

## ZERZEVAN CASTLE IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT ARCHEOLOGICAL RESEARCHES

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**Keywords:** *Zerzevan Castle • Garrison • Roman Empire • Sassanid • Amida*

Southeastern Anatolia, which forms the extreme border of the Roman Empire, has been transformed into a geography where great struggles between the two great powers of the time, Rome and Parthians/Sassanids, have been maintained throughout history from the perspective of economic, political and military strategy. The research that began at Zerzevan Castle, the military settlement of Rome, plays a very important role in understanding the Roman period of the region. Due to its location, the entire valley is dominated by this strategic Roman border garrison on the antique trade route that controls a large area. Besides Zerzevan should be considered as a settlement where not only soldiers settled but also civilians. When the existing architectural remains and the finds uncovered in the excavations are examined, it can be said that the area was used in the 3rd century AD; but it is very difficult today to estimate the area covered at that time. The walls and structures of the settlement were probably repaired during Anastasius I (AD 491-518) and Justinian I (AD 527-565) periods, and some structures have been reconstructed to the final state as found today. The settlement must have been in use until the conquest of the region by the Islamic armies in 639 AD.

### YENİ ARKEOLOJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR IŞIĞINDA ZERZEVAN KALESİ

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Zerzevan Kalesi, Garnizon, Roma, Sasani, Amida*

Roma İmparatorluğu'nun doğudaki en uç sınırını oluşturan Anadolu'nun güneydoğusu ekonomik, siyasi ve stratejik açıdan her zaman önemini korumuş, bu coğrafyada hakimiyet kurmak için dönemin iki büyük gücü Roma ve Parth/Sasaniler büyük mücadele vermiştir. Bu bağlamda kilit noktada yer alan ve Roma'nın askeri yerleşimi olan Zerzevan Kalesi'nde yeni başlayan çalışmalar, bölgenin Roma Dönemi'nin aydınlanması açısından oldukça önemli bir rol üstlenmektedir. Yerleşim konumu itibarıyla bütün vadiye hakim, antik ticaret yolu üzerinde, geniş bir alanı kontrol altında tutan, stratejik bir Roma sınır garnizonudur. Bununla birlikte Zerzevan'da sadece askerler kalmamış, aynı zamanda sivillerin yaşadığını da söyleyebiliriz. Yerleşimde mevcut mimari kalıntılar ve kazı çalışmalarında ele geçen buluntular incelediğinde MS 3. yy'da alanın kullanıldığı söylenebilir, fakat bu dönemdeki boyutları hakkında bilgi vermek şu an için çok zordur. Büyük bir olasılıkla yerleşimin surları ve yapılarının Anastasios I (MS 491-518) ve Justinianos I (MS 527-565) dönemlerinde onarılarak, bazıları ise yeniden inşa edilerek mevcut son haline getirildiği söylenebilir. MS 639 yılında İslam orduları tarafından bölgenin fethine kadar da yerleşim önemini korumuştur.

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Gönderilme tarihi: 29.05.2017; Kabul edilme tarihi: 03.10.2017

Southeastern Anatolia, which has been the easternmost border of the Roman Empire, has always maintained the economic, political and strategic importance thereof and has become the scene of great struggles between the two great powers of the period, namely Romans and Parthians and subsequently Sasanians which have succeeded Parthians with an eye to establish dominance in this region. Excavations launched in 2014 at the Zerzevan Castle military settlement located 13 km from the Çınar district of Diyarbakır province within the Demirölçek Village has a very significant role in terms of shedding light to Roman period of the region<sup>1</sup>.

The settlement, for which extensive studies have not been carried out until now, was first visited by Carsten Niebuhr in 1766. Niebuhr, who called the settlement *Kasr Zerzaua*, mentioned about some buildings and stated that he was not able to find any inscriptions in the area. No continued settlements were determined save the remains during the visit of Niebuhr<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile Eduard Sachau, who has traveled from Mardin to Diyarbakır in 1880 and visited the settlement, has made short and undetailed descriptions. Sachau also does not provide any information as to continued settlement in the settlement named *Zerzaua*<sup>3</sup>. Subsequently, Conrad

Preusser made a short visit to Zerzevan Castle in 1910, furnishing undetailed information<sup>4</sup>. Samuel Guyer penned his observations as a memoir in 1911. His sister, Hanna Schätti-Guyer, who travelled with him, also provided some brief information as to the settlement. On the other hand Guyer mentions about the existence of a village which has not been seen by the previous travellers<sup>5</sup>. Demirölçek Village 1 km from the settlement in our day, has been founded by those who lived in Zerzevan Castle mentioned through Guyer. It is known that a family first settled in the castle in the 1890s and after a time 17 other families also moved there. The inhabitants of this village settled in a place very close to Zerzevan in 1967, due to water shortage and transportation difficulties just in the vicinity of Aşağı Konak Village which is present in our day. The name *Zerzevan* must have been derived from the word “gold” in Kurdish and is the changed form of *Zerzaua* mentioned by the travellers and it is the name given to the settlement while the village was here.

