

An Open Letter About the Status of Hagia Sophia

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30 June 2020

Dear colleagues,

On July 2, the Turkish Council of State will announce a decision regarding the status of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Multiple learned societies have expressed concern regarding this news. As scholars of Byzantine and Ottoman art and culture, we write now, not to protest an action that has not yet been taken, but to clarify the concern that we share, on the basis of the information currently available to us.

In our opinion, the central question is not, “Should Hagia Sophia be a museum or a mosque?” The central question is rather, “How can we best care for Hagia Sophia?”

In other words, we draw a distinction between *function* and *stewardship*. We are concerned that the ongoing dispute over function hinders the development of a management strategy commensurate to the scale of the challenges: preservation of the historical fabric and continued visibility of the works of art of all periods, Byzantine and Ottoman; responsible management of mass tourism; and protection against the threat of earthquake.

From 1453 until 1934, Hagia Sophia served as a congregational mosque, and was administered by a pious endowment (*vakıf*). After the declaration of the Turkish Republic (1923), jurisdiction over all such entities was assumed by a new government ministry, the Directorate General of Foundations. Hagia Sophia continued in use as a mosque throughout the 1920s, but in 1931 restorers began to reveal the mosaics of the interior. The spectacular success of their work convinced the Turkish Council of Ministers (1934) to transfer jurisdiction over the building from the Directorate General of Foundations to the Ministry of Education.

This change in *jurisdiction* coincided with a change in *function*, through which the building was closed to worship. Both jurisdiction and function, however, have continued to evolve. Hagia Sophia is today administered by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, as the administrative successor to the Ministry of Education. At the same time, the function of the building has expanded to include increasingly visible expressions of Muslim piety. Since 1991, there has been a room dedicated to Muslim prayer within the complex. Since 2016, Hagia Sophia has been served by a full-time imam, the call to prayer has sounded from the minarets, and Qur'anic readings and prayers have taken place within during the annual observation of Laylat al-Qadr.

Thus, in a certain sense, Hagia Sophia is currently functioning as both a museum and a mosque. As far as we are aware, the expansion of this latter function has not resulted in damage to the building or obstruction of its works of art. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism remains a responsible steward.

At the same time, prominent voices in Turkey have long argued that the transfer of jurisdiction to the Ministry was unlawful. They claim that the Turkish state did not have the right to “secularize” Hagia Sophia in 1934, since pious endowments are perpetual and inviolable. According to this argument, the rightful custodian of the building is the Directorate General of Foundations.

In recent years, the Directorate General has assumed control of other Byzantine monuments and reopened them to Muslim worship. One prominent example is another Hagia Sophia, this one in Trabzon on the Black Sea, whose proper administration has been contested since 2013. An effort to re-open the building to Muslim prayer included construction of an elaborate set of screens to obscure the Byzantine frescoes. Less publicized, but of more lasting harm, was the campaign of restoration carried out by the Directorate General on Hagia Sophia in Vize (Thrace) in 2006, which resulted in substantial damage to the historical fabric of the building.

Our concern is that the current conflict, until now only a “war of words,” could result in similarly careless treatment of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul: that historical and archaeological evidence could be damaged, and works of art concealed.

Hagia Sophia is too beautiful a monument and too precious a historical document to serve as a pawn in regional politics. Successive Byzantine, Ottoman, and Turkish governments have protected it against the ravages of time and thus maintained its significance not only for themselves, but also for those to come in the future — including all of us. It is a matter of vital concern to us as scholars of Byzantine and Ottoman art and culture that the current Turkish government continue this tradition of responsible stewardship.

Respectfully,

Appendix A: Signatories (Last updated 5 July)

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Appendix B: Une lettre ouverte à propos du statut de Sainte-Sophie

Chers collègues,

Le 2 Juillet, le Conseil d'État turc annoncera sa décision sur le statut de Sainte-Sophie à Istanbul. De nombreuses sociétés savantes ont exprimé leur inquiétude concernant cette nouvelle. En tant que spécialistes d'art et culture byzantins et Ottomans, nous écrivons à présent, non pas pour protester contre une action qui n'a pas encore été entreprise, mais pour exprimer notre inquiétude au vu des informations actuellement à notre disposition.

