



Palace of Daphne

Summary :

The core of the fourth-century imperial palace at Constantinople, comprising reception and dining halls as well as private apartments, seems to have occupied roughly the area of the Sultan Ahmet Camii complex. This monumental core of the palace of Constantine the Great is usually referred to as the Daphne in scholarly literature.

Date

4th-12th (?) century

Geographical Location

Constantinople, Istanbul

Topographical Location

Sultan Ahmet Camii area

1. Introduction

Constantinople, the [new capital](#) of the Roman Empire, was inaugurated on [May 11, 330](#) and it is beyond any doubt that there was a suitable residence for the emperor and his court at that time. Like the emperors of the tetrarchy, beginning with [Diocletian](#) in [Nicomedia](#), [Constantine the Great](#) (306-337) built the imperial palace next to the [Hippodrome](#) (or circus) to which it was connected by a spiral staircase leading to the imperial box (*kathisma*).¹ Although nothing remains of the Constantinian palace it is possible to locate it, on the basis of [textual sources](#), to the two upper terraces in the [Great Palace complex](#).² The palace was entered from a colonnaded street, leading south of and parallel with [Hagia Sophia](#), through a magnificent **domed** vestibule later called the [Chalke](#) that led to the area of imperial offices and barracks of emperor's guards. To the west of this northernmost part of the palace was the [Zeuxippos](#), the main public baths of [Constantinople](#).

The core of the Constantinian palace comprising reception and dining halls as well as private apartments seems to have occupied roughly the area of the Sultan Ahmet Camii complex. This monumental core of the fourth-century palace is usually referred to as the Daphne in scholarly literature. However, it is not clear when this name was introduced and if it applied to the whole central area of the fourth-century palace. The earliest use of the name Daphne is attested in the sixth century: [John Lydos](#) uses it for the area where the halls of the Early Byzantine palace stood.³ On the other hand, the *De Cerimoniis*, a tenth-century compilation of the court ceremonies, applies this name only to the court south of the main reception halls of the Constantinian palace.⁴

2. The architecture of the palace

Since no excavation has been carried out in the area of the palace of Constantine, all attempts to reconstruct its plan are based solely on textual evidence and must, therefore, remain hypothetical. However, Byzantine sources, notably the *De Cerimoniis*, give us an idea of the relative location of the main buildings and their mutual communication.⁵ The principal façade of the Constantinian Daphne palace faced north and was preceded by a large courtyard (the Tribunal). It is known that a flight of stairs ascended from the Tribunal to the main gate in the centre of the façade of the Daphne.⁶ The Consistorium was the main audience hall of the early palace and it seems to have flanked the east side of the Tribunal courtyard.⁷

Behind the Tribunal façade of the Daphne ran a corridor (so-called **Portico** of Nineteen Couches) that connected two main ceremonial halls: the Triklinos of Nineteen Couches and the Augusteus. The Triklinos of Nineteen Couches was a long dining hall with nineteen apsidal **niches**, each probably containing a semicircular couch and table.⁸ The second **apsed** hall, the Augusteus, served as a throne and crowning hall.⁹ Between the long propylaic corridor (Portico of Nineteen Couches) and the Augusteus was a (possibly semicircular) courtyard called the Onopous.¹⁰ Such a layout of the Daphne would have its closest parallel in the central part of the



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fourth-century luxury villa at Piazza Armerina on Sicily, where a large apsed hall and another, smaller apsed hall preceded by a semicircular portico were attached to a corridor that formed the one side of the central **peristyle**.

Private apartments of the early Great Palace seem to have been around another large courtyard (see note 4), south of the main palace halls, where the emperors could enjoy beautiful view of the **Sea of Marmara** and the Bosphorus. In this courtyard was also one of the most important churches in the Palace that was dedicated to St. Stephen. The church was erected by **Theodosios II**'s (408-540) sister Pulcheria in 421 and was used in imperial weddings until the ninth century.¹¹ Constantine's palace may also have contained an elaborate garden in the shape of a small hippodrome situated on the lower terrace of the palace (26 m above sea level), perhaps similar to the stadium garden in the *Domus Augustana* in Rome. This structure is called the Covered Hippodrome (*hippodromos skepastos* or simply *hippodromos*) in Byzantine sources.¹²

Although the imperial residence expanded gradually as far as the Sea of Marmara since the late seventh century, the later emperors erected their buildings also in the area of the Constantinian palace – the apsed hall with the mosaic peristyle (perhaps **Herakleios**' work),¹³ the Justinianos (built by Justinian II) and several edifices by the emperors **Theophilos** (829-842) (the Sigma and Triconch being the most important among them) and **Basil I** (867-886).



