

HANS BUCHWALD

Directions in Byzantine Architectural Research¹

The monumental history of English monasteries by Dugdale and Dodsworth first appeared in 1655, and Milizia's work on the lives of renowned architects in 1768. In 1769 Malden published a guide to King's College Chapel in Cambridge which identified construction phases by close examination of the building fabric and of documents. Durand's *Recueil* of Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Gothic and Renaissance architecture appeared in 1800. To bring matters to a point, by the early 19th century all important Romanesque, Gothic, and Renaissance buildings in Europe were probably known and published, as were many of the methods and important issues of architectural history, even though obviously much work still needed to be accomplished.

In stark contrast, at that time architectural historians had not yet taken a serious interest in Byzantine buildings. Of course the striking beauty of a few Byzantine churches, such as St. Sophia in Istanbul, San Marco in Venice and San Vitale in Ravenna had been recognized by travellers, artists and scholars for centuries, and buildings such as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and St. Peter's in Rome had been focal points of religious interest throughout the ages.

A first awakening of serious interest in Byzantine buildings occurred only with Charles Texier's publication of churches in Asia Minor in 1864, de Vogüé's expedition to Syria in the 1860's, and with the work of the Fossati brothers and of Lethaby and Swainson on Saint Sophia, published in the 1890's. A greatly expanded, extremely fruitful effort to document the enormous volume of Byzantine buildings was undertaken only after 1900 in important publications such as those by Bell

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and Rott working in Asia Minor, Van Millingen, George, Ebersolt, and Thiers in Istanbul, Millet, Lambakis, Schultz and Barnsley in Greece, Butler in Syria and Gsell in North Africa.

The exploration and publication of Byzantine monuments continues to be the most important direction of studies in Byzantine architecture, measured by the volume of published material. Only now are we slowly catching up with research on other European architecture in knowing which buildings were built where, but hardly when. For the most part these efforts have been expanded only recently beyond the documentation of churches with studies, for instance, of domestic architecture both at the monumental and the village scale, and of civil construction such as fortifications and water distribution systems. But there is much more to be found and recorded.

In the past many Byzantine buildings were inadequately known because they were located in regions not often visited by Western scholars. In Greece and the Balkans local scholars studied Byzantine buildings, but in many other regions the local population had little interest in buildings which were not products of their own cultural heritage. That situation has changed dramatically, for instance, in Turkey, where a new generation of scholars is intensely interested in Byzantine material. Open borders, better and less expensive means of transportation, and better maps have contributed to the increasing volume of publications of Byzantine buildings.

Many Byzantine buildings were inadequately known because they were buried underneath the sediment of history. Today archaeological excavation is probably the most fruitful method of obtaining new information concerning Byzantine architecture. Without excavation we would have only inadequate knowledge, or no knowledge at all of the appearance, for instance of the Imperial Palace in Istanbul; the medieval Byzantine streets, shops and houses of Corinth and Pergamum; the huge, important church of St. Polyeuctus in Istanbul; the early, well dated cruciform church of St. Babylas near Antioch; the impressive monumental churches of St. Mary and of St. John in Ephesus, and many dozens of other important, as well as less distinguished Byzantine buildings from the Iberian peninsula to Mesopotamia, and from the Crimea to Nubia. In short, our understanding of Byzantine towns and buildings would be only a seriously distorted fraction of what it is today.

Archaeologists have developed sophisticated, interdisciplinary, technologically highly advanced methods of obtaining information from the

evidence of excavations. Yet usually Byzantinists are not trained to know about these methods. Most archaeologists, on the other hand, know only little about Byzantine buildings. Excavations of Byzantine buildings are often conducted either by Byzantinists who are inadequately prepared to take full advantage of today's archaeological and technological resources, or by well-trained archaeologists who have only a passing interest in the Byzantine buildings which happen to be on their sites. The result is that frequently valuable information is lost.

I do not suggest that we need to become specialists, for instance, in dendrochronology or metallurgical analysis, but I do believe that historians of Byzantine architecture need to be sufficiently competent in many technologies so that they may fully recognize their advantages and limitations and carefully evaluate their results. Today the excavation and documentation of Byzantine buildings by integrated teams of specialists with a strong interest in Byzantine material is quite rare; I hope that in the future it will become an important tool of scholarship on Byzantine architecture.

