



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi

The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 6 Sayı: 26 Volume: 6 Issue: 26

Bahar 2013 Spring 2013

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

THE CAVE OF GAVUR BEŞİĞİ: A CHURCH DEDICATED TO THE VIRGIN MARY

Aytuğ ARSLAN*

Abstract

The principals behind choosing a cult site in Christianity are various. The importance of the place due to the biblical reference is the common feature for many churches, especially in the Holy Lands. However, the miracles of the saints, Marian apparition or the miraculous historical events involving emperors constitute the other basis for the religious sites in the regions such as Anatolia, Balkans and Greece. In practice of Christian churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary, even the natural features of the site such as streams, caves have played an important role for the choice. There is a cave converted into a church, named Gavur Beşiği, in the village of Çamlık, the district of Derebucak, Konya. This study aims at the evaluation of the cave church in many respects by considering the other examples in Anatolia to find out to whom it was dedicated, its geographical features and iconographic program.

Keywords: Byzantine, Christianity, the Virgin Mary, Cave, Fresco, Konya

1. Introduction

The cave, in fact a rock cleft, is situated in the cliff face nearby the Cave of Suluin in the village of Çamlık, the district of Derebucak, Konya (Pic. 1). The cave which is 10 m above the ground consists of two chambers (Pic. 2). It is locally called Gavur Beşiği, literally non-Muslim's cradle¹. It is of historical interest as it contains a number of frescoes from the Byzantine period. However, they are in bad condition due to the damages made by the people rather than natural causes.

2. The Principals behind the Conversion of Gavur Beşiği Cave into Church

In the course of explaining himself, the fact that Jesus' claim to be the light of the world had led him and his resurrection to be associated with the rising of the sun in the east (Zarley, 2006: 78). Therefore the Orthodox churches were built facing east as an architectural manifestation of being directed to the Lord in expectation of his second coming (Schönborn, 2000: 37). The verses of *Acts* and *Matthew* seem to have formed a basis for the orientation of the churches as the architectural feature². The long chamber in the Cave of Gavur Beşiği lies to the

* The University of Selçuk, Beyşehir Ali Akkanat Vocational Training School, Tourism Guidance; The University of Anadolu, Art History (Ph.D. Candidate) (arslan_aytug@hotmail.com)

¹ The villagers must have taken the shape of the long chamber into consideration to name it.

² The orientation of the church buildings stem initially from the Old and New Testament verses.

(a) "And there was the glory of the God of Israel coming from the way of the east. And the glory of the Lord came into the house by the way of the doorway looking to the east" (Ezekiel, 43: 1-4)

east which means it is oriented naturally in conformity with the early Christian tradition of building a church with the nave laid out in an east-west direction. Therefore it is appropriate for church layout with its long chamber on the east-west axis.

The churches were traditionally erected nearby holy springs which had the reputation of having healing properties. The stream which flows inside the Cave of Suluin must have played an important role as well while choosing the cave as a worship place (Pic. 3). Although it lacks archaeological and written sources, the stream appears to have had religious significance and may have been used for the liturgical purposes such as baptism or venerated for its healing properties³.

3. Its Dedication

The custom of dedication refers to the fact of presenting a church to a particular person to gain the patronage of the person addressed. Tradition, not the Bible, says that Virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus in a cave⁴. Therefore the caves especially with springs were dedicated to Virgin Mary in Anatolia. According to S. Eyice, the holy springs in Anatolia called ayazma⁵ are especially found in the churches and monasteries dedicated to Virgin Mary and the presence of sacred water reflects the mystic view defining Mary as a "life giving spring" (Eyice, 1997: 47). The Cave of Gavur Beşiği seems to host one of the churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Anatolia. Although the life-giving spring was a feast day in the Orthodox Church associated with a historic church in Constantinople and an icon of the Theotokos, there must have been a custom to sanctify springs that were located near churches dedicated to the Holy Mother with the icons of her. The icon of the Virgin Mary presents an important clue to think that Gavur Beşiği Cave Church was dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Pic. 4).

4. Some Churches Dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Anatolia

Among the churches in Constantinople, the Church of Saint Mary of the Spring and the Church of Saint Mary of Blachernae can be counted. According to historian Procopius, both of them were erected by Emperor Justinian outside the walls of Emperor Theodosius II⁶. While the former was named after a nearby holy spring and reputed to have healing properties, the latter hosted the icon of the Virgin Mary which was considered by the Christians as amulet to protect them during the wars and natural disasters. Therefore the springs and icons of Virgin Mary were the centre of the miracles.

