

## Hagios Gregorios Theologos Church in Cappadocia

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**Abstract** Hagios Gregorios Theologos church is the one of the most important monument of Gelveri, a small town in the region of Cappadocia which is one of the first settlement areas in Anatolia, in central Turkey. The church is dedicated to Gregory the Theologian who is the Cappadocian father of the church in the fourth century.

The building consists of three distinct phases of construction: the apse, the naos with a narthex west of it, and the parekklesion, north of the naos. Hagios Gregorios Theologos church was suffered important interventions after the date he's erected in 385. The building was used till the migration in 1924 and then was converted to a mosque.

Situated in a region known with his rock-cut architecture, the building differs with his construction of masonry and maintain tradition of built architecture. It distinguished by the qualified use of the harder volcanic stone. In this paper, the planning and the structure analysis of Hagios Gregorios Theologos church is aimed to be presented.

**Keywords:** Byzantine architecture, church, Cappadocia, conservation

### Introduction

Güzelyurt district of Aksaray, which is in the southeast of Cappadocia Ancient region, hosted many civilizations throughout the history, Hittites, Medes, Persians, Cappadocians, Romans, Byzantians, Seljuks and the Ottomans made the region their homes. Güzelyurt which was a religious centre during the period when Christianity started to spread was founded on a land which was owned by Gregorios who was an important Saint, and one of the founders of the Orthodox sect in Anatolia.

There are many monasteries and churches in and around Güzelyurt. There are 200 churches according to Lebides (1899), besides according to Akakiades (1923) there are 300 churches exist in the area. Hagios Gregorios Theologos Church as a religious centre for Greeks living in the area was used as a church until exchange of immigrants in 1924, and it was converted into a mosque in the same year.

### Location of the Church

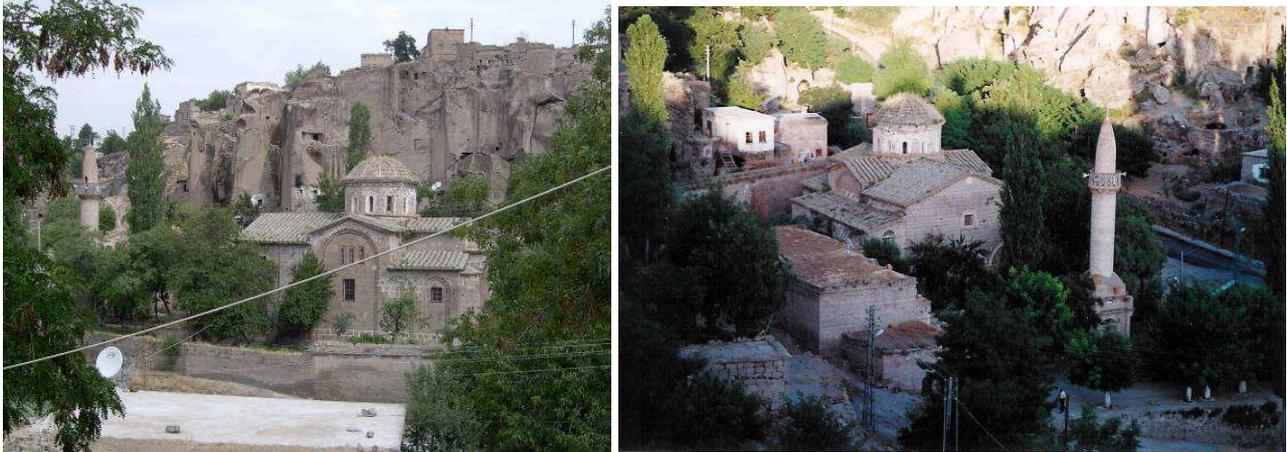
Hagios Gregorios Theologos Church is located in the Lower Quarter where is the first settlement area of Güzelyurt. It had been first settled into the rocks around the church in the region. Christians were living in the Lower Quarter and Muslims were living in the Higher Quarter before the exchange (Fig.1, Fig.2).

Monastery Valley, which accomodates many chapels and churches, is accessed from this district. Settlement units that are built by either rock carving, or masonry and combination of both can be seen in the region. Rock carvings are mostly used as a store or a barn, but also some of them are still used as a house by low-income families.

### Historical Development

The church was dedicated to "TİMİOS STAVROS" the holy cross by Emperor Theodosius in 385, according to the inscription which was lost during the restoration done by architect Grégoire Madentzis in 1835. The writings on the inscription which is found on the one of three doors of the

church as the following: "This church was built by Byzantine Emperor Theodosius. Emperor gave the part of the cross as a gift to the church through Gregorios Nazianzos".



*Figures 1, 2: Hagios Gregorios Theologos Church and Lower Quarter*

Hagios Gregorios Church had significant changes after it was done in 385. There is only the ruins in the apse left today from the first situation of the church. Plan scheme has changed during the restoration in 1835. Greeks living in Istanbul did have the necessary permission for restoration by providing an imperial edict in 1834.

