

## Water Nymphs and the *Kolymbos*?: The Laskarid Palace at Nymphaion Revisited<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Nymphaion Palace in Kemalpaşa, İzmir and situates it within the Laskarid imperial and palatial aspirations using the results of the salvage excavations conducted in 2002 and 2008-2012. As the founding and ruling dynasty of the Empire of Nicaea, which lasted from 1204 to 1261, Laskarids ruled via multiple centers, controlling western and northwestern Anatolia and the Aegean islands, and the Nymphaion acted as the winter residence. Previously, this palace was analyzed in terms of its typology and construction techniques. However, salvage excavations revealed fascinating evidence that completely changed our understanding of the Laskarid palatial aspirations, one based on bathing practices. Using textual and archaeological evidence, this article examines the aquatic aspirations in the Laskarid court and offers a nuanced interpretation of the architectural framework of the ground floor. First and foremost, it suggests the term *kolymbos*, a tholos-shaped pond only found hitherto in textual accounts of the middle Byzantine period that has been discovered archaeologically at the Nymphaion. Then, it examines the Laskarid hydraulic setting at the Nymphaion and its cross-cultural reflections.

**Keywords:** *Nymphaion, Laskarids, Byzantine archaeology*

## Su Perileri ve *Kolymbos* (Tholoslu Havuz-Hamam):Laskaris Dönemi Nif Saray'ına Yeni Bir Bakış

### ÖZET

Bu makale, İzmir Kemalpaşa'daki Nymphaion Sarayı'na odaklanmaktadır. 2002 yılında saray yapısının yakın çevresinde ve ardından 2008-2012 yıllarında yapının bodrum katında

<sup>1</sup> I shared my initial thoughts on labeling the remains on the ground floor at the Nymphaion as a *kolymbos* at the *Fourth International Sevgi Gönül Memorial Symposium on Byzantine Studies*, June 23-25, 2016, which was published in the co-edited volume by I. Jevtić and Koray Durak: S. Çağaptay, "The Laskarid Moment: Building an Empire with Constantinople in Mind," *Fourth International Sevgi Gönül Memorial Symposium on Byzantine Studies* (Koç University Publications: Istanbul, 2019): 269-291. My further reiterations on the topic presented on different occasions are as follows: "Water Nymphs and the *Kolymbos*: The Laskarid Palace at Nymphaion Revisited," *Late Antique and Byzantine Archaeology Speaker Series*, University of Oxford, UK, January 25, 2018; "The Laskarid Triangle of Power: Nicaea, Nymphaion, and Magnesia," *Urban Agencies Workshop, Personal and Collective Agency in Anatolian and Caucasian Cities (13th-15th Centuries)*, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, Austria, June 6-8, 2019; "Made in Byzantium: Rethinking Eclecticism in Laskarid Architecture," *Made in Byzantium: New Perspectives on Architecture, Decoration and Function*, Online Workshop, Koç University-Stavros Niarchos Foundation, Center for Late Antique and Byzantine Studies (GABAM), Istanbul, Turkey, May 4-6, 2021; and finally "The Palace at Nymphaion Revisited," at the Centre of Byzantine Studies, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, February 23, 2022. Professor Paul Magdalino and the late Professor Bob Ousterhout read an earlier version of this paper back in 2018. I thank them both for their insights, invaluable remarks, and encouragement to publish this. I thank Alp Yılmaz for taking the time to prepare the drawings appearing as figures 9 and 10 in this article.

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yürütülen kurtarma kazılarının sonuçlarını kullanarak yapının Laskaris dönemi imparatorluk ve saray gelenekleri bağlamına yerleştirme amacını taşır. 1204-1261 yılları arasında hüküm süren ve İznik İmparatorluğu'nun kurucu hanedanı olarak Laskarisler, Batı ve Kuzeybatı Anadolu ile Ege adalarını kontrol ederek birden fazla merkez üzerinden hüküm sürüp günümüzde Kemalpaşa'da konumlanan Nif Sarayını kışlık ikametgah olarak kullanmışlardır. Önceki dönem çalışmalarında, saray yapısı tipoloji ve inşaa tekniklerine odaklanan tartışmalar ışığında incelenmektedir. Ancak her iki kurtarma kazısına ait sonuçlar Laskaris hanedanlığı ve Bizans dönemi saray geleneklerine ilişkin bildiklerimizi sorgulatan yeni kanıtlar ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu makalede, özellikle saray içinde hamam uygulamasının saptanmasının ünük bir veri olmasından hareketle, Bizans kronolojisi içindeki yazılı ve arkeolojik yansımaların yardımıyla Nif sarayındaki su kullanımı ve yıkanma kurgusu incelenmekte ve elde edilen verilerle nüanslı bir yorum sunulmaktadır. Ardından, bugüne kadar yalnızca Orta Bizans dönemine tarihlenen yazılı kaynaklarda karşımıza çıkan ve *kolymbos* olarak tanımlanan (tholos biçimli bir havuz) yapı tipinin Nif Sarayı'nda uygulanmış olması ihtimali sorgulanıp eş zamanlı ve art zamanlı kültürlerarası karşılaştırmalarla Bizans kültüründe seçkin sınıfın kutsal amaçlar veya temizlik ihtiyacıyla yıkanmaya verdiği öneme ait yorumlamalarla bu makale sonlandırılacaktır.

*Anahtar Kelimeler:* Nif Sarayı, Laskaris Hanedanlığı, Bizans arkeolojisi.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Laskarid palace at Nymphaion, located in Kemalpaşa (formerly Nymphio or Nif) in the Hermus Valley, is an important late Byzantine palace. Edwin Freshfield identified and photographed in the 1870s, called the “Palace of the Laskarids,” and later on visited by Gertrude Bell in 1907 (Freshfield, 1886, and Bell, 1907). Its single-block scheme represented a “change” from the older tradition of the atrium-house plan to a single-block type as discussed by Richard Krautheimer, who attributed this change to the penetration of Western palace architecture as introduced by advancing Western conquerors (Krautheimer, 1984, p. 449).

The ruins have attracted the attention of a series of scholars since the 1960s, among them Semavi Eyice, Tatiana Kirova, Judy Patterson, Hans Buchwald, and Zeynep Mercangöz, who have examined them through the lens of construction technique. More recently, Suna Çağaptay, Julia Jedamski Bokody, and Naomi Pitamber have contextualized the palace within the political, social, and cultural dynamics of the late Byzantine world.<sup>3</sup>

In the Byzantine accounts, the palace is first mentioned as the favorite residence of John III Vatatzes (r. 1221–1254), during whose reign, the construction, initially started by his

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<sup>3</sup> For a review of earlier scholarship, see, S. Çağaptay, “How Western Is It? The Palace at Nymphaion and Its Architectural Setting,” *The First International Sevgi Gönül Memorial Symposium on Byzantine Studies*, Istanbul: Koç University Publications, 2010: 357–363. To the more recently scholarly examinations, we can add a recent MA Thesis by F. Lolli, “Architettura residenziale bizantina nel regno dell'impero di Nicea (1204-1261),” for up-to-date photos. I thank Federica Lolli for sharing a copy of her thesis with me.

predecessor, Theodore I Laskaris (r. 1205–1222), was finished (Macrides, 2007: 88-89). It was also where Theodore II (r. 1254–1258) and Michael VIII (r. 1259–1282) proclaimed themselves emperors.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the palace at Nymphaion stands as an imposing shell measuring approximately 12 by 26 meters (Figure 1). The first floor is constructed from ashlar blocks, giving the building a sturdy, castle-like appearance, while the rest of the masonry alternates between brick and stone. Inside, there are no clear floor divisions, as it is often built with timber and terra-cotta flooring. Sturdy pilasters and the springing of the arches hint at the vaulting system and the division of floors. This is also best inferred from the window openings—six on each of the longer sides and possibly two on each shorter side—plus no windows on the ashlar-surfaced ground level. Additionally, six arrow loops are on the longer sides of the ground floor. The organization of the façade suggests that there are likely four stories, each approximately three meters high. The springing of the pilasters and arches also indicates three divisions on the first floor, with the middle section slightly larger than the flanking parts. Its upper floors are likely to follow the layout of the first. Terra-cotta pipes for heating and/or water drainage run vertically from the ground, alongside the wall pilasters, up to the upper floors, reinforced with timber.