The military settlement has been built on a rocky hill at the height of 124 m. The remains and city walls of the settlement area, spread over a large area on the surface with an area of approximately 60 acres, as well as the necropolis located outside remains and city walls can easily be seen<sup>6</sup>. There are architectural remains such as observation and defensive towers (southern tower), churches, administrative

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<sup>1</sup> The excavation and restoration studies at Zerzevan Castle, which began in 2014, are still being carried out with the permissions of Ministry of Culture and Tourism and under the chairmanship of Diyarbakır Museum by Yrd. Doç. Dr. Aytaç COŞKUN as the scientific consultant.

<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr 1780, 323; Ritter 1844, 389; Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 8, fn.1, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Sachau 1883, 44; Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 8, fn.1, 31; Preusser 1911, 54.

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<sup>4</sup> Preusser, 1911, 54ff; Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 31.

<sup>5</sup> Guyer, 1968, 156.

<sup>6</sup> Coşkun 2015b, 72; Coşkun 2016, 101-102.

building, arsenal and rock altar in the southern area of the settlement surrounded by city walls and where public buildings are located. In the north, street-alleys and houses can be observed. Water cisterns, underground sanctuary, underground shelter and many structures functions of which have not yet been determined have been identified at the same time. There are canals providing water to the settlement and presentation bowls outside the city walls in addition to the rock tombs and vaulted tombs in the necropolis area (Plan 1-2, fig. 1-2).

### Fortifications

Entrance from the city walls is provided from the east where the ancient road is located through two great bastions. The whole settlement has been surrounded by 12-15 m. high and 2,1 - 3,2 m thick city walls (plan 1-2)<sup>7</sup>. 10 bastions and 2 towers placed at certain intervals on the fortification wall with the length of 1.2 km. have been identified. There are also support walls protruding between the towers. It is observed that in some parts of the walls, especially in the eastern and southern parts, the bedrock has been carved and used as a city wall to a certain height and its surface has been straightened while the walls are formed of cut blocks. The reason why most of the bastions were built on the walls of the eastern fortress is that the only entrance into the castle and the ancient road were located in this section and the location has a topographical characteristic open to attacks. The three-storey large tower for

observing and defense purposes in the south of the settlement was protected up to a height of 19.2 m. and its original height was determined to be 21 m. (Drawing 1, fig.3-4)<sup>8</sup>. The lower part of the tower has been constructed as a seven-step pedestal outward according to the slope incline of the tower. The place where the city wall joins with the tower at the northern wall can be understood easily and the wall height can be calculated in this way. A passage proceeding to underground was detected in the researchers conducted in the southern tower and a part thereof was unearthed, but it was found that it was closed with good shaped blocks and mortar prior to the last siege.

### Houses

The area that gets lower to the north, where streets and alleys can be observed, is the residential area (Plan 2). The dwellings are made up of one or more spaces, their foundation parts are carved in the bedrock, and the blocks obtained by carving the bedrock have been utilized on the building walls. Walls and door blocks of the cited dwellings preserved up to a certain height can be seen in our day. The lower floors with big doors of the houses designed as two floors have been allocated for horses and livestock, and have also functioned as warehouse and soldiers and civilians have used the upper floor for their living space (fig. 5)<sup>9</sup>. Rough stones were laid between some of the perpendicular blocks drawing attention in the walls of some buildings structure. There are big

<sup>7</sup> Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 9; Coşkun 2015a, 92; Coşkun 2016, 103.

<sup>8</sup> Coşkun 2015b, 74; Coşkun 2016, 104.

<sup>9</sup> Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 16-17; Coşkun 2016, 104-105; Coşkun 2017, 133-137.

sized independent settlements with four or more spaces also in the southern part where the public buildings are predominant in addition to the residential area in the northern part. One of these special structures is located in the middle part of the settlement, between the arsenal building and the big water cistern, and consists of four spaces. The house with the dimensions of the 9.6 x 12.4 m. should have been utilized by a senior military official. Its walls formed of large blocks were preserved to a certain level, and the door jambs and lintels have reached until present. The reason why that the walls of the house have been constructed rather thick compared to the other construction must be due to preventing heat loss and durability (fig. 6)<sup>10</sup>.

