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A GROUP OF EARLY CHURCHES IN CAPPADOCIA: EVIDENCE FOR DATING

For almost a century scholars have been attracted to the wealth of rock-cut churches in Cappadocia. Most of their studies have been devoted to the better-preserved and richly decorated Middle Byzantine monuments, since the absence of dated inscriptions and painted decorations created difficulty in dealing with early monuments. While some churches were attributed to the Early Christian period there is still a lack of substantial evidence. Therefore, the progress and activity in the field of Middle Byzantine Cappadocia is strikingly contrasted with the neglected state of research on the Early Christian period. The neglect of Early Christian churches is undeniable, especially when one confronts the question of local architectural tradition; then the dating of early rock-cut churches in this area becomes a crucial point in modern scholarship. While the absence of inscriptions has limited accuracy in church dating, the churches' relative chronology can be established on the basis of the style of their architectural components and sculptural decoration. These data are consistent with those from built churches in this area. Since the latter are more securely dated due to their construction technique or inscriptions, they become an important source for the dating of the rock-cut churches in Cappadocia.

The purpose of this paper is to present evidence which we believe allows us to distinguish a group of Cappadocian rock-cut churches and place them within the sixth century. In the scope of this paper I will limit my discussion to only five churches, namely the Domed Hall in Balkan Dere, St. John in Çavuşin, Chapel 1 and 2, both in Zelve, and Chapel 3 in Gülü Dere¹. Although some important observations in support of their early dating have been presented, these churches have not been discussed by scholars as a closely related stylistic group. All of these churches are located near different villages and towns. The Domed Hall is situated in the Balkan Dere valley near Ortahisar; the basilica of St. John is in Çavuşin village, Chapel 3 is in Gülü Dere valley near Çavuşin and Chapel 1 and 2 are in the Zelve area². These churches have different plans and vaulting, but what they share are similar architectural components and sculptural decoration.

Because the Domed Hall is a key monument for understanding the time of excavation of

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¹ For a general listing of Early Christian churches: N. Thierry, "Monuments pré-Iconoclastes en Cappadoce rupestre," *Actas del VIII Congreso Internacional de Arqueología Christiana*, Barcelona, 1969 (Barcelona, 1972), pp. 563-565; "La croix en Cappadoce: typologie et valeur représentative," *Le site monastique copte des Keltia* (Geneva, 1984), pp. 197-212; and pls. II, III, figs. 6, 8. *Arts of Cappadocia*, ed Luchiano Giovannini (London, 1971), p. 93, and figs. 45-47; 199, 201, 202, 204. For St. John: G. de Jerphanion, *Une nouvelle province de l'art byzantin, les églises rupestres de Cappadoce*, (Paris, 1932), vol. 1, pp. 511-513; H. Rott, *Kleinasiatische Denkmäler aus Pisidien, Pamphylien, Kappadokien und Lykien* (Leipzig, 1908), pp. 236-238; N. Thierry, *Haut Moyen-Age en Cappadoce: les églises de la région de Çavuşin I* (Paris, 1983), pp. 59-65, and figs. 23, 24; S. Kostof, *Caves of God* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1972), pp. 70-75, and pls. 19-21. For Chapel 3 in Gülü Dere: Jerphanion, *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 592-594, and pl. 136; J. Lafontaine-Dosogne, "L'Eglise aux trois Croix de Gülü Dere en Cappadoce," *Byzantion*, 35 (1965), pp. 175-207; N. Thierry, "Notes critiques à propos des peintures rupestres de Cappadoce," *REB*, 26 (1968), 349-350; M. Restle, *Byzantine Wall Painting of Asia Minor*, trans. I. R. Gibbons (Recklinghausen, 1967); S. Kostof, *ibid.*, p. 262.

² *Ibid.*

the entire group of churches, I will begin by establishing its dating and then provide further evidence for a stylistic bond between the Domed Hall and the above-mentioned group of churches.

