



Tetrapylon

Summary :

The no-longer extant Bronze Tetrapylon was the main landmark in south-western quarter of Constantinople. As a pagan triumphal structure at the crossing of *cardo* and *decumanus*, this four-columned monument marked the intersection of the Mese and avenue connecting the Golden Horn and the Sea of Marmara. By the 10th century, the Tetrapylon sheltered the relics of the Forty Martyrs, confirming the long-living tradition of triumphal tetrapyla within a Christian context.

Date

4th - 10th century

Geographical Location

Constantinople

1. Tetrapyla in Constantinople

An architectural structure on four columns, as its name literally means, the tetrapylon had a long-established meaning of a triumphal structure in the Mediterranean tradition.¹ Established as triumphal structures in pagan tradition, situated at the intersection of major thoroughfares within the street grid, monumental quadrifrons (four-way arches) and tetrapyla were imperial markers over the *locus mundi*, the navel of the world.² Comprised of four single pillars identical in size and shape, standing apart from each other and forming a coherent square plan, sometimes connected with an entablature, and occasionally topped by vaults, quadrifrons and tetrapyla were essentially colossal canopies (*ciboria*). In the Mediterranean these Late Antique structures were usually associated with the canopied throne of the Emperor in the audience hall and symbolized the presence of the Roman Emperor even in his absence.³

Though we do not have enough material evidence on exact number and physical appearance of the tetrapyla in [Constantinople](#), most likely these monuments resembled, in form and function, other tetrapyla from the period of Roman Tetrarchy, as Constantinople was clearly designed to be on a par with the major cities of the Empire: Rome, Alexandria and [Antioch](#), to name but a few.⁴ The imperial civic programme, set by [Constantine I](#) (d. 337), accomplished by Emperor [Theodosius II](#) (r. 408-450), and followed by Middle Byzantine emperors included an imperial ceremonial pathway, marked by tetrapyla.⁵ Most often the triumphal way followed the long main city avenue, known to the Byzantines as the [Mese](#), or central street, which connected the so-called [Golden](#) and [Chalke](#) (Bronze) Gates, those being the main entrances to the City and the [Great Palace](#) respectively.⁶

Following the Mese, Byzantine emperors on their ceremonial path were passing through triumphal structures, which marked special stations according to the urban topography. Often described in conjunction with imperial victorious and honorific monuments, [sculptures](#) and columns, such hybrid architectural installations effectively imbued the stations marked by tetrapyla with ceremonial associations of imperial triumph. The Emperor passing on his ceremonial route below the canopy-like tetrapylon would have been associated with canopy-like throne and symbolically transformed into a divine person.⁷ On the Mese, there were at least three such monumental tetrapyla – the domed tetrapylon over the [Milion](#), the mile marker at the [Augustaion](#) square;⁸ the tetrapylon near Sigma square, sometimes referred to as the Golden Tetrapylon;⁹ and the so-called Bronze Tetrapylon (Chalkoun Tetrapylon), between the [fora](#) of Constantine and Theodosios.¹⁰

2. The Bronze Tetrapylon

Though none of the above mentioned Constantinopolitan tetrapyla remains, the Bronze Tetrapylon is known in modern scholarship as the Tetrapylon par excellence. This bronze- or copper-reveted Tetrapylon, as its epithet Chalkoun (mean. bronze) suggests, was the main landmark in the south-western [quarter](#) of Constantinople and one of the major public monuments in general.¹¹ Built under Emperor Constantine I (d. 337), the Tetrapylon marked the place where the Mese running east-west intersected with a transverse



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avenue connecting the [Golden Horn](#) and the so-called Julian [Harbour](#) at the Sea of [Marmara](#), today approximately coinciding with the intersection of Divanyolu (ancient Mese) and Uzunçarşı Streets.¹² In the 7th century, Emperor [Phokas](#) (r. 602-610) placed his public statue on a column near the Tetrapylon, following essentially pagan tradition.¹³ However, the survival of the Late Antique concept of the tetrapylon and its appropriation in the Christian canopies of Byzantine Constantinople became manifest in the case of the Bronze Tetrapylon, at least since the 10th century. Recorded in the [Synaxarion](#) and later mentioned by Clavijo in the early fifteenth century, the Bronze Tetrapylon also sheltered the relics of the Forty Martyrs of [Sebasteia](#).¹⁴ Such a practice effectively combined the meaning of saintly shrine with the honorific meaning of the tetrapylon.¹⁵ The use of non-longer extant Bronze Tetrapylon, as a major public monument in Constantinople, thus confirms the long-living tradition of the triumphal tetrapyla within a Christian context in the Byzantine realm.

