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Displaying the Past in Byzantium. Figural Spolia on the City Gates of Nicaea (13th c.)

In the Middle Ages, in Western Europe as well as in Byzantium, the vestiges of Antiquity, as is well known, are constantly revived, in the form of spolia. Whenever the spolia consist of figural pieces, the question arises whether the imagery they display somehow influenced the choice of reusing them, and, on a further stage, whether and to what extent their original meaning has been preserved or reinterpreted.

In the pages that follow, I wish to illustrate a peculiar and very problematic aspect of this phenomenon, as it appears in the Byzantine world: the reuse of ancient figural spolia on city walls, especially in some of the most strategic parts of them, namely the gates. My work is still in progress, and what I wish to present here is a restatement of the question, as well as some preliminary remarks thereupon¹.

The custom of displaying statues or busts in niches on the city gates goes back to the Greco-Roman tradition of the 'triumphal arches', but, in the Byzantine world, the pivotal points of the walls are very frequently embellished by means of reliefs, which are not realized ad hoc, but rather 'ready-made' elements recovered from other buildings, in most cases available in loco.

A number of examples constellate medieval Anatolia. In Ankara, figural spolia appear abundantly on the citadel walls of Michael III (842–867): human figures are laid horizontally in the texture of the wall, thus consciously undoing their potential meaning. On the contrary, the very meaning is emphasized in further examples, where the spolia take up extremely relevant places, as 'frames' proper to the city gates. The case of the citadel of Ephesus is highly interesting in this respect: on the gate leading to the sanctuary of St. John, a Roman frieze is displayed, of which today only a small fragment with putti survives in situ, but that, after 18th-century descriptions, is known to have consisted of a row of panels depicting scenes of the Trojan War. Among those, the scene of Hector dragged behind Achilles' chariot, was commonly mistaken for a martyrdom scene, hence the name gate of persecution ascribed to the archway [13]².

Constantinople itself provides more than one example: the Gyrolimne Gate, that pierces the comnenian section of the Blachernae walls, had been adorned with three late antique busts³; on the propylaea of the Golden Gate, twelve marble panels with mythological scenes have been added, at a date which is still uncertain, and are now almost completely lost [24, 26]; similarly, a late antique relief representing a Nike once embellished a gate in the area of Balat (by the Golden Horn), probably together with a second figure as its pendant; a chronology of these decorative additions cannot be fixed yet, due to the lack of relevant archaeological traces and references in the written sources.

In terms of the variety and number of the reused materials, one of the most striking examples, among those still extant, is that of the urban gates of Nicaea, today Iznik, in Bithynia. Thanks

¹ I wish to thank the Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations, Koç University, Istanbul, and the Warburg Institute, London, for supporting the first stage of my research.

² On the trip of the French ambassador to the Porte, Choiseul-Gouffier, see Barbier [6]. The reliefs reused above the gate of Ephesus are discussed in the forthcoming article by Bevilacqua [8] (with further bibliography).

³ The three busts probably dated back to the 6th c. [5, p. 145–146; 26, p. 114; 27, p. 126–127].

to their overall good state of preservation, the walls of Nicaea have enjoyed some popularity among scholars, but their artistic, symbolic, and aesthetic value has been taken only rarely into consideration together with their defensive purpose. The main contribution to the study of the walls as a whole (a study in which not only the description and the dating, but also the decoration of the boundary is considered), is, hitherto, that of A.M. Schneider and W. Karnapp, done in 1938 [34]. In the other fundamental study on the walls of Nicaea, "Byzantine Fortifications" by C. Foss and D. Winfield [17], their ornamentation is not discussed. A number of reliefs built into its walls have drawn the attention of archaeologists, who debated on their provenance, subject, style, and date [9, 10, 23, 33, 35], but with disregard of the context of their secondary setting. All considered, despite a rich historiography on the 13th-century life of the city, few and only partial studies have been devoted to the artistic production in the same period.