### **1.1 A Debate to Date: Nymphaion and Its Typology**

Following Krautheimer's footsteps, previous scholarship has focused on the single-block framework of the palace and sought to link its origins to Western palatial idioms. Challenging this view, I (2010: 357-363) discussed the emergence of this typology as an idea with roots in Byzantium, citing a tenth-century Constantinopolitan prototype. I also situated the development of this form due to the shared palatial idioms between Byzantium and its neighbors, specifically the Armenians and the Rum Seljuks, who embraced similar design principles for their palaces and shared aspirations for aquatic landscapes and agricultural production.<sup>5</sup> Speaking of the tenth-century Constantinopolitan prototype, the plan of Romanos I's palace in Constantinople<sup>6</sup> seems to have slowly replaced earlier modes

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<sup>4</sup> As discussed elsewhere, R Macrides in her *George Akropolites: The History/ Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Oxford, 2007): 87-88, using textual and numismatic evidence studied by Michael F. Hendy in the *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection*, Alfred R. Bellinger and Philip Grierson ed. (Washington, DC, 1966-1999): IV/2: 471 and *ibid.*, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy, c. 300-1450*. (Cambridge, 1985): 231-235 questions the role of Nymphaion under Theodore I Laskaris.

<sup>5</sup> For earlier bibliography and the comparisons with the Armenian and Seljuk palatial and residential traditions, S. Çağaptay, "How Western Is It? The Palace at Nymphaion and Its Architectural Setting," *The First International Sevgi Gönül Memorial Symposium on Byzantine Studies*, Istanbul: Koç University Publications, 2010: 357–363. For the Armenian examples, Robert Edwards, *The Fortifications of Armenian Cilicia* (Washington, DC, 1987). For a discussion on the Rum Seljuk examples, especially for Hasbahçe and Hacıbaba: Scott Redford, "Thirteenth-Century Rum Seljuk Palaces and Palace Imagery." *Arsl Orientalis* 1993 (23): 219; S. Redford, *Landscape and State in Medieval Anatolia: Seljuk Gardens and Pavilions of Alanya*.

<sup>6</sup> Juxtapositions between the imperial and non-elite housing and the single-block plan as appearing in both is discussed by Kostis Kourelis, "The Rural House in the Medieval Peloponnese. An Archaeological Reassessment of Byzantine Domestic Architecture." In *Archaeology in Architecture: Studies in Honor of Cecil L. Striker*, edited by Judson J. Emerick and Deborah M. Deliyannis, 119-128. Mainz, 2005, especially 120.

of imperial architecture in Byzantium, characterized by individual buildings arranged around courtyards, as best represented by the Great Palace in Constantinople. This typology, extending from the Palace of Romanos I to Nymphaion's single-block framework, deepens with the replanning of the Blachernai Palace complex under Manuel Komnenos (r. 1118–1180) and his wife Bertha of Sulzbach.<sup>7</sup> Later on, with the early-fourteenth-century Tekfur Saray of the Palaeologan period, we note the mature phase of the single-block palace typology (Papadopoulos, 1928; Schneider, 1951, pp. 82-107; Magdalino, 1993, pp. 117; Ahunbay, 1997, pp. 248-251). Accordingly, the palace at Nymphaion demonstrates the revival of this type under the Laskarids away from Constantinople. Furthermore, Nymphaion's imperial and palatial aspirations are evident in its cyclical use during the winter months and in its siting, which helped the Laskarids claim control over and inhabit their lands (Çağaptay, 2010, pp. 357-363; *ibid.*, 2019, pp. 269-291).<sup>8</sup>

## 1.2 Nymphaion and Its Alternative Reading

Regrettably, no studies have examined the relationship between the single-block form and the palace's name, Nymphaion, except Naomi Pitamber (2015, p. 228), who analyzed the results of the excavations in her doctoral dissertation and concluded that it was a "luxurious bath". While she brilliantly urges us to discuss the relationship between the toponym and the facts on the ground at the Nymphaion, Pitamber's use of archaeological evidence is minimal. The textual evidence, including a previously unpublished epigram and a quotation from an oration, has severe translation and interpretive mistakes and is overall misleading (see Appendix 1).

I reexamined Naomi Pitamber's interpretations of the Nymphaion in a conference proceeding (Çağaptay 2019, pp. 269-291). In it, I devoted a section to the analysis of the excavations on the ground floor of the Nymphaion, suggesting that the excavated remains at the Nymphaion may have indicated a *kolymbos* that went beyond the mere "luxurious bath" definition proposed by Pitamber.<sup>9</sup> In this article, I would like to take my analysis to the next level by revisiting my previous reading of the ground floor as the *kolymbos* (a tholos-shaped pool) and suggest that this floor might have served as a ritual bathing complex, drawing on further textual, topographical, and typological evidence. Despite coining a new term for the palace's ground floor, my emphasis on water-related elements

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<sup>7</sup> For an overview on the Blachernai, W. Müller-Wiener, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbul: Byzantion, Konstantinoupolis, Istanbul bis zum Beginn d. 17* Mango, 1991: 3, 293; F. Özgümiş and K. Dark, *Constantinople: Archaeology of a Byzantine Megapolis*, 62-88. Oxbow, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> While the cyclical nature of the palace has been accepted when it was preferred to be used is a matter of debate. Macrides (2007), using Akropolites' writing I. § 91, argues that the Nymphaion was the winter residence and the place to prepare for campaigning, whereas, for Constantinides (2009, 94), it was the summer palace. This seasonal shifting of residence parallels the Rum Seljuks tradition, in which Kubadabad was the summer residence and Kubadiye was a site to prepare for winter campaigning (Redford, 1993:219).

<sup>9</sup> S. Çağaptay, "The Laskarid Moment," 288-290, for an initial discussion on attributing the remains to a *kolymbos*.

remains preeminent for two reasons. First, the term *kolymbos*, denoting “waterfowl,” was used in the classical period but came to signify a sacred bathing area only in Byzantine times. Second, the toponym *Nymphaion* highlights the nymphs themselves, mythopoetic deities that are inseparable from water from the ancient period onward. Thus, the nymphs’ significance extends from practical uses of water to that of the symbolic and sacred. In the final section of this article, drawing on textual and archaeological evidence, I would like to make a case for the creation of aquatic landscapes in Byzantium and the broader Mediterranean realm.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. METHOD

The first round of salvage excavations was prompted by the Municipality of Kemalpaşa in 2002, during landscaping projects to the southwest of the palace, during which walls resembling the palace's construction technique, accompanied by water channels, pottery, and coins dating to the reign of Isaac II Angelos and John III Vatatzes, were discovered.<sup>11</sup> The trenches were confined and did not adjoin the palace walls, making it difficult to determine the relationship between the palace and the other remains found outside. Yet they revealed buildings with cloisonné, the typical wall-construction technique of the Laskarid period. Despite the gap left unbridged, the evidence from the palace revealed that archaeology can speak for what the texts cannot and do not for the character and context of the Nymphaion.

