

A detailed mosaic of Emperor Justinian I, wearing a crown and ornate robes, holding a model of the Hagia Sophia. The background is gold leaf, and there is a halo around his head. To the left, there is a column of Greek text. The title 'Hagia Sophia' is written in a large, blue, cursive font across the center, and 'A Photo Essay' is written in a smaller, blue, cursive font below it. The author's name 'by Daniel C. Waugh' is at the bottom left.

# *Hagia Sophia*

*A Photo Essay*

*by*

*Daniel C. Waugh*





*Hagia Sophia from the Sea of Marmora, the Church of St. Irene to the right.*

...a spectacle of great beauty, stupendous to those who see it and altogether incredible to those who hear of it...

-- Procopius, *De aedificiis*

The Great Church, as described by Emperor Justinian's chronicler Procopius, still astounds the viewer who first sees it on the skyline of Istanbul and then is privileged to contemplate its interior. It impressed all those who visited Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, left its imprint on the architecture of the conquering Ottoman Turks, and even in our own time has again become a focus of attention and controversy. The selection of photos (all taken by Daniel Waugh) which follows here provides a visual introduction to the history and artistic glories of this building, which is one of the great monuments of world culture. In many ways it is much changed over the centuries, but is no less impressive as a result.

*The "Blue Mosque" (Sultan Ahmet Camii) and Hagia Sophia*





Aerial view of Istanbul juxtaposed to a 17th-century Ottoman map of Constantinople, the arrows indicating the location of Hagia Sophia.



Located on the Bosphorus, the waterway connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, Byzantium/Constantinople/Istanbul was ideally situated to play a key role in the historic “Silk Road” trade across Afro-Eurasia. The heart of the city is on a peninsula along whose northern shore extends one of the great natural harbors of the world, the Golden Horn. As shown above, the Bosphorus runs North to South, emptying into the Sea of Marmora. Emperor Constantine I made the city the capital of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the fourth century CE. Under Emperor Justinian I (527-565), the Byzantine Empire extended from Spain to the Euphrates. His gold coins were in a sense the “reserve currency” of his realm and even were treasured as exotica as far away as China. Justinian was a lavish patron of architecture. Hagia Sophia, arguably the greatest of his foundations, was erected beginning in 537 to celebrate his suppression of a major revolt in the capital. Its dedication is to the Divine Wisdom.



(above) Gold solidi of Justinian I, that on the right found in the tomb of the important general Tian Hong (d. 575) at Guyuan, Ningxia, China. (right) The Golden Horn at sunrise looking east. Hagia Sophia is in the far upper right corner.





