CHAPTER 10

KNOTS, THREADS AND MEANING

Liminality and Value in the Carpet Trade of the Istanbul Grand Bazaar

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Tourism stands as one of the main driving forces of Turkey's economy and, among the various domestic destinations on offer, Istanbul – Turkey's largest and most vibrant city – remains one of its most visited. Almost ubiquitously designated and represented as a crossroads between East and West, North and South, for centuries (Ahmad 1993; Secor 2001; Tugal 2008; Yazıcı 2013), advertisements inviting tourists to visit the city often play out Istanbul's many forms of 'in-betweenness'. Images of contrasting lifestyles and of geographical and historical landmarks and landscapes that emphasize its role as a 'bridge', 'crossroads' or 'corridor' take precedence in such adverts. One of the most iconic representations of Istanbul as a geographical and geopolitical 'crossroads' is the Bosphorus Strait. A waterway that cuts through the city, separating the European and Asian continents, the 31 km strait also stands as an important economic and military corridor between the Black Sea region and the Mediterranean. While the Bosphorus stands as a powerful geographical landscape evoking Istanbul as an important geopolitical hub, the Istanbul Grand Bazaar also figures in touristic advertisements as an iconic landmark, evoking the city's historical role as a connecting hub promoting the circulation of goods and ideas through the commercial encounter between travellers and tradesmen since the fifteenth century.

In such advertisements, the most common pictures of the bazaar are panoramic shots emphasizing its immense rooftop, alongside written or voice-over references to the more than three thousand shops distributed along its

sixty-one covered streets. In other equally appealing images, one or more of the Bazaar's twenty-two imposing doors stand side by side with images of its interior. In these takes, the focus is on the network of corridors and passages, the plentifulness of goods and colour and, sometimes, pictures of smiling sellers standing by their shops. Describing the internal area of the bazaar as a 'labyrinth', touristic adverts describe it as an exotic place where visitors may be lured by enticing objects that they can take home if they outsmart the bazaaris' 'mischievous character' in the process of bargaining for lower prices. In many ways, these descriptions of the bazaar bear similarities with the ways in which Istanbul is marketed in advertisements inviting international tourists to the city.

Grounded in over twelve months of ethnographic research conducted at the Istanbul Grand Bazaar between 2017 and 2019, in what follows I explore further aspects of what has been outlined above, extending the understanding of the bazaar beyond the established approaches that emphasize the 'bazaar economy' (Geertz 1978; Fanselow 1990; McMillan 2003). Drawing on the asymmetries that mark the encounters between foreign customers and sellers in the context of the carpet trade, I am concerned to show that the liminal intensity (Wagner 2018) of the Grand Bazaar is central to its economy and to its larger economic role. I will further claim that the negativity that accompanies attitudes to the trade in carpets is a positivity, vital to the appeal of the bazaar and to understanding key processes of value production, which extend beyond issues such as lying, falsity and truth.

Liminality and Asymmetries in the Bazaar

My arrival in the field in January 2017 coincided with one of the most difficult times in the recent history of Turkey. On New Year's Eve the city witnessed a massacre carried out in one of its most upscale nightclubs. This was one of several ISIS-inflicted terrorist attacks that had taken place during the previous year and threatened to continue in the months ahead. Paired with the tensions of the Syrian refugee crisis and with an economy further wounded by instabilities generated by an attempted coup d'état in July 2016, the terrorist attacks had a significant impact on the daily life of the bazaar. With a remarkable reduction in the flow of tourists, the shops were nearly empty when compared to previous years. The relative absence of tourists changed the rhythms of everyday life in the bazaar's streets, generating 'bubbles of idleness', particularly observable in businesses that depend on large-scale revenue, such as the carpet trade. In many ways, this idleness is what enabled my access to these spaces, which are usually occupied by customers carefully entertained by the salesmen's showmanship typical of the process

of carpet/kilim selling. Under the slow pace of business, sellers who might have been inaccessible or unavailable in previous years were, in the early months of my fieldwork, willing to spend some of their time generously engaging with my many questions. One of these sellers was Ahmed, whom I met in the early days of fieldwork.