More revealing results emerged during the second round of excavations, which focused on the interior and were conducted from 2008 to 2012.<sup>12</sup> The Municipality of Kemalpaşa decided to pursue a preservation and restoration project that included consolidating the walls and installing a protective roof. While cleaning the building and removing accumulated debris, a doorway on the north side, providing direct access to the ground

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The salvage excavations were carried out outdoors in 2002 and inside the palace from 2008 to 2012 by the Izmir Archaeological Museum, under the scientific supervision of Prof. Zeynep Mercangöz, who was then teaching in the Department of Art History at Ege University in Izmir. Some of the findings from the 2002 salvage excavations are discussed in a report cited in ft. 11 of this article. The remains excavated during the second phase of salvage excavations are discussed in N. R. Pitamber's doctoral dissertation, “Replacing Byzantium” (2015). The main archaeological evidence in this article is based on my personal communication with Professor Mercangöz, as well as the descriptions and visuals from Dr. Pitamber's dissertation and several photos I took during a visit in 2012.

<sup>11</sup> For the report: Z. Mercangöz, Z. Derin and L. Doğer, “Kemalpaşa, Laskarisler Sarayı,” *Ege Üniversitesi Arkeolojik Kazıları* (İzmir, 2012): 439-450. The report also includes ceramic evidence revealing a wide range of samples, from Zeuxippus Family Ware to different kinds of sgraffito, as well as an early Bronze Age burial site.

<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the results of the 2008-2012 excavations remain unpublished. Since the architectural analysis of Nymphaion was my first academic publication (as noted in ft. 3 in this article) and is close to my heart, I take the liberty of sharing a personal digression about this building. I was very hopeful at the start of the excavations inside the palace that they would lead to a full restoration and heritage management project. However, a thorough restoration project fell through soon after 2013, and the site became inaccessible. Currently, the scaffolding erected to reinforce its walls completely obscures its monumentality, and the archaeological evidence that reveals so much about the late Byzantine palatial idioms needs a better display. Additionally, recognizing my affection for this building, I would like to add that this article is part of a larger monograph project I have been working on—focusing on the thirteenth-century urban aspirations and the role of Laskarid urbanism in it, as I have discussed in a recent publication: “The Laskarid Architectural Production Revisited,” 313-330.

floor, was identified (Figure 2). This led to a stairway. Then, on the northern and southern sections of this floor, respectively, four rooms on each side were observed, which were separated by an oval-shaped basin covered with frescoes and hydraulic plaster (Figure 3). In the middle of the oval-shaped basin is a round wellhead, which possibly helped divert water into underground channels, preventing flooding (Figure 4). Two terra-cotta conduits are set at an angle at each axis of the basin, adding up to eight in total (Figure 5). The walls are covered with decorated frescoes preserved in bright red, green, and blue. Also on the walls, zigzag frame-like geometric designs encompass varying floral patterns, suggesting lily or palmette motifs. Corridors were identified that allowed for access to the rooms on both sides. In the south rooms, excavators found hypocaust tiles in situ (Figure 6). Finally, all the rooms appear to be identical in size, except for the easternmost room on the south side (Figure 7) (Mercangöz, personal communication, Pitamber, 2015, 178-181 and 222-227 and Çağaptay, 2019, 288-289).

In this article, the archaeological material and architectural phasing are carefully examined using excavation notes and visuals. Then, the textual sources are drawn on to contextualize the archaeological findings. The discussions are also supported by cross-cultural comparisons to demystify the cultural and aquatic context of the archaeological evidence.

### 3. FINDINGS

Now, how can we interpret these findings? In his *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*, Siegfried Giedion (1948, p. 643) says the following: “The manner in which a civilization integrates bathing within its life, as well as the type of bathing it prefers, yields searching insight into the inner nature of the period.”<sup>13</sup> This inspiring statement would help us visualize the nature of the palace at Nymphaion. With the results from both salvage excavations, we can navigate the architectural context of the single-block layout, which houses administrative, private, and ceremonial rooms, along with an inner bathing area, and the experience of inhabiting the palace and its immediate surroundings. All this complements the textual descriptions of its fortress-like appearance wrapped in a palliative garden landscape, which I would like to discuss further in this article.

#### 3.1 What is in a Name?: Nymphaion

Could we assume that this was the reason the site was called the Nymphaion? The term itself might suggest a specific type of monumental water structure. However, at this location, we also know that plentiful waters came from springs and streams originating in the mountains. A recent hydrographic study of the region highlights numerous creeks,

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<sup>13</sup> As cited by J. Caskey, 1999, 170.

streams, and water wells. The main river basins, from north to south, are the Hermos (Gediz), the Caystros (Küçük Menderes), and the Meander (Büyük Menderes) (Şimşek et al., 2008, fig.1). Providing fertile land that is naturally irrigated, it remains an important area for agriculture in Turkey. In fact, Evliya Çelebi, the seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler, described a potential source of the *nymphaion* that the Laskarid palace is named after during his visit to the castle on the Nymphaion Mountains.

*“The fortress is a strongly built edifice located on a steep rock and has five sides, the circumference measuring 2,200 Ottoman adims [about 880 meters] along with two portals. Through the domes built under these portals flows ice-cold water.”* (Tezcan, 1990, p. 83)

Evliya’s description indicates water flowing abundantly through both natural and man-made contours in the region. In fact, a correlation between the portals and the water moving through the domes built beneath them suggests water sources in the mountains and plains surrounding Nymphaion. Additionally, grottoes decorated with paintings and rejuvenated by springs have been identified by a survey and excavation team working since 1999 on the acropolis of Nymphaion under the leadership of Istanbul University.<sup>14</sup> Amid the strong symbolism given to life-giving water and nymphs, the site seemed to represent a place of well-being under the Laskarids.

### **3.2 Byzantine Aquatic Spaces: Literal and Physical Evidence**

The thirteenth-century descriptions of the area by Manuel Holobolos, a Byzantine orator and monk, complements Evliya’s depiction. In the *enkomion* written by Holobolos for the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII (r. 1261-1282), and delivered on the Christmases of 1265, 1266, and 1267 in Constantinople, he mentions, among other attributes of Nymphaion, a soothing climate, blossoming meadows, and rich springs. In his third oration, Holobolos mentions Michael VIII’s acclamation at Nymphaion: “The place, by name, as though it were flooded by waters.” (Treu, 1906, p. 92. 27-28)<sup>15</sup> Holobolos discusses the settlement of Nymphaion as a place of health, conducive to the flourishing of all living things (Treu, 1906, p. 48, 29-32). Holobolos’ references to water, combined with other historical details, help to document the abundance of water, its course towards the city, and its mythopoetic and therapeutic qualities.

Accordingly, Theodore II, after his wife Elena’s death, received advice from Akropolites while at Nymphaion to bathe often to relieve his deep sorrow (Akropolites, I: § 39.5 and §

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<sup>14</sup> For an up-to-date description of findings and the history of the excavations, see <https://www.nifolympos.com/>

<sup>15</sup> “Νυμφαῖον ὁ τόπος τὴν κλησιν, ὡς πολλοῖς καταντλεῖται τοῖς ὕδασι ...” in *Manuelis Holoboli orationes*, ed. Maximilian Treu (Potsdam, 1906), 92.27-28. Here a correction is necessary. Pitamber, “Replacing Byzantium,” 232, reads ὕδασι (waters) as ὕδρασι... (water snakes), which seems like a misreading. I thank Paul Magdalino for bringing this misreading to my attention.

