Structuring the Sacred: Visual Systems of Female Piety in Byzantine Sacred Architecture

Abstract

This paper examines how sacred architecture and visual culture in Byzantine Constantinople, particularly within Hagia Sophia and the Church of Chora, mobilised the image of the Virgin Mary as a structural and theological axis for enacting female sanctity. Rather than reading Marian centrality as a zero-sum dominance over other female figures, the paper reframes it as a generative force that enabled a wider devotional economy of female participation. Drawing on art historical, theological, and philosophical sources, the study explores how mosaics such as the Deësis and Dormition affirmed doctrine and constructed sites of affective encounter, intercession, and ritualised visibility. The paper shows that sacred space operated as a visual vechicle of inclusion, where sanctity was represented and performed. Ultimately, it argues for rethinking sacred architecture as a civic mechanism that encoded gendered presence into the very fabric of Byzantine public and religious life.

List of Illustrations

Introduction

How is female sanctity constructed, visualised, and spatially embedded within the sacred architecture of Byzantium? This question lies at the intersection of theology, image-making, and spatial politics, forming the basis of this study. In Byzantine visual culture, sanctity was shaped by architecture, expressed through materials, and grounded in theology. Yet within this system, female sanctity presents a particular challenge: how does a tradition so bound to hierarchical theology and ritual choreography accommodate multiple, often stratified, representations of women in sacred space? By examining key mosaics within the Hagia Sophia and the Church of Chora, two sites whose visual programmes are theologically significant and liturgically structured. By analysing how the Virgin Mary and other female figures are positioned, framed, and liturgically activated, this study interrogates the mechanisms (iconographic, spatial, and performative) through which female piety is understood and interpreted in chronologically diverse forms and mechanisms.

At the Hagia Sophia (6th Century) and the Church of Chora (4th Century), the Virgin Mary was both a sacred figure and served as a theological and iconographic axis around which sacred space, liturgical meaning, and female sanctity were organised coherently. While the Virgin's centrality did not preclude the presence of other female saints, it provided the typological and devotional framework within which their sanctity could be rendered legible.

To substantiate this argument, the paper proceeds in four parts. First, it examines the apse mosaic of the Virgin and Child at Hagia Sophia (fig. 3,4), focusing on verticality, placement, and doctrinal clarity. Second, it explores the Deësis mosaic (fig. 5), considering how gesture and proximity function as vehicles of female sanctity. Third, it turns to the Empress Zoe panel (fig.

6,7), where sanctity is externalised through donation and naming. Finally, the paper investigates the Dormition of the Virgin mosaic (fig. 9) at the Church of Chora, arguing for a more metaphysical model of female sanctity grounded in receptivity, light, and architectural transition. Taken together, these case studies offer a framework for understanding how gender, sanctity, and sacred space are co-constructed through image, theology, and liturgical environment.

Axes of Devotion: The Theotokos, Empress Zoe, and the Visual Logic of Hagia Sophia

Commissioned by Emperor Justinian I and consecrated in 537 C.E., the Hagia Sophia (*Ἁγία Σοφία*, "Holy Wisdom") in Istanbul, serves as a seminal site in the visual and liturgical history of Orthodox Christianity. Designed by the mathematician-architects Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus, the Hagia Sophia was a church that, in Procopius's words "a most glorious spectacle, extraordinary to those who beheld it, and altogether incredible to those who are told of it."[1] The Hagia Sophia has operated as both an imperial dominion and a cosmic stage for the performance of theology, where art, ritual, and architectural space work in tandem to create a transcendent whole. Scholars such as Anthony Cutler and Robert Nelson have similarly argued that Hagia Sophia's aesthetic programme must be understood in conversation with its theology, liturgical choreography, and evolving imperial ideology.[2] In this context, the mosaics – created over successive centuries and in response to shifting doctrinal, political, and ceremonial demands – form an iconographic framework through which sacred authority was mediated and contested. These conversations between the heavenly and terrestrial concerns are made most

[1] Procopius, *The Buildings of Procopius*, trans. Aubrey Stewart, annotated by C. W. Wilson and Hayter Lewis (London: Adam Street, Adelphi, 1888), Book I, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/65404/65404-h/65404-h.htm
[2] Cutler, Anthony. "Structure and Aesthetic at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 25, no. 1 (1966): 27–35. https://doi.org/10.2307/428881; Robert S. Nelson. Hagia Sophia, 1850-1950: Holy. Wisdom Modern Monument. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004

legible in the three monumental mosaics within the architectural complex of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople: the *Virgin and Child Enthroned* [fig. 3 & 4] in the apse (late 9th century), the *Deësis panel* [fig. 5] (13th century), and the *Empress Zoe mosaic* [fig. 6 & 7] (12th century). Though separated by time and positioned in different liturgical zones, these images, when placed in visual and conceptual dialogue, allow us to interrogate how space, light, and ritual collectively shaped a hierarchy of female sanctity. By attending to the Hagia Sophia's iconographic and architectural framing, this study seeks to invite a re-reading of Hagia Sophia's visual programme: one in which multiple female voices – Theotokos[3] and those which have been lost to time – contributed to the building's devotional economy.[4] While the Virgin's supremacy as Theotokos is doctrinally uncontested and visually reinforced through her commanding placement in the apse, the empresses participate in a different visual economy: one that approximates Marian imagery without collapsing into equivalence. In other words, Empress Zoe's iconographic representation, while also participating in the church's visual field, invites us to consider how female sanctity was staged with varying degrees of authority, proximity, and permanence.

The Hagia Sophia provides an especially generative site for this inquiry. As Robert Nelson argues, it was not a church among churches, church, the liturgical and political epicentre

[3] The term Theotokos (Greek: Θεοτόκος), means "Birth-giver to God" or more commonly "Mother of God," is a title for the Virgin Mary formally affirmed at the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus (AD 431). It safeguards the Orthodox Christian belief that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man, one Person with two natures. By calling Mary "Theotokos," the Church affirms that she gave birth not merely to a human being, but to the incarnate Word of God. This title protects the doctrine of the Incarnation against heresies like Nestorianism, which separated Christ's human and divine natures into two persons. In Orthodox tradition, this title also emphasizes Mary's unique holiness, perpetual virginity, and her role as the supreme example of synergy with God's will.

