



# *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand 30, Open*

Papers presented to the 30th Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand held on the Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia, July 2-5, 2013.

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/conference/sahanz-2013/>

Nigel Westbrook, “An Exchange Between East and West Emulations and Borrowings in Roman, Byzantine, Sasanian and Arabic Palaces, from the Third to Tenth Centuries” in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 30, Open*, edited by Alexandra Brown and Andrew Leach (Gold Coast, Qld: SAHANZ, 2013), vol. 1, p 365-374.

ISBN-10: 0-9876055-0-X

ISBN-13: 978-0-9876055-0-4

# *An Exchange Between East and West*

Emulations and Borrowings in Roman,  
Byzantine, Sasanian and Arabic Palaces,  
from the Third to Tenth Centuries

*Nigel Westbrook*

*University of Western Australia*

*In this paper, I will examine the cultural borrowings that occurred in the development of palace architecture from the late Roman Empire through to the Early and Middle Byzantine periods. Studies of cultural interaction between Byzantium and its neighbours have been undertaken in relation to the Arabic-influenced Palace at Bryas, the Moorish-style Mouchroutas hall of the emperor Manuel I, and the influence of the Great Palace on Carolingian palaces at Aachen and Ingelheim, and the Papal palace at the Lateran, notably by Luchterhand, and in relation to exchanges of art motifs by Matthew Canepa. Here, I will adopt a more specifically architectural analysis. Early Byzantine Imperial and Governors' palaces appear to have served a political function in communicating the power and prestige of the state, despite an often discordant reality. Architectural and decorative motifs acquired a significance in this respect, and the elements related to official receptions became amplified in scale and spatial effects. Thus, there developed increasingly elaborate decorative mosaic programmes, rectangular, circular and semicircular forecourts, monumental covered walks and loggias, and centralised, often polylobate reception halls. This elaboration took place in both Rome, Early Byzantium, and in Sasanid Persia and the Umayyad Caliphate. This paper will argue for a specifically symbolic reading of such "showpalaces." I will support this reading with graphical reconstructions of several of the Great Palace buildings: the sixth century Chrysotriklinos, and the ninth century Triconch and Sigma of Theophilus. These structures will be discussed in relation to known Byzantine, Western and Eastern palace buildings.*



Sasanian Persia and Rome formed two poles of power and influence in the Late Antique period. The two centres were aware of each other through long-standing diplomacy and military encounters. Matthew Canepa, focusing on artistic rather than architectural evidence, argues that there was, from the third to seventh centuries, a two-way exchange of ritual and artistic motifs between Rome and Iran that appears in literal form in the gift exchanges that took place at court between emperor and Sasanian ambassadors.<sup>1</sup> Here, the exchange of architectural motifs between Iran, Rome and early Byzantium will be explored.

What was the origin, and interrelation of such types and motifs?<sup>2</sup> If we take the question of the origins of the central-plan reception hall, we run up against problems of symbolic meaning and social utility.<sup>3</sup> Within the Late Empire, there is an apparent proliferation of such halls, raising the question of whether they were an innovation, perhaps an adaptation of earlier funeral structures, or derived from a cultural exchange with the other great power, Sasanian Iran, which had been a focus of Roman contestation since the third century.<sup>4</sup>

On the function and significance of Sasanian palaces, we are constrained by the relative silence imposed by the Arab invasions. The necessary degree of inference is thus greater—is, for example, a particular room a reception hall or fire temple? We must, in the main, depend upon comparative formal analysis. Prior to the Sasanian period, Iranian palaces were established on platforms, and incorporated the *Iwan*, (ayvān), a barrel-vaulted, open-ended structure built of baked bricks. This latter motif was based upon earlier local traditions, and enabled the creation of imposing reception spaces.<sup>5</sup> These elements are also used in Sasanian palace architecture, but, at least in the earlier cases, used in combination with domed halls. The third century Sasanian palaces of Ardashir: Qal'a-ye Doktor, and Atashkada ('Palace of the Fire Temple') in Firuzabad, and the palace of Bishapur, founded by his son Shapur I, combined domed reception halls, *iwans*, and rectangular courtyards. The palace of Shapur I at Bishapur may have been aided by Roman engineers and craftsmen, known to have been captured by that ruler when he defeated and captured the Roman emperor Valerian in 260 CE at the Battle of Edessa.<sup>6</sup> Although certain details, such as a Greek decorative stucco frieze in the central four-*iwan* court<sup>7</sup>, demonstrate a western influence, the overall layout, and the relation to the nearby water temple, are local in derivation.<sup>8</sup> Later Sasanian palaces, while

