

Publication Data:

Oleksa Haiworonski, 'An Overview of the Mediaeval Crimean Tatar Settlement of Eski Yurt', *EJOS*, VIII (2005), No. 1, 1-11.

ISSN 0928-6802

© Copyright 2005 Oleksa Haiworonski

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, translated, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE MEDIAEVAL CRIMEAN TATAR SETTLEMENT OF ESKI YURT

OLEKSA HAIWORONSKI

1. Historical background

The town of Bağçasaray in Southwest Crimea, Ukraine, was the former capital of the Crimean Khanate, the state of the Crimean Tatar people, in 1532-1783. As with many other old urban centres the territory of the modern Bağçasaray includes historical areas of older settlements, formerly separated from the town. There were three such settlements existing in the vicinity of the present Bağçasaray –Qırq Yer, Salaçıq and Eski Yurt. Before 1532, when Bağçasaray was founded, each of these settlements played an important role in the development of urban life of the Crimean Tatars in the Southwest Crimea.

Eski Yurt was located in the western part of what is now the town of Bağçasaray. The present area of Eski Yurt is overlaid partly with modern housing and industrial building, and partly with suburban wastelands. Eski Yurt also contained a smaller outlying part called Aziz or the Aziz of Malik Aşter.

The exact date when Eski Yurt was established remains unclear. The oldest gravestone from a local cemetery dates from 1316.¹ From another source, two independent narrative sources of the 17th century state that Muslim religious buildings in Eski Yurt were made of ruins of certain Christian

¹ Iwanow, A., “Nadpisi iz Eski-Jurta”, *Siewernoje Priczernomorje I Powolżje wo wzaimootnoszenjach Wostoka I Zapada w XII-XVI wiekach*, Rostow-na-Donu 1989, p. 26.

temples.² These reports seem to be confirmed by the secondary use of a marble column fragment with Christian symbols as a Muslim gravestone of the 15th century in Eski Yurt.³ This could be an additional argument for research to clarify what settlements existed there before the epoch of the Golden Horde.

Eski Yurt flourished in the 14th and 15th centuries. Possibly Eski Yurt was an important urban center of the region during the epoch of the Golden Horde, as one of the oldest and largest Muslim cemeteries of that period in the Crimea is at Eski Yurt.

The settlement was located on a trade route which connected southwest Crimean ports with the plains. The historical topography of the settlement shows clear analogies with that of another Crimean Tatar urban centre of the same period –the town of Qırım (also known as Solqat or Eski Qırım, presently Staryj Krym) in the eastern part of the Crimean peninsula, the administrative and cultural centre of the Crimean province of the Golden Horde.

After the rise of an independent Crimean Khanate in the middle of the 15th century Eski Yurt apparently lost its significance. After 1532, when Bağçasaray was founded, it gradually became almost depopulated because of the movement of citizens to the newly-founded Crimean capital. Up to the middle of the 20th century Eski Yurt was a separate settlement, often considered a suburb of Bağçasaray. That changed in the Soviet period after the Second World War and deportation of the Crimean Tatar people to Central Asia, when the settlement was renamed “Podgorodnieje” and incorporated into the municipal area of Bağçasaray.

The toponym Eski Yurt (“old settlement” from Crimean Tatar) apparently has a secondary character, however the known sources do not provide any information about the initial name of the settlement.

² Broniewski, M., “Opisanije Kryma”, *Zapiski Odesskago imperatorskago obszczestwa istorii i drewnostiej*, VI, Odessa 1867, 344; “Skazanije swiaszczennika Iakowa (1634)”, *Zapiski Odesskago imperatorskago obszczestwa istorii i drewnostiej*, II, Odessa 1850, p. 691.

Huseyin Bodaninski (a Crimean Tatar painter and historian, and the first director of the Museum of the Bağçasaray Khan Palace) considered Eski Yurt as an integral part of a group of settlements of the Çürük Suv river valley. Another key point in that group was the fortress of Qırq Yer (now Çufut Qale) located in the upper part of the valley. Accordingly to H. Bodaninski, the mountain fortress was the fortified citadel of the trade settlement of Eski Yurt.⁴ Bodaninski assumed that the original name of the settlement was Qırq, interpreting the word Qırq (literally “forty”) as a Turkic patronym.⁵ Another example of the use of numbers as tribal names in Crimea is the Crimean Tatar toponym and patronym Otuz (“thirty”).

