Chalke Gate (Entrance of Great Palace)

Summary:
Chalke (Bronze) Gate, rendered from Greek “Brazen House”, was the main vestibule of the Great Palace, so named either for bronze tiles of its roof or for its bronze doors. A famous icon of Christ was placed over the doors. Now lost, this imperial Gate originally facing the Augustaion, south of Hagia Sophia, was one of the most important architectural symbols of Constantinople.

1. History

Chalke Gate, literary meaning Copper or Bronze Gate and elegantly rendered from Greek "Brazen House", was the main entrance vestibule of the Great Palace of Constantinople. The Chalke got its descriptive name most likely either for gilded bronze tiles of its roof or for its bronze door valves. The Chalke was one of the most important architectural and symbolic imperial structures around the Augustaion, the main public space in medieval Constantinople. Now lost, a portico connected the Chalke with the Holy Well, a dependence of Hagia Sophia (Fig. 1).

Turbulent history of the ceremonial Chalke Gate, with a famous image of Christ over its doors, known as icon of Christ Chalkites, entails imperial politics. The Chalke not only symbolized but was also the actual place of important events in Byzantine history, such as the declarations of war on the enemy, imperial triumphal processions after military victories, the solemn procession of emperors' remains during ceremonial burial cortege, the public proskynesis in front of the icon of Christ Chalkites before the Emperor entered the Sacred Palace, as well as the removals and re-installations of the very same icon and declarations of imperial Iconoclasm or resturation of Orthodoxy.

Architect Aitherios built the first main entrance to the imperial palace under the rule of Emperor Anastasios I (r. 491-518). Burnt down during the Nika riot in 532, the imperial vestibule was rebuilt by Emperor Justinian I (r. 527-565). By the 7th and 8th centuries, the Chalke or its dependences became a prison. Emperor Basil I (r. 867-886) repaired the building and turned it into law court. A small toponymous chapel dedicated to Christ Chalkites was attached to the Chalke by Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos (r. 920-944). When Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (r.963-969) enclosed the Great Palace by less extensive walls, the Chalke Gate lost its importance as a main entrance. In ca. 972, Emperor John I Tzimiskes (r. 969-976) reconstructed the chapel of Christ Chalkites on a larger scale, endowed it with important relics and was buried there himself. The two-storey, centrally planned chapel of Christ Chalkites, situated on the elevated platform, was built in accordance with ancient building tradition of imperial mausolea. The Chalke itself was stripped of its bronze doors by Isaac II Angelos during his first tenure (r. 1185-1195, 1203-1204) and was not mentioned as such in Byzantine sources after the 1200s. Yet, meticulous Russian pilgrims of the 14th and 15th centuries did mention the Chalke Gate of the Imperial Palace across the Augustaion plaza. By that time known as Arslanhane, the ruins of the chapel, later serving as a menagerie, are recorded several times, until its final destruction in the 19th century. The 18th-century drawings, etchings and plans show the building some 100 m south of Hagia Sophia. However, the exact spatial relation between the church of Christ Chalkites and the Chalke, remains unclear and unverified.

2. Appearance of the monument
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Though today lost, the Chalke Gate has been vividly described by Procopios, as it was built by Justinian; this description reveals its importance for understanding 6th-c. monumental architecture in Constantinople. Justinian reconstructed the Chalke Gate as a free-standing building, rectangular in ground plan, with four engaged piers supporting the central dome (Fig. 2). The building was crowned by a dome on pendentives, that rested on the arches of four shallow barrel vaults. To the east and west, these arches sprang from piers projecting inward; to the north and south, from the backs of lower, narrow barrel vaults which linked the sides of the piers to the outer walls. As such, the Chalke essentially evolved from a domed cross unit and formed a domical square bay, which became a recognizable modular unit, standardized in Justinian’s architecture.

