

The Magnificent History of the “Bodrum Camii”



Fig 1: The Bodrum Camii

The Bodrum mosque was formerly the Church of the Monastery of Myrelaion. It is located in Laleli, a part of today's İstanbul's historical peninsula. The Myrelaion Church was built on a cross-square plan, by Emperor Romanos I Lecapenos as a family chapel when he converted his nearby palace to a monastery in 922. Romanos I Lecapenos was the son of an imperial guardsman of Armenian named Theophylaktos. Romanos did not take any refined education but he advanced through the ranks of army during the reign of the Emperor Leo VI. First he became the general of the naval and after served as admiral on the fleet. After becoming very influential, he started to have a close relationship with the underage Constantine VII and in 919 he married his daughter with him and became the "father of the emperor". In 920, he became the co-emperor. He was in the power until 944 when he deposed by his sons. The monastery sits on the ruins of the 5th century rotunda and is also known as a female monastery (Nunnery). Emperor Romanos created a complex place which includes a monastery, church and a burial place. The church also became a burial place for their family. Between 922 and 961, six members of the Lecapenos family were buried in the church. The church was damaged during the Crusades in 1203. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the church was converted into a mosque by Grand Vizier Mesih Paşa around 1500s. Nowadays this mosque is called "Bodrum Camii", bodrum means an enclosed area that is generally use for storage that is partially or completely underground however it is also known as "Mesih Paşa Camii" named after the Grand Vizier. In 1784 and 1911, the mosque was gravely damaged due to back fire incidents. However, after 1965 C.L.Striker came to İstanbul and cleaned its cellar and did a digging to find out something related with the monastery of Romanos. After 1986, it was completely restored by an institution and now it is used as a mosque.



Fig 2: The exterior of Myrelaion Church *from* www.byzantium1200.com

Romanos Lecapenos was an emperor during 920 to 944. As a matter of fact he was an usurper to the throne; he wanted to build a palace for himself so he bought a late antique rotunda which was built in the 5th century. (Freely, Çakmak, pg.150) Both entrances of the rotunda were closed by walls. The inner side of the rotunda was supported by approximately eighty columns to hold the ceiling where the rotunda was transformed into a cistern. (Yerasimos, pg. 86) The ceiling was divided into two parts; one half was constructed as a palace and a terrace, where the other half was being used as the courtyard. (Yerasimos, pg.86). Lecapenos also wanted to build a family chapel next to his palace. Myrelaion church was built on the south-west of Rotunda which was attached to the palace. The church was a two storey building and it was located at the same level with the palace and the terrace. A same sized substructure was built beneath the church with the aim of this church being at the same level with the palace. Although the church and the substructures are not connected inside, they both carry their individual entrances outside. (Freely, Çakmak, pg.151)

