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APPROACHES TO BYZANTINE ARCHITECTURE

It cannot be claimed that historians of Byzantine architecture have been in the forefront of scholarly theory as compared to their colleagues who work in other periods and civilizations. If we have devoted more effort to the collection of materials than to meditating about possible methods of viewing them, that is due in large measure to the nature of the subject, as I hope to explain in the following pages. Even so, theoretical problems have not gone entirely unnoticed. Our experience may, therefore, be of some interest to those who toil in the adjacent field of Islamic architecture, which in its earliest period is hardly separable from the Byzantine; they continued to interpenetrate one another for many centuries. Of this affinity Creswell was perfectly aware.

Let me admit at the outset that the boundaries of Byzantine architecture (as of Byzantine art, literature, speculation, etc.) are decidedly blurred. Is it the architecture of a political entity (the Eastern Roman Empire) or of a religion (eastern Christianity) or should it rather be defined as a style, i.e., in terms of formal characteristics? The answer to this question will determine the field of our inquiry. It is customary to link Byzantine architecture to that of the early Christian period, which means that our starting point is considered to be Constantine's conversion (A.D. 312) and, furthermore, that we have to take in the Christian West until such time as East and West went their separate ways. It would be, however, equally legitimate to hold that the early Christian period should be treated as a separate subject and that Byzantine architecture, strictly speaking, starts with the great divide of the Dark Age (seventh-eighth centuries). Whether it also includes the architecture of the Caucasus (Armenia and Georgia) and the prolongation of the Byzantine tradition in lands of the Orthodox faith (the Balkans and Russia) until its displacement by European styles are further matters of uncertainty. Whatever position we wish to take on these issues, our field of endeavor remains extremely wide.

Dispersion in space and time is often coupled with inaccessibility. Whereas the specialist in Renaissance architecture need not stray far from the most inviting countries of western Europe, his Byzantine colleague

has to trudge up the Taurus and the Tur 'Abdin, to wander through the Syrian desert and follow the course of the Araxes, sometimes to discover that the intriguing monument which had been photographed at the turn of the century by Gertrude Bell or Hans Rott has in the meantime been reduced to a pile of rubble. Under such conditions "theory" can be dispensed with. The urgent task is still to record. The monument that is standing today may not be standing tomorrow.

A further difficulty is posed by anonymity and the near absence of a firm chronology. But for one or two exceptional cases (like St. Sophia at Constantinople) the identity of the architect eludes us altogether. Indeed, it is rather misleading to speak of Byzantine architects: master masons would be a more appropriate term. Such masons being rather lowly persons, no need was felt to record their names, and if an inscription was put up, it was the patron, not the craftsman, who was commemorated on it. Building inscriptions, which are fairly common in certain eastern regions (Syria and the Caucasus), are, however, extremely rare in the core provinces of the empire, thus depriving us of what might have been an essential guide to chronology. As a result, dating is approximate and depends on the constitution of evolutionary series. After decades of scholarly endeavor the margin of uncertainty has been reduced, but we are still far from being able to place a building on comparative grounds within a decade or a quarter of a century. Take the example of two famous and vast churches, namely St. Demetrios and St. Sophia at Thessalonica: it is still a matter of dispute whether St. Demetrios is of the mid-fifth century or of the sixth, and whether St. Sophia should be attributed to the early seventh or to the late eighth.

One other feature of the subject ought to be mentioned. To an outside observer it may appear that Byzantine architecture consists of nothing but churches and monasteries. He is seldom made aware of the fact that the Byzantines also built houses, palaces, and baths, works of fortification, bridges, aqueducts, and cisterns. Through a combination of historical factors such secular or utilitarian structures have tended to disappear or,

if they have survived, have not attracted much attention precisely because they are utilitarian and not “artistic.” Handbooks of Byzantine architecture usually mention the abandoned villages of northern Syria, two or three palace buildings of the later Middle Ages (the so-called Tekfur Sarayi of Constantinople, the Lascarid palace of Nymphaeum, and the palace of the Despots at Mistra), the walls of Constantinople, Nicaea, and Thessalonica, and a couple of the more spectacular cisterns of Constantinople, namely the Cisterna Basilica and that of Philoxenos (Binbirdirek). Having done so, they devote 95 percent of their space to the evolution of the church.

So exclusive a preoccupation with ecclesiastical architecture needs to be corrected, and it is encouraging to note that the study of Byzantine castles and city walls has been started in earnest.¹ We should also welcome the continuing and increasingly meticulous exploration of the rural agglomerations of Byzantine Syria² and the excavation in many parts of the Mediterranean basin of urban complexes from late antiquity. The Byzantine house, which General De Beylié had so much difficulty in defining at the beginning of the century, has finally become a knowable entity, at least for the period down to the sixth or seventh century. Even so, the church structure continues to dominate our attention and we need to inquire why that should be the case.

