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BYZANTINE BEGINNINGS OF THE BEDESTEN

Introduction

The ruined church in the centre of Nicosia known as the Bedesten is one of the most enigmatic buildings of the Crusader period in Cyprus (Plate 1). Numerous views have been expressed regarding its dedication, chronology, and stylistic significance.¹ A detailed examination of the Bedesten's fabric indicates that it is both older and more complicated than previously thought. As a preliminary step towards putting the history of this important church on a firm footing, this article provides a detailed description of the initial phase of construction dating to the early Byzantine period.

Description and Chronology

The Bedesten as it stands today is primarily a Cypriote Gothic structure of the fifteenth century. The establishment of the church, however, goes back much further in time. This is shown by various archaeological remains which have been preserved in the chancel and north aisle of the present building. These remains, exposed when the monument was repaired in 1935, consist of a central and subsidiary apse, and vestiges of surrounding ecclesiastical buildings.²

Only a few stones of the original north apse have survived, but they give some idea of the dimensions and shape of this feature (Figure 1). More of the main apse is preserved because it was buried under the floor of the Gothic chancel. In the late middle ages, this floor was several steps higher than the rest of the church, as shown by the height of the door in the south wall of the chancel (Plate 2, left side).

The main apse is semicircular on the interior, and seven-sided on the exterior (Figure 1). It was constructed of quality ashlar, now showing signs of decay. Two courses survive to a maximum height of 70 cms. As the courses were laid down, wide blocks of stone were set alternately with narrow ones. This is clearly shown

1. A convenient summary, not without flaws, is Sir George Hill, *A History of Cyprus*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1940-52), 3: 1129-31.

2. 'Repairs to Ancient Monuments', in *Report of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus, 1935* (Nicosia, 1936), pp. 3-4. This report does not describe the archaeological material presented in this article.

in figure 1. Small wedges, consisting of unglazed pottery sherds, were forced in from behind to make the stones fit tightly. Chinking and mortar fills the space between the interior and exterior masonry.

The method of construction we see here is not unique to the Bedesten. An identical technique with alternating wide and narrow stones is found in the apse of the Asomatos church at Aphendrika.³ The dimensions of the Aphendrika apse are also close to the Bedesten, showing the two churches are closely related. Because the initial phase of construction at Aphendrika probably dates to the mid-fifth century, we can assign the same chronological horizon to the remains at the Bedesten.⁴

Nothing of the original south apse can be seen because the Gothic building is standing in its place (Figure 1). The position of the two aisles suggests that they were added to the Byzantine structure; an analogous Gothic addition is seen in the church of Panagia Angeloktistos at Kiti.⁵ The style of the Bedesten capitals indicates that the south aisles were erected in the fifteenth century. The double-aisled configuration may reflect an earlier plan, a point that will be taken up below in our reconstruction.

Earlier scholars, beginning with Camille Enlart, proposed that the two south aisles formed the original church.⁶ The Byzantine apse demonstrates that this interpretation is not correct. The similarity of the aisles to buildings like the Dominican church at Agen prompted this reading of the facts.⁷ Because these French churches date to the thirteenth century, the aisles of the Bedesten were dated to the same period. The fact that some of the capitals copy thirteenth century types was used to support this dating; the rustic character of the copies and the late Cypriote style of the others was ignored (Plate 3). It is an important point of method that a colonial bias has made historians seek direct antecedents in Europe for aspects of Cypriote Gothic that are readily explained by the local context.

3. A. H. S. Megaw, 'Three Vaulted Basilicas in Cyprus', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 66 (1946): 48-56, figure 4.

4. The date of Aphendrika is established by the narrow passages cut through the apse walls. This feature, introduced in the late fourth century, disappeared by the end of the fifth century. A. H. S. Megaw, 'Byzantine Architecture and Decoration in Cyprus: Metropolitan or Provincial?', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 28 (1974): 62-64.

5. Illustrated in Andreas and Judith Stylianou, *The Painted Churches of Cyprus* (Nicosia, 1964), figure 5.

6. C. Enlart, *L'art gothique et la Renaissance en Chypre*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1899), 1: 154; Hill, *History of Cyprus*, 3: 1130.

7. Robert Branner, *St Louis and the Court Style in Gothic Architecture* (London, 1965), p. 116.

To the east of the main Byzantine apse at the Bedesten are remains of rubble walls and large paving stones (Plate 2). These are the vestiges of surrounding ecclesiastical buildings, such as found beside the early churches at Salamis and Kourion.⁸ No record was made of any finds during the rough-and-ready excavation of this area in 1935, but a small fragment of early Byzantine glass was recovered there in 1980.

An early date for the remains so far described is roughly confirmed by their relative depth. The paving stones and fragmentary apses are slightly lower than the nave of the Bedesten, and this floor is approximately 1.5 metres lower than the ground level of the immediate neighbourhood. The adjacent cathedral of St. Sophia (begun *circa* 1209) is not encumbered with debris, indicating that the ground level around it has not changed since the thirteenth century. The early apses and other remains inside the Bedesten are substantially lower, demonstrating that they date to a much earlier time. From the standpoint of stratigraphy, this is all that can be said until the cathedral precinct is subject to proper exploration. However, a few additional observations are worth making. That the general ground level has changed little over the last five or six hundred years is confirmed by the exterior of the chancel and north facade of the Bedesten itself. These parts, probably built in the late fifteenth century, are not obscured in any significant way. Yet the interior of the Bedesten (now cleared to its late medieval level as shown by the pier bases and other details) is several steps below the exterior. This shows that when the Gothic reconstruction of the Bedesten took place, the Byzantine floor level inside was preserved, but accommodations had to be made to the higher level outside.

