

## The *Historia Ekklesiastike kai Mystike Theoria*: A symbolic understanding of the Byzantine church building

Vasileios Marinis, Yale University

The *Historia Ekklesiastike kai Mystike Theoria*, a liturgical commentary attributed to Germanos I, patriarch of Constantinople (d. 730), interprets the Divine Liturgy and its material context, the church building, at the beginning of the eighth century. The *Historia's* interpretation proved popular throughout the Byzantine period and beyond. Over sixty manuscripts preserve the text, more than any other in this genre. It was the only commentary included in Ducas's *editio princeps* of the three Byzantine liturgies. Thus, the *Historia* represents the most prevalent and widespread understanding of a church building in Byzantium. Despite this importance, it has received little scholarly attention.

In this paper I provide a close reading of the passages in the *Historia* that pertain to the church. The *Historia's* interpretation of the building is highly symbolic, steeped in scripture and dependent on earlier and contemporary theological thought. On occasion, the text sheds light on actual architectural developments, as in the case of the skeuophylakion. On the whole, however, the discussion of architecture is frustratingly vague. I argue that the *Historia* is part of a long exegetical and ekphrastic tradition on ecclesiastical architecture that disregards any functional aspects of a church building, a disconnect enabled by the adaptability of Byzantine liturgical rites.

The *Historia* begins with a discussion of the building and some of its parts—a discussion that is at the heart of this paper—then proceeds with an examination of the Divine Liturgy, from the preparatory rites to communion. This account follows the patriarchal liturgy in Hagia Sophia, the cathedral of Constantinople, at the beginning of the eighth century, as Robert Taft has argued. But the author's chronological and geographical reference points are of little or no consequence, as indicated by the wide dissemination of the text. Similarly, the discussion of architectural features is general enough to apply to most, if not all churches.

The first chapter of the commentary treats the symbolism of the church building. Although parts of this have been repeatedly used in modern scholarship as one of the few examples of a Byzantine understanding of a church, there has never been an attempt to analyze it systematically. Therefore, most of the text's complex system of quotations, allusions, and imagery has gone unremarked.

1a. The church is the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:10-17; 2 Cor. 6:16), a holy precinct, a house of prayer (Mt. 21:13; Mk. 11:17; Lk. 19:46, all quoting Is. 56:7), a gathering of people, the body of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-17, 12: 27; Col. 1:24; Eph. 2:19-22). 1b. Its name is bride of Christ. 1c. It has been cleansed through the water of his baptism, it has been sprinkled with his blood, it is adorned like a bride, and it has been sealed with perfumed oil of the Holy Spirit according to the prophetic saying: 1d. *your name is perfume poured out* (Sg. 1: 3) and *we shall run after you into the fragrance*

*of your anointing oil (Sg. 1: 4) 1e. because it is like the perfumed oil on the head, which descends on the beard of Aaron (Ps. 132:2).*

1f. The church is earthly heaven, where the heavenly God dwells and walks about.  
1g. It represents symbolically the crucifixion and the burial and the resurrection of Christ.  
1h. It is glorified more than Moses's tent of witness, in which were the propitiatory and the Holy of Holies.  
1i. It has been prefigured by patriarchs, proclaimed by prophets, founded by apostles (Eph. 2:19), adorned by hierarchs, and perfected by martyrs.

The text here communicates on two levels, one being a straightforward characterization of the building (e.g., "a church is the temple of God," 1a), the other a more allusive description aimed at readers sensitive to the subtle contextual references (e.g., the image of the church as an anointed bride alludes to the rites of consecration, 1b-1e).

The series of characterizations in the first sentence (1a) conflate the physical building with the assembly of God's people, that is, the *ekklesia*. This is evident in the progressive movement from the material to the symbolic that culminates with the quotation from 1 Corinthians 12:27, that the church is the body of Christ. This conflation of building and assembly, which appeared in Christian discourse only around the beginning of the fourth century, marks a break from the earliest distaste for localized sanctity. New Testament authors, as well as early Christian theologians, treat the community of believers, not the space where they met, to be body of Christ. In fact, they completely deny the sacrality of manmade temples. In Acts 12:24 Paul says: "The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands." In a similar vein Clement of Alexandria (d. before 215) asserts: "I call church not the place, but the gathering of chosen." However, the term *ἐκκλησία* had come to designate both the building and the gathering of the people by the time of Eusebios of Caesarea (d. 339 or 340), who used this conflation in the speech he delivered on the occasion of the dedication of the church at Tyre in 315.

