Life in a Late Byzantine Tower: Examples from Northern Greece

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Life in a Late Byzantine Tower: Examples from Northern Greece

Abstract
Medieval masonry towers are a prominent and ubiquitous feature of the Mediterranean Basin and the Balkan Peninsula. Many are in ruins and most have yet to be studied. We surmise that they were built for protection, so that they are typically associated with the architecture of an “age of insecurity.” Professor Slobodan Ćurčić, who dedicated his career to the study of medieval architecture, has nourished a special interest in these buildings. Honoring Professor Ćurčić, I offer this chapter surveying a discrete group of seven Late Byzantine (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries) freestanding towers in northern Greece.

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Life in a Late Byzantine Tower: 
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Jelena Bogdanović

Medieval masonry towers are a prominent and ubiquitous feature of the Mediterranean Basin and the Balkan Peninsula. Many are in ruins and most have yet to be studied. We surmise that they were built for protection, so that they are typically associated with the architecture of an “age of insecurity.” Professor Slobodan Ćurčić, who dedicated his career to the study of medieval architecture, has nourished a special interest in these buildings. Honoring Professor Ćurčić, I offer this chapter surveying a discrete group of seven Late Byzantine (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries) freestanding towers in northern Greece.

Built in relative proximity to each other and in the environs of active settlements, four towers are located on the Chalkidiki peninsula and three on the banks of the Strymon River (Figure 9.1). The four towers on the Chalkidiki are known by the names of nearby villages—Galatista, Siderokausia, Mariana near ancient Olynthos, and Agios Vasileios on Lake Koronia. The three towers along the Strymon River valley are the so-called towers of Marmarion and Agios Georgios near ancient Amphipolis, and the tower of Apollonia. Not only were these seven towers geographically, economically, and administratively connected with Mt. Athos at the time of their construction but they also bear strong visual and structural resemblance to numerous surviving towers there. As points of comparison I shall also include some mention of towers in the region. Set against the backdrop of the Holy Mountain and the dynamic political history of the region, these towers stand as significant exemplars of both fortification and residential architecture. In addition, the distinct similarities of monastic and secular foundations are noteworthy. The following is intended as a brief survey of these monuments, which have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve.
The seven towers from northern Greece survive today as freestanding structures, often preserved to a height of 20 m. Initially two to seven stories tall, they are rectangular in plan, with typical external dimensions ranging from 7 to 12 m on each side. The walls are made of rubble and stone masonry or occasionally fieldstone and brick (Figure 9.2). The walls are exceedingly thick, as much as 2 m at ground level, tapering to almost half that thickness in the uppermost floors. The lower stories are occasionally pierced by loopholes—narrow windows and slits—positioned to provide ventilation and illumination. They also may have functioned for defense during times of siege. The upper walls usually contain additional, larger windows.

Deterioration of the walls of some towers has revealed additional information about building techniques. Of note is the use of wooden beams
Figure 9.2 Tower at Mariana, near Olynthos, exterior view (photo by P. Theocharides, Essay, fig. 34).
laid lengthwise within the masonry walls at regular intervals. Brick was used internally for vaults and blind domes in almost all towers. Materials were occasionally acquired from older structures when ancient sites were nearby. Architectural spolia were used in the Marmarion tower near Amphipolis, and in the tower at Mariana (Figure 9.2). The Tower of Orestes at Serres and the Tower of St. Sava at Hilandar on Mount Athos are similar in technique, suggesting that artisans trained in the same idiom built both the Athonite and non-Athonite towers. All feature uneven, alternating bands with multiple courses of brick and stone, as well as vertical zigzag and diamond-shaped patterns. The St. Sava and Marmarion towers similarly bear a strong resemblance to the interior arches of the Athonite tower of Kolitsou through the use of banded voussoirs in the arches (Figure 9.3).9

