



## Summary :

The Byzantine church in the region of Blachernai (modern Ayvansaray) is known as Atik Mustafa Paşa Camii. Considered to be the oldest Constantinopolitan church (second half of 9<sup>th</sup> c.) of the cross-in-square type, it is a significant monument for the study of Middle Byzantine architecture in the Byzantine capital. A later date in the 11<sup>th</sup> century has also been suggested and, if proven correct, it could overturn this theory. On the initial dedication of the church various views have been expressed (Sts Peter and Mark, Sts Cosmas and Damianos, St Elias of Petron), but this remains an open question.

## Date

second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> c. or late 11<sup>th</sup>-early 12<sup>th</sup> c.

## Geographical Location

Constantinople, Istanbul

## Topographical Location

Blachernai, mod. area

## 1. Topography

The Byzantine church known as Atik Mustafa Paşa Camii was situated in the region of [Blachernai](#), near the walls of the [Golden Horn](#) (modern Ayvansaray), approximately 100-150 m. east of the church of the [Virgin Mary of Blachernai](#) (figs. 1-3). The study of its church is significant for the understanding of the evolution of [religious architecture](#) in Constantinople after [Iconoclasm](#). Several suggestions have been made concerning the initial dedication of the church (Sts Peter and Mark, Sts Cosmas and Damianos, St Elias of Petron), but they are all being debated (see further on).

## 2. Architectural design

The building, 15 m. wide and 17.5 m. long, is the only example of a "standard" tetrastyle [cross-in-square](#) church in Constantinople (see [ground plan](#)):<sup>1</sup> in this church we do not see the additional bay between the the square of the naos and the triple [apse](#), which is usually characteristic of the complex cross-in-square types in Constantinople. The origin of this architectural type has been associated with monastic church-building of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, mainly in [Olympos](#) of [Bithynia](#), one of the most important monastic centres of Byzantium in this period.<sup>2</sup> The Atik Mustafa Paşa Camii is considered the earliest surviving post-iconoclastic church in Constantinople and the first of the cross-in-square type; it displays many archaic elements and can be dated to the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

The [dome](#) is supported by four built pillars, much less heavy and large compared to the pillars of the early [domed basilicas](#). The [corner bays](#) are spacious rooms covered with [barrel-vaults](#), and they communicate through arches. On the eastern side, there are three wide apses of similar height; they are semicircular on the inside, while on the outside they are formed with three sides ([fig. 5](#)). Two rows of arched windows are opened on the central apse, separated by walls, which is considered an archaic element; in early 10<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the north church of the [monastery of Lips](#) (907) has three-light windows on the apse, the [lights](#) separated from each other with semi-columns.<sup>3</sup>

There were also several openings on the southern facade of the building ([fig. 6](#)). In the middle of the facade, between two buttresses, there are traces of a triple arched entrance to the church; it was flanked by a simple door on the east, and a double arched niche on the west side. On the upper level there were windows – one, two or three – according to the width of the respective openings in the lower level. In 1957, the American Byzantine Institute found frescoes on the [lunettes](#) of the three arches of the triple entrance; they depicted the Archangel Michael ([fig. 7](#)) in the middle, flanked by the saints Kosmas ([fig. 9](#)) and Damianos ([fig. 8](#)) and they are dated



to the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. These frescoes, along with the fragments of frescoes, of entirely different style, from the **exonarthex** of the [Chora Monastery](#), the only other samples of monumental painting in [Constantinople](#) in that period.<sup>4</sup>

The central and western parts of the south facade are articulated in two levels: the upper level offers some indications that it had some sort of roof intended to shelter the exterior space below. Some late-Byzantine burials found in that part of the monument suggest that it was possibly converted into a funerary chapel; this would also explain the presence of a fresco of the "psychopomp", conductor of souls, Archangel Michael. In any case, the chapel was probably destroyed by the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

The north exterior wall has been subjected to various alterations, but traces from the Byzantine period indicate that its articulation resembled that of the southern wall. On the west side there was a **narthex** in the Byzantine period, of which only parts of the side walls survive. Three doors led from the narthex to the nave.