1. M. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2008). For a partial rebuttal of Canepa's thesis of an agnostic relationship between Roman and Persian artistic forms, see A. Cutler, "Intention and interpretation at Ctesiphon and Constantinople," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 24 (2011): 873–79. For an analysis of the gift-giving at imperial receptions for ambassadors, see F. A. Bauer, "Potentialler Besitz," in ed. F. A. Bauer, *Visualisierungen von Herrschaft: Frühmittelalterliche Residenzen- Gestalt und Zeremoniell*. Internationales Kolloquium (Istanbul 3–4 juni 2004) *Byzas* 5 (2006).

2. J. T. Smith, *Roman Villas: A Study in Social Structure* (London: Routledge, 1997), 13.

3. I. Lavin, "The House of the Lord: Aspects of the Role of Palace Triclinia in the Architecture of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages," *Art Bulletin* 44 (1962): 1–27 and fig. 1–26.

4. I. Baldini Lippolis, "Case e palazzi a Costantinopoli tra IV e VI secolo" in *Corso sull'Arte ravennate e bizantina* 41 (1994): 279–311; I. Baldini Lippolis, *La domus tardoantica: forme e rappresentazioni dello spazio domestico nelle città del Mediterraneo* (Imola: Bologna University Press, 2001).

5. E. J. Keall, "Architecture ii. Parthian Period," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (henceforth *EI*), vol. II, Fasc. 3, 327–329, last updated August 11, 2011, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/architecture-ii>. Originally published December 15, 1986.

6. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth* (2008), 56.

7. R. Ghirshman, *Bichâpour II: Les mosaïques sassanides* (Paris: n.p., 1956), Plan II. For interpretation as square court with four *iwans*, see E. J. Keall, "Bšpr," *EI*, vol. IV, Fasc 3, 287–289.

8. L. Bier, "The Sassanian Palaces and their Influence in Early Islam," in *Ars Orientalis* 23, ed. G. Necipoglu (Ann Arbor: Department of History, University of Michigan, 1993), 57–66 at 58.

perpetuating the *iwān* structure, are more recognisably related to western examples—thus a late fourth century palace of Shapur II possesses an apsidal hall opening onto an axially-aligned courtyard, thus similar to a Roman peristyle courtyard house. In the last Sasanian palace, that of Kosrow II at Qasr-e Shirin, a high platform was raised up, upon which a square central hall, again with a squinched dome, aligned axially with a rectangular entrance courtyard and inner courtyard. Surrounding the palace were ornamental pools and gardens.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the great palace at the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon has a monumental *iwān*, the *Tāq-e Kesrā*, axially facing what would have been the entrance courtyard, behind which was located a vast hall, almost certainly used for banquets and receptions (fig. 1). These palaces developed synchronously with Roman palaces—it is certain that, through their embassies, the two courts were aware of each other’s architecture.<sup>10</sup>

9. Y. Hirschfeld, “New Perspectives for Garden Archaeology,” in *Middle East Garden Traditions: Unity and Diversity* 23, ed. M. Conan. (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2008)

10. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, 127 ff.

