

Eliciting Liturgical Participation: The Southwest Vestibule Mosaic in Hagia Sophia

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During the Middle Byzantine period (843-1261), the church of Hagia Sophia served as the seat of the patriarchate in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). Comprising what was then a larger complex, the patriarchal palace adjoined Hagia Sophia at the building's south side, and the imperial Great Palace (no longer extant) was located across the open square to the south (Figure 1).¹ The church proper was the setting for liturgical ceremonies in which the emperor regularly participated.

It is within the context of the liturgical ceremonies on major feast days that this paper examines the southwest vestibule mosaic in Hagia Sophia.² The mosaic depicts the Theotokos and Christ child with Emperors Constantine I (r. 324-37) and Justinian (r. 527-65) (Figure 2). It is dated by style and letter form of the inscriptions to the second half of the tenth century.³

Recently, scholars have limited their analyses to a reading of the mosaic as a symbol of imperial legacy.⁴ The aim of

the present work is to demonstrate that the mosaic should not be restricted to a single reading. This paper offers a new interpretation of the mosaic as a participatory image, one which was meant for the imperial view and guided the emperor in his role in the liturgy. For the scope of this inquiry, this need not be a specific emperor, but rather any emperor during the Middle Byzantine period. Consequently, the significance of the mosaic's location in the church, as well as the mosaic's iconography and surrounding media, it will be argued, combine to reinforce the emperor's liturgical role.

The mosaic is located in a recessed niche under a semicircular arch above the door of the southwest vestibule, leading into the inner narthex (Figure 3). At the center of the mosaic is the enthroned Theotokos with Christ child, flanked by images of the posthumous Emperors Constantine I and Justinian. Theotokos is the Greek title given to the Virgin, and it translates to God-bearer. Her epithet M-P ΘΥ (*meter theou*, Mother of God) is inscribed to either side of her

I thank my professor Dr. Lynn Jones for her endless support and guidance in the development of this paper. I am also deeply indebted to my fellow students Sarah Simmons, Brad Hostetler and Christopher Timm at Florida State University for their encouragement, generosity and suggestions.

¹ This complex was located at the east end of the city.

² I center on the liturgical ceremonies of the major feast days because it demonstrates the recurrent program of liturgical activity in which the emperor participated. According to Albert Vogt, the major feast days on which the emperor would participate in the liturgical ceremonies at Hagia Sophia include Easter, Pentecost, Transfiguration, Christmas and Epiphany; see Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, *Le livre des cérémonies*, ed. Albert Vogt (Paris: Société d'Éditions, 1935), 1:17.

The mosaic is so-named by its location inside the southwest vestibule of Hagia Sophia. The mosaic was first uncovered from its Ottoman layer of plaster at the end of the nineteenth century by architects and brothers Gaspare and Giuseppe Fossati. It was not unveiled to the public, however, until 1934, following additional restorative work by Thomas Whittemore, Director of the Byzantine Institute. For more information on the original restoration, see Thomas Whittemore, *The Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul: Second Preliminary Report Work Done in 1933 and 1937: The Mosaics of the Southern Vestibule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).

³ The date of the mosaic is debated in the scholarship. This is due to the unknown nature of its commission. The majority of scholars, however, agree on a date in the mid- to late-tenth century. Thomas Whittemore dates the mosaic based on style and the inscriptions to the late tenth century. This would be during the reign of Basil II (r. 976-

1025). Whittemore suggests that the mosaic may have been installed between the years 986 and 994 when Hagia Sophia was closed for repairs. See Thomas Whittemore, *Mosaics of St. Sophia*, 30-31. See also Whittemore, "On the Dating of Some Mosaics in Hagia Sophia," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 5 (Summer 1946): 34-45.

Leslie Brubaker suggests that the mosaic was created during the early tenth century under the reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (r. 913-59). See Leslie Brubaker, "Gifts and Prayers: The Visualization of Gift Giving in Byzantium and the Mosaics at Hagia Sophia," in *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 33-61.

Charles Rufus Morey, on the other hand, proposes a ninth-century date by placing the mosaic under the commission of Emperor Basil I (r. 867-86). See Charles Rufus Morey, "The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia," *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* 2 (1944): 207-210.

⁴ Liz James suggests that the mosaic places emphasis on the past emperors in order to explain and legitimize contemporary Byzantine rule. Liz James, "A Partial Account of the Statues of the City and its High and Very Great Columns: Constantine's Account of Constantinople," in *Constantine of Rhodes, on Constantinople and the Church of the Holy Apostles: with a New Edition of the Greek Text by Ioannis Vassis* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 159-180.

