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Torp, H. *La Rotonde Palatine à Thessalonique. Architecture et Mosaïques* vol. I-II.

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Hjalmar Torp is one of the most important Norwegian scholars working on Classical and Byzantine material. Among many other honours and signs of regard, he is Professor Emeritus at the University of Oslo and Member of the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters, who awarded him their prestigious Fridtjof Nansen medal in 1999. He has also been honoured with the Silver Medal of Hagios Demetrios from the Holy Diocese of Thessaloniki, and is a Knight of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic. In 1953-1954, Torp spent time in Thessaloniki studying the mosaics of the Rotunda, and he has been working on them, one way or another, ever since. His first book on the topic was published in 1963 in Norwegian, which unfortunately

meant that it did not get the recognition it deserved. Since then, Torp has continued to publish articles on the church and its mosaics, as well as a handy guide in Greek and English, *The Rotunda in Thessaloniki and its Mosaics* (with Bente Kiilerich, Athens 2017). The book reviewed here, *La Rotonde Palatine à Thessalonique: Architecture et Mosaïques*, is the culmination of over fifty years of study, a true magnum opus.

The Rotunda in Thessaloniki (also known now as the Church of St George, Hagios Georgios) is one of the major surviving monuments of Late Antiquity, and its spectacular mosaics are among the most beautiful and sophisticated. But it is a problematic building with a contested history. It seems likely it was originally part of a Late Antique palace complex. At some point, it was converted into a church and at some point, mosaics were put into the building. The who, when and why of these events is hotly debated.

Against this backdrop, this book is a monumental achievement, a thorough and detailed study of the building and of its mosaics. Torp has very clear ideas and arguments about the date of both. His view is that the archaeological evidence – which he fairly-mindedly sees as circumstantial – suggests that the building itself was begun in the very early fourth century and completed and decorated with mosaics in the reign of Theodosios I, an emperor who spent periods of time in Thessaloniki between 379-80 and 387-88, and who was responsible for laws making Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. The core argument of the book is that the Rotunda should be understood as Theodosios's palace church and the mosaics should be interpreted in that context. These are contentions that Torp has been making consistently in articles since 1963, but in this book, he gathers everything together to make that rationale more substantively.

Volume One is the text. The opening two chapters consider the architecture of the Rotunda. For an ostensibly simple structure – a circular building with an external diameter of 36.5 metres and 6.3 metres thick walls interrupted by eight barrel-vaulted niches – it has generated a huge amount of debate, largely about the sequencing of the phases of adaptation and repair. Torp sets it up as a Late Roman structure, part of a place complex built by the emperor Galerius (293-311), perhaps a sort of Pantheon, a temple to all the gods or to the imperial cult, but one that was never completed or roofed. It was then converted to a church, with the structures that go with a church. Torp's reconstruction of the church is based on the important excavations and surveys of Ernest Hébrard in 1919 and Ejnar Dyggve in 1939, which he uses to advance his argument for the addition of an ambulatory, and on the more recent work undertaken by, in particular, Kalliope Theocharidou (important in the discussion of the phases in the construction of the dome). His conclusion is that the structure should be seen as a palace church, the work of Theodosios I. This is not uncontroversial: others would argue that it was the work of Constantine I, and not everyone is convinced by Hébrard's and Dyggve's interpretations of what they found, which form the base for Torp's own interpretations. I note this, because it is against this framing that the discussion of the mosaics takes place, occupying

the bulk of the book. Torp's view that the conversion and the mosaics are should be attributed to Theodosios I both underpins the rest of the book and is the case that is argued throughout.

