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A Byzantine church at Sirkeci in Istanbul

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In the early spring of 2000, during construction work for an office building in Sirkeci, the remains of a badly damaged Byzantine structure were exposed. The structure, provisionally identified as a church, is located on a site that is key to understanding the Byzantine topography of the Sirkeci district of modern Istanbul. The dedication of the church, which is a subject for debate, remains unknown.¹ This paper describes the structure and discusses possible interpretations of it, before putting forward a tentative identification of its dedication. As such, it seeks to pave the way for future research, since a resolution of this question would shed important new light on the archaeology and topography of the area.

The structure was found where Ankara Caddesi and Ebusuud Caddesi, two of the main streets in Sirkeci, bisect each other at right-angles. Unfortunately, most of the structure was completely destroyed by bulldozers during the demolition of modern buildings, except for what may be the main apse and *prothesis* of two *pastophoria*. The author was alerted to the existence of this structure by a colleague and, with the collaboration of Istanbul Archaeological Museum, it was possible to preserve *in situ* what remained of the church (Fig. 1).

When fully exposed, the east wall of the structure was found to be in a very good state of preservation, revealing that the building had been of substantial proportions, with a tri-apsidal east end. The brick walls were constructed in 'Recessed Brickwork', suggesting that the structure dates to the 11th or 12th century.² The main, central, apse and adjacent surviving area of the east wall stand over six metres high and are constructed of rubble faced with four courses of brick and at least one course of stone (Fig. 2). Only a

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very small part of the superstructure of the main apse is still visible – an area some six metres in length (Fig. 3). The existing walls are approximately one metre thick, with 11 cm of mortar between each of the brick courses. During recording of the main apse, fragmentary human remains were found.

Additional courses of fine brickwork were found nearly 20m west of the apsed structure, unfortunately almost completely destroyed by the bulldozers. From these, the approximate length of the substructure may be extrapolated as at least 19m. Among the finds from this area are some fragments of marble revetments and a few glass sherds (Fig. 6).

The apses, surviving plan and alignment are consistent with this being a Middle Byzantine church. If so, the burial in the main apse may be that of a priest, a patron or another revered individual. The most striking aspect of this building is the predominance of recessed brickwork (Figs. 4 & 5). The oldest known example of this construction technique is found at St. Mary Peribleptos in the Koca Mustafa Paşa district of western Istanbul.³ However, all of the Byzantine churches that are textually attested in the Sirkecki area were built earlier than the Peribleptos church. If the newly-exposed church is one of these, then its recessed brickwork walls could even be the earliest example of this technique in Constantinople, although it could just as easily represent the undocumented rebuilding of an earlier church.

The topographical context

The Byzantine topography of the district today known as Sirkeci is not wholly understood. The main avenue, Ankara Caddesi, divides the district into two major parts. These are broadly equivalent to the Genoese and Pisan concessions of the Middle Byzantine period. As such, the newly-exposed church probably stood in the Genoese concession. By 991, Italian merchants, especially Venetians, had commercial franchises in the capital and, in 1112, Alexios Comnenos (1081-1118) granted the Pisans same privileges as the

Venetians.⁴ These two communities had privileged access to the two harbours of Prosopharion and Neorion. The Genoese concession had access to the Prosopharion harbour and the Pisan concession, which was probably on the other side of present-day Ankara Caddesi, had access to the Neorion.⁵

Although it probably stood in the Genoese concession, the dedication of the church remains uncertain. Several Byzantine churches are textually-attested as having been located in this area and so there are several possible dedications. As a substantial church, it is possible that it formed part of a textually-attested complex. The best-known secular complex in this area is the so-called 'Palace of Botanieates'. The precise location of this complex remains uncertain, although it is often, probably wrongly, associated with a structure on Cemal Nadir Caddesi, one km from the Sirkeci church.⁶ Because of its location at Sirkeci, it might be supposed that this Middle Byzantine ruin was part of the 'Palace of Botanieates' complex but the distance between them renders this unlikely and, in any case, other churches are known to have stood in this area.

Identification of the church

Topographical criteria are important to any consideration of possible dedications. Janin's topographical work forms a vital starting point here.⁷ Among the attested churches in the Sirkeci area the Kauleas Monastery was perhaps the largest and most prestigious monastic establishment, given that it is mentioned in association with Emperor Leo VI (886-912).⁸ The Kauleas Monastery, also known as the Monastery of St. Antony (Moni tou Kyr), was built by Patriarch Antonius II Kauleas (893-891) near the Neorion harbour.⁹ Russian travellers visited it in the Middle Byzantine period, although they appear to have mistakenly located it near St. John Studios in the west of the city.¹⁰ The monastery's beautiful mosaic decoration is described in some texts.¹¹ However, it is generally agreed that it was very near to present day Yeni

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Cami or Balik Pazarı, so it is very unlikely to be the same church as that newly exposed at Sirkeci.¹² Another church that might be taken into consideration is the church of St. Demetrios, of which very little is known. Janin claims that it was located in the Sirkeci quarter and for this reason it is considered here, although it is perhaps more likely to have been located further to the south and west, near the district of Kumkapi.¹³

Hagia Dynamis, which was dedicated to the Divine Power of God in the 11th century, must also be taken into consideration.¹⁴ This date would fit well with the recessed brickwork on the Sirkeci Church, but since Hagia Dynamis was apparently constructed very near the Neorion harbour it is unlikely to be represented by the Sirkeci substructure.