[4] By "devotional economy," this study refers not to a literal system of exchange but to the atmospheric, affective, and symbolic milieu within which acts of veneration, visual piety, and sacred presence were negotiated. It denotes the relational web of gestures, gazes, liturgical rhythms, and material aesthetics through which sanctity was both produced and experienced within the space of Hagia Sophia.

of Byzantine religious life.[5] Here, as scholars like Natalia Teteriatnikov and Bissera Pentcheva have demonstrated, mosaics are not inert objects but were activated by light, voice, and movement, forming a multisensory environment in which sacred presence was constructed dynamically. [6] Within such a space, the visual dominance of the Theotokos cannot be divorced from the building's orientation, illumination, and ritual flows. The positioning of women within the upper galleries and arches (spaces marked by restricted access and elevated ceremonial visibility) afforded them a distinct, though not insignificant, form of ritual engagement. Their placement signaled a mode of participation that was both symbolically charged and spatially significant, underscoring their presence within the sacred and political hierarchies of Byzantine worship. Analysing the mosaics in tandem with the apse image of the Virgin, I will uncover a more nuanced devotional economy, one in which multiple female figures situated differently in space and theology contributed to the sacred atmosphere of the Great Church.

This paper proceeds in four parts. It begins with an analysis of the apse mosaic of the Virgin and Child, focusing on its spatial and liturgical prominence. It then turns to the mosaic of Empress Zoe. The final section situates both mosaics within the broader ritual landscape fo the Hagia Sophia, demonstrating how space, sound, and ceremony produced a stratified yet interconnected model of female sanctity.

---

[5] Robert S. Nelson. Hagia Sophia, 1850-1950: Holy. Wisdom Modern Monument. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004

[6] Natalia B. Teteriatnikov, "Mosaics of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul: The Fossati Restoration and the Work of the Byzantine Institute," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998): 73–74; Pentcheva, Bissera V. "Byzantine Art and Perception." In *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Art and Architecture*, edited by Ellen C. Schwartz. 2022. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190277352.001.0001

The Apse Mosaic

The *Virgin and Child Enthroned* (fig. 3,4) mosaic, situated within the apse conch of the Hagia Sophia (fig. 1,2) , occupies the most exalted visual and liturgical position in the building's architectural schema. Executed in shimmering gold tesserae, the mosaic depicts the Theotokos seated on an elaborate, cushioned throne with the Christ Child perched on her lap. While lacking an identifying inscription beyond the standard *Μήτηρ Θεοῦ* (Mother of God), the image's monumental scale, spatial elevation, and axial alignment with the altar mark it as the theological and ritual epicentre of the great church. The mosaic's placement above the synthronon situates it at the culmination of the building's vertical hierarchy and establishes a direct iconographic link between heavenly intercession and eucharistic presence.

Scholarly consensus generally dates the mosaic to the third quarter of the ninth century, following the end of Byzantine Iconoclasm in 843 CE, with many attributing its unveiling to the Patriarch Photios's homily of 867.[7] The mosaic stands not merely as a decorative triumph but as a triumphal declaration of image restoration and doctrinal orthodoxy. The seated Virgin on a *thokos* (throne) becomes a visual refutation of iconoclastic arguments, anchoring divine maternity in both matter and space. Furthermore, the image functions as a statement of ecclesiastical and imperial cohesion. Following decades of theological disruption and iconoclastic policies, the apse mosaic reasserted the unity of doctrine under imperial patronage.

[7] Delivered on Holy Saturday, 29 March 867, in the presence of Emperor Michael III and his court, Homily 17 of Patriarch Photios commemorates the unveiling of the first figural image to be installed in Hagia Sophia after the end of Iconoclasm. This homily is central to the art-historical and theological interpretation of the apse mosaic of the Virgin and Child. In it, Photios celebrates the restoration of the holy icons and articulates a theological poetics of visuality, wherein the image of the Theotokos becomes a medium of divine presence, a site of doctrinal triumph, and a renewal of the Church's aesthetic and liturgical dignity. See *The Homilies of Photius Patriarch of Constantinople*, trans. Cyril Mango (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958)

This has been substantiated by scholars such as Bissera Pentcheva, who have emphasised that the mosaic simply does not appear but rather resounds through the vaults, activated by hymnography and processional movement that culminated in the sanctuary. Moreover, the mosaic performs in what is known as a "performative aesthetics of theophany," wherein the mosaic's sonic and kinetic presence is made perceptible through the building's acoustics and lighting architecture.

The *Virgin and Child Enthroned* mosaic, situated in the apse of Hagia, presents the Theotokos as both the theological and spatial apex of the church's sacred geometry. It is positioned (fig. 1,2) on the church's longitudinal east-west axis and elevated above the synthronon. Thus, its curvature naturally draws the congregational gaze upward and forward, enforcing the theological centrality of the image it enshrines through architectural composition. This iconographic formulation that emerged as a dominant visual theology following the Council of Ephesus (431), which affirmed her status as *Theotokos*, God-bearer.[8] Crucially, the mosaic is a highly choreographed architectural framework where light, acoustics, and verticality construct a complex sensorial theology. This visual composition must be contextualised within the ideological aftermath of iconoclasm and the imperial desire to restore orthodoxy through image. Its installation under Basil I reasserted doctrinal authority via Marian intercession, but it also performed a gendered operation. The apse (the most hieratic zone of the church, proximate to the altar and reserved exclusively for the clergy) enshrines not merely an image of maternity but a codified vision of idealised female sanctity. As Brigitte Pitarakis has noted, female piety in

[8] The Council of Ephesus in 431 CE formally affirmed Mary's title as *Theotokos* (God-bearer), a christological declaration intended to safeguard the unity of Christ's divine and human natures. This doctrinal ratification catalyzed a new iconographic emphasis on the Virgin and Child. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

Byzantium was not monolithic but stratified across public and private ritual spheres, often mediated through Marian devotion. The placement of the Virgin above the altar enacts a visual hierarchy in which Mary becomes both liturgical mediator and theological prototype, her visibility linked to her singular, doctrinal function as *mater Dei*.

