

A REPORT OF WORK ACCOMPLISHED AT TRABZON

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The decision to uncover the wall paintings of Ayasofya Camii, formerly a Byzantine church dedicated to the Holy Wisdom, was made by Professor D. Talbot Rice, M. B. E., of Edinburgh University. The expedition is financed by the Russell Trust of S. Andrew's University.

Mr. Ernest Hawkins of the American Byzantine Institute in Istanbul made a preliminary report on the condition of the paintings in 1956. Scaffolding was erected at the east end of the building where paintings were already visible and a trial season of work accomplished by the author in 1957.

The first full season of work was for a period of eighteen weeks from May 26 to October 3, 1958. The work was under the direction of the author with the full time assistance of Mr. Michael Smith. Miss A. Powell arrived in June, and Mr. Robert Thomson worked with us for the month of August. Miss Alive Asırbav acted as our Commissar on behalf of the Department of Antiquities for the first half of the season, and Mr. Ali Rıza Ören for the second half. We were ably assisted by two local Turkish workers. Mr. Osman Koroğlu and Mr. Yakub Kemer, both of whom learned the work of cleaning very quickly. We hope that they will continue with us in future seasons.

In the course of the summer Mrs. Michael Ballance carried out an architectural survey of Ayasofya and of other buildings of antiquarian interest in the vilâyet of Trabzon.

The scaffolding erected in the bema and the apse in 1957 remained in position throughout the winter and it was decided to concentrate on work in this area in during 1958, since the greater part of

three scenes: the Appearance of Christ at the Sea of Tiberias, the Incredulity of S. Thomas and the Final Blessing of the Apostles, were already uncovered on the walls of the bema, and a certain amount of plaster had been removed from the vault and from the conch of the apse. By the end of the season we had brought the three scenes on the walls of the bema as near to completion of cleaning as was possible without the final work of conservation, and had removed all the heavy plaster covering from the conch of the apse, thereby revealing an enthroned Mother of God, flanked on either side by an archangel, and an Ascension scene taking up the whole area of the barrel vault of the bema. The second stage of cleaning, consisting of the removal of whitewash beneath the plaster was completed for the whole of the conch and for the lower part of each side of the barrel vault, containing the figures of the twelve apostles, the angel of the Ascension and the Mother of God. The final cleaning was in progress in these areas in the last weeks of the season, as also was the removal of whitewash from the centre of the vault.

In addition to these major operations some tidying up of smaller areas was achieved, notably the cleaning of the serving niches in the north and south apse chapels, containing respectively a damaged head and shoulders of Christ and decorative patterning with some lettering; the uncovering and cleaning of the upper part of the figures of four bishops and a central medallion in the archway from the north chapel into the main apse; and the uncovering and cleaning of various fragments of decorative border patterning together with the remains of a large inscription

around the moulding where the barrel vault of the bema narrows into the conch.

A detailed photographic record was made of all the stages of cleaning and Mr. Smith acted as photographer for the expedition in 1958, most of the photographs in illustration of this article having been taken by him. Miss Powell made sketches of areas of painting where photographs would have proved unsatisfactory as a record, and she spent the last three weeks of the season in painting a full scale copy in oils of the Three Apostles in a boat on the sea of Tiberias. Mr. Smith also made some sketches, a tracing of the best preserved inscription, which is that pertaining to the Appearance at the Sea of Tiberias, and he was successful in identifying the inscriptions of three out of four bishops in the archway from the north chapel into the apse.

In the course of the season a collection of samples of pigments and of pieces of plaster was made, and these have been handed over to Miss Plesters, of the National Gallery laboratory department, who is undertaking the analysis of them. Finally the two blocked archways in the sides of the north and west porches of Ayasofya, which were filled in when the building was used as a cholera hospital at the turn of the century, were cleared of masonry.

Methods of Cleaning and Conservation.

We concentrated mainly on the cleaning of the paintings in 1958 and only worked on conservation in areas where this was immediately necessary since we wished to gain a clearer picture of the nature of the paintings. The cleaning operation was carried out in three main stages. The thick plaster covering was for the

most part chipped away with a sculptors hammer and chisels, but where the covering was already detached from the paintings, as was already the case over a large area of the barrel vault of the bema, it proved possible to lever away fairly large pieces of plaster (up to 30 cms. across) in one piece, thereby saving much of the damage which might have been caused to the paintings by the concussion of continual hammering.

The removal of the plaster covering left in most places a layer of whitewash which still concealed the paintings. This was removed so far as was possible by gently chipping it away or eroding it down with palette knives.

The final cleaning was done with dental picks or wooden modelling tools, the delicate points of which are able to scrape off minute pieces of whitewash while doing the minimum of damage. In several parts of the paintings, where the surface of the paint was in good condition, it was possible to put a final finish to the cleaning process by rubbing gently over the surface of the paint with a soft india rubber. This removed all fragments of dust that might have been left on the surface and allowed the colours of the paintings to glow out with something of their original freshness. Water was sponged or dabbed onto the paintings wherever necessary in the course of cleaning.

It will be seen from the illustrations that the paintings have been severely chipped, and it will be necessary in the future to fill in these holes with new plaster and tone them down in neutral colours so that the original work and not the damaged parts will stand out at first sight. The original plaster is in many places detached from the wall, and this will have to be reattached to the walls where necessary with casein.

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In the conservation of crumbling plaster and of powdery pigments on the surface of the paintings, weak solutions of polyvinyl alcohol were used. This was used in preference to polyvinyl acetate since the latter forms a watertight skin on the surface of the paintings and prevents moisture from escaping out of the plaster, which would be very dangerous in view of the humidity of the climate at Trabzon.

In conclusion I should like to express our grateful thanks for the help given to us by the Department of Antiquities in Ankara, by officials of the Vilâyet and Belediye of Trabzon, and in particular to Mr. Fikri Karaniş, Deputy for Trabzon, through whose good offices we were supplied with the necessary scaffolding for our work.