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Dispersed ottoman unified-field tile panels

ΑΝΑΤΥΠΟ



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THE APPLICATION of surface decoration to buildings is a basic element of Islamic art, from the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock onward. In a similar vein, the removal or recycling of architectural revetments is a common theme through Islamic history and modern archaeology.

The decontextualization of ottoman revetment tiles

In the early 16th century CE, the Ottomans removed Mamluk polychrome marble *ablaq* revetments from the mosque of Nasr b. Muhammad in the Cairo citadel; these now are to be found on the mosque of Çoban Mustafa Pasha in Gebze and the Hirka-i Saadet Dairesi in Istanbul's Topkapı Palace. The Mamluks themselves were recyclers; some of the revetments of al-Muayyad's 15th-century mosque in Cairo may have been transferred from other monuments, just as its magnificent metal doors were taken from the 14th-century madrasa of Sultan Hasan. In the aftermath of archaeological investigations, Islamic revetments from Zaragoza are now found in Madrid, and those of Samarra are found in great numbers in Berlin. The same fate has befallen many other forms of building decoration throughout the Islamic world.

In this history, the movement of architectural decoration in the Ottoman Empire is an especially interesting case. Because especially after 1500 Ottoman builders and patrons began to favor the use of underglaze-painted modular tiles made in Iznik/Nicaea, which unlike tile-mosaic decorations created *in situ* were relatively easier to remove and reassemble, and because of the seismically active geography of Istanbul, the Ottoman capital, as well as many of the Ottoman Empire's major provincial cent-

ers, the adaptation and re-use of architectural tile decoration was fairly common from earlier Ottoman times. The various buildings and rebuildings, some due to fires or earthquakes and others due to expansion alone, of the Topkapı palace in Istanbul have completely changed many of the tile revetments of the palace.¹ Today visitors to the harem of the Topkapı see tiles that are largely from the latest and most disappointing period of Iznik production, as well as a number of startling examples of later European tile production, with only a few rooms containing their original late 16th or early 17th-century Iznik tile decoration. The vast bulk of the tiles of the mosque of Sultan Ahmet in Istanbul, completed around 1616, are of that date and likewise of poor quality, while the best tiles, found in the upper rear galleries of the monument, are almost entirely later 16th-century tiles recycled from other monuments, including the Topkapı itself, and two palaces of court officials that were pulled down to make way for the construction of the mosque.² The revetments on the exterior walls of the Eyup shrine near Istanbul are almost entirely recycled from other monuments, while the celebrated revetments of the Sünnet Odası or Circumcision Room in the Topkapı Palace were rearranged entirely sometime in the early 20th century.³ Today a very large part of the first major Ottoman monument to be extensively decorated with Iznik tiles, the mosque of Rüstem Pasha in Istanbul, is not in its original state; a complicated pastiche of tiles from different monuments today encompasses most of the exterior porch decoration and the entire upper left gallery.⁴

While many tiles removed from their original locations



Fig. 1. Tile made for the tomb of Selim I in Istanbul, Iznik, ca. 1574. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 11157.

were subsequently recycled to other Ottoman monuments, large quantities of such artistic works were purchased by private collectors in Europe and around the Mediterranean; of these, the bulk eventually ended up in museum collections. Visitors today to the Victoria & Albert Museum in London can see numbers of Ottoman tiles from many different monuments in that museum's well-lit galleries of Islamic ceramics. Large panels of Iznik tiles from identifiable monuments were formerly on display in the Musée des arts décoratifs in Paris. Important collections of Iznik tiles relegated to storage are found in other museums, most notably the Louvre in Paris and the Calouste S. Gulbenkian in Lisbon.⁵ The collecting of Iznik tiles in Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries appears to have received a special impetus from two events: first, the Russo-Turkish War of 1878-1879, with the siege and subsequent occupation of the secondary Ottoman capital city of Edirne, and the destruction of the revetments of its palace; and second, the 1902 earthquake in Istanbul, which took a special toll in monuments near the fault by the city walls at Topkapı and Edirnekapı. As the prices of Iznik tiles have continued to reach very high levels in the marketplace (a place they have maintained for well over a century and a half) the



Fig. 2. Four tiles with diagonal axes of symmetry, Iznik, ca. 1485-1490. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 117.



Fig. 3. Tile with asymmetrical central motif, Iznik, ca. 1560. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 83.



