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# The Byzantine Basilica at Priene

STEPHAN WESTPHALEN

The basilica at Priene was investigated during two campaigns in 1995 and 1996.<sup>1</sup> The church had already been excavated by a German mission at the end of the nineteenth century and was published by Theodor Wiegand.<sup>2</sup> Since then few studies have been devoted to the church, and none of these presented significant new information.<sup>3</sup> The ruins are almost completely excavated and comparatively well preserved. In addition, much of the liturgical furniture is still extant, including the ambo and particularly, the posts and screens of different chancels. In the course of our investigation it was decided that no new excavations be undertaken, but rather that we document the architecture by producing large-scale plans (scale 1:25) and the liturgical furniture with drawings and photographs. Defining the history of the building and its reconstruction were our main objectives.<sup>4</sup>

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The basilica is situated on the upper terrace of the Hellenistic town above the agora, in the

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<sup>1</sup>The campaigns were supported by the German Archaeological Institute and conducted by W. Koenigs. For the 1996 campaign, Dumbarton Oaks provided a project grant.

<sup>2</sup>T. Wiegand and H. Schrader, *Priene* (Berlin, 1904), 475–85.

<sup>3</sup>V. Schultze, *Altchristliche Städte und Landschaften, Kleinasien* (Gütersloh, 1926); P. Verzone, “La ‘Cattedrale’ di Priene e le sue sculture,” *Felix Ravenna* (1970): 261–75; M. Schede, *Die Ruinen von Priene*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1964), 108–11.

<sup>4</sup>For a detailed study, see S. Westphalen, “Die Basilika von Priene: Architektur und liturgische Ausstattung,” *IstMitt* 48 (1998): 279–340, pls. 30–43. See also the short reports of S. Westphalen and W. Koenigs, “Priene 1995,” *XIV. Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı* (Ankara, 1997), 71–76, figs. 1–9; eidem, “Priene 1996,” *XV. Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı* (Ankara, 1998), 308–11, figs. 2, 3.

general area inhabited during the Byzantine period.<sup>5</sup> The building defines the north side of an older insula. The *Theaterstrasse* lies immediately to the north. To the east, the church is built against a Roman bath. The area west of the church is not excavated, so that it is as yet unknown whether the church was entered there from an open space, an atrium, or a narrow street.

The building is divided into three parts: the apse, the three-aisled naos, and the narthex (Figs. 1, 2). The latter is a simple rectangular hall with two portals in the western wall. Three further portals connect the narthex with the central nave and the aisles. The south wall of the south aisle is punctuated by two doors. Ten pairs of columns originally divided the nave from the aisles. The lower drums of the southern row of columns are still *in situ*, whereas only the drums of the first, third, and tenth columns (counted from the east) are extant in the northern row. Rectangular piers were placed between the columns during a rebuilding phase. The apse is not visible from the outside, since it was built directly into a niche of the thick wall of the Roman bath.

## HISTORY OF THE BUILDING

In his study of the site, Wiegand had already distinguished two phases of the building.<sup>6</sup> In the earlier phase, the church was a simple basilica with columns. Later, when the church was rebuilt, the columns were replaced with strong piers. During our investigation we were able to distinguish a phase earlier than Wiegand’s first phase. It is visible at the wall that divides the aisles from the narthex. This wall

<sup>5</sup>W. Müller-Wiener, “Mittelalterliche Befestigungen im südlichen Ionien,” *IstMitt* 11 (1961): 47, fig. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Wiegand, *Priene*, passim.

abuts the side walls and covers older plaster. Furthermore, it is built on top of the marble floor slabs. This wall was therefore set subsequently into the building, as were two wall piers at the end of the two rows of columns. The construction of the columns thus belongs to the same phase of rebuilding.

