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Hagia Sophia: Church, Mosque, Museum

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Abstract

Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, the Great Church of the emperors of Rome and the patriarchs of Constantinople, assumed its definitive form in the 6th century CE, the work of the architects Anthemios of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus. A dichotomy between East and West, Rome and Persia, was built into its fabric and determined its rhetorical presentation from the start. This oppositional view coexisted alongside a universalist view of the building, whose geometric perfection evokes an ecumenical divinity. The tension between the two views has informed the use and reception of the building ever since. The oppositional view is evident in its many conversions: from Orthodox cathedral to Catholic (1204) and back again (1261), then from mosque (1453) to museum (1934) and back again (2020). These ideologically charged moments of rupture exist alongside a continuous admiration for the architects' structural achievement, especially the massive span of the dome, and the solemn beauty of the interior, especially the luminous space under the dome. The goal of pilgrims from Asia and from Europe—Christian, Muslim, and secular—Hagia Sophia remains a key monument both for the global history of architecture and for the concept of world heritage.

Keywords: [architecture](#), [Byzantine](#), [Ottoman](#), [sacred space](#), [world heritage](#)

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Justinian's Church, 532–1453

The history of Hagia Sophia is tied to that of Constantinople, the “new Rome” founded in 330 CE by Emperor Constantine I (r. 306–337) on the site of old Byzantium.¹ The city spreads out across a wedge-shaped, hilly peninsula framed by the Sea of Marmara, the Golden Horn, and the Bosphorus Strait, the latter of which connects European Constantinople on its western shores to Asian Chalcedon on its east. Unlike Rome with its martyrs' cemeteries and Jerusalem with its holy sites, Constantinople had no usable Christian past; no saint was buried there and no sacred history transpired there.² It was rather rendered holy by architecture, most notably by two churches built on the city's old Acropolis and dedicated to abstract principles. Hagia Eirene (“Holy Peace” in Greek) was built already under Constantine, while the first church of Hagia Sophia (“Holy Wisdom”) rose under his son and successor, Constantius II (337–361).

Nothing remains of that first Hagia Sophia, which was probably a five-aisled timber-roofed basilica. As such, it followed the conventional and formally unambitious architecture of Rome (like Old St. Peter's and St. John in the Lateran), not the more creative, vaulted forms of Jerusalem (like the Anastasis Rotunda on the site of the Tomb of Christ). When the first Hagia Sophia burned in a riot (404), its replacement, whose west end was excavated in the 20th century, was likewise basilical in form.³ However, when that second church burned in another riot (532), its successor was different in kind, a bold experiment in structure and form.⁴ Procopius, a contemporary historian whose prose description of the church is unsurpassed for its precision and style, supposed that God let its predecessor burn, “foreseeing into what an object of beauty this shrine was destined to be transformed.”⁵

That third Hagia Sophia is the same building one may still visit in 2024, nearly 1,500 years after its consecration on December 27, 537 (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Exterior view of Hagia Sophia from the south, November 2023.

Source: Photograph (cropped) by Wikimedia Commons user Another Believer (License: CC BY-SA 4.0).

At root, it, too, is a basilica. However, its central aisle is exceptionally broad and spanned by a brick-and-mortar dome, which rests on four massive piers and opens on to further half-domes to the east and west (Figure 2).

