



Byzantine Church at Üçayak (Kırşehir, Cappadocia)

Περίληψη :

This church of which only the ruins stand today, is an enigmatic case of middle-Byzantine architecture for various reasons. Located in Üçayak, near Kırşehir in Central Anatolia, it appears that it was built at a perfectly isolated spot, away from any settlement; yet the style of the architecture seems to have been of an exceptionally high artistic level. The double-church plan, the fact that it was constructed entirely of bricks except for the foundations and its somewhat inclined walls are all rather unusual characteristics, and the dedication of the church remains unknown. On grounds of style and construction, the monument has been dated to the late 10th or the 11th centuries.

Χρονολόγηση

late 10th - 11th centuries

Γεωγραφικός Εντοπισμός

Üçayak, near Kırşehir in Central Anatolia, Cappadocia

1. Location,date and state of preservation

The Byzantine name of the site near Kırşehir in Central Anatolia, Cappadocia, where the Üçayak church ruins are located, is not known with certainty. The site could have been Justinianopolis, Pteria or [Mokissos](#).¹ Near this site is the modern village of Taburoğlu (Tabur-oğlu). Close to the ruined church there was a spring of water, but no material remains have been found, which means, that this church was built originally in a completely isolated and remote place.

The double church of Üçayak has been dated around the 10th - 11th centuries because of the style of construction, and the arrangement of the decorative elements on the facades. The slightly inclined walls point to a chronology in the end of the 11th century, but a more accurate chronological framework would range from the late 10th until the course of the 11th centuries.²

The monument became known in 1842 through the report of W. F. Ainsworth. His remarks were studied by J.W. Crowfoot and published by J. Strzygowski in 1903.³ The great arches supporting the remains of the upper parts were still preserved then. ⁴ But in 1938, an earthquake caused serious damages to the church in Üçayak. It was then that the remnants of the **drums of the domes**, great arches and the upper parts of the walls collapsed ([fig.7](#)).⁵ The condition of the church has still deteriorated since ([fig.8](#)). A small excavation was executed in the northern part by Semavi Eyice in the 1970's.⁶

2. Architectural description

2.1. The plan

The type of the ruined church in Üçayak is very rare in [Byzantine architecture](#). It was a double church, with two identical **naves** flanking each other ([fig.1](#)).

In the west there was a **narthex** or a **porch**, but very little remains have ever been found in this western part of the edifice. Two independent entrances led from this narthex or porch into each nave, which were separated by a wall. Both naves were quadrangular in form, and prolonged eastwards into **apses** of externally polygonal form. The length of the naves, without the semicircles of the apses, is 8.10 m. and the width of both parts 5.25 m.⁷

A separate dome was crowning each nave. Both of the domes have been completely destroyed, as have the arches supporting the higher parts, which have collapsed. The domes were not completely identical. Archaeological evidence implies that the southern dome



Byzantine Church at Üçayak (Kırşehir, Cappadocia)

was pierced by eight openings, while the northern one only by four.⁸

Double or triple churches are not unknown in Byzantine architecture, but usually the flanking churches have been constructed successively, and not at same time as in Üçayak. Scholars have tried to explain the double character of this church, but it has remained enigmatic because the dedication of the church remains unknown. An obvious explanation would be that the church in Üçayak was dedicated to two saints, or martyrs, or probably archangels. Another suggestion has been that the church of Üçayak was built by two distinguished founders, e.g. by the Emperor and his consort.⁹ The later hypothesis seems more plausible, because no traces of any crypt or recess for preserving relics (of the alleged saints or martyrs) were found, when the church was partly excavated in 1970's.¹⁰

2.2. Construction

Besides the plan, the construction technique of this church is also very particular. The masonry of the church consists entirely of brick (fig. 4), except for the substructure, for which stones have been used (fig.3). The use of brick for the entire construction is very rare in Byzantine architecture. The bricks in Üçayak are flat and long, with an average length of 30-35 cm, some even 70 cm long, and height of 3.5 - 4 cm only.¹¹ On the contrary, the beds of the mortar are somewhat broader than the tiles, about 4.8 - 6 cm high.¹² At least, when J.W. Crowfoot visited the ruined church in 1900, there was left on the surface of the walls some coating of finer pink plaster, spread over the mortar. That pinkish layer made the wall surfaces even, and fitted well with the warm colour of the tiles. But the parts not exposed to the viewer, like the middle of the walls, were built of rubble, stones and fragments of white marble appearing at various points. This rubble was held together by wooden beams, about 15 cm², and at levels about 2 m apart.¹³

The remnants of the narthex (or porch) consisted of the projection westwards of the side walls; also a pilaster with a marble capital was at the time still preserved.¹⁴ The spring of an arch has been found above this capital, but overall these remnants did not provide enough evidence to decide whether the original structure was a narthex or a porch.

