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Constantinople: The Fabric of the City
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INTRODUCTION

Constantinople: The Fabric of the City

O how great is that noble and beautiful city! How many monasteries, how many palaces there are, fashioned in a wonderful way! How many wonders there are to be seen in the squares and in the different parts of the city!

Like Fulcher of Chartres, writing nine hundred years ago, we still find great fascination in the city of Constantinople. Although it is the center around which our Byzantine studies revolve, our knowledge of the Byzantine city remains rather limited. It can hardly compare with what our counterparts in classics know about ancient Athens or Rome. Constantinople has not benefited from the decades of careful, systematic excavations these cities have enjoyed. Moreover, Constantinople lacks the equivalent of the American School in Athens, where even the most bookish of philologists are regularly subjected to *in situ* lectures on archaeology, so that they come away with a vivid image of the settings for the important events of antiquity.

Confronting the modern megalopolis of Istanbul unaided can be a daunting experience for the Byzantinist. The population has swelled in recent decades to more than twelve million, and remnants of the past diminish in visibility as the city grows. Our impression of Byzantine Constantinople is consequently limited to isolated “monuments of unageing intellect,” which present, at best, the distilled essence of the city’s historic greatness. That is to say, we know Constantinople more as a concept than as a reality. Or, to put it another way, we know a great deal in detail but very little in general. We are familiar with the intricate movements of the Byzantine liturgy, but we are completely lost when we set foot outside the church door. Similarly, we know the stations and acclamations and even the costume changes involved in an imperial triumph, but we are unsure as to the size and shape of the public spaces it traversed. And, if we step off the Mese, we are in *terra incognita*. Moreover, it is perhaps ironic that the two most influential institutions in Byzantine society, and the institutions that have left us the best documentation—monasticism and the imperial court—are perhaps the most difficult for us to visualize today.

With these issues in mind, we organized the 1998 Dumbarton Oaks Symposium, “Constantinople: The Fabric of the City.” Our intention was to address the shape and development of Constantinople, its planning, its structures, its image and character—that is, the city as a living, three-dimensional entity. The symposium was interdisciplinary,

with scholars of different backgrounds and interests addressing the city from their own perspectives, reconstructing in words and images the settings for the events that shaped the Byzantine world. We are pleased that many of the papers presented at the symposium could be included in this volume.

Several themes emerged in the course of the symposium. The first is the fruitful conjunction of archaeology, that is, the study of the physical remains of the city, with the study of texts. By themselves, a brief reference in a text or a fragmentary remnant of a structure may tell us relatively little, but in combination they can be very informative indeed. The texts give life to the masonry, and the masonry gives credence to the texts.

A second theme is the usefulness of comparative studies. The better preserved monuments in other cities can throw light on the exiguous remains of Constantinople. This has been demonstrated for all aspects of the city, whether it be the reconstruction of the Hippodrome and its functions, the placing of commercial activities in their settings, or the reconstruction of churches, palaces, and other buildings.

A third theme concerns the physical remnants of the Byzantine city and their incorporation into the expanded city of Istanbul. In spite of modern urban renewal, a significant amount of the Byzantine city still remains visible: at the same time, however, these survivals are insufficiently surveyed and recorded. There are, for example, many vestiges of residential buildings in the city, in addition to its better known churches. And the churches themselves, through careful observation of the Byzantine remains in their vicinity, can be reintegrated into their Byzantine urban settings.

A fourth theme has been the vision of Constantinople as a mosaic of daily life, a city made up of many neighborhoods, each with its local churches, monasteries, shops, and baths. Even the cloistered monastics interacted with their local communities. These different neighborhoods were linked through commercial and other activities, and also through the streets and water systems, the evolution of which throws light on the residential development of the city. The examination of the fabric of the city provides a vivid picture of its daily life—the best places to live, where to buy a book or a pig, where to take a bath, and even how to build a vault.

Finally, in spite of significant changes, elements of the Byzantine city survived into Ottoman times. The gardens of the Mangana were preserved, in part, under the ramparts of Topkapı Palace; churches were converted to mosques; the Turkish bath continued the tradition of the Byzantine bath, even if not in the same structures; shopping took place in similar locations, but in covered bazaars instead of porticoed streets. Even today, the Hippodrome can serve as a focal point for public ceremonies and entertainments. If it is no longer possible to have chariot races, it is still possible to see folk dancers and musicians performing in front of the Obelisk of Theodosius, before the marble gazes of the Byzantine emperor and his court.

Istanbul has always been a city with ghosts, ghosts of its past that have lingered and have refused to be eradicated by future ages. For the Byzantines themselves, Constantinople was haunted by the ghosts of pagan antiquity in the form of statues and other monuments. For the present-day inhabitants of Istanbul, it is the ghosts of Byzantium that, in turn, haunt the city. When we first planned this symposium, we were afraid that the ghosts might be fading away, as the vestiges of monuments were swept under the tide of progress and modernization. Hence, our initial aim was to reinvigorate the study of

the physical remains of the Byzantine city and, to summon, as it were, the ghosts back to life. However, as the symposium and subsequent events have demonstrated, the ghosts have proved to be more robust than we initially thought.

Since the 1998 Dumbarton Oaks symposium took place, Byzantine Constantinople has witnessed a flurry of activity, ranging from new archaeological discoveries dramatically announced by the international press, to new programs—less dramatic, yet no less important—for survey and documentation, and new initiatives for the preservation and restoration of the historic monuments. In addition, a major collection devoted to Byzantine studies has been bequeathed to the library of the American Research Institute in Turkey, broadening the scope of research now possible in Istanbul. Several international scholarly organizations are now planning to hold their conferences in Istanbul, and scholarly studies and discussions continue. Notably, our symposium was followed by a workshop on “Byzantine Constantinople: Monuments, Topography, and Daily Life,” which took place *in situ* in Istanbul, organized by Boğaziçi University and the Institut Français des Études Anatoliennes in April 1999. The papers from the workshop are now being prepared for publication.

In conclusion, we wish to thank those responsible for facilitating the symposium and this resulting publication. We are grateful to the Senior Fellows of the program in Byzantine studies, who adopted the topic and provided valuable advice. In addition, thanks are owed to the Director of Byzantine Studies, Alice-Mary Talbot, for her continual support, and to Allison Sobke and Sarah Gordon, who shouldered most of the practical arrangements for the meeting. Most of all, however, our gratitude is due to the former Director, Angeliki Laiou, who created a fertile ground for the project to grow.

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