

TURKEY

Churches built in Ottoman times

In the later Ottoman centuries Christian minorities, such as the Greeks and Armenians, were again able to build their own schools and churches, which had long been restricted. Ottoman rulers slowly realised the impossibility of a total Islamicisation and decided to give their non-Moslem citizens more freedom to have and keep their own cultural identity. If we look at the outlying Ottoman border provinces in the Balkans and in Armenia, it now seems that we can trace as far back as the 17th and 18th centuries a greater and rather earlier phase of Christian activity there than on the Empire's mainland. The climax of the Christian regeneration and advance was reached in the 19th century and corresponds with the political liberalisation of the Ottoman Empire, the so-called *Tanzimat* (reform) era, under the rule of Sultan Abdülmecit I (1839-1861). Now perhaps for the first time in Ottoman history, fitting literary attributes for this period might be the term *Pax Ottomanica* which indeed benefited Christian communities in the 19th century, or Lord Kinross' perceptive and apt book title in 1956 considering modern Turkey not as 'Asia' but instead as 'Europa Minor'. At that time, on occasion extremely large churches were erected all over Anatolia in the centres of Greek and Armenian settlement – in East Anatolia, Cappadocia, the Trebizond (Trabzon) region and on the West Coast. These were built, not only in a neo-Byzantine, neo-Gothic, Classical or historical style, but also in a convincing Christian-Ottoman architectural style.

However, dramatic historical events at the beginning of the 20th century ended forever this last fortunate and flourishing period of Anatolian Christianity. The Armenian genocide reached its climax in 1915 and the mistake of the Kingdom of Greece to launch a military attack on Anatolia, the remaining central body of the collapsed Ottoman Empire, after it lost in World War I, ended in an unbelievable disaster. The last acts of this drama were the burning of Smyrna (Izmir) in September 1922 and the complete expulsion of the Anatolian Greek population (with the exception of Constantinople and some islands), ratified in 1923. This brought an end to Christianity in areas which had been Christianised since the time of the apostles, but equally also ended traditional Turkish settlement and culture in Greece and on the Balkans.

The present state of some of the surviving monuments

Both the post-Byzantine churches and their late classical and Byzantine predecessors are in roughly the same situation. In fact many post-Byzantine churches were built on or in the ruins of medieval ones (for the state of these earlier heritage sites see *H@R* 2002–2003). The main problem is until now that most of the Christian heritage places built during the Ottoman period, just as their earlier counterparts, are not scientifically recorded and therefore, up to now have not been as eligible for heritage protection by even European let alone by Turkish art-historians and archaeologists.

In Anatolia we face the same problems as those we found and are finding in the Balkans and in Greece. In some cases an Anatolian Christian church is now used as a mosque which ensures its survival as a building. Other examples verify a secular use of churches. For example in 1982, it was discovered that an 18th century village basilica was being used as a farm-house in the village of Çakıl (Greek: Michania), Bithynia, on the far eastern Kyziko

peninsula on the shores of the Sea of Marmora. Astonishingly two oval canvas paintings, of Christ and an Evangelist, which originally hung between the wooden columns of its *naos*, were at the time still being kept at the site by the farmers.

Anatolian churches were and are being blown up, destroyed and are still being used inappropriately. For example, the impressive cathedral-church of Hagios Gregorios of Nyssa built in 1863, that dominated the silhouette and skyline of Trebizond, was blown up in the 1930s to permit modern city development.

The problems in protecting and caring for heritage places are many and widespread. Many churches do not possess an attractive outer or inner appearance, or no longer do, because at times the building materials used were quite plain. This also leads to an inappropriate management assessment and evaluation, because a building might be ranked as not aesthetic enough to be protected at all. It is precisely this that has caused and is causing the loss of many heritage buildings in many rural areas, as well as the strong interest to readily getting cheap building materials for modern structures.



