

# **Beyond Anıtkabir: The Funerary Architecture of Atatürk**

The Construction and Maintenance of National Memory

**Christopher S. Wilson**

**Studies in Architecture**

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## List of Figures

I.1	Atatürk's Bedroom in Dolmabahçe Palace, Istanbul. (Courtesy of the Grand National assembly of Turkey, Deputy Secretary General – National Palaces.)	2
I.2	Atatürk's Catafalque in the Grand Ceremonial Hall of Dolmabahçe Palace. (Courtesy of the Turkish Armed Forces, Chief of General Staff, Directorate of Communications.)	2
I.3	Atatürk's Catafalque in front of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, Ankara. (Courtesy of the Turkish Armed Forces, Chief of General Staff, Directorate of Communications.)	3
I.4	Atatürk's temporary tomb in the Ethnographic Museum, Ankara. (Source: <i>Cumhuriyet</i> newspaper, 10 November 1944, cover page.)	3
I.5	Atatürk's mausoleum, Anıtkabir, Ankara. (Photo by author.)	4
3.1	Dolmabahçe Palace, ground floor plan. (Courtesy of the Grand National assembly of Turkey, Deputy Secretary General – National Palaces.)	24
3.2	Dolmabahçe Palace, Grand Ceremonial Hall. (Courtesy of the Grand National assembly of Turkey, Deputy Secretary General – National Palaces.)	29
3.3	The procession of Atatürk's coffin through the streets of Istanbul, 19 November 1938. (Courtesy of the Turkish Armed Forces, Chief of General Staff, Directorate of Communications.)	32
4.1	The procession of Atatürk's coffin through the streets of Ankara, 20 November 1938. (Courtesy of the Turkish Armed Forces, Chief of General Staff, Directorate of Communications.)	40
4.2	View of Ankara from Train Station Square to the area of Ulus, 1930s. (Courtesy of SANTUR, Ankara.)	41
4.3	Atatürk exiting the Second Turkish Parliament Building after addressing parliament on the 7th anniversary of the Republic of Turkey, 29 October 1930. (Courtesy of the Turkish Armed Forces, Chief of General Staff, Directorate of Communications.)	41

4.4	Bruno Taut's crayon sketch design for Atatürk's catafalque, 15 November 1938. (Courtesy of the Turkish Armed Forces, Chief of General Staff, Directorate of Communications.)	43
4.5	Plan and elevation of Bruno Taut's catafalque for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Ankara, as published in his posthumous <i>Lectures on Architecture</i> [ <i>Architekturlehre</i> ], 1938, between pages 79 and 80.	45
4.6	Atatürk's coffin escorted through the streets of Ankara to the Ethnographic Museum, 21 November 1938. (Courtesy of the Turkish Armed Forces, Chief of General Staff, Directorate of Communications.)	50
5.1	The Ethnographic Museum, Ankara: the location of Atatürk's temporary tomb, 1938–1953. (Courtesy of Vehbi Koç Research Center [VEKAM], Ankara.)	56
5.2	The procession of Atatürk's coffin through the streets of Ankara, 10 November 1953. (Courtesy of the Turkish Armed Forces, Chief of General Staff, Directorate of Communications.)	61
6.1	Sketch for an Atatürk Monument by Hermann Jansen, dated 24 November 1938. (Courtesy of the Architecture Museum of the Technical University of Berlin, Inventory No. 22947.)	66
6.2	First prize-winning Anıtkabir competition entries from Johannes Krüger, Arnaldo Foschini and Emin Onat–Orhan Arda. (As published in <i>Architettura</i> , vol. 21, no. 11, 1942, p. 349 [Foschini] and p. 354 [Krüger]; and in <i>Arkitekt</i> , nos. 1–2, 1943, p. 5 [Onat–Arda].)	73
6.3	Honourable mention Anıtkabir competition entries from Hamit K. Söylemezoğlu–Kemal A. Aru–Recai Akçay, Giovanni Muzio, Feridun Akozan–M. Ali Handan, Ronald Rohn, and Giuseppe Vaccaro–Gino Franzi. (As published in <i>Arkitekt</i> , nos. 1–2, 1943, p. 13 [Söylemezoğlu, <i>et al</i> ], p. 16 [Akozan, <i>et al</i> ] and p. 18 [Rohn]; and in <i>Architettura</i> , vol. 21, no. 11, 1942, p. 357 [Muzio] and p. 363 [Vaccaro–Franzi].)	74
6.4	Non-prize-winning Anıtkabir competition entries from Sedat H. Eldem, Necmi Ateş, Selim Benar–Rahmi Bediz–Demirtaş Kamçıl, Paolo Vietti-Violli and Adalberto Libera. (As published in <i>Arkitekt</i> , nos. 3–4, 1943, p. 59 [Eldem] and p. 61 [Ateş]; <i>Arkitekt</i> , nos. 5–6, 1943, p. 106 [Benar, <i>et al</i> ]; and in <i>Architettura</i> , vol. 21, no. 11, 1942, p. 367 [Vietti-Violli] and p. 365 [Libera].)	77
6.5	Non-prize-winning Anıtkabir competition entries from Clemens Holzmeister, Hans Döllgast, Auguste Perret, and German Bestelmeyer. (As published in <i>Arkitekt</i> , nos. 3–4, 1943, p. 64 [Holzmeister]; courtesy of the Architecture Museum of TU München [Döllgast and Bestlemeyer]; and courtesy of the Société des Auteurs des Arts Visuel et de l'Image Fixe, Paris [Perret].)	81
6.6	Revised Anıtkabir design by Emin Onat and Orhan Arda (model). (As published in <i>Mimarlık</i> , no. 5, 1944, p. 3.)	87
6.7	Cover of <i>Sanat–Edebiyat–Sosyoloji</i> , 7 June 1939. (Author's collection.)	88

