

# Significance of the Architectural Space and Mountains in the Christian Art of the Inner Narthex of the Chora Church

Keisuke Inomata<sup>1</sup> and Shigeyuki Okazaki<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Department of Architecture, Mukogawa Women's University, Nishinomiya, Japan*

Corresponding author: Keisuke Inomata, Department of Architecture, Mukogawa Women's University, 1-13 Tozaki-cho, Nishinomiya, Hyogo, 663-8121, Japan, E-mail: ino@mukogawa-u.ac.jp

**Keywords:** Chora Church, Byzantine, Christian art, architectural space, mountain

**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the themes and layouts of the Christian art in the domes of the inner narthex of Istanbul's Chora Church, and clarifies the significance of the architectural space and the mountains depicted in the art. The inner narthex's south- and north-domed bays are studied, interior elevations and photomontages of the Christian art are created, and they are analyzed and discussed. This paper focused on the art of the pendentives and lunettes located under the domes that express the relationship of God's world to the terrestrial world, where the angels, acting as intermediaries between the two worlds, and the mountains are drawn. In the Chora Church, the mountains depicted in the Christian art of the domes in the inner narthex reflect a place where one can connect to God. The architectural space containing this artwork configures the lower part of the wall as the terrestrial world and the dome as God's world, and the pendentives and lunettes divide these two worlds.

## 1. Introduction

In Byzantine Christian art, people are historically the main theme, with nature seldom represented. When depicted, nature serves as background or as accompaniment for another subject. What meaning does nature have in Byzantine art? In our study thus far, the Christian art of the Chora Church (Turkey, 14th century) has been analyzed and discussed because they are masterpieces of Late Byzantine art and were created in the center of the Byzantine Christian world (Inomata, Okazaki & Yanagisawa, 2011). We clarified that the mountains<sup>1</sup> connote places with special meaning for connecting with God.

In this paper, we analyze the themes and layouts of the Christian art of the domes in the inner narthex of the Chora Church, and clarify the significance of the architectural space and the mountains in these artworks. Understanding the connection between the architectural space and the Chora Church's mosaics and paintings offers considerable insight into Late Byzantine Christianity's view of the world.

## 2. Related Works and Research Position

There is much historical research on Byzantine Christian art. Underwood (1966, 1975) and Ousterhout (1987, 2002) are well-known works on the Christian artwork of the Chora Church.

Because of the lack of existing churches and historiography of Byzantine history, the relationship between the architectural space and the Christian art of Byzantine churches has not been clearly delineated. Our research clarifies the meaning of the architectural space in relation to the art using interior elevations and photomontages.

## 3. Research Outline

Istanbul's Chora Church was built in the 6th century and was later rebuilt by Isaak Komnenos in the early 12th century. When Theodore Metochites commenced restoration and renovation of the church from 1316-21, the Church was decorated with elaborate mosaics and frescoes. The Chora Church has a cross-in-square plan. After the 15th century, the Church was used as a mosque called "the Kariye Camii" and is now a museum. The Byzantine Institute of America undertook the cleaning and conservation of the mosaics and frescoes in the 1950s (Underwood, 1966, 75). In the Chora Church, mosaics were constructed in the naos and in the inner and outer narthexes. Frescoes were painted in the parekklesion. In the naos, there are only three mosaics, including "Jesus Christ." The cycle of the



Fig 1. Overhead view of the south side of the Chora Church. (Aksit, 2010)

life of the Virgin can be found in the inner narthex and the cycle of the life of Christ can be found in the outer narthex. Other paintings, including the Old Testament or “Christ in Judgment,” are drawn in the parekklesion<sup>2</sup>. Christian art in the Chora Church emphasize the Church dogma of “incarnation” and “salvation” as a whole (Ousterhout, 2002, pp.103-116).

The Chora Church has domes in the naos, the inner narthex, and the parekklesion, which is an independent side chapel. However, almost all of the art of the naos’ dome are lost. We studied the south- and north-domed bays of the Chora Church’s inner narthex, and analyze and discuss interior elevations (Fig. 4, 5, 8, 9) and photomontages (Fig. 6, 7) of the art.

#### 4. Iconographic Program in Byzantine Churches

The iconographic program of Byzantine churches has three hierarchical zones (Demus, 1955, pp.16-29). The first is a dome or an apse. “Christ Pantocrator” is located on domes and “Christ as God” is depicted. “The Virgin and Child” is located on an apse and “Christ as a person” is depicted. The incarnation of the invisible God is expressed by these two images. The second zone is the upper part of a wall, or a pendentive or squinch, and is where narrative images such as the cycle of the life of Christ are found. These narrative images depict the life of Christ visually for the illiterate population and serve the further function of presenting Christian dogma. The third zone is the lower part of a wall, at eye level, and is where depictions of the Saints can be found. The figures of the Saints receive prayers directly from people and convey them to God, thereby connecting God with

