

# Narthex of the Deaconesses in the Hagia Sophia

by Neil K. Moran

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Abstract: An investigation of the ceiling rings in the western end of the north aisle in the Hagia Sophia revealed a rectangular space delineated by curtain rings. The SE corner of the church was assigned to forty deaconesses. An analysis of the music sources in which the texts are fully written out suggests that the deaconesses took part in the procession of the Great Entrance ceremony at the beginning of the Mass of the Faithful as well in rituals in front of the ambo.

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Since the turn of the century, a lively discussion has developed about the function and place of deaconesses in the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches. In her 2002 dissertation on "The Liturgical Participation of Women in the Byzantine Church."<sup>1</sup> Valerie Karras examined the ordination rites for deaconesses preserved in eighth-century to eleventh-century euchologia. In the *Novellae Constitutiones* added to his code Justinian stipulated that there were to be forty deaconesses assigned to the Hagia Sophia:<sup>2</sup>

*Wherefore We order that not more than sixty priests, a hundred deacons, forty deaconesses, ninety sub-deacons, a hundred and ten readers, or twenty-five choristers, shall be attached to the Most Holy Principal Church, so that the entire number of most reverend ecclesiastics belonging thereto shall not exceed four hundred and twenty in all, without including the hundred other members of the clergy who are called porters.*

*Although there is such a large number of ecclesiastics attached to the Most Holy Principal Church of this Most Fortunate City, and the three other churches united with the same, none of those who are now there shall be excluded, although their number is much greater than that which has been established by Us, but no others shall be added to any order of the priesthood whatsoever until the number has been reduced, in compliance with the present law.*

Regarding the forty deaconesses Novella 6, 6 § 2 stipulated that “*first of all, in age they should neither be young, nor in their flowering which could easily lead to transgressions, but from those who have passed their middle age and who are, in harmony with divine rules more than 50 years old. Only then they merit sacred ordination.*” The assignment of a role in the ceremonial of the Hagia Sophia to deaconesses would have doubtlessly won the approval of the strong-willed Theodora, who observed the Divine Liturgy from her throne above the imperial doors in the women’s gallery. Sixteen columns in the church bore the monograms of both Justinian and Theodora.<sup>3</sup>

Karras noted however in an article on “The Liturgical Participation of Women in the Byzantine Church” from 2005 that the rite for the ordained order of deaconesses had disappeared in the Byzantine Church by the late twelfth century.<sup>4</sup> She cites Theodore Balsamon who claimed that the office had devolved into an honorary title for certain nuns by his time.<sup>5</sup> In the same year, Kevin J. Madigan and Carolyn Osiek took up this theme in a book with the title: *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*.<sup>6</sup>

In the following year, 2006, Sharon Gerstel<sup>7</sup> published *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West*. It contains nine papers on themes ranging from the barriers in the Jerusalem

temple to discussions on “Dividing Interior Space in Early Byzantine Churches: The Barriers between the Nave and Aisles” by Urs Peschlow and “The Proskynetaria of the Templon and Narthex: Form, Imagery, Spatial Connections, and Reception” by Sophia Kalopissi-Verti. Robert Taft’s contribution to the volume is an essay on “Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When-And Why?”<sup>8</sup>

In 1979, I published an article in the *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* entitled: “The musical ‘Gestaltung’ of the Great Entrance Ceremony in the 12th century in accordance with the rite of Hagia Sophia.”<sup>9</sup> Drawing on the rubrics in music manuscripts generally unknown to most liturgists, I argued that the Great Entrance ceremony at the beginning of the Mass began inside the church to the left of the altar. The implements for the procession were brought from the skeuophylakion into this area. Accompanied by the singing of the Cherubikon hymn, the procession then proceeded to the center of the left aisle where it turned into the nave.<sup>10</sup> A photograph of one of the ceiling rings was included as an illustration.