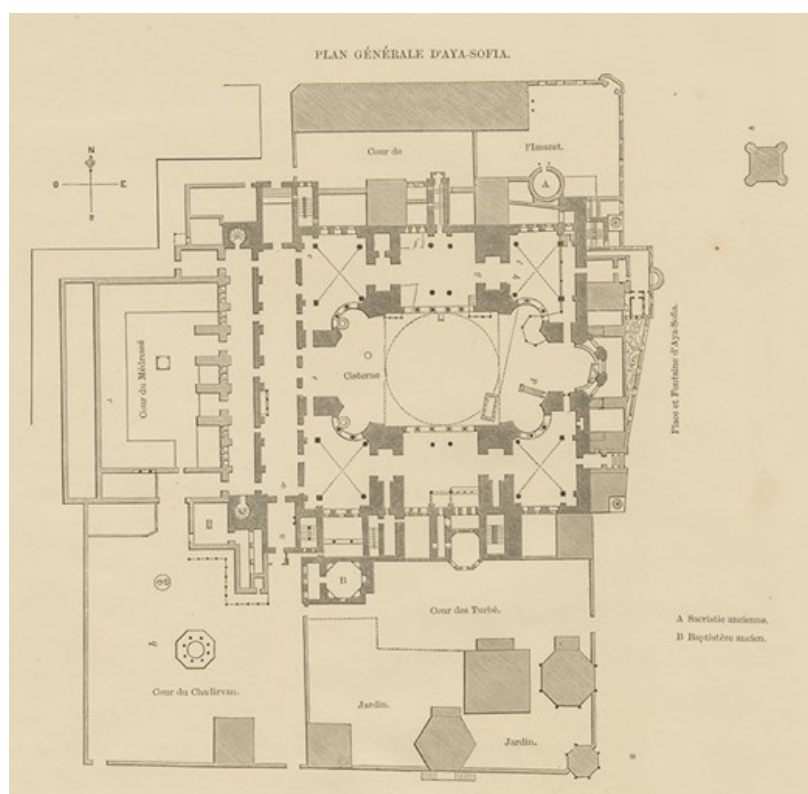


Figure 2. Plan of the Hagia Sophia complex in the 19th century.

Source: Gaspare Fossati, *Aya Sofia, Constantinople: As Recently Restored by Order of H.M. the Sultan Abdul-Medjid* (London: R. & C. Colnagni, 1852). Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

The sublimely huge space beneath is suffused by light and contained by marble—from the floors to the cladding of the piers and the colonnades that support a gallery at west, north, and south—and mosaic, most of it gold (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Interior view of Hagia Sophia facing east to the apse, c. 1900.

Source: Composite photograph from the studio of Sebah & Joallier. [Library of Congress](#).

From the beginning, it has been marked by multiple meanings—political and aesthetic, religious and structural—none of which is fully commensurate with the other. Broadly speaking, the political and religious meanings emerge from the rhetorics of contest and triumph, while the aesthetic and structural meanings are universalist and inclusive.

As a political monument, Hagia Sophia is the work of the Emperor Justinian (527–565) and the Empress Theodora, who raised the money for construction and whose monograms are carved into 68 of the church's 114 capitals.⁶ Procopius, Justinian's court historian, claims it as a victory monument over the emperor's enemies: both internal (those rioters who took up arms "not against the Emperor alone . . . but no less against God himself") and external.⁷ Foremost among the latter are the Sasanian Persians, who maintained a precarious peace with Rome during the years of the church's construction, 532–537. The 6th-century mosaics of the interior, all of them notably non-figural, frame Sasanian motifs like emblems between bands of more traditional Roman ornament.⁸ Their meaning remains ambiguous—aspirational trophies, traces of a cosmopolitan vogue, or both. No such ambiguity attended the colossal equestrian statue, no longer extant, that was set just outside the basilica atop a 164-foot (50-m) column built of solid masonry.⁹ The statue represented, in Procopius's words, Justinian "stretching forth his right hand" to the east, by which gesture "he commands the barbarians in that quarter to remain at home and to advance no further."¹⁰

As an aesthetic monument, Hagia Sophia is the work of its two designers, whom the historians (most unusually for the era) never fail to name: Anthemios of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus. Both were known as engineers and mathematicians. Anthemios was the author of treatises on mechanics and burning mirrors and a dedicatee of a contemporary work on conics, while Isidore prepared an edition of the works of Archimedes.¹¹ Their mathematical expertise is reflected in the harmonic ratios that structure the church's plan and elevation.¹² Procopius describes the main structure in the manner of a geometric construction and concludes that its proportions are essential to its beauty:

All these details, fitted together with incredible skill in mid-air and floating off from each other and resting only on the parts next to them, produce a single and most extraordinary harmony in the work, and yet do not permit the spectator to linger much over the study of any one of them, but each detail attracts the eye and draws it irresistibly to itself.¹³

This aesthetic quality, which one may still perceive, was the bedrock of the building's religious significance.¹⁴ It enabled a place where nothing had happened and no one was buried to nevertheless induce a sense of the sacred in the visitor, whose mind (once more to quote Procopius) "is lifted up toward God and exalted, feeling that He cannot be far away, but must especially love to dwell in this place which He has chosen."¹⁵ In Procopius's account, this sense of divinity contains little reference to the Christian gospels, and some have even held the architects for sympathizers or full-blown pagans.¹⁶ A triumphantly Christian thematic emerges in a contemporary hymn by Romanos the Melode, who contrasted the Temple of Solomon ("still it remains fallen; it was not restored") to the "grace of this church, which offers eternal life."¹⁷ In this rhetorical construction, Hagia Sophia represents the supersession of Judaism. By contrast, in the slightly later verse description by Paul the Silentiary, the church represents the triumph of Christianity over paganism: "Make way, Roman Capitol, make way! My emperor has so far overtopped that wonder, as great God is superior to an idol."¹⁸

