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The 'Nahil': A Symbol of Fertility in Ottoman Festivities

The Ottoman court used to celebrate the birth and circumcision of a prince, or the marriage of a princess, the victory of the army, a new campaign of the sultan, or his succession to the throne, the arrival of a royal guest or an important foreign ambassador, with imperial festivities which sometimes lasted fifty days and nights,¹ or more.² The characteristic difference between the Ottoman court festivals and the royal festivities in Europe and elsewhere was that they were all free to the public.³ These festivities which flourished until the close of the nineteenth century,⁴ served the purpose of entertaining both the courtiers and the people, as well as impressing the foreign nations by displaying the pomp, greatness and might of the sultan. Sometimes an occasion for a public rejoicing was created after an unsuccessful campaign or a defeat of the Ottoman army, with the intention of turning the attention of sultan's subjects elsewhere and to falsify the result of a battle.⁵ The wedding and circumcision ceremonies very often and deliberately coincided with Kurban Bayrami,

¹ The circumcision festival of Prince Mehmed (later Sultan Mehmed III) under his father Sultan Murad III, in 1582.

² The festival of 1449 under Murad II, to celebrate the wedding of his son prince Mehmed (the conqueror of Constantinople in 1453) and Sitt Hatun, continued for three months.

³ The festivities are called *Senliker*, meaning "public rejoicings."

⁴ Elliot Stout claims that such Ottoman festivals continued until the close of the "Tulip Age," under Sultan Ahmed III (see *An Ottoman Festival*, p. 30). This information does not seem to take into account at least a dozen more festivals in such scope under Mustafa III, Abdülhamid I, Mahmud II, Abdülmecid and Abdülaziz.

⁵ The best examples of such festivities are in 1457, after Mehmed II was compelled to draw back from Baghdad; in 1530, when Süleyman the Magnificent had to retreat from the siege of Vienna; and in 1582, after the failure of Murad III in the war against the Persians.

a religious celebration of Mohammed's pilgrimage to Mecca. There were also court festivities, which were organized merely to solemnize the pilgrimage of the Prophet.⁶

The public rejoicings included not only pageants, fireworks, illuminations, equestrian games, architectural displays, new inventions, and technical devices, but also poetic recitations, academic discussions, musical performances and various artistic skills. The essential feature of such festivals resembled those of European court festivities in the Renaissance, with their spectacular parades, masked clowns, marionet-plays, artificial flower gardens, big galleys, flame-throwing dragons, hundreds of pageants, represented by various craft and trade guilds; and also monsters that could submerge and swim under water with men inside, dramatic performances on rafts, dangerous artistic shows which needed skill, and numerous festal palms in various sizes.

In this article, I am only concerned with the last of the items, namely the festal palms, which were originally called *nahils*.⁷ Hammer is the first Ottoman historian to draw attention to the symbolical significance of the *nahils*. According to him, the size of these palms implied the power of the virility of the bridegroom, and the fruits on their branches alluded to the fecundity of the bride. He indicates that while the *nahils* represented the phallaphores, the red tulle on the wedding palanquin suggests the flammeum and the torches - the flambeau of Cupidon and Hymen; here, the fescennium and corybantes are replaced by sensual songs and orgiastic dances in unison with the pulsating beats of drums and castanets.⁸

This phallaphoric symbol sometimes took the form of a wreath, or a fir branch, but generally it was made in the form of a cypress. In earlier periods it was in the shape of a date-palm decorated with different kinds of ornaments, mouldings, fruits and emblems. We observe such *nahils* in Anatolia as far back as the Phrygians and Hittites.⁹ In the region of Afyon and Konya, during the reign of the Phrygian kings, the symbols headed a ritualistic procession mostly in spring.

In the Ottoman festivals these *nahils* had an important place not only in the weddings, but also in the circumcision ceremonies. In the weddings it was prepared by the bride's family, and in the circumcision by the boy's parents. In these ceremonies, the *nahils* were carried in front of the procession, and if it was an imperial

⁶ Among others, a recent one was in 1866, under Sultan Abdülaziz.

