

G. P. Majeska

NOTES ON THE SKEUOPHYLAKION OF ST. SOPHIA*

The removal of the accumulated material that, in modern times, has filled the lower level of the round Byzantine structure at the northeast corner of the Church of St. Sophia in Istanbul¹ should reanimate discussion of the uses of that building during the Byzantine era and allow surmises and assumptions to be checked against the physical evidence. Although the still impressive older theoretical studies of what is generally recognized as the σκευοφυλάκιον, or treasury, of the Great Church remain fundamental to any understanding of the building's architecture, history and use², in recent years considerable light has been thrown on the nature of this building by scholars considering its liturgical role.

The monographic studies of Thomas Mathews and Robert Taft leave no doubt that, at least in the pre-iconoclastic period, and quite possibly also later, this building was not only used to store liturgical vessels and church plate but also served as the starting point of the "Great Entrance," the procession that brought the eucharistic elements to the high altar of St. Sophia during the Divine Liturgy. Indeed, it has become clear that it was in the *skeuophylakion* of the Great Church that the bread and wine for the liturgy were prepared in a rite that came to be called the προσκομηδή, or liturgy of preparation³. Although how late the tradition of performing the liturgy of preparation in the *skeuophylakion* continued is unclear, as late as A.D. 1200 a Russian traveler still describes the building as the "πρόθεσις" (малый олтарь), that is, the place where the eucharistic elements are prepared⁴. The building's use for the liturgy of preparation means that it must have had a table on which the deacons prepared the bread and wine for the

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¹ The only published report I know of is S. Türkoğlu, "Ayasofya Skeuophylakionu kazısı," *Ayasofya Müzesi Yıllığı*, vol. 9 (1983), pp. 25-35 and plan; English summary, *Annual of Ayasofya Museum Summaries*, vol. 9 (1983), pp. 10-11. See also R. Mainstone *Hagia Sophia. Architecture, Structure and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church* (London, 1988), pp. 137-41.

² See particularly E. Antoniadès, "Ἐκφρασις τῆς Ἁγίας Σοφίας," vol. 2. (Athens, 1908), 146-53; J. Ebersolt, *Sainte-Sophie de Constantinople. Etude de topographie d'après les Cérémonies*, (Paris, 1910), pp. 29-35, and F. Dirimtekin, "Le Skeuophylakion de Sainte-Sophie" *REB*, vol. 19 (1961), pp. 390-400 and pls.

³ T. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy*, (University Park, PA and London, 1971), especially pp. 154-62, and R. Taft, *The Great Entrance: A History of the Transfer of the Gifts and other Pre-anaphoral Rites of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, vol. 200 (Rome, 1975), especially pp. 185-203. N. Moran, "The Skeuophylakion of the Hagia Sophia," *Cahiers Archeologiques*, vol. 34 (1986), pp. 29-32, argues against this idea.

⁴ Книга Паломник. Сказание мест святых во Цареграде Антония Архиепископа новгородского в 1200 году, ed. Н. М. Лопарев, ППС, vol. 51 (St. Petersburg, 1899), pp. 2-4. On малый олтарь-прόθεσις see I. Sreznevskij, *Материалы для словаря древнерусского языка*. (М., 1902), vol. 2, col. 663. The use of this term for the *skeuophylakion* would suggest that even as late as 1200 the proscomedion ceremony was still performed there; Taft, *The Great Entrance*, pp. 202-3, n. 77, notes the persistence of the use of the word *prothesis* interchangeably with *skeuophylakion*. That Antony's малый олтарь is in fact the *skeuophylakion* of the Great Church is confirmed by the Russian text noting the burial in that building of a certain "Anna" who had given to the church the land on which was built the *skeuophylakion* in return for the privilege of being buried there; see Книга Паломник, *loc. cit.* The same story is told of the *skeuophylakion* by the Διήγησις περὶ τῆς Ἁγίας Σοφίας, *Scriptores originum constantinopolitanarum*, ed. Th. Preger (Leipzig, 1901), vol. 1, pp. 77 - 78.

