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The Karadoz Beg Mosque: A Gem of Islamic Architecture in Mostar Attributed to Mimar Sinan

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Abstract: This article explores the architectural luminosity of the Karadoz Beg Mosque in Mostar, a masterpiece attributed to Mimar Sinan. As a gem of Islamic architecture that harmonizes the physical and divine orders, the mosque stands as both an artistic and conceptual benchmark, not only for other mosques in the city but also for the entire corpus of Islamic architecture in Mostar. Despite experiencing functional fluctuations due to regime changes following the Ottoman departure from Bosnia and Hercegovina, the mosque has consistently stood “tall,” radiating the supremacy, persistence, and resilience of truth, and defiantly confronting its antitheses. The article analyses the mosque’s major architectural components: the dome, minaret, windows, *mihrāb*, *minbar*, *mahfil* (gallery), entrance, portico, and decorative strategies, relating each to the principles that govern both terrestrial and otherworldly dimensions of life. Through the Karadoz Beg Mosque as an archetype, the study affirms that Islamic architecture is not merely a dialogue between form and function; it is a metaphysical expression of the earth–heaven axis, affirming man’s existential purpose and his noble mission as vicegerent (*khalifah*) upon the earth. The methodology employed combines descriptive and analytical approaches, treating the mosque as both a conceptual and perceptible reality.

Keywords: The Karadoz Beg Mosque; Mostar; Islamic architecture; Mimar Sinan, the Ottoman

Introduction

Like other Ottoman-Islamic cities, Mostar’s skyline and overall landscape were dominated by mosques and their soaring minarets. These were the largest, tallest, most architecturally substantial, and most impressive buildings. As the cores of the city’s basic urban units, the *mahallahs* (residential quarters), mosques shaped not only the physical fabric but also the everyday lives of people. Accordingly, they were not merely places of worship but community development centers where diverse activities aimed at spiritual, educational, and socio-cultural refinement took place. Indeed, as both idea and built form, the mosque distills Islam’s worldview and moral order, effectively serving as a microcosm of the faith.

In other words, mosques functioned as the fulcrums of both urban and human development: they stood at the heart of individual and collective life and acted as reference points from which virtually everything beneficial to the city and its inhabitants originated and to which subsequent outcomes returned for validation. Mosques were the catalysts of the city’s existence and growth; they gave the city its vigor, identity, and charm. The city of Mostar was what its mosques were and how they functioned, and simultaneously the city and its mosques reflected the people’s aspirations, character, and religious-cum-civilisational orientation. The axis linking city, mosques, and community was clearly defined and robust, with the three components finely intertwined and continually drawing strength from one another.

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This article explores the architecture of the Karadoz Beg Mosque (Karadoz-begova džamija), the most monumental and iconic mosque in Mostar. It was most likely designed and constructed by Mimar Sinan, the universally acclaimed master builder, who thereby bestowed upon Mostar—and indeed the entirety of Bosnia and Hercegovina—a gem of Islamic architecture that continues to inspire admiration and awe among both Muslims and non-Muslims. The mosque set a high benchmark for mosque architecture in particular and Islamic architectural expression in general within the city. The article seeks to connect architecture with the realms of spirituality, intellectual refinement, and emotional wellbeing, using this case study as evidence of how Islamic architecture must be preserved not only in its physical form but also in its functional and spiritual essence, and how it is to be genuinely appreciated and lived.

Who was Karadoz Beg?

Karadoz Beg's full name was Haji Zaim Muhamed (Mehmed) Beg ibn Abu al-Sa'adat. His sobriquet Karadoz, "dark-eyed," signaled his marked prominence and notability. A native of the Mostar hinterland, he was born in a village roughly twelve kilometers north of the city. A chronostich carved on a white-marble panel above the mosque's entrance indicates he had a brother who attained the office of the most illustrious or most noble (*al-afkham*)—interpreted by some as grand—vizier (Mujezinović, 1962). Most scholars identify that vizier with Rustem Pasha, himself of Bosnian origin, whose marriage into the sultanic family markedly increased his influence at the imperial court in Istanbul.

It is plausible that Karadoz Beg, as a close kinsman of such a powerful figure, availed himself of courtly channels to advance Mostar's interests, which helps explain the exceptional patronage and state attention given to key urban projects there. The analogy extends to Gazi Husrev Beg and his commitment to Sarajevo's providential destiny. Some accounts attribute the latter's meteoric rise and the city's striking transformation in part to kinship with Sultan Suleyman and to his status as the grandson of Sultan Bayezid II, which rendered him a figure of immense political and financial influence. In both cases prominence bred further prominence, as familial ties and courtly favor amplified access to resources and enabled successive acts of endowment that consolidated status and accelerated urban development, producing a self-perpetuating cycle in which initial distinction opened the way to ever greater opportunities for public benefaction and civic advancement (Zlatar, 2010; Muvekkit-Hadžihuseinović, 1998).

There is, however, a small irregularity. Rustem Pasha's only recorded brother is the grand admiral Sinan Pasha, which suggests that Rustem may have had another, less-documented brother or that the most illustrious vizier named in the chronostich is not Rustem. There is still something else that may even complicate the identification of the patron of the Karadoz Beg Mosque. The issue pertains to Mimar Sinan's autobiographical notes, in which the founder of the Karadoz Beg Mosque—designed by Mimar Sinan—is referred to as a pasha, a title denoting a considerably higher rank than bey (beg). So, was it a Karadoz Pasha or a Karadoz Beg, and were they two different persons?

Gulru Necipoglu (2005) seeks to resolve this by arguing that Sinan's autobiographical records, which list Mostar's principal mosque among his works, likely mis-recorded the patron's title, calling him a pasha rather than a bey (beg). But to dismiss the incongruity as mere confusion is too simplistic, for there had to exist a very close professional and even personal relationship between Sinan as the architect and Karadoz Beg as the client of the mosque. It is implausible that there was an unintended mix-up in recording titles that would warrant corresponding mutual treatment.

