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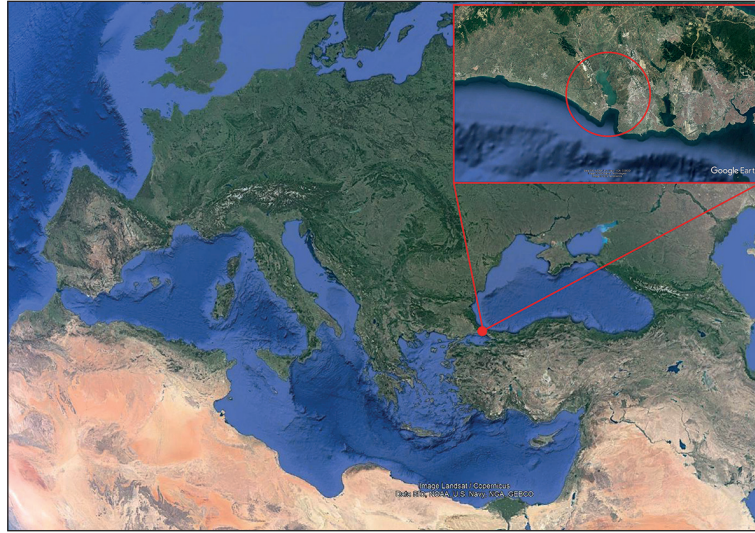
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Episkopeia, a Justinianic Fortress in Eastern Thrace*

Büyükçekmece, a town and a homonymous district in the Thracian territories west of Istanbul (fig. 1), takes its modern name from a lagoon lake situated within the district borders (fig. 2). The ancient name of the city was Athyra(s), a term that was also common for a large stream, modern Karasu, which flows into the lake from the North. The rivers of Melas and Athyras converge in the North of the region identified by antique writers as the Athyras river (Strab. 7, 54; Plin. nat. 4, 11; Ptol. 3, 11)¹. In this estuary region, the rivers formed with their alluvial deposits a wide and fertile plain².



1 The location of Büyükçekmece

In that plain where the two rivers met until recent times, the fortress of Ahmediye Castle is located, in the basin of the Büyükçekmece dam lake (fig. 3). The fortress lies 8 km north-west of the road that leads from the outfall of Lake Büyükçekmece to the city of Çatalca, and it is clearly visible from the International Highway E-80 (fig. 4), a road that corresponds

* The research was carried out with the permissions of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism (dated 01. 10. 2018, no. 788617 and 13. 06. 2019 no. E.490358).

¹ There are different names for the ancient river Melas: Sometimes the river appears as Inceğiz, sometimes as Karasu stream. The Athyras river rises at modern Sazlıkçayır near Durusu, merges first with Karasu and afterwards with the waters of Beylikçayır. It expands and flows into the Marmara Sea. The name Athyras may be derived from its two arms. Kaya 1999, Map Attachment no. 4.

² The first detailed study on Büyükçekmece/Athyras was carried out by S. Aydınğün and her scientific team during the Istanbul Prehistoric Archaeological Survey (Aydınğün et al. 2015, 1–12; Aydınğün et al. 2017, 21–31). The previous archaeological surveys in Büyükçekmece and surroundings, conducted by M. Özdoğan from Istanbul University and his team, were mainly focused on prehistory, while later periods were not the focus of attention (Özdoğan 1982; 1983a; 1983b; 1984; 1986a; 1986b; 1988; 1992; 2008; 1992).



2 The position of Episkopeia/Ahmediye

period, approximately 10 km north of Athyra, which maintains its road station status, will become clear due to further studies in the future». Sayar did not connect the castle in question with the fortress of Episkopeia⁷. Members of the »TAY Projesi« followed Sayar's text with brief information on the apparent rectangular plan and the current condition of the structure⁸. The Viennese historian Andreas Külzer was the only scholar dealing with Eastern Thrace who identified the fortress of Ahmediye with the Byzantine place of Episkopeia⁹.

