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As Liz James has noted in *Light and Colour in Byzantine Art* (1996), reflected and transmitted light in Byzantine religious art and architecture contributed to, indeed symbolized, the passage between the material and the transcendent world. This symbolism of light, lustre and colour would seem to have also been a characteristic of secular architecture. The tenth century Byzantine Continuator of the Chronicle of Theophanes refers to the 'splendid halls' erected by the last Iconoclast emperor, Theophilus (ruled 829-42), the main hall of which was characterised by a golden roof and polished silver and bronze doors, while lustrous marble covered the floor and walls. The courtyards were paved with polished white marble with a golden fountain overlooked by a golden throne. The lustre of such halls continues a tradition that began in the Roman and Late Antique periods, notably in Nero’s Golden House, in which the emperor was portrayed in the symbolic role of the conquering sun, in a syncretism of Roman and Persian symbolism and artistic motifs. Such symbolism appears to have continued through the Christian era to the Middle Byzantine period. In this paper, the role of golden lustre in a late sixth-century palace hall, the Chrysotriklinos, or Golden Hall will be examined. This octagonal structure, beyond its function as a “show-palace” was also a bounded territory within and through which the ruler both held and carried out his or her office in the asserted role of the earthly representative of God. This paper will examine the intentionality underlying the design, through the theories of citation and social memory, and propose that the symbolism served to legitimate the ruler, as Paul Magdalino has described, as a “New Constantine.”
Anicia Juliana was perhaps the wealthiest citizen of sixth-century Constantinople. An older contemporary of the emperor Justinian I, who would commission the church of Hagia Sophia, she was the descendent of a Spanish family that traced its lineage back to the second century emperor Vespasian, and was thus of lofty status. Under pressure from Justinian to contribute her wealth to his wars, Anicia Juliana was said to have transferred it to golden tiles on the ceiling of her dynastic church of St. Polyeuktos, modelled on the biblical Temple of Solomon. 1 Despite the fabulous character of this story, it appears likely that the roof was in fact either roofed in gilt-bronze tiles, the ceiling was surfaced in gold mosaic, or both. Its excavator Harrison has reconstructed the building as possessing a dome supported by great piers within an square plan, which would make it the first of its type, and suggests it to be a precedent for the great church of Hagia Sophia, rebuilt soon after in 532 with a golden ceiling, and about which Justinian is supposed to have declared ‘Solomon, I have outdone thee’. This raises the question, why a gold roof, and why, for that matter, a dome? Both elements do not appear to result from technical or programmatic necessity, but rather appear as innovations, perhaps motivated by intended ascriptions of meaning. Given the usefulness of gold as a means of commodity exchange, or for buying off troublesome barbarians, what then was the purpose of lavishing vast sums of wealth upon the interior, and possibly exterior, of such structures?

The construction of St. Polyeuktos (520s), and the subsequent construction of S.S. Sergius and Bacchus and Hagia Sophia (530s) appear to constitute some form of meaningful citation - there are no earlier domed churches in the city, or at least structures that were originally built as churches, as opposed to martyría. On the other hand, there are a number of circular, apparently domical structures built in the fourth and fifth centuries as palace reception halls, and in particular a number of enormous structures built by Anicia’s imperial family, that can be interpreted as dynastic statements. The remains of one such structure, a vast 41.8 metre diameter circular hall, have been found adjacent to the 10th century Myrelaion church in Istanbul. 2 This fifth century hall has been associated, on the basis of Early Byzantine sources, with the palace of Arcadia, the daughter of Arcadius and granddaughter of the emperor Theodosius I. 3 If this attribution is correct, an imperial residence was situated adjacent to the dynastic temple of the Constantines, the Philadelphion, and included in its layout a hippodrome, like a number of earlier Tetrarchic palaces.

Further evidence is supplied by the fifth century palace, or palaces, associated with the court chamberlain Antiochos, a Hellenized Persian high official of the grandson of Theodosius I, Theodosius II, in which, similar to the ‘Arcadianae’, a sigma-shaped forecourt is axially aligned with a central plan reception hall. Thus, the huge dynastic church of Anicia Juliana, if Harrison’s interpretation of it possessing a huge dome is correct, together with the Theodosian halls can be understood as dynastic statements, incorporating through their form and gliding analogies with the cosmic domes of Nero and Hadrian in Rome, and those of the Sasanian kings, with whom Theodosius I had arranged a pact, and Theodosius II had conducted a war that ended in stalemate and truce.