Despite similar architectural decoration, the group of towers under study demonstrates a variety of construction techniques. Most have smooth exterior walls built of stone with occasional use of brick and mortar, while the towers of Ag. Vasileios and Galatista have multiple projecting spurs on all four sides (Figure 9.4).10 These external features find comparison in the towers of Ag. Georgios, King Milutin, and Ag. Vasileios, all of which were articulated externally with pilasters, which suggests a defensive character.11 Several towers, such as at Mariana, Marmarion, and Ag. Vasileios, do not have machicolations or loopholes, disclosing their limited defensive role.12 Not all of these have external pilasters, suggesting that some elements currently understood in a military context were in fact intended as structural and possibly symbolic additions, to convey messages of security and power.

The interiors typically consisted of a single-story space without internal partitions. More developed plans included a square main chamber and a small antechamber. The latter consisted of a narrow, rectilinear room with an entrance area and two small side niches. This is the case in the towers at Mariana and Kolitsou, both built in the 1370s (Figure 9.5). These two towers have identical plans, although Kolitsou is almost one-and-a-half times larger. Despite their similarities, they differ in masonry and overall execution. The tower at Kolitsou is built of rubble-stone masonry, while the tower in Mariana is of fieldstone with decorative wall articulation, similar to the tower in Amphipolis.13 This suggests that while the master builder(s) who laid out the two towers may have been trained in the same tradition and used the same design principles, they employed different teams of masons.

Most towers from this group have only one external point of entrance, raised at least 2 m above ground level and frequently located as high as the second floor (Figures 9.3–9.4).14 None of the original doors are preserved. On Mt. Athos, the wooden entrance door of the Kaliagra Tower of Koutloumousiou Monastery and the original metal riveted door of the tower entrance in Karakallou Monastery give some suggestion of their appearance.15 A wooden bar may have provided additional security.16 At Kolitsou the only entrance
Figure 9.3 Tower of Marmarion, near Amphipolis. Detail of banded voussoirs (photo: Y. Yannelos, from Zikos, *Amphipolis*, fig. 18).
Figure 9.4 Tower at Galatista, Chalkidiki. Exterior view (photo by S. Ćurčić, from Theocharides, “Galatista,” fig. 5).
was elevated as much as 5 m above ground level and accessible only by rope
ladder or removable wooden bridge, so the tower was presumably secure.\textsuperscript{17}
The tower at Siderokausia offers an alternative solution, with two relatively
low entrances opposite one another. This seems to be a modification designed
to allow inhabitants the possibility of escape during times of siege.

Judging from the beam brackets frequently found in the interior, all towers
under discussion had wooden floors. Internal communication between floors
was achieved either by spiral or straight stone staircases built within the walls
or by removable wooden stairs or rope ladders. Sometimes brick arches and
vaults appear, usually in the lowest or the uppermost levels of a tower. The
lowest floors were usually voluminous, vaulted spaces. They were used either
as water cisterns, to judge by the presence of hydraulic mortar in some cases,
or as storage spaces. Chambers without external openings, for example the
tower at Kolitsou, also may have served as places of refuge during attack
(Figures 9.4–9.5).\textsuperscript{18}

Figure 9.5 Towers of Mariana and Kolitsou. Comparative analysis of the plans and
cross-sections (drawing: author, after Theocharides, "Mariana," fig. 6, and
idem, "Kalezi (Kolitsou)," fig. 3).
Latrines could be set into the niches of exterior walls, as is the case in the Galatista and Kolitsou towers. The toilets may have been similar to the latrine in the tower of King Milutin or in the tower of the Transfiguration in Vatopaidi Monastery. Archeology suggests that no advanced sewage system existed, and all waste would have been discharged outside the tower along its exterior walls. Water and drainage systems are apparent in the Siderokausia tower in its damaged southern and western walls. Here three vertical conduits, made of ceramic pipes approximately 30 cm long, were built into the wall. Similar examples have been noted elsewhere. Several stone fireplaces built within the walls on different levels in the Siderokausia tower suggest that residing in a tower during cold weather was possible. The presence of latrines, water cisterns, water supply, and heating systems along with storage spaces suggests that these towers were equipped to house their inhabitants for prolonged periods when necessary.