The fact remains that the prevailing view treats the mosque's patron as a beg, while Sinan's autobiographies unmistakably present him as a pasha. For example, based on the latter, one of the master builder's commissions was "the noble Friday (*Jumu'ah*) mosque of Sofu Mehmed Pasha in Hercegovina" (Sinan, 2006). The epithet "sofu" is an Ottoman-Turkish term meaning "pious," "devout," or "ascetic." As a prefix before a personal name, it functions as an honorific describing the person's public reputation for religiosity. In addition to being a formal rank and insignia, "pasha" can also function as a fluid honorific, signaling social prestige and economic clout. Because Mehmed's name is thus preceded by an epithet, the subsequent title "pasha" likewise appears intended to perform the same function, flanking the name with two unconfined honorifics. The objective appears to be to underscore popular rather than official status, purposes, and roles. Mehmed Karađoz Beg might have been a bey, but in the eyes of many, including Mimar Sinan, he was a pasha. He was larger than life, as it were.

Karađoz Beg thus remains the undisputed patron of the mosque, with Sinan the probable architect; yet the identity of the eminent vizier and his relationship to the benefactor remain unresolved. It is possible that the term "most illustrious vizier" in the inscription above the mosque's entrance should not be interpreted strictly as the empire's highest-ranking minister and effective head of government, but rather practically or reputationally to denote a lower-ranked yet highly prominent and influential vizier whose name was omitted. Thus, the "most illustrious vizier" refers to an "exceptionally famous and powerful vizier." Otherwise, the word *al-afkham* (the most illustrious or most noble), as in the chronostich, would have been substituted with the word *al-a'zam* (grand), which was unambiguously employed for the apex of the Ottoman political hierarchy directly under the sultan (Mujezinović, 1962). Nevertheless, for rhetorical effect and to augment the subject's prestige, many sources continue to affirm that Rustem was Karađoz Beg's brother, making this claim a widely accepted narrative.

Karađoz Beg was a remarkable benefactor. He served as administrator of Hercegovinian tax farms (*mukataas*) and supervised the construction of Mostar's Old Bridge. His title of Hercegovinian *zaim* indicates he held a large feudal fief with an annual income of 20,000–100,000 akce (the Ottoman silver coin, weighing roughly 1.15–1.18 grams of silver) (Zvonić, 2018). Besides the mosque already mentioned, he endowed a madrasah, a library, a *maktab* (elementary school), an *imaret* (public kitchen or similar charitable institution), a *musafirhana* (guesthouse for travelers), and a *han* (caravanserai), all in Mostar. These were located next to or in the vicinity of the mosque. Moreover, in other parts of Hercegovina—in both towns and villages—he endowed a range of institutions and structures, including *maktabs*, *hans*, bridges, a *masjid*, and a *hammām* (public bathhouse). To finance these endowments and ensure their self-sufficiency, Karađoz Beg also bequeathed 42 commercial shops in Mostar's market district, 16 craft shops and businesses (*taphana*), six watermills, two fulling mills for processing cloth, parcels of arable land in and around Mostar, and 300,000 Ottoman dirhams in cash (Hasandedić, 2005).

The Karađoz Beg Mosque: a testament to the classical Ottoman style

The Karađoz Beg Mosque was built of local cream-colored limestone known regionally as Mostar stone or *tenelija*, a fine-grained, workable limestone quarried nearby. Skilled masons from Dubrovnik (the independent maritime Republic of Ragusa) supplied labor, specialist techniques, and additional building materials, a pattern that influenced a number of Ottoman-era architectural masterworks in Mostar and Sarajevo (Hasandedić, 2005). This exchange shows that architectural refinement accompanying Ottoman rule often depended on cross-Adriatic cooperation rather than being produced solely by local craftsmen. It is likely that the latter did not possess the necessary skills or know-how for advanced building work.

Working with Dubrovnik was both practical and strategic, since Ragusa pursued a policy of neutrality and diplomacy towards the Porte to protect its trade and secure privileged access to Ottoman markets and safe passage for its shipping. The relationship yielded mutual benefits: The Ottomans gained revenue, market access, Adriatic stability, and diplomatic intelligence, while Ragusan merchants expanded their commercial reach. Dubrovnik documents record that as early as 1549 the Ragusan government sent five masonry experts to Mostar at Karadoz Beg's request, with additional specialists arriving in later years for work on the patron's mosque as well as the Old Bridge. Another Ragusan record notes that Karadoz Beg's chief tailor (*terzibaša*) travelled to Dubrovnik to purchase textiles, indicating cordial ties that extended beyond construction assistance (Zvonić, 2018). There is no doubt that Mostar's geographic importance positioned it at the heart of the Dubrovnik-Ottoman commercial and diplomatic network. The fast-growing urban marvel of Mostar effectively formed the pivot of the dynamic south-north and south-northeast axis.

The Karadoz Beg Mosque was built with such strength that it required few major repairs over time. Only at the end of the nineteenth century was the minaret rebuilt above the fifty-seventh step. The lead cladding of the domes was replaced intermittently as needed. In 1909, the mosque's interior was redecorated and repainted, denoting the first comprehensive refurbishment in the building's documented history. The mosque has remained in uninterrupted use as the city's principal congregational mosque and was officially designated a protected cultural monument in 1950, during the period of the People's Republic of Bosnia and Hercegovina, the designation describing it as the most monumental structure in Mostar. It suffered extensive damage during the Serbo-Croat aggression from 1992 to 1995 but was fully repaired and restored for use in 1996 and again after further work in 2004 (Hasandedić, 2005; Medžlis Islamske Zajednice Mostar, 2018). The mosque's sustained material integrity and uninterrupted function render it a notably authentic example of its original architecture. It constitutes an invaluable exhibit of Mostar's open-air museum.

The mosque was built in a *mahallah*, or neighborhood, named after Karadoz Beg. The mosque itself was constructed first and subsequently served as a stimulus for the formation and growth of the *mahallah*. Typically, *mahallahs* were named after the mosques that functioned as their nuclei, which in turn were named after their benefactors. The Karadoz Beg *mahallah*, though not the largest, was reportedly the most elitist. In 1585, it housed 50 families. Among its residents were the son of Karadoz Beg, the *dizdar* (commander) of Mostar's fortress and his two deputies (*kethuda*), as well as several scholars, teachers, merchants, Sufis, and five individuals who had performed the *hajj* in Makkah (Čar-Drnda, 2014).

