

The Last Roman Forum: the Forum of Leo in Fifth-century Constantinople

K. R. Dark and A. L. Harris

THE FORUM OF LEO, constructed in Constantinople in 471, has not attracted much previous discussion—perhaps because it is not described in detail in written sources, and its exact site and extent are unknown. However, the significance of the Forum extends beyond the city itself: it is the latest example of an imperial forum in the Roman Empire, and so of considerable archaeological and architectural interest on an Empire-wide scale.¹

Written evidence shows that the Forum of Leo was the last of a series of imperial *fora* constructed in fourth- and fifth-century Constantinople. These included the Forum of Constantine (ca. 328), the Forum of Arcadius (403), the Forum of Theodosius (423), and the Forum of Marcian (450–452). All of these other *fora* survive in the landscape of modern Istanbul as archaeological monuments. The *fora* of Constantine, Arcadius, and Marcian are still represented by parts of the monumental columns that they once contained. The great arched gateway of the Forum of Theodosius is another prominent landmark of the modern city, and terraces and walls associated with that forum may still be seen in neighbouring streets.²

The sites of these *fora* are, therefore, seldom disputed, although the details of their exact architectural form are more

¹ C. Mango, *Le développement urbain de Constantinople* (Paris 2004) 71–72; F. A. Bauer, *Stadt, Platz und Denkmal in der Spätantike* (Mainz 1996) 215.

² Mango, *Le développement* 28–29, 44–45, 71, 77–78; Bauer, *Stadt* esp. 167–215; C. Mango, *Studies on Constantinople* (Aldershot 1993) III, IV, X, and XI; U. Peschlow, “Eine wiedergewonnene byzantinische Ehrensäule in Istanbul,” in O. Feld and U. Peschlow (eds.), *Studien zur spätantiken und frühbyzantinischen Kunst I* (Bonn 1986) 21–33.

debatable—for example it is uncertain whether the arch surviving from the Forum of Theodosius was the western or eastern arch of the forum. However, even the site of the Forum of Leo is unknown.³

Locating the Forum of Leo

As Mango has noted, what appears to be the most accurate description of the Forum's location is in a fifteenth-century Latin translation of the *Synkrisis* of Manuel Chrysoloras. This tells us that the Column of Leo, which was located in the Forum—and which fell only ca. 1400—had stood *super Byzantiorum tumulo* (“on the hill”—that is, acropolis—“of Byzantium”) *ad dexteram templi Pacis* (“to the right of the temple of Peace”). The site of the acropolis of Roman-period Byzantium is not in doubt: it is the hilltop on which the Ottoman palace of Topkapı Sarayı later stood. The *templum Pacis* is presumably, as Mango observes, meant to indicate the famous, and still intact, church of the Holy Peace (Hagia Eirene), immediately southwest of this hill.⁴

Hagia Eirene is not itself *super Byzantiorum tumulo*, so that the description is best to be understood to mean that the Forum was both to the right of the church and on the acropolis. If the Forum was located “to the right” of the church, this cannot mean to the south of the building, as would be implied if one were looking east from the western entrance of the church or the entrance to its atrium. The ruins of the Hospital of Samson still stand immediately next to the church to the south, and beyond them are surviving Byzantine cisterns. There is no trace of anything that could be a Roman-style forum in this zone, despite the large amount of archaeological evidence surviving in the area. In addition, the available area between the Hospital of Samson and Hagia Sophia is probably insufficient

³ R. Naumann, “Neue Beobachtungen am Theodosiusbogen und Forum Tauri in Istanbul,” *IstMitt* 26 (1976) 117–141; Mango, *Le développement* 77; J. Bardill, *Brickstamps of Constantinople* (Oxford 2004) 130. Dagron's classic *Naissance d'une Capitale* (1984) does not even mention the Forum of Leo.

⁴ Mango, *Le développement* 77–78, see also 71.

to accommodate a Roman forum. In any case, this area is also not on the hill of the acropolis but to its south.⁵

For the area west of Hagia Eirene to be “to the right of” the church would require one to look south from the western entrance of Hagia Eirene or its atrium. This would place the Forum of Leo on a very steep slope down to the main harbour to the east—not an obvious location for a Roman-style public square and, again, not “on the hill of the acropolis” at all. Although Byzantine-period terracing survives well in Istanbul, it is absent from this zone, and this location can therefore be excluded as a possible site for the Forum.