Although Robert van Nice<sup>11</sup> had not prepared a graph indicating the placement of these rings in his meticulous survey, he said that he was certain that they dated from the period of Justinian when I spoke to him during my term as a fellow at Dumbarton Oaks in 1978. Their actual location, however, were not documented until my colleagues Ruth Dwyer and Şebnem Yavuz were in the Aya Sofya Müzesi in 2012 and again in September 2014. They recorded the placement of over 300 rings in the four corners of the church.

On the basis of this documentation, I published an article with the title “Nochmals zum Großen Einzug in die Hagia Sophia: Eine Erwiderung an Robert Taft” in *Oriens Christianus*.<sup>12</sup> In two graphs the arrangement of the ceiling rings at the eastern end of the church were represented. The emperor’s mitatorion was hidden behind curtains in the SE corner. It is clearly

marked by the rings in the ceiling. The curtain rings outlining a rectangle is at variance with the location of the metatorion proposed by Mainstone, Mathews, Taft and Mango, who squeezed it into one of the bays on the south aisle.<sup>13</sup> Since the metatorion included an oratory, changing area, triclinos with a dining table and an imperial loge with a throne it would have taken up a large space. A similar arrangement of ceiling rings is found at the eastern end of the north aisle, confining thereby my hypothesis in the *JÖB* article that the clergy with the oblation gathered in the prothesis in the NE corner at the beginning of the Great Entrance.

In addition to the ceiling rings at the east end of the church, there are also rings in the NW and SW corners. Most intriguing were the rings in the NW corner. It is well established that the empress and her ladies assembled in the upper gallery in the NW corner. A special floor mosaic marked the position of Theodora's throne from which she observed the liturgy.<sup>14</sup> Paul the Silentiary<sup>15</sup> described the upper gallery as (line 389f):<sup>16</sup>

*Upon the porphyry columns stand others from Thessaly, splendid flowers of verdant stone.  
Here are the fair galleries for the women, and they have the same form that may be seen  
below, except that they are adorned not with two columns, but with six Thessalian ones.*

Procopius refer several times to women being on the second floor of Hagia Sophia as well as to the position of the women on the ground floor:<sup>17</sup>

*And there are two stoa-like colonnades (stoai), one on each side, not separated in any way from the structure of the church itself, but actually making the effect of its width greater, and reaching along its whole length, to the very end, while in height they are less than the interior of the building. And they too have vaulted ceilings (orophê tholos) and decorations of gold. One of these two colonnaded stoas has been assigned to men*

*worshippers, while the other is reserved for women engaged in the same exercise. But they have nothing to distinguish them, nor do they differ from one another in any way, but their very equality serves to beautify the church, and their similarity to adorn it. But who could fittingly describe the galleries (hyperôa) of the women's side (gynaikonitis), or enumerate the many colonnades and the colonnaded aisles (peristyloi aulai) by means of which the church is surrounded?*

In the *Book of Ceremonies* there is a reference to this area on the ground level as the place of the deaconess:<sup>18</sup>

