

Review article

Byzantine buildings: monumental architecture at Miletus and Resafa

Andreas Pülz & Ina Eichner*

PHILIPP NIEWÖHNER. *Die byzantinischen Basiliken von Milet* (Milet Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen und Untersuchungen seit dem Jahr 1899, Band 1; Bauwerke in Milet Heft 11). 2016. xvii+411 pages, numerous colour and b&w illustrations. Berlin: De Gruyter; 978-3-11-041688-6 hardback £142.99.

THILO ULBERT (ed.). *Forschungen in Resafa-Sergiopolis* (Resafa 7). 2016. x+254 pages, numerous b&w illustrations. Berlin: De Gruyter; 978-3-11-046746-8 hardback £74.99.



These two new volumes, both published by De Gruyter, shed new light on early Christian and Byzantine

art and archaeology. The first focuses on the early Byzantine basilicas of the city of Miletus in Asia Minor; the second turns to the fortified pilgrimage centre of Resafa in Syria and relates mainly to the interpretation of a large building—used for at least part of its history as a church—and the surrounding cemetery. Together, they offer the opportunity to compare and contrast the monumental architecture of the sixth century AD in western Asia Minor, at the heart of the Byzantine Empire, with that of its frontier in the East.

Miletus

The site of Miletus in ancient Caria, south-western Turkey, had been occupied for almost 2000 years by the time Constantine refounded Byzantium as his new imperial capital, and, subsequently, Christianity was adopted as the official state religion. It is the Late Antique/early Byzantine Christian basilicas of Miletus that form the focus of Philipp Niewöhner's comprehensive publication. In contrast with other

cities in Asia Minor, here only three basilicas survive: the so-called 'Große Kirche' ('Large Church') and the Church of St Michael, both in the city centre, and a huge basilica in the cemetery next to the *Kalabaktepe* (the probable acropolis of the ancient city) to the south. The publication also presents interesting evidence including geophysical survey and sculptural elements, such as column capitals recently disturbed by ploughing, that may indicate the presence of an additional basilica in the southern part of the city. On the other hand, the book does not provide any specific treatment of the well-preserved Church of Mary, on the basis that this central-plan building is not, as are the others, a longitudinal basilica; nevertheless, its decorative scheme is discussed for comparative purposes.

Each of the basilicas is described comprehensively in chapters featuring short histories of research; detailed accounts of their architecture, including the courtyards, gates and other associated buildings; and analysis of their locations within the urban topography. In turn, this material provides the basis for discussion of the dating of the basilicas and of their liturgical functions. These chapters are supported by the rich data presented as a catalogue in an appendix at the end of the publication. Its core is undoubtedly Niewöhner's presentation of the architectural materials and the decorative and liturgical equipment. Other contributions include coins (J. Gorecki), ceramics (H. Möller), glass (J. Becker) and archaeometrical analyses of the marbles (W. Prochaska), as well as brief analyses of the human remains (M. Kunter) and animal bone (H. Obermeier & N. Pöllath). The volume is richly illustrated throughout, including photographs and plans.

Niewöhner proposes that the *Große Kirche*, located to the east of the agora, was constructed during the second half of the sixth century AD. The presence

* *Institute for the Study of Ancient Culture, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Hollandstrasse 11–13, 1020 Vienna, Austria (Email: andreas.puelz@oeaw.ac.at; ina.eichner@oeaw.ac.at)*

of a baptistery was taken by the original excavators in the early twentieth century to indicate that this was the basilica of the city's bishop, but numerous examples of baptisteries in parish churches elsewhere demonstrate that their presence is not indicative of an episcopal seat; in addition, there is no evidence of any nearby residence for the bishop. These facts, as well as the moderate dimensions of the church and its late date, lead Niewöhner to avoid making any link between this basilica and the city's bishop. On the other hand, as a result of the lack of evidence for any alternative liturgical classification, the precise interpretation of the church and its enclosed rooms remains elusive.