Leslie Brubaker juxtaposes the mosaic with the so-called Leo mosaic located at the entry to the nave in Hagia Sophia. The Leo mosaic is thought to depict the Emperor Leo VI (r. 886-912), who is shown prostrating before Christ enthroned. Like the vestibule mosaic, the commission of the Leo mosaic is unknown. Brubaker identifies both mosaics as a general demonstration of imperial legitimacy. See Brubaker, "Gifts and Prayers."

head.⁵ This depiction of the Theotokos follows the Middle Byzantine iconographic standard; she is frontal and occupies the place of honor in the composition. The two emperors are shown in an act of gift giving; each offers the Theotokos an architectural model that exemplifies their imperial contributions. Constantine is shown presenting a model of the city of Constantinople, which bears his name. He is identified by his accompanying inscription: "Constantine, the great Emperor amongst the saints."⁶ Justinian presents a model of the church of Hagia Sophia. He is labeled: "Justinian, Emperor of illustrious memory."⁷ The two emperors, as we shall see, do not follow the contemporary iconographic standard for imperial imagery.

Beneath the mosaic is a marble revetment (Figure 4). The image is further framed by non-figurative mosaics that were installed throughout the building when Justinian constructed the church in the sixth century. In the vestibule, they cover the interior surface of the semicircular arch and extend along the walls to the vault (Figure 5).

The Liturgical Procession and the Southwest Vestibule

Any interpretation of the mosaic's meaning hinges on an understanding of the ritual space in which it is located. As a brief introduction, it should be recognized that the opening procession in the church began in the southwest vestibule. The liturgical processions in Hagia Sophia are known from the tenth-century *De Ceremoniis* or *The Book of Ceremonies*, compiled by the Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (r. 913-59).⁸

The Book of Ceremonies states that, after having crossed from the imperial palace, the emperor enters the church

through the southwest portal (Figure 6A).⁹ Once inside the vestibule, his crown is removed by high members of the court.¹⁰ This is done in a draped booth located inside the vestibule.¹¹ Bareheaded, he then passes through the door (above which the mosaic is located) to meet the patriarch and attending clergy who are awaiting him in the narthex (Figure 6B). In this space, the emperor kisses a cross and the Gospel Book, after which he and the patriarch exchange a kiss on the cheek. The two men then proceed in the narthex to the central imperial door where the emperor bows three times before entering the nave (Figure 6C).¹²

As the choreography of the procession makes clear, the initial, ritual acts of the liturgy were performed within the space of the vestibule.¹³ It is important for a discussion of the mosaic to note that the southwest vestibule served as a space of transition, marking the divide between secular functions and sacred functions of the liturgy.¹⁴ From the point at which the emperor crosses the threshold into sacred space, he demonstrates his recognition of the patriarch's authority within the church, a fact evidenced by the divestment of his crown.¹⁵ It is significant then that the mosaic is located above this space of transition where the two heads of the body politic first meet and engage in a ritual exchange. The vestibule was also a significant space because it served as the emperor's privileged and private entrance into the church; therefore, the mosaic would have been for the imperial view.

Reinforcing the Imperial Role

Turning to a discussion of the mosaic's iconography and surrounding media, one should consider what the mosaic might have communicated to the emperor within the space

⁵ Whittemore, *Mosaics of St. Sophia*, 24.

⁶ Ibid., 25. Translation by Whittemore. In Greek: "ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΣ Ο ΕΝ ΑΓΙΟΙΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ."

⁷ Ibid. Translation by Whittemore. In Greek: "ΙΟΥΣΤΙΝΙΑΝΟΣ Ο ΑΟΙΔΙΜΟΣ ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ."

⁸ Henceforth *De Ceremoniis* will be referred to strictly by its English title, *The Book of Ceremonies*. Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, *The Book of Ceremonies: with the Greek edition of the Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae (Bonn, 1829)*, ed. Ann Moffatt and Maxeme Tall (Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2012). See especially Book one, Chapter one.

⁹ The choreography of the liturgy is also retraced by George P. Majeska. I rely heavily on Majeska, together with *The Book of Ceremonies*, for this paper. See George P. Majeska "The Emperor in His Church: Imperial Ritual in the Church of St. Sophia," in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829-1204*, ed. Henry Maguire, 1-11 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection: Harvard University Press, 1997), 5.

¹⁰ *The Book of Ceremonies* calls these court officials *praipositoi*. Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, *Book of Ceremonies*, 14. The emperor is not divested of his crown on the occasion of his coronation. Majeska, "The Emperor in His Church," 5.