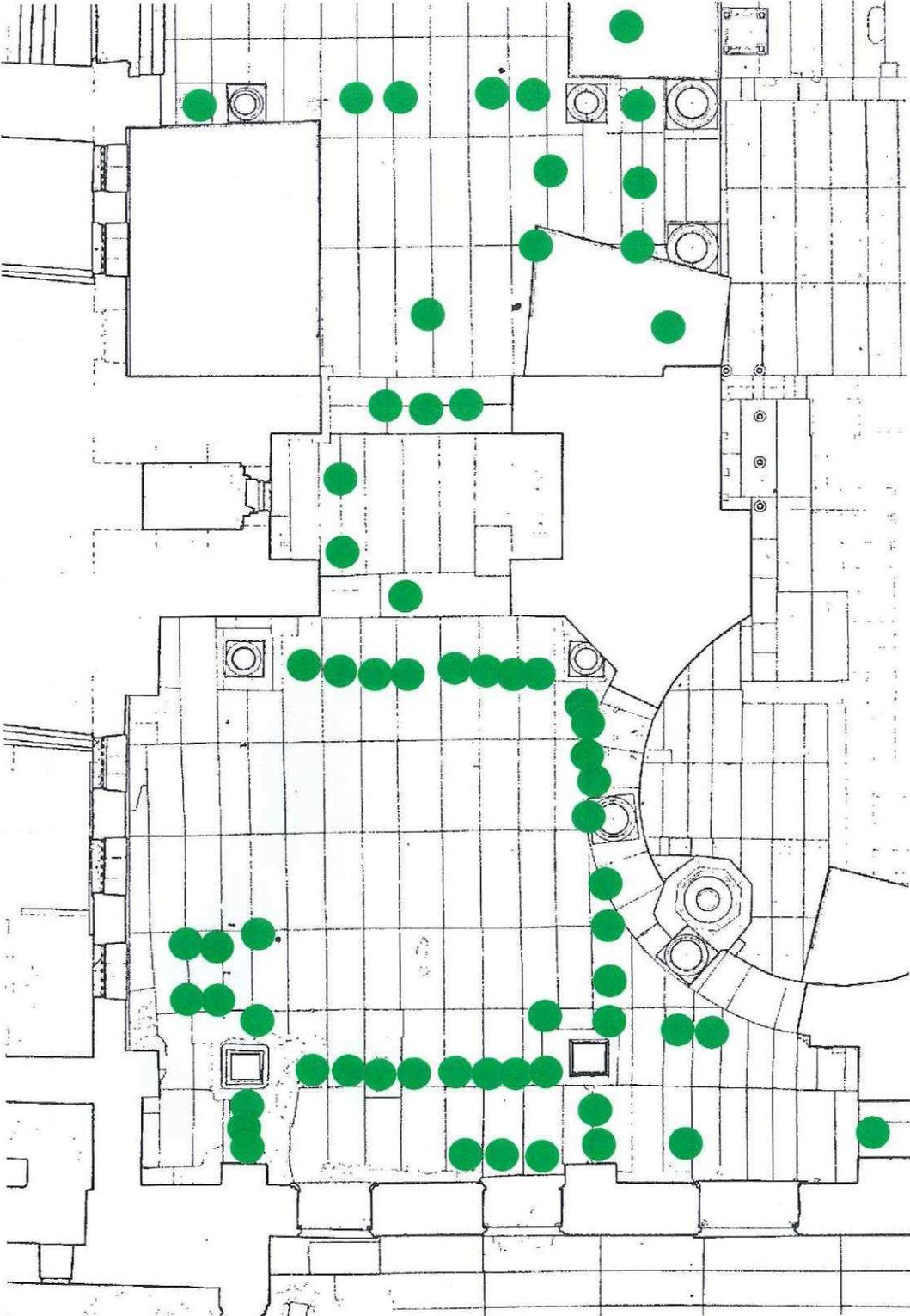
*On Holy Saturday the Emperors are said to enter Hagia Sophia by the southeast entrance (the entrance by the Holy Well) and go into the sanctuary, where they change the altar-cloth and leave their offering of gold. "They then go out by the left side of the sanctuary and go into the skeuophylakion, where the sovereign incenses the holy vessels; they sit on their golden thrones while the patriarch is seated on the throne placed there for him". ... Returning to the sanctuary they pass through the narthex of the women's place (γυναικῆτης) where the deaconesses stay.*

George Majeska elaborated on this text in an article on "The Emperor in his Church":<sup>19</sup>

*After the nard has been distributed, the patriarch and the emperor leave the building and go through the north part of the church, through the women's narthex, where the deaconesses of the Great Church have their station (17), and through the corridor behind the apse (the "passage [δαβατικά] of St. Nicholas) (18) until they come of the Holy Well Shrine (13).*

However, in their edition of *The Book of Ceremonies* A. Moffat and M. Tall assume there is a lacuna in the text at this point. They note that: “*The narthex here may be the eastern end of the south aisle. Otherwise this route from the Sacristy through to the passageway of St. Nicholas is difficult to follow*”.<sup>20</sup>

Ill. 1: Floor plan of the H.S. showing arrangement of the ceiling rings in the NW corner



Ill. 2: NW corner looking up (credit: Ruth Dwyer and Şebnem Yavuz)





Ill. 3: NW corner showing rings (credit: Ruth Dwyer and Şebnem Yavuz).