52.10).<sup>16</sup> John III Vatatzes favored the Nymphaion as a site to overcome his health problems. Known to have suffered from seizures (Akropolites I: § 51-52), John III Vatatzes sought out the warmer weather at Nymphaion, as compared to Nicaea, and he likewise relished the cultivated gardens around the palace. It was in these gardens that he married his second wife, Constance II (referred to as Anna in the Laskarid court), daughter of Frederick II of the Holy Roman Empire. For the wedding held in 1244, the epithalamion written by Nicholas Eiririkos describes Anna as a rose and John III as a lotus, mentioning the venue as a meadow on the palace grounds (Constantinides, 2002: p. 9 ft. 37; Heisenberg, 1920, 10, 103.80–104.92). It was also in these gardens that he found refuge and spent his final days in 1254, as Akropolites states (I: §51-52).

Can the Nymphaion be the only place in which the Laskarids were involved in construction or enjoyed using? Akropolites (I: § 84.4) proves helpful here. For example, near the Nymphaion, he talks about the area of Klyzomene and Phlebia being “washed over by water” in proximity to Nymphaion.<sup>17</sup> Only thirty kilometers south of Nymphaion, at Perikylistra (Figure 8), the Laskarids were orchestrating other hydraulic projects. Mentioned by Akropolites (I, §39 (p. 63.1–2); §52 (p. 103.8–11)), this site had a residence used by John III Vatatzes. Hélène Ahrweiler identified Perikylistra as the modern Halkapınar neighborhood of İzmir.<sup>18</sup> It once had a Roman-era bathing complex dedicated to Diana, supplied by water from the mountains, drawing from the stream called Meles. This stream formed a lake before flowing into the Aegean Sea and was reused by the Laskarids. Although little physical evidence remains today, nineteenth-century postcards help us envision the lush, well-watered landscape.

### 3.3 A Nymphaion at the Nymphaion?

Having reviewed contemporaneous examples of bathing structures and hydraulic systems, let’s now return to the Nymphaion. Based on the available evidence showing a bath meeting an indoor pond, I would like to argue that this was a basin surrounded by rooms for bathing in privacy (Figures 9 and 10).<sup>19</sup> In other words, what we had within the Nymphaion was an indoor *nymphaion*. So far, the salvage excavations have only revealed the pipe system within the building. Further excavations are needed, especially around and just outside the walls, covering the gap between the palace walls and the trenches opened during the

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<sup>16</sup> As discussed by Pitamber, “Replacing Byzantium,” 228, citing from N. Festa (ed.) 1898, 61. 6-9, 61. 21-23.

<sup>17</sup> If these two names stand for towns or a region is a matter of debate. Ahrweiler (1965: 72-73) discusses this as a regional name, whereas Tomaschek (1891: 29) argues for the region irrigated by the Kyron River, extending from Çeşme (Gr. Krini) to Urla (Gr. Vourla).

<sup>18</sup> Citing from Akropolites, Macrides, 2007, 217, ft. 39 and Angelov, 2007, 64, attempt to localize Perikylistra and they both follow Ahrweiler 1965:34–43, p. 35–37, who suggested that modern-day Halkapınar (lit. circular springs) in Konak, İzmir is the likely the location. By contrast, Ramsay (1890:116) identifies Perikylistra as Bunar Bashi (Pınarbaşı) in today’s Bornova, to the northeast of İzmir.

<sup>19</sup> I thank Javier Jimenez Martinez for going through the checklist of items to be found while digging up a nymphaeum in an archaeological context.

salvage excavations in 2002. To support my reconstruction regarding the essential functions of a basin surrounded by bathing rooms, I would like to extend the discussion to a larger Byzantine context to demystify what we are observing at the Nymphaion.

### 3.4 Ritual Bathing Practices in Constantinople

Bathing, a necessity for cleaning, also had ritual purposes in the Byzantine period, especially among members of the elite, clergy, and the imperial court. For example, Paul Magdalino has stated that Romanos I (r. 920–944) initially wanted to demolish a structure on his property in the Arsenal of the Neorion (Figure 12, circled in red),<sup>20</sup> which had been initially established by a certain *patrikios* named Antonios. After encountering the Virgin in a miraculous vision, Romanos decided to restore it and added a pool. Magdalino also notes that the earlier reign of Michael III (r. 842–867) coincided with the “Triumph of Orthodoxy” (the end of the Iconoclastic period). This religious shift involved the determination of pious and learned men to turn private bathing rooms (*loutron*) into ritual bathing sites (*louma*). This ritual was characterized by the assembly of “God-loving men” once a week, organized by *patrikios*, to carry out the practice of “Brothers of Christ.” (Magdalino, 2016, p. 134).<sup>21</sup> One aspect we need to highlight here is that often the *lousmata* are linked to public or monastic churches, but never to imperial palaces. Pious confraternities also served them. If my reading is correct, the Nymphaion, which was begun by John III Vatatzes, is an exception. Yet, I would like to make another connection here. Although it is pure speculation, I would like to ask if we can see this bathing-cum-pond space as a spatial rendition of Vatatzes as the Almsgiver?<sup>22</sup> The appellation “eleemosynary” (philanthropic) linked to Vatatzes may be considered in the context of not only his imperial but also his domestic program. So far, excavations have not revealed evidence for a chapel on the ground floor. But given that the middle room areas are larger in the palace, as indicated by the area occupied by the *kolymbos* on the ground floor, can we assume that there was a chapel on the floor above or just outside of the palace, now destroyed, that John III Vatatzes instituted a confraternity as part of his famous *eleemosyne*?<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, as Alice-Mary Talbot discusses (2014: 163), “The Byzantine emperors bathed twice, apparently the first time to cleanse the body, the second time for a ritual bath, being submerged three times in the pool.” Another piece of textual evidence comes from Blachernai, located on the northwestern tip of Constantinople (Figure 11, circled in purple),

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<sup>20</sup>This Arsenal was part of the harbor that is known with the same name and occupied the area that is located to the south of the Golden Horn and the east of the Galata Bridge, roughly corresponding to the area that is now known as Bahçekapı.

<sup>21</sup>The following two works are worthy of mentioning here: P. Magdalino, *Studies on the History and Topography*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007) and P. Magdalino, “Church, Bath and *Diakonia* in Medieval Constantinople,” *Church and People in Byzantium*, ed. Rosemary Morris, 165–188.

<sup>22</sup>For a thorough reading of Vatatzes’s imperial ideology and his cult as the Almsgiver, see Ruth Macrides, “From the Komnenoi to the Palaiologoi: Imperial Models in Decline and Exile.” *New Constantines*, Paul Magdalino (ed.) (Aldershot, 1994), 269–282.

<sup>23</sup>I thank Paul Magdalino for making this connection, and yet also telling me it would be a pure speculation.

for which the physical remains are fragmentary. The textual evidence indicates that there was the Church of *Theotokos*, the chapel of the *Soros*, containing the relics of the holy robe, and the associated holy bath, or *hagion louma*. Alice-Mary Talbot reminds us that our knowledge of the *hagion louma* derives mainly from the *Book of Ceremonies*, a tenth-century text on palace ceremonial etiquette, and a liturgical *typikon*. (Talbot, 2013, pp. 159-160 and 163) Every Friday, according to these texts, the emperor, accompanied by the senate, would go to the Blachernai and visit the church and chapel before retiring to the *adyton* (cloakroom) and changing into his golden towel (*lention*). He would then proceed to the *hagion louma*, which contained a *kolymbos* filled with holy water running through holes in the marble icon of the Virgin's hands (Talbot, 2013, pp. 159-160; Ousterhout, 2015, 65).

