

# Constantine, Silvester and the Church of S. Polyeuctus in Constantinople

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Through his excavation of the Saraçhane site, the late Martin Harrison contributed fundamentally to the study of the topography, history and architecture of Constantinople. He was, in collaboration with Nezhir Firath, the first to conduct anywhere in the city a scientific excavation that gave due attention to all levels from Ottoman to late Roman; and he focused interest on the remains and *membra disiecta* (as far afield as Italy and Spain)<sup>1</sup> of one of the most significant as well as lavish buildings ever erected in the New Rome. His conscientious publication of the site,<sup>2</sup> together with J. W. Hayes' volume on the pottery,<sup>3</sup> are now major reference works for Byzantinists, while a more popular volume has made his conclusions available to the general public.<sup>4</sup> But discussion of the significance of Anicia Juliana's church of S. Polyeuctus continues.<sup>5</sup> The present note proposes that the building was designed to make a clear religious and political statement at a specific historical conjuncture — a possibility that Harrison regarded as "unlikely".<sup>6</sup>

Harrison had, of course, his own view of Anicia Juliana's motive in building the church of S. Polyeuctus, and his interpretation was sound as far as it went. It was based on the foundation epigram placed in the church by Anicia Juliana herself. Bits of this inscription had already turned up in 1960, before Harrison started digging in 1964. I. Ševčenko immediately recognized in them fragments of the text as preserved in *Anthologia Palatina* I.10.<sup>7</sup>

No reader of this epigram's 76 lines will for a moment doubt that raw ostentation figured prominently among Juliana's motives in rebuilding the shrine her great-grandmother the empress Eudocia first raised on this site in honour of a 3rd-c. soldier-martyr from Melitene. Harrison makes much of this: for him the church, which formed part of Juliana's palace, was primarily a monument of family, indeed dynastic pride, intended by a descendant of emperors and empresses to outdo the upstart peasant-soldier Justin (518-27) and his nephew Justinian.<sup>8</sup> There is support for this view in Gregory of Tours, who tells how Juliana outwitted the emperor Justinian's designs on her great wealth by pouring it all into the decoration of her church, and then inviting the emperor to visit it, whereupon he understood that he could hardly rob a martyr.<sup>9</sup>

Justinian was raised to the rank of Augustus in April 527, while Juliana died in 527-28, so we know that the church was ready by then. It may, indeed, have been completed some years

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1 See M. Vickers's review of Harrison's publication of the site, *Antiquity* 64 (1990) 693-94.

2 R. M. Harrison, *Excavations at Saraçhane in Istanbul* 1 (Princeton 1986).

3 J. W. Hayes, *Excavations at Saraçhane in Istanbul* 2 (Princeton 1992), reviewed below in this issue.

4 [R.] M. Harrison, *A temple for Byzantium: the discovery and excavation of Anicia Juliana's palace-church in Istanbul* (London 1989).

5 Vickers (supra n.1).

6 Harrison (supra n.2) 417.

7 C. Mango and I. Ševčenko, "Remains of the church of St. Polyeuktos at Constantinople," *DOP* 15 (1961) 243-47. For the recovered fragments of the inscription see now Harrison (supra n.2) 117-19, (supra n.4) 128.

8 Harrison (supra n.2) xii, 420. Justinian had recently (c.518-19: C. Mango, *Studies on Constantinople* (Aldershot 1993) XIII.189) built his own palatine church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul at the House of Hormisdas where he resided. Its dedication epigram, brief and concerned that there be καὶ ψυχῆ καὶ ὀμμάσι κέρδος (*Anth.Pal.* I.8), is a refreshment after Juliana's prolix, self-regarding and remorselessly worldly outburst.

9 Gregory of Tours, *De gloria martyrum* 102 (conveniently reproduced by Harrison [supra n.2] 8-9).