



Palace of Magnaura

Summary :

The Magnaura served as an audience hall in the Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors in the Middle Byzantine period and was situated near the Chalke, the main gate of the Great Palace. First mentioned in 531, it may have been originally the Senate House or a reception hall of the *magister officiorum*'s praetorium, the official residence of the head of the civil service of the empire in the Early Byzantine period, situated in the Palace. The Magnaura is last mentioned in the tenth-century compilation of court ceremonies (*De Cerimoniis*).

Date

6th c. - last mentioned: 10th c.

Geographical Location

Constantinople, Istanbul

Topographical Location

Great Palace, east of the Augustaion and north-east of the Chalke

1. Introduction

The [Great Palace](#) of the Byzantine emperors was entered from the Regia (a colonnaded street leading south of and parallel with the [Augustaion](#) square), through a magnificent domed vestibule called the [Chalke](#) which led to the area of imperial offices and barracks of emperor's guards. In this northern part of the Palace stood also the famous Magnaura. The origins of the Magnaura are obscure but it is apparent from textual sources that by the [Middle Byzantine period](#) it became an audience hall.

2. The Palace of Magnaura in the Early Byzantine period and its function

The Magnaura is mentioned first in 531 when, according to Kyrillos of Skythopolis (d. around 558), St. Sabas during his visit to [Constantinople](#) was received there by the emperor [Justinian I](#) in the presence of the *questor* [Tribonian](#).¹ Nevertheless, the location and proper function of the building are not clear from the saint's life. In this respect it should be mentioned that Cyril Mango suggested long ago that the [Senate House](#) at the Augustaion may have become known solely as the Magnaura after the sixth century. Mango provided the following reasons: 1) Both buildings could be situated in the same area, namely east of the Augustaion square which was on the south flank of [Hagia Sophia](#). 2) The Senate House was not mentioned after Justinian I's reign.² However, Mango's widely accepted hypothesis was challenged first by Gilbert Dagron³ and later by Rudolph Stichel.⁴ The latter argues that the Senate stood south of the existing sultans' tombs in the Aya Sofya precinct and may have become a part of the [Patriarcheion](#) (palace of the patriarchs) under the name Thomaites Hall in the seventh century.

Further objection against the identification of the Magnaura with the sixth-century Senate is provided by the *Chronicon Paschale*'s account of the fire that devastated this part of the city during the [Nika Riot](#) in 532: In this early seventh-century source the Magnaura and the Senate House at the Augustaion are mentioned as two different buildings.⁵ Moreover, Prokopios' description of Justinian's rebuilding of the Senate suggests that its porch faced directly the Augustaion which was not the case of the Magnaura: The Magnaura was preceded by a forecourt, situated east of the Augustaion and separated from it by a street running behind the *apse* of Hagia Sophia.⁶

If Stichel's reconstruction of the spatial relationship of the Justinianic Senate House to the Augustaion and Hagia Sophia is correct, then the question is whether there was an Early Byzantine palatial building in this location (that is east of the Augustaion) that may be identified with the Medieval Magnaura Hall. In this respect it has been recently suggested by the present author that the Magnaura may have originally been a reception hall in the *magister officiorum*'s praetorium, the official residence of the head of the civil service of the empire, situated in the northern part of the Great Palace.⁷ The *magister officiorum*'s praetorium can be identified as the Schola of Magister, situated in the Great Palace area near the Chalke, of the sixth-century chapters of the *De Cerimoniis* (*De Cer.*



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Bk. 1, Ch. 87 and 89). Taking this identification as working hypothesis, the praetorium in the location of the Magnaura (east of the Augustaion and north-east of the Chalke) would be accessible to the public either from the street behind the apse of Hagia Sophia or from the open space directly behind the Chalke, and would be attached to the guard quarters, which were situated east and south of the Chalke, since the *magister officiorum* was also in charge of commanding the *scholae palatinae*.⁸