This hierarchy is structured through what Anthony Cutler calls the "syntax of elevation," wherein space is not neutral but ideologically loaded. [9] The pendentives and half-domes guide the eye upwards toward the apse, culminating in an image whose centrality lies both in its metaphysicality and physicality (fig. 1-4). Bissera Pentcheva further develops this idea by demonstrating how light (modulated through the apse conch and cascading windows) renders the image performative and multidimensional. Part of what can be thought of as a sounding icon, animated by chant and liturgy. Mary's radiance, therefore, is not metaphoric but materialised through architecture and ritual sound.

Yet to read this centrality as isolating or exclusive would be to miss the mosaic's generative function within the larger visual and liturgical system. As scholars such as Nadine Schibile note, the Theotokos becomes a figure of such theological magnitude that she simultaneously defines and shapes the parameters of female sanctity across Byzantine art.[10] Rather than overshadowing the other women, Mary provides the archetype through which female figures such as Empress Zoe (fig. 7) can be viewed as in conversation with the divine. This is the primary iconographic reason that Mary's image stabilises the visual grammar of feminine sanctity. As Liz James demonstrates, representations of the Empress Zoe engage in what might

---

[9] Cutler, Anthony. "Structure and Aesthetic at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 25, no. 1 (1966): 27–35. https://doi.org/10.2307/428881.

[10] Schibille, Nadine. "A Quest for Wisdom: The 6th-century Mosaics of Hagia Sophia and Late Antique Aesthetics." In *New Light on Old Glass: Recent Research on Byzantine Mosaics and Glass*, edited by Chris Entwistle and Liz James. The British Museum, n.d.

be called *imitatio Mariae*, a mimetic logic whereby female authority is staged not autonomously but by referencing the Marian ideal. Their gestures, attire, and compositional framing invoke the Theotokos not arbitrarily, but according to a tightly regulated visual syntax that mechanises resemblance while delimiting equivalence. This mechanism operates through three identifiable constraints: First, women are often depicted in postures of offering or intercession, gestures that echo Marian prototypes but are redirected toward Christ, rather than originating from a position of theological agency. In figure 6 and 7 for instance, Empress Zoe stands in a static posture of donor presentation, visually rhyming with Marian intercession yet stripped of soteriological significance. Her hands are raised, but not in the *orans* posture of liturgical mediation; she is formal, courtly, and deferential. Second, attire. Though richly adorned in loroi, these garments signal courtly authority. The Theotokos, by contrast, wears the *maphorion*, a garment codified through centuries of iconographic convention to signify virginal incorruptibility and divine election. Thus, while Empress Zoe is visually elevated through material splendour, she is simultaneously marked as belonging to the secular, temporal order. This distinction functions iconographically to maintain Marian supremacy. Thus, these mechanisms articulate a visual and liturgical grammar of feminine sanctity, one that does not exclude but structures the appearance of women within Hagia Sophia's sacred field. By placing empresses such as Zoe close to the image of the Theotokos, often in the same visual register, but slightly off-centre, we observe a spectrum of hirearchy and female sanctity. While the Theotokos embodies divine intercessory power and spiritual purity, the empress is presented as a pious earthly ruler whose sanctity is contingent upon her imperial role and proximity to the sacred. Their images, though distinct in theological weight, remain fully legible within the Marian framework, which confers recognisability through gestures of resemblance, iconographic, spatial, and ceremonial elements.

Despite the chronological gap between the mosaics, both are placed in similar visual roles near central religious figures. This suggests a consistent strategy: to show imperial women close to the sacred without equating them with it. While it can be argued that imperial men are often shown in the same way, Empresses, unlike figures such as John the Baptist or Christ, are never in the centre. Empress Zoe always lies near the sacred, never a part of it – signifying how female sancity is mediated through closeness but never equivalence. Now, when we look at imperial men, such as Constantine IX (next to Zoe), or Constantine I and Justinian we see a similar visual logic: they are donors, deferential in gesture, slightly smaller in scale. However, a distinction lies male sanctity in Byzantine art is often tied to authority and legacy (founding, building, protecting the faith), whereas female sanctity is more closely aligned with piety, devotion, and dynastic legitimacy. For instance, Zoe's sanctity is visualized not through military conquest or theological authorship, but through her presence at Christ's side and her role as empress-consort. Thus, while the visual syntax is similar, the type of sanctity being constructed is gendered. Therefore, this hierarchy is generative. It makes possible a spectrum of female piety, one in which women and female saints participate in the church's sacred landscape through forms of agency, ritual observation, and sanctity.

In this way, Hagia Sophia's mosaic programme, when read through the relational lens of space, light, and liturgy, reveals a more nuanced devotional economy that could be characterised as polyphonic. Multiple female voices, from the doctrinally singular to the representational to the ritually ephemeral, are made visible and active within the church's architecture of holiness. The Virgin occupies the apex, but her centrality enables rather than forecloses the appearance of others. Re-reading these mosaics side by side invites the viewer to consider the depictions of the

Virgin Mary and Empress Zoe alongside how these mechanisms choreograph female sanctity into a spatialised liturgy of presence, visibility, and veneration.