¹¹ *The Book of Ceremonies* states that the emperor's crown is removed "by the *praipositoi* inside the curtain hanging in the vault...at the

entrance to the narthex." Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, *Book of Ceremonies*, 14.

This "curtain" refers to a *metatorion* or curtained booth. Gilbert Dagron, "Ceremonial and Memory," in *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 92. George P. Majeska describes the *metatorion* as a "draped booth." Majeska, "The Emperor in His Church," 5. Hagia Sophia had two *metatoria*. In addition to the *metatorion* located in the vestibule, a *metatorion* was also located in the south aisle of the nave. See W. Eugene Kleinbauer, *Saint Sophia at Constantinople* (Dublin, NH: William L. Bauhan, Publisher, 1999), 46.

¹² The initial ritual acts of the liturgy are not performed in the public eye of the congregation, but rather in the presence of a limited and privileged audience which comprises only the emperor, the patriarch, and a selected number of their attending clergy and court officials. See Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, *Book of Ceremonies*, especially Book one, Chapter one.

¹³ I give special thanks to Sarah Simmons for assisting me with retracing the choreography of the liturgical processions in Hagia Sophia and for her direction in my understanding of the vestibule space.

¹⁴ In his explanation of this transitional space, Gilbert Dagron suggests that once the emperor crosses the threshold of the narthex, he leaves his realm of supremacy. See Dagron, "Ceremonial and Memory," 99.

¹⁵ Ibid.

of the vestibule. The imperial iconography is unique and therefore of particular interest. Although scenes of gift giving are common in the Byzantine Empire, we do not find in any other depiction a living Byzantine emperor offering a church or city.¹⁶ What is typical is the emperor offering monetary gifts, such as the depiction of John II Komnenos (r. 1118-43) in a later mosaic, also in Hagia Sophia (Figure 7). Thus, there is no contemporary imperial comparanda for the southwest vestibule mosaic.

Another consideration is that representations of a posthumous emperor are not common for the Middle Byzantine period. The only exception is the case when a single past emperor was used as the prototype for a current emperor, usually to legitimize his rule. An example is found in the room above the southwest vestibule. In Figure 8, a ninth-century fragmentary imperial portrait depicts a figure generally accepted as a representation of Constantine I, which was meant to be understood as a prototype for the Emperor Basil I (r. 867-86).¹⁷ The southwest vestibule mosaic does not follow this tradition since there are two emperors depicted, and there is no known association with any specific contemporary ruler.

Furthermore, standard imperial imagery of this time functions to convey status or rank. Emperors are shown frontal, with a full beard, haloed, and wearing a crown.¹⁸ Figure 9, an early tenth-century mosaic panel located in the gallery of Hagia Sophia, provides an example of this standard with the image of the Emperor Alexander (r. 912-13). In the vestibule mosaic, even though Constantine and Justinian are shown haloed and wearing crowns, they are beardless and oriented away from the viewer. They are therefore depicted in a manner not consistent with the standard for imperial portraits—but why? Might this speak to their larger function in the mosaic?

Scholars have suggested that the atypical iconography purposely portrays the emperors in an ambiguous manner

in order that any living emperor could associate himself with their image.¹⁹ It is important to note, however, that their iconographical ambiguity does not render them anonymous; they are, after all, identified by their naming inscriptions. Nonetheless, scholars generally interpret them not as historical figures—that is, not as the person of Constantine and Justinian—but rather as a unified symbol of the imperial line.²⁰ This is supported by the fact that the figures are nearly identical to one another in terms of dress, orientation, and physical features. While not disagreeing with this reading, this paper argues that the emperors were intentionally depicted in an iconographically ambiguous manner to reflect and reinforce the role of the contemporary emperor in the liturgy of Hagia Sophia, since the emperor's role in the liturgy appears at times unclear and contradictory to his rank.

This fact is made immediately evident by the divestment of his crown in the vestibule. It is further evidenced by the ritual acts that take place in the nave. In the space of the nave, the emperor assumes a secondary position to the patriarch. His imperial status is demonstrated by his access to the sanctuary, but, at the same time, he enters this restricted space only at the invitation of the patriarch.²¹ Despite the fact that the emperor serves as Christ's representative on earth, his access to the altar and the Eucharist is mediated by the patriarch.²²

This ritual exchange between the emperor and patriarch is conveyed through the mosaic's composition and especially through the figure of the Theotokos. In the mosaic, the Theotokos is placed at the center of the scene, emphasizing her typical role as the mediator between the faithful and God, with both emperors placed on either side.²³ It is through her that they, via the act of giving gifts, access God. While this arrangement is standard, it recalls an important liturgical function of the patriarch. In the liturgy, the patriarch's role is analogous to that of the Theotokos: as head of the clergy, he serves as the channel through which all in attendance—in-

¹⁶ Byzantine religious imagery is replete with iconography of offertory, deriving from scenes of the Adoration of the Magi taken from the Gospel account of Matthew. For more information on scenes of gift giving, see Brubaker, *Languages of Gift*.