Certain historical factors have certainly contributed to this situation. In lands that passed under Muslim domination (as happened in the greater part of the Byzantine Empire) churches were usually converted into mosques, thus helping their survival. The incidence of fires in towns that were increasingly built of wood and mud brick has also taken a heavy toll of residential and utilitarian structures. That, however, is only a small part of the explanation. I would venture to suggest another, more fundamental reason. The ancient cities of the Hellenistic East, which became the principal cities of the Byzantine Empire, witnessed in the Roman imperial period a phase of competitive adornment on a monumental scale. Spurred on by civic pride, each city strove to be more beautiful than its neighbors: colonnaded streets, marketplaces decorated with statues, temples, arches, fountains, basilicas, libraries, luxurious baths, and mansions were put up by the leading families. Constantinople, too, was built in the fourth and fifth centuries in the antique tradition of monumental splendor. Later imperial foundations, like Dara in Mesopotamia and Justiniana Prima (Caričin Grad) maintained, albeit in a diminished manner, the same conception of planned civic dignity.

But already in the fourth century, as the empire was becoming Christian, the older cities found it increasingly burdensome to maintain their lavish piles of marble and cut stone. Preservation was difficult enough without adding to the stock of public monuments, as attested by a considerable body of imperial legislation. Building activity switched to churches and to providing the welfare services that came under the control of the local bishop. As we reach the twilight of late antiquity (sixth-seventh centuries) the secular sector, which in earlier times had been a focus of architectural expression, is virtually abandoned. Thereafter the Byzantine world ceased putting up civic monuments of any artistic pretension. Indeed, most cities started on a decline that reduced them to little more than big villages.

Such are some of the features of the Byzantine architectural heritage. I now come to interpretation. Looking back no farther than the beginning of the century, we may discover, I believe, four approaches, used sometimes in isolation, at other times in combination. The first is the *typological*. It consists, after a preliminary accumulation of material from as many regions as possible, in its classification according to ground plan, elevation, system of support, decorative elements, masonry, etc. In other words, buildings are labeled and pigeon-holed like biological specimens according to formal criteria: where a resemblance is found a connection is assumed even across a wide gulf in time and space. Alongside the typological approach went a belief in the existence, indeed in the primary importance, of geographical “schools” — that of Constantinople, that of Greece, that of the Asiatic East, the last a somewhat ill-defined area that extended from Mesopotamia to the mountains of the Caucasus and the plateau of Asia Minor, either including or excluding Syria and Palestine. The history of Byzantine architecture consequently came to be seen as a battleground of various “elements,” some Hellenistic or Roman, others seeping in from the Orient; and the most controversial questions concerned the geographical origins of this or that element, e.g., the squinch or the pendentive, and, more generally, the primacy of East or West.

The typological approach was dominant in the first forty years of our century³ and is still alive and well, although the vocabulary of classification has tended to change.⁴ If I may set aside the stimulating but increasingly dotted contributions of Josef Strzygowski, I should like to mention as examples Gabriel Millet’s pioneering and very influential *L’École grecque dans l’architecture byzantine* (written in 1911; published 1916) — note

the term “*école*” in the title — and Jean Ebersolt’s *Monuments d’architecture byzantine* (1934), founded on the principle that “Nothing reveals more clearly the filiation of different schools of architecture than the composition of groundplans.”⁵ It may be noted that Gabriel Millet was also the author of a monumental work on the Byzantine iconography of the New Testament, in which he applied exactly the same criteria to the study of pictures. The important thing was to collect all the available examples and then classify them according to their composition. Once that had been done, one was able to reconstruct a number of schools and trace their mutual interaction through the ages. What applied to iconography applied equally to architecture.

I have not found a reasoned justification of the assumption that regional schools provide, as it were, Ariadne’s thread in the study of Byzantine architecture; its validity was assumed without argument. To be sure, the builder’s craft was passed on locally from master to apprentice and depended both on established traditions and the availability of materials, such as stone, brick, and timber, not to mention climatic conditions. The execution or interpretation of architectural concepts was naturally affected by such variables. We can tell at a glance the difference between a Syrian basilica, built of ashlar, with decorative exterior moldings, tripartite sanctuary, etc., and a Constantinopolitan or Greek basilica, built of brick and mortared rubble, with galleries and projecting apse. These and other distinctions do not, however, detract from the basic family likeness of all early Christian basilicas, and I find it hard to see how the introduction of this type can be explained in terms of geographical schools. It is the internationalism rather than the nationalism of early Christian architecture that is most apparent. The requirements of Christian congregational service could indeed have been met by a variety of architectural solutions and the regions, if left to themselves, would probably have developed different forms. Instead, we find the longitudinal, aisled, timber-roofed basilica spreading from one end of the Mediterranean basin to the other with remarkable rapidity and remaining the standard type of church building for over two centuries in the East, much longer in the West. Whether this came about as the result of a directive from on high, prescribing what a Christian church ought to be like, or through a process of imitation of a particularly prestigious church,⁶ is something we do not know because no ancient author has given us the answer. However that may have happened, the preferred type of basilica was probably dissemi-

