

**THE AIA SOPHIA. Consecrated fourteen centuries ago.**

by Prof. Dr. F. J. DE WAELE.

"Church of fourteen centuries" I wrote as a variation on Schaepman's song, in my diary a few years ago, when I was sitting all alone on the long Turkish mats under the dome of Justinian's masterpiece in Constantinople, officially: in Stamboul. There happened to be no tourists, no guards, no praying Turks, no scaffolding. What a stroke of luck, to be allowed to walk around all alone, without shoes on, out of respect for the place, as well as out of aversion to the ship's keels of Turkish slippers, which were prescribed when entering the church. What a heart-warming feast of memories and examination of history, to be alone for a few moments with the shadows of the old masters, with the pages of history and the poets' praises of this wonder of the world, which was a church, became a mosque and is now a museum. On December 27 of this year it will be exactly fourteen centuries since it was consecrated, and although we know that there is human megalomania in celebrating such anniversaries, we still believe that we should think less of human ability now than of the psalm's word, which in this case would be, that fourteen centuries for the Most High are but as many as fourteen days or fourteen minutes. We have reason to rejoice in the church of holy Wisdom, even though it is in foreign hands and condemned to rigidity, even though we are now further than ever from the prophecy of consolation in the famous lamentation on the fall of city and church: "Comfort yourself, Mother, comfort yourself, one day this church will be yours again; the Aia Sophia has now become a museum and the "Allahoe Akbar", the Mohammedan owl screeching has now come to an end, while the nightingale song of Christian symbols still resounds. New nightingales have come to light: the plastered faces of the Cherubs are indeed still hidden behind their Islamic mask, but in the last years from 1931 to 1934, the English Byzantinist Th. Whittemore, in the long inner hall (esonarthex) exposed musical visions of piety and beauty and once again the intimacy of the Byzantine churches begins to live, although is the melancholic smile of the Mother of God still very modest with the ostentatious curls of the beautifully calligraphed letter shields of the caliphs under the Cherubs of the pendentives. The Holy Wisdom. In the eyes of Constantine it was not yet the Godhead in her all-wise governance of all humanity, but, when he built the first Aia Sophia in 325, it seemed as if the "Holy Wisdom" was a compromise deity, to which the pagan symbolism could not take offense and in which the Christians found a spiritual core for lofty contemplations and Byzantine hair-splitting. Constantine's son, Constantius I, expanded the basilica, which after an existence of three-quarters of a century was completely destroyed in a fire with the senate building; that fire was not only a material disaster, but also a flaming symbol of the popular anger at the banishment of the great Chrystomos. Once again the torch was thrown into the "new" Wisdom Church, which Theodosius had built in place of the Constantine and which had become 117 years old: this fire, during the bloody unrest of the city revolution in 532, destroyed many quarters, — such a mass destruction also happened in the wooden Stamboul of 1911 and 1917 — also a part of the imperial palaces and the baths of Zeuxippes. A few days later the emperor conceived the plan to build a church, "such as never had been a cult building since Adam's time and never will be", but the site of the old basilica was much too small. How the one and a half hectares, which were needed for the building itself, and the surrounding square, were obtained by force, or cunning, or otherwise, from the many owners in this densely populated quarter, are told by many edifying legends, which perhaps conceal a violent expropriation plan. But not only Constantinople, but also the entire empire would contribute to the gigantic construction costs, although the riches and ancient art treasures of this Empire were still largely pagan. In Asia Minor and in the East, as in Greece, the mighty temples were still standing, although the statues of the gods had been abducted and the pious no longer brought an increase to the temple treasure. But then they would give pieces from their own bodies, and so the four green columns that separate the main space from the side aisles are violent borrowings from the temple of Artemis at Ephesus, while the red porphyry columns in the side aisles were stolen from the sun temple of Aurelian at Heliopolis. Just as the Venetian sailors on the Levant supplemented their shipload with antique sculptures and a travel gift each time brought with you for the building of San Marco, ships and fleets now travelled to Constantinople with stolen temple pieces, with white marble from the Prokonnesos, green marble from Carystos on Eubea, red marble from Iasos in Caria, verde antico from Numidia, not to mention the other cargoes of gold and precious metals with this gigantic St. Peter's or rather Holy Wisdom Medal from the "oikoumene". A whole lustrum passed before the two Asiatic master builders, Anthemios of Tralleis and Isidoros of Miletus, made Justinian's dream come true. In the meantime, the

emperor himself had encouraged the progress of the building work with word and deed: every day he was in simple clothing among the 16,000 workers who worked "for God and prince".