Selon nous, la question centrale n'est pas "Sainte-Sophie doit-elle être un musée ou une mosquée ?", mais plutôt, "Comment préserver au mieux Sainte-Sophie ?" En d'autres termes, nous faisons une distinction entre fonction et administration. Nous craignons que le conflit en cours sur la fonction fasse obstacle à l'élaboration d'une stratégie de gestion à la mesure des défis : préservation de la structure historique et visibilité continue des œuvres d'art de toutes périodes, gestion responsable du tourisme de masse, et protection contre les séismes.

De 1453 à 1934, Sainte-Sophie servait de mosquée principale et était administrée par une fondation pieuse (vakıf). Après la proclamation de la République turque (1923), la juridiction sur l'ensemble de telles entités fut confiée à un nouveau Ministère, la Direction Générale des Fondations Pieuses. Sainte-Sophie a continué d'être en usage comme mosquée tout au long des années 1920, mais en 1931 les restaurateurs d'œuvres d'art ont commencé à dévoiler les mosaïques de l'intérieur. Le succès spectaculaire de leur travail a convaincu le Conseil des Ministres de

Turquie (1934) d'en confier la juridiction non plus à la Direction Générale des Fondations Pieuses, mais au Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale.

Ce changement de juridiction a coïncidé avec un changement de fonction, l'édifice étant dès lors fermé au culte. Juridiction et fonction ont pourtant toutes deux continué à évoluer. En ce qui concerne la juridiction, Sainte-Sophie est aujourd'hui administrée par le Ministère de la Culture et du Tourisme qui a succédé en tant qu'administrateur au Ministère de l'Éducation. En même temps, la fonction de l'édifice s'est élargie jusqu'à inclure de plus en plus de manifestations visibles de la piété musulmane. Depuis 1991, il existe une salle consacrée à la prière musulmane dans le complexe. Depuis 2016, un imam est affecté à Sainte-Sophie à plein temps, l'appel à la prière est lancé des minarets, et des récitations coraniques ont lieu à l'intérieur durant la célébration annuelle de Laylat al-Qadr (nuit du destin).

Ainsi, d'une certaine façon, Sainte-Sophie fonctionne actuellement à la fois comme musée et comme mosquée. Pour autant que nous sachions, l'expansion de cette dernière fonction ne s'est pas traduite par l'altération de l'édifice ou l'interdiction de l'accès à ses œuvres d'art. Le Ministère du Tourisme a toujours été un administrateur responsable.

En même temps, des voix influentes en Turquie ont depuis longtemps soutenu que le transfert de la juridiction au Ministère était illégal, déclarant que l'état Turc n'avait pas le droit de "séculariser" Sainte-Sophie en 1934, puisque les fondations pieuses sont perpétuelles et inviolables. Selon cet argument, le gardien légitime de l'édifice est la Direction Générale des Fondations Pieuses.

Ces dernières années, la Direction Générale a pris le contrôle d'autres monuments byzantins et les a ouverts au culte musulman. Un exemple majeur est celui de Sainte-Sophie à Trabzon dans la région de la Mer Noire, dont l'administration est contestée depuis 2013. Afin de pouvoir rouvrir l'édifice au culte musulman un ensemble de paravents et d'écrans a été dressés afin de cacher les fresques byzantines. Un autre exemple, moins médiatisée mais causant des dégâts plus durables, fut le projet de restauration menée par la Direction Générale sur Sainte-Sophie à Vize (Thrace) en 2006 qui dégrada considérablement la structure historique de l'édifice.

Notre inquiétude est que ce qui n'est pour l'instant qu'une 'guerre des mots' ne débouche sur le transfert de Sainte-Sophie d'Istanbul à un administrateur moins responsable. Les expériences passées ont montré les risques encourus par les fragiles témoignages historiques et archéologiques, ainsi que par les œuvres d'arts dissimulées.

