Andrew Bridgers

Research Paper

Keys to Dan Brown’s Inferno

November, 2013

From Christ to Muhammad: The Transformation of Hagia Sophia from Basilica to Imperial Mosque

“[The Church] is distinguished by indescribable beauty, excelling both in its size, and in the harmony of its measures, having no part excessive and none deficient; being more magnificent than ordinary buildings, and much more elegant than those which are not of so just a proportion.”(The Description of Hagia Sophia)In Dan Brown’s *Inferno*, Robert Langdon visits the Hagia Sophia, an architectural and artistic masterpiece in Istanbul Turkey that now houses a secular museum. The house of worship has inspired visitors and worshipers alike for over a millennium (Hagia Sophia). Hagia Sophia, or the “Church of the Holy Wisdom” has a unique religious history that parallels the history of her host city, Istanbul, from one of the early centers of Christianity to being in the heart of the Muslim world.

The site of Hagia Sophia has a long religious history. In the newly founded Christian city of Constantinople, the emperor Constantine intended to construct a great Christian church (Swift 8). The original construction of Hagia Sophia is believed to have been on the site of a previous pagan temple (Hagia Sophia). The first church was not as grand in scale or décor as it is today. It was rectangular with a wooden roof, except for the half dome above the sanctuary (Swift). The construction of The Great Church represented the religious transition of the city of Constantinople from paganism to Christianity.

Hagia Sophia has been destroyed and rebuilt multiple times early in its history, and each time was rebuilt larger and grander. The church was burned down by a mob in 404 C.E. and was burned down a second time in 532 C.E., and then Emperor Justinian began construction to rebuild the church later that year (Jordan 189)(Swift 9). To ensure that the church was built quickly but also of the highest quality, Justinian ordered the construction of Hagia Sophia “regardless of all expense.” (Swift 12) The architects who Justinian entrusted to build his grand church, Anthemios of Tralles and Isidoros of Miletos, were well known for their vast knowledge of mathematics and mechanics and were the best of their time (Hagia Sophia). Contemporary accounts of the construction describe ten thousand men employed by the architects to build Hagia Sophia (Swift 12). Emperor Justinian dedicated Hagia Sophia in December of 537 C.E., less than six years after construction began (Mainstone 153). The Hagia Sophia that still stands today was constructed in an incredibly short amount of time for a building of such a large scale and which houses such ornate interior mosaic decorations.

The interior of Hagia Sophia was built to overwhelm the senses of visitors and worshipers with its grand decorations acting as a “visual demonstration of the power of the other world” (Kleinbauer 49). The large scale of the interior of the domed sanctuary with the walls decorated shining gold mosaics filled the church with bright glowing light during the day, that reflected and glistened all around worshipers. Hagia Sophia was not always decorated with detailed mosaics depicting stories from the Bible. At the time of Emperor Justinian, the western religious artistic tradition used many religious images of human figures as well as visual representations of god and Jesus. However, the interior that was decorated during Emperor Justinian’s rule did not include visual representations of man or god. Rather, it was decorated in an eastern tradition with large amounts of gold tesserae, geometric shapes and images from nature, such as flowers (Kleinbauer 49).

Hagia Sophia flourished as a Christian Basilica for the better part of a thousand years after her construction. During this time, Hagia Sophia appeared outwardly different than the Hagia Sophia that can be seen today. The iconic image of Hagia Sophia with her expansive dome surrounded by the four minarets rising into the sky was not completed until after the Ottoman conquest. The church that was rebuilt by Justinian was almost square, and built almost entirely of stone, in contrast to the wooden roof of the original church built in the 4th century (Mainstone 25-28). The true dome of Hagia Sophia rested on top of four arches and was accomplished by Justinian and his architects. The dome was a sign of the transition of Christian buildings from the basilica style to domed churches (Kinross 35).

The interior decorations of Hagia Sophia have a history of their own. During the years that Hagia Sophia was a Christian church, the decorations in the interior changed greatly in style and content. The initial figurative imagery from the decoration under Emperor Justinian lasted many years until after the Iconoclastic period of rule of Hagia Sophia. The Iconoclasts did not believe in portraying god or Jesus in art (“Western Painting”). Because of the Iconoclastic Age’s ban on figures in art in Constantinople—from 717-843—any figurative decorations in Hagia Sophia that had been previously installed were destroyed or removed from the church (“Western Painting”). All of the ornate and intricately done mosaics depicting scenes of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the many Christian saints date from after the Iconclast period. The Iconoclast’s and Ottomans were not the only forces that damaged the interior mosaics of Hagia Sophia; Constantinople was hit by a series of serious earthquakes that knocked loose many mosaic decorations. However, after each earthquake the mosaics were redone at a higher quality (Kleinbauer 49). Another aspect that differentiated the art of the Orthodox Basilica from Catholic Churches in Italy and Western Europe is that the writing in the Mosaics of Hagia Sophia is in Greek, while those of Western Europe were in Latin(Kleinbauer 69).

