

# ERZİNCAN ALTİNTEPE CHURCH WITH MOSAIC

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*M.S. 6. yüzyıl ortalarına (imparator I. Justinianus dönemine) tarihli Altintepe kilisesi, iç mekanı 19,60 x 11,30 m ölçülerinde, doğu-batı doğrultusunda uzanan 2 x 3 sütun dizimli, üç nefli ve bazilikal planlıdır. Doğu yönünde yaklaşık 60 cm yükseklikte apsis platformu yer alır. Girişi olasılıkla kuzeydendir. Yaklaşık 220 m<sup>2</sup>lik alan kaplayan kilise iç zemini, güneydoğudaki pastaphorion hücresi dışında tamamen mozaiklerle döşenmiştir. Dikdörtgen panolarda, çeşitli geometrik ve bitkisel unsurun yanı sıra, dönem stilini yansıtan çok sayıda hayvan betimlemeleriyle de karşılaşılmaktadır. Zemin dışında, duvarların ve kemerlerin de mozaik ve duvar resimleriyle kaplı olduğu kalıntılardan anlaşılmaktadır. Zaman zaman onarımlar geçiren yapı MS. 7. yüzyılda Arap akınlarıyla yıkılmış, ancak kaledeki Bizans varlığı sone ermemiştir.*

**Keywords:** Altintepe, Mosaic, Basilica, Early Byzantine, Justinianus

Altintepe is situated in Eastern Anatolia and 15 km away from the Erzincan city center which is in the northeast direction. The castle, which is lying on a possessive situation for the Erzincan plain, is founded on a volcanic hill that has 400 m. in diameter and 60 m. in height (Fig. 1). The remnants of the castle, in which the clues of the first settlements reaches to the Bronze Age, belongs to the Urartian period<sup>1</sup>. It is also understood from the ruins of the construct that are unearthed that the castle retains its importance in later periods<sup>2</sup>. The church complex having mosaic pavements that forms our study's subject is one of those remnants.

## Architecture

The church, that began to be excavated in 2003, was built on a natural terrace that is approximately 25 m high from the plain level at the eastern hillside of Altintepe. The rectangular structure that is sized 19,60 x 11,30 m and situated in the east-west direction, has 3 naves and is planned in basilica form (Fig. 2). A 2 x 3 ordered column row, in which only 3 pedestals remain, separates the naves (Fig. 3). The thicknesses of the walls are approximately 1 m in each direction. The entrance of the church is probably on the north wall. The long and narrow place at the northern side of the structure should have been used as nartex. However, it is most likely for generating a flat area in front of the entrance of the structure lying on a hillside. A symmetrical view is applied in Basilical planned structures in general. However, for this structure the location of entrance on the north wall instead of the west wall is a necessity due to the hillside. Additionally, probably for the same reason, the apses was placed interior of the church unlike with circular outward apses of other examples. A 3,60 x 7,10 m sized apses platform that is 60 cm high from the church ground is placed in the interior part of the east wall (Fig. 4). In the south of the apses platform, and in the southeast corner of the church there is a pastaphorion chamber having 2,40 x 2,60 m dimensions (Fig. 5). In the north of the apses, a chamber does not exist and this part is covered with a mosaic pavement as a continuance of the north side nave. As it is understood from the ruins, the middle nave of the church was constructed larger and higher than the others. The interior lightening of the church was obtained by the light holes on the middle nave's higher parts. Any indicator for the existence of a dome has not been found. The ruins of the roof point that the roof, which was rising on the arches made of bricks and covered with mosaics, was double slopped, supported by timbers and covered

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1 One of the important remnants belonging to Urartu period on the hill is pebble stone paved atrium of the temple-palace complex. There is not any motive or a depiction on the pavement formed through closely spaced ranging colorful natural stones. This is one of the important representatives of the Anatolian Iron Age pebble mosaics with floor pavement of the early Phrygian period in Gordion: Özgüç 1966, 8, Panel XVI.1-2; Karaosmanoğlu 2009, 121, fig. 5.

2 Karaosmanoğlu 2007, 69-83.



Figure 1  
Altıntepe

with roofing tiles (Fig. 6-7). In the light of similar architectural examples and the ruins of the church, it can be said that the overall height of the structure can be approximate to its width (10-11 m.).

### Mosaics and Wall Paintings

The interior floor of the church, which has an area of approximately 220 m<sup>2</sup>, is covered with mosaics except the south-east chamber. However, only half of these mosaic pavements remained today (Fig. 3). The master colors of the tesserae are black, grey, red, white, yellow, brown, blue and cream.

Generally, floor mosaics are comprised of rectangular panels and bands within these panels. Besides various geometrical and plantal components that are committed together, many animal depictions reflecting the style of the period are confronted too.

