

The so-called monastery at Torba, region of Halikarnassos: architectural design and mosaic decoration

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One of the more intriguing archaeological sites on the Halikarnassian peninsula, in the province of Caria in southwestern Asia Minor, is a small coastal settlement named Torba, located 5 km north of Halikarnassos. Torba has a group of five buildings dating to the Early Christian to Early Byzantine periods and was previously called a monastery. These structures consist of what has been labeled a “mausoleum,” a residence named a bishop’s house, a small set of baths, a basilica church, and a cistern. The style and technique of manufacture of the mosaics decorating the ensemble help refine the dating to the period from the late 4th to early 6th centuries CE.

Various factors suggest identifying the small apsed building at Torba, the earliest structure there, as a chapel and not a mausoleum. This shrine could have commemorated a Christian saint associated with its locale, perhaps becoming a *martyrium* in a secondary phase. The structure, moreover, occurred along an increasingly well-traveled road linking the cities of Mylasa and Halikarnassos. Sometime in the later part of the 5th century an unidentified individual (or individuals) acquired the land at Torba and constructed a residence with an accompanying set of baths. The house and baths, plus the chapel, later became part of an ecclesiastical complex, when a church and cistern were erected on the site.

The mosaics ornamenting the baths and basilica at Torba (some of the best preserved pavements on the site) appear close in date. I believe that all of these works are products of a local branch of a mosaic workshop originating on the island of Kos and also fulfilling commissions at locations along the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, including nearby Halikarnassos. This atelier flourished in the late 5th to early 6th centuries. One example is a well preserved pavement ornamenting the bath building at Torba. It shows a circle-in-square design, with a large circle enclosing an interlacing pattern made by a tightly braided guilloche and a cable band, forming a wreath of eight circles around a curvilinear octagon. Exactly the same pattern occurs in a mosaic carpet at one end of Room C in the House of Charidemos in Halikarnassos, dated to the 5th century.

At the E end of the north aisle of the basilica at Torba can be seen a variation of a signature pattern of the proposed workshop, displaying a design of four-pointed stars bearing a large central square and forming diagonally set lozenges, each of which bears a small square. This arrangement is a local variation of a pattern used repeatedly by the workshop on Kos and also employed in the House of Charidemos at Halikarnassos.

One final question is whether the group of buildings at Torba functioned as a monastery. It seems more likely that Torba was a pilgrimage site offering visitors temporary shelter, a place of worship, and bathing facilities, and its chapel may have served the cult of a local saint or martyr. Torba apparently became a way station on the pilgrimage route stretching from Halikarnassos to Mylasa.

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Fig. 1. Plan of site of Torba



Fig. 2. Torba, baths, photo of mosaic