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Mural Painting Composition of the Chora Museum

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Abstract

Byzantine Art is made up of combining the perceived physical world with the spiritual world, and these two exist in splendid coexistence. In Byzantine Art there is such a strong connection between architecture and mural paintings that some iconographic scenes are made on structural items. Mural paintings and building elements are arranged in a specific hierarchy according to the subjects and the spatial symbolism they represent. Dome that is carried on the arches which represents the sky and the paradise, mosaics that is made from gold as shining stars, pillars expressing the four corners of the earth, buttresses that strengthening the structure like a steep cliffs is often seen in Byzantine church architecture. The development of church architecture occurred after Christianity was an imperial religion. After the ban on paganism, Christianity spread and the need for churches increased. The Chora mural paintings that make up the subject of this article are also considered as being very important for the Byzantines. The icons that decorate the walls of the Byzantine churches and their homes represented not only the decoration, but a surreal dimension that transcended the natural universe. The icons in the mural paintings are perceived as mediators to feel the presence of an invisible and transcendental power. For example, Mary's Theotokos Hodegetria icon was moved to Chora Church to be closer to the fortress to protect the city in 1453 siege. the Chora Museum which is its present name is still a subject that is worthy to research in terms of mural painting composition and architectural integrity.

Key words: *Chora Museum, Mural Paintings, Iconography*

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Introduction

Byzantine art and architecture is made up of combining the perceived physical world and the spiritual world that exist in splendid coexistence in order to reach a transcended power. In Byzantine art there is such a strong connection between architecture and painting that some iconographic scenes are made on architectural items.

According to the paintings, the structure is ordered by a certain hierarchy. The column-free construction, the dome that carried on arches, the golden mosaics shining like stars, some parts which representing the upper floors of the heaven, the four arches representing the four corners of the earth, buttresses that make the construction as strong as the rocky cliffs are used to express the Byzantine religious architecture.

The development of church architecture took place after Christianity was an imperial religion. At the beginning, no special architecture was needed. Small Christian groups were worshiping in appropriate places in private homes. Church *ecclesia* (parliament) was not a building but people themselves.[1] After all other religions were banned, Christianity spread and the need for church increased.

Icons forming the theme of this article are very important for the Byzantines. The icons that decorate the walls of their churches or keep them in their homes were not just decorations. The icon pointed to a

[1] Leland M. Roth, **Mimarlığın Öyküsü**, 2006, İstanbul: Kabalcı Publishing, p. 332.

supernatural dimension that transcended the natural universe. The icon was perceived as the representation of an invisible supreme being. Because, it was believed that the icons had spirits of the sacreds in themselves.[2] For example Mary's Theotokos Hodegetria icon moved to the Chora monastery where is closer to the fortress in order to protect the city in the 1453 siege.[3] Chora Museum is still an important research topic that has been the subject of various researches in the past in terms of architecture and mural paintings integrity.

1. Chora Museum

1.1. Its Early History up to the Fourteenth Century

The building, which was called Chora Mosque or Chora Museum today, was the church of the Byzantine Empire and used to be called Chora Monastery. The church was the center of a large group of buildings during the Byzantine era. The building in Edirnekapı in İstanbul was outside the walls of the city until construction of the walls of Theodosius which is still remains its presence today in the fifth century.

[2] Engin Akyürek, **Bizans'ta Sanat ve Ritüel**, 2006, İstanbul: Kabalcı Publishing, p. 92.

[3] Dukas, **Bizans Tarihi**, (translator V. Mirmiroğlu), 1956, İstanbul : İstanbul Fethi Derneği, p. 167.

It seemed relevant to the location of the place that the meaning of its name is “out of town”, “away”, “settlement area” in ancient Greek language.[4]

This name also remains spiritual and mystical symbolism in it and that can be understood while examining the mural paintings. Emperor Kantakuzene who was an eminent historian refers to this monastery as an incarnation womb/core *(Hora)* for the body of Jesus that does not fit into the world.[5]

In the inscriptions on Jesus' mosaics are written “House of the Living Ones”. On Mary’s mosaics are written “House of the Transcended One”.[6] In the light of this information, the significance of the name of the monastery can be understood.

Only parts that can survive in the Chora Monastery today is the church and additional structures attached to the church. These are the main structure of the church with its inner and outer narthexes, an additional two-storey structure to the north, and an additional chapel to the south.

It was only the eastern side infrastructure that could be reached from the earliest construction period, which was defined as the first

[4] Engin Akyürek, **Bizans’ta Sanat ve Ritüel**, 2006, İstanbul: Kabalcı Publishing, p. 21.

[5] Aziz Ogan and Vladimir Mirmiroğlu, **Kariye Camii Eski Hora Manastırı**, 1955, Ankara: TTK Press, p. 7.

