



Summary :

Tekfur Sarayi, or the “Palace of Porphyrogenetos”, constitutes the only surviving late Byzantine palace of Constantinople. It is a trapezoid-shaped three-story building which is situated on the northern end of the land walls of Theodosios II. In terms of arrangement, it bears similarities with the south wing of the palace of Mistra, whereas its morphology resembles similar buildings of the West. It is dated to the 14th century, based on its wall masonry and its morphological elements.

Date

14th century

Geographical Location

Constantinople, Istanbul

1. Presentation of the monument

1.1. Identity of the monument

Tekfur Sarayi, the so-called “Palace of the Porphyrogenetos”, is the latest palace of the Byzantine [Constantinople](#) still preserved.¹ During the period 1959-1965 restoration works were carried out on the building; extended repairs took again place in 2006. Today it has been characterized as an area of archaeological importance, which can be visited along with the walls of the city and the [Chora Monastery](#). The importance of this building is exceptional for the research, since it provides evidence for the imperial residence of the late Byzantine period.

The tradition connects this monument with the so-called “Palace of the Porphyrogenetos”. In late Byzantine sources the house of an anonymous Porphyrogenetos (mean. Purple-born) is mentioned. Better known is the name Tekfur Sarayi, which has been widely used since the 17th century and thereafter. The origin of its name could have been Greek (from the expression «του κυρίου»), Armenian (from the word «thakauř», which means «basileus») or Persian (from a word translated as «the one who bears the crown»²).

1.2. History of the monument

At one time, the erection of the palace was believed to date to the 10th century, in the years of [Constantine VII](#) (Porphyrogenetos) (912-920/944- 959). Later it was considered to be the residence of Constantine Porphyrogenetos, third son of [Michael VIII Palaiologos](#) (1261-1287), and its construction was placed between the years 1261 and 1271, a period during which the [Blachernai palace](#) was renovated.³ Nevertheless the wall masonry and its morphological elements point towards a later dating, in the 14th century.

During the Ottoman period the palace ceased to function as a residence. At the end of the 16th century it was used as menagerie by the Ottoman sultans. Because of the kiln excavated at the site,⁴ it is believed that in the 18th century a ceramic workshop was established there, which later functioned as a glass-works. In the 19th century the structure accommodated part of the [Jewish community](#) of the city.

1.3. Location

Tekfur Sarayi stands on the northeastern corner of the old city of Constantinople, at the north end of the land [walls of Theodosios II](#), on the level of Xylokerkos (see map of [fig. 1](#)). To the north of the palace started the wall of [Manuel I Komnenos](#) (1143-1180), whereas to the south the palace was attached to a tower of the Theodosian fortification, repaired in the 12th century.⁵ The vicinity of



Tekfur Saray with the Blacharnai palace led, incorrectly, some researchers to identify the two monuments as one.⁶

2. Architectural description

2.1. Outer facade

The palace of the Porphrogennetos is a trapezoid-shaped three-story building with a courtyard, which bears similarities in the arrangement with the south wing of the palace of Mistra, whereas its morphology resembles similar buildings of the West.⁷ It belongs to the type of tower-like palace, with strong fortification. Notably the western façade of the palace, with few windows opened, was reinforced with a tower at the west side of the Xylokerkos Gate (fig. 3), since it was more vulnerable to enemy attacks.⁸ The masonry of the palace consists of courses of finely dressed, rectangular stones, alternated with triple courses of brick stones. On the double arches of the windows pieces of colored marbles alternate with triple brick stones (fig. 5 and 6).⁹

2.2. Internal arrangement

The internal arrangement of the monument is not preserved, the vaults of the ground floor and the floors of the two stories have collapsed. Information about it we derive from the drawings of C. Texier and W. Salzenberg.¹⁰

On the ground floor, six columns supported eight circular vaults and a narrow semicircular vault on the back side, via relieving arches.¹¹ The north side of the ground floor communicated with the courtyard, through four arcaded openings (fig. 2). The arches rested on a central, cross-shaped pier, which was framed with two pairs of columns and two subsidiary pilasters. From the twine columns are still preserved the drawings of two capitals, which were *spolia*. The theodosian capital with the rosettes is dated to the middle Byzantine period, whereas the composite Corinthian capital goes back to the 3rd to 4th century.¹²

The first storey had at least three rooms, as it is discerned from the surviving traces of the separating walls. Access to the upper storey was provided by a steep ramp from the rampart of the outer defensive wall. On the north façade (fig. 2) were created arcades, in full match with the openings of the ground floor, pierced by smaller, arched windows.¹³

The second, timber-roofed, storey must have been undivided, with one conch for the throne in the middle of the south side. On the north façade double arched windows were opened, in mismatch with those of the lower storeys.¹⁴ Two balconies were formed on the southern and on the eastern side. The way of communication between the two upper storeys is still unknown.