Fig. 4. Tiles with horizontally continuing pattern, from Rüstem Pasha Mosque in Istanbul, Iznik, ca. 1560.

looting of monuments remains a major threat in Turkey today, and the aftermath of the most recent earthquakes in north-west Turkey appears to have produced yet another round of looting of Iznik tiles.⁶

In the broader historical context, it is perhaps prudent to resist the attempt to moralize excessively when examining this phenomenon. Certainly the removal of art treasures from the Middle East in the age of European colonialism was in part a kind of Orientalist trophy-hunting with less than noble motives. But just as the art of Classical antiquity had achieved an almost iconic status in European aesthetics by the 16th century, which if anything had increased by the 18th and 19th centuries, so the appreciation of Islamic art, and in particular the ceramic art of Iznik, has existed in Europe from the 16th century onward, that is, from the time of the creation of these Iznik wares and tiles themselves, and the collecting of Iznik tiles in Europe was motivated in large part by respect for their beauty and technical perfection. What in the eyes of today's ethics may be seriously wrong may in the 19th century have been part of a serious effort either to bring works of beauty before the European public or to expose European artists and artisans to the superiority of historic Islamic works of art. What is perhaps ironic in the spasms of European collecting of Iznik from the later 19th century onward is the fact that for most Europeans these works of Ottoman ceramics were known as 'Rhodian' or as products of Damascus, Kütahya, vaguely-defined potteries of the Golden Horn in Istanbul, or even of Iran, even though in earlier times their actual ori-

gin in Iznik (ancient Nicaea) appears to have been well-known in Europe.⁷

The subject of study: tiles in private and museum collections

The Iznik tiles removed from their original locations and today found elsewhere, especially in European collections, can be placed in two main categories and a number of smaller ones. Those of the first main category are termed here 'repeating-module tiles'. These are tiles of a standard size, usually around 27 cm. square, that either have identical patterns, created from a template consisting of a single paper cartoon or several identical paper cartoons,⁸ or have a close repetition composed of an artistic unit that consists of no more than four tiles that repeat again and again. Especially popular in the early days of the production of polychrome tiles at Iznik after about 1558, such tiles reflect the prevailing styles of the Ottoman court at Istanbul, where many of the templates apparently originated. Individual tiles that composed repeating patterns, almost all of them rectangular, were of several types, most of which were designed to create a decorative pattern that flowed from tile to tile across an architectural surface. Some of these had a vertical axis of symmetry but with corner or side elements that carried a pattern on into adjacent tiles (fig. 1), and others had a diagonal axis of symmetry, usually put together as decoration in groups of four (fig. 2). Still others had a central motif that was asymmetrical, but included half-motifs on the sides that carried the overall pattern

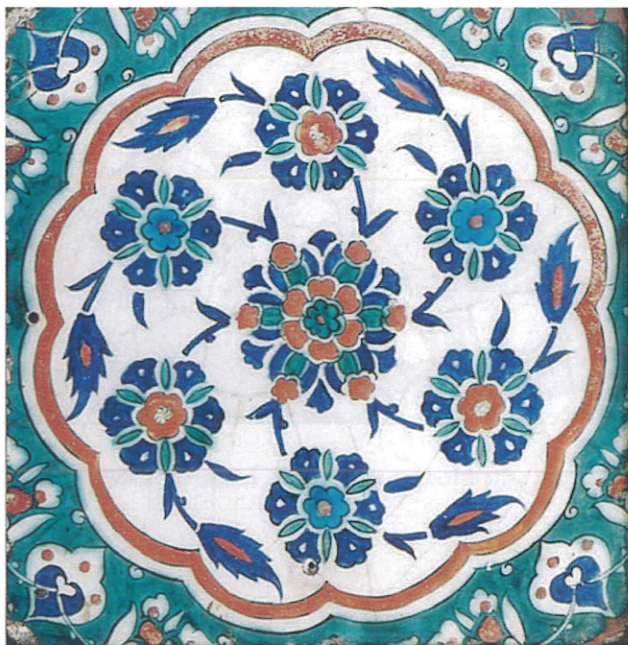


Fig. 5. Tiles made for the mosque of Mesih Ali Pasha in Istanbul, Iznik, ca. 1586. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 108.