Sainte-Sophie est un monument trop beau et un témoignage historique trop précieux pour être utilisé comme enjeu politique. Les dirigeants successifs, byzantins, ottomans et turcs, ont jusqu'à présent su la protéger contre les ravages du temps et maintenir sa signification non seulement pour eux-mêmes, mais aussi pour les générations futures et pour nous tous. Pour nous, spécialistes et chercheurs d'art et culture byzantins et Ottomans, il est primordial que l'État turc actuel poursuive cette voie d'une administration responsable.

Respectueusement,

Appendix C: Ανοιχτή επιστολή σχετικά με το καθεστώς της Αγίας Σοφίας

Στις 2 Ιουλίου το Συμβούλιο της Επικρατείας της Τουρκίας θα ανακοινώσει την απόφασή του σχετικά με το καθεστώς της Αγίας Σοφίας της Κωνσταντινούπολης. Εν αναμονή των εξελίξεων, πολλές επιστημονικές οργανώσεις έχουν ήδη εκδηλώσει την ανησυχία τους. Οι υπογράφωντες, μέλη της ακαδημαϊκής κοινότητας και μελετητές της τέχνης και του πολιτισμού του Βυζαντίου και της Οθωμανικής Αυτοκρατορίας, έχουμε στόχο όχι την διαμαρτυρία για αποφάσεις που δεν έχουν ακόμα ληφθεί, αλλά την έκφραση της ανησυχίας μας με βάση τα όσα ήδη γνωρίζουμε για το θέμα.

Κατά τη γνώμη μας, το επίδικο σήμερα δεν είναι το αν η Αγία Σοφία πρέπει να είναι μουσείο ή τζαμί, αλλά το ποιος είναι ο καλύτερος τρόπος, για να προστατεύσουμε το μνημείο. Με άλλα λόγια, είναι αναγκαία η διάκριση ανάμεσα στη λειτουργία του χώρου και την επιμέλειά του. Αυτό που μας ανησυχεί είναι ότι η συνεχιζόμενη διαμάχη δυσκολεύει την εκπόνηση μιας νέας στρατηγικής διαχείρισης του μνημείου που να στέκεται στο ύψος των προκλήσεων που εκείνο αντιμετωπίζει σήμερα: τη συντήρηση των δομικών του στοιχείων, τη διατήρηση του διακόσμου του σε δημόσια έκθεση, την υπεύθυνη διαχείριση του όγκου των τουριστών που το επισκέπτονται και την προστασία του από τους σεισμούς.

Από το 1453 έως το 1934, την περίοδο που η Αγία Σοφία λειτουργούσε ως τζαμί, υπεύθυνο για τη λειτουργία της ήταν το οικείο ευαγές ίδρυμα (βακούφι). Με την ίδρυση της Τουρκικής Δημοκρατίας το 1923, τη διαχείριση αυτών των ιδρυμάτων ανέλαβε μια νέα κυβερνητική υπηρεσία, η Γενική Διεύθυνση Βακουφίων. Η Αγία

Σοφία συνέχισε να λειτουργεί ως χώρος λατρείας μέχρι το 1931, όταν οι συντηρητές άρχισαν να αποκαλύπτουν τον ψηφιδωτό διάκοσμο στο εσωτερικό της. Το 1934, ως απάντηση στην τεράστια επιτυχία των έργων συντήρησης, το υπουργικό συμβούλιο αποφάσισε να μεταφέρει το μνημείο από τη Γενική Διεύθυνση Βακουφίων στην αρμοδιότητα του Υπουργείου Παιδείας.

Η αλλαγή στο φορέα διαχείρισης του μνημείου συνέπεσε με τη μεταβολή στο καθεστώς λειτουργίας του, καθώς η Αγία Σοφία έπαψε να αποτελεί χώρο λατρείας. Σήμερα το κτίριο ανήκει στην αρμοδιότητα του Υπουργείου Πολιτισμού και Τουρισμού, το οποίο διαδέχτηκε το Υπουργείο Παιδείας στον ρόλο αυτό. Παράλληλα τα τελευταία χρόνια η χρήση του χώρου έχει διευρυνθεί, ώστε να επιτρέπει και πάλι την έκφραση της ισλαμικής πίστης. Το 1991 ένα από τα κτίρια του συμπλέγματος της Αγίας Σοφίας άρχισε να λειτουργεί ως χώρος προσευχής. Από το 2016 και μετά η Αγία Σοφία διαθέτει το δικό της ιμάμη, από το μιναρέ της αντηχεί το κάλεσμα στην προσευχή. Επιπλέον κάθε χρόνο, στην εορτή της Νύχτας του Θεσπίσματος (*λαϊλάτ αλ-καντρ*), το κτίριο φιλοξενεί την ανάγνωση του Κορανίου και οι πιστοί είναι ελεύθεροι να προσευχηθούν στο εσωτερικό του.