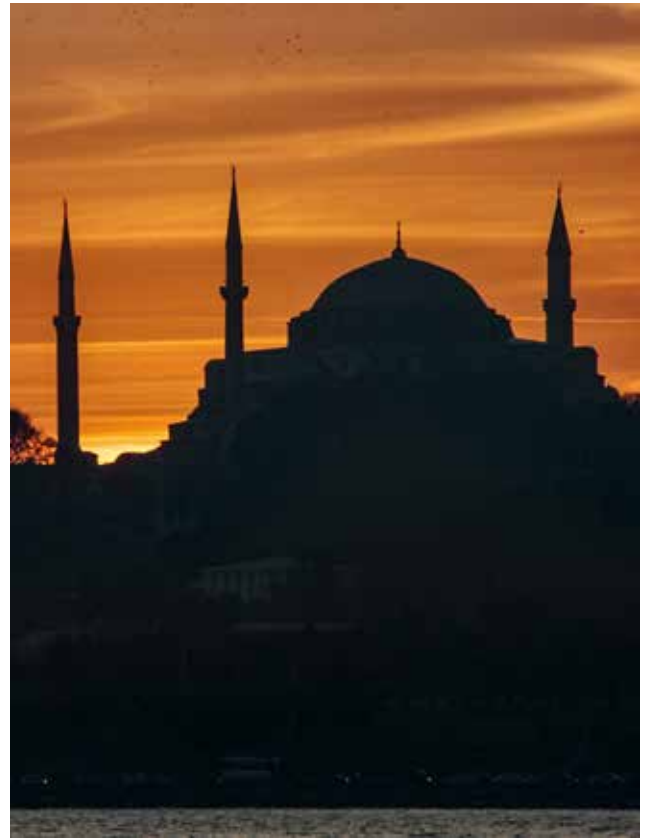
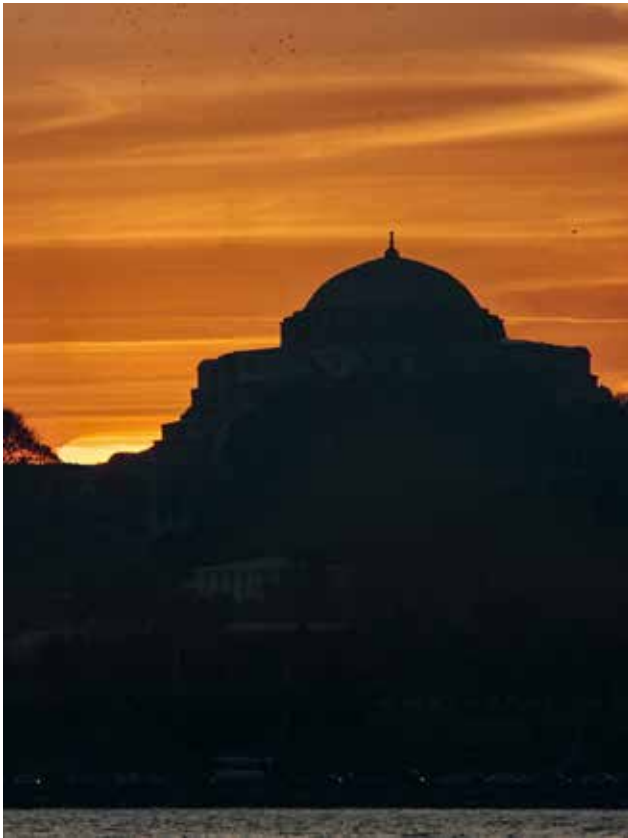


*Dedication mosaic (late 10th century) above a doorway leading from the south narthex to the main narthex that runs along the west side of the building. On the left, Justinian I presents the cathedral and on the right, Constantine I presents his capital city, invoking the protection of the Virgin Mary.*

The church was erected on the location of an earlier cathedral whose remains can be seen displayed adjoining the western side of Hagia Sophia. Its facade, shown here in a reconstruction drawing, included a typical Roman temple portico, from which there are remains of the bases of columns and some of the carved decoration.







*The silhouette of Hagia Sophia, as imagined on the left without the current minarets that were added after the conversion of the church into a mosque by the Ottomans.*

Justinian obviously wanted something more grandiose and daring in its design, which must explain why he turned to two “engineers” rather than to experienced architects. Their design in fact was so daring for the proportions of the dome that it collapsed and had to be re-built with a higher arch two decades later. As the historian of Byzantine architecture, Richard Krautheimer has put it, “Defying all laws of statics, shaken by successive earthquakes, collapsing at its weak points and being repaired, the H. Sophia stands by sheer miracle.” Procopius’ encomiums in his description of the exterior aside, to the modern eye the silhouette impresses more with its bulk than with grace, a feeling reinforced by the massive buttresses.

