

# THE DATE AND THE FUNCTION OF THE NORTHERN ANNEX OF VEFA KILISE CAMII AT ISTANBUL

## ABSTRACT

La moschea di Vefa Kilise di Istanbul è un edificio di epoca bizantina, principalmente composto da un nucleo, il *naos*, di epoca comnena e da una serie di strutture - un campanile, un esonartece e un perduto *parekklesion* - aggiunte in epoca paleologa. Tra le due fasi è possibile collocare la costruzione dell'annesso nord, la cui originaria funzione non è stata ancora chiarita. Il presente articolo, tramite il confronto con soluzioni simili, di epoca sia comnena sia paleologa, costantinopolitane o strettamente collegate agli sviluppi architettonici della capitale, prova a ipotizzare una o più destinazioni di uso per l'annesso in questione e rispettivamente quelle di cappella funeraria, sacristia-biblioteca e unità abitativa.

The monument today known as Molla Gürani Camii, or Vefa Kilise, was the core of a monastery in Byzantine Constantinople, whose Christian dedication has not convincingly identified. Doubts concern also its northern annex, whose original purpose has not been clarified yet<sup>1</sup>.

For the sake of clarity and in order to contextualise the annex in question, I will briefly explain the historical phases which have characterised the evolution of the whole complex of Vefa Kilise. The first phase of the building, even though a manipulation of a previous building cannot be excluded, is Komnenian and mainly concerns the *naos* of the church. The plan, the masonry technique and the stylistic and architectural elements of the Komnenian phase of Vefa Kilise Camii are comparable to the Constantinopolitan churches of the Pantokrator (1118-1136), the Pantepoptes (ca. 1087) and the Komnenian phase of Chora (1118-1122). The last phase of the building is Palaiologan instead and consists of the addition of a series of smaller buildings all around the *naos*. The *naos* itself presents as well some little alterations, that I believe to be dated to this latest phase. In the Palaiologan period, on the southern side of the church a *parekklesion* (by then completely disappeared) and a squared annex, likely a belfry, have been added, while on the western side, a 'palatial' exonarthex has been built and sumptuously decorated with marble *spolia* and mosaics. The mannerist use of the ceramoplastic decoration, the features of the porch façade and the style of the mosaics of the domes in the exonarthex are comparable respectively to the decorated masonry of the Tekfur Sarayı in Istanbul, to the façade of the church of the Holy Apostles built for the Patriarch Niphon (1310-1314) in Thessaloniki, and to the mosaics of the *parekklesion* in the Pammakaristos church (now Fethiye Müzesi, after 1304) and in the Chora (now Kariye müzesi, 1315/6-1321). Such considerations allowed me to propose the beginning of the fourteenth century as the absolute chronology for the refurbishment of the Komnenian nucleus of Vefa Kilise<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See EFFENBERGER 2006 for the latest attempt at identifying the building, HALLENSLEBEN 1965 and THEIS 2005, pp. 83-98, Pls. 60-79, for previous bibliography and reflections about Vefa annexes.

<sup>2</sup> VARSALLONA 2017.

The construction of the rectangular northern annex (figs. 1-2) took place between the Komnenian and the Palaiologan phases described above. Its short sidewalls lean directly against the northern side of the *naos*. From the interior of the annex, indeed, it is possible to see the setback of the arches of the former northern external wall of the Komnenian church (fig. 3). On the West, the exonarthex instead has been built after the annex and this can be deduced from the presence of the lower profile of a window of the former western façade, now visible on the western side of the annex, from the exonarthex interior, and under a thick layer of plaster (fig. 4). In addition, the rear section of the northern dome of the exonarthex is incomplete, as it was covered since the beginning by the higher annex (fig. 5).

The analysis of the masonry of Vefa Kilise Camii enabled me to date the northern annex construction between of the Komnenian phase of the *naos* and the Palaiologan additions, and more precisely, between the first half of the twelfth century and the beginning of the fourteenth century<sup>3</sup>. But if its period of construction can be inferred thanks to the analysis of the masonry, this is not true also for its former function. Nowadays in fact, within the annex, the toilets of the mosque find a place.