eucharist celebrated in the adjoining sanctuary, and the table would have been a large one, given the size of the congregations that must have taken communion at the Church of Hagia Sophia. Inasmuch as the altar table is almost always at the east end of Christian buildings in the mediaeval period, one might assume that this “proto-altar” would also have stood on the east side of the treasury building. Water would also be a necessity in the *skeuophylakion*: the clergy had to wash their hands before preparing the eucharistic elements, and water was also needed to dilute the wine and wash the sacred vessels. Indeed, a Russian source notes specifically that water was brought into the building by pipes⁵. It was also in the *skeuophylakion* that nard was prepared out of oil and spices to be consecrated as chrism by the patriarch on Holy Thursday⁶. There was here a stove (φοῦρνος) on which to cook the fragrant chrism⁷; the stove was also used to burn icons on which one could no longer distinguish the sacred figures⁸ and to burn eucharistic elements that had spoiled⁹. There must also have been some open space on the ground floor of the building, for thrones for the emperor and patriarch were erected there on Holy Saturday, when the two figures came into the treasury with members of their entourages to cense the sacred vessels stored there¹⁰.

Storage of liturgical paraphernalia was, of course, the basic function of the *skeuophylakion*, a building devoted to protecting vessels, in the case at hand, the precious sacred vessels used in the Great Church. There is one extant inventory of the building’s contents, done in October, 1396. Here one finds a list of the contents of the building: gold and silver chalices, patens, gospel books and various liturgical veils for the vessels, many of which lacked a pearl here or a jewel there¹¹, a reminder of the hard times onto which the Palaeologan empire had fallen. It should be noted that the *skeuophylakion* served as a repository not only of church vessels but also of sacred relics¹² and that, at least on occasion, visitors were allowed to enter the building to view and venerate these holy treasures as well as to wonder at the precious liturgical objects kept there¹³. Two of these visitors, in fact, have left us descriptions of the miraculous objects they saw and venerated in this building in the twelfth century, the *Mercati Anonymus* and Dobrinja Jadreikovič, later Archbishop Anthony of Novgorod.

Most revered among these relics was the cross showing the height of Christ when he

⁵ *Книга Паломник*, p. 4.

⁶ Nicephorus Gregoras, *Historiae byzantinae* (Bonn), vol. 3, pp. 247-48. The “nard” was a sweet balm used to make holy chrism; like cinnamon, it was also used as a perfume; see J. Reiske, Commentary, Constantinus VII Porphyrogenitus, *De ceremoniis* (Bonn), vol. 2, p. 887; Cf. Ebersolt. *Sainte-Sophie*, p. 29.

⁷ Georgius Pachymeres, *De Michaelae et Andronico Palaeologis* (Bonn), vol. 2, pp. 79-80; G. Mercati, “Il santo forno,” *Studi e testi*, vol. 56 (1931), pp. 295-96; A. Dmitrievskij, “Ο ἅγιος φούρνος,” *Viz Vrem*, vol. 24 (1923-26), pp. 139-40 (which would connect this “furnace” with the prop used in the liturgical Play of the Three Holy Children performed in St. Sophia during the Advent season; see G. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies XIX* (Washington, 1984), pp. 233-34, on this mystery play.

⁸ So, at least, says Anthony of Novgorod (*Книга Паломник*, p. 9).

⁹ Pachymeres, *loc. cit.* The “holy stove” was treated as a sacred vessel. It was censed by the emperor on Holy Saturday along with the sacred vessels there, and also sometimes by the patriarch on Easter Monday after vespers, before he distributed nard to people in the *skeuophylakion* (Dmitrievskij, “Ο ἅγιος φούρνος” p. 139, quoting an eleventh-century Typicon).

¹⁰ Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *De Cerimoniis* (Bonn), vol. 1., pp. 34, 181-83; Dmitrievskij “Ο ἅγιος φούρνος” p. 139.

¹¹ *MM*, vol. 2, pp. 566-70; the inventory also lists a number of relics (see below). The “list” of church vessels, lamps, censers, etc., preserved in the Διήγησις περὶ τῆς Ἀγίας Σοφίας, pp. 99-100 ff. is certainly fantasy; see G. Dagron, *Constantinople imaginaire. Etudes sur le recueil des Patria* (Paris, 1984), pp. 249-51 et al.

¹² Antoniadēs, *Ἐκφρασις τῆς Ἀγίας Σοφίας*, vol. 2, pp. 148-52, emphasized the collection of relics in the *skeuophylakion*, but restricted his study almost exclusively to relics of the true cross.

