



Palaces of Byzantine Constantinople

Summary :

Very little is known of the once famous imperial and aristocratic palaces that adorned Constantinople. The Great Palace, which served as the imperial residence and the center of administration, was an agglomeration of buildings of various dates and forms. Starting in the 11th century, the emperors preferred the Blachernai palace in the northwestern part of the city. Examples of aristocratic residences from the early period are known from the remains of the palace of Antiochos in the 5th century.

Geographical Location

Constantinople, Istanbul

Period

4th-15th century

Topographical Location

1. Introduction

Imperial and aristocratic palaces constituted an important aspect of Constantinople's urban fabric. In addition to the primary imperial residences, the [Great Palace](#) and, after the 11th century, the [Blachernai](#), numerous others are known from both textual sources and archaeological evidence. The scarcity of the latter, however, makes any generalizations about the impact of palatial architecture on the urban development of [Constantinople](#) difficult. Nonetheless, it is safe to assume that early palaces, as with almost every other kind of [architecture](#) in the capital, continued Roman practices, and therefore they would have been open to and in close harmony with the city. After the Dark Ages (7th-9th centuries) and with the emergence of Medieval Constantinople palaces became fortified and thus isolated. In the Late Byzantine period palatial architecture was influenced in style and arrangement from Western models.

2. Early Byzantine Period (324-842)

The Great Palace, the primary residence of the Byzantine Emperors until 11th century, was located to the southeast of the city, between the [Hippodrome](#) and the sea, on the area now occupied by Sultanahmed (the Blue Mosque).¹ Begun by [Constantine](#) and continued by his successors, the Palace included residential quarters ([Daphne](#)), the quarters of the [imperial guards](#), the Tribunal or Delphax, the Augusteus, probably a throne room, and an audience hall called Consistorium. Subsequent emperors made several additions to the Great Palace. Unfortunately, very little survives with the exception of a large [peristyle](#) court, which preceded an [apsed](#) hall and was decorated by splendid floor mosaics. It has been dated to the 6th or the 7th century.

The remains of two 5th-century residences unearthed close to the Hippodrome offer us an idea of what an aristocratic palace would have looked like in that period. The [palace of Antiochos](#), a [praepositos](#) during the time of [Theodosios II](#), was located in the northwestern side of the hippodrome.² It comprised a hexagonal hall preceded by a semi-circular portico. The palace's construction took place between 429 and 433. When the relics of St. Euphemia were transferred from [Chalcedon](#) to Constantinople in 680, a [church](#) dedicated to her was established in this palace. Textual sources indicate that the [Palace of Lausos](#), a [praepositus sacri cubiculi](#) again in the court of Theodosios II, stood not far from the palace of Antiochos. Lausos was famous for his collection of [antique statuary](#) which he proudly exhibited in his residence (the collection included the [Knidian Aphrodite](#) of Praxiteles and Pheidias' Olympian Zeus, among other famous works of classical art).³ The remains of a rotunda and an adjoining rectangular hall to the northeast of the palace of Antiochos have been identified with the palace of Lausos, although this identification has been recently challenged.⁴

3. Middle Byzantine Period (842-1204)



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The Great Palace is best known in its 10th-century form thanks to the *Book of Ceremonies*, a compilation of imperial protocols collected by [Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos](#). Additions to the palace made throughout the centuries by various emperors created an irregular layout, which included structures of diverse forms, gardens, and sporting grounds. In the 10th century, the emperor [Nikephoros II Phokas](#) fortified the central part of the palace.⁵ In the last decade several legal and illegal excavations have uncovered extensive substructures in the area. Substantial ruins located today on the shore overlooking originally the port Boukoleon belong to the [palace of Boukoleon](#).⁶

The remains of a mansion belonging to [Romanos I Lekapenos](#) have been excavated close to the church of the [Myrelaion](#) (today Bodrum Camii, ca. 920) to which it was originally attached.⁷ The [palace at Myrelaion](#) was placed on the remains of an enormous 5th-century rotunda, which in all likelihood belonged to a residential aristocratic complex. Lekapenos' palace was a rectangular hall. Two smaller wings were attached to its west side, separated by a colonnaded courtyard. The Myrelaion complex is indicative of the changes in residential architecture that occurred from the early to the middle Byzantine period: the whole 10th-century mansion took less than half of the size of the 5th-century rotunda, which was just a part of an early residence.