¹⁷ The image most likely also included a crown, but due to damage it is no longer clear. The dating to the ninth century is proposed by Cormack and Hawkins. See, Robin Cormack and Ernest J.W. Hawkins, "The Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul: The Rooms Above the Southwest Vestibule and Ramp," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 31 (1977): 240.

¹⁸ In particular, depicting an emperor bearded was in vogue during the Middle Byzantine period. Kateryna Kovalchuck, "The Founder as a Saint: The Image of Justinian I in the Great Church of St. Sophia," *Byzantion* 77 (2007): 205.

¹⁹ See Brubaker, "Gifts and Prayers," 33-61. See also James, "Constantine's Account of Constantinople," 159-80.

²⁰ In speaking specifically of the image of Constantine, Cormack and Hawkins argue that he does not take on the form of a "historical" emperor. This is in comparison to the depiction of the "typical" emperor in the fragmentary panel in the room above the vestibule. Cormack

and Hawkins, "The Mosaics of St. Sophia," 240.

Whittemore identifies the image of Justinian as "imaginary," suggesting that he is rendered more as a "mythological" figure than as a typical "imperial" figure. This is in comparison to other depictions of Justinian, such as the Ravenna panel and as he appears on coins. See, Whittemore, *Mosaics of St. Sophia*, 17-18.

²¹ George Majeska suggests that the emperor demonstrates his high status by gaining access to the sanctuary and "serving the altar," as this access is reserved for members of the higher clergy. Majeska, "The Emperor in His Church," 8.

²² For a more in-depth analysis of the choreography and ritual exchange between the emperor and patriarch in the liturgy see Majeska, "The Emperor in His Church;" and Dagron, "Ceremonial and Memory." See also Sarah C. Simmons, "The 'God Bearing' Patriarch: Hagia Sophia's Apse Mosaic in Ninth-Century Byzantine Politics," Chapter 2 (MA thesis, Florida State University, 2011), electronic.

²³ Brubaker states that "Byzantine visual protocol identifies the central Virgin and child as the highest status participants." Brubaker, "Gifts and Prayers," 43.

cluding the emperor—access God.²⁴ It is reasonable then to suggest that the mosaic would have signified to the emperor a correlation between the function of the patriarch and the Theotokos.

Additionally, the mosaic highlights the role of the patriarch for the imperial view by visually emphasizing the figure of the Theotokos. This is accomplished by means of her inscribed monograms and the marble revetment located under the mosaic. While her monograms are customary, they are unique in the mosaic for their large size and bold inscription. During the restoration of the mosaic, they were measured to be larger than her head.²⁵ In no other image do we find her monograms as visibly distinct as they are in the vestibule mosaic.²⁶

Regarding the marble revetment, its visible markings, as shown in Figure 4, join at the center to align with the figure of the Theotokos. This is not to suggest that either the mosaic or the marble were installed with any conscious consideration to the other, rather, one must take into account the possibility that this marble revetment, combined with the noticeable monograms, would have directed the eye of the viewer—i.e. the emperor—to the central image of the Theotokos. These accentuating elements would have encouraged the emperor's contemplation of her and her intermediary role, and therefore would have reinforced the imperial role alongside the patriarch in the liturgy.

Eliciting Imperial Piety and Benevolence

To highlight another important aspect of the emperor's liturgical role, it must be considered that the emperor participated in ritual acts that indicated his piety and benevolence to the Church. One refers back to the sanctuary where the most salient demonstrations occur; namely, the emperor places a bag of gold coins on the altar table.²⁷ The emperor's donation is given visual expression in the figures of Constantine and Justinian, who are shown in their own acts of gift giving to the Mother of God. This correlation between the contemporary emperor in the liturgy and the emperors in the mosaic is not drawn by the objects offered, but rather by the act of imperial donation. In the mosaic, Constantine

and Justinian provide the example for the contemporary emperor to emulate in the nave.

Supporting this message of imperial benevolence are the non-figurative mosaics framing the image. They serve as visible evidence of Justinian's personal involvement in the construction of the church. While these mosaics are present throughout Hagia Sophia, it is reasonable to suggest that they become significant in this space when considered with this depiction of imperial gift giving. The collective image renders legible a combined message that not only recalls pious and charitable acts in the imperial line, but would have further guided the emperor's actions in the liturgy, a significant and timely message for the emperor given his presence in the vestibule at the open of the liturgy.