Restoration projects have also provided important new information concerning Byzantine architecture. Such projects usually have many goals. Not only should they obtain new insights into the history of the building, they should also make the building usable, while retaining its value as evidence, and its unique and special character. The restoration of Byzantine buildings is a complex and difficult procedure implemented by many disciplines and there are very few successful examples. Scholars of Byzantine architecture are often unaware of the complex goals and responsibilities involved with restoration projects. This problem should be eliminated in the future: in addition to obtaining new information concerning Byzantine architecture, we should also achieve better examples of architectural preservation.

Not until the mid-20th century did scholars begin seriously to study the functions and meanings of Byzantine buildings. The work of Grabar on martyria, Smith on domes, and Lassus on Syrian churches was significant even though some of their conclusions have been questioned. This direction of research was emphasized in subsequent fruitful studies, for instance, concerning the functions of ancillary church chambers, the impact of liturgy on Byzantine churches, and imperial ceremony in St. Sophia. Yet many building functions remain to be determined.

These investigations can be effectively accomplished only with the aid of written documents. While Byzantine texts are abundant, in the past they were studied by architectural historians primarily to establish

the chronology or identity of buildings. Only rather recently has the interpretation of written documents extensively and fruitfully been exploited as a tool which provides vital information concerning Byzantine buildings and their cultural context. However, the complementary procedure has only seldom been implemented: existing buildings themselves may also be used as documents concerning the cultural, political, social and economic history of Byzantium. We can go far beyond the observation, for instance, that when buildings were constructed persons and means for their construction must have been available. We need to learn how to fully read the buildings as evidence in order to understand what they can tell us.

Some architectural historians believe that there was a "revolution" in the 1970's which replaced an emphasis on style with a new emphasis upon the context of buildings in history and society. Again, there is a dramatic difference between research on the architecture of western Europe and that of Byzantium. Only seldom was style emphasized in studies of Byzantine buildings, and there *was* no discourse concerning Byzantine architectural style. The nearest that Byzantinists came to discussing style is in the publications, for instance, of Millet, who defined local characteristics of Greek and Serbian buildings, Kautzsch, who identified chronological changes in the design of capitals, Megaw, who studied techniques which lend themselves to dating medieval Greek churches, and Deichmann, who clarified characteristics of the architecture of Constantinople in the 5th and 6th centuries.

Each of these, and other similar studies are important for our knowledge of Byzantine buildings, and need to be continued and expanded. But they do not constitute an encompassing study of style, which involves an understanding of how spaces and volumes are conceived and articulated, how light transforms buildings, and how architectural forms interact with structure and decoration. Without the study of style we cannot establish criteria of architectural quality or evaluate architectural achievement. To use an analogy from music, scholars of Byzantine architecture have not yet clearly differentiated between the arias of Mozart and Donizetti, and they have not yet made clear how a symphony by Beethoven differs from a Polonaise by Chopin.

Other lacunae in the research of Byzantine buildings which need to be filled in the future include, but are certainly not limited to investigations concerning the impact of social, technological and production issues upon architecture, and studies of how, why and by whom architectural designs were conceived, developed and implemented. Where

direct evidence is missing, we must develop theories based upon the evidence that we have, theories which may either be confirmed, modified or overturned in the future. All science works with theories. The overemphasis on architectural theories based on insufficient evidence, and on national ideologies and race such as the “East – West debate” of the first half of the 20th century created a general distaste for theory in our field in the last half century. While that distaste is understandable, it needs now to be discarded so that fruitful, open debates concerning important issues may lead to new insights and new directions.

The vast majority of research in Byzantine architecture is descriptive. In stark contrast, only a small portion of research has been devoted to analysis, and most analyses concentrate upon the reconstruction and chronology of building features and phases. An even much smaller portion of research has been devoted to the synthesis of data concerning Byzantine buildings. Nevertheless, already in 1914 Oskar Wulff published his *Altchristliche und byzantinische Kunst*, which includes comprehensive accounts of a number of important Byzantine buildings. The book also provides succinct discussions of architectural problems, many of which have not yet been resolved.

In stark contrast, Cyril Mango’s more recent synthesis in his monumental work *Byzantine Architecture* has a different approach. Primarily it places buildings into their cultural context, dealing with them as objects within the political, religious, or economic history of Byzantium. At times this approach is contrasted with studies that emphasize architectural features and achievements, and often scholars feel compelled to choose one approach to the exclusion of the other. Yet these different approaches to Byzantine architecture are not opposed to each other. Rather, in many respects they are complementary, and reflect two essential sides of the same coin. One approach is incomplete without the other. The two approaches may, and indeed need to be combined with each other – to identify the interface between them, the interaction between form and content.

There are numerous approaches to the study of Byzantine architecture which are equally valid and fruitful, and many of them will no doubt be identified only by future generations.