nated, in the first instance to provincial capitals and thence to smaller towns and rural areas. Only at that stage would it have been interpreted according to locally prevailing building practices.⁷

The second approach is the *symbolic* or ideological. One of its most determined proponents was Earl Baldwin Smith, who devoted much attention to Byzantine examples while ranging much wider in time and space.⁸ I have no doubt that the symbolic interpretation of architecture is the one most consonant with the workings of the medieval mind, as we can see if we open any commentary on the church building in either Greek or Syriac. Authors such as Maximus Confessor or the Patriarch Germanus were unaware of the “school” of Constantinople or the origin of the pendentive; they were, on the other hand, deeply concerned to show that the church structure represented the cosmos; that if there were three windows in the apse, that meant the Holy Trinity; that the apse was either the cave of Bethlehem or the cave in which Christ was buried; the ambo either the upper chamber of Sion or the stone which the angel rolled back from the tomb. That being so, I am entirely prepared to believe my colleague Martin Harrison, who argues that the extraordinary church of St. Polyeuktos at Constantinople, which he excavated, was meant, both in its measurements and its decoration, to reproduce Solomon’s Temple.⁹ The only trouble with the symbolic approach is that once we have granted the celestial meaning of the dome, the imperial connotations of the ciborium, the towered gate, and other such features, it is difficult to put it to any further use; and it certainly does not help to explain the multiplicity of forms that the architectural historian has to deal with.

The third approach may be called *functional* and is exemplified by two important books, both published just after the Second World War, namely André Grabar’s *Martyrium* (1946) and Jean Lassus’ *Sanctuaires chrétiens de Syrie* (1947). There is considerable overlap between the two, but whereas Lassus, a field archaeologist, keeps his nose fairly close to the ground, Grabar, an armchair archaeologist, is carried away by broader theoretical issues. In the case of Lassus we find an explicit reaction to the typological method, which had ignored the use for which a building was intended and treated it as a configuration of forms, i.e., as a work of art, created by an architect without reference to the needs or wishes of the patron. Grabar, if I understand him correctly, accepts typology, but bends it to his purpose, which is to clarify the monumental expression of certain types of Christian piety. One (possibly unfair) example of his method con-

cerns the churches of the Tur 'Abdin, many of which have a transverse instead of a longitudinal nave. These had earlier been explained as an offshoot of Mesopotamian pagan temples in accordance with the concept of regional continuity. Grabar, however, was able to discover two transverse martyria, one at Salona in Dalmatia, the other at Tipasa in Algeria, and it is to these that he connects the churches of the Tur 'Abdin.¹⁰ His argument may strike us as paradoxical given the geographical distance and the lack of evidence that the transverse churches of the Tur 'Abdin were martyria.¹¹ I am simply quoting it as an example of how typology can be exploited to prove something different than the permanence of local schools.

Speaking for myself, I find that the functional approach opens more doors than the purely typological. If we take the case that preoccupied Grabar and Lassus to a lesser extent, namely that of the cult of relics, we are made to see how the Christian commemorative shrine evolved from the pagan mausoleum or herôon because of the identity of function; how it became at first a building of "centralized" plan outside the city walls; how, with the growing practice of the translation and dismemberment of relics, it moved into cities and invaded the ordinary, congregational church as a special chapel next to the apse, as often happens in Syria. I am less sure that we can explain along the same lines one of the central problems of Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture, namely, why it was that the timber-roofed basilica went out of fashion after the sixth century and was replaced by the domed or vaulted building for all types of church, whatever its exact destination. Indeed, I am not sure that the cult of relics was architecturally quite as crucial a factor as Grabar supposes.

