

Mapping the Sacred: The Mosaic Meanders in the Narthexes of the Chora Church / Kariye Cami in İstanbul

Kutsalın Haritasını Çıkarmak: İstanbul'daki Kariye Cami / Chora Kilisesi'nin Nartekslerindeki Meander Mozaikleri

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Abstract

Meanders and swastikas, often interpreted as medieval metaphors for the journey of earthly life, form an intricate narrative within the Chora Church (Kariye Cami) mosaics. These visual labyrinths, with their interwoven geometries, serve as symbolic pathways, suggesting both the trials of earthly life and the divine guidance leading toward salvation. This study focuses on the significant role of the swastika motif within the Chora Church's mosaic program, exploring its layered symbolism. A detailed analysis of its strategic placement within the labyrinthine compositions, particularly in the mosaics above the Deesis and in the exonarthex vault, reveals its role as a spiritual guide. Furthermore, this article examines the gamma-shaped meander patterns, particularly those above the Infancy Cycle, highlighting their stylistic features and contribution to the overall narrative. By considering the mosaic technique, including the use of opus vermiculatum, gold tesserae, and vibrant colour palettes, the study demonstrates how Theodore Metochites' appreciation for artistic craftsmanship enhances the spiritual impact of these intricate designs, offering a unique perspective on Late Byzantine visual art.

Keywords: Chora Church, Kariye Cami, mosaic, labyrinth, swastika, the narthex, Byzantine art.

Öz

Meanderler ve svastikalar, genellikle dünyevi hayatın yolculuğunu sembolize eden Orta Çağ metaforları olarak yorumlanır; Kariye Kilisesi (Kariye Cami) mozaiklerinde karmaşık bir anlatı oluşturur. Bu görsel labirentler, iç içe geçmiş geometrileriyle sembolik yollar sunar ve dünyevi hayatın zorluklarını ve ilahi rehberliğin kurtuluşa giden yolunu gösterir. Bu çalışma, Kariye Cami'nin mozaik programındaki svastika motifinin önemli rolünü inceler ve onun katmanlı sembolizmini araştırır. Labirent şeklindeki kompozisyonlar içindeki, özellikle Deesis'in üzerindeki ve eksonarteks kubbesindeki mozaiklerdeki stratejik yerleşimi, onun manevi bir rehber olarak rolünü ortaya koyar. Ayrıca, özellikle İsa'nın Çocukluk Döngüsü mozaiklerinin üzerindeki gama şeklindeki meander desenlerinin stilistik özelliklerini ve genel anlatıya katkılarını inceler. Mozaik tekniğini, opus vermiculatum, altın tesseralar ve canlı renk paletlerini de ele alarak, bu çalışma, Theodoros Metokhites'in sanatsal ustalığa verdiği değerin, bu karmaşık tasarımların ruhani etkisini nasıl artırdığını gösterir ve Geç Bizans görsel sanatına benzersiz bir bakış açısı sunar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Khora Kilisesi, Kariye Cami, mozaik, labirent, gamalı haç, narteks, Bizans sanatı.

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Introduction

The Chora Church (Kariye Cami, Fig. 1) is a significant example of Byzantine art and spirituality, renowned for its theologically rich and complex mosaics. Originally constructed in the early 11th century and later renovated in the early 14th century under the patronage of Theodore Metochites (c. 1270-1332; Logothetes tou Genikou 1317-1321; Megas Logothetes), the church stands as a testament to the integration of art and devotion in Byzantine culture (Ševčenko 1975: 29; Ousterhout 1987: 35; Featherstone 2000: 225; Schroeder 2009: 37-53; for ktetorial portrait cf. Ševčenko 2012: 189-205; Ćirić 2021: 41-51). The



Figure 1
Chora Church / Kariye Cami,
photo: ©Jasmina S. Ćirić.