The northwestern-most free-standing column in the north aisle was known as the column of St. Gregory Thaumaturgus. According to a report dating from 1200 A.D., Anthony of Novgorod venerated this column after leaving the prothesis and passing through the area where the myrrhbearers sang.<sup>21</sup> “Myrrhbearer” was another designation for a deaconess.<sup>22</sup> Taft translated the pertinent passage from Anthony of Novogorod as “*And not far from this prothesis the Myrrhbearers sing and there stands before them a great icon of the most pure Theotokos holding Christ*”.<sup>23</sup>

In my first illustration the ceiling rings in the NW corner are indicated. The rings outline a rectangle similar to the spaces in the other three corners as well as a pathway to the center of the north aisle. Ruth Dwyer and Şebnem Yavuz noticed disturbances in the pavement in the area between the two northernmost columns, which could have marked the location of the tomb of the spiritual child of St. Athenogenos and the icon of the Theotokos mentioned by Anthony of Novgorod. In contrast to the other three corners of the church, no ceiling rings could be detected on the upper left side of the rectangle, which might have hidden the northern wall. After venerating the icon and tomb, the bishop ended up before the column of St. Gregory Thaumaturgus. There a gap in the ceiling in the NW corner similar to that on the opposite side, which may have been a conduit to the upper level. The account of Anthony of Novgorod and the actual curtain rings in the NW corner indicate that the deaconesses had their place at the west end of the north aisle. The term “*narthex*” can refer both to a forecourt as well as to a place of congregation.

Both the *Book of Ceremonies* and the Russian account refer to the deaconesses of the Hagia Sophia as *μυροφόροι*. The same term appears in the *typikon* for the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem.<sup>24</sup> In her article on “The Liturgical Functions of Consecrated Women in

the Byzantine Church" V. Karas noted:<sup>25</sup> *"For Easter matins, the clergy, which apparently included the myrophoroi, gathered early in the morning at the patriarchate, in the secreton, where they changed into white vestments before presumably returning to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The text of the typikon reads:*

*The doors of the church are immediately opened and the patriarch together with the clergy enter the church, chanting the 'Christ is risen'. And the patriarch and the archdeacon immediately enter into the Holy Sepulcher, those two alone, with the myrophorot standing before the Holy Sepulcher. Then the patriarch shall come out to them and say to them [the myrophoroi]: "Rejoice! [ or "Greetings!"] Christ is risen." The myrophoroi then fall down at his feet, and, after rising up, they cense the patriarch and sing the polychronion to him. They [then] withdraw to the place where they customarily stand.*

*Following the deacon's chanting of the epakousta, there was a procession to the bema with two of each clerical order: deacons, subdeacons, deaconesses, and myrophoroi. The deacons held censers, the subdeacons and deaconesses held manoualia, and the myrophoroi each carried a triskelion. The two myrophoroi took up position one on each side of the Holy Sepulcher, censing throughout the second deacon's reading of the Gospel. At the end of the reading, the myrrhbearers entered the Holy Sepulcher and censed and anointed it.*

The curtain rings in the NW corner outline a large rectangular space connected by a passageway of paired curtain rings to the middle of the north aisle. Since the curtain rings in the other three corners are arranged in a similar manner, there can be no doubt that the deaconesses lined up before the ambo with the imperial party and the clergy during the Great Entrance

Ceremony. When one reads Patriarch Germanos' comment that the ambo of the Hagia Sophia represented the Holy Sepulcher, it is not hard to imagine a ceremony similar to that in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem was played out in the Hagia Sophia. Germanos (Patriarch 715 to 730) wrote:<sup>26</sup> *“the ambo signifies the weight of the stone of the Holy Grave upon which the angel sat after he had pushed it aside and proclaimed loudly near the entrance the resurrection of the Lord to the women bearing the ointment”*.

