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

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. 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.

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¹ For further information consult The Chronicle of Novgorod.

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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 5005 men, depending on the period that we focus, the number would increases or decreases. The excubitors were therefore the first wall of containment in the 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 excubitors were joined as the first defensive corp in the defense of the Sacred Palace by the corps of the domestici, which represented two numerae6 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 domestici.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 Chalke.6 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

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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 numera 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 numera 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.
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 Ceremoniis” 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 sacred communications and facilities, are essential factors which together with the great 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.

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 located to another force corp: the Murario guards18, 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 Guillard, as the Chalk of the Hippodrome19 or as the later prisón 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

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 Zeuxippon 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 Chalke Gate, since it was during the HeracIian dynasty when the magnificent entrance to the Great Palace started to be considered as a prison.

Similarly, some sources also testify that this building is of Heraclius (610-641), which is another common mistake related to the Chalke Gate, since it was during the HeracIian dynasty when the magnificent entrance to the Great Palace started to be considered as a prison.

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.

1. AGUADO, F. A., La guarnición y el funcionamiento tácito de la muralla teodosiana de Constantinopla, Granada (en prensa).
15. SOTO CHICA, J., Bizancio y la Persia Sasánida: dos imperios frente a frente. Granada, Centro de Estudos Bizantinos, Neogriegos y Chipriotas, 2015