Supplementum
Cappadocia in Context 2014 – a report

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We all know certain opportunities happen once in a lifetime. I have the feeling I just had one. One early afternoon, while flying back to London from Istanbul, I went through the photographic survey of my last few weeks in Cappadocia and I became increasingly aware of the truly unique and academically valuable programme I just had the privilege of experiencing.

The “Cappadocia in Context” field trip, organised by Prof Robert Ousterhout and Dr Tolga Uyar, is indeed one of the rarest opportunities to investigate the cultural, architectural and artistic heritage of this Anatolian region – once a province of the Byzantine Empire – while immersing oneself into its naturalistic beauty. But we should be clear: this is not a cultural holiday. “Cappadocia in Context” is a field study, conducted scientifically, and an intense research trip, which merges the scholarship of the two group leaders with the opportunity of direct exposure to the multifaceted and syncretic environment of Medieval Cappadocia.

The 18-day programme starts with a two day introduction in Istanbul. It then moves on to Mustafapaşa, a small village located close to Ürgüp in the centre of Cappadocia. The programme includes a series of visits to some of the best known Cappadocian sites, but also to other less known ones, still the subject of current scientific interest and scholarly research.

Prof Ousterhout and Dr Uyar conduct these visits in an excellent double act. While the first is responsible for providing detailed analyses of the architectural features of both stone carved and masonry built churches, as well as monastic, residential and agrarian complexes, the second adds a broad and contextualised understanding of the pictorial programme decorating most of the religious buildings. Lectures by the two scholars and participant reports complement the visits to the sites, offering a comprehensive overview of the many relevant aspects for the study of the art and the architecture of the region.
This stimulating learning experience is then garnished by the culinary expertise of the Chef of Gül Konakları, a beautiful boutique hotel in Mustafapasha – a village once known as Sinasos – that offers a rare opportunity to reside in a 19th century Greek mansion.

The programme allows participants to venture into the unique volcanic landscape of Cappadocia, discovering incredible sites where naturally carved valleys and their rock formations – one cannot miss the suggestive cones topped by a rock, the so called fairy chimneys – have been transformed by centuries of anthropic activities that have invested the region.

Even though the programme focuses specifically on Byzantine Cappadocia, the site visits and the lectures allow students to develop an understanding of Roman and Seljuk occupation, thanks to the participation in the programme of scholars such as Murat Gülyaz of the Nevşehir Museum, and Prof Scott Redford, former director of the Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations at Koç University, which sponsors the programme.

Churches and other selected architectures of Cappadocia constitute the most substantial corpus of the objects of study. While accompanying the students through thorough in situ investigations of these monuments, Prof Ousterhout also provides detailed analyses of their architectural features with lectures ex cathedra. The buildings carved from tuff and soft volcanic ash - main components of the petrographic spectrum of the region – as well as those built in masonry are considered in all of their constitutive parts, using stylistic and structural analysis.

Based on this close examination Prof Ousterhout is able to conclude, convincingly, that the design of a group of the Middle Byzantine Cappadocian churches is the result of an adaptation process, which transferred architectural elements found in masonry-built churches into rock-carved churches. According to this reading, elements found in Cappadocian cross-in-square churches – such as interior columns that are structurally over-dimensional for their purpose, or non-structural pendentives with carved decorations connected to domes, which also show statically unsound solutions – are the result of an architectural design intended to establish a symbolic visual relation with known examples found in Constantinople and other centres of the Empire. Exemplary in this respect are the cases of Karanlık Kilise, Çarıkli Kilise and Elmalı Kilise in Göreme, or the Ağaçaltı Kilisesi in the Ihlara Valley. These churches distinguish themselves in their plan from other solutions adopted in the region, such as the early Christian single nave basilica, the three naves basilica, or – a recurrent typology in Cappadocia – the double naves plan. The latter features in several cases and is well
represented by two churches, both in the Soğanlı Valley, the Church of St Barbara and Geyikli Kilise.