The zone to the east of Hagia Eirene could be described as “to the right” of the church, if one is facing the south of the church (or is just east of the apse) and looking north from the axis of the building. However, the main terrace wall of the acropolis transects it, and, as both a Byzantine baptistery under the eastern range of the Ottoman Third Court and a Byzantine cistern cut the terrace wall, the wall has to be Byzantine or earlier. As the terrace wall running across it shows, this area is another that is not “on the hill” of the acropolis. Thus, this area may also be excluded as a possible location for the Forum.

It is more likely, therefore, if the Forum of Leo probably was “on the hill” and “to the right” of Hagia Eirene, that it stood north of the church. In terms of the present topography, this would be within the First, Second, or Third Courts of the Ottoman palace complex of Topkapı Sarayı (today a museum) or the part of the surrounding park at the tip of the promontory to their north.⁶

The *Chronicle* of John Malalas, a text of the sixth century A.D., says that there had been temples dedicated to the pagan deities Helios, Artemis, and Aphrodite on the acropolis in the Roman period (13.39). Malalas observes that these structures were still standing, but used for other purposes, in his own lifetime. The *Chronicon Paschale* (p.495 Bonn) tells us that the temple of Aphrodite on the acropolis was opposite the theatre; and a

⁵ Mango, *Le développement* 78.

⁶ H. Tezcan, *Topkapı Sarayı ve çevresinin Bizans devri arkeolojisi* (Istanbul 1989), unnumbered main foldout map.

curving wall, which may be that of a theatre, was identified by Martiny on the seaward hill-slope below the eastern side of the Second Court of the Ottoman complex. This is significant for the location of the Forum of Leo, because the temple of Aphrodite became the carriage house for the Praetorian Prefect. This is known to have been in, or close to, the Forum of Leo, which would, then, also be on the acropolis—perhaps in the area of the Second Court of Topkapı Sarayı.⁷

Archaeology may provide confirmation for this. The massive column capital, fragments of shaft and impost blocks that now lie in the Second Court of Topkapı Sarayı were excavated in the same court, but do not appear to have been reused in the Ottoman complex. Peschlow, Mango, and others have identified these pieces as probably deriving from the Column of Leo.⁸ If the capital is from the Forum of Leo, then this supports the view that the fifth-century forum stood on the later site of the Second Court of Topkapı Sarayı. This site offers much potential for a major imperial complex because it is a level area with extensive views across the city, visible from land and sea alike. This spot might also have had both symbolic and topographical attractions as the highest point in the city centre and the monumental core of the Roman town. Ships coming into the harbour on the Golden Horn would draw in under the promontory forming the acropolis, and traffic along the Bosphorus to the east would see this hill clearly as they passed through the narrow straits.⁹

Identifying the buildings of the Forum

The Second Court of Topkapı Sarayı has been extensively excavated. The fullest account is by Oğan, a former director of the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, which contains measured plans of the site and partial finds-lists. Other finds are

⁷ See E. Jeffreys et al., *The Chronicle of John Malalas* (Melbourne 1986) 187; Mango, *Le développement* 18.

⁸ Mango, *Studies* III “Addenda”; Peschlow, in Feld/Peschlow, *Studien*.

⁹ K. R. Dark, “The Eastern Harbours of Early Byzantine Constantinople,” *Byzantion* 75 (2005) 152–163; “The New Post Office Site in Istanbul and the North-eastern Harbour of Byzantine Constantinople,” *IJNA* 33 (2004) 315–319.

noted in the accession lists of Istanbul Archaeological Museum. By combining the different published descriptions of the excavation, a picture of what was found can be pieced together.¹⁰

The principal excavated structure found in the excavation was a large aisled basilica with a polygonal apse and a small narthex attached to its west (*fig. 1*). The plan and decoration of the structure, along with associated burials and finds, show that this was a church, probably with its principal entrance to its northwest. Paved surfaces around the building contained burials, showing that the church stood in a courtyard, but it is uncertain whether the church and courtyard were built together or whether the church was constructed within an existing paved space.¹¹

The walls identified by the excavators as part of a possible atrium (perhaps with a fountain off-centre) might alternatively be seen as a range of buildings running north-south, approximately 10–15 m. west of the church. A similar range of buildings can be seen from the plan to have stood adjacent to the east side of the church, again running along a north-south axis. This could, therefore, be taken to indicate two ranges of structures on each side of the paved courtyard to the east and west of the church.¹²

