



The Justinian Hagia Sophia May Not Make it to 2050

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Fig. 1: The Hagia Sophia. Photo: I.J. Goetz / unsplash

The decision by the Turkish authorities in 2020 to convert Hagia Sophia and the Monastery of Christ at Chora in Istanbul into mosques had an impact on the credibility of the World Heritage Convention, one of its five strategic objectives (Credibility, Conservation, Capacity-building, Communication, Communities). (Concerning the Chora Monastery the implementation of the above decision until now has been delayed for conservation works).

This act is due to the policy of Turkey seeking to elevate its international status by establishing itself as the representative of the broader Muslim world. Since 2006, several other important Byzantine churches in Turkey dedicated to the Sophia of God which had functioned as museums have been converted into mosques: the Hagia Sophia in Nicea (Bithynia), the Hagia Sophia in Bizye (Thrace), the Hagia Sophia in Trapezounta, and the Agia Sophia in Ainos.

Hagia Sophia in Istanbul and the Chora monastery were designated as a component of the "Historic Areas of Istanbul" and inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1985 based on criteria (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv), which includes other major historic monuments and sites. The World Heritage Committee (44th session, 2021) requested Turkey to submit an update State of Conservation (SoC) Report on the monument by February 2022 for consideration at its 45th session (to take place this year). This report has not been published yet even though according to the Operational Guidelines, SoC reports provided by the States Parties are automatically uploaded for public access by the World Heritage Centre.

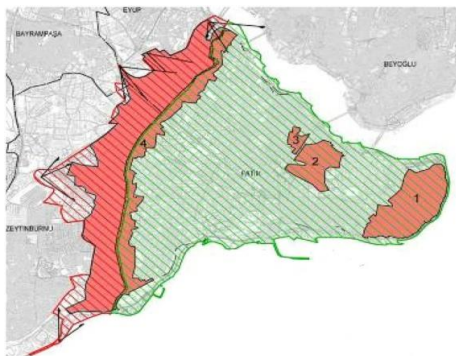


Fig. 2: Historic Areas of Istanbul World Heritage Site. Map: Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 2003

As expected, the uncontrolled access to the Hagia Sophia around the clock - Hagia Sophia is now visited by around 40.000 mosque visitors a day -, and the lack of security have caused

considerable damage and deterioration to the monument.

A lot of related reports and photos have appeared in the Turkish media, such as the newspaper Cumhuriyet, as quoted in Orthodox Times of 19 May, 2022:

“Hagia Sophia will not make it to 2050” was the newspaper’s ominous prediction for the World Heritage Site, which sent its journalists there, who watched the situation, saw dozens of visitors flock to it, and reported that in “Bayram” a few weeks ago, more than 100 thousand visitors entered Hagia Sophia in one day.

As pointed out in the article of Cumhuriyet, even the moisture from the breaths of the crowd of people entering Hagia Sophia, suffice to destroy the monument, which for 1,500 years stands in the same place and has suffered a lot of damage in recent years mainly the last two that turned into a mosque.

The newspaper “sounds the alarm”, because the correct restoration work has not been done.

There are also many visitors, who use the monument to stay overnight, to leave their suitcases and “park” in it the baby strollers, or to use the toilets.

Archaeologists and Turkish historians warn, that a ticket must be applied for the entrance to Hagia Sophia and only 20 people must enter at a time so that the monument can be preserved, otherwise, they predict in the near future its total destruction.”



Fig. 3: Shoes storage.
Photo: novasports.gr



Fig. 4: Damaged water tank.
Photo: medya.news

Turkish archaeologists and historians have referred to cracks in the marble floor (Fig. 5), frescoes peeled (Fig. 6), vandalism on the Imperial Gate (Fig. 7), and many other irreversible damages. These interventions affect seriously the three essential criteria (Outstanding Universal Value, Authenticity and Integrity) which are the basis of the 1972 Convention. Unless remedied completely, the situation may continue to deteriorate and the monument will risk losing its Outstanding Universal Value.