The aforementioned textual evidence for the emergence and rise of ritual bathing among members of the Byzantine court resonates with the archaeological evidence. In the excavations conducted by Robert Demangel and Ernest Mamboury in 1923 (1942, pp. 88-111 and plate XII), we note a Prokonessian basin, hexagonal in shape and embellished with water conduits on the inside and dodecagonal on the outside, topped with a ciborium carried on twelve colonettes (Figure 12). Robert Ousterhout reexamined this evidence and questioned whether the excavations by Mamboury and Demangel could be part of the Hodegon Monastery. I want to collaborate with his reading as in the accounts, we note that the *Theotokos ton Hodegon* housed an *hagiasma*, an icon of the Virgin, and a ritual bath, all supported by imperial patronage.<sup>24</sup> According to the *Patria*, the structure was built during the reign of Michael III. (The *Patria*, 2013, pp. 150 and 151). Regardless of whether the hexagons at Mangana were part of the Hodegon Monastery,<sup>25</sup> a building complex that is often situated to the east of Hagia Sophia, it is worth noting that imperial or aristocratic patronage was important in promoting sanctified bathing facilities in religious settings. These imperial and palatial cases help us to confirm that the ritual bathing practice appears to have begun in the ninth century and persisted in later decades in Byzantine Constantinople.

All this evidence suggests the following five points: First, Laskarid emperors, like their Byzantine counterparts, might have engaged in both ritual and regular bathing. Secondly, ritual bathing was conducted in proximity to palaces, both inside, as in the case of the Nymphaion, and outside, as indicated by the Blachernai. Thirdly, baths could be situated underneath other buildings. Fourthly, the Blachernai might have served as the most likely “prototype” for the Laskarid Nymphaion. And finally, I want to reiterate the point I made

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<sup>24</sup> Citing verbatim from Magdalino (2016, p.135) discusses that this was the Monastery of Hodegon, “which according to the *Patria* was built by Michael III which combined a sacred spring, a famous icon, a popular church in a revered monastery, imperial patronage and a ritual bath.”

<sup>25</sup> For a review of the scholarship on the enigmatic site of Mangana and its contents: R. Janin, *Les églises et les monastères*, 206-207; more recently, problems of identification and the overview of interpretations about the Mangana, A. Ercan Kydonakis, “The Phantom of Byzantine Constantinople,” 287-312.

elsewhere (Çağaptay 2019, p. 290) that the borrowings the Laskarids took from Constantinople helped them craft their imperial identity. Just as the Laskarids aimed to create their imperial image by reviving and accommodating the literary, architectural, and visual forms of Komnenian Constantinople, we can assume another revival and continuity in ritual bathing practices.

### **3.5 Of Water and the *Kolymbos*: The Case of the Nymphaion**

The textual accounts of the Laskarid emperors describe their frequent visits to the bathhouses, but do not specify any ritual component. (Herrin, 2010, p. 278; Constantinides, 2002, p. 93 and Akropolites I: § 39 and § 56). As discussed in detail by Alice-Mary Talbot (2013: 162-170), the continuation of ritual bathing in Constantinople from the middle Byzantine period into later periods might suggest that the Laskarid rulers could well have conducted this imperial practice at the Nymphaion. Keeping in mind the description provided by Magdalino, Talbot, and Ousterhout's reading of the architectural remains at the Blachernai, I would like to argue that ritual bathing in the basin, as well as in private rooms, took place at the Nymphaion.

Notwithstanding the lack of Laskarid-era textual evidence specifically talking about a ritual bathing section within the Nymphaion to support this claim, the archaeological findings I presented in this article hint at an oval basin filled with water, with walls decorated by frescoes and covered with a sail-vaulted roof reminiscent of a tholos-shaped roof, a *kolymbos*, as can be visualized in figures 9 and 10 in this article. The basin, as noted, was accessed through a corridor that likewise allowed for passage in and out of the rooms. While the southern section with hypocaust tiles suggests a *louma*, the room in the north wing may well have functioned as an *adyton*, or a cloakroom, overhung by a slightly pointed vault. Furthermore, based on a water-filled oval basin and smaller side rooms fitted for private bathing, the excavated remains at the Nymphaion visually manifest a version of the textual description of the *hagion louma* at the Blachernai.<sup>26</sup> While the Nymphaion lacks references to details such as holy water, connectivity with a chapel—which might have been located on the upper floors of the palace—and marble icons, the palatial context, layout, roofing system, interior decoration, and relationship between the pool and side rooms allow me to suggest that ritual bathing might have occurred at the Nymphaion. Strikingly, the *kolymbos*, a term only found in textual accounts, has been discovered archaeologically at the Nymphaion. The presence of a pool topped with a vaulting suggesting a *kolymbos* might suggest a profane or sacred bathing practice in the Laskarid realms.

### **3.6 Cross-Cultural Reflections of Bathing Practices in the Medieval World**

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<sup>26</sup> For the description, see Talbot, 2013, p 163.

Just as the single-block framework overlapped and shared idioms, so did bathing in the courtly cultures of the medieval world. Whether it served a ritualistic purpose or not, it was an essential architectural unit appended to palatial contexts. For example, among the Laskarids' immediate neighbors, the Rum Seljuks, we see a wide range of archaeological evidence for how they integrated bathing into their daily lives. The bathing complex in Aksaray, dating to 1192; the site of Hasbahçe in Alanya, dating to the period of Alaeddin Keykubad I (r. 1220-1237), (Redford, 1993, 2000, and 2015); the Köşklü Hamam within the Kubadabad Complex in Beyşehir, dating to the 1220s<sup>27</sup>; and the Şekerhane Köşk, the so-called Cenotaph of Trajan at Selinus in Alanya, a temple turned into a kiosk with a bathhouse, also dating to the 1220s (Winterstein, 2007, and Türkmen et al., 2009), are good examples. The Rum Seljuk evidence demonstrates how the ruling family and the elite used landscape resources to provide themselves with the civic amenities they needed.

Bathing complexes within palaces are also noted in the western Mediterranean during the medieval period. Giuseppe Bellafigliore's work on La Zisa discusses the presence of a chapel, a fishpond, and a hypocaust-tiled room located near a spring, as described by sixteenth-century travelers. Ursula Staacke (1991: 51-60) suggests that it may have been from 1165 to 1189. La Zisa (Figure 13) is comparable to Nymphaion not only in its compact planning, functioning as a hunting lodge and residential and administrative quarters, but also in its ultimate prismatic shape. Similarly, in the Sicilo-Norman context, we have the spring-fed bathhouse at Lo Scibene and La Favara with its hypocaust-tiled bathing room fed by an artificial lake built nearby, both of which predate La Zisa (Katz, 2016, 173-183 and 138-149).