Two hints cannot be ignored. Firstly, a vast amount of *spolia* has been used specifically inside the northern annex and namely two (perhaps three in the past) Ionic impost capitals of the Justinian era, one '*Theodosius kapitell*' and another capital of the fourth century<sup>4</sup>. A lavish green marble door is the threshold of the annex and it was added during the Palaiologan construction of the adjacent exonarthex, reiterating the symbolical importance of the annex, also in the new arrangement of the complex (figs. 6-7). It seems clear that the ancient marbles were used in order to emphasise the eminence of the room. Secondly, according to Miltiadis Nomidis, the archaeologist and restorer who worked in the complex in the 1930s, a passage on the wall of the upper floor on the northern annex connected the annex to the *naos*. On the *naos* side, during Nomidis time, there still was an unstable wooden loggia, later demolished<sup>5</sup>.

Thanks to the archaeological data and through the comparison with other Byzantine buildings it is possible to formulate different hypotheses about the functions of the northern annex and namely its use as a funerary chapel, a sacristy-treasure, a library or a residential unit.

Even though the funerary function in Byzantine ecclesiastical buildings, and so in Vefa Kilise Camii, was surely accomplished by the former *parekklesion* and by the exonarthex – where it is possible to recognise spaces devoted to the placement of the burials – tombs have been found also elsewhere. During his survey on the building complex, Nomidis found within the complex eight entombments, most of them already violated and some of them in the *naos* and in the annex in question. Here, and specifically close to the former door which originally connected the annex to the narthex, Nomidis found an underground burial, reachable through stairs made by stone<sup>6</sup>. Its presence proves that at least the ground floor of the annex has been used as a funerary chapel even though it is not possible to determine when.

<sup>3</sup> Ivi, pp. 216-217; I refer to this article for the bibliography concerning the *status quaestionis* of the monument.

<sup>4</sup> MATHEWS 1976, pp. 386-401, figs. 40.20-22.

<sup>5</sup> *Misn* 1958, pp. 18-19; MANGO 1990.

<sup>6</sup> *Misn* 1958, pp. 18-19; MANGO 1990, pp. 423-424.

The presence of a luxury tomb, on this area of the church complex, is something largely widespread both in Komnenian and Palaiologan religious architecture. I shall refer to some cases mainly Constantinopolitan or in some way connected to the architectural developments in the Capital.

One of the most intriguing cases of Byzantine burial sites is the one of Isaac Komnenos Sebastokrator, the son of the emperor Alexios I. Originally it was planned inside the church of Chora in Constantinople, but later it was moved to the church of the Kosmosoteira of Bera, probably the current Komnenian church at Pherrai, in the Greek Thrace. The *typikon*, the rule of the monastery which, begun in 1152, clearly describes the planned transfer of icons, marble and metal frames, once in Chora to the Kosmosoteira. It also gives some information about the collocation of the sepulchre inside the Kosmosoteira: it was located on the left side of the narthex, where the founder wanted a specific 'extension', the so-called *παρεκβολή*; the tomb was separated from the narthex by a balustrade, brought as well from Constantinople. The building identified as the church of the Kosmosoteira, in its current setting, does not show any narthex or annex, while two possible burial places are within the *naos*<sup>7</sup>. The description of the 'extension' remarkably coincide with the arrangement of Vefa Kilise instead, and perhaps describes a solution more common in Byzantine times than normally expected. A similar north-west collocation of a burial can be seen in the Komnenian church built slightly later at Nerezi, St Panteleimon (1164), close to Skopje. In this case, the prestigious founder is Alexios, son of the purple-born Theodora and nephew of the already mentioned emperor Alexios I Komnenos. His body was probably buried in this area, within an *arcosolium* 190 cm long and 98 cm deep<sup>8</sup>.

Similar location for tombs can be found also in the buildings of the Palaiologan period. The construction of the four easternmost bays of the northern extension of the Pammakaristos church in Constantinople took place between the Komnenian phase of the church and the construction of the magniloquent southern *parekklesion* commissioned after 1304 by Maria-Martha to honour the memory of her deceased husband, the *protostrator* Michael Glabas Tarchaneiotes. Slightly before in fact, between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth Centuries, Michael in turn had started the refurbishment of the building complex, adding the supposed belfry and a series of lateral bays with a funerary purpose, possibly the *koimeterion* celebrated by Manuel Philes in one epigram<sup>9</sup>. The space shares with the north annex of Vefa Kilise Camii, more than the typology, the function and a remarkably similar sandwiched chronology. At the church of the Hodegetria in Mystras, a building that shows striking planimetric affinities with Vefa Kilise Camii and artistic connections with Constantinople in general, there is a two-storey chapel on the north-western side of the complex generally ascribed to the interventions of the abbot Pachomios (1310-1322). This chapel, whose space is articulated internally by *arcosolia*, has a funerary function and houses at least two high-rank burials, firstly the one of *ktetor* Pachomios (d. 1322) and later the one of the despot Theodor I Palaiologos (d. 1407), brother of the emperor Manuel II<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Isaak Komnenos *Kosmosoteira: Typikon*; ŠEVČENKO 1984.