1. The direct connection between the palace and circus/hippodrome was a common feature of all Roman Imperial palaces in the main residences of the emperors. The palace-circus model goes back to Domitian's *Domus Augustana* (first century) on the Palatine Hill in Rome which overlooked the *Circus Maximus*. The circus played an important role in the imperial ideology: the emperor used to appear before the public there as the divine ruler, winner of wars, and provider of peace, games and prosperity – see Humphrey, J. H., *Roman Circuses. Arenas for Chariot Racing* (London 1986), pp. 579-638; Heucke, C., *Circus und Hippodrom als politischer Raum* (Olms-Weidmann 1994). In Constantinople, after a new emperor had been crowned, he ascended to the *kathisma* and was acclaimed by the inhabitants.
2. For terracing see esp. Bolognesi, E., "The Great Palace Survey: The First Season (1992)," *Araştırma Sonuçları Toplantısı* 11 (1993), pp. 19-34.
3. John Lydos, *De Mensibus*, ed. R. Wünsch, *Ioannis Lydi liber de mensibus* (Leipzig 1898; repr. Stuttgart 1967), p. 163. According to the *Patria Constantinopoleos*, the name of this part of the Great Palace allegedly derived from a statue of the nymph Daphne that stood there – see Berger, A., *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinopoleos* (ΠΟΙΚΙΛΑ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΑ 8, Bonn 1988), p. 263.
4. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis*, ed. J.J. Reiske *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris de ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae* I, (CSHB, Bonn 1829), ch. 39, p. 197 and appendix 507: In 829 the emperor Theophilos on his way from the Hippodrome to the later, medieval part of the Great Palace near the sea, passed through the gate beneath the *kathisma* and rode his horse through the Daphne, which seems to have been an open space (probably a courtyard) south of the representative halls of the early palace, to reach the Covered Hippodrome.
5. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis*, ed. J.J. Reiske *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris de ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae* I, (CSHB, Bonn 1829), esp. ch. 38, 39, 40, 41, 43, 44.
6. The Tribunal is also mentioned as the Delphax in the fifth- and early sixth-century chapters of the *De Cerimoniis*. John of Antioch (sixth century) speaks of the *delphikoi kiones* (=columns from Delphi) in the stoa (portico) of the palace courtyard which may have given the name to this ceremonial space (Guilland R., *Études topographiques de Constantinople byzantine* I [Berlin - Amsterdam 1969], pp. 70-71). The Tribunal was used for various ceremonial purposes, especially when a large number of people was present: For example, acclamations of a new caesar and empress took place there in the presence of the army and state officials, cf. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis*, ed. J.J. Reiske *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris de ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae* I (CSHB, Bonn 1829), ch. 40, p. 204f.; ch. 41, pp. 209-212; ch. 43, p. 218. Furthermore, members of the circus factions used to gather in the Tribunal for the audiences with the emperor until Herakleios' reign (*Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* 36, ed. Th. Preger, *Patria Constantinopoleos* I [Leipzig 1901; repr. New York 1975], p. 39.). Large courtyards for ceremonies and gatherings of a great number of people were a common feature of Roman imperial palaces and residences of provincial governors and high military officials (*praetoria*). The so-called Palace of Giants on the Athenian Agora and the military praetorium in Dura Europos on the Euphrates can be mentioned as good examples of such complexes, combining residential and official functions and comprising large peristyle forecourts – see Frantz, A., *The Athenian Agora XXIV. Late Antiquity A.D. 267-700*, (Princeton 1988), pp. 95-116; Downey, S.B., "The Palace of the Dux Ripae at Dura-Europos and 'Palatial' Architecture of Late Antiquity" in: *Eius Virtutis Studiosi. Classical and Postclassical Studies in Memory of Frank Brown, Studies in the History of Art* 43 (1993), pp. 182-198. The *De Cerimoniis* tells us that the emperor and empress used to appear to those gathered in the courtyard standing behind a railing on the top of the flight of stairs. The gate in the middle of the palace façade may have been preceded by a gabled porch which was common in the Roman palatial architecture. Taking this into account the porch (and the staircase in front of it) may have looked like that in Diocletian's palace at Split, facing the so-called peristyle.



