

УДК 7.033.2...1

ББК 85.11

DOI:10.18688/aa155-2-20

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Family Inheritance: Classical Antiquities Reused and Displayed in Byzantine Cities

The reuse and display of ancient statuary and *spolia* in the Byzantine cities in Late Antiquity has been studied extensively in the last decades. Therefore, in this few pages I will not undertake a reassessment of the question in its general terms, nor comment upon a very well known phenomenon¹. Focusing on the realm of figural *spolia* in the Byzantine world, I wish instead to observe and trace the occurrence and survival of a classical iconographic subject — the myth of Heracles — which appears on a peculiar urban setting: the city gates of Byzantine Asia Minor.

I will endeavour to trace the occurrence of this iconographic theme by describing a few examples, and I will start from the very heart of Anatolia. In fact, one relevant case appears to be particularly interesting in this respect, namely the Byzantine citadel of Ankara. In the seventh century, the once prosperous Roman city of Ancyra undergoes several sacks by the hands of the Persians, first, and then of the Arabs. Large areas of the city are set on fire, and thence abandoned. Following this catastrophic events, the city is partially restored and rebuilt making use of the materials quarried from the Roman monuments. Like almost all of the Late Antique cities, in this context of turmoil, the city receives a new fortification². The fortified area is radically reduced in extension — compared to the area of the Roman settlement — and removed to the top of the steep slopes of one of the city's hills, the one that today has the Turkish name of Altındağ (“Golden Mountain”). When seen from the distance, the new citadel of Byzantine Ankara would thus appear impregnable, thanks to its string of pentagonal towers, projecting from the walls in resemblance of ship's prows. The main gate itself would not be spottable at first glance, since it was hidden behind a barbican with an elbow-shaped entrance system. The latter is now called “Zindan Kapı”, “Dungeon gate” in Turkish. Nonetheless, even in a curtain of walls built almost entirely out of materials quarried from ancient, abandoned

¹ Secondary literature on the topic of *spolia* and their reception is huge. I will mention here only a few general reference texts, most of them limited to the Byzantine world. Several of the authors cited have tackled the topic more than once; I am citing their first relevant approach to the matter [50, 33, 12, 7, 35, 43, 9, 11, 1, 22, 18, 29, 44, 8, 38, 4, 15, 23, 41, 37, 47]. Nevertheless, studies on figural *spolia* in their secondary setting in the Byzantine art and architecture have not been accurately researched yet, especially as far as *spolia* in fortifications are concerned. I dwelled on this topic myself in the Proceedings of the Third Symposium on “Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art” [6]. The present article includes some remarks that are being integrated in the context of a wider research project on figural *spolia* in Byzantium. Specifically, I have carried out my research on the city walls of Ankara thanks to a TÜBİTAK-BİDEB Research Fellowship at the University of Istanbul.

² On the history of the Roman settlement of Ancyra, see [24]. As for the Byzantine phase, see [17, 40, 5, 3, 46].

buildings, the segment hosting the main gate was visually highlighted through a set of elements of a different nature: albeit *spolia*, they bear some carefully arranged decoration and a row of human figures.

The seventh-century enceinte is approximately rectangular in shape (Fig. 1). Its main entrance is in the middle of the south side, facing the most gentle and accessible slope of the hill. The southern and western extension to the fortress is an addition that has been dated to the 9th century, on the basis of epigraphic evidence [19, 20], and I will not consider that one on this occasion, although it is still awaiting a more thorough and comprehensive study.

The decoration that I am going to describe is displayed on the inner circle, the “İç Kale”, on the outer wall of the aforementioned projecting barbican (Ill. 31). Three levels or registers of decoration can be seen: the central, main visual line is provided by a row of white marble or limestone slabs, probably pieces of a balustrade, or socle, of some dismissed building, rather than altars. Only the one occupying the central position is most likely either an altar or a funerary stele. It is decorated with a garland, a rosette, and two protomes (*bucrania*), along with two palm-shaped *acroteria*, common in Roman tombstones’ ornament.