The Ottomans, when they took control of Constantinople and Hagia Sophia in 1453, were not the first to conceal or destroy Christian images in the church. During the 8th century, the Emperor Leo III repelled an Arab attack on Constantinople. However, he was sympathetic toward the Iconoclasts, who held views similar to Muslims, and destroyed and then replaced many mosaics and representations of Christ with a simple cross. As an inscription over the gate of his palace read, “The emperor cannot endure that Christ should be represented by a mute and lifeless image graven of earthly materials” (Kinross 57). The artistic beliefs of the iconoclast sect of Christianity are an example of a similarity between the symbols of Islam and Christianity.

In 1453, the Ottomans conquered Constantinople. Constantinople, now modern day Istanbul, is geographically and culturally between Europe and Asia—Christianity and Islam. During the 15th and 16th centuries, the Ottoman Empire was one of the most powerful in the world, controlling large regions of land along the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea all around Constantinople (Ottoman Empire). In April and May 1453, the Ottomans lay siege to Constantinople and subsequently captured the city (Ottoman Empire). On the night of the 28th of May and lasting into the early morning of the 29th, Greeks and Latins joined together in Hagia Sophia to say mass for the last time in Hagia Sophia. Following the mass, the Emperor of the time, Constantine XI rode to the final battle for Constantinople where, just before his death, he declared, “I will die with my city! God forbid that I should live as emperor without the empire.” (Cannon 291) With the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, the reign of Christianity in Istanbul and its practice in Hagia Sophia was over.

Mehmed II, the twenty three year old conqueror of Constantinople, strode into Hagia Sophia on the afternoon of May 29, 1453 and immediately declared that Hagia Sophia should be dedicated as a Mosque. Following his command, an Islamic theologian recited a Muslim Prayer to begin Hagia Sophia’s history as a Mosque (Kinross 102).

Mehmed II physically altered the building to eliminate the majority of the Christian decorations in Hagia Sophia without vandalizing the beautiful building: the Christian cross on the dome of Hagia Sophia was replaced with the Muslim crescent, the altar and many of the thrones and movable objects from the Christian Church were removed from the building (Swift 14). The floors of Hagia Sophia were covered in carpets and rugs since Muslim prayer includes kneeling on the floor (Detorakis 59). Mehmed II added the minarets to Hagia Sophia. Initially built as a temporary wooden minaret, the first minaret of Hagia Sophia was rebuilt out of brick, and three others were added around the building by the successors of Mehmed II. (Kinross 103) The first minaret that was added to Hagia Sophia was the first minaret built in the conquered city, and thus, for the Ottomans, was the first monument to their conquest of Constantinople (Kinross 103).

Further renovations and conversions were made to the interior of Hagia Sophia in the centuries after the Ottoman conquest. Four railed balconies from which they the Koran was read to worshipers were constructed, as well as a box for the sultan. The Ottoman sultans also founded library and theological school attached to Hagia Sophia to further Muslim teaching and scholarship (Kinross 108).

While Hagia Sophia saw a clear transition from worshipping Christ to worshipping Muhammad, the images and evidence of the hundreds of years of Christian worship in Hagia Sophia were not immediately erased. The respect for the Christian images that Mehmed II and the Ottomans showed was an example of their religious tolerance. Constantinople had always been a diverse city with people of many ethnicities and religious backgrounds. The ruling sultans in Constantinople after the Ottoman conquest formally recognized the Jews and Christians of the city as “protected non-Muslims” and did not force the population of the city to convert to Islam. (Veinstein 323) In fact, less than a year after conquering Constantinople, Mehmed II reinstituted the Patriarchate of the city, allowing Christians to maintain their church and structure in the newly Muslim city. (Veinstein 322) With the conquest of Constantinople, the Ottomans renamed the city Istanbul, which came from the Greek meaning “into the city” (Kinross 102). While the city of Constantinople took on a new name and new religion, Hagia Sophia only received a new religion. As a sign of respect for Hagia Sophia, Mehmed II did not do away with the name; he simply called it “the Great Mosque of Aya Sofya”, or the Great Mosque of Hagia Sophia. (Kinross 102)