There is insufficient space here to construct an argument for the derivation of the central-plan imperial church from the model of the Late-Antique central-plan reception hall, however it is clear that there was innovation in such halls in the fourth and fifth centuries, the explanation for which may, as has been argued elsewhere, be explained by an association with imperial status, and derivation from an ‘agonistic’ exchange of imperial motifs between Eastern Rome and Sasanian Iran. 4 This shift is certainly difficult to explain through frameworks of stylistic or technical development. This issue raises the core focus of this paper: attention needs to be placed upon the theoretical methodology through
which the subject of such innovations or revivals is approached. In particular, stress needs to be placed upon the question of what such motifs meant to their receptive audiences. This paper will focus upon the example of another golden hall – the Chrysotriklinos in the Great Palace of the Byzantine emperors – in attempting to set out such an appropriate methodology.

Art-historical scholarship on Late Antique and Early Byzantine architecture has, for the most part, been based upon theoretical frameworks focusing on function, style and construction method. Furthermore, the derivation of much scholarship on the period from biblical studies has led to a focus upon the case studies of churches and monasteries. Secular buildings have received substantially less attention, admittedly not least because of the paucity of material evidence. There is, for example, no extant secular equivalent of the church of Hagia Sophia. The negative consequence is that the social context of architecture in this period has been inadequately explored. The contrast between scholarship in Byzantine and early mediaeval European architectural history could not be starker. Within this latter field, scholars have, at least in part, moved away from the history of styles - the evolution from Romanesque into Gothic - and secondly from fixed symbolic conceptions of the cathedrals as models of a heavenly Jerusalem, as proposed by Sedlmayer and others, towards the sociologically-informed methodology of Panofsky, and the historically situated, iconological methodology of Krautheimer and Bandmann. Central to the historical writing of these latter scholars was the question of what buildings were intended by their designers and patrons to signify to their audience, and what associations they were meant to engender. Krautheimer argued that for mediaeval minds the meaning content of architecture, its iconicity, was its most important element, and that in addition to function and form, the iconography of pre-modern architecture needed to be considered. Significantly, he noted the emulation of prior symbolic motifs, as architectural copy or emulation. Bandmann also questioned the traditional art-historical approaches of stylistic history and functionalist analysis, instead focusing upon the question of how forms or motifs were received by their societies and the agents responsible for the construction of buildings, in adding and producing their intellectual meanings: immanent, allegorical, historical and aesthetic. The reception of these theories into English-speaking scholarship has been in part limited by the delay in translation from the German. Thus, Bandmann’s canonical work of 1951 was not published in English until 2005.

The ideas of Krautheimer and Bandmann were further developed by Kunst, Schenkluhn and others in the 1970s in the form of the theorization of the social function of architectural citations (‘Zitattheorie’). From this perspective, forms and motifs of preexisting architecture may be knowingly incorporated in new constructions as ‘citations’ through which social statements may be made, such as continuity with a revered past, or assertions of political or hierarchical supremacy, as appears to characterize the citations of the papal palaces by Charlemagne in his campaign of palace buildings in Francia. However, in contrast to Bandmann, Kunst and Schenkluhn argue that there are no fixed, archetypal entities such as an essential typological or motival meaning, in such cited architectures. Rather than continuity of symbolic meaning, they focus upon historical meaning, and upon what it is that is received in the process of a citation, in what way, and in support of what agenda or purpose: “One can... say the question is quite simply: what is received and how? In the analysis, the question of how is not foreseen (by the scholars of essential meaning)” [author’s translation]. Schenkluhn, then, focuses upon the ‘how’ - literally the mechanism through which motifs or elements are received, but also investigates what purpose the reception serves. In the mediaeval period, it would appear that the major reason for such citations was the intended maintenance (or fabrication) of a tradition as a statement of power and legitimacy. The citation partakes of something of the perceived transcendent truth of the archetype. It is argued that it was precisely this assertion of legitimacy that underlay similar citations in Byzantine palatine architecture, the construction of a social memory that legitimated both monarch and society.

