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Divriği's architectural plasticity: Study in Seljuk innovation and cross-cultural analogy

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Abstract: This study offers a comprehensive architectural reading of the Great Mosque and Hospital of Divriği (early 1220s) in Turkey, a rare mosque–hospital ensemble commissioned under joint male–female patronage by Ahmed Şah and Turan Melek. Attributed to the master builder Hürremşah of Ahlat and a cosmopolitan workshop, the complex fuses diverse artisanal traditions into an exceptional synthesis of structure and sculptural ornament. The mosque adopts a courtyard-less, multi-aisled plan of 25 calibrated bays oriented to the mihrab, where graded supports and differentiated vaults articulate a clear spatial hierarchy. The ensemble's portals; especially the monumental North Portal and the Darüşşifa entrance, exhibit unprecedented high-relief stone carving, dominated by vegetal programs, bundled colonnettes, and rigorously profiled mouldings. While formally sui generis within Anatolian Seljuk architecture, the portals' plastic dynamism and shadow-rich surfaces invite heuristic analogies with later European "Gothic" (in framing logics) and "Baroque" (in surface vitality), without implying genealogical ties. Inside, the mihrab's three-dimensional rod-interlace and the original ebony minbar by Ahmed of Tiflis underscore the workshop's technical range. The Darüşşifa's modified four-iwan scheme, lanterned dome, and integrated mausoleum extend the programmatic complexity. Noting phases of incompletion and later repairs, the paper situates Divriği as a uniquely ambitious medieval Anatolian monument where architecture verges on sculpture, producing intensity through local means.

Keywords: Divriği Ulu Cami, Seljuk Anatolia, multi-bay plan, hypostyle, muqarnas, sculptural portal, ornament, Darüşşifa

INTRODUCTION, HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND PATRONAGE

The Great Mosque of Divriği (in today's Turkey) was commissioned in the early 1220s by the Mengücekid ruler Ahmed Şah, while the adjoining hospital (Darüşşifa) was endowed in the same period by his consort Turan Melek. The ensemble is among the rare Anatolian Seljuk monuments realised as a contiguous mosque-hospital complex under a joint male-female patronage. Although the precise construction period is not documented, it has been inferred, on the basis of historical conditions and the scope of work, that the building campaign likely lasted five to six years. The chief architect is recorded as Hürremşah of Ahlat (son of Muğis), who appears to have directed a cosmopolitan workshop during construction.

Sources emphasise that artisans and masons of diverse origins and training collaborated on site; in light of the political and social circumstances of the period, it has been considered plausible that craftsmen fleeing Mongol advances from Central Asia (including from Bactra), along with stonemasons from Syria and workers of Armenian, Georgian, and Iranian background, were present, whether as migrants, captives, or dependants This confluence of traditions has often been invoked to explain the monument's distinctive synthesis and the exceptional ambition of its stone-carving programme, and it further suggests a deliberate preference for master artisans recruited on the basis of expertise rather than uniform provenance (Kuban, 1999).

In urban silhouette the complex reads primarily as a mosque; viewed from the rear, the integration of the hospital becomes legible. The endowment also comprises a tomb (türbe) with two domes. The exterior facades are faced with finely dressed stone, and the mosque itself is planned on a rectangular footprint with a covering system that includes domical elements. A cylindrical minaret stands at the north-western corner, yet its status as an original component has been questioned. It has been argued that following the collapse of the west wall, the minaret was rebuilt together with the large cylindrical buttress at the corner; the minaret is further reported to have been reconstructed in 1523, during the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent (Çobanoğlu, 2012).

The complex underwent repair campaigns in the first half of the eighteenth century, again towards the end of the nineteenth century, and in the early decades of the twentieth century (Çobanoğlu, 2012). Recognised internationally for the unique integration of architecture and sculptural ornament, as well as for the outstanding state of preservation of its ensemble, the Great Mosque and Hospital of Divriği were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985 (UNESCO, 1992-2025).

PLAN AND SPATIAL ORGANISATION

It has been applied in accordance with the basic design of the courtyard-less and minaret-less mosque typology that developed in regions under Danishmendid control in the 12th century, albeit with specific modifications. The building adopts a multi-aisled plan type as can be seen in Fig. 1, and its interior extends longitudinally toward the mihrab. The central aisle is slightly wider than the lateral aisles, and in this respect the overall plan invites superficial comparison with five-aisled churches, although the tectonic logic and liturgical program are distinctly Islamic and Anatolian (Kuban, 1999; Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987).

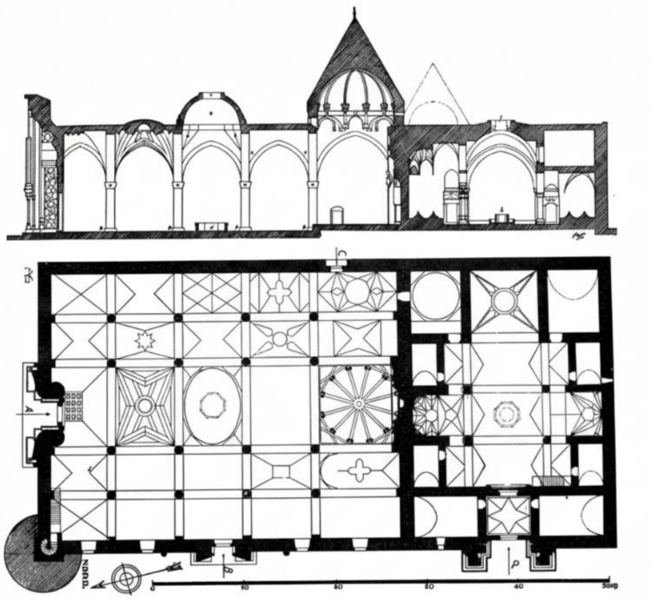

Fig. 1. General plan and massing of the Divriği Great Mosque and Darüşşifa; schematic of the 25-bay interior grid and longitudinal section. (Source: Cahen, 1988)

The bay in front of the mihrab is framed by two narrower bays arranged parallel to the principal axis of the building, effectively encircling the central maqsurah. Toward the entrance, the bay immediately following the mihrab-front unit reads as a relatively narrow, reduced iwan aligned with the main axis and covered by a barrel vault. The modular plan comprises twenty-five units configured as five bays in each direction, yet the module dimensions have been calibrated elastically rather than held constant, so that individual bay measurements differ across the grid.