This becomes especially apparent when the music is taken into consideration. During the Great Entrance Ceremony, the imperial procession proceeding from the metatorion met the clergy bearing the oblation in front of the ambo. At that point in the music codex Messina gr. 161 four psalm verses are interpolated into the text of the Cherubikon:<sup>27</sup>

Ἄρατε πύλας οἱ ἄρχοντες υμῶν· καὶ ἐπάρθητε πύλαι αἰώνιοι καὶ εἰσελεύσεται ὁ βασιλεὺς τῆς δόξης. (Ps. 23:9)

Τίς ἐστὶν οὗτος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῆς δόξης (Ps. 23:10)

Κύριος τῶν δυνάμεων αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ βασιλεὺς τῆς δόξης (Ps. 23:10)

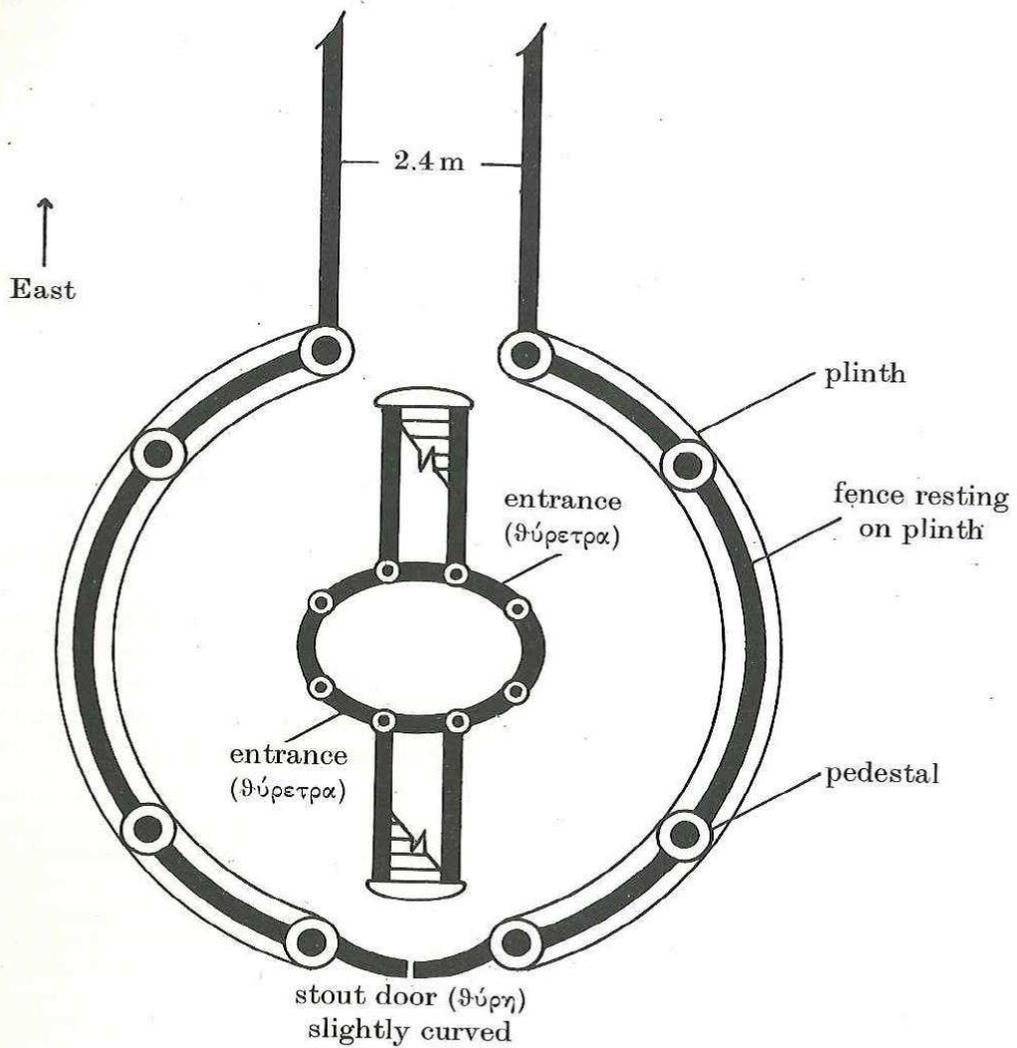
and

Εὐλογημένος ὁ ἐρχόμενος ἐν ὀνόματι Κυρίου (Ps. 117:24)

Although based on the same melody the four psalm verses are of differing lengths, suggesting that the music could be adjusted in accordance with the time required to arrange the participants. The *De ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae* of Konstantin VII describes this part of the Great Entrance Ceremony in detail:<sup>28</sup>

*When the holy gifts are about to be brought in for the holy altar, the praipositoi go in and advise the rulers and put their chlamyses on them and the rulers go out in their chlamyses, without their crowns. They go through the right-hand side of the said church with the koukoukleion and senate, escorted by the sceptres and the rest of the insignia, and they go away behind the ambo.*

The interlude began with the soloist singing the exhortation “*Lift up ye gates*” as the *praipositoi* coordinated the movements of the imperial procession and the assembled clergy, *praipositoi*, chamberlains, senators, scepter-bearers and ministers before the ambo. The signal for the opening of the “*stout door*” on the ambo mentioned by Paul the Silentiary was the recitation of the text: Εὐλογημένος ὁ ἐρχόμενος. The emperor or emperors then passed through the ambo area and the solea. These same psalm verses are used in the dramatic dialogue describing Christ’s harrowing in Hell. In the drama the verse from psalm 117 is sung as the gates of Hell are burst by a triumphant Christ.