The church of St. Mary of the Mongols or Theotokos Panagia Mougliotissa was named in honor of Maria Palaeologina, the daughter of Emperor Michael VII and bride given to a Khan of the Mongols who lived in the thirteenth century. The marriage was a political marriage, formed in attempts to soothe relations with the powerful Mongols to the north and east. After her husband’s death, Mary returned to Constantinople and founded the church around the year 1285.
The church was part of a female monastery in the late Byzantine period dedicated their lives to the service of God. The monastery was built on the site of an earlier monastery dedicated to Theotokos Panagiotissa or the Mother-of-God the All Holy, which had been devastated by the Latins. Maria bought the grounds and some remaining structures and repaired them as well as constructing new ones. Maria exhausted all her fortunes endowing the monastery with relics, manuscripts, vessels and many other valuable documents (Millingen).

After Maria’s death, the monastery was given to Isaac Palaeologus Asanes, husband of Theodora, who was like a daughter to Maria. The result of this was that the convent quickly became exploited for the pocketbook of the family and so the convent, with increasing debt, came close to dying out. The nuns, as a result, appealed to Emperor Andronicus III and reclaimed their rights to the property in 1351.

After the Fall of Constantinople, the church was saved from being turned into a mosque by decree from Mehmet the Conquer as a reward for the construction of the Mosque of the Conqueror (Fatih Camii) to the Greek architect Christodoulos. St. Mary of the Mongols was the only church spared conversion of all the Byzantium churches and so it is one of the only ancient churches of Byzantium whose dedication we are able to correctly identify. Even today, the copy of firman of Mehmed II which gave ownership if the church to the Greek community is still framed and hanging on the wall near the entrance of the church.
Although, the church has always been controlled by the Orthodox Church, it has gone through massive amounts transformations both in Byzantine and later times. St. Mary was originally of a simple quatrefoil plan (four semi-circular niches surmounted by a half-domes). The central dome sits on a cross formed by four elegant piers set across the angles of the square which is enlarged under the vaulting level by three semicircle niches. Originally, the church had no narthex; the three-bay narthex was added later as evident in the apparent modification of the southern quatrefoil to house the narthex. The hall to the south of the church, a belfry and the porch in front of the narthex are all also modern additions to the structure.

The original interior is plastered and painted over. Most of the remaining area is blocked by icons and ornaments which make the study of the church very difficult. There is however, a washed out depiction of the Last Judgment on the eastern wall facing the entrance of the church remaining as an old painting. An annotation on the manuscript of Suidas’s Lexicon, a Greek encyclopedia, revealed that the church was painted by Modestus in the late 13th century.
The issue of enlargement and mutilation of the church structure to incorporate the double-naved hall has also prevented any significant study of the original architecture of the church. We can however, access a lower floor space by walking down a couple of steps into a basement-like entrance near where the southern apse used to stand. Although only approximately a meter and a half has been excavated, we can examine two different rooms while inside. The first one residing on our left side upon entering, has a squared hole cutout and different levels of elevation of the floor. The second room down the small hallway is barrel vaulted with large pieces of pottery inside. We are in need of more archaeological excavations of this lower space in order to learn more of St. Mary’s architectural evolution and help in unraveling the mysteries of its ancient past.

St. Mary is located on what is now the Fatih district in the neighborhood of Fener bit west of the Greek Communal School. St. Mary still stands atop a summit overlooking the golden horn as a silent reminder to the centuries with its conflicts, rapid transformations and cultural changes of this neighborhood. We, as inheritors of this matchless church have an obligation to improve our understanding of this structure and reflect on the its ancient past which – still is and continues to be – laced into the landscape of our modern world.

The church is open every day from 9:00am to 4:00pm.

References


