ARISTOTLE MENTZOS

REFLECTIONS OF THE INTERPRETATION AND DATING
OF THE ROTUNDA OF THESSALONIKI

Introduction

The Rotunda of Thessaloniki (fig. 1) was built during the reign of the tetrarchic Emperor Valerius Galerius Maximianus, between 298/299 and 311, the year of that emperor’s death. The Rotunda was built on the higher ground of a smooth elevation at the north-eastern part of the city. According to the incomplete archaeological investigation of 1939, directed by E. Dyggve, the Rotunda lay on a previously uninhabited, sparsely built area, at the north-eastern end of the part added to the city by the third century fortification. This area was found empty of buildings and played the role of a temenos to the Rotunda. At the south end of this area stood a monumental tetrapylon consisting of four marble clad piers with a narrative in relief of Galerius’ res gestae. The southernmost of

2. Cf. Vitti, Η εξέλιξη της Θεσσαλονίκης, 106. This high ground was limited to the east by a stream which crossed the area before the building of the Wall and covered much of the ground that was later occupied by the palace complex.
3. The walls were hastily erected c. 260 following the danger of the Gothic invasion; cf. G. Velenis, Τα τείχη της Θεσσαλονίκης, Thessaloniki 1998, 162. The area included in the walls was, until that time, probably used as a site of military encampment (campus martius); hence the name Κάμπος of the neighbourhood in modern times. Cf. Spieser, Thessalonique, 53, n.155.
the city’s decumani, later known as the Άεωφόρος, originally passed at a certain
distance and at a considerably lower level than that of the Arch. E. Dyggve suggested the existence of an octagonal peribolos wall around the Rotunda, with two semicircular exedrae opening towards the building on its East-West axis. G. Velenis, on the other hand, proposed that there existed a quadrilateral court with four pairs of semicircular exedrae, which ended to the south-west, toward the street, in a portico. Both suggestions are purely hypothetical. The sturdy two-tiered apse unearthed before the Rotunda’s west entrance, as well as its pendant outside the eastern end of the building, are most probably Early Christian burial chambers. They bear no similarity to the exedrae opening on enclosure.

6. Cf. Ο Βίος της Οσιομυροβλύτιδος Θεοδώρας, S. Paschalidis (ed.), Thessaloniki 1991, 82, 9. 3-5: «…τὸ πρὸς τῇ λεωφόρῳ τῇ ἐπί τὴν Κασσανδρωτικήν ἱόσχη πύλην…».
11. Dyggve, loc. cit., considers the exedrae as «galerian». Later, in «La région palatiale», 356, he claims that they were remodelled as burial chambers in Theodosian times. There is, though, no evidence of such a transformation. In Dyggve’s plan of the roman Rotunda, as well as in Velenis’, «Probleme», the roman exedrae are rendered as different from the excavated niches. On the contrary, fig. 4 in Curcic, Observations, shows the hypothetical exedrae in the same manner as the excavated niches.
walls like, e.g., those of the temples of Peace and the Sun in Rome, or the Hadrianic gymnasium in Athens\textsuperscript{12}. The meagre traces of the supposedly octagonal peribolos wall are connected with exactly these Early Christian burial chambers\textsuperscript{13} (fig. 2); its proposed restoration follows partly the line of the later mosque outer wall. It is equally doubtful whether there was a stoa outside the temenos’ southern limit towards the street, on either side of the Arch. The traces of arch springs at the sides of the Arch which indicate a stoa\textsuperscript{14} belong actually to the Early Byzantine phase. In its original form the Arch probably stood completely

\textsuperscript{12} Cf. J. B. Ward-Perkins, \textit{Roman Imperial Architecture}, Harmondsworth 1994, 66, fig. 30 (Templum Pacis), 417, fig. 281 (Templum Solis) and J. Travlos, \textit{A Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens}, New York 1973, 244, fig. 316.

\textsuperscript{13} Hébrard, «Les travaux», pl. III-IV.

free of appendages\textsuperscript{15} and was obviously conceived as a processional starting point, marking the entrance to the sacred precinct of the temple, the Rotunda\textsuperscript{16}.

Although conceived and built in conjunction with Galerius’ palace the Rotunda complex belonged to a separate construction project; still, the original, Galerian planning did treat the landscape of both temenos and palace as a unified perception: it is notable that the axis connecting the south gate and propylon of the Rotunda with the centre of the Arch, beneath the dome, if prolonged towards the south, meets the apse centre of the palace basilica\textsuperscript{17}. It has been confirmed that the palace constructions discovered between the basilica and the Arch had been added in later periods\textsuperscript{18}. It becomes obvious, considering their axial placement—the centre of the Arch being aligned with the centre of the Rotunda propylon and the temple’s vertical axis—that the Arch was primarily related to the Rotunda and not to the palace, though this actually happened later\textsuperscript{19}. Although the Arch is axially linked with the Rotunda, originally the two buildings did not seem to be connected in whatever way. The traces of the colonnaded passageway leading from the Rotunda to the Arch, discovered in the sixties of the twentieth century, are contemporary with the Early Byzantine interventions to the Rotunda; the via colonnata proposed here by Dyggve is purely imaginary\textsuperscript{20}.

The Roman Rotunda

On the basis of what has been said above, the Rotunda must have predated the Arch, which was erected by the city of Thessaloniki\textsuperscript{21} in honour of Galerius. There is no scholarly consensus regarding the original function of the Rotunda but the most widely accepted opinion, supported by recent archaeological find-
ings\textsuperscript{22}, favours its interpretation as a pagan temple rather than as a mausoleum, which had been suggested by earlier scholars\textsuperscript{23}. The mausoleum interpretation was recently revived in an interesting paper by Sl. Curcic\textsuperscript{24} who, among others, proposes that the Rotunda was built by Constantine rather than Galerius, with the purpose of serving as Constantine’s mausoleum. Although carefully structured, this explanation cannot be accepted for the following reasons: As mentioned above, p. 60, the Rotunda, together with the palace nucleus and the Arch, belonged to the same architectural concept, the association of which with Galerius is undeniable. The Arch was clearly put in this place because of the Rotunda. It is, therefore, very difficult to disassociate the Rotunda from Galerius. Furthermore, the building could not have been a pagan mausoleum for the following reasons: It was built \textit{intra muros}\textsuperscript{25}, its size exceeded by far that of all other mausoleums in Rome or elsewhere and no subterranean tomb chamber or any burial arrangement was found inside it. Apart from the size, it is a direct imitation of the Roman Pantheon, not only in its general architectural characteristics, but also as regards its interior arrangement\textsuperscript{26}. There is only one major difference from the Pantheon, a row of eight large windows above the big groundfloor niches. It has recently been argued that these windows are a proof of the Constantinian date of the Rotunda\textsuperscript{27}. Still, the existence of the windows may be explained as a general feature of contemporary buildings, mausolea or not, centrally planned or otherwise, since it appears timidly in the Tor de’ Sciavi Mausoleum and it is also met in centrally planned pagan temples, like the so-called Minerva Medica\textsuperscript{28}, or