The Karadoz Beg Mosque exemplifies the classical Ottoman paradigm: a single-domed, virtually symmetrical square structure anchored by a porticoed main entrance. This architectural blueprint—at once simple and profound—was gradually perfected, expanded, and diversified through the addition or substitution of myriad structural and ornamental elements. Yet all such innovations remained derivatives or variations of the original modules, testifying to the enduring integrity of the foundational design. The apex of this perfection is commonly associated with Mimar Sinan, whose architectural genius shaped the very soul of Ottoman aesthetics. It is thus no surprise that the Karadoz Beg Mosque stands out as a mesmerizing jewel, and that Mostar and its people are, in a sense, blessed to host the artistic footprints of Sinan in their midst. The mosque has earned a distinguished reputation as the finest exemplar of Ottoman-Islamic architecture in the Balkans (Čar-Drnda, 2014).

Those even partially acquainted with Sinan's masterpieces—scattered across lands once integral to the Ottoman devlet—can discern the spirit of his architectural school: unprecedented in style, yet deeply rooted in the Islamic worldview. Sinan himself declared, "Architecture is the most difficult profession, and he who wishes to practice it correctly and justly must, above all, be pious" (Freely & Burelli, 1996). To him, the domes of mosques in particular were not mere

architectural features—they were celestial metaphors: revolving heavens suspended above the earth, bubbles rising from the sea of elegance. The pervasive harmony and symmetry in his buildings echoed the divine order that permeates the cosmos. He refused to deviate from, or even slightly disturb, the universal configurations that governed creation. He sought not merely to integrate his buildings into the divine order, but to subdue them to its laws—both physical and metaphysical—just as he yearned to align his own being with the will and workings of his Creator.

Architecture, for Sinan, was a form of worship: a means of drawing nearer to God through the disciplined harmonisation of matter and meaning. His edifices were not autonomous creations, but humble articulations of cosmic obedience—structures that bowed, as he did, before the majesty of divine ordinance. His architecture was not simply an expression of material beauty; it was a testament to his conviction in the existence of sacred correspondences, metaphysical bonds, and divine ordainments. Every line, curve, and proportion bore witness to a worldview in which form mirrored faith, and structure became a vessel of cosmic truth. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that, being in all likelihood a devout Sufi, Sinan imbued his buildings with the same inner orientation and outward discipline that shaped his own spiritual path (Sinan, 2006).

It follows that in every edifice Sinan embedded not only technical mastery but also spiritual intentionality. Those who live by the same worldview and its attendant values are best positioned to appreciate the master's work. The two realms—the architecture and spirituality of Sinan and the spirituality as well as inquisitiveness of an architecture user—gravitationally draw towards one another until they converge. Put differently, Sinan built not only an idea but also himself into his magnum opuses. His mosques are living representations of a man, an ideology, and an otherworldly dimension. The more one observes, uses, and interacts with the foremost mosque of Mostar, the more it unveils itself—and the more Sinan unveils himself too. In such moments, both the mosque and its celebrated architect become vessels of architectural wisdom, capable of communicating with the committed seeker, the murid of beauty and truth.

To some observers, the Karađoz Beg Mosque shares its architectural concept and typology with the Aladža Mosque in Foča—a valid observation insofar as both exemplify the prototypical Ottoman architectural foundation, whose core elements recur across numerous regional iterations (Čar-Drnda, 2014). Yet when one considers architectural performance in its deeper and more profound dimensions, the Karađoz Beg Mosque may also be placed in the same league as the Rustem Pasha Mosque in Istanbul, likewise designed and built by Sinan.

Although the Rustem Pasha Mosque—completed roughly five years after the Karađoz Beg Mosque—is markedly larger, more intricate, and adorned with unprecedented tilework, a conceptual reduction of its form to the classical Ottoman single-domed paradigm reveals striking parallels with the Mostar gem. Stripped of its subtle monumentality and decorative excess, the Rustem Pasha Mosque tends to mirror the Karađoz Beg Mosque in several key structural and stylistic components: the double portico—one with domes and another with a steeply pitched roof—the elegant transition from the central dome to the square base below, the luminous embellishment of the dome's inner core, and the generous use of windows as masonry screens or perforated stone panels filled with glass insets. The latter features not only provide natural illumination but also evoke emotional resonance, facilitating a spiritual ascent—a signature motif in Sinan's architectural vocabulary.

It is therefore reasonable to interpret the Karađoz Beg Mosque as a small-scale counterpart to the Rustem Pasha Mosque, a distilled expression of Sinan's genius that, despite the omnipresent architectural grandeur of Istanbul, still commands distinction. Perhaps this architectural kinship lends credence to the popular notion that the mosques' patrons were brothers—a sentiment that extends architectural affinity into the realm of familial association.

Whether literal or symbolic, the perceived fraternal bond reflects the shared aesthetic and spiritual lineage embedded in their respective edifices. At least within the realm of architecture, such an affiliation is both authentic and unbreakable. It acts as an enduring testament for which Sinan is to be duly commended. Through his genius, the bonds between Mostar—and Bosnia and Hercegovina more broadly—and Istanbul were not merely imagined but architecturally enacted. They were etched into the pages of history and quite literally set in stone.

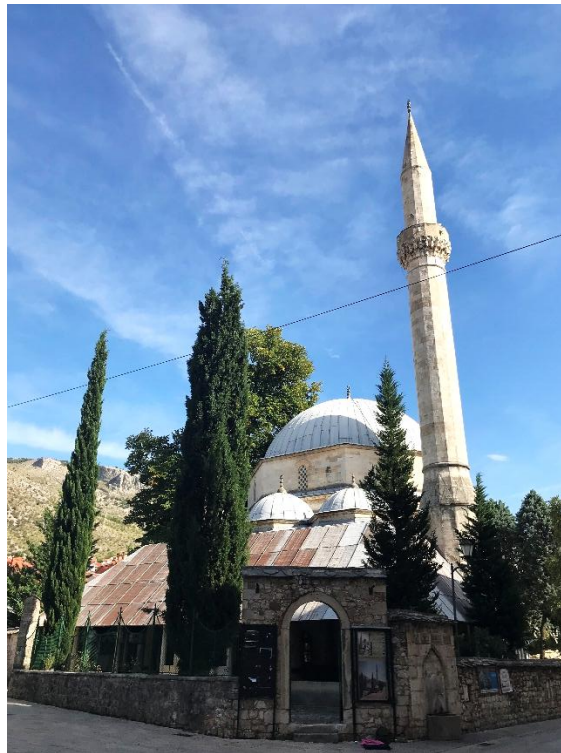


Figure 1. The Karadoz Beg Mosque is the finest-looking mosque in Mostar.