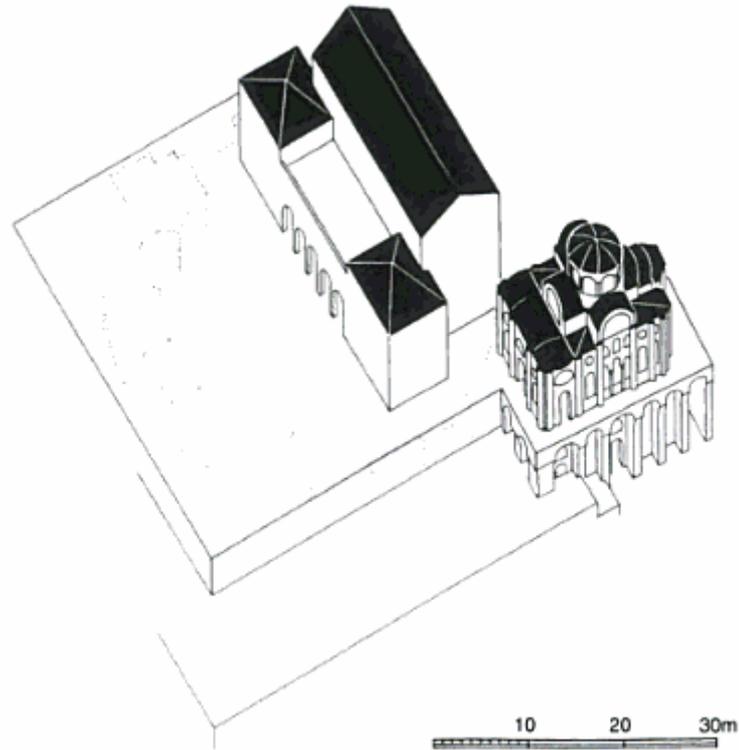


Fig 3: Hypothetical reconstruction of the Myrelaion palace, church and the substructure of the Myrelaion church from *İstanbul İmparatorluklar Başkenti* by Yerasimos



Fig 4: The Myrelaion church and the substructure from www.byzantium1200.com

The Myrelaion church was built on a cross-square plan which became popular after the basilica plan in the 9th century. The term “four-column church” is also applied to this kind. (Ousterhout, pg. 15) In this type of church, “forms are massed in a pyramidal manner, the vaults cascading downward from the top. There was a dome in the center of the church which rises above a drum, whose windows around its base provide the light to focus on the center. The dome is supported by four columns that divide the interior space into nine units.” (Ousterhout, pg 16) “The narthex of the church has three bays which were separated by the arches. The central bay has a dome vault; however the other ones have cross-groined vaults.” (Millingen, pg.198). “Three archways lead from the narthex into the nave. In the nave there is a central hall with four columns that carry the dome. The aisles lead into clover-shaped pastoforion or side rooms that are linked to the sanctuary in the middle.” “The inner side of the church was also decorated by mosaics and marble revetments. In the crypt, where the Lecaponos’s family were buried has a fresco painting from the Palaogeloion Dynasty, still exists in the mosque.” “In the painting, there is a female figure kneeling and supplicating from a standing Mother of God. The exterior parts of the walls are semicircular buttresses and the eastern side of the church is dominated by the semi-hexagonal apses of the sanctuary and the side rooms. The whole church is made by bricks.” (C. L. Striker)