Ahmed worked as a carpet seller in the Istanbul Grand Bazaar. He proudly explained to me that he had over twenty years of experience as a carpet seller in the bazaar, having started off in the business as an apprentice (*çırak*) at the age of thirteen. Besides learning the basics of weaving and repairing, the main role of the *çırak* is to run errands in the shop, attending to the requests of the other two workers. He then moved on to the position of *yancı*, a support role during the sales, commonly in charge of spreading the carpet in front of customers and folding and piling them back. Only then was he considered ready to move on to the position of 'main seller' (*tezgahtar*) in the shop he worked at when we met. Although the transition to each of these positions is not specifically marked in terms of rite of passage, the relative power each one of these roles yields is acknowledged by fellow workers.

At the time of our meeting in 2017, he was 36 years old and the father of two young children. For him, one of the joys of working in the bazaar was that every day he met new people, from all around the world. Indeed, he had sold rugs to some famous people: Hollywood stars, internationally acclaimed footballers, and powerful politicians. Like many carpet sellers, he displayed their photos in his stall.

Although Ahmed has from time to time sold other wares (e.g. leather goods), his principal occupation is as a carpet salesman (*halıcı*), but not always at the same stall. Over the previous three years, he had worked at eight different stalls in the bazaar. On one occasion, when I visited his shop, he had had a very quiet day, for no customers had come into his premises. But just before he shut up shop, a potential buyer reluctantly accepted Ahmed's invitation to entered the shop. While the customer, an Englishman aged about 60, preferred not to sit down and refused Ahmed's offer of a cup of tea, he did look over the carpets displayed around the walls of the stall. I was introduced to the customer as Ahmed's friend. As the customer was showing interest in a particular carpet, bargaining preliminaries began with the usual exchange of information relating to the carpet's provenance and a contesting and testing of knowledge. However, with little further ado, the customer broke off the encounter and left the shop, but apparently having enjoyed the brief exchange. This, of course, is a feature of bazaar interactions, for it is the performance of this type of exchange that brings enjoyment (for tourists especially) – possibly as much as the actual act of purchasing. Indeed, carpet sellers must work within such a performative exchange, all the

while attempting to turn it into a more serious and committed purchasing encounter.

Ahmed had missed his chance and reacted with mutterings of sarcasm and offensive jokes at the would-be buyer's expense. Ahmed confided that he had tried to capture the Englishman's custom by playing along with the man's display of knowledge, despite the fact that it was largely inaccurate. In other words, Ahmed was complicit in the construction of a lie (or a story) in order to realize a sale. He said as much in his own explanation of his action to me.

> I know it's wrong, and we shouldn't lie. I fear God and I don't like to lie. That carpet, for instance, is probably from Pakistan, but they are now doing it in similar patterns to look like it was made here [Ahmed had colluded with the customer that the carpet was Kurdish in origin]. They have cheaper wool there and they do business with other places, such as India, for weave and dyes . . . not very good quality of course. But if I said this, the customer loses interest. That is why I prefer to tell certain customers that the carpet is of Kurdish origin, for example. If I don't say this to particular customers [especially Germans in Ahmed's opinion] they drop all interest. Other carpet sellers do the same. Even if the carpet comes from China, they will say it is Kurdish, just to close a deal. I have no other choice than to play the game, for I must make a sale for the sake of my family. My son, I believe, might have some of his health difficulties as Allah's punishment for the lies that I tell in this business. But I cannot do otherwise.

The encounter between Ahmed and the tourist from England illustrates one of the many instances where the liminal vitality of the bazaar is at play. In this specific case, I draw attention to the particularities of the asymmetries between the parties involved in the exchange. Ahmed recognizes his own position of 'liminal personae' (Turner 1969) vis-à-vis the values and structures of life beyond the bazaar. Whilst he recognizes his precarity and belonging in the margins of the formal economy beyond the bazaar, within the bazaar walls Ahmed draws on the 'symbolic inversion' (Turner 1974: 83) of social attributes which mark his separation from the rigid hierarchies beyond the bazaar walls. Ahmed also embodies in his performance a confident aura that results from having complied with the demands implied in each of the stages to become a *halıcı*. In other words, as reward for having mastered the informal rules at play within the Bazaar, Ahmed finds himself occupying a position of authority that he might not be able to occupy beyond the bazaar walls. The Englishman, on the other hand, and despite his assumed economic power, finds himself, in his interaction with Ahmed, socially converted into what can be described as a position analogous to that of the neophyte in a rite of passage.