In the Hellenistic era Nicaea had a smaller ring of walls, as Strabo records (XII, IV, 7 [20, p. 462-465]). The walls were enlarged in the late 3rd c., when they received their present shape. The inner wall dates back to this latter phase, and has remained more or less as we see it today, in spite of undergoing many restorations and rebuilding, in the wall itself as well as in its semicircular and square towers, due to earthquakes and sieges, up to the 11th c.

Later, during the reign of the second ruler of the Lascarid dynasty, John III Vatatzes (1222-1254), the walls were strengthened with a second circle, concentric to the former, with a trench in between, likewise equipped with towers, but lower, and surrounded by a moat. This arrangement was inspired by that of the Theodosian walls of Constantinople: the reference is as obvious to modern scholars [17, 4], as it must have been to contemporaries (builders, inhabitants, and visitors). Most importantly, two of the gates that pierce the outer wall show, on their exterior face, ancient reliefs, set into the brickwork next to their jamb-stones.

The so-called Istanbul Gate (Fig. 66), connecting the city to the road leading to Constantinople, consists of a triple passage system: the late-antique circuit includes the roman triumphal arch, and is preceded (on the inner side) by a second entrance gate, decorated with two marble masks, recovered from the Roman theater of the city; finally the Lascarid outer wall, on which four pieces of ancient sculpture are assembled. On the left hand side, there is a huge marble stone, perhaps originally intended to be the side of a large sarcophagus, though surely incomplete, depicting three standing, female figures, the details of which are difficult to identify. This is topped by a frieze with human protomes, which is actually the lid of a second sarcophagus. On the wall segment on the upper right hand side, there was another relief, recovered from a sarcophagus of the «Sidamara» type, smaller than the first one, showing three figures, of which the center one is standing under an arch on spiral columns; the latter relief is now on display in the Iznik Museum, but it can be seen still in situ in some photographs dating from before the 1930s⁴, as well as in drawings by L. de Laborde and C. Texier from the 19th c. [22, 36]⁵. Below it is a rectangular marble slab depicting a battle of knights.

The complex of the Lefke Gate (Fig. 67), too, consists of a triple entrance system, as in the Istanbul Gate, which includes the late Roman triumphal arch, with the whole inner structure displaying an extensive use of spolia. The outer wall's masonry appears altered, but still exhibits the chromatic value, which is a characteristic of the whole 13th-century structure. Two reliefs have been incorporated between the wall and the tower on the right, depicting a display of trophies

⁴ A collection of historical photographs is preserved in the Photographic Archive of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Istanbul. The sculptural collection of the Museum has been researched by Barsanti [7].

⁵ On the drawings by Texier, see also S. Pedone [29], who cites extensive literature on this topic.

and a triumphal scene respectively; lastly, two twin altars have been placed symmetrically next to the two jambs.

The lower relief on the right of the Istanbul Gate and the two on the right of the Lefke Gate have been associated by scholars, not only with one another, but also with a fourth element, today preserved in fragments, in the garden of Iznik Museum. This depicts a scene that is difficult to interpret, with, as its focal point, a kneeling figure, above which the inscription "ALAMANNIA" can be read. Before being moved to the museum, it was immured in the raising of the inner south-eastern wall of the city. The four blocks come from one and the same monument, presumably a triumphal arch⁶, dating back to the tetrarchy period [9, 10, 23], or even earlier [33].