<sup>8</sup> SINKEVIĆ 1996, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> BELTING – MANGO – MOURIKI 1978, pp. 16-17, 24.

<sup>10</sup> BROOKS 2002, pp. 328-337; TANTHE 2014.

The cases here analysed, as said, are just representative of the whole Byzantine burial panorama. But I presume that the location of the tombs of the eminent personalities in the churches in question on the north-western side of the complex, often in specific annexes, both in the Komnenian and Palaiologan period, cannot be considered a mere coincidence but more likely a custom.

Robert Ousterhout has stressed the similarities between the northern annexes of the Vefa Kilise Camii and of the Chora. At the latter, a rectangular, two-floored building lies on the northern side of the church as well, leaning against the *naos*. The annex of Chora is connected by a door with the narthex and with the *bema* of the church. Its elongated shape would be also a former characteristic of the annex of Vefa Kilise Camii, shortened on its eastern side at a later stage (fig. 8). In both cases, masonry stairs have been built into the northernmost wall, even though in the case of Vefa Kilise they seem to have undergone recurrent alteration (fig. 9). It is interesting to note that before the Palaiologan era the use of wooden ladders was more common instead. Following Underwood, Ousterhout believes the first floor of the Chora annex to be the prestigious library of the re-founder of the monastery, Theodore Metochites, while the ground floor possibly was a sort of sacristy. The upper floor in fact, due to his elevated positioning and large numbers of openings, warranted a good natural enlightenment. The walls of the low floor present instead niches used for housing liturgical vessels and other functional objects. According to Ousterhout the visual and acoustic connection of the library, on its upper floor, with the *naos* of Chora allowed the monks to listen to chants while reading, as witnessed by written sources for saint Neophytos of Cyprus, secluded in his own monastery<sup>11</sup>.

The library was an important part of the spiritual and material richness of the monastery. Several are the mentions of books and libraries in the Byzantine *typika*. The complex of Saint John Prodromos in Serres, Greece, offers a demonstrated example of a library within a Byzantine *katholikon*. The original library was located on the western side, on the first floor of the exonarthex of the church, added at the beginning of the fourteenth century by the bishop of Zichnae, Ioakeim. On that area it is possible to find now a chapel dedicated to Saint Nicholas, modified in 1358-1364 and adapted as a tomb for the sister of the Serbian governor of Serres, Jovan Ugljesa (1365-1371) and her daughters. The fact that it was a former library is attested firstly by the presence, until the last restoration works, of the shelves for books on the walls, and secondly by a nineteenth century inscription stating «library» on the front and external wall<sup>12</sup>.

Libraries located within the *katholika* of the monasteries, on the first floor of the exonarthexes or on the upper-galleries, were not rare and were present also in Thessaloniki, in the churches of the Prophet Elijah and of the Panagia ton Chalkeon, and on the Athos peninsula, and specifically at Iviron, Great Lavra and Vatopedi<sup>13</sup>. At Athos, it is also attested the presence of libraries inside towers and the reason seems to efficiently protect the precious material from thefts and fire<sup>14</sup>. As precious objects, books could be stored together with the *vasa sacra* in the treasury-sacristy, the *skeuophylakion*. This is often suggested by written sources, such as the act of the sixth Ecumenical

<sup>11</sup> OUSTERHOUT 1987, pp. 114-116; Neophytos, *Testamentary Rule*, p. 1360.

<sup>12</sup> BAKIRTZIS 2012, pp. 40-42.

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, p. 41.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 45.

Council of Constantinople (680-681), which states the presence of sacred books together with the liturgical vessels in the *skeuophylakion* of Hagia Sophia<sup>15</sup>; the information is confirmed also by an inventory of 1396<sup>16</sup>.