There are four other churches in this area that seem more plausible as candidates for the newly-exposed church. These include the monasteries of Theodosiu and Mondila, both of which were constructed in the 11th and 12th centuries, like the Sirkeci church. While acknowledging that little is known about these churches, Janin suggests that they were both located in the Sirkeci district, in the area that was once a Genoese Concession.¹⁵ Given their topographical proximity to the Genoese colony and their foundation dates, these two monasteries cannot be eliminated.

The two remaining known churches share characteristics with the Sirkeci substructure. These were the churches dedicated to the Virgin and St. Michael respectively. Both are thought to have been located in an area formerly known as 'Eugeniu', which Janin argues was around Sirkeci.¹⁶ One of these, the church dedicated to the Virgin, was constructed during the reign of Theodosius I (379-395). According to Janin, it was in the south of Eugeniu, which would make it rather too far from the Sirkeci church for that dedication to be attributed it. Yet, more recently, Berger has located it in the centre of the area, and much nearer to the newly-exposed structure so, like Hagia Dynamis, it cannot be eliminated from our enquiry.¹⁷ However, it should be remembered that whereas the church of Sirkeci is Middle Byzantine in date (or at

least substantially repaired in the Middle Byzantine period) the church of the Virgin dates from the 4th century. The last of the four possibilities is that dedicated to St. Michael.¹⁸ Janin argues that it must have been near the present-day Sirkeci railway station, based on a reading of the accounts of Patriarch Matheius I in the 14th century.¹⁹ This would accord well with the location of the Sirkeci church.

Conclusion

It is, of course, possible that none of the churches discussed above represent the newly-exposed church at Sirkeci and instead, it may simply be one of the several undocumented Byzantine Churches of Istanbul. It is to be hoped that further research will be carried out on this structure, in order to enhance our knowledge and understanding of the Byzantine archaeology of the city, and especially the Sirkeci district.

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Plan and cross-section of the Sirkeci church

Fig.1 The prothesis and the main apse

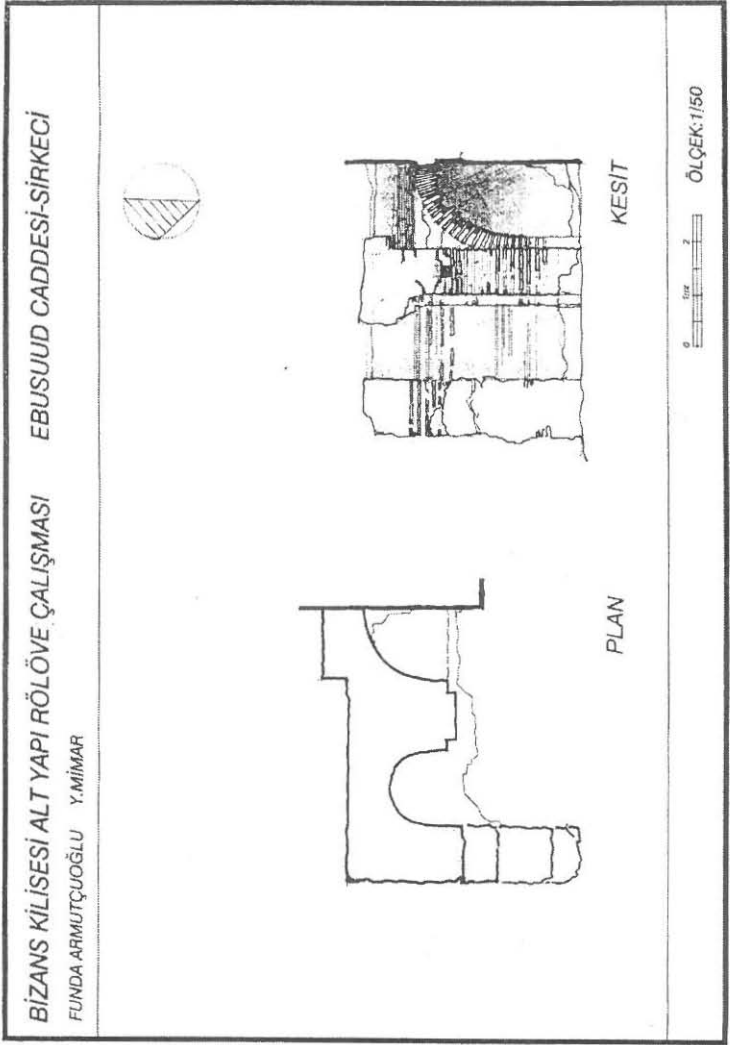
Fig.2 The main apse from the East

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Fig.5 Brick layers in the main apse