mosaics are recognized not only for their exquisite craftsmanship but also for their profound theological significance. Each mosaic is meticulously designed to guide the observer through a salvation-oriented journey, reflecting the intricate relationship between the physical space and the divine realm (Ousterhout 1995a: 91-109; Nelson 1999a: 67-101). The artistic program of the Chora Church is a sophisticated interplay of iconography and spatial design, creating a visual and spiritual map that leads the faithful from the mundane to the divine (Inomata et al. 2015: 2403-2411; Fogliadini 2023). Among the diverse symbolic elements incorporated into Chora's visual program, the maze and swastika motifs stand out due to their historical depth and layered meanings. Given their widespread use since antiquity, Theodore Metochites (Fig. 2), with his deep ties to both Nicaea and Constantinople, would undoubtedly have encountered these designs frequently in his surroundings and within broader Byzantine artistic traditions (Borgeaud 1974: 1-27; Ševčenko 1975: 17-91; Magdalino 2011: 169-87; Smyrlis 2022: 69-111; on the mazes and their symbolism from Antiquity to the Renaissance cf. Chambers 1903: 128-129; Backman 1952: 75; Reed Doob 1990: 123, 134; Thomas 2007: 320).¹ Metochites's artistic practice, rooted in an education emphasising the importance of classical antiquity, engaged in

¹ While Daszewski (1977) and Guimier-Sorbets (1982) contributed to the study of meanders in ancient contexts, Philips (1992: 322) makes the definitive statement that "all the mazes occurring in antiquity are meander mazes." Polito (2002) further explores the motif's use, identifying its function in demarcating sacred spaces (p. 102) and positing its connection to courtly or aulic symbolism (p. 109).

Figure 2

Ktetorial portrait of Theodore Metochites, lunette above the west portal, inner narthex, photo: ©David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy.



a dynamic dialogue between the past and present, drawing upon the prestige and symbolism of classical antiquity (Kiilerich 2004: 20; Semoglou 2010: 45-65). Central to this approach were labyrinthine patterns and ancient symbols – most notably the swastika and meander – which he reinterpreted not simply as decorative motifs but as profound representations of the soul's spiritual journey. Rather than serving a purely ornamental function, these symbols were woven into a broader narrative framework, reflecting Metochites's sophisticated understanding of both Byzantine art and its classical antecedents (Polito 2002; Featherstone 2011; Jevtić 2013; Boeck 2015). His integration of art and architecture created a sacred environment, where every element—visual and spatial—was intentionally designed to inspire contemplation and devotion, further illustrating the unity of form and function in Byzantine sacred spaces (Underwood 1966; Klein et al. 2011; Studer-Karlen 2023: 31-74).²

This study explores the symbolic resonance of labyrinths and swastikas within the visual narrative, analyzing how these motifs frame key iconographic themes, thereby contributing to the overall spiritual journey depicted in the church narthexes. By examining their spatial context, we aim to explain the underlying theological concepts embedded within these labyrinthine compositions.

Technique and Style of Meander Frames in the Chora Church Narthexes

The mosaics of the Chora Church are widely recognized in art historiography for their intricate designs, theological depth, and sophisticated technique, all of which contribute to their vibrant aesthetic (Ševčenko 1975: 29; Nelson 1999a: 67-101; Moutafov 2016: 199-212). The artists employed the *opus vermiculatum* technique, using small, carefully selected stone tesserae of various colours to create detailed images and patterns.³ This technique allowed for a high degree of precision in delineating forms and creating subtle gradations of colour,

2 Entering the church, therefore, involves passing through multiple sequentially arranged spaces. These spaces share a common characteristic: they are part of a unified conceptual system fundamentally based on the sacred and the profane. This is the primary opposition within the entrances, arising from the function of the boundary between the space outside and inside, the liminal point between the material and the divine world (James - Webb 1991: 1-17; Van Opstall 2018: 31-65).

3 The appearance of tesserae in a particular colour can vary depending on the colours surrounding them (Kiilerich 2011: 181-183).

adding a sense of movement and dimensionality to the designs (Weiss 1997; for the concept of style in general Demus 1975: 107-160). Such meticulous craftsmanship underscores the importance of these visual elements in conveying complex theological concepts (Lazarev 1986: 161; James 1991: 71, 85).

