

Crossroads of twelfth-century empires: the Byzantine, Danishmendid and Georgian landscapes of power

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Like most history students, I spent the duration of my undergraduate and master's degrees mostly sat in libraries. It was revolutionary, therefore, when I was complaining to my supervisor one day about how I couldn't tell anything about a certain site from a text and he responded that, in that case, I should go and see the site myself. This break-out moment led to my first fieldwork in Anatolia in 2013, and, indeed, my first encounter with the British Institute at Ankara. Moreover, I've never looked back from that moment of recognising the value of seeing things with my own eyes. It has taken me through the Balkans, Iran and further, but I always return to Turkey and always relish taking out the Institute's Toyota Hilux for a spin. It is, therefore, a privilege to write this short article on my latest fieldwork and to share with the readers of *Heritage Turkey* a few of the ups and downs of these trips, particularly my latest to Turkey and Georgia.

The starting point for one of these expeditions is not dissimilar to the prompt made by that first comment from my supervisor. In short, reading about a particular place of worship, bridge or fortification, for example, leads to a huge number of questions. Does the fortification guard a settlement or a frontier? Is it on a trade route or a line of communication? What is its relationship to other sites and fortifications in the surrounding landscape? What does that landscape tell us about events that were alleged to have occurred there and the people who lived there? The surviving ruins themselves allow us to consider questions related to the construction and nature of a structure. Was it built quickly on a small budget or with monumental features that were designed to have a visual impact on those encountering it. Was it a huge, invasion-stopping fortress, a glorified watchtower or a customs barrier? Were the building materials local or imported? Are there any inscriptions or other datable remains?

Even when an archaeological report is available for a site, many of them are based on fieldwork conducted many years ago or have a different focus to my own interests. Though excellent projects such as the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* have begun to answer many of these questions, much remains to be done. My own research seeks to cross-reference textual references with the remains on the ground of structures built during the reign of the Byzantine emperor John II Komnenos (1087–1143), including those built by contemporary powers, such as the Danishmendids and the Georgians. The latter element of the project is especially important, as modern geo-political boundaries have often constrained studies, when, really, we should look at similarities and differences across the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Baltic, Persia and the Levant.

My focus for this recent fieldwork trip was the northeastern coast of Turkey, around Trabzon, and southwestern Georgia. This region was at the nexus of expansionary campaigns conducted not only by John II but also by the great Georgian king David IV ('The Builder') and the hegemonic Turkish ruler Ghazi II Gümüştegin Danishmend, whilst the area around Trabzon was independent between 1126 and 1139 under Doux Konstantine Gabras. Thus the region saw heavy use of fortifications by all these powers, but also, intriguingly, the construction of numerous religious buildings.

I had a few specific objectives. The first was to retrace the 1139–1140 campaign route of John II against the Danishmendids in Niksar and, in particular, to identify the site of 'Kinte', where John wintered his army. Second, I hoped to identify whether or not the surviving fortifications and religious structures (both Danishmendid and Byzantine) in this region were similar to those on the western and eastern coasts of Anatolia, as studied on previous expeditions. Third, by adding the Georgian borderlands to my analysis, I intended to establish how typical any of this was in another cultural landscape. In addition to viewing the landscape itself, I also intended to visit local museums; unpublished or undervalued material culture finds can be extremely helpful in reconstructing the trade and cultural context of an area. With all this in mind, I designed a tightly scheduled itinerary, with times and distances worked out between sites so as to cover as much as possible – though I added at least two hours to each day to allow for things going wrong or the opportunity to visit an additional site.

All fieldwork has both its successes and failures. Yet even the latter can be hugely useful, if for no other reason than to bring alive my writing about a place. The search for Kinte illustrates this point well. Having driven the roads between Trabzon and Niksar, I at last understood why this city was the target of John's campaign: quite simply, it is the first settlement one comes to having crossed the mountains, and so, despite its seeming remoteness on a map, when the terrain is taken into account it is obvious why it was the focus of the emperor's campaign. Similarly, the contemporary accounts of the campaign found in the court speeches of Theodore Prodromos (who describes in great detail how the army started starving over the winter) are brought to life by the landscape – between the fertile region around Trabzon and Niksar itself there is very little good farming land. The only exception is the area around the Kelkit river, the Byzantine Lykos, which is where I hoped to find the mysterious Kinte.

This site has been the object of quite a goose chase. Ferdinand Chalandon identified it with the village of Kundu in 1912, and, subsequently, this identification has been cited by historians. Chalandon based his conclusion on a 19th-century traveller's account which mentions that Kundu had a 'Roman bridge'; the directions, however, were entirely based around how many days it took to get there with a horse and donkey-drawn caravan. Thus reconstructing the route to the bridge was a bit of a task, as, beyond the major cities, either place names have changed or the sites themselves no longer exist. Nonetheless, from a combination of the original 12th-century sources and the later accounts, I had managed to pinpoint a few possible locations for the bridge. It took most of a day to search for and locate them all, but unfortunately none had any surviving ruins and nor was there any place called Kinte or Kundu. However, a modern road bridge across the Kelkit did bear the name 'Kundu Bridge'. This was in possibly the most fertile area I had seen outside of Niksar and the coast around Trabzon, and a local man reported that there used to be ruins in the area, though not for many years and particularly since the new road had been built.

Taking all these factors together, along with the 1980s study by T.A. Sinclair (which concludes that the modern road follows the Roman one; short of constructing tunnels, the geography makes this a practical necessity), I have concluded that the bridge site is the most likely option for where the emperor spent the winter of that campaign. Though in many ways a failure, as I found no ruins to confirm this opinion, the act of searching for Kinte and making this identification will bring my writings on this campaign to life in a way that would have been impossible without this fieldwork.

This too I learned from my supervisor. The late, great, Mark Whittow was well known within the British Institute at Ankara for his survey work and he remains much missed by many; I would certainly not be doing what I do today if it were not for him. Accordingly, to every history student or enthusiast who has never thought of it before, please take what you have read and go to investigate it for yourself. Even if most of your time is spent with your head in a book, you'll never regret seeing how a site, city or landscape looks in real life, even if you don't find precisely what you're looking for.



The site of John II's winter quarters of Kinte? The view along the Kelkit river valley with the modern Kundu road bridge beyond.