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Η ομορφιά των κάστρων: Μια περιγραφή του 10ου αιώνα για ένα πύργο στην Κωνσταντινούπολη.

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The Beauty of Castles: A Tenth Century Description of a Tower at Constantinople

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The epigrams of John Géomètres, a poet and rhetorician who was active in the second half of the tenth century, are a still insufficiently utilized source for the history of Byzantine art and architecture. Although these poems were written in an allusive and often obscure style, they can be made to reveal both concrete information about buildings and their decoration, and also valuable insights into Byzantine reactions to works of art. In this tribute to the memory of Doula Mouriki, who was one of the twentieth-century’s foremost interpreters of Byzantine monuments, I would like to discuss a tenth-century interpretation of a Byzantine structure, namely a description by John Géomètres of a fortified tower. Even though the text of the poem, as it has come down to us, is incomplete, the Byzantine writer’s *ekphrasis* has a special interest in that the specific building that he described still survives, and we are thus able to compare the reactions of the medieval viewer with our own.

The text, which I reproduce here from the edition by Cramer, is as follows:

"Αλλοι κατοικείτωσαν εις γήν ώς μυες·
ώς ερπετών χείριστα και των κνωδάλων,
τρώγλας, χαράδρας· ού γαρ οικίας λέγω
σπήλαια και σήραγγας ή μυωξίας,
ή σαθρά και τρέμοντα παίγνια ξύλων,
άθυρμα παιδών, έργα και πάσης βίας,
ομβρων, πυρός, σεισμών τε βρασμών, πνευμάτων.
Ημΐν Θεός δέδωκε πύργον ισχύος,
πύργον βέβαιου, πύργον άρρηκτου βίου*

πάντων κρατούντα τών παθών τοΰ βίου,
και βαρβάρων χειρών τε και τεχνασμάτων
πάντων καλών γέμοντα και θεαμάτων
πύργωμα κάλλους, πύργον άφραστο γάνους,
έκ γης, θαλάττης, αέρος, φωτός, πόλου*

κάλλους δε μάλλον κράμα τών ωρών, ορον
gης και θαλάττης δεσμός έστι, καν ορός
συνδεΐ κατ' αυτό και διείργει τάς φύσει·

υψος κολοσσός, και τέμνων τον αέρα
βιαζεται πως και προς αιθέρα φθάσαι.
Το δ' εύρος ευρύς, και το μήκος τι πλέον.
Άμφοϊ δε τούτων κάλλος, άλλ' οσον πλέον.
Κοσμεί λίθους το σχήμα τετραγωνία*
έξαισία τις άρμογή και προς τρίχα
το σχήμα κάλλιστο έξαγωνία,
ήρται προς άστρα, και τα κάλλη του πόλου.
Μη μοι πάλαιαν φράζε πυργοποιΐαν
εκείνος ουπω πύργος, άλλ' είχε τέλος·
μέγιστος ούτος και πεπύργωται, μόνος
εστηκεν αυτός, και φυλάττει τήν πόλιν.
Τέρπει δε μάλλον πάσαν δυσι και πόλιν,
των θαυμάτων τις χάρους, δέρος μέσον
των πενεμάτων τις κόλπους, οίκος Αίδου
και κάλλως αυτός, πάν δε κάλλως έφόθηκε
κόσμου θεωράντων, κόσμους έστιν άμετάν.

Το πύργον δοξάζει, και προς το θαύμα
πάντων των κάλλων, και προς τον θάνατον
των πολεμών των άμπελων
πάντων των πολεμών των θαυμάτων,
Ανθρώποι έκ τού πύργου, ανθρώποι·
κοσμεί παλάμης το σχήμα τετραγωνία*
έξαισία τις άρμογή και προς τρίχα
το σχήμα πύργου, σχήμα λεπτού κηρίου*
το σχήμα κάλλιστο έξαγωνία,
ήρται προς άστρα, και τα κάλλη του πόλου.
Μή μοι πάλαιαν φράζε πυργοποιΐαν
εκείνος ουπω πύργος, άλλ' είχε τέλος·
μέγιστος ούτος και πεπύργωται, μόνος
εστηκεν αυτός, και φυλάττει τήν πόλιν.
Τέρπει δε μάλλον πάσαν όψιν και πόλιν,
των θαυμάτων τις χώρος, αέρος μέσον
των πενεμάτων τις κόλπους, οίκος Αίδου
και κάλλως αυτός, πάν δε κάλλως έφόθηκε
κόσμου θεωράντων, κόσμους έστιν άμετάν.