Υπό μία έννοια, λοιπόν, η Αγία Σοφία ήδη λειτουργεί συγχρόνως ως μουσείο και ως τζαμί. Η διεύρυνση του θρησκευτικού χαρακτήρα της Αγίας Σοφίας δεν έχει προκαλέσει ζημιές στο κτίριο ή στον ψηφιδωτό του διάκοσμο. Το Υπουργείο Πολιτισμού και Τουρισμού παραμένει ένας ευσυνείδητος διαχειριστής του μνημείου.

Ωστόσο, στην Τουρκία ακούγονται εδώ και καιρό φωνές που υποστηρίζουν ότι η απόδοση της Αγίας Σοφίας στο υπουργείο ήταν παράνομη. Ισχυρίζονται ότι το υπουργικό συμβούλιο δεν είχε το δικαίωμα να «εκκοσμικεύσει» το μνημείο το

1934, καθώς το νομικό καθεστώς των βακουφίων είναι αμετάβλητο και ορίζεται στο διηνεκές. Για αυτούς, ο νόμιμος φορέας διαχείρισης της Αγίας Σοφίας είναι η Γενική Διεύθυνση Βακουφίων.

Στην Τουρκία, κατά τα τελευταία χρόνια πολλά άλλα βυζαντινά μνημεία έχουν περάσει στη δικαιοδοσία της Γενικής Διεύθυνσης και έχουν μετατραπεί σε χώρους ισλαμικής λατρείας. Χαρακτηριστικό παράδειγμα είναι η Αγία Σοφία της Τραπεζούντας, το νομικό καθεστώς της οποίας αποτελεί αντικείμενο αντιπαράθεσης από το 2013. Μια απόπειρα να ανοίξει ο χώρος στην ισλαμική λατρεία συνοδεύτηκε από την κατασκευή περίπλοκων καλυμμάτων που έκρυβαν τα βυζαντινά ψηφιδωτά. Ένα δεύτερο παράδειγμα, λιγότερο γνωστό, είναι η Αγία Σοφία της Βιζύης, τη μετατροπή της οποίας σε τζαμί το 2006 ακολούθησαν εργασίες συντήρησης υπό της εποπτεία της Γενικής Διεύθυνσης Βακουφίων, που προκάλεσαν σοβαρές ζημιές στο κτίριο.

Αυτό λοιπόν που μας κάνει να ανησυχούμε είναι το ενδεχόμενο η μέχρι τώρα λεκτική αντιπαράθεση να οδηγήσει σε αντίστοιχα ανεύθυνες επεμβάσεις στην Αγία Σοφία, με αποτέλεσμα τη φθορά ιστορικών και αρχαιολογικών στοιχείων και την απόκρυψη των έργων τέχνης στο εσωτερικό της.

Ένα μνημείο τόσο όμορφο, ένα ιστορικό κειμήλιο τόσο πολύτιμο όσο η Αγία Σοφία δεν πρέπει να καταλήξει εργαλείο σε παιχνίδια εξωτερικής πολιτικής. Στους αιώνες της ύπαρξής της, η Αγία Σοφία προστατεύτηκε από τη φθορά του χρόνου χάρη στο έργο των Βυζαντινών, Οθωμανών και Τούρκων διαχειριστών της, που κράτησαν ζωντανή τη σημασία του μνημείου όχι μόνο για τους εαυτούς τους αλλά και για τις επόμενες γενιές. Ως μελετητές της τέχνης και του πολιτισμού του Βυζαντίου και

της Οθωμανικής Αυτοκρατορίας, θεωρούμε εξαιρετικά σημαντικό η τουρκική κυβέρνηση να συνεχίσει αυτήν την παράδοση της ευσυνείδητης διαχείρισης.