⁷ The Arabic word *nahl*, later became *nahil*, *nakil*, *nahil* or *nakil* in common Turkish usage. It literally means "date-palm" (Konyali, pp. 137-8). An adornment for women is also called *nahl* in Arabic (And, p. 16)

⁸ Hammer, V, 451.

⁹ Terracotta panels with reliefs decorated in coloured glaze from the Phrygian city Pazarli (near Ankara) show such palms as fertility symbols (see, Akurgal, 54 and 55). The excavations at Altinepe (situated in the plain of Erzincan) brought out panels decorated with palmettes belonging to the period of Urartus in Anatolia (see Özgüç, plates 3 and 29). Also the sculptures of the main gallery in Yazilikaya (East of Ankara) show the Hittite phallaphoric symbols.

celebration, the grand vizier, the viziers and important high officials walked behind them. If *nahils* were in various sizes, generally the biggest would be carried first, and it would be followed by other *nahils* together with gardens of sugar work, sweets in golden, silver and bronze trays, golden and silvers decanters of *sherbet* (a sweet drink made of various fruit juices), bundles of the bride's trousseau, coloured purses full of silver coins and caskets full of precious stones.

There were special craftsmen, who constructed these *nahils*. Evliya Çelebi described them in his travel journal¹⁰ as *esnâf-inahilciyan-i sur-i hümayun*.¹¹ According to him, the guild had four workshops in Istanbul with 55 skilled members. The founder of this guild was Meyser Ezheri. These craftsmen Çelebi writes, "constructed *nahils* in wax as tall as the minaret of Süleymaniye Mosque, with coloured ribbons, silver and gold threads, which could also be illuminated." The iron-structured gigantic *nahils* "were carried by hundreds of galley-slaves supervised by guards, who gave with whistles such orders as: 'pull it to the right, to the left, etc...'"

A similar scene is described in detail by an English priest,¹² who had the occasion to see the festivities of Sultan Mehmed IV, in the summer of 1675, in Edirne.¹³ He witnessed these guards—generally dockyard stewards—with whistles, directing each group of slaves (with more than a hundred¹⁴ in one group) carrying gigantic *nahils*, approximately 25 meters high. The lower end (approximately 4.50 to 5.50 meters in diameter) had eight or ten, long parallel bars, and the slaves carried the *nahils* holding these bars. There was someone who directed them: he commanded the slaves to rest, or to carry on at the sound of the whistle.¹⁵

The gigantic *nahils* were so big that in order to carry them through the streets the projecting parts of the houses, such as eaves and balconies, were often pulled down and rebuilt afterwards. In the festival of 1646 to celebrate the wedding of Fatma Sultan—who was then four years of age—the daughter of Sultan Ibrahim (the Crazy), as two "minaret-high" *nahils* were too high and too big to pass through the streets

¹⁰ Evliya, *Seyahatname*, I, p. 612: written in the seventeenth century.

¹¹ Guild of *Nahils* for imperial festivities.

¹² Dr. John Covel, who was the chaplain of the British Ambassador to the Porte, from 1670 to 1677.

¹³ There were two celebrations in this festival, one after the other: the circumcision of princes Mustafa (later Mustafa II) and Ahmed (later Ahmed III) which continued fifteen days and nights; the wedding of Hatice Sultan (sister of Mehmed IV), which lasted eighteen days and nights.

¹⁴ Covel says there were 160 slaves in each group (folio 217v). See also N a b i, p. 58, he mentions that in each group there were about 200 of them. There were approximately 80, 100 slaves who carried the gigantic *nahils* in the festival of 1582 (see Haunolt, p. 473). Another German visitor confirms this figure (see Lubaneu, II, p. 50).

