

# Theodore Metochites Mosaic at Chora and the Relics of the True Cross

## Kariye'deki Theodore Metokhites Mozaïği ve Gerçek Haç'ın Kalıntıları

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*Μήτηρ γὰρ Χριστοῦ ναὸς , Χριστὸς δὲ Λόγος*  
 ("The Mother was a temple for Christ, while Christ  
 was a temple for the Logos", To Nemesius, PG 37, 1565A)

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### Abstract


*This article aims to analyze the ktetorial composition depicted above the west portal of the Chora Church (Kariye Camii). Although many researchers provided a description of this composition, the representation of the church in the hands of Logothetes tou Genikou, Theodore Metochites, has not been specifically examined. No matter that the church is depicted with the majority of the architectural elements which correspond to the reality, it is interesting to notice that two large crosses are depicted laterally of the west portal. These crosses do not correspond to the elements of the brickwork of the west facade. Nevertheless, careful analysis of the marble portal between naos and narthex area contains quite particular detail: in the lower third of two jambs of the portal were inserted pectoral crosses (encolpia) which testified to the keeping of small particles of the True Cross relic, hope for salvation and inscribing of the ktetor in the circle of the protected by True Faith.*

**Keywords:** Theodore Metochites, the Chora church, ktetorial composition, mosaic, relics of the True Cross, pectoral crosses, marble portal.

### ÖZ

*Bu makale Khora Kilisesi'nin (Kariye Camii) batı portalının üzerinde tasvir edilen bani sahnesini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Kompozisyon birçok araştırmacı tarafından tanımlanmasına rağmen, Büyük Hazineci (Logothetes) Theodore Metokhites'in elindeki kilisenin temsili özel olarak incelenmemiştir. Kilise gerçeğe karşılık gelen mimari unsurların çoğu ile tasvir edilmesine rağmen, batı portalın yanlamasına tasvir edilen iki büyük haç motifini fark etmek ilginçtir. Bu haçlar batı cephesinin tuğla örgüsünün unsurlarına uymuyor. Ancak, naos ve narteks arasındaki mermer portalın dikkatli analizi oldukça özel bir detay içermektedir: portalın iki sövesine pektoral haçlar (encolpia) yerleştirilmiştir. Bu pektoral haçlar, ktetor'un Gerçek İnanç tarafından korunma ve kurtuluş umuduna tanıklık ederek Gerçek Haç rölik parçalarının kilisede saklandığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, ktetor'un kurtuluş için umudu ve Gerçek İnanç tarafından korunan daireye kaydetmesini simgelemektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Theodore Metokhites, Khora Kilisesi, bani sahnesi, mozaik, Gerçek Haç, pektoral haçlar, büyük kapı.

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In Byzantium those who had built, restored, reconstructed a church often had themselves portrayed as ktetors in front of the holy figure to whom the church was dedicated (Velmans 1977: 69–97; Kalavrezou–Maxeiner 1991: 1705; Danker 2000)<sup>1</sup>.

Within the repertoire of the architectural depictions in later Byzantine art, ktetors and representations of the church in the hands of the commissioners have a specific ideological background (Kazhdan 2000: 1160)<sup>2</sup>. The representation of ktetor portrayed with a model of the church is connected with a deep eschatological model of thinking. The Last Judgement sets the agenda for every Christian. Likewise, the ktetor expresses hope for his salvation and redemption of his soul, whose pledge is the church which he offers to Christ, is one of the basic *stimuli* of the ktetorial activity (Grabar 1971: 106–111)<sup>3</sup>. The aim of this article is to analyze in detail ktetorial (donor) mosaic composition depicted above the west portal of Chora Church / Kariye Camii (Fig. 1). The art of the Chora has attracted an enormous amount of attention in scholarship over the years. The Chora is the most celebrated monument of the second decade of the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD (Underwood 1966; 1975; Hjort 1979: 199–289; Ousterhout 1987; Ousterhout 2002; Klein et al. 2011)<sup>4</sup>.

Within the scope of new discoveries it is possible to discuss the Chora Monastery in ways that are simply not feasible at almost any other site.

Theodore Metochites, who was for some years Logothetes tou Genikou (prime minister) of the Byzantine Empire, the richest citizen after the emperor Andronikos II, lavishly and richly restored the church of Chora (Fig. 2). That



Figure 1  
Theodore Metochites presenting the church to the enthroned Christ, mosaic above the entrance to the naos, Chora church (Kariye Camii), İstanbul. Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić.