<sup>29</sup> Although ignored in previous studies the placement of the ceiling rings in the Hagia Sophia has revealed significant information about the liturgy of the Great Church.<sup>30</sup>



Illustrations:

Ill. 1: Floor plan of the H.S. showing arrangement of the ceiling rings in the NW corner.

Ill. 2: NW corner looking up (credit: Ruth Dwyer and Şebnem Yavuz).

Ill. 3: NW corner showing rings (credit: Ruth Dwyer and Şebnem Yavuz).

Ill. 4: Reconstruction of the ambo of the Hagia Sophia.

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<sup>1</sup> V. Karras, "The Liturgical Participation of Women in the Byzantine Church," Ph.D. dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 2002 and Guy Fortin, "Les diaconesses de l'Église byzantine du IVe au VIe siècle: ordonnées ou instituées? État actuel du débat à partir d'une approche liturgique ," (Dissertation, Université de Sherbrooke, Québec, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Fred Blume's translation of Justinian's Code and Novels is published on the Annotated Justinian Code website, 2008: <http://www.uwyo.edu/lawlib/blume-justinian//>

<sup>3</sup> R. Dwyer, "A Mathematical Interpretation of the Decorative Elements of the Hagia Sophia," *Scintilla* 2-3 (1985-86), 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> V. Karras., "The Liturgical Functions of Consecrated Women in the Byzantine Church," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005), 96-116.

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Balsamon, *Scholia in concilium Chalcedonense*, in: PG 137.44

<sup>6</sup> K. Madigan and C. Osiek, eds., *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History*, (Baltimore 2005).

