

Hagia Sophia's Conversions: Reflections on the Political, Temporal, and Aesthetic Dimensions of Heritage

A Zoom-based webinar hosted by the Max Planck Research Group "Empires of Memory: The Cultural Politics of Historicity in Former Habsburg and Ottoman Lands"

10 November 2020, 18:00, Central European Time

As a discourse and a set of institutionalized policies, heritage-making necessarily involves a complex mix of identities, politics, and power. Simultaneously, the sites, objects and practices that heritage seeks to encompass and preserve are myriad, defined by disparate histories that are not equally suitable to the ends that heritagization seeks. Hagia Sophia, which stood at the symbolic center of two great empires and continues to inspire identification on the part of two religions, represents a unique example of this dynamic. In her seminal article, Gülrü Necipoğlu emphasized Hagia Sophia's unprecedented capacity for transformation over time, but also noted that the building "was not an open signifier." Rather, regardless of the context, its reinterpretations have consistently revolved "around the twin themes of universal empire and religion." [1] As such, Hagia Sophia has always carried powerful political symbolism and possibilities of interpretation. It is no surprise that Hagia Sophia is still claimed by different religious actors, in different languages; it is a witness to and protagonist of a plethora of legends and histories, which simultaneously inform and unsettle recent decisions to manipulate heritage discourse for political gains.

On July 10, 2020, Hagia Sophia once again became a mosque when the Turkish Council of State revoked its museum status, which had been granted in 1934 in an attempt to diffuse its imperial connotations

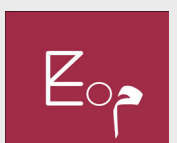


and open the building to researchers. Two weeks later, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, tens of thousands of worshippers gathered to celebrate the opening with an initial Friday prayer. The reopening of Hagia Sophia as a mosque was the result of a long campaign, most recently led by Turkey's ruling party, the AKP. When President Erdoğan called for the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia as a "return to its origin" (*aslına rücu*), it initiated another recontextualization of the monument and the elevation of only one of its many histories.

Against this backdrop, our workshop aims to address three larger themes in relation to the place of Hagia Sophia, both today and in the past. The first is the tension between the anti-imperialist discourse



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that accompanied the museum's reconversion, and the language and symbolism of (re)conquest that simultaneously marked the opening celebrations. While removal of the monument's museum status has been touted as proof of Turkey's sovereignty and a response to the past injustice of musealization in deference to the "West," the reconversion is also couched in the language of the "right of the sword," and symbolism that combines ethno-nationalist bluster and religious hegemony.

Second, historians have long pointed out that the conversion of Ayasofya into the royal mosque of Sultan Mehmed II did not constitute an erasure, but, rather, was a re-consecration of the building, and its inclusion—together with that of Eastern Roman imperial heritage—into the emerging Ottoman context. While there is no doubt that Hagia Sophia represents shared heritage par excellence as a place of collective memory, there have also been proposals for sharing the building in practice, opening it for prayer on the part of different communities, on various Christian and Islamic holidays. How can we understand Hagia Sophia in the wider context of shared sacred spaces? What are the challenges and possibilities of imagining a calendrical division between Christianity and Islam, or even between religiosity and secularity, in its space?

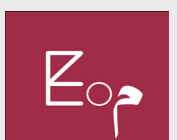
Finally, the dense relationship among space, aesthetics, and historicity that Hagia Sophia embodies demands appreciation in its own right. Over the past decade, scholars of the church in the Byzantine era—notably Bissera Pentcheva [2]—have begun to understand the intangible heritage of Hagia Sophia, which goes beyond symbolism and language and opens the domain of sensorial experience of the past. Byzantine imperial power anchored itself in the temporal play of light and sound in this vast, extremely reverberant interior. As the emperor stood under the dome and the elite choir sang acclamations from the drum of the golden dome, glittering reverberation 'rained' from the resplendent cupola over the ruler. Byzantine legacies both persevered



and shifted in unexpected ways in the subsequent Ottoman period. For instance, a well-known tale maintains that the beauty of Hagia Sophia inspired melancholy on the part of the Sultan Mehmed II. Upon seeing Christendom's greatest church, the conquering sultan apparently mused over the transience of earthly power, but also decided to immortalize himself by converting the building into his royal mosque. In light of these concerns, the third theme of our workshop seeks to emphasize the unique features of the materiality and historicity of Hagia Sophia, including its architecture, acoustics, and decorations. How does the monument figure in art history? How were elements specific to Christianity and Islam highlighted or erased in the building's various incarnations, and what will their place be in the reconsecrated Ayasofya-i Kebir Mosque? Finally, which sensorial experiences are possible, and which are foreclosed, under this new dispensation?