Indeed, in the case above, the tourist did not comply with the rules of a typical sale, where the tourist is made comfortable in a chair, offered tea, and

introduced to the goods of the store, flamboyantly displayed by the seller, alongside lengthy explanations about each exhibited piece. Questions about price are deflected as much as possible by the seller, whose cordiality and recurrent offerings of tea and coffee become, in themselves, both an index of a customer's compliance with the 'ritual' as much as elements of pressure in the course of the sale. In the case at hand, the customer's reluctance to enter the store, followed by his refusal to sit and drink tea, stood as a declaration of unwillingness towards embracing the role of the 'neophyte'. Ultimately, without the customer's compliance, the ritual does not take place, and consequently, the interaction results in an unsuccessful transaction.

This particular interaction also provides an opportunity to reflect on how events situated on a larger spatial and temporal scale find expression in the daily interactions between customers and sellers in the context of the bazaar's carpet trade.

The Bazaar at the Crossroads

As mentioned earlier, my arrival in the field in 2017 coincided with a period of great turmoil both domestically and beyond the borders of Turkey. These events had a significant impact on the economy and in the daily routines within the bazaar. In comparison with previous years, a relatively reduced number of tourists explored the bazaar, and even they were mostly interested in smaller souvenirs and in taking pictures. While my interlocutors have repeatedly made negative remarks about the prospects of the carpet trade remaining relevant for many years to come, they did not entertain the possibility of any radical change taking place, even in the face of the immense hardships the economy was facing at the time. 'Yes, there will be changes in this business' and 'yes, there will be hardships', but, as they remembered from other crises in the past, 'it will pass . . . until the next one reaches us again'.

Indeed, in operation since the fifteenth century, the bazaar demonstrates immense resilience and resourcefulness to absorb the impact of changes within and beyond its walls. By means of concerted mechanisms of interpretation, translation and conversion, survival is attached to alternative ways of managing and dispelling crisis.

Understanding the Sales Pitch

A typical sales pitch starts with the salesman identifying a potential customer among the crowds roaming the streets of the bazaar and passing by the store.

Once a potential customer is identified, the main challenge is to persuade him or her to enter the shop and to listen to the sales pitch, which can lead to the purchase of one or more of the pieces. The customer will be surprised by the language skills of the seller, who will most likely be able to communicate in the native language of their customers with at least enough words to cause them to be curious. They will be invited to come into the shop and will be treated to tea or coffee, depending on their preference. Carpets and kilims will be brought by the assistant of the main seller and opened in front of the customer in a more or less flamboyant fashion. At this point the seller engages customers in storytelling narratives about precedence, quality, and the meaning of patterns and dyes that commonly accompany the sales pitch. This narrative was not always fundamental for the sales but it has become an increasingly important part of the trade, particularly from the late 1990s onwards. Carpet sellers with more than thirty years' experience in the bazaar identify that period as the beginning of changes that resulted in heightened distrust between sellers and buyers in the business. Ali Bey, a highly regarded and well-known *halıcı*, identifies the time of heightened ideological warfare and economic competition around disputes in the Middle East that culminated in the terrorist attack that took place in the United States on the 11th of September 2001 as a turning point in the way of engaging with tourists:

> Well, if we look back, as you ask me to, I would say that it was during the time of the attack in the United States that things started to change. People were afraid to travel and Islamophobia became more visible. Our most educated and richest customers (North America and, in Europe, Germany and France) were no longer around as much. I guess this is where things started to become really difficult; and in order to make the business attractive to tourists from other places who were not so much interested in carpets, the stories started to become less accurate. It was not only the quality of the carpets that changed (referencing the circulation of fake carpets), the quality of tourists changed as well!

It is significant to note that changes in the way of doing business are associated with a time of transnational and domestic economic and political duress, which was combined with a heightened global atmosphere of xenophobia and Islamophobia. According to Ali Bey, changes in the 'quality of goods' as well as in the 'quality of tourists' contributed to the use of deceiving narratives aimed at making goods more appealing to new customers who were not as much interested in tapestry. While his view provides one possible explanation of how an apparent culture of deceit has become associated with the trade in carpets and kilims in the bazaar, it does not explain how a business that draws economic value from 'authenticity' has thrived when that 'authenticity' is not verifiable in the first place.

