TRACING LAYERS OF CONTINUITY AND TRANSFORMATION: THE URBAN PALIMPSEST OF AMIDA (DIYARBAKIR) THROUGH ITS CITY WALLS AND SPOLIA PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Diyarbakır, historically known as Amida, embodies a rich urban and architectural heritage shaped by centuries of transformation. This study examines the city's layered history through the lens of its city walls, exploring their expansion phases as a localized manifestation of the urban palimpsest phenomenon. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical narratives and field surveys, the research highlights the strategic role of spolia in architectural adaptation and continuity, particularly during late antiquity in the context of recurring Sassanid sieges. In light of reconsidered primary sources, the study further investigates the dynamic processes of fortification and reuse. It ultimately proposes a hypothesis on a lost monument within Amida's religious landscape, contributing to a deeper understanding of the city's evolving built environment.

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FORMA CIVITATIS: International journal of urban and territorial morphological studies (IJUTMS), Vol. 4, N. 1, 2024

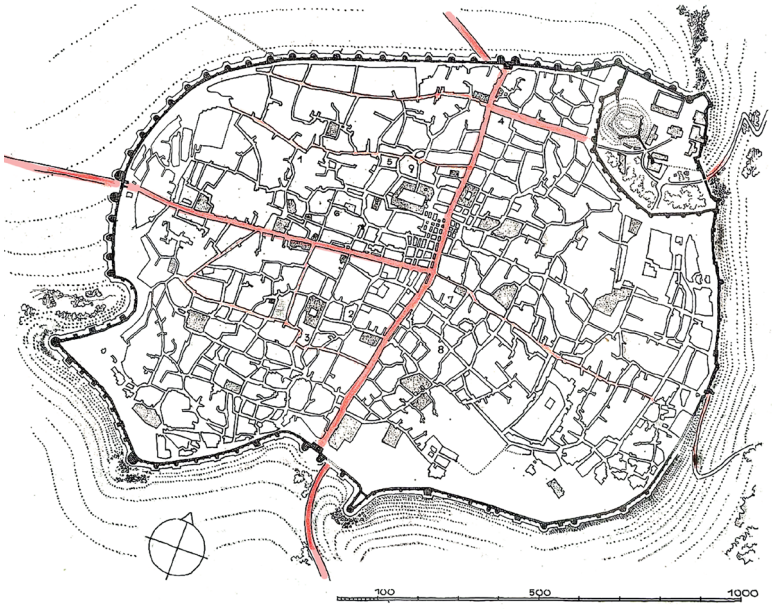


Figure 1. Walled city of Diyarbakır, layout plan. Source: SALT Research, digitally enhanced by Martin Ebert.

Introduction

Diyarbakır, located in southeastern Turkey on the northern banks of the Tigris River, occupies a strategic position in the fertile Mesopotamian basin, often regarded as the cradle of civilization. This location has made the city a historic crossroads for trade, migration, and cultural exchange, shaping its layered urban identity. Continuously inhabited since antiquity, Diyarbakır—known as Amida in ancient times—has witnessed the rise and fall of numerous civilizations, leaving a profound imprint on its urban fabric. The city's iconic basalt fortifications, the Diyarbakır City Walls, are among the largest and best-preserved ancient walls globally and are recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Historically a cultural and economic hub in Upper Mesopotamia, Diyarbakır has blended influences from Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the Levant, reflected in its historic core, Suriçi. This walled city preserves its medieval street layout and features mosques, churches, caravanserais, and traditional courtyard houses, encapsulating its multilayered heritage (UNESCO, 2015).

Amida was among the largest Byzantine strongholds on the Persian frontier. While the dating of its fortifications has been debated, they are often attributed to Constantius II and Justinianus I, reflecting two major construction phases between the 4th and 6th centuries in response to persistent Sassanid attacks. Inscriptions in Latin and Greek, along with stylistic features, support this attribution. The city walls, though modified over time, retain elements of their original structure. Spanning 5.5 km, they include a 4.5 m wide and 8–12 m high main wall, complemented by an outer wall 1.8 m

