



## Summary :

After the Fall, many churches in Constantinople were modified into Muslim religious sites. During the following centuries, quite a few churches burned down due to multiple fires. Later on, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of Tanzimat, many orthodox churches were constructed.

## Date

15<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century

## Geographical Location

Constantinople (İstanbul)

## 1. Ottoman policy on church building

### 1.1. From the Fall to the middle of the 19th century

In theory, after the ottoman conquest of [Constantinople](#), in areas where (non -Muslim) inhabitants resisted the sultan's army, the prohibition on church building was absolute. In contrast, inhabitants of cities, townships and villages that had surrendered without a fight, had been initially acknowledged the right to keep their religious buildings and sometimes, under certain terms, to build new ones. It is known, however, that the reality in the Ottoman Empire was quite different and that both Christians already living within the ottoman dominion and Sephardim Jews, who migrated in successive waves from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century after the great "Exodus" from the Iberian Peninsula, could, despite the legal prohibitions, build new churches and synagogues.

### 1.2. From mid-19th century onwards

Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the general principle regarding the construction of non-Muslim religious buildings remained unchanged, even though, in reality, the ottoman rule repeatedly proved to be tolerant and issued at times many permits to build non-Muslim temples. One of the reasons that the ottoman state did not intend to revise the legislative rule by adjusting it to its subjects claims was, possibly, the need to keep a means of pressure towards the Christian countries (especially Russia), that always undertook the role of protector for the Christians of the East. In other words, the permission to build non-Muslim temples was, essentially, bound to inter-state relations and the balance of political power between east and west. It is not accidental that after the [Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca](#) (1774), a treaty signed by the Ottoman Empire and Russia that signified the beginning of the end for the Imperial House of Osman, the cases of legal construction or repair of churches multiplied.

Politically effete, the ottoman state officially recognized the free exercise of religious rights of all its subjects – non-Muslims included – in the context of the [Tanzimat](#) reformation. In that (Tanzimat) it is clearly stated that Christians and [Jews](#) are given henceforth the right to build churches and synagogues, to found schools, hospitals and cemeteries, but under certain terms. Until the end of the ottoman period, the Porte tolerated churches and synagogues provided they were located afar from Muslim quarters and in sufficient distance, in order not to disturb or provoke the Muslim religious sentiment. Moreover, even after 1856, the permit to build churches or synagogues was issued solely by imperial [firman](#), after an application by the religious leader of the interested community. That means that the sultan, despite the liberal spirit of the reformation and the declarations of equality, kept the right to judge whether to issue a permit for the construction of a church or not, according to each case.

## 2. Church building in Constantinople after the Fall

Theoretically, Constantinople, which was conquered after a [siege](#), could not keep its Christian churches, whose modification into Muslim religious sites was the least the new rulers could do in order to affirm their supremacy. However, during the first two weeks after the Fall, the only church modified into a mosque was [Hagia Sophia](#), while until 1481 (end of [Mehmed II's](#) reign), only four



churches are known to be dedicated to the Muslim faith: [Pantokrator](#) (Zeyrek camii), [Christ Pantepopt](#) (Eski İmaret), [Kyriotissa](#) (Kalenderhane camii) and San Domenico (Arap camii). The rest remained vacant and silent. This happened because in May 1453, the once “Queen of Cities” (Vasilevousa) that Mehmed II, from then on called “the Conqueror”, offered his warriors, was no more than an empty city, largely deserted by its inhabitants. In the context of the intense [re-peopling policy](#) that was followed in order to re-connect the social plexus, dense Christian population was transferred from other areas and located in the capital of – henceforth – the Ottoman Empire. These newcomers, for whose religious needs many of the city’s churches re-operated, came from the Black Sea, [Crimea](#), but also [Lesvos](#), Samothrace, Evoia and Fokaia.

In January 1584 the church of the [Holy Apostles](#) (Aghion Apostolon), was ceded to the first Patriarch of the ottoman period, Gennadios II, as his see. The area, however, was deserted, and when the body of a Turk was found in the churchyard, the Patriarch decided to retreat in the church of the [Virgin Pammakaristos](#) (Fethiye camii), in a Christian district. As for the church of the Holy Apostles (Aghion Apostolon), it was demolished in 1459 and the mosque of the Conqueror was built in its place (Fatih camii).