Figure 2  
Chora Church (Kariye Camii), west facade. Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić.

- 1 The word ktetor derives from the Greek *κτάομαι*, which in ancient Greek means “to acquire,” and by Late Antique times comes to mean “to possess” or “to own”.
- 2 Kazhdan defined this term also as the ktetorial right (*κτητορικών δίκαιον*).
- 3 Ktetorial composition is also the term which is often used in the historiography. Andre Grabar used to identify this composition also as “offrande de l’empereur”.
- 4 *Chora* (Χώρα), which in Modern Greek means village or the capital of an island. The word *chora* also has other meanings, such as container, dwellingplace, or keep (*donjon* or fortress) and the name of the monastery came to be reinterpreted in a mystical sense. In the pendant images at the entrance, and throughout the building, Christ is entitled as *ἡ χώρα τῶν ζώντων*: The Dwelling-place of the Living, a reference to Psalm 116:9, a verse that appears in the funeral liturgy, a reference to our heavenly reward - here a play on the name of the monastery. The literature on the building is now voluminous. In this case is quoted only selected titles among many others.

restoration was very extensive. Since only the nave of the Komnenian building remained, at the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD, a dome, pastophoria, and side annexes with narthex and exonarthex with domes were added to it (Ousterhout 1987: 35). Precisely, Metochites provided for the entire space to be redecorated, including the surviving marble revetments and floors, as well as the partially surviving mosaics.

At the same time, he enveloped the older building with new additions. The pastophoria were rebuilt and decorated with mural paintings; a two-storied annex was added to the north side of the naos; two narthexes were added to the west, lavishly outfitted with marbles and mosaics; and a funeral chapel or parekklesion was added to the south, decorated with frescoes. At the southwest corner, where the minaret now rises, a belfry was constructed, also decorated with Metochites' monograms in brick. According to Ihor Ševcenko, Andronicus II gave to Theodore Metochites the title of ktetor. Moreover, Metochites's words provide an intimate assessment of his role as patron (Featherstone 2000: 225)<sup>5</sup>. That is exactly the reason why Metochites holds a model of the church he patronized in the lunette above the west portal with the church in his hands as if he was the one who established the monastic structure and was the founder of the monastery (Fig. 3) (Ševcenko 1975: 29 note 76). Although many researchers

Figure 3  
Theodore Metochites presenting the  
ktetorial model. Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić.



5 Metochites described his personal motivations as follows: "Now, Time which carries off all good things in its current had all but consigned this monastery to ruin. But the emperor desired to raise it up and restore it as it had been formerly; and he urged me on to this work with force - desirous as I myself was - to oversee this offering in all ways most pleasing unto God, this exceeding delightful favor to the emperor and gain for our soul and unperishable renown through all ages, if only I could shore it up firmly and make it in all ways more secure than before - as indeed it now is - and thereby bring before God and before the emperor such an immense and right glorious gift". Featherstone 2000: 225.

analyzed this composition, honoured the mosaics and frescoes themselves with many descriptions and intriguing interpretations, the representation of architecture in the hands of Theodore Metochites, ktetor of Chora church, was not of particular scientific interest. It is curious, that in the principal historiography of the Late Byzantine art, ktetorial model - model of the church depicted above the portal, is scarcely mentioned. To explore this question, this essay will consider description of the ktetorial composition. Second and more relevant, this essay will argue what might be depicted within the model of the church - more specifically around the representation of the portal, according to the preserved material remains.

Project of the restoration in Chora embodies the idea of potent symbols of imperial power, and it is for this reason that ktetor is honoured with mosaic depiction with golden tesserae, underlining the inscription of the True Faith (Nelson 1999: 67-101). Cyril Mango recognized this composition as embodiment of Metochites's snobbery (Mango: 1959: 142).