The arrangement of the exterior walls consisted of niches framed by recessed arches (fig.5 and 6). Such kind of blind arches have been attested in the church of [Çanlıkilise](#) in [Cappadocia](#), and in the 11th century reconstruction of the [Church of the Dormition](#) of the Mother of God in [Nicaea](#) (mod. Iznik). Combined with the use of plain brick, the facades of the double church in Üçayak must have been impressive.

2.3. Traces of interior decoration

Some remains of wall-paintings were still left in 1900 when J.W. Crowfoot visited the site. He found traces of a fresco in one [pendentive](#), but it was difficult to distinguish the motif, which looked like a row of heads in circles or haloes.¹⁵

J.W. Crowfoot also refers to two inscriptions, which were still preserved at the church in the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁶ However they were already illegible at his time. Probably these defaced inscriptions contained the answer to the question, why a double church was erected in such a completely isolated area.

1. Eyice, S., «La ruine byzantine dite "Üçayak" (=Utch-aiak) près de Kırşehir en Anatolie Centrale», *Cahiers Archéologiques* 18 (1969), p. 137; Eyice, S., «Monuments byzantins anatoliens inédits ou peu connus», *Corsi di Cultura sull'arte Ravennate e bizantina* (1971), p. 323.

2. Eyice, S., «La ruine byzantine dite "Üçayak" (=Utch-aiak) près de Kırşehir en Anatolie Centrale», *Cahiers Archéologiques* 18 (1969), pp. 147,155; Eyice, S., «Monuments byzantins anatoliens inédits ou peu connus», *Corsi di Cultura sull'arte Ravennate e bizantina* (1971), p. 323.

3. Crowfoot, J.W., "Ütschajak", in Strzygowski Josef, *Kleinasien, ein Neuland der Kunstgeschichte: Kirchenaufnahmen von J.W. Crowfoot und J.I.*



Byzantine Church at Üçayak (Kırşehir, Cappadocia)

Smirnov (Leipzig 1903), pp. 32-41.

4. Eyice, S., «La ruine byzantine dite "Üçayak" (=Utch-aiak) près de Kırşehir en Anatolie Centrale», *Cahiers Archéologiques* 18 (1969), fig. 1 and 3-7; Crowfoot, J.W., "Ütschajak", in Strzygowski Josef, *Kleinasien, ein Neuland der Kunstgeschichte: Kirchengruppen von J.W. Crowfoot und J.I. Smirnov* (Leipzig 1903), fig. 24 and 26-27.
5. Eyice, S., «La ruine byzantine dite "Üçayak" (=Utch-aiak) près de Kırşehir en Anatolie Centrale», *Cahiers Archéologiques* 18 (1969), pp. 141, 143.
6. Eyice, S., «Monuments byzantins anatoliens inédits ou peu connus», *Corsi di Cultura sull'arte Ravennate e bizantina* (1971), p. 323.
7. Eyice, S., «La ruine byzantine dite "Üçayak" (=Utch-aiak) près de Kırşehir en Anatolie Centrale», *Cahiers Archéologiques* 18 (1969), p. 144.
8. Crowfoot, J.W., "Ütschajak", in Strzygowski Josef, *Kleinasien, ein Neuland der Kunstgeschichte: Kirchengruppen von J.W. Crowfoot und J.I. Smirnov* (Leipzig 1903), p. 34.
9. Crowfoot, J.W., "Ütschajak", in Strzygowski Josef, *Kleinasien, ein Neuland der Kunstgeschichte: Kirchengruppen von J.W. Crowfoot und J.I. Smirnov* (Leipzig 1903), p. 33. Eyice, S., «La ruine byzantine dite "Üçayak" (=Utch-aiak) près de Kırşehir en Anatolie Centrale», *Cahiers Archéologiques* 18 (1969), pp. 154 -155.
10. Eyice, S., «Monuments byzantins anatoliens inédits ou peu connus», *Corsi di Cultura sull'arte Ravennate e bizantina* (1971), p. 323.
11. Eyice, S., «La ruine byzantine dite "Üçayak" (=Utch-aiak) près de Kırşehir en Anatolie Centrale», *Cahiers Archéologiques* 18 (1969), p. 146.
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Byzantine Church at Üçayak (Kirşehir, Cappadocia)

