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MATERIAL OBJECT PROJECT: THE HAGIA SOPHIA

Jessica Saunders

Medieval Europe

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In 527, Justinian became ruler of the Byzantine Empire and left a legacy that still exists today. One remaining aspect of this legacy is the Hagia Sophia. The greatness of this structure lies not only in its grandeur, but also its representation of the Byzantine Empire and the value it placed on art and religion. The transformation that the building has undergone over the centuries represents the shifts in the Byzantine Empire both culturally and religiously. As a culture, Byzantium managed to align itself with Western Europe, while at the same time having strong enough ties with the East to set it apart into its own separate empire.

When Justinian the Great came to power in 527, his goal was to restore the glory of the ancient Roman Empire. Historians debate whether Justinian's approach involved restoring the grandeur of the past Roman world, or rather constructing innovations that contributed to the evolution of the empire. Regardless of which mentality Justinian possessed, the reconstruction of the Hagia Sophia resulted as a product of his ambition. The Nika Riots that occurred in 532 nearly brought Justinian's reign to a quick demise. However, he managed to squelch the rebellion and maintain his position of authority with no physical harm done to him. The Hagia Sophia fared differently. This Cathedral of Eastern Orthodoxy had been built by Constantine two years after his conversion to Christianity in 322. During the Nika Riots, the rebels who attempted to overthrow Justinian completely demolished the Hagia Sophia. Once the rebellion was ended, the reconstruction of the Hagia Sophia provided a perfect opportunity for Justinian to display his power and celebrate his victory over the rebels in the Nika Riots. His triumphant response to the finished product of the Hagia Sophia was, "Solomon, I have outdone thee."¹

Indeed, the Hagia Sophia remains one of the most awe-inspiring products of the Byzantine Empire. The structure of the Hagia Sophia in itself is a work of art. Justinian hired

¹ G. W. Bowersock, "Justinian," In *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, edited by Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. Url. (accessed April 12, 2015).

men by the names of Anthemius and Isodore to undertake the task of designing this monumental church. Both men exhibited knowledge and expertise which qualified them for the job at hand. Anthemius was an expert in projective geometry, while Isodore was a teacher of stereometry, the measurement of volumes, and physics. These skills enabled Anthemius and Isodore to design the largest cathedral that existed in the world for 1,000 years.

Not only did its sheer size make the Hagia Sophia great, but its greatness also lied in the uniqueness of its architecture. An unprecedented size for that time, the dome stretched across the ceiling with a span of 107 feet and a height of 164 feet. Anthemius and Isodore masterfully created the pendentive method that solved the problem of how to make the curve of the dome fit into the right angle of its supporting wall. It was this method that enabled the architects to construct a dome of that size. The project only took five years, which was a relatively quick construction period. The architectural talents of Anthemius and Isodore, as well as the skills of the builders, serves as proof of technical skillfulness and the intelligence of humanity. Despite the new and innovative support system for the massive dome, an earthquake caused its collapse in the year 558. Reconstruction soon took place and more sturdy arches were constructed along with adding external tower buttresses to support the piers that held up the dome.²

While its original architecture may have remained the same, the Hagia Sophia's utilitarian purposes underwent a sequence of drastic changes through the course of her existence. These changes include the church's transformation into a mosque, and years later followed by a transition into a museum. It is interesting to note how these transformations indicate the distinct "in between" quality of the Byzantine Empire. The Hagia Sophia began as a place of worship

² Richard Frucht. "History". *Eastern Europe: An Introduction to the People, Lands, and Culture*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004. url. (accessed April 15, 2015).

for Christians, but it's location in Constantinople, right between Christian Western Europe and the Muslim East caused it to be a predictable target for invaders from the East.

In addition to the striking exterior and architectural features that make up the Hagia Sophia, the interior possesses artwork that captures the essence of Byzantine culture. Byzantine artwork was primarily religious, symbolic and didactic.³ Constantinople and the Hagia Sophia were the religious and artistic centers, and essentially served as a melting point for Asian and European artwork.⁴ The bright, colorful and intrinsic artwork demonstrated the Asian influence. While the religious themed mosaics show the influence of Western Europe.⁵ These pieces of art are unique in how they combine traditional beliefs with abstract paintings, and spirituality with décor. This elaborate artwork displays qualities of a society that placed value on religion, imagination and civilization.

