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Negotiating Above and Underground Sacredness in Nineteenth-century Cappadocia: The Use of Underground settlements

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Abstract
Today, the underground settlements of Cappadocia are regarded as places of mystery and therefore attract tourists in search of unusual experiences. Most of these places are closed these days, with only a few open to visitors who have become the main actors in these ancient places. However, although the underground settlements of Derinkuyu and Kaymaklı are said to have been discovered in the 1960s, these and many others had been known to and were used by local villagers at least since the 19th century. This presentation aims to elucidate the ways in which these villagers, mostly Orthodox Christians but also Muslims, made use of the underground settlements for profane purposes, for example as storage space for agricultural products, as permanent living spaces, or for refuge in times of war, but also as sacred places.

Comparing the communal use of the underground settlements, we arrive at contradictory views of sacredness. In most cases, the underground settlements were not considered as “places of everyday sacrality,” since the modern church (or mosque) was usually not included in the underground space, but rather built above ground. Notwithstanding, old underground churches did exist and were sometimes used as “places of occasional sacrality,” namely as thaumaturgic places, often shared between Christians and Muslims. Only the villagers of Misti (today’s Konaklı) used their underground settlement as a permanent living space. But, paradoxically, their underground settlement was not a sacred space since the only building in Misti built above ground was the main church and, therefore, the main sacred place of the village. The villagers of Misti were known to inhabitants of the neighboring areas as particularly savage and backwards. Contrary to other Orthodox Christians of Cappadocia, they derived their livelihood from livestock farming and the preparation of keçe fabric, while other Rum communities had largely given up on agriculture and lived from trade.

Through examples of several communities of Cappadocia, I will attempt to understand how different ways of life influenced the way underground settlements were used and especially the diverse ways in which local communities negotiated sacrality between the above and underground realms.

Keywords
Cappadocia, Underground settlements, Ottoman period, Nineteenth century

1. INTRODUCTION
Today, the underground settlements of Cappadocia are regarded as places of mystery and therefore attract tourists in search of unusual experiences. We know today around 150 underground or smaller undergrounds composed of a few rooms, generally on one or two stories.

Most of these places are closed these days, only a few are opened to visitors who have become the main actors in these ancient places. Although the underground settlements of Derinkuyu and Kaymaklı are said to have been discovered in the 1960s, these and many others were already known to and used by local villagers in the 19th century. My presentation will thus focus on these actors of the 19th century, on their use of undergrounds as profane or sacred place. By comparing several villages of Cappadocia where underground settlements were already known by locals in the nineteenth century I will try to show how villagers used to negotiate sacredness and spirituality between the above and the undergrounds.

For that purpose, I have based my analysis on descriptions available in publications of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mainly travelogues and in Greek and Karamanli books and articles about Cappadocia. But our main sources are actually testimonies today available in the Center of Asia Minor Studies in Athens. These testimonies have been collected from the late 1930s to the beginning of the 1960s by collaborators of this center founded by a woman, Melpo Merlier, who aimed, with
quite precursory methods of oral history, to collect information on the way of life of Greeks who lived in Anatolia in 1920s. These oral archives contain all kinds of information about villages and villagers, about geography, economy, cultural and religious aspects of everyday life. Particularly important for our purpose, descriptions of sacred places, celebrations and rituals bring very interesting details on local religiosity and interpretations of sacredness. Before getting in our specific issue of the use of undergrounds and especially on the sacredness issue, it is useful to have a general introduction on nineteenth-century Cappadocia and especially on the ethno-religious and linguistic sharing of local population.

Then, through examples of different village communities, I will focus on the communal and individual use of undergrounds, considered as profane or sacred places.

2. COMMUNITIES OF CAPPADOCIA

Until the 1923 exchange of population between Greece and Turkey that was decided during the conference of Lausanne, the region of Cappadocia was inhabited by a pluri-religious, ethnic and linguistic populations. In this presentation, I define Cappadocia as the region located approximately between the Kızılırmak in the north, the Taurus in the south and east and the Tuz gölü in the west, centralized on 4 main centers which are Nevşehir, Aksaray, Niğde and Kayseri. The underground settlements were more concentrated on the western part of Cappadocia, especially in the regions of Aksaray and Niğde but also in the large plain of Derinkuyu. We will thus focus on this western part more in details and let the region of Kayseri aside, except for the village of Ağırnas and its underground settlements about which we have interesting data concerning sanctity of undergrounds.

