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The Great Palace in Constantinople and Late Antique Palatine Architecture

Nigel Westbrook: The Great Palace in Constantinople. An Architectural Interpretation. Turnhout: Brepols 2019 (Architectural Crossroads. Studies in the History of Architecture 2). 333 p., 66 ill. € 125.00. ISBN: 978-2-503-56835-5.

Lynda Mulvin/Nigel Westbrook (eds.): Late Antique Palatine Architecture. Palaces and Palace Culture: Patterns of Transculturation. Turnhout: Brepols 2019 (Architectural Crossroads. Studies in the History of Architecture 5). 213 p., 160 ill., 10 tables. € 90.00. ISBN: 978-2-503-57472-1.

It has long been a commonplace in modern scholarship that the evolution of the emperor's residence on the Palatine Hill (*Palatium*) reflects the development and perception of the Roman monarchy. Augustus, who established a military dictatorship in the guise of a 'restored republic', lived in a luxuriant townhouse that was symbolically placed between the temples of Apollo and that of the *Magna Mater*, but still shared the hill with other equally impressive aristocratic houses. Only under Augustus' successors did the imperial residence take over the entire *Palatium* until the name of the hill became synonymous with 'palace'. And only Diocletian and his colleagues and successors built *palatia*/παλάτια in their newly established residence cities such as Milan and Nicomedia, which made manifest the loss of Rome's political primacy and the decentralisation of the Empire, a process that led to the establishment of Constantinople as a second Rome.

Thanks to large-scale excavations on the Palatine Hill and a recent re-evaluation of its ruins – most importantly by the late Ulrike Wulf-Rheidt – the original *palatium* is well known and understood. The same applies to the villas of Tiberius on Capri and of Hadrian in Tivoli, which served as imperial residences after these two unpopular emperors had left Rome and its political drama – which unfolded not just on the Palatine Hill but, even more importantly, in the circus, the theatre, and in the meetings of the Senate. We would like to know more about the *horti* on the urban periphery of Rome

– enclosed parks with extravagant residential architecture – that were established in the late Republic, and became a favourite haunt of Roman emperors. But on the whole, the relationship between the emperors' various residences and the physical manifestation of imperial power and politics in the urban space of Rome is more or less firmly established.

The same does not apply to late Roman palaces in the new residence cities of the fourth century, or to the Great Palace of Constantinople. With the exception of a large section of the palace of Thessaloniki and a small part of the Great Palace, the sprawling urban residences of late Roman and early Byzantine emperors remain unexcavated. We are better informed about provincial and rural imperial residences such as Split, Gamzigrad, and Šarkamen, but these have not been studied in the same detail as their early and high imperial equivalents.

In addition to problems of evidence, the study of late antique imperial residences outside Rome has been hampered by a narrow typological approach towards 'palace architecture'. Previous scholarship has been primarily concerned with which combination of building types constitutes 'palace architecture', whether these types had political and/or symbolic meaning, and where their architectural forms originated. In terms of genuine historical analysis, the debate has mostly focused on architectural citations of prominent palace buildings in Constantinople, how these quotes reflect the political claims of popes and early medieval kings, and what they might mean for the continuity of Roman architectural traditions and their cultural significance.

Two recent books, a monograph on "The Great Palace in Constantinople" by Nigel Westbrook and an edited volume on "Late Antique Palatine Architecture" co-edited by Lynda Mulvin and Westbrook, still tackle late Roman and early Byzantine imperial and royal residences along these lines.

In the revised version of his Reading dissertation, Westbrook attempts an 'architectural interpretation' of the Great Palace, which is a challenging endeavour, as so little of it has survived. The book comes in two parts. Part I situates "The Great Palace in the Context of Late Antique and Early Byzantine Palace Architecture" (10–163). Part II presents an "Interpretation of Archaeological and Textual Evidence for the Building and Topography of the Early Great Palace" (167–278).

Part I is divided in three chapters. In chapter 1 (19–49), Westbrook gives an overview of previous scholarship and previous reconstruction attempts of the Great Palace. Chapter 2 (51–109) offers up an architectural survey of imperial palaces beginning with the Palatine Hill and late Roman and Persian residences that have been labelled 'palaces' by earlier scholarship. Only on p. 88 does Westbrook raise the question of what might constitute a 'palace' in a proper historical sense – without discussing the issue further or offering a definition of his own: "is a residence within which the imperial ritual takes place constituted, even if temporarily, as the seat of empire, and thus as a palace?" Instead of situating 'palatial' architecture within imperial governance and court culture, Westbrook's remains focused on the shape and typology of large audience and dining halls, which are found in all high-status Roman residential buildings, and which were particularly large in imperial villas and urban residences.

