Chapter 3: Byzantine Mese and Ottoman Divanyolu

There is a vein of ambiguity in the interpretation of the Mese as forerunner of the Divanyolu. The coincidence, however rough, of the Divan axis with two of the main three branches of the central Roman-Byzantine Meses has, in almost all times, given rise to confusion and to a completely false association of epochs and forms. Most maps drawn by Europeans in the 19th century meticulously superimpose the ancient Byzantine-Roman sites and place-names on the Ottoman town.

Fig. 17: *Extract from the Stolpe-Mordtmann 1855-80 map. Above: from Fatih to Edirnekapı. Centre: from Beyazıt and Eski Saray to the Fatih complex. Below: from Topkapı Palace to Beyazıt and Eski Saray.*

The use of the 1855-60 Stolpe map by Mordtmann is a good example of this.[40] It is a carefully surveyed and drawn plan, an excellent restitution of the Ottoman town, with its *mahalle*, ethnic differentiation, and the ever-changing street system. And yet, the site-names of the Mese, the Artopoleon and various Fora—which would have deserved their own autonomous representation—have been printed by Mordtmann on this totally extraneous context.

[40] Reprint of the Plan de la Ville de Constantinople ainsi que ses confins... per C. Stolpe, ci-devant au service de la Sublime Porta... corrigé et augmenté depuis l'an 1855 jusqu'à 1863 par C. Stolpe", Berlin-Pera 1863. Scale 1: 10.000, in August J. Mordtmann, Guide de Constantinople avec une introduction historique, Constantinople: Lorentz & Kiel (n.d. but around 1880). See also the earlier C. Stolpe, Text zum Plan von Constantinopel mit seinen Vorstadten, Pera-Constantinopel: Selbstverlag des Verfassers, 1863). An interesting interpretation is Barbié du Bocage's 1783 sketch plan Essai d'un Plan de Constantinople telle qu'elle était sous les Empereurs Grecs depuis Constantin jusqu'à la prise des Turcs... Terminé le 30 novembre 1783 at the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris (Cartes et Plans Ge.C.10571).

Fig. 18: *Extracts from Mordtmann "Constantinople au Moyen-Age" (1891). Above: from the Charsia gate (now Edirnekapı) to the Holy Apostles (now Fatih). Below: from the Forum Taurii to the Hippodrome*

In this respect, the same Mordtmann's reconstruction of the Byzantine sites,[41] though superseded by later research, is much more correct. It seeks to locate the Byzantine and Roman sites referring to some of the existing Ottoman elements, but does not attempt to weld two totally non-referential images. It is interesting to note that for the westernmost part of the axis, from Fatih to Edirnekapı, any extrapolation of the scant archaeological data onto the wholly un-Classical street web is correctly avoided.

The general geography and layout of the two thoroughfares from the Hippodrome-Ayasofya-Sultan Ahmet area to Beyazıt-Forum Taurii, bifurcating out from there south-west (Porta Aurea) or north-west (Porta Charsia—Edirne Kapı), and the siting on the highest topographic saddles along the hills do give a rough impression of analogy. On the other hand, the multiple channels of the Ottoman Divan axis system (see Chapter 2), and the still open questions of the archaeological interpretation of the Byzantine street system render hazardous the attempt to correlate the two epochs.

During the last two decades, the work of Mango and Berger—mainly focused on the early Roman-Byzantine Constantinople—and that of Magdalino on Medieval Constantinople have thrown new light on the hypothetic form and urban significance of the Byzantine

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[41] Partial archaeological map in August J. Mordtmann, "Constantinople au Moyen-Age—Relevé Topographique", in: "Revue d'Art Chrétien", 1892. Published as a separate map as: *Esquisse Topographique de Constantinople: Constantinople au Moyen-Age—Relevé Topographique des constructions encore existantes remontant à cette époque dressé par le docteur J. Mordtmann sous les auspices et aux frais du Comte Riant, membre de l'Institut et publié par F. de Melyv MD.CCC.XC.I*, Lille: 1892. Müller-Wiener *Bildlexicon*, and Wolfram Kleiss, *Topographisch-Archäologischer Plan von Istanbul*, Tübingen: Wasmuth 1967, contain updated archaeological information on Byzantine sites.

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Mese system.[42] But we do not know how much that system had changed in the two centuries that preceded the Ottoman conquest.

