

ARCHITECTURE AND MOSAICS IN RECENTLY DISCOVERED PALAEOCHRISTIAN BASILICAS

MUSTAFA ŞAHİN

Uludağ Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi,
Arkeoloji Bölümü, Bursa – Turkey

RECEP OKÇU

Uludağ Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi,
Arkeoloji Bölümü, Bursa – Turkey

1. R. Janin, *Les églises et les monastères des Grands Centres Byzantins* (Paris 1975).

In this paper, the importance of Bursa and its surrounding area for understanding Early Christianity between the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods, which we have very little knowledge about, is going to be explained. To indicate this potential, the Basilica in Derecik which was found by coincidence in the early 2000's and where we started an excavation and a restoration programme in cooperation with Lausanne University in Switzerland in 2007, is going to be substantially discussed.

Uludağ, starting from the 4th century AD, became one of the most important inhabited areas in the Late Antique Period. The reason for this is the immigration of some Christian communities to Uludağ Mountain (Olympos) after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The immigrants chose to live a hermitic way of life. According to written sources, in this period many monasteries were erected in different parts of Uludağ¹. It is possible to mention *Atroa*, *Kokinobaphos*, *Kenalachos*, *Sakkudion* and *Symboleon* as the most important ones. Although it is estimated that the number of these monasteries is up to 50, their locations are unknown due to the lack of detailed research. Because of this abundance of monasteries, Uludağ was called '*oros tōn kalogerōn*' which means 'Monk Mountain'. This name had been changed to Uludağ in 1925 which means 'Olympos' in Greek as well. Thus the name of the mountain has always had a religious meaning; therefore it is possible to say that this mountain had been blessed by all religions.



FIG.1

The monasteries of Uludağ, similar to the ones in other regions, acted together for specific purposes and were administered jointly'. Although the monasteries were generally organized as federations, it is known that the Uludağ monasteries were organized under the chairmanship of a *'prôtos'* and archimandrite. This type of organization did not change after the Ottoman occupation but they became abandoned over time although some of them still survived as churches. These churches emptied totally after the population exchange between Turkey and Greece in 1924 and, after that year, they were abandoned to their fate.

The Basilica in Derecik is located inside an oak forest in one of the settlements in Uludağ called Büyükorhan district (Fig.1). In March 2001, security forces went to that area with a suspicion of illegal excavation and found the Basilica by chance. The first excavation and research were done by the archaeologists Recep Okçu and Konca Hançer from the Archaeological Museum of Bursa. After the rescue excavation, which continued for approximately two months, a large part of the basilica with its mosaic floor was revealed. Later it was abandoned to its fate due to the lack of funding. The first publication about the Derecik Basilica was published five years later in the proceedings of the '3rd International Mosaic Symposium of Turkey'². The 3rd International Mosaic Symposium of Turkey also played an important role in the beginning of archaeological excavations and research around the Derecik Basilica: during an excursion to the site as part of the activities of the congress, Sophie Delbarre-Bärtschi and Claude-Alain Paratte from Switzerland had the opportunity of a close observation of the basilica and offered to complete the excavation and restoration with a cooperative project. After that, the excavations started again in 2007 under a protocol signed by all parties. The parties are the Institute of

2. R. Okçu, "Derecik Bazilikası Kurtarma Kazısı", The Proceeding of III. International Symposium of the Mosaic of Turkey, 8-10.



FIG.2 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.



FIG.4 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.

Archaeology and Sciences of Antiquity (IASA) of Lausanne University, the Association suisse pour l'étude des revêtements antiques (ASERA) and Uludağ University. So it is possible to divide the excavations of the Derecik Basilica in two phases. The first phase comprised the rescue excavations led by the Archaeological Museum of Bursa. The second phase consisted of the excavations once again led by the same museum and with the scientific consultancy of Prof. Dr. Michel Fuchs, IASA, University of Lausanne, Dr. Sophie Delbarre-Bäertschi, and University of Neuchâtel, MA Claude-Alain Paratte, Archéologie cantonale, Etat de Vaud, Lausanne, and Prof. Dr. Mustafa Şahin.