The narthex of the church has probably closed in 1896 that is written on the door. Also the date of construction of the chapel is estimated to be the same. Hagios Gregorios Church, was converted into a mosque during the exchange in 1924.

### **Architectural Characteristics**

**Plan Scheme** Narthex has a rectangular plan in the north-south direction with dimensions of 3.7x11.7 m. It has been converted to a closed space during the restoration in 1896, while it was an open area before. The four circular columns with a circular section of 72 cm. in diameter, as the main supporting elements of the space, partially remained within the walls after the restoration. After the gaps between the columns are filled, the door was placed on the middle axis and the windows are located along the other apertures. The cover system of the place is formed by three cross vaults. The access to the nave is provided through the door across the narthex entrance. The floor of the space is covered with rectangular and square shaped stones.

Nave is in the east-west direction and 11.1x14.4 m. in size (Fig.3). It opens to the narthex through three doors with woodwork and zinc coating on one side, and to the chapel by a wooden door. The elliptical shaped dome with 4.85x5.50 m. sizes is supported by four arches which are carried by four piers of rectangular section. The dome's height is 15.6 meters from the ground level.

The length of eastern aisle of the cross is 3.95 meters and the length of western aisle of the cross is 2.45 meters in the space. The lengths of north and south aisles are equal to each other in 2 meter sizes. The corner spaces are in a rectangular shape and covered with vaults. Their heights are 10.4 meters. The ceiling system of the aisles are also covered by barrel vaults and the height of them are 6.77 meters.

The apse of the nave is semi-circular shaped with inner center and has a 3.39 meters depth. The form of the apse is heptagon from the outside. There is a niche built in the apse wall with wooden doors and a window located over that niche. The cover system is a half dome (Fig.4).

Diaconicon is 20 cm. above from the ground level. It's depth is 88 cm. Prothesis is above 26 cm from the ground level and its depth is 88 cm. The both apsidioles are circular from inside and outside. They are covered with half-domes. There is a small fountain near the north of Prothesis, located

adjacent to the wall. There is a stone bench along the same wall extending upto the stairs with 26 cm. height.

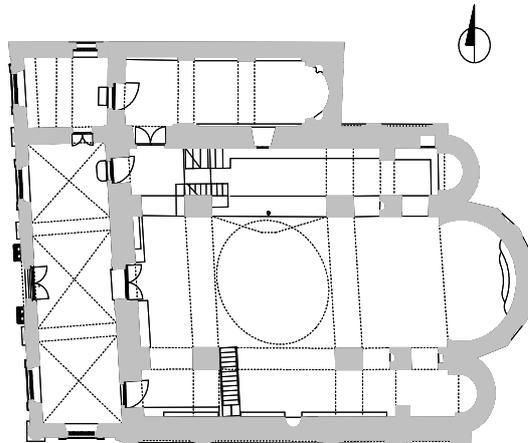


Figure 3: Hagios Gregorios Theologos Church ground level plan

The bema section, which is separated from nave by wooden iconostasis, aligned with two columns that they just start in front of the apsidioles. The iconostasis are placed in the direction of the *mihrab* (niche in a mosque wall indicating the direction of Mecca) today. There is a niche in each column with 26 cm. depth.

The ambon and the iconostasis, located on the northwest pier carrying the dome, are given as a gift by Russian Czar Nikola the 1<sup>st</sup>. The access to the ambon is provided by a stair with 13 steps. However, due to the conflicts with the staircase leading to *mahfil* (screened and elevated loge in a mosque), the stairs between eighth and tenth were closed. The ambon and the ikonostasis have survived to present day in original state (Fig.5).

The floor of the space is covered with rectangular and square-shaped stone. The dimensions of the stone sizes change between 30 ~ 46 x 30 ~ 84 cm. There is a floor covering just below the dome, 3x3 m in size, which has a circular form of 1.3 m. in diameter. The floor of the bema section is created by carving the current rock, shaped by chisel. It is thought that this floor remained from the first period of the church.

The frescoes in the interior of the church are covered with lime plaster. However, the plaster has fallen off at some locations, revealing the frescoes underneath. Three facial figures can be clearly perceived particularly in frescoes under the dome. According to what Greeks from Gelveri have asserted, there are depictions of; judgment of Jesus by Platus, Crucifixion on the northern wall of the church, and those of St. Gregorios, St. Anthanasius and St. Basileus on the apse.

Mezzanine floor is reached through a stair, which is attached to the northern wall of nave, of 8 stone and 18 wooden steps. Its dimensions are approximately 4.85x11.4 m. and has a rectangular plan. The roof system consists of surbased vault on northern and southern ends and barrel vault in the middle. Moreover, the gallery has a balcony of 2.1x4 m lying along the right aisle. There are spaces for storing goods each above both this balcony and the stairs leading to the gallery. *Mahfil* is reached through the 13<sup>th</sup> step of the stair. This section, which is totally made of wooden construction, was added after the church had been converted to mosque (Fig.5).