At the centre of the twenty-five-bay field, above a transition zone articulated with Turkish triangles, a source of daylight is provided. Each bay is covered by a vault with distinct ornamental treatment, carried by likewise ornamented supports. The diameters of the supports increase from the inner rows to the outer rows, a pattern that corresponds to span and load differentiation across the interior. This graded thickening is plausibly intended to accommodate the greater loads associated with the wider central spans (Kuban, 1999).

PORTALS AND THE POLITICS OF ORNAMENT

Ettinghausen and Grabar's survey of Islamic art, the ornament of the Divriği complex is characterised as "fantastic vegetal and even animal forms, violently tormented, that recall Celtic miniatures and the facades of Roman architecture," a description intended to convey both the intensity of carving and its layered, hybrid visual memory (Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987, p. 234). Radically different from all known contemporary examples, the decoration; concentrated especially on the monumental portals, consists most notably of stylised vegetal motifs in high-relief stone carving of truly astounding quality and variety (Pancaroğlu, 2009).

The ensemble possesses four principal portals (Fig. 2), three giving access to the mosque and one to the hospital. In each case, the primary arch profile of the portal continues without interruption; this compositional decision yields an uncommon and arguably unparalleled configuration in which there is no reliance on flanking wall returns, deep portal recesses, or half-domes and barrel vaults enriched with muqarnas. Rather, the portal mass is generated by the single, sweeping movement of a complex group of mouldings, which constructs depth and shadow through profile alone (Kuban, 1999).

Considered at the level of authorship and workshop practice, the carving style of the portals displays a striking internal consistency in motif design and execution, which might suggest the hand of a single master. Yet the scale, complexity, and density of the programme render completion by one carver implausible. It is therefore more likely that a chief master; widely identified in the literature as Hürremşah of Ahlat, established the overall conception and directed the work, while a team of specialist stone-carvers realised the components and completed the ornamental composition in situ (Kuban, 1999). This model accords with broader Seljuk workshop organisation, where a principal designer or head mason coordinated multiple hands under a unified schema.

A further distinctive aspect of the Divriği complex is the presence of human figures in relief. While figural imagery is not unknown in Islamic architectural ornament, particularly in secular and some frontier contexts, its appearance remains exceptional and often context-dependent (Grabar, 1992; Necipoğlu, 2007). At Divriği, the placement of such figures in the Darüşşifa rather than in the mosque proper is notable and has been read as an index of programmatic differentiation between a healing-educational institution and the congregational sacred space.

Within Anatolian Seljuk architecture, the figural repertoire has been variously interpreted, including associations with patronal representation and astral symbolism, yet it does not warrant a simple opposition of "Islamic" versus "pagan" practice; rather, it indicates a complex negotiation of image, meaning, and decorum across building types and audiences (Kuban, 1999). In this sense, the Divriği carving programme exemplifies a high degree of sculptural ambition and iconographic nuance, integrating a rigorous moulding logic with a richly coded ornamental language.

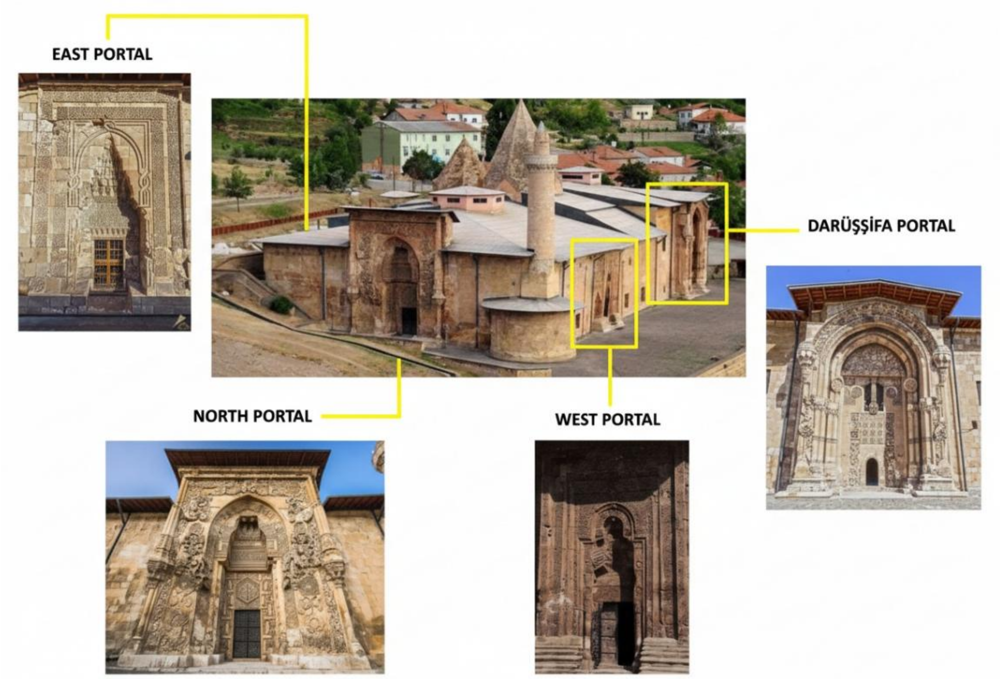

Fig. 2. Schematic of the Portals of The Great Mosque of Divriği. (Source: Author, 2025, AI-generated drawing using Gemini Flash 2.5)