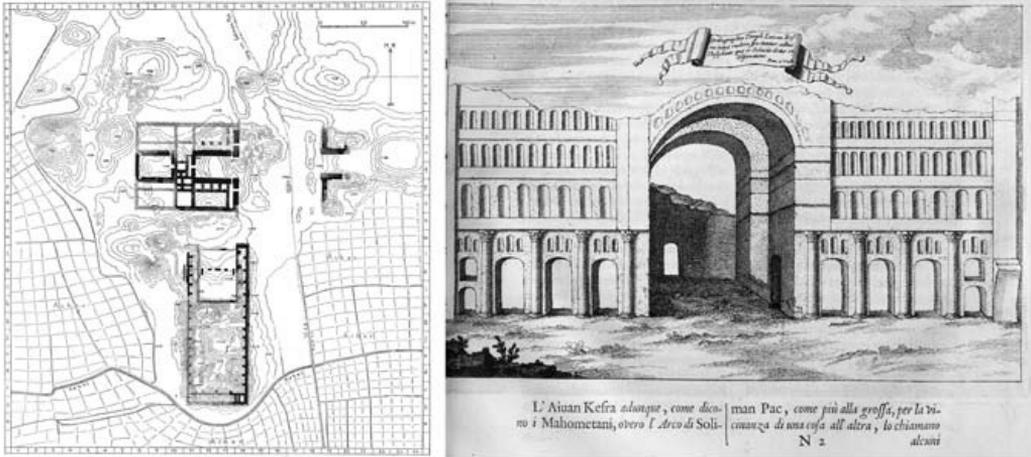


Figure 1. Plan of Ayyān-e Kesrā and adjacent features, Tisfun, Iraq, from O. Reuther, ‘The German Excavations’, *Antiquity* 3, 1929, and etching from Athanasius Kircher, *Turris Babel*, Amsterdam (1679).

The palace at Ctesiphon (Tisfun) has been associated with Byzantine influences. The Byzantine chronicler Theophylaktos Simokatta wrote that:

Ctesiphon is the biggest of the royal residences in Persia. It is said that the emperor Justinian sent Greek stone as well as architects, who were experts in building and experienced in vaulting, to Chosroes, the son of Kavāt. And they built the royal palace not far from Ctesiphon in the Byzantine manner.<sup>11</sup>

Ctesiphon was, however, the capital city, and it possessed a number of palace complexes in addition to the partially surviving Taq-e Kesra. It is unlikely, however, that the latter was the

11. Theophylaktos Simokatta (*Histories* 5.6, ed. C. de Boor, Leipzig, 1887, cf. *Sāhnāma*, ed Borm, IX, pp. 2886ff.)



structure described by Simokatta, given its very different construction technique in comparison with known sixth century Byzantine buildings. Its date has, furthermore, been disputed, and has been placed variously between the third and sixth centuries.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless its façade, with its superimposed storeys of blind pilastered arcades built in mud-brick, appears to be a peripheral emulation of a Roman structure, but here the tectonic logic is abandoned in the apparent attempt to construct an image of order.<sup>13</sup> It might be added that the possible sources for this emulation are more likely to be Roman than sixth century—such as, for example, the superimposed orders of the Colosseum. Also, unlike the interior focus of Roman architecture, there is an emphasis upon positive external spatial volumes: the overall site plan indicates the possibility that two *iwans* opposed one another, while a third complex stood to the south.<sup>14</sup> The surviving *iwan*, an uncentred arch, is of enormous proportions—43.5 meters deep by 25.5 meters wide—and a technical triumph in itself. Its outward-directed architecture is thus very different in construction and concept to the essentially introverted nature of Byzantine building. The structure referred to by Simokatta may have rather been another complex, the “White Palace,” which is known to have still been standing at the time of the Arab invasions.<sup>15</sup>

In all these examples, there is a clear hierarchy of entrance and reception, one which would have created a strong impression of grandeur and distantiation of client or ambassador and the ruler and his courtiers. The axial sequence of entrance gate, courtyard and high reception hall is certainly comparable to descriptions of the Byzantine imperial palace. On the basis of records of diplomatic exchanges between Byzantium and Sasanian Iran, these palaces were used as competitive settings for emulative spectacle. Despite obvious differences—the hot climate in Iran led to the development of the *iwan*, or outdoor room, and to domestic quarters being arranged on an upper floor—the elaboration of ceremonial entrance into the palaces does bear comparison.<sup>16</sup> It is also clear that in both the Byzantine and Sasanian examples there is an association of the complex with religious structures and symbolism—they are “sacred” palaces.

We have a textual source for a Byzantine encounter with a Sasanian palace hall. George Cedrenus relates Heraclius’ encounter with the audience hall at Takt-e Solayman in 624 during his invasion of the Persian heart-land:

12. E. E. Herzfeld, *Archaeological History of Iran*, Schweich Lectures of the British Academy (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 94 ff.; E. E. Herzfeld, “Damascus: Studies in Architecture – II,” *Ars Islamica* 10 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1943), 59–61; O. Kurz, “The Date of the Taq i Kisra,” *JRAS* (1941): 37–41; E. J. Keall, “Ayvān-e Kesrā,” *EI*, vol. III, Fasc 2 (2011) 155–59.

