Hjalmar Torp. *La rotonde palatine à Thessalonique: Architecture et mosaïques*. 2 Vols. pp. 568, 192 col. and b/w ills and plates. 2018. Athens: Éditions Kapon. ISBN: 978-618-5209-37-7, hardcover €86.

The great American satirist, Tom Lehrer, once said (in relative youth) 'when Mozart was my age, he'd been dead two years'. When Hjalmar Torp began to write about the Rotunda (or Church of St George) in Thessaloniki, this reviewer hadn't been born for 8 years... Torp's first contribution to the study of this remarkable and enigmatic building was published in 1954. It was the beginning of a string of discussions. If anyone knows this monument really well, it is the great – now 95-year-old – doyen of Norwegian early Christian archaeology. What he has published here is a beautifully produced and lovingly written *summa* of a lifetime's work, with publications spanning French, Norwegian and English over 65 years – a period that included significant events in the lifetime of the building itself, such as the damage of the earthquake of 1978 and the painstaking restorations thereafter. The book is commanding, comprehensive and fundamental, and the addition of a brief typology of the portraits of the saints by the distinguished art historian Bente Kiilerich is welcome (pp. 187-93).

The monument itself is one of the great enigmas that stand in the way of an easy and simple history of Byzantine art. Like the Trier ivory for instance (which has been compellingly dated between the fifth and the ninth centuries – with radically different meanings depending on the option taken) the Rotunda's decoration offers a wide range of options on its dating but no easy answers. The building has many problems – not least the loss of so many of the great mosaics of its dome (but fortunately the survival of the spectacular examples around the drum). The drum mosaics show one of the finest visions of fantastic architecture in Byzantine art, with birds (like the canon tables of early Gospels), peopled with 16 standing males in splendid dress (saints, perhaps, or patrons) in the Orant posture: their chief rival for architectural mosaics anywhere in late antiquity are the great seventh century examples in the courtyard of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. The lower dome, whose decoration is almost entirely destroyed, appears to have held a band of many figures (apostles, prophets, elders?) perhaps before the divine throne, while the centre (again largely lost) seems to have portrayed a standing Christ inside concentric circular borders of gold stars on a blue ground, garlands with grapes, pomegranates and other fruits on a gold ground, and a rainbow, held by angels alongside a nimbed phoenix. Their quality is of the very highest level (technically and aesthetically), perhaps unsurpassed. This makes the loss of the decoration of most of the central dome figures all the more painful.

The greatest problem with the monument is the question of dating (although there is no certainty on the iconography of its mosaic decoration, its meanings, patronage, artists or even their provenance). Although the standing figures in the drum are provided with *tituli* giving their names, no dedicatory inscription survives to steer us towards placing the questions of patronage and chronology. The building itself was certainly once part of a Tetrarchic complex of the early fourth century, perhaps originally planned to be an imperial mausoleum for the pagan emperor Galerius (reigned 305-311), who was resident in Thessaloniki although he was not ultimately buried there, that was later adapted to use as a church, with some expansion. The fraught issue is the date of the mosaics, notably of the surviving drum mosaics (which need not certainly be of the same campaign or date as those, mainly lost, of the dome). These must have been set up in the period after the pagan building was converted to being a church, either at the point of Christian re-dedication or at some stage afterwards, although we have no clear steer for when such things might have happened. They are very expensive products using gold and thus indicate a wealthy (and hence it is often inferred, imperial) patron. The mosaics as a whole are very extensive – occupying an area of just under 1,500 square meters.

Torp has always championed the earliest possible date – in the later fourth century with completion by 400 at the latest, identifying the patron with the emperor Theodosius I (379-395, esp. pp. 445-84). Over the last century many scholars have looked later – to the fifth or even the sixth century. This reviewer would not necessarily be averse to the sixth – thinking of Justinianic parallels for the figures and the Umayyad trajectory for the architecture (the Damascus mosque is often argued to have been decorated by Byzantine or Byzantine-trained artists). There is of course no documentary proof, just the usual fantasy architecture of stylistic supposition and comparison with relatively few surviving extant parallels, all dependent on that least subjective of all criteria of judgment, the art-historical eye. All empirical evidence (such as there is) is inconclusive. The problem with Torp's

book is arguably that he knows the building and its many scholarly arguments too well. His *summa* is a consistent diatribe against his many opponents and a long apologetic for his chosen solution. His adduction of relevant Theodosian parallels (although really there are no comparable mosaics) is excellent, but of course there are no parallels given for alternative explanations (some of them by no means less plausible) – turning the book into a plea for a position, rather than an objective summary of uncertain options. The problem here is that the fissile and messy uncertainty of so much of what we know about early Christian art is seen as something that needs cleaning up with positivist art-historical solutions so that a clear trajectory (for the monument in its own right and for the whole field, once one has placed the monument in its correct place) can be given. Arguably, with some exceptions about which we know more (such as Justinian's St Sophia in Constantinople), this is the wrong kind of story to tell: what is the point of clearing up the mess if you sort it out by putting the bits in all the wrong boxes? We need to embrace the mess of our evidence in its totality and to tell our stories with full empirical genuflection to how little we know. What the Rotunda's mosaic decoration offers are the sad remains of a stunning and exceptional dome programme plus the spectacular survival of a unique circle of drum images of extraordinarily high quality of execution and design, whose import, date and meanings remain singularly inaccessible, if we want precision, but whose broad significance and placement with the long development of Christian religious art between the late fourth century and the seventh are huge and unassailable.

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Medieval to Postmedieval

Dimitros E. Psarros. Το Αϊβαλί και η Μικρασιατική Αιολίδα [***Ayvalik and Aiolis of Asia Minor***]**. pp. 627, with b/w and col. ills, 1 map in bag pocket. 2017. Athens: Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece (MIET). ISBN 978-960-250-687-5, hardback € 85.**

This is a particular book, written by a refugee of second generation from Aivalik, who dedicated his life to the history of his homeland (he has studied Aivalik from 1969 till his death in 2008). An electrical engineer and architect by profession, a "technician' and not an academic or a professional writer', as Psarros himself states (579), the author prepared a book free of the scientific constraints that sometimes academic writings possess. Although his focus was on topography, settlement evolution and architecture, the author was not afraid to enter into the field of history, and the information he includes from his numerous oral interviews enlivens the places the author describes. In fact, reading, or better, wandering through the book, one has the feeling that he meets Fotis Kontoglou's 'heroes' of his *Το Αϊβαλί η πατρίδα μου* (Athens 1962).[1]

Psarros died before completing the book (with the exception of the texts), and that entailed research into his archive for the full documentation of illustrations, maps, topographical sketches and captions by the editorial team of the Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece, who managed to offer to the public a wonderful edition.

The topic of the book is the town of Aivalik (Kydoniai), the adjacent Moschonisia (Cunda islands) and Genitsarochori (Küçükköy) in Aiolis in western Asia Minor. From 1773, this area – inhabited by ca. 30-40.000 souls, was granted special privileges by the Ottomansenjoyed total autonomy and economically exploded, reaching its peak in the early 20th century. Since the 18th century the whole area of the gulf of Adramytion, as well as the island of Lesbos, was dedicated to monoculture of the olive, which was very fruitful for the inhabitants of the aforementioned areas. By contrast though to

[1] Fotis Kontoglou was born in 1895 in Aivalik and was one of the leading painters and intellectuals of 20th century Greece, master of Yiannis Tsarouchis and Nikos Eggonopoulos, founder of the Neo-Byzantine-style of painting, and winner of the Academy of Athens Prize for his book *Ekphrasis* on Orthodox Iconography.