Above the west entrance to the naos, where Metochites is shown with his high hat (Popović 2010: 91–117), offering the church to Christ, the inscription states (Fig. 4): *† Ὁ κτήτωρ λογοθέτης τοῦ γενικοῦ Θεόδωρος ὁ Μετοχίτης*: “Founder and Minister of the Treasury Theodore Metochites” (Ševčenko 1975: 19- 55; Magdalino 2011: 169 – 87). “The Living library“ or the greatest scholar of his day, Metochites in both hands holds a model of the Church. This depiction of the church is quite peculiar in later Byzantine art since the church is depicted frontally. Although some authors considered that the church is depicted more symbolically and ideally since the reality of Chora is absent (Azara 2001: 440), e.g. there is no literal connection with the real image of the facade of Chora, it is our assumption that this representation corresponds to the real appearance of the building. The church in the hands of Theodore Metochites, fully and in detail reflects the appearance of the western facade of the church. The representation of the church shows the largest number of elements of the church: the main dome, two lateral domes of the exonarthex, the roof structure depicted with usage of the upper perspective, and the white color of the west façade (Ousterhout 1987: 35-36 pl. 2, 4).



Figure 4  
Christ and glittering of the mosaic.  
Photo: © David Hendrix / The Byzantine Legacy.

To the side of the main dome are two lateral domes of the same size. In reality, the north dome above the narthex is smaller, has twelve registers and a smaller

number of openings in comparison with the dome compared to the south, which has twenty-four segments. The central dome is depicted realistically, with the same amount of openings that are, from one point, visible on the actual building.

The west façade consists of three registers (Fig. 5). Each register contains one arched pediment which resembles a blind niche or lunette. In midst of the façade predominant is depiction of the portal divided by six rectangular fields, and above is a lunette depicted without a patron of the church. To the side of the portal depicted with golden tesserae are arched fields. To the left and right of the golden door are two crosses of almost the same dimensions as the portal depicted in the center.

Figure 5  
Ktetorial model in the hands of  
Theodore Metochites.  
Photo: © David Hendrix / The  
Byzantine Legacy.



Some of the issues involved in defining of the ktetorial model is given by white color of mosaic *tesserae* which is used for the “façade”. On the white background of a model is visible golden portal flanked by two crosses which are almost the same size as the portal. It is completely clear that there are no preserved brick ornaments reminiscent to a cross on the façade. It can be rather said the mosaicist’s tendency was to emphasize these geometric crosses within a model of the church. Yet, in addition to this, another argument seems to indicate a move toward the reading of ktetorial composition and the meaning of a model: the golden portal. As a first step in reconsideration of the image, it is necessary to recall the Golden Gate of Constantinople, but also the Golden Gate of Jerusalem where Joachim and Anne had met (Matheou et al. 2016: 213). The glimmering *tesserae* of the mosaic background and the portal are juxtaposed and much that is visible is that its patron did not spare any expense. Mosaic with glimmering tesserae remains the costliest medium which mirrors the pretensions of the monument and a person who paid for its adornment. Glimmering light of the Golden Door is an active force in the golden picture (*aurea pictura*) creating the impression that the worshippers are embraced by the daylight, “living” light that embedded Christ’s presence even more deeply into the sacred building. Light made of golden tesserae was alive in a more particularly Christian sense, as they played with ideas of incarnation and embodiment that were central to Christian belief (James 1996: 106–107, 121–123; Janes 1998: 18–42; Bühner-Thierry 2004: 521–556; Schibille 2014). The structures of light contained in the background of this mosaic move, bend, spring up, stretch, and even dance. Glimmering works

to produce sacredness of the interior. If we follow the arguments of Nicoletta Isar that the choral pattern happens in the Church leading toward the divine and eternal, it means that golden tesserae turn the image and interior into a container of light in motion (Isar 2006: 59–90).

Last but not least, it is necessary to explain the meaning of the crosses on the model, as the third axis within which it is necessary to interpret this mosaic. Evocative physical evidence is embodied in the west portal of naos. It preserves evidence of keeping the memory of True Cross. During my scholarship at Koç University provided for the Summer Programme “Istanbul through the Ages” held in July and at the beginning of August 2012<sup>th</sup>, I worked on a detailed photographic study of the ktetorial mosaic at Chora. In the lower third of the marble portal jambs I noticed deeply carved crosses, shaped specifically thinner in the upper part, so that it is quite noticeable that it served to receive precious metal content: votive set of pectoral crosses (Figs. 6, 7, 8). These crosses which

Figure 6  
Left cross on the jamb of the west portal to the naos. Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić.



Figure 7  
Right cross on the jamb of the west portal to the naos. Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić.