The so-called 'Nicene experience', as defined by H. Ahrweiler [1, 2], developed, as is well known, over a period of about fifty years, starting from 1204, the year of the Latin conquest of Constantinople during the Fourth crusade [4, 18, 19]. When the crusaders entered the city, the court was forced to take refuge elsewhere, and the territory of the empire broke up into a number of independent empires (the main ones in Epirus, Trebizond, and Nicaea). The area where the rulers of the Lascarid dynasty settled included, in the beginning, Nicaea and Bithynia. The 'empire of Nicaea' was later extended to Ionia, with Smyrna, Nymphaion, and Magnesia as the main centres. Besides the emperors, a number of members of the aristocracy and the intelligentsia take refuge in Nicaea, fleeing from the besieged city, and so did the patriarch himself, so that the city came to be considered, in the collective imagination, as 'temporary capital', replacing Constantinople until the latter was taken back by the Byzantines, which occurred under Michael VIII Paleologus in 1261. While the exiles were awaiting the recapture of the city, the whole Byzantine tradition was revived in Nicaea, in keeping with the legacy of Constantinople. Authors and philosophers, who followed in the retinue of the Lascarids, provided the intellectual support. On the shores of the Lake Ascanion they recreated an environment, which they tried to make as similar as possible to the "Paradise lost" beyond the Marmara Sea. From the legal system to the imperial ceremonial, everything referred to the model of Constantinople. Literature aside, there was also a lot of artistic activity, and the emperors undertook a program of embellishment and restoration of the city.

Nevertheless, the panorama of the artistic production in the Lascarid era has not been explored in detail, mainly because the archaeological remains are difficult to interpret⁷. As for architecture, this panorama is limited to a series of sacred and profane buildings in Ionia⁸, and in Nicaea, since the 1940s, some remains of churches have been excavated: each of them is thought to be from the Lascarid era, but none can surely be dated to that time, nor associated with any of those, that, according to primary sources, had been sponsored by the emperors⁹. The largely ruined

⁶ The finding of large piers, partially emerging from the soil, in the area of Maltepe (a neighbourhood within the city, near the Lefke Gate), perhaps the remainders of a large arch, led to thinking that the reliefs could pertain to that monument. According to Bittel [9, 10] and Laubscher [23], the monument was coeval to the arch of Galerius in Salonica, and dedicated to the battle of Vindonissa (298).

⁷ As far as architectural enterprises are concerned, the only remarkable exception is Buchwald [12]. A general overview of the artistic production in Nicaea over the centuries is provided by Yalçın [39] and Möllers [25].

⁸ John III commissioned major building activity, not only in Bithynia, in the region of Nicaea-Bursa-Nicomedia (where already Theodore I had sponsored architectural activity), but also in the area of Smyrna and Magnesia, where he especially cared the refurbishment of the fortifications [1].

⁹ The churches, indicated as A (by the Istanbul Gate), B (south-east of the theatre), and C (north of Yenişehir Gate), have been tentatively identified with buildings mentioned by the written sources, which existed during Lascarid rule: St. Triphon, the monastery of Tornikios, and St. Anthony respectively. A church built over the theatre's orchestra and surrounded by a graveyard (church D) might also date to the same years [28]. New decoration campaigns in St. Sophia and in the monastery of Hyacinthus, may date to the period of the Lascarid rulership. Peschlow [30] suggests to ascribe

frescoes in the south chapel of St. Sofia, too, are ascribed to the 13th c. [3, 32]. Undoubtedly, the problem of the refurbishment of the new capital deserves new research, that should also involve other artistic media, such as marble sculpture¹⁰, manuscript illumination¹¹ and weaving¹². Given how little else survives, the city walls are certainly the most relevant existing testimony of the architectural and artistic taste of this milieu.

Two Byzantine texts shed some light on the contemporary perception of the walls, although they are marred by the customary tantalizing vagueness and ambiguity of Byzantine authors when dealing with monuments and art works. Theodore II Laskaris, in his speech “In praise of the Great City of Nicaea”, delivered before his father, John Vatatzes (the patron of the outer walls), celebrates the walls with the scope of celebrating the emperor himself. Theodore’s words, however, do not mention any ‘embellishment’ of the walls, although he does compare the solidity and adornment of the enceinte of a city to its capability of ‘nourishing’ culture in itself, and establishing a parallel between military and intellectual strength:

“And I call the city also a divine mind, having in it you good citizens like some noble thoughts, vigorously debating and mixing practice and the steps of reason with theory, walking in a pure path, doing themselves honour, altogether by the force of reason, and building walls around their own, as it were, mind, this city; they make it more illustrious than the wealth of the Medes or the golden heavenly chain of Homer. <...> so a city which sees its own members, the men who live in it, dignified with eloquence, is given a form and is splendidly beautified by its good harmony” [16, p. 137].