Chapel of Hagios Theodoros is attached to the northern wall of the church. The building is accessed through a door opened from nave and narthex. The dimensions are approximately 2.65x8.4 meters. The building with rectangular plan extending along east-west direction has one aisle. The depth of the apse at the eastern end of the space is 1.08 meters. There are two niches in the apse. This section is 14cm above the ground level. The roofing structure is barrel vault along the east-west direction. The vault is reinforced by seven arches. The floor is covered with stone of rectangle and square shape. It has a window facing the space between itself and the narthex as well as nave.



*Figures 4, 5: View of apse and nave with “Mahfil”*

The last three steps of the stair leading to the first floor of chapel have not survived to present day. There is a door reached from the stair leading to the gallery from the nave. The dimensions of that section are 3x14 meters. Roofing structure is a vault on east-west direction.

The dimensions of the space that is located on the north of narthex and providing connection with chapel is 3.5x3.9 meters. The roof system is barrel vault. It has a gate opening to the garden of the church. The clapper of the church bell also takes place in that space.

A guesthouse where highpriests accomodate exists in the north of the church court. The board of trustees used to gather and discuss issues regarding the region. Meetings used to be organised here during the visits of the dignitary of the region. Today, it is used as the house of the mosque imam.

There is a bakery in the northeast of the court, and a underground ayazma (holy spring) that is reached through 37 steps in the southwest of the courtyard. In the early phases, there was a cemetary where rich citizens were burried in the southern part of the church.

The bell tower, that was converted to a minaret during the conversion of the church into a mosque in 1924, which was of 15 m high, used to exist in the west end of the courtyard. The bell tower was made of metal construction and laid out as brickwall during the conversion into a minaret.

**Façade Formation** The western facade where the enterece is located had an open narthex until 1896. Four pillars are connected to each other via iron tension bars and arches. Later, a chapel is added to the church and narthex was closed.

There are figures of angles, lions and cross on the column capitals (Fig.6). There are lion figures above the window that opens to the western façade of the gallery floor. This window is placed on the axis of narthex. Four wooden window frames are placed between the columns after the narthex was closed. The enterece gate, too, is decorated with forms made of nails on the zinc plates that was covered to the exterior face of the frame.



*Figure 6: A column capital from narthex*

The northern facade is blocked with the chapel. There are two rectangular windows on the upper floor level of the chapel. There is a wooden gate with zinc plate covering – as in other doors of the

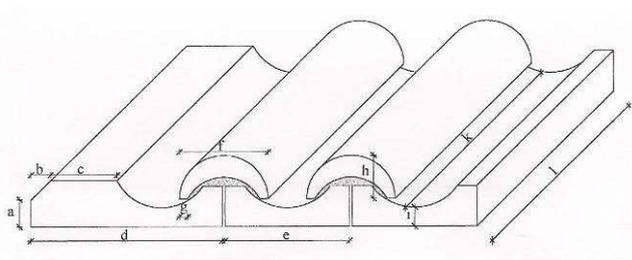
church - that opens into the courtyard on the ground floor. The upper section of three top windows can be seen on the direction of apse. One part of the secondary arches on the wall of northern apsidiole is left behind the wall of the chapel.

The order of triple apses can be observed on the eastern façade. Main apse is heptagonal and supported by a pentagon tambour. There are five semicircular arched openings, though those on two opposite ends are blind, in the apse. Three of these are closed by laying brick walls. Each apsidiole, on the other hand, have symmetrically placed one window having the same dimension with those on the openings of the apse. Both are closed by the walls laid.

The traces of three stages of the assumed evolution of the church throughout its history can be clearly seen even only on this façade. The first stage is 385 when the church was first built. There is no clear information regarding the second stage. The third stage is its state that is preserved from 1835 to present day.

There are three semicircular arched windows in the line of apse on the south façade. On the lower level, in the central axis of the arch, a rectangular window is opened. It can be assumed that it is opened later due to the reasons regarding both the dimensions of the window as well as the way it is opened. There is a square shaped window at the level of gallery floor. There is a type of disorder in the form of the fourth arch. Probably, this arch is demolished and is re-built in a manner that is not in accordance with the original.

One of the most important building elements of the church is the slate roof tiles. Although it is possible to come across with stone roof tiles in churches from Cappadocia region, these are distinguished by its form identical with traditional Turkish tiles (*alaturka*) (Fig.7).



Figures 7: Stone roof tiles

## Conclusion

Hagios Gregorios Theologos is one of the most important religious building in Güzelyurt settlement which is in Cappadocia area. The church that is dedicated to St. Gregorios Theologos has been exposed to many changes since 385 until today. The plan scheme has changed, the narthex which had been open was closed and a chapel was added. The changes of the building has been completed by its conversion into a mosque.

The church, like the region itself, has been abandoned and lost its community after the immigration of Greeks in 1924. The people living here have been placed to the disaster homes after the Lower Quarter, including the church, was declared as a disaster area. The mosque's community remarkably decreased after the construction of the new mosque in the Higher Quarter. The number of people who come to worship does not exceed only a few people today.

After the church lost its religious influence, the region has also lost its importance. The Turks who have placed the region after the exchange became alienated to the environment and they started to use the region according to their own economic and social conditions.

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