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THE SELJUQS OF RUM AND THE ANTIQUE

In the 1250’s the Nicaean Emperor Theodore II Lascaris passed through the city of Pergamon. In describing it he mentions that the ancient structures still on view there were the work of the Hellenes, but he does not dwell on this point. Rather, what most impresses him is the quality of their stone construction, especially when compared to contemporaneous buildings found there:

There are walls reared up, their construction as variegated as that of the brazen heavens. In between flows a river bridged by tall arches which (by the Maker of Heaven!) you would not think to be composite, but rather to have grown up naturally as a single block of stone. If a sculptor like Pheidias were to see them, he would admire their exact evenness and lack of inclination. Between the buildings are low bowels, which appear, as it were, to be the remains of the houses of the departed, and the sight of them causes much pain. For, as mouseholes are compared to the houses of today, so one might say are the latter compared to those that are being destroyed.¹

The medieval inhabitants of Anatolia must often have been struck by the extensive standing remains of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, yet they left few testimonies like the one just quoted, either for the Byzantines or their neighbors, the Seljuk Turks.

When one encounters references to ruins in medieval sources dealing with the Turks in Anatolia, they are in anecdotes dealing with treasure, or with talismany or other sciences. These stories often center on the interpretation of signs or knowledge of the language found on inscriptions in those ruins. In these accounts, the remains and learning of the past are chiefly useful for finding buried treasure. However, they are also a source for the homilies of which medieval Muslim authors were so fond. Some of the same stories are heard in Anatolia to the present day.²

Al-Harawi, in his early-thirteenth-century Baedeker for Muslims, mentions, in addition to places of pilgrimage and worship, curiosities worthy of a visit. One of these, located in Konya in an apricot orchard, was a figural sarcophagus.³ In addition to this one literary appreciation of antique remains from a medieval Islamic source there are countless built testimonials to the admiration the Seljuqs had for the architectural and artistic achievements of antiquity in Anatolia. All the cities occupied by the Seljuqs had had long histories, and there were still extensive standing remains of ancient city walls, temples, churches, and other public buildings. Even such new foundations as the Seljuq palace complex at Kubadabad and Seljuq caravansaraiés, though not built on ancient sites, reused building materials from ancient sites nearby.

Reuse is, of course, the easiest and most efficient method of building quickly, and therefore need not necessarily bespeak regard for architectures past. It does, however, underscore the ubiquity of ancient stone-built structures in Anatolia. Even outside the cities, the major highways of Anatolia had forts and way stations at regular intervals; monasteries and pagan sanctuaries were found in more remote locations.

Carved stones, whether inscriptions, ornamental or figural reliefs, or statuary, had awed the medieval Byzantines before the Seljuqs.⁴ For some figural reliefs and sculpture, the Byzantines seem to have found Christian associations. More popularly, however, certain columns and/or statues were endowed with talismanic power. Others were believed to be inhabited by demons. It is probably these latter two associations that led Byzantines to incorporate extensive figural and inscriptive spolia into their city walls. Most of the time, these consisted of funerary art: antique reliefs, stelae, and sarcophagus panels. Although the practice was widespread, few undisturbed examples remain. The best known and best preserved of these instances is at Ankara, where figural reliefs near the south entrance to the citadel were part of a decorative program that also included crosses carved on those towers facing south toward the Arab threat. As with the crosses, these figures may have been used apotropaically, although their placement on their sides could be in line with the classical display of trophies on city walls.⁵

The number of spolia found in Seljuq buildings in Anatolia is immense. Only one scholar has attempted a catalogue and classification scheme for the Seljuq reuse of architectural elements. She did not, however, attempt
to derive meaning from this practice, despite the display of highly carved pieces in or around portals, minarets, mosque interiors, city gates and towers, and other architecturally prominent locations on Seljuq buildings. In this brief essay, I would like to consider a few aspects of this topic, centering on the construction of, and use of spolia in, thirteenth-century Seljuq city walls at Alanya, Sinop, and Konya. This subject seems appropriate to a volume dedicated to Oleg Grabar, much of whose early scholarship so fruitfully explored the engagement of Islam with pre-Islamic pasts.

ALANYA

The walls of Alanya and an account of the city's taking by the Seljuqs provide clues relating to the issues of talismany and apotropaism raised above. They also return to that quality of ancient constructions — their fineness and solidity of construction — most admired by Theodore Lascaris. Alanya, on the south coast of Anatolia, had once been a great Hellenistic fortress. When the Seljuq Sultan Alaeddin Keykubad set out to conquer Alanya, then named Kalonoros, in 1221, he was unable to do so. The lord of the castle, an Armenian named Kir Fard, was bought off. Extensive rebuilding of the Hellenistic fortifications in and around the main entrance to the fourth sector of the castle and the Ehmedek, or landward citadel, point to the presence, even in the pre-Seljuq medieval period, of defenses that would have made a siege of the fortress difficult.

The account of the siege given by the Seljuq chronicler Ibn Bibi contains one passage associating a talismanic quality with one particular kind of stone: marble. The sultan ordered that the mangonels of the besieging army be furnished only with projectiles of marble because, as he maintained, no other stone could fly as far. This order seems to have caused a considerable delay in the siege since, as Ibn Bibi rightfully reports, no marble occurred naturally on that castle rock. Indeed, the Hellenistic and Roman inhabitants of all of Pamphylia had imported all the marble used in their cities, the vast