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THE MONASTERY NEAR KIYIKÖY IN EUROPEAN TURKEY

Abstract. The monastery near today's Kiyiköy settlement on the Black Sea coast is a very interesting rock-cut complex. It probably inherited an ancient sanctuary near the ancient Thracian and Roman city of Salmydessos, which became an important Christian center in the vicinity of Constantinople. In this text, we briefly review the historical information about the city, then describe the monastery, because there has been only one scientific publication since 1970 and the monastery is very difficult to access. We apply the three plans of the monastery that have been published since the 19th century to trace the change in the condition of the rock and the rooms that have been added. Then we analyze the architectural program and types of decoration of the three-nave basilica and the sacred spring, which have no exact analogue and are comparable both to examples from antiquity and to the best temples in the Byzantine capital. Based on this analysis, we assume three construction periods – ancient, from the time of Justinian and from the end of the iconoclastic period after the destruction of the city by the Bulgarian Khan Krum.

Keywords: Medea, Midieh, Salmydessus, rock monastery, rock church, Ayazma, sacred spring

Significance of the site

Today's Kiyiköy settlement has a really rich and ancient history. It is located on the coast of the Black Sea in the Turkish part of Strandzha Mountains (Istranca dağı) in Kırklareli Province, Marmara region. The settlement is also known by the older Turkish names Midye and Midieh. In the Middle Ages it was known as the Byzantine settlement Μηδεια, and in antiquity by the name Salmydessus (in Latin) or Salmydessos (Ancient Greek: Σαλμυδησσός), also Halmydessus or Halmydissos (Ἀλμυδισσός)¹. Kiyiköy is located approx. 97 km

¹ KLAUDIUS PTOLEMAIOS, *Handbuch der Geographie Griechisch-Deutsch*, III, 11.4, ed. A. STÜCKELBERGER, G. GRASSHOFF, [s.l.] 2006; GAIUS PLINIUS SECUNDUS, *Libri 1–6*, IV, 11.18, ed. K.F.Th. MAYHOFF, Lipsiae 1933 (repr. of the 1905 ed.); POMPONIUS MELA, *De situ orbis libri III*, Lipsiae 1831. The citation of ancient authors is in the universally established way, indicating the book and paragraph and the edition. There are no different readings in the quoted passages.

north of the entrance to the Bosphorus Strait on a high rocky promontory between two bays with beach areas into which two rivers flow. In ancient times there were two harbours, but today only the southern bay has harbour facilities for fishing boats. The two rivers are called Pabuçdere (to the north) and Kazandere. Today the Pabuçdere is quite shallow because of a dam that was built further up the river, but in ancient and medieval times it must have been full-flowing enough to shelter ships from the dangerous northerly winds and currents of the Black Sea.

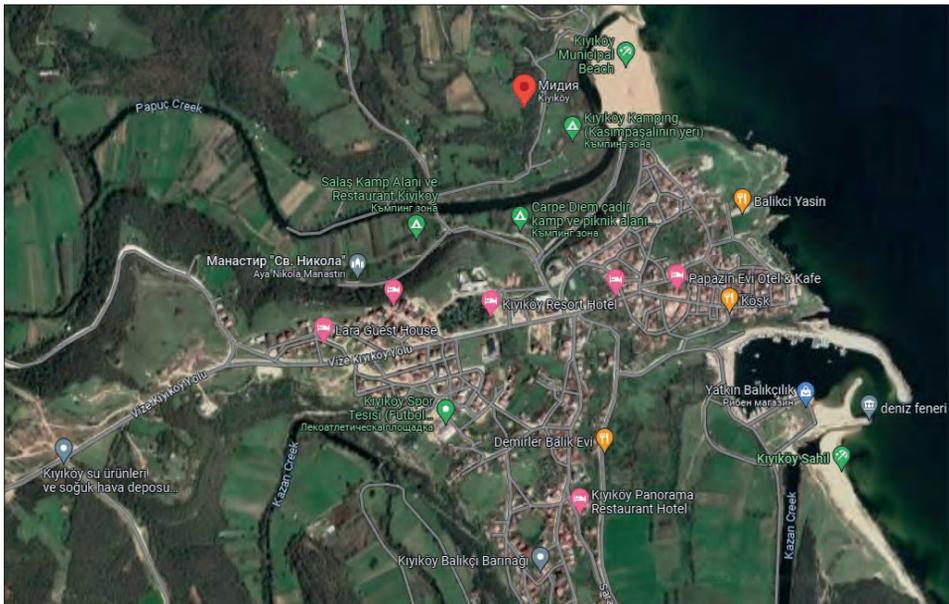


Fig. 1. Kiyıköy and environs from Google Earth.

On the right bank of the Pabuçdere, less than 1 km from the medieval fortress wall of the town, an abandoned rock monastery, known today as St. Nicholas, is situated. It is designated as a tourist site, but no special care is taken of the place. However, it has attracted the interest of tourists, mainly from Bulgaria, because of its proximity to beautiful beaches. But on January 1, 2020, natural gas was released on the TurkStream natural gas pipeline, which carries gas from Russia along the bottom of the Black Sea to the Balkan Peninsula and comes ashore right at Kiyıköy Bay. This made access to the monastery very difficult for Turkish researchers and practically impossible for foreigners. This led us to think that our observations and photographs of this site might prove valuable because no one can now say what the condition of the monastery is and whether when (and if) access to it is restored there will be no damage to architectural elements. The observation

that the publications of this rock monastery are very scarce also led us to undertake its description, even though none of the authors are specialists in ecclesiastical architecture.