Whether there were other buildings on the northern and southern sides of the church is uncertain, because the relevant

¹⁰ A. Oğan, “Les fouilles de Topkapu Saray,” *Belleten* 4 (1940) 317–335, pls. LXXII–LXXXIII; T. H. Bossert, “Istanbul Akropolünde Üniversite hafriyatı,” *Universite Konferansları 1939–1940* (Istanbul 1940) 206–231. For commentary by well-informed scholars not directly involved in the excavations or initial study of the artefacts recovered: E. Mamboury, “Les fouilles byzantines à Istanbul,” *Byzantion* 13 (1938) 301–310, at 305–306, and 21 (1951) 425–459, at 426–427; A. M. Schneider, “Grabung im Hof des Topkapu Sarayı,” *AA* 54 (1939) 179–182; T. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park 1971) 33–38, and *The Byzantine Churches of Istanbul: A Photographic Survey* (University Park/London 1976) 383–385; S. Eyice, “Les basiliques byzantines d’Istanbul,” *Corso di cultura sull’Arte ravennate e bizantina* 26 (1979) 91–113, at 93–96. For the Museum finds inventories: Anon. (= N. Firatlı?), “Museum of Antiquities. Accessions ... 1937–1947,” *IstArkMüzYill* 3 (1949) 50–52.

¹¹ Oğan, *Belleten* 4 (1940) 317–335.

¹² Oğan, *Belleten* 4 (1940) 317–335; Anon., *IstArkMüzYill* 3 (1949) 51.

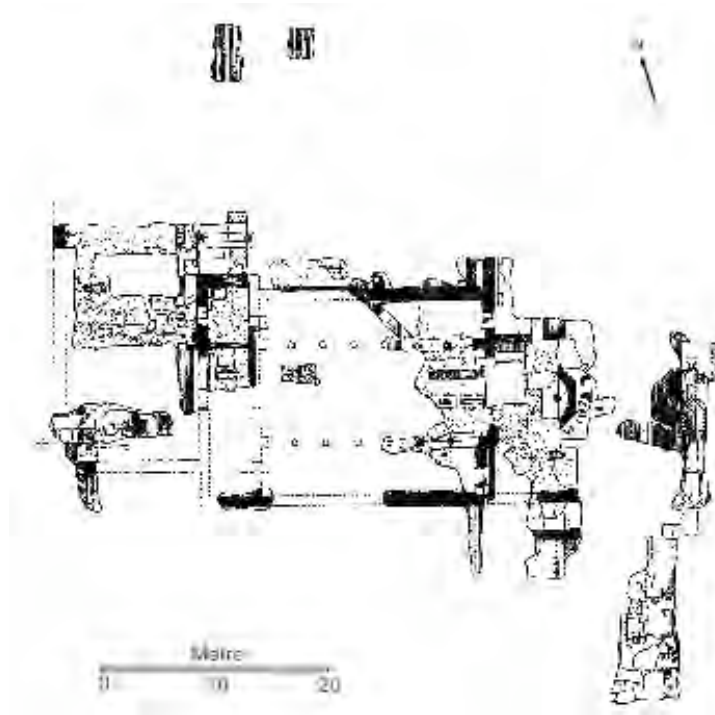


Figure 1. The “Topkapı Sarayı basilica” (after Oğan 1940)

space to the north remains occupied by the standing buildings of Ottoman Topkapı Sarayı and that to the south was not excavated. Nevertheless, in 1962 a series of *in situ* fallen columns were found in the Second Court, which indicates a portico of unknown size.¹³

The extent of the courtyard on the south is perhaps implied by another, much smaller, Byzantine structure ca. 50 m. to the south (Tezcan map, S1), under the lawn of the Ottoman Second Court. This was also surrounded by a paved surface and, assuming that it was part of the same paved area found near the church, this may show that the Byzantine courtyard extended across most, if not all, of the Second Court. Mamboury and others have suggested that the structure could have been a

¹³ Tezcan, *Topkapı* 307, pls. 411 and 412.

funerary chapel because it has an apse; but it was sunken below the paved yard and the apse faces north, rendering an ecclesiastical interpretation unlikely. A ramp leading up to the surface of the structure suggests an overlying construction, but no trace of this was found during the excavation.¹⁴