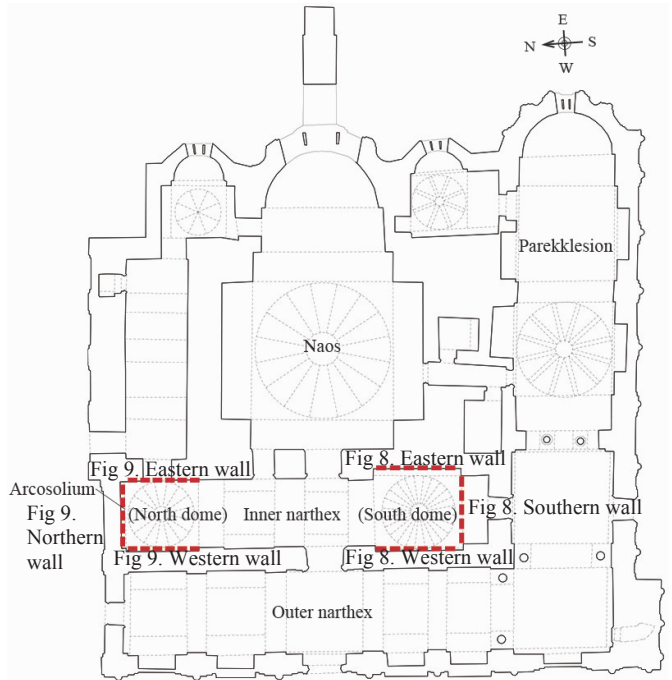


Fig 2. Plan of the Chora Church.

the people (Masuda, 2012, p.310). A dome of the first zone illustrates God’s world and the lower part of a wall of the third

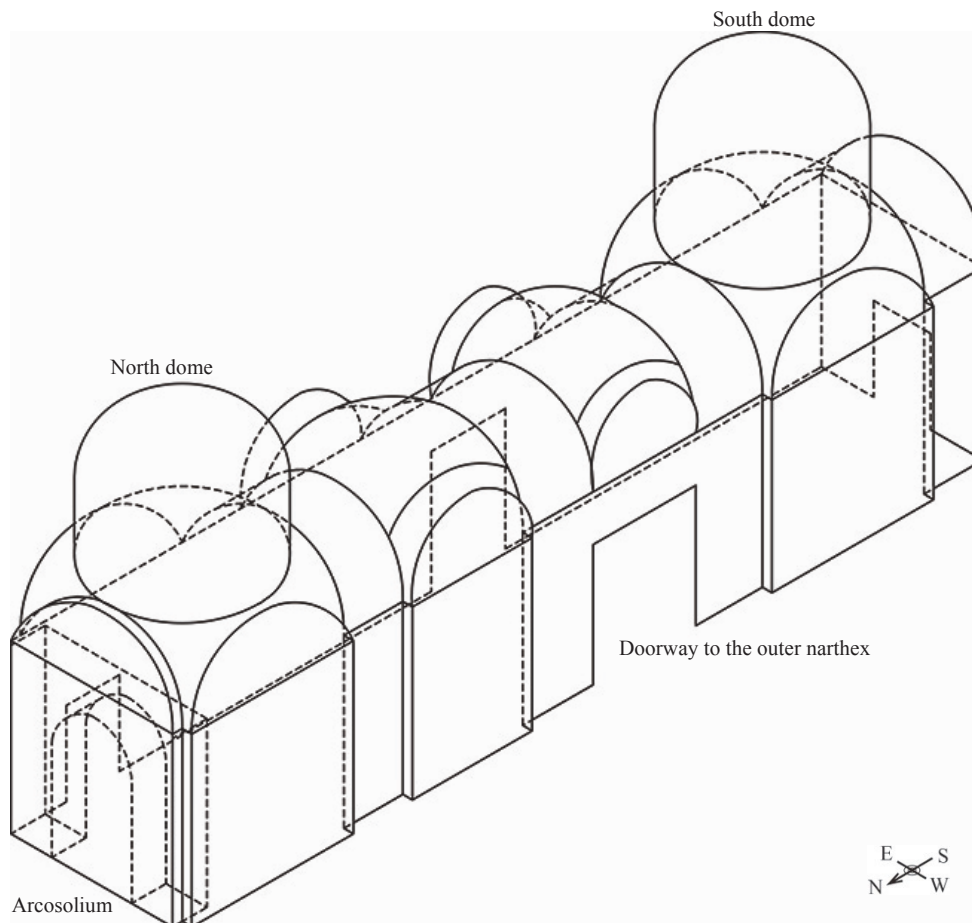


Fig 3. Isometric drawing of the Chora Church’s inner narthex.