We can add one more comparanda to these Italian examples: the Castel del Monte (Figure 14). This was Frederick II's hunting retreat, built in Apulia around 1240, which included an octagonal pond. Recalling the geometry of baptismal fonts, this octagonal pond, possibly used for dipping and containing an inner console for pool coping (Figure 15), (Caskey, 1999; p. 186; Calò Mariani, 1992; 2015, p. 69-71; 74-76; 78-81). This evidence demonstrates that the connections between Frederick II and John III Vatatzes abound. John III Vatatzes pledged a political alliance to Frederick II in return for his help in recovering Constantinople, and he also provided military service to Frederick II during the Siege of Brescia in 1238. This close alliance led Vatatzes to marry Frederick's illegitimate daughter, Constance II, known to the Byzantines as Anna. Given the political alliances between Frederick II and John III Vatatzes,<sup>28</sup> can we assume a direct source of transmission or exchange between the two worlds? Interestingly, we see that these buildings were located on plains or high points, surrounded by green areas and parklands offering grounds for

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<sup>27</sup> For a recent description of the excavated remains, <https://www.kubadabad.com/kosklu-hamam>. The access date: April 01, 2025.

<sup>28</sup> For an overview between Frederick II and the Laskarid court, see D. Angelov, 2007.

hunting and other courtly activities, not only in the contemporaneous Rum Seljuk examples but also in the Norman Sicilian and Italian ones.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In sum, for the Nymphaion, the fortresslike effect, which the late Cyril Mango (1973: 254) described as “lacking any attempt at elegance,”<sup>29</sup> was part of the design for good reasons. Besides having a military aspect, the palace’s setting in a plain surrounded by agricultural fields can be seen as reflecting a Laskarid interest in the land and its potential. Contemporary historians often praised John III Vatatzes’s interest in cultivating the soil. His policies helped form an army that included peasants on the Seljuk frontier, whose members cultivated the land. Vatatzes might even be seen as a thirteenth-century protectionist ruler during a time of peril: to strengthen his domestic economy, he discouraged the import of goods from outside the empire. He urged his subjects to purchase only what was produced locally. Hence, western Asia Minor under the reign of Vatatzes became primarily a middle-class agricultural society (Gregoras, 1:43, 17-24).

The recent findings of the salvage excavations at the Nymphaion help us consider four aspects of the Laskarid interest in the land and its potential: first, political, in the sense that the Nymphaion was located on the fringes of Laskarid Asia Minor, built not primarily as a retreat from the city but rather as a central administrative ground; second, seasonal, as a feature in the cyclical residency of the royals; third, military, as expressed in its sturdy, towerlike appearance might have provided security to the Laskarid emperors, commanding the plain; and, fourth, water-based, given the fecundity of the terrain and its practical and symbolic significance. This aspect highlights ambition for territorial expansion, signaling the impermanence of both Laskarid borders and those of its neighbors. At the same time, the agrarian and hydraulic dimensions enabled the Laskarid emperors to thrive on well-watered, fertile lands. Findings from salvage excavations are especially telling for the last aspect: the hydraulic. The bathing floor, whether used for ritual or private bathing purposes, indicated the “Laskarid milieu” in which water flowed, nymphs resided, and prosperity appeared possible. The overall excavations reveal the Laskarid aquatic setting, which completely changes our understanding of late Byzantine palatial idioms.

#### Appendix 1<sup>30</sup>

S. Lampros, “Ἐπίγραμμα sur l’‘hédre de Lascaris’,” *Ἐπίγραμμα εἰς τὴν ἔδραν τοῦ Λασκάρεως*, *Νέος Ἑλλ.* 3 (1906): 122-123.

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<sup>29</sup> C. Mango, 1973: 275 states that the Tekfur Saray is a more elegant version of the palace of Nymphaion.

<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to Paul Magdalino for reading my text and providing me with the translations and encouraging me to rethink the archaeological and textual evidence at the Nymphaion.

The epigram was discovered in Ms. Phill. 1581.

Τὸ πρὶν τηλεθάον **Νυμφάων** χεύμασι δένδρον ἐτμήθην ὠμῶς ὑλοτόμου παλάμη ἀλλάγνάθους Ἥφαιστου λάβρον τε στόμ' ἀλύξαι Λασκάρει κλεινὴ νῦν **καθέδρη** γενόμενῃ. Νύμφαι τοίνυν χαίρετε, δένδρεα θάλλετε τᾶλλα νυμφαϊκοῖς θαμινῶς ῥεύμασιν ἀρδομενα χ' ὑμεῖς Κεκροπίδες τραυλίζειν μὴ φείδεσθε τοῖς κείνων κλωσιν βήματ' ἔρεθσάμεναι. Κύκνον ἐπεὶ μελίγυρυν ἐμοῖς λάχον ἀγκαλίδεσσιν αἴρειν Μουσάω φθέγματ' ἔρευγόμενον, οἷς παινομένη γλυκεροῖς ἀρδεύμασιν οὔσιν τῶν ὑπὸ Νυμφάων θάλλω ἀρειότερον.

**(Naomi Pitamber, “Replacing Byzantium,” 2015, p. 229)**

“The mighty tree in front of [the] luxuriant **Nymphaion**, streaming with spring waters, having been untimely cut down, has escaped from the jaws and mouth of Hephaistos And has now been fashioned, by the hand of the carpenter, into the **throne** of the renowned Laskaris.

And now, greetings, Nymphs! Trees, sprout anew!

And you other waters crowded with nymphaic streams, and you, Athenians [i.e., descendants of King Kekrops of Athens], having been fixed on a base, pay no heed to the lisped clucking of others.

Then I chanced upon a sweet-voiced swan that trumpets with the voice of the Muses, and with bent arms carried [its voice] to us, by virtue of irrigated land, [increasing] in sweetness, so would I thrive better at Nymphaion.”

**(Paul Magdalino’s translation, via email, Jan 10, 2018).**

“Once flourishing as a tree by the streams of the **nymphs** I was brutally felled by the woodcutter’s hand,

But escaping the jaws and the fierce mouth of Hephaistos I have now become a **distinguished chair** for Laskaris.

So rejoice, O nymphs, and sprout, you other trees,

Irrigated repeatedly by the streams of the nymphs (*or* Nymphaic streams),

And you, O Atticists, do not stop chirping

As you base your steps [establish your chairs?] upon their branches.

For the sweet-voiced (?) swan whose lot is my embrace

Likes to pour forth utterances of the Muses,

And nourished by their sweet irrigations

I thrive more vigorously than by those irrigated by the Nymphs.”

**Author’s note: With the help of personal communication with Paul Magdalino on February 18, 2018, here, quoted verbatim:** “As one sees, there are major differences in both translations. Pitamber argues that this is an epigram written in the Laskarid period,

reading the words **Νυμφάων** as **Nymphaion** and **καθέδρη** as the **throne**. Grammar-wise, the former stands for the nymphs and the latter for a distinguished chair. It is not an epigram from the Laskarid period, but rather from the fifteenth century, referring most likely to Konstantinos Laskaris (1434-1501), a Byzantine philologist in Renaissance Italy.”

### **Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Beyanı**

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Makalenin tamamı Suna Çağaptay tarafından kaleme alınmıştır.

### **Çıkar Beyanı**

Yazarın herhangi bir kişi ya da kuruluş ile çıkar çatışması yoktur.

