

## **Lecture**

**Dr Christophoros Sofroniou,  
cardiologist and author**

**«The architectural and visual art treasure  
of Agia Sophia,  
an invaluable legacy of Romiosyni»**

In the inauguration ceremony of the exhibition

**THE ARCHITECTURAL WONDER OF AGIA SOPHIA  
IN CONSTANTINOPLE AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION  
OF THE ECUMENICAL ROMIOSYNI**

Translation from Greek by  
**Dr. Katerina Vlachaki**

**29 November 2020**

**ΑΓΙΑ ΣΟΦΙΑ.  
Ο ΑΡΧΙΤΕΚΤΟΝΙΚΟΣ  
ΚΑΙ ΕΙΚΑΣΤΙΚΟΣ ΘΗΣΑΥΡΟΣ ΤΗΣ.  
ΑΝΕΚΤΙΜΗΤΗ ΚΛΗΡΟΝΟΜΙΑ  
ΤΗΣ ΡΩΜΙΟΣΥΝΗΣ.**



**ΧΡΙΣΤΟΦΟΡΟΣ Δ. ΣΩΦΡΟΝΙΟΥ**  
**2020**

The Constantinopolitan Societies of  
**Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom** and  
**Washington, Los Angeles** and **Chicago** from the USA  
in collaboration with the  
Ecumenical Federation of Constantinopolitans (EFC)  
are organising an online exhibition on

## **THE ARCHITECTURAL WONDER OF AGIA SOPHIA IN CONSTANTINOPLE AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION OF THE ECUMENICAL ROMIOSYNI**

The virtual exhibition will be available in Greek, French, English and German, online:

[www.hagiasofiaexh.com](http://www.hagiasofiaexh.com)

from 29 November 2020 to 31 January 2021

**The Grand Opening will be performed online**

**On Sunday 29 November 2020 at 9:00 p.m. (Greek time)**

**with esteemed speakers:**

**Dr Christophoros Sofroniou, cardiologist and author,  
«The architectural and visual art treasure of Agia Sophia,  
an invaluable legacy of Romiosyni»**

**Mr Ioannis Ktistakis, Assistant Professor of the Faculty of Law, Democritus  
University of Thrace**

**«Agia Sophia: a prescribed “islamisation”»**

You may follow the online Grand Opening event via the ZOOM platform in English  
Translation by sending your full name to [nnap@otenet.gr](mailto:nnap@otenet.gr)

Alternatively, you may follow from

<https://www.facebook.com/oiomko.org>

in Greek Language

Distinguished dear ladies and gentlemen, dear compatriots and friends all over the world.

Having accepted the kind and honourable invitation of the chair and the trustees of the Ecumenical Federation of Constantinopolitans, I will accompany you on a historical review and spiritual tour of the architectural and art treasures of Hagia Sophia and eventually focus on the notion of heritage we deserve as Romioi

You all might have climbed the first hill of Poli and between the Hippodrome, Agia Eirini and the ruins of the Grand Palace, between nowadays Sultan Ahmet, Gülhane and Topkapi, you might have seen Hagia Sophia -always there, defiant and aristocratic- overcoming several times and eras, empires, sultanates, occupation regimes, and states; going through fire and water, but being dominant in the history of fifteen centuries.



Hagia Sophia we see today and admire, is the third church in a row with the same name built on about the same site. They both glorious structures but were destroyed by a fire. Founder of the first Hagia Sophia was Constantine the Great. He laid the first stone in 326 and named her Hagia Sophia in order to honour the Wisdom of God. So, the church is dedicated to Christ Himself who manifests Himself through His actions, one of which being the act of Wisdom. In 404, however, at the time of the Arcadius' reign, during the revolt of the followers of Saint John Chrysostom who were reacting to his arbitrary exile, the first Hagia Sophia was set on fire and destroyed.