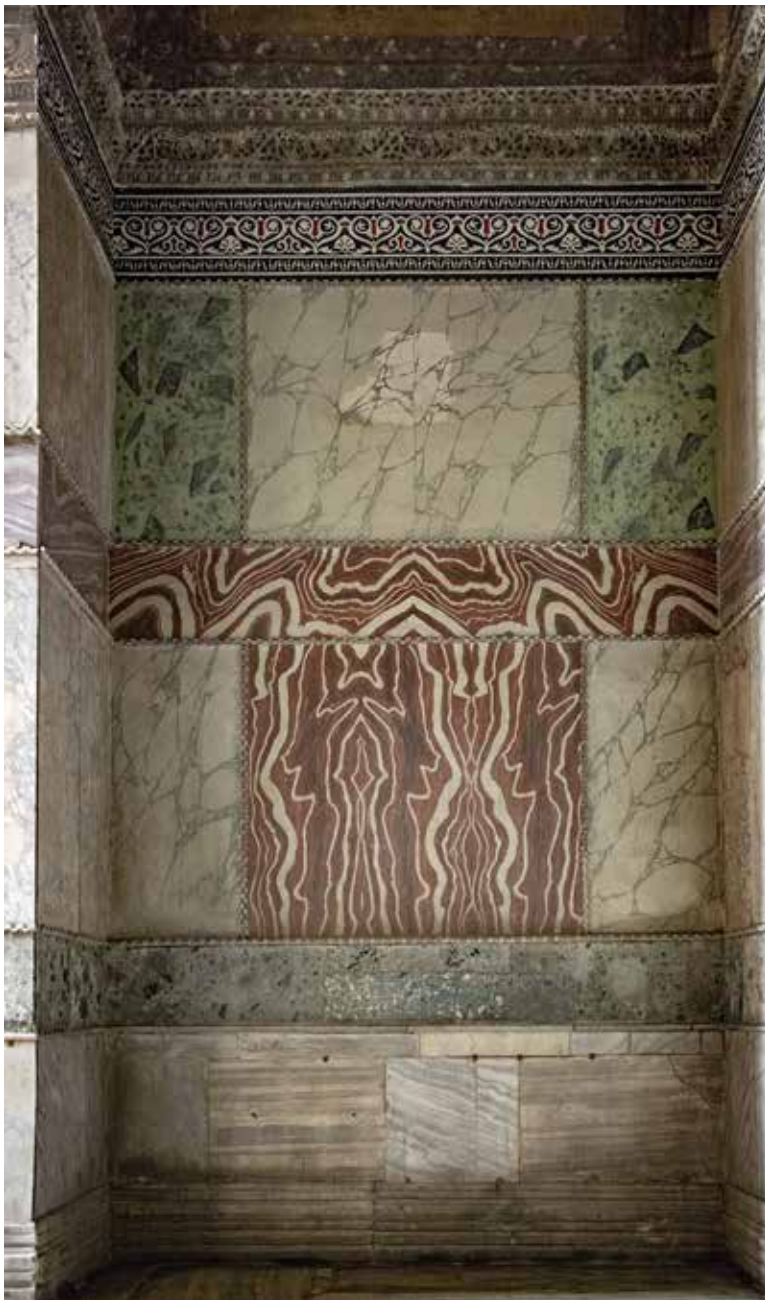


*Hagia Sophia from the south.*



*The column of St. Gregory.*

An anonymous Russian traveler who visited the church in ca. 1390 was particularly taken by the various holy relics on display. While they were removed by Sultan Mehmet II after he conquered the city and converted the church into a mosque, a curious relic of earlier belief remains in the “weeping column” of St. Gregory, where tourists line up to make a wish that allegedly will come true if their finger emerges damp from a hole in its side.



It appears that the development of a coherent iconographic scheme of mosaic decoration occurred only after the end of the iconoclasm of the 8th and early 9th centuries. Decorative mosaic bands presumably from the earliest period still can be seen on arches. But the now well-known anthropomorphic representations of the holy figures and the rulers invoking their intercession all date from various later periods. One of the famous “Silk Road” travelers, Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, the Spanish ambassador who traveled to the court of Tamerlane in Central Asia at the beginning of the 15th century, described in some detail Hagia Sophia, which even in that period of Byzantine decline impressed him with its mosaics, colored marble columns and cladding, and a canopied ambo or pulpit that stood in the center of the nave. Most of the mosaics are gone, but the polished marble and exquisitely carved capitals remain.