Discussion of the mosaics opens with a chapter laying out the history of the mosaics after their installation and the various vicissitudes they have undergone. Indeed, most recently, they and the Rotunda were severely damaged in an earthquake and were under restoration between 1978 and 2015. The presence of a scaffold for over twenty years allowed Torp access to the mosaics in a way not possible otherwise, and this adds depth to his analysis. It also means that he was familiar with them before and after the restorations. This chapter also summarises debates in the scholarship about the date of the mosaics, including the vexed question of what the radiocarbon date of a fragment of mortar from the building might be understood to be. If I appear to sit on the fence here over the issue of date and indeed patron, it is because I am on the fence. Two papers published in *The Mosaics of Thessaloniki Revisited* in 2017, one by Beat Brenk, the other by Torp himself, are worth consulting in this context. They set out different strengths and weaknesses of the many arguments around both topics, and it seems to me that as yet, no one line of reasoning is totally convincing or conclusive.

Fascinating though the architecture is, the glory of the Rotunda lies in its mosaics. They originally covered the cupola and the barrel vaults of the passages and windows. Torp gives a figure of about 1815 square metres for the original total extent of the mosaics, though not all of that survives. Four distinct areas of mosaic do remain. In the vaults and lunettes, the mosaics echo floor mosaics in their geometric designs with birds, fruits, baskets, stylised flowers and all manner of ornaments. In the cupola, there are three zones, all containing figures. The lowest is the best-preserved. Here in a framework of gold and silver architecture, fifteen of the original twenty saints stand solemnly resplendent, in groups of two or three, hands lifted in prayer. They vary in height from 2.28 to 2.40 metres, and are accompanied by inscriptions which identify each by name, profession and month of commemoration. In the middle, very little remains but what does suggests there were perhaps thirty figures in long white robes circling the space. Finally, in the centre of the dome are the remains of an image of Christ; only the tip of a halo and a right hand survive, but a sketch on the brickwork suggests he was depicted as a standing figure in flowing robes. Around him are three concentric bands: stars on a blue background; a garland of flowers and fruit; and a rainbow. These bands are supported by what remains of four angels, with the head of a phoenix popping up between two of them.

The centre of the book is Torp's very detailed and full account of the mosaics, working through these different zones. He starts with the splendid ornamental mosaics of the vaults and lunettes, with a detailed description and discussion of the motifs, setting these into a wide-ranging art historical context. To pick out just one aspect from many, the associations he draws between the mosaics and textiles is an important one, often overlooked in the literature in favour of comparisons with floor mosaics. Next is the discussion on the images of the saints at the base of the cupola, first the frames, then the figures and then the architecture. That bald sentence does not do justice to the depth of observation and thought that has gone into these sections.

These mosaics are really complicated to describe and analyse; they contain a huge amount of material to work through. For a start, there is no convincing story yet for why the choice of these saints and why they are organised as they are: they are not organised by month or by profession, nor is it clear why they are grouped as they are. Nonetheless, a lot of skill on the part of the mosaicists has gone into making each one different in his appearance and clothing, of turning them into individuals, details which are not visible from the floor of the church. Torp does a grand job of breaking this mass of material into manageable sections – each martyr one at a time – and then, importantly, he also brings the material together for a wider discussion of iconography and typology (a section written in part by Küllerich, who has clearly made a fully acknowledged wider contribution to the book and its ideas), setting the saints between reality and imagination. There is a whole chapter dedicated to considering who these saints are and why they might appear together in this mosaic programme - geographical? Imperial? Protectors of the East? Maybe their relics were held in the church? Another chapter is dedicated to teasing out complex webs of dogmatic elements of the mosaics, seen through the details such as candelabra, ciboria, crosses, books, thrones and fountains. Torp draws this together to highlight three themes: the Trinity; the words of Christ; and the Heavenly Church; these echo and re-echo in and across the mosaics. These, he argues, were themes with particular resonances in fourth- and fifth-century Christianity: the Trinity, for example, mattered to the Orthodox emperor Theodosios in his conflict with Arian Christians who sought to downplay the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Moving then to the architecture that surrounds the saints, Torp provides an equally detailed account, breaking the architecture into types, relating it to Roman painting and the *scaena frons*, but also asking if this depiction in the late fourth century (as he sees it) represents an on-going tradition or a return to earlier models. Finally, he considers the role of the architecture in creating an image of heaven, the New Jerusalem, a heavenly palace inside the earthly church, pulling together many of the little iconographic details – the swan frieze running around some of the buildings, the use of the globe, the cypress trees, the peacock tail niches – to show how they come together to create an overwhelming image. Then, above the martyrs in the next zone are the remains of feet and above that in the centre, is the great roundel depicting Christ held aloft by four angels, and the phoenix. These too get their full description. Torp suggests that the feet belong to dancing angels, located below a vault in which Christ stands in majesty, victorious inside a rainbow border. Christ in this interpretation is the light of the world, and something of a conflation with Sol Invictus, the Undeclared Sun so influential in the iconography of Theodosios's great predecessor, Constantine I.

