



Shaping the Past: Architecture as a Carrier of Meaning in the Restorations of Pantokrator Monastery

Ellie Vlahakos

Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA

Introduction

The Monastery of Christ Pantokrator (now Zeyrek Camii) was founded in Constantinople (now Istanbul) the early twelfth century by John II Komnenos (r. 1118-1143) and his wife Irene. Following the Ottoman conquest, the complex was converted into a madrasa and then a mosque, which was accompanied by alterations characterized by the addition of Islamic and Ottoman architectural features, including a minaret, mihrab, altered rooflines, filled windows, the enclosure of the south bay to form the Sultan's tribune, and other modifications reinforcing the building's changed cultural context and religious function (Van Millingen, 1912).

The modern restoration history of the complex also reveals a deliberate series of architectural choices. In the mid-20th century, two restorations occurred, the first in 1953 and the second beginning in 1960. At some point during this period, a campaign reinstalled some scalloped, Byzantine-style eaves, reversing earlier Ottoman interventions. The 1997-98 restoration was largely focused on structural stabilization, and replacing the dilapidated Ottoman-era roofing with a replica in the Ottoman style. The 2001-2005 continuation prioritized Ottoman adaptations primarily through choices of reconstruction rather than the removal of earlier Byzantine elements. This philosophy foreshadowed the major 2006-2018 campaign, which enacted sweeping alterations to produce a nearly "like new" version of the monument's nineteenth-century Ottoman appearance, with many reversals and additions. The most architecturally prominent changes include the removal of the scalloped eaves and the construction of the flat Ottoman roofline on the western portion of the structure, the reconstruction of a walled 19th-century courtyard, and the addition of a new wooden Sultan's pavilion with a lead roof attached

to the Southwest wall of Pantokrator Monastery.

These architectural decisions reveal the broader prioritization of Ottoman-era identifiers at the expense of recognizing the monument's Byzantine heritage, in furtherance of the narrative that the building's historical and artistic import are fundamentally Ottoman and Muslim. By examining the Pantokrator/Zeyrek restorations in this context, I will argue that recent architectural interventions result from, and actively contribute to, this modern political agenda by selectively elevating Ottoman solutions while minimizing and obscuring Byzantine elements.

History of the Pantokrator/Zeyrek Complex

The Monastery of Christ Pantokrator was founded in the early twelfth century on the fourth hill of Constantinople as the second-largest Byzantine imperial construction after Justinian's Hagia Sophia. Construction began around 1118 under Empress Eirene, wife of John II Komnenos, with the South Church dedicated to Christ Pantokrator. After this came the North Church, dedicated to the Theotokos Eleousa, and a funerary chapel dedicated to the Archangel Michael that linked the two churches. During the Byzantine period, the complex remained a major religious, charitable, and ideological center (Berger, 2004).

This structure was a manifestation of Byzantine political authority, and no other Byzantine church housed so many imperial burials, including John II and Eirene, Manuel I and his wife Bertha of Sulzbach, and later Palaiologan emperors Manuel II and John VIII. The monastery also held unique religious significance, housing famous relics related to the life of Christ and a revered icon of the Theotokos Hodegetria (Berger, 2004).





During the Latin occupation of Constantinople (1204–1261), the Pantokrator served as Venetian headquarters, and valuable objects were taken, including some later identified at St Mark's Basilica in Venice (Ousterhout et al, 2009). After the Byzantine reconquest in 1261, the monastery was restored to Orthodox use and remained a stronghold of the Orthodox resistance to Roman Catholic unification during religious debates that preceded the fall of the city in 1453. Following the Ottoman conquest, the complex was converted first into a madrasa, and then into Zeyrek Mosque, named for the most prominent teacher at the madrasa (Van Millingen, 1912).