thick and 2 m high, featuring galleries for troop deployment. Towers, approximately 15 m in diameter and projecting 12 m outward, are interspersed along the walls, supported by solid buttresses. Four monumental gateways, with triple passages flanked by U-shaped towers, enhance the fortifications. The walls reflect a Hellenistic architectural tradition, utilizing elaborate ashlar masonry. Stone dominates as the primary material, appearing in mortared rubble cores and finely worked facades, while brick use is limited to vaults in cisterns and towers. Large U-shaped towers, spaced 40 m apart, alternate with rectangular buttresses over 2 m wide, with smaller towers and buttresses arranged on the southern side. This design optimized defensive capabilities, combining positions for archers and ballistae, typical of earlier fortification strategies. Diyarbakır's fortifications remained the city's central defensive element also under Arab and Turkish rule from the 7th century onward, meeting its vital defense needs throughout history, through constant repairs and improvements (fig. 1) (Kontogiannis, 2022, pp. 27, 74, 77–81).

Diyarbakır's urban fabric presents a complex palimpsest of historical layers, a phenomenon well-documented in the scholarly literature. Archaeological excavations beneath the 11th-century Grand Mosque have uncovered monumental remains of Roman and Byzantine public buildings, revealing the city's deep stratification (Halifeoğlu and Assénat, 2021). The Grand Mosque itself, traditionally believed to have replaced the Early Byzantine cathedral dedicated to St. Thomas, exemplifies this continuity through its extensive use of spolia, primarily dating from the end of Late Antiquity (Keser-Kayaalp, 2018). Beyond this prominent site, numerous other churches of Diyarbakır are recorded in primary sources. While some remain in active use, others survive in various states of ruin, and a significant number have been subsumed beneath the modern urban fabric, their presence traceable only through archival and archaeological evidence (Tuncer, 2002).

Through a meticulous analysis of primary sources in conjunction with architectural and archaeological evidence, Gabriel (1940, pp. 177–181) successfully reconstructed the refoundation of Amida as a fortified provincial capital under Constantius II. He further argued that its expansion—effectively doubling its size—was undertaken during the reigns of Jovianus and Valens in the 4th century, followed by an almost complete renewal under Justinianus I in the 6th century (fig. 2). This article reexamines some of the primary sources previously cited by Gabriel to reassess aspects of this reconstruction. In contrast, Parla (2005) challenged Gabriel's multi-phase hypothesis, advocating instead for a single-phase fortification

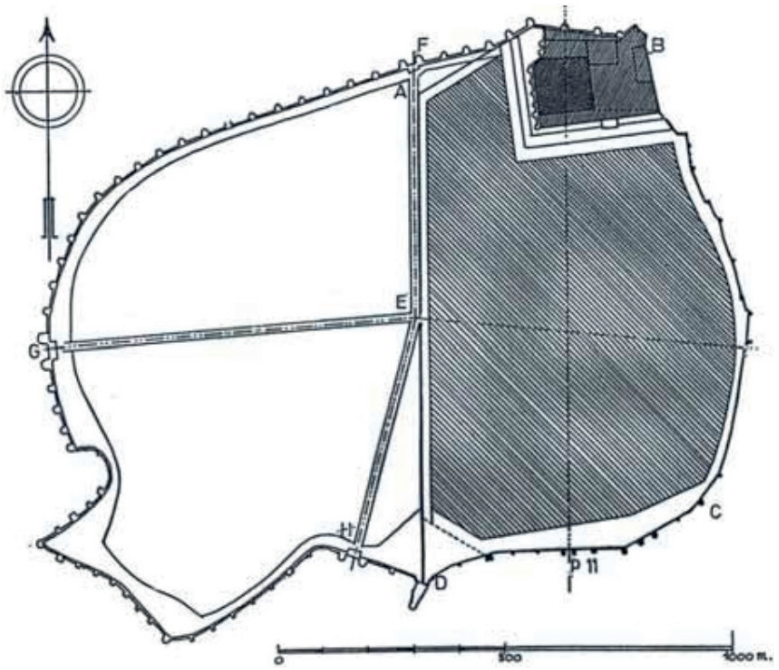


Figure 2. Reconstruction of Amida by Gabriel. Source: Gabriel, 1940, p. 180.

project under Constantius II. More recently, Crow (2007) reaffirmed Gabriel's interpretation of the 4th-century defensive works, distinguishing between two distinct construction phases. He further argued that these fortifications were both repaired and elevated in the early 6th century under Anastasius I, while dismissing Justinianus I's supposed interventions—referenced by Prokopios—as a myth.