The Domed Hall

The Domed Hall is situated in the farthest part of the Balkan Dere Cliff (Fig. 1.).³ Since its eastern end collapsed some time ago, it is difficult to reconstruct its original plan. Judging from the surviving remains of the structure, it was probably some sort of a cruciform shape, and possibly a church. In plan it is close to the sixth century Cappadocian built church of Buzluk near Persek⁴. On the other hand, because only the triumphal arch remains from the apse, we can only guess its original function. The fragmentary state and irregularity of its plan cannot supply us with much information regarding the time when it was excavated from the rock. The important task in studying this church is to attempt to analyze its rich architectural components and sculptural decoration. Because these churches are excavated in tufa rock, the quality of execution of their architectural components and sculptural decoration will be comparable in all cases.

The ribbed dome is located at the center of a flat ceiling (Fig. 2.). The latter is surrounded by a step-cornice with dentils. All these architectural elements actively project into the interior space. Their dynamic, almost sculptural style belongs to Early Byzantine architecture and particularly to the sixth century.

The surviving fragment of the dome indicates that originally this was a domed church. Significantly, this fragment has one vertical and three horizontally carved ribs. To my knowledge, there are only two early churches that have preserved vertical ribbed domes: Hagia Sophia in Istanbul (ca. 537) and St. Repsime in Armenia (ca. 717)⁵. Although vertical ribbed domes appear in some of the Middle Byzantine churches, there are no parallels to the horizontal ones, neither in early nor in Middle Byzantine churches. It is possible that the combination of vertical and horizontal ribs in the Balkan Dere dome might have been inspired by Roman coffered domes, as in the Pantheon in Rome⁶. The latter, however, had coffered niches between the vertical and horizontal lines. The dome in Balkan Dere is articulated by means of projecting vertical and horizontal lines, in a simplified version of the Roman type of dome. The rock-cut technique allows some freedom in execution of architectural elements in churches.

The ample, three-step cornice surrounding the flat ceiling is another notable feature of this church. This projecting cornice with a step-like profile was used in both the interiors and exteriors of Early Christian buildings, as for example in the central nave of the rock-cut basilica of the monastery in Mydie in Thrace, which has been dated to the early sixth century⁷.

Below the cornice of the Domed Hall there are small dentils, an imitation of those found in the early sixth-century, built church of Akkilise, located in the Soğanlı valley (Fig. 3.)⁸. The latter church is dated by H. Rott, M. Restle and others to the year 500 or the early sixth century⁹. Since

³ See note 1.

⁴ M. Restle, *Studien zur frühbyzantinischen Architektur Kapadokiens* (Vienna, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 49, 50; vol. 2, figs. 83-90, and pl. 27.

⁵ T. F. Mathews, *The Byzantine Churches of Istanbul: A Photographic Survey* (University Park and London, 1976), 292, figs. 31-43; O. Kh. Khalpakhchian, *Architectural ensembles of Armenia* (Moscow, 1980), fig. 25.

⁶ W. L. MacDonald, *The Pantheon: Design, Meaning, and Progeny* (London, 1976), 22, and fig. 14, p. 39, fig. 37.

⁷ S. Eyice, N. Thierry, "Le monastère et la source sainte de Midye en Thrace Turque," *Cahiers Archéologiques*, 20 (1970), 47-76, and figs. 9, 32.

⁸ M. Restle, *Studien*, vol. 1, 24-26, vol. 2, figs. 10, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*

this church was published at the beginning of this century, it has been turned into a Turkish house, with the original north wall still serving as its wall; fortunately, some dentils have survived. Dentils were popular in the church architecture of the Early Christian period. Their type and function derived from Roman architectural tradition, where dentils used to support cornices¹⁰. Early Christian church architecture adopted and widely used this classical motif. It often appears on fifth- and sixth-century churches, as for instance in the exterior cornice of the sixth-century built church of Kızıl Kilise in Cappadocia¹¹. In Armenia, this motif was frequently used on both exteriors and interiors: as a part of the interior cornice it is seen in the Ciceravank basilica (sixth century)¹². Examining early Armenian architecture, Tokarskii concluded that this ornamental frieze of small dentils found in some Armenian churches dated from the sixth to the mid-seventh century¹³. Because many Armenian churches can be dated by inscriptions, the middle of the seventh century can be seen as a *terminus ante quem* for this architectural motif. The protrusions below the dentils in the Balkan Dere Hall can also shed some light on their dating. This architectural detail is found on the fifth- and early sixth-century church at the Sati monastery¹⁴ in Cappadocia and the sixth-century cathedral of Echmiadzin in Armenia¹⁵.