Three centuries later, in 1555, the Austrian traveller H. Dernschwam would describe the entrance to the city in this way: “On the right hand side, on a bastion, is immured a white marble stone, on which the busts of two characters are portrayed, holding a book” [14, p. 158-160]. His description is extremely vague, and does not literally correspond to any of the reliefs on the Istanbul Gate; still, it makes clear how some of the pictures exhibited could have been perceived by someone passing through the gates as an indicator to the lively cultural life of the city.

Another primary source for the city walls of Nicaea is Theodore Metochites’ «Nicene Oration», from the early 14th c., in which the author devotes an entire page to their praise. Metochites, too, is silent about the sculpted ornaments. In his words, however, we can find a reference to the vestiges of the past, both of this particular city, and of the Byzantine empire in general, when the author praises the history of the Bithynians, declaring: “this same city may be regarded as both old and new. And let Antiquity adjudge this honor also to the city; and let wise Time who always determines right adjudge it also” [16, p. 169].

The orator continues describing the fall of Constantinople into foreign hands. As for the role of Nicaea, he uses expressions such as “preservation of the seeds of later revival”, “restoration”, “renewed life”, and states that it has become “the life-giving sap to the whole dissolved empire of the Romans, and gathered it together again and assembled it” [16, p. 191]. In its very own way,

the church located in the area of Yenişehir kapı to the second quarter of the 13th c.; see also Eyice [15].

¹⁰ A well-head, today in Iznik Museum, which P. Hetherington [21] believes of Lascarid date, can be mentioned.

¹¹ John Vatatzes encouraged cultural activities in all the cities of his empire, allowing entire libraries to be brought in those same cities, as testimonies such as Theodore Scoutariotes, Pachimeres, and the letters written by Theodore Laskaris attest [11, 37, 38].

¹² Theodore Metochites, interestingly reports that «[the city] provided a plentiful supply of the arts, sending some along, and keeping others whose perfection is found only here for herself <...> yet even of these she sends the useful products, and decorates the imperial palace by the art of weaving, which here only is at its finest» [16, p. 190-193].

the same idea is declared on the city gates, where the symbols of a ‘dissolved’ past are ‘gathered together’, ‘(re)assembled’, and displayed.

Contemporary literature insists on a tight connection between Nicaea and the former capital, and on the latter being a model for every sphere of life: it is then reasonable to wonder whether the solution adopted for Nicaea’s main gates may also have been dictated by the desire of specifically imitating the gates of Constantinople, where a similar arrangement can be observed in the three cases recalled above. In fact, it would be of course intriguing, to think that not only the idea of building an outer wall, but also that of such an arrangement of the reliefs deliberately refers to the gates of Constantinople, perhaps even to the Golden Gate, assuming that the arrangement on the latter was older than the 13th c. — but the debate on that problem is still open.

More elements are intertwined here, and one final remark should be made, concerning the position of the two gates adorned with reliefs, in both an urban and interregional context. It is not mere chance that the figural spolia are superabundant on the Istanbul Gate, ‘looking’ towards the old capital. The Lefke Gate, on the other hand, faces the road leading to Ankara — the eastbound highway of Anatolia. There, around the same time, another monumental display of antiquities was arranged on the city gates of the Seljuk walls of Konya¹³. The European travellers testify that for many centuries to come, the road connecting Constantinople to Central Anatolia would go through here. Those who went that way would cross Iznik and, one after the other, the two gates we have analyzed.

