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THE YAKUPOĞLU KONAK

AN OLD TURKISH HOUSE AT SÜRMENE KASTIL

By

D. WINFIELD, M. Q. SMITH, SELINA BALLANCE and ANN POWELL

OTTOMAN TOWN HOUSES of the later 19th century still exist in considerable numbers throughout the bounds of the Empire, and a number of them have received the attention of students. Remains of houses of an earlier date are much less common, and the development of the country house or *konak* in the years succeeding the age of castles is as yet imperfectly understood.

Although the rich and fertile lands of the Empire of Trebizond had been firmly under Ottoman control since the end of the 15th century, many castles were still inhabited in the 19th century. The majority of the many country houses that remain along the shore of the Black Sea near Trebizond (*Trabzon*) are no more than seventy-five years old. Not far from Trebizond itself are the foundations and slight ruins of a 16th or 17th century *konak*, the proper study of which would entail excavation. The members of the 1958 Walker Trust Expedition had, however, the opportunity of visiting a *konak* older than most of the rest, built at about three miles east of Sürmene in the village of Sürmene Kastil. (Kastil is not a word of Turkish origin, and is perhaps derived from "castello", a memorial of Genoese and Venetian trading interests in the middle ages.) The exact history of the *konak* is unknown, but the villagers agree that it was built by a member of the family of Yakupoğlu (a surname borne by the present occupants, and by many others in the area) about 150 years ago.

This period was one of weak central government, and it is probable that the Sürmene Kastil *konak* was built by the then head of the Yakupoğlu family, who in his position as owner of the lands in the surrounding area would have been the *derebeyi* or virtual ruler of the district. It is therefore of particular interest that the house was designed partly for defensive purposes: it combines some of the advantages of a castle with the comforts of a lordling's house.

The plan of the *konak* shows the four wings projecting from the central square. The three entrances to the building, in the east, west and north walls, are thus outflanked by these wings. Similar projections (*cumba*), generally of the first floor rooms, are a common feature of Ottoman houses. The three pairs of wooden doors are strongly constructed, hanging on fine, boldly designed iron hinges (Pl. XXVc). The walls are built of thirty-six courses of roughly cut rectangular blocks of a local stone. Dressed blocks are used only to form the facings for windows, where a yellow stone is used. Fenestration in the ground floor is limited to a slit window in the south-west wing; there are other slit windows in the first storey. The east and west doors are used by the inhabitants, while the

north door gives cattle access to the dark northern parts of the interior. Local tradition is that the wings were used as prisons. The south-western one is lit by a single slit window, and there are niches in the walls ; it was probably a servant's room. The central part of the ground floor was probably the servants' area. Cooking is done in a spacious fire-place on the south side, which has a long flue leading straight up to the chimney