Brief history of the city

Salmydessos has two meanings². The first is a coastal stretch, a territory on the west coast of Pontos Euxeinos (*aigialos*), even just a bay (*kolpos*), and the second a place (*topos*), most probably a city in Thrace where King Phineus lived. The Argonauts, led by Jason, received from Phineus a prophesy of how to cross the Cyanean Rocks also known as the Symplegades, a pair of rocks at the Bosphorus that clashed together whenever a vessel went through, according to Greek mythology. For that reason, Salmydessos is closely present in the mythological cycle of the Argonauts, and hence also in the ancient Greek tragedies. Aeschylus places Salmydessos at Themiscyra on the Thermodon river in Asia Minor, but this is an obvious mistake – he is the only ancient author with such a localization of the city³ (*Themiscyra on the Thermodon, where, fronting the sea, is Salmydessus' rugged jaw, evil host of mariners, step-mother of ships*⁴). Sophocles gives an interesting additional account⁵:

[966] And by the waters of the Dark Rocks, the waters of the twofold sea, are the shores of Bosphorus and the Thracian city Salmydessus,

[970] where Ares, neighbor of that city, saw the accursed, blinding wound inflicted on the two sons of Phineus by his savage wife⁶.

The exact Greek expression in line 970 is ἀγχίπτολις Ἄρης, which translates as “near the city”, “dwelling hard by”⁷ or “close neighbor to a city”⁸. Whether this sanctuary was the place where the successors of Phineus gave prophesies cannot be said. It has been suggested that this may be the pagan prototype of the rock monastery, as there is no other cult complex in the vicinity of the city, but this will remain unverifiable until systematic archaeological excavations are carried out⁹.

² L. BÜRCHNER, *Salmydessos*, [in:] *RE. Zweiter Reihe (R–Z)*, ed. G. WISSOWA, W. KROLL, Stuttgart 1920, col. 1991–1992.

³ AESCHYLUS, *Promētheús Desmôtēs*, 696sqq, ed. U. VON WILAMOWITZ-MOELLENDORFF, [in:] *Aeschyli Tragoediae. Editio maior*, Berlin 1914.

⁴ Trans. Herbert Weir Smyth, London 1926.

⁵ SOPHOCLES, *Antigone*, 966–975, ed. R.D. DAWE, Stuttgart 1996 [= BSGR].

⁶ SOPHOCLES, *The Plays and Fragments*, pars 3, *The Antigone*, ed. et trans. R.C. JEBB, A.M. HACKERT, 3rd St. Clair Shores 1971.

⁷ LSJ (online), <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=1> [6 VI 2023].

⁸ *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon*, vol. I–II, ed. J. DIGGLE, Cambridge 2021.

⁹ А. ПОРТАЛСКИ, *Салмидесс – древное святилище и столица фракийских царей*, M&E 4.3, 2008, p. 276–279.

Herodotus mentions that after some resistance the inhabitants of Salmydesos submitted to the Persian king Darius in his campaign against the Scythians across the Danube¹⁰. The city is also mentioned by Diodorus Siculus¹¹ and Strabo¹² who add no significant new information. The only ancient author of the pre-Roman period whom we are sure that visited the city is Xenophon, who confirms the popular (and probably erroneous) opinion that the coast was very unsuitable for navigation, and that shipwrecks were regularly washed up there, which the natives plundered, and, in order that there might be no strife, divided the shore with stakes, and it is known exactly on whose ground the wreck was thrown¹³. The Athenian author probably gives this strange explanation of stakes for *dalyans* (specific fishing nets), which the Greeks did not know, but he left us no other description of the city.

Theophanes the Confessor (758/760 – 817/818) is the first to mention the city under the name *Mēdeia* in the year 763¹⁴. According to Andreas Külzer, this is related to a resettlement of the city according to Grēgoras¹⁵. In 813, *Mēdeia* was devastated by the army of the Bulgarian ruler Krum¹⁶. The war of 763 between the troops of Khan Teletz (761–764) and Emperor Constantine V was not particularly successful for the Bulgarians, but in 813 it is quite possible that the local population was taken captive in the interior regions of Bulgaria¹⁷. In the summer of 896, the Bulgarian troops under the leadership of Tsar Simeon (893–927) advanced south and, after the defeat of the Byzantine army at Bulgarophyon, managed to extend their sphere of influence to the region of *Mēdeia*, for the place is described as situated near the border¹⁸. In 925, the important city of Bizyē (Βιζύη – today's Turkish city of Vize) was captured by the Bulgarians led by Tsar Simeon after a siege of about five years. Most of the local population fled to nearby *Mēdeia*, which is told in the hagiography of the local saint Maria the Younger¹⁹. From the text of the

¹⁰ HERODOTUS, *Historiae*, IV, 93, ed. H.B. ROSÉN, Lipsiae 1987 [= BSGR].

¹¹ GAIUS DIODORUS SICULUS, XIV, 37, [in:] *Diodorus of Sicily in Twelve Volumes with an English Translation*, vol. IV–VIII, trans. C.H. OLDFATHER, Cambridge Massachusetts 1989.

¹² *Strabons Geographika. Mit Übersetzung und Kommentar*, I, 3, 4, 7; VII, 6, 1; XII, 3, 3, vol. I–X, ed. S.L. RADT, Göttingen 2002–2011 (cetera: STRABO).

¹³ XENOPHON, *Anabasis*, VII, 5, 12, [in:] *Xenophontis opera omnia*, vol. III, Oxford 1904 [repr. 1961].

¹⁴ *Theophanis Chronographia*, AM 6255, vol. I, rec. C. DE BOOR, Lipsiae 1883, p. 434, 12–13.

¹⁵ A. KÜLZER, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*, vol. XII, *Ostthrakien (Europe)*, Wien 2008 [= DKAW.PhH], s.v. *Mēdeia* (Μήδεια) 519. Cf. *Nicephori Gregorae Byzantina historia: Graece et Latine*, III, 382, vol. II, ed. L. SCHOPENUS, B. NIEBUHR, Berlin 1828 (cetera: NICEPHORUS GREGORAS).

¹⁶ A. KÜLZER, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*..., 520.

¹⁷ Y.M. HRISTOV, *Prisoners of War in Early Medieval Bulgaria (Preliminary Remarks)*, SCer 5, 2015, p. 73–105.