Consequently, the islamisation of the new ottoman capital was not only gradual but also respective – and in no way absolute and total. Since the city’s new rulers tolerated (if not encouraged) the presence of other believers, it was not possible to suspend their religious sites. However, the churches that were maintained or the synagogues that were founded during the first centuries of the ottoman conquest were, by rule, humble buildings, very discreetly integrated into the urban plexus. In contrast, hulking and intensely “monumental” looking, the Muslim complexes that were built by the members of Imperial House of Osman (eg. Mehmed the Conqueror, Bayezid, Suleyman the Magnificent) were meant to declare the sultan’s supremacy, but also the consolidation of the ottoman rule in the coasts of Bosphorus. Visible from afar, most of the large mosques dominate the city landscape, irrefutable witnesses of five centuries of Muslim presence. Moreover, for the construction of some of these monumental complexes, building material from Christian churches that were deserted or demolished, was used. The imposing and vast mosque of Suleyman the Magnificent, for example, built by the celebrated [architect Sinan](#) (1489-1588), was largely constructed by what remained from the church of St Euphemia of Chalcedon (Kantiköy), whose foundation is attributed to [Constantine the Great](#).

### 3. The orthodox churches of Constantinople

#### 3.1. From the 15th to the 18th century

Thanks to the multitude of written sources (chronicles, censuses) that understandably accompanied and recorded a change as dramatic as the conquest of Constantinople, we are today in a position to reconstruct, however partially, the image of the urban landscape, especially that of the Christian districts, during the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, the dispersion of the orthodox religious sites remains unclear for the following centuries (16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>), but the information is abundant. Stefanos Gerasimos has studied the per district and by name ottoman catalogues made for the payment of the capital tax where the members of the Greek-orthodox parishes were recorded, between the years 1540 and 1544. Besides that, those interested in the orthodox churches of the city are aware of the records by Petros Gyllios (1547), by the Russian Tryphon Korobeinikov (1593), by Antonios Paterakis (1604), by Thomas Smith (1675), but also by the thorough researches of [Manouil Gedeon](#) and A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus. However, this material is not sufficient in order to accurately map the orthodox presence in the ottoman capital, mainly because the names but also the location of many churches appears to have changed between the two records. According to Korobeinikov, for example, in 1593 the city had 46 Christian churches. Eleven years later (1604), Paterakis mentions 47. But the two records are not similar; there are churches mentioned by one and omitted by the other, while, at the same time, on the 1604 list six new churches are included, that had not appeared in the 1593 one.

In his numerous studies concerning orthodox churches in Constantinople, Manuel Gedeon believes that name-changes, churches disappearing in some districts only to re-appear some decades later bearing the same or another name, reflect demographic shake-ups. The same writer – an intellectual beacon of the late ottoman period, who was interested in the state of orthodox churches during the 17<sup>th</sup> century – notes that many churches were destroyed by fires (three in [Galata](#) in 1660; eleven in 1739; three in [Nichori](#) in 1772; seven at Vlaga and [Psamathia](#) in 1782) and that the indigence of the “Nation” was so great that “despite the protection and the leniency of the Conqueror’s heirs, it was not possible to rebuild any (of the fallen churches) in its former beauty or glory”.<sup>1</sup>



### 3.2. From the 19th to the 20th century

By the time of Tanzimat, the permits to build Christian churches multiply. Most of the ca. 80 churches that, in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, operate on the borders of the Constantinople archdiocese and the [Metropolis of Chalcedon](#), Derka and Prigkiponnisa, are 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings. However, even during the “liberal” period of the reformations, churches being build or repaired are generally humble and obscure within the urban landscape. Aghios Georgios (St George) Antiphonitis in [Fanari](#) (1830), Panaghia (Virgin) Hantzeriotissa in Tekfursaray (1837), Aghios Minas of Psothathia (1833) or Panaghia tou Palaiou Baniou (Virgin of the Old Bath) in Beşiktaş (1864?) are, from that point, quite characteristic. On the contrary, remarkable (yet not unique) is the exception of the Aghia Triada Stavrodromiou (Holy Trinity of the Crossroads) church that “dominates” the south corner of the Taksim square and whose opening was celebrated in much grandeur in September 1880. For the Greeks of Constantinople, the Holy Trinity church, built by the architect Vassilakis Efendi Ioannides, is a special case not only because of its sheer size, but also because on many occasions its completion was almost cancelled due to shortage in capital; wealthy Greeks had to get mobilized in order to successfully complete construction, which lasted more than 20 years. The opening ceremony, when it finally happened, carried a great symbolic importance, since all of the city’s inhabitants – orthodox and non-orthodox – realized that the Greek orthodox community was in a position to undertake and complete ambitious and grand plans, leaving its mark and transforming the urban landscape. If the Holy Trinity had not been built after all, maybe neither would have the ["Zappeio" girls' School](#) (1885), the [Great School of the Nation](#) (1882), the ["Zografeio" Lycaum](#) (1893).