Conclusion

The intention of this discussion has been to offer a new interpretation of the vestibule mosaic as a participatory image. While the interaction between the mosaic and its contemporary viewer may never be fully understood, through analysis of the image within the context of the tenth-century liturgy, it is clear that the mosaic should not be restricted to a single reading. As this paper has argued, the mosaic set the stage for the liturgy and established a precedent for the emperor's liturgical performance. The atypical iconography of Constantine and Justinian, together with the accentuated figure of the Theotokos, is suggestive of the mosaic reinforcing the emperor's secondary position in the liturgy. This paper has also argued that the image of Constantine and Justinian, with the surrounding non-figurative mosaics, evoked imperial demonstrations of piety and benevolence to the Church, and by so doing, further underscored the emperor's liturgical role. Such a message would have held particularly strong connotations for the emperor within the space that preceded the liturgical ceremony, since it was there, in the southwest vestibule, that he could visually align himself with past emperors and contemplate his role alongside that of the patriarch in the liturgy.

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²⁴ Ioli Kalavrezou argues that, as a general rule, the Theotokos serves as an "appropriate [image] for the patriarch who, in his capacity as head of the clergy is, like [her], the mediator between the people and God." See Kalavrezou, "Images of the Mother," 171.

As dictated by Byzantine liturgical protocol, the patriarch, as leader of the procession, held the place of honor in the liturgy. Thomas F. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), 142.

²⁵ This measurement is by Whittemore and is recorded in the 1930s

restoration report of the mosaic. The measurement of the Theotokos's monograms includes the circles in which they are enclosed. He takes the measurement of her head from the top of her *maphorion*, or head covering, to her chin, excluding her halo. See Whittemore, *Mosaics of St. Sophia*, 24.

²⁶ Kalavrezou states that the epithet is "the largest and boldest inscriptions of these words ever made." Kalavrezou, "Images of the Mother," 171.

²⁷ Mathews, *Early Churches of Constantinople*, 142.