The Deësis Mosaic

The Deësis mosaic (fig. 5), located in the upper gallery of the Hagia Sophia, was likely created in the late 13th century during the period of Byzantine restoration following the Latin occupation (1204–1261). The mosaic marks a stylistic and political shift, reflecting renewed identity under the Palaiologan dynasty (1261–1453).[11] The mosaic features Christ flanked by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist, and is significant for its emotive style and emphasis on intercession. The mosaic exemplifies the mature Palaiologan style through its expressive figuration.[12] Christ Pantokrator, centrally enthroned, turns slightly toward the Virgin, whose tilted head and raised hands enact a posture of intercession, echoed by the Baptist's mirrored stance. As Morey notes, this grouping represents a climax of Constantinopolitan mosaic art, combining theological clarity with heightened emotional realism through subtle modelling and directional gaze.[13] The gold background flattens spatial depth, yet the figures' volumetric treatment (especially Christ's deeply shadowed face) introduces a renewed interest in individual presence and affect. It can be argued that such triadic compositions, while formulaic, were made

[11] The Palaiologan dynasty (1261–1453) was the final ruling dynasty of the Byzantine Empire, beginning with Michael VIII Palaiologos, who restored Byzantine rule in Constantinople after the Latin occupation. Despite facing severe territorial losses, economic hardship, and the growing threat of the Ottoman Empire, the period saw a remarkable cultural and artistic revival, often referred to as the Palaiologan Renaissance. This era is now recognized for its resilience and vibrant intellectual, theological, and artistic life, challenging older portrayals of unrelieved decline. See Marie-Hélène Blanchet and Raúl Estangüi Gómez, eds., *State and Society in the Palaiologan Era (13th–15th Centuries)* (London: Routledge, 2025).

[12] This is connoted by a shift towards realism, individualised features, and naturalistic body expressions. In the Deësis mosaic (fig. 3), this is particularly visible in the elongated faces, the deep-set, mournful eyes, and the subtle gestures of the Virgin and John the Baptist. Their bodies are rendered with softer modelling, creating a sense of volume and lifelikeness. The figures also have depth – rather than being flat icons.

[13] Charles Rufus, Morey. "The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 2, no. 7 (1944): 202. https://doi.org/10.2307/3257129.

meaningful by their liturgical context and precise iconographic choices.[14] This mosaic thus functions as an image of supplication and as a visual theology of judgment and presence.

However, focus must be paid toward the Virgin. One way the Deësis mosaic in Hagia Sophia stages female piety is by positioning the Theotokos as a structural axis within a sacred visual system rather than an isolated devotional figure.[15] As Anthony Cutler argues, the Deësis is not a fixed formula but a mutable compositional scheme in which "meaning may be supposed to inhere in the relationship of parts"[16] rather than in the identity of any single figure. I think this can be understood as a re-reading of the Deësis. That is to say, rather than constructing and interpreting the meaning of the Deësis solely from who its figures are, meaning is created by how the figures are arranged in space, what gestures they make, and how they relate to one another visually. This suggests that female sanctity in Byzantine visual culture is not determined by fixed iconographic attributes or static theological roles, but instead emerges through relational visibility, that is, through how the Theotokos is spatially positioned, the gestures she performs, and the extent to which her presence anchors the compositional and spiritual logic of the image. The Virgin's posture (turned toward Christ in a gesture of *paraklisis*) situates her within a spatial and theological hierarchy in which her sanctity is rendered through this very relational proximity. This dynamic is significant because, unlike portraits that mimic Marian forms to stage authority, here Mary is constitutive, creating the conditions[17] for others (like John the Baptist) to be legible

[14] Anthony, Cutler. "Under the Sign of the Deēsis: On the Question of Representativeness in Medieval Art and Literature." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987): 144–46. https://doi.org/10.2307/1291552.
[15] The term structural axis in this context refers to the Theotokos's placement at a pivotal compositional and theological juncture within the mosaic. Her gaze, gesture, and position organize the visual flow and intercessory narrative.
[16] Ibid., pg. 153
[17] That is to say, she enables the roles of surrounding figures to take on meaning, anchoring the image's function as one of intercession.

as intercessors. Cutler's analysis of alternative Deësis groupings, where Mary may replace Christ or appear without John the Baptist, underscores this representational elasticity.[18] In this light, the Theotokos is a visual mechanism through which female sanctity is imagined as active, contingent, and embedded in the visual syntax of a liturgical space.

Empress Zoe

The Deësis mosaic and the Zoe panel, created nearly a century apart, represent two distinct modes of female piety, one grounded in sacred mediation, the other in display and self-presentation. While the Theotokos in the Deësis is rendered as a theological constant through her gesture of paraklisis, Empress Zoe's portrayal is rooted in the visual rhetoric of courtly donation. As Morey observes, her figure, while adopting a frontal stance reminiscent of the Theotokos, is static and ornamental, her face is composed of "conventionally modeled" features like the "straight mouth" and "protuberant cheeks" repeated across her group.[19] Her sanctity lies not in intercessory gesture but in the act of offering, a donation inscribed into the mosaic itself. I think an interesting parallel to contemporary political thought can be drawn here. In this sense, Zoe participates in what Hannah Arendt might describe as action without speech, a visibility grounded not in dialogue or relationality, but in monumental permanence.[20] That is to say, in the case of this mosaic, Empress Zoe's scroll becomes her voice while her body remains static, while

---

[18] Cutler, Anthony. "Structure and Aesthetic at Hagia Sophia in Constantinople." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 25, no. 1 (1966) https://doi.org/10.2307/428881.

[19] Charles Rufus, Morey. "The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 2, no. 7 (1944): 204–5. https://doi.org/10.2307/3257129.

[20] Hannah Arendt distinguishes between mere activity and true political action in *The Human Condition*, emphasising that genuine action arises through speech and plurality, where individuals disclose themselves in a shared world. Yet she also acknowledges forms of action that achieve significance through their enduring presence rather than verbal expression, such as heroic deeds or the creation of lasting works. These acts possess their own kind of visibility and meaning, offering a form of self-disclosure grounded in permanence and remembrance. In this light, Zoe's presence can be seen as a powerful mode of action. See: Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

meaning accrues around her. If the Theotokos generates sacred meaning through presence and gesture, Zoe's piety is mediated through repetition of iconographic conventions and a display of her role as patron. If the Theotokos radiates sacred presence through embodied gesture, Zoe's sanctity is conveyed through visual and textual cues that align her with divine favor and imperial legitimacy. These contrasting forms of representation thus speak to the diverse modes by which female sanctity could be visualised, through gesture and proximity in one, and image, naming, and patronage in the other.