North Portal

The renown of the Great Mosque of Divriği has been secured in large part by the extraordinary ornament of its North Portal (Fig. 3), also known as the Cennet Kapı or "Baroque" Portal. Measuring approximately 14.5 metres in height, 11.5 metres in width, and 4.5 metres in depth, it constitutes the largest, most imposing, and most original of the complex's portals, and it has reportedly remained closed for more than fifty years (Kuban, 1999). The compositional scheme is generated by a sequence of nested geometric frames within which richly carved surfaces are orchestrated. The high-relief vegetal programme that adorns the portal, sculptural in character, has been interpreted as a monumental "tree of life" motif whose expansive, enveloping disposition defines the visual logic of the entrance composition (Kuban, 1999; Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987).

The rich system of mouldings and the unusually extensive repertoire of vegetal motifs on the North Portal of the Great Mosque of Divriği have been read as evoking a baroque effect. Baroque, as a European architectural and artistic style, emerged in late sixteenth-century Rome and reached maturity over the seventeenth century, with its codification marked by dynamic massing, plastic surfaces, deep chiaroscuro relief, and curvilinear vegetal profusion (Blunt, 1973; Wittkower, 1999). By contrast, the Divriği complex was commissioned and constructed in the 1220s under Ahmed Şah and Turan Melek, more than three centuries earlier (Kuban, 1999; UNESCO, 1992-2025). The analogy proposed in the literature is therefore morphological rather than genealogical: the portal's unusually deep, high-relief vegetal carving, organised around an enveloping "cosmic tree", produces a shadow-rich surface vitality that behaves like Baroque ornament in its plastic dynamism (Kuban, 1999; Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987).

Here, plastic dynamism names a perceptual condition in which carved profiles act like modelled, pliant matter, generating the illusion of expansion, contraction, and flow as one moves before the portal. It arises from calibrated contrasts in relief depth and edge profiling that orchestrate light into gradients rather than flat shadows; from continuous, curving vegetal lines that knit disparate fields into a single, travelling figure; and from localised thickenings at crowns, returns, and junctions where mouldings bundle, twist, or bifurcate, concentrating visual energy. The effect is experiential and time-based: shifting daylight and changing vantage activate different layers of the carving so that forms seem to emerge, recede, and recompose; less a fixed pattern than a sequence of revelations. In this sense, the stonework operates as architectural sculpture, using shadow to simulate malleability and to stage rhythmic intensifications across the threshold. Such behaviour parallels Baroque surface vitality not through historical transmission but through shared optical tactics, chiaroscuro, curvature, and edge plasticity, mobilised here within a medieval Anatolian grammar of vegetal invention.

In the comparative plate, Divriği Ulu Cami's north portal is juxtaposed with three seventeenth-century Baroque entrances; the Royal Basilica of Our Lady of the Forsaken in Valencia, Palazzo Carignano in Turin, and Santa Maria della Pace in Rome, not to assert genealogical descent but to register morphological affinities (Fig. 4). Read in this way, Divriği's portal "behaves like" Baroque portals in several respects: its unusually deep, high-relief vegetal carving generates intense chiaroscuro akin to the plastic modelling of projecting orders and broken cornices; its layered archivolt and nested niche create an enveloping frame that concentrates movement toward the threshold, much as Baroque entrances stage approach through concave-convex profiles and clustered supports; its sinuous scrolls and bulging mouldings produce undulating outlines comparable to the rhythmic curvature of Palazzo Carignano and Santa Maria della Pace; its hieratic verticality, achieved by a tall arched bay and stacked registers, parallels the vertical accents of columnar groupings and elevated niches; and its calibrated textural density thickens around turning points to suggest flow across the surface, a strategy characteristic of Baroque ornament. Overall, the comparison isolates a formal analogy: the Divriği portal's plastic dynamism and shadow-animated surface resonate with Baroque entrance design while arising from a distinct medieval Anatolian decorative grammar

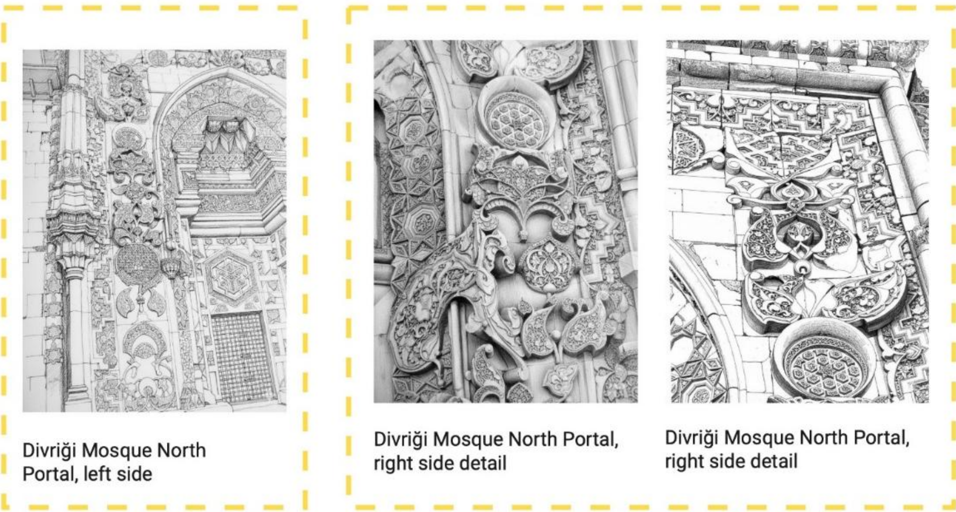

Fig. 3. The Great Mosque of Divriği North Portal and details of ornaments. (Source: Author, 2025)