<sup>7</sup> S. Gerstel, ed., *Thresholds of the Sacred: Architectural, Art Historical, Liturgical, and Theological Perspectives on Religious Screens, East and West* (Washington 2006).

<sup>8</sup> R. Taft, "Women at Church in Byzantium: Where, When – and Why?," *DOP* 52 (1998), 27-87.

Taft identified two areas for women on the ground floor of the Hagia Sophia; the gynaeceum of the deaconesses and the narthex of the deaconesses. Taft placed the gynaeceum of the deaconesses in "the eastern half or at least the easternmost bay of the north aisle, opposite the imperial metatorion on the other side of the church in the east bay of the south aisle." It is assigned the number 14 in his plan on page 35 of the article in *Oriens Christianus*. (R. Taft, "Quaestiones disputatae: The Skeuophylakion of Hagia Sophia and the Entrances of the Liturgy

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Revisited,” *OC* 81 (1997), 1-35). The narthex of the diaconesses appears as no. 15 in an outside vestibule entered through a door behind the north side of the bema.

<sup>9</sup> N. Moran, “The musical ‘Gestaltung’ of the Great Entrance Ceremony in the 12th century in accordance with the rite of Hagia Sophia,” *JÖB* 28 (1979), 167-193.

<sup>10</sup> In their publications Mathews and Taft believed in contrast that the ceremony began in the skeuophylakion at north-east corner of Hagia Sophia and made its way along the side of the church to a door on the east side. (cf. T. Matthews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople: Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park-London, 1971); R. Taft, *The Great Entrance: A History of the Transfer of Gifts and other Pre-anaphoral Rites of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Rome, 1975) and R. Taft, “The Skeuophylakion of Hagia Sophia and the Entrances of the Liturgy. Revisited, Part II,” *OC* 82 (1998): 52-87.

<sup>11</sup> R. Van Nice, *Saint Sophia in Istanbul: An Architectural Survey, Installment I* (Washington, 1965) and *Saint Sophia in Istanbul: An Architectural Survey, Installment II* (Washington, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> N. Moran, “Nochmals zum Großen Einzug in die Hagia Sophia. Eine Erwiderung an Robert Taft,” in *OC* 98 (2015), 174-183.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. above Mathews and Taft as well as R.J. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia. Architecture, Structure and Liturgy of Justinian’s Great Church* (London, 1988) and C. Mango, *The brazen house: a study of the imperial palace of Constantinople* (Copenhagen, 1959), 64, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the discussion of Theodora’s throne in the presentation by R. Dwyer, “Boethius, the Quadrivium and the Hagia Sophia” on youtube.

<sup>15</sup> Paulus Silentarius, *Descriptio Sanctae Sophiae; Descriptio ambonis (Ekphrasis tou naou tēs Hagias Sophias)* ed. Claudio De Stefani (New York, 2011): lines 389, 541, 562, 587. Cf. also P. Friedländer, *Johannes von Gaza und Paulus Silentarius. Kunstbeschreibungen justinianischer*

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*Zeit* (Leipzig-Berlin, 1912), 227-256 and J. Kostenek and K. Dark, “Paul the Silentiary's description of Hagia Sophia in the light of new archaeological evidence,” *Byzantinoslavica* LXIX (2011), 88-105.

<sup>16</sup> This is translated on the internet:

([www.learn.columbia.edu/ma/html/or/ma\\_or\\_gloss\\_essay\\_paul.htm](http://www.learn.columbia.edu/ma/html/or/ma_or_gloss_essay_paul.htm)).

<sup>17</sup> Procopius of Caesarea, *Buildings*, ed. H.B. Dewing, 7 vols. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.-London, 1914-40). Greek text with English translation on the internet at: <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Procopius/Buildings/home.html>. Regarding the word “stoa” cf. G. Downey, “The Architectural Significance of the Use of the Words Stoa and Basilike in Classical Literature,” *AJA* 41 (1937), 194–211. According to the generally accepted interpretations of these words a stoa would be a colonnade consisting either of two parallel rows of columns or of one or two rows of columns running parallel with a wall. Cf. G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1961-68), II 899.

