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About the Defense of the Great Palace of Constantinople: A Proposal for the Location and Identification of the Jail or Quarter of the Noumera

By Miguel Navarro Torrente

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In the current study we will try to clarify the approximate number of contingents in charge of the defense of this primordial complex together with the hierarchical structure and the division of forces that it followed; at the same time, we will make a proposal for the location of one of the main buildings where one of the most important forces was quartered: the Noumera.

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About the Defense of the Great Palace of Constantinople: A Proposal for the Location and Identification of the Jail or Quarter of the Noumera

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Astral- Numerous and exhaustive studies have been carried out on the defensive system of the city of Constantinople, its troops, the number of those available during the different dynastic periods, its successful and impregnable Theodosian walls and how they remained standing repelling foreign enemies attacks during more than ten centuries (ignoring the civil and internecine wars that the Empire suffered during this prolonged period). The Imperial Byzantine capital suffered more than thirty attacks, being the most notable one carried out by the Crusaders in 1204, which, as is well known, ended with the devastating Crusader looting of one of the richest cities in the world. [1] But, what defensive system was available in the heart of what had been the capital and most important city in the world for such a long period? Who was in charge of the essential task of personally protecting the emperor's life in the Great Palace? How many bodies of Military elite were in charge of the custody of the Great Palace of Constantinople and where were their quarters located?

In the current study we will try to clarify the approximate number of contingents in charge of the defense of this primordial complex together with the hierarchical structure and the division of forces that it followed; at the same time, we will make a proposal for the location of one of the main buildings where one of the most important forces was quartered: the *Noumera*.

Astral- Se han realizado numerosos y exhaustivos estudios acerca del aparato defensivo de la ciudad de Constantinopla, de sus tropas, el número de las que disponía durante los distintos períodos dinásticos, de sus exitosos e inexpugnables muros teodosianos y de cómo se mantuvieron en pie repeliendo ataques foráneos enemigos durante más de diez siglos, obviando las guerras civiles e intestinas que sufrió el Imperio durante este prolongado período. Más de una treintena de ataques sufrió la capital bizantina, de los cuales, el más reseñable fue la realizaba por los cruzados en 1204, que, como bien es sabido, acabó con el devastador saqueo cruzado a una de las ciudades más ricas del mundo.[1] Pero, ¿de qué sistema defensivo disponía el corazón de la que había sido la capital y ciudad más importante del mundo durante tanto tiempo?¿Quién se ocupaba de la primordial labor de proteger personalmente la vida del emperador en sus inmediaciones?¿Cuántos cuerpos de élite militares se encargaban de la custodia del Gran Palacio de Constantinopla y dónde se ubicaban sus instalaciones?

En este estudio trataremos de esclarecer el número de contingentes aproximado encargado de la defensa de este primordial complejo junto con la estructura jerárquica y la división de fuerzas que seguían; al mismo tiempo, realizaremos una proposición de la ubicación de uno de los edificios principales donde se acuartelaba una de las fuerzas de mayor importancia: los *noumera*.

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[1] For further information consult The Chronicle of Novgorod.

I. The Great Palace of Constantinople and Its Defensive Corps

One of the main issues and premises that must be considered when we are studying the defense of the enclosure are the cyclopean dimensions of the Great Palace (around 400,000 m^2), [2] its labyrinthine and intricate of communications at different levels of height, in a terraced mode and the vital importance of the enclosure. Due to these main reasons and many others, the defensive system that it should have had to be up to the tactical and numerical height of its dimensions.

The main forces in charge of protecting the Emperor, designed both inside of the Great Palace of Constantinople as well as on its surroundings, should have been as great as the facilities assigned for this purpose. Surrounding the monumental palatine entrance, the Chalké Gate, the *triklinos* of the main units of defenders of the Imperial Palace were placed. In fact, we find a close relationship between this colossal and luxurious main entrance and the palatal defensive forces. They shared a direct communication system, and were also related in their practical part. That is because many of the guardhouses whose facilities were close to the *Chalké Gate*, used its large quadrangular forecourt of 1815 m^2 (33 meters wide by 55 meters long),[3] for carrying out military tactical maneuvers and rehearsals. combat, thus becoming, a parade ground.

These guard corps mentioned responsible of the defense of the Great Imperial Palace added up to a total of approximately 6,000 men excellently armed and trained men, who had their main base in the Great Palace, although only those closest to the emperor or those who had no other recourse and stood out for their loyalty slept inside the palatine enclosure. This was the case of many of the *excubitores, cubiculari, doryphoros, domestici*, etc., who resided inside the palace and were

[2] Author's rough calculations.