Citation may also be illuminative, revealing a new meaning and conception that is strengthened by the prototype. Through this process, a form of perceived continuity is maintained. The citation as image may also visualize an absence, a model that might exist somewhere else, but could perhaps survive only in social memory, as in the case of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. From this perspective, a building form can be said to have had no intrinsic meaning, but rather a meaning that was ascribed to it through the performing of traditions, such as the circular procession in the above church. Objects and building forms could acquire specific meanings that migrated across cultural boundaries. Schenkluhn and Bosman stress the significance of the meaning content understood by the agents responsible for the ‘citation’ of the received model. Through this process, tradition was handed on and transformed. This ‘handing on’, or conversely the confrontational ‘illuminative’ use of citation to create new meanings, leads to the connected issue of memoria as it applies to architecture. In this regard, it is pertinent to note the preface written by the 10th century Byzantine emperor Constantine VII, at the beginning of his Book of Ceremonies, compiled to preserve then-current and obsolete palace ceremonies from oblivion:
Over a long time many things can disappear which, while achieved in that time, are also consumed by it. Among these was the treatise outlining the imperial ceremonial, something valuable and important. Because this had been neglected and become, so to speak moribund, the imperial power was in fact unadorned and unattractive to look at. Therefore... we believed it was necessary to collect with unremitting effort from many sources those things which were devised by earlier generations and were made known by those who had seen them... It was... as if we were setting up in the middle of the palace a radiant and newly cleaned mirror in which are seen what befits the imperial rule ... so that the reins of power will be managed with order and beauty.18

This highly poetic passage, with its evocation of consuming time, and the dangers of oblivion is, together with the treatise of which it forms part, itself an illuminative citation, the reconstruction of a tradition, and of a social memory, and thus also of a heritage, the reconstruction of the past in the present for the purposes of informing the future. It remains to outline how a theorization of citation of the past, together with the fabrication of social memory, may inform a new understanding of architectural history.

Following Schenkluhn and Bosman, the question of why certain forms and spatial configurations were adapted is arguably disregarded or inadequately addressed in stylistic and functionalist explanations of historical transformations within architecture. In the final section of this paper, this issue of intentionality will be examined in relation to the case study of the late-sixth century palace hall within the Great Palace, the Chrysotriklinos, which was, on the basis of later sources, built by the emperor Justin II (r. 565-78). The building was constructed as one of several ‘golden’ halls of that emperor. It is later recorded as having been ‘splendidly decorated’ by his successor Tiberius (r. 578-82).19 By the ninth century, it had acquired religious icons, asserting the victory of Orthodoxy over Iconoclasm.20 Thus, an icon of Christ was depicted in the eastern apse above the imperial throne, signifying the emperor as God’s vicegerent on earth, while an army of saints held court.21 Some 350 years after its construction, the Chrysotriklinos was restored under Constantine VII (r. 913-59), the compiler of the Book of Ceremonies, who installed silver doors and a silver table, and decorated the hall with wall images in mosaic of a rose-garden enclosed by a silver border.22 This imagery was
clearly meant to evoke the garden of paradise, (an image which had also been used by the Iconoclasts in place of icons) but here there is not the ideological statement of the restored icons of the ninth century. But aside from such architectural ornament, it is the presence and effect of the golden ceiling and domical roof, which seems to have had the greatest effect on its contemporaries, as a concrete cosmological symbol. In the absence of detailed contemporary descriptions, or material evidence, it is hard to be precise about how the building would have appeared as a landmark, but there are several other references to golden roofs in Constantinople. First, there is the previously mentioned golden ceiling and possibly golden roof of the dynastic St. Polyeuktos church. Furthermore, the poet Corippus provides us with a reference to a hall in the Sophianae Palace built by Justin II, and named for his wife Sophia:

There is a hall within the upper part of the palace
That shines with its own light as though it were open to the clear sky
And so gleams with the intense lustre of glassy minerals,
That, if one may say so, it has no need of the golden sun
And it ought really be named the ‘Abode of the Sun’
So pleasing is the sight of the place and still more wondrous in appearance.

This description is of a ceiling that was covered, in all probability, with gilt glass mosaic, glowing from the light entering lantern windows, as at Hagia Sophia. The poet proceeds to use the hall and its light as an allegory for the emperor as the light of the city and the world. Berry notes the direct comparison made by Corippus between Justin’s hall at the Sophianae and his father Justinian’s Hagia Sophia:

There are two wondrous things imitating the glorious sky, founded with the guidance of God, the venerable temple and the glorious building of the new Sophianae. This is the hall of the emperor and this of God.

The poem must predate the construction of the Chrysotriklinos, as surely the poet would have used the Chrysotriklinos as a comparison had it already been in existence. But it is also a clear example of illuminative citation, through which Justin’s client-poet is associating his Emperor with the maiestas of the great Justinian, while subtly altering the intended meaning to assert a closer connection between ruler and church. Barry notes the long tradition of associating the domain of the ruler with the house of the sun, evidenced spectacularly at Nero’s Golden House, in which probably Sasanian-derived imagery extended to a revolving celestial ceiling that emitted thunder and rain. In turn, the round reception halls of the Theodosian dynasty appear through their form, and perhaps iconography too, to assert continuity with Imperial Rome.