In the center of the large panel of the central nave, a panel with figures is placed that is found largely undamaged and sized approximately 2,34 x 5,86 meters (Fig. 8-12). There is a composition formed with lion, taurus and tiger figures ordered from left to right along the north edge; and deer, bear, and chamois figures ordered from left to right in south direction. In the central panel beside

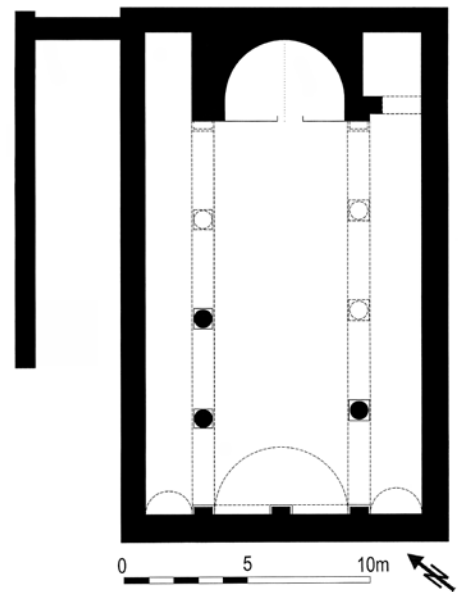


Figure 2  
Altıntepe church, plan



Figure 3  
Interior of the Church, view from east



Figure 4  
Apses platform in the interior part of the east wall of the church



Figure 5  
Pastaphorion chamber in the south-east corner of the church

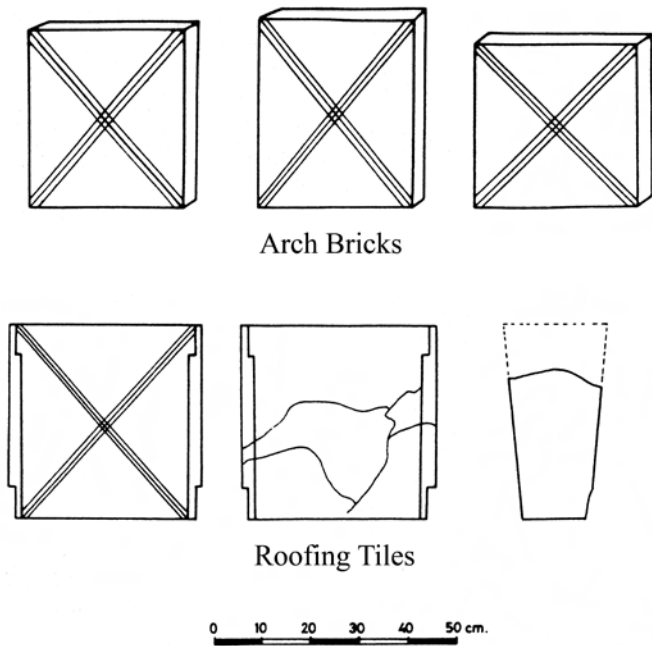


Figure 6  
Arch bricks and roofing tiles



Figure 7  
Roofing tiles



Figure 8  
Large panel in the central nave

the figures mentioned above which are forming the main composition, smaller bird figures are placed also. 13 examples of these birds can be counted in the protected parts of the panel. In the panel, besides the figures, trees, little plants and flowers are also used as inlay motives for the purpose of emphasizing the natural ambiance and filling the empty parts over the white background. Mostly, flower motives are placed in the central panel.

The central panel is surrounded by a wide meander band (Fig. 8). Swastika typed meanders are formed by two different arms crossing each other from place to place. Eight little panels are placed between the arms of meander. In the preserved six panels, a grazing fawn (Fig. 13), a spotted leopard crouched on hind legs, a grazing deer, goose/duck and a sitting taurus with a medallion (Fig. 14) are depicted.

A 4,95 x 4,20 m sized large panel in front of the apses (presbyterium) is surrounded by geometrical elements (Fig. 15). The main motive of the panel is composed of thin reticular bands. The bold body from which the symmetrically



Figure 9  
Lion figure in the central panel



Figure 10  
Taurus figure in the central panel



Figure 11  
Deer figure in the central panel



Figure 12  
Smaller birds and flowers in the central panel



Figure 13  
A grazing fawn figure



Figure 14  
A sitting taurus with a medallion



Figure 15  
Presbyterium panel in front of the apses platform



Figure 16  
South-west corner of the church



Figure 17  
North-west corner of the church

placed boughs grow is largely damaged. Grape leaves and bunches of grapes are seen on the grape boughs that grow from this bold root and disperse on the white ground. There are bird figures that are placed symmetrically among grape branches, leaves and bunches.