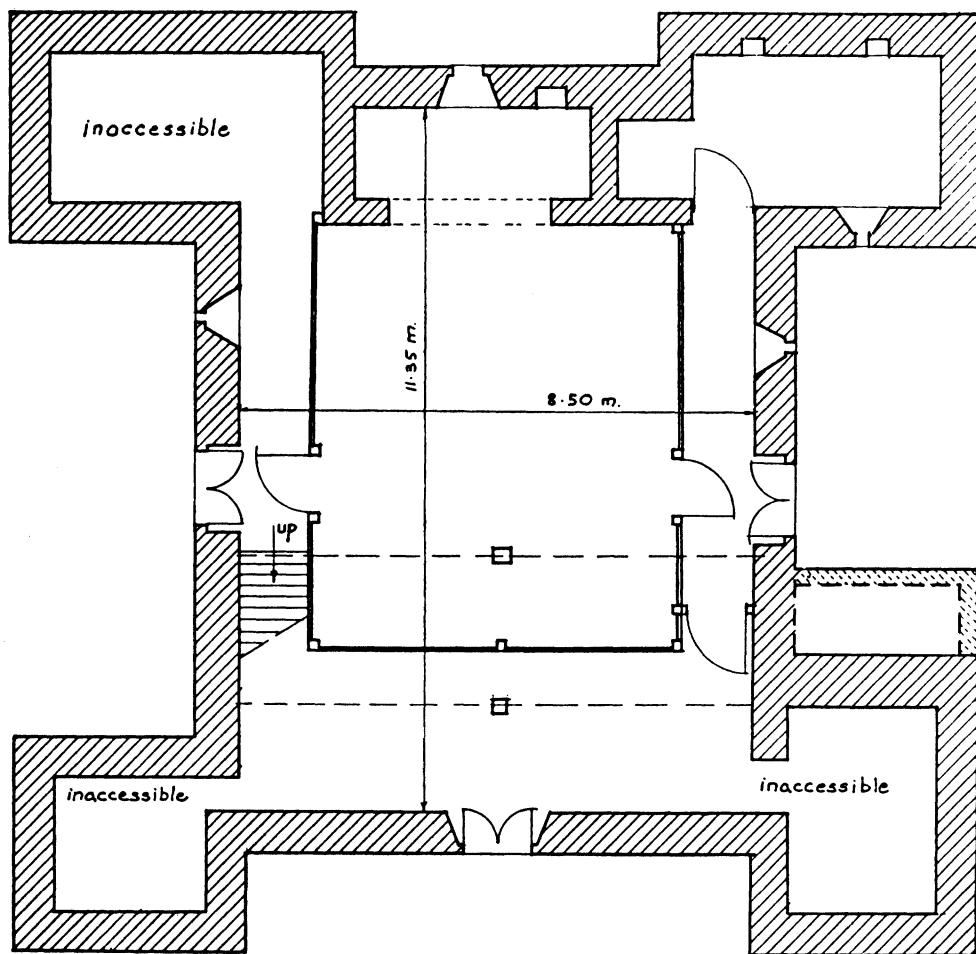


FIG. 1.—Ground Floor Plan.

on the roof (Pl. XXVb). The floor is of earth throughout, and the central space is separated from the corridors to the wings and from the northern parts by walls of planks. To the north of the east door a steep flight of stairs leads to the first floor.

Apart from the stonework on the south side containing the fire-place, chimney and bath, the whole of the interior structure—floors, ceilings and partitions—is of wood. On the north, seaward side, a timber frame construction is used from the first storey upwards. This type of building, called *dolma*, is common throughout Anatolia, the infilling varying



(a) View from seashore, showing the *konak* on left.



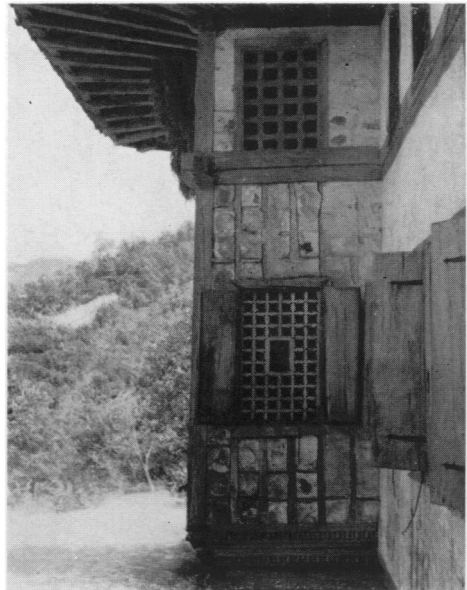
(b) The West front of the house.



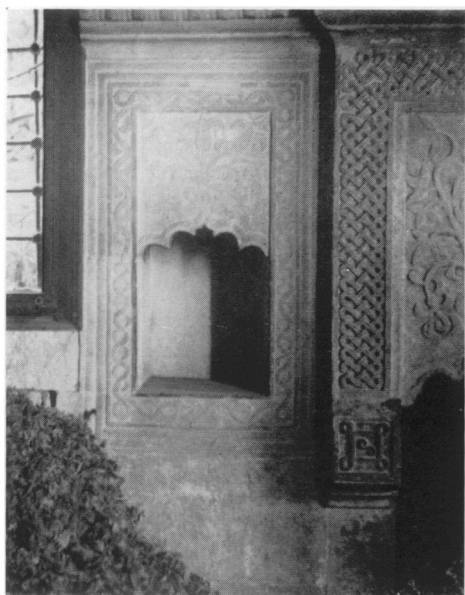
(a) The North front of the house, which faces the sea.



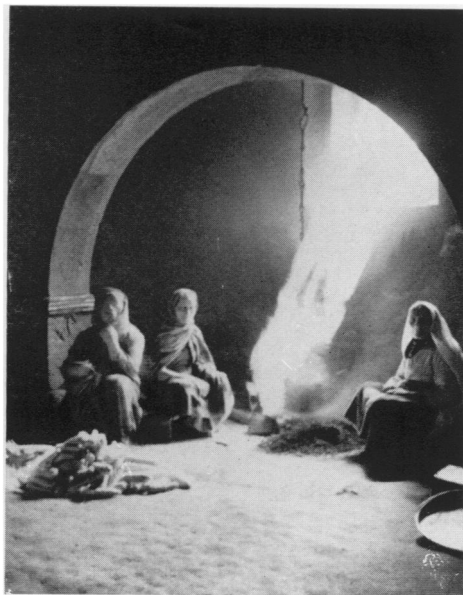
(b) Oblique view showing the overhanging eaves and a modern repair of masonry in the north-west angle.