In keeping with this artistic and theological complexity, the decorative framing motifs throughout the Chora Church reflect an approach rooted in classical traditions yet open to innovation. The sheer abundance of images naturally draws the viewer's eye to the multi-figured narratives. These scenes are surrounded by a variety of ornamental frames, including the swastika and gamma meander motifs, which serve a practical function by physically separating the individual narratives. However, these frames are more than mere dividers. Upon closer inspection, they reveal intricate and unexpected patterns that seem to borrow from early Byzantine or even Graeco-Roman art traditions. The use of such classical-inspired ornaments raises the question of why these motifs were revived around 1317, a period marked by a dynamic fusion of historical references and artistic creativity.⁴

The labyrinthine motif, closely associated with the swastika, appears in several variations throughout the Chora Church. These motifs are carefully adapted to their specific locations and symbolic contexts. It is interesting that in studies focusing on this composition, and more broadly on the compositions within the narthex of the Chora Church, particular attention has not been given to the swastika motif above the Deesis (Underwood 1975: 104-121; Teteriatnikov 1995: 163-184; Karahan 1997: 89-95). Two notable examples of the swastika can be found in the inner narthex: one above the *Deesis* composition and the other in the exonarthex vault. Both instances of the motif are executed using the *opus vermiculatum* technique, yet they differ significantly in colour palette and overall visual effect. In the inner narthex, the arrangement of gold tesserae captures and reflects light, creating a radiant, almost celestial glow. The usage of gold tesserae had most probably a religious impetus rather than aesthetic (Averincev 2004: 404-425; cf. Moutafov 2008 paragraphs 4.3 and 7).

The gamma meander, another variation of the labyrinthine motif, is prominently featured above the compositions of the Infancy Cycle (Ousterhout 2017: 27-29, 53-55). Also executed in a predominantly red palette, echoing the exonarthex swastika, the meander emphasizes angularity in its design. The tesserae are arranged to accentuate the sharp turns of the gamma shape, creating a sense of procession and continuity.⁵ It may be claimed that gold was used to create the polychrome effect. Seen from afar the general impression is of a swastika or meander in dark red set against a golden background. But seen from the close-up, red and gold tesserae are broken down into their surfaces and shapes. In this context, the meander serves primarily as a framing device, drawing the viewer's eye to the narrative scenes below and subtly guiding their gaze along the sequence of events in the Virgin's life (Kiilerich 2004: 14-16).

These variations in the labyrinthine motif—from the celestial glow of the Deesis swastika to the earthly vibrancy of the exonarthex example and the processional flow of the gamma meander—demonstrate the adaptability of this symbolic

4 According to Kostis Smyrlis, the widely accepted timeline for the restoration of the Chora (around 1315-21) should be revised to an earlier date, approximately half a decade sooner. The project was completed by 1317 at the latest, as Theodore Metochites, its patron, is referred to as Megas Logothetes from that year onward—a title he only obtained after the work on the Chora had been finished (Smyrlis 2022: 69-111).

5 Scholars usually determined this style as heavy, cubic or tectonic. Kiilerich 1993: 190 with references for surface classicism and ceremonial classicism.

form. The artists skillfully tailored the motif's colour palette, arrangement, and placement to create distinct visual and spiritual experiences for the viewer, enriching the overall theological program of the Chora Church.

Liminal Zones: Preparing the Soul for Divine Contemplation

Theodore Metochites, a prominent intellectual of his era, and the man behind the restoration of the Chora church, understood the profound power of symbols (Ševčenko 1975: 19-55; Nelson 1999b: 56-82; Nelson 2004: 31-40; Maguire 2011: 57-69). Consequently, the entrance to the Chora Monastery is imbued not only with symbolic spatial divisions but also with a decorative program that complements the intricate iconographic program, creating a layered and meaningful passage into the sacred space.⁶

The outer narthex of the Chora Church (Fig. 3) serves as a significant liminal space, designed to prepare visitors for the sacred journey within (Ousterhout 1995a: 100-104; Gerov 2004: 110-111; Gerov 2006: 144-159). Drawing on Arnold Van Gennep's theory of liminality, we can understand this space as a transitional zone between the profane world and the divine realm. The outer narthex employs a combination of architectural and iconographic elements to induce a state of contemplation and spiritual readiness (Čurčić 1971: 333-344; Ousterhout 1987: 63-76; Nelson 1999a: 67). The subdued lighting, the carefully proportioned space, and the strategically placed mosaic panels create an atmosphere of introspection, inviting the viewer to pause and reflect before proceeding (Ousterhout 2002: 23-28; Marinis 2022: 180-199). The outer narthex functions as a symbolic threshold, guiding the beholders from the mundane to the consecrated and ultimately preparing them for the profound spiritual experiences that await (Karahana 2005: U 2019, 301-327; Studer-Karlen 2023: 36-39).