FIG.5 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.



FIG.6 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.

In the rescue excavations of 2001, the basic plan of the basilica was revealed. The most important artefacts uncovered in that year were the mosaic pavements with geometric and plant ornaments and the grave located in North Eastern corner of the church. Four construction phases were discovered as a result of a probe carried out in consultation with Michel Fuchs in 2007-2008. The detailed information about it is being prepared for publication by M. Fuchs and his team³; therefore we are just going to describe the rescue excavations in 2001. The rescue excavations were started with a probe in June 2001. The extent of the

3. Michel E. Fuchs, Sophie Delbarre-Bärtschi, Fouilles suisses à Derecik, Büyükorhan, province de Bursa (Turquie). Rapport préliminaire 2007-2008. *Antike Kunst* 52, 2009 (forthcoming). June 2006 – Bursa (Bursa 2007), 37-44 and 169-175.



FIG.9 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.



FIG.10 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.

excavated area was then increased. The floor was covered by a mosaic pavement which was found by the probe. The excavations took place between 30.7.2001 and 20.8.2001. The structure was located just under the agricultural layer at a depth of 50-120 cm (Fig.2). After it was cleaned, it became apparent that the structure measured 12.5 x 20.75 meters. During the excavations, a church located in an east-west direction with nave, narthex, *presbyterium* and apse was revealed. The narthex has dimensions of 2.75 x 10.75 m and is 30 cm below the nave as a result of the slope of the terrain. The nave had dimensions of 10.30 x 10.75 m and was divided



FIG.11 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.



FIG.12 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.

by two rows of columns. This was the observation of R. Okçu, the archaeologist of the rescue excavations. The excavations by M. Fuchs and his team show us that the columns did not exist in the first phase: the structure consisted of only one nave and in a second period was enlarged with the two rows of pillars or columns.

During the rescue excavations, a different pavement has been discovered in the north east corner of the nave. A probe has been done in this part to find the reason for this difference. At a depth of 25 cm, marble plates have been found. After the removal of those marble plates, it has been found that there was a grave cut into a granite rock (Fig.4). The grave has dimensions of 1.86 x 0.65 m, its floor covered by four rows of tiles with dimensions of 43 x 43 cm. The interior of the grave was covered with a thin layer of plaster which in some places had fallen down. A scattered skeleton with dissolved rib bones was found lying there in an east-west direction. Anthropological research showed that the skeleton belonged to a woman aged 40-45 years. In the western edge of the grave measuring 30 cm in width and 3 cm in height, located under the head of the skeleton. The only find was an iron belt buckle. Detailed researches on this skeleton will give us important clues about the first phase of the basilica and also the whole complex. The area of the grave was covered with a roof after the rescue excavation.

The floors of the narthex, nave and apse of the basilica were entirely covered by mosaics (Fig.5). The pavement was damaged in patches by tree roots and agricultural activities. It is ornamented with plant and geometric motives with rich polychrome frames. Together with those motives the figures of peacocks (Fig.6), partridges and pigeons can also be seen.

The mosaic of the basilica was laid in the *opus tessellatum* technique on a thick mortar foundation with white, red, yellow, olive green and dark blue tesserae. In the middle of the narthex mosaic is represented a *refrigerium* scene which has a mainly



FIG.13 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.