In the nineteenth-century, the population of Cappadocia was, for a large majority, Muslim but an important minority of Greek-Orthodox was also present in towns and in villages. Very small communities of Armenians were settled in the western part but, as we move toward the east, from the region of Kayseri and Develi, the number and size of Armenian communities tend to increase while that of Rums to decrease.

Many settlements of the region (Fig. 2) were actually mixed, inhabited by Orthodox Christians and Muslims. In a town like Nevşehir, the Rums were around 30% of the total population, and more than 20% in Niğde.

By the way, Niğde, in the early nineteenth century became the official seat of the metropolitan of Ikonium because most Orthodox of the diocese actually lived in the surroundings of Niğde.

Linguistically speaking, the majority of the Orthodox communities of the region spoke Turkish are called Karamanlı and used to write Turkish in the Greek alphabet, but there were also several communities speaking different Greek dialects who, however, tended to be turkified in the course of the late nineteenth-century (Fig. 3).
Figure 2: Population of main Towns and Villages of Cappadocia by Religious Affiliations (circa 1895) (A.A. de Tapia)

Figure 3: Orthodox Christian Communities by Linguistic Affiliations (circa 1900) (A.A. de Tapia)
For instance, in the region of Niğde, the villages of Fertek and of Andavale were about to totally abandon their Greek dialect in the early twentieth century. In fact most Turkish as well as Greek-speaking communities of Cappadocia had open a Greek school thanks to the revenues earned from immigration to large cities of the empire (especially Istanbul, Izmir) and taught Greek to their pupils.

However, in the large majority of communities, they were not particularly successful in terms of language education. Only in villages such as Sinasos and Cemil in the region of Ürgüp, from where many men immigrated to Istanbul, Greek language was strengthened in the course of the nineteenth-century and local dialects tended to be replaced by the Greek speaking in the Constantinople. An example of village which preserved its Greek dialect until 1923 was the village of Misti described further and which was a quite exceptional case among other communities of Cappadocia, for its way of life as much as for its particular use of its underground settlement.

3. UNDERGROUND AS PROFANE PLACES
These details can appear to be far away from our main issue but they are necessary to understand the complexity of local population. The movement of immigration to large cities in search of economic revival and the withdrawal from agricultural activities and development of trade but also the opening of schools in villages aiming to promote Hellenism and to develop, in communities which were quite isolated from the Greek-orthodox centers, a feeling of belonging to the Greek nation and the particular involvement of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in this issue are important keys that we need to keep in mind.

In everyday life, undergrounds were basically used as warehouse for agricultural production, and wine. In most Christian settlements, each house had its own “cave” with a direct access from the house but they were also often connected to each other. To such a way that, if necessary, inhabitants could flee their house through the undergrounds and go out through another house. These caves were called, by Greeks as well as by Turks, “in”.

However, according to many testimonies, only Christian houses had such a cave. Emmanouil Tsaiikoglu, a researcher who worked for the CAMS and made a field research in the 1970s in Zincidere, the village of its parents wrote in his report:

I think that even in mixed villages, the Turks had no “in”, or at least not so large ones. And mostly, if the purely Turkish villages would have had “in”, it would have been difficult for Christians to know if, at the end of their underground escape, they would go out in the midst of a Christian or of a Turkish house. Consequently, I think that we can find only “in” in formerly Christian villages converted to Islam and that the Christians had invented the “in” long before the Turks conquered the region.

Some Christian villagers indeed explained that they or their parents had used the undergrounds for escaping from the Turks at different period. In 1895-96 and in 1915-1916, during the massacres of Armenians, especially in the surrounding of Kayseri, as well as in the region of Niğde, many Greek and Armenian villagers found a refuge in these caves. In several legendary stories, Christians had even been able to escape their village by using these tunnels up to another settlement but according to narrative, it only occurred in very old times and nobody among the informants had never experienced or heard this kind of escape during their own time.

