

THE EDGE OF THE CITY: THE THEODOSIAN WALLS OF CONSTANTINOPLE/ISTANBUL AS CULTURAL LANDSCAPE ON THE FRINGE: THE ISTANBUL LAND WALLS IN URBAN HISTORY AND IN DAILY LIFE

Koç University, Research Center for Anatolian Civilization (ANAMED)
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MARIANNE SÁGHY

Curated by Figen Kıvılcım Çorakbaş and a sizeable team of experts including archaeologist Zeynep Ahunbay, the last and most conscientious restorer of the walls, this exhibition presents the role the 1600-year-old Theodosian walls played in the life of the city. The team created a 1/500 scale, 13-meter long 3-D architectural model for the exhibition, to offer visitors a chance to observe the size and the location of the Land Walls and to explore the relationship of these walls with the environment surrounding them (Fig. 1). Video interviews with archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists inquire about the role of the walls in daily life. The exhibition presents, in six chapters, the urban function and the memory of the walls: 1. the imperial legacy, 2. People on the fringe, 3. The renovation of the walls after sieges and earthquakes, 4. The green and blue of the city, 5. Spirituality and religion, 6. Walks on the walls.

Despite their original construction as structures of defense, the land walls and the areas surrounding them encapsulate a multi-layered cultural landscape that bear the traces of various events, situations, and people throughout the 1600-year-long history of the city. The exhibition examines traces of different historical periods preserved in and around the walls, discussing the relationship between the Land Walls and the cultural landscapes that surround them. It features spiritual and religious stories associated with the walls as well as stories from people who have lived and/or are living around them and from other residents and travellers who visited them. Through urban legends, historical photographs, scientific reports and quotes from literary sources, *On The Fringe* aims to show the plurality of memories, perspectives, and representations of this great monument.



Fig. 1: Architectural model of the Wall (ANAMED, photo: Marianne Sághy)



Fig. 2: Motorway built over the Theodosian Wall today (ANAMED, photo: Marianne Sághy)



Fig. 3: Vegetable gardens at the Theodosian Wall today (ANAMED, photo: Marianne Sághy)

UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1985, the Theodosian walls are on the list of the monuments in danger since 2008. Real estate developments pushed by the unstoppable expansion of the city as well as poor restoration work caused huge damage to this unique monument of Byzantine architecture, comparable only to the Great Wall of China. The faults and weaknesses of the restoration were spectacularly revealed by the 1999 earthquake: the new parts of the monument – poorly made of bad quality material – fell, while the original, 1600-year-old walls stood intact and unmoved. Real estate sharks and the majority of Stambulites today (Anatolian newcomers, refugees from Africa and Syria) are uninterested in the wall: not knowing anything about them, they only represent an obstacle to expansion (Fig. 2). Investors demolished large parts of the wall, the peaceful vegetable gardens (*bostan*) at the foot of the wall all but disappeared (Fig. 3). To preserve the memory of the wall, the exhibition presents the blooming life at the wall as if to say: it would be a pity if this life disappeared. This explains the lack of archaeological features proper of the exhibition: albeit it involved archaeologists, this is no archaeological exhibition. It is text-heavy, no objects, no archaeological photographs are exhibited. The term 'land walls' used throughout the exhibition is somewhat imprecise and misleading, as Constantinople had other land walls: the fifth-century Anastasian walls stretching 65 km West of the Theodosian Walls, and the medieval city walls of Galata destroyed in the nineteenth century.

The Theodosian Walls (τείχος Θεοδοσιακόν, *teichos Theodosiakon*) were finished under the reign of Emperor Theodosius II, hence their name. They were not the first city walls of Constantinople, however: already Constantine the Great surrounded his new foundation with walls giving towards the land on the West and to the sea on the South: the sea walls of Byzantium at *Sarayburnu* are the earliest parts of the defensive structure going back to times before Constantine. From three sides, the historic city is surrounded by sea: most vulnerable was her western, landlocked side, where a double (with the Anastasian Walls a triple) defensive wall structure was built. The curtain wall of Constantine stood until the ninth century, when it was demolished by an earthquake and by urban expansion. Parts of the Constantinian Walls survived up to the nineteenth century in *İsakapı*, and fragments were discovered during construction work at *Yenikapı* Transfer Center. The area outside the Constantinian Wall (*Exokionion*) soon became settled.

