

# Church of Divine Wisdom: Hagia Sophia

## *Kutsal Bilgelik Kilisesi: Ayasofya*

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Hagia Sophia is seen as one of the 8 wonders of the world and is accepted as one of the outstanding monuments of art history and architecture. There are very few structures of this age and size that have been able to survive to the present day. Hagia Sophia was the world's largest church for many years and is now the fourth largest old church after St. Paul's in London, St. Peter's in Rome, and Doumo in Milan. Byzantine historians Theophanes, Nikephoros and Gramerci Leon have

reported that Hagia Sophia's construction started during the Emperor Constantinius I era (324-337) and finished in 360 during the Emperor Constantinius II era. The famous historian Socrate states that the structure's first name was Megalo Ecclesia (*meaning a colossal church*) and it was named Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) after the 5th century. This name is not related to any saint and is one of the three names of God according to the main principles of Christianity. Hagia Sophia



**Figure 1:** General view of Hagia Sophia.



**Figure 2:** General view of Hagia Sophia.



**Figure 3:** Interior view of Hagia Sophia.

was therefore dedicated to Theia Sophia (*the Holy Wisdom*), the second of the Christian triad. It was started to be called Megalo Ecclesia as well (Figure 1, 2).

The current Hagia Sophia is not the first structure. Construction of the first Hagia Sophia was started in 350 at the Emperor Kostantios period and was completed in 360. The first Hagia Sophia had a basilica plan, wooden roof and five naves and was burnt to the ground following an uprising, with nothing left to the present day. Emperor Theodosius II (408-450) had Hagia Sophia built again by Architect Rufinos and opened it for worship in 415. The second Hagia Sophia is known to be

a stone-walled structure covered with a wooden roof with a basilica plan, like the first Hagia Sophia. Some remnants of this Hagia Sophia have been found during the excavation by Prof. A.M. Schneider in 1936. These are the temple entry steps, facade stones, columns, column capitals, column pedestals, adornments and friezes. These can be seen in Hagia Sophia's garden and just below the entrance today. However, Hagia Sophia suffered the same fate once more and was burnt to the ground during the Nika riots (nika meaning "the conquer") that started in the Hippodrome in 532.

After the Nika riots were suppressed, Emperor Iustinianus II (527-565) felt more confident and wanted to build a larger and more magnificent church than the previous Hagia Sophias that were symbols of victory, and appointed the Mathematician Anthemius from Tralles and Geometry specialist Isidoros from Miletus as the architects of the church. The Emperor sent orders to all the provinces for the construction of the church and asked for pieces, columns, capitals, marbles and colored stones from architectural monuments at their location to be sent to Istanbul in order to be used in Hagia Sophia. Hagia Sophia's construction started in 532 and eight red porphyric columns were brought from the Diana temple in Ephesus together with material from well-known marble quarries around the world. Light green marble was brought from Eğriboz Island, yellow marble from Algeria, veined pink marble from Siga, and light red marble from Southeast Anatolia. The construction was completed in 5 years, 11 months and 10 days with the work of a thousand

craftsmen and ten thousand workers and was opened for worship in 537 (Figure 3).

Hagia Sophia continues to be magnificent at present and clearly shows signs of early Byzantine architecture, Roman architectural tradition and Eastern arts. A large covered middle section, two side naves, a protruding apse, and an interior and exterior narthex can be seen on the plan. This structure, defined as a domed basilica, is entered via the three doors (external narthex) on the eastern part of the atrium. One can pass to the interior narthex through the five doors of the exterior narthex covered with long and narrow monastery vault. Two large doors are noticeable in the northern and southern parts of this area with colorful marble plates and mosaic-decorated walls. The northern one leads to the ramps going to the upper gallery and southern one to the yard through the horologion door. Hagia Sophia's main section is entered through nine doors from the interior narthex that is extremely rich in decorations. The middle bronze-framed door is the Emperor door. The wings of the marble jambed door is made of very thick oak and is covered with bronze plates.

Naos, Hagia Sophia's worship area, is divided into two side naves by four large pillars and the columns between them (Figure 4, 5). This section that longitudinally clearly represents the Byzantium basilica plan has dimensions of 73.50 x 69.50 meters. The main section is on pendants carried by four large pillars and the dome that sits on the hoop is 55.60 meters



**Figure 4:** Another view of the central dome and upper gallery.

high. The dome has lost its circular feature after various repairs and is now ellipsoid. The south-north diameter is 31.87 meters and the east-west diameter 30.87 meters (Figure 6). The eastern aspect of the dome was completely destroyed by an earthquake 22 years after it was built and it was repaired by Architect Isidoros' nephew with the same name. The dome's height was increased 7 m and supports that would prevent its extension were built laterally. The new dome's east-west diameter became smaller. Emperor Iustinianus opened Hagia Sophia once again on 24 December 562 together with Patrick Eulhyus. However, Hagia Sophia still did not have a structurally sound dome. The western half-dome was almost destroyed in the 869 earthquake during the Emperor Basileus I (867 - 886) period. It again suffered great damage in the 989 earthquake. During the Emperor Basileus II period (1025-1028), an Armenian architect named Trinidat repaired Hagia Sophia and covered the dome fractures. (Figure 7).