Episkopeia was scarcely mentioned in Medieval and early modern sources; a rare exception was the Brabantian cartographer Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598) who presented Episkopeia in his »Orbis Terrarum« on the banks of the Athyras River (fig. 5).

The Balkan Peninsula and especially Eastern Thrace was one of the core regions of the Byzantine Empire, together with western Asia Minor, the Aegean Sea and the Sea of Marmara¹⁰. The site of Athyra was located in the neighbourhood of the Empire's capital Constantinople, in its fertile hinterland. The whole area was prosperous thanks to the rich natural resources. On the other hand, the proximity to Constantinople was responsible for recurring hostile

with the former Via Egnatia³. Obviously, the fortress was situated close to the Via Egnatia, for both the safety of the travellers and the safety of the neighbouring plains and landscapes.

Academic studies dedicated to the fortress provide only inadequate information. Formerly, some historians mentioned a fortress »Episkopeia«. The outstanding scholar Konstantin Jireček already localized in the 19th century a strong fortress with this name and prominent towers in the neighbourhood of Athyra⁴. His contemporary A. G. Paspatēs gave no valuable information beyond a short reference⁵, while Achill Th. Samothrakēs referred in his important »Geographic and historical Lexicon of Thrace« to the strong walls and towers of Episkopeia – however, he connected the place erroneously with the Byzantine bishopric of Metrai, modern Çatalca⁶. The Turkish epigrapher Mustafa Hamdi Sayar described the archaeological remains in Ahmediye, and expressed his hope that »for what strategic purposes this fortress was constructed in the Byzantine

³ The Via Egnatia, being one of the most important communication roads in the Balkan Peninsula, crossed Eastern Thrace in an east-west direction and connected the Adriatic Sea with Constantinople. In the Roman period, the connection ended already on the banks of the river Maritsa, but in later times, it was extended to the east, to the city of Constantinople. In the hinterland of Heraclea, some crossroads connected it with the Via Traiana (Soustal 1991, 132–134. 137–138; Külzer 2008, 199–202. 342–344; Külzer 2011, 190–195; Külzer 2018, 246; Lolos 2008, 36 f.; Popović 2010).

⁴ Jireček 1877, 62.

⁵ Paspatēs 1877/1878, 37.

⁶ Samothrakēs 1963, 353. 362.

⁷ Sayar 1997, 110 fig. 3.

⁸ Türkiye Arkeolojik Yerleşimleri, Bizans: Ahmediye <[http://tayproject.org/TAYBizansMar.fm\\$Retrieve?YerlesmeNo=20007&html=bizansdetail.html&layout=web](http://tayproject.org/TAYBizansMar.fm$Retrieve?YerlesmeNo=20007&html=bizansdetail.html&layout=web)> (17. 02. 2020).

⁹ Külzer 2008, 352 f. 533.

¹⁰ Koder 2001, 16–18.



3 Remains of the walls of the castle



4 Ruins of the castle; in the background the International Highway E-80

5 Map by Abraham Ortelius (1527–1598), showing Episkopeia on the banks of the Athyras River



raids and devastations. Therefore, several castles, fortresses, and walls¹¹ were built to protect the landscape and its inhabitants. Construction work was carried out throughout from the 4th century onwards, but a peak level was reached in the sixth century. At that time diseases, epidemic plagues and invasions created vast landscapes in many parts of Thrace which were hardly populated and without any noteworthy agricultural production. Even the food supply of Constantinople was precarious¹².

Written sources provide detailed information about the political and social situation during the reign of Emperor Justinian I (527–565 A.D.). Ahmediye Castle is estimated to be one of the structures built during that period, when Emperor Justinian was committed to reconstruction with the aim of protecting the land to the west of the capital after the struggles he engaged in there with the Thracians, Avars and Bulgarians. It is stated in the book »De Aedificiis«, assumed to have been written by the historian Procopius before 558 A.D., that 700 cities and settlements were equipped with castles by Emperor Justinian and that some of them were established and others were restored. Procopius wrote the following on Athyra and its surroundings: »Beyond Athyras there is a certain place, which the inhabitants call Episkopeia.