Niches embedded in the east wall of the top floors of the Mariana and Kolitsou towers point to the existence there of upper-story chapels. Likewise, the tower of Ag. Vasileios at Lake Koronia may have contained a chapel, although its vaulting and uppermost walls have collapsed. As most of the towers are in ruins, the presence of upper-story chapels is uncertain. If chapels existed, however, they would not offer evidence for differentiating monastic from non-monastic structures, since we know so little about private chapels and devotional spaces in domestic contexts. Even so, chapels can be found in non-monastic towers, as exemplified by the surviving tower in the medieval town of Golubac (before 1337) on the Danube River in eastern Serbia. Square in plan, the tower was among the town’s oldest structures and is considered its first residential building. While its upper floors have disappeared, the presence of three niches in the eastern wall confirms that this room functioned as a chapel.

The foregoing architectural analysis suggests the towers were inhabitable. Their overall size, form, and interior organization suggest they provided the possibility of a relatively safe residential existence during the Late Byzantine period. The forms of many of the towers still alluded to their defensive role. Others clearly lost their protective function, but it was still necessary to convey notions of power and security. The presence of many features, including latrines, water drainage and collection, and fireplaces, confirm that they were at least partially and occasionally inhabited. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the sweeping views and sensory experience of being elevated above the surrounding landscape remained quintessential and appealing components of life in a tower. In one seventeenth-century account, the traveler Hadji Jalfa, gazing at the Siderokausia towers, wrote about them as “a villa standing on a hill slope and having the best view towards the sea.” If the towers from northern Greece functioned as watchtowers and landmarks, I would suggest that those who kept watch also resided in them.
The Role of Towers within Settlements

Scholars have noted the disposition of towers within the fortification system of the wider region of Macedonia. By the Late Byzantine period these towers continued to protect the territory from pirate raids and foreign intrusions. They were important for the protection of monastic and private estates. As components of such a network, the towers located on cultivated land, natural passages, and primary communication routes (which merged in Thessaloniki and Mt. Athos) potentially served as checkpoints and observation posts connected to castles, monasteries, and cities.

While the ruins of these towers in northern Greece are now freestanding edifices, some may have existed within larger fortifications or residential complexes no longer extant. All towers surveyed from this area are contemporary with or predate other towers scattered throughout the Balkans. The majority of these were integral parts of larger complexes. I propose three possible explanations for their development: buildings could have been added buildings to an existing tower; a tower could have been added to an existing house; or a tower may have become an integral part of a settlement as it grew by accretion. For example, the fourteenth-century tower at Galatista seems to have constituted the center of a large estate, around which the modern settlement developed. Excavations revealed the remains of watermills and a cistern, which seem to predate the tower. Today a nearby church and a number of other public buildings are grouped around the square to form the village center. This scheme resembles a small Athonite enclosure, such as the Mylopotamos metochion, which grew around a tower.

The transformation of freestanding towers into complexes with additional enclosures and buildings is comparable to the creation of arsenals, fortified monastic outposts, on Mt. Athos. In addition to their function as observation posts and places of refuge, arsenal towers could have been continuously inhabited by a monk or a small monastic community. As a combination of tower, with living quarters, sometimes a boathouse, and occasionally a small church enclosed within precinct walls, they mimic the evolution of monasteries on a smaller scale. In the case of the non-Athonite towers analyzed here, their relative disposition within the immediate environment suggests that some might have become formative elements of local residential complexes and settlements.

Two of the towers, those at Galatista and Ag. Vasileios, may have generated the development of modern villages around them. Conversely, the towers of Marmarion and Ag. Georgios are positioned on either side of a bridge across the Strymon River near Amphipolis. This expanded configuration of tower and settlement may have conveyed an image of a fortified town. Thus, the modern village of Isvoros, originally surrounded by a triad of towers of which only that of Siderokausia survives, was described by a mid-sixteenth century
French traveler, P. Belon, as "a great village ... not well-built but which resembled a town." 