Numerous rectangular panels on which geometrical motives are depicted are placed on the inner ground of the church (Fig. 3, 16-17). Besides the designs formed by consistent combinations of squares, circles and spirals; three dimensional (3D) prismatic combinations are seen from place to place. North and south naves are filled with only one geometrical motive. Especially, the north nave which is composed of thirteen similarly sized, repeating geometrical panels and is remarkable. Except in these, there are also geometrical depictions formed by nested rectangles, squares, quarries and triangles in the presbyterium, in front of the apses and between the column bases. Besides the mosaic pavement covering the ground of the church, the surface of the apses platform is also



Figure 18  
Apses platform mosaic



Figure 19  
Tesserae from the wall mosaics



Figure 20  
Large block with mosaic existing in front of the west wall



Figure 21  
Some fragments from the wall paintings



Figure 22  
Partially preserved wall paintings in the west edge of the north wall

covered with mosaic on which geometrical designs are placed (Fig. 18). The geometrical elements of the only partly preserved mosaic are composed as a semi-circular shape properly to the architectural form of the apses.

Inside the debris stratum that fills the structure, numerous broken arch (fascia) bricks are found. It is understood from the tesserae and mosaic pieces, that they belong to this arch and the walls, mostly spread through spilling. Few of them are found with some mortar on pieces, and the bottom surface of the walls and arches are covered with mosaics. The mosaic tesserae covering the walls are made from various colored glass and also these glasses are produced as golden glazed (Fig. 19).

Of the polychrome glass mosaics of Altuntepe Church walls and arches, only some little pieces that are spread and fragmented remain. The most substantial piece of wall mosaics is on a large block existing in front of the west wall (Fig. 20). One surface of the block that is 65 cm wide and that is removed to Erzincan Museum for consolidation process<sup>3</sup> is covered with various colored glass tesserae. It is understood that the scene is a part of a large mosaic wall panel and is surrounded by a band formed by tiles, one on the top of the other. Here, a figure's foot part turning to left slightly is depicted. The toes of the left foot and a part of the pendant dress are seen. The colorful part near the figure is supposed to be endpiece of a wing. In this situation, it can be said that this is an angel figure.

Wall paintings are placed in the spaces between the mosaic panels<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 21). Red squares and black sand-glass motives are depicted in rotation and spaces are painted with cream on the preserved walls, especially on the west edge of the north wall, in the geometrical bordure embroidered on stucco (Fig. 22).

## Conclusion

Besides architectural features, the Altuntepe Church also has an importance for the region with its mosaics covering the ground, walls and arches. Its uniqueness<sup>5</sup> in the entire East Anatolian region indicates that these mosaics are not a product of a local workshop. Probably, these mosaics are products of commuter mosaic masters having a Cilicia Region style and technique manner. The Altuntepe Church and other early Byzantine structures on the hill indicate that the castle, which had importance with its location on the natural gate from the East Anatolia and Urartu to Central Anatolia, preserved its importance in the Late Antiquity too. Building such an important structure on this location brings to mind that it can be a product of religious and political oriented propaganda studies in the Justinianus period (527-565 AD).

Altuntepe is in the Üzümlü town of Erzincan. The previous name of the town was "Cimin". This "Cimin" name began to be used in the period of Mengücekoğulları Seigniorship. It derives from the "Tzumina" name, which was the Roman, or earlier period name of the town. Tzumina had also affected from the security precautions that Byzantine Emperor Justinian I had started against

<sup>3</sup> Can 2007: 106.

<sup>4</sup> The pieces of the wall paintings that preserved slightly are brought to Erzincan Museum and restoration of a little part that stayed in-situ is partly made in 2005: Can 2007: 106-107.

<sup>5</sup> Doğanşehir and Kuluncak mosaics that exists in the Malatya are the closest examples of Altuntepe mosaics in terms of geography. Except from those, mosaic parts that had found in Erzincan and brought to the Erzurum Museum in 1952 are also similar to the Altuntepe mosaics in terms of style and technique. However, their find places are not known. Those mosaics that are mentioned here are being studied by me.

the Sassanid threat<sup>6</sup>. In the sources, construction of a new city having the same name with the Emperor (Justinianopolis) by the order of him is mentioned<sup>7</sup>. In the surroundings of Üzümlü the only center having intensely Early Byzantine ruins is Altntepe. Altntepe of the early Byzantine period with its city walls, structures inside the castle, small chapel and basilical church is built on the Urartu ruins and it is of high probability that is same as “Justinianopolis” as mentioned in the sources.

It is possible to date the Altntepe Church Mosaics to mid-6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The spolia materials that are observed in structure walls also indicate that pieces elements belonging to a structure, maybe having same function,existing in earlier periods are used in the church (Fig. 23). Additionally, indications of a date between 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. coming from the analysis of the bones of many Byzantine tombs that are found within the decadent stratum (Fig. 24), denote that the possibility of the destruction of the structure in the period of Arabian invasions beginning around 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and the continuity of Byzantine existence on the hill for a long time afterwards.



Figure 23  
Spolia fragments in the structure walls



Figure 24  
Grave built in stone bond at the outer corner of the southern wall

6 Konukçu 2004: 11.

7 Procopius III. 6, 3-7; Adontz 1970: 49, 103 vd.



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