13. Keall, “Ayvān-e Kesr.”

14. J. Kröger, “Ctesiphon,” *EI* (updated 2011) vol. VI, Fasc. 4, (2011), 446–448, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ctesiphon> (accessed December 20, 2012).

15. Kröger, “Ctesiphon.”

16. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, 135–36.

When [Heraclius] entered [the throne room] he found the foul image (*eidolon*) of Kosrow, and his image in the spherical roof of the palace as if he was enthroned in heaven. And around him were the sun and moon and stars, which the pagans worship as gods, and sceptor [*sic*]-bearing angels stood around him. There the enemy of God had contrived with machines to sprinkle down rain like a thunder-shower and noise to clamor forth like thunder.<sup>17</sup>

Here, as Canepa has observed, the resemblance to Byzantine references to the Chrysotriklinos in the Byzantine Great Palace is striking, as will be discussed below.<sup>18</sup> While the Iranian example, also probably dating to the sixth century, possessed a depiction of what Canepa suggests was the god Ohrmazd, the contemporary Chrysotriklinos possessed, at least in its post-Iconoclasm phase, an icon of Christ above the imperial throne.<sup>19</sup>

The emphasis upon monumental enclosing walls, *iwan*-type entrance vestibule, courtyard and monumental centralised-plan reception halls was to be continued into the Islamic period in examples of Caliphal palace architecture.<sup>20</sup> Central-plan halls were equally a feature of Early Byzantine palaces, as evidenced by several examples that have been excavated and recorded in Turkey. These consist of two types: centrally-planned reception

17. George Cedrenus, *Historiarum compendium*, ed. I. Bekker, CFHB 2 vols. (Bonn: Weber, 1838–39), 721, cited by Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, 148. On Heraclius' campaign, see W. E. Kaegi, *Heraclius: Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 127, here citing R. and E. Naumann, *Takht-i Suleiman* (Munich, 1976).

18. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*, 147.

19. Av Cameron, "Artistic Patronage of Justin II," in *Continuity and Change in Sixth-Century Byzantium*, ed. A. Cameron (London: Variorum, 1981).

20. J. Sauvaget, "Observations sur les monuments omeyyades," *Journal Asiatique* 231 (1939); K. Cresswell, *A Short Account of Early Islamic Architecture*, rev. by J. W. Allen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1989); R. W. Hamilton, *Khirbat al Mafjar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957); O. Grabar, "The Date and Meaning of Mshatta," *DOP* 41 (1987); O. Grabar, "Umayyad Palaces Reconsidered," *Ars Orientalis* 23, ed. G. Necipoglu (Ann Arbor: Department of History, University of Michigan, 1993), 93–108; R. Ettinghausen and O. Grabar, *Islamic Art 650-1250* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); E. Herzfeld, "The Genesis of Islamic Art and the problem of Mshatta," in *Early Islamic art and Architecture*, ed. J. Bloom (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002).

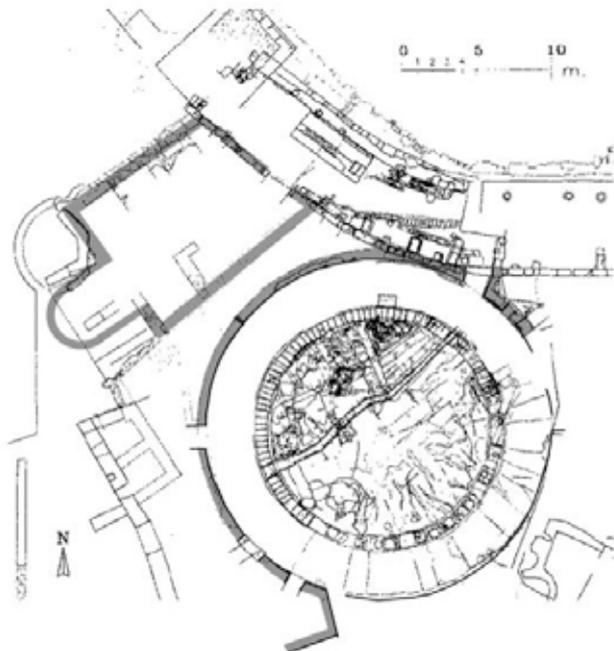


Figure 2. Plan of presumed governor's palace, Elaiussa Sebaste, near Mersin, Turkey, from Eugenia Equini Schneider, *Elaiussa Sebaste: A Port City Between East and West* (Istanbul: Homer Kitabevi, 2008), with overlay by author.