The upper register’s decorative details are scarcely visible today: three rectangular blocks, of a bluish marble, are arranged alternately to white blocks. They contrast with one another, not only because of their colour, but also because the former used to bear figural reliefs, now almost completely worn out. Thanks to some early nineteenth-century photographs, such as the pictures taken by Sebah and Joaillier, dating back to before 1933 and published in Mamboury’s *Guide Touristique d’Ankara* [32], the nature of this upper level of decoration can be somehow established. The third marble block from the left clearly reveals a scene, for which the Photographic Archive of the German Archaeological Institute in Istanbul preserves a detail: while it is catalogued as a “Battle scene” in the DAI database, a winged figure in the centre would rather point to a triumphal scene³.

The third, and lower register of decoration displays a series of most interesting pieces, all in a row. To begin with, a fragment of an inscription can be read: in consideration of its shape and of the quality of its ornamentation, it must have been recovered from the *stoa*, the *via colonnata* of Roman Ancyra, although, reportedly, it cannot be integrated into the text of

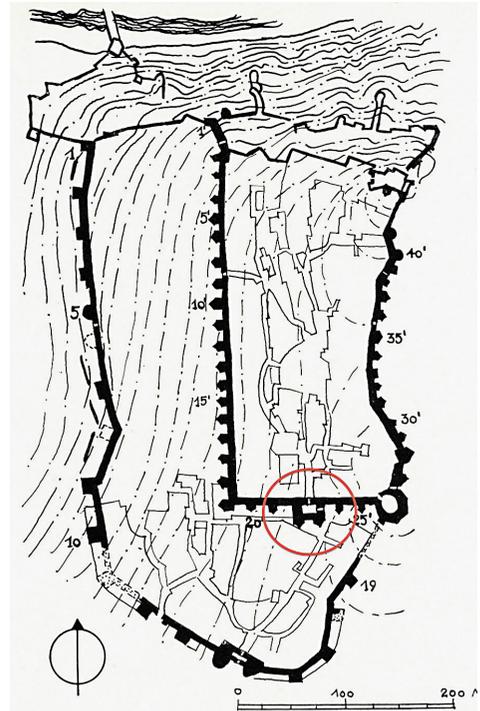


Fig. 1: Ankara, the Byzantine citadel, map (after Restle M. s.v. Ankyra. *Reallexikon zur byzantinischen Kunst*, I, Stuttgart, Hiersemann, 1966).

³ A similar arrangement of alternating reused reliefs and smooth conches can be seen on the Late antique walls of Aphrodisias [37].

the other epigraphic findings of that excavated area. It is tempting indeed to read here “...Υ ΡΩΜΑ...”⁴.

There follow four little herms, lying on their sides, whose heads have been either broken or intentionally removed, it is impossible to say when. Who do these reliefs portray? Only Guillaume de Jerphanion has attempted to explain their subject: he has described them as “priapes couchés”, “reclined Priapi”⁵, which might have had an apotropaic function. It is likely that Jerphanion, back in 1928, was not able to get close enough to the curtain, and that he could not observe the reliefs carefully, otherwise he would not have misidentified these figures. Alas, Jerphanion’s words have been repeated up until the most recent studies. Seen upright, in reality, the herms introduce themselves plainly (Ill. 32): a man is holding a lion’s head with his left hand, while with his right he holds to his chest the corners of a cloak, which is in fact a lion’s skin, since we can easily recognise the animal’s paws. One cannot doubt the fact that Heracles with the Nemean Lion has been portrayed here, although this is certainly not the most common iconography of the popular demi-god. If, on the one hand, we are used to seeing him standing, naked, holding a club and supporting the lion’s skin with his arm, on the other hand, herms such as the ones found in Herculeaneum show the hero wearing such skin as a mantle, but without the lion’s head in his hand [42]. To my knowledge, there is only one parallel to this, and it is, again, in Asia Minor.

