



# HAGIA SOPHIA

*The dome and minarets of Hagia Sophia give Istanbul a magical skyline, particularly at dusk. In this aerial view out towards the Bosphorus, the Blue Mosque, built in 1609, closely echoes the style of Hagia Sophia. After the city's capture by the Turks in 1453, the cathedral became a model for the other great mosques that began to adorn the city. But while each of these could qualify as a 'wonder' on their own account, it is Hagia Sophia that remains the mother of such Islamic invention.*



**Location** Istanbul, Turkey  
**Built** 537 AD  
**Elevation** 55.6 metres (182 feet)  
**Materials** Stone, marble  
**Approximate dimensions** 270 x 240 feet (82 x 73 metres)

“ For a thousand years it was the largest cathedral in the world, and a wonder of the world for its fine architecture and enormous dome

AS SUCH HAGIA SOPHIA WAS THE MODEL for many celebrated mosques of later millennia, and remains the masterpiece Byzantium.

The cathedral was built in 537 by the Emperor Justinian the Great, sometimes known as the 'last Roman' – a man of extraordinary vision and energy who wanted to resurrect the Roman Empire. Ten thousand labourers took part in the cathedral's construction, and materials were brought from all over the Mediterranean – porphyry from Egypt, green marble from Thessaly in Greece, black stone from the Bosphorus region and yellow stone from Syria.

The project represented not only Justinian's imperial ambition, but his commitment to the Eastern Orthodox Church. He was intolerant towards other religions, persecuting Jews, Samaritans and the ancient Hellenistic schools of Athens, so there is a considerable irony in his greatest church becoming the religious centrepiece of a later Islamic civilization.

At the time of its construction, Hagia Sophia represented all that was most wondrous about Byzantium and its glittering capital, Constantinople. It lured travellers from all over the world: Vikings sailed down through Russia to reach it, and crusaders came, both to defend and to pillage. The greatest marvel was the dome, 102 feet wide, and how it was constructed over such a large open space. It became a symbol of the lost technology of the Roman Empire. The cathedral's fabulous mosaics were begun by Justinian's successor, Justin, but these had a troubled history. In 726 the emperor Leo the Isaurian issued a series of edicts against the worship of icons, and all religious images were removed from Hagia Sophia or destroyed. Only in the ninth century were later emperors able to restore them. Further vicissitudes followed with a great fire in 859, and then earthquakes in 869 and 989, which between them ruined the great dome. The emperor Basil II repaired it in 994.

A commonplace of history is that Constantinople survived a thousand years as a Christian city until its final surrender to the Turks in 1453, one of the most famous dates in European history. Less remembered is that the real damage was inflicted on the city not by the Turks but by fellow Christians, the crusaders, who had taken Byzantium in a brutal siege in 1204. Led by the Venetians, the army of the Fourth Crusade had diverted from its ostensible purpose – the recovery of the Holy Land – to the opportunistic and lucrative sack of one of the richest cities on earth. In the process Hagia Sophia was desecrated: the silver iconostasis, the icons and the holy books were all destroyed and the crusaders were said to have seated a prostitute on the throne of the Patriarchs.

Much of this destruction stemmed from the bitter schism that had arisen between the Western and Eastern Churches. By contrast the Turks, while desperate to seize Constantinople, respected many of its finest buildings. Hagia Sophia was promptly restored and converted into a mosque. Over the following centuries all the usual Islamic accoutrements were added: minarets, a madrasa (religious school) and mausoleums for the sultans. So classically Muslim does it appear that some casual modern visitors remain blithely unaware that it had a previous existence for nigh on a millennium as a Christian church.

The last few centuries have seen substantial restoration work take place on the building: between 1847 and 1849, the dome was repaired, the mosaics cleaned and discs hung on columns to commemorate the prophet Muhammad and the early caliphs. The various minarets built at different times were also levelled to be more symmetrical and of equal height. When Turkey became a secular state in 1922, Hagia Sophia was turned into a museum – with the result that the customary carpets of the mosque were removed to expose the fabulous marble floor decorations.

Today the gold and the polychrome marble still dazzle the eye some 1,500 years after the church's first consecration, while the dome gives a distinctive profile to the city, whether by noon or night. As Yeats wrote in his poem 'Byzantium':

*A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains*

*All that man is,*

*All mere complexities*

“



THE ART OF THE DOME  
The heroine of the lines was the German Maria Reiche, who campaigned tirelessly over her long life ((1903-1998) for their preservation. Her view that the lines were 'the most important astronomical monument of Peru and perhaps the world' – a vast sophisticated series of alignments that charted the heavens with a sophistication and accuracy surpassing contemporary astronomers in the west – has now been discredited, but she undoubtedly brought the lines to the world's attention.