¹¹ See Velkov 1977, 30; Crow 1995, 109–124.

¹² Külzer 2018, 249.

The Emperor Justinian, perceiving that it lay exposed to the assaults of the enemy, and that a large expanse of country here was altogether unguarded, since no stronghold at all existed, built a fortress in that place; and he built the towers there, not in the customary manner, but as follows: At regular intervals a structure is built out from the circuit-wall, very narrow at first, but finally spreading out to a great breadth; on this in each side a tower was erected. Thus it is impossible for the enemy to get close to the wall anywhere, because when they get into a precarious position between the towers they are easily shot at from both sides and from above by the guards there and are destroyed. The gates too he did not place in the customary position between the towers, but at an angle, in the narrow part of the projection which runs out from the wall, where they could not be seen by the enemy but were masked behind the towers. In that place Theodore, a very clever man who held the office of *silentarius*, was of service to the Emperor. Thus were these fortifications built. And it is proper, proceeding thence to the long walls, to explain them briefly.¹³

It is estimated that the settlement Procopius describes as »a certain place which the inhabitants call Episkopeia« is the predecessor of the modern village Ahmediye, a place that has been inhabited since the Neolithic-Early Bronze Age period (figs. 6. 7 a. b). In addition, Hellenistic-Roman ceramics (fig. 8) and a funerary stele¹⁴ (fig. 9) discovered in surveys conducted by us near the fortress prove the existence of a small settlement in the region before the 6th century A.D.

The castle claimed by Procopius to have been built by Emperor Justinian I is thought to have been established near this settlement and a large part of it is assumed to be under the waters of the dam lake today. The description of the fortress of Episkopeia by Procopius fully conforms to the castle in Ahmediye, according to our first examinations. The wall ruins in the southwest and northwest of the fortress located in the northwest of Lake Büyükçekmece, which has been converted



6 Neolithic stone axes



7 a Early Bronze Age stone whorls and weights



7 b Early Bronze Age terracotta whorls



8 Hellenistic-Roman ceramics

¹³ Prok. 4, 3, 19–56.

¹⁴ APELLAS STOMAKHAS, SON OF APELLAS AKHILLAS is written on the inscription on the funerary stele, which can be dated between the 1st and 2nd c. (read by Mustafa Hamdi Sayar).

into a dam lake today, are still standing (fig. 10 a. b), although one part consists of scattered debris. Many parts of the fortress are today below the water. The fortification wall of the fortress continues throughout the lake in a northeast and southeast direction.

The longest of the still standing walls (no. 1) (fig. 11 a–d) measures 28 m in length (figs. 12. 13) and 3 m in width (fig. 14). The walls were constructed in *opus incertum* technique, while on the inside of the wall lime mortar (without any brick dust or fragments) and rubble rock were employed¹⁵. Rectangular form cut stones are applied at the inner and outer surface of the wall; however, much of this has been largely destroyed. Furthermore, a row of bricks could not be determined, nor could reused material be detected in the wall. The highest standing point of the walls measures 6 m. On the southern side of this wall it is possible to discern the traces of ten steps of a staircase climbing to an upper floor (fig. 15). The upper parts of the wall still preserve the exterior stone platings and it is assumed that at one time all the walls were covered in the same style. On the northern side, cut stones of much large size are evident. On the face of the wall there are circular holes, possibly for inner wooden construction (fig. 15).

