

Hasankeyf in the Context of Cultural Heritage Preservation in Turkey

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Turkey has a firm legal framework for the protection of cultural heritage, yet major engineering projects like the construction of hydraulic powerplants have been quite effective in endangering a number of natural and archaeological sites. In many parts of the country dams were planned without consultation with cultural heritage experts and environmentalists threaten natural, urban and archaeological reserves.

During the 60's or 70's of the past century, engineers did not pay much attention to environmental or cultural heritage issues. Today, these concerns are crucial from different standpoints. Cultural heritage of Anatolia attracts national and international scholarship, environmental changes are a global concern and the social implications of displacing people from their land need to be taken more seriously. Especially the dam projects at Zeugma (a Roman garrison city near Gaziantep, in southeast Turkey), Allianoi (an ancient spa center near Pergamon, in western Turkey) and Hasankeyf (medieval site near Batman, southeast Turkey) have raised a lot of public and scholarly reaction to the inundation of cultural heritage which has universal importance.

International charters and conventions concerning protection of the cultural heritage recommend that at the preliminary survey stage of engineering projects, sites of historic and archaeological importance be marked and measures taken to preserve them in-situ. UNESCO's Recommendation concerning the Preservation of Cultural Property Endangered by Public or Private Works (1968) points out the fact that "It is duty of governments to ensure the protection and the preservation of cultural heritage of mankind as much as to promote social and economic development. Preventive and corrective measures should be aimed at protecting or saving cultural property from public or private works likely to damage and destroy it."

UNESCO's recommendations have been ratified by Turkey; thus interested professional bodies: architects, archaeologists, art historians, engineers and several NGO's have been insisting on the revision of the Ilisu dam project in order to reduce its impact on the archaeological sites in the region. About 200 sites will be affected by the Ilisu Dam. Hasankeyf is the best visible and representative of all, due to its picturesque location and rich architectural content. It was an important locality on the Silk Road with a majestic bridge crossing the Tigris River. Prof. A. Gabriel was very much impressed by the site; made a photographic survey of it in the first half of the twentieth century. With its important monuments and archaeological potential, Hasankeyf is one of best preserved medieval sites in Turkey and is registered as a Grade I archaeological site with significant landmarks.

History and Significance of Hasankeyf

Two major rivers, Euphrates and Tigris which are born in Anatolia have given life to the lands which they pass through, leading to the development of ancient Near Eastern civilizations. Not only Mesopotamian but also Roman, Byzantine and Islamic cultures have contributed to the richness of the area. Keban and Atatürk dams built over Euphrates River in the 1960's and 1980's were supplanted by international rescue archaeology campaigns which contributed to the salvage of only a minor fraction of the cultural heritage in the dam reservoir areas. In rescue archaeology, the small time given to the archaeological teams to finish their research is far from being satisfactory.

According to finds revealed during excavations conducted by Prof. Dr. Oluş Arık from Ankara University during the years (1986-2003), human settlement at the site started about 4 000 B.C. The first settlers probably lived along the Tigris River in canyons and caves. Assyrians and other societies in the neighbouring lands, called the people living in the rock caves "kefenen", which means "people of the rock".

Later the region was under the rule of Alexander the Great, the Parthians, Sassanians and the Romans. Although the Romans changed the names of the lands they conquered, they kept the ancient Assyrian name of the site until the seventh century, calling it “Castrum Kefa”, meaning The Castle of the Rock.

During the fifth century, one of the independent churches of the eastern Roman world began to be organized around here. The Syriac culture and community developed upon this foundation. “Cepha”, the Syriac Bishopry was represented by a bishop at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

With the establishment of Islamic rule in the region during the seventh century, Syriacs continued to live there. The Arabic version of the “Rock fort”, Hisn Kayfa, was used as the new name of the site, which was finally transformed into Hasankeyf. Several Abbasid governors ruled in the area; in the tenth century a principality was founded by the descendants of Hamdani family, establishing a dynasty in the region.