¹⁸ *Vita Euthymii Patriarchi CP*, ed. P. KARLIN-HAYTER, Bruxelles 1970, XVI Peri Niceta philosophou tou Paphlagonos, p. 107, 6–7; A. KÜLZER, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*..., 520.

¹⁹ *Vita Mariae Junioris*, [in:] *Acta Sanctorum Bollandiana*, Bruxellis 1925, Novembris IV, col. 692–705. Also ed. E. KOURILAS, [in:] *Thrakika* 26 (1957), p. 111–147; A. KÜLZER, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini*..., 520.

hagiography it is clear that Mēdeia was not affected at that time. The place is mentioned briefly in a letter by the scholar Iōannēs Tzetzēs in the 12th century²⁰. The Arab geographer al Idrisi describes Īmīdhīa in the mid-12th century as a flourishing *emporium* 25 miles from Agāthōbolī (i.e. Agathopolis, present-day Ahtopol in Bulgaria)²¹. After the conquest of Constantinople by the Western Knights in 1204, Mēdeia remained in the possession of the Latin emperors, and the city was later handed over to the Genoese²². In 1247, Ioannes III Dukas Vatatsēs in alliance with the Bulgarian king Michael II Asen managed to wrest from the Latins the cities Mēdeia, Tsurulon, Derkos and Bizyē²³.

In 1347, Mēdeia was a possession of the Byzantine Empress Anna of Savoy at the civil war against Ioannes VI Kantakouzenos. Dobrotitsa (Τομπροτίτζας in contemporary Byzantine documents), brother of the Bulgarian ruler Mpalikas (Balik), came to help with an army, but was defeated in the battle of Sēlymbria; yet in gratitude he was appointed *Archōn of Mēdeia* by Anna of Savoy. From this place he resisted Kantakouzeni, whose authority he did not recognize, plundered the neighboring towns, but he was ultimately besieged by land and sea. Despite Mēdeia's defense options, Dobrotitsa sees how the struggle for the throne will end and prefers to surrender and come to terms with the emperor, for which he is rewarded with a court title²⁴.

After their victory over the Crusader army at Nikopolis in 1396, the Turks organized a campaign along the Black Sea coast and captured Mesēmbria, Anchialos, Agathopolis and Mēdeia²⁵.

In 1588 the Greek merchant Iakōvos Mēloītēs described Mēdeia as the first port on the Black Sea coast after leaving the Bosphorus²⁶. The famous Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi visited Mēdeia along with other towns on the Black Sea coast in 1660 and described the local population as predominantly Christian. There were still

²⁰ Ioannis Tzetzēs *Epistolae*, Ep. 7, ed. Th. PRESSEL, Tubingae 1851, p. 10, 17–20.

²¹ Б. НЕДКОВ, *България и съседните ѝ земи през XII век според Идриси*, София 1960, p. 70, 76, 98.

²² A. KÜLZER, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini...*, 520.

²³ GEORGIOS AKROPOLITES, *Opera*, 47, vol. I–II, rec. A. HEISENBERG, Leipzig 1903 (ed. anni MCMIII correctiorem curavit P. WIRTH, Stuttgartiae 1978), p. 85, 1–11; cf. R. MAKRIDES, *A Translation and Historical Commentary of George Akropolites' History* (PhD Thesis at King's College London 1978), note to p. 85, 22–24: *According to the anonymous note, the towns of Derkos and Medea, on the shores of the Black Sea, were also taken on this campaign.* The electronic thesis of dissertation: <https://kcl-pure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/studentTheses/a-translation-and-historical-commentary-of-george-akropolites-his> [11 VI 2023].

²⁴ IOANNES VI KANTAKOUZENOS, *Historia*, III, 95, ed. L. SCHOPEN, Bonn 1831 [= *CSHB*, 20], vol. II, p. 584–588; vol. III, p. 62–63; NICEPHORUS GREGORAS, XVI, 1–2, p. 795–801.

²⁵ A. KÜLZER, *Tabula Imperii Byzantini...*, 521.

²⁶ Σπυ. ΠΑΠΑΓΕΩΡΓΙΟΥ, *Ὀδοιπορικὸν Ἰακώβου Μηλοίτου*, Par 6, 1882, p. 632–642. About Meliotes see A. KÜLZER, *Peregrinatio graeca in Terram Sanctam. Studien zu Pilgerführern und Reisebeschreibungen über Syrien, Palästina und den Sinai aus byzantinischer und metabyzantinischer Zeit*, Frankfurt a. Main 1994, p. 33–34.

three active churches, but it is not clear whether one of them is that of the rock monastery. The town had no harbour, and as in ancient times smaller ships were simply hauled up on the beach²⁷.

Travelers and researchers of the monastery

In the modern era, Mēdeia remains mysterious and unknown to Europeans. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the research paper by Jan Stronk²⁸, in which he explains that Salmydessos disappears from historical sources because it disappears physically (?!?!). The first reason for this was the subsidence of the coast by 4 mm per year, and the second – mentioned by Strabo the silting of the coast by the sediments of the rivers, especially near this city, where the raging streams contributed to this²⁹. Stronk himself corrected his opinion at the next *Thracia Pontica* symposium after he had the opportunity at the end of the Cold War to travel to a border region of Turkey and visit the still existing Kiyıköy³⁰. He conscientiously quotes the so-called sea-pilots – manuals with information on all possible problems facing sailors. There were no sea-pilots for the Black Sea before 1774, when the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarça between the Ottoman Empire and Russia allowed non-Turkish ships to enter the Black Sea. However, both the *Atlas Maritimus et Commercialis* and the description of the Dutchman Cornelius Cruys (vice-admiral of Russian Tsar Peter the Great), as well as the *Sailing Directory* published by John Purdy in 1834, and *Zeeman's Wegwijzer* of J. Swart mention Cape Ineada and the so-called “False Bosphorus” at the entrance of Lake Dercos, but between them there is no port named either Salmydessos, nor Mēdeia, nor Midieh³¹.