Construction of the city's second basilica, the Church of St Michael, to the west of the agora, is dated to c. AD 600 and is thus slightly later than the Große Kirche. Following extensive investigations during the 1960s and 1970s, the Church of St Michael was also believed to have been the episcopal basilica, with a palatial residence for the bishop directly to the north. Niewöhner points, however, to the modest dimensions of the basilica and its baptistery and casts doubt on this interpretation. Instead, he proposes that the basilica was a private oratory for the bishop. If correct, the location of the episcopal basilica of Miletus would remain unknown.

In any case, Niewöhner expects the bishop's church to have been of a substantial size, possibly reaching the dimensions of the third basilica under consideration here, which is located in the city's cemetery. This church was discovered in the early 2000s and was the subject of fieldwork directed by Niewöhner for several years. The three-aisled basilica was approximately 40m in length (excluding the apse) and was characterised by a transept in front of the apse. Various rooms were enclosed on the southern side of the atrium, one of them most probably a *martyrium*. Dated to the beginning of the sixth century AD on the basis of the archaeological evidence, this cemetery-basilica is the oldest of the three known Christian basilicas of Miletus.

The description and interpretation of the individual churches is followed by a chapter that is important for understanding of the Late Antique city as a whole. Niewöhner's analysis of the architectural features of the basilicas reveals an obvious lack of high-quality materials prior to the second half of the sixth century AD. There are very few indications of imports of Proconnesian marble or of stylistic links with Constantinople until after the reign of Justinian (AD

527–565). In this way, Miletus differs from many other cities in Asia Minor, where earlier use of high-quality building materials was followed by a gradual decline from the second half of the sixth century AD onwards. Niewöhner points to a particular peculiarity of Miletus in that many of the monuments, public spaces and streets of the Roman imperial period were maintained as late as the seventh century AD, giving a 'conservative' appearance to the Late Antique urban landscape.

By considering all of these new discoveries at Miletus in a regional context (the Carian coast and islands such as Kos) and comparing them with evidence from other early Byzantine cities in Asia Minor (e.g. Aphrodisias, Ephesus and Sagalassos), this volume goes far beyond the presentation of three individual basilicas. For this reason, Niewöhner's monograph enriches our knowledge not only of Miletus, but also of Late Antique/early Byzantine Asia Minor in general.

Resafa

Resafa, ancient Sergiopolis, is located 25km south of the Euphrates in central Syria. Originally a military camp guarding Rome's eastern frontier, it developed into a fortified town and a centre of pilgrimage following the martyrdom of St Sergius at the site in AD 312; during the fifth and sixth centuries AD, several monumental churches were constructed. Resafa has been the subject of a long-term research project by the German Archaeological Institute (DAI), starting in 1952; Thilo Ulbert, the editor of the second volume under review here, has been the director of excavations since 1975.

Volume 7 of the Resafa series deals with the northern cemetery and the al-Mundhir building outside the northern city gate, and Basilica C within the walls, near the eastern gate. The volume completes a sub-project of the wider DAI research dealing with those monumental buildings not previously documented in detail.

Chapter 1 considers the so-called al-Mundhir building, named after the sixth-century Ghassanid *phylarch*, or leader, al-Mundhir. The building is focused on a square central hall, with each corner supported by four cross-shaped pillars ('Vierstützenbau'). An ambulatory surrounds this hall, its corners covered by cupolas and its sides by barrel vaults. On the eastern side of the building is an apse, flanked

by two side chambers. The original function of this building is uncertain, although it was later used as a church.

In the first part of Chapter 1, Ulbert comprehensively describes and analyses photogrammetric images of the building taken in 1980 and 1982. P.-L. Gatier then addresses the four Greek inscriptions from the building, including one located in the centre of the cornice on the inside of the apse that names al-Mundhir and from which the building takes its (modern) name. Al-Mundhir was commander of the Arab *federati*, or allied troops, who monitored the northern part of the Roman frontier (*limes*) with Syria. The inscription is associated with the practice of late imperial acclamation and, from its prominent position in the apse, Gatier suggests that it was a demonstration of al-Mundhir's personal power.