Fig. 4. Four portals; Divriği Great Mosque, Our Lady of the Forsaken (Valencia), Palazzo Carignano (Turin), and Santa Maria della Pace (Rome), with an overlay density map highlighting shared zones of emphasis and their Baroque-like plastic dynamism. (Source: Author, 2025)

Nevertheless, the analogy requires methodological caution: formal affinities such as swelling vegetal masses and dramatic relief do not imply historical precedence or influence, given the distinct tectonic logics, workshop practices, and liturgical contexts of thirteenth-century Seljuk Anatolia and early modern Catholic Europe (Flood, 2001; Wittkower, 1999). Among the most salient features of the portal is the large muqarnas-like capital surmounting a shaft that rises from the pavement, above which a substantial bundle of colonnettes is deployed. These bundled colonnettes are visually tied by a horizontal moulding course that spans the portal opening and links the clusters on either side. The next framing zone is articulated by a frieze of geometric meander motifs. Within the field encircled by this meander frieze, and surrounding the portal niche, the surface is dominated by a "cosmic tree" composition.

The motifs are disposed in a symmetrical order, repeating a numerical rhythm of three composite leaves followed by one solar roundel (3 + 1) three times; each 3 + 1 unit may be read as a discrete cosmic tree. This fantastic, quasi-animate vegetal mass, conceived as if intent on occupying the entire doorway, symbolises an encroaching nature and was likely intended to produce the effect of nature enveloping architecture. The two cosmic-tree figures that rise symmetrically from either side are tied across the top of the portal by a horizontal band of rosettes and palmettes; among the horizontal elements, three central motifs are lotus blossoms, a device well attested in Islamic ornamental vocabularies (Kuban, 1999; Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987).

The outermost frieze of the main portal niche is composed of rosettes formed by octagonal stars and rhombi set upon an oblique moulding. Within the large pointed-arched niche, the design of the secondary, inner niche constitutes an original configuration attested only at the Mosque of Divriği (Kuban, 1999).

West Portal

The West Portal, measuring approximately 9.5 metres in height, 6 metres in width, and 2.5 metres in depth, functions today as the principal entrance to the mosque. Owing to the profusion of lace-like patterns, it is also referred to as the "textile portal." The west wall and the aisle behind it were rebuilt following collapse together with their vaults, although it remains uncertain whether the present appearance was assumed during repairs in the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent or during subsequent eighteenth- or nineteenth-century interventions. The carving is executed in a comparatively mechanical, geometric, and monotone manner that departs from Seljuk-period ornamental richness. Fragments from the original portal appear to have been reused in the rebuilding, yet workmanship is of lower quality than that observed on the other portals, and the patterning is coarser. The use of motifs that are not characteristic of either Seljuk or Ottoman repertories, combined with the fact that much of the complex exhibits areas of incomplete carving while this portal is finished throughout, has been cited as supporting the view that the present ornament was applied at a later date. (Kuban, 1999)

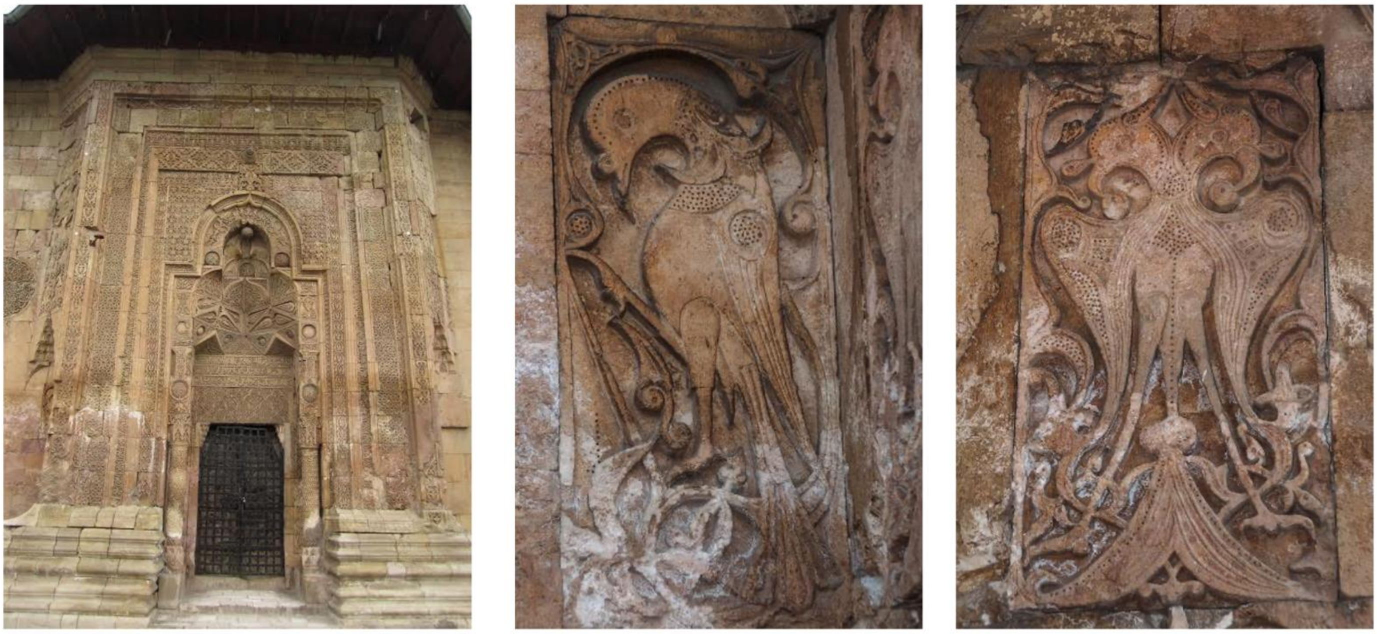

Fig. 5. From left to right: West Portal, a falcon figure, and a double-headed eagle figure. (Photos: Alyılmaz, 2016)