[3] MAMBOURY, E. y WIEGAND, T., *Die Kaiserpaläste von Konstantinopel zwischen Hippodrom und Marmara-Meer*. Berlin, Gruyter, 1934, p. 35.

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in charge of protecting the Chalké Gate and its surroundings day and night. This includes its roofs and various levels. As well as those who had the aforementioned buildings or close to them. Hence the importance of the premeditated communication system between the different quarters and the main entrance to the Palace. I would like to emphasize once again the importance of these elite guard forces, their organization, training and disposition, since the life of the most important person on the planet at that time depended on them.

Moreover, the defense of the main entrance was in charge of the *excubitors*, who originally numbered some 300 heavy infantrymen clad in striking armor covered with white cloaks, protected by large shields, with their heads and faces protected behind spectacular helmets of shining bronze. crowned with red plumes and armed with heavy axes, long swords and spears. [4] Subsequently, their number would vary between 300 and 500[5] men, depending on the period that we focus, the number would increases or decreases. The *excubitors* were therefore the first wall of conteinment inthe event of attack and were headed by the figure of the *Comes Excubitorum*. A figure that would acquire a special political relevance in the sixth century, to such an extent that it was the post usually occupied by the man destined to succeed the Emperor. Such would be the case for example and to mention only a few cases, of Tiberius II, *Comes Excubitorum* with Justin II or with Maurice, who in turn was Tiberius's *Comes Excubitorum.*

The *excubitores* were joined as the first defensive corp in the defense of the Sacred Palace by the corps of the *domestici,* which represented two *numerae*[6] in total, made up of troops that could serve as infantry and cavalry, i.e., around another thousand men. [7] Focusing on these latter mentioned, the *domestici,* were originally a corps made up of a selection of soldiers from the most prominent legions, such as the Palatines. The function of the *domestici* was to protect the August during his displacements inside and outside of the capital. They were divided into two companies (12.000 men) around the whole Constantinople: one made up of foot soldiers, and the other made up of cavalry or equites, each of these groups led by their respective *comes domesticorum.*[8] So, if we add the strength of the *domestici* who were destined at the Chalke Gate to that of the *excubitors*, the Bronze Gate had a fixed defense of between 1,300 and 1,500 men.

Behind them and next to them, we would have the units that constituted the bulk of the original Palatine force: the *Scholae Palatinae*. This elite unit made up of 7 heavy cavalry squadrons, that is, about 3,500 *equites,* who had their own quarters since the founding of Constantinople, adjacent to the backyard of the Chalké.[9] They were excellently armed and trained men who fulfilled a double function: on the one hand they were soldiers known for their bravery and impeccable professionalism, and on the other they were personally in charge of the guard and custody of the emperor himself.

Access by sea to the Great Palace was also largely protected by them, although they were preceded by the imperial fleet of course, who was the main force in charge of the defense of this part. Together with the approximately two thousand three hundred troops from the crews of the ten ships that made up the Palatine naval detachment docked in the Port of Boukoleón, (port and maritime residence of the Great Palace), and which together with the aforementioned guard corps, constituted a formidable force that reached almost eight thousand men.[10] In fact, if the emperor had not had these forces at his disposal, the insubordinates of the Nika Riot of 532 would most probably have penetrated inside the palace, and the emperor would have been left with no other option than to scape by sea as he proposed at that point of the revolt.[11]

[4] Richard FRANCK: *Scholae Palatinae The Palace Guards of the Later Roman Empire,* Roma, American Academy in Rome, 1969, p. 19.

[5] Camille JULLIAN: *De protectoribus et domesticis Augustorum. Thesim Proponebat Facultati Litterarum Parisiensi*, Whitefish, Kessinger Publishing, 1883; Francisco AGUADO: *La guarnición y el funcionamiento táctico de la muralla teodosiana de Constantinopla,* Granada (published in press), p. 24.

[6] MAGAÑA ORÚE, E., RODRÍGUEZ GONZÁLEZ, J., y DE LA TORRE RODRÍGUEZ, J.L., *Mauricio emperador romano de Oriente. Strategicon.* Madrid, Ministerio de Defensa, 201, l.4.