Trebizond, church 'Hagios Gregorios of Nyssa (1863), blown up in the 1930s

Yayla Köyü, area of Muğla (Caria), village church (19th c.): View from the north

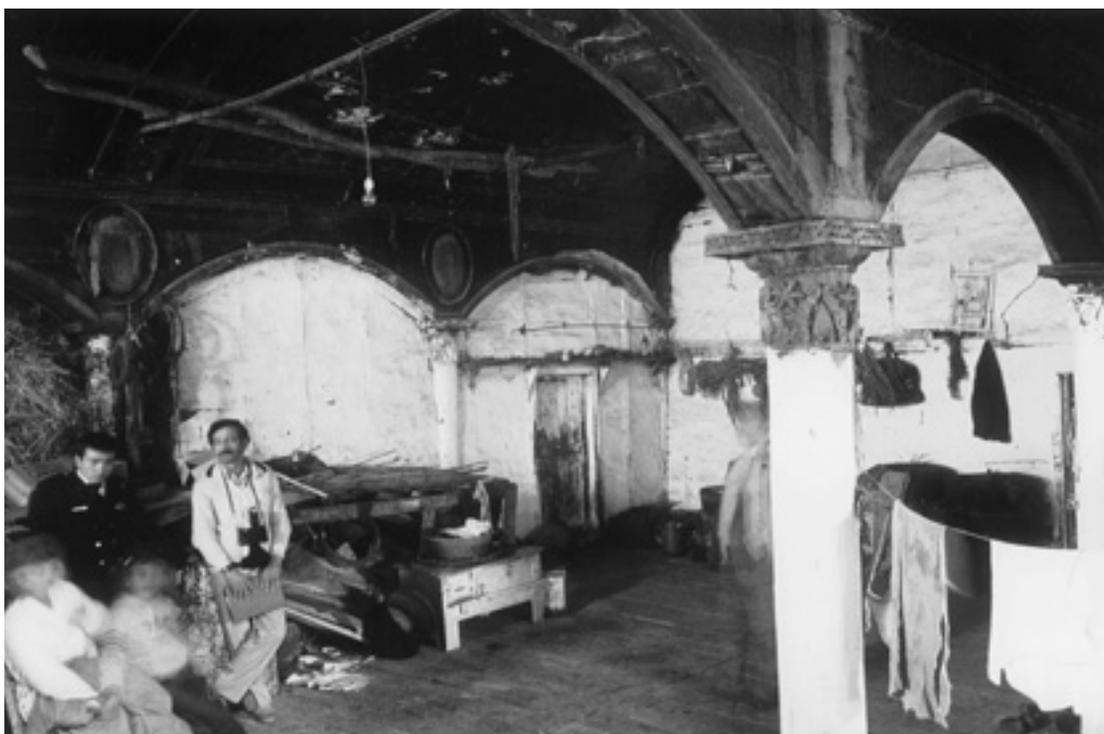


Other reasons also lead to the total destruction of the often empty and ruined buildings: the destruction of the south-western Anatolian one-aisled 19th century village church of Yayla Köyü (the former Greek village of Hagios Antonios), near Muğla in the historical landscape of Caria, was caused by the collapse of its rotten wooden roof construction reported in 1998. It is mostly the domes and vaults of these churches that are structurally at risk, and such cracked masonry can clearly be seen in the village of Cunda on Cunda Adası (Greek: Moscho-Nisi) near Ayvalık

(Greek: Kydonia) on the West coast. The triconch cross-domed church of this village is in definite danger of collapsing. Cracks in the building's brickwork are undeniably threatening the pillars and the vaults, and this might lead to a total collapse of the building in the near future. As well as this, we still find remains of the church furnishing, such as the iconostases, which often were constructed of wood, and bishop's thrones and chancels, in a ruined state, for example inside the church of Hagios Archangelos Michael in Sille near Konya in Phrygo-Lycaonia. In addition, stucco decorations



Sivrihissar, large Armenian domed basilica built in 1881 (2003)



Çakıl – Michania, basilica inside, building used as a farm-house as seen in 1982

and wall-paintings of the churches are particularly at great risk of total loss and destruction, mostly because of vandalism to the lower parts of the unused buildings. Consider for example the 19th century painting 'Baptism of Christ' in a niche on the south of the eastern apse of the domed triconch church in Cunda, Cunda-Island off the coast of Ayvalık-Kydonia. Another risk is water, which can pour through leaking vaults and roof constructions and cause the loss of painted and decorated plaster.

The basic practical problem for the municipalities, especially of small villages, can be summarised in frequently heard questions: "How do we cope and what do we do with buildings like this?", and if interest is aroused: "Who helps us financially?"

Also architectural changes to buildings can be demonstrated and are causing damage to the original structure. The large Armenian domed basilica of Sivrihissar, built in 1881 some 120 km south-west of Ankara, was used as a factory for a long time and it was decided to add walls in the western interior, so destroying the concept and sense of its original architecture. The building now stands empty. Also the large basilica of Misti, built 1844 in southern Cappadocia, is now used as a storehouse for building materials such as sand, wood and stones. There is finally the non-religious use of a church as a farm-house as mentioned above.

Conclusions

Some Anatolian municipalities have good ideas about what to do with their historical Christian architectural heritage, which is mostly located in town and village centres. The consciousness and awareness of historical events help in a better treatment of the heritage places and this is the main key in solving their poor conservation state, and the fragile condition the buildings are mostly in currently.

The use of churches as local museums, concert halls or art-galleries, or as other places for general public cultural use, are perhaps a good way to protect them as heritage places. Plans to transform churches into mosques can be connected with considerable interference. For example, the municipality of the Euphrates small town Nizip banned continuing the transformation of the town's Byzantine church into a *Camii* (mosque) during the 1990s; it was recently planned to change the unused building into a museum. In this case, the erection of a planned minaret was stopped. To ensure a long-term success of such ideas financial support, international and European involvement are urgently needed.

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Cunda Adası, near Ayvalık, domed church, cracked brick-pillars and vaults

Cunda Adası, domed church, vandalised niche painting 'Baptism of Christ'