3. The Palace of Magnaura in the Middle Byzantine period and its functions

It is conceivable that the magister's audience hall was simply called the Magna Aula well before the sixth century as the Latin origin of the name Magnaura suggests. The *magister officiorum* lost its high status during the seventh century and was deprived of many of his former functions (for example the *domestikos ton scholon* replaced him as head of the guards). Since *Herakleios* is said to have reconstructed the Magnaura (which seems to have been rebuilt by Justinian after it had been burnt in the Nika Riot), probably after his victory over the Persians and the return of the True Cross to Jerusalem in 630,⁹ it is possible that this emperor converted the former magister's reception hall to a new audience hall of the emperors. However, in the Middle Byzantine period it did not serve only this purpose but it was, so to speak, a multi-functional building: judicial hearings, venue of a church council, seat of a university, place where the emperors delivered a public homily at the beginning of Lent etc.¹⁰

The Magnaura is traditionally reconstructed as a *basilica* with a *nave* and *aisles* and three apses.¹¹ However, there are hints that the Magnaura may have been a *cross-in-square* building (at least in the tenth century, when the *De Cerimoniis* was compiled) as Albrecht Berger has suggested.¹² He argues that the four columns mentioned in the *De Cerimoniis* (Bk.2, Ch.15) supported the *dome* of the Great Triklinos. Nevertheless, the hall of Magnaura was able to house more than 308 bishops or representatives of bishops who gathered there at the last session of the *Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787*,¹³ which would have been impossible if the Magnaura had been a cross-in-square building at that time. On the other hand, it is also possible that the large hall of the praetorium may have been replaced by a smaller, cross-in-square building, possibly erected by *Basil I* (867-886) who is known to have reconstructed the Magnaura.¹⁴

The *De Cerimoniis* also provides other details of the appearance of the Magnaura complex. For example, the hall itself was preceded by a *porticoed* courtyard, the *Anadendradion*, which had a garden character. At least the south colonnade of the *Anadendradion* was two storied and the continuation of its upper storey provided private access to Hagia Sophia from the Palace. A flight of stairs led from the garden forecourt up to the main door in the west façade of the Magnaura which suggests that the floor of the hall was elevated above the ground. There were also two apsed rooms at the east end of the hall which functioned as a *metatorion* (changing room) and a *bedchamber* (used especially after an imperial wedding; the *Pentapyrgion*, a large cupboard with five domes, stood there). In addition, the *De Cerimoniis* (Bk. II, Ch. 10 and 15) and the account of the diplomatic mission of the Bishop of Cremona Liutprand (tenth century) provides us with interesting details of the interior decoration of the Magnaura: the throne on which the emperor sat ('Throne of Solomon'), for instance, was lifted to the ceiling of the hall at some time during the audience, while organs played and mechanical lions roared and birds in the silver trees and on the throne sang harmoniously. Several precious chandeliers were hung on chains in the hall and the imperial guards, standing near the throne, held traditional Roman sceptres and other insignia.¹⁵

1. Schwartz, E., (ed.), *Kyrillos von Skythopolis*, (Leipzig 1939), p. 168. Tribonian was Justinian's close adviser and his presence is not surprising.

2. Mango, C., *The Brazen House. A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople*, (Kopenhagen 1959), p. 57f.

3. Dagron, G., *Naissance d'une capitale. Constantinople et ses institutions de 330 à 451* (Paris 1974), p. 138, note 2.

4. Stichel, R., 'Sechs kolossale Säulen nahe der Hagia Sophia und die Curia Justinians am Augusteion in Konstantinopel', *Architectura, Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Baukunst* 30 (2000), p. 24.



