

Deir Mar Barsaum

ܕܝܪܡܪ ܒܪܨܘܡ

The Monastery of Mar Barsaum
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Syriac as a Bridle Culture,

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First Expedition: Year 2000

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Plan:P.Antoine ABOU RAHHAL

Second Expedition: 1-7-2004

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Plan: Emile AL AKRA & Falah WAKIM
Sketching: Falah WAKIM

The Monastery of Mar Barsauma: A General Survey

Dear Colleagues Let us profit in this occasion of this IV Symposium of The Canadian Society for Syriac Studies to launch an alarming call to the institutions who are taking care of Syriac Studies, to the Turkish universities with a chair of Medieval Archaeology, to save the site of Mar Barsauma Monastery from wild excavations and site destruction: crypt « cleaned », destroyed walls, and broken pottery. Dear colleagues, the best way to save this site could be an interunivesrities, patenariate for an excavation campaign.

This paper is the fruit of an in situ research aiming to rediscover and discribe the remaining of what it was the famous monastery-fortress of Mar Barsauma. The two visits to the site were guided by my initiative, together with my friend, Mr. Fadi BAROUDI (Historien), accompanied for the first time by Mr. Sami KARKABI and Mr. Robert GABRIEL in the year 2000, and for the second time, (July 1st 2004) by Emile AL AKRA (architect , university professor), Falah WAKIM (architect-restaurer of historicals monuments), Gabriel AYDIN (young syriac guy of turkish nationality, post graduate student in musicology at our university(USEK), turkish, Kurdish, syriac, arabic and english speaking, especially the kurdish wich is a necessity in those remoted area, where people speak only this language. And we had also a kurdish young driver-guide Abdullah..

Deir Mar Barsaum

ܕܝܪܡܪ ܒܪܫܘܡܐ

Our headquarter for those two visits to Mar Barsauma Monastery, was in the town of Kahta (New Kahta). This permitted us to pass by tow localities mentionned in the syriac Chronicles, Eski Kahta (Old Kahta) and Tegenkar, plus the commodity of traveling, because a big part of our road is the main road to the Nemroud Dag (Antiochus Epiphanius Mausoleum), and Gerger (The old Syrian Orthdoxe bishopric of Gargar). Our direction was North West to the Kapli Dag, because the monastery is exactly situated on the first heights of this mountain.

The best time to visit this site is the period between the end of April and the end of Septembre, othertime, the road is very muddy and difficult in winter time and needs a four wheel or a microbus adapted for this kind of road.

After passing the village of Tegenkar, the Kapli Dag mountain was profiling in front of us; The view is same as in the photography taken by A. Maricq in 1953 and published by E. Honigmann, « *Le couvent de Barsauma et le patriarcat jacobite d'Antioche et de Syrie* ». This photo helped us to mark the site at our first expedition ; The identified houses in the photo belong to the village of Sholyan and according to our knowledge, nobody of those who has visited this site, had mentioned this village, but all of them mentioned Perash. Remain Zayno a third village hiden in the other side of the mountain, unknowen by visitors and by our group.

Deir Mar Barsaum

دير مار بارساوم

This mountain standing in front of us, inside an undulating country at an altitude of 1600 m, looks as the highest in the region ; the stiff slope down and the cliffs defending the peak, confer to this site a grimy and repulsive aspect as to discourage the assailant. The basis of the mountain is belted by three villages and their agricultural domaine, Perash on the North, Sholyan on the South and Zayno on the East. The territories of those two villages separate the peak from the counterfort of the Nemroud Dag mountains.

Arriving there, we had to finish the whole work in one day, climbing with difficulty the abrupt mountain for one hour, redoing the topography of the ruins, identificating and measuring the remaining of the retaining and surrounding walls, visiting the caves, studying the defense system and finding any indication concerning the water catching , and all this in one day before the sunset.

Around 11 a.m, we had access to the site following a long rocky ramp arranged on the side of the cliff continuing with small notched stairs . It is the only possible way, and the cliff is forming a natural defense line. The view is magnificent. The monks massons profited of the first heights of the Kapli Dag massif, to establish natural defenses. The peak is a long ridge toward the North East, its width is arround fifty meters in the middle. The ruins are localised in a space starting from the crest line of the Kapli Dag in three distinguished levels, the inferior, the middle and the superior. The difference in level from the top point to the lowest one is more than 100 meters. The lowel and middle levels are sandy and rich in remains, such as potsherd with incised decoration. The upper level is a huge agglomeration of rocky slabs and the remaining of fortifications.

The middle level: The church and its dependencies.

The church is situated in the middle level, where Patriarch Michael the Syrian is buried, « **In his life he erected his tomb in front of the northern altar (E. H. p. 50)** ». The church is rectangular with three naves and three apses. Of the set of supports delimiting the three naves, only one is remaining. The north-eastern apse is demolished, its debris are in the limitroph ravine, and the remaining of eastern apse is partially hidden, with the appearance of a tiny niche, inserted in the apse . We have to underline the exequity of the side naves, which forms two kinds of non functional corridors. Of the chevet of the church remains a bare wall of 6 meters high.

The walls of the church are double, stuffed with rubbles and mortar. The western wall is built near the ridge line, and at 8 meters down, we can guess a part surrounding wall. In front of the main entrance of the church, there is a small area with an impressionant emptiness. This entrance in the form of a semicircular arch ploughed up in the middle, covers the central door opening toward the principal nave. After the entrance there is a hole conducting to an underground which function is unknown (crypt ?)

Near southern side of the church, there are rectangular enclosing walls (unknown function) of 23m x 16m ; The eastern wall is extended with a very wide distinguished wall, 20m long, ending exactly at the limit of the ridge ; it seems as a retaining wall of the church parvis. It is parallel and at 7m from the main entrance (the space in front of the main entrance is limited by this wall:) see plan).

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The upper level: The fortress.

The distance between the first fortification wall in the upper level and the North East angle of the church is 110m as the crow flies ; to attend it, you should follow the crest and climb among the rocky slates, through steps and notches, to arrive to the highst point of the site at 1584m. This chaotic ensemble of rocks shelters the remaining of huge fortifications ; These remaining are wall ending and basis for right angle walls in curved stones, built as a defense system with a perfect execution. One of these is situated in the eastern side upon a rocky peak showing an impressionant emptiness, while in the other direction (North-East), the wall cut the crest , and in the other side , there is a big excavation like the defense trench in the fortresses, and many debris coming from the destruction of these fortifications.