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} The mausoleum of Galerius has been recently identified with the tumulus and burial site outside Gamzigrad in southern Serbia, which in turn has been associated with Romuliana, Galerius native town; see D. Srejovic, \textit{Roman Imperial Towns and Palaces in Serbia: Sirmium, Romuliana, Naissus}, Belgrade 1992, 46 ff.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} As for example Dyggve, \textit{«La région palatiale»}, 361; still, in his last reference to the Rotunda Dyggve balances between the mausoleum and temple theories. On the original function of the Rotunda see Spieser, \textit{Thessalonique}, 117.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Curcic, \textit{Observations}.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} The only other known \textit{intra muros} mausolea were Constantine’s mausoleum at the Apostoleion in Constantinople and Diocletian’s mausoleum in Split. Constantine was rightfully buried \textit{intra muros} as \textit{conditor urbis}. Split, on the other hand, was not a city, nor a palace either; it was rather a private fortified residence of a retired emperor. See on this subject, Spieser, \textit{Thessalonique}, 117.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} There were in the Roman phase of the Rotunda colonnaded screens dividing the niches from the central space, as well as smaller aedicules between the niches; cf. Velenis, \textit{«Observations»}. Also, Theocharidou, \textit{«The Rotunda»}, 67, fig. 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Curcic, \textit{Observations}, 12.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Ward-Perkins, \textit{op. cit.} (note 12) 426 and fig. 287 (Tor de’ Sciavi), 433 ff., figs. 294-295 (Minerva Medica).
\end{itemize}
in basilicas as that of Trier and the Basilica of Maxentius in Rome\textsuperscript{29}.

It has been noted in the past, in comments on the plans of the building\textsuperscript{30} that the dome consists of two distinctly different curvatures which divide it in two zones, roughly equal in height. The lower zone has a regular hemispheric curvature centered on the level of the dome springing line, while the upper part follows a slightly steeper curvature. It has been proven through comparison of the building material, that the two parts of the dome belong to separate construction periods, an earlier «Galerian» and a later Early Christian, contemporary with the mosaic decoration\textsuperscript{31}. The dome phases have been recently explained by the theory that the building was left unfinished at the time of Galerius’ death in 311 and it remained in this condition for about 80 to 100 years, until its transformation into a church by the end of the century\textsuperscript{32}.

This theory is hard to accept for several reasons: It is generally admitted that the building of the Rotunda started in the earlier period of Galerius’ residence in Thessaloniki, between 298/299 and 303/304\textsuperscript{33}; there was, therefore, plenty of time until Galerius’ death, in 311, for the completion of the building, given that the temple, as part of the imperial building program, would be a project of high priority. Even in the case that the Rotunda had been left unfinished at the time of Galerius’ death, there is no reason whatsoever to assume that its construction was not continued after that event: recent archaeological investigations have shown that small scale adjustments in the palace decoration were done during the reign of Licinius\textsuperscript{34}. Works in the palace complex, particularly the octagonal hall, went on after Galerius’ death, up to at least until the middle reign of Constantine, around AD 320/325\textsuperscript{35}. Finally, indications on the dome itself speak

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 426 f., figs. 289-290 (Rome) and 442 f., fig. 297 (Trier).

\textsuperscript{30} Hébrard, «Les travaux», 5-40. Hébrard, who was the first to observe the double curvature of the dome, considered the structure as belonging to one phase. With him agreed Ward-Perkins, \textit{op. cit.} (note 12) 454, who, after Dyggve, supports that the dome curvature in Hébrard’s plan was slightly exaggerated.

\textsuperscript{31} Torp, \textit{Mosaikkene}, based on close observation attributed the two parts to different phases and supported the contemporaneity of the mosaics with the upper part of the dome. In a later paper, «The Date», 13 ff., he introduced the theory of the unfinished building; this was repeated and elaborated by Theocharidou, «The Rotunda», 63 ff.

\textsuperscript{32} Torp, «The Date», 15 and Theocharidou, \textit{op. cit.}, 66.

\textsuperscript{33} See Kleinbauer, «Rotunda of Galerius», 119 note 1. This dating is also supported by the dating of the Arch of Galerius, since the latter functioned as a porch to the Rotunda precinct.

\textsuperscript{34} Licinius installed a small marble arch with reliefs; cf. Th. Stefanidou-Tiveriou, \textit{Τὸ μικρὸ τόξο τοῦ Γαλερίου στὴ Θεσσαλονίκη}, Athens 1995.

\textsuperscript{35} Stefanidou-Tiveriou, \textit{op. cit.}, 101 f. It is argued there, that at least a part of the complex, where the small arch was found, was completed after 311 and the octagonal hall, probably a
against the «unfinished» assumption: the masonry line dividing the two phases is irregular; if the dome was left unfinished the line would be even and at the same distance from the dome base.

On the other hand, if the Rotunda had remained exposed for almost a century with a gaping hole about 20 meters wide in its roof, it would certainly have suffered serious structural damage, which would have necessitated a major rebuilding, about which there is no evidence. There is, on the contrary, evidence for the installation in the original building of the interior opus sectile decoration which imitates the Pantheon interior, including the architectural facades on the front ends of the eight great niches and the marble decoration of the aedicules among the niches. All this would have been impossible in a roofless building, since in the process of construction interior decoration and floors normally come last. It is more probable that an earthquake, among those which often strike the city, was responsible for the partial collapse of the Roman dome, in such a way that a large scale repair be deemed necessary. This hypothesis is corroborated by the observation that the steeper dome curvature and the high external tympanum of the repairs aim exactly at increasing the dome structural strength.

The Early Byzantine Rotunda

Some time after the erection of the Arch a large rectangular hall with apsidal short sides was constructed adjacent to the Arch’s south facade. The two buildings were linked by a wide brick arch on a pair of pilasters attached to the hall’s northern wall. The other end of the arch was inserted in the south pair of the marble clad pillars. This addition made it possible to link the Arch with the palace, but at the same time it blocked the earlier course of the throne room, which was finished by c. 320. This view is corroborated by the fact that the octagonal hall has undergone structural changes during the early stages of its construction, namely the enlargement of the north niche, opposite the entrance (Cf. F. Athanasiou et.al., «Νέα στοιχεία για το Οκτάγωνο του Γάλεριανού Συγχρονίτηματος», AErgoMak 8 (1994) 174 ff. That could be explained by a change of opinion of one of Galerius’ successors, Licinius or Constantine.