Like the North Portal, the West Portal projects outward from the facade, although, unlike the north, it does not exceed the height of the mosque wall. On the niches flanking the portal opening, two heraldic bird figures are present: a double-headed eagle as can be seen in Fig. 5, widely associated with Seljuk sovereignty, and a falcon, linked to The House of Mengüjek; together they have been read as articulating Mengüjek loyalty and deference to Seljuk authority. The falcon's raised talon has been interpreted as a sign of latent power and readiness for action. Such raptorial bird motifs are traced to Turkic steppe and pre-Islamic totemic traditions and occur with some frequency in Anatolian Seljuk architectural ornament. Characteristically, the portal's raking outer edges incorporate geometric, arabesque niches with muqarnas; there are also decorated spherical elements and niche treatments that range between Turkish-triangle transitions and coarse muqarnas. In contrast to the other portals, foliate and floral motifs are not employed on this doorway (Kuban, 1999).

East Portal

The window-sized opening that is thought to have been used by the ruler for entry to the mosque is consequently referred to as the Şah Kapı or Hünkâr Mahfili Kapısı (Fig. 6). It presents a modest appearance in the classical Seljuk manner. Explanations for its small dimensions vary in the literature: in some accounts it is suggested that the opening was originally a window later converted into a door; in others it is argued that the small scale was intended to underscore the ruler's humility before God; still others interpret it as a deliberate security measure against potential attack. The inscription above the opening reads "Sovereignty belongs to God, the One and the Subduer," a reminder to the patron upon each entry of the true owner of dominion. The opening affords direct access to the wooden mahfil, which is considered the earliest preserved example of its type in Anatolia in its original form and survives at the Great Mosque of Divriği (Tanman, 2003).

Fig. 6. East Portal. (Left photo: Mehmet Koştumoğlu, MWNF, 2025; Right photo: Semerkand, 2025)

Despite these debates, there are reasons to consider that the opening was originally conceived as a door. Chief among them is the presence of a large decorative outer surround that projects approximately 2.60 metres beyond the eave cornice. In contrast, there are no known Seljuk precedents for doors that do not project beyond the wall plane; this particular opening sits within the thickness of the wall like the other windows. It is therefore possible that the aperture was reduced at a later time, although no definitive evidence has been identified. Given that the opening is elevated above the floor level and aligns with the springing of the vaults, it becomes plausible that it was opened as a window when the vaults were constructed. In the context of the Divriği ornamental programme, it is not surprising that a window would be given such an elaborate treatment.

The frame has been composed according to a classical scheme. In contrast to the other portals of the complex, the ornament here is geometric rather than vegetal. Moreover, whereas muqarnas is not employed on the other portals, a classical muqarnas treatment appears above this opening. These differences support the view that the ornamental decisions at this location were taken by craftsmen other than those responsible for the original design and carving programme of the complex, and that the work was executed after the departure or death of the initial master carvers (Kuban, 1999).

Darüşşifa Portal

In comparison with the North Portal, the Darüşşifa (hospital) portal is less fully completed (Fig. 7). The surfaces of the large three-dimensional palmettes on the front elevation, the plinth frieze at floor level, the ornament of the inner arch, and the carving on the back wall of the portal niche all remain unfinished. Despite this state of partial completion, the Darüşşifa portal, like the North Portal, constitutes an exceptionally original and singular masterpiece within both Turkish and Islamic art (Kuban, 1999).

The portal possesses a monumental pointed arch that has prompted comparisons with the Gothic (Fig. 8). In planimetric terms (Fig. 9), the analogy is understandable, since the framing is organised by two concentric arches of the same height. A key difference, however, is that whereas in Gothic architecture the nested arches typically recede inward with diminishing height, at Divriği two parallel arches of equal height are employed.

The door surround is formed by a sequence of large, nested arches articulated by richly profiled mouldings, which rise from bases with elaborate motif repertoires. Bundled colonnettes terminate in vegetal capitals; above these, cavetto-like mouldings develop into the arch profiles that constitute the portal's crown. On either side of the portal surface, large consoles without structural function are set as part of the sculptural composition. In the innermost plane, where the arches terminate, a grille-profiled window is divided into two lights by a centrally placed, round-section, densely ornamented colonette.

The projection of the portal lacks a rectangular bounding frame. Within the inner tympanum field, pentagonal and octagonal star motifs associated with the Anatolian Seljuk polity have been employed. Flanking the opening to the right and left, human figures appear in relief above the carved panels; the faces of these figures have been abraded over time. These figural elements, plausibly representing the patrons and sometimes interpreted as alluding to astral symbolism (sun and moon), reinforce the perceived affinity with Gothic portal programs that integrate figural and ornamental registers within a sculptural facade (Kuban, 1999; Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987).

It should be underscored that, whereas in Gothic and Baroque architecture the ornamental effect is often produced through the articulation of the architectural members themselves, at Divriği the architectural members acquire a markedly sculptural character through carving, yielding a facade that reads as architectural sculpture (Kuban, 1999).

Fig. 7. Darüşşifa Portal. Photo: Mehmet Koştumoğlu. (Photo: MWNF, 2025).