[7] As the doctor and researcher José Soto Chica points out in "SOTO CHICA, J., *Bizancio y la Persia Sasánida: dos imperios frente a frente.* Granada, Centro de Estudios Bizantinos, Neogriegos y Chipriotas, 2015, pp. 70-72" a *noumera* or also known as a *tagma* was even made up of about 520 men in the event that it was completely complete, as it appears encrypted in the *Strategikon of Maurice*: I.4. It should be noted that on rare occasions the *tagma* or *noumera* were complete respect to the number of soldiers, but, in the case of such a notable and spatial case such as the personal defense of the emperor and the surroundings where he resided, we must assume that these formations were in full composition.

[8] Camille JULLIAN: *De protectoribus et domesticis Augustorum. Thesim Proponebat Facultati Litterarum Parisiensi*, Whitefish, Kessinger Publishing, 1883; Francisco AGUADO: *La guarnición y el funcionamiento táctico de la muralla teodosiana de Constantinopla,* Granada (published in press) p. 24.

[9] DEWING, H. B., (ed.): *Procopius: Anecdota, or Secret history*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1969, pp. 284-285

[10] AGUADO, F. A., *La guarnición y el funcionamiento táctico de la muralla teodosiana de Constantinopla,* Granada (published in press), pp. 16-32.

[11] Whitby, L. Mary & Whitby, Michael, *Chronicon paschale.* Liverpool, Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Classics, 2015, AD. 532, pp. 114.121.

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II. The Location of the Main Forces: A Proposal for the *Noumera* Quarter

The location of these forces was carefully chosen on the basis of tactical convenience. Therefore, the proximity of the *triklinos* to the main entrance of the Great Palace was aimed to fulfill an obvious strategic requirement, which together with the great communications and facilities, are essential factors when it comes to understand the effectiveness of the defense of the Great Palace enclosure.

These structures were several independent and well communicated buildings which housed different types of guard corps. In the mid-nineteenth century, the French jurist and historian Jules Labarte placed in a quite precise way the quarters previously mentioned. He also pointed out that there were four different types of *triklinos*: one of them was placed outside the walls, commonly known as the *noumera*'s *prisión* or quarters, and three quarters inside the Palace whose original name came from the type of contingent:[12] *scholarios, exkoubitores and candidati.* In the present study we are aimed at defining, clarifying and identifying the *noumera*'s *triklinos*, the one situated outside the walls of the palatine enclosure.

As it was previously exposed, the *noumera* were the only contingent situated outside of the walls of the Great palace; but it is a fact that it was quite close to the *Chalké Gate*, as Constantine Porphyrogennetos reflects at " *De Ceremonii* ".[13] This location seems quite logical if we take into account that this quarter was one of the main defenders of the Palace.

According to the Dr. Francisco Aguado, the"*noumera*" seem to be the heirs of the primitive Roman "numerus".[14] They were an auxiliary force from the Roman army, and it was composed of a variable number of barbarian allies, adapting its size and composition depending on the territory's requirements or the type of military campaign they were aimed to, as well as on the enemy to be confronted. Lately, it will become a regular infantry unit belonging to the "*limitanei*" with a defined number of soldiers.[15] It should be noted that one of the basic functions of the "*limitanei*" and the *noumera* is closely related. As it has been explained, the noumera were not only in charge of protecting the prisión, but also defended the sacral-palatine enclosure's perimeter gust as the *limitanei* defended the "limits" or the border territories. The Great Palace became thus a symbolic representation of the Empire on a small scale, both sharing the same defensive system and military hierarchy.

Ultimately, it was a regular Byzantine infantry corps led by a "*Domestikos ton Noumeron*" which would correspond to a "*Comes*". The first *Domestikos ton Noumeron* we have evidence of is Leo Lalakon, from the reign of Michael III in the IX century.[16] In spite of this, since some sources mentioned this force before and some archaeological remains have also been found relating it to the VIII century, we can infer that it must have been from an older historical period. We also know that, although the have given to it was not originally the same, the original building which was later used for the *noumera*'s *triklinos*, dates back to the Constantine I the Great times and that this was contemporary with the first *Chalké* Gate and to the other *triklinos* of the *Scholae Palatinae.*[17]

The noumeriots were closely linked to another force corp*:* the *Murario guards*[18], whose main function, as their name suggests, was to defend the walls of the Byzantine capital. They also shared the same hierarchical structure and are usually named together in *the Cer*. in most of his narrations.

Regarding the "mysterious building" where the noumeri were quartered, several theories have been put forward. We will now attempt to clarify the type of building it was, trying to identify it and to define its main functions and structures on the basis of the scarce documentary evidence we have as well as on the archaeological remains that have been found.