6.8	<i>Men</i> (left) and <i>Women</i> (right), by Huseyin Özkan, at the entrance to Anitkabir. (Photos by author.)	91
6.9	Left: Lion from the ceremonial approach to Anitkabir by Huseyin Özkan. (Photo by author.) Right: Lion sculptures from the Neo-Hittite settlement of Carchemish/Jerablus, Turkey. (Courtesy of The British Library, London.)	92
6.10	Turkish carpet decoration on Anitkabir's Ceremonial Plaza porch ceilings and floor. (Photos by author.)	93
7.1	<i>Tomb Memory</i> , by the Turkish artist known as "Extrastruggle," 2000. (Courtesy of the artist.)	106

## List of Maps

- |   |  |    |
|---|--|----|
| 1 | Atatürk's coffin's procession through Istanbul. The solid line indicates the route taken and the dashed lines indicate the alternative routes discussed by the author.   | 33 |
| 2 | Atatürk's coffin's sea journey from Istanbul to Izmit and train journey from Izmit to Ankara.  | 34 |
| 3 | Atatürk's funeral procession through the streets of Ankara, 1938 (superimposed upon a contemporary map of Ankara). The solid line indicates the route taken and the dashed line indicates the alternative route discussed by the author.           | 51 |
| 4 | Atatürk's coffin's journey from the Ethnographic Museum to Anıtkabir, 1953 (superimposed upon a contemporary map of Ankara). The solid line indicates the route taken and the dashed line indicates the alternative route discussed by the author. | 62 |

*This book is dedicated to my father,  
Samuel Warren Wilson (1932–1992).*

# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Maps</i>	<i>xi</i>
Introduction	1
1      Funerary Architecture, Representation and Atatürk	5
2      Identity, Memory, Nationalism and Architecture	11
3      Dolmabahçe Palace	23
4      The Ankara Catafalque	39
5      Ethnographic Museum Temporary Tomb	55
6      Anıtkabir Mausoleum	65
7      Maintaining National Memory	101
Conclusion	129
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>135</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>143</i>

## Introduction

This book is not about Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) – at least not directly. It is not about Atatürk's birth in the Ottoman city of Salonika (today Thessaloniki, Greece), nor his childhood in the family of a customs civil servant. This book is also not about Atatürk's early success in the armed forces of the Ottoman Empire, nor his dislike of the empire's occupation after World War I. It is neither about Atatürk's leadership during the subsequent Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923), nor his secularizing and westernizing reforms as first president of the Republic of Turkey (1923–1938). Lastly, this book is not about Atatürk's last days and his death, although these events provide the beginning to the story.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk died in a bedroom (Figure I.1) in Dolmabahçe Palace, Istanbul, the former Ottoman seat of government, at exactly 9:05 am on 10 November 1938. He had been seriously ill for some time and was in Istanbul, rather than Ankara – the new capital of Turkey – at the advice of his doctors, who recommended its sea-level altitude and mild climate. Soon after Atatürk's death, preparations began for his official funeral, which would take place in Ankara 11 days later. The famous German modernist architect Bruno Taut was commissioned to design the catafalque that would be the architectural focus of that event. In the meantime, a temporary yet dignified catafalque (Figure I.2) was arranged in the Grand Ceremonial Hall of Dolmabahçe Palace. Atatürk's coffin lay upon that structure from 16 to 19 November, after which it was draped with the Turkish flag, loaded onto a gun carriage and escorted through the streets of Istanbul to Seraglio Point. There, the coffin was transferred to a battleship and taken to Izmit, where it was then loaded onto a special train, arriving in Ankara on the morning of 20 November 1938.