#### *Phase 1*

The side walls belong to the earliest building phase of the basilica. The church is 13.80 meters wide in the east, 13.55 meters wide in the west. These dimensions were maintained up to the latest phase. We know very little about the area and its surroundings in pre-Byzantine times. It is bounded on the east by the Roman bath. The western wall of the bath is very thick (ca. 3.80 m) and was punctuated by a rectangular niche. The niche was opened to the outside during the construction of the basilica and rebuilt as the apse of the church. The northern wall of the church encroaches on the *Theaterstrasse*, thereby reducing it to a narrow street. Perhaps other buildings standing to the south necessitated the church's placement further north on the street. Older constructions were demolished to prepare the area for the church. Below the floor, the wall of an older building crosses the basilica. Unfortunately, it was not possible to discern its ground-plan. In any case, this earliest division of the area was later abandoned. In general, we can conclude that preparations for the church were extensive, since an opening was made to the bath, the *Theaterstrasse* reduced, and an older building pulled down. To the oldest parts of the church also belong the marble floor slabs, which are of *spolia* of varying sizes and upon which the wall dividing the three aisles from the narthex was built. In this area, the floor is laid regularly, whereas about two meters east of the dividing wall it is haphazard. Here a strip of irregularly laid slabs crosses the church, presumably marking the placement of the western wall in phase 1, before it was demolished in phase 2 and covered with the floor slabs. The earliest nave was, therefore, slightly shorter than the extant nave, which measures 24.45 meters. The placement of the columns cannot be reconstructed with certainty, but it does not seem too daring to propose eight

pairs of columns with intercolumniations of 2.20 meters, for a total length of about 24 meters.

#### *Phase 2*

The ground-plan of the second phase is clearly visible in the preserved state of the ruins. The nave is about 26.75 meters long and 6.80 meters wide. Ten columns with intercolumniations of around 1.80 meters divide the nave from the aisles. The columns are *spolia* of the Hellenistic period that did not come from the nearby gymnasium, as Wiegand thought, but mainly from the stoa south of the temple of Athena.<sup>7</sup> The Doric columns measure some 4.50 meters in height. They are dated to the second or first century B.C. and were, therefore, already five to six hundred years old (and perhaps had fallen down) by the time of their reuse in the basilica. In the Byzantine construction, the columns were not as tall as they had been in the Hellenistic structure. They consisted of two or three drums and were only about 3.10 meters high, including the capitals. The columns seem short in comparison to their diameter (62 cm) and stood in narrow rows. Besides the Hellenistic marble *spolia*, we also found fragments of the arcades above the columns. The stones of the arcades are so-called breccia, that is, a porous local stone. The mason clearly did not place much emphasis on polished surfaces or a precise cut. It is likely that the arcades were covered with plaster, as were the walls, where parts of the painted plaster are still preserved.

#### *Phase 3*

The most striking feature from this phase are the large piers, the massive stumps of which are preserved between the aforementioned columns. Perhaps structural problems were the reason for this rebuilding activity, as suggested by the fact that deeper foundations were laid out. The piers, about 2 meters in length and 1.30 meters in width, were inserted into every third intercolumniation. They were partly set into the nave, thereby narrowing that space to a width of 5.20 meters. Wiegand interpreted the piers as an indication that the ear-

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 481.

lier, wooden-roofed basilica was vaulted at this time.<sup>8</sup> It is possible to reconstruct arches between the piers, which defined three square bays of considerable regularity. While such vaulting or a configuration of three domes cannot be excluded, there are no further indications that this design was adapted. The earlier excavators make no mention of large heaps of rubble, which would have pointed to collapsed vaults; nor is there any significant quantity extant of brick, the building material generally used for vaulting.

#### THE ARCHITECTURE

The architecture is difficult to date, because it corresponds to a type used over centuries. The walls contain no architectural sculpture from the Byzantine period, because only *spolia* were used in their construction. The basilica of phase 2 can be compared with other churches in the area. Similarities can be noted between our basilica and that in the adyton of the temple of Apollo at Didyma, the ruins of which were pulled down during the excavation of the 1910s. This three-aisled basilica with galleries was built in the late fifth or early sixth century A.D.<sup>9</sup> The churches at Didyma and Priene are nearly identical in terms of their dimensions, proportions, and building techniques. At Priene the naos covered a space of 353 square meters (26.75 × 13.20 m), whereas at Didyma the church was just slightly larger, with an interior space of 387 square meters (25.83 × 15 m). The nave at Priene is about 6.80 meters wide, while that at Didyma is 6.72 meters wide according to the published ground plan. The primary difference between the two churches concerns the placement of the columns. The basilica at Priene had ten columns with intercolumniations of about 1.80 meters. At Didyma, on the other hand, the basilica had only eight columns with wider intercolumniations of some 2.35 meters. As at Priene, older material was reused at Didyma, and little care was taken in its placement. At Didyma the columns of the ground floor were assembled from *spolia*. For the galleries, by contrast, new capitals

were made. They are similar to those used in the *Bischofskirche* at Miletus and were perhaps sculpted in the same workshop.<sup>10</sup>