However, many testimonies show that undergrounds were still used as refuge in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An informant from Germir, a mixed village of the region of Kayseri, for instance explained that

In the past, all the houses of Germir had “in” which were dug in stone and served as place of refuge. It was in the basement of our houses and in time of tensions, we could live there during several days. Under our house, the in was formed of two floors: the first floor received daylight but the other was in the dark and we could close its access with a large round stone. For accessing to the first floor, we walked down 5-6 steps.

The walls were all stone, and it looked like but was not a natural cave. When we were afraid by a situation outside, we went down to the second floor and we locked it. But it happened almost never. Most of the time, we only used them during summers to keep cool our cheese, wine and fruit. In 1915, however, during the persecutions against the Armenians, they served as refuge for them but also for us because we feared to have the same destiny.

Another interesting narrative is given by an informant from Misti, a Greek-speaking Christian village known in the region for its savagery and especially feared by Turks because villagers did not hesitate to kill Turks who came too close. Mistiotes are actually the only community to have lived, up to 1920, in underground houses (Fig. 4 and Fig. 7).

Figure 4: House of Misti (Source: "Μυκροσατηκόν Ἡμερολόγιον ο Ἀστήρ" – 1914)
In times of dangers, the villagers used to go down on the lower levels and to close the access with round stones.

My father did not experience it but my grandmother did. When she was a child, a decree of the sultan obliged all Christians of the region to turkify or to be beaten. [in fact; it seems that this even happened in 1770s when the vali of Nigde decided to torture the Christians who did not pay on time their tax. A sultanic firman of 1777 indeed orders the vali of Niğde to stop to persecute Christians of the region]

When the agents came to Misti, they found no one because the inhabitants had sneaked into the undergrounds. The agents consequently wait because they thought that there was no water and that Mistiotes would be obliged to go out. Actually there was a well. When the Turks saw it, they tried to throw buckets of water to empty it but Mistiotes cut the strings down. So the agents tried to go down. There were first 5 or 6 rooms to go through then, a door and after it a long slope. In the middle of this slope, there was a wheel that protected the Mistiotes from outsiders (Fig. 5). The Turks stood there for 1-2 days and then, unable to do anything else, broke camp and left.

Gradually, the Mistiotes went out, looked down the street, recuperated animals and products and returned to hide in undergrounds. Then, when the Turks abandoned the application of the decree, they definitely went out and began to build houses but kept the caves as refuge in case of necessity in the future.

These first examples are representatives of the way the undergrounds were basically used. In general, there were simple warehouse for wine, cheese, pekmez (molasses) and other perishable goods which were easier to preserve in the coolness of the undergrounds. In that sense, it was not, contrary to the words of Tsalikoglou, exclusively used by Christians. Besides, undergrounds were not only old places. In Andaval, for instance, when a new house was built, new undergrounds were dug under it in order to have a warehouse connected to the house. An inhabitant of Andaval even dug a large warehouse for the mufti of Niğde right under his house. He worked three years and opened three rooms where the mufti was able to store 3 wagons of apples he then sent to Istanbul each year.

When the conditions required it, however, undergrounds, especially the older ones which were composed of several levels, had access to a wells and could be closed with a wheel stone, became place of refuge for Christian villagers, Rums as well as Armenians (Fig. 6).

4. UNDERGROUNDS AS PLACES OF SACREDNESS

In nineteenth century everyday life, undergrounds were not used as place of daily or even weekly worship. Sacredness and religiosity was rather connected to the above world. In the course of the nineteenth century and especially after the beginning of the Tanzimat, Christian communities of Cappadocia began to build large churches in dressed stone. They also continued to use troglodyte Byzantine churches but only a few days each year, generally for main celebrations such as Eastern, Theophany or saints’ days.

It is worth noting that underground and troglodyte religious buildings are described as two different categories by villagers. If the latter continued to use more or less regularly troglodyte churches, most Christian communities had given up the underground chapels as communal worship places. Locals often knew where the entrance of these underground chapels were however, in many cases, they neither used them as worship places nor knew to what saint they were dedicated.