Here we have one of the most appropriate interpretations of Qırq, abundantly represented in Bağçasaray (Qırq Azizler cemetery, Qırq Yer fortress) and in other parts of Crimea. Bodaninski reveals the clear meaning of Qırq Azizler as “the sanctuaries of the Qırqs” and that of Qırq Yer as “the [fortified] place of the Qırqs”. However, the use of Qırq as the initial name of Eski Yurt has no other grounds than Bodaninski's.

Several Muslim cemeteries are found in the vicinity of Eski Yurt. The two largest, Qırq Azizler and Aziz, located by the opposite sides of the settlement, are the best known.

The first cemetery, Qırq Azizler, occupies a wide area to the northwest of the settlement and is one of the oldest known Muslim cemeteries in Crimea.

The second cemetery, located in Aziz, was of a special spiritual significance for the Crimean Muslims as the memorial sanctuary (*aziz*) of Malik Aşter (619-658, a military commander in the army of khalif Ali). The sanctuary included a mosque, a Sufi *tekiye* (dervish lodge), and numerous

³ Baszkirow, A., Bodaninski U. “Pamiętniki krymsko-tatarskiej stariny. Eski-Jurt”, *Nowyj Wostok*, 8-9, Moskwa 1925, p. 307.

⁴ Bodaninski, U., Zasyplin, B. “Çufut-Kale (po materialam raskopok 1928-1929 gg.)”, *Izwestija Tawriczeskogo obszczestwa istorii, archeologii, etnografii*, III (60), Simferopol 1929, p. 181.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Muslim tombs of different kinds including four large mausoleums. The Aziz of Malik Aşter was one of the most important centers of Sufism in Crimea and kept its significance up to the beginning of the 20th century.⁶

2. *Historiography of Eski Yurt*

It is necessary to note, that the historical data about Eski Yurt and Aziz are rather scarce because of lack of both narrative and archaeological sources. The known sources are limited to some old descriptions of the site,⁷ a publication which followed the only archaeological expedition in Eski Yurt in 1924-1925,⁸ 25 monuments moved from the cemeteries of Eski Yurt to the Museum of the Bağçasaray Khan Palace and, finally, 5 buildings (mausoleums and a stone *minber*) that still remain in Aziz. The problem of research into the history of Eski Yurt is complicated by the fact that a significant part of the site is overlaid by a dense residential area.

Most of the old narrative sources are short travelers' notes that provide very little historical information. Visitors to this locality ignore Eski Yurt, mentioning it (if at all) as a prelude to descriptions of Bağçasaray. The only known exception is the *Seyahat-name* by Evliya Çelebi from 1666 which gives an extended (although not very detailed) depiction of Eski Yurt.⁹ Another kind

⁶ G-ij, I. [Gasprinski I.], "Krymskije azizy", *Wostocznyj sbornik Obszczestwa russkich orijentalistow*, Sankt-Peterburg 1913, p. 213.

⁷ Broniewski, *op. cit.*, p. 344; "Skazanije swiaszczennika...", p. 691; Pallas, P.S., *Nabliudienija, sdielannyje wo wremia putieszestwija po jużnym namiestniczewam russkogo gosudarstwa w 1793-1794 godach*, Moskwa 1999 [Russian translation of: Pallas, P.S., *Bemerkungen auf einer Reise in die südlichen Staathalterschaften des Russischen Reiches in den Jahren 1793 und 1794*, II, Leipzig 1801], p. 34; Żurjari, I., "Pojezdka w bliżajszej okriestnosti Bachczisaraja", *Izwiestija Tawriczeskoj uczionoj archiwnoj komissii*, 9, Simferopol, 1890, p. 109; G-ij, *op. cit.*, p. 214; Kuźmenko, W., "Oczerki Jużnago berega I gornoj czasti Kryma", *Po Krymu (Obszczestwo jestiestwoispytateliej i liubiteliej prirody)*, 4, Simferopol 1918, p. 91.

⁸ Baszkirow, Bodaninski, *op. cit.*

⁹ *Kniga putieszestwija. Tureckij awtor Evliya Çelebi o Krymie*. Simferopol 1999 [Russian translation of: *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi*, VII, VIII, İstanbul 1928], p. 59-68.

of source is two 19th century documents about repairs to the mausoleums of Aziz.¹⁰

For the most part, Eski Yurt has not yet been an object of systematic scientific research. In 1924-1925 H. Bodaninski, A. Baszkirow and I. Borozdin organized the first archaeological expedition to the site. The subsequent publication focused mainly on a typological analysis of monuments from the Qırq Azizler cemetery.¹¹ Bodaninski outlined a plan for further work intended to clarify the true role of Eski Yurt in the history of the Crimean Tatar state and the development of Crimean Tatar urban life. This work was not accomplished, however, as in the 1930s the Communist authorities terminated the Turkic research of the Bağçasaray Museum, and in 1938 H. Bodaninski was arrested and murdered by the Soviet regime.