The analysis of churches, residential and monastic complexes is also done in the context of the agricultural, pastoral and military activities of the region. Thanks to his broader analytical approach, Prof Ousterhout has helped refine what were believed to be uses for some of these complexes, previously thought of as only monastic, as is the case of the settlements of Çanlı Kilise and Açık Saray. According to Prof Ousterhout’s extensive survey of the settlement, the 23 areas with courtyard complexes in the proximity of the Çanlı Kilise, complete with halls, chambers, stables, chapels and cistern, are a military settlement. The settlement developed alongside the fortresses of Akhisar and Sivrihisar, along the upper portion of the root connecting the Lycaonian Plain, where the city of Aksaray is located, to the highlands of Cappadocia and to mountain Hasan Dağı. The complex of Açık Saray is, according to Prof Ousterhout, a horse farm, evidence for which can be found in the architectural elements of several complexes comprising of halls and chambers, elements that can be associated with large stables and annexed facilities.

Prof Ousterhout’s rich and extensive architectural survey of the region is then complemented by Dr Uyar’s scholarship on the frescoes and interior decorations of the sites. Dr Uyar provides introductory and in-depth explanations regarding the frescoed programmes inside the churches. With developments covering the 9th-10th, 11th and 13th centuries, these programmes present distinctive regional features, while showing a rich pattern reminiscent of Constantinopolitan art of the Middle Period, as well as stylistic features and themes that can be associated with Eastern visual and cultural traditions brought to Cappadocia at different stages of its history.

Of particular interest in the churches of the 9th and 10th century is the recurrent employment of a visual repertoire that scholars have named archaic programme. According to this programme, the vault or flat roof covering the main nave of the church is decorated with scenes taken from the life of the Theotokos and of Christ, organised in continuous bands running one on top of the other. The scenes are chronologically arranged, and show distinctive stylistic features in the rendition of the main characters and of their attributes. A well-known case of this 9th/10th century typology can be found in the old nave of the Tokalı Kilise. In the same church, a later transformation added a transverse nave to the original one. This transversal nave has frescoed decorations that still present a challenge in regards to its dating: most scholars date these frescoes to the mid-10th century, while German scholars postpone them to the 13th.
The scholarship on this large and complex repertoire, originally started by French scholars in the late 19th century and further developed in the 20th century, is extensive and presents unresolved issues, which are debated in the field of Cappadocian Art History. Some of these debates were the subject of instructive digressions on-site, and of extensive discussions during lectures by Dr Uyar. Dr Uyar has contributed significantly to the study of the art of the region while analysing 13th century figurative and decorative programmes found in the church of St George in Ortaköy, in the Eski Kilise Cami in Marvuçan, and in the church of the Archangel Michael in the Cemil Monastery. The frescoed programme of the latter bears an inscription, which mentions the Nicaean Emperor Theodore Laskaris. According to Dr Uyar, these exempla are a demonstration of the close connection between the Seljuk Cappadocia and the Nicaean Empire. They also show iconographic and stylistic features that relate their corresponding workshops to artistic Orthodox Christian visual standards, a sort of *lingua franca*, that can be found during the 13th century in other regions of the East Mediterranean such as Cyprus, the Mani region, some of Aegean islands, like Cythera or Naxos, and that can probably resonate with the art of the Nicaean Empire of the same period.

Due to the word limit of this journal, in this short report I cannot digress into the numerous academic issues debated by its organisers and participants. But hopefully I have given the reader a taste for the extraordinary experience of immersing oneself in Cappadocia. This unique Anatolian region can be fully appreciated and understood only if read in the context of the cultures of its many historical inhabitants – the Hittites, the Persians, the Romans, the early Christian subjects of the Byzantine Empire, the Seljuks, the Ottoman Turks – who lived there and left many traces of their anthropic activities. These traces merge into the beautiful and fragile Cappadocian natural environment, challenging scholars to decipher and interpret them, while posing numerous questions for their preservation. Only carefully conducted surveys and appropriate restoration and conservation campaigns can guarantee the survival of these world heritage monuments. But such campaigns can only start after appropriate research, scientific studies and informative workshops and field trips, of which “Cappadocia in Context” is definitely one of the best, if not the only, example.