Female Piety in the Hagia Sophia

Together, the mosaics of the Theotokos and Zoe demonstrate how Hagia Sophia's visual programme enabled multiple forms of female sanctity to coexist within a coherent sacred order. Rather than flattening female representation into a single type, the building's iconographic and spatial logic created a structured continuum from doctrinal intercession to ceremonial visibility through which women could participate [21] in the devotional life of the church. This range is not a contradiction but a feature; by assigning distinct roles through gesture, proximity, and inscription, the mosaics affirmed the value of diverse expressions of piety. This range becomes a feature of the site's constructed theological experience as a mechanism to affirm multiple expressions of female piety within a unified sacred framework. In this sense, the Hagia Sophia is instrumental in actively depicting female piety through the coordinated interplay of image, architecture, and ritual performance. This prompts the question if such a nuanced visual economy could operate at the heart of Byzantium's most sacred space, what other sites might similarly reveal a stratified, yet integrated, vision of female devotion?

[21] The word participate in this context refers to the way in which women could be seen and remembered within the devotional life of the church.

Performing the End: The Dormition and Female Sanctity in the Church of Chora

The Church of Chora in Istanbul, originally a monastic complex situated on the northwestern edge of Constantinople, was restored and expanded under the direction of the scholar and statesman Theodor Metochites in the early 14th century. The church's name, *Chora*, meaning place or space, is thematically central to its iconographic programme. As Pop notes, the word *chora* was intentionally deployed in both its spatial and metaphysical senses: Christ is inscribed as the *"Land of the Living"* (*chora ton zonton*), and the Virgin as the *"Container of the Uncontainable"* (*chora tou acheiretou*).[22] This conceptual framing underpins a highly choreographed iconographic system across the two narthexes and funerary chapel (fig. 8), in which narratives of the Virgin and Christ unfold through spatial progression. Through its fusion of Platonist metaphysics, liturgical narrative, and architectural rhythm, Chora becomes not only a physical site of devotion but a theological space that visualises incarnation, death, and resurrection as acts of divine emplacement.

Among the many episodes that structure the Church of Chora's rich iconographic programme, the Dormition of the Virgin, positioned above the entrance to the central nave (fig. 8), offers a particularly potent meditation on female piety, mortality, and sacred presence. This section argues that the Dormition of the Virgin mosaic at the Church of Chora functions as a visual theology of female piety, one that foregrounds receptivity, transformation, and sacred transition through the figure of the Theotokos. Commissioned during Theodor Metochites' early 14th-century restoration of the church, the mosaic is situated above the entrance to the central nave. Pop notes that this threshold is charged with metaphysical significance within the Chora's

[22] Mihaela Pop, "'The Land of Living' and 'The Container of the Uncontainable' or How the Invisible Becomes Visible," in *Images de l'invisible. De l'Antiquité tardive à la fin du Moyen Âge*, ed. Luminița Diaconu, Alexandra Litu, and Ecaterina Lung (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2020), 78.

iconographic programme.[23] Here, the Virgin is not simply portrayed in death, but staged as a vessel of divine passage. Drawing on Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of *chora*, Pop describes a symbolic space in which the visible and invisible converge. In this framework, female sanctity is not confined to intercession or purity but is instead expressed through ontological openness or the capacity to contain the uncontainable. By placing the Dormition at the narrative and liturgical culmination of the narthex, the Church of Chora presents Marian death not as an end, but as a point of theological transition. In doing so, the Church of Chora frames female piety as a sustaining force within the sacred order, active, continuous, and structurally embedded in the logic of the church's devotional programme.

Dormition of the Virgin

The Dormition of the Virgin mosaic (fig. 9) at the Church of Chora offers a distinctly theological articulation of female piety, one that reframes Mary's death from a closure into a transition. Situated above the threshold that separates the nave from the outer narthex, the scene marks a spatial and symbolic crossing: from death to life, earthly liturgy to eschatological promise. The composition enacts this liminality through its vertical alignment, Mary's body stretched on a catafalque surrounded by apostles, saints, and clergy, while Christ hovers behind her in a mandorla, holding her soul in the form of a swaddled infant. This mosaic reverses the nativity iconography because the Son now bears the Mother, collapsing temporal boundaries between birth, death, and resurrection.[24] This reversal collapses linear temporality, replacing it

[23] Ibid.
[24] Mihaela Pop, "'The Land of Living' and 'The Container of the Uncontainable' or How the Invisible Becomes Visible," in *Images de l'invisible. De l'Antiquité tardive à la fin du Moyen Âge*, ed. Luminița Diaconu, Alexandra Litu, and Ecaterina Lung (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2020).

with a cyclical model of sacred time where death and birth are structurally fused.[25] Pop even writes that the Virgin can be understood through three phases:

> Saint Virgin Mary becomes not only the inhabited place but also the creative one in the same way as the soil becomes fertile, the desert becomes garden through the divine intervention. Saint Virgin Mary evolves during these three steps as a symbolic place of the divine plan. She starts being *Maria -- locus* (when the Archangel Gabriel kneels in front of her calling her: "full of grace"). *Maria -- thesaurus* supposes the moment when her body becomes the receptacle of the divine plan and *Maria -- templum* suggests that her body becomes a living temple, the new Ark as the Son of God was already incarnated bringing thus to humankind the New Alliance.[26]

The surrounding figures, shown in various states of mourning, veneration, and ritual gesture, establish Mary's body as the focal point of liturgical attention. The Dormition mosaic in Chora humanises the Virgin by emphasizing her physical death and emotional resonance, rather than abstract divinity. Her limp body, mourned by apostles and angels, invites viewers into a scene of shared grief and devotion. This portrayal aligns female piety with vulnerability and embodied sanctity, making the Virgin both accessible and spiritually central. Thus, the Virgin becomes the very site where divine transition is staged. In this sense, the Dormition becomes a visual liturgy, one that choreographs sacred space around the figure of a woman whose sanctity is rendered not through agency or speech, but through receptivity and presence.