Historical context:
Enhancing the defenses of a vulnerable city

According to the 6th-century historian Ioannes Malalas, Traianus (r. 98–117) elevated Amida to the status of a metropolis, appointed a governor, and founded the Province of Mesopotamia after separating it from the Province of Osroene (Malalas, 1986, p. 145). After the accounts of Ammianus Marcellinus (4th century), the Chronicle of Edessa (mid-6th c.), Jacob of Edessa (7th–8th c.), the Zuqnin Chronicle (also known as the Chronicle of Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre) (late 8th c.) and Michael the Syrian (12th c.), it can be said that Amida, a small provincial capital by the 2nd century, underwent two major reconstruction and enlargement phases in the 4th century, including its fortification. The first, in 330/331, occurred during the reign of Constantinus I (r. 306–337), likely overseen by Constantius II as caesar (r. 327–337). The second, in 348/349, took place under Constantius II as emperor (r. 337–361), highlighting his influence on Amida's urban and military development (Cowper, 1865, p. 32; Brooks, 1898, p. 311; Chabot, 1899, p. 267; Marcellinus, 1935, p. 462–465; Harrak, 2017, pp. 262, 270).

The soldier-historian Ammianus Marcellinus, writing as a contemporary eyewitness of the Siege of Amida (359) in the Roman-Sassanid Wars of 337–361, first provides a vivid description of the city's transformation: Amida was originally a modest settlement, but Constantius II, while still serving as caesar, undertook extensive fortifications to provide a secure refuge for the surrounding populations. He enclosed the city with robust walls and towers, established an armory equipped with mural artillery (ballista), and transformed Amida into a formidable stronghold capable of deterring enemy incursions. The city's garrison consisted of Legio V Parthica, supported by a contingent of local cavalry (Marcellinus, 1935, pp. 462–465).

According to the lengthy tactical account of Marcellinus about the siege of 359, Amida's defenses, which could shelter at least 20,000 people, consisted of a single circuit of walls that were exposed to direct assaults, with minimal protection from a shallow ditch. The Sassanids launched offensives using heavily armored troops with war elephants, siege towers armed with ballistae, and scaling ladders, but the defenders successfully set them ablaze. Undeterred, the Sassanids constructed two massive mounds against the walls, prompting the Byzantines to build counter-mounds within the city. However, these defensive measures eventually gave way under sustained pressure. The siege culminated as the area between the city walls and the mounds was leveled, creating a direct path for the attackers and enabling the usage of a battering ram that destroyed a newly elevated, unsettled part of the wall against the siege mound, ultimately leading to the city's catastrophic fall (Marcellinus, 1935, pp. 470–511).

Although Amida was quickly restored following the Sassanid tactical withdrawal, it was reportedly in ruins by the time of Julianus (r. 361–363) (Marcellinus, 1940, pp. 194–195). The subsequent peace negotiations resulted in the cession of a strategic neighboring province, including its metropolis, Nisibis, to the Sassanids. As reported by Malalas, the Zuqnin Chronicle, and the 7th-century Chronicon Paschale, Jovianus (r. 363–364) undertook significant fortification efforts in Amida in 363. The emperor extended the city walls of Amida westward to encompass a nearby village situated beyond the preexisting urban boundary. This newly fortified area served as a refuge for emigrants from the surrendered province, including those displaced from Nisibis (Malalas, 1986, p. 183; Whitby and Whitby, 1989, p. 43; Harrak, 2017, p. 278).

The Siege of Amida (502–503) during the Byzantine-Sassanid War of 502–506 provides significant insights into the city's defenses and subsequent military enhancements under An-

astasius I (r. 491–518). Sources depict Amida as once again defended by a single circuit of strong walls, which, while formidable, remained approachable and open to direct assaults, echoing the conditions observed during the siege of 359. Despite these drawbacks, Malalas highlights Amida's strategic significance as the strongly fortified metropolis of Mesopotamia at that time (Malalas, 1986, pp. 223–224, 282).