The Founders and Residents of Towers

The actual residents of the surveyed towers from northern Greece remain elusive, although textual evidence provides clues concerning possible founders and inhabitants. In 1376 Chariton, a dignitary of the Hungarian-Vlach Church and Protos of Mount Athos, considered the relatively well-built tower of Kolitsou to be a recent work of the Byzantine Emperor John VI Kantakouzenos (r. 1347-1354). A much earlier marble inscription, perhaps dating to the eleventh century and located today in the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens (BXM 861) acknowledged the foundation of a tower by a certain *depostes* Leon of Athens, who was also a *synkellos* and a *rhaktor*. These were titles reserved for the highest ecclesiastical and political officials in Byzantine society, indicating that both church and civic officials may have founded towers. Monograms and decorative brickwork in the exterior of some towers suggest certain aesthetic and proprietary concerns. At Amphipolis a now lost inscription identified two brothers and well-known Byzantine generals, Alexius and Ioannes, as founders of the tower in 1367 as a dependency of the Pantokrator Monastery on Mount Athos. The tower of Mariana, almost a replica of the tower in Amphipolis, was connected with farmland originally owned by the Athonite monastery of Docheiariou (Figure 9.6). Approximately at the same time when the two brothers acquired the Amphipolis tower, a *chrysobullos logos* issued by Byzantine Emperor Andronikos IV (r. 1376-1379) confirmed that certain Radoslav was allowed to live in the tower in Kalamaria, property of the Monastery of Ag. Paulos.

Ownership of these towers can be related to the monastic institution of *adelphaton* ("fellowship"), which provided the *adelphatarios* (holder) with living allowances within or outside the monastery for life. Established in the eleventh century, *adelphata* enabled *adelphatoi* to acquire towers, a practice which acquired renewed popularity beginning in the fourteenth century. In the 1420s the Kastriot family bought the tower of Ag. Georgios, today known as the Arbanáški Pirg in the vicinity of the Hilandar monastery and four *adelphata*, which granted them the right to remain within the monastery for the rest of their lives.

By the 1330s, high officials held the privilege of founding towers. The inscription on the walls of the so-called Tower of Hreljo at Rila monastery in Bulgaria informs us that the *prosevasta* Hreljo, a high official under Stefan Dušan of Serbia (r. 1331-1355) founded the tower in 1334/1335. At Serres, a brick inscription on the tower reads + Πύργος Στ(ι)φ(ά)νου Βασ(ιλέως) άν έκτησεν Ορέστης +, identifying its builder as a certain Orestes, a castle-
Figure 9.6 Tower at Mariana, near Olynthos. Detail of brick monogram in the exterior wall (photo: S. Ćurčić).
guard of Serres in the service of Emperor Stefan Dušan. It seems that monks, high ecclesiastical and administrative officials, soldiers and members of the military aristocracy founded towers in the Late Byzantine period and possibly resided in them as well.

My assessment of adelphation, the institution which provided monastic citizenship for lay people who invested in it in exchange for the security of life in a tower, suggests the permeability of religious and secular, monastic and non-monastic organizations in the Late Byzantine period. Even if most of the towers analyzed here were initially built and used as monastic properties, their fate once the institution of adelphata ceased remains obscure. Were the towers associated with monastic estates gradually abandoned or reinhabited? Analysis of the towers examined here suggests, among other things, the transition of adelphation to potentially new forms of citizenship within a highly diversified society. From the late fourteenth century on, important social changes in Byzantine society effected changes in the residential aspect of towers as these became associated less with the military aristocracy and more with prosperous individuals, local authorities, and merchants.