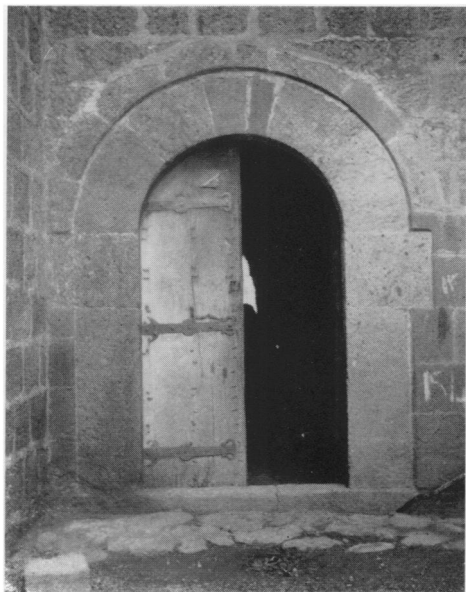
(c) Detail of the exterior, north side, showing construction of the wall and types of shuttering and window bars.



(a) South-east room, first floor : carving in white stone.



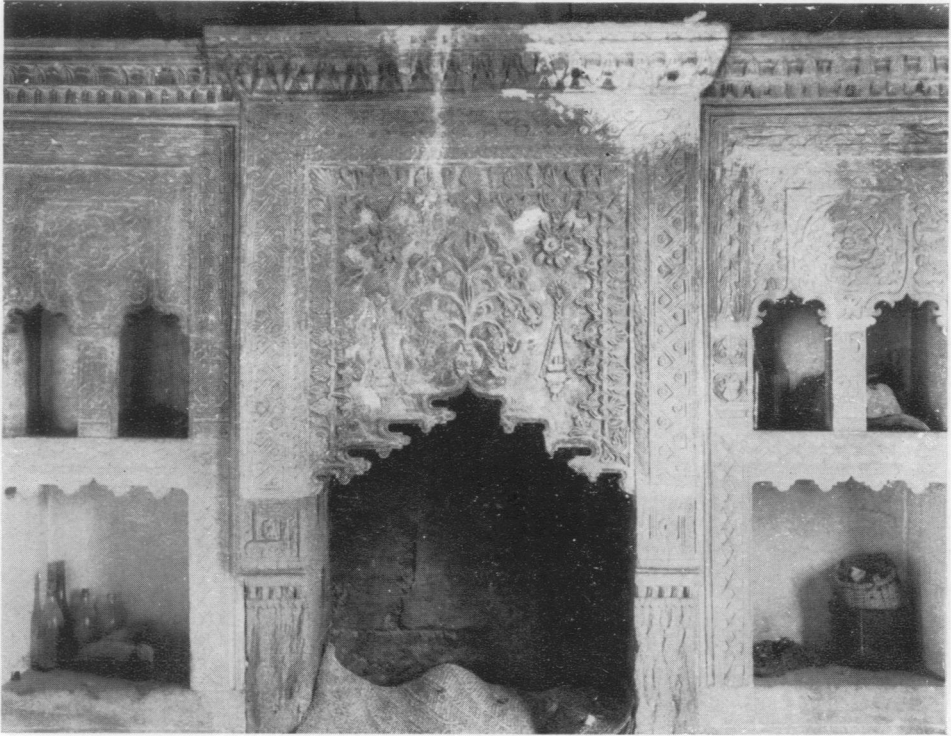
(b) Ground floor : the kitchen fire.



(c) Entrance on west side of *konak*.



(d) Detail of lower panel of door to west central room from the *sofa*.



(a) White stone carving, fireplace, and "lazy holes", north-west room.