The 6th-century Chronicle of Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor, the 6th-century historian Prokopios, and the third part of the Zuqnin Chronicle (or Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite) detail the siege, marked by relentless assaults and inventive countermeasures: Despite employing battering rams, the Sassanids were unable to penetrate or destabilize the city walls. Then, they constructed a massive mound to eliminate the city walls, but the defenders undermined it, causing its collapse. Undeterred, the Sassanids rebuilt the mound with reinforced materials and shielded their laborers using a water-soaked thick tent to protect against arrows and fire, which the defenders destroyed with a large stone-hurling engine. Despite these setbacks, a critical lapse in defense led to the city's downfall. A Sassanid soldier discovered an inadequately concealed underground passage near a tower, allowing a small force to infiltrate the city and catch the defenders off guard. Exploiting this breach, the Sassanids eventually breached the city walls by using ladders and a series of towers to ascend them, rather than demolishing the structures, which had proven resilient against advanced siege tactics. Subsequent Byzantine attempts to reclaim the city involved constructing large siege towers, deploying siege engines, and mining beneath the walls, but none of these strategies succeeded (Hamilton and Brooks, 1899, pp. 153–154, 157–158, 160; Dewing, 1914, pp. 52–57, 68–69, 74–77; Harrak, 2017, pp. 404–412, 426, 428, 436).

The Chronicle of Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor further notes that following the siege, the city was ransomed by the Byzantines after a truce in 505. Once peace was restored, Amida was repopulated and underwent significant restoration, including enhancements to its walls, with new construction added to bolster its defenses (Hamilton and Brooks, 1899, p. 163). Likewise, the 6th-century historian Evagrius Scholasticus provides a complementary account, describing Amida as a strong city of Mesopotamia. Following its recapture by the Sassanids, Anastasius I undertook substantial renewal (ἀνενεώσατο) efforts, expending considerable resources to restore the city to its former strength and significance (Scholasticus, 2000, p. 181).

Afterwards, amid continued clashes with the Sassanids and extensive fortification efforts across Mesopotamia, as Prokopios recounts once again, Justinianus I (r. 527–565) undertook significant defensive measures to secure the region. Both the primary wall (τεῖχος) and the outworks, namely the fore-wall (προτείχισμα), of the city of Amida, which had been constructed long before and had deteriorated with age, were replaced by new structures. These efforts not only restored the city's fortifications but also ensured its safety against future threats (Dewing, 1971, pp. 122–125).

The sieges of 359 and 502–503 exposed the vulnerabilities of Amida's defenses, which seemingly relied on a single wall that was highly susceptible to direct siege tactics such as battering rams, ladders, wooden towers, and earthen mounds. Following the Sassanid withdrawal in 505, Emperor Anastasius I initiated significant reconstruction efforts, likely incorporating preventive measures against these threats. As implied by the Chronicle of Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor and Evagrius Scholasticus, these improvements presumably included the addition of a fore-wall and a deeper moat to enhance the city's defenses. Such features, common in late antique fortifications, were first explicitly referenced by Prokopios in the mid-6th century. During the reign of Justinianus I, the city walls had reportedly deteriorated, prompting his restoration efforts to reinforce Amida's defenses. The challenges faced by the city during the tumultuous period between approximately 500 and 540 are further detailed in the Zuqnin Chronicle, which attributes several of the city's hardships to a series of significant earthquakes (Witakowski, 1996, pp. 102–103).

The East Anatolian Fault, running near Amida, experienced heightened seismic activity during the 520s, including two major earthquakes and prolonged aftershocks in Antioch as well as its surroundings. Historical accounts suggest that the first half of the 6th century was a particularly active seismic period across the Byzantine Empire (Downey, 1955, pp. 597–598). These events likely contributed to the structural damage and instability of Amida's fortifications, as noted by Prokopios. Following Anastasius I's earlier reconstruction efforts, which finalized the defensive layout, Justinianus I's comprehensive repairs presumably addressed the damage caused by these earthquakes, ensuring the fortifications remain functional against both natural disasters and military threats.

Discussion: Field survey and material evidence

The historical accounts discussed above align with Gabriel's (1940, p. 180) reconstruction, which posits an initial, smaller city established under Constantius II, later expanded to

Figure 3. Southwestern section of the walled city, n.d. Source: SALT Research.

twice its size. However, Parla (2005, pp. 60–61) contested this model based on an argument concerning population density and urban surface area, estimating a population of 20,000 would need a much larger area. Yet, her hypothesis relies on modern urban data, making it anachronistic and unsuitable for the period in question. In contrast, a comparative analysis of Roman urban settlements suggests that Constantius II's Amida, covering approximately 75 ha, could have accommodated such a population with ease, before Jovianus and Valens' expanded Amida that reached 145 ha. Roman Pompeii—considered a middle-to-upper-class settlement—had a density of 166 p/ha, amounting to roughly 12,500 inhabitants, while Ostia, a commercial harbor city, had a significantly higher density of 317 p/ha, reaching an estimated 24,000 residents (Storey, 1997). Given these figures, the smaller Amida of Constantius II as a modest provincial capital could have feasibly housed 20,000 inhabitants, perhaps even more, particularly in times of siege.