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Γλωσσάριο :

	apse
An arched structure or a semi-circular end of a wall. In byzantine architecture it means the semicircular, usually barrel-vaulted, niche at the east end of a basilica. The side aisles of a basilica may also end in an apse, but it is always in the central apse where the altar is placed. It was separated from the main church by a barrier, the templon, or the iconostasis. Its ground plan on the external side could be semicircular, rectangular or polygonal.	
	drum of dome
Part of the church, semicircular or polygonal, on which rises an hemispheric dome	
	mortar, the
Liquidised paste consisting of soil, water, sand or marble. It is used as binding material between rocks or plinths. Thus, it assures stability and protection of masonry.	
	naos (nave)
The main part of the temple, between the <i>narthex</i> and the <i>bema</i> . It was the place where the congregation took part in the liturgy.	
	narthex
A portico or a rectangular entrance-hall, parallel with the west end of an early Christian basilica or church.	
	pendentive
Triangular surface used for the transition from the square base of the church to the hemispheric dome.	
	porch
The covered space at the front of a gate on the building's entrance or a stoa.	

Παραθέματα

Church of Üçayak, place and construction details

A second building, the double church known as Üçayak, near Kirşehir, lies on the border between Cappadocia and Galatia (Fig. 67). Except for courses of stone in the foundation walls, the church is constructed entirely of brick racing on a rubble core. Although its plan –two adjoining atrophied-cross naoi with extended sanctuaries but no pastophona– might find some comparison among the double-naved rock-cut churches of Cappadocia, in terms of its brick construction the double church remains an anomaly. A closer look at the construction, however, reveals a number of telling similarities with the Çanlı Kilise. In both, the bricks are laid with great care and the courses are broadly spaced with wide mortar beds of an exceptionally hard mortar. Both employ niches with multiple setbacks to enliven wall surfaces and apses, and the attention given to the relationship of concentric voussoirs is similar as well. In terms of the use of brick, Üçayak may offer the best technical comparison.

Ousterhout R.G., *A Byzantine settlement in Cappadocia* (Washington 2005), p. 69-70.

Church of Üçayak in the context of the Middle Byzantine architecture and the the development of the cruciform churches

Cruciform churches were common throughout Middle Byzantine Cappadocia, representing a simpler spatial and structural solution than the cross-in-square type. Two of the masonry churches on Hasan Dağı have atrophied Greek-cross plans, demonstrating that the type is not limited to rock-cut churches. The curious double church of Üçayak, near Kirşehir, also follows a similar design. Curiously, the cruciform church as a planning type is absent from Constantinople and its vicinity in the tenth and eleventh centuries. It reappears only in the twelfth, perhaps as part of a revival of older architectural forms. In Cappadocia, however, the cruciform plan



Byzantine Church at Üçayak (Kirşehir, Cappadocia)

appears throughout the Byzantine period. Large cruciform churches of masonry appear in the early period, as at Mokisos and in our North Settlement, and early rock-cut examples are known as well, as for example in the Balkan Dere. A number of rock-cut churches dating from the ninth century onward also have cruciform plans, in the Balkan Dere, at El Nazar in Göreme, in the Hal Dere, in the Ihlara Valley, and elsewhere. Göreme 6a and the Ağaç Altı Kilise in Belisirma, among numerous examples, have broad crossarms similar to the church in Area 17 (upper) and the chapel in the East Settlement. Finally, the rather unusual flat ceiling of the cruciform chapel in Area 18 finds a comparison in the Yılanlı Kilise in Ihlara.

Ousterhout R.G., *A Byzantine settlement in Cappadocia* (Washington 2005), p. 159.