### 4. The churches’ waqf status

In ottoman cities, the religious buildings (either churches or synagogues or mosques) are generally preserved by the income coming from leases on neighboring, usually, property (shops, work-houses, houses). Characterized as “**Wakfs**” regarding their legal status from 1935 onwards, these estates could not, initially, be sold, since their purpose was the maintenance of the religious building, on which they were depended. This means that most of the churches in Constantinople were (and still are) the core of a building complex, following the example of Muslim mosques. The church of Aghia Euphemia is mentioned for example, to which many stores and work-shops in the market of Chalcedon (Kandiköy) belong, the church of Aghia Triada (Holy Trinity) in Taksim, from which the surrounding buildings are depended on (shops, restaurants etc), but also Panaghia (Virgin) of [Pera](#) (Stavrodormi, Beyoğlu) which borders an imposing “apartment” (block of flats).

### 5. Orthodox churches by other nationalities (non-Greek)

#### 5.1. Russian, Bulgarian, Rumanian

From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the location of the orthodox churches in Constantinople, bear the changes that came upon the orthodox religion by the establishment of national states and the creation of autocephalous churches in the Balkans. Besides the churches that belong to the [Ecumenical Patriarchy](#), there are more being administrated by other Churches, especially the Russian, the Bulgarian and the Rumanian ones, all of which do not use Greek as the liturgical language, even though they follow the same Byzantine ceremonial ritual. In a very thorough sturdy, Vasileios Stavrides mentions four Russian orthodox glebes in Galata (Aghios Panteleimon, Aghios Andreas, Prophitis Elias, Aghia Triada), that were founded around 1870 and operated as lodging places for the many Russian pilgrims of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1920s, these buildings were used to house the thousands of refugees arriving in Constantinople after the 1917 Russian Revolution. In 1930 the church of Aghios Andreas ceases to operate, its glebes are taken seized by the Turkish police and are handed over to the tax service. Stavrides also chronicles the Bulgarian churches operating in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; Aghios Ioannis (St John) of Rila in Sisli (founded in 1870), Aghios Stefanos (St Stephen) in Phanari (the celebrated knock-down metallic church, 1898), the cemetery church of Aghios Demetrios (St Demetrius, 1921) and the chapel of Aghios Panteleimon (St Panteleimon) in the Bulgarian hospital. As for the Rumanians, whose demographic presence in Constantinople increased greatly after 1990, from 2004 onwards they are accommodated in the church of Aghia Paraskevi of Pikridion ([Hasköy](#)) after an agreement between the Rumanian Patriarchy and Phanari and with the permission of the Turkish authorities.



## 5.2. The case of Turkish-speaking orthodox

Lastly, as a product of the area of nationalism, the [Turkish-Orthodox Church](#) of [Papa Eftim](#) deserves an honorary mention. This Church founded in [Cappadocia](#) just before the Asia Minor Disaster with the support of kemalists and in order to destabilize the Ecumenical Patriarchy, used Turkish as its liturgical language and appealed mainly to the Turkish-speaking orthodox population of Anatolia ([Karamanlis](#)). After the population exchange and the departure of all orthodox Christians from Asia Minor to Greece, Papa-Euthym's venture had no demographic to rely on and became totally obsolete. The self-called "Turkish-Orthodox Patriarchy" was confined in the quarter of Galatas where it impropriated, with the silent approval of the authorities, the wealthy orthodox parishes and churches of Panaghia (Virgin) Kafatiani, Agios Ioannis Chion (St John of Chios) and the church of Sotiras Christos (Christ the Savior).

## 6. The practice of church devotion

The church's names, as recorded from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, express at large the believers' focus on certain personalities from the history of Christianity. Among them the Mother of Christ, St George, St Demetrius, St Paraskevi, St Nicholas, St Panteleimon and St Charalambos, are quite prominent.

### 6.1. The Virgin Mary

The many churches that have been dedicated to Virgin Mary bear many different names, some of which state locations, while others state her attributes or advert milestone events of her life: Pammakaristos, Perivleptos, Elpida, Gorgoepikoos, ton Ouranon, Zoodochos Pigi, but also Mouchliotissa, Kyriotissa, Hantzeriotissa, Souda, Vefa, Vlachernon, Kafatiani, Balinou, Palaiou Baniou, Eisodion, Evaggelistria. For the Christian inhabitants of the city, Virgin Mary is not just the Mother of Christ, honoured and loved by all Christians, wherever they are. She is a familiar figure, who "took part" in many different and crucial events of the city's turbulent history leaving an intense impression on collective memory. The case of Panaghia ton Vlachernon (Virgin Mary of Vlacherna) is one of the most indicative – but also famous – cases of Virgin Mary's "active" participation in local history.