Fig. 5: Damaged marble floor
Photo: iefimerida.gr



Fig. 6: Peeled frescoes.
Photo: novasports.gr



Fig. 7: Damaged Imperial Gate
Photo: novasports.gr

The “Report on the 2nd UNESCO Advisory mission to the World Heritage property Historic

Areas of Istanbul (Turkey) 29 January - 3 February 2021"¹ states (p. 15):

1. The mosaics on the ground floor are covered by panels only during prayer times and activated by an electronic system which allows it to be showcased outside of prayer times.
2. The restoration work on the paving and the mosaics of the upper gallery is completed and it will not be covered and be open to visitors, as in the past,
3. Regular ventilation of the prayer carpet is needed to avoid the development of microorganisms on the ancient marble floor (Fig. 8). Specialists need to analyze the degree of humidity created by the carpet laid out in one piece,
4. It is recommended to establish an "Archaeological Garden" in order to regroup the archaeological pieces scattered on the grounds of the monument.



Fig. 8: The floor of the main hall of the monument fully covered by carpets, with large crowds camping down. Note the cover of the mosaics in the apse (upper center left of the photo).
Photo: dailysabah.com

However, the panels are still permanently closed as well as the gallery. The ventilation of the carpet is not a scientific approach for the control of humidity and is not feasible due to the large surface of the carpet laid out in one piece.

The creation of an "Archaeological Garden" presupposes the conservation and restoration of the archaeological remains that are an integral part of the monument which has to be seen in the context of the surrounding structures. This issue has been ignored by UNESCO.

The Justinian Hagia Sophia was built on the foundations of the 4th century church of Constantius II and the 5th century Church of Theodosius II which were burnt. As the cathedral church it had important dependencies abutting on such as the patriarchal palace, library, two baptisteries, a treasury, school, and outlying chapels. Excavations in the area began by the German archaeologist A.M. Snaider in the mid-1940s revealed the spectacular Theodosian facade (probably that of the Theodosian atrium rather than of the church itself) and fragments of from both 4th- and 5th-century churches.

Discoveries between 2004 and 2018, by Ken Dark and Jan Kosteneč («Hagia Sophia in Context: An Archaeological Reexamination of the Cathedral of Byzantine Constantinople», Oxbow Books, 2019), alter significantly the known plan of the building and the surrounding ecclesiastical complex as well as data for the function of these and for interpreting the wider ideological, cultural, religious and architectural changes in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. The authors try to provide a clearer and updated picture of the monumental buildings that surrounded the Hagia Sophia, namely the Great Palace, the Augustaion, the Senate, the Strategion, and the church of Hagia Eirene.

Findings also of the Byzantine and Ottoman period were revealed during the construction

¹<https://whc.unesco.org/document/188387>

works of the Madrasa on the North side of Hagia Sophia. It is considered appropriate that all the excavations results should be fully and centrally recorded on a data base, and a setting plan be adopted.

Advisory missions have been organized by UNESCO between 1993-2000 assessing the present state of the Hagia Sophia and making recommendations for its preservation and restoration. Since then no special autopsy of the monument has taken place. All the missions of eminent specialists and consultants proposed the establishment of an “International Multidisciplinary Committee” with a task to coordinate the various studies and projects (this committee was never created and the works carried out are supervised by a National Committee).

The conversion of the monuments into mosques also raise a legal question: Whether a monument with many uses over time, such as the Hagia Sophia (Christian church, mosque, museum) can be used in a way that favors one use and overlaps the others, or if this contradicts the exceptional ecumenical value of the monument.

It is pointed out that the new use is not in compatibility with the criteria and the justification of their inscription on the list. They declared world monuments as museums reflecting multilayered cultural/historical richness over the centuries.

The UNESCO legal department could examine this issue as in other cases in the past. For instance, an opinion had been given whether the consent of the State Party is required for the inscription of a monument on the World Heritage in Danger.

In this context, a statement by the 2019 UNESCO/ICOMOS Advisory Mission to Istanbul on the reconstruction of the Madrasa is put into question: The Madrasa, part of the social complex of the Hagia Sophia as a mosque, could have a beneficial impact on the Hagia Sophia and its setting in terms of the way it is appreciated and understood, and thus on the overall Outstanding Universal Value of the property.

