

ST. SOPHIA THE MOSAICS OF THE NARTHEX

WORK DONE IN 1932

The order of the Turkish Government enabling the Byzantine Institute of America to lay bare and conserve the mosaics of St. Sophia was issued in June 1931 at Ankara by the Council of Ministers. His Excellency Esat Bey, at that time Minister of Public Instruction; B. Halil Ethem sometime Director of the National Museum and now Deputy from Istanbul in the Grand National Assembly at Ankara; B. Dr. Hamit Zubeir Director of Museums; and B. Aziz Director of the National Museums of Istanbul, from the first and continuously gave their advice, encouragement, and enthusiastic support.

The study of the mosaics on which members of the Institute had already been for some time engaged, was actively pursued from December 1931 in the Narthex of the Mosque. First the entire mosaic area of the vaults and walls of the Narthex was submitted to careful study and was photographed; The mosaics throughout the Narthex largely owe their preservation to the skilful work of Gaspare and Giuseppe Fossati, natives of Italian Switzerland, who between the years 1847 and 1849 were engaged at the command of the Sultan Abdül Mecid in the task of renovating the Mosque and preserving the mosaics. Under their supervision the mosaics of the Narthex which cover the panels of the vaulted ceiling, the soffits of the arches, the lunettes over the doors leading into the Mosque, the crenellated borders which trace the ribs, and the acanthus scrolls which frame the windows, were all re-established. No original design was introduced by them into the Narthex; and when during 1932 the surfaces were freed from the extraneous oil-painting, no Turkish work, and no ancient work, and no work of any merit whatever was destroyed. Evliya Efendi saw the mosaics and described them in the seventeenth century. Cornelius Loos as late as 1710 shows that the crosses in the lunettes above the doors were freely exposed at that time. It would thus seem that no sceneing of the Byzantine decoration in the Narthex had occurred up to the eighteenth century; nor are there traces of any earlier covering than that of the Fossati.

Examination of the central Lunette shows that its mosaics are of a later epoch than those of the rest of the Narthex. It was clear that an earlier mosaic had been cut out and another inserted subsequently. It is, indeed, possible that, as occurred at Nicaea, the existing representation was that of a simple cross, and that previously no other subject had appeared in the Narthex. In the middle of

the scene a figure of Christ is presented of about twice human size. The exact height excluding the nimbus is 2. 15 m. He is seated robed and nimbate on a high and broad-backed throne. With the right hand He is blessing, with the left He supports an open book resting on the left knee. His feet repose on a footstool placed before the throne. To Christ's right hand is a figure conceived on a smaller scale, yet half as large again as a human being, representing an emperor kneeling. He is shown wearing a mantle in the act of adoration. His head is encircled with a nimbus. On either side of the lunette in the space flanking the throne is placed a roundel, each containing the head and shoulders of a figure of human proportions. That to our left contains the figure of a woman wearing a dark-blue *miphorion*; that to our right shows a winged angel bearing a wand. When we compare the Emperor's face with the images of emperors on the coins, there can be no hesitation in recognizing the monarch as Leo VI (886 - 912). The identification afforded by the definite portraiture of the coinage is corroborated by the direct testimony of Anthony of Novgorod in 1200, by that of an ivory in the Berlin Museum, and by the omission of the mosaic from Constantine's list of works executed by Basil I. The vivid sense of a monarch humbling himself before his suzerain, while remaining a monarch, is here expressed within the terms of a mosaic picture and with unfaltering success. This precious portrait is now added once again to the series of extant human achievements.

The moment has not yet arrived for epitomizing the lessons to be learnt from the Mosaics of the Mosque. As far as the task of examining them has been carried, it is clear the great mosaic in the central lunette outweighs in the importance of its intention the other decorations of the Narthex; but we may say of all of them that we are in the presence of works of Metropolitan masters, compared with which the contemporary mosaics in Italy, for instance, are provincial and derived. By way of conclusion it should be stated that mosaics have been scaled of the paint deposited on them, but no extraction of mosaics has taken place, nor have any artificialities been introduced. The mosaics of the Narthex, as they are seen to-day, are the mosaics of Byzantine times, cleansed and corroborated, but not subjected to subtraction or addition.

