The Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors and the Walker Trust excavations

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The spectacular discoveries made during the excavations undertaken on behalf of the Walker Trust in the Great Palace at Constantinople in 1935-38 and 1952-54 have since been extensively discussed by archaeologists and art-historians. Nevertheless, no consensus has been reached regarding the identification and date of the Apsed Hall and mosaic-floored Peristyle that were revealed. The failure to identify the structures is rather surprising, since the complex is extremely large and the buildings concerned must have belonged to a major part of the Great Palace, at the heart of imperial ceremony. They can hardly have gone unmentioned in our literary sources. If the structures could be named, we would have an important fixed point on the map of the Great Palace.

The buildings excavated to the east of the Hippodrome included a rectangular courtyard surrounded by colonnaded porticoes, which covered an area of about 65 x 55.5 m (fig. 1). The short sides of the Peristyle were roughly parallel to the euripos of the Hippodrome. Decorating the floors of the porticoes was a magnificent mosaic, depicting rural scenes, animal hunts, and mythological subjects. To the southeast of the courtyard, on the same NW–SE axis, was found a chamber measuring 32 x 16.5 m, at the SE end of which was an apse. The evidence of the masonry, the pottery, the brickstamps, and the style of the mosaic pavement have all been adduced to support various datings. I intend to show in detail elsewhere that there can be little doubt that the mosaic phase is later than the reign of Justinian (527-565), despite the most recent claims by the Austrian team in charge of the restoration that it belongs in the first decades of the 6th c. The date of the complex may not, however, get us very far in identifying it, since our knowledge of the repairs and reconstructions that were undertaken in the many

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