[6] Robert Ousterhout, **Sanatsal Açıdan Kariye Camii**, 2002, İstanbul: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Publishing, p. 21.

construction phase in Ousterhout, covering the period up to the ninth century.

It was only the eastern side infrastructure that could be reached from the earliest construction period, which was defined as the first construction phase in Ousterhout, covering the period up to the ninth century.

After the victory of iconography supporters at the Council of Iznik in the 843, the monastery has entered into a period of wealth again and its reputation has increased. Mikhael Synkellos who was appointed as the chief bishop has initiated a great production campaign. This was the second construction phase. We can see the trail on the eastern end of the structure, but we do not have enough knowledge beyond that.

From the middle of the ninth century to the first quarter of the eleventh century we have little knowledge about the Chora Church. As far as we can learn from historian Nikephoros Gregos, however, in the last quarter of the eleventh century the Komnenos' built a new church on the nearly destroyed monastery. This series of building actions is called the third construction phase. The remains of this third phase can be seen when the marble coatings of the naos walls are removed.

Shortly after about half a century from the last restoration, the monastery required a major construction due to an unknown cause and İsaakios Komnenos who is the little son of Alexios the First built the

monastery almost from the beginning in 1120. That is the fourth construction phase.

Three apse plan of the structure were replaced with a single large apse and the relatively small dome that used to be carried by four columns was enlarged and strengthened with four pillars, the arches were narrowed and a more monumental interior space was created.

The arms of the first crucifix were shortened and this plan was used as one of the most widespread plans of the twelfth century. In Deesis mosaic that in the inner narthexes belonging to the fourteenth century, İsaakios Komnenos who was portrayed as closed to Mary's feet, probably has seen the right to use his own body as the reconstructor of the building probably has put his own portrait into the structure. Metokhites who was the last reconstructor in the fourth century has re-established the portrait of Komnenos on the Deesis mosaic because of respecting him as the first founder *(Ketetor)* of the structure instead of the portrait of İsaakos that had previously made.[7]

1.2. Construction of Metokhites and the Fourteenth Century

The other phase in the history of construction is the most important and best documented one. In 1315 or 1316, the scientist and statesman Theodore Metokhites undertook the construction and restoration of Chora. He was appointed by Emperor II. Andronikos Palaiologos as

[7] Engin Akyürek, **Bizans'ta Sanat ve Ritüel**, 2006, İstanbul: Kabalcı Publishing, p. 21-26.

the ktetor of the monastery. His presence can be seen on everwhere of the structure. His portray that he was submitted the church to Jesus can be seen in entrance of the temple *(naos)* and his monograms were placed inside and outside the structure. The Metokhites completed his restoration in 1321.[8]

The restoration of Metokhites was in fact extensive enough to go beyond the limits of the word of restoration. Only the Greek crucifix naos form could survive from the structure which is construct by Komnenos. The main dome of the annex, the two-storey annex adjoining the north, the inner and outer narthexes and the additional chapel *(parecclesion)* in the south, marble slabs and mosaics of naos, the mosaic decoration of the narteks and the fresco decoration of the additional chapel were also built by Metokhites.

The building which was left empty according to Semavi Eyice continued to be used as a church for a long time after the conquest, was converted to a mosque in 1511 by Vezir Hadım Ali Pasha during the reign of Sultan Beyazıt II (1495-1512) and a madrasah was added to it. In that period, windows of outer narthex were closed and an altar *(mihrab)* was added to naos.

When wanderer Gyllius came to İstanbul between 1544 and 1547 he visited Chora. He did not mention about mosaics while he was talking

[8] Robert Ousterhout, **Sanatsal Açıdan Kariye Camii**, 2002, İstanbul: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Publishing, p. 12.

about the delicate marble coverings on the walls. But it is understood that the mosaics are hidden in some way and Gyllius could not see them.[9] According to Ousterhout fresco and mosaics were hidden with plaster and paint.[10] According to Çelik Gülersoy, they were covered with wooden flaps that can be opened and closed manually whenever needed.[11]

Chora Mosque was declared a national monument in 1945. Byzantine Institute of America and Dumbarton Oaks Research Institute started a comprehensive cleaning and restoration program in 1947 and completed in 1958. After this restoration Chora has reached its current form.[12] Before the restoration the lead covers on all surfaces excluding the dome have stolen and the top of the mosque had become a bushes.[13]

1.3. Architectural Structure

[9] Engin Akyürek, **Bizans'ta Sanat ve Ritüel**, 2006, İstanbul: Kabalcı Publishing, p. 43-45.

[10] Robert Ousterhout, **Sanatsal Açıdan Kariye Camii**, 2002, İstanbul: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Publishing, p. 16.

[11] Çelik Gülersoy, **Batıya Doğru**, 1976, İstanbul: Türkiye Turing ve Otomobil Kurumu Publishing, p. 7.