The city walls of Amida exhibit distinct architectural characteristics that correspond to two primary construction phases. Broadly speaking, the western half with the Urfa Gate features massive towers interspersed with regularly spaced buttresses and built with finely cut ashlar masonry laid in uniform courses (fig. 3–6). In contrast, the eastern half—extending from the Harput (Dağ) Gate to the Mardin Gate axis—is characterized by longer wall segments with fewer towers, constructed with relatively smaller, roughly hewn stones arranged in irregular courses (fig. 7). These

Figure 4. Harput (Dağ) Gate in the north, with later towers, n.d. Source: SALT Research.

structural distinctions align with the interpretations of Gabriel (1940) and Crow (2007), contradicting the hypothesis proposed by Parla (2005).

A notable feature documented during the field survey is the use of spolia particularly in the section northeast of the Tek Gate in the north, where three towers prominently incorporate repurposed column shafts. These elements are systematically inserted at regular intervals, serving as binding materials between the mortared cores and the external façades. This practice not only reinforces the structural integrity of the walls but also reflects an urban palimpsest phenomenon akin to that observed in the Grand Mosque. The walls themselves, through their construction phases and incorporation of spolia, embody the architectural legacy of the city's earlier monuments. While the presence of these materials has been briefly acknowledged in previous scholarship (Gabriel, 1940, pl. 68/10; Şahin-Güçhan et al., 2005, pp. 29–30; Halifeoğlu, 2012, p. 127), their significance in the context of

Figure 5. Mardin Gate in the south, with the fore-wall, n.d. Source: SALT Research.

Figure 6. Southwestern section, with the fore-wall, 1965. Source: SALT Research.

Amida's urban history and built environment has yet to be fully explored (fig. 8–9). Similar spolia, though fewer, were also reutilized to wall up a postern next to a northwestern tower on the main walls between the Çift and Urfa gates, as a later defensive measure (fig. 9).

According to the 6th-century historian Ioannes of Ephesus, during the construction of the massive siege mound by the Sassanids against the city walls of Amida in 502–503, the monastery of Mar John Urtaya, located near the northern city walls, was destroyed, and its materials—wood, stones, and tiles—were added to the mound. The monastery had been a thriving institution, known for its extensive buildings and vibrant community. To expand their space, the monks had begun constructing a larger chapel, with materials transported from nearby quarries in an organized effort, which remained incomplete due to the Sassanid attack. Nevertheless, since the mound remained after their departure, much of its material was repurposed for the city's reconstruction, including a chapel, and other urban structures. Although the monastery was later rebuilt, by using materials quarried from the mound, it was on a smaller scale (Brooks, 1923, pp. 563–567). In this context, it is

Figure 7. Eastern section of the walled city, n.d. Source: SALT Research.