[1] Gülrü Necipoğlu, "The Life of an Imperial Monument: Hagia Sophia after Byzantium," 225.

[2] Bissera Pentcheva, *Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space and Spirit in Byzantium* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2017).



Participant biographies:

Karen Barkey is the Haas Distinguished Chair of Religious Diversity at the Othering & Belonging Institute and Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. She is also currently the Director of the Center for the Study of Democracy, Toleration, and Religion (CDTR). Barkey has been engaged in the comparative and historical study of the state, with special focus on its transformation over time. Her main empirical site has been the Ottoman Empire, in comparison with France, the Habsburg, and the Russian Empires. Her current research centers on shared sacred spaces, specifically Greek Orthodox churches and monasteries in Istanbul that continue to be shared by Christians, Muslims, and Jews. She co-edited the *Shared Sacred Sites: A Contemporary Pilgrimage* (CUNY, 2018) and co-curated the Shared Sacred Sites Exhibit in Thessaloniki and New York.

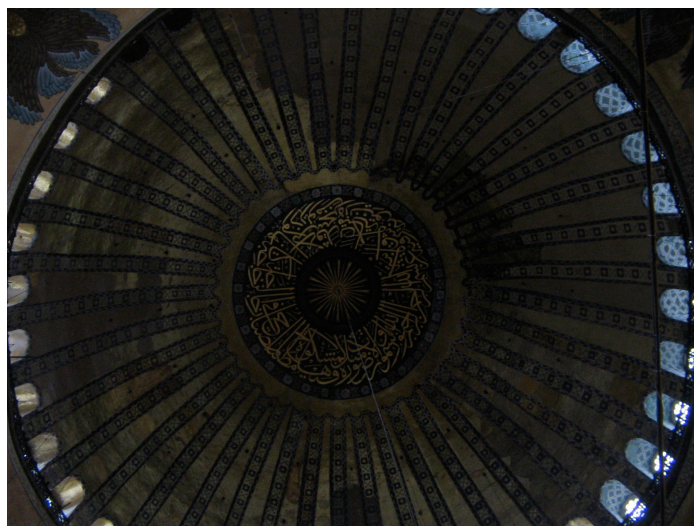
Axel Corlu is a scholar with over two decades of experience in academia. His research fields include Byzantine and Ottoman history, food history, military history, political violence and terrorism, and the modern Middle East, among others. Over the years, he has taught courses in history and sociology at four universities in the United States. Dr. Corlu's published work in English and Turkish has appeared in various academic and popular venues, and he continues his participation in numerous conferences around the world. A native speaker of Greek, Italian, and Turkish, Dr. Corlu holds degrees in History, Intelligence Studies, Sociology, and Political Science.

Emily Neumeier is Assistant Professor of Art History at Temple University. Her research concerns the art and architecture of the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. Before coming to Temple, Neumeier was a Research Collaborator in the Max Planck Research Group "Objects in the Contact Zone: The Cross-Cultural Lives of Things" at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence. During the 2018–2019 academic year, Neumeier was in residence at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens as a Getty/American Council of Learned Societies Fellow in the History of Art.

Bissera V. Pentcheva is Professor of Art and Art History at Stanford University. Her innovative work in acoustics, art, and music has redefined the field of Byzantine architecture. She has published three books with Pennsylvania State University Press, of which *Hagia Sophia: Sound, Space and Spirit in Byzantium* (2017) is of great relevance to our

discussion today. The book received the prestigious 2018 American Academy of Religion's Award in excellence in historical studies. Pentcheva's research on Hagia Sophia has been featured on NPR and in *The New York Times* this past year.

M. Hakan Yavuz is Professor of Political Science at the University of Utah. His current projects focus on transnational Islamic networks in Central Asia and Turkey; the role of Islam in state-building and nationalism; ethnic cleansing and genocide; and ethno-religious conflict management. Yavuz received his M.A. from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and his Ph.D. from University of Wisconsin-Madison in Political Science in 1998. He has thus far published five books: *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford University Press, 2020); *Toward an Islamic Enlightenment: The Gülen Movement* (Oxford University Press, 2013); *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2003); *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); and *The Emergence of a New Turkey* (University of Utah Press, 2007), which he edited. He is the author of more than thirty articles on Islam, nationalism, the Kurdish question, and modern Turkish politics.



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