In the *Historia* the conflation and its resulting ambiguity is of utter importance as a rhetorical device because it allows the author to apply quotations about the assembly of believers to the building, even though his focus is really the building, not the assembly. The conflation is limiting for both Church and building because it implies a codependency, but it is especially restrictive for the building, which, the *Historia* seems to imply, has no meaning outside the *ekklesia*. In other words, the building does not have any inherent holiness, but is made holy through the presence of God's people and rituals, just as there can be no bridechamber without a bride and matrimonial ritual.

Bridal imagery of this sort is central to the *Historia's* ideal of a church evident in 1b ("Its name is bride of Christ") and from its use of Song of Songs (or Song of Solomon, 1d). The Song has been understood as a symbolic exchange between Christ and the Church, starting with Origen. In the *Historia*, through the conflation of Church (assembly) with church (building), the latter appropriates the imagery of the former, which had, in turn, been given the imagery of the bride in the Song of

Songs. However, the preceding references to the bride who is cleansed through Christ's baptism, or sprinkled with his blood (1c), are at first difficult to understand in the context of a building. The *Historia* is alluding to ritual acts performed during the consecration (καθιέρωσις) of a church and its altar. The text makes this idea explicit with references to the rite of consecration (1c). The sequence in the *Historia* aligns well with the pertinent rubrics in the Barberini Euchologion (ca. 800), the earliest surviving manuscript of its kind. The patriarch first washes the altar with white soap and lukewarm water from the baptismal pail, using a new, clean sponge. One of the prayers recited during this ritual makes reference to Christ's baptism. Subsequently, the patriarch pours perfumed wine over the altar, while reciting psalm 50 ("You will sprinkle me with hyssop, and I shall be cleansed"), then wipes it using a linen cloth. After pouring perfumed oil on the altar, he covers it completely with the appropriate textiles. Finally, while the patriarch censes, one of the attending bishops anoints the whole building with perfumed oil, making crosses on each column and pier. The *Historia's* quotations from the Song of Songs allude to the intense desirability of being in the "temple of God," one that has been officially consecrated by perfumed oil, repeatedly invoked in 1d-e. In this context, the final quotation in the paragraph about the perfumed oil that descends on the beard of Aaron (1e, psalm 132:2), can be understood only if we include the previous verse, "Look now, what is good and what is pleasant more than that kindred live together." The verse and its context connect the *myron* used in the consecration of the building with the delight of being among "kindred," a return to the idea of the Church as the assembly of people inside God's temple.

Another gathering of God's people and another consecration with oil is alluded to with the phrase "Aaron's beard," recounted in Leviticus 8:1–13. Moses assembles the people at the door of the tent of witness. He summons Aaron, washes him with water, and dresses him in the high priest's garments. Moses then sprinkles and anoints the altar, utensils, and tent with the anointing oil, and pours some of it over Aaron's head. The parallels between these verses and the Byzantine rite of consecration are clear, even if not precise. It is also clear that the author of the *Historia* was conscious of these parallels because, in the following paragraph, he compares the church building with Moses's tent of witness, the Tabernacle, rather than with Solomon's Temple, which as a built rather than a portable structure would have been more appropriate.

The allusion to the Tabernacle, a dwelling place of God, connects the end of the first paragraph and the beginning of the second (1f). As God's abode—like the Tabernacle—the church is also an "earthly heaven" (1f, ἐπίγειος οὐρανός). The attribution of cosmological symbolism to a worship space is common to many religions and it has Jewish precedents. In the first century CE Josephus claims that Moses's Tabernacle imitated the cosmos: one third of the Tabernacle was dedicated to God, like the heavens, and two thirds to priests, like the earth. The church is also an earthly heaven where "God dwells and walks about." The quote is from 2 Corinthians 6:16, itself a conflation of Leviticus 26:12 and Ezekiel 37:27. In both Old Testament passages God promises to dwell physically among the people of Israel (Ezekiel uses the word κατασκήνωσις, encampment), an allusion to the Tabernacle and the Temple. Paul, on the other hand, spiritualizes the idea by claiming that the

believers constitute the temple of God, where he resides. The *Historia*, mining the conflation of assembly and building, returns to the older, Old Testament meaning of the quotation: God dwells physically in this building.