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7. Guillard, R., *Études topographiques de Constantinople byzantine 1* (Berlin - Amsterdam 1969), pp. 56-59; Bolognesi, E., 'The Great Palace of Constantinople' in: Jobst, W. - Kastler, R. – Scheibelreiter, V. (eds), *Neue Forschungen und Restaurierungen im byzantinischen Kaiserpalast von Istanbul* (Wien 1999), p. 12f.
8. The name of the hall is derived from the number of dining couches (gr. *akkoubita*). Such couches were usually semicircular in Late Antiquity (a couch of this type was often called a *stibadium* or *sigma*) and they carved along semicircular tables. The semicircular shape of couches in the *Triklinos* of Nineteen Couches is confirmed by the account of a banquet written by the Bishop Liutprand of Cremona who visited Constantinople in the tenth century (he also adds that guests used to recline during imperial banquets according to the ancient custom that had been long abandoned in the former Roman world). The *Triklinos* of Nineteen Couches belongs to the distinctive group of representative multi-apsed buildings known from the fourth century onwards, such as the *triclinium* in the House of Bacchus in North African Djemila (seven apses), the northern hall in the Palace of Antiochus in Istanbul (seven apses) or the early ninth-century Council Aula in the Lateran palace in Rome (eleven apses). The *Triklinos* of Nineteen Couches does not seem to have been vaulted because the emperor Constantine VII (913-959) is said to have replaced the old, rotten wooden coffered ceiling with a new one. For the *Triklinos* of Nineteen Couches see esp. Krautheimer, R., "Die Decanacubita in Konstantinopel. Ein kleiner Beitrag zur Frage Rom und Byzanz," in Schumacher, W.N. (ed.), *Tortulae. Studien zu altchristlichen un byzantinischen Monumenten (RömQ Schr Suppl. 30)*, (Rom - Freiburg - Wien 1966), pp. 195-199.
9. For the Augustaion see Guillard, R., *Études topographiques de Constantinople byzantine 1* (Berlin - Amsterdam 1969), pp. 81-86. Jonathan Bardill hypothetically identified the excavated apsed hall and the adjoining mosaic peristyle (the mosaics displayed partly *in situ* in Mosaik Müzesi), which he dates to the late sixth- or early seventh century, as the Augustaion assuming that the excavated building replaced the original Augustaion of the Constantinian Palace – Bardill, J., "The Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors and the Walker Trust Excavations", *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 12 (1999), pp. 216-230 and Bardill, J., *Brickstamps of Constantinople*, 2 vols., (Oxford 2004), I, pp. 134-147.
10. The name of Onopous (also called the Onopodion) seems to have derived from the Greek words *onos* (ass, donkey) and *pous* (foot) which suggests that it was probably semicircular or horse-shoe shaped. The portico limiting this courtyard was known as the Chrysocheir (Golden Hand) – see Kostenec, J., "The Heart of the Empire: The Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors Reconsidered", Dark, K.R. (ed.), *Secular Buildings and the Archaeology of Everyday Life in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford 2004), pp. 4-13 and Kostenec, J., "Observations on the Great Palace at Constantinople: The Sanctuaries of the Archangel Michael, the Daphne Palace, and the Magnaura", *Reading Medieval Studies* 31 (2005), pp. 35-42. Such semicircular portico courtyards were popular in the fourth- and fifth-century palaces and examples of this layout were also excavated in Istanbul (Antiochus' palace, hexagonal hall in Gülhane and the rotunda next to the Myrelaion/Bodrum Camii).
11. Holum, K.G. - Vikan, G., "The Trier Ivory, Adventus Ceremonial, and the Relics of St. Stephen", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 33 (1979), pp. 128-132; Janin, R., *La géographie ecclesiastique de l'empire byz. I: le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat oecuménique III: les églises et les monastères*, (Paris 1969), p. 511f. On Imperial weddings in the Church of St. Stephen see Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis*, ed. J.J. Reiske *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris de cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae I*, (CSHB, Bonn 1829), ch. 39 and 41.
12. Guillard, R., *Études topographiques de Constantinople byzantine 1* (Berlin - Amsterdam 1969), pp. 165-210; Piganiol, A., "La loge impériale de l'Hippodrome de Byzance et le problème de l'Hippodrome Couvert", *Byzantion* 11 (1936), p. 387f.; Vogt, A., "L'hippodrome 'couvert'", *Echos d'Orient* 37 (1938), pp. 23-35.
13. Dated by J. Bardill on the archaeological evidence to the late sixth- or early seventh century (see note 8). For the dating of the apsed hall and the peristyle to the reign of Herakleios see: Trilling, J., "The Soul of the Empire: Style and Meaning in the Mosaic Pavement of the Imperial Palace in Constantinople", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 43 (1989), pp. 27-72; Kostenec, J., "The Heart of the Empire: The Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors Reconsidered," in Dark, K.R. (ed.), *Secular Buildings and the Archaeology of Everyday Life in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford 2004), pp. 15-18 and Kostenec, J., "Observations on the Great Palace at Constantinople: The Sanctuaries of the Archangel Michael, the Daphne Palace, and the Magnaura," *Reading Medieval Studies* 31 (2005), p. 47 note 4; Dark, K.R., "Roman Architecture in the Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors at Constantinople During the Sixth to Ninth Centuries," *Byzantion* 77 (2007), pp. 87-105.