Ten years later, during the reign of Emperor Theodosius II, Hagia Sophia was renovated, expanded and turned into a five-aisled and more glorious church. This was the second Hagia Sophia which a century later, in 532 -at the time of the reign of Justinian and Theodora-, was set on fire along with the biggest part of Poli during the bloody Nika riots. Forty days after the suppression of the Nika riots, Justinian began the construction of the third Hagia Sophia. This is the church that we see, admire and worship today, as one of the holiest relics of Christianity, Orthodoxy and Romiosyni.

So, Emperor Justinian was the founder and inspirer of Hagia Sophia. Being the seventeenth successor of Constantine the Great, he built, among many other buildings, Hagia Sophia which he left as his key mark on history.

The design of the building as well as the supervision of the construction work -the contract work we would say today- was assigned to two renowned engineers of that time, Anthemius from Tralleis and Isidorus from Miletus, who were experienced connoisseurs of Greco-Roman architecture. The



Emperor himself was actively involved in the design and the generation of symbolisms that were communicated through the design gestures, especially those concerning the lighting of the building. Therefore, legend has it that the source of light and its diffusion inside the temple was a design priority demanded by the Emperor.

The construction of the great temple finished five years, ten months, and two days after laying its foundation stone, a record very impressive for a structure of such scale, complexity, and originality. It should be reminded that the construction of St Peter's Basilica in Rome -which was built a thousand years later, having available much more advanced means of construction- took one hundred and twenty-four years to be finished; and Notre Dame of Paris took seventy- two.

The inaugural ceremony took place on December 27th, 538, the eleventh year of the reign of Justinian, during Menas' Patriarchy. Justinian exclaimed: Solomon, I have outdone thee! This statement was preceded by the following words: Glory to God who has thought me worthy to finish this work.

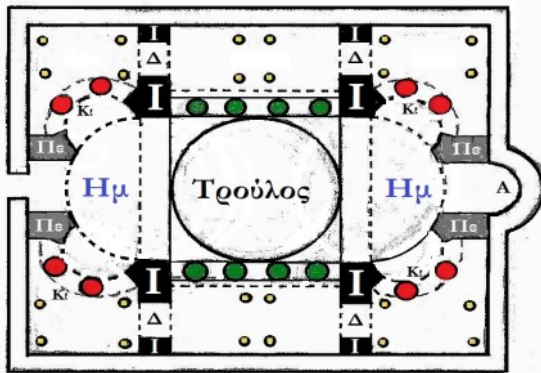
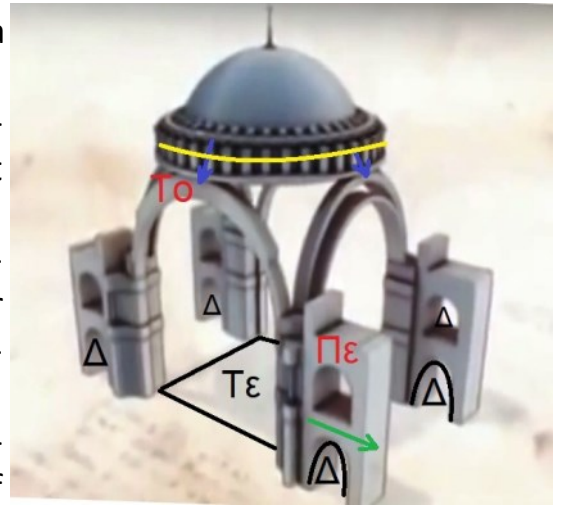
Hagia Sophia introduced a new order in the church architecture. The typology of basilica with a central dome or domed basilica had since served as a model for the construction of many famous temples across Christianity.

Earthshaking events took place at Hagia Sophia, events that left their mark on her history, the history of the world and the history of the Church. Her inauguration, the convening of the Fifth Ecumenical Council, the christianisation of Russians that had as a starting point their admiration for Hagia Sophia, were some of the glorious pages of her history. The beginning of the Great Schism with the Roman Catholic Church following the pope's excommunication inflicted on her altar, the church being stripped of her relics and the violation of her sanctity during the two successive conquests by the Franks and the Ottomans, and lastly, her recent sacrifice as an answer to the demands of populism and religious fanaticism, indicate that Hagia Sophia's suffering is never-ending. A heartbreaking symbol of her sufferings are the four minarets which like giant nails hold her crucified body at Golgotha, at the now Turkified Poli.