The Charsia gate (Edirnekapı) route might have acquired its Ottoman period layout from around the 10th century. We should also take into account the pendulum of change in urban directions through two millenniums of city development. Very early, the overland northern route out of the city of Byzantium had asserted itself. Then, under Constantine the Via Egnatia-Porta Aurea direction acquired privilege. Still later, the Holy Apostles-Blachernae Palace-route into the Balkans direction gained urban momentum.[43] In the first three centuries of Ottoman rule, emerged (or reasserted itself) the Edirnekapı direction out towards the Davut Pasha military grounds and Eyüp; there ensued a peripheral downfall for the Porta Aurea and the south-western gates. Lastly, in the early 19th century, we perceive an ambiguous return of functional and partly ceremonial roles to the Lâleli-Aksaray-Koca Mustafa Pasha and Yedikule axis, confirmed a few decades later by suburban and railroad development along the Marmara coast. We do not know when precisely, and how gradually, those changes took place, and to what degree they were counterbalanced by persisting previous trends, but we do know that they were not absolute: that the superseded directions maintained part of their urban roles and potential. It is therefore impossible to establish clear-cut differences or similarities between the Byzantine period as a whole and the Ottoman period in all its duration.

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[42] For the earlier period see the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium, *Constantinople* in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers 54* (2000), 157-264. For the later period: Magdalino *Constantinople Médiévale.*

[43] Important triumphal processions through the Charisios gate were exceptional. Only one, in AD 793 is mentioned by = slcf!G [hai&ÒThe Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate", in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers 54* (2000), 174 and note 8. Even after the Blachernai palace became the imperial residence most processions were staged from the Seraglio Point (Sarayburnu), reached by the emperor by boat from Blachernai church, up to St. Sophia and the Hippodrome(see also Albrecht Berger, "Imperial and ecclesiastical processions in Constantinople", in *Byzantine Constantinople—Monuments, Topography and Everyday Life*, ed. N. Necipoğlu, Leiden: Brill 2001, 83).

Even at the eastern end of the system (the Ayasofya-Çemberlitaş tract: recognizable heir to the Mese Regia), archaeological findings show that the modern DivanYolu, *grosso modo* as wide as the central alley of the early Mese Regia, has sled some 10 meters south.[44] But of course, this has come after fourteen centuries of infill which has raised the street level by 2.35 meters,[45] and after many encroachments, followed by 19th century street reformation.

There are no proofs at all that the Fatih-Karagümrük-Edirnekapı road coincides in all its length with the Byzantine Mese system or with the later pre-Ottoman street system.[46] East of the Fatih complex and starting from its central Western gate, the route kept a curving and yet coherent layout in which monuments, residential buildings and cemeteries were concentrated in sequence much as in other Moslem quarters of Istanbul. It is reasonable to presume that the double path north and south of the Bozdoğan-Valens aqueduct, now Şehzade Caddesi and Kovacılar Caddesi, well established in Ottoman times, as we can presume from the sequence of *vakıf* works on both lanes, existed in the Byzantine period as the crest position and the open arcaded structure of the aqueduct would easily have allowed it. Berger's second option in the reconstruction of the street system in the Holy Apostles-Polyeuktos region, if confirmed, would certainly reinforce the assumption.[47] Of course, the *"old overland road to the northwest... along the Aetios cistern... (to) the Gate of Charisios... (running) parallel.. to the large court of the Fatih mosque"*,[48] would coincide with the

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[44] See Müller-Wiener *Bildlexikon*, 232, fig. 263.

[45] Ibid., 256.

[46] As a matter of fact, the Mordtmann *Esquisse Topographique* map does not even attempt to correlate the Mese and the Divan axis north-west of Fatih.

[47] Albrecht Berger, "Streets and Public Spaces in Constantinople", in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers 54* (2000), 161-72. See page 169 and figures 3 and 4.

[48] Ibid, 168. Note that Berger (ibid., 162) holds that only the part east of the Capitol should be named Mese. Cfr. Müller-Wiener *Bildlexikon*, 269, as well as 21, fig.2 for the 4th to 7th centuries: all three branches (Deuteron, Xerolophos and the main Milion-Taurus tract) are denominated Mese. For the later periods (ibid., figures 3 and 4) the northern branch loses its distinction. See also Rodolphe Guilland, *Etudes de Topographie de Constantinople Byzantine*,

