CAPPADOCIA’S ROCK-CUT COURTYARD COMPLEXES: 
A CASE STUDY FOR DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE 
IN BYZANTINUM

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Abstract

Until recently, our knowledge of the Byzantine house has been severely limited by the paucity of available evidence. In the last few years, however, surveys have been conducted in Cappadocia, central Turkey, where archaeologists and art historians working at separate sites recently realised that places formerly understood to be monasteries were actually domestic complexes of the rural elite.¹ High above the Peristrema Valley in western Cappadocia, a medieval estate known as Selime Kalesi extends over 100 m in length along a cliff of volcanic rock. Once thought to be a monastery, this too is now recognised as one of a number of aristocratic domestic residences that provide our first extensive information about the Byzantine house. Selime Kalesi is the largest and most elaborate example in design and decoration of over a dozen similarly designed residences that belong to the same settlement. This especially prominent site offers an excellent case study for examining Byzantine domestic architecture and secular use of space.²

Introduction

Of all the rock-cut courtyard dwellings recorded thus far from Byzantine Cappadocia, the double-courtyard mansion known as Selime Kalesi presents the largest and most elaborate example in design and decoration. Within its two separate courtyards and associated rooms, we can come to a better understanding of Byzantine domestic architecture

¹ Kalas (2000) and (2006); Mathews and Daskalakis-Mathews (1997); Ousterhout (1997a) and (2005).
² I thank the Program in Hellenic Studies at Princeton University for a post-doctoral research fellowship that allowed me to present versions of this material at the Fifty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, Denver, Colorado, April 2003, and at the colloquium Byzantine Habitat: Class, Gender, and Production in the Eastern Mediterranean, Princeton University, May 2003.

L. Lavan, L. Özgenel and A. Sarantis (edd.) Housing in Late Antiquity (Late Antique Archaeology 3.2 – 2005) (Leiden 2007), pp. 393–414
and secular use of space. Selime Kalesi, moreover, is only one among fifteen similarly designed residences newly surveyed in the Peristrema Valley, around the modern Turkish villages of Selime and Yaprakhisar in western Cappadocia. These houses are contemporary with one another and together form an entire Middle Byzantine settlement dating from the 10th to 11th centuries. They provide a rare glimpse into the material culture and daily life of Byzantium’s famous Anatolian aristocracy. In the 9th c., Arab emirates of northern Syria conducted yearly raids into Byzantine territories through the region of Cappadocia and twice besieged Constantinople, the empire’s capital. As a result of this steady onslaught, Byzantium reorganised its military administration and, by launching a counter-offensive, regained a large portion of its former eastern lands. During this time of security and prosperity, from the 10th to 11th centuries, a large population living in Cappadocia carved their dwellings and places of worship into the peculiar, cone-like formations of the region’s soft volcanic rock.

When European travellers and explorers of the 18th and 19th centuries came upon Cappadocia’s exotic landscape of volcanic rock formations, and the abundant dwellings carved therein, they formulated the idea that monks once settled the region. According to a predominantly romantic outlook, monks sought refuge from the world by digging into the saintly isolation of Cappadocia’s volcanic landscape. In the 20th c., research focused almost exclusively on the region’s myriad painted churches while neglecting the diverse secular aspects of Cappadocia’s rich material culture. Given modern scholars’ fascination with Cappadocia as a site for medieval monasticism, it is surprising that no contemporary Byzantine sources refer to the area in this way. Although the region is indeed mountainous, Cappadocia has nothing to compare with Byzantium’s famous holy mountains such as Latros, Olympos, and Athos for which ample evidence exists. In addition, the region is often associated with monasteries because of the Cappadocian origins of Basil the Great, the father of the Orthodox Church who wrote and established the rules of Orthodox monasticism. Basil was indeed born in Caesarea of Cappadocia, but he flourished in the 4th c., a full 500 years earlier.

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4 Cappadocia is not included, for example, in Janin (1975).
5 Lowther Clarke (1913) and Quasten (1963).