Figure 3

View toward the west portal of the exonarthex, Chora Church, photo: ©David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy.



Liminal experience is further enhanced by the mosaic decorations that adorn the walls, combining biblical narratives with symbolic motifs, executed on the southern vault (Figs. 4-4a). These elements are not merely decorative; they are

⁶ Bente Kiilerich observed a similar phenomenon in the act of entering the church: "Entering the narthex is as if one were looking at the stage sets of a miniature theatre: buildings stand like fragmented stage props, dividing walls are used to set off or frame figured scenes, to lead the spectator's eye to the main part of the picture, and to suggest not so much where the figures are, but who they are" (Kiilerich 2004: 14).



Figures 4-4a

South vault of the exonarthex with the swastika ornament in the medallion, photo: ©David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy.

strategically integrated within the overall composition, serving as the collective memory of culture, visual, and spiritual signposts (Grabar 1992: 103; Cvetković 2009: 3-4; Debevec 2016: 188).

The guidance provided by the swastika in the Chora Monastery mosaic patterns can be understood as analogous to the qualitative differences in human experience, much like the perception of air. While air is omnipresent, its experience varies—from the simple physical sensation of a breeze to the profound emotional impact of liturgical music, which transcends sound to evoke a deeper spiritual response (Pentcheva 2014: 120-128; Papalexandrou 2017: 67-85; Caseau 2022: 23-32). Similarly, within the narthex, the swastika's presence becomes more than a decorative element; it integrates into the worshiper's sensory experience, directing both sight and spirit toward contemplation (Guimier-Sorbets 1982: 195-213). In this sacred context, the swastika serves as a visual conduit connecting the worshiper with the space's theological framework. Its placement within the mosaic pattern reinforces the church's sacred nature, underscoring the communal and individual recognition of the space as a Christian place of worship (Polito 2002: 91-112; Stevović 2018: 168; Ćirić 2022: 91-93).

As suggested in the introductory sections of the text when the stylistic approach was mentioned, in early Christian symbolism, the swastika's association with good

fortune and divine power, inherited from various ancient civilizations, evolved into a distinctly Christian interpretation. Early Church Fathers recognized the importance of symbols like the cross, and by extension the swastika, in Christian worship and expression (Basilios 1991: 658). The swastika, with origins in ancient Greece and earlier cultures, was adopted as a Christian symbol, also known as the 'gammadion cross', representing Christ as the cornerstone of the New Temple (Robert 1999: 343). This symbol's incorporation into early Christian art was both a theological and cultural adaptation, emphasizing the unchanging centre of God amidst the ever-changing world (Pennick 1990: 30; Ramzy 2014: 1-12).

The swastika's structure, composed of four rotating Greek gamma letters, suggests a deeper theological meaning within its Christian context, representing the cardinal directions and the divine presence governing all creation (Baldwin 1916: 89-194). This symbolism resonates with the biblical verse, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" (Psalm 118:22), illustrating how the swastika-like the cross—became a representation of Christ's centrality in both the physical and spiritual realms. Its recurring presence in Christian art, particularly in mosaics, reveals a deliberate synthesis of ancient symbols with Christian theological ideas (Turnbull 2010: 1-76). Thus, the swastika functions not only as a decorative element but also as a visual reminder of Christ's role as the eternal center, reflecting the complex interplay between the Christian faith and the symbolic heritage of the ancient world.

This mindful placement of the swastika aligns with Van Gennep's concept of liminality (Van Gennep 1909), as the motif becomes a symbolic guide, orienting individuals for the deeper spiritual engagement awaiting them in the interior spaces. Continuing the spatial progression through the Chora, visitors transition from the liminal threshold of the outer narthex to the nucleus of sacrality within the inner narthex (Fig. 5). This spatial shift reflects a deepening of the spiritual experience (Studer-Karlen 2023: 41-47). The inner narthex is designed as a focal point, drawing the observer inward toward a heightened sense of divine presence (Isar 2012: 130-139).⁷ Notably, the dome (Fig. 6) is positioned directly above the swastika motif that runs along the interior cornice above the *Deesis*.

Figure 5
View toward the upper structures of the inner narthex, photo: ©David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy.