In addition, the special character of the Balkan Dere dentils is their decoration: each dentil is carved with a small cross or a palm (Fig. 4.). An almost identical carved cross is used on dentils of the above-mentioned Akkilise in the Soğanlı valley (Fig. 3.) Similar dentils with carved crosses are also found in Kızıl Kilise in Sivrihisar and in the Sati monastery¹⁶. It is possible that the carving was produced by the same local atelier at a time close to that of the other churches. Since Balkan Dere and Soğanlı valley and Sivrihisar are near one another, it would not be surprising that architects utilized a similar architectural and decorative vocabulary.

In addition, a sculptural decorative element of the Balkan Dere Domed Hall further provides us with evidence for dating. A carved medallion with an inscribed wreath surrounded by a zig-zag border can be seen on the south wall of the hall (Fig. 4.). The center of this medallion was likely decorated with a cross like those found in many fifth- and sixth-century churches around the Mediterranean, e.g. in different buildings of the monastery at Mount Sinai, where this motif is found not only on the exterior of the monastic buildings but also in various parts of the church interior, including the door and the apse wall, of the basilica¹⁷. A cross within a zig-zag ornamental roundel is seen above the entrance of the sixth-century basilica at Ererowk, furnishing a close parallel¹⁸. Examples found in Cappadocian buildings are in Dolay Han in Tilköy, Obruk Han and others¹⁹.

The carved palm above the roundel on the wall to the left of the apse of the Balkan Dere Domed Hall also belongs to the early Christian repertory. A similar palm is carved on the wall of the St. Catherine Monastery in Mt. Sinai²⁰. In Cappadocia this motif is found on a capital

¹⁰ Cf. *Pantheon in Rome*: MacDonald, *Pantheon*, 22 and fig. 14; for S. Constanza in Rome and other examples *ibid.*, figs. 108, 114.

¹¹ *Ibid.* M. Restle, *Studien*, vol. 1, pp. 57-63; vol. 2, fig. 108-111.

¹² F. Gandolfo, *Le basiliche armene IV-VII secolo* (Rome, 1982), figs. 231, 234, and 244.

¹³ Н. М. Токарский, *Архитектура Армении IV-XIV вв.* (Erevan, 1961), 149-154, and fig. 60, p. 152 (a-o).

¹⁴ M. Restle, *Studien*, vol. 1, pp. 55-57; vol. 2, figs. 106, 107.

¹⁵ F. Gandolfo, *Le basiliche armene*, fig. 106

¹⁶ Rott, *Kleinasiatische Denkmäler*, 277f, and 173 and fig. 57; M. Restle, *Studien.*, pp. 57-63, 55-57, and figs. 109-112, and 106.

¹⁷ G. H. Forsyth et al, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine of Mount Sinai: The Church and Fortress of Justinian* (Ann Arbor, 1973), pl. X, (c,e) XXXI (a), XLI (a), CII (a,b,c), LXIII (d), LXV (d), XCI (c), CI (b), XLVI, XLVII (a,d).

¹⁸ F. Gandolfo, *Le basiliche armene*, fig. 171; J.-M. Thierry, *Armenian Art* (New York, 1987), fig. 37.

¹⁹ F. Hild, *Das byzantinische Strassensystem in Kappadokien* (Vienna, 1977), 30, 37.

²⁰ G. H. Forsyth et al, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine*, pl. XXVII.¹⁰ Cf. *Pantheon in Rome*: MacDonald, *Pantheon*, 22 and fig. 14; for S. Constanza in Rome and other examples *ibid.*, figs. 108, 114.

near the apse of the early sixth-century built church of Eski Cami in Çardakkö²¹. Flanking a cross, palms appear on the ceiling of Chapel 3 in Gülü Dere, the architecture and sculptural decoration of which can be attributed to the sixth century (Fig. 5)²².