36. Velenis, «Observations», 300 ff. The findings were confirmed by Theocharidou, «The Rotunda». The failure of Hébrard and Dyggve to locate the roman floor has been interpreted by Curcic as absence of such a floor, therefore as a proof that the roman building had not been completed. It does not need to be so, since it is possible that the roman floor, especially if it had been in large slabs, had been removed to be reused, probably in the same building.


38. The hall, referred to as «vestibulum», was first discovered in 1935 and later (1939) investigated by Dyggve; cf. recently, P. Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, Τα ψηφιδωτά δάσεια της Θεσσαλονίκης, Thessaloniki 1998, 183.
cessitated the deviation of the street, the course of which now passed under the Arch\textsuperscript{39}. This arrangement was maintained until the early fifties of the twentieth century.

The relationship of the Rotunda with the Arch was also emphasised in the Early Byzantine period\textsuperscript{40}: another pair of secondary piers was then added to the north facade of the Arch\textsuperscript{41} and a gate with door-wings led, via the columnar passageway, to the vestibule attached to the south of the Rotunda ambulatory wall\textsuperscript{42}. The Early Christian modifications in the original building included the piercing of the niche back walls and the building of a continuous ambulatory around the

\textsuperscript{39} G. Velenis, Τα τείχη της Θεσσαλονίκης, Thessaloniki 1998, 110, fig. 18, has shown that the street followed originally an almost straight course as it approached the Wall, which it met originally a little to the south of the later, byzantine, Kalamaria Gate.

\textsuperscript{40} Velenis, «Probleme», 249-263.

\textsuperscript{41} G. Velenis, «Nachträgliche Beobachtungen am Oberbau des Galeriusbogens in Thessaloniki», AA 1983, 273-275. Velenis has modified Dyggve’s theory about the columnar way in «Bericht», 67, by ascribing it to the early christian times. I have suggested in «Rotunda», that this ceremonial way was more likely a via tecta, than a via colonnata, as Dyggve had suggested.

\textsuperscript{42} Dyggve, «Bericht», 68. The actual width of the passage, with an intercolumnation of 2.70 m, was considerably less than the width of the Arch.
roman core, a deep U-shaped barrel-vaulted chancel with a semicircular apse, a monumental entrance to the South consisting of a vestibule abutting to a tribelon (fig. 3), whose centre is on the same alignment with the Arch’s north-south axis, as well as three annexes, annex A (fig. 2) by the west entrance and annexes B, C by the south entrance43 (fig. 4). A door on the eastern wall of the vestibule led to a small, circular hall C, ending in an apse to the east, with internal shallow niches. At some later time it was used as a funerary chapel; off-hand burials were arranged in the niches and an altar was set in the apse44. A larger, octagonal hall B, was partly excavated at a small distance and to the west of the vestibule. This room communicates with the ambulatory and has been interpreted as a baptiste-

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43. The southern annexes were investigated during the restoration works in the monument after the 1978 earthquake. Cf. Moutsopoulos, «The Early Christian Phase», 369 ff.
44. The tombs are probably dated to the late byzantine period; I owe this information to J. Kanonidis, archaeologist of the 9th Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities.
ry. Its interior remains still unexplored, but no traces of a baptismal font were found inside it. The annexes discovered on the west side of the Christian building consist of: an irregular four-sided, probably hypaethral hall that communicates with the ambulatory; a spacious rectangular hall which ends in a broad apse to the north and is joined to the north of the hypaethral hall. None of these annexes fits the description of an atrium or a narthex. Interestingly, the whole complex of the Early Byzantine Rotunda, including the annexes described above, has no access other than that through the south vestibule. In fact, if the published plans are to be trusted, this only access through the south vestibule led further —via the stoic way and the north gate of the Arch—to the palace.

Although it has never been argued upon, these alterations have traditionally been attributed to the same construction phase; they have been linked to the dome mosaics on the assumption that all Christian interventions to the Roman building were realised at the same time and served one and the same purpose, the transformation of the Rotunda into a church. Though this assumption seems logical, it remains unfounded and, as we are going to see, by no means evident.

A preliminary discussion of the bricks used in the Early Christian interventions, including the dome repairs, has shown the presence of several types of bricks, one of which predominates in the dome repairs, whereas others predominate in other Early Christian parts of the building. The addition of the ambulatory and the deep and spacious chancel ending in a big apse suggest that this conversion was probably realised later than the prevalent dating of the dome mosaics, at a time when the Mass ceremonial had already made a substantial progress within the Eastern Church.

As regards architectural typology too, the church may be classified among

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46. The excavation was conducted by Hébrard, «Les travaux», 6-35.
47. Hébrard, «Les travaux», 64.
48. Theocharidou, «The Rotunda», 65 f., and Hébrard, op. cit., 31. It must be noted that when Hébrard wrote about early christian bricks he meant only those discovered in the excavations of the ambulatory; he didn’t examine the upper part of the dome because he considered the dome as belonging to one and the same phase (ibid., 24). The same bricks have been the object of comparisons with those in other Early Christian buildings of Thessaloniki, cf. Vickers, «The Date», 183 ff., Kleinbauer, «The Iconography», 95 ff. Going through Kleinbauer’s text is especially instructive of the difficulties in such an undertaking, considering that the author took pains to establish, with the help of the bricks, a 5th century dating for the church of Acheiropoietos, which he later rejected.
the centrally planned double-shell monuments of the later fifth and sixth centuries\textsuperscript{50}. Still, the structural evidence at our disposal does not necessarily imply that the remodelling of the pagan building occurred as late as the sixth century\textsuperscript{51}. Although a detailed study relating the story of the architectural interventions to the Rotunda has yet to appear, it has been noticed that there are traces of an earlier, lower and obviously shallower apse before the present one\textsuperscript{52}. If this is true, then the ambulatory and the present chancel were features of another, later, Christian intervention to the Rotunda; according to this hypothesis the Rotunda of the dome mosaic would actually comprise solely of the Roman nucleus with the Roman south porch and a shallow apse at the east, accommodated in the width of the eastern niche\textsuperscript{53}. This, in turn, raises the question regarding the chronological relation of the niche mosaics to those of the dome, since it has been noticed too, that the mosaics of the south and west niche barrel-vaults are also related to those of the dome\textsuperscript{54}. Still, this does not suggest the simultaneity of the dome and niche decorations, since the barrel-vaults of the two niches, as entrances to the Christian building would have been opened up and decorated independently of the building of the ambulatory\textsuperscript{55}.