Kiyıköy was visited by land more often, but mainly by travelers in the 20th century.

Before that, Joseph Pitton de Tournefort leaves a brief description in his book *Voyage du Levant* and places Mēdeia east of Constantinople, north of Mavromolos, around Belgrade³². Mavromolos was at that time a large monastery on the Bosphorus itself, near its mouth to the Black Sea. It remains unclear what kind

²⁷ H.J. KISSLING, *Beiträge zur Kenntnis Thrakiens im 17. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden 1956 [= AKM, 32.3], p. 69–71.

²⁸ J. STRONK, *Wreckage at Salmydessos*, [in:] *Thracia Pontica III. Troisième symposium international. Theme générale “Les Thraces et le colonies grecques, VII–V s.av.n.e.”*, Sofia 1986, p. 63–75 (= *Wreckage at Salmydessos*, Tal 18–19, 1986–1987, p. 63–70).

²⁹ STRABO, I, 3,7; I, 3,4.

³⁰ J.P. STRONK, *Conditions for Colonization. Calpes Limen and Salmydessos Reconsidered*, [in:] *Thracia Pontica, 4. Les agglomérations côtières de la Thrace avant la colonisation grecque. Les sites submergés. Méthodes des recherches. Quatrième symposium international. Sozopol 6–12 octobre 1988*, Sofia 1991, p. 97–108.

³¹ IDEM, *Wreckage at Salmydessos...*; IDEM, *Conditions for Colonization...* with illustrations from navigational charts; cf. *The Black Sea Pilot. Comprising the Dardanelles, Sea of Marmora, Bosphorus, Black Sea, and Sea of Azov*, London 1908, p. 129–132.

³² J.P. DE TOURNEFORT, *Voyage du Levant*, vol. II, Paris 1717, p. 153; cf. IDEM, *A Voyage into the Levant. Perform'd by Command of the Late French King*, trans. J. OZELL, Cambridge 2014.

of Belgrade it is, and everything points to the fact that the Frenchman himself did not visit the city. After him, the famous French epigrapher George Seure explains why Midieh remains such an unknown settlement. He passed through Strandzha Mountain at the beginning of the 20th century and was warned that a large number of criminals lived in the mountains, protected by the difficult terrain. The government struggled to control them with violence and often the heads of the executed criminals were hung from the windows of the city council in the town Burgas. According to local residents, the smuggling channels to Constantinople passed through the mountain after the establishment of the Bulgarian state in 1878³³.



Fig. 2. The Black Sea according to J.P. de Tournefort, *Voyage du Levant*, II.

There is data that there are three more travelers who visited Midieh in the 20th century before A. Portalsky: F. Schaffer, J. Stronk, and D. Müller. Enough was said about Stronk, and Schaffer was able to visit “Istrandscha Dag” for a geological survey and defined it as one of the least known areas in European Turkey. He also consulted Konstantin Jireček, who was kind enough to supplement his travel notes. He reached *the settlement of Midia, an apparently ancient city*³⁴.

³³ G. SEURE, *Inscriptions grecques du Pays des Astiens*, REA 31.4, 1929, p. 297 and note 2.

³⁴ F. SCHAFER, *Archäologische Beobachtungen auf eine Reise im östlichen Thrakien*, *ÖAIW* 6, 1903, p. 63–66.



Fig. 3. The walls of Midia on Schaffer's photograph from 1903.

He was told a local legend, a variant of the Argonaut myth, that the name came from the legendary poisoner and the wife of Jason's, Medeia. The legend is most likely very late and is the result of searching for an ancient tradition and proving the Greek roots of the settlements – a common occupation of educated Greeks in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Schaffer was impressed by the highly defensive position of the wall and moat. No trace of a moat is now visible near the wall, but according to Schaffer, it extended the whole width of the stone promontory, though in his time it was almost buried. Perhaps it made the walls appear higher, because according to Schaffer, it appears that they were 6–8 m in height. The walls were located on a rocky ledge above the steep bank, which made them inaccessible. This ledge cannot be seen now, probably owing to the burying of the moat, except in the northernmost part of the wall, under the corner tower, where it began to give way in antiquity and was fortified with bricks.

Schaffer also gives a brief description of the rock monastery, located according to him in the area of Papas dere, a quarter of an hour's walk from the city. He believes that the cave in which the church is located is of natural origin and we should believe him, having participated in a geological survey. However, the natural cave has been masterfully expanded and shaped. Schaffer writes about a later-dated jutting part (*Vorbau*), but he does not explain why he considers this part to be of a later period. Schaffer was struck by the many vaults of different heights inside the church and the sculptured decoration on the ceiling and columns, and there were also the remains of frescoes with half-erased names of saints. A full-flowing stream gushed from a gap in the rocks, the waters of which were collected in a cistern. We suppose he meant the sacred spring inside the church, but there is very little water in it, and there is no longer any trace of any full-water stream.

After the Austrian researcher, during the Balkan War, the rock monastery was visited and examined by Karel Škorpiľ, who was recruited as an archaeologist to the Bulgarian army and drew a good plan of the site.

at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and South-West University “Neofit Rilski”, Alexandar Portalsky had the opportunity to visit the monastery several times, but the site was only briefly mentioned in his research paper³⁸.

Finally, we must mention the most important researchers of the site so far. The first were the French explorer and traveler Xavier Hommaire de Hell (1812–1848) and his companion and printmaker Jules Laurens. De Hell became seriously ill during his travels and died in Turkey, but his widow diligently collected all the notes and diaries and published *Voyage en Turquie et en Perse exécutée par ordre du gouvernement français* in 4 large volumes with an additional volume of illustrations³⁹. Hommaire de Hell certainly visited the rock monastery and was very impressed by it. According to one of Laurens’s engravings, the two spent the night in the monastery at the holy spring around a makeshift hearth, and the inscription **De Hell 1846** remains carved on the rock, which in 2012 could still be clearly seen. Hommaire de Hell examined the walls thoroughly and redrew the surviving Greek inscriptions, preparing them for publication. Finally, the two travelers also draw a fairly accurate plan of the site, but, inexplicably, it lacks the end rooms to the right of the sacred spring. We assume that the very dense vegetation along the river prevented the premises from being noticed.