These stylistic links between the Balkan Dere Domed Hall and early sixth-century Cappadocian, Armenian and other Byzantine built churches strongly suggest that this church was excavated from the rock during this period. More specifically, the close similarity of the Balkan Dere dentils to those in Akkilise suggests that both churches were executed not far apart in time. Akkilise has been dated to the year 500 or the early sixth century on the basis of the close resemblance of its technique, architectural and decorative style to those of the church of Panagia in Göreme²³. The latter church is dated according to the paleography and text of its inscription²⁴. On this ground, we would like to date Balkan Dere close to Akkilise in Soğanlı. Because all these architectural and decorative motifs circulated within the same time period, it is possible to place Balkan Dere generally within the first half of the sixth century.

Assuming that this date is plausible, let us now explore the architectural components and sculptural decoration of the Domed Hall with a view to establishing the chronology of other rock-cut churches in this region.

Related churches

The churches of St. John in Çavuşın, Chapel 3 in Gülü Dere, and Chapel 1 and Chapel 2 in Zelve share with the Domed Hall their architectural elements and sculptural decoration. It appears that it is precisely these features which were shared by this group of churches and were used with great imagination by the local stonecutter. We will discuss only these elements which link this group of churches with the Balkan Dere Hall, being characteristic of the specific time of their carving and constituting a part of their architectural vocabulary and decorative programs.

In spite of the great variety of church types, we can distinguish one aspect of the architecture of Balkan Dere Hall, which is shared with the churches of this group; it is not found in the Middle Byzantine churches in Cappadocia. This feature is a characteristic of the articulation of the wall on both sides of the apse. In the Balkan Dere Hall one can see an extension of the wall below the level of the triumphal arch, continuing along the walls (Fig. 1.). In this fashion, this extension toward the naos breaks the height of the walls almost in the middle. Thus the eastern wall of St. John's basilica and Chapel 3 in Gülü Dere are treated in the same fashion as the walls of the Balkan Dere structure (Figs. 5., 6.). Moreover, the molding around the arch of the apse is very much alike in all the churches of this group.

The Domed Hall also shares its ornamental repertory with the churches of the entire group. For example, a zig-zag motif, carved below the cornice as well as around the roundels on the ceiling of the Balkan Dere, appears in all churches of this group. It is seen along the border of the square on the eastern wall of the south aisle in the basilica of St. John in Çavuşın, on the ceiling of the same aisle, along the walls of Chapel 2 at Zelve, in a monastic living room behind Chapel 3 in Gülü Dere and in a round medallion in the apex of the apse in the same church (Figs. 7., 8., 9.)²⁵. This motif is also found on the sixth-century capital from the church of St. Vardan in Zovovni²⁶.

²¹ M. Restle, *Studien*, vol. 1, pp. 34-36; vol. 2, fig. 44.

²² For dating: Lafontaine - Dosognc, "L'eglise;" Teteriatnikov, "The Domed Hall." For illustration: Restle, *Byzantine Wall Painting*, vol. 3, fig. 333.

²³ M. Restle, *Studien*, vol. 1, pp. 42-44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 42-44.

²⁵ N. Thierry, "La croix en Cappadocce," pl. II, fig. 8.

²⁶ F. Gandolfo, *Le basiliche armene*, p. 107, fig. 176.

A relief cross stands out as a major decorative motif for the entire group. The cross within the medallion (decorated with small dots in each arm) in Chapel 3 in Gülü Dere is very similar to that near the prothesis niche in Chapel 1 in Zelve or the capital from the church of Panagia in Göreme (ca. 500 or early sixth century) (Figs. 8., 10.)²⁷. Even the triple oval moldings around the medallions are executed in the same manner in all these cases.