Ottoman axis only at its points of origin and arrival. But then, 16th to 19th centuries urban density may have diverted the alignments of the intermediate tracts in that previously sparsely built region.
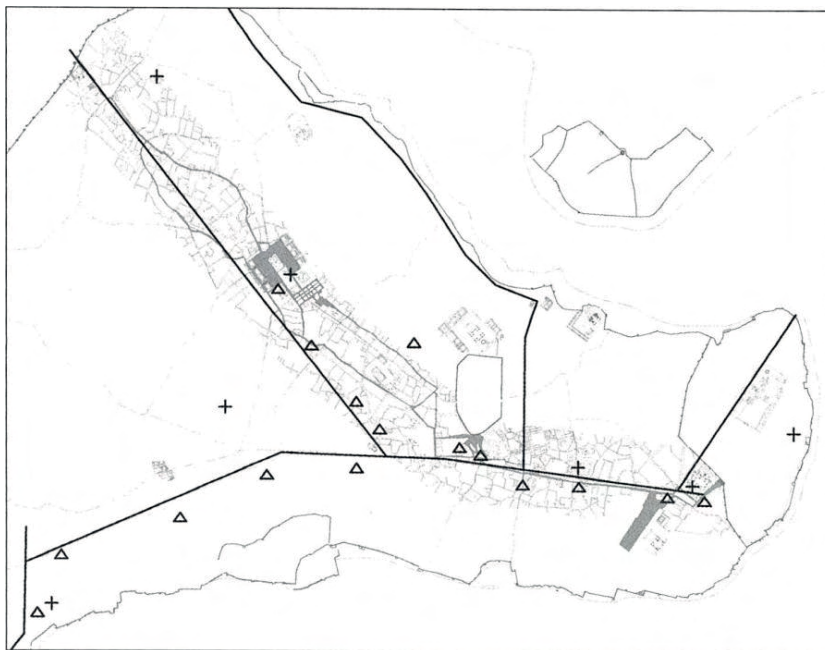

Fig. 19: *Processions and holy sites in the late Byzantine period (Synthesis of data from Berger "processions" and Magdalino Constantinople Médiévale). Black lines: mostly mentioned processional routes. The two main Mese exit through the Charisios gate (upper left) and the Porta Aurea (lower left). Crosses: churches visited by emperors both in the late period and before. Triangles: ceremonial stations quoted in The Book of Ceremonies.*

On the other hand, the south-western processional way of Byzantine Constantinople, extending *"about 5.5 kilometres from the Theodosian Golden Gate to the Milion* [and] *basically unchanged after 435"*,[49] had reacquired momentum only at the end of the 18th century, and not as far as the city walls.

It has been held that all public spaces of Constantinople except those of the pre-Constantine nucleus were all on the Mese

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Berlin—Amsterdam: 1969, II 72 (the *mese* were often named after the quarter they crossed), and 72-76 for the many synonyms of *mese* in naming main thoroughfares (*leoforou, plateia, agora*).

[49] Mango ÒThe Triumphal Way", 180.

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branches.[50] Meaning, I suppose, formal open space: *fora*, *stoai*, voids centered on a monumental column.[51] This was certainly not the case in Ottoman Istanbul whose public spaces were the outer courts of the larger *külliye*, prairies or informal *meydans*, some of which like those of Vefa, At Meydanı (Hippodrome), Karagümrük, lay at a very short distance from the Divan axis. Similar informal spaces must have existed in the late Byzantine city, too. The busy thoroughfares and commercial concentrations and most informal elements were a common heritage of the two urban cultures. What distinguished them was rooted more in the formal characterisation of space than in the informal traits of the city.

The early Meses were arcaded streets with clear architectural junctions and hinges the Imperial Palace, the Million, the Forum of Constantine etc. all architecturally measurable and controlled through a clear geometry and perspective. The Ottoman system is a non-artery rambling through the city in a continuum of short linkages between juxtaposed elements whose strong linguistic implications I shall discuss later. The four focal elements inserted by Fatih Mehmet II—his imaret and its markets, the Old Palace, the Grand Bazaar, the New Palace—are lonely islands recognizable as emergent places, not visually conclusive. However impressve, Ayasofya and the Beyazıt mosque are no more than episodes from the viewpoint of the street system.

The late Byzantine city had already undergone heavy disintegration, as we can see in the Buondelmonti view, even if some fragments of arcade streets had remained.[52] It would also seem, that

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[50] Albrecht Berger, "Processions", 73. Furthermore, Berger points to the fact that the processional routes to the churches and back were on the Meses or on the Makros Embolos, whereas in Rome they had followed circular itineraries (ibid., 74). This may contradict the opinion that circular ceremonial processions by emperors and patriarchs were more typical (see note 55).

[51] ! "It is...remarkable that ecclesiastical ceremonies were held in the Forum... in the late ninth century a small chapel was built... at the base of the column of Constantine." (ibid., 75).

