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

Henry MAGUIRE
The epigrams of John Geomètres, 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 Geomètres 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:

1

Το δ' εύρος ευρύς, και το μήκος τε πλέον.

20 Το δ' εδής εδρώς, και το μήκος τε πλέον.

25 το σχήμα κάλλιστον ἔξαγωνία, ἢταν πρὸς ἄστρα, καὶ τὰ κάλλη τοῦ πόλου.

30 Νῆμα μοι παλαιόν φράζε πυργοποιήνων ἔκεινος οὐκέ πύργος ἀλλ' εἶχε τέλος μέγιστος σῶτος καὶ πεπρόγονα, μόνος

35 κύσμοι θεοριάν, κύσμοι ἐπιστέων ἰμμάτων.

40 ἐκ γῆς μὲν ἄνθη, δόλιάν, λεμβάνειν, χλώνα,

45 κρήνης, δρυμώνες, ὄργανος, κολάζους, διά τις

50 ἐκ γῆς μὲν εὔφορα μιμείον μεθυτρόφος.

55 Ημῖν Θεός δέδωκε πύργον ισχύος,

60 και βαρβάρων χειρών τε και τεχνασμάτων

65 πάντων κρατοῦσα καὶ κάλλους, πύργον άφράστου γάνους,

70 κάλλους δε μάλλον κράμα τών ωρών, ορον

75 γης και θάλαττης δεσμός έστι, καν ορός

80 τέμνων τον αέρα-

85 βιάζεται πως καὶ προς αἰθέρα φθάσαι.

21 http://epublishing.ekt.gr | e-Publisher: EKT | Downloaded at 17/11/2019 07:50:03 |
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) arrangement (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 construction 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 earth 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 beautiful 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 Theodosian 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. I). 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 beautiful shape to the stars and to the beauties of the firmament"). 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 construction. That was not yet a tower, but its construction 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 identifying the tower as that of the emperors Basil and Constantine. This is one of two inscriptions appearing on the walls of Constantinople that mention these two emperors together; the other one is on the north tower of the gate of the Pege. It is generally believed that these inscriptions 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 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 inscription 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 reconstruction in line 7 ("the victim of every form of violence... 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 Heraclius" at the Blachernae, which might also be said to be at the junction of land and sea (i.e. these two towers are near the point where the land-walls meet the Golden

Fig. 1. Plan of the southern end of the land-walls of Constantinople. (After: B. Meyer-Plath - A. M. Schneider, Die Landmauer von Konstantinopel, II, 1943, pl. I)
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 Marmara\(^8\). 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


3. Πύργος Βασιλείου και Κωνσταντίνου πιστών έν Χρ(ιστ)ω αυτο­κρατόρων ευσεβείς βασιλείς *Ρω(μαί)ων*.

Meyer-Plath- Schneider, op.cit., p. 123.

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


---

\(\text{Fig. 2. Inner land-wall of Constantinople, view of tower number 1 from the southwest, taken circa 1870.}
\)

\(\text{(After: Meyer-Plath - Schneider, op.cit., pl. 25).}\)
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  
(ἀρετάς) 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 ele-  
vated 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 in the area of Maltepe
c, 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 as the one on the extreme southern end of the  
land-wall, the park of the Aretai must have been situat-  
ed well south of the region of Maltepe.  

The poem, then, acquires interest as an empirical con-  
firmation of reconstruction work on the walls of Con-  
stantinople 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 note-  
worthy 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 beauty  
of the construction and shape of the tower, and especial-  
ly 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  
merely literary embellishment, for we know that at this  
time, in the tenth century, other fortifications were be-  
ing constructed with such a double purpose, as military  
defenses and as look-out 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 Aght’amar, on an  
island in Lake Van"). The description of Aght’amar by  
the contemporary author Thomas Art Ursuni 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-out-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 for-  
tifications in tenth-century Byzantium for which there is  
also evidence in other cultures at this time. It demon-  
strates that even though defensive towers were a necessi-  
ty, they could be made a virtue, too, and that an appre-  
ciation of the beauty of towers was not only an inven-  
tion of nineteenth-century Romanticism.  

9. On the Aretai, see Janin, op.cit., p. 138, 443; H. Maguire, A  
Description of the Aretai Palace and its Garden, Journal of Garden  
10. ...τάς καλουμένας ἀρετάς. Τόπος δε ούτος ἀνεκάθι τῆς πόλεως  
dιακεχείνεται, ὕπερεκχεινειν μὲν τῆς παθιδος καὶ τοῖς  
cάτωθένσι ἱπταμένοις καὶ πρὸς τοῦτον δρόμου εἰς λοιπὰν  
ἀναπαυόμενος καὶ τὴν ἐτέραν μὲν πλευρὰν πρὸς θάλασσαν  
ἀπολεύομεν, κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἐτέραν πρὸς τὸ Βυζάντιον,  
tοῖς δὲ γλυκαῖς δοθεῖ πρὸς δρόμον καὶ δίσει, παντὶ  
ἀνέμῳ καταπαύομενοι... Alexandria, 2.8.5; ed. B. Leib, I,  
Paris 1937, p. 90-4.11.  
11. A. M. Schneider, Byzanz, Vorarbeiten zur Topographie und  
Archäologie der Stadt, Berlin 1936, p. 81.  
13. For a survey of the buildings at Aght’amar, with earlier biblio- 
ography, see S. Der Nersessian - H. Vahramian, Aght’amar  
(Documenti di Architettura Armenia 8), Milan 1974.  
14. History of the House of the Artsruni’, translation and comment- 
tary by R. W. Thompson, Detroit 1985, p. 356. I am grateful to Lynn  
Jones for this reference.  
15. D. Fairchild Ruggles, The Mirador in Abbasid and Hispano- 
Umayyad Garden Typology, Muqarnas 7 (1990), p. 73-82, esp. 75-76.  
16. F. Hernández Giménez, Madinat al-Zahra’: Arquitectura y  
Decoración, Granada 1985, p. 61-62; cited and discussed by Fair- 
child Ruggles, op.cit., p. 76-78, fig. 8.  
17. For example, the Torre de las Infantes; O. Grabar, The Alham- 