

## Bird Shelters in Turkey: Birdhouses and Dovecotes

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Makale Kodu (Article Code): KVFD-2012-6837

### Summary

The present paper was aimed at the description of bird shelters constructed in various regions of the Anatolian peninsula, and based on these findings, at the qualitative assessment of the human - animal bond throughout Turkish history. In Turkish societies, all which have valued animals greatly; birds have been creatures well-loved and believed to bring luck. In particular, birds, including sparrows, swallows, collared doves, pigeons and storks, have been considered to be sacred and have been valued dearly. In Turkish history, starting from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, special shelters were built for birds, sometimes to protect them from danger and sometimes to make use of them. These shelters may be classified under two titles, namely, birdhouses and dovecotes. Following the detailed assessment of several features of bird shelters, including their site and date of construction, and architecture, it was concluded that birdhouses and dovecotes were distinctive structures; the former designed from a zoocentric point of view and the latter an anthropocentric perspective, all which reflect the sociocultural features of the period in which they were built.

**Keywords:** Bird shelters, Birdhouses, Dovecotes

## Türkiye’de Kuş Yuvaları: Kuşevleri ve Güvercinevleri

### Özet

Bu makalede, Anadolu’nun çeşitli yörelerinde bulunan kuş yuvalarının tanıtılması ve bunlardan yola çıkılarak, Türk tarihinde insan-hayvan ilişkisinin niteliğinin ele alınması amaçlanmıştır. Kuşlar, hayvanlara önem veren Türk toplumlarında, çok sevilen ve uğur getirdiğine inanılan canlılardır. Özellikle serçe, kırlangıç, kumru, güvercin ve leylek gibi kuşlar kutsal hayvanlar olarak kabul edilmiş ve bu kuşlara diğerlerine kıyasla daha farklı bir değer verilmiştir. Türk tarihinde, kimi zaman kuşları tehlikelerden korumak, kimi zaman ise onlardan faydalanmak için 13. yüzyıldan başlayarak özel barınaklar yapılmıştır. Bu barınaklar kuşevleri ve güvercinevleri olmak üzere iki başlık altında toplanabilir. Kuş yuvalarının yapıldığı yerler, dönemleri, yapılış şekilleri gibi noktaların ayrıntılı değerlendirilmesinden sonra kuşevlerinin genel olarak hayvanmerkezli, güvercinevlerinin ise insanmerkezli bakış açısıyla tasarlanan özel yapılar oldukları ve yapıldıkları dönemin sosyo-kültürel özelliklerini yansıtan izler taşıdıkları sonucuna ulaşılmıştır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Kuş yuvaları, Kuşevleri, Güvercinevleri

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, birds have always had a privileged status in Turkish societies <sup>1</sup>. Owing to both their privileged status and their being an important part of social and cultural life, both the right to live and the livelihood of birds have been protected by law, as has been the case for other animal species <sup>1-3</sup>. Hence, Turkish history is full of examples of implementing measures aimed at the protection and management of birds <sup>4-7</sup>. In particular, in the Ottoman State, charitable foundations and hospitals were established for the treatment and management of diseased birds, and special constructions and shelters were built for the convenience of birds, that provided them with water for both drinking and bathing <sup>1,4,8-10</sup>.

Man-made shelters built for birds in Turkey can be classified under two titles, namely, birdhouses and dovecotes. Birdhouses are thought to have been built, merely, as a result of the compassion of Turkish people for animals <sup>11</sup>. Birdhouses encompass shelters and model houses built for the sheltering of birds such as sparrows, swallows, pigeons and collared doves <sup>8,12</sup>. The second type of shelters built specifically for birds are dovecotes. These are unique structures, built particularly during the Ottoman period for the regular and systematic collection of pigeon droppings used in agricultural production as a fertilizer, as well as for obtaining meat and eggs for human consumption, excluding the nesting period <sup>11,13-16</sup>.