The destruction of the combined armies of the Avars and the Persians which besieged Constantinople and the victories against the Arab sieges of 717-718 were attributed to the protection of the icon of Virgin Mary preserved in the church of Saint Mary of Blachernae. As for the Church of Saint Mary of the Spring, Emperor Justinian noticed a small chapel surrounded by a group of women. Upon asking the importance of the building, he was told that it was the sources of the miracles. He ordered that a magnificent church be built there with the material remaining after the erection of the Hagia Sophia. Another legend involves a healing miracle that occurred Emperor Leo I the Thracian when he was a soldier. Before entering the

(b) "And while they were looking up to heaven with great attention, two men came to them, in white clothing, And said, O men of Galilee, why are you looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come again, in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts: 1: 10-11)

(c) "For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Matthew, 24: 27)

(d) "Then again Jesus said to them, I am the light of the world; he who comes with me will not be walking in the dark but will have the light of life" (John, 8: 12)

³ The water sources were considered as sacred through with a significant or miraculous event such as the River Jordan in which Jesus Christ was baptized or the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem where disabled people -the blind, the lame, the paralyzed- used to enter for healing. (Matthew, 3: 13-17, John, 5: 1-9).

⁴ The Basilica of the Nativity was built in Bethlehem by the Emperor Constantine at the request of his mother Helena over it.

⁵ It is derived from the Greek word 'ἅγιασμα', literally holy spring.

⁶ Procopius (1940). *On Buildings* (transl. by Dewing H. B.) Loeb Classical Library.

city, Leo I met a blind man who asked him to give him water. A female voice ordered to wet the eyes of the blind man with water from a nearby swamp. The same voice added that she had chosen that place to be worshiped and he would one day receive the crown to the empire. At once the blind man recovered his eyesight. After his ascension to the throne, he erected a magnificent church on the spot, named the Church of Saint Mary of the Spring (Janin, 1953: 170, 233).

Other churches which were founded in honour of the Virgin Mary in Anatolia are Sumela Monastery, a cave complex near Maçka in the province of Trabzon and the church constructed within Heaven Hollow in Silifke⁷. While the Sumela monastery was glorified by the icon of Virgin Mary, the holy water 'ayazma' was common feature for both churches. In the inner courtyard of the monastery, the sacred water drips from the rock above and there is a small brook at the bottom of hollow where the church was built.

According to legend, the icon of Mary was painted by Lukas the Evangelist. This icon could cure all diseases. One day during the reign of the Emperor Theodosius it was carried above the clouds by angels leaving its place in Greece and taken to a high mountain cave in around the city of Trabzon. It was found by two monks, Barnabas and Sophronios, setting off on a journey from Athens by ship after seeing the Virgin Mary in their dreams. After finding it on a rock in front of a cave, they built the first church there in 385 A.D. (Fallmerayer, 2002: 131).

5. Its Iconographic Program

In the Cave of Gavur Beşiği, the faint traces of the icon depicting Virgin Mary can still be seen inside a niche on the left wall of the long chamber. However she is only visible in vague outlines. The Virgin Mary with a white nimbus is dressed in burnt red chiton and wears a dark red cloak maphorion covering her shoulders and head. The traces of hands apparently reveal her having once been in an orant pose with hands close to the body.

The iconographic program of the long chamber is dominated by the saints (Pic. 5). There are full-length portrayals, young, middle aged and old, on the left of the long chamber in two rows covering the entire width of the wall (Pic. 6). While some of them are depicted young beardless, some of them are old with white beard. All of them have stylized black or white hair. The upper row is divided with a red line into two panels that consist of four figures each on a dark grey ground. The saints with white and yellowish nimbus outlined in black and burnt red are depicted full length in pastel hues of light blue and burnt red. The saints wear a light blue loose chiton extending over the ankles and belted at the waist with embroidered trim under burnt red brocaded mantle which features a tablion fastened at the neck, the costume of the court dignitary. While the front is always split, the back is solid. They were anachronistically depicted in Byzantine court dress. The saints are shown holding a cross in their right hands. Their hands are raised with the palms open that may be regarded as the symbol of the saint's soul in heaven praying for the faithful on earth. The lower row of the saints are depicted in the same manner but highly damaged.

The portraits of saints depicted on the opposite wall are partially destroyed. They are all old with white hair and long beard except one, middle aged with black hair and beard (Pic. 7). All of the figures wear clerical dress consisting of long yellowish camisia covering their feet, burnt red mantle and a white omophorion which is the distinguishing vestment of ecclesiastical authority. The portrait of the saint in the arched niche on the wall is only differentiated from the rest of the figures with the colour of the garment.