Figure 8  
Right cross on the jamb of the west portal and view toward the naos. Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić.

testified to the efficacy of the cult, served as a protective device for keeping and admiration of small particles of the True Cross (Cvetković 2020: 115-123). Crosses refer to Christ as the “light” and “life” (φῶς ζωῆ) of the world, as in John 8:12: “I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Similar crosses are found at the main portal of St. Catherine church at Sinai (Filotheu 2008: 77-78) but most of all in Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Spatially similar to Chora church, two crosses are found in the inner narthex of Hagia Sophia (Figs. 9a, b, c). In the green marble band

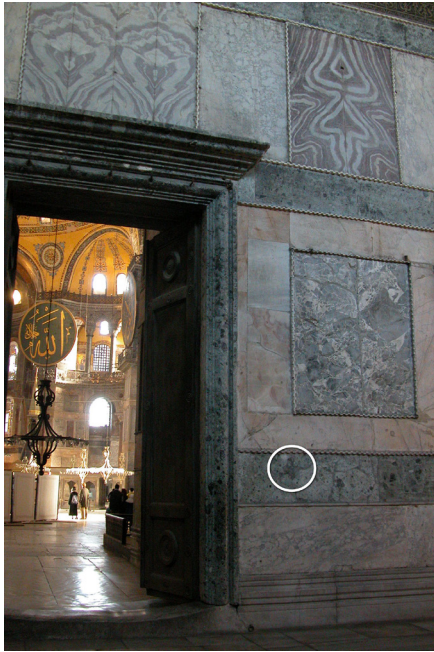


Figure 9a

Portal of the inner narthex with visible cross-shaped cavities, Hagia Sophia, İstanbul. Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić.

Figure 9b

Marble between two portals in the inner narthex of Hagia Sophia. Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić.

Figure 9c

Portal of the inner narthex with visible cross-shaped cavities, Hagia Sophia, İstanbul. Photo: © David Hendrix / The Byzantine Legacy.

Figure 10

Gallery of Hagia Sophia, marble with visible cross-shaped cavities. Photo: ©David Hendrix / The Byzantine Legacy.

between the second and third doors from the north and between the central and fourth doors (Teteriatnikov 1998: 432). Also, cross-shaped cavities are visible at the eastern wall of the western gallery and at the south side of the western gallery (Fig. 10) (Teteriatnikov 2003: 74-92). Intervisual context between two churches, is additionally empowered by the fact that crosses in Chora are found almost in front of the composition Deesis. At the gallery of Hagia Sophia cross-shaped cavities are visible in the spatial unit which follows west wall of the south gallery also known because of the preserved mosaic of Deesis (Nelson 1999: 67-101, esp. 71, 77). Having in mind that the beholder moves from the west toward the east, it means that procession functioned from the interior narthex through the west portal between narthex and naos. In the domical vault above this portal is *Eisodia Theotokou* or the Entrance of Mary to the Temple (Fig. 11), it is relatively easy to understand visual construct with the idea of the entrance underlining (Lafontaine-Dosogne 1975: 220–223; Evangelatou 2019: 92). All



of these visual underlining would have resonated in the eyes of the Byzantine viewers. *Eisodia Theotokou* as focal point for the gaze of the viewers evoked the idea of Mary as the variety of exegetical images based on allegory or metaphor of the Temple (naos) of Jerusalem and its gate: “Having opened the gates and entrances, the Temple receives the gate of God, the King of all, and adorns the inner parts. At her entrance, the Temple is illuminated with grace“ (Olkinoura 2015: 281)<sup>6</sup>.

Theodore Metochites before Christ, mosaic in the inner narthex, is flanked by depiction of the Holy Apostles, St Peter and St Paul (Fig. 12). Such mosaics are the closest images to the beholder. The towering figures of Theodore and Christ can hardly be ignored. Theodore in submissive position makes an effort to establish communication before the Christ. That is evident in the manner he proffers the ktetorial model with both hands showing his piety and hope. Worshippers would cross from the exonarthex inside of the area of narthex and through the narthex they would enter in the area of naos through the west portal adorned with pectoral crosses. This triangle, Metochites, model and crosses that flank the west portal, recreate the act of passage and holyness inside additionally underlined with the panel of Dormition of the Virgin above the portal and with

<sup>6</sup> The fact that *Eisodia* is connected with the idea of portal and the Cross is additionally visible at the south portal of narthex of Chilandar katholikon at Mount Athos. The south portal contains two inserted crosses in the jambs of the portal. Crosses were inserted between the particles of stone, in the mosaic-like picture with the illusion of depth which resembles to the particles of the floor (Bošković 1959: 130). The fact that crosses were inserted in the portals of Serbian churches was not previously researched. It is intriguing the fact that in the axe of the lintel of west portal between narthex and naos of the Virgin’s church in Studenica are preserved traces of two crosses. Most probably these crosses marked the position of pectorals. About marking of the portal with the cross there are several descriptions within Serbian written sources (Trifunović 1973: 172).