*Polished marble paneling in the upper gallery.*





*The inlaid floor marking the location in the nave where the imperial coronation took place.*



*Columns (among them ones of precious porphyry), carved impostes and capitals, and a carved beam in the second-floor gallery. Some capitals that one sees today are modern replicas.*



A7







Visitors enter today from the south under the dedication mosaic depicting Justinian and Constantine. Above the central door of the narthex, used for imperial processions, Emperor Leo VI (886-912) kneels before the enthroned Christ.





In the late 10th century, according to tradition, wishing to adopt one of the religions of the book, the pagan Prince Vladimir of Kievan Rus sent out diplomatic missions to observe their practices. His emissary to Constantinople reported, “They took us to the place where they serve their God, and we did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth. Nothing like such beauty can be seen, and we are unable to explain it all. We only know that in that place God is present.” Surely he was describing the impact of walking into the vast domed space of the Great Church, which would have been alive from the light streaming through countless windows and at night the flickering of candles and lamps on the gold mosaics covering the vaults and dome.



This composite view toward the main apse provides a sense of the vastness of the space but also reminds the visitor how much changed as a result of the Ottoman conquest of the city in the 15th century. Covered over with plaster, some of the mosaics survived, uncovered and restored after the building was declared a secular museum in 1934. An image of the Virgin Mary holding Jesus, dated to the mid-9th century, occupies the place of prominence in the conch of the apse. A *mihrab* (indicating the direction of Mecca) and *minbar* (pulpit) had been added, along with numerous Arabic inscriptions. The large medallions inscribed with the names of Allah, the Prophet Muhammed, the first four caliphs, and two of the Prophet's grandsons were produced by a noted calligrapher for a restoration in the 19th century.









On the bema vault over the apse were images of the archangels . Only fragments remain on the north, but the south side preserves most of the lovely 9th-century image of Gabriel.

The pendentives (the triangular architectural elements that transition from the circular dome to the rectangular nave) are decorated with seraphim, only one of which now preserves the face of the angel.









While the mosaics had been plastered over back in the first century after the Ottoman conquest, in the middle of the 19th century, the Sultan hired Italian specialists who uncovered and consolidated them and then plastered and painted them over with non-figural “neo-Gothic” designs. Much of that painted overlay still can be seen on the vaults of the church. The restoration project of the Byzantine Institute, under the direction of Thomas Whittemore, uncovered and conserved the main mosaic panels in the late 1930s, the records of its work now preserved at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library in Washington, D.C. While our photos do not include all of the important panels, the most significant ones located on the gallery level of the church are shown here.



*Emperor Alexander, mosaic probably dated to 912/913, located in a rather dark niche on the north side of the center bay of the north gallery. In his right hand is a silken pouch (akakia) wrapped in a handkerchief; in his left hand an orb.*





(above). Emperor John II Komnenos and Empress Irene presenting donations to the Virgin and Christ child, ca. 1118/1122.  
 (below). Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos and Empress Zoe presenting donations to Christ, 11th century.







While Constantine IX Monomachos and his wife Zoe reigned from 1042-1050, significant portions of the mosaics date from the time of his predecessors, Romanus III and Michael IV, to whom she had been married. Constantine's name replaces that of his predecessor, and the images of the heads have been updated.



The panel which evokes perhaps the most admiration in the gallery depicts a deesis, with Mary and John the Baptist praying to Christ. It has been dated as early as the 1260s, though some specialists place it in the 14th century.







