

A REPORT ON THE WORK OF THE
BYZANTINE INSTITUTE OF AMERICA, 1954.

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Early in April, 1954, the Byzantine Institute of America again took up its work at the Kariye Camii in Istanbul where, with the authorization and cooperation of the Department of Ancient Monuments and Museums of the Ministry of National Education, it has been engaged in preserving, cleaning, and studying the mosaics of the early fourteenth century. Formerly the church of the Monastery of the Chora, this is one of only four Byzantine Churches in all of Turkey in which anything more than the merest fragments of mosaic images are at present known to exist. The Kariye Camii, however, contains not less than fifty three separate scenes or subjects in mosaic and in addition the impressive number of 105 identifiable or largely preserved representations of saints or biblical personages and thus constitutes by far the greatest treasury of Christian mosaic art in Turkey. Moreover, among existing works of the early fourteenth century its mosaics are more extensive and of higher quality than can be found in Byzantine monuments anywhere.

Since reporting on the season of 1953 in these pages the cleaning and repairing of all the mosaics of the inner narthex has been completed with the exception of three panels that occur on the walls beneath the cornice and these have been begun. A scaffolding has been erected in the southern half of the outer narthex in preparation for the season of 1955 - the last large area of mosaics remaining to be treated.

No interesting new discoveries, such as were reported in these pages last year, have

been made. It has been a question simply of progressing as rapidly as this delicate work permits. But several new undertakings not connected with the mosaics have been begun, most notably the reinforcement of the structure of the building itself. In the course of removing the plaster which covered areas where mosaics had fallen, great fissures in the vaults and walls of the structure were laid bare and it became apparent that the building was in dangerous condition at certain points threatening the loss of some areas where mosaics and frescoes still existed. This year an engineeringly sound plan of reinforcement with concealed heavy steel bars has been worked out and a start on this work has been made in the most seriously threatened part of the building - the northern end of the inner narthex and its dome. This part of the undertaking has been accomplished in the last months of the season of 1954 and the rest of the task will be completed next season.

All the plaster above the marble revetments in the interior of the church itself has been removed and the timbers of the modern wooden dome have been inspected and repaired and the interior of the dome itself replastered. The masonry of the other vaults inside the church above the marble revetments, where no mosaics have existed for many years, has been cleaned and repointed and now presents an architectural point of interest which is pleasing both in texture and color.

The work of uncovering the frescoes in the side chapel of the Kariye Camii has also continued this year. As reported last season brilliant frescoes in the apse and the

dome of this chapel had already been completely cleaned and repaired. This year work went forward in the two transverse arches that support the dome, the four pendentives beneath it, and in the two tympana at either side. These frescoes, while not generally in as good condition as the parts previously cleaned contain many areas of brilliant painting especially in the northern tympanum where the scene of Jacob's Ladder was found to be in remarkably good condition and of especially high quality.

The season of 1954 also saw the beginning of another project by the Byzantine Institute. With the gracious cooperation of the Ministry of National Education and of the Vakıflar work began early in May on the pavement of the Zeyrek Camii, the ancient church of the Pantocrator. Built by the Emperor John II, Comnenos, in the early years of the twelfth century, this church was famous for its mosaic decorations. Of these nothing is known to exist today, but the original pavement has in large part survived. The first stage in the restoration of this richly decorated and colorful floor has been achieved in the careful cleaning of the original parts of the central areas of the floor which have had to be rubbed thoroughly, piece by piece, with grit-stone and fine carborundum powder in order to retrieve the original colors of the marbles.

The square area under the dome, it was found, was divided into a series of nine square units, three by three. The four units at the corners and the one in the center were formed into richly bordered circles. The other four, in the center of each side, were squares. The alternating circles and squares were tied together by a continuous interlace of white stone bordered on both sides by yellow marble. These main borders and interlaces are of opus sectile. Perhaps the richest and most interesting work occurs in the triangular areas between the four loops of the interlace around the five circular units. These triangles which bring

the circles to a square were treated in opus incertum, that is, the main design is left in the surface of the white stone, the background cut away and filled by inlays of green and red porphyry. Each triangle contains three rinceaux, one large and two small, which provide circular frames for fantastic animals whose features are drawn in incised lines on the surface of white stone. A rather wide foliate border, also in opus incertum, is contained within the interlace border of the corner units. The central unit, however, and the one immediately in front of the place where the holy gates stood, contain inner borders of opus tessellatum, very fine and colorful in green, red, and yellow tesserae, forming star-like patterns which stand out like jewels. Around the great central square and filling the strips between the four piers that support the dome are four long narrow panels each broken at the two ends and in the center by circular interlaces of opus sectile larger than those that join together the nine units of the central square. Along the two sides, north and south, leading from the lateral doors at the west to the two side-apses at the east, are still larger narrow panels again punctuated at the ends and center this time by square panels each containing a circle surrounded by a brilliantly colored chevron border. The wide borders that define the whole panels and their three subdivisions are treated in a very effective pattern made up of pieces of black, yellow, and white stones cut in the form of the double-axe and neatly fitted together in alternating directions and colors, the blacks all north and south, the yellows and whites, alternating with one another, east and west.

These are the main features of the pavement. While comparable pavements are to be found in Italy, no highly ornamental pavement of this period as extensively preserved as this now exists in Istanbul and few of this type anywhere can rival it in richness, diversity of technique, or interest of motifs.