On the one hand, from the point of view of the archaeological evidence, Hagia Sophia offers the best example of a still standing and independent *skeuophylakion*. It is a circular in plan, with two storeys, already part of the Theodosian project of the Great Church. It lies on the north-eastern side of the church and its circular inner walls are articulated by twelve niches for the placement of the liturgical objects<sup>17</sup>. The circular *skeuophylakion* of the Justinian Saint John the Baptist in Ephesus similarly lies on the north-eastern side of the church and its function is testified by a carved inscription on the lintel of the south entrance. In other cases, such as Hagia Eirene in Constantinople, Basilica E at Amphipolis, Hippos, and Kourion some annexes have been interpreted as *skeuophilakia*. Some of them present a squared plan, lie on the north-western side of the churches and are in connection with them. As noted by Isabella Baldini, the lack of main proofs for the identification of annexed rooms – namely the presence of niches or the discovery of precious vessels still *in situ* – makes the identification in some cases purely speculative<sup>18</sup>. Assuming they are *skeuophilakia*, it is evident that their location always on the northern side of the *naos*, with a close connection with the sanctuary for liturgical reasons, was a custom.

On the other hand, on the written sources, the terms *skeuophylakion*, *prothesis* and *diakonikon*, in the context of the liturgical practices, are sometimes used interchangeably<sup>19</sup>. According to Marinis so, based on liturgy commentaries, the use to build the external *skeuophylakion* was gradually abandoned and the functions of this room were completely incorporated into the two *pastophoria*. For the author, this is true especially in those churches not particularly big built after the Iconoclastic controversy, when the triple-apse *bema* became the standard for Byzantine churches<sup>20</sup>. This should explain why examples of independent *skeuophilakia* are limited to the Early-Christian Era while the mention of the *skeuophylakion* in written sources along the whole Byzantine era clearly testifies its surviving over the centuries.

I have no proofs for the identification of Vefa Kilise Camii's northern annex, neither as a library nor as a Middle or Late Byzantine *skeuophylakion*. My hesitation is also due to the fact that I have been always denied access to its upper floor, and to the possibility to analyse its inner masonry. Even though written evidence provided by Marinis about the switch from the external *skeuophylakion* to the *bema* chapels of the liturgical functions is convincing, I struggle to imagine the tiny *prothesis* of buildings such Vefa Kilise Camii fulfilling the function of the storage of the vessels and of the other precious objects. Above all, I find incontestable the analogies between the northern annex of Vefa and that one of Chora, interpreted, as mentioned above, as a sacristy-library. From the outside, notwithstanding the remake of the external masonry and mortar, the structure of the Vefa Kilise northern annex has almost a fortified aspect, with a few and small

<sup>15</sup> BALDINI 2014, p. 129; *Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum*, pp. 190-191.

<sup>16</sup> HETHERINGTON 2009, p. 96; *Acta et Diplomata Graeca*, pp. 566-570.

<sup>17</sup> MAJESKA 1998; MORAN 1986; DIRIMTEKIN 1961.

<sup>18</sup> BALDINI 2014.

<sup>19</sup> BABIĆ 1969, pp. 58-65.

<sup>20</sup> MARINIS 2014, pp. 30-41; MARINIS 2015, pp. 763-767.

openings. I wonder if these features have been designed to provide protection for the objects there safeguarded and the necessary condition to set shelves.

As a last hypothesis, I propose to consider the northern annex of Vefa Kilise Camii as a residential unit for one or more nuns or monks of the Byzantine monastery. The setting of monastic cells within the *katholikon* of a monastery, and specifically on the *katechoumena* or towers, has been widely analysed by Slobodan Ćurčić. Living and sleeping in the church, was apparently a very common practice, especially for the elder or for the most eminent guests of the monastery. This allowed the monk a simplified monastic seclusion and the control over the activities of the monastery, taking part to the rites. This residential function of galleries and towers is mainly proven by written sources. To this matter, one of the most interesting episodes concerns Saint Sava (twelfth-thirteenth century). At some point of his ecclesiastical career, he abandoned the public life for the seclusion in the monastery of Žiĉa, Serbia. But according to the Archbishop Danilo II, the biographer of the Bishop Arsenije, the successor of Sava, the latter was able to control Arsenije, during the service of the liturgy, from his highest position located on the *kathekoumena*.<sup>21</sup> Later (1324-1330), Danilo II was responsible for the restoration of the church of the Mother of God at Peĉ, and probably planned his seclusion inside the bell tower dedicated to his namesake saint, Daniel the Stylites<sup>22</sup>. Sava and Danilo had previously spent years at Vatopedi and Chilandari monasteries, on the Athos peninsula, where similar dwelling or seclusion uses of the monastic towers are largely attested<sup>23</sup>. At the above-mentioned church of Saint John Prodromos in Serres, the *kathekoumena* are known to be used as 'residential' place<sup>24</sup>. A private cell close to the *naos* documented both by written sources and archaeological evidence can be seen in the complex of St Neophytos, Cyprus (twelfth-thirteenth century)<sup>25</sup>.