Little is known about the exterior of the Chalke under Justinian, but his official historian Procopios offers an account of its monumental decoration. Up to the cornice level, the interior was reveted in multicolored marble and from the cornice level up, all curved surfaces were covered in mosaics. The mosaics represented Justinian’s victories over the Goths and Vandals, a theme of imperial victory associated with triumphal arches from the Roman Imperial tradition. Centrally represented, Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora were surrounded by military dignitaries and senators. Belisarius, a general who actually led and won these victories over the Goths and Vandals, was shown leading his army, in a gesture of offering Justinian conquered kingdoms and war spoils.

3. The Christ Chalkites icon

As the Byzantines closely associated imperial triumphs with the triumph of Orthodoxy, the central theme on the exterior of the Chalke was the image of the Lord. The famous icon of Christ of the Chalke was set above the main doors (cf. Fig. 3). The origins of the icon are obscure, since Procopios does not speak of it, and yet it must have been on the façade by the time of Emperor Maurice (r. 582-602). Its removal by Emperor Leo III sometime during his reign, between 726 and 730, was the first public act of imperial Iconoclasm. The icon was restored by Empress Irene in ca. 787, but was once again removed by another Iconoclast emperor, Leo V (r. 813-820) and replaced by a cross. At the time certain pious women died while trying to protect the icon of Christ from the Chalke. The incident was later conflated with the martyrdoms of a certain patrician Mary and of the legendary saint, nun Theodosia of Constantinople, who is depicted in the famous image of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, with the icon of Christ Chalkites, here showing Christ in bust (Fig. 4). Soon after the final triumph of Orthodoxy in 843, the iconodule painter, monk Lazaros, whose hands were mutilated during iconoclastic persecutions in Constantinople, set up again the icon on the Chalke.

However, this new image of full-length Christ Chalkites standing was this time set in mosaic in contrast to the previous detachable ones (cf. Fig. 3). The history of the image of Christ Chalkites reveals not only the iconophile attitudes in Constantinople, but also the symbolism of the publicly displayed icon of Christ above imperial gates for the Christian Orthodox beliefs.

1. The classic reference to the Chalke remains the published doctoral dissertation by C. Mango, who proposed the term “Brazen House” rather than Bronze Gate, since the term Chalke in primary sources often referred to the entire building, not only to its doors. Mango, C., *The Brazen House: a study of the vestibule of the imperial palace of Constantinople* (Copenhagen 1959).


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Anthologia graeca, ed. H. Beckby (Munich 1965), 9:656.


13. C. Mango summarizes the most important references for the chapel of Christ Chalkites in The Brazen House; a study of the vestibule of the imperial palace of Constantinople (Copenhagen 1959), pp. 149ff. An old engraving of the chapel was published by Eyice, S., “Arslanhane’ ve çevresinir arkeolojisi,” Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri Yzlliği, 11/12 (1964), pl. VII.

14. See Mango, C., The Brazen House; a study of the vestibule of the imperial palace of Constantinople (Copenhagen 1959), p. 154, who proposes that the church was left to the Chalke, though a possibility that the chapel topped the Chalke has been also suggested.


18. The iconography of Christ Chalkites, inscribed as such in a number of Byzantine medals, seals, coins, as well in the Deësis mosaic in the inner narthex of the Chora and in heavily damaged fresco from the Boyana church, Bulgaria, all dated from the 11th to the 14th c., is consistent in representing a bearded Christ standing tall on a footstool. More in Mango, C., The Brazen House; a study of the vestibule of the imperial palace of Constantinople (Copenhagen 1959), pp. 135-142.


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21. Mango, C., The Brazen House; a study of the vestibule of the imperial palace of Constantinople (Copenhagen 1959), pp. 84, 122, with reference to Theophanes Continuatus, Chronographia, ed. I. Bekker (CSHB, Bonn 1838), pp. 18-21 and other authors who describe how on the first day of his reign in 813, Leo V, before he entered the Great Palace, kneeled on the porphyry omphalos in front of the gates and the icon of Christ Chalkites. This proskynesis may have been an established part of the imperial ceremonial, especially considering that the very same emperor re-launched Iconoclasm two years later.