Fig.6 Metal, marble, glass and ceramic sherds



Plan and Cross-section of the Sirkeci Church



Fig.1 The prothesis and the main apse



Fig.2 The main apse from the East



Fig.3. The main apse and prothesis from the West



Fig. 4. Metal, marble, glass and ceramic sherds



Fig. 5. North-East corner of the main apse, showing concealed brick technique



Fig. 6. Brick layers in the main apse

NOTES

¹ This church was first discussed at the 20th International Congress for Byzantine Studies, held at Paris in 2001. See Ferudun Özgümüş, 'Recent Archaeological Survey in Istanbul', *XX. Congres International des Etudes Byzantines. College de France-Sorbonne. 19-25 Aout 2001, Pre Actes. II. Tables Rondes* (Paris, Association International des Etudes Byzantines, 2001), p. 251. I am grateful to Dr A. V. Çobanoğlu of Istanbul University for first drawing my attention to the existence of this structure.

² For the recessed brickwork technique see Robert Ousterhout, *Master builders of Byzantium* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999).

³ C. Mango, 'The Monastery of St. Mary Peribleptos (Sulu Manastır) at Constantinople Revisited', *Revue des Etudes Arméniennes*, XXIII (1992): pp. 473-93, pp. 474-5.

⁴ E. Mamboury, *The Tourist's Istanbul* (Istanbul, Rizzo & Son, 1953), pp. 38-40.

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⁵ For the two harbours see W. Müller-Wiener, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbul* (Wasmuth, Tübingen, 1974), pp. 57-8. See also A. Van Millingen, *Byzantine Constantinople: The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historical Sites* (London, J. Murray, 1889), pp. 219-28. Ferudun Dirimtekin, *Fetihten Önce Haliç Surları* (Istanbul, Istanbul Enstitüsü, 1956), pp. 57-8.

⁶ B. Paluka, 'Ruinen eines Byzantinischen Baues aus dem X. Jahrhundert', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Excursions Klubs in Konstantinopel*, II (1895): pp. 2-40. L. de Beylie, *L'Habitation Byzantine Les Anciennes maisons de Constantinople - Supplement* (Paris, E. Leroux, 1903), pp. 6-7; Martin Schede, 'Archäologische Funde-Turkei', *Archäologischer Anzeiger-Beiblatt I/II* (1929): pp. 342-3. A. M. Schneider, *Byzans: Vorarbeiten zur Topographie und Archäologie der Stadt* (Amsterdam, A. M. Hakkert, 1967), p. 91. Müller-Wiener, *Bildlexikon*, p. 41.

⁷ R. Janin, *La Géographie Ecclésiastique de L'Empire Byzantin: Le Siège de Constantinople et le Patriarcat Ecuménique. Les Eglises et les Monastères*, 2nd ed. (Paris, Publications de l'Institut français d'études byzantines, 1969); also R. Janin, *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et répertoire Topographique*, 2nd ed. (Paris, Institut français d'études byzantines, 1964).

⁸ Janin, *La Géographie Ecclésiastique*, pp. 39-41.

⁹ A. D. Mordtmann, 'Topographique de Constantinople', *Revue de l'art chrétien*, IX (1891): pp. 47-9; A. Cutler & A. M. Talbot, 'Antony II Kauleas', *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium I* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 125.

¹⁰ G. P. Majeska, *Russian Travellers to Constantinople in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries* (Washington, Dumbarton Oaks, 1984), p. 283.

¹¹ J. P. Richter, *Quellen der Byzantinischen Kunstgeschichte* (Wien, C. Graeser, 1897), p. 230; A. Frolow, 'Deux Eglises Byzantines d'après des sermons peu connus de Leon VI Le Sage', *Études Byzantines III* (1945-6): pp. 43-91. C. Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire (312-1453), Sources and Documents* (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 202.

¹² For a more detailed description of the location of this church see V. Kidonopoulos, *Bauten in Konstantinopel 1204-1328* (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994), pp. 13-14.

¹³ Janin, *La Géographie Ecclésiastique*, pp. 92-3. Kidonopoulos, *Bauten*, pp. 37-8.

¹⁴ The Divine Strength was one of three characteristics attributed to God. Each characteristic had a church in Constantinople: St. Sophia (Holy Wisdom) and St.

Irene (Divine Peace). All three are discussed in Janin, *La Geographie Ecclesiastique*, p. 101.

¹⁵ Janin, *La Geographie Ecclesiastique*, pp. 146 and 320.

¹⁶ Janin, *Topographique*, p. 349.

¹⁷ A. Berger, *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos* (Bonn, R. Habelt, 1998), p. 428.

¹⁸ It has been argued that churches dedicated to St. Michael are usually early in date as St. Michael was believed in the Early Christian period to be the commander of the faithful against the idolaters. See Ferudun Özgümüş, *Anadolu'da Kiliseye Çevrilmiş Yunan ve Roma Tapınakları* (İst. Üniv. Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Yayınlanmamış Doktora Tezi, İstanbul, 1994), p. 117.

¹⁹ Janin, *La Geographie Ecclesiastique*, p.341.