

EUROPEAN CENTER FOR BYZANTINE AND POST-BYZANTINE MONUMENTS

*The Byzantine Monuments of the  
Evros/Meriç River Valley*

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*Thessaloniki 2007*

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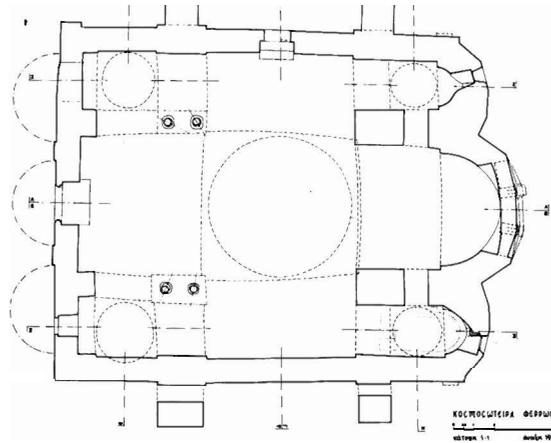
## CHAPTER 3

### *Vera (Pherai) and its Monuments*

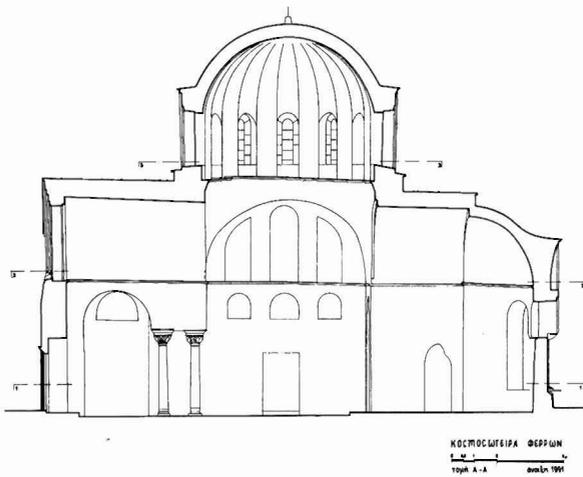
Situated in the middle of the town of Pherai (Greece), known in Ottoman times as Ferecik, on a hill overlooking the valley of lower Evros River some 4 km away, is a large and impressive Byzantine church set within the remains of a fortified enclosure. The site was first identified by Th. Uspensky as the Byzantine Vera, where in 1152 the Sebastokrator (crown prince) Isaakios Komnenos founded the monastery of the Panagia Kosmosoteira, with the unusual dedication to the Virgin as the savior of the universe. Isakios describes the site thus:

And so I think that the charms of the monastery and the site will draw many men to them. There is the spot itself - even if previously it was the dwelling of snakes and scorpions - the river Ainos, the sea with its surf and its calms, the pasturage and grazing land of evergreen meadows to nourish horses and cattle. There is the site on the crest of the hill, with its easy access. There is the fine temperance of the currents of air and the power of strong breezes with the everlasting reeds rustling in tune with them about the mouth of the river. There is the immense plain, and the panoramic view, especially in summertime, of corn in flower and in ear, which impresses great gladness on those who gaze there. There is the grove of lovely saplings growing so near the monastery, and bunches of grapes are entwined among them. As a joy to the throats of the thirsty, water gushes forth wonderfully beautiful and cold. [*Typikon*, §74]

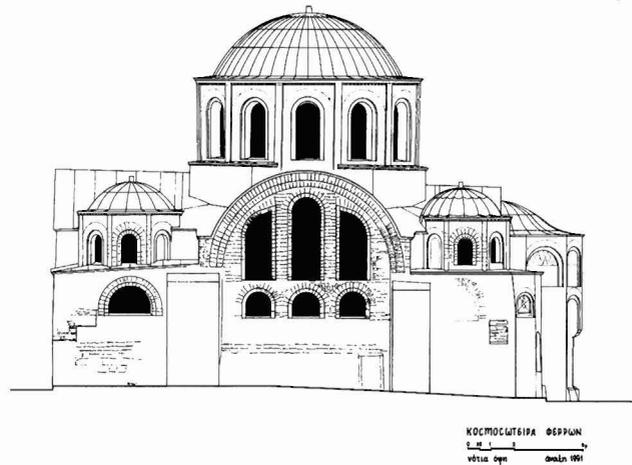
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Pherai, Panagia Kosmosoteira, plan drawn by P. Xydias



Pherai, Panagia Kosmosoteira, longitudinal section, looking north drawn by P. Xydias



Pherai, Panagia Kosmosoteira, south façade elevation drawn by P. Xydias

abaci. The plaster covering survived in poor condition only on the south capitals but were partially removed during recent conservation. It was noted that the plaster corresponded with that of the wall above, where the scene of the Presentation in the Temple is located, indicating that plaster coverings of the capitals date are from the Byzantine period and must be the same date as the wall paintings. Most likely, the capitals were resurfaced to cover imperfections in the reused capitals or to enhance their volume to better fit with the massive wall above.