24. Mango, C., The Brazen House; a study of the vestibule of the imperial palace of Constantinople (Copenhagen 1959), pp. 125-126, with references and further discussion on the role of monk Lazarus, whose hands were burnt with red-hot iron during torture, and thus presumably preventing him from making images, but whom Byzantine sources praised for painting miraculous icons and completing the mosaics of the Virgin and Child, and two archangels in the apse of Haghia Sophia.


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- **Κωνσταντίνος Πορφυρογέννητος**, Περὶ βασιλείου τάξεως, Reiske, J. (ed.), Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris de cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae libri duo, I, Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1829
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**Webliography**:

http://www.byzantium1200.com/chalke.html

**Glossary**:

- **barrel-vault**: vaulted, semi-cylindrical construction used often as roof.
- **Christ Chalkites**: Iconographic type of Christ, named after the icon allegedly placed over the doors of the Chalke Gate of the Great Palace in Constantinople. Christ is depicted frontal, with the facial traits of a Pantocrator, standing on a footstool. By the 13th-14th centuries, any representation of Christ standing must have been called Christ Chalkites.
- **pendentive dome**: A circular small dome without a drum on pendentives, which is used to cover small compartments in Byzantine architecture. When lowered the small dome is called also callote.
- **triumphal arch** (Rom.): A structure in the shape of a monumental archway, built to celebrate the victory of a Roman general or Emperor. (Byz. Archit.) The arch formed above the Horaia Pyle (Royal Door), which frames the curve of the conch of the apse and separates the bema from the nave.
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Sources


Quotations

Anastasios' epigram on the first monumental Chalke Gate

Οἶκος Ἀναστασίοι τυραννοφόνου βασιλῆος
μόνος ὑπεπερτέλλων πανυπείροχος ἀστεῖο γαίης,
θαύμα φέρων πάντεσσιν, ἐπεὶ κοσμήτορες ἔργων,
ὑψός ὁμοῦ μῆκός τε καὶ ἄπλετον εὖρος ἱδόντες,
ἄσκεπὲν ἐφράσσαντο πελώριον ἔργον ἐᾶσαι·
ἀλλὰ πολυκμήτοιο λαχὼν πρεσβήια τέχνης
Αἰθέριος πολύιδρις ἐμὴν τεχνήσατο μορφήν,
ἀχράντῳ βασιλῆι φέρων πρωτάγρια μόχθων,
ἔνθεν ἀπειρέσιον μέγεθος περὶ παντὶ τιταίνων
Αὐσονίης νίκησα βοώμενα θαύματα γαίης,
εἶξον ἀρειοτέροισι, χάρις Καπετωλίδος αὐλῆς,
εἰ καὶ χαλκείων ὀρόφων ἀμαρύγματα πέμπεσιε·
κρύψον ἀμετρήτων μεγάρων στεινούμενον αὐλαίς,
Πέργαμε, φαιδρὸν ἄγαλμα τεόν,
μηδὲ τανυπλεύροισιν ἀρηρότα,
Κύζικε, πέτροις Ἀδριανοῦ βασιλῆος ἀμεμφέα
νηὸν ἀείσεις, οὔ μοι Πυραμίδων ἱκέλη κρίσις οὔδὲ Κολοσσοῦ·
μεγάλην μοῦνος δ’ ὑπερέδραμον αἴγλην.
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αὐτὸς ἐμὸς σκηπτοῦχος Ἰσαυροφόνον μετὰ νίκην χρυσοφαές με τέλεσσεν ἑδέλιον Ἡρεγενείης πάντῃ τετραπόρων ἁνέμων πεπετασμένον αὔραις.

_Anthologia graeca_, 3, ed. H. Beckby (Munich 1968), 9:656.

**Restoration of the Chalke by Justinian I**

τοσοῦτον δὲ μόνον ἐν γε τῷ παρόντι γεγράφεται, ὡς τῶν βασιλείων τὰ τε προπύλαια καὶ ἡ καλουμένη Χαλκῆ μέχρι ἐς τὸν Ἀρεως καλοῦμενον οἶκον [...] τούτου δὴ ἔργα τοῦ βασιλέως τυγχάνει ὅντα.