FIG.14 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.

destroyed upper part and only a *kantharos* and two peacocks' tails were preserved in the lower part (Fig.9). Only geometric ornaments take part in the panel. The panel on the North side of the scene has only geometric ornaments, and the panel on the South is notable for its star motives containing stylized figures of birds (Fig.10). The mosaic in the centre of the nave is divided into two parts. In the first part there are figures of birds which are each drawn differently inside octagons with cross shaped transition components (Fig.5). Between them, guilloche and floral ornaments can be seen. In the other part, there is a three dimensional star motive in the centre with four circles around and surrounded by circles, squares and lozenge patterns. Every circle is ornamented differently: star, wheel of fortune, Solomon's knot, etc. In the area of the transition between the nave and apse, three heavily damaged inscriptions have been conserved each of three or four lines. The first epigraph indicates the wish of Epituchanos, *diakōn*, a church member; the other inscriptions have not been translated yet (Fig.11 e 12). Along the south wall of the nave, there is a band consisting of ivy with heart shaped leaves (Fig.13). In western section of the northern side, there is a composition' instead of 'setting starting with a peacock figure inside a rich interlacing. South of this composition, there are three medallions next to each other. The central one stands out with a *kantharos* figure and the other ones have stylized pigeon figures. In the northern side of the nave, there are two different significant compositions continuing through to the east (Fig.14). While a very rich interlaced composition lies next to the wall, adjacent to it is a composition filled with different geometric motives which consists of hexagons and octagons related to each other. In the *presbyterium* part, a panel represents heart shaped ivy leaves and two plait lines. Between these two plait lines, squares and circles are differently ornamented (Fig.15 e 16). In the *presbyterium* part there is a panel with a border of heart-shaped



FIG.15 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.



FIG.16 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.

leaves and an inner border of two-strand guilloche. The panel is ornamented with a variety of circles and concave-sided squares.

Two different types of work stand out in the mosaics. We would like to suggest that this is because the different types of work belong to different phases. The first mosaic floor which was most probably crafted in the late 4th century AD was renewed in the late 5th century for an unknown reason. Explanation of the time difference between this two mosaic floors in a clear way will reveal the acceptable chronology of basilica.

Marks on the wall indicate that there was fresco painting on the plaster. This is also indicated by numerous pieces of wall plaster found in the excavations (Fig.18). Furthermore, because pieces of tile were discovered within the remains, it demonstrates that the structure was covered with roof tiles (Fig.19).

The Basilica in Derecik is best preserved and earliest known example in the Bursa region and also in Northern Anatolia. This basilica shows Early Byzantine Age characteristics with its mosaic pavements and countless Byzantine ceramics. Also the cross motives used in floor and *refrigerium* scene in the narthex support a date in the same era. It is known, however, that this scene was quite popular during the 4th and 5th centuries. The best comparison for this subject is the hypogeum frescos of Nikea dated to the 4th century⁴.

Two antique altars were used as backfill material (Fig.20). They were found during the rescue excavations in 2001 and show us that the basilica was not built here by coincidence. Each monument has an epigraph. On the marble altar used as a building material in the northern corner of the apse, we can read four lines. The translation of this epigraph is: "Zeus Anabatenos erected this monument for Zeus Kersoullos". According to this, we can say that Zeus was worshipped here under two different epithets. The second altar was found during the probe made inside the basilica. Zeus Anabatenos is also mentioned upon it. Based on these two artefacts it is possible to

4. B. Yalman, Nikea - Iznik (Bursa 2000), 121-124.



FIG.18 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.



FIG.19 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.



FIG.20 PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHORS.

suggest that the Zeus cult was common in or around this region. But nothing was found to support this suggestion during the excavations of 2007; in 2008, robbed-out walls under and in another direction as the basilica strongly indicate an ancient building. It does not seem possible that these altars have been brought here from a distant place for use in the base of the building because of their weight. It will certainly not be a surprise for us if we encounter a sacred area for Zeus around this site. This situation as we mentioned before will be the greatest evidence that this mountain was respected by all religions from polytheist to monotheist religions. Among the many churches whose existence is presumed, the Derecik Basilica is the first example which has been researched archaeologically. Therefore it is a great opportunity to bring the richness of the region's religious buildings erected in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Age – its value as 'Olympos' – to the scientific world. The basilica indicates that Uludağ had a very important function in the enlightenment of the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Age dated to the 4th-5th centuries. The research which is going to be carried out in this region will play an important part in understanding this very little known era. ●