From the Misreading of a Sixteenth-Century Sketch to an Exquisite Evidence of Constantine’s Nea Roma

ABSTRACT
Through the past decades, there have been many attempts to reconstruct Constantine the Great’s Forum in Constantinople – his Nea Roma, and to decipher its intended symbolical meaning. Most of these attempts were fruitful to some extent, but the entire message that the Emperor wanted to convey through the specific arrangement of the Forum has never been fully and clearly explained. Moreover, the Middle and Late Byzantine literary sources have additionally obscured the original message, so each piece of evidence about Constantine’s original concept of the Forum is extremely valuable. This paper should thus be a contribution to the understanding of its original symbolism, based on a piece of evidence that has often been either circumvented or ignored by the researchers: the unique drawing of the pedestal of Constantine’s porphyry column, made by Danish artist Melchior Lorichs (1526/27 – after 1583). The pedestal was decorated with an elaborate relief, whose proper interpretation becomes an important clue for deciphering Constantine’s imperial agenda. So, the paper offers a new interpretation of the relief, and establishes its importance in the symbolical framework of the Forum.

KEYWORDS
Constantine the Great, forum in Constantinople, pedestal relief, Melchior Lorichs
Protekla desetljeća svjedočila su mnogim pokušajima rekonstrukcije i odgonetanju simboličke Konstantinova konstantinopolskog foruma – središnjeg trga njegova No-voga Rima. Mnogi su od njih polučili određene rezultate, no cjelokupna poruka koju je car želio prenijeti nikada nije do kraja i jasno protumačena. Štoviše, pisani izvor srednjo- i kasno-bizantskog razdoblja učinili su izvornu poruku dodatno nejasnom, pa je svako svjedočanstvo o Konstantinovoj izvornoj ideji iznimno značajno. Cilj je ovog rada doprinijeti razumijevanju izvorne poruke, kroz analizu jednog vrlo značajnog svjedočanstva, koje se do sada ili zaobilazilo, ili zanemarivalo: jedinstveni crtež postamenta Konstantinova stupa koji je načinio danski umjetnik Melchior Lorichs (1526./27. – nakon 1583.). Naime, postament je bio ukrašen prilično razradoštenim reljefom čije je ispravno tumačenje iznimno važno za razumijevanje Konstantinove carske agende. Stoga se u radu donosi nova interpretacija reljefa te ga se kontekstualizira unutar simboličkog okvira prema kojem je forum bio strukturiran.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI
Konstantin Veliki, konstantinopolski forum, reljef postamenta, Melchior Lorichs

Introduction

Through the past sixty years much ink has been spilled over the original arrangement of Constantine the Great’s round forum in Constantinople, and a number of important scholars have tried to provide answers about its specific decoration. Raymond Janin, Cyril Mango, Gilbert Dagron, Wolfgang Müller-Wiener – all tried to decipher the semantic algorithm on which Constantine had based the arrangement and embellishment of his new mundus, to borrow the term from Plutarch. The new generation of scholars have lately contributed to the better understanding of the Emperor’s original intentions in decorating his Nea Roma; in the first place Anthony Kaldellis and Sarah Bassett. However, in spite of all the efforts invested into the reconstruction of the decorative programme of the central and focal point of Constantine’s New Rome, a number of issues related to the meaning of the whole still remain. Most often it has been interpreted either as a reflection of the Emperor’s antiquarian inclinations, or as a result of his general intent of aggrandizement of his new capital. However, the decoration of the Forum (fig. 1), and also all other structures built by Constantine in his new capital, were without any doubt endowed with quite a complex meaning. The round form of the Forum itself, as well as the sculptures and monuments that adorned it, had a deep symbolical value, by far exceeding the Emperor’s allusion to the long history behind his Empire.