Initially, the proportions of the building must have seemed a lot lighter than today. This is due to the change in ground and floor level; in the Byzantine period, the floor was 1.50 m. lower than today. Also the **drum** of the Byzantine dome was taller, filled with windows.

### 3. Chronology

The masonry, as seen on the east facade of the building, shows the alternation of stone and brick rows, a standard masonry technique in Constantinople from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. However, there is a complete absence of the ornamental masonry that develops in the Middle Byzantine period. Combined with the archaic style of the apses, this leads to an early dating of the monument.<sup>6</sup> The three triple apses filled with windows also appear in the securely dated churches of the Theotokos of the Lips monastery and the katholikon of the [Myrelaion](#) monastery (920-922); however, in our monument, the way the windows are formed shows an earlier trend. What is more, the two other Constantinopolitan churches have a horizontal cornice that connects the apses, which does not appear in the Atik Mustafa Paşa Camii; this is considered to be evidence of older and simpler architectural techniques in this building. Based on this evidence, the church is dated to the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century and is considered part of the extensive building activity of [Basil I](#), after his rise to the throne in 867.<sup>7</sup> The significance of this monument lies in the fact that, being the earliest cross-in-square church in Constantinople with many archaic elements, it is a very important example of the evolution that led to the formation of this type in the Middle Byzantine period. However, if the later date suggested by Müller-Wiener is proved to be correct, then the monument will be associated with the churches of the late 11<sup>th</sup>- early 12<sup>th</sup> century in Constantinople, known for their archaisms in terms of architectural type ([Gül Camii](#), Chora Monastery, [Kalenderhane Camii](#)).

### 4. History of the monument

The history of the church's foundation is closely linked to its initial dedication,<sup>8</sup> which still remains uncertain. The first to identify this monument as the church of St Peter and Mark in the Blachernai – known from Byzantine sources – was the [Patriarch](#) of Constantinople Konstantios I in the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>9</sup>. The [Synaxarion of Constantinople](#) mentions that the patrons of the church were two **patrikioi**, who, in 458, brought to Constantinople the holy vail, **maphorion**, of the Virgin Mary and built the church in order to house the relic.<sup>10</sup> The existing building cannot, of course, be dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century. However, it is possible that reference to the church's antiquity does not reflect reality; in any case there is no concrete evidence that this monument should be identified with the church of St Peter and Marc.

A second suggestion, proposed by Eyice, identifies the building with the church of St Thekla, a chapel built by Thekla, daughter of Emperor Theophilos, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century; this was situated in the [Blachernai palace](#), adjoining to her private rooms.<sup>11</sup> The date of the building agrees with this theory, however, its location and size do not allow the hypothesis that it was a private chapel, part of the complex of the Blachernai palace.

Another identification with the Monastery of Sts Kosmas and Damianos in the region of Blachernai<sup>12</sup> could be enhanced by the presence of the frescoes of the two saints, but is not supported by other archaeological evidence. The building bears no trace of



Palaiologan activity, while it is recorded that this particular monastery was refurbished by Empress [Theodora Palaiologina](#) in the period 1425-48.

T.F. Mathews and E.J.W. Hawkins suggested that the monument could be the church of St Elias of Petrion, mentioned in the *Vita Basili*<sup>13</sup> as one of the churches built or restored by Basil I; they do, however, point out that it is not certain whether Petrion extended to the area where the surviving church is situated. Therefore, the issue of the identification of the monument remains unresolved.

After [1453](#) the church had undergone extensive changes, since, at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the vizier Mustafa Paşa converted it into a mosque. The narthex was replaced by a wooden vestibule ([fig. 10](#)), while a minaret was built in the south-western corner ([fig. 3](#)). Many doors and windows have been blocked or replaced by smaller ones, effectively turning the interior of the church a lot darker ([figs 11](#) and [12](#)). A **mihrab** was placed in the central apse, while the north-eastern corner room with its apse has been turned into a sanctuary of Cabir ibn Abdullah, the legendary warrior of Islam and companion of the Prophet Mohammed; thus the building assumed further religious significance.