Significant architectural modifications accompanied this transformation. To facilitate Muslim worship, a mihrab was added, reorienting the building towards Mecca. A mimbar was constructed out of spoliated elements from the church's iconostasis, marble from a nearby Church of St Polyuktos, and other Byzantine elements. Triple windows in the apses of all churches, as well as windows in other locations, were infilled. Interior surfaces were plastered, sometimes in keeping with the Islamic prohibition on depictions of animate beings, but also to remove Byzantine vegetal and geometric motifs to accommodate Ottoman-style wall paintings. Many repairs were also initiated, which over time resulted in an entirely Ottoman roof, where scalloped Byzantine eaves found on domes and rooflines were adapted in the Ottoman style, forming a more angular silhouette. In several places, characteristic Byzantine dogtooth brickwork was replaced by flat parapets or greenstone cornices, though elements of original dogtooth remained into the 21st century (Ousterhout, 2000). A walled outdoor courtyard was implemented during this period (Nar, 2018). On the exterior, a protective plaster, which may have also served decorative and symbolic roles when functioning as a church, gradually wore away, entirely revealing the facade's brickwork by the 20th century. On the southwest wall of the church, a wooden Sultan's lodge was erected, which connected to the Byzantine roofline and was accessible via an outdoor staircase (Nar, 2018). On the interior, a raised wooden platform with an enclosure was constructed for the Sultan to attend worship in the North Church. Most interior Byzantine carved Corinthian columns were encased

or replaced by Ottoman piers (Van Millingen, 1912).

20th Century Restorations

By the early 20th century, the structure was crumbling (Van Millingen, 1912). It continued to languish until the mid-20th century, when excavations and restorations were made in the building. Though these restorations provided immediate remedy, some of these alterations proved structurally threatening long term, especially in roof areas that were subjected to concrete solutions (Ousterhout, 2000). In the 1960s, the Dumbarton Oaks-sponsored restoration unveiled an ornate opus sectile floor in the South Church. They also recovered a significant amount of Byzantine stained glass. This glass is a rare example of figural window fixtures in Byzantium. These findings were substantial and allowed experts to create hypothetical reconstructions of their appearance using these shards (Megaw, 1963)

During this time, Dumbarton Oaks extended some of the lost areas of dogtooth brickwork on the western wall. In the pastophoria of the South Church, the original Byzantine dogtooth cornice remained unaltered (Ousterhout, 2000) The western wall was subject to more extensive architectural modifications around this time. The Ottoman roof in this area was replaced completely, and scalloped Byzantine eaves were reinstated (Figure 1) (Ousterhout, 2000).

Significance of the 20th-Century Restorations

This total reconstruction of the Byzantine roofline reflected the restorer's emphasis on the Byzantine origins of the building. It was contemporaneous with the discovery of significant Byzantine features, like the opus sectile floor and the rare stained glass. It may be assumed that, from the perspective of those involved, once a new roof was required, the replacement would reflect what they saw as the more authentic version of the building. This choice reveals that restorers did not consider, or perhaps fundamentally objected to, the meaning behind the Ottoman adaptations to the roofline. The flattened appearance, which gave the structure an altogether more Turkish architectural character, represented a physical manifestation of the structure's





role as an Islamic structure serving a Turkish population. The Ottoman roofline was a particularly visible exterior element, making the 20th-century Byzantine-style alterations a deliberate and uniquely public contestation of this identity, achieved through the partial reintroduction of Byzantine eaves in an otherwise Ottoman-style roofline.

1997-1998 Restoration

In 1998, another Dumbarton Oaks restoration project took place under the leadership of Dr. Robert Ousterhout, Dr. Zeynep Ahunbay, and Dr. Metin Ahunbay. The primary focus of this phase of the project was the stabilization of the structure and the replacement of the roof (Ousterhout, 2000). The team claimed that, with this project, they aimed to “treat the building as the sum of its history, and this means respecting the modifications effected during the Ottoman period” (Ousterhout, 2000, p. 265).

Ottoman features were represented in the replacement of nearly the entire roof, which had been badly damaged over time, with a structurally sound replica, also in the Ottoman style. During the replacement, some Ottoman-era greenstone cornices were found in situ (Ousterhout, 2000). These were repaired. Most areas without surviving cornices were fabricated and carved using a mortar mixture composed of greenstone, cement, and epoxy resin to replicate the Ottoman motif. The Byzantine elements restored constituted “several minor areas of cornice [that] have been replaced in dogtooth” (Ousterhout, 2000, p. 267).