halls, sometimes with semicircular forecourts, such as the Palace of Antiochus, north-west of the Hippodrome in Constantinople,<sup>21</sup> and the circular forecourt, which appears in the fifth century palace at Eliaussa Sebaste in south-western Turkey.

This Byzantine administrative centre and residence was built in several stages and completed in the mid-fifth century, and thus contemporaneous to the Theodosian palaces of Antiochus and Arcadia in Constantinople. It consists of a grouping of two wings of halls arranged on multiple levels, around a 29.7 meters wide, two-storied circular porticoed courtyard that formed the focus of the palace, off which a monumental reception hall on two levels was accessed.<sup>22</sup> Both hall and court would have presented an imposing spectacle during receptions.<sup>23</sup> A similar configuration reappears in the later, ninth century Abbasid palace of Dar al-Khilafa at Samarra, but here as a vast sunken pool, faced by reception chambers.<sup>24</sup>

From where did these building types originate? One theory is Spain, from where the Theodosian imperial line descended. A vast early fourth century “palace,” recently excavated at Cercadilla, near Cordoba in Spain,<sup>25</sup> possesses a semi-circular forecourt and several polylobate reception halls.<sup>26</sup> However the Iberian origin is speculative, and indeed the same forms can be seen in the earlier Villa dei Quintilii, on the Via Appia, a vast aristocratic villa built between the second and fifth centuries, also possessed a hemicyclic (“sigma”) courtyard preceding a circular, and probably domed representational hall of 12 meters.<sup>27</sup> This may, however, be a later phase of the complex. What becomes apparent, however, is that in the fourth and fifth centuries, there was a development

21. E. Mamboury and R. Demangel, *Le quartier des Manganes et la première région de Constantinople* (Paris: De Boccard, 1939).

22. E. Equini Schneider, Elaiussa Sebaste, *KST* 1995–2007, in particular “Excavation and Research at Elaiussa Sebaste. The 2002 Campaign,” *KST* 25 (2003): 303–16 and figs. 9–10; “Archaeological Research at Elaiussa Sebaste: The 2004 Campaign,” *KST* 27 (2005): 195–204; E. Equini Schneider, *Elaiussa Sebaste, a Port City between East and West, an Archaeo-logical Guide* (Istanbul: Homer Kitabevi, 2008).

23. Equini Schneider, Elaiussa Sebaste 2004, (2005): 107, 181-96.

24. A. Northedge, “An Interpretation of the Palace of the Caliph at Samarra (Dar al-Khilafa or Jawsaq al-Khaqani),” *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993): 143-70 at 148: “The Large Serdab,” and figs. 162, 10.

25. Cercadilla: C Marquez, R Hidalgo and P Marfil, “El complejo monumental tardiromano de cercadilla en colonia patricia Corduba” *Africa Romana* 20, ed. A Mastino (Sassari, 1992); E. W. Haley, “A Palace of Maximianus Herculus at Corduba?,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 101 (1994): 208–214; R. Hidalgo, “Memoria de las excavaciones arqueológicas en el yacimiento de Cercadilla, Campaña de 1994,” *AAA* (1994): 45–54; R. Hidalgo, et al., *El Cryptoportico de Cercadilla. Analisis arquitectonico y scuencia estratigrafica* (Seville: Junta de Andalucía, 1996); R. Hidalgo, et al., “El triclinium triconque del Palatium de Córdoba, *Anales de arqueologia cordobesa* 9 (1998): 273–302; J. Arce, “Emperadores, Palacios y Villae (A propósito de la villa romana de Cercadilla, Córdoba,” *Antiquité Tardive* 5 (1997): 293–302.