The length of the remaining wall 2 is 11 m and its height 5.3 m (fig. 16 a. b). It is thought that the main gate of the castle exists between walls nos. 3 and 4 (fig. 10 a. b). On the flanks of these walls, rows of cut stones are preserved in quite good condition (fig. 17). Wall no. 5 has a length of 4.7 m and a height of 5.1 m (fig. 18 a. b). The enlargement of the lake due to its use as a freshwater reservoir covers most of the castle's walls. It is possible, however, to use Google Earth's archived images to view the structure in the seasons in which drought had shrunk the lake. In such a season (24. 09. 2014), the walls on the eastern side of the castle, which would normally be under water, were measured as 431 m (fig. 13). There are traces of 13 towers including what can be detected from satellite images in the summer months when the water had receded. The visible end was covered by a round corner tower, while there are also rectangular towers in the spaces. However, there are no apparent remains of these towers. Although the distances between the towers differ, they are located at intervals of around



9 Funerary stele



10 a Fortification walls of Episkopeia



10 b Fortification gate of Epsikopeia

¹⁵ Turnbull – Dennis 2010, 10



11 a Wall no. 1 in summer



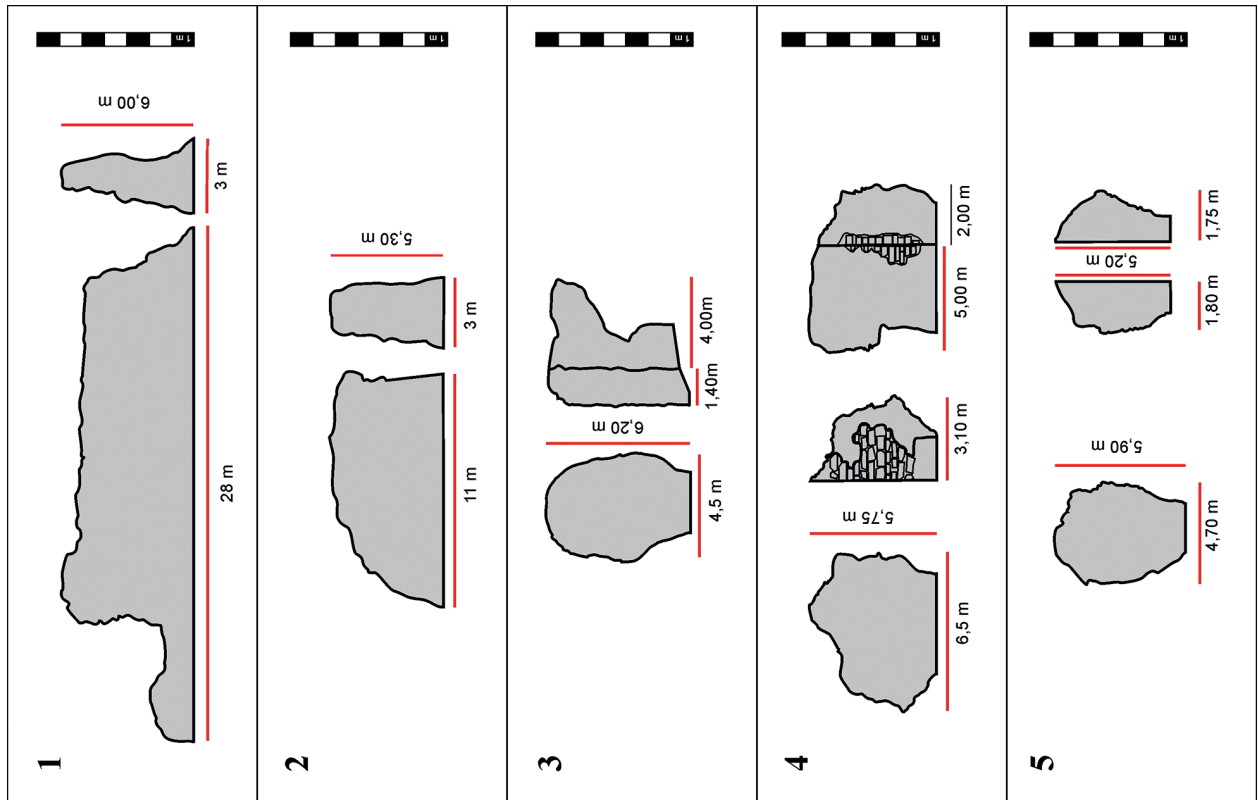
11 b Wall no. 1, north side



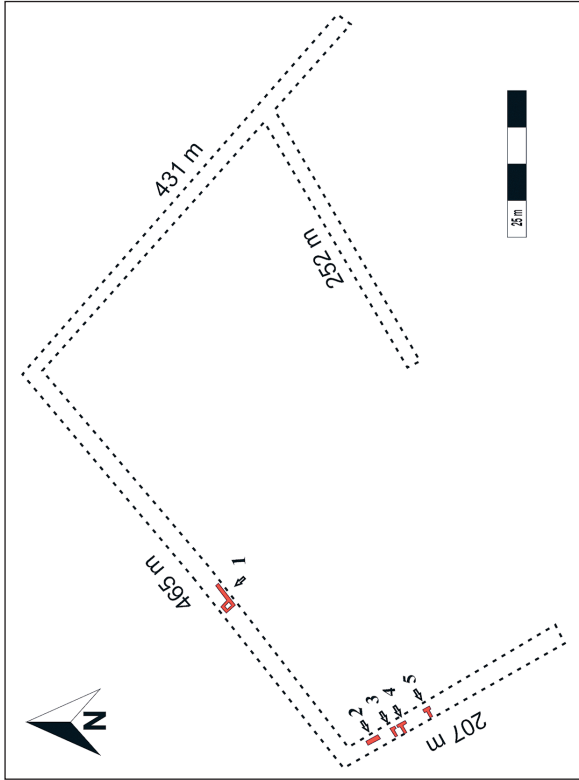
11 c Wall no. 1, south side



11 d Foundation stones between wall no. 1 and wall no. 2



12 Cross sections of the castle walls



13 Plan of the walls and the locations where the cross sections were made



14 East side of wall no. 1



15 Staircase steps on wall no. 1

40–65 m, enabling the elimination of enemies with arrows from that distance¹⁶. This layout is common practice for architecture of the period¹⁷. The fortifications of the Late Antique towns (4th–6th c.) followed the same principles as the Roman model, including the achievements of Greek engineering as applied to Roman military tactics. In northern Greece, the fortresses along the Via Egnatia road, such as Kumutzēna (modern Comotini) and Philippi, are planned according to these characteristics¹⁸. The construction of Episkopeia shows similar features. The castle was erected in the plain; its purpose was the protection of the farmland and the Via Egnatia road.