The double line of the Theodosian Walls was built 2.5 km further West as a testimony to the fast growth of the city in a mere seventy years. According to an inscription discovered in 1993, construction started in 404–405 under the direction of Anthemius, the praetorian prefect of the East, and was finished in 413 as the *Codex Theodosianus* testifies. This initial construction consisted of a single curtain wall with towers, which now forms the inner circuit of the Theodosian Walls. The walls were severely damaged by the earthquake of 447 and construction resumed. A twenty-kilometer long, double structure was built, the inner wall was 4.5–6 m thick and 12 m high, the outer wall 8 m high, defended by terraces and by a 20, long, 10 m deep

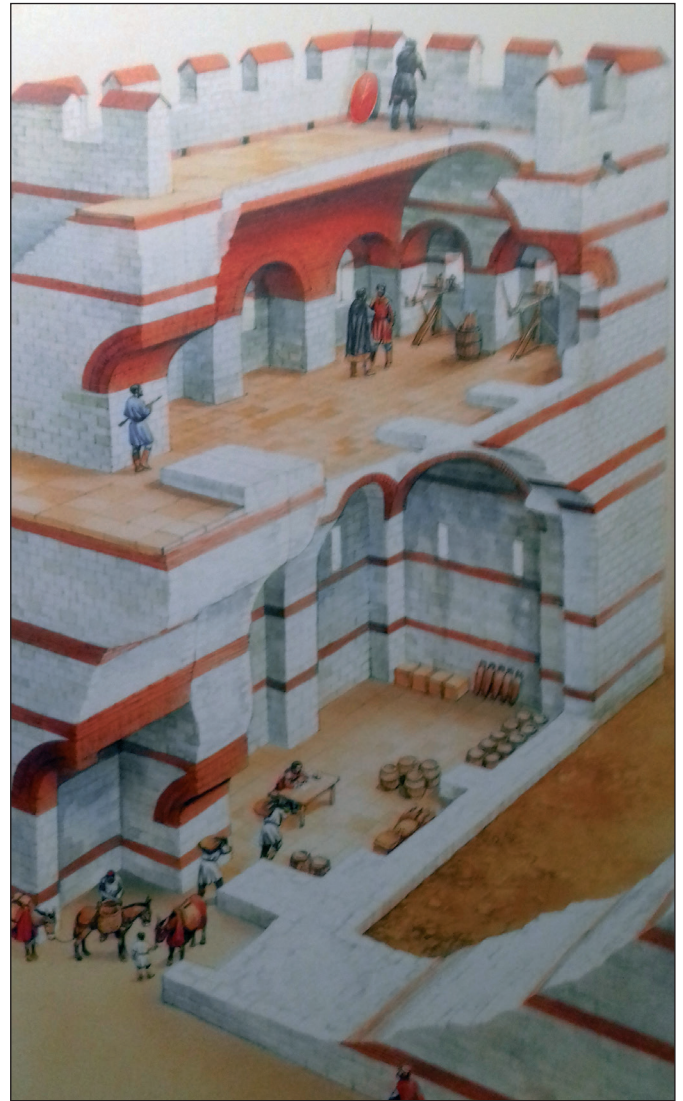


Fig. 4: The structure of the Theodosian Wall
(ANAMED, photo: Marianne Sághy)

moat. Between the outer wall and the moat (σοῦδα) there was an outer terrace. Only one third of the structure survives, 5.7 km of wall from south to north, from the Marble Tower (*Mermer Kule* or Tower of Basil and Constantine, *Pyrgos Basileiou kai Kōnstantinou*) on the Propontis coast to the Palace of the Porphyrogenitus (*Tekfur Sarayı*) in the Blachernae quarter (Fig. 4).

Throughout their history, the walls were damaged by earthquakes and floods of the Lycus river. Repairs were undertaken on numerous occasions, as testified by the numerous inscriptions commemorating the emperors or their servants who undertook to restore them. The responsibility for these repairs rested on an official variously known as the Domestic of the Walls or the Count of the Walls (Δομέστικος/Κόμης τῶν τευχέων), who employed the services of the city's populace in this task. After the Latin conquest of 1204, the walls fell increasingly into disrepair, and the revived post-1261 Byzantine state lacked the resources to maintain them, except in times of direct threat.