Figure 11

The Entrance of the Virgin in the Temple, mosaic in the domical vault above the west portal. Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić.

Figure 12

Apostle Paul, mosaic in the left niche with visible north jamb of the west portal and cross-shaped cavity in the lower third of the jamb. Photo: Jasmina S. Ćirić.

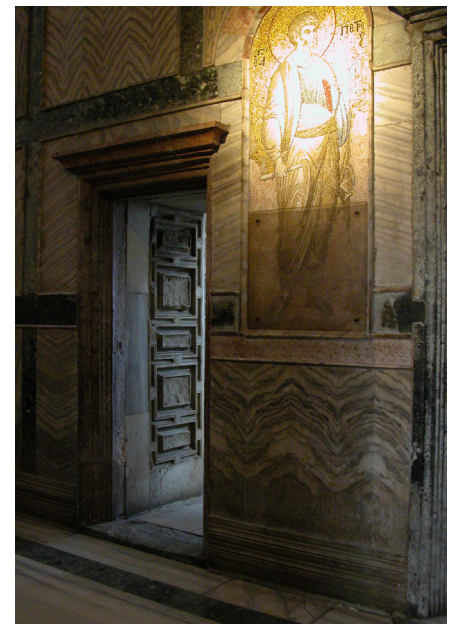




Figure 13  
Dormition of the Virgin Mary, mosaic in the naos, above the west portal.  
Photo: © David Hendrix / The Byzantine Legacy.

the composition above in the vault where is the mosaic of the Entrance of Mary to the Temple (Fig. 13) (Ousterhout 1995: 91-108). Imagological speaking, this spatial area marked with the portal, pectoral crosses and two mosaics became the embodiment of the solemn Sanctification of the Water. Because of the illnesses



that often occur in August, the custom took root long ago in Constantinople of carrying out the Honorable Wood of the Cross into the streets to sanctify the places and avoid illness. On the eve, July 31, the Wood was taken out of the royal treasury and placed upon the holy table of the Great church (Hagia Sophia). From this day until the Dormition of the Mother of God, processions were served all over the city and the cross was offered to the people for veneration. This is that very procession (*προόδος*) of the Honorable Cross. Another custom was joined to this one: to sanctify the water in the church of the royal court in Constantinople on the first day of each month, with the exception of January, when the water was sanctified on the 6<sup>th</sup>, and September, in which it occurred on the 14<sup>th</sup>. These two customs lie at the foundation of the celebration of the All-Merciful Savior, Christ our God, and His Mother the Most Holy Theotokos, Virgin Mary on 1<sup>st</sup> August. On the same day the "Procession of the Honorable Wood of the Cross of the Lord" was executed when priests evoked *Staurotheotokion* (Σταυροθεοτόκιον; Foley - Bangert 2000: 289; Bulgakov 2009: 69), a hymn commemorating the Blessed Virgin at the cross and the attending solemn sanctification of the water (Klein 2006: 79-99; 2015: 201-212). Through the synergy of spatial articulation, the symbolism of forms and their shaping as choral movement and auditive

image, in presence of the relics of the True Cross as well as a specific mosaic program, the whole church was metaphorically transformed and linked with the image of the Garden of Eden and Land of the Living (*ἡ γῶρα τῶν ζώντων*).

The function of Theodore's portrait and ktetorial model served as preservation of the memory on the relics of True Cross, reflection of the miraculous belief in contact between natural and supernatural, between humanity and divinity, opening of the field of mystery contained in the Cross, the Savior and His victory over death (Evangelatou 2019: 92). Thus, the west portal became not only the container of the mystery of the Crucifixion, but also struggles, temptations and sufferings of the Mother of God at the foot of the Cross since she is hailed as container and provider of eucharistic body of Christ.

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