“Christians like faces; Muslims like words.” (Brown 395) In Dan Brown’s *Inferno,* Langdon explains the differing approaches of Islam and Christianity in representing “*the word.*” As Dan Brown explains, Islamic tradition held that only god could create life, so man should not create images of life in paintings or mosaics, while Christians portrayed god and Jesus visually through art. (Brown 394-395). When Muhmed II captured Constantinople and transformed Hagia Sophia to a mosque, he was “liberal-minded and considerate in [his] treatment of the church.” While his religion prohibited the human form in art, Muhmed II did not cover in whitewash all of the images of god and Jesus in Hagia Sophia from the building’s Christian times. Rather, he allowed many of the Christian mosaics to remain intact, including the group of the Virgin and Child above the mihrab[[1]](#footnote-1). (Swift 15) An example of the decorations added by the Ottomans is the great pulpit that was built. At the top of the great pulpit hung eight round plaques that had the names of Allah, Muhammad, and the first six teachers all inscribed in gold calligraphy (Detorakis 59). This example of Muslim art demonstrates their use of ornate words to represent deities, in contrast to the images of god used by Christians.

Not all of the Muslim rulers were as tolerant of the co-existence of Christian images in the Great Mosque of Hagia Sophia. Beginning after the middle of the eighteenth century, the Christian mosaics of figures were covered over with lime wash. The only Christian images left visible at this point in the history of Hagia Sophia were the headless seraphim that were left visible in the pendentives (Kinross 113).

In history, rarely have clashes of religious conflict avoided violence. The Middle Ages were wrought with religious violence as the Christians of Western Europe left their homelands to fight the Muslims. The history of Hagia Sophia is no different. Thousands of people died in the events that caused Hagia Sophia’s transition from Grand Basilica to Imperial Mosque. The Ottoman’s captured Constantinople and transformed her to the center of a great Muslim Empire. With this transition of power from the Byzantines to the Ottoman Turks, Hagia Sophia lost one god, only to find another already in his place. Hagia Sophia had been a center for Eastern Orthodox Christianity with her record-breaking size and grandeur, but was transformed to the foremother of future Imperial Mosques at the heart of the Muslim world.

Works cited

"The Description of the Hagia Sophia, 537-." *The Bible: The Book That Bridges Millennia*. United Methodist Women, n.d. Web. 07 Oct. 2013. <http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/procopius.stm>.

“Hagia Sophia.” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Academic Edition*. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2013. Web. 07 Oct. 2013.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/251562/Hagia-Sophia>.

“Ottoman Empire.” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Acedemic Edition.* Encyclopædia BritannicaInc., 2013. Web. 21 Oct. 2013.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/434996/Ottoman-Empire>.

“mihrab.” *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online Acedemic Edition.* Encyclopædia BritannicaInc., 2013. Web. 21 Oct. 2013.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/382937/mihrab>.

Brown, Dan. *Inferno*. London: Transworld, 2013. Print.

Cannon, William Ragsdale. *History of Christianity in the Middle Ages: From the Fall of Rome to the Fall of Constantinople*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1960. Print.

"Hagia Sophia." *The Middle Ages*: *An Encyclopedia for Students*. Ed. William Chester Jordan. Vol. 2. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996. 189-190. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 21 Oct. 2013.

Kinross, Lord. *Hagia Sophia,*. New York: Newsweek, 1972. Print.

Mainstone, Rowland J. "The Structure of the Church of St. Sophia at Istanbul."*Structure in Architecture: History, Design, and Innovation*. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 1999. 153-86. Print. Variorum Collected Studies Ser.

 Sauvaget, Jean. "The Mosque and the Palace." *Early Islamic Art and Architecture*. Vol. 23. Burlington: Ashgate, 2002. 109-47. Print. The Formation of the Classical Islamic World.

Swift, Emerson Howland. *Hagia Sophia*. New York: Columbia UP, 1940. Print.

Veinstein, Gilles. "Religious Institutions, Policies and Lives." *The Cambridge History of Turkey: The Ottoman Empire as a World Power, 1453-1603*. Ed. Kate Fleet and Suraiya Faroqhi. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 320-55. Print.

1. A mihrab is a prayer niche in the wall of a mosque that orients the faithful toward Mecca (Jean Sauvaget) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)