Similar plaster coverings were applied to the marble cornice that extends around the interior of the church at the springing of the vaults, and to the dome cornices. These have not been preserved, but the dimensions of the plaster cornices must have been sizeable, if we judge by the empty bands that extend into wall paintings below and above the cornice. The thin marble cornice must have served as an anchor for the fixing of the plaster cornice to the wall. The size of the plaster cornice and its detailing must have been similar to that of the capitals.

The marble chancel screen of the bema is also part of the architectural sculpture. Fragments of the epistyle 0.19 m in height carry in their front decoration consisting of a frieze of three-leaved acanthus above, a torus molding, with decorative bosses. Other fragments of the epistyle are 0.15m in height and carry simpler decoration, a frieze of alternating lotus and acanthus; they come from the epistyles of the prothesis and the diakonikon. These are now incorporated into the modern chancel screen of the church which imitates screen a Byzantine style. The lintel above the main entrance is decorated with a similar spiky acanthus frieze. The door frame itself is reused and probably not in its original position.

*The founder's tomb.* The monastery *typikon* (§ 89 and 90) provides much information about the tomb Isaakios had prepared for himself at the Kosmosoteira:

It was once my intention to have my humble remains interred in the monastery of Chora, and I set up a tomb there [to contain] them, in accordance with the wishes I expressed to the Chora monks. But now that I have renewed, with God's help, this holy

monastery of my, ever pure Mother of God, the Kosmosoteira, another thought has come to mind, namely, to have my remains interred in this one. Indeed, I have begun to [take measures] towards this [end], which I [lay down as] injunctions in the present *typikon* of mine. Already, I have indicated in other requests and agreements with the Chora [monks] that the slabs of the coffin [that was to contain] my remains should be taken up, and placed here in order to receive my remains-that the [slabs] be taken up, plus whatever I myself joined to the tomb, just as the content of the letter addressed to me by the superior of the monastery of Chora indicates. This very [letter] has been deposited in the sacristy of this holy monastery of my Kosmosoteira the Mother of God. It is my duty to carry out this plan, just as I wish [to do], with God's help, if I have time yet to live. But if I pass away, it is the duty of the superior, along with the others, to fulfill this plan of mine and have the marbles of my tomb taken up from the monastery of Chora and to transport them to this newly established monastery (just the way I transported the marbles for the church), and to set up this tomb on the left side of the narthex, there where I made an extension to the building on account of the tomb. In the center of the lid of my tomb, I wish my *enkolpion* [of] the Mother of God to be fastened in a prone position in [a setting of] silverwork; [this] has been readied and handed over, and I have just now deposited it in the sacristy. The important [elements] of my tomb at Chora (along with the marbles of the tomb), are the following: a cast bronze railing, and the portraits of my revered holy parents the emperors, and the stand for my mosaic [icon of the] Mother of God. As for the portrait of myself, made in my youth, in the vanity of boyhood, I do not wish for it to be removed from Chora, but to stay where I set it up. For my wretched body, which worms will tear apart, will not need to be honored with a likeness, after its dissolution. If by chance [the monks of Chora], with a greedy hand or out of willfulness with regard to my orders, balk and do not hand over the things of which I spoke, the superior of my Kosmosoteira the Mother of God, accompanied by some of the monks, must approach the holy emperor and file charges regarding this unjust business. He-for I know well the goodness of his

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conscience and his character-will not deem me unworthy of such a just appeal, but, for the sake of God, will return with [his] imperial hand the things that are being requested, that have been deposited in Chora for safekeeping.