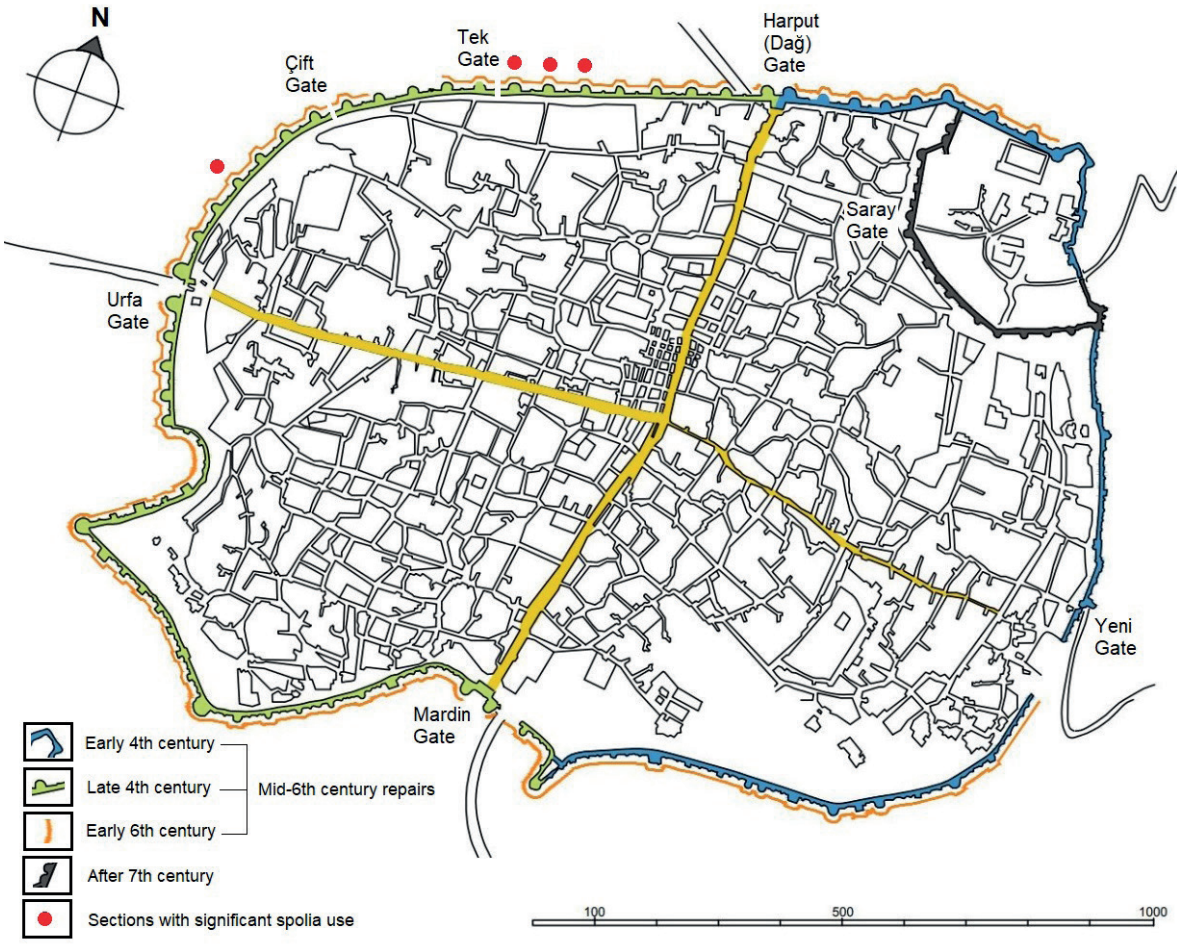
Figure 8. One of the towers with spolia, northeast of the Tek Gate. Source: Funda Arslan.

worth questioning whether the spolia building materials documented in the northern walls and towers originated from this monastery via the abandoned mound and were repurposed during the reconstruction efforts undertaken by Anastasius I after 505.

Conclusion

This interdisciplinary study, by integrating historical narratives, field surveys, and a comprehensive analysis of Diyarbakır's (formerly Amida) urban defense system, reveals the dynamic processes of fortification, material reuse, and architectural adaptation that have shaped the city's long history, particularly evocative of Amida's strategic significance in Late Antiquity—a period characterized by recurrent Sassanid sieges as well as natural disasters. Amida's urban palimpsest phenomenon reflects the city's resilience and highlights its evolution with major fortification phases in the 4th and early 6th centuries, where Anastasius I's intervention seemingly included also the addition of a fore-wall and a moat to reinforce the defense. A significant finding presumably from the same period is the concentration of spolia, especially column shafts, within a short northern section of the walls, which suggests a possible link to a now-lost

Figure 9. Walled up postern between the Çift and Urfa gates. Source: Funda Arslan.



monument within Amida's religious landscape by the early 6th century, potentially the monastery of Mar John Urtaya. This interpretation contributes to a deeper understanding of the city's urban development and the enduring relationship between its fortifications and sacred topography. Finally, after the reconsidered primary sources, it can be argued that Prokopios' account of Justinianus I's mid-6th-century efforts, either overstated or overlooked in scholarship, likely refers to extensive post-earthquake repairs (fig. 10).

Figure 10. Major expansion phases and modifications of the Diyarbakır city walls during late antiquity, highlighting sections with significant spolia usage. Source: Funda Arslan.

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