In the 11th century, emperor Constantine IX Monomachos built a palace, along with a monastery dedicated to [St. George](#) and a hospital, in the area of Mangana. Of the substantial remains of the monastery that were excavated in the early 20th century, none can be identified with the palace.

One of the major changes took place during the reign of [Alexios I Komnenos](#) who had the administrative center of [Constantinople](#) moved from the Great Palace to the Blachernai palace, located in the northwest of the city and near the [Blachernai church](#).⁸ The palace was built at ca. 500. It was subsequently fortified and expanded by both Alexios I and Manuel I.

4. Late Byzantine Period (1204-1453)

The Blachernai palace was the customary residence of the [Palaiologoi](#). The Great Palace was left to decay, probably because it was too expensive to upkeep. To the Palaiologan period dates the most important and complete example of palatial architecture surviving in [Constantinople](#), the so-called [Tekfur Sarayı](#) (turk. "the palace of the prince), which dates to the late 13th or 14th century⁹ It is located at the northernmost end of the [Theodosian fortifications](#) of the city, wedged between the inner and outer walls. Tekfur Sarayı was originally a three-story building. The ground floor is supported by columns and piers. The upper floor probably did not have any interior divisions and was used as a throne room or audience hall. On this floor there was a chapel on the south side.

1. For the Great Palace see Paspates, A.G., *The Great Palace of Constantinople* (London 1893); Ebersolt, J., *Le Grand Palais de Constantinople* (Paris 1910); Miranda, S., *Étude de topographie du Palais Sacré de Byzance* (Mexico City 1976); Mango, C., *The Brazen House. A Study of the Vestibule of the Imperial Palace of Constantinople* (Copenhagen 1959).

2. For the career Antiochos, the palace, and earlier bibliography see Greatrex, G. - Bardill, J., "Antiochus the "Praepositus": A Persian Eunuch at the Court of Theodosius II," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50 (1996), pp. 171-197.

3. On this collection see Mango, C., Vickers, M. and Francis, E.D., "The Palace of Lausus at Constantinople and Its Collection of Ancient Statues," *Journal of the History of Collections* 4 (1992), pp. 89-98; Guberti Bassett, S., "Excellent Offerings": The Lausus Collection in Constantinople," *The Art Bulletin* 82.1 (2000), pp. 6-25.

4. Bardill, J., "The Palace of Lausus and Nearby Monuments in Constantinople: A Topographical Study," *American Journal of Archaeology* 101.1 (1997), pp. 67-95.

5. For this see Mango, C., "The Palace of the Boukoleon," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 45 (1997), pp. 41-50.



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6. Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls* (Tübingen 1977), pp. 225-228.
7. Naumann, R., "Ausgrabungen bei der Bodrum Camii (Myrelaion), " *Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri Yilligi* 13-14 (1966), pp. 135-139; Idem, "Der antike Rundbau beim Myrelaion und der Palast Romanos I Lekapenos, " *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 16 (1966), pp. 199-216. See also Striker, C.L., *The Myrelaion (Bodrum Camii) in Istanbul* (Princeton 1981).
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http://www.byzantium1200.com/daphne.html	
	Great Palace
http://www.byzantium1200.com/greatpalace.html	
	Palace of Botaneiates
http://www.byzantium1200.com/botenai.html	
	Tekfur Sarayi
http://www.byzantium1200.com/tektur.html	
	The Palace near Myrelaion
http://www.byzantium1200.com/palace.html	

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.	
	peristyle
A colonnade surrounding a building or a courtyard .	
	praepositos
(from lat. praepositus sacri cubiculi) The praepositos or praipositos (πραιπόσιτος του ιερού κουβουκλίου or του ευσεβεστάτου κοιτόνου) was a grand chamberlain by the Early Byzantine period the highest official, usually Eunuch, in the imperial service. After the 6th C. his functions were assumed by the parakoimomenos. The dignity involved in palace ceremony and disappeared until the end of 11th C.	

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