A 6th-century coin was recovered from inside the fortress. The chalices dated to the 6th and 7th centuries¹⁹ (fig. 19), which were recovered from the ruins along with a number of medieval coins (fig. 22) and glazed ceramics²⁰ with sgraffito technique from Constantinople, prove that the castle was in use until the 14th century (fig. 23). Numerous horse bones were also encountered during our surveys of the interior of the fortress and its immediate surroundings, correlating with the military function of the structure. Furthermore, it is clear from the medical equipment recovered, that there was a medical team in the fortress (fig. 20). A special production mace²¹, which can be dated to the 11–13th centuries, and similar ones known from Balkan battlefields suggest the existence of a high military command in this castle and a number of military conflicts (fig. 21).

In the interior of the fortress, in the middle section, a space inside the fortress is visible from the base level. Finally, as stated in the Registration Decision of the Istanbul Council I for the Conservation of Cultural Property dated 16. 06. 1987 and numbered 3612, funerary steles with farewell scenes dating to the period of the Roman Empire were found outside the fortress, while architraves and pieces of columns with Christograms, dating to the Byzantine era, were found inside the fortress and placed under protection in Istanbul's Archaeological Museums.

Local inhabitants have reported that a large cistern was located outside the fortress and that it was covered in recent times. The dimensions of this structure are approximately 40 × 10 m. The narration of Procopius regarding the claim that the gate of the fortress was hidden with a triangular wall once again is consistent with the presence of a gate located in a triangular wall in the land part, as can be seen from the aerial photographs.