One of the main concerns had been "the piling" for the new church. Several times a century the city and the area around the Bosporus are ravaged by disasters: for example, 80 years before the construction of the Justinian church, an earthquake had razed the walls and 57 towers of the city and buried the patriarch Euphrasius under the ruins of his palace in 527. It could have been foreseen that the largest church in Christendom would also suffer damage from the many seismic vibrations and tremors, although no one would have dared to foresee that the dome would collapse in such an earthquake only 20 years after its completion. The underground work of the church was gigantic: an extensive system of deep wells and colossal pillars was constructed on the rocky ground with the intention of increasing the elasticity of the entire building, which formed a rectangle of 75 by 65 m. To which were added the annexes: the large western forecourt, the two vestibules, the outer and inner narthex, the baptistery and the "skevophylakion" or sacristy. We must imagine ourselves without the later Turkish buttresses and the many tombs, the four minarets, the school building, etc.

On the third day of Christmas 537 it was the great day of the dedication. On a triumphal chariot and with his entire court retinue Justinian rode to the new church, the "megali Ekklesia", as it was stamped in the bricks; at the entrance of the building the patriarch Menas received him and the emperor himself hurried inside, where, before the iconostasis, in ecstasy and with raised hands, he exclaimed: "Glory to God, who has deemed one worthy to complete such a work. Solomon, I have surpassed you!" However much has disappeared, the idea of church lives on here, yes, even more than, for example, in Rome in St. Peter's Church. What has disappeared? The living blood of this work of art is gone, while the beautiful mask has remained. No more altar, no iconostasis, no amboon, no singers' tribune, and moreover that miserable Turkish plastering over of so much beauty!

But just as in the Asian Minor churches, which I found after the disaster of 1922 as Christian churches even though they had been converted into mosques, here the prayer niche carved out towards Mecca can make the eye turn away from the apse built towards Jerusalem, that is, in a south-eastern direction. Although we want to leave out much pathos and rhetoric from the 900 hexameters that the imperial secretary Paulus Silentarius dedicated to the great church as a poem of praise, as an "ekphrasis" (the poem was however only recited in 563 on the feast of the blessing of the water, our Epiphany), yet in reading his work the fairy tale of splendor and wealth comes to life again before our eyes: precious stones and pearls were fused together for the altar, the recess on the altar was decorated with cameos, gems and enamels. Columns of the purest gold and adorned with pearls and diamonds supported the golden roof of the ciborium or tower-like tabernacle, of solid gold was the globe with the cross above it. Of solid gold was also the dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, in which the "immaculate Mysteries" were preserved. Around the altar, — which in itself was a wonder of the world — lay the choir stalls with seven steps, — all gilded silver, — for the patriarch and higher clergy, and twelve golden columns divided the iconostasis, the end of the choir, into smaller parts. Under the dome sat the numerous lower clergy and the amboon, the tribune of honour for the emperor was in the middle of the church, where the presbytery ended. When we speak of a "sea of light" that put the church in full splendor, we use the poet's image: "Like a fleet of barges you see there in the heights the silver lampwork, it is a sea of light in which one could swim, it is a fleet of light, that is not richly laden with goods and possessions, but with shining rays. Like a man who adorns his royal bride with love and veneration and chooses a necklace from the most precious stones, so that it may shine in competition with the flaming glow of the sun's lamp: so has my emperor on all vaults a fleet of lamps hang"...

That's how it was once, and today this memory may be recalled again, although the Christendom so impoverished in Stamboul feels deep pain for the disfigured Aia Sophia. I have walked around there for hours, and repeatedly, laid my hands on the old marble, caressed the stone lacework with my eyes, because one could not touch it with the hands, even put my finger in the hollow of the "sweating column", of course not to bring the moisture to our eyes, as the thousands of superstitious Turks did, supposedly to obtain the cure for their eye complaints, while in reality it usually meant a worsening, but to live through the symbol of the greatest wound of Eastern Christendom.

Finally, one wanders back to the statues in the narthex, to Christ and the dear Lady, who in this petrified museum now have a great jubilee Christmas.

There in the narthex we find another pure piece of Byzantium, there the crosses and flower stars shine on the vaults and lunettes and speak to us in the same symbolic

language as that cryptographic confession of faith in mosaic and in astronomical allusions, which glorified the Logos (Father), Christ, the Son, and Sophia, the Wisdom of the Holy Spirit (see Christmas number 1935). The abstract symbolic part of the narthex decoration certainly dates back to the time of Justinian and is related to the emperor's policy to win over the Monophysites (the followers of Eutyches who claimed that in Christ only one nature, the divine, existed, and were therefore averse to the originally Syrian cross representation with the bloody body of Christ) for the official church: in the mosaics only the cross trees are depicted. But, although we gladly admire the image of the enthroned Christ, before which Emperor Leo VI (886-912) kneels (two medallions of the Mother of God and of the Archangel Gabriel flank it) and which is already known through the discovery and restoration work of Fossati in 1847, we are particularly attracted by the "imperial Christmas" in the narthex: a variant of the Magi is the representation of the seated Mother with the Child on her lap, while the two fathers of Byzantium, Constantine with the model of the city in his hand and Justinian, who carries the church, stand next to it. It was not until the end of the 10th century, according to Whittemore, when the church was solemnly put into use again after a long period of abandonment, that this mosaic of the two great Magi was installed. It does not seem to me a daring hypothesis to think that the musivist wanted to glorify the glorious Christmas Day of half a millennium ago (for the artist of that time) in such a traditional artistic scheme, and it can hardly be otherwise than that on this centenary we turn again to this "Christmas mosaic" with the greeting of the Bethlehem angels, which Justinian repeated on 27 December 537: Glory to God, who has given and preserved for us this masterpiece of high art.