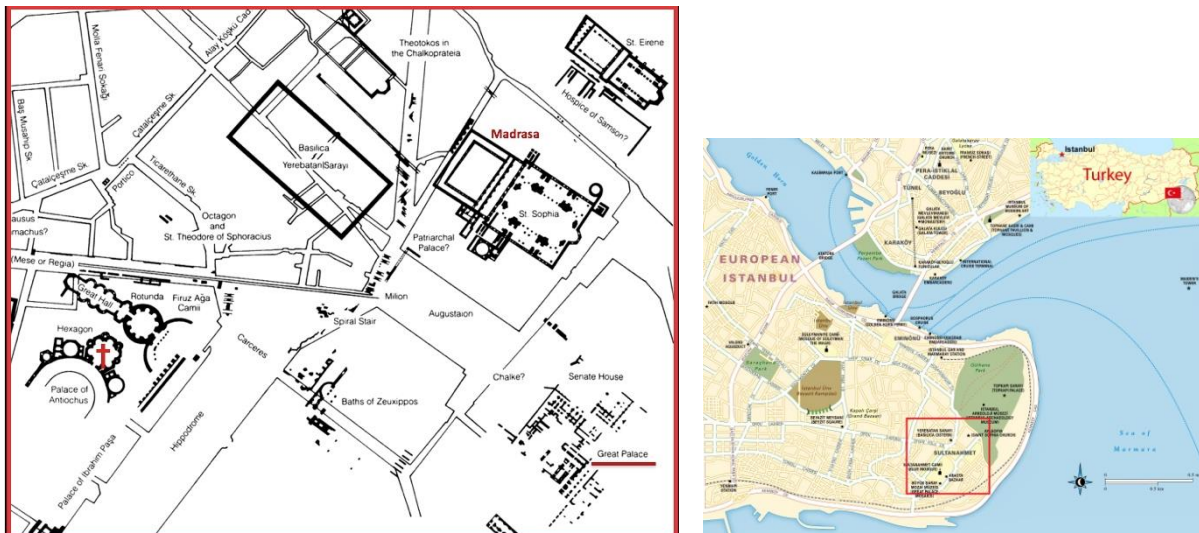


Fig. 9: Location of the Madrasa adjacent to the Hagia Sophia. Maps: a) After Bardill, J. 1997. 'The Palace of Lausus and nearby monuments in Constantinople: a topographical study', *AJA* 101: 67–95. b) Moon.com/maps

This view is in favor of the priority of one layer over the others, which is contrary to the spirit of the convention on the universality of cultural heritage. In addition, the new building affects the visual-aesthetic integrity of the monument.



Fig. 10: The reconstructed Madrasa. *Photo: Anadolu Agency 2022*

The issue of the use of the World Monuments needs special study and specifications which should be included in the Operational Guidelines, such as mentioning the use of the monument (related to the criteria and the justification) in the nomination file, and the eventual plan for change it in the future. Otherwise, a can of worms will be opened considering that the case of the two monuments will be presupposed as approved.

§ 166 of the Operational Guidelines already states that: Where a State Party wishes to have the property inscribed under additional, fewer or different criteria other than those used for the original inscription, it shall submit this request as if it were a new nomination.

The historic areas of Istanbul are at risk

Large scale infrastructure projects on the historic peninsula have negative effects on the OUV of the property. A number of them have been developed without adequate Tourism and Environmental Impact Assessments being undertaken in advance of approval or work commencing, and without formal notification being provided in line with Paragraph 172 of the Operational Guidelines.

In addition, the OUV of several monuments is threatened. For instance, extensive reconstruction, repairs and re-facing of the Byzantine and Roman walls were undertaken using cement rather than Khorosan mortar, contrary to internationally-accepted standards for the conservation of masonry monuments. Their landscape setting should be improved making them more accessible to visitors.

The Ottoman-period timber houses of the vernacular architecture, reflecting artistic and historic values (particularly in the Zeyrek and Süleymaniye core areas) are falling into continued degradation, and the tendency is to replace them with concrete buildings. Conservation and rehabilitation measures have to be undertaken with urgency.

It is recommended to consider the possibility of inscribing the historic areas of Istanbul on the World Heritage List in Danger in compliance with Art. 11 of the World Heritage Convention.