LATE BYZANTINE ARCHITECTURE

Introduction

After the Latin Conquest (The Fourth Crusade) of 1204, Byzantine art and culture began to fade out as a strong, independent force. The Latins occupied Constantinople for about fifty years, at which time the city returned to autonomous rule under the Paleologan Dynasty. This period was, as Richard Krautheimer puts it, something of an “epilogue.” (In other words, Byzantine architecture was no longer defining itself, but was instead tenuously holding on to its architectural past.) There was a revived energy in the pictorial arts of this period, particularly in mosaics and manuscript illumination. In architecture, however, there was no such renaissance.

Buildings constructed during this period followed Middle Byzantine conventions and often combined different styles and features in new and eclectic ways. This hybridity can in part be attributed to the empire’s expansiveness. In the furthest reaches of the empire, local traditions were often far stronger than were the Byzantine conventions. Churches of this period tend to emphasize the vertical space of the church, with tall domes and semi-domes cascading down over a relatively narrow space. Ornamentation was particularly extensive and ostentatious at this time, with patterning and design often assuming more importance than the structural design. As Richard Krautheimer states, “...Architecture becomes a mere framework for mosaics, murals, and decoration. Never is Late Byzantine architecture monumental, never great. So it is to us no more than an epilogue, albeit often attractive and exciting.”¹

Later in this section, you will learn about the Kariye Camii, one of the most famous examples of Late Byzantine Architecture. For a more complete understanding of the architecture of this final period in Byzantine history, this essay provides you with one more example of the Late Byzantine church.

Fenari Isa Camii (Monastery of Constantine Lips), Constantinople, 1282-1304
(Please view the following relevant images of this building: Exterior Detail, Interior, Dome.)

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This church was built in honor of Saint John the Baptist at the behest of the widow of Emperor Michael Paleologus. Its plan follows the Middle Byzantine church type with certain Late Byzantine architectural adjustments: it is a compact, cross-in-square plan with a tall central dome and is surrounded on all sides by a tall, narrow ambulatory. As was typical of Late Byzantine architecture, the space inside the building is segmented—even awkward. This marks a decisive shift away from the soaring open spaces of Early Byzantine architecture (showcased in buildings like the Hagia Sophia). Spaces were added to the core of the church, a feature commonly found in Late Byzantine architecture in Constantinople, since new spaces were needed to accommodate the changing needs of the emperors and religious officials. Indeed, Late Byzantine churches amounted to the architectural equivalent of a patchwork quilt; rather than a unified, cohesive space, the Late Byzantine church was an amalgam of related, but disconnected spaces, resulting in an intricate, mazelike building.
The interior decoration of this building, most of which no longer remains, was typical of earlier Byzantine church decoration: the interior space was covered with marble revetment and mosaics. However, the decorative quality of the wall surfaces on the exterior reached new heights in Late Byzantine architecture, as shown in this example. Whereas earlier Byzantine wall decoration was more restrained (choosing either pattern or depth), the hallmark of Late Byzantine architecture was unrestrained, almost explosive surface decoration.

Take a look at the image above, “Exterior Detail,” for a sense of the wall decoration in this building. Notice how the design employs texture, color, and depth to adorn an otherwise plain brick wall. Niches of varying height and depth add a lively sculptural quality to the wall; bricks are arranged in various patterns to create a sense of pattern and texture; and materials of different colors add yet another element to the exterior of this building. Compared to earlier Byzantine architecture, this approach to the wall surface is new and over the top.²

Ultimately, this church exemplifies the new direction of Late Byzantine architecture. Rather than creating new forms and styles, architects of this period employed older traditions, but combined them in new and exciting ways. Spaces were readjusted to accommodate changing liturgical needs and design elements were combined into an eclectic new style. Thus, Late Byzantine architecture can be seen as a kind of modernized extension of Middle Byzantine architecture, but there is no doubt that this was the denouement of the long story of Byzantine architecture.

² Ibid., 448-49.