Significance of the 1997-1998 Restoration

The decision to retain the Ottoman roof silhouette rather than reconstruct a Byzantine roof undeniably maintains an Ottoman appearance, but this approach is in keeping with their attempt to treat the building as the “sum of its history”. From a conservation standpoint, this choice is expected, as reconstructing a Byzantine roof would have substantially altered the existing fabric. A total reconstruction would have represented a level of revisionism that denies architectural significance to the Ottoman construction. Such a project would also reject the claims of this architecture, which was intentionally utilized to reflect and project Ottoman

aesthetic sensibilities and presence in the monument.

The treatment of the cornices is more complicated. The restoration team elected to repair surviving Ottoman greenstone cornices. In the missing sections, however, they also fabricated most cornices in the Ottoman style. Restoring dogtooth brickwork would have represented one way to highlight the significance of this building as a Byzantine foundation, yet the element was reintroduced only in “several minor areas”. This selective reconstruction subtly indicates a preference for Ottoman elements and acknowledges the Byzantine history as present, but secondary.

2001-2005 Restoration

The 1997 project was halted due to bureaucratic issues, but was resumed under the same leadership. This project completed the replacement of the old roof, along with exclusively by Ottoman cornices (Ousterhout et al., 2009). It also stabilized gallery vaults and windows throughout. The project also instituted a program of marble, Ottoman-style window fixtures to replace modern solutions, including tarp, that were universally used in the building before restoration (Ousterhout et al., 2009). They removed Ottoman plaster from marble-carved Byzantine cornices in the interior.

The team also unblocked several windows filled in the Ottoman era (Ousterhout et al., 2009). Significantly, they unblocked the central light of the North Church’s triple window in the apse, as well as the central light of the Middle Church’s triple window in the apse. They could not unblock the lateral lights of the North Church due to structural concerns indicated by visible cracks in mullions (Ousterhout et al., 2009). The lateral lights in the South Church apse were simply “not included in the program,” though in the future, they “may be possible to open” (Ousterhout et al., 2009, p. 243). Some unblocked windows unveiled vine-pattern mosaics and geometric frescos in the window reveals, which were conserved for display. On the facade, they also “decided to leave the brick surfaces exposed in the restoration,” justifying that they had “become quite familiar to visitors over the years and they are also important for representing the history of the building” (Ousterhout et al., 2009, p. 239).





Significance of the 2001-2005 Restoration

This iteration imposes on Pantokrator Monastery an exterior that reads as almost entirely Ottoman. The preservation and display of a few mosaics and frescoes on the interior window arches, while not erased, is vastly overshadowed by the effect of the Ottoman fixtures applied to them. The restoration's handling of these windows comes at the expense of historical accuracy. The presence of Byzantine decorations in the reveals of the unblocked windows indicates that they were probably only in use during the Byzantine era, and thus never would have had Ottoman coverings. Although at that time the only surviving historical window fixtures are Byzantine examples documented by Megaw, exclusively Ottoman-style marble frames were fabricated and applied uniformly across the building. This choice presents a unified Ottoman exterior regardless of the chronology of individual spaces.

The selective reopening of only the central lights of the triple apse windows distances the building from its identity as a church. Triple apse windows carry a uniquely Christian meaning, as they reference the Holy Trinity (Patricios, 2014). In the South Church, the decision to reopen a single light while excluding the lateral lights for reasons unrelated to structural necessity constitutes a superficial acknowledgment of Byzantine architecture, achieved by the unblocking of this light, but severs these elements from their Christian meaning. The practical result is a mosque with improved lighting rather than an acknowledgement of the building's Christian identity.

The choice of window fixtures is particularly troubling in this context. Megaw's sketches (Figure 2) approximate the original Byzantine window fittings for the South Church triple windows, which are both unique and art-historically significant. Like others in the building, these windows were blocked during the Ottoman period and thus were never fitted with the nineteenth-century marble frames now imposed upon them. The decision to reopen only one light of each triple window and then mark that opening with an ahistorical Ottoman fixture, distorts the historicity and coherence of the space. In the South Church, where the only known historical window treatment is Byzantine

stained glass, the possibility of restoring this feature was never considered.