Westbrook is very much interested in how these buildings functioned within 'imperial ritual', which, to him, essentially means the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies* compiled for and by Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos. This is a problem, because imperial ritual evolved with the Roman monarchy over the six centuries between the establishment of the Great Palace by Constantine the Great and the Macedonian dynasty. For instance, Julian the Apostate often held court in the Senate House (Amm. 22.3) of Constantinople and not in the palace. This may have been due to Julian's quixotic attempt to mimic Marcus Aurelius, and, indeed, Ammianus Marcellinus, in a rare criticism of the emperor, chided Julian for his lack of dignity in matters of ceremony. Yet, the fully Christianized middle-Byzantine ritual of a palace-bound emperor such as Constantine VII was very much different from imperial ceremonies of the fourth century when most imperial palaces and their main reception and dining halls were first constructed, and the Roman monarchy was – not least in religious terms – both differently structured and mediated.

Of course, Westbrook is aware of the shifting meaning of individual buildings and architectural types, but because his main interest is in architectural symbolism, there is very little analysis of what the ritual use of architecture may mean across different periods. Instead of reading his literary sources historically, Westbrook mines them for information about how some of the most famous ritual spaces of the Great Palace may have looked like. The result is a series of plausible and gorgeous reconstruction

drawings of the Dekanneakoubita, the Chrysotriklinos, and the Sigma, and some equally plausible remarks about their architectural symbolism in chapter 3 (111–163). Yet, Westbrook has to restrict himself to generalities such as the solar symbolism of domes and gold in imperial architecture, because not a shred of archaeological evidence for any of these buildings has yet been uncovered.

The concluding remarks of Part I about the "issue of continuity in the architecture of the Great Palace: spoliation, imitation and inscription" (153–154) are also broad and uncontroversial, not least because they turn on so little evidence. In the end, Westbrook can only come up with six "typologies and motifs" which "became associated with palatine architecture and hence imperial legitimacy" (162). These are well known, but, at least in Late Antiquity, not restricted to imperial architecture, in particular the "raised covered garden promenade, portico and xystus" (162), "the axial basilica" (163), and "the octagonal reception hall" (163).

Few will object to Westbrook's remarks on architectural citations. As Manfred Luchterhandt[1] and others have clearly demonstrated, the Lateran palace and Charlemagne's palace in Aachen deliberately evoked the representation halls of the Great Palace, and Westbrook is surely right to emphasize the importance of raised passages for imperial processions in the Great Palace and the papal and royal palaces quoting it. But the focus on grand state rituals and the grand halls that were used for them – and were, therefore, the buildings copied by rulers with imperial pretensions – represents a very limited view of the Great Palace, and does not attempt to understand its architecture vis-à-vis the living and breathing institution of the *palatium sacrum*, along the lines of more modern work such as Harriet Fertik's recent book on "The Ruler's House"[2].

Whereas Part I attempts an architectural interpretation of the little that we know about the Great Palace, Part II focuses on the archaeological remains

1 M. Luchterhandt: Päpstlicher Palastbau und höfisches Zeremoniell unter Leo III. In: C. Stiegemann/M. Wemhoff (eds.): 799 – Kunst und Kultur der Karolingerzeit. Karl der Große und Papst Leo III. in Paderborn. Katalog der Ausstellung Paderborn 1999, vol. 3: Beiträge zum Katalog der Ausstellung Paderborn 1999. Mainz 1999, 109–122.