#### **The Serpent Column of Delphi in Constantinople**

There is no record of the Serpent Column's removal from Delphi in the early fourth century, but there are numerous references among Roman sources to its arrival on the Bosphorus. Constantine I's importation into the capital of a great many divine and profane statues was an embarrassment to his Christian friends. Eusebius claimed that the emperor collected and displayed the artworks only to demonstrate that the idols of the past were now decoration to be laughed at or scorned. Sozomenus and Socrates echoed this in their continuations of Eusebius' Church History. Eusebius did not mention the Serpent Column directly, but rather that 'the Delphic tripods were deposited in the Hippodrome'. Sozomenus, however, explicitly recorded that among them was the famous tripod which Pausanias and the Greek cities dedicated after their victory over the Persians.

See

[https://www.academia.edu/3334914/The\\_Serpent\\_Column\\_of\\_Delphi\\_in\\_Constantinople\\_Place\\_ment\\_Purposes\\_and\\_Mutilations](https://www.academia.edu/3334914/The_Serpent_Column_of_Delphi_in_Constantinople_Place_ment_Purposes_and_Mutilations)

**The Column of Constantine** (Turkish: Çemberlitaş Sütunu, from çemberli 'hooped' and taş 'stone'), also known as the Burnt Stone or the Burnt Pillar, is a Roman monumental column constructed on the orders of the Roman emperor Constantine the Great in 330. It commemorates the declaration of Byzantium (renamed by Constantine as Nova Roma) as the new capital city of the Roman Empire. The column is located on Yenıçeriler Caddesi in the eponymous neighborhood of Çemberlitaş, Fatih, central Istanbul, along the old Divan Yolu (the 'Road to the Imperial Council') between the Hippodrome of Constantinople (now Sultanahmet Square) and the Forum of Theodosius (now Beyazıt Square).

The Column of Constantine is one of the most important examples of Roman art in Istanbul. The column is 35 m tall today. Restoration work has been under way since 1955. Cracks in the porphyry were filled and metal brackets renewed in 1972. Since 1985, the monuments of the historic peninsula of Istanbul, including the column, have been listed as a World Heritage Site.

The column was dedicated on May 11, 330 AD, with a mix of Christian and pagan ceremonies.

In Constantine's day the column was at the center of the Forum of Constantine (today known as Çemberlitaş Square), an oval forum situated outside the city walls in the vicinity of what may have been the west gate of Antoninia. On its erection, the column was 50 m tall, constructed of several cylindrical porphyry blocks. The exact number of porphyry blocks is disputed, but common figures range from seven, up to as many as eleven. These blocks were surmounted by a statue of Constantine in the figure of Apollo. The orb he carried was said to contain a fragment of the True Cross. At the foot of the column was a sanctuary which contained relics allegedly from the crosses of the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus Christ at Calvary, the baskets from the loaves and fishes miracle, an alabaster ointment jar belonging to

205 Mary Magdalene and used by her for anointing the head and feet of Jesus, and the  
palladium of ancient Rome (a wooden statue of Pallas Athena from Troy).  
A strong gale in 1106 felled the statue and three of the upper cylinders of the  
column. Some years later, Byzantine emperor Manuel I Komnenos (reigned 1143-1180)  
210 placed a cross on top in place of the original statue and added a commemorative  
inscription that read "Faithful Manuel invigorated this holy work of art, which has  
been damaged by time". Bronze wreaths once covered the joints between the drums, but  
these were taken by the Latin Crusaders who plundered the city during the Fourth  
Crusade in 1204. The cross was removed by the Ottoman Turks after the fall of  
Constantinople in 1453.  
215 Earthquakes and a fire in 1779 destroyed the neighborhood surrounding the column,  
leaving it with black scorch marks and earning it the name 'Burnt Column' (or, as  
referred to by Gibbon, the "burned pillar"). The column was restored by Abdülhamid I,  
who had the present masonry base added. The base was strengthened in 1779. The  
original platform of the column is 2.5 meters below ground.

220

#### **Reconstruction of Constantinople, Byzantium 1200**

Website <https://twitter.com/Byzantium1200> (nieuw)