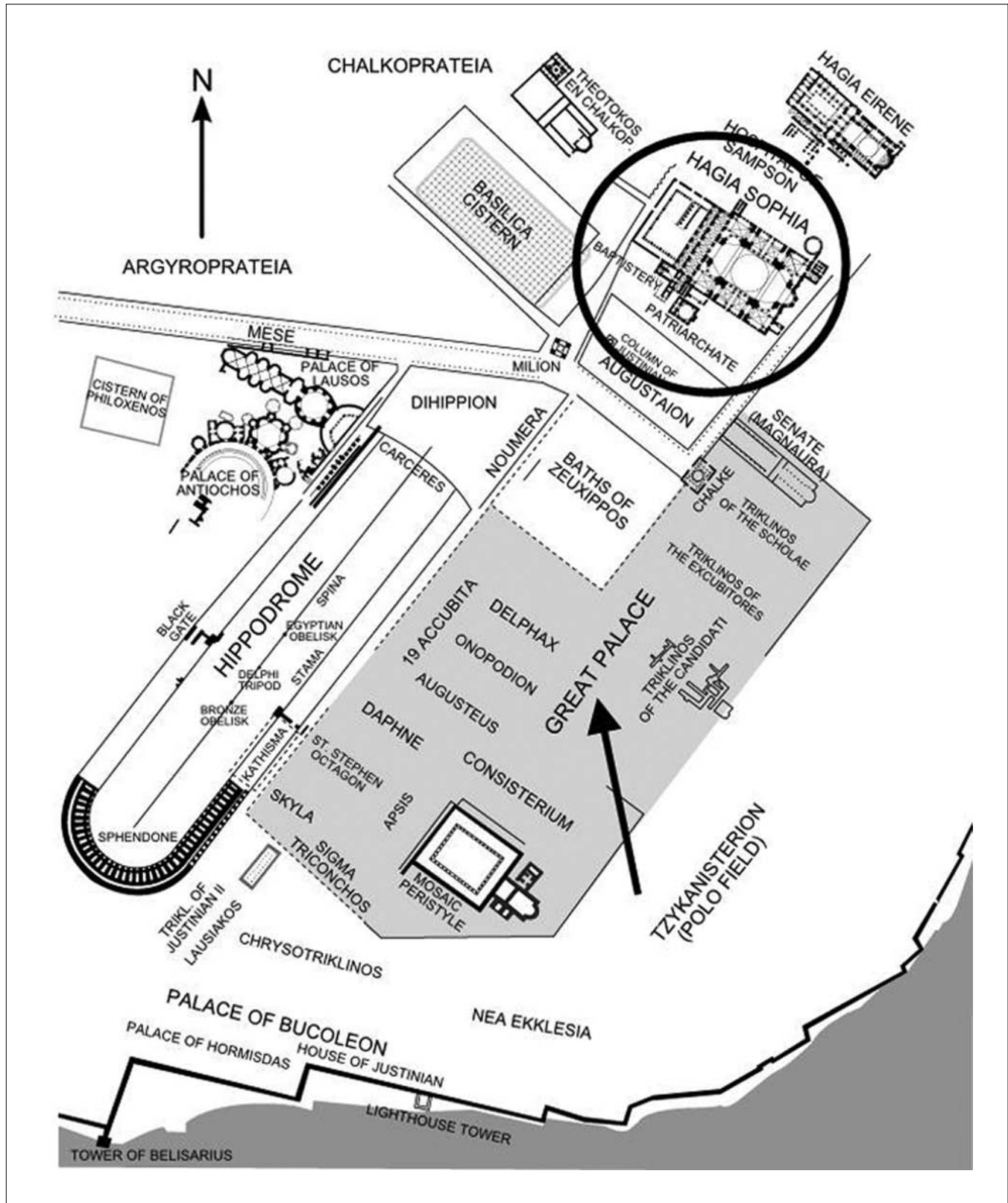


Figure 1. Map of Constantinople indicating location of Hagia Sophia and the imperial Great Palace. Indications: Katie Townsend.



Figure 2. The southwest vestibule mosaic, tenth century, mosaic. Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey.