The poem may be translated:

"Let other creatures, such as mice, live in the earth, and such as the lowest of reptiles and of beasts, in holes and ravines. I pass over dwellings such as caves, hollows in rocks, or mouse-holes, or unsound and trembling trifles constructed of (pieces of) wood, playthings of children, the victim of every form of violence, of storms, of fire, of earthquakes and tremors, and of winds. To us God gave a tower of strength, a tower of firmness, a tower of life not to be broken, overcoming all the sufferings of life and the assaults and machines of the barbarians, full of all beauties and wonders. A towered fortification of beauty, a tower of ineffable joy, from land, from sea,

from the air, from the light, from the sky. Rather, a 
mixture of the beauty of the seasons, it is a bond of land 
and sea at their limits, although the limit thus (both) 
unites and separates their natures. A colossus in height, 
and cleaving the air, it strives somehow to reach even 
the sky. It is wide in breadth, and in length greater. In 
both dimensions there is beauty, but how much more! 
The stones are beautified by their quadrangular shape, 
while an admirable and finely (constructed) arrange­ 
ment (beautifies) the shape of the tower, namely the 
shape of a delicate honey-comb; a hexagon raises its 
most beautiful shape to the stars and to the beauties of 
the firmament. Do not talk to me about ancient tower 
construction. That was not yet a tower, but its construc­ 
tion came to an end. But this tower has been raised to 
the greatest height, it stands alone, and guards the city. 
But more, it delights every sight and the city. It is a place 
of wonders, in the midst of the air, a kind of hollow of 
the breezes, a house of Aeolos. And contemplating the 
beauty, all the beauty of the world from above, it is a 
world of adornment for the eyes. From the earth (are 
seen) flowers, trees, meadows, foliage, springs, coppices, 
pastures, and streams; the vine heavy with innumerable 
fruits, many a wine-producing vine, and many a fruit 
bearing tree. And there is in some places even a beauti­ 
ful mixture, for the vine is raised up on towering trees, 
branches together with beautiful tendrils, fruits together 
with grapes, and more, and beds of leaves, and stoas and 
roofs. Do you wish to know the whole prospect of the 
tower? Raise your eyes straight, look from nearby at the 
virtues of the earth...."

As was stated above, it is possible to identify the specific 
fortification tower that John Geometres was describing, 
namely the first tower on the inner line of the Theodo­ 
sian land-walls of Constantinople, which stands at the 
point where that wall adjoins the wall running along the 
Sea of Marmara ("Tower 1", in Fig. 1). This identification 
is suggested by several passages in the poem:
1. The poem describes a fortification tower, which 
guards the city from barbarians (lines 11 and 30).
2. The poet says that the tower stands at the junction of 
land and sea (lines 15-17: "it is a bond of land and sea at 
their limits, although the limit thus (both) unites and separates their natures"").
3. The tower is hexagonal in its upper part (lines 23-26: 
"...an admirable and finely (constructed) arrangement 
(beautifies) the shape of the tower, namely the shape of 
a delicate honey-comb; a hexagon raises its most beauti­ 
ful shape to the stars and to the beauties of the firma­ 
ment"). This is true of tower number 1 of the land-walls, 
which is pentagonal in its lower parts, where it abuts the 
curtain wall (Fig. 1), but hexagonal above, where it rises 

clear of the wall. Older, nineteenth-century photographs 
show that at its top the tower was given an additional 
facet on its southeast side, where it surmounts the 
thickness of the wall (Fig. 2).

4. The poet may imply that the tower he describes had 
recently been restored, or completed (lines 27-29).

Drawing a contrast with the unfinished Tower of Babel, 
he says: "Do not talk to me about ancient tower con­ 
struction. That was not yet a tower, but its construc­ 
tion came to an end. But this tower has been raised to the 
greatest height..."). Tower number 1 still displays in its 
upper part (i.e. in the portion of the tower that rises 
above the height of the land-walls) an inscription identi­ 
fying the tower as that of the emperors Basil and Con­ 
stantine. This is one of two inscriptions appearing on 
the walls of Constantinople that mention these two em­ 
perors together; the other one is on the north tower of 
the gate of the Pege. It is generally believed that these 
iscriptions record repairs made to the fortifications by 
the Emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII after the 
severe earthquake of 989, which, according to Leo the 

Fig. 1. Plan of the southern end of the land-walls of Constan­
tinople. (After: B. Meyer-Pla th - A. M. Schneider, Die 
Landmauer von Konstantinopel, II, 1943, pl. 1).

Deacon, brought down the "towers of Byzantium" as 
well as the dome of St. Sophia. Thus the date of the 
reconstruction of tower number 1 that is indicated by its 
iscription fits with the date of the composition of the 
poem (second half of the tenth century). There may be a 
reference to the earthquake that necessitated the recon­ 
struction in line 7 ("the victim of every form of vio­ 
ence... of earthquakes and tremors"").