The foundation of the walls passes the 35cm and it shows a big construction ; the covering stones are well cut and well joined. The large installation proves the important construction. Are they not the towers mentioned by Michael ? Others constructions are in an other high cliff. This elaborated defense system is necessary over here in the most vulnerable part of the site :The huge fortifications were to cut the way to the assailant coming from the peaks where the access is easy.

The lower : The retaining walls.

In the second visit we discovered a successivity of retaining walls built with freestones in the lower level. A delicate descent is obligatory to have a whole view of the elaborated walls shouldering and filling till the table-land of the site and resisting till now the pushing of the soil. Upon these walls, a square freestone construction intrigues us ; Is not a basis of a tower ? We are in the southern part of the monastery, and Patriarch Michael, mentioned : **«We built the southern tower ... (M.S. III p.164) »** This part of the site contains also a certain number of remaining walls from the surrounding wall. Up on these walls an opening leads to an underground chamber(Tomb ?). The altitude of the lower level is 1470m.

As a conclusion, we can advance the following possible configuration: The worship place and its dependencies, the water cisterns, the defense works (towers and surrounding walls) were built in freestones and the site was totally buckled and defended, and the monks could build inside a perimeter of 15000m² of superficies *adjoining cells by groups of four or five and the walls and the roof were built with wood.* (M.S. III p.391).

For the syriacisant, the visit of the site of the old jacobite patriarchate, the monastery of Mar Barsauma is a part of uncounternable stages « **One of the most famous monasteries fortresses of all the Orient...A site with a considerable importance for the universal history ... It is there according to all probabilities , where were composed the three big chronicles , so precious for the syriac orthodoxe (Jacobite) history : The Cronicles Of Michael the Syrian, the anonymous Chronicles of 1234, and, in its major part, the Chronicles of Barhebreus,** (E. H. pp. I, 4-5) ».

Those who are skeptical concerning the authanticity of the site,,they are for tow reasons :

a- They are waiting to find a kind of « Vatican » or more majesteous ruins, and is not the case over here.

b- They cannot admit that the water , according to Michael , was collected and canalised till the top of the mountain. Our answering is that a deep examination of the ruins, allowed us to confirm the existense of a monastery surrounded by walls, with the superficies of 15000 m² approximatly (see map). The problem of the water is resolved after our second exploration of the site, discovering the canalisation in the rock and the potery tubes reused today by the habitants of Qaydereh (Zeino) for cheminies in their houses, according to a man from Perash (Ahmed the muler)

A- The actual toponymy of the site

Kala del Barsun, Kala del Barsum, (a young man pronounced **Kala del Barsim**), **Barsoum Kalesi** - see E.H. pp.III-IV, The correcting of the name of the site by the mayor of the village to André Maricq, **Kala Der Barsum**.

B- The descriptions and analysis of our predecessors in the affair.

F. van Luschan and A. Maricq (see in E.H.), M.Thierry (see biblio.), T.A. Sinclair (see biblio.).

C- The situation of the localities near the monastery

Mentioned by M.S., C.A., B.H., and the actual comparaison with the site.

Tegenkar :The village still carrying the same name and it is on the South at 7.5 km from the site, « *One night, they attacked suddenly a fortress situated in the neighborhood of the monastery called Tegenkar...* (M.S. III p.294) », the same did, B.H. mentioning **Tegenkar** and its proximity to the monastery (in Chronicon Syriacum, p.316) ; actually the fortress does not exist any more.

Gerger : or Gargar which we visited, is a small town of 4000 habitants, situated on the South-East at 21,5km from the site; see the three chronicles, especially M.S. III p.392.

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Kahta and Nemroud Dag : « *At one day distance from the monastery, (of Mar Barsauma) in the neighborhood of Kiahta, (the actual Eski Kahta or the old Kahta, situated on our road to Mar Barsauma site) It was in the mountain a pagan temple built with white freestones called Tabashin, meaning the construction of the demons, because of its admirable construction and the big size of the freestones used for this construction. The patriarch sent beasts to carry the stones from there. They were hewed, carried on the mules and transported...* (C.A. pp.234-235) » ; the famous **Nemroud Dag** is on the South at 20km from our site.

D- The arrival to the monastery

It is mentioned in the Chronicles by the verb **ascend** or the world **ascending or rising** : « *He went out of Amid and came to salute Josselin, and from there he asended to the monastery of Mar Bar Çauma...(M.S. III p.228)* ». «*The maphrien prepared for the patriach a pompy mount. He ascended with him with pomp and joy till the monastery of Mar Barsauma ...* ». «*As for the patriarch, he went to the monastery of Duwayr and from there to Barid. After that he ascended to the monastery of Barsauma* ». «*Ascending of the patriarch to the monastery* (title of a paragrape) ». «*The arrival of patriarch Michael, he ascended to the monastery...* (C.A. pp.216, 228, 230, 252) ».

It seems that ascending to the monastery was not a restful thing «*The diocesan murmured and complained... They found it very difficult to go everyday to the monastery of Mar Barsauma near the patriarch ...* (C.A. p.246) » ; of course, everybody didn't have a mount. In fact, the lifting up to the site is tiresome, and more we approach the peak , more hard becomes. Without any doubt, they were many muletracks well -kept for the 12 mules in the time of Michael patriarchate (M.S. III p.288).

M. Thierry quoted that the going up walking or on a horse ride by a slope full of debris and cut stones is very rough and takes one hour (p.192, n.27).

E- The monastery was a fortress

During an attack by brigand, some monks were massacred « **After that, in the year 1380 (1069 J.C.), the monks (of Bar Çauma monastery) built two elevated towers ; thirty tow years later, in the year 1412 (1101 J.C.), a new tower were built between the two others, and after 45 years ... we built the southern tower (M.S. III p.164)».**

In his Chronicles, Michael the Syrian mentioned that the monks of the monastery of Mar Barsauma went to meet the Count of Edessa Josselin « **They took the cross and the gospelsbook and went out to meet him at the southern door. When he saw the cross, he went down from his horse with astute and humility till his entrance and establishment in the monastery). Then he showed his astuted thought to one of his soldiers, who participated to his malignity, and sent them to inspect the fortress. Some of the monks understood the trick of this inspection. Then five men went up (to the fortress... M.S. III pp.285-286) ».**

The description in this paragraph is matching to the situation on the upper level, and as we described, the difference between the two levels is one hundred meters, and to reach the upper site , we should ascend, and these ruins are a part of a defense system with the remains of powerful fortifications perfectly executed.