Appendix D: Ayasofya'nın statüsüne ilişkin açık mektup

Değerli meslektaşlarımız,

2 Temmuz 2020 tarihinde T.C. Danıştay Başkanlığı Ayasofya'nın resmi statüsü ile ilgili kararını kamuoyuna duyuracak. Çeşitli bilim dernekleri ve kuruluşlar bu gelişmeyle ilgili kaygı ve endişelerini dile getirmeye devam ediyorlar. Bizans ve Osmanlı tarihi, kültürü ve sanatları üzerine araştırma yapan bilim insanları olarak bizim bu metni kaleme almaktaki amacımız henüz alınmamış bir karara itiraz etmek değil, ortak kaygılarımızı hâlihazırda sahip olduğumuz bilgilere dayanarak açıklığa kavuşturmak.

Kanaatimizce temel mesele “Ayasofya müze mi yoksa camii mi olsun?” değil, bilakis “Ayasofya'yı en iyi şekilde nasıl koruyabiliriz?” olmalı. Başka bir deyişle biz, yapının *işlevi* meselesi ile *idaresini* (ve *koruma sorumluluğunu*) birbirinden ayrı tutuyoruz. Endişemiz, yapının işlevine dair süregelen tartışmaların önümüzde duran elzem sorunlara cevap verebilecek ölçekte bir idari strateji geliştirmeye engel olması. Özellikle yapının tarihi dokusunun korunması, Bizans ve Osmanlı eserlerinin görünürlüğünün devamı, kitle turizminin sağlıklı bir şekilde idamesi ve deprem tehlikesine karşı gerekli tedbirlerin alınması gibi meseleler bizim için öncelik taşıyor.

Bilindiği üzere 1453'ten 1934'e dek cami olarak hizmet veren Ayasofya'nın idaresi Fatih Sultan Mehmet'in kurduğu vakıf tarafından sağlanmıştır. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin 1923'te ilanından sonra bu ve benzer vakıfların temsil ve idaresi Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü'ne geçmiştir. 1920'lerin sonuna kadar camii olarak

kullanılmaya devam eden Ayasofya’da bu durum ihtiyaç sonucu başlayan restorasyonu yürüten ekibin 1931’den itibaren mozaik bezemeleri gün yüzüne çıkarmasıyla değişmiştir. Bu tarihi kazanımın yadsınamaz önemi dönemin Bakanlar Kurulu’nu binanın idare ve denetimini Maarif Bakanlığı’na devretmeye teşvik ve ikna etmiştir.

Yapının idaresinin el değiştirmesi ile eş zamanlı meydana gelen işlev değişikliği sonucunda Ayasofya ibadete kapanmıştır. Bununla beraber bu dönüşüm mutlak olmamış, tarihi yapının hem işlevi hem de idaresi o tarihten beri muhtelif değişikliklere uğrayarak bugüne kadar gelmiştir. Ayasofya günümüzde, Maarif Bakanlığı’ndan ayrılan T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı tarafından yönetiliyor. Bir yandan da yapının işlevinin hudutları gittikçe daha görünür olan Müslüman cemaatin isteklerini karşılayabilmek maksadıyla genişletilmiştir. 1991’de Hünkar Mahfili Müslüman cemaatin ibadetine açılmış, 2016’dan bu yana ise tam zamanlı bir imam Ayasofya’da hizmet vermeye başlamıştır. Günümüzde minarelerinden ezan sesi yükselen yapıda Kadir Gecesi Kur’an tilaveti ve dualarla kutlanıyor.

Bu açıdan Ayasofya hâlihazırda hem bir müze hem de camii olarak faaliyet gösteriyor. Bildiğimiz kadarıyla yapının ibadethane rolünün genişletilmesi şu ana dek Ayasofya’ya herhangi bir zarar vermemiş, içinde yer alan sanat eserlerinin yeniden gizlenmesine sebep olmamıştır. Bu bağlamda T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı ehil ve sorumluluk sahibi bir idare sergilemeye devam etmekte.