[52] Mordtmann *Esquisse Topographique*, 44 and 73, reports two different versions of the Buondelmonte view in the Vatican and in Venice. Contemporay descriptions point to a loss of individual identity of the Mese. The route had probably already become a meandering

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in the last period of Byzantine rule *"the old ceremonial way through the city was used rarely"*, the Constantine forum being visited by imperial processions only once a year.[53] The image of architectural grandeur and unity of imperial urban space had been perhaps lost decades and centuries before the Ottoman conquest. Is it hazardous to presume a gradual reduction of the ceremonial use of the thoroughfare in Byzantine times?[54]

Later, the Ottomans transformed the thoroughfare into an infinitely long route out of the city, and through the city, whereas each Mese had been finite. This long path, in certain aspects, not much different than a suburban or non-urban road along which functions and buildings aggregate, typically underwent a process of permanent transformation.

The ceremonial role of the axis, too, despite some common symbolism of imperial exposure to public view along the axis, was very different functionally and culturally. Is the sultans' self-representation through their movement in urban space and their symbolically stopping in certain points (by the *türbe* of an ancestor, at the gate of the Eski Odalar janissary barracks) comparable to the *taxis* of the Byzantine emperors?[55] I believe not. After all, such stops

urban space through voids, ruins and isolated monuments without having yet the vitality of the Ottoman epoch.

[53] Berger "Processions", 84-85. It has yet to be proved that the Mese were the most important ceremonial and architecturally representative urban spaces of the very late Byzantine period. See on the routes of the Byzantine imperial manifestations, and generally on the so-called *mese* main streets: Müller-Wiener *Bildlexikon*, 269-70; Guilland *Etudes*, I 217-49 for "Itinéraires des Livres des Cérémonies", and II 69-76 for "La Mése ou Regia".

[54] See Jean Ebersolt, *Constantinople: receuil d'études, d'Archéologie et d'histoire*, Paris: 1951, 49, for Basil the First's Sunday procession from St.Sophia to the Holy Apostles (actual site of the Fatih *külliye*), which does suppose an imperial parade through the main axis, but most ceremonial texts mention tours of the walls or short trips to given religious sites. See also: Cyril Mango, *Le développement urbain de Constantinople: 4. - 7. siécles*, Paris: de Boccard, 1985.

[55] At least for the periods examined, and especially from Theophilos to the Isaurians, *"une symbolique très forte est instituée entre l'empereur et*

during a procession were, and are, usual in almost all cultures. In Byzantine Constantinople the ceremonial stations had an exceptional aura and symbolic intricacy in which religious and loyalist meanings were intermingled: the *Book of Ceremonies* of Constantine Porphyrogenitus attributes the title 'holy' to many rooms of the Imperial Palace in which the ceremonies took place; in the emperors' processions through the town numerous ceremonial stations were both religious and civic.[56] So intense an interpenetration of religious and state ceremonial and culture in urban and architectural space is unknown to the Ottoman town.

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la ville" through the emperor's processional movement in urban space (M.-Fr. Auzépy, "Les déplacements de l'empereur dans la ville et ses environs (VIII-Xe siècles) in: *Constantinople and its hinterland—Papers from the Twenty-seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Oxford, April 1993*, eds. Cyril Mango and Gilbert Dagron, London: Variorum 1995, 359-366). Though some processions did run through the town from Palace to gates, Auzépy reads a stronger symbolism in the circular or encircling processions which took the Palace cross to various sites in a spiral of stations, or sailing around the town walls and gates.