The only scientific publication of the monastery is the work of Semavi Eyüce and Nicole Thierry⁴⁰. Both authors are well-known names as scholars: Nicole Thierry has studied many other rock churches and monasteries, especially those in Cappadocia, and Semavi Eyüce (1922–2018) was one of the best experts at Byzantine antiquities in and around Constantinople.

Semavi Eyüce also has a preliminary publication in Turkish in which he explains that he intended to summarize his many observations in a book, but preferred to do so with the help of colleagues⁴¹. In the next text, however, he notes sadly that this book will not appear and therefore they make the joint publication with Nicole Thierry at least about the monastery. We also hoped that this text would be published after archaeological excavations of the monastery, which would clarify many things about the dating, but at the moment there is no prospect of that happening, so we decided to share our observations now.

³⁸ A. PORTALSKY, *Salmydessos Reconsidered*, [in:] *Thracia XVI. In honorem X congressus studiorum thraciorum*, София 2005, p. 35–44.

³⁹ X.H. DE HELL, Ph. LE BAS, M. DE LA ROQUETTE, J. LAURENS, *Voyage en Turquie et en Perse. Exécuté par ordre du gouvernement français*, Paris 1854–1860.

⁴⁰ S. EYÜCE, N. THIERRY, *Le monastère et la source sainte de Midye en Thrace turque*, Car 20, 1970, p. 47–76.

⁴¹ S. EYİCE, X. *Hommaire de Hell ve Ressam Jules Laurens Müşterek Türkiye Seyahatnamelerinin Değerlendirilmesi Yolunda Bir Araştırma*, BTTK 27(105), 1963, p. 59–88, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/ttkbelleten/issue/73644/1213086> [11 VI 2023].

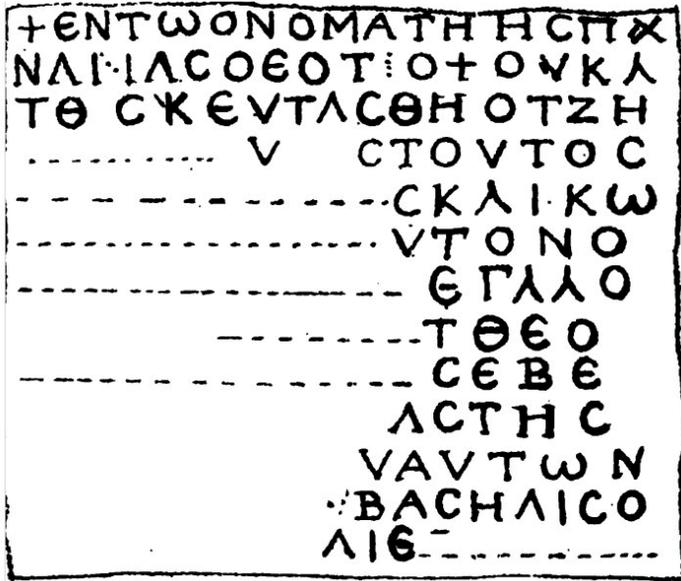


Fig. 5. The longest inscription in the church redrawn by De Hell and Laurens⁴².



Fig. 6. Narthex of the Rock Church, engraving by Laurens⁴³.

⁴² After X.H. DE HELL, Ph. LE BAS, M. DE LA ROQUETTE, J. LAURENS, *Voyage en Turquie...*

⁴³ After *ibidem*.

The monastery

Here we have the opportunity for the first time to offer all the known plans of the rock monastery. Of course, the most detailed and good is the latest one, which most accurately depicts the very few surviving masonry elements (with a dark black continuous line) and the presumed additions, which are shown with solid black lines without shading, while the shaded elements are those that are cut into the rock. This raises the question of the dating of the additions – whether they existed originally or were added later. The reason for such an extension could be the collapse of the rock ledge and the need to replace it with a wall and a roof. We are very skeptical of such a possibility for the following reasons.

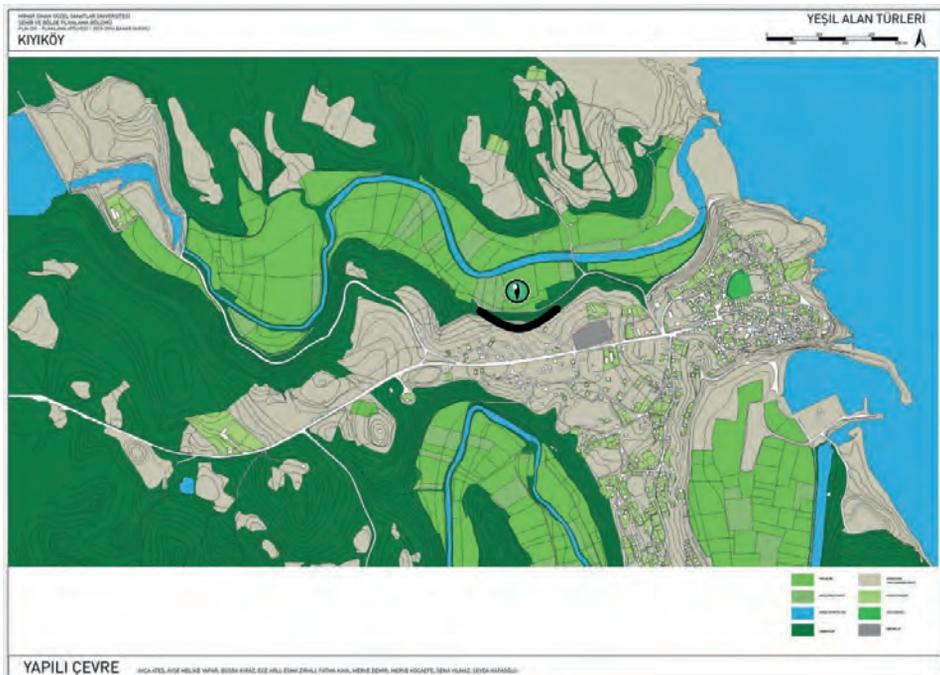


Fig. 7. The plan of Kıyıköy. The location of the rock monastery is marked with a thick black line, and the location of the modern observer – with an eye. After A. Odman et al.