However, to view the Koimesis mosaic linearly would be to misunderstand its dimensional significance. This mosaic materialises Plato's notion of *chōra*, a term introduced in the Timaeus to describe a third ontological category, neither form nor matter; this space that makes becoming possible.[27] This metaphysical model is literalised in the figure of the

---

[25] Anne Karahan, "Chapter II," in *Byzantine Holy Images: Transcendence and Immanence: The Theological Background of the Iconography and Aesthetics of the Chora Church* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 90–102.
[26] Mihaela Pop, "'The Land of Living' and 'The Container of the Uncontainable' or How the Invisible Becomes Visible," in *Images de l'invisible. De l'Antiquité tardive à la fin du Moyen Âge*, ed. Luminița Diaconu, Alexandra Litu, and Ecaterina Lung (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2020), 91.
[27] In *Timaeus* 49a–50d, Plato introduces *chōra* as a third ontological principle—distinct from both form and matter. He describes it as the "receptacle and, as it were, the nurse of all becoming" (49a), a necessary condition that allows

Theotokos, named *chōra tou acheiretou*, the "container of the uncontainable." This makes a broader pronouncement about the fact that the mosaic of Mary is the site in which the divine becomes visible, not by generating meaning herself, but by being the space that makes divine manifestation structurally possible. Mary's sanctity, therefore, is not based on speech, movement, or individual agency, but on her function as a medium through which transcendence enters the visual and liturgical world. This mechanism of representation and interpretation becomes particularly revealing due to the sharp contrast between Marian and female saint iconography between the Hagia Sophia and the Church of Chora. In the apse mosaic, for example, Mary's sanctity is constructed through axial alignment with the altar, vertical elevation, and eucharistic proximity. Here, the theological weight rests on her doctrinal singularity as Theotokos, positioned above the synthronon is visually enshrined as the mediatrix between heaven and the sacramental body of Christ. In the Deësis mosaic, however, sanctity is choreographed through relational gesture, the Virgin's intercessory posture (paraklisis) and sideward gaze generate a liturgical narrative of supplication. Mary's sanctity emerges from spatial and theological adjacency; she does not operate alone but activates meaning through relational proximity to Christ and John the Baptist. By contrast, the Zoe panel reconfigures female sanctity entirely. Sanctity, in this mosaic, is externalised, formalised through donation, court attire, and inscription. The Church of Chora offers a more complex and internally differentiated vocabulary of female sanctity; that said, it relies not on status or physical importance but on the spatial significance and theological importance. Anne Karahan extends this by arguing that the mosaic is phenomenologically designed to enact this metaphysical logic:

---

all things to take shape. Further, at 50b–d, he elaborates that *chōra* is a space that receives all material things, not through sensory perception but as a conceptual, intelligible presence.

under certain light conditions, the gold and silver tesserae illuminates Mary's body in white radiance, not as aesthetic embellishment but as a visual analogue for divine energy. Light appears to emanate from Mary as opposed to simply falling upon her. In doing so, the structural conditions of the Chora work in tandem with the mosaic to enable a performance. This precise structural role allows the mosaic to operate not merely as a depiction of sanctity but as a liturgical mechanism of sacred transition. In this sense, the Dormition mosaic honours both the Virgin and the holy space around her. This thus helps reaffirm that female piety is central, structural, and indispensable to how sacred presence is staged, recognised, and sustained.

Conclusion

Such visual strategies across sites like Hagia Sophia and Chora collectively affirm that female piety in Byzantine art is constitutive. It structures not only the aesthetic but the ritual experience of the sacred. The representation of the Virgin Mary across the mosaics of Hagia Sophia and the Church of Chora reveal a multidimensional model of female sanctity, a system of visual and theological differentiation through which sacred authority was spatially distributed and ideologically reinforced. Whether through doctrinal elevation in the apse, intercessory posture in the Deësis, donation in the Zoe panel, or metaphysical receptivity in the Dormition, each mosaic mobilises a distinct mechanism by which female sanctity is visualised and made legible. These mechanisms, gesture, alignment, inscription, and stillness, work in conversation with each other and can be interpreted as frameworks that embed women into the architectural and liturgical life of the Byzantine church.

The Virgin emerges in each case as a structural principle marking transition, enabling presence, and modelling piety in visual, spatial, and conceptual terms. Crucially, sanctity is depicted as calibrated, made meaningful through site, ritual function, and iconographic logic.

Chora, in particular, reveals the capacity of sacred space to hold more than one articulation of female piety, presenting Mary simultaneously as image, as container, and as metaphysical threshold.

What emerges from this study is a network of differentiated yet coherent mechanisms of female piety, doctrinal enthronement, intercessory adjacency, ceremonial patronage, and ontological receptivity, each aligned with specific liturgical and spatial demands. This affirms that the sacred spaces of Byzantium were capable of staging multiple, layered expressions of female sanctity that responded to evolving theological, imperial, and cultural needs.

Taken together, these visual programmes compel more critical thought about how gender, sanctity, and sacred space are co-constructed through image and architecture. The presence of diverse articulations of female piety within even the most hieratic spaces of Byzantine Christianity, each inflected by site-specific liturgical function, underscores the extent to which the visual politics of sanctity remain an open field of inquiry. The lesser-known churches, regional monastic centres, and secular-built environments of the empire's peripheries, together with the women who inhabited them, warrant sustained scholarly attention as potential sites of resistance, negotiation, and reconfiguration of the dominant orthodox visual and liturgical paradigms.

Bibliography

Akşit, İlhan. *The Museum of Chora: Mosaic and Frescoes*. Translated by Uluer Bilgen. 2001.

Brubaker, Leslie, and Mary B. Cunningham, eds. *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium*. Routledge, 2016.

Cutler, Anthony. "Under the Sign of the Deēsis: On the Question of Representativeness in Medieval Art and Literature." *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987): 145–54. https://doi.org/10.2307/1291552.

Karahan, Anne. "Chapter II" in *Byzantine Holy Images - Transcendence and Immanence. The Theological Background of the Iconography and Aesthetics of the Chora Church*. Peeters Publishers, 2010.

Kitzinger, Ernst. "The Mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo: An Essay on the Choice and Arrangement of Subjects." *The Art Bulletin* 31, no. 4 (1949): 269–92. https://doi.org/10.2307/3047256.

Morey, Charles Rufus. "The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 2, no. 7 (1944): 201–10. https://doi.org/10.2307/3257129.