2.3. Decorative elements

Tekfur Sarayi presents common decorative trends with Constantinopolitan monuments of the 14th century, such as the church of Saints Theodoroi, the chapels of the church of Pammakaristos and of the Chora Monastery.¹⁵ Ceramoplastic decorative patterns carry the north façade of the palace, the lunettes of the arches, the interfenestral spaces and the continuous frieze (fig. 5 and 6). Rhombus, chess-shaped decoration and crosses are formed. It is possible that there were as well shields carrying the symbol of the four Sigma (= the letter "C"), that some believe to be the monogram of the Palaiologoi house. The decorations were only covering the outer surfaces and tend to easily come off.¹⁶ On the balconies, the rain gutter ends were shaped in the form of lion heads.¹⁷

1. Μπούρας, Χ.Θ., *Ιστορία της Αρχιτεκτονικής, Αρχιτεκτονική στο Βυζάντιο, το Ισλάμ και την Δυτική Ευρώπη κατά τον Μεσαίωνα Β'* (Athens 1999), p. 404.

2. Late Byzantine sources mention the "house of Porphrogennetos", cf. Κριτόβουλος Α. 27.3. The same author reports as well the



name Tekfur Sarayi, as a location where the Turkish troops encamped during the siege of 1453; see Van Millingen, A., *Byzantine Constantinople, The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historical sites* (London 1899), p. 109, and Ahunbay, M., "Tekfur Saray" in Curcic, S.–Χατζητρούφωνος, E.(ed.), *Κωνσταντινούπολη, Τουρκία, Κοσμική Μεσαιωνική Αρχιτεκτονική στα Βαλκάνια 1300 – 1500 και η Διατήρησή της* (Thessaloniki 1997), p. 248. For the etymology see Van Millingen, A., as above, p. 109, and Meyer-Plath, B. – Schneider, A.M., *Die Landmauer von Konstantinopel* (Berlin 1943), p. 96.

3. Van Millingen, A., *Byzantine Constantinople, The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historical sites* (London 1899), pp. 110-113. Mango, C., "Tekfur Saray", in Kazhdan, A.(editor-in-chief), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 3 (Oxford – New York 1991), p. 2022. Ahunbay, M., "Tekfur Saray", in Curcic, S.–Χατζητρούφωνος, E.(ed.), *Κωνσταντινούπολη, Τουρκία, Κοσμική Μεσαιωνική Αρχιτεκτονική στα Βαλκάνια 1300 – 1500 και η Διατήρησή της* (Thessaloniki 1997), p. 248. Mango, C., "Constantinopolitana", *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 80 (1965), pp. 334-335.
4. Ahunbay, M., "Tekfur Saray", in Curcic, S.–Χατζητρούφωνος, E.(ed.), *Κωνσταντινούπολη, Τουρκία, Κοσμική Μεσαιωνική Αρχιτεκτονική στα Βαλκάνια 1300 – 1500 και η Διατήρησή της* (Thessaloniki 1997), p. 250.
5. Ahunbay, M., "Tekfur Saray", in Curcic, S.–Χατζητρούφωνος, E. (ed.), *Κωνσταντινούπολη, Τουρκία, Κοσμική Μεσαιωνική Αρχιτεκτονική στα Βαλκάνια 1300 – 1500 και η Διατήρησή της* (Thessaloniki 1997), p. 248.
6. Meyer-Plath, B. – Schneider, A.M., *Die Landmauer von Konstantinopel* (Berlin 1943), p. 96.
7. See Ορλάνδος, Α.Κ., «Τα παλάτια και τα σπίτια του Μυστρά», *Αρχεῖον των Βυζαντινών Μνημείων της Ελλάδος* 3 (1937), pp. 50 -51? Mango, C., "Tekfur Saray", in Kazhdan, A.(editor-in-chief), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 3 (Oxford – New York 1991), p. 2022. Western architecture had infiltrated in the dominion of Byzantium already since the 13th century; see Mango, C., "Constantinopolitana", *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 80 (1965), p.334. Krautheimer, R., *Παλαιοχριστιανική και Βυζαντινή Αρχιτεκτονική*, Μαλλούχου-Τουφάνο, Φ.(trans.) (Athens 1991), p. 551. Μπούρας, Χ.Θ., *Ιστορία της Αρχιτεκτονικής, Αρχιτεκτονική στο Βυζάντιο, το Ισλάμ και την Δυτική Ευρώπη κατά τον Μεσαίωνα Β'* (Athens 1999), p. 404.
8. Ahunbay, M., "Tekfur Saray", in Curcic, S.–Χατζητρούφωνος, E. (ed.), *Κωνσταντινούπολη, Τουρκία, Κοσμική Μεσαιωνική Αρχιτεκτονική στα Βαλκάνια 1300 – 1500 και η Διατήρησή της* (Thessaloniki 1997), p. 241. Van Millingen, A., *Byzantine Constantinople, The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historical sites* (London 1899), p. 111. Mango, C., "Tekfur Saray", in Kazhdan, A.(editor-in-chief), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* 3 (Oxford – New York 1991), p. 2021.
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10. Mango, C., "Constantinopolitana", *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 80 (1965), p. 330.
11. From the columns is still preserved only a fragment of the original capitals, see Ahunbay, M., "Tekfur Saray", in Curcic, S.–Χατζητρούφωνος, E. (ed.), *Κωνσταντινούπολη, Τουρκία, Κοσμική Μεσαιωνική Αρχιτεκτονική στα Βαλκάνια 1300 – 1500 και η Διατήρησή της* (Thessaloniki 1997), p.248. For the rest of the architectural elements see Mango, C., "Constantinopolitana", *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 80 (1965), pp. 330, 333, and Feld, O., "Zu den Kapitellen des Tekfur Saray in Istanbul", *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 19-20 (1969-70), pp. 359 -367.
12. Mango, C., "Constantinopolitana", *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 80 (1965), p. 330, 333, and Feld, O., "Zu den Kapitellen des Tekfur Saray in Istanbul", *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 19-20 (1969-70), pp. 359 -367.
13. Ahunbay, M., "Tekfur Saray", in Curcic, S.–Χατζητρούφωνος, E. (ed.), *Κωνσταντινούπολη, Τουρκία, Κοσμική Μεσαιωνική Αρχιτεκτονική στα Βαλκάνια 1300 – 1500 και η Διατήρησή της* (Thessaloniki 1997), p.248.
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στα Βαλκάνια 1300 – 1500 και η Διατήρησή της (Thessaloniki 1997), p.248. Van Millingen, A., *Byzantine Constantinople, The Walls of the City and Adjoining Historical sites* (London 1899), p.111. Mango, C., "Constantinopolitana", *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archaologischen Instituts* 80 (1965), p. 330,