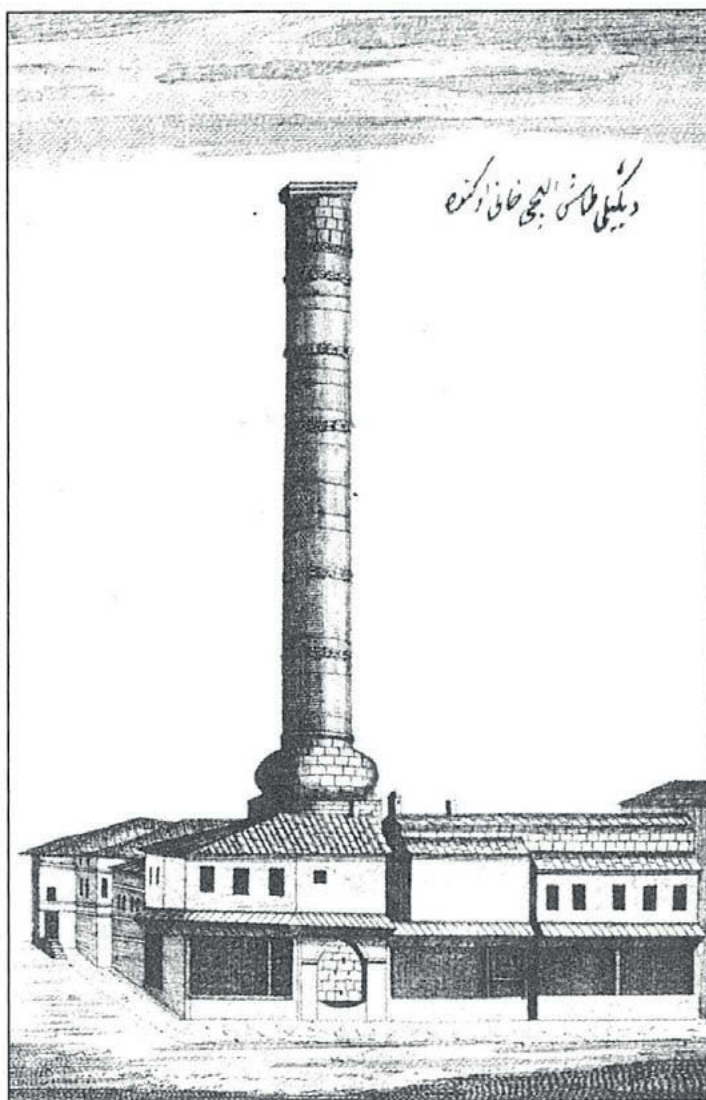[56] Mango&ÒThe Triumphal Way", figure 2.

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Fig. 20: *Shops and huts surrounding the column of Constantine in an early 19ᵗʰ century drawing.*

Not only an idea of magnificence, but also commerce had given form to the early Byzantine arcaded Mese, which had only in certain tracts a monumental build, and had often ephemeral wood arcades. Both the Divan axis and the Meses (or the arcade streets, or *stoai*) bore commercial development in certain tracts, but not along their entire

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course.[57] The position of those concentrations was maintained after the Ottoman conquest.[58] In the Ottoman town, shopping streets consisting of wooden shops not much different than the Byzantine ones, caused an interruption or deviation, even when they were built on orthogonal patterns as often was the case: they did not underline architecturally the thoroughfare. This was probably true also of the late Byzantine period.

Ottoman processions, interesting and picturesque in themselves, did not seem to require magnificent backgrounds. In no case, except Nevşehirli Damat Ibrahim Pasha's unique Şehzade *arasta*, have Ottoman builders and patrons tried to revive the arcade street tradition. Columns and arches, have an important place in Evliya's accounts and in lore for their grandeur and for their supposed magical properties, certainly not because of their place in the classical urban tradition.[59]

In conclusion, the temptation to interpret the Ottoman and Byzantine thoroughfares in mutual reference could not but give rise to an incongruous perception of the authentic image and structure of each period, lost in the too facile equation, inhibiting the perception of the specific architectural values of the Ottoman axis.[60]

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[57] Marlia Mundell Mango, "The Commercial Map of Constantinople", in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers 54* (2000), 189-208. Also Guilland *Etudes*, II 69-79, mentions the prevailing commercial function of the main *mese* (Constantine's Mese Regia—ἡ Ρηγία—later was often called simply *agora* like many other commercial streets) lined by mall shops.

[58] M. Mango "The Commercial Map", 206-07.

[59] Probably things did not stand otherwise with the late Byzantines. Their roots in Classical culture and traditions may have had more of the myth than of effective cultural continuity, as Cyril Mango holds in: "Byzantinism and Romantic Hellenism" in *Byzantium and its Image—History and Culture of the Byzantine Empire and its Heritage*, London: Variorum Reprints 1984, 29-43.

[60] Such wishful thinking and such false attribution of ancient and glorious formal values to a totally different asset have played havoc with urban reform around the Divan Yolu. Celal Esad's innocent and well-meaning reconstruction drawing of the

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(MC)

'Byzantine Mese' was an alarming forerunner of misplaced sentiments and ambitions in popularised historicism: see Djelal Essad [Arseven], *Constantinople de Byzance a Stamboul*, Paris: Librairie Renouard, H. Laurens 1909. I believe such imagery partly gave an ideological support to the incredibly gross street clearance of the Nineteen-Fifties, as if the city were expressing a long-neglected vocation for miles-long perspectives.

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