The reference to the Tabernacle and Temple necessitates a comparison between those structures and the church, one that is unfavorable to the former. This continues a long tradition in Christian and Byzantine rhetoric, beginning in Hebrews 8, in which the church building had a peculiar relationship, admiring and at the same time antagonistic, to the Jewish manmade worship setting, be it the Tabernacle, or the later Temple, especially Solomon's. The *Historia* makes this comparison explicit in 1h with the reference to the Tabernacle, employing a set of complex analogies to make this point. For example, the expression "earthly heaven" is not merely a cosmological paradox; it is also a topos for the Theotokos, recurrent in homiletic literature. For example, John I, archbishop of Thessalonike (d. ca. 630 or 649), writes in his sermon on the Koimesis (Dormition): "Because he [Christ] showed her as his throne on earth and as an earthly heaven." The author of the *Historia* likely used this expression intentionally, in order to trigger to the audience both associations. The parallel between the Theotokos and the church is not improbable. They both carry inside them the body of incarnate Christ, which in the case of the building is the assembly of the faithful, as already mentioned in the opening line of the *Historia*. And other architectural analogies connect the Mother of God to the church building, such as her epithet ἔμψυχος ναός—"living temple"—and the dome itself, which was a norm in churches by the eighth century. The author of the *Historia*, in using "earthly heaven," could be invoking the domed building that, filled with the body of Christ, becomes a symbol of the pregnant Theotokos. This suggestion is not as unlikely as it may sound. A twelfth-century ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia by Michael the Deacon uses the language of pregnancy to describe its naos and dome. Furthermore, the word "to dwell," ἐνοικέω, although part of a quote, is often used to describe Christ dwelling in the womb of the Theotokos.

Because the church is a metonymy of the incarnation, as well as the place where God dwells and walks about, it is also the place that symbolizes the life, but especially the passion of the incarnate Christ, by representing his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection (1g). The *Historia* elucidates this point in later paragraphs, where both rituals and spaces inside the church—primarily in the sanctuary—recreate the topography of the Holy Land. Thus the ciborium represents the Crucifixion, and the main apse represents the place of burial. Although not explicitly mentioned, the text here implies that the church is all this that the Tabernacle or the Temple were not.

The adverse juxtaposition of Temple and church continues in 1i, which states that the church was proclaimed by prophets, adorned by hierarchs, and so on, in contrast to the Temple, which had none of this. The enumeration of these categories of saints would have an additional meaning for the Byzantines because the interior decoration of a church would have included such images. But the statement in 1i is also symbolic language. Again the *Historia* transfers the symbolism from the Church to the building, and once again there is a reference to the consecration rite. The church is perfected by martyrs, because a *sine qua non* of the consecration rite was the presence of the relics of martyrs, which were sealed in the altar.

The first chapter of the *Historia* offers a complicated and highly symbolic understanding of a church building. It conflates it with the assembly of people and stresses its importance as a consecrated space, the bride of Christ sealed with perfumed oil. It asserts that it is an earthly heaven and a place where God dwells, like the Tabernacle and Temple, but infinitely more elevated, because, through the rituals that take place in it, it represents Christ's passion.

In contrast to this general treatment of the building as a whole, in subsequent chapters the *Historia* focuses on specific parts of the church and assigns one or multiple symbolic associations to each. These associations fall into three categories: a memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ; the fulfilment of Old Testament prefigurations; and anticipation of the heavenly liturgy and the times to come. Unlike the allusive symbolism in chapter one, these interpretations are straightforward, even if not entirely systematized. Furthermore, the comparisons with the Temple or the Tabernacle are neutral.