Addressing this apparent contradiction requires further understanding of how carpets can be simultaneously understood as valuable goods in their own right but, more than that, also as objects mediating relationships between contexts – and ultimately, between people.

Carpets as Mediums of Value

Carpets have long been important items of trade, but carpets from Central Asia only entered Western Europe in the thirteenth century via the Venetian trade with Constantinople (Spooner 2011). The carpets woven by nomadic populations were vital to survival in the harsh environments of the peoples who made them, and had meaning and value in the everyday worlds of their cultural existence.[1] However, when traded into Europe, they acquired new, largely ornamental value (as items of luxury) and were repurposed in their use-value, being displayed on tables and beds, and used as rich floor coverings. Effectively, Central Asia became vital as a zone of their production, and Western Europe as a place of their consumption and a source of carpet-mediated wealth. While many historical changes have complicated the circulation of carpets and rugs up to the present day, the production of carpets and much of their value has to do with the fact that Europe is a major consumer, and thus Europeans are the most important targets for the carpet seller. Also, of course, this underpins the high value of the carpet as a trading item, which is also integral to establishing a context for other items of trade. The Istanbul Grand Bazaar is a major centre for trade because of carpets, and it is a vital site for the attraction of tourists – especially Europeans – who are integral to the economy of Istanbul and the surrounding society.

Many factors affect the value of carpets, including the changing political and cultural constellations involved in their production and passage to the bazaar. Industrialization and contemporary globalization have complicated matters of authenticity and historical provenance, which are crucial to the value of the carpets (a value that is connected to the historical meanings woven into them), somewhat akin to kula shells in the system of Trobriand trade classically discussed by Malinowski (2014). Machine technology and modern dyes have replaced the skills that are key to the worth of a carpet or rug. Carpets and rugs that are claimed as being Kurdish, as Ahmed said, are frequently made in Pakistan or India or China, using techniques that are not 'traditional', so 'old' carpets sold as such might in fact be very new.

Carpet sellers are frequently well aware of such complicating factors (as are many of their customers) but they feel they must play to Western values and build a story into the carpet or rug that fits with expectations or takes ac-

count of differences in orientation as to what counts as authentic, and what might subvert what counts as authentic.

A broader observation that may be made at this point is that the story that can be woven around a particular carpet for sale is often crucial in the determination of its value. The sale is in large measure influenced by the degree to which customers can be captured into the weave of the story of a carpet (by the seller and buyer) in the ritual performance of a negotiated transaction. In J.L. Austin's sense, a deal has the dimensions of a performative utterance (Austin 2013), and thus the value of the carpet lies also in the dynamics of the construction of meaning, interpretation and the exchange of knowledge that goes along with the sale.

The Making of a Liminal Space

Historians writing of the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 report that after the conflict the city bore little resemblance to its glorious past. With its population largely destroyed or dispersed, the city hardly resembled a town, much less the capital of a thriving new empire (Inalcık 1969). Sultan Mehmed II saw trade as the key to restoring the city's glory and as the jewel in the new imperium he was establishing. It was Mehmed's inspiration to make the caravanserai (a resting area, common along the Silk Road, where travellers spent the nights) into a market, the Cevahir Bedesten.[2] Built in 1456, the Cevahir Bedesten provided space for the trade of jewellery and luxury goods, such as textiles, of which carpets were an important item. It was also the bank of Istanbul, functioning as a storage place for precious goods upon payment of a fee (Küçükerman and Mortan 2007). The revenue from the trade in the bedesten was invested in structures that strengthened and regulated civic life in the city. The conversion of the Greek Orthodox Ayasofia into a mosque was funded by revenue from the bedestan. The growth of the Cevahir Bedesten into a major hub for trade correspondingly facilitated the accompanying development of communication and transport networks centred upon making it an engine of the political economy of the Ottoman Empire. The 'relative location' (Green 2014) of the bazaar at an axial point between Europe and Asia added to its significance for global trade and, importantly, to its position as a liminal site of high intensity for the creation and conversion of value.