We conclude that Ahmediye Castle is the Episkopeia Fortress, built by Emperor Justinian I in the first half of the 6th century. Before our study, the most detailed information regarding the fortress until now was provided by the contemporary Procopius. Furthermore we learn that Theodore, who was officiating as *silentarius*²², was given the task of construction by order of the Emperor²³. The findings, especially the sixth-century ones in the fortress, strengthen and underline the narration of Procopius.

The area in which the fortress is located is quite suitable for settlement due to both its climate conditions and geomorphological structure. The fortress was built in the region

¹⁶ Bakirtzis – Oreopoulos 2001, 34.

¹⁷ Lawrence 1983, 193.

¹⁸ Bakirtzis – Oreopoulos 2001, 28 f.

¹⁹ These type glass chalices are dated by Hayes to 6th–7th c.: Hayes 1992b, 400–409.

²⁰ For similar ones please look at Hayes 1992a, 400–409 fig. 28; Bakirtzi 1999, 29–71; Arslan 2004, pls. 46, 15; 49, 37–39; 72, 142, 143.

²¹ D'Amato 2011, 7–48 figs. 16, 1; 23, 6.

²² The 30-person advisory board composed of the senators working most closely with the Emperor. A court attendant whose first duty was to secure order and silence in the palace. The *silentiarioi* belonged to the staff of the *praepositus sacri cubiculi* and stood under the jurisdiction of the *magister officiorum*. Silentariioi are first mentioned in an edict of 326 or 328. By 437 the *schola* of *silentiarioi* in Constantinople consisted of 30 members under the command of 3 *decuriones*. Their functions were informal: they served as the emperor's marshals, calling the meeting of the *consistorium*; Kazhdan 1991, 249.

²³ Prok. 4, 3, 19–56.



16 a Wall no. 2, east side



16 b Wall no. 2, west side



17 Wall no. 4, rows of cut stones



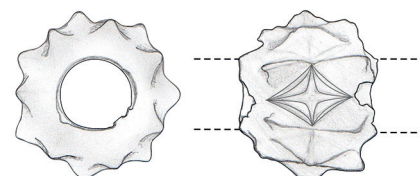
18 a Wall no. 5, east side



18 b Wall no. 5, north-west side



19 Chalice (6th–7th centuries)



21 Iron war mace



20 Medical bronze probe



22 Bronze coins dated from Hellenistic to Middle Ages



23 Sgraffito ceramic fragments

where the Athyras/Karasu Stream discharges into Lake Büyükçekmece. The alluvium of the Athyras/Karasu Stream turned the field into a focal point for agricultural activities. Considering the fact that the lake area was narrower in the past and that the alluvial accumulation field of the Athyras/Karasu Stream covered wider spaces, it is assumed that the people who lived here were engaged in intensive agricultural activity in the area that was uncommon for that period. Furthermore, due to its location the fortress was able to control transportation activities on both the lake and the Athyras/Karasu Stream.

The fortress of Episkopeia at Ahmediye, which was built on geologically weak lithological soil, was

therefore partly damaged by earthquakes that occurred throughout history on both the North Anatolian Fault line and the small faults to the west of Lake Büyükçekmece. However, the greatest damage to the fortress was inflicted by humans, and the depredation continues.



24 a Aerial photo of the castle remains in summer season



24 b Aerial photo of the castle remains in autumn

Apparently, the most extensive damage occurred during the construction of a tarmac road from Çatalca to Büyükçekmece in the 1950s. According to the information provided by the elders of Ahmediye, the walls of the fortress were dismantled and the stones were used as ground filling in the construction of the road. The fortress is still located within the Büyükçekmece Dam Lake water conservation basin of ISKI (Istanbul Water and Sewerage Administration); the structure and its surroundings were classified as a Grade I archaeological site in 1987 during the dam construction and placed under protection. However, it is understood that when this decision was made, many ruins located outside the borders set during the environmental inspection were not considered, and that the borders were kept narrow. The local