Finally, the decision to leave the exterior building without plaster represents a further disassociation from its Byzantine past. Plaster was a necessary component of Byzantine construction in the area because of the humid climate and was present when the complex functioned as a church. Its omission is contrary to modern conservation ethics, given its importance for ensuring the longevity of the structure. The puzzling explanation offered by the restoration team may be motivated by other concerns. A possibility reveals itself when considering that the 2008-2017 restoration team chose to replaster the building at the conclusion of their project. This final restoration made alterations that may have impacted the plaster, or have been made more difficult to accomplish, if it was preemptively applied, such as when building additional structures connected to Pantokrator and adding, removing, and reshaping parts of the walls. Whether intentional or not, the absence of plaster at the conclusion of the 2001-2005 restoration allowed for a more seamless integration of Ottoman architectural elements during the final restoration campaign.

2009-2017 Restoration

This restoration was undertaken by the Turkish Government's Directorate of Pious Foundations. The individuals working on this restoration cannot be easily identified. A restoration report for this iteration was issued by an architect named Nuran Nar for her presentation of the project in the 10th Seminar on Restoration and Conservation in Masonry Structures in 2018 (Nar, 2018).

This project effected numerous changes to Pantokrator/Zeyrek, so this paper will limit the discussion to four aspects of this program. First, the Western wall's Byzantine-style elements reintroduced in the 1960s are addressed as follows: "West and North fronts soffits on the outer narthex of South building were seen as flush in the photographs from 19th century and beginning of 20th century. They were dismantled in the 1960s and converted into wavy form. Dogtooth freezes made out of cement mortar and bricks are removed in compliance with the approved project and rebonded with khrosan mortar and flat bricks





as forming parapet.” (Nar, 2018, pg. 204). Though not explicit, photographs reveal that the Byzantine scalloped roof was raised completely. It was rebuilt with several levels of brickwork and finished with a flat, sloping, Ottoman-style roofline. (Figure 1) The reference to the removal of the dogtooth brickwork does not appear to be limited to the modern dogtooth on the western wall. After 2017, dogtooth brickwork cannot be identified anywhere on the building.

Another significant construction was directly adjacent to this Western wall. Here, the report states: “East part of South Wall which was bonded by incongruous perforated bricks is dismantled. Under the surveillance of Istanbul archaeological museums the area excavated in order to find possible foundation of the wall. Based on data obtained from excavations... courtyard walls are completed with original-sized bricks and khrosan mortar” (Nar, 2018, p. 206). It seems that the area was excavated in search of the foundations for this wall, upon which a wall of entirely modern construction was erected atop the 19th-century foundation to replicate the Ottoman courtyard (Figure 3).

Another addition to the exterior is implied in the report: “Scrutinizing 19th century photographs an approved restoration project is applied. This project suggested a wood staircase leaning on the middle building’s West wall and providing ascend towards portico level from mosque’s interior and a wooden lodge under the sultan’s lodge on South building’s West wall” (Nar, 2018, p. 215) Photographs posted on social media after 2017 reveal that an elevated, large rectangular wooden structure capped with a lead roof is joined to the South Church (Figure 3).

A 19th-century Rococo decorative scheme was also implemented throughout the interior, which required plastering over Byzantine frescos and mosaics. The work on the interior of the Sultan’s dome is particularly notable. The term Sultan’s dome likely refers to the South Church’s gallery dome, but this is unclear. The painting on this dome is unique in that it displays several decorative schemes (Figure 4). The earliest style is the 19th-century theme reproduced throughout the space, and on the majority of the dome. Two other Ottoman phases of wall painting were revealed during restoration on the cone of the

dome, which were not painted over, and instead were given spot-retouches and displayed so that “samples of various periods are left untouched” (Nar, 2018, p. 211). These Ottoman paintings, like many other Ottoman elements uncovered during this phase of renovations are described in the restoration report as the “original... decorations” (Nar, 2018, p. 211).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) State of Conservation Report from 2019 remarks favorably on this decision, noting that “the opportunity is also taken to display evidence of the evolution of the structure.” (UNESCO, 2019, p. 24). Unlike the restoration report, they add that “Christian traces are behind obscured glass which can be removed when inspection is needed.” (UNESCO, 2019, p. 24). If the Sultan’s dome is indeed the South Church gallery dome, the Christian traces referenced by UNESCO constitute a non-figural motif in a window reveal.