Bununla beraber uzun yıllardır muhtelif sesler yapının sorumluluğunun T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı’na bırakılmasının gayri meşru olduğunu iddia ediyor. Bu kişiler vakıf taşınmazlarını yöneten vakfiyelerin ebedi ve değişmez olduğunu, bu nedenle Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Devleti’nin 1934’te Ayasofya’yı ‘sekülerleştirme’

yetkisine sahip olmadığını savunuyorlar. Bu iddiaya göre, binanın meşru idare mercii Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü.

Son yıllarda Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü devraldığı diğer Bizans dönemi anıtsal eserlerini Müslüman ibadetine açtı. Elimizde olumsuz bir örnek olarak 2013'ten beri idaresi ve uğradığı değişiklikler itiraz ve eleştirilere neden olan Trabzon'daki diğer Ayasofya bulunuyor. Bu tarihi yapıyı ibadete uygun hale getirmek için iç mekânına müdahale eden paravanlar yerleştirilerek Bizans freskleri kapatılmış ve taban mozaiklerinin üzeri ahşap ile örtülmüştür. Güncel tartışmalarda kendine daha az yer bulabilmiş ama uğradığı zararlar çok daha derin ve kalıcı olan Trakya Vize'deki Küçük Ayasofya ise 2006'da geçirdiği restorasyondan tarihi dokusu ciddi şekilde hasar alarak çıkmıştır.

Endişemiz, süregelen ve hâlihazırda sadece 'söylem münakaşası' şeklinde seyreden tartışmaların Ayasofya'nın tarihi ve arkeolojik bulgularının zarar görmesi ve sanat eserlerinin gizlenmesi ile sonuçlanacak benzer şekilde özensiz ve yanlış müdahalelere maruz kalması.

Ayasofya yerel ve bölgesel siyasete âlet edilemeyecek kadar güzel bir anıt ve önemli bir tarihi belge. Birbiri ardına gelen Bizans, Osmanlı ve Türkiye Cumhuriyeti yönetimleri bu anıtı zamanın yıkıcı etkilerinden korumuş ve değerini sadece kendileri için değil, bizler de dâhil olmak üzere bütün gelecek nesiller için muhafaza etmeyi başarmıştır. Mevcut Türkiye Cumhuriyeti devletinin bu korumacı ve sorumluk sahibi idare geleneğini sürdürmesi bizim, Bizans ve Osmanlı tarihi, kültürü ve sanatları üzerine çalışan bilim insanları için hayati öneme sahip.

Saygılarımızla,

Appendix E: History of Publication

The open letter was drafted, circulated for comment, revised, and published by Benjamin Anderson, Ivan Drpić, Cecily Hilsdale, Emily Neumeier, and Galina Tirnanic. We are profoundly grateful to those who drafted and edited the translations. We thank everyone who read and who gave feedback. We apologize to colleagues whose names we inadvertently omitted. We thank the many citizens, students, and colleagues in neighboring disciplines who wrote to express their support.

The English, French, Greek, and Turkish texts were published on Medium on 30 June 2020. As of 5 July, the four posts together had over 12,000 “views” and 4,000 “reads.”

The English text was republished in its entirety by Ahval (1 July), Kathimerini, and Duvar (2 July).

The Greek text was republished in its entirety by Kathimerini, Flash, and Anaskafi (2 July).

The Turkish text was republished in its entirety by Duvar, Euronews, HyeTert, and T24 (2 July).

Various journalists excerpted and /or linked to the letter, for example: Ayla Jean Yackley in Politico (1 July), Anindita Ramaswamy in Deutsche Presse-Agentur (2 July), Andrew Wilks in the National (Abu Dhabi), and Sebnem Arsu in the Independent (3 July).

On 3 July, Ariana Ferentinou wrote in Hürriyet Daily News:

Assuming that the widespread speculation is correct that Turkish Council of State decided yesterday that Hagia Sophia should stay as a museum, although we should wait to see the full text of the decision which will be published in 15 days, it may be a chance for us to look again at the open letter that was signed by thousands of scholars of Byzantine and Ottoman culture from all over the world who took a position about the fate of this unique monument. “In our opinion, the central question is not, “Should Hagia Sophia be a museum or a mosque?” The central question is rather, “How can we best care for Hagia Sophia?”