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TWO SILVER BOOK COVERS WITH BIBLICAL SCENES FROM NORTH-WESTERN CAPPADOCIA (CENTRAL TURKEY)

Ergün LAFLI
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Cuvinte-cheie: argint, tehnica repoussé, coperte de carte, scene biblice, Kırşehir, Kayseri, nord-vestul Capadociei, Turcia, perioada post-bizantină, arheologie post-bizantină
Key words: Silver, repoussé work, book covers, biblical scenes, Kırşehir, Kayseri, northwestern Cappadocia, Turkey, post-Byzantine period, post-Byzantine archaeology

The Kırşehir Museum, located in the Byzantine region of northwestern Cappadocia (**Map 1**), houses two silver book covers decorated with repoussé depictions of biblical scenes (**Figs. 1-2**). The covers are rectangular with a slightly concave spine; they measure 25.5 cm in height and 21.2 cm in width. Dating to the 17th or early 18th century, the two silver mounts were likely crafted in Kayseri (Cappadocia)—a city known for producing numerous comparable pieces (such as the silver-clad Gospel book W.542 in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD)[1]. It is possible that these covers originally belonged to a local Armenian monastery or church in this part of Cappadocia[2].

The earliest surviving metal book covers originate from Early Byzantine Asia Minor and Syria. Four pairs of silver covers featuring repoussé work are known to exist, all dating to the second half of the sixth century. Two of these pairs were apparently found alongside the famous Antioch Chalice in Antioch-on-the-Orontes (northwestern Syria), while the other two were discovered in Lycia (Antalya, southern Turkey).

Similar silver book covers associated with Kayseri [known in the ancient Armenian tradition as Mazaka (Մազաք)] typically originate from a prominent workshop of Armenian silversmiths active in Cappadocia during the 17th and 18th centuries, rather than from the earlier Byzantine era[3]. Although Cappadocia is deeply rooted in Byzantine tradition, these specific silver mounts were created

[1] Cf. Miner (ed.) 1957.
[2] The Centre for Asia Minor Studies in Athens houses a collection of liturgical objects from Orthodox churches and monasteries in Cappadocia, including some from the Kırşehir region; cf. Papadimitriou 2017.
[3] Cf. Merian 2011, 2013, 2018, and 2024. These studies examine examples from the Kayseri school; the author characterizes specific book covers and other metalwork as products of a local workshop in Cappadocia, distinguished from pieces of other origins by specific features.

centuries after the fall of the Byzantine Empire. Rather, they flourished during the Ottoman era under regional Armenian guilds. These handcrafted liturgical objects are distinguished by intricate repoussé work in silver, gold or silver-plated copper and are frequently adorned with enamel or gemstones.

Approximately one-third of the known pieces bear explicit inscriptions identifying the silversmith, the date of manufacture and Kayseri as the place of origin. The artists who worked in this (possibly family-run) workshop remain largely unknown to us; very few pieces can be attributed with certainty to named masters who were rarely mentioned in literary or epigraphic sources. The plaques from Kırşehir in question, however, bear no signature from their creator. Stylistically, they could have been produced in the same workshop—or even by the same silversmith. These examples from Kayseri were designed for religious manuscripts, liturgical Gospel books and church altars, echoing Early Byzantine models such as the book covers of the Sion Treasure from Lycia. Scholarly literature records approximately 100 examples of bookbinding art from Kayseri dating to the 17th and 18th centuries.

This magnificent binding from Kırşehir most likely encased a Gospel manuscript. The front and back covers feature nearly identical designs. The figures are executed in a technique reminiscent of low relief with defined contours. Both scenes adhere to canonical modes of representation and are framed by ornamentation typical of the Kayseri school.

The large silver plaques depict Jesus Christ in a frontal pose—standing and holding a Gospel book—and the Archangel Gabriel on the back; both represent a remarkable fusion of art, history and spirituality. In this depiction Jesus Christ is making a preaching gesture, framed by an arc. The plaque's unadorned background draws the viewer's gaze to the figure and his divine significance.

The Archangel Gabriel plays a pivotal role in God's plan of salvation, particularly through the Annunciation of the Incarnation of the Son of God by the Virgin Mary; his depiction is highly complex, distinguished by elaborate robes, attributes and wings. As an archangel, he is often portrayed with great splendor, serving as a direct representative of divine glory. Depicted with magnificent, outspread wings, St Gabriel on the plaque from Kırşehir holds a staff and an orb adorned with an engraved cross. He is dressed like an imperial dignitary. Detailed patterns on the wings and the hem of his robe complement the figure, evoking the luxurious visual language of Byzantine iconography. A delicate halo encircles the archangel's head; it symbolizes divine holiness and underscores the sacred nature of the figure. Gabriel's hair is rendered in tight, stylized curls—a feature that harkens back to Early Byzantine artistic conventions. While the Treasury of St Mark's in Venice houses famous gold and

enamel icons of the Archangel Gabriel, the post-Byzantine example from Kırşehir sets new standards of craftsmanship.

Few such covers have survived that would allow for precise dating; however, based on their craftsmanship and the style of the drapery, they—like the other examples—appear most likely to date from the 17th or early 18th century.

Discussion

Examination of the two pieces revealed no iconographic or epigraphic elements clearly pointing to an Armenian pictorial tradition; indeed, as previously noted, there are no relevant inscriptions or maker's marks. On the contrary, both the architectural framework (the arch with twisted columns) and the depiction of the figures—Christ shown frontally and the archangel with imperial regalia, holding a staff and an orb surmounted by a cross (globus cruciger)—draw upon visual motifs widely prevalent in Byzantine and post-Byzantine art.