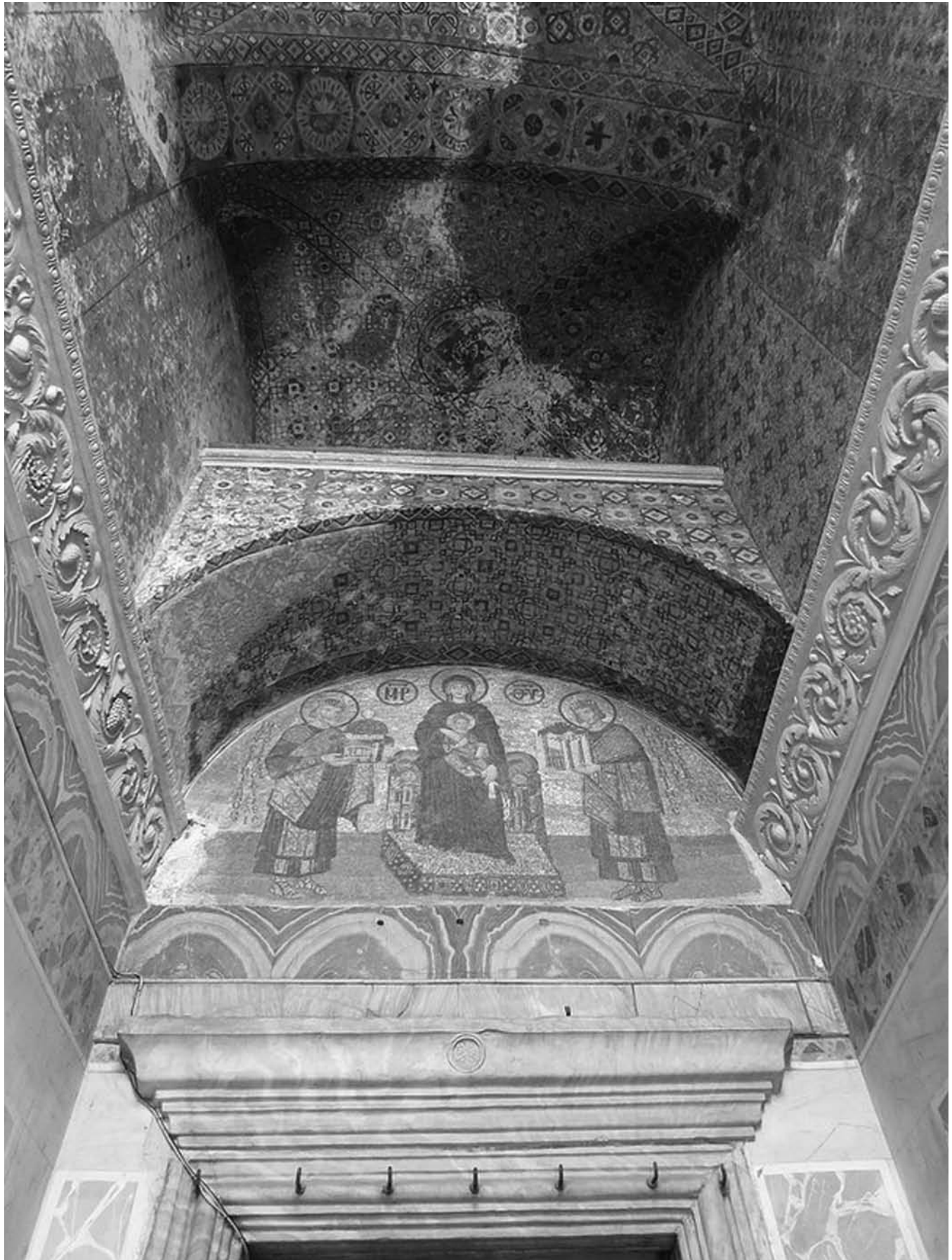


Figure 3. Passageway from the southwest vestibule. Photo credit: Brad Hostetler.



Figure 4. Detail with marble revetment underneath the mosaic. Image source: ARTstor, <http://artstor.org> (accessed 7 February 2015). Indication: Katie Townsend.

► Figure 5. [facing page] View of the mosaic and vestibule vault showing surrounding non-figurative mosaics. Photo credit: Brad Hostetler.