This multiple oval molding appears also in a medallion on the western wall of the Balkan Dere Hall, on a larger scale. At the same time, the huge, smoothly carved cross within the medallion on the north wall of the Balkan Dere Hall is similar in scale, technique and type to those on the western wall in Chapel 2 in Zelve and that on the eastern wall of the south aisle in the St. John basilica (Figs. 7., 9., 11.)²⁸.

The presence of all these architectural and decorative motifs cannot be dismissed simply as accidental. None of these stylistic features belongs to the local Middle Byzantine architecture. On the other hand, the stylistic characteristics discussed herein were widespread in the sixth-century architecture and decoration of the neighboring areas of Armenia and Syria.

In view of the wide circulation of the above-mentioned stylistic motifs, I would like to suggest the first half of the sixth century as a date for the entire group of monuments under discussion. Further studies might bring more substantial materials so that we can specify the dating of each individual church. The history of Cappadocian rock-cut architecture is not, of course, limited to the monuments discussed here. But what is significant is that we can now place these ecclesiastical foundations within a specific historical period as well as a geographic area.

It would be worthwhile to take a closer look at the period when the local patrons invested their money in the ecclesiastical foundations. Comparing these rock-cut churches with the built churches, clearly the situation is similar. There is a large group of built churches also dated to this period, such as the church of Panagia in Göreme, Akkilise in Soğanlı, and others. Rock-cut churches were obviously established in more remote areas, though not far from the major roads and towns. St. John is, in fact, a large basilica intended for a sizeable congregation, and probably served the rock-cut village which is nearby. Chapel 3 in Gülü Dere is not far from Çavuşin; the Domed Hall is near the ancient village of Ortahisar. Thus these ecclesiastical foundations were clearly dependent on the local roads, and served the local population²⁹. But who were the patrons of these churches and what were their motivations to support these ecclesiastical foundations during this period?

Although we know comparatively little about church architecture during this period, there is information in the *Novella 30* of Justinian, which describes the general economic and social structure in this region³⁰. According to this text, the military and the tax collectors had enormous power over the local population, which in fact was heavily abused by taxation. Thus the military aristocracy and the local landowners probably had the money to establish church foundations. One of the important motivations to invest in church foundations was heavy taxes. According to Byzantine law, money given to the church was tax-deductible. This is illustrated by the well-known tale of Gregory of Tours about the foundation of the church

²⁷ M. Restle, *Studien*, vol. 1, pp. 42-44; vol. 2, fig. 8.

²⁸ N. Thierry, "La croix en Cappadoce," fig. 67.

²⁹ F. Hild, *Das byzantinische Strassensystem*, Map. No. 4.

³⁰ *Novellae*, Corpus iuris civilis (MCMXXVIII), Nov. XXX, 223-235.

of St. Polyeuktos (*ca.* 527) in Constantinople by one of the wealthiest ladies of Constantinople, Anicia Juliana³¹.

The Emperor Justinian was apprised of Juliana's great wealth and requested her to make a contribution to the public treasury. She feigned to be willing to do so and invited the Emperor to visit her in her house after a given period of time, during which she might be able to bring her treasure together. Meanwhile, she called in craftsmen, handed them all her gold and directed them to cast it into plaques, which were to be affixed to the (vaulted) roof (*cameram*) of St. Polyeuktos. After this had been done, Juliana invited the Emperor to come and, having taken him to the martyr's church, pointed to its roof. 'My poverty,' she said, 'is contained in this work. Do with it whatever you please.' In this way she was able to avert Justinian's rapacity³².

This text clearly illustrates a method by which wealthy people tried to avoid taxes by building churches. Cappadocia was a Constantinopolitan province where people's intentions were no doubt the same. There are more rock-cut churches in this area dating from this period, which need further research. The study of these churches will give us a more complete picture of the extent of ecclesiastical foundations established during the Early Christian period and the growth of local architectural tradition in this province of Byzantium.

³¹ C. Mango and I. Sevčenko, "Remains of the Church of St. Polyeuktos at Constantinople," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 15 (Washington, D. C., 1961), 245; Harrison et al. *Excavations at Sarachane in Istanbul*, vol. 1 (Princeton and Washington, D. C., 1986), 420.

³² *Ibid.*