An attempt to systemize the scientific information about Eski Yurt was undertaken in 1941 by a Russian archaeologist, N. Riepnikow, who had previously worked at the site with the Bodaninski expedition. Riepnikow's work was neither completed nor published.¹²

Several short sketches about architectural monuments of Aziz were published later in Russian and Turkish.¹³ Translations of Turkic and Arabic inscriptions from some gravestones of Qırq Azizler were published by H. Bodaninski and O. Aqçoqraqlı in the 1920s and by A. Iwanow in 1989.¹⁴

¹⁰ Tiesenhausen, W., "O sochranienii i wozobnowlienii w Krymu pamiatnikow i ob i9zdanii opisaniija i risunkow onych", *Zapiski Odesskago imperatorskago obszczestwa istorii i drewnostiej*, VIII, Odessa 1872, p. 393-394; Steven, A., "Diela Tawriczeskago Gubernskago prawlienija, odnosiaszczijesia do razyskanija, opisaniija i sochranienija pamiatnikow stariny w predielach Tawriczeskoj gubernii", *Izwestija Tawriczeskoj uczionoj archiwnoj komissii*, 13, Simferopol 1891, p. 51-52.

¹¹ Baszkirow, Bodaninski, *op. cit.*

¹² Riepnikow, N., "Materialy k archeologiczeskoj kartie Jugo-zapandogo Kryma. 1941", *Archiw Instituta Materialnoj kultury*, F.10, f.1, pp. 1-6.

¹³ Zasyplin, B., "Pamiatniki architektury krymskich tatar", *Krym*, 2 (4), Moskwa, 1927, pp. 116-120; Oktay, A. *Kırım ve Küzey Azerbaycanda Türk Eserleri*, İstanbul 1979, p.14; Krikun, J., *Pamiatniki krymskotatarskoj architektury*, Simferopol 1998, pp. 21-26.

¹⁴ Iwanow, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-31.

3. Architectural monuments from Eski Yurt

The surviving architectural monuments from Eski Yurt are the following:

- 4 *dürbes* or mausoleums in Aziz (15th or earlier -16th centuries);
- a small stone tower (usually referred to as a *minber*, actually a small minaret)
- 25 marble and limestone gravestones of the 14th-early 15th C moved from Qırq Azizler cemetery to the Bağçasaray Khan Palace by the expedition of 1924.

A. Mausoleum of Bey Yude Sultan:



The square-planned mausoleum with a hemispherical dome bears an Arabic inscription above the entrance, stating that the mausoleum was built by Muhammed Şah Bey for his mother, Bey Yude Sultan, a

daughter of Acağan Bey. No gravestones remain inside the mausoleum. The entrance is decorated with a characteristic Seljuk portal with lateral niches (*mihrabs*). The most probable dating is the 15th century.

B. Mausoleum of Ahmed Bey:



The building is a cube with a hip-roofed dome mounted on an octagonal drum. The mausoleum has no inscriptions or monuments inside. From a name on a tombstone of 1577 excavated close to its walls, the building has

conventionally been called “the mausoleum of Ahmed Bey”. However, the architectural style of the mausoleum indicates an older date, as closer analogies to the building are found in Eastern Crimean mosques of the 14th century rather than in the octagonal tombs of Bağçasaray and Eski Yurt of later periods.

C. Mausoleum of Mehmed Bey:



This mausoleum, conventionally called “the mausoleum of Mehmed Bey”, has no tombstones inside or monumental inscriptions on the walls. The building is an octagon. The hip-roofed dome, originally backed with sheet-

lead, rests directly on the main walls without without the drum of every other Crimean mausoleum. Exact dating is unclear; probably, the 16th century.