Seeing that we are still largely concerned with churches, it is obvious that we should pay particular attention to the development of the liturgy, which was the main activity that churches were built to accommodate. Lassus already went some way in that direction. A more determined effort was made in 1971 by T. F. Mathews with reference to the early churches of Constantinople, i.e., up to the time of Justinian.¹² These are of different types — timber-roofed basilicas, domed basilicas, and buildings of a "centralized" plan — but they share certain minor features that distinguish them from churches in other areas, such as the great number of exterior entrances and the single sanctuary, without side chambers, in contrast to the tripartite sanctuary that we find, say, in Syria. According to Mathews, these peculiarities can be explained by reference to the emphasis placed on

the entrance of the celebrant accompanied by the faithful (the so-called First Entrance) and the practice of consecrating the eucharistic elements not inside the church, but in an exterior sacristy. I am not here concerned with the correctness or otherwise of these views; indeed, I find it odd that in a place as cold and wet as Constantinople the elements should have been carried in procession under the open sky. It is the approach that counts, and it is certainly desirable to take full account of the liturgy, provided the liturgiologists make the task a little easier for us — something they have until now failed to do.

The fourth and last approach I can discover is the *social and economic* (also taking account of geography), which is best exemplified in the well-known work of Tchalenko.¹³ It has lately become fashionable to poke holes in Tchalenko's theories, and I would not care to defend all of them, such as the "monoculture" of the olive tree or the disappearance of the market for olive oil as the main cause of the abandonment of the villages of the Massif Calcaire. But even those who criticize Tchalenko by pointing out, for example, that the vine was also cultivated alongside the olive in the area concerned, or that some of the villages continued to exist after the Arab conquest, have recourse to the same method of explanation. We may also add that what Tchalenko has been able to do, thanks to an unusually dense concentration of well-preserved, standing ruins in a restricted geographical area, may be difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish elsewhere. There is some scope for the application of the same method in parts of Asia Minor — in Cilicia, Lycia, and, perhaps, Cappadocia. Considering the rate at which ancient monuments are disappearing, I hope that can be done as a matter of urgency.

That, I believe, is roughly where we stand today. The present trend, if I interpret it correctly, is towards an extremely meticulous, archaeological analysis of buildings,¹⁴ coupled with a certain reserve as regards the "big questions" as they have been formulated in the past. It may well be that the big questions have to be put differently, yet it is by reference to them that detailed studies of individual monuments acquire their significance. We may still hope to understand more fully than our predecessors have done why it was that the East and the West, starting as they did from a common architectural heritage, diverged so markedly after the sixth century, why from that period onwards Byzantium did not put up any big buildings, and why the medieval Byzantine church, for all of its undeniable beauty and charm, un-

derwent for many centuries so little development.

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NOTES

1. See C. Foss and D. Winfield, *Byzantine Fortifications: An Introduction* (Pretoria, 1986).
2. See, e.g., J.-P. Sodini, G. Tate et alii, *Déhès, Campagnes I-III* (Paris, 1980).
3. An advanced example is provided by F. W. Deichmann, *Versuch einer Darstellung der Grundrisstypen des Kirchenbaues in frühchristlicher und byzantinischer Zeit im Morgenlande*, Diss. Halle, 1937.
4. As, e.g., in H. Buchwald, "Western Asia Minor as a Generator of Architectural Forms in the Byzantine Period," *Jahrb. d. Österr. Byzantinistik* 34 (1984): 199-234.
5. It is amusing to note the tactful reservation expressed by Charles Diehl in his preface to this book ("Nul ne contestera, même s'il eût préféré peut-être une autre manière de présenter les choses...").
6. So R. Krautheimer, "The Constantinian Basilica," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 21 (1967): 138, who considers the Lateran cathedral as the model.
7. A. Grabar, *Martyrium* (Paris, 1946), 1: 386, on the other hand, sees the crystallization of regional schools at a later stage, that of the transition from the martyrium to the domed congregational church, which he dates after the sixth century.
8. *The Dome* (Princeton, 1950); *Architectural Symbolism of Imperial Rome and the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1956).
9. *A Temple for Byzantium* (London, 1989), pp. 137 ff.
10. *Martyrium*, 1: 131-32.
11. For more recent discussions of the transverse nave, see M. M. Mango, "Deux églises byzantines de la Mésopotamie du Nord," *Cah. archéol.* 30 (1982): 47-70; J.-P. Fourdrin, "Les églises à nef transversale d'Apamène et du Tūr 'Abdin," *Syria* 62 (1985): 319-35.
12. *The Early Churches of Constantinople. Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park, Pa., 1971).
13. *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord* (Paris, 1953-58).
14. Among many excellent recent studies, I may mention U. Peschlow, *Die Irenenkirche in Istanbul* (Tübingen, 1977); Ch. Bouras, *Hê Nea Monê tês Chiou* (Athens, 1981); J.-P. Sodini and K. Kolokotsas, *Atiki II: La basilique double* (Athens-Paris, 1984); R. G. Ousterhout, *The Architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul* (Washington, D.C., 1987); K. Theodoridou, *The Architecture of Hagia Sophia, Thessaloniki*, BAR Intern. Ser. 399 (1988).