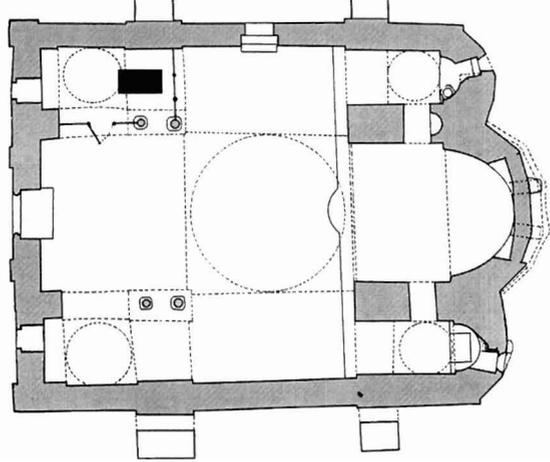
But since the degradation of an unfortunate life has nursed me from infancy, and, in the course and flow of this life of ill-luck, [I have] been separated from my sweet fatherland for most of the years of my existence, a stranger to my kinsmen's renown and [since] of course I did not heedlessly choose the tomb here [to house] my remains, having run through in my mind and reckoned up all the things in life that together turned out badly for me, as I lie on a bed in a dark corner, alas grievously ill, by God's will, and already falling into Lethe, and of the memory . . . .instead of any other kind of adornment of fantastic glory for my tomb, [I want] the icon from Rhaidestos of the Mother of God as the Kosmosoteira, [which was] sent down to me from heaven, and which I framed with an ornament of gold and silver. [I want it] to be placed at one end of my tomb in its projected form. It should remain resting in that spot throughout all time, preserved without change, to mediate for my wretched soul. Furthermore, I wish [the icon of] Christ, which is the same size, to rest alongside it, the placement of these icons being appropriate for them, and pleasing as well, and the illumination suitable. Indeed if he fails to carry out this wish of mine, the superior and the rest of the monks will be judged along with me on the Day of Judgment. After my tomb is set up I need no other great expenses for it, as I will be insensible to the sight of the sensible and visual [world]. At any rate, I wish the tomb to be divided from the entire narthex by the bronze railing that I mentioned earlier, but access to the tomb [should be] through [this railing].

From the text we learn the following: Isaakios earlier had founded his tomb at the Chora monastery in Constantinople. The tomb's founding may be dated between his two exiles in 1136 and 1143. After his permanent removal from Constantinople and the founding of the

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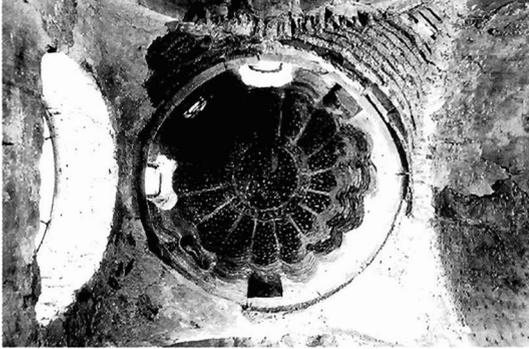
Pherai, Panagia Kosmosoteira, Holy Women at the Tomb of Christ



Pherai, Panagia Kosmosoteira, plan with hypothetical arrangement of the founder's tomb

Kosmosoteira monastery, Isaakios decided to be interred in the *katholikon* of this monastery “on the left side of the narthex, there where I made an extension to the building on account of the tomb.” Locating the exact placing of the tomb depends on the meaning attested by Isaakios to the two architectural terms of *narthex* and *extension (parekvole)*. The term narthex might indicate the now-destroyed vestibule to the west of the church. However, Isaakios also mentions an *exonarthex*, where the tombs of his secretary Michael and his servant Leon Kastamonites were to be buried in marble sarcophagi set in frescoed arcosolia (§ 107). The lost western vestibule was more likely the exonarthex, and to the east of this, in the west part of the main church, was the narthex.

Nancy Ševčenko proposed that *extension (parekvole)* means a sort of structure, a small funerary room attached in the north wall of the *katholikon*. She wondered whether the wall of an additional structure that seems to be protruding from the north wall of the Kosmosoteira in an



Pherai, Panagia Kosmosoteira, northwest dome with the Theotokos in roundel (S. Mavromates)

old picture is the extension. In contrast, Robert Ousterhout has suggested that the narthex is the elongated western part of the church - that the extension is the northwest corner compartment, which was separated with a bronze railing from the rest of the naos. Isaakios specifies that no other burials were to be “inside the church and its narthex,” and the major icon of the church was to be at his tomb and not in the naos proper. The dome above this bay contains an image of the Virgin, whom Isaakios

implores fervently for the salvation of his soul, and the arch contains a scene of the Holy Women at the Tomb, a common funerary theme. In the latter, the Angel seated on Christ’s tomb, points downward toward the proposed location of the founder’s tomb.