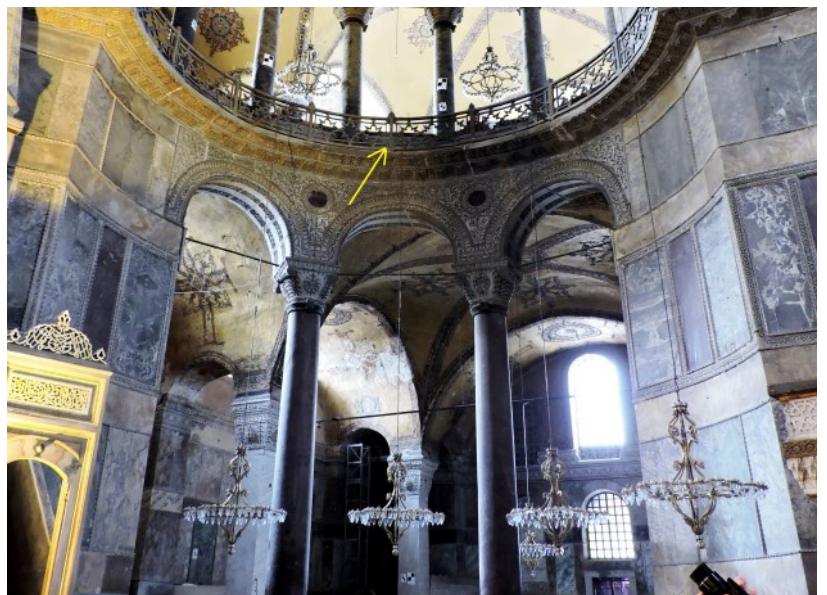
## AN ARCHITECTURAL TREASURE

The architectural vision realised in the design of Hagia Sophia was the creation of a basilica with a dome. In other words, the creation of a balance between a longitudinal, terrestrial axis, that was serving the movement of believers towards the centre of the temple, with a vertical, extraterrestrial axis that was leading the believers upwards, ("sursum corda" meaning lift up your hearts). But how could this huge dome rest on the columns of the basilica without its weight breaking them or moving them sideways? This is how: Four large arches, perpendicular to each other, rise from the edges of four enormous piers. The base of the dome rests on the peak of the arches (see blue arrows) that create a virtual square. The gaps between the



The gaps between the base of the dome and the arches are filled by spherical triangles called pendentives. The weight of the dome now rests on the piers. These do not carry the weight, but they distribute it towards the east and west directions with two big semi-domes. The latter also distribute the weight outwards, towards two secondary piers, and even more outwards and lower, to three smaller semi-domes, creating these fascinating height differences. The same structural strategy couldn't be used for the north and the south part because

then, the church would be widened and the dominance of the longitudinal axis along with the fundamental element of basilica architecture -which is the rectangular layout – would be revoked. The four piers, expanded outwards, neutralised the sideways thrust. In fact, they were perforated with arches in order not to interrupt the longitudinal section of the side aisles on the one hand, and to reduce a feeling of visual bulk on the other hand. The columns in front and behind the piers were lined up in a semi-circle and niches were created. Above them, there were four platforms which created a sense of harmony in the space.





The dome rises above a cylinder, known as drum (see the yellow curve), with forty slotted windows; and rests on a square basis defined by the peaks of the big arches. The light beams that enter through the forty windows intertwine and create a bright spectrum, a halo, that gives the impression that the dome is floating. One wonders how this whole structure is supported! Before you gazed at it, you suspect the existence of a luminous sky-like structure that floats above your head. Firm and bulky pillars are nowhere to be seen. Down on the ground floor and upstairs, at the gallery, a "forest" of 140 columns with their unique and impressive capitals defines the spaces



without blocking the way or creating a sense of inaccessibility.

