



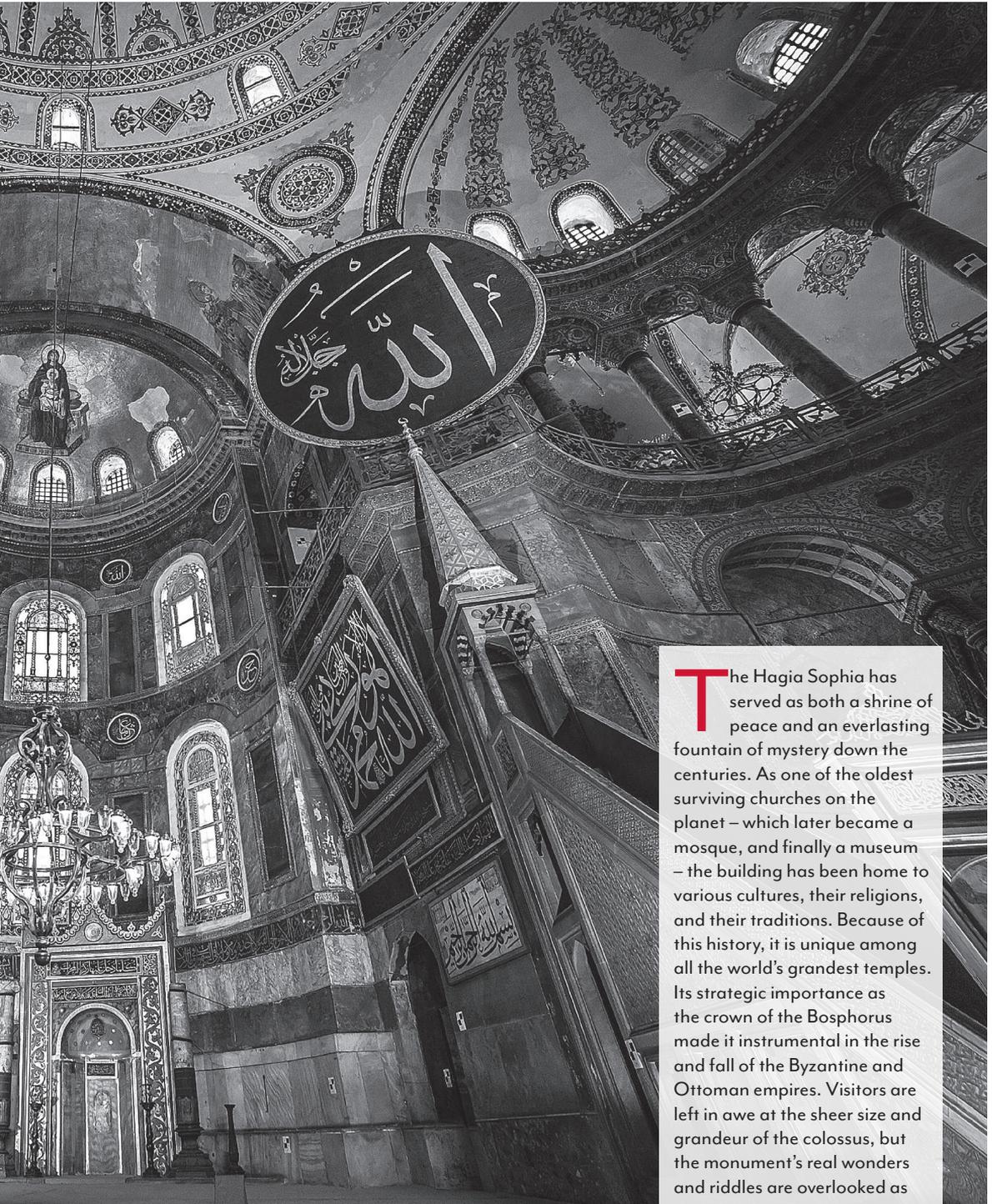
FEATURE

**THE KEY  
IS IN THE  
DETAILS:**

# UNLOCKING THE HAGIA SOPHIA

BY ASLIGÜL ARMAĞAN





**T**he Hagia Sophia has served as both a shrine of peace and an everlasting fountain of mystery down the centuries. As one of the oldest surviving churches on the planet – which later became a mosque, and finally a museum – the building has been home to various cultures, their religions, and their traditions. Because of this history, it is unique among all the world's grandest temples. Its strategic importance as the crown of the Bosphorus made it instrumental in the rise and fall of the Byzantine and Ottoman empires. Visitors are left in awe at the sheer size and grandeur of the colossus, but the monument's real wonders and riddles are overlooked as



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The Emperor Door

minute details – cogs that make up this impressive machine. We walk past them, usually do not notice their presence, and even when we do, we are ignorant of their significance. The only way to truly understand the Hagia Sophia is through the stories the building has to tell us – by lending our ears to the ghosts of history. Take yourself on a journey through one of the most ancient buildings in the world. Imagine the Hagia Sophia more

intimately than is possible these days, without the low buzz of conversation, the excitable tourists, the camera clicks. Imagine, instead, that the building is empty. The air is damp and cool; the building's acoustics echo your footsteps as you make your way inside, from the exterior narthex (entrance area) through the center door, into the interior narthex. Focus on the details. What do you see?

