

Medieval Architecture

February 5-7 2002

Byzantine Architecture

Constantinople (Istanbul) and H. Sophia

Middle Byzantine Architecture

## Readings

R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 153-170

R. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia, Architecture, Structure and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church*, *passim*

## Chronicon Paschale:

“Under these consuls [in 324] the illustrious Emperor Constantine ... paid repeated visits to Byzantium. He renewed the original walls of the city of Byzas and many many additions to them ... and he called the city Constantinople. He also completed the Hippodrome which he decorated with bronze statues and other embellishment and made in it a lodge for the emperor to watch [the games] in imitation of the one in Rome. He built a big palace near the said Hippodrome and connected it with the lodge of the Hippodrome..... He also constructed a big and very beautiful forum and set up in the center of it a tall column of purple Theban stone worthy of admiration. At the top of this column he set up a big statue of himself with rays of light on his head which bronze statue he brought from Phrygia. ....He also offered a bloodless sacrifice and conferred the name *Anthousa* on the Tyche of the city he had renewed.

“He made another statue of himself of gilded wood holding in his right hand the Tyche of this City, also gilded, and he decreed that on the day of the birthday games this wooden statue should be brought in under escort of soldiers wearing cloaks and boots, everyone holding white tapers, and that the charior should go around the upper turning post and come in front of the imperial lodge and that the reigning emperor should arise and pay homage to the statue of the emperor Constantine and the Tyche of the City.”

Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, “Honoring with special favor the city which is called after his own name, he [Constantine] adorned it with many places of worship and martyrs’ shrines of great size and beauty, some in the suburbs and others in the city itself; by which he both honored the memory of the martyrs and consecrated his city to the martyrs’ God. Being altogether inspired with divine wisdom he determined to cleanse of all idolatry the city which he had decreed should bear his own name....”

The Walls of Constantinople, built 412, four and a half miles long; main wall has a height of 30 feet and thickness of 16 feet. Preceded by an advance wall and a 60-foot wide moat (concentric system of defense). 96 towers and six major gates. Completed in a year's work.

Masonry technique: concrete faced with with small limestone blocks and tied together with horizontal bands of Roman brick

## Historical Background

Emperor Justinian of peasant origins, raised by his uncle, Emperor Justin I. Justinian given an excellent education in politics and theology.

Justin died on April 4 527 and Justinian was crowned with Theodora as his consort.

Constantinople had reached 500,000 in population--now larger than Rome. The old Roman Empire had been divided and the western provinces overrun by the Goths. 410 sack of Rome. Constantinople was now capital of the Empire and the Church was the binding cultural force. Constantine had envisaged an alliance between Church and Empire (*Caesaropapism* )

Theological problems over the definition of Christ's nature--was he divine or human; with one nature or two? The single-nature, known as *monophysite*, was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon, 451.

Justinian's reconquests of N. Africa, Italy and Spain.

Justinian's architectural program as a means of projecting the power and unity of the Church.

The Great Church of the Holy Wisdom (Santa Sophia or Hagia Sophia) had originally been begun under Constantine (consecrated in 360) and remodelled in 415. It was entirely burned down in the *Nike Riot* of 532. Justinian, after putting the riot down, perhaps as a monument of his victory decided to rebuild the church on a plan and of a size and lavishness never before known. Consecrated on December 27 537.

The architects: Isidorus of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles. Isidorus seems to have been a professor of geometry and had written a commentary on a lost treatise on vaulting by Heron of Alexandria. Anthemius was the author of a book on conical sections. They would have been known as *mechanopoioi*--engineers--unlike the master masons of the Middle Ages.

This was the last great example of Roman engineering, drawing upon abstract theoretical knowledge that had its roots in Egypt and Mesopotamia.

The first dome, lower than the present one, collapsed in 558 and was replaced by a taller ribbed dome, completed in 563. The great tympana on the north and south sides were re-worked.

989 the western part of this second dome collapsed and was replaced by the Armenian architect Trdat.

In the ninth century the west façade was reinforced with flying buttresses.

Description: A great rectangle 225 by 240 Byzantine feet encloses a central square 100 feet by 100. Corners marked by great piers. Four transverse arches spring at 70 feet above ground. Four pendentives link the arches. Dome rises from pendentives to height of 56 meters. North-south thrust of dome met by exterior buttresses. East-west thrust said to be met by half-domes. Smaller conches or *exedrae* open from the half domes.

A double-skin design. Interior space billows into peripheral space.



## The art of description: Procopius *De Aedificiis*

“So the church has been made a spectacle of great beauty, stupendous to those who see it and altogether incredible to those who hear of it. Its breadth and length have been so fittingly proportioned that it may be without impropriety be described as being both very long and extremely broad. And it boasts of ineffable beauty, for it subtly combines its mass with the harmony of its proportions, having neither any excess nor any deficiency inasmuch as it is more pompous than ordinary buildings and considerably more decorous than those which are huge beyond measure; and it abounds in gleaming sunlight. You might say that the interior space is not illuminated by the sun from the outside, but that the radiance is generated from within so great an abundance of light bathes this shrine all around....”

Detailed factual description of the east end.