7 Faith is the foundation of life on earth. In heaven, faith is not needed, for there, life is lived by sight, not by faith. Evagrius Ponticus states: "Καὶ πάσης μὲν ἡδονῆς ἐπιθυμία κατ' ἀρχὴν, ἐπιθυμίαν δὲ τίττει αἰσθησις· τὸ γὰρ αἰσθήσεως ἄμοιρον καὶ πάθους ἐλεύθερον." ("And the desire for all pleasure begins with desire, and desire is born from sensation, for what is devoid of sensation is free from passion.") (Evagrius Ponticus 1970: 74).



Figure 6
The Dome of the narthex, photo: ©David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy.

The gamma-shaped meander ornament, also known as the Greek key or “the figure of the labyrinth in a linear form” (Kerényi–Manheim 1976: 89), is a prominent element in Byzantine decorative art. Its use in sacred spaces like the Chora Church reflects its symbolic significance as a representation of eternal continuity and divine order. The meander pattern’s unbroken, repetitive nature visually conveys the Christian concept of eternity—time as infinite and governed by divine laws that transcend the temporal world (Mango 1986: 54-57). As Oleg Grabar notes, this feature represents “a culture-determined, synchronous, unique” action “that creates, represents, possesses, organizes, or utilizes these expressive forms on an individual work” (Grabar 1992: 120).

In this context, the meander serves as a symbolic reminder of God’s eternal presence and the promise of salvation, resonating with Byzantine theological beliefs that emphasized the unending cycle of life, death, and resurrection (Ladner 1967: 233-259). The meander’s association with divine order is further reinforced by its placement in liturgical architecture, where it plays a role in orienting worshippers within the sacred space. By guiding their visual and spiritual journey, the meander subtly directs the faithful from the earthly realm to the divine, aligning with the broader Byzantine theological framework that viewed architectural elements as conduits for transcendent experience (Kiilerich 2001: 320-323; Ćirić 2022: 85-88). This directional flow of the meander pattern, moving from left to right when facing east, reinforces the spatial progression, acting as a precursor to the deeper spiritual experience awaiting within the church’s interior sanctum (Grabar 1992: 151; Barry 2011: 238-239).⁸

The inner narthex emerges as the quintessential locus of Theotokological/Marian devotion within the Chora church (Lafontaine–Dosogne 1975: 163-194). Functioning as a symbolic womb, this architectural space is meticulously orchestrated to evoke the divine mysteries of the Incarnation (Wessel 1996: 268-293). Here, the gamma-shaped meander (Γ) evolves from its directional role in the outer narthex to assume a more profound symbolic significance (Figs. 7-7a). Its

⁸ The labyrinthine motif is a multifaceted symbol demonstrating that the meanings of the physical world are not always expressed through narrative or chronological sequence. Since early Christian times, the meander’s meaning has been associated with the labyrinth, a medieval metaphor viewing life as a journey toward salvation (Borgeaud 1974: 1-27). Earthly life is suggested to be full of temptations, while the higher reality—Paradise—is a place where divine order prevails.

Figure 7

The Virgin entrusted to Joseph, inner narthex of Chora Church, photo: ©David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy.



Figure 7a

Joseph taking his leave of the Virgin, photo: ©David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy.



strategic placement above the ktetorial composition and in relation to key scenes from the Life of the Virgin—including the Virgin receiving a skein of purple, the Annunciation, the Virgin entrusted to Joseph, Joseph taking his leave of the Virgin, the Nativity, and the Presentation of the Virgin—underscores its function as a visual conduit to the divine (Underwood 1966: 64-65; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1975: 167, 171, 173, 179; Ousterhout 2002: 46-47; Brubacker-Cunningham 2011: 155; Maguire 2011: 63-67; Cormack 2018: 191; Studer-Karlen 2023: 31-74). Through this careful orchestration of space, architecture, and iconography, the Γ meander acquires an allusive meaning connected to the idea of wandering and the religious-chorographic journey through the church. This interpretation, which, to my knowledge, has not been previously challenged, highlights a previously unnoted phenomenon: when standing in the inner narthex facing the western portal, with gaze directed westward, the gamma-shaped meander (Γ) extends from north to south.