The *Bischofskirche* is the older of two churches excavated at Miletus. Its construction was completed before that of the Justinianic city walls and is therefore dated to the early sixth century A.D. at the latest.<sup>11</sup> It has the form of a basilica with galleries and includes an atrium to the west and additional rooms, including a baptistery and a chapel of central plan, at the sides. The decoration was quite rich; columns and capitals were carved, and the floors were covered with figural mosaics. Most striking, however, is the small size of the *Bischofskirche*, the nave of which covered a space of only 257 square meters (18 × 14.30 m) and was divided from the side aisles by only six columns.

These comparisons suggest that the basilica at Priene was probably also of the type with galleries above the side aisles, even though this is not definitively proven by the preserved material on site. Access to the galleries was probably obtained by a stair ramp adjoining the building, since there is no trace of stairs inside the church. The similarity of our basilica with the buildings at Didyma and Miletus is striking and suggests that the church at Priene (phase 2) must also have been built in the late fifth or early sixth century A.D. In any case, basilicas with wooden roof, columns, and galleries were a widespread phenomenon and render a precise dating impossible.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps of more interest than the standard building type employed are the reasons for the selection of the site (phase 1). At Didyma, the church was built in the middle of the ancient temple. Its construction, therefore, signals the replacement of pagan worship by Christianity, since the members of a pagan community would not have been allowed to enter a holy enclosure reserved for priests. Presumably, reoccupation of the traditional religious space was more important at the famous oracle of Didyma than at Priene, where a similar attitude guiding the selection of the site is not appar-

<sup>10</sup> Peschlow, "Byzantinische Plastik," 211.

<sup>11</sup> W. Müller-Wiener, "Die 'Grosse Kirche' (sog. Bischofskirche) in Milet," *IstMitt* 23/24 (1973/74): 131–34, plan 3; Peschlow, "Byzantinische Plastik," 211.

<sup>12</sup> R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 4th ed. (Harmondsworth, 1986), 106 ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 484.

<sup>9</sup> H. Knackfuß and T. Wiegand, *Didyma* (Berlin, 1941), 29–37; U. Peschlow, "Byzantinische Plastik in Didyma," *IstMitt* 25 (1975): 211.

ent. Here, the church is situated well outside the temple precinct, near the bath and theater. The presence of revised building material, like the columns from the stoa on the terrace of Athena, does not indicate that a certain edifice was pulled down because of religious reasons. Secular reasons likely played a role in the selection of the site, for example, the availability of an inexpensive piece of land. Precisely when the site was leveled for the church is not known, but it cannot be excluded that construction of the basilica had begun already in the first half of the fifth century A.D., that is, when the first bishops from Priene are recorded.<sup>13</sup>

The wooden-roofed basilica was altered by the construction of piers (phase 3), which divided the nave into three bays. It is likely that these bays were covered by arches, vaults, or even domes. Similar rebuilding programs characterized by the addition or even replacement of older columns with piers are known from several other basilicas. In Binbirkilise, church no. 1 was restored during the ninth century A.D., after the town had been deserted for a long period. Rectangular piers were placed in front of the supports of the early Byzantine period in order to carry a new vault over the nave.<sup>14</sup> At Binbirkilise it is believed that this change was effected to achieve a different conception of space (*Raumgedanke*) rather than for structural reasons. Generally, piers in the churches of Asia Minor probably date to the ninth century A.D.<sup>15</sup> We may argue, however, that the alternation of columns and piers, as well as the domed or vaulted form of basilica, was not unknown in the sixth century A.D. The church at Priene can be compared, for example, with a church from the nearby island of Samos. Here, at Pythagorion in 1979, a church was excavated that had been incorporated into an older building, the so-called Don-tia.<sup>16</sup> The three-aisled basilica has an externally polygonal apse, a narthex, and an atrium. The