After the fire in the monastery, patriarch Michael quoted : « **We stayed with the monks in the top of the fortress, in the tower, for a whole month ... then we went rebuilding . In three years, the monastery were rebuilt, twice more than its former size.** (M.S. III p. 393) ».

The patriarch Michael is right to say « top of the forteress », because this part of the site is the most high. (M.S.III p.164)

Barhebraeus quotes : « *The patriarch Michael lifted the southern tower and fortified the upper part of the monastery* (B.H. arabe, p.107) ».

This upper part, is built on a big rocky agglomeration, composed of big slates, and the patriarch quoted in a new perquisition of Josselin in the fortress : « **Again they went up on the rock ...** (M.S. III P.288) ».

The monastery was surrounded by a wall, attested by the remains of freestones walls; Michael talking about Barwahboun says : « *He manufactured cords , went down the walls of the monastery and escaped ...* (M.S. III p. 386) ».

During the big fire « The doors of the monastery, who were iron manufactured, burned, the walls felt down, and let us say that nothing was saved, except the new church which was under construction, and the door of Gargar... (M.S. III p.392) ». Michael mention also the southern door (p.285) ;

Deir Mar Barsaum

دير مار بارساوم

The Count of Edessa Josselin describe the monastery on those terms : « **Myself , I took the monastery of Mar Barssauma, a fortress elevated higher than the others like an eagle upon the birds ...**(M.S. III P.287) »

A monastery fortress surrounded by walls with a space of 15000m² needed defenders, the monks and their servants became soldiers in emergency case; and it seems that « those » of Mar Barssauma monastery, were good archers according to Barhebreus : « *The emir of Malatya assembled 500 knights and engaged, to support them, 50 fantassins from the monastery of Mar Barssauma, who were clever archers ...* (B.H. arabe, p.285) ». During one of his travels , while going back to Mar Barssauma, quoted that he waited in Sergius monastery the arrival of *50 armed monks from the monastery of Mar Barssauma, coming to accompany him* (B.H. arabe, p.329). The patriarch Michael himself talks about archers-monks with their names, killed during a skirmish (M.S. III p.164).

F-The water

Michael quoted as following (III pp. 321-323) : « In the year 1474 (1163 J.C.), *while we decided to take the direction of Mar Bar Çauma, we put all our effort to bring the water to the monastery ... especially in his feast (Mar Barsauma), uncountable people were gathered in the monastery ... The peregrinage endured many days. People were suffering thirst, because the water was brought from away on mules. As the bishop of Mardin had perfectionate the art of geometry, he conducted and brought easy waters where it was a need. It was likely to this venerable bishop to keep his memory in this holy place. This was not likely for the monks ...They did not believe on the possibility of establishing canalisation on the peak of such a mountain full of stones and rocks.... The time passed till myself humble Michael, I was called and nominated as an archmandrit for this monastery ... and I wrote to the venerable Mar Youhanon who came in a hurry. After measurement, he demonstrated that the water could come in the monastery.. Then the work started by digging the soil and preparing all what is necessairy. At the approach of the winter, the venerable bishop went back in his diocese, to return in the month of April. I will not tell how much I suffered from the murmure of the brothers ... all the monks, old and young, shouted and complained against my poor person.*

Deir Mar Barsaum

ديار بارساوم

One was objecting the budget, another was affraid of the jealousy of our neighbors ... The spring came, and the holy bishop came back as he promited. Instead of the jealousy of our neighboring prince, we got help and pledge from the christian as well from the moslem. Then the monks started working ... How many prodiges and miracles ... happened during this work ... One happened at the end of the work, and I should tell about it briefly. The waters approached the entrance of the monastery, but it was impossible to split a high rock in the middle ... We were hopeless. Then the saint appeared to a foreigner monk saying : go tel to the bishop and the archmandrit : do not be discouraged; you will find a passage for the waters in this place. When he reported this, nobody believed him; because the mountain in this place was very hard all over. The monk digged alone in the indicated place, and found the mountain splited in tow in a space of five hundred feet ... Every body was surprised and praised (the Lord) . Some they said that the split is old, others, the Lord digged newly. Myself I say : If it was digged from the origin, or it was done now, the virtue of God residing in our lord Mar Bar Çauma proved us that he has done this work ,not ourselves ... the work was achieved the 24th August of the year 1474 (1163 J.C.).

We have intentionally mentioned this long passage to understand what we have seen and observed. We passed the last fortifications following the line of the crest in direction to the top. A big tilted rocky slab, with a vertical split, got our attention, and more down we went we saw this canal, curved in the rock from time to time. Is it not the rock mentioned by Michael, very high... splited along five hundred feet ...near the monastery ? Encouraged by this discovery, we continued our way, but the crest seemed unending, and the Kapli Dag was confused with other mountain spurs.. Suddenly,, toward the East at the foothill, we found a hidden village. Going back to the site, we had a conversation with the kurdish muler who accompanied me, Ahmed Karaqosh, and Gabriel translated:

- What is this village on the foothill East of the mountain ?
- Zayno was its original name, now it is called Qayadereh.
- Have you been here (in the site) ?
- Yes, many times.
- Is it possible to bring the water till this place, the ruins ?
- Yes, before the water arrived to the kalaa. Those who lived here impounded the water at the Hazarmouni spring situated on the mountain up of Zayno ; they digged the soil, then send the water with tubes of potery till the kalaa.
- How do you know this ?
- Many people from the region know this, and Ali, originely from Zayno unearthed the tubes and sold them to the village to use as tubes for cheminies, and they are still seen in Zayno houses ».