26. Haley, “A Palace of Maximianus,” 212.

27. Villa dei Quintili: A. Ricci, “Via Appia. La Villa dei Quintili,” (circ. XI) *Bullettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma*, (1986), 607–615; A. Ricci, ed., *La villa dei Quintili. Fonti scritte e fonti figurate* (Roma: Lithos editrice, 1998); U. Schädler, “Scavi e scoperte nella villa dei Quintilii,” in *La villa dei Quintilii. Fonti scritte e fonti figurate*, ed. A. Ricci (Rome: Lithos editrice, 1998), 29–79.

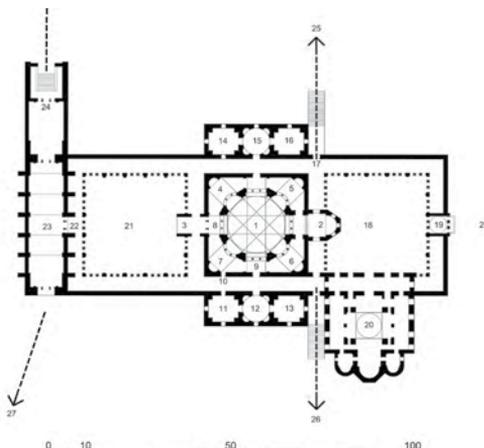


Figure 3. Reconstruction of plan of Chrysotriklinos, based upon references in the Book of Ceremonies (author)

beyond the peristyle villa typology, and toward a language of introverted, volumetric and massive structures, in which architectural cohesion gave way to spatial elaboration.

One Byzantine palace hall of central plan, the Chrysotriklinos within the Great Palace, probably constructed by the sixth century emperor Justin II, does appear to resemble the Iranian examples and may have been conceived in direct response to them. Its name, loosely translated as “Golden Triclinium,” is suggestive of a conflation of Christian and solar symbolism which Dagron has argued was central to the ideology of the Roman and Early Byzantine emperors,<sup>28</sup> and comparable to Iranian imperial ritual.<sup>29</sup> Textual descriptions provide sufficient information for us to be able to reconstruct the Chrysotriklinos in its schematic form (fig. 3). It possessed eight vaults, or apses. Within the south-eastern vault was placed the throne, above which was depicted an icon of Christ. A great cornice bore the weight of a dome, floating above sixteen lantern windows, as appears also in the church of Sts Sergius and Bacchus.<sup>30</sup> Between the vaults and the central space were curtains, probably framed by columns. To the west, outside the building and probably facing an entrance courtyard, was an open entrance vault, the Tripeton, the descriptions of which recall a Sasanian *iwan*.<sup>31</sup> The building was flanked to the north and south by offices and private suites.<sup>32</sup>

While the post-Islamic invasion period witnessed a shift away from classical cultural forms, there is evidence for some continuity within the Byzantine court.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless this was balanced by the influence of the wealthy Caliphate based at Baghdad, Samarra then Damascus. The ninth century Byzantine emperor Theophilus apparently built the Bryas Palace in imitation of the

28. Solar symbolism in early Constantinople: G. Dagron, “l’Organisation et le Déroulement des Cours d’après le *Livre des Cérémonies*,” *Travaux et Mémoires* 13 (Paris: De Boccard, 2000).

29. G. Gnoli, “Indo-Iranian Religion,” *EL*, vol. XIII, Fasc. 1, accessed December 20, 2012, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/indo-iranian-religion>, 97–100.

30. Chrysotriklinos: J. M. Featherstone, “The Chrysotriklinos seen through *De ceremoniis*,” in *Zwischen Polis, Provinz und Peripherie: Beiträge zur byzantinischen Geschichte und Kultur*, ed. L. M. Hoffmann (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005), 845–852; J. M. Featherstone, “The Great Palace as Reflected in the *De Ceremoniis*,” in *Visualisierungen von Herrschaft*, ed. F. A. Bauer (2004) (2006), 47–61.

31. A. Vogt, *Le Livre des Cérémonies*, vol. I (Paris, 1939), 23.

32. J. M. Featherstone, “De Cerimoniis And The Great Palace,” in *The Byzantine World*, ed. P. Stephenson (New York: Routledge, 2010), 162–74.

