

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.¹ Nevertheless, no consensus has been reached regarding the identification and date of the Apsed Hall and mosaic-floored Peristyle that were revealed.² 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 *euripus* 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.³ 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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- 1 The results of the excavations were published in two reports: G. Brett, G. Martiny, and R. B. K. Stevenson, *The Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors* (London 1947); D. Talbot Rice (ed.), *The Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors. Second report* (Edinburgh 1958). An important review of the latter by C. Mango and I. Lavin appeared in *ArtB* 42 (1960) 67-73.
 - 2 A brief summary of the various views so far advanced is given by P. J. Nordhagen, "The mosaics of the Great Palace of Constantinople: a note on an archaeological puzzle," in L. Rydén and J. O. Rosenqvist (edd.), *Aspects of Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium* (Swedish Res. Inst. Istanbul, Trans. 4, Uppsala 1993) 167-71. Nordhagen's own opinion is that the excavated structures belonged to the Justinianos, built by Justinian II during his first reign (685-695): see P. J. Nordhagen, "The mosaics of the Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors," *BZ* 56 (1963) 53-68.
 - 3 The pottery evidence is presented in detail in W. Jobst and H. Vetters (edd.), *Mosaikforschung im Kaiserpalast von Konstantinopel: Vorbericht über das Forschungs- und Restaurierungsprojekt am Palastmosaik in den Jahren 1983-1988* (Denkschriften der phil.-hist. Kl. 228, Vienna 1992) 43-61. On p. 60, the packing beneath the mosaic is dated no earlier than the last quarter of the 5th c. For the Justinianic date, see W. Jobst, "Archäologie und Denkmalpflege im Bereich des 'Großen Palastes' von Konstantinopel," *XI Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı 1993* (1994) 9-18, and in A. Iacobini and E. Zanini (edd.), *Arte profana e arte sacra a Bisanzio* (Milion 3, Rome 1995) 227-36. We await the publication of the proceedings of the conference held in Istanbul in November 1991, entitled, "Neue Forschungen und Restaurierungen im byzantinischen Kaiserpalast von Istanbul." Note also W. Jobst, B. Erdal and C. Gurtner, *Istanbul. Büyük Saray mozayığı: araştırmalar, onarım ve sergileme 1983-1997 / Istanbul. Das Grosse byzantinische Palastmosaik: seine Erforschung, Konservierung und Präsentation 1983-1997* (Arkeoloji ve Sanat Yayınları, Istanbul 1997) 58-61 and bibliography. Contrast this dating with that of J. Trilling, "The soul of empire: style and meaning in the mosaic pavement of the Byzantine Imperial Palace in Constantinople," *DOP* 43 (1989) 27-72, who would place the mosaic c.630 on stylistic grounds. M. Mundell Mango, "Imperial art in the seventh century," in P. Magdalino (ed.), *New Constantines: the rhythm of imperial renewal in Byzantium, 4th-13th centuries* (Aldershot 1994) 131-34, expresses doubts with regard to Trilling's date.