*In Orthodox iconography, the central figures of the deesis, shown here, may be flanked by additional saints: the archangels Michael and Gabriel, the Apostles Peter and Paul, and other apostles or possibly locally venerated saints. With the development of the high icon screen in the late Byzantine period, the deesis row of icons is the central focus of the larger array. The late 18th-early 19th century icon screen below is in the Church of the Transfiguration at Kizhi in northern Russia.*







The period in which this exquisite *deesis* mosaic was crafted (whatever exactly its date) was in a sense the twilight of Byzantium, whose decline had been accelerating by the late 12th century as the Italian commercial powers gained control of its international trade and political strife weakened the government. A curious testimony to the latter seems to be embodied in the wall-size stucco copy of a synodal decree of 1186 displayed in the outer narthex of Hagia Sophia. A church council which met in the cathedral reversed an earlier decision compelling noblewomen to enter convents but then also deposed the Patriarch, who had crossed the new emperor, Isaac II Angelus, in approving a marriage of illegitimate royals.

The crisis of empire culminated with the diversion of the Fourth Crusade to Constantinople and the crusaders' taking of the city by storm in 1204. Massive looting occurred, with many of the spoils carried off to Venice, most famous among them the quadriga of bronze

horses that then was installed high on the facade of the Cathedral of San Marco. A Latin emperor was crowned in Hagia Sophia, which, even if we allow for much rhetorical excess by the contemporary Niketas Choniates, lost some of its treasures and many of its holy relics. When Marco Polo's father and uncle passed through Constantinople on their way to Central Asia in 1260, the city was still in Latin hands, but in the following year, the Greeks recaptured it. The next decades under the new Palaeologian dynasty witnessed a kind of Renaissance in intellectual life and the arts, as exemplified in the Hagia Sophia *deesis* and the exquisite mosaics and murals of the Kariye Camii, another of the Byzantine churches that recently has been converted back from museum status to being an active mosque.



(middle). Medieval Italian ships imagined sailing in the Sea of Marmora near the great Byzantine walls that failed in 1204 to protect the city.



(bottom). The splendid bronze quadriga looted from Constantinople by the Venetians. Shown here are the original statues, now protected from the elements inside the Cathedral of San Marco, which has replicas of them on the facade.





*Portrait of Sultan Mehmet II by Gentile Bellini, 1480. Collection of the National Gallery, London.*

Having lost most of the Empire's territories, reduced to a handful of its former population, the once great city fell to the Ottoman army in 1453. The last emperor perished on the walls. Even though the rest of the Christian world knew the end was near, it had failed to provide support and treated the news as a great catastrophe. Over the next century, the Ottomans conquered the Middle East, extended their power across North Africa and threatened the heart of Europe. Mehmet II, who earned the sobriquet "The Conqueror," immortalized by the Italian artist Bellini and buried in an elaborate mausoleum near one of the great mosques that rises over the Golden Horn, understandably today is one of the heroes of Turkish history. Well educated with a breadth of interests beyond his faith, he exercised the prerogative of the conqueror of a city that failed to submit peaceably when he converted Hagia Sophia into a mosque.





Over its nine centuries as the most important of Byzantium's churches, Hagia Sophia inspired the construction of many other central places of worship dedicated to Sophia, the Divine Wisdom. However, architecturally they emulated the building practices of their times, not the original.



Relations between Byzantium and the Viking princes who ruled the lands of Rus in the 9th to 11th centuries were close, if not always friendly. Viking warriors were hired by the emperors for their palace guard, one of them scratching his name in runes on the marble parapet of Hagia Sophia. The conversion of Prince Vladimir of Kiev to Orthodoxy in the late 10th century probably was not due to recognition of its superiority as a religion but rather involved a marriage alliance and military support for one of the emperors. When his son Iaroslav took the throne in Kiev, in celebration of a military vic-

tory over the nomadic Pechenegs he commissioned a magnificent new cathedral dedicated to the Divine Wisdom. Even though the goal was to emulate the Great



Church in Constantinople, the architecture and iconographic program of the Kievan Sancta Sophia follow 11th-century Byzantine norms. Byzantine mosaicists were hired to supervise the interior decoration, including a depiction of the Eucharist, with Christ officiating, assisted by an archangel at the canopied altar (here we see the left side of the apse).

