entrance as it is to be seen now after the removal of the inscription.

work as a military engineer. The White Tower was finished in 1536. Sinan is known to have built a similar tower in the Albanian port of Valona in 1537¹. He became Imperial Architect in 1538. In spite of the fact that the tower is not mentioned on the known lists of Sinan's works², basically the Tuhfetülmi'marin and the Tezkiretülebniye as well as some minor lists, this does not mean that he did not actually build the towers mentioned, as almost none of his military works from before 1538 are mentioned in the lists.

The reason the tower of Thessaloniki was built, or rebuilt, is without doubt the naval war with the Western Mediterranean powers in the third decade of the 16th century in which the Ottoman coastal dominions were frequently threatened (raid on Modon and capture of Koron in 1531, actions against Rhodos of Antonio Bosio and those against Dalmatian ports etc.). The tower commanded the entrance of the bay and covered the sea walls. Its construction might suggest that the Ottomans strengthened their flank before embarking on the Corfou Campaign of 1537 as otherwise their lines of communication could easily be cut by an expedition force disembarking in Thessaloniki. In this context we should remember that it was still before the Battle of Preveza (September 1538) in which Hayruddin Barbarossa defeated the joined Western fleets under Doria and lessened the pressure on the Ottoman coasts.

From a pawn in grim international conflicts the White Tower has become much of a symbol for the Thessaloniki of our time. As a work of art it is a remarkable piece of Ottoman military architecture of the first half of the 16th century about whose date of construction there is no longer need for doubt.

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«Sinan» by Franz Babinger. For an exhaustive biography of Sinan in a Western language see: Ernst Egli, *Sinan, der Baumeister osmanischer Glanzzeit*, Zürich 1954. See also Godfrey Goodwin, *A History of Ottoman Architecture*, London 1971, especially pp. 197-202.

1. So according to Evliya Çelebi, see: Babinger, *op. cit.*, p. 73, and 75, which is a detailed source in this case. According to the contemporary sources of Sinan's life (see note 24) the great architect really took part in the Corfou campaign. According to the Diary of this expedition given by Hammer (Joseph von Hammer, *Geschichte des Osmanische Reiches* III, pp. 696-698) the Ottoman army under Süleyman was in Valona between 13 July-18 August. Sinan would have had ample time to survey the military situation and to give general instruction for the works on the castle of Valona.

2. The basic sources of Sinan's work, four works contemporary to him, were published in Latin characters transcription by Rifki Melül Meriç, *Mimar Sinan, Hayatı, Eseri*, Ankara 1965.