When one remains in the same position but turns toward the donor composition and the *Deesis* to the right, the meander appears to mirror itself, now oriented toward the south. This phenomenon can be understood as a corporal inscription

within the liturgical space, where the gamma-shaped meander (Γ) guides the observer and is reflected in a mirrored manner. This mirroring can be related to the apostolic idea of seeing “as in a mirror” (1 Corinthians 13:12), suggesting a deeper spiritual reflection and understanding.⁹

Mirroring effect of the gamma-shaped meander suggests that the late Byzantine mosaicist functioned as an “illuminator,” echoing Gregory of Nazianzus’s assertion: “The earth and its surroundings are poised in the middle, and the motion of all the revolving bodies is round this fixed and solid center. Therefore, whatever may happen to each one of the atoms on the upper side of the earth, the same will happen on the opposite side” (Schaff–Wace 1917: 826).

This understanding connects to the liturgical identification of the believer with the role of a warrior. In Ephesians 6:11-17, the armour of God is described: “Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” Gregory of Nyssa, for example, envisions believers following their leader, the Savior, as the “mighty in battle march through the labyrinth” where earthly sins test the warriors (Grégoire de Nysse 1978: 90). Similarly, Augustine evokes the image of the Christian labyrinth, drawing a parallel with Theseus and Aeneas from classical mythology: “Let us therefore keep to the straight path, which is Christ, and with Him as our Guide and Saviour, let us turn away in heart and mind from unreal and futile cycles of the godless” (Dods 1950: 404).¹⁰ The gamma-shaped meander, acting as a visual conductor, directs the pilgrim’s gaze toward this focal point, creating a dynamic interplay between the architectural framework and the pictorial narrative (Chodorow 1984: 382–383; Artress 2006). This mirrored reflection of the ornament, while potentially unnoted previously in this context, has been discussed in relation to the church at Zaum on the shores of Lake Ohrid (Ćirić 2013: 104). ”

The Sacred Threshold: Symbolic Dimensions of the Swastika in the Inner Narthex

Far from being randomly placed, the interconnected gamma-shaped meanders form a deliberate and calculated pathway, leading the faithful from the liminal threshold of the outer narthex toward the culminating point of spiritual focus within the inner narthex, stimulating both intellect and spirit (Ćirić 2015: 391-400). The transition from the outer narthex to the inner sanctum of the Chora Monastery marks a profound shift in the pilgrim’s salvation-oriented journey. The inner narthex, a liminal space imbued with profound theological significance, is often interpreted as a symbolic representation of the Virgin Mary’s womb. This spatial metaphor, deeply rooted in Byzantine theology, echoes the Akathistos Hymn: “Rejoice, O Bride Unwedded, door through which the Logos passed” (Ἀγαλιάσων, ἄχραντε, θύρα δι’ ἧς ὁ Λόγος ἐπορεύθη). This liturgical hymn encapsulates the Virgin’s pivotal role as the Theotokos, the God-bearer, through whom the divine Logos entered the world (Pentcheva 2004: 225-238; Peltomaa 2010: 487-498).

9 The meander’s repeating angular turns echo the same uninterrupted flow, guiding the viewer’s eye along its path with a similar sense of movement and progression. The alternating directional shifts in the meander reflect the balance between stillness and motion (Jenkins - Turner 2009: 13-14).

10 With the assistance of a guiding hand, Theseus descended into the depths of the labyrinth, a symbolic journey into the heart of darkness, to vanquish the fearsome Minotaur. By slaying the beast, he freed his people from oppression and restored order to a society fractured by Minos’s greed (Kendall 1998: 104).

The inner narthex's architectural configuration, with its enclosed and protective character, further reinforces this spatial analogy. Just as the womb nurtures and protects the developing fetus, the inner narthex provides a sanctuary for the pilgrim's spiritual growth. The interplay of light and shadow within this space creates an atmosphere of both intimacy and awe, mirroring the mystery of the divine incarnation (John of Damascus, *On the Birth of the Virgin* (PG 96:661-80), which also contains the epithet "Womb in which the Uncontainable (*achrōtos*) was housed"; Kalokyres 1972: 242-244).

The Virgin Mary's life cycle, from her birth to the Dormition, unfolds in a narrative sequence across the walls. The inner narthex thus becomes a sacred space where the physical and the spiritual intersect, inviting the pilgrim into a profound contemplation of the Incarnation (Olkinoura 2019: 192-215; for the Dormition panel and the mosaic of the Entrance of Mary to the Temple in the inner narthex cf. Ćirić 2021: 48-49).