(b) Centre of ceiling, north-west room.

according to the material locally available. The Sürmene *konak* has simple square spaces filled with stone, both stone and woodwork being plastered over inside and out except for the main horizontal beams that mark the divisions of the storeys. Other houses in the area have much more complex and intricate woodwork, displaying the capabilities of local carpenters, who are also famed for their present-day skill in the related craft of boat building. The first floor has a slight overhang formed by the double row of timbers, which are carved with a simple, repetitive

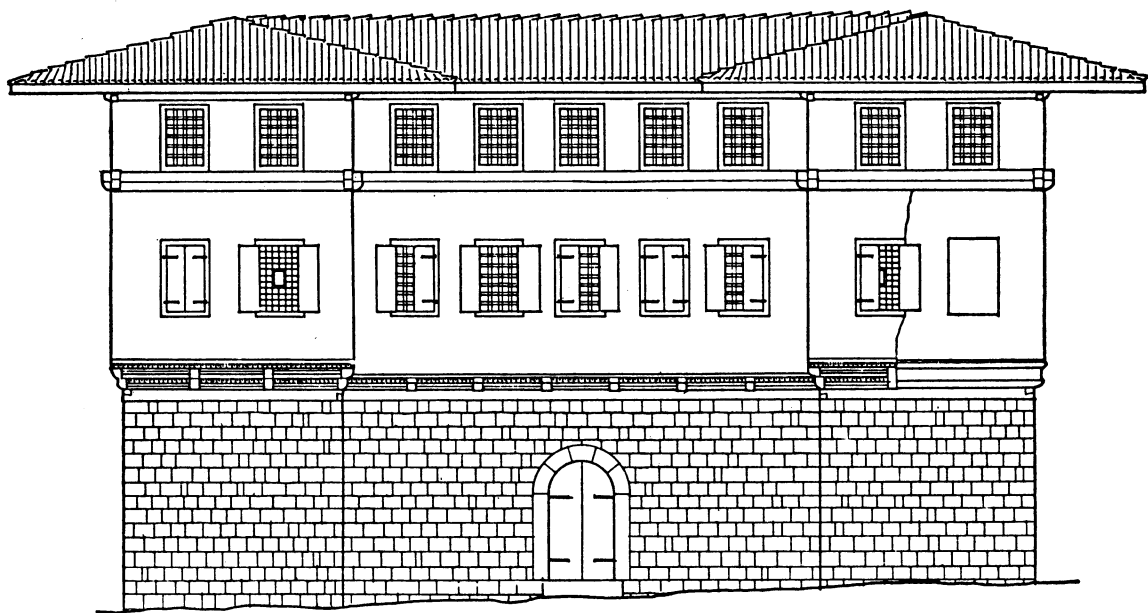


FIG. 2.—North Elevation.

pattern. The roof is a complex timber construction with a large overhang. The tiles are placed on wooden slats fixed to the major beams. Beneath the roof is a considerable attic open to the roofing slats and ventilated by windows with wooden bars. It is reached by ladder through a trapdoor, and is now used for the storage of fodder and fuel for the winter. A thorough survey was interrupted, and the sad state of the timbers demonstrated, by the fall of a member of our party through the ceiling of the room below.

The living quarters are all on the first floor, and it is on these rooms that all the decoration has been lavished ; this part of the house must have been more comfortable to live in than any castle. The largest room is the reception room or *sofa*. The staircase leading into it from below has a decoratively carved newel post, and the well space is separated from the room by a low balustrade. The staircase can be closed by lowering a large trapdoor, so that the whole of the upper part of the house is sealed from the ground floor. The *sofa* is an oblong room with five windows overlooking the sea. They have plain wooden shutters on the

outside ; the window frames are fitted with rounded wooden bars, five horizontals crossed by three verticals, with polyhedrons at each joint, a pattern common throughout the Ottoman Empire for a long period. There is no sign that these windows ever had glass. Below the windows and running the length of the outer wall at a height of about 50 cm. there appears to have been a window seat. The interior walls are of large