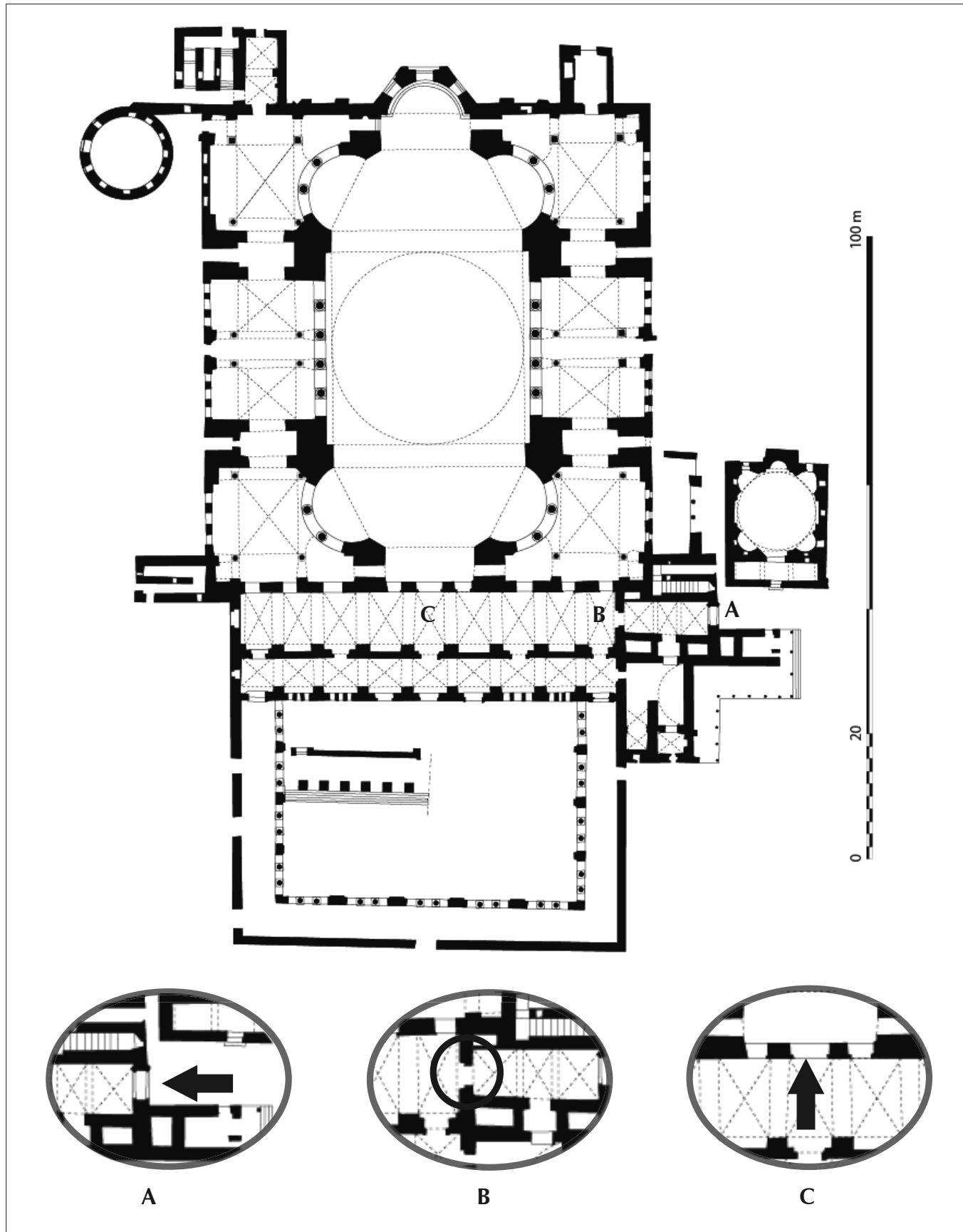


Figure 6. Floor plan of Hagia Sophia with details. Detail A. Indication of the emperor's point of entry into the southwest portal, leading into the vestibule. Detail B. Location of the mosaic. Detail C. Location of the central imperial door leading from the inner narthex into the nave. Indications: Katie Townsend.



Figure 7. John II Komnenos and Empress Irene with the Theotokos and Christ child, c. 1122, mosaic. Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey. Image source: ARTstor, <http://artstor.org> (accessed 12 October 2014).

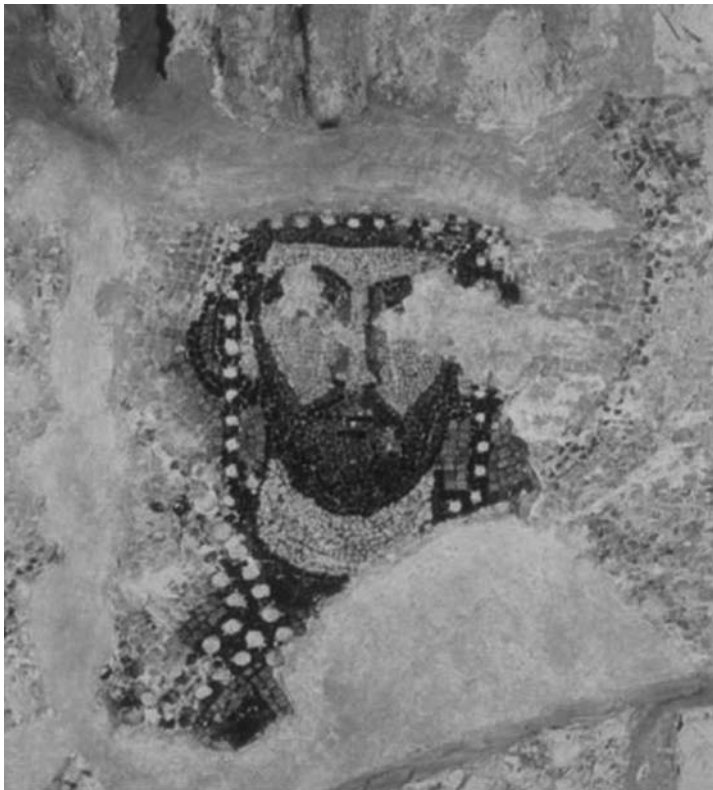


Figure 8. Detail of Constantine I, ninth century, mosaic. Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey.

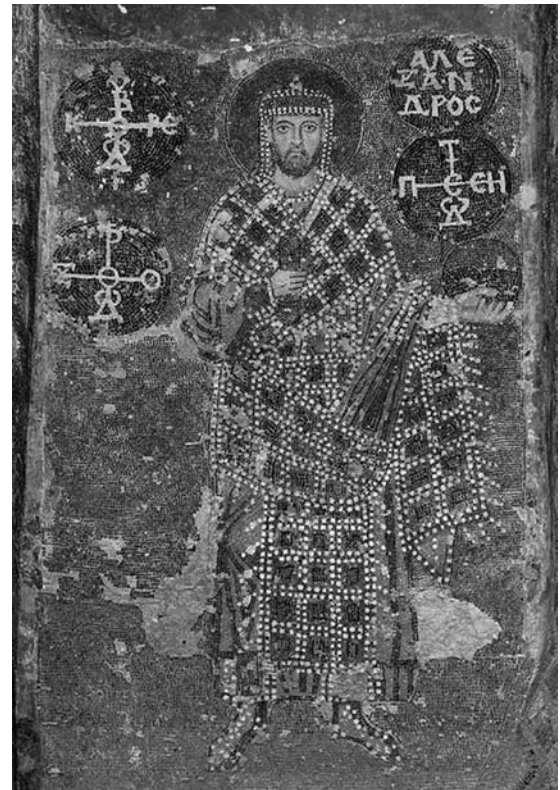


Figure 9. Emperor Alexander, tenth century, mosaic. Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey. Image source: ARTstor, <http://artstor.org> (accessed 15 April 2015).