### Religious Buildings

There is an underground prayer room used by the early Christians living here at the center of the settlement converted from a rock tomb of the previous Roman period (fig. 7)<sup>11</sup>. It is a tomb with seven steps, single entrance and three klines which has been originally built under the ground by carving the bedrock and it must have been used in the 3rd century AD. A small group of people who lived here converted the grave into a sanctuary and performed their prayers here subsequently with the permission given to praying Christianity in the Roman world. At this stage, the kline in the east was carved from two sides and transformed into a sanctuary and the sign of

cross and some characters were engraved on the eastern walls. The kline in the north was destroyed and converted into a second entrance gate and the sign of cross was carved on both sides of the door. A large hole for ventilation was opened on the ceiling of the kline in the south inasmuch as the place was used for worship. Outside and right in front of the structure there is a pool carved into the bedrock, used for baptism. Additionally, a niche has been opened to place lamps on the eastern wall of the sanctuary. This reveals the fact that the sanctuary was illuminated and used also in the evenings. The large church which still exists in our day in the settlement must have been built due to the increasing number of community members living here. There are public buildings located in the southern part of the settlement which is the higher part of the settlement. One of the most well-preserved public buildings in the city is the church with four spaces in the east-west direction (drawing 2, fig.8). There is a church built in the 6th century AD at the highest point of the settlement to which it is entered from the courtyard in the south, and there is a baptistery pool inside the structure<sup>12</sup>. A bronze bucket found in Zerzevan Castle is currently exhibited in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum under inventory number 852<sup>13</sup>. The sides of the upper part

<sup>10</sup> Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 17; Coşkun 2016, 105; Coşkun 2017, 128-131.

<sup>11</sup> Coşkun 2016, 131-133.

<sup>12</sup> Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 26; Coşkun 2016, 107; Coşkun 2017, 137-138.

<sup>13</sup> The bucket on which "ΥΠΕΡ ΕΥΧΗΣ ΚΑΙ ΣΩΤΗΡΙΑΣ ΑΝΤΙΠΑΤΡΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΠΑΝΤΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΟΙΚΟΥ ΑΥΤΟΥ ΚΥΡΙΟΣ ΦΥΛΑΞΙ ΣΑΙ (For acceptance of the wish -or offering- of Antipatros and his family and for their salvation. God bless you)" is written in Ancient Greek and which belongs to the church is from the 6th century (Joubin 1898, 55; Devambez

of the rocky area, located in the south 19 m from the church extending in the east-west direction, has been restored and the upper part has been left natural. There are niches on the walls of the building with a total dimension of 7,7x10,2 m and must have been used for offering purposes<sup>14</sup>. The surface of the bedrock located outside of the walls, on the hill in the south of the tower 202 m. from the tower where the rock tombs and the stone quarry are located has been leveled and two offering bowls have been made in this area. Religious ceremonies during the Roman period must have been performed here. These bowls are with the diameter of 85-58 cm. and in the depth of 24-28 cm. while the structures are parallel to each other. The distance between the bowls extending in the north-south direction is 8,2 m<sup>15</sup>.

#### Arsenal and Underground Shelter

The biggest structure of the settlement is located in the north of the church. This narrow and long structure has the dimensions of 10,9x36,4 m. (plan 2). The building with a cradle roof is thought to be an arsenal and on the western side of its north wall there is a lower structure which may be an entrance gate<sup>16</sup>. The structure which was standing until 1975 completely, can be seen today with its destroyed eastern wall<sup>17</sup>. The de-

tails as to the function of structure will only be reached subsequent to the excavations to be carried out. There is a wide area at the north of arsenal which is considered where there are no buildings and where the bedrock has been leveled is thought to be a meeting place. There is an underground shelter in an area close to the northern fortification wall of the settlement built by carving the bedrock where 400 people can be temporarily sheltered. The underground shelter consisting of two parts has 5 ventilations and an entrance with a spiral staircase. The height of the shelter, each section of which is in the dimensions of 14x3,5 m., is 4,3 m. It is thought that the structure was utilized by people engaged in local agriculture in the wartime as a food warehouse in times of peace.

#### Water System

There are 54 cisterns carved into the bedrock fulfilling the water requirements of the settlement. There are also large cisterns in the northern part for the use of people in addition to the individual cisterns located in front of the houses<sup>18</sup>. The lower part of the cited vaulted cisterns has been carved into the bedrock up to the beginning part of the arch. There are holes made to the ceiling in order to take the collected water from the cisterns with a pulley like mechanism in case of need. It is clear that the two-parted large water cisterns covered by vaults the eastern wall of which is adjacent to the city walls and with the dimension of 11.2x22.5 m. are the main water sources of the city (drawing 3,

1937, 47, det. 24; Fıratlı 1955, 50, fig.15, 37; Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 39; Pleket – Stroud 1977; Pitarakis 2015, 354-355, cat.112).