The Byzantine artwork possessed distinguishable characteristics. In fact, the word "Byzantine" now refers to a style rather than the geographical location on the map. The people living during this time period would have never referred to themselves as Byzantines, but rather as Roman. However, scholars in later years became uncomfortable calling this empire 'roman' due to the major differences between classical Rome and Byzantium. Byzantium's unique characteristics included the elongated human figures portrayed in the mosaics. These figures were drawn with strong lines, appeared extremely rigid, were ornamented with gold and had a flat appearance. The mosaics mostly portrayed religious icons which were trademarks of

³ *The Macmillan Encyclopedia*, "Byzantine Art and Architecture," Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2003. url (accessed Apr.12, 2015).

⁴ Charles Rufus Morey, "The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia," *the Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 2, no. 7(1944): 201, accessed April 10, 2015. url. (accessed April 13, 2015).

⁵ *The Macmillan Encyclopedia*, "Byzantine Art and Architecture," Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2003. url (accessed Apr.12, 2015).

Byzantine society.⁶ The mosaics, as well as other architectural features of the Hagia Sophia would influence society in Western Europe particularly places such as St. Marks in Venice and Westminster Cathedral in London.⁷

Despite their beauty, the religious icons and mosaics were not without controversy. The Iconoclasm Controversy developed from a deep rooted fear of Christianity becoming a form of idolatry. The Byzantines debated the question of where to draw the line between honoring Christ and the saints through a representation, and worshipping the actual representation itself. This argument proved to be problematic and caused the empire to be split for 140 years between the 8th and 9th century. On one side of the controversy, stood the iconophiles. The iconophiles supported religious paintings and representations. Iconoclasts existed on the complete opposite side of the spectrum. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the original Greek word that iconoclasm derives from literally means “image destroyer.” The modern definition defines iconoclasm as a person who opposes beliefs that are widely accepted and destroys religious images as a result.

The religious relics that were destroyed were beautiful pieces of artwork that represented the Byzantine era. However, the idea of these images being idols brought about the justification for the destruction of these pieces of artwork and history. They saw religious art as something that was not biblical, but rather something the church had added to its customs. Over time, the eastern churches in the east began to defend relics, and support iconoclasm less and less. This was when the controversy began. The first stage of the iconoclasm controversy took place in the year 730. The Byzantine Emperor Leo III began to forcibly carry out iconoclast policies within

⁶*The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*, “Byzantine.” Abington: Helicon, 2014. url. (accessed Apr 12, 2015).

⁷*The Macmillan Encyclopedia*, “Byzantine Art and Architecture,” Basingstoke: Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2003. url (accessed Apr.12, 2015).

the church. It remains unclear the extent to which the Hagia Sophia specifically suffered from the iconoclasm controversy. Historians can only tell that some of the mosaics were saved, while others were covered up or destroyed. Leo III destroyed a figure of Christ in the Hagia Sophia, supposedly saying, “the emperor cannot endure that Christ should be represented by a mute and lifeless image graven of earthly materials.”⁸ He and his son, Constantine, exhibited great passion concerning this issue and demanded the destruction of all religious artwork, including panel icons, wall paintings, and mosaics in churches. However, the tides turned in the year 843, at the Second Council of Nicaea. There the iconophiles views were affirmed and the “theology of images” became an accepted view in the Orthodox Church.⁹

The iconoclasm controversy demonstrated the ever present issue that existed concerning the Byzantine Empire. This empire is difficult to describe because it seemed to be caught between a constant struggle of opposing forces of religion, culture and ethnicity. The Hagia Sophia exists as a physical representation of that struggle. One reason the iconoclasm controversy was so pronounced was that it involved the tension that existed between those in the empire who valued relics, rituals and mysticism and those who were uncomfortable with the ceremonial and wished to be more conservative. The mysticism mostly derived from the east, while the structure and conservatism came from the west.¹⁰ It makes sense why the Byzantine Empire would have been the center of this iconoclasm controversy. The Byzantine Empire, and more specifically the Hagia Sophia, represent the meshing of two opposite cultures and views of Christianity into something unique. The abuse, reconstruction, and transformation of the Hagia

⁸ Lord Kinross, *Hagia Sophia* (New York: Newsweek, 1972): pgs. 56-57.