Notwithstanding the multiplicity of histories, peoples and geopolitical interests dispersed or brought together in the materialities and the narratives that converge in the bazaar, what seems to have persisted throughout time is an aura of 'regimented informality'. While at first glance this expression might sound contradictory, it aims to capture the ways in which the bazaar

has always been able to establish its relevance on the basis of simultaneously subverting or bypassing the rules/regulations of the world beyond its walls in favour of establishing new –albeit tacit – rules suitable to guarantee its own survival. Thus, the significance of the carpet trade in the context of this particular institution is largely grounded in their ambiguous role as both *goods* and *lived experience* – both of which are encompassed in the sales pitch. In other words, while as goods with material value they contribute to the circulation of currencies and profit, carpets sold in the bazaar are also tokens of the liminal experience one endured in the process of purchasing them. In this regard, carpet sellers operate as tricksters whose own liminal status (de)stabilizes (un)certainties and reassigns meaning to the goods they sell and to the experiences attached to the items.

Carpet Sellers as Hermes, the Bazaar as a 'Hermeneutic Chamber'

In the example that opened this discussion, Ahmed explained his struggle to match his customer's expectations regarding a particular item for sale. Through a narrative that partially disclosed the 'truth' of the carpet, he had sought to reweave the item by adding threads of origin and history to it that he imagined would meet his customer's expectations. This process of 'reweaving' the carpet through narrative and performance entails an assessment by the seller of a customer's potential background, which, in turn, could influence the direction a negotiation might take. Therefore, the encounter between a tourist and a carpet seller is also an encounter of assumptions, prejudices, fears and aspirations, all projected and, importantly, processed through the exchanges between them. The fact that a sale takes place while 'looking in the eye', only enhances the complexity of the encounter; apparent concerns or discomforts about the origin or price of an item, for instance, can easily become a proxy for other conflicts and tensions.

I asked why Ahmed valued German customers above English ones (a factor in his negative reaction). He explained as follows:

> It is because we need German customers. They appreciate craftsmanship. They are, alongside [North] American customers, the ones who buy more carpets than any other nationality. Germans like to know the story behind what they are buying, they like the dyes to be natural, and many of them, especially if they are not very young, they may know a lot about it. They like Kurdish carpets, for instance, because they like activism and they like politics . . . so saying a carpet is Kurdish helps.

As we see from this example, in the negotiation of different expectations, carpet sellers stand at a threshold where the customer's aspirations and the

merchant's needs meet. In the face of this encounter, much of the work that enables the achievement of consensus between the parties depends on painstaking meaning-making, which seeks to overcome the knowledge discordancies that may threaten a potential deal.

Reflecting on the act of making sense of the world when meaning and intelligibility are not immediately available, Marion Grau (2014) sets out to revisit the etymological relationship between the Greek god Hermes and the practice of interpretation. Writing about Hermes, the trickster who inhabits roads where travellers and merchants (among others) meet, and who is 'etymologically linked to the sacred practice of interpretation', she explains:

> As a denizen of the crossroads, the figure of Hermes is associated with travel, trade, writing, communication, translation, and other processes of encounter and the negotiation of differences. Among the Greeks, the messenger of the gods is etymologically linked to the sacred practice of interpretation. Hermeneutics manifests with ambivalence, with dramatic potential for mistranslation, shifts of meaning, and outright deception. Hermeneia, the practices and skills associated with interpretation, powerfully ground, bind and shift relationships, meaning, and ways of human interaction with the forces of the universe. Hermeneutics as an interpretive, translational act is a deeply transcultural practice, at the core of communication across difference. (Grau 2014: 79)

The performance that surrounds the sale of carpets highlights both the action of carpet selling and the nature of the activities in the Grand Bazaar itself as an intense place for the contestation, conversion and production of value. In this sense, as a 'betwixt and between' space (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969; Kapferer 1983), I suggest that the bazaar might be described as a 'hermeneutic chamber', a locus of intersecting historical trajectories, cultural differences and crossover. Hermes, the messenger of the gods, is also the god of the market place. He is a trickster whose very ambiguities and tricks are born of the contradictions, dangers and risks encountered at the margins of difference and in the shifts, transmission and translations of value. Hermes embodies the spirit of the market and the performance – the labour or work in fact – of the carpet sellers, who themselves express the dynamic of the bazaar as a whole.

