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A Brief History of Hagia Sophia: Once Christian, Now Islamic

The magnificent temple known as Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) in Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey) was for many centuries the largest Christian church in the Byzantine Empire, also known as the Eastern Roman Empire, which continued for a thousand years after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. Completed in 537 A.D., Hagia Sophia was the pearl of the Eastern portion of the Catholic Church until the East-West religious schism of 1054, when it became the center of the Orthodox Church. Its magnificence over and above its religious significance as a truly remarkable example of architectural genius can hardly be challenged.



Only a few decades after Hagia Sophia began welcoming Christian faithful and visitors, Mohammed was born about the year 570. Early in the Seventh Century, he reported receiving a series of angelic revelations that led to his founding the Islamic religion. Originating in what today is Saudi Arabia, Islam spread throughout the Middle East where one of its strongholds became the nation of Turkey, including eventually Constantinople, its gateway to the West.

Hagia Sophia was soon surrounded by Mohammadens who craved the remarkable temple for their own religion. During the Seventh Century, Islam succeeded in establishing dominance in northern Africa and even into Iberia (Spain and Portugal) where they remained until the campaign led by Ferdinand and Isabella forced them out in the late 1400s.

As early as the late Seventh and early Eighth Centuries, unsurprisingly, Muslims sought to capture Constantinople. Several attempts met with failure so the city and its coveted temple remained in Christian hands. But beginning in 1421 under a succession of Turkish leaders, Muslim forces began efforts to conquer the territory surrounding the great city. Finally, led by Mehmet II, their siege lasting 53 days succeeded and Constantinople was now theirs. Mehmet's forces went immediately to Hagia Sophia and turned it into a mosque. It stayed that way until the rise to leadership in Turkey of Mustafa Kernal Ataturk in the 20th Century.

Once in control of the enormous temple and its surroundings, Muslim conquerors killed and brutalized its many occupants. Niccolo Barbaro's *Diary of the Siege Constantinople* tells of the carnage, the kind of incredibly harsh treatment frequently carried out by militant Islamists. Barbaro wrote:

The Turks put the city to sword as they came, and everyone they found in their way, they slashed with their scimitars - women and men, old and young, of every condition, and this slaughter continued from dawn until midday.... They sought out the convents and all the nuns were taken to the ships and abused, dishonored by the Turks, and sold at auction as slaves to be taken to



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Turkey.... Some preferred to throw themselves into the wells and drown.

Attempts by Mehmet II and his successors to conquer more lands for Islam failed at Belgrade (1456), Lepanto (1571) and Vienna (1683). Islamic attempts to conquer other lands militarily ceased for several centuries and, in Turkey, the secularist military commander Ataturk became Turkey's political leader in the 1920s. He converted Hagia Sophia from a mosque to a museum in 1935, a move that angered hardline Muslims. He also relaxed strict Islamic domination in Turkey and sought to have the country become an industrial power similar to several western countries. One of his accomplishments saw the status of women upgraded into 20th Century levels. But strict Islamists didn't want their nation modernized and, unsurprisingly, they also wanted the famous temple in Istanbul to again become a primary center of their religion.

Ataturk converted Turkey into a republic and, in 1935, he was named its first president. He passed away in 1938 at age 57. Leaders of Turkey who followed him have sought to undo the modernization Ataturk had begun. The current leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, emerged as a political force after serving as mayor of Istanbul 1994-1998. One year later, he endured a brief time in prison for publicly advocating goals that included, "The mosques are our barracks; the dome our helmets, the minarets our bayonets, and the faithful our soldiers." He then founded an Islamist movement called AKP that won a victory in parliamentary elections in 2003. He was then named Turkey's prime minister and, in 2014, he won election as the country's president.

Regularly denying a desire to impose strict Islamic values, Erdogan worked to undo the modernization begun by Ataturk. He survived a coup attempt to replace him in 2016 and, after restoring order, his crackdown included mass arrests and the loss of jobs of 150,000 military officials and public workers. In 2017, he won in a national referendum and gained increased presidential powers.

In mid-2020 after having reversed many of the moves begun by Ataturk, Erdogan reestablished Hagia Sophia as a mosque. Built by Christians as a place to practice their faith more than 15 centuries ago, the remarkable edifice is back in hands of Islamists.

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