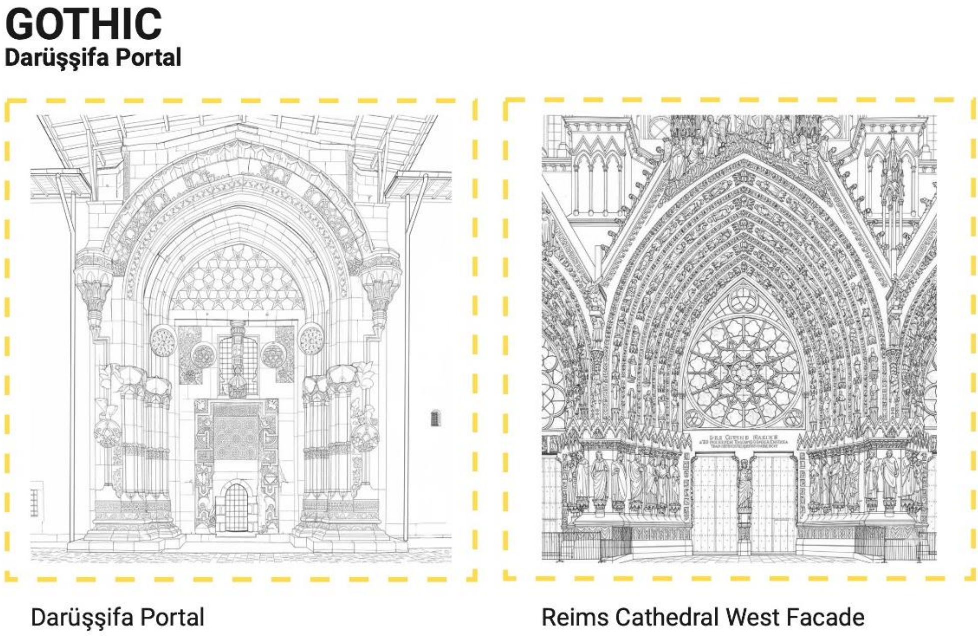

Fig. 8. On the left, Darüşşifa Portal. On the right, Reims Cathedral. (Source: Author, 2025)

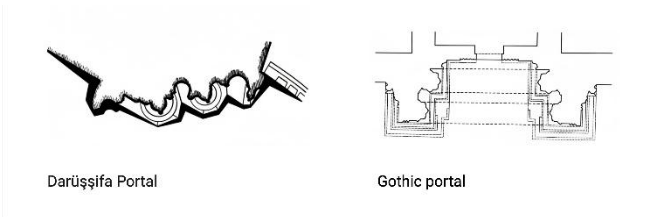

Fig. 9. On the left, the Darüşşifa Portal plan. On the right, a Gothic portal plan. (Source: Kuban, 1999)

INTERIOR ELEMENTS: MIHRAB, MINBAR, MAHFIL

The interior of the mosque presents a markedly restrained character. The space is divided into twenty-five units of varying span by pairs of pointed arches set in two directions, which tie together octagonal piers (in Ottoman, paye, i.e. load-bearing support, column). The bay immediately in front of the mihrab, which is wider than the flanking bays, is covered by a pyramidal dome provided with triangular light apertures, a feature attested in other medieval Anatolian mosques as a means of emphasising the mihrab axis. In longitudinal section, the central dome volume assumes an oval profile. The remaining bays are roofed with a repertoire of star-shaped, plus-shaped ("+"), and composite vaults, and the central fields of these vaults frequently incorporate carved or modelled ornament, including floral, foliate, star, and geometric motifs. This calibrated combination of varying bay widths, two-way pointed arches, and differentiated coverings establishes a clear spatial hierarchy oriented to the qibla (direction of prayer) and is consistent with the measured and analytical descriptions of the Divriği ensemble (Kuban, 1999; Ettinghausen and Grabar, 1987).

A carving technique and design parallel to those of the North Portal and the Darüşşifa portal are observed on the mihrab and the qibla wall. The interior ornament of the mihrab niche appears to have been completed, whereas the ornament above and below, together with the three-dimensional rod-twist and the lateral profiles, were left uncarved. The wall surrounding the mihrab was conceived as part of a continuous vegetal programme. On the basis of the ornament that extends onto the portals and into the mihrab, the large motifs on the mihrab wall are interpreted as isolated remnants of a more extensive decorative scheme. This inference is supported by the presence of guide lines marking intended carving on different layers that were outlined but not pursued, which suggests an interrupted work sequence. In comparison with the portals, the qibla wall outside the mihrab niche is notably restrained. Large foliate motifs that spring from cylindrical buttresses indicate a decorative programme that could not be brought to completion. These observations collectively support the conclusion that the building was not fully finished (Kuban, 1999).

The semi-circular mihrab niche that can be seen in Fig. 10, set within the thickness of the wall, opens to the prayer hall under a pointed arch. In the finished parts of the niche ornament, a plastic weave is formed by multiple layers of interlaced rods. The principal element consists of cylindrically profiled rods carved in deep relief to create a three-dimensional basket-weave effect, with interstices filled by floral motifs. Analogous but simpler interlace schemes for such three-dimensional rod work have been noted on Armenian capitals, in Syrian Islamic architecture, and on Gothic capitals, which provides a comparative framework for understanding the eclectic craftsmanship evident at Divriği (Kuban, 1999; Hillenbrand, 1994).