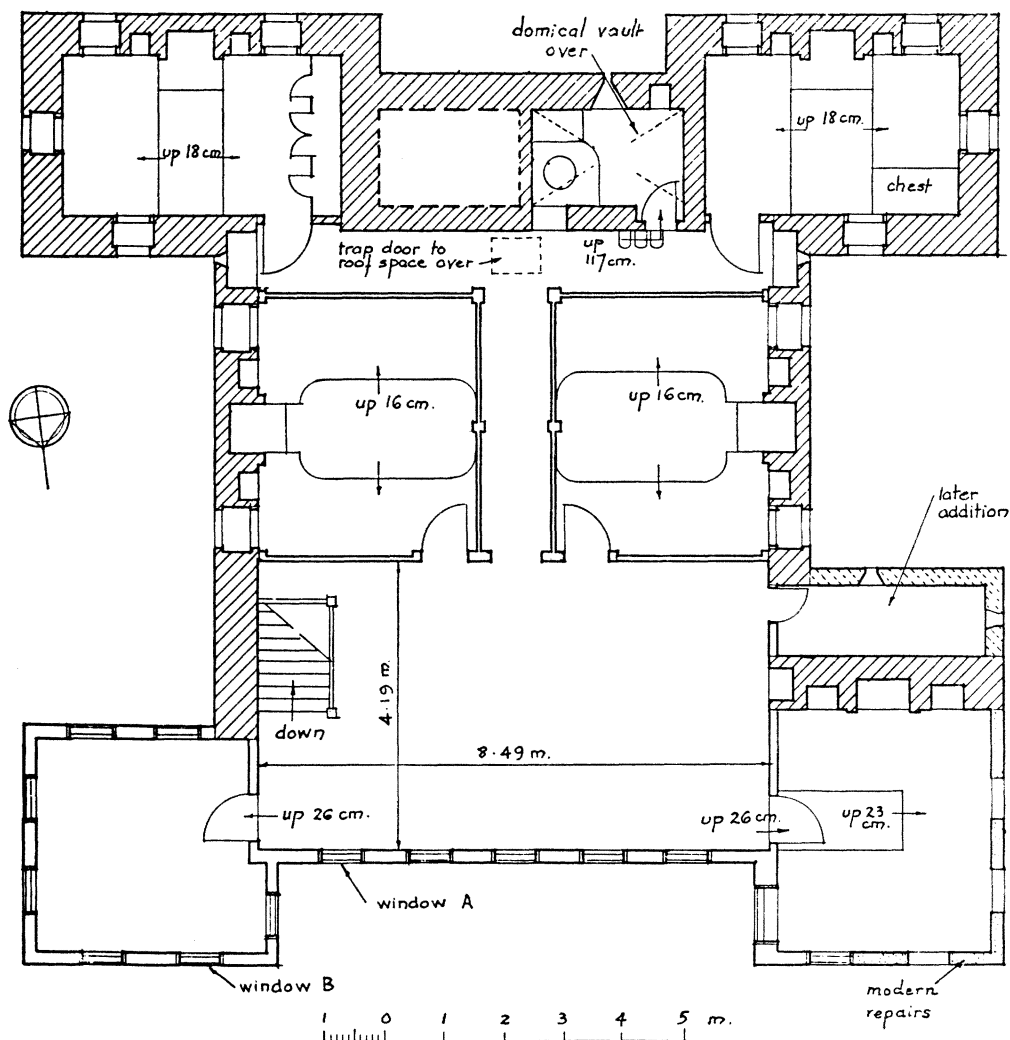


FIG. 3.—First Floor Plan.

chestnut planks laid horizontally, fixed by vertical pilaster strips. The centre of the south wall is taken up by a fine woodwork panel, composed of three round-arched doorways set in a rectangular frame. The central door, which is painted but not elaborately carved, leads to a corridor running through to the rooms on the south side of the house. The side doors are well carved in low relief (Pl. XXVd), and open into the two central rooms which have windows facing east and west respectively. The door to the north-west room also has carved panels. In the west wall of the

sofa are a niche with a stone washbasin and the door with carved panels to the lavatory. A large wooden chest formerly stood against this wall. The floor and ceiling are of chestnut, the latter being decorated with an overall pattern of crossed slats.

There are six other principal rooms on the first floor. As is usual in Turkish houses, there is no indication of function, since each room was used indifferently for eating, sleeping and sitting in. It is likely that the seaward facing rooms on the north side of the house, including the *sofa*, made up the *selamlık* or quarter for the reception of guests and transaction of business. These rooms are the most elaborately decorated, and even in decay have considerable charm. The outer corner of the north-west room has recently been rebuilt with sand and cement blocks, and it is probable that the lavatory next door has been altered. Only one of the original windows of the room survives; it has double wooden shutters outside, heavy wooden bars with saw tooth edges and glass in a separate frame in the interior, an arrangement adopted in the north-east room also. The ceiling is finely carved in a high relief of floral and leaf patterns in a geometric design. The central section revolves, probably to regulate ventilation. This and the north-east room have plastered walls, painted with friezes of stylised flowers in vases. The vases are of different shapes, each about 50 cm. high, and rest on elaborate stands of stylised leaves. In addition, the north-east room has varied fruits painted higher on the walls. The colours used are bluish-green, yellow and red.