naos is 330 square meters (22 × 15 m), the same area as the basilica at Priene, and the nave is also 6.80 meters wide. During a later restoration, the church was outfitted with piers alternating with two columns. The piers (1.25 m long, 1 m wide) are thinner than those at Priene, but colossal piers at the outer walls indicate that the space was vaulted. The rebuilding can be dated to Justinianic times by its architectural decoration. Finally, we should recall the great buildings of the sixth century, such as the church of St. John in Ephesos<sup>17</sup> or the basilica at the nymphaeum in Hierapolis in Phrygia,<sup>18</sup> whose impressive masonry vaults may well have influenced the rebuilding of formerly wooden-roofed basilicas elsewhere.

#### THE LITURGICAL FURNITURE

The liturgical furniture of the Priene basilica is relatively well preserved. The synthronon in the apse and the foundations of the altar and ambo in the nave are still partly *in situ*. In addition, there are approximately fifty pieces of chancel screens and posts, preserved either completely or as fragments in the church.<sup>19</sup>

At the synthronon, two different states can be distinguished. At first it featured four steps and was covered by plaster colorfully painted in imitation of small marble slabs. Later, probably during phase 3 of the building, the synthronon was rebuilt in brick and reduced in size to just three steps.<sup>20</sup>

The most important furnishing to survive is the ambo (Figs. 3, 4), which can be reconstructed in most of its parts.<sup>21</sup> In the nave lies an octagonal plinth for the small columns that carried the platform, now lost. West of this stands a staircase on a socle, which is worked

<sup>13</sup>Wiegand, *Priene*, 475 f.

<sup>14</sup>M. Restle, "Binbirkilise," *RBK* 1:699.

<sup>15</sup>W. Nausch, "Untersuchungen zur Pfeilerbasilika in Kleinasien" (Ph.D. diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, 1977), 55, 58, 163.

<sup>16</sup>Short report by K. Tsakos, *AA* 34 (1979): Χρονικά 355–57, pl. 162b-d; N. Poulou-Papademetriou, "Samos paléochréienne: l'apport du matériel archéologique" (Ph.D. diss., Sorbonne, 1985), 73–78, pls. 42–45.

<sup>17</sup>H. Hörmann, *Die Johanneskirche*, Forschungen in Ephesos 4.3 (Vienna, 1951), 157 ff, pl. 68 f; M. Büyükkolancı, "Zur Bauchronologie der justinianischen Johanneskirche in Ephesos," *Akten des 12. Internationalen Kongresses für Christliche Archäologie, Bonn 22.–28. September 1991, JbAC Ergänzungsband 20.1* (Münster, 1995), 598–602.

<sup>18</sup>P. Verzone, "Hierapolis," *RBK* 2:1215–20.

<sup>19</sup>For a detailed catalogue, see Westphalen, "Basilika von Priene," 330–39, nos. 62–117.

<sup>20</sup>For details see *ibid.*, 303–5, fig. 13, pl. 36.1.

<sup>21</sup>Verzone, "La 'Cattedrale' di Priene," 272 ff, figs. 9–13; O. Feld, "Christliche Denkmäler aus Milet," *IstMitt* 25 (1975): 198 f, pl. 34.2; *idem*, *Spätantike und frühes Christentum, Propyläen Kunstgeschichte, suppl. 1*, ed. B. Brenk (Frankfurt, 1977), 168, no. 133; Peschlow, "Byzantinische Plastik," 238, fig. 2, pl. 49.4.

as a monolith from a square block of marble. It has four risers, the upper one of which is half as high as the three below. The top of the staircase is flat. The sides are divided by semi-circular niches and decorated with reliefs of vine scrolls and peacocks. Only the central section of the ambo remains *in situ*. A fragment belonging to a second staircase of this ambo was also found. Perhaps more important was the discovery of another block, also decorated with vine scrolls and containing two risers, the lower one of which is half as high as the upper one. This block fits perfectly with the remains *in situ*, and together they form the complete staircase of the ambo. It consists of five risers leading to the now lost platform that lay ca. 1.90 meters above the floor level. The type of ambo with two flanking staircases is widespread.<sup>22</sup> The construction of staircases out of massive blocks, together with its decoration of vine scrolls and peacocks, is limited to the region of Caria and Ionia.<sup>23</sup> The ambo of Priene is, thus, a representative example of this regional type.