[12] Engin Akyürek, **Bizans'ta Sanat ve Ritüel**, 2006, İstanbul: Kabalcı Publishing, p. 47.

[13] Cahide Tamer, **İstanbul Bizans Anıtları ve Onarımları**, 2003, İstanbul: Türkiye Turing ve Otomobil Kurumu Publishing, p. 145.

Parecclesion along the southern front of church from Komnenos era were built on a basement that is to straighten the land and serve as a crypt *(krypta)*. This basement which has the basics of the structure above it, is separated into two vestibules with a thick wall and long and lowered vaults. The long space on this basement, which is used as a krypt and a cistern, is nothing but a single-nave chapel in terms of plan. At the western end of this parecclesion, which is 29 meters in length, a square section corresponding to the exonarthex follows a narthex section which is also close to the square, corresponding to the narthex of the main building. The main nave which comes after these special sections, each separated by arches, is divided into two sections separated by an arch. These are covered with a high-hooped dome with a window and a vault. Still the apse that follows the bema section, which also contains a cradle vault, is leaping out the entire width of the stage. This apse is internally half-rounded and its outside is very angular.[14] A flying buttress was added to the apse to reinforce it in the 14th century. The flying buttress which is taken from the French Gothic is an unusual implementation for the Byzantine architecture and the reason behind this practice is not fully understood. Today, the flying buttress looks like just a supportive element.[15] The exonarthex which is added in the 14th century

[14] Semavi Eyice, **Son Devir Bizans Mimarisi**, 1963, İstanbul: Baha Publishing, p. 36.

[15] Robert Ousterhout, **Sanatsal Açıdan Kariye Camii**, 2002, İstanbul: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Publishing, p. 11.

stretches along the entire western side of the building and forms the current facade of the structure. The outer walls of all these annexes were built in the form of regular stone and brick constructions. They were made to follow a straight line of four bricks from four cut stones. The northern facade is the simplest, where it is seen that the two blind arch arrays separated by a marble sculpture are listed. The curves of the two-echelon arches were made with the joint use of stone and bricks. After all, outer walls of exonarthex and parecclesion are more rich in all aspects.[16]

2. Mural Paintings, Mosaics and Frescoes

Mosaics and frescoes were widely used decoration techniques of the Byzantine religious painting. In Chora as well, we are able to see those two decoration techniques together. The outer and inner narthexes are decorated with magnificent sequential scenes that could be considered among masterworks of mosaics, narrating mainly the life and miracles of Jesus Christ, and the life of Virgin Mary, respectively. On the other hand, in the parecclesion, religious stories from the Old Testament and scenes such as the judgment day, resurrection and last judgment are depicted in frescoes.

The mosaic art found by Egyptians was at first used as a flooring decoration. In the Hellenistic period, this art was developed by the introduction of glass mosaics. That kind of mosaic was called

[16] Semavi Eyice, **Son Devir Bizans Mimarisi**, 1963, İstanbul: Baha Publishing, p. 37-38.

"psifidoton" in the Byzantine period. In the Early Christian period, the mosaics were created by laying small triangular, quadratic, cubic etc. pieces called "tesserae" and made of stones, glasses and seashells of various colors and almost flesh-colored tile pieces covered with gold and silver leafs on a wet, quick-drying plaster together. This art, which was widely implemented in the 6th century for wall decoration, entered a period of stagnation in the 10th century, because of its complexity and since it was costlier than frescoes. However, in the 14th century, in the late Byzantine period, it revived, as seen in the Chora. That phenomenon is also an indicator of the extent of the socio-economic development of the Byzantine Empire after the Latin occupation (1261).

A very good example of the substitution of the art of fresco painting the mosaics in the Byzantine painting art since the later technique was expensive and difficult to implement, can be seen in the parecclesion of the Chora. In the period of Metokhites, after the completion of the mosaic decorations in the naos and narthexes of the Chora, the decoration of the parecclesion was initiated, but here, mosaics were used nowhere with the exception of tomb niches, and all decorations were frescoes. Obviously, during the last phases of the renovation, the economic situation should have been worsened.

The fresco technique consists of painting in pigment dissolved in water by squeezing on wet plaster via a brush with stiff and long

bristles. Thus, the pigments are absorbed by the wet plaster and the colors stay bright for a very long time. Thanks to both the painting technique implemented and the high-quality materials chosen for the parecclesion section of Chora, the brightness of the colors of the paintings have been preserved until today. The cliffs, trees, clothes stretched between buildings, and architectural elements aiming at providing depth to the paintings were implemented very successfully, and they have added three-dimensionality to the paintings.