Significance of the 2009–2017 Restoration

The 2009–2017 restoration undertaken by the Directorate of Pious Foundations represents the most sweeping visual program in the monument’s modern history, which fabricated replicas of long-lost Ottoman features while covering and sometimes demolishing the few remaining Byzantine features of the building.

The Byzantine-style roof introduced in the 1960s is represented in the restoration report as an ahistorical distortion of the Ottoman norm and thus something that required correction. Even the UN parroted this valuation when they described the procedure as follows: “the wall head was brought level to a cornice, and other details reinstated, as had existed before the 1960s” (UNESCO, 2019, p. 21). Like Nar’s report, there is no recognition that the 1960s version was a reconstruction of the earlier Byzantine version, nor does UNESCO acknowledge that any non Ottoman roofing style had ever existed on the building. This denial of the monument’s Byzantine history was extended even to the original dog-tooth, which was removed in keeping with the narrative that the structure is fundamentally Ottoman. By contrast, photographs of long gone nineteenth-century Ottoman architectural adaptations are treated as essential to the monument, and are thus reinstated through extensive new construction. Paradoxically, Byzantine





replicas built anew are considered ahistorical, yet it is appropriate to reinstate Ottoman features.

The reconstruction of the pavilion wall, and especially the addition of the Sultan's lodge, constitute new constructions rather than repairs or restorations. These interventions visibly alter the exterior of the complex in ways that strongly reinforce an already dominant Ottoman program. The Sultan's lodge has no surviving original fabric and relies on nineteenth-century photographs for the construction of an approximate replica. A paucity of documentation regarding this structure's historical presence raises questions about the nature of this structure's role and artistic value that apparently demanded its reintroduction in a 21st-century restoration project.

The courtyard wall constructed adjacent to the western facade further illustrates the restoration team's insincere approach to historicity. Although excavations were conducted in search of foundations, the resulting wall appears to be a modern construction erected atop the nineteenth-century base, with little clear archaeological evidence dictating its final form. Here, historical accuracy is subordinate to the primary goal of instituting a reconstruction that visually imposes an exclusively Ottoman identity on the Pantokrator Complex.

The interior treatment of the "Sultan's dome", likely the gallery dome of the South Church, reveals the revisionist goals of this restoration. The two Ottoman decorative schemes uncovered during the project were restored and displayed as "original" decoration. At the same time, Byzantine elements present in the same space, likely non-figural motifs in the window reveals, were covered with opaque glass. This decision cannot be explained by concerns for visual coherence, as the dome's surface is already deliberately fragmented by the display of multiple Ottoman schemes. The dome thus creates the illusion of representing the layers of the building's history while excluding evidence of the building's original identity. Because this dome purports to represent the historical phases of the building, the concealment of Byzantine elements here is especially troubling.

Taken together, the 2009–2017 restoration reveals a highly selective program aimed at articulating

almost entirely Ottoman elements. The result is not a mosque adapted from a former church, but instead a monument altered to present Ottoman Turkish culture as having the exclusive claim on the building's essence.

Conclusion

The modern restoration history of the Pantokrator/Zeyrek complex demonstrates how formal architectural changes can impact how meaning is communicated. Their cumulative effect has been the increasingly dominant presentation of the building as an Ottoman mosque, with its Byzantine origins obscured. This was validated at an international level. The UNESCO State of Conservation Report characterized the most recent restoration as successful, concluding that "as completed, internally the Byzantine structure and its Ottoman overlay combine to form coherent, impressive and functional architectural spaces," and that "the overall balance seems right" (UNESCO, 2019, p. 25).

This coherence is achieved through a selective articulation of history. A tourist seeking directions to the monument on Apple Maps is led to a destination identified as a "12th-century mosque" (Figure 5). This description is incorrect and further obscures the monument's Byzantine imperial foundation and Christian origins. Such a characterization is not the result of any single architectural intervention, but these rewritings are enabled in part by the restoration programs applied to the building, which are themselves products of the same desire to reshape the past. Berger,

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About The Author

Ellie is a senior from Houston, Texas, double-majoring in Political Science and Art History. Her academic interests include cultural heritage, history, and art. Outside of class, she enjoys spending time with friends and family, painting, running, and reading.



Ellie Vlahakos

Majors:
Political Science and
Government