¹³ Anthony of Novgorod, for example, describes a large decorated plate, supposedly contributed to St. Sophia by Princess Olga of Russia, that he saw in the *skeuophylakion*. It had an image of Christ on it; people took an impression of the image “for good luck”; see *Книга Паломник*, pp. 3-4.

walked the earth (it was decorated with silver, gold and precious stones)¹⁴. But other sacred relics are also specifically recorded as being in the *skeuophylakion* of the Great Church in the twelfth century: blood from a stabbed icon of Christ, blood and the head of St. Panteleimon, the swaddling clothes from the nativity as well as gifts of the Magi¹⁵, a piece of the true cross, the stole and staff of St. Gregory the Wonderworker, the head of St. Anastasios, a chair of St. John¹⁶, the heads of Saints Quadratos, Hermylos and Stratonicos, the hand of St. Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople, Christ's plate from the last supper, the chariot of Constantine and Helen, and the icon sent by St. Germanos to Rome over the waters¹⁷. In the late fourteenth century, there were in the *skeuophylakion* of St. Sophia, besides a number of relics of the true cross, a reliquary of blood (which remains unidentified because the manuscript is defective), the heads of St. Stephen the Younger and St. Eustratios, the jawbone of St. Paul the Great and the beard of St. Procopios. They were all jumbled up with gospel books, stoles, chalices and communion spoons, possibly listed in the order in which they were kept in the chests¹⁸, the armoires (τὰ ἀρμάρια), that the patriarch and chartularies opened so that the emperor could cense their contents on Holy Saturday¹⁹.

For at least part of its term as a functioning treasury for the Great Church, the *skeuophylakion* had two entrances, to judge from the written sources. A Grottoferrata manuscript *Euchologion* of the Great Church, for example, describes how during the Holy Saturday baptismal service the patriarch descended from his throne in St. Sophia and went to the great Baptistry "through the *skeuophylakion*" (διὰ τοῦ σκευοφυλακίου)²⁰. The great baptistry (no longer in existence) was on the north side of the church, west of the *skeuophylakion*²¹. Anthony of Novgorod, who visited the Great Church in the year 1200, lists many of the relics kept in the *skeuophylakion* and then adds that "at the outside door" of the *skeuophylakion* there stood a cross the height of Christ during His life²². Specifying that this cross was at the *outside* door (в ней двери) implies that there was also an "inside" door of the *skeuophylakion*, doubtless the one through which the visitor had entered the treasury from the interior of St. Sophia and through which he must have left to return to the church near the narthex of the deaconesses²³. The "outside door" of the *skeuophylakion*, where Anthony locates a cross that was the height of Christ, is doubtless the "*ostium gazophilacii*" next to which stood the "*mensura longitudinis corporis Christi*," according to the mid-twelfth-century *Mercati Anonymus*²⁴.

¹⁴ *Книга Паломник*, p. 4; Mercati Anonymus, "Une Description de Constantinople traduite par un pèlerin anglais," ed. K. N. Ciggar, *REV*, vol. 34 (1976), p. 246. The fact that both these other sources specifically locate this object in the *skeuophylakion* serves to strengthen the identification of Anthony's малый олтарь with the treasury; see above, n. 4.

¹⁵ Mercati Anonymus, ed. Ciggar, p. 246; *Книга Паломник*, pp. 2-4.

¹⁶ Mercati Anonymus, *loc. cit.*

¹⁷ *Книга Паломник*, *loc. cit.* Holy relics were, of course, kept in other places in the Church of St. Sophia besides the *skeuophylakion*; see, for example, *ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Inventory of 1396, *MM*, vol. 2, pp. 566-70.

¹⁹ Dmitrievskij, "Ὁ ἅγιος φοῦρνος," p. 139.

²⁰ *Euchologion sive Rituale Graecorum*, ed. J. Goar (Venice, 1730), p. 291 bis.

²¹ On the location of the baptisteries in St. Sophia see Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia*, p. 124.

²² *Книга Паломник*, pp. 3-4; Mercati Anonymus, ed. Ciggar, p. 246.