33. M. Milojević, “Forming and Transforming Proto-Byzantine Urban Public Space,” in *The Sixth Century, End or Beginning? Byzantina Australiensis* 10, ed. P. Allen and E. Jeffreys (Brisbane: AABS, 1996).

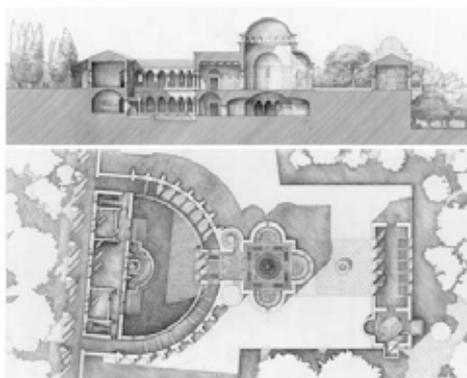


Figure 4. Reconstruction of the Sigma and Triconch in the Great Palace, Constantinople of the ninth century Byzantine emperor Theophilus (author).



palaces of the new Abbasid caliphs ruling from Baghdad.<sup>34</sup> A passage in a Byzantine chronicle describes the visit of an imperial envoy to the court at Baghdad. On his return he apparently convinced the emperor Theophilus to build the Bryas palace, in the Asian suburbs of Constantinople, in the style of an Abbasid palace.

Theophilus is also recorded as having constructed the Sigma and Triconch in the imperial Great Palace. Even if this attribution may have been a case of gilding the lily it would, nevertheless, seem that he had—at the least—refurbished it. Although the formal arrangement of this complex, then, resembles Late Roman structures, the immediate influence may have been Islamic (fig. 4).<sup>35</sup>

The Sigma and Triconch does indeed seem anachronistic for the ninth century—indeed such forms were most abundant in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>36</sup> Was, as Ken Dark has recently argued, the Sigma and Triconch in the Great Palace evidence of the survival in Constantinople of classical architecture through to the ninth century?<sup>37</sup> The situation is perhaps not so clear—the cultural context during this period of contestation between Abbasid East and Christian West recalls the earlier contestation and cultural exchange between Rome and Sasanian Persia. Could, therefore, Theophilus’ palace complex owe more in inspiration to the Abbasid pleasure palaces of Al Mansour and his successors in Baghdad and Samarra (fig. 5)?

34. Theophanes Continuatus in *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312–1453*, trans. C. Mango (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 160.

35. A. Ricci, “The Road to Baghdad,” in *Byzantium in the Ninth Century: Dead or Alive*, ed. L. Brubaker (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), 131–49, esp. 132.

36. A. Augenti, “The Palace of Theoderic at Ravenna,” in *Housing in Late Antiquity: from Palaces to Shops*, ed. L. Lavan, L. Özgenel and A. Sarantis (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 425–53, esp. 439–40.

37. K. R. Dark, “Roman Architecture in the Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors at Constantinople during the Sixth to Ninth Centuries,” *Byzantion 77* (2007): 87–105, esp. 102–05.

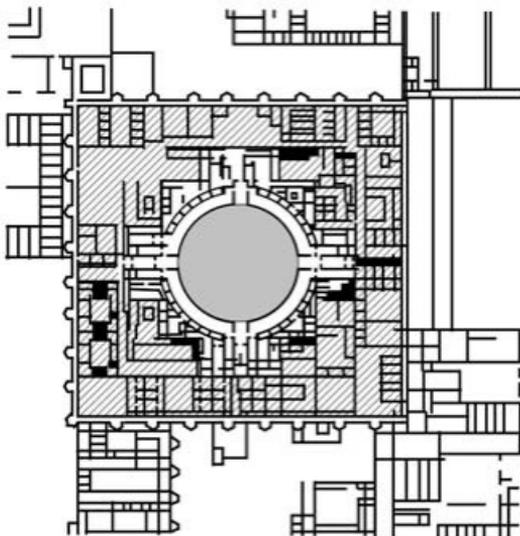


Figure 5. Large Serdab, Dar Al-Khalifa, Samarra, built by the Caliph Al Mu'tasim in 836 CE (author after Northedge)

38. A. Northedge, "The Palaces of the Abbassids at Samarra," in *A Medieval Islamic City Reconsidered: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Samarra*, ed. C. F. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 29–67.