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## BIRDHOUSES

In the safe corners of the constructions they dwelt and prayed in, Turkish people built small shelters for the birds they held sacred, such as sparrows, swallows, pigeons, and collared doves, and thereby, took these animals under their protection<sup>4</sup>. These small shelters, referred to as birdhouses, were constructed out of the reach of humans and animals (i.e. cats and dogs), along the sun-drenched walls of the north wind-safe facades of constructions, including mainly mosques, madrasahs, little caravanserais and libraries, with an aim to provide shelter for birds, protect them from bad weather conditions, and provide them with a safe environment to raise their nestlings and continue their lineage<sup>12,17</sup>. It is also considered that these structures may have been built to prevent birds from building their nests randomly and soiling the environment<sup>8,17-19</sup>. Birdhouses, which are among the most beautiful designs of manmade structures built for animals, not only symbolize feelings like "compassion" and "love", but also reflect the features of the time period in which they were built and the architectural style of the particular period<sup>18</sup>. There are birdhouses made from marble, brick, stone, tile and mortar, which constitute delicate specimens of stone carving<sup>8,17,20</sup>.

Shelters referred to as birdhouses also encompass the roof spaces of households<sup>7,20,21</sup>. In order to enable the access of birds to such birdhouses, various external openings were made to roof spaces<sup>21</sup>.

Early specimens of birdhouses in Anatolia date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>. Some of these miniature houses, which increased in number, in particular, starting from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, characterized by classical Ottoman architecture; show that birdhouses, although numerically few, were also built prior to the foundation of the Ottoman State<sup>18</sup>. The Şifaiye Madrasah (1217-1218) of Sivas, the Slender Minaret (*İnce Minare*) Madrasah (1260-1265) of Konya and the Kutlu Hatun Tomb (1305) of Kayseri hold the oldest birdhouses known<sup>1,8,9</sup>.

Birdhouses are classified under two groups with respect to their type of construction and architectural composition. Birdhouses included in the first group are rather simple. These are structures composed of one or multiple adjacent openings in the form of a square, rectangle, triangle or any other geometrical shape, carved into the facades of stone-built constructions<sup>4,7,17</sup>. Birdhouses of the Şifaiye Madrasah, Slender Minaret Madrasah and Kutlu Hatun Tomb can be classified under this group. This type of birdhouses are also considered as an indication of the intention of Turkish people to avoid extravagancy and acquire merit<sup>4,20</sup>. As a matter of fact, in Ottoman architecture, buildings constructed in the early period were made of rectangular prism-shaped stones, and in the event of the occurrence of any problems with these stones, openings in the form of various geometrical shapes were carved, enabling the use of these stones as birdhouses. Thereby, by providing

savings in time, labour, loading-transport-unloading costs and stone material, and through the re-use of defected stones, both wastage was avoided, as is stipulated in the religion Islam, and also defected stones were put to good use by being converted into bird shelters<sup>4</sup>.

The second type of birdhouses encompasses more decorative and flamboyant shelters, designed as cells or chambers protruding from the external walls of buildings. These structures are mostly composed of a single compartment, whilst the interior of some of them have been divided into multiple compartments<sup>4</sup>. Birdhouses, all which are unique, have been designed and constructed such that they resemble either single or multi-stored mansions, palaces or waterfront residences<sup>17</sup>. These birdhouses, which also embellish the external appearance of buildings, are found in buildings particularly constructed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4,18</sup>. The second type of birdhouses, which have been claimed by Aksel<sup>20</sup> to replace sculpture and reliefs in Turkish constructions, are found in various Anatolian provinces, yet the most impressive specimens exist in İstanbul. Birdhouses carved into the walls of the Ayazma Mosque (1760-1761), Yeni Valide Mosque (1708-1710), Darphane-i Amire (1727) and Selimiye Mosque (1804) are only a few of these rare specimens<sup>8,9</sup>.

## DOVECOTES

The pigeon has not only been praised in Turkish societies, but has been valued and held sacred in many civilisations, ever since old ages<sup>4,7,22</sup>. Although different opinions exist on the first site of domestication of the pigeon, it is known that this bird species has been domesticated back in very old times and has been used by mankind for different purposes<sup>23</sup>. The pigeon, which was among the animals raised for their meat and manure in ancient Egypt, and among those that were sacrificed for the Gods by the Hittites, following the discovery of its skills of finding direction and flying long distances, as well as its loyalty to its nest, was started to be used in different civilisations for the dissemination of messages<sup>23,24</sup>. In Turkish societies of Central Asia, dating back to the pre-Islamic era, as well as in the Seljuk and Ottoman States, pigeons were raised both for their use in the transfer of messages as well as for their beauty. Although records pertaining to the Ottoman State in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries contain information on pigeon meat being cooked in the court kitchen, it has been reported that the consumption of pigeon meat was not a general habit and that the common public ate pigeon meat only very rarely<sup>23</sup>.