The dome as a vessel of spiritual meaning

The Karadoz Beg Mosque, whose interior forms an almost perfect square—measuring 13 meters in both length and width—is crowned by a semispherical dome with a diameter of nearly 11 meters and an internal height of 16.5 meters, measured from the floor to the apex of the dome. Clad in lead and topped with a modest alem or finial, the dome's silhouette is gracefully completed, its vertical emphasis and visual refinement subtly asserting presence. Besides working as ornamental and refining flourishes, such finials often function as capstones that seal and structurally stabilise the dome's apex.

Though the mosque is neither structurally massive nor colossally imposing, its setting, surrounded by open spaces and a low-rise built environment, allows it to command an admirable visual charisma. It draws the gaze towards itself and, through that visual invitation, towards the beliefs and values it embodies, radiating its noble message and, by extension, the universal message of Islam. The dome, architecturally distinct and immediately perceptible, plays a pivotal role in this spiritual dynamic. It evokes the vault of heaven overarching creation, enclosing beneath it a sanctified space where acts of devotion and remembrance are regularly performed and which connote the acts that aim at that very heaven.

Structurally, the dome facilitates balanced weight distribution, acoustic resonance, and a masterful manipulation of light and color, all in service of the mosque's mission. It is not

merely a roof, but a metaphysical canopy, an architectural expression of the Islamic worldview, where form and function converge to elevate the soul. As a spiritual beacon, the dome additionally guides hearts and minds upward towards transcendence. In its form and appreciable aura, it encapsulates the mosque's purpose: to harmonise the earthly with the heavenly, the visible with the invisible (Sinan, 2006).

All this is further corroborated by the dome's inner core, which is adorned with a sizable ceiling medallion. The medallion is a work of art that is both symmetrical and spiritually evocative. Its outermost layer features teardrop-shaped arabesque motifs radiating outward like sunbursts, suggesting a dynamic descent from higher spheres to the earthly realm. This visual rhythm conjures the all-encompassing harmony, stability, and equilibrium that characterise both the cosmos and the worship spaces below. At the heart of the medallion lies an inner circle of Arabic calligraphy, seamlessly interwoven into the geometry of the design. The inscription features the following verse from the Qur'an: "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Indeed, Allah holds the heavens and the earth, lest they cease. And if they should cease, no one could hold them (in place) after Him. Indeed, He is Forbearing and Forgiving" (Fatir 41).

Undoubtedly, the above verse was deliberately chosen. For a dome that, in various philosophical reflections, symbolises heaven, a Qur'anic verse encapsulating the fundamental nature of the heavens and the earth—the entire universe—was deemed most fitting. Its selection aimed to convey a profound truth: no matter how talented or accomplished a person may be, he can never replicate the magnificent creations of Almighty Allah. Human abilities and achievements are granted solely through the grace and providence of the Creator. There can be no comparison, let alone challenge, to Allah's supremacy.

Ultimately, man must come to recognise at once the power of the Creator and the limitations of his own being. This acknowledgment is often most evident in architecture, where human design adheres strictly to the natural laws ordained by Allah. All human thought, action, and creation remain subject to divine provision and decree, leading to the realisation that their conclusive fate rests in Allah's hands alone. Never will anything pertaining to creation amount to anything comparable to the Creator. In all actual and aspirational circumstances, creation will remain forever just that—creation—and the Creator will remain the transcendent and ultimate Originator, Lord, and Master. There will never be an exchange of titles, jurisdictions, or prerogatives.

This architectural philosophy manifested in the decoration of the central dome's inner core of the Karadoz Beg Mosque appears to have been a defining obsession for Sinan, residing at the heart of his broader philosophy of architecture and life. So potent was this approach that it evolved into a lasting architectural-cum-artistic culture. Numerous edifices designed by Sinan feature the same Qur'anic verse prominently inscribed within the dome's medallion, a tradition that continued in the works of those who followed in his footsteps.

Where the original verse was omitted, alternative selections were made with equal deliberation, chosen to reflect the identical spiritual and intellectual ethos. Among these, the Qur'anic chapter al-Ikhlās and the Ayat al-Kursī (the Throne Verse) (al-Baqarah 255) stand out. The former affirms the essence of Allah's transcendence and oneness (*tawḥīd*), while the latter asserts His absolute sovereignty, omniscience, and guardianship over creation. Together, they form a theological axis drawing attention to who Allah is and how He governs.

Even when some other verses were sporadically selected, they rarely deviated from this metaphysical orientation. A notable example is Surah al-Fatihah, likely due to its status as the opening chapter of the Qur'an and its unparalleled role in compressing the essence of Islamic belief, worship, and the divine-human relationship. Its inclusion signals a comprehensive

invocation of divine mercy, guidance, and lordship. Another example is the *Ayat al-Nūr* (the Light Verse) (al-Nūr 35) as one of the profound verses in the Qur'an, symbolising divine guidance, transcendence, and the metaphysical illumination that sustains creation. In every case, the chosen inscription functioned as both a visual and spiritual anchor, reinforcing the mosque's role not merely as a place of ritual worship, but as a sanctified space where divine truths were architecturally embodied and eternally proclaimed.

Of the mosques designed by Sinan that feature the above-cited Qur'anic verse number 41 from Surah Fatir in the main dome's core—apart from the Karadoz Beg Mosque—are the Suleymaniye Mosque, completed in 1557, slightly before the Karadoz Beg Mosque; the Rustem Pasha Mosque (1563); the first Sokollu Mehmed Pasha Mosque (1571), located in the Kadirga neighborhood of the Fatih District; the second Sokollu Mehmed Pasha Mosque (1577), located in Beyoglu on the opposite shore of the Golden Horn; and the Shemsi Pasha Mosque (1581), located in the Uskudar district on the Anatolian (Asian) shore of the Bosphorus.

There is also the Yeni Valide Mosque in the Uskudar district, which highlights the same verse in the dome's center. It was built in 1710, 122 years after Sinan's death, but it is often said that the mosque generally follows Sinan's architectural style, hence the use of the same verse for decoration. The same can be said about the New, or Yeni, Mosque, which, although built in 1665, was heavily influenced by Sinan's school. One of its initial architects was an apprentice to Sinan.