The Forum, the Column and the "New Romanitas"

Before we start with the analysis of the relief, some remarks should be made about the symbolic value of its setting – Constantine’s round Forum, whose form has not been appreciated for its symbolical meaning. At first glance, the choice of its form could be interpreted as Constantine’s hommage to the culture and architecture of the eastern part of the Empire, where round fora were nothing unusual. For example,
Warwick Ball included Constantinopolitan forum in the same group as those in Jerash, Bosra, Palmyra, etc. The most important of them, with a central column instead of a tetrastyle, is the one in Antioch – with Tiberius’ column in the middle. However, taking into consideration that Constantine’s forum was the Forum of Nea Roma, embellished with many symbolically highly potent images, one realizes that its form could not have been just an homage to the eastern culture. In the context of Constantine’s motivation to establish his New Rome, it becomes clear that, what the Emperor had in mind, was the idea of Romanitas as it had been originally formulated. This idea, as Maurizio Bettini points out, was not founded on tales about cosmogony, theogony or anthropogony, but on the story of Rome’s urbanology. He says: “The crucial importance of the civitas in the Romans’ definition of the ‘beginnings’ both of humanity and of divinity invites us to consider the event representing the ‘beginning’ of the civitas itself: namely, its foundation story.” So, if Constantine wanted to have a new Rome, he had to start with the proper ritual, as Roman urbanology demanded. If he wanted to re-enact the foundation of Rome, the first thing he had to do was to symbolically dig a round pit, mundus, just like Romulus had done before him; and the shape of the Forum confirms that. Next, he had to invite all the “newcomers” to join his asylum, and to contribute with some of the tokens brought from their native lands. As it is obvious from the collection of sculptures brought to Constantinople from almost every part of the Roman world, in a symbolic way Constantine did exactly what would have been expected of him as the New Romulus. That he, indeed, was recreating Romulus’ asylum is also confirmed by the fact that he included Christian monuments in his new mundus. By honouring the basic values of Romanitas – inclusivity, openness, and cultural diversity – he was, undoubtedly, striving to revive it in its original form in his New Rome, conscious to what extent the original idea had been corrupted through time by the institutions, including the Roman Senate and some of the irresponsible Emperors. Further still, it is apparent that Constantine was aware of Marcus Aurelius’ attitude towards the role of the emperor in the perfect world of universal Romanitas. He was the pillar mediating between the cosmic order and the worldly order, and had the royal and law-making capacity to act on behalf of good for all mankind. So, he did what was expected of him – he erected the pillar as the symbol of imperial capacity and its role in the world, structured according to the original idea of Romanitas (fig. 2). His sculpture on the top of the column, in the guise of Sol/Apollo/Heliос, symbolically overlooked the whole mundus and safeguarded the universal order that Romanitas implied. If we consider the construction of the porphyry column from this perspective, it becomes obvious...
The Pedestal and Melchior Lorichs’ Drawing

Contrary to the common idea of the Westerners, Mehmed II’s conquest of Constantinople in 1453 was not a catastrophic event. Philip Mansel states: "As the Habsburg dynasty created Vienna, so was Constantinople a creation of the Ottomans. They required a world city, worthy of their empire. Mehmed II and his successors called themselves ‘world-conqueror’, ‘the King of the World’. One of the favourite epithets, both of the sultans and their city, soon became alem penah, ‘refuge of the world’". Mehmed II and his successors promoted multinationalism and Realpolitik, and, as a result, contrary to the general opinion, there was no great destruction or persecution. Even the Patriarch of Constantinople enjoyed the protection of Mehmet II. Could it be perceived like yet another revival of “Romulus’s asylum”? So, in 1555 a young Danish artist and nobleman Melchior Lorichs (Lorck) (b. 1526/27) arrived in the Turkish capital, now called Istanbul. He was employed as a companion of the ambassador of the Holy Roman Emperor, and was a member of his entourage.

Lorichs started his career by the apprenticeship as a goldsmith in Lübeck, where he was trained in engraving and woodcutting. There he spent his early years, working for various patrons, before the appointment in Istanbul. Judging by his travels, he was acquainted with the artistic scene of Venice, Bologna, Florence and Rome. Studying Dürer’s and Michelangelo’s work, he refined his own skills before he was sent to Istanbul. During his four-year stay in Istanbul he continued drawing, and just at the end of his stay he created his remarkable masterpiece – Panorama of Constantinople in 1559 he got the permission of the Ottoman Sultan Süleyman II (the Magnificent) to prepare a panoramic drawing of his capital, as viewed from locations along the northern shore of the Golden Horn. It recorded in unprecedented detail both the Byzantine and contemporary, early Ottoman structures, surpassing in its naturalism former bird’s-eye view panoramic depictions. The Panorama is 11.45 m long and 45 cm high, and comprises twenty-one sheets joined together to show the entire urban vista of the peninsula of Istanbul, viewed from the northern shore of the Golden Horn. Of exceptional interest for this paper is the way in which Lorichs made such a detailed and accurate image of the town. Although scholars interested in his work cannot prove that he used camera obscura, it is assumed that he must have employed the device that was coming into use at that particular time. He could not have been as accurate as he was without employing it from
various standpoints on the Asian side of the Bosporus (fig. 3). However, there is another indication that he used *camera obscura*, and not only for the purposes of drawing the *Panorama*.

