



## Myrelaion palaces (Rotunda and Palace of Romanos I Lekapenos)

### Summary :

In the immediate vicinity of the Myrelaion church (today Bodrum Camii) two palatial buildings dated to the byzantine period were excavated before and after the World War II. The earlier building (5th century?) was a huge rotunda preceded with a semicircular portico. The later, possibly Middle Byzantine palace was erected directly on the top of the ruins of the rotunda palace. The later palace was once a property of the emperor Romanos I Lacapenos (920-944) who converted it into a nunnery and also added the still existing cross-in-square church in which he and members of his family were buried.

### Date

5th-10th c.

### Geographical Location

Constantinople

## 1. Rotunda palace

Excavations of a huge rotunda next to the Myrelaion started before the World War II (D.T. Rice and T. Macridy)<sup>1</sup> and were completed in the 1960s by R. Naumann.<sup>2</sup> The unearthed (probably) fifth-century centrally-planned building, originally covered with a large **dome**, has outer diameter 41.80 m which makes it the second largest circular structure of the Roman-Byzantine period (only the Pantheon in Rome surpasses it).<sup>3</sup> Inner diameter is 29.60 m and the maximum thickness of the rotunda wall is 6.10 m. The lower part of the building, which has survived up to 3.40 m, is built of cramped limestone blocks. The interior of the circular hall was articulated with large **niches**: four rectangular niches on the main axes and four semicircular niches on the diagonals. The exterior of the building is flatened on the north and south and there were entrances to the interior through the respective rectangular niches. The north door was the main entrance and was preceded with a (probably) semicircular (sigma) **portico** of which only two columns and part of a **stylobate** survived in-situ. The reconstructed diameter of the semicircular colonnaded forecourt, which was located just south of the **Mesê street**, is about 55 m. Due to the sloping ground there were eight semicircular steps in front of the south entrance. A fragment of wall projects from the south façade of the hall and a column base aligned with this wall was found nearby. These remains are interpreted as part of a north-south colonnade which may have had its counterpart west of the south door of the rotunda. If so, there would be an elaborate entrance way leading to the rotunda from the south. Yet further south of the huge rotunda another centrally-planned building was excavated. This small structure stood on a lower level than the rotunda and had an **opus sectile** floor.

The original function and identity of the rotunda are disputed. One of the possibilities, taking into account the probable fifth-century date of the complex, is that it was the palace of the **Theodosian** princess Arcadia.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Naumann suggested that the sigma portico of the rotunda could be identified as the **Amastrionon** which served as a market and place for public executions in the Middle Ages (this identification accepted for example by A. Berger).<sup>5</sup> According to **Byzantine texts**, the Amastrionon was an open space limited by a semicircular portico and adjacent to the Mesê approximately in the location of the Myrelaion rotunda and it was defined by a semicircular portico and a straight wall which contained a gate. The **Patria** (10th century) tell us other interesting details: For example, there were several reliefs and statues in the Amastrionon court, such as Zeus driving a chariot , turtles, a personification of the **Lycus River** and a relief of a man from Amastris with his servant.<sup>6</sup> In the 8th century the rotunda behind the portico must have been in ruins (confirmed by the twentieth-century excavations) and it is quite possible that the sigma court may have become a market place by that time.

## 2. Palace of Romanos I Lakapenos

The ruined rotunda was re-used when a new **palatian** building was erected directly on the top of it in the Early **Middle Ages**. Before the construction of the new palace started, the walls of the rotunda had been consolidated and both doors walled-up. The interior of



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what had left of the late antique structure was converted into a cistern whose vaulting, supported by re-used columns, created a leveled platform on which the medieval palace was built. The palace was considerably smaller than the rotunda and occupied only the eastern part of the platform. It consisted of a rectangular hall (21.75 x 7.80 m) with two corner tower-like structures connected by a portico.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the building resembled Roman corridor villae. The building was identified as the palace which belonged to the emperor [Romanos I Lakapenos](#) (920-944) and was converted by him to a nunnery, as it is known from the sources, situated near the [Myrelaion church](#) (also work of Romanos) which fortunately survived, converted into a mosque (Bodrum Camii). Nevertheless, it is not certain whether Romanos built this palace. In this respect it has been suggested that the palace may be the same as the House of Krateros adjacent to the semicircular Amastrianon court (either the general Theodore Krateros serving under the emperor Theophilos (first half of the 9th century) or Andreas Krateros who was a **domestikos** in the reigns of [Basil I](#) and Leo VI (second half of the 9th century)).<sup>8</sup>

1. Talbot Rice, D., "Excavations at Bodrum Camii 1930", *Byzantion* 8 (1933), pp.151-176.
2. Naumann, R., 'Der antike Rundbau beim Myrelaion und der Palast Romanos I. Lekapenos', *Istanbul Mitteilungen* 16 (1966), pp. 199-216
3. Striker, C., *The Myrelaion (Bodrum Camii) in Istanbul*, (Princeton 1981), p. 13.
4. Naumann, R., 'Der antike Rundbau beim Myrelaion und der Palast Romanos I. Lekapenos', *Istanbul Mitteilungen* 16 (1966), pp. 206-208
5. Naumann, R., 'Neu Beobachtungen am Theodosiosbogen und Forum Tauri in Istanbul', *Istanbul Mitteilungen* 26 (1976), 133; Berger, A., *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos*, ΠΟΙΚΙΛΑ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΑ 8 (Bonn 1988), p. 344.
6. Berger, A., *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos*, ΠΟΙΚΙΛΑ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΑ 8 (Bonn 1988), pp. 341-342.
7. Striker, C., *The Myrelaion (Bodrum Camii) in Istanbul* (Princeton 1981), p. 15.
8. Berger, A., *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos*, ΠΟΙΚΙΛΑ ΒΥΖΑΝΤΙΝΑ 8 (Bonn 1988), pp. 345-346.

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	<b>Berger A.</b> , <i>Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos</i> , Bonn 1988, Ποικίλα Βυζαντινά 8
	<b>Naumann R.</b> , "Der antike Rundbau beim Myrelaion und der Palast Romanos I. Lekapenos", <i>Istanbul Mitteilungen</i> , 16, 1966, 199-216







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	The Palace near Myrelaion <a href="http://www.byzantium1200.com/palace.html">http://www.byzantium1200.com/palace.html</a>



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### Glossary :

	<b>dome</b>
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.	
	<b>domestikos</b>
A term that during Byzantine times denoted a wide array of ecclesiastic, civil and military officials. In church hierarchy the domestikoi were in charge of special groups connected with liturgical rites, such as lectors, sub-deacons but mainly cantors. In the military chain of command during the 6th, 7th and 8th century the domestikoi were the commanders of the <i>tagmata</i> , the regiments under the direct command of the Emperor.	
	<b>niche</b>
Semi-circular recess on the surface of the wall.	
	<b>opus sectile, the</b>
Technique of floor or wall decoration. Thin pieces of polychrome marble are carved or joined so that a decorative motif could be depicted.	
	<b>portico</b>
A porch or a structure consisting of a roof supported by columns or pillars, leading to the entrance of a building.	
	<b>stylobate</b>
The top step of the crepidoma (the stepped foundation of an ancient Greek building) from which the columns rise.	