The fragments from the chancel screens are particularly numerous and indicate a variety of liturgical functions. Most are screens that served to divide the public from the altar. There are, however, clear signs of another screen that separated the nave from the aisles. Vertical grooves in the columns (Fig. 5a) were carved to receive closure slabs, of which no parts remain. The size and shape of these slabs can, however, be easily deduced from the form of the sockets. The slabs were placed around 60 centimeters above the floor, most likely on a socle of stone or bricks. They were between 90 and 100 centimeters high and capped with a cornice. The sockets are still to be seen on eighteen drums, which belong to phase 1 of the church. Such high screens placed between the nave and aisles were perhaps used to separate men and women, as described by John Chrysostom in the churches of Antioch.<sup>24</sup> These

divisions of the aisles of the church were abandoned by the time of its second construction phase.

The chancel screens dividing the altar from the nave (the *templon*) were rearranged several times. To phase 1 belong the screens and the piers that, according to an inscription, were donated by a certain Iulianos, an *ep-archikos* (Figs. 6, 11e, f). The screens are decorated on the front side with a lattice pattern, on the back with a cross.<sup>25</sup> This screen arrangement was presumably demolished, at the latest, during the rebuilding of the church. In phase 2, the chancel was placed between the third pair of columns. The southern column is still *in situ* (Fig. 5b). On its northern side is a groove intended to hold a screen. The western side of the column is marked by crosses, parts of which are carefully carved and were originally filled with metal, parts of which are scratched, much like *graffitto*. In phase 3, the chancel was placed even further to the west. Of its screens only their impressions made in the plaster of the large piers are preserved. These changes in the chancel screens reflect the various rebuildings of the church. In every phase, the liturgical furniture was restored or, to a certain extent, replaced.

The church contained other liturgical furniture as well, fragments of which are preserved, but cannot be easily reconstructed. To this group belong posts of different dimensions and bearing different patterns. The posts of the chancel screen of phase 1 have a simple soffit decoration (Fig. 11e) on the front side (101 cm high). From these a post of the same size can be distinguished, decorated with a vine scroll (Fig. 11b). Some larger posts (135 cm high) were provided with simple flutes or with soffit decoration (Figs. 7, 11a). The screens likewise, are heterogeneous. The slabs decorated with a lattice pattern have already been mentioned (Figs. 6, 11f). There were also large screens (131 cm high) bearing a simple cross

<sup>22</sup>P. Jakobs, *Die frühchristlichen Ambone Griechenlands* (Bonn, 1987), 44–50.

<sup>23</sup>Feld, "Christliche Denkmäler," pls. 34, 35; Peschlow, "Byzantinische Plastik," pl. 49. M. Falla-Castelfranchi, "Amboni carii: un caso desueto," in *Bild und Formensprache der spätantiken Kunst. Hugo Brandenburg zum 65. Geburtstag* [Boreas 17] (Münster, 1994), 49–52.

<sup>24</sup>F. van de Paverd, *Zur Geschichte der Messliturgie in Antiochia und Konstantinopel gegen Ende des vierten Jahrhunderts:*

*Analyse der Quellen bei Johannes Chrysostomos, OCA 187* (Rome, 1970), 25–27.

<sup>25</sup>Wiegand, *Priene*, 482–84, figs. 590, 591, 596, 597; T. Ulbert, "Studien zur dekorativen Reliefplastik des östlichen Mittelmeerraumes (Schrankenplatten des 4.–10. Jahrhunderts)" (Ph.D. diss., Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, 1968), cat. 29, no. 85, text 16; Verzone, "La 'Cattedrale' di Priene," 266, fig. 6.7; Schultze, *Allchristliche Städte*, 140 f, fig. 50.