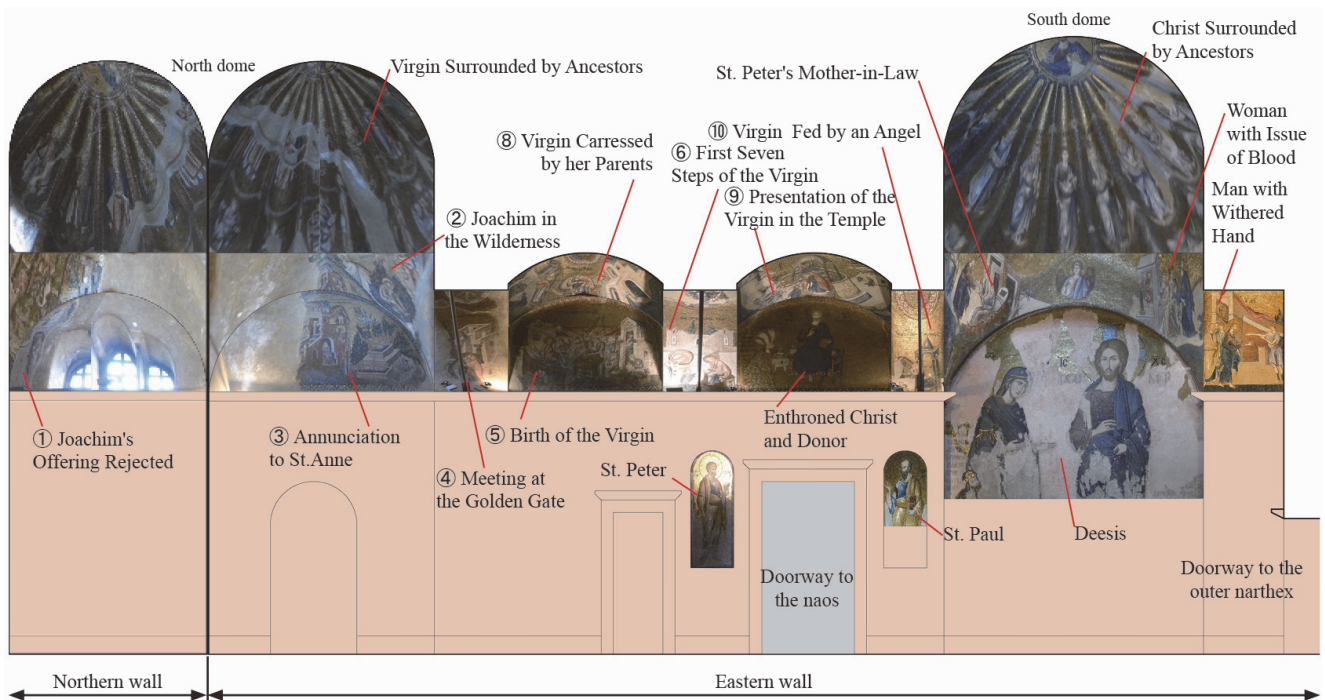


Fig 4. Interior elevation of the eastern and northern walls of the inner narthex of the Chora Church.

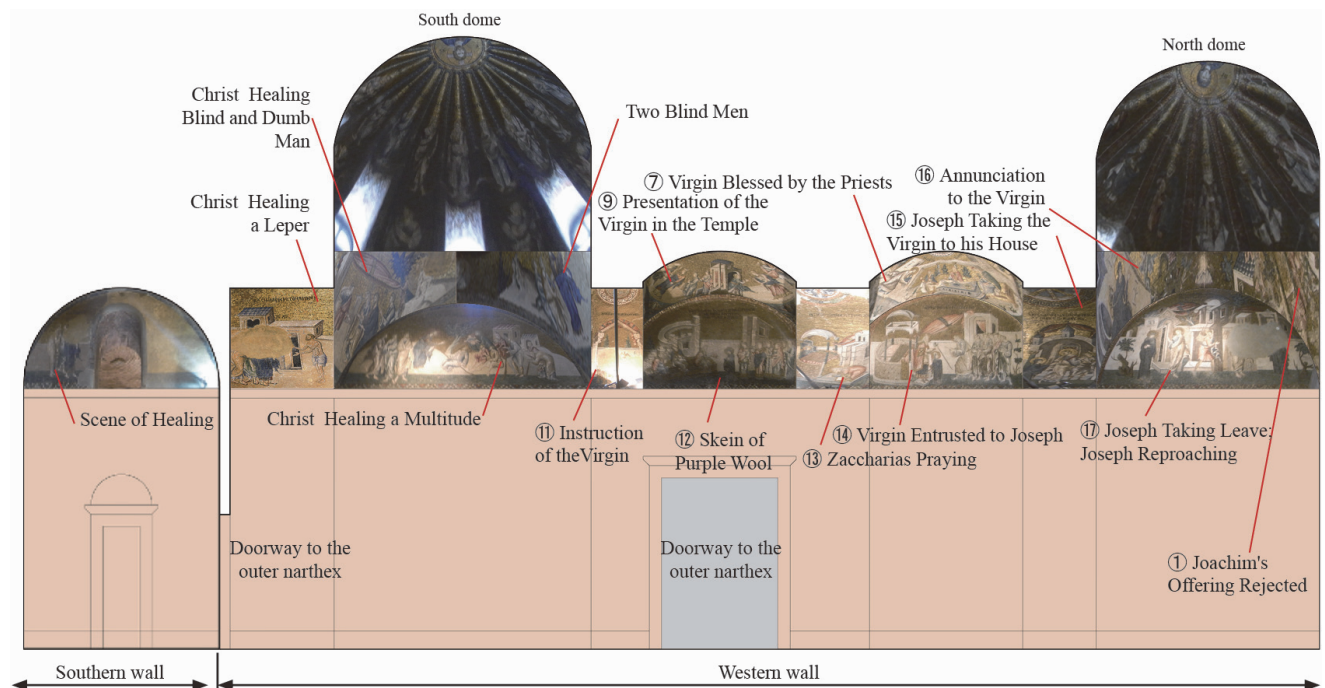


Fig 5. Interior elevation of the western and southern walls of the Chora Church's inner narthex. The cycle of the life of the Virgin is drawn basically clockwise on the northern, eastern, and western walls except for in the south-domed bay. We have numbered the art in serial order from "①" to "⑰." The story begins with an earlier narrative before the birth of the Virgin, and follows with her life in the Temple, marriage to Joseph, and the Annunciation in the inner narthex. The narrative continues with the cycle of the life of Christ in the outer narthex. Mountains are drawn in "Christ Healing a Blind and Dumb Man" and "Two Blind Men" in the south-domed bay, and in "Joachim in the Wilderness" in the north-domed bay.

zone represents the terrestrial world.

Although there is no apse in the Chora Church's inner narthex, there are two domes. Mountains are drawn in the south- and north-domed bays of the inner narthex. In this paper we analyze the three hierarchical zones described above and discuss the vertical composition of these artworks in the architectural space.