To draw this contemplation to a close, it should be noted that three masterpieces of Sinan—the Mihrimah Sultan Mosque (1570) in Istanbul, the Shehzade Mosque (1548) in Istanbul, and the Selimiye Mosque (1574) in Edirne—include the *Ayat al-Nūr*, Surah al-Fatihah, and Surah al-Ikhlās, respectively, in their dome core decorations. In this way, the Qur'anic ethos brings full coherence to Sinan's architectural and existential vision.



Figure 2. The decorated core of the mosque's dome.

Windows

The dome of the Karađoz Beg Mosque transitions gracefully into the square prayer hall below via a structural base known as the drum which is octagonal in its external geometry, yet circular within. This intermediary form not only mediates between the dome and the hall but also contributes to the mosque's visual harmony and spatial coherence. The drum is punctuated by eight arched window panels, each perforated and inset with glass. These panels evoke the jali screens of Indo-Islamic architecture, themselves part of the broader family of *mashrabiyyahs*—oriel windows enclosed with intricately carved wooden latticework and often adorned with stained glass. Such elements serve both aesthetic and climatic functions.

The transition from the circular dome to the square base is achieved through pendentives—smooth, curved triangular sections that span the corners between the arches. These rest upon arches springing from the tops of piers or pillars, which in turn channel the dome's weight downward into the structural core. Pendentives allow the dome to appear as if it floats effortlessly above the square hall, a visual metaphor for the descent of the celestial into the terrestrial. At the bottom tip of the pendentives there is muqarnas, a form of three-dimensional geometric ornamentation often described as "stalactite" or "honeycomb" decoration. The muqarnas are plaster or stucco niches arranged in tiers, forming a visually rich transition element at the junction between the vertical wall and the curved pendentives.

Repetitive windows in the drum and upper walls of the mosque further lighten the structure—both visually and physically—while inviting natural light into the interior. This interplay of geometry, illumination, and materiality reflects a sophisticated architectural language, one that harmonises structural necessity with spiritual symbolism. The mosque's interior is generally well lit by natural light, a vital quality that allows naturality and spontaneity to prevail over artificiality and constraint. This luminous atmosphere is achieved not only through the eight arched windows in the dome's drum but also through the numerous openings strategically positioned throughout the walls. These perforations are not merely functional; they are also expressive of ideas, emotions, and aesthetic splendor.



Figure 3. An abundance of natural light permeates the mosque's interior through 25 sizable windows. Eight of them pierce the drum of the dome.

The mosque features exactly seventeen additional windows, sizable and well distributed across its four walls: five each on the *qiblah* (front), right, and left walls, and two on the rear wall containing the main entrance. The windows are articulated in three distinct levels, each enhancing the mosque's light and spatial experience. The first level has two tiers: a standard wooden-framed window below and an upper semi-circular arch filled with small circular glass insets set within a lattice-like screen. This upper tier is framed by a painted arch adorned with floral motifs and is fixed (non-opening), serving mainly aesthetic and illumination purposes. These dual-tiered windows are present on all four sides of the prayer hall, totaling eight. Directly above them is the second level, featuring arched lattice-like screens identical in size and appearance to the windows in the dome's drum. There are two such windows on each wall except the rear, amounting to six in total. The third and highest level contains a single window on each wall except the rear, bringing the total to three. These also mirror the design of the drum and second-level windows, maintaining visual continuity and reinforcing the mosque's layered lighting strategy. Evliya Celebi (1967) described the mosque in 1664 as having a generous spatial layout, refined artistic detailing, and an abundance of natural light.

The *mihrāb* niche

The *mihrāb* niche of the mosque is rather extravagant. It is vertically elongated and shallow, set into the *qiblah* wall to indicate the direction of Makkah. It is topped with tiered *muqarnas* that form a decorative half-dome effect above the niche. The *muqarnas* is arranged in a conical, pyramidal formation, tapering upward in diminishing tiers. Each tier is geometrically precise, creating a dynamic interplay of shadow and depth. The *mihrāb* is bordered by an ornate band of interlacing geometric patterns in painted plaster and is crowned by a richly decorated painted lunette, also known as a tympanum. Flanked by turrets, this lunette echoes the shape of a half-dome or shell with a crown-like top element, signaling the *mihrāb*'s supreme importance within the mosque's spatial and functional hierarchy. Facing the *qiblah* and following the leadership of the imam—whose positional and operative epicenter is the *mihrāb*—are indispensable elements of congregational worship.

The *minbar* or pulpit

The *minbar*, or pulpit from which the imam delivers the khutbah sermon, is likewise relatively extravagant, echoing the opulence of the *mihrāb*. This correspondence underscores its foundational significance within the mosque's spatial and operational hierarchy. Constructed of stone, the *minbar* exemplifies the refined craftsmanship of Ottoman mosque architecture, replicated across virtually all monumental mosques with variations in scale and ornamentation proportionate to each mosque's dimensions, scope, and civic stature (Sinan, 2006). Its elevated position ensures the diffusion of the imam's voice throughout the mosque's interior and, symbolically, its exterior realm—facilitating clarity of speech while evoking authority, consequence, and spiritual leadership.

The *minbar* consists of a staircase ascending to a small platform enclosed by a pointed canopy or spire, suggestive of a minaret. The conical highpoint, though perhaps not intentionally symbolic, unmistakably reverberates the formal language of Ottoman minarets. Its vertical thrust puts the accent on notions of rise and transcendence, while contributing to the compositional balance and geometric alignment of the mosque's interior and its harmonious, transitional relationship with the exterior. The staircase's side panel is adorned with geometric and floral motifs characteristic of Ottoman stone carving. Repetitive arabesque

medallions, interlinked with rosette and knot motifs, generate a vine-like visual rhythm, rendered in green, red, and beige tones. This decorative scheme of the *minbar* resonates with the iconic medallion at the dome's core, establishing thereby not only a visual axis but also a psychological and spiritual resonance. Furthermore, the arch and niche patterns beneath the stairs of the *minbar* emulate the window and *mihrāb* forms, introducing an additional layer of cadence and aesthetic cohesion to the interior.

