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Book Review

Nicholas N Patricios, *The Sacred Architecture of Byzantium.*

Art, Liturgy and Symbolism in Early Christian Churches, New York: Tauris, 2014.

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In the “Sacred Architecture of Byzantium”, Nicholas N. Patricios has embarked on a particularly challenging project. The study of Byzantine church architecture is fraught with many difficulties, chief among which are the variety of Byzantine churches and the vast geographical and chronological span of this topic. The author proposes to tackle these challenges with a new system of typological classification for the hundreds of the different Byzantine churches built from the fourth to the fifteenth century. His examination of the design of these churches is combined with the study of their mosaic and fresco decoration and its relationship with the overall architectural programme. This study is not only concerned with the description of the material aspect of these churches: it aims to interpret church forms by referring to the development of worship practices. This multifaceted approach to the monuments, both typological and functional, increases the potential interest of this project.

Books like this one invite comparisons with previous surveys of Byzantine Architecture, such as the ones published by Richard Krautheimer (1965;1986), Cyril Mango (1974; 1978), and Hans Buchwald (1984). Given the high quality and broad audience of these textbooks, not to mention the recent advances in Byzantine scholarship, both scholars and non-specialists are entitled to expect a lot from new offerings in this field. This review takes this into account as it discusses the degree to which the book satisfies the ambitious goals it sets in its introduction, and, in particular, the ones associated with the new typological classification and description of Byzantine churches. But, before going on to discuss these points further, a few words are necessary to describe the structure that the author has chosen to do justice to this challenging topic.

Following a Prologue that underlines the influence of worship rituals on the experience of sacred space, the first chapter of the book provides an overview of the historical background under which Byzantine church architecture and liturgy developed. The two following chapters are devoted to the design of churches. Chapter 2 investigates the question of typology and proposes a new way of classifying the monuments. Chapter 3 provides a detailed catalogue of “splendid churches” built in the most important Byzantine centres of architectural production, such as Rome, Constantinople, Thessaloniki, Ravenna and the Holy Land. These two chapters put emphasis on the description of forms; the study of construction technology and urban setting are somewhat overlooked. The following two chapters (4 and 5) are devoted to the decorative programmes. They analyse the use of mosaics, wall paintings, and icons to adorn the interior spaces of Byzantine churches. The book closes with two chapters that investigate the development of the liturgy and the symbolic meaning of the spaces of Byzantine churches. These explain the influence of Christian rituals, such as the processions and the offerings associated with the Eucharist, on the design of Byzantine churches. They also explore the symbolic meaning of the spaces and layouts encountered in these churches. Finishing this book one wonders whether it provides a convincing “survey of *the nexus* between buildings, art and, worship”. Although the book refers to both art and architecture, these topics could have been synthesized further. Despite certain interesting conclusions regarding the associations between form and liturgy, as well as between architectural framework and decorative programme, the main structure of the book reflects a clear tendency to address these as separate and independent aspects.

Let us now focus on the way in which one of these aspects is treated. The author’s new approach to the architectural typology of Byzantine churches is one of the key parts of the book. This approach is based on the identification of seven architectural types: the basilica, the domed basilica, the cross-in-square, the centralized, the cruciform, and the Athonite church, as well as the converted temple. The same designations have been used in the past, but most previous authors attribute them to different buildings. This may confuse teachers, and students using this book, especially as they challenge the current consensus regarding the typology of Byzantine church architecture. Take, for example, the church of the Koimesis at

Nicaea. Patricios considers this as a Cross-in-Square church. On the other hand, both Krautheimer (1986, p. 292) and Mango (1978, p. 96) describe this as a cross-domed church, a type that develops in the so-called “Transitional Period” (7th-9th Century) and is very different from the cross-in-square church, which develops later. This crucial distinction is absent from Patricios’ book, making it very difficult for the reader to understand the architectural development of the Transitional Period. The way in which types and individual examples are presented in this book also raises some questions. There is an emphasis on the grouping of churches by type at the expense of a broader chronological narrative. This makes it difficult for the reader to understand the development of church architecture during the Byzantine period.

Establishing the development of Byzantine architectural types is very difficult, of course. The use of up-to-date, specialised scholarship, alongside an ability to distinguish between facts and hypotheses is crucial in achieving this. Unfortunately, this is not one of the strengths of this book. The presentation of certain buildings tends to overlook recent findings and to present hypotheses as facts. For instance, there is hardly any conclusive evidence for the author’s claim that the Pre-Justinianic church of St. John at Ephesos was built by Theodosius II. The absence of bibliographic references makes it even more difficult for the reader to review the current state of knowledge about the buildings mentioned, raising doubts about the potential of the book to serve as an academic resource for students of Byzantine Architecture.

The points mentioned above should not detract us from the merits of this book. The parts devoted to the relationship between architecture and liturgy are very interesting and help to establish the symbolic meaning of Byzantine churches. The study of building design and decorative patterns avoids the sclerotic distinction between decorative and architectural programmes and demonstrates the potential value of a holistic approach to Byzantine art and architecture.
