ON THE DATING OF SOME MOSAICS IN HAGIA SOPHIA

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The Bulletin for March, 1944, in connection with the Museum's exhibition of reproductions of mosaics uncovered by the Byzantine Institute, published an article by Professor Charles Rufus Morey on the mosaics of Hagia Sophia. The following paper, read in Mr. Whittemore's absence at a recent symposium of Byzantine scholars held at Dumbarton Oaks, deals with some problems brought out in "this charming and learned discourse" and offers conclusions "sometimes in wide variance to Professor Morey's opinions," to quote Mr. Whittemore's introductory remarks. Certain other problems relating to the mosaics of Hagia Sophia were discussed in a paper given by Professor Albert M. Friend. Although Mr. Whittemore prefers the spelling Hagia Sophia, we have used Hagia Sophia in the present article in order to maintain consistency with the labels in our galleries. The illustrations are reproduced through the courtesy of the Byzantine Institute.

—Editor

Professor Morey agrees with us that the Christ of the Beautiful Gates above the central door of the narthex was executed by order of the Emperor Leo VI (886-912), but he imputes the panel of the southwest vestibule, representing the Mother of God and the Child between the Emperors Constantine and Justinian (see p. 56), to Basil I (866-886), a century earlier than we are disposed to do in ascribing it to Basil II Bulgaroktinos (967-1025). To the same period, more precisely to Basil I's conjoint rule with Michael III (866-867), Mr. Morey assigns the apse Mother of God (see opp. page) and the surrounding inscription.

In his study of the dating of the panel of the vestibule, Mr. Morey questions in general the use of palaeographic evidence and declares that Byzantine palaeography, "prone to revivals and mixtures of early and late," can but doubtfully supply discussion with solid chronological criteria. This statement, it is obvious, can explain the presence of traces of archaism—as we ourselves have noted—in the form of the beta, epsilon, and omega, but it cannot justly be offered as a denial of the later dating of the panel that we unhesitatingly support. Mr. Morey further regards our comparative study of the lambda, mu, and tau as inexact, without mentioning, nevertheless, other letters, as for example the gamma and upsilon, analyzed by us, which, we think, should be included in a finished criticism. On the other hand, with his characteristic courtesy, he points, in confirmation of our dating of the panel, to the tenth-century form of the letters in the monograms of the Mother of God.

The main argument which Mr. Morey advances for his dating of the mosaic in the ninth century rather than in the tenth rests on his conviction that all the inscriptions of the panel are later insertions. Neither inscriptions nor monograms, he believes, were a part of the original mosaic.

The monograms, as he sees them, are insertions because the rows of tessellae are set irregularly around and within their enclosing circles and because the lines of tessellae adjoining the letters interrupt the horizontal rows of the ground. The wavy irregularity that Mr. Morey, with suspicion, notes in the rows of tessellae within and without the circles of the monograms (see p. 40) is an habitual practice in construction throughout Byzantine mosaic, as may be seen in this panel, in the nimbi of the Mother of God and of the emperors, and in the nimbus of the cross on the dome of the model of the church in the hands of Justinian. It is evident that in this irregularity we are observing a technical method employed to set out
The Mother of God. Mosaic in the eastern apse of Hagia Sophia. The Museum has a reproduction of part of this mosaic, shown in the mediaeval galleries south of the main stairway.
the gold medallions and give them luster on a ground of similar gold. Nor, we aver, may the lines of gold tessellae surrounding the letters of the monograms be taken as proofs of insertion, since the figures of the Mother of God, Constantine, Justinian, the models of the church, the city, and the throne, as well as the panel itself are enclosed by a gold line of demarcation. This is but an application of technical knowledge and understanding ennobling to Byzantine work. The gold line is a mode not to be mistaken for the painting in outlines and flat tones of the great Chinese masters; its purpose is not to draw in outline or to set limits to form, but on the contrary to dissipate the outlines of all figures by lifting them, in the visual magnetism of the cubes, separated and distant, into an abode of interluminary light.