In fact, Ephesus, too, in Late Antiquity, experiences the same contraction as other Anatolian cities. In the 5th century, the passage between the areas of the upper agora and the lower market area (the latter, apparently, still in use at the time) is marked by the so-called “Gate of Heracles” [14]. Interestingly, this late antique archway had been built out of *spolia*, including two herm-like jambs with the effigy of our hero. Except for the fact that the Ephesian sculptures are larger in scale than the Ankara ones, the two examples are absolutely overlapping. I think we should ask ourselves whether the display of the effigy of Heracles on these two late antique city gates is to be considered mere chance or if it might have been deliberate.

Two more major cases of display of the (in one case symbolic) image of Heracles need to be recalled in this respect, both of them in the very capital city of the Byzantine empire, Constantinople: the triumphal archway of the Forum Tauri (the Theodosian cattle market square) was precisely composed of a set of columns resembling Heracles’ club: the hand of the hero was holding them from the top, thus suggesting his real gigantic presence. There are only broken bits left today of the Theodosian Forum, but the reconstruction drawn by Rudolf Naumann provides a clear idea of it [36].

It is true that there was a cross carved on the base of one of the columns of the Theodosian arch, but the Christian sign is here a minor one, compared to the massive predominance of the Herculean symbol, and may even be a later addition. It is well known how much Theodosius’ imperial ideology — despite his laws against the idols — was entrusted to the symbolic image of the demi-god⁶.

⁴ I was not able to see *de visu* the findings from the *stoa*, therefore my considerations are based on the photographic material available. However, I incline to think that the epigraphic evidence of our fragment is consistent to the set of remaining fragments of that excavation area. For a correct reading of the text, we shall wait for the complete publication of all the findings [48].

⁵ [10, p. 150]. On the relationship of this French scholar with Turkey, and Ankara in particular, see [16].

⁶ On the Theodosian dynasty, see, most recently, [39].

One might argue that the Theodosian columns were by no means a reuse, and no city gate proper. However, the recovery was there ideological indeed, and — being a triumphal arch — that of the Forum Tauri conveyed the same meanings as the gateways along the city walls, marking different steps of the same triumphal way of the victorious emperor to the city. As it is well known, and as it has been widely demonstrated (by Paul Magdalino and Cyril Mango among others⁷), the starting point of such triumphal way to central Constantinople, throughout the Byzantine millennium (or at least until the 12th century), was the Golden Gate. Here, at an unspecified, later, date — either Middle or Late Byzantine — an outer wall was added, which was adorned by means of a set of twelve reliefs. They had already disappeared by the end of the 17th century, but, as we learn from earlier descriptions, along with other mythological characters such as Endymion, Selene, Cupid, Pegasus, a selection of the Twelve Labours of Heracles was also visible, carved on marble slabs recovered from earlier monuments⁸. In the context of a wider iconographic program, even in this later case, the scenes depicting Heracles might have been intentionally chosen to adorn a key point of the city, one especially striking the Byzantine imagery.

In this respect, the case of Ankara preserves its crucial importance, being — to my knowledge — the best preserved example in Byzantine Anatolia, although the landscape of Altındağ has changed dramatically in less than a century.

The case of the Forum of Theodosius, as recalled, is emblematic, in that we know exactly its patron and the ideology which lays behind it. May we infer that the Herculean iconography might have been deliberately chosen in Ankara, as well? This latter question brings about a major problem: the date of the building of the Upper fortress. Very few elements can be effectively taken into account to this purpose. As I briefly outlined in the beginning, the dating of the walls within the 7th century is coherent with a refortification of the city against the Persian and Arab invasions. Most of the scholars (Restle and Foss *in primis* [40, 17]) have placed the walls into the reign of Constans II (641–668), after the capture of the city by Muawiya, and in the context of the reorganization of the eastern military districts of the empire. Archibald Dunn has offered a different hypothesis, on the basis of the resemblance of Ankara's inner castle with sixth-century Balkan fortifications, such as Salona: the “saw-like”, pentagonal-towered system has been applied to both Salona and Ankara, following the directions of the “Anonymous” sixth-century treatise on the construction of a city [13]. The Balkans were still part of the Byzantine empire up to the reign of Heraclius (610–641), and the biographers of this emperor report that the champion of the Christianity against the Persians, was also a keen expert in military art [cfr. 25]. Moreover, the entrance system of the bastion projecting from the south wall, recalls the “gamma-shaped” gates recommended by

⁷ The two scholars have devoted a number of major studies to the topography of ancient Constantinople, and specifically to this problem: [30, recently 31; 34].