In the Muslim village of Eskigümüs with which the Christians of Andaval had many relations, an underground church was known but not used neither by Christians nor by Muslims. An informant of Andaval explained:

The Turks of Eskigümüs said that in the past their village was Greek but they did not know when they had been turkified. They had an underground church but we, Andavalotes, we did not know it but one time, I visited it. There were 2 rooms, in one of them, there were benches to sit carved in the rock. The church could welcome 25-30 people but there was nothing inside; neither painting nor anything else. We did not know to which saint this church was dedicated. We never prayed there. The turks of Eskigümüs actually used it to store apples.

In the midst of the fields of Kalleli (between Andaval and Eskigümüs), there was an underground site. When we entered, we came to a vaulted church where there were paintings on three sides. We did not know to which saint it was dedicated. Actually we not give so much importance to the underground churches.

This disinterest for underground sacred places was actually linked to their localization. When the entrance of the,
undergrounds was located outside Christian villages or in the middle of a Muslim village such as Eskigümüs. Christians generally did not visit them, not necessarily because they feared the Turks but rather because there were so many churches in their close environment that they did not need to visit churches too far away. As for Muslims, when they visited churches, it was rather in places that Christians also visited since, in a way, the rituals performed by Christians attracted the Muslims who saw in it the confirmation of the spiritual power of the place.

The situation was quite different when the underground chapels were located in the midst of Christian villages. These chapels were still not used for regular masses or for celebrations but for thaumaturgic purposes. In that sense, villagers kept alive their sacredness but it remained exclusively connected to desperate situations which needed the intercessions of saints. Darkness of undergrounds, difficulty of access seemed to strengthen the sacrality of the place while it simultaneously bonded it to a kind of obscure sacrality, almost dangerous to frequent too regularly. The thaumaturgic power of these places made often them famous throughout the region, among the Christian but also among the Muslim communities. For Christians and mostly for Muslims, to visit an underground chapel had something of mysterious and mostly of frightening but people did overcome this fear when the issue was vital.

In the village of Germir, the church of St. John the Theologian was also underground:

There was no stairs but a long slope to get to the entrance of the carved room. There was no door or stone at the entrance. The interior was straight, 4-5 m wide. There was no icon or cross or any other object in the church. The priests did not come to celebrate Mass. It was mostly women who came alone or in group. And Turkish women came too.

It was said that St John gave voice to the silent children. If a child was silent at an advanced age, but also, if he had difficulty for walking, we took him there. When we reached the entrance of the room, we left the children on the floor of the church and we left them inside for a while.

Once in the room, we lighted up candles, burned incense and made prayers and we also put down small stones for the saint accepts our vows. The Turks also left pebbles. But they never came without oil lamp. They were very cautious and afraid when they came but their distress incited them to believe in our saints.
In Malakopi too, one of the three underground churches located in the underground settlement was visited for therapeutic purpose by Christians and Muslims of the village. The church was known as the Sts. Anargyri church and was located on the second level of the underground settlement but in a part today closed to visitors. The place was believed to be thaumaturgic and especially to heal madness. An informant described the place and the worship as follows:

The oldest church of Malakopi was underground. It was known by Greeks and Turks to be miracle worker. To reach the church, we had to go down on a fairly long distance tunnel. When they came, the Turks lighted candles to illuminate the road. Near the entrance arch was a little chapel. The Turks thought that the tunnel only led to this room but actually, we could go lower.

In this church, sick people came and stood and going out being better. There were chains to attach them because when the priests were reading, sometimes they tried to escape, they shouted, and they cursed everybody. The Turks who were sick often slept in one night walked away the next day.

Generally, only laymen and especially women came alone or in small groups, seeking for health recovery and no priest came to preach but in few cases, as that of Malakopi priests can participated in prayers. Actually priests generally participated in the prayers when the visitors asked for their presence, whilst rare are the cases of mess or celebrations organized by the clergy in an underground church.

In Ağırnas for instance, St. Prokopios the Elder was an underground church located under the Turkish houses of the village. (...) Christian and Muslim women wanted to do their personal wishes, in the light of candles. They went there when they wanted to pray for the health of a family member. But sometimes priests came too and performed services.