Fig. 6. Tiles with confronted birds, Iznik, ca. 1570-1580. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 75.

into adjacent tiles (fig. 3). One quite exceptional pattern from the mosque of Rüstem Pasha in Istanbul, found early in the development of polychrome Iznik mural ceramics, is notable both for the asymmetry of its design and for repeating only in a horizontal direction (fig. 4). Smaller groups of mass-produced tiles were made with self-contained symmetrical designs, usually consisting of bouquets of flowers, self-contained cusped roundels (fig. 5) or even two confronting birds (fig. 6).

When we examine dispersed tiles, the repeating-module examples now found in museums suggest that, especially at the beginning of mass production between 1560 and 1570, such tiles were produced in numbers greater than their eventual architectural use demanded for specific projects, and many tiles that today appear in museums may have been 'extras' or over-runs. This appears to be the case with the mosque of Rüstem Pasha, where numbers of tiles identical to those in the mosque, that apparently are not from the mosque itself, have made their way to the marketplace and to museums (fig. 7). A famous red-ground border tile produced for restorations of the Topkapı Palace in the mid-1580s and today still found in the Murad III Room in the Topkapı also

found its way to the marketplace in vast numbers (fig. 8). In fact, the chief procurement officer for the Palace in the 1580s, Hacı Hüsrev Efendi, appears to have diverted a number of tiles made for the Palace to his small mosque in Istanbul, today known by the name of Ramazan Efendi Camii.⁹ Such tiles were both prestigious and expensive, but because the court paid the Iznik tilemakers a fixed price per tile at a benchmark price that had not kept up with inflation, the tilemakers preferred to make the more lucrative ceramic wares instead, and there are surviving documents from the court to the Qadi of Iznik admonishing the tilemakers to execute royal orders rather than making ceramic wares.¹⁰ In this tight and expensive market, the creative Hacı Hüsrev appears to have 'skimmed' tiles intended for the palace to furnish his mosque. Other well-known Ottoman monuments with repeat-module tile types that found a fairly widespread dispersal in later times include the Piyale Pasha mosque (ca. 1572) and the tomb of Selim II (1574); while there was undoubtedly plunder in both cases, there also appear to have been original overruns in production for both monuments.¹¹

Large tiles, often made in sets, constitute another body

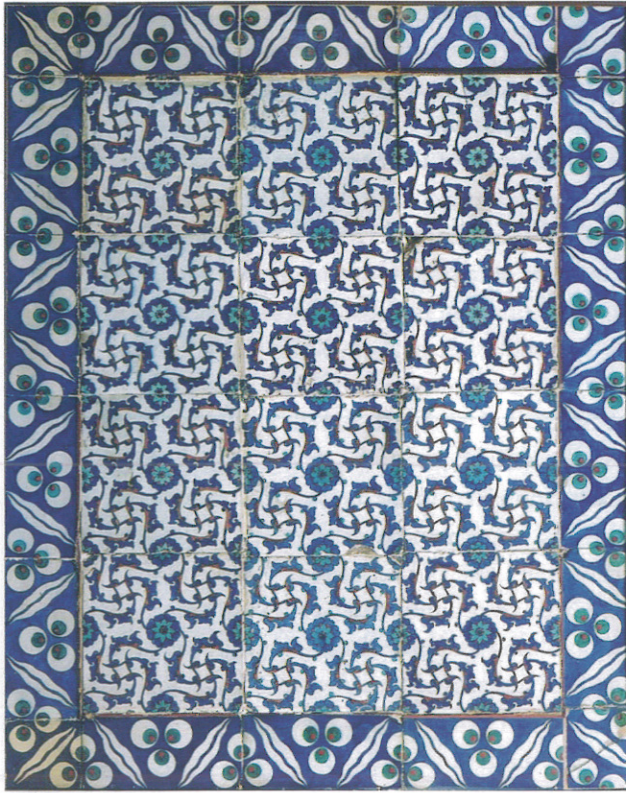


Fig. 7. Tiles made for the mosque of Rüstem Pasha Mosque in Istanbul, Iznik, ca. 1560. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 102.

of material that is no longer found in any original locations within the former Ottoman empire. Sets of large rectangular tiles about 60 x 90 cm designed for programmatic use in a single building are a rare case, but six of these, one with elaborate inscriptions, have survived in various collections.¹² Some of these may have been intended for wooden buildings or for royal Ottoman *kayık* barges, where fields of smaller tiles would have been impractical.¹³ Large octagonal tiles, whose original purpose remains obscure but which may have been the tops of tabouret tables, have also made their way into museum collections (fig. 9). Other tiles were made in the form of spandrels for the recessed shelves (*dolap*) that were built into many important Ottoman domestic buildings. Many of these are now in museum collections but virtually none has survived *in situ* in its original location.