That is, the church seems to have stood, perhaps centrally, in a large rectilinear paved courtyard surrounded by buildings. The church, courtyard and surrounding structures are difficult to date precisely, although their construction and style of architecture has been seen as suggesting a date in the fifth century. The coins and other associated artefacts run from the fifth century onward, although these need not be entirely contemporary with the church rather than activity in the general area of what was later the Second Court. This is the same court that contained the fragments of the massive fifth-century monumental column mentioned above.¹⁵

These features, other than the church, would be consistent with a Roman-style forum—a large paved rectilinear or curvilinear open space surrounded by buildings and possibly a portico and monumental column; and they may date from the fifth century. Other Constantinopolitan *fora* also consist of large unroofed paved areas containing monuments (including columns), surrounded by structures, and probably had enclosing porticos. That is, although without an inscription such an interpretation cannot be certain, the excavated complex is arguably of the correct form, in the right location, and of the right date to be the Forum of Leo. If the apsidal structure (Tezcan map, S1) dates from the fifth century also, this might be the base of a fountain, statue, or monument appropriate to a forum.

A church would be an atypical component of a Roman forum, but this could be explained by the late date of the Forum of Leo, which was constructed at a time when the Empire was becoming increasingly Christianised. If the church is a secondary feature, then it might also have been built in the Forum as a result of such processes. A chapel was built next to

¹⁴ Unnumbered fold-out plan in Tezcan, *Topkapı*.

¹⁵ Mathews, *Byzantine Churches* 383–385; W. Müller-Wiener, *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls* (Tübingen 1977) 74–75.

the Column of Constantine in the Forum of Constantine during the Byzantine period and churches were added to other Eastern Roman public spaces in the fifth and sixth centuries. So the presence of a church does not detract from this interpretation.¹⁶

If the church is fifth century in origin then it might have been a part of the original design of the forum, and—if this is the Forum of Leo—it is dateable precisely to 471. Although no written source refers to a church built on the acropolis in 471, the church of Saints Peter and Paul, known as the church of St. Paul, was built, or rebuilt, by Justin II in 571/2. This church was, according to Anna Comnena (*Alex.* 15.7.4), “in the quarter near the acropolis, where the mouth of the sea widens, ... *on the highest spot of the city it stood out like a citadel*” (transl. Sewter, our italics) Thus, it probably stood on, rather than on the slope of, the hill. If the church was constructed (rather than refurbished) in 571/2, then this building may have been intended to commemorate the centenary of the foundation of the Forum in 471. Nevertheless, 571 would seem a late date for the excavated church on comparative grounds and, on the basis of the standard dating of the basilica, we favour the interpretation that the church could be an original part of the Forum, perhaps refurbished by Justin II in 571 to commemorate the centenary.¹⁷

¹⁶ On the archaeology of the Forum of Constantine: Mango, *Studies* III and IV; Bauer, *Stadt* 167–186; Müller-Wiener, *Bildlexikon* 256, fig. 288; N. Firath, “Short Report on Finds and Archaeological Activities,” *IstArkMüzYill* 11–12 (1964) 207–209; E. Mamboury, “Le Forum de Constantin: la chapelle de St Constantin et les mystères de la Colonne Brulée,” *Πεπραγμένα του Θ’ διεθνούς Βυζαντινολογικού συνεδρίου* (Thessaloniki 1955) 275–280. See also K. Boyd, “Pierre Gilles and the Topography of Byzantium,” in N. Bagelen and B. Johnson (eds.), *Myth to Modernity I Istanbul. Selected Themes* (Istanbul 2002) 1–15, at 9–11.

¹⁷ E. R. A. Sewter, *The Alexiad of Anna Comnena* (Harmondsworth 1969) 494–495. For a detailed discussion of the relationship between this church and the Middle Byzantine Orphanage on the acropolis see Dark and Harris, “The Orphanage of Byzantine Constantinople: An Archaeological Identification,” *Byzantinoslavica* (forthcoming). We are not the first to suggest that this might be the Church of St. Paul: U. Peschlow, *JSAH* 33 (1974) 85 (rev. of Mathews, *Early Churches*).

Baths on the acropolis?