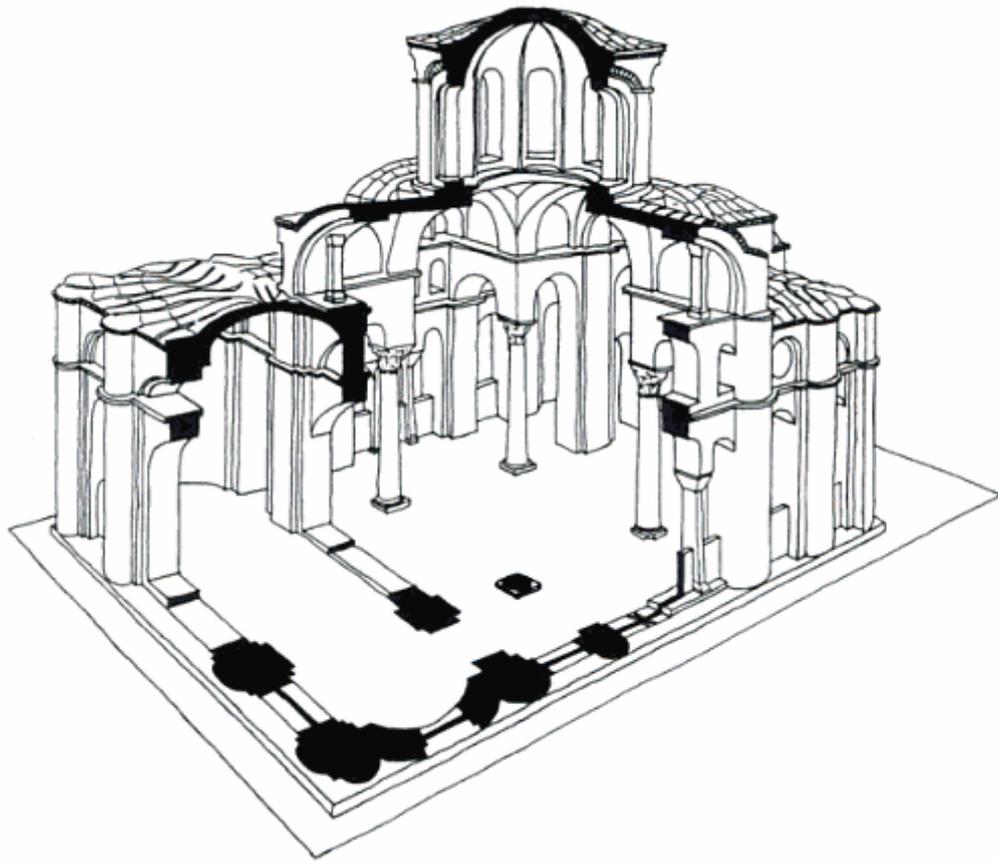


Fig 5: Cutaway perspective view of the Myrelaion church from *İstanbul'un Bizans Anıtları* by Freely and Çakmak

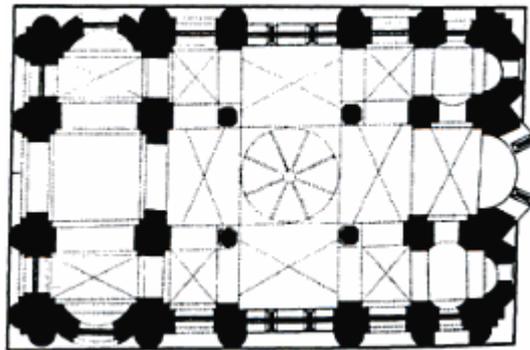


Fig 6: The plan of the Myrelaion church. Cross-square plan from *İstanbul'un Bizans Yapıları* by Freely and Çakmak

The church is used as a burial place for Lecapenos, his family and Romanos I. First his wife Theodora in 922 and after by order: his son Christopher in 931, Constantine's (his son) wife Helena in 940, his son Constantine in 946, Romanos I himself in 946 and Emperor Constantine VII's wife Helena in 961. Romanos was the only emperor who was not buried in

Havariun or the church of the Holy Apostles, because Romanos became emperor by making her daughter marry with Constantine VII and after eliminating Constantine VII. Romanos I desired for the privilege of being buried in the Havariun church also known as Holy Apostles, however, he was buried in the Myrelaion church as he was not considered from the royal blood. (Yerasimos, 87) There are still surviving traces of the burials in the Archeology Museum in İstanbul. Furthermore, the palace of Romanos was used as a monastery, converted by Romanos II. Not only Romanos II locked his sister to the monastery but also the wife and the daughter of the Komnenos I were locked to this monastery as a nun. That's why the monastery was also known as a nunnery.



Fig 7: The Myrelaion church, the interior,
Looking east



Fig 8: Myrelaion church, the south-west cross
cross angle

Both of the pictures are from the Byzantine Churches in Constantinople by Millingen

The whole complex was damaged because of the Crusades in 1203 by the fire incidents. In 1261, Michael IX was recaptured the Constantinople and started to restore

Constantinople from its damages. Michael IX was one of the member of the Palaeologian Dynasty. Myrelaion church was also restored in the late 13th century, during the Palaeologian Dynasty in 1261. During these repairs, a burial chapel was added in the substructure of the building. After the conquest of the Ottoman Empire, the church was converted into a mosque by the Grand Vizier Mesih Ali Paşa, under the ruling of the Sultan II Beyazıd. The mosque is also known as Bodrum Camii, named after the cistern beneath the monastery, coming from the word “Bodrum” in Turkish language.

