

## Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire

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**Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya; Ayasofya Camii)** One of the most hotly contested religious sites of all time, the Hagia Sophia (Church of Holy Wisdom) was built as an Orthodox Christian church in 532–37 under the auspices of Byzantine Emperor Justinian. Following the Fourth Crusade (1201–04), when the crusaders conquered Constantinople and established the Latin Empire of Constantinople (1204–61), the Hagia Sophia became a Catholic church. It recovered its Orthodox status in 1261, when the Byzantine emperor in exile in Nicaea reconquered the city. In the wake of the Ottoman conquest of the city in 1453 (*see* CONSTANTINOPLE, CONQUEST OF), the church was converted into a mosque by MEHMED II (r. 1444–46; 1451–81) and renamed Ayasofya Camii. In 1934 MUSTAFA KEMAL ATATÜRK had it transformed into a museum.

Although the structure has justifiably attracted the interest of architectural critics and scholars, it has also been the ongoing focus of political, mythical, and religious discussions. Over the course of almost 1,500 years the building has undergone many functional, aesthetic, cultural, political, and environmental transformations. It has served as a church, a site for imperial ceremony, a seat for the patriarchate, a seat of the CALIPHATE, a museum, a tourist attraction, and a source of architectural inspiration for many later mosques and churches.

The historiography of the Hagia Sophia has taken the form of many myths and stories that have served to justify the political and religious aspirations attached to it. These myths were widespread among both the Byzantines and the Ottomans. For instance, the Byzantines held that Emperor Justinian received the plan of the church from an archangel. Similarly, the Ottomans claimed that

its shattered dome was repaired only after permission was granted by the Prophet Muhammad, thus endorsing the building's status as a mosque. Another Muslim myth narrated how the last ABBASID caliph passed the caliphate to SELIM I (r. 1512–20) under its dome, a myth that involves the building in the legitimation of Ottoman political power.

The church was built on the site of an earlier church that had been built by Emperor Constantine (d. 337 C.E.) to emphasize the city's transition from paganism to Christianity. When the Hagia Sophia was built on the site of that burned church in 537, it served as the last example in a long tradition of imperially sanctioned buildings in the Roman Empire. Emperor Justinian boasted about constructing a church whose dome surpassed that of Solomon's temple. But the first dome collapsed because of an architectural defect 17 years after its construction; the current dome is lower than the first one. One of the important renovations to the church was carried out in 1346 after its eastern arch and one-third of the dome collapsed during an earthquake.

The building went through several renovations that were not merely cosmetic but that deeply affected its identity. Following the CONQUEST OF CONSTANTINOPLE, Ottoman Sultan MEHMED II (r. 1444–46; 1451–81) ordered the church's conversion into a mosque. A wooden minaret replaced the cap of the turret of the west facade; a *minbar* (freestanding pulpit) and a mihrab (directional pointer niche) were added to the interior; the bell, relics, crosses, icons, and the cross on top of the dome were removed; the floor was covered with mats and carpets; and icons on the side of the *qibla* (direction of Mecca) were plastered over. The rest of the building



The Hagia Sophia was built in the 530s as the principle church of Byzantine Constantinople. After the Ottoman conquest in 1453 it was transformed into a mosque. In 1934 it was converted into a museum. (Photo by Gábor Ágoston)

remained untouched. The second large-scale renovation was undertaken in 1572–74 during the reign of SELIM II (r. 1566–74) by architect Mimar Sinan. The buttresses were repaired, the wooden minaret was replaced by a brick minaret, and two new minarets were added. In addition, the adjacent buildings were demolished, providing the structure with the courtyard characteristic of an imperial mosque. Selim II, who broke the Ottoman sultans' tradition of the funerary mosque complex, was buried in a tomb next to the building, thus giving the mosque imperial status. Another set of renovations was carried out in 1607–09 during the reign of AHMED I (r. 1603–1617); the flat panels were renewed, ceramic tiles were added to the interior, and most of the icons or figural mosaics were whitewashed over, having been interpreted as being contrary to Islam's ban on figurative art.

MAHMUD I (r. 1730–54) turned the mosque into a *küllüye* (mosque complex) by adding a library, a fountain, an *imaret* (an inn or hospice), and a school for children.

The renovation of ABDÜLMECID I (r. 1839–61) in 1847–49 marks an important change in the perception of the building. Two Swiss architects, Gaspare and Guisepe Fossati, were appointed to renovate the building. This structural renovation was in the neoclassical and neo-Byzantine style that carries traces of westernization. The figural mosaics of the mosque had been uncovered, but popular pressure against the sultan's decision led to their being whitewashed again. Only the images of the archangels on the pendentives were spared, provided that their faces were modified by being changed to stars. The last renovation project, directed by Thomas Whittemore, uncovered the mosaics in 1931. In 1934, under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's orders, the mosque was converted into a museum.