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**ILLUSTRATIONS**

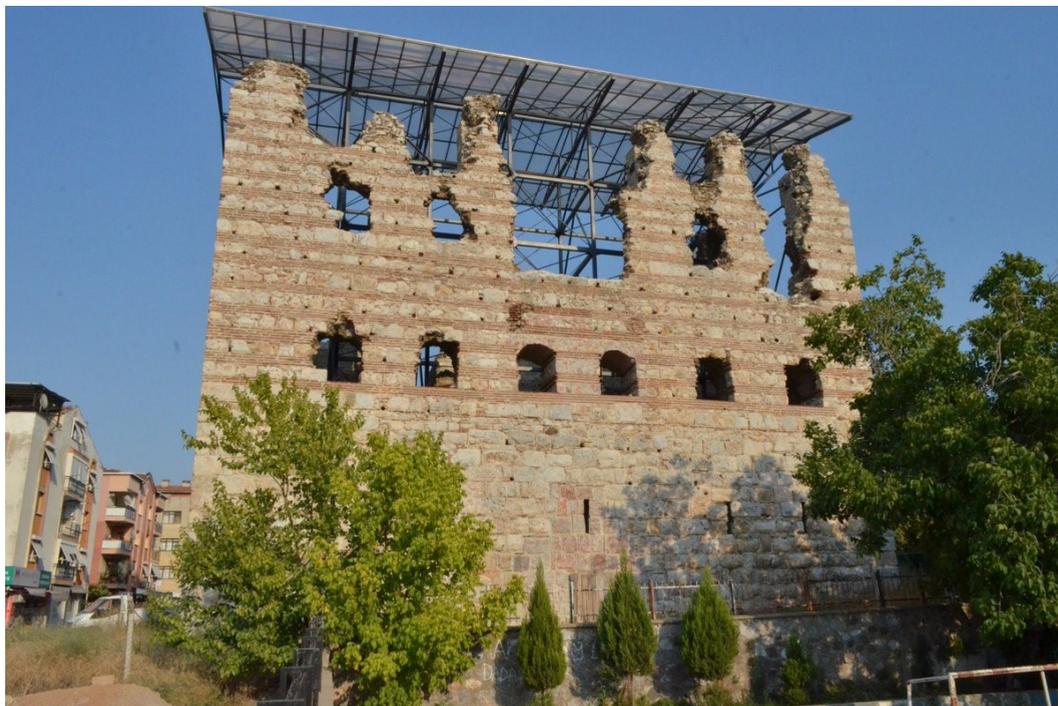


Fig.1 A General view into the east façade, 2018 (David Hendrix)



Fig. 2 Doorway on the north side (Suna aęaptay)



Figure 3. A view into the vaulted basin during the earlier stages of excavations, showing the springing of the vaults and water sprouts (Suna Çağaptay)



Figure 4. The round well head identified in the middle of the basin (Suna Çağaptay)



Figure 5. A view into the walls of the basin with frescoes and water conduits (Suna Çağaptay)



Figure 6. The hypocaust tile in one of the south rooms (Suna Çağaptay)



Figure 7. A view into the changing room section on the north (Suna aęaptay)



Figure 8. Halkapınar (<https://www.izmirdergisi.com/tr/turizm/kultur-turizmi/45-izmir-in-kayip-golu-halkapinar>) (Accessed on April 01, 2025).

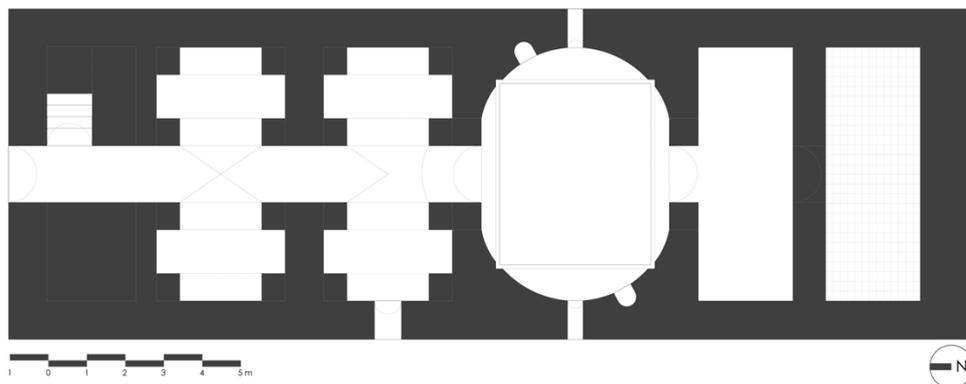


Figure 9. The plan of the ground floor, drawn by Alp Yılmaz and Suna Çağaptay on the basis of the author's visit to the site in 2012 and also Pitamber, 2015, fig.174).

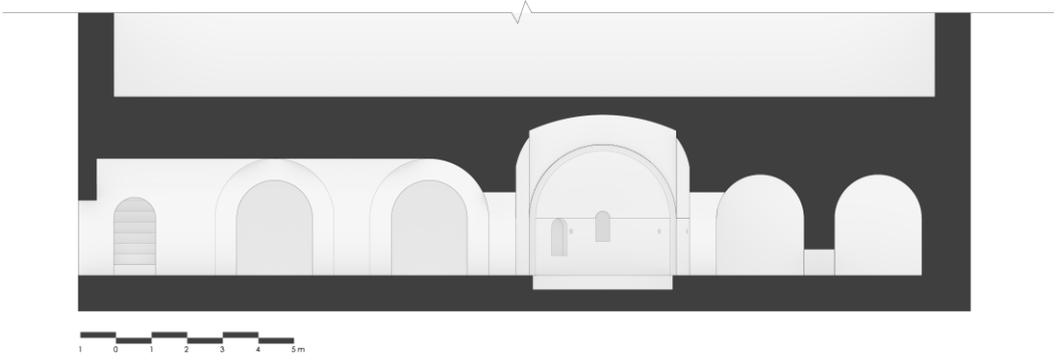


Fig. 10. Section of the ground floor drawn by Alp Yılmaz and Suna aęaptay, on the basis of the author's visit to the site in 2012 and also Pitamber, 2015, fig.174)