Mouriki, Doula. "A Deësis Icon in the Art Museum." *Record of the Art Museum, Princeton University* 27, no. 1 (1968): 13–28. https://doi.org/10.2307/3774423.

Mouseio Benakē, and Maria Vasilakē. *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos In Byzantium.* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

Oikonomidès, Nicolas. "The Mosaic Panel of Constantine IX and Zoe in Saint Sophia." *Revue des études byzantines* 36, no. 1 (1978): 219-32. https://doi.org/10.3406/rebyz.1978.2086

Pentcheva, Bissera V. "Byzantine Art and Perception." In *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Art and Architecture*, edited by Ellen C. Schwartz. 2022. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190277352.001.0001

Pentcheva, Bissera. "Eternal Victory: Byzantine Territorial Expansion and Constantinopolitan Liturgical Splendour at Hosios Loukas (Steiris, Greece)". *Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Music,* 2022. 6 (1):1-70. https://doi.org/10.57050/jisocm.113301

Procopius. *The Buildings of Procopius*. Translated by Aubrey Stewart. Annotated by C. W. Wilson and Hayter Lewis. London: Adam Street, Adelphi, 1888. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/65404/65404-h/65404-h.htm.

Schibille, Nadine. "A Quest for Wisdom: The 6th-century Mosaics of Hagia Sophia and Late Antique Aesthetics." In *New Light on Old Glass: Recent Research on Byzantine Mosaics and Glass*, edited by Chris Entwistle and Liz James. The British Museum, n.d.

Simmons, Sarah C. "The "God Bearing" Patriarch: Hagia Sophia's Apse Mosaic In Ninth-Century Byzantine Politics", (PhD diss., Florida State University) 2011. http://purl.flvc.org/fsu/fd/FSU_migr_etd-1713.

Teteriatnikov, Natalia B. "Hagia Sophia, Constantinople: Religious images and their functional context after iconoclasm." *Zograf* 2004-2005, no. 30 (2004): 9-19. https://doi.org/10.2298/ZOG0530009T

Teteriatnikov, Natalia B. "Mosaics of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul: The Fossati Restoration and the Work of the Byzantine Institute," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 52 (1998): 73–74.

Teteriatnikov, Natalia B. "The Mosaics of the Eastern Arch of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople: Program and Liturgy." *Gesta* 52, no. 1 (2013): 61–84. https://doi.org/10.1086/669685.

Vasilakē Maria, *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, Mouseio Benakē (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 145–146.

Illustrations

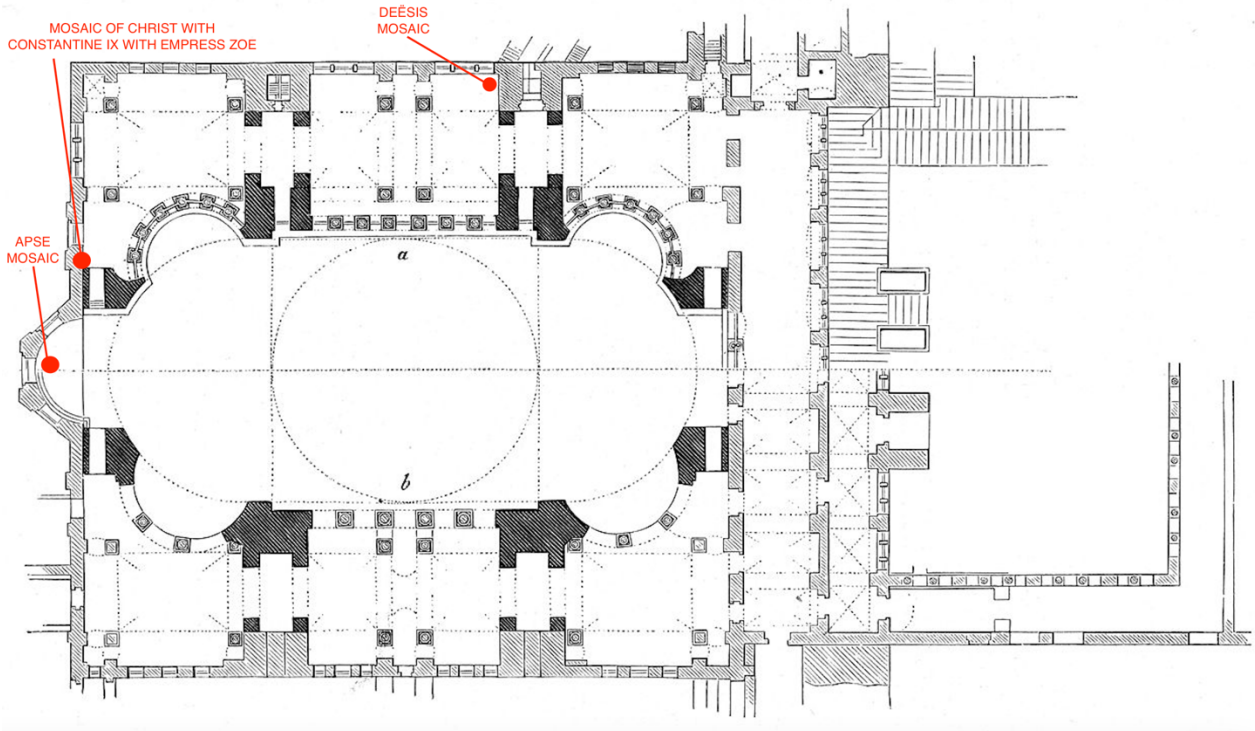

Figure 1: Floor plan of the Hagia Sophia, adapted from the Index of Medieval Art (Princeton University), with annotations by the author.
https://theindex.princeton.edu/images/5E887429-3BBF-4A02-9535-5877C432E95C

Figure 2: Apse of the Hagia Sophia (Interior View) with Byzantine mosaic and Ottoman mihrab. Photo by David Blankenberg, May 13, 2015. Courtesy of Duke Divinity School Library, https://divinityarchive.com/handle/11258/15105

Figure 3: Virgin and Child (Theotokos), apse mosaic, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul), dedicated 867.