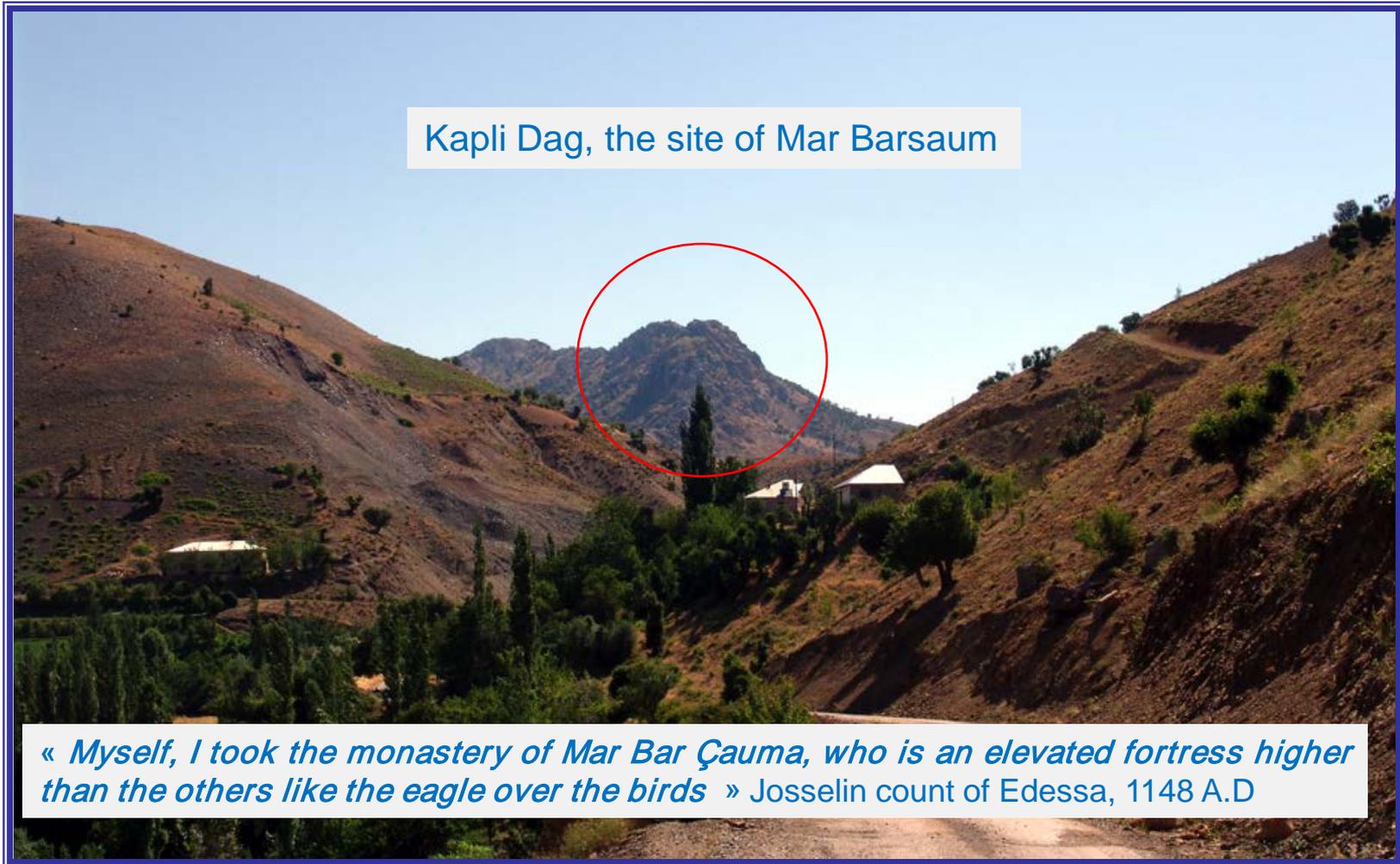
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- C.A. = *Anonymi auctoris chronicon ad. A.C. 1234 pertinens*, traduit par Albert Abouna, Louvain, 1974.
- Michel Thierry, *Monuments chrétiens inédits de Haute-Mésopotamie*, Syria-70, 1993.
- T.A. Sinclair, *Eastern Turkey : an architectural and archeological survey*, vol. 4, Pindar press.
- Concerning the successive destructions and devastations of the monastery of Mar Barsauma and its desertation, see E.H. pp.50-51.
- Concerning the jacobite immigration to these regions, see the text of patriarch Michael in M.S. III p.130, and especially the nice article of Gilbert Dagron, « Minorités ethniques et religieuses dans l'Orient byzantin à la fin du Xe et au XIe siècle : l'immigration syrienne », in id., *La Romanité chrétienne en Orient, héritages et mutation*, Variorum reprints, Londres, 1984.