(Figs. 10, 11c) and lower screens (67 cm high) with rhomboid decoration (Figs. 9, 11d). The most richly decorated screen (Fig. 8) bears a cross and two confronted peacocks (79 cm high).

The decorated sculpture exhibits several common characteristics. The motifs are limited to a few common symbols and patterns. The relief is simply carved. The marble was mainly reused *spolia*. All features indicate that the liturgical furniture was made by workshops in the region and was not imported from Constantinople or elsewhere. Beyond these similarities, however, the pieces have obvious differences. As one example, we can compare the ambo (Figs. 3, 4) with the screen decorated with peacocks (Fig. 8). In each the tail feathers are rendered differently: on the screen, the eyes of the feathers appear like pearls on a string, whereas on the ambo the eyes are carefully differentiated from the hatched barbs of the feathers. Differences can also be recognized between the ambo and the post with the vine scroll (Fig. 11b). On the post, the leaves are formed as stylized hearts, whereas the vine leaves of the ambo are rendered in a more naturalistic manner with four or five leaf tips. Stylistic differences are likewise apparent in the carving technique. The motifs are incised, as in the slabs containing the rhomboid decoration (Figs. 9, 11d), or are worked in high relief, as in the large screens with a cross surrounded by a circle (Figs. 10, 11c). How can we explain these differences? The material might not have been worked at the same time. As we have shown, the church underwent fundamental reconstruction, and the chancel screens were altered several times. The screens and posts might have been restored and reworked again and again. In any case, the sculpted material is not suitable for showing temporal differences or for presenting chronological variations. Moreover, it is highly questionable that workshops existed in early Byzantine Priene. Perhaps the liturgical furniture was ordered from foreign shops, or perhaps itinerant craftsmen traveled to Priene when required. Presumably

they were Ionian or Carian, but they cannot be localized with any certainty. Only rarely can good parallels for the Priene carvings be found. The slabs with the rhomboid motif (Figs. 9, 11d), for example, can be compared with an ambo in the *Bischofskirche* in Miletus. As in Priene, the motifs there are shallowly carved with a round groove.<sup>26</sup> The dating of the *Bischofskirche* to the late fifth or early sixth century A.D. can thus suggest a similar date for the slabs in Priene. The church at Didyma was built at the same time. To this edifice belong posts decorated with vine scrolls that are markedly similar to those on the post in Priene (Fig. 11b). In both cases, two leaves and a fruit grow out of each tendril. These examples reflect well-known motifs taken up by the workshops in the Proconnesos and subsequently spread all over the Byzantine world. Closely related motifs can be found in the chancel screen sculpted in the 530s A.D. and reused in the Romanesque Schola Cantorum of San Clemente in Rome.<sup>27</sup>

To conclude, we note that the relief sculpture of Priene demonstrates the same dichotomy that Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann observed at Ephesos: while the motifs are similar to those found at Constantinople and surroundings, the workmanship is different. The situation at Ephesos is paradigmatic. Local workshops were still active everywhere in Asia Minor during late antiquity, although on a more modest scale. Deichmann's judgment concerning the workshops of Ephesos, that is, that they were still producing some worthy, albeit simple, works, is valid for Priene as well.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>O. Feld, "Milet 1972," *IstMitt* 23/24 (1973/74): 136 f, pl. 38, 3.4.

<sup>27</sup>F. Guidobaldi, C. Barsanti, and A. G. Guidobaldi, *San Clemente: la scultura del VI secolo*, San Clemente Miscellany 4.2 (Rome, 1992), 210 f, figs. 136–97. See also U. Peschlow, "Zum Templon in Konstantinopel," in Ἀρχαὶς Τιμητικὸς τόμος στὸν καθηγητὴ Ν. Κ. Μουτσόπουλο (Thessalonike, 1991), 3:1449–75.

<sup>28</sup>F. W. Deichmann, "Zur spätantiken Bauplastik von Ephesos," *Mansel'e Armağan, Mélanges Mansel* (Ankara, 1974), 549–70; reprinted in *Rom, Ravenna, Konstantinopel, Naher Osten* (Wiesbaden, 1982), 560 f, 570 f.