The chapter continues with considerations of the architecture and decoration. F. Arnold proposes two alternative reconstructions of the inner square hall ('Vierungsquadrat'), one with a wooden pyramid roof and the other with a stone cupola. G. Brands assesses the architectural decoration and dating: the pillar capitals are dated by the al-Mundhir inscription to his years of office (AD 569–581), flagging up conservative stylistic elements that can be attributed to older capitals in Resafa (Basilica B) and on the Syrian Limestone Massif from the first half of the sixth century AD. Brands proposes that the al-Mundhir building originally functioned as a memorial church, symbolically positioned on the site of a former *memoria* of St Sergius known from the written sources. Simultaneously, the building could have been planned as a dynastic burial place for al-Mundhir. This interpretation is supported by the representation of a *thiasos* (or retinue) of fabulous sea creatures on the frieze that surrounded the interior of the apse, a theme often associated with Christian funeral contexts.

M. Konrad turns to the results of the excavations undertaken in 1998 and 2000, both in the northern cemetery of Resafa and inside the al-Mundhir building itself. This work has shown that the area was initially used as a quarry and subsequently repurposed as a cemetery c. AD 300. Burial within the northern cemetery came to an end with the construction of the al-Mundhir building, but as this structure respected neither the earlier tombs nor the *cella memoria* of Tomb 4, it is suggested that its construction was unrelated to earlier funerary activity. Hence, in contrast to Brands's interpretation

of the al-Mundhir building as a monumental *memoria* for St Sergius located near or above the martyr's tomb, Konrad argues instead that the building was not sacred. Furthermore, the liturgical arrangements of the first phase of the building are unknown, and the absence of decorative features such as wall paintings, mosaics or marble veneering, which are present in all other churches at Resafa, argues against the interpretation of the original function of this building as a church.

Konrad goes on to argue that the al-Mundhir building must be seen in the context of late Roman military architecture and of Arabic and pre-Islamic palace architecture. She interprets the building as the garrison commander's office and assembly hall, based on parallels with Late Antique military forts, combining the *praetorium*, *officia*, *aula* and *sacellum* into a single structure—the so-called *principia-cum-praetoria* building.

It is intriguing that this volume should include two contrasting interpretations—those of Brands and Konrad—concerning the function of the al-Mundhir building. Fortunately, readers will be able to follow the well-supported arguments of both scholars easily and decide for themselves which of the interpretations is most convincing.

Chapter 2, by Ulbert, addresses the smallest basilica at Resafa: Basilica C. Located near the eastern city gate, the church was elevated on a podium on its southern and western sides. Inside, three aisles led to a somewhat horseshoe-shaped apse, flanked by two side chambers. Only a single pillar capital in the eastern part of the basilica remains *in situ*, with another recycled into a later wall. These capitals date the basilica to the first half of the sixth century AD. Later structural changes in the area of the presbyterium were noted but cannot be fixed chronologically.

Basilica C was probably destroyed by an earthquake and was repaired after the middle of the eighth century AD (dated by an Abbasid coin under the renewed floor). Subsequently, the church was robbed out, with most of the materials reused in other buildings around the city. Only the eastern part of the basilica has partially survived, being used as a habitation until the thirteenth century AD. Next, D. Kurapkat reconstructs the basilica, including columned halls on the western and southern sides. These halls were arcaded and their width has been reconstructed by careful observation of the extant bases for the columns (stylobate) and an original

architectural drawing on the floor of the nave of the church.

All of the buildings, the architectural decoration and the burials presented in this book are put into their wider regional and supra-regional contexts. The volume is therefore not only an important contribution to the history of Resafa during the Byzantine period, but also adds to the broader history of the northern Syrian *limes* and the self-representation of the Ghassanids. The outstanding documentation of these buildings with numerous drawings and photographs and the analysis of the

architecture, its decoration, inscriptions and (from the tombs) small finds, as well as reconstructions of the buildings, will be of great value for future archaeological research on Byzantine Syria.

In summary, these two new volumes represent an important contribution to the cultural history of the Late Antique and early Byzantine period. The results reported, some for the very first time, significantly enlarge and develop our understanding of the urban development, burial rites, architectural sculpture and religious buildings of the early Byzantine world.