The seventeen gates of the temple -five of which are the imperial-, the wounded because of the detachment of their carved crosses and the more than two hundred windows -which apart from being sources of light, are also part of the temple's exterior decoration- contribute towards creating a sense of architectural harmony.

Let us entrust the praise of Hagia Sophia to the leading historian of Byzantium, Sir Steven Runciman who wrote: "'Never thereafter in the whole course of Western architecture did the Christian mystical spirit attain such a perfect, such an exalted, expression in terms of visible space and form. The great ideal of the Christian Church at the threshold of the Middle Ages, the liberation of the soul from the ties of an earthly existence, was here embodied once and for all in a supreme work of art ".



## ART TREASURES

In terms of the wall painting, the decoration of Hagia Sophia only involves mosaics because the church was never decorated with murals.

At the time of its construction, the temple had only non-figurative mosaics and crosses. (Non-figurative we generally call the paintings that depict only shapes and patterns; those depicting faces are called figurative.) The large mosaics were created during the Justinian's reign, mainly on the ceilings, the so called groin vaults, also known as cross vaults. These are the golden surfaces, adorned with crosses and colourful designs, that catch our eyes as we cross the threshold of the inner narthex and "soften" the partly lighted spaces of the temple by emitting a soft light. Even

at the top of the dome and in the niche of the sanctuary there was only a cross. The absence of figurative mosaics was meant to emphasise that the church was solely devoted to Christ. However, it seems that very soon after Justinian's death, as early as the reign of his successor Justin II, icons of Christ and other saints -depicting narrative scenes with themes from the New Testament- began to appear at the temple and at the adjoining patriarchate halls. By the middle of the 8th century, Hagia Sophia was decorated from end to end with mosaics.



Unfortunately, not a trace of all these majestic creations was left, because they were destroyed during Iconoclasm.

Immediately after the end of Iconoclasm, the creation of new mosaics for Hagia Sophia reflects Christians' lodging for worshiping the icons. Until the end of the 13th century, many emperors were dedicating to the temple the representations we admire today, but unfortunately most of them were hidden behind plaster after the Fall of Constantinople. However, all the visible representations are separate pieces of art and expressions of devotion that do not present thematic affinity or continuity, and therefore I am going to present them to you in chronological order.



First, in historical order, Theotokos – Platytera - the oldest Hagia Sophia mosaic – located in the apse of the temple,. It was created when patriarch of Constantinople was Photius the Great. Mary is represented enthroned with the Christ child sitting on Her lap and Her face reveals Her sorrow. We can almost see tears in Her eyes, as if Her future pain for the sufferings -sufferings that she would have to witness ever-more-of her flock was prophetically depicted on Her face.



Very close to the mosaic of Theotokos, at the inner side of the adjacent arch, there is the Mosaic of Archangel Gabriel, created around the same time with Theotokos mosaic. Gabriel is now the only guardian of the church, since a mosaic of Archangel Michael, just across from Gabriel, has been destroyed. Having been created in the same period, that is



the early years after the end of Iconoclasm, the representations of the hierarchs St. John Chrysostom, St. Ignatius Theophoros and Ignatius the Younger are depicted on the base of the northern wall and are the only ones that survive today from the original fourteen. The representations that adorn the four flanks of the dome, only two of them being mosaics nowadays, were created simultaneously with the mosaics of the hierarchs mentioned above.



Next, in chronological order, is the first mosaic we see when entering the temple. Dating back to the 10th century, it is located high above the central imperial gate and represents the emperor Leo VI the Wise





kneeling before Christ. The emperor is grateful for being blessed with a long-desired heir and for having received permission to get married for the fourth time. Leo's brother, co-emperor Alexander, is depicted at a darker corner of the northern gallery, a representation that you won't notice if you don't know its position in advance.