⁸ On the basis of the position of the frames (still *in situ*), it is possible to envision the arrangement of the reliefs on two rows, placed symmetrically on the two sides of the outer gate. A few fragments only remain today, which were recovered during the excavations carried out in the 1920s [28], and which are currently on display in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. The reliefs had been described by the British ambassador to the Porte, Sir Thomas Roe, in early 17th century [49, pp. 386–387], before they disappeared by the end of the seventeenth century. For an overview of the Theodosian walls of Constantinople, see at least [26, 2]. On the outer addition to the Golden Gate, and its debated chronology, see also [21, 34].

a number of ancient military treatises on the building of a military camp⁹, which Heraclius surely knew about. The illustrations preserved (such as the one in cod. Vat. gr. 1164, fol. 236v, dating to ca. 1020) illustrate later manuscripts, but the idea goes far back into antiquity. It must be taken into account that the primary sources are generous as far as the reign of Heraclius is concerned [25], but not so much so when it comes to the reign of Constans II, thus making a judgement on the reign, and ideological inspiration, of the latter very hard. Nevertheless, I think that the presence of Heracles' figures on Ankara's gate might further support Dunn's idea. Mythological elements have been connected in many ways to the artistic production of the time of Heraclius — I will just mention, but not comment upon, the complicated problem of the Silver "David" Plates [27]. This problem surely deserves a deeper investigation.

Be it as it may, as they used to be throughout the Byzantine era, the Herculean reliefs of the Zindan Kapi still, represent, both in their position and in their meaning, what might be regarded as a "family inheritance", entrusted to the generations to come. The walls of the Byzantine citadel mark today the space of a playground for the children of Ankara — if not a construction site [45] — and even in this "tertiary" function the figural *spolia* immured in the curtain represent a major sign of the legacy of antiquity that still awaits to find its correct place in history.

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Abstract. A small group of gates of Byzantine city walls were decorated with reused, ancient figural sculpture, including the figure of Heracles. In some cases, such as the herms arranged horizontally on the main gate to the citadel of Ankara, this subject had not been identified before. Along with providing a detailed analysis of the decoration of the Zindan Kapi at Ankara, this paper traces the occurrence of the same iconographical subject, in similar architectural and urban contexts. Other examples considered as a comparison are the "Gates of Heracles" in Ephesos, the "Golden Gate" in Constantinople and the arch in the Theodosian Forum in the same capital city.

Keywords: Byzantine architecture; city walls; fortification; Spolia; Anatolia; Ankara; Ephesus; Constantinople.

Название статьи. Семейное наследие: античные артефакты, вторично используемые в византийских городах.

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Аннотация. В ряде случаев византийские городские ворота украшали античные скульптуры, в том числе фигуры Геракла. Некоторые из этих памятников до сих пор не были исследованы, среди них, например, помещенные в горизонтально установленных гермах скульптуры главных ворот цитадели Анкары. В данной статье автор, наряду с детальным анализом декора башни-темницы (Зиндан Капи) в Анкаре, прослеживает устойчивое повторение иконографического сюжета в других памятниках и выделяет некоторые детали, позволяющие установить, чем был предопределен выбор изображения данного мифологического героя в такого рода сооружениях. В качестве сравнительного ряда для исследования привлекаются «Ворота Геракла» в Эфесе, «Золотые ворота» и Форум Феодосия в Константинополе.

Ключевые слова: византийская архитектура; городские стены; крепостные сооружения; споллии; Анатолия; Анкара; Эфес; Константинополь.

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⁹ I am grateful to Prof. Antonio Iacobini for sharing with me his suggestions concerning the gate.

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