Deir Mar Barsaum

ديار وديع حارسوم

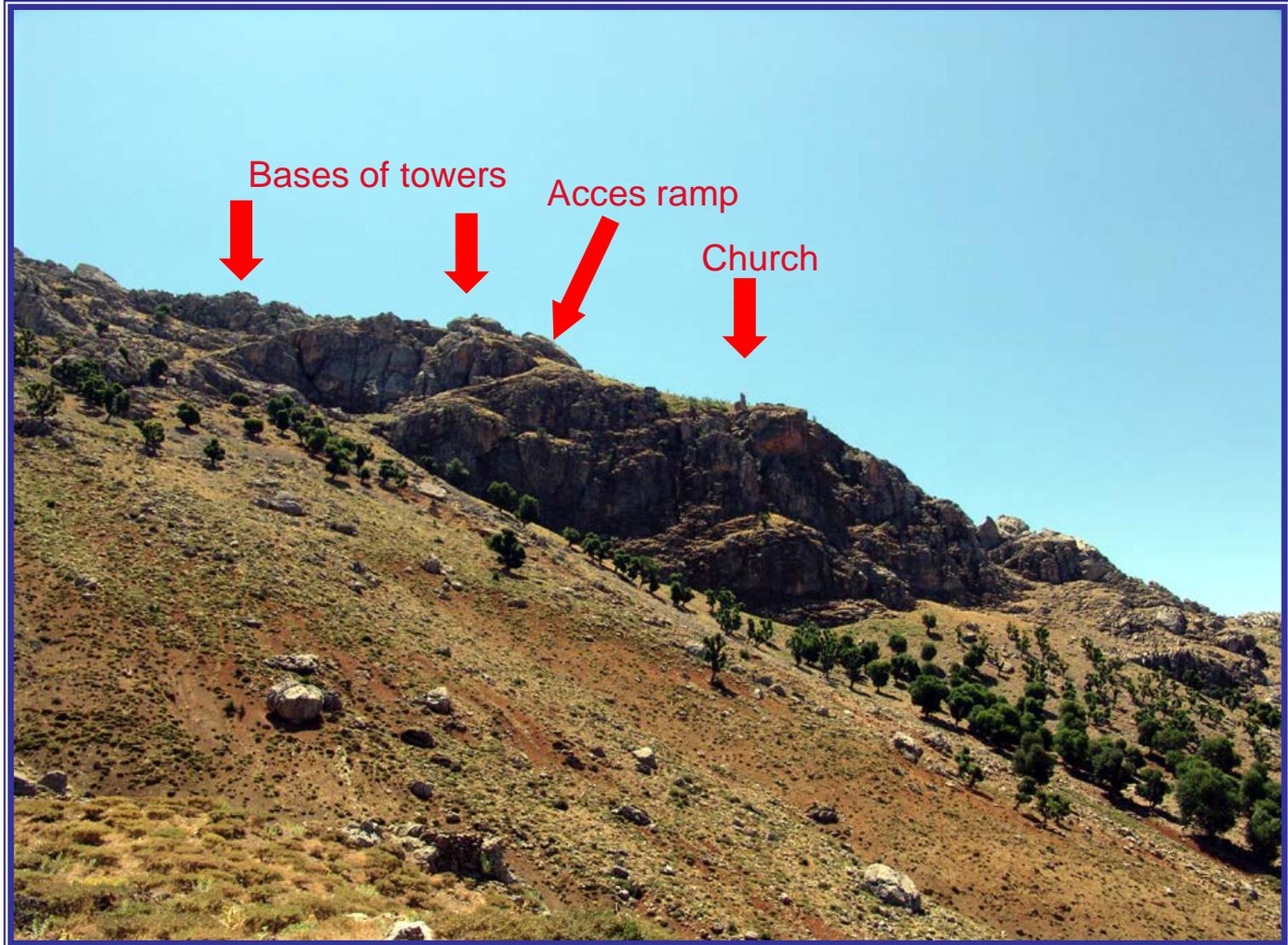
Kapli Dag, the site of Mar Barsaum



« Myself, I took the monastery of Mar Bar Çauma, who is an elevated fortress higher than the others like the eagle over the birds » Josselin count of Edessa, 1148 A.D

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The ramp



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وینا وھنہ حزیوم

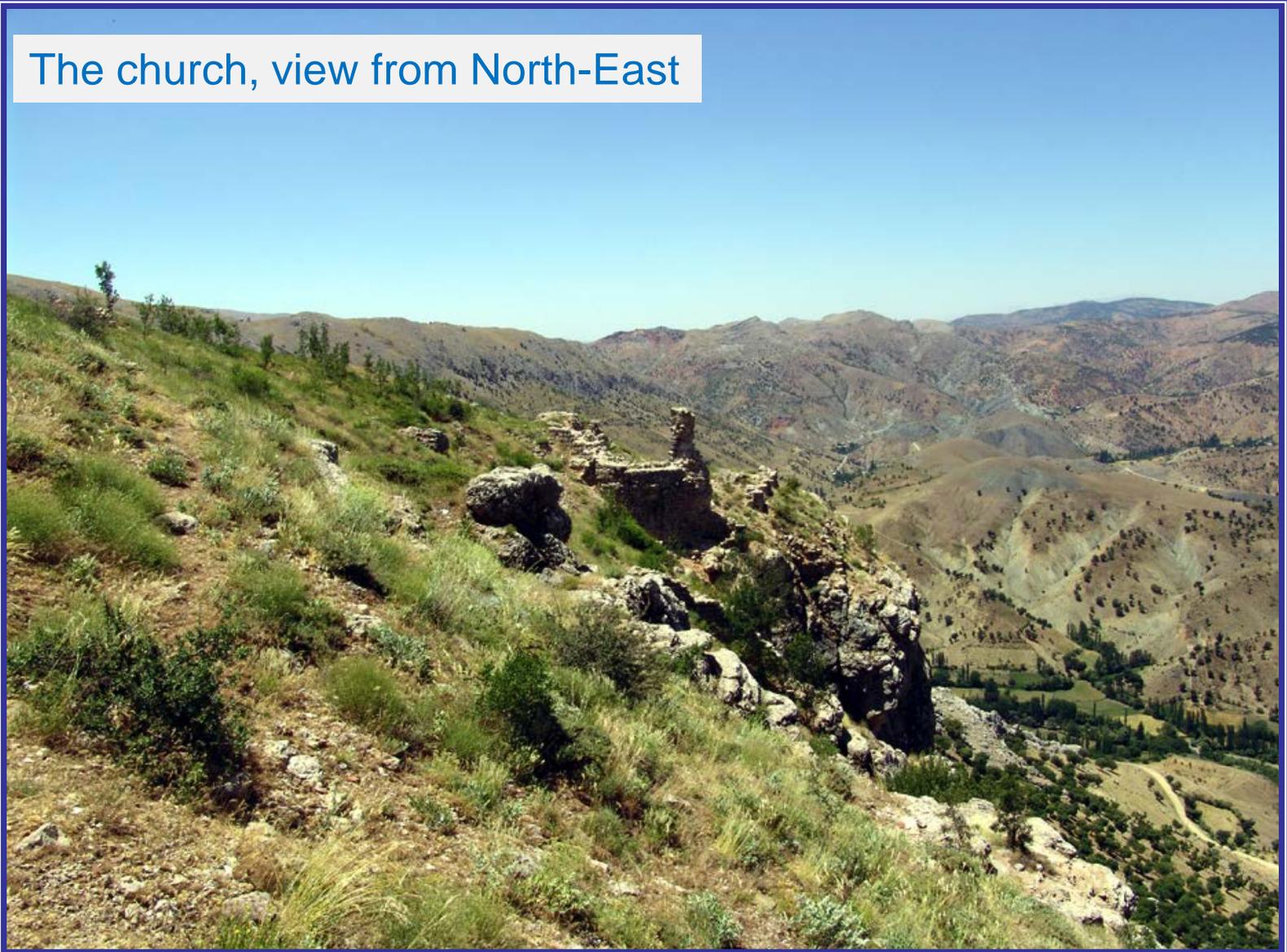
Notched stairway



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The church, view from North-East