The next mosaic was created in the same century, during the reign of Basil Bulgaroctonus. It is the last mosaic we see when exiting the church as it is located above the visitors' exit. The mosaic depicts the standing figures of two great emperors bowing down before Mary the Virgin respectfully, the latter holding Child Christ. On Her left side, stands Justinian – founder of the temple- who is giving Her a model of Hagia Sophia, and on Her right, stands Constantine the Great –founder of Constantinople- who is presenting a model of the city to Her.



Two generations later, Empress Zoe, the last of the Macedonian dynasty, depicted her figure and those of her successive husbands in a mosaic which was placed at the eastern end of the southern gallery. The mosaic represents Christ and on either side of Him there are the figures of Constantine Monomachus and Augusta Zoe. The faded letters of the Emperor's name confirm the well-known fact that with each husband Zoe had, the faces of the mosaic-and, of course, the names- were changing.



In the same area of the south gallery, a little to the right, another mosaic/tribute is exhibited. Emperor John Komnenos and Empress Eirene are depicted on either side of standing Theotokos. It is a mosaic that narrates the good deeds and honors the excellent reputation of the royal pair. John was well known for his charitable work -to which he owes the nickname John the Good- and Eirene for being the founder of the largest charitable institution in Constantinople, the Monastery of Christ Pantocrator (now Zeyrek Cami). Next to their depiction was later added the depiction of their son, co-emperor Alexios.

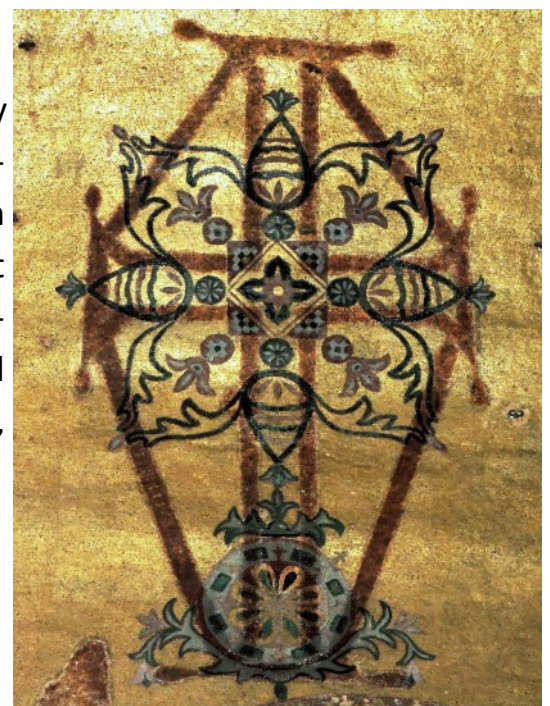




A century and a half later, shortly after reconquest of Constantinople from the Franks, the last of the surviving mosaics of Hagia Sophia, the Deesis mosaic, was added to the central part of the southern gallery. It depicts Virgin Mary and St. John the Baptist on either side of Christ as if they are praying to Him, as if they are pleading with God. What makes this creation unique and one of a kind in the history of art, is the expressiveness of the faces depicted and the thoroughness of artistic execution, two elements that represent the mastery involved in making this mosaic. The mosaic, as a whole, is quite damaged, but fortunately, the figures and the inscriptions are preserved intact.



The art treasures of Hagia Sophia are dominated by figurative mosaics but we should not overlook the importance of her non-figurative decorations that enrich her golden internal surfaces. On the contrary, we ought to honor and feel sorry for the crosses that were covered in the 19th century and are slowly reappearing and are faintly visible, witnessing the building's true identity, the identity of a Christian temple.





The unalterable identity of Hagia Sophia is safeguarded by a hidden contract that none of the different sovereigns dared to cancel. Above the central gate, towards the inner side of the temple, you can see the model of a domed church. Drawing the curtain that there is in its centre, a Cross on a pedestal is revealed, declaring the lifelong status of the building, that of a Christian church. Its indisputable seal, the Cross, is always there, behind the curtain, hidden but also tellingly obvious.