The Forum was not the only structure on the hilltop in the late fifth and sixth centuries. As already mentioned, there had been pagan temples and other monuments on the acropolis of Byzantium before the fourth century, and the temple structures were still standing and used for other purposes in the sixth century. However, the most striking monument surviving on the promontory today is the monumental column known as the “Column of the Goths.”¹⁸ The date of the column is uncertain within the Byzantine period, but a large curvilinear hollow can be seen as a grass-covered earthwork around its base. Several scholars have suggested that this hollow may be the Kynegion, probably a Roman-period amphitheatre used for executions in the Byzantine period.¹⁹

However, an early nineteenth century drawing depicting the Column of the Goths shows the surrounding area flat, with no trace of the depression, while illustrating other features, and the Column itself, accurately. This, and the observation that the hollow does not appear on nineteenth-century plans of the Ottoman palace gardens, which show landscaping and planting extending across the area in question, suggest that the hollow is a modern feature—perhaps an element of nineteenth-century landscaping or horticultural activities designed to “show-off” the Column as a garden ornament. If so, the Kynegion must be sought elsewhere.²⁰

Near the Column is a series of small portico-fronted rooms. These buildings have never been properly published, and what is visible today is only part of what was found in excavation

¹⁸ The column is described and discussed by U. Peschlow, “Beobachtungen zur Götensäule,” in *Tesserae. Festschrift für Josef Engemann* (Münster 1991) 215–228; R. H. W. Stichel, “Fortuna Redux, Pompeius und die Goten: Bemerkungen zu einen wenig beachteten Säulenmonument Konstantinopels,” *IstMitt* 49 (1999) 467–492.

¹⁹ The hollow around the Column of the Goths is shown in plan in R. Demangel and E. Mamboury, *Le quartier des Manges et la première région de Constantinople* (Paris 1939), main plan.

²⁰ S. Yerasimos, *Constantinople – Istanbul’s Historical Heritage* (Paris 2005) 31.

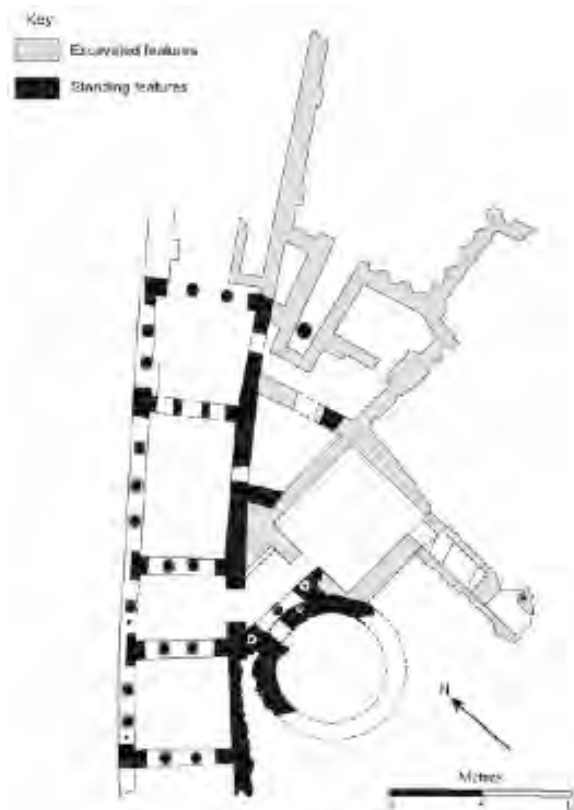


Figure 2. The Byzantine structures by the Column of the Goths
(after Schneider 1936)

early in the twentieth century. Excavation revealed a circular structure just to their east, and other Byzantine walls adjacent to them running southeast and north of the excavated area (*fig. 2*).²¹ These walls are extremely difficult to interpret, or date, with certainty, although they may include a cistern. To judge from its construction and the associated finds, the earliest ele-

²¹ E. Unger, "Grabungen an der Seraispitze von Konstantinopel," *AA* 31 (1916) 1–48; A. M. Schneider, *Byzanz. Vorarbeiten zur Topographie und Archäologie der Stadt* (IstForsch 8 [1936]) 90–91 no. 2, *fig. 44*; Müller-Wiener, *Bildlexikon*, fold-out plan.

ments of this complex, including the circular structure, are perhaps fifth or sixth century in date.