<sup>14</sup> Coşkun 2015b, 75; Coşkun 2016, 115

<sup>15</sup> Coşkun 2017, 138.

<sup>16</sup> Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 27; Coşkun 2015a, 93; Coşkun 2016, 105.

<sup>17</sup> Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, taf. 13.1.

<sup>18</sup> Coşkun 2015b, 76; Coşkun 2016, 105.

fig.9)<sup>19</sup>. A very long canal located outside the city walls in the south of the city 616 m of which has been unearthed provided these large cisterns with water (plan 1, fig. 10). The width of the canal is 51-68 cm while the depth there of is 48-61 cm<sup>20</sup>.

### **Necropolis**

There is a necropolis area consisting of different types of graves outside the settlement area and 3 types of tombs have been identified in general in this necropolis area<sup>21</sup>. These are vaulted tombs and rock tombs carved in the form of sarcophagi. Two vaulted tombs have been identified until now in the studies carried out in the necropolis area. The first of these tombs is located in the western part of the southern tower, close to the city walls while the other is the one-space grave located on the other high hill in the south of the settlement. Two graves outside the settlement carved into the bedrock 88 m. in the south of the southern tower are completely unearthed with the works carried out (plan 1, fig. 11). The ceiling, on which no works have been carried out yet, has collapsed and other destroyed rock tombs are located on the other high hill in the south of the settlement. The tombs in general have a stepped entrance and open directly into the burial chamber. The burial chamber extends in the northeast-southwest direction. Three klines have been made to place the deceased persons in all three directions outside the entrance, but the

pillow on which the heads are placed have not been made. It can be asserted that the unearthed tombs have directional unity and it is noteworthy that uniformity has been observed in the numbers of the steps in both graves. All the graves in which no findings were obtained in the excavations have been robbed both in the antique period and in our day and subsequently demolished by using them as an animal shelter and the tombs have been merged after the intermediate wall has been removed<sup>22</sup>. There are five tombs carved in the form of sarcophagi into the bedrock extending in the 4.5 m. north-southeast direction, unlike direction of the rock tombs, at the north-western side of the rock tombs (plan 1, fig.12)<sup>23</sup>. The sarcophagus lids of the tombs have not reached until our day. The grooves around the tombs are noteworthy and this structuring has been constructed to throw out the rain water coming from the hill without getting into the grave. All of the graves were cleaned and unearthed thanks to the works carried out.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

The military settlement was at a strategic point on the way from Amida (Diyarbakır) to Dara (Mardin) in the ancient period. Zerzevan, with this location thereof, is also along the ancient road route starting from Edessa (Şanlıurfa) to Nisibis (Nusaybin). The cited ancient period road has been utilized by Shapur II the Sasanian king during the campaign against Constantius II in 359 AD and Shapur II

<sup>19</sup> Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 29; Coşkun 2016, 110; Coşkun 2017, 138.

<sup>20</sup> Coşkun 2016, 111; Coşkun 2017, 138-139.

<sup>21</sup> Coşkun 2016, 112-115.

<sup>22</sup> Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 30; Coşkun 2016, 114.

has captured Amida<sup>24</sup>. Ammianus who gave significant information about the siege informed that Legio V Parthica set foot in the city and he also recorded that five legions and a troop of cavalry running away from the Sassanid army took refuge in the city<sup>25</sup>. Garrison cities commenced to be established for border security particularly following this date<sup>26</sup>. Dara city, another border garrison previously which was a small settlement, was chosen as a garrison city through Anastasios I (AD 491-518) due to the oppression of Sasanians and the construction activities thereof were carried out in AD 503-507<sup>27</sup>. The ancient writer Procopius has stated that castles between Dara and Amida have been reconstructed during the period of Justinian I (AD 527-565) and the region has become secured in an unconquerable way. It is interesting that Procopius does not make the mention of Zerzevan (Samachi) among the reconstructed castles<sup>28</sup>. This situation suggests that the settlement was built prior to Justinian I. The general opinion is that great significance was attached to castles for border security in this period<sup>29</sup>. Considering the fact that the name Zerzevan was given in our day, most probably the ancient name of Zerzevan

Castle was Samachi<sup>30</sup>. The military settlement had also the nature of a shelter for people who had settled in the water-rich valley and dealt with farming. It can be stated that Zerzevan was not only a place where soldiers resided but also where civilians lived. The settlement, thanks to its dominant position over the entire valley, was a strategic Roman border garrison, on the ancient trade route, controlling a wide area and obviously it was a scene of great battles between Romans and Sasanians.