The significant issue here is the ‘why’: what did such imagery mean for the patron of the building and his advisors? The same Justin is known to have commissioned a golden apse in the church of St. Mary of Blachernae. The common trope for these projects is that of the brilliant light of the building competing with the light-filled firmament. Later, until at least the ninth and 10th centuries, golden ceilings were installed in new palace halls. Thus, the last Iconoclast emperor Theophilus is described as having installed such ceilings in his triconchal reception hall and other private rooms, while Constantine VII in the 10th century restored the Great Hall of Nineteen Akkoubita with a golden ceiling. The explanation for all these light-filled, ‘cosmic’ halls could be couched in simple terms of the desire to impress, but here, too, it appears that there was a conscious attempt to cite elements of the past.

How then might the form and appearance of the Chrysotriklinos and the rituals that Constantine’s treatise described occurring in, through and in relation to it, be explained in relation to the theory of citation set out above? One encounters the interior of the building in a passage in the Book of Ceremonies, which describes the furnishing of the Chrysotriklinos for an imperial audience for Arab ambassadors. Imperial crowns were installed in a golden five-towered stand, the pentakoubouklion, apparently positioned in the eastern apse, with imperial thrones flanking it. Further thrones were installed in the side (north and south) vaults. The western curtain was raised for the entrance, supported on two silver stands. During the interview, the ambassadors would have been permitted to advance through the centre of the hall to meet and converse with the emperor, while their retainers were held at the west end of the hall, separated by the three gold platters which appear to have formed a kind of screen. On occasions of promotions and audiences, the members of the Court would form a consistory, with the chamberlains forming a semi-circle around the emperor,
flanked by the other high officials of the court, senators, patricians and generals, in their ceremonial robes. The Court would thus form a representation of the hierarchy of the empire itself, as occurred also in Sasanian receptions, but also a mimesis of heaven. Thus, the central room would be turned into an octagonal hall with axial apse, and the spatial movement would be similarly axial, from the entrance court, to the Tripeton, then through silver-clad doors to a vestibule screened off by a curtain which, when raised, led the supplicant towards the imperial throne and eastern apse. From this description, it is evident that the intention was to maximize the lustre and reflectance of the hall, literally dazzling the visitor before he or she encountered the emperor as the still centre of a moving universe, seated on a raised golden throne. It is impossible to say with certainty that such rituals followed to the letter earlier receptions, such as the occasions when Hadrian held court in the Pantheon in Rome, but what does appear certain from the preamble of the Book of Ceremonies is that the court believed itself to be following imperial traditions. While these rituals took place some 400 years after construction of the building, they surely represented an asserted continuity with the past: the building and its rituals were citations of a perceived Christian Roman empire that stretched back to Constantine I, and before him to the pre-Christian Roman Empire. Indeed, the inferred form resembles the octagonal reception hall in Galerius’s fourth century palace at Thessaloniki, as do the fifth-century halls at the Myrelaion and northwest of the Hippodrome. And yet by this period the imagery and ritual of the conquering sun, sol invictus, with its association with the pagan Kaiseraal, seems anachronistic at a time when the emperor was projecting a new role as the Christian god’s representative on earth.
From its descriptions, it would appear that the Chrysotriklinos was distinguished by the effects of light and colour, which were created by its decoration and furnishing. These effects may be related more generally to the use and significance of light, reflectance and colour in Byzantine architecture. In combination with the issue of the performativity of such spaces, it has been argued here that form, experience and performativity in such early mediaeval architecture may be related to the functions of citation and memoria, and further that such an analysis of the social and ritual context of the building - of what it meant to its contemporary subjects, and what associations it gave rise to - allows one to go beyond the traditional, and limited history of styles, building techniques, and building function.

Endnotes

26 Barry, "House of the Rising Sun", 83.


25 Fabio Barry, “The House of the Rising Sun: Luminosity and Sacrality from Domus to Ecclesia,” in Flavius Cresconius Corippus,

24 A reference to gold tiles lining the ceiling does not make practical sense. Much more likely is the use of gold for a mosaic

23 Much more likely is the use of gold for a mosaic


20 Bosman, “Architektur und Zitat.” A theory of citation and substitution, according to which a kind of cultural


17 (1979): 49-64.


13 On the issue of ‘social memory’, see Aby Warburg, Memory and Time, 89-99.

12 Bosman, “Architektur als Zitat.”


8 Krautheimer, Iconography, 115-50.


3 A reference to gold tiles lining the ceiling does not make practical sense. Much more likely is the use of gold for a mosaic


1 Schenkluhn, “Bemerkungen zum Begriff des Architekturzitats”, 11.

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lux sacra palatia conplet, lux urbis et orbis