Unified-field panels—large designs created first as cartoons on huge sheets of paper and then transferred to entire fields of identical rectangular tiles—are the larg-



Fig. 8. Border tile made for Murad III Odasi, Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, Iznik, ca. 1580. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 85.



Fig. 9. Large octagonal tile, Iznik, ca. 1560-1570. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 103.

est and arguably the most important two-dimensional works in the Turkish art tradition.¹⁴ They evidently draw their inspiration from the five very large and very famous blue, turquoise and white tiles now on the facade of the *Sünnet Odası* in the Topkapi Palace,¹⁵ which were probably executed after designs of the court artist Shah Kulu sometime in the second quarter of the 16th century (fig. 10). The large unified-field tile panels from Iznik come in two types—with added borders, and with inclusive borders. The earliest examples of such tile panels were made to fit the irregular spaces of spandrels between arches of



Fig. 10. Large tile with design after Shah Kulu, from Sünnet Odasi, Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, Iznik, ca. 1550.

Ottoman buildings, but artists quickly moved to create rectangular panels for wall surfaces. A large blue-ground example probably from the hand of the court artist Kara Memi,¹⁶ originally one of a pair flanking the main portal of the mosque of Rüstem Pasha, is both the earliest and the most spontaneous of these. Later such panels were expertly custom-made in Iznik to fit specific wall surfaces in a number of famous Ottoman monuments.¹⁷ Many have survived intact in Istanbul, but many others were broken up and sold piecemeal on the art market in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and one, a panel from the tomb of Selim II (1574) in Istanbul, was removed entirely by M. Germain Bapst, French minister to the Ottoman court, and given to the Louvre; it was replaced in Istanbul by a copy made by the great French studio potter Théodore Deck.¹⁸ A set of identical tile lunettes made to be placed over a building's windows were stripped from the building and ended up in many museums, including the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon, the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Köln, and the Louvre in Paris. The provenance information provided at the time of acquisition of a number of these was, as recorded by Gaston Migeon,¹⁹ 'Palais de Piyale Pacha'; it is entirely possible that this may have referred to the six-domed mosque in Istanbul built for the Ottoman admiral Piyale Pasha by the architect Sinan, but it is more likely that a nearby kiosk made for the same patron, now completely destroyed, was the source.

The 1902 earthquake in Istanbul was, like the siege of Edirne a quarter-century earlier, another catalyst for the migration of Ottoman tiles to Western collections. The beautiful little wooden mosque built by the Istanbul city walls in the mid-1590s by the maker of felt caps Takieci Ibrahim Aga was one of the hardest-hit monuments,²⁰ and its characteristic tiles with patterns of grape-vines are found today in over a dozen museums worldwide (fig. 11). Another major casualty of the 1902 earthquake was the mosque of Mihrimah Sultan, built around 1560 at the Edirne Gate in Istanbul directly above the earthquake fault, where today not a single tile is to be found.

Recombining lost tile fragments

The advent of computer imaging technology has greatly aided research in these dispersed tiles from unfield-field panels. Comparison of individual repeating tiles among collections is a relatively easy task; reuniting white-ground



Fig. 11. Tile from the mosque of Takieci Ibrahim Aga in Istanbul, Iznik, ca. 1590. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 11166.

tiles from the middle of the large panels, especially if they have no border designs which are easier to match up, is far more difficult. The work is made easier when the researcher is able to scan research photographs made over many decades, and then to re-create them in the same scale digitally, and then to attempt to put them together in much the same way as a picture-puzzle, but with all of the 'pieces' being the same shape and size. In working with literally thousands of slides taken in museums all over the world, I was able by the mid-1990s to identify a significant number of dispersed unified-field panels, but two of these were by far the most interesting. Juxtaposition of individual tiles and small groups of adjoining tiles from the Benaki Museum, the Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian Museum, the Museum für Angewandte Kunst, the Victoria & Albert Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum led to a digital reassembly first discussed by the author at a Turkish art conference in Utrecht in 1999. Additional work by the Benaki Museum staff led to a more refined digital assembly of what was originally none identical panel of tiles (fig. 12), an unprecedented