These are dense, detailed sections of the book, packed with information and complex ideas. They bring together the labours of over fifty years of thought and research into a coherent whole. Then, having laid out for his reader the separate details of each band of decoration, Torp shows how it can all pull together. In the concluding four chapters, he moves increasingly from the specific to the more general. First he considers the lost mosaics of the choir and apse and what they might have been before moving to contemplate how the zones of mosaic might have

functioned as an ensemble in the setting of a palace church, so scaling the earlier discussions about iconography up a level, and highlighting the mosaics as an appropriate setting for a Christ-Sol figure. There then follows a useful discussion of materials and techniques, including valuable details about the density of the setting of the tesserae. (It is a pity that so far no work seems to have been done on the analysis of the tesserae but it is possible that this will be forthcoming from the restoration work). The thinking about how the mosaics work visually, the blending of colours and the reflections of light, the aesthetics of the mosaics and the lovely technical details that went into the creation of the images is fascinating. Finally, the mosaics are set into the art of the age of Theodosios, as an explicit account of something which has been implicit in many ways in the earlier chapters in terms of style and of iconography. If I were to summarise where we end up in one sentence, it would be that Torp sees the mosaics as taking a familiar visual language from the traditions of Roman art and adapting them for a Christian end, one that placed Christ, his angels and saints eternally above the congregation.

As with all Kapon books, this is beautifully produced and very thoroughly illustrated. The second volume is all pictures, largely colour. It is well-organised by chapter and includes many reproductions from both Hébrard's and Dyggve's publications, as well as Torp's own over the many years. The photographs of the mosaics come largely from Torp and Küllerich's own photographs, and supply some wonderful details not found in other publications, details of the tablia of two of the saints and of the robe of Basiliskos for example, and the one page with the heads of all of the saints. And also, depending on the date the images shows elements of the mosaics before, during and after restoration. There is also a wealth of valuable comparative material. Dyggve's plans and elevations are used, and Marianne Brochmann's exquisite and very useful line drawings of different elements of the mosaics are a bonus.

As I've suggested, not everyone will agree with all of Torp's arguments and the conclusions he draws from the material. However, Torp does discuss many of the alternative theses and in so doing allows his readers scope to think for themselves. One of the biggest problems is that the mosaics of the Rotunda stand alone. There are no other mosaics – no other works of art - that are really like them. This is a problem in mosaic studies more widely: surviving mosaics are generally so few and so far between, and so problematic in their dating, that drawing comparisons across them feels unproductive. When Torp asks questions like whether the depiction of architecture is a return or a continuing tradition, it is clear this is an important question to ask – but whether the paucity of the evidence allows us to answer it is another story. How valid or useful comparisons are across media is like asking how long is a piece of string, but that is almost the only tool available to us. In the end, as Torp acknowledges, the evidence from which he draws his over-arching conclusions can only be circumstantial.

Nonetheless, Torp's book is hugely important. It is very much the sort of book that is needed before many of the bigger questions can be begun to be answered. Any book which presents the reader with the level of detail and density of material that this one does is not an easy read. That is not the point. We readers need to know that detail and to have the arguments

and debates laid out before us by the expert, by the person who knows the building and its mosaics through years of patient study and thought. I may not be totally convinced in the end by all of Torp's arguments, but I can only salute his depth of knowledge. Reading this book has enhanced and enriched my understanding of the Rotunda and its mosaics. Every church, every set of mosaics, deserves a book like this. Thank you, Professor Torp.

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