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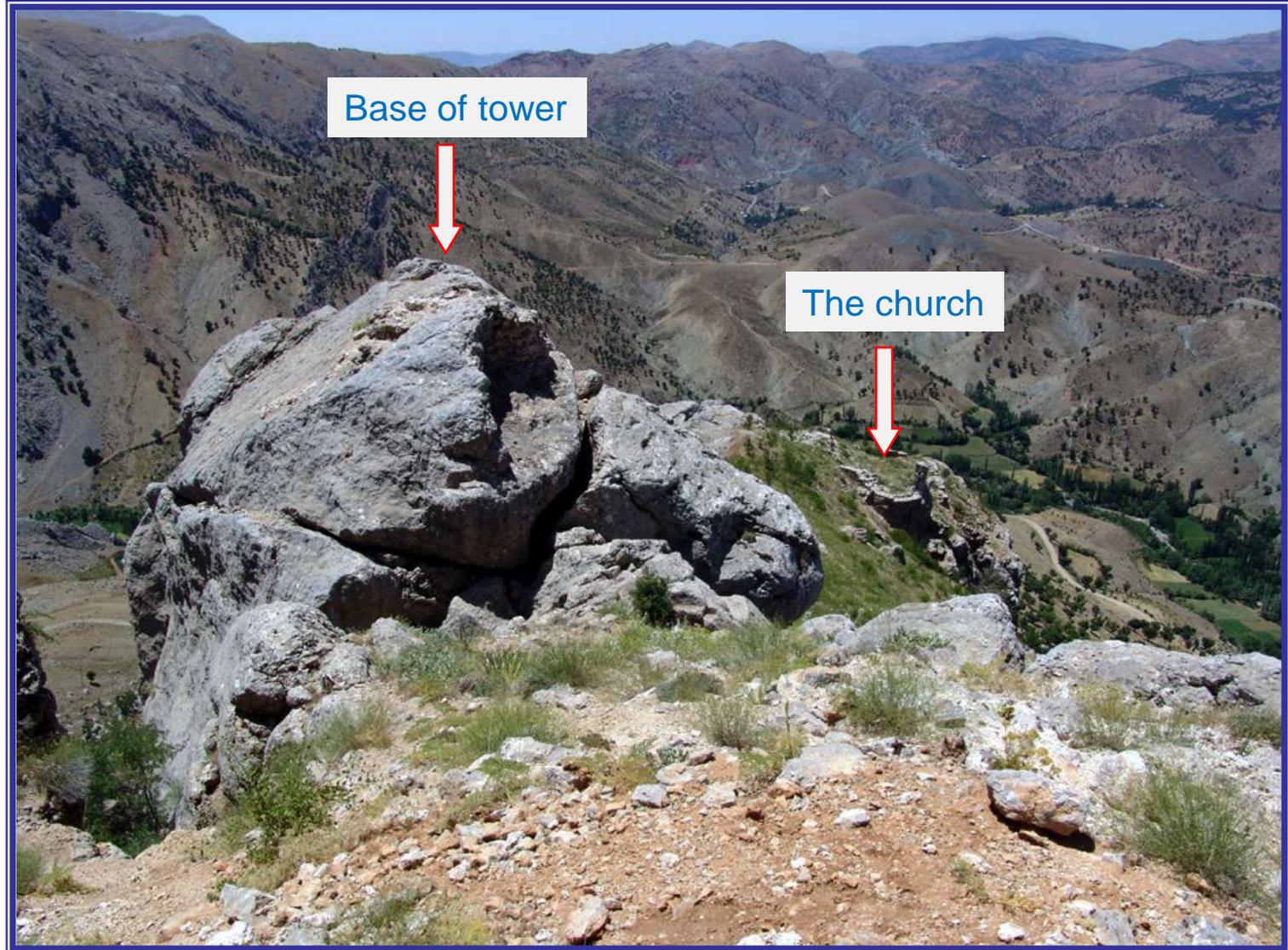
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The bases of the towers, seen from the church



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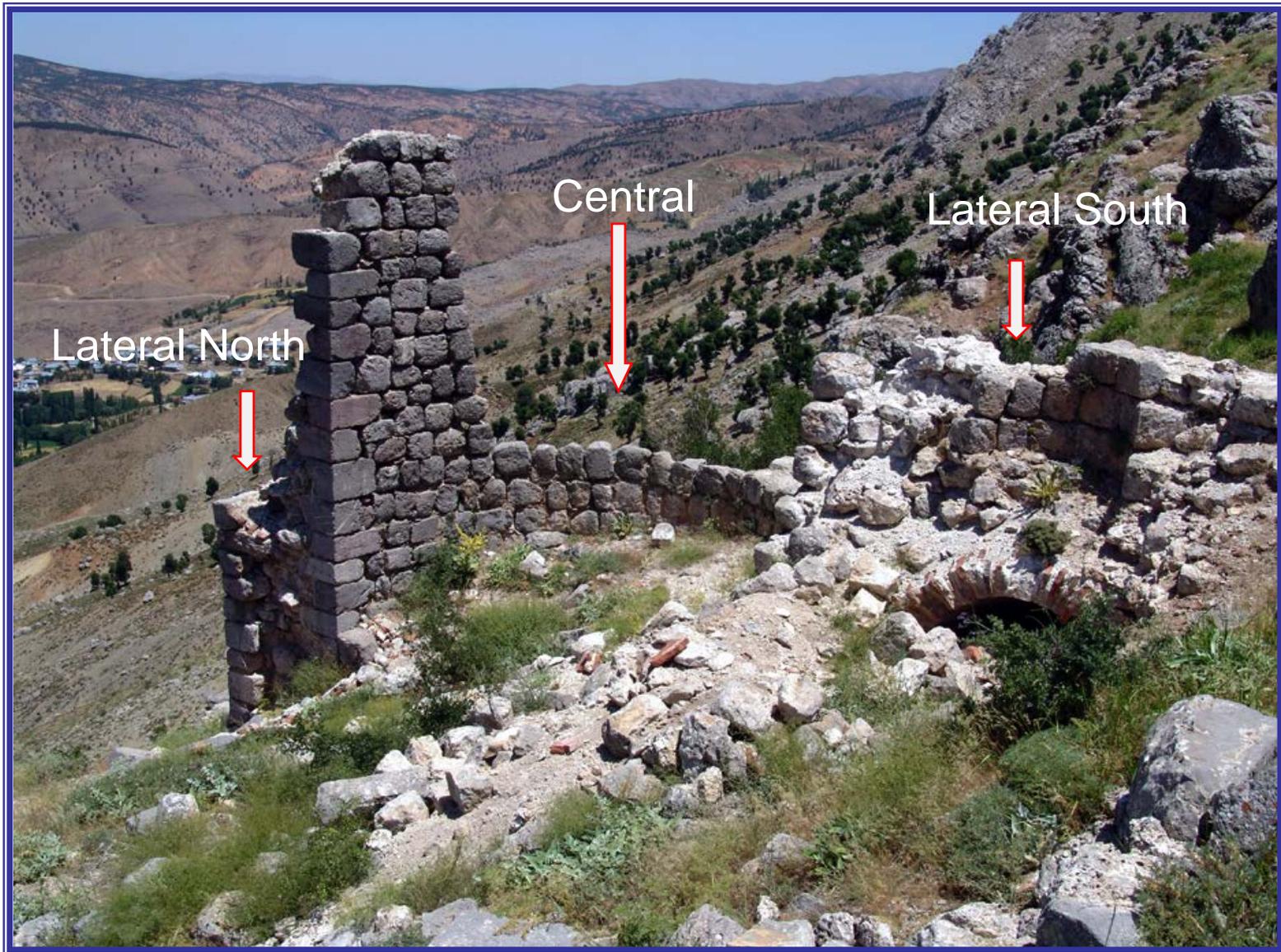
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The three apses of the church



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Tomb of Michael The Syrian ?