Turning to the imperial inscriptions, Mr. Morey regards the prominence of their tessellae as another proof of incision. Yet similar prominence appertains likewise to the cubes of the nimbi throughout the panel of the vestibule, as well as to the inscription on the open leaves of the Gospel held by Christ in the narthex, where there is no question of incision. The tessellae used in this way are of pigmented glass of soft, dark purple, a black-violet, and a bold jasper-red containing so many bubbles that they resemble natural obsidian or even scoria. Set but slightly higher than the gold tessellae, they are considerably raised in value by light that is spread concentrically around them like ripples in water around a stone, casting vibrant shadows that give force and character to the lettering and the nimbi.
Consonant with this gentle projection of the cubes in the inscriptions is the stronger undulating surface of the entire mosaic wall, plainly seen in the photograph we present on this page. This shows the part of the mosaic representing the head of Justinian in a difference of levels reaching 17 mm. in span; the section of the panel with the second monogram of the name of the Mother of God has differing levels of 4.5 mm. to 5.5 mm.

The last argument used by Mr. Morey to support his theory of incision rests on the disposition of the Constantine inscription (ill. p. 40), which he considers faultily fitted to its space. It is true that the text of the inscription bears easily identified Fossati conservations, but in spite of them and in spite of the difference of stroke in the letters, the inscription in its freedom declares itself to us from beginning to end as written by one moving hand at the time of the setting of the panel. The end of the pillar-like (χιηθσις) Constantine inscription, turned by a lively force of sentiment without effort another way, is at first glance disturbing to the eye but need not trouble us. So in the inscription of the Deesis panel in Hagia Sophia the end of the word Prodromos swerves unexpectedly from its course into a new light (see p. 43). Harmony in discord and rhythms lawless in the classical canon are not strange to Byzantine expression, as we see in the Leo panel, where the figure of the kneeling emperor brings its own dynamic balance to the composition.

Luckily, in the panel of Constantine IX and Zoe in the metatorion of the south gallery of Hagia Sophia we are afforded an instance of indisputable incision (ill. p. 41). Confirmed by camera, examination of materials, and chronicles, the Zoe panel provides us with an example of violent substitution of cubes in sharp contrast to the construction of the rest of the mosaic. Here is a definite break in continuity in the setting of tessellae between all the incisions and the original ground, contrary to what is to be observed in the inscriptions and monograms of the vestibule panel, where the transition from the gold background to the letters is perfectly even. All the incisions of the Zoe panel form a depression in the surface of the mosaic: the maximum is 5 mm. in the head of Christ and the head of Zoe, 8 mm. in the head of the emperor and the name “Constantine,” and even as much as 9 mm. in the patronym “Monomachos.” Gold tessellae surrounding the words “Constantine” and “Monomachos” are of a larger size than those used elsewhere in the ground, and the cubes of the faces are of another cutting than those of the hands in the earlier mosaic. The laying of tessellae on a previous setting-bed has weakened the adhesion and caused many cubes in the Zoe panel, both gold and red-violet, to fall out.

The total absence of all these disrupting features in the vestibule panel asserts that here we are before an undisturbed, homogeneous creation: all elements are simultaneously in unison and of interdependent origination.

In the second part of Professor Morey’s approach to the dating of the mosaics, he submits a study of style, iconography, and, in some measure, of historical data. He suggests that
Head of Justinian, from the southwest vestibule panel
Head of Constantine, from the southwest vestibule panel
the figures of the panel have a "robust volume" which is found in the miniatures of the Homilies of Gregory (Paris 510) illustrated for Basil I but which a hundred years later disappears, as is witnessed, according to his observations, in the Vatican Menologion illuminated for the second Basil. As a matter of fact, in the Paris manuscript the figures fall into two groups, but neither group, we think, offers exact similitude to the figures of the panel of the vestibule. On folios 316 and 438 the figures belong to the first group; they are taller and somewhat more slender than those of the vestibule, but in general the manuscript presents personages of a stubbed type with large hydrocephalitic heads, which differentiate them not only from the first group of the miniatures but from the regal figures of the vestibule panel. The difference is especially striking between the seated personages in folios 322 vo. and 355 and the enthroned figure of the Mother of God in the mosaic. Similar drawing is met in other manuscripts of the ninth century, for example, in the Vatican Cosmas Indicopleustes, and appears to be a reminiscence of the pre-Iconoclastic painting preserved in the "Sinope fragment" in the Bibliothèque Nationale. In the manuscripts of the tenth to twelfth century, for example, Vienna Cod. Theol. Gr. 240, Paris Gr. 70 and 139, and Athens Nat. Libr. Cod. 56 and Stau-ronikita Cod. 43, this archaism disappears and figures reach normal proportions, which actually justify comparison with the vestibule panel.

