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An Early Christian Basilica on Taurus Mountain Range at Cilicia Pedias

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A basilica leaning on the bedrock of Karasis mountain lies in east-west orientation with a single entrance on its south side. The east end of the basilica is semicircular in shape with a double window. The interior of the structure is lavishly decorated with geometric floor mosaics. A single cross relief remains on one of the engaged pilasters. The structure is a barrel-vaulted single aisled basilica, which must have functioned as an early Christian parish church dated to the fifth century.

The Taurus mountain range rises high to the northeast of Cilicia Pedias to form the anti-Taurus mountains. On its flanks lies the suburb of Kozan of Adana city (Fig.1). To the north of the town on the mountains is the Çürükler district, located in a landscape beautified by a dam lake and with a magnificent view of Mount Karasis. The mountain rises dramatically on the north side of the lake, surmounted by an Hellenistic fortress on its rocky peak.[2]

On the south side of Mount Karasis there is a structure on an east-west orientation, just below the high-rising bedrock of the fortress (Fig. 2, 3). There is a water source next to the structure, which presumably was also the major water source for the fortress. In the vicinity of the structure, at its east and southeast, remnants of a temple stylobate (Fig.4), a fallen column (Fig.5), molded architectural pieces, and abundant sherds of roof bricks have been detected scattered on the hill skirts, which denotes the existence of an ancient settlement. The remaining walls and the apsidal curvature at its east end identifies the structure by the water source as a small basilica.

An illicit excavation in 2002 exposed the basilica with its lavishly decorated floor mosaics. The north wall of the structure was neatly stripped off and the dirt on the floor skilfully lifted, yielding an exquisitely decorated polychrome floor mosaic[3] (Fig.6). The north wall of the basilica, which leans on the slope of the hill, remains intact, as well as the west wall. The wall of the eastern part of the structure making a semi-circular curve remains to half length. On the north wall, which leans on the bedrock, four engaged pilasters are noted. This is a single-aisled and barrel-vaulted basilica with a protruding semi-circular apse at its east end (Figs.7, 8). The engaged pilasters should have been supporting the springing arches of the superstructure, indicating that the structure was covered with a barrel-vault. One of the engaged pilasters supporting the arches of the barrel-vault bares a carved Greek-cross (Fig. 9). Evidently, this was a small parish church serving a modest community. Barrel-vaulted single-aisled churches are abundant on the mountainous parts of Cilicia, including Isauria, where this type is common among Binbir Kilise churches. Hence, the church of Baka in Cilicia Pedias demonstrates the same plan type, a single-aisled barrel-vaulted basilica, also decorated with an aniconic polychrome floor mosaic.[4]

Concerning architectural sculpture and plastic decoration, there is only a Greek cross relief found on one of the north wall pilasters of the church. The piles of large blocks of ashlar yielded only a couple of blocks with cornice molding. The basilica measures 16.60 m in length and 6 m in width. The width of the apse wall is 97 cm. The pilaster is 1.34 m in height, its depth is 20 cm and its width is 62 cm. The window opening at the apse measures 1.08 m. In Plain Cilicia churches, particularly in the churches of Baka and Domuztepe, the width of the apse wall and the size of the semicircular apse are similar.[5]

The single-aisle nave of the church is adorned with an overall mosaic of aniconic decoration (Fig.10). Two separate geometric compositions divide the nave floor mosaic into two, almost equal east and west halves. A shaded strapwork of interlacing circles and ovals encloses the entire floor mosaic uniting the two mosaic panels. The polychrome mosaic is busy with elaborate geometric ornaments. The intricacy of the motifs indicates the usage of multi-colored tesserae.[6] The mosaic panel in the eastern half is composed of an orthogonal composition of squares, each containing a different geometric ornament. The western mosaic panel is an overall decoration of an orthogonal pattern of a spaced swastika-meander motif containing squares in the spaces employed in infinite repetitions. From outwards to inwards, a crow-step ornament encloses the mosaic followed by the major border ornament, that is the strapwork of circles and ovals, and the third border constitutes of semicircular tangent discs alternating in three colors which only frames the eastern panel. The ellipses and the circles of

[2] The survey of the Karasis Hellenistic Fortress is being conducted by Prof. Dr. M. H. Sayar of the Istanbul University in collaboration with Prof. Dr. Dip.- Ing A. Hoffman, the director of the German Archaeology Institute at Istanbul, and Prof. Dr. M. De Vos of the University of Trient in October 2003.