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The chevet of the church



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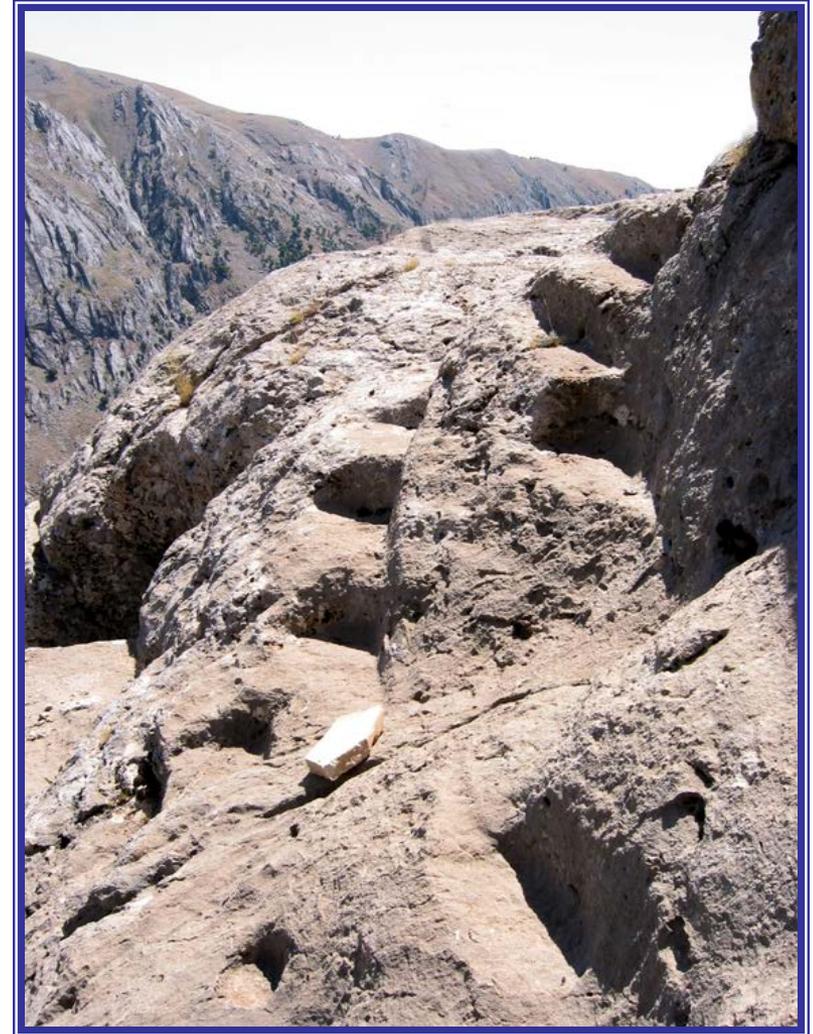
Retaining wall of the parvis of the church



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Notched steps



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Base of the eastern tower



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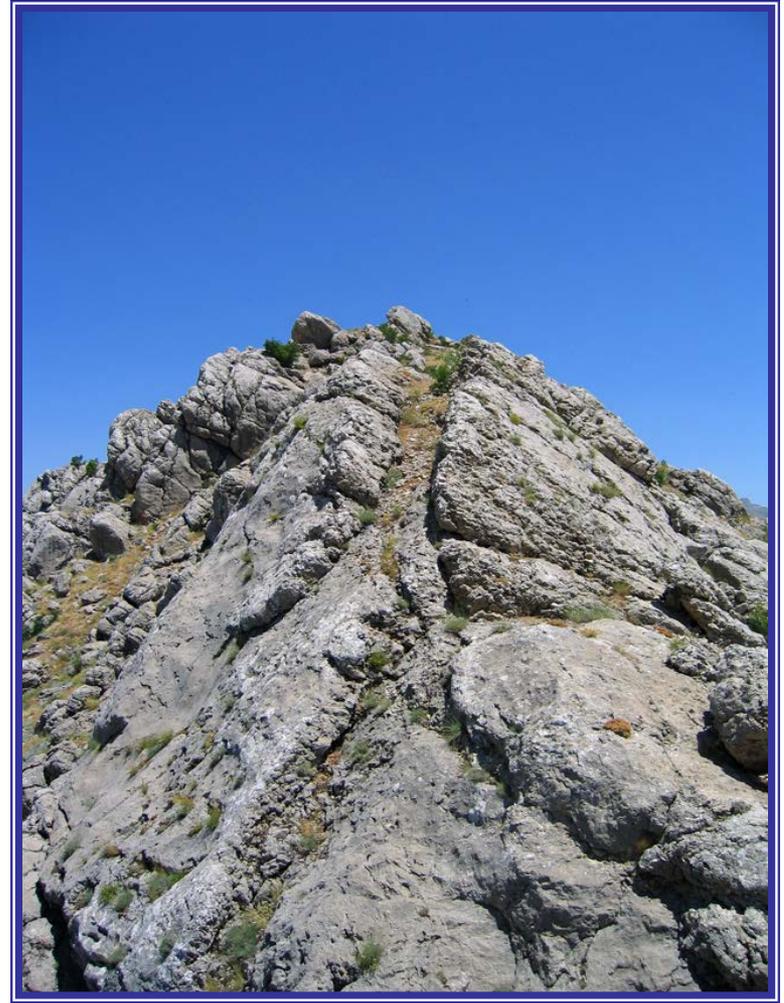
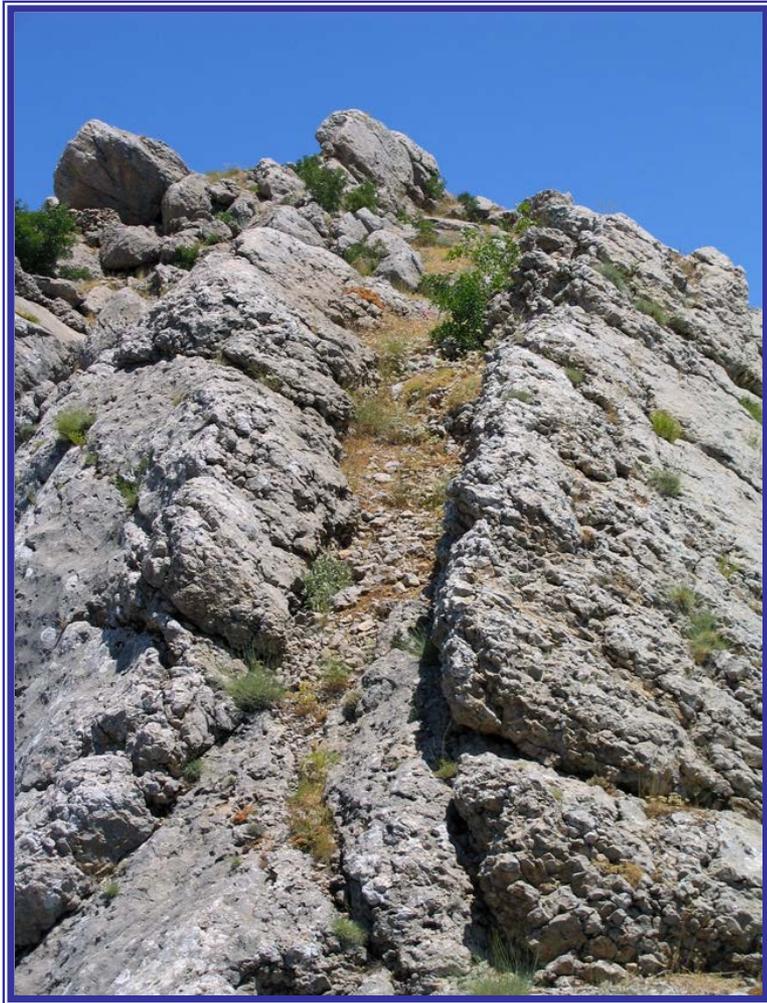