< A reconstruction model of the original appearance of Kievan Hagia Sophia.







The route “from the Varangians to the Greeks,” connecting Constantinople along the East European waterways to the Baltic, ran past Kiev. Its major political and commercial center on the north was the city of Novgorod. There, in the middle of the 11th century, another great church dedicated to the Divine Wisdom was erected. Although influenced by the Kievan model (and possibly some knowledge of Western churches), its architects adapted the design to the harsh conditions of Russia.

Another of the important churches dedicated to the Divine Wisdom, initially erected for an Orthodox Patriarch in medieval Bulgaria, is in Ohrid. The current building, roughly a contemporary of the Novgorod Sancta Sophia, has a basilical nave influenced less by Byzantine than by Western architecture. It preserves important frescoes following Byzantine iconographic norms: the seated Virgin is in the conch of the apse; on the arch above her is a *deesis*; below her is the Eucharist; on the vault is a scene of the Ascension. The *minbar* on the right was added when the Turks converted the church into a mosque.



One of the last parts of the Byzantine Empire to fall to the Turks was the Empire of Trebizond (Trabzon), where in the middle of the 14th century the local rulers of the Comneni Dynasty erected their own Hagia Sophia.



In the somewhat under five centuries of Ottoman rule in the former Byzantine capital, changes were made in Hagia Sophia (renamed the Aya Sofya Camii) to conform to the requirements for a mosque.



One can appreciate the aesthetics of the mosque lamps juxtaposed to the calligraphic medallions. Above, the name of the first of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, Umar ibn al Khattab (d. 644 CE/23 AH); on the right, the name of Al-Husayn ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 680 CE/61 AH),

a grandson of the Prophet whose martyrdom at Karbala is commemorated in a day of mourning by Shi'i Muslims. The *minbar* (on the left here) and the *mihrab* (on the right) were renovated in the 19th century. The two large candlesticks flanking the *mihrab* are trophies seized by Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent in Hungary in the 16th century.







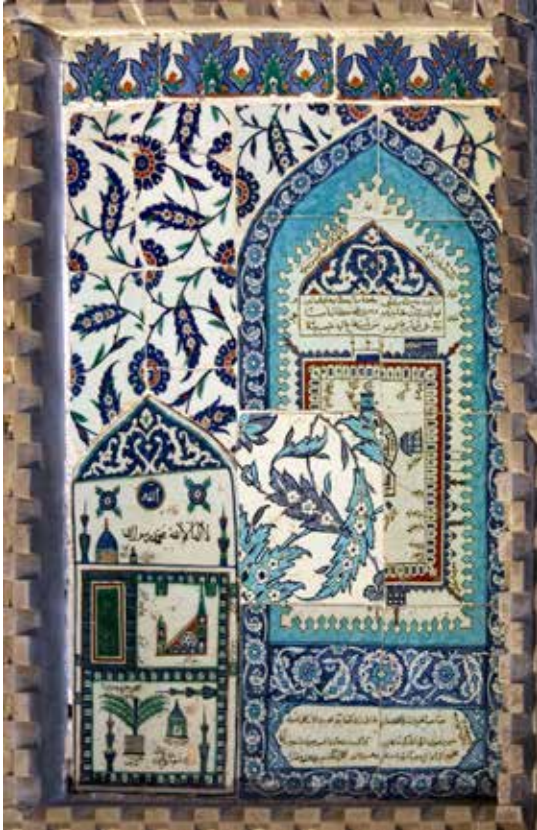
*Among the Ottoman additions was a screened loge where the sultan prayed, the current version, a creation of the 19th century, shown on the left after a recent restoration.*