In his treatise *On the Unity and Incarnation of the Son*, Saint Cyril of Alexandria states: "The holy Virgin is truly called the Mother of God, since the holy body of the Lord Jesus Christ, with its rational soul, was formed within her, and she gave birth to the Word made flesh" (Cyril of Alexandria 1881: 185-236; Matevosyan 2022: 38). This statement underscores how her physical body became the vessel for the Incarnation of the divine Logos.

Another prominent motif in the Entrance's hymnography is the Virgin Mary's depiction as the spiritual gate. This concept derives from Ezekiel's vision (chapters 40 and following), read during the Great Vespers of the feast. In this vision, God provides Ezekiel with specifications for constructing a temple, including an east-facing gate reserved exclusively for divine entry by God himself (Ezekiel 44:2-3). Mary is identified as this gate, through which only Christ, who is God, could enter. This metaphor aligns seamlessly with the inner narthex's liminal function, serving as a transitional space between the earthly and the divine realms (Olkinoura 2015: 281).¹¹ The mosaic program, adorned with images of the Virgin Mary and Christ's life, reinforces the embedded theological concepts within the architecture. Together, these elements create a sacred microcosm, a place where the faithful can encounter the divine mystery.

The Theotokological program of the inner narthex is enriched by the strategic placement of symbolic motifs, most notably the swastika. The *Deesis* composition in the Chora Monastery's inner narthex is crowned by a swastika (Figs. 8-8a), playing a crucial role in the mosaic's visual and symbolic language (Underwood 1966: 36-41; Schroeder 2009: 41-45; Moutafov 2024: 25, 60). Positioned near the *Deesis*, this motif reinforces the Christological concept of the *Sol Invictus*, underscoring Christ's role as the source of spiritual light and salvation. This solar symbolism resonates with the biblical metaphor of Christ as the "Sun of Righteousness" (Malachi 4:2), illuminating the world with divine grace. In the inner narthex, the swastika becomes a visual manifestation of Christ's eternal light, emanating from the Virgin's womb and dispelling the darkness of sin (Ćirić 2017: 46-47; Ćirić 2018: 665-696).

¹¹ Romanos the Melodist's kontakion *On the Nativity* presents an intriguing wordplay involving *thyra* (meaning "door") and *anoigō* (meaning "to open"). In this text, it is described that "She opens the door and receives the retinue of the Magi. She opens the door which cannot be opened, through which only Christ has passed. She opens the door, the one who has been opened but who has in no way been despoiled of the treasure of her chastity. She opened the door, of whom was born the door, the newborn babe, God, for all ages." This idea draws upon the imagery found in Ezekiel 44:2. Reichmuth 1975: 104.



Figures 8-8a
Deesis, south part of the inner narthex; detail of the swastika ornament, photo: ©David Hendrix/The Byzantine Legacy.



Figure 9
Greek key meander executed in the brick, south facade of the Christ Pantepoptes Church/ Eski Imaret Cami, photo: ©Jasmina S. Ćirić.



Figure 10
Swastika executed in the brick, the apse of St. John Prodromos church (so-called South Church) of the Constantine Lips Monastery/ Fenari Isa Camii in Istanbul, photo: ©Jasmina S. Ćirić.

