1. The historical background

The monastic community dedicated to the Theotokos Peribleptos was installed in the Psamathia vicinity near the Marmara shore, in the southwest part of the city. The monastery and its church were commissioned by Romanos III Argyros (r. 1028-1034) who, between 1030 and 1034, erected a church there, aspiring after building a monument rival to the ones of Justinian I. After his death, he was buried in his institution. A few years after him, another imperial benefactor, Nikephoros III Botaneiates (r. 1078-1081), was also buried in the church. 1

At some point during the Latin occupation of Constantinople, probably around 1206, the Peribleptos monastery was given to Latin monks. It was returned to the Greeks after the recapture of Constantinople (1261), by Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1261-1282), who also restored the church. 2 After that, the church seems to have played some role during the Palaeologan period and the imperial court visited it on the day of the Hypapante (the feast of the Presentation in the Temple). The church was also well known for the relics it housed, such as the hand of St. John the Baptist and the head of St. Gregory of Nazianzos. 3 Two late 12th-c. sculptural icons with the Archangel Michael and the Virgin Orans from the monastery of Peribleptos are preserved and they are today in the Museum für Spätantike und Byzantinische Kunst in Berlin. 4

After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, the monastery was soon given to the Armenians as the seat of their patriarchate, probably as early as in 1458. The church was rededicated to St. George (Surp Kevork) and remained the Armenian patriarchal church until 1643-4. It is supposed that the church was already dilapidated by then, but it also suffered damages from fire in 1782 and again in 1872. The modern Armenian church of Surp Kevork, which have also served as a school, was erected on the ruins of the Byzantine church. It is also known today in Turkish as Sulu Manastır, meaning the "watery monastery", because of the "hagiasma" (holy source) in the courtyard of the church. 5

2. Evidence of the existing structure

Until the 1990s the church was known only from the description of Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, who in 1403 passed through Constantinople on an embassy from Henry III of Castile to Tamerlane. It was usually argued that the Byzantine church had been completely destroyed by fires by the 20th century, although substructures under the existing Armenian church had been noted as early as 1924. In the 1940s, a photograph was taken of exposed Byzantine brick and stonework substructures to the south of the modern church, but this was only published in the 1990s. Building works near Sulu Manastır have exposed architectural fragments that
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possibly relate to the Byzantine church, but they had not been recorded in a systematic way. However, comparison with Tower B19 of the city walls built under Romanos III, which constitutes a parallel as regards the masonry of the substructure, has allowed the identification of the substructure with that of the Byzantine church.

In 1998, an archaeological survey under the auspices of the Istanbul Rescue Archaeological Survey, directed by Ken Dark and Ferudun Özugman, shed light on the Byzantine substructure, which had been once again exposed due to building works in and adjacent to Surp Kevork. The principal substructure stands approximately six and a half metres above the modern pavement, and appears to be the same as that in the 1940s photographs. The substructure is constructed of red brick with some uncoursed stone rubble. The southern facade has four high, round-headed niches, and there is another arched niche in a wall immediately to the west continuing until modern houses obstruct the view. The exterior closely compares to the substructure of the Myrelaion church (Bodrum Camii), built AD 920 and the "recessed brickwork" is typical of the Middle Byzantine period. The interior of the substructure contains four or probably five eastern apses connected by what Dark describes as "tunnels"; its arrangement on the whole, which resembles a cross-in-square, renders its interpretation as a space of liturgical function rather likely. The substructure was once again associated with the Byzantine church of the Peribleptos monastery and for the first time a reconstruction of the church would be supported by archaeological evidence.

3. Reconstruction of the church of Peribleptos

Dark used both the written accounts and the 1998 survey of the substructure, to suggest a tentative reconstruction of the Peribleptos church and monastery. According to him, the church might be either a cross-in-square (which would resemble the Athonite Middle- and Late Byzantine katholika) or a cross-domed church with a dome dominating the central crossing and supported by columns of green marble ("jasper," according to Clavijo). Clavijo's description support both suggestions. In any case, the church should also have a U-shaped ambulatory, which Dark thinks would explain some parts of Clavijo's description. Besides, such ambulatories were a common feature of Late Byzantine religious architecture, and could well belong to the phase of Michael VIII's restoration. The church probably had three apses, according to the usual Byzantine scheme, but, since Clavijo speaks of "five altars," Dark suggests the existence of two internal apses at the east end of the lateral parts of the ambulatory. There was a large atrium, probably containing a (perhaps central) fountain, to the west of the main church. Both the church and atrium stood on a large, wide, substructure with arched niches along its sides, analogous to those of the Myrelaion.

The church must have been richly decorated. The floor was probably of marble and the walls were also adorned with marble revetment. Mosaics covered the dome and some parts of the walls. Clavijo mentions the portraits of an imperial family, probably the portraits of Michael VIII Palaiologos, his wife and his son Constantine; he also mentions a representation of the Virgin Mary and a Tree of Jesse, a theme that became rather popular in Palaiologan monumental painting.

The entrance from the main church may have led to a two-storey refectory on the southeast. The upper story of the refectory contained a dining hall, with a gold mosaic ceiling, a long white marble table, and marble side tables. The substructure may have been used as a crypt to display and veneration of icons and relics, as well as an ossuary for the bones of monks. Such usage of the substructure would not be unparalleled in Constantinople, since it was the same in the case of Gül Camii. Romanos III could have been buried an asymmetrical room in the substructure, but if so, his sarcophagus must later have been transferred to the main church along with the burial of Nikephoros III Bontaneiates.