In Zincidere too, the underground church of St. Panteleimon was visited for its healing power. According to several informants, it was particularly famous among Muslims. According to Harekleia Palazoglou, the Turks came more regularly than Christians and often asked the priest to come with them and to pray for their sick relatives. For therapeutic purpose, people had to sleep in the church during the night.

The Turks were fond of the church to such an extent that they bought dust from the church’s soil and water from its wells. According to another informant, the Turks came all the Thursdays and paid one kurus in order to stay in the church during the night when they were sick. Each Thursday, the Christian community thus collected money from around 70 Turks.

From these various examples, it is difficult to propose a generalization, specifically because there was not an only way to use and to negotiate the sacredness of undergrounds. In some settlements, villagers made use of the undergrounds only for profane purposes, especially as warehouse and, in period of conflict as refuges, even when they knew that a room was obviously an old church or chapel.

Only few communities used the undergrounds as sacred places and when it was the case, the sacrality of these places was experienced through specific ways. For “regular” or “institutional” sacredness, villagers rather used the churches that their community built in the course of the century or for important celebrations the troglodyte Byzantine churches located in or near to their settlement. On the contrary, underground sacred places were places of occasional sacrality, exclusively linked to thaumaturgical power. In that sense their sacrality included a part of mystery and of darkness both in the literal and figurative sense. It frightened but also attracted villagers who often found there a supernatural power impossible to find above ground.

5. CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding their supposed extraordinary power, undergrounds were generally considered as representatives of the primitive way of life of former communities of Cappadocia. This vision came from the West. European travelers but also Greek elites of Istanbul considered that Cappadocians who lived in undergrounds were primitive people who had not succeeded in developing a real architecture because of their remoteness but also because they were surrounded by Turks.

To confirm this idea, the Greek community of Misti, the last one where people continued to live undergrounds in the late nineteenth century, was described as the prime example of this primitive community, incapable of founding a real school and of educating its children. In 1916, Dawkins noted indeed:

It appears to be only at Misti that until recently the people lived entirely in these subterranean dwellings without any houses above ground (...) This underground village consisting of 4 hundred houses, apparently lay round about the present big church: the crowns of the vaults of some of the houses may still be seen rising just with the surface". [Dawkins, 1916]

Population of Misti, up to 1923, was composed only of Greek-speaking Christians and was a particularly closed community feared by other Christians as well as by Muslims of the region because of their savagery and hostility towards outsiders. Greek writers of the nineteenth century described them as totally uneducated and ignorant people. Mistiotes were also the last Greeks of Cappadocia to live from animal husbandry and from the preparation and itinerant selling of keçe fabric.
This activity explains, I think why they had an image of backward people among other Greeks. The traditional preparation of keçe fabric required indeed a very strong physical condition which made that Mistiote men appeared to villagers of other communities as quite uncouth people. By the way, no one in the region wanted to marry their daughter to a Mistiote as well as no Mistiote men married outside the community because they considered that women of other communities were too frail and lazy. Mistiotes were also very religious people. As a result, in the mid-nineteenth century, the only building they decided to finance and to build above the ground was the impressive church of St. Basil (Fig. 8) while the villagers continued to live underground. Through this way, they extracted sacredness from undergrounds and settled it above ground, the undergrounds becoming exclusively a profane place while the church, exposed to bright daylight became the symbol, above the ground, of communal devotion to sacredness. In the village, the St. Basil church became the only place of worship, undergrounds being totally excluded from the local understanding of sacredness.

The case of Misti, next to the other examples I exposed earlier show that sacrality and with it spirituality and worship were locally negotiated by communities which produced their own understandings of the relation between individuals, beliefs, above and underground worlds and sacrality.

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- 143-146 Neapoli;
- 173-178 Malakopi;
- 204-206 Andaval;
- 215-218 Limni;
- 241-250 Misti;
- 298-303 Ferteki.

Figure 8: St. Basil church of Misti (in restoration), next to the underground houses (A.A. de Tapia, 2014)