The monument is steeped in symbolic value. Its construction represented the city's Christian character, and for a millennium afterward it was renowned as the seat of the patriarchate. Its conversion to a mosque at the hands

of Mehmed II symbolized for many the transition from a Byzantine to an Ottoman era and the victory of Islam over Christianity. It was declared Istanbul's first royal mosque, and in 1517, it also came to serve as the seat of the caliphate. The conversion was part of the Islamization of the whole city. Since the church was the site of imperial ceremonies, the conversion was not only a religious act but also a military and political statement. The monument's importance as an emblem of sovereignty underlined the British attempt in the wake of WORLD WAR I to reconvert it into a church. Its eventual categorization as a museum in 1934 highlighted Republican Turkey's adoption of a secularist political model. The mosque's desanctification epitomized the attempt to distance the new Turkish Republic from its Ottoman past. Thus, for the first time in its entire history, the building was turned into an artifact of the past. Having served as an imperial mosque for 481 years, and as a seat of the caliphate, the building could not find a legitimate presence as a mosque in the new secular republic. Through this rupture, the Hagia Sophia became a site of memory instead of continuing as a symbol of lived religious experience. During the building's conversion to a museum, some features were removed, including rugs, racks for footwear, and a coffee shop in the courtyard.

From an aesthetic point of view, Hagia Sophia is a crucial witness to the transformation of Muslim attitudes against imagery. During the time of Mehmed II, only the images on the *qibla* side were seen as conflicting with Islam. Over time, other images were plastered over until, in the mid-17th century, almost all mosaics and figural images were either altered or whitewashed. In the second half of the 19th century, a process of westernization that valued the visual images in the structure led to their restoration. The formal secularization of the building by its transformation into a museum marked the culmination of this trend. In reflecting diverse approaches toward imagery, the Hagia Sophia is a living critique of the belief that Islam invariably takes an essentialist approach to figurative imagery.

As a splendid monument, the Hagia Sophia has been an object of desire, a source of inspiration, and a challenge to the Ottoman architectural tradition. A dome suspended on four arches and pendentives was not uncommon during the ancient times, but having two semidomes of the same diameter (102 feet; 31 m) was a novelty. Although the building was renowned throughout Christian Europe, it had little influence on the development of late medieval Christian architecture. Rather, it was Ottoman architects who regarded the structure as a technical challenge and who replicated the dome and window designs of the Hagia Sophia in other structures, finally managing to extend and exceed the technique. This led to the development of a universal mosque design

that extended throughout the Muslim world. The revival of the popularity of the Hagia Sophia is thus closely related to the dome-based architectural tradition in Ottoman times.

Similarly, in the late 19th century, the Hagia Sophia became the universal example of Greek Orthodox churches around the world. This development should be understood in the context of the extended geographical reading of Europe, with the inclusion of the Byzantines into the European metanarrative. Before the 19th century, the Byzantine Empire was not perceived as an integral part of Europe but was associated with Eastern "corruption" and "despotism." But with the rise of 19th-century neoclassicism and historicism that imagined a direct ancestral line from the ancient Greeks and Romans, the genealogy of Europe was rewritten to include the Byzantines. This new perception of history coincided with Sultan Abdülmecid's promotion of the building in Europe following its 1847–49 renovations. To commemorate the event, Sultan Abdülmecid had a medal cast in Paris with his own *TUGRA* on one side and the Hagia Sophia's image on the other; he also had an album published that included lithographs of the Hagia Sophia. These events concluded a long process by which the Hagia Sophia complex replaced that of the Süleymaniye as the most important monument in Istanbul.

Starting with the 1847–49 renovations, when the area around the building was cleaned, gentrified, and opened like a European piazza, the character and experience of the building has changed dramatically. Since that time the Hagia Sophia has been experienced as an isolated tourist attraction rather than a building that is part of an active community. Therefore it must be understood that today's building is neither the Byzantine Hagia Sophia nor the Ottoman Ayasofya but a new space for tourism. The building is now open as a museum, and its status and identity continue to pose tantalizing questions of social and political significance.

Nuh Yılmaz

**Further reading:** Metin Ahunbay and Zeynep Ahunbay, "Structural Influence of Hagia Sophia on Ottoman Mosque," in *Hagia Sophia from the Age of Justinian to the Present*, edited by Robert Mark and Ahmed Ş. Çakmak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 179–94; Cyril Mango, "Byzantine Writers on the Fabric of Hagia Sophia," in *Hagia Sophia from the Age of Justinian to the Present*, edited by Robert Mark and Ahmed Ş. Çakmak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 41–56; Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Life of an Imperial Monument: Hagia Sophia after Byzantium," in *Hagia Sophia from the Age of Justinian to the Present*, edited by Robert Mark and Ahmed Ş. Çakmak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 195–225; Robert S. Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).