## 5. Analysis and Discussion

### 5.1. SOUTH-DOMED BAY

The images of the healing miracle scenes of the cycle of Christ's

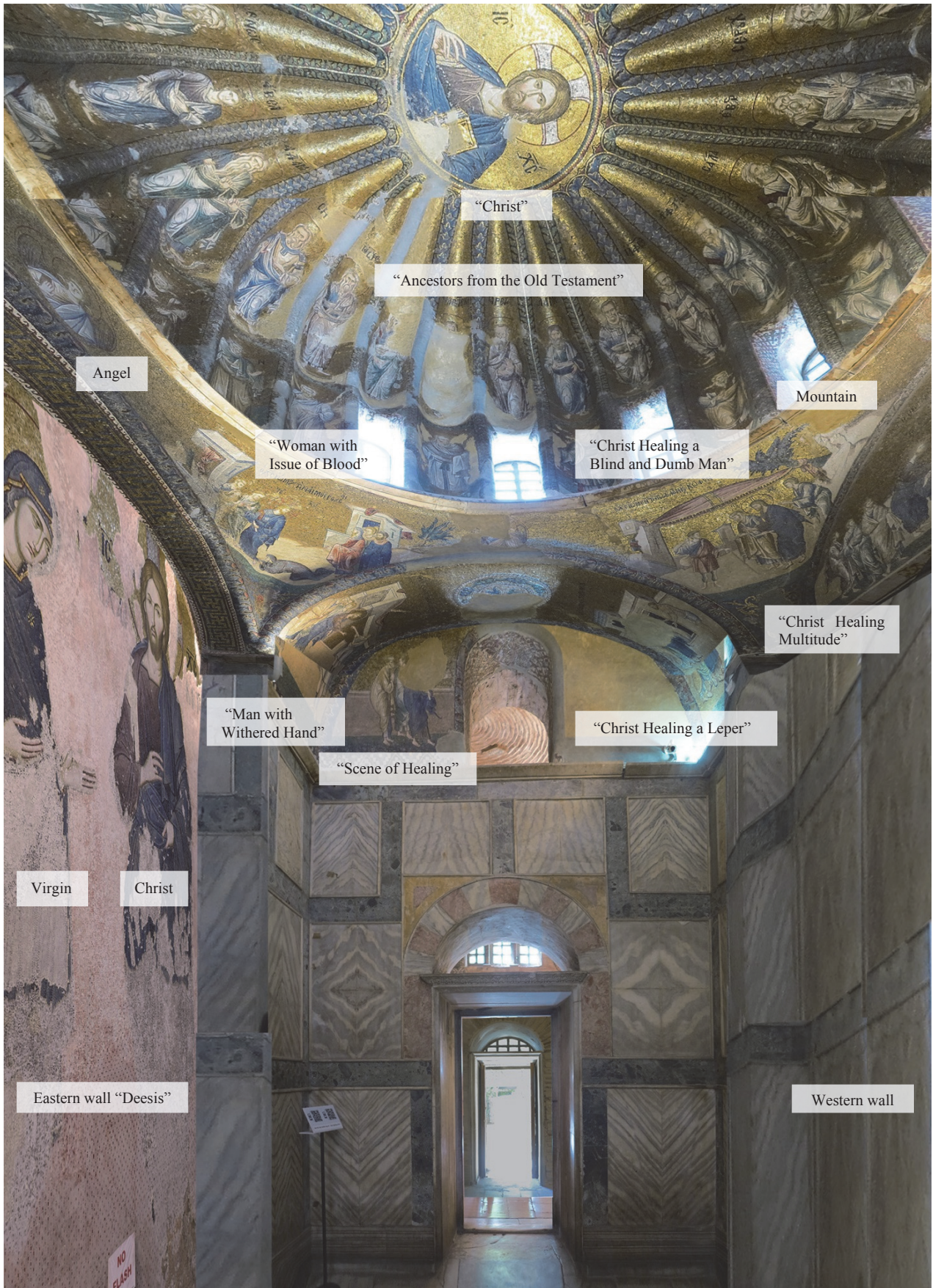


Fig 6. Photomontage of the south-domed bay of the Chora Church's inner narthex. "Christ" is drawn against a gold background, which signifies God's world, and mountains are drawn as the background of the healing miracles on the pendentives under the dome. Furthermore, the "Deesis" of the Virgin imploring Christ for salvation is drawn underneath these on the eastern wall.