A fountain and faucets for ablution was constructed near the mosque. In 1782, so far the biggest fire in history of Istanbul damaged the mosque. However, the mosque was damaged most by the fire in 1911. The restoration of the mosque was on a long hold until 1986. At the moment, it is used as a mosque, Bodrum Camii. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to see any remaining of the monastery from the past. The cistern which is constructed by Romanos was used for water storage in the Byzantine period however now it is turned into a shopping mall. You can still see the columns and the ceiling of the cistern. Now the “bodrum” of the mosque which was the burial chapel in the past is used for only Friday prayers. Today, the church is visited by many tourists where their feelings and memories from the church are kept in the “Visitors Book”. Most tourists seem to appreciate the restoration that they can still have a chance to see the remaining of the church and its features from the past.



Fig 9: The exterior of the Bodrum Mosque



Fig 10: The dome of the Bodrum mosque



Fig 11: The interior of the Mosque

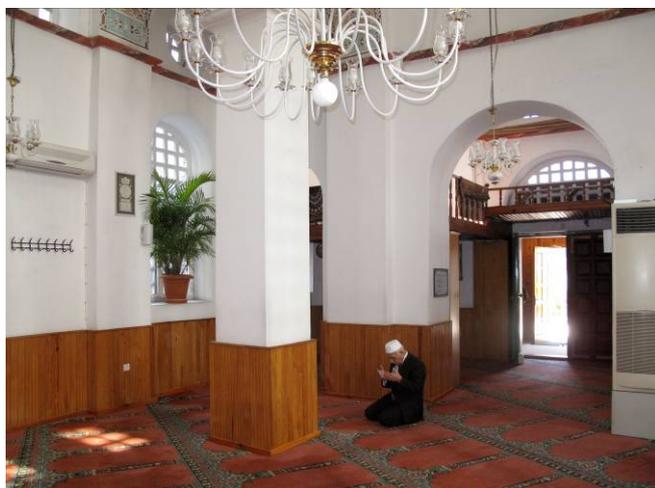


Fig 12: The interior of the Mosque



Fig 13: The fresco painting, represents the mother of god



Fig 14: The interior of the burial place, now it is used only for Friday pray

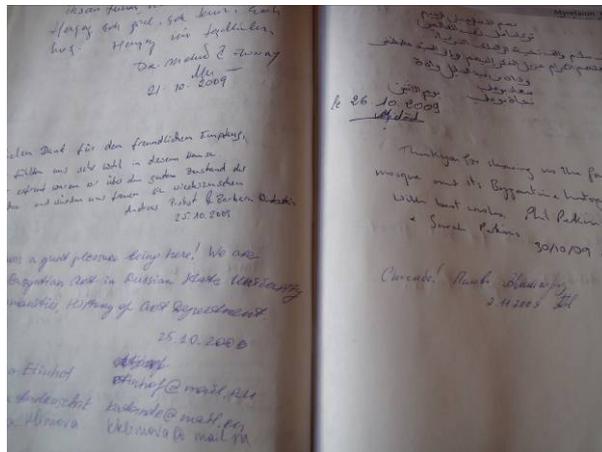


Fig 15: Visitor's book



Fig 16: The Cistern

Nil Hocaoglu
20050244

Upon your arrival, please do not forget to check the crypt (burial place) of the church.
It is only open on Friday. When you ask for permission to enter, they will allow you to enter
I believe it is a must-see place as it represents a magnificent history from the Roman Empire.