Surviving documents concerning the ownership of some sixteenth-century and later towers indirectly support such a hypothesis. Towers were inhabited by local feudal lords (as at Plav in Montenegro and Kustendil in Bulgaria) and leaders of clans (as in the Mani). By the fifteenth century, towers in the northern Balkans were residential quarters, occasionally bearing names of their female owners. Mara’s Tower near Kuršumlija in central Serbia was presumably a residence of Mara, daughter of the Serbian Despot Djurdje Branković (r. 1427–1456) and a wife of Ottoman Sultan Murat II (r. 1421–1451). According to surviving narratives, Mara returned from Edirne following her husband’s death and lived in her tower. Twelve recorded fifteenth- to sixteenth-century towers that once existed in the medieval town of Kratovo in Macedonia were privately owned and also bore the names of their historic owners. All these individuals who gained their authority in the local communities through wealth acquired by trade and silver production may have expressed their status by living in a tower.

The obvious diversification of social rank, gender, and ethnicity of those who founded and lived in towers in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries in northern Greece points to various expectations concerning living standards. Life in towers may at first have symbolized the status and privilege of royal or local aristocratic residences, perhaps offering a higher standard of living. It cannot be assumed, however, that living standards in a tower were consistent across temporal, geographical, and cultural boundaries. Byzantine society changed over time, and the intricacies of daily life and attitudes toward the built environment are exceedingly difficult to flesh out. Interdisciplinary approaches and the subtle combination of archaeological surveys and anthropological fieldwork related to towers and their inhabitants is still
needed in order to further illuminate our understanding of life in a tower in the Late Byzantine period.

Notes


4 Towers of Mount Athos, 18-23, 40-43.

5 For example the south tower at Siderokausia measures ~7 x 6 m; Mariana ~8.8 x 7.3 m; and Galatista ~12 x 10 m. These measurements are similar to Athonite towers with residential function, such as the Kolitsou Tower ~13.10 x 10.30 m.

6 Zikos, Amphipolis, 22-3; Theocharides, “Mariana,” 220-21; Essay on Byzantine Fortification, 42.

7 Towers of Mount Athos, 52, fig. 4; 98-9.


9 Zikos, Amphipolis, 22-3, fig. 18; P. Theocharides, “Tower of Kaletzi (Kolitsou), Mt. Athos, Greece,” in Secular Medieval Architecture, 218-19, fig. 5.

10 Towers with multiple projecting spur walls crowned by massive arches represent a distinctive type of freestanding tower in the Balkans, whose origin is still obscure. These towers developed either under the influence of the French donjon

11 In the fifteenth century the new weaponry led to the development of polygonal with openings for cannons, as in towers at the Great Lavra, Vatopedi, and Iviron monasteries; see Ćurčić, “Pyrgos-Stl’p-Donjon,” 21–2; Theocharidis, “Fortified Enclosure,” 59–70; idem, “Galatista,” 222–3; N. Chaneva-Dechevska, “Khrelo’s Tower, Rila Monastery, Bulgaria,” in *Secular Medieval Architecture*, 234–5; *Towers of Mount Athos*, 16, 66–79; *Essay on Byzantine Fortifications*, 42, fig. 32.

12 Theocharides, “Kaletsi (Kolitsou),” 218–19; Theocharides, “Mariana,” 220–21; *Towers of Mount Athos*, 50–53; Bakirtzis, Chapter 8 in this volume.

13 Theocharides, “Mariana,” 220–21, figs. 2–3; Theocharides, “Kaletsi (Kolitsou),” 218–19, fig. 1; Zikos, *Amphipolis*, 22–3, fig. 18.


15 See: *Towers of Mount Athos*, 90, fig. 4; 115, fig. 17.

16 The sixteenth-century Pirkova Kula in Kustendil, Bulgaria, possibly had a wooden door secured by a wooden bar. Furkov, “Pirkova Kula,” *Secular Medieval Architecture*, 232–3. Holes for a wooden beam to bolt the entrance door from the inside are found in the tower of Nea Skete of St. Paul’s monastery; *Towers of Mount Athos*, 136.