[3] After the arrival of the security forces, they reburied the mosaics with the debris. The structure has been studied and its drawings have been made during the field research of the Cilician Mosaic Corpus project by Tülek in the summer of 2002. The floor mosaic has been examined with the photographs obtained from the locals. Tülek 2004, 109-111.

[4] Bell 1906, 23; Hill 1996, 99.

[5] Tülek 2004, 66-74; 82-88

[6] It is difficult to discern the colors from the blue washed photos

the major border ornament are superimposed with motifs such as multicolored stripes, circles, four-petal flowers quartered with a cross or lilies, and serrated diamonds.

The east mosaic panel is framed by another border ornament, which also divides the mosaic into separate square compartments. The motif is a trellis of tassels, rendered in shades of dark to light colors, of three petals aligned in dense rows. Each square compartment contains various geometric motifs that are basically linear and multicolored, such as chevrons, zigzags, single octagons, compartments quartered by rainbow filets, single swastika motifs, quatrefoils, checkerboard, knot of Solomon etc.

An orthogonal composition of spaced swastika-meander motifs has been observed in Cilicia in the Misis Edifice in Plain Cilicia, which has been employed as a broad border ornament of a central composition. An example of the pattern identical to that of the Misis Edifice has been found in a pavement of Bath F, in Antioch, also employed as a border ornament. The north aisle pavement of the church of Kaoussie contained a mosaic panel of the same pattern employed as an overall decoration similar to that of the Karasis church mosaic. The Kaoussie mosaic panel does not only contain the orthogonal composition of a spaced swastika-meander pattern, but it also contains linear geometric fillers in its squares. Thus, the Kaoussie example is more or less a combination of the east and west mosaic panels of the Karasis church pavement. A floor mosaic containing a composition identical to the church of Karasis mosaic is found in Antioch, in the House of the Green Carpet.[7]

The shaded strapwork of inter-looping circles and ovals is a common border ornament found in numerous examples of the mosaics of Rough Cilicia, such as those found in the churches of Anemurium, Korykos, Meryemlik, and Dağ Pazarı, which have been dated to the first quarter or to the second half of the fifth century.

The church of Kaoussie has been dated to the last quarter of the fourth century, the Misis Edifice has been assigned to the fifth century. The securely dated floor mosaic in the House of the Green Carpet has been dated to the second half of the fifth century and Bath F in Antioch has been dated to the beginning of the sixth century. As for the dating of the parallels of the border ornament with inter-looping circles and ellipses, the dates of the Rough Cilicia examples range from the first quarter to the end of the fifth century.

The aniconic character of the mosaic decoration, the linearity of the geometric fillers, and the lack of any floral ornaments, except a couple of florets contained in the circles point to an early dating close to that of the church at Kaoussie. However, the rich use of the rainbow style and the employment of the trellis of petals/tassels denote a later period. It should be noted that the single cross relief cited is not of much help in dating, nor is the plan type of the church. Tentatively, the mosaic of the church of Karasis assignment is to the beginning of the fifth century.