2 H. Fertik: The Ruler's House. Contesting Power and Privacy in Julio-Claudian Rome. Baltimore, Md. 2019.

of the complex, and, very much in the tradition of earlier scholarship, uses the *Book of Ceremonies* to determine the spatial relationship between different palace buildings known from Byzantine literature. Westbrook painstakingly discusses previous reconstruction attempts, which makes Part II difficult to read. His main new finding is the identification of a ceremonial passage that linked the foundations documented by Ernest Mamboury and Theodor Wiegand[3] in 1912–1918 with the mosaic courtyard uncovered by the St. Andrews excavations in 1935–1938 and 1952–1954. The overall result is a handsome new plan that is almost certainly an improvement over previous attempts to map out the Great Palace and its most important buildings, even though it remains just as hypothetical. As Westbrook himself remarks, the recently excavated Chalké Gate looked rather different from previous reconstructions based on literature, whereas the only scientifically excavated part of the palace cannot be securely identified with any building known from written sources. If ever conducted, a state-of-the-art geophysical survey of Sultan Ahmed Park would almost certainly yield many surprises and render all hypothetical reconstruction attempts obsolete.

In sum, Westbrook's book does not open up new avenues of inquiry that would conceptually advance the study of the Great Palace and late antique 'palace architecture' beyond a typological approach. It does, however, offer a very diligent and intelligent discussion of the availabe if highly fragmentary evidence that will form the starting point of all further work on the Great Palace. The same applies to the volume co-edited with Mulvin.

"Late Antique Palatine Architecture" is a somewhat disparate collection of nine articles that does not do full justice to its subtitle "Palaces and Palace Culture: Patterns of Transculturation". The first contribution by the late Ulrike Wulf-Rheidt ("The Palace of the Roman Emperors on the Palatine in Rome", 23–36) deftly sums up her work on the Palatine in English, which will form the basis of any new study on the original *palatium*. The second piece by Sarah Wilson "Magna Mater and the *pignoria imperii*: Creating Places of Power" (37–49) turns on the fact that the black betyl of the *Magna Mater* was – like many other pledges of Empire – transferred from the Palatine to Constantinople, but only offers little more than a brief discussion of the cult of Cybele on the Palatine. Elisha Dumser's lively written contribution on

3 E. Mamboury/Th. Wiegand: Die Kaiserpaläste von Konstantinopel zwischen Hippodrom und Marmara-Meer. Berlin/Leipzig 1934.

Maxentius's residences in and around Rome ("The Political Power of the Palace: The Residences of Maxentius in Rome", 51–62) offers a succinct and intelligent summary of the current state of research. Only the two following contributions by Verena Jaeschke ("Adapting to a New Concept of Sovereignty: Some Remarks on Tetrarchic Palace Architecture", 63–76) and Josip Belamarić ("Diocletian's Palace: Villa, Sacrum Palatium, Villa-Cum-Factory, Chateau?", 77–94) tackle the question of how to meaningfully approach the concept of palatial architecture. Jaeschke convincingly interprets the newly built urban palaces of Tetrarchs as the expression of a new concept of imperial sovereignty. Belamarić offers an up-to-date survey of the archaeology of Diocletian's residence at Split and does an excellent job at tracing the later history of the palace, which makes clear that it was not just Diocletian's 'retirement home'. Mulvin's piece on "Architecture, Innovation and Economy in the Late Roman Danube-Balkan Region: Palaces and 'Productive Villas' from Pannonia" (95–114) convincingly links large fortified villas with large granaries to the logistic needs of the Roman Danube armies, but has little to say about the similarity between these estates and Gamzigrad, or for that matter the complex of Šarkamen, which is not discussed throughout the volume. Daniel Millette's "The *porticus post scaenam* of Lugdunum Convenarum" (115–136) summarizes the University of Ottawa excavations of a first century CE colonnaded courtyard behind the theatre of Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, with no apparent connection to the theme of the volume. Westbrook's "The Question of the Survival of Roman Architectural Traditions within the Byzantine Great Palace" (137–164) summarizes many of the findings of his book reviewed above, and, though still pre-occupied with typology, argues for not essentializing architectural meaning but for taking architectural citations on the terms of those employing them. This prefigures Bernd Nicolai's survey of Western royal architecture and its connection to Roman models ("'In More Romano': Medieval Residences of the Holy Roman Empire", 165–183).

Taken together, "The Great Palace in Constantinople" and "Late Antique Palatine Architecture" illustrate the conceptual difficulty of employing categories of classification as categories of interpretation. Architectural typology is a useful tool to organize a vast corpus of buildings, and to map the spread of techniques and designs. But typology alone does not impart historical meaning, in particular when it comes to unique complexes such as 'The' Great Palace or the palaces of the fourth century that were the result

of a very specific set of never repeated historical circumstances. Still, these two volumes offer an excellent starting point for future research.

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