A pair of angels is represented on the lower part of the wall under the row of the saints (Pic. 8). The archangels, supposedly Gabriel, who were seen as divine bodyguards wear the distinctive garments of the emperors, a plain yellowish loros over a burnt red tunic. The globus

⁷ It was dedicated to Virgin Mary by a religious person named Paul in the 5th century according to the inscription over the gate.

cruciger is held by the angels in their left hands which symbolizes Christ's dominion over the world. It is understood from the traces that they hold a scepter, probably tipped with a cross in their right hands. The angels' stylized wings were painted in burnt red. The bottom border trim under the panel is filled with zigzag motif. Although there are the traces of the frescoes on the walls of the entrance hall, it is not possible to describe them because of being damaged.

The saints were identified by the inscriptions around their heads. Most of the legible inscriptions are saying ὁ ἅγιος(ς) and the name of the saint is following. Although most of them are badly damaged, it is possible to figure out a few names with some certainty⁸. The third figure on the upper row of the left wall is ὁ ἅγιος(ς) Νεόφυ(τος); Saint Neophytos. The fourth figure is ΤΡΙΦΟΝ; Saint Tryphon and the sixth figure is ὁ ἅγιος(ς) Κοσταν(τῖνος), the Saint Constan(tine). On the opposite wall, the names of the saints at the end of the upper row are Ζωσιμάς, the Saint Zosimas and ΕΦΡΕΜ for Saint Ephrem.

Byzantines managed to capture the territories as far as Melitene (Malatya) in the IX. century after gaining victory over Arabs. Subsequent to the rule of Nikephoros II Phokas (963-969) when the region of Cilicia was brought under Byzantine power, the campaigns of John Tzimiskes (969-976) terminated Arab raids. Byzantine rule in the inner Anatolia lasted during the reign of Constantine X Doukas (1059-1067) (Sunay, 2008: 9-10). The second period of iconoclasm was instigated by the Emperor Leo V the Armenian in 813 and his policy was followed by other emperors until 843 when the icons were again venerated under the auspices of Empress Theodora (Hunt, 2010: 90). The period of revival lasted for almost two centuries (843-1050) and has come to be known as Byzantium's golden age. The Seljuk Turks from the middle of the XI. century invaded Anatolia, ultimately resulting in permanent settlement. Therefore, the period of time between X. and XI. centuries seems appropriate to date the frescoes in the cave church of Gavur Beşiği.

Conclusion

The natural orientation of the cave and the existence of stream nearby must have played important role in converting the cave into a church. When compared the rock-cut churches in the village of Sille and ancient city of Kilistra, the cave church of Gavur Beşiği attracts attention with its partially preserved frescoes. It is possible to date the frescoes to X-XI. centuries. Unfortunately, many of them are badly damaged by graffiti or have faded by natural causes over the centuries. The devastating effects of the illegal excavations which were carried out in the cave are especially seen on the paintings. The paintings depict the Virgin Mary, the saints and the angels. Based on the Orthodox tradition and the examples in Anatolia, the cave church seems to be dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

REFERENCES

- EYİCE, Semavi (1997). *Trabzon Yakınlarında Sumela Manastırı, Bir Tutkudur Trabzon*, İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları
- FALLMERAYER, Jakob Philip (2002). *Doğu'dan Fragmanlar* (transl. by. Salihoğlu, H.) Ankara: İmge Kitabevi
- HUNT, Hannah (2010). *Byzantine Christianity, the Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, (ed. Parry, K.) Wiley-Blackwell.
- JANİN, Raymond (1953). *La Géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin. Le Siècle de Constantinople et le Patriarcat Oecuménique: Les Églises et les Monastères*, Paris: Institut Français d'Etudes Byzantines.
- PROCOPIUS, (1940). *On Buildings* (transl. by Dewing H. B.) Loeb Classical Library.
- SCHÖNBORN, Christoph (2000). *Living the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Sacraments*, vol. II, Ignatius Press.
- SUNAY, Serkan (2008). *Aksaray Güzelyurt Manastır ve Kilise Binaları* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) Ankara University, the Institute of Social Sciences.
- ZARLEY, Kermit (2006). *The Third Day Bible Code*, Synergy Books.

⁸ I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Ida Toth and A. Victor Walser for their epigraphical contributions.

Plate 1



Pic. 1



Pic. 2



Pic. 3



Pic. 4

Plate 2



Pic. 5



Pic. 6



Pic. 7



Pic. 8