Much as the period when the settlement was first built is not certain, definite results will be reached with the excavation works to be carried out. Existence of a castle named Kinabu is asserted in the Assyrian Period in Zerzevan located on the ancient road route<sup>31</sup>. It is also likely that residential area located on the King's Road during the Persian period has been used with an eye to provide road safety<sup>32</sup>. It is possible to say that the area was used in the 3rd century AD when the current architectural remains and the finds unearthed in the excavations are examined however it is very hard to give information as to the dimensions at this time<sup>33</sup>. It can be said that the city walls and buildings of the settlement were restored in the periods of Anastasios I (AD 491-518) and Justinian I (AD 527-565), and some of the constructions were reconstructed and thus the present final state was obtained<sup>34</sup>. The settlement must have been used until 639 which is the conquest

<sup>24</sup> Dillemann 1962, 290ff; Blockley 1988, 244; Lightfoot 1989, 285; Blockley, 1988, 244ff; Lenski 2007, 219ff.

<sup>25</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, 18.9.1, 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> The Sassanid armies marched this road during the western campaigns of 502 and 604 AD and captured Amida in connection with the Zerzevan Castle. Blockley 1992, 86-87, Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 63-67; Lenski 2007, 223-224; Kütük 2014, 144, Kütük 2015, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Ahunbay 1990, 391; Can 2014, 347; Erdoğan 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Dewing 1914; Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Kütük 2014, 144; Kütük 2015, 78ff.

<sup>30</sup> Dillemann 1962, 159; Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 33; Marciak 2014, 39.

<sup>31</sup> Olmstead 1918, 227, fn.40.

<sup>32</sup> French 1998, 18, fn.27, fig.10.

<sup>33</sup> Coşkun 2016, 118; Coşkun 2017, 141.

<sup>34</sup> Deichmann – Peschlow 1977, 35-36.

year of the region by the Islamic armies<sup>35</sup>. The region of Zerzevan lost its geopolitical significance as the settlement of Amida and Dara continued during the expansion of Islam, and was abandoned due to its location on a high hill, transportation and water problems. It has not been used from AD 639 until the 1890's for any purpose except being used as a temporary shelter.

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<sup>35</sup> Beysanoğlu 1987; Beysanoğlu 1995, 5; Beysanoğlu, 1999, 41; Çevik, 2002, 147-170.