Upper retaining wall in the southern side

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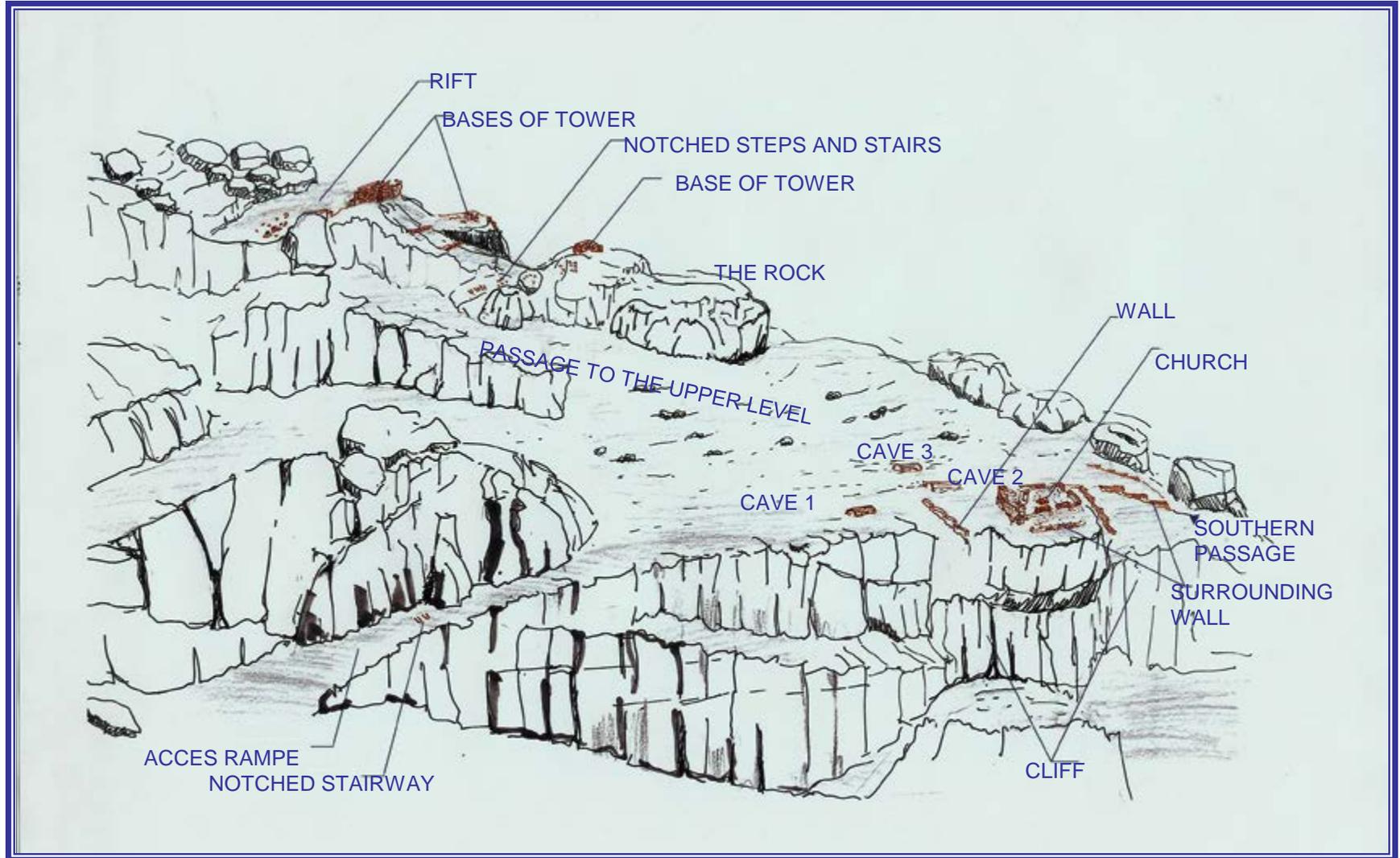
دبر مار بارساوم

Isn't the splited mountain... *the split*, mentioned by Michael The Syrian ?



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ديار وهدى حزام



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بنا وهدى حرم