*An impression believed to be the footprint of the Prophet, displayed in the Topkapi Saray treasury. (Photo from 1996)*

“Trophies” added in the late 16th century in the Aya Sofya Camii included two huge polished marble purification urns, brought from Pergamon/Bergama, where they had been made in the 2nd century BCE. After the conquest of Arabia in the early 16th century, the sultans assumed the mantle of the Sunni caliphs with responsibility for the Muslim holy cities. Over time, a great many relics of the Prophet and the venerated figures of the Old Testament were collected and are now kept in the Topkapi Saray treasury. It would be interesting to learn to what degree any of them may have replaced the Christian relics in Hagia Sophia, since it is not uncommon for mosques to contain analogous Islamic relics.





In the passage to the north of the apse are several panels of Iznik tiles. In the center of the one on the east wall is a *mihrab*. The correct direction of Mecca is indicated by the *mihrab* placed in the apse itself, off-center to the SE. It is not clear when these tile panels may have been added. Note that a separately framed smaller one (above) is a mashup of pieces of different tiles, one of which presumably showed the holy sanctuary at Mecca.



A baptismal font displayed in an annex on the south side of the building. Presumably it had formerly been in the separate baptistery to the south, which was converted into a mausoleum for the deposed Sultan Mustafa I (d. 1639).





What one might term the “museification” of Hagia Sophia, apart from the addition of explanatory captioning, has included the moving of artifacts into the building which presumably never were there originally but might interest tourists. Among them is a large sarcophagus (typical of those made for Byzantine royalty) which was installed in the outer narthex in 1960 next to the wall-size replica of the synodal decree of 1186 (also added at that time??). The sarcophagus is that of the Empress Irene who had been buried in the Pantocrator Monastery. The galleries of the building have been used for special exhibitions, one displaying wonderful examples of modern Islamic calligraphy, and another the stunning large-scale photographs of Hagia Sophia by the Turkish photographer Ahmet Ertuğ, which had illustrated a lavish book of his entitled *Hagia Sophia: A Vision for Empires*. (For the many publications that include his photos, visit the website of Borusan Sanat/Ertuğ & Kocabiyık Publications <[https://www.borusansanat.com/en/publications\\_7/ertug-kocabiyik\\_41/](https://www.borusansanat.com/en/publications_7/ertug-kocabiyik_41/)>).

*The sarcophagus of Empress Irene.*



*A visitor in the exhibition of Ahmet Ertuğ's photographs.*





The legacy of Hagia Sophia to Turkish mosque architecture has been substantial, as one can readily see from comparing these views from the east of the church and the nearby Sultan Ahmet Camii (the Blue Mosque). However, we are not dealing with mere copies; the architectural designs reflect the individual talents of the Ottoman practitioners. The interior of the Blue Mosque, striking as it is, has been criticised for its massive columns, structural features that in Hagia Sophia are concealed behind the sides of the nave. The brilliant 16th-century architect Sinan, however, was able to adapt the models to different settings in innovative ways. Among his masterpieces are the Atik Valide Camii in Uskudar (below) and the Suleymaniyye (below right).





The current controversy over the fate of Hagia Sophia involves the decision by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to annul the status of the building as a secular museum and re-convert it to a working mosque. The building had been welcoming the largest number of visitors of any Turkish museum, but its re-establishment as a mosque was a longstanding goal of the president and his Islamist political allies. Apart from genuine religious motivations, arguably one of his goals has been to restore Turkey to its glory days of the Ottoman period. Other former Byzantine churches are again working mosques, and there have been grandiose construction projects, among them the building of imposing Ottoman-style mosques. It is clear from the most recent news about the first day of prayers in the restored Aya Sofya Camii (24 July 2020) that the decision enjoys wide popular support. Pictures show the nave packed with worshippers, with others filling the parks and squares outside of the building. The Byzantine Christian images have been concealed behind drapes during the time of prayer, though the promise is that they will be unveiled at other times for visitors to view.