The first humble building dedicated to Panaghia ton Vlavhernon (Virgin Mary of Vlacherna) was built in 430 near a water source, whose water was thought of as miraculous (hagiasma). A few years later, when Mary's cloak was found in Jerusalem and sent to Constantinople, Emperor Leon I (457-474) built a church on that spot in order to keep the holy relic safe. Scarlatos Byzantius, in an exceptional topographic description of Constantinople, mentions that, when they went on campaign, the Byzantine emperors took that piece of fabric with them and used it as a war flag, because they considered it a talisman. During the reign of Leon I, in the church of Vlacherna a belt of Virgin Mary was also presented. Four centuries later, that belt "released" the Empress Zoe, wife of Leon the Wise, from her "demons". Since then, this miracle is being commemorated by the Orthodox Church on August 31<sup>st</sup>.

From this long history, the Greek collective memory mainly kept Virgin Mary of Vlacherna intervention during the [siege of Constantinople by the Avars in 626](#), when the Emperor Heraclius was away on campaign against the Persians. Here, on the city walls, Virgin Mary appeared dressed for battle to encourage the Byzantine soldiers and save her city. And here, the people of Constantinople gathered later to praise her. Up until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite the demographic shrinking of the Constantinople Greeks, every Saturday morning of the fifth week of Easter Lent, the humble church of Panaghia ton Vlavhernon is filled with believers who come to commemorate that specific historical event.

### 6.2. St George

The special place that is saved for St George, who is commemorated on April 23<sup>rd</sup> and to whom Constantinople Christians have dedicated many churches, in popular local worship practices, is partly due to his ability to crush the multiple "dragons" of human existence. However, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, which according to the Julian calendar coincides with May 6<sup>th</sup>, is an important day for Muslims as well, since they celebrate Hinterlez. Related to Nature's rebirth and early spring (like the celebration of St Demetrius on October



26<sup>th</sup> signifies the passing to the winter period), it unifies, until mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Christians and Muslims around common festivities and rites-de-passages ceremonies, for which there are many attestations. In Turkish Constantinople of the year 2000, the case of thousands of Muslim pilgrims flocking every year on April 23<sup>rd</sup> to the monastery of St George Koudounas on the island [Pringipos](#) to honour, but also to beg the “delivering” saint to grace them, is very well known. Regarding other districts of Constantinople where there are churches dedicated to St George ([Ortaköy](#), Psamathia, Fanari, [Edirne Kapu](#), [Yeldeyirmen](#), [Kouzgoudzouki](#), Çengelköy, Makrochori), April 23<sup>rd</sup> remains a very special day for Muslims, since many do not fail to light a candle in his memory.

### 6.3. Other saints

Protector of sailors and all of those who earn their living at sea (fishermen, boatmen, punters, many of whom were living in Constantinople until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) St Nicolas, is commemorated in churches located in Galatas, Nichori on Bosphorus, [Cibali](#), Psamathia, Topkapı, and also [Chalki](#) and Pringipos.

St Paraskevi, as well as – even though less – saints Panteleimon and Charalambos, are also included in those personages of Christianity that marked the every day life and psyche of the common man in Constantinople. Healing saints, they were for centuries both refuge and the last hope against endemic diseases, but also when every kind of epidemics (especially the plague, cholera, typhus) broke out. It should be stated that in the whole Constantinople area, there are about 70 hagiasmata (springs of holy water) dedicated to St Paraskevi, not to mention four churches still operative (in Hasköy, Therapia, Büyük Dere, Beykoz). Originating from Asia Minor and equally effective in easing human pain, saints Panteleimon and Charalambos, also have their miraculous fountains in [Kouzgoudzouki](#), Çengelköy, Bebeki where their memory is kept along with the traditions of orthodox Anatolia.

Like the Virgin Mary, St George, St Demetrius, St Nicholas, St Paraskevi, St Charalambos or St Panteleimon are beacons of Constantinople, since their worship has been unifying for centuries Christians and non-Christians (especially Muslims) around common worship practices, abolishing some of the barriers official religion raises among men. The relative incongruity that is apparent nowadays in mapping out the orthodox churches in Constantinople is anything but original. In contrast, its diachronic examination and the reading of the successive layers of collective constantopolitan memory, verifies that the polyphony and multitude of cultural identities has always been a sine qua non characteristic of the Eastern Orthodox Church, whose longevity is ensured by its ecumenical status.

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## Glossary :



**firman**

In the Ottoman Empire, an imperial edict or commission signed and sealed by the Sultan.



**tanzimat**

The 19th-century reforms in the Ottoman Empire, which were inaugurated in 1839 with the edict of Hatt-i Şerif and came to an end with the Constitution of 1876. The reforms, which were considered an effort for the modernization and liberalization of the state, concerned every aspect of the political, social and economic life in the Empire. Of particular importance were the ones that equated legally Muslim and non-Muslim subjects.



**wakf (vakif)**

A foundation, a grant of land or other source of income, including tax revenues, which was considered to be dedicated according to the sacred law (şeriat) and was used for religious and charitable purposes.