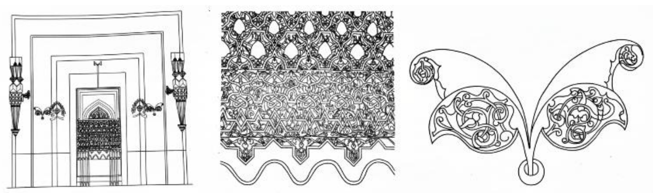

Fig. 10. On the left, drawing of the mihrab wall. On the right, drawing of the mihrab ornament and the large leaf detail. (Source: Kuban, 1999)

The wooden minbar, said to be fashioned from ebony, is contemporaneous with the mosque and has remained in its original state, continuing in use to the present day (Fig. 11). An inscription attributes the work to the master craftsman Ahmed of Tiflis, and the piece exhibits the formal and ornamental characteristics associated with thirteenth-century minbar design. The carved decoration does not replicate the inventive sculptural plasticity seen in the mosque's stone ornament; rather, it is executed with meticulous detail and constitutes a work of careful craftsmanship. The decorative programme employs a pattern composition based on geometric forms organised by a hexagonal modular system, a device well attested in Islamic art, with the interstices filled by rumi scroll motifs. Claims that the minbar is made of "the longest-lived tree in the world" are best treated as rhetorical, since ebony refers to a dense hardwood from several Diospyros species rather than a single longevity-defined specimen, and the art-historical literature describes the material without validating such a biological superlative. (Kuban, 1999; Blair and Bloom, 1994)

Fig. 11. Image of the minbar and details from the minbar ornament. (Source: Top-left photo: © Prazeres, 2014, CC BY-SA 4.0, others: Kuban, 1999)

ADDITIONAL STRUCTURES: DARÜŞŞİFA (HOSPITAL) AND MAUSOLEUM

Darüşşifa

Conceived in the form of a general hospital, the Divriği Darüşşifa ranks among the earliest and most significant surviving hospitals in Anatolia, Turkey. It was commissioned by Turan Melek Hatun, daughter of Fahrettin Behram Şah, the Bey of Erzincan from the Mengüjekid dynasty. Constructed of finely dressed stone, the building was erected contiguous with the south wall of the mosque (Kuban, 1999; UNESCO, 1992-2025).

In terms of typology, the hospital is a variation of the familiar madrasa plan with rooms and vaulted halls disposed around a covered court with an arcade (Fig. 12) (Pancaroğlu, 2009). The closed courtyard consists of four iwans, and the central bay is covered by a dome. The second storey was constructed over a part of the first floor. From the monumental entrance hall, over which two small rooms are situated, access is gained to the principal three-iwan volume whose centre is illuminated by a lantern. From this principal hospital space, stairs lead to rooms in the western and southern sectors of the upper floor, which were most likely arranged as dormitory accommodation for students (Kuban, 1999).

In its original period of use, the Darüşşifa served for the treatment of both somatic and mental disorders. From the eighteenth century onwards, in addition to its therapeutic function, it also operated as a madrasa in which the positive sciences and religious studies were taught (Çobanoğlu, 2012; Terzioğlu, 1992).

The hospital complex, whose central zone is covered by a lanterned dome, is organised as four courts, one of which is enclosed (Fig. 13). Within the hospital, small rooms are arranged around the enclosed courtyard. One of these rooms houses the tomb (türbe) containing the graves of Ahmed Şah, his consort Turan Melek, and members of their family. Evidence that the construction of the hospital was not fully completed is provided by the unfinished original wall located behind the northern iwan (Kuban, 1999; UNESCO, 1992-2025).

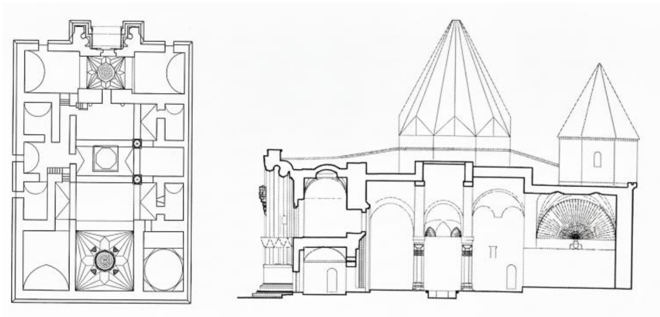

Fig. 12. Darüşşifa plan and section. (Source: Kuban, 1999)

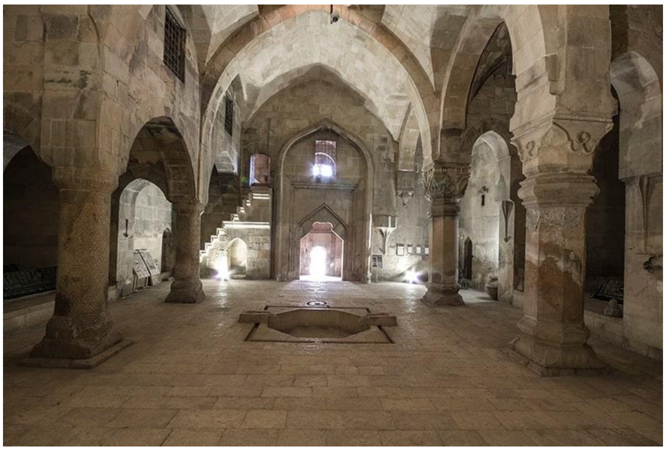

Fig. 13. Şifahane interior. (Photo: Semerkand, 2025)

Mausoleum

The room to the east of the northern iwan of the hospital was arranged as the Mausoleum (Fig. 14) of Ahmed Şah and his family. Its covering consists of a square bay roofed by a dome, separated by an arch from an adjacent bay covered by a barrel vault. The pervasive ornamental ambition evident throughout the complex is not manifested in the tomb, which appears to have been left incomplete, most likely because it was deferred to the final phase of work (Kuban, 1999).