The interpretation concentrates primarily on the area of the bema, where most of the liturgical action took place. The main apse is both the cave in Bethlehem and the cave where Jesus was buried (§3). The altar is the place in the tomb where Christ was placed. It is also the throne of God, on which he rested in the flesh, and it also symbolizes the table of the Last Supper, which was prefigured in the table that held the manna descended from heaven (§4). The ciborium stands for the place where Christ was crucified. It also symbolizes the Ark of the Covenant (§5). The sanctuary is the tomb of Christ but also named after the heavenly and spiritual sanctuary (§6). The synthronon (which he calls bema) is an elevated space and the throne on which Christ sits with his apostles; it also points to the Second Coming (§7). The entablature (κοσμήτης) symbolizes the curtain of the Temple and displays the seal of Christ in its cruciform decoration (§8). The chancel barrier indicates the place of prayer (the naos) and separates it from the "Holy of Holies," accessible only to clergy. It also imitates the bronze barriers in the actual sepulcher of Christ in Jerusalem (§9). The ambo (ἄμβων) indicates the stone that closed the holy tomb.

The bulk of the *Historia's* general, amorphous descriptions of individual liturgical spaces tell us little about specific churches or their development, with a single important exception, that concerning the development of the tripartite bema. Chapter 36 elaborates on the *proskomide*, the readying of the gifts for the Great Entrance. In reality, however, this paragraph discusses the symbolism of the space where this took place, the *skeuophylakion*, which translates literally as "the place where the vessels are guarded" — a sacristy. Here is the first sentence:

36. The *proskomide*, which takes place in the *skeuophylakion*, signifies the place of the skull, where Christ was crucified. It is said that the skull of our forefather Adam lies there, and it shows that the tomb was close to where he was crucified (cf. Jn. 19:41–42).

This passage is of great import for it indicates that as a matter of course the *skeuophylakion*, which signifies the Calvary, was in close proximity to the central apse, which represents the tomb. This arrangement, however, goes against the

current understanding formulated by Thomas F. Mathews, who places the skeuophylakion most often outside the building in the early churches of Constantinople.

The skeuophylakion in Hagia Sophia was certainly an outbuilding, still surviving today outside the northeast side of the church. Mathews and Taft offered evidence for the existence of outside skeuophylakia in three other churches—Hagia Eirene, the Theotokos at Blachernae, and Hagios Theodoros Sphorakios—but this evidence is not without problems. In Hagia Eirene Feridun Dirimtekin uncovered the remains of a structure that abutted the north exterior wall of the church. It dates to the eighth century and was square in the exterior with a circular interior. Dirimtekin calls it a skeuophylakion, simply because he considered it too small to be a baptistery. Urs Peschlow does not assign a function to this structure. The church of the Theotokos at Blachernae has long disappeared. Its skeuophylakion is mentioned in the tenth-century *De cerimoniis*, but the pertinent passage does not exclude the possibility that its sacristy was inside the church. Indeed, Cyril Mango reconstructed it that way. We should entertain the possibility that, whereas some churches had an outside skeuophylakion, in others during this early period it was located inside the church and in close proximity to the main altar. In fact, there is secure evidence for such an arrangement in the church of Hagios Ioannes Prodromos in Oxeia. This church was probably built in the early sixth century and was famous for housing in an underground crypt the coffin with the relics of Artemios, a saint specializing in the cure of testicle diseases and hernias. The building has not survived, but based on extensive information in the seventh-century *miracula* of Artemios we can reconstruct it as a three-aisled basilica, with the main apse flanked by a skeuophylakion to the north and a chapel dedicated to Saint Febronia to the south. The specifics of this arrangement are unknown, but given the absence of any evidence for a triple-apse sanctuary in Constantinople before the ninth century, it is unlikely that the side spaces were apsed. In this respect, Mango's reconstruction of the Oxeia church with a single projecting main apse in the middle of two auxiliary rooms with flat east walls cannot be far off the mark.