While the livelihood of carpet sellers depends on the sale of their rugs, the rugs themselves derive much of their appeal from features that locate them within a way of life that is long gone and unlikely to be reproduced in contemporary times. In the negotiation of these different expectations, carpet sellers stand at the edge, or at the limen, where conflicting expectations intersect. Much of the work that enables the achievement of consensus between the parties involved in the transaction depends on painstaking

meaning-making, which seeks a resolution of such conflicts in expectation and differences in knowledge or expertise.

While from an outsider's point of view, the exchanges between foreign customers and these highly skilled sellers take on a playful facade – recognized through the banter and bargaining associated with these interactions – a closer look reveals the seller's labour of (re)interpretation and (re)signification that simultaneously prevents/protects the tourist from confronting the dissonances and fragmentations 'woven' into a carpet, and contributes to the bazaar's continuing importance as a place of trade and a major tourist attraction.

When discussing the view of carpet sellers as 'liars', Ali, a collaborator with over thirty years' experience in the business, casts light on the complex position they inhabit, raising yet another aspect of the hermeneutical duty performed by the seller. While he does not dispute that some carpet sellers may not tell 'the truth' about a carpet, he raises the problem of the encounter between handmade and machine made through a very illustrative comment:

> See . . . the problem is that people come to the bazaar and they bargain, and this is done *looking in the eyes*. So they [customers] think we are lying. Now, when they go to Starbucks, because they don't have to bargain there, they think everything they say, all that is written in the package about their coffee, that those things are real. But here, because you have a person in front of you, you feel you cannot trust.

Ahmed's reflections above stand as witness to the burden carried by these sellers who, in contrast to a salesperson in a large retail chain, are perceived by their customers to be the personification of the virtues and flaws of the objects they sell. In this regard, a customer's appraisal of a carpet's 'authenticity' is mediated by their appraisal of the seller's 'honesty' – and vice versa.

Final Remarks

The Grand Bazaar stands both as a place of trade and as a hub that articulates connections and disconnections between multiple histories and places and, by the same token, between the people implicated in these contexts. The vast majority of those visiting the bazaar are tourists who are, in their own right, navigating a liminal experience per excellence (Selänniemi 2003; Bristow 2020; Rink 2020).

Carpet sellers are part and parcel of the tourists' – their customers' – liminal experience. In a similar situation to Hermes, they occupy a 'betwixt and between' space (Turner 1969), mediating a diversity of contradictory and

often conflicting expectations with the aim of resolving them into a sale. Such a mediating role opens the carpet sellers up to the charge of being deceitful at best and liars at worst. The stories they weave in participation with their potential customers become an important part of the value of a carpet. In other words, value is not so much 'what the market may bear' as the story that is woven around the carpet during the sale. That, I suggest, is the experience that the tourist/customer will take home as they are reintegrated into their regular routines. In this regard, overcoming the doubts that surround the 'authenticity' of a carpet, the customer reaches not only a comfortable place where there is enough certainty to go ahead with the purchase, but also the certainty of having had an 'authentic experience'. In this regard, the carpet stands as a token of having navigated the encounter with these very skilled sellers. To conceive of the practice as lying or falsity, or even trickery, is to a large extent to misunderstand the nature of the practice and, perhaps in the wider scheme of things, the cultural embeddedness of the processes of achieving economic value. It is the storytelling of the carpet seller, the skill of the merchant (in discourse with the customer), that determines effective value. Grounded on face-to-face interactions, in a world where business is increasingly mediated by screens, numbers and algorithms, the bazaar carpet seller is left with only his will and skill to manage, through narrative and performance, the widening gap between the customer's expectations of 'authenticity' and the increasingly limited possibilities of delivering it. That is, as with so many marketing or trading transactions, sale and value are achieved through the stories that are told (e.g. advertising), and this receives particular intensity in the art of carpet selling in the Grand Bazaar.

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NOTES

1. Archaeological evidence suggests that carpets were woven and traded by nomadic populations in the Altai mountains of Siberia from at least the fifth century BC (see Rudenko 1970; Spooner 1986; Bohmer and Thompson 1991).
2. Istanbul had three bedestens by that time, but the Cevahir Bedesten was the most important one. Küçükerman explains that 'while the Grand Bazaar of today is an Ottoman work, there existed a large bazaar on the same site in the Byzantine Period' (Küçükerman and Mortan 2007: 130).

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