Contact: *İmam Mustafa Alpsoy*

E-mail: *alpsoy1955@gmail.com*

Address: *Bodrum Camii, South of Ordu Street, Laleli District, Fatih / İstanbul*

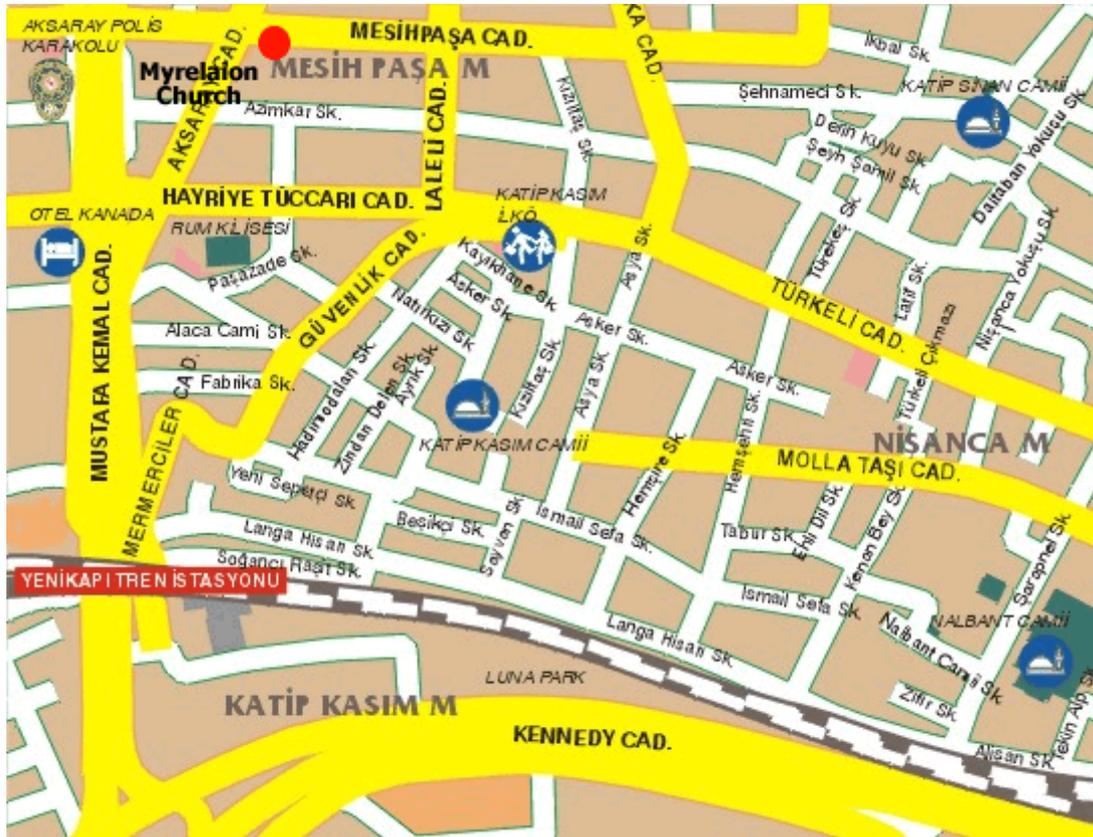
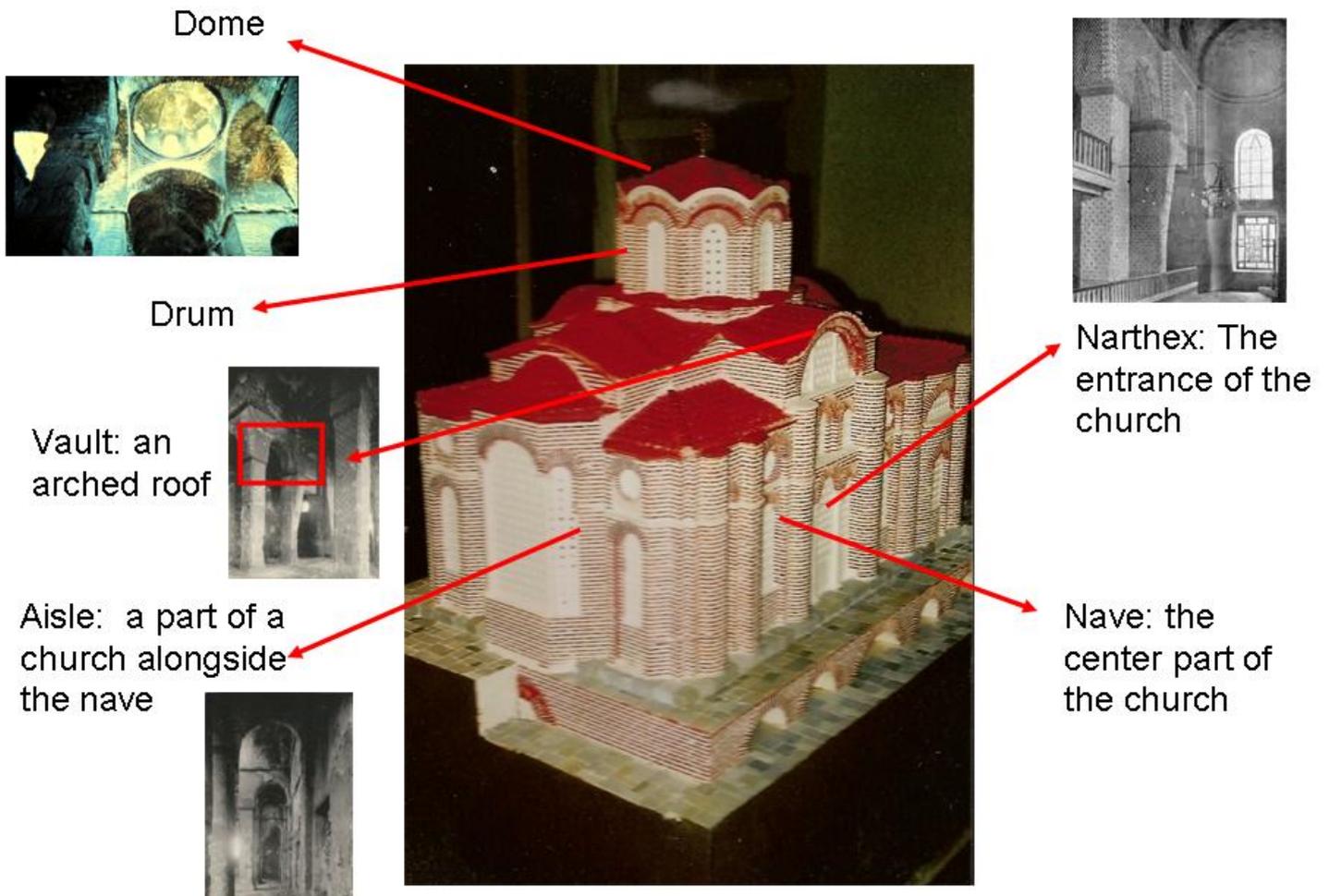


Fig 17: Map

Glossary



Bibliography

1. Meriçtoyn, Y.A. (1994). Tarih Öncesi Çağlardan Osmanlı Devrine kadar İstanbul'un Tarihsel Gelişimi ve Bizans'ın Temel Yapıları: *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, vol 2. İstanbul: Ana Basım,
2. Millingen, A.V. (1912). Byzantine Churches in Constantinople: *Their History and Architecture*, pp. 196–198.
3. Outerhout R. (2008). *Master Builders of Byzantium*. Published by University of Pennsylvania
4. Striker C.L.(1981). *The Myrelaion (Bodrum Camii) in İstanbul*. Princeton University Press.
5. Yerasimos S. (2000), *İstanbul İmparatorluklar Başkenti*, Tarif Vakfı Yurt Yayınları pp. 86–88.
6. Freely J. Çakmak A. S. (2006). *İstanbul'un Bizans Anıtları*, Yapı Kredi Yayınları. pp. 149–153.
7. Wiener W. M. İstanbul'un Tarihsel Topografyası: *17. Yüzyıl Başlarına Kadar Byzantion-Konstantinopolis-İstanbul*, Yapı Kredi Yayınları. pp. 103–107.