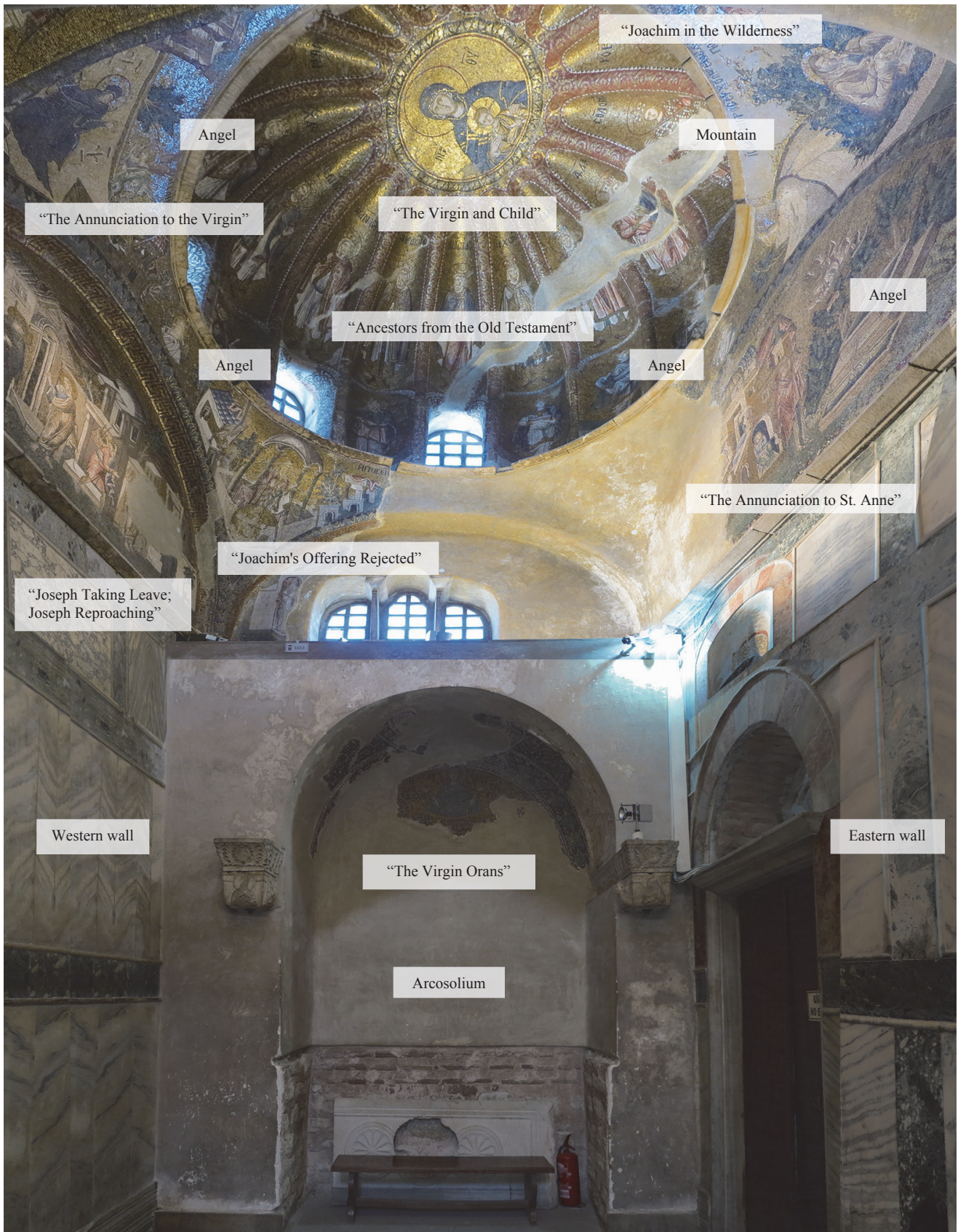


Fig 7. Photomontage of the north-domed bay of the Chora Church's inner narthex. "The Virgin and Child" appears on the dome against a gold background that represents God's world. The pendentive or lunette under the dome is chosen as the location for the "Annunciation," through which the word of God is brought to the terrestrial world, and as where the angel, who connects the two worlds, and the mountain are drawn. In addition, underneath these, there is the arcosolium for Demetrios I Palaiologos, which probably expresses a hope for salvation.