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5. *Chronicon Paschale*, L. Dindorf (ed.) (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1832), p. 623; cf. Berger, A., *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos* (Bonn 1988), ΠΟΙΚΙΛΙΑ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΑ 8, p. 268: he pretends that the Magnaura was merely another name for the Senate at the time when the *Chronicon Paschale* was written - it stops at 627.
6. For the forecourt of the Magnaura and the street between it and the east side of the Augusteon see: Guillard, R., *Études topographiques de Constantinople byzantine I*, (Berlin - Amsterdam 1969), pp. 142-147 and Mango, C., *The Brazen House. A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople*, (Kopenhagen 1959), pp. 66-71. Moreover, it is archaeologically attested that local 'senate houses' (curiae; seats of city councils) in several Roman cities adjoined one side of the forum which also speak in favour of Stichel's location of the Constantinopolitan Senate. On the other hand, Berger (Berger, A., "Die Senate von Konstantinopel", *Boreas* 18 (1995), p. 135), trying to reconcile Prokopios' description with what is known about the Magnaura, proposed that the Justinianic Senate porch (six columns supporting a gable) may have in fact formed a propyleum leading not directly to the interior of the Senate (which he, in accord with Mango, identifies as the Magnaura) but to its forecourt (later the Anadendradion of the Magnaura, according to him).
7. Kosteneč, 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. 42-45; on the *magister officiorum* see Bury, J.B., *History of the Later Roman Empire*, (London 1923), pp. 29-31 and Mango, C., "Magnaura", Kazhdan, A.P. (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 2, (Oxford-New York 1991), p. 1267. Three praetoria are known to have existed in Constantinople: the praetorium of the urban praefect on the Mese, the praetorium of the praetorian praefect near Hagia Eirene, and that of the *magister officiorum* – see Mango, C., *Studies on Constantinople* (Aldershot 1993), addenda 1.
8. *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris de cerimoniis aulae Byzantinae libri duo*, II, J. Reiske (ed.) (Bonnae 1829), 10.547 and 15.577 and Kosteneč, 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), p. 22: a gate in the south portico of the forecourt of Magnaura which opened into the space behind the Chalke. Guillard, R., *Études topographiques de Constantinople byzantine I*, (Berlin - Amsterdam 1969), p. 142 and Mango, C., *The Brazen House. A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople*, (Kopenhagen 1959), p. 57, n. 137: a door in the north portico of the Magnaura forecourt that led to the street leading behind Hagia Sophia; this door faced a gate in the east side of the Augustaion. Eugenia Bolognesi places the magister's offices directly behind the Chalke but at the lower level (terrace at 26 m a.s.l.) – see Bolognesi, E., 'The Great Palace of Constantinople', Jobst, W. - Kastler, R.- Scheibelreiter, V. (eds), *Neue Forschungen und Restaurierungen im byzantinischen Kaiserpalast von Istanbul* (Wien 1999), p. 12f; Bolognesi, E., 'Il Gran Palazzo', *Bizantinistica* 2 (2000), p. 220f. Normally, imperial audiences took place in the Consistorium at that time but St. Sabas' meeting with Justinian does not seem to have had the character of formal audience. The hall in the magister's praetorium would be an appropriate place for such a meeting because during formal audiences foreign envoys were initially received by the *magister officiorum* in his *schola*, where they were asked the usual questions concerning the purpose of their visit, and only then were taken to the Consistorium where the emperor sat on his throne. (For the audiences of foreign ambassadors as described by Peter the Patrician see E. Bolognesi's 1999 paper above).
9. *Anthologia Palatina*, IX 655, H. Beckby (ed.), *Anthologia Graeca* 3 (Munich 1968).
10. Guillard, R., *Études topographiques de Constantinople byzantine I*, (Berlin - Amsterdam 1969), pp. 141-142; Mango, C., *The Brazen House. A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople*, (Kopenhagen 1959), p. 58, n. 138.
11. The basilical plan of the Magnaura is based on the dating of the building to the reign of Constantine by the Patria (Berger, A., *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos* (Bonn 1988), ΠΟΙΚΙΛΙΑ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΑ 8, p. 214, 266) and by the mention of a south-east apse in the *De Cerimoniis* which implies the existence of a central (larger) and north apses. Ebersolt, J., *Le Grand Palais de Constantinople et le Livre des Cérémonies*, (Paris 1910), pp. 68-70; Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine. Développement urbain et répertoire topographique*, (Paris 1964), pp. 117-118; Guillard, R., *Études topographiques de Constantinople byzantine I*, (Berlin - Amsterdam 1969), p. 141; Mango, C., *The Brazen House. A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople*, (Kopenhagen 1959), p. 57.
12. Berger, A., "Die Senate von Konstantinopel", *Boreas* 18 (1995), p. 135. Fatih Camii at Trilve on the south coast of the Sea of Marmara dated on the basis of dendrochronology to the early ninth century is the earliest dated example of the cross-in-square plan (Ousterhout, R., 'Reconstructing ninth-century Constantinople' in Brubaker, L. (ed), *Byzantium in the Ninth Century: Dead or Alive? Papers from the Thirteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 1996*, (Aldershot 1998= Ousterhout 1998), pp. 127-128 and n. 42 with refereces to P.I. Kuniholm's dendrochronological project). However, when this architectural type was invented is unclear. Perhaps, it may have developed in Constantinople before the seventh century if Mathews' interpretation of the remains of Beyazit church C as a cross-in-square structure and Bardill's dating of these remains to the late sixth century are correct (Mathews, T.H., *Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy*, (University Park, Pennsylvania - London 1971), p. 69; Bardill, J., *Brickstamps of Constantinople*, vol. I (Oxford 2004), pp. 133-134).
13. *Theophanis Chronographia*, C. de Boor (ed.), (Leipzig 1883), p. 463; Darrouzes, J., 'Listes épiscopales du Concile de Nicée (787)', *Revue des Études Byzantines* 33 (1975), pp. 5-76.