A close scrutiny of the Byzantine remains provides further insights into the building's history. Three square holes (marked in Figure 1) were cut in the masonry of the main apse. The middle hole is placed directly below the keystone of the chancel rib vault, while the side holes line up with the transverse ridge. These holes appear to have received beam-ends which went up to support the Gothic centering. Further evidence of later activity is seen in the remains to the east of the apse. The rubble foundations have been sliced away to make room for the massive walls of the chancel. In addition, a rough hole was knocked in the central group of paving stones (Plate 2). This is not a random break. It is directly in line with the middle hole in the main apse, and is placed

8. G. Jeffery, 'The Basilica of Constantia, Cyprus', *Antiquaries Journal* 8 (1928): 344-49; further excavation mentioned in Megaw, 'Archaeology in Cyprus', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* (Supplement) 75 (1955): 33; Megaw, 'Excavations at the Episcopal Basilica of Kourion in Cyprus in 1974 and 1975: A Preliminary Report', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 30 (1976): 345-71, especially figure A.

immediately beneath the keystone of the apse rib vaults. Evidently, another beam for the centering was set here. This information elucidates Cypriote vaulting techniques, but more importantly suggests that the Byzantine apse and adjacent structures stood until the Gothic rebuilding was initiated. The low floor level of the interior (discussed in the previous paragraph) supports this conclusion.

Reconstruction

Some effort can be made to reconstruct the dimensions of the original Byzantine church. Ruins at other sites and features of the Bedesten itself allow this reconstruction to be more than completely theoretical (Figure 2). The shape of the east end is easily extrapolated from the remanents that have survived. The south apse, of which nothing is presently visible, was no doubt the same shape as the north apse. An additional aisle has been added to our plan because the two Gothic aisles on the south side probably perpetuate the configuration of the earlier church (Figures 1–2). An extra south aisle was fairly common in early Cypriote architecture, examples being found at Carpasia, Ayia Trias, and Sykha.⁹

There is no direct evidence for the length of the original nave. A clue, however, is provided by the east end, which is almost identical in width to Afendrika and Ayia Trias. Given that the general proportions of these buildings were followed, this would mean the original Bedesten was about 20–25 metres long (Figure 2). In a building of this size, six bays would have been required.

Early churches in Cyprus commonly had a narrow passage cut through the apse walls to provide lateral communication across the east end. This local feature, probably of Syrian origin, was introduced in the late fourth century, and disappeared by the end of the fifth century.¹⁰ Given that the construction technique used at the Bedesten links it to churches with narrow passages, we would expect to see some vestige of this feature. And in fact the Gothic building does have a passage or door linking the chancel and north aisle (Figure 1). However, close examination of the Byzantine portions gives no indication of this particular type of passage. This does not divorce the Bedesten from the early group, but links it specifically to the complex at Ayia Trias, where the church has no narrow passage.¹¹ The implication is that a variety of plans were current, and that the passage could be omitted in certain circumstances.

9. Megaw, 'Metropolitan or Provincial?', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 28 (1974), figures C and D; and Megaw, 'Three Vaulted Basilicas in Cyprus', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 66 (1946), figure 12.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 62–64.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 67, n. 31 for excavations at Ayia Trias.

Conclusion

The fifth century portions of the Bedesten do not settle the question of the original dedication, but they seem to demonstrate that the church never belonged to the Knights of St. Thomas the Martyr. This small military order was established during the third crusade, and fled to Cyprus in 1291 with the fall of Acre. Their seat was near Limassol, but an establishment was also maintained in Nicosia.¹² The Bedesten has been identified as the order's Nicosia church because both, we are told, were dedicated to St. Nicholas.¹³ That the Bedesten was sacred to St. Nicholas is by no means settled, but even granting this fact, it is difficult to imagine that a minor military order obtained an ancient and venerable site in the very centre of the capital, and then built one of the largest Gothic churches in Cyprus, all at a time when the order's simple presence on the island is undocumented! Because the Knights of St. Thomas had associations with England, the failure to recognize that the order has no link to the Bedesten may be regarded as another colonial quirk in the historiography of Cypriote medieval architecture.

Of more scholarly import is Cyril Mango's suggestion that Nicosia was founded by the Umayyads.¹⁴ The material presented here indicates that Nicosia existed before the Arab invasion, though it is probable that the Umayyad army camped in the vicinity, and contributed to the growing importance of the place.

12. On the Knights of St., Thomas, see Hill, *History of Cyprus*, 2: 54. Further information in Jean Richard, *Documents chypriotes des archives du Vatican (XIV^e et XV^e siècles)* (Paris, 1962), pp. 69, 84.

13. First proposed in Enlart, *L'art gothique*, 1: 150-51; repeated in J. Hackett, *A History of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus* (London, 1901), p. 649, and with diffidence in Hill, *History of Cyprus*, 3: 1129, n. 1. The dedication to St. Nicholas rests on the account of Mariti who was in Cyprus between 1760 and 1767; Giovanni Mariti, *Travels in the Island of Cyprus*, trans. by C. D. Cobham (London, 1909), p. 43.

14. Cyril Mango, 'Chypre carrefour du monde byzantin', in *XV^e congrès international d'études byzantines* (Athens, 1976), p. 12, n. 45.