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KEN DARK – JAN KOSTENEC, *Hagia Sophia in Context. An Archaeological Re-Examination of the Cathedral of Byzantine Constantinople*. Oxford – Havertown, PA: Oxbow Books 2019. X, 141 pp. – ISBN 978-1-78925-030-5 (£55.00)

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The six years preceding the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque by the Turkish government witnessed the publication of important monographs dedicated to this iconic cathedral of Constantinople. All of them treat topics that, if not previously totally neglected, had not received the attention they deserved. In chronological order, and starting with 2014, we have the books by NADINE SCHIBILLE (on its natural illumination), NATALIA TETERIATNIKOV (on its Justinianic mosaics), BISSERA PENTCHEVA (on music and acoustics), and ALESSANDRO TADDEI (on architectural and other history before 532). The book under review is a significant addition to this list, yet different in approach and thematic orientation. It is the final report on a project that involved the authors' personal archaeological investigation of parts of the church complex and its surrounding space during the years 2004–2018. This resulted in a number of separately published papers, which the authors now consider as replaced by this larger and more comprehensive publication. Indeed, the book delves into several specific matters concerning the topography of the church complex, whether this points to Hagia Sophia's building as a whole or, more often, precise constructions in its interior and exterior. Descriptions and material analyses of the various sites examined by the authors are followed by a discussion of the functional aspects of these constructions. The discussion is fleshed out by no fewer than 97 photos and plans accompanying the text as well as 14 color plates appended to the end of the volume. The book is usefully furnished with a rich bibliography in which, as regards primary sources, one omission should be noted: the 1912 edition of Paul Silentiarios' *Ekphrasises* by P. FRIEDLÄNDER is now superseded by CLAUDIO DE STEFANI's new Teubner edition (2011). It is regrettable that the book has no indexes inasmuch as it is often hard for the reader to cope with the citing system, i.e., the in-text citation of primary sources and secondary bibliography.

The introduction and the five chapters of this book substantiate the authors' contention that, in the study of Hagia Sophia, art historians have reaped the lion's share whereas archaeologists still have much to say about this magnificent construction. By and large, the authors make their own descriptions and observations of specific sections of the building complex, especially, those adjoining or surrounding the main edifice, and then they revise previous assessments and submit new interpretations. As they note at one point, '... at least from the sixth century, the church as a building has to be seen in the context of the surrounding structures' (p. 72).

The introduction rehearses the history of the Constantinopolitan cathedral, the phases that its study underwent once it was decreed to function as a museum, and the approaches taken at times by scholars and scientists alike. As the authors assess, 'no previous archaeological study has attempted to use the material evidence from it as a source for social, economic or cognitive archaeology' (p. 3). Moreover, in their view, several aspects of the architectural plan of the sixth-century church were and still are in need of substantial revision, and this is one point of their focus, the other being the patriarchal complex, its shape, divisions, and exact location. By the same token, modern research must acknowledge that, as it stands, the monument, though essentially identical with the Justinianic church, displays several aspects and details that appeared after the sixth century. These do not solely date from the Ottoman period and as a result of the first conversion of the church into a mosque but, rather, reflect structural additions and modifications during the Byzantine era, and chiefly from the ninth to the fourteenth century.

A brief presentation of the little that is known and the much that is assumed about the first (fourth century) and second (fifth century) Hagia Sophia opens ch. 1, as an introduction to the authors' own contributions to the study of the two pre-Justinianic churches. The sizeable bricks, uniquely stamped on their sides and found in the hypogeum located in the northern part of the sixth-century church, are similar to those preserved from the fourth-century Constantinopolitan hippodrome. The authors surmise that this was a burial place of importance, perhaps hosting the relics of martyrs and prophets, a practice not to be excluded out of hand for the early days of the Church but hardly compatible with its later history and function. In fact, despite the impression transmitted by the record of Russian pilgrims in the last centuries of Byzantium, Hagia Sophia was never identified as a shrine and, as such, did not host any notable collection of holy relics. More

compelling is the argument from the study of the Skeuophylakion and the lower layer of its walls, which, chiefly because of the type of its bricks, permits a pre-Justinianic dating. The existing Skeuophylakion must have thus been constructed in the fifth century and replaced the earlier one of the fourth century. The above reconstruction suggests that the fire of 404 burnt down only the church itself, leaving the surrounding structures unharmed.

Chapters 3 and 4 represent the core of the book not least because they deal with concrete material evidence. The authors investigate several peripheral areas of the church complex, and they are enabled to do so in part because the face of the wall of certain structures was recently stripped of modern plaster. Significantly, apart from these peripheral areas, they also shed light on the main body of the Justinianic church. In ch. 3, entitled 'New Light on Justinian's Hagia Sophia', the reader will first note with interest their examination of the dome base staircases and their contention that they chiefly date from after the sixth century. Nonetheless, the overall tendency is to defend the sixth-century chronology of the areas they studied, such as the four vestibules (the south-west, the south-east, the north-east, and the north-west ones) and the access ramps, some of which bear masons' marks and graffiti. Indeed, should the latter be dated to the sixth century, they would point to a more widespread literacy in the late antique population and would defend the Christian identity of the workers involved in the Justinianic project against the pagan one assigned to Hagia Sophia's architects.