Thus far, two interpretations of the Christian Rotunda have been put forward: the first holds that the building served as a church, notably a palace church\textsuperscript{56}, the other that it was a martyrium\textsuperscript{57}. The martyrium theory presumes that martyr relics were deposited, either inside the building, in the «enkainion», the reliquary pit underneath the altar\textsuperscript{58}, or in the external exedrae bordering the monument at its east and west sides\textsuperscript{59} (fig. 4). The upper part of the apse wall, above the sills

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\textsuperscript{50} R. Krautheimer, Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture, Harmondsworth 1986, 228 f.

\textsuperscript{51} This is, though, Spieser’s view: Cf. Thessalonique, 11.

\textsuperscript{52} See Moutsopoulos, «The Early Christian Phase», 365.

\textsuperscript{53} This is deduced by the observations made by Torp, «The Date», 16 f., fig. 5. There Torp shows what, in his opinion, are the marks of four consecutive phases in the building of the Bema arch: a small beginning of arch phase III, between two sections of wall phase II, is rather the remnant of the outer, third ring of the Roman niche vault.

\textsuperscript{54} Spieser, Thessalonique, 135 f.

\textsuperscript{55} E. Nikolaidou-Kourkoutidou, «Παλαιότερα και νέα στοιχεία για την Ανακαινιση του Σουλλυμπλέκτου», in: Παλαιότερα και νέα στοιχεία για την Ανακαινιση του Σουλλυμπλέκτου, Αθήνα 1990, 45 f.

\textsuperscript{56} The relation of the remodelled building with the palace was suggested by E. Dyggve, mainly in «La région palatiale», 356 and was subsequently adopted by Torp, Mosaikenne, Kleinbauer, «The Iconography» and others.


\textsuperscript{58} Dyggve, «La région palatiale», 357 and figs. 4, 7.

\textsuperscript{59} Dyggve, «Recherches», 67.
of the large windows, together with the semi-dome and the sanctuary barrel vault were again rebuilt after a collapse, either at the 7th, or at the 9th-10th centuries AD\textsuperscript{60}; the enkainion pit must have originated in the post-iconoclastic rearrangement of the Rotunda, which followed the collapse of the eastern part of the dome and the half-cylinder of the sanctuary. The last investigations by Dyggve (1953), have revealed parts of large slabs from the sanctuary pavement, together with four dissimilar column bases embedded in the pavement, that belonged to the altar canopy (ciborium)\textsuperscript{61}. Both features are characteristic of a Middle Byzantine construction, which is corroborated by the dating of the Ascension painting of the sanctuary apse\textsuperscript{62}. As regards the outside exedrae and their presumed use as burial chambers\textsuperscript{63}, the fact that they are not directly accessible from the main church building is evidence against their function as sites of martyr pilgrimage. Indeed, the translation of relics was a rare practice in the early period of the fourth and fifth centuries, limited only to a few important sanctuaries, usually imperial pilgrimage foundations, like the Apostoleion or the Blachernae church in Constantinople. Another objection to this theory is provided by the fact that none of the martyrs depicted on the dome is known to have come from or be related in any way with Thessaloniki\textsuperscript{64}, nor is there any common element connecting all these martyrs. Finally, if the Rotunda had been a multiple martyrion, especially such an imposing building as it was, it would have left its impression on the civic life and history of Thessaloniki and the fact would be commemorated either in contemporary or in later sources. It would have also survived in local cult practices and it would certainly have left a reminiscence in the church dedication.

On the contrary, there is absolutely no written information about the Rotunda from the moment it was built or in the centuries that followed; here, indeed, we are again in absolute darkness. Its dedication to the Celestial Powers is inferred only from much later sources: the earliest, though indirect, reference to a church by the name of the Asomatoi (body-less creatures, angels), or church of

\textsuperscript{60} The 7th c. dating is proposed by Theocharidou, «The Rotunda», 65 and 67, while the later dating by Hébrard, «Les travaux», 37 (10th c.) and Moutsopoulos, «The Early Christian Phase», 371 and 373.

\textsuperscript{61} Cf. fig. 4 in Dyggve, «La région palatiale».

\textsuperscript{62} A. Xyngopoulos, «Η τοιχογραφία της Αναλήψεως εν τη αψίδι του Αγ. Γεωργίου της Θεσσαλονίκης», \textit{AE} 1938, 32 ff.

\textsuperscript{63} Graves were found everywhere in the church yard, but it seems that they belong to the late byzantine period (cf. note 44); information provided by J. Kanonidis.

\textsuperscript{64} G. Gounaris, «Αλ ευστοικικά επιγραφαί των ψηφιδωτών του τρούλλου του Αγ. Γεωργίου (Rotonda) Θεσσαλονίκης», \textit{Makedonika} 12 (1972) 201-227.
the Angels, comes from the late 11th century, without any specific clue, which would enable us to securely identify that church with the Rotunda. The Asomatoi church is positively identified with the Rotunda only in a description of Thessaloniki included in a diary of a Venetian soldier from the end of the 16th century. Therefore, none of the theories proposed until now offer a fully convincing explanation for the choice of the martyrs depicted in the frieze, an issue still open to future research.

The absence of any mention of the Rotunda in Middle Byzantine sources meant probably that it was inaccessible to the public. In fact, there is evidence that the area of the former temenos was included in the palace enclave. Furthermore, Dyggve’s theory that the Rotunda had served as a palace church is corroborated by a series of indications: even after the construction of theambulatory, the southern main entrance of the Rotunda was not only preserved but further emphasised with a vestibule and the monumental colonnaded way (via tecta, διαφανειας), leading to the Arch of Galerius, which in these times had been transformed into a monumental gateway to the palace. The Early Byzantine additions to the ambulatory, though not easy to interpret, can be related reasonably with the two processional axes of the Christian complex, one east-west, another north-south: annex A, situated to the left (north) of the western entrance was probably related to the ecclesiastic ceremonial, while annex C, to the right of the south vestibule, was probably destined as a station of the imperial retinue (as a metatorium?) on its way from the palace; it was therefore related with the imperial ceremonial. We can conclude that these Byzantine interven-

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65. They mention the Asomatoi neighbourhood, which as has been shown, lies in the vicinity of the Rotunda church; cf. Mentzos, «Rotunda», 37 ff. This information is corroborated by Eustathius of Thessaloniki who, in his narration of the city siege by the Normans, mentions a wall gate in the same area called «Gate of the Asomatoi» (Eustathius Thessalonicensis, La espugnazione di Thessalonica, S. Kyriakides (ed.), Palermo 1961, 94, 6-7).

66. G. Velenis believes that the Asomatoi church could be identified with the monastery whose gate he investigated in «Γύρω από ένα καταστραμμένο βυζαντινό κτίσμα της Θεσσαλονίκης», in: Μετρ. Τιμητικός τόμος για τον καθηγητή Μ. Ανδρόνικο, Thessaloniki 1987, 119 ff.