All this, surely—both consciously and unconsciously—awakens in the mosque's visitors a profound sense of inner peace, tranquility, and contentment. Within the mosque—and in other sanctuaries where the foundational principles of Islamic aesthetics are honored—a person may be effortlessly transported to otherworldly realms of meaning, beauty, and experience. There, one may encounter and actively embody ontological truth. One may encounter a portal to the unseen, where the veils of the mundane lift, and the soul glimpses the fulfillment of its deepest aspirations and long-held dreams. One may discover the meaning and purpose of life. One may, ultimately, find oneself.

That is why, unlike other architectural theories and systems—where individuals seek to construct a purposeful trajectory for life and then generate architectural and artistic expressions accordingly—Islam offers a fundamentally different operational paradigm. As a comprehensive philosophy, worldview, and way of life, Islam first forms and refines the human being, who then shapes his aesthetics and built environment in accordance with how his thoughts, attitudes, and perceptions have themselves been shaped. In this process, the human being is both shaped by and becomes a shaper of reality, guided by existential and heavenly standards. Whereas other architectural systems often remain confined within the narrow frameworks of humanism and materialism, Islamic architecture treats man and his earthly context merely as a point of departure—a launching pad—for honoring and elevating him beyond the stifling limitations of both. It continually propels him towards his ultimate fulfillment: towards the realm of spirit, towards transcendence, towards heaven. Islamic architecture is thus a conduit, not a culmination. It liberates rather than confines, evokes rather than imposes, and “leads further and away” rather than “captures and controls.” It is shaped by truth, not allowed to shape it.

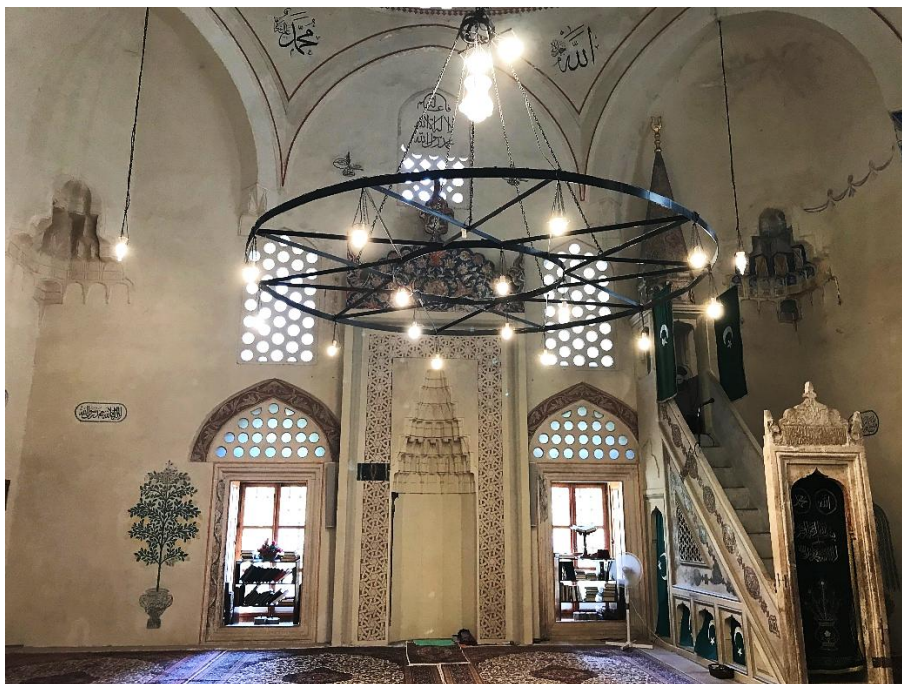


Figure 4. The *qiblah* wall of the mosque, featuring a clear view of the *minbar* and the *mihrāb* niche.

The *mahfil* or gallery

Upon entering the mosque, one encounters to the right a *mahfil* or gallery, measuring approximately 3.5 meters in height, 2.5 meters in width, and extending along roughly 40 percent of the mosque's longitudinal axis. Beneath it, a narrow doorway pierces the right wall, providing access to the upper level of the gallery. Functionally, the gallery serves as a women's prayer section, though it may also accommodate men during peak congregational times—particularly the Friday (*Jumu'ah*) and the biannual 'Id prayers. Originally, it was established as a platform for the *mu'adhdhin* during these occasions, when the mosque reaches full capacity and its acoustics perform at their prime. It may also have fulfilled additional roles related to privacy and social status, possibly serving as a secluded space for members of the nobility.

Architecturally, the gallery is supported by three slender columns and two arches, forming a shallow arcade. The columns are slim and graceful, transitioning into the arches through muqarnas-like corbels that soften the junction and introduce ornamental refinement. The upper section of the balcony includes a lattice-style balustrade with geometric perforations. Beneath it, the frieze—marking the beam or gallery edge—is adorned with a sequence of floral motifs arranged in a vine-like rhythm, seamlessly integrated into the mosque's broader artistic and aesthetic composition.

The entrance and its alignment with the *mihrāb* niche

The entrance of the mosque is framed by a pointed arch set within a rectangular portal, establishing a clear and dignified threshold. Above the doorway rises a triangular composition bordered by muqarnas, forming a niche or canopy that mediates the transition from the flat wall to the ornate apex. This architectural gesture marks the entrance as a liminal zone—significant and symbolic—signaling passage from one realm to another, the latter being of greater spiritual consequence. At the center of this niche is a stone inscription panel, carved in intricate and stylised Arabic calligraphy, recording the identity of the patron and incumbent Sultan in Istanbul, the date of construction, and the purpose behind the founding of the Karadoz Beg Mosque. The wooden double doors are composed of solid panels, articulated into geometric rectangular forms and likely hand-carved. Iron studs and hinges not only enhance structural durability but also call up the mosque's historical depth and reflect the craftsmanship of traditional Ottoman joinery.

Flanking the portal are two vertical bands of geometric ornamentation, composed of infinitely interlaced symmetrical motifs. These patterns replicate those framing the *mihrāb* niche within. Such is no mere aesthetic coincidence. The entrance and the *mihrāb* are conceptually and spatially aligned. Positioned directly opposite one another, they constitute a symbolic axis—thresholds of entry and orientation—that embody movement, dynamism, and spiritual progression. The entrance invites the worshipper into the worship space, while the *mihrāb*, as the focal point, draws the gaze and the heart towards a higher order of involvement, experience, and appreciation, with the imam leading the charge. Before one can encounter the *mihrāb* and partake in what it represents, one must first pass through the main doorway. Indeed, the law of gradation applies equally in the physical and metaphysical domains. Spiritual elevation within the mosque presupposes entry; one must first be received by its space to be transformed by its spirit. For that reason, it goes without saying, do the two components—entrance and *mihrāb*—exhibit a comparable architectural design and a perfectly matched decorative scheme.