17 *Towers of Mount Athos*, 50–53; Theocharides, “Kaletsi (Kolitsou),” 218–19.

18 *Towers of Mount Athos*, 52–3, figs. 7–8.


20 *Towers of Mount Athos*, 44–9, figs. 27–8.


22 A similar circular drainpipe between the monastery and the arsenal tower existed in Iviron monastery; see *Towers of Mount Athos*, 40–43, 58–61. Ceramic circular pipes were also used at Hilandar monastery; see M. Kovačević, “Ispod kaldrme u porti Hilandara,” *HilZb* 10 (1998): 135–44.

23 Some fireplaces could also have served as a smithy or other workshops. The smithy furnace from Zographou arsenal tower verifies accounts that the two identified fireplaces and lateral branches of water conduits from the Siderokausia tower at some point served in the production of silver. I. A. Papangelos and J. Tavlakis, “The Maritime Fort of the Monastery Karakalou in Mt. Athos,” in *Pirgoi kai kastra*, ed. N. K. Moutsopoulos (1980), 99–120; Theocharides, “Consolidation Works,” 76–97; *Towers of Mount Athos*, 59–61, fig. 17; 100–5, fig. 19, 24; 112–17, fig. 15.


25 Bakirtzis, Chapter 8 this volume.

26 “Life of St. Mary the Younger,” in *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints’ Lives in English Translation*, ed. A.-M. Talbot (Washington, D.C., 1996), 257, records that Mary had to go twice a day to the church in Vizye because “there was no private chapel in her house.” The text confirms that some houses had private chapels.


30 About the role of these towers in the fortification system of Byzantine Macedonia with Thessaloniki in its center see: Essay on Byzantine Fortifications, 48–53, fig. 1, on pp. 20–21.

31 F. Dölger also records medieval monastic documents that testify to the existence of the coastal tower of Zographou monastery in 1286/7 and “palaioi pirgoi” (“old towers”) as landmarks and observation outposts, in Aus den Schatzkammern des Heiligen Berges, 115 Urkunden und 50 Urkundensiegel aus 10 Jahrhunderten (Munich, 1948), 136–8.


34 Ibid.


36 Bakirtzis, Chapter 8 this volume, argues that the tower at Ag. Vasileios belonged to eponymous monastery.

37 Essay on Byzantine Fortifications, 42; Zikos, Amphipolis, 22–3.

38 Theocharides, “Consolidation Works,” 76–97, quote on 79.

39 Theocharides, “Kaletzi (Kolitsou),” 218–19.


41 Zikos, Amphipolis, 22–3.

42 Essay on Byzantine Fortifications, 42.

43 Dölger, Schatzkammer des Heiligen Berges, 48–9.


45 For the inscription see N. Andrejević-Kun, ed., Istoriija primenjene umetnosti kod Srba, 1. Srednjevekovna Srbija (Belgrade, 1977), 51.

46 For the inscription see Andrejević-Kun, ed., Istoriija primenjene, fig. 44. Moreover, article 127 of a Legal Code (Zakonik), issued by Emperor Stefan Dušan (first in 1349 in Skopje and then amended in 1354 in Serres) prescribed that wherever a tower (koula) collapsed, the citizens of a local town and/or the district which belonged to that town (joupa) were responsible for rebuilding it; see B. Marković, ed., Dušanov zakonik (Belgrade, 1986), 74.127.

47 “Pyrgos,” ODB, 3: 1760–61, suggests that peasants may have inhabited some of towers, notably those that belonged to a metochion.

Still extant towers of Simić, Krste, Zlatko (previously bought from Asan Efendi), Emin-bey, Hadži-Kostov, together with now lost towers which once belonged to Jazbus, M'ze, Mango, Spaiska, Došević, and Sut, reveal that over time members of different ethnic communities had a right to possess and live in a tower; see Hadžipeceva, “Kratovo,” 230–31; Deroko, Srednjevekovni, 23–4.