In the Christian tradition, swastikas can be viewed as a variant of the cross. This interpretation is reinforced by the presence of similar symbols in numerous early Christian pavements and textiles, where swastikas appear in repeated patterns (Du Bourguet 1991: 2221-2227; Assimakopoulou-Atzaka 2003; Marsham 2021: 41; Khalaf Mohamed - Mostafa 2022: 14-15). To further illustrate the prevalence of this motif in Byzantine architecture, it is important to mention the following examples: the carved cornice above the floor of Hagia Sophia (Ćirić 2014; Van Opstall 2018: 60), the interior cornices of S. Apollinare Nuovo, and the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (Grabar 1966: 17, 117 fig. 124, 275; Kiilerich 2018: 81-82). In Constantinople, labyrinthine and gamma-shaped ornamental structures were widely used in Middle Byzantine architecture and became more prominent during the Palaiologan period. For instance, such motifs are visible on the south wall of the Church of Christ Pantepoptes / Eski Imaret Cami (Fig 9.) (Krautheimer 1986: 361; Ousterhout 1992: 50; Freely-Çakmak 2004: 204-206), as well as on walls possibly belonging to the Christ Philanthropos Monastery at Mangana (Zulueta 2000: 260, esp. 262-263; Ćirić-Terryn 2015: 42), the Vefa Kilise Mosque, the north and south churches of the Convent of Lips (Fig. 10) (Marinis 2004: 88-127; Ćirić 2013: 231-244; Ćirić 2022: 77-103), at Eskihisar, near Gebze on the Sea of Marmara (Ousterhout 1989: 36-44 esp. note 22) and at Yoros Castle on the Bosphorus, the swastika appears next to a heart pattern (Eyice 1976: 72-92 figs. 115-116; Ousterhout 1989: 42-43). Similar ornaments are also observed on the exterior of the late 14th-century Profitis Elias Church in Thessaloniki, a structure likely commissioned by imperial patrons (Papazotos 1991: 121-128).

During the Palaiologan period, swastikas were a symbol of dynastic power linked to the classical heritage of Hellenism (Kiilerich 2004: 20, with references to earlier literature). The flourishing court culture of the time, with its encyclopedic approach to the aesthetics of the Ancient Greek world, led to a deep engagement with classical ornamental vocabulary (Parker 1907: 542; Skinner 2006: 134; Jevtić 2013: 209-217; Boeck 2015; Ćirić 2016: 303-312). This perspective is captured in Theodore Metochites' assertion: "...to us, who share the same origin and language with them [the Greeks], and who are their successors" ("ἡμῖν οἱ καὶ τοῦ γένους ἐσμέν καὶ τῆς γλώσσης αὐτοῖς [τοῖς Ἕλλησι] κοινωνοὶ καὶ διάδοχοι", cf. Müller - Kiessling 1966: 14-15). This phenomenon underscores

the profound cultural and symbolic significance of the swastika in Byzantine art and its continuity with the classical past.

Conclusion

Having considered the intricate interplay of swastika and labyrinthine gamma-shaped patterns throughout the Chora Church, it is evident that these elements illuminate not only the physical space but also the beholder's inner world, evoking a profound spiritual response in the medieval viewer (Cutting–Massironi 1998: 137-168; Isar 2006: 59-82; Freedberg 2010: 38). The labyrinths (swastikas, and gamma-shaped ornaments) contain highly allusive meanings, deeply connected with the concept of wandering and chorographic walking through the spatial units of the church. These motifs narrate a form of corporeal “autobiography” or “body story”, where the movements of the body and the gaze through these intricate ornamental structures were integral to the liturgical experience. The viewer's interaction with these elements marked the beginning of a spiritual metamorphosis, achieved through passage between the two narthexes of the Chora Church (Lawler 1946: 118; Isar 2000: 56-72 with references on chorography of the visual perception).

However, the journey of preparation and transformation does not conclude within the inner narthex. Labyrinthine ornaments primarily facilitated human engagement with the divine, guiding the viewer's perception rather than becoming the narrative's focus (Ousterhout 1995a: 100 esp. 101-102; Nelson 2000: 150-154). The physical experience of navigating a labyrinth, with its twists and turns, mirrored the spiritual journey towards salvation. The visual cues within such spaces, such as the recurring swastika and meander patterns, served as symbolic guides particularly in the approach towards a parekklesion, echoing the idea of Christ as the ‘Door’ (John 10:9). The faithful, guided by these visual and symbolic pathways, followed a course reminiscent of Gregory of Nyssa's description of a spiritual maze, where adherence to the Redeemer's path ensured ultimate deliverance (Mateo-Seco–Maspero 2010: 92). This embodied journey, therefore, transcended mere physical movement, becoming a tangible representation of the Christian imperative to follow Christ towards eternal life. The spiritual journey culminates in the parekklesion, where the frescoes, particularly the Anastasis, serve as the final visual and spiritual encounter (Ousterhout 1995a: 65-66; Semoglou 2020: 302; Semoglou 2023: 74-99). This eschatological focus in the parekklesion, centred on the ktetor's facing of the Last Judgment, signals the completion of the viewer's transformative experience—a theme that warrants further exploration within the broader context of the twilight of Byzantium.

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