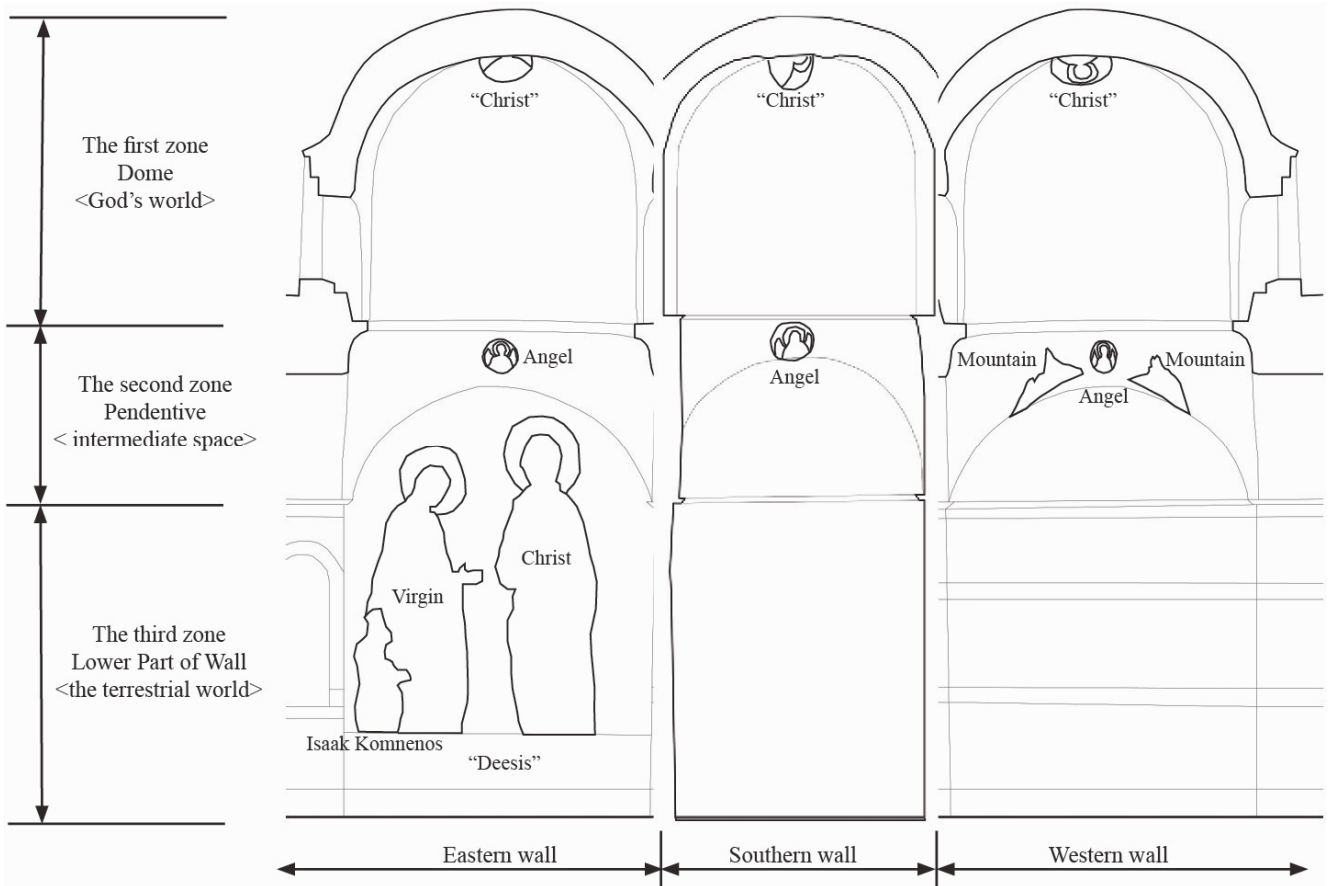


Fig 8. Interior elevation of the south-domed bay of the Chora Church's inner narthex.

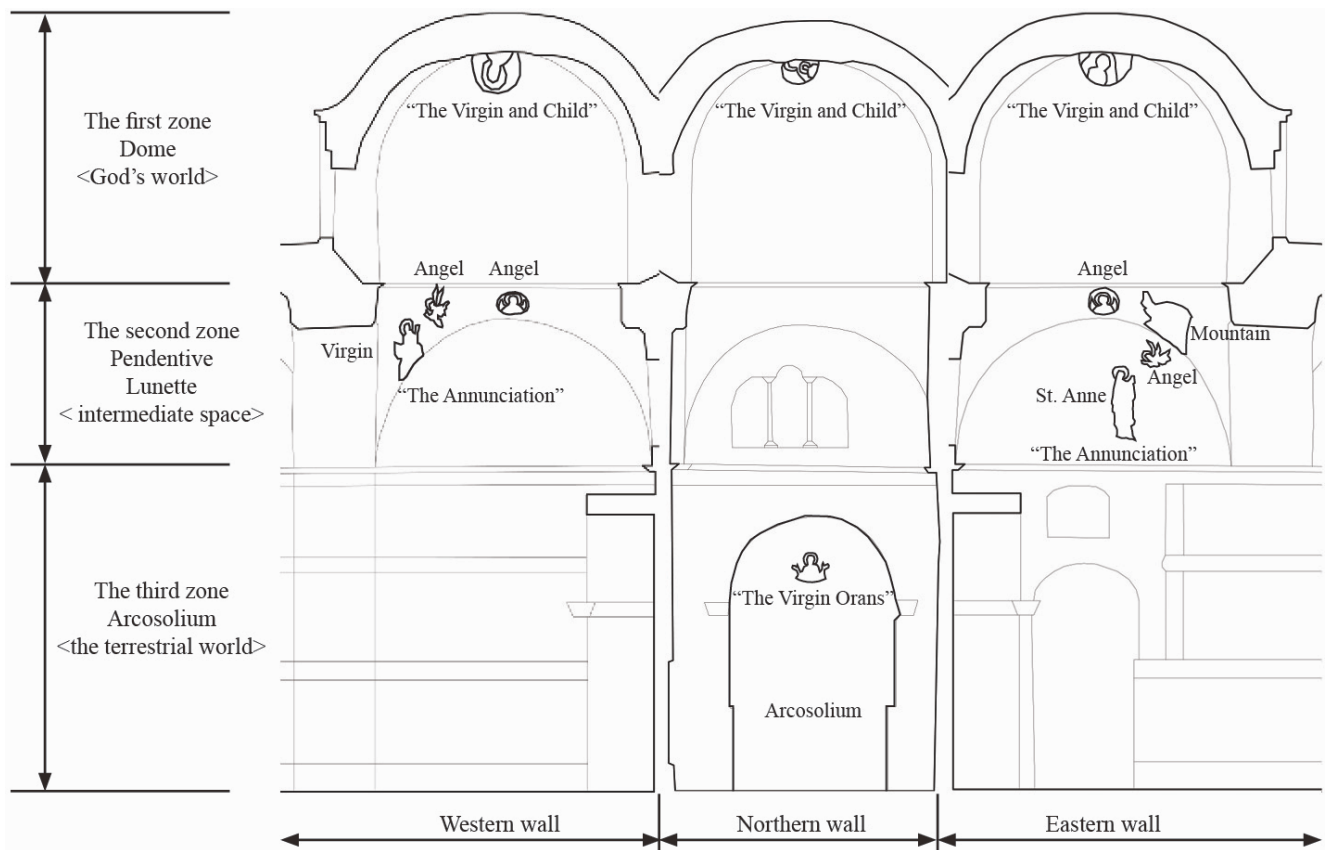


Fig 9. Interior elevation of the north-domed bay of the Chora Church's inner narthex.