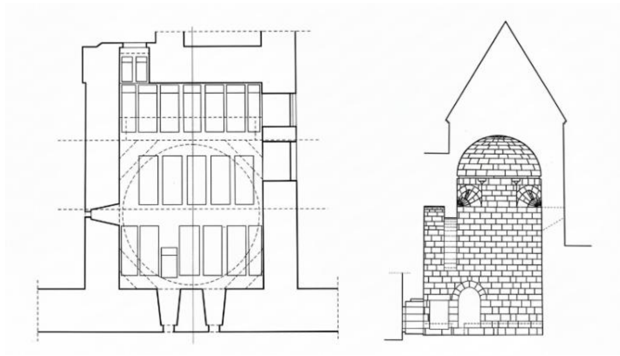

Fig. 14. On the left is the plan and, on the right, section of the Mausoleum. (Source: Kuban, 1999)

METHODS

This study is based on a direct architectural reading of the Great Mosque and adjoining Hospital of Divriği, focusing on their spatial organisation, structural articulation, and ornamental program. The analysis proceeds by describing the building's plan and construction logic; its multi-bay scheme, calibrated bay dimensions, differentiated supports, and vault typologies, together with the formal and sculptural features of the portals, facades, and interior surfaces. Each element is examined in terms of its formal composition, relief depth, material treatment, and degree of completion, as visible in the building and in measured documentation.

Within this building-centred framework, the paper also reflects on how certain features of Divriği conceptually intersect with general tendencies that, in later European terms, are called "Gothic" and "Baroque." These analogies are treated as open questions rather than as direct stylistic comparisons. The Gothic and Baroque are approached here only as broad formal and perceptual paradigms; one privileging structural articulation and linear depth, the other emphasising surface plasticity and movement, used to illuminate how Divriği's architecture achieves similar effects through different, local means. No specific European monument serves as a comparative case; instead, the categories are employed heuristically to test the limits of cross-cultural interpretation (Bony, 1983).

Thus, the method combines detailed description with limited conceptual comparison: it first reconstructs Divriği's own architectural logic, then situates observations about its plastic surfaces and compositional rhythm within another discussion of how architectural form produces intensity and meaning across traditions.

RESULTS

The portals demonstrate a calibrated pursuit of plastic intensity without recourse to structural theatrics associated with European cases. The north composition builds movement by stacking profilations (articulated moulding profiles) and staging high-relief vegetal masses that script light in deep registers; the hospital portal composes depth through equal-height concentric frames and bundled supports that choreograph the approach. Inside, a five-by-five bay field is tuned by span and support diameter to stage a measured crescendo toward the mihrab, while vault types vary locally to sustain visual interest without destabilising hierarchy.

Carving campaigns show distinct tempos: a tightly controlled, motif-coherent phase at the major portals; an interrupted programme around the qibla wall with marked but unrealised fields; and a later, planar-geometric completion at the west, whose mechanical cadence and motif drift betray different hands and intentions. The minbar's hexagon-based geometry with rumi infill exemplifies precision woodworking grounded in Islamic proportional logics rather than stone-plastic bravura. The hospital integrates a four-iwan scheme, a lanterned dome, and upper-level cells into a clinical-educational typology, with an unfinished northern backdrop that fixes the project's open-endedness in masonry. Figural admission at the hospital threshold, coupled with heraldic birds on the west, demonstrates a context-sensitive decorum rather than blanket prohibition or indiscriminate borrowing.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Great Mosque and Hospital of Divriği reveal how a medieval Anatolian project could achieve exceptional experiential intensity through locally grounded means, while inviting; but not requiring cross-cultural analogies. The portals convert architecture into sculpture: profiled mouldings, bundled colonnettes, and deep vegetal relief orchestrate light into gradients that activate "plastic dynamism," producing the perceptual illusion of swelling, recession, and flow as viewers move and daylight changes. The Darüşşifa portal's equal-height concentric arches generate depth without Gothic recession; the north portal's enveloping "cosmic tree" binds disparate fields into a single, travelling figure. Such effects parallel Baroque surface vitality and, in framing logics, evoke Gothic concentrics, yet the convergences are morphological rather than genealogical. They emanate from project-internal problems; how to intensify thresholds, articulate hierarchy, and synchronise ornament with liturgical and institutional programs, solved through the Anatolian Seljuk workshop's techniques and compositional intelligence.

Workshop evidence sharpens this reading. The major portals display tight motif discipline consistent with a master-led conception executed by multiple hands, while the unfinished qibla program and the planar-geometric West Portal signal altered tempos, later repairs, and shifting patronal priorities. The interior counterbalances exterior exuberance with restraint: a five-by-five bay field, graded supports, and differentiated vaults produce a controlled crescendo toward the mihrab, where the deep rod-interlace reiterates the portals' plastic logic at a reduced scale. Programmatic decorum is likewise calibrated: figural relief appears at the hospital threshold and heraldic birds at the west, aligning image to function and audience rather than to a simplistic religious binary.

In conclusion, Divriği stands as a uniquely ambitious synthesis in which structure, ornament, and program co-produce meaning. Its achievements can be distilled as follows: a courtyard-less, multi-aisled mosque that articulates hierarchy through calibrated spans and supports; threshold architectures that stage shadow-rich, time-based readings of the facade; context-aware iconography; and a material record of incompletion and intervention that preserves the building's making as part of its message. The Gothic and Baroque analogies serve heuristically to clarify Divriği's accomplishments: not as precursors to European trajectories, but as independent solutions to shared perceptual aims; depth, movement, and surface vitality, rendered through a distinct Anatolian stone-carving grammar. As a result, Divriği offers a benchmark for method: cross-cultural comparison can illuminate without conflating, and close attention to workshop practice, phasing, and site-specific decorum reveals how medieval architecture in Anatolia could attain a level of sculptural ambition that remains unparalleled in the region.

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