The first thing that catches your attention is the magnificent center door that leads from the interior narthex into the main building. The Emperor Door, aptly named as it was used exclusively by the Byzantine monarch, is not only the largest door in the entire structure at seven metres high, but also one which has spellbound spectators for centuries. The oak panels and bronze frame which make up this structure date back to the second century, and were brought to the Hagia Sophia from their original site at a pagan temple in Tarsus. Contemporary sources have surmised that the wood which makes up the door comes from Noah's Ark, or, alternatively, the chest which the Jewish holy plates were kept in. Whether or not these origin stories are true, they are nonetheless a wonderful introduction to the patchwork of history, mythology, and culture that makes up the Hagia Sophia.

Before you step through the Emperor Door, allow your eyes to travel up to the truly breathtaking mosaics that span the ceiling of the entire interior narthex. The one that stands right above the central door, the Imperial Gate Mosaic, inevitably draws the most attention due to its strikingly beautiful yet commanding depiction of the Christ on his throne, as Emperor Leo VI the Wise bows to him in supplication. The text reads: "Peace be with you. I am the light of the world." It is no coincidence that these are the words chosen to resonate with us upon our entrance. Hagia Sophia has been mistranslated as Saint Sophia since its inception. However, the



building is not and has never been dedicated to a Christian saint. Instead, the temple's name is an ode to the Holy Wisdom (of God) – the correct translation of Hagia Sophia – and the building has been a monument to peace, light, and wisdom throughout its various incarnations. We will see that Islam chose to emphasise light in one of the focal points of the structure, as did Christianity.

And now, we finally make our way inside. Step through the Emperor Door, but look first at the markings on the ground. These mark the place where the two great men of Byzantine Constantinople would stand for the ceremonial bow, from the Emperor to the Patriarch of the basilica, which the Patriarch would then return. It is not rare to see such crucial ceremonial locations marked clearly on the floor in the Hagia Sophia; for example, you will see circular shapes of marble on the floor near the *minbar*, or imam's pulpit,

an Ottoman addition. The circles make up the Omphalion, and mark the spot where Byzantine coronations would take place. The shapes are said to represent Jesus and the twelve apostles – and also the familiar heavenly bodies of our own solar system.

But looking at the floor can only get us so far; it is now time for the grand reveal. We step to the heart of the building – the nave – and as we stand right underneath the giant dome, take a panoramic look around, before turning our heads directly upwards. Perhaps one of the most well-known stories about the Hagia Sophia is that when Emperor Justinian I first walked into the building which became his sovereign glory in 537, he couldn't help but murmur the iconic words, "O Solomon, I have surpassed thee." And it is not hard to see why – the sight is truly majestic. There are 107 columns in total,



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and the majority are dotted around the lower levels. Materials from all over the empire were used in the temple's construction, including Hellenistic columns from the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus (one of the Wonders of the Ancient World), large stones from Egypt, green marble from Thessaly, black stone from the Bosphorus, and yellow stone from Syria. It is no overstatement to say that the building was not only grand in its dimensions: it was also a manifestation of the might and span of the Byzantine empire. Yet it is only when we look up to the dome that we see why the Hagia Sophia was unmatched in innovation and grandeur in the centuries that followed its construction.

Justinian I was an ambitious emperor. After quelling the violently political Nika riots which destroyed the Hagia Sophia's predecessor, he set out to build the most majestic basilica ever constructed. True to its founder's vision, the nave of the Hagia Sophia spans a distance three times wider than any Gothic cathedral, and stood taller than any other church for more than a millennium. The key to such ambition was mathematical innovation. Justinian commissioned Anthemius of Tralles and Isidoros of Miletus to create a revolutionary design, and the stakes were truly high: the area is prone to earthquakes, and the design incorporated a



The Deësis Mosaic



round dome onto a square base, a style which had no precedent. What the architects came up with was ingenious. They incorporated triangular concave pendentives — which allow a round dome to cover a square room — around the central dome, followed by adding semi-domes of various sizes to further support the main dome. The effect was an optical illusion of a truly colossal nave.