The superiority of the church to the Capitol was partly religious and partly structural. No building in Rome, not even the Pantheon, matched the brazen ambition of Hagia Sophia's vaulted interior. "Measured from entrance to apse," thus traversing the dome and both half-domes, "the nave preserves the greatest vaulting span of any building to survive from antiquity or the Middle Ages."¹⁹ The central dome, approximately 102 feet (31 m) in diameter, has collapsed three times, always the result of an earthquake. In all three cases, posterity names the architects who supervised the reconstruction: Isidore's nephew, "Isidore the Younger," after the collapse of 558; the Armenian architect Trdat, after the collapse of 989; and the Italians Fazzolati and Giovanni de Peralta and

the Greek Astras, after the collapse of 1346.²⁰ To understand and maintain a structure so “precarious in its statics” has always been a cosmopolitan pursuit.²¹

The universal admiration for the structural achievement was ever balanced by the building’s confessional and national specificity. Hagia Sophia was the first temple of the Byzantine Empire: where the patriarchs of Constantinople, shepherds to all Orthodox Christians, kept their offices and celebrated the liturgy; and where the emperors of Rome were crowned and preferred to observe the divine mysteries.²² From the 9th through the 15th centuries, the emperors made their mark through a series of figural mosaics in the church interior, enacted by and celebrating them.²³ First came the Virgin and Child in the apse, which was executed soon after the final defeat of iconoclasm (843), and framed by a short, polemical poem: “The images that the heretics took down from here / Our pious sovereigns replaced.”²⁴ In another early mosaic, within an arch in the southwest vestibule, the same Mother and Child receive the gifts of two long-dead emperors: the city from Constantine and Hagia Sophia itself from Justinian (Figure 4).²⁵



Figure 4. Hagia Sophia, mosaic of the southwest vestibule, in which Emperors Constantine (left) and Justinian (right) present gifts to the Virgin and Child (center).

Source: Photograph by Wikimedia Commons user Francesco Bini (License: CC BY-SA 4.0).

A remarkable mosaic above the central door of the narthex shows an anonymous emperor, often identified with Leo VI (886–912), stoop to worship the enthroned Christ.²⁶ Later mosaics installed at the gallery level depict and name living sovereigns: the unfortunate Alexander (912–913),²⁷ the urbane Constantine IX (1042–1055) and Zoe (1028–1050), and the tireless John II (1118–1143) and Eirene (1104–1134).²⁸

When Constantinople fell to the Crusaders in 1204, the Latin conquerors adopted Hagia Sophia as their own cathedral, crowning their emperor within just like the Byzantines before.²⁹ After the Byzantines retook their city in 1261, Emperor Michael VIII (1261–1282) gave thanks by means of a spectacular mosaic in the southern gallery, which shows the Virgin and John the Baptist in a Deesis (prayer of supplication) directed to the enthroned Christ.³⁰ After the dome collapsed in 1346, Emperor John V (1341–1391) commemorated the repair by placing his own image beside the Virgin’s on the great eastern arch—simultaneously the highest and the last of the imperial portraits in Hagia Sophia.³¹

Over time, the church’s fame abroad came to match its central role within the empire.³² One of the earliest foreign accounts of Constantinople, preserved in the 10th-century *Chiu T’ang shu* but likely composed three centuries before, passes over Hagia Sophia in silence, focusing on the city walls and palace instead.³³ In the 9th century, Harun ibn Yahya, a prisoner of the Arab–Byzantine wars, saw Hagia Sophia only from the outside,

leaving descriptions of the Justinian statue and the elaborate mechanical clock that marked the entry to the southwest vestibule.³⁴ As later travelers became more loquacious, the native tension between partisanship and awe also emerges in their discourse. Thus, the 14th-century traveler Stephen of Novgorod plainly states the message of the statue of Justinian, whose “right hand stretches out bravely . . . toward the Saracen land and Jerusalem.” Nevertheless, he also found there “much that amazes” and “which the human mind cannot express.”³⁵ For him, as for the Byzantines, Hagia Sophia was a strange mix of the ideologically determinate and the intellectually ineffable.