Among the changes, we should also consider the formation of pediments on the top of the facades of the building; the old dome has also been replaced by a new one, set on an octagonal drum, without any windows. The western arm of the cross is covered by an irregularly shaped barrel-vault, which suggests that this part of the building must have been rebuilt at some point. The two side entrances leading from the narthex to the nave have been blocked and converted into windows.

## 5. Modern condition

The building suffered extensive damages from fire (1729) and an earthquake (1894), but was restored in both instances. A new refurbishment began in 1922. Until today, there has been no systematic archaeological research in the area; the particular sanctity that this space holds for Muslims often sets an obstacle towards this direction. Entrance is strictly forbidden, even for observation, in the south-eastern corner bay, which houses the tomb of Cabir ibn Abdullah.

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1. For the architecture of the monument see Mathews, T.F., *The byzantine churches of Istanbul. A photographic survey* (University Park 1976), p. 16; Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbul* (Tübingen 1977), pp. 82-83; Mathews, T.F. – Hawkins, E.J.W., “Notes on the Atik Mustafa paşa camii in Istanbul and its frescoes”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 39 (1985), pp. 125-130.

2. Mango, C., *Byzantine Architecture* (London 1986), pp. 96-97.

3. Γκιολέζ, Ν., *Βυζαντινή Ναοδομία (600-1204)* (Αθήνα <sup>2</sup>1992), p. 87.

4. Mathews, T.F. – Hawkins, E.J.W., “Notes on the Atik Mustafa paşa camii in Istanbul and its frescoes”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 39 (1985), pp.130-133.

5. Mathews, T.F. – Hawkins, E.J.W., “Notes on the Atik Mustafa paşa camii in Istanbul and its frescoes”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 39 (1985), pp. 129, 130-131.

6. Mathews, T.F. – Hawkins, E.J.W., “Notes on the Atik Mustafa paşa camii in Istanbul and its frescoes”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 39 (1985), pp. 127-128.

7. Usually the monument is dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. A later date in late 11<sup>th</sup>-early 12<sup>th</sup> c. has also been suggested, since it was a period of archaisms in the architecture of the capital, see Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbul* (Tübingen 1977), p. 82.

8. For the different proposals concerning the initial dedication of the monument see Mathews, T.F. – Hawkins, E.J.W., “Notes on the Atik Mustafa paşa camii in Istanbul and its frescoes”, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 39 (1985), pp.133-134.



9. Van Millingen, A., *Byzantine Churches in Constantinople, Their History and Architecture* (London 1912; repr. 1974), pp. 191-2; Janin, R., *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'Empire byzantin 1ère partie: Le siège de Constantinople et Patriarcat OEcuménique*, iii: *Les églises et les monastères* (Paris 2<sup>e</sup> 1969), p. 402. See also Schneider, A.M., *Byzanz. Vorarbeiten zur Topographie und Archäologie der Stadt* (Berlin 1936), p. 53· Müller-Wiener, W., *Bildlexikon zur Topographie Istanbuls* (Tübingen 1977), p. 82; Ebersolt, J. – Thiers, A., *Les Églises de Constantinople* (Paris 1913), p. 131.
10. Delehayé, H. (ed.), *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae*, col. 793-4 (July 2).
11. Eyice, S., *Istanbul. Petit guide à travers les monuments byzantins et turcs* (Istanbul 1955), p. 66.
12. Aran, B., "The nunnery of the Anargyres and the Atik Mustafa pasha mosque", *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 26 (1977), pp. 247-253.
13. *Vita Basilii* [= *Theophanes Continuatus* V] 82, Bekker, I. (ed.), *Theophanes Continuatus* (CSHB, Bonn 1838), p. 325. The *Vita Basilii* has been added as a fifth book of the *Chronography* by Theopanes Continuatus. It was written in the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century (ca. 950) by Constantine VII Porphyrogennitos or some other member of his circle, in an effort to construct a glorious genealogy for Basil I, who was actually of humble descent.