At this point, it is better to stress again on the link traced by Nomidis between the *naos* and the northern annex and the former presence of a wooden loggia<sup>26</sup>. The loggia recalls the setting still visible within the *naos* of the Eski Ĭmaret Camii at Istanbul, probably the former church of the Christ Pantepoptes, built by Anna Dalassena, the mother of Alexios I Komnenos, around 1087. The current loggia is Ottoman but it leads to a gallery built over the narthex, with a direct vision over the narthex<sup>27</sup>. This gallery has been interpreted as a private and discrete space for a special guest. Understanding the nature of the passage seen by Nomidis in Vefa Kilise and the links between the annex and the *naos* is so crucial to determine the liturgical and functional use of the room.

As things stand, it is not possible to draw one conclusion. Although the presence of a tomb on the northern annex's floor proves that at some point it was used as a funerary space, it is not possible to determine the chronology of this intervention and specifically if a tomb has been conceived since the construction of the space in question. As stated above, there are some reasons to believe that the north-west collocation of the tomb within the complexes was in some way the

<sup>21</sup> ĆURČIĆ 2000. See also ĆURČIĆ 2000a.

<sup>22</sup> ĆURČIĆ 2006b.

<sup>23</sup> POPOVIĆ 2000, pp. 99-104.

<sup>24</sup> BAKIRTZIS 2012, p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> Neophytos, *Testamentary Rule*, p. 1360; MANGO – HAWKINS 1966, pp. 133-134.

<sup>26</sup> MİSİ 1958, pp. 18-19.

<sup>27</sup> MATHEWS 1976, pp. 59-70, figs. 9.12 and 9.20; OUSTERHOUT 1992.

most appropriate for the founder or the illustrious benefactor of the church or monastery. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny the analogies between the northern annex of Vefa and the one in Chora, interpreted as sacristy and library. However, the presence in its upper floor of a (visual?) link, seen by Nomidis, with the *naos* reminds the setting in the Pantokrator and leads us to think about a private space but from where it was possible to attend the rites.

For these reasons I have expounded, none of the hypothesis discussed for the original function of the north annex of Vefa Kilise Camii seems more convincing than the others. However, it should be remarked that any of the hypothetical uses does not exclude the others. Text and material evidence show indeed that the Byzantine conception of the ancillary spaces was largely multi-functional and susceptible to change in time. Cases like the mentioned chapel of Saint Nicholas within the church of Saint John Prodromos in Serres, firstly conceived as a library and then transformed into a funerary chapel, clearly show that conceiving a space with a specific function did not mean that after a while its function would not be diversified according to new contingencies or practices.

Towers, since buildings were composed of many floors, housed chapels, treasuries, libraries, scriptoria and residential units in the same spaces and probably also at the same time. This is clearly deducible from the lives of the martyrs of Zographou, Athos (thirteenth century): a fire in the tower cut their lives but also burnt the library and the treasure here housed<sup>28</sup>. Furthermore, the boundary between a book and a precious vessel in term of preciousness is very faint in the Middle Ages. Similarity, the rooms in which these objects were housed might have also been multi-functional as libraries, treasures and sacristies all together<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> POPOVIĆ 2000, p. 104.

<sup>29</sup> MARINIS 2014, pp. 98-99.

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1.



2.

Figs. 1-2. Istanbul, Vefa Kilise Camii, northern annex: from North and interior.



3.



4.

Figs. 3-4. Istanbul, Vefa Kilise Camii, northern annex: interior, southern wall and from the exonarthex.



Fig. 5. Istanbul, Vefa Kilise Camii, domes of the exonarthex.





Fig. 6. Istanbul, Vefa Kilise Camii, northern annex: interior.



7.



8.



9.

Figs. 7-9. Istanbul, Vefa Kilise Camii, northern annex: from the exonarthex, from east and masonry stairs.