Tekfur Palace as a Forgotten Monument

Tekfur Palace can be considered as a very complicated case for the late Byzantine and Ottoman city of Istanbul, of course there are several reasons for that complication. One of the reason is that simply we do not know for sure how the Byzantines were calling to their palace. There are various theses like foreign visitors around 16th century calling the palace as the palace of Constantine but later that turns to Palace of Porphyrogennotos which means born from purple as can be considered as a common name for the sons of emperors. In addition to that the only progress was not the identification of the palace but was to discover which it isn’t. In the 19th century some scholars argued that Tekfur palace is actually the Palace of Hebdomon but then in 1899 A. Van Millingen proved that the Palace of Hebdomon is actually in Bakirköy-Yenimahalle (Van Millengen, 1906) (Paspates and Metcalfe, 2004) (Anthony, 1986). Historical facts are usually important in many cases that is of course also valid for Tekfur Palace but since most of the arguments are still open to discussion historical facts should be passed more swiftly. To sum up the most accepted argument is that the Tekfur palace is dated in the late 13th century and identified with the Palace of Constantine Porphyrogennetos, a son of Michael VIII Palaiologos. (Talbot and Sullivan, 2005)

If we look at the structure we see a master piece and a unique example of secular Byzantine structure. It is pretty hard to visit such building as a guest visiting the city with a tour guide. Although the Chora Monastery, present day Kariye Museum and Tekfur Palace is just five minutes' walk we see that people visiting Chora Monastery are just skipping Tekfur Palace simply because they are not informed about its existence. In modern day Turkey the only similar structure to Tekfur Palace, dating to around same period is situated in Izmir Nympheion/Kemalpaşa but not to mention not in a very healthy shape. To continue with if we take a look at the placing choice of the building we see that it is rather in a very remote area, far away from the public and holy monument, Agia Sofia. Now as a reasons we can take into account some assumptions; the first one is that after the Fourth Crusade in 1204 as it is known Byzantine Emperors were exiled from the city and the Great Place next to Hippodrome and Augusteon was abandoned and not taken care of, even after the city was
conquered Byzantines were not very determined and did not have the capital to rebuild the old Great Place. The second reason can be that Byzantine Emperors may be seeking refuge in that remote part of the city, because if we look at the post 13th century Byzantine empire we see constant turmoil’s and revolts. Parallel to that the location of Great Palace was crowded and vulnerable to revolts. On the contrary the regions around Tekfur Palace were far away and let’s assume a revolt rose in the city and then there would be enough time for the emperors to skip away till everything calms down. (Paspates and Metcalfe, 2004) (Talbot and Sullivan, 2005)

Before going into the structure in itself it is relative to talk about its functions after the conquest of the city by Mehmed the Second in 1453. In the post conquest accounts such as the ones in Piri Reis’s in 16th century travel logs also in Melchior Lorichs travel logs the building is still in one piece with a rooftop. Although it is negligible scholars are quite sure those the structure was used for keeping exotic animals such as giraffes and elephants. Actually that is quite relevant because it is still possible to see the ancestors of those animals within the walls of the structure. As a suggestion one who would try to go in the Palace walls should be cautious, there are many dogs living in the structure and they do not hesitate to attack and chase you. The other function which is also very interesting is that Tekfur Palace was used for producing ceramics. Ottoman art historians are able to distinguish the master
pieces produced in Tekfur Palace, some of the ceramics were also used in mosques. After the ceramic producing abounded the palace was used as “Yahudihane” a poorhouse for Jews. (Paspates and Metcalfe, 2004) (Talbot and Sullivan, 2005) (Anthony, 1986)

If to continue with the architectural design of the structure we see that the palace was built on the Thedosian land northern land walls stretching rather on a panoramic platform as a consequence in order to avoid a weak line in the city walls, architects expanded the walls something like a hundred meters down the slope. Probably Ottomans when they besieged the city should have realized the vulnerability and disruption in the wall defense system and exploited the parameter constantly. If you approach the structure from the direction of the Golden Horn you see the straight high walls and you come to the entrance of the building which is now a park. Although it is not possible to enter I managed to get a sight towards the down floor of the structure. There you see a colonnaded courtyard with columns which are possibly re-employed from a pre-dating structure. We see such examples under the Kadir Has University cistern and under structures of the Great Palace. Unluckily the art works on the columns heads seems to be disappeared. If we look to the structure from east we see rather a different picture. On the eastern side we have seven windows in which one is relatively a meter below the other six. We may also distinguish the window in the middle with its square shape and marble coverings. Just on the right side of the marble window we have a window which looks like a balcony but because it looks east it is probably the apse of a small chapel. Another interesting identity of the building is that in addition to the spiral rows on the windows we have some designs made up with brick no wonder they looked shinier before, we will take a look at those art works once we pass to the northwestern part of the structure. If we continue towards the southern part we see may see a destroyed arch connecting the palace and the Thedosian walls although the arch didn’t survived you may easily see the starting point of the arch on the walls. Now if you will try to look the palace from the front side (northwest and west) you should consider climbing and a chase by the dogs taken refuge inside the city walls. If you manage to do so you will
encounter the three floored structure with two marble and two brick columns in the basement. Another thing to notice would be the artworks on the first floor windows. They are brick type of symmetrical carvings on the upper side of the windows you have various kinds on different windows. What took attention was the inspiration of the symmetrical positioning of the artworks which is a not a big surprise if we take in account the Byzantine interest in symmetry and it seems to be a feature of several late Byzantine facades. (Marble walls of Chora Monastery is a great example to that interest).

The survival of the structure has two points to make; the first one is that we are quite lucky to have a Byzantine palace in the modern city of Istanbul which still stands. Now if we look the other side of the medallion we see hall a different picture. In the entrance you may read that the building is under restoration but no one is actually working, the door is sealed with chains like Byzantines did hundreds of years ago to the Golden Horn. There is not even one information board or a sign to direct people towards the monument, it looks like people visiting Istanbul or living in the neighborhood just forgot the very existence of the building. On the southern side you a car park from where again you have to avoid the guard dogs. It is also possible that during the time of visit one may encounter numerous buses which not only block your point of view but also your passage to the most of the extension walls.

- Plan by Mimar Sinan University

How to reach?
To reach the structure one may try to just take a bus from Eminönü (golden horn shore) bus station either to "Edirnekapı or Ayvansaray" and follow the land walls. From direction Ayvansaray you would encounter Anemas dungeons then it would only take more or less ten more minutes walk to Tekfur Palace along the walls.

*How the interior looks at present- Porticoed facade lower level as of 2009 (Photo taken by the author)
*View from the south (marble window and the chapel) as of 2009 photo taken by the author.

- Remains of the arch connecting the palace to the left and the walls to the right, as of 2009 (photo taken by the author)
*Front facade with artworks on the windows as of 2009 (Photo taken by the author)

*Wall extensions towards west as of 2009 (Photo taken by the author)
*Palace Walls blocked by tour buses, 2009 (Photo taken by the Author)

Marble blocs, possibly taken and re-employed from a pre-dating structure as of 2009 (Photo by the author)
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