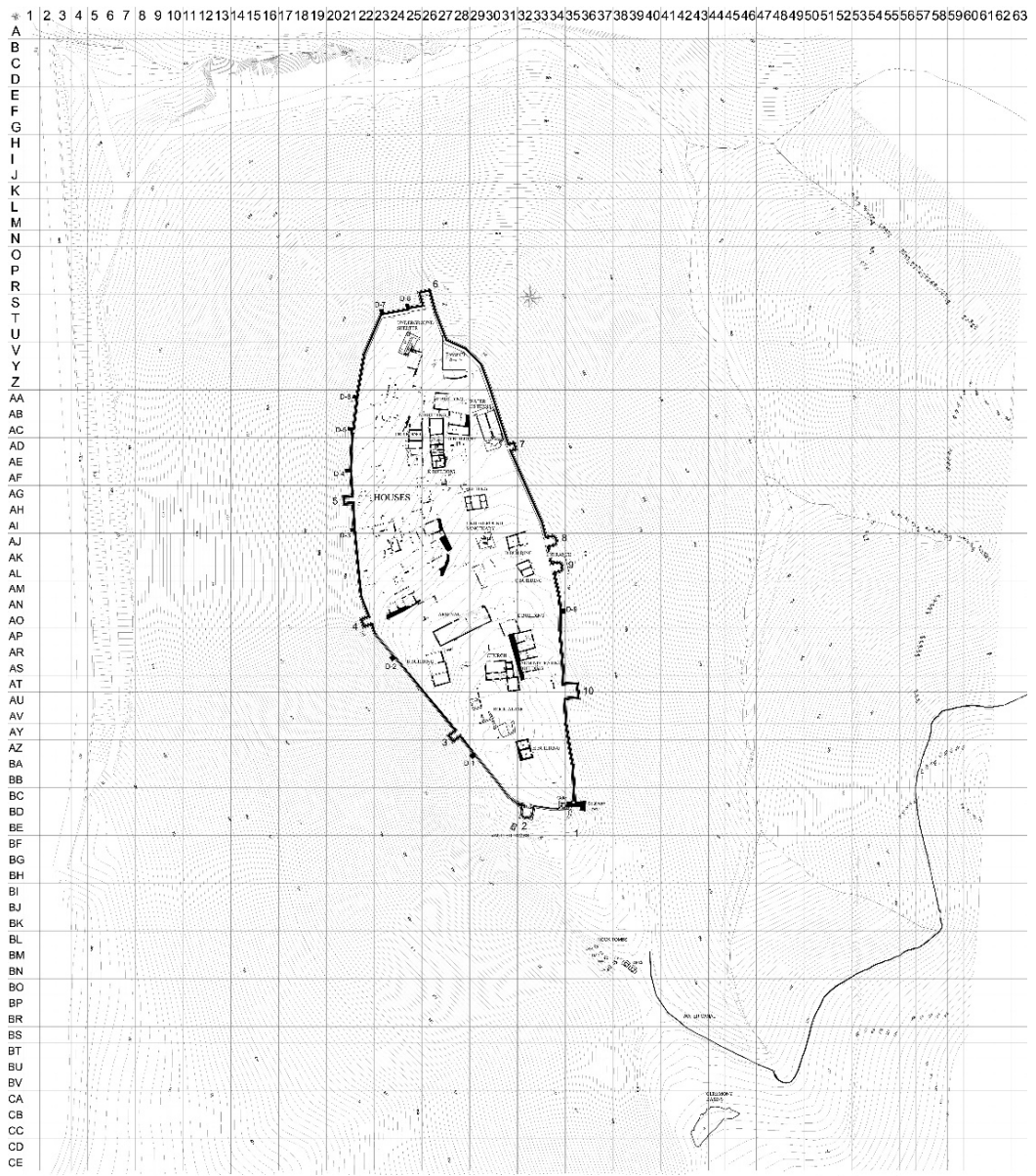


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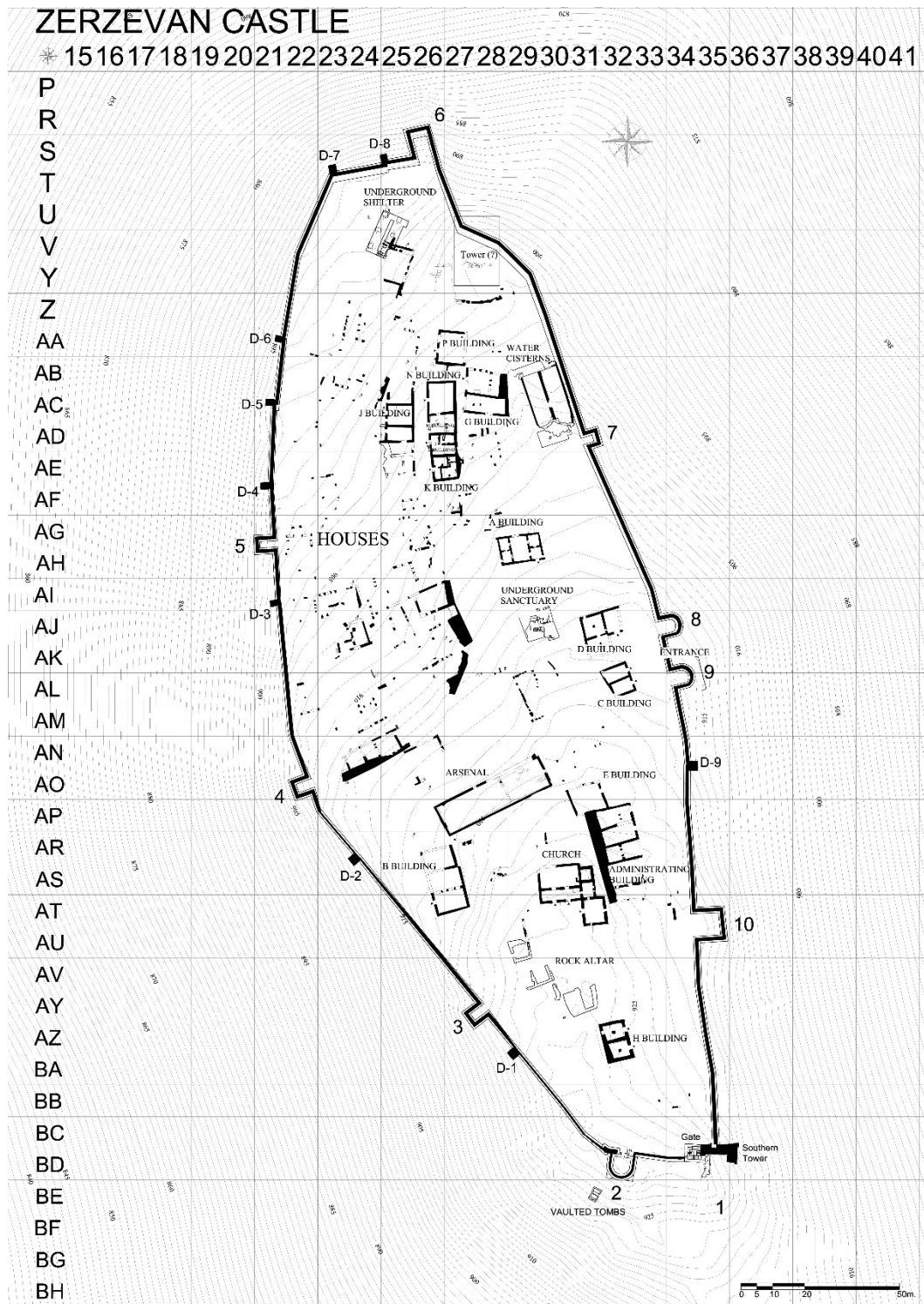