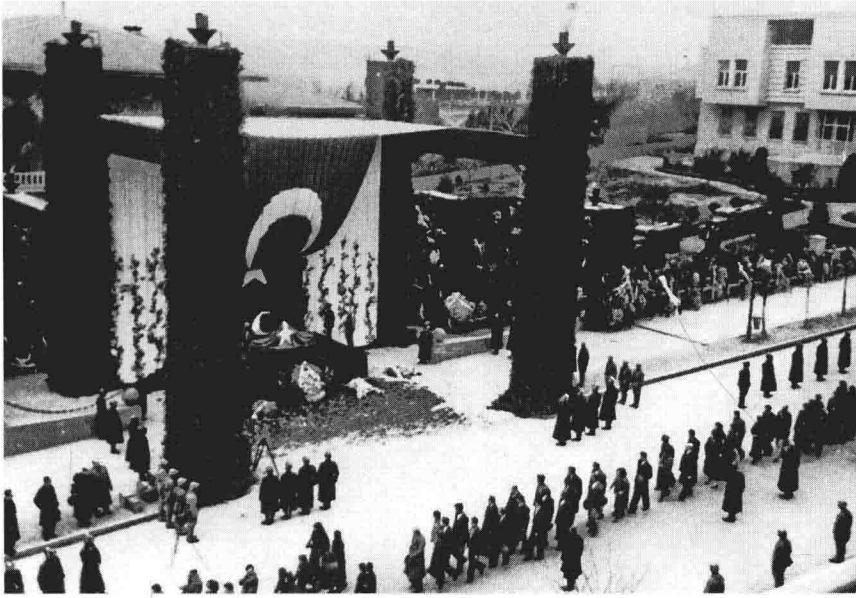
Upon leaving the train, the coffin was again loaded onto a gun carriage and ceremoniously paraded through the streets of Ankara and placed onto Taut's catafalque (Figure I.3) located in the forecourt of the Turkish Grand National Assembly Building, known today as the Second Parliament Building. The coffin remained there for the rest of the day as the body lay in state. Atatürk's official funeral took place the next morning, on 21 November 1938. At the conclusion of



I.1 Atatürk's Bedroom in Dolmabahçe Palace, Istanbul



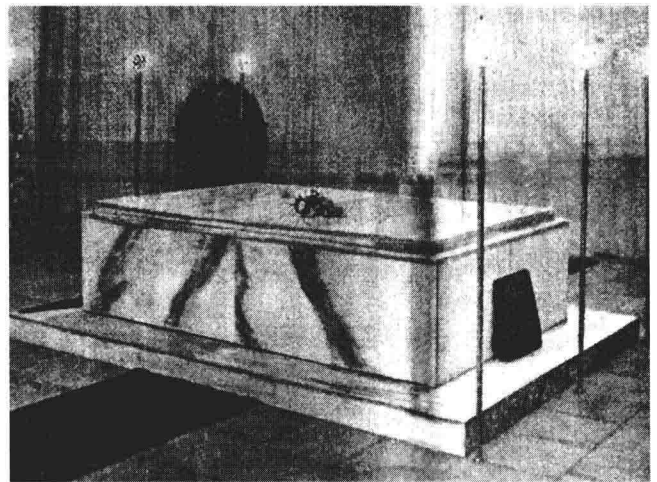
I.2 Atatürk's  
Catafalque  
in the Grand  
Ceremonial Hall  
of Dolmabahçe  
Palace