Fig. 8. Plan of Kiyiköy with elevation lines marked. The location of the rock monastery is marked with a thick black line, and the location of the modern observer – with an eye. After A. Odman et al.

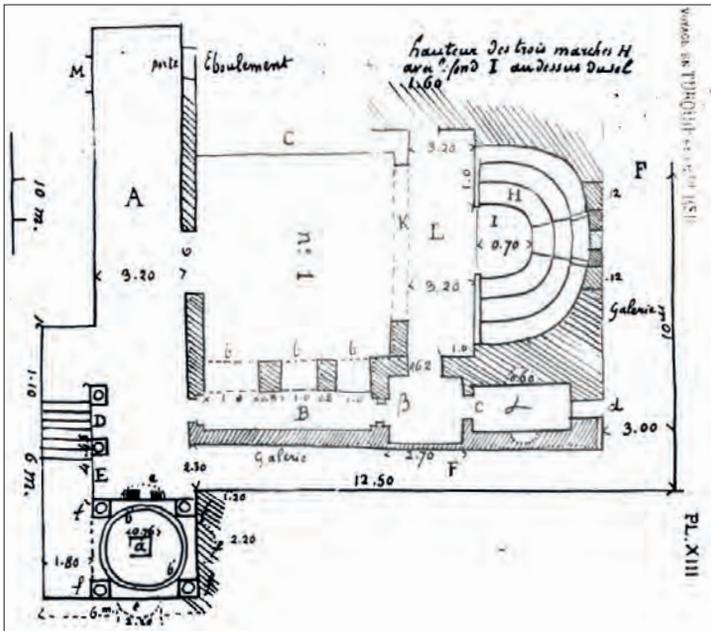


Fig. 9. Plan of the rock monastery after Hommaire de Hell *Voyage en Turquie et en Perse...* (plate XIII).

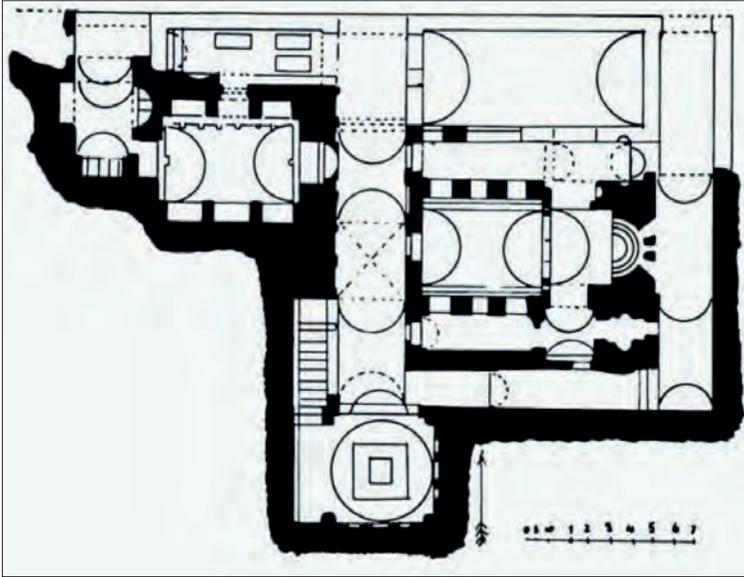


Fig. 10. Plan of the monastery after Karel Škorpil. After S. Eyice, *X. Hommaire de Hell ve Ressay Jules Laurens...*

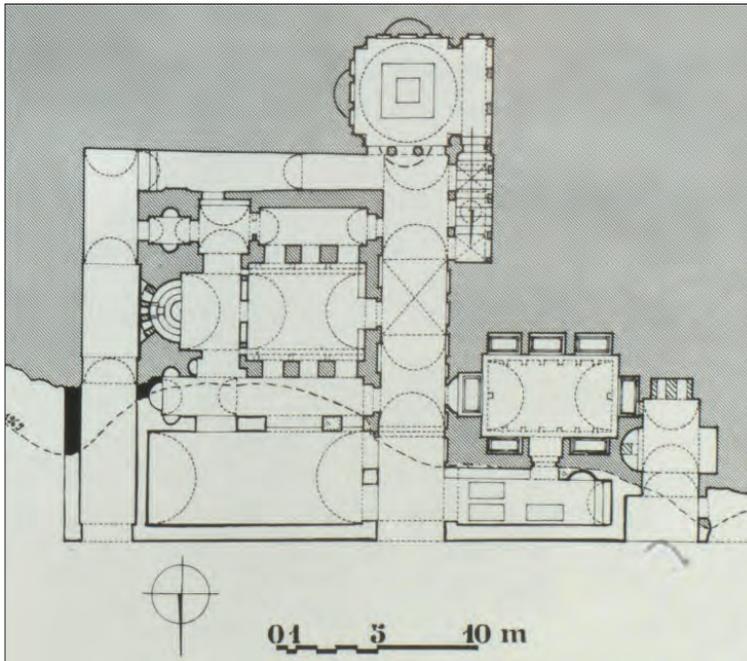


Fig. 11. Plan of the monastery from 1969. After S. Eyıçe and N. Thierry, *Le monastère et la source sainte de Midye en Thrace...*