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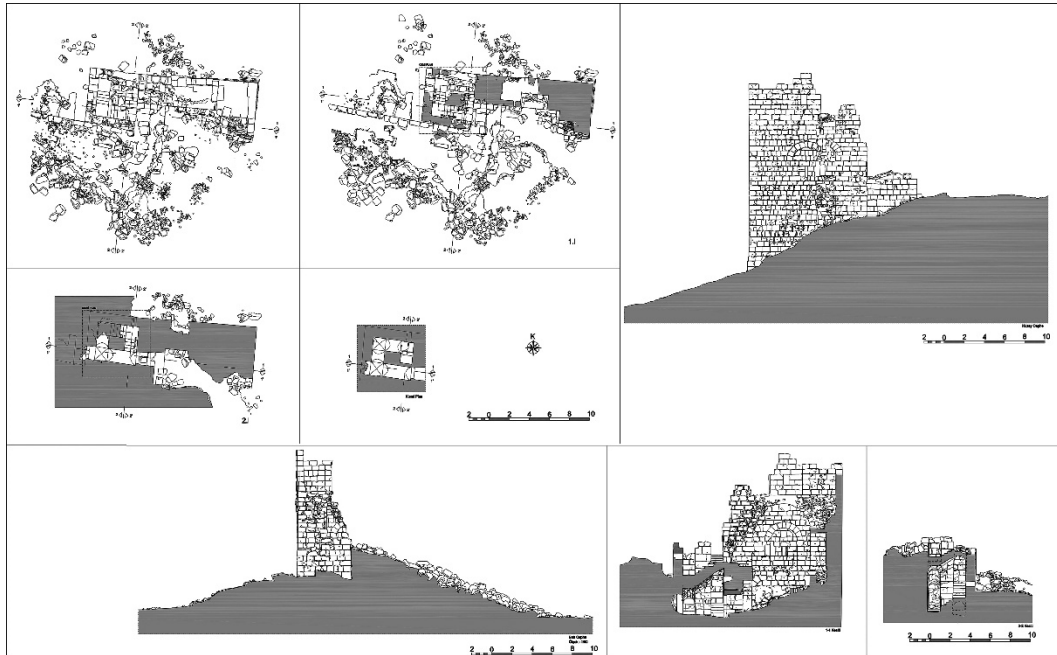
ZERZEVAN CASTLE