These considerations make an identification of the tower 
described in our poem with the first tower of the 
land-walls of Constantinople extremely likely. The only 
other possible candidates on the land-walls would be the 
two hexagonal towers attached to the "wall of Heracli­ 
us" at the Blachernae, which might also be said to be at 
the junction of land and sea (i.e. these two towers are 
neat the point where the land-walls meet the Golden
A TENTH CENTURY DESCRIPTION OF A TOWER AT CONSTANTINOPLE

Fig. 2. Inner land-wall of Constantinople, view of tower number 1 from the southwest, taken circa 1870. (After: Meyer-Plath - Schneider, op.cit., pl. 25).

Horn)⁷. But the description is less apt for these towers, for they are, in fact, some seventy-five meters inland, while tower number 1 stands right at the water's edge. Furthermore, the poet stresses that his tower is one that "stands alone" (lines 29-30), and this characterization does not describe the hexagonal towers of the Blachernai well, since they are set in a clump together with other towers. It could also possibly be argued that our tower was one of those on the sea-wall, fronting the Sea of Marmara⁸. But such a location also seems less likely on account of the description "stands alone", which better suits a corner position such as that occupied by tower number 1. In addition, there is another reference in the poem which suggests that our tower faced the suburbs of Constantinople on its land side, as would have been the case if it were part of the land-wall, and not the city itself, as


4. Tower 36; Ibid., p. 129.


6. ...τά τε πυργώματα τού Βυζαντίου προς γῆν κατερίπωσε... Bonn ed., p. 175.24-176.1. On this earthquake, see G. Downey, Earthquakes at Constantinople and Vicinity, A.D. 342-1454, Speculum 30 (1955), p. 599-600.


would have occurred if it were attached to the sea-wall. The last preserved lines of the poem (lines 46-48), ask: "Do you wish to know the whole prospect of the tower? Raise your eyes straight, look from nearby at the virtues (áρετάς) of the earth". It is possible that these words are a reference to the suburban park and palace of the Aretai, rather than just a figure of speech. This district was described by the historian Anna Commena as being "near the city" of Constantinople. She wrote: "It is elevated above the plain, and, to those standing and looking on it from below, gives the appearance of rising into a ridge, inclining one of its flanks towards the sea, and the other towards Byzantium, and the two others to the North and to the West, being exposed to all the winds". Modern scholars have located the Aretai either in the area of Maltepe, which faces the northern portion of the land-walls, or further to the south, on the high ground west of Hazanarçiftlik, three kilometers north of Bakirköy. If our poem does indeed refer to the Aretai, then, since it says that this hill was visible from the tower, two conclusions follow: 1) The tower in question was part of the land-walls; it cannot have been attached to the sea-wall. 2) Since our tower should be identified on the one extreme southern end of the land-wall, the park of the Aretai must have been situated well south of the region of Maltepe.

The poem, then, acquires interest as an empirical confirmation of reconstruction work on the walls of Constantinople by Basil II and Constantine VIII after the earthquake of 989. At least in the eyes of the poet, this reconstruction went beyond mere repairs, for he implies that the emperors heightened the tower, making it more conspicuous than the other towers of the Theodosian wall (lines 29-30 "...this tower has been raised to the greatest height, it stands alone, and guards the city"). The most interesting aspect of this poem, however, is not the factual information that can be gleaned from it, but what it reveals about the poet's reactions to a newly built monument of military architecture. It is noteworthy that the author devotes very few lines explicitly to the defensive functions of the tower (e.g. lines 8-11: "a tower of strength... overcoming... the assaults and machines of the barbarians"). The greater part of the poem, as it survives, is devoted to praising the beauties of the construction and shape of the tower, and especially to the views to be obtained from it as a look-out point over the countryside and perhaps over the Aretai park. The extensive description of the charms of the landscape to be seen from the tower (lines 34 to 45) is more than mere literary embellishment, for we know that at this time, in the tenth century, other fortifications were being constructed with such a double purpose, as military defenses and as lookout points that were intended to provide aesthetic pleasure. There is a reference to such miradors at the tenth-century palace and city which the Armenian monarch Gagik built at Agh'tamar, on an island in Lake Van. The description of Agh'tamar by the contemporary author Thomas Artsruni refers to the fortified wall enclosing Gagik's city with its gardens; this wall was both "fearsome", and "adorned" with "very high and broad-based towers and raised bastions, which had in them deep niches with pleasure seats, where the king often took his ease with his sons and noble courtiers". The tenth-century palace at Madinat al-Zahra in al-Andalus certainly contained pavilions that were constructed as look-outs giving onto terraced gardens. It has been suggested that this palace also may have featured miradors on its buttress-towers, such as were built later into the fortifications of the Alhambra palace at Granada. The poem of John Goemetres, therefore, informs us of an aesthetic of fortifications in tenth-century Byzantium for which there is also evidence in other cultures at this time. It demonstrates that even though defensive towers were a necessity, they could be made a virtue, too, and that an appreciation of the beauty of castles was not only an invention of nineteenth-century Romanticism.