

## HAGIA SOPHIA IN CONSTANTINOPLE

### *The Chronicle of a Death Foretold*

The 44th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee recently concluded under the shadow of the decision to convert the Hagia Sophia and the Monastery of Chora into mosques.

From the year 2016, the reading of the Quran inside the Hagia Sophia and the gathering of worshippers in the surrounding area was the precursor of its “fall”.

Despite numerous protests and international concerns, UNESCO did not issue a public statement or recommendation, a fact that was apparently assessed by the Turkish side as tacit tolerance.

Following the decision of the Supreme Court of Turkey (July 2020) and the announcement that the Monastery of Chora would be converted into a mosque, UNESCO released austere statements and sent an advisory mission to assess the situation.

The UNESCO representative also met with members of the Turkish National Committee for ICOMOS (a nongovernmental organization, institutional advisor to the World Heritage Committee) who expressed reservations about the interventions in the monuments to date. They proposed a holistic approach which would be beneficial for a long-term vision of the whole zone of Hagia Sophia and Chora. (This Committee was not consulted by the Turkish authorities, although its chairman is a member of the country's scientific committee for Hagia Sophia)

The concept of "exceptional universal value", at the core of the World Heritage Convention, has been clarified by the adoption of criteria and other parameters (authenticity, integrity) that must be met by world monuments based on the Charter of Venice and other standard-setting instruments for the protection of cultural heritage.

In the church of Hagia Sophia, the curtains that cover the mosaics and the covering of the old marble floor with prayer rugs will affect their state of conservation (no previous study on the relative humidity control measures was conducting). Long rows of shelves for shoes have been installed in the inner narthex as well as covers in the southern gallery for the isolation of the central aisle, due to the presence of mosaics.

According to the Charter of Venice, items of sculpture, painting or decoration form an integral part of a monument (Article 8).

The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) also expanded the characteristics that document the authenticity of a monument (use and function, intangible values). These interventions offend the visual-aesthetic integrity and the historical and intangible values of the monument. In addition, uncontrolled daily access to it carries additional risks for its protection.

The works in the Monastery of Chora have not been completed so it is not possible to use it at the moment as a mosque. The mosaic representations of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ and the Holy Mother holding the Infant Jesus have already been covered with panels.

The decoration represents a leading example of the monumental art of the Late Byzantine period. The eminent professor Robert Ousterhout expressed the view that "The monument is a three-dimensional work of art" so in order to understand one its importance must see it as a whole, as a work where architecture coexists with mosaics and frescoes.

How could anyone dispute that the "exceptional universal value" of these monuments has already been affected and the visitor will only see "mutilated" world monuments?

UNESCO has not considered nor has it yet examined the issue of substance, which lies in the compatibility of the new use with the criteria and the justification according to which the monuments/museums were designated world monuments: a) Hagia Sophia is recognized as a masterpiece of Byzantine architecture with influences in Eastern and Western art, b) The monuments reflect multilayered cultural/historical richness over the centuries.

The change of use marks the priority of one layer over the others, which is contrary to the spirit of the Convention on the universality of cultural heritage and undermines the interfaith and intercultural dialogue, a 'lighthouse' program of UNESCO.

The Burra Charter (ICOMOS Australia-2013) also states that the conservation of a place should identify and take into consideration all aspects of cultural and natural significance without unwarranted emphasis on any one value at the expense of others (Article 5.1).

The Ottoman character of Hagia Sophia has been emphasized by the recent reconstruction of the madrasa (Muslim school) which was demolished in 1936 (it is not clear when it was granted permission by UNESCO, probably afterwards) on the grounds that this building will be used for needs of the museum and will replace the rough structures in the surrounding area. Recently, however, it was announced that it would host a theological school.

This bulky construction, situated northwest of Hagia Sophia, violates its integrity and goes against to the principles of the Charter of Venice: the conservation of a monument implies preserving a setting which is not out of scale. No new construction or modification which would alter the relations of mass and colour must be allowed (article 6).

*The decision of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee is considered "weak" - expressing grave concern about the potential impact of status change on the exceptional universal value of the monuments and calling on Turkey to submit un*

update report on their conservation status for consideration at its next session in 2022).

The adoption of this decision without discussion or intervention by its members, as *erga omnes partes*, raises questions. It should be noted that EU and Council of Europe countries are members of the Committee, as well as other countries that "raise the banner" of Orthodoxy.

On the contrary, the Committee rejected a UNESCO draft decision, following a long debate, on the inscription of Venice and Lahore in the World Heritage List in Danger. (Many contracting parties consider that the inclusion in this List is a reproach to the State in which the monument is situated while the Convention considers this mechanism to be a lever of obtaining enhanced protection measures).

It is considered appropriate to reflect on the possibility of implementing the following proposals:

- 1) The establishment of an ad hoc International Interdisciplinary Committee by UNESCO because the drafting of a "Master Plan" for the monuments was proposed and the World Heritage Committee called on Turkey to engage in international cooperation and dialogue.
- 2) The examination by UNESCO of the compatibility of the change in the use of monuments with the criteria and the justification for their World Heritage listing.
- 3) The restoration of all interventions to date that harm their exceptional universal value.
- 4) The convening of an extraordinary session of the World Heritage Committee (provided by its rules of procedure) in case Turkey continues with its unilateral actions (there are indications that movable elements of Hagia Sophia will be detached).

The Turkish National Commission for ICOMOS stated that "the character of Hagia Sophia, as a masterpiece of 6th century AD art and architecture, should remain intact, so that this magnificent monument may continue to inspire us as a symbol of interfaith, friendship and world peace".

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