67. Ibid., 48. Also, Spieser, Thessalonique, 52.


69. Dyggve, «Recherches», 402 ff. This view was accepted by the majority of scholars; cf. Th. Pazaras, The Rotunda of St. George in Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 1985, 28.


71. The existence of a metatorium octagonal cubicle (κοισβούλιον) before the entrance of the palatine church of Constantinople is inferred in the Book of Ceremonies, I. Reiske (ed.), 1. 7 and 8. The Emperor changed there before entering the church of St. Stephen in the Great Palace.
tions to the Roman building aimed at the same end, namely, to connect the Rotunda with the palace by means of an imposing processional way and to adapt the originally undivided space of the Roman building to the necessities of a complex ceremonial, such as that of the imperial court. All this leaves us with only one theory for the interpretation of the Byzantine Rotunda, that of a palatine church.

The dome mosaic of the Rotunda: interpretation and dating.

In addition to its restoration the dome of the Rotunda was covered with mosaics on an impressive scale and «...of a quality barely equalled and certainly not surpassed by any other relic of Byzantine decoration...»72. The decorative program of the dome mosaic has been generally recognised as a masterpiece of the period, in concept, as well as in execution. It consists of three wide concentric zones, of which only the lower one is today in a fairly good state of preservation. The central medallion at the dome apex, partly preserved, consists of a starred band, a rich vegetation garland and a rainbow ring; inside it, set on an East-West direction, stood a striding cloaked figure of youthful Christ, now mostly lost (fig. 5), as if descending towards the apse. The clipeus is carried by four flying angels, whose heads and wings are only partly preserved. On the same level with the angels, one can discern on the north the head of the mythical bird Phoenix, and on the south rays emitted probably from a radiating cross. This intermediate zone is now for the most part lost, except for a meagre band at its bottom, showing a greenish ground with a few pairs of sandaled feet and occasional hems of long white garments, which seem to belong to a group of about 24 to 36 briskly moving figures73. The unity of this zone has been questioned74; there is a change in the colour of the background from bright green to gold between the standing and the flying figures. The moving figures have been identified with prophets, saints or, more possibly, the twenty-four Elders or angels75. The third zone is

73. N. Gioles, «Ένα εικονογραφικό παράλληλο των μοσαϊκών του τρούλου της Ρωτοντας της Θεσσαλονίκης», Παρουσία Α’ (1982) 123 ff., amends Torp’s and Sotiriou’s restitution by proposing the omission of the palm-trees in the interval between the flying angels and the acclaming figures.
74. Sotiriou, «Problèmes», 220.
75. Sotiriou, «Problèmes», 221 f. A comprehensive account of the proposed interpretations in: Gioles, loc. cit. To the discussion may be included a passage in Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople, Hist. eccl.; cf. F. E. Brightman, «The Historia Mystagogica and Other
divided perpendicularly in eight panels, coupled in four similar pairs. The whole
stands upon a mosaic console frieze, that serves at the same time as a crowning
of the lower *opus sectile* marble revetment; its upper end is also crowned by a
mosaic cornice with a sima. The centre of each panel is dominated by an intri-
cate tripartite imaginary architectural facade, in front of which stand orant or,
more probably, acclaiming saints in groups of two or three. In two panel pairs
the centre of the facade is occupied by a bema or a baldachin containing either
a monumental cross or a closed book upon a table inside a railing. This zone has
been interpreted by the majority of scholars as a representation of Heavenly
Jerusalem\(^76\). A recent theory of W. E. Kleinbauer attempts to interpret the fi-
gures on the lower mosaic frieze as donors, living or recently deceased persons,
who have actually contributed to the remodelling of the Rotunda and the deco-
ration of its dome. The architectural background in which they stand is interpret-
ed as realistic church fittings, rejecting, thus, the interpretation of the frieze as
Heavenly Jerusalem\(^77\).

As a result of the 1953 cleaning works a charcoal preliminary drawing of the
figures of Christ and the four flying angels carrying the clipeus, has been re-
vealed. The drawing was not intended merely as a guideline for the mosaicist,
since at least two coats of mortar would be applied on the bricks covering the
drawing, before the final application of the mosaic tesserae. It would rather have
served as an indicative setting of the composition schedule, since the figures of
Christ and the angels were drawn clearly bigger than their actual size in the mo-
saic, and the intermediate decorative bands seem to have been omitted. It is
worth noting that this preliminary drawing was limited to the central medallion;
it did not extend to the intermediate group of figures and probably did not ex-
tend to the lower zone either. It is therefore probable that the entire decoration
project was the result of an original conception, created expressly for the Ro-
tunda dome, in which the master artist probably collaborated with some other
person of a thorough theological education, who could have sponsored the work,
but had definitely provided the theological guidelines for the iconography.

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\(^76\) Sotiriou, «Problèmes», 222, and A. Lidov, «Heavenly Jerusalem: the Byzantine Ap-
proach», in: *The Real and Ideal Jerusalem in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Art*, Jewish Art

\(^77\) Kleinbauer, «The Orants», 25-45, mainly 33 ff.; the proposed interpretation is equally
hard to be accepted and shows the impasse at which is the research in this matter.
Fig. 5. Rotunda, the summit of the Dome. Drawing of the central medallion (Torp).
The date of the mosaic decoration has not been decided yet. Opinions vary from the late fourth to the early sixth century. The advocates of the early, «theodosian», dating, the «scandinavian» school, Dyggve, L’Orange and Torp base their argument mainly on stylistic and iconographic observations, as well as on technical details. While some of these observations are valid, as the relationship of the Christian Rotunda with the palace and the execution of the dome reconstruction in the same campaign as the mosaics, they do not necessarily point toward an early dating; the stylistic arguments in favour of an early dating are not convincing, since there is practically no ground for stylistic comparisons. The same holds true as regards the early sixth century dating, which is represented by E. Weigand and, more recently, by Brenk, Christern and Spieser. The more generally accepted approach on the chronology of the mosaics supports a dating around the middle of the fifth century; Although none of these theories has proven a decisive advantage over the other two, the 5th century dating is likely to be more widely accepted.

Even more perplexing is the problem of the interpretation of the dome mosaic. Even though it is a matter of consensus that the dome composition represents heaven, the interpretations proposed differ in details. These interpre-

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80. Recently Curcic, Observations, 15 f., offered new arguments in favour of a theodosian dating for the mosaics, based mainly on the abundance of classical architectural elements in the decoration and the originality of the composition. The discussion about classicism in byzantine pictorial art is actually a very long one; here it must be stressed that the architectural forms in the composition are precisely a feature of a date later than the fourth century. As regards originality, it is owed rather to the sophistication of the theological concept behind the composition and it is again an indication of an advanced dating.
84. Already in earlier, pre-Christian works the spherical form of the dome has been used for the representation of heaven, c.f. K. Lehmann, «The Dome of Heaven», Art Bulletin 27 (1945) 1-27.
tations include the Ascension\textsuperscript{86}, an eschatological Second Coming of Christ, or an Eucharistic version, which sees Christ as presiding in the Celestial Mass\textsuperscript{87}. Apart from a generic identification with Christ’s glorious presence in Heaven, the composition does not conform to any particular known compositional scheme: it cannot be interpreted either as an Ascension, or as a Last Judgement. Instead, as Kleinbauer has pointedly put it, «it drew upon various accounts of the Parousia and selectively integrated them into a unified program»\textsuperscript{88}.