Each of the six rooms, except the north-east, has an elaborately carved stone fire-place. The fire-places themselves are made of a yellowish-brown stone, and the surrounds of white. The bases of the chimneys, *ocak yasmağı* or *davlumbaz*, do not swell into conical projections as in many old Turkish houses, but are flat and protrude only slightly into the rooms. The decoration consists of a version of the honeycomb moulding for the cornices (similar to that on the beams forming the cornice below the north front of the first storey), various spiral interlace patterns in the borders, while the major spaces are filled with stylised flowers, frequently the traditional Turkish tulip and rosette patterns, and occasionally hanging lamps as on prayer rugs. The north-western and central rooms have two niches on either side of the fire-place, an open lower niche below one of the same size divided by a central column (Pl. XXVIa). The fire-places in the southern rooms have only a single niche (Pl. XXVa). These niches, called *tenbel deliği* or *takçegöz*, literally "lazy hole", were used for keeping within easy reach such things as pipes and coffee cups. All are close to the floor compared to shelving in European houses, but it must be remembered that the Turkish custom was to recline on cushions. These were placed on the slightly raised platforms round the walls, which leave a depression in the centre of the floor running from the fire-place, except in the north-west room where it runs from the door of the *sofa*. The north-east room has no depression in the floor, but the boards at the centre are placed in the pattern of a square divided into four equal triangles.

The central rooms on the east and west sides of the house have no distinguishing features except for a wooden shelf round the walls at the height of the top of the fire-place. This is supported by decoratively shaped brackets which serve also as pegs. Only one bracket remains in the central west room. This type of shelf was a standard feature in old Turkish houses and is known as a *terek*.

The central corridor leads from the *sofa* to the rooms on the southern, inland side of the house which probably constituted the *harem*. Leading from the corridor, near the south side of the centre of the house, are steps up to a small Turkish bath with a domical vault. The fire to heat the water was stoked from a niche in the corridor. There is a local tradition of torture when the room was used as a prison by the Russians in the First World War. Above the T junction of the corridor is the trapdoor to the attic. At either end of the corridor are stone washbasins set in niches, draining through stone pipes to the exterior of the house. Above each niche is a slit window.

The central and southern rooms have iron bars on the exterior of the windows, and double wooden shutters within. There is no sign that they were glazed. Both southern rooms had a shelf running round two walls. The doors to each room are made of three plain wooden planks set vertically, secured on the inside by horizontal wooden bars at the top and bottom, and on the outside by two wrought iron bars which form the hinges. These are fastened by round-headed iron nails, the large heads of which form a decorative pattern. The door handles are made of circular discs of iron with a central clasp from which hangs the ring. The keyholes are of iron in the shape of tulip flowers. The south-east room still retains a large fitted wooden cupboard, carved in low relief with tulip designs and rope interlaces. This was the bedding and general storage cupboard known as the *yüklük*. It was by using such cupboards and chests that the Turks were able to avoid tying the rooms of their houses to any one function. Mattress, quilt and cushions took the place of bedstead and chairs, and when food was wanted a folding wooden frame, known as a *sofra iskemlesi* was put out, and a large circular tray of copper or brass placed on it to form a table.

The Sürmene Kastil *konak* has many similarities of detail with other old houses throughout the bounds of the Ottoman Empire : the overhanging eaves, window shuttering and bars, the carved ceiling and general arrangement of the rooms, the *dolma* half-timber work can be compared with similar features elsewhere. But there are features which are perhaps peculiar to the district and period. The fire-places are of a type not found outside the area ; Ihsan Nemli Bey has saved an example from his destroyed family *konak* in Trebizond, and a few others exist in other houses in the neighbourhood. The Sürmene Kastil *konak* shows many similarities with Tudor domestic architecture, which also succeeded an age of living in castles. The house is in part designed for defence ; unwelcome visitors could easily be restrained from entering. But the owner lived in relative comfort, in surroundings lavishly decorated with carved

wood and stone, with painted walls and a rich ceiling. The craftsmanship is always competent, and the designs are firm, well articulated and do not degenerate into incoherence. The *konak* was built at the end of an age when fortification was of prime importance, but its comfortable rooms and pleasant windows foreshadow the elegance of the later 19th century many-windowed houses that still exist in great numbers along the coast of the Black Sea. The house as a whole retains a grandeur and masculine majesty not seen in later examples. It is sad that it is in imminent danger of destruction.