²³ *Книга Паломник*, *loc. cit.* What the Russian source describes as the place "where the myrrh-bearing women sing" is doubtless the "narthex of the women" (ὁ γυναικίτης νάρθηξ) at the northeast corner of the church; see Antoniadis, "Ἐκφρασις τῆς Ἁγίας Σοφίας," vol. 2, pp. 156-157; vol. 1, pl. 17; Tait, *The Great Entrance*, pp. 199-200. Dirimtekin, *Le Skeuophylakion de Sainte-Sophie*, pp. 396-97, and pl. 3, would expand the precincts of the narthex and expand it north of the northeast ramp. Note that when the emperor went to the *skeuophylakion* on Holy Saturday to cense the sacred vessels and distribute nard and cinnamon left over from the preparation of the chrism to the members of the imperial court he, too, returned to St. Sophia through the narthex of the women; see Constantine VI Porphyrogenitos, *De Cerimoniis*, vol. 1, pp. 34, 181-83.

²⁴ Mercati Anonymus, *loc. cit.*

The “outside door” at which stood the cross showing the height of the incarnate Christ was probably on the west side of the building, where there is a large, filled-in opening described in the excavation report published by Türkoğlu²⁵. The door here would have led towards the now disappeared Great Baptistery, where the patriarch was going when he went “through the *skeuophylakion*” on Holy Saturday²⁶. The location of the second doorway of the *skeuophylakion*, the one through which the patriarch had entered the building, is less clear, but it was probably in the south wall, which stands a scant five meters from a door of the church which it served as a storage area. The seventeenth-century French traveler Guillaume Grelot writes as if the south door of the *skeuophylakion* were still visible in his time, albeit apparently walled up like the nearby door in the east bay of the north aisle to which it was connected²⁷. This south door of the *skeuophylakion* would have made the chalices, patens, etc., needed for the celebration of the liturgy in the church and stored in the *skeuophylakion*, readily available to the clergy performing the services in the church. Indeed, the fact that the ceremony of the *πρόθεσις*, wherein the bread and wine were prepared for the eucharist, was performed in the *skeuophylakion* argues strongly for a door leading from the treasury building directly into the east, i.e. sanctuary, end of the church where the bread and wine were needed for the liturgy. Bringing the eucharistic vessels and elements to and from the altar via the main, west door of the *skeuophylakion* would entail a very indirect route, either circling the *skeuophylakion* to the doors in the east bay of the north aisle of the church (onto which a door on the south side of the *skeuophylakion* would open) or going west from the *skeuophylakion* as far as the doors in the central bay of the north aisle, where one would enter the church only to turn east again to approach the altar. Not only would these routes be “the long way around,” but they would be particularly impractical in inclement weather²⁸.

In the now emptied *skeuophylakion* described by Türkoğlu, we have an ideal building for protection and storage of ecclesiastical valuables: a thick masonry tower reminiscent of a fortress with windows only at the highest level²⁹, with two levels of niches for storage chests covering the walls, much like what one finds in ancient library buildings (which are basically buildings devoted to preserving things while keeping them accessible)³⁰. It is to be hoped that further archaeological study of the *skeuophylakion* will reveal details of the placement of the various fixtures and pieces of furniture which we know to have been within the structure and the exact nature of the physical connection with the church building it served.

²⁵ Türkoğlu, pp. 27-28 and plan. 3; see also Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia*, p. 137.

²⁶ *Fuchologion*, ed. Goar, p. 291 bis.

²⁷ G. J. Grelot, *Relation nouvelle d'un voyage de Constantinople*, (Paris, 1680), p. 125; note, however, that the south door of the *skeuophylakion* is not shown on the accompanying “Plan du Temple de Sainte Sophie,” although the door from the church which would have connected with it is shown.

²⁸ The arcades thought to surround the building (cf. Mathews, *Early Churches*, pp. 89-91) would provide some cover for those bringing the patens and chalices to the altar, but the clergy would still be following a less than practical path. On the route of the procession see *ibid.*, pp. 161-62, and Taft, *The Great Entrance*, pp. 194-203.

²⁹ The Life of St. Pancratius of Taormina describes a church treasury building as “τὸν πύργον τοῦ σκευοφυλακίου;” see P. O’Connell, *The Ecclesiology of St. Nicephorus I*, 758-828, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*, vol. 194, (Rome, 1972), p. 162.

³⁰ On ancient library buildings, see C. Wendel, “Bibliotheki,” *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 2, (Stuttgart, 1954), cols. 261-67, and E. Makowiecka, *The Origin and Evolution of the Architectural Form of the Roman Library*, *Studia Antiqua*, vol. 1, (Warsaw, 1978).