About 1090, the region was taken over by the Great Seljuks. In 1102, the Artukid Principality of Hisn Kaifā, which was attached to the Great Seljuks was founded here. The period of their domination is regarded as the Golden Age of Hasankeyf.

In 1236, the principality known as “Ayyubids of Hasankeyf” was established. After the Mongol invasion of the region in the fourteenth century, Akkoyunlu princes of Anatolia extended their rule till Hasankeyf. Yet, being a land on the border of Ottoman, Safavid (Persian), Ayyubid and Akkoyunlu states, it suffered from the tensions between those powers, finally submitting to Ottoman rule in 1524. Since then, it has remained within the Anatolian unity.

The Ilisu Dam and its Impact on Hasankeyf

The Ilisu high dam project which was prepared more than thirty years ago has become obsolete and outdated. The main concern of the engineers who designed it was creating new sources of energy. It was developed without making a survey of the cultural heritage in the area. With today’s changed concepts, the dam project needs to be reviewed thoroughly; the human, environmental and cultural heritage concerns are more important than a dam which will be totally useless in about fifty years. Yet the Ministry of Culture and Tourism does not insist on development of alternative solutions like the lowering of the dam level or employing more environment-friendly sources of energy instead of the high dam.

Two years ago the Turkish Prime Minister Mr. T. Erdogan announced that Hasankeyf will not be inundated but saved from perishing under water. Now, the decision is changed; the Ilisu dam will be constructed! If the dam is built, the lower part of the historic city will be totally submerged, only a little part of the Citadel will rise above the water. The rock on which Hasankeyf is built is a soft limestone which lends itself to fine carving is sensitive to water. Therefore the inundation of the rock may aggravate formation and development of cracks and the bedrock may fall or slide into the dam lake, leading to great losses from the parts of the historic city which will stand above the water as well.

Recently the Ministry of Culture and Tourism started to develop projects to transfer some monuments from historic Hasankeyf to a new location, as a measure to “save Hasankeyf”. The relocation or transfer of a whole town is a great project, if it is taken seriously, yet the prospects for the possible transfer of monuments do not satisfy the demands.

In Hasankeyf, the possibility of salvaging some of the monuments by transferring them to another site needs to be considered thoroughly. Modern technology offers several methods for transferring masonry buildings. The most favourable from the point of conservation is the technique in which the monument is cut off from its foundations and mounted on a wheeled trolley. This sophisticated technique has been used in Europe and Egypt to move cathedrals, temples and palaces which were endangered by city planning or dam construction. This technique would be the right one for Zeynel Bey Tomb, which is a significant monument from late fifteenth century, standing very close to the Tigris River. The structure has a

cylindrical shaft, the exterior of which is decorated with glazed bricks, laid in geometric patterns, featuring Timurid tradition and marking the strong artistic link between Anatolia and Central Asia in the fifteenth century.

Another technique which is widely adopted for moving is by dismantling the historic building carefully and reassembling it at the new site. In this system, good photographic documentation and survey are essential; each stone block or piece in the structure is numbered. This technique is generally applied to monuments with ashlar construction. In Hasankeyf, it can be used to transfer architectural elements like minarets and the gates of the citadel. The criticism to this technique is that during the dismantling and the re-erection process, monuments may lose some of their original members or beautiful decoration; some blocks break down or crumble. Binding elements like mortar and clamps may need to be changed or replaced for the process. The workmanship for the reassembly may not be the same quality. The mounting has to be done meticulously to assure proper alignment of the members.

The rubble construction used commonly in the construction of Hasankeyf buildings does not lend itself to being dismantled. When taken down, the masonry will disintegrate into a heap of rubble. Therefore even important monuments like Koç and Sultan Süleyman mosques can not be transferred easily. When such structures are dismantled for transfer, almost ninety-five percent of the old masonry will be destroyed; the authenticity of the historic building will be sacrificed.

When the structure has rubble masonry, only some of its important features, like the muqarnas portals, mihrab and other fine details which are made of finely cut stone or with plaster may be dismantled carefully and protected at a safe place. The decorations with gypsum plaster over the transition zones and the domes of Sultan Süleyman Mosque fall in this category. These fragile details can be kept in a museum specially designed for Hasankeyf.