First of all, this intriguing and garish building been identified by some authors, as Rodolphe Guilland, as the *Chalke of the Hippoodrome*[19] or as the later prisión of the *Chalké Gate* because of the custody function they both shared.

But the truth is that, to the present day, it can be affirmed that they were different buildings, quite different on their architectural constructions, although they were communicated to each other by a discreet passageway known as the "*Achilles*", which led to the Hippodrome. This Hippodrome has an outstanding importance in the present study, since it allows us to locate and place what was later to become the headquarters of the noumera prisión: the splendid and well-known *Baths of*

[12] LABARTE, JULES, *Le Palais Impérial de Constantinople et ses abords. Sainte-Sophie, le Forum Augustéon et l´Hippodrome*, Paris, Librairie Archéologique de Victor Didron, 1861, pp. 237, 238.

[13] MOFFAT, A. Y TALL, M. (eds): *The Book of Ceremonies,* vols. I y II. Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2012, Book II, cap. 15, p. 579.

[14] AGUADO, F. A., *La guarnición y el funcionamiento táctico de la muralla teodosiana de Constantinopla,* Granada (published in press), p. 80.

[15] Frontier soldiers belonging to the time of the late Roman Empire. For more information consult: KAZHDAN, ALEXANDER P. *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium.* Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 1230.

[16] KAZHDAN, ALEXANDER P., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium.* Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 647: PG 105: 513B.

[17] PREGER, Th., *Scriptores Originum Constantinopolitanarum*. Munich: Teubner, 1895, 218, 219.

[18] Wall defensive corp. Further information about this force in: AGUADO, F. A., *La guarnición y el funcionamiento táctico de la muralla teodosiana de Constantinopla,* Granada (published in press).

[19] GUILLAND, R., *Études topographiques de Constantinople byzantine*. Berlin-Amsterdam, Berliner Byzantinistische Arbeiten, 1969. Book I, pp. 41-51.

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Zeuxippon. Once again, it is in the "*De cer.*" where we can find the following information related to this:

> "*Standing up for the throne, he mounted his hose and went via the passageways of the Achilles and the side of the Zeuxippon, and went out into the open Hippodrome*"[20]

Thanks to this valuable description we are able to clarify the famous *Baths of Zeuxippon*, originally built by Septimus Severus, painstaking y decorated by Constantine and renovated by Justinian after being rated to the ground in the *Nika Riot* (532),[21] were located outside the palace walls and almost adjacent to the Hippodrome, quite close to the Chalke Gate.[22]

Having established the topographical location of the *Zeuxippon Baths*, we must now clarify its identification with the quarter of the noumera.

The Greek ecclesiastical historian *Nicephours Callixtus*, who had access to historical sources that now have been lost, provides us the first evidence which help with our purpose, since he quotes quite clearly and precisely that what was originally called the *Baths of Zenxippon* would be later called the *Noumera.*[23]

The settlement of the Noumera corps in its original quarter has also been clearly linked to the reign of Heraclius (610-641), which is another common mistake related to the *Chalké Gate*, since it was during the Heraclian dynasty when the magnificent entrance to the Great Palace started to be considered as a prision.
Similarly, some sources also testify that this building is also used as the Zeuxippon Baths well into the VIII century, and more specifically untill the era of the Emperor Philippi Bardanes:

> *"the emperor decided to make on the Saturday of Pentecost4 an entry on horseback, to bathe in the public baths of Zeuxippos and to lunch with citizens of ancient lineage"*[24]

Therefore, there is no doubt as to which was the headquarters of this significant guard corp. This study not only contributes to a better knowledge of the topography of Constantinople, but also to have a more clarified idea of the complex, magnificent/grandiose and gradual implementation of the defense of the Great Palace.

[20] MOFFAT, A. Y TALL, M. (eds): *The Book of Ceremonies,* Vols. I y II. Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2012, Book I, Append. p. 507.
[21] WHITBY, L. M., *Chronicon paschale*, Oxford, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Classics*. 2015, 532, pp. 114.121.
[22] BARDILL, J., *Brickstamps of Constantinople*¸Vol. I, Nueva York, Oxford University Press, pp. 67-69.
[23] P.G. CLXVI, p. 246.
[24] MANGO, Cyril; SCOTT, Roger. *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History, AD 284-813,* Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997, 712/713, p. 533.

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13. MOFFAT, A. y TALL, M. (eds): *The Book of Ceremonies,* vols. I y II. Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2012
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