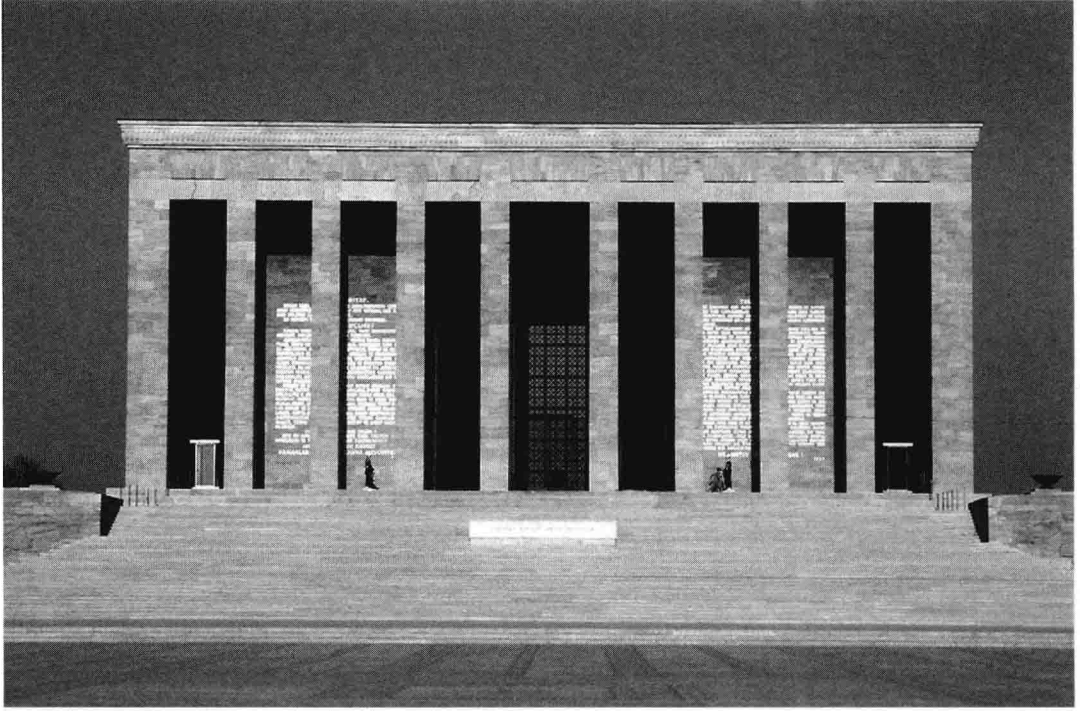
I.3 Atatürk's  
Catafalque in front  
of the Turkish  
Grand National  
Assembly, Ankara

ceremonies, which included processions of Turkish soldiers, foreign honour guards, representatives of friendly nations and the general public, Atatürk's coffin was again carried on a gun carriage and escorted through the streets of Ankara to the Ethnographic Museum, where a temporary tomb (Figure I.4) had been prepared. Atatürk's body lay in this tomb until 10 November 1953, exactly 15 years after his death, when it was moved to a permanent mausoleum, called Anıtkabir – in Turkish literally, "memorial tomb" – where it still lies today (Figure I.5).

As previously stated, this book is not about Atatürk. Instead, it is about the representations of Atatürk as seen in the examples of funerary architecture that have housed his corpse since his death, listed above: the bedroom in Dolmabahçe Palace where he died, the catafalque in Dolmabahçe's Grand Ceremonial Hall, Bruno Taut's catafalque for his official funeral in Ankara, the temporary tomb in the Ankara Ethnographic Museum, and his mausoleum Anıtkabir. Related to these constructions are also the transfer ceremonies when Atatürk's body was conveyed through Istanbul and on to Ankara in 1938; from Taut's catafalque to the Ethnographic Museum, also in 1938; and from the Ethnographic Museum to Anıtkabir in 1953.



I.4 Atatürk's temporary tomb in the Ethnographic Museum, Ankara



I.5 Atatürk's  
mausoleum,  
Anıtkabir, Ankara

Being the final construction in this series and also the grandest, Anıtkabir is the most well known of all of them. It receives approximately 8 million visitors every year, both Turkish and foreign, and is a national monument for Turkey – some would say the national monument for Turkey. However, the constructions that housed Atatürk's body before Anıtkabir are just as equally significant, hence the first meaning to the title of this book: All of these settings and ceremonies – not just Anıtkabir – were, in one way or another, architectural representations of Atatürk.

Atatürk did not create these representations himself, which is an impossible post-mortem task, unless planned before one's death. Instead, those who were left after his death created them and subsequent generations have maintained them. Individually, these representations were separate moments that occurred at different times and under quite varying circumstances – some accidental, some designed, some temporary, and some permanent. Taken together, they were and are the outcome of the intersection of identity, memory, nationalism and architecture, which shall be explained in more detail in later chapters.

Although it may not be possible to attribute one singular national or collective memory for Atatürk or the nation of Turkey, the representations seen in the funerary architecture of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk have been and continue to be a major factor in shaping Turkish national and collective memory, hence the second meaning to the title of this book: the on-going or future shaping of Turkish national identity and memory that will now take place following the construction, maintenance and institutionalization of Anıtkabir. It is the goal of this book to narrate the "beyond Anıtkabir" of the past in order to predict the "beyond Anıtkabir" of the future.