Moving monuments is a hard task. It requires a good budget, technical means and perfect planning. One of the serious objections to the Ilisu Dam is that there is no planning for the re-location of Hasankeyf's architectural heritage. Siting and topography are very important in moving monuments or parts thereof. A similar landscape and context has to be created in order to make the monuments sustain their impressive and meaningful stature. When monuments are cut off from their foundations and erected on a completely different site, they look quite different. They are alienated or isolated, losing much of their dignity and integrity. A relocated building seldom has the same aesthetic relationship to its new site.

Recently, a sketchy project has been published about the prospected new Hasankeyf. The new Hasankeyf is located on a hill, which does not look like the historic Hasankeyf. Within the new settlement, an area is allocated for the display of transferred monuments and architectural members. No serious landscape study has been done beforehand to provide an appropriate landscape for the transferred monuments of Hasankeyf. Anyway, the presence of river Tigris, dividing the city into two, cannot be recreated in the new location. The reflections of the high cliffs on the river, the rock cut cave dwellings, the historic bridge, the valleys and spaces between monuments make Hasankeyf what it is, an exciting landscape. It is impossible to create the same landscape and context for the transferred monuments. It is impossible to re-create the picturesque backdrops for monuments like the Koç and Sultan Süleyman Mosques. And what will happen to the medieval bridge? In short, only a small group of buildings, not really representing the old city may be transferred to the new location. The open air museum created in this way will probably display an uncoordinated collection in a restricted area, in great contrast to the present state and location of the monuments. The collection will probably not consist of entire structures but only exhibit some crippled buildings: like the minarets from some mosques, the gates from the castle. This destructive transfer operation can not be accepted as an act of preservation or salvage; it will create a sad caricature (!) of the real thing.

Consequently, it is impossible to transfer and "save" Hasankeyf at the same time. Hasankeyf consists of a spectacular landscape incorporating major natural features closely connected to a complex fabric of monuments. Hasankeyf can only be saved by being preserved in situ, developing conservation projects for its extensive buildings and ruins and continuing research and excavations to reveal its hidden parts.

Another critical point about Ilisu Dam is its life span. Experts foresee 30-50 years of functional life for this dam. It is predicted that in a very short period of time it will be filled with rubble and not be as useful as at the beginning. In the long run, the dam will be a social, cultural and environmental disaster. When the very short useful life of the dam is set against the long history of Hasankeyf and its potential to live for eternity, one is compelled to ask the authorities "Why build Ilisu dam?"

No material gain or money can bring back or reproduce a treasure like Hasankeyf. People living there and others, who have visited it, have memories and very close ties with the site, all of which are worth more than a dam. We want the future generations to see it in its full scale, enjoy its beauty and presence. We still have a great deal to learn from it. Many of the historic features of the old city were brought to light by excavation, yet there is still more to be revealed. One third of the visible traces are still covered by rubble and earth.

Hasankeyf offers immemorable vistas and moments for visitors and inhabitants. From its acropolis, it is wonderful to watch Zeynel Bey Tomb and the river Tigris flowing peacefully under the ruins of the medieval bridge. It is irrational to bury a site which has such great potential for the present and the future.

When one compares the short-term economic prosperity the dam will generate with the long-term survival of a significant site which encompasses treasures from early human settlements up to late medieval period, one without doubt makes the preference for the survival of Hasankeyf. Public opinion and scholarly concerns support the view that short-lived dams should not be permitted to devastate culturally abundant lands. Hasankeyf should not be "Doomed by the Dam".

It is important to warn all who support the dam construction, that they are helping the destruction of cultural heritage which is registered as Grade I archaeological site. The international charters like the Valletta Convention encourage the state parties to protect and preserve archaeological heritage. The local people, art historians, archaeologists and architects in Turkey are against the project and run campaigns to stop the construction. Maybe this information might help to initiate a movement also in the European Parliament against a project which will result in the destruction of cultural heritage, will damage the ecosystem in the region and will dislocate the local inhabitants, detaching them from their cultural heritage and homeland.