The form of Isaakios’s tomb is not known. Since marbles are being mentioned we can assume that it was a sarcophagus made up of four marble slabs with a lid on which there was a special place for the founder’s *enkolpion* of the Virgin. From the area around the Kosmosoteira, Ch. Bakirtzis has collected pieces of carved marble that were originally mounted on a wall and may come from the founder’s tomb.

Several articles were to be brought from the founder’s tomb at the Chora monastery: (a) a bronze railing; (b) paintings of his parents, the imperial couple Alexios I Komnenos and Eirene Doukaina; and (c) an icon stand with the mosaic icon of the Virgin Kosmosoteira, which the founder acquired in Radestos, and an icon of Christ. The position of the icons suggests that the visible part of the tomb monument was freestanding under the corner dome.

At the same time, Isaakios specifies that his own portrait from the Chora monastery, “done in my

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youth in the vanity of boyhood,” was to remain at the Chora. Elsewhere in the charter he asked that his portrait should not be depicted anywhere inside the monastery (§77). The strictness of the order suggests either great humility on the part of Isaakios, or that such orders as this were not obeyed. Nevertheless, Isaakios adds the following as an expression of the utmost humility: “For my wretched body, which worms will tear apart, will not need to be honored with a likeness after its dissolution” (§89).

Th. Uspensky noted the existence of a funerary inscription, which he saw in the middle of the church, and he rightly supposed that it came from another part of the building. It is a reused marble slab with dimensions 0.95 X 0.97 m, its upper part missing. It bears seven lines of couplets, the uppermost incomplete. It is not know whether it bore more.

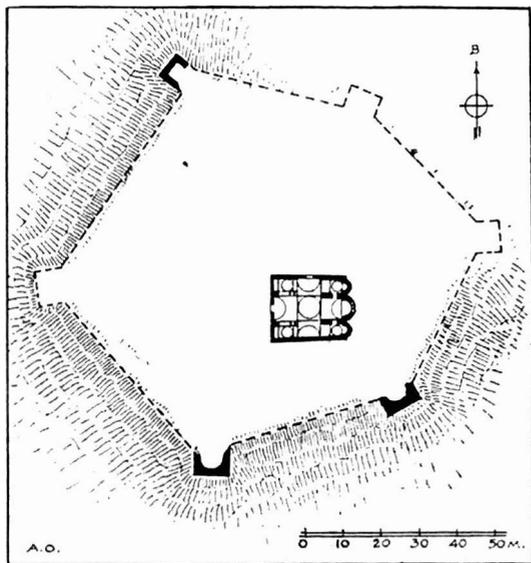
... embittering feeling and the heart. But thou who dispenseth the blessings in this world and withdraweth them again according to thy will, preserve him as an ear of corn, as a pearl, as sweet honey in your storehouses. Plant your worshiper, the *despotes* as a flourishing tree in the valley of bliss.



Pherai, Panagia Kosmosoteira, inscription from the tomb of Isaakios Komnenos (?). Now in the Ecclesiastical Museum of Alexandroupolis

The writing is elegant in capital letters with correct orthography and punctuation. The carving is shallow, with capital letters terminating in drill holes. Each line ends with a decorative scroll. The form of the letters can be securely dated to the twelfth century. The *despotes* (“lord,” or “master”) who is the object of the inscription may be Isaakios himself, and it is possible that the slab formed the lid covering his tomb. It should be noted that Isaakios refers himself indirectly as *despotes* in the *typikon* (§107).

Of course there were other graves as well, either inside or outside of the church, of notables and plain people. In addition to the information about burials provided in the *typikon*, an underground chamber, perhaps a tomb, was found beneath the floor of the diakonikon. In addition, the French traveler Robert de Dreux, who visited in 1669, wrote, “We stayed at Vera/Feredjik and we had the chance to visit the mosque that is very beautiful. The imam who is the minister of the mosque, showed us many graves with inscriptions, which led me to the conclusion that the mosque was once a church.”



*Other monuments.* In the *typikon*, Isaakios mentions the outer and inner walls of the monastery, gates, towers, and other buildings inside and outside the enclosure: cells of the monks, the refectory, baths, storerooms, a treasury, a library, cisterns, a dwelling for his secretary Michael, a hospice for the elderly, a hostel for visitors, a residence for the founder, stables, mills, chapels, and oratories. In addition to the

Pherai, Panagia Kośmosoteira, proposed plan of fortifications (Orlandos)