After the conversion of the church into a mosque, all inscriptions, Christian symbols, all frescoes, and mosaic decorations were covered by a thin layer of dye and lime without destroying them. Thus, they have been able to survive without suffering any damage until today.[17]

The mural paintings in Chora Museum dates back to the fourteenth century and they can be divided into four parts, the ones on the naos, exonarthex, esonarthex and frescoes in parecclesion:

Naos; Koimesis, the Dormition of the Virgin. Before ascending to Heaven, her last sleep. Jesus is holding an infant, symbol of Mary's soul; Jesus Christ; The Virgin Mary.

Esonarthex; The Enthroned Christ with the Donor, Theodore Metokhites presenting a model of his church; St. Peter; St. Paul; Deesis, Christ and the Virgin Mary without St. John the Baptist with

[17] Robert Ousterhout, **Sanatsal Açıdan Kariye Camii**, 2002, İstanbul: Arkeoloji ve Sanat Publishing.

two donors below; Genealogy of Christ; Religious and noble ancestors of Christ.

The mosaics in the first three bays of the esonarthex give an account of the Virgin's birth and life. Some of them are as follows: Rejection of Joachim's offerings; Annunciation of St. Anne, the angel of the Lord announcing to Anne that her prayer for a child has been heard; Meeting of Joachim and Anne; Birth of the Virgin Mary; First seven steps of the Virgin; The Virgin given affection by her parents; The Virgin blessed by the priests; Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple; The Virgin receiving bread from an Angel; The Virgin receiving the skein of purple wool, as the priests decided to have the attendant maidens weave a veil for the Temple; Zacharias praying, when it was the time to marry for the Virgin, High Priest Zacharias called all the widowers together and placed their rods on the altar, praying for a sign showing to whom she should be given; The Virgin entrusted to Joseph; Joseph taking the Virgin to his house; Annunciation to the Virgin at the well; Joseph leaving the Virgin, Joseph had to leave for six months on business and when he returned the Virgin was pregnant and he is suspicious of that.

Exonarthex; Joseph's dream and journey to Bethlehem; Enrollment for taxation; Nativity, birth of Christ; Journey of the Magi; Inquiry of King Herod; Flight into Egypt; Massacres ordered by King Herod; Mothers mourning for their children; Flight of Elizabeth, mother of St.

John the Baptist; Joseph dreaming, Return of the holy family from Egypt to Nazareth; Christ taken to Jerusalem for the Passover; St. John the Baptist bearing witness to Christ; Miracles; Jesus Christ; The Virgin and Angels praying.

Parecclesion; The pictures here are frescoes. This chapel was designed to be a burial place. Among the major frescoes in the parecclesion are as follows: Anastasis, the Resurrection. Christ, who had just broken down the gates of Hell, is standing in the middle and trying to pull Adam and Eve out of their tombs. Behind Adam stand St. John the Baptist, David and Solomon. Others are righteous kings; The Second coming of Christ, the last judgment. Jesus is enthroned and on both sides the Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist (this trio is also called the Deesis); The Virgin and Child; Heavenly Court of Angels; Moses.[18]

Conclusion

Chora is important in terms of architectural and picture integrity. In the Byzantine churches, the architectural settlement of the scenes was not random. The more holy an image is, the higher the program is depicted. Jesus, Mary, and angels on the dome, and the second part,

[18] Paul Underwood, **Third Preliminary Report on the Restoration of the Frescoes in the Kariye Camii at Istanbul**, 1958, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

the upper walls, have been painted with stories about Jesus' life. Saints and bishops are placed in the third region.[19]

On the apse and east side of the chapel, Jesus is dominant icon. Mary has the same dominance on the western unit. Although it is not necessary in Chora, which is shaped according to the wishes of Metokhites, the use of various building elements means that the painting is to be better reflected in the architecture. In many sections the purpose of preserving the integrity of the narration of the painting series in the use of the sail vault has been observed. However, the use of a dome is preferred to accommodate stationary compositions that are not part of a series. The composition symbolizing Mary, the ladder on which God descended to the earth, was placed directly above the arcosolium where Metokhites' grave is.

Initially, entrance of the structure reveals a complete interaction with architecture, painting and the position of the observer. At the end, the organization of ascension to Heaven is felt from grave, which is the point where liturgy related to death in parecclesion is realized. In parallel with the positive and negative connotations of the right and left expressions in the various western languages, the north and south directions of the church have been adopted as right and left in good and bad terms.

[19] Engin Akyürek, **Bizans'ta Sanat ve Ritüel**, 2006, İstanbul: Kabalcı Publishing, p. 136.

This article reveals the position of Chora to give direction to other researches in other structures. This structure shows that almost no scenes in the Byzantine churches, no icons, were found incidentally on the architectural elements.[20]

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[20] Sedat Bornovalı, "Mimarlık ve Resim Bütünlüğü Açısından Kariye Örneği", *İTÜ Journal*, 2009, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 51-56.

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