The decision has provoked an outcry of protest outside of Turkey. Hagia Sophia is listed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, a designation that is supposed to ensure appropriate protection of cultural heritage (though in practice does not always do so....). Conservators and academic specialists have expressed concern about preservation and the limitation of opportunities for the still needed serious study of the building. Some of those protesting see the change as an affront to their Christian beliefs. As Mustafa Akyol, a Muslim, has argued in an opinion essay: "All religious traditions should be respected. And the magnanimity of tolerance should overcome the pettiness of supremacism." At very least, as the images above should suggest, Hagia Sophia/Aya Sofya Camii, has a complex history as a monument reflecting cultural aspirations of different eras, whether or not they meet approval by anyone's current standards of judgment. It is part of our common cultural heritage that merits understanding and close study.

**Note on the photography.** *I first visited the building in 1996. Most of the images were taken in 2010 and 2014. On all those visits, parts of the building were under scaffolding, whose placement changed over time as the restoration work proceeded. This means that some parts of the building were not visible; some areas not under restoration were simply closed to access.*

**Some bibliographic notes.** The Wikipedia entry for Hagia Sophia <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hagia\\_Sophia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hagia_Sophia)> is very informative and has been updated on the current controversy. For the news reports and opinion, see Carlotta Gall, "Erdogan Fulfills Cherished Goal, Opening Hagia Sophia to Prayers," New York Times, 24 July 2020; Mustafa Akyol, "Would the Prophet Muhammad Convert Hagia Sophia?" New York Times, 20 July 2020. On the architecture, see Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (=The Pelican History of Art) (rev. ed. 1975), Ch. 9. While dated and somewhat sketchy, the account by the eminent Byzantine art specialist André Grabar, *Byzantine Painting* (1953/1979), pp. 91-107, introduces the mosaics. Specifically on issues of restoration and conservation, but revealing a great deal about what one now sees in the building, see Natalia B. Teteriatnikov, *Mosaics of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul: The Fossati Restoration and the Work of the Byzantine Institute* (1998). Given the controversies over the dating of the mosaic in the conch of the apse, one should consult the report on its detailed examination which was undertaken in 1964: Cyril Mango and Ernest J.W. Hawkins, "The Apse Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul. Report on Work Carried out in 1964," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 19 (1965): pp. 113+115-151. Both of these works may be downloaded for free from the Dumbarton Oaks website. On an important aspect of the interior furnishings of Byzantine churches with a discussion of relics and theological significance, see the remarkable monograph by Jelena Bogdanović, *The Framing of Sacred Space: The Canopy and the Byzantine Church* (2017), esp. pp. 165-176. An excellent selection of primary source translations is Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453* (1972), pp. 72-102, 187-190, 237, 249. The epigram from Procopius is Mango's translation. For the account of the sack in 1204, see *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, tr. Harry J. Magoulias (1984), p. 315. For the anonymous Russian description of the late 14th century, see George P. Majeska, *Russian Travelers to Constantinople in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries* (1984), esp. pp. 128-137. Clavijo's description is in Clavijo, *Embassy to Tamerlane 1403-1406*, tr. Guy Le Strange (1928), pp. 71-76. My quotation of the report to Prince Vladimir is from an unpublished draft translation of the Russian Primary Chronicle by the late Professor Horace Lunt. Those interested in the music which would have accompanied Byzantine worship in the church can be inspired by Cappella Romana's *Lost Voices of Hagia Sophia*, a sophisticated digitalization reconstructing the acoustics of Byzantine chant as though it is actually being sung in the church. The CD can be purchased via <<https://cappellaromana.org/>>, where one can also access streaming of a concert version. Cappella Romana has also recorded laments on the fall of Constantinople, which can be heard from a link to our web page on the history of the city <<https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/cities/turkey/istanbul/istanbul.html>>.