Because the *Historia* reflects common practice at the time of its composition, we need to reevaluate our understanding of the development of the sanctuary in the churches of Constantinople. The traditional scheme holds that pre-iconoclastic churches had a single apse with no side rooms but with an outside skeuophylakion, where bread and wine were prepared for the Eucharist. The triple-apse bema appeared only in the ninth century, rather abruptly. Clearly, the *Historia* and such churches as Saint John in Oxeia complicate this picture. The latter indicates that an alternative configuration existed—an inside skeuophylakion near the altar—at least in the early sixth century, and the former reveals that this arrangement was the norm in the early eighth century. If this is true, then the appearance of the triple-apse bema in the ninth century makes sense as a step in a larger and gradual process. This bema configuration, likely imported from Bithynia, offered a solution that met both practical and symbolic needs: it provided a separate space that accommodated the prothesis rite with its growing ritual complexity, while maintaining the proximity to the altar that was important for the sacred topography

enacted in the liturgy. At the same time, the newly introduced south side room maintained the symmetry of the building, a major concern as many middle Byzantine churches in the capital attest.

Although there is no archaeological record of this transition, liturgical texts make it evident. *Pseudo-Sophronios*, a twelfth-century liturgical commentary that is strongly influenced by the *Historia*, and often elucidates its meaning, repeats the symbolic topography simply by updating the vocabulary: “The holy altar manifests the holy tomb, where he was buried; the holy prothesis is the place of the skull, where he was crucified.” Another pertinent passage comes from Symeon, the early fifteenth-century bishop of Thessalonike, who writes, “The place of the skeuophylakion, which is also called prothesis, to the side of the sanctuary signifies Bethlehem and the cave. That way it is secluded and not far from the sanctuary, although it used to be farther out in the large churches for the safekeeping of the vessels.” It is difficult to assess the truth of Symeon’s comment that only “large churches” had an outside skeuophylakion, but it is an appealing hypothesis. After all, the only such structure securely identified belongs to Hagia Sophia, where it was used at least until the tenth century.

How much does the *Historia* help us understand specific architectural developments? Admittedly little, with the notable exception of the indoor skeuophylakion. We learn that at the beginning of the eighth century a “typical” church needed to be consecrated, and that it had an altar, ciborium, synthronon, templon, ambo, and a separate place for the preparation of the eucharistic gifts. It most likely had a dome that enhanced its cosmological symbolism, and its interior was decorated with Gospel scenes and images of saints. In short, for an architectural historian the discussion of the architecture in such a source is frustratingly vague. There is no explication of causal relationships; no discourse on connections between architecture and ritual; no mention of size, height, or how wall decoration, ritual action, and architecture work together during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

The *Historia* is not alone in its disregard for practicalities pertaining to the performance of ritual acts inside a built space. The eleventh-century *Protheoria* mentions, but in utter generalities, the altar, the prothesis (§7), the marble floors of Hagia Sophia (§14), the ciborium (§18) and the doors (§21). Of the 110 paragraphs in Symeon of Thessalonike’s *Interpretation of the Divine Temple*, only 11 discuss elements of architecture, and even then quite blandly. In the fourteenth-century liturgical commentary of Nikolaos Kabasilas the building is virtually absent. Granted, in these commentaries the architectural symbolism lacks details because it was meant to apply to all churches, but even when the text is about a specific building, the situation is no better. An example is patriarch Photios’s tenth homily, an ekphrasis of a palace church, that is probably to be identified as the Pharos in the Great Palace at Constantinople. This is not a liturgical commentary but a sermon about a particular church, delivered by a clergyman. Photios pays extensive attention to the atrium and concentrates on the beauty of the church evidenced by the costly materials. He mentions the altar and the templon, the ciborium and capitals, and the mosaic decoration (which included images of Christ in the dome, as

well as the Theotokos, angels, martyrs, prophets, and patriarchs). Photios repeats the topoi: the building symbolizes heaven and it resembles, but surpasses, the Tabernacle and the Temple. Yet there is no mention of the building as a *liturgical* space. This is a common trend in Byzantine ekphrastic literature; as Ruth Macrides and Paul Magdalino say about Paul the Silentiary's poem on Hagia Sophia, "the ekphrasis fails on two counts: it is insufficiently sensitive to points of technical and stylistic detail; it also fails to link the appearance of the church with its religious purpose."

