

## The Bulgarian trace in the frescoes of Chora Church in Istanbul



### The last home of Bulgaria's Asen Dynasty - threatened to face the same fate as Hagia Sophia

The Chora Church\* in Istanbul, world-famous for its unique frescoes, will probably follow the fate of the emblematic Hagia Sophia in the Turkish capital. The news of its conversion into a mosque, following a decree of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on August 21<sup>st</sup>, sparked criticism among the world cultural community once again.

“Such a step is as much a loss for the Christian world as a blow to the world cultural heritage,” Prof. Emanuel Mutafov from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences commented in an interview with BGNES agency. In mid-August, on the occasion of the great Christian feast of the Assumption of the Theotokos, a scientific research of the professor was published, dedicated to the worship of the Mother of God in the temple art in Constantinople.

“My book, by coincidence, is the last scientific work written about this church when it was still a museum,” said Prof. Mutafov, adding: “I am not

happy about this fact. As Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I said, the decision to convert the church into a mosque also caused physical pain to Christians. For me, things are felt twice as strong because I am also one of the researchers, albeit modest, of this church.

In his monograph, **the author offers a hypothesis that in the chapel of the church of Chora, descendants of the Palaeologus (the dynasty which ruled Byzantium from 1261 to 1453) and the Asenevtsi (the Asen dynasty which ruled the Second Bulgarian Kingdom between 1187 and 1280) were buried**

“Following the whole history and mainly the sources related to Chora as texts and epitaphs, I came to the conclusion that Queen Irina Palaeologina was buried in the arcosolium. She was a Byzantine princess – sister of Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologus and wife of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Asen III. Two of her sons were buried in the other two arcosolia. It is an indisputable fact that the monograms of the Asen dynasty tsars exist in the images of Chora.”

**Ivan Assen III and Irina Paleologina gave rise to one of the most powerful Byzantine clans, which played an important role not only in the Balkans but also in Western Europe and Russia.** It gave the origin to the last rulers of the Byzantine Empire, as well as to Tsar Ivan the Terrible. The first Russian tsar was the grandson of Sofia Asenina Palaeologus, niece of the last Byzantine emperor and great-granddaughter of Tsar Ivan Asen III, one of the brightest figures of the Russian Empire.

Now, however, this entire chapter of history could be erased when the Chora Church Museum becomes an Islamic spiritual symbol, historians fear. Also, this decree will halt the access to one of the most significant monuments of the Byzantine Palaeologus art of world importance.

“And because these actions are political, they must provoke a political response. It must be swift and definite, not only at the level of states, but also at the level of the European Union,” Prof. Mutafov urges. Regarding the conversion of Hagia Sophia from a museum into a mosque the reaction was very soft and very uncertain. We are now tearing a whole chapter from the Byzantine art textbook for many generations to come because Chora is a jewel. No one denies the period in which these monuments functioned as mosques. It is long enough and no intelligent person would like to see both Hagia Sophia or Chora with the status of churches. We want them to be preserved as neutral spaces or museums.”

Prof. Mutafov is adamant that what has been happening in Turkey in recent years is the erasure of the secular state and its transformation into a leader of Islam. And in the implementation of this plan, most likely more Byzantine churches will have the same fate.

\* The Chora Church is one of the most significant and well-studied Byzantine monuments in modern science. With its architecture, exquisite mosaics and frescoes, it is a unique example of Byzantine art from the Palaeologus era, worthy of the treasury of world cultural heritage. In 1453, the Christian church was the first that the Ottomans desecrated during their invasion of Constantinople, smashing the miraculous icon of the Holy Mother of God, protector of the capital of Byzantium. Later, around 1511, the church was turned into a mosque /Kariye mosque/, and since 1945 it has been a museum. It is not yet specified when, after the presidential decree of August 21, 2020, it will be turned into an Islamic house of prayer.

Editor: Stavros Vaniotis

English: Rossitsa Petkova

Photos: BGNES

---

[Source](#)