It worked. The dome is 56 metres high, and over 31 metres across, and is the largest one built in the Byzantine empire. Despite damage by earthquakes, fires, and the passage of time, the original design has lived on for close to 1,500 years. The dome is currently decorated with Islamic scripture, and although we do not know for sure what lies beneath it, the most likely answer is another golden mosaic with Christian imagery. The scripture dates

back to the Ottoman period and has been left untouched because it represents the harmony of the Hagia Sophia's symbolism across cultures.

In the nineteenth century, during the most extensive period of renovation the building has seen since its inception, Sultan Abdülmecid commissioned Kazasker Mustafa Izzet Efendi, one of the most important calligraphers of his time, to decorate the dome. He chose to transcribe the 35<sup>th</sup> verse of the Quran, the verse of light, a section of beautiful esoteric imagery. We can see that the values the Hagia Sophia stood for had not changed in more than a thousand years. It was, and always had been, a building dedicated to beauty, light, wisdom, and peace across cultures, empires, and religions. As we make our way into the upper galleries, we come across some of the more unexpected

details that help us decipher the history of the Hagia Sophia. The western gallery was occupied by the empress in Byzantine times, and her balcony has the most incredible view of the building. The northern gallery was occupied by female worshippers. Finally, the southern gallery was the emperor's territory, and it is here that we find some of the most thought-provoking remnants of history.

Although every mosaic in the Hagia Sophia has a story of its own, ask any visitor to choose the most captivating one, and they will point you to the Deësis mosaic. It dates back to the thirteenth century, and marks a celebration held for the building's return to the Orthodox faith after a turbulent period of Roman Catholicism during the Fourth Crusade, when mosaics were ransacked and looted. Defining features of this mosaic panel are the incredibly human



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Hellenistic columns

detail and soft features of the images: Christ Pantocrator, an ancient translation of one of the Hebrew names for God, surrounded by the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist as they pray for the salvation of humanity on Judgement Day. Although the lower half of the panel has suffered environmental damage, this only serves as a juxtaposition against the vibrancy and beauty of what remains above.

Straight across from this mosaic panel is the secluded cenotaph of Enrico Dandolo, the 42<sup>nd</sup> Doge of Venice and the commander of the Latin crusaders in 1204. The crusade was a time when the building experienced perhaps the most destruction, looting, and deterioration in its history, and it is a dark but humorous irony to have a dedication to the man responsible directly across from a celebration of beauty and salvation. That being said, the cenotaph has not been excavated due to fears of further

damaging the building – and perhaps it is in our best interest to keep the legends of this incredible structure alive. It is these small paradoxes that make the Hagia Sophia what it is today.

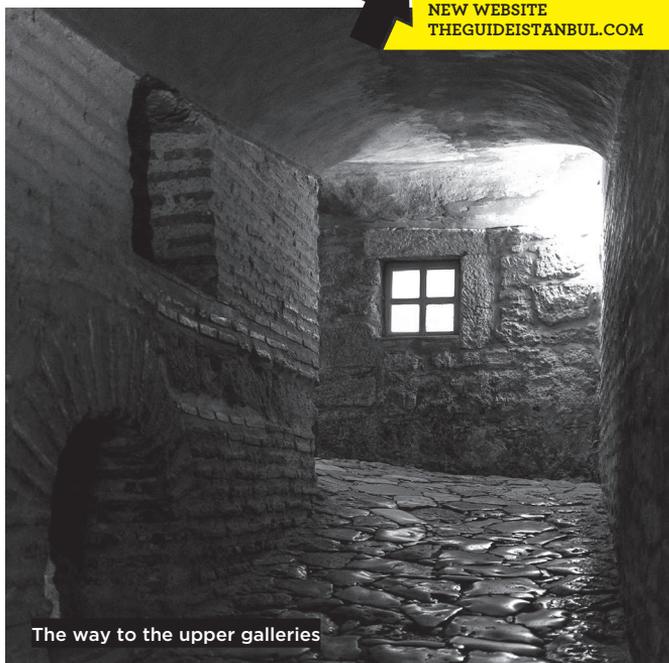
A final anecdote the Hagia Sophia shares with us is virtually unnoticeable unless you know what you're looking for. Adjacent to the Deësis mosaic on the bannisters of the southern gallery, you will notice a small runic inscription etched on the marble. This ninth-century addition is Viking scripture which reads "Halfdane was here," and is a contribution most likely made by a member of the Varangian Guard, a group of Viking mercenaries who were an integral part of the Byzantine imperial guard regiment for about 200 years. Not only

does this whimsical autograph mark the multiculturalism of the building, it is an astonishing insight into the unchanging aspects of our nature: no matter when, no matter where, human eccentricities are universal.

This is the wonder of the Hagia Sophia: it has spanned so many centuries, cultures, religions, artistic movements, political junctures, and people that when we take a good look at what is left behind, it is almost like holding up a mirror and seeing what makes us happy, what leaves us in awe, and, perhaps most importantly, what makes us all human.

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