¹⁵ Covel, f. 198v.

of Istanbul, the terraces, balconies and eaves of various houses had to be pulled down, and the streets widened.¹⁶ The case was the same in the festival of 1675: Dr. Covel witnessed the demolishing process in Edirne; some of the houses were completely pulled down.¹⁷ In the festival of 1720,¹⁸ the money for the reconstruction was granted to the owners of the houses while the process of demolishing was underway.¹⁹

Although the rebuilding of the houses required a great deal of money, the value of the *nahils* was almost twice, the expenses thus incurred. These most important fertility symbols were each a work of art and very expensive. Some of them were entirely in silver and some were adorned with jewelry. At the wedding of Hatice Sultan, sister of Süleyman the Magnificent, in 1524, one of the *nahils* consisted of forty thousand and another of sixty thousand pieces of handwork; and they were skilfully ornamented with beautiful, precious stones, in the shape of legendary birds.²⁰

A German traveler described some of the expensive *nahils* constructed for the festival of 1586,²¹ under Murad III, which were decorated with gilded wax balls, big pieces of turquoise and hundreds of pearls. One such palm cost forty or fifty thousand golden ducats.²² Grand vizier Salih Pasha paid fifty thousand *quruş* for two silver palms for the wedding of Sultan Ibrahim's little daughter in 1646.²³ We come across such valuable silver palms also in the festivities under Mehmed IV, in Edirne.²⁴ In 1648, for the wedding of another daughter of Ibrahim, two *nahils* of gigantic height were enriched by different kinds of jewelry, handwork of gold and silver.²⁵ The beauty, skill and richness of such palms were so impressive that the English scholar, mentioned above, stood aghast when he first saw them. He tells, how "the Vizier sent an expresse to the Bailo of Venice, commanding him to send for all the actors of their operas to come with their scaenes, musick, etc., to grace the Grand Signor's solemnities. The Bailo excused himself, urging it was impossible (besides of the inconveniences, etc.) to bring all the lumber and trumpery by land and Sea in due time—The Ghiaus (the messenger) storm'd and swore: what was impossible for the Grand Signor to do? Wallah (by God) my maister, if he will, can fetch your whole city hither just as it stands there; streets, houses, churches, and all. The Bailo with much adoe, got

¹⁶ Naima, IV, 211.

¹⁷ Covel, f. 200r.

¹⁸ Celebrations for the weddings of three daughters and two nephews of Ahmed III, and the circumcision of his four sons.

¹⁹ And, p. 17, see also Vehbi.

²⁰ Danişmend, II, p. 104.

²¹ The marriage of Ayşe Sultan, one of the daughters of Murad III.

²² Haunolt, p. 532.

²³ Naima, IV, 211.

²⁴ Hezarfen Hüseyin, f. 178r, and Abdi, f. lv.

²⁵ Naima, IV, 262.

off; butin faith, when I saw this moving wooden steeple (meaning the *nahil*) so easily menaged, I began to think the Ghiaus had some reason in him."²⁶

The celebration of a circumcision and a wedding one after another in the summer of 1675 is a typical example of the variety of *nahils* in an Ottoman festival. Mehmed IV ordered four gigantic, eighty medium-sized and hundreds of smaller *nahils*. The bridegroom Musahib Mustafa Pasha also presented two palms of complete silver.²⁷ Two of the gigantic, half of the medium-sized *nahils* were for princes Mustafa and Ahmed, who were circumcized together with eight thousand boys of the poor families. The innumerable smaller palms were for the boys and for the renegades, who were circumcized in honour of the two princes.²⁸

Shortly, the *nahils* represented the virility of men and the fecundity of women, as well as the economic power and mark of supremacy in the society.

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²⁶ Covel, f. 200r.

²⁷ Abdi, f. 15 r, Hezarfen, f. 166r, and Nabi, p. 58.

²⁸ Approximately 3500 boys were circumcized in this solemnity by 300 surgeons (see Abdi, f. 3r, Hezarfen, f. 149r–149v, and Nabi, pp. 49–56).