Hagia Sophia is known for its mosaics in addition to its architecture (Figure 8). All surfaces, arches, vaults, half-domes and overlays of Hagia Sophia other than the marble-covered walls are embellished with lovely mosaics (Figure 9). The first



**Figure 5:** Another view of the central dome and the South tympanon wall.

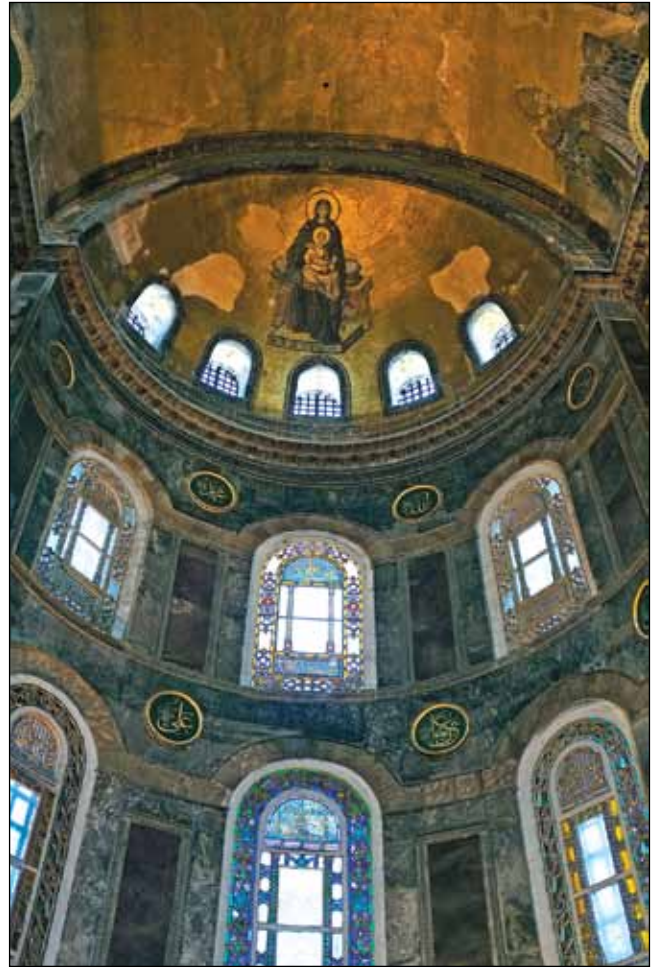


**Figure 6:** Central dome of Hagia Sophia.



**Figure 7:** The series of columns on the South tympanon wall above.

mosaic figures of Hagia Sophia were destroyed during the figure breakage movement in Byzantine history and gilded mosaics with plant figures replaced them. The monument has become more magnificent with the mosaic figures created after the Iconoclasm movement. These mosaic figures have been created in the IX and XIIth centuries and can be seen on the Emperor's Door, the southern entry (Vestibule) (Figure 10), abse half-dome (Figure 11), northern Tympanon walls, the southern gallery and the northern gallery. The Christ Pantocrator composition in the dome has been left below the Kazasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi line created in the Ottoman period. Lower quality mosaics are also present in the area called priest rooms in the upper gallery.



**Figure 8:** The central nave and the apse of Hagia Sophia.

Hagia Sophia suffered great harm during the Latin conquest of İstanbul (1204 - 1261) with many church items being damaged or taken to Europe.

Various sources state that Hagia Sophia, one of the oldest structures of the town, was in derelict condition after İstanbul's conquest by Fatih Sultan Mehmet in 1453. Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque and a wooden minaret was built on the small western dome. The southwestern brick minaret was added during Fatih Sultan Mehmet's reign and the northeastern small minaret during the Sultan Beyazit II reign. A shrine, pulpit, ambos and a Sultan section have been added to the worship area of Hagia Sophia in the Ottoman period and its use as a mosque has continued during the Ottoman reign with repairs done at various periods (Figure 12).

Hagia Sophia has been converted into a museum with the decision of the Council of Ministers on 24 November 1934. The original of the directive for the conversion is now at the Monuments and Museums General Directorate and a copy is at the Hagia Sophia Museum. This directive was signed by President Kemal Atatürk, Prime Minister İsmet İnönü,



**Figure 9:** The Deesis trinity (Christ, Mary and John the Baptist) in the gallery. 12th century.



**Figure 11:** The Virgin Mary in the semi-dome of the apse. 9th century.



**Figure 10:** The Virgin with the emperors Constantine and Justinian over the door way of the South vestibule. 10th century.

Secretary of State Şükrü Kaya, Secretary of Education Abidin Özmen, Secretary of Finance Celal Bayar and other ministers.

Hagia Sophia was transferred to the museum management after a protocol that was arranged between the İstanbul Deputy Governor, Director of Pious Foundations and the İstanbul Museums General Director. An intensive project was started to make sure the Hagia Sophia Museum could be opened to the public within a short time, and the museum started accepting visitors on 1 February 1935. The Hagia Sophia monument has been standing for more than 1500 years and has been the world's biggest closed area for 800 years. It has been subject to several earthquakes with the main dome being rebuilt several times and the supporting structure being repaired and reinforced during several periods. It is possible to see the effects of previous earthquakes and large deformations in the structure at present. Hagia Sophia has been able to survive until now, thanks to restorations during the Byzantine, Ottoman and Republican era.



**Figure 12:** Mihrab of Hagia Sophia. Ottoman period.