Thus the *Historia* is part of a long exegetical and ekphrastic tradition that disregards the functional aspects of a church building. But why is this the case? I contend that this phenomenon is due to the adaptability of the Byzantine liturgical rites. The same Divine Liturgy could be celebrated both in a small chapel and in an enormous cathedral, with just a few necessary adjustments, such as the length of processions. The form of the building, and indeed the building itself, is immaterial to the efficacy of the Eucharist; it is not even necessary. Neilos Kerameus, patriarch of Constantinople (d. 1388), succinctly encapsulates this in one of his canonical regulations:

Our benevolent master and lord Jesus Christ, who is God on earth, gave us many ways [to sanctification]. The first and highest is the sacrifice of his precious blood and body... The servants and preachers of the Divine Word, his saintly apostles and disciples, and along with them our holy and God-inspired Fathers and teachers of the ecumene prescribed this holy tradition not simply to be carried on and fulfilled by us, but [to carry it on] in the world or often outside it [i.e., in monasteries] in a certain holy place, dedicated specifically to God... However, because generals and even emperors themselves leave on trips, and in foreign lands, where there is no holy church; or because some pious clergy withdraw from their own cities or monastery and settle in a desert place out of love for quietness and asceticism; and because often impious people come to the lands of Christians and destroy the churches and the Christians cannot rebuild them, or they are often afraid that, if they build others, they [the impious] will destroy them again; for all these reasons, and because they have the need to be sanctified and commune, we find announced by the saintly Fathers and the holy and saintly synods that [these Christians] were given a holy table consecrated through a wooden tablet or a textile. And having received it, they place it in a private space, separated and clearly defined either with a wall, if it is inside a house, or with a curtain, and they perform the Eucharist privately... And this object, because it is evidently a holy table, has a prothesis on the left side, a bit smaller than the holy table. All Christians ought to love, and watch over it, and consider it holy, and honor and venerate it, as they do to it in the holy churches.

Neilos refers to a category of objects conventionally called *antimensia*, portable altars made of wood or cloth. They appear as early as the eighth century and were used when a consecrated altar was unavailable, as in the cases outlined in the text. What Neilos and other canonical texts state is that, even though a "holy place,

consecrated to God” is the most appropriate context, the only *sine qua non* for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy is a (somehow) consecrated altar. Indeed, the tenth-century *vita* of Saint Blasios of Amorion (d. ca. 912) recounts how the saint celebrated his last Divine Liturgy on an altar set up near his deathbed. And Saint Paul of Latros (d. 955) had the liturgy celebrated in the cave that he inhabited, which presented problems of access for the clergy. In neither case did the authors consider the absence of an actual building as restrictive or even peculiar.

In this light, the vagueness about the building in liturgical commentaries, and the absence of the liturgy from *ekphraseis* of churches makes sense. In these texts the building’s identity as a liturgical space is of secondary importance: the absolute requirements for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy are minimal and the ritual could be adapted easily. Consequently, formal aspects of the building, like its size and type, and even its decoration, often had a tenuous link to its liturgical function. They could enhance the symbolism of the ritual, or they could be influenced by it, but neither was necessary, and there is no causal relationship. The chancel barrier symbolizes the separation of the “house of prayer” from the Holy of Holies, regardless of whether it is small or large, decorated or plain, made of marble or wood.

The *Historia* establishes the symbolic framework in which a church building was understood from the eighth century onward, and even up to today. In October 2013 the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America confirmed that the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava will design the new Saint Nicholas church at Ground Zero in New York City. In the published renderings the building is centrally planned, with a dome, and has a spacious narthex. The press coverage, which mostly quotes the spokesperson for the archdiocese, highlights the prominence of the dome, the church’s prototypes (Hagia Sophia and the church of the Chora in Istanbul), and the fact that it will have a bereavement center and be a house of prayer for all people. Calatrava’s proposal to the selection committee outlines his creative process in very specific terms, but it makes no mention of the practicalities of the building as a liturgical space. The same is true for the deliberations of the selection committee, which consisted of academics, laypeople, and clergy. All of them assumed, as did the *Historia* and its readers over many centuries, that the Liturgy will somehow fit.