The wall had several gates, the most ornate was the Golden Gate (*Chryseia Pyle, Porta Aurea*). It was the main ceremonial entrance of the emperor into the capital, but in 519 and 868 papal legates, and in 710 Pope Constantine also came through this gate. Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos entered the city on 15 August 1261, after its reconquest from the Latins through the Golden Gate. Decorated with statues, the Golden Gate was much admired and emulated, from Thessaloniki to Antioch, from Kiev to Vladimir and to San Francisco – Golden Gate is a distant historical tribute to Byzantium. Despite its ceremonial role, the Golden Gate was

a strategic stronghold. According to the Greek legends, when Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, an angel rescued the emperor Constantine XI Palaiologos, turned him into marble and placed him in a cave under the earth near the Golden Gate, where he waits to be brought to life again to conquer the city back for Christians. The legend explained the walling up of the gate as a Turkish precaution against this prophecy. Interestingly, this legend does not figure at the exhibition. Sultan Mehmed II built a new fort in 1458 by adding three larger towers to the four pre-existing ones on the inner Theodosian wall, he established the Fortress of the Seven Towers (*Yedikule*) and integrated the gate into the wall (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: *The Golden Gate walled up after the Ottoman Conquest*
(ANAMED, photo: Marianne Sághy)

The exhibition focuses less on the construction and military role of the wall than on its function in daily life. Despite a rather traditional presentation through texts, it manages to evoke in an exciting way life blooming at the foot of the wall. The wall was constructed partly on imperial estates, partly on private property. The owners – aristocrats, courtiers, ecclesiastics, monks – were obliged to guard, maintain, and restore the wall on their property. Monasteries – Stoudios, Kosmidion, Chora, Perge – mushroomed on lands stretching in between the walls as noblemen had a tendency to make their foundations at the walls. Land was cultivated by monks. Little is known of the military living here. The „fringe” of Constantinople was not inhabited by lower-class people, or manufacturers, and the vineyards and gardens gave a picturesque, tranquil air to economical activities. Churches came to be built next to life-giving springs, where masses of pilgrims looked for healing. The most famous spring was the water of the Theotokos in



Fig. 6: Hyperperion of Michael VIII. Palaiologos (the Theotokos) and the Wall defend Constantinople (ANAMED, photo: Marianne Sághy)

Blachernae, but Pege also had healing water. The cult of the Holy Virgin is very important at the walls, because as it is shown by Palaiologian coins, the Theotokos – and the walls – protected Constantinople (Fig. 6). At sieges, the miracle-working icon of the Theotokos was put on the walls. Water receives, for the first time, attention at this exhibition: apart from the springs, the moat also was part of the urban water system. Next to the churches, stood large cemeteries – orthodox Greeks, but also Jewish ones (Fig. 7). Following the Ottoman conquest, the fringe did not change. Churches were converted into djamis, but the vineyards, the gardens, the springs, and the cemeteries remained. It is shocking to realize that the Theodosian Wall's struggle for survival starts now, five hundred years after the conquest.

The texts of the exhibition are informative accompanied by a good bibliography (albeit without separating sources and scholarship and reference to modern scholarship is mostly Turkish). Maps

and photos of objects – the inscription of the Theodosian Wall, the statues of the Golden Gate in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul – would have been welcome. Paradoxically, the text-heavy nature of the exhibition makes it a very high-brow show, while in fact it is addressed to the general public and the nice nineteenth-century photographs also point towards popular culture. The exhibition is a good illustration of the spatial turn in Byzantine studies¹ as it makes the wall a text and the text evokes a spatial object. The show also evokes many European walls demolished in the nineteenth century – apart from Rome, Nürnberg, Ferrara, and some other cities, few places can boast with a wall. What was the role and function of the walls of Paris and Pest in the eighteenth century? It would be exciting to analyse these walls as a cultural landscape and thus reintegrate them into the urban tissue.

The exhibition is hosted by Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations (ANAMED). Founded in 2005 to support scientific research on the history of Anatolia, ANAMED is an international cultural institution affiliated to the Vehbi Koç Foundation. In addition to supporting all disciplines of study on Anatolian history from ancient times to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic, art history and archaeology, ANAMED provides a scientific platform for exploring cultural heritage and improving museum management studies. I would like to thank ANAMED for the scholarship that made it possible for me to visit the show and think about the meaning of the walls.



Fig. 7: The Greek Orthodox Cemetery at the Wall (ANAMED, photo: Marianne Sághy)

¹ Myrto, Veikou: Space in Texts and Space as Text: A new approach to Byzantine spatial notions. *Scandinavian Journal of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* (2016)/2, 143–177.