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#### Glossary :

	<b>apse</b> An arched structure or a semi-circular end of a wall. In byzantine architecture it means the semicircular, usually barrel-vaulted, niche at the east end of a basilica. The side aisles of a basilica may also end in an apse, but it is always in the central apse where the altar is placed. It was separated from the main church by a barrier, the templon, or the iconostasis. Its ground plan on the external side could be semicircular, rectangular or polygonal.
	<b>barrel-vault</b> vaulted, semi-cylindrical construction used often as roof.
	<b>corner bays</b> In a cross-in-square church, they are the four compartements between the arms of the cross, that make inscribe the central cross into a square. They were usually covered with cross-or domical vaults.
	<b>cross-domed basilica</b> Type of domed basilica. A church plan, whose core, enveloped on three sides by aisles and galleries with a transept, forms a cross. The core is surmounted by a dome in the centre.
	<b>cross-in-square church</b> Type of church in which four barrel-vaulted bays form a greek cross; the central square of their intersection is domed. The cross is inscribed into the square ground plan by means of four corner bays.



	<b>dome</b>
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.	
	<b>drum of dome</b>
Part of the church, semicircular or polygonal, on which rises an hemispheric dome	
	<b>exonarthex (outer narthex)</b>
The transverse vestibule or portico preceding the narthex of the church.	
	<b>light</b>
(of a window) The arched opening or window in Byzantine churches. Depending on the number of lights, there are single-light, double-light and three-light windows.	
	<b>maphorion</b>
A women's garment covering the head and shoulders and sometimes reaching down to the feet. In Byzantium maphorion was the name of the Virgin's outer veil. According to the christian tradition it was preserved by apostle Thomas after the Dormition and 4-5 centuries afterwards it was transferred to Constantinople and deposited at the church of Blachernai. It was one of the most important relics gathered in Constantinople.	
	<b>mihrab</b>
A niche in a mosque pointing towards Mecca	
	<b>narthex</b>
A portico or a rectangular entrance-hall, parallel with the west end of an early Christian basilica or church.	
	<b>patrikios</b>
(from lat. <i>patricius</i> ) Higher title of honour, placed, according to the " <i>Tactika</i> " of the 9th and the 10th centuries, between <i>anthypatos</i> and <i>protospatharios</i> . It was given to the most important governors and generals. Gradually, however, it fell into disuse and from the 12th century did not exist any more.	
	<b>Synaxarion of Constantinople</b>
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]).	
	<b>tympanum (lunette)</b>
(Rom., Byz.) The arched panel (lunette) inside an arch or an arcosolium.	

## Sources

*Theophanes Continuatus* 5.82 [ *Vita Basilii* 82], Bekker, I. (ed.), *Theophanes Continuatus* (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1838), p. 325.

## Quotations

**The restoration or building of St. Elias in Petrion (possibly identified with Atik Mustafa Paşa Camii) by Basil I:**

τὸν δὲ Ἡλιοῦ τοῦ Προφήτου κατὰ το Πετρίον ναὸν ὥσπερ λειποψυχούντα ἀνέρωσε [ο Βασίλειος Α'] καὶ περιφανῶς ἐκτίσατο, ἐλευθερώσας καὶ τῆς περιστοιχοῦσης καὶ τῆς πιεζούσης τῶν κοινῶν οἰκιῶν συνοχῆς

*Theophanes Continuatus* 5.82 [ *Vita Basilii* 82], Bekker, I. (ed.), *Theophanes Continuatus* (CSHB, Bonn 1838), p. 325.

## Chronological Table

**second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> c.:** [according to another view, **late 11<sup>th</sup>-early 12<sup>th</sup> c.:**] Building of the monument

**first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> c.:** conversion of the area before the south entrance into a funerary chapel. Frescoes of the Archangel Michael and of Sts Kosmas and Damianos on the south facade of the church



**mid-15<sup>th</sup> c.:** the chapel is destroyed

**αρχές 16ου αι.:** conversion of the church to a mosque

**1729:** damages caused by a fire

**1894:** damages caused by an earthquake

**1922:** refurbishing of the monument