Figure 5. The *mahfil* and the entrance at the rear side of the mosque.

The minaret

The mosque is crowned by an exquisite minaret, soaring to 34.50 meters in height and executed in the classical Ottoman style. Fashioned from the same finely hewn stone as the rest of the structure, the minaret asserts a graceful vertical emphasis, tapering elegantly towards its apex as if gesturing towards a destination, a purpose, a realm beyond. It does not merely rise; it points, symbolically and architecturally, towards the sky, towards the Divine (Nasr, 1987). A single balcony encircles the shaft, supported by a band of muqarnas that serve both ornamental and structural functions. These elements transition fluidly from the shaft to the balcony's base, forming what appears to be a continuous bracket, a seamless architectural flourish. From this elevated perch, the *adhān* (call to prayer) is sounded. Its proclamation, issuing from a point that rises well above the mosque's dome and once towered over the surrounding cityscape, becomes a summons from above, a celestial invitation from the Creator. The minaret is capped with a pointed conical finial (*alem*), completing its upward thrust with a symbolic spearhead piercing the heavens. Though often described as cylindrical, the shaft is in fact a tetradecagon (14-gon)—its fourteen facets subtly articulated to create the illusion of roundness. At its base, the minaret widens slightly, anchoring itself firmly to the mosque's body and ensuring structural stability.

The dual-section portico

The mosque presents a frontal portico composed of two distinct sections: a domed portico adjoining the prayer hall and an outer portico covered by a steeply pitched wooden roof. The inner portico comprises a series of pointed arches borne on columns, forming a semi-open, transitional zone between the exterior and the interior prayer hall. This semi-enclosed area accommodates worshippers for gathering, social interaction, and preparation for prayer, and

functions as overflow space during peak services; it also provides a place of prayer for latecomers or for those seeking seclusion and contemplation.

The domed portico is divided into two raised platforms flanking a central passage that leads to the main entrance. Each platform is elevated approximately half a meter, a subtle device that marks the area as part of the mosque's precinct and as an extension of the prayer space despite its external position. Four columns, via a system of arches, support three small domes: one over each lateral platform and one above the central passage. These domes are miniaturised analogues of the main dome, their drums lacking the perforations of the principal dome. The outer edge of the portico is carried by the columns and pointed arches, while the inner edge is tied directly to the mosque's exterior masonry wall, which measures approximately 90 centimeters in thickness. This substantial load-bearing wall moderates light and temperature and provides structural resilience. The arch springing points are embedded into solid masonry with no openings beneath, a deliberate arrangement to preserve robustness. Column capitals are ornamented with muqarnas motifs. Both the upper and lower ends of the columns are encased in metal collars, employed primarily for structural reinforcement. Horizontal beams connect the capitals, restraining lateral movement and maintaining the integrity of the architectural grid.



Figure 6. The mosque comprises a two-part frontal portico: an inner domed section adjoining the prayer hall and an outer section sheltered by a steeply pitched wooden roof.

Extending from the domed portico is the outer portico, roofed with a sloping wooden structure and covered in lead sheeting analogous to the domes. This outer portico shelters a stone-paved courtyard that is not designated for formal prayer and therefore lacks elaborate architectural embellishment. Shoes are not removed in this area; it functions as an intermediate, covered exterior space that facilitates informal gathering, relaxation, and social activity before and after worship. As such, it constitutes the first stage in the transition from the mundane exterior to the sanctified interior and the beginning of the physical and spiritual preparations associated with the vivacity of the mosque. Hence, nearby to the left when entering the mosque's compound, there is a beautiful *shadrwan*, or fountain, for ritual ablution. The fountain has two segments: an octagonal open pavilion with a pitched roof covered in stone slabs, supported by eight columns connected by pointed arches; and the fountain base, an

octagonal stone basin fitted with water taps around its perimeter. According to Hivzija Hasandedić (n.d.), another key underlying function of the second portico is environmental: it shields both the structure and its users from the elements, particularly from summer heat and cold winter winds.

The outer edge of the second portico is supported by a series of slender stone columns, noticeably smaller than those of the domed portico; their capitals bear simplified muqarnas ornament appropriate to their scale. The extended sloped portico has antecedents in several Istanbul mosques attributed to Mimar Sinan—among them the Rustem Pasha, Sokollu Mehmed Pasha in Beyoğlu, Mihrimah Sultan, and Mesih Ali Pasha (1586)—a parallel that reinforces the assessment of the Karadoz Beg Mosque as reflecting Sinanian architectural principles and the broader splendor of Istanbul.

Visual splendor and spiritual expression in the decoration

The decoration of the Karadoz Beg Mosque is both opulent and extraordinary—yet, in its present state, it neither fully replaces the original ornamentation nor constitutes a completed replica. Rather, it remains a work in progress, in a manner of speaking, adding a fascinating and layered dimension to the mosque's architectural expression. Not only is the structural framework lavishly adorned, but the spiritual atmosphere it fosters is likewise profoundly enriched. So exceptional is this precedent that even tourists—many of whom are non-Muslims—find themselves drawn to and deeply impressed by its aesthetic and symbolic resonance. Beyond the previously noted calligraphy and geometric arabesque patterning, the mosque's decorative scheme includes stylised wall paintings of local and regional flora: pomegranate, fig, olive, orange/lemon, pear, weeping willow, cypress, and palm trees. These are accompanied by vegetal garlands and festoons that form a continuous, chain-like sequence encircling much of the mosque's interior. Vine-scrolls and foliate bends frame prominent architectural elements such as pendentives and arches, further enhancing the visual rhythm. Each tree emerges from an ornate vase and stands between one and one and a half meters tall, blending botanical realism with the symbolic and ornamental sensibilities intrinsic to Islamic non-figurative art.