The eschatological aspect of this heavenly apparition may be considered under several restrictions\textsuperscript{89}: it is a fact that the judgmental element has developed gradually in Christian iconography and typical medieval pictorial examples have little in common with the triumphal optimism of the early centuries; furthermore, there are a few traits here which prevent us from citing the composition among the eschatological representations: the youthful Christ, striding from Heaven towards the two superimposed groups of heavenly acclaiming figures, has neither the age nor the solemnity of the enthroned Christ-Judge in scenes of this subject in the Ravennatic and Roman mosaics\textsuperscript{90}. The acclaiming angels and the exalting martyrs of the two lower zones do not fit well into the sober atmosphere of the Last Judgement either. Finally, the fact that the whole composition is located in Heaven — even the lower zone of Heavenly Jerusalem, set somewhat apart, denotes an intermediate stage of Heaven\textsuperscript{91} — and the earthly world is totally absent, provides the composition with a distinctive air of exaltation and rejoicing.

The redemptive, eucharistic aspect, inherent in a representation of Christ King of Heaven is, in my opinion, subordinate to the triumphal elements of the composition. The cross-staff carried by Christ alludes both to His sacrifice as to the imperial staff. As regards the imaginary architectural facades of the martyr frieze that have been interpreted by some scholars as church sanctuaries, one observes that only in two of the four facade patterns of the dome there are any Christian symbols at all\textsuperscript{92}; the big, gem-studded, golden cross, which stands out

\textsuperscript{86} Grabar, «À propos», 59, has rejected this assumption.
\textsuperscript{87} Grabar, \textit{loc. cit.}, and Kleinbauer, «The Iconography», 54 f.
\textsuperscript{88} Kleinbauer, \textit{op. cit.}, 29.
\textsuperscript{89} Cf. B. Brenk, «Die Anfänge der byzantinischen Weltgerichtsdarstellung», \textit{ByzZ} 57 (1964) 106 ff.
\textsuperscript{90} As for example Christ amid the apostles in the apse mosaic of Sta Pudenziana at Rome (early 5th c.) and the enthroned Christ, flanked by angels, in the mosaics of S. Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna (around 500).
\textsuperscript{91} Contrary to what Grabar believes: «À propos», 66.
\textsuperscript{92} Cf. the folding plan, drawn by M. Corres in: Sotiriou, «Problèmes», fig. 1.
in front of, or beneath, the central baldachin in one pair of the third zone mosaic compartments alludes to the (mosaic?) cross set by Constantine on top of the palace gate in Constantinople\textsuperscript{93}, or to the undoubtedly triumphal cross of gold with gems pitched on the hill of Golgotha by Eudoxia, the wife of Theodosius the second\textsuperscript{94}. Indeed, the religious elements in the lower zone of the decoration are, as a whole, meagre\textsuperscript{95}. As a result, it can be stated that the whole iconography derives directly from the «classical» graeco-roman artistic tradition, but, especially in the lower zone, in contrast to what happened in the upper zones, whole existing iconographic subjects were freely applied\textsuperscript{96} with the \textit{a posteriori} addition, whenever it was convenient, of the appropriate Christian symbolism\textsuperscript{97}. The composition shows a lot of features common in the imperial Adventus iconography and its later Christian derivations, such as the triumphal cross-staff in Christ’s shoulder, the hailing figures beneath Him, the candelabra and incense burners among the imaginary buildings in the lower zone and the official dress of the acclamation martyrs\textsuperscript{98}. In their interpretations of the mosaics, several scholars have repeatedly stressed the recurrence of analogies with imperial iconography, court practices and imperial attributes\textsuperscript{99}. The triumphal elements, present in the staff, the vegetal garland and the starred ring that surround Christ are borrowed from the vocabulary of the imperial representation\textsuperscript{100}. Particularly the element of motion in Christ’s figure, as well as in the figures of the second zone, suggest a triumphal arrival, an \textit{adventus}, broadly inspired from \textit{Matthew}, xxiv, but iconographically based on the Late Roman court ceremony\textsuperscript{101}. This is also suggested in the Sermons of St. John Chrysostome, where Celestial Jerusale-

\textsuperscript{93} Eusebius, \textit{Vita Const.}, III 49.

\textsuperscript{94} As in the representation of Celestial Jerusalem in the apse of Sta Pudenziana; cf. Grabar, «À Propos», 73. The cross on the Golgotha hill has been interpreted as a \textit{tropaion}, a triumphal trophy, in the battle against death: E. Dinkler, «Bemerkungen zum Kreuz als ‘Tropaem’», in: Mullus. Festschrift Theodor Klauser, Münster 1964, 71-78. Here, again, the interpretation supports the fifth century date for the mosaics.

\textsuperscript{95} Grabar, «À propos», 69.

\textsuperscript{96} Sotiriou, «Problèmes», 223.

\textsuperscript{97} There is a general scholarly accordance on this subject; cf. Sotiriou, \textit{op. cit.}, 223 f.; Kleinbauer, «The Iconography», 58 ff.


\textsuperscript{99} Cf. Kleinbauer, «The Iconography», 63 ff. (The Imperial Character of the Mosaics).

\textsuperscript{100} H. P. L’Orange and P. J. Nordhagen, \textit{Mosaik von der Antike bis zum Mittelalter}, München 1960, 27.

\textsuperscript{101} Cf. a relevant remark of Kleinbauer, «The Orants», 32: «Thus the figures appear garbed for a notable festal occasion».
lem is described in terms of idealised palace architecture, as consisting exclusively of palaces made wholly of gold, with gem-studded architectural members\textsuperscript{102}. An indirect relation with the mosaic can also be established with the \textit{De hierarchia coeleste} of pseudo-Denys the Areopagite\textsuperscript{103}; it may be supposed in the same way that the hierarchical organisation of the Cosmos in the Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes drew upon similar concepts\textsuperscript{104}.