Mr. Morey's assertion that the strong modeling of the features of Constantine and Justinian is a symptom of the ninth century rather than of the late tenth may also enter our discussion. In the mosaics of the Santa Prassede, ordered by Pope Paschal I at the beginning of the ninth century, the faces are given without modeling of forms. The same may be said of such ninth-century Byzantine manuscripts as Paris 923 and Milan Ambrosian Libr. 49 and 50. Shadows appear in Paris 510, but the artist confines himself to rendering a relief without details of the muscles. The strong and detailed modeling that distinguishes the representations of Constantine and Justinian appears, as far as we are aware, only from the tenth century on. In the Vatican Bible, which belongs to the tenth century, the face of King David is lined with deep wrinkles (Reg. Gr. 1, fol. 487 vo.) and the Menologion of Basil II contains several representations still closer to the vestibule handling of features (see, for example, pp. 7, 15, 17, 19, 31, 186, etc.). In footnote 8 of our Report on the
Mosaics of the Southwest Vestibule, which must inadvertently have escaped Mr. Morey’s attention, we have indicated several eleventh- to thirteenth-century wall paintings and mosaics where the same emphasized and detailed modeling is present. Such are the heads of the apostles formerly in the destroyed Basilica Ursiana at Ravenna, the faces of saints in Santa Croce in Rome, and a number of representations in Georgia, Serbia, and Russia.

Mr. Morey finds another indication for an earlier dating of the vestibule panel in the “heavy scale of the ornament,” which seems to him to belong rather to the ninth than to the tenth century. He does not specify which ornament he has in mind: is it the jeweled ornamentation of the throne or that of the woven design in the imperial vestments? Both ornaments, it will be recalled, are found in examples of the eleventh and twelfth centuries mentioned on pages 16, 19, and 20 of our Second Report. The decoration of the footstool is to be compared with the eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantine chalices now in the treasury of Saint Mark’s and with the description in Chapter LII of the Schedula of Theophilus. The ornamentation of the vestments finds close parallel in the carved stones of the tenth and eleventh centuries at Melegab and in the Panagia Gorgoeikoos [the Small Cathedral] in Athens. Similar motives also adorn the loroi of the angels in the Capella Palatina and are on the loros of an angel on a steatite icon formerly in the Boldini collection in Florence, both dated twelfth century, and on the vestments of the angel in Toqale Kilisse at Guremê in Cappadocia, dated by Jerphanion eleventh century.

Professor Morey's belief that the mosaic of the vestibule cannot be dated by the architectural features of the model of Hagia Sophia held by Justinian is outside the present discussion and must be left to a controversy between Professor Morey and Professor Edmund Weigand, to whom he refers. It is necessary, however, to question the assertion that the city presented by Constantine is definitely of an early type retaining still the complete circuit of walls as observed in late classical art, whereas in the tenth century, to judge from the cities in the Menologion of Basil II, artists represented the city walls only in the forepart of the model, indicating the rest by a mass of buildings. Do we not know models of cities with a part of the walls concealed by buildings earlier than the tenth century, for instance in the pre-Iconoclasm mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore and in San Lorenzo fuori le Mura? On the other hand, cities with complete circuit of walls are met in monuments of the tenth century. Such is the representation of Bethulia in the Vatican Bible, folio 393, and of Rome and Chersonese in the Menologion of Basil II, pages 40 and 204. Further examples may be noted of a still later date, for instance, in the fourteenth-century Bulgarian manuscript of Manasses in the Vatican, folios 18, 28, 41, etc. Here, it seems to us, is the conclusion of the whole matter: representations of cities with encircling walls and of cities with walls seen only in part are to be found in all periods of Byzantine art and therefore cannot serve as chronological data.