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14. George Kedrenos, *Compendium Historiarum*, I. Bekker (ed.), *Georgius Cedrenus Ioannis Scylitzae ope II* (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1839), p. 204. Alternatively, it is also conceivable that Basil I added vaulting and the mentioned four columns to the old Magnaura which would parallel his textually attested reconstruction of some churches in Constantinople and also archaeologically documented transformations of Early Byzantine basilicas into vaulted structures during the Middle Byzantine period elsewhere (for the latter see Ousterhout, R., 'Reconstructing ninth-century Constantinople' in Brubaker, L. (ed.), *Byzantium in the Ninth Century: Dead or Alive? Papers from the Thirteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Birmingham, March 1996*, (Aldershot 1998= Ousterhout 1998), p. 126).

15. Featherstone, J.M., "ΔΓ' ΕΝΔΕΙΞΙΝ: Display in Court Ceremonial (De Cerimoniis II, 15)", Cutler, A. – Papaconstantinou, A. (eds.), *The Material and the Ideal: Essays in Medieval Art and Archaeology in Honour of Jean-Michel Spieser*, (Brill 2007), pp. 75-112; Berger, A., 'Die akustische Dimension des Kaiserzeremoniells. Gesang, Orgelspiel und Automaten', Bauer, F.A. (ed.), *Visualisierung von Herrschaft: Frühmittelalterliche Residenzen- Gestalt und Zeremoniell*, (Istanbul 2006), BYZAS 5, pp. 63-77; *Liutprandi Cremonensis Opera Omnia*, Chiesa, P. (ed.), *Corpus Christianorum Scriptorum Latinorum* 94 (Turnhout 1998), p. 147.

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	Janin R. , <i>Constantinople byzantine. Développement urbain et répertoire topographique</i> , 2, Paris 1964
	Berger A. , <i>Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos</i> , Bonn 1988, Ποικίλα Βυζαντινά 8
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	Kostenec J. , "The Heart of the Empire: The Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors Reconsidered", Dark, K.R. (ed.), <i>Secular Buildings and the Archaeology of Everyday Life in the Byzantine Empire</i> , Oxford 2004, 4-36
	Kostenec J. , "Observations on the Great Palace at Constantinople: The Sanctuaries of the Archangel Michael, the Daphne Palace, and the Magnaura", <i>Reading Medieval Studies</i> , 31, 2005, 27-55
	Bolognesi E. , "Il Gran Palazzo", <i>Bizantinistica</i> , 2, 2000, 197-242

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Byzantium 1200 | Senat House (Magnaura)

<http://www.arkeo3d.com/byzantium1200/senato.html>

Glossary :

aisle

The part of the naos of a church set off by the internal rows of piers or columns, namely by the structures supporting the roof.

apse



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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.

basilica

In ancient Roman architecture a large oblong type building used as hall of justice and public meeting place. The roman basilica served as a model for early Christian churches.

cross-in-square church

Type of church in which four barrel-vaulted bays form a greek cross; the central square of their intersection is domed. The cross is inscribed into the square ground plan by means of four corner bays.