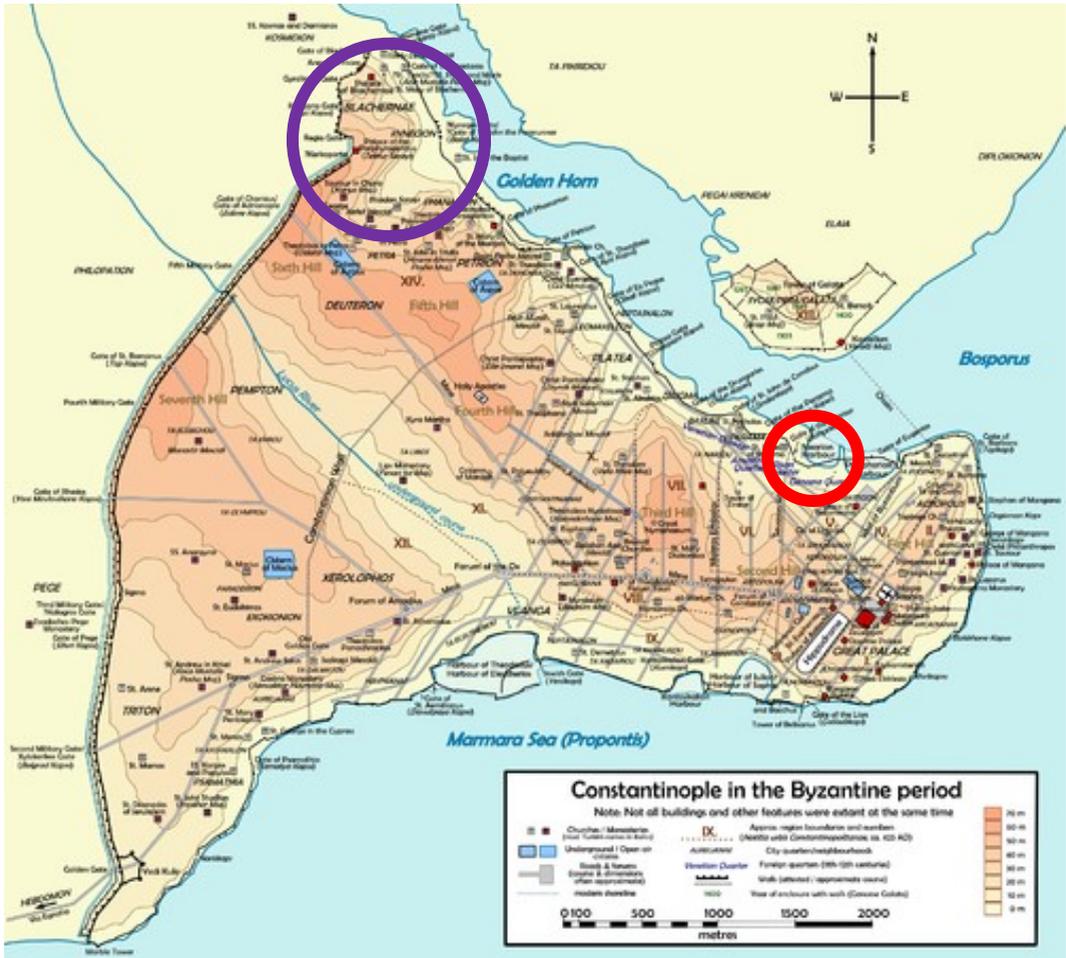


Figure 11. Map of Constantinople (Red: Neorion and Purple: Blachernai).  
 (Source: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>; Date of Access: April 01, 2025).

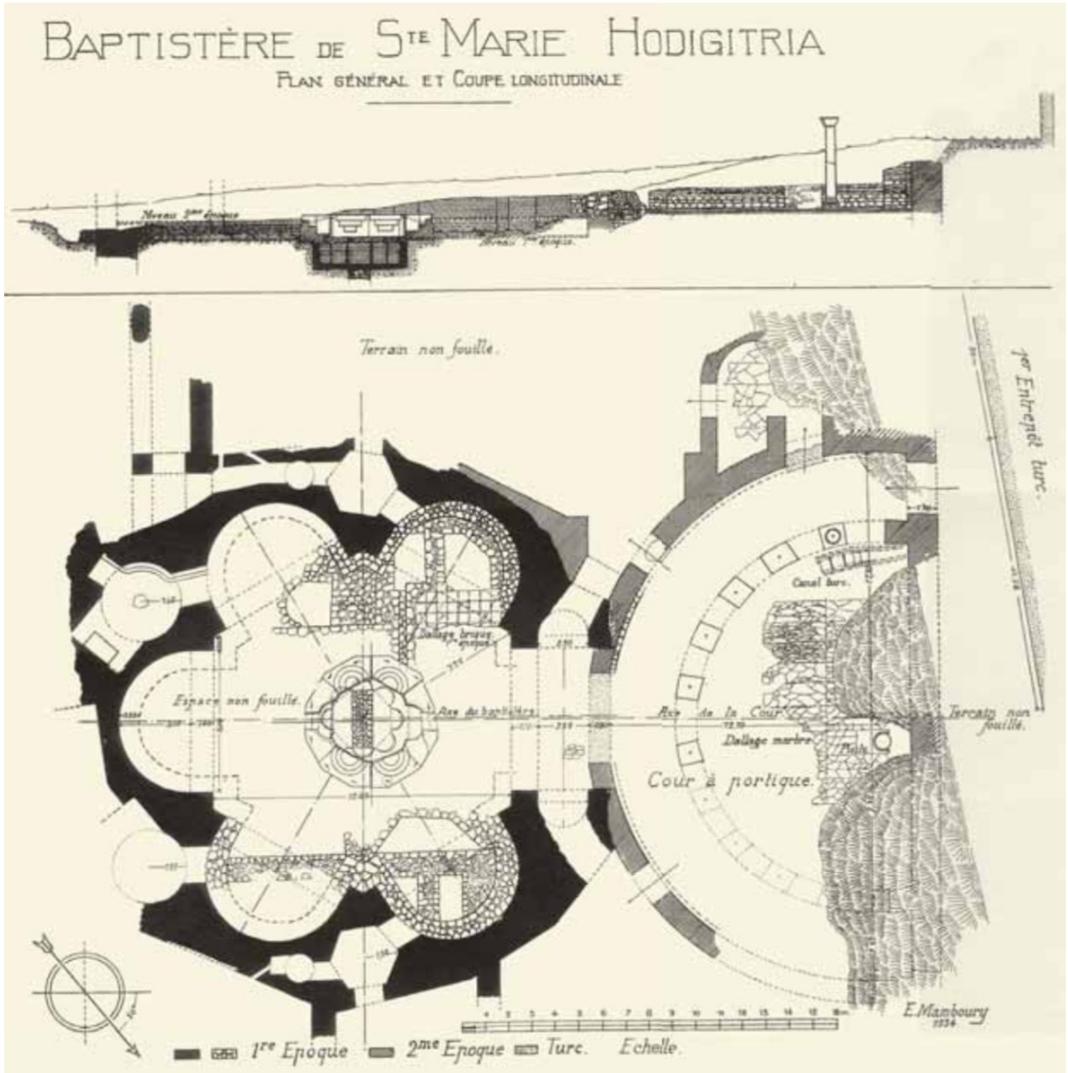


Figure 12. Plan of the hexagonal building, Mangana area, 1934  
(from R. Demangel and E. Mamboury, *Le quartier des Manganes et la première région de Constantinople* [Paris, 1942], pl. XII).



Figure 13. La Zisa Palace (Photo: Suna Çağaptay)



Figure 14. Castel del Monte (Photo: Suna Çağaptay)

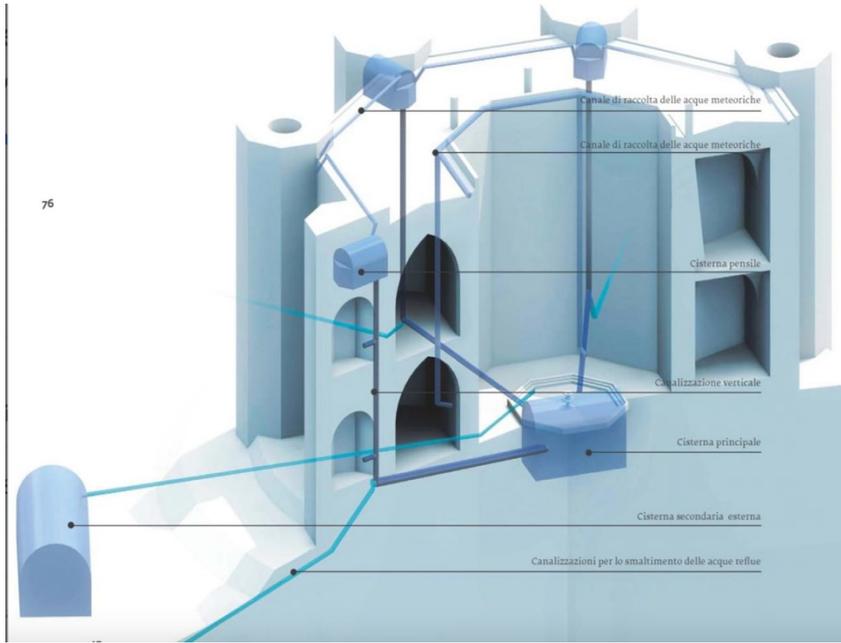


Figure 15. Diagram showing the water infrastructure at Castel del Monte (Caló Mariani, 2015, fig. 11).