community and the Ahmediye Neighbourhood Representative Erdinç Kartal reports that many rows of walls and sarcophagus-type archaeological remains were encountered underground in this region, where ISKI has installed various channel lines outside of the site borders even in recent years. We learned that a number of these remains were left under debris and that some were shattered by earth diggers. For this reason, it can be surmised that the work carried out by official bodies actually caused the greatest damage to the fortress. In addition, there are many illegal excavation sites in the region. The fortress is a popular focal point for illegal treasure hunters due to legends referring to the presence here of carriages carrying gold to the Emperor. The fortress is very much exposed to depredation due to the fact that its surroundings are accessible and that it is a few hundred meters from Ahmediye village.

The borders of the fortress, which extend to the dam lake, are broader on the landward side. When we follow the traces of the borders of the fortress that can be seen in the old and new satellite images on Google Earth, this situation is clearly revealed (fig. 24 a. b). Additionally when we examine the geomorphological history of the region where the fortress, which is submerged in the winter and spring months, is located, we find that the lake was formed at the end of the Oligocene epoch.

The Marmara Region, which underwent a period of stress in the Middle Miocene-Early Pliocene period, began to subside and the Büyükçekmece formation was developed in accordance with these movements²⁴. In this formation, streams and lakes were filled with sediments. In the Last Glacial Period, the streams that discharge to the Bosphorus and the Marmara Sea eroded their beds down to sea level, which was 70–80 m lower than today; these kinds of valleys began to be flooded in accordance with the sea level rising in the post-glacial period²⁵. The

²⁴ Koral 1998, 27–36.

²⁵ Koral 2007, 571–601; Özgül 2011, 6.



25 a Büyükçekmece Bay and Büyükçekmece Dam Lake



25 b Athyras/Karasu stream discharges alluvium into Lake Büyükçekmece. The photo was taken in autumn after the lake's water receded

Büyükçekmece cove (fig. 25 a. b) was formed as a result of Karasu valley being submerged by the rising sea. It is thought that the initial area covered by the lake, which was formed by the invasion of seawater, was approximately 6–8 km². Although this area showed increases and decreases, it did not affect Ahmediye Castle and its immediate surroundings. With the decision to use the lake for irrigation purposes, a dam was constructed on the outfall of the lake that began to operate in 1989²⁶. Following this, the lake area rapidly expanded. This growth sometimes increases the area of the lake to 25–30 km². Today, where this rise in water level is common, the lake bank sometimes approaches the Episkopeia/Ahmediye fortress, and sometimes submerges it. When the lake level drops in accordance with the climate and the amount of water used, the fortress once again is included in the inland area.

It is necessary to wait for the end of the summer months when waters are withdrawn in order to

conduct detailed studies of the Episkopeia/Ahmediye Fortress, which is fascinating even with its current standing wall ruins in the immediate surroundings of Istanbul. In order to protect the fortress, which could be studied within a limited time period in 2016 and 2018, from all kinds of depredation, the historical significance of the fortress needs to be underscored. This article represents the first preliminary report on the fortress, and a great responsibility falls to local administrations and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in the future. Conducting scientific excavations in the fortress is increasingly important in terms of the new information it would provide regarding the history of Late Antiquity.

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²⁶ Ministry of Environment, 1995; D.S.I, 1974; Akgün 1996.

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Abstract

Şengül Aydingün – Błażej Stanisławski – Hakan Kaya – Haldun Aydingün – Ayberk Enez – Hakan Öñiz, Episkopeia, a Justinianic fortress in Eastern Thrace

This article is dedicated to the fortress of Ahmediye, 8 km north of Lake Büyükçekmece to the west of Istanbul. The fortress was built in the 6th century to protect the fertile landscapes and agricultural regions in the hinterland of Constantinople. The construction can be identified with the fortress of Episkopeia that is mentioned in the book »De aedificiis« (4, 3, 19–56), written by the historian Procopius of Caesarea.

Keywords

Büyükçekmece – Episkopeia – Ahmediye Fortress – Istanbul – Emperor Justinian I.