We confess that we are puzzled by Mr. Morey's statement that, when looking at the panel as a whole, he finds the figures are “conceived in a space” that had disappeared from Byzantine art by the time of Basil II. Is Mr. Morey speaking of space in two dimensions or in three dimensions? If in two dimensions, that is to say, in regard to the design on the surface of the wall, we should observe that middle

An inscription showing incisions. From the mosaic of Constantine IX and Zoe on the east wall of the south gallery
Byzantine compositions either in fresco or in mosaic remain to us in such paucity that comparison in a field so narrow fails to yield chronology. The mosaic pictures of the Great Church are comparable only with each other. It is irrelevant, we affirm, unless we are in search of iconographic detail, to liken the architectural semblances in Hagia Sophia to the crowded figures in the roughly quarried ninth-century caves of Cappadocia or to the feeble drawing and grouping in the frescoes and mosaics of ninth-century provincial Rome, and more than all to figures in the derivative miniatures of manuscripts.

Still less may we agree with Mr. Morey if he alludes to a three-dimensional space. The art cultivated by the Byzantine mosaicist was not an attempt to reach a reconciliation between Hellenic spatial values and Asiatic linear decoration, but an effort by means of a scale in terms of two dimensions to give in a synthesis of colors the effect of figures in nature moving in a diffusion of gold light where there is no darkness at all. The Byzantines understood space, but they never made the mistake of trying to represent it objectively: space was to them an obstacle in the path of dynamic religious vision.

Near the close of his article in the Bulletin, Mr. Morey produces some historical considerations with which we do not find ourselves in complete accord. The supposition that the representation of Constantine on the vestibule panel emanates from an especial devotion of Basil to the founder of Constantinople is debatable. Mr. Morey points out that Basil I named a son after the Great Emperor and dedicated a church to him. True, but the name Constantine was then as now one of the most common names in Greek family usage: eleven emperors bear it among nine Michaels, eight Johns, and five Alexiases. Of his many churches Basil dedicated but one church to the "emperor among the saints." If we recall all Basil's dedications, we reach the conclusion that the founder of the Macedonian dynasty rendered especial devotion not to Constantine but to the Prophet Elijah. In the capital alone several churches were dedicated by Basil I to Saint Elijah: one in the eastern part of the Great Palace, one at Pigi—now called Balalikı—where the church of Saint Constantine stood, and one on the delicate promontory of Hiereia—now known as Fener-Bahçe. To the Mother of God, Saint Nicholas, the Archangel Gabriel, and Saint Elijah the emperor dedicated the Nea, the most famous of all his churches. The legend according to which Elijah, appearing in a vision to the mother of Basil, predicted her son's accession to the throne, merely adds confirmation of the emperor's personal veneration of the prophet saint.

Nor do the facts confirm the statement that Basil I, this "astute, base-born usurper," would not have deemed it decorous to place himself alongside the Μέγας Βασιλεύς, and would therefore have ceded to Justinian the position which, according to Mr. Morey, was imperially his own. This explanation, we affirm, does not appeal to us at all: Basil had repudiated his ignoble origin as is witnessed by the well-known attempt of Photios to manufacture for the emperor a descent from the first Christian kings of Armenia.

Equally contestable, we venture to think, is the supposition that the emperor, whoever he was, Basil I or Basil II, could have entertained the idea of self-representation in this picture.

Mr. Morey reminds us, as it were in parallel, of a mosaic picture in the kainourgion [the royal palace] showing Basil I enthroned and surrounded by his generals, who offer him cities that they have taken in battle. But is this the subject of the picture in Hagia Sophia? The lost mosaic of the kainourgion belonged to secular imperial liturgy; the vestibule preserves an icon.