Equally important is the discussion of the newly discovered mosaics and frescoes found in interior parts of the church complex, some of which had previously passed unnoticed. Such is, for instance, the geometric mosaic located in a passage inside the buttress pier at the ground-floor level. In turn, marble slabs above the roof of the exonarthex bear out the hypothesis that the veneer of the west façade of Hagia Sophia extended to other places too, thereby increasing the church's visibility from a distance and its brightness. Ch. 3 is also where the question of the patriarchal palace is first treated, to be reiterated later and in more detail in ch. 4. The authors are in favor of the early chronology of the Large Hall of the Patriarchate, where the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) might have been held. As often in the book, the discussion returns to previously addressed matters, for instance, the south-west vestibule which, in light of the same masonry as that of the antechamber of the Large Hall and the greenstone used, can be safely dated to Justinian's reign. It is then argued that the Baptistery, standing on

the south side of the main edifice, may have been first built as a reception room for the patriarchal palace and then (in the ninth century?) changed its character. The chapter concludes with an essay linking the archeology and the specific arrangements of the sixth-century building with the liturgy and its performance. Much of what was designed in the sixth-century Hagia Sophia was planned in this light.

Ch. 4 is about Hagia Sophia after Justinian. The authors survey modifications traced in the Skeuophylakion and the north-east and south-east vestibules, the latter being associated with the Corridor of St Nicholas and, more generally, developments in the liturgy and ceremonial ritual. A lengthy discussion, well supported by written sources, ensues about the modifications that occurred after the sixth century and are to be observed in the spaces above the south-west vestibule and the exonarthex; they can be identified with upper levels of the Patriarchate constructed in the early seventh century. The authors associate these constructions with a substantial remodeling of a pre-existing complex, then undertaken by patriarch Thomas (hence the Thomaïtes, a name to be associated with the Large Hall of the Patriarchate). It is assumed that the patriarchal library came to be located in this space after it suffered serious damage in the fire of 791. Later developments are to be seen in the Baptistry too, whose discussion focuses on alterations of the middle and late Byzantine period.

A revisionist tendency runs through the examination of the buttresses built in the Byzantine and Ottoman eras in the following pages. To begin with, the south-east buttress is justly discarded as a term for barely representing its real function: to provide, on the one hand, access for patriarchs and emperors to the south gallery of the church and, on the other, to provide communication between the church and the two porches of the Baptistry. The south-east buttress is revisited here in all its preserved details, in order to bring out all its phases of reconstruction and decoration. The reader's attention is inevitably drawn to the poorly preserved mosaics and frescoes covering the rooms on the top of the buttress. In fact, this must have been a chapel for the first time studied at some length in this book and coupled with tentative prosopographical and chronological identifications. Aside from the picture of an enthroned Christ, who is clearly recognizable, the other much-erased figures chiefly depict saintly bishops; judging from the Greek word ΜΕΘΟΔΙΟΣ, which clearly designates patriarch Methodios I as the authors rightly suggest (and not the painter's name, as they suggest as an alternative) and is the only inscription that can be clearly read,

it is plausible to infer that they represented a host of holy patriarchs of Constantinople and that they postdate the end of Iconoclasm (843). This late-ninth-century date is supported also by the type of masonry and may have been the chapel dedicated to St Theophylaktos mentioned in the *Book of Ceremonies*. Though beset with similar difficulties, the discussion of all other buttresses leads to less significant and innovative results. The authors engage with the controversy around the date of the flying buttresses in the west façade of Hagia Sophia. They side with SLOBODAN ĆURČIĆ's suggestion that they are earlier than 1204 and do not reflect an introduction of western architectural practices; rather, they betray late tenth-century repair work undertaken in support of the dome and the west semi-dome. The chapter concludes again with reference to the archeology and liturgy after the Justinianic period and with the significant remark that smaller liturgical spaces, evidenced as later developments, represent an increased need for individual, more private, worship.

The final chapter roams over Constantinople's monumental center as defined by the Great Palace, the hippodrome, and Hagia Sophia, as they came to be shaped in the sixth century. Ideas and suggestions about the shape of the church and its patriarchal palace are adduced by recourse to recent surveys and assessments made in other sites of the late antique empire. The overall endeavor is to provide a clearer and updated picture of the monumental buildings that surrounded Hagia Sophia, namely the Great Palace, the Augustaion and the Senate, the Strategion, and Hagia Eirene. Hagia Sophia was thus erected to physically dominate the surrounding space. If it is hard to disagree with this statement, this is not so with the conclusion that 'the Hagia Sophia complex, completed in a rapidly worsening environment, was a reaffirmation of Orthodox Christian faith and imperial confidence in dramatically altered circumstances' (p. 129). But it is hard to speak of 'a rapidly worsening environment' in the 530s and of 'darkened skies' amidst which the construction of Hagia Sophia took place. Seen from the perspective of this precise decade, the rapid construction of the new Hagia Sophia was a priority for Justinian for the sole reason that it answered those who disputed his rule; it was a strategy to solidify his rule.

There is much to be gained from this book, which draws together hitherto scattered and under-researched areas of the Hagia Sophia complex and, more often than not, ushers in broad and thought-provoking revisions. The authors' decision to arrange their discussion according to a chronological and not a thematic dividing line makes it that the same parts of the mon-

ument are studied in different places of the narrative, but this can hardly be a complaint, especially if historical evolution is prioritized, as it should. Although it is likely that this synthetic work would attract much less attention than all other recent monographs on Hagia Sophia, dealing as they do with more ‘exciting’ topics, its contribution to a better understanding of the cathedral church of Constantinople must be fully acknowledged. KEN DARK and JAN KOSTENEC have granted us generous access inside the Justinianic and post-Justinianic edifice and have successfully tried to solve a great deal of its riddles.

**Keywords**

archaeology; Constantinople; Hagia Sophia; Justinian; mosaics; patriarchate