Ministry are located mainly in the inner narthex's south-domed bay (Fig. 4, 5). "Christ" is positioned at the center of the dome and the "Ancestors from the Old Testament"<sup>3</sup> are drawn on the circumference (Fig. 10). The healing miracles of "Christ Healing a Blind and Dumb Man" (Fig. 11 left), "Two Blind Men" (Fig. 11 right), and "Christ Healing a Multitude" (Fig. 11 middle) are placed on the upper part of the western wall under the dome. The mountains are drawn symmetrically about the medallion of the angel at the center of each pendentive (Fig. 11). The healing miracle of the "Woman with Issue of Blood" (Fig. 10 lower right) and "St. Peter's Mother-in-Law" (Fig. 10 lower left) are also on the upper part of the eastern wall under the dome. Underneath these, the "Deesis" (Fig. 12) is drawn on the lower part of the eastern wall close to the floor, unlike the other mosaics on the inner narthex's wall. This "Deesis" is an image of the Virgin imploring Christ for the salvation of Isaak Komnenos, a 12<sup>th</sup>-century donor of the Chora Church.

In "Christ Healing a Blind and Dumb Man" and "Two Blind Men," the mountains are placed outside the living space of people (Inomata, Okazaki & Yanagisawa, 2011), in the architectural space, the mountains are drawn on the intermediate space between the dome that shows God's world and the lower part of the wall that shows the terrestrial world.

To summarize, "Christ" is drawn against a gold background on the dome, signifying God's world, and the mountains provide background for the healing miracles on the pendentives under the dome. Furthermore, on the eastern wall under these is the "Deesis," in which the Virgin implores Christ for salvation (Fig. 8). In other words, "salvation," which is one of the overall themes of the Christian art of the Chora Church, and "Christ as God," who relieves people by the miracles of healing, are expressed in the south-domed bay. This can be interpreted as meaning that Christ has come down to the terrestrial world from the dome that is God's world with the donor who seeks salvation.

## 5.2. NORTH-DOMED BAY

The cycle of the life of the Virgin is drawn basically clockwise on the northern, eastern, and western walls except for in the south-domed bay (Fig. 4, 5). The story begins with an earlier narrative before the Virgin's birth, and her life in the Temple, marriage to Joseph, and the Annunciation are drawn in the inner narthex. The story continues with the cycle of the life of Christ in the outer narthex. The alcove on the lower part of the northern wall serves as an arcosolium for Demetrios I Palaiologos (Underwood, V1, 1965, p. 295). "The Virgin and Child" is located at the center of the north dome and the "Royal ancestry of the Old Testament" is drawn on the circumference (Fig. 13). "The Annunciation to St. Anne," who is the Virgin's mother (Fig. 14 middle), and "The Annunciation to the Virgin" (Fig. 16 left) are drawn on the upper part of the western wall under the dome. In each scene, an angel bringing the word of God appears in the terrestrial world and informs the Virgin or St. Anna of the pregnancy. "The Virgin Orans" (Fig. 15), depicting the Virgin imploring Christ for the salvation of the people, is located on the upper part of the arcosolium.

In "Joachim in the Wilderness" (Fig. 14 right) on the eastern wall under the dome, a mountain is drawn in the background. Although the adjacent image of the northeast pendentive (Fig. 14 left) has been lost, we can assume that it had the same composition as the western wall under the south dome described above, and thus mountains may have been drawn symmetrically about the medallion of the angel. In "Joachim in the Wilderness," the mountain is drawn to exist outside the living space of people, in the architectural space, and is situated in the intermediate space between the dome depicting God's world and the lower



Fig 10. The south dome of the Chora Church's inner narthex. "Christ" surrounded by "Ancestors from the Old Testament;" "St. Peter's Mother-in-Law" (lower left, northeast pendentive); and "Woman with Issue of Blood" (lower right, southeast pendentive).



Fig 11. The upper part of the western wall under the south dome of the Chora Church's inner narthex. "Christ Healing a Blind and Dumb Man" (left, southwest pendentive); "Christ Healing a Multitude" (middle, lunette); and "Two Blind Men" (right, northwestern pendentive).



Fig 12. Lower part of the eastern wall under the south dome of the Chora Church's inner narthex. "Deesis."



Fig 13. The north dome of the Chora Church's inner narthex. "The Virgin and Child" surrounded by "Ancestors from the Old Testament."

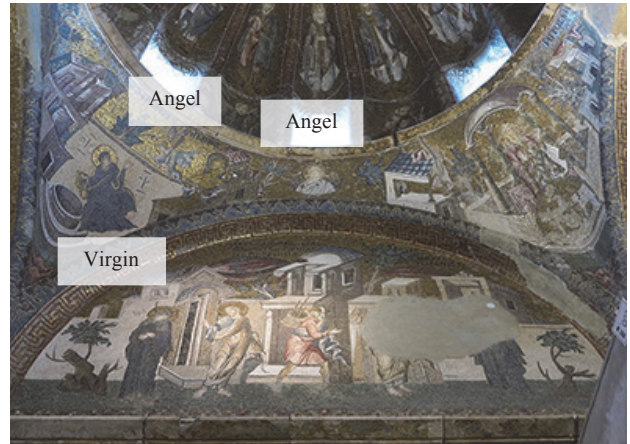


Fig 16. Upper part of the western wall under the north dome of the Chora Church's inner narthex. "The Annunciation the Virgin" (left, southwest pendentive)

part of the wall that represents the terrestrial world, such as the south dome.