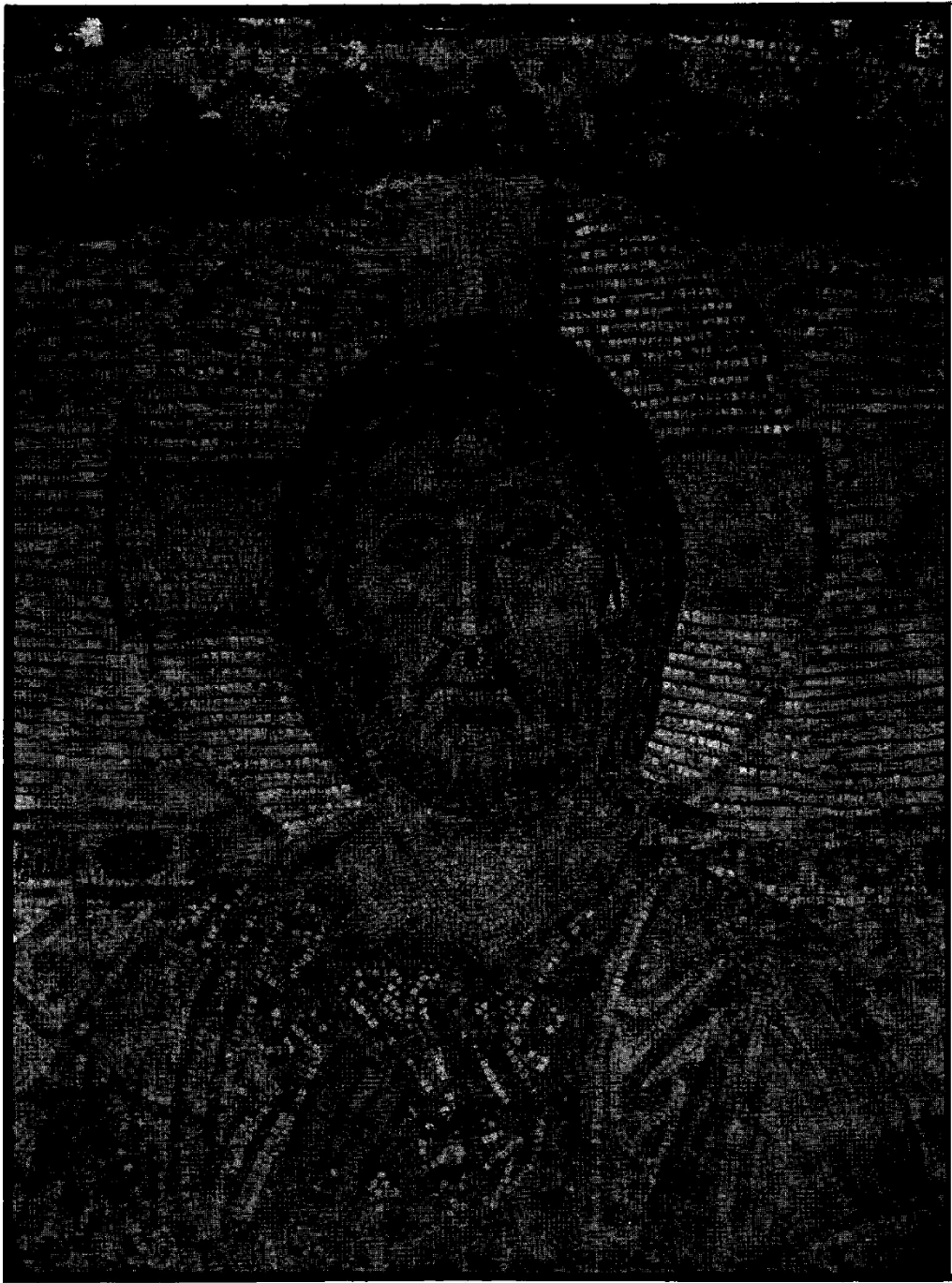
Thomas Whittemoe



Central Lunette over the main entrance into the Mosque, after cleaning.



Central Lunette over the **main** entrance into the Mosque, before cleaning.



Detail of the head of Jesus in the Central Luette.



Golden ceiling of **the** Narthex, now cleaned.