<sup>18</sup> T. Matthews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople*, 160.

<sup>19</sup> G. Majeska, “The Emperor in His Church: Imperial Ritual in the Church of St. Sophia,” in: *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204*, ed. Henry Maguire (Washington, 1997), 1-11. The numbers refer to his map of the Hagia Sophia. Cf. also G. Majeska, “Notes on the Skeuophylakion of St. Sophia,” *Византийский временник* 55 (1998), 212-215.

<sup>20</sup> A. Moffat and M. Tall, eds., *Constantine Porphyrogennetos, The book of ceremonies: with the Greek edition of the Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae* (Bonn, 1829), (Canberra, 2012), I 182. The text suddenly jumps from the north wall of the church to a position before “*the left-hand door of the bema.*”

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- <sup>21</sup> Cf. К. Лопарев, *Книга Паломник. Сказание мест святых во Цареграде Антония Архиепископа новгородского в 1200 году* (Publications of the Orthodox Palestine Society 51), (Petersburg, 1899), 12.
- <sup>22</sup> Allie M. Ernst, *Martha from the margins: the authority of Martha in early Christian tradition* (Leiden, Boston 2009), 155.
- <sup>23</sup> Taft, “The Skeuophylakion of Hagia Sophia and the Entrances of the Liturgy Revisited,” 25.
- <sup>24</sup> A. Ernst, *Martha from the margins: the authority of Martha in early Christian tradition*, 152-155. For a description of the Easter celebration in Jerusalem cf. P. J.-B. Thibaut, *Ordre des offices de la Semaine Sainte, à Jérusalem, du IVe au Xe siècle* (études de liturgie et de topographie palestiniennes), (Paris 1926) and A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Analekta Hierosolymitikes Stachyologias*, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg, 1894).
- <sup>25</sup> V. Karras, "The Liturgical Functions of Consecrated Women in the Byzantine Church," *Theological Studies* 66 (2005), 96–116.
- <sup>26</sup> N. Borgia, *Il commentario di S. Germano patriarca costantinopolitano e la versione latina di Anastasio Bibliotecario*. Grottaferrata 1912, 11.
- <sup>27</sup> Bartolomeo Di Salvo, “Gli asmata nella musica bizantina,” *Bollettino della Badia Greca di Grottaferrata* 12 (1959); 45–50, 127–45; 14 (1960), 145–78, esp. vol. 14, 158. The music for these psalms is transcribed in N. Moran, “The musical 'Gestaltung' of the Great Entrance Ceremony,” 190.
- <sup>28</sup> A. Moffat and M. Tall (tr.), *Constantine Porphyrogenetos, The book of ceremonies: with the Greek edition of the Corpus scriptorum historiae Byzantinae* (Bonn, 1829), (Canberra, 2012), I 16-17.

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<sup>29</sup> R. Taft, "Psalm 24 at the Transfer of Gifts in the Byzantine Liturgy: A Study in the Origins of a Liturgical Practice," in: R.J. Clifford and G.W. MacRae (eds.), *The Word in the World. Essays in Honor of Frederick L. Moriarty, S.J.*, (Cambridge, MA 1973) 159-177.

<sup>30</sup> An investigation of the curtain rings in other churches with the ambo-solea key-hole arrangement now is necessary. Cf. P. H. F. Jakobs, *Die frühchristlichen Ambone Griechenlands* (Bonn, 1987) and S. Ristow, "Zur Gestaltung des Ambo in Gallien, Germanien, Raetien and Noricum," in: *Frühmittelalter, Architektur und Liturgie. Akten des Kolloquiums vom 25. bis 27. Juli in Greifswald*, ed. M. Altripp and C. Nauerth (Wiesbaden, 2006), 223-232.