Mehmed’s Mosque, 1453–1934

Muslim travelers seem not to have been allowed inside the Great Church but nevertheless traded accounts of its interior: where an angel dwelt, where the walls bore representations of all the cities of the world and all the trades of man, where a stream flowed between two walls of marble.³⁶ Like the Byzantines and the Christian travelers, Muslim authors alternated between the agonistic and the universal in their accounts of the church. Ibn Jubayr, abroad in the 1180s, found the tension embedded in competing interpretations of the Justinian statue:

Opinions vary concerning this monument. Some think that the globe is a talisman with the power to inhibit the enemy from invading their country; others say that the globe holds an inscription that says: “I have possessed the world, and I held it in my hand like this globe; I left it without taking anything.”³⁷

The Muslim view of Hagia Sophia is inextricable from the Muslim view of Constantinople, an object of desire and a subject of prophetic traditions. A widely known hadith remembered Muhammad’s promise: “The first among my people who will conquer the city of the Caesar will have their sins forgiven.”³⁸ The Ottoman army fulfilled the prophecy in May 1453. “Contemporary histories agree that the very first act” of the victorious Sultan Mehmed II (1444–1446, 1451–1481) “upon entering Constantinople was to visit Hagia Sophia, and that the conversion of the Great Church into a mosque was the first Ottoman intervention in the city.”³⁹ Unusually, the conversion entailed no change of name; the Greek dedication was simply transcribed into Arabic script, and Hagia Sophia became Ayasofya.⁴⁰ Similarly, Ottoman scholars set about translating and adapting the rich corpus of Byzantine stories and legends about the church, thus “to situate Hagia Sophia in an Ottoman present.”⁴¹

Adaptation of the church to Muslim worship required few physical alterations. Mehmed “added the first two minarets . . . removed the bells from its belltower, and the cross at the summit of its dome. . . . To the mosque’s interior he added a marble minbar and mihrab.”⁴² Much to the surprise of foreign visitors, the Byzantine mosaics remained visible for centuries afterward (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Interior view of Hagia Sophia facing east to the apse.

Source: Guillaume-Joseph Grelot, *Relation nouvelle d'un voyage de Constantinople* (Paris: Pierre Rocolet, 1680).
Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg.

The inscription of Mehmed's mihrab even includes a Qur'anic verse about Mary (3:37), thus directly engaging her image in the apse above.⁴³

Such intriguingly ecumenical gestures were balanced, as ever, by more agonistic engagements. The statue of Justinian, long a symbol of conflict between East and West, was hauled from its perch and melted down for canon at the urging of Mehmed's astronomers.⁴⁴ In 1698, a version of the conquest hadith was inscribed on the exterior of the southwest vestibule, where once the clock had stood.⁴⁵ The most conspicuous additions to the interior were the monumental rectangular calligraphic panels bearing the names of God, Muhammad, and the four Rashidun, which were mounted on the piers at the level of the gallery around 1650. These were the forerunners of the eight shield-like panels (adding the names of Hasan and Husayn) that still encircle the nave, which were installed in 1849. Naturally, these massive medallions announce the Muslim faith of the sultans, but they also have an aesthetic function, engaging and activating the vast open space underneath the dome.⁴⁶

Within the Ottoman state and religion, Ayasofya retained the ceremonial and devotional priority that Hagia Sophia held for the Byzantines. For example, the sultans visited the mosque on the twenty-seventh night of

Ramadan, known in Arabic as “Laylat al-Qadr” (The Night of Power) to perform their prayers and devotions—a tradition that dates back to the reign of Murad III (1574–1595), if not earlier.⁴⁷ As an institution, Ayasofya was immensely wealthy, the beneficiary of a *waqf* (pious endowment), which was established by Mehmed and drew its income from the properties he seized by conquest as sultan.⁴⁸ Later sultans embellished the foundation by extending the architectural complex. Between the 16th and the 17th centuries, five sultans were interred with their families in newly built mausoleums just to the south of the mosque. A more intensive expansion occurred under Mahmud I (1730–1754), who sponsored the construction of a library, a primary school, an ablution foundation, and a public soup kitchen. The facade of the soup kitchen directly engaged the 6th-century sculpture of Justinian’s church, while the Arabic inscriptions of the ablution fountain addressed a cosmopolitan audience of “diplomats, dervishes, and dealers” from across the Muslim world.⁴⁹