In Anatolia, shelters of various size and varying aesthetic value have been built for pigeons. These shelters, which are called dovecotes when referring to specimens found within the territories of Turkey, are also named as "boranhane", "borhane", "burç" or "güvercinlik" in different regions.

Dovecotes have served for the collection of pigeon droppings, widely used in agriculture, and have also enabled pigeon meat to be presented for human consumption, excluding the nesting period of the species. Therefore, pigeons have been appraised as animals of economic value by local people <sup>14-16,25</sup>.

In the Ottoman State, pigeon droppings were used in agricultural production in Kayseri, in grape vines in the Cappadocia region, and in watermelon production in Diyarbakır and its vicinity <sup>15,16,22</sup>. Apart from its use for the abovementioned purposes, pigeon manure may also be exported. Furthermore, it has been reported that pigeon droppings were used in the production of gunpowder during the Turkish War of Independence <sup>13</sup>. The most beautiful specimens of dovecotes may be seen in Cappadocia, Kayseri and Diyarbakır. When compared to birdhouses, dovecotes are rather large structures <sup>13,15,16,22</sup>. Dovecotes in Turkey are classified under three groups with respect to their architectural style and construction site, namely, Cappadocian Dovecotes, Gesi Dovecotes and Diyarbakır Dovecotes <sup>25</sup>.

### **Cappadocian Dovecotes**

In the Cappadocia region, dovecotes are called “güvercinlik” and the oldest specimens date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Cappadocian Dovecotes are mostly little chambers carved into rocks. However, specimens, which are made of cut stones and resemble houses in appearance, also exist <sup>26</sup>. Moreover, rock-carved chapels characteristic of the Byzantine period, later converted into dovecotes, are also frequently observed in the region <sup>15,26,27</sup>.

In Cappadocia, dovecotes are enclosed spaces designed to prevent the frequent access of humans and constructed out of the reach of children and wild animals. For the convenience of pigeons and to encourage their laying eggs, alcoves were burrowed into the inner walls of the shelters and wooden perches were placed inside the dovecotes. On the other hand, openings were carved into the external walls of the dovecotes to ease the access of the birds to the shelter. The external surfaces of these openings were either coated with lubricant substances or were painted in different colours to attract the birds to the shelters, and in some cases, even to protect them and keep them safe from damage. Generally, different geometrical patterns, figures representative of the typical social life of the region, and plant and animal patterns are observed to have been engraved in dovecotes <sup>26</sup>.

The entrances of dovecotes generally face the eastern or southern part of valleys. Thereby, it was aimed to prevent the birds being harmed from the cold of winter months, and to enable the interior of the dovecotes receiving sunlight <sup>26</sup>.

### **Gesi Dovecotes**

Dovecotes found in the vicinity of the Gesi district

of Kayseri province, so called “burç” are composed of separately designed shelters, claimed to have been built in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century <sup>15,25</sup>. Primarily, these structures were built by the non-muslim residents of the region. However, it is understood that, in the course of time, muslim residents carried on the tradition of building dovecotes <sup>11</sup>. These structures, typical of the Gesi district and its vicinity, are made of two parts, including overland and underground compartments. The underground compartment is a carved chamber of circular shape and a height of 6-7 metres, where the pigeon nests are situated <sup>11,14</sup>. The most distinctive architectural feature of Gesi dovecotes, which differentiates them from other dovecotes, is this underground chamber <sup>25</sup>. The second overland compartment, is a chimney-like structure of a height of 1.5-3 metres, located above the underground chamber, where the pigeons enter the dovecote, and which protects the bird shelter from the harm of vermin <sup>11,14</sup>. This overland compartment serves as some kind of gate that enables the access of pigeons to the shelter. This gate that rises from the ground in the form of a chimney-like structure also enables the lighting and ventilation of the interior chamber. The oblique cut, and thereby, the angulation of cubic masses, situated 1.5-3 metres above the ground level, is aimed at facilitating the entrance of birds into the shelter <sup>15</sup>.