D. Mausoleum of Mehmed II Giray:



This building is an outstanding example of Crimean Tatar monumental art, with the historical significance of being one of the dynastical tombs of the Crimean khans. According to written sources, three Crimean khans were buried

in the mausoleum: Mehmed Giray II (d. 1584), Saadet Giray II (d. 1587) and Mehmed Giray III (d. 1629). Seventeenth-century sources note that Eski Yurt (Aziz) was the burial place of the khan family.¹⁵ No monuments or inscriptions remain in the mausoleum today. The mausoleum of Mehmed II Giray is similar to the classical Ottoman *türbes* of the 16th century, differing from them by more restrained decoration. A remarkable architectural feature of the mausoleum is the double dome (*çift kubbeli*: inner and outer dome), which is found also in the Ottoman mausoleums built by Mimar Sinan in the same period.¹⁶

¹⁵ “Skazanije swiaszczennika...”, p. 691; *Kniga putieszestwija*, pp. 59-68.

¹⁶ Sönmez, Z., *Mimar Sinan dönemi Türk mimarlığı ve sanatı*, İstanbul 1988, p. 339.

E. Minaret in Aziz:



The ground around the “mausoleum of Ahmed Bey” was originally a fenced courtyard enclosing the mausoleum, a cemetery and the mosque of Aziz. The original mosque, built in the 17th century, was reconstructed – or rather replaced with a new one – in 1914, and then completely destroyed in the 1950s. However, one construction remains in Eski Yurt, apparently the last remnant of the old mosque. It is usually called a *minber*, a pulpit for the *imam*. The construction looks like a small stone tower with 11 high steps. Its orientation from east to west leaves little possibility for this object to be a *minber*, which must be oriented from north to south. Rather it is a minaret remaining from the older mosque (the newer mosque of 1914 had its own high slim minaret). There were very similar small minarets at other mosques in Bağçasaray, but today the minaret in Aziz is the only construction of this kind in Crimea. The “minber” is conventionally dated to the 16th C though no evidence for this dating has ever been provided.

F. Gravestones from Qırq Azizler:

The expedition of Baszkirow and Bodaninski of 1924 moved about 30 gravestones from Qırq Azizler cemetery to the Khan cemetery of the Bağçasaray Khan Palace (the exact number is unknown).¹⁷ The two dozen gravestones saved by Bodaninski are now the only surviving examples of

¹⁷ For the cemetery of the Bağçasaray Khan Palace see also [Kançal-Ferrari, Nicole, 'The Art of the Khans of Crimea and its relation to Ottoman Art: The Cemetery of the Khan's Palace in Bahçesaray', *EJOS*, IV \(2001\) \(= M. Kiel, N. Landman & H. Theunissen \(eds.\), *Proceedings of*](#)



monuments from Qırq Azizler. All other monuments, left by the expedition in their original sites, were destroyed after the Second World War (most likely for building material). The monument collection of the Bağçasaray Historical & Cultural State Preserve currently includes 25 gravestones from Qırq Azizler dated from 1316 till 1414 (some gravestones have no date or inscription). The monuments decorated with ornamental and calligraphic stone-carving are masterpieces of the Seljuk style in Crimea. Most of the tombstones are adorned with fine geometrical patterns and characteristic Seljuk entrelacs. One common decorative motif is the image of a lamp, found in variations on many tombstones. Many gravestones bear epitaphs with dates and sometimes names of the dead (a total of 11 names). It is worth noting that in three cases the name shows as origin the city of Qırım, capital of the Crimean province of the Golden Horde. The inscriptions are in Arabic, Turkic and (more seldom) Persian, sometimes combined on the same stone. The epitaphs are either short texts mentioning only the name and the date, or quotations from the Qur'an, sayings by the Prophet Muhammad and sometimes verses.

4. The present state of the site and protection of monuments

The mausoleums of Aziz are protected by the law of Ukraine as objects of national cultural heritage. The buildings urgently need restoration, recently begun by the Bağçasaray Historical & Cultural State Preserve (which is responsible for the state protection of the historical monuments in the region). The Preserve has renewed archaeological researches at the site and organized

[the 11th International Congress of Turkish Art, Utrecht - The Netherlands, August 23-28,](#)

in 2005 the first expedition to Eski Yurt in 80 years. The further program of protecting monuments foresees the creation of a museum of spiritual culture of the Crimean Tatars in Aziz.

In order to popularise and promote the Crimean Tatar cultural heritage at Eski Yurt, a website in Russian was created with essays on the history of Eski Yurt, descriptions of its monuments and an online library of references to Eski Yurt in old sources and in modern scientific works.¹⁸

[1999\), No. 24, 1-22.](#)

¹⁸ Haiworonski, O., *Istorija Bachezisaraja: Driewnij Gorod Eski-Jurt i Kladbische Kyrk-Azizler, Bachezisaraj, Krym*: <http://www.eskiyurt.iatp.org.ua/index.html>.