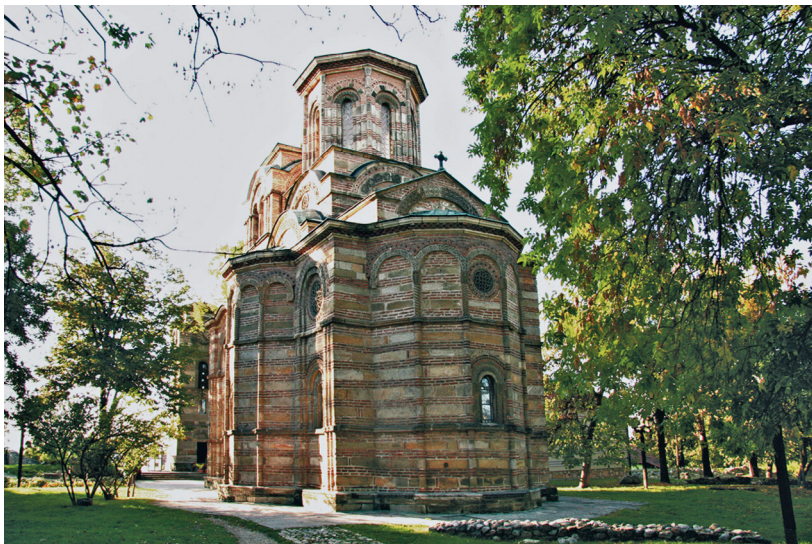
Reusing ancient spolia on doors was a common practice in Byzantium, as is testified by a number of examples, both in a secular (ceremonial) and religious context. Doors and gates were regarded as prefiguration of an inner space, and therefore their decoration deserves special attention. The case of Nicaea also makes it clear that research on this phenomenon can benefit from the study of primary sources as well as more recent testimonies, which, when interpreted with caution, help us reconstruct (paraphrasing M. Baxandall’s words) a ‘period eye’ for looking at figural spolia.

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¹³ The problem of the reuse of antique (and Byzantine) spolia in Seljuk architecture has been analysed by S. Redford [31].

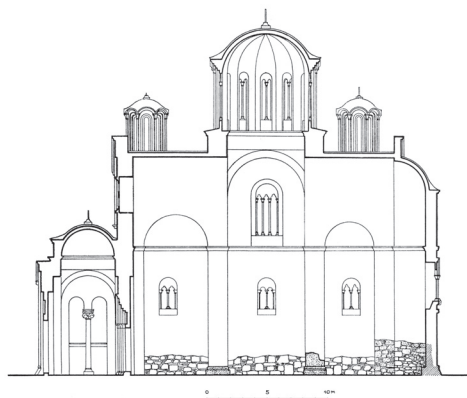
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Илл. 62. Церковь
Св. Стефана
«Лазарица».
Посл. четв. XIV в.
Фото С.В. Мальцевой



Илл. 63. Церковь Вознесения монастыря Равница.
Посл. четв. XIV в. Фото С.В. Мальцевой



Илл. 64. Церковь Архангела Михаила монастыря
свв. Архангелов под Призреном. Сер. XIV в.
Реконструкция южного фасада (С.М.Ненадовић [1967])



Илл. 65. Интерьер кафоликона Осиев Лукас в Фокиде.
Первая пол. XI в.



Fig. 66. Istanbul Gate.1222–1254. Byzantine city walls. Nicaea (İznik). Photo around 1880 by G. Berggren (DAI Istanbul, Fotothek, neg. nr. 534+R 29.516)



Fig. 67. Lefke Gate.1222–1254. Byzantine city walls. Nicaea (İznik). Photo by L. Bevilacqua



Илл. 68. Церковь св. Георгия в Икви. Грузия



Илл. 69. Церковь св. Георгия в Икви. Общий вид росписи сводов. Грузия