Fig. 12. Tile panel, probably from the Edirne Palace, reconstituted by the Benaki Museum (original tiles: Benaki Museum, Museum of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The remaining part of the panel reproduces tiles at the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Vienna Museum für Angewandte Kunst), Iznik, ca. 1570-1574.

seventeen tiles in height and three tiles wide, composed of several different areas that included an arched socle imitating purple breccia stone, a white-ground arched panel with a complex arabesque of split-leaf rumi forms, large complex lotus palmettes, and curved leaves, and above this something very unusual: a depiction in translucent blue of a lead-covered dome from Ottoman architecture. A distinctive green-ground border integral to the composition was a considerable help in bringing the various tiles together. The Benaki Museum then took the imaginative and daring steps both of reuniting the surviving tiles and of reconstructing the missing tiles of one panel, with an eye toward installing the recreated panel in the new Benaki Islamic Museum.

What is the origin of the panel now on display in Athens? The most probable source is the now-destroyed Ottoman royal palace on Kırkpınar Island²¹ in the Meriç/Maritza river in Edirne/Adrianople, where today the borders of Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria meet. In all probability, the panel now reconstructed in Athens was matched by another similar panel and both were originally placed to either side of the doorway of the palace. In their style, they are clearly from the reign of Selim II (r. 1566-1574), whose fondness for Edirne also resulted in the building there of his great imperial mosque. Their unusual proportions, and their unusual iconography with the inclusion of architectural elements, make the two panels unique in the history of Ottoman tile decoration.

What is the value of this process, both in terms of the amount of time spent, and the very expensive nature of the effort? The results of the Benaki's investment are of

course visually impressive, but even more importantly they make a major contribution to study of the history of Ottoman art. In the case of the panel now on display in Athens, we are able to see for the first time a kind of panel, with depicted architectural elements, that does not survive intact in any Ottoman monument, and which reveals an aspect of Ottoman architectural decoration not previously known to historians of art. When this process is repeated for other tiles and other panels, we may be able to reconstruct all or parts of certain important Ottoman buildings that are no longer extant, such as the Palace of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha on the Hippodrome in Istanbul, or the baths built in 1572 for Selim II in the Topkapı Palace. The original decoration of Sinan's great mosque of Mihrimah Sultan in Istanbul may also be revealed. There are thus tremendous gains in understanding to be realized in this process of piecing together fragments of the history of Ottoman art by reassembling Iznik tiles such as those in Athens. It is to be hoped that the success of the Benaki's splendid efforts in this regard will in future be emulated by other institutions.

Note of the editor: The tiles now kept at New York and Vienna constitute part of the lower and middle area of the second identical tile panel.

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NOTES

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1. The complex history of the Topkapı Palace is discussed in G. Necipoglu, *Architecture, Ceremonial and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (New York-Cambridge-London 1991).

2. See W. B. Denny – A. Ertuğ, *Gardens of Paradise: Turkish Tiles. 15th-17th Centuries* (Istanbul 1998) 154-56.

3. See W. B. Denny, *The Ceramic Revetments of the Mosque of Rustem Pasha and the Environment of Change* (New York-London 1977) 114-30.

4. Denny (*op. cit.*) 78-81.

5. S. T. Bakır, *Iznik Çinileri ve Gülbenkian Koleksiyonu* (Ankara 1999).

6. See www.michelvanrijn.nl/artnews/iznikcontinium.htm

for tiles said to have been stolen from a mosque in Izmit. On its website Saz Productions reports 171 tiles stolen in November of 2003 from the Ramazan Oglu mosque in Adana; a search of Google shows several other examples of Iznik tiles embroiled in similar controversies.

7. The entire question of historical misattribution of Iznik ceramics was treated in detail by A. Lane, *The Ottoman Pottery of Iznik*, *Ars Orientalis* 2 (1957) 247-81.

8. W. B. Denny, *Turkish Ceramics and Turkish Painting: The Role of the Paper Cartoon in Turkish Ceramic Production*, in: A. Daneshvari (ed.), *Essays in Islamic Art and Architecture in Honor of Katharina Otto-Dorn* (Malibu 1981) 29-36.

9. Denny (n. 3) 165-68.

10. Quoted by Denny (n. 3) 168.

11. Denny (n. 3) 165 and 100.

12. One is illustrated in E. Atıl, *The Age of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent* (Washington-New York 1987) 278.