1. Structures on four columns, called “τετρακίονος” [tetraκionos, literally meaning four columns] and “τετράπυλον” [tetrapylon] known in the Mediterranean region since Antiquity, see Downey, G., “The Architectural Significance of the Use of the Words Stoa and Basilike in Classical Literature,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 41.2 (1937), pp. 194-211; Downey, R. E. G., “References to Inscriptions in the Chronicle of Malalas,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 66 (1935), pp. 55-72; Bogdanović, J., *Canopies: The Framing of Sacred Space in the Byzantine Ecclesiastical Tradition* (Diss. Princeton University 2008), pp. 34-35.
2. Thiel, W., “Tetrakionia. Überlegungen zu einem Denkmaltypus tetrarchischer Zeit im Osten des Römischen Reiches,” *Antiquité Tardive* 10 (2002), pp. 299-326; Milojević, M., “Forming and Transforming Proto-Byzantine Urban Public Space,” *Byzantina Australiensia* 10 (1996), pp. 247-262.
3. On the discussion of Imperial canopies (ciboria), exemplified by the Severan quadrifrons covered by a dome in Leptis Magna, Libya, see Lehmann, K., “The Dome of Heaven,” *Art Bulletin* 27.1 (1945), pp. 1-27. See also Roueche, C. and Smith, R.R.R. (eds), *Aphrodisias Papers 3. The Setting and the Quarries, Mythological and Other Sculptural Decoration, Architectural Development, Portico of Tiberius and Tetrapylon* (JRA Suppl. 19, Ann Arbor 1996).
4. Thiel, W., “Tetrakionia. Überlegungen zu einem Denkmaltypus tetrarchischer Zeit im Osten des Römischen Reiches,” *Antiquité Tardive* 10 (2002), pp. 299-326; Milojević, M., “Forming and Transforming Proto-Byzantine Urban Public Space,” *Byzantina Australiensia* 10 (1996), pp. 247-262. On the Hellenistic and Roman tetrapyla with domes see also: Kader, I., *Propylon und Bogentor: Untersuchungen zum Tetrapylon von Latakia und anderen frühkaiserzeitlichen Bogenmonumenten im Nahen Osten* (Mainz 1996), where she analyses in particular the tetrapylon of Latakia, until now usually called a “triumphal arch” and dated to the late 2nd or early 3rd centuries. More on the topic: Bogdanović, J., *Canopies: The Framing of Sacred Space in the Byzantine Ecclesiastical Tradition* (Diss. Princeton University 2008), pp. 34-35, and ch. 3.2 “The tetrapylon and victory symbolism of the Byzantine canopy”, pp. 129-134.
5. Mango, C., “The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000), pp. 173-188.
6. C. Mango discusses how with the extension of the city under Theodosius in the fifth century, the Mese was essentially stretched, while the concept of Constantine’s Golden Gate was transferred to another location at the now standing Golden Gate. He further concludes that the triumphal way along the Mese as established by the fifth century remained more-or-less unchanged, Mango, C., “The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000), pp. 173-188.
7. See, for example McCormick, M., *Eternal Victory* (Cambridge-New York 1986), pp. 297-327.
8. Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls* (Tübingen 1977), pp. 216-218.
9. *Notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae* in Seeck, O. (ed.), *Notitia Dignitatum* (Frankfurt 1962), p. 243.
10. On the Bronze Tetrapylon, see Mango, C., *Le développement urbain de Constantinople, IVe-VIIe siècles* (Paris 1985), pp. 30-32; Magdalino, P., *Constantinople médiévale: études sur l'évolution des structures urbaines* (Paris 1996), pp. 21-25; Berger, A., “Streets and Public Spaces in Constantinople,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000), pp. 161-172, with further references. There are also suggestions that the Tetrapylon stood between the forum of Theodosius (ancient Forum Tauri) and the Philadelphion, see Janin, R., *Constantinople byzantine. Développement urbain et répertoire topographique* (Paris 1964), pp. 101, 104, 208, 210, 328-329, with references to primary sources.