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Glossary:

- **ambulatory** (byz. arch.)
  A continuous passage that envelopes the *naos* or the centrally planned core of a structure. In a cross-domed church, where the dome is supported on four masonry piers and between each pair of piers two columns are inserted, the ambulatory is formed by the lateral aisles and western part of the church. Later on, an ambulatory could also envelop a cross-in-square core. During the Palaeologan period, ambulatories, usually serving as funerary chambers, were added to many middle-Byzantine churches of Constantinople.

- **apse**
  An arched structure or a semi-circular end of a wall. In Byzantine architecture it means the semicircular, usually barrel-vaulted, niche at the east end of a basilica. The side aisles of a basilica may also end in an apse, but it is always in the central apse where the altar is placed. It was separated from the main church by a barrier, the templon, or the iconostasis. Its ground plan on the external side could be semicircular, rectangular or polygonal.

- **atrium**
  1. Antiquity: The large, open space within a building, which is enveloped by colonnades.
  2. Byzantium: The forecourt of a church in early Christian, Byzantine, and medieval architecture. It was usually surrounded by four porticoes (quadriporticus).

- **cross-domed basilica**
  Type of domed basilica. A church plan, whose core, enveloped on three sides by aisles and galleries with a transept, forms a cross. The core is surmounted by a dome in the centre.

- **cross-in-square church**
  Type of church in which four barrel-vaulted bays form a Greek cross; the central square of their intersection is domed. The cross is inscribed into the square ground plan by means of four corner bays.

- **dome**
  A characteristic element of Byzantine architecture. The dome is a hemispherical vault on a circular wall (drum) usually pierced by windows. The domed church emerges in the Early Byzantine years and its various types gradually prevail, while they are expanded in the Balkans and in Russia.

- **katholikon**
  The main church in a monastic complex, heart of the monastic activity.

- **marble revetment**
  The facing of a wall with slabs of marble

- **orans**
  (lat., mean. praying): An iconographic type which was used mainly for representations of the Virgin in Byzantine art. It depicts a standing, frontal figure with its hands open, lifted to shoulder height to either side. It was the typical early Christian posture of praying, but in Middle Byzantine years, when the prayer is depicted with the proskynesis type, the orans type becomes more rare.

- **Tree of Jesse**
  A metaphorical image that was developed in the West and is introduced, from the 13th c. on, in Byzantine painting as well. Inspired from Isaiah (11,1), it depicts the descent of Christ from the biblical king David through his mother, Maria. Jesse, David's father, is the root of the tree (hence the image's name). The theme was used by both Serbian and Byzantine dynasties as visual means for justifying their imperial claims.

Sources

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Ruy González de Clavijo, *Embajada a Tamorlan*, ed. F. Lopez (Madrid 1943)

Quotations

Romanos III founds the church and the monastery of Peribleptos and lavishes money on them

Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν αὐτῷ τῆς εὐσεβείας τρόπον ἔπενοήθη· ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ τὸν αὐτοκράτορα Ἰουστινιανὸν ἐπί τῷ μεγάλῳ τεμένει καὶ ἐπονομάζει τῆς θείας καὶ ἀρρήτου Σοφίας, ἀντανοικοδομεῖν ὅσπερ καὶ ἀνθυδρύειν ναὸν τῇ Θεομήτορι ἐπεχείρησεν· ὑπερβολὰς ἀνευρίσκει καὶ ποικιλίας σχημάτων ἐν τοῖς φιλτάτοις· τὰς βασιλείους ἐπιμελεῖσθαι καὶ κατακοσμεῖν τὴν ἀκρόπολιν καὶ τὰ διερρωγότα συνάπτειν... Ἀλλὰ δέον, εἴ τι καὶ περὶ τῶν ἐκτὸς κόσμων παρανομεῖν χρὴ· τῶν βασιλείων ἐπιμελεῖσθαι καὶ κατακοσμεῖν τὴν ἀκρόπολιν καὶ τὰ διερρωγότα συνάπτειν...


Clavijo's description of the church of the Peribleptos Monastery

Then, the same day, they went to see another church of St. Mary which is called Parabilico [sic], and at the entrance of this church is a great courtyard in which are cypresses, walnut-trees, elms and many other trees. And the body of the church is on the outside completely decorated with pictures of different kinds, rich in gold and azure and many other colors. And further, as one enters the body of the church, on the left-hand side, are represented many images, among them one of St. Mary, and next to it, on one side, is an image of an emperor, and on the other side the image of an empress, and at the feet of the image of St. Mary are represented thirty castles and towns... And they said that these towns and castles belonged to the domain of this church and had been granted to it by an emperor called Romanus...

In the body of the church thera are five altars, and the body itself is a round hall, very big and tall, and it is supported on jasper [columns] of different colors; and the floor and the walls are like-wise covered with slabs of jasper. This all is enclosed all round by three aisles which are joined to it, and the ceiling of the hall and the aisles are one and the same, and is completely wrought in mosaic. And at the end of the church, on the left side, was a big tomb of colored jasper wherein lies the said emperor Romanus... And in this church was another big tomb of jasper in which lay another emperor. Also in this church was the other arm of St. Jogn the Baptist...

Outside the body of the church there was a cloister beautifully adorned with different pictures, among which was represented the Tree of Jesse, of whose line the Holy Virgin Mary was descended...


Chronological Table

**1030-1034:** Romanos III Argyros erects the church of St. Mary Peribleptos. He is buried there after his death (1034)

**1081:** Nikephoros III Botaneiates is buried in the church
after 1261: the church is restored by Michael VIII Palaiologos

1403: the Spanish ambassador Ruy González de Clavijo visits the church

c. 1458 - 1643/4: seat of the Armenian Patriarchate, rededicated to St. George (Surp Kevork)

1782: Fire

1872: Fire

late 19th c.: the modern Armenian church of Surp Kevork is erected on the ruins of the Byzantine structure

1997-8: remaining substructure of the original Byzantine building surveyed and published