On the other hand, it is well known that the Greek Orthodox communities and monasteries of Cappadocia maintained very close ties with the wealthy Cappadocian diaspora in Constantinople during the Ottoman period. The latter frequently commissioned high-quality ecclesiastical artworks in the capital and donated them to their home regions.

Against this backdrop—and in the absence of signatures or epigraphic evidence—it is impossible to state with certainty whether these pieces originated in a local workshop (specifically an Armenian one) in Kayseri or whether they should be viewed within the broader context of commissions placed by the Cappadocian diaspora for local churches.

One might surmise that the two book covers (assuming they belong together) were associated with one of the region's many churches dedicated to the Archangels (Taxiarchoi)—specifically the important church at Flaviana (modern-day Zincirdere near Talas, approximately 18 km west of Kayseri).

Consequently, I am of the opinion that classifying such objects within the context of Ottoman Cappadocia is a far more complex matter, and that it is best to await the publication of further, hitherto unknown material from Turkish museums.

Acknowledgements

The study of these plaques was conducted based on authorization granted by the Directorate of the Kırşehir Museum on August 21, 2017 (reference number 62252840-152/791). The necessary documentation was

prepared between October 2017 and October 2019. I would like to thank Mr Süleyman Tunç, Deputy Director of the Kırşehir Museum, and Mrs Nuray Kaya Kuşçu, the museum's curator, for this authorization, for their support during and after my research, and for their hospitality in Kırşehir. Map 1 was created by Dr Fatih Hakan Kaya (Dokuz Eylül University, Izmir), to whom I would like to express my sincere thanks. I also wish to express my gratitude to Professor Erwin Pochmarski (Graz), Mr Kleanthis Sidiropoulos (Heraklion) and Professor Hugo Thoen (Ghent / Deinze) for reviewing my manuscript.

ABSTRACT

Two exceptionally well-preserved silver book covers are housed in the Kırşehir Museum in Central Anatolia. These covers likely originate from an Armenian milieu in Cappadocia—possibly the city of Kayseri—and date to the 17th or early 18th century.

FIGURE CAPTIONS AND PHOTO CREDITS

Map 1. Locations mentioned in the text (by F. H. Kaya, 2026).
Figs 1–2. Two silver plaques with biblical depictions, Museum of Kırşehir (photo. E. Laflı, 2018).

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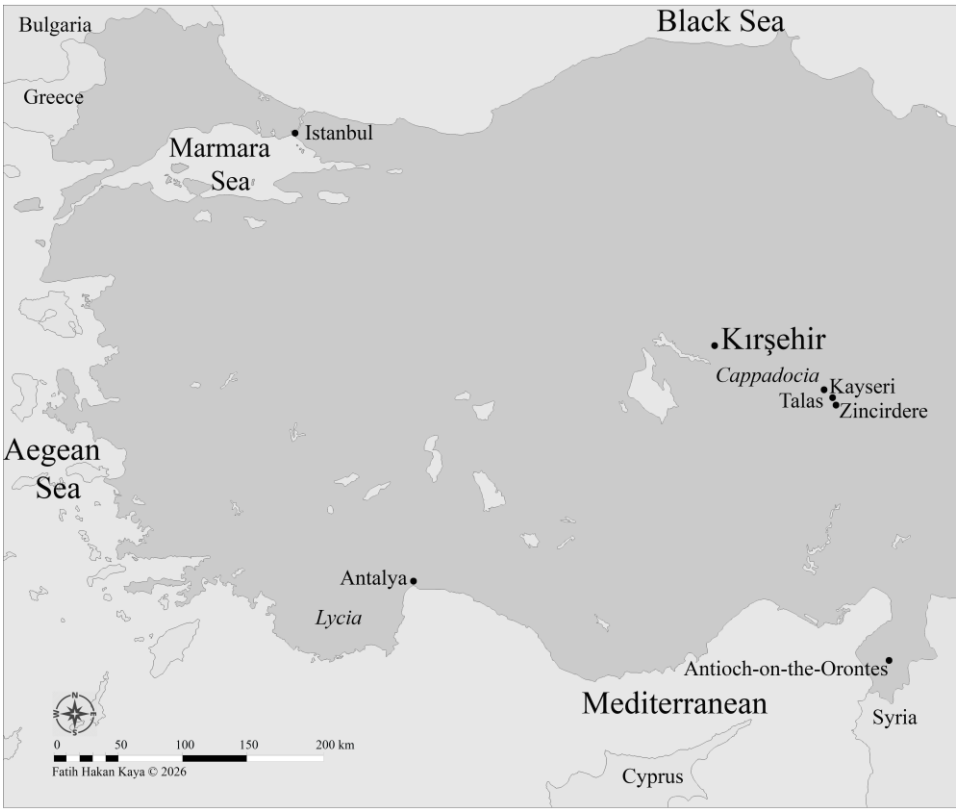

Map 1. Locations mentioned in the text (by F. H. Kaya, 2026).



Fig. 1. The first of the two silver plaques with biblical depictions, Museum of Kırşehir (photo. E. Laflı, 2018).



Fig. 2. The second of the two silver plaques with biblical depictions, Museum of Kırşehir (photo. E. Laflı, 2018).