These official engagements with the ancient building were accompanied by a robust popular reception. Ayasofya was the goal of Muslim pilgrims from as near as Konya and as far as Bukhara.⁵⁰ Within the popular imagination, it was closely associated with the prophet Khidr, and the great space under the dome came to be known as his “maqam,” or shrine, “where some thousands of holy men have enjoyed the happiness of discoursing with that great prophet.”⁵¹ The 17th-century litterateur Evliya Çelebi relays the remarkable story of a man who, while attending a crowded vigil in Ayasofya, was seized by a sudden need to use the toilet and by Khidr’s intervention was miraculously transported to a suburban riverbank.⁵² The 19th-century folklorist Jean Nicolaïdès records a story told by a Muslim student of theology in which Khidr converses with a drunkard beneath the dome.⁵³

For Greek Christians, both those within the Ottoman Empire and those beyond, Hagia Sophia’s new function was cause for sorrow. Beginning in the 19th century, multiple folklorists recorded variations on a verse “Lamentation of Hagia Sophia,” which, at its core, dates back to the conquest and both regrets the loss of the building and (depending on how one reads the final line) may also look forward to its eventual return.⁵⁴ According to an alternative tradition, the conversion was incomplete, as a hidden chamber within the structure still hosted a priest and worshippers who celebrated a perpetual mass.⁵⁵ The two traditions represent two different ways of coming to terms with the building’s new, robustly Islamic identity.

For travelers from west and central Europe, Hagia Sophia was a topic of recurring fascination, and they left a remarkable dossier of descriptions and images. The first detailed drawings derive from a lost work by the antiquarian merchant Cyriac of Ancona (1391–c. 1452), which was copied by the architect Giuliano da Sangallo (1443–1516), then engraved and printed to accompany Charles du Cange’s *Historia byzantina* (1680).⁵⁶ The same year saw the publication of Guillaume-Joseph Grelot’s *Relation nouvelle d’un voyage de Constantinople*, which included a detailed description accompanied by a newly prepared plan and views of the exterior and interior. French interest in the monument was bound up in imperial contest; du Cange constructed his history to assert a French claim to the Byzantine throne, and Grelot’s dedication to Louis XIV expressed the hope that his majesty would soon take Constantinople.⁵⁷

These and similar dispatches kept the old discourse of the East–West conflict alive, and foreign visitors regularly reproached the sultans for their perceived failure to maintain the ancient monuments of their lands.⁵⁸ In 1846, Sultan Abdülmecid I (1839–1861) responded by declaring Hagia Sophia “an esteemed and ancient monument” whose physical deterioration was “neither appropriate nor fitting” for his imperial majesty.⁵⁹ Shortly thereafter, Abdülmecid retained the Swiss Italian architect Gaspere Fossati to undertake a thorough consolidation of the structure and restoration of the interior. This project was completed in 1849 and still determines much of the building’s appearance, especially the extensive frescoes that Fossati designed in imitation of the non-figural 6th-century mosaics.⁶⁰ The sultan also funded the publication of a deluxe album of lithograph views based on drawings by Fossati, which present the interior of the venerable structure as “a wishful mirror for contemporary Ottoman society”: where religious scholars mingle with modernizing officials, African tourists with European (Figure 6).⁶¹



Figure 6. Interior view of Hagia Sophia facing east to the apse.

Source: Gaspare Fossati, *Aya Sofia, Constantinople: As Recently Restored by Order of H.M. the Sultan Abdul-Medjid* (London: R. & C. Colnagni, 1852). Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection.

Ultimately, it was not Fossati's image that defined Hagia Sophia in the minds of European artists and scholars but a diametrically opposed view of a purely Byzantine building stripped of its Ottoman layers. This is how it is seen, for example, in Wilhelm Salzenberg's widely acclaimed *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale von Constantinopel* (1854), which even restores Justinian's statue to its perch outside (Figure 7).⁶²



Figure 7. Cross section of Hagia Sophia viewed from the north.

Source: Wilhelm Salzenberg, *Alt-christliche Baudenkmale von Constantinopel vom V. bis XII. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Ernst & Korn, 1854). Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg.