As we have seen, the dome decoration is full of imperial court connotations and its most manifest element is the triumphal one. In fact, for all its obvious religious significance, the decoration may not even be destined for ordinary ecclesiastic use. As we know from contemporary and later sources, it was not unusual for important halls of Byzantine palaces to be decorated with representations of a complex religious content\textsuperscript{105}. If to all this be added that, as it is proposed above, the dome decoration was probably anterior to the construction of the ambulatory and the Bema, that there was an earlier, lower and more shallow apse than the present, the theory that the Rotunda was right from the beginning transformed into a typical church becomes even more questionable.

It is, therefore, requisite that we look for a historic event or a series of events connected with imperial activity in Thessaloniki, which would explain the undertaking of the Rotunda restoration and its mosaic decoration. It is rather surprising that during the late fourth and the first half of the fifth century the imperial presence in Thessaloniki was very frequent and that important developments took place in the city. In the late fourth century, from the summer of 387 until November 391, Valentinian II, his family, Theodosius and his family, resided for fairly long intervals in Thessaloniki. In the winter of 387-388 Theodosius married Galla, Valentinian’s sister, in Thessaloniki\textsuperscript{106}. The marriage took place hastily and the emperor set off almost immediately against the usurper Maximus. Theodosius, being a widower, was unlikely to opt for a pompous marriage and, since both parties were concerned with the expulsion of the usurper, they would have neither the time nor the means for the restoration of the Rotunda.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item 102. \textit{PG} 57, 24. The analogies between Chrysostome’s text and the lower zone of the Rotunda mosaics have been already noticed by Kleinbauer, «The Iconography», 52.
\item 103. \textit{PG} 3, Kap. X ff.
\item 104. The analogy was noticed by Grabar, «À propos», 64. Kleinbauer in «The Iconography» rejected it, but it still remains a fact that the same hierarchical concept underlies both compositions.
\end{thebibliography}
The second period of imperial residence in Thessaloniki, starting at the end of 423, is marked by some extraordinary circumstances: when, after the death of Honorius, the usurper John seized the throne of the West, Theodosius II decided to enthrone his nephew Valentinian instead. For this reason he dispatched Valentinian and his mother, Galla Placidia, in early spring of 424 to Thessaloniki with army, in order to prepare an expedition to the West, with this city as a probable rear base of operations. There, in 23 October 424, Valentinian was vested the purple of Caesar by Helion, Master of the Offices in Theodosius’ court. Together with his elevation Valentinian was betrothed to Licinia Eudoxia, Theodosius’ daughter.

In fulfillment of these agreements, which included the transfer of a part or the whole of Illyrium to the East, negotiations started the summer of 436 in Constantinople for the realization of the marriage. It was decided, among other things, that it would take place in Thessaloniki, which was conveniently in mid-distance between the two capitals. Things had progressed when Valentinian, either in deference to Theodosius, or because the latter didn’t feel well, offered to make the journey to Constantinople himself; so, he arrived in Constantinople on October 21 of 437, probably via Thessaloniki. But it still remains a fact that preparations had already been made in Thessaloniki, because after the marriage on October 29, the new imperial couple sailed to this city, where they spent the winter until the middle of March, when they sailed for Ravenna.

In theory, conditions were most favourable for the matrimony: peace reigned in both parts of the empire and the memory of the undivided Imperium was still alive in people’s mind. The dignities involved in the ceremony were the highest; both bride and groom were augusti, the ceremony was to take place in the presence of the senior emperor, Theodosius, and at least one empress, Galla Placidia. The prospects of this union were most propitious: Theodosius had no male successor and his prospect of obtaining one had, by that time, actually va-

108. The province was allotted by Theodosius I to his younger son Honorius; it is probable that despite all the troubles during the early years of the 5th c., the Illyricum had remained in Honorius’ jurisdiction, or that, even if it was snatched from Honorius, it was returned to him after the death of Arcadius. See E. Stein, «Der Verzicht der Galla Placidia auf die Praefectur Illyricum», Wiener Studien 36 (1914) 344-347.
109. The negotiator on the groom’s part was the Roman senator Volusianus; we find information on his mission in the Life of Saint Melanie the Roman: H. Delehaye, «Sanctae Melaniae junioris acta graecae», AnalBol 22 (1903) 7 ff.
The new imperial couple could rightly aspire to the inheritance of a unified empire, an aspiration suitably reflected, in my opinion, on the iconography of the Rotunda dome.

In the light of the above, it is reasonable to suggest that the series of the events between 424 and 436 AD can justify both the building activity in the palace area and the dome repair and decoration of the Rotunda. As it belonged to the imperial property and was suitably situated near the palace, the Rotunda was linked to it through a monumental access with the Arch as intermediate station and was refurbished so as to accommodate the imperial ceremony. As we have seen, the iconography of the dome mosaics is perfectly suitable for the occasion. It is my contention that it would not be too risky to relate the circumstances of the decoration with the activity of Galla Placidia; she is known as a strong willed, but also pious and cultivated princess and a caring mother. She combined religious devotion with a taste for building projects and did not lack the financial means for realising them. It is worth noting, in this respect, that the closest iconographic analogy to the decoration of the Rotunda dome is on the dome of the Cathedral Baptistery in Ravenna, executed around the middle of the fifth century AD, while the figure of Christ in the Rotunda central medallion (fig. 5), bears an iconographic analogy to the figure of St. Laurence in the lunette mosaic of the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna. This is an additional indication that the presence of Theodosius’ daughter in Thessaloniki was the motive force of this undertaking. It is interesting that also a series of major projects in Thessaloniki have been dated in the middle of the 5th c.; Vickers has convincingly argued that works in the Rotunda were included in a major program of building activities in Thessaloniki around the middle or in the second quarter of the 5th century and this view has been confirmed by recent research in the palace of Thessaloniki.

In conclusion, we can state that on the dome mosaic of the Rotunda is painted an Adventus, a ceremonial appearance of Christ-King in heaven, where the celestial court is represented as choruses of dignitaries in a hierarchical order, with the celestial Jerusalem, or the celestial church of the deceased martyrs as the

112. The analogies are stressed by E. Kitzinger, Byzantine Art in the Making, London 1977, 56.
lower stage115. In this purely celestial image the eschatological aspect, even though not altogether absent, is subordinate to that of the triumphal Advent in the style of the imperial Advent. The whole may be, therefore, explained as a manifestation of the reciprocation, both in the patron’s and the artist’s eye, of the earthly and heavenly kingdoms: the triumphant Christ, lord of the heavenly world, as conceived in terms of imperial iconography, was reflected upon the Christian Roman emperor among his court, just as the late Roman Empire was the earthly copy, “typos”, of the celestial Kingdom. In this period of intense activity in the city, the imperial marriage is, in my opinion, a most probable focal point around which the rebuilding and decoration of the Rotunda could be placed. It is true that an undertaking of this size could not be completed in a short time; if, though, we adopt the idea that the initiative of the wedding belonged to Galla Placidia, we can also assume that the preparations began in 424, the year of the betrothals.