Generally, two types of oblique cuts are observed. The first type of cut is square-shaped in the front and circular in the back, whilst the second type of cut is square-shaped in both the front and the back <sup>13,15,25</sup>.

### **Diyarbakır Dovecotes**

Dovecotes, found in Diyarbakır province and its vicinity, are named as “borhane” or “boranhane”. These dovecotes stand out with their simple form and interior structure designed specifically for pigeons. On the external mud-walls of these structures, openings that serve as points of entrance, facing different directions, exist, at a high level near the roof. The simplest dovecotes with rectangular form are composed of a single compartment. However, dovecotes composed of two, three and five compartments also exist. The interconnection between the multiple compartments are enabled by narrow and very low passages <sup>16</sup>.

The same approach is observed in the shaping and interior design of the dovecotes found in this region. The compartments of the rectangular structure differ only in size. Wooden poles of two different heights, falling within a range of 1.5-2 metres, are arranged within these dovecotes <sup>16</sup>. These wooden poles not only carry the handled basket-shaped pigeon nests, which are made of willow branches and hang from the interior walls, but also increase the resistance of the high mud-walls by connecting them at multiple points <sup>16,22</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

It is reported that birdhouses are structures designed to protect small birds such as sparrows, pigeons and collared doves and to ensure the continuation of their lineage<sup>8,12,17</sup>. In this context, in view of the reflex to "protect" being a consequence, it is clear that the core issue of the discussion is to describe the reasons that led to the protection of birds. Based on previous research, it can be said that the tradition of Turkish societies to protect and feed birds stems from two main approaches. The first and most widely accepted opinion suggests that the tradition has its roots in a zoocentric approach, as a mere expression of mankind's compassion for birds<sup>9,11,13</sup>; whilst the second approach is a belief-motivated anthropocentric perspective, which is aimed at acquiring merit and fulfilling the obligations laid on man by his Creator<sup>4,7,20</sup>. Based on birdhouses being found mostly in special constructions, such as mosques and madrasahs; the use of defected stones for the making of birdhouses, and thereby, the avoidance of wastage; and the intention of man to acquire merit by contributing to the livelihood of birds and their buildings nests, some researchers claim that birdhouses have been built as a result of belief-oriented thoughts<sup>4,7,17</sup>. On the other hand, Göksoy<sup>19</sup> suggested that, in view of birdhouses not being found in some other mosques and madrasahs of the same period, and in fact the existence of these shelters in small caravanserais, libraries and private households, birdhouses have been built merely as a result of the compassion of Turkish people for birds. As a matter of fact, the extensity of wooden birdhouse specimens in Turkish houses, that could not manage to survive to date<sup>7,20,21</sup>, and even if not specifically designed as birdhouses, the eaves, attic and similar parts of Turkish houses being built such that birds may easily have access to the interior, are further evidence in support of the opinions of Göksoy. Furthermore, it would not be false to indicate that this supportive evidence is not strong enough to rule out the opinion suggesting that birdhouses were built as a result of a belief-based approach. Therefore, it would not be correct to explain the construction of birdhouses from a single perspective.

When compared to birdhouses, dovecotes, which were built in ensuing periods in the Anatolian peninsula, are considered to have been built as a consequence of a further third approach. Based on their interior design, it is understood that the main purpose in constructing these shelters was to collect pigeon droppings<sup>14-16,25</sup>. This suggests that the shelters were designed to demonstrate usefulness. Hence, the feeding of the pigeon, which is held sacred in many societies and mainly in Islamic civilisations<sup>4,7,22</sup>, for its eggs and meat is also in favour of this opinion. Although appearing to be contradictory to the general structure of Islamic societies, the consumption of pigeon meat by Turkish people can be attributed to the different cultures that flourished in Anatolia and to the traces of old civilisations that managed to survive in Anatolian societies.

In conclusion, it can be suggested that, in Turkish societies, which valued birds greatly and were very much attentive to them, the much earlier constructed shelters, namely, birdhouses, were generally built in view of a zoocentric approach, whilst dovecotes, which were built in the ensuing periods, were structures designed from an anthropocentric perspective.

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