Constantinople, Hagia Sophia, Virgin and Child. Shortly after 834. Mosaic. Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives. Artstor. https://jstor.org/stable/community.18146618.

Figure 4: Virgin and Child (Theotokos), apse mosaic detail of Virgin Mary, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul), dedicated 867.

Constantinople, Hagia Sophia, Virgin and Child. Shortly after 834. Mosaic. Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives. Artstor. https://jstor.org/stable/community.18146618.

Figure 5: Deesis (Christ, Saints Mary and John the Baptist); mosaic in the north gallery. *Deesis (Christ, Saints Mary and John the Baptist); Mosaic in the North Gallery*. 12th c. Mosaic. Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives. Artstor. https://jstor.org/stable/community.18150382.

Figure 6: Christ Pantocrator Enthroned between Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos and Empress Zoe, mosaic, south gallery, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1030–1042.

Constantinople, Hagia Sophia, Christ Pantocrator Enthroned between Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos and the Empress Zoe (Christ as Universal Ruler). 1028-42 (c. 1030; the head of Constantine was substituted for that of Zoe's first husband, Romanos, c. 1042). Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives. Artstor. https://jstor.org/stable/community.18150880.

Figure 7: Christ Pantocrator Enthroned between Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos and Empress Zoe, detail, mosaic, south gallery, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople (Istanbul), c. 1030–1042.

Constantinople, Hagia Sophia, Christ Pantocrator Enthroned between Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos and the Empress Zoe (Christ as Universal Ruler). 1028-42 (c. 1030; the head of Constantine was substituted for that of Zoe's first husband, Romanos, c. 1042). Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives. Artstor.

https://jstor.org/stable/community.18150880.

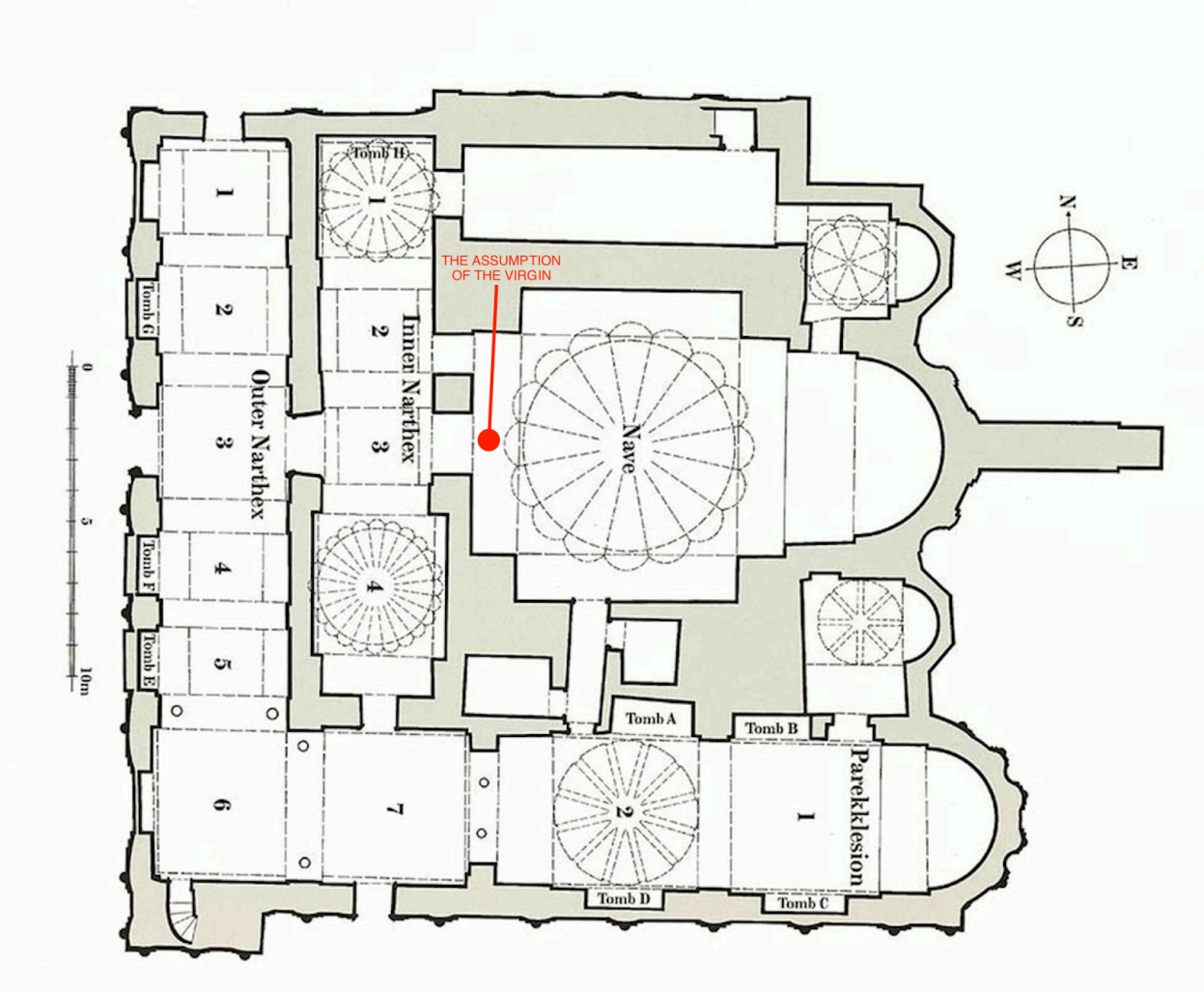

Figure 8: Floor plan of the Church of Chora, adapted from the M. and I. D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, with annotations by the author. http://www.columbia.edu/cu/wallach/exhibitions/Byzantium/html/building_icon.html#introduction & https://projects.mcah.columbia.edu/treasuresofheaven/shrines/Constantinople/index.php

Figure 9: Church of Our Saviour in Chora/Church of the Holy Savior in the Country/The Church of the Holy Redeemer in the Fields, Naos, Koimesis (Death of Virgin Mary), Mosaic. c. 527-565 AD.