



The Hagia Sophia: The History of the Famous Church and Mosque

Charles River Editors

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"So the church has been made a spectacle of great beauty, stupendous to those who see it and altogether incredible to those who hear of it...Its breadth and length have been so fittingly proportioned that it may without impropriety be described as being both very long and extremely broad. And it boasts of an ineffable beauty, for it subtly combines its mass with the harmony of its proportions, having neither any excess nor any deficiency, inasmuch as it is more pompous than ordinary [buildings] and considerably more decorous than those which are huge beyond measure; and it abounds exceedingly in gleaming sunlight. You might say that the [interior] space is not illuminated by the sun from the outside, but that the radiance is generated within, so great an abundance of light bathes this shrine all round." - Procopius

The Hagia Sophia, built from 532-537, is inarguably the masterpiece of Byzantine architecture and one of the greatest buildings ever constructed. Upon its completion, the Hagia Sophia remained the largest enclosed space in the world for nearly a thousand years, a reign that only ended after the rebuilding of St. Peter's in Rome. Fittingly, the rebuilding of St. Peter's was partly inspired by the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 1453.

The building of Hagia Sophia itself was shocking and transformational. Beginning with Procopius of Caesarea, Justinian's court historian, visitor after visitor noted that the giant dome seems to hover on air, and it's unquestionably true that the arches, vaults, semidomes, and domes add up for an otherworldly, ethereal effect. The surfaces are enriched by colored marble and elaborate mosaics, and when viewing from the aisles and galleries, looking into the nave is dramatic thanks to all the interconnecting layered spaces and repeating, complex curved forms. Interestingly, however, the brick exterior of the building was left unadorned, representing a shell that houses a magnificent interior.

The Hagia Sophia examines the history of one of the world's most famous religious sites and analyzes the religion and politics that shaped its fate.

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