In summary, "The Virgin and Child" is placed against a gold background on the dome illustrating God's world. The "Annunciation," in which the word of God is brought to the terrestrial world, is selectively placed on the pendentive or lunette under the dome, where the angel, acting as intermediary to connect the two worlds, and the mountain are drawn. Under these is the arcosolium for Demetrios I Palaiologos, which probably signifies a hope for salvation (Fig. 9). In the north-domed bay, many images of the Virgin can be found, emphasizing the disciple's prayer for the salvation that the Virgin beseeches of Christ.

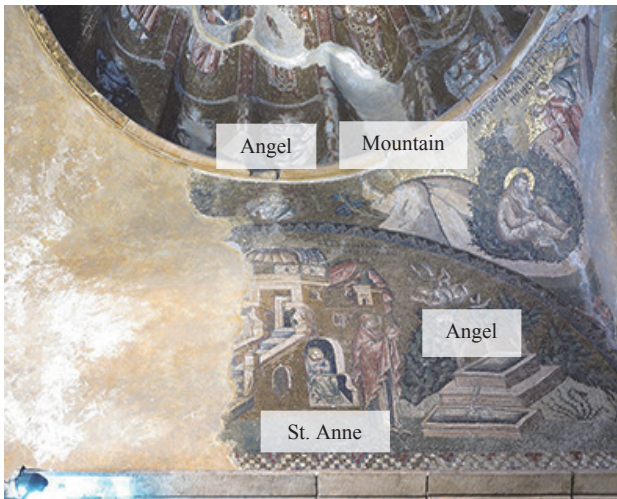


Fig 14. The upper part of the eastern wall under the north dome of the Chora Church's inner narthex. "The Annunciation to St. Anne" (middle, lunette); "Joachim in the Wilderness" (right, southeast pendentive). Although the adjacent image of the northeast pendentive is lost, the same composition as the western wall under the south dome is assumed, and therefore mountains may have been drawn symmetrically about the medallion of the angel.

## 6. Conclusion

We studied the south- and north-domed bays of the Chora Church's inner narthex using interior elevations and photomontages of the Christian art, interpreted the representations of the architectural space and the mountains depicted in the art. Icons that express God's world to the terrestrial world are placed on the pendentives and lunettes under the domes, where angels, acting as intermediaries between the two worlds, and mountains are drawn. Furthermore, located on the wall underneath, is the Virgin imploring Christ for the people's salvation and the arcosolium for the disciple, which likely represents the hope of salvation. In other words, the mountains are drawn on the intermediate space between the dome depicting God's world and the art asking for salvation is located in the terrestrial world or the arcosolium. Furthermore, the mountains are drawn on the closest space to the domes, such as the artworks that express the relationship of God's world to the terrestrial world and the angels acting as intermediaries. We now understand that the mountains in the Christian art of the Chora Church have the special significance of representing a place to connect to God's world. The architectural space of the Chora Church configures the lower part of the wall as the terrestrial world and the dome as God's world, with the pendentives and lunettes dividing the two.

## Endnotes

1. In this paper, we defined mountains as rugged ground consisting of a great incline and excluded smooth ground with only slight rises.
2. The artworks "The Annunciation," "The Nativity of Christ," "The



Fig 15. The arcosolium under the north dome of the Chora Church's inner narthex. "The Virgin Orans."



Baptism of Christ,” “The Transfiguration of Christ,” the “Crucifixion,” and so forth are believed to have been in the naos, but are not longer in existence (Lowden, 2000, p. 416).

3. In this paper, the titles of the artworks are based on “The Art of the Kariye Camii” (Ousterhout, 2002).

## References

- Akşit, İ. (2010). Chora: Byzantium's Shining Piece of Art, Akşit Kültür ve Turizm Yayıncılık.
- Demus, O. (1955). Byzantine Mosaic Decoration: Aspects of Monumental Art in Byzantium, Boston Book & Art Shop.
- Inomata, K., Okazaki, S., and Yanagisawa, K. (2011). Types of Mountains Painted in Christian Paintings of the Chora Church - Focusing on the Relationships to Persons. *J. Archit. Plann., AIJ, Vol. 76, No. 670, Dec., 2011, 2477-2485.*
- Inomata, K., Okazaki, S., and Yanagisawa, K. (2011). Functions of Mountains in Visual Composition of Christian Paintings in the Chora Church. *Intercultural Understanding, Vol.1, 25-30.*
- Inomata, K., and Okazaki, S. (2012). Functions of Mountains in Visual Composition of Christian Paintings in Hosios Loukas. *Intercultural Understanding, Vol.2, 25-28.*
- Lowden, J. Translated by Masuda, T. (2000). Early Christian & Byzantine Art. Iwanami Shoten. (In Japanese)
- Lowden, J. Translated by Masuda, T. (2000). Early Christian & Byzantine Art. Iwanami Shoten. (In Japanese)
- Masuda, T. (2012). Byzantine-seido-soushoku no Icon to Narrative. Chisen Shokan. *Chusei no jikan-ishiki, 309-335.* (In Japanese)
- Ousterhout, R. (1987). The Architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul. *Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.*
- Ousterhout, R. (2002). The Art of the Kariye Camii. Scala.
- Underwood, P. (1966). The Kariye Djami, Vol. 1 - Vol. 3. Bollingen Foundation distributed by Pantheon Books.
- Underwood, P. (1975). The Kariye Djami, Vol. 4. Princeton University Press.

## Sources

The picture in Fig. 1 is by Akşit (2010). The drawings in Figs. 2, 4, and 5 were made by Inomata based on Ousterhout (1987). The remaining pictures in the figures are by Inomata.