⁹ Mary B. Cunningham. *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, "Iconoclasm." Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. url. (accessed April 12, 2015).

¹⁰ *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*, "Byzantine." Abington: Helicon, 2014. url. (accessed April 12, 2015).

Sophia symbolize this uniqueness and the shifts that happened throughout the Byzantine Empire. The iconoclasm controversy was just one of the time periods that affected it.

The mosaics held inside the Hagia Sophia are central to the controversy of iconoclasm and what the Hagia Sophia represents. These mosaics have become iconic of that time period of Byzantium. Morey states that the mosaics are comparable to the Greek Elgin Marbles that are displayed in the British Museum in that both of these magnificent styles of artwork are representative of their culture. The distinctive style of the mosaics give the saints illustrated on the stained glass a flat and elongated appearance. Greek influence led to the mindset that religious paintings were more holy and appropriate for the church than sculpture. The Byzantines steered clear of any artwork in the third dimension. The artwork located on the walls were consistently flat, avoiding any type of relief sculpture. Even after the second Iconoclasm Controversy, with the iconophiles' victory and the church's acceptance of religious artwork, the Byzantines still avoided any type of sculpture. The Byzantines realized that statues, or any other type of three dimensional structure resonated too closely to idols. The Biblical passage located in Exodus 20:3 rung clearly in their ears. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God." Therefore, they chose to artistically represent Christianity through beautiful mosaics that would in time come to symbolize their culture.¹¹

These intricately designed mosaics involved a tedious process. They were first created by using small pieces of glass, usually cubes, and placing them in moist plaster. Once this was done, a gold and silver leaf would be applied to the surface of the mosaic. Finally a protective

¹¹Charles Rufus Morey, "The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia," *the Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 2, no. 7(1944): 201-202, accessed April 10, 2015. url. (accessed April 13, 2015).

layer of glaze would cover the final product. The mosaics inside the Hagia Sophia are beautiful and world-reknown. Most artists of the individual mosaics remain anonymous. This is the case with the famous mosaic of the Virgin and Child located within the Hagia Sophia. This huge mosaic captures the tenderness of a mother while still exhibiting grandeur. Today, it remains one of the mosaics that is still intact. Not all mosaics fared this well over the course of the years, due to the iconoclasm controversy as well as the later Islamic Turkish conquest.¹² Mosaics of Peter and Paul were both destroyed, a mosaic of John the Baptist was recovered with plaster. There were also mosaics that included the four major prophets along with 12 minor prophets. Sadly, all of these were either covered up or destroyed. Church figures were also put in mosaics. 14 bishops were known to be pictured in mosaics, however, only 3 survived. One mosaic in particular stands out above the rest, and that is the Deesis. This piece can be classified as one of the greatest of all mosaics. Its realism, and devotional composition inspire its greatness. The Deesis portrays Jesus on his throne in the center of the piece, with John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary kneeling at his side. The realistic figures make this particular composition unique and explain why it is considered the finest of all the mosaics.¹³

Eventually, the Sultan Turks invaded and conquered Constantinople in 1453. The leader of the Turks, Sultan Mohhamed II treated the church with a degree respect. He demonstrated this by maintaining the name of the structure. He translated the title to the Islamic form, “The Great Mosque of Aya Sofya.” Muslim tradition rejects any representation of human form and because of this, they did inflicted damage upon the mosaics and Christian relics located inside the Hagia Sophia. Thankfully, they refrained from covering and destroying every single

¹²Lord Kinross, *Hagia Sophia* (New York: Newsweek, 1972): pgs.57-60.