An earlier form of this paper was read at the symposium on Byzantine Thessaloniki, organized by the Institute for Balkan Studies in December 1995. A revised version was read by Prof. Slobodan Curcic, who commented on it in his paper «Some Observations and Questions Regarding Early Christian Architecture in Thessaloniki», published by the Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities of Thessaloniki.

Abbreviations - Bibliography


ΣΚΕΨΕΙΣ ΠΑΝΩ ΣΤΗΝ ΕΡΜΗΝΕΙΑ ΚΑΙ ΧΡΟΝΟΛΟΓΗΣΗ ΤΗΣ ΡΟΤΟΝΤΑΣ ΣΤΗ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗ
ΑΡΙΣΤΟΤΕΛΗΣ ΜΕΝΤΖΟΣ

Η Ροτόντα της Θεσσαλονίκης κτίστηκε ανάμεσα στο 298/299 και στο 311 α’ ένα χαριτωλο έξωμα του εδάφους, στην περιοχή που περιλήφθηκε στην πόλη με την οικόπεδο του μέσον του 3ου αιώνα μ.Χ. Το νότιο πέρα του χώρου οριζόταν από ένα μαρμαρεπόνυτο τετράγωνο, το Τόξο του Γαλερίου και στα νότια διερχόταν η νοτιοτέρη δεξαμενή του νοτιοανατολικού πολεοδομικού ιστού. Το μνημείο περιβάλλοντα πιθανώς από περίβολο, η αρχιτεκτονική μορφή του οποίου μας διαφέρει. Η Ροτόντα εντάσσεται, μαζί με το Τόξο, σε ενιαίο με το ανάκτορο πολεοδομικό σχεδιασμό, δε θα έπρεπε να ανήκαν στο ίδιο οικοδομικό πρόγραμμα. Το Τόξο πρέπει να ακολουθεί την οικοδόμηση της Ροτόντας, διότι τοποθετήθηκε σε σχέση με τον χώρο άξονα του κτιρίου αυτού.

Ο αρχιτεκτονικός προορισμός της Ροτόντας ήταν μάλλον αυτός του ναού και όχι του μνημείου. Αυτό στηρίζεται στην απουσία χαρακτηριστικών ενημέρωσης, στη θέση του κτιρίου εντός του τείχους και, χωρίς, στην ανάλυση του με το Πάνθεον της Ρώμης. Το ίδιο απόθεμα να αναπτύσσεται ο συσχετισμός του μνημείου με αυτοκράτορα άλλον από το Γαλέριο. Το κτίριο είχε το ανάτετερ τη μήτη του θόλου του, πιθανώς από σεισμό, και επισκενώνταν μαζί με την υποθετική διαχώριση του θόλου. Στην πρώιμη βυζαντινή περίοδο η Ροτόντα συνδέθηκε με το Τόξο μέσω ενός χιονοστήρικτου διαβατικού, που έξευγόν ο από μικρότερο ξενοποιημένη τοιχογραφίας και συνόδευτα με το κύριος Τόξο στη βόρεια πλευρά του. Η Ροτόντα περιβλήθηκε επίσης με έναν κυκλικό δακτύλιο που απέλεγε στην ανατολικά σε ημικυκλική αψίδα. Στη νότια πλευρά του δακτυλίου υπήρχε παραπλάγιαμος προθάλαμος που συνέδεται το ναό με το χιονοστήρικτο διαβατικό που έξευγόνει από το Τόξο. Άλλα προσκιτήματα στο νότιο και στο δυτικό μέρος του κτιρίου θα πρέπει να εκτιμητούνταν το θρησκευτικό και χωσμικό όρολ της Ροτόντας. Τόσο τα προσκιτήματα, όσο και ο δακτύλιος με την αψίδα, ανήκουν πιθανώς σε μετασχέση μεταγενέστερης άπο τη διακοπή του θόλου. Ο ναός δεν ήταν μαρτύριο, διότι δε διαθέτει τα χαρακτηριστικά του μαρτυρίου και δεν υπάρχον γραπτές πληροφορίες για μαρτυρική λατρεία α’ αυτών. Η σύνδεσή του στα βυζαντινά χρόνια με το Τόξο και, μέσα αυτού, με το ανάκτορο υποδεικνύει ότι στην τελική μορφή του χρηματοποιήθηκε ως ανακτορικός ναός.

Όσον αφορά τον υποκείμενο διάκοσμο του θόλου, αποτελεί την αρχαιολογική απότομα να καλυφθεί μια τόσο μεγάλη επιφάνεια με ένα ενιαίο εικονογραφικό πρόγραμμα με αρχαίους συμβολικούς περιεχόμενο, πράγμα που προήλθε την ανάπτυξη της χρησιμοποίησης της θεολογίας, αλλά και την υπαρξη ενός
γορητού με ανεπτυγμένη θεολογική παιδεία. Το θέμα του διαχώσιμου είναι η
θριαμβίκη εμφάνιση, «προέλευσις» του Χριστού-Βασιλέα του Παραδείσου,
αλλά τα επιμέρους στοιχεία του διαχώσιμου δεν εντάσσονται σε ένα συχνο-
χρημένο ευκονογραφικό τύπο. Τονίζεται ο θριαμβικός χαρακτήρας της Ελέν-
σης με έμφαση στην ερωτική οργάνωση της σύνθεσης και με αναλογίες από
το αυτοκρατορικό τυπικό και στοιχεία ανακτορικού διαχώσιμου. Τα ιδιαίτε-
ρα αυτά στοιχεία του διαχώσιμου σε συνδυασμό με την πρωτοτυπία της
έμπνευσης και το γεγονός ότι το κτήτορο περιλαμβάνονταν στην αυτοκρατορι-
κή ιδιοκτησία, οδηγούν στη σύνδεση του με την αυτοκρατορική οικογένεια
και ένα σημαντικό γεγονός της επίσημης ιστορίας, που σχετίζεται με τη Θεσ-
σαλονίκη, στο διάστημα γύρω στα μέσα του 5ου αιώνα μ.Χ. Στην πόλη αυτή
tελέστηκαν το 424 οι αρραβώνες και σχεδιάστηκαν επίσης για το 437 οι γά-
μοι του Βαλεντινιανού Γ' με τη Λυκινία Ευδοξία, κόρη του Θεοδοσίου Β' —
oi oποίοι έγιναν τελικά στην Κωνσταντινούπολη— και ο χώρος της τελε-
tίς ήταν πιθανός η Ροτόντα. Έτσι μπορεί να εξηγηθεί το μέγεθος του έργου
tης επισκευής και διαχώσιμης του θόλου και το υψηλό επίπεδο της ευκονο-
γραφικής σύνθεσης και εκτέλεσης του έργου.