13. See K. Otto-Dorn, *Das Islamische Iznik* (Berlin 1941) 168.

14. Denny (n. 3) 77-116.

15. W. Denny, *The Saz Style and the Istanbul Nakshane*, *Muqarnas* 1 (1983) 103-21.

16. Denny (n. 3) 45, 51.

17. Denny (n. 3) 52, 76-117.

18. Denny (n. 3) 100.

19. G. Migeon, *L'Orient musulman: Paris, Musée du Louvre* (Paris 1921) 41.

20. Denny (n. 3) 172-79.

21. See R. Osman, *Edirne Sarayı* (Ankara 1957).

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Διάσπαρτα οθωμανικά πλακίδια με ενιαίο σχέδιο

Η οθωμανική κεραμική και τα πλακίδια του Ιζνίκ υπήρξαν συλλεκτικά αντικείμενα για τους Ευρωπαίους ήδη από την εποχή της κατασκευής τους, τον 16ο και τον πρώιμο 17ο αιώνα. Η πολιτική αστάθεια, οι πόλεμοι και οι φυσικές καταστροφές που επικράτησαν στην ευρύτερη περιοχή κατά τα τέλη του 19ου και τον πρώιμο 20ό αιώνα χρονικά συνέπεσαν με την κορύφωση του συλλεκτικού ενδιαφέροντος, με αποτέλεσμα μεγάλες ποσότητες από πλακίδια που επένδυαν οθωμανικά κτίρια να καταλήξουν στη Δύση. Ορισμένα απ' αυτά έφεραν όμοια μοτίβα σε κάθε πλακίδιο, σχηματίζοντας μια ευρύτερη σύνθεση με επαναλαμβανόμενο σχέδιο. Σε άλλες περιπτώσεις, το βασικό μοτίβο διαμορφωνόταν πάνω σε τέσσερα πλακίδια που αποτελούσαν τη μονάδα του επαναλαμβανόμενου διακόσμου.

Ακόμα μεγαλύτερο ενδιαφέρον παρουσιάζουν τα αυτόνομα τετράγωνα πλακίδια (με ύψος γύρω στα 27 εκ.) ή ομάδες τους, που αποτελούσαν τμήματα μεγαλύτερης σύνθεσης για την επένδυση τοίχων, που συχνά ξεπερνούσε τα 2 μ. σε ύψος. Πολλές φορές είναι δύσκολο να εντοπιστεί η προέλευση αυτών των πλακιδίων, που σήμερα φυλάσσονται στις συλλογές διάφορων μουσείων στην Ευρώπη και την Αμερική. Με τη βοή-

θεια όμως της ψηφιακής φωτογραφίας, είναι δυνατόν τα πλακίδια να επανασυναρμολογηθούν και να αποκατασταθεί η αρχική ενοποιημένη σύνθεση.

Πλακίδια από δύο τέτοιες μεγάλες συνθέσεις –τα οποία ξεχωρίζουν επειδή είναι ψηλότερα και στενότερα από τα περισσότερα που βρέθηκαν *in situ*– εντοπίστηκαν στο Μουσείο Μπενάκη, το Μουσείο Γκιουλμπεκιάν στη Λισσαβόνα, το Μουσείο Εφαρμοσμένων Τεχνών στη Βιέννη, στο Μουσείο Βικτωρίας και Αλβέρτου στο Λονδίνο καθώς και στο Μητροπολιτικό Μουσείο της Νέας Υόρκης. Μέσω μιας πρώτης ψηφιακής αποκατάστασης εξήχθει το συμπέρασμα ότι πρόκειται για δύο ίδιες συνθέσεις με 17 πλακάκια σε ύψος και αουνήθιστες παραστάσεις οθωμανικού τρούλου στην κορυφή κάθε σύνθεσης. Οι ειδικοί στο Μουσείο Ισλαμικών Τεχνών του Μουσείου Μπενάκη κατάφεραν –σε συνεργασία με άλλα ιδρύματα και με μόνιμους δανεισμούς πλακιδίων ή υψηλής πιστότητας αντίγραφα– να αποκαταστήσουν τις δύο συνθέσεις που τοποθετήθηκαν στη νέα έκθεση στο Μουσείο Μπενάκη. Οι συνθέσεις αυτές, που πιθανότατα χρονολογούνται γύρω στο 1570, κατασκευάστηκαν για το μεγάλο θερινό ανάκτορο στην Αδριανούπολη επί Σελίμ Β' (βασ. 1566-1574).