A comparison with other mosaics in the church makes clear the unique intention of the vestibule panel. Constantine IX and Zoe, John II and Irene adorned the walls of their private metatorium in the south gallery with portraits of themselves in state robes offering ceremonial gifts to Christ and the Mother of God. Leo VI permitted himself to be represented for the narthex in the attitude of a donor prostrate at the feet of Christ of the Beautiful Gates. The panel of the vestibule excludes any personal
John the Baptist, a detail of the Deesis in the south balcony. The Museum has a reproduction of the entire group, which is not at present on exhibition.
representation. It is composed within the bonds of a very early icon showing the Mother of God enthroned and holding before her the Divine Child. Angels and archangels sometimes attend her, sometimes the Magi, sometimes saints. Here Constantine and Justinian, the founder emperors, are at her side, not in earthly portraiture but in spiritual countenance, themselves venerated and in sainthood, guardians of a Universal Laudation of the Theotokos. Except in a frame which here does not exist, the presence of a donor in this icon is inherently debarred.

In his analysis of the mosaics of Hagia Sophia Mr. Morey turns his attention also to the eastern apse to discuss the figure of the Mother of God with the Child (ill. p. 35) and the fragments of the inscription on the apse arch (see ill. at left). We quite agree that the inscription belongs to a period immediately following the end of the tumultuous discord over the icons. The complete text of this inscription was identified by Antoniades in his monumental research on Hagia Sophia as the first epigram of the Anthologia Palatina: “The images that the heretics took down from here our pious sovereigns replaced.” Subsequently, in the Codex in the library of Saint Mark’s, Venice (498), Dr. Silvio Giuseppe Mercati discovered the epigram under the heading of “On the Arch of the Apse (Hύπατος) of Hagia Sophia.” This makes Antoniades’s reading unassailable.

Questions arise only around the identification of the “pious sovereigns” mentioned in the epigram. According to Mr. Morey, while the inscription may point to the regency of Theodora during the infancy of Michael III, “the plural mention of the sovereigns would better fit the brief dual reign (866-867) of Michael III and Basil I.” The speculation is based on an erroneous supposition that Theodora was only a regent, not an empress, during the minority of Michael III. The truth is that the regents were the empress’s brother Bardas, her uncle Manuel, and the Logothetes Theoktistos, while she, herself widow and mother of an emperor, was actually empress both regent and regnant. This validates the place of Theodora in the epigram as one of the honored sovereigns.

If we were supporting Mr. Morey’s interpretation, we might quote from the homily that the Patriarch Photios pronounced in Hagia Sophia at the unveiling of a new mosaic representing the Mother of God and the Child. The sermon was preached on the twenty-ninth of March, 867, when Theodora was already dead and Michael shared the throne with Basil I. On that day the preacher declared that Hagia Sophia, “the eye of the world,” formerly tarnished by the Iconoclasts, was restored to its original brightness by a new mosaic represent-
ing the Mother of God and the Child. The pompous rhetoric of the patriarch literally accepted might mislead us to conclude that he is describing the first mosaic made in Hagia Sophia after the restoration, when actually, as D’Aristarches has shown, he is pointing to a later image on the western arch mentioned by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos in his enumeration of the repairs and adornments executed in the Great Church by his grandfather. Had it been the Mother of God in the apse to which Photios referred in his sermon of 867, the mosaic would have been included by Constantine in his comprehensive inventory of Basil’s benefactions. Further, at the turn of the twelfth century an indomitable and usually well-informed traveler, the Archbishop Anthony of Novgorod, recording his visit to Constantinople, attributes the mosaic of the icon of the Mother of God with the Divine Child and the two angels in the sanctuary of Hagia Sophia to Lazaros, an artist of great renown who, as we know from other sources, died in 856, ten years before the conjoint reign of Michael III and Basil I. It must be accepted as possible, therefore, that these mosaics of the apse were made in the reign of Michael and his mother, the empress. This subject will be discussed in our future book on the sanctuary of the church.

We are infinitely grateful to Professor Morey for offering to us this opportunity of mutual study of the panel in the southwestern vestibule and of the mosaic of the apse of Hagia Sophia. Our deductions, even after the acute examination of months and years, may well be open to further question, but since the mosaics are clearly to be seen, scholars are themselves in possession of all they need for verification and correction of this balanced evidence.