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 Geómetres, 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 Geómetres 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· ὠς ερπετών χείριστα καὶ των κνωδάλων, τρώγλας, χαράδρας· οὐ γαρ οἰκίας λέγω σπήλαια καὶ σήραγγας ή μυωξίας, ή σαθρά καὶ τρέμοντα παίγνια ξύλων, ἄθυρμα παιδών, ἐργα καὶ πάσης βίας, ομβρων, πυρός, σεισμῶν τε βρασμῶν, πνευμάτων. Ημΐν Θεός δέδωκε πύργον ἵσχυος, πύργον βέβαιου, πύργον ἀρρήκτου βίου πάντων κρατούντα τῶν παθῶν τοῦ βίου, καὶ βαρβάρων χειρῶν τε καὶ τεχνασμάτων πάντων καλῶν γέμοντα καὶ θεαμάτων πύργωμα κάλλους, πύργον άφράστου γάνους, ἐκ γῆς, θαλάττης, αέρος, φωτός, πόλου πάντων κρατούντα τῶν παθῶν τοῦ βίου, καὶ βαρβάρων χειρῶν τε καὶ τεχνασμάτων πάντων καλῶν γέμοντα καὶ θεαμάτων πύργωμα κάλλους, πύργον άφράστου γάνους, ἐκ γῆς, θαλάττης, αέρος, φωτός, πόλου*..."
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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 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 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. 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 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 Konstantinopol, II, 1943, pl. 1).
Horn). 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 Blachen­nai 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. 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 Χ(ριστ)ω αυ­τοκράτορως ευσεβείς βασιλέως *Ρωμ(αί)ων*. Meyer-Plath - Schneider, op.cit., p. 123.

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


6. ...τά τε πυργώματα τοῦ Βυζαντίου προς γῆν κατερίπωσε... Bonn ed., p. 175, 176-176.1. On this earthquake, see G. Downey, Earth­quakes at Constantinople and Vicinity, A.D. 342-1454, Speculum 30 (1955), p. 599-600.


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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 (ἀρετὰς) 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 associated with the one on the 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 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 Arstruni 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.