



Hagia Sophia

: History of Conflict and Faith



Hagia Sophia was built in 537, with minarets added in the 15th–16th centuries when it became a mosque.



Hagia Sophia

Names:	Hagia Sophia, Ayasofya (Turkish), Αγία Σοφία (Greek), Sancta Sophia (Latin)
Location:	Fatih, Istanbul, Turkey
Type:	Byzantine Christian cathedral (c. 360–1204, 1261–1453), Latin Catholic cathedral (1204–1261), Mosque (1453–1931; 2020–present) Museum (1935–2020)
Part of:	Historic Areas of Istanbul
Website:	muze.gen



Hagia Sophia

History of Hagia Sophia



The Hagia Sophia rising along the shore of the Bosphorus, Istanbul.

The **Hagia Sophia** was built as a Church and has been around for around 1500 years. It has seen multiple religions and empires. Its walls have [Byzantine](#) Mosaics, Viking Runic Inscriptions, and Islamic Calligraphy.

Constantinople, now known as Istanbul has bridged the west and the east for a long time. It has seen multiple [empires](#) and religions and many great emperors have called it their home. Perhaps its diverse history is best exemplified by its most iconic building, the Hagia Sophia which first served as a church, then a mosque, then a museum, and now, once again, a mosque.

The first church was destroyed by riots around 404CE. The second church was built some ten years later but it too was burnt during riots around 532CE. Then, the famous Eastern [Roman Emperor](#) Justinian started the construction of the third structure which is the one we see today. It was called the Church of Hagia Sophia which means, Holy Wisdom.

The church was damaged and repaired various times in the next thousand years. After the great schism, it became the heart of Orthodox Christianity and the seat of the



Hagia Sophia

Ecumenical Patriarch. It was even a Roman Catholic Church for a few decades after Constantinople fell to the Catholics after the sacking during the Fourth Crusade although, the status quo was restored. Constantinople would struggle to recover from the sack until that one fateful day in 1453CE.

Sultan Muhammad II of the [Ottoman Empire](#) or, as he is usually called, **Sultan Mehmed Fatih**, conquered Constantinople on the 29th of May, 1453CE. He went straight to the Hagia Sophia where he bent down and poured some soil over his turbaned head as a sign of humility to Allah.

The Sultan then immediately ordered that Hagia Sophia be turned into a mosque. A crescent was added to the top of the dome. All portable icons of Christianity such as the ambo, the thrones, and the altar were removed. Despite the Muslim prohibition on the representation of the human form, many Christian images were preserved. Although, the ones in the prayer area were whitewashed and covered. A pulpit and a Mihrab were added in the direction of Mecca.

In the southeast corner of the complex, a Minaret was added to make it appear more like a traditional mosque. It was made of wood but would later be remade from bricks. Over the next centuries, three more minarets were added. All of them were commissioned by **Selim II**, son of Suleiman the Magnificent, but he died before they were finished.

The Great Mosque of Ayasofya was now Kostantiniye's first Turkish mosque. Although Constantinople had housed a mosque before, throughout various portions of its existence, mainly established for Muslim merchants.

Sultan Muhammad Fatih considered himself the patron of the Orthodox Church so, he had ordered his men to spare the Church of the Holy Apostles so that it could serve the role that Hagia Sophia had previously served for the Orthodox Church. Although, a few years later, the clergy moved to another location, and the Church of the Holy Apostles was demolished and used in constructing the Mosque of Fatih. Next to the Mihrab, on both sides two giant candles were added which had been taken from Hungary by Suleiman the Magnificent during a campaign.



Hagia Sophia

By 1573CE, the one thousand-year-old building was showing signs of fatigue, and Selim II ordered repairs. Mimar Sinan, the famous Ottoman architect was given the task. Extensive internal and external repairs were carried out and buttresses were reinforced. The remaining mosaics were covered again. In 1839CE, Caliph Abd al-Majid came to power, or what little power the Ottomans had left by then.

In 1846CE, the sultan ordered the full restoration of Hagia Sophia. The task was given to two Swiss brothers named Gaspare and Giuseppe Fossati. According to the notes they made, Hagia Sophia's domes were cracked and let in the rain. The more orthodox Muslims weren't happy with two Christians being given the task. The story goes that the Sultan waited till pilgrimage season when most of the extremists were away from the capital.

The restoration was financed by a childless sheik's inheritance, roughly around 1.5 million dollars in modern terms. They painted the external walls red and added the eight green placards with the names of Allah, the Prophet, the first four caliphs and the two grandsons of the Prophet.

Fossati's noted that only two men died during construction and one of them was a Christian and was given final rites, in secret, by a priest. Probably the first Christian prayer in the Hagia Sophia since 1453CE. During the restorations, all the Christian images were uncovered from the plaster put on them in the years before.

The Swiss brothers sketched them and actually made the suggestion that they should be covered because they were likely to be damaged by the people if remained uncovered. The brothers made a sketchbook of all the mosaics and gave a copy to the Sultan. The sultan wanted the mosaics outside the prayer area to remain uncovered but in the end, he had to cave before the reactionary influences and ordered them to be covered as well.

The covered plaster was painted over with patterns of flowers and other things. The mosque, after restorations, was inaugurated in 1849CE. Time passed and well, so did the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish Republic was declared on the 29th of October,



Hagia Sophia

1923CE. With Mustafa Kamal Ataturk as its first president, Turkey was de-Islamised and turned into a secular state.

The Ottoman Caliphate was abolished on the 3rd of March, 1924CE. The following Friday, in the prayer sermon, the caliph's name was omitted and replaced with the **Republic of Turkey**. Hagia Sophia, which had been a symbol of the conflict between the West and the East now became a symbol of their union as Ataturk decided to convert it into a Museum.

The story goes as that one day, Hagia Sophia was a mosque, and the next day, there was a sign at the door written in Ataturk's handwriting that said, "The Museum is closed for repairs." All the mosaics were uncovered, painstakingly, by a team from the Byzantine Institute of America. The Museum was opened in 1934CE. For 85 years, a lot of people have been advocating for it to be turned back into a mosque.

In 2016CE, a call to prayer was made in a mosque for the first time in 81 years. Since then, President Erdogan has been setting the stage for turning it back into a mosque. It finally happened on the 10th of July, 2020CE when the Turkey State Council passed a decision to revert the building to be used as a mosque and nothing else.

The first Muslim prayer in 85 years to be held on the 24th of July, 2020. At the time of this video's recording, the Turkish government maintains that the mosaics will not be covered. They'll be covered using curtains and carpets and some sort of light technology but only during prayer time, so five times a day. Also, no one will be stopped from entering the building, Muslim or otherwise. The entrance fee will be waived as well because now, the state will be upkeeping the mosque from its revenue. How this turns out remains to be seen.

The reason is that first of all, the intent is political. Erdogan is simply using this to distract the country from his administration's many failures. Religion has been used throughout the world to distract people from their problems. Those who cannot deliver in the present glorify the past. My favourite example of this is Narendra Modi's India which turns everything, including curbing air pollution, into a Hindu Muslim conflict to distract the people.



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Hagia Sophia

Secondly, Hagia Sophia, in its 1500 years has seen a lot and has recorded quite a lot of it. On its walls, there are Christian mosaics, there are damaged mosaics that were destroyed by the Iconoclasts, there are Viking runic inscriptions and finally, there's Muslim calligraphy.