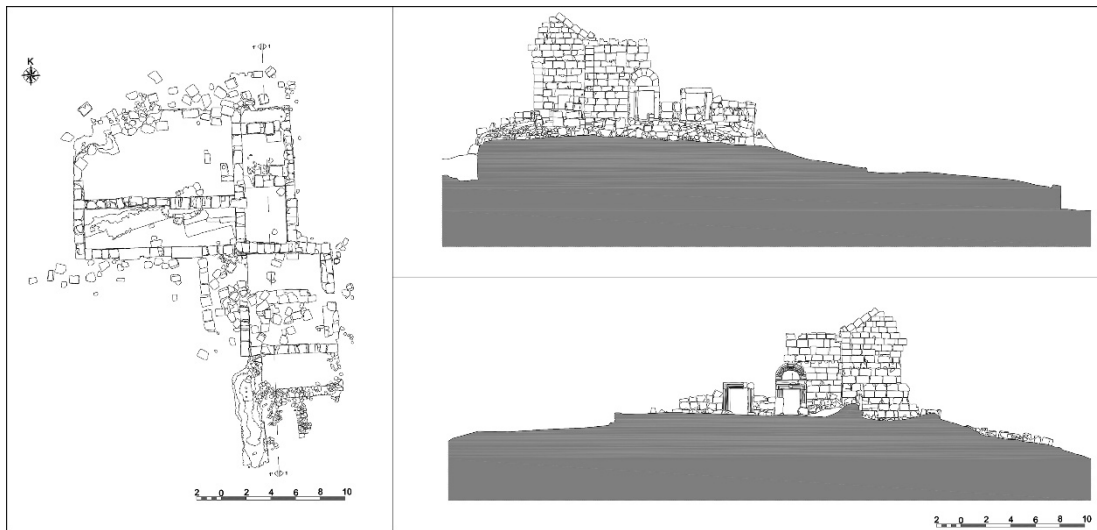
Plan 1



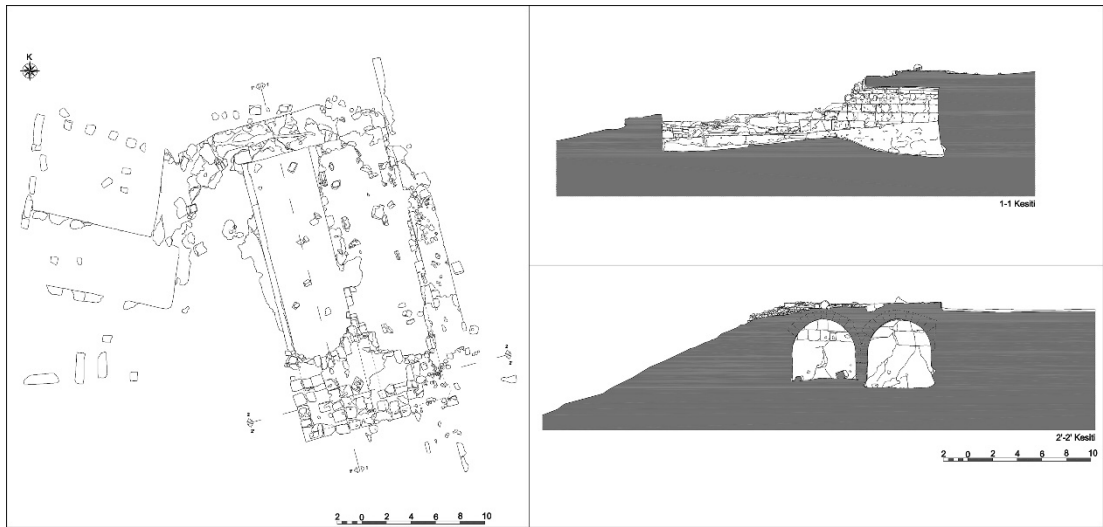
Plan 2



Drawing 1



Drawing 2



Drawing 3

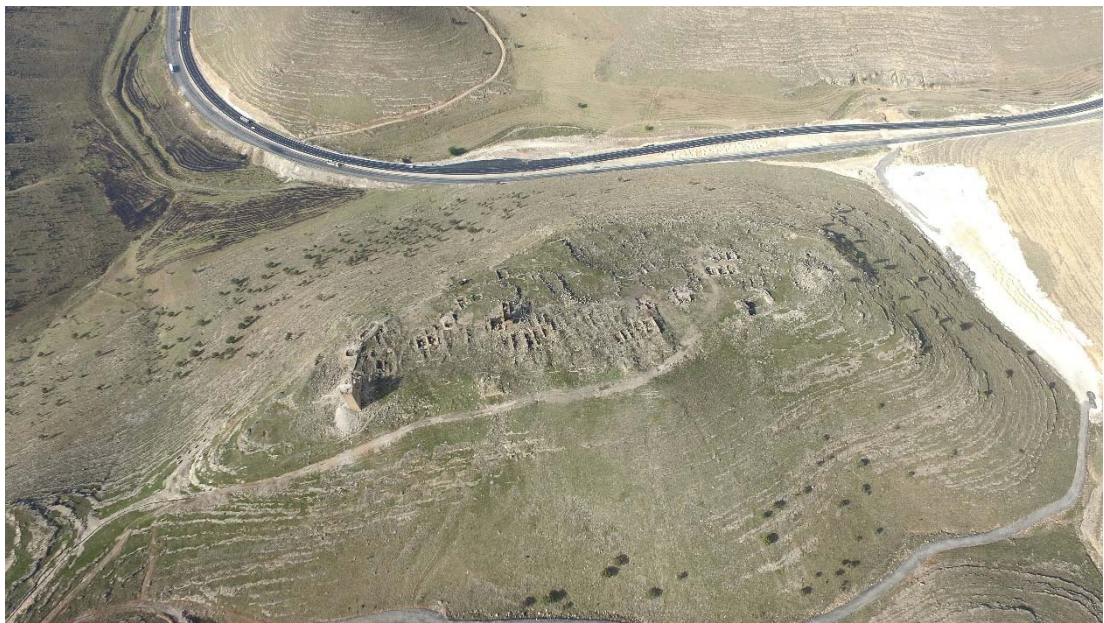


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5





Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12