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.

domestikos ton scholon

Commander of the regiment of *scholae*. The first officer with this title appears in 767/8. In the 10th C the domesticos became very powerful among the army of the *themata*; in mid-10th C the office was divided in two, *domestikoi ton scholon* of the East and those of the West, commanders in chief of the eastern and the western provinces' army respectively.

magister officiorum

The head of the central political administration of the empire, his functions were predominantly judiciary, although he did have some military ones too: he was the head of the *scholai*, i.e. the emperor's personal army. He had no economic functions; he administered three services and was responsible for the court's internal affairs.

naos (nave)

The main part of the temple, between the *narthex* and the *bema*. It was the place where the congregation took part in the liturgy.

questor (lat. quaestor, -oris) or quaesitor

Antiquity. Elected officials who supervised the treasury and financial affairs of the state, its armies and its officers.

Byzantium. Q. derived from the Latin quaestor; originally high-ranking legal officials, drafter of laws, later a judicial official of lesser rank. In the Early Byzantine period q. was a powerful official.

1.) **q. of the sacred palace** (Lat. quaestor sacri palatii), high-ranking official of the late Roman Empire, an office created by Constantine I. The quaestor was originally responsible for drafting imperial laws. His judicial rights were relatively insignificant, but as the emperor's closest adviser in legal questions he acquired enormous influence.

2.) In 539 Justinian I introduced another office called **quaesitor** (called also simply quaestor), involving police and judicial power in Constantinople, esp. control over newcomers settling in the capital.

During the Middle Byzantine period quaestor had lost his earlier prestige, some of his functions having been transferred to the Logothetes tou dromou, the Epi ton Deeseion. He was considered one of the *judes* (*kritai*). The quaestor survived at least until the 14th C., when he occupied 45th place in the hierarchy, but this was only an honorary position.

scholae palatinae

Scholae palatinae were created by Diocletian (284-305). They were corps of the imperial guard, and to be more precise they formed the personal army of the emperor. They served under the *magistri officiorum* and later on under the *Domesticos ton Scholon*. Seven regiments were stationed in the East and five in the West. Justinian I (527-565) introduced four more short-lived regiments.

stoa, portico, the

A long building with a roof supported by one or two colonnades parallel to its back wall.

Sources

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Chronological Table

531: First mention of the Magnaura Hall (visit of St. Sabas to Constantinople)

532: The Magnaura is burnt during the Nika Riot (then probably rebuilt by Justinian I)

596: Maurice (582-602) builds a round terrace (*heliakon strongylon*) near the Magnaura and erects his statue; also builds an armoury there

630s (?): The Magnaura is reconstructed by Herakleius (610-641)

784: Tarasios is chosen to be the patriarch in the Magnaura, in the presence of Empress Eirene and inhabitants of Constantinople

787: The last session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council was held in the Magnaura

Ninth century: Judicial hearings were held in the Magnaura under the emperors Nikephoros (802-811) and Basil I (867-886). Theophilos (829-842) convoked shortly after its accession a silentium to the Magnaura to condemn the assassins of the emperor Leo V. The same emperor, when he was on his deathbed, gathered people to the Magnaura complex to commend his wife and son (Michael III) to their care. Michael III (842-867) and Eudokia as well as Leo VI (887-912) and Theophano stayed in the Magnaura complex for some time after their weddings. A university was established in the Magnaura by Emperor Michael III and Caesar Bardas. Ex-patriarch Photios resided there under Basil I.

Tenth century: Audiences of foreign envoys took place there, notably those of the Tarsiote ruler Sayfaddawla and his client Nasr at-Tamali of Amida as well as of envoys of the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba (946) and the Kiev princess Olga (957). The description of these audiences and the decoration of the hall is described in *De Cerimoniis* (Bk. II, Ch. 15) and also by Liutprand of Cremona, the envoy of Berengar II to the court of Constantine VII in 949.