

Reconstructing a largely lost monument: the Kılıç Arslan Köşk in Konya

Richard Piran McClary | University of York

The central Anatolian city of Konya is well known as being the home of the mystical poet Rumi, and it was the main city of the Rum Seljuqs in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This was despite the fact that the idea of a capital city was still somewhat anathema to a semi-nomadic, and peripatetic, court.

The citadel hill, now known as Alaeddin Tepe, is in the centre of the city and was the nexus of power. The northern end was the location of not only the principal mosque and the dynastic tomb tower, but also the main royal palace. Little survives above ground of the palace, which was destroyed and rebuilt at least once in the early thirteenth century, but the brick and stone stump and part of the brick *muqarnas* balcony supports of one of a pair of kiosks still stand.

Long covered with a concrete shelter, this has recently been removed, and replaced with a rather Las Vegas-like simulacrum of the lost original that hovers over the surviving section atop a steel frame. However, most of the structure survived into the early twentieth century and was recorded by such leading scholars in the, then nascent, field of Islamic art as Gertrude Bell and Friedrich Sarre. Unfortunately, owing to a number of factors, the bulk of the upper portion collapsed in 1907, and the surviving decorative elements were dispersed, with large amounts being smuggled out to Berlin, where they remain in the Museum für Islamische Kunst. Other elements are in the Musée du Louvre in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Çinili Köşk Müzesi in Istanbul; some glazed tiles and stucco fragments are in the nearby Büyük Karatay Medrese Müzesi in Konya.

As the only medieval palace kiosk in the whole of the Persianate world to have survived into the modern age, it is an incredibly important structure, even in its current state. A close study of the building and its constituent elements can add to our understanding not just of this particular palace köşk or nearby ones such as those at the Kubadabad site to the west of Konya, but also buildings such as the palace of Badr al-Din Lu'lu, built in the thirteenth century and overlooking the Tigris in Mosul, and now completely destroyed.

The first major study of the köşk was published by Sarre in 1936 in his wonderfully clearly titled book *Der Kiosk von Konia*, but, important as this work is, much more information has come to light since then, and all the images are black and white, which is a shame as so much of the surviving decoration is brightly coloured, either painted or glazed. More recently, in 2017, I published a chapter on the building in my book *Rum Seljuq Architecture, 1170–1220: The Patronage of Sultans*, which grew out of my doctoral research at the University of Edinburgh. However, it became



The Kılıç Arslan Köşk in Konya prior to the collapse of 1907 (photo by Friedrich Sarre).



Mina'i tile composition from the Kılıç Arslan Köşk in Konya (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).



Stone lion from the front of the Kılıç Arslan Köşk in Konya (Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi, İstanbul).

apparent as I was writing it that there was far more that needed to be said about the form, decoration and construction process than was possible in that context.

The consequent research project, which will result in a monograph and a digital online exhibition, is a joint undertaking between myself and Patricia Blessing at Princeton University. The work will draw on a combination of analysis of archival images, study of the dispersed fragments and the results of the long-running excavations at the site around the kiosk. These excavations have demonstrated the extent of the two phases of the palace: the first was built by Kılıç Arslan in the late twelfth century and destroyed by fire; the second by ‘Ala’ al-Din Kay Qubadh after 1220. A great deal more of the latter has been found to have survived, including red-painted plaster wall decoration. In addition, the foundations and lower walls of the second köşk, some 15m to the west of the partially surviving one, have been found, along with additional fragments of the distinctive (and unique in the context of Anatolia) overglaze-painted *mina’i* tiles. Having already gathered together a significant amount of archival resources and having managed to roll the dice successfully and make a mid-pandemic dash to spend time on the site in Konya and see the newly excavated material, the next phase is to conduct a thorough re-examination of all the material held in Berlin, hopefully at some point next year.

We will then be able to continue compilation of all the data that will enable both a detailed study of the structure and its constituent elements, and also a three-dimensional digital recreation of the whole building. This will aid in the creation of as clear an understanding as possible of not only the form and decoration, but also the construction process required and the structural elements within the fabric of the building. A number of these were revealed, for the first time since it was built in the late twelfth century, by the collapse of most of the upper section and almost all of the western side of the structure in 1907.

The building featured significant amounts of decoration in a variety of different media, including not only the glazed *mina’i* tiles, but also a pair of monumental carved-stone lions, one of which still survives and is in the Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi in İstanbul. Despite it being attributed to the Seljuq period in all the publications that mention it, the fact that it is carved in the round and there is a large notch in the back to allow it to recess into the building, makes it likely that this lion is an earlier sculpture that was repurposed and placed on the northern façade of the building. Inside the köşk, along with the *mina’i* tiles and monochrome glazed tiles, in both star-and-lozenge and pointed-tip cross and eight-point star compositions, there was extensive use of mural stucco revetments, most likely as a dado decoration. Traces of pigments have been found on some of the pieces, showing that they were originally polychrome, rather than the white they are now. One of the most striking pieces, normally in the Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi in İstanbul but currently on a brief sabbatical in the new İstanbul airport, is a panel featuring the typical princely pursuit of hunting on horseback, with both a dragon and a lion being killed by the two horsemen in the surviving section.

Despite the collapse of most of the building over one hundred years ago and the publication of a monograph on it in 1936, there is still a great deal more to be said about the site and the surviving fragments. With the generous financial support of the British Institute at Ankara, this project is now several steps closer to achieving its goal of demonstrating the significance of the Kılıç Arslan Köşk in Konya.



Stucco wall panel with hunting scene from the Kılıç Arslan Köşk in Konya (Türk ve İslam Eserleri Müzesi, İstanbul).