The portico-fronted structures at the core of this complex are reminiscent of a series of shops of the type widely known in Late Antique towns across the Eastern Mediterranean. However, similar suites of rooms are also known from Late Roman public baths and the interconnection of the structures here might suggest parts of a larger complex rather than shops.²²

The circular structure is unusual: freestanding circular buildings other than mausolea or ecclesiastical structures are rare in Late Roman or early Byzantine architecture; but there is no evidence for religious use in this case. If this is a secular structure, the nearest analogy may be to the large circular heated rooms found in Roman-period public baths.²³

The portico-front of these structures has a noticeable arc, suggesting a circular or semi-circular plan. However, if one projects the curve of the portico then the resulting line runs off the acropolis summit to the north-east and into the terracing of Topkapı Sarayı, near the Ottoman Fil Kapı to the south-west. It seems, therefore, that the structures had a roughly semi-circular or curving plan, perhaps resembling a C or D. C- or D-shaped structures are also typical of public baths elsewhere in the Late Roman world, and this may support—although it does not necessitate—an interpretation of the first phase of these buildings as public baths.²⁴ Recreational use would be

²² For portico-fronted Late Antique shops: J. S. Crawford, *The Byzantine Shops at Sardis* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1990); M. M. Mango, “The Porticoed Street at Constantinople,” in N. Necipoğlu (ed.), *Byzantine Constantinople. Monuments, Topography and Everyday Life* (Leiden 2001) 29–52; A. Harris, “Shops, Retailing and the Local Economy in the Early Byzantine World: The Example of Sardis,” in K. Dark (ed.), *Secular Buildings and the Archaeology of Everyday Life in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford 2004) 82–123; S. Ellis, “The Seedier Side of Antioch,” in I. Sandwell and J. Huskinson (eds.), *Culture and Society in Later Roman Antioch* (Oxford 2004) 126–133, at 126–128.

²³ For examples of baths, see J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture*² (New Haven/London 1981) 418–419, 430–431, 446–449.

²⁴ The authors have checked the curvature of the structures for themselves on site. For examples of C- and D-shaped structures in bath complexes see Ward-Perkins, *Roman Imperial Architecture* 419, 431, 447.

consistent with the diverse, and sometimes dubious, functions to which the disused temples were put, as described by Malalas, and a tavern close to the Column of the Goths referred to by John Lydus.²⁵

Mango interpreted the latter phases of the structures by the Column of the Goths as the famous Orphanage that stood on the acropolis in the Middle Byzantine period. In another paper, we show that this is unlikely and argue at length that the Orphanage may well have reused the courtyard of the Forum of Leo, where there is extensive evidence of refurbishment in the Middle Byzantine period.²⁶ Reuse of fifth-century secular structures for a Middle Byzantine complex with a different function is paralleled in Byzantine Constantinople, and the church of St. Paul stood within the Orphanage complex.²⁷

Conclusion

Our interpretation is, therefore, that the structures and paved surface represent the fifth-century Forum of Leo. The inclusion of a church may reflect the increasing Christianisation of public space during the fifth century seen in other Eastern towns, and it is possible that the church was refurbished in 571 to commemorate the foundation of the Forum.

If the structures on the northern end of the promontory are public baths, then their relationship to the Forum of Leo is uncertain. Nonetheless, they do suggest that the Forum was not the only major new fifth- or sixth-century structure on the acropolis and may combine with textual evidence to suggest that the north of the acropolis was given over to recreational uses.

The Forum of Leo is important as the last forum to be built in a Roman capital city. It therefore represents the culmination of an architectural tradition going back to the Roman Republic. Later emperors would build churches or add to or adapt

²⁵ Tavern near the Column of the Goths: Mango, *Le développement* 71–72.

²⁶ See n.17 above.

²⁷ For an example of a Byzantine church reusing a fifth-century secular complex: R. Naumann and H. Belting, *Die Euphemiakirche am Hippodrom zu Istanbul und ihre Fresken* (Berlin 1966). See also Bardill, *Brickstamps*.

existing complexes, not furnish cities with monumental public spaces of this sort.

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Research Centre for Late
Antique and Byzantine Studies
Univ. of Reading
Reading RG6 6AH, U.K.
k.r.dark@reading.ac.uk
Inst. of Archaeology & Antiquity
Univ. of Birmingham
Birmingham B15 2TT, U.K.
a.l.harris@bham.ac.uk