“Rising above this circle is an enormous spherical dome which makes the building exceptionally beautiful. It seems not to be founded on solid masonry but to be suspended from heaven by that golden chain and so to cover the space.”

“All of these elements, marvelously fitted fitted together in mid-air, suspended from one another and reposing only on the parts adjacent to them, produce a unified and most remarkable harmony in the work, and yet do not allow the spectators to rest their gaze on any one of them for a length of time, but each detail readily draws and attracts the eye to itself. Thus, the vision constantly shifts around and the beholders are quite unable to select any particular element which they might admire more than all the others. No matter how much they concentrate their attention on this side and that, and examine everything with contracted eyebrows, they are unable to understand the craftsmanship and always depart from there amazed by the perplexing spectacle. So much, then, for this.”

“Who could recount the beauty of the columns and the marbles with which the church is adorned? One might imagine that one has chanced upon a meadow in full bloom. For one would surely marvel at the purple hue of some, the green of others, at those on which the crimson blooms, at those that flash with white, at those too, which Nature, as a painter, has varied with the most contrasting colors.

Whenever one goes to this church to pray, one understands immediately that this work has been fashioned not by human power or skill, but by the influence of God. And so the visitor's mind is lifted up to God and floats aloft, thinking He cannot be far away, but must love to dwell in the place which He himself has chosen."

## Strategies in the Art of Description (*ekphrasis*)

You make an initial disclaimer: “words are not adequate....”

Literal cataloguing. But you have to name names. It’s boring!

Pulling the experience together in a *dialectic*. “It’s this, but then again, it’s that....”

What does the thing *look like*? Literal comparisons. Figurative speech. Similes. Metaphors.  
“It’s as if.....!” “Like”

The power of the building to make us tell untruths. Space “expands” Colonnades “ascend”

Affective language. Purple passages. Art gush.

The power of rhetorical tradition. Stealing other people’s words.

read Krautheimer 156

the existence of figurative programs (mosaics, painting) and the liturgical use of space introduces additional dimensions.

Making the past present. Making the absent present

## Strategies in the Art of Description (*ekphrasis*)

### *Representing the Building*

1. You make an initial disclaimer: “words are not adequate....”
2. Literal cataloguing. But you have to name names. It’s boring!
3. Pulling the experience together in a *dialectic*. “It’s this, but then again, it’s that....”
4. What does the thing *look like*? Literal comparisons. Figurative speech. Similes. Metaphors. “It’s as if.....!” “Like”
5. The power of the building to make us tell untruths. Space “expands” Colonnets “ascend”
6. Affective language. Purple passages. Art gush.
7. The power of rhetorical tradition. Stealing other people’s words.

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Making the past present. Making the absent present

The possibility of technical assistance

## Interacting with H. Sophia

- Motion
- Vision
- Memory (“it is as if....” “it is like.....”)
- Anticipation
- Transformation
- Representation

## Middle Byzantine Architecture

Crisis of the Byzantine Empire. Sharp reduction in size and wealth

Spread of Islam

Northern incursions--Avars, Khazars etc.

Iconoclasm (image breaking) paralleled negative attitudes to images shared by Jews, Islam and Manichaeism. Iconoclasm became the orthodox dogma between 726 and 780 and again between 814 and 842

“Middle Byzantine” associated with the revival after Iconoclasm. The word “Renaissance” sometimes used.

Retrospective attitude combined with innovation

Theoretical thought replaced by the practical

Building dominated by relatively small monastic foundations. Byzantine monasticism was quite different from Western. Houses were smaller and had no tradition of intellectual enterprise.

Domed churches still dominate, but lateral movement replaced longitudinal.

## Thessaloniki (Salonica, Northern Greece)

7th-Century, the cathedral of the city. Relatively small scale (30-foot diameter dome), cross domed church--correcting structural problems of H Sophia of Constantinople.

Unlike the spatial unity of H. Sophia of Constantinople, Middle Byzantine architecture has clear divisions.

Define	naos
	bema
	prothesis
	disconikon



Myrelaion Church built c 920--the palace chapel of the family of Romanus Lekapenos. Cross-in-square church with dome raised on drum, clearly divided interior spaces and articulation of interior spaces in the clearly articulated forms of the exterior.

Constantinople, the church of Constantine Lips (Fenari Isa Camii)  
Monastic church established by a high court official. Composed of a  
main church and a parekklesion. The north church was dedicated in  
907

The Kariye Camii was originally the principal church of the monastery of Saint Saviour in Chora.

Between 1315 and 1321 Theodore Metochites undertook the restoration of the monastery. Metochites was one of the leading intellectual figures of his time and held a position equivalent to prime minister. The monastery was located close to the Walls and the Blachernae Palace

He rebuilt the *naos*, *pastophoria* and *parekklesion*. Added a bell tower.

The church contains one of the most complete cycles of Byzantine painting and mosaics, portraying, according to Metochites, “in mosaics and painting how the Lord himself became mortal man on our behalf.” The extensive program includes Old Testament ancestors and pre-figurations of Christ fortelling the Virgin birth and cycles of the life of the Virgin and Christ, ending with the Last Judgement.

In 1328 he lost his post and was exiled for a while.

He was buried in his church in 1332