The colorful marble revetment of the church's wall and the marble embossed panels that like an embroidery adorn the fronts of the arches and the beams are two other elements that showcase the church's wealth; although not being artistic elements, they are treasureable.

Mosaics are the most popular and famous objects of pilgrimage of Hagia Sophia. Because, in addition to being creations of fine art, reflections of the philosophy of their makers and works that involve high levels of mastery as their originality and beauty reveal, they also do hide inside them a pain. They are "deprived" of the presence of their "siblings", the mosaics buried under cheap plaster. These mosaics wear out, are forgotten and any concern for these buried, unique, masterpieces over time fades away.





## AN INVALUABLE LEGACY OF ROMIOSYNI

Lately, after the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, we have heard several things about the building: World heritage, a heritage shared by different people and religions, an ecumenical monument, a Unesco monument, etc. Mere journalistic nonsense and political rhetoric that seek to justify the publicity, the political controversy, and the affectations.

Our fathers envisioned and built Hagia Sophia and invested the temple with the surplus of their love of beauty and artistic mastery. Creating and operating the temple, they activated both the philosophical legacy bestowed upon them by their pre-Christ ancestors and the theology that fermented over time and transformed a building into a Church and a painting into an Icon. The theology that presented Christ with His festive garment and Orthodoxy with an inviolable heirloom. For fifteen centuries, Hagia Sophia was the centre of the political and spiritual life of our fathers and symbol of the state's status and cultural growth. Our nation's greatest moments took place inside Hagia Sophia, both good and bad. She was the last resort when hopes were dashed. However, standing untouched by time and resisting conquerors, it proclaims the rights and manifests the presence of the Romioi in good times and times of darkness.





For us, who were our fathers that inhabited Poli, Asia Minor, the islands and the Balkans, the thousand-years-old cradles of Hellenism, and for those who are scattered throughout the world, the legacy of Hagia Sophia is invaluable. It is invaluable because her worth cannot be determined by human standards, but instead, by the weight of our tradition. Adhering to this tradition, renewing it, spreading it to the world, and even more, passing it down to our descendants for letting the cultural and spiritual circle be unbroken, these are all actions that make us worthy heirs. These are elements that give us the right to enter Hagia Sophia proudly, entering through the central imperial gate, as pilgrims and not excursionists, as settlers and not temporary residents. Those elements consciously symbolize all the times we return to our tribe's birthplace.

Woe betide us if we consider the heritage of Romiosyni, that took shape in Hagia Sophia, unworthy of our attention, obsolete and outdated, letting it be erased from our identity. : if we insist on an infertile ancestral arrogance and narcissistically focus on our self-affirmation as heirs of

tourist attractions, admirers of charming but lifeless museum exhibits; If we analyse in a sterile, mere scientific way the architectural structure, the shell, and remain ignorant of the spirit, the divine Wisdom, that stems from it; If we meticulously analyse the chemical composition of the tes-



sera and let the aura and the miracle of what is represented on these mosaics pass us by; We will then lose all these elements that could guarantee that our future would reflect our true identity and physiognomy. If Hagia Sophia ceases to be the place where the heart of the nation beats, then she will be declared uninhabited and her symbols of past greatness will turn into mere memories. Memories that we will recall with sorrow. And if our memory has faded, the usurpation of its existence and the surrender of Hagia Sophia to forgers of history, actions of fanaticism, and the merchants of nations and gods, will then be completely legitimised.

For almost one thousand one hundred years, Hagia Sophia had been the seat of ecumenical Christianity, the seat and the consolidation of Romioi's Nation. The Franks and the Ottomans the purpose only intercepted of the building. The temple's violent Islamisation; its transformation -then and now- into a mosque; its "demotion" to a museum; and its exposure to the "mundane issues of the world", affected the building's body, but not its spirit. The soul, the "breath" of the Great Church, never had a permanent home or someone to lean on. It was a guest at Hagia Sophia back then, then at Pammakaristos, and today at Phanar.