## FUNERARY ARCHITECTURE

Also called sepulchral architecture – from the Latin *sepelire* meaning to bury – funerary architecture is that which is built to house or contain a dead body. This architectural type can vary in size from a humble tombstone or simple grave marker to a large family burial chamber or grand mausoleum. Other examples of funerary architecture include the catafalque or bier (a funeral stage), the sarcophagus (a decorated stone coffin), the cenotaph (a tomb without an actual body), the columbarium (a structure with niches for cremated remains), the catacomb (a tunnel-like underground cemetery with recesses for graves) and the crypt (an underground burial chamber). The comprehensive eighteenth-century *Encyclopedia or Reasoned Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and Trades*, edited by scholars Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, explains that “The Romans defined three kinds of tombs: *sepulchrum*, *monumentum* and *cenotaphium*. The sepulchre was the ordinary tomb, where the whole body of the deceased was deposited. The monument was something more splendid than the simple sepulchre; built to preserve the memory of a person” (de Jaucourt, 1967). The cenotaph, which literally means “empty tomb” in Ancient Greek, was a work of funerary architecture constructed in honour of a person or group of persons whose bodily remains could be found elsewhere.

Funerary architecture has neither geographic boundaries nor historical restrictions. It can be found in many places and at many times throughout history, from the Neolithic upright stone dolmen constructions of Northern Europe (4000 to 3000 BCE) to the Complex of Angkor Wat in Cambodia (1113–1150) and from Hadrian's Mausoleum in Ancient Rome (135 CE) – known today as the Castel Sant'Angelo – to the Taj Mahal in Agra, India (1631–1654). Funerary architecture does, however, have intellectual boundaries, existing only in those societies or cultures that wish to remember their dead. The most famous of all funerary architecture is perhaps the Great Pyramids near Cairo, Egypt, built as tombs for the Fourth Dynasty Ancient Egyptian kings Cheops, Chefren and Mycerinus around

2570 BCE, 2530 BCE and 2500 BCE, respectively. Because of their vast size and massive volume, the Great Pyramids are an obvious attempt at materializing an immortality that was believed to exist for their royal inhabitants. Cheops' pyramid alone measures 230 m x 230 m at its base, and scholars estimate that it consists of around 2.3 million individual stones weighing approximately 6.5 million metric tons in total. French anthropologist and philosopher Georges Bataille (1992: 36) has theorized that such monumentality was an attempt to counteract death: "the monument and the pyramid are where they are to cover up a place, to fill in a void: the one left by death. Death must not appear, it must not take place: let tombs cover it up and take its place." This sentiment is equally true for both large and small examples of funerary architecture – it mostly exists to cover up a death or, at the very least, make up for the loss.

The Tomb of Mausolus is another famous example of a construction that was the result of a death, and is significant for the story of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's funerary architecture because of its form and location. Mausolus (390?–353 BCE) was the local governor of an area centred around Halicarnassus, which is present-day Bodrum, Turkey, called Caria at the time. The Carians were not ethnically Hellenic, but they embraced Hellenic arts and culture. After Mausolus' death, his widow Artemisia is said to have built this tomb for him, from which the English word mausoleum – a general term for a monumental structure housing the corpse of a significant person – is derived. The Tomb of Mausolus is believed to have been destroyed by earthquakes sometime before 1404 when the Knights of St. John Malta used the collapsed stones of the structure to provide building material for their castle at Bodrum. Although there has been much speculation about the actual form of the mausoleum, experts generally agree that the building consisted of a large rectangular 38 m x 32 m base, an Ionic-colonnaded middle section and a stepped-pyramidal roof crowned with a four-horse chariot and driver sculpture, with a total height of about 45 m (Smith 1875: 744–55). The significance of this form to Atatürk's mausoleum will be revealed later, but for now it will suffice to say that the Tomb of Mausolus, along with the Great Pyramids at Giza, has provided many a designer with a model for monumental and grandiose funerary architecture.

Another building that has given its name to a type of funerary architecture is the Pantheon in Rome, estimated to have been constructed around 125 CE. The Pantheon, however, was not constructed to house dead bodies. Meaning "temple of all the gods," it was built as a place of worship to the seven deities of the seven planets in the state religion of Ancient Rome. Its cylindrical main interior contains seven niches, one for each deity. The Pantheon was converted into a church in 609 CE and began to be used as a burial place during the early sixteenth century. Famous Renaissance painter Raphael and architect Baldassare Peruzzi are buried in the Pantheon, as well as the nineteenth-century Italian kings Vittorio Emanuele II and Umberto I. It is through this use of the Ancient Roman Pantheon as a burial place that the word pantheon has come to mean "a monument or building commemorating a nation's dead heroes," thereby containing "a strong political purpose as a celebration of nationhood" (Rugg 2000: 271). Because contemporary pantheons are collective burial places designed for dead bodies selected especially