Among his sketches of individual monuments from Istanbul, there is an interesting drawing of a sculpted pedestal of a column, made in pen and black ink (434 × 335 mm; cat. KKSgb5473, Department of Prints and Drawings, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen) (fig. 4). It has already been identified as the pedestal of Constantine’s column on the Forum. However, the unique and detailed sketch of such an important part of Constantinopolitan heritage unfortunately never received due consideration. It attracted the attention of Rudolf H. W. Stichel in 1994, but he did not offer an interpretation of the relief, so well–documented by Lorichs. One reason must have been of particular importance – the drawing is inverted because Lorisch must have used *camera obscura*. So, the relief was reproduced, and is still being reproduced, with left and right sides reversed. Stichel did not only evade the interpretation of the relief on the pedestal, but he also added some of his own ideas about Lorichs’ drawing, led by the belief that the composition had been contaminated by the author’s imagination; as the so-called "Turkish Publication", and his other sketches were published years after his departure from Istanbul. The drawing in question was dated by the year 1561, two years after Lorich had left Istanbul. However, it is quite strange that Stichel did not recognise the exceptional care for detail, and considered it only a provisional sketch made from Lorichs’ memory, of a "monument, which stood only a few steps away opposite the ambassador’s hotel". Stichel, sceptical and critical about the proportions of the figures on the relief, even speculated whether the pedestal had several tiers of sculptural decoration, although there is no indication for such a conclusion. It seems that Stichel was not well acquainted with Lorichs’ usual *modus operandi*, or with hisopus.

Still, this exquisite and most detailed drawing, obviously made with the help of *camera obscura*, is actually a treasure of information about the Forum, its symbolism, and the mindset of Emperor Constantine; and the first requirement for its proper interpretation would be the inversion of the picture. Once we do that, the theme of the depiction becomes more than clear, and what might have been confusing becomes quite logical (fig. 5). The theme is easily recognizable as the Wisdom of the Occident and the Orient, the West and the East, paying respect to the victorious
Rhea/Tyche of Constantinople. The legend explaining the origins of Byzantium tells a story of Byzas, a Thracian, who dedicated the city to goddess Rhea as the city’s Tyche. The two were then combined into a single deity. The above-mentioned Patria and Dionysius of Byzantium considered Rhea to be same as Tyche Poliade, the queen of the city. The same semantic relationship between the two was alive at the time when Constantine the Great consecrated and dedicated his Nea Roma. For that reason, he continued and enhanced their veneration, even housing their images in the niches of Tetrastoon. If Zosimus is right, he even brought the famous statue of Rhea from Cyzicus to be put in one of the niches.

So, there can be little doubt to whom the sages of the West and the East are bowing. Seated on a throne adorned with a rams’ head, an Alexandrian symbol of universal power, a young female figure humbly receives the honours with her head gently bowed. We believe that is not so much important whether this is Rhea or Tyche, because it is evident that she is the queen of Constantinople, embodiment and protector of Nea Roma. At the same time, she represents the connection between the history of the city of Byzantium and the future of the city of Constantinople. She is victorious on both sides of the world, East and West, personified not only by the sages, but also by Victorieae carrying tropaea. This could have hardly been the representation of aurum coronarium, although Mango carefully hinted into that direction. The offerings from the East and the West are represented as young boys, hierarchically smaller in size, carrying baskets full of some unrecognizable content (gold coins, bread?). Both of them seem to be encouraged by the gestures of the sages standing behind. Regarding the sages, the inverted image shows that the western one is an ideal depiction of a Graeco-Roman philosopher, dressed in toga and paludamentum, long-bearded as a stoic philosopher, while the eastern one, also bearded, wears a cape and a conical Phrygian cap, usually associated with Persians, Medes, Scythians, etc.