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17. On the drawings of Salzenberg, the rain gutters are shaped in the form of other animals as well, such as eagle heads and ram heads; see Salzenberg, W., *Altchristliche Baudenkmale von Constantinopel* (Berlin 1854), Mango, C., "Constantinopolitana", *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archaologischen Instituts* 80 (1965), p. 333.

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Glossary :

	anta or pilaster, the A shallow rectangular feature projecting from a wall, having a capital and a base and architecturally treated as a column.
	capital The uppermost part of a column or pillar crowning the shaft and supporting the entablature. The decoration of the capital characterizes the ancient greek orders of architecture. In Doric order the capitals are decorated with abacus and echinus, in Ionic with spiral scrolls (volutes), while the corinthian capitals are composed of small corner volutes and a basket-shaped body decorated with rows of acanthus leaves.
	composite Corinthian capital A mixed order, combining the volutes of the Ionic order capital with the acanthus leaves of the Corinthian order. These capitals also have echinus molding with egg-and-dart ornamentation.
	relieving arch The relieving arches are built over openings on the wall or, in case of fortifications, on the inside of the curtain wall, to help carry the weight of the elevation.
	rosette, the An ornament with a generally circular combination of parts resembling a flower or plant.
	theodosian capital The theodosian capital was an innovation of Early Christian architecture. Initially it was a very schematic composite capital with extremely deep relief (usually made with the drill). By the sixth century the theodosian capital turned more and more into the geometric shape of a truncated cone, sometimes a folded one. Usually it was covered by a more or less schematic vegetal decoration evoking the acanthus leaves and continuing without a break on the impost block, which thus merged with the cone of the capital.
	tympanum (lunette) (Rom., Byz.) The arched panel (lunette) inside an arch or an arcosolium.
	vault A semi-cylindrical roof.

Sources



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Quotations

A reference to the monument as the residence of the Porphyrogenetos in a Byzantine source:

(3.) Καρατζία δὲ τῶ τῆς Εὐρώπης ἐπάρχῳ καὶ ἑτέροις τῶν σατραπῶν τὸ ἀπὸ τῆς Ἑυλίης Πύλης ἀνιόντι μέχρι τῶν Βασιλείων τοῦ Πορφυρογεννήτου καὶ φθάνοντι μέχρι τῆς ὀνομαζομένης Πύλης τῆς Χαρισσοῦς ἐγχειρίζει δούς αὐτῶ καὶ τινὰς τῶν μηχανῶν καὶ μηχανοποιούς παίειν τὸ ταύτη τείχος, ἧ ἂν ἀσθενὲς καὶ ἐπίμαχον εἶη, καὶ κατασεῖειν αὐτό.

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