It is clearly visible that the central and most important part of the monastery is located deepest in the rock. In Turkish it is named *Ayazma*, a name derived from the Greek term *hagiasma* meaning “holy water” or “holy spring”. This element is inherent in every ancient sanctuary, and therefore we believe that a place was sacred long before the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Water probably also created the original natural cave as defined by Schaffer. At the current line of the rock shelter, it reaches inward almost 23 meters. The depth of the burial of the church is a little over 12 m. This is a great depth, and even just shaping the rock to such dimensions required the labor of many craftsmen and it was expensive. On the plan after Eyiçe and Thierry 1970, the rock ledge line is indicated by the dashed line and dated 1969. In 2015, this line was practically unchanged. Hardly any part of the rock has collapsed as a result of erosion over the last 700 years, but it probably wasn't a big part. Even if the shelter reached the end of the left side nave of the church, it could not have enclosed the temple as a side wall, and windows and columns could not have been cut into the rock. Therefore, we believe that the additional masonry parts of the church are a structural element being added later, but are not a part of the original construction of the temple. They also had the important role of radically changing the external appearance of the old pagan sanctuary, to show its new Christian nature and function.

This leads to the conclusion that the temple, which had masonry parts, could definitely have had plasterwork. Since it cannot have been applied to only some of the walls of the temple, it had not only sculpted but also painted decoration from the beginning. Schaffer claims to have seen remains of frescoes, i.e. they were visible until the beginning of the 20th century. On the other hand, Eyiçe and Thierry write that in 1855–1856 the local Greeks undertook restoring the temple and make it a place of pilgrimage. The result of this late restoration was the declaration of the temple under the patronage of St. Nicholas. Therefore, we avoid calling it by this name, since it is most likely not the original one, but belongs to the maritime tradition of dedicating coastal temples and chapels to St. Nicholas, who is the patron saint of sailors and fishermen. Then, add Eyiçe and Thierry, a masonry extension was built to complement the collapsed facade, which they found completely destroyed. We need to make a clarification here. It is not about the left naos of the church, but about the vaulted room attached to it. It is not marked on Homere de Hell's plan, but is clearly visible on Karel Škorpiš's plan. A well-educated and schooled archaeologist like him would not be able to invent a non-existent room. However, Eyiçe and Thierry did not see it, and we did not notice even a trace of it on the field. This leads us to think that this room was not built in the Middle Ages, but was completed in 1855–1856. At that time, the site did not function as a monastery, but only as a church, and there was a need for such a room where the priests could change their clothes and store the church utensils. An additional argument for this is that this room spoils the general symmetry of the temple and does not allow the traditional circumambulation of priests and laitmen at Easter.

While on the right side of the right naos there is a carved corridor through which three people can safely pass in procession during the services. Hardly so much work was put into the aesthetic design of the rock temple – the corridor is still fully functional today.



Fig. 12. General view of the rock monastery in 2010. To the left, there are the incised columns that separate the central naos from the left one, to the right next to A. Portalsky is the entrance to the sacred spring, and the low opening further to the right leads to the tomb.

The church itself is a three-nave basilica, which is carved into the rock, but gives the full impression of a brick temple – with such precision and perfection all the architectural elements are formed.

The altar apse immediately makes an impression. It is small, but well formed with three rows of step-shaped seats that form a synthronon, bench reserved for the clergy in an Early Christian or Byzantine church. André Grabar, an expert at early Christian and Balkan Byzantine architecture, gives a very precise description of the meaning of the synthronon: each synthronon of a cathedral church serves to seat the priests during certain church services and also for other gatherings convened by the local bishop, and there is a throne in the middle of it; in the ordinary cathedral, as a rule, only one clergyman had the episcopal rank, but an archbishopric included several dioceses, each of which was under the leadership

of a bishop. In the archbishop cathedral, the presiding seat of the “synthronon” fell by right to the archbishop, surrounded by his deputies⁴⁴. This is important because it explains the diligence in building this temple.



Fig. 13. The church: from the left naos you can see the middle one, part of the altar space, part of the right naos with a large window to the round corridor. Above the false vault, the beginning of a carved vault is visible, which covered at least part of the left naos, but hardly formed a whole vault without masonry parts.



Fig. 14. The entrances to the side rooms of the monastery.

⁴⁴ A. GRABAR, *Deux témoignages archéologiques sur l'autocéphalie d'une église. Prespa et Ochrid*, ЗРВИ 8.2, 1964, Mélanges Georges Ostrogorsky, p. 163–165.



Fig. 15. The altar apse.



Fig. 16. Synthronon of the church of St. Sofia in Nicaea (Iznik).

On each side, two columns separate the central naos from the side naves. The base of the vault is highlighted by a triple cornice. Below this cornice, 6 consoles can be seen in a projecting forward part, 3 on each side. Those which are not damaged have the form of the protome of an eagle or a lion. Eyiçe and Thierry write about an iconostasis that was also cut into the rock, with an arch in the middle and a window on the right. In 1961, this entire thin barrier was destroyed, and now not even a trace of it can be seen. We have no reason not to trust the two authors, which also gives us clues about the possible dating of the temple: it is not too early, because the altar would not be hidden behind such a stable partition. On the other hand, the final shaping of the altar partition in the iconostasis took place after the end of the iconoclastic period. If the temple had a stable iconostasis, it would also resemble the eternal vault to which it was held. Therefore, we think that here it is not so much an iconostasis as an altar partition.



Fig. 17. The entrance to the central nave – view from the apse.



Fig. 18. The two “columns” between the central and left (north) naves.



Fig. 19. The ceiling of the corridor to the sacred spring.