These vegetal motifs are not naturalistic but rather denaturalised and idealised, evoking a sense of otherworldliness. They invite the observer to seek that same transcendent quality within the self. As such, the representations offer both visual serenity and spiritual elevation. They embody a sophisticated interplay of symmetry, rhythm, balance, harmony, and verticality, while simultaneously spiritualising and abstracting nature and man's role within it (al-Faruqi, 1986). Moreover, these depictions subtly teach the principles of sustainability and harmonious coexistence with the natural world, for the mutual flourishing of both man and nature. Nature is portrayed as the source and symbol of life's abundance, fertility, divine order, and as a mirror of man's vulnerability and dependence. Without nature, man cannot survive, let alone build civilisations or fulfill his existential purpose. Nature is also a compendium of divine signs, revealing truth and constantly pointing to the presence and majesty of the Creator.

Given this, man's engagement with nature should not be limited to physical exploitation for selfish ends. Rather, he must learn from it and treat it as a partner in his journey towards truth and spiritual realisation. The painted trees and plants are often interpreted as representations of Paradise. Yet, an additional, complementary message emerges: man's entry into Paradise on the Day of Judgment will depend significantly on how he treated himself, others, and the natural world—and how he utilised nature as an indispensable context for salvation, both in this world and the Hereafter. This implies that unless one renders this world a form of spiritual paradise, the journey towards the Paradise of the Hereafter is unlikely to be

smooth. The “paradise” of this world must be cultivated first; it is the precondition for the next. Man, as the divinely appointed vicegerent on earth, is tasked with creating, sustaining, and enjoying, not deforming, destroying, and suffering. This ethos is further affirmed by the mosque’s calligraphic inscriptions, which visually accompany and conceptually reinforce the natural motifs. Together, they recall the foundational spiritual truths of Islam enshrined in the Qur’an and the Prophet’s Sunnah.

It is worth noting that three other mosques in Mostar follow in the decorative footsteps of the Karadžoz Beg Mosque, attesting to the widespread presence of this refined artistic consciousness in the region. These are the Koski Mehmed Pasha Mosque, the Tabačica (or Hadži-Kurt) Mosque, and the Čejvan Čehaja Mosque. In Sarajevo, the Muslihudin Čekrekčija Mosque exhibits a similarly adorned interior, further confirming that this aesthetic approach was not isolated but rather a shared cultural expression across Bosnia and Hercegovina. According to Nihad Čengić (2008), comparable artistic outputs were also found in the mosques of Stolac and Travnik.

The same author, however, contends that the current decorative scheme and its constituent elements in the Karadžoz Beg Mosque are merely replicas or surrogates of the original. During the mosque’s recent restoration and repair, the lavish ornamentation was reintroduced—yet, in the author’s view, the process could have been executed with greater artistic integrity and professional dedication. As it stands today, the mosque remains laden with untapped potential—architecturally, artistically, and spiritually—that could elevate it to far greater heights of sophistication and splendor (Čengić, 2008).



Figure 7. In addition to calligraphy and geometric arabesque patterning, the mosque’s decorative scheme includes stylised wall paintings of local and regional flora, including pomegranate, fig, olive, citrus (orange and lemon), pear, weeping willow, cypress, and palm trees.

At any rate, to be fair to the mosque and to those entrusted with its function and upkeep, it must be acknowledged that the decorative scheme—being part of a broader structural actuality—has not yet been fully replicated or completed. In light of this, passing definitive

judgments at this stage would be premature. Only once the restoration processes are concluded and the mosque is fully adorned can such evaluations be responsibly made.

Conclusion

The Karađoz Beg Mosque is the finest-looking mosque in Mostar. Commissioned and endowed by one of the city's greatest sons and leading patrons, Karađoz Beg, it was designed and executed by the Ottoman imperial architect Mimar Sinan and intended to serve as Mostar's principal religious landmark. Together with the monumental Old Bridge, the mosque was conceived to place Mostar on the global cultural-urban map and to accelerate, as well as mark, the city's transformation from a *kasabah*, a fortified town quarter, into a *shahar*, a fully constituted city and advanced urban ecosystem.

For this reason, both monuments were realised under the same imperial government of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent: the Karađoz Beg Mosque was erected in 1557–58 and the Old Bridge in 1557–66. The employment of Sinan for the mosque and his pupil Mimar Hayruddin for the bridge signals the state's investment of its foremost architectural talent in Mostar's urban and symbolic reconfiguration. It should be mentioned that Karađoz Beg was also in charge of overseeing the construction of the Old Bridge, thereby reinforcing his status both at home and at the seat of power and highlighting the importance of the flourishing Mostar-Istanbul axis. In this way, the golden age of Istanbul shone brightly over the creation and subsequent growth of Mostar, acting almost like a big brother city.

Based on the foregoing, just as Gazi Husrev Beg and his mosque—one among numerous endowments—anchored Sarajevo's swift transition from a *kasabah* to a *shahar*, so Karađoz Beg and his mosque fulfilled an analogous role in Mostar's urban development. This parallel is strengthened by the chronological concurrence of both processes under Sultan Suleyman's reign. Furthermore, attribution of Gazi Husrev Beg's Mosque to a single architect remains disputed: some sources name the Persian Adžem Esir Ali, while others attribute the work to a practitioner of Mimar Hayruddin's school, a student of Mimar Sinan. Together these facts indicate a coherent pattern of imperial patronage and the deployment of elite Ottoman architectural expertise in Bosnian urbanisation, making the region's growing socio-economic and political significance to the empire readily apparent.

Finally, each and every mosque in Mostar—with the Karađoz Beg Mosque leading the way—bears a story told through its visible scars and through repeated acts of reconstruction. Beneath their finely executed architectural and artistic details lie stratified layers of history that testify to a once-glorious, later turbulent, and at times urbicidal past. The reverberations of these dramatic vicissitudes are readily perceptible to any observer who engages the buildings with an attentive and inquisitive mind.

For illustrative purposes, during the post-World War II period from 1947 to 1969—when Socialist Yugoslavia's atheist founding charter and its early policies were enforced most emphatically—nine mosques and three masjids in Mostar were completely destroyed. Whereas during the subsequent Serbo-Croat aggression—as documented in the archival records of Muftijstvo Mostarsko and Medžlis Islamske Zajednice Mostar (the Muftiate of Mostar and the Council of the Islamic Community of Mostar)—all available mosques and masjids were either demolished or severely damaged, leaving the city without a single functional Muslim place of worship.

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