¹³ Ibid.,. pgs. 63-64.

mosaic.¹⁴ It causes one to ponder what caused Mohammed II to refrain. It is possible that he had a sense of the irreplaceable symbols of culture and religion that were in his possession, and could not bring himself to destroy them. However, the church did undergo a drastic conversion. The transformation involved obliterating Christian symbols within the building and covering the beautiful mosaics located on the interior with plaster. These would not be uncovered for hundreds of years. Circular disks with verses from the Koran were mounted throughout the interior. The pulpit was replaced by a Sultan's box, and a Muslim crescent replaced the cross located at the summit of the dome. In addition to the changes of the interior, the Turks added 4 minarets to the corners of the Hagia Sophia, building them up one at a time.¹⁵ Minarets hold an important place in Muslim religion. These towers contain a muezzin which calls the Muslim faithful to prayer daily.¹⁶

For fourteen hundred years, the Hagia Sophia served the world of Christianity as well as the world of Islam. Two opposing forces converged upon one another in the land between the East and the West. The Hagia Sophia and the changes it underwent stood as an obvious symbol of this dynamic of the Byzantine Empire and its history. However, the changes did not stop there. The mosque that was once a church would eventually turn into a museum.

In 1918, a new leader came to power and made a significant mark to the country of Turkey. Mustafa Kemal decided to remake Turkey by deserting imperialist ideologies and ridding secular society of Muslim influence. The country created a definite bridge between church and state, following after western models. In 1923, the nation was officially declared the

¹⁴ Ibid., pg.103.

¹⁵ Anthony Grafton, *The Classical Tradition*, "Hagia Sophia," Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. url. (accessed April 15, 2015).

¹⁶ *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, "Minaret." New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. url. (accessed April 15, 2015).

Turkish Republic. Islam remained the main religion of the country, it just did not mix into political aspects of life.

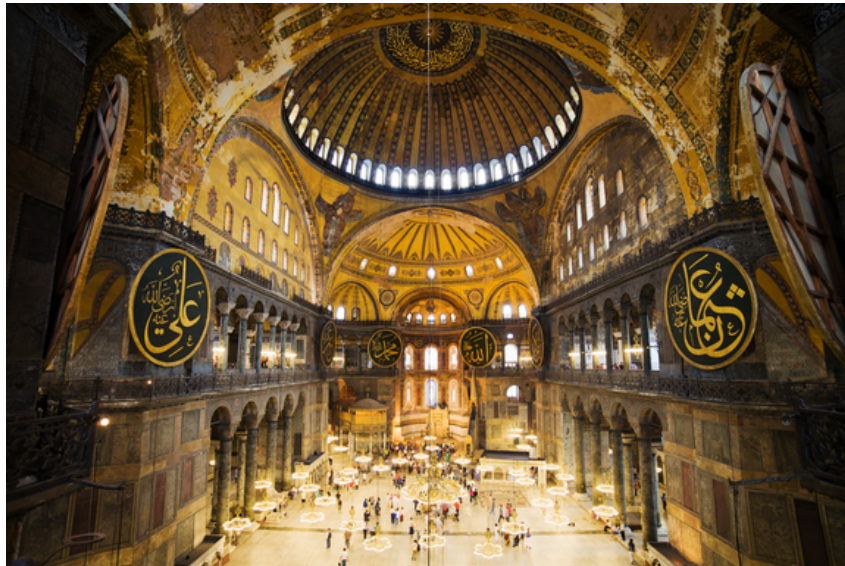
Due to this shift to secularism, the president of Turkey decided to convert the Hagia Sophia into a museum. This iconic building that housed two of the world's main religions now served as a memorial of sorts to both of them. The Hagia Sophia represented the unification of two completely different worlds, the east and the west. The president of Turkey gave authority to the Byzantine Institute of America to do what they could to preserve the mosaics and religious artworks located inside the Hagia Sophia. Their task would be to "lay bare and conserve," the mosaics. The leader of Turkey possessed the mentality that the artwork should be preserved, seeing as how they were treasures to the Christian religion. An American by the name of Thomas Whittemore, an archaeologist and scholar, was placed in charge of restoring the mosaics. He and his team used a tedious process to bring the mosaics back to their former glory. Whittemore reported that their job "cleansed and corroborated, but was not subject to subtraction." Whittemore and his team were able to reveal and preserve art as it existed thousands of years ago.¹⁷

This structure constructed from an emperor's ambitious attempt to restore the former glory to his empire definitely achieved its purpose. The Hagia Sophia's grandeur, size, proportion and artistic beauty is difficult to surpass. Not only does the Hagia Sophia represent grandeur, but it symbolizes the changes of the city of Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire and it will continue to do so as a museum for years to come.

¹⁷ Ibid., pgs.123-128.



Exterior view of the Hagia Sophia



Interior view of the Hagia Sophia

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