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-  **Ψευδο-Κωδινός**, *Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, Preger, T. (ed.), *Scriptores originum Constantinopolitanarum, II*, Leipzig 1907 (ανατ. New York 1975)



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	Bolognesi E. , "Il Gran Palazzo", <i>Bizantinistica</i> , 2, 2000, 197-242
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Glossary :

	apse An arched structure or a semi-circular end of a wall. In byzantine architecture it means the semicircular, usually barrel-vaulted, niche at the east end of a basilica. The side aisles of a basilica may also end in an apse, but it is always in the central apse where the altar is placed. It was separated from the main church by a barrier, the templon, or the iconostasis. Its ground plan on the external side could be semicircular, rectangular or polygonal.
	dome A characteristic element of Byzantine architecture. The dome is a hemispherical vault on a circular wall (drum) usually pierced by windows. The domed church emerges in the Early Byzantine years and its various types gradually prevail, while they are expanded in the Balkans and in Russia.
	niche Semi-circular recess on the surface of the wall.
	peristyle A colonnade surrounding a building or a courtyard .
	stoa, portico, the A long building with a roof supported by one or two colonnades parallel to its back wall.



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Quotations

The alleged derivation of the name of Daphne, according to John Lydos

φασί <δὲ> Λατῖνον ἐκεῖνον τοῦ Τηλεγόνου μὲν ἀδελφόν, Κίρκης δὲ παῖδα, πενθερόν δὲ Αἰνείου, κτίζοντα τὴν τῆς Ῥώμης ἀκρόπολιν πρὸ τῆς παρουσίας Αἰνείου εὐρεῖν ἐπὶ τοῦ τόπου δάφνην κατὰ τύχην καὶ οὕτως πάλιν ἐᾶσαι αὐτὴν ἐκεῖσε διαμένειν· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἐνταῦθα Δάφνην προσαγορεύουσι τὸ Παλάτιον.

John Lydos, *De Mensibus*, ed. R. Wünsch, *Ioannis Lydi liber de mensibus* (Leipzig 1898; repr. Stuttgart 1967), p. 163.

The alleged derivation of the name of Daphne, according to the *Patria*

Ἡ δὲ Δάφνη ἐκλήθη διὰ τὸ ἴστασθαι ἐκεῖσε στήλη ὄνομα φέρουσα Δάφνης· ἀπὸ γὰρ τῆς Ῥώμης ἤφεραν αὐτὴν· εἰς μαντεῖον γὰρ ἦν ἐκεῖσε· ἀλλὰ καὶ στεφάνους ἀπὸ δάφνης ἐλάμβανον οἱ ἄρχοντες κατὰ τὸν Ἰανουάριον μῆνα.

Pseudo-Kodinos, *Patria Constantinopoleos*, ed. Th. Preger, *Patria Constantinopoleos* II [Leipzig 1907; repr. New York 1975], p. 256.