

AYASOFYA. TRABZON. 1961

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The Russell Trust of Edinburgh University, under the direction of Professor Talbot Rice carried through a fifth season of work on the cleaning and preservation of the paintings at Ayasofya, in co-operation with the Department of Antiquities.

The work was again under the leadership of the author, who again acted as Field Director, and Bay Muhittin Uysal of the Conservation Department of the Istanbul Archaeological Museum worked with us throughout the season as representative of the Department of Antiquities, giving us great help both in the actual work, and in making contacts with the local authorities, when necessary. Mrs Wainwright was responsible for the recording of the paintings and for colouring in the repair work that was carried out. Bay Yakup Kemer and Bay Osman Koroğlu both completed their fourth season of work with the Expedition and each of them was responsible for the training of two more workers; all drawn from the village of Ayasofya. During the summer we had the assistance of Mr Hale of St John's College Oxford, who joined us for the month of August.

Work began on the 27th April with continuation of the final cleaning of the scenes in the west vault of the naos. This area had been cleaned of covering plaster in 1960, revealing a large scene of the Last Supper, and parts of the 'Washing of the Feet' and of the 'Agony in the Garden'. These were finished off by the 8th of June and the scaffold dismantled to make way for the erection of a large central scaffold up in the cupola.

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Professor Talbot Rice and his wife joined the Expedition from May 3rd to May 18th to conduct excavations around the foundations of the church in order to elucidate some of the problems connected with the structure. The paucity of objects found was disappointing but nevertheless the excavations provided so meuseful information. To the north of the present church the foundations of a smaller and perhaps earlier church were uncovered. There were no objects found in it which might give a clue as to it's date, and a grave beneath the floor in front of the altar had already been robbed. The plan of the church, a small basilica with round apses, is similar to that of the church of Saint Anne in Trabzon which was repaired in 884 A. D. so that an earty date seems quite likely.

Texier, who visited Ayasofya in the 1830's and planned it, recorded that there were steps leading up to the church and that it stood on a terrace, but his description is rather vague. Our excavations showed that it stood originally on a raised terrace about 1.5 metres above the surrounding ground and that the facing of this terrace was composed of tombs, each set in semi-circular niches, the inner faces of which were originally covered with paintings. All of these tombs had been robbed, and the arches of most of them destroyed; but one on the south west side contained some painting, and part of the lid of the sarcophagus was still intact. The ruined tombs and the foundations of the of the small church were filled in since the Belediye hope to make a garden around the church, but the painted tomb has been

left open to give some idea of the original terrace around the church.

At the finish of the excavations the work on the paintings within the church was expanded, and a scaffold was erected in the south vault of the narthex and over west door into the church. In the south vault four scenes had been uncovered by the end of the season. In the east half of the vault were 'Christ Teaching in the Temple' and 'The Meeting with the Woman of Samaria' while in the west half there are the Miracles of the "Marriage Feast" and of the sick man to whom Christ said "Take up the bed and walk †". The upper scene in each side of the vault is in good condition since like all the scenes in the narthex vaults they are covered only by thick whitewash and have been protected from rain by the rooms above the vaults. However they have suffered from stone throwing because swallows nested in the corners of the vaults, and the paintings are much pitted in the areas where they nested. That this damage was done in the Byzantine period is attested by the fact that these pitmarks are under the whitewash and therefore pre-Turkish. On the south wall of the narthex above the doorway we uncovered a remarkable representation of the 'Woman with a Son Possessed by Devils, where in his combination of realism with fantasy the painter prefigures the works of Brueghel and Bosch.

Above the west door into the church is the 'Annunciation' with the figure of the Angel to the north of the door and that of the Mother of God to the south. The attitude and garments of the angel are painted so as to give a lively impression of forward movement which carries the eye across the archway to connect with the waiting figure of the Mother of God. In the eastern corner of the quadripartite vault, above the door, a Cherubim flanked by Powers, and a gay decorative pattern were revealed.

In mid June a scaffold was erected into the pendentives and cupola over the central space of the naos, and the work of uncovering the paintings there began. The whole area was covered by a heavy layer of plaster which we removed with sculptors hammers and chisels in the same way as in previous years. The paintings which we found beneath were in variable condition, having suffered more or less badly from damp and exposure to the sea air. In the dome was a head and shoulders of Christ Pantocrator of which only the cartoon colouring now remains. The face measures about a metre across and the border of His great halo was painted in gold of which only one or two small fragments remained. Below Him is a frieze of angels in adoration, of which those on the south side are in good condition, while those on the north side have lost most of the detail work in tempera the which has fallen away. The frieze is notable for its lively composition with a great crowd of angels which nevertheless give no impression of being cramped or ill-arranged; and also for the colouring, for this is the only place in the church where the 'blue' retains its full splendour. The analysis of the colour has not yet been completed but it must almost certainly be 'lapis lazuli'.

In the drum of the cupola were the figures of the Twelve Apostles between the windows and pairs of Prophets in the window embrasures, with decorative medallions above. The figures on the north side which is exposed to the north westerly Black Sea storms, are gone, and much of the detail of the other figures has worn away with time, but enough remains to give some idea of the original splendour of the paintings.

During the last weeks of the season work was begun on the paintings in the pendentives below the drum. Parts of the original plaster have fallen away, but on

what remains the painting is in good condition. The south west pendentive contains Saint Mark and the 'Baptism'; the south east has Saint John and the 'Descent into Hell'; the north east has Saint Mathew and the 'Crucifixion'; and the north west has Saint Luke and the 'Birth of Christ'.

In all these areas only the initial cleaning and the plaster repairs were done since we wished to uncover as much as possible in the 1961 season in order to obtain a clear idea of how much more work remained to be done.

Scaffolds were also erected in the south vault and in the south west corner of the naos, and in the exonarthex. The south vault, contrary to expectation contained no painting, and in the south west corner only a few small fragments were preserved on the west wall.

The exonarthex proved to be more interesting and it appears to have contained a representation of the 'Last Judgement' spread across the vaults and walls, except for the lower register. In the vaults were the Heavenly Host, and on the west wall above the colonnade are the dead arising from their tombs in response to the trumpet calls of the angels. There are also bodies being disgorged by fish and a lion or a tiger disgorging a body. In the lower register of the east wall to the north of the door is a fragment of a figure of Christ. Water running down the wall at this point

for many years has destroyed the detail, but fragments of gold paint showed that the whole of the halo, and the highlighting of his robe were painted in gold.

The EVKAF have made a generous grant of 90,000 lira for the restoration of the structure of the church and this work is now in progress. The removal of successive repairs revealed the original tilings of the roof, and something of the constructional details. The difference in shape between the interior barrel vaults and the external gables necessitated thick layers of filling along the sides of these vaults. On the exonarthex to avoid the heavy weight of rubble filling, empty jars and amphora of pottery were inserted into the mortar, thereby solving the problem of unnecessary weight.

In the process of removing rotten stonework in the walls and refacing, two Mihrab niches were revealed in the outer west wall of the exonarthex, and these are being left open.

The expedition was greatly helped by the Director of Forestry for the north eastern vilayets, who provided us with good timber for scaffolding at a very modest price, and I am pleased to be able to thank the Vali of Trabzon and his officials, the Director of the EVKAF and the Department of Antiquities and their representative who have always given of their time and interested themselves in our work.