39. Other sites of round Sasanian cities include Nehbandan castle in southern Khorasan, the round city of Jundi-Shapur in Khuzestan which like Firuzabad may have been built by Ardashir, and Darabgird, near modern-day Darab in south-western Iran.

40. G. Anderson, "Islamic Spaces and Diplomacy in Constantinople (Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries C.E.)," *Medieval Encounters* 15 (2009): 86–113, esp. 93–4.

41. K. Krüger, "Die Palaststadt Madinat al'Zahra bei Cordoba als Zentrum kalifaler Machtausübung," in *Visualisierungen von Herrschaft*, ed. F. A. Bauer (2006) 233–271.

42. So-called Palace of Bryas: A. Ricci, "The Road from Baghdad to Byzantium and the case of the Bryas Palace in Istanbul," 131–49; A. Ricci, "Kent Arkeolojisi, İstanbul: Küçükyalı ArkeoPark'ı," *Arkeoloji ve Sanat* (Journal of Archaeology and Art) 139 (2012): 202–216; S. Eyice, "İstanbul'da Abbasi saraylarının benzeri olarak yapılan bir Bizans sarayı: Bryas sarayı," *Belleten* 23 (1959): 79–104; S. Eyice, "Contributions a la histoire de l'art byzantin: quatre edifices inedits ou mal connus," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 10 (1959): 245–50. Damatrys palace: E. Akyürek et al., "Samandıra Yazlık Sarayı," *Türkiye Arkeolojik Yerleşmeleri* 8 (İstanbul, 2007).

While one might reasonably locate the origin of such typologies in Late Antique pavilion types, there may perhaps have been a functional similarity between the Sigma and Triconch, and the Large Serdab of the ninth century palace Dar al-Khilafa, built by the Caliph Al Mu'tasim in Samarra,<sup>38</sup> laid out, in all likelihood, in emulation of earlier Iranian circular cities.<sup>39</sup>

The Sigma and Triconch, on the basis of the Theophanes Continuatus description, comprised a pavilion on two levels facing a semicircular, enclosed space which could be flooded on special occasions. There thus appears to be, at least on the basis of the sketchy details available to us, some functional similarity to the Large Serdab at Samarra. The Byzantine emperor Theophilus would presumably, on this analogy, have used the lower level of the Triconch as a cool, sunken residence in mid-summer, the air further freshened by breezes passing over the basin within the Sigma courtyard. Textual references indicate that the complex had both public and private functions, hosting acclamations from courtiers, while also serving as a pleasure pavilion for the Emperor. Did it also perhaps serve as a new space for the reception of ambassadors, notably the emissaries of the Abbasid caliphs? At this time there was considerable diplomatic activity related to the exchange of military and other prisoners.<sup>40</sup>

If the Bryas Palace of Theophilus were constructed in emulation of the splendour of the Abbasid court of Caliph Al-Mutasim at Baghdad, then was the Sigma and Triconch, together with the other halls of Theophilus in the Great Palace imaged in emulation of Imperial Rome or of Abbasid Samarra and Baghdad?<sup>41</sup> Perhaps both—certainly later emperors based their prestige upon emulation of Constantine, the inaugural Christian emperor. Further research remains to be undertaken into the complex question of the cultural exchange between Byzantium and the centres of Iran and the Caliphate.<sup>42</sup>

In summary, it is here argued that there appears to have been an ongoing exchange, appropriation and emulation of palace ceremonial and motifs from the third to tenth centuries. While Sasanian architecture could be understood as an amalgam of local traditional building practices and formal typologies combined with appropriated western motifs, Byzantine palace buildings such as the Chrysotriklinos and the Sigma and Triconch may also owe as much to the example of their contemporary Sasanian and Abbasid



equivalents, as spectacular settings for the continual diplomatic exchange and contestation, as to their classical precedents. They were in part “show-palaces,” to use Thomas Mathews’ term, instruments in the process of emulation and exchange between competing cultures, in which the architecture of Hellenistic Greece and imperial Rome could be seen as a common heritage.<sup>43</sup>

43. T. Mathews, “The show-palaces of Constantinople and Hagia Sophia,” in *Proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup> International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, 21–26 August, 2006*, ed. E. Jeffreys (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 241.