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[7] Levi, *AMP II*, pl. CXXVIII. b; *AMP I*, p.315



Fig.1 Karasis mountain viewed from southwest across the lake



Fig.2 The basilica viewed from west to east



Fig.3 The basilica viewed from east to west



Fig.4 Molded architectural pieces scattered around the basilica and in the vicinity



Fig. 5 Fallen column and architectural blocks



Fig.6 The polychrome geometric floor mosaic of the basilica

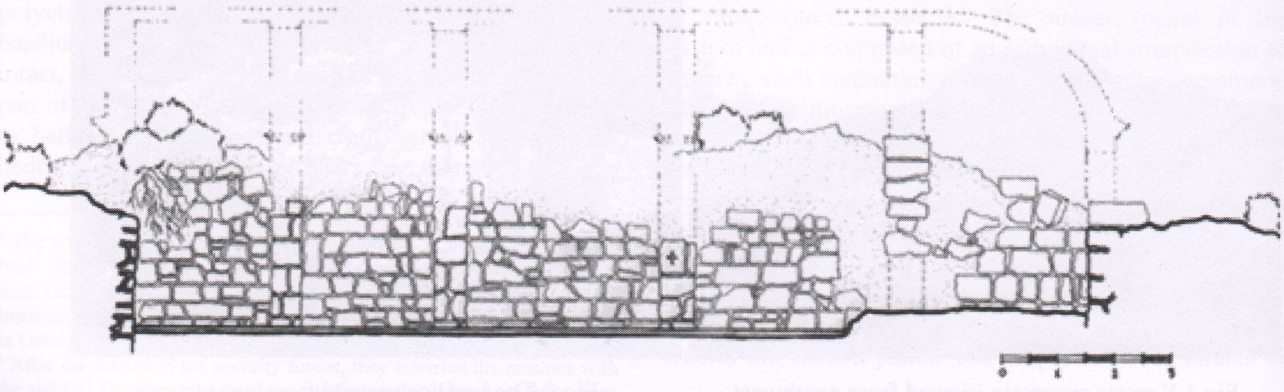


Fig. 7 Plan and drawings of the basilica

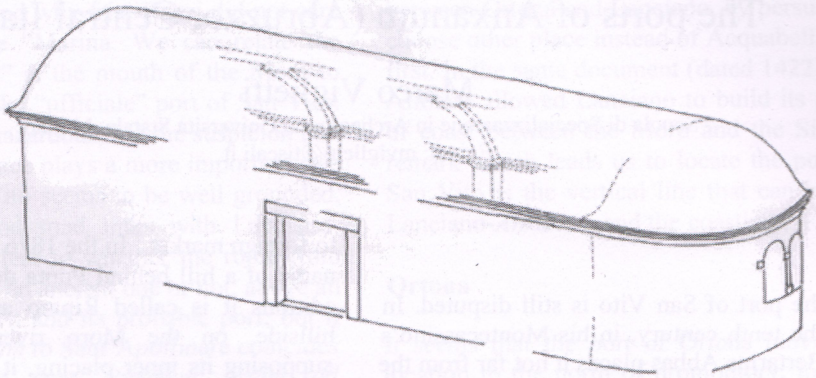


Fig.8 Plan and drawings of the basilica



Fig. 9 Carved Greek cross on the engaged pilaster of the basilica

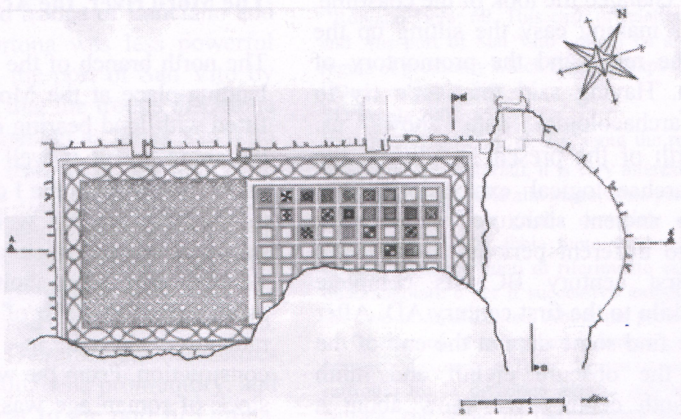


Fig. 10 Layout of the floor mosaic