Finally, the crucial figure is represented as a bust in a circular wreath, as a relatively short haired youngish adult crowned by a radial crown, just like the sculpture from the top of the column. His image is positioned right in the centre, just over the central figure, and he must have stared at the observer with the well-known fulgor oculorum. The image of the Emperor may be perceived as the visualisation of the words of an anonymous orator praising Constantine and his resolve in 310, saying: “in quo his fulgor oculorum, haec veneranda pariter et grata maiestas praestringit simul et invitat ad spectum.” There is yet another thing that has to be pointed out in order for the relief to be understandable to the general public. It was carved on
Conclusion

The relief preserved in Melchior Lorichs’ drawing seems to be crucial for understanding the general symbolism of Constantine’s Forum in Constantinople, and could actually be considered the pivotal part of the message the Emperor wanted to convey. That is why it is quite surprising that it has never received more scholarly attention. It is equally surprising to what extent Lorichs’ skills have been underestimated, even though he created the impressive Panorama of Constantinople. If only it had been taken into account that Lorichs extensively exploited the possibilities of camera obscura, the conclusions about the whole monument; the pedestal, the column and the sculpture, might have been more conclusive and comprehensive. In any case, we hope that this short contribution, focused on the interpretation of the theme of the relief from the pedestal, will become relevant for further exploration of the symbolical concept of Constantine’s Forum, and all of the details of the message woven into its original and ingenious concept.

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a) The western sage (philosopher);

b) Rhea/Tyche and the clipeus with the bust of Constantine;

c) The eastern sage with a Phrygian cap (after: Westbrook et al., 2010, fig. 6)

a) Zapadni mudrac (filozof);

b) Reja/Tihe i klipej s Konstantinovom biston;

c) Istočni mudrac s trigliskom kapom (prema: Westbrook et al., 2010, sl. 6)


8. About the asylum see the excellent study Emma Dench, *Roman Identity from the Age of Alexander to the Age of Hadrian* (Oxford University Press, 2005).


16. There have been two attempts to identify the pedestal as a part of some other Constantinopolitan monument. For example, Josef Engemann (1989) was inclined to attribute Lorichs’ drawing to the column monument of Leo I in the Ptitakia, while Martina Jordan–Rwu (1995) assumed that the drawing represented the relief from some other unidentified column in Constantinople. However, some obvious correlations between the decorative and structural details of the pedestal depicted in Freshfield Album (from 1935 Trinity College Library, Cambridge, folio 1, quite certainly depicting the porphyry column) with the ones on Lorichs’ sketch, led Cyril Mango to conclusion (1965, the same text was reprinted in 1993) that Lorichs indeed sketched the pedestal of Constantine’s column. See Josef Engemann, "Melchior Lorichs Zeichnung eines Säulensockels in Konstantinopel", Quaeritur inventus colitur. *Miscellanea in onore di padre Umberto Maria Fasola*, B. (Città del Vaticano, 1989), 247–65; Martina Jordan–Rwu, “Das Säulenmonument. Zur Geschichte der erhöhten Aufstellung antiker Porträtstatuen,” in *Asia Minor Studien* 19 (Bonn, 1995), 132–134; Cyril Mango, "Constantinopolis–politana, "Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 80 (1965): 305–306; Cyril Mango, *Studies on Constantinople* (Aldershot, 1993), 305–313.


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SAŽETAK

Od pogrešno protumačenog crteža iz 16. stoljeća do prvorazrednog svjedočanstva Konstantinova Novoga Rima

reljefu koji je krasio postament stupa. Ono što je ostalo neprepoznato jest da je Lo-\nrichs i ovaj crtež, kao i mnoge druge, izradio koristeći se novim instrumentom koji mu je bio na raspolaganju – a to je camera obscura. Posljedično, ostalo je neprepo-\nznato da crtež zapravo bilježi reljef inverzno, odnosno da je lijevo postalo desno, i obručno. Kada se to uzme u obzir, rastvara se puno značenja elaboriranog reljefa koji iznimno rješito prenosi poruku kako je Konstantin Veliki zamišljao ulogu i karakter svoje nove prijestolnice. Štoviše, pravilno tumačenje figura prikazanih na reljefu do-\nvdio da shvaćanja koliko je višeslojan bio Konstantinov koncept nove prijestolnice i novog Carstva. Kroz tumačenje ovog reljefa, koji je krasio središnji konstantinopoli-\nski spomenik, otvaraju se posve nove perspektive u tumačenju Konstantinove car-\nske ideologije i njegovih planova za budućnost Carstva.

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