As Ottoman rule collapsed after the close of the First World War, British diplomats debated how best to make this fantasy image a reality and “re-convert” Hagia Sophia to Christian worship.⁶³ The military triumph of the Turkish Nationalist Movement, led by Mustafa Kemal, put an end to these schemes. With the proclamation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Ayasofya remained in use as a mosque, even as the new state’s Turkification policies brought a change in the language of worship from Arabic to Turkish.

Atatürk’s Museum, 1934–2020

After the Fossati restoration, the Ottoman state actively promoted Ayasofya as a tourist monument. Permissions granted to non-Muslim visitors spiked in the 1850s, and by the turn of the century, the government had a brisk business selling tickets to foreigners to view the Laylat al-Qadr festivities from the gallery.⁶⁴ The rise of mass tourism was complemented by the corresponding prominence of Hagia Sophia in mass media, including newspapers both at home and abroad.⁶⁵ At the beginning of the 20th century, American journalists regularly speculated about the fate of the building after the anticipated demise of the Ottoman state; one editor aptly distilled the level of discourse with the headline “Christians vs. Moslems.”⁶⁶ In short, increasing fame led to an intensification of the oppositional view of the building as a political symbol, at the direct expense of the universalist appreciation of its aesthetic and structural achievements.

The rise of mass tourism and mass media provide the necessary context for changing views of the building during the first decade of the Turkish Republic. Mustafa Kemal, now president, and his circle were at first content to “nationalize” Ayasofya. For example, they used the celebration of Laylat al-Qadr in 1932 to introduce Turkish prayer in place of Arabic, an event widely reported in newspapers and broadcast via radio to city squares throughout the nation.⁶⁷ This political use of the building, however, coexisted alongside a genuine interest in its aesthetic and cultural values. In 1931, the Turkish Cabinet granted permission to the Byzantine Institute, a private American foundation, and its director, Thomas Whittemore, to document and restore the figural Byzantine mosaics that had been covered up again at the conclusion of the Fossati restorations.⁶⁸

The building remained in use as a mosque until November 24, 1934, the same day that the Turkish parliament honored President Mustafa Kemal with the surname Atatürk (Father of the Turks). A decree signed by Atatürk and all his ministers explained the decision in explicitly universalist terms:

Owing to its historical significance, the conversion of the Hagia Sophia Mosque in Istanbul—a unique architectural monument—into a museum will gratify the entire Eastern World and will cause humanity to gain a new institution of knowledge.⁶⁹

Despite the lofty rhetoric, the decree went unreported for weeks, and its ramifications remained unclear. Initial plans to display Byzantine and Ottoman works of art within the nave and galleries eventually gave way to “a museum with no other display than its own architecture and decoration.” Initial reactions were muted: both domestically, where not a single voice was raised in protest, and abroad, as the approbation that the move was designed to elicit failed to materialize in the foreign press.⁷⁰

Over time, Ayasofya Müzesi did fulfill the initial hopes, developing into a “new institution of knowledge.”⁷¹ It counted eminent scholars of art and architecture among its directors, effectively managed the influx of tourists, and published a scholarly journal dedicated to studies of the building and its history.⁷² In 1985, Hagia Sophia was among the “Historical Areas of Istanbul” inscribed by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Mass media continued to drive interest in the building, which was even used as a set in a James Bond film (*From Russia with Love*, 1963).

Within Turkey, conservative newspapers first began to publish calls to reopen the building to Muslim worship at the start of the 1950s. The nascent “Hagia Sophia Cause” formed part of a broader Ottomanist nationalism that sought to counter Kemalist secularism and reclaim the Ottoman legacy for the Turkish Republic.⁷³ In 1952, a Greek newspaper published an editorial calling for the reopening of the building to *Christian* worship; the proposal received little attention in Greece but provoked a fierce response from the Turkish press.⁷⁴ Within religious nationalist circles, Ayasofya became a melancholy object, the “lost mosque” won heroically in the Conquest then handed back to the West by the secularists.⁷⁵

Calls to reopen Hagia Sophia as a mosque intensified again at the close of the 20th century with the rise of the “Justice and Development Party” (AKP) and its own highly successful brand of neo-Ottomanism.⁷⁶ As in the 1950s, these domestic movements were accompanied (and indeed fueled) by parallel calls from foreign organizations, such as the “Free Hagia Sophia Council of America,” which sought to reclaim the building for Christian worship. Hagia Sophia once more became a symbolic pawn in rhetorics of civilizational contest, which were curiously divorced from an appreciation of its aesthetic and structural achievements. As the architectural historian Robert Ousterhout wrote in 2011, “the building has accrued meanings that have nothing to do with its physical form and quite possibly very little to do with its history—and even less to do with religion.”⁷⁷