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11. M. Mango embraced in her work conclusions on the Tetrapylon and its location by Mango, C., *Le développement urbain de Constantinople, IVe-VIIe siècles* (Paris 1985), pp. 30-32. She further examines the Miracles of St. Antemius and records how the area around the Tetrapylon developed as an important commercial site in Byzantine Constantinople and later in Ottoman Istanbul. Mundell Mango, M., "The Commercial Map of Constantinople," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000), p. 197.
12. According to Mango, C., *Le développement urbain de Constantinople, IVe-VIIe siècles* (Paris 1985), pp. 30-32 and Kuban, D., *Istanbul. An Urban History: Byzantion, Constantinopolis, Istanbul* (Istanbul 1996), p. 33.
13. Magdalino, P., "Constantinople: History and Urban Development," in <http://www.groveart.com>. [Accessed May 2008].
14. *Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae. Propylaeum ad Acta sanctorum*, ed. H. Delehaye (Brussels 1902), pp. 356, 524; Janin, R., *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin I. Le siège de Constantinople et le Patriarcat Oecuménique*, iii: *Les églises et les monastères* (Paris 1969), pp. 485-86.
15. More in: Bogdanović, J., *Canopies: The Framing of Sacred Space in the Byzantine Ecclesiastical Tradition* (Diss. Princeton University 2008), ch. 3.2 "The tetrapylon and victory symbolism of the Byzantine canopy," pp. 129-134.

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	Smith R.R.R., Roueche C. , <i>Aphrodisias Papers 3. The setting and quarries, mythological and other sculptural decoration, architectural development, portico of Tiberius, and Tetrapylon</i> , Ann Arbor 1996, JRA Supplement 20
	Müller-Wiener W. , <i>Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls, Byzantion – Konstantinupolis – Istanbul bis zum Beginn d. 17. Jhs.</i> , Tübingen 1977
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	Mango C. , <i>Le développement urbain de Constantinople (IVe-VIIe siècles)</i> , 2, Paris 1985, Travaux et Mémoires, Monographies 2
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	Janin R. , <i>Constantinople byzantine. Développement urbain et répertoire topographique</i> , 2, Paris 1964
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	The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate http://www.doaks.org/publications/doaks_online_publications/DOP54/DP54ch9.pdf

Glossary :

	ciborium, -a, n (lat.) Domed construction or pyramidal structure, supported by four thin columns. Ciboria were usually erected over the altar, tombs of saints, fountains etc. inside of a church and in outdoor space.
	dome A characteristic element of Byzantine architecture. The dome is a hemispherical vault on a circular wall (drum) usually pierced by windows. The domed church emerges in the Early Byzantine years and its various types gradually prevail, while they are expanded in the Balkans and in Russia.
	entablature, the The upper part of the classical order, that rests on the columns, it consists of the architrave, frieze and cornice.
	pillar Pier of square or rectangular cross-section.
	Synaxarion of Constantinople A compilation of brief accounts on every saint that was celebrated during a liturgical year, arranged by months. It was one of the first and most thorough compilation of synaxaria and it is considered a valuable source for the Byzantine studies. Its compilation must be dated to the 10th century and was probably linked to the tradition of the Church of Constantinople. It was the model for many synaxaria compiled later (such as the Menologion of Basil II), and it was completed or slightly altered in some parts through the years. It was published in 1902 by the Belgian scholar Hippolyte Delehaye (<i>Synaxarium ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae e codice Sirmondiano</i> [Bruxelles 1902]).
	vault A semi-cylindrical roof.

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