The most important part of this complex was the sacred spring. It is in the deepest part of the rock and is shaped like a pool, which is reached by steps, completely in the spirit of the ancient tradition. The pool is quite voluminous and is designed to hold water over 1.5 m deep, but it is now almost completely dry – it is full of pebble stones, with a little water glinting through. If we judge by the height of the carved inscription **De Hell 1846**, the French traveler, stood in the same place as us, and then also there was not much water in the sacred spring. Above the pool there are semi-columns carved into the rock with ornate capitals that surround small panels, in the same manner as in some decorative frescoes in Pompeii. The space above the spring is masterfully shaped like a dome.

It is difficult to say when the sacred spring was shaped in this way. Many nymphaeums in antiquity had a similar appearance. The craftsmen's effort to cover every part of the rock with something speaks of a desire to erase the pagan purpose of this spring and to emphasize its already Christian use.

Capitals attract attention. With them, a plant ornament covers the entire surface and is in high relief, as if it was torn from the stone. As a prototype, Eyiçe and Thierry point to the decoration of the columns in St. Polyuctus of Constantinople

from 512–527 (fig. 25 in their article). This technique was very common in the 6th century and is visible in St. Sofia and St. St. Sergius and Bacchus in Constantinople, San Vitale in Ravenna and elsewhere⁴⁵.



Fig. 20. Decoration of the sacred spring.



Fig. 21. Capital above the sacred spring with the image of a vine.

⁴⁵ S. EYİÇE, N. THIERRY, *Le monastère et la source sainte de Midye en Thrace...*, p. 64–67.

Conclusion

It is difficult to give a reliable dating of the site without carrying out archaeological excavations. We agree with Eyiçe and Thierry, who argue that there are at least two construction phases. They believe, however, that the small western cell of a hermit situated not far from the spring must have been cut first. The authors agree that it was already a revered place, but they do not accept its formation in this way during antiquity, which for us is very likely. Later, according to Eyiçe and Thierry, the ensemble of rock halls must have been cut – the hall with the dome and the spring, the basilica and the circular corridor that served for processions. The funeral hall served for the burial of the first hypothetical hermit, and then of the abbots of the monastery.



Fig. 22. Beginning of the stairs to the spring.

The hypothesis of Eyiçe and Thierry that such large-scale construction could have been carried out in a period of longer peace is logical. For this region it may be the time of Justinian. A period of invasions followed, but in 626 the Avars were defeated and a period of peace began again until the beginning of the Bulgarian invasions around 710. Finally, there came the peace treaty with khan Omurtag, the successor of the Bulgarian ruler Krum, which gave a new long period of peace.

We assume there were three construction periods. The first is from antiquity. Then the sacred spring was created not in a completely natural environment, but in the traditions of Greco-Roman architecture. After that, the monastery got its original form during the time of Emperor Justinian. This is also Eyiçe and Thierry's opinion due to the many marks of the style, which seems to be an imitation of antiquity in the spirit of the age. Here we would also add the availability of financial means for such construction. Eyiçe and Thierry point out that the architecture and decoration are very homogeneous and reminiscent of a proto-Byzantine model, which is difficult to explain for such a secluded place: in large centers of civilization, works of the past could be successfully imitated for a long time, but it is not so in secluded places. Here we must note that today, and to the travelers of the 19th and 20th centuries, Strandzha Mountain seems a secluded and inaccessible place, but in the Middle Ages it was not like that at all. The mountain is the natural hinterland of Constantinople, aqueducts for water supply to the capital started from it and its defense began there. The above mentioned synthronon testifies that at least a bishop, and perhaps an archbishop, served in the temple, who would not have stood in a small and insignificant settlement. The city was populous, rich, and close enough to the capital for local craftsmen, though provincial ones, to diligently imitate the models of Constantinople.

During one of Khan Krum's campaigns, the city was destroyed and, since the Bulgarians were still pagans at the time, the monastery must have been looted as well. However, then its masonry part was damaged, since, even if it was tried to be set on fire, the rock could not burn. Therefore, it could most easily be restored afterwards.

According to Eyiçe and Thierry, the large supraapsidal inscription, as well as the cross that rises above it, as well as the cross (perhaps bejeweled) on the north wall, can be dated to the 9th century in its iconoclastic period. The decoration of the apse is indeed reminiscent of the large cross in St. Irene in Constantinople. Then probably a new plaster was also laid with the corresponding iconoclastic images, which were in complete harmony with the vegetal sculpted decoration. After all, the famous church of St. Sofia in Βιζύη, in Turkish Vize according to Eyiçe and Thierry (in note 43 they quote Cyril Mango) also dates back to the 9th century. Again, according to them, at the end of the 10th and in the 11th century, the monument seems to have been much visited, judging by the style of some graffiti in the narthex, but now these graffiti have already been erased by the many new ones.

Finally, we must add one more argument for the dating. The monastery has no cells for living, it is not coenobitic (κοινόβιον), which immediately distinguishes it from Aladzha Monastery near Varna or from the rock monasteries near the village of Ivanovo in Bulgaria. Their dating is accordingly after the end of the 12th century, while it was precisely in the early monasteries that the monks lived around, in small hermitages and dugouts, and gathered around the church only during ministrations. This again points to the 6th century. We also asked ourselves if there are any remains of such monastic dwellings nearby.



Fig. 23. Entrance to the skete near Kazandere.



Fig. 24. The interior of a supposed skete near Kazandere.

Indeed we found some. They have not been recorded until now because they are not located in the immediate vicinity of the monastery, but on the bank of Kazandere, the river on the southern side of Kiyıköy. They are so comfortable and practical that they are used even now as sleeping places by shepherds and fishermen by the river, and perhaps also by farmers working in the many gardens. In some of them, electricity has even been installed as well as lamps and refrigerators. Therefore, we could not examine these dwellings in detail, and we cannot rule out that they were carved in a very recent time, but the treatment of the stone makes us think that they are significantly older.

A beautiful and very specific rock monastery near Kiyıköy has revealed some of its charm and mysteries to us, but it seems that it will wait a long time for its serious archaeological investigation. Without such investigation, nothing more can be said about this site.

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