Once in power, the AKP was initially content to hold the Ayasofya cause in reserve, pursuing incremental measures in place of a full-scale “reconversion.” These included the creation of a small dedicated space for prayer, the appointment of an imam, and (beginning in 2016) a renewal of Laylat al-Qadr celebrations inside the building, which were broadcast live on national TV. In 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic and hyperinflation within Turkey, high-ranking government officials began to publicly discuss reconversion and hosted two major spectacles at the building: first, again, on Laylat al-Qadr (May 19) and then, far more provocatively, on the anniversary of the Conquest (May 29).⁷⁸ This latter celebration provoked an official denunciation from the Greek Foreign Ministry, followed by a still more vehement response by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and ultimately an announcement that Turkey’s highest administrative court would hear a legal case to invalidate the 1934 decree. On July 10, the court ruled that the decree constituted an illegal abrogation of Mehmed’s *waqf*, and Erdoğan proclaimed Ayasofya open for worship.⁷⁹

The events of the summer of 2020 provoked an unprecedented intensification and polarization of discourse about Hagia Sophia. Politicians, scholarly organizations, and even Audrey Azoulay, director general of UNESCO, denounced the reconversion.⁸⁰ Many objections rested on a barely concealed (and highly questionable) premise

that Muslim worship is incompatible with World Heritage status.⁸¹ At the same time, the reception of the reconversion in the wider Muslim world was mixed; the Grand Mufti of Egypt even declared it “forbidden.”⁸²

An alternative critique sought to refocus attention on the building’s physical fabric and aesthetic impact, asking whether the Turkish religious ministry would exercise the same responsible stewardship as previously the museum professionals.⁸³ The process of reconversion included a series of physical transformations, as the marble floors of the nave were covered in carpet and the mosaics of the interior were shielded from view.⁸⁴ At first, it also entailed a removal of entrance fees for all visitors, thus bringing Ayasfoya in line with other grand mosque complexes in Istanbul. This potentially democratizing gesture simultaneously led to accusations of lax oversight and vandalism by unsupervised visitors.⁸⁵ In 2024, officials introduced a dedicated entrance and itinerary for “visitors from foreign countries,” along with a renewed entry fee.⁸⁶

The Future of Hagia Sophia

December 27, 2037, will mark the 1500th anniversary of the consecration of Hagia Sophia. For a work of such structural ambition to stand for so long, unaltered in its essentials, still evokes admiration for the architects’ achievement, and indeed intimates divine protection. The greatest threat to the building remains, as always in the past, seismic; the modern megalopolis Istanbul sits just north of an “earthquake gap . . . that has not been filled for 250 years.”⁸⁷ The second greatest threat is the polarization of discourse, through which Hagia Sophia has become “a superficial signifier to be invoked by Muslim and Christian alike.”⁸⁸ The grisliest instance to date is the invocation of Hagia Sophia by the Christian man who murdered fifty-one Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019.⁸⁹

At the same time, renewed attention to Hagia Sophia’s many histories represents an opportunity. The events of 2020 have occasioned a variety of critical reflections, not only on Hagia Sophia but also on the legacy of the 20th-century conception of world heritage in the “postsecularist” early 21st century.⁹⁰ As the architect Ziad Jamaledine writes, “Hagia Sophia itself has the formal potential to support multiple concurrent religious practices.”⁹¹ Similarly, the Armenian patriarch of Constantinople, Sahak II, has proposed “that Hagia Sophia could naturally be transitioned into a place of joint worship.”⁹²

In an age of globally resurgent conservative nationalisms, such reflections are necessarily utopian. Nevertheless, the case of Hagia Sophia effectively reveals the poverty of a strictly functional approach to historical architecture. Hagia Sophia has always served multiple functions. Just as “a church is never just a church” but also a space of community and commemoration, so too is a mosque never just a mosque, and a visit to a museum can easily become a religious experience.⁹³ Doubtless many visitors in the early 21st century are drawn to Hagia Sophia at least in part by a fascination with its triple life—church, mosque, museum—and the attendant rhetorics of conflict and exclusion. Once inside, some among them find their thoughts drawn upward to the space under the dome where divinity “must especially love to dwell.” Some of those, finally, will be led to ponder the relations between these two very different ways of thinking about a single great monument.

Discussion of the Literature

Few buildings have generated a quantity of scholarly literature comparable to that surrounding Hagia Sophia. Broadly speaking, scholarly discourse sees either a single building (the Hagia Sophia of the engineers) or three (church, mosque, and museum, the Hagia Sophias of the historians).⁹⁴ A historian may well envy the engineers for the systematicity and unity of their discourse. The first major campaign to survey and publish the building's historical fabric was undertaken by the Ottoman Greek astronomer Eugène Antoniades, with the support of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876–1909), and published in three volumes, 1907–1909.⁹⁵ The second was undertaken by the American architects William Emerson and Robert Van Nice, with the support of the Ayasofya Müzesi and the Byzantine Institute, and published in two installments, 1965–1986.⁹⁶ These surveys provide the basis for analyses of the building's structure by the engineers Rowland Mainstone, Robert Mark, and Ahmet Ş. Çakmak, among others.⁹⁷

The discourse of the historians, by contrast, is far more fragmented, divided as it is into disciplines (art history, political history, cultural history) and eras (Byzantine, Ottoman, Turkish). Despite the wealth of studies dedicated to aspects of the building's decoration, above all its mosaics, there is no synthetic art-historical treatment of Hagia Sophia. Studies of the building's aesthetic impact focus heavily on the 6th century and are guided by the literary descriptions of Procopius and Paul the Silentiary.⁹⁸ Later Byzantine modifications to the building's decoration and use, consequential as they were, have been treated only sporadically, leading to the false impression that the building did not change substantially between 537 and 1453. The changing aesthetic of Hagia Sophia in the Ottoman period has received increasing attention,⁹⁹ but as of 2024, there is no art-historical study of Hagia Sophia during the Turkish Republic.¹⁰⁰

Studies of the building's later political and cultural histories are, by contrast, more numerous. Nevertheless, no one has attempted a book-length biography of the building since Lord Kinross in 1972; his volume admittedly lacks a scholarly apparatus but is nevertheless admirable for the breadth of its vision and the evenness of its coverage.¹⁰¹ Otherwise, it is a question of many studies of specific aspects of the building's history. One is reminded once more of Procopius's remark that "each detail" of the building "attracts the eye and draws it irresistibly to itself," hindering comprehension of the whole.

Rarer still are studies that bridge the divide between the engineers and the historians, placing the building's underlying structure in dialogue with the complex history of its use and reception. Robert S. Nelson's book-length study of Hagia Sophia's rise to prominence in Western scholarship and modernist literature constitutes a notable exception.¹⁰² The rich documentation of both—structure and reception—accordingly represents an underutilized resource, through which the life cycles and contemporary relevance of complex historical monuments might be better understood.¹⁰³

Primary Sources

Two literary accounts are key witnesses to the 6th-century construction and appearance of Hagia Sophia: Book I of the prose *Buildings* of Procopius¹⁰⁴ and the verse *Description of Hagia Sophia and Its Ambo* by Paul the Silentiary.¹⁰⁵ The anonymous 9th-century *Diegesis* (Story) of *Hagia Sophia* blends a historical account with fabulous traditions.¹⁰⁶ It was widely read in the Byzantine world and served as one basis for early Ottoman accounts of the building.¹⁰⁷ The Russian travelers are the most loquacious of the many medieval visitors.¹⁰⁸ Archival sources from the Byzantine period are scarce, but ample from the Ottoman, especially the later centuries.¹⁰⁹ Many (by no means all) are collected in a massive, multi-author volume on "One Temple in Three Ages," which also compiles selected documentation from the Republican era.¹¹⁰ The Ottoman litterateurs Evliya Çelebi (17th century)¹¹¹ and Ayyansarayî (18th century)¹¹² both provide extensive accounts of the building; as do the many foreign visitors to Istanbul.¹¹³ The 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries supply countless materials for a study, yet to be written, of the reception of Hagia Sophia in popular culture.¹¹⁴

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101. Lord Kinross, *Hagia Sophia* (New York: Newsweek, 1972).
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- [112